Forest Lost and Paradise Regained
Hervé Brunon

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Skrúður, Núpur
The xxiv International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens

publication edited by
Patrizia Boschiero, Luigi Latini, Domenico Luciani

Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche
Treviso 2013
The 2013 Prize, the XXV in the series
Skrubur, Núpur
Dyrräjdur, Iceland

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The International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens
The International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens is an annual awareness-raising campaign focussed on a single place, promoted and organized by the Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche, the Chairman of which is Luciano Benetton and the Director Marco Temani. An international jury designates the prize-winning place. A working group, with the offices of the Foundation, assembles relevant documentation, publishes a monographic dossier, mounts an exhibition, organizes a seminar and a public ceremony. Assistance with media relations, Tom Wright.

José Tito Rojo, Lionello Puppi, Hervé Brunon, Margherita Azzi Visentini
The working group comprises:
Tom Wright
Honorary members:
Massimo Venturi Ferriolo, Lionello Puppi, Domenico Luciani

The programme also included projections and musical interludes (Icelandic song) performed by Sigtryggur Andersen and Hildur Orn Hilmarsson.
Brynjólfur Jónsson, as Chairman of the Fondazione studi ricerche, the Foundation which is the body now responsible for the designated garden, was presented with the Prize Seal designed by Carlo Scarpa and spoke on behalf of the Foundation. The event opened with the distribution to the audience of the dossier, and concluded with refreshments.

Saturday 10 May
Treviño, auditorium of Spazi Bomben
Lecture on the landscape of Iceland, given by Reykjavík Vilhjálmsdóttir (landscape architect, Landslides Studio, Reykjavík) and the opening of the exhibition dedicated to the XXV Carlo Scarpa Prize, open to the public in Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche, Spazi Bomben until 30 June.
Amongst those present was Vigdis Finnbogadóttir, President of the Republic of Iceland from 1980 to 1996.

Saturday 11th May
Treviño, auditorium of Spazi Bomben
Seminar on the award-winning place
The aims of the meeting is to introduce the geology, the geography, the history and the gardens of Iceland, starting with the emblematic case, of historical, social and educational importance, of Skrubur at Núpur, in Dyrräjdur through first-hand contributions from Icelandic scholars and public figures. Speakers at the seminar coordinated by Luigi Latos (Fondazione Benetton Studi Ricerche), included
Magnús Tumi Guðlaugsson (Institute of Land Sciences, University of Iceland); Guðmundur Hjálmarsson (Department of History, University of Iceland); Priitko Ikstokis (landscape architect, Landslides Studio, Reykjavík); Ívar E. Sæmundsson (landscape architect, Landsmót Studio, Kópavogur); Álfbrekktur Eiríkur (Secretary of the Skrubur Project Fund); Brynjólfur Jónsson (Chairman of the Skrubur Project Fund); Daniel Jakobsson (Mayor of the Municipality of Ísafjarðarbær and member of the Skrubur Project Fund). Also taking part was Vigdis Finnbogadóttir, Reykjavík Vilhjálmsdóttir and the members of the Jury of the International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens.

Saturday 11th May
Treviño, Municipal Theatre
Carlo Scarpa Prize Award Ceremony.
The ceremony, coordinated by Fondazione Benetton (International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens), included speeches by Vigdis Finnbogadóttir (President of Iceland from 1980 to 1996) and Álfbrekktur Eiríkur (Secretary of the Skrubur Project Fund). The programme also included projections and musical interludes (Icelandic song) performed by Sigtryggur Andersen and Hildur Orn Hilmarsson.
Brynjólfur Jónsson, as Chairman of the Foundation, spoke on behalf of the Foundation which is the body now responsible for the designated garden, was presented with the Prize Seal designed by Carlo Scarpa and spoke on behalf of the Foundation.

Friday 10 May
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A working group, with the offices of the Foundation, assembles relevant documentation, publishes a monographic dossier, mounts an exhibition, organizes a seminar and a public ceremony. Assistance with media relations, Tom Wright.

The working group comprises:
Marina Patti, Patrizia Boschi; Kerstin Brunson, Francesca Gherletti, Luigi Latos, Massimo Venturi Ferriolo, Massimo Venturi Ferriolo, Simonetta Zenon.

