

# C.TH. SØRENSEN LANDSCAPE MODERNIST



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# Introduction

Carl Theodor Sørensen is one of the great landscape architects of the twentieth century. His work is at once monumental and modest, artful and humane, refined and original, serious and playful, restrained yet free.

Sørensen's career spanned the rise and evolution of Modernism in the twentieth century. He worked with virtually all the leading architects of Danish functionalism. He shared their belief that architecture is both a spatial and social art. Unlike many Modernists, however, Sørensen studied garden history, and a playful interpretation of the motifs of garden art was integral to his work.

Sørensen's body of work is enormous – more than two thousand projects – and encompasses a remarkable range – from small gardens to large institutions and new residential developments. Among these are monuments of landscape architecture and of modern design. Sørensen's work still seems fresh. It anticipated current explorations and investigated ideas and forms not yet fully explored. And it addressed issues of great concern today.

How can we build landscapes that express the special conditions of a particular time and place? How can we design landscapes that invite the creative participation of the people who use them and that still retain an artistic integrity? What is the relationship between landscape art and the arts of painting and sculpture? What are the special characteristics of landscape as an artistic medium, and how can these be exploited? How can an understanding of the history of garden design contribute to contemporary landscape architecture? Sørensen was concerned with all these issues; the same man who defined his work as garden art was also the inventor of the adventure playground. His ability to fuse art, function, and tradition belie the polarizations that plagued the profession in the decades after his death. Therein lies Sørensen's greatness and his significance for landscape architecture today.

## *The International Context*

Sørensen began his career as a landscape architect during the second decade of the century, the period when Edward Lutyens (1869-1944) and Gertrude Jekyll (1843-1932) accomplished some of their finest work in England, and when Beatrix Ferrand (1872-1959), Warren Manning (1860-1938), and Jens Jensen (1860-1951) produced great gardens and parks in the United States. Some of Sørensen's finest early work (Kampmann) shows the influence of Lutyens and Jekyll.

Sørensen (1893-1979), Thomas Church (1902-1978) of the United States, Geoffrey Jellicoe (1900-1996) of England, and Luis Barragan (1902-1991) of Mexico stand out as giants among the first generation of Modernists in landscape design. Their best works are monuments of Modernism. Gunnar Asplund (1885-1940), Sigurd Lewerentz (1885-1975) and Frank Lloyd Wright (1867-1959) also contributed great works of landscape design (Forest Cemetery and Taliesin West, respectively), but these were singular projects within predominantly architectural practices.

Sørensen's work was to Denmark what Luis Barragan's work was to Mexico and Tommy Church's work was to California. Church and Sørensen, in particular, shared many characteristics. Both men designed humble suburban gardens, as well as large estates for wealthy clients. Both delighted in the exploration of formal geometry; both shared a respect for function. Church's book, *Gardens Are For People* (1956) was well-known in Denmark, and may have inspired Sørensen's *39 Haveplaner. Typiske haver til et typehus* (1966). The geometry of Donnell Garden (1948), one of Church's masterworks, invites comparison with the allotment gardens in Nærum (1948) and Sonja Poll's garden (1970).

Sørensen retired from his professorship at the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in 1963, during the period in which Lawrence Halprin was designing freeways, public plazas, and residential projects, in which Ian McHarg introduced ecological planning and design to the landscape architecture curriculum at the University of Pennsylvania. The end of Sørensen's career in the 1970s, coincided with the rise of Post-Modernism. Sørensen died in 1979, the year that the Etablissement public du parc de La Villette was created to supervise the planning and construction of the park that later became one of the landmarks of Post-Modern landscape design.

### *Place*

The work of C.Th. Sørensen is fundamentally Danish in form and spirit. The recurrent motifs in Sørensen's work are the common elements of the Danish cultural landscape: the woodland edge, the open field, the hedge, the grove. The winding woodland edge of Vitus Berings Park with the open lawn at its center is a microcosm of the Danish landscape, as are the lawn and groves of oak at Århus University and Højstrupparken. The hedges that form the boundary of Århus University, the hedges of the allotment gardens in Nærum that enclose fruit trees, gardens, and bungalows, the elliptical hedge of Sonja Poll's garden echo the hedges that enclose Danish farmhouses and farmyards.

