

# Investigating the Notion of Room (Indoor-Outdoor) as Interpreted by Mellor, Meigs and Howe in Design of Garth and Garth Gwynyn

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The houses which form the basis of this study were designed in 1920s by Philadelphia architects: the McCracken house (Garth) and Mellor residence (Gharth Gwynyn). The name "Garth" (an ancient English term for an enclosed garden or yard) recalls the court-garden of medieval cloisters and symbolically emphasizes the modest size of the building. The decade of 1920s marks the emergence of a new era in Chestnut Hill architecture which was distinguished by the best of the Philadelphia school of country house design. In its respect for the environment and the nature of local materials, these houses clearly situated themselves

within a prevailing Romanticism popularized in America by the country life movement as interpreted through the traditional background of the gentleman farmer. The special quality of these houses conceptualize the particular cultural characteristic of the client, emphasizing the simplicity of the Philadelphia Quaker. In both Garth and Gharth Gwynyn, the architectural composition is indicative of a tendency toward privacy and seclusion, reflecting the modesty of the client's cultural attitude based upon the spiritual power of "Inner Light." Enclosed and screened as a walled "house-garden", the houses represent a



*Fig. 1. Garth Gwynyn, Germantown, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania  
Architects: Mellor and Meigs, 1928; Photographed by K. Bozorgi.*

discreet public image. The wall in unifying the composition is the overriding architectural element identifying the such unique "type" of design in relation to the cultural connotations and physical circumstances.

The social customs and traditions, the architectural principles and the circumstantial environmental factors which guided architects in America during 1920s were shared by a wide segment of society. Yet these Philadelphia estates differ markedly from contemporary houses in Newport, on Long island and even Main Line Philadelphia. These differences have grown out of the varying emphasis or interpretations given to the many factors that contributed to the decisions made by owners and architects in the process of design. A unique combination of factors has produced an unusual "type" of houses in the Philadelphia examples. The intimate relationship between exterior and interior was developed from a particular conceptualization of the room (indoor-outdoor) as forming a compositional unit. Both interior rooms and exterior gardens were designed as part of an uninterrupted sequential space conception while preserving their independence. The room as an independent element of the plan participates sequentially as an intellectual generic space conception in unifying the inside room and out-door walled-garden. This is experienced dynamically in the relationship between the living room and the garden.

Though countless ideas and cultural traditions have made decisive contributions to the end result of a recognizable Philadelphia country house, perhaps most powerful is the architectural principle of unity which conceives the house and garden as one rather than as a marriage, happy or unhappy, of two discrete elements. Unquestionably there are many historical examples from Rome and Paris where site limitations have forced a unity of concept similar to those in Philadelphia. Yet even in these cases additional factors or cultural biases have produced designs which bear no resemblance to the Philadelphia examples. The Renaissance conceptualized symmetry as the absolute cosmic harmony by rediscovering the principles of the architecture of antiquity and elevating the ideas of Vitruvius. In the densely packed Paris of the Turgot plan, French academic architectural principles transformed the Baroque hotel into a sophisticated instrument of Parisian aristocracy. In certain Renaissance French Hotels, despite the constraints of the surroundings, the composition of the plan is still determined by indisputable laws of symmetry. In Avignon, Francois Franque, the architect of the Hotel for the Marquis de Villefranche had to content with an unbelievably irregular site and yet, because of his classical beliefs, steadfastly maintained, despite all obstacles, a classical symmetry in all its rooms, courts and gardens. Though the Chestnut Hill houses in Philadelphia confronted the same problem of small confining urban sites situated in a dense network of buildings, their designs in no way ape the earlier Paris hotels represented through the Turgot Plan of early seventeenth century.

