

A reflection on the projects of landscape architect Cornelia Hahn Oberlander, examining the philosophical underpinnings of her garden and landscape designs, and how they cultivate an idea of civility.

Civil landscapes

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Drawing on philosophical writings ranging from the enlightenment and the romantics through to the contemporary world – including, among others, Rousseau, Hegel, and Thoreau – this article explores the civil dimensions of Cornelia Hahn Oberlander's gardens and landscape designs, arguing that Oberlander's landscapes are not merely visual delights, they are civil, humanist works. Surveying a selection of her designs, from collaborations with Arthur Erickson and Renzo Piano to her public housing projects and the playgrounds that she designed in-and-around her home of Vancouver, Canada, a secondary argument holds that Oberlander's gardens and landscapes are not merely aesthetic objects, but artworks, and they do the work of art as Hegel describes it: showing us something of our human spirit, specifically our creative and political *geist*.

Nature and art

Awarded the Order of Canada in 1990, Cornelia Hahn Oberlander (1921–2021) is known for paying close attention to the natural and human ecologies of her landscapes, and for their seamless fit into their surroundings.¹ They have a minimalist character that can be traced to her Bauhaus-influenced training. Oberlander was among the first female graduates of Harvard Graduate School of Design in 1947, having studied there with Bauhaus School founder Walter Gropius. Minimalist though they may be, her gardens and landscape designs are always marked off in some way from the natural world. While Oberlander works with and in nature, she creates art.

My discussion relies on a distinction between gardens and wilderness, or more broadly between human creation and the natural world. Although intuitively sensible, it can be hard to precisely state this distinction, given that the natural world is to some degree shaped by human activity, and human creations are in some sense natural products. Gardens and landscape design – henceforth I'll use 'gardens' here for both – may even look like the untrammelled natural world. Be that as it may, we nevertheless see gardens as created places, not as

undifferentiated nature. John Dixon Hunt argues that what prompts us to see a garden this way is not necessarily that it has been made by human hand, but that 'we register [it] as having been made', and thereby see it as a *place*, set apart from the natural world.² We also see gardens as set apart from the wider built environment, often identifying them as places of natural beauty and refuge within that built environment.

On the flip side, we see the natural world, including wilderness, as distinct from human creation. Definitions of nature and the natural world have long been framed by dualism, with prevalent divisions such as nature-supernatural, nature-artefact, nature-culture, and wilderness civilisation. However, these divisions are not pristine, and current thought is more attuned to their entanglement.³ That said, 'the natural world' or wilderness generally refers to those stretches of the bio-world that may be shaped by human activity but are not directly subject to human control. In the words of George Monbiot, wilderness is 'self-willed'.⁴ Gardens, by contrast, are not self-willed. In the garden it is the creator's will that matters. Granted, there are limits to what a gardener might achieve in a garden. But the gardener's creative will determines what is attempted. Wilderness is not subject to a creative will in the same way. Even a steward's interventions in wilderness areas, such as controlled burns for example, are not for the sake of making a place of refuge and beauty, or to directly cultivate the land for harvest or services, rather these are interventions made for the sake of the land's own authenticity and ecological functioning. The steward may bend nature to her will, but she is doing so for it – for nature – to remain autonomous, or to become autonomous and self-willed once more. Although I describe wilderness as untrammelled nature (following the US Wilderness Act of 1964), the salient feature of wilderness is not so much that it is untouched, but that it is 'unrestricted'.⁵ As I will show, while Oberlander was mindful of nature's 'will' in her work, her landscapes are not wildernesses, they are intentional creations, in fact artworks.



Given their minimalism, however, Oberlander's gardens and landscapes often require more than visual inspection to bring them into focus as created places. They require both a visual and cognitive frame to see them as such. Sometimes a visual frame suffices, if the frame is unambiguous. Consider Oberlander's courtyard garden in the New York Times Building (2007) [1]. The garden is framed on all sides by the glass and steel structure of the building, which prompts the viewer to identify this small stretch of land as no longer wilderness but now a courtyard garden. In turn, the linear birch trees growing in the courtyard, reflected in the structure of the surrounding building, provide a frame for viewing the building as an amplification of the natural elements in the garden, perhaps for identifying the courtyard garden as the core of the building: the acorn from which the building grows so to speak.

Sometimes a more-than-visual frame is required to bring a garden into focus. Consider here Oberlander's landscape design for the Museum of Anthropology at the University of British Columbia (1975) [2]. Oberlander employed traditional First Nations plants and grasses to create a native botanical landscape for the museum, broadening the ethnographic reach of the museum into the natural surroundings.⁶ The resulting design fits seamlessly into its surroundings. It is not entirely undifferentiated from its natural surroundings but remains inconspicuous. It might be possible, simply by looking at this stretch of land, without

any knowledge whatsoever of its history and context, to appreciate the beauty of the plants and grasses. However, to bring this stretch of land fully into focus as a place, as a native botanical garden, requires some digging into its cognitive stratum to discover its history and context. Here we require not only a visual frame, but also a cognitive one to see this stretch of land as a created place. I propose to dig even further into the cognitive stratum of Oberlander's gardens, to see them not only as created places, indeed as artworks, but also as humanist works, that cultivate civility in their users.

Humanism

Modern design is commonly identified as an aesthetic movement, concerned with abstractions of line and space, and the transparent use of materials (sharing Hegel's contempt for dissembling in art, about which more below). But it was also a social movement that sought a more serviceable built environment for democratic society. These two tenets of modernism reinforce each other. Abstraction and transparency seem inherently egalitarian in that they do not require

¹ New York Times Building, Manhattan, 2007. Architect: Renzo Piano Building Workshop. Landscape Architects: Cornelia Hahn Oberlander with HM White.