### *People*

Sørensen's works are profoundly humane. They are comfortable. The needs of people are not neglected for the ends of art. Often what first appears as a rigid geometric structure is actually quite flexible in its use (Kampmann, Kalundborg, Nærum). Even his most monumental projects, such as Kongenshus Mindepark, do not dwarf the human, but keep the human at the center.

The places Sørensen created are enlivened by the people who use them. He frequently crafted an artful framework that he intended the users to employ and transform; this is part of the strength of the allotment gardens in Nærum (1948), for example. In this sense, Sørensen anticipated performance art and the public projects of Lawrence Halprin, such as the Portland Fountains of the 1960s.

When Sørensen retired from the Royal Academy of Fine Arts in 1963, a new wave of concerns was sweeping over the School and society. The new generation rejected formal art and the traditions of garden design and focussed upon social function and



politics. This Sørensen could not comprehend. Although a formalist, he had never abandoned a concern for people and for larger social issues. This is especially important to remember now, in a period when gardens are once again being regarded as an art form. Today, many landscape artists forget that gardens are a social, as well as a spatial, art.

#### *Landscape as Art*

C.Th. Sørensen insisted that gardens are an art form. He wrote a manifesto outlining this conviction: *The Origin of Garden Art* (1963). He was intensely interested in modern painting and sculpture, as were many contemporary landscape designers, such as Andre Vera in France and Geoffrey Jellicoe in England. While Vera translated the vocabulary of Cubism into garden design, and Jellicoe the surrealists, Sørensen was especially intrigued by Futurism and Constructivism. These movements were influential on Sørensen's development as a landscape architect who saw his work as a form of art. Landscape, as a dynamic medium, was well-suited to exploration of the themes of these artistic movements. Sørensen translated them into landscape design in the spirals and ovals at Vitus Berings Park and the allotment gardens in Nærum.

#### *Landscape as a Medium*

Sørensen was well grounded in the medium of his profession. His early training and experience as a gardener provided a foundation for continued observation and experimentation, particularly with plants. He used plants selectively – often massing a single or several species – and inventively (such as his use of Laburnum at Middel-fart Byggecentrum). Many of his designs required an attentive gardener and unorthodox gardening techniques. At times, this put him at odds with municipal gardeners.

#### *Historic Precedent*

Sørensen had a broad, deep knowledge of garden history, but he studied gardens from the perspective of a maker of gardens rather than a scholar. He drew from this knowledge and used it freely. Sørensen did not quote from the past, he transformed historical elements rather than applying them unaltered. He brought traditional garden elements into new relationships with one another. Sørensen used these motifs in forms that were unmistakably modern, yet connected to the traditions of Danish garden art from Liselund to Mariebjerg Cemetery.

#### *Written Work*

Of all twentieth century landscape architects, C.Th. Sørensen may be the most prolific author. If Sørensen had written in English, he would be well-known for his writings alone. He wrote eight books, edited two volumes, and published hundreds of articles. Of these, one short book was translated into English and another into German and Dutch.

The subjects of these publications are wide-ranging: the role of open space in urban life and town planning (*Parkpolitik i Sogn og Købstad*, 1931); horticulture (*Buske og Træer* and *Frilandsblomster* 1948-49); the history of garden art (*Europas Havekunst*, 1959); principles of garden design (*Om Haver*, 1939, and *39 Haveplaner. Typiske haver til et typarhus*, 1966); education (*Vejledning i Fagtegning for Unge Gartnere*, 1927 and 1934); and autobiography (*Haver. Tanker og arbejder*, 1975).

Despite his built and published work, C.Th. Sørensen is not well known outside Scandinavia and even within Denmark outside of the design professions. Apart from a brief mention in such books as Shephard's *Modern Gardens* (1953) and Elizabeth Kassler's *Gardens in the Modern Landscape* (1964), and, since the original publication of this introduction in 1993, an article by Peter Bosselmann in *Landscape Journal*, virtually nothing is written about Sørensen in English. How could one of the great masters of twentieth century landscape architecture escape international recognition?