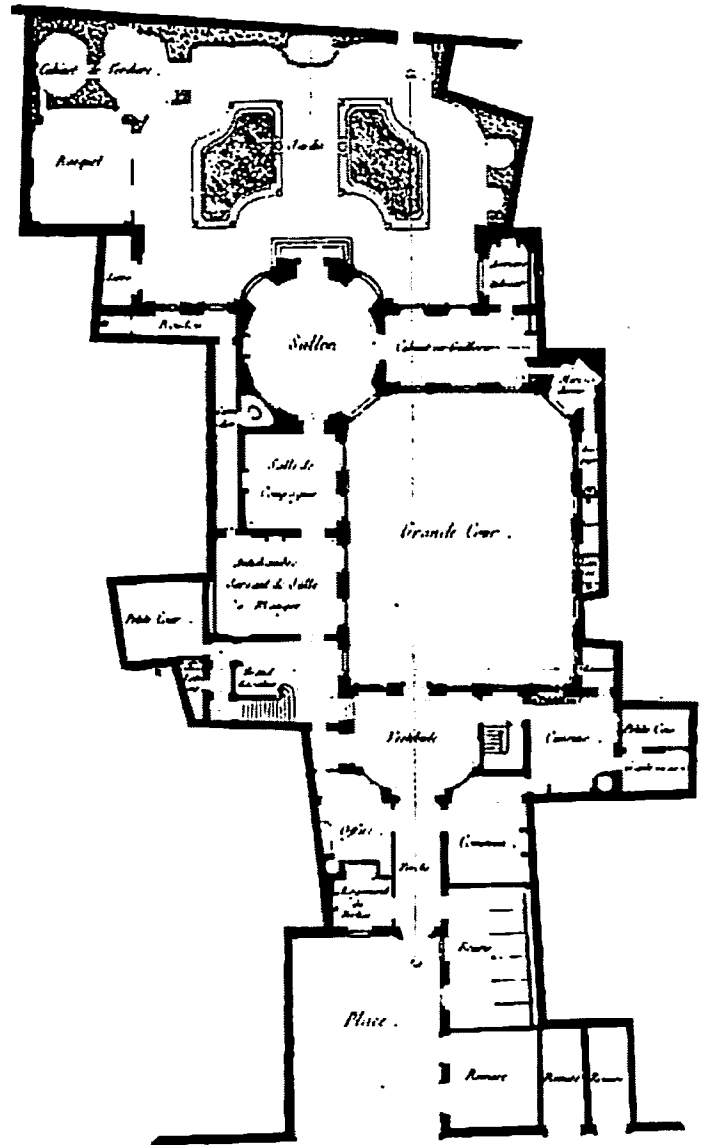


Fig. 2. House for the Marquis de Villefranche at Avignon, designed by Francois Franque. *Diderot/D'Alembert, Encyclopedie, Recueil de Plances...* I. 1762.

Garth and Garth Gwynyn are the products of a common cultural heritage which has uniquely characterized the natural and rural image of Philadelphia landscape. The modest architectural treatment owes much to the prevailing Quaker heritage and to a nostalgic interest in the farms of Normandy and rural England as well as an insistence on the finest craftsmanship in masonry, woodwork, tile, and iron. Within a framework of inward-looking courts and gardens, the traditional background of the gentlemen-farmer and the constraint of a small site determined such harmonious integration of architecture and landscape. Characteristically, the traditional Philadelphia country house conveys a picturesque silhouette, yet remains cohesively structured. The unity of inside rooms and outdoor courts which are asymmetrically balanced based upon an intellectual awareness of spatial sequences in planning, restrains the entire architectural composition.

