

Beyond the Code: Samuel F. B. Morse, Aesthetics of Landscape Gardening & Architecture

In 1826, Samuel Finley Breese Morse (1791-1872) delivered a lecture series in which he defined the fine arts as “painting, sculpture, poetry, music and landscape gardening, oratory and histrionic art.”<sup>1</sup> This series is one of his earliest surviving lectures and was fundamental to the development of nineteenth century American art theory. Though landscape design and gardening was considered a fine art in England for generations, Morse was one of the few academics to recognize it as such in America. These lectures mark the initial steps towards a new school of landscape design that would be cultivated in America. They also reflect an emerging style within American architecture, represented by Alexander Jackson Davis and Andrew Jackson Downing; with their respect for nature and emphasis on adapting architectural forms to their surrounding environment, they were viewed as champions of development along the Hudson River. I aim to explore how Morse, in conjunction with the efforts of Davis and Downing elaborated upon the elements of picturesque theory to develop a new strand of American style unique to the Hudson.

The burgeoning interest in American landscape design was due in part to the sheer abundance of wild terrain and natural resources found at home. In the first half of the nineteenth century the untamed natural beauties of America became the focus of both painterly and tourist attention and with the invention of the steam engine, pioneers were soon followed into the wilderness by steamboat and railroad. In particular the Hudson River Valley was characterized both culturally and visually by the variety of country estates that lined both sides of the river. It is therefore unsurprising that Morse often compared landscape design to then widely popular genre of landscape painting, describing it as “the Art of arranging the objects of Nature in such a manner as to form a consistent landscape and requires in the professor a knowledge of all those qualities of objects which give pleasure or pain to the imagination through the sense of sight. He must to a certain extent possess the mind of the Landscape Painter, but he paints with the objects themselves.”<sup>2</sup> The manicured grounds, country estates and farmlands served to contrast with the natural features of the riverside landscape, a visual quality essential to the work of Hudson River school painters.<sup>3</sup>

In addition to its role in the expansion of art and tourism, the Hudson River Valley came to symbolize the American ideals of freedom and opportunity. The extensive reach of the river as well as the position of the United States Military Academy at West Point put it on the map as the epitome of American strength, culture and beauty. In his treatise on landscape gardening and architecture Downing suggests that the betterment of one’s property was itself a patriotic act that served to honor both citizen and country: “Whatever, therefore, leaders may want to assemble the comforts and elegancies of life around his habitation, tends to increase local attachments, and render domestic life

more delightful: thus not only augmenting his own enjoyment but strengthening his patriotism and making him a better citizen.”<sup>4</sup> The Hudson River Valley is a site marked conjointly by history and progress, featuring estates from the early Dutch patroons to the elegant homes of the Livingston fortune. The artists began their exploration of the river as summer visitors but eventually began to make more permanent marks on the region, acquiring residences in various parts of the valley.

In 1847, with the money he earned from his patents on the telegraph, Morse was able to purchase a country home of his own. He bought a house with one hundred acres of land just outside of Poughkeepsie at under eighteen thousand dollars. In a letter to his brother he elaborated upon his good fortune writing:

I am almost afraid to tell you of its beauties and advantages. It is just such a place as in England could not be purchased for double the number of pounds sterling. Its ‘capabilities,’ as the landscape gardeners would say, are unequalled. There is every variety of surface, plain, hill, dale, glens, running streams and fine forest, and every variety of different prospect; the Fishkill Mountains towards the south and the Catskills towards the north; the Hudson with its varieties of river craft, steamboats of all kinds, sloops, etc. constantly showing a varied scene.<sup>5</sup>

He called the estate *Locust Grove*, a name which echoed the title granted by its’ original owners. However, if his hope was to lead the calm life of a country gentleman then his letters and journals suggest that he was otherwise occupied and often found himself away on business or in court defending his invention.

In the early 1850's Morse made time to begin renovations on the house in the Italianate style. He enlisted the help of friend and architect Andrew Jackson Davis to give form to his notions of the ideal country home. Davis had trained at the American Academy of Fine Arts, the Newark Drawing Association and the National Academy of Design at which time he came into contact with Thomas Cole, Asher B. Durand, and William Cullen Bryant, often traveling with them on their “nature expeditions” to the Catskills and Berkshires. Though he began his career designing buildings in the prevailing Greek revival style his architectural focus shifted to residential design and the home’s relationship to landscape.<sup>6</sup> The primary documentation of his changing interests is his book Rural Residences (1837-38). It is the only book that Davis published and holds a unique place within the scheme of American architectural literature as the first work on rural architecture produced in America.<sup>7</sup>

Rural Residences was initially intended to culminate in a six-part volume, but the expensive quality of the prints as well as the unenthusiastic public reception resulted in the publication of only two books. These consisted of colored lithographs of cottages, farmhouses, villas, and village churches, each with a brief description, including a site plan and estimate. An interesting anecdote is that for the title-vignette, Morse had been persuaded to paint a small romantic scene with a picturesque villa (Fig.1 & 2).<sup>8</sup> In essence, the book was a portfolio and pattern book for residential and other designs. Davis’ sources were the picturesque cottages and villas of England, his ambition

however was not to copy these models but to replace the “bald and uninteresting aspect” of American residences with regional designs, which complimented their natural surroundings.<sup>9</sup> In the case of Locust Grove, originally a Greek revival house built in 1830, he added wings to the north and south corners creating an octagonal shape. He also constructed a carriage entrance and the dominant four-story tower facing west toward the Hudson River (Fig. 3). This established a powerful focal point for the landscape that Morse was already planning.

