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Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque: ethics, aesthetics and garden design in Belgium (1913–1940)

Bruno Notteboom, Department of Architecture and Urban Planning, Ghent University, Belgium

Garden and landscape design have been a privilege of the elite for centuries. However, from the late eighteenth century onwards the concept of the private or public garden as a place where contact with nature would also regenerate the non-elite urban population developed all over Europe (Van Molle 2007: 16–19). The democratization of gardens and parks was a result of both the emancipation of the lower classes and paternalistic attempts to create a healthy and stable pastime for the working class. As a consequence, discourses on workers' gardens are a pre-eminent way to explore the ethical and aesthetic role of garden design.

This paper investigates the discourse of Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque (The New Picturesque Garden) founded in Belgium in 1913 as a 'national association for the renovation and the popularization of garden art' (Van Billoen 1913). [1] The key figure of the association was Jules Buyssens, a professional landscape architect, commercial horticulturist and inspector of the City of Brussels plantation service. The idea for Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque emerged when Buyssens was asked to design a model garden for a worker's dwelling at the 1910 World's Fair in Brussels. It was commissioned by the Algemene Spaar- en Lijfrentekas (ASLK), a loan association for workers. [2] In its early publications, Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque set itself the explicit target of popularizing garden art and gardening amongst the working class. It also intended to set up a commission to study and promote workers' gardens (Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque 1913: 3). In the first issue of its seasonal journal *Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque*, the association sounded rather idealistic as it announced the following subjects to be treated in subsequent issues: 'The

social and moral role of the garden – The affinity between the evolution of the garden and that of morals – Influence of the contact with and studies of plants on the happiness and the formation of the spirit – Garden cities, parks and public promenades – Workers’ gardens, school gardens and gardens for children’ (Anonymous 1914: 57).

For Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque, popularizing the garden went hand-in-hand with the promotion of a new type of garden: the so-called ‘new picturesque garden’ (Fig. 1). The interpretation of the concept of the new picturesque garden as well as the instruments and goals of popularization were not unambiguous. Especially before World War I, the board of Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque comprised an amalgam of members with divergent agendas. Using the journal *Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque* as its main source, this article outlines what was understood by ‘the new picturesque garden’, why this garden was considered a suitable instrument for popularization and how the addressed audience evolved. [3] I will argue that the association’s focus shifted from ethics to aesthetics in the course of the interwar period.

The ‘new picturesque’ garden: a wild garden

When Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque was founded, the English landscape garden had been the prevailing idiom of public and private parks and gardens all over Europe for decades. In Haussmann’s Paris, landscape architect Adolphe Alphand adapted picturesque landscape design to the needs of the modern city and the public park (Lambin 1987: 11–12). Although Jules Buyssens himself worked between 1892 and 1902 at the office of Édouard André (Alphand’s collaborator) he voiced his concern about the reduction of picturesque garden design to a rigid style, a standardized formula taught in handbooks. Landscape architect Louis Van der Swaelmen, one of the founders of the association, felt equally compelled to react against the banality of contemporary parks and gardens. In 1913 he wrote that the picturesque landscape garden had become a false imitation of nature, an amorphous garden, characterized by its ‘sausage-style roads around lawns in the shape of a sole of a boot, kidney or cutlet-shaped ponds’, in short, a ‘cream cake surrounded by macaroons’ (Van der Swaelmen 1913: 3). As much as Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque was opposed to the artificial *style*

paysagère, it equally condemned the return of the formal geometrical garden, especially in France. [4]

Father and son Henri and Achille Duchêne in particular, who specialized in the restoration and the creation of seventeenth-century style gardens, were pilloried in *Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque* as the protagonists of French geometrical garden design. However, the journal reserved its fiercest polemic for landscape designer André Véra, who was considered the founder of French modernist garden design (Le Dantec 2003: 473–577). In fact, the adjective ‘pittoresque’ figured in the name of *Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque* as an answer to *Le Nouveau Jardin*, the 1913 book in which Véra pleaded for the reinstatement of geometry in the garden (Véra 1913; Buyssens 1934: 475).

