

Chapter 1

The Landscape of Modernity

Jean-Marie Canneel-Claes left Brussels for Belgian Congo on 1 March 1950. The papers recording Canneel's transfer as a colonial civil servant succinctly list the main stages of his life and professional development from garden architect to urbanist.¹ Born in Schaerbeek, a suburb of Brussels, on 12 July 1909 to Eugène Canneel and Jeanne Claes, he graduated in "garden architecture" from the Institut Supérieur des Arts Décoratifs (ISAD), known as La Cambre. Canneel practiced as *architecte paysagiste urbaniste* from July 1931. He served as an architect in the Central Administration for Urbanism, an elusive appellation for the German-controlled Agency for the Restoration of the Nation, between September 1940 and October 1944. In addition, he taught in the horticulture school of Brabant between October 1942 and September 1946, and from November 1947, at the Institut Supérieur et International d'Urbanisme Appliqué (ISUA) in Brussels. Canneel boarded the plane with his wife, Yvonne, and daughters Nicole and Martine to reach Léopoldville and the promise of a new beginning. There, Canneel could reinvent a professional persona and distance himself from his questionable affiliation with the German occupiers of Belgium.

It seems paradoxical to begin near the end of Canneel's professional career, yet unpacking this outline allows the identification of the core issues that defined his practice. Canneel's knowledge of architecture, which he stressed to secure employment in Congo, can be traced to La Cambre, where he studied with the Belgian avant-garde and was exposed to theoretical concepts and a range of subjects that went beyond those typically associated with an education in landscape architecture. Such versatility led him to promote a new breed of designer, one equally versed in architecture, urbanism, and landscape architecture. Canneel held a privileged position during the interwar years, when landscape architects recast their professional role, seizing the opportunity to shift from estate design to the shaping of the larger physical and social environment. Engaging the debate on modernism, he joined garden to city. Searching for a new theory and a new practice, he was emblematic of the new landscape architecture profession, but the path he chose was atypical, first in his education and later in his design production.

Modernist Discourses

Marshall Berman's discussion of modernity offers a useful structure for situating landscape modernism within a larger cultural framework. As Berman argues, the experience of modernity developed over a series of phases going back five hundred years.² Reflecting physical, scientific, aesthetic and, above all, social changes, the process of modernization generated long-lasting uncertainty. Twentieth-century modernism responded to the nineteenth-century process of modernization, with its rapid industrialization and urbanization. Such forces became engines for change in architecture and landscape architecture. Throughout the 1920s and 1930s, designers invoked the gray city and the frenzied pace of life to justify gardens that alternated between geometric and mineral, lush and romantic. Yet these decades witnessed more than a stylistic repositioning. The geopolitical and cultural upheaval that followed World War I and the Great Depression led to a reassessment of the social and aesthetic basis of garden design and caused a fundamental questioning of the landscape profession.

Garden designers summoned the themes of democratization, new modes of living, contemporary materials, and hygiene, to reinvigorate their field. Emphasizing the social and the technical, these themes moved landscape away from questions of style—associated with the past—and led to a rapprochement with architectural theory. In this way, the emergent landscape profession joined the debate on modernity, specifically on function and aesthetics. The relation of function to garden form was as elastic as that of function to building. The vague concepts and contradictory statements of early-twentieth-century architectural theory equally plagued landscape architecture.³ In addition, landscape architecture had a very small body of literature, making it necessary to interpolate from few essays and designs how modernity inflected the discipline.

Even though public parks, cemeteries, and exposition grounds were central to this period's landscape production, the private garden remained the principal laboratory for experimentation, interpretation, and argumentation. Rhetoric and results varied widely. The garden stood at one end as a safeguard of moral values and at the other as a record of change. The texts and themes discussed here represent core samples rather than a complete survey. Together, they offer a context within which to evaluate the theory and practice of Canneel.

