

# **Accessibility and Gardens**

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## Abstract

*The following study engages in further exploring the matter of accessibility in public green environment like gardens and parks. In order to reflect on how historical park landscapes can be adjusted to the 20th concept of accessibility and usability, the adjustment of the gardens belonging to the Versailles Château will be explored in this study.*

## Introduction

“Landscape and garden were studies of contrasts.”<sup>1</sup> Rather, landscape was contemplated as a connecting piece to a neighboring village – unfamiliar and evoking the “feeling of uncertainty”<sup>2</sup>. On the other hand, gardens were considered to follow the divine rules of nature,<sup>3</sup> where “a natural balance was struck between abstract order and living growth, which was the aim of most of the “classical periods.”<sup>4</sup> The intention was to create interplay between the man-made design and the arbitrary nature. Gardens as such were merely to be considered as an extension of the house,<sup>5</sup> which followed the same geometrical rules to which the building adhered, thus, continuing architecture in the form of a garden.<sup>6</sup>

During the mid-18th century, a new type of garden was introduced, the so-called landscape garden or the English garden. It stood out as a contrast to the former idea of gardens being an “antithesis to opulent nature.”<sup>7</sup> Having no need of sharp borders between garden and the unattended nature, the landscape garden created a smooth transition between these two landscape types.<sup>8</sup> In addition, during the late Baroque era, the life style was quite detached from nature, and, in contrast, the landscape garden became a place of refuge from the artificial daily life.<sup>9</sup> Often, this living was regulated by social hierarchy, and subject to ceremonials. Although, the landscape

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<sup>1</sup> Baumann, E. 1955: Neue Gärten New Gardens. Zürich: Editions Girsberger, p. 6 (bilingual book)

<sup>2</sup> Ibid., p. 6

<sup>3</sup> Cf. Ibid., p. 7

<sup>4</sup> Ibid., p. 7

<sup>5</sup> Cf. Ibid., p. 6

<sup>6</sup> Cf. Ibid., p. 6

<sup>7</sup> Ibid., p. 7

<sup>8</sup> Cf. Ibid., p. 7

<sup>9</sup> Cf. Ibid., p. 7

garden shared the idea of shielding off routine life, this landscape design thinking differed from the modern garden in one critical aspect – to be a meeting point for interests in art, history and literature. “Regarded as antithetical of the daily turmoil, history, art and nature were perceived as an entity.”<sup>10</sup> Hence, the landscape garden included statues, memorial stones, forest chapels, inter alia. Often, modern gardens lack these elements, because the connection between art, history and nature have ceased to have the same influence.<sup>11</sup>

Nowadays, modern gardens or landscape designs have no intention for shielding off the wild landscape as they used to by ordered and structured garden planning: Modern people are searching for the informality of nature in order to emphasize the sensation of freedom. The general idea for gardens has changed; the contrast no longer lies in the difference between the natural landscape and the human-designed gardens, but in the opposition of the everyday routine life and gardens as a source of revitalization.<sup>12</sup> They “counterbalance the authoritarian intellect”<sup>13</sup> with nature, so that gardens become an antipole to modern technology. Understanding the idea of the garden, as a space of freedom, peace and refuge, explains the significance of modern garden design<sup>14</sup>. The approach is different; gardens no longer follow rules of symmetry. Instead, they are divided into certain functional areas, inspired by the idea of “form follows function,”<sup>15</sup> the motto of the modern era.

In order to understand the idea or the essence of a garden, one must consider it with reference to the time period when it was created, the artist behind the garden design and the demands of the people.<sup>16</sup>

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid., p. 7

<sup>11</sup> Cf. Ibid., p. 7

<sup>12</sup> Cf. Ibid., p. 7

<sup>13</sup> Ibid., p. 7

<sup>14</sup> Cf. Ibid., p. 8

<sup>15</sup> Cf. Sullivan, L. 1896: The Tall Office Building Artistically Considered. Lippincott’s Magazine, p. 403-409

<sup>16</sup> Clifford, D. 1962: A History of Garden Design. London: Faber and Faber, p. 15

