

## Baldassarre Peruzzi and the Garden Design of the Renaissance

### *Abstract*

The work of the Siennese architect and painter Baldassarre Peruzzi merits careful examination because of the influence of his original ideas on the art of garden design in the 16th Century. They define a particular tendency within the Renaissance and exercised a direct influence of the development of this art.

The work of the Siennese architect and painter Baldassarre Peruzzi merits careful study of his original ideas which contributed to the art of garden design in the sixteenth century. They defined a particular tendency within the Renaissance and exercised a direct influence on the development of this art form. A look at some of Peruzzi's work will allow us to specify those criteria that directed the garden's design, and specifically, the rapport binding the buildings to the garden, and the garden to the landscape, as a logical sequence in a single creative process. This spatial conception crowns Peruzzi as an innovator of landscape architecture, and as the precursor of a poetics that, in certain respects, has remained unexpressed yet continues to be relevant.

The figure of Peruzzi dominates the artistic scene of the early Renaissance alongside Bramante and Raphael. However, in contrast to them, he was not interested in interpreting the grandiosity of the classical world. Even his clients were different. They were members of the wealthy middle class wishing to represent their newly achieved status with restraint rather than ostentation. In the Farnesina, the well-known suburban villa constructed for a fellow Siennese citizen, the banker Agostino Chigi, and documented in the drawings of Letarouilly in the middle of the nineteenth century, the gardens projected on three sides of the buildings and were divided by high walls. The fourth side flanked a public street, the ancient via Settimitiana (today known as the via della Lungara). The building's C-shaped plan, derived by connecting the two lateral wings to the central building, defines a formal motif that governs

its surrounding environment. The garden facing the square between the two projecting wings ideally culminates in the architecture of the building itself, and in the paintings of the loggia of Psyche overlooking the natural setting. Similarly, the loggia of Galatea once had its side wall opening onto gardens that, prior to the construction of the present river embankment and promenade, gently descended to the banks of the Tiber. A grotto and a loggia for banquets were sited along the riverbank, apart from the main design. The third garden, to the front of the palace entrance, was enlarged when the Farnese family, who had purchased the villa, incorporated the neighbouring property. All three gardens avoid being viewed from the front, so that they suggest different points of view linking the villa to the landscape. Peruzzi's idealized association of this suburban villa with the surrounding countryside was founded in his respect for, and interest in, the natural environment.

Vasari probably alludes to this effective setting when praising the building. He describes it as «... conducted with that fine grace that one sees not constructed, but born».

A precise turning-point in the design of the Renaissance garden, was the renouncement of the classic motif's sequence of geometric spaces along a central axis, as stated in the treatise writings of the fifteenth century, and confirmed in the Belvedere and the Villa Madama, and which was later spread by the work of the Mannerists.

The Farnesina brings to mind the Villa Le Volte Alte. Located in the Siennese countryside, its gardens open around the villa with a great freedom of composition. The avenues meeting the buildings do not set a perspective frame, but rather approach from the sides to give access to the open squares. A sixteenth century drawing preserved in the Vatican library clearly shows the layout of the various features on the farm property. The square between the projected wings is paved with bricks laid in an herring-bone pattern, with an orderly arrangement of jasmine and citrus fruit plants in pots. These plants were stored in the nearby building, which housed the caretaker, during the winter.

This garden was inserted into the agricultural landscape like a jewel. It was a model of the Mediterranean gardens which were widespread in Tuscany.

