

Sir Edwin Lutyens



In the summer of 2017, we were fortunate enough to go to the south of England and visit several houses designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens. His work is well known – particularly in the UK – and has already been extensively described and documented. From the beginning of his career, his work was featured in publications such as *Country Life* with beautiful black-and-white photography. But for us, visiting the houses and gardens opened up fresh perspectives. Upon returning, we began redrawing the plans, sections and elevations of the houses and discussing Lutyens designs with our fellow colleagues who had joined us on the excursion. In this text, we focus on Hestercomb Gardens and Castle Drogo, but our observations were also informed by the other works we visited.

All photography in this issue
is made by René de Wit.

Lutyens' career spanned almost 55 years between setting up his practice at age 19 in 1889 until his death in 1944. From the vernacular approach of his first houses, he evolved towards a Renaissance Classicism reflecting an ever-growing interest in a timeless geometry, proportion and abstraction. Lutyens not only designed many private houses, but he was also one of the architects for New Delhi, the new capital of British India, and was a principal architect for the Imperial War Graves Commission for which he designed many WWI memorials and graveyards in France, Belgium and the United Kingdom.

Hestercombe Gardens in Somerset was designed in close collaboration with Gertrude Jekyll in 1904 to embellish an existing Victorian country house. The landscape garden and adjacent orangery was commissioned by E.W. Portman and reframed the landscape setting of the house to improve the valley views from both the house and the garden. The garden is constructed in a locally-mined slate combined

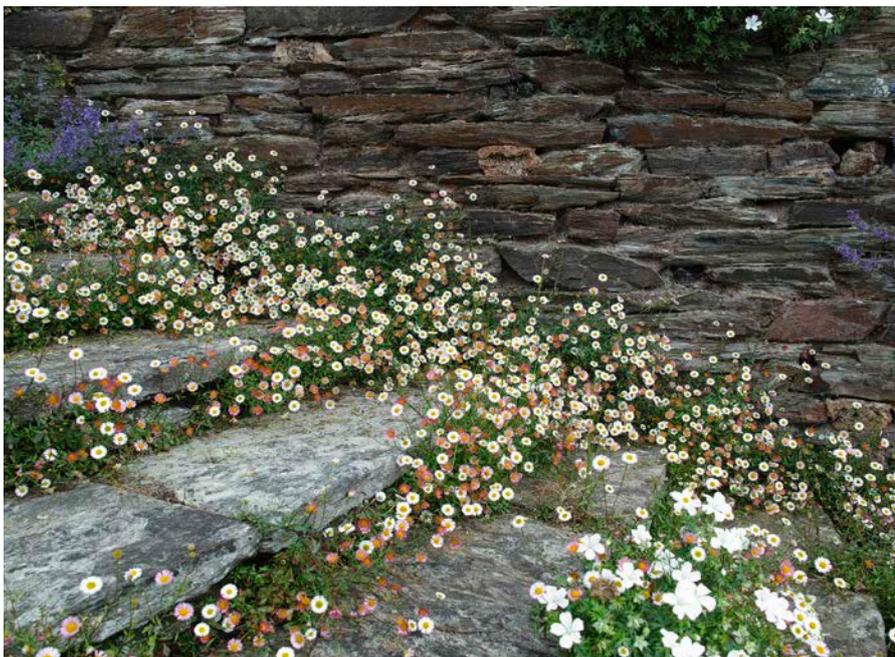
Hestercomb Gardens.



with elements of sandstone. The orangery is designed in a baroque fashion and entailing all the classical architectural elements that Lutyens referred to as ‘the high game’.

Castle Drogo is on a cliff overlooking the Dartmoor. Designed and built for Julius Drewe between 1910 and 1930, Castle Drogo mediates between having the appearance of an austere castle while still offering all the comforts of a country estate. The design developed through several stages as the client often changed his mind and ambitions around the project. As a result, the finished house was only a portion of what was originally intended. Built with a locally-mined granite, the resulting massive construction is often referred to as ‘last castle built in Britain’.

By publishing our drawings and the short essay ‘Keeping Up Appearances’ as part of the Local Heroes series, our motivation was less about introducing Lutyens’ work to a wider audience, but rather contributing to the various readings of his work while seeking a deeper understanding of the genius of this remarkable architect. On our visits to the houses, we were accompanied by the photographer René de Wit who wonderfully captured Lutyens’ work – with some of his images now accompanying our texts and drawings. Lastly, we would highly recommend anyone to visit Hestercombe Gardens and Castle Drogo when visiting the south of England.



Hestercomb Gardens and orangery.

Keeping up appearances

When visiting a house designed by Sir Edwin Lutyens, one enjoys a calming coherency. Everything seems to fit: from the local landscape and topography in which the house is embedded, to the formal layout of the house and scenography of the routes, right down to the way house is constructed and the applied building materials. The house appears to be self-evident in its casual, ensemble-like arrangement of these different elements. Slightly understated, these works do not provoke many questions at first glance.

However, upon visiting a series of Lutyens' houses in the south of England, it became apparent to us how the architect was able to achieve the characteristic appearance of his houses in wildly differing conditions. Not only did he have to deal with different and often-fickle clients for every project, but he also had to confront different landscapes, often extreme local topographies, the pre-existing existing constructions and artefacts, and the local construction materials available to him. By juggling all these different variables, Lutyens revealed himself to us as a master in the art of architectural improvisation.

Hestercomb Gardens.



The gentle art of architectural improvisation

To us continentals, improvisation seems deeply rooted in English culture – fitting nicely with other national charms such as quirky humour and a penchant for self-mockery. But perhaps this improvisatory approach was a pragmatic way by which Lutyens could seriously discuss matters with his patrons and adapt to not only client whims but also local needs and conditions.

Compared with theatre and music, improvisation in architecture seems undervalued – perhaps because once it's “set in stone” any suggestion of the improvised disappears. Regardless, while an intrinsic part of the profession, improvisation is not really part of the larger conversations and storytelling taking place in architecture.

