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The Villa

Britta Hentschel

"Yesterday I came to the villa of Careggi, not to cultivate my fields but my soul," is how Cosimo de' Medici described his motivation for visiting one of his villas outside Florence in a letter around 1460. His comment set the tone for generations to come, and continues to resonate with our collective perception of the Renaissance villa.

Around fifteenth-century Florence, the ancient Roman villa culture underwent a full revival, and bankers, rich merchants, and statesmen invested in elegant abodes outside the city walls. The builders and their architects were inspired by the opulent and detailed descriptions of villas by Pliny the Younger from the first century CE. In the spirit of the Ciceronian *topos otium cum dignitate*, or "dignified leisure," the merchants and politicians of the Renaissance devoted time to antique literature, art, and philosophy in manicured gardens and delicately frescoed loggias far from the madding crowd. Here, in the company of the intellectuals of their time, they reflected on the meaning of the good life and the conduct of statecraft, and were entertained with stories and performances, as Boccaccio had previously described in his mid-fourteenth-century *Decameron*.

Cosimo de' Medici even gave the leading Florentine humanist, philosopher, and physician Marsilio Ficino a country house in Careggi in 1463, so that he would always be close to him. The

famous Platonic Academy, which Ficino is said to have maintained at Careggi on de' Medici's behalf, however probably corresponds more to a wishful projection of the seventeenth century. Nevertheless, the villa became, over the centuries, an ideal place for the exchange of ideas and the contemplation of art in Arcadian surroundings. Even in contemporary wealthy suburbia, this aspiration still resonates quietly as an urtext.

But this is only one side of the story. The passion for culture and art as a compensation for the harsh realities of economic and political life alone does not explain the enthusiasm for villas in fifteenth- and sixteenth-century Italy. More than six hundred villas and villa-like buildings were located in the vicinity of Florence during the Renaissance. The villa as a counterpart to the palazzo in the city was thus a mass phenomenon in which even apothecaries, rich craftsmen, and successful artists partook. A desire for prestige and improved social standing were unquestionably other factors. The villa also indirectly provided the economic basis of the modern capitalist banking system: mortgaged land created the security against which the tradable share certificates of the Florentine banks were issued.



Villa and garden are also often understood as a sign of bourgeois republican liberties, or as an expression of a culture of bourgeois emancipation. This, too, is an eminently possible explanation. In addition, until the nineteenth century the villas were large farms, which guaranteed the patrician family a year-round supply of food, provided by tenant farmers on half-leases. This could prove decisive in the event of an epidemic.

Between 1347 and 1351, the plague swept through Europe. Within just four years, seventy-five to eighty million people succumbed to it, about a third of Europe's population at the time. According to medical historian Klaus Bergdolt, the plague "represents one of the great European memories." Suffering, despair, a lonely and agonizing death, the dissolution of social ties, the loss of religious and ideological securities, utilitarian restrictions on freedom, and the internalization of a state of emergency shook first Italy and then other European countries.

The two modes by which the bacterial infection spread, firstly via fleas which used the rat as an intermediate host, but then also by droplet infection from person to person – analogous to the novel coronavirus – made the pandemic both incomprehensible and effectively uncontrollable. In the face of the collapse of administrative and charitable institutions, many saw flight from the cities as the only remaining option for protection against the disease.

Galen, the famous physician of antiquity, blamed winds and damp for the spread of the plague, in





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accordance with his theory of the humors. Yet even this doctor, whose doctrines misled European medicine for centuries, left Rome in 166 CE because of the Antonine Plague.

“Ruptures of civilization” (*Zivilisationsbrüche*), in Norbert Elias’s sense, regularly accompany unpredictable, deadly epidemics. In the 1350s, the Black Death dealt a blow to the late medieval aristocracy of Tuscan cities and led to the rise of new state-supporting groups such as the guilds, the craftsmen, and the bankers—above all, the Medici family. And they relied on prevention: in defense against the plague that had made their rise possible in the first place, the Medici bought a villa in Cafaggiolo, north of Florence near Lago di Bilancino.

