FEDERICO DE MATTEIS

LANDSCAPE AND THE OSCILLATIONS OF DWELLING: TWO HOUSES, TWO GARDENS

1. House thinking

In 2018, Fondazione Prada Venice hosted an exhibition with the title *Machines à penser*, curated by critic Dieter Roelstraete. The spaces of Ca' Corner della Regina were dedicated to three of the most important 20th century philosophers – Martin Heidegger, Ludwig Wittgenstein, Theodor W. Adorno – and their respective houses. The thesis set forth by the exhibition highlighted the tight relationship between the space of home and philosophical practice, as if only the archetypal place of dwelling could sustain the unfolding of deepest thoughts, as these authors have offered to the world. In particular, Heidegger and Wittgenstein shared the choice of retreating, over extended periods of time, to small huts located in natural settings: one in Todtnauberg, in the mountainous German Black Forest, the other, à la Thoreau, in a remote site overlooking the Norwegian village of Skjolden. Due to their owners' cultural stature, both houses have become mythical places: in Ca' Corner, a reproduction of Heidegger's house in 88% scale was the centerpiece of the entire exhibition, while a replica of the Austrian philosopher's hut was rebuilt in recent years after the original had been dismantled, leaving only the stone basement.

Figure 1: Two philosophers' retreats. Martin Heidegger's hut in Todtbauberg, Germany, and the reconstruction of Ludwig Wittgenstein's hut by Skjolden, Norway. © Wikimedia Commons/Muesse; Wikimedia Commons/Olaf Meister

Curiously – or perhaps not – neither house had a garden. Simply said, they were too diminutive to afford the luxury of a garden. We could dive into the two celebrated philosophers' biographies to inquire on their relationship with gardening, but perhaps it is enough to observe that both architectures are sturdy containers, meant to protect their occupants in carapace-like shelters capable of keeping the external environment at bay. While visual relation towards the exterior was not negated – Heidegger's home opened windows towards the valley, while Wittgenstein dominated the sumptuous Eidsvatnet lake, in a classic prospect-refuge setting – the relationship between their siting and structure is obviously binary: in vs. out, house vs. mountain, artificial vs. natural. Stepping beyond the threshold of the hut purports a sudden transition from one condition to the other: the philosophers provided no space (and no time) for a garden, which could have been a sort of 'intermediate' entity between the binomial terms.

Heidegger is widely known as the philosopher of *Wohnen*, and many authors in the recent past have placed dwelling at the core of architectural theory. Typically, these theories observe two distinct spatial conditions: the siting of buildings, the way they relate to the ground, as in Norberg-Schulz's controversial book (1980), and the interior dimension, its ability of producing homeliness and comfort, a condition at once material and existential (Rybczynski 1986). Gardening, however, does not figure prominently in the subject matter of dwelling theories, as if in the old-fashioned architecture/nature divide tending the soil entirely fell towards the latter term. It seems however reductive to conceive of gardening as a purely decorative practice, unbound from a radical attachment to the ground and the landscape, a central feature in the Heideggerian conception of *Wohnen*

(Heidegger 1993, 349). In addition, while the two philosophers' dwellings show that a house without a garden can exist, it is perhaps more difficult to find gardens without houses: a garden is almost always found as the annex to a dwelling place, and thus partakes – or expands – the home's spatial structure vis-à-vis the ambient world.

My argument here is that gardens, just as houses, are indeed dwelling devices. Just as with a domestic interior, their purpose can be very practical – establish an enclosure, produce shadow, grow vegetables – but also refer to the sphere of affects, by arranging vegetation and objects in such a way as to declare an attitude towards the surrounding environment and world. This attitude can be both contextual – bound to the specific location and setting of a particular garden – or convey the gardener's personal biography, the past events and traumas affecting the lived body's disposition.

