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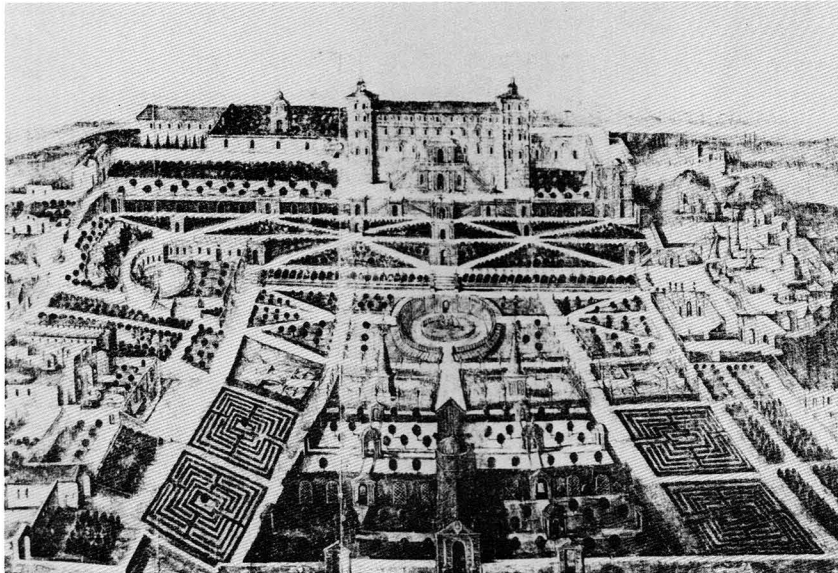
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American Gardens and their European Precedents:

Tradition and Strategy

Joanna Lombard



Perspective view, Villa D'Este.

Introduction

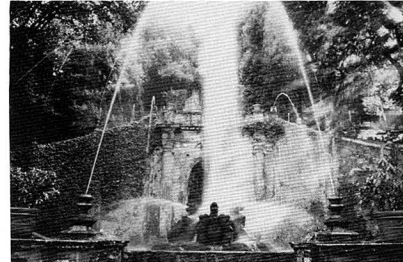
The study of American gardens and their European precedents has yielded two essential ideas. One is a way of categorizing garden form, the other an elaboration of the parts of American gardens that seem distinct and shared.

The garden history significant to American gardens can be classified into two traditions, that of the epic, and that of the artifact. The epic tradition presents a spatial sequence evocative of the literary epic journey. The gardens of Renaissance Italy most clearly illustrate this notion in their execution of a literal, iconographic narrative.¹ Distinct spaces denote arrival, sequence and departure. Participation in the unfolding journey is essential and the complete experience

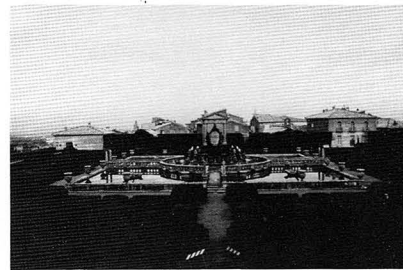
of the garden is dynamic and cumulative.

The artifact tradition is most easily seen in the picturesque English garden where objects are arranged compositionally. The object holds particular symbolic meaning and associate power without the spatial delineation of sequence. The quality of the visual experience supersedes both sensorial movement through space and the literary narrative.

American gardens borrow from these traditions, one dynamic and fully sensorial, the other static and primarily pictorial. It is important here to distinguish between garden tradition and garden plan. While the gridded plan of the Renaissance garden is static, the totality of spatial sequence is dynamic. In



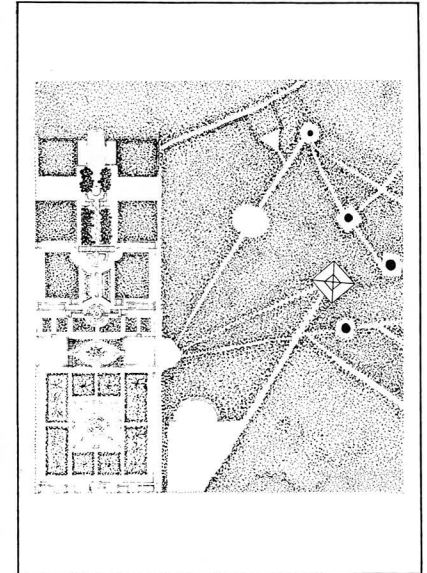
Villa D'Este.



Villa Lante.

contrast, the picturesque plan appears dynamic but the spatial sequence is in fact static.

Examples of the epic and artifact tradition precede an analysis of American gardens in order to illuminate both precedent and subsequent transformation of the American garden. Two Italian gardens express the epic tradition clearly, Villa d'Este at Tivoli and Villa Lante at Bagnaia. Palladio's Villa Barbaro at Masèr further describes the evolution of the type into a precursor of American gardens. Stourhead in England illustrates the characteristics of the artifact garden. Finally, five American gardens exemplify American strategy. An analysis of these American gardens focuses on the distinction of the genre.



