

## Villa Rufolo. A medieval vision of paradise in Italy

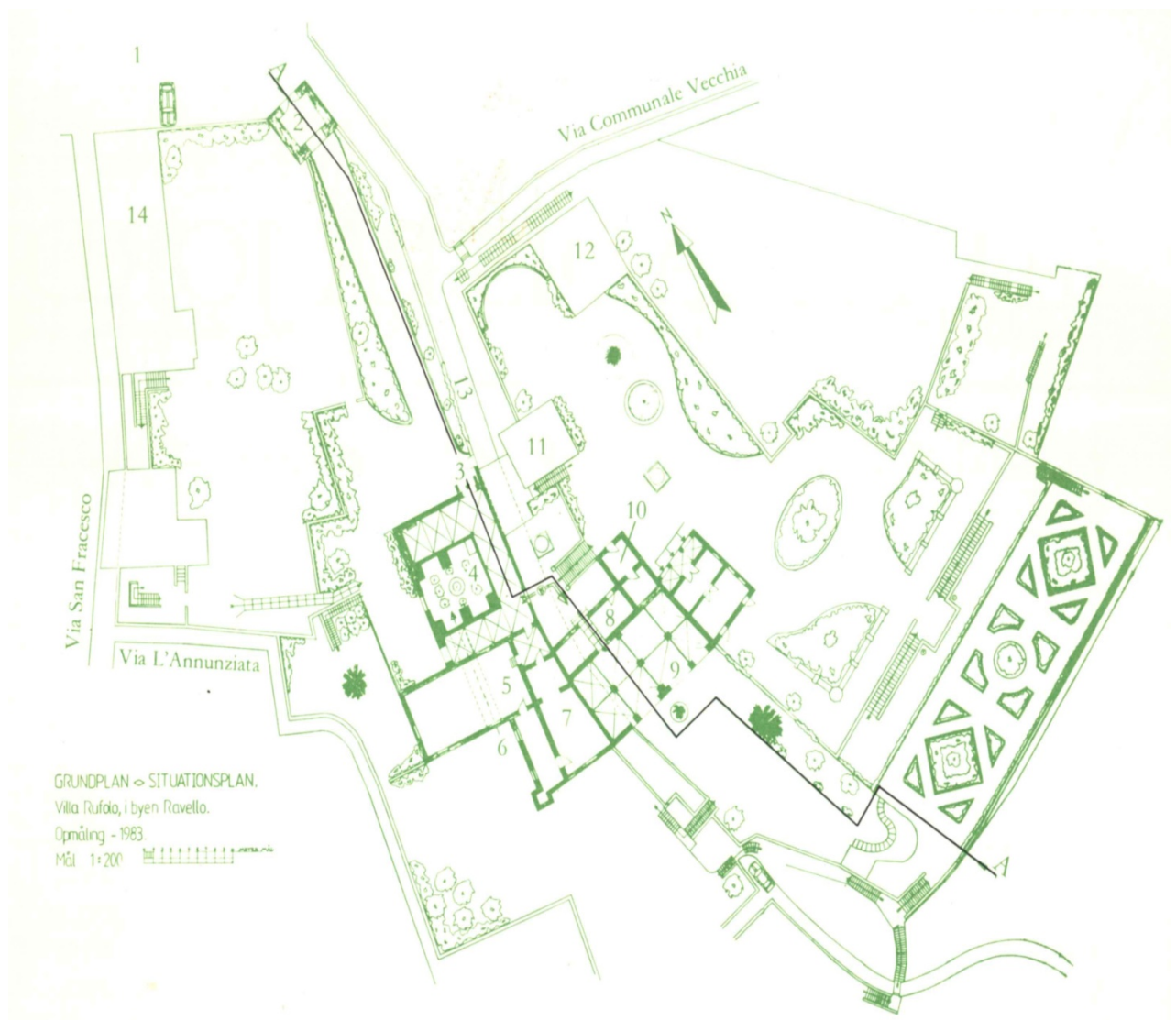
Author & copywrite; D. E. Lombardo, Cand. Mag. & Architect

### Prologue

The villa Rufolo, lays at the very edge of the sleepy hamlet of Ravello, which is perched some 320 meters ( ca, 1000 feet) high up, in the nearly vertical cliffs overlooking the sea. The Villa completed in 1270, lies on the Capo d'Orso peninsular; near the town of Amalfi in Southern Italy.