In theatre and music, improvising is rightfully considered at the heart of the profession. Improvisation requires a performer to already have an embedded knowledge and understanding of structures and standards. It reveals the ability to simultaneously deal with the fundamentals of the profession while still confronting the circumstances ‘as found’. Even in the more extravagant moments of ‘free jazz’, there are deep roots at work. And by seeking to understand Lutyens as a reflection of the ‘standards and structures’ he employed, we found a path to follow to better understand his work.

As found: Becoming part of the landscape – and vice versa

Lutyens’ design process obviously starts with understanding the circumstances he faced. The undulating landscape of South England is varied with stark contrasts in typology, vegetation and topography. The houses – whether they are estates, castles or the more ordinary houses and cottages – have all been carefully embedded into these landscapes. At first, the construction seems part of the landscape. But Lutyens goes deeper: he also transformed the landscape as it appears from in and around the house.

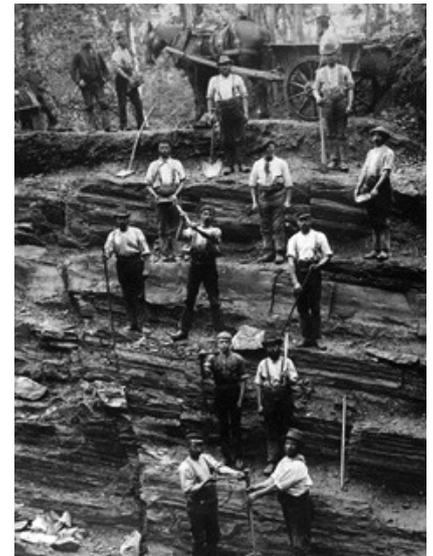
The role of the gardens in the work of Lutyens has been discussed in length. In addition, Peter Inskip already described the garden walls, terraces, pergolas and walkways as the remains of fictional fortifications that lend the houses the metaphoric aura of castles.



Hestercomb Gardens.

And indeed, these built garden elements are as much part of the gardens as they are part of the house. They are crucial in the scenography of the routes, and mediate and anchor the house – while at the same time cultivating the surrounding landscape. These elements provide a sense of order that stretches the act of inhabitation far beyond a house’s windows.

Hestercombe Gardens is a case in point. The garden is sunken into the landscape to provide a foreground to the perspective from the pre-existing house into the valley’s expanse. At the same time, the garden acts like an outdoor set of rooms ennobling the rather uninteresting house as part of a grand ensemble. The occasionally extreme topographical conditions force Lutyens not only to extend his houses outwards, but also to extend the landscape into the house itself. The positions of the entrance, the main representational room and the accesses to the gardens all find their positions in various ways. This made Lutyens rethink the programmatic arrangement, routing and scenography over and over again – resulting in unique typological solutions like we see at the Red House in Godalming and Littlecroft.



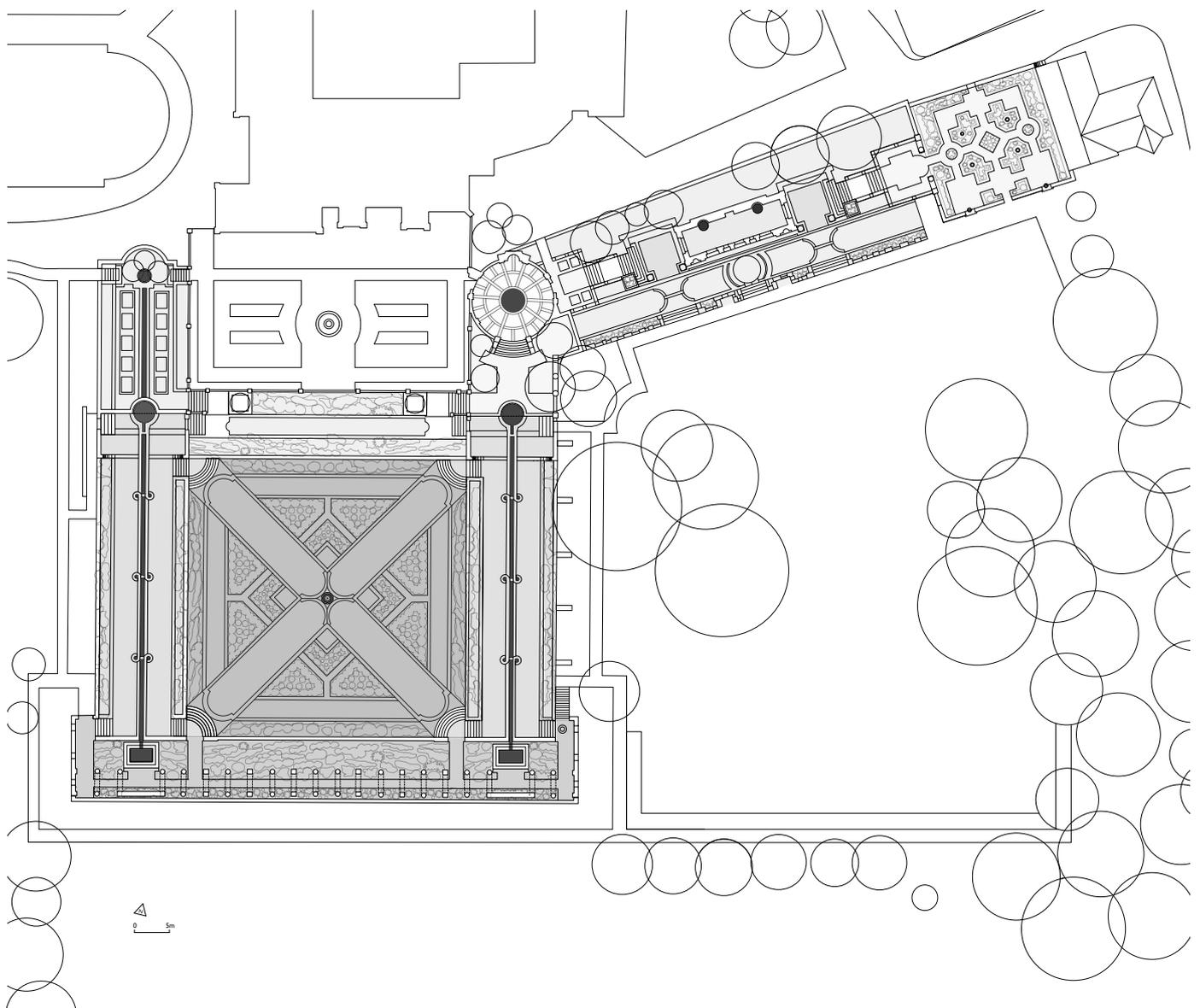
Hestercomb quarry workers, 1903.

