Chapter Eleven

THE PATTERN OF DESIGN

In the eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in Britain landscape gardening was perceived as having distinct social functions. Landed estates were never purely commercial units. They were also political and administrative centres, status symbols and embodiments of a family lineage but also artistic creations. Commercial reorganization of the estate as a result of the agricultural revolution was accompanied by remodelling of the Big House, its gardens and surrounding parkland. The new house and grounds manifested the social prestige and political influence of the landowning family. It also showed the good taste of the owner in his conformity to the aesthetic rules of the ‘picturesque’ landscape and drove a clear wedge between aesthetics and commerce. The beautiful was incompatible with the commercial and in Newby’s words:

"the imposing beauty of the English country house and its surrounding park also symbolized an enduring social dominance."  

The solitary grandeur of the eighteenth century landscape park was replaced in the nineteenth by a philosophy which stressed the value of the ideal village community and the integration of the landscaped mansion into the village. Again to quote Newby:

"The locally powerful assumed the responsibilities of leadership, transforming their often arbitrary control into an ethic of 'service' to the community."  

Architects working later were preoccupied with the vernacular and tried to free their work from historical styles. Many of them joined the new progressive societies and guilds. Their architecture became known as ‘Arts and Crafts’ and their work had common features:

"Plans and elevations became the expression of utility; a building’s materials were taken from the locality, being cheaper and in harmony with its surroundings. Details were based on vernacular originals and not taken from classical pattern-books. All the architects were interested in craft and in employing plasterers, painters, carvers, and sculptors to enrich a building. Ornament was based on nature."  

The movement loved England and things English and returned to English garden designs of before the mid eighteenth century and a liking for artisan seventeenth century classicism as well as the vernacular. The vernacular was defined by Gertrude Jekyll:

"The local tradition in building is the crystallisation of local need, material and ingenuity. When the result is so perfect, that is to say, when the adaptation of means to ends is so satisfactory that it has held good for a long time, and that no local need or influence can change it for the better; it becomes a style, and remains fixed until other conditions arise to disturb it."  

At that period an architect trained in an office where the pupil’s parent paid for his son to be articled for a set period. Articled pupils could also attend evening classes at, for example, the Royal Academy Schools or the Architectural Association. Such a training would have encouraged a cross fertilization of ideas with specific office methods contrasting with theoretical teaching. To the evening classes and guilds must be added the influence of a rapidly expanding architectural press on the trainee architect. Four extremely influential new magazines were established at the end of the century:

Academy Architecture (1889),
The Studio (1893),
Architectural Review (1896),
Country Life (1897)

Stimulated by all these ideas of originality and freedom, and the ‘House Beautiful’(q.v.) the young architect spent his weekends touring the home counties looking for ideas and sketching. One may well wonder what was the strongest influence on the young architect of the 1880s and 1890s. No matter how many fervent meetings he attended the trainee was most likely to be influenced by the office where he learnt to trace, to go on site, to detail and to draw.  

How these ideas influenced practice in New Zealand is difficult to assess but at least two New Zealand architects spent time in Sir Edward Lutyens’ office.
Fig 11.1 (a) and (b) Two drawings and designs by C E Mallows FRIBA for (a) a garden and a house intended for a small shooting box - notice the pergola, and (b) for a house at Speldhurst, Kent, taken from The Studio, 1909.
Early in this discussion of garden design we should bear in mind Fairburn’s recent suggestion as to the role of gardens in colonial New Zealand. He has rejected traditional views of the social development of New Zealand and instead suggests that the key feature was the atomisation of society and the very poor development of a cohesive social structure. Gardens and liquor both played a part in reducing the worst features of loneliness in the young colony. The former reminded the colonist of the best liked features of home (Britain), while the latter blotted out the worst features of their isolation. The extension of houses was seen as part of this process, with the additional rooms being used to accommodate visitors in a period when much recreation was home based and visiting neighbours was a major pastime. The extended home was often surrounded with a little bit of England, a well managed garden, to show visitors that the niceties of civilisation were not totally foreign.  