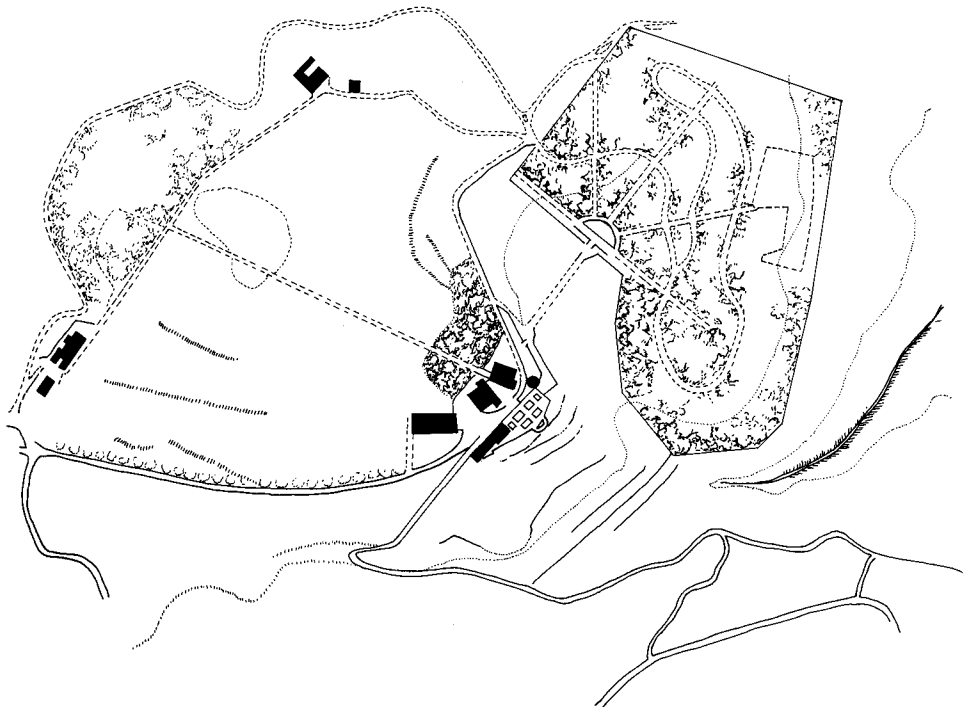
Behind the villa, lies a garden with grapevines and fruit trees, in the form of a semi-ellipse, connected to the property's main elm-lined access avenue. Sources note that next to the house was a small garden with grapevines and strawberries. The fishpond is separate from the main design. It has a 'stage-set' backdrop of a grotto and a flight of stairs set into the supporting wall, which provides an effective display hidden from view, to be enjoyed

as an element of surprise within the image of the cultivated countryside. In front of the fishpond is a vegetable garden whose design blends with the architecture of the nymphaeum. Tree-lined avenues approach woods and so-called « ragnaie » (wooded areas delimited by string for bird hunting). A small pavilion stands in the upper righthand corner of the drawing. It was used during hunting and was probably covered by vegetation.

The composition of these gardens is characterised by the definition of the outdoor spaces and the arrangement of the different functional units in an organic design which shows the agricultural character of the environment.

The villa of Vicobello takes advantage of its beautiful setting. Located on a Siennese hillside, the garden descends via a number of terraces to the cultivated land of the valley below. Next to the villa are citrus gardens, and the various terraces are inter-connected by stairways.

The villa of Vicobello certainly represents a model for Peruzzi's architecture, but it is in the Villa Celsa, located near Sovicille in the Siennese countryside, that the architect's spatial vision is most apparent (fig. 1-2). The villa was built in the form of an ancient medieval tower. Very little evidence of the organisation of the sixteenth century garden remains. Even the scenic garden, facing the entrance's open plaza with the refined motif of the semi-