Building on – and amplifying – existing structures

Many of the houses are extensions of previously existing houses and structures. As with the landscape, Lutyens displays an equally remarkable sensitivity to these artefacts. The pre-existing elements are incorporated into the house’s formal arrangement and routings. And again, as with the landscape and topography, these artefacts are not considered to be ‘exterior conditions and extensions’. Rather, they are seen as fundamental elements that are invited deep into the house and profoundly influence the house’s spatial and typological organisation.

For example, the three sides of Mells Park face the vast landscape: the lake and oak forest, the pavilion on the hill, and the access path. The fourth side incorporates the pre-existing court into the route toward the elevated central hall. In return, the court is mirrored in the asymmetrical façade and a deep cut in the roof of the main building.

Similarly, the extension of the Mothecombe house mediates between the existing house and the small cottages in the back unifying them around a new routing in and around the ensemble. These 'as found' elements constitute an important part of the 'structure and standards' in the work of Lutyens – resulting in the reciprocal appearances of the houses and its wider context.





As built, locally-sourced

The houses of Lutyens are spread over the landscape of the south of England where local building traditions and materials differed from place to place. At the time of their construction, these building sites were often in quite remote places, and certainly a long journey from Lutyens' office in London. Of course, Lutyens was known to be a well-informed 'man of the world' who was part of the international debates around architecture.

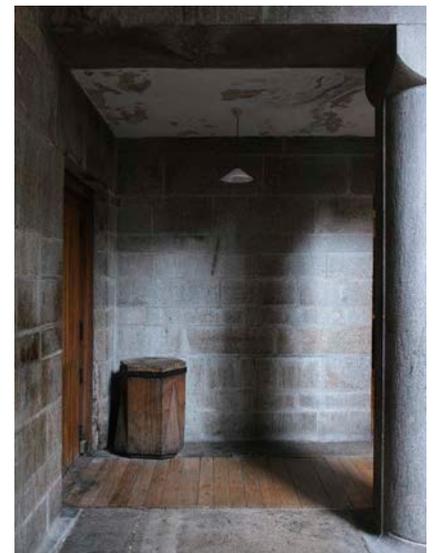
However, Lutyens also had little formal education in architecture and actually developed himself by studying the vernacular architecture around his family home in Surrey. And when we visited his houses, we realized Lutyens' sensitivity for local materials and building traditions perhaps arose from this personal path in education, and as such was a key for us to better understand his work.

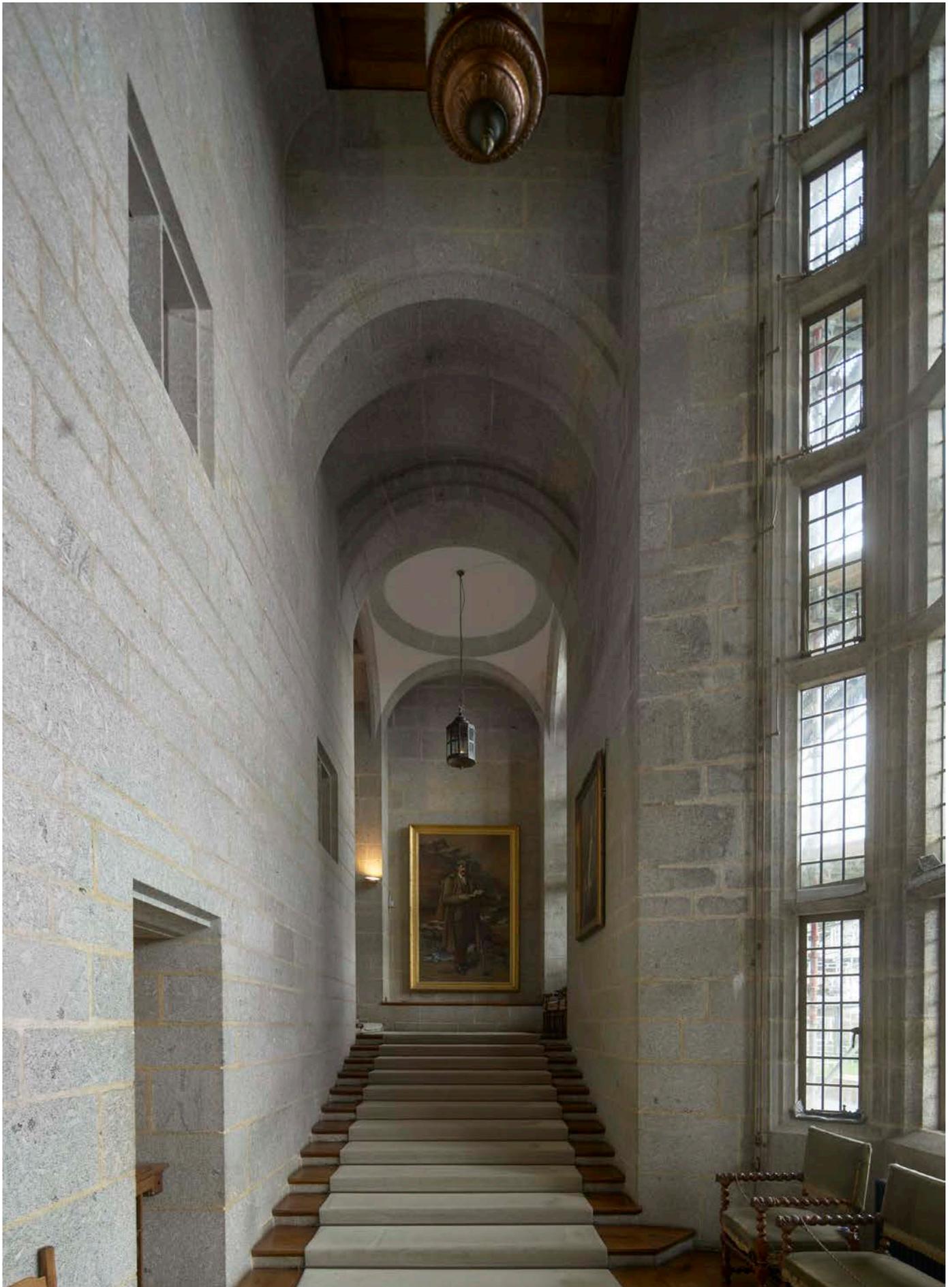
Lutyens was first and foremost a practical architect with a large office production. Working with local materials, builders and their proved ways of construction enabled him to keep control over the prices and the quality of the execution at a relative distance. And while the decisions around on 'what material and how to construct' may have been pure pragmatism, they also proved essential to the appearance of the houses.

