Historical Continuity

Of all the great gardening traditions preceding the 20th century, gardens associated with Islamic dominance over several hundred years, in the West as well as the East represent an ideological continuity which is unique in its spread and development over a wide range of geographical and cultural regions. In comparison, the art of garden design as it evolved in Europe from the 16th to the 18th century was at the time geographically limited in its extent and influence – the classical proportions of the villa gardens of Renaissance Italy, later the grand theatrical settings of Baroque compositions in France, and finally the revolutionary “irregularity” of the Picturesque or English Landscape Style – each one of which was of immense artistic significance no doubt, but confined in its development and refinement to Europe alone.

Gardens of the Mughal period in India belong to a historical tradition of formal gardens extending over three continents, and at least five centuries. From West Asia and Persia to North Africa and Southern Europe, i.e. Moorish Spain, and in the East to Central Asia and the Indian subcontinent. There are thematic connections that link the spatial and aesthetic qualities of these arrangements of land, water, and vegetation, no matter that individual examples may be widely separated in time and space.

Origins

The origins of the Mughal garden, as of other geometrical gardens in the Islamic tradition, may be traced back to forms evolved for the careful husbanding of water resources and the productive use of land, embodied in the cultural landscape of ancient Persia. Enclosed baghs or orchards and other horticultural plots were irrigated by narrow runnels flowing from one to the other, with water brought with great difficulty and extraordinary engineering skill, from the mountains to the dry plains by underground and surface canals.

Though these formal or paradise gardens are commonly associated with Islamic symbolism – they are also referred to as “Islamic” gardens – the origin of this distinctive form is acknowledged by scholars to lie in a time even more remote. In other, earlier cultural contexts it is not improbable that their symbolic meaning was quite different to the one attributed during the centuries of Muslim dominance (circa 10th-17th century), when this style of landscape design was most widespread.

To quote Sylvia Crew, an authority on Mughal gardens: “...while Persian tradition has been one of the main forces in the evolution of the paradise garden, its origins are far older than the Persian empire. It is indeed described in the Book of Genesis: And a river went out of Eden to water the garden: and from thence it was parted and became into four heads.”

Arrangement of Space

The arrangement of the Mughal garden is deceptively simple and suggests an abstract representation of these forms and processes. An orthogonal grid of paths divide the space, four-fold or otherwise; the plots in between are lush with the foliage of freely growing orchard trees, the whole interlaced with a network of water-channels punctuated by pools and cascades. The garden is territorially defined and contained in a walled enclosure, accessible only through symmetrically arranged gates. Often, one side of the enclosure, usually opposite the main entry gate, opens to a view of the landscape outside.

There are, of course, significant departures. Depending on function and usage: the spatial concept in the Tomb gardens of the plains is distinct from that of the pleasure gardens. The Tomb garden is almost always perfectly
balancing and combination of certain dualities within the same space – utility and ornamentation, productive and aesthetic values, a rigid framework overlaid with unrestrained organic growth, enclosure and prospect, movement and stillness

The strategic siting of the garden at a place with convenient access to a water source and thus already geographically identifiable, and the use of a grid-plotted internal spaces for many functions – for ceremony, recreation and sensory stimulation as well as horticultural production.

Water
At the heart of the design is the idea that the bath should be alive with the continuous flow of water, whose primary purpose is to irrigate the garden and maintain its health. The means through which this is accomplished is the supreme achievement of the Mughal garden. The garden contains a wide array of water-related elements and structures to provide a considerable ordinary task, by enhancing and modulating in many subtle ways the movement, appearance and sound of water.

Familiar examples include, for instance, falls negotiating large differences in level, from one terrace to the next in thick sheets, their sound recalling the soothing rumble of waterfalls in nature. Or, in another interesting technique, inclined stone cascades engraved with patterns to create a white sheet of foaming water (the chadar), especially effective when viewed by moonlight. Gravity-fed fountain jets, integrated into the carefully engineered system of channels and ponds complete the picture. In the best examples, the entire ensemble is imbued with a delicacy of concept and elegantly precise execution, whose overall effect when everything was “functioning” can only be imagined as poetic.

Site and Surroundings
Nader Arslan in his incisive analysis of Islamic architectural tradition, The Sense of Unity, touches on the great significance attributed to choosing sites which had a “regional sense of place”. Sites possessing a defined identity, for example, “at the foot of the hill”, or “overlooking the valley”, or again “between the land and the water” can be readily recognized as types of places where Mughal gardens are found.

Typically, in the pleasure gardens of Kashmir, the garden site is at the lower elevation of a hill, between the hill and the lake. It is not accidental that this particular location is the perfect place form which spectacular views of the regional space of the valley are revealed: to one side the mountain at the back, on the other, the lake view. Towards the lake, the visual link between garden and valley is marked by the flow of water in that direction and the progression of terraces downwards with the grand chenars on either side. These direct the eye away from the details of the garden to the extended lake panorama and hills beyond. The garden celebrates the beauty of the valley. It transcends its visible physical limits, and the internal space engages dramatically with the larger setting.

The gardens of Humayun’s tomb in Delhi, and of the Taj at Agra, exhibit variations in the development of this major theme. At Delhi, the river view seems incidental to the original scheme (only acknowledged by the later addition of a Baradari on the eastern, river-facing wall), because attention focuses on the mausoleum occupying the centre of the garden enclosure. At Agra, the mausoleum is placed at end of the garden, overlooking the river view, the base of the tomb functions as a vast platform from which to experience two worlds: the exquisitely sophisticated, enclosed paradise on one side, the robustly rural, dusty expanse of the Jamuna flood plain on the other.

Within forts and palaces this idea is demonstrated in the planning of gardens to look out into the countryside from an elevated viewpoint—numerous examples can be cited: the Forts of Agra and Delhi, Raispur palaces at Amber, Jagadh and Udaipur, Gokonda and other forts and palaces of the Deccan kingdoms; preceding these, in the many royal structures and complexes in the historic city of Maml.

The Future
These gardens today are without many of the features which imparted a living vibrancy and character; on looking at them now one has to imagine the presence of these missing elements to appreciate their true genius. The dense, freely flowering orchards have gone and the water systems are defunct; landscape within the garden enclosure is reduced to a desolate pastiche of the Victorian gardenscape public park – bald or water-logged grass “lawns”, hedges, ragged or otherwise, and flower beds disposed here and there at the discretion of the head – mul. Everything incongruous and makeshift, with-out dignity or reference to the artistic heritage and historical context.

The urgent need to conserve and perhaps revitalize the spatial and heritage resource that these gardens represent is now being recognized, though the effort on the ground is piecemeal and limited to one or two prominent sites.

Also apparent are the obvious changes in the physical context and the function and usage of these gardens, especially those in metropolitan cities. From being oases in a largely hostile landscape they have become precincts within the city fabric, always in danger of encroachment. From being scenes of ceremony and the indulgence of royal pleasures, these gardens today fulfill a limited role as tourist attractions and public space.

The preservation of these landscape for posterity presents challenges of three kinds: first, the need to research, document and identify; second, based on this research, to designate and classify, and to formulate historically authentic strategies for conservation and use; thirdly, to address the issues raised by the need to generate internal resources enabling the sustainable management of these properties in perpetuity.