The programme also included projections and musical interludes (Icelandic song) performed by Sigtryggur Andersen and Hildur Orn Hilmarsson.
Brynjólfur Jónsson, as Chairman of the Fondazione studi ricerche, the Foundation which is the body now responsible for the designated garden, was presented with the Prize Seal designed by Carlo Scarpa and spoke on behalf of the Foundation. The event opened with the distribution to the audience of the dossier, and concluded with refreshments.

Saturday 10 May
Treviño, auditorium of Spazi Bomben
Meeting/Concert
Reykjavík Icelandic songs of epic and nature performed by Sigtryggur Andersen and Hildur Orn Hilmarsson.
Cultural initiative under the aegis of the Italian Ministry of the Cultural Heritage, the Veneto Region, the Province of Treviso, the City of Treviño.

The Foundation is grateful to all those who, in various ways, have contributed, since the study tour to Iceland in late summer 2012, to the XXV International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens. In particular: Vigdis Finnbogadóttir; Brynjólfur Jónsson, Ablaistein Eiríkur, Peitur Sigtryggsson; Reykjavík Vilhjálmsdóttir; and Þórir Örn Guðmundsson, Sigtryggur Guðlaugsson, pastor at Núpur; Magnús Tumi Guðmundsson, Iceland: a volcanic island of unique geology in the North Atlantic; Þórir Ólafsson, National Park, 103; Gullfoss, Skógafoss, Dynjandi, 107; Avalanche protection structures in Súlfafjarður, 110; Guðmundur Halldánarson, History of Iceland, 112; Sigurður E. Sæmundsson and Sæmund H. Harðarson, From vegetable patches to ornamental gardens, 119; Massimo Rossi, The cultural construction of the Nordic elsewhere, 138; Hervé Brunon, Forest lost and paradise regained, 150; Jose Tito Rojo, Skrubur, the happy garden, 156; Bibliography, 167; Maps available, 171; List of illustrations, 172; International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens 2013, 174;

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There is something extraordinary, almost miraculous, about Skrúður. Certainly this is the initial impression that strikes people the first time they come across this small garden on the shore of Dýrafjörður, one of the innumerable inlets in the Westfjords peninsula – finis terrae linked to the rest of Iceland by an isthmus which is so narrow that it seems almost an island in the middle of an immense ocean – very close to the Arctic Circle, the island in the middle of an immense ocean.

I started my studies of the history of gardens in a wide open, mainly mineral landscape standing out at the foot of the mountain – an experience shared by my friend José Tito Rojo (here, pp. 108-165) – it was probably because it reminded me of an oasis in the middle of the desert. The image it immediately brought to my mind was that of an oasis in the middle of the desert to species that can withstand the constraints. Nevertheless, this approach has been much revised since the first developments during the XIX century of biogeography as a scientific discipline, which still tended to describe the spatial distribution of living beings on the earth without taking account of anthropic influence. Nowadays, however, we know that every landscape is the outcome of an interaction between a natural history and a human history.

Today there are almost no forests in Iceland: recent estimates put coverage at scarcely 1.5 per cent of the overall surface area of the island and just 3.6 per cent of the parts below an altitude of 400 metres. But has this always been the situation? A reading of the exceptionally fine literary heritage of the Island suggests the contrary. As regards the “Period of Settlement”, the Islandskongur (The Book of Icelanders), written in Iceland by Ari Porglason at the beginning of the XCI century, states that: «I Punn 13 var Island við vatn á milli falla ok fjóru» («At that time, Iceland had woods growing between the mountains and the shore»).

As we know, woods often play an important role in the sagas: in the late-XI century Saga of Gúli Sírsson, for example, the hero, denounced and banished from the community after the killing of his brother-in-law, spends part of his long exile hiding in thick woods. These texts, however, were written three centuries after the “Period of Settlement” (landdúmdust, 874-939) and some scholars consider such quotations to be suspect.

In 1987, Régis Boyer, writing of the Westfjords where the Saga of Gúli Sírsson is set, mentions that «the region was heavily wooded and our saga confirms this at several points»; immediately after, however, he adds that «we must not distort the sense of what is specifically translated for this dossier.