2 Museum of Anthropology, University of British Columbia, Vancouver, 1975. Architect: Arthur Erickson; Landscape Architect: Cornelia Hahn Oberlander.

overly specialised knowledge or familiarity with historical narratives for their appreciation. Further, serviceability is keyed to basic human physiology and psychology, which, to some degree, can benefit anyone. Thus, the modernist is presumed to embed egalitarian values in society through her art, with creations that most can understand and comfortably inhabit. This is not to say that historical elements are ignored. Oberlander, for example, incorporates historical elements into her designs: old growth, mature trees, traditional uses and meanings of the land. Nevertheless, modernism is not fixated on historical style for its own sake. Oberlander apprenticed with the landscape designer Dan Kiley, who was known for his revival of historical landscape traditions. However, late modernists such as Kiley were not, as the postmodernists were, interested in representing history as such, rather they were interested in using historical elements in the creation of novel works.⁷

Oberlander's humanism, then, derives in part from her modernist sensibilities, a movement that sought to serve and enrich humanity. However, there is also an older sense of the term: humanism

as an educational idea; a course of study in languages and culture – the humanities – that enriches the whole person. Oberlander's humanism also derives from this broadly moral ideal of the betterment of the whole person through education. It is an ideal, I will show, that can be traced to the enlightenment philosopher Jean-Jacques Rousseau. For both Oberlander and Rousseau, the garden is instrumental to this ideal of betterment. Rousseau, for example, argued that, rather like a gardener, the role of the educator is to nurture the student's natural capacities for inquiry, creativity, and morality towards good habit formation. Moreover, a key tool in this educational enterprise is the natural world itself. For Rousseau, such an education is the foundation for a healthy *civitas*. I will show, then, how Oberlander shares with Rousseau his interest in human betterment, as well as his turn to the natural world as a guide for cultivating our human nature and civil life. My discussion, therefore, is not only about Oberlander's works, but is also an opportunity to see Rousseau's ideas exemplified.

Civitas

Enlightenment political thought centred on the theory of the social contract, whereby a community agrees (contracts) to be governed by a constitution and laws. As a way to explain how such contracts come about, and why they are justified, thinkers imagined a fabled state of nature, life prior to such a social contract.⁸ It is a hypothetical state, a thought experiment, meant to clarify the terms of the social contract. One can imagine that there would be a certain freedom to life in a state of nature. Not only would humans be free of contract and law, but the natural world itself would be free for the taking. As the early enlightenment philosopher Thomas Hobbes put it, there is no '*Mine and Thine*' in a state of nature.⁹ However, Hobbes also imagined that life in a state of nature is 'nasty, brutish, and short'.¹⁰ Unconstrained by law, humans will do and take as they wish, insofar as they can. It is for this reason, Hobbes proposed, that we enter a social contract with others, to create a civil sphere governed by law (and for Hobbes a monarch) to protect ourselves from such brutishness.

The civil sphere is not a physical place, an *urbs* constructed of buildings and such. Rather, Annabel Brett clarifies, the civil sphere is a metaphysical place, a *civitas*: 'the political space that human beings have constructed [...] in which to live a distinctively human life.'¹¹ Hobbes speculated that, in a state of nature, resources might be scarce, and we may disagree over their use and distribution. A social contract, and associated laws, allow us to make claims of ownership over these primitively un-owned stretches of the natural world, to give us control over them, and thereby to pre-empt disagreement and conflict over their use and distribution. For Hobbes, the social contract allows us peaceable coexistence. By contrast, the later enlightenment thinker Jean-Jacques Rousseau did not imagine life in a state of nature to be so odious.¹² Instead he argued for our kinship with

the natural world, and for its continuity with civilised life. He agreed that we eventually leave life in a state of nature to enter a social contract with others but that we do so, ideally, for the increased opportunities which this offers us, to cultivate our already fairly decent human nature through education and the realisation of common interests.¹³ Whereas the social contract, for Hobbes, protects us from our nature, for Rousseau it should provide us with opportunities to cultivate our nature. For Hobbes, nature is a countervailing force to civilised life, whereas for Rousseau civility is cultivated from nature.