What was this ‘new picturesque’ garden, then, that would be able to escape the constraints of both the standardized *style paysagère* and the severe geometry of Véra and the Duchênes? It would in the first place be a *natural* garden: ‘the type of garden that seems to seduce everyone, because it is inspired directly and even more than the old landscape garden, by the example of wild nature itself: it is what we could call the natural garden, or, with a more complicated term, the sub-spontaneous garden, what the English call the *wild garden*’ (Van Billoen 1913: 4, author’s italics). In the 1913 programme booklet, photographs of natural forest vegetation were used as an example to be followed in the ‘new picturesque’ garden (Fig. 2). William Robinson, who promoted the wild garden in England from the 1870s onwards, unmistakably influenced *Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque*. The idea of an informal garden, where plants developed with less human intervention, as well as the model of winter-hardy mixed borders of exotic and native plants as an alternative to the annual planting in flower beds, were introduced by Robinson and further developed by Gertrude Jekyll, who was cited a few times in the journal *Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque* (Allan 1982; Tooley and Arnander 1995). In addition, English garden magazines, which played a major part in the popularization of garden design and gardening, served as an example for the journal. Over the years it published translated articles from magazines such as *Gardening Illustrated*, which popularized the ideas of Robinson and Jekyll among the growing English middle class (Desmond 1987: 212).

The concept of the worker’s garden, stressed in the early publications of *Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque*,

harks back to a long-standing ethical attitude in Europe. Its important models were Christian Hirschfeld's *Volksgärten* concept and Daniel Schreber's *Schrebergärten*, which situated gardening within an idea of physical and moral regeneration of the people that would become the goal of the German *Lebensreform* movement (Buchholz 2001). However, by focusing on the English wild garden—German examples were never mentioned in *Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque*—the association was actually subscribing to the English 'gardenesque' tradition that was essentially aimed at leisure gardens for the emergent middle class instead of workers' gardens for food production. On the practical level of horticulture and landscape design, *Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque* oriented itself in the interwar era towards the French-speaking world, in line with the commercial interests of Buysens and his fellow horticulturalists.

Popularization with constraints

The outbreak of the World War I disrupted the activities of the association and the second issue of its journal did not appear until 1923. After the war the founding members who were most interested in the social role of the garden had left the association. Albert Van Billoen, initiator of the 1910 model home and garden of the ASLK loan association, became administrator-general of the national social housing corporation Nationale Maatschappij voor Goedkope Woningen en Woonvertrekken (NMGWW) (Vereecken 2002: 21). [5] Louis Van der Swaelmen, who had spent the war years in Holland, had become more interested in urban planning than in landscape design (Stynen 1979). As a consequence, Jules Buysens came to monopolize the content of *Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque* in the interwar era. Because Buysens owned a horticulturalist firm, the popularizing ambition of the journal did not cease with simply informing the readers of the latest developments in garden design anymore but became a medium for the promotion of his own practice as well. During the economic crisis of the 1920s and 1930s, many landowners' estates were divided into residential allotments and Buysens was forced to reorient his practice to the needs of the middle class. As far as the workers' gardens were concerned, well-organized associations such as the Ligue du Coin de Terre had achieved a breakthrough during World War I (Heyrman 2007: 53–54). As a

consequence, the target group of *Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque* was situated in the middle of the socio-economic spectrum. From the lists of subscribers, published annually in the journal, one can deduce that in the course of the interwar era the clientele shifted from the aristocracy and the higher bourgeoisie to the lower bourgeoisie and the middle class, but definitely not to the working class. The issues of workers' gardens and the social role of the garden were abandoned. Although the model of the wild garden was considered as low maintenance in comparison with the landscape park, the gardens on display in *Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque* were far too labour intensive and expensive for the lower class. As mentioned above, Jules Buyssens' professional contacts were focused on the French-speaking part of the world, especially with Henry Correvon, a Swiss horticulturalist specializing in alpine plants. Correvon was a great influence on the design of *jardins alpins* in botanical and private gardens all over Europe, a topic that was extensively discussed in *Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque* (Haveaux 1914). Although the journal demonstrated how to construct such gardens within a small area, it speaks for itself that the rock and alpine gardens promoted by Correvon were not the cheapest to create.

