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THE VILLA

Form and Ideology of Country Houses

With 213 illustrations, including 71 drawings

THAMES AND HUDSON

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1 · The Typology of the Villa

A villa is a building in the country designed for its owner's enjoyment and relaxation. Though it may also be the center of an agricultural enterprise, the pleasure factor is what essentially distinguishes the villa residence from the farmhouse and the villa estate from the farm.\(^1\) The farmhouse tends to be simple in structure and to conserve ancient forms that do not require the intervention of a designer. The villa is typically the product of an architect's imagination and asserts its modernity.

The basic program of the villa has remained unchanged for more than two thousand years since it was first fixed by the patricians of ancient Rome. This makes the villa unique: other architectural types—the palace, the place of worship, the factory—have changed in form and purpose as the role of the ruler, the character of the liturgy, the nature of manufacture have changed, frequently and often radically. But the villa has remained substantially the same because it fills a need that never alters, a need which, because it is not material but psychological and ideological, is not subject to the influences of evolving societies and technologies. The villa accommodates a fantasy which is impervious to reality.

The villa cannot be understood apart from the city; it exists not to fulfill autonomous functions but to provide a counterbalance to urban values and accommodations, and its economic situation is that of a satellite. (The relationship is vividly evoked in a Roman relief which shows a walled town with a villa outside its walls [\textit{i.r.}].) The villa can be built and supported either by monetary surpluses generated by urban commerce and industry or, when it is sustained by agriculture, by the need of urban centers for the surplus it produces beyond its own requirements. Consequently the fate of the villa has been intimately tied to that of the city: villa culture has thrived in the periods of metropolitan growth (as in ancient Rome, eighteenth- and nineteenth-century Britain, and the twentieth century throughout the West) and has declined with urban decline—indeed, to the point of extinction, as urban life withered in the Dark Ages from the fifth to the eleventh century in the West. But for two periods in Western history this generalization is invalid: at the apogee of the republican city-state in classical Greece and in the communes of central Europe and Italy between 1000 and 1400. Perhaps at a time of communal idealism the wealthy felt no need for an escape from the city, or perhaps life in the country was still too rugged and unsafe for anyone not raised in its rigors.

As satellites, villas have not always been near to the cities on which they depended: colonial agricultural centers such as those in Gaul, Britain and Africa in Roman times and in the southern United States in pre-revolutionary times were settled in areas
almost devoid of urban development and became in themselves industrial and cultural centers, importing the values of urban culture, and often large in scale. Their dependence on the institution of slavery was essential to the economy in both these cases, partly perhaps because the prospect of isolation and dependence did not attract sufficient free labor and partly because slaves cost less and were easier to discipline.

While the acquisition of a villa has generally been possible only for persons of wealth and usually of prestige and power (or at least until the democratization of the type in the nineteenth century), it is nevertheless a bourgeois concept in the strict sense of the word (see p. 63), responding to the perceived needs of the city dweller. The villas of kings and princes, built and supported by public wealth, are essentially hybrids, being rooted in bourgeois attitudes but, by virtue of often unlimited economic means and the symbolic and representational requirements of supreme power, demanding a scale and an elegance in some degree antithetical to the concept. The villa of the Emperor Hadrian at Tivoli is the most notable example.

The ideology of the villa

Today as in the past the farmer and the peasant, whether poor and oppressed or rich and independent, do not as a rule regard country life as an idyllic state, but accept it as a necessary and often somewhat antipathetic condition. In the folklore of all ages, the country dweller, with some misgivings, has longed for the stimulation and comforts of city life. The city dweller, on the other hand, has typically idealized country life and, when means were available, has sought to acquire a property in which it might be enjoyed. This impulse is generated by psychological rather than utilitarian needs; it is quintessentially ideological. I do not use “ideology” in the current colloquial sense to designate a strongly held conviction, but rather in the sense of a concept or a myth so firmly rooted in the unconscious that all who hold it affirm it as an incontrovertible truth: a concept which Marxists interpret as the means by which the dominant class reinforces and justifies the social and economic structure and its privileged position within it while obscuring its motivation from itself and others. The villa is in these terms a paradigm not only of architecture but of ideology; it is a myth or fantasy through which over the course of millennia persons whose position of privilege is rooted in urban commerce and industry have been able to expropriate rural land, often requiring, for the realization of the myth, the care of a laboring class or of slaves.

Because literature is a primary depository of ideological myth, the ideology of the villa in every epoch is richly illustrated in poetry and prose. Indeed, literary works have not merely reflected the villa culture of their time but have promoted villa concepts of later times.

Major revivals of the villa from that of the fifteenth century in Italy to Le Corbusier have been explicitly justified by reference to the Roman writers of the late Republic and early Empire—Cato, Varro, Virgil, Horace, Pliny the Younger, Vitruvius and others. Each villa revival has been accompanied by a revival of villa literature: in the fifteenth century that of Poliziano and Bembo; in eighteenth-century England, that of Shaftesbury, James Thomson, Pope and ultimately the early novel (the writings of Jane Austen seem obsessed with the property and status problems of urban-oriented country
1.2 Paolo Veronese, fresco of a pleasure villa, in Palladio’s Villa Barbaro, Maser, 1560–61 (see pp. 102–03)
life); in nineteenth-century America, that of the Transcendentalists, Henry James and Edith Wharton. These and other vital moments in villa history were also marked by literature devoted to the design and improvement of villas and their gardens—an equally rich source for the interpretation of the myth. The villa descriptions by ancient writers were too vague to help in visualizing the appearance of the buildings, so Renaissance treatise-writers (Palladio especially) had to be especially inventive as they sought to revive the type. The publication of villa books in England from the early eighteenth to the mid-nineteenth century was an industry in itself, and there were those for whom it was a primary vocation. In America, from the time of The Horticulturist in the 1830s to Sunset Magazine, House and Garden and House Beautiful in the mid-twentieth century, instruction in the creation and nurture of the suburban villa and garden has attracted a large public.