I also intend to claim that gardens are inherently atmospheric, and that their design strives to «cultivate emotions in an enclosed space», as per Hermann Schmitz's definition of dwelling (Schmitz 2014, 28). A garden's enclosure – and a landscape's alike – is not necessarily a hard boundary, an actual fence or wall; on what defines the 'boundary' of a landscape we will return later, in an effort to understand the relation between houses, gardens, natural environments, the dweller/gardener, and the swarm of emotions that permeate all these entities. Such relations evolve in time, not only as taste in garden design changes, but as the hallmark of a deeper mutation, that of the sensibility towards the ambient natural world and its acting forces.

To illustrate this argument, I have placed on the table two small houses, not unlike Heidegger's and Wittgenstein's in size and shape. They are both archetypal 'huts', albeit born under very different circumstances and in rather distant landscapes. One is a celebrated place, as famous as the two philosophers' retreats: Derek Jarman's Prospect Cottage in Dungeness, on the coast on Kent. The other, on the contrary, is an anonymous architecture, a tiny temporary house with its spontaneous garden in the post-earthquake settlement located in Onna, near L'Aquila, Italy. Although at first glance they may appear to be radically different buildings and gardens, my feeling is that their analogies are not merely superficial. Both are imbued with trauma – one personal, the other collective – and in their occupying the ground in a

certain way they articulate their owners' stance towards the world. They provide an occasion to interrogate the spatial conditions established by the house and garden as a symptom of their creators' drives, their attempts to manipulate the atmosphere of these places. And while simply comparing these two diminutive architectural spaces is a futile task, using one spatial condition to illustrate and clarify the other seems, on the contrary, a promising inroad into the atmospheric nature of landscape.

2. Prospect Cottage

Life begins the day you start a garden.
(Chinese proverb)

Derek Jarman's Prospect Cottage is a multifaceted cultural item. The British director's last book (Jarman-Sooley 1995), published shortly after his death in 1994, is dedicated to the garden. His earlier book *Modern Nature*, containing the journals held between 1989 and 1990, reports on the garden's making and development, and provides insight into the daily life at Prospect Cottage. Jarman's 1990 film *The Garden* was largely shot on his own Dungeness property. Although the house has only recently been opened to the public – over twenty-five years after the director's death – thanks to this multiplicity of representations it has acquired a relevant, almost iconic place in the collective imaginary of our days.

Figure 2: Derek Jarman's Prospect Cottage in Dungeness, Kent. © Wikimedia Commons/Poliphilo

The director's personal history was dramatically connected to Prospect Cottage, which he purchased shortly after being diagnosed with HIV. It seems almost counterintuitive to start a garden when one receives the news that death is imminent, but as he himself reports the house's purchase and the beginning of the garden were almost incidental, and became a sort of «therapy and pharmacopoeia» (Jarman-Sooley 1995, 12). The garden's character appears as an incarnation of Jarman's visionary world, which had previously taken form in set design and cinema, painting and sculpture. Already during the few residual years of the director's life, it became a small attraction, and Jarman was not afraid to display himself while at work, a sort of political statement of the public persona who had revealed his medical condition to the world. Indeed, the garden's making is associated to that 'frosted generation' of young gay men that was heavily affected in the early years of the virus's spread (Cook 2014, 246). It can be considered an activist manifesto of sorts, given the strong social stigma towards homosexuals that accompanied the beginning of the epidemic.

Even more than the houses of his philosophical counterparts, Jarman's hut cannot be detached from his own personality, since he actively contributed to its making. After purchasing the early 20th-century fishermen shack in 1986, the director almost incidentally started to grow the garden in an environment as distant as possible from our classical conception of pleasant landscape. The house lies on the coast, about 400 m from the Atlantic, on a flat and barren expanse of shingle that can hardly accommodate any vegetation, except the resilient plants accustomed to growing under the rough atmospheric conditions of the ocean shore. To make the scenery even more somber, the hulking mass of a nuclear power plant rises just over a kilometer south of the cottage, and figures prominently in the photographs illustrating Jarman's book. While the idea of garden is often associated to a paradisiacal image, one could hardly think of a setting more distant from this conception, a «volatile quasi-nuclear mythscape» (Kennedy 1993, 34). The director, however, describes his garden as such:

> The word paradise is derived from the ancient Persian – 'a green place'.