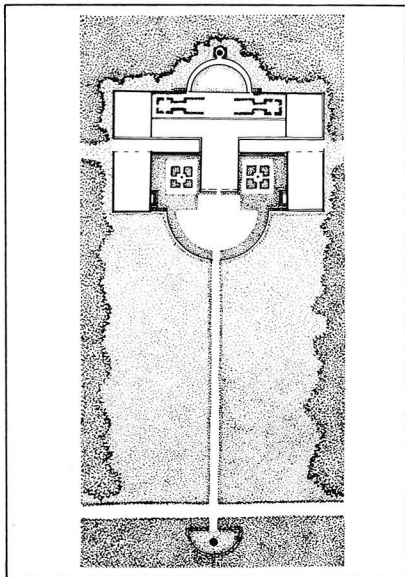
Plan, Villa Lante.

The Epic Tradition

Villa D'Este

Villa D'Este, garden of Ippolito II d'Este, Cardinal of Ferrara, follows a specific iconographical program designed by Pirro Ligorio and Marc Antoine Muret, to honor the Cardinal.² David Coffin, in *The Villa in the Life of Renaissance Rome*, describes three inter-related themes expressed in the cross axial organization of the garden.

The first two axes, terminated by the fountains of Nature and the Sea on one level, and the Ovato and the Rometta fountain at the next level express the relationship of nature to art. The geographical theme of Tivoli V. Rome is expressed in the second level foun-



Plan, Villa Barbaro.

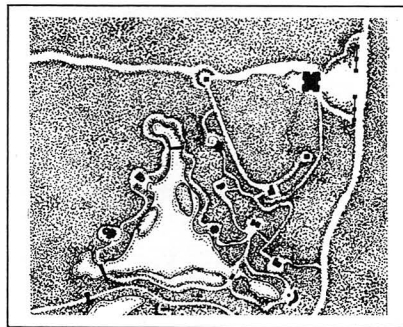
tain. Finally, the moral dilemma of Hercules is depicted in the central fountain of the Dragons, a point where the cross axial and diagonal paths meet. The association of Hercules with the Cardinal, and the Garden of the Hesperides with that of Tivoli is implicit. The journey through the garden, characterized by decisions and choices, is a dynamic and cumulative journey that links the participant, through the Cardinal, to the larger mythic choices of Hercules.

Villa Lante

Villa Lante, garden of Cardinal Gambara in Bagnaia, is said to be designed by Vignola. The period is the 1570's — shortly after the Villa D'Este. David Coffin offers further explication of the



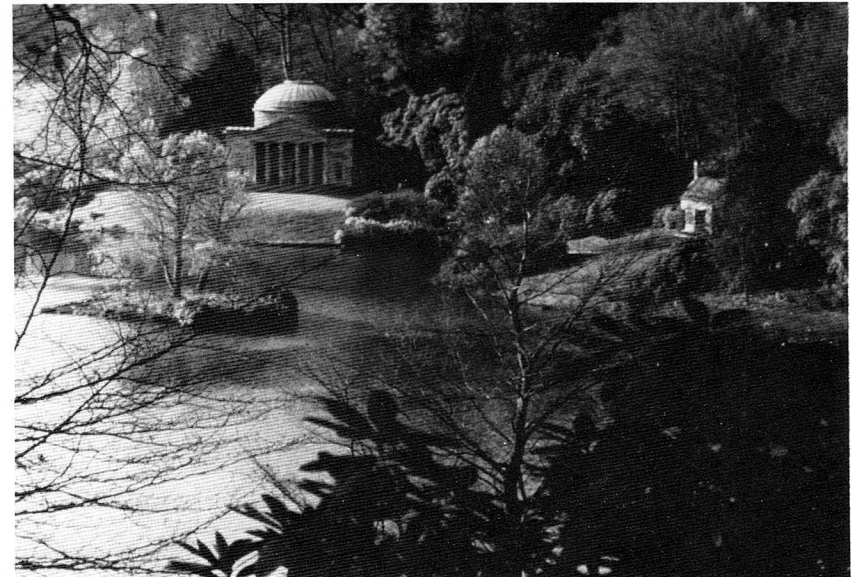
Villa Barbaro.



Plan, Stourhead.

allergorical associations in this villa and garden.

Villa Lante recalls Ovid's Golden Age through the park, which immediately surrounds the villa. Moving through the park to the top of the hill, the story of the Deluge is expressed through water, sculpture, landscape, and built pieces. The houses of the Muses assert the potential unity of art and nature. The Dolphin fountain leads to the waterstair and the fountain of Giants. A dining table suggests the benefits of nature, while continued progression to the parterre reveals nature in the service of art. The narrative is linear and can be approached from either direction. Once again, the actual movement through the garden recalls a mythic journey.³



Stourhead.