If *Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque* fulfilled a social role at all in the interwar period, it should be sought at the level of the participation of women in public life. As early as 1914, approximately one-third of the non-professional members of the association were women, and we can assume that more were subscribed under their husband's name. [6] As was the case in England, gardening and the management of the garden was seen as a suitable occupation for women, as an extension of their household duties (Raphael 1987). *Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque* also offered women the opportunity to leave the domestic realm for excursions, lectures and exhibitions, but even if the president of *Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque* was a woman—Mme Lefèvre-Giron, who also wrote a column on gardening for the journal—the professional domain of the landscape designer or horticulturalist remained male dominated. It is also questionable whether the female members of *Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque* were active gardeners themselves. The articles and plans in the magazine were not technical and detailed enough to serve as a guideline for the actual layout and plant choice of a garden. The association and its journal allowed the members to get acquainted with garden

design and botany but they would have to be assisted by a professional, such as Jules BuysSENS. As a consequence, *Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque* became as much a means to assure BuysSENS of a clientele as to popularize knowledge about the garden and gardening.

‘A new Belgian garden’

How did the ‘new picturesque’ garden evolve in the interwar period? As mentioned earlier, BuysSENS tried to translate the vocabulary of the landscape parks of the elite to suburban and urban gardens: the size of gardens portrayed in *Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque* varied from the large villa garden to the small walled garden in the city—even gardens on a roof terrace atop a garage figured in the journal. The fact that *Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque* did not completely abandon its initial popularizing ambition led to a certain ambiguity in the journal, which is here and there visible in a discrepancy between text and image. In a 1927 article entitled ‘Contra la vie chère’ (Against the expensive life), for instance, the journal urged government organizations to teach the population how to optimize the vegetable and fruit produce of their gardens to ameliorate the economical crisis (Brichard 1927). Ironically, the article was illustrated with the image of a decorative flowering tree in the garden of a large mansion (Fig. 3). The strategy of *Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque* was one of emancipation by means of emulation: the popularization of the garden came down to an imitation of the higher classes by the upcoming middle class, and the social concern became an aesthetic one (Fig. 4). Gardens for the working class, in the form of allotment gardens, for instance, were provided by other organizations such as the Ligue du Coin de Terre (Seghers and Van Molle 2007). It goes without saying that in these workers’ gardens the emphasis was on the economic rather than on the aesthetic aspects. In the course of the interwar era the model of the wild garden (including the labour-intensive rock and alpine gardens) was adapted to modern demands. Although BuysSENS had fiercely opposed the geometrical garden before the war, his designs evolved into a combination of geometrical and picturesque elements. As a comment on the 1925 Exposition des Arts Décoratifs in Paris, which displayed a number of modernist gardens (including Robert Mallet-Stevens’s concrete trees as a much-discussed element), BuysSENS pleaded

for ‘a modernism instructed by and with respect for the past’ (Buyssens 1925: 150). This idea was illustrated by a 1923 model garden that ‘exemplified the image of Belgium’: a geometrical garden, based on the sixteenth-century Flemish *béguinage* garden combined with a picturesque ‘Walloon’ garden (Buyssens 1923) (Fig.5). The ‘Modern Belgian Garden’ that Buyssens designed for the Ghent Flower Exhibition of 1928 was even more geometrical. Buyssens’s return to geometry can be read as an answer to the rising popularity of gardens inspired by art deco and modernism, which not only differed aesthetically from the picturesque garden, but were also functionally much more conceived as an extension of the house and, above all, required less maintenance. The search for an idiom of the Belgian garden was inspired by commercial as much as by aesthetic or functional motives. By designing gardens that combined geometrical and picturesque elements, Buyssens safeguarded the profession of the landscape designer/horticulturalist by responding to the demand for a more architectural approach while maintaining the need for botanical knowledge.

In the 1930s Jean Canneel-Claes became the leading figure in Belgian modernist landscape design, and with him ethics seemed to re-enter the discourse on the garden. Together with Christopher Tunnard he pleaded in 1937 for a social role of the garden in their programme for the Association Internationale des Architectes de Jardins Modernistes (Flouquet 1938; Imbert 2009: 113–126). However, until the end of the 1930s this social concern was hardly expressed in realized projects as Canneel-Claes (like most Belgian modernist architects) mainly designed for the well-to-do. In the end, the choice of a ‘modernist’, a ‘classical’ or a ‘picturesque’ garden seemed to be a matter of taste rather than of ideology. In 1933 the architectural journal *Bâtir* published two model plans for gardens of ‘moderate’ houses by Buyssens and Canneel-Claes (Buyssens 1933; Canneel-Claes 1933) (Fig.6). The differences between them were mostly aesthetic and organizational rather than socio-economic: judging by the budget mentioned in the text, both gardens were too expensive for the average family, let alone for families living in social housing.