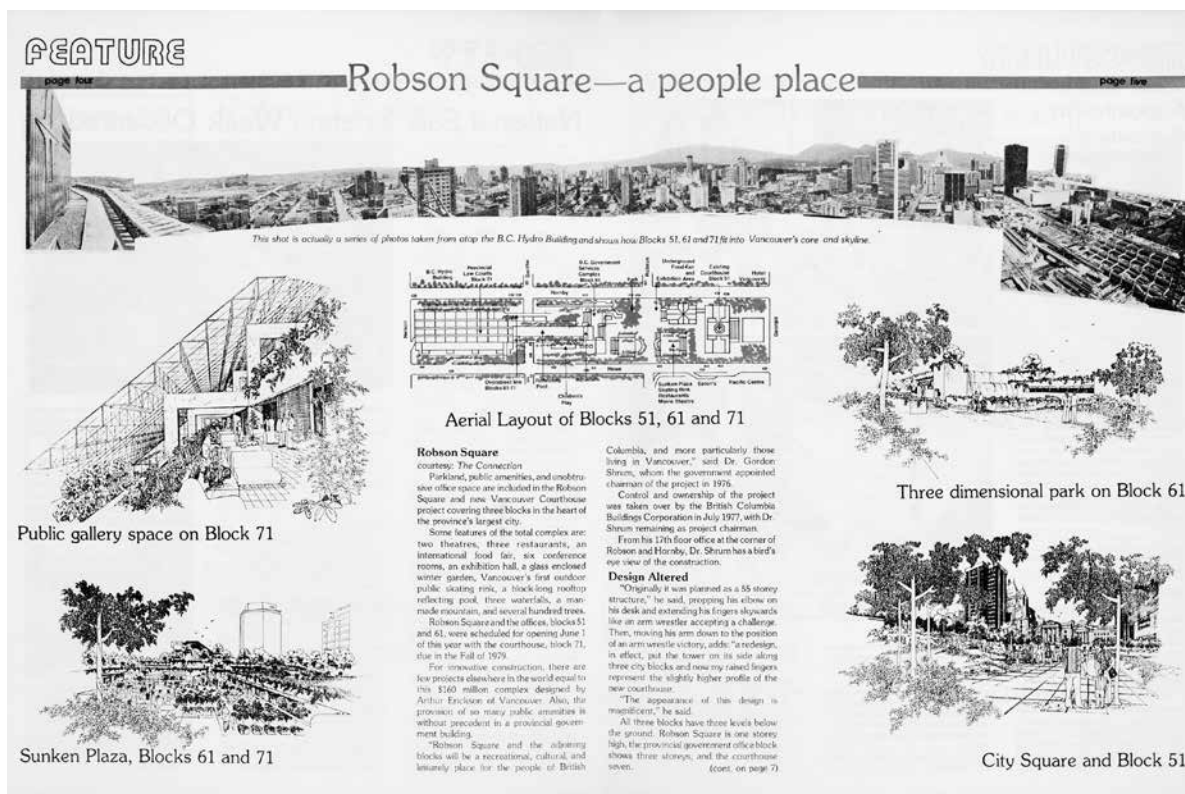
These contrasting views on civil life are nicely illustrated in the two main garden types of the period: the seventeenth-century formal garden, as found at the Palace of Versailles in France; and the eighteenth-century natural garden, as found at that time on large private estates in England. In their historical survey of the garden, Moore, Mitchell, and Turnbull describe the formal garden as an orderly-paradise garden, being an attempt to transform the natural world into an earthly paradise through 'rigorous laws [that] bring order and clarity to a chaotic world'.¹⁴ In turn they describe the natural garden as a greater-perfection garden, borrowing the term from Francis Bacon's essay *Of Gardens* (1601), in which the creator merely aims to cultivate 'the harmonies' already present in the natural world 'toward greater perfection'.¹⁵ The maker of an orderly-paradise garden treats the natural world as a foe to be vanquished through orderly design, whereas the maker of a greater-perfection garden treats nature as a congenial partner to be cultivated. The orderly-paradise garden reflects the Hobbesian view that law and order tame natural conditions, while the greater-perfection garden reflects Rousseau's sense that nature is to be, not so much tamed, as cultivated.

For the romantics who followed the enlightenment, the view of the natural world as civilisation's foe withered, alongside a growing appreciation for the natural garden, as well as for the aesthetic of the picturesque. Both the natural garden and the picturesque relied on an interplay of human artifice and wild nature, between *nature cultivée* and *nature savage*. Whereas the natural garden *hides* human artifice, the picturesque frames nature into art-like vistas, *revealing* artifice in nature. Romantic thinkers were influenced by Rousseau. His novel *Julie, or the New Heloise* (1761) was widely read, with its descriptions of Julie's natural garden, Elysium, lacking all artifice, and Saint-Preux's descriptions of the Swiss Alps framed as if artworks, as spectacle.¹⁶

By the nineteenth century, notably in the Americas, an appreciation for wilderness itself had taken hold, with the belief that the natural world could be understood and appreciated on its own terms: neither as a countervailing force to civilisation nor necessarily as a congenial partner, but rather as something wild, unadorned by art, and beautiful in its own right. With this,

both garden appreciation and the aesthetic of the picturesque began to give way to a new aesthetic of the sublime. Whereas the picturesque entails a distancing from the natural world to frame it into pleasing vistas, the sublime calls for an immersion in the natural world, to experience its wonder. The sublime is less visual, more visceral, and also a moral aesthetic. Henry David Thoreau, for example, argued that taking time from our busy modern lives to experience the natural world first-hand is a spiritual tonic.¹⁷ Similarly, the naturalist John Muir, known for his work establishing US national parks, argued that wilderness areas provide weary citizens, depleted by the demands of modern life, with places of spiritual renewal.¹⁸ Increasingly the naturalists turned away from picturesque nature towards remote, unsettled wilderness where, Thoreau argued, one can find beauty even in bogs and pond scum.¹⁹ The garden also held little allure for these naturalists, its artificiality degraded nature and its practical benefits were limited.

Oberlander shares with the naturalists their appreciation for nature on its own terms, unadorned and wild. For one example, her landscape design for the Northwest Territories Legislative Assembly Building in Yellowknife (1993) is located on a peat bog on the outskirts of the city that Oberlander preserved and incorporated into the design, seemingly following Thoreau's exhortation to find beauty in bogs.²⁰ However, Oberlander's deeper affinities are for Rousseau: not only with his appreciation for nature and for cultivated nature, that is, not just wildernesses, but also with his egalitarian sensibilities and interests in human betterment. For example, in her design for the Legislative Assembly, beyond attention to the delicate flora and terrain of the North, Oberlander also paid attention to the civil ecologies of the land. Following the consensus-style politics of the region, she solicited input from those who would eventually live and work within this landscape. Collaboration and consensus are hallmarks of Oberlander's practice, notably in the public housing projects she worked on over the years, beginning shortly after her graduation with an appointment to the Citizens' Council on City Planning in Philadelphia. These sensibilities and interests can also be seen in the playgrounds that Oberlander designed in and around her home of Vancouver, as well as for the public housing projects she worked on, and for the Children's Creative Centre for the Canadian Pavilion at Expo 67 in Montreal. A public playground is not only a fair and common provision of land for citizen recreation, it provides an opportunity for human betterment, by enabling children to exercise and cultivate their natural capacities, and their creative and political will. While Oberlander shares with the naturalists, then, their appreciation for nature on its own terms, unadorned and wild, she was not merely interested in nature, but more so in terms of nature shaped into a place of civility.