Villa Barbaro

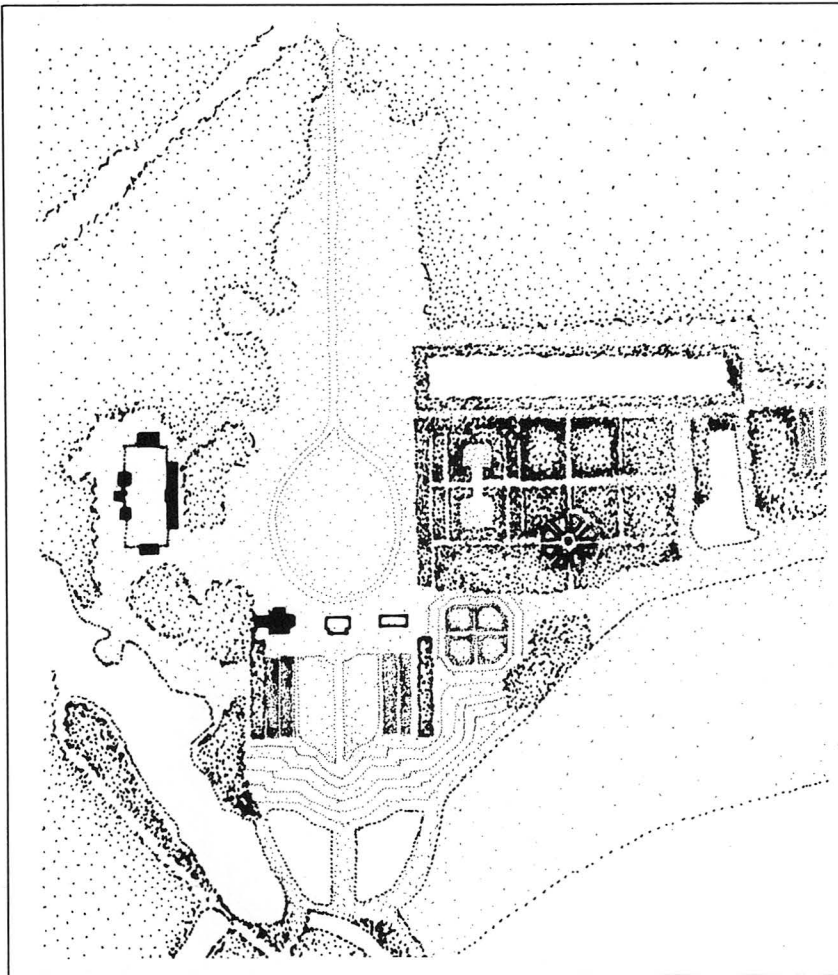
Palladio is of interest here because his Venetian clients took a more pragmatic view of the villa. Venetian escape was limited to the world of the painting⁴ and the landscape of the villa was productive.⁵ Therefore, the sequence of the epic narrative is expressed compactly.

The farmlands surround the villa, which is organized along a central axis. The formal parterre garden forms the first layer of the villa. The villa itself is the center. The axis terminates in the nymphaeum which recalls the grotto, an aspect of Renaissance gardens evocative of the Ovato of Villa D'Este and the fountain of the Deluge of Villa Lante.

The Artifact Tradition *Stourhead*

Stourhead, garden of Henry Hoare, dates from the 1740's and is located in Stourton, England.⁶ As in the Italian gardens of the Renaissance, antiquity remains the ideal referential resource. Unlike the Italian examples, Stourhead's spatial sequence is less significant than the character of particular objects which individually evoke classical associations.

The visual phenomena of an object set in the landscape (encountered as an event on a circuit walk or as an aspect of a distant vista) supersedes the importance of cumulative, spatial perception. The value of the architecture is in its symbolic potential, an experience that requires the detachment of an observer.



Plan, Middleton Place.