The late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries witnessed intensified discussions on stylistic suitability. In England, the notorious dispute between Reginald Blomfield and William Robinson pitted formal against wild garden as paragons of Englishness.⁴ Underscoring the role of the garden as emblem of national identity, their argument also pointed to contested professional ground: whether garden design was the domain of the architect or plantsman. To Blomfield, the architectural garden—with its terraces, structures, and topiary—expressed the English spirit and a means to regain the territory lost to nineteenth-century landscape gardeners and horticulturists. In contrast, Robinson described the landscape gardener's practice as site-specific (observing nature and enhancing its characteristics) and far more appropriate than the application of a preconceived architectural plan onto the site. This either/or condition of architecture against "nature" would find a resolution, at least in England, with the gardens of Gertrude Jekyll and Edwin Lutyens. The collaboration between garden artist and architect yielded landscapes in

Bois des Moutiers, Varengeville-sur-mer, France. Gertrude Jekyll and Edwin Lutyens, circa 1899. The entry garden.
Photo by Dorothée Imbert

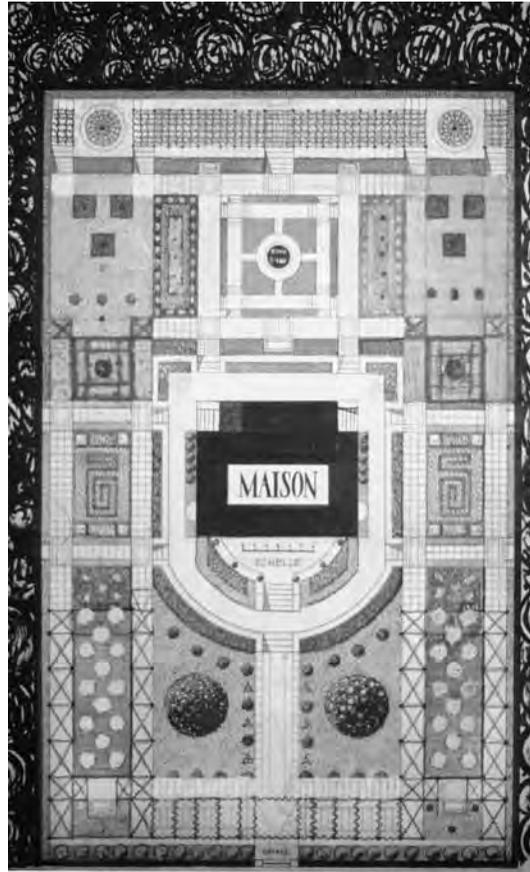


which the delicate textures and colors of plants offset the structure of paving, steps, rills, and walls. Their well-publicized integration of formal and natural elements evoked rural life and cottage architecture. In suggesting a gently used modernity, the Lutyens-Jekyll garden satisfied nostalgic ideals of Englishness and, paradoxically, offered a popular model for designers abroad.⁵

The German architect and critic Hermann Muthesius presented Lutyens and Jekyll as a successful model for design unity in his writings on the English house and garden.⁶ However, when expressing his view on the architectural garden, Muthesius aligned himself with Reginald Blomfield. Calling for garden-house oneness (*Einheit*) and for the architectural garden as the antidote to miniaturized mock nature, Muthesius refuted his appreciation of the Lutyens-Jekyll partnership by stating, “the house and garden are so intimately related . . . that it is simply impossible that two strangers, an architect and a gardener, give form to the house and its setting.”⁷ In his 1904 *Das englische Haus*, he equated modernity with “objective simplicity” (*sachliche Einfachheit*), advocating for an architecture free of stylistic constraints and connected to the past. The term *sachlich*, or objective, which Muthesius used to describe modest and practical design, would come to be associated with the contentious notions and aesthetics of functionalism and rationalism. His folding of garden design into architectural design and position on beauty and objectivity registered in the discourse on modern gardens in Germany and abroad.⁸

In France, the formal style also ruled with renewed nationalistic intensity. Shortly before World War I, garden designer and author André Vera emphatically decried that any new garden in the picturesque or anglicized style was simply “an act of sabotage against the National Revolution.”⁹ Much like Muthesius, Vera saw the garden as part of the architectural scope and a way to a renewed modernity. To Vera, the rigorous twentieth-century *jardin régulier*, or formal garden, guaranteed both design and moral integrity and symbolized the enduring French spirit.¹⁰

The impact of modernization and democratization, as well as the growing visibility of modern architecture, fueled discussions on the new garden—what it stood for, how it was to be designed, and by whom. In the 1935 *Les Jardins de l’avenir* (*Gardens of the Future*), French landscape architect Achille Duchêne modernized traditionally symmetrical plans by inserting programmed activities such as swimming, dancing, and