Painting as well as literature bolsters the ideology: in Pompeian and other Campanian villas the walls were often decorated with ideal garden and villa scenes; it is chiefly from this source that we know of the appearance of the seaside pleasure residences of the type called villa marittima. In late medieval country castles, tapestries and wall paintings depicted the delights of country life, anticipating the scenes of social gatherings, music parties and outings on the walls of Palladian villas [1.2]. Eighteenth-century England pioneered a new genre of painting, the portrait of the country house, the popularity of which was stimulated by the visit of the distinguished Venetian topographical painter Canaletto [1.3]. Turner got his start as a specialist in this genre which, though it admittedly gave prominence to the great country houses of the landed aristocracy, must have promoted bourgeois idealization of country life. Seventeenth-century classical landscape painting, particularly that of Claude Lorrain, rose to prominence in the eighteenth century and fostered the aesthetic of the informal English garden, and then of the “picturesque” in gardening and architecture. At the end of the century the first romantic villa designers actually took the imaginary buildings of the Roman Campagna in paintings by Claude as architectural models. The more modest ambitions of the mid-nineteenth-century suburban villa are reflected in early Impressionist painting, especially that of Monet. In all these cases country life is presented in the most favorable possible light.

The content of villa ideology is rooted in the contrast of country and city, in that the virtues and delights of the one are presented as the antitheses of the vices and excesses of the other. The expression is fully articulated in the literature of ancient Rome, where it evolves from an early proto-villa stage in the agricultural treatises of Cato and Varro into the typical mature form of Pliny the Younger’s two letters describing to a friend the pleasures of two of his numerous luxurious estates, one, Laurentinium, on the seashore not very far from Rome, and the other, Tusci, in the Apennines in southern Tuscany (see the next chapter, pp. 52ff.). The early stage, related to Stoicism in its ascetic and moral tone, advises the urban man of affairs to acquire a modest farmhouse on a small country property and to cultivate it himself with little or no help; the labor itself is seen as purifying him of the contamination of the city. A similar pattern of evolution is repeated in later times—in the provincial villa culture of Imperial Rome, in the transition from the simple and almost undorned country residences of the fifteenth century in the Veneto to the elegance of Palladian villas, and in the metamorphosis
traceable in Thomas Jefferson’s concept of his farm at Monticello from the modest structure of the 1770s (itself surely influenced by the early Roman writers) to the lavish estate of the early nineteenth century [1.26].

In describing the sumptuous Tusci, Pliny set the tone for later writers; his letter (Epistles, V. vi. 45) concludes with an encomium that clearly delineates the rural–urban antithesis:

For besides the attractions which I have mentioned the greatest is the relaxation and carefree luxury of the place—there is no need for a toga, the neighbors do not come to call, it is always quiet and peaceful—advantages as great as the healthful situation and limpid air. I always feel energetic and fit for anything at my Tuscan villa, both mentally and physically. I exercise my mind by study, my body by hunting. My household too flourishes better here than elsewhere: I have never lost a retainer [slave?], none of those I brought up with me.

Sixteen hundred years later Palladio describes the same benefits from the architect’s perspective:

But the villa mansion is of no less utility and comfort [than the city house] since the rest of the time [the gentleman] passes there overseeing his possessions and in improving their potential with industry and with the skill of agriculture. There also, by means of the exercise that one can get in the villa on foot or horseback, the body may more actively be made to preserve its health and robustness, and there the spirit tired of the turmoil of the city may be greatly
restored and consoled and may peacefully attend to the pursuit of letters and of contemplation. For this reason, the ancient sages used often to retire to such places, where they might be visited by their virtuous friends and relatives and where there were houses, gardens, fountains and similar relaxing places, and above all [lacuna] their Virtù, so that they could easily pursue that blessed life so far as it may be achieved here below.

And Le Corbusier, referring to a commission of the late 1920s, stresses the importance—mentioned by the preceding authors, but not in these lines—of the landscape setting:

The inhabitants, who have come here because this rural countryside was beautiful with its country life, will contemplate it from the height of their terrace garden or from the four aspects of their strip windows. Their domestic life will be inserted into a Virgilian dream.

The same repertory of the benefits of villa life echoes down the centuries: the practical advantages of farming, the healthfulness provided by the air and exercise—particularly hunting—relaxation in reading, conversation with virtuous friends and contemplation, and delightful views of the landscape.

Social and economic aspects

Le Corbusier’s reference to his client’s “domain” reminds us that the villa is necessarily the possession of the privileged and powerful class in society, though at certain times in history, as in the mid-nineteenth century, the privilege has filtered down to those of modest financial means. The social structure of most of the villas we are considering involves the proprietor and his guests on one stratum, servants on another, and, in the case of agricultural establishments, farm laborers, often supervised by bailiffs, on still another. For most of Western history the latter, whether free or enslaved, have been bound for their subsistence to the proprietor and to his estate and could not break the bond without great risk. He, however, had no reciprocal obligation toward his retainers. In this respect the farm villa differs fundamentally from the feudal castle, where the relation between the lord and his retainers was contractual and reciprocal; they provided goods and services—including military service—and he provided protection against common enemies. Long after the feudal system had been forced into the background by a money economy and by urban capitalism, the landed nobility resisted abandoning their country castles in favor of villas; this class had no reason to develop a villa ideology until the time came when it became economically dependent on the city.

So, in those areas of the postmedieval Western world in which the feudal system was most firmly established, a villa culture was slow to develop. The situation is clearly delineated in France, where the format of country life for the privileged classes derived from the feudal château. The social character of the château did not change substantially as the monarchy gained in power, drawing the aristocracy into a dependent position at the court, where competition for royal favor made rustic retirement a risky option. Furthermore, the prestige of the aristocracy in France was such that, well into the nineteenth century, bourgeois proprietors modeled their country residences on the aristocrat’s château. Viollet-le-Duc’s designs for country residences are called “châteaux” while César Daly’s, for a lower social stratum, are called “villas.”
Economically, as we have seen, there are two categories of villa: one is the self-sustaining agricultural estate that yields not only produce for its own use but a surplus for sale to urban or regional markets sufficient to sustain the proprietor’s desired mode of life. The other is the villa described by Leone Battista Alberti as “per semplice diletto,” conceived primarily as a retreat (though some cultivation may be pursued as part of the diletto), and dependent for its construction and maintenance on surplus capital normally earned in urban centers. The ideology that extolls the country and scorns the city is thus in part a paradoxical response to the dependence of the villa style of country life on the economic resources of the city.