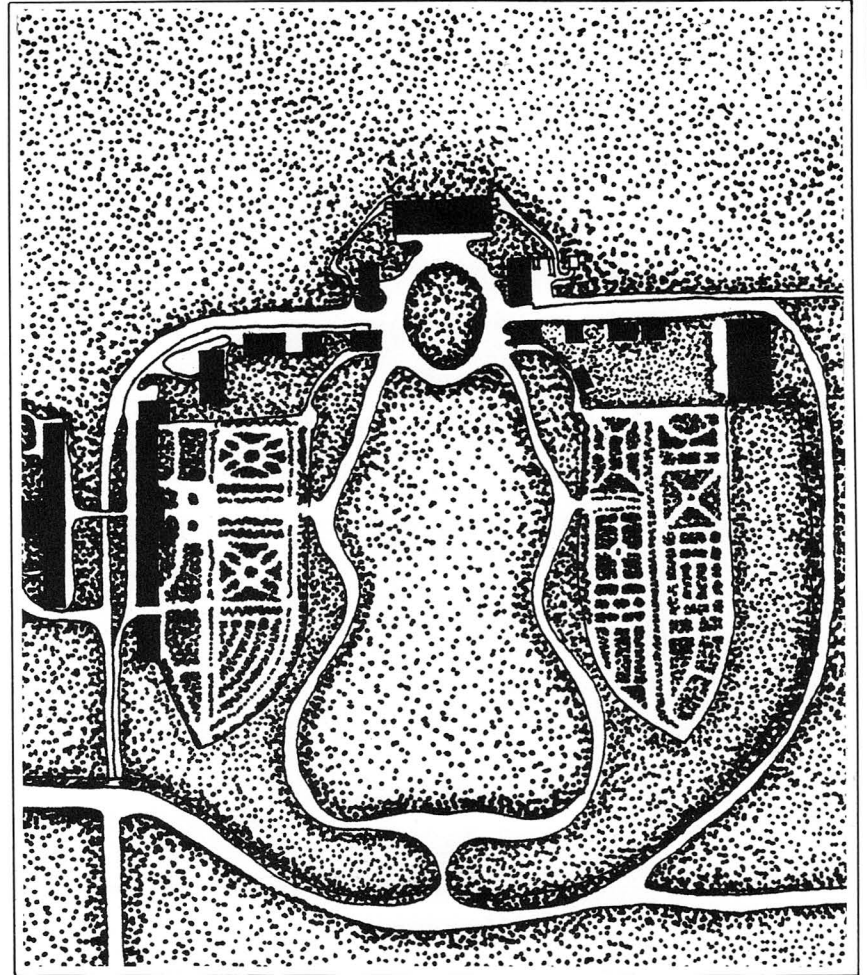
American Strategy

Like Palladio's Venetian clients, the American client is expansive, optimistic and entrepreneurial. However, the mythic journey of literature is manifested in the actual journey to the New World. The evocation of antiquity is supplanted by the evocation of Europe. Garden spaces and objects recall Italy, France, or England, rather than that of Hesperides.

The epic tradition yields the notion of spatial sequence, the participatory elaboration of theme, and perception as the result of cumulative experience. The artifact tradition permits a liberal usage of objects for associative power, generally situated to mark centers, transitions and edges. Rather than alluding to the classical past, American garden

objects describe immediate relationships to the larger landscape. The larger landscape is the Golden Age made real, and the participant is firmly placed within it. These two traditions and the American passion for land can be seen in three particular characteristics of American gardens.

First, a central axis links major geographic features, unifying the axis of the house with the axis of place. The plantation is linked to the forest, the forest to the river, horizon to horizon, (generally, east to west). Then, a secondary axis, perpendicular to the central axis, organizes the cultivated landscape linking kitchen and formal garden spaces. And finally, the edges of the garden alter in a pattern of concentric demarcation that eventually unites the garden with the native landscape. The



Plan, Mount Vernon.

very character of a space describes both its distance from the villa, and its relative position within the larger landscape.

Middleton Place

Henry Middleton started Middleton in the 1740's outside of Charleston, South Carolina.⁷ The central axis organizes (from west to east) the wood, lawn, house, "butterfly"⁸ lakes, central walk, and the Ashley River. The primary elements of river and wood are linked by the central axis.

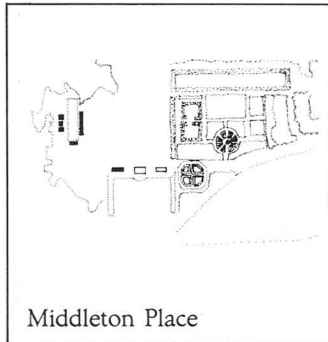
Kitchen gardens terminate the southern end of the secondary axis, while formal gardens organize to the north. Concentric demarcation begins to occur as the gardens move away from the house, changing from the clipped edges of the tea garden and rose garden to the

naturalized edges of the outer garden rooms, finally reaching the cypress swamp and the river itself.

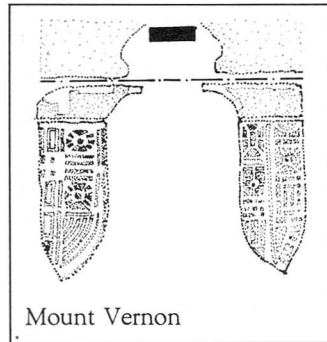
Mount Vernon

George Washington planned the gardens of Mount Vernon, Virginia, in the 1770's.⁹ Although his inspiration may have been Batty Langley's pattern book¹⁰, Mount Vernon shares the strong, central west-east axis linking the forested countryside, central drive, green house, lawn, and the Potomac River.