2. See Régis Boyer, Islandsfræði 2008.
being said, for it is probable that Iceland has never known real forest coverage. At the most, there will have been woods, but however many trees they contained they will not have grown above average height, probably because of the winds that lash the island throughout the year\(^4\). Returning in part to this point in his overview of L’Islande médiévale, published in 2001, the great historian continues to be doubtful or at least wary: “It is not impossible that the country once had extensive woods, as legends recount and as the ancient texts affirms, but close reading of them reveals clear echoes of the Bible and the discovery of the Land of Canaan, and the wind, which prevails over everything in those parts, cannot have helped the growth of large woods\(^5\). The information provided by archaeology over the last few years, however, has hamished almost all doubt in the matter. Prior to the last glacial periods of the Pleistocene, Iceland was covered by mixed boreal forests consisting of conifer (Pinus, Picea, Abies, Larix) and broad-leaved species (Betula, Acer, Alnus). At the end of the last glacial episode, around 10,000 years ago, the Betula pubescens, the main surviving forest species, became predominant all over Iceland and at the time of Scandinavian colonization about a quarter of the island’s surface was covered with forests. But the trees all but disappeared during the X and XII centuries\(^6\). Evidencing the factual and often laconic style typical of the genre, a passage from one of the earliest, 8. Sogns Islandsins 1867, p. 188 (note 5 on p. 68), 5. Boyer 2002, p. 25, Boyer does acknowledge, in connection with the statement quoted above, which occurs at the beginning of The Book of Icelanders that: “It is possible, and archaeology would tend to offer confirmation” (p. 72), but elsewhere he speaks of the “somewhat fanciful tradition” according to which “Iceland was thickly wooded at the time of its colonization” (p. 22). 6. According to THORSTEIN EVSTENSON 1996, p. 40. 7. Sogns Islandsins 1867, p. 364. The text appears in the Flétigverk, an illustrated manuscript dated to the end of the XIV century (1410). 8. See THORSTEIN EVSTENSON 1996. of which by 2015 had reached a rate of over 6 million new trees a year and an annual increase in overall forested area of 1,000 to 1,500 hectares\(^9\). The 2,000-hectare National Forest of Hallormstafur, in eastern Iceland, is now the country’s biggest. Albeit on a much smaller scale, with the wood on the eastern side of its garden, Skrúður too is part of this effort to “reembrace the desert”. Following the suggestion of Giambattista Vico’s Scienza nuova (1744) – “This was the order of human institutions: first the forests, after the huts, then the villages, next the cities, and finally the academies” –, Robert Harrison, in a stimulating reflection on forests and the western imagination, suggests that the history of civilization should metaphorically be seen as the gradual expansion of a clearing. In its constant quest for more light, society, through its dominant institutions, gradually pushes back the “edge”, the frontier that separates it from the forest, and thereby takes its place; thus the forest becomes symbolically its “shadow” in the cultural memory, the otherness that thereby takes its place; thus the forest becomes symbolically its “shadow” in the cultural memory, the otherness that defines the very idea of civilization. -This gradual loss of an edge of opacity, where the human abode finds its limits on the earth, is part of the global story of civic expansionism. In the West its first and last victim has been the forest\(^10\). The indefinite expansion of the clearing is not only a symbolic image but links up with a geographical reality. Harrison notes how the process of “mindless deforestation” seems to be an inevitable by-product of the expansion of the Greek and Roman civilizations in Antiquity: with the advance of the great empires from east to west, the forests disappeared from around the Mediterranean and towards Northern Europe; by causing erosion, he suggests, deforestation was one of the factors that precipitated the decline and fall of some of the richest and most important cities of Antiquity, places such as Ephesus, which was abandoned by its inhabitants as a result of the gradual silting up of its natural harbour\(^11\). Harrison thus raised an issue that since then has been widely studied and debated in the context of global environmental history\(^12\): the more or less crucial impact of the poor management 4. Sogns Islandsins 1867, p. 1698 (note 5 on p. 68). 5. Boyer 2002, p. 25. 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of territorial resources on the “collapse” of certain societies – a subject that has attracted the attention of the public at large thanks to the success of Jared Diamond's Collapse: How societies choose to fail or succeed, published in 2005, which also relates the theory to the colonization of Iceland and Greenland14. Without entering into detail concerning those extremely complex problems, I wish simply to stress that in the case of Iceland, the history of forests involves stakes that are amongst the most critical in the contemporary world and of the planet-wide ecological crisis. Though scientists continue to wrangle over the starting point of the Anthropocene, i.e. the current, post-Holocene geological era, during which human influence over the terrestrial system has become predominant – the industrial revolution? the Neolithic revolution? – it can be argued that on this island, where latitude, isolation and geology combine to make the vegetation especially vulnerable and weaken the resilience of the ecosystems, the Anthropocene began around the year 1000, more or less around the time of colonization and at the latest a few generations after the arrival of the earliest inhabitants.