Although Rural Residences was well received by critics, high production costs resulted in its financial failure. In spite of this, the book continued to have an enormous effect on American architecture. Its publication also marked a turning point in Davis’ career; he received several commissions for villas and cottages all along the Hudson River, and at the end of that same year a young horticulturalist from Newburgh (Downing) approached him to illustrate the “Rural Architecture” section of his first book. Their collaboration would last for the next twelve years.

Downing’s treatise, much like Davis’ is geared specifically to American soil with both environmental and political aspirations. While his text is devoted largely to the discussion of various species of trees and plants, in his final chapter, and also in subsequent publications he emphasizes the importance of good housing as a means of civilization, social value and moral influence. In the introductory essay to The Architecture of Country Houses (1850) he wrote, “The mere sentiment of home, with its thousand associations has, like a strong anchor, saved many a man from shipwreck in the storms of life,’ and thus a house ‘shall symbolize the best character and pursuits, and the dearest affects and enjoyments of social life.”<sup>10</sup> Downing touches upon the qualities inherent to our relationship with the home, both as private residence and national institution. In caring for it, beautifying its appearance and cultivating its growth we express not only our gratification but also a sense of self, an identity.

Privately, Morse was a nature and gardening enthusiast who took an active role in all areas of gardening (including the kitchen garden). In addition to a tenant farmer, he employed a gardener and worked closely with him on the development of the landscape. Today, the Morse garden continues to showcase his creativity as well as his experimentation with gardening techniques that evolved in the mid nineteenth century.<sup>11</sup> As previously mentioned, the four-story tower Davis added onto the house was crucial to his interaction with the landscape, acting as a belvedere through which he had direct access to a view of the river as well as the farmlands located below the main property (Fig.4). In 1901 the Young family purchased Locust Grove and modernized it for year-round use. Though the house underwent several renovations the tower is one element of the structure that maintains the vision of its previous owner.

In his lectures Morse characterized landscape gardening as a fine art in which “there is the same distinction between the mechanical and intellectual operation which exists in Architecture; it is not the laborer who levels a hill, or fills a hollow, or plants a grove that is the landscape gardener, it

is he alone who with the 'prophetic eye of taste,' sees prospectively the full grown forest in the young plantation, and selects with a poet's feeling passages which he know will affect agreeably the imagination."<sup>12</sup> Though he was never able to execute fully his aspirations within painting, his accomplishments at Locust Grove, as well as his commentary on the aesthetics of landscape gardening and architecture, reveals the extent of his ingenuity beyond the limits of the telegraph. Perhaps, most of all, it displays a certain sensitivity for the application of the arts within a grander scheme. Morse, Davis and Downing called for an art form that would raise America up and celebrate its finest qualities. The Hudson River Valley, in turn, presented the opportunity to work with natural materials, and to produce works which not only promoted beauty but also a sense of national pride.

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<sup>1</sup> Morse, Samuel F.B. & Cikovsky, N., ed. Lectures on the Affinity of Painting with the Other Fine Arts. Missouri: University of Missouri Press, 1983, 47

<sup>2</sup> Morse, Lectures on the Affinity of Painting with the Other Fine Arts, 50-51

<sup>3</sup> Phillips, Sandra. Charmed Places. Hudson River Artists and Their Houses, Studios, and Vistas. New York: Harry N. Abrams, Inc., 1988, 16-17

<sup>4</sup> Mallgrave, Harry. Modern Architectural Theory: A Historical Survey, 1673-1968. New York: Cambridge University Press, 2005, 157

<sup>5</sup> Morse, Samuel F.B. Samuel F. B. Morse, His Letters and Journals, Volume II. Montana: Kessinger Publishing, LLC, 2004, 280

<sup>6</sup> Mallgrave. 156

<sup>7</sup> Davies, J. B. Alexander Jackson Davis. American Architect 1803-1892, Introduction. New York: Rizzoli International Publications, Inc., 1992, 1

<sup>8</sup> Davis. Alexander J., Rural Residences. New York: Di Capo Press, 1980 (Reprint of 1837 ed.)

<sup>9</sup> Davis. frontispiece & 3

<sup>10</sup> Mallgrave. 159-60

<sup>11</sup> see Downing, Andrew J., The Horticulturalist & Journal of Rural Art & Taste, Vol. I-XIV, Rochester: Tucker, Vick & Albany, 1846-1859.

<sup>12</sup> Morse. Lectures on the Affinity of Painting with the other Fine Arts, 50-51