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The garden as art

Alongside the naturalist's heightened interest in wild nature, a rival interest emerged that can be traced to the Romantic philosopher Georg W. F. Hegel, in the fine arts as a distinctly human activity quite apart from the wonders of the natural world. Here, also, there was a loss of interest in gardens. Unlike the naturalists who found gardens artificial, to Hegel's mind they were not artificial enough to be considered fine art. He was particularly disparaging of the natural garden type. It perplexed him: presumably a garden is meant to be art, yet the natural garden dissembles as nature.²¹ The art writer Quatremère De Quincy similarly discounted gardens 'in the irregular style' (i.e., the natural garden) as a fine art, inasmuch as '[w]hat pretends to be an image of nature, is nothing more or less than nature herself.'²² An inverse complaint about gardens from one of Hegel's contemporaries, Arthur Schopenhauer, concerned their artificiality, not their lack of it.²³ Schopenhauer was more forgiving of the natural garden type and instead disparaged the ornate formal garden type, which he saw as an expression of the human will to enslave nature. For Hegel, however, the point of art is not to reproduce nature, rather it is to give us created representations of the human spirit or *geist*, our capacity for reason, and the exercise of freedom. He even bestowed a 'higher rank' on landscape painting over actual landscapes precisely because it is an art, shaped and appreciated by a human mind.²⁴

To this day, the garden's status as art is debated, with some discounting gardens as in any case a *fine* art, with others aligning gardens to the expanded field of site-specific and environmental art.²⁵

3 Cornelia Hahn Oberlander, Pamphlet, Robson Square Provincial Government Complex, Vancouver, BC. Between 1977 and 1986.

Despite Hegel's own reluctance to count gardens as artworks, his approach to identifying and appreciating art is instrumental to the appreciation of gardens as art. It is a critical, not primarily an aesthetic approach to appreciation, which is directed towards intentional creations. Critical appreciation requires some understanding of the object of appreciation to identify – to 'register' as Hunt would put it – the creation as a work, for example to identify plants and grasses as a native botanical garden, which is then appreciated for the kind of artwork that it is. Aesthetic taste is a somewhat more subjective response, directed towards any sort of object, including non-art such as the natural world, and does not *require* an understanding of the object of appreciation.²⁶ Of course, a person might very well have some understanding of the object in question, and this will likely influence how she feels about it. Still, an understanding of the object of appreciation is not required for an aesthetic response. It is, however, required for the appreciation of artworks. The question is whether, or not, gardens can be identified and understood as art.

Hegel seemed to suggest that the natural world, because it is not an intentional creation, cannot be appreciated as art, and consequently because gardens are more-or-less undifferentiated



4 North Shore Neighborhood House Playground, Vancouver, 1968. Landscape Architect: Cornelia Hahn Oberlander.

from nature, they also cannot be appreciated as art. But not all would agree that gardens are undifferentiable from nature. Even minimalist gardens, it seems, can be recognised as such with sufficient contextual knowledge, and thereby differentiated from the untrammelled natural world. John Nivala adds that not only can gardens and landscapes be differentiated from wilderness, they can also be differentiated from strictly utilitarian places, such as croplands and service buildings. When gardens and landscapes are not primarily about the realities of habitation in the way that, say, a cropland or a service building is – he would argue – and they instead concern the abstraction of habitat, or of the *genius loci* or spirit of the place, thus they invite regard and appreciation as artworks.²⁷ Croplands and service buildings are intentional creations and may be beautiful and innovative in their own way, but they lack the abstract ‘aboutness’ of artworks.

The utilitarian bedrock of some of Oberlander’s landscapes, particularly her playgrounds, can make it hard to see them as artworks. However, they represent more than mere realities of habitation, and invite regard and appreciation as artworks. Furthermore, they do the work that Hegel ascribes to the arts, of showing us something about ourselves. Consider, for example, Oberlander’s landscape design for Robson Square and Provincial Law Courts in Vancouver (1973–83), another collaboration with architect Arthur Erickson [3]. Robson Square was an urban renewal project that revitalised three derelict blocks in the city core with a public space connecting the city’s art and government centres. As Oberlander describes it, Erickson essentially rotated a 55-storey high-rise onto its side, effectively providing ‘a green roof over three city blocks’ creating ‘a linear park for all citizens to enjoy throughout the seasons,

day and night, and that we could traverse from one street to the other surrounded by greenery.’ It is, incidentally, an architectural iteration of Oberlander’s horizontal climbing tree in the North Shore Neighbourhood Playground [4].²⁸ The egalitarian gesture of placing a vertical, hierarchical structure onto its side, provides a frame for looking at Robson Square as a distinctly political landscape.

Walking through Robson Square and its greenery, denizens will be reminded of the natural world but also of human artifice in the creation of Robson Square as a place apart from the untrammelled natural world. They may even reflect on the equipoise between these two worlds. As enlightenment thinkers speculated, there are distinct freedoms to be found both in a state of nature and the civil sphere. Presumably in a state of nature we are free to act as we wish, insofar as we can, and without heed of rules. While we give these freedoms up when we enter a social contract, we may enjoy new freedoms in the civil sphere, precisely through contract and law that may not be available to us in a state of nature, such as the freedom of opportunity for example. We may even wonder about the best way to arrange our lives in the civil sphere to increase opportunities.²⁹ In any case, as Hegel argued, art nudges us towards self-awareness. Here, the landscape shows us our place in the scheme of things, as creatures of nature with windows of opportunity for freedom and betterment through acts of civil dwelling. Viewing Robson Square in this way, we are enjoying a created image of the human spirit.

