

THE VIRTUES OF A VALLEY

Set in a quiet valley in Devon, the gardens at Coombe House are an eloquent yet challenging example of creating a garden full of meaning. **Chris Young** took a tour to find surprise, drama, solitude and mythological references of the highest quality. Photography by Neil Hepworth

LANDSCAPE OF MEANING Sunset in the heart of a small valley, not far from Tiverton in Devon. Yet this seemingly pastoral scene is deceptive: Alasdair Forbes' garden – which he calls 'Plaz Metaxu' – is a highly atmospheric and meaningful place. By using natural topography and vegetation (such as the slowly decaying stag-headed oak), combined with mythological references, he has made a place full of otherworldliness



SITTING ON THE LAWN at the front of Coombe House, Alasdair Forbes' intensely private garden in Devon, can be a disconcerting experience. This is a semi-circular space, suggesting an 'offering' to a 'tamed' Artemis, Greek goddess of hunting, forests and hills. From landform and symbols referencing mythological figures to physical relationships between garden and landscape (such as the use of a ha-ha), there is meaning at almost every turn. Topography, too, can throw the visitor, with views across the steep-sided valley, up and down, in and out. However, it is best to accept this constantly changing view of the garden. Whatever you take from this creation, it cannot be denied that this is a place full of spirit and atmosphere.

In its simplest form, the garden at Coombe House, called 'Plaz Metaxu' (translated from Greek, meaning 'the place that is in-between'), is a series of spaces linked together by meaning, metaphor and modulation. Extending to 13ha (32 acres) in total, half is gardened, the other half is farmed with flocks of sheep, interspersed with woodland. It is a garden of a whole, as well as parts; and, as its name

suggests, it is a place that makes the visitor stop and think about the spaces he or she walks through. Making reference to stories and people from literature and myth, Alasdair has created a garden of large proportions, both physically and emotionally; a space that has its own identity, using planted material, sculpture and the landscape itself to tell a medley of stories. But where do you begin to unravel a design as complex as Plaz Metaxu?

Human touch

It is perhaps easiest by starting with its creator. Alasdair, a quiet and deeply private man, bought this house and landscape as a reaction from life in London. Having been an art historian at the Courtauld Institute of Art, he was well aware of the romantic nature of landscape, and began 'to realise that gardens could be as moving as the paintings I was studying'. With this in mind, he began to travel, as he says, 'to educate myself in understanding gardens, natural rhythms and the issues involved in maintaining a large garden'. In 1992, he bought Coombe House, an old

whitewashed farmhouse sitting at the base of an east-west valley; and, since then, his constant desire to redeem academic understanding has led him to create this one-off of outdoor spaces.

For Alasdair, there is a clear sense of catharsis in his creation. He chose Coombe House because of his desire to make a garden – 'I really wanted to conceive a garden as a way of working things out' is how he describes it. However he did not want to stick to strict design rules. Instead, he has balanced the inspiration from his studies with the valley's topography and site, letting the landscape offer design ideas. A good example of this is the Avenue of the Hours – a long walk running up a slope in a field dedicated to the goddess of order, law and custom, Themis. Her aides (the 'hours') are represented here by nine pairs of different trees, some with seasonal interest, such as the splendid summer foliage of lime, *Tilia x europaea* 'Wratislaviensis', or the deep green-grey of evergreen oak, *Quercus ilex*. You can almost sense relief in his voice as he describes such areas, of why one seemingly innocent ►

GARDEN WITHIN A GARDEN At the back of the house, a small, domestic, walled garden (below) has been retained; beyond, the pink berries of *Sorbus vilmorinii* show well against *Fagus sylvatica* 'Dawyck'. The yews, clipped *Lonicera nitida* 'Baggesen's Gold', and countless other hedges in the garden are kept in trim by Alasdair's indispensable gardener, Cyril Harris



DIFFERENT SPACES
The area in front of the old whitewashed farmhouse (above) is dedicated to the goddess Artemis; the semi-circular lawn hints at an offering to this deity of hunting and hills. Spaces (left) between parts of the 13ha (32 acre) garden are as important as the areas themselves – owner Alasdair's translation of Plaz Metaxu is 'the place that is in-between'

PLAZ METAXU

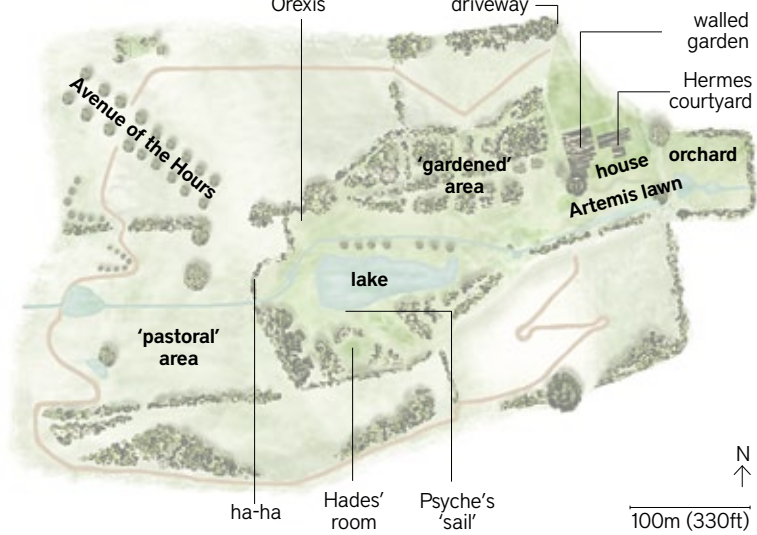


ILLUSTRATION: NICOLE HEIDARPOUR



LANDSCAPE OF PARTS One of the interesting aspects of Plaz Metaxu is the way all the elements link together – from the pastoral valley sides to the lake, from the hedged planting areas to Greek deity references. A thin, stainless-steel ‘sail’ on the far side of the lake (below) is a reference to Psyche (goddess of soul) and her butterfly wings

element can have such substantial implications on another; this is healing in motion. ‘You can often get taken by surprise,’ he says, ‘as nature always intervenes in mysterious ways. As a result, I am constantly modifying or refining elements in the garden.’