None of Sørensen's works were built outside Denmark, and they were rarely published outside Scandinavia. The absence of work outside Denmark, however, is only part of the answer to Sørensen's relative invisibility. Even in Denmark, many architectural histories make slight mention of his work and his contributions to important architectural projects such as Århus University.

Sørensen's relative lack of recognition is part of a larger problem relating to landscape architecture and to the history of Modernism. Most people, including architects and architectural historians, have little understanding of the scope of landscape architecture and little knowledge of its history. A few years after Sørensen's death, for example, the Museum of Modern Art in New York sponsored a conference on landscape design in the twentieth century. Landscape architects listened with amazement as architects and architectural historians pondered such questions as why there was no modern movement in landscape architecture. Why and how could they have overlooked Church, Jellicoe, Tunnard, Halprin, and Kiley, not to mention C.Th. Sørensen?

The fundamental flaws of the conference (and the book published later) lay in the misconceptions of the organizers "that this century had witnessed the fundamental demise of the park and garden; and . . . that, generally, a vital, modern landscape tradition never emerged." The organizers also felt "that the aesthetics of the twentieth century, particularly in the visual arts, were fundamentally hostile to nature." To anyone familiar with the work of C.Th. Sørensen, not to mention the works and writings of many other twentieth-century landscape architects, these statements are unbelievable. Fortunately, recent books on Modernism and Landscape Architecture have brought attention to these works. This book presents the life and work of C.Th. Sørensen to an international audience for the first time.

Anne Whiston Spirn

# Eidsvold Værk in Norway

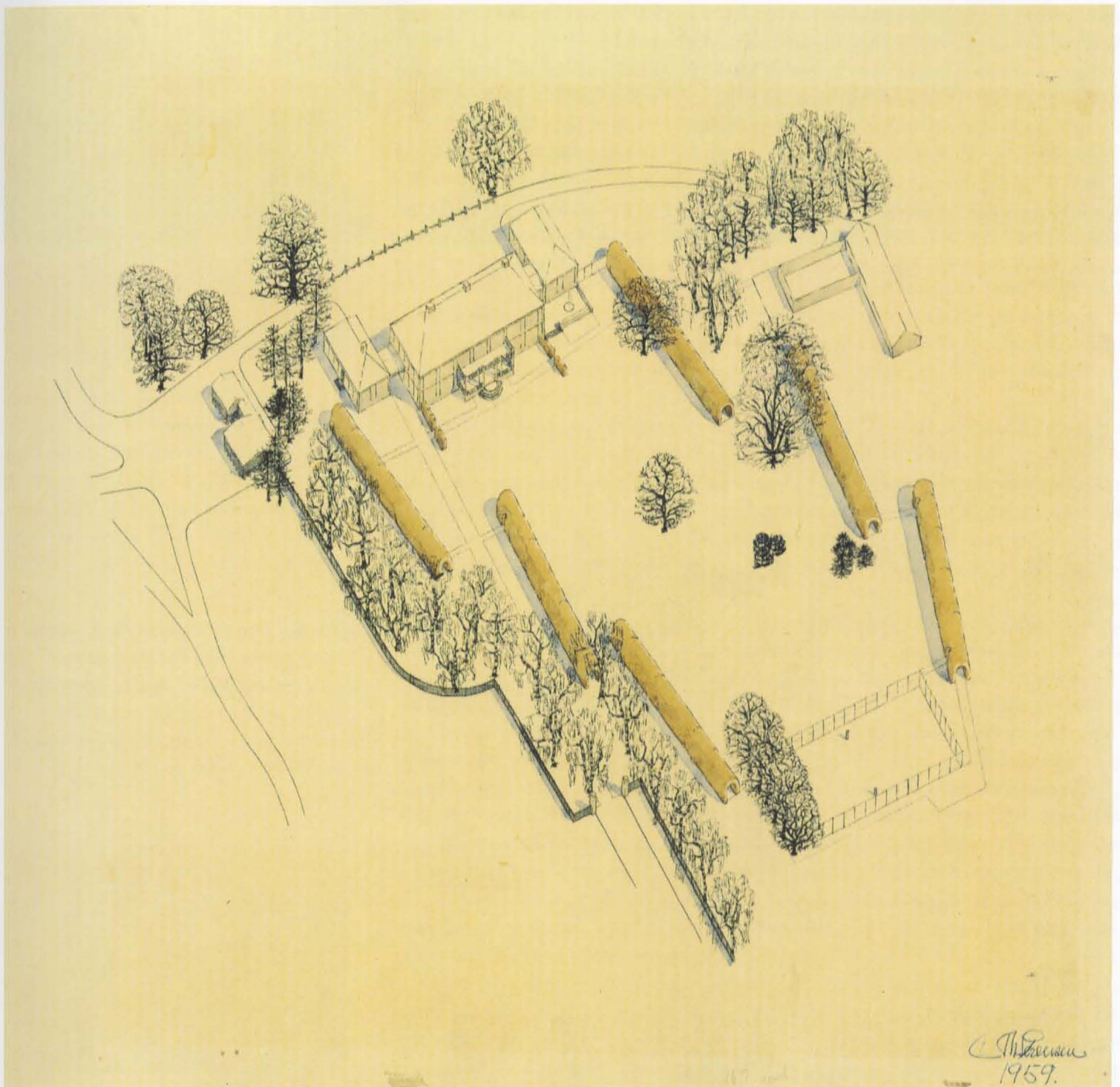
*C.Th. Sørensen achieved wholly unique, ground-breaking results by combining well-known artistic effects of historical garden art with the visual arts of his own time.*