As far as forests are concerned, Iceland in a certain sense offers a speeded up picture of human history on the Earth15. It should not be forgotten, in fact, that according to the estimates in the latest FAO report on the state of the world’s forests, «about half of western Europe’s forests are estimated to have been cleared prior to the Middle Ages»16 and before the sharp decline in the continent’s population in the XIV century. And in the long term, global deforestation, whose trajectory «has more or less followed the global growth rate of the human population», would appear to be «one of the most widespread and important changes that people have made to the surface of the earth. Over a period of 5,000 years, the cumulative loss of forest land worldwide is estimated at 1.8 billion hectares, an average net loss of 300,000 hectares per year»17. According to the United Nations Organization and its programme Reducing Emissions from Deforestation and Forest Degradation (REDD), half of the forests, this time of the whole world, were felled during the

XX century alone18. And the consequences affect not only the soil, the water cycle, biodiversity and greenhouse gas emission, but also the productivity of economic activities, the quality of life conditions, the transmission of lifestyles, memory and culture. To what point can the “clearing” of human civilization continue to expand? Is not the extreme “insularity” of Iceland, which accentuates the fragility of ecological balance, perhaps a sort of synecdoche for the finiteness of the biosphere? In this case, the image of Skríður as an oasis in the middle of the desert becomes immensely significant. The Reverend Sigtryggur Göðałfson's achievement takes its place on the horizon of hope, of which Jean Giono’s short story L’Homme qui plantait des arbres (1953) – the tale of a simple shepherd who set out to reforest his region of Haute Provence – is a parable. It could also bring to mind Onguso Machemine (1842-1922), who in 1862 inherited a vast estate of desolate moorland on a wind-swept coast at Wester Ross in Scotland; nothing grew there but a single twisted willow, yet he managed to transform the place by creating Inverewe, a botanical garden with thousands of different species19. Or in our own time, Wangari Maathai (1940-2011), who led the struggle against deforestation in Kenya through the Green Belt Movement (which she herself had set up in 1977) and caused millions of trees to be planted, creating employment and raising the profile of women in African society; her efforts and achievements were acknowledged by the award of the Nobel Peace Prize in 2004. And like these there are many, many others all over the world. Like Yacouba Sawadogo in Burkina Faso.
The International Carlo Scarpa Prize for Gardens to Skrúður, Núpur

Heře Brunon,

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documentary made by Mark Dodd,

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23. Unpublished text, quoted in

22.

2009.

2009.

...being on Earth»

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Choose to Fail or Succed


Michaela Kulea 2012

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DARRETT 2001


Deyo 2002


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...of the desert and on “greening

that elsewhere on Earth there are

other oases of peace which bear out my


WILLIAMS 2006


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THORFJORD EYFESTINSON 2009


KÜSTER 2009

Hansjak Küster, Storia dei boschi.

whose efforts focus on stopping the

advance of the desert and on “greening

the Sahel” by improving the traditional

technique of sowing in zeri holes, which

retain rainwater and use organic matter
to attract termites whose tunnels

improve the soil structure; since 1984

he has planted trees on dozens of

tufts of knowledge and seeds by organizing

twice-yearly “market days” that bring

together farmers from around a handful

of villages. Or like Jakub Payeng, an

Indian farmer who has, since 1979,

with his own hands, planted an entire forest

on a huge, empty expanse of sand in the

middle of the Brahmaputra River, at

Jorhat in the state of Assam. At the dawn of the third millennium

Skrbur, the tiny rectangular garden

partner Yves had created in Brittany

who spoke of the place she and her

Bertrand-Gillen (1949-2012), a gardener

and Rome...