

**Villa rustica, villa suburbana:
Vernacular Italianate architecture in Britain,
1800 to 1860**

Rosemary Jane Yallop
Kellogg College

submitted for the degree of
Doctor of Philosophy in Architectural History
University of Oxford

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Volume I of II

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Short Abstract

This thesis examines the emergence and evolution of the Vernacular Italianate style of domestic architecture in Britain. The style was introduced in the form of a series of three country houses by John Nash in the first decade of the nineteenth century. It subsequently evolved over the next five decades into a popular template for the modest suburban house, widely disseminated through the medium of the architectural pattern books. The thesis considers the intellectual sources and antecedents which led to the emergence of this style and influenced its characteristics, analyses Nash's particular vision, and explores how the style was able to make a successful transition from *villa rustica* to *villa suburbana*, responding to the social and economic pressures which were at play in the expanding towns of the Regency and early Victorian era. It is a style which has been the subject of limited academic study to date, and the extent and significance of its role as a model villa for the new suburb is a theme which has been central to this research. A case is put forward that the style proliferated for two principal reasons: its versatility and adaptability for houses of differing physical scale and location, and its informal charm, inexpensively achieved, which conferred an air of sophistication appropriate to contemporary social aspiration. Nevertheless, as its popularity and accessibility grew over time the intellectual and aesthetic basis which underlay its origins as a product of the Picturesque aesthetic tended to be misunderstood or overlooked entirely, and by the 1860s the style had become diluted, frequently reduced to a matter of exterior detailing, with little reference either to Picturesque composition or to relationship between house and landscape, in contradiction of the tenets of Picturesque architecture propounded in the late eighteenth century, and in complete antithesis to the approach of John Nash in his original and distinctive Italianate interpretation.

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Long abstract

This thesis traces the appearance and subsequent evolution of a particular style of domestic architecture in Britain during the first half of the nineteenth century, termed for this purpose Vernacular Italianate. It is a style which to date has received little academic attention in its own right, being largely subsumed into the general topic of the impact of the aesthetic theory of the Picturesque on architectural form and urban planning. While the style, which in origin was strongly influenced by Italian rustic buildings, which accounts for its nomenclature, certainly had Picturesque provenance, commentaries on the development of the design of the smaller house during the nineteenth century have tended to concentrate on other elements of the Picturesque repertoire such as the *cottage orné* and Jacobethan Revival, and more significantly the Gothic Revival mode. The conventional polarity of the supposed 'Battle of the Styles' from the mid-century moves the focus almost exclusively to the role of the Gothic Revival in replacing established classical idioms, and as a result the study of Italianate forms in general and Vernacular Italianate in particular has been overshadowed.

The style was introduced to Britain by John Nash in the first decade of the nineteenth century in the form of the compact country house, but its form was gradually adapted for houses of varying scale and status, both in rural areas and in urban and suburban developments. It was widely disseminated through the medium of the architectural pattern books which appealed to a broad, lay readership; in addition to illustrating a spectrum of designs these works provided a forum for a debate, both aesthetic and practical in tone, about the appropriateness and versatility of the style. This thesis argues for a re-assessment of the role of Vernacular Italianate style as a widespread and popular mode of building for the new genre of smaller house, the suburban villa, which emerged in the early decades of the century to meet the demands of the expanding town and of a burgeoning middle class, and concludes that its significance has to date been understated. This later, post-Georgian transformation of the villa has also been a neglected area of study for the most part. The style was also employed for institutional and public buildings such as railway stations, hospitals and asylums, police stations, market halls and hotels, but in the interests of

restricting the scope of this thesis to manageable proportions these have been excluded from consideration. The focus is on the domestic house.