> Paradise haunts gardens, and some gardens are paradises. Mine is one of them. Others are like bad children – spoilt by their parents, over-watered and covered with noxious chemicals. The only chemical I have used is against the slug which devours my *Crambe cordifolia*. (Jarman-Sooley 1995, 40)

The garden's aesthetic does not descend, in his view, from a picture-quality beauty, rather from its resistance against an adverse environment and an atmosphere that is both powerful and aggressive. As recounted in *Modern nature*, Jarman's typical English upbringing has made gardening one of his passions ever since childhood (Jarman 2018, 7). As a radical artist, however, his conception of nature lies a sideral distance from the bucolic cliché and from the over-manicured gardens of the English tradition, particularly those managed by the National Trust with its politics of 'heritization' (O'Quinn 1999, 121). His journal's title, in fact, descends from a conversation reported in its opening pages:

> I was describing the garden to Maggi Hambling at a gallery opening. And said I intended to write a book about it.
> She said: «Oh, you've finally discovered nature, Derek».
> «I don't think it's really quite like that», I said, thinking of Constable and Samuel Palmer's Kent.
> «Ah, I understand completely. You've discovered modern nature». (Jarman 2018, 8)

Even to non-expert eyes, Jarman's garden appears as a peculiar arrangement of vegetation and objects. The director would frequently comb the beach near the cabin and gather driftwood, shells, metal scrap and other objects that were then re-worked and assembled within both the garden and the house. The unfenced, relatively small plot of land (just over 2000 m^2) hosts a variegated arrangement of plants, most of which low brushes. The gravel terrain in itself is barren, and Jarman dug circular holes wherein soil was poured, giving the vegetation a distinctive geometry. The front and back garden follow very different schemes, one more formal, the other with a free layout rich with totem-like, vertical posts made from recovered materials. A vegetable and herb garden, enclosed in rectangular wooden planter boxes, complements the ornamental garden.

Figure 3: The rear garden in Prospect Cottage. © flickr/diamond geezer

Jarman's choice of plants is telltale of a certain attitude towards gardening and nature. While many were purchased in nurseries, the director often harvested plants in the surroundings and transported them to the garden. Various sorts of sea kale, particularly resistant to the harsh climate, adorned the plant beds. He would also gather seeds from flowering plants and scatter them, wind-like, on the plant beds, contaminating their 'purity' with the intermingling of species that is normal in spontaneous vegetation. Again, what seems to be the challenge for Jarman is not that of achieving a canonical beauty, rather of making a garden here even possible, with the constant need of fighting against the dry terrain and the wuthering winds, the rabbits and insect pests. To do this, each plant species is carefully considered, privileging the humble-but-resistant over the gorgeous decorative plant. By adopting an approach sensible towards the ecology of plants, the amateur gardener Jarman was following in the footsteps of landscaping celebrities such as Beth Chatto and Christopher Lloyd – who even visited Prospect Cottage (Jarman 2018, 298) – or, later, Piet Oudolf.

The garden is not only vegetal, as the director's sculptures animate it with strange presences. Jarman takes great effort in producing the elaborate arrangements of stones, which he compares to pre-historic objects: «The stones, especially the

circles, remind me of dolmens, of standing stones. They have the same mysterious power to attract» (Jarman-Sooley 1995, 24). Arnaudo (2005) observes how this echoes the writings of gardener Russell Page, who, in the 1983 preface to his classic *The education of a gardner* writes:

> My understanding is that every object emanates – sends out vibrations beyond its physical body which are specific to itself. These vibrations vary with the nature of the object, the materials it is made of, its colour, its textures and its form. Any tree has twigs, branches and a trunk – the bark on a twig is other than that of its trunk – the texture of foliage varies through the seasons. So too with a stone – the material and texture of marble differ from those of sandstone or granite, and like the shape and colour of a flower or a fruit these dictate the speed and spread of the emanations of each particular object and thus the interplay between objects. (Page 1983, *Preface*)

There is a strong resonance between Page's considerations and Gernot Böhme's (2017, 18, 95) notion of *ecstasy*, which postulates the 'openness' of things in their coming out of themselves and striking the experiencing subject. What could be described as the amuletic power of objects, their ability – in the case of Prospect Cottage – of engaging and perhaps balancing the untamed forces of nature, could also find its deeper reason in the objects' ability of affectively tinging our spatial environment, manipulating the atmosphere we sense, setting a certain *Stimmung* (De Matteis 2021a, 124).

