

The State as Gardener – the State as Structure

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Introduction

The railway is one of the innovations that has influenced modern social development the most. When the first main lines began to be built in Sweden during the mid-19th century, cultivation was an integral component of the railway system, comprising aesthetic gardens, protective cultivation, and kitchen gardens. Despite the large areas and resources this cultivation demanded, our current knowledge about why gardens were established, and when attitudes towards them began to change, have been surprisingly limited.¹

A PhD study – purpose and methodology

The aim of this paper is to discuss the results from my PhD thesis *The State as Gardener: Railway Cultivation from the Art of Improving Nature to Bequest (Staten som trädgårdsmästare. Järnvägens planteringar från naturförsköningskonst till testamente, 2022)*, with the purpose to analyse and discuss the events and ideals that characterised the rise and fall of the gardening organisation of the Swedish State Railways. Chronologically the study includes two key periods: the construction phase of 1855–1875 and the decline phase of 1955–1975. Archive material has been located by using the railway's organisational system as a starting point. The method used to analyse archive material and published sources has consisted of text analysis, inspired by discourse perspectives and the theory of path dependence.² The theory of path dependence has helped to broaden the analysis by using aspects of formative moments, driving forces, mental maps and resources of power.³

With the concepts of modernity and place as points of departure, the thesis discusses how the transition, from gardens being fundamental to the railway system to their being phased out from the organisation, can be understood and explained.⁴

The thesis shows that gardens were an integral component of the first main lines, contributing to the concept of what a railway should be and the benefits it should provide. Railway cultivation comprised aesthetic gardens, protective cultivation and kitchen gardens. (Fig. 1) The building of a railway station included a station park, flowerbeds next to the buildings in the station area, protective cultivation alongside the tracks, and utility gardens adjacent to the staff accommodation buildings. In terms of area and numbers, this extensive cultivation remodelled the entire landscape in a structured way. Initially, local gardeners were employed. After a few years, plant nurseries were created as a central part of cultivation activities, with gardeners recruited to staff them. For many years the State Railways operated the largest network of nurseries and gardens in Sweden. (Fig. 2).

How ideals influenced material expression

Gardens were among the perceived benefits of railways, where they played a key role when new places were created alongside the lines. During the construction phase of 1855–1875, railway gardens were characterised by the ideal of “the art of improving nature” (*naturförsköningskonsten*) and that of nation-building.⁵ The organisation and coordination of gardening, including for example plant nurseries and gardeners, was a fundamental railway activity. The art of improving nature embraced the concepts of beauty, good taste, holism and morality, with an emphasis on science-

based cultivation techniques. The importance of gardening skills, careful management and designs based on the taste and fashion of the day would characterise railway gardening far into the future.

According to the thesis, the role of the garden in placemaking was important in the 19th century, when completely new places were being built, with the accompanying demand for arenas for travellers, employees and locals. Gardens can be seen as “perfected forms of place making”.⁶ The role of the garden in industrial modernity included its perception as an expression of structure, order, progress and education.

Post-war ideals of modernisation came to characterise railway gardens in several ways. In the 1950s, railway conditions changed to focus on minimising losses. Ideals of rejecting the old, promoting the new, and doing away with the class society of the past began to make their mark, and influenced the railway system.⁷ In 1959, the central gardening office closed. Moreover, cultivation was repositioned in the decision-making procedure. Gardeners and the gardening director now entered the planning process at a later stage, after the annual budget had been decided.⁸

During the decline phase of 1955–1975, a turn I have named “the performance-based realignment” (*den prestandainriktade vändningen*), led to a focus on rationalisation and economic cutbacks.⁹ Post-war ideals of modernisation, a new rail policy, road transport and an increased emphasis on urgency all contributed to the declining role of the railways.¹⁰ Structure and aesthetics were no longer expressed in the same way through gardens and many places changed.¹¹

The ideals of 19th-century industrial modernity gave rise to the creation of railway gardens. The ideals of late 20th century high modernity initially meant financial cutbacks, which were finally followed in 1973 by the closure of the nurseries and changes to the duties of gardeners. In the construction phase, gardening was an integral cog of the great railway wheel. In the decline phase, changes were made not only to conditions, working methods and resources, but also to materiality in terms of vegetation, forms and structures.

