Each area of Versailles is unique in its physical organization, with distinct combinations of primary and secondary focal points, rhythmic patterns, spatial delineation and axial structure inviting site-specific movement.

As soon as one enters the central room, the space to the left attracts one’s gaze with the strong axiality suggested by the symmetrical layout and the fountain of the Arc de Triomphe at the upper end. The latter is made more ‘triumphant’ by its elevated location and by the shape of the space; one finds oneself in an antechamber that one has to cross to enter the actual room in which the Arc de Triomphe is located. The passage from antechamber into chamber is reinforced by the change of level and by the two ‘goulettes’ (small waterfalls on the ground) that further restrict the space available for movement.

The other objects in the space are secondary focal points. On the way up, when one’s attention is concentrated on the arch, they reinforce the axis of symmetry leading up to it. On the way down, they enliven one’s journey by offering a succession of quite different points of interest. On one’s way down, the fountain at the lower end of the room acts as a terminal focal point, one’s last goal before definitively leaving the space. (This is one way of exploring the space – there are many other ways).

This diagram is similar to the score representing Louis XIV’s walk, but here showing categories to describe the movement and its directedness.

‘Moments of rest’ are places where the garden offers the visitor a sense of wholeness, of having reached one’s goal, having fulfilled one’s desire (“I see this statue in the best way I can see it; I know it as much as I can know it”). Before being reached, the ‘object’ of my desire has to appear as a reachable goal. The rhythmic organization of the space accompanies and invites the visitor’s movement from goal to goal, from one ‘moment of rest’ to the next, as a constant invitation to continue the promenade.
Analyses of gardens are commonly encountered through plan and perspective views only – as if a garden in situ might be replaced by its representation in plan, and as if the actual experience of a garden is limited to a succession of views. This has been especially true of the gardens of Versailles, which are thoroughly well known in plan and pictures but experienced less commonly.

Yet, walking in the garden (any garden) is a much richer experience than simply encountering a succession of framed views. Being spatial environments, gardens are perceived and explored by looking, feeling, walking visitors. Therefore we should not be surprised to find the spatiality of such experience in many literary descriptions of gardens – including 17th-century descriptions of Versailles.[1]

The most famous itinerary of movement through Versailles was devised by Louis XIV himself to show the garden to visiting diplomats and heads of state. As well as constituting an ‘official’ itinerary, the tour was also a personal one, created by a man who knew his garden well – not only its statues and fountains but its complete spatial characteristics. Leading visitors from open vistas to bounded spaces, from axial views to labyrinthine paths, to minor or dramatic surprises, Louis XIV was able to play with and make good use of, the full experiential potential of the garden, to offer a rich and multifaceted aesthetic experience engaging both ‘the mind and the senses’.

Studying literary descriptions of his itineraries, we find records of views that unfold at different scales as the visitor walks down an alley accompanied by sounds, smells, light and shade. Beyond these primary sensory experiences, we also find mentions of kinaesthetic experience and bodily orientation, surprise and expectation. Indeed perception through the ‘senses’ of this kind may be understood as our active participation in environment;[3] our bodily project toward what surrounds us.

By examining these literary descriptions of sensory spatial experience at Versailles is it possible to construct notations like instruments of a sensory orchestra to illustrate a complete, multisensory, experiential ‘sensuous’ promenade. The richness of this dialogue in Versailles comes from the complexity of the choices offered to the promeneur, allowing them to build through time a meaningful aesthetic experience of the garden.

The graphical explorations in this essay are an attempt to explore the components and underlying structure of the spatial experiences inherent in any designed space. The aim of the notations and diagrams is a multilayered analysis, with some affinity to other graphical analyses of temporal arts such as Rudolf Laban’s movement notation system or Heinrich Schenker’s musical analysis.

Promenade is indeed a temporal ‘choreography’ through space. Each timeline representation shows only one of the innumerable ways to explore the garden. This is simultaneously the strength and weakness of these notations. However, in offering a description of temporal discovery the graphical notation methods shown here enables us to read plans more richly than we often do. Despite their shortcomings, plans remain our most powerful tool for representing space. Through notation analysis we come to understand the plan as a richer representation of spatial experience than we often give it credit for.

The walk in the garden, as we actually ‘live’ it, is experienced as a sequence of meaningful events. We set ourselves goals – reaching the statue we see over there, entering the bosquet through this alley over here – and we achieve them. The analysis of the different types of goals potentially offered by the spatial composition of the garden is based on the work of philosopher and psychiatrist Erwin Straus, who describes spatial experience as twofold: ‘sensing’, which we share with mobile animals, and ‘perceiving’, in which we distance ourselves from our surroundings.[4]

In ‘sensing’, we are immersed in space, experiencing temporal succession as a multiplicity of possibilities of movement, relating the ‘here’ where we are and the ‘there’ whither we can go. The garden invites motion through its spatial form, by offering the possibility of heightened experiences of ‘here’ – views, objects, spaces seen along an axis – and ‘there’ – views and objects at a distance; that we can feel to reach. More subtly, the garden can accompany the transition from the fulfillment of being ‘here’ to the desire of going ‘there’ and enrich, through such transitions, our motion itself.

