

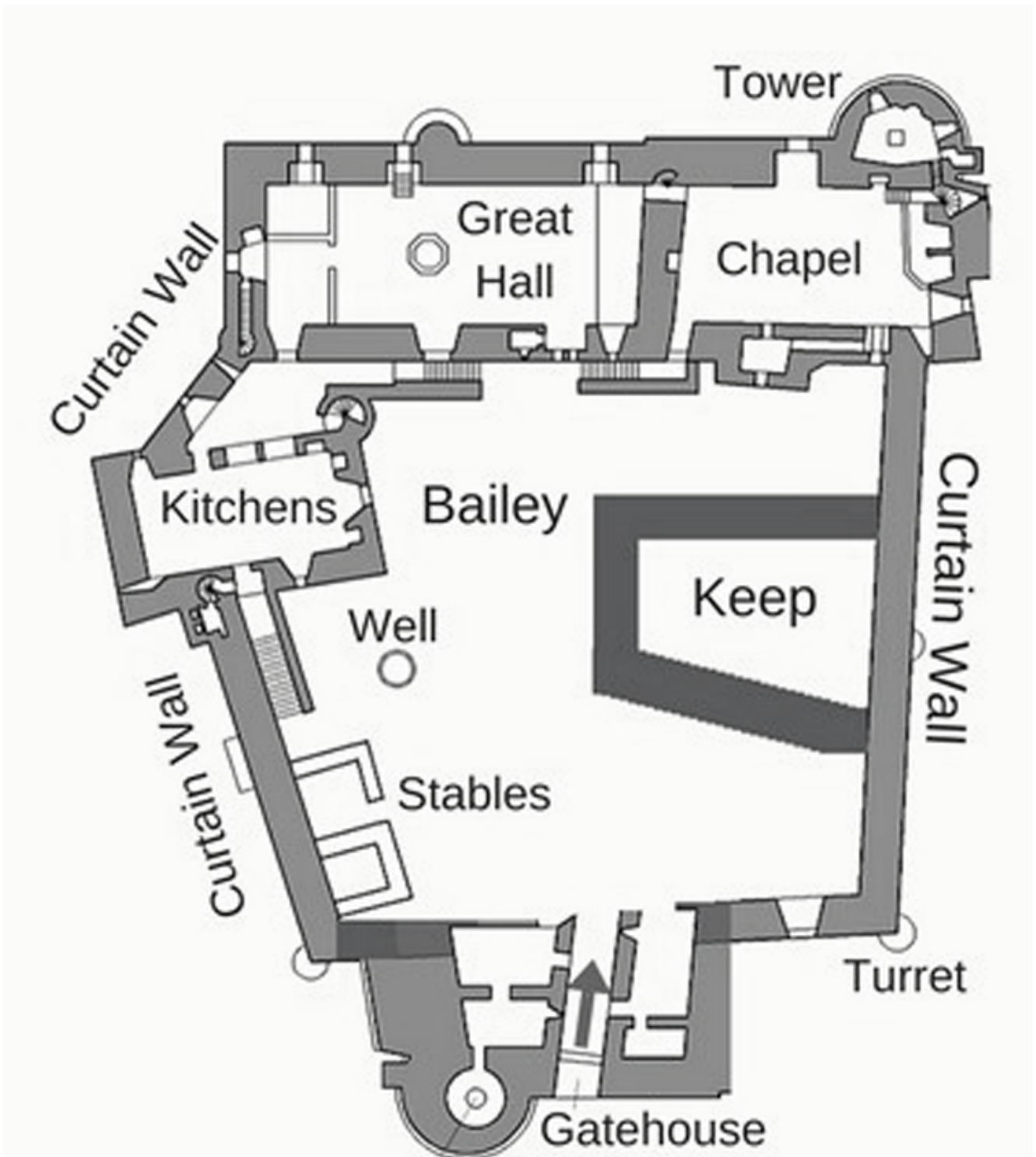
From European Castle to Modern American Luxury Estate

by [John Henry](#) (January 2021)



Caernarfon Castle

What is missing in today's luxury homes that falls short of mimicking those great castles and palaces of yesteryear? What rooms were included a few centuries earlier but are irrelevant now and why? How does culture, technology and conflict shape large manors and chateaux? This short historical narrative should help explain the evolution of historic large castles and manor houses to American pleasure palaces and other castle type manors inspired by European styles.



Travelling through Italy, Germany, France, and England one can see the fortified castle evolve into a show palace over a few centuries. The medieval castle is a fortified structure designed to keep the occupants safe and defend against any outside attack. Usually, they are added on to for years but normally start with a solitary tower, the Keep, which contains the family, servants, soldiers, and livestock.

A wall of varying geometry encircling the Keep allowed

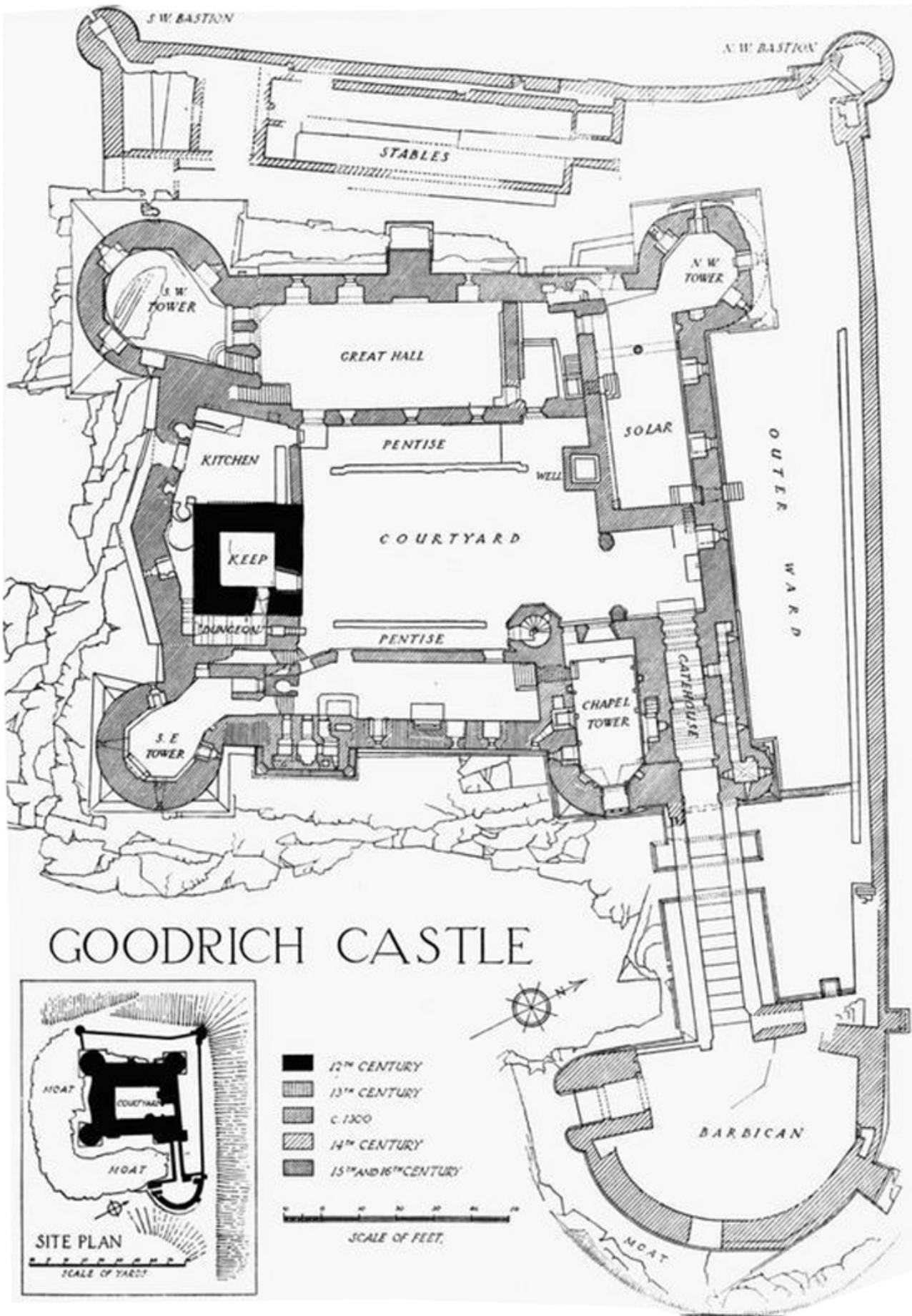
farm animals to be contained and offered a first line of defense. This courtyard was entered through a gatehouse or barbican tower. Note the immense thickness of walls as siege catapults, battering rams, assault with ladders, and other weapons and military strategy had to be resisted. The higher the walls, the thicker they had to be constructed for stability. Rounded towers were added later as they deflected arrows and bullets and lastly cannon shot.

