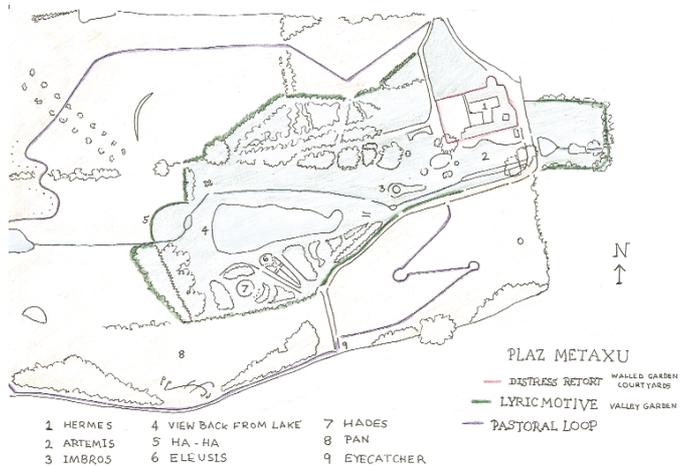


Plaz Metaxu

Susi Batty



Alasdair Forbes' hand-drawn map

Plaz Metaxu, Alasdair Forbes' thirty-two acre garden near Witheridge in north Devon is, quite simply, a wonderful place. Coombe House was named, as were so many houses in Devon, for its situation in a valley or 'coombe/combe', but re-named by Alasdair as Plaz Metaxu, meaning "the place that is in-between". I visited it on a cold, clear day in February and rarely have I been more inspired - winter is, of course, an ideal time to explore a garden for the first time as the structural bones are more easily read. However, arriving at the understated entrance to the garden from a quiet country lane, marked by a drooping ash tree, a rusty white gate and a cattle grid, I was utterly unprepared for what lay beyond.

The garden can be separated into three sections: first what Alasdair has called the 'Distress Retort' (close to the house), second the 'Lyric Motive' (the valley garden), and third the 'Pastoral Loop' (the path around the garden and above the valley). What one discovers first is the house, wrapped around by a cob-walled garden and a cluster of barns to the back and the sides. The walled garden, originally productive and functional, is divided by gravel paths and formal box hedges which are filled now with billowing herbaceous plants in the summer. So far so expected, but the courtyard accessed through an arched gate is most unexpected. Dominated by stone barns, the surface is reddish gravel interspersed with patterns of setts and flat stone paths, and punctuated by carefully positioned planting, jars and pieces of sculptural of stone (almost a 'plan de gravier'). This is an area for quiet perambulation and contemplation; many of the apparent paths are intended to lead thoughts, not feet, and each space has its own dedication. Thus the walled garden is 'Auxo' and the contemplative courtyard 'Hermes', for instance. A foretaste of the challenging concepts ahead.



View over 'Hermes' from the upper floor of the house (Alasdair Forbes)

A wide stream emerges from the orchard ('Pothos') to the east and runs across the lawn in front of the house ('Artemis') through an old granite channel. Here, as the ground begins to fall away down the valley, the garden is quite formal: swirls of hornbeam and upright stones create intimate spaces, some empty, some not. Lovely though these enclosures are, they are not merely decorative: again, each has a distinct meaning and philosophical purpose, even a name (one of the enclosures is 'Ithaka', for example, another, 'Herse'), and forms part of a narrative. Alasdair calls this 'the poetics of milieu', explaining that:

Many areas of the garden therefore bear the names of Greek gods or demigods. This is not an ornamental association, but an attempt to draw a structural connection between the way a space presents itself and the distinctive style of consciousness of a given god.

'Imbros' in winter (Marcus Batty)



Away from the house, the importance of the valley setting becomes apparent. The stream flows along the valley bottom, anchoring the garden; whilst the path Alasdair has called the 'Pastoral Loop' makes a circuit above. A succession of progress walks wind through mown grass and alder and balsam poplar woods underplanted with over 30,000 bulbs (the tiny *Iris reticulata* were in flower when I was there). There are views from the grassy slopes to the lakes, the 'Zen Bens', hillside inscriptions and meticulously placed standing stones; and always one is aware of the opposite, balancing, side of the valley.



Looking across the lake to Eleusis (Marcus Batty)



Looking down the Avenue of Hours to Hades (Marcus Batty)



Winter colour at the shallow end of the lake (Marcus Batty)



Figure of Pan on hillside in porphyry setts, looking across the valley (Jo Whitworth)

All is not seriousness, however: glancing up a green 'allee' on the southern slope I caught sight of a witty eyecatcher: a tall printer's sign for 'new paragraph', overlooking the valley. Between the eyecatcher and the largest lake sits a further cluster of symbolic glades and enclosures: one tight space, planted with sinister, black-twigged, *Cornus alba* 'Kesselringii', inky hellebores and hopeful snowdrops represents the story of the abduction of Persephone into the underworld, for example.

The most recently planted part of the garden is poised high on the north side of the valley, looking obliquely across the Avenue of the Hours to the lakes and the enclosures spread out below and also out to the wider landscape. This is 'Orto Carolina', created as a memorial garden to Alasdair's friend, Caroline Villiers, and planted to combine Mediterranean and northern landscapes. Looking down into the valley from this vantage point Plaz Metaxu appeared a gentle, arcadian place in the slanting sunlight, even in February; but strong westerly winds can tear up the valley, and winter temperatures frequently hover around minus 7 or 8C. Minus 11C has been recorded in the walled garden and frosts linger until May.



Eyecatcher marking concealed entrance to Pan: printer's sign for 'new paragraph' (Jo Whitworth)

In this garden it rapidly becomes apparent that the experience of passing from enclosed to open space is crucial. Physically small spaces are linked to apparently larger ones; and both must be reflected on within the wider, surrounding landscape. Questions are constantly asked and perhaps only half-answered. By giving names to spaces and to objects within the garden Alasdair Forbes is, arguably, looking both back to the eighteenth century gardens of progress, philosophy and symbolism and forward with other twentieth century gardeners such as Ian Hamilton Finlay (Little Sparta in the Pentlands) and Charles Jencks (the Garden of Cosmic Speculation at Portrack, Dumfriesshire). However, we should not stretch these connections too far for Plaz Metaxu is unlike either of these. All three are gardens of symbolism and all contain elements of great beauty, but where Little Sparta could perhaps be described simplistically as a political garden and Portrack as a scientific garden, Plaz Metaxu is more of a reflective garden. It has its roots in meditation, in mythology and philosophy; and - arguably its greatest achievement - sits most harmoniously in the natural landscape.

Alasdair Forbes has gardened here for sixteen years, helped one day a week by an unflappable and indispensable man, Cyril Harris. It is an extraordinary achievement and I am deeply conscious that, in such a short space, I can only hint at the complexity of this remarkable place. Plaz Metaxu is a garden that can be experienced on many levels: the classicist will 'read' it on one level, the poet or the philosopher on another, and a plantsman in yet a fourth way. It is also possible simply to enjoy the garden as a picture in, and part of, the landscape. Therein lies its success perhaps.



Slate antennae keeping vigil in the valley (Jo Whitworth)