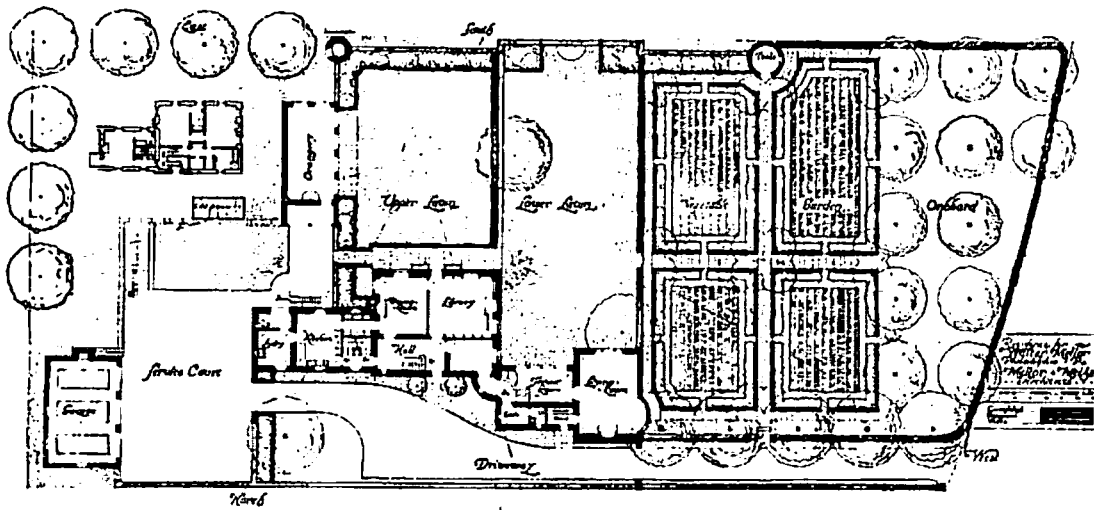


Fig. 3. Garth Gwynn. Germantown, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Architects: Mellor and Meigs, 1928; Photographed by K. Bozorgi.

These houses reflect the strong sense of balance that is part of the unity of indoor architectural space and outdoor landscape gardening. They are freed from the indisputable Vitruvian symmetry that was restated in the Renaissance and reestablished by Francois Blondel. The plans of these houses perpetuated the principles of unity expressed in the intimate architectural transition between house and garden. However they did not necessarily follow the restrained bilateral symmetry cele-

brated in the well known winning drawings of the Grand Prix de Rome and retained in the designs of contemporary American architects like McKim, Mead and White. The "upstairs-downstairs" social relationships of post-industrial revolution England also produced complete layouts as that of Buchanan House in Stirlingshire by William Burn which could had been culturally and socially relevant to these classical examples.

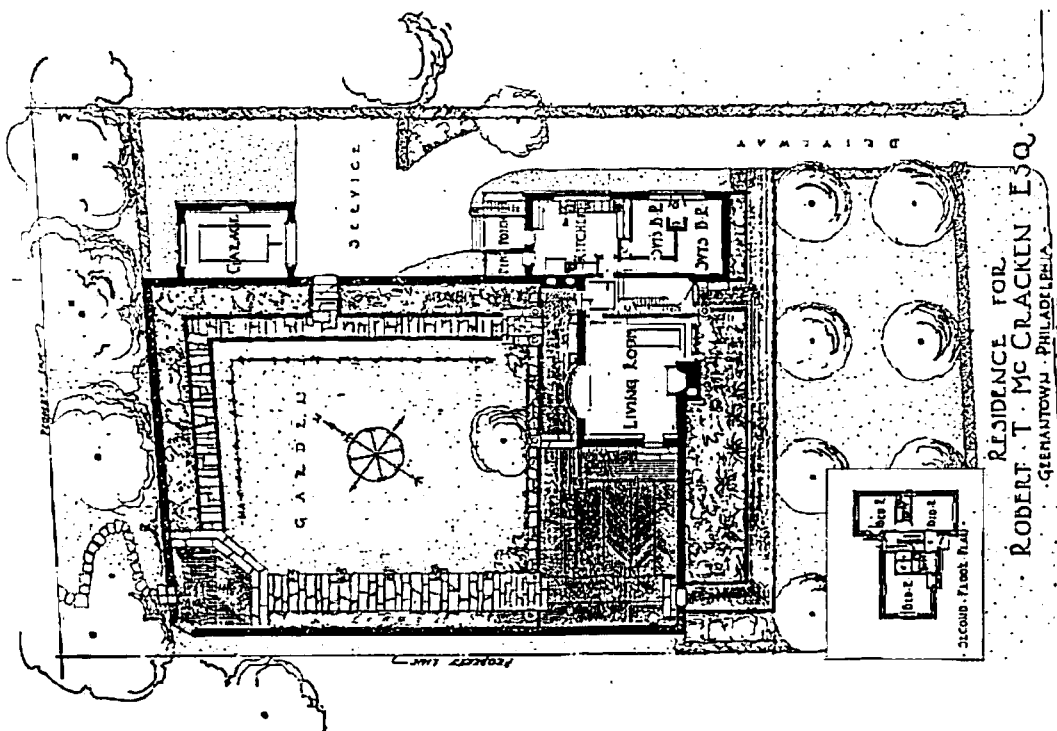


Fig. 4. Garth. Philadelphia, Pennsylvania. Architects: Mellor, Meigs and Howe, 1919; Photographed by K. Bozorgi.



