

EUROPEAN GARDEN AWARD 2015

Herrenhäuser Gärten

Winner in the category: “Best development of a historic park or garden”

Laudation by Ed Bennis, Manchester

It is helpful to understand the origins and concepts behind a garden and I hope to give you some insight into origins of thought related to this magnificent garden. When you see the images of the garden, these will speak for themselves about the obvious quality and importance of the gardens; there is little need for me to describe them. But first, I wish to congratulate both Sigutà in Italy, and Painshill Park in the United Kingdom. These gardens are exceptional and represent the highest standards of conservation and management at an international level. Our regret is that only one finalist is chosen, but all are more than worthy.

There are times when you have to question why we seem to love gardens so much for all of the problems that it entails in having a garden. Garden owners and gardeners complain about it being too cold or too hot, too wet or too dry, early frosts, weeds and an ever depleting bank account. They strain us physically, emotionally and financially. Which leaves the question, why do we bother? Nearly four centuries ago, Francis Bacon (*Of Gardens* 1625) wrote that ‘God almighty first Planted a Garden. And indeed, it is the Purest of Humane pleasures. It is the Greatest Refreshment to the Spirits of Man; Without which, Buildings and Pallaces are but Gross Handy-works...’. Bacon gives us part of the answer, it gives us pleasure, but gardens in Bacon’s time and those of today fulfil many needs. Surveys carried by EGHN in Germany,

England and France asked why visitors came to a garden. Basic questions were asked such as are you interested in the history of the garden, the plants, the management, the designer, or ideas for your own garden? Only 5% had any interest in these topics so clearly most visitors were not here for intellectual enlightenment! There was a much more fundamental reason, it was simply a nice place to go, and one that kept everyone happy, grandparents, parents and children giving pleasure and a refreshment to the spirits that Bacon wrote. However, gardens contribute to other aspects such as botanic collections, scientific knowledge, environmental quality and habitat creation.

Herrenhausen is without doubt one of the great gardens of Europe. It reflects the economics, politics and the taste of the past, but it provides for today's society as well.

This is a garden with an amazing past, a garden that was built as a baroque garden and summer palace with different periods of change that tells the story of the garden as a series of layers. The Berggarten started as a kitchen garden with early experiments in growing rice, tobacco, and mulberry for silk production, not all experiments were successful. Conservatories were built, rebuilt and replaced with larger ones when fashion meant that one needed a palm house; the famous Tilia allée was planted; and, of course an English garden was added, all part of the fashion of a period. The most dramatic garden was The Great Garden, a 50 hectare parterre of walks, lawns, flower beds, hedges, statues and fountains which was regrettably destroyed during the war, despite pleas from the British royal family to the RAF. The RAF spared the gardens and palace; however, sadly it was the Americans who destroyed it. Even before the war, the gardens had gone through renovations in the 1930s, but with near complete destruction in July

1943, the gardens and later the palace would be resurrected like the Phoenix rising from its own ashes.

A few years ago I was co-authoring a book on Sir Peter Shepherd and I interviewed Peter several times. We discussed the restoration of gardens at Het Loo and the Privy Garden at Hampton Court both of the same period of thought and design as Herrenhäuser Gärten. Peter said that this was not really a high point in garden design, and while I agreed with Peter on many things, I could not agree with him on this. These three gardens are exceptional, and each is subtly different; and while they show the art of the garden in that period, underneath is the idea of man's domination over nature and men. Herrenhausen is a significant part of the culture of the nation and the restoration of these gardens demonstrates the importance placed on them. But moving beyond restoration, the gardens and palace have been reinvented and demonstrate that historic gardens have a positive role to play in modern society.

Restored in the 1960s, the gardens show that historic monuments can adapt and change yet retain their conceptual integrity. Many events are held in the gardens throughout the year including a Festival of Small Arts, Small Festival in the Great Garden, a Festival Week, the International Fireworks Competition, and a series of musical and theatrical events with performances in the Garden Theatre in The Great Garden. Perhaps the greatest surprise is the Grotto which looks simply like another high quality garden building; it completely belies what happens inside. As one of the few features that survived the war, the Grotto has entered a new phase of life with the work of Niki de Saint Phalle and her amazing sculpture installations bringing renewed interest and excitement to a new generation of garden visitors. This type of

garden was always meant for display and entertainment; the performance is as much within the acts presented as it is with those who come to see them.

There is something about a garden that is very difficult to define as to why people return year after year. In part it is the changing events that attract them, but it is also the fact that a garden is never static. It is constantly altering throughout the months and the years. My local historic garden, Tatton Park, is very English in style and far removed from the elaborate style of the Herrenhäuser Gärten. But those gardens attract over 700,000 visitors a year and many are return visitors, while the house attracts only 40,000 visitors a year. There is a message here which takes us back to Francis Bacon when he wrote 'And a Man shall ever see, that when Ages grow to Civility and Elegancie, Men will come to Build Stately, sooner than to Garden Finely. As if Gardening were the Greater Perfection.'

At Herrenhausen the gardens were restored long before the palace and indeed, these gardens are the 'Greater Perfection' and provide the 'Purest of Humane pleasures'. There is more to seeing and visiting the gardens, go and experience the garden and when you have been, go back again because the gardens will be different. A few Euros will never have been better spent for your own pleasure as well as supporting one of Europe's great gardens.

Ronald Clark, Director of the Herrenhausen Gardens, is with us to accept the award, please welcome him.