## **Guidelines for Accessibility and Usability in French Historical Gardens**

On 17th of May 2006, the French Ministry of Housing, Equality territories and Rural Policy issued the decree 2006-555, which forwards 14 essential bullets concerning accessibility in the built environment, buildings and gardens. The decree focuses on “external paths, [...] parking of vehicles, [...] conditions of access to and reception in the buildings, horizontal and vertical corridors inside the buildings, access to interior space, sanitary facilities open to the public, doors and interior lock[s] and exits, [...] coverings of floors and walls, as well as equipment like in- and outdoor furniture that could be installed, including lighting and information system for the public”.<sup>17</sup>

The principle aim of the decree is to provide access for people with disabilities to public buildings, regardless of the nature of the individual impairment<sup>18</sup>. Depending on the specific focus in the access problem, physical dimensions are explained and listed as well as matters concerning safety regulations for access or use. In general, the aspect of accessibility covers concerns for traffic, car parking spaces, elevators, premises and equipment: the “access conditions for people with disabilities should be the same as for people supposedly without impairments.”<sup>19</sup>

In a complementary article, Article 2 of 1st August 2006, the regulations concerning external paths were further defined, stating that the “accessible routes must provide access to the main entrance [and] must be the traditional path”.<sup>20</sup> In addition, main structural elements like handrails and the general layout of the accessible path must be clearly identifiable. The paving material should create a visual and tactile contrast between the accessible path and the surroundings. In general, a sloping path should be avoided. If it is unavoidable, the path should meet the regulations for tilting surfaces of either 8 percent over a length less than or equal to 2 meters or up to 10 percent over a length less than or equal to 0.50 meters. In the case, the slope requires a higher tilt, then, it should be no higher than or equal to 4 percent, and a rest platform is necessary every 10 meters.

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<sup>17</sup> <http://www.accessibilite-batiment.fr/erp-neufs/generalites-et-definitons/decret.html> (approximate translation by author)

<sup>18</sup> Cf. <http://www.accessibilite-batiment.fr/erp-neufs/generalites-et-definitons/decret.html> (approximate translation by author)

<sup>19</sup> <http://www.accessibilite-batiment.fr/erp-neufs/generalites-et-definitons/decret.html> (approximate translation by author)

<sup>20</sup> <http://www.accessibilite-batiment.fr/erp-neufs/cheminements-exterieurs/arrete.html> (approximate translation by author)

The minimum width of accessible paths must be of 1.40 meters and free from obstacles. Furthermore, the possibility for making a U-turn must be provided at a crossing, before a gateway and in front of door operating space. If the path crosses a route that is used by vehicles, a warning device must be installed on the right-hand side of the path as well as a notification sign on vehicle lanes that a pedestrian walk will come ahead. In addition, the path must include a lighting installation. If the path includes a difference in levels higher than 0.40 meters “a protective device must be installed in order to prevent”<sup>21</sup> pedestrians from falling. Any flight of stairs with 3 or more steps must meet the requirements for stairs according to Article 7-1.

Article 3 also clarifies necessary regulations concerning parking space. It states that the necessity for providing, at least, one parking space adjusted to the needs of people with disabilities, and reserved only for their use. This space must be located near the main entrance to the building and reachable by use of an accessible path. The minimum width of the parking space must be 3.30 meters.<sup>22</sup>

Accessibility regulations inside the building are defined in Article 4 and 5. The subsection “Identification” implies that the main entrance to a building must be clearly and easily recognizable as such by the use of architectural elements or “treatment with different or visually contrasting materials.”<sup>23</sup> “In the public reception area, all furnishing, equipment or furniture that are needed to access the open public spaces [...] must be located, reached and adjusted to the needs of persons with disabilities. This includes other horizontal surfaces for internal circulations.”<sup>24</sup> The purpose of regulations for accessible facilities is to enable people with disabilities to independently enter and leave a building.<sup>25</sup>

Concerning vertical levels, Article 7 states that levels in heights larger than 1.20 meters is to be considered as a floor level.<sup>26</sup> In Article 7-1 and 7-2, regulations concerning staircases and elevators are specified. According to these, the tread width of a step must

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<sup>21</sup> <http://www.accessibilite-batiment.fr/erp-neufs/cheminements-exterieurs/arrete.html> ((approximate translation by author)

<sup>22</sup> Cf. <http://www.accessibilite-batiment.fr/erp-neufs/stationnement/arrete.html> ((approximate translation by author)

<sup>23</sup> <http://www.accessibilite-batiment.fr/erp-neufs/acces-aux-batiments-et-accueil/arrete.html> ((approximate translation by author)