From ethics to aesthetics

This study of Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque demonstrates how garden design is situated in a continuously shifting position between ethical, aesthetic and commercial considerations; that, in spite of the initial stress on the social role of the garden, the focus of Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque moved to a rather business-oriented attitude, in which the promotion of a specific aesthetics played an important role. From World War I onwards, the world outside the private garden did not exist in *Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque* and such issues as allotment gardens, the public park, social housing or the garden city were barely mentioned. The concept of the ‘wild garden’, initially embedded in a discourse on the regenerating ability of nature, became a means to position oneself socially. The journal’s readership consisted of the growing group of owners of (mostly suburban) homes and gardens, whose main joint aspiration was—as Lewis Mumford formulated it—‘a collective effort to lead a private life’; in the artificial nature of the garden, they sought a retreat from the modern city. [7] The Catholic and liberal political parties that came into power in 1926 only encouraged and cultivated the ideal of the private home and garden at the expense of collective housing and public space (Van Loo and Zampa, 1994: 198). In a society marked by a growing middle class, the ‘new picturesque’ garden—in line with J. C. Loudon’s ‘gardenesque’ designs in England—was an instrument that helped its practitioners to climb the social ladder through emulation: the garden allowed them to appropriate the symbols of a higher class (Fishman 1989: 95). With the aid of the English ‘wild garden’ and the Swiss *jardin alpin*, picturesque garden design was modelled in such a way as to become manageable for the lower orders of the bourgeoisie, creating an idiom that would be absorbed *en masse* by the post-World War II middle classes.

Although the focus of Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque shifted from ethics to aesthetics in the interwar era such notions as the ‘new picturesque’ garden and the ‘wild garden’ from the early years worked as catalysts for ideas on the social role of the garden. The most comprehensive attempt to place landscape design in an ethical context was undertaken by Louis Van der Swaelmen. During his war years in Holland he wrote *Préliminaires d’Art Civique*, a handbook for the reconstruction of Belgium and for urban planning in

general (Van der Swaelmen 1916). Van der Swaelmen integrated his pre-war ideas and writings on the social role of landscape architecture in an urban planning framework, departing from the conception of urban planning and democracy inspired by Hendrik Berlage (Stynen 1979). The wild garden that *Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque* discussed solely in the context of the private garden played a public role in the work of Van der Swaelmen. In *Préliminaires d'Art Civique*, as in modernist urban plans from the 1930s, the term 'wild garden' comes to designate a kind of nature reserve that surrounds and permeates the urban agglomeration. [8] The concept of immersion in 'wild' nature as a means of improving the physical and moral health of the population reoccurred equally strongly in Van der Swaelmen's designs for garden cities in the 1920s. From this perspective, the initial ideas on the social role of the garden continued to develop, albeit outside of *Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque*.

Notes

1 This paper is based on research for my PhD thesis (Notteboom 2009: 403–439). See also, Bailly 1984; Schoofs 1986; Vereecken 2002.

2 'General Saving and Annuity Bank'.

3 Since most of the archive of Jules Buysens is lost, the journal *Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque* is the most complete source of information on the association. What is left of Buysens's archive is managed by landscape architect Jean-Marie Bailly at the Institut Supérieur d'Architecture des Jardins et de Paysage in Anderlecht, Belgium.

4 In late nineteenth-century France, the aristocracy and the *haute finance* fell back on the gardens of the Ancien Régime. This revival must be situated in an ideological climate that was created by the Action Française, a political movement that pleaded for the return of the monarchy (Le Dantec 2003: 375–376).

5 'National Association for Cheap Houses and Rooms'.