This particular walled fortress villa, is very interesting for a number of reasons which shall pass the revue very shortly. It is remarkable that in 2010, one can still find a pretty much intact and original fortified residential profane building. Throughout the centuries, many a visionary and eccentric person has found both solace and inspiration at the Villa.

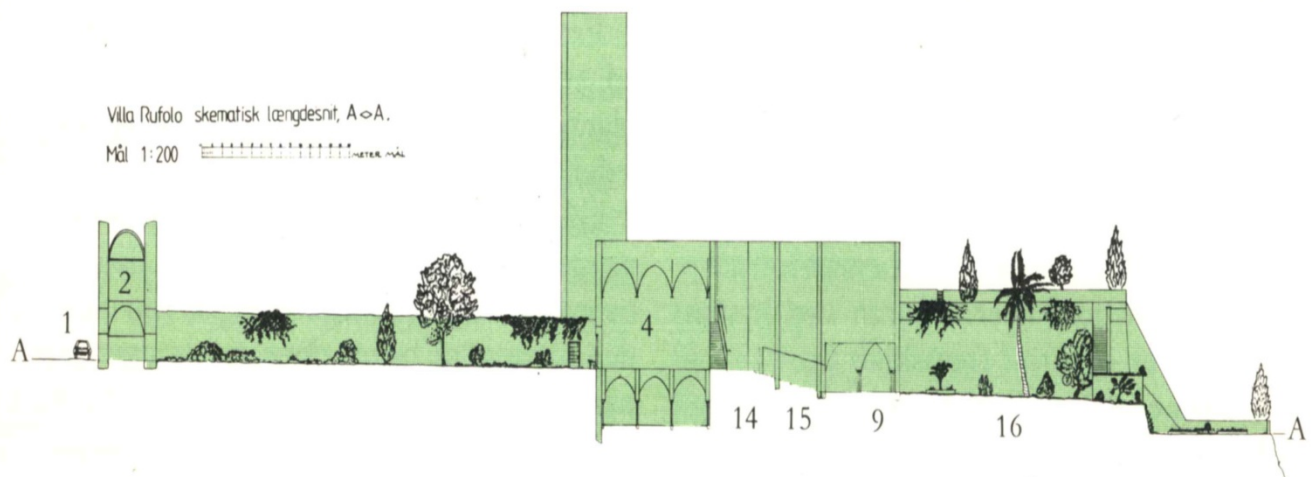
### The main overall plan or the Villa and gardens (shown below)



## The overall ground plan.

1. Parking and edge of the village ( top left)
2. Entrance and tower (top left)
4. il Chiostro (middle left)
- 6 to 10. Main residential complex (bottom right)

In 1851 the Scottish botanist and gardening enthusiast, Neville Reid bought the Villa and immediately set about tidying up the gardens and making sense of the building fabrics disheveled appearance and general bad state of repair. In 1880 a strange looking figure; both pale, small and darkly clad in top hat, cravat, waistcoat, and tails, scurried feverishly around the place. The figure in question, was no less a person than Richard Wagner who had at last in Ravello, found the perfect inspiration for the Castle of Klingsor and sublime magic garden for his opera Parsifal.



## Longitudinal cross section.

1. Parking
2. Entrance tower
4. il Chiostro and sunken garden
- 14&15. Residential areas
9. Sala di Pranzo
16. Part of the gardens

### **The background**

The medieval period of 1200, was a fairly peaceful period for the Amalfi coasts towns and villages. Of course the Republic of Amalfi had already in 1137 lost its independence to Pisa. But the ever resourceful Amalfi managed however, to hang onto its importance as a trading power, right through the next couple of centuries.

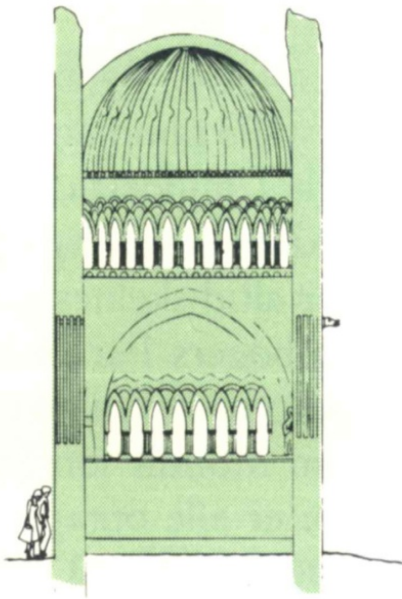
A rather colorful medieval figure in the post republican period was Landolfo Rufolo. Together with his sons, and all depending how one looks upon such matters, he was either a wheeler dealer or a rather talented business man and very astute diplomat. Quite apart from the various business aspects, he also held a number of official posts and had numerous diplomatic contacts with the Byzantine Empire, Egypt and the North African Caliphates.

