

## The thirties style in gardens - the south of paris

### FROM SQUARE RENE LE GALL (13TH) TO SQUARE SAINT-LAMBERT (15TH)

City gardens introduce this idea of nature, with its autonomous plant life, revealing and hiding itself. There are secret gardens, reserved only for their owners, and public gardens, open to everyone.

Under the Ancien Régime, Paris contained a large number of these private gardens, which the mansions of powerful people opened up onto. Under the Restoration, the bourgeoisie and aristocracy partitioned them, sold them and divided them into plots and by 1850 the great parks of the nobility had almost all disappeared. Only the public gardens were saved, through the intervention of Prefects Chabrol and Rambuteau.

When Haussmann re-cut the roads which shaped the city, huge areas of the land freed up by the demolition were set aside for parks, undoubtedly at the request of the sovereign. The remains of the great gardens of the nobility were thus incorporated into the urban park network. In this way Napoleon III gave Paris English-style green spaces, inspired by those which had captured his attention in London during his exile. This first generation of esplanades profoundly changed the landscape of Paris.

The definitive rejection of the Parisian defence system at the end of the 19th century, with the successive disappearance of the fortifications and then the "zone", again resulted in projects to extend the city, making large areas of land available to the urban planners. This was also the time of a great battle of ideas throughout the entire inter-war period, to decide which would win, gardens or houses.

## New land for the extension of Paris

It was not a new idea: an extending city always ends up breaking through its fortifications. The State rapidly marked out a new protective cordon further from the city, opened up wide boulevards where the walls had been and divided up the land which formed the glacis (land unsuitable for building at the foot of the enclosures).

Louis XIII had already done this, as had Louis XIV, assisted by his "private preserve" policy which favoured defences at the boundaries instead of walls around Paris. There was hardly the time to build Louis XVI's Wall of the Farmers-General before it was knocked down by the Revolution. Finally Adolphe Thiers, then a minister under Louis-Philippe, ordered a new wall, consisting of bastions and a large network of fortifications, which in 1870 proved useless in the face of modern artillery. Thus Paris was formed of concentric circles, plots of land and boulevards placed on the sites of its former defences. With each new extension, the public space inherited planted esplanades and gardens won in a bitter battle against new housing.

During this post-war period, the result was once again formed of compromises which balanced the different points of view. The city, still searching for land, also took advantage of the ceasing of gas production to take over the land occupied by the gasometers and decided to cover over certain hydraulic networks, such as the canals in the north and the course of the River Bièvre to the south. The new wave of parks which were to be positioned there bore the mark of J.C.N. Forestier. However, the Iberian model Forestier advocated was tinged with Italianism in the creations of his colleagues, such as Jean-Charles Moreux, Léon Azema, Georges Sébille and Roger Lardat.

**1** (13th) Rue Croulebarbe, 43 Rue de Corvisart, Rue Emile-Deslandres

### Square René Le Gall

In the Square René Le Gall we discover one of the greatest Thirties creations in Paris. Its designer, Jean-Charles Moreux (1889 -1956), was a very productive artist: an architect, furniture designer, interior decorator and landscape painter, he first made his mark as the pupil of Mallet-Stevens. However he quickly returned to a Neo-Classical style, which was nonetheless marked by an uncluttered aestheticism. His talent could therefore satisfy a well-off, aristocratic clientele wanting its own style of modernism. In his work, he also cultivated the art of the learned quote, perhaps a legacy of his years of study at the Chartes School (National College of archival studies and palaeography) and the Louvre College. Here he was faced with a vast area of land, taken partly from the course of the Bièvre but mainly from the gardens of the workers at the Factory of the Gobelins tapestry factory, which had the right to a market garden there. The original plot extended to the so-called "Castle of the White Queen", but as the developers for the 1937 Exposition wanted to use the land of the storehouse on Quai Branly, a large plot was reserved for the construction of the National Furniture (State-owned furniture used to furnish State buildings) (Auguste Perret). It should be stressed that during the same period, it was still possible to see opening onto this patch of greenery the extension which Le Corbusier had just created for the Salvation Army. As the Bièvre had been diverted underground, an area of 3.4 hectares

remained. Moreux marked out alleyways in the existing vegetation, making the most of the existing trees. In the most shaded part of the route, he designed a series of terraces around a square flowerbed, contained within four concrete gazebos, in a design borrowed from the very old gardens of Villandry, which he enclosed within a curtain of greenery like a real room. An obelisk marked the centre of the composition. On the opposite side Moreux positioned a playground punctuated with topiary shrubs, representing the gardener's sculptural skills. This space was enclosed with porticos and contained within an amphitheatre, providing a place for children to play their games peacefully. But the most striking architectural features of the composition are the two great sets of steps which go up to the different level of the Rue Croulebarbe. The walls are in the style of Baroque caves, covered with a millstone facing connected to the concrete. The sculptor Garnier created a highly original series of grotesque masks evoking the work of Arcimboldo, who assembled different kinds of fruit and turned them into faces, in a mosaic-style of art which was both rustic and skilful and not without humour. These terraces lend a real sense of majesty to the whole garden, which is softened by the affability of the sculpture.