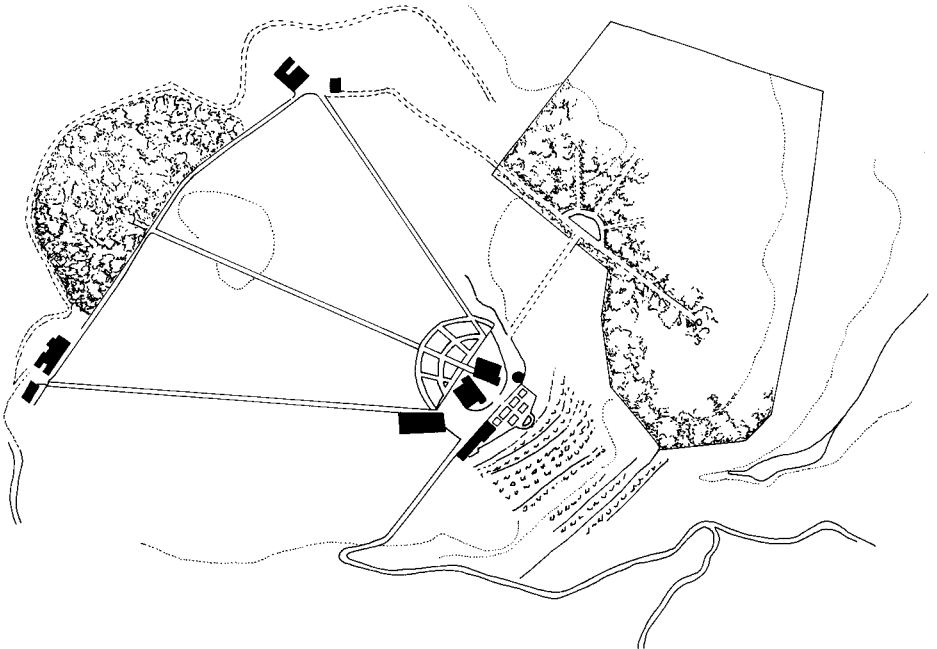


*Fig. 1. Present lay-out of Villa Celsa-Sovicille (Siena).*

circular fish pond, was transformed in the seventeenth century. The avenue lined by tall pines which connects the villa to the public road was laid at the beginning of this century, the original way that descended to the bottom of the valley and from which effective, foreshortened views of the whole estate could be obtained, being no longer in use.

However, several drawings and documents preserved in the villa allow a reconstruction of the property's various phases of transformation. An aerial survey photograph shows the actual organisation of the property. At the right there is a garden which remains the dominating motif of the present layout. This walled garden with a large semi-circular fish pond, and adorned in the seventeenth century by imposing arboreal architecture, is accessible from a broad avenue. Hedges in a curvilinear design commence in the plaza behind the building, and flank this avenue.

The aerial survey also shows the original garden, drawn by Peruzzi, at the front of the villa, beside the chapel. Another grove is shown at the rear of the building, connected by a bridge, and in the form of a semi-circle, a product of the transformation of the ancient formal garden at the end of the last century. Careful scrutiny of the photograph also shows the nearby rural settlement of the sixteenth century with traces of roads which may be deduced from the configuration of the terrain, and the ancient gardens. This



*Fig. 2. Lay-out of Villa Celsa in the plan of Peruzzi.*

analysis leads us to a systematic design of avenues behind the building: an eighteenth century drawing confirms the existence of three radiating avenues, and that of a semi-circular garden divided into a parterre. Originally situated behind the villa, this was later transformed into an English-style wood, the shape of which is defined by hedges of holm oak. So an ambitious landscape design was planned, connecting the various farms, woods, « ragnaie » and cultivated land.