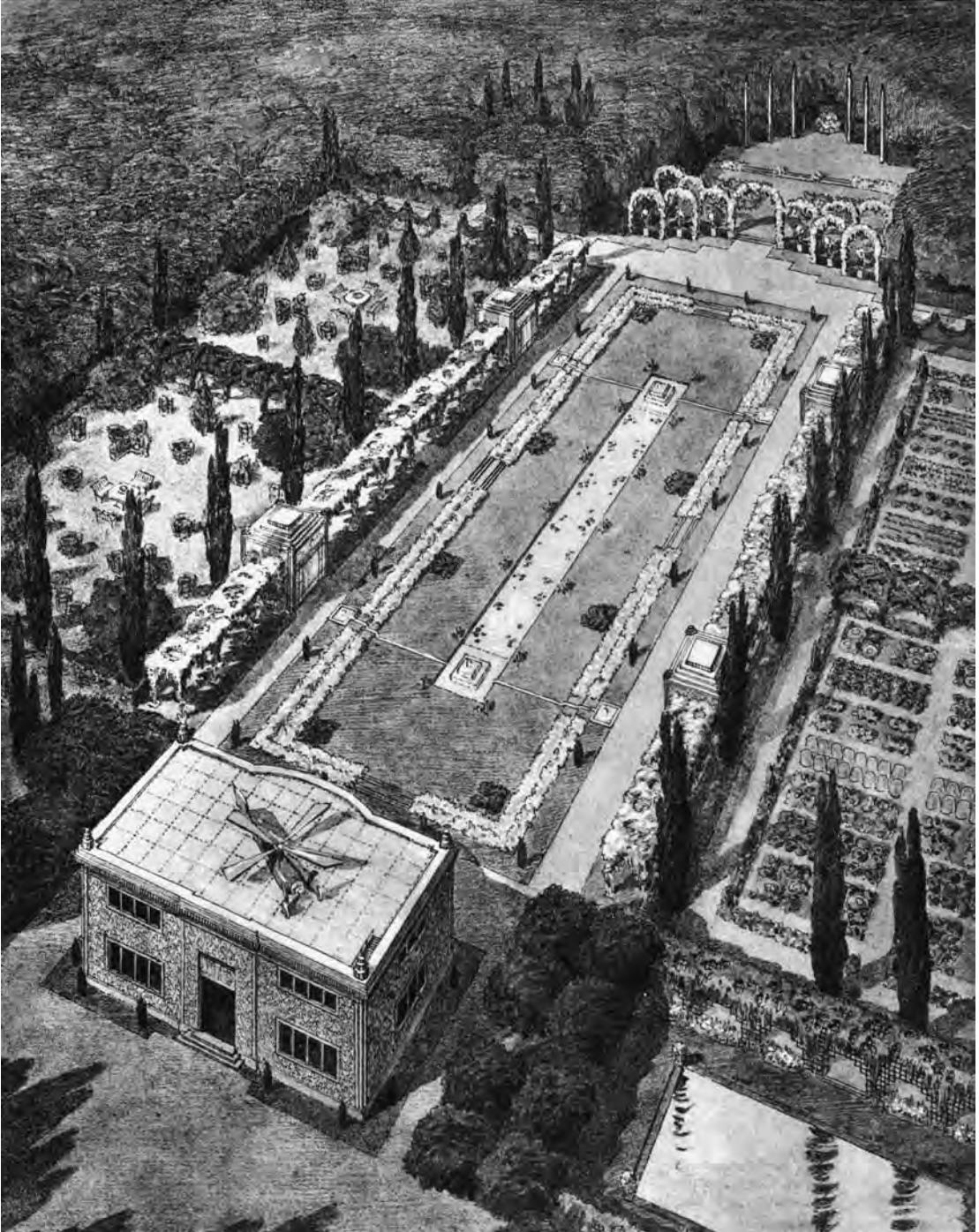
Jardin d'amour. Paul Vera, circa 1918. Gouache and ink study for André Vera's *Les Jardins*.
Courtesy of Yu-Chee Chong, London