On Thursday, the thirteenth of July, 1922, Sørensen was in Oxford. He came there on his first trip to England. And he enjoyed it. "It is completely delightful here." He made notes on five different projects, then wrote that he had taken "a long walk through the town and am now exhausted by the whole tour and all the many impressions." Among all the superlatives ("among the best I have seen – the most impressive – uncommonly beautiful – completely enchanting – wonderful"), which were unusual for Sørensen, who was normally a cool observer, one is taken aback by his opinion of the arbor in St. John's garden: "not nearly as beautiful as I had expected; our own in Kongens Have is much better."

This disappointment is due to the fact that he expected so much of arbors. He wrote about them again and again during his trip to Germany in 1921 and a year later here in England. The subject was timely, but Sørensen clearly had decided to take a critical look at the phenomenon. His very first article (in *Gartnertidende* in 1920) was about arbors. And it was critical. The pergola had become an essential part of the bourgeois garden around the turn of the century; in the finer works of Neo-classicism, it was used as the tie between the architecture of the building and that of the garden. Sørensen objected that it had been reduced to a cheap support of wood or iron for the vines, which had become more important than the architecture of the structure itself. It was probably a consolation that the plants would "cover over the sins that will result, as happens again and again in gardens, where the very beauty of the plants – the colors and vigorous growth of roses, Wisteria, and Virginia creeper – attracts the eye so completely that poor placement and unfortunate juxtapositions are overlooked. Despite the delightfulness of the climbing rose, it is surely not right to forget the growing arbor or the arcade." Thus he wrote in his next article on arbors (*Havekunst* 1923), where he gathered examples from all over Denmark, illustrated with a very beautiful picture of an elm arbor at Bella Vista in Klampenborg, among other examples. Then he put the arbor into historical perspective: "It is one of the most ancient features of garden art, and it also has great value for the present, since it is well-suited to gardens that are small in extent and laid out in orderly compositions."

