



## Death of a Folly

In centuries past, obscenely wealthy people who didn't yet have the option of flaunting their wealth by building spaceships found another path to ostentation in their own back yards. Not content with building private houses larger than many hotels, they shuffled hills and valleys, redirected rivers, scooped out private lakes, and transplanted full-sized trees. All this was accomplished without cranes or bulldozers, on the strength of small armies of oxen, horses, and men with shovels.

After the landscape was altered to their satisfaction, though, something was still missing. Though the great houses were intended to be looked at, they equally required something interesting to be viewed from. Classically inspired mini-temples, strategically placed on distant hilltops, sometimes doubled as family mausoleums, and thus were less likely to be snickered at. Some owners, enamored of tales of King Artur and his knights, built vaguely medieval towers, complete with crenellated tops and narrow window slits for arrows. Anachronistic, yes, but often at least partially redeemed by great views from up high. Still others installed ornate grottoes lined with elaborate shell mosaics. Silliest of all, at least to modern eyes, were those who recreated moody ruined structures meant to evoke real ruins seen on European Grand Tours. (Check out the intentionally crumbling rooflines of Gillette's Castle.) Proud owners thought of these buildings as ornaments, but common folk had a more irreverent name for them: follies.

American suburbs don't offer much in the way of follies. We tend to site the house more or less in the center of the lot, with not much to look out at other than a driveway, a deck, maybe a kids' playset. My little estate, though, has an unusual layout, with the house set some eighty feet directly behind the garage. In place already were three sides of a courtyard: the back of the garage, a retaining wall to the south, and then the house itself. The fourth side was a ridgeline down to the lawn, and all that was needed was something to define it.

A row of columnar evergreens was briefly considered, but rejected almost at once. The obvious choice, arbor vitae, is deer candy. Besides, in a row of trees, there's always at least one runt, which spoils the look. But I neither wanted nor could afford a solid wall. Instead, I scrounged ten salvaged round porch columns, painstakingly reglued, caulked, and painted them, and had them set in a row along the ridge, spanning the distance from garage to house. To my eye, the row of columns was a

necessary element of the house's front entrance, an appropriate and reasonable project. Still, the argument that it qualified as a folly was strong; it was a large, entirely optional and relatively extravagant structure, built for no other reason than to please the sensibilities of people like me, who spend entirely too much time browsing coffee-table garden design books. It did please me—for a while.

And then March's lion roared its last big windstorm, and my beloved columns crashed down into a splintered mess. I had laughed at the naivete of building fake ruins, and this was my punishment: the real thing. From classical grace to Roman ruins, overnight. Boxwoods were crushed, a "Diane" witch hazel may never recover, and the tree peonies escaped destruction by an inch.

After the initial shock passed, I realized that whatever could be saved needed to be stored under cover until the damage could be assessed and repaired. Most of the columns had split lengthwise along the seams I had so carefully glued before installation, but with time and stronger adhesives, they can be restored. One, Humpty Dumpty-like, shattered into dozens of pieces, and all the king's horses couldn't put it back together again. Several of the crosspieces cracked, and the one that slammed into a stone step was reduced to toothpicks. All the salvageable pieces are stacked in the garage, and I'm already chasing down replacements for the rest.

But the essential question has been answered, definitively: the row of columns was no folly. Without the columns, an intimate and welcoming courtyard has reverted to a random, awkward space. Without something to mark the line between the level courtyard beds and the steep slope down to the lawn, the two areas are jarring, simply falling off into space. I may have had them almost long enough to take them for granted, but now it's impossible to become reconciled to their absence. By midsummer, my folly-not-folly will rise again.