

*Postcard from Paris*

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There's nothing unusual about roof gardens but I would hazard a guess that Jardin Atlantique in Paris is probably the only one on the roof of a railway station. The Gare Montparnasse is vast, more like an airport, and trains departing from the station travel westwards, towards the Atlantic coast, hence the name of the garden. To make the enormous roof into a public park was the idea of an inspired town planner in the early 1990s, so it has had time to mature. It was a soft autumn morning when we found our way up there (with some difficulty as no one in the station seemed to have heard of the garden and the access route is not obvious) having read about it in a little book called *Quiet Paris* by Siobhan Wall (Francis Lincoln, 2013). It was indeed quiet, the loudest noises being the plopping of tennis balls from several of the courts around the perimeter of the garden, and the chirping of sparrows – even the trains couldn't be heard. There are lawns, deciduous and evergreen trees, borders and, nicest of all for a stroll, a long hidden wooden walkway snaking through plantings of tall grasses and dense shrubbery. The shiny modern office and apartment buildings that surround the station are blessed with a view of greenery and a peaceful place for a lunchtime sandwich, a weekend jog or a game of tennis.

Here is another walk in the sky: the Promenade Plantée, near the Place de la Bastille. Like the now famous High Line in New York City, this is another garden on a decommissioned elevated railway line. The last train ran in 1969 and the line was then neglected and vandalised. But, in 1986 the then Mayor, looking to enhance his green image, persuaded the city to buy the tracks and transform them into a park. It is more sedate than the NYC version and it follows a straight line for two miles, above the several dozen elegant brick arches now called the Viaduc des Arts, where galleries and shops fill the high spaces. The Promenade is a good place to walk all year round, but prettiest when the cherry trees and roses are in bloom.

Off to Boulogne-Billancourt with the Metro map and a *carnet* of tickets to find another tucked-away garden. Albert Kahn (1860–1940) was a banker with a wide circle of intellectual acquaintances. Indulging his taste for travel he went to Japan with his chauffeur/photographer to record their journey through that country; on his return he set up a project to photograph the entire Earth, no less, sending photographers to every continent. Having acquired ten acres of land in Boulogne-

Billancourt Kahn organised his collection of seventy-five thousand photographs into *The Archives of the Planet*. His house there became a private meeting place for the intelligentsia of the early years of the twentieth century, until the Great Depression and his bankruptcy in 1929 put an end to his project. He had, however, made a remarkable garden on his land that he named, modestly, Les Jardins du Monde. It consists of separate areas in the styles of English, French and Japanese gardens. There are streams, delicate bridges, bamboo gates, temples, lanterns, many varieties of evergreen trees tightly cloud-pruned, and a large wooded area of conifers with blue Atlas cedars and Colorado spruces, said to remind him of the forests near his birthplace in the Vosges. After his bankruptcy the garden was made into a public park where Kahn continued to walk, and the whole site is now a National Museum.

A visit to Les Jardins de Luxembourg is always a pleasure, usually combined with an exhibition in the Palais. The park was quiet last time we were there, on a Monday in late autumn. The sweeping of the leaves was nearly finished, great mounds waiting to be flung into huge wire-netting containers, as big as haystacks. In the still, sunless morning the only trees to hold their leaves were the beeches, like bonfires among the bare chestnuts and limes and a persimmon (*plaqueminier*), loaded with fruit, glowed. You can't actually go into the orchard, Le Verger de Luxembourg, in the quiet corner furthest away from the Palais. However, it is surrounded by elegant railings through which it is easy to see the several hundred varieties of apples and pears. There are cordons, pyramids, U-shapes and espaliers, all labelled, and yielding a ton of fruit each year. This surprising little orchard was originally tended by the monks of the Chartreux Monastery; whoever is looking after it now is evidently nurturing it with loving care. The park is said to be the most popular in Paris and on a hot summer day you'd be hard pushed to find one of the moveable metal chairs empty – so many people sitting around reading books and newspapers. The essential traditional elements are all there too: playground for children, *boules* space, cafés, ice cream, donkey rides and a bandstand. In a city where most people live in apartments the parks are their gardens.

There are more gardens mentioned in *Quiet Paris*, mostly small and intimate – Balzac's looks inviting and so do Les Jardins des Archives Nationales and the shared garden at the Clos des Blancs Manteaux. In the breezy wide open Parc André Citroën, overlooking the Seine, the offer of 'quiet' is from a tethered hot air balloon, high up over the park and available for hire. Another time perhaps.