A beautiful sample of the weave of nature and civil life at Robson Square is a tree-lined sidewalk at its northwest perimeter. Oberlander planted maple trees along two sections of the walk (blocks 61 and 71), spaced in such a way that they have grown into canopied *allées* for pedestrians to walk under as they

go about their day-to-day business. At first glance, the *allées* are about the realities of habitation, specifically providing citizens with refuge from the busy city streets. Yet, apart from the utilitarian service of these *allées*, they also reveal a *genius loci*, a spirit of the place, as an equipoise between the natural and civil worlds. Indeed, a recent retrospective of Oberlander's work at the West Vancouver Art Museum was titled 'Cornelia Hahn Oberlander: Genius Loci', presenting her work as not only about habitation but about the abstraction of habitat, as works that invite regard as artworks in a museum setting.³⁰

Our better nature

While Hegel provides a lens for looking at Oberlander's gardens and landscapes as artworks, it is Rousseau's thought that runs as a vein throughout the landscapes themselves. Gardens did not disappear with the rise of the fine art world, but they were less likely to be deemed high art. The garden then came to be appreciated mainly as a life-style ideal in the form of the home and community garden. Johann Wolfgang von Goethe summarised:

[gardens ...] once the ambition of all [...] are now quite out of fashion. People neither hear nor read, as they used to, that somebody or other is still making crooked paths, or planting weeping-willows, and it looks as though the fine gardens we have will soon be broken up to make potato patches.³¹

By the nineteenth century, notably in the Americas, the home garden – and the many local garden clubs and community gardens that home gardening begat – had taken root as a moral and political ideal.³² Particularly throughout the Progressive Era, the garden was viewed as a 'civilising' place, as Catharine Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe extolled: a moral school in which citizens could learn lessons of humility and industry required for American life.³³ Robert Emmet adds that the home garden brought practices of conservation and stewardship into focus that, along with innovative landscape design of the period, prepared the ground for the twentieth-century environmental movement.³⁴

The idea that the garden, and the natural world generally, are imbued with moral and educational significance can be traced, once again, to Rousseau. Recall how Hobbes and Rousseau thought differently about the social contract. For Hobbes it affords us protections, freedom from the interferences of others. Whereas for Rousseau the point of the social contract is for human betterment, affording us the freedom to achieve things. He acknowledged that social contracts can go awry, and in fact Rousseau found the social contract of his own time and place flawed. He saw it as a Hobbesian-style contract that primarily protected rights-holders from interference, notably wealth and property owners, thereby allowing the wealthy to monopolise property. Without the opportunity for all to acquire wealth and property in the first place, a social contract

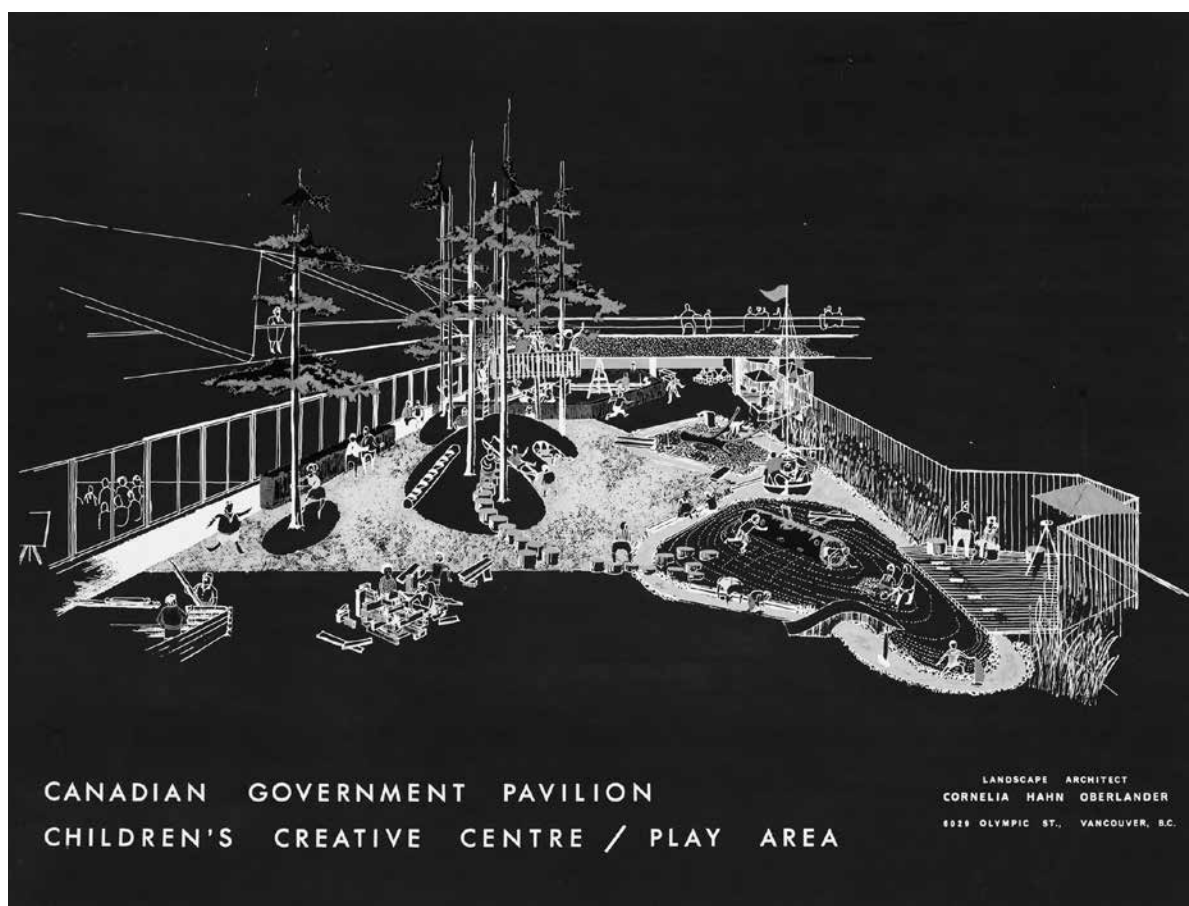
becomes unhinged from the point for having it at all, namely, for the realisation of common interests and human betterment. Rousseau, then, favoured a more egalitarian contract.