Hence, the 'economy of means' gets an evolved meaning in this way of working. The decision on the material is providing the very design foundation for the construction of the house and is a major theme in the architectural improvisation. It becomes, as they say, the '*raison d'être*' of the construction itself and thereby largely interacts with the spatial typology, routes and programmatic organisation of the house.

From the why to the how

After the selection of the material, the question for Lutyens and his clients was no longer why one constructs a house from brick, slate, granite or chalkstone. Rather, the focus became how one constructed it. In other words, the rich appearance of his houses is largely achieved within the architectural and formal play evolving from the practical decision what materials to use.





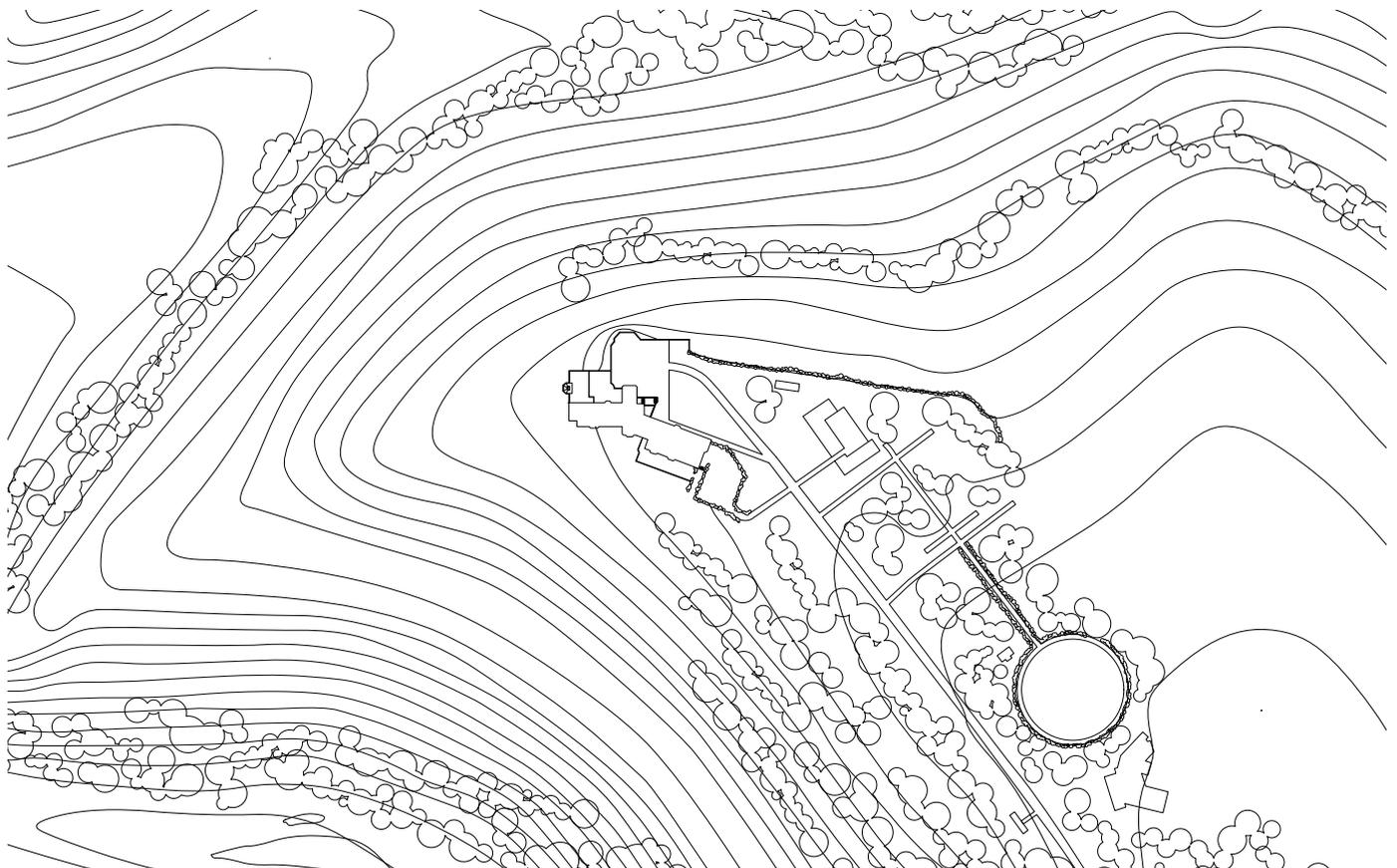
Castle Drogo: situation plan and aerial view.

The precisely sculpted corner pieces at Drogo coming to mind and similarly, the use of locally mined slate at Hestercombe Gardens that appears as stacked plate columns and steppingstones. These all needed fitting pieces at important passages in the garden where slate could not be used. Made with sandstone, these pieces make a fascinating – and even humorous – combination with the slate. The combination of both materials is reversed in the orangery where the slate takes the role of infill and embellishment and thereby bringing the garden and the orangery into a delicate relation through the use of both materials.

