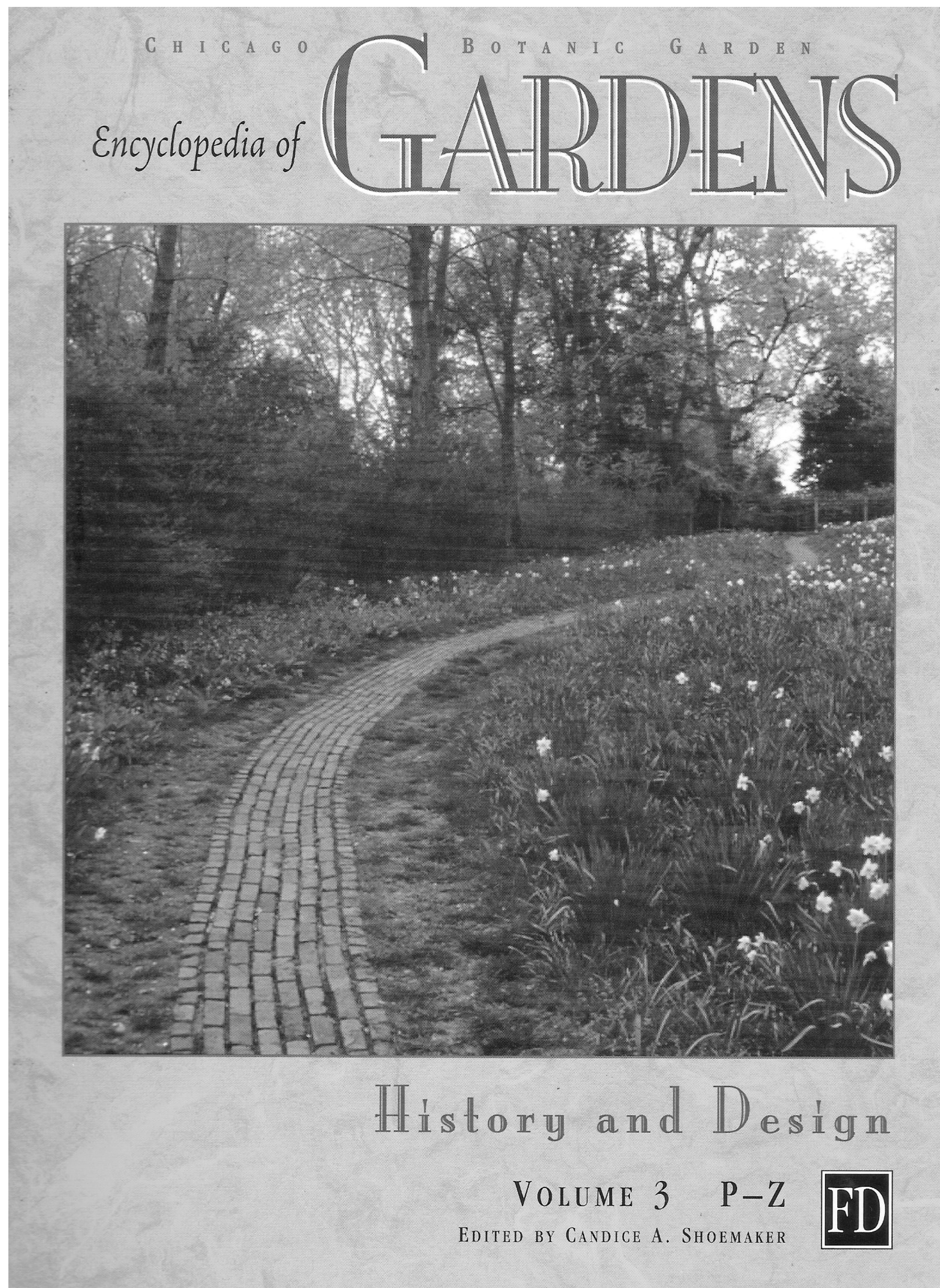

Renaissance Garden Style

The Renaissance garden embodied, among many things, the medieval view of the garden as sacred space. Enclosing the monastic garden on all four sides by walls served to define it as a sacred space, bounding it in such a way that it was a guarantee of integrity, as "virtue's barrier against the wild boar of the world" (Comito). Both the ancient Roman city and the medieval city were also ritually bounded as sacred space in defense of the surrounding wilderness. This is exemplified in the well-known story of Romulus, who murdered his own