The villa frequently appears in a colonial context, where a powerful empire controls distant territories from whose produce it gains sufficient profit to offset the expense and burden of providing defense and communications. Colonial villas tend to differ in type and scale from those in the homeland: being isolated, they must function as social and administrative units in themselves, often serving as substitutes for towns. Their economy is typically dependent on the production of their estate. The grander villas on the periphery of the Roman Empire—in Gaul, Pannonia, Africa, and elsewhere—mostly built from the second to the fifth century, were more complex establishments than those on the Italian peninsula; some, like the villa at Anthée near Namur in Belgium [1.4] were effectively small villages, containing community baths. The American colonics of the southern Atlantic seaboard were, like Rome’s, virtually townless, so that the estates had to accommodate all the communal functions; many included dependent settlements, like their Roman ancestors. Too few of the dwellings and workshops of slaves and freedmen have survived to permit a credible reconstruction of these settlements.

In the course of time, colonial villas in un–urbanized territories often spawned towns, reversing the normal dependence of the villa on the city. The far-flung Imperial villas—settlements of Rome and the American plantation centers had been sited originally in places adapted to communication, transport and, in the case of the Roman examples, defense. As urbanization increased, these considerations encouraged the growth of towns, as we are reminded in the etymological linking of “villa,” “village” and the French “ville.” These were not the great metropolitan centers that grew up as
administrative headquarters but more modest market towns. In the southern United States the domestic architecture of these towns retained some of the openness and rural flavor of the villa/plantation residence.

Southern plantation mansions themselves were not designed to express autonomy from the mother country; on the contrary, their owners wanted to affirm in them their close ties to Britain, and had their carpenters build from plans in books recently published in London. This explains the Palladian porch added to the facade of Drayton Hall near Charleston, South Carolina [155], which was to have had symmetrically placed outbuildings connected to the central block by Palladian quadrants. The fact that plantation owners had to subdue the wilderness of a new land at great physical and financial risk cemented their attachment to the country life and architectural tastes of the British squire. The absence of a comparable villa development in the north Atlantic colonies is attributable initially to the different social and political origins of the colonists, the majority of whom, refugees from church and class domination, had not attained positions of privilege and status in Britain upon which they could reflect with nostalgia. They had chosen, furthermore, an area more adapted to family farming on small freehold properties, and they had established a society in which there were no slaves, peasants or serfs to support a gentleman farmer or to maintain a pleasure-villa. The contrast between the northern colonial farmer and the southern plantation owner was even greater than that between Cato and Pliny the Younger in Roman times. Cato was a statesman who farmed for ideological and philosophical reasons, while his American counterpart farmed to survive, with a certain Catoian (and Protestant) pride in successful crops and in the sweat they represented, but without those mythic trappings that find expression in the literature, art and architectural symbolism of a true
ideology. Eventually, the polarity in both the Roman and the American social and ethical attitudes became the seed of civil war.

The most radical mutation in the history of the villa occurred in the early nineteenth century when the villa ideology became democratized and accessible to the growing body of lower-middle-class city dwellers. The causes were complex: they included the rapid growth of central cities at the expense of the countryside; industrialization; steamboat, rail and trolley transportation; the effects of eighteenth-century egalitarian social philosophy; and romanticism. The development was anticipated in British villa literature of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth century (most effectively by Loudon in Great Britain and by Alexander Jackson Davis and Andrew Jackson Downing in the United States), which first provided model plans for small and inexpensive country houses accompanied by texts promoting those elements of the traditional mythology that suited proprietors below the rank of gentleman [1.6; 9.9; 10.13]. Once the villa had been presented in this way as a commodity, it was a short step to its manufacture by entrepreneurs for the open market, and another short step to its mass production on the periphery of great cities and ultimately even of smaller ones. The garden-city movement of the later nineteenth century appropriated as much as possible of villa ideology into its blurred vision of urban and rural values. Ultimately, the term "villa" came to be applied to any detached or semi-detached residence, whether in
the city, suburb or country, with a little more open space around it than dwellings in the densely populated streets of the urban core. This development, however, did not affect the evolution of the villa in its traditional sense except perhaps in helping to disparage the use of the word "villa" to designate the type. Nineteenth-century country houses in the villa tradition, such as those of Scott, Richardson, Viollet-le-Duc, Voysey and others, were not called villas, and in the present century Le Corbusier was exceptional in his revival of the designation.

Style and form

The distinction between the farmhouse and the villa is not simply one of purpose and of program: it is rooted in different cultures and in different rates of evolution. Just as agricultural practices change more slowly than those of industry and commerce, so the farmhouse changes more slowly than the villa. French historians of the Annales school have called this phenomenon of gradualism the longue durée, and have opened new historical possibilities in studying its processes. Farmhouses in many parts of Europe today retain forms that have remained unchanged for millennia (though they are rapidly being replaced by contractors' villas and will soon be threatened with total extinction). The debased economic and social position of the peasant, the contadino, and the sharecropper have kept them until recent times from altering their agricultural methods or the physical setting in which they lived and worked, but even on the rare occasions when they became wealthy and worldly their sense of propriety and pride of class led them to retain traditional forms.

The villa is quite the opposite: it rarely displays an effort on the part of the proprietor or the architect to conform to past custom (as do most of the early villas of the Medici [3.3–5]); more typically, it strains to be the paradigm of the most up-to-date architectural style (as in the Medici's Fiesole villa [3.12–14]). The rule is illustrated in all of the following chapters and most decisively by the celebrated milestones of modern architecture: the Ames Gate Lodge at North Easton, Massachusetts [1.24], the Coonley house at Riverside, Illinois [11.3–6], the Villa Savoye at Poissy [1.7; 11.16–18], and the suburban retreats of contemporary designers such as Peter Eisenman [1.8], Mario Botta and Robert Venturi. Even though the Renaissance architects sought to revive antique villas and British eighteenth-century villa architects were fanatic Palladians, in both cases the revival was a progressive statement that explicitly rejected a prevailing style. There is hardly a moment in the history of architecture when villas were less innovative than other architectural types. Urban residences sometimes have kept abreast of villas, but generally follow a more conservative tradition, even in cases where urban and rural residences were designed by the same architect and/or for the same patron. This generally is consistent with the proprietor's fashions of dress in the city as opposed to the country.

