

TRANSLATION TRANSLATION

Proceedings of the
**Society of Architectural Historians,
Australia and New Zealand**
Vol. 31

edited by Christoph Schnoor
(Auckland, New Zealand SAHANZ and Unitec ePress;
and Gold Coast, Queensland: SAHANZ, 2014).

The bibliographic citation for this paper is:

Ian Henderson, "Re-writing Through both Phenomena and Noumena: a Case Study on the Donnell Garden," in *Proceedings of the Society of Architectural Historians, Australia and New Zealand: 31, Translation*, edited by Christoph Schnoor (Auckland, New Zealand: SAHANZ and Unitec ePress; and Gold Coast, Queensland: SAHANZ, 2014), 715-722.

Published in

*Auckland, New Zealand: SAHANZ and Unitec ePress [ISBN - 978-1-927214-12-1];
and Gold Coast, Australia: SAHANZ [ISBN - 978-0-9876055-1-1]*

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**Re-writing through both Phenomena and Noumena:
A Case Study on the “Donnell Garden”**

Among garden historians, modernist gardens were generally perceived to be all about form, lacking meaning, and did not refer to precedents or literary allusions. This paper argues that a garden cannot be adequately apprehended through analysis, reference, or interpretation based on other literary references or antecedents alone; that the garden itself is the primary source. Above all, gardens are of a haptic nature: they possess singularity of locality, an enveloping physicality, and provide sensate responses in their experience. Evolving interpretations emerge through both a garden’s historiography and its reception over time and by the individual. The “Donnell Garden” in Sonoma County, California, a seminal work of the Californian Modernist movement, is explored in both the literature and on the ground to demonstrate such re-writings.

Introduction

“When a full-page colour photograph of the recently completed Donnell garden in Sonoma, California, appeared on the cover of the April 1951 issue of *House Beautiful*, the picture must certainly have done for Church’s career what the proverbial thousand words never could... Now famous for its biomorphically shaped swimming pool, sensitive site planning and exquisite design, the garden became a national icon of post-war leisure and home ownership.”¹

Dianne Harris describes the reception and influence of the Donnell Garden in Sonoma County, California, by Thomas Church, as of a populist nature. Among landscape architects and garden designers it has a reputation as one of the most notable gardens of the twentieth century. Although the above quote comes from an article published by a prestigious garden history journal in an issue dedicated to Thomas Church, this garden has attracted limited interest among garden historians, except notably Marc Treib.²

In “Approaches (New and Old) to Garden History”, John Dixon Hunt has suggested that garden history lacks “rigor, scope and conceptual assumptions”.³ Among the several requirements to write histories worthy of the garden’s significance as a “complex and central activity”,⁴ he suggests:

“The histories of it must... interrogate and narrate a cluster of concerns: how men and women represent themselves and their place in the world through the garden; what role the garden plays as a special site of beliefs, myths, fictions, illusions, and the melding of palpable (phenomena) with impalpable (noumena).”⁵

The Donnell Garden

This paper describes an analysis process of the Donnell garden in the terms outlined by Hunt above. It explores the concepts of phenomena and noumena as they apply to this garden. A method is described, which accomplishes how these concepts inform each other, or in other words with a focus on the *melding with* of Hunt’s statement. This is done as an account of my experience of both the literature on the garden and its milieu, and also of the garden as a site and a place to be in and to be of. It is done through the lens of a student of garden design and a garden designer. So it is a personal account of the scope and limits of my readings and the account of the garden on a particular day.

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- 1 Dianne Harris, “Thomas Church as Author: Publicity and the Professional at mid-century,” *Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes* 20, no. 2 (2000): 161.
 - 2 Marc Treib, *Thomas Church, Landscape Architect: Designing a Modern California Landscape* (San Francisco: William Stout, 2003); Marc Treib, *Modern Landscape Architecture: A Critical Review*, (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992); Marc Treib, *Studies in the History of Gardens and Designed Landscapes* 20, no. 2 (2000).
 - 3 John Dixon Hunt, “Approaches (New and Old) to Garden History,” in *Perspectives on Garden Histories*, ed. Michel Conan (Washington, D.C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1999), 77.
 - 4 Hunt, “Approaches (New and Old) to Garden History,” 90.
 - 5 Hunt, “Approaches (New and Old) to Garden History,” 90.