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brother for not honoring the sacred wall of the Roman city. In the description of the nature of the monastic life as virtue's barrier can be heard resonances of the monastic garden itself: the solitude of the cloister life is sacred and distinct from the profanity of life outside. This distinction between potent and powerless space is both literally and symbolically represented in the walls of the garden and monastery, which itself is a self-sufficient community with aspirations toward being a heavenly city on earth.

The medieval monastery garden was best if it was square. Divided into four quadrants, the garden made visible the symbolic structure of the cosmos, representing the four rivers, the four seasons, the four elements, the four humors, the four cardinal virtues, and the four gospels—in other words, "all the co-ordinates of man's physical and spiritual cosmos . . . the inner reality of the world" (Comito). The crossing at the center of the four quadrants marked a sacred space, wherein a fountain or a tree of knowledge was placed. The Renaissance garden incorporated this quartering of space and also recalled the classical precedents of the Roman town planning structure of the primary and secondary cross-axiroads called *Roma Quadrata* and the *Cardo Decumanus*. These roads divided the city into four quarters for both practical (military) purposes and cosmological reasons in line with the north-south and east-west axes, ensuring that the city was in harmony with the gods through the seasons and the four directions, and so on. In this way not only was the garden a microcosm of the city but both the garden and the city were microcosms of the cosmological order of the world.

Many aspects of the medieval garden are embodied implicitly in the Renaissance gardens. At the same time there is a radical departure. The 15th-century architectural theorist Leon Battista Alberti discussed the Italian villa garden as integral to the house in that the spaces of the garden extend from those of the house. Alberti may have been influenced by Plato's analogy of the city as a house: "If men are to have a city wall at all, the private houses should be constructed right from the foundations so that the whole city forms in effect a single wall: . . . A whole city looking like a single house will be quite a pretty sight" (*The Laws*). Following on from this, the citizens would be considered as members of one big family of the city. Alberti not only makes the analogy between the city and the house but broadens it to include outside spaces:

> For if a city according to the opinion of philosophers, be no more than a great house, and, on the other hand, a house be a little city; why may it not be said, that the members of that House are so many little houses; such as the court-yard, the hall, the parlour, the portico, and the like?

Given that the Renaissance garden was an extension of the villa (and indeed often upstaged the villa itself), Alberti extended the analogy to include the outside spaces such that the villa and garden were as one. It follows that the rooms of the garden would be equally contributing members as the rooms of the house, which he perceived as the many buildings that make up the fabric of the city. Like Plato's analogy of the city as a single house, here the villa is a little city. Alberti's ideal Renaissance city sounds as much like a garden as it does a city:

> A harmonious enclosure separated from the ordered terrestrial world outside, which within it has the principles of nature, philosophy, and intellect, and of God's harmony, order, and wonder clearly revealed to the sight in its design and ornament. . . . [One] is surrounded by the evidence of the harmony of the cosmos provided by the art of the architect. (Westfall)

Influenced by the Roman statesman Pliny the Younger in his condemnation of the trivial business of the city and love for serene repose of the garden as intellectual and physical respite, Alberti associated the real city with vice and the garden with virtue.

Two specific gardens demonstrate these aspects of Renaissance design principles.

Villa Lante

Cardinal Giovan Francesco Gambara's Villa Lante in Bagnaia, designed by Giacomo Barozzi da Vignola and completed in 1578, was influenced by Albertian principles. It is located approximately 50 miles (80.4 km) from Rome and just 3 miles (4.8 km) from Viterbo. Cardinal Gambara exhibited the virtuous qualities of Alberti's ideal citizen, owing to his intellect and his noble, powerful, and famous family from Brescia, which dated back to the tenth century. This 16th-century garden addition to the town of Bagnaia was designed for summer visits by the bishops of Viterbo.