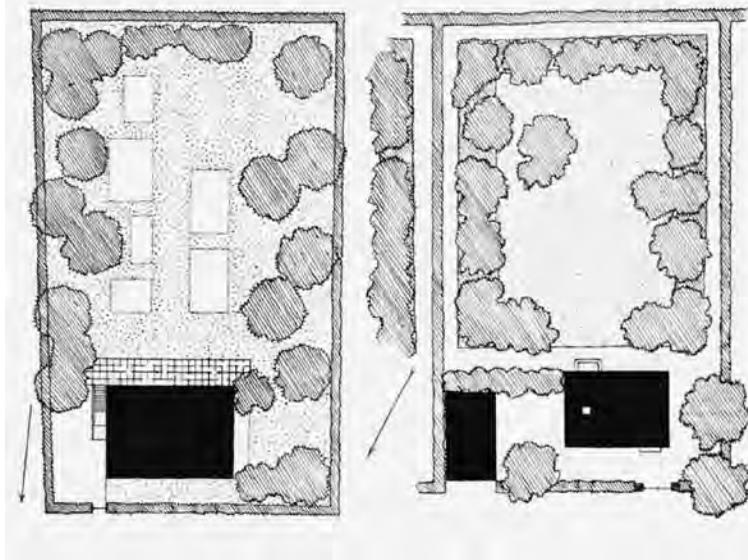
beekeeping in their hedge-bound rooms. While reminiscent of privileges associated with the past, these activities bore witness to the rationalization of aesthetics through function that prevailed in architecture and landscape architecture at the time. Architects figured prominently in French garden design of the interwar years, as attested to in the mineral constructs of Gabriel Guevrekian, Robert Mallet-Stevens, and Jean-Charles Moreux. In his 1924 call “Exhortation aux architectes de s’intéresser au jardin,” Vera described the garden as an affair of mathematical proportions and rhythm, which was the concern of the architect. Conversely, he saw the park as the domain of the horticulturally trained landscape designer.¹¹ Vera’s stance on professional expertise would remain central to discussions on specialized education and the nature of landscape architecture through the following decades.

As Vera associated the synthetic and formal *jardin régulier* with national identity, others defined the new garden with more abstract concepts, such as social improvement and mental health. The perceived impact of modernization and overcrowded urban conditions generated a series of responses that ranged in scale from private gardens to garden

Garden project for a family of artists. Achille Duchêne, circa 1927. The helicopter on top of the villa's roof adds a touch of modernity to the otherwise classically formal layout.

Duchêne, *Jardins de l'avenir*





100 percent green garden; two variants. G. N. Brandt, circa 1927. The plan on the left features flowerbeds growing out of lawn and the one on the right, Brandt's double enclosure. *Wasmuths Monatshefte für Baukunst und Städtebau* (April 1930)

cities. A case in point was Danish landscape architect G. N. Brandt (1878–1945) who advocated for a 100 percent green garden as the necessary antidote to what he considered gray city life.¹² This concept, exemplified in Brandt's own garden in Charlottenlund, begun in 1914, drew on the emotional qualities of plants and on a collective landscape memory. The new garden was to be quiet and comforting, without noisy gravel paths. It was small, enclosed and protected from neighbors, and yet expressed a “feeling of boundlessness” with layered vegetation and reflecting water.¹³ Formally simple, it was lushly planted to offer a wealth of imaginary readings and implied connections to the greater landscape, away from the “wood, brick, and steel” of the city. Perceptually ambiguous, it was decidedly *not* architectural.

Brandt stated his position on modernity and style with two articles on the garden of the future in which he took the concept of the architectural garden to task.¹⁴ He deemed “incomprehensible how Muthesius and his contemporaries nearly repudiated the garden cultures of both the eighteenth century and Japan in order to introduce their coarse and costly architectural garden.” Alas, he continued, “many landscape architects were influenced by the architectural garden style that has dominated the last twenty-five years, forgetting their own true calling, and acting as second-rate architects.”¹⁵ By pointing to the importance of the horticultural, historical, and cultural roots of landscape design, Brandt affirmed the landscape architect's preeminence in the garden.

The notion of “greenness” allowed Brandt to skirt issues of style. He believed, like Muthesius, that there was no need to confer modernity



Brandt garden, Charlottenlund, Denmark. G. N. Brandt, 1914. Brandt described this part of the garden as a 100 percent green outdoor room. Photo by Dorothée Imbert, 2001

through a new formal language. Unlike Muthesius, however, Brandt expressed modernity not in the rigor of plans but in the sensory and the ambiguous qualities of plants—the sheltering feeling of lush vegetation and the poetic effect of flowers. He placed the design of the garden in the hands of the landscape architect, asserting that plants were no construction material and remained unaffected by architectural modernism. Instead of promoting the typical modernist rupture with the past, Brandt argued that “the new garden will not be the product of a revolution. . . . Rather it will crystallise gradually out of the current multiformity, under the pressure of new social conditions.”¹⁶

By stating that “the garden [was] shaped more by the subjective than the functional or rational (*sächlich*),” Brandt called attention to one of the main questions regarding landscape modernism: what functionalism meant for the garden. The term *Sachlichkeit*, which had originally meant “objectivity” and “simplicity” before World War I, evolved into *neue*

