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The idea of a villa rustica, a self-sustaining agricultural estate, traces back to ancient Rome. Once cities were formed, the idea was to escape them—to balance the human chaos of cultural and political striving, and the economics of maintaining life in a bustling urban center, with a spiritual retreat into nature. Horace had his olive groves and apples, his ruddy cornels and plums. Pliny the Younger had his sheep and horses, his cattle driven down from the mountains to grow sleek in the rich pastures below. And centuries later, when Rousseau retreated to his own garden, he cited these classical traditions. Here in the New World, once European settlers arrived, it wasn’t long before families with names like Livingston, Van Rensselaer, and Van Ness began establishing their own rural retreats along the Hudson Valley, and inland in places like Claverack. The men of these families were engaged in the civic and commercial life of the still-young nation, and significantly, they grounded these endeavors in the classical vision of a pastoral life, an endeavor which by the nineteenth century would become widely known here as “gentleman farming.” Not surprisingly, the Hudson Valley landscape that we look out on today was in large part shaped by this belief in the redemptive and spiritual values of landscape, a valley shaped by agricultural pursuits into an ideal of the pastoral.

At Sun Farm outside of Hollowville, the weekend home of New York City based architects Daniela Bertol and David Foell, this ideal of the villa rustica lives on, albeit with a contemporary twist. Here on their 68 acres, Foell and Bertol are building what Bertol calls an “energy farm.” Their harvest isn’t apples or pears, vegetables, corn, hay or even cover crops, but solar power; literally, they plan to harvest sun. Eventually, photovoltaic panels situated on the house and throughout the grounds will gather solar power and transfer it to the local grid, serving as a showcase for alternative energy sources. For now, their house, designed and built following principals of passive solar design, collects and utilizes sunlight for heat. And true to the ideal of the villa rustica, the connection they aim to cultivate with the land is aesthetic and spiritual, as well as commercial.

For Bertol, who is a digital artist as well as an architect, this means that the landscape of the farm will be slowly transformed into an artwork she calls “Sky Spirals.” By landscaping according to digital models, maps and aerial photographs, she intends to transform the entire farm into a large-scale permanent earthwork that, in accordance with ideas stemming from the land art movement of the 1960s, will be a direct expression of Bertol’s vision of land and sky. Already she has built trellised walkways, meditation points, installed a wooden sculpture she calls the time helix, and dug a pond designed to follow the pattern of a logarithmic spiral. But this is just a beginning and Sun Farm only one site in a series of site specific works that, in her words, “celebrate earth and sky.”

Although she had been born and raised in Rome and began her career as a digital artist as well as an architect, once she encountered the land art movement, Bertol began shifting from purely virtual, computer-aided design toward an exploration of art in landscape.

Historically, the land art movement, with practitioners such as James Turrell, Robert Smithson, and Michael Heizer, produced large-scale permanent earthworks in desert landscapes with wide horizons. But Bertol decided to try making a series of permanent earthworks in the Hudson Valley. She had moved to New York City, and it was while there that she discovered the Hudson River School painters. It wasn’t long before she wanted to drive up the river to see the landscape that these painters had been so engaged by, and once she saw the valley, decided to try making an earthwork here.

In 1999, Bertol and her husband bought an abandoned bee farm some fifteen miles inland from the river. Bertol and Foell designed the house together, and Bertol then began landscaping the grounds to convey both literal and metaphoric representations of astronomy, connecting landscape and cosmology. In an article on her project, Bertol wrote: “My art is both a metaphor and a vehicle for understanding the universe.”

I visited Sun Farm on the day before Easter, but the landscape around me—brown meadow grass buffered by wind—offered little promise of spring. Walking against the chill wind, you could tell that it would be weeks before the goofy yellow daffodils and stalwart forsythia would begin to blaze. April in Columbia County means shad season, but even the fish, deep in the cold river, hadn’t reached Hudson yet. I had checked our woods that morning and couldn’t see skunk cabbage tips, and even the eager puss willows weren’t quite ready to bud.

But there on Sun Farm, Daniela Bertol knew it was spring—eighteen days and eight hours into the new season to be exact. She knew because at dawn some days before, she had watched the location of the sun as it rose through one of her constructions, a 40-foot-long sunrise trellis, built along a direct east-west axis from the side of the house. In the sunrise trellis, the sun rises exactly in the middle at the spring equinox. Even if she didn’t catch the sun at dawn, she could chart its location by looking at the top of 12-foot high freestanding columns aligned along a north-south axis at one end of the house. This structure, called “noon columns,” defines a meridian and thus serves as a sundial. By locating their shadows, Bertol can tell the time as well as the season.
“I build time-telling instruments on an architectural scale,” Bertol explained as we walked through the property. These structures, along with a rock garden and a wooden sculpture shaped like a helix—the most accurate visual depiction of time—denote the language in which she works as an architect and installation artist. As she explains, pointing to the small pond in front of the house, which she had built alongside the design of a logarithmic spiral, emphasizing its shape with a line of columns, “I’m using geometry to understand the landscape.”

Walking through Bertol’s landscaped grounds, I couldn’t help but think of the philosophy and aesthetic that underlies Japanese traditional gardens, in which the placement of stones and plantings, ponds and meditation points, the choice of texture and leaf color, the careful pruning of plants and trees, and the exact raking of gravel, all symbolize the passage of time and refer to larger natural elements such as mountains or the ocean. To walk a Japanese garden is to take a stroll that is both literal and metaphorical.

Similarly, one enters Sun Farm along a road which is a direct east-west line and marks the outer edge of a logarithmic spiral that begins at the center of the pond. After following this path, one soon turns left through the first of several gateways, called the Meditation Gate. At that point, one has begun the journey, and what follows is a singular emphasis upon astronomy and the charting of time and place through awareness of the location of the sun.

“All this,” Bertol explained, as she pointed to the house, situated on a slight rise, the pond below, the path leading out to the Taconic foothills, “creates an awareness of time and a link to consciousness. What I’m learning here, and documenting, is that I am a part of the world. For example, when you stand here, you are in this place, facing south. You know where you are. That creates an awareness of a connection.”

Bertol’s sense of connection is thus based on astronomy. In an interesting way, her vision is ahistorical, or perhaps simply based in prehistory. For if you are thinking by now of Stonehenge, or of Mayan and Aztec monuments, you are on target. Bertol has studied what she calls “naked eye observatories” for the specific ways in which people in places such as Uxmal in Mexico built stone interventions that followed alignments to the planets and to solar solstices. From this beginning, Bertol extended her studies into the era of the Renaissance when thinkers such as Petrus Apianus combined an interest in multiple disciplines. Some years ago, she saw an exhibition in Rome about Apianus, and since then has been keenly interested in the Renaissance idea of cosmography—the fusing of astronomy, geometry, surveying, and architecture. For Daniela Bertol, finding a point of connection to landscape is a critical activity, at once spiritual, scientific, and aesthetic. She finds it through a heightened awareness of time, space, and the source of all life on earth—the sun.

Leila Philip is the author of A Family Place: A Hudson Valley Farm Three Centuries Five Wars, One Family, an award-winning memoir which traces the history of her family’s almost three-century-old Claverack farm. She is the recipient of a 2007 Guggenheim Fellowship.