For the aspiring landscape architect and student of historical gardens, the Donnell garden featured large in the catalogue of notable gardens of its type and era. Exposure to a significant number of images and commentary on the Donnell garden created a sense that this garden was indeed a garden of fame - as Harris declared, relating to its image on the cover of *House Beautiful* in 1951. As Marc Treib states: "Of all Californian gardens in the modern idiom, Thomas Church's 1948 Donnell garden in Sonoma County has become the ultimate icon".⁶ Its significance as a designed and constructed landscape was recognized in the proceedings of the 1995 Wave Hill-National Park Service Conference, which was dedicated to the preservation of America's landscapes of legacy. Mentioned many times in various papers in the conference publication, the garden is described by Peter Walker as "one of the most frequently photographed gardens of our time"⁷, and by Elizabeth Meyer as one of "the best documented".⁸ So many images were available and the general commentary was that this garden captured aspects of the modern movement like no other. How did it do this?

First and foremost, it had form closely derived from some of the art and architecture of the Modernist period, especially the abstract forms of Cubism, art forms that allowed for multiple points of view and developed dynamic relationships between forms and space. Later landscape architects were also to use what was described as *biomorphic* shape, a stylized free-form, in particular Roberto Burle Marx and Isamu Noguchi, providing a body of work for which the Donnell garden could be considered seminal. These artistic influences have been well described in the literature.⁹

Secondly, this garden follows a major tenet of Modernist design in that it must prioritize function. This required the design to be people-centred and responsive to the site. So the lifestyle (an outdoor Californian one) and social requirements of the owners drove the design, hence the pool and all its outdoor activity accoutrements - lanai, changing rooms, diving board, and so on. This play focussed space required maximum ease of use, a seamless indoor-outdoor connection ensuring this, both physically and visually, to make a clear statement of intent.

In addition the site offered specific opportunities. Native coastal live oaks, *Quercus agrifolia*, were on the site. These trees were utilised in the design to provide a backdrop and frame the views. Various sloughs of the Sonoma Valley river system meander across the flatlands below the garden site. When sitting in the lanai or alongside the pool (the intended and experienced view at ground level), the kidney-shaped pool (fig. 1) is reconfigured from this viewpoint to echo a sweep of the meandering waterways beneath (fig. 2).

6 Marc Treib, "Axioms for a Modern Landscape Architecture," in *Modern Landscape Architecture: A Critical Review*, ed. Marc Treib (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992), 64.

7 Peter Walker, "Preserving the Recent Design Past," in *Preserving Modern Landscape Architecture: Papers from the Wave Hill-National Park Service Conference*, ed. Charles Birnbaum (Cambridge, Mass.: Spacemaker Press, 1999), 10.

8 Elizabeth Meyer, "Preservation in the Age of Ecology: Post-World War II Built Landscapes," in *Preserving Modern Landscape Architecture: Papers from the Wave Hill-National Park Service Conference*, ed. Charles Birnbaum (Cambridge, Mass.: Spacemaker Press, 1999), 15.

9 Treib, "Axioms for a Modern Landscape Architecture," 36-67.

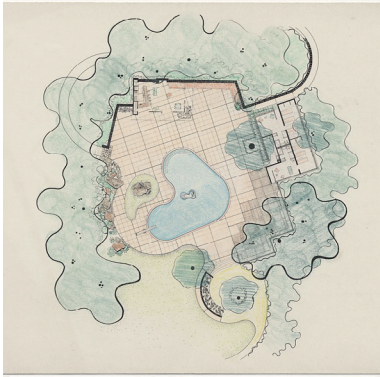


Fig. 1. Drawing for Donnell Garden, Thomas Church. Thomas Church, Donnell (Dewey) Residence, Sonoma, CA, 1947-1954; Pool Area Design. California Digital Library, University of California: <http://content.cdlib.org/ark:/28722/bk0000n526s/?&brand=calisphere> (accessed February 25, 2014).



Fig. 2. Pool in the form of the waterways. Felice Frankel, cited in Rod Barnett, *Garden Style in New Zealand* (Auckland: Random House, 1993), 96.