<sup>24</sup> <http://www.accessibilite-batiment.fr/erp-neufs/acces-aux-batiments-et-accueil/arrete.html> ((approximate translation by author)

<sup>25</sup> Cf. <http://www.accessibilite-batiment.fr/erp-neufs/circulation-interieures-horizontales/arrete.html> (approximate translation by author)

<sup>26</sup> Cf. <http://www.accessibilite-batiment.fr/erp-neufs/circulation-interieures-verticales/arrete.html> (approximate translation by author)

be larger than or equal to 28 centimeters, whereas the height must be less than or equal to 16 centimeters. A handrail must be present on both sides of the staircase and the minimum width between them must 1.20 meters. Moreover, the stairway must be fitted with an illumination device.<sup>27</sup> With regard to sanitary aspects, Article 12 states that each level must have at least one toilet adjusted to the needs of persons with disabilities, which implies necessary maneuvering space for completely turning a wheelchair inside this space.<sup>28</sup> Article 14 gives information on the quality of lighting, defining the intensity of light in certain areas and situations, taking into account that no visual discomfort shall be created.<sup>29</sup>

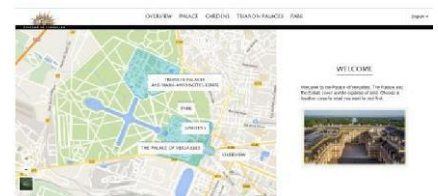
## The Gardens of Versailles

The Gardens of Versailles were completed 1701 after Louis XIV commissioned André Le Nôtre with the design in 1661<sup>30</sup>. However, André Le Nôtre did not work alone. Several architects, painters and landscape planners assisted him in designing and planning the different parts of the gardens. Due to the vast period of time and different design influences, the Gardens of Versailles demonstrate shifts in landscape planning.



III. 1

A long time has passed since the 17<sup>th</sup> century and the demands of the people have changed. In the following text, the Gardens of Versailles will be scrutinized according to the modern needs of accessibility. Firstly, the official website should be mentioned. It provides an interactive map to plan a trip in advance and navigate around the vast estate. It is divided into an overview, the Palace, the Gardens, the Trianon Palaces and the Park. Choosing one of these locations, a submenu opens, which provides information



III. 2

27 Cf. <http://www.accessibilite-batiment.fr/erp-neufs/circulation-interieures-verticales/escalier/arrete.html> (approximate translation by author)

28 Cf. <http://www.accessibilite-batiment.fr/erp-neufs/locaux-ouverts-au-public-et-sanitaires/arrete.html> (approximate translation by author)

29 Cf. <http://www.accessibilite-batiment.fr/erp-neufs/qualite-generale-du-batiment/arrete.html> (approximate translation by author)

30 Cf. <http://en.chateauversailles.fr/gardens-and-park-of-the-chateau-> (approximate translation by author)

about restaurants, practical information about access conditions. In this section, frequently asked questions about entrances and directions are answered, but also how disabled people can access and navigate inside the Palace.



III. 3

The well-provided information for people with special needs and access conditions in general are commendable. However, the implementation has been done in an exemplary manner: i.e., the separate entrances to the palace are indicated on the map. To manage height differences and levels between the palace and the gardens; a lift reserved specially for people with locomotory problems or other issues has been installed. It allows access for people regardless of possible disability to visit the Trianon Palaces. These buildings have been made accessible by ramps. The Grand Trianon is entirely accessible as well as the Petit Trianon on the garden level. Furthermore, there are toilets adjusted to people with special needs, as well as, in some restaurants that are traceable on the map.



III. 4



III. 5



III. 6

Due to the immense area that the estate covers, it can be tiring especially for elderly people to walk long distances. As a service to this group of visitors a small motor vehicle, the Little Train, traffics the park. It has several stops between the Grand Palace and the Trianon Palaces. The design of these vehicles are also accessible for people with disabilities. Regarding transportation, the facility supplies special parking areas for people with special needs, which can also be found on the interactive map<sup>31</sup>.



III. 7

<sup>31</sup> Cf. <http://bienvenue.chateauversailles.fr/en/overview/welcome-to-versailles> (translation by website)

## Conclusions and Discussion

It can be said that the implementation of different adjustments of an accessibility nature at the Versailles Palace is eligible, especially for people who use a wheelchair. A notably positive item is the ample access points to information for people with special needs, but also for visitors in general. It allows potential visitors to the premises to plan his or her trip in advance, and make allowance for certain difficulties, that may occur, for instance differences in level and long distances.