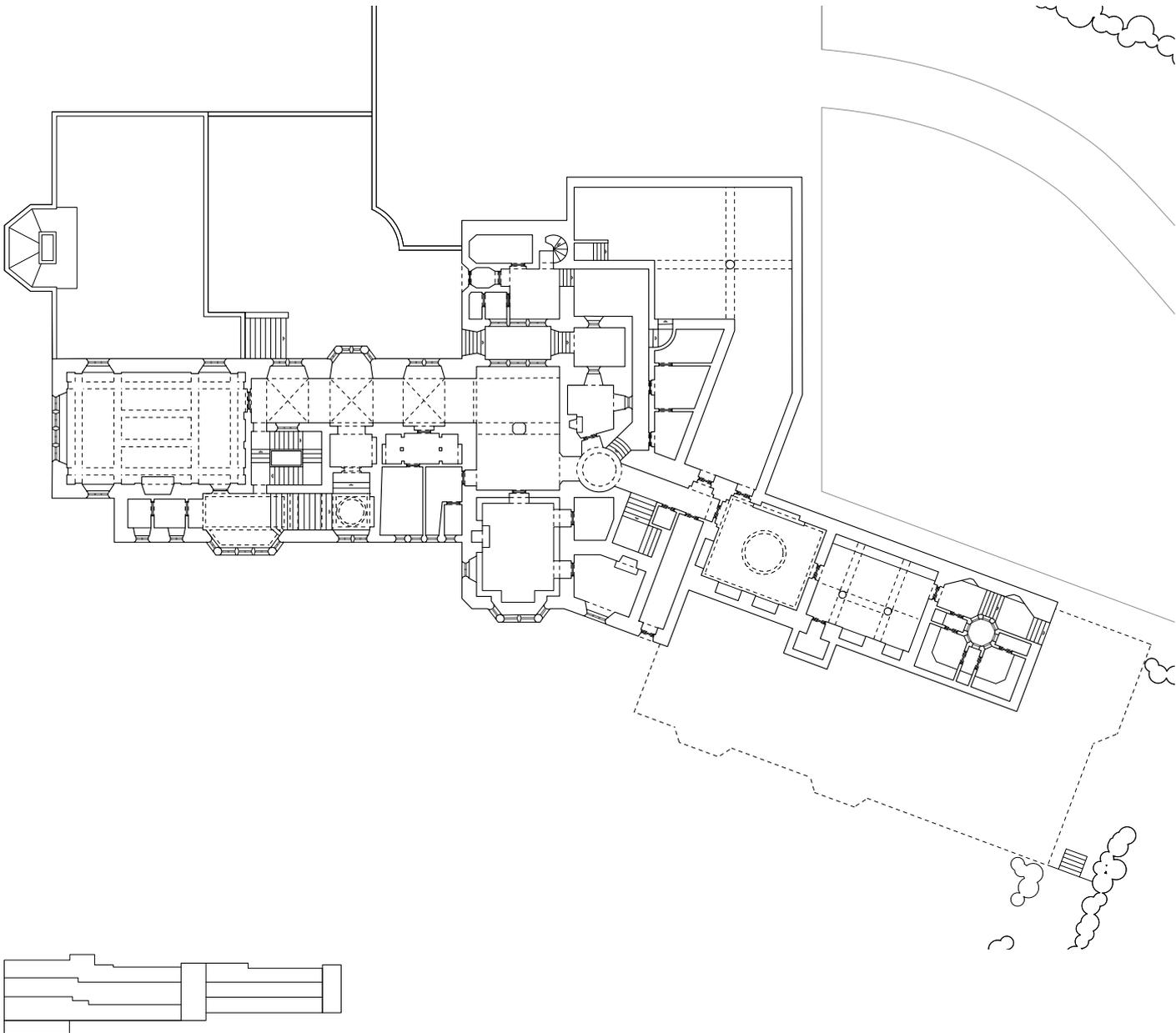
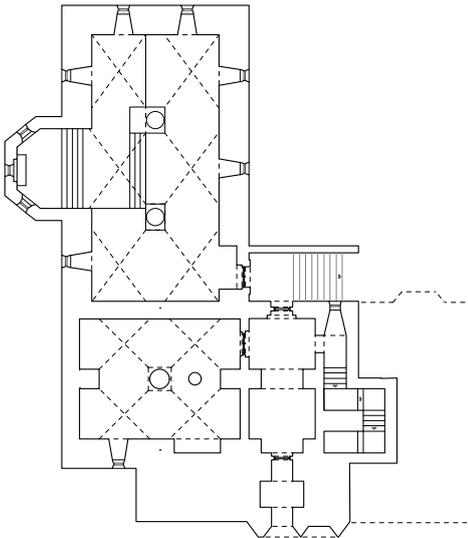