If an intruder made it into the Bailey or Ward, they could be shot at from the Keep and other towers around the perimeter wall. The castle owner, over time, often expanded the property/rooms and added a Great Hall and Kitchens. Chapels were constructed nearby. Initially there were no glass windows, only small openings that were narrow enough to keep safe and from which to launch spears and arrows.

Large fireplaces could barely heat the cold stone rooms in the winter. Secret passageways allowed hiding and a safe exit in the event things were untenable in an attack. If one had the time, funds, and manpower to build more extensively at the outset, then a larger plan would be developed with imaginative geometries and layouts. Upper floors would contain extra bedrooms and other storage areas, etc.

You can trace Goodrich Castle's growth at right (11th to 13th centuries) by looking at the shading of the walls.

In 16th-17th century France the proliferation of defensive castles by landowning lords and merchants who flaunted the King's taxation practices and opposed strict edicts would have to be attacked routinely and the occupants jailed or executed to keep them in line with the law of the land. These royally ordered sieges were so expensive and deadly that finally all fortified castles were prohibited, and most were forced to be torn down.



At the time of the Sun King, and before Versailles was built, a minister of his cabinet constructed Vaux le Vicomte

outside of Paris. Although there was a vestigial moat around a part of the structure, this design was clearly a non-defensive pleasure palace intended to impress. Vaux, completed in 1656, was an early model for succeeding structures of this type which were residential in nature and not intended for military use.

As Europe's monarchs saw periods of peace the start of an incredible series of palace and large country house building had begun from Italy to Germany and in England to Russia. Vast lands were carefully designed for views, novelty, cultivation, and monuments with ceremonial gates, walls and fences announcing for several miles the principal structure.

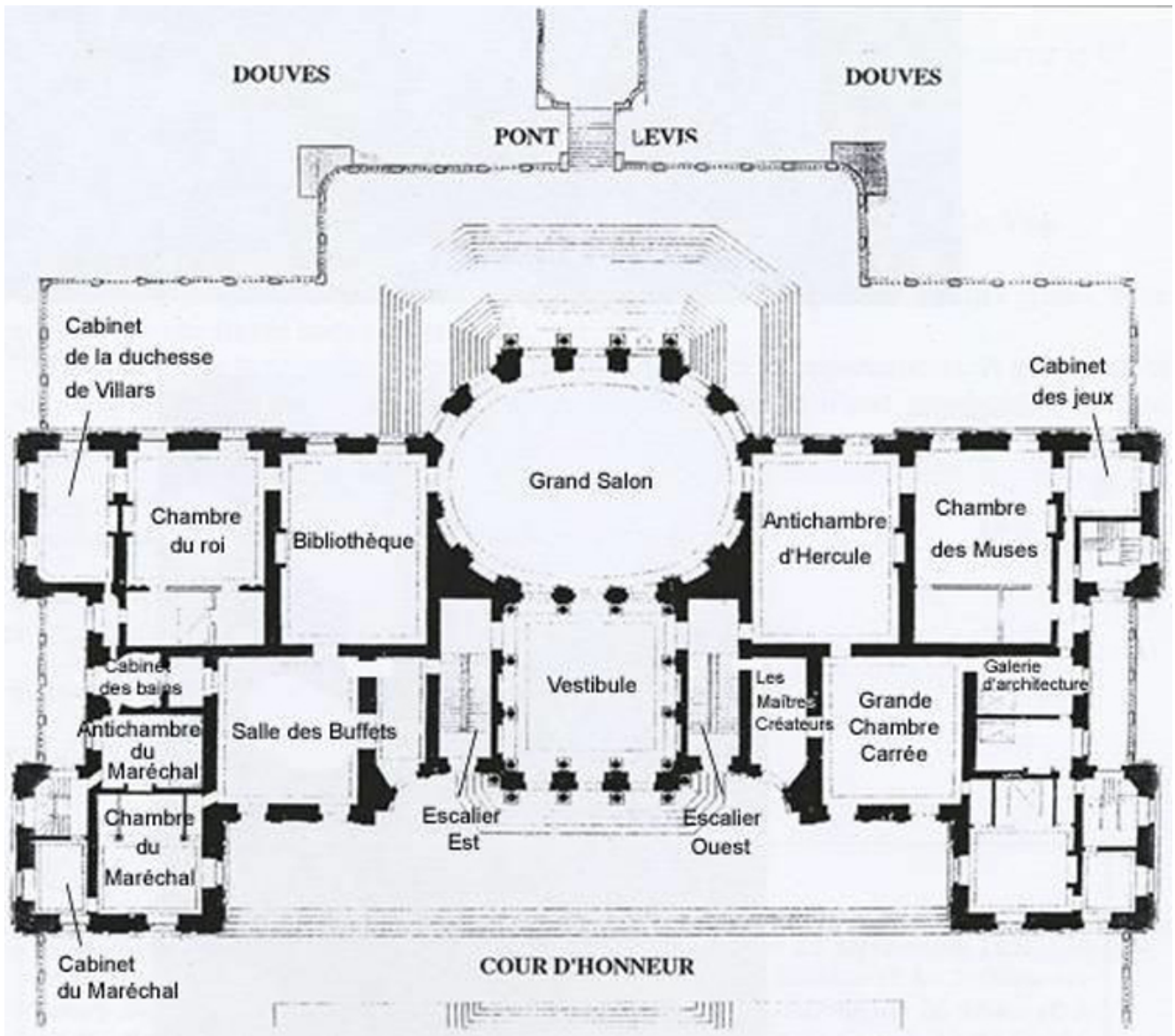


The main residence was not alone on the property. There were stables, livery, farm implements and other storage nearby and integrated into the site planning and architectural theme. The area of land on which these chateaux or manor houses were constructed were in the hundreds and thousands of acres with reflecting ponds, parterres, fountains and

landscaped areas with grottos, pavilions, secondary villas, etc.

For many not familiar with the reasoning behind such extravagant and voluminous designs, the owner had to include rooms for the often-unannounced head of State and his/her retinue, which often took up half the size of the estate. Horses and carriages had to be cared for and kept in storage. Military attaches and soldiers needed quarters. These properties were typically self-sustaining.

In Vaux le Vicomte (above), wine, stores, food prep and kitchen were in the basement. Above that were the main public rooms including the fantastic elliptical nearly three-story Grand Salon (apparently inspired by Palladio's Villa Rotonda in Vicenza) at the center and here pushed to the outer wall to take in the fabulous views of nearly two miles of pools and landscaping at the rear. Fouquet's private household slept in chambers on one half of the house while the King's bedroom was to the left, through the Library. Nearby were smaller rooms for the King's immediate officers.