The walls surrounding the grounds of the Villa Lante enclose two distinctly different landscapes: the formal garden and the adjacent hunting park called the *bosco*. The iconographic theme of the garden expresses the relationship between nature and culture as depicted in the allegorical and juxtaposed themes of the Golden Age of Saturn (the *bosco*) and the Age of Jupiter (the formal garden). The natural state of the Golden Age is brought out in the *bosco*, representing a virtuous existence of people who lived in freedom and peace with no laws. The state of nature was not altered by plowing the land, cutting the trees, mining the earth, or slaughtering the animals. They ate what was produced by nature, shared the land, and lived without wars, cities, and other such institutions of civilization. The Age of Jupiter

is the age of discovery of the arts, the invention of tools with which to implement the ideas, and the gaining of knowledge that accompanies civilization. Consequently, the "art" of civilization is embodied in the formal garden. The two contrasting landscapes represent the natural state of ideal existence and civilized society, freedom from limitations versus restraints, and instinct and nature versus reason and art (Lazzaro).

The formal garden is composed of a series of five terraces arranged in a linear progression ascending the slope of a hill. The terraces are connected by stairs and ramps bridging the "garden rooms." The water is turgid at the top of the garden, and the vegetation at its most lush. The water and plantings become increasingly calm and formal toward the lower terraces. The grotto, at the top of the formal garden, bridges the two distinct gardens and is a symbol of the transition from chaos to form, an idea that the Renaissance associated with the story of the deluge and its aftermath. Water is a dominant theme and the life source of the garden. It connects each terrace and fountain in a variety of ways, flowing along the central perspectival axis that serves to invite and persuade people into the garden. Alberti speaks of perspective as a persuasive device that can lead people toward a virtuous life. This fits well into the symbolism of the Renaissance garden as ideal city that encourages its inhabitants toward an ideal existence.

From the grotto begins the process of civilization. This is depicted through the gradual introduction of the arts—the decrease of the natural vegetation on the successive terraces—until in the final terrace geometry and symmetry prevail. The water in the grotto bursts forth from the seemingly natural springs of the earth, gradually decreasing in pressure until it culminates in the placid pools of water in the fish ponds of the lowest terrace, where nature is ultimately subdued by art.

The division of the square of this highly formal and geometrically organized space of the final terrace recalls both the monastic garden's cosmological quartering of space and the quartering of the ancient Roman city. Here, the sacred crossing at the center of the quadrants is marked by Gambara's family device (a crayfish), reflecting Renaissance transitions from a God-centered to a human-focused world.

The grotto, the mythological themes, the dramatic representation of the cosmological order embodied in the quartering of space, the perspectival axis, and the transformations of the water and plantings from natural to ordered all express the ideas of nature and culture. What emerges is a theme common to the Renaissance garden and the ideal city: the creation of settings that inspire a virtuous existence. The garden as an ideal city was a stage for the expression of virtue.

The spatial structure of Villa Lante finds its precedent in the Cortile del Belvedere in Rome. In both gardens there is a highly significant plateau at the lowest level with adjacent twin buildings that act as a proscenium backdrop to this primary space and also give definition to the perspectival axis of the garden. The ascending plateaus are common to both gardens, as is the U-shaped architectural configuration at the top, a form marking the ultimate place of arrival.

It is interesting to note, too, that there is a significant urban space in Rome that comprises a similar spatial structure—the principal processional route involving the Piazza del Popolo, the Corso, and the Campidoglio. Entering first through the triumphal arch gate in the ancient city walls, one then moves into the grand entry space of Piazza del Popolo. Initially established in the third century A.D. as the northern entry gate to Rome from the rest of Europe, Piazza del Popolo has a long tradition of ceremonial arrivals deriving from the triumphal entry ceremonies of ancient Rome. This was revived during the Renaissance and baroque periods and was accorded to royal, papal, and political visitations. The entry procession to the Piazza del Popolo contained a clear sense of sequentially ordered ceremony, comprising a procession through layers of gates into the inner sanctum of the heavenly city.

