

20th Century Gardens: Nature, Landscape and Identity

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Introduction

20th century gardens have frequently fallen into oblivion, unlike architecture of the 20th century that is widely appreciated and increasingly revisited. Only in the past few years a discussion has been prompted about the fragility and neglect of the 20th century green heritage (Fig. 1), and even more about the gardens of the mid-to-late decades that are usually overlooked and undervalued.

There have not been publications on the subject for very long ago. Only some 20 years ago, Marc Treib first published what is considered a milestone, *Modern Landscape Architecture. A Critical Review*.¹ Since then, publications have been increasingly frequent, as well as monographs on well-known landscape artists and architects. Exhibitions and other events and activities are contributing to raising awareness on the subject, but much is yet to be studied and researched, especially on the very close relationship between modern landscape design, architecture and urbanism, not to mention the links with contemporary ecological movements or nature conservation.

Some recent initiatives are fortunately taking place, this conference being one of them, and others I would like to mention as examples, like the current revision of the Florence Charter on Historic Gardens that the International Scientific Committee on Cultural Landscapes ICOMOS-IFLA is carrying out, or the 2017 Madrid-New Delhi Document,² a document by the ICOMOS International Committee on 20th Century Heritage (ISC 20C) that was first meant as guidelines for the preservation of architectural heritage, and has been revised to encompass other typologies, such as cultural landscapes. There are others with a more practical aim, as the initiative for including mid-to-late 20th century designed landscapes in Historic England's National Heritage List for England (NHLE), within the Register of Historic Parks and Gardens.

All these initiatives mentioned are clear indicators of the concern for historic gardens from the 20th century to be considered as a type of heritage, and thus worthy of protection, conservation, and specific management, just like the architecture of the same period. However, under the label of 20th century heritage most of the national registers include very few or no gardens or parks at all, as is the case of the French Ministry of Culture under the label *Patrimoine XXème siècle*³, or the very few parks, avenues or gardens included in the Spanish register of protected properties of the 20th century.⁴ So, although we have to congratulate ourselves that the situation is changing, there is still a long way to go. Unfortunately, landscape is inherently vulnerable and fragile, and

much of this heritage is being lost due to multiple factors, such as primarily a lack of understanding, development pressure, neglect, etc., and society should be conscious that many of these threatened properties have already disappeared.

Historic gardens and national identity

Throughout the century, landscape architecture ran parallel to the rest of artistic trends and was even, in some cases, the spearhead for innovative ideas related to major social, economic, political, artistic, and scientific shifts. While there were artists participating in the international modern, in rationalist movements, and those whose ideas on gardens and landscapes were nearer to a naturalistic style, another strong current was historicism, especially in the first half of the century, when gardens became a symbol indissolubly linked to the identity of certain countries. During most of the first half of the past century, there was a permanent debate between the proposals of national garden styles and followers of a modern, international style.⁵

Mostly during the 1920s and 1930s, garden styles were so clearly linked with certain periods and nations that they came to be called by the nation's name, and were as such known and explained in the garden history books. Many publications also appeared in that sense. Thus, the Renaissance garden was known as the Italian garden, a term used to describe geometric, architectonic and regular gardens in general, regardless of the country where they were. This fact was also due in part to the dissemination of classic Italian gardens linked to the preservation and restoration of Ital-



Fig. 1: Cubist garden, Villa Noailles, Hyères (photo Mónica Luengo)



Fig. 2: *Château de Villandry* (photo Carmen Añón)

ian Renaissance villas at the turn of the century by an elite, among which were well-known personalities such as Cecil Pinset, Charles A. Platt or Bernard Berenson. In fact, these pioneers in the appreciation of historic gardens, and especially of the formal gardens' classical canon at the beginning of the 20th century, emerged simultaneously with publications that are considered today as classics. In France, there were interesting initiatives such as the poetic reinvention of history at Villandry by Dr. Carvallo (Fig. 2). However, the great promoters of the renewal of the classical French garden were Henri Duchêne (1841–1901) and his son Achille (1866–1947) who worked in Europe, North America and Argentina. Indeed, their aesthetics were closely linked to French nationalism arising after 1870 with the Third Republic.⁶