Space is thus conceived not as a backdrop that we see while in motion but as an invitation to motion, as a spatial dialogue taking the shape of a promenade. The richness of this dialogue in Versailles comes from the complexity of the choices offered to the promeneur, allowing them to build through time a meaningful aesthetic experience of the garden.

Notes
1 Versailles opened to visitors at about the time Louis XIV started work on the gardens in 1664. The first descriptions were published in 1671, and the first official guidebook in 1674. These were followed by numerous published versions and guidebooks and unpublished writings throughout Louis XIV’s reign, collecting different stages of the constantly evolving garden.
When one enters a bosquet, one is expecting to find something there. The longer one walks, the more the expectation increases, as one approaches a bed, one's expectation grows – to be at times disappointed; the bend was only hiding another allée, with another bend at the other end. Here the expectation grows in steps, until one finally reaches the central space.

After having explored the space, one is ready to leave; there is nothing more to expect, the expectation diminishes – until one has reached the entrance to the next bosquet.

Figure 3a Louis XIV’s c. 1695 promenade itinerary on the plan view of the garden at the time.

The first half of Louis XIV’s walk is here represented as a timeline. The upper part shows schematically the spaces crossed along the walk. The lines below show the different experiences, regrouped thematically. Each section is proportional to the actual distance travelled. We can see that the first two groups – ‘views’ and ‘sense of orientation’ at different scales are closely (but not unequivocally) related.

The garden plays with our sense of orientation at various scales through the views available combined with the complexity of the paths we are led to follow. Together with the attendant sensory richness our aesthetic experience of the garden is formed.

The second half of Louis XIV’s walk is here represented on the plan view of the garden at the time. The 

The garden plays with our sense of orientation at various scales through the views available combined with the complexity of the paths we are led to follow. Together with the attendant sensory richness our aesthetic experience of the garden is formed.

Figure 3b Score for Louis XIV’s c. 1695 promenade itinerary.
Figure 4
Some of the light-and-shade experience of the promenades of Louis XIV and Felibien.

The first official guidebook to the gardens at Versailles, written by the king’s historiographer André Felibien, was published in 1674. The tour described by Felibien uses views down the avenues, but doesn’t follow them, instead visiting the bouquets. This established a manner of visiting the garden that influenced all subsequent tours, including that of Louis XIV, even though the direction they took varied. Felibien began with the northern half, Louis XIV with the southern half. Figure 4 shows the succession of light and shade during each promenade, each portion of the wheel in a given tone proportional to the length of the path with that condition.

The experience of shade was one of particular importance for 17th-century authors. The lack of shady areas close to the palace (shown by the wide white section of the wheel at the beginning and at the end of the walk) was one of the complaints of the courtiers living in Versailles.

Figure 5
The Allée Royale Promenade of La Fontaine

While looking always involves the same sense of sight, the experience of looking at a space (that surrounds us) or at an object (facing us, being there in space over against us) is fundamentally different experience, implying a different bodily engagement (walking within a space, walking toward an object). The dynamics of these different experiences of looking can be illustrated by a poem of Jean de La Fontaine (in his novel Les amours de Psyché et Cupidon, shown above, right) in which he describes the walk down the central avenue of Versailles garden, from the palace to the Grand Canal. He first looks at the entire space before him, then in common with our task, then scans the whole space again, notices a new detail, and yet another. As he moves through the space, new spaces and new objects appear. The notation diagram represents La Fontaine’s walk, beginning from the top. The poems can be divided into three types of activity: looking at the space (first column), looking at a particular object (second column), and walking (third column). The length of each segment is proportional to the number of verses devoted to it in the poem.

Biographical Notes
Catherine Szántó is a landscape architecture student at Cornell University. She completed her Ph.D. on the experience of promenades in the garden of Versailles at the École d’Architecture Paris-La Villette in 2009. She is currently working and teaching there in France and Hungary. Catherine Szántó is a landscape architect (post-graduate course ‘architecture, urbanism and environment’ in the École d’Architecture at Versailles). She teaches architecture history and urban planning and architecture students specializing in historic gardens.

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LA FONTAINE (Jean), Les amours de Psyché et Cupidon, Paris, 1669.

LIVRE DEUXIEME
[Les trois amis] s’arrêtèrent longtemps à l’endroit qu’en appelle le Fer-de-Cheval, ne se pouvant laisser d’admirer cette longue suite de beauté toutes différentes qu’on découvre du haut des rampes.

Là, dans des chars dorés, le Prince avec sa cour
Vu glisser la flûteuse sur le déclin du jour.
L’un et l’autre soleil, unique en un epoque,
Étoile aux regards se pente et se richesse.
Phébus bille à l’œuvres de monarque français ;
On ne sait bien ouvrir à qui donner sa voix.
Tous deux sent pleins d’état et rayonnant de gloire.
Ah ! j’ai aisi d’âge des filles de Méméire !
De quels traitst j’amener cette compositjon !
Versailles, ce serait le palais d’Apollon :
Les belles de la Cour passeraient pour les Heures :
Mais pegoignons celatons ces charmantes demeures.
En face d’un porteur au palais appliqué
Est un amphithéâtre en rampes divisé […]

Est un amphithéâtre en rampes divisé (…)