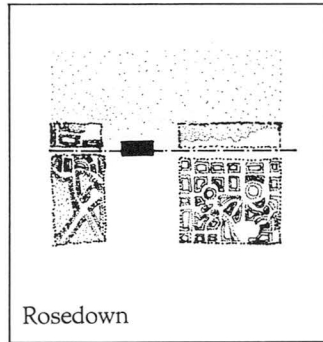
The secondary axis defines the organization of the kitchen and flower gardens which are spatially distinct. The edges of the garden are architectural, when close to the house and eventually merge, through the use of the "ha-ha," with the park.



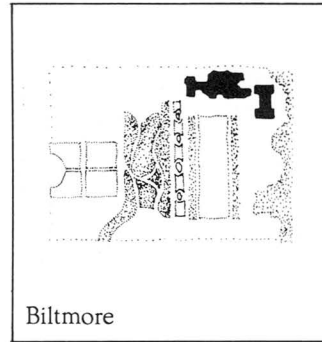
Middleton Place



Mount Vernon



Rosedown



Biltmore



Vizcaya

Secondary cultivation axes.



Middleton Place.



Mount Vernon.

Rosedown

The Turnbulls developed Rosedown in St. Francisville, Louisiana, during the 1830's.¹¹ The major geographic features of the central axis are the cotton fields (now timber fields), allee, front court, house, lawn, reservoir and native wood. An oak allee and sculpture path establishes the rhythm of the central axis. The secondary axis aligns the kitchen garden and formal gardens. The edges of the Rosedown garden are particularly sensitive to the distinction of distance into the wood. Cross axes are marked architecturally, and internal borders are layered. The edges of the garden closest to the wood begin to open visually to the wood beyond.

The garden rooms are experienced in periphery, unlike the centrally focused

rooms of Middleton and Mount Vernon. Like other American gardens, the opportunity to survey the garden from within the house offers the only possibility of a scenographic experience. On the ground, movement through the garden is essential to understanding the accumulation of pieces.

Biltmore

G.W. Vanderbilt planned Biltmore with Frederick Law Olmsted and Richard Morris Hunt.¹² Work began in the late 1880's to re-foliate the Asheville, North Carolina mountainside.¹³ Although the scale of Biltmore differs vastly from that of the previous gardens, the organizational strategy remains similar. In each garden the approach through the countryside opens onto the clearly expressed central axis. The Biltmore court aligns

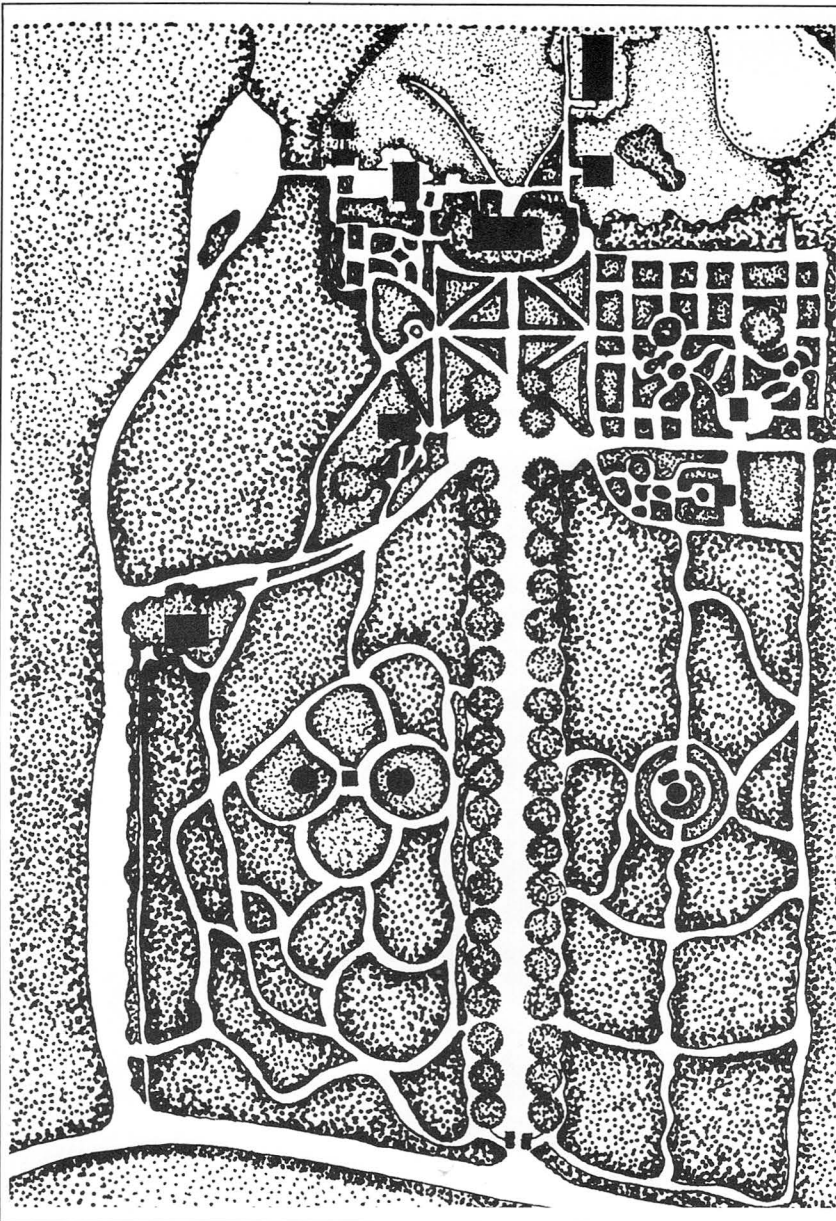
the house, entry court, mount, and lawn, which all respectively extend to the mountains in the west and the new forest to the east. The secondary axis of the Biltmore aligns the garden terraces and utility spaces, (in this instance, stables), to the north. Olmsted had hoped for a vegetable and herb garden, but Vanderbilt was resolute in his opposition to grow anything "useful".¹⁴