Factors considered conducive for modernity

From the very beginning, the gardening service was fully integrated within the railway’s construction and management organisation, where its staff worked closely with those responsible for technical operations. Gardening competence was a key to the business of cultivation. Its elevated status was reflected, in among other ways, by the gardeners in the 1870s being given the title of senior permanent-way inspector (*förste banmästare*).¹² Sometime later, a gardening central office was established. In the organisational hierarchy it was closely connected the Director General, with its office situated beside that of the senior management at Stockholm Central station.¹³

In terms of gardening activities, the era between the two periods of this study is characterised by a comprehensive, permanent organisation and central control. The view that gardening was part of the railway, and the notion that its practical knowledge belonged within the State Railways, was expressed by way of instruction and in practice in a structured layout.¹⁴ (Fig.3).

The thesis highlights how attitudes to what places represented, and the nature of their role, changed between the periods 1855–1875 and 1955–1975. Public space shifted from being an arena in which *to spend time*, becoming instead an area *to pass through*.¹⁵ A railway station went from being a prestige location to an interchange for swift passage.¹⁶ Road vehicles influenced railway gardens in several ways. In the late 1950s, geographical areas of garden responsibility changed when gardeners were provided with company vehicles, meaning they were no longer bound by train timetables and railway routes. Car parks were frequently built beside railway lines, where they often replaced gardens. Urban planning increasingly focused on providing accessibility for road vehicles.¹⁷

In 1963, the Riksdag approved a new traffic policy, which placed great economic demands on the railways. Measures such as line closures, reorganisation and staff redundancies were enacted.¹⁸ The thesis refers to the transition from a holistic approach to the phasing out by rationalisation of previous key components, values and methods of coordination as *the performance-based realignment*. This turn, which focused on performance and reduced spending, led to streamlining and rationalisation that would characterise the entire railway organisation from the 1960s onwards.

The State Railways Board took a decisive step in 1971 that led to major changes in railway gardening. The decision entailed closing the plant nurseries, shifting responsibility for gardening from a central technical level to a local administrative level, and changing the duties of gardeners. These measures came into effect in June 1973, after which gardening was no longer part of technical operations.¹⁹ The thesis shows that to prepare for this change, each district drew up a “will”, a survey of existing cultivation that included cost-reduction proposals. This is also an example of a structured approach how the state railway handled the new conditions. These surveys were then succeeded by local management programs and reviews of continued ownership. This often led to local councils assuming responsibility for the management of parks and gardens, by way of a “bequest”.

Nineteenth-century industrial modernity provided the impetus for railway gardens. High modernity in the second half of the 20th century led to initial downsizing and eventually, in 1973 to the closure of the plant nurseries and revised tasks for the gardeners. In the mid-19th century, gardens were viewed as promoters of modernity, whereas by the mid-20th century they were increasingly seen as an economic burden.

The structure of a beautification line and a rationalisation line

Drawing on the theory of path dependence, two separate lines of interest emerge in attitudes to railway cultivation. The first consists of the creation of extensive, well-designed gardens, which the thesis calls *the beautification line*, with reference to the art of improving nature. This began in the infancy of the main lines, later being replaced by a new way of thinking, *the rationalisation line*, from the mid-20th century onwards. The rationalisation line intensified in the early 1970s with a decentralised approach to railway gardens.

When gardening was no longer a concern of the central administration, when it no longer formed part of technical operations, and when the gardener's skills were no longer required, the rationalisation line continued onwards, producing the unstructured, often incomprehensible areas found in railway environments today.²⁰ (Fig. 4). In conclusion, the thesis highlights how knowledge of railway gardens and their remains can be safeguarded and sustainably conveyed into the future.

Figures

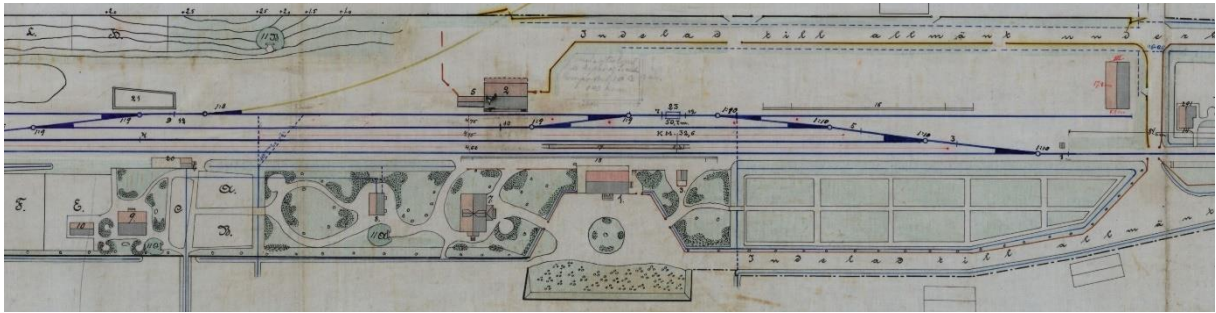


Fig. 1 Aneby station with aesthetic gardens, kitchen gardens and a plant nursery. The drawing is undated, but may be the original railway yard drawing from the 1870s. From: Järnvägmuseet, SJ, Ritningar. Cropped and processed.