Making one's way across the piazza, the eye is drawn to the perspectival view of the Corso, which persuasively draws the participant into the city. Passing between the twin churches S. Maria di Montesanto and S. Maria dei Miracoli (completed by Bernini in 1679 and designed to reinforce the Renaissance trident), one travels along the ancient processional route into the heart of the city (near the Roman Forum) and ascends up the steps to the Campidoglio. The entrance to the Campidoglio piazza is framed by two literal twins, Castor and Pollux. The Campidoglio piazza is defined by the U-shaped configuration of the senate house and palace. This existing urban topography is less malleable and therefore less ideal than that of the garden, However, it does comprise the spatial structure shared by both the Belvedere and Villa Lante: significant stage at lowest level, perspectival axis, ascension, and U-shaped space at top. In his writings, Alberti allows for less than ideal translations to be made into existing urban conditions. In comparing ideal and actual space, it was much easier to construct the ideas of an ideal city into a garden than into an existing city, as we see at Villa Montalto.

Villa Montalto

The trident extending away from the Piazza del Popolo is a Renaissance invention that was first established there on a grand scale. The three perspectival axes radiating from the Piazza del Popolo persuasively invite people to venture forth along the routes into the depths of the city. The Villa Montalto in Rome incorporated this newly invented Popolo trident into its structure of paths in the garden.

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Villa Montalto was designed and built between 1580 and 1590 by Pope Sixtus V and his architect Domenico Fontana. Destroyed in 1888, it was located where the Rome train station, the Termini, now stands. While creating this paradise out on the Esquiline Hill, Sixtus V and Fontana were also carrying out an overly ambitious papal project on the eastern arm of the Popolo trident in the city, which had intriguing structural parallels in the Montalto garden.

Sixtus V became pope following a succession of popes who had been revitalizing the city with design projects of their own. They had all inadvertently set the stage for Sixtus V's subsequent vision of linking all the pilgrimage churches, palaces, monuments, and significant piazzas of the city by the placement of Egyptian obelisks at terminus points of significant axial routes. The location of obelisks created a large-scale urban structure that not only expressed the power of the papacy but also marked the perspectivally persuasive invitation through the city toward the principal churches of Christian worship along the pilgrimage procession, including Sixtus V's favorite church, Santa Maria Maggiore. The pilgrimage route represented a dramatic reenactment of the sacred journey of Christian devotion, in this most "heavenly paradise" of Rome (Westfall).

Sixtus V's particular urban enthusiasm was that of connecting the Piazza del Popolo to Santa Maria Maggiore and developing this eastern area of the city, which was near his villa. The pope provided this part of the city with roads and water, thus developing it through large-scale urban design and the revitalization of the ancient aqueduct, the Aqua Felice. Like gardens, fountains were replenishing theatrical celebrations of water as a life-giving substance.

The Montalto garden, located just east of Santa Maria Maggiore, was enclosed in 1587 by walls and six prominent portals. The plan of the Monalto garden included certain elements common to the urban axis upon which the Pope was focusing. This was the Via del Babuino axis of the Piazza del Popolo trident, which extended to the Piazza di Spagna, the Trinita dei Monti, the Quattro Fontane, and Santa Maria Maggiore. Such an immense project could be realized more immediately and ideally in the smaller-scale version of a garden.

The elements from this urban axis that are recalled within the Montalto garden include the Piazza del Popolo, the trident, Santa Maria Maggiore, and the Quattro Fontane, although in a different order. This can be seen in a significant entry piazza and trident that radiates into the garden. The pope's own villa stands on the principal axial route of the trident. Just behind the villa was the circular fountain that was placed at the intersection of the garden's primary and secondary axes, similar to Quattro Fontane's strategic position within the city. The organization of the Montalto garden parallels aspects of the structure and elements of the pope's vision for the city, which proved impossible to make actual in its ideal form.

The primary influences embodied in Roman Renaissance gardens have origins in the philosophy and architecture of the ancients, the symbolic conception of space of the Middle Ages, the early Renaissance treatises for ideal cities, and the use of perspective and theater as political and religious tools of persuasion. The planning of gardens and of cities involved similar underlying principles and structural orders that reinforced the metaphorical relationships between them.

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