6 The list of subscribers was added annually as an appendix to the journal.

7 Lewis Mumford in *The Culture of Cities* (1938), cited in Fishman (1989), x.

8 Such as in the plan for the urbanization along the Albert canal by J. F. Hoeben (1934).

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Figures

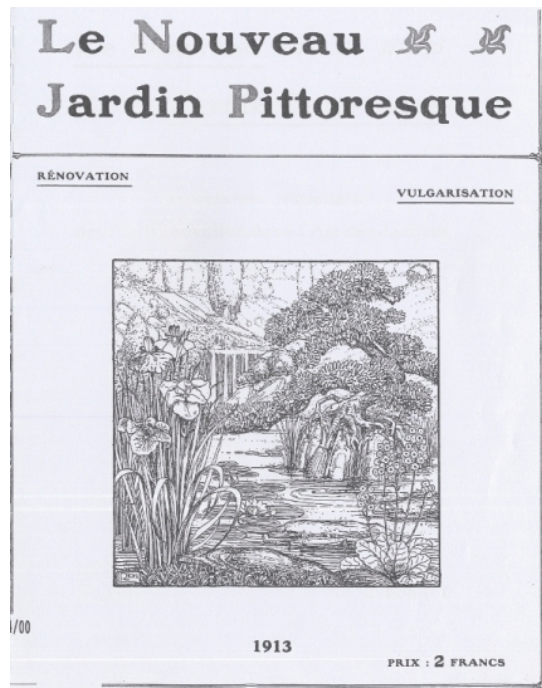


Figure 1 Cover of the first issue of *Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque* (1914).

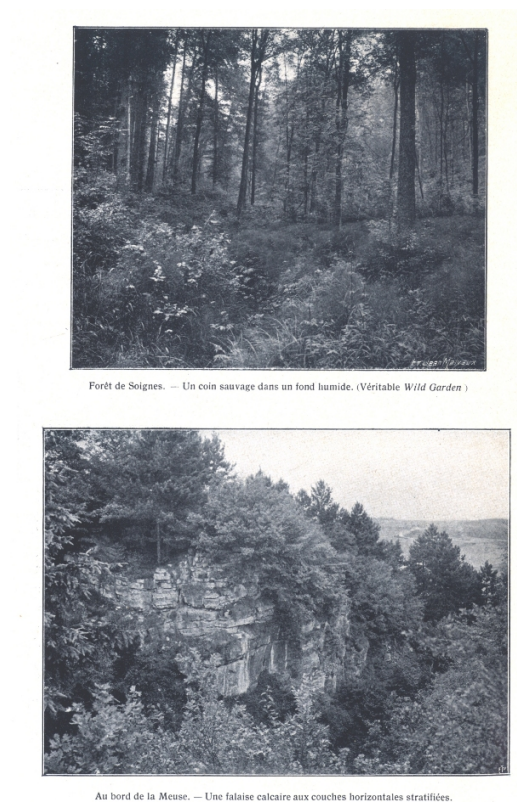


Figure 2 Photographic images of forest vegetation as an inspiration for the 'new picturesque' garden in the programme booklet of *Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque* (1913).



Figure 3 Illustration with the article 'Contre la Vie Chère' (*Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque*, 1927).



Figure 4 A charity event in a garden designed by Jules Buyssens (*Le Nouveau Jardin Pittoresque*, 1929).

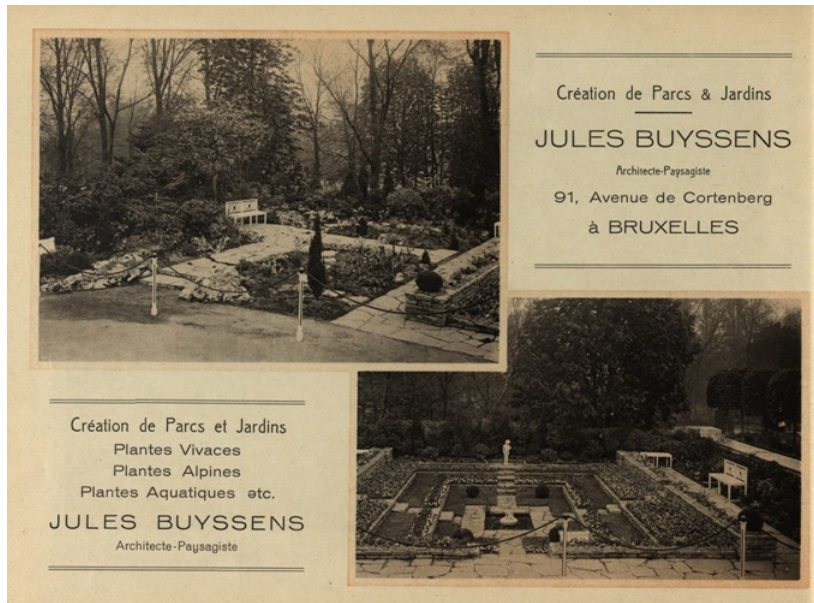


Figure 5 ‘Flemish’ and ‘Walloon’ garden at the annual Ghent flower show of 1923 (*Floralies Gantoises*, 1923).