*Fig. 5. Garth, Philadelphia, Pennsylvania  
Architects: Mellor, Meigs and Howe, 1919; Photographed by K. Bozorgi.*

Since they were trained under Beaux-Arts principles, the Philadelphia architects' distinguished design achievement was their use of the academic tradition couple with their attachment to the intuitive Romantic genius of some of the admired structures of Normandy, such as La Vesvre near Autun in France. The application of such romantic idea shaped the Philadelphia architect's concept of the farm house for Arthur E. Newbold in Laverock, Pennsylvania. The architectural form of this farm-house was influenced by the peasant architecture of Normandy. The architectural concept of this farm-house recalling a 'French manoir', represented the romantic mentality of the Philadelphia aristocracy of the 1920s. In their Romantic creations, an image of French vernacular architecture was combined with the rustic charm of the Pennsylvania farm-house through the use of local materials, organically blended with the surrounding environment.

The essence of Philadelphia architect' planning was a feeling for the static laws of balance, along with a sensitivity to the physical and social backdrop of Philadelphia. On one hand, the asymmetrical balance governing the plan organization fabricated a hierarchical complex of primary, secondary and tertiary axes in order to bring together the circulation dictated by the program and the natural topography. Cognizant of both these factors, the Philadelphia architects modeled the structural axes of their project in part on Duquesne's Voltive Church at a Noted Pilgrimage place, whose asymmetrical composition presented an excellent solution to the problem of an inclined site. On the other hand as a result of their Anglo-American cultural ties, their designs were also influenced by the dynamic

composition and intricacy of the irregular plan of Leyswood by Norman Shaw or Gray Walls by Edwin Lutyens. In general, architectural romanticism should be studied in relation to eighteenth and nineteenth century literature and poetry, which combined a nostalgic search for the past with a worship of naturalistic irregularity. Garden design was the first object that reflected such poetic modes. The Baroque garden design of Le Notre was condemned by romantics like Repton and others who rejected formality in support of picturesque irregularity. Clearly the work of Shaw, Web and Lutyens influenced American architecture by the late-nineteenth century.

The subtle architectural composition of Garth is dependant upon balanced asymmetry in plan and elevation. Guadet's "beautiful plan", where the architectural character of the plan reflects the three-dimensional composition of the building and vice-versa, provides the key. In the planning of Garth, the characteristic peculiarity of the house is simultaneously present in every aspect of architectural and horticultural design. Yet such close relationship between house and garden has not been pretentiously over-emphasized by the use of color and ornamentation. The end result is a walled garden which maintains the sense of tranquility expressed by the Chestnut Hill landscape. The unique picturesque image expressed by the Philadelphia country house is the legacy of a Romantic sensibility, expounded by centuries of nostalgic search for the past. The wholesomeness of a "green countrie towne" that William Penn dreamed of for Philadelphia landscape, the romantic classicism as interpreted by Jefferson in his design of Monticello Adams' fascination with Normandy, and Poe's