There is an obvious connection between ideologies, specifically nationalism, and gardens, as in fact these are the formalisation of the feeling of man towards his surrounding nature, his natural environment. Some scholars have made in-depth research on this relationship, such as Joachim Wolschke-Bulmahn and Gert Gröning, who have explored and demonstrated the “ideological character of German landscape design in the early twentieth century and how these ideas and their underlying ideology influenced landscape design in the changed political and social conditions of early twentieth-century Germany”.⁷

Thus, the gardens following these historicist trends were considered as part of the cultural heritage due to their historic association, and in most European nations they were restored long before those linked to the modern movement

that had a more international character and could be less identified with a specific nation. What is really paradoxical is that the consideration of these historicist gardens as part of the national cultural heritage was often introduced into the country by foreigners, such as the already mentioned Americans in Italy, or the French Jean-Claude Nicolas Forestier (1861–1930) who promoted the new “Spanish” style based on Arabic and Andalusian concepts (Fig. 3). He spearheaded a revolution in the 20th-century Spanish garden scene, and his influence would last throughout nearly the entire century. He created the “neo-Sevillano” or “neo-Moorish” style, based on solid botanical and historical foundations, and adapted to our climate and our unique characteristics.

Forestier was an urbanist and landscape architect trained by Adolphe Alphand and had become the conservator of the *Promenades et plantations de la ville de Paris*⁸ and he was also in charge of the gardens and promenades of Paris during the International Exhibition of Industrial and Decorative Arts of 1925 that was to become a turnover in garden art. He became very renowned and was commissioned to remodel Maria Luisa Park in Seville for the International Exhibition of 1929. He considered Andalusia as the birthplace of the great gardens of Europe, so he took the view that the project should evoke its flourishing Moorish past. Forestier would also work in Barcelona on the Montjuïc Hill for another International Exhibition, also becoming a promoter of what he called “gardens under the climate of the orange tree”.⁹

Since its opening the Maria Luisa Park and its Plaza de España, a project by the architect Aníbal Gonzalez, has been