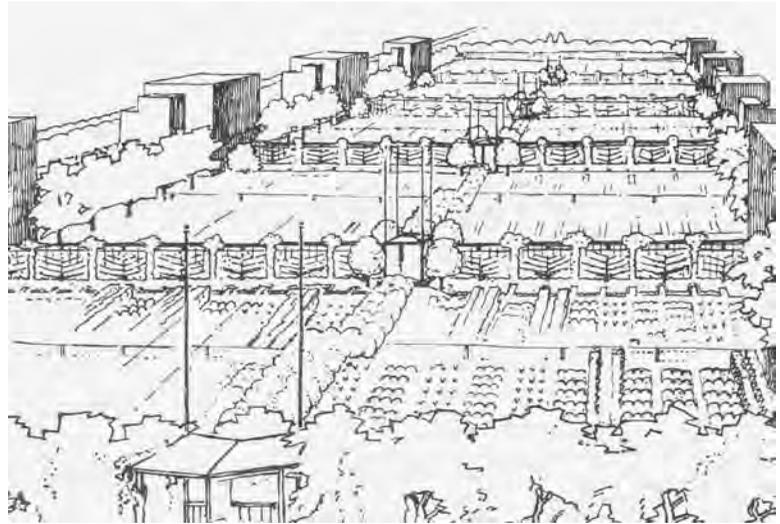
Sachlichkeit during the 1920s and became equated with functionalism and rationalism. These were contentious concepts in architectural circles that set in opposition proponents of a tradition-rich modernity and those of an “anti-aesthetic aesthetic.”¹⁷ Functionalism was even more fluid in its application to landscape architecture. For some, like Canneel, it entailed spaces in which to practice gymnastics, play, sunbathe, or grow vegetables and fruits. For others, like Brandt, it epitomized the application of architectural language to the garden. Although Brandt was not immune to modern architectural catchphrases, describing the garden of the future as inexpensive, easy to maintain, useful, and flexible—all themes shared with architecture and acknowledging the impact of economic restraint and democratization—he remained wary of functionalism.¹⁸ He urged the landscape architect to focus on the intangible rather than the rational and act as a “subtle psychologist”: “The more the world becomes mechanized, rationalized, standardized, and organized,” Brandt wrote, “the more gardens will provide relaxation through seclusion.”¹⁹

Ultimately, Brandt’s response to modernization was threefold: to establish the historical continuity between contemporary landscape architecture and its past; to stress the timelessness of vegetation; and to address the twentieth-century frenzied “*tourbillon de la vie sociale*” with calm, escapism, and illusion.²⁰ The garden was to counter mechanization, rationalization, and standardization with spiritual experiences and unconscious associations, best expressed through the narrative value of plants. His was not a nostalgic plea for romanticism, nor a negation of modernity, but a scientific experiment in psychological comfort and free association.

At the other end of the subjective-functional spectrum was German garden architect and polemicist Leberecht Migge (1881–1935). Migge was as concerned as Brandt with the problems of urban living, seeing in the garden the medium for social reform. But unlike his Danish contemporary, he was a fervent proponent of standardization, functionalism, and the application of new technology to gardening.²¹ Migge’s manifestoes and his collaborations with modernist architects on the Frankfurt and Berlin *Siedlungen* strove to elevate the discourse of garden design to the level of political, architectural, and land reform.²² As a member of the German *Werkbund*, Migge equated functional with modern and, after World War I, actively promoted the productive garden as a unit of planning.

Staaken Siedlung, Berlin. Leberecht Migge with Erwin Gutkind, 1923. Each block features vegetable gardens with fruit trees espaliered against the enclosing walls.

Migge, *Die Gartenkultur des 20. Jahrhunderts*



His two polemics, “Jedermann Selbstversorger” (Everyone Self-Sufficient) and “Das grüne Manifest” (The Green Manifesto) published in 1918 and 1919, respectively, aimed to curb the economic crisis of postwar Germany through the individual production of foodstuffs on a large scale. The goal was national self-sufficiency and the establishment of a healthier urban settlement pattern benefiting from the modernist trilogy of sun, air, and greenery. In a direct reference to Ebenezer Howard’s garden city diagram, Migge’s *Stadt-Land* (city-country) was to relieve the congested city and make use of peripheral fallow land.²³ In turn, cultivating a productive garden would connect the urban dweller with the soil—a fairly common concern among contemporary landscape architects—to reap mental, physical, and economic benefits. To Migge, rational housing and rational gardening dictated the interrelationship of architecture and site. Greenhouses extended interior spaces and allowed for the cultivation of tender plants; pergolas provided support for vines and outdoor rooms; walls collected heat for espaliered fruit trees; and the recycling of human waste and the geometric layout maximized output.