A system for construction – and for reining in fickle clients

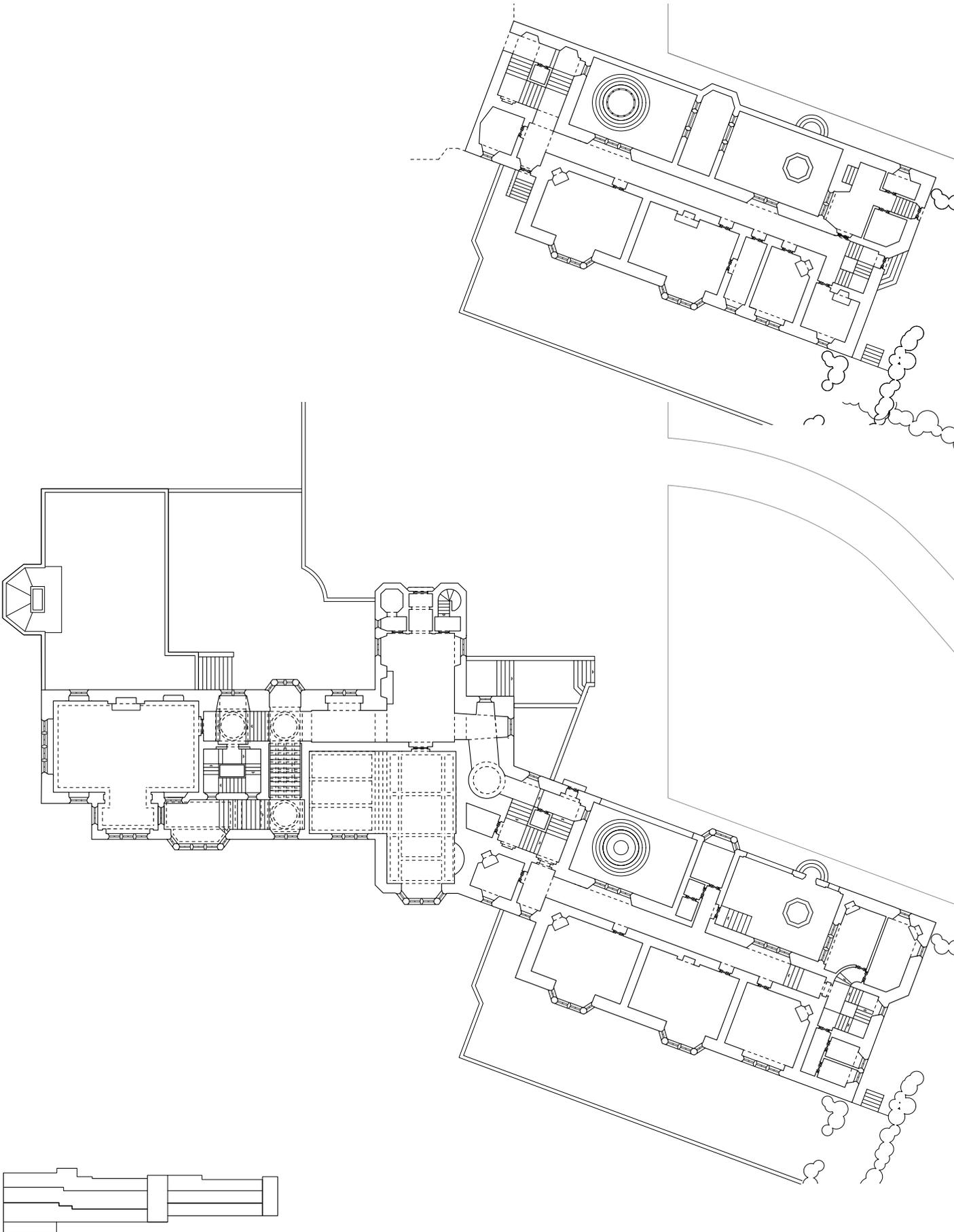
The decisions on material and construction by Lutyens are anything but naive or romantic. By working to decrease construction and transportation costs, the architectural design was given a sense of rationality. In fact, it could be systematically applied to counter any arguments he may have had with his more demanding and/or whimsical clients.

