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Between agriculture and delight: villas, gardens and agricultural landscape in northern Italy

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The Italian landscape has very different aspects in the various regions, as result of the fragmented political and social history. However, we can recognize some common features. One of these is the simultaneous presence of leisure and productivity. The presence of well-kept gardens and agricultural land in a harmonic unity is still visible in the villas, the suburban residences built by the aristocracy and the gentry in the various regions, where new forms of cultivation and agricultural management were often experimented. Even today, in many cases, in the surroundings of villas and gardens there are still important evidences of traditional rural landscapes integrated with significant values of the main part of the complex. The villas were used not only for pleasure but also as the focus of agricultural estates. Sometimes, part of the garden had agricultural use, especially when its dimensions became larger. In other cases, the agricultural landscape was linked to the garden by path geometries, agricultural warping and water lines. The water and its regimentation merge the villa, garden and agricultural space in a single design. Unfortunately the agricultural context outside the garden is not always properly protected and well known. In many cases we risk to lose this important part of the landscape that the villa organized and managed over time.

Le paysage italien présente des aspects très différents selon les régions, en raison de la fragmentation de l’histoire politique et sociale. Cependant, nous pouvons reconnaître certaines caractéristiques communes. L’un d’eux est la présence simultanée de loisirs et de productivité. La présence de jardins bien entretenus et de terres agricoles dans une unité harmonique est encore visible dans les villas, les résidences de banlieue construites par l’aristocratie et la gentry dans les différentes régions, où de nouvelles formes de culture et de gestion agricole ont souvent été expérimentées. Même aujourd’hui, dans de nombreux cas, autour des villas et des jardins, il existe encore de nombreux témoignages de paysages ruraux traditionnels intégrés aux valeurs significatives de la partie principale du complexe. Les villas ont été utilisées non seulement pour le plaisir mais aussi comme centre d’activités agricoles. Parfois, une partie du jardin avait un usage agricole, surtout lorsque ses dimensions devenaient plus grandes. Dans d’autres cas, le paysage agricole était lié au jardin par des géométries de chemins, des déformations agricoles et des conduites d’eau. L’eau et son réglage font de la villa, du jardin et de l’espace agricole un concept unique. Malheureusement, le contexte agricole en dehors du jardin n’est pas toujours bien protégé et bien connu. Dans de nombreux cas, nous risquons de perdre cette partie importante du paysage que la villa a organisé et géré au fil du temps.
**Rural landscape and garden strictly linked: Venetian villas**

Venetian villas are the basic element of the oldest and the more extended in space and time political landscape of Renaissance (XVI century) western world, the result of the collaboration between private owners and central government who in a very difficult moment for the Republique made profitable to invest in the land and swift the main income of the State from commerce to agriculture. Andrea Palladio invented an architectural and landscape formula perfectly responding to both aesthetic and functional requirements.

The organization of the different components of the villa extends beyond the fence and draws the countryside with "stradoni", "broli", fields with hedges, hydraulic reclamation of the swamps, etc. Even now, significant portions of Venetian plantation, such as hedges of trees and shrubs used as delimitations of the fields, vines married with mulberry trees (Morus alba and nigra) and other forms of agrarian cultivation, survive in many cases next to the villas and gardens.

**Pictures:**
1. Angelo Gattolini, Estate called Brolo, 1731, Villa Emo archive. The map shows the organization of the villa, with garden, geometric paths and water lines that draws the rural landscape.
2. Napoleonic land registry (1814) with the general organization of the farm and the division of the fields (Treviso, State Archive, Censo Stabile)
3. The agricultural landscape of Andrea Palladio’s villa Emo in Fanzolo in Vedelago (Treviso - Veneto Region). The building is in the center of the estate, which is structured by means of large green alleys in the North - South direction.
4. Emo Capodilista Villa in Montecchia (Veneto Region), built upon a hill completely covered by vine cultivations and woods, with a geometric manierist garden (XVII century).

**Rural landscape and garden strictly linked: The Medici Villa of Poggio a Caiano (Florence)**

In 1477 Lorenzo de’Medici created at Poggio a Caiano, halfway between Florence and Pistoia, a farm with extremely innovative features in the rural economy of the time. The architectural complex has its fulcrum in the Cascina, a quadrilateral building surrounded by a moat. It was used as dairy farm, barn and stables.

The model is probably inspired by the great park of Galeazzo II Visconti in the castle of Pavia. Shortly before Lorenzo’s death (1492) the building of the Villa di Poggio a Caiano, designed by Giuliano da San Gallo, was begun.

The Lorraine plan (about 1835) shows the mosaic of the agricultural plots of the farm, recognizable by the green colour, and the cadastral parcels external to the Medici-Lorraine property. The comparison with an aerial photo of 1954 shows how the fabric of the fields was almost unchanged and in part still inserted in the Roman greed (centuratio).

A late-19th century photo shows the villa in the context of the agricultural landscape, with rows of trees (grapes climbing upon Acer campestre) that affect the elongated shape of the parcels. Although the landscape is today much altered due to the urban expansion, the plot of the farmsteads is still preserved.

**Pictures:**
3. The Villa of Poggio a Caiano in its rural context (late 19th century).