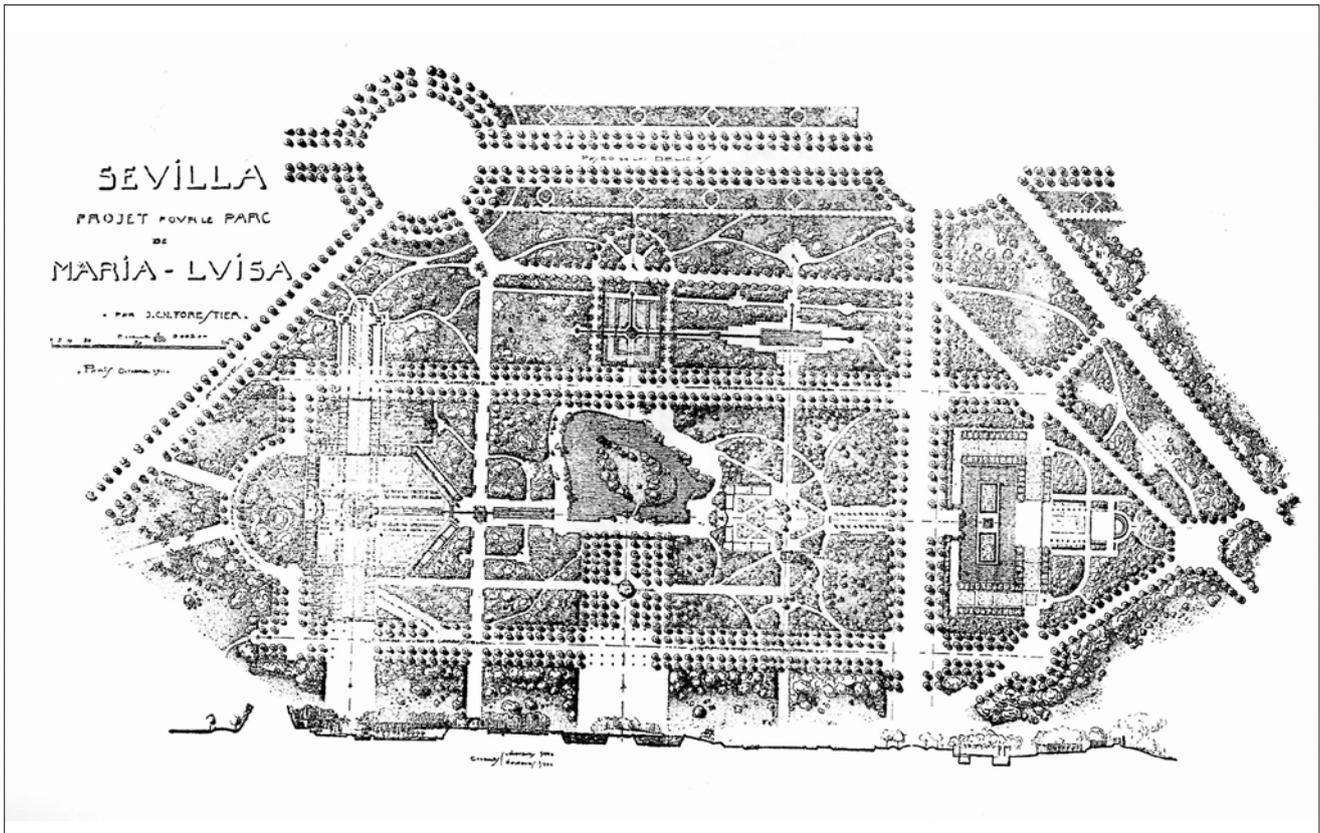


Fig. 3: Plan of Parque de Maria Luisa, Seville, J. C. N. Forestier (*Jardins, carnet de plans et de dessins*, J. C. N. Forestier, 1920)

an icon for the city of Sevilla.¹⁰ Careful restoration has been continuous almost since its opening, especially due to the fragility of the tiles and some of the ornamental features. It set the standard for a multitude of public and private parks of the first half of the 20th century, not only in Spain but also in France, North Africa and Latin America.

A clear example of its influence is the Andalusian garden of the Rosedal (Rose Garden) in Buenos Aires, Argentina.¹¹ It is the work of Eugenio Carrasco. In 1924 an Andalusian Patio was donated by the City Council of Sevilla¹² (Fig. 4), with very similar tiles provided by the same factories that had worked for the Parque de Maria Luisa. In 1999, the Rose Garden was restored under the direction of Sonia Berjman, but it was only in 2011 that it was registered as cultural heritage.

As Latin American nations gained independence from Spain (Bolivia and Ecuador in 1809, Mexico, Colombia, Argentina, Venezuela in 1810, and finally Cuba in 1868), the new republics followed garden trends from Italy, France, the United Kingdom, etc., while also looking for a new national style: a blend of their history, their past, their climatic conditions and their incredible botanic richness. We agree with Janet Waymark that by the end of the 1930s, both in North and South America there was an important trend of self-discovery in garden design, and “a new generation of landscape architects began to design for indigenous lifestyles which owed less to Europe than before”, while simultaneously welcoming modernist émigrés from Europe (Mies van der Rohe, Gropius, etc.). Major landscape designers “absorbed

European modernism, but used it creatively in combination with their own national styles and the climatic requirements of their countries. (...) In this way they helped to evolve national styles of their own.”¹³

A major figure of modern landscape design stands out in this sense: Roberto Burle Marx (Fig. 5). His work is an exceptional paradigm of the blending of ideas from two



