

Picturesque Ambiguities: The Country House Tradition in America

Richard Guy Wilson

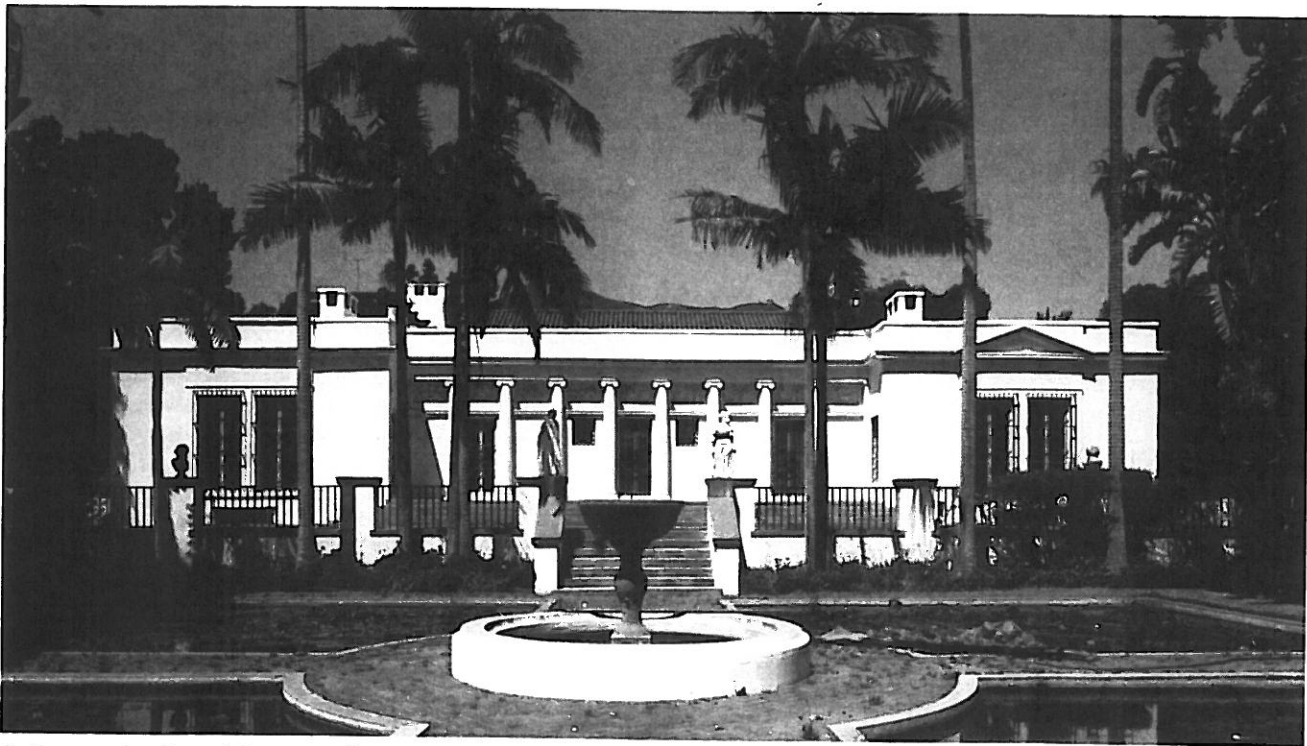
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I dentifying an American country house tradition is so fraught with ambiguities, so filled with circumlocutions and qualifications suggesting the later manner of Henry James that, one might argue, no such tradition exists. But paradoxically we know they do exist, or at least many Americans have created what they call country houses. The American fascination with country houses, both our own and the English, retains a firm hold on our imagination as an exemplary, if not *the ideal* way in which to live. The notion of a country house has provided a freedom for Americans they could not find in the city. But what might be called a country house has varied, as infatuation has risen and diminished. Interest grew in the country house in the later half of the nineteenth century, culminating in the decades of the 1880s to the 1920s, and then fell in the 1930s and only began to rise again in the 1970s into what may rate as a contemporary revival.¹ One can claim that the American country house with all its ambiguities, variety, problems of definition, Anglophilic origins, and uncertain location somewhere in the landscape, is a central feature of American identity and culture.

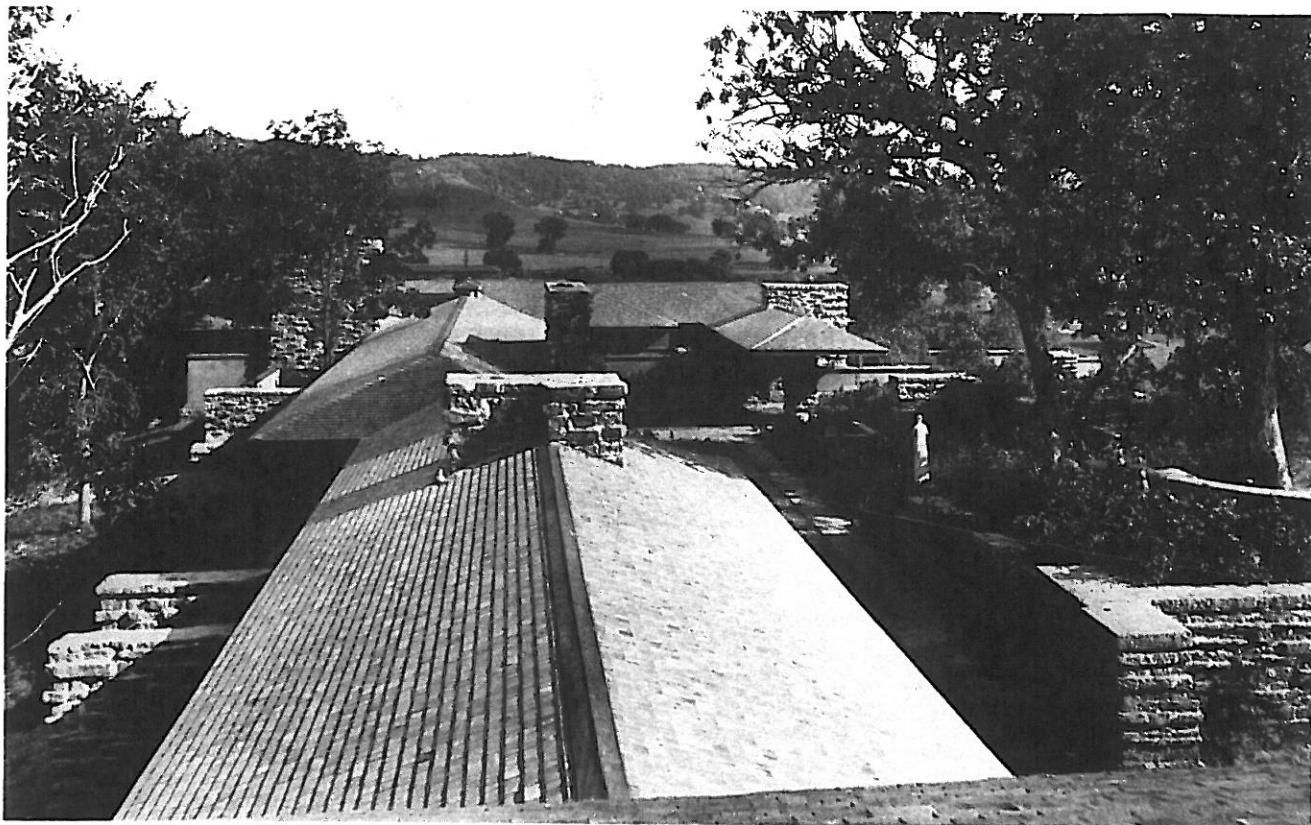
Part of the ambiguity lies with the term country house. It is generic to a whole cast of buildings which might include—in descriptive terms—country seat, villa, place, estate, plantation, manor, lodge, resort, suburban ranch, cottage, a



1. McKim, Mead and White, Roger Goelet House, Southside, Newport, Rhode Island, 1883–84. East/ocean facade. From George Sheldon, *Artistic-Country Seats*, 1886.



3. Bertram Goodhue of Cram, Goodhue and Ferguson, James Waldron Gillispie House, El Fureidis, Montecito, California, 1902. South facade.



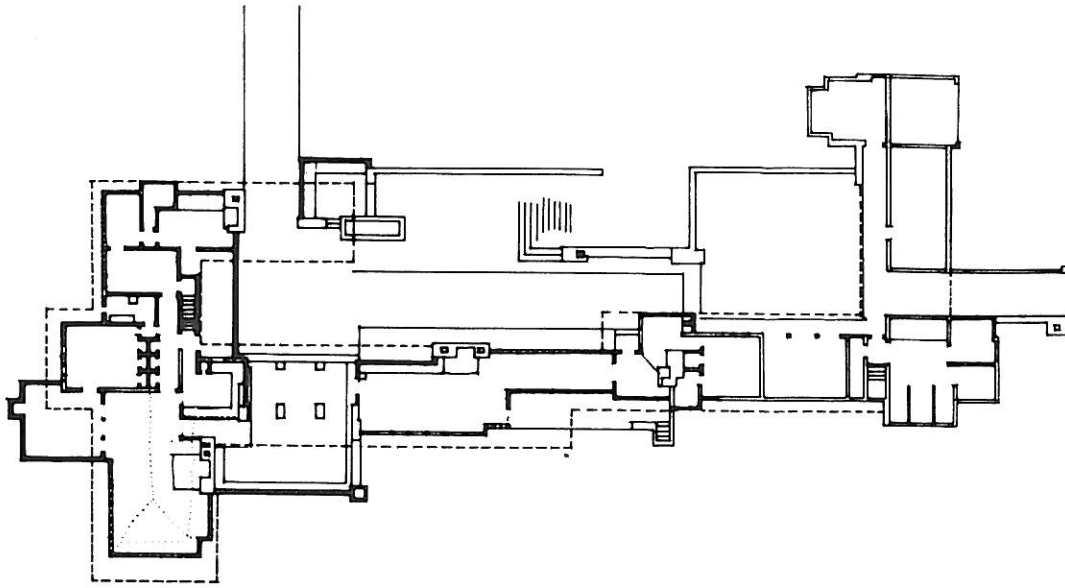
5. Frank Lloyd Wright, Taliesin, Spring Green, Wisconsin, 1912. Looking south, before 1917.

with other resort cottages in Newport, to twenty-five or thirty acres in country places or suburban enclaves on the outskirts of larger towns or cities in Georgia or California, to many hundreds of acres in rural Wisconsin. The different sizes of the setting illustrate the amorphous nature of the American country house: the Goelet house is a summer resort house, Swan House and El Fureidis with their limited acreage are either country places or large suburban mansions, and Taliesin was the manor house for a large domain.