While Jarman's illness evolves, he spends long periods of time hospitalized in London, as the doctors attempt treatments for his failing health. Even from the hospital bed, the garden at Prospect Cottage is remembered and imagined in its passing seasons, as it lies deprived of care on the ocean shore: «Following my star to this Eden, I cried throughout Tuesday for the sky and the sea. […] So late at night. I weep for the garden so lonely in the shingle desert» (Jarman 2018, 281).

In the few years Jarman inhabited it and tended to its garden, Prospect Cottage served as a hideaway:

> Prospect Cottage is the last of a long line of 'escape houses' I started building as a child at the end of the garden: grass houses of fragrant mowings that slowly turned brown and sour; sandcastles; a turf hut, hardly big enough to turn around in; another of scrap metal and twigs, marooned on ice-flooded fields – stomping across brittle ice. (Jarman 2018, 276)

It is an architectural refuge similar to that chosen by Heidegger and Wittgenstein, but which also served as a place for creativity and making. Jarman spent long hours and days engaged in gardening, and many others painting, making sculptures with driftwood, and also writing. Jarman was no philosopher but a multifarious artist, and his activity involved a wide variety of practices we would hardly imagine Heidegger engaged in.

What however makes Jarman's cabin stand out from the other retreats is its overall spatial ensemble. The two philosophers' homes were rather anonymous buildings, as could be found throughout the adjacent landscape. While Wittgenstein could enjoy a remote loneliness and spectacular view over the Norwegian fjords, Heidegger's cabin is indeed located on a rather unremarkable hillside typical of the Alpine arc. Prospect Cottage, on the contrary, stands out as an oneiric totem in a lunatic landscape which could well be inspired by the British director's films. This ambient environment is afforded by the expanse of shingle and the looming power plant, by the pitch-black hut and by Jarman's garden; but perhaps most of all by the powerful natural forces animating the atmosphere. *Modern nature* offers a vast number of descriptions of the weather in Dungeness. Some are razor-sharp and evoke vivid images, such as that which opens the book:

> Prospect Cottage, its timbers black with pitch, stands on the shingle at Dungeness. […] There are no walls or fences. My garden's boundaries are the horizon. In this desolate landscape the silence is only broken by the wind, and the gulls squabbling round the fishermen bringing in the afternoon catch. There is more sunlight here than anywhere in Britain; this and the constant wind turn the shingle into a stony desert where only the toughest grasses take a hold. (Jarman 2018, 3)

Others abound with enumeration of plants, showcasing Jarman's deep botanical knowledge:

> What a joy this sunlight brings. The flowers in bloom are primrose, speedwell, groundsel, buckthorn, daisy, gorse, wild pear, heartsease. About fifty little plants, white and yellow in an isolated clump: ragwort, sea sandwort, periwinkle – the large variety that has invaded the sallow woods, elusive pale blue stars; early forget-me-not, so small that you could easily pass it by. Common dog violet, henbit dead nettle, narrow leaved vetch, dove's foot cranesbill. (Jarman 2018, 279)

Still others focus on the dynamic and changing sky, such as that of the tremendous storm that strikes the cottage:

> I awoke in the early hours of morning from a fitful sleep. A sharp wind had sprung up. At first I thought little of it; Dungeness is known to be exposed and the wind blows here without ceasing. In the dark I noticed that the glass lampshade in the centre of the room was swaying back and forth, and the room was full of dust forced by the wind from every nook and cranny. I switched on the light and nothing happened. The power lines were down.
> The first dull waves of panic washed over me. […] Feeling cold and nauseous I groped my way by the spectral beam of the lighthouse towards the kitchen at the back of the house, which was taking the full brunt of a storm increasing its intensity by the minute. […] A fisherman's hut disintegrating seemed in the dark to be the house itself; every timber was stretched to the breaking point. Now and again a board split from its neighbour, […] the house was breaking up. I sat and waited for the roof to blow away or a window to cave in.
> The hurricane grew. A deep and continuous roar now underpinned the higher notes of gutter and drainpipe: the shrieks and groans and banshee whistling took on symphonic proportion. My Prospect Cottage never seemed so dear, beaten like a drum in the rushing wind that assaulted it and flew on howling after other prey. (Jarman 2018, 18-19)

Prospect Cottage, the small house on the edge of the ocean, is a phenomenological amplifier. Jarman was seeking a retreat from the mundane London life, but not an isolation from the forces of (modern) nature, which on the contrary he desires and accepts. It is indeed a pathic approach towards experience, resounding also in his cinema, but especially clear as we see the director photographed in his garden, bearing the marks of illness and beaten by the brightest sunlight in England, the storm clouds and the sea-water spray carried from the beach by the wind. There is not one tree to offer shade, no water in a gentle glade, only the roaring waves of the ocean. While battling with AIDS, determined to stay alive in the face of public chatter, Jarman both sought and built an atmosphere of vitality and natural power: a therapeutic form serving to negotiate the trauma of impending death. Nothing at Prospect Cottage harks to the *Gemütlichkeit* of Heidegger's Alpine hut, or to the Thoreauesque wildness of Wittgenstein's Norwegian hideaway.

3. Under the mountain

As we move southward from Prospect Cottage and into the Italian Apennine, we bid farewell to the immensity of the landscape and the raging oceanic storms, which are replaced by the ring of mountains surrounding Onna and a bland suburban setting. Here, there is no avant-garde author nor philosopher at work, only the inhabitants of temporary post-earthquake housing who have lost their homes in April 2009 and, fourteen years later, are still enduring a fragile existential condition. While Jarman deliberately chose the semi-exile of the coast of Kent as a therapeutical measure in a moment of crisis, trauma here seems to be addressed in entirely different ways. While the sequence of small wooden houses offers the evacuees a decent if humble accommodation, it seems almost cynical to observe that the small neighborhood lies just a stone's throw from where the ruins of the original village are found (De Matteis 2021b). As reconstruction slowly progresses, the renewed buildings still stand empty, haunted by the ghosts of lives past (De Matteis-Catucci 2022, 101).

Figure 4: Post-earthquake housing in Onna, by L'Aquila, Italy. © The Author

If we observe these houses, a comparison with Jarman's seaside abode is inevitable. There are obvious differences: the ground here is not barren, and the arrangement of plantings hovers between formal and haphazard, sometimes following the narrow

gravel paths or the borders of the sidewalk, but also with vases carelessly placed on the floor. The choice of species is altogether different from the sophisticated simplicity of the British garden, where the humble coastal plants were privileged for their resiliency in the face of adverse weather rather than for their sheer decorative aesthetics. Rose, geranium, violet, nasturtium, cyclamen are the staple of all local nurseries, and are offered with strong discounts even in supermarkets. One can sense that the implicit intention here is not that of starting a garden that will last for generations – or at least outlive the gardener: Jarman often said, «a garden locates you in eternity» –, rather that of adding color and floral kindness to an otherwise bleak and squalid transitional housing solution. With few exceptions, all plants are low bushes or potted seasonals: easy, instant-result providers of beautification, for planting trees requires a temporal outlook that goes beyond the scope of this neighborhood.

As in Dungeness, a series of objects complements the garden vegetation – stone circles surrounding plants, the seven dwarves – but also the usual array of backyard domesticity: bicycles, drying racks, containers, garbage bins, garden chairs, satellite dishes and all the paraphernalia that Venturi-Scott-Brown (1972) found so delightful in their exploration of America's sprawling residential neighborhoods. Regardless of its post-catastrophe origin, this suburb could be found in many different places around the world, where a global pop-consumer culture has leveled the aesthetics to a bland continuum.