Visually unlike the light and airy Renaissance villas, Cafaggiolo was a self-sufficient medieval fort that could serve as a refuge in times of epidemics as well as political turmoil. Such a place was perfect for whiling away the time, as Boccaccio noted in the *Decameron*, the ultimate plague book, written between 1349 and 1352. In the *Decameron*, seven young women and three young men flee to a country house near Fiesole, above Florence, and tell each other frivolous tales while the plague rages in the city.

It was only shortly beforehand that the progressive securing of the territory had even made it possible to settle safely in the countryside. Throughout the Middle Ages, spending the night outside city walls was considered mortally dangerous, and only

those who could not avoid doing so would undertake the risk of travel.

A decade before the Great Plague, Ambrogio Lorenzetti impressively depicted the effects of good and bad government on city and country in his cycle of frescoes for the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena (1338 to 1339): tyranny plunges city and country into war, destruction, and disease, but good government secures the territory. Agriculture, hunting, trade, and architecture can then flourish.

The good government of the Florentine Republic made the acquisition and leisured enjoyment of country estates possible from the fourteenth century onward. The Medici, however, took a strategic approach. The family's villas grew out of old defenses in places where it seemed politically advisable to have a presence: near borders and mineral resources, or close to administrative centers for agriculture and fish farming, as in the case of the aforementioned and particularly prized villa in Careggi.

The great reconstructions and designs of Renaissance architecture that followed the formal vocabulary of antiquity, and the semantic connotations that established the villa as a place of longing, were realized above all under Cosimo de' Medici and his house and court architect Michelozzo, who also extended the Medici parish church, San Lorenzo, in Florence – albeit according to the plans of the already deceased Brunelleschi – and created the family palazzo on the Via Larga.

The hybrid of the Renaissance villa as a place of protection from epidemics – the plague returned to Florence every twenty years and could therefore mark a generation's life experience several times over – as well as a place of leisure, agricultural production, and social representation, finally found its definitive Renaissance manifestation with the Medici villa in Poggio a Caiano of 1490, designed by Giuliano da Sangallo.

Palladio's famous villas in Veneto also date back to a large-scale campaign by Alvise Cornaro in the mid-sixteenth century to drain Venice's hinterland by digging canals. The heat and humidity of the lagoon was a dreaded source of infection for humans and animals, and drainage works brought it under control. It was these canal constructions that made it possible to access the villas by boat from Venice in the first place. As the most important trading city and goods hub of the Mediterranean, Venice was affected by epidemics and infections like no other city. Between 1348 and 1576 alone, it was struck by the plague twenty times – hence the considerable need for villas as places of refuge in times of the Black Death.

At present, many wealthy individuals have retreated to their villas and chalets in fear of the COVID-19 pandemic. The coronavirus crisis thus also raises the question of what the potentially enduring social distance rules will do to space. How should a city be formed if it is to offer both quality of life and prevent epidemics? One answer to the Spanish Flu

was international modernism, with its emphasis on light, air, and washable surfaces.

But what will COVID-19 mean for office buildings, public transport, settlement density, and the landscape? The plague—and, in its swan song, the Renaissance—led to a new, altered perspective on both landscape and architecture. We have retained much of this perspective to this day, but it does not adequately meet all the current challenges of social distancing and the coronavirus pandemic.

The postwar generation, shaped by enforced communal experiences such as the military, camps, or bunkers, had had enough of collective space after 1945. The desire for a prelapsarian world, the retreat into the private, into the apolitical, and, in the best case, into one's own suburban home—the miniature villa *par excellence*—led to deserted, anti-urban spaces, to commuter traffic and to the desolation of the cities. A repetition of this movement, however, seems ill-advised in the twenty-first century, given the higher population, scarcity of space, and the climate change that is taking place. Nonetheless, we must now rethink densification in line with the pandemic.

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fig 1. Giusto Utens, *Lunette of the Medici Villa in Cafaggiolo*, (1599–1602)
Source: Museo Villa medicea della Petraia, Florence

fig 2. Giuseppe Zocchi, *Villa di Careggi* (1744)
Source: Wikimedia commons

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