These differences of location and their relation to their surrounding land mark one of the dramatic differences between the American country house and its English forebears to which all American examples owe a debt. Mark Girouard, the leading scholar of the English country house, defines them as not just large houses in the country in which rich people lived, but “power houses—the houses of a ruling class.”⁷ The English country house represented family lineage—they were dynastic seats—and economic and political power, based upon the ownership of large tracts of land. The control of land, not for farming, but for rents to tenants and the resultant wealth, monetarily and politically was the foundation upon which the English country house lay. For centuries the country house was the basis of political power in England. The nineteenth and twentieth centuries have seen changes in the size, and the economic and political

importance of the English country house; frequently they have become simply large weekend retreats with no political or economic connection to the surrounding countryside. Yet until the 1930s, much of England was run by owners of country houses. Following this English definition, only Taliesin (of those houses treated above) and a few other American examples might be considered true examples of a country house. The closest American example would be the large landowners’—and politicians’—houses of the eighteenth century such as Mount Vernon, and Carter’s Grove, in Virginia, or Philipse Manor in Yonkers. And there were nineteenth century equivalents, the large ante-bellum plantation houses of the south, or possibly the post-Civil War house, Biltmore, and maybe even those dwellings of the Kings in Texas, or the Kohrs in Montana from which the vast cattle domains were controlled. But these houses, especially the western examples, lack in many ways what we associate with country houses—the refinement, the taste, the urbanity, the stylish life—that either the four noted earlier, or the English models bring to mind.

While few American country houses fit the English definition of “power houses,” still England has provided the inspiration for Americans both literally and metaphorically. Washington Irving on a tour of England in 1818 reflected that the country house had “all the conveniences and



6. Frank Lloyd Wright, Taliesin, Spring Green, Wisconsin, 1912. Plan, 1912. Redrawn by Sidney K. Robinson.

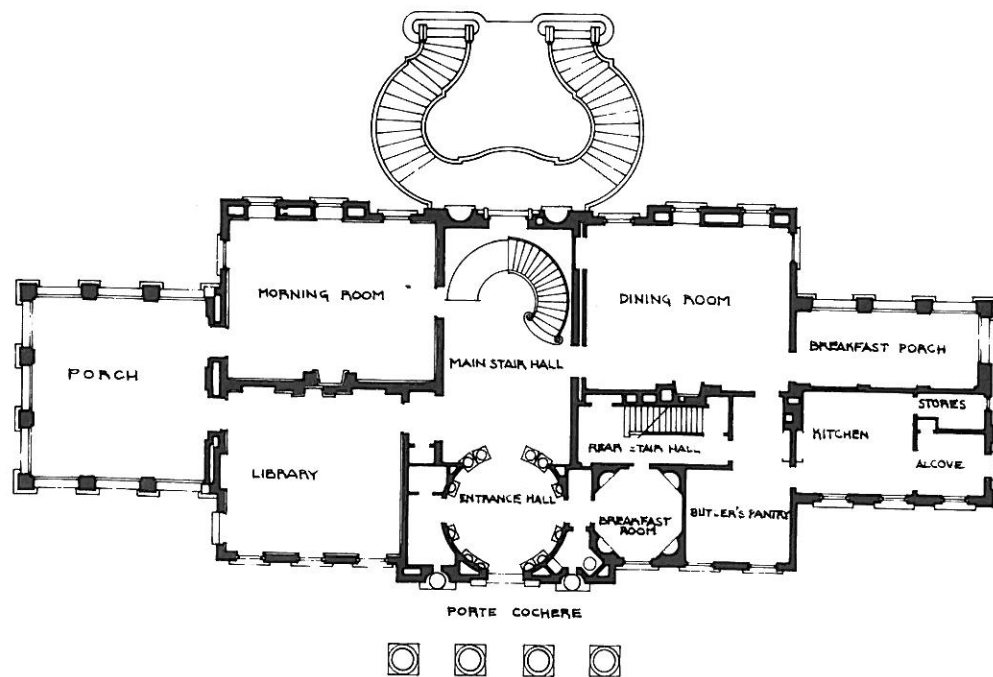
elegances of polite life,” there were no “restraints.” He went on to observe that the Englishman’s “country seat abounds with every requisite, either for studious retirement, tasteful gratification, or rural exercise. Books, paintings, music, horses, dogs, and sporting implements. . . . in the true spirit of hospitality provides the means of enjoyment.”⁸ Nearly half a century later on the eve of the great American country house boom Henry James would claim: “Of all the great things that the English have invented and made part of the credit of the national character, the most perfect, the most characteristic, the only one they have mastered completely in all its details so that it becomes a compendious illustration of the their social genius and their manners, is the well-appointed, well-administered, well-filled country house.”⁹ In James’ fiction, such as *The Portrait of a Lady* (1881), in which the novel opens with tea on the lawn of a venerable English country seat owned by a wealthy American, or *The Spoils of Poynton* (1896), he taught Americans to crave the psychic safety that the country house represented. And over one hundred years later, J. Carter Brown of the National Gallery in Washington, D. C., observed the “central place the country house still holds in the British national consciousness, and what dreams of Elysium it continues to offer in an egalitarian twentieth century.”¹⁰ Americans have not been able to create Knoles, or Blenheims, but inspired by the English example combined with the American penchant for

treating ideals as real form, they have created a native country house tradition.

Economic conditions are a key to understanding the American country house. Prosperity spells a boom in country house building, depression or recession leads to a scaling back in aspirations and fewer country houses. The bank and insurance company failures of the mid-1870s and mid-1890s led to a hiatus in country house building; major designers of country houses such as McKim, Mead and White turned to public work. The stock market crash of 1929 and the depression of the 1930s meant a virtual end to all country house building for years; many homes were sold at bankruptcy sales, and an entire generation of architectural practice came to an end. Firms such as Delano and Aldrich who received and designed over one hundred separate country house commissions (which included all the support structures: gate lodges, stables, garages, and sports pavilions) between 1905 and 1929, did only three in the 1930s.¹¹ Those architects who had based their livelihood on country houses, such as Charles Adams Platt, Mellor, Meigs, and Howe, or Harrie T. Lindeberg, scrambled—generally unsuccessfully—for different types of work. Economics also played a role in undermining whatever real American country house tradition existed in the eighteenth and early nineteenth century. Instead of holding land and farming as the



7. Philip Trammell Shutze of Hentz, Reid and Shutze, Mr. and Mrs. Edward H. Inman House, Swan House, Buckland, Georgia, 1926–28. Entrance/east facade.



9. Philip Trammell Shutze of Hentz, Reid and Shutze, Mr. and Mrs. Edward H. Inman House, Swan House, Buckland, Georgia, 1926–28. Plan.



8. Philip Trammell Shutze of Hentz, Reid and Shutze, Mr. and Mrs. Edward H. Inman House, Swan House, Buckland, Georgia, 1926–28. Garden/west facade.

source of wealth, the United States changed; now commerce, finance, industry, and the professions would provide the riches to create the effect of a country house. What had been real country houses were either destroyed, allowed to molder away as shabby hulks filled with ghosts, or in a few cases altered until they became luxurious imitations of their past.

Culturally the American country house tradition draws upon a deeply ingrained American characteristic that values life in the country and near nature. While this attitude does not exist in isolation and arguments can be made for an American urban tradition, the arcadian impulse of finding true worth, value, and the good life in the countryside has been very strong since the later eighteenth century and continues today. The political philosophy of Thomas Jefferson held as fundamental the society of the aristocratic country house and the small town. America grew into an urban nation in the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, and the ideal was transformed. Nature and the country became an arcadia, ranging from the pantheism of the Transcendentalists, to the roughness of *The Call of the Wild*. There are many permutations of the American love affair with nature and the countryside, from “back to the land” to Teddy Roosevelt’s “strenuous life,” and certainly not all are directly associated with country houses, but there is a continuum along which all are

arranged. And all are tied by point of contrast to the city, indeed the country house of the turn-of-the-century could not exist but for the city which not only provided the wealth to support it but an umbilical cord in the form of transportation. The railroad and then the automobile opened up the country and allowed escape first on the weekends and in the summer, and then on a daily basis.¹²

There have been some genuine American country houses following the English power house definition. The early American plantations and manor houses noted above, such as Carter’s Grove or Mount Vernon, came very close. And based upon English Georgian and Palladian models, these houses have continued to exert a stylistic influence on their imitative successors. Also in certain rural areas especially in the south, power houses did remain in the ante-bellum period.¹³ But with the changing economic and cultural pattern of the mid- and later nineteenth century they ceased to be power houses and became shrines, as with Mount Vernon, or ironically a plaything of northern wealth as with Carter’s Grove. At the turn of the century numerous northern business men sought the plantation image in the south and purchased old estates, such as the DuPonts at Montpelier—James Madison’s home—in Orange, Virginia; Louis Hertle of Chicago at Gunston Hall—George Mason’s house—in Fairfax County; and T. Perceval Bisland and then Molly and Archibald



10. Philip Trammell Shutze of Hentz, Reid and Shutze, Mr. and Mrs. Edward H. Inman House, Swan House, Buckland, Georgia, 1926–28. Library.