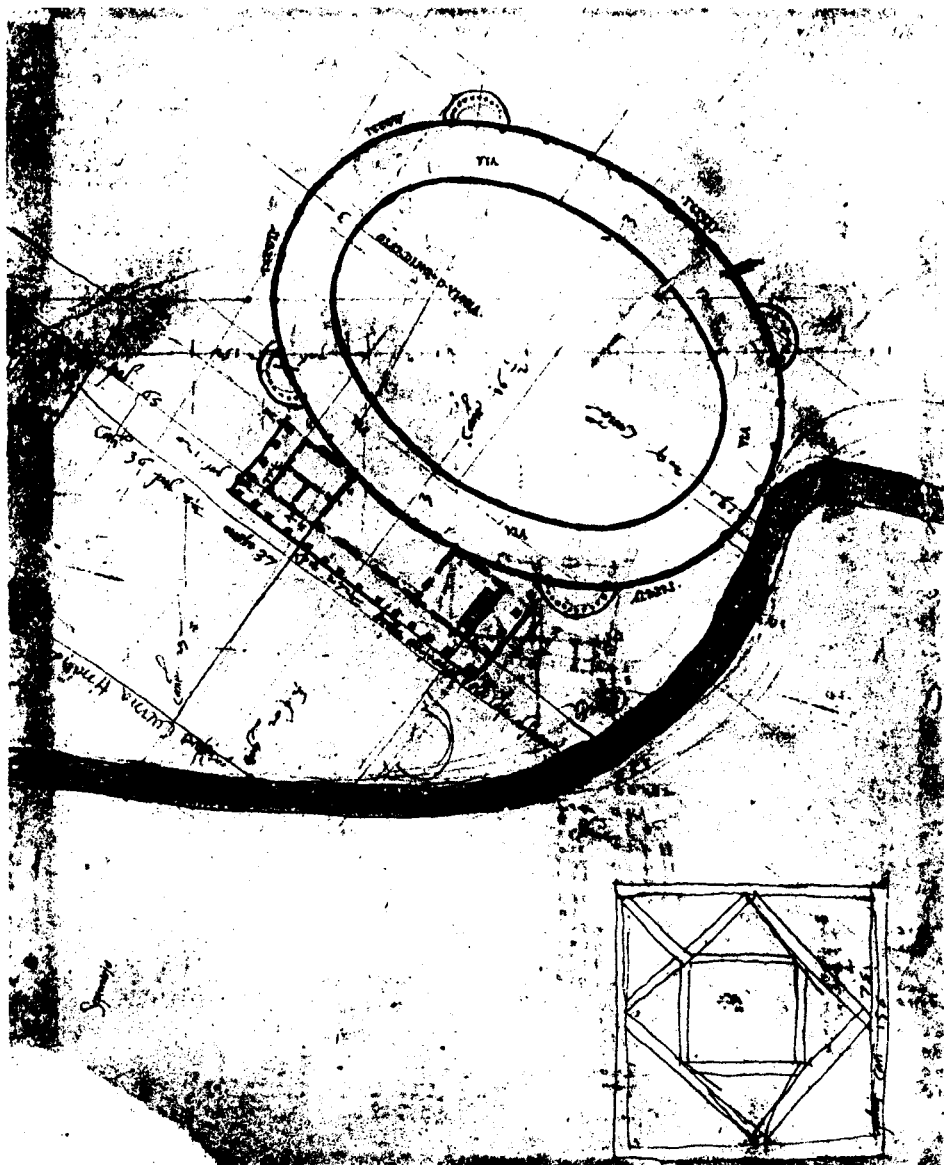


Fig. 3. Villa Trivulzio a Salone (Roma). Plan of Peruzzi.

The drawing presented here illustrates a hypothetical reconstruction of this grandiose scheme. The three roads commence from the aforementioned semi-circular grove and open radially. The central of these led to a chestnut grove of a semi-circular shape, the others extended to the present-day farms of Poggio and Borgo at the edges of the property. The three axial avenues appear to anticipate the urban designs of the end of the sixteenth century, particularly the Villa Montalto, and the radial design of Piazza del Popolo. The eighteenth century garden with its large fish pond does not seem to belong to the sixteenth century composition, but the existence of hundred year-old holm oaks implies the pre-existence of a wood, separate from the main grounds, and which served for hunting. Perhaps a natural confluence of waterways formed a basin which was the origin of the fish pond. From the scenic garden in front of the building, there was access down to the fruit orchards and terraced vineyards that extended to the bottom of the valley. Here one may suppose that the Val di Celsa ditch, at its deepest part, formed a useful basin for water collection.