Fig. 4: Patio Andaluz, Jardín Español, el Rosedal, Buenos Aires (photo Mónica Luengo)

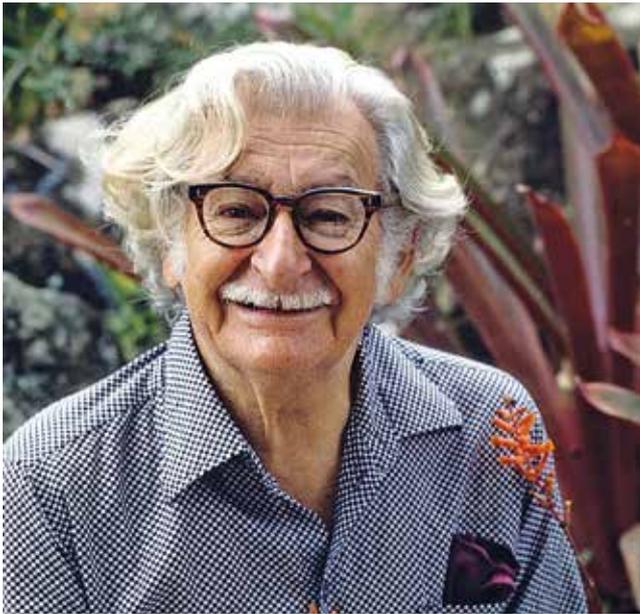


Fig. 5: Roberto Burle Marx (photo The Jewish Museum/Corbis/Burle)

different continents, creating a shared heritage that had influence beyond borders. He became one of the most influential landscapes architects of the 20th century, with his works ranging from great public spaces to private gardens. He was also a complete artist: painter, sculptor, music lover, illustrator, designer of textiles, jewellery and theatrical sets, and a ceramist (Fig. 6) etc. But above everything else, as the inventor of an “internationally recognized language for modern landscape design (...) he combined research on botanic specimens, respect for ecosystems and an application of innovation concepts in modern architecture with landscape gardening practice. (...) Using abstraction as his guiding principle and grand sweeps of voluminous local



Fig. 6: Roberto Burle painting tablecloth and tiles at Sitio San Antonio de Bica (photo Claus Meyer/Tyba)

vegetation and colourful flora, Burle Marx devised a whole new form of landscape expression that revolutionized garden design.”¹⁴ His training as a painter and the influence of visual artists made Burle Marx conceptualise the philosophy of the pictorial modern abstraction in garden and landscape design (Fig. 7).

He was the son of a German Jewish father and a Brazilian Catholic mother, and this mixed heritage led to a private education at a German school in Rio de Janeiro, including French and music lessons, and produced in him a deep love for both Brazilian and European (particularly German) culture. The family home of his parents was a centre of culture with musicians, artists and intellectuals from Brazil and abroad, giving him the chance to meet Arthur Rubinstein, Stefan Zweig, Portinari and Le Corbusier. Since he was a child, he developed a strong spirituality and thus considered Nature the most perfect of all the works of art and his role as a landscape architects in biblical terms.¹⁵

When he was young, he travelled to Weimar with his family, living in Berlin for a year and a half (1928–29). The period was seminal for his development as a painter and landscape architect. He took singing and drawing lessons and got to know the German Expressionists, Picasso and many other of the 1920s’ avant-garde. He also visited the Berlin Botanical Garden in Dahlem where he discovered the indigenous Brazilian flora and was amazed by the extraordinary richness of the plant collection that was organized according to ecological criteria. “There Burle Marx discovers species of the Brazilian tropical flora of which he not only has never heard before but which, he understands, contain all the artistic richness of Van Gogh’s palette.”¹⁶

When he returned to Rio de Janeiro in 1930, all that he had studied and seen resulted in a strong turn of his artistic vocation that by a series of coincidences would lead him to become a member of a group of artists and intellectuals who were looking for a version of modernity that could also integrate Brazilian native culture, which at the time was being discovered (Fig. 8).