It is almost impossible to describe the feeling you get when walking round, except to say that there is constantly a great sense of atmosphere. Near the lake, the spirit of hero Narcissus is clearly referenced when looking down onto the water; further into the lake a stainless steel ‘alarm sail’ rises, being both a figure of soulful Psyche and a visual link to the mount of Eros; and from the underworld, Hades swirls round in a dark, circular yew room nearby. For many, these have incomprehensible meanings that require a description to aid their understanding; but the reality is that as a garden experience, it still ‘works’. The ground may be heavy in meaning, but you do not have to speak the language to appreciate it.

The perhaps surprising aspect of Plaz Metaxu is that Alasdair is a passionate plant enthusiast. Near the house, in what was the old garden, fine examples of *Rosa* ‘Constance Spry’, *Schizophragma integrifolium* and *Paeonia delavayi* grow plentifully; the planting combinations here are domestic and soft. In the courtyards, *Phillyrea latifolia* has been clipped into buttress shapes; *Stauntonia hexaphylla* commands attention; and *Magnolia grandiflora* ‘Exmouth’ looks substantial against the walls. Further from the house, an old orchard welcomes a range of trees that Alasdair has planted – *Abies pinsapo* ‘Kelleriis’ gives strong, grey-blue

colour in winter, and *Larix kaempferi* ‘Diane’, a corkscrew larch, adds visual interest. Further from the house, plantings of *Taxodium distichum* var. *imbricarium* ‘Nutans’, *Cornus* ‘Eddie’s White Wonder’ and *Acer campestre* ‘Pulverulentum’ give protection to more intimate areas of planting. The result is a garden of imaginatively planted, quite dense areas, all set within the wider rolling landscape.

Conflict in the making?

At the heart of Plaz Metaxu, it is this conflict that is most enthralling – personal and public, horticultural and agricultural, domesticated and wild. At certain times it can be a lonely garden, making the visitor feel on his or her own, walking through a space that has no sense of direction. But then, in just a few steps, it can be a landscape of hope. These may sound strong emotions to be gained from a garden, but so great is the strength of place that such feelings do emerge. The main body of the garden (see map, p684), nearest the house and lake, does have a more domestic feeling, but surrounding it on three sides sits the ever-present agricultural landscape: sheep roam the pasture, visually reminding you that this is farmland. This close connection also hints at a garden in tension, the gardener keeping the spaces near the house in control while allowing the more natural-looking areas space to breathe. At times in Alasdair’s garden this constant argument between ‘the domestic’ and ‘the agricultural’ can be quite intense, but at other times it is as natural as walking around a Picturesque landscape.

And what of the name, Plaz Metaxu? It is easy to forget its meaning, so it is well worth considering why Alasdair named it such – ‘the place that is in-between’. This can be interpreted on many levels: physically, for instance, in the path between hedges; or imaginatively, in the play between the literal and figurative. However you read it, by remembering the name you start to consider the ‘empty spaces’. In most gardens, if planting is used to direct a view, the normal approach is for a focal point to be installed – maybe an urn or statue – yet Alasdair leaves the space empty. At other times, the path through the garden forces you to enter narrow spaces, acting as chambers taking you from one space to another – their role essential to the journey.

However you view this garden, there is no denying its beauty and drama. It is a solitary garden, best experienced on your own, and with an open mind. Whether you understand the meanings superficially or intimately, ultimately it is still a garden of substance – acknowledging Alasdair’s beliefs only helps to improve the experience. The garden may well be called ‘the place that is in-between’, but what has been created is a confident, soulful garden that is now nowhere in between – rather is a place of itself, by itself, created by its valley virtues, and its owner’s vision. For that he should feel great pride. ■

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i Visiting Plaz Metaxu is by appointment only. Contact: Alasdair Forbes. Email: arrobe@btinternet.com



DOES MEANING MATTER?

Many gardens are created to impart an idea or belief, such as Ian Hamilton Finlay’s Little Sparta or Charles Jencks’ Garden of Cosmic Speculation, both in Scotland. Indeed, landscape architects undertaking public work often look to the site’s history for inspiration – Martha Schwartz’s Exchange Square, Manchester took many cues from the locale. Should we question if a design works whether or not we know its meaning? Ultimately, if the design succeeds visually, then the meaning can be secondary; but often the appreciation of a space is considerably improved if that meaning is uncovered.

SCULPTURE AND STYLE On a mound called Orexis, overlooking the lake (above, top), fillets of Delabole slate stand proud, urging you to look to the skies. The old farm courtyard (above) has been made into a sacred space, dedicated to Hermes, messenger of the gods