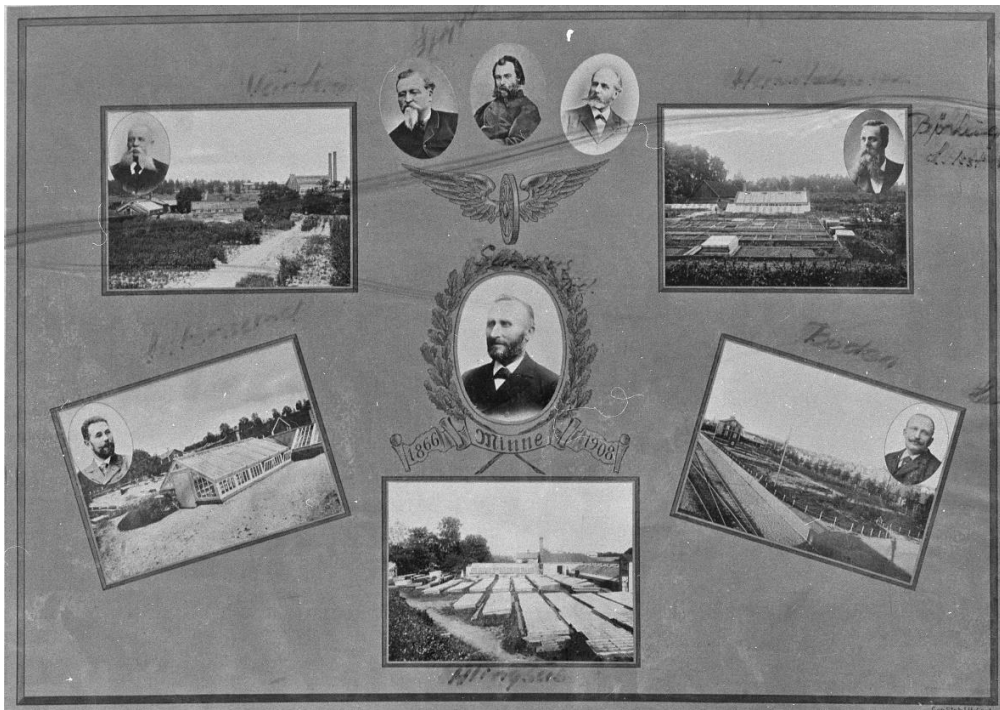


Fig. 2 A memory tablet from 1908 of Anders Högfeldt's time as gardener at the plant nursery in Alingsås. A portrait of Högfeldt is placed in the middle with the plant nursery in Alingsås at the bottom. Plant nurseries from left: Värtan, Hässleholm, Östersund and Boden, with portraits of the responsible gardeners inset. At the top the first three coordinators who after some time received the title Garden Director. From: Järnvägmuseet, JVM 13254.



Fig. 3 Skutskär station at the 1950s with a typical station park and flower beds along the station building. From: Järnvägs museet.



Fig. 4 The station of Skutskär from the same angle as Fig. 3, in 2016. From: Järnvägs museet, Photographer: Christina Engström. Cropped.

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Endnotes

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³ Inspired by Falkemark 2006, p. 56 and Bladh 2008, p. 683-686 and 690-91.

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¹⁰ Bauman, Zygmunt, *Postmodern etik*, Göteborg: Bokförlaget Daidalos AB (1993) 1996, p. 218.

¹¹ Cf. Sennett, Richard, *The fall of public man*, New York: W.W. Norton & Company (1974) 2017.

¹² Statens Jernvågstrafik: "Banafdelningen", *Arvodesstat* år 1876, Stockholm: K. L. Beckman 1876, s. 16, 36 and 58.

¹³ Lindgren 2020, p. 108 and 167–168.

¹⁴ Cf. Cederpalm, Enoch, "Planteringsväsendet", *Statens Järnvägar 1906–1931. Minnesskrift i anledning av de svenska statsbanornas 75-åriga tillvaro med Kungl. Maj:ts nådiga bemyndigande utgiven av Kungl. Järnvägsstyrelsen*, band II, Stockholm 1931, p. 353 and Järnvägs museet, SJ, Statens järnvägars författningssamling, Särtryck nr 22: *Föreskrifter och anvisningar rörande användandet och skötseln af Statens järnvägars gräsbärande eller för planteringar afsedda mark 1879, 1886, 1891, 1897, 1918, 1925*.

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