

EUROPEAN GARDEN AWARD 2016

Laudation: Kloster Lorsch



Kloster Lorsch posed a small problem for the judges as to which category it belonged: was it a reconstruction of an historic garden, or an innovative new garden? And, as you look at these images, you may question if in fact, it is even a garden or a park. It seems to lack the many features, particularly plants, which we associate with gardens. There are no statues, pergolas, or fountains, although there is a new herb garden based on historic documents. A few years ago when interviewing Sir Peter Shephard, I asked him 'What is a garden?' and his reply was 'That is the \$64,000 question'. Peter's answer was reinforced to me when I had designed a new garden on a site that was protected by English Heritage. The local conservation officer could not understand why the existing garden was on the English Heritage list as there were 'no flowers'. Often there is little understanding, or a misunderstanding, of what an historic park or garden is, and how to deal with them. This lack of understanding is not restricted to the public but also to many professionals as the word 'garden' lacks clear definition, and as such comes in many different forms. It is even more frightening when the conservation officer has no idea what he or she is dealing with.

While outwardly simple, Kloster Losch is extremely complex and with its long history came countless alterations, additions and loss. The story lies in the past and much is either buried or lost. It is extremely difficult to appreciate its development through the many changes. The judges were impressed with the approach and sensitivity of TOPOTEK ; their solution shows that historic sites can take on a new life, with new ideas in a meaningful way. TOPOTEK 1 has shown great restraint, which is always difficult for a designer as their resolution is seemingly simple, yet dramatic. It was Russel Page in *The Education of a Gardener* (1962) who recognised the need for restraint when he wrote 'My thought is always "How little can I do", rather than how much, to achieve the most telling result.'

The designers have knitted together pieces of the story, at least as much as is known for there will forever be questions that remain unanswered. In some ways the lack of physical information is an asset in that it gives some freedom to the designers; yet, it also makes it difficult to find a starting point and a clear finish. Personally, I would have loved to have head the discussions, debate and no doubt arguments that must have ensued during the project. Rather than embellish the space with artefacts and planting, the physical design has revealed the structure and

form at Lorsch through identifying the footprint of earlier structures and spaces. You can see the footprint of the church, entrance and conclave with the cloister. To make these features more readable, they are outlined by sharp and articulated, grass slopes that are 365cm high. The design team refers to this as a form of braille, and indeed grass slopes and forms were often important parts of historic gardens. While these are not historic, the slopes are clearly modern and of today and are easily understood by the visitor. There is reference to the spirit found in the *Architekturgarten* of an earlier era.

In a similar nature, the walks read as a modern intervention which are not historic but the manner for accessing and understanding the spatial forms and sequences. Remnants of the Carolingian and later periods are exposed and become more visible, but the story is never absolute and complete leaving much to the imagination of the viewer. In terms of current conservation practice, TOPOTEK 1 has distinguished new from old, there is no attempt to falsify or misrepresent the site.

David Hockney said that 'the past is edited, so it always looks better, which is a jumble' (Esquire UK July 2016). TOPOTEK 1 has taken a complex site and edited it to become more meaningful and understandable although we will never know the complete story. Lorsch is no longer a jumble of incoherent pieces, but a unit that tells an important story which has been recognised as a UNESCO World Heritage Site and received the German Landscape Architecture Award 1st Prize. The challenge in dealing with historic sites is how to integrate the past with the needs of today and future generations. Much is hidden, parts will never be understood, but Rudyard Kipling in his poem *Glory of the Garden* (1923) refers to what we see and the emotional understanding of the garden: 'But the Glory of the Garden lies in more than meets the eye'.

Our congratulations to all those involved in this remarkable scheme at Kloster Lorsch; particularly to the design team of TOPOTEK 1 and the state of Hessen for having the conviction and foresight to bring Lorsch into the 21st century. Accepting the award from Hessen State Palaces and Gardens are Karl Weber, Director, and Inken Formann, Head of Gardens and Garden Heritage Protection.

Laudation by: Ed Bennis