

A garden narrative

History and Theory Studies:
Writing Architecture, Marina Lathouri
2024

Tom Punte



Architectural Association
School of Architecture

Exchange between TU Delft and AAschool

Introduction

From time to time you stumble upon a building or place that evokes something in you, it could be a great curiosity, infatuation, or even a disdain for it. It happens to me more often than I would like to admit, most often when I'm on my way to school, work or a recreational activity. One particular place that I encountered in London and felt strongly about was the Garden Square, specifically Bedford Square in front of the Architectural Association. Passing by it almost every day awakened a curiosity to enter the green city void and uncover its story. For every built or unbuilt work tells a story, one the creator wanted to tell, one by its historical perseverance or surroundings and one by our own making, influenced by our individual experience. Together forming a rich narrative that documents the multi-faceted story of a particular project or architectural phenomenon. By understanding this narrative, one can in my opinion begin to understand the significance and meaning of something. Looking through a combination of historical and current series of events and combining this with your own perception, tying everything together to form this ever so important narrative.

By understanding something through its narrative, the meaning of the word becomes quite essential. For the word narrative has its own story and history, with its earliest known use as a noun in the mid-fifteenth century in Scottish law, literature and later on in textual criticism ¹. Oxford Dictionary states that the word in 1571- onward was used to describe 'An account of a series of events, facts, etc., given in order and with the establishing of connections between them; a narration, a story, an account.' ². Later in 1845- the word narrative was also used in literary criticism and defined as 'The part of a text, esp. a work of fiction, which represents the sequence of events, as distinguished from that dealing with dialogue, description, etc.; narration as a literary method or genre.' ³. Interesting to note is that the word is categorized by historical treasures with words such as storying, storytelling and yarning ¹. Making the meaning of the word quite straightforward, a sequence of events, but its close relation to the art of telling a story even more compelling to incorporate in the tool of writing down a narrative.

Returning to my initial curiosity about Bedford Square, this writing shall be an answer to my great curiosity, by documenting the multifaceted narrative of this particular place, through history, current events and my own personal experience. Bedford Square is known as one of the best-preserved Georgian squares in London and was built between 1776 and 1780, most probably the work of Thomas Leverton, as well as the builder/contractors William Scott and Robert Grews ⁴. The Square has an imposed architectural uniformity on all four sides and in its heart a great and mysterious garden.

1. Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "narrative (n.)," September 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/3575296173>.

2. Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "narrative (n.)," sense 2.a," September 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1152188169>.

3. Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "narrative (n.)," sense 2.b," September 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1152188169>.

4. Historic England. "BEDFORD SQUARE Listed on the National Heritage List for England," historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1000245?section=official-list-entry.



Photograph of the gate of Bedford Square Garden, own image

I the gate and the key

Like most gardens, Bedford Square Garden has a gate through which one can enter or leave and that is exactly where our narrative begins. Some can gracefully swing it open, for others an unmovable barrier, it all depends on who has the key. This makes me think back to my first encounter with the garden square. Similar to all students studying at the Architectural Association, I was destined to try to enter the Bedford Square Garden on my own. On my first school day I was seeking relief from the tropical heat that had befallen London and the garden in front of the school seemed like the perfect place. Without any knowledge about it, I walked numerous times around the two arched gates on either longitudinal side to find an entrance I could access, ultimately coming to the realisation that one could only enter through one of the gates with a digital key, which sadly was not in my possession. Not wanting to give up, my quest led me to the School of Architecture's reception, where I attempted to exchange my card for the key, unsuccessfully. I turned to the internet, as any modern-day person would do. Looking up the garden square online I found it to be part of the Bedford Estate development. Their website provided me with the answers I was looking for; access was only to be granted to key holders living in Bloomsbury (addresses with a WC1 postcode) and one needed to subscribe to an annual keyholder subscription⁵. Importantly to note, there is currently a substantial waiting list.

The inaccessibility of Bedford Square Garden revealed a greater current-day controversy surrounding the private and public green spaces scattered around London. A year ago a small rebellion was even held at Cadogan Square Gardens in Knightsbridge. A wooden still was placed over a locked gate to criticise the high number of privatised gardens and green spaces in London, suddenly making the garden accessible for everyone⁶. The article states that most square gardens in London are underutilized for much of the year. It is hard to disagree with this statement looking at Bedford Square, where during my first semester at the Architectural Association only a handful of people ever used the garden.