He studied at the national School of Fine Arts in Rio where the architect Lucio Costa was his professor and also a family friend, living in the neighbourhood. He gave young Burle Marx his first opportunity and recommended him to his fellow architects as a designer of gardens. In 1932, Burle Marx took care of the gardens at the Schwartz House. He decided to plant banana trees and organised the garden-terrace with modern iconography, initiating a permanent collaboration between the two, which soon opened a path to another great contemporary architect, Oscar Niemeyer.

His career developed very quickly and only two years later, in 1934, he got his first official employment as Director of Parks and Gardens in Recife (1935–1937), where he met the botanist Henrique de Lahmeyer Mello Barreto, who would train him until he became a consummated expert in Brazilian flora. Burle Marx became interested in studying the plants in situ through expeditions. This would trigger a landscape revolution in the 1930s. He was recommended again by Lucio Costa to reform existing squares and create new public spaces in different neighbourhoods of the city.

In this context he created the modern garden, the Brazilian garden, as an “expression of art shaped by the plant, the



Fig. 7: Moreira Salles Residence, Rio de Janeiro (photo Mónica Luengo)

main plastic element of the composition, along with water, murals, stones, buildings and sculptures. These elements were thought according to principles of composition, such as harmony, proportion, light, opposition of colours, relations between volumes, texture, and also considering the location” (Fig. 9).¹⁷

Le Corbusier came to Rio, invited by Costa in 1928 and designed the project of the Ministry of Health and Education in collaboration with Costa, Reidy and Niemeyer, and with the remarkable artistic help of Claudio Portinari and of Burle Marx himself in the landscaping of the square and the famous garden-terrace. This was the first significant materialisation of a modern garden on the roof of an emblematic building (1938). He also created gardens around the base of the building, the first public gardens in Rio.

Roberto Burle Marx would actually do a very simple operation, almost instinctive: he worked simultaneously on the garden as landscape painter and as an architect, using the expressionist palette as reference for his projects and also the organic geometries of the abstract – of Arp, Le Corbusier, Leger, Calder. However, he did it as an architect, because despite using gouache, his landscapes were conceived as compositions in a ground plan. This was an alienation from the procedure of the ‘views’ characteristic of the traditional landscapers and painters. It brought him closer to the architectonic and cubist vision”.¹⁸

Since his time in Recife, Burle Marx conceived the landscape in the city as part of a system, “defining the character

of the garden from the natural and built elements for the place and regions, seeking the identity of the place. He presented the garden as ‘organised nature subordinated to the architectural laws’”.¹⁹ Sa Carneiro summarizes: “The landscape artist Burle Marx’s exercise in perceiving the landscape was keen on capturing structures, landmarks, architecture, social facts and other stimuli to conceive of something different from what had hitherto prevailed. Action on reforms and complementary actions in the existing gardens, he implanted a new way of thinking of the public space from the elements of the local landscape interpreted according to artistic principles of painting, music and botany” (Fig. 10).²⁰

In the period from the 1950s to the beginning of the 1970s Burle Marx up-dated the programme about park systems that Olmsted had created. Burle Marx made a ‘system of parks’ his own by redefining the notion of the public and the identity of Rio de Janeiro. In Rio Burle Marx had the opportunity to intervene in large public spaces (an incredible number of public projects, more than 200), which he considered his major and most influential works. They significantly transformed the landscape of the city and the concept of public space, placing the individual in the centre of the conception of landscape²¹. His great works were linked to the great urbanisation works by means of “aterros”, gaining ground to the sea and solving some of the city’s growth problems.