Sørensen designed quite a few pergolas through the years. The slightly bent one in Hvidøre Strandpark and those that define the space so precisely in Kampmann's Garden are the best known. It was first in 1959, however, that he designed a project



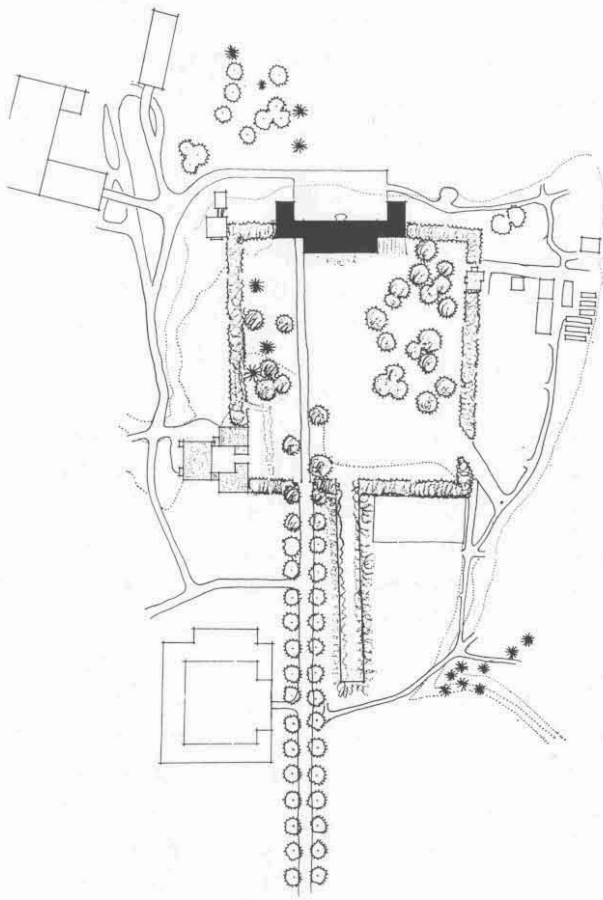


*This drawing of the little estate at Eidsvold shows how C.Th. Sørensen envisioned the arrival through a grove of birches and how the large garden room is shaped by arbors, which stand like stage sets in a theater. In plan, the composition could have been an abstract painting.*

with arbors, and it happened in such a way that they dominated the garden and such that the historical motif is experienced as a radical renewal.

Sørensen was brought into Eidsvold Værk in Norway by the architect Bernt Heiberg; just as in Horsens, fourteen years earlier, he was asked to produce something special. Why else would one hire a professional from outside Norway?

Sørensen first designed a *Garten an sich*, a square garden enclosed by arbors. On one side of the square lay the mansion's wings in flight with the arbors. When mature, these would be eight meters wide and four to five meters high. From the middle of the mansion, an axis in the form of a flower bed eighty meters long would shoot out through the opposite wall of the garden space. Outside the garden itself!



*The first plan for Eidsvold Værk, with the closed garden room and the enormous perennial bed beyond. By placing the flowers, the intimate medium, outside the enclosed garden, Sørensen broke with all traditions of garden art.*

This was sublimely simple and extraordinarily bold. It was probably a bit more sublime and a good deal more bold than what the client had in mind. Sørensen wrote in 1969 that he was well pleased with this plan, but that he was later glad that the owner, H. Mathiesen, requested a view from the mansion to the surroundings. This gave him the opportunity to take up the assignment once again. Sørensen certainly did not say to himself that he would sit down and unite "one of garden art's most



*Sørensen varied the theme of the pergola-arbor in many unconventional ways: at Eidsvold, as green tunnels without the usual eye-catcher at the end, at Hvidøre Strandpark (1930), with bold curves in plan and section. Photo, 1956.*



*On a trip to France in 1966, Sørensen found his Eidsvold idea realised at Couëlan near Caulnes. He brought home this photograph.*

ancient features" with Modernism's open space and the visual arts of Constructivism. However, that is how the result appears. And it was so good that he himself spoke of it as "one of the few that completely succeeds."

The theaters of Baroque gardens with their wings of hedges are among Sørensen's references. He knew such works from Drottningholm in Stockholm, from Hannover, and from Villa Marlia in Tuscany. But these are all rigidly symmetrical, and the dimensions are modest, appropriate for a theater group that plays Molière's comedies. In Eidsvold Værk, he made the entire garden into a stage where there would be "a fine promenade, shifting from light to dark, possibilities for festive events."