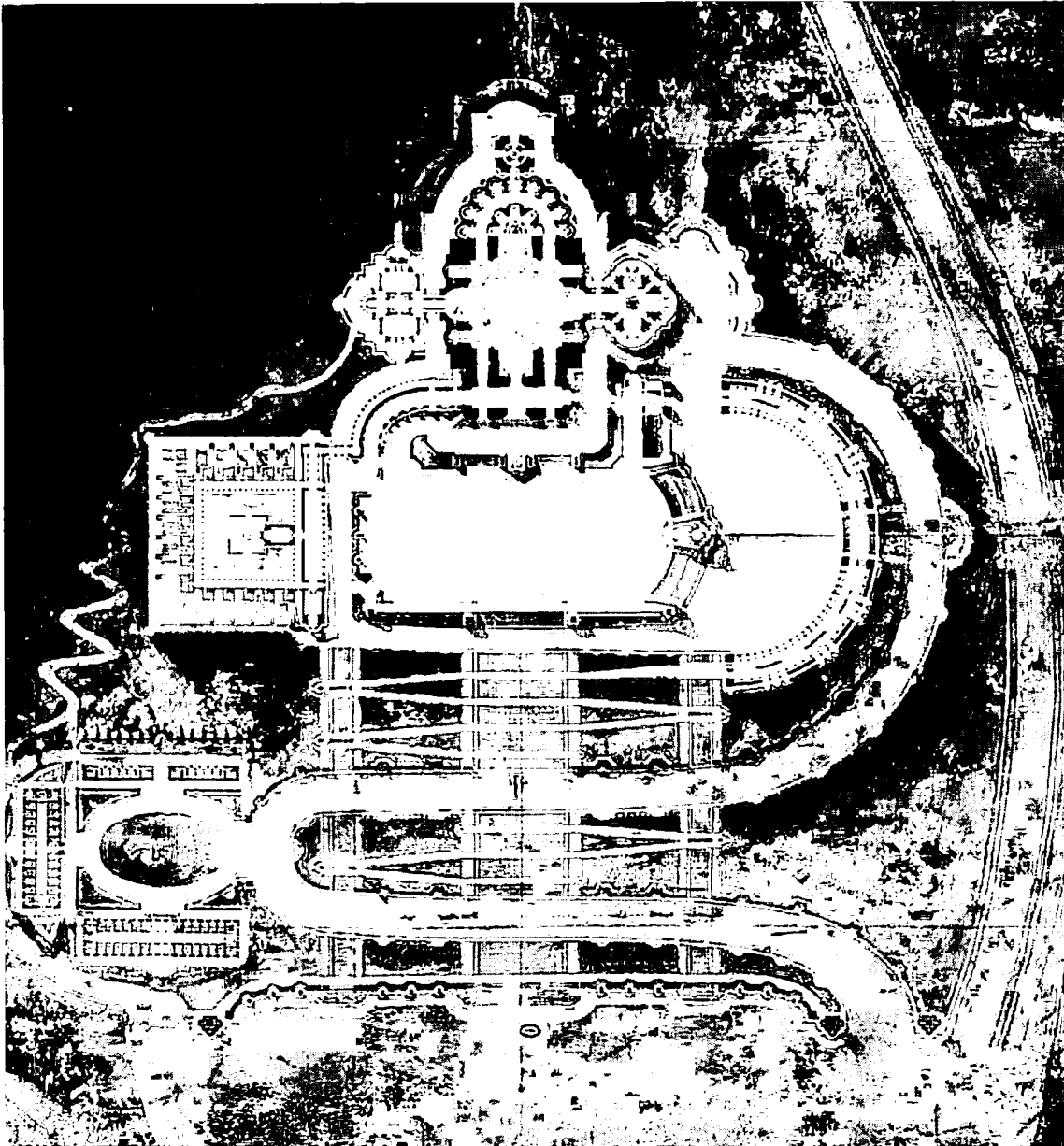


Fig. 7. Joseph-Eugene-Armand Duquense. *A Votive Church in a Celebrated Place of Pilgrimage, First Grand Prix, 1897.* Source: *The Architecture of Ecole des Beaux-Arts* by A. Drexler, 1975.

Surry which successfully represents the design concept of a harmonious correlation between the building and the garden. The unique architectural expression found in the work of Mellor, Meigs and Howe, produced a special kind of unity that integrates the exterior courts, garden and interior rooms within an inward looking self-contained plan. Wall, the distinct and inseparable element of composition, defines the architectural space of this confinement. Characteristically, the unity circumscribed by such a defined boundary reflects the social attitude of the Philadelphia gentleman molded by his Quakerish traditions. The concept of wall as rendered in the Chestnut Hill home includes this cultural modesty while maintaining a union of the other elements of composition.

Wright's Prairie houses emphasized the interlocked space conception based on the destruction of predetermined boundary of a confined box. In Robie House, the dynamic visual integration of the building with its exterior court and small garden has created an organic unity. Under different circumstances, at Philadelphia the compositional unity has been achieved with the authentic understanding of the restricted site and the concept of a court-garden. In this case, the wall produces a limited vista for the viewer when experiencing the inside-outside relationship. What harmoniously integrates the two is a humanized scale that relates the elements of the plan composition to one another and to the whole. The picturesqueness characterized by such compositional unity appears to



*Fig. 3. Chestnut Hill, Philadelphia  
Photographed by K. Bozorgi.*

relate to what Uvedale Price (1747-1829) called "sublime" rather than the beauty of classical formalism. The distinctive character of the roof, which unifies contracting elements in a sublime fashion, can be interpreted through what Soane (1753-1837) theorized to be the principal feature in representing an artistic composition. John Soane stated that: "In every Poem we seek for a distinguishing and chief object; in every picture, a principal figure or group, a principal color, a principal light, to which every other parts diverge."