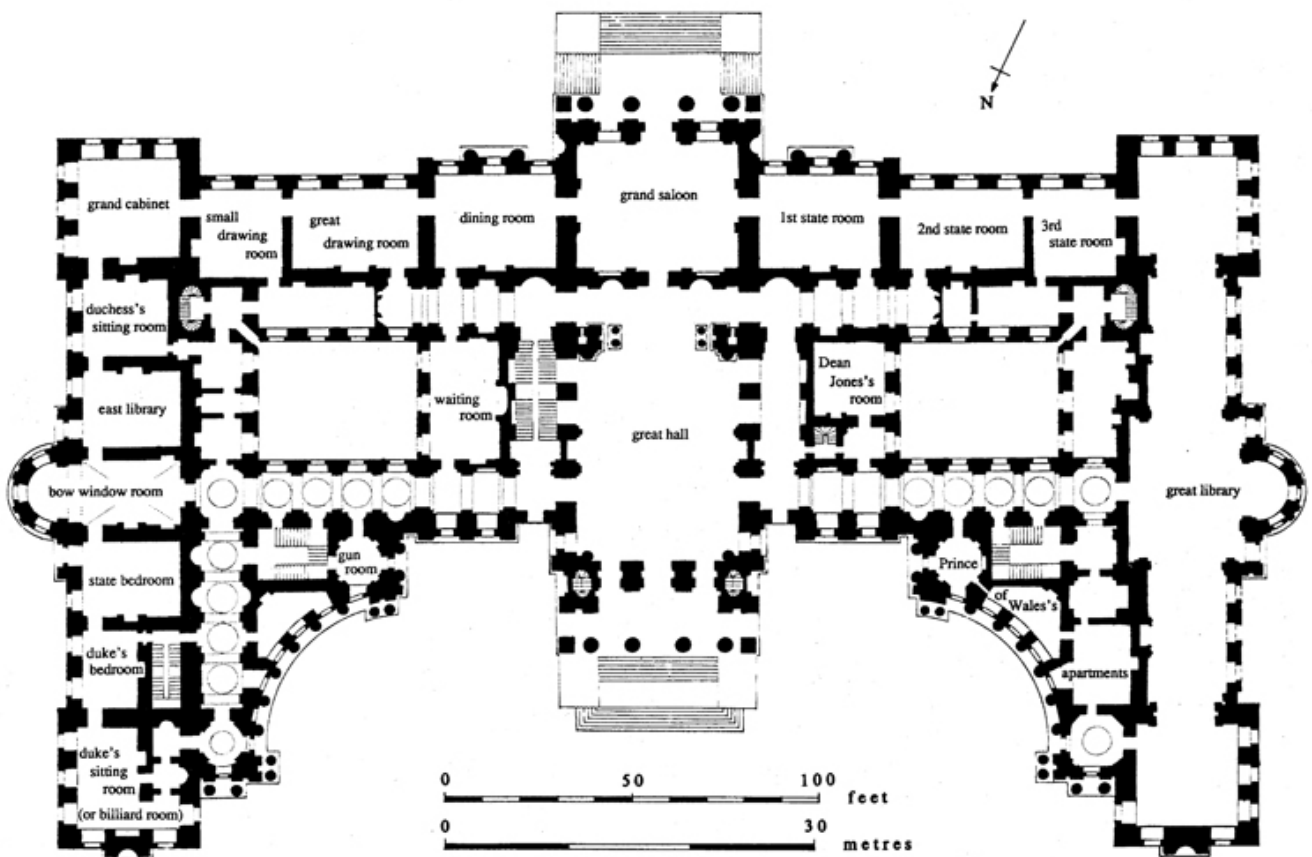
What we see for the first time in these pleasure palaces are rooms that had to be developed to make the floor plans symmetrical in many cases and had no other function other than be dedicated to the arts, mythological and religious themes. At the right of the Grand Salon is an ante chamber dedicated to Hercules and next to that of the Muses. There are other rooms attached with additional art works and one Gallery dedicated to Architecture. This type of interior art program is based on Italian villas which often had gigantic frescos with gods and other allegorical themes.



Vaux le Vicomte did not have a central flamboyant staircase but one grand stair on each side of the Vestibule, hidden from the entry hall. We see something like this at Blenheim Palace, finished in 1792, where the Great Hall leads to a Grand Salon. In Vaux le Vicomte you will notice that

there are no named hallways. There is an 'enfilade' of rooms that connect to each other so that one simply walks from one room to the next. Blenheim has this connection around the perimeter rooms but also has interior hallways. One reason for this is that servants could be available from just outside the principal rooms in the hallway without walking through the enfilade.

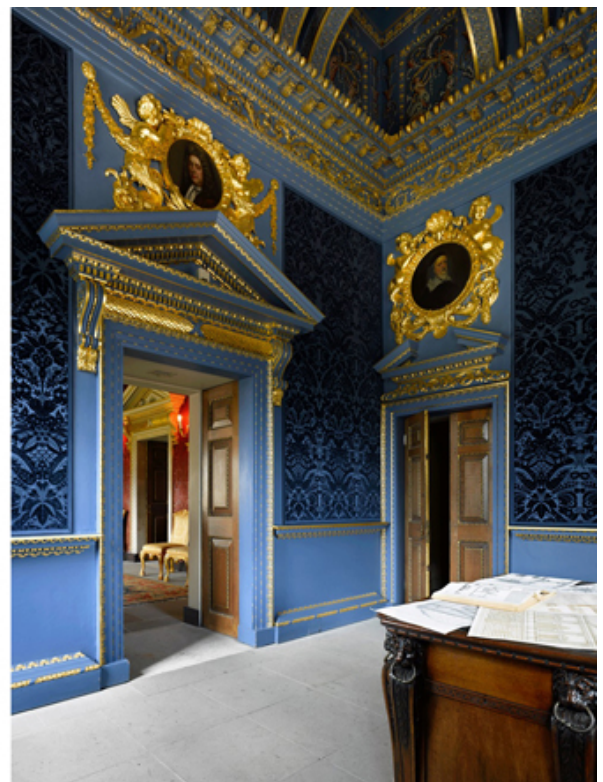
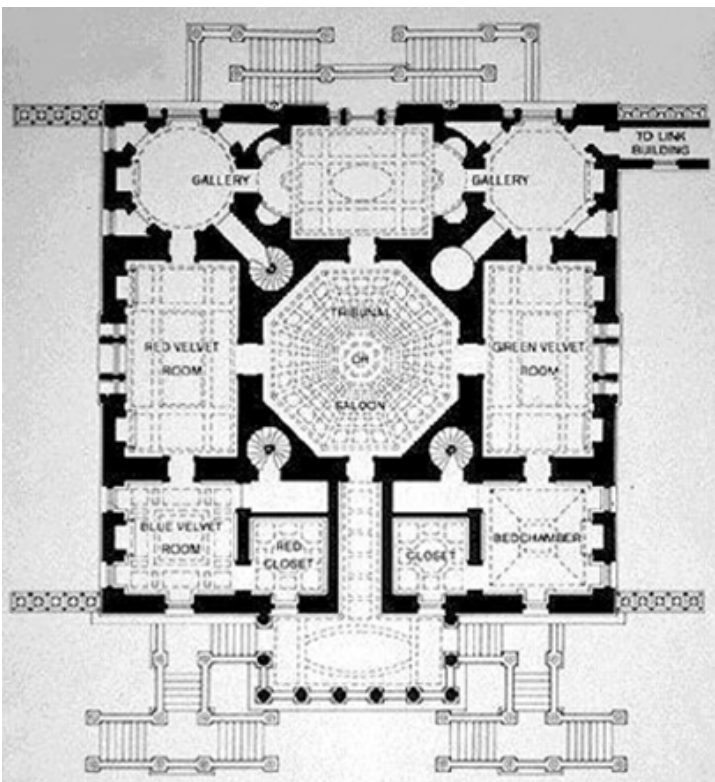
Vaux does not have a Chapel, but Blenheim does. The larger layout shows it connected to the right of the main block through exterior covered passages. In Blenheim's ground plan you will see how much space is dedicated to the 'working' part of the estate which includes a complete Kitchen where animals were kept for slaughter and curing, butter churned, vegetables processed, pigs and other yard animals penned, etc. The other large component was the stable with livery, blacksmithing, etc. The overall effect is immense. A mile or more away are grand entry gates demarcating the property, outer walls, and monuments.