The water garden, referred to as the "Italian garden," is closest to the house and most formal in character. The "Ramble" follows, recalling the Central Park planting that Vanderbilt wanted to recreate.¹⁵ The walled flower garden terminates the formal garden sequence. The character of the wall is rustic and the portals open to the forest paths beyond. The surrounding wood, a composition of terrain, foliage, brooks, and

architectural pieces encompass the estate. Roads and paths continue the sequence of movement that links the garden to the forest and wilderness.

Vizcaya

James Derring began planning Vizcaya with Paul Chalfin and F. Burrall Hoffman in the 1900's.¹⁵ Diego Suarez began work on the gardens¹⁶ and Vizcaya began to shape the Miami, Florida shoreline in the 1910's. The drive through the native wood opens onto a central axis that links the western wood to the eastern expanse of Biscayne Bay. The open court of the Villa reinforces the secondary axis from which the cultivated gardens grow. The northern land was farmland and woodland, to the south, the formal garden.



Plan, Rosedown.

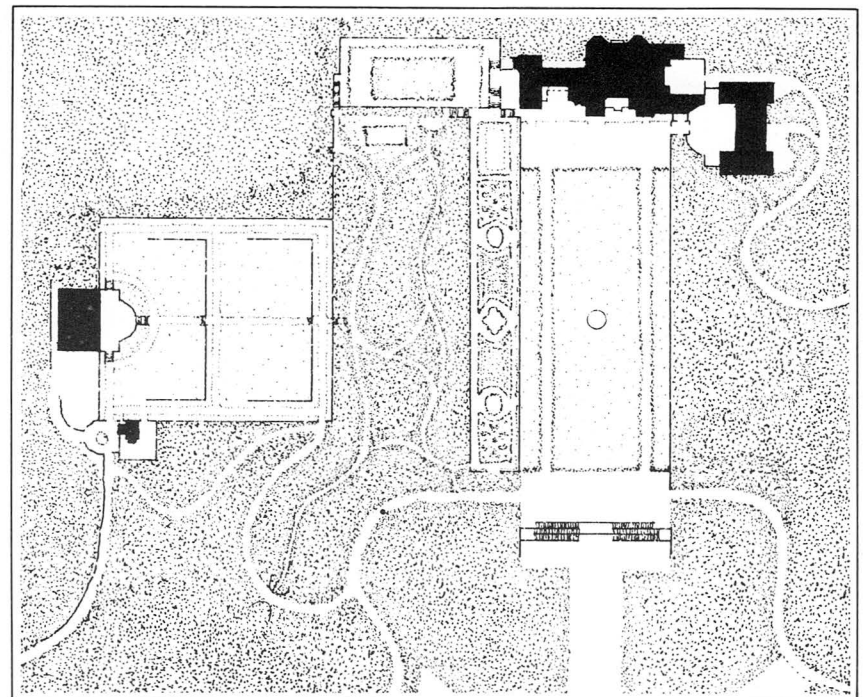
The garden rooms allude to the landscape surrounding the villa, carrying distinct messages of place, reiterating the unity of identity of building and landscape. The seaward wall of the secret garden is ornamented with the imagery of Neptune. While the iconography of the renaissance garden referred to mythic heroes, Vizcaya's mythic figures refer to place.

