

Middleton Place

Charleston, South Carolina

Photographs by Alan Ward 1996, 2023

Notes on the Making of the Photographs

I photographed Middleton Place for the book *American Designed Landscapes: A Photographic Interpretation*, because it is one of the few remaining eighteenth-century designed landscapes in America. A house built in the 1740s is on a bluff looking east to a bend in the Ashley River, where visitors arrived from Charleston - and the commerce of the plantation took place (6). Henry Middleton acquired the property through marriage and added flanking buildings to the house in the 1750s. The property was severely damaged during the Civil War - followed by an earthquake in 1886 (4). All that remains of the residence are foundations of the house and the rehabilitated south wing (3,5).

In the preprofessional era, the owners probably relied on European precedents, and perhaps pattern books, to derive the plan for the site. The framework of the landscape design remains with a central organizing axis that originates at the entry gate, extends nearly 400m along a drive to the site of the house, and continues through the former residence to the Ashley River. The design connects to the water with a series of symmetrical earthen terraces that step down to constructed rice ponds, while the central axis leads to the water (7,28). Gardens north of the former site of the house, including the sundial garden and octagonal garden, are geometrically ordered and graded level (10-14). A transverse axis is centered on a simple rectangular reflection pool, shaded by a mature magnolia allée (16-18). Paths framed by hedges link these gardens back to the house in a grid pattern (13). At the north end, a sculpture of a wood nymph terminates the gardens, where a transition

occurs to a more natural landscape with Cypress Lake (19,23,25) and other upland ponds. The site includes camellias planted in the eighteenth century, live oaks spreading out over the water's edge in groves on the banks of the river, and massed planting of azaleas bordering a rice mill pond (21,24,25,28). This is a landscape that is serenely fitted to the surrounding lowlands, with views to the sinuous lines of the river, contrasted with the ordered and symmetrical composition of the gardens. There is a relative balance between earth and water, where the two meet in the Low Country (6).

I stayed at the contemporary Middleton Inn, located on-site, for a couple of days to photograph in early morning light. Typically, the first day is consumed getting the more obvious views, but then returning, I tend to visualize more complex and nuanced images that tell a more complete story. I aim to use photography to intensify the perception of a place and its design. For example, in the view of a live oak reaching out over the edge of a rice pond (22), it is first a description of one of the oldest and largest trees at Middleton Place. However by selecting a panoramic camera and framing one side of the tree extending out over the water, it amplifies the horizontal habit of live oak branching with its characteristic spiraling form for added strength. After deciding that the content is relevant, followed by composing within the frame, I then consider the image in rather abstract graphic terms to engage the eye in the interplay of lines and shapes, as well as the balance of dark and light tones within the rectangle.

List of Photographs

1. Curving drive from the entry, central axis to the right, 1996
2. Curving drive approaching south wing of the house, 1996
3. Large oval arrival court, 2023
4. Steps to ruined central block of the house, 2023
5. South wing of house, 2023
6. Axis to Ashley River and rice mill, 1996
7. Terraces and south wing of house, 1996
8. Border along central axis to the river, 2023
9. Path connecting to site of former house, 2023
10. Sundial garden, 2023
11. Octagonal garden, 1996
12. Octagonal garden, 2023
13. Path to sundial garden, 2023
14. Sundial garden, 2023
15. Curving path between gardens, 1996
16. Reflection pool, 1996
17. Reflection pool, 2023
18. Magnolias along reflection pool, 1996
19. Wood nymph and transverse axis, 1996
20. Path along river, 1996
21. Live oak grove, 1996
22. Live oak and flooded rice fields, 1996
23. Cypress Lake, 2023
24. Path along river, 2023
25. Upland pond, 2023
26. Spring house and chapel, 2023
27. Rice Mill Pond, spring house and chapel, rice mill, 2023
28. Terraces and ponds, early morning, 1996
29. Reconstructed stables, 2023
30. Eliza's house, 2023
31. Middleton family tomb, 2023
32. Burial ground for slaves, 2023

































































Notes

Selected Publication of the Photographs:

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

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