Despite his concerns, Rousseau was optimistic that we can recalibrate the laws and contracts that, after all, we have created to better suit us. For guidance on how we might go about recalibrating our civil life, he turned to the natural world, to life in a state of nature, as a regulative ideal. Rousseau, then, was not circumspect about life in state of nature in the manner of Hobbes. Rather, it was civil life he was wary of. Humans are by nature good, he thought, but faulty social contracts can debase that nature. For example, with a Hobbesian-style contract, our natural inclination to be loved by others is distorted into an endless need for the esteem of others through the accumulation of wealth and property.³⁵ With an improved social contract and civil institutions, we can realise, indeed perfect, our basically good nature, developing our capacities and interests as best we can.³⁶

To negotiate a decent social contract, one that facilitates rather than hinders human flourishing, Rousseau thought that this requires citizens whose decent nature has not been debased, and who can negotiate without selfishness and in good faith with others. This, in turn, requires citizens educated to preserve and build upon their basically good human nature.³⁷ A certain kind of education, therefore, is the foundation for a healthy *civitas*. In this way Rousseau's treatise on education, *Émile or On Education* (1762), provides the preliminary ground for his arguments in the *On the Social Contract* (also 1762).

The garden school

The role of the educator is to nurture the student's natural capacities for inquiry, creativity, and morality towards good habit formation. This is possible, Rousseau reasoned, because we are not fundamentally creatures of instinct, but of habit. Whereas instincts are fixed, habits are 'plastic' and 'belong to the [...] open-ended and voluntary realm' of morality.³⁸ We are free, then, to develop our character in accordance with our will, within our limits, and can just as easily develop bad as good habits. The role of the educator, thus, is to guide the student towards good habit formation, and does so by providing her with opportunities to develop her own capacities in a relatively natural manner, and towards civil ends. A key tool in this educational enterprise is the natural world itself. For example, Rousseau recommends teaching geography by inviting students to ramble across diverse terrains.³⁹ Whether or not this is sufficient for a good education is an open question. Surely learning to read a map also has educational value? However, in any case, for Rousseau, the student is not an empty vessel to be filled with information but is a whole person, and the role of the educator is to nurture the child's own capacities and growth. Moreover, they should do so in a way that leads to civil habit



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formation, and ultimately a sound *civitas*.

The early American philosopher John Dewey objected that Rousseau 'subordinated' the student's civil education to her natural development.⁴⁰ Far better, he thought, for the educator to concern herself with a distinctly civil or social education, not merely a child's natural growth and development. *Pace* Dewey, Rousseau was concerned with civil education. In cultivating the child's own capacities and interests, the point is not for the child to become self-involved and uncivil, but to simultaneously grasp that her capacities and interests are cultivated in concert with others, with the natural world as well as with other people. The Rousseau-ian ideal is to collaborate with nature, neither to subordinate the self to nature (as Dewey worried), nor to wholly subordinate the natural world itself (as Schopenhauer worried), but to cultivate nature.

Oberlander's playground designs exemplify Rousseau's collaborative ideal. For one thing, they present children with the opportunity to change the environment, to exercise their will rather than follow the dictates of stationary and standardised playground equipment. In her design for the Children's Creative Centre for the Canadian Pavilion at Expo 67 in Montreal, Oberlander incorporated a number of movable playthings, including movable objects, as well as the moveable plaything *par excellence*, the sand area [5]. Oberlander included a protected sand area for nursery-age children as well as another open sand area, surrounded by a shallow

canal with flowing water, reached either by crossing a small bridge or more ambitiously by stepping on log stumps resting in the water, or even just leaping across the canal.⁴¹ It is interesting to note that the Children's Creative Centre had both an indoor and outdoor area, and that the most compelling for children was the outdoor area. This recalls the enlightenment idea that there is a certain freedom afforded us in the outdoors that we, reluctantly perhaps, give up when we move indoors and become constrained by law.

Although children exercise their will in the playground, at the same time they are doing so *with* materials that have their own properties to contend with. The garden, generally, is a strikingly clear reminder of how our creations are collaborations with our materials. The gardener may wilfully alter the natural world for creative ends, but she must also grapple with, and submit to, the conditions of the garden's living materials in doing so.⁴² How a garden turns out is as much a matter of the gardener's will as it is the maturation of the garden's living materials. All art making is collaborative in this way. The artist does not create works *ex nihilo*, but from a give and take between her intentions, materials, and intellectual *milieu*.⁴³

5 Cornelia Hahn Oberlander, Perspective view for Children's Creative Centre Playground, Canadian Federal Pavilion, Expo '67, 1967 or before.

When Oberlander does bring fixed equipment into the playground, it is often bespoke equipment following the native features of the land, such as swings affixed between tree trunks, or felled trees repurposed for climbing [4 refers]. A related design innovation of Oberlander's is the felled log repurposed as a bench, now a beloved feature of most Canadian parks and public beaches. Both the movable and fixed playground equipment are a model of the improvisation and creativity that the playground itself invites. These design choices also reflect Oberlander's modernist sensibilities. A design is not imposed on the land in the manner of the formal garden, rather it follows the land's features and character. Yet, neither does Oberlander merely reproduce or even perfect nature for its own sake, in the manner of the natural garden type. Granted, Oberlander follows the features of the land, however, this is not undertaken to perfect nature for its own sake, more than this, there is a civil aim to the work. Oberlander finds in nature a beauty and logic that can be used to facilitate human flourishing.

Oberlander's collaborative-style playgrounds are harder to find these days. A lack of fixity in the playground makes public officials who are concerned with safety and liability nervous. Such anxieties have led to the closing of public spaces everywhere, including the New York Times Building courtyard, which is no longer accessible to the public.⁴⁴ On the other hand, the rise of the forest kindergarten, in which children are allowed free play in wilderness areas, defies liability anxieties with a less coddling approach to outdoors children's play and learning. The forest kindergarten is not so much a playground as it

is organised education that takes place outdoors. The teaching and learning need not be about the outdoors, only that education takes place there – a notably Rousseau-ian idea.