The villa is less fixed in form than most other architectural types because the requirements of leisure lack clear definition. But two contrasting models were firmly established in Roman times: the compact-cubic and the open-extended [1.9, 21]. The former was better suited to crowded suburbs like Pompeii where the line between the city house and the villa was, as in the residences of Le Corbusier or Eisenman [1.7, 8],
1.7 Villa Savoye, Poissy, by Le Corbusier, 1928–30

1.8 Falk House, Hardwick, Vt, by Peter Eisenman, 1970
not firmly drawn, and to the initial settlements on the periphery of the Empire where considerations of defense demanded consolidation. The compact Pompeian form, as in the Villa of the Mysteries just outside the city walls [1.9; 2.7], is due also to the fact that the villa had not yet gained its independence from urban models by the first century BC; the vagueness of the contemporary writer Vitruvius in describing villas (his main point is that the order of rooms at the entrance differs from that of the city houses) confirms this suspicion. The compact villa, when it faced a farmyard or a view, tended to acquire a loggia along its facade, typically framed in Roman examples between two projecting blocks or towers. This type reappears in the small early Renaissance villa like the Belvedere of Innocent VIII at the Vatican or the Farnesina in Rome [1.10, 20C]. Tropical forest conditions produced a variant of the cubic type in the plantation houses of seventeenth-century Brazil and the eighteenth-century Caribbean, a veranda-surrounded block that seems not to have been exported from Europe; it found its way into the plantation-house design of the early nineteenth-century Mississippi valley, as at Home Place in Louisiana [1.11].

The open villa is more congenial to the identification of the natural environment with health and relaxation. It expands informally in extended asymmetrical blocks and porticoes and in the varied profiles of changing levels, and often grows like an organism as the wealthy proprietor is tempted to extend the initial structure by adding rooms, courts and porticoes, as Pliny must have done, and Jefferson (who in the course of forty years never ceased to alter the shape of Monticello), and Wright at the Taliesins [1.12].
10 (upper) Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii, 2nd-1st C. B.C.; reconstruction

11 Villa Farnesina, Rome, by Baldassare Peruzzi, 1500-11. Drawing, 16th C.

111 Home Place, La., 1801

112 (below) Taliesin, Spring Green, Wis., by Frank Lloyd Wright, begun 1911
To fulfill its ideological mission the villa must interact in some way with trees, rocks and fields, and the two major types I have defined are roughly coordinated with two types of interaction: the compact-cubic villa is often a foil to the natural environment, standing off from it in polar opposition, and the open-extended type is integrative, imitating natural forms in the irregularity of its layout and profile, embracing the ground, assuming natural colors and textures.

A paradigm of the first is Lorenzo de' Medici's villa at Poggio a Caiano outside Florence \[1.4.3\,3.18\], which is inscribed within a cube, faced with white stucco to emphasize its total polarity to the irrationality of foliage and rolling hills, and, to underscore this message, raised on a high podium to ensure that the contact of the residents with nature should not be intimate but removed and in perspective.\footnote{Palladio followed this tradition in the design of an early villa, that of the Godi family in Loniedo \[1.1.2\,4.9\], which is also sharply geometrical in form, avoiding even window-frames or mouldings; there is no podium but the entrance stairway leads to the upper floor. (Later Palladian works are more engaged with nature— even the entirely cubic Villa Rotonda in Vicenza \[4.18\], which is designed to reflect the varied views and which seems to crown the hill on which it is placed.) The effort to respond to nature by antithesis explains the apparently paradoxical appearance of the sharply geometrical and classical Palladian style in early eighteenth-century Britain (e.g., at Lord Burlington's villa at Chiswick \[6.3\,4\]) in tandem with the invention of the informal English garden. The white}
1.13 Villa Godi, Loneda, by Andrea Palladio, 1537–42

1.14 (below) Villa Medici, Poggio a Caiano, by Lorenzo de' Medici and Giuliano da Sangallo, 1485 on. Painting by Giusto Utens, 1598–99
Renaissance designers would have been disappointed and disoriented had they discovered that most Roman villas weren’t classical. The normal ancient examples (none of which could be reconstructed before the discovery of Herculaneum and Pompeii) lacked the axial symmetry, rational integration and proportion that supported their conception of the heritage of antiquity \([r.15]\). Even the villas described by Pliny, which to us seem patently sprawling and irregular, were visualized in the eighteenth century as rigidly symmetrical and rational. Whether Roman villas, like many in later times, expressed their communion with nature by a richness of color and of texture is hard to tell even today because of the condition of the remains. In any event, Renaissance architects, from Giuliano da Sangallo through Bramante, Raphael and Palladio, did give the villa and garden a classical form by imposing a rule of order, number and symmetry that fixed the type up to the moment of naturalist disruption in the eighteenth century (Sebastiano Serlio, in his manuscript for a book on villas and palaces, even classicized the peasant’s hut). This achievement greatly narrowed the distance between the two Roman types by pulling the extending arms and wings of the open villa in symmetrical order about a central block, as in the porticoed villas of Palladio.