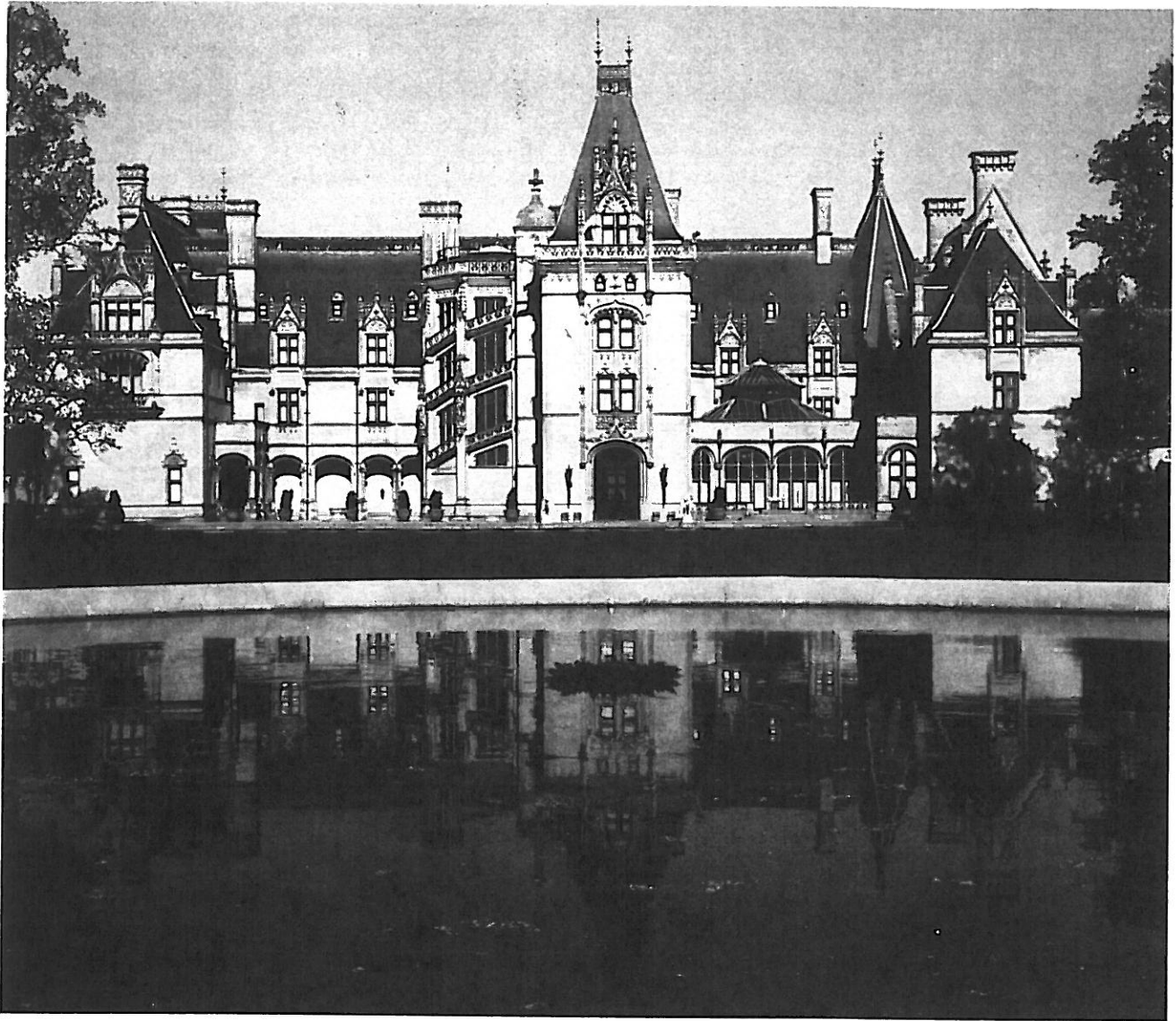
11. David Minitree, builder; W. W. Tyree and W. Duncan Lee, restoration architects, Burwell-Bisland-McCrea House, Carter's Grove, James City County, Virginia, 1751–55, 1906, 1926–28. River/south facade.

McCrea all of New York at Carter's Grove (fig. 11). Originally built in 1751–1755 for Carter Burwell, T. Perceval Bisland purchased Carter's Grove and, with the assistance of the New York architect W. W. Tyree, restored the house, stripping the original white paint from the magnificent hall and staining the wood a dark color. The McCrea's purchased Carter's Grove in 1928 and hired the Richmond architect Duncan Lee, who conducted a "restoration-plus" on the house. Arthur Shurcliff, who concurrently was designing gardens for the Rockefeller-sponsored Colonial Williamsburg, worked up elaborate formal gardens for the McCreas, but only a portion were realized. The former separate dependencies of Carter's Grove were linked by hyphens to the main house, the roof was raised and dormers installed, shutters were added and the interior was modernized. Lee and the McCreas lightened the dark stain in the hall. Carter's Grove became a idealized reproduction of an eighteenth century plantation house and a setting for twentieth century country house parties.¹⁴

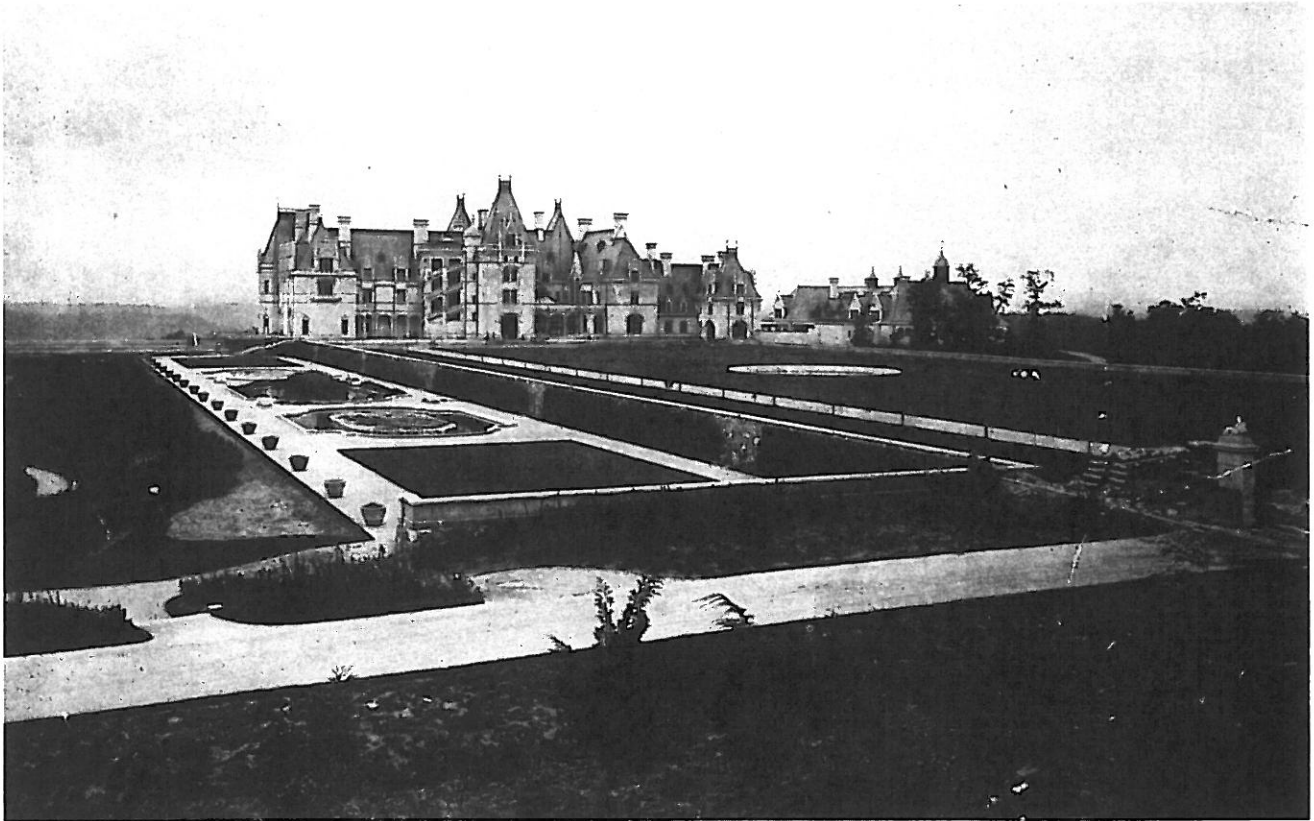
Later attempts to create genuine power houses in America have been rare but significant. Biltmore, the country estate laid out and built between 1889 and 1894 for George Washington Vanderbilt outside of Asheville, North Carolina is the premiere example (figs. 12a, b). Acting as the seat for 125,000 acres of land both under cultivation and conservation, and

supported by a host of farm buildings, outbuildings, roads, and formal and informal gardens, the scale of Biltmore out does most English country houses. Henry James visited it in 1905 and claimed this 255-room house was of "a size to contain two or three Mentmores and Waddesdons," and his room was a "glacial phantasy."¹⁵ Frederick Law Olmsted and his assistants laid out the extensive grounds which exhibit French, Italian, and English gardening features along with an American approach to the vastness of the enterprise. Designed by Richard Morris Hunt in the French François Premier style, Biltmore owes a debt to the Rothschild English country house, Waddesdon Manor, Buckshire, built from 1874 to 1883. As much as George Vanderbilt wanted to imitate the English country house, his ability came from family commercial interests, and even while there is a resemblance in this feature to the Rothschilds, still Biltmore never became a political base.¹⁶

At the turn of the century before the income tax depleted the wealth of some robber barons, there were other attempts to replicate in all possible details the English country house. William R. Mead, the middle partner of the McKim firm, wrote in an ironical manner to a friend in 1895: "Twombly wants a house on the order of an English Country gentleman. I don't think he knows exactly what he means, and I am sure I don't, but as near as I can gather, his idea is that it



12a. Richard Morris Hunt. George Washington Vanderbilt House, Biltmore, Asheville, North Carolina, 1889–95.



12b. Richard Morris Hunt. George Washington Vanderbilt House, Biltmore, Asheville, North Carolina, 1889–95.

shall be a thoroughly comfortable house without the stiffness of the modern city house. Twombly is the sort of man who, if he gets what he wants, is willing to pay for it.”¹⁷ To this end Hamilton McKown Twombly, who was married to Florence Vanderbilt—the sister of George Vanderbilt—and managed the Vanderbilt business interests assembled 1,200 acres in northern New Jersey about twenty-five miles from Manhattan. Between 1890 and 1900 he had McKim, Mead and White design him a model farm, gate house, lodging for help, stables, indoor swimming pool, orangery, and a main house modeled loosely on Wren’s additions to Hampton Court (fig. 13). The main house lacks grace, the windows are too small and too many and the front door is awkwardly proportioned to the columnar portico. Nonetheless, the house is ample in space with over a hundred rooms and sits alone on its acreage safe from the encroachments of neighbors. Frederick Law Olmsted advised on the layout and the placing of the house and wrote Twombly: “you have a sweep of landscape to an infinitely remote and perspectively obscure background, an appropriate and well-proportioned foreground and middle distance being perfectly within your control; as much so as if you owned the State of New Jersey.”¹⁸ Named Florham, a combination of the Twombly’s first names, the estate was intended to serve as a backdrop for a noble American dynasty. Here Twombly could indulge himself, fill the house with art and antiques, raise prize cat-

tle, ride to the hounds, and hold house parties for guests who would arrive at a private railroad siding, appropriate for the owners of the New York Central. The dynastic seat lasted scarcely fifty years; in 1955 the estate was subdivided and the house became a college.¹⁹

