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Road to recovery

Kim Wilkie at Villa La Pietra | Architech | PLUS: aj focus

Italian evergreen

In restoring the garden at Villa La Pietra on a hillside overlooking Florence, Kim Wilkie is giving new life to an important scheme that has lessons for designers today

By Andrew Mead. Main photographs courtesy of New York University

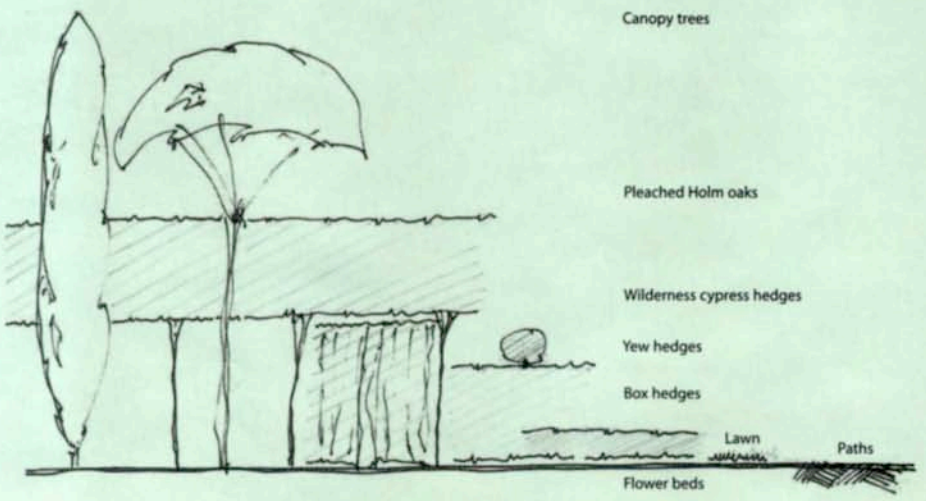
The dome of Florence Cathedral must be one of the most familiar sights in all architecture, signifying both the city it presides over and the whole Renaissance. So when, early last century, Arthur Acton began to create a 3.4ha garden in the grounds of Villa La Pietra, his home on a hillside north of Florence, it was almost a given that Brunelleschi's red-tiled dome would be worked into the design.

And so it is – but only after an orchestrated route through a series of outdoor 'rooms' does the visitor suddenly emerge into a clearing and find a vista through the trees to the cathedral. You half-expect it but it's still a surprise – one of many artfully contrived effects in the garden as a whole.

Such effects had become blurred, however, when Sir Harold Acton (Arthur's son and heir) died in 1994, for the garden was in decline. Bequeathed the property by Sir Harold, its new owner, New York University, decided not just to repair the house but to fully restore the grounds, and British landscape architect Kim Wilkie got the job. His work is now sufficiently advanced for visitors to see and understand the garden anew. Highly significant historically, it still has implications for design today.

Villa La Pietra dates from the 14th century, but when Arthur Acton's wife Hortense (daughter of a Chicago banker) bought it in 1907, all that survived of any formal landscape scheme there was the *pomario* – an 18th-century fruit-and-vegetable garden. In line with prevalent taste in Italy, La Pietra's owners in the 1860s had turned the rest into an 'informal' English parkland garden, but Acton had something else in mind. An avid collector and art dealer, he had studied in Paris at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts before marrying Hortense and settling in Florence. His education would no doubt have inclined him towards axial, formal schemes, and what he sought to do at La Pietra was create his own early 20th-century version of an Italian Renaissance garden.

In this he brought fresh eyes and artistry to a new fashion in garden design, which was primarily Anglo-American. In her *Italian Villas and their Gardens* (1904), Edith Wharton lamented 'the Anglicisation of the Tuscan garden', with the introduction of 'alien vegetation' and 'dissolution of boundaries'. She advocated instead 'the prolongation of the house' that she saw in surviving Renaissance schemes, with their intelligent planning, clearly subdivided spaces, and sequential effects[1]. A few years earlier, the American landscape architect Charles Platt had published his *Italian Gardens* and begun designing accordingly, while British figures such as Cecil Pinsent and Harold Peto were



Above right: plan of the garden at Villa La Pietra. Right: Kim Wilkie's sketch shows the different 'layers' in the garden, which need to be strictly maintained. Opposite page: the entrance to the villa. The axis of the approach road extends though the villa into the garden

Top: view from the *prima vasca* to the terrace at the back of the villa, from where a circuit of the garden begins. Centre: restoration in progress in the *prima vasca* with the *tempietto* visible in the background. Bottom: looking on axis to the *seconda vasca* after the hedges were cut back

also looking to the Renaissance. In 1907, in a similar vein, Lawrence Johnston began his Hidcote Manor Garden in Gloucestershire, now one of the National Trust's most popular properties.