All these features heretofore formed part of my understanding before I physically experienced the garden itself - the site features, design, concepts, artistic influences, form, association with the principles and tenets of Modernism, images and at least some of the literature. So I did not approach this garden without preconceptions.

John Dixon Hunt attempts to weigh up the influences of literature and direct experience of a garden on its analysis, using Rousham as a case study: “We need constantly to remind ourselves both that garden art is experienced directly through the senses, emotions, and intellect and that the fragility

of a garden's beauty is every bit involved in its 'meaning', in what it 'says', and thus to be addressed by students of garden history."¹⁰

He writes that it is ideal if the garden is approached before the literature intervenes to cast an interpretation on our 'reading' of it. Simon Pugh argues that it is seldom the case that we experience the garden free of prior knowledge of that garden.¹¹ This of course is especially the case with a garden of repute like the Donnell Garden, and has been the case for me. Though such assumed knowledge colours the experience of the garden and therefore cannot permit a solely observed, sensate, haptic experience, it might offer the opportunity to expand an understanding of and the range of interpretations of the garden, the personal physical experience building on the prior 'readings'.

My sole experience of the Donnell Garden happened on 23 June 2010. This may not seem important, except that any experience of a garden is dependent on the circumstances and timing of that event. As Pugh writes: "A garden is always in a state of flux or change: it can never be pinned down, fixed, it can never be a 'definitive text'."¹² So my visit constitutes a powerful experience for me, but must be of a transitory nature in and of an environment of a fragile nature (as Hunt describes it), and furthermore to be my own experience and not that of anyone else.

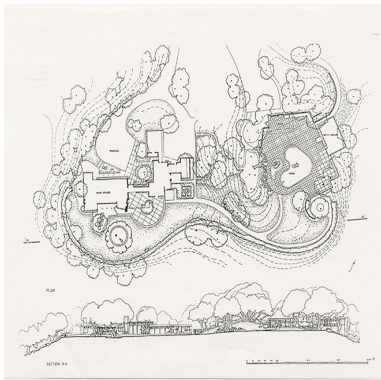


Fig. 3. Site drawings, including house and pool area. Thomas Church, Donnell (Dewey) Residence, Sonoma, CA, 1947-1954: Site Plan. California Digital Library, University of California <http://content.cdlib.org/ark:/28722/bk0000n5z6s/?&brand=calisphere> (accessed February 25, 2014).

23 June was a warm and sunny (almost cloudless) day in Sonoma County when I arrived at the gate, to be met by Justin Faggioli, son-in-law of the Donnells (it has remained in the family). The long drive is through dry pastureland and the arrival at the garden is into a green oasis. Justin left me to explore on my own. The first surprise is the separation of the house and garden, at least the pool garden that is the focus of the literature. This is not so much the geographical distance, which is not very great. This is also well described in the literature and the images (fig. 3). On the ground however this separation is pronounced, made more distinct by topography and vegetation. The glade of live

10 John Dixon Hunt, "Verbal versus Visual Meanings in Garden History: The Case of Rousham", in *Garden History: Issues, Approaches, Methods*, ed. J. D. Hunt (Washington, D. C.: Dumbarton Oaks Research Library and Collection, 1992), 152.

11 Simon Pugh, *Garden, Nature, Language* (Manchester: Manchester University Press, 1988).

12 Pugh, *Garden, Nature, Language*, Introductory Note, ix.

oaks is shady and cool and provides some enclosure before arrival at the terrace with the swimming pool.

The experience of visiting this garden both confirmed the readings and images of the garden and revealed new information. The strength and intensity of the passage through the garden cannot be gained from the series of photos, and is difficult to express fully in words. The driveway arrives at a point part way between house and pool garden, indicating the importance of both and the distinction between both. Constricted enclosure through the cool, dark passage of live oaks contrasts with the open sunny pool area with views outward.

A trip across the farmland revealed dry grassland, dotted with rocks and copses of live oaks. Much more of the contextual materials of the landscape was revealed to me than the prior reading had done. Later on, studying the photos, I determined something of the relationship between site features and design. The garden, making use of the site materiality, is a stylized abstraction of the wider landscape, trees framed in decking (fig. 4), selected clusters of sculptural rocks framed in grass circles (fig. 5), paving the colour of the grasslands, and of course the emerald serpentine pool echoing the meandering waterways (fig. 2) - the garden as an idealized and synthesized landscape, but in close proximity to its raw original, the simulacra within. The complete picture of this was unknown to me until I had experienced both garden and wider landscape. So when the composition is read with this interpretation it is significantly more profound and integrated than the individual retaining of site trees, echoes of the Sonoma sloughs, and copies of Jean Arp forms.