BLENHEIM PALACE c. 1860



Looking closely at the Blenheim plan you will notice the following rooms: Great Drawing Room, Small Drawing Room, Grand Cabinet, Sitting Rooms, East Library, Bow Window Room, State Bedroom, Duke's Bedroom, Duke's Sitting Room, Waiting Room, Gun Room, additional State Rooms and the Prince of Wales's Apartments. The Great Library is one of the largest ever built on a private estate. The Great Hall is a medieval English antecedent.

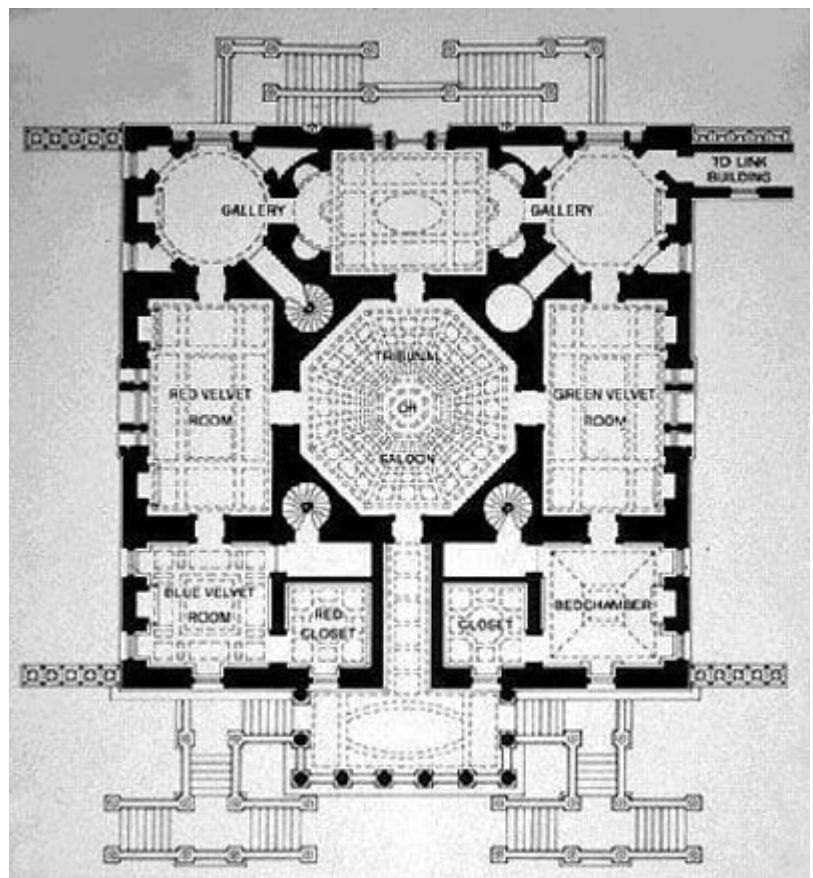


Chiswick House, built in 1729, is also an inspiration

of Palladio's most famous work, as in Vaux. In the center of the house is an octagon instead of a pure circle. What is interesting are the types of rooms named around the 'Tribunal Saloon.' There are a series of art galleries, reception and dining rooms named the 'Red Velvet Room,' 'Blue Velvet Room,' 'Red Closet,' and 'Green Velvet Room,' One Bedchamber and Closet must be for dignitaries on this main floor. As in Villa Rotonda, small spiral staircases connect service quarters and kitchen/stores to this main level.

What we see here is a culture of manners and protocol. These rooms simply were not included in succeeding generations of large country house building which saw a logarithmic downsizing to accommodate essential functions with no provision for large staffs and on site husbandry and food production. There were also tax issues in Britain, France, and the United States which saw immense estates abandoned in Europe and through the Gilded Age here.

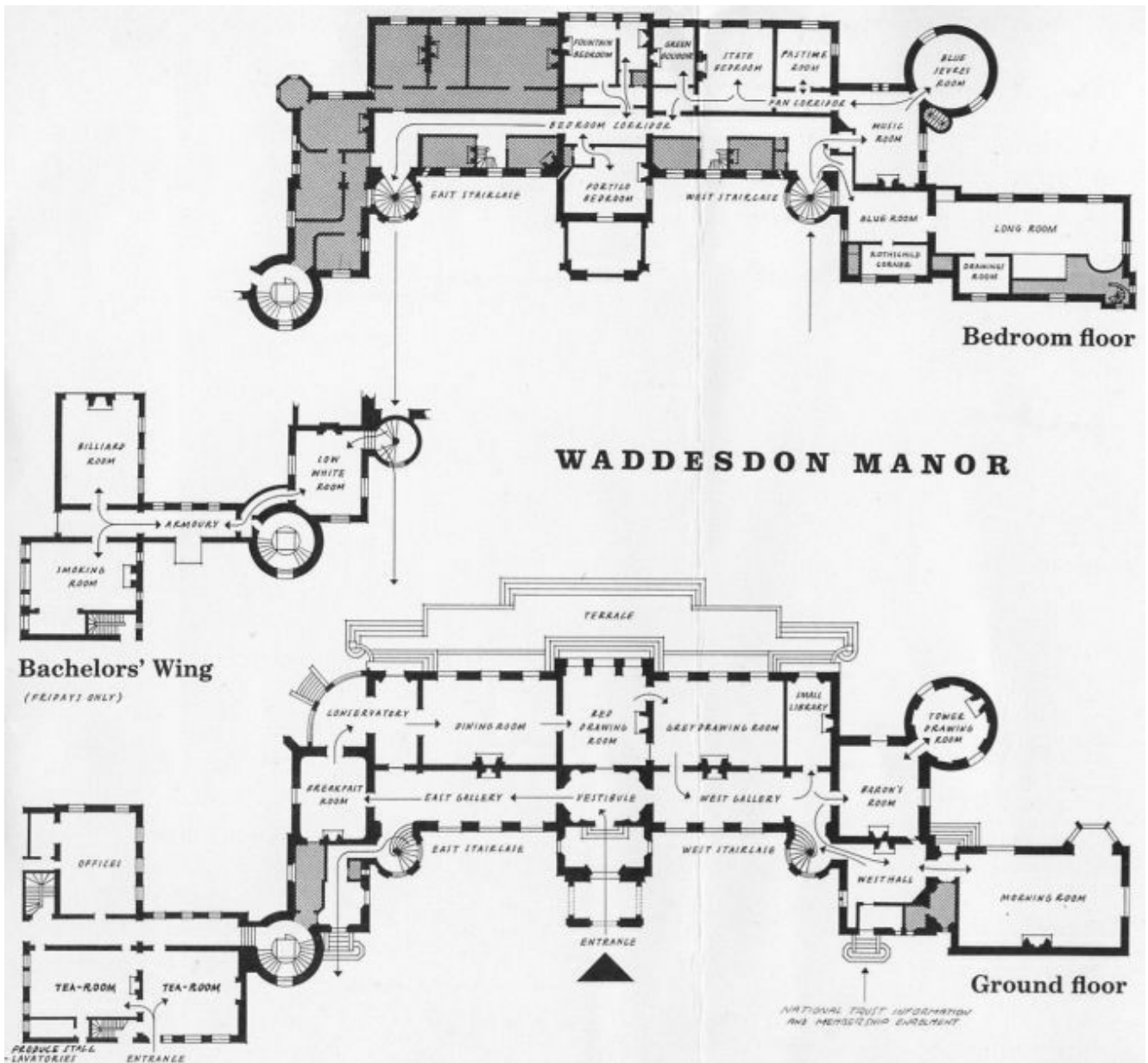
Another great English manor is Waddesdon (1889), owned by the Rothschilds. This later concoction melds French and English Renaissance motifs. Here we see a more reasonable and modern arrangement of rooms and spaces. Entering a small elliptical Vestibule, East and West art galleries face the front court. The left side is connected to the Main Dining Room, Conservatory, Breakfast Room, and Tea Rooms. A central 'Red



Velvet Room, and Tea Rooms. A central 'Red

Drawing Room' is open to the Dining Room at left and 'Grey Drawing Room' at right. There is a Small Library, the Baron's Room with attached Drawing Room (study), then the West Hall and Morning Room. The Second Floor consists mostly of bedrooms, including the Portico Bedroom, Fountain Bedroom with Green Boudoir, a Pastime Room, Music Room, and Blue Room with Rothchild Corner. The Third Floor via the front tower stair connects to the Low White Room, Armoury, Smoking and Billiard Room (for Bachelors).