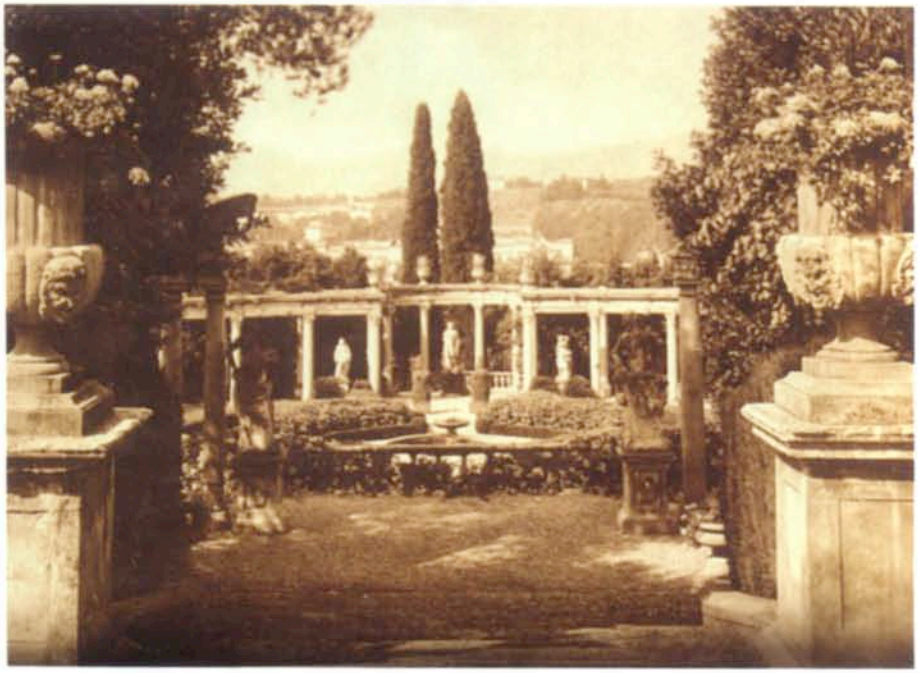
The Renaissance garden, which each of these designers interpreted and recreated in an individual way, was itself a recreation – a version of the gardens of Roman antiquity. There was little evidence on the ground of these, apart from the remains of Hadrian's Villa at Tivoli, which were gradually being uncovered and studied towards the end of the 15th century. The sources instead were literary: such writers as Pliny the Younger, whose *Letters* contain quite specific descriptions of his own villa gardens. The governing principles were codified by Alberti in *De re aedificatoria* (1452), in which he says that a carefully planned garden should echo in its straight lines and curves 'those figures that are most commended in the plans of houses, circles, semicircles, and the like'.[2] The garden, then, was itself *architectural* – as Wharton puts it, 'a prolongation of the house'.

For the Neo-Renaissance designers of Acton's time, there was a further literary refraction of the original Roman garden that they could draw on if they chose – the writings of the English Augustans of the early 18th century; especially the poems of Alexander Pope, with their Classically imbued prescriptions for design and distaste for excessive show or artifice. Arthur Acton and his son Harold certainly took Pope to heart.

On the level

The hills around Florence are dotted with villas, which may look distinct from a distance but tend to recede as you get closer, withdrawing behind high stone walls and groves of olives, so all that can be seen is a patch of tiled roof or rendered facade. Villa La Pietra is no exception. It is approached down a long avenue of cypresses, planted by Acton in place of false acacias, and for a long while the house is just a yellow-ochre sliver between the tightly framing trees.