Looking once more at the Bedford Estate website showed a second page with historical trivia about the square and garden, providing me with the first foundation of information on how this situation came to be. In the seventeenth century, a Lord of a manor could come to the realisation that his land could be developed and leased out, bringing in a substantial income⁷. Leading lords to divide their land into units, that could again be developed into a community such as the one around Bedford Square Garden, part of the larger Bloomsbury Estate development⁵. The accessibility of the garden can be traced back to the community that lived around it and furthermore the lord of the estate. Similar to my experience, city residents from outside the community could not access the gardens. Initially gates restricted access to the entire community at first, providing residents and the larger Bloomsbury Estate more privacy and protection. Later on between 1891 and 1893; some of these main gates were removed, but the garden gates remained⁴.

5. The Bedford Estate. "Bloomsbury Garden Squares," thebedfordestate. n.d., <https://www.bedfordestates.com/about-us/garden-squares/>.

6. Amelia Hill. "The Push to Open up the 'Locked and Bolted' Green Spaces of UK Cities," The Guardian, December 12, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2022/dec/11/privately-owned-green-spaces-parks-gardens-uk-cities-campaigners>.

7. Peter Ackroyd. London: The Biography. (London: Chatto & Windus, 2001), 238-244



Photograph of railing of Bedford Square Garden, own image

II the railing that goes around

A gate does not merely stand on its own but is almost always accompanied, or was accompanied, by an impenetrable railing. One made of metal, wires, wood or some other dubious materials, adorned with ornaments or as simple as a day, standing proud through winter and summer with the main intention of keeping some in and some out. For Bedford Square Garden this is certainly no different, with a railing spanning the entire perimeter. After my attempt to enter the garden had left me disheartened the presence of the railing greatedened. The two gates showed a possibility to enter, the railing did not. This made my interest shift from what was inside the garden to its border, its walls. I started by walking around the railing to determine its oval shape and counting my footsteps as I went along, a total of one hundred forty-five which is circa three hundred fifteen meters. The railing itself is quite simple, not at all heavily ornamented, following the Georgian era principles of symmetry and proportion, which were prominently used at the time of construction of Bedford Square Garden. This particular era encompasses the reigns of George I, II, III, IV, and even William IV, spanning between 1714 and 1837, witnessing profound shifts in society, politics, and culture ⁸. With the onset of the Industrial Revolution and the rise of Romanticism, alongside Britain's expansion and dominance through exploration and warfare and of course its architecture, with its railings, inspired heavily by classical Greek and Roman structures ⁹.

The details of the railing itself feature square baluster bars topped with spiked heads held together by three horizontal railings. The railing is fortified with additional smaller spiked balusters on the first half meter to not let small mammals through nor people climb over. All were constructed out of painted black cast iron, a material that I could hardly escape in London. Noticing it on railings, gates, lamp poles, road poles and much more, even seeing it across from my flat in Westminster on a neighbouring building. I wasn't even able to escape it at the Victoria and Albert Museum, where a whole hallway is dedicated to all sorts of cast iron pieces. This abundance of cast iron features on buildings, parks and gardens, is no mere coincidence. The material came into popularity in the eighteenth century thanks to the progress in cast iron production techniques, making it cheaper compared to wrought iron work, while allowing greater uniformity in the individual pieces ¹⁰. Returning to the railing, my final observation, the railing stands upon a raised stone kerb.

A gate does not merely stand on its own but is almost always accompanied, or was accompanied, by an impenetrable railing. One made of metal, wires, wood or some other dubious materials, adorned with ornaments or as simple as a day, standing proud through winter and summer with the main intention of keeping some in and some out. For Bedford Square Garden this is certainly no different, with a railing spanning the entire perimeter. After my attempt to enter the garden had left me disheartened the presence of the railing greatedened. The two gates showed a possibility to enter, the railing did not. This made my interest shift from what was inside the garden to its border, its walls. I started by walking around the railing to determine its oval shape and counting my footsteps as I went along, a total of one hundred forty-five which is circa three hundred fifteen meters. The railing itself is quite simple, not at all heavily ornamented, following the Georgian era principles of symmetry and proportion, which were prominently used at the time of construction of Bedford Square Garden. This particular era encompasses the reigns of George I, II, III, IV, and even William IV, spanning between 1714 and 1837, witnessing profound shifts in society, politics, and culture ⁸. With the onset of the Industrial Revolution and the rise of Romanticism, alongside Britain's expansion and dominance through exploration and warfare and of course its architecture, with its railings, inspired heavily by classical Greek and Roman structures ⁹.