I will close with a final example that brings together the various threads of Oberlander's influences and interests: her landscape design for East Three Schools, Inuvik (2012) [6, 7]. The building itself, located within the Arctic Circle, is a long two-storey construction anchored into the permafrost with steel adfreeze piles. Its profile has been likened to 'a great grey bird' hovering over the land.⁴⁵ Normally Arctic buildings raised above the permafrost require steep steps to their entrance. At the East Three Schools, however, Oberlander worked with the architects to create a gently sloping walkway leading from the edge of the school grounds upward towards a grade-level entrance to the school. The grounds were planted with spruce, birch, and larch trees retrieved from the surrounding boreal forest, to create a shelterbelt protecting the school and its grounds from wind and snowdrifts. Additionally, the grounds were planted with an array of plants, shrubs, and ground cover native to the region, able to thrive in local conditions, and further slow the high winds. Both the building and the landscape were designed with the effects of climate change in mind, such as melting permafrost and higher winds. Plantings

6 East Three Schools,
Inuvik, 2012.
Architects: Pin/
Taylor Architects;
Landscape Architect:
Cornelia Hahn
Oberlander.



6



7 East Three Schools,
Inuvik, 2012.
Architects: Pin/
Taylor Architects;
Landscape Architect:
Cornelia Hahn
Oberlander.

were also selected for their cultural significance, for their use as traditional food and medicine. And, naturally, the grounds also have a play area for students.

Oberlander's light but purposeful touch recalls the practice of rewilding. However, the aim of rewilding is to return cultivated land to its wild, self-willed state. Oberlander's landscapes are not wildernesses. Rather they can be identified and appreciated as created landscapes. That said, they often require contextual knowledge to see them as such. For example, the administrators of East Three Schools, who had not been informed of the school's landscape design, assumed that the land surrounding the school building was but an unremarkable yard. They were unaware, also, that the landscape requires regular maintenance. After being informed of the intentional design, and now equipped with plans detailing the design and plantings, the administrators view the landscape with new eyes, as an educational opportunity for students to learn about local flora, traditional food

gathering and preservation practices, and food security in conditions of climate change.

There are also lessons to be learned about civility on the East Three Schools' grounds. Gardens are invariably about ownership, whether private, public, or common ownership, or about physical or cultural ownership. Harkening back to Rousseau, one of the lessons that Émile learns in his estate garden is about fair land use and ownership. The narrator relates how Émile unknowingly planted fava beans in a plot where the estate gardener, Robert, had just sown his prized Maltese melon seeds. Robert complains that not only had Émile planted his 'miserable beans' without asking permission but, in doing so, he had deprived others of the pleasure of superior melons.⁴⁶ After discussion, apologies, and restitutions, the three negotiate a new agreement (contract) for sharing the plot. For Rousseau, and also Oberlander, the garden is not merely a place to sow prized melon seeds. Gardening can, in turn, sow civility in the gardener.

Notes

1. Cornelia Oberlander passed away from complications due to COVID-19 on 22 May 2021, one month shy of her centennial birthday.
2. John Dixon Hunt, *Greater Perfections: The Practice of Garden Theory* (Philadelphia, PA: University of Pennsylvania Press, 2000), p. 8.
3. For an explication of the meanings of 'nature', see Lorraine Daston, *Against Nature* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2020).
4. George Monbiot, *Feral: Rewilding the Land, the Sea, and Human Life* (London: Allen Lane, 2013), p. 10.
5. The Wilderness Act (1964) <https://www.fs.usda.gov/Internet/FSE_DOCUMENTS/fseprd645666.pdf> [accessed 31 August 22]; Brandon Keim, *The Eye of the Sandpiper: Stories from the Living World* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017), p. 185.
6. Susan Herrington, *Cornelia Hahn Oberlander: Making the Modern Landscape* (Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Press, 2014), p. 156.
7. On Oberlander as a late modernist, see Herrington, *Cornelia Hahn Oberlander*, pp. 1-5. On the distinction between modernism and postmodernism, see *Ibid.*, pp. 86-8.
8. David Graeber and David Wengrow argue against a pristine distinction between a state of nature and civilisation, showing life in a so-called state of nature to be just as organised and political in its own way: *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (Toronto, Can.: McClelland & Stewart, 2021).
9. Thomas Hobbes, *Leviathan*, ed. by R. Tuck (1651; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1991), p. 90. Although Hobbes predates the high enlightenment, *Leviathan* is a canonical work in enlightenment political theory, and he is typically considered an early enlightenment thinker.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 41.
11. Annabel Brett, *Changes of State: Nature and the Limits of the City in Early Modern Natural Law* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2011), pp. 1, 7.
12. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Part One: Discourse on the Origin and Foundations of Inequality Among Men*, trans. by D. A. Cress, pp. 18-44 (1755; repr. Indianapolis, IN: Hackett Publishing Company, 1983), pp. 18-20.
13. Whereas the *Discourse on Inequality* describes a flawed social contract, *On the Social Contract* prescribes an improved contract. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *On the Social Contract*, ed. and trans. D. A. Cress (1762; repr. Indianapolis: Hackett Publishing Company, 1987).
14. Charles W. Moore, William J. Mitchell, William Turnbull Jr, *The Poetics of Gardens* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1998), p. 21.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Julie, or the New Heloise: Letters of Two Lovers Who Live in a Small Town at the Foot of the Alps*, *The Collected Writings of Rousseau* Vol. 6, ed. by R. D. Masters and C. Kelly, trans. by P. Stewart and J. Vaché (1761; repr. Hanover: Dartmouth College Press, 2010).
17. See the opening paragraphs of Henry David Thoreau, 'Walking', in *Essays*, ed. by J. S. Cramer (1862; repr. New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2013), pp. 243-80.
18. *John of the Mountains: The Unpublished Journals of John Muir*, ed. by Linnie Marsh Wolfe (1938; repr. Madison: University of Wisconsin Press, 1979), pp. 234, 317, 350.
19. Thoreau, 'Walking', p. 262. See also *Picturesque California: The Rocky Mountains and the Pacific Slope*, ed. by John Muir (Concord, MA: J. Dewing Pub. Co., 1888).
20. Architects: Ferguson Simek Clark/Pin Matthews (Yellowknife), and Matsuzaki Wright Architects (Vancouver); Landscape Architect: Cornelia Hahn Oberlander.
21. Georg W. F. Hegel, *Aesthetics: Lectures on Fine Art*, 2 Volumes, trans. by T. M. Knox (1835; repr. Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1975), pp. 248, 699-700.
22. Antoine Chrysostôme Quatremère De Quincy, *An Essay on the Nature, the End and the Means of Imitation in the Fine Arts*, trans. by J. C. Kent (London: Smith, Elder and Co., 1837), p. 170.
23. Arthur Schopenhauer, 'Isolated Remarks Concerning Natural Beauty', in *The World as Will and Representation* Vol. 2, ed. and trans. by J. Norman, A. Welchman, C.