This axis continues into the villa, across its once-open courtyard, and out on to the terrace behind, where Acton's tour of the garden would begin. It then extends still further, down the middle of the symmetrical *prima vasca* and *seconda vasca* (each with a fountain at the centre), to exit the grounds of La Pietra between two closely spaced cypresses and terminate on a crest on the other side of the valley. As the plan shows, such axes and cross-axes – not quite parallel but adjusted to the irregularity of the site – structure the whole garden. First the eye is drawn in a straight line to a statue 100m or



more away, and then, a few steps further, a cross-axis offers another focus or terminus – like vignettes in a treatise on perspective.

But the numerous statues and such built features as a little temple, a peristyle, and a stone pergola, are subservient to the vegetation: this is green architecture in a literal sense. The main materials are box, yew, cypress, holm oaks and pine, each a different shade of green and distinct in texture; and these all 'layer' the garden at successive levels, from the low box hedges that subdivide the *seconda vasca* to the stone pines with their umbrella-like canopies high above. They can't make their effect with ragged edges, though: such a scheme is quite high-maintenance if the garden's clarity and definition are to stay intact.

When Wilkie first saw La Pietra, that clarity was certainly compromised, but not displeasingly. His main impression then was of 'magical neglect' (which recalls a remark of Edith Wharton's on another Florentine garden, where 'time and neglect have added the requisite touch of poetry'). Wilkie knew nonetheless that drastic measures were necessary, with radical pruning, uprooting and replanting, for the garden to face the future. The task, he says, was 'to restore the precision of its structure without destroying the charm – the happy accidents – of its maturity'. How to hold on to the magic once work got under way?

There has been major surgery in places but a stealthy approach as well – the 'soft touch' Wilkie recommended in his masterplan. The stability of the architectural structures is regularly monitored, but they are only being repaired when absolutely necessary, so steps still subside in places, stonework flakes, and the patina of moss or lichens is undisturbed. 'But we only just caught the *tempietto* in time – it was about to collapse,' says Willkie; the vegetation that once stabilised the soil around it had been cleared some years before. As well as helping to make the *tempietto* secure, new planting will also create a proper context for it – seen suddenly from just one angle, down a green path from the *prima vasca*, 'in its sylvan, Arcadian setting'.

The rose pergola, important in accentuating a major cross-axis in the garden, was ruinous and – but for two columns – has been completely rebuilt in the grey *pietra serena* sandstone that is a Florentine staple. With vegetation as well as architecture, Wilkie has at times had to be 'ruthless': for instance, to coax hedges to the right height to enclose a room or frame a vista, they may have to be cut back far beneath that level to begin with, giving parts of the garden a ravaged look for a time. This must disconcert some clients.

Wilkie, though, has three images simultaneously in mind: the garden as he first found it; as it is now; and as it should be in 10 years

Top: the *seconda vasca* in the 1930s when the garden was in its prime. Centre: the same area in the late 1990s, with hedges obscuring the flowerbeds, the benches and the view. Bottom: the *seconda vasca* with the hedges cut back, the vista reopened and the borders replanted

Top: the *tempietto* after stabilisation and new planting. Centre: a 1930s view towards the *tempietto* down its green path off the *prima vasca*. Bottom: the *prato ovale*. Wilkie will keep the plants and flowers that colonised the lawn during the years that the garden was neglected

time; while his touchstone is how it looked in 1930s photographs, when it was in its prime. This long view is necessary not just with the main structural features but the general ambience – 'the balance of colour and texture' that he is trying to restore.

One area which has been substantially replanted is the *prato ovale* in the furthest reaches of the garden, now fringed by new young cypresses that will become a clipped hedge. But this is also a place, says Wilkie, 'that has acquired a special character through neglect'. Wild thyme, bird's foot trefoil, even orchids, now grow in the lawn that the cypresses surround, and these will be retained.

Perhaps the most memorable feature of the whole garden is the *teatrino*: an open-air theatre on a descending series of grassy terraces, punctuated by balustrades, seats, statuary and topiary, where past performers have included Serge Diaghilev and Brigitte Bardot. Wilkie believes that 'it ranks with Herrenhausen': here, par excellence, is the garden designed for pleasure.