**2** (13th) Boulevard Kellermann, Rue de la Poterne des Peupliers, Rue Max Jacob

### **Kellermann Park**

Kellermann Park is a perfect example of a garden originating in artifice: backed onto the former fortifications, it was developed on the old "zone" which had been entirely redeveloped and extended over the course of the now-underground Bièvre. Furthermore, it was here, at the postern of poplar trees, that the two branches of this small affluent of the Seine entered the enclosures of Paris through two long tunnels which were closed with gates before being buried around 1910. It was the project of Jacques Gréber, who was also chief architect of the Universal Exhibition, which was chosen in 1937. His design combined the geometry of Forestier in the upper part with the naturalism of Alphand in the lower part of the playground (considerably redeveloped around 1960 and 1980). The composition was punctuated with small brick and concrete buildings. The first function of this park was to promote a new discipline in French teaching at the time: although gymnastics had been on the curriculum since the mid-19th century, it was not until 1920 that the Ministry of Hygiene and Social Assistance promulgated a decree stating that children had to practise "physical education", adding individual sports but especially team sports, thus aiming to foster solidarity and community life as well as body balance. Under the highly elegant canopy at the entrance, which itself is almost a sculpture with its pent roof perched on supports which become slimmer towards the top, Elie Ottoway transcribed this ideal into two antique-style bas-reliefs, one representing a game of boules for boys and the other a dance for girls. These two reliefs are valuable particularly for their decorative aspect, providing clear echoes on either side of the entrance, and for their texture, which provides a break from the regularity of the brick.

**3** (14th) Avenue Ernest Reyer, Rue de la Légion Etrangère, Avenue de la Porte de Montrouge

### **Square du Serment de Koufra**

Built on the glacis and ditches of the fortifications, the Square du Serment de Koufra seems slightly cut off from the city. It was in the pipeline for a long time and there was probably a debate to decide between the different choices. As the war was approaching, it was not built until the end of the Forties. However, all the Thirties style features are there. There are the large playground, the brick steps, the concrete constructions, the regular central garden in the shape of a square, the landscaped esplanade around the outside and even Martial's Bather (1958) which misleads us, as it evokes the Bathers of Maillol with their solid, radiant forms. But in this classical-looking art, the whole finesse of the sculptor resides in managing the light and shadow, which lend elegance to this important work. This naked body seems astonishingly light, coming out of a summer Eden and lost in a forest of pine trees with the scent of the beaches of Brittany.

**4** (15th) Rue Théophraste Renaudot, Rue Léon Lhermitte, Rue Jean Formigé, Rue du Docteur

Jacquemaire-Clémenceau

### **Square Saint Lambert**

In 1836, the gas company built a large production factory on an area of land rented by the City of Paris. In 1909, the municipality decided to take back the land, with the intention of creating a Square. To finance the operation, it allowed the periphery to be divided up to the Affordable Housing company, although there was also a need for a school for young girls. The division of the land between each part of the programme was a long and difficult process, with the high school covering the majority of the costs, which led its architect, François Le

Coeur, to design a tall building. The schoolgirls had to make do with terraces for recreation, but were able to practise sport in the garden.

After the demolition of the factory, Georges Sébille, a City architect, had the soil, which was blackened and polluted by the gas and the chemicals used to purify it, replaced with clean embankments and vegetation. He retained the different levels in order to give the appearance of varied reliefs and reused the foundations and the structure of the base of the gasometer to create a vast basin surrounded by amphitheatre terraces, which form the centre of the composition. Three areas were connected to this structure. One was reserved for children, with a sand pit and swings. The second contained another sand pit and a circular shelter for taking cover from the rain and sun. The last one included an open-air theatre, with a cupola stage and a sloping floor for dramatic art performances. The water effects consisted of a group of central jets accompanied by bowls spread along the back wall of the basin.

Showing the constant desire of artists in the Thirties to enliven the walls put up by architects in a unitarian design, a monumental relief sculpted in 1935 by Auguste Guénot (1882 – 1966), a prolific sculptor from Toulouse, welcomed visitors towards the Rue de la Croix Nivert. It has three scenes and is dedicated to Youth, with three Graces in the centre surrounded by a circle of children in a slightly recessed panel, suggesting a “flat” perspective effect. On either side, young people are dancing in an Ancient style and playing with a rope. The entire work is animated by a movement which is discrete but finely expressed by the constantly off-balance positions of the bodies. Two other charming works can be found in the Square: The Dog by René Paris (1942), which is much loved by children and Bear Cubs by Victor Peter (1938), which is hidden in the greenery.

Throughout the capital, the Department of Cultural Affairs of the City of Paris maintains some six hundred commemorative monuments and statues which form part of the municipal heritage. These works, most of which date from the beginning of the Third Republic, are the result of an active policy of artistic commissions intended to decorate the squares and streets, in accordance with the wishes of the elected officials of Paris. They include some of the masterpieces of French sculpture: The Fountain of the Four Continents by Carpeaux and The Triumph of the Republic by Dalou.

The 20th century was for a long time more cautious in this respect, but over the last twenty years or so, the City of Paris has revived the tradition of commissioning public art. In 2004, it set up the Art Committee in the City, a consultative committee of elected officials and experts to provide an opinion on policy in this area. Together with this Committee, the City of Paris commissioned 35 permanent or temporary public works between 2004 and 2008.

From Exercise Tower by Wang Du (Paris 17th) to the Dance of the Emerging Fountain by Chen Zhen (Paris 13th) and the Forest of Candelabras by the Berlin collective Inges Idee (Paris 19th), all these works can be discovered throughout Paris.