At some point in his career, he was also running a private equity firm and was also lending money to various individuals; in the higher echelons of society. Ever the man of the moment, and at one point in time, he received as collateral; the Royal Crown of Naples from the King. This was in exchange for some dire financial assistance. Two of Landolfo's sons chose another path, which belonged to the church and both ended up being appointed Bishops.

### **The Villa as a three dimensional propaganda piece.**

The Villa is surrounded by a high wall which is richly decorated with various inlays of brick and stonework. Indeed, once safely inside the outside walls one is confronted with another set of high walls lose by, which in fact contain the main residential areas. In a way, the whole villa complex is not unlike a Russian doll, with one part hidden away inside another. Though completed with an outside wall and tower or donjon, it is not really built as a serious fortress. The geography of the cliffs which career steeply down from Ravello and end in the sea, plus a long mountain range along the Amalfi coast, are all pretty daunting, even today. One might say that the front line of defense were the towns and coastal villages, and the intimidating sheer cliffs under the mountain tops. Anyway, the outside walls are neither thick nor high enough, to withstand a serious attack with any medieval war machines. The outside walls are really more for showmanship. However, just in case of emergency the impregnable fortress like impression, would perhaps offer some measure of support to the owners self confidence. Be it due to the scrutiny from prowling Corsair pirates, brigands, or perhaps some angry locals, aggrieved about taxation levels, or any such like matters.

The main outside entrance to the Villa, is though the porch entrance with a pointed Norman arch in the high focal tower. Here standing inside, the surrounding walls are richly decorated with arabesque ornaments and as one peers upwards to the domed shaped roof or cupola, one sees a ribbed shaped vault, which only speaks the language of the Near Orient.



### **The main entrance tower, or donjon.**

Cupola shaped objects which are used in architecture, go way back in time and are quite common in both Eastern and Western civilizations. Apart from being a clever way of spanning distances, spreading loads and creating spatial effects, by using such cupolas, one can also underline or accentuate something special about a room or space covered by a dome. Take the church of St. Peter's in Rome for example. The grave of St. Peter, is in fact covered by a huge domed roof construction. Domes or cupolas, cover the throne rooms of both Kings and Emperors past and present; and even the "White House" in America is topped by a dome or cupola.

So, be it a mausoleum, astronomical observatory, lighthouse, throne room, library, church; or the humble lavatory in an English Stately Home, cupolas have always tended to convince the viewer by speaking with silent words of power, obedience, humility and reverence. Alternatively, the more modern domes tend to do the opposite and generally speaking, it is more a case of roaring crowds and ear deafening music which takes center stage. But no matter which ever dome it may be, it will undoubtedly always appeal to the senses and human emotions.

Depending on your social status, you would probably be met by "Landolfo" at the entrance tower, under the high echoing cupola. Here, the laughter of good fellowship would mingle with the clatter of horses hoofs on the cobblestone paving's; and any possible musical airs played in honor of the guests, would all resonate all together in this elongated boxed space, topped with a ribbed dome. Yes, in certain circumstances, one might well make a case for the fact that one can also hear architecture. This type of ceremonial meeting is of course the forerunner of the modern protocol, and then, just as now; it would also have served to remind each of the participants of their rightful place in the hierarchy of a well ordered society.