The city of Brasilia, inaugurated in 1960 and designed by Lucio Costa, posed a considerable challenge from the land-



Fig. 8: Banco Safra headquarters, Sao Paulo (photo Leonardo Finotti)



Fig. 9: Cavanellas residence, Petropolis (photo J. M. Hoffmann)

scaping point of view, as it lies in a vegetation zone geographically distinct: grasslands with xerophilous vegetation that is very different from the rest of the exuberant Brazilian ecosystems. Sadly, Burle Marx would only be called to collaborate after the first stages, thus missing a unique opportunity for his participation in the initial plan. He would participate with Niemeyer in 1961 in the urban planning of the city's monumental axis conceived by Costa, and in minor works and accomplished projects, such as the Ministry of Defence (1970) and Itamaraty Palace (Ministry of Foreign Affairs) (1965).

Burle Marx's work was not confined to Brazil, it also expanded to many other countries on the American continent (Argentina, Venezuela, Chile, USA), but also to South Africa and Europe. He had an immense influence globally as he

travelled, lectured and taught. He introduced into modern landscape design not only the artist's vision, but also ecological concepts that remain valid until today. Among these are the present political and cultural awareness of the environment, the recycling of materials in the construction of new gardens and parks, and blending different artistic expressions that range from the vernacular and popular arts and crafts (tiles, building materials, etc) to modern architecture, i.e. integrating modern and traditional artistic currents into a new synthesis. All this was of great inspiration globally in landscape architecture, covering 20th century themes in an exemplary way.

His work had a visionary dimension which came partly from the lucid assimilation of ecological processes into cultural mixing processes as origin of the contemporary public realm. It was also the starting point of a movement for the introduction and conservation of native species in the formation of a country's cultural national identity.

The legacy of Burle Marx is also this: a legacy in favour of beauty, against so many social, functional or scientific determinisms; a legacy that makes art, nature and architecture speak with one voice; a legacy of multicultural values embodied in beautiful living works of art. For this reason, at the end of his life, in 1993, he was commissioned by the city of Berlin to design a public garden for the newly reunified country at Rosa Luxemburg Platz in the Scheunenviertel. Unfortunately, the project was never implemented.

Recently, his work has been more and more recognised and some of his most important works were inscribed as part of two World Heritage sites: The Flamingo Park in Rio de Janeiro and the landscape of Pampulha, a residential complex. Burle Marx's work is the perfect example of a shared contemporary heritage that only began to be appreciated in the past years, while some of his major works, such as Parque del Este in Caracas, are in great danger. Conservation and management issues of his works are yet to be much more carefully studied, but are supported by programmes and initiatives such as the conservation plan of the Sitio de San Antonio de Bica, his own private garden and laboratory.

His works were also recently catalogued by Ana Rita Sa Carneiro and some important restorations have taken place in Recife, where he carried out 13 public projects and a general plan for embellishing the city. In 2001 a project between the Federal University of Pernambuco and the landscape laboratory of the city was initiated to restore three of the emblematic squares that were very damaged: Praça Euclides da Cunha that was used as a parking lot and where the cacti were in bad condition due to the shadow of the too-tall trees; Praça Faria Neves and Praça do Derby. They all pose a challenge due to their very rich ecological and botanical variety and a misunderstanding of some of Burle Marx's principles. In general, as occurs to many other gardens of the time, his works are undervalued and not understood as part of both the natural and cultural heritage of the city. However, the Recife initiative involved the joint work of the city, the university and of residents and generated a discussion in the press and a meeting with institutions on environmental entities that have spearheaded a general conservation movement (Fig. 11).