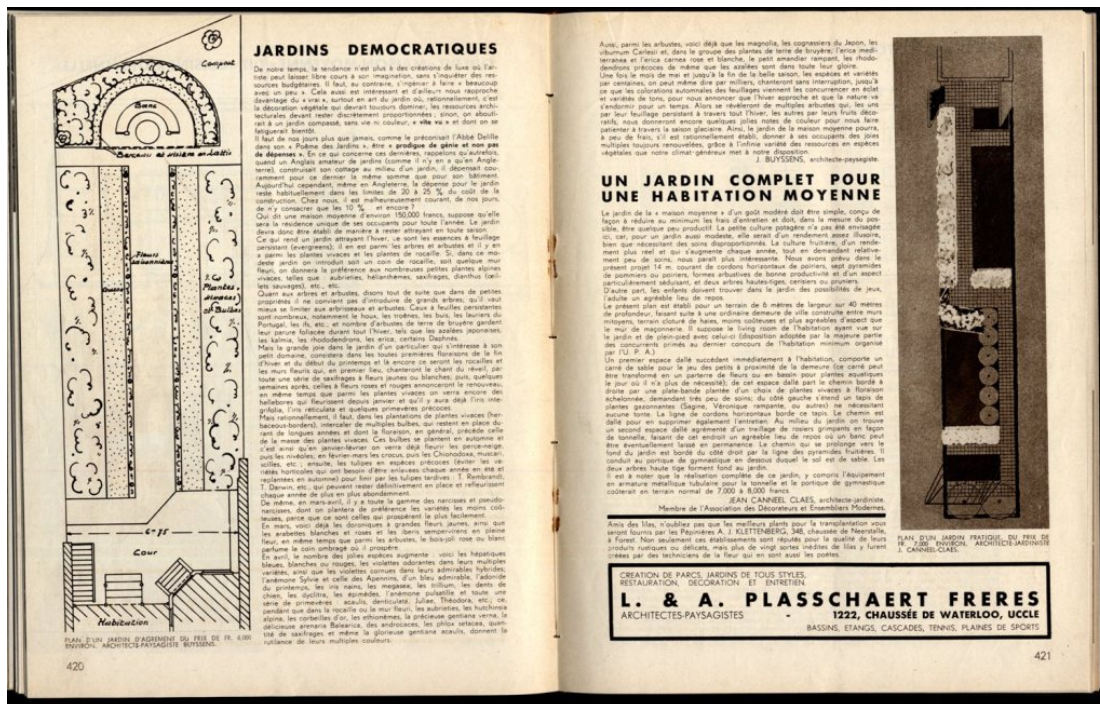


Figure 6 Model plans for gardens of ‘moderate’ houses by Buysse and Canneel-Claes (*Bâtir*, 1933).

Biographical Notes

Dr Bruno Notteboom is an engineer-architect with a masters in urban planning. He worked as an urban planner and researcher in Belgium and abroad until obtaining his doctorate in urban and regional planning in 2009 at Ghent University with the dissertation '*Ouvrons les yeux*'. *Stedenbouw en beeldvorming van het landschap in België / Urban planning and landscape iconography in Belgium 1890–1940*. Today he is an assistant professor at Ghent University and guest professor at Sint-Lucas School of Architecture, Ghent. His research focuses on the relationship between landscape and urban planning since the nineteenth century.

Contact

Bruno Notteboom

Assistant Professor

Department of Architecture & Urban Planning, Ghent University

Jozef Plateastraat 22

9000 Ghent

Belgium

T +32 (0) 9 264 39 07

F +32 9 (0) 9 264 41 85

bruno.notteboom@ugent.be