

Garden in the Bayou or Bayou in the Garden: Design Provenance and Environmental Adaptation at Le Petit Versailles

KEVIN RISK

INTRODUCTION

TRACING THE DESIGN PROVENANCE and formal evolution of a garden provides a fairly narrow understanding of the garden as place. A garden is conditioned by site-specific environmental factors, as well as by broader patterns of cultural inheritance. In fact, a garden's long-term physical survival is determined as much by adaptability to localised environmental context as by sustained recognition of cultural significance. Indeed, a garden may display elements of a recognised design tradition – Chinese stroll garden, English park, French parterre – and still be largely vernacular (or improvisational) in its environmental expression.

Le Petit Versailles, the antebellum garden of Creole planter Valcour Aime (1797–1867), is such a garden. Despite formal stylistic pretensions, the topographic character and spatial extent of this now garden ruin were determined largely by the swampy terrain and vernacular long-lot pattern of land division along the Mississippi River. Indeed, the working edge between formal pleasure garden and agricultural field is blurred at Le Petit Versailles, which lies along the west bank of the river in St James Parish, Louisiana. Surrounded by sugarcane fields stretching to the distant horizon, the garden emerges from an agricultural corduroy of furrowed rows and drainage canals leading back from the river's edge. Only within the shadowy tangle

KEYWORDS

Jardin anglo-chinois

Cultural hybridity

Environmental modification

Exile

Louisiana gardens

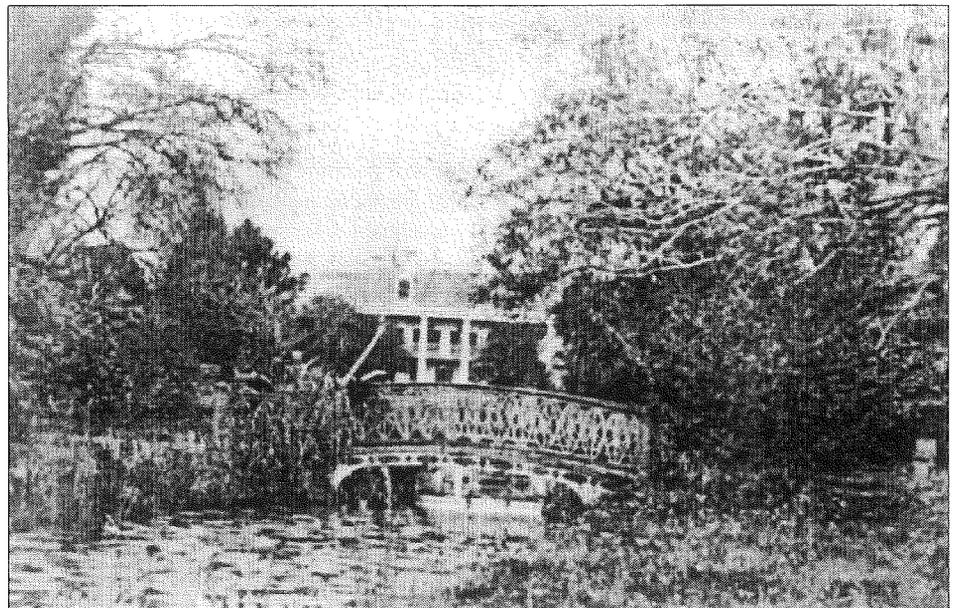


Figure 1: *Le Petit Versailles, view of the house and chinoiserie bridge from garden's main island, c 1890s (Courtesy of Southeastern Architectural Archives, Tulane University).*

of a century's growth do we stumble upon the imprint of the meandering canals, the once sun-lit island, and the artificial mountain that identify this place as the remnants of Aime's fanciful *jardin anglo-chinois*.

It is difficult to determine an exact source of inspiration for Aime's garden, since no evidence to date has shown that he visited any of Europe's well-known *jardins anglo-chinois* prior to its construction. Furthermore, his journal entries on the garden's construction are characteristically brief, recording mostly the quantities and costs of materials transported to the site, substantial bits of progress, and periodic setbacks occasioned by the vagaries of weather. Primary documents offer few glimpses of Aime's personal sentiment or his long-range vision for the garden. As a result, defining the garden's conceptual relationship to the larger agricultural landscape requires a certain degree of speculation. Was the garden primarily a refuge from the workaday landscape, a prototypical Eden carefully enclosed against the outside world? Or was it a masterful improvisation on the local, a stylised microcosm of the native landscape of southern Louisiana?