The triumph of nature over architectural form was ultimately achieved in eighteenth-century England, where the fashion of the picturesque emerged (see Chapters 7 and 9). The desire to make the real environment look like pictures was stimulated by the landscape paintings of Nicolas Poussin, Claude Lorrain, Jacob van Ruysdael and others, in which the architecture, while frequently geometric in its forms, was designed to be seen as part of the landscape and to respond to it in mood \([7.2]\). Authors of books on architecture and landscape design such as Richard Payne Knight \([9.7]\), Uvedale Price and their heir Humphrey Repton urged clients to build villas that borrowed from the landscape something of its irregularity, its contrasts of light and its shadows and textures. The asymmetries of Gothic proved sympathetic to this aim, and the “Italian villa” style \([9.7, 8]\) abruptly emerged, not from any actual models in Italy, but from the canvases of the French and British painters who had worked there. From this point on, a picturesque, nature-integrating spirit dominates the naturalist lineage of villa architecture—from the publicists Repton, Loudon and Downing to Philip Webb’s Red House, Shaw and Richardson, Lutyens, Aalto, Wright, the Greenes, and Maybeck to Moore.

The view

In reflecting on the ways in which villas respond to the landscape one must remember to look not only at them but out from them. The choice of prospect is almost as subject to myth and the rule of taste as the choice of design. I say “almost” because the villa builder is limited in the choice of land formation and flora by the nature of the territory in which he intends to settle and by the property available to him. In the environs of Tivoli, east of Rome, there are examples of three genres of villa sating. Hadrian’s vast villa \([2.9]\) extends over a low-lying escarpment at the base of the hills that rise out of the wooded Campagna, barely above the level of the plain; it is a nestling villa, in the lap of the hills, with views just over the treetops. The villa of Quintilius Varus and the Renaissance Villa d’Este are perched high on the slopes—not on the very peaks but high enough to gain a
vast panorama of the countryside and distant mountains: a view toward the former from the terrace of the latter [1.18] shows both to be commanding, extroverted villas (the famed gardens of the Villa d'Este, incidentally, are barely visible from the villa itself: they drop sharply away, and attention is drawn only to the distant panorama). By contrast, Horace's "Sabine Farm" is back within the mountains on an extraordinary site suited to a poet [1.19]: a saddle, only large enough to hold a small cubic structure, deeply embedded between two sharply rising hills, with a valley on one side of the cross axis and conical peaks on the other, atop one of which a village seems almost to cling (the existing
one is believed to occupy the site of a Roman predecessor). Surely each of these four structures was designed for what could be seen from them as much as what was to be done in them.

The villa view that in one sense most fully illustrates the urban roots of the villa myth is the one that looks back on the city from a high and distant promontory outside its walls. Such villas once dotted the slopes of Mount Vesuvius when Pompeii flourished, and Cosimo de' Medici built his Fiesole villa on a manmade terrace so that he could enjoy in leisure hours visual command of Florence, the city he controlled politically [3.13, 14].

The influence of the visual prospect upon the conception of the villa was intensified in eighteenth-century England where the vogue for the informal garden was extended to embrace the entire agricultural landscape. This was achieved by removing walls, hedges and fences so that the lawn and planted trees merged imperceptibly into pasture and boscage. The innovation was not due entirely to a change of taste, as its promoters believed, but also to a radical change in agricultural economy and society. The Acts of Enclosure led to the elimination of ancient common pastures and peasant tillage as well as many villages on the great estates. They concentrated development of the entire landscape in the hands of the major landowners. Extended fields with cattle and haystacks now could become embellishments of a pastoral elegy [7.12].

Survival or revival?

Renaissance villa architects, intent as they were on reviving the ancient villas, did not know of any models on which to base their designs, and were forced to depend entirely on the meagre literary sources. Of these, Vitruvius was of almost no help, and Pliny's
descriptions, though ample, were useful only for projects of great lavishness, such as Raphael's design for the Villa Madama in Rome (about which he wrote a letter filled with Plinian phrases). In spite of this, archaeologists today continue to unearth Roman villas that anticipated Renaissance and later types. Since a revival of these ancient forms cannot have occurred, they must somehow or other have survived over the intervening centuries through links that have mostly vanished. The persistence of the compact-cubic type may not be especially significant since within the rationalist orientation of Mediterranean culture it is one self-evident architectural solution to the problem of designing a freestanding structure. The U-shaped villa with projecting blocks framing a central loggia, however, is specific enough in form to arouse curiosity about how it traveled from the late Roman Empire to the fifteenth century and beyond. Whatever the answer, it is likely to be more in the realm of folkways than of architectural style. In a characteristic Roman provincial example, at Mayen in German Gaul [1.20A], the loggia with extended wings was added in the fourth century to an earlier block. The type was preserved in a sixth-century villa of Theodoric in Galeata [1.20B], not far from Ravenna, and emerges again in the typical Venetian-Byzantine palace, whence it passes back into a type of early Renaissance villa that achieves a refined form in Baldassare Peruzzi's Villa Farnesina in Rome [1.19, 20C]. Another villa, only recently excavated at Montmaurin in the French part of Gaul [1.21], anticipated the entranceway flanked with two quadrants of a circle in a style invented again by Palladio for such projects as the Villa Badoer at Fratta Polesine [1.22], which passed from there into innumerable houses and villas in Europe and America.
The villa as sign

The villa inevitably expresses the mythology that causes it to be built: the attraction to nature, whether stated in engagement or in cool distance, the dialectic of nature and culture or artifice, the prerogatives of privilege and/or power, and national, regional or class pride. The signifiers range from the siting and form of the building as a whole to individual details and characteristics. Since signs and symbols convey meaning only to those who know what they signify, they are usually chosen from past architectural usage or occasionally are imported from other types of construction, like the ship-railings of Le Corbusier [11.18].

Intimate engagement with nature is signified by a site and design that permit the villa to nestle and to extend out into its surroundings, by asymmetrical and open design, colors reflecting the setting, and natural and varied textures. Distancing from the setting, on the other hand, is signified by a compact form, cubic in outline, often with a podium or similar device to elevate the living quarters off the earth, studied proportions, and emphasis on plane surfaces of white or of a light color which disguise the nature of the materials. Ambiguity toward these two poles can also be expressed, as in Frank Lloyd Wright’s Kaufmann house in Bear Run [11.23; 11.22–24], which poses a dialog between the nature-affirming effects of fieldstone hearth, chimneys and floors laid in irregular slabs linking the interior and exterior, and the contrasting smoothness of the

1.23 Kaufmann house, Fallingwater, Bear Run, Pa., by Frank Lloyd Wright, 1936
carefully formed cement balconies, which Wright wanted to paint gold. Claude Nicolas Ledoux's Hôtel Thélusson in suburban Paris was a classical jewel entered through a menacing imitation cave.