From the study of Philadelphia Country Houses a well defined "type" emerged. A unique combination of seven architectural characteristics were recognized involving the element of wall, the essence of room, balanced symmetry, natural setting, picturesqueness, materials, and craftsmanship. Not all of the examples exhibit equally all these characteristics which in combination identify the Philadelphia "type." All are, nevertheless, fine architectural creations. Many of the qualities shared by these examples derive from a common Philadelphia architectural tradition, found earlier in the work of other Philadelphia architects like Price, Eyre, Gilchrist, Dubring and Okie. Their impressive designs, initiated an architectural style that dealt organically with the natural environment of the site, through the employment of local materials and the best of the skilled craftsmanship available in the area. Yet the architectural concept of the walled "house-garden" that is the basic characteristic of the Philadelphia "type" in which the indoor and outdoor are conceived as an indivisible unity is found in

the earlier work. In response to the functional requirements of the program the architects have uniformly employed a balanced asymmetry in plan and elevation while at the same time made for a better relationship to the topography of the site. The small lots, characteristic of Philadelphia, encouraged the use of the inward looking walled "house-garden" parti in which common walls simultaneously serve indoor and outdoor rooms. It should be noted that the vast majority of the fine houses in Philadelphia exhibit one or more of the characteristics examined in this study. Nearly all of those built in this era were of native stone, most were on comparatively small lots, many were superbly crafted and a sizeable minority possessed a picturesque quality that grew out of their balanced asymmetry, yet relatively few exhibited that unique combination of the seven characteristics that define the Chestnut Hill "type." For example, most of the houses were symmetrical free standing structures that repeated colonial or Georgian architectural mannerisms. Stylistically these differed little from similar suburban communities along the east coast. On the other hand one cannot help but observe that the very special architectural quality of the community was primarily by those unique houses which created the ambience for the highly cultivated yet retiring life-style of Baltzell's Philadelphia Gentleman.

The poetic sensibility characterizing the architectural composition in the works under consideration introduces aesthetic ideals quite divergent from the Vitrobian notion of beauty. In



*Fig. 9. Garth Gwynn  
Photographed by K. Bozorgi.*

the Philadelphia house, the classical concept of bodily-proportioned composition has been replaced by the image of a picturesque interweaving of house and garden, similar to that which Edmund Burke (1729-97) romanticized in his interpretation of natural beauty based upon "obscurity" and "surprise." Burke's discussion of "sublime and beautiful" was continued by the Romantic generation in Europe and their American contemporaries. As illustrated in the design of the Philadelphia architects, the advocacy of true organic beauty is a unique theoretical synthesis, reflecting the ideas of Lodoli, Greenough and Emerson. Garth and Garth Gwynn celebrates the sublime expression of unity. A whole of which all the architectural, cultural and physical forces inseparably and intimately unites. In these examples, the image of a rustic farm-house, the respect for the natural form of the ground, and the ingenious handling of local materials all combine to create an organic quality, at once simple and integrated. Monumental mansion was seen as pretentious and immoral. To imitate the slickness of marble by the use of inferior stucco was to show no respect for the nature of materials, as instead upon by men like Lodoli, Downing and Wright. By contrast, the aesthetic values of craftsmanship which characterize the unity of house and garden in the Philadelphia country house is a conscious expression of the cultural background of its owners and of its physical environment. The harmonious relationship between external and internal appearance of these houses illustrates the integration of both in accordance with the social and religious background of their owners. The distinguishing characteristics of such integration

are the use of native gray stone and the skilled incorporation of wood and ironwork that unites the house naturally with the landscape architecture of the garden in texture and color. In the work of Yellin and other local artisans, Viollet-le-Duc's rationalism, based on structural unity, is successfully joined with Pugin's moralizing exaltation of the honesty of craftsmanship.