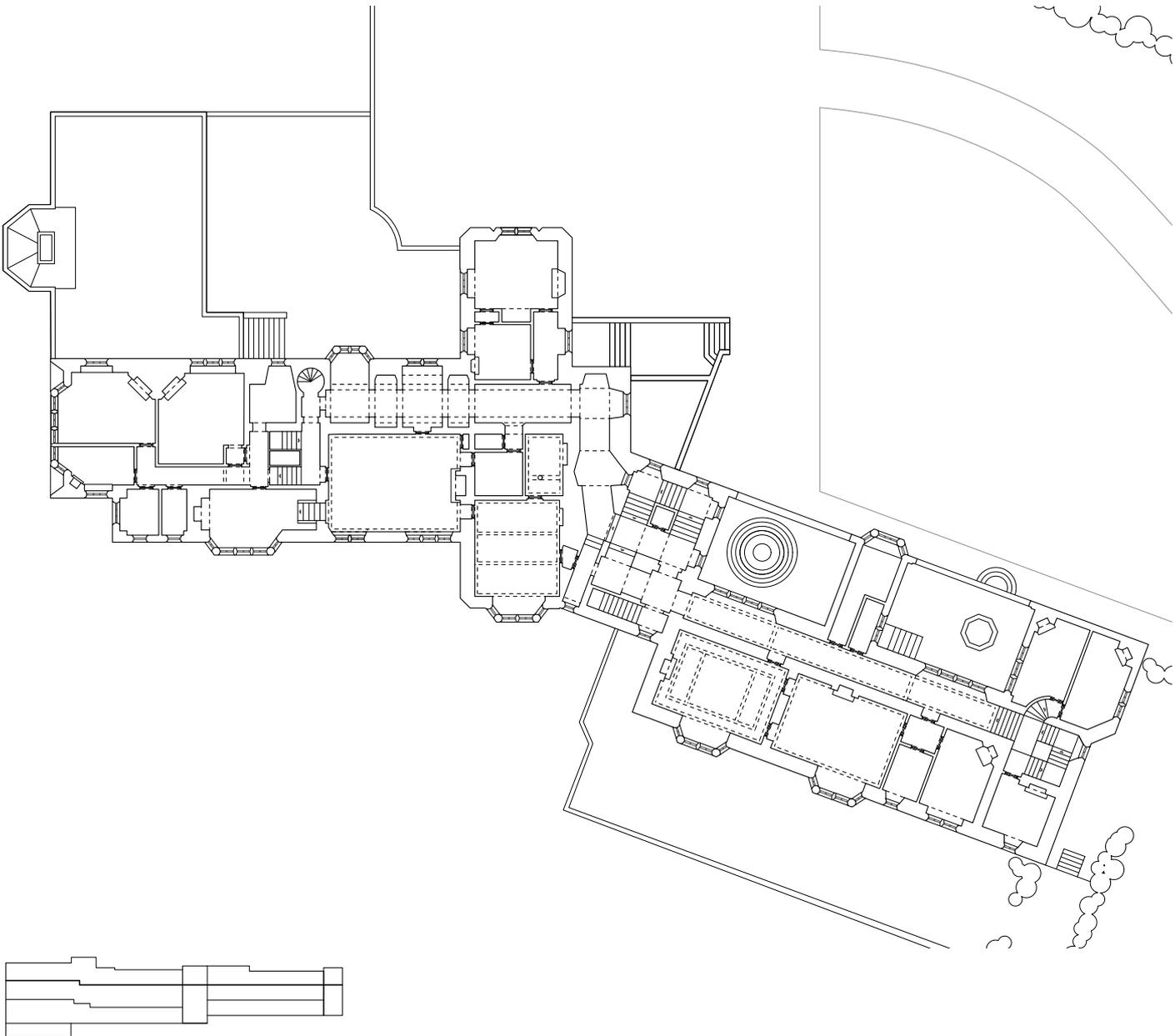


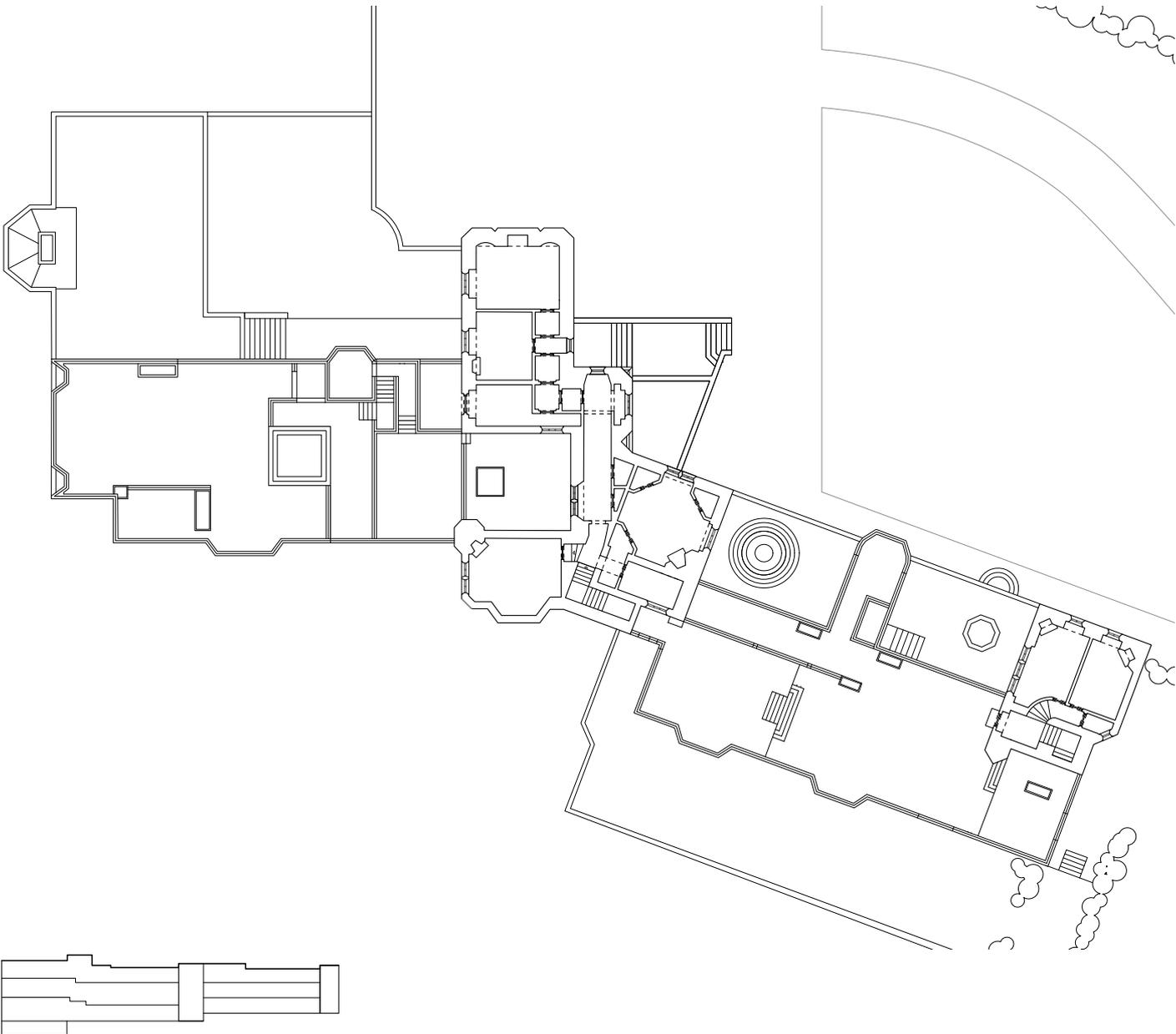




Castle Drogo: ground floor
and mezzanine







Lutyens' pragmatic approach is very apparent in the design of Castle Drogo, where the sizes of the granite blocks were limited due to transportation constraints. This resulted in a vertical measurement system in which the three different heights of blocks could work together. Since Drogo had to be a monolithic construction, these vertical measures became the entire organizing system in the floor heights, composition of the windows and shifts in the building mass that anchor the building firmly on the edge of the cliff it stands on. In the long and winding design process of Castle Drogo, this system provided Lutyens a kind of 3-dimensional grid in which the shifting of windows, reorganization of rooms and changing mass could still fit – and thereby enabling him to respond quickly to his client's changing wishes.



The Merrivale quarrymen who worked the granite for the interior of Castle Drogo.

Bringing the outside in

Lutyens' architectural vocabulary progressed over his career from a rich, additive approach in his arts and crafts houses, towards the more abstract and classically-ordered later houses. During this development, he also weaved in an elaborate canon of personal motifs such as chimneys and fireplaces.