On the other hand, it should also be pointed out, that there are still specific areas in the Palace and at the Petit Trianon, in which no elevators are installed. Therefore, these buildings are not fully accessible to for people who use a wheelchair or other transportation devices. However, this important feature is not evident on the interactive maps.

Furthermore, hygiene spaces in the Grand Palace and the differentiation between the accessible path and the surroundings are still lacking, which shows that the regulations for accessibility in the built environment set by the French Ministry of Housing, Equality territories and Rural Policy are still not met fully. This opens up for further improvements. However, in comparison with other historical parks and gardens, the Palace of Versailles with its gardens is a commendable example on how to implement modern requirements for universal usability in historical architecture.

In similar environments, people with special needs can often be excluded given that the access to the site can be an issue, but also the lack of adequately adjusted hygiene space inside the historical buildings, restaurants and other spaces. In order to make historical monuments accessible to everyone, further adjustments of built space and garden space have to be realized. However, the balance between historical architecture and modern requirements has to be mastered. The Palace of Versailles with its Gardens shows that such adjustments can be made by use of modern architectural designs and materials, not to say modern information technology.



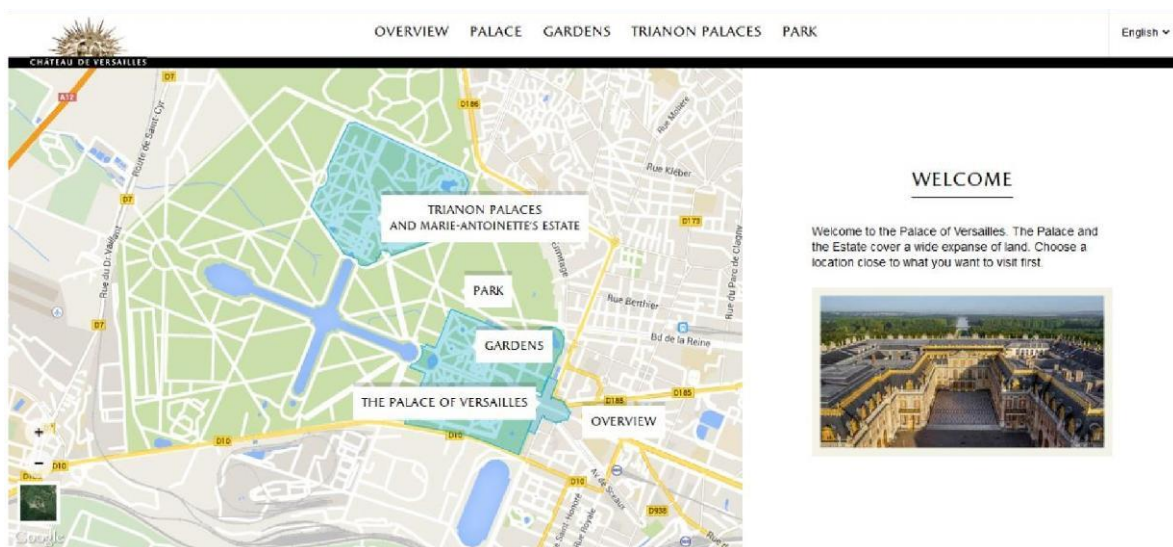
## Appendix

### List of Illustrations



### Ill. 1: The Gardens of Versailles

Source: <http://en.chateauversailles.fr/explore-the-estate/the-garden/the-copses/the-orangerie>



### Ill. 2: Interactive Map

Source: <http://bienvenue.chateauversailles.fr/en/accueil>



Ill. 3:

Source: <http://bienvenue.chateauversailles.fr/en/accueil>



Ill. 4: Lift

Source: <http://bienvenue.chateauversailles.fr/en/accueil>





Ill. 5: Grand Trianon

Source: <http://bienvenue.chateauversailles.fr/en/accueil>



Ill. 6: Petit Trianon

Source: <http://bienvenue.chateauversailles.fr/en/accueil>



Ill. 7: Little Train

Source: <http://bienvenue.chateauversailles.fr/en/accueil>

## 5.2 List of Literature

“A History of Garden Design”, Derek Clifford  
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“neue Gärten new Gardens”, Ernst Baumann  
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