In Victorian Canterbury many gardens were laid out by the ‘professionals’, the nursery trade, as well as by the gardeners on big estates. According to Challenger many of the early gardeners and nurserymen were very competent at their craft. They had been trained in Britain and had obtained some experience there before they emigrated. Such men as Thomas Abbott were responsible for laying out the public and private landscapes of the new colony. Nurserymen were often garden designers as well as the suppliers of plants, and Thomas Abbott and John Greenaway fell into this category. Normally the gardeners undertook the construction of any designs being laid out.  Little remains of the very earliest designs, either on the ground or as plans. Challenger has provided us with a convenient summary of these early designs:

"The designs which can be traced usually involve rigid boundary belts, probably as much for shelter as for segregation, with large lawns in front of the house, and long, meandering carriageways which lead to the house. Drives may sometime lead between avenue trees, and often skirted shrubberies on their way. Gardens were usually expected to be self sufficient in supplying fruit and vegetables. These functional items were usually placed to the rear of the house, adjacent to the stables - which, of course, was the source of materials for the hot beds to provide out-of-season production."  

Alfred Buxton, as a young man, worked in an environment where this was the typical pattern of design. One of the major problems facing the young garden designer must have been the lack of recognition of the nature of landscape gardening. His one time employee and friend, James Campbell, published an article entitled ‘Landscape Gardening’ in the Journal of Agriculture in 1913. This article is subtitled ‘Laying down and maintaining lawns’, which perhaps illustrates the general lack of knowledge of the subject matter and focuses on a major problem for most of New Zealand’s new householders. The subject is also one covered by Buxton’s only writing on the subject, his articles on The Garden Beautiful. Similarities in the use of language can be detected between the two articles. Campbell begins

"As a means of beautifying and improving the surroundings of the homestead, landscape gardening is receiving more attention now than in the past, but there is still room for improvement in this direction. It should be the aim of every householder, where possible, to do something by way of ornamenting the grounds in connection with his residence corresponding with the extent of land available. Neatly kept lawns, flower beds, and shrubbery borders, &c., not only improve the appearance of the property, but make the home more attractive and pleasing to the occupants... There can be no rule of thumb method laid down in reference to general landscape work, as different positions invariably require special treatment and design, but in dealing with small areas it is always advisable to aim at neatness and simplicity..."

While Campbell’s article was not intended to discuss design, it appears to be addressing a pragmatic concern for all New Zealand landowners. André Siegfried noted the lack of desire exhibited by New Zealanders for debating philosophical subjects. Good and bad design work might be included among these. New Zealanders’ preference was for pragmatic subjects and for solving problems such as laying down lawns.  Alfred Buxton grew up in a largely pragmatic atmosphere where the major concerns were economic rather than philosophical and his attitude to design is more likely to have been pragmatic too; more concerned with getting jobs than the nicer points of design. His design philosophy, such as it was, is most clearly expressed in a quote from one of his 1931 articles:

Landscape Architecture - the art of subjecting nature to our will.

Here, in the 20th century, we find ourselves...struggling to subject nature to our will...to secure even a semblance of obedience...to make her carry on her wondrous work under human direction and control...to produce an embodiment of Nature’s paradisiacal beauty."
Fig 11.2 The mature garden at Panikau showing the pergola and the swimming pool which replaced the original rose garden (Peter Murphy).

Fig 11.3 A view of the lookout at Panikau Station where Edgar Taylor based his detailed design on the work of C E Mallows.
an idea Buxton came to identify with strongly. By about the time of the First World War Buxton had taken up the English pergola style of Lutyns and Mawnson, and by the 1930s some of his pergolas were Italianate. 346 It seems likely that he was influenced by the 'Country Life School' of English designers since he held a subscription to that journal. Country Life was also the major publisher of gardening literature, including The Century Book of Gardening, of which the third volume of some 610 pages still remains in the possession of his daughter. 347 This book provides little in the way of advice on more than the basics of laying out lawns, some suggestions on rustic pergolas, and layouts of gardens in confined spaces.