The use of local materials and construction methods made his houses harmonise with the surrounding landscape and neighbouring buildings. By creating a new mass from an existing mass, as he did at Castle Drogo and Marshcourt, and by applying the materials not only on the facade but also in the interiors, he even managed to bring the landscape into the houses. The weathered materials are deeply rooted in the local landscape and by breathing the same atmosphere they work to reciprocally enrich each other. In a way one can regard Lutyens' work as 'vernacular' or even 'critical regional' long before these theoretical frameworks were even conceived.



‘A double act of construction’

The structures and standards within ‘As found’ and ‘As built’ enabled Lutyens to master architectural improvisation, both at a practical level and at a fundamentally architectural level. The improvisation allowed him to respond to whatever circumstances he was confronted with – and even bring the humorous wit often affiliated with improvisation into the detail solutions within the houses.

Lutyens established a reciprocal balance between the landscape and history of a place, local materials and construction techniques, and the programmatic and typological organisation of the house. It is within this ‘double act of construction’ the houses receive their cultivated elegance and natural demeanour.

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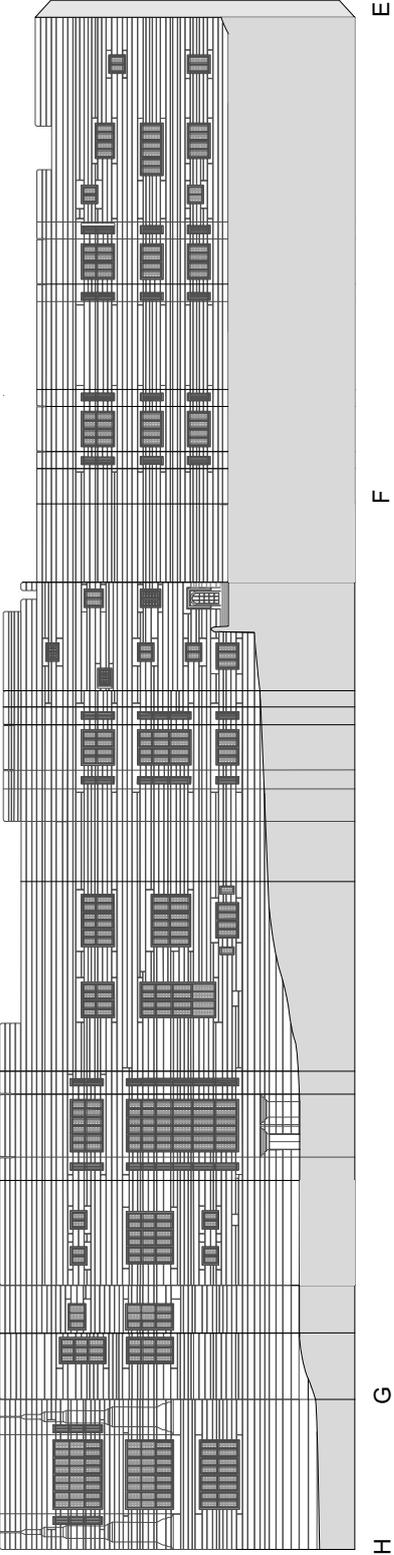
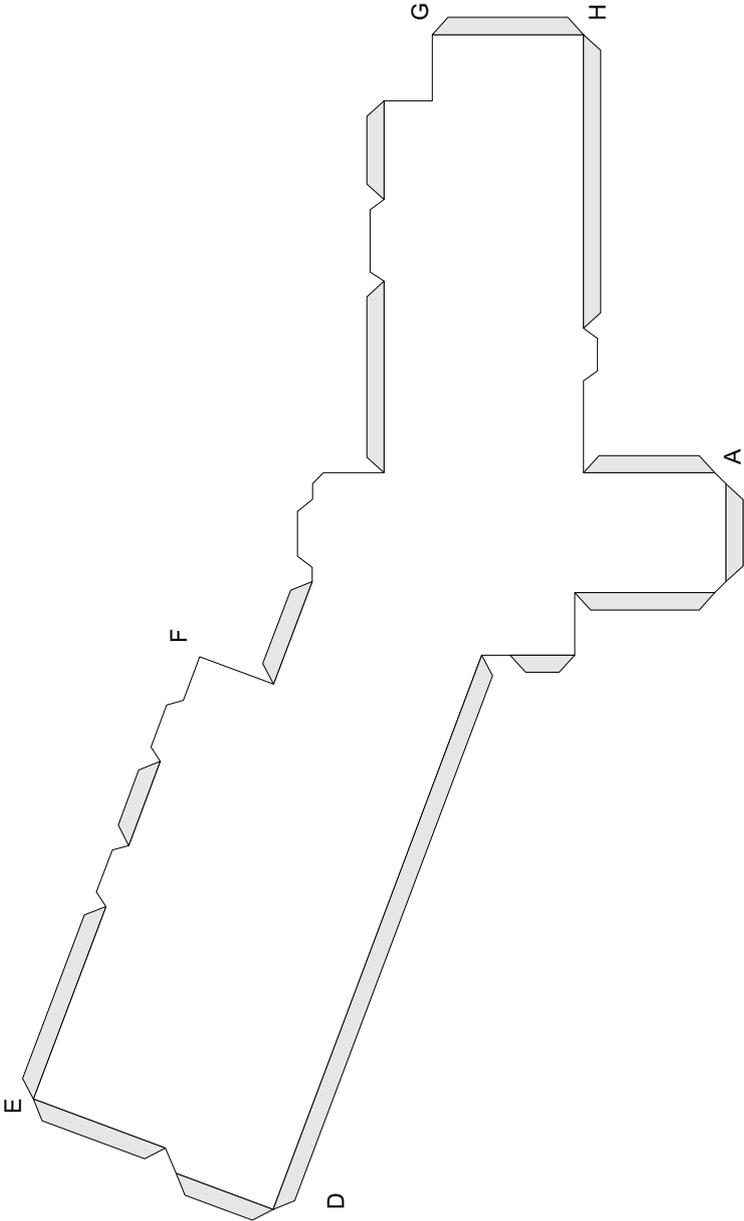
Colophon

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DIY Drogo



DIY Drogo