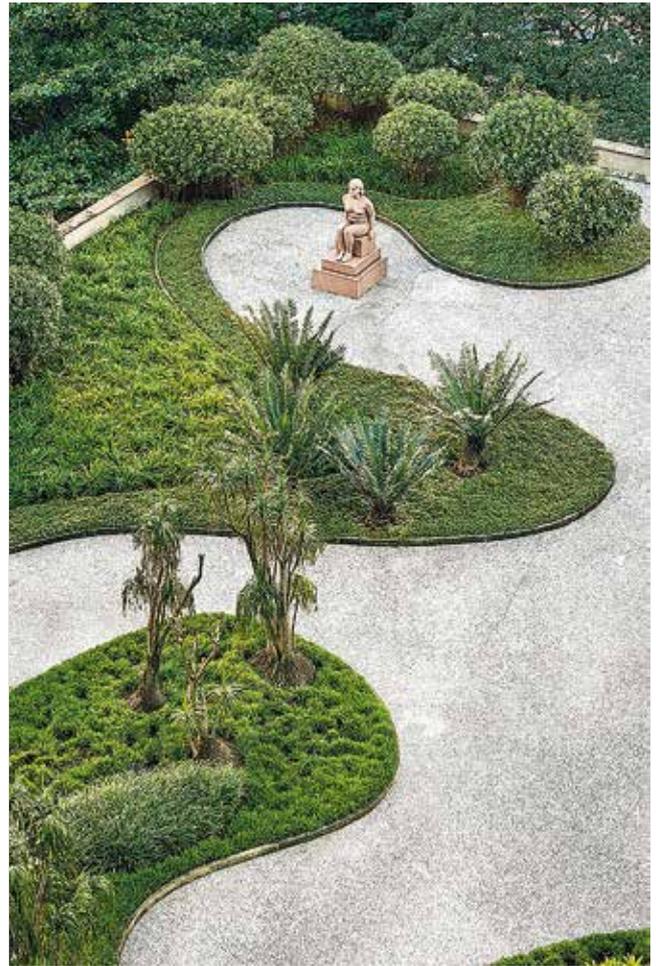


Fig. 10: Garden of the Ministry of Education and Health, Rio de Janeiro, 1938 (photo Cesar Barreto)

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Fig. 11: Praça Salgado Filho, Recife, after restoration (photo A. R. Sa Carneiro)

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¹ TREIB, *Modern Landscape Architecture*, 1993.

² <http://www.icomos-isc20c.org/madrid-document/>

³ <http://www.culture.gouv.fr/Aides-demarches/Protections-labels-et-appellations/archives/Label-Patrimoine-du-XXe-siecle>

⁴ <http://www.culturaydeporte.gob.es/planes-nacionales/dam/jcr:c18d8043-ddc5-44c1-afa9-60b9cb286a6a/06-01-listado-de-bienes-prottegidos-siglo-xx.pdf>

⁵ TITO, *Modernity and Regionalism*, 2015. On the same subject see also CONAN, TITO, ZANGHERI, *Histories of Garden Conservation*, 2005.

⁶ GRANGE, *Duchêne*, 1998.

⁷ WOLSCHKE-BULMAHN, *Nationalization*, 1997.

⁸ In fact, he even published a well-known publication, *Grandes villes et systèmes de parcs*, in 1906.

⁹ Forestier described his ideas on gardens in another publication: *Jardins, carnet de plans et de croquis*.

¹⁰ It has also been the scenario for some famous film shooting, like *Lawrence of Arabia* or, much more recently, some episodes of the *Star Wars* saga, where it was “tuned” as the planet Naboo.

¹¹ BERJMAN, DI BELLO, *El Rosedal*, 2010.

¹² BERJMAN, CAULA, DI BELLO, NIETO CALDEIRO, *El Patio-Glorieta*, 2010.

¹³ WAYMARK, *Modern Garden Design*, 2005.

¹⁴ CAVALCANTI, EL DAHDAH, RAMBERT, Burle Marx, 2011.

¹⁵ HOFFMAN AND NAHSON, Roberto Burle Marx, 2015.

¹⁶ ABALOS, Roberto Burle Marx, 2007.

¹⁷ SA CARNEIRO, *Quinta porta*, 2017, p. 83.

¹⁸ ABALOS, p. 7.

¹⁹ MARX, Recife, 1935.

²⁰ SA CARNEIRO, *Quinta porta*, 2017, p. 82.

²¹ REY, *La Nueva Estética*, p. 2.