The Texts of Time

In the late 15th century, a nobleman began the garden that would become the Trsteno Arboretum on Croatia's Adriatic coast. Parts of it were lost to an earthquake, to modern warfare, and a ravaging wildfire. Today, postcards and other printed evidence are guiding its restoration in a true renaissance spirit.

By Alex Ulam / Image Credit Ivan Simić
To understand why stand in the shade of the cork oaks and look out at the verdant island of the Adriatic. The small dock is waiting for the sailboat. Small boat covered with cloths and canoes sailing to the main path leading from the garden. Have a friend read aloud one of the Raisman poems that was recited here hundreds of years ago.

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The villa was built modestly to deter invaders...

Soon the place became a hub for noblemen, poets, artists, and gardeners from the nearby republic of Dubrovnik (or Ragusa, in Italian). The Renaissance garden, which is one of the oldest in Europe, included what at the time were exotic plant species such as agave and Opuntia, both of which had recently been brought back from the Americas by the local sailors, some of whom sailed with Columbus. Famous people wiled away many hours here, often escaping the area’s brutal summer heat under the shade of a giant oak tree, behind the villa, that died in the 1950s. One regular visitor during the 16th century was the poet Cvijeta Zuzorić, a redhead with long, curly tresses who was renowned throughout Southern Europe for her beauty and her intellect. In his Dialogue About Beauty: Written in the Spirit of Platonic Dialogues, the Doge of Dubrovnik, Nikola Gučetić (a descendent of Ivan), described Zuzorić walking in the garden deep in conversation with his wife, Mara Gundulić. The two women spoke passionately of the garden’s beauty and of that of each other.

“Now that we have seen your beautiful and spacious garden,” Cvijeta said to Mara, “let us sit in the shade of that rock by the clear and cold waters of that brook, to spend more comfortably these hot hours.”

“Who could ever refuse, my dear and fair lady, to be in your company?” Mara replied to Cvijeta. “Who wouldn’t obey you, when even these trees seem to nod and pay respect to your singular beauty. In these gardens there never was, nor will there ever be, I believe, a more beautiful flower than you.”

Fast-forward 500 years and the Trsteno Arboretum is a sleepy place with few visitors. The hordes of tourists that disembark from huge cruise ships in Dubrovnik, 12 miles away, seldom make it out here. But then again, the place has not been gussied up for tourism, which only adds to its allure. The upstairs section of the villa is full of old furniture and dusty portraits of figures from different generations of the Gučetić family.
A stone aqueduct has survived destruction...

An extraordinary landscape restoration effort is taking place here under the auspices of the Croatian Academy of Arts and Sciences. With the aid of books, letters, diaries, and postcards, Ivan Šimić, the director of the Trsteno Arboretum, and his assistant, Maja Kovačević, are implementing a restoration plan that will reestablish the defining character of the different sections of the garden. "We are trying to take the best of all periods," says Šimić, a tall, athletic man with a serene manner that seems to come from spending so much time in a quiet place surrounded by plants. "We are trying to restore the garden, but we don't cut down old plants that are in a bad condition or because they are not in the proper place."
The arboretum is also serving as an important window into the past in its own right. Šimić is using it as a case study for his dissertation on the fertilization of Renaissance plants such as boxwoods, grapevines, and olive trees at the University of Zagreb’s School of Forestry. One focus of his dissertation is how to prevent chlorosis, a condition in which the leaves of plants turn yellow owing to insufficient chlorophyll. Kovačević is also preparing a dissertation at the University of Zagreb’s School of Architecture on the history of the Trsteno Arboretum.

Both academics also have a strong emotional attachment to this enchanted place. Šimić has been working here only six years, but he has been visiting the arboretum since he was a child. The arboretum has “changed my view of design,” he says. “It has had an effect on my life in almost every sense—and it has been incredibly peaceful to work here.”

The 40,000 to 50,000 plants at the arboretum include many from the Renaissance period, when plants were chosen both for their ornamental as well as their useful qualities. Over the centuries, the descendants of the Gucetić family added on to the garden, which today encompasses 70 acres and includes the original Renaissance garden between the villa and the sea. This ordered garden includes roses, jasmine, pomegranates, rosemary, and lavender. At various places in the Renaissance composition there also are interlopers planted during modern times such as palm trees and eucalyptus. In addition, a greenhouse that was built on the western side of the Renaissance garden during the 20th century has been slated for removal by Šimić.
Old records help replace missing features like the willows...

Behind the villa is a dark sylvan baroque section, which was built during the 17th and 18th centuries. Here, a network of hard-packed dirt pathways with archways formed by boxwood trees lead past statuary and to secret places surrounded by trees. One of the most arresting sites is the Green Loggia, an outdoor green room formed by knee-high stone walls. Moss carpets the floor, and other than a simple round stone table at its center, the outdoor room is empty. Adjacent to the ordered baroque pathways are curvilinear romantic ones that were added during the 19th century. Many new species of plants also were added during the 19th century, including the Californian cotton palm, the camphor tree, the persimmon tree, black bamboo, and the sago palm.

To the west of the main garden is an open, hilly section designed in a neo-romantic style with follies in the style of classical ruins amid wild grasses and scrub trees. A stone staircase descends to the sea past stone walls and a series of terraces. At a spectacular overlook with views of the green Elaphite Islands, a false ruin with a sundial and stone crest of the Gučetić family is prominently attached to a wall. The last Gučetić in the dynasty, Count Vito Gučetić, built these ruins here at the turn of the 20th century and also opened the estate for the first time to tourists.