Once my inspection was done and I took a few steps back to look once more at the entire garden and its border, I asked myself, what would happen if this railing was removed. Would this green patch suddenly be overrun with tourists and locals alike and slowly sink into desolation or would it keep existing. Interestingly this question was somewhat answered in 1941, when during the Second World War throughout London railings were removed for their resources to be used for ammunition production and to heighten the morale of citizens ¹¹. I can only assume that the same happened with the railings of Bedford Square Gardens during this time. After the war the railing must have been restored, turning the brief public space, into a private space once more.

8. Peter Ackroyd. London: The Biography. (London: Chatto & Windus, 2001), 238-244

9. English Heritage, "Georgian England," ENGLISH-HERITAGE, n.d., <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/story-of-england/georgians>

10. Antonia. "What Is the Difference between Georgian, Victorian and Edwardian Railings?: British Spirals & Castings," British Spirals & Castings, January 16, 2018, <https://www.britishsc.co.uk/georgian-victorian-edwardian-railings/>.

11. London gardens trust. "Putting Back the Style", londongardentrust, 2015, <https://www.londongardenstrust.org/features/railings.htm>



Photograph of Bedford Square Garden and the street, own image

III the garden or the street

away from the crowded Regent Street. Over time these places change and change again, with every Autumn the leaves turn red, yellow and brown after which greenery returns in Spring.

my head every time I passed Bedford Square Garden to look through the scrubs and trees to catch a glimpse of the grass field, gravel path or its little wooden hexagonal pavilion. The more leaves fell, the less I needed to squint my eyes to see inside.

Even though the conditions changed in Bedford Square, the patch of nature still remained an escape from the city for me providing everyone who passed and most certainly everyone who entered a little relief from urban life. A somewhat similar reasoning was used for why a community such as Bedford Square needed a garden in its centre when it was realised between 1776 and 1780¹². After the horrors of the plague and the great London fire of 1666, wealthy Londoners were not keen to return to the overcrowded conditions of the old city and rather looking to the openness of the countryside, with its associated health benefits^{13 14}. This made garden square communities such as the one of Bedford Square quite popular for the upper middle class of the time. Once positioned on the edge of the city, the square was slowly consumed by the northward developments of London, making the green space even more rare.

The layout of the garden was designed by the trustees of the Duke of Bedford¹², consisting of a perimeter of scrubs, mature plane trees and a path just behind the railing, providing more protection the centre with the outside. With and privacy from wooden benches placed oriented to the middle placed every so often next to the gravel path. Initially, the centre of the garden had serpentine paths leading from the west, north, east and south to the centred wooden hexagonal pavilion, this was changed in the nineteenth century when these paths were removed and the pavilion was moved to the west side of the garden¹². This has led to the current layout of the garden.

Since I still wasn't able to enter the garden, I could only admire it from afar on the pedestrian-dominated pavement of the four streets surrounding the garden. Contrary to nearby Oxford Circus, these streets seem more pleasant and friendly towards its visitors. With benches and a sizable portion of the street designated for just pedestrians. I was never against taking a seat on one of the benches, whenever in the area, to have lunch or just before continuing my way to my unit room in Montague Street. The streets weren't always like this. Looking into the archive of the London Transport Museum showed me that at the time of Bedford Square's construction a considerable amount of street space was designed for carriages and later automobiles¹⁵. Back then the square seemed more like a roundabout. Later on, while the garden's perimeter persisted, the sidewalks were expanded to accommodate pedestrians, ultimately giving rise to the Bedford Square we recognize today.

away from the crowded Regent Street. Over time these places change and change again, with every Autumn the leaves turn red, yellow and brown after which greenery returns in Spring.