The Introduction begins by reviewing the literature on Italianate-influenced styles in British domestic architecture. This reveals a degree of terminological confusion among modern commentators about what constitutes British Italianate, which to an extent echoes that of a number of nineteenth-century architectural practitioners as expressed through the pattern books. Post-Palladian British Italianate has come to be identified largely with the work of Sir Charles Barry, exemplified by his large-scale works including London gentlemen's clubs such as the Travellers' and the Reform, and his substantial country houses such as Trentham Hall, Staffordshire and Shrubland Park, Suffolk. This concentration on the scale of these buildings and on Barry's stylistic preferences, which derived from his own field observations and studies of Renaissance architecture, has fostered two trains of thought voiced by different historians which it is argued here have hampered a proper consideration of the rustic Italianate form. The first claim is that Barry's style represented a further evolution of the rusticity initiated by Nash; the second is that the limited range of Nash's experiment, a series of only three houses, suggests that it was not a popular style, and that the Renaissance-inspired alternative gained much greater currency for both rural and urban forms. Examination of these arguments is central to this thesis: both claims appear to require heavy qualification as a result. In its mature phase the style was associated with the more modest house of relatively low social significance, often designed and built by unknown architects or builders for un-named clients: as this constituency leaves correspondingly less archival evidence, this may also help to explain the dearth of detailed studies to date. The methodology for the identification of examples of Vernacular Italianate houses for the purposes of this research is explained: the approach was to take a matrix of architects known to work in the Picturesque, pattern book architect-authors who presented Vernacular Italianate designs, and those towns which for a variety of reasons were experiencing growth in the period under review, to research each area individually and then to work systematically through the obvious areas of overlap. The object was not to produce a full gazetteer, which would have been an impossible goal, but to find examples from across different regions and towns, from different dates and by the hand of a variety of architects, to attempt to establish some evolutionary patterns. The pattern books of the period were closely studied as a guide to changing styles, terminology, and attitudes.

The first two substantive chapters address in turn the two themes which dominated the intellectual landscape of domestic architecture in Britain throughout the first half of the nineteenth century: the evolving concept of the 'villa'; and the Picturesque aesthetic as it applied to architecture and landscape design, and later to urban planning. Chapter 1 considers how the villa began the century as an élite secondary retreat, transforming itself gradually into a more accessible concept as a middle-class ideal of home, encompassing a set of coalescing social values and marking the separation of home from work. It considers how the architectural profession responded to this need and offered appropriate solutions. The new idea of the villa offered a finely-judged balance between respectability and informality: style was not prescriptive but the intangible qualities of 'elegance, compactness and convenience' were prized. Chapter 2 looks at Picturesque theory and its architectural

interpretations, examining arguments that the stylistic freedom which it granted from classical restraint posed a threat of undisciplined eclecticism. It notes the link made by the principal Picturesque theorists between landscape painting and architectural design, which in turn encouraged the study of Italian vernacular buildings. It concludes by looking at the work of John Nash as one of the most subtle and instinctive exponents of the Picturesque, and at the range of architectural characterisations which he created.

The thesis then addresses the nature of the cultural relationship between Britain and Italy over this period, suggesting that at the outset it could still be seen as a pre-occupation of the élite and one which, exemplified by the conventions of the Grand Tour, was primarily if not exclusively conducted at an intellectual level. It is suggested that this was gradually supplemented if not supplanted by a different approach from a different constituency. After the Napoleonic Wars travel became possible once again and feasible for the 'middling sort' to afford, encouraged by a plethora of travel writing, depictions and literary works which not only extolled the natural beauty of the country but also introduced the antique and Renaissance traditions to a wider audience beyond a scholarly cadre. This gave new impetus to the popular fostering of visual awareness of Italian art and landscape; writers and travellers consciously constructed a romanticised identity for Italy which heightened its sentimental appeal. It is suggested that this familiarity with Italian culture, or at least a popular interpretation of it, played a significant role in preparing the ground for the reception of Italian-derived architectural forms.

Chapter 4 is a close study of the three Italianate villas designed by John Nash in the first decade of the nineteenth century: Cronkhill, Shropshire as an estate house for the land agent to Lord Berwick; Sandridge Park, Devon as a country villa for the widowed Lady Ashburton, and Lissan Rectory, Co, Tyrone as a rectory. Their external design, relationship with the landscape, plan and function are all considered, as are the common architectural elements which identify them as Vernacular Italianate, and which were to recur as signifiers of the style in future decades. These included the use of geometrical forms derived from vernacular Italian buildings, whose rustic dovecotes and castellation were transcribed into square and round towers; the broad overhanging eaves supported on exposed rafter ends which were common to Italian rustic buildings for their provision of shade or shelter according to season were formalised as broad eaves with decorative brackets; the roof was exposed to view rather than hidden behind a parapet, and the pitch was shallow. These particular elements were assembled by Nash in a generically Picturesque way, in that the different geometrical shapes combined to give a highly asymmetrical form and irregular elevation, casting light and shade on different elevations. The link with landscape was emphasised by dispensing with a *piano nobile* and lowering the floor level to that of the grounds outside. The conventional explanations for Nash's visual references and allusions are tested and alternative and complementary sources are proposed.