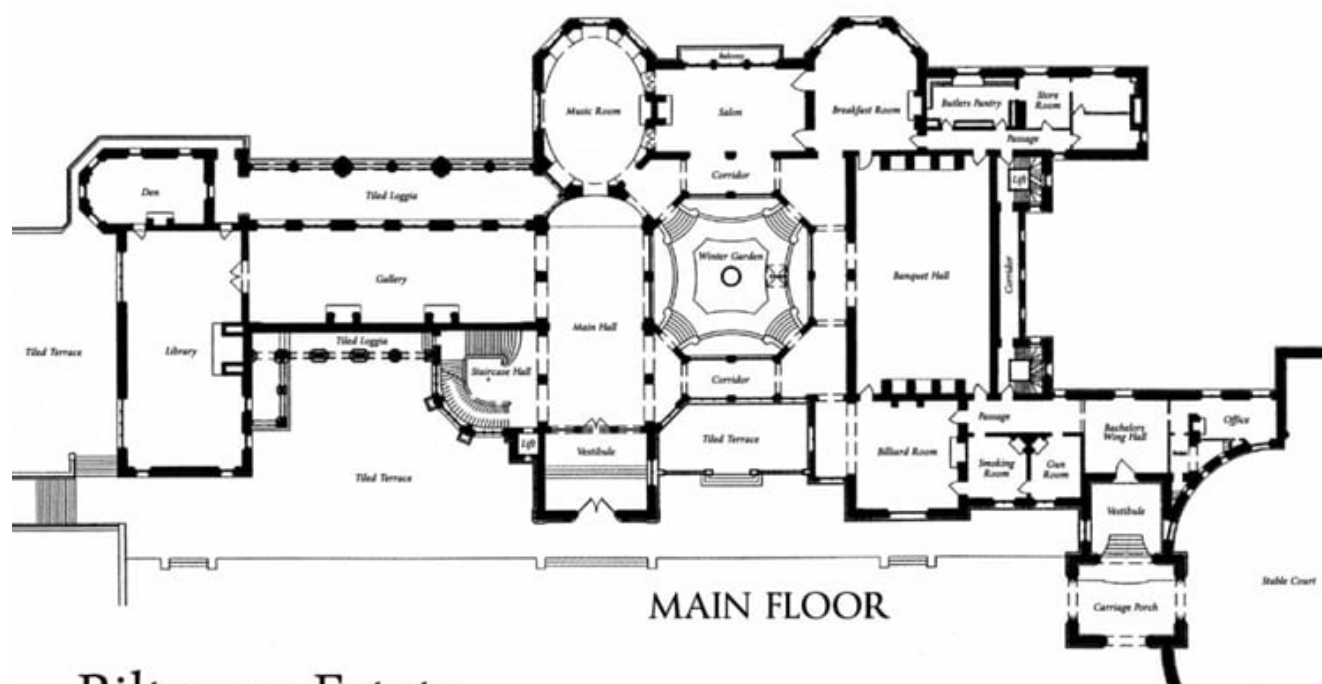


In the United States, there are three or four significant houses that exemplify the best historical manors based on European precedent. These are The Biltmore (1895), San Simeon (1947), and Vizcaya (1922). In all the mid-18th century 'piles' in Europe and later, notice how many more windows of increasingly larger size are included. These houses were not defensive in nature of course and the cultural norms and technology of the day tended to direct the floor planning. Wall thickness was reduced but most were all masonry construction. Sizes and number of windows increased. Formal rooms and mannered protocol decreased.



On originally extensive landholdings, the Biltmore was designed by Richard Morris Hunt, who studied in Paris at the famed L'Ecole des Beaux Arts. (see video tour here: <https://youtu.be/7xLALy-JT-E>) The famous staircase at Blois was a central design feature incorporated into the grand

scheme. From a rectangular Vestibule, Hunt dazzles the visitor with the Grand Stair at left, Winter Garden diagonally at right, through Main Hall the art Gallery to the left and elliptical Music Room overlooking the vast wine valley. At the end of the Gallery is the two-story Library with Den and the largest room in the mansion is the six fireplace Banquet Hall. A Breakfast Room faces the grounds at rear with a practical Butler's Pantry. Private stairs to the Kitchen below and using elevators, servants can attend to guests. There is a Billiard Room, Smoking Room, Gun Room, and Bachelor's Wing Hall with office—a grouping of rooms with a private Carriage Porch entry.



Biltmore Estate

Biltmore's second floor consists of seven fancifully named guest bedrooms on the left side accessed from the Second Floor Living Hall, on one end framed by the Louis XVI Room and at the opposite side a His and Her Bedroom for the owners with the Oak Sitting Room in between. Mrs. Vanderbilt had her closest maid nearby. Additional guests were situated in seven bedrooms on the other side of the upper Banquet Hall.

The third floor has sixteen secondary bedroom suites with formal Hall and Tower Rooms. Halls and corridors cleverly connect all the rooms in this mansion; the enfilade system is not used. Biltmore is a completely concrete structure, walls and roof included, which give it the



appearance and strength of the thick-walled French chateaux it mimics.