A drawing preserved in the Uffizi confirms Peruzzi's creative genius. It concerns the project for a villa built by Cardinal Agostino Trivulzio in Salone on the outskirts of Rome (fig. 3). Vasari describes it in the life of Daniele di Volterra as an enormous tenement house which the cardinal had decorated with fountains, stucco-work, and paintings. Begun around 1525, the building was soon interrupted by the dramatic events of the Sack of Rome when Cardinal Trivulzio was taken as one of the six imperial hostages in exchange for the liberation of Pope Clement VIth. Only traces of the project are preserved in the present villa, but there is evidence of a long arcade on the front facade facing the Salone river, and an elliptical-shaped garden at the rear facing south. The perimeter of this garden is traversed by a broad avenue, on average 6.7 m wide, and there are four exedra and a row of trees on the outside. The river crosses the property diagonally and forms a bend that skims one end of the elliptical avenue. The originality seen in Peruzzi's project does not only rest with the building's daring geometric organisation on the oval garden, but in the juxtaposition of this compositional motif with a grandiose garden divided into large triangles that is unequalled in the Renaissance as a spatial institution. The drawing clearly illustrates the strength of the project's composition. At the bottom, beside the detailed drawing of the building and the elliptical garden, is a brief sketch representing the area's scheme: a large square with 348 m long sides subdivided into triangular areas by perspective avenues as broad as the elliptical avenue. A short poem describes this landscape architectural project from the first decades of the sixteenth century. Written by Lorenzo Mondanaro and dedicated to Cardinal Trivulzio, it appears in a collection of various authors published in Basel in 1544, four years prior to the death of the illustrious prelate.

The beauty of the river Salone is celebrated by descriptions leading one to an understanding of how the garden, at least in its overall aspect, must have already been laid out. Mondanaro writes :

« A vast expanse divided into large triangles shines with innumerable flowers. In fact, here and there are born all that the field of Paestum and the dewy island of Cyprus possess. In this way, all is in flower, the citrus fruit plant is cheered by the colour of the flowers, as are the new hedges along the partitions ; in fact, the green hedges pruned by art (that is, topiary) surround the triangles in rows, divided in equal measure so that one may be led to think that there the goddess Clori had situated her sacred places. ».

The architecture of the villa, described to us by Mondanaro, as : « ... an elongated, imposing dwelling supported by one hundred columns ... », appears as a temple that foreshadows the vision of Palladio. Mention is made in the poem of a drawbridge that rose above the riverbed, of a marble portal of brilliant candour with doors of gold and silver, of an apple orchard, of a vineyard with twenty types of grapes, and of an area used for seed cultivation. A copious list of trees included pear, plum, fig, quince, peach, and various types of apple. Walnut, pine, plane, cypress, beech, cornel, chestnut, myrtle, laurel, cherry, elm and oak trees, and even ivy and broom are also mentioned. Box would have been pruned into a variety of shapes according to the fashion of the times.

However, the great attraction of the villa was its roses, including among their impressive variety, the Damascus, canine and muscat roses. Rose bushes were fashionable in the sixteenth century not only for the strong and impermeable hedges that they formed. We learn in Solderini's treatise of their multiple uses : from vinegar to scented waters and perfumes, from rose sugar and rose oil to medicinal preparations for curing various ills.

A harmonious rapport bonds the arboreal and shrub architecture to the flowering of plants as a sensitive encounter where nature favours the rustic for exalting values of utility and delight. It seems that in Peruzzi's work, the conflict between the world of art and that of nature, those two rival positions that marked Renaissance thought, had been assuaged to give rise to a 'third nature' dear to Bonfadio and to Taegio who wished that dialectics be overcome by the image of rural nature and the sublimation of fruit and agricultural cultivation.

The importance of Peruzzi's outlook can be deduced from a treatise by his disciple Sebastiano Serlio. Serlio inherited from his teacher the preparatory drawings for an unfinished treatise, as well as a new conception of the rapport between house and garden.

In the example of suburban villas presented in the seventh book of his treatise, this new conception has been made explicit. The fifth example is

in fact described in the following way: « ... the building in front will be a garden, its four corners will have four apartments, and in the centre an inhabitable pavilion: and it will be the entire garden ... ». The building will be a garden, a new poetic that invests architecture with new values until now left unexplored by historians, and that actually proves in tune with contemporary concerns.

Alessandro TAGLIOLINI  
Centro Studi Giardini Storici e Contemporanei  
Via S. Agostino 1  
I - 55045 PIETRASANTA (LU), Italy