The three chapters which follow examine the Vernacular Italianate house after Nash, each taking a different theme. Chapter 5 asks to what extent the architectural pattern books can be regarded as an accurate mirror of the timing and acceptance of Vernacular Italianate and in doing so takes account of the evolution of the pattern book genre itself. The incidence of Italian design in these publications increases rapidly, and the 1820s saw the appearance of

several seminal works by architects who, reiterating the advice of the Picturesque theorists, extolled the virtues of seventeenth-century Italian landscape painting as architectural sources. The apogee of the Italianate pattern book seems to have been in around 1840: it was not that after the mid-century Italianate designs no longer appeared, but that the pattern books themselves became less discursive and more technical, at the same time as Vernacular Italianate had clearly lost its novelty to the point that it no longer required explanation. From this point it is increasingly regarded as a style - 'Anglo-Italian'- which is all but indigenous. The influence as tastemaker of John Claudius Loudon, whose manuals included Italianate designs for houses on a variety of scales, is discussed. The 'builders' books' of the later decades evidence mutations in the style to accommodate the much smaller house, including the semi-detached pair and the terrace.

Chapter 6 reverts in time to the architectural repertoire immediately after Nash and looks at those who followed him in creating their own interpretation of the style, most notably Robert Lugar who built Italianate villas contemporaneously with Nash. There is evidence for what may be seen as an intermediate style as architects of the smaller house began to create innovative irregular Picturesque villas in the 1820s, employing some of the characteristic forms and details and observable in Italian rustic buildings and used by Nash, but not to such radical effect. Distinctive elements begin to coalesce and the asymmetrical house with a square tower at one corner, documented in the pattern books, becomes by 1840 one of the normative models for the detached Italianate villa: indeed this vertical accent in a variety of forms is a defining characteristic of the style along with grouped round-headed fenestration. These are features which were readily open to re-interpretation or adaptation, according to size, function and materials, while still retaining their role as identifiers of the style. Variations on this model for the detached house continue to be built at least into the 1860s.

Chapter 7 addresses the problems and opportunities presented by the rapid urban expansion which was taking place from the early part of the century. At the more prosperous end of the middle-class housing market the novel idea of the Picturesque park on the fringes of town, where houses were either scattered within or disposed around a protected green space, provided an attractive solution and a homogeneous social environment. Architects enjoyed the freedom to use a range of different styles at once as each house, carefully placed in its landscape, related only at a distance to its neighbour: Italianate forms are often seen in these and other speculative developments. Three case studies in this chapter look at relatively unusual examples of developments, in Reading, Stoke-on-Trent and Newton Abbot, where Vernacular Italianate was the exclusive idiom. Bristol is selected for the variety of urban forms which were devised there which together display aspects of the evolution of the style which have more general application.

While this thesis considers Vernacular Italianate in Britain, there is a direct and identifiable channel for its transmission to America and Australia, and this is considered in Chapter 8. One significant element in this was the medium of the pattern books: American architects such as Alexander Jackson Downing, for example, recommended the study of specific British pattern books. In addition, a number of architects who designed Italianate forms in America were British émigrés. Its enthusiastic reception there was accompanied by detailed

discussion of its underlying philosophy and practical qualities, to an extent unparalleled in Britain at the time, but which may shed light on its appeal in the home country. Equally, a number of British-born architects in Australia designed closely-observed counterparts of British models.

The concluding chapter considers the longer legacy of Vernacular Italianate. The most tangible element is of course the extensive built repertoire, both in and beyond the town. Published reactions to the style, both contemporary and retrospective, are explored in order to analyse the factors underlying its widespread use. It seems that in the realm of the smaller house, whether in the country or the suburbs, by the 1870s the style was losing ground to the Gothic Revival, although the hybrid 'Italianized Gothic' which appeared in the pattern books offered a compromise which was readily taken up. This thesis does not set out to claim that Vernacular Italianate triumphed over or supplanted other contemporary styles for the smaller house at any point in the period covered by this thesis. It aims simply to bring out of the shadows a style which from rural beginnings in the shape of the country house became ubiquitous in the town, was the mainstay of the practices of many provincial architects, and as one of a number of incarnations of the suburban villa helped to foster the nineteenth century middle-class idea of home.

There has been no attempt to compile a Gazetteer as examples are too numerous. Instead, an outline scheme of classification, using a range of examples, is included at Appendix II.

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Rosemary Yallop

Oxford, 2016

In uns selbst liegt Italien – Italy lies within us

Hans von Marées, 1872

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