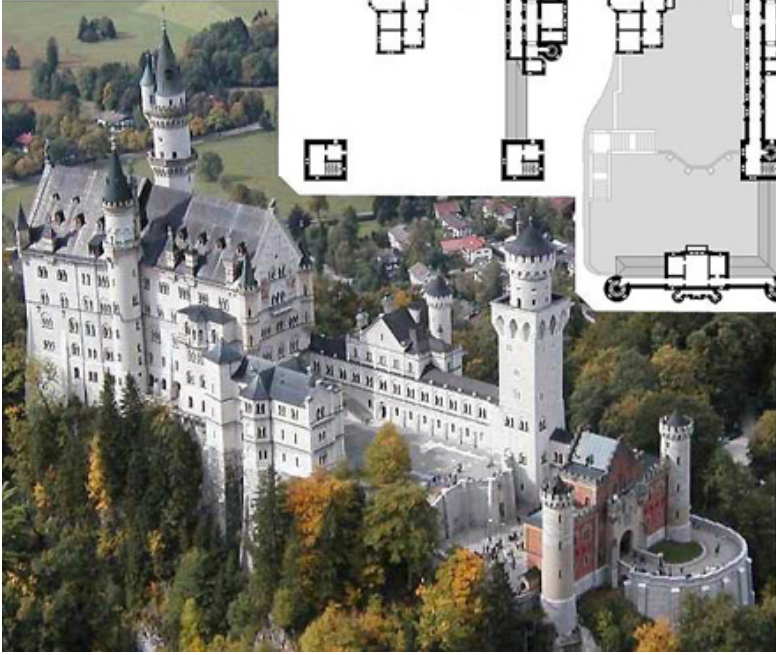
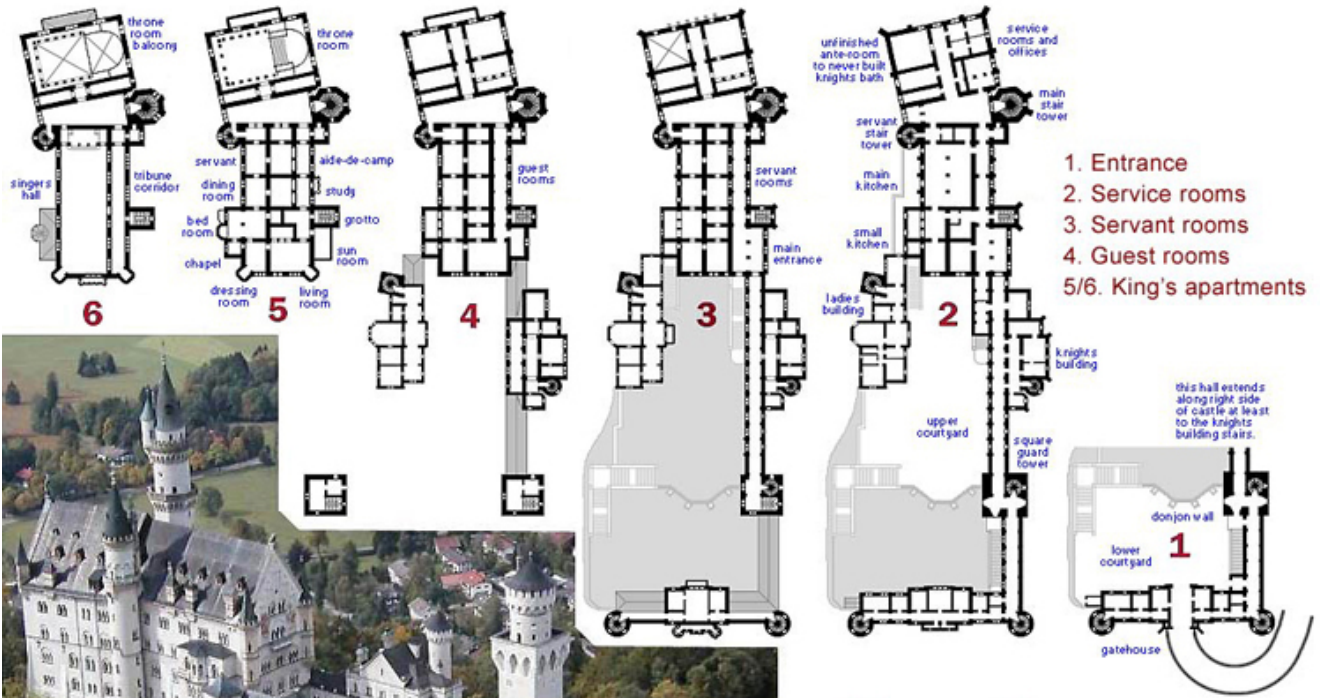
The fourth floor has a series of sixteen female servant's bedrooms and sitting areas. There is also a formal Observatory. The male servants were quartered in the basement and in outbuildings.

The basement includes an indoor swimming pool with seventeen dressing stalls. There is a Gymnasium, Bowling Alley, and large Halloween Room where seasonal festivities took place. The main Kitchen had a Rotisserie and Pastry Room, Servant's Pantry and Dining Room, Storerooms, Laundry area with Washing, Drying, and Folding Rooms.

The Sub Basement contained the main boilers and electrical rooms, Plant Storage, Storerooms, and Wine Cellar.



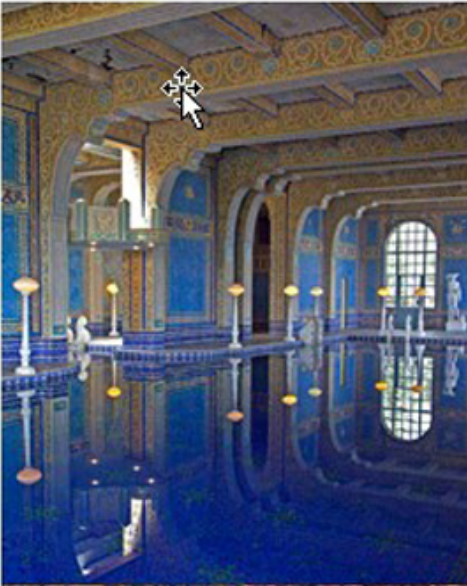
The Biltmore, at over 160,000 SF, is the largest privately owned manor house in the United States and became a model for the custom and luxury homes that followed in this country. While built in a French style, many other luxury estates were designed on Greek and Roman design principles in a general 'classical' style. There were Tudor, Victorian, Neoclassical, and other variants.



Neuschwanstein Castle, Bavaria

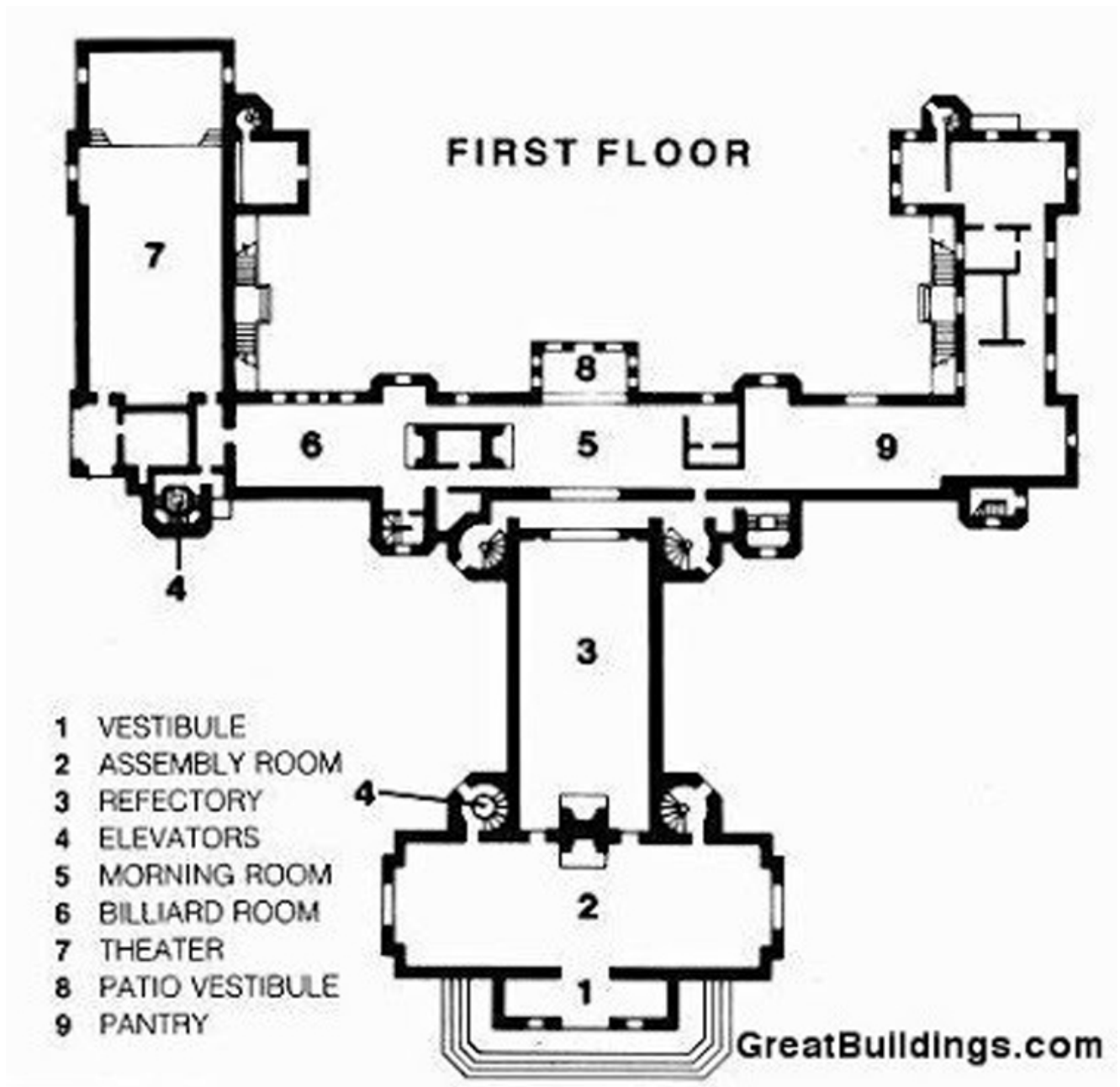


A parallel achievement that should be mentioned, constructed just 13 years prior to the Biltmore, also in concrete with the earliest use of electricity for a faux castle of this type, was Ludwig's famed Neuschwanstein built on a tall prospect in southern Bavaria. While appearing historically correct in detailing it is a complete fantasy with crenellations, towers and what appears to be a Keep, mimicking castles built hundreds of years earlier. There is no real application to today's modern mansions as the entire artistic program is based on Norse myth and Wagnerian musical allegory.