He laid out varied promenades: one can walk between the arbors or inside them, one can slip from one tunnel arbor to another, one can walk out into the garden space and feel protected from the outside world or wander on the outermost side and experience a beautiful, open landscape. One can use the long arbors like telescopes out to the landscape or as background and stage sets for the people with whom one promenades.

And he understood that guests and parties belonged to such a mansion, since the owner's business was global, and the hostess was Audrey Hepburn's lively cousin. A flock of youths plays tennis in the afternoon, in the evening some more friends gather for a party, and one day there is a garden party for 300 guests. This garden would have been the right frame for all that, but perhaps it would have been at its best on a crystal-clear, cold winter day when the beech hedges appeared light brown against blue shadows on white snow.

Unfortunately, the project was never built. The client's "taste is very conventional," said Bernt Heiberg. He wanted a symmetrical garden for a symmetrical house, and as far as the anticipated guests were concerned, "maybe not the sort of people who would welcome the atmosphere of the tunnel arbors." Bernt Heiberg received no recognition from his peers for the house, which in its classicist calm is a bit reminiscent of Thomas Havning's villa for Per Kampmann; it was too conventional. And Sørensen's garden was not built because the client found it too unconventional.

If one compares Eidsvold Værk with Kampmann's garden (they have, for the most part, the same conditions), the similarities are immediately apparent. They are tightly structured by familiar elements, which are handled freely and unconventionally. The differences are just as clear. Thirty years separates the two projects. During this time, Sørensen discovered, digested, and assimilated into his ballast of garden history not just Russian Constructivism, but also Italian Futurism.

In 1966, Sørensen journeyed through Brittany. In Caulnes, he saw something that reminded him of the composition of tunnel arbors that he had imagined for Eidsvold Værk. They belonged to the castle at Couëlan. It was a bittersweet experience. Here he found the confirmation that his proposal was right. And here he was reminded that it was never built. "Why," he asked. Yes, why should one be satisfied with a congenial proposal when one could have had a garden of genius?



# The Adventure Playground in Emdrup

*Social responsibility, in the deepest sense of the term, is the background for C.Th. Sørensen's "invention" of the adventure playground.*

What Sørensen later described as "that loosely formulated concept," was realized in 1940 in a project, which is now regarded as an important discovery. That project is the adventure playground at Emdrup.

Sørensen himself rejected the designation "invention," but he was convinced that it served an extraordinarily important purpose.

In his book, *Parkpolitik i Sogn og Købstad* (1931), he included a chapter on playgrounds that began with the simple statement that "children's playgrounds are the city's most important form of public plantation." He offers no advice on playground equipment for children's superficial enjoyment. Instead he demanded that attention be paid to the location of playgrounds in relation to houses and to the real meaning of a playground. He did this in such a way that one suspects he was aware of the pedagogical ideas of Friedrich Fröbel, Rudolph Steiner, and Maria Montessori concerning children's independent play and self education. "Unfortunately," he wrote, "it is impossible to estimate how many people have been ruined because they, as children, did not have any other place to go out in the open air besides the street or dark courtyards." Tuberculosis, rheumatism, and unhealthy pallor: one thinks immediately of these as causes for his chiding, and one is reminded of the residential plans of that period, their design determined by solar diagrams.

But the scolding continues: "the shadowed courtyard, which gave not the slightest opportunity for imagination or energy; those who consider this even slightly, shudder and suspect the saddest sort of waste."

Imagination, energy, development, and mental growth are the words.