In the true tradition of the Renaissance villa, however, Acton's garden was not just a source of pleasure but of produce too. In the enclosed *pomario*, its walls encrusted with *rocaille*-work pebbles and shells, fruit and vegetables grew in profusion – but this productive role had lapsed. Surveying the ranks of potted lemon trees now in situ, Wilkie says: 'Just to have the fruit back here is wonderful – when it was threadbare, it completely missed the point.' At the time of my visit last autumn, this reinvigorated part of La Pietra was permeated by colour and fragrance. Soon afterwards, the potted trees would be moved into the 18th-century *limonaia* to spend the winter protected from the cold.

This working element is a reminder that the usual way of characterising gardens – the dualism of 'formal' versus 'informal' – is simplistic. The landscape historian John Dixon-Hunt argues as much in his essay 'The Idea of a Garden and the Three Natures'[1]. The first nature is untouched, a wilderness; the second, the cultivated world of fields, orchards, and olive groves; the third, the garden, which – always in dialogue with the other two – may stage its own version of a wilderness or incorporate areas devoted to produce, like La Pietra's *pomario*.

Gardens require more effort to make and maintain than olive groves, which in turn may demand more attention than fields. What Dixon-Hunt points to are *gradations* in the landscape: 'a sliding scale of cultural intervention in the natural world'. At La Pietra, then, the formal aspects of Acton's scheme, and its labour-intensive *pomario*, should be seen in relation to the groves outside, where scrub and dead trees have

been cleared and 1,500 new olives planted in Wilkie's restoration.

Limited palette

'I would usually prefer to be making new gardens, not restoring existing ones,' says Wilkie – see AJ 21.11.96 and 13.11.97 for some of his projects – 'but this is such a jewel in terms of its techniques that, repairing it, you're learning almost at the master's hand.' For Acton, he believes, *was* a master, fine-tuning the effects at La Pietra over 30 years.

'It plays with light and texture more than any garden I've known,' adds Wilkie. 'You're aware of a very different set of statues and vistas if you make a circuit at lunchtime rather than first thing in the morning. And it's wonderful too by moonlight, when the glow-worms are out and the frogs are croaking.'

Distinguishing it from such grandiose Italianate schemes of the mid-19th century as Charles Barry's garden at Shrubland Park, Suffolk, Wilkie says: 'You feel in the scale of these rooms something of Hidcote and Sissinghurst' – and both Lawrence Johnston and Vita Sackville-West, the makers of those two gardens, were guests at La Pietra.

One might contrast it too with Neo-Renaissance designs by some of Acton's contemporaries. Harold Peto was certainly Acton's equal when it came to amassing architectural fragments with Italian pedigree – capitals, columns, wellheads and mausolea – but an air of make-believe pervades the garden of Peto's Iford Manor home, where they are reassembled, charming though it is.

Above and above right: the terraces of the *teatrino* – a stage in past years for such performers as Serge Diaghilev and Brigitte Bardot. The photographs show this area after repairs and replanting: 'It's just waiting for the green architecture to grow back,' says Wilkie. Right: the rose pergola after rebuilding

Top: the restored *pomario* is a source of fruit and vegetables again. Above: a scene in autumn 2003 as the potted lemons were being moved into the 18th-century *limonaia*. Left: looking down the length of the *limonaia*, where the lemon trees are sheltered each winter. Opposite page: the long-delayed view from the garden to the dome of Florence Cathedral

The recreation at La Pietra seems altogether more authentic and convincing: 'Peto and Pinsent didn't think seriously about the Augustan precedents – Acton did,' says Wilkie.

A further thought occurs to him. 'With all this statuary around, it seems ridiculous to call it a *minimalist* garden but in a very real sense it is. It works with such a limited palette of plants but is so resourceful in the way it exploits them and avoids monotony. In this – and in the subtle manipulation of texture and light – it has a great deal to teach designers today.'

There are lessons to learn, then, for those so-minded, and Wilkie's restoration is making them clear. It's tempting, though, just to absorb them subliminally. Lemons swelling in the sunshine; the sound of water from the fountains in the *vasche*; green rooms, each different in character, successively revealed on a sloping site; the sudden vista of the cathedral – the garden of La Pietra is a gorgeous place to be.

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