On the west coast of California, W. Randolph Hearst built San Simeon (above) in an eclectic Greco/Italian/Moorish/Spanish style. The interesting aspect about the first floor is that there are no real hallways as room to room are directly connected, something like an enfilade, but directly so and not ringing outer walls. One starts from a Vestibule and then into an Assembly Room, then an immense Refectory, connected to leisure rooms: Morning Room, Billiard Room, and Theater. The second floor is all bedrooms accessed from a Lobby, Main Library and North and South Alcoves. There is an underground pool open on one end to

the outside, and an outdoor pool mimicking Hadrian's water works with three large guest houses.



In Miami, Florida James Deering built the charming Vizcaya (below), an Italian style villa situated on the bay with lush gardens and grottos on one side. Vizcaya has a central courtyard, open once but now enclosed with a glass roof, that allows an enfilade of rooms with passage to the courtyard through hallways. The tour begins from the Entrance Loggia to the left through these rooms: Entrance Hall, Library, Reception Room, North Hall, Living Room, Passage to outdoor East Loggia (views of Bay of Biscayne), then through

the Music Room, Dining Room, and Enclosed Loggia (views of Gardens). There is a Flower Room, Hall, and Service area with Pantry.



The Kitchen and Servant's quarters were on the second Floor at the front of the house— a major variation from tradition—while the Owner's bedrooms and guest bedrooms faced the sides and rear. Included are a Breakfast Room in an Oriental style, two Salons and Maid's quarters. A formal Stair is used by the principals and the service is through a curved staircase on the opposite side.

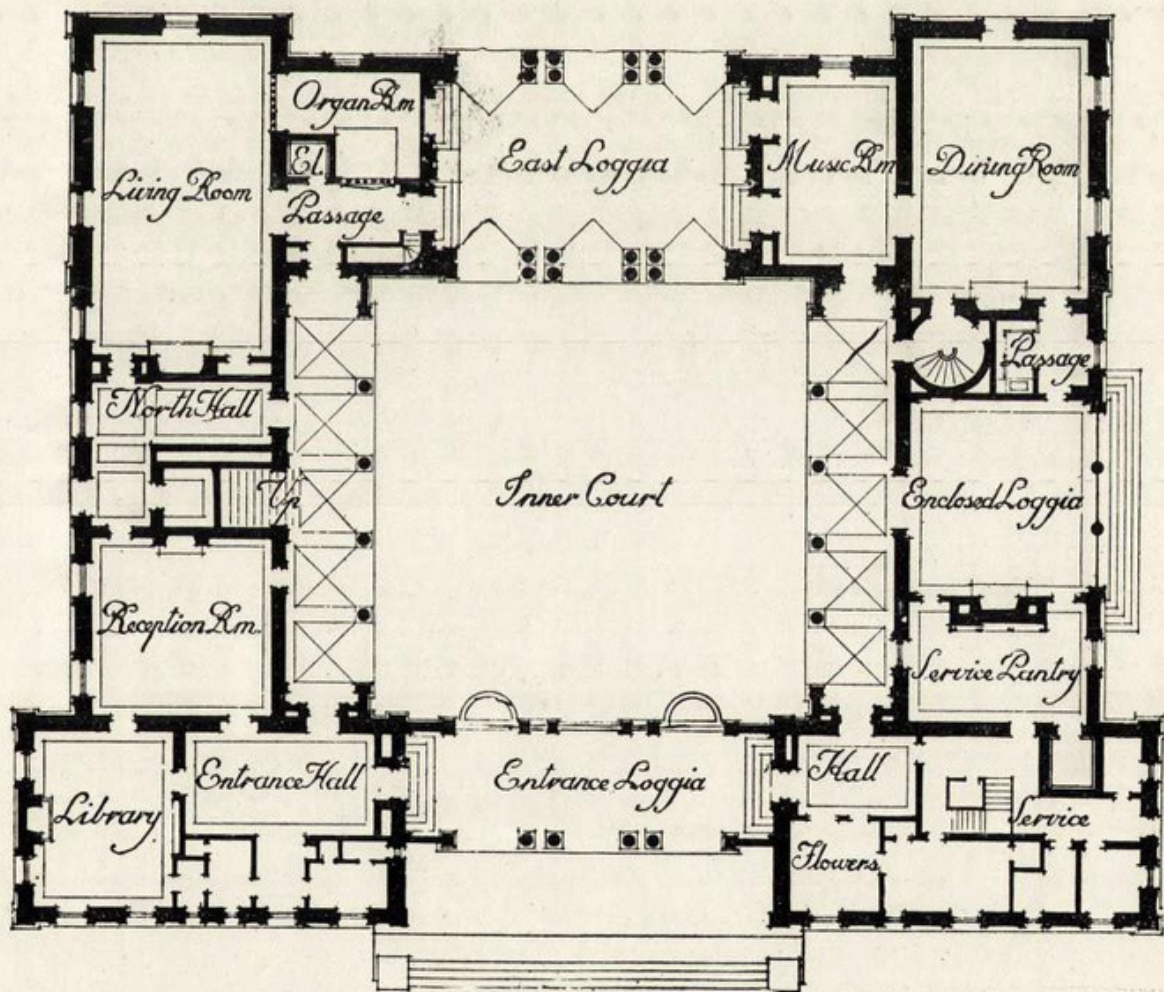
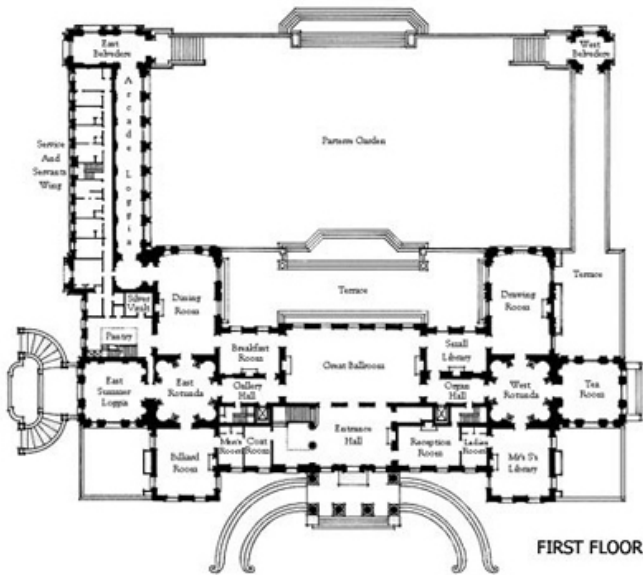


FIG. 9A. FIRST FLOOR PLAN—VILLA OF JAMES DEERING, ESQ., MIAMI, FLA.
 Paul Chalfin & F. Burrall Hoffman, Jr., Architects.
 (From the Architectural Review for July, 1917)



Whitemarsh Hall

Whitemarsh Hall, built in 1921, was a Greek inspired luxury home of over 100,000 SF. The plans indicate formal rooms and service facilities on the first floor with a second floor consisting primarily of bedrooms. The notable rooms on the first floor are: Entrance Hall, Great Ballroom, Small Library, Organ Hall, West Rotonda, Drawing Room, Tea Room, Mrs. S's Library, Reception Room, Ladies Room, Gallery Hall, Men's Room, Billiard Room, East Rotonda, East Summer Loggia, Breakfast and Dining Rooms and Service/Servant's quarters. A large garden area in rear is flanked by an East and West Belvedere. This is an easily copied model for many custom luxury houses which followed. This is a more 'real' example of the large modern American Luxury Home in terms of size, space organization, and amenity.