But there is something else at work here, an eerie presence that the apparent laziness of this place only barely makes recede to the background. This landscape is borne from trauma, and the atmosphere one breathes is still loaded with destruction. To arrive here, you go by a way that makes you encounter the traces of the earthquake: the shattered houses, crumbling buildings barely supported by bracing, the dichotomy between the historic village lying in ruins and the tidy new houses with their young gardens. There is a sequence of conditions that you encounter, the expressivity of the ruined landscape produces an accumulation that charges the perceiving body with a tension that is impossible to ignore. The artificially pacified post-earthquake village, then, almost appears as a cynical joke, a paradox one would not expect to find here. The potted plants and garden dwarves are not an

anomaly in themselves: what is otherworldly is to find them precisely *here*.

Figure 5: Post-earthquake housing in Onna, by L'Aquila, Italy. © The Author

On the other hand, the anthropological drive taking place in Onna is all but unexplainable. Jarman tended his garden as a form of cure, and did so with conscious deliberation. As in Dungeness, these gardens are growing in the last place where you would expect them to be, on the site of a tragedy that has collectively struck a community. The inhabitants of this place have no aesthetic agenda to pursue, but are obviously struggling to inscribe their houses and garden with the attributes of normality. It is a strategy to cope with the wounded atmosphere of this landscape: with the chthonic power of the earthquake, surfacing from the deep of the ground, and with the wilderness agitating the mountainous territory that encircles the town. Onna's inhabitants feel the atmosphere of destruction that emerges from the ruins, and try to resist by manipulating it, bringing it closer to their own terms, the terms of normality and pacification. Thus, while Jarman espoused and subjected himself to the desolated landscape of Dungeness2, here the inhabitants battle against the onslaught of the desert.

4. Conclusion. The oscillations of dwelling

When we engage the environment, we never do so in an affectively neutral way. Something is always at stake: our relationship to nature, the way we feel towards it; the need to spatially negotiate our personal disposition or a collectively experienced mood, as they may have been altered by an event that has left behind a trauma. Architecture as a practice reflects our conscious or spontaneous need to go about with the world, to spatially express our emotions (De Matteis 2019). Starting a garden is also an arrangement of space, and one can do so with many different objectives in mind: to create a world in miniature, a contained domain that one can affectively control (Griffero 2016, 139); to plant a totem in the ground; to heal by tending the land; to find consolation in the selfless beauty of plants and flowers; to pacify the demons of violence and destruction left behind by a catastrophe. All these emotional aspirations become embedded in the garden, and hence emanate towards the experiencing subject as an atmosphere.

The deeper drive towards the making of a garden has to do with the way we dwell, with our relationship with the world and to our personal or collective biographies. The two houses and gardens we have described here are distinct opposites: the post-earthquake housing encroaches upon itself to keep at bay a wilderness laden with menaces, while the oceanic cabin resonates with its desolate, uncanny domain. The first seems to say: we can tame the beast, endure the slaughter and return to be the masters of the land; the second, on the contrary, is expecting to be carried away by the wind at any moment. These are different attitudes towards dwelling: instantiated by the subject and their agendas, their aesthetic capacities, but also by the culture they operate in. The practices of dwelling are not stable, but change over time to cope with the oscillating ways we exist in the world.

Atmosphere is indeed a key word in the making of gardens. The gardener does not simply arrange vegetal life on the terrain and the placement of objects: s/he is manipulating the emotional response of those who happen to come upon this enclosed space. Gardening is at once an act of dwelling, and the instalment of an atmosphere, of the *Stimmung* that Simmel identified as the unifying element of a given landscape (1913). And that a landscape's boundaries are defined by a continuity in the feeling afforded to the experiencing subject – rather than by a framing

view, or a mode of perception – indeed also grounds Jarman's choice of leaving his garden unfenced: although Dungeness was his escape from the world, it was not a *secret* garden, a place hidden from view, sheltered from unwanted gazes. Prospect Cottage is not only *in* the oceanic landscape, it is phenomenally fused with the feeling this affords. The landscape ends only when the atmosphere fades away.

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