Walking away from the entrance tower towards the main residential area, both host and guests would stroll down a broad avenue flanked with shady cooling trees and exotic plants; either from inland, or some strange and far off countries. After the preliminaries of the greeting ceremony, the

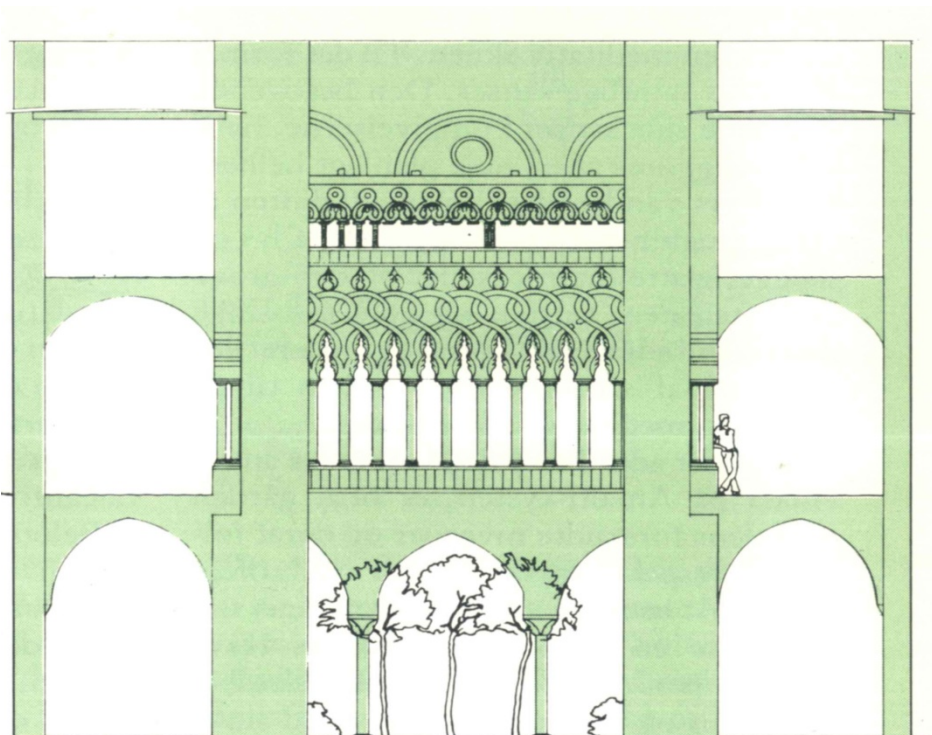
## Lifestyle Antiques Forum and Collectables

party would then stroll down a very gentle slope towards the residential part of the Villa, which is a high two storey walled building with a both wide and high pointed Norman arched entrance; quite aptly called “ Il Chiostro” or cloister.

Passing through the doorway entrance, the party then enters a large square space almost similar to a monastic cloistered world. This is a high enclosed area, with a long series cross vaulting which forms the ceiling all the way around this enclosed square or quadrangle shape. Furthermore a colonnade of double granite piers all around the quadrangle, are perched on a parapet. These piers in turn are supporting both the cross vaulted ceiling which in turn is also the next floor or storey, high above ones head.

Peering over the parapet with its vertical lines of granite piers which stand stiff and upright, rather like soldiers on parade. One looks downwards about 5 meters, not however into any dismal abyss, but into an amazingly cool and fragrant garden many meters below, which wafts the sensual fresh air upwards to greet the beholder. The luxuriously green leaves of the orange and lemon trees in the garden below, gush upwards to greet the visitors and show off the richness and bounty of this partially volcanic soil.

The walls around the cloistered area high above the capitals on the piers , are all highly decorated with polychrome arabesque incised stucco motifs and stonework.



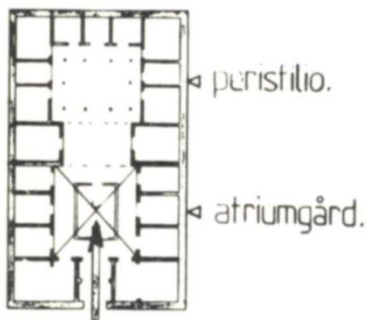
**The area called il Chiostro** (The sunken gardens are seen below the figure leaning on the parapet.)

## Lifestyle Antiques Forum and Collectables

This particular style or aesthetic, is an expression of a spatial synthesis which sought to combine the most practical and enjoyable aspects of both Eastern and Western architectural elements of that time. This European artistic and constructive expression, is something which is very characteristic to both Southern mainland Italy and also Sicily. This however is hardly surprising, given the history of this part of the medieval world where Muslims, Normans, Byzantines and many others, throughout the ages, each have each delivered a contribution towards building a common culture at the very edge of Southern Europe.

### How different cultures have regard public and private space

Indeed the Villa's decorative themes along with some ideas which concern such questions, as what is the function of an axis, or linearity, what constitutes a strictly private, semi private or even public space. Such subject matter are in fact, all related to ideas which were prevalent in some Western and Arab cultures at that time.



