

Villa Il Roseto

Florence, Tuscany, Italy

Pietro Porcinai

20th century

0.02 hectares / 0.4 acres

Temperate Mediterranean

Architectural / Formal / Modern

Although it is little known outside the garden design profession, Il Roseto is one of Europe's most exciting and unusual gardens. Created by Italy's foremost landscape designer, Pietro Porcinai, it combines the boldness and abstraction of 1960s Pop art with the swirling grandeur of the local Baroque style. Il Roseto is also an engineering tour de force in which Porcinai took a tall but undistinguished three-storey villa and reconfigured its relationship with the surrounding countryside. Raising the main entrance level to the first floor *piano nobile*, he created a hanging garden around it, 4 metres (13 feet) above the original level of the ground.

Porcinai had been brought up at the famed Villa Gamberaia, where his father was head gardener, and this formative experience of one of Italy's outstanding seventeenth-century gardens gave him a visceral appreciation of classical horticulture. Updating traditional motifs and materials, at Il Roseto he created a dramatic garden of circular lawns, meandering stone paths and curved box hedges, which sweep round the skylights illuminating the space below. Views are framed by two plane trees, while the spherical crown of an ancient holm oak rises from the level below and a fountain jet at the end of the garden provides a further vertical element. In true Italian style, this is a monochrome garden, where flowers have little place amid the water, evergreens and stone.

The raised garden offers spectacular views of the olive groves to the south and the Florence skyline to the north. Meanwhile the ground-level plaza has been transformed into a remarkable grotto-like carport. Its domed, vaulted ceiling is supported by concrete columns, which resemble tree trunks, while a swirling pebble-mosaic floor recalls the terraces of grand Baroque villas. The space can be emptied to create an open ballroom. The lower floor of the villa, now effectively underground, has been turned over to services such as laundry, storage and staff quarters. A small door leads from the garage to the villa, but the main entrance is from the garden above, accessed by a spiral stone-and-steel staircase curtained by vines and winding round a small fountain jet. Porcinai has transformed even this gloomy level into a horticultural space.

1, 2—Porcinai constructed massive retaining walls to support a series of 'hanging gardens'; from each terrace, views framed by plane trees open to the wider landscape in accordance with the perspectival principles of the Renaissance theorist Leon Battista Alberti. 3, 4—Beneath a terrace with an oculus, circles of grass and sweeping curves of box, a room of imposing proportions serves as the main entrance and an underground car park.