At that time, Sørensen was alone among landscape architects in seeing children's play as a pedagogical method. "Children play wonderfully on vacant lots and probably prefer the primitive possibilities, which are ideally suited to their play and enjoyment." He developed this potential and advanced the "loosely-formulated concept": "Perhaps we could try to set up (on unbuilt sites) a kind of junk playground in appropriate large areas, where children would be allowed to use old cars, packing crates, branches, and that sort of thing." It was Sørensen himself who put the word *skrammellegepladser* (junk playgrounds) in italics, so he seemed to be aware that he had invented a new word. The illustrations show how the first, deliberately constructed, adventure playground looked in its earliest years. The planted berm was to provide shelter from wind and form to a frame around the children's domain. It was



*Sørensen understood what children wanted and approached them with respect. He was the originator of the adventure playground, and this was the first one built. Emdrup Adventure Playground. Photo from middle of the 1940s.*



*Sørensen believed that children learn while they play. He loved this picture from the early days at Emdrup Adventure Playground. The children are deeply involved in their activities. He saw the boy holding the level as a budding engineer. Photo from middle of the 1940s.*



also intended to protect the neighbors from an unpleasant sight, a provision found in the building code. Sørensen and architect Dan Fink (who had the idea to realize Sørensen's ten-year-old concept as part of a larger residential project) knew that the surrounding residents would not appreciate the "junk play," for they all made nice gardens with lawns bordered by flowering shrubs, with everything in its place.

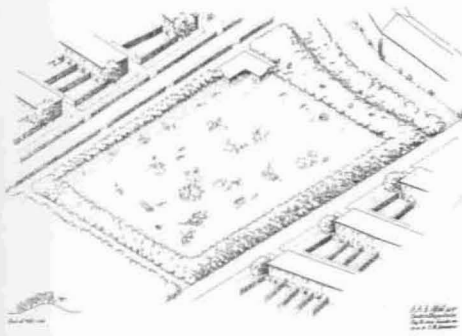
"Whether one flies over a district of single-family homes or walks around such a place and looks at the gardens, the impression is very monotonous; there is a long way between anything that fixes itself in our memory, the gardens are not exciting," sighed Sørensen in the introduction to *39 Haveplaner*. One must conclude that they are so monotonous because the owners lack imagination and creative drive. Is there



*Older children well play together if they have a project on which to collaborate. Photo from middle of the 1940s.*

something wrong with these good people's "development and mental growth"? Is it here one finds "the shuddering waste", which he discussed in *Parkpolitik*?

There is no doubt about Sørensen's pedagogical philosophy. Children's natural imagination and freedom must be developed and channeled toward the ideal of an adult who has the courage to be himself and who is undogmatic. Sørensen believed that schools should teach children to read, write, and calculate. Furthermore, they should be encouraged to teach themselves. And above all, they should learn through