- Janaway (1844; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), pp. 420–2.
24. Hegel, *Aesthetics*, p. 29.
 25. See Thomas Leddy, 'Gardens in an Expanded Field', *British Journal of Aesthetics*, 28 (1988), 327–40.
 26. On the subjectivity of taste, see Carolyn Korsmeyer, 'Philosophies of Taste: Aesthetic and Nonaesthetic Senses', in *Making Sense of Tastes: Food and Philosophy* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2002), pp. 38–67.
 27. John Nivala, 'The Landscape Art of Daniel Urban Kiley', *William and Mary Environmental Policy and Law Review*, 29 (2005), 267–326 (pp. 291, 299).
 28. Cornelia Hahn Oberlander, 'The World Through Your Eyes', *The Canadian Architect*, 54 (2009), 28–9 (p. 28).
 29. For an exploration of new forms of contract and community, see *The Great Awakening: New Modes of Life Amidst Capitalist Ruins*, ed. by Anna Grear and David Bollier (Santa Barbara, CA: Punctum Books, 2020).
 30. Cornelia Hahn Oberlander: *Genius Loci*, West Vancouver Art Museum, 20 January–13 March 2021 <<https://westvancouverartmuseum.ca/exhibitions/cornelia-hahn-oberlander-genius-loci>> [accessed 31 August 22].
 31. From Goethe's 1825 correspondence with Varnhagen von Ense, cited in Marie Luise Schroeter Gothein, *A History of Garden Art: From the Earliest Times to the Present Day in Two Volumes* [English translation 1928], ed. by Walter P. Wright and trans. by Laura Archer-Hind (1913; repr. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014), p. 325.
 32. Andrea Wulf traces the home and community garden ideal back to the founders of the US republic, who saw the garden as a school for democratic citizenship and nation-building: *Founding Gardeners: The Revolutionary Generation, Nature, and the Shaping of the American Nation* (New York, NY: Vintage, 2012).
 33. Catharine Esther Beecher and Harriet Beecher Stowe, *The American Woman's Home: or, Principles of Domestic Science: Being A Guide to the Formation and Maintenance of Economical, Healthful, Beautiful, and Christian Homes* (Pittsburgh, PA: J. B. Ford and Company, 1869), p. 296. Cited in Robert S. Emmet, *Cultivating Environmental Justice: A Literary History of U.S. Garden Writing* (Amherst, MA: University of Massachusetts Press, 2016), p. 24.
 34. *Ibid.*, pp. 25–33.
 35. Rousseau, *Discourse on Inequality*, pp. 35–8.
 36. On the contested concept of 'human nature' (good or otherwise), see Maria Kronfeldner, *What's Left of Human Nature? A Post-Essentialist, Pluralist, and Interactive Account of a Contested Concept* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2018). Kronfeldner argues that although essentialist conceptions of human nature are problematic, we still need some concept of human nature in the sciences, when studying the human. For example, when considering how to nurture and educate humans, we need to know what is good for them, as opposed, say, to horses. Therefore, we need to classify, describe, and explain the human life form (human nature), but will ideally do so in a post-essentialist and pluralist manner.
 37. Jean-Jacques Rousseau, *Émile or On Education*, trans. by A. Bloom (1762; repr. New York: Basic Books, 1979).
 38. James Miller, 'Introduction', *Discourse on Equality*, p. xiv.
 39. Rousseau, *Émile or On Education*, Book III, pp. 168–9.
 40. *Ibid.*, pp. 131–2.
 41. Cornelia Hahn Oberlander, 'Space for Creative Play', *The Canadian Landscape Architect* (1966), pp. 16–17.
 42. David E. Cooper, *A Philosophy of Gardens* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2008), p. 95.
 43. As Beth Preston argues, we create art within a commons of social norms, practices, and institutions: *A Philosophy of Material Culture: Action, Function, and Mind* (London: Routledge, 2013), p. 77. Preston adds, not only is art making broadly collaborative in this way, it is improvised and experimental: *Ibid.*, p. 8. Planning, of course, is part of the process, however, art making is not the discrete transfer of a lucid plan to inert materials.
- It is the progressive working through of contingencies, over time, until a stable artwork is achieved.
44. On the gradual enclosing of commons, see Derek Wall, *The Commons in History: Culture, Conflict, and Ecology* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2014), pp. 73–86.
 45. Anne Raver, 'Permafrost Frontier', *Landscape Architecture Magazine*, 22 June 2022 <<https://landscapearchitecturemagazine.org/2019/09/20/permafrost-frontier/>> [accessed 31 August 22].
 46. Rousseau, *Émile or On Education*, p. 107.

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Competing interests

The author declares none.

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