The dialectic of nature and artifice is expressed in the paradoxical imitation of natural forms by manmade elements. Rustication, adopted from a small number of Roman buildings of the first century, was a Renaissance device that aimed to give building blocks the appearance of "living" stone as distinct from the ashlar masonry of finely finished surfaces. While late medieval and early Renaissance rustication implied a military and public function, the symbolism evolved in the sixteenth century to conform with the rustic implications of the term, and rustic gates, walls and portals, often with the rusticity created in terracotta, were increasingly used for villas. Sebastiano Serlio, taking up the idea from Giulio Romano, made much of combining rustic and smooth treatments as a way of dramatizing the antithesis of the natural and the artificial [1.28].

The fountain-grotto of villa gardens was a companion motif, in which irregular natural phenomena such as stalactites were reproduced in a variety of plastic materials to which natural objects such as shells and fossils were added. H.H. Richardson used rustication of a vigorous new kind, not intending particularly to refer to the Renaissance, most vividly in the Ames Gate Lodge [1.24] and the Payne House in Waltham, Massachusetts. He was also one of many proponents of shingles as a nature-invoking surface.
The expression of power and class aspiration is evident in the first villas of the Renaissance, which took over the vocabulary of the medieval feudal castle—towers, irregular blocks, battlements and crenellations—such as the Medici villa at Cafaggiolo [1.25: 3.6]. Even a villa as modern as Lorenzo de’ Medici’s Poggio a Caiano [1.14] was given a walled enceinte with four corner towers decades after its completion, and the equally avant-garde early sixteenth-century Villa Giustinian at Roncade, near Venice, was given a moat and drawbridge [3.23]. Castle-villas returned to favor in the eighteenth century in the work of Vanbrugh and in the early Scottish designs of Robert Adam. While the adoption of Georgian architectural symbols in southern plantation houses affirmed the link of the colonists with their homeland, Jefferson’s taste for Republican Roman and Palladian references was intended to express Republicanism against aristocratic ideals [1.26]. In nineteenth-century Newport, Rhode Island, the villas of the excessively rich again assumed aristocratic, even regal pretensions.

Regionalism permeates the symbolism of the Florentine villas of the Medici dukedom in the sixteenth century, the British villas of Scott, Voysey and Lutyens, and more recently those of the California school.

Palladio was extraordinarily prolific in devising and combining villa-messages. While his geometric and axial forms and white surfaces express a sophisticated contrast to the organic world, the composition often reaches out into the surroundings [4.10, 1.3]. While his domes and temple-front facades imply the patron’s exalted social status by suggesting classical learning and religious tradition, he could join them to common
1.26 Monticello, Charlottesville, Va., by Thomas Jefferson, begun 1768; garden (west) front

1.27 Villa Emo, Fanzolo, by Andrea Palladio, c. 1564
barnyard elements. At the villas Barbaro at Maser [4.10], Emo at Fanzolo [1.27], and elsewhere, he adapted the loggias flanking the templefront from barchesse, traditional agricultural sheds of the Venetian mainland, designed to store farm machinery and implements, produce and cattle. Their role in the Palladian villas was probably not fully utilitarian: the patrons would not have supported the odors and noise. Barchesse do not appear at the Villa Rotonda near Vicenza [4.18] because it is a suburban villa with no farm functions; here, Palladio tells us, he put temple fronts on all four faces of a domed cube to underscore the focal position of this hilltop site in relation to the surrounding views.

Conclusion

The villa poses a cultural paradox. If the farmhouse resists change because agriculture and farm culture evolve slowly, we might expect the villa to remain even more convention-bound: it is supremely conservative socially, being a luxury commodity available only to persons of privilege and power, and the ideology that sustains the type has changed little over millennia. Yet the mythical nature of villa ideology liberates the type from mundane restraints of utility and productivity and makes it ideally suited to the creative aspirations of patron and architect. Often this creativity has been limited to the sphere of taste, like that of fashion in apparel, which has also been motivated by an unchanging mythology since surplus wealth first offered its temptations. But the villa draws our attention because through the centuries it has articulated concepts and feelings of different cultures with respect to the dialog between city and country, artifice and nature, formality and informality. The villa gives shape to universal human concerns.
2 · The Ancient Roman Villa

At the close of his Satire on the exasperations of living in Rome (II. vi), Horace tells the tale of the country mouse and the city mouse. The former invites his urbane friend to share a meal in his simple dwelling in the woods, serving the few delicacies he has managed to save—which his fastidious guest barely nibbles—while he himself eats dessicated berries and scraps of lard. The city mouse then persuades his friend that life is too short to be spent in rustic and frugal conditions and that he should join him in returning to town. There, all is luxury, in a great house with sumptuous furnishing and a vast array of remains from a banquet of the night before. But, as the companions are lounging on their ivory couches, there is a tumultuous banging on the door and the hall is filled with terrifying hounds. The country visitor beats a hasty retreat saying that he prefers his cave and his weeds.

In the preceding lines, Horace had complained of his own life in the capital where he is jostled by the crowds, suffers from bad weather and, because of his associations with highly placed persons and even the Emperor, is assailed by petitioners, called as a witness, and subjected to trivial gossip. He dreams of his Sabine villa near Tivoli where he can relax with the books of the ancients, sleep or simply rest, forgetting mundane cares, and where he can enjoy simple and plentiful wine and food, discussing with his guests matters of substance such as the nature of good and the question of its highest form.¹ Horace’s image is not merely particular to him; almost all of the Roman writers who touch on the subject of country life depict the city in an unfavorable light.² Martial compares the constant noise and annoyances of city life, which disturbs his sleep (Epigrams, XII. 57) with the quiet of the countryside, where he has a farm; Juvenal (Satires, III. 160) compares the high cost of life in Rome, especially for the poor, with the simplicity of country life, were “no one wears a toga until he’s dead.” The toga apparently was the Roman equivalent of the suit and the necktie, and it was often referred to in this sense; Pliny the Younger, as we have seen (above, p. 13), listed among the advantages of Tusci, his villa in the Apennines, that there was no need to wear a toga there. Martial exaggeratedly claims that in Rome four togas are worn out in the summer, while one suffices for four autumns on his modest villa at Nomentum (Epig. X. xcvi.11); elsewhere he refers to “tunicata quies,” repose in an ordinary tunic (Epig. IV.lxiv.10).