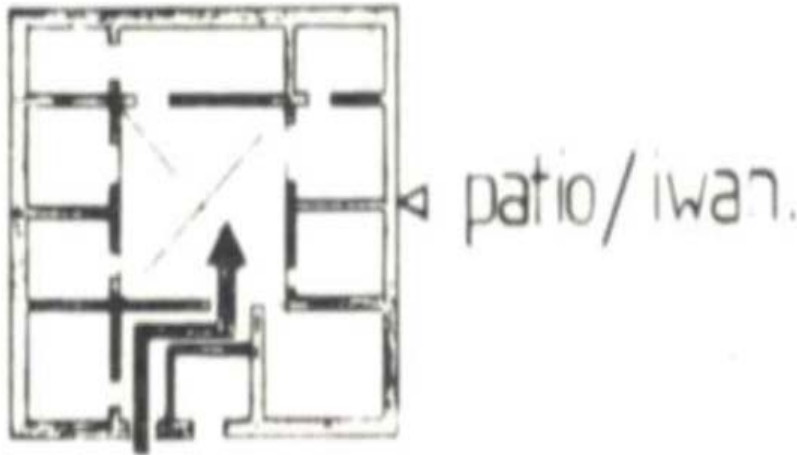
### A typical Roman merchants house

The axis is linear, a visitor can from the entrance, can see pretty much the whole space inside.



### The Alhambra in Andalucía in Spain

The Alhambra throne room axis is only partially linear, as a visitor from the entrance ( bottom center) cannot see inside the throne room at the top, because pretty much of the whole space inside is veiled, due to intervening walls, screens and vegetation and spraying water from the fountains in the “Lions Court” in the middle section .



### A typical Arab merchants house in North Africa

This house is non – linear, as at the entrance any visitor is unable to see inside. Here is one of the facets of privacy and the later more modern developments of the fortified cities in Europe. This type of plan, has more in common with the Villa Rufolo.

### To sleep, perchance to dream ( Hamlet – act III )

One of the architectural foundation stones in the Arab world was to use ilm-al batin. Quite simply the guest or viewer was to let his, or her sight turn inwards, towards a more contemplative or meditative world. Ideally, one needs to activate all of one's dormant senses and allow them free range. Thus, in order to fully understand and appreciate Villa Rufolo, one must as it were; bathe all of one's senses in the Villa's fabric and its surrounding gardens. This is made possible, by a well conceived overall plan of both gardens and buildings, both mutually together and also individually.

Consider the following; The contrasting sounds of tinkling and splashing waters from the many fountains, at strategic points throughout the whole residential area. Reflect on the pleasantly cooling effects, of looking at the soothing water from under a blistering sun – where at the height of summer, even the normally chirping cicadas, decide to throw in the towel and choose to remain silent.

## Lifestyle Antiques Forum and Collectables

While resting in the shade, a hot sultry burst of humid summer air, brings you a showering scent of herbs and flowers . The citrus trees give off their fragrant smells along with those of the heavily laden peach trees. The dusky purple lavender bushes offer up, a more heavy and distinct fragrance, as each flower is vigorously inspected by honey bees.

Both buildings, plants and trees, play games with the sun's rays; by making either a light grey or darker shadows , and also by casting longer or shorter shaded areas in which to escape the dreaded heat of the day.

Let one's eyes, run lazily over the stone and plasterwork on the buildings. Gaze at the veined marble and granite piers in the colonnade. Look at the shiny wear on the lower parts of the piers, all due to the many eager hands of people which have all sought a cooling refuge, in touching the cold stones during those long hot summer days. Squint upwards at the richly decorated stonework, see the weather torn plasterwork, on the left - all curled up in the shade, while on the right - see the suns heat rays swirling and bounce along the stucco arabesques, while warming the small bottle green lizards, before the heat finally vanishes upwards into the cloudless steel blue sky. Watch, as the metallic and noisy dragonfly's chase a few unwary insects, then dive downwards and back to the moist green coolness of the mossy bearded fountain.



**The area called il Chiostro**

Listen to the soft sounds of leather soled shoes whispering against the well worn floor tiles, as someone scurries across the courtyard and into the pantry, but also accidentally letting the paint scorched door bang harshly against the parched and gnarled doorframe. Across the way, from behind the rose clad arbor, the sounds arise of someone tuning a lute; drifts across a bed of thyme.