Fig. 4. *Quercus agrifolia* framed in decking. Photo by Rondal Partridge, in Thomas Church, *Gardens are for People* 3rd ed. (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 25.

My experience of the garden was both familiar, recalling the garden images from when it was first conceived and photographed 60 years ago, and also new. As Pugh and Hunt claim gardens are fragile and always changing. Since the early photos of the coastal live oaks (fig. 4) and my visit in 2010 the trees have grown into very large trees. But more importantly some have even died. This is happening because, in the attempt to maintain that original idealised landscape, with its stylised (manicured) sward, the native oaks are unable to endure the water levels needed for a verdant lawn. Justin had informed me of the attempt to maintain the garden according to the original intent envisioned

by Thomas Church and his family. So as they die, the native coastal live oaks, *Quercus agrifolia*, are being replaced by a southeastern oak, *Quercus virginiana*, tolerant of these water levels. This replacement will change the nature of the garden, from its essential engagement with the site materiality, context and indigeneity, and the garden's stylisation of these particulars.



Fig. 5. Local rocks framed in grass circles.
Photo by author

Re-reading the literature on the history of the garden after having been in it, explored and experienced it - the journey through it, the spatial makeup, its materiality, its context, and the relationship of its parts - new interpretations are made evident. A critical piece of information, previously overlooked in the literature as being of no relevance to any particular interpretation, was that the garden was built before the house by a number of years.¹³ During these years, prior to the main house being built, the lanai was used as a living room, guests were put up in the changing rooms, and the pool garden was used for parties. The spatial formation of this area is significant. A stone wall forms an edge to this space, partially enclosing it. This stone wall is continuous between garden edge and lanai, forming the back wall of this building. The rest of the lanai has transparent walls (fig. 6). So this room, the most important room for the outdoor lifestyle centred on the pool, is fully integrated with the garden, almost invisible as a room. It has become a part of the garden.

The garden has become central to living. It has taken on the function of the house. Interestingly one of the rooms in the house built later is full of plants, has glass walls, wet-able surface and outdoor-style furniture, a garden within the house.

My personal understanding of this garden has included some of the literature about this garden prior to visiting it, followed by an experience of the garden itself, and then reading the literature anew after the visit. The initial research included a culturally contextual interpretation, understanding this garden as part of a Modernist idiom that included art, architecture, and gardens,

¹³ Treib, "Axioms for a Modern Landscape Architecture," 64.

of which this garden had played a seminal role. The visit to the garden itself was rich with the sensate experience, but also with the contextual knowledge already gained. New understandings were revealed on site, especially of the totality of site characteristics and the relationship of parts. Then the literature became more meaningful on the re-reading following the experience of the garden as a tangible artefact in its own environment. This re-reading allowed the garden to be seen anew. But this was dependent on the experience of sighting and being in the garden itself.



Fig. 6. Pool lanai with glass walls.
Thomas Church, *Gardens are for People* 3rd ed.
(Berkeley: University of California Press, 1995), 184.

Gardens of this sort, those that are written about, are nearly always known in some way prior to visiting them, directly through the literature or even perhaps hearsay. Some, as in the case of the Donnell garden, have had significant exposure, leading to established readings and interpretations. This is likely to colour the experience of the garden as a sensate, haptic environment. But it also creates a foundation to allow for deeper and more meaningful interpretations than an initial experience is likely to permit. The personal experience of the garden also informs in a way that is otherwise impossible. Besides the gamut of visual and other sensate qualities that are just acquired by being in the world, the garden experience offers a journey through it, a certain spatial makeup, an organisation, its own materiality, a particular context, and relationship of parts - all of which are difficult to discern fully, if at all, without being in it. But once visited, the experience can provide knowledge whereby new readings may interact with that experience, a kind of loopback capacity. My own experience indicated that the three stages of acquiring knowledge of the garden and consequent interpretation were inextricably linked. Each of these stages created a new reading of the garden and each informed both the next one and the last.