

Biltmore

Asheville, North Carolina

Photographs by Alan Ward 1996, 2022

Notes on the Making of the Photographs

Biltmore appears in many photographs, most of which are focused on the 250-room French Renaissance style mansion at the end of a rectangular arrival court. My aim was to illustrate Frederick Law Olmsted's larger vision for a self-sustaining 125,000-acre estate in the Blue Ridge Mountains for George Washington Vanderbilt. In addition to the arrival court (3,4,7), there are terraces and gardens related to the house (10-17); beyond are ponds, meadows and trails in a park of approximately 200 acres (18-22). Further afield, the bottom lands of the French Broad River are agriculture, while the majority of the property is forested (24-29). Olmsted advocated for organized and systematic forestry for the site and for the country. Since Olmsted was working at a vast scale at Biltmore, many of the views are intended to put the mansion in the context of the larger plan for the property.

The first two images show the entrance lodge and three-mile approach road (1-2). Olmsted said in a letter to Vanderbilt that an approach can be made that is "consistent with the sensation of passing through the remote depths of a natural forest." It is challenging to depict a kinesthetic experience along an entry drive in one still image. I selected a point of view that illustrates multiple curves to draw the viewer along the road. The curves are more pronounced by using a longer lens to collapse the view. This image

is framed to depict how the drive is embedded in the grading and planting along both sides of this created landscape.

I view the experience of a designed landscape like Biltmore as almost overloading perception with its complexity; the goal becomes how to simplify and organize an image within the frame. I start by identifying a relevant subject for a view. The photograph that best captures the architectural composition of the terraces and gardens at different levels was done in evening light from a point of view that shows the elevated terrace and wisteria arbor on the right, the South Terrace central to the image, and steps down to the Italian Garden on the left (10). It is only at this exact position and height of the camera where each of these elements comes together as a composition within the frame. If the camera is shifted inches, either to the right or left, or up or down, the elements in the scene start to awkwardly merge. Moving back or forward would change the relationship of the mountains to the terrace. When a complex scene appears to converge in a coherent way at a certain location, it seems to snap into place, and becomes the exact position for the camera. Finding the precise location where the view becomes comprehensible and organized is the essence of photography. It is instinctive, but also deliberate.

List of Photographs

1. Lodge Gate, 2022
2. Three-mile approach road, 1996
3. Entry to the Esplanade, 1996
4. View west to the Esplanade and Biltmore house, 2022
5. Vista west to greensward, Esplanade and house, 1996
6. North allée at Esplanade, 1996
7. View east of north allée of Esplanade and Ramp Douce, 2022
8. Sunken Winter Garden in Biltmore house, 2022
9. View west from Loggia, 2022
10. South Terrace and Library Terrace, sunset, 1996
11. View south from Library Terrace under wisteria arbor, 1996
12. View north from Tea House to Biltmore house, 2022
13. Tea House at South Terrace, 2022
14. View east from Esplanade to Italian Garden, 2022
15. View west in Italian Garden toward house, 1996
16. View north in pergola toward Biltmore house, 2022
17. Conservatory and arbor in Walled Garden, 2022
18. View south to meadow path, 2022
19. View north along meadow path toward house, 2022
20. Path from Ramble connecting to Bass Pond, 2022
21. Foot bridge, Boat House and path at Bass Pond, 2022
22. View south from Boat House, 2022
23. Bass Pond dam and waterfall, 1996
24. Swannanoa River Road and agricultural fields, 1996
25. One of twenty-eight stone or brick bridges, 1996
26. Road along the French Broad River, 1996
27. Trees in Deer Park near house, 1996
28. Deer Park and near Biltmore house in spring, 1996
29. Forest plantations, evening, 1996



























































Notes

Selected Publication of the Photographs:

Rosenburg, Elissa, Book Review "American Designed Landscapes,"
Land Forum, Fall Winter 1997

Ward, Alan, *American Designed Landscapes: A Photographic
Interpretation*, 1998

Ward, Alan, "American Designed Landscapes," *View Camera: The
Journal of Large-Format Photography*, January/February 1999

Arad, Michael, "Reflecting Absence," *Places*, Spring 2009

Exhibitions of the Photographs:

"Luminous Landscapes: Photographs by Alan Ward" The National
Building Museum, 2016

"American Designed Landscapes: Space and Light" Sarasota Center for
Architecture, 2018

Biltmore®

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