*Drawing of a adventure playground,  
1940.*

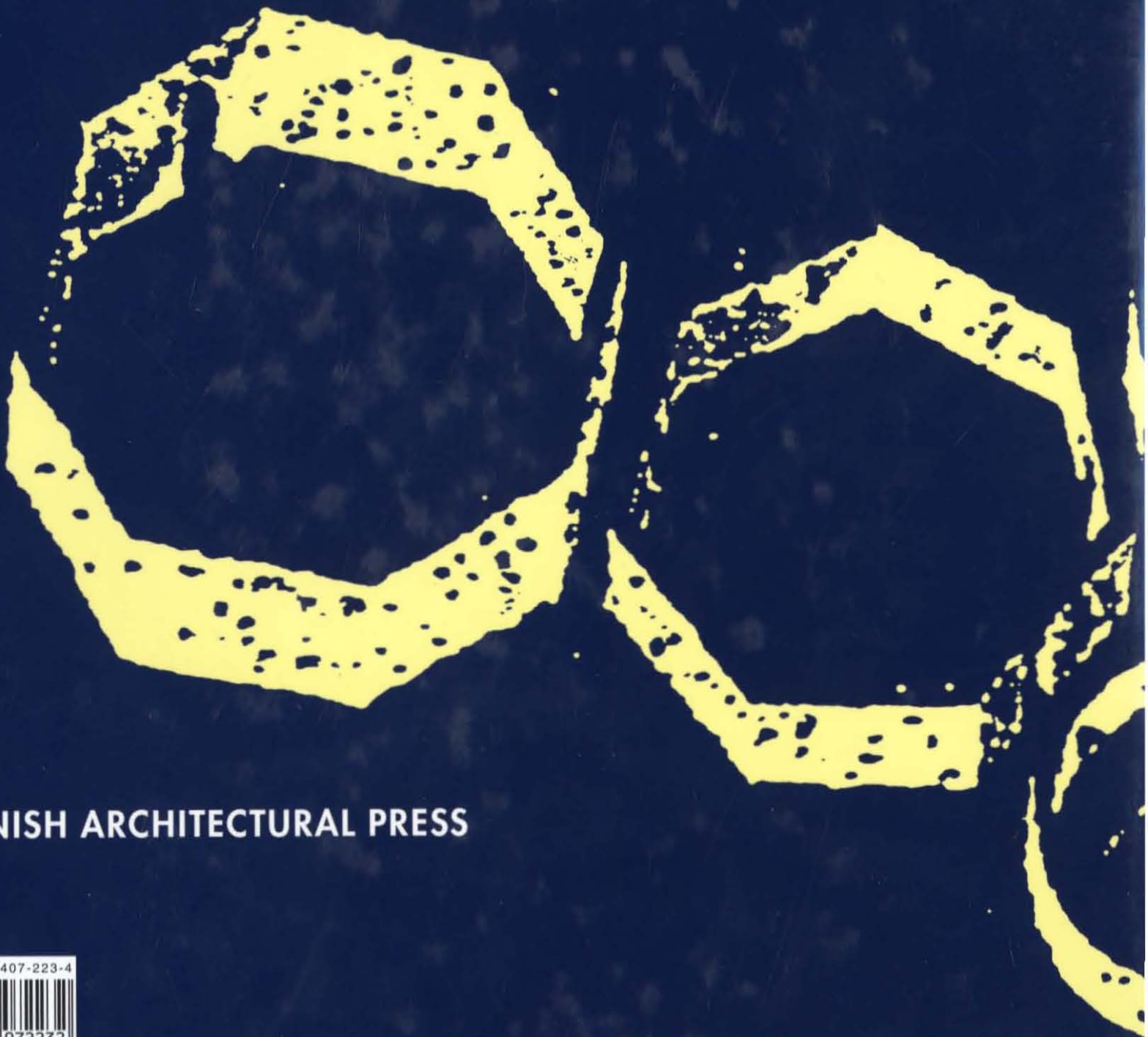
their own experience. He did not like it when naturalistic garden art was created with reference to Rousseau, but when it came to education, he greatly admired the ideas of the philosophers of the French Enlightenment. These ideas were well suited to the adventure playground. Here children could learn about materials and construction. Here they could develop democratic cooperation. Here they could learn to manage on their own, and here they could experience the joy of creating without being forced to do so. With the congenial, understated collaboration of an adult, John Bertelsen, much was built in the first adventure playground. Huts, houses, and towers.

Really exciting, conspiratorial huts and daring towers. These were the expression of the children's creative drive, but Sørensen also saw them as a preschool for architecture and the art of engineering. One cannot become a good architect without having built huts as a child, and congenial structures can only be created by those who have learned to think undogmatically, through play directed toward a goal.

Despite the fact that Sørensen believed that the adventure playground would shape a playing person, a *homo ludens*, this did not mean that he supported dilettantism. Just the opposite. Those who have had a stimulating childhood and the opportunity to develop their talents in an interplay of physical activities and intellectual pursuits find their own particular potential and develop it to the fullest extent. There is a connection between the adventure playground and Sørensen's vision of the many individualistic gardens that ought to have surrounded the adventure playground.

The adventure playground at Emdrup soon lost its raw strength; pedantic tidiness ultimately took over. But the idea spread around the country and the world: as *byggelegepladser*, as *Robinson Spielplätze*, as adventure playgrounds. The first ambassador for the adventure playground was the Englishwoman, Lady Allen of Hurtwood, who was devoted to social welfare. She has published her memoirs, in which Sørensen and the adventure playground in Emdrup have a prominent place: "I was completely swept off my feet by my first visit to the Emdrup playground. In a flash of understanding I realized that I was looking at something quite new and full of possibilities."

The title of her book is *Memoirs of an Uneducated Lady!*



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