Escaping the Plague: The Villa from Pompeii to Napa

Lecture 1: Overview

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Literary descriptions:
Cato, *De agricultura*, 234-149 B.C.E.
Horace, *Odes, Epistles*, 65-8 B.C.E.
Columella, *De re rustica*, 4-70 A.D.
Pliny the Younger, *Letters*, 61-112 A.D.

Incomplete manuscript discovered in Verona in 1419 – complete 5th century papyrus ms. discovered in an abbey in Paris in 1500; it was acquired by Aldus Manutius and published in 1508, dedicated to Alvise Mocenigo.

Boccaccio, *Decameron*, 1351

J. P. Getty Villa, Malibu, CA; modeled after the Villa dei Papiri, 1st century BC, Herculaneum

Villa of Poppaea at Oplontis (Torre Annunziata), 1st century BCE and remodeled in 1st century CE, between Naples and Sorrento. Owned by Nero and used by his 2nd wife, Poppaea Sabina as her main residence when not in Rome. Buried in 79 AD with eruption of Vesuvius and first discovered in the 18th century during construction of the Sarno Canal. Excavations began again in 1964 and continued until the mid 1980’s.

Villa of Mysteries, 1st century BC, outskirts of Pompeii; famous for the frescoes in the Triclinium believed to represent the initiation rites of a Dionysian mystery cult.

Villa of P. Fannius Synistor at Boscoreale, 1st century BC; smaller scale than many others – consisted of 3 stories, complete with bath suite and underground passage to stables. Ground floor living quarters consisted of 30 rooms around colonnaded courtyard. The villa is most famous for the elaborate frescoes; the cubiculum (bedroom) is in the MET.


Augustus Prima Porta, 1st century AD, Vatican; discovered in 1863 at the villa suburbana owned by Augustus’ third wife, Livia Drusilla in Prima Porta. Carved by Greek sculptors and assumed to be a copy after a lost bronze original. Cuirass imagery refers to the Parthian restitution of the Roman standard in 20 BC. The statue may have been commissioned by Tiberius, son of Livia and successor to Augustus; he served as intermediary in the Parthian campaign appears on the cuirass. Augustus is barefoot with Cupid by his leg > divinity – mythical connection to Venus through his adopted father, Julius Caesar.

Roman copy of Doryphoros by Polycleitos, 5th century BC; misidentification of the Doryphoros in Roman period as Achilles

Maecenas, Villa on Esquiline Hill, Rome, 1st century AD: wealthy patrician and advisor to Augustus; 1st heated swimming pool; left his estate to Augustus.

Caligula’s Palace and Gardens, Esquiline Hill, next to Maecenas estate – just discovered!

Villa of Livia at Porta Prima, 12 kilometers north of Rome on Via Flaminia, 1st century BC
(although built in 4 stages, continuing until the 4th century); frescoes now in the Palazzo Massimo museum. It was rediscovered in 1596, but not recognized as belonging to Livia. The statue of Augustus was discovered in 1867; believed to be a copy of a bronze statue celebrating the return in 20 BC of the Roman military standards captured by the Parthians in 53 BC.


Rediscovery and Renaissance

Botticelli, Birth of Venus, 1483.
Botticelli, Venus and Mars, c. 1485.
Botticelli, Primavera, c. 1483.
Raphael, Galatea, Villa Farnesina, 1514

Palladio, Villa Barbaro, Maser, begun c. 1560.

“Nor must I neglect Studius, a painter in the days of Augustus, who was the first to introduce very enchanting wall painting with villas, harbors, landscapes, groves, woods, hills, fish ponds, canals, rivers, coastlines and whatever else one might desire. In this were reproduced several persons walking or sailing or on their way by land to their villas on the backs of donkeys or in carriages. There were people on fishing trips, catching birds, hunting or gathering grapes. Amongst his artistic works there are reproductions of noble villas.” Pliny the Elder, Natural History.

Richard Boyle, 3rd Earl of Burlington, Chiswick House and gardens designed by William Kent, 1726-29. Inspired by ancient Roman architecture, especially the Baths of Diocletian, and by the buildings of Andrea Palladio and Vincenzo Scamozzi. Ideal proportions, comprising a cube, 70’x70’x70’. Symbolic sculpture abounds: in domed entrance hall – bust of Augustus (early Georgian era was known as the Augustan Age); gardens decorated with sphinxes and obelisks reinforcing the Augustan reference. Statues of Venus, wolf (Romulus and Remus), goat (capricorn) placed strategically throughout garden. The gardens, like the villa, were inspired by ancient Rome through the writings of Horace and Pliny. Alexander Pope, whose country house was nearby, also believed that ancient gardens were informal – nature ruled by God. Jefferson is known to have visited.

Drayton Hall, near Charleston S.C., 1738 ff; inspired by Palladio’s Villa Cornaro. Southern plantation owners wanted to affirm their ties to England and their carpenters worked from plans in books recently published in London.

Thomas Jefferson, Monticello, 1768-1809; inspired by Palladio and Lord Burlington, Jefferson sought to create a new architecture for a new nation. In 1784 Jefferson served as Ambassador to France and spent several years in Europe where he visited classical buildings in Italy and England. He returned to the US and began to remodel his home, adding the octagonal dome among other changes.

S. Prestley Blake (Friendly’s Icecream) replica of Montecello in Somers Ct.
Crow Hill, Hudson Valley, 1839: built by Margaret Rogers Whiting.
John Russell Pope, Spring Hill, Roslyn, NY, c. 1903, for William L. Stowe.

Frank Lloyd Wright, The Avery Coonley House, Riverside, Illinois; Avery Coonley, a Chicago Industrialist, and his wife Queene Ferry, were both heirs to industrial fortunes, commissioned Wright to build a house on a peninsula jutting into the Des Plaines River. Wright considered it among his finest works; courtyards, buildings and garden walls interconnected and brought the outdoors in.

Le Corbusier, Villa La Roche, Paris, 1923-25, for Swiss bander Raoul La Roche. 5 points of architecture: pilotis-free façade-open plan-ribbon windows-roof garden.

Le Corbusier, Villa Stein-de-Monzie, 1926, Garches; 1st use of golden section.

Le Corbusier, Villa Savoye, Poissy, 1928-30; built as a country retreat for the Savoye family and designed according to Le Corbusier’s “Five Points: 1) support of ground-level pilotis to elevate building from the earth, 2) a functional roof serving as a garden and terrace, reclaiming for Nature the land occupied by the building; 3) a free floor plan; 4) long horizontal windows for illumination and ventilation; 5) freely-designed facades as skin for the wall and windows, without load-bearing functions. Oriented to take in view and rising and setting of the sun. Plan incorporated the principal ratios of the golden section – square divided in 16 equal parts. Colin Rowe, in his The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa, compared the Villa Savoye to Palladio’s Villa Rotunda.

Philip Johnson, Glass House, 1948-9, New Canaan, Ct.

Villa Maria, Watermill, NY, 1919.

Villa Sorriso, Napa.

Ned Forrest, Hudson House, Napa; built for Lee and Rebecca Hudson.