Two other variations on duplicating the English country house are the Mackay estate, Harbour Court, at Roslyn, Long Island, and Frank Lloyd Wright’s Taliesin. The MacKay’s limited land, 648 acres, and the competing nearby houses, such as E. D. Morgan’s Wheatleigh, and William C. Whitney’s The Manse, made Harbour Court more a country place. But so lavish were its appointments that Wallis Warfield Simpson’s future husband, on his American tour of 1924, claimed the house and grounds outdid any English country house.²⁰ Frank Lloyd Wright tried hard to fit Taliesin I, 1911–12 (and its later variations) into the English country house definition. The land which originally came from Wright’s family grew in time to 3,000 acres and while the house reflects Wright’s Prairie School and Japanese interests, the highly complicated spatial program and the way the house rules the valley have an English origin. The house surrounds the brow of the hill, and commands the valley which Wright carefully redesigned, burying power lines, cutting new roads, damming and creating streams and ponds and replanting all types of vegetation—in the best English pic-



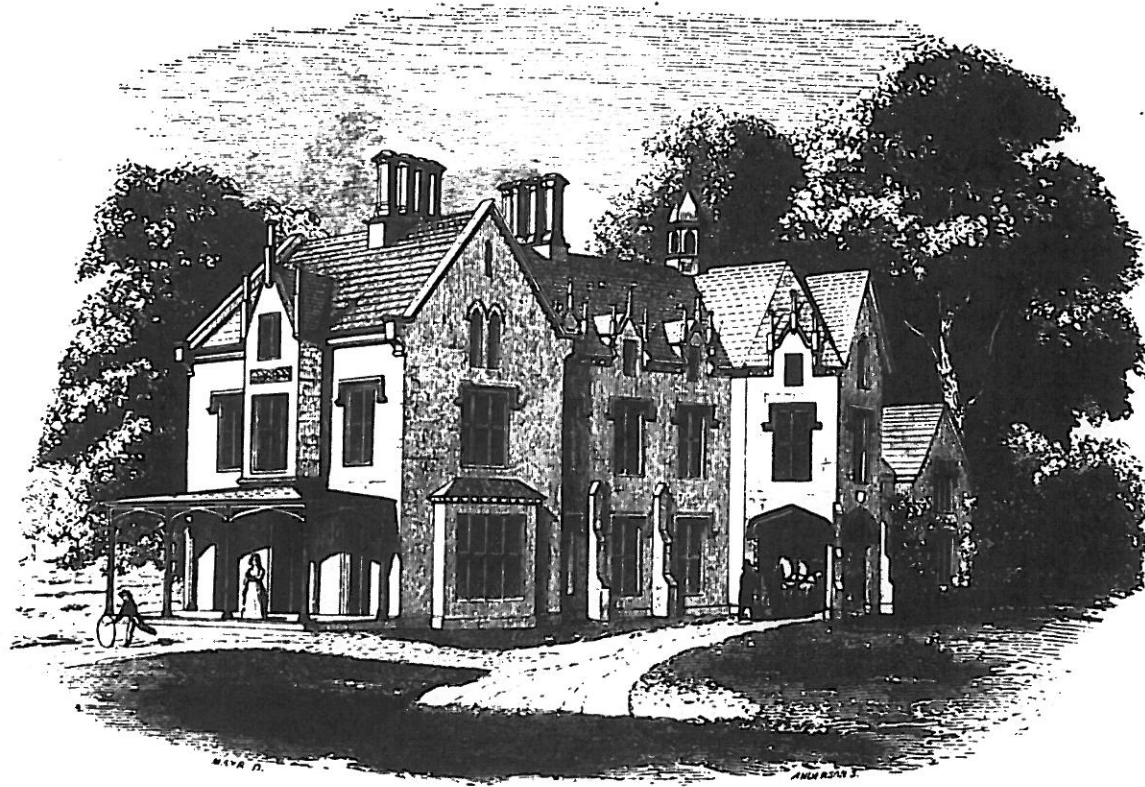
13. McKim, Mead and White, Hamilton McKown Twombly House, Florham, Madison, New Jersey, 1890–1900. Entrance/west facade.

turesque tradition—throughout his long tenure until his death in 1959. Wright had a love-hate relationship with the English country house; he recognized its virtues, even acknowledging an admiration for Edwin Lutyens, though questioning—at least in print—the paternalism involved. Yet Taliesin (who was a Welsh poet, though Wright liked to claim the house's name meant “shining brow”), became the ultimate feudal domain, complete with its own group of employees and students who owed nearly total allegiance to the master.²¹

These attempts at real American power houses make up only a small portion of the American country house tradition; for the less wealthy there are the imitations, the country villas, places, and resort cottages. Imitations appeared very early in America; a house such as Mount Pleasant, 1761, along the Schuylkill River outside of Philadelphia looks like the country seat of minor English landed gentry; it was actually the suburban home of a Scottish sea captain. This locating of retreats in the countryside outside of the metropolitan area appeared early and would continue as one of the major American land use traditions, one that was neither urban or rural, but a middle landscape of country houses in close proximity to each other.

This deeply rooted desire of imitative country houses only

became a real ethos, complete with published models, in the mid-nineteenth century with the work of Andrew Jackson Downing, and his sometimes collaborators, Alexander Jackson Davis and Gervase Wheeler. All of Downing's many writings, and especially *The Architecture of Country Houses* (1850), develop the proposition: “the villa, or the country house proper, then, is the most refined home of America—the home of its most leisurely and educated class of citizen” (fig. 14). This sentiment would be repeated ad infinitum throughout the remainder of the nineteenth century and well into the twentieth.²² Downing outlined various styles of country houses, from Gothic to Italianate and Bracketed, along with plans, details, furnishings and garden layouts. Certainly Downing wished for all his prospective country house clients to have large estates, but his real concern was the house and he offered models from large to small that could be placed on sites of all sizes, from a half acre to many, as long as some shielding from the neighbors took place. The result over the next thirty years was the creation on the outskirts of cities, and in particularly scenic areas such as the Hudson River Valley, of a pastoral landscape, a Currier & Ives picture of domestic harmony with families located in their own—as Edith Wharton termed them—*Hudson River Bracketed* country seats (fig. 15).²³ The link is direct between these various country villas and later country houses, places, resorts, and suburban enclaves.



14. Gervase Wheeler, "An American Country-House of the first class." From Alexander Jackson Downing, *The Architecture of Country Houses*, 1850.

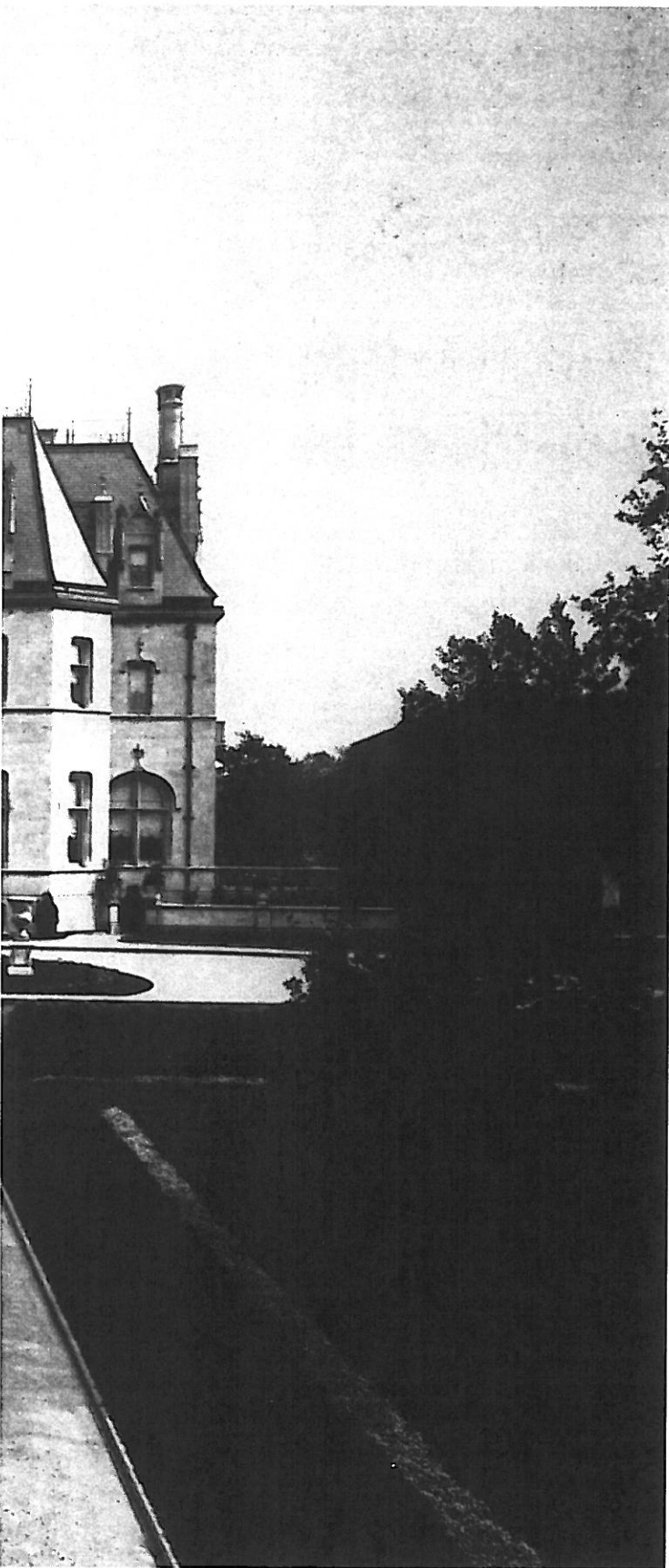
One of the first planned garden suburbs in America, Llewellyn Park, New Jersey, 1853–57, laid out in part by A. J. Davis, provided country house sites of an acre or two, each carefully screened from the adjoining property (fig. 16). These were country houses for the middle and upper classes that could be used as weekend, and in time, daily retreats from Manhattan, twelve miles distant. The Llewellyn Park resident owners had most of the advantages of a country house existence without the bother of extensive land to manage. Within the confines of the park existed an imported community of like-minded social equals.²⁴

Beginning in the 1870s and continuing until well past the turn of the century a new type of hybrid landscape for imitative country houses came into being, the resort. Actually Newport, Rhode Island, became a summertime watering spa in the 1790s, and Downing and Davis had both done imitative country houses there in the 1840s and 1850s, but the explosion of wealth, the increased travel facilities of trains and boats, and the innovation of vacations led to the flowering of resorts in the period after the Civil War.²⁵ There were the seacoast resorts, Newport and Narragansett, Rhode Island; Elberon, Long Branch and Cape May, New Jersey; the North Shore of Boston; Southampton, Oyster Bay, Smithtown, and Montauk on Long Island; Bar Harbor, Dark Harbor and Winter Harbor, Maine; Palm Beach in Florida;