Alfred Buxton as a garden designer passed through four discernible phases. The first was before Edgar Taylor was employed in 1906. The second was while Edgar Taylor was acting as the Company’s draughtsman and Landscape Manager from 1906 until the early 1920s when Trevor Buxton joined the Company. The third phase began with Edgar Taylor ceasing to be involved and Trevor Buxton taking over some of the the landscape reins, and ends with Trevor Buxton’s reduced involvement after 1932, when he moved to Palmerston North and terminated his directorship with A W Buxton and Sons Limited. The final phase covers the period after Trevor Buxton had established himself in Palmerston North and was no longer directly involved in his father’s projects, although he appears to have acted as the draughtsman for projects such as that for Government House in Wellington. As already indicated, we know little of Alfred Buxton’s landscaping prior to Edgar Taylor joining A W Buxton Limited in 1906. The only gardens for which many details are available are those built for his uncle in St Albans (Rotorura) and at Leslie Hills. Upon those we have to base our assessment of Alfred Buxton’s initial landscape designs. 348 We do know that he had no particular landscape education as he had left school by the age of fourteen. He was apprenticed to Thomas Abbot and that apprenticeship and any earlier experiences of spectacular gardens in England must have been the design foundation on which he built. But these foundations are uncertain. William Robinson had attacked some of them in his book The English Flower Garden published in 1883. Those characteristics repudiated included carpet bedding, topiary, and rustic pergolas. The latter were rejected for being complex and ugly. Their only merit was that they soon fell down. Also Robinson attacked those parts of garden design which were the work of the architect such as Paxton’s landscape setting in Sydenham for a permanent home for the Crystal Palace. 349 When Alfred Buxton became aware of these criticisms of accepted styles we do not know, but the extensive rustic work at Leslie Hills, Wharanui and Achray does not seem to be repeated in later years. The second phase, from Edgar Taylor’s employment, brought the most radical changes in landscape style. 350 Taylor had been schooled by his father at the Botanic Gardens in Christchurch in the rudiments of draughting and mensuration. His training was based on his father’s experiences at top English gardens: Woburn Abbey, Chatsworth, Kew, Harewood House, and Tring Park, as well as indirectly at the neighbouring Rothschild gardens at Mentmore Towers and Waddesdon Manor. Further he had added to these early experiences by attending the School of Art of Canterbury College under George Hart. He was to have attended the Royal Botanic Gardens, Kew, like his father, but was prevented by the sinking of the s.s. Ruapehu with it the family friend who was to have arranged a cheap passage for him. 351 By the time he had finished at the School of Art in 1912 he had won prizes for his architectural designs. Also he was awarded a Diploma in Landscape Design by the Canterbury Society of Arts. His draughting style had matured substantially from the relatively simple style exhibited for Miss Crosby and at ‘Westburn’ (Fig 5.6 and 5.7) to the more mature style adopted for McLachlan’s at Birdlings Brook in the 1920s (Fig 11.4).

Another problem with Taylor’s contribution to the design team of A W Buxton Limited was the degree to which he designed and that to which Alfred Buxton designed. Was it a relationship somewhat like Thomas Mawson had with his staff where they added the detail to his preparatory sketches, which he had discussed with the client? We do know that much of the detail was Taylor’s concern and the getting of contracts Buxton’s. But it is not precisely clear where the boundary was, and how much freedom Taylor was allowed. 352

One name stands out in Taylor’s work, that of the Arts and Crafts architect C E Mallows. Taylor studied his work closely. 353 Mallows is not well known now but at the beginning of the century he and his work were much appreciated. He worked closely with Thomas Mawson and they had adjacent connecting offices in London. 354 Mallows drew many of the perspective drawings in the first edition of Mawson’s book The art and craft of garden making. 355 His work is also cited by Gertrude Jekyll and Lawrence Weaver in Gardens
for small country houses. In her introduction to the 1981 edition of the book Jane Brown suggests that Jekyll was far too astute an observer to confine herself to the influences of Lutens and Country Life on garden design, and extensively illustrated her book with the work of other contemporary designers, including Walter Cave, C E Mallows, Inigo Triggs and Thomas Mawson. Charles Edward Mallows (1864-1915) had been one of William Flockhart’s first pupils in London about 1885 and was one of the designers in the forefront of the ‘Arts and Crafts’ school. He contributed several articles to The Studio between 1908-1910 on architectural gardening which he defined as:

"...the arrangement, within preconceived and definite architectural lines, of the garden in relation to the house". All of his work is in this very formal manner and he argued:

"...it is of the greatest importance that the details of the garden architecture should be in absolute sympathy and agreement with those of the house itself and have that same kind of intimate connection which is to be found in a thoughtfully designed interior of a house and all its decoration, even down to the details of the furnishing". He could turn his hand to many styles - Art Nouveau, Arts and Crafts vernacular, Georgian, or classical for public buildings, but is probably most associated with the full blown Elizabethan style. He is better known for his skill as an architectural draughtsman, and with his pupil Frederick Landseer Griggs, could convey the random textures of houses and gardens far better than anyone else of his generation. Mallow’s drawings are some of the most effective of the Movement in conveying a romantic impression of buildings already well established in natural settings after some years. He also wrote:

"In the larger masses and general outline both of form and colour the perspective drawing is most valuable in the first stages of design, and even in the final stages; but it is always necessary to supplement and correct and compare this with experiments on the site". He also stressed

"...the importance of the pictorial element, and of unity, in house and garden design......By ‘pictorial element’ is meant the studied arrangement of pictures both within and without the house, not only as concerns a composition as a whole, but also the details of its various parts". Taylor has claimed that Mallows’ work influenced him for the garden at Panikau Station, near Glasgow, which was constructed for the Murphy family between 1919-1921. Certainly it was one of the more architectural of the Buxton gardens of that period. Stone facings were added to an extended house; a most extensive masonry pergola was constructed, which originally surrounded three sides of a rectangular shaped rose garden. A smaller pergola adjoined the house, and extensive walling and two stone gateways with wrought iron gates completed the design. The garden also has a stone lookout which is set below the main level of the the garden but overlooks the adjacent valley (Fig 11.3). The site is unusual being 24 km off the sealed road in the back blocks not far from Tolaga Bay. Not exactly where one might expect to find an architectural or Buxton garden. However, in terms of Fairburn’s thesis, that gardens provided work and beauty to counter loneliness, the location is less unexpected. This garden also provides some insight into Alfred Buxton’s personal design philosophy. Murphy family tradition suggests that Buxton believed that a garden should be full of surprises, that all should not be visible at once. But rather as one progressed through a garden each vista should be complete and separate, and that there should be something exciting to see around each corner. This philosophy is not original. Alexander Pope had encapsulated this view in 1731. During Taylor’s time as the Company’s landscape draughtsman Japanese gardens came into vogue in England and were followed in Buxton’s landscape designs to some degree. Unfortunately none of these early designs have survived and it is impossible to guess how much of the design was Taylor’s and how much was Buxton’s. One can only say that the design ideas with a Japanese influence were carried through by Alfred Buxton to his later garden designs when Taylor was no longer making a contribution. Strongman suggests that the abundance of water in the Canterbury area supports the concept of water gardens with Japanese overtones, which when ‘artistically planted’ with various aquatic plants such as water lilies make a delightful change and ‘in hot weather give quite an oriental effect’. The Landscape Department specialises in this kind of work and a special pond was constructed at the nursery to house the collection of hybrid water lilies. The gardens at Oakleigh and Parkdale were among those which exhibited this character. The planting was similar with Chusan palms, bamboo, magnolias, camellias, rhododendrons and hydrangeas. The nursery sold several varieties of Japanese maples and nine varieties of flowering Japanese cherries, from white to deepest pink. Another Japanese characteristic which appeared regularly was the Japanese lantern which was often used at the sharp end of a tear drop shaped drive, such as at Ernest Short’s property Parorangi.
Edgar Taylor eventually asked to be relieved of his North Island responsibilities and returned to manage the nursery. Only the plan drawn for Mclauchlan’s at Birdling’s Brook (Fig 11.4) and the associated planting survive from this later period of his work for Buxton’s. Taylor did set up in business on his own after leaving Buxton’s in 1926 but with the onset of the ‘Depression’ it was not a success and he was compelled to make his employees redundant and take a job himself. After working as Grounds Supervisor at St Andrew’s College he joined the Parks and Reserves Department of Christchurch City Council in 1942 as their first Landscape Architect.  

Trevor Buxton started working for his father’s company before Edgar Taylor had left, and was for a time his pupil. In 1920 and 1921 he also attended the School of Art, Canterbury College. In 1920 he was registered for both morning and evening classes and in 1921 for evenings only. His first known plan, completed for the company in 1923, was No. 232 for W Brown, a farmer on the northern bank of the Waitaki River at Ikawai. Other plans were completed for E Lyons near Hastings, for H G Cross near Oxford, and for A and P L J Anderson at Southbridge. The 1927 plan for Greenmeadows, Orari, for G Stewart, was also drawn by Trevor Buxton. Trevor Buxton obtained a National Diploma in Horticulture by examination in 1935. At that stage it included no landscape design component. The proposal for the Institute of Horticulture to offer a National Diploma in Landscape Architecture was promoted successfully by his father at the annual meeting of the Horticultural Trades Association in 1934. However, it was never taken up by the Institute.