Pliny the Younger was a very wealthy senator and a writer of the first century AD who owned numerous properties and two palatial villas, while Horace was a celebrated poet of the previous century, the son of a freed slave. His modest villa–farm had been the gift of his patron Maecenas. Martial (c. AD 40–c. 104), also a poet, owned a small rural
holding, evidently much more rustic than that of Horace, comparable in its own sphere to that of the country mouse. But despite the markedly different economic positions of the three, they shared a common attitude toward country life and, with a few others of their time, contributed to formulating for posterity the essential features of an ideology. Defined as an antithesis to urban life, its essential elements were the simplicity and the informality of country living, the healthfulness of the air and the opportunity for exercise (especially in hunting and fishing—though Pliny does confess to fishing from a couch), the scope for undisturbed intellectual and creative activities, leisurely conversation with friends, and the delights of contemplating the natural and cultivated landscape in different seasons and conditions.

What defines this complex of attitudes as an ideology is the fact that it can be maintained only by privileged persons whose income, whether large or small, is not dependent on the rigors and risks suffered by those full-time country dwellers who have to wrest a living from the soil and to suffer the tedium of a life in isolation. History records little evidence that farmers, peasants or slaves—who have no option but to stay put—experienced the charms of rural life depicted in the villa literature. Indeed, it was typically by the sweat of the laborer’s brow that the delights of rusticity were made available to the proprietors.

But faint echoes of this contrast transpire through the literary encomia. The rigors of winter in the stormy countryside are described by Martial (Epig. VII. xxyv), who retails, however, the greatest affection for his villa. A letter of Horace dismisses—with what today seems crude insensitivity—the grumbling of the overseer of his Sabine villa (Epistles, I. 14) who is longing for the city with its games and baths and is complaining of the heavy farm work (perennial sentiments: witness the World War I song, “How’re you gonna keep ’em down on the farm, after they’ve seen Paree?”). Columella (De re rustica, XII. Preface, 9) complains that the spoiled women of his time are bored in the country and look on a few days’ sojourn at the villa as a “sordid business.” Similarly, in later centuries, many of the attractions of country life identified in the literature have not been accessible to women.

For the large landowners, the country landscape may be clouded by the uncooperative attitude of peasants and tenants; Pliny writes from Tuscany that he has escaped there in order to be free to do as he wishes, but instead he is assailed by the complaining petitions of the peasants (Epist. IX. xv.1.3). Horace claims in the letter to his foreman that he likes to do a moderate amount of work on his farm, which was tended for practical purposes by the foreman and a moderate number of slaves. In his Epode II, which begins “Beatus ille qui procul negotiosis / ut prisca gens mortalium / paterna rura exercet...”, he focuses on the rewarding toil of the farmer and his wife and the pleasures of simple country food, probably in imitation of Cato and the agricultural writers to be cited below. The fame of this piece was rekindled by the free paraphrase of a later villa enthusiast who would not have found pleasure in wielding a hoe, Alexander Pope, in his Ode on Solitude:

Happy the man, whose wish and care
A few paternal acres bound,
Content to breathe his native air,
In his own ground.
Whose herds with milk, whose fields with bread,
Whose flocks supply him with attire,
Whose trees in summer yield him shade,
           In winter fire.
Blest! who can unconcern’dly find
Hours, days and years slide soft away,
In health of body, peace of mind,
           Quiet by day . . .

But in Horace’s poem the perspective unexpectedly shifts in the last quatrain, where it emerges that the speaker is the usurer Alfius, who, having called in all his loans to acquire a country place, puts them out shortly after and remains in his despised vocation, in town.

Otium

The negotiis (from negotium) of Horace’s first line (business, affairs, preoccupations) is the perennial antithesis of otium, the ideal condition of country life in the minds of urban Romans. Pliny, in describing the benefits of his Laurentine villa on the seashore outside Rome, exclaims (Epist. I. ix. 6): “O sweet and honorable otium, lovelier than any negotium!” (“O dulce otium honestumque ac paene omni negotio pulchrius!”). If we must find a single English word for otium it would be seclusion, or serenity, or relaxation, but the ancients thought of it rather as an opportunity to engage, often intensely, in worthwhile physical and mental pursuits. The concept was sustained in early Roman times by the teachings of the Greek philosopher Epicurus (341–270 BC), which rejected glory, military enterprise, politics, and the crowd. Epicurean themes were sustained in the first century BC by the poets Lucretius, Catullus and, as we have already seen, Horace.

Pliny the Younger gives a vivid image of the relevance of the concept to the understanding of villa life in his description of a typical summer day at his more remote villa, Tusci (Epist. IX. xxxvi). He wakes at sunrise and meditates in the dark for a time, often planning the day’s writing. Then he calls his secretary and dictates what he has composed; later, walking or sitting in the garden or portico, he returns to work, and again dictates, after which he goes for a drive in his coach, still concentrating on his writing. He continues:

Then I sleep a little more, and then walk, and then read a Greek or Latin oration aloud and with emphasis, not so much for my voice as for my stomach, though it strengthens both. Now I walk again, am oiled, exercise and bathe. Then if I am dining either with my wife or with a few friends, a book is read and after dinner a comedy is performed or the lyre is played. Again I walk a little with members of the household, a number of whom are well educated . . . . Friends come from nearby towns, sometimes bringing a welcome interruption when I am tired. I hunt a little, but not without taking my notebooks so that if I catch nothing I can still bring something home. I also devote time to my tenants—not enough from their point of view—and their boorish quibbles make our literary pursuits and urbane occupations more attractive by contrast.