Migge’s quest for efficiency included standard dimensions for paths, planting beds, and walls. Vegetation bore architectural qualities as “constructive” and “functional,” the former structuring the space and the latter constituting the ground.²⁴ Taking a different stance on beauty and function than Brandt, Migge’s own version of “Der kommende Garten” (The garden of the future), answered the question “Should gardens be beautiful?” with a resounding “No! Gardens just need to be, and nothing more. . . . The garden style of our time? We need not concern ourselves with it. It will present itself when the time is right.”²⁵

By extending the home, the garden helped to shape family life. When this basic unit was multiplied to fulfill the needs of a city's population, it transformed the urban condition and colonized the region. Inasmuch as Migge shared his pursuit of modernism with other Werkbund garden architects, he remained atypical in treating the garden as a technological and planning unit.²⁶ Although the enlisting of modernist architects such as Ernst May and Bruno Taut to his cause did not yield the anticipated urbanization through ruralization he had envisioned, Migge succeeded in raising the aesthetic debate on the modern garden to a social and theoretical level. With "economic-ethical demands," he concluded, it would be the masses who determine the type and style of gardens.²⁷

The implication that modernist architecture not only responded to societal transformations but also shaped society by creating better living conditions proved enticing for landscape architects in search of a new professional identity. Leaving behind the idea of the landscape artist who fulfilled the wishes of a landed gentry, the modern landscape architect became an expert on open space at the service of society. As landscape architecture addressed crowded urban conditions, reduced economic means, and new housing patterns, it also had to contend with a new architectural doctrine. Although designers such as Canneel wholly embraced the application of architectural theory to landscape, others had a more reserved approach.

A landscape aesthetic independent of styles was a difficult notion to reconcile with the art of gardens. Architectural theory and practice provided an impetus for change in the landscape profession yet undermined its specificity. Many landscape architects viewed functionalism as well as new materials and modes of production to be architectural annexations of their professional territory. Ultimately, landscape architects of the 1920s and 1930s had to achieve a delicate balance between modernizing their profession and defending their field against architects by claiming historical ownership of technical expertise. While landscape architects viewed architects as both potential collaborators and rivals, architects took little notice. The widely distributed polemics of Sigfried Giedion and Le Corbusier made no mention of landscape architects. This was a notable slight, since the modernist interpenetration of interior and exterior spaces with *pilotis*, free façade, and roof garden had a direct impact on the design and perception of the landscape.²⁸

The view of garden as foil to building—a green, textural, and poetic counterpoint to rationalism—was one shared by many modernist architects as well as a few landscape architects. René Pechère, a Belgian contemporary of Canneel argued against a theoretical and formal mimesis between landscape and architecture, claiming that it was the “instinctive desire [for the voice of Nature] which prompt[ed] the most advanced architects to refuse the garden an evolution parallel to the evolution of building.”²⁹ Such a statement confirmed the perception of the landscape as enhancing, but not competing with, architecture, and of the landscape architect as a mere consultant to the architect.

These issues engaged early-twentieth-century landscape architects across most of Europe. Modernization triggered the need to reassess the living environment, land use, and methods of production. Concepts ubiquitous in architecture publications equally pervaded the modernist landscape discourse. Democratization, better hygiene, the practice of sports, and the interpenetration of spaces became standard arguments for the transformation of landscape practice. But landscape architects also faced a specific professional challenge. To raise their visibility with both society and architects, they had to establish credibility in practice and to develop a theory of landscape architecture. If specialization was to keep the architect at bay, theory would separate the profession from the contractor and horticulturist.

Belgian Context

Canneel remained singular in calling for interdisciplinarity and internationalism at a time when design protectionism was on the rise. Perhaps his desire to reach across boundaries was partly due to Belgium’s small size and receptiveness to the trends of neighboring Germany, the Netherlands, France, and England. Early-twentieth-century Belgian gardens reflected the influences of the *jardin régulier*, the *style composite*, the wild garden, and the architectural garden. Such formal eclecticism allowed for varied interpretations of modernity. Most Belgian garden designers argued for simplicity; some advocated for the *nouveau pittoresque*—a hybrid of the wild garden and architectural garden; others, such as Canneel, promoted stylistically neutral functionalism.

When Canneel embarked on his career, two figures dominated the Belgian landscape: Louis-Martin Van der Swaelmen (1883–1929) and Jules