What follows is a quote from the report of the Proceedings of the Royal Commission Read by His Royal Highness Prince Albert on the Occasion of the Opening of the Great Exhibition, 1 May 1851. Published in the Official Catalogue of the Great Exhibition, 1851.

“The number of Exhibitors whose productions it has been found possible to accommodate is about 15,000 of whom nearly one-half are British. The remainder represent the productions of more than forty foreign countries, comprising almost the whole of the civilised nations of the globe. In arranging the space to be allotted to each, we have taken into consideration both the nature of its productions and the facility of access to this country afforded by its geographical position. Your Majesty will find the productions of Your Majesty’s dominions arranged in the western portion of the Building, and those of foreign countries in the eastern. The Exhibition is divided into the four great classes of – 1. Raw Materials; 2. Machinery; 3. Manufactures; and 4. Sculpture and the Fine Arts. A further division has been made according to the geographical position of the countries represented; those which lie within the warmer latitudes being placed near the centre of the Building, and the colder countries at the extremities.”

The Great Exhibition took place in Hyde Park, London, from 1 May to 11 October 1851 and was a much-anticipated event in celebration of modern industrial technology and design. It is sometimes referred to as The Crystal Palace Exhibition due to the temporary glass-and-iron cathedral like structure, designed by architect Joseph Paxton, that it was housed in. The Exhibition was intended to showcase Britain to the world as its industrial and cultural leader, as well as play a role in public education.

“At the time of the Great Exhibition of 1851, Britain and the western world in general were experiencing such a break. The Crystal Palace is a crystallized attempt to hold on to a reality which is slipping—it is a “perfect” version of a British and Victorian society which was at the pinnacle of its strength as a political and industrial power; being at the summit, however, implies being able to foresee the inevitable descent, and the Crystal Palace was a built effort to delay or completely deny this.” – (Reading Imperialistic Space: The Crystal Palace by Ilse Bussing López, pg. 98)

When the Great Exhibition opened in 1851 Europe had just pulled through two decades of social, political, and revolutionary upheaval. By the early 1840s, industrialization in Great Britain was almost three times what it had been in 1800. Industrialisation was also growing in many countries across Europe, doubling in Belgium, increasing by 77% in France, and growing increasingly quickly in Belgium. Then the progress in mechanization was quickly accompanied by a disaster in agriculture. A potato blight in Europe in the mid-forties, accompanied by drought and bad harvests, caused food shortages and higher prices. 1848 saw a vast amount of political and social uprisings across the continent; Swiss Civil war accompanied by uprisings and protest in Milan, Vienna, Budapest, and across Romania and Prussia showcase the anti-establishment sentiment that was widespread at the time. The Great Exhibition intended to showcase the perceived superiority of the British Empire to Europe during the time of great upheaval. Through the show, Britain sought to demonstrate to the world that they could achieve a better future, a utopia that seemed unattainable. They sought to prove that it would be British design that could pave the way forward. The exhibition reflected on the world and built upon it, creating an environment within that was other, but similarly real.

The Great Exhibition was not just a show to the world, it also acted as a place to educate. People of all classes visited the show, with 6 million people visiting the Great Exhibition, with a daily average attendance of 42,831. Initially costing £3 for gentlemen and £2 for ladies the price dropped to as little as 1 shilling, opening the exhibition to people from all classes of society. The Great Exhibition was thus a collection of wonders from “almost the whole of the civilised nations of the globe” being displayed freely to people from all aspects of society. The show was also extremely popular, the Queens family visited three times, and The Guardian newspaper explained how “The interest felt by the public has in no wise diminished […] and the number of visitors has exceeded expectation.” (7 May 1851). The incredible popularity of the show can be seen in the writing of William Makepeace Thackeray, who wrote in ‘Mr Molony’s Account of the Crystal Palace’,

“Amazed I pass
From glass to glass,
Delighted I survey 'em;
Fresh wondthers grows
Before me nose
In this sublime Musayum!

![FIG 1 London in 1851. One of George Cruikshank's illustrations for Mayhew's '1851', showing crowds in Regent Circus heading for the Crystal Palace in Hyde Park.](image)

In ‘1851; or the Adventures of Mr and Mrs Sandboys’ Henry Mayhew explains “At last, the long looked-for shilling day has arrived. Barriers had been placed up outside the building, so as to stem the expected crush”. There was, however, criticism of inviting the public to the Exhibition, some conservatives feared that the mass of visitors might become a revolutionary mob. “For many days before the ‘shilling people’ were admitted to the building, the great topic of conversation was the probable behaviour of the people. Would they come sober? Will they destroy the things? Will they want to cut their initials, or scratch their names on the panes of the glass lighthouse?” However, it seems their concerns were unfounded, and it was reported that

“they [the public] have surpassed in decorum the hopes of the well-wishers [...] We have been thus prolix on the classes attending the Great Exhibition, because it is the influence that this institution is likely to exercise upon labour which constitutes its most interesting and valuable feature. If we really desire the improvement of our social state, (and surely we are far from perfection yet,) we must address ourselves to the elevation of the people; and it is because the Great Exhibition is fitted to become a special instrument towards this end, that it forms one of the most remarkable and hopeful characteristics of our time.” (Henry Mayhew)

A brief utopia was built within the temporary glass walls, and perfection seems to have been met inside the Crystal Palace. A collection of wonders from all over the world, available to rich and poor alike, were collected in one place. The exhibition, like all museums, mirrored the outside world. “The idea of accumulating everything, of establishing a sort of general archive, the will to enclose in one place all times, all epochs, all forms, all tastes, the idea of constituting a place of all times that is itself outside of time and inaccessible to its ravages, the project of organizing in this way a sort of perpetual and indefinite accumulation of time in an immobile place, this whole
Idea belongs to our modernity. The museum and the library are heterotopias that are proper to western culture of the nineteenth century. (Michel Foucault [1967] "Of Other Spaces," Diacritics 16 (Spring 1986)

A Heterotopia is a concept elaborated by the philosopher Michel Foucault. These are spaces of otherness, they reflect the world outside and create something new. Heterotopias are places where things are different, a physical representation or approximation of a utopia, or a parallel space that contains undesirable bodies to make a real utopian space possible. There are many places that can be described as acting as Heterotopias, such as; libraries, festivals, art galleries, ships, prisons, museums, and gardens. These places reflect on reality and create a new reality that mirrors the outside world, there are many types of heterotopia such as heterotopia of time, crisis heterotopia, and heterotopia of deviation. Foucault explains that “either the heterotopias have the role of creating a space of illusion that denounces all real space, all real emplacements within which human life is partitioned off, as being even more illusory [...] Or, on the contrary, creating a different real space as perfect, as meticulous, as well-arranged as ours is disorganized, badly arranged and muddled” (Of Other Spaces: Utopias and Heterotopias, Foucault, pg. 184).

Heterotopias are single real places that contrast several places and bring them together, a single place that acts as a microcosm for the outside world. Gardens are a perfect example of a heterotopia, a place where plants from all over the globe are collected and grown together, displayed side by side in the private fabricated world of the gardener. The architect for the Crystal Palace, Joseph Paxton, was a well celebrated gardener of his time. The Great Exhibition acted as a garden of culture, science, and the industrial, large glass walls replace brick walls of the garden, and an amalgamation of intrigues are brought together and displayed together in both. The Great Exhibition was a cultural garden of the imagination, a curated corner of space and time. For a brief time in 1851 a real utopia was created in the Crystal Palace. A garden collection, open to all, which mirrored and distorted the time it existed in.