Ocean Springs in Mississippi; Carmel, California; and inland resorts, Tuxedo Park and Lake George in New York; Lenox and Stockbridge in the Berkshires of western Massachusetts; Lake Geneva in Wisconsin; Pasadena and Redlands (winter resorts) in California, and many others which became the new setting for American country house experiments. Initially as in Newport or Lenox, the resorts focused on earlier colonial settlements which provided some architectural imagery, but there and in most of the other wealthy resorts, the compulsion to build houses quickly spread to the outskirts and created a carefully manicured, country house neighborhood or suburb. The houses for these settings, such as McKim, Mead and White's great wood shingle palace for Robert Goelet in Newport, became the model for suburban and country developments all across America. In Newport in the late 1880s a shift upwards in an already enlarged scale took place, which in time was followed in other places such as along the New Jersey shore, or in Florida. This new gigantism of competitive "conspicuous consumption," as Thorstein Veblen labeled it, brought Henry James to call them "white elephants, . . . all cry and no wool, all house and no garden . . . [a] distressful, inevitable waste."²⁶ Euphemistically called cottages, houses like Ochre Court, which Richard Morris Hunt designed for Ogden Goelet on a two-acre site next door to his brother's house, show the new scale; this was a house that could only be comfortable commanding a



15. Richard Morris Hunt, Ogden Goellet House, Ochre Court, Newport, Rhode Island, 1888–93. Entrance/west facade.

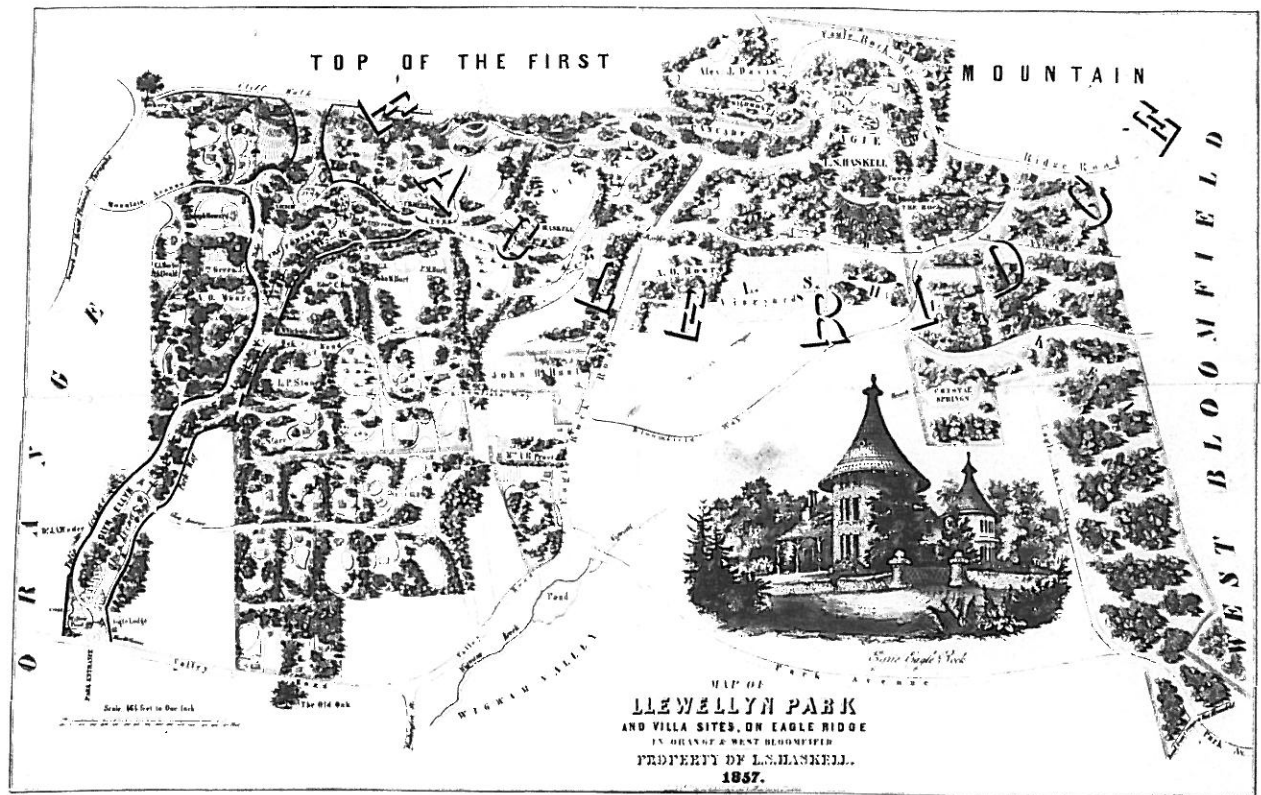


duchy (fig. 17). Ochre Court became a prototype for Hunt's later Biltmore, and the new, elephantine, turn-of-the-century, robber-baron mansion.²⁷

The resort became the basis for many of the later country place and suburban enclaves, both as setting and also for housing models. The resort further provided the model for that essential feature of the country place and suburban enclave, the sport or country club. First came the casino, entertainment pavilions of various sizes, from simply covered dance floors to multipurpose structures containing dining, sports, conversation and party spaces. McKim, Mead and White led with their casinos in Newport, 1879–81 and Narragansett Pier, 1883–86 (fig. 18). Casinos could be independently standing structures such as these or attached to a resort hotel such as the dance pavilion McKim, Mead and White did for the Argyle Hotel at Babylon, Long Island. Soon most resorts of any pretense had a casino.²⁸ The first golfing club in the United States was the St. Andrew's Club in suburban Yonkers, New York, formed in 1888. The first permanent golf club building and one of the first professionally laid out golf courses was that at Shinnecock Hills done for the summer resort community at the eastern end of Long Island. By 1902 there were more than a thousand golfing, or as they came to be called, country clubs in America. The country club which in addition to golf could offer tennis, cricket, polo, pigeon shooting, or drag hunting was essential to the country house boom of the turn of the century. On the links the businessman could commune with a purified, predictable and artificial nature while engaged in sporting competition. The club was exclusive and offered entertainment when life was slow at home.²⁹

Not all of the new resort houses were such "a barely interrupted chain" along Bellevue Avenue on the cliffs in Newport, but encompassed more acreage such as at Lenox in the Berkshire Hills. There Henry James found during his tour of 1905 perhaps "some injury at the hands of the summer people," but still this came the closest to "leisure on the way to legitimation, of the social idyll, of the workable, the expensively workable, American form of country life."³⁰

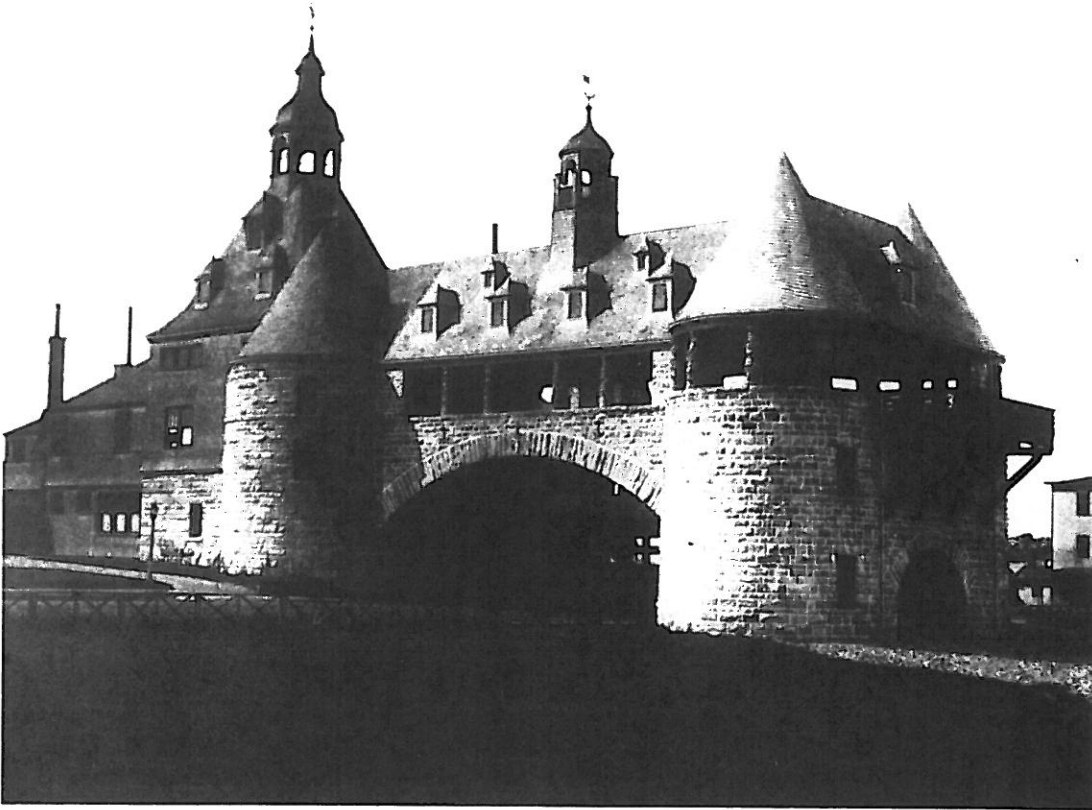
To Lenox from Newport came Edith Wharton, who chronicled some of the trivialities of American country house life in her novels. Together with Ogden Codman, she had written *The Decoration of Houses* (1897), an important treatise on how the interior of the new American plutocrats house should be architectural and reflect the best of European classical taste, essentially Louis XIV to XVI, and Georgian. Fed up with the "vapid watering-place amusements" of Newport she purchased 126 acres of land in Lenox and together with Francis (Frank) L. V. Hoppin, as architect, Codman as interior decorator, and Beatrix Jones Farrand as landscape designer, she created her version of the American country house (figs. 19, 20). The Mount, as she named it, was loosely based upon Belton House, Lincolnshire, England, which was thought to have been designed by Sir



16. Alexander Jackson Davis and Llewellyn Haskill, assisted by Eugene A. Baumann and Howard Daniels, Llewellyn Park, West Orange, New Jersey, 1853–57. Map of 1857.