The edges of spaces alter as one proceeds out to the limits of the garden. Mangrove and shallow reefs are visible from within the garden rooms along the

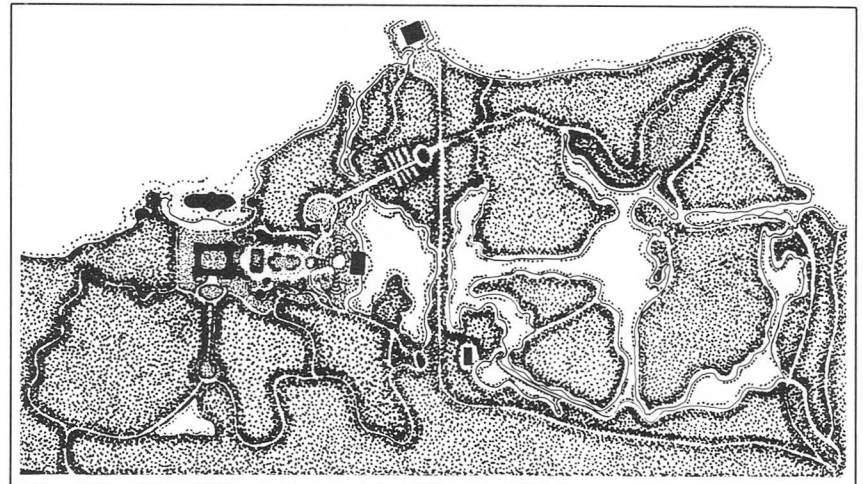
bay, while the western garden rooms refer to the hammock. The casino overlooks a network of picturesque canals in which the continuous merging with native landscape as a spatial journey culminates.

Conclusion

The strategies of spatial organization, — central geographic axis, secondary cultivation axis, and concentric demarcation — allow richness of form, variety of individual parts and expressiveness



Plan, Biltmore.



Plan, Vizcaya.

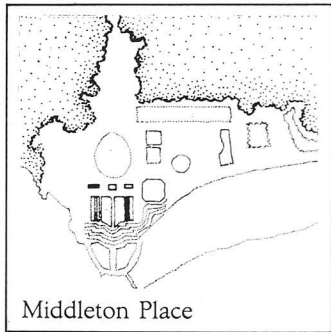
of place. The American garden is referential in a broad cultural sense.

The assertions of place and engagement with native materials are consistent with the American delight in the bounty of the land. Expansiveness is a quality inherent to a nation whose eager boundaries crossed mountains, rivers, prairies, canyons, and deserts.

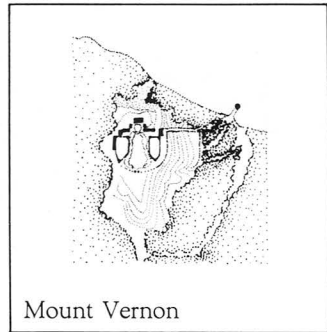
The presence of the working land prevails. Vanderbilt asked Olmsted to eliminate that sense from Biltmore. Yet, even at Biltmore and later, the highly or-

namented Vizcaya, the central axis still recalls the heritage of geography — that of the working land, producing timber, crops, and sustaining livestock and wildlife — as it opens to the larger landscape that sustains the villa and garden.

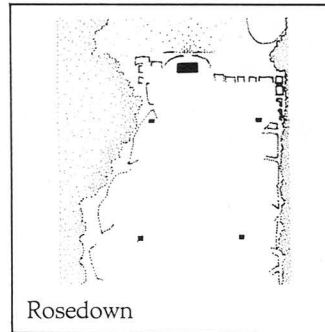
It is also important to examine the tradition of the American villa, in relation to the evolution of the suburb. There have been only two distinct suburban models, the wilderness and the city. Gardens offer a third type that already unifies the opposite forces of suburban generation.