The smaller custom or luxury homes of our day do not include for example, 'Organ Rooms,' 'Reception Rooms,' etc. The walls in Vizcaya are still brick and stone and about 18" thick. We build with concrete block or 2x8 framed walls with stone veneers now. Our interior walls are much thinner, the Kitchen is almost always on the first floor, but we do locate all the formal and family room functions on the first floor and traditionally bedrooms on the second. Master Suites are typically on the first floor and garages for automobiles, if not hidden, mar the architecture unfortunately.

Properties and lots are much smaller in desirable suburbs unless in a rural location and the grand effect becomes lost as the necessary narrower elevations do not allow for correct proportions as in these historical examples. Ruining proportions also are mandatory maximum heights between 25 and 35 feet. The French roof is impossible to make true in such cases and the result of late are a spate of low pitched 'Mediterranean' style homes or flat roofed contemporaries.

In my work, and for many historic reproductions in the last 30 years, contemporary amenities and lifestyle trump the desire to slavishly reproduce the style of the manors of years gone by. The ratio of window to wall size has increased and at most the front elevation may have a nod to precedent, while the rear elevation—with outdoor amenities and views—has large expanses of glass, continuous decks, etc. that stray from the prototype 'ideal.' In many historic replica manors, the slavish true to style method of the 1800s meant that fabulous views were often blocked by fireplaces and few windows to take in the scenery, as the classical rule was for a ratio of more wall to glass openings.

Now isolated stuffy rooms with extravagant detail are eschewed in favor of large two-story spaces with a restrained elegance and a few tastefully nice period touches. The 'open plan' has seeped into all larger homes and the classic room to room effect has been lost. Unfortunately, since rooms are open

to each other, one cannot 'decorate' each room with a separate theme as the effect is too jarring to see clashing moldings, flooring, coloration, and detail side by side.

One of my best examples of modern eclectic period design is Mere Belle, built in Central Florida in the early 90s. The owners had a keen interest in detail and had access to nearby classical molds from a theme park, which were used for many brackets and delicate details while custom moldings were formed onsite and columns and capitals, balusters, and stone flooring were imported from Italy and Mexico.



The general layout is on three levels while the site consists of 6 acres. Mere Belle was sited on a sloping lot facing a lake with a rear view. The general layout is Formal rooms on ground floor with Guest wing and bedrooms with the

Master Suite and secondary bedrooms upstairs.

A walk out basement was contrived due to the slope and it is a partial space containing a spa and exercise room. On the grounds (and included in the plans) is a Service Quarters, Gazebo, and Boat House.

A decorative wood beamed Covered Entry Porch opens to the Foyer, two story, with a Grand single curving stair ahead—cantilevered. The stairs go up to the second floor and a smaller central spiral takes you down to the Walk Out Basement. There is a Foyer, Office, and Library/Den, Formal Living Room, Parlor and Dining Room.



There are columns and arches framing the Library and Parlor with a two-story space and bridge overhead. A full range of French doors faces the rear view down a long corridor leading to the left and right wings. The doors open to an equally long Verandah which is covered and has a grand stairway leading down to the walk out Basement level and the

Pool.

There is an elevator and two Powder Rooms on the First Floor.

The right wing contains the Kitchen, Family Room, and Breakfast area. There is a rear patio open to the rear from the Family Room and a covered Porch off the Breakfast area. A secondary stair takes one up to the Master Suite only. A spiral stair leads down from the Family Room into a Wine Cellar.



Through a covered Driveway to the right of the Kitchen you can take a small car or other equipment to the back yard. On the other side of this passageway are two Guest Suites at an angle to the main block with private porch and also connected to a 3 car Garage which forms the right front main wing of the house. The matching left front wing has a 2 car Garage with a Breezeway connecting to the left rear wing.



The left rear wing contains a full Mother-in-Law Suite with Formal Living and Dining Room, Island Kitchen and two Bedrooms with Baths ensuite. It has a private entry but also connects to the end of the main Corridor of the main living quarters.

The pool in back is framed by the rear left and right wings and has an intricate limestone pattern. Much of the exterior stone was sourced and carved in Mexico.

In the main block of the house on the Second floor, the right side contains the Master Bedroom with Private Balcony at rear and a small one at front with a Sitting Room, Bath and large Walk in Closet. There is a large private Office or Craft Room off to the right of this suite and has a private exterior open stair to grade.

The Master Suite also has a spiral stair leading up to a small view tower.

The left side of the second floor has two bedrooms with two baths ensuite. There is a Laundry room off the Bridge. Access to both levels is via the main stairway or Elevator.

The center of the basement has sitting areas, room for games and a spa, exercise room and sauna. There is a bath and dressing area also available to the Pool.

A wet bar faces the rear of the house with access to the pool. A secret passage was developed to go to a Billiard Room or Home Theater under the rear left wing. A conference room was added later below the Family Room of the right wing.

There is a delightful design for a Gazebo, used once as an aviary and then converted to a small wedding Pavilion.

A boathouse with Living/Dining, Kitchen and Single Bedroom with Bath is located at water's edge.

The Service Quarters is a two-bedroom house with Living/Dining and Kitchen. An in-ground gas storage tank is included.

The most unusual rooms and amenities designed in recent projects and some from the past include:

- A full-size gun range underground with sitting area and storage.
- Underground servant's quarters
- A series of secret chutes from the second floor down to a Safe Room in the Basement with a hidden corridor to escape the premises.
- Hair Salon and Masseur
- Casino under ground
- Prayer Room
- Trophy Room
- Bar Lounge
- Office in Garage looking down on exotic autos
- Gentleman's Retreat
- Smoking Room
- His and Hers Valuables Storage, secret location
- Armored Guard House
- Helicopter Pad
- Carousel Garage
- Aviary Gazebo
- Classical Boathouse/w Kitchen and Bedrooms
- Glass Blowing Room
- Indoor Putting Green
- Elevator from Garage to Master Bedroom Closet
- Full Disco with rotating stage
- Underground Game Room with view to glazed wall with view to Swimming Pool
- Fire pole from upstairs Master Suite to exotic car Garage below
- Rotating Family Room
- A two-lane bowling alley designed within the Porte Cochere roof between Garage and Second Floor
- Chair lift from cliff house to lake below
- Classical style Orangerie

The creation and construction of luxury houses, based on period styles, has been a process of emulation and adaptation of larger, extravagant designs into smaller estates and custom

homes. We try to capture the romance and detail, the proportions and handiwork of palaces and castles, into our own homes much like lesser lords and merchant princes who vied to integrate some of the heraldry and extravagance of their monarchs and wealthy lords into their own residences from Medieval through Renaissance times and to the present day.



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John Henry is based in Orlando, Florida. He holds a Bachelor of Environmental Design and Master of Architecture from Texas A&M University. He spent his early childhood through high school in Greece and Turkey, traveling in Europe—impressed by the ruins of Greek and Roman cities and temples, old irregular Medieval streets, and classical urban palaces and country villas. His Modernist formal education was a basis for functional, technically proficient, yet beautiful buildings. His website is [Commercial Web Residential Web](#).

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