All of these events are meant stimulate ones senses, and each in its own way are destined to deliver a contribution to both a peaceful and meditative state of mind. This is the essence necessary, in order to fully explore and appreciate all of the decorative and architectonic facets, of this remarkable jewel.

### Creating the imaginable and unattainable

One of the things which make a distinction between Villa Rufalo and many other edifices along the Amalfi coast, is the garden of the Villa.



### A view from il sala di Pranzo, and out across part of the garden and then far out to sea

It is a remarkable achievement indeed, partially based on a classical terrace system which is part medieval and part 19<sup>th</sup> century, all of which ensures both minor and huge variations in height and distance. Joined together, all of which, have quite different effects when looking at objects and scenery in an ever changing, and sometimes very dangerous and dramatic perspective.

Take the enclosed garden with the colonnades for example; to lean out well above the citrus trees and look downwards into the tree tops and peer into a cool bubbling fountain where sparkling dragonfly's avidly zoom around, and fragrant scents drift upwards to greet one. All this, does indeed conjure up images of the Garden of Paradise. Without question, this must surely have filled Landolfo Rufo, with some measure of pride at being its instigator.

Walk down the stairs and into the sunken garden, look upwards at the colonnade, admire the veined marble and granite piers, next to the stone and stucco work. Peer up through the tangle of

dusky branches with deep green citrus leaves, and past the bulging oranges and lemons. Watch in awe, as the metallic colored dragonflies sweep past in acrobatic order. Examine the decorations high above with the sunlight filtered through the trees. Peer downwards into the mossy green fountain which gently bubbles forth its fresh clear spring water. See everything which lies high above, which is also mirrored in the veiled and trembling waters.

This use of this kind of veiling's effect is at that period of time, is a typical Arabic aesthetic and was used to maximum effect in order to enhance the mystical. It was used to create a sense of the unreal, including all of that which; perhaps for good reasons - is far beyond human definition.

The gardens also had a more general and boisterous use. It is here that the family and guests would while away some spare hours, especially in the summer when both the heat and sunlight became more agreeable. Children played outside, and were also educated there. Courting couples or meetings of a more "*risqué*" nature would also have taken place in more secluded and shaded places. Music and singing, picnicking, doing impersonations, archery, fencing, falconry, dancing, skittles were as ever; very popular items. But also the playing of card games like "Scopa" along with dice or chess. Perhaps some reading, composing a letter, reciting and storytelling, or possibly just dozing off in the shade, until the worst of the late afternoon heat had disappeared.

Another part of the Villa which is deserving of some attention is the dining area called "Sala di Pranzo", or dining area. In the main residential building, one must descend a steep flight of stone stairs to reach this very large oblong room. Its long side faces the direction of the sea and is enclosed only on three sides. The ceiling is cross vaulted. The long side facing the garden and the sea is supported by pillars which flow up from the ground, to become pointed Norman arches higher up. In fact, looks a bit like a row of large pointed gothic church windows, but without any stained glass. In one sense, it is a completely modern architectural concept. The outside area and inside areas, are therefore integrated into one complete, and undivided architectural space. Here the dining area and outside garden areas have become one. Thus, at mealtimes one can sit a long table in a cool airy and lofty, oblong room. Here sitting with ones back to the stairs one can gaze out through the spacious openings between the granite pillars and out towards the sea. The diner could gaze out across the well trodden gravel and flagstones, past the lawns, the euphoric colored flower beds, the many exotic trees and bushes and yet still onwards; out into the hazy blue mirage of the Mediterranean sea.

Yet, this vista still continues and one can still gaze even much farther out into the distance, only to become lost in this magically unreal, veiled and indistinct infinity. One has at last reached a point in time and space, where the mirage of unreal colors, the blue sky and blue sea finally merge together as one.

It is possibly at this boundary of illusions, where such an apparition becomes something of perhaps mythical proportions. They in fact belong to a timeless Greek Odyssey and therefore are beyond anything, which might fit within the boundaries of any ordinary human experience.

Speaking of illusionary masters, Visconti touched upon this aspect of the boundaries which belong to all such illusions; in his 1971 film of "Death in Venice." The borders between illusion and reality are transfixed, in the last poignant scene when Aschenbach, collapses and dies in his deck chair on the hotel beach, while staring at an apparition far out towards the horizon.