The tradition of the English Arts and Crafts garden, as seen particularly in the work of Edwin Lutyens (what Muthesius has called the modest English individuality), combined with Guadet's idea of employing materials that the modest English individuality), combined with Guadet's idea of employing materials that respond to the utilitarian concept of the program and the reflection of truth in structure are contributing factors in creating the intimate relationship between inside house and outside landscape. The Romantic sense of pre-industrial values, characterized by living craft traditions working in harmony with nature, is uniquely expressed by the architectural composition of these walled garden country-houses. The tranquility resulting from this harmony can be attributed to those who believed in the divine creation of landscape, uniting all elements of nature and man-made structures. In their quest for the spirit of place, the architects successfully combined rules and principles that would bring their design into close association with the physical environment of Philadelphia. Consequently the end result is an organic cohesiveness perfectly in tune with the site. From a detailed study of Philadelphia country houses there emerged a



recognizable "type" exhibiting a unique combination of architectural characteristics.

The wall harmoniously integrates house and garden as a united composition. Such an architectural feature discreetly defines an enclosed courtyard house, which was spatially conceptualized through the architect's interpretation of the garden as a room. In the work of the Philadelphia architects, the concept of wall exceeds its rational purpose as a means of division and structural support. The architectural extension of the wall from inside out coherently harmonizes the distinct character of the construction while also expressing its aesthetic plasticity. The inward-looking garden by means of its unpretentious wall is publicly blended with the texture and color of the surrounding landscape. The Philadelphia "type" contains its own cultural heritage, representing a particular social image carried by the Philadelphia gentlemen. The oneness of house and garden while handsomely satisfying the clients needs, at the same time overcome the limitations imposed by zoning restriction and small lots.

When analyzing the plan organization, the Philadelphia "type" is identified in part by the notion of "room" governing the relationship between indoor and outdoor. As classically defined by Alberti, the 'Wall', the 'roof' and the 'opening' represent the basic spatial modules of academic composition. In this respect the rationalism in planning evident in the Philadelphia country house is linked with the concept of the 'autonomous room'. In

this houses the unity in plan is expressed through a dynamic movement demonstrating the asymmetrical juxtaposition of harmoniously balanced rooms. The indoor-outdoor conformity is based upon a similar spatial concept observable simultaneously in rooms, garden, service court and forecourt in which the enclosed circulation romantically interpreted an upper class life style with its background of Quaker simplicity. Such an architectural expression combines spiritual unity with a sentimental search for the past recalling Hegel's understanding of space: "The distinctive form here is the fully enclosed house. In fact, just as the Christian spirit concentrates itself with itself, so the building becomes the place, closed in on all sides. . . ."

The unique character of these houses is produced by the principle of architectural unity which masterfully expresses the social and cultural background of the client, placed within the boundary of a limited site and particular surrounding circumstances. A preference for architectural unity, Romanticism, and balance asymmetry was acquired by the Philadelphia architects through training, foreign travel, and their social and cultural background. Characteristically, the sentimental interpretation of the pastoral architecture of the past, couple with the asymmetrical picturesque house of 19th century England, found a strong echo in the architectural composition of these examples. Because of their architectural educational background under the Beaux-Arts system, the architects were influenced by Guadet's theory of composition based upon the rejection of bilateral symmetry in favor of balanced irregularity



Fig. 10. Garth, Germantown, Pennsylvania  
Photographed by K. Bozorgi.

where a sense of "equilibrium" is produced by a harmonious correlation between primary, secondary and tertiary axes. A beautiful plan, which for Guadet is the originator of a beautiful elevation, becomes the compositional goal sought by Mellor, Meigs and Howe, McGoodwin, and Willing and Sims. The ability to visualize the inseparable relation of plan and elevation as taught at the Ecole is explained by Van Pelt when he writes that: "The power of seeing a completed figure in the mind's eye is acquired by thorough training in descriptive geometry . . . through practice anyone can finally attain facility, provided he never draws a silhouette in plan without knowing what it means." The preference of client and architect for the irregular picturesque, for the requirements of the program and for a response to the site and topography are important reasons why these architects chose the design principle of balanced equilibrium while rejecting neoclassical forms of symmetry. The aesthetic attitude behind the design concept of Mellor, Meigs & Howe is expressed by a love of diversity. In this romantically inspired eclecticism, the characteristic method of using and combining architectural elements as dictated by a cultural nostalgia for a dynamic and pictorial skyline.

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