DESIGN PROVENANCE AND CULTURAL HYBRIDITY

Constructed between 1842 and 1853, Aime's garden represents a retardataire adaptation of the *jardin anglo-chinois*, a landscape-gardening style fashionable in France and continental Europe during the late eighteenth century. Incorporating meandering water features, an artificial mountain and subterranean icehouse, rusticated and classical masonry bridges, an island fortress (le Rocher de Ste Helene), and numerous summer houses of rustic or Asian influence, the garden was a showplace for the exotic plant materials Aime imported to this naturalistic retreat set within his agricultural estate. The garden was a rare, if not unique, example of the style in the United States, and a unique example in the plantation South.

The *jardin anglo-chinois* reached its most elaborate expression in such French works as Parc Monceau (1773), la Bagatelle (1777-1780), and le Desert de Retz (c 1780) (Von Erdberg, 1936). These gardens were continental variations on the fashionable English-style park, which affected a strong sense of naturalism through the artful arrangement of meandering paths and carriageways, curvaceous water bodies, and a carefully planned sequence of view lines among garden features, designed to appear spontaneous. The English park 'borrowed' nature - or, in the English case, the almost universally cultivated landscape - as an extension of the more consciously designed parkland that extended outward from the core of an estate. In this fashion, hay fields, rural barns, and village church spires became borrowed scenery for the garden, positing cultural identity within the familiarity, and indeed peculiarity, of the local landscape.

The *jardin anglo-chinois* represented a cultural hybrid, intermixing elements of English landscape pastoralism - serpentine lakes, rolling pastures, sculptural hillocks, bottomland meadows - with rustic, Asian-inflected, or otherwise exotic features, such as pagodas, turkish tents, rockeries, and subterranean grottoes, revelling in the eclecticism of distant, global places and narratives. This decidedly catholic expression

of the garden envisioned cultural identity as embedded within an increasingly complex web of global references, reflecting an expanding world view occasioned by such contacts with the exotic as Napoleon's campaign in Egypt (or his later political exile), allusions to which resonate within Aime's garden, or the French colonisation of Southern Louisiana – which must have epitomised in an acutely personal way for Aime the sometimes disconcerting isolation occasioned by the collision of global culture and a hostile local environment.

Ironically, French formalism seems to have had lasting appeal for the early settlers of Louisiana, even though English Romanticism was in full vogue in Europe by the mid-eighteenth century. The comforting regularity of straight lines and geometric parterres apparently provided a much-needed sense of order and security in a hostile and unfamiliar landscape. Furthermore, the almost uniformly flat terrain of southern Louisiana was better suited to the formal French style, which emphasised horizontality over topographic complexity. Aime defied local topography and convention, however, creating at Le Petit Versailles a hybrid garden adapted to the bayou landscape.

ENVIRONMENTAL ADAPTATION

Unlike most English-style gardens, whose layout and orientation were determined by picturesque native features or existing topographic irregularities, the garden at le Petit Versailles was designed around a subtle and largely man-made topography, because of the limitations of the flat, alluvial soil. An entry in Aime's plantation diary from 3 September 1842 first fits description to these modifications: "Prepared the ground for an 'English Park', and dug a basin in front of dwelling house, with over one hundred and twenty hands" [Fortier, 1878]. This suggests that the garden, with its meandering canals and ornamental lake, may have been conceived as a solution to drainage problems Aime encountered in the area to the north of his dwelling, a swampy bayou that, according to son-in-law Alexis Ferry, Aime filled in with manure (Ferry, unpublished). Indeed, tracing the contour lines on the Mississippi River Commission Charts from 1877 highlights the presence of a pronounced topographic ridge (levee) and wide adjacent swale cutting through Aime's property from the southeast, consistent geological markers of an ancient bayou that flowed out of the river just west of Aime's garden.