However, Landolfo Rufolo was but one of a long series of people, who have strove to leave a mark on the world. But his particular stamp, was to re-create a vision of paradise on earth. Of course, it is fairly well documented, how the medieval mind approached the idea of the Garden of Eden.

Looking to the Arab world in the East; or to Dante and Boccaccio in the West, many clever minds had expressed ideas concerning at to what shape paradise might take. In medieval Italy, Guido Cavalcanti and the learned Arabs such as Mondir ibn Said, and al Belotti of the Caliphates, were all highly interested in the ideas concerning the reincarnation of a paradise on earth. This interest is quite understandable; given the facts and unpleasantness of the 'Black Death' in the middle ages. Part of the 13th century's spirit, is vividly captured in a book called "Roman de La Rose by the two Frenchmen; Jean de Meung and Guillaume de Lorris. This book is highly illustrative with regard to medieval thought processes, and can also be equally applied to the reasons for wishing to create such a unique setting. This can also equally be applied to the values regarding how a Medieval Italian ideal Villa residence such as Villa Rufolo, might possibly function in practice;

*My feet had only been moving for a small hour,*

*Suddenly a garden appeared in view, both large and beautiful,*

*Around it stood a defensive wall,*

*The wall is high, built of hard stone,*

*Roughly hewn stones, lay close together and presented a closed defense,*

*These enclose the large garden,*

*I glanced full of expectations and joy,*

*Towards the entrance door , both straight and narrow,*

*This has all been well built, into the stern looking walls,*

*Every single living tree, from the land of the Saracens,*

*He brought along, for such arts to him are well known ,*

*To create a marvelous garden of joy*

*(Note; The authors own translation from the French)*

### **Epilogue**

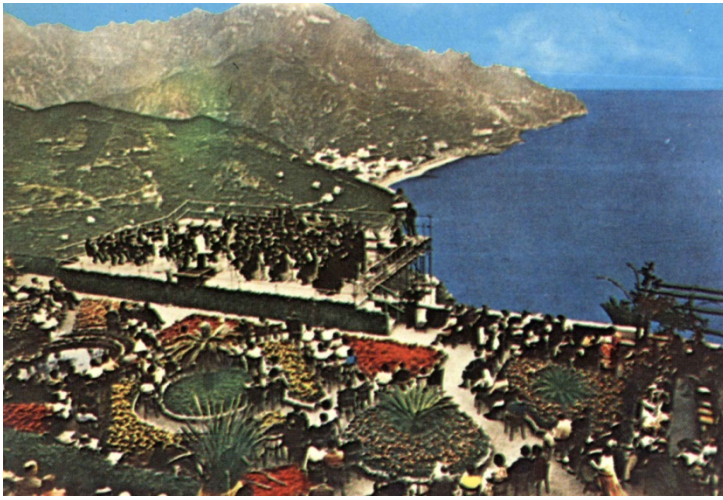
The medieval writer and poet Boccaccio, had some very close connections to Amalfi which has also given description of. Furthermore, Boccaccio also knew Landolfo Rufolo quite well and he is also characterized in his book "il Decameron". He might well have had the Villa Rufolo in mind, when he wrote about the introduction to the 11th day in his fourth chapter for the Decameron.

The concentration of impressions of beauty, which caused Landolfo Rufolo to create his unique Villa and gardens and those psychological needs which drove him relentlessly, towards the creation of a

“Paradise on Earth,” has also stirred the contemporary Italian writer Renato Fuchini to pen the following prophetic lines;

On the day of judgment, for those citizens of Amalfi who shall rise up to heaven, it will just be a day like all of the previous days..... ..

In other words according to Renato Fucini; the Amalfi region is not merely so very beautiful and not only such an ideal place in which to live. But that all the inhabitants are in fact, already living in paradise.



### **A concert in the gardens**

A view across the gardens at during a Wagnerian summer concert. Note; the orchestra at the end of the garden, really is perched on a boarded scaffolding; which quite literally hangs onto the sea cliffs far above the abyss.

This is part of a much larger article, which I have published while at university. Please respect the international copywrite laws concerning this article, the drawings and illustrations. If used for any purpose then, please do so within the correct contexts. Also do please; mention and credit the source. Thank you.

Yours etc; David E. Lombardo, Cand. Magister &, Architect BNA