The plans prepared for Government House, Wellington, in 1935, were far more elaborate than any other set of surviving Buxton plans. Not only are there nine different plans, with five perspectives, but also sketches of the resultant alterations and developments. Two of the documents combine sketches of the pergolas proposed and overhead plans. They include sketches of a proposed private garden, and a formal sunken garden and ornamental ponds. The plans also provide for extensive terracing, both walled and grass, with steps down to the main lawn. The main terrace is the subject of a separate plan which gives details of the steps and balustrading. Taken as a whole the plans are not only more elaborate, but exhibit more architectural features with the balustraded terracing, sunken garden, ornamental ponds and pergolas Of the latter Jones has written that Buxton’s plans:
"...show that he intended to introduce two extremely formal pergolas, one laid out on a major axis of the garden facing the portico of the Vice-Regal Residence. The other had glass enclosed portions at either end, perhaps as sun rooms for Vice-regal relaxation on Wellington's frequently windy days."

Trevor Buxton separated his business interests from those of his father in 1932 after his marriage and moved to Palmerston North. He continued to prepare landscape designs of his own. Again the mutual influence of the two designers is unclear. Perhaps their business interests separated because they could not agree on design issues. Seventeen of his landscape plans for the later period of his life remain (1935-1948) All but one are for domestic gardens and exhibit strong axial tendencies, walls, and sunken gardens with ponds showing marked architectural features (Fig 11.6)

Only in the period after Trevor Buxton had left the company in 1932 can one write with any confidence that Alfred William Buxton’s design work was his own, with minimal outside influence from other individuals. Some of the gardens of those relatively late years of his life show hidden depths, which previously may have been choked by the work of others, or by business activity, or by the need to maintain activity for economic survival. The greater depth of those gardens suggests also an ongoing process of self education. Jones has described Buxton's design work at this period as follows:

"His garden designs were still of the formal Edwardian kind, but were now richer in spatial terms. His Eskvale (Koponga) garden, at Ranfurly, is a gem of an early English Renaissance layout. A walled garden adjoins the homestead and a pergola runs along the sunniest wall as a 'green' cloister or gallery, linking also with the house terrace as a perimeter walk. The Eskvale design has generated a warm micro-climate and an inviting 'sense of place', a garden to be enjoyed, a pergola to be savoured, to sit in and to move through. The garden has human scale and proportion, and the walls and pergola columns are of smooth river boulders whose soft tones almost merge with the foliage. Figures 11.7 and 11.8 taken 50 years apart, emphasise the imagination one has to have at the time of constructing a garden."

Also the garden had ponds (now disused and overgrown) with Japanese bridges (Fig 9.31) and a smaller more Japanese pergola at the front entrance (Fig 9.32), before the original farmhouse was burnt down. Ponds originally had irregular concrete banks.
Fig 11.6 Trevor Buxton's plan for N Loisel, Tolaga Bay. (Mrs M Kirkwood)
Fig 11.7 The original planting at Eskvale (Koponga) near Ranfurly. (P. Neate)

Fig 11.8 The same walled garden fifty years later, without the rose-garden but still a warm sheltered spot in a hostile environment.
Fig 11.9 The Japanese style pond at Lake Hawea Station, now sheltered by mature trees in Central Otago sunshine.

Fig 11.10 The landscape plan prepared for Lake Hawea Station in 1936. The draughtsman is uncertain but may be Doug Brown.
and bottoms with sunken holes for water lilies. The pond at Lake Hawea Station (1936) follows this pattern with Japanese style hump backed bridges as at Parkdale and Oakleigh (Fig 11.10). The later designs for ornamental ponds at Government House, Wellington and that executed at Angus's, Waikanae (Fig 10.5-6), were more architectural too. They were established on basically rectangular shapes with brick or concrete surrounds and some sculpted shapes on the longitudinal axis. The Waikanae Lily pond is oriented along a straight avenue, originally of cherries, now of maples and azaleas. However, this plan was not constructed completely. Jones has described the plan and should have perhaps the last word on A W Buxton's design capability:

"The Angus design shows a strong architectural use of the pergola - as a loggia with one side and both ends walled, and facing north onto a swimming pool. The loggia is raised slightly above the surrounding ground so as to be entered by steps centrally positioned on each side. The loggia commands a good view of the pool and would be a warm place to relax after a swim. There are small cubicles at each end of the loggia and ....one is struck by the remarkable parallel with Pliny's villa at Tusci (62 AD).....It is evident in history that good ideas repeat themselves. It is doubtful that Buxton was schooled in Roman garden design and more probable that he had a fertile mind which devised worthwhile spatial relationships." 372

Fig 11.11 A detail from one of the plans for Government House showing a more formal style of pond of a more geometric design.