Roman society was originally agricultural, however, and the conservative, libertarian spirit of the independent farmer and patriotic public servant survived in a segment of
Roman intellectuals of the late Republic and early Empire. Influenced by the Stoic tradition, they had only contempt for the Epicurean ideal and for the sort of country life it implied. They advised frugality, simple food and living accommodations and hard work. Their views are represented in the agronomical treatises and by Cicero and Pliny the Elder (uncle of the author of the *Epistles*). The major surviving agricultural texts represent three different stages and three centuries in the evolution of the Roman villa/farm: those of Marcus Porcius Cato (234–149 BC), Marcus Terentius Varro (116–27 BC) and Lucius Columella (first century AD).4

Cato, one of the distinguished statesmen of his day, wrote his short *De agric cultura* in the aftermath of the Punic Wars, when the countryside and its livestock had been wasted, rural manpower decimated and the peasant and freighthouse ruined and driven into the cities by the pillaging of the armies, the competition of slave labor and cheap produce imported from the provinces. The agricultural economy was restored by two alternatives to the operation of traditional family farms.5 One was the purchase by urban middle-class investors, like Cato, of moderate-sized farms to be worked by slaves. The other was the gathering of large properties (*latifundia*) by much richer city dwellers who had profited, often illegally, from the wars. These were ranches and plantations—made available both by the collapse of the peasantry and subsequently by confiscation of the property of those defeated in the civil strife of the first century BC—which were transferred from crop cultivation to grazing or, in the more southern areas, to wine and oil production. Plutarch (*Life of Tiberius Gracchus*, 8) refers to the country around Cosa in southern Etruria, the area of Settefinestre [2.4.5], as “poor in free men, filled instead with *barbarici* slaves used by the rich to cultivate their property, after they chased away the farmers.” That strategy was deplored by the agronomists as destined to weaken Rome by rendering it dependent for grain on provincial imports.6

Cato was deeply committed to affairs of state and to personal financial involvements, and his book addressed others like himself who sought to profit from their agricultural investment. He approaches the villa as if it were a factory for the production of certain commodities, and in his recommendations for the management of the staff of slaves he is calculating in his generosity and harsh in his administration, recommending reducing rations for slaves assigned to light work and selling those who are old or sick. He prescribes frequent supervisory visits by the proprietor, who depends on an experienced slave-foreman called the *vilicus* to carry the responsibility for the effective management of the estate.7 But his image of the villa-residence, from what may be gathered from his sketchy description of it (*De agr. XIV. iv*), provides only basic shelter and does not recommend any but the most minimal comforts. This type is commonly referred to as the *villa rustica*. Such a building is described more fully by Varro (*Rerum rusticarum*, I. xiii. 1ff.). Apart from its ample kitchen, it is designed for the convenience more of the animal than of the human occupants: evidently the proprietor is not expected to spend time there. It is placed near the manure heaps for convenience. An interlocutor in Varro’s Book III asks for clarification on the definition of a villa, pointing out that the same term is applied to the simple *villa rustica* and to the comfortable *villa urbana* (modeled on the city house) incorporated into the working farm, such as Varro’s own at Reate. Varro allows that this is true, but insists that all villas may be economically productive and that in any event the elegant modern type designed for pleasure is degenerate.
Cato's attitude toward the country appears to be wholly unsentimental but for one theme that runs through his text and those of the other agronoms, the idealization of the traditional husbandman (De agr. I. iv): "But it is from the farming class that the strongest men and sturdiest soldiers come. Their calling is held to be the most exalted, and their living the most stable; they excite the least envy and are least likely to harbor evil thoughts." Varro writes, in the introduction to his second book (Rer. rust. II. i), "It is not without reason that those great men our ancestors preferred country people to city-dwellers; for just as in the country those who live in the [luxury] villa are lazier than those who are working in the fields, so they believed those who stay in town to be more indolent than those that live in the country." Pliny the Elder writes (Naturalis Historia, XVIII. iii, 13), in his account of early Roman agriculture, "The rural tribes who possessed farms were the most highly regarded, while it was a disgrace to be transferred into a city tribe because of the disapproval of inactivity."

The opinion of these determined farmers (echoed by Jefferson, p. 206) constitutes a competing ideology to that of otium and is fused with the view that life in the country, when led by the refugee from the city, ought to be Spartan, frugal, self-denying. This ideal was a survival of an age of independent husbandmen; it already was difficult to maintain when proprietors came to be city-based. Ultimately, in the age of elegant country houses after the mid-first century AD, it became anachronistic.

Virgil and country life

Virgil wrote two works devoted to life in the country that have been admired and read for two millennia: a pastoral poem in ten episodes called the Eclogues or Bucolics, from 42 to 37 BC, and, immediately after, the Georgics, a poetic treatise on agriculture in the tradition of the agronoms. Both poems were composed within the orbit of Octavian (later the Emperor Augustus) and reflect the impact of his policies on farm management. Both idealize and mythologize country life—but in a new way that curiously fuses the opposing ideologies of the authors discussed above. Like the agronoms, Virgil represents the life and labors of the husbandman and the shepherd as the optimal and most ethical existence but, like the city-based villa owners, he represents farming as a calling free of care and unwanted distractions which offers even the farmer the opportunity for otium. In contrast to Pliny the Younger, however, Virgil's otium is the reward for hard physical labor.

The Eclogues constitute the paradigm of Arcadian literature (the term "Arcadians" appears in Ec. X. 31); shepherds and peasants or simple farmers inhabit an ideal countryside, joke with one another, or compose songs to heroes and beautiful boys and girls; mythology and legend enrich their leisurely existence. The universe of the Eclogues is idyllic and abstract. But in two of the ten poems (I and IX), the actual world enters. In the first, a dialog between Meliboeus and Tityrus, the former complains of having lost his farm by expropriation when, after the civil wars that brought Octavian and his allies into power (especially after the victory at Philippi in 42 BC), small farmers were dispossessed as land was redistributed to soldiers who had fought with Octavian. Tityrus, on the other hand, like Virgil himself, had gone to Rome and (probably through the protection of Maecenas, who was an intimate and adviser of Augustus) won the right