A survey of Aime's diary accentuates the fact that his garden cannot be fully appreciated, or its significance assessed, without acknowledging the contributions of the slaves whose labour brought the refinements of a garden to the bayou, and alternately, the waters of the bayou to the garden. The artificial mountain and subterranean icehouse, as well as the ornamental lagoon and meandering *riviere*, represent mammoth feats of hand excavation, and Aime's journal entries indicate that his "workers" were responsible for both the excavation and ongoing maintenance of the garden. The 1860 Slave Census for St James Parish lists Aime's holdings as 127 slaves, making him one of the largest slave holders in the parish (Blake, 2001). Certainly, many of these individuals contributed to the digging

of the canals and mountain at Le Petit Versailles, and others, probably women, contributed to the upkeep of the garden.

Aime's garden differed from an "English park" in respects other than those topographic. Rather than treating the surrounding agricultural landscape as a perceived extension of the garden, with attendant views to be borrowed, Aime's garden created a sheltered microcosm within its walls. In keeping with local plantation precedent and French garden fashion, the garden's perimeter was enclosed, defined by a rather substantial brick, wood and iron fence with carriage or pedestrian entrance gates on at least three sides. The walls of the garden probably served to keep livestock out of the garden terrain, in addition to their function as ornamental or formally space-defining features. Furthermore, the drainage ditches just outside the east and west boundary walls, in addition to supplying water to the man-made rivulets, ponds, and fountains, served as ad hoc "ha-ha" walls, physically separating fields from garden. The garden's shape and orientation – rectilinear with long axis perpendicular to the river – were both dictated and constrained by the existing long-lot pattern of land division and by the system of agricultural ditches that drained the sugarcane fields. As such, the garden was really a stylised hybrid between a picturesque English park and a bounded formal garden, adapted through ingenuity, or trial-and-error, to the relatively unscenographic landscape of southern Louisiana.

CONCLUSION

The distinction between high-style and vernacular landscape is rarely discrete at Le Petit Versailles. Indeed, much of the garden's significance resides in its localised peculiarity, not in its global representativeness. As landscape historians, we must guard against the tendency to categorise gardens first and foremost by formal content and cultural context so as not to overlook more subtle environmental adaptations. After all, gardening, like historical research, is an act of alchemy, neither pure science nor sheer magic, but a transformative combination of the two.

Aime's garden can be read simultaneously as a retardataire response to European fashion and as a progressivist's experiment on the land, but it is also on a certain level an expression of Aime's cultural exile within the New World. It is this ambiguous relationship between global garden fashion, Aime's intents, and the peculiar functional adaptations to the Louisiana landscape that makes the garden so intriguing. Globalised Eden or stylised microcosm? There is no definitive answer; Aime's garden is poly-vocal, a place of cultural hybridity and contradiction, at once global and local.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Blake, Tom (transcriber) (2001) St James Parish, Louisiana, Largest Slaveholders from 1860 Slave Census Schedules. <<http://freepages.genealogy.rootsweb.com/~ajac/lastjames.htm>> (last accessed 10/12/04).

Ferry, Alexis (unpublished) Journals, 1848–73, 5 vols, Rare Book Room, Howard-Tilton Library, Tulane University.

Fortier, Florent (trans) (1878) *Plantation Diary of the Late Mr. Valcour Aime*, New Orleans: Clark and Hofline Printers.

Ligne, Charles Joseph, Prince de (1991) *Coup d'Oeil at Beloeil and a Great Number of European Gardens*, translated and edited by Basil Guy, Berkeley: University of California Press.

Meek, AJ and Turner, Suzanne (1997) *The Gardens of Louisiana: Places of Work and Wonder*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press.

Mississippi River Commission Charts, No 71 and No 72, US Coast Guard Survey, 1877.
Reproduced in Robert Leeper's *Sugar Cane, Orange Blossoms, and Ostriches: A Remembrance, Interpretation, and Proposal for the Valcour Aime Plantation, Saint James Parish, Louisiana*. BLA thesis, LSU School of Landscape Architecture, May 1991.

Risk, Kevin (2002) *Cultural Landscape Report, Valcour Aime Plantation Garden*, Baton Rouge: Louisiana State Historic Preservation Division.

Von Erdberg, Eleanor (1936) *Chinese Influence on European Garden Structures*, Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press.

Wiebenson, Dora (1978) *The Picturesque Garden in France*, Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.