17. Frances F. Palmer, *American Country Life*, 1855. Lithograph published by Nathaniel Currier, 1855.



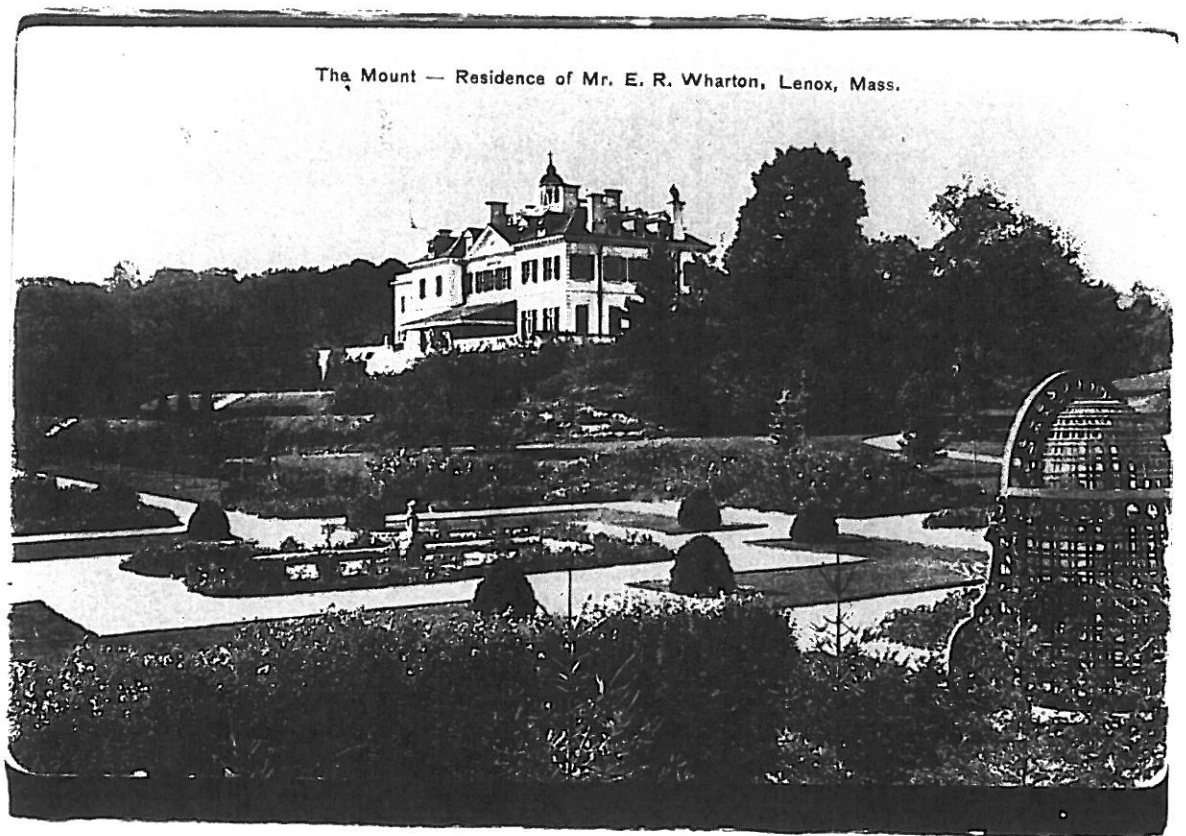
18. McKim, Mead and White, Narragansett Pier Casino, Narragansett, Rhode Island, 1883–86. South east/bay view. From George Sheldon, *Artistic-Country Seats*, 1886.

Christopher Wren in the 1680s. The white color and green shutters were purely American. The interiors were a mixture of French, Italian and English styles. The approach with an allee of sugar maples and a thick forest was French, while the elaborate terraces, and cross axial gardens were Italian. From her terrace she could view Laurel Lake in the middle distance and in the background lay the low Berkshire Hills. This eclecticism of European sources merging into a new whole is typical of the American Renaissance mentality of the turn of the century; America was the heir of the old world, and as Stanford White once said: “had, therefore, the right to obtain art wherever she could.”³¹

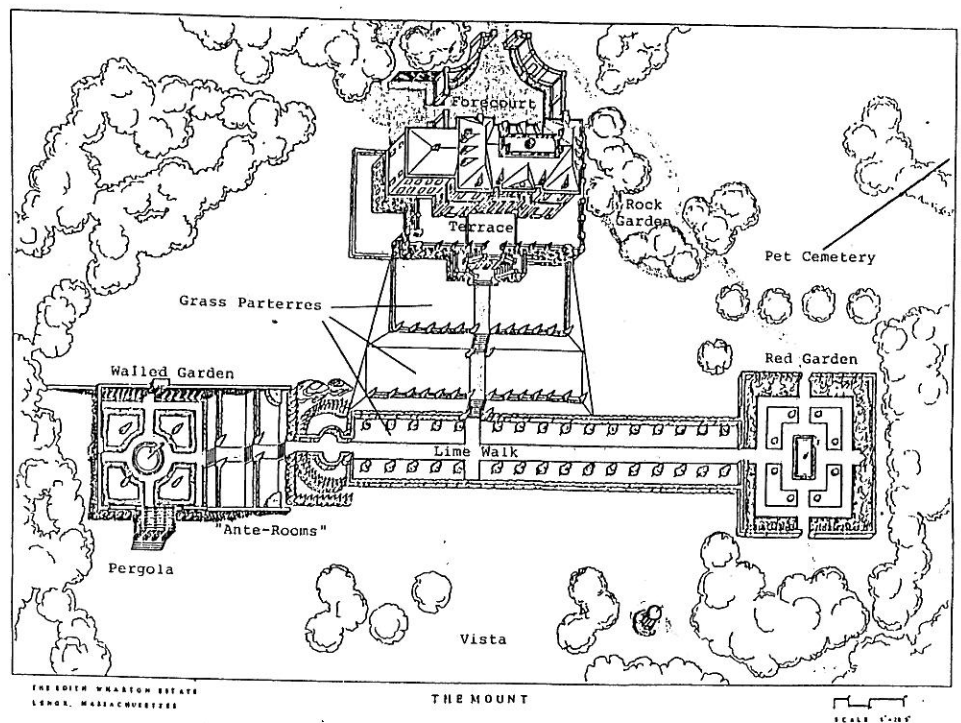
Wharton’s house was not a “power” country house, but a country place. Located on limited acreage with stables, gate house, gardens, and sometimes with a few acres for farming, the country place became the most popular form of country house into the late 1920s. The size of a country place could vary, from five acres, or in reality a spacious suburb, to fifty or sixty acres. The setting was as one critic claimed “a rural park.”³² Growing in many cases out of earlier resorts, the country place was designed for sport and relaxation. Country places dotted Westchester County, northern New Jersey, the Main Line outside of Philadelphia, the northern suburbs of Chicago and Atlanta, and indeed, every American city had a country place. Shutze’s Swan House outside Atlanta shows

the developed type well. With its English Palladian entrance front, Italian garden facade, cascades, Grinling Gibbons styled carving on the interior, it could clearly command great acreage, rather than a mere twenty six. Near the end of the country house era in 1928, *Time* magazine painted a distinctive picture of Long Island: “Here, in a country made for pleasure, live socially-minded persons who dart to their diversions along concealed and crooked trails, inserted through the woods or strewn upon the shore. Their houses, lying between hills or built above bright beaches, are walled with forest and reticent behind curling drives.”³³ Edward, the Duke or Windsor, whose admiration of the Mackay estate we noted earlier, stayed at the Burden house, Woodside at Syosset in the summer of 1924, a house and gardens designed by Delano and Aldrich (figs. 21, 22). He admired the scale of hospitality and the “fine homes with well-kept lawns and swimming pools. Compared to the creature comforts American took for granted, the luxury to which I was accustomed in Europe seemed almost primitive.”³⁴ But this would all end very quickly. In the 1930s a new social order led by Robert Moses would push parkways and super highways through the country places and open the island to a new form of settlement, the closely packed generic suburb of Levittowns.

Supporting the country place era were not only architects,



19. Francis L. V. Hoppin of Hoppin and Koen, Edith Wharton House, The Mount, Lenox, Massachusetts, 1901-02. Garden/north east facade, c. 1905.



Drawing by Carole Palermo-Schulze

20. Francis L. V. Hoppin of Hoppin and Koen, Edith Wharton House, The Mount, Lenox, Massachusetts, 1901-02. Garden plan. Restoration drawing by Carole Palermo-Schulze.



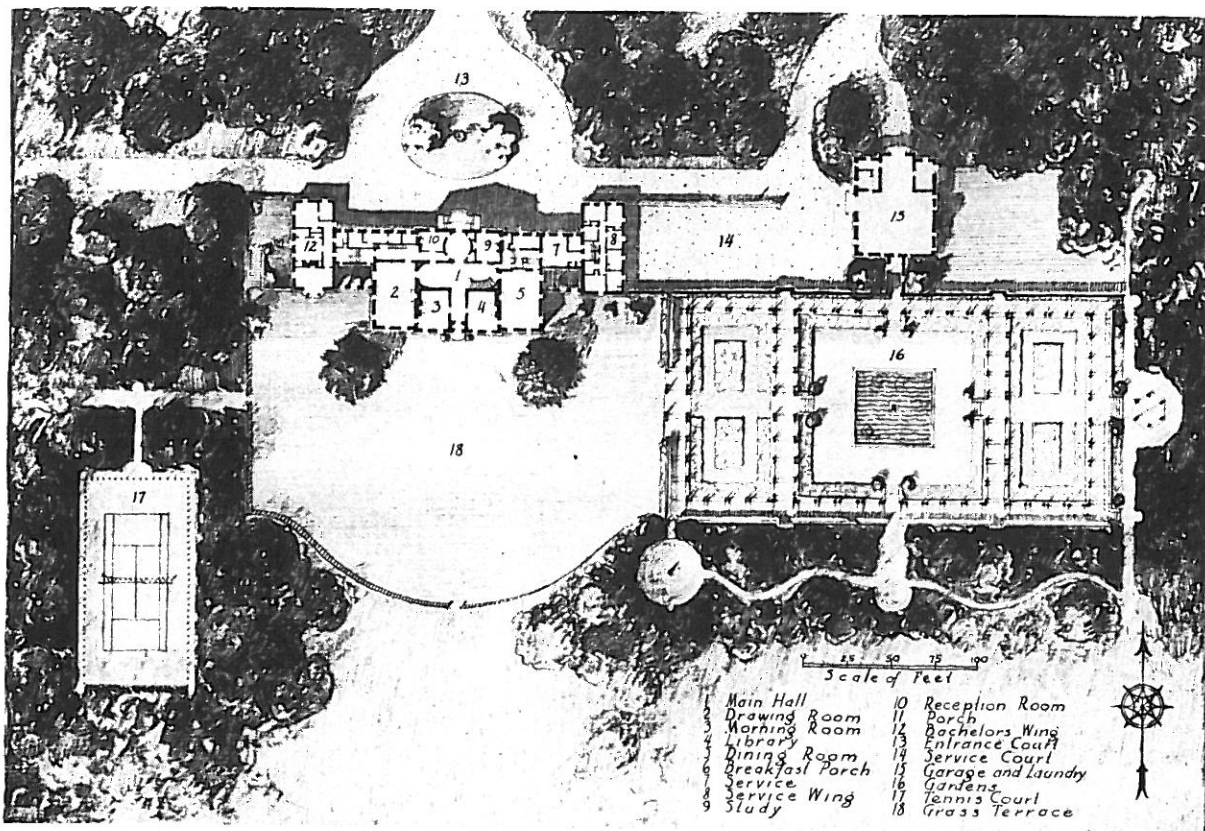
21. William Adams Delano of Delano and Aldrich, James A. Burden House, Woodside, Muttontown/Syosset, New York, 1916–19. Drawing by Chester B. Price for *Portraits of Ten Country Houses*, by Delano and Aldrich, 1924.

