



DESIGN

COUNTRY SEAT
Adirondack chairs
near the edge of
the woods overlook
the hornbeam room
at Middlefield, in
Upstate New York.

MODERN PASTORAL

When classicist architect Gil Schafer teamed up with celebrated landscape designer Deborah Nevins to craft the grounds for his Greek Revival house, the two created a garden that feels historically appropriate—yet surprisingly contemporary **BY DAVID NETTO**

WHEN AN ARCHITECT PLANS A GARDEN, it tends to be an extension of the principles of the house. Some of the most successful gardens, however, are devised to offer elements that aren't necessarily present in the architecture—but add to it just the same.

It was just such a collaboration of complementary differences that architect Gil Schafer had in mind when

he sought the advice of renowned landscape designer Deborah Nevins. In 1996, Schafer purchased a 45-acre property in Dutchess County, New York, where he planned to build himself an understated Greek Revival house that would look for all the world like it had been there for generations. But before doing anything, he called Nevins, whom he had met in New York soon after graduating from architecture school.

Nevins is considered one of the top garden designers in the country; her clients are among the wealthiest and most private in the world. (She is currently at work with Renzo Piano on a project for the Stavros Niarchos Foundation Cultural Center of Greece.) Schafer's practice, while younger, has steadily assembled an impressive roster of work, and he is sought after as an adept classicist. (His first book, *The Great American House*:



So, in terms of inspiration, which came first, Monticello or Maya Lin?



POINTS OF VIEW
From left to right: The hedged rooms were built on the property's rare bits of flat land; Schafer and Nevins at Middlefield; part of a network of low retaining walls made from Pennsylvania fieldstone. Below: The pillared façade at Schafer's house.

Tradition for the Way We Live Now, will be published by Rizzoli in October.) And although the two designers have collaborated before and since, the personal nature of Middlefield, as the property is called, make this site special to them both. The garden's loveliness and the genteel style of the house mask some audacious formal experimentation—a traditional building in a stealth modernist setting.

"This was pretty small potatoes for her," says Schafer. "Then as now, Debby's time was very valuable. I would take her out to dinner and doodle on the tablecloth. There was a lot of that, rather than meetings or site visits." Even so, Nevins was at Middlefield when it came to selecting the site for the house. She didn't choose the highest point of the sloping property, as Schafer had been planning, but a hollow in the middle. "The view's the thing," she says. "In this instance, I realized a view could mean looking up and into the woods as much as looking away and down, which is what we usually find." Schafer adds that Nevins's choice of site has, for visitors, the added advantage of conferring a sense of expectation rather than having simply arrived. "There is a feeling that Middlefield has much more left to explore, which comes from the landscape but penetrates into the house."

The house, nestled midway up a continuous rise, is one stop on a journey that carries on uphill and into

the woods. Then there are the hedged rooms: Loosely arranged around the house in two directions is a series of more formal gardens covering six to seven acres. Formed of hornbeam and privet, they seem at first glance to be fairly familiar examples of traditional landscaping. But look more closely. At the back of the house, a hedgerow that appears from most angles to be unbroken is actually composed of two unaligned, asymmetrical arms. These act as gates through which one passes out of the structured part of the garden into the wildness of the upper meadow. "Those strong arms keep the garden moving," says Nevins. "Toward the slope, with the slope—away from the architecture, away from the house."

The most significant feature of Nevins's garden at Middlefield is the hornbeam room, entered as one moves up a flight of stone-and-grass steps toward a bench set on axis with what is the beating heart of any country house in summer, the well-used and much-loved screened porch.

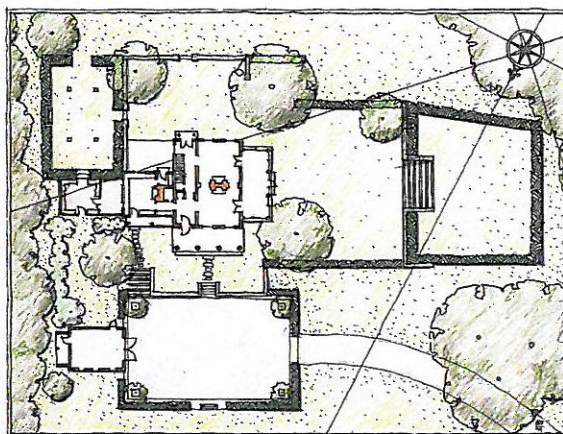
Old or new in style, every good garden has a narrative. The hornbeam room, viewed from the house, looks like a classic walled enclosure—a hedged room of the type one finds in patrician gardens like Wethersfield in Amenia, New York, or Dumbarton Oaks in Washington, D.C. However, seen from above and nearer to the woods, with its sunken walls half-embedded into the hillside, it reveals itself as a modernist sculpture in





SECRET GARDENS

From left: The lawn and privet hedge on the south side of the house; a small fenced garden off the kitchen protects spring bulbs from deer.



NATURAL DESIGN

From left: A mowed line in the property's meadow grass helps transition between natural and formal landscapes; Schafer's plan for Middlefield.

living green—a minimalist form that could have been designed by Richard Serra or Maya Lin.

So, in terms of inspiration, which came first, Monticello or Maya Lin? As is true of most successful collaborations, it's hard to get to the bottom of who originated which ideas. "I'm always trying to be minimal in my work," says Nevins. "While the flowers die, space remains." Despite his affection for classical ornaments such as urns and traditional terra-cotta pots, Schafer is unsurprised that such a daring feature became the centerpiece of his garden. "I did train as a modernist," he explains, patient and bemused at being questioned about Modernism alive and well in the landscape at Middlefield. "My own work aside, I like Luis Barragán, Louis Kahn and Richard Neutra, whose projects are about architecture in the landscape, the role of landscape in defining space."

"Gil is no Prince Charles, whose love for gardens is famous but only channels the past," Nevins says. "He really appreciates Modernism and what it can add to his architecture." Says Schafer of Nevins, "One of the things I love about Debby is that I totally trust her instincts. I might not understand what is going on, at least at first, but I know it will end well." As the great and lately departed decorator Albert Hadley (a design hero of Schafer's) was fond of saying, "Give 'em what they never knew they wanted!" ♦