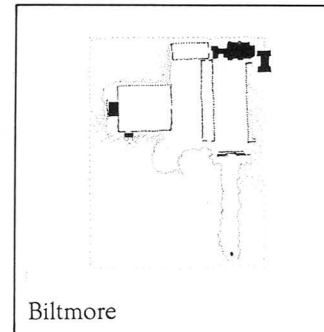
Middleton Place



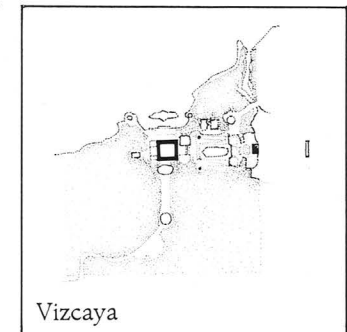
Mount Vernon



Rosedown

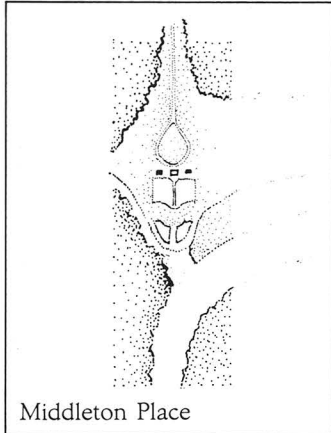


Biltmore

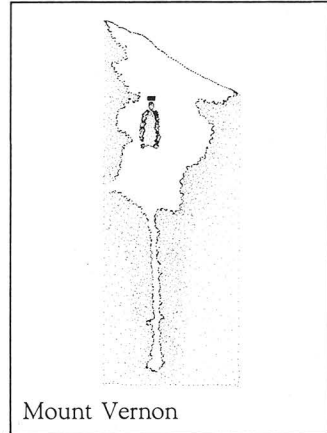


Vizcaya

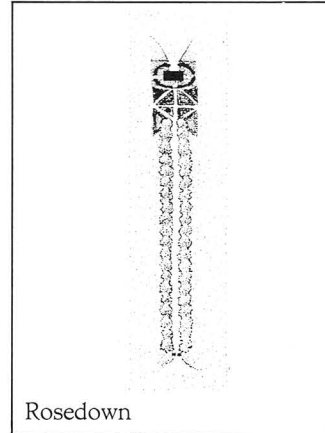
Concentric demarcation.



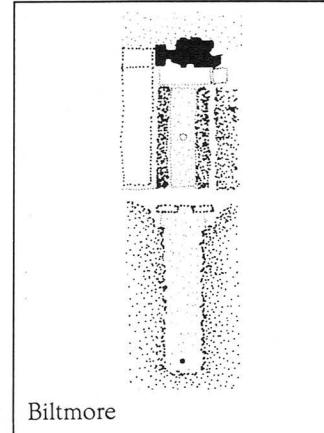
Middleton Place



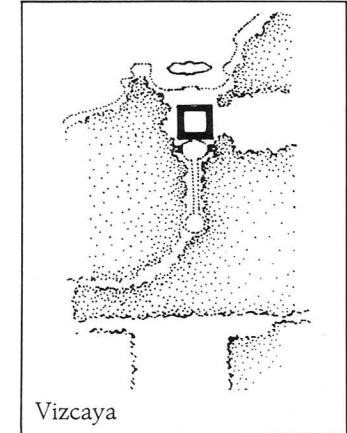
Mount Vernon



Rosedown



Biltmore

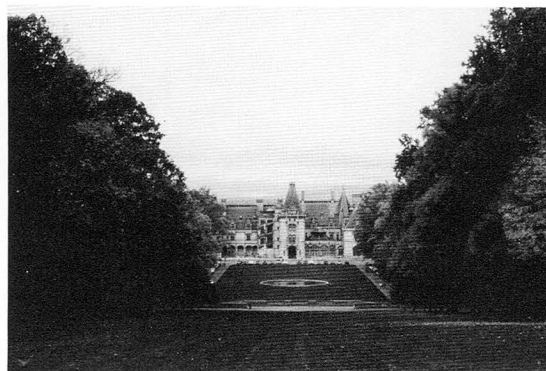


Vizcaya

Central geographic axes.



Rosedown.



Biltmore.



Vizcaya.

In a more general way, gardens as design models clearly illustrate concept. Without the intervention of structure and daily use, strategy and execution are one. Therefore, as both a design exercise and as a method to study formal organizations, gardens offer a potent theoretical tool.

Terry Comito in *The Idea of the Garden in the Renaissance*, comments that "... if the dream of Eden can be used to justify a longing to escape from the world, it can also embody aspirations toward the discovery of a world."¹⁶ The study of

American gardens elucidates the relationship between aspiration and expression, recollection and the present, the fantastical world and the realm of daily life. The gardens offer an opportunity to understand and enhance architecture — because they illuminate the fusion of form, culture and place.

NOTES

1. David Coffink, *The Villa in the Life of the Renaissance Rome*, (Princeton: Princeton Univ. Press, 1979), p. 358.
2. *Ibid.*, p. 327.
3. *Ibid.*, p. 359.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
5. James Ackerman, *Palladio: The Architect and Society*, (1966; rpt. New York: Penguin Books, 1979), p. 54.
6. Kenneth Woodbridge, *The Stourhead Landscape* (Great Britain: The National Trust, 1982) p. 6.
7. *Middleton Place* (Charleston: Middleton Place Foundation, 1975), p. 5.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 26.
9. Elizabeth Kellan de Forest, *The Gardens and Grounds at Mount Vernon*. (Mount Vernon: The

- Mount Vernon Ladies' Assoc. of the Union, 1982), p. 12.
10. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
11. Ola Mae Word, *Reflections of Rosedown* (St. Francisville: Rosedown Plantation, 1970), p. 16.
12. Susanne Brendel-Pandich, "Biltmore in Asheville, North Carolina," *Antiques*, April 1980, p. 857.
13. Carl Alwin Schenk, *Birth of Forestry in America*, 2nd ed. David Butler (Santa Cruz: Forest History Society, 1974), p. 45.
14. G.W. Vanderbilt, Letter to F.L. Olmsted (Washington: Library of Congress, 1977), Container #43, reel 38.
15. *Ibid.*
16. Doris Bayley Littlefield, *Vizcaya* (Italy: Martori Enterprises, 1983), p.8.