decorators and landscape designers, but an extensive promotional literature such as the magazines *House & Garden*, *House Beautiful*, *Countryside*, *Suburban Life*, *Country Life in America*, and weekly or monthly columns in *Collier's*, *Ladies' Home Journal* and many others. *Country Life*, founded in 1901 in imitation of the similarly named, and successful English magazine, had its editorial offices in Garden City, Long Island. The editor, Liberty Hyde Bailey, supported almost anything having to do with the country: "We would preach the sermon of the out-of-doors, where men are free."³⁵ He published articles on gardening, suburban colonies for the lower middle class, and especially, large country places for the wealthy, which became the equivalent of centerfolds. His ideal was the archetypal setting for Americans in their country places: "Some day we shall construct great pictures out-of-doors. We shall assemble the houses, control the architecture, arrange the trees and forest, direct the roads and fences, display the slopes of the hills, lay out the farms, remove every feature that offends a sensitive eye; and persons will leave the galleries, with their limitations and imitations, to go to the country to see some of the greatest works of art that man can make."³⁶

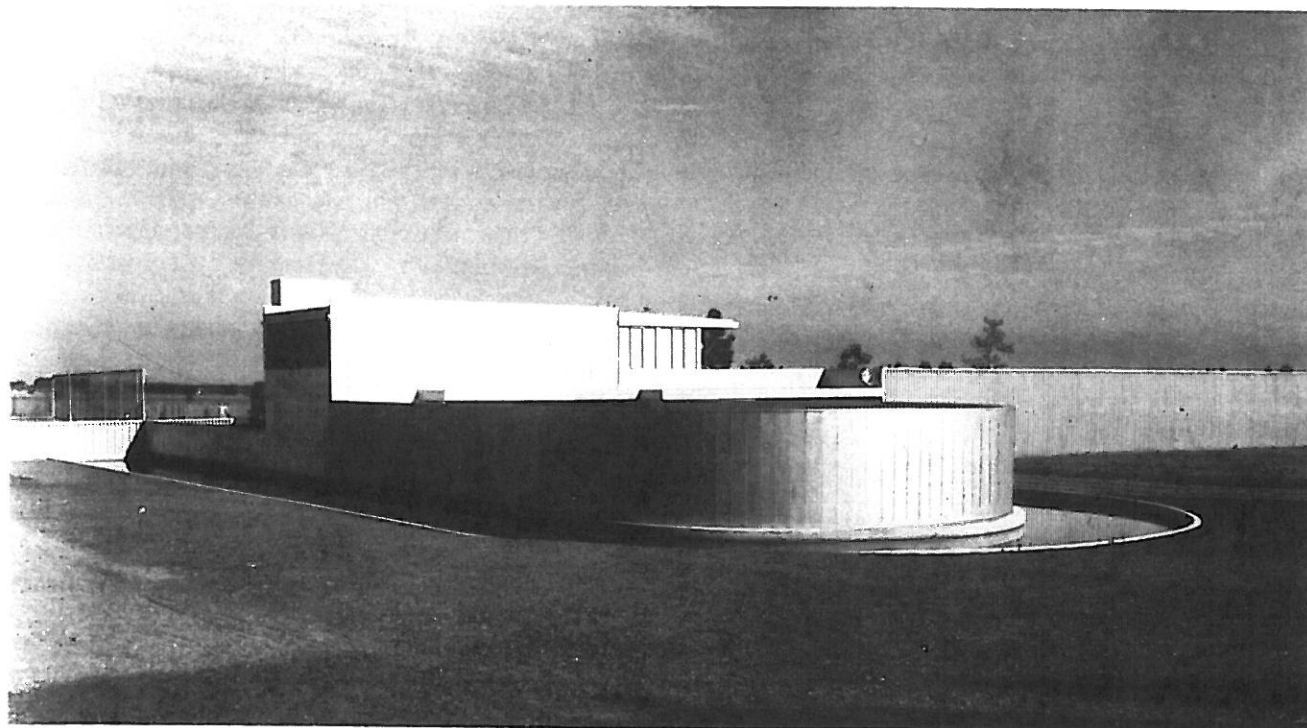
What seemed an idyllic, arcadian way to live came to an abrupt end in 1929. While the country house ethos with its old world stylistic lineage appears to be the utter antithesis of

the shiny new, and machine oriented Modernism as it developed in the 1930s, still some of the myth of country life remained. A large stylistically Modern house, such as that designed by Richard Neutra for the movie director Joseph Von Sternberg and built in the San Fernando Valley in 1936, was described by him as "a county house," and with its twenty acres, garden, pool, tennis courts and orchards, it was bigger than many other country places and had a similar picturesque whimsy (fig. 23). Here was a shiny, streamlined object existing in the middle of an almost desertlike setting; certainly Hollywood in image, but country house in its picturesque and artificial contrast.³⁷ Country houses were done by other Modernists: George Howe, William Lescaze, A. Lawrence Kocher, Edward Frey, Raymond Hood, Edward Durrell Stone, and of course Frank Lloyd Wright. During the high point of Modernism in America—the 1940s through 1960s—country houses were certainly not emphasized, many were demolished, split up, or turned to institutional uses, but a few were saved and opened to the public as relics of a past life.

The 1970s witnessed the opening stages of a country house revival starting with a fascination for English models—the old American Anglophilicisism remained strong—with countless books of similar sounding names, and museum exhibits.³⁸ Interest in American country house equivalents



22. William Adams Delano of Delano and Aldrich, James A. Burden House, Woodside, Muttontown/Syosset, New York, 1916–19. Site and house plan. Drawing by Chester B. Price for *Portraits of Ten Country Houses*, by Delano and Aldrich, 1924.



23. Richard Neutra, Joseph Von Sternberg House, "The All Steel Residence," San Fernando Valley, California, 1934–35. North west facade.



24. Robert A. M. Stern, Residence at Calf Creek, Water Mill, New York, 1984–87. Entrance/east facade.

came more slowly and was spurred on by the rise of Postmodernism or POMO. POMO with its recovery of history, coupled with the fantastic new wealth generated in recent years, rediscovered the American country house. Renovated or restored country houses were one solution but the demand quickly outstripped the supply and leading Postmodernists like Robert A. M. Stern produced quality reproductions that replayed the popular styles, from Shingled to French Norman, and contained the new spaces of the 1980s such as large family kitchens and media centers. No longer able to command even the limited acreage of a 1920s country place, a new term appeared, *tract mansions*, to indicate luxury houses measuring many thousands of square feet located in exclusive developments.³⁹ Stern's Calf Creek house on eastern Long Island consciously replays many themes from turn-of-the-century resort architecture such as the Shinnecock Golf Club or the nearby William Merritt Chase house (figs. 24, 25). The massing is picturesque with gambrel roofs of various heights and an engaged tower at one end. Weathered red cedar shingles are set off by classical details such as Tuscan columns for the porches. Located on a limited site, in a tract mansion neighborhood, the house is sited well back from the road and approached by a curving drive that gives the property the appearance of extent. Fences, trellises, a pool, tennis court, and a formal garden help make up a country place compound.⁴⁰ The Calf Creek

house is large in square footage, but certainly not the size of 1920s country places. It is doubtful whether the contemporary country house revival ever will attempt to duplicate the size of earlier country houses for we are in a new stage of a constantly evolving building type.

The American country house as a generic type has always been in evolution, but certain essential features stand out. The first principle as a writer at the turn of the century announced, is that the country house must "possess the country," it should "fit the place where it stands."⁴¹ The country house must have or appear to control acreage and if the land is limited the house must be sheltered from its neighbors. A country house must have a garden of some type, either natural or formal, and it should have outbuildings, or support structures, though they can be limited to a garage, pool house, or garden pavilion. The house should have an ease of communication with the out-of-doors, with porches, verandas, and terraces. A country house is built for show, but also for pleasure, relaxation, and sport, and in addition to the nearby country or hunt club, or polo field, it should have its own sports facilities such as a pool, or tennis courts. The house itself must be large and look substantial and contain a luxury of space especially in public areas such as halls, staircases, or conservatory. Specific room types can vary, but space for a library, and multi-



25. Robert A. M. Stern, Residence at Calf Creek, Water Mill, New York, 1984–87. South facade.



26. Albert Kahn, George and Ellen Booth House, Cranbrook House, Bloomfield Hills, Michigan, 1907–20.

sitting rooms help. Furnishings also can vary but art of some type must be evident. The architectural style of the house is important, but there is no one style. Styles have ranged from English half-timber to the more popular classical derivatives. Lawrence Kocher did a survey in 1925 which indicated nearly three quarters of the country houses of the previous year had classical origins with American colonial the strong favorite. A few years earlier Fiske Kimball noted the same preference though he claimed that an Arts and Crafts oriented approach inspired by Lutyens and Voysey was also apparent; but he bemoaned that Frank Lloyd Wright seemed to have little influence.⁴² The Arts and Crafts aesthetic did not mean just Wright as is shown in the house Albert Kahn did for George and Ellen Booth at Cranbrook (fig. 26). The origin of the house is English Tudor but all of its details and fittings are Arts and Crafts. A country house displays wealth, it is for retreat and also show. A country house must have its own name—a street number is an insult—for it exists as an independent personality, a picturesque creation on its own right.

This last, the American country house as a picturesque object, is perhaps its most essential and unifying characteristic of the past 140 years. The country house exists in contrast, both to the city and also its surrounding landscape; it gains meaning by this contrast. The country house could not be without the city and yet while it is an escape from urban chaos, it also brings cosmopolitan sophistication to the countryside. The country house is not a necessity but a choice, a diversion. In the sense that the picturesque developed in England and originally meant to resemble a picture, and especially the architectural and landscape backgrounds of paintings, the American country house is picturesque, or in other words, it is artificial. The picturesque did become a specific visual aesthetic in the hands of theorists such as Sir Uvedale Price: "roughness and sudden variation joined to irregularity."⁴³ But the essential characteristic of the picturesque always remained its artificial quality. The American country house is a caprice, a whimsy; it is a folly. Certainly there exists the element of too much, of excess, of an image—the house and grounds—straining to look natural, and yet no matter the style, they are human creations of the recent past. Time can add patina and soften the harshness of outline, but ultimately the country house is more image and effect. The country house is in a sense a fictional world, time differs, does not stop, but takes on a refracted quality. In a sense the country house allows a freedom not present in the city, the freedom to create one's own world.