Some sections of the garden were redesigned during the different eras of the garden’s history to reflect more contemporary aesthetics. For example, a pathway behind the house leads to a clearing in the trees where an ornate baroque fountain and grotto were built in the 18th century. This composition replaced the original Renaissance fountain that was damaged a century earlier, in 1667, during an earthquake. It has a large pool of water with goldfish swimming around amid gigantic lily pads and ferns. Presiding over the place is a life-size sculpture of Neptune, the god of the sea, who stands bare-chested with one hand on his
hip and a pitchfork in the other. On either side of Neptune are statues of two young nymphs, with water gushing forth from their mouths.

Many of the changes have been caused by disasters, both man-made and natural. In addition to destroying the original fountain, the earthquake of 1667 also destroyed the original villa, which according to historical records was a much more lavish affair, with massive arches and large windows. The current villa, with its rough-hewn stone walls, was built several years later on a more modest scale because, given the political turmoil at the time and the threat of invaders from Venice, the Gućetić family was concerned that overt displays of wealth might make them targets for plunderers.

The most significant damage occurred in modern times. Although the Yugoslav government placed the garden on a list of natural monuments in the 1950s, it was singled out for attack in what some people believe was an act of cultural genocide. In 1991, during the siege of Dubrovnik, the arboretum was subjected to bombardment from the air and the sea by the Yugoslav army, which badly damaged the Renaissance section. In 2000, an even more destructive calamity struck when a forest fire, attributed by some people to climate change, blew through the place, damaging 120,000 square meters of trees.

Walking around the arboretum now, it is difficult to believe that so much of it could have been destroyed. A large, 70-meter-long stone aqueduct with 14 arches, which looks as though the Romans could have built it, still supplies the place with water. In this area are some of the oldest and highest trees, including species such as the American lime and the Himalayan cypress. The most ancient trees are two 400-year-old London plane trees a short distance
"We don’t cut down old plants that are in a bad condition."

Ivan Šimić, Trsteno’s director
outside the garden at a public garden located near the entrance to the arboretum. These gnarled trees, which are 15 feet in diameter, are specimens of the original European London plane tree, *Platanus orientalis*.

Although additions have been made to the garden, much of the original layout has not been changed. Kovačević points out that the Renaissance garden is still arranged along the same poles, with a spiritual axis that leads from the dark and lush garden at the back of the villa through the front entrance of the villa to the sunny Renaissance garden with its pavilion that overlooks the sea. The other axis is the economic one, which runs perpendicular to the spiritual axis and leads in from the fields to the west where olive groves are being restored and runs past the side of the house facing the sea. The rows of pillars along this Renaissance-era pathway, which once supported a pergola, are typical for Dubrovnik Renaissance gardens, as is the border of low-lying stone walls. Where the row of pillars ends to the

**BELOW**
There are plans to replant willow trees and boxwood trees that once grew in this area near the fountain.

**IMAGE CREDIT**
Iva Filipovic Ulam
east, the pathway turns and descends down to the sea where there is a large stone pier next to a church. Along the way it passes an ancient stone building that houses an olive mill with an immense old wood olive oil press.

What has changed over the ages in the arboretum is the plant palette. “The bad time for the Renaissance part was the beginning of the 20th century,” says Kovačević. “They changed the conception—they planted some very high trees such as palms, so you don’t have a view of the sea.” Some of these noisome palm trees in the Renaissance part were even planted by the director of the garden who preceded Šimić, notes Kovačević with chagrin.

When the restoration work on the garden started in 2000, much of the place was a jungle, and many younger trees were cut down. However, more mature established trees such as the palm trees, which don’t fit with the traditional aesthetics of the different periods, are being allowed to live out their lives. Instead they will simply not be replanted when they die, which Kovačević says should happen in the near future, as many of the palm trees in the Renaissance section are upward of 100 years old.

“We don’t accept the French view of restoration gardens—coming in with big machines and cutting away everything,” says Kovačević. “This project is for the gradual rehabilitation of the garden.”

In many areas, Šimić and Kovačević are drawing on historical records to replace missing plants and structures. For example, they have determined that there were once willow trees around the fountain, and they plan to plant several new ones where those stood. Missing flowerpots are being sculpted in the same manner and from the same stone as the original ones that were imported from Malta in the 18th and 19th centuries. And after studying pergolas at other villas in the Dubrovnik region, Šimić and Kovačević are getting
ready to build a new arbor of cypress wood atop the pergola pillars that line the Renaissance walkway.

One of the most critical aspects of the restoration work at the garden is taking care of old plants that were part of one of the original designs. In the baroque section of the garden, rows of boxwood trees were planted during the 18th century to form orderly hedges, which were found throughout this part of the garden. What remains of the original boxwood trees today, some of which are 250 years old, are dried-up bushes with sections demudded of leaves. The arboretum’s staff is replanting sections of boxwood trees in areas where the originals died out. And although the survivors from the past have a desultory appearance, they are trying to extend their lives for as long as possible and incorporate them into a design with younger generations. “We must not cut down these trees because they are part of history,” says Kovačević. “But we cannot cure them—they are too old—like a human being.”

The gnarled and dried-up survivors eventually will die off, as did the giant oak tree that sheltered the Ragusan intelligentsia from the summer heat centuries ago. However, the original spirit of this incredible place slowly is being restored to what it was during the times when Cvijeta Zuzorić and Mara Gundulić wandered the arboretum’s pathways and spoke of beauty.

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