London knows many gardens and parks, each an escape from the city with its ideal scenery and character that contradicts its surroundings; drinks at Primrose Hill during a sunset, Hyde Park for an athletic activity or Hanover Square Gardens to get

I have carefully noticed these changes at Bedford Square Garden, the leaves falling over the railing onto the street and the density of the flora lessening the more winter approached. With weeks turning into months, I kept turning

12. The Bedford Estates. "Bloomsbury's History & Heritage: The Bedford Estates," thebedfordestates, n.d., <https://www.bedfordestates.com/about-us/history/>.
13. London gardens trust. "1650 to 1700," londongardentrust, 2015, <https://www.londongardenstrust.org/history/squares1650.htm>
14. Andrew Byrne. "Bedford Square: An Architectural Study," (The Anthlone Press, 1990), 49-56
15. London Transport Museum. "B/w Glass Neg, Bedford Square Fenced in by Iron Railings and with Parked Cars by Topical Press, 13 Jan 1934" londontransportmuseum, n.d., <https://www.ltmuseum.co.uk/collections/collections-online/photographs/item/2003-17996>.

Epilogue

Since my time in London was almost over and the date of my departure was fast approaching, I wanted to attempt one last time to enter the garden. My plan, attempt one more time to persuade the receptionist at the School of Architecture, with the hope someone more understanding would be behind the desk. To my surprise, the receptionist agreed without hesitation, with no need for a compelling explanation. With the key in hand, I finally walked towards the garden, opened the gate and left the city behind.

This piece of writing unearths the hidden historical and current meaning of Bedford Square Garden, which may have been overlooked initially by its visitor, in this case myself. The garden is a relic from the past, that still has an important role to play in the future of the city. London isn't the same as it was when Bedford Square was created, but now green space is scarce and hard to come by. Maybe it's too early to ask for the gates to be opened, Bedford Square Garden would certainly not be the first, but for now, the garden can only be admired from afar and foster curiosity in the unaware.

Tom Punte

Bibliography

- Ackroyd, Peter. "London: The Biography." (London: Chatto & Windus, 2001), 238-244
- Antonia. "What Is the Difference between Georgian, Victorian and Edwardian Railings?: British Spirals & Castings," *British Spirals & Castings*, January 16, 2018, <https://www.britishsc.co.uk/georgian-victorian-edwardian-railings/>.
- Byrne, Andrew. "Bedford Square: An Architectural Study," (The Anthlone Press, 1990), 49-56
- English Heritage, "Georgian England," ENGLISH-HERITAGE, n.d., <https://www.english-heritage.org.uk/learn/story-of-england/georgians>
- Hill, Amelia. "The Push to Open up the 'Locked and Bolted' Green Spaces of UK Cities," *The Guardian*, December 12, 2022, <https://www.theguardian.com/lifeandstyle/2022/dec/11/privately-owned-green-spaces-parks-gardens-uk-cities-campaigners>.
- Historic England. "BEDFORD SQUARE Listed on the National Heritage List for England," *historicengland*. 2000, <https://historicengland.org.uk/listing/the-list/list-entry/1000245?section=official-list-entry>.
- London gardens trust. "A Short History of London's Garden Squares: 1650 to 1700," *londongardentrust*, 2015, <https://www.londongardenstrust.org/history/squares1650.htm>
- London gardens trust. "Putting Back the Style", *londongardentrust*, 2015, <https://www.londongardenstrust.org/features/railings.htm>
- London Transport Museum. "B/w Glass Neg, Bedford Square Fenced in by Iron Railings and with Parked Cars by Topical Press, 13 Jan 1934" *londontransportmuseum*, n.d., <https://www.ltmuseum.co.uk/collections/collections-online/photographs/item/2003-17996>.
- Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "narrative (n.)," September 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/3575296173>.
- Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "narrative (n.)," sense 2.a," September 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1152188169>.
- Oxford English Dictionary, s.v. "narrative (n.)," sense 2.b," September 2023, <https://doi.org/10.1093/OED/1152188169>.
- The Bedford Estate. "Bloomsbury Garden Squares," *thebedfordestate*. n.d., <https://www.bedfordestates.com/about-us/garden-squares/>.
- The Bedford Estates. "Bloomsbury's History & Heritage: The Bedford Estates," *thebedfordestates*, n.d., <https://www.bedfordestates.com/about-us/history/>.

Other photographs



Photograph of railing of Bedford Square Garden, own image



Photograph of Bedford Square Garden and the surrounding street, own image



Photograph inside of Bedford Square Garden, own image



Photograph inside of Bedford Square Garden, own image



Photograph inside of Bedford Square Garden, own image



Photograph of the key of Bedford Square Garden, own image