Certainly at one level the idea of a country house tradition appears antithetical to twentieth century egalitarian beliefs; but who could deny the appeal? As a tradition it is ambiguous, but paradoxically it exists and in the refractions of its circumlocutions we can still see our ideals.

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1. Erica Abeel, "Magnificent Obsession: A House in the Country," *The New York Times Magazine*, 19 April 1987, pp. 20–30.
2. Professor William Jordy has informed me that the house's actual name was Ochre Point named after its site; however, at some point writers began calling it Southside, and the name has stuck. See: George William Sheldon, *Artistic Country-Seats* . . . (New York: Appleton, 1886), vol. 1, pp. 7–11; Arnold Lewis, *American Country Houses of the Gilded Age (Sheldon's Artistic Country-Seats)* (New York: Dover, 1982), pl. 4–5; [Sheldon] *Artistic Houses*, . . . (New York: Appleton, 1883), vol. 2, pp. 81–82; and Vincent Scully, Jr., *The Shingle Style* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1955), p. 138.
3. Goodhue was the designer, the firm name was Cram, Goodhue and Ferguson; see: "El Fureidis, Montecito, California, The Villa of James Waldron Gillespie, Esq.," *House & Garden* 4 (September 1903): 97–103; *American Country Houses of Today*, 1912 (New York: The Architectural Book Publishing Co., 1912), pp. 52–58; and Richard Oliver, *Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue* (New York and Cambridge: The Architectural History Foundation and MIT Press, 1983), pp. 42–44.
4. There is a tremendous literature on Taliesin, the best is: Sidney K. Robinson, *Life Imitates Architecture: Taliesin and Alden Dow's Studio* (Ann Arbor: Architectural Research Laboratory, The University of Michigan, 1980); Walter Creese, *The Crowning of the American Landscape: Eight Great Spaces and Their Buildings* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1985), chap. 8; Thomas Beeby, "The Song of Taliesin," *Modulus* 14 (1980–1981): 2–11; Frank Lloyd Wright, *An Autobiography* (New York: Duell, Sloan and Pearce, 1943); and Olgivanna Lloyd Wright, *The Shining Brow* (New York: Horizon Press, 1960). Taliesin was included in the yearly round up by Fiske Kimball, "The American Country House," *Architectural Record* 46 (October 1919): 291–400.
5. Shutze was the architect, the firm name was Hentz, Reid and Shutze. See Marcus Binney, "Swan House, Georgia," *Country Life*, 183 (5, 12 May 1983): 1168–71, 1240–44; and Elizabeth Meredith Dowling, "Philip Trammell Shutze: A Study of the Influence of Academic Discipline on His Early Residential Designs," *The Atlantic Historical Journal* 30 (Summer 1986): 33–55.
6. Elsie de Wolfe, *The House in Good Taste* (New York: The Century Co., 1913), p. 268.
7. Mark Girouard, *Life in the English Country House* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1978), p. 2.
8. Washington Irving, "Rural Life in England" [1818] in his *Sketch Book* (New York: Educational Publishing Company, 1903), p. 73.
9. [Henry James] "An English New Year," *The Nation* 28 (23 January 1879): 65–66, republished in *Portraits of Places* (1883; reprint ed., New York, 1948), p. 325.
10. J. Carter Brown, "Introduction," *The Treasure Houses of Britain*, G. Jackson Stops, ed. (Washington, D. C.: National Gallery of Art, 1985), p. 10.
11. These figures are based upon a list from 1935 prepared by the firm for the Federal Reserve Competition, located in the files of the Commission of Fine Arts, Washington, D. C.
12. On this complicated background see: Peter J. Schmitt, *Back to Nature: The Arcadian Myth in Urban America* (New York: Oxford, 1969); Leo Marx, *The Machine in the Garden* (New York: Oxford, 1964); and Morton and Lucia White, *The Intellectual Versus the City* (New York: New American Library, 1962).
13. The best study is, Roger Kennedy, *Architecture, Men, Women and Money in America 1600–1860* (New York: Random House, 1986).
14. W. Duncan Lee, "The Renaissance of Carter's Grove," *Architecture* 67 (April 1933): 185–95. I am indebted for much of my information to Mark R. Winger who has been researching Carter's Grove. He has forthcoming: "The Colonial Revival in Virginia."

15. James, letter to Edmund Gosse, 16 February 1905, in *The Letters of Henry James*, P. Lubbock, ed. (New York: Scribner's, 1920), vol. 2, p. 25; and quoted in Leon Edel, *Henry James: The Master, 1901–1916* (Philadelphia: Lippincott, 1972), pp. 270–71.
16. Paul R. Baker, *Richard Morris Hunt* (Cambridge, MIT Press, 1980), chap. 23; Mrs. James D. Rothschild, *The Rothschilds at Waddesdon Manor* (London: Vendome Press, 1979).
17. Mead, letter to Frank Millet, 9 July 1895, The New York Historical Society.
18. Olmsted, letter to Twombly, 3 April 1891, Library of Congress.
19. Richard Guy Wilson, McKim, Mead & White, *Architects* (New York: Rizzoli, 1983), pp. 154–59.
20. Edward, The Duke of Windsor, *A King's Story* (New York: G. P. Putnam's Sons, 1951), p. 200; see also, Lawrence Wodhouse, "Stanford White and the Mackays," *Winterthur Portfolio* 11 (1976): 213–33; and Richard Guy Wilson, "McKim, Mead & White on Long Island" in *Long Island Country Houses*, Robert McKay, ed. (New York: Norton, forthcoming).
21. On Wright and the English country house see: Frank Lloyd Wright, "Studies and Executed Buildings," in *Ausgeführte Bauten und Entwürfe von Frank Lloyd Wright* (Berlin, Ernst Wasmuth, 1910), n.p., reprinted, Frank Lloyd Wright, *Drawings and Plans of Frank Lloyd Wright, The Early Period (1893–1909)* (New York: Dover, 1983), n.p.; and Frank Lloyd Wright, "Review of the Memorial Volumes," *Building* (London) 26 (July 1951): 260–61.
22. Andrew Jackson Downing, *The Architecture of Country Houses* (New York: D. Appleton, 1850), pp. 257–58. See also Marianna Griswold Van Rensselaer, "American Country Dwellings, I," *The Century* 32 (May 1886): 3.
23. Edith Wharton, *Hudson River Bracketed* (New York: Appleton, 1929); and John Zukowsky and Robbe Pierce Stimson, *Hudson River Villas* (New York: Rizzoli, 1985); and Creese, *The Crowning of the American Landscape*, chap. 2.
24. Richard Guy Wilson, "Idealism and the Origin of the First American Suburb: Llewellyn Park, New Jersey," *American Art Journal* 11 (October 1979): 79–90; and Jane B. Davies, "Llewellyn Park in West Orange, New Jersey," *Antiques* 107 (January 1975): 142–58.
25. The American resort has not received adequate study; among the few attempts see, Richard Guy Wilson, ed., *Victorian Resorts and Hotels* (Philadelphia: The Victorian Society, 1982); and Cleveland Amory, *The Last Resorts* (New York: Grosset & Dunlap, 1952).
26. Henry James, *The American Scene* (Bloomington: Indiana University Press, [1907] 1968), p. 224.
27. An excellent study of these giants is, James T. Maher, *The Twilight of Splendor: Chronicles of the Age of American Palaces* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1975).
28. Richard Guy Wilson, "From Informality to Pomposity: The Resort Casino in the Later 19th Century," in *Victorian Resorts*, pp. 109–16.
29. Schmitt, *Back to Nature*, p. 12; also see H. B. Martin, *Fifty Years of American Golf* (New York: Dodd, Mead & Co, 1936); and Ross Goodner, *The 75 Years History of the Shinnecock Hills Golf Club* (Southampton: Shinnecock Hills Golf Club, 1966).
30. James, *American Scene*, pp. 224–40.
31. Quoted in Lawrence G. White, *Sketches and Designs by Stanford White* (New York: The Architectural Book Co., 1920), pp. 24–25. See also, Richard Guy Wilson, Dianne Pilgrim, and Richard Murray, *The American Renaissance, 1876–1917* (Brooklyn and New York: The Brooklyn Museum and Pantheon, 1979). For Wharton's The Mount, see Richard Guy Wilson, "Edith and Ogden: Writing, Decoration and Architecture," in, Metcalf, et.al., *Ogden Codman: The Decoration of Houses* (Boston: The Boston Athenaeum, 1988, forthcoming).
32. A. Lawrence Kocher, "The Country House," *Architectural Record* 62 (November 1927): 337. The only substantial treatment of the country place from a historical perspective is Norman T. Newton, *Design on the Land* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1971), chap. 30.
33. "Art," *Time*, 12 November 1928, p. 32.
34. Edward, *A King's Story*, pp. 199–200.
35. "What This Magazine Stands For," *Country Life in America* 1 (November 1901): 24.
36. Liberty Hyde Bailey, *The Outlook to Nature* (New York: MacMillan, 1905), p. 86.
37. W. Boesiger, ed., *Richard Neutra 1923–50* (New York: Praeger, 1966), p. 38.
38. In addition to those in notes above, a partial listing should include Mark Girouard, *The Victorian Country House* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1971); and Clive Aslet, *The Last Country Houses* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1982).
39. Anne H. Soukhanov, "Word Watch," *Atlantic* 260 (December 1987): 116; and Thomas Fisher and Susan Doubilet, "Tract Mansions," *Progressive Architecture* 68 (December 1987): 102–107.
40. Robert A. M. Stern, *Buildings and Projects 1981–1985* (New York: Rizzoli, 1986), p. 220–21.
41. E. P. Powell, "The American Country House," *House and Garden* 8 (December 1905): 221.
42. A. Lawrence Kocher, "The American Country House," *Architectural Record* 58 (November 1925): 402–43; Fiske Kimball, "The American Country House," *Architectural Record* 46 (October 1919): 329–44.
43. Quoted in Christopher Hussey, *The Picturesque* (London: Frank Cass, [1927] 1967), p. 14. I am also indebted to Sidney K. Robinson, "The Picturesque: Sinister Dishevelment," *Threshold* (forthcoming, 1988).