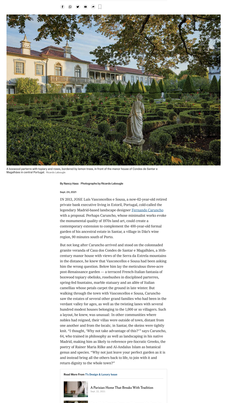
In a Fading Portuguese Village, the Gardens Bloom Again

A landscape designer has transformed the town of Santar with a series of lush, contoured plots where everyone is free to roam.



A tangled network with organic architecture, the work by Isabel Costa, is Santar's first of the island. Image of Costa's de Santar 2 Magalhães, in central Portugal. Nicolas Lamasse

By Nancy Hass | Photographs by Nicolas Lamasse

Sept. 10, 2021

IN 2011, JOSÉ Luís Vasconcelos e Sousa, a new 62-year-old retired private bank executive living in Estoril, Portugal, celebrated the legendary Madrid-based landscape designer Fernando Caruncho with a photo spread, Perhaps Caruncho, whose minimalist works evoke the Moorish gardens of his native Spain, has created contemporary variations to complement the 400-year-old formal gardens of his ancestral estate in Santar, a village in Dão's wine region, 90 minutes south of Porto.

But not long after Caruncho arrived and stood on the colonnaded terrace of the family home, he realized that the 10 acres of land that covered coarse linear with views of the Serra da Estrela mountains in the distance, he knew that Vasconcelos e Sousa had been asking him the wrong question. Below him lay the meticulous three-acre post-Renaissance garden — a terraced French Italian fantasia of boxwood parterres, pleasure paths, a cascade, a pomegranate-spring-fed fountain, marble statuary and an allée of Italian cancellos whose petals carpet the ground in late winter. But Caruncho was not the man for restoration work. He was looking not the crisms of second-order grand families who had been in the verdant valley for ages, as well as the twinning lanes with several hundred modest houses belonging to the 1,000 or so villagers. Such a layout, he knew, was unusual. In other communities where Caruncho had worked, the local residents had been forced to move one another and from the tracks, in Santar, the stories were tightly knit. "I thought, 'Why not take advantage of this?'" says Caruncho, 65, who trained in philosophy as well as landscaping in his native Madrid, making him as likely to reference pre-Socratic Greeks, the Spanish Civil War and the Cold War as the Moorish gardens of his patron and aperitif. "Why not just leave your perfect garden as it is and instead bring all the others back to life, to join with it and return dignity to the whole town?"

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The Caruncho-designed Vasconcelos family home, surrounded by a grove of olive trees, is a 10-minute walk from the gardens of Isabel Costa's Rua Ferreira de Castro in Magalhães. Nicolas Lamasse

An abandoned cemetery inside of Santar, one, designed by Caruncho, that leads out into the wide pathway of Isabel Costa's Rua Ferreira de Castro in Magalhães. Nicolas Lamasse

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A lightly clipped boxwood hedge surrounding beds of ornamental roses. Nicolas Lamasse

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And so the men began a nearly decade-long collaboration, connecting the series of walled properties with gates and bridges in a unified 30-acre master plan, one that incorporated the agriculturally cultivated countryside. Their aim was not merely to create a beautiful landscape for the Vasconcelos family, but to touch on the veranda in the battered estate has he wears so proud himself from the sun. Now accessible to outsiders interested in gardens, viticulture and the complex relationship between the local aristocracy and the peasants, Santar has been dubbed by some Portuguese journalists the Versailles of Dão. Tourism has been steadily rising in popularity since the 1980s, with young people leaving for better opportunities in the cities and wealthier European countries while the population of Santar has dwindled from small plots of grapes, olives and fruit trees on the outskirts of town, selling their crops to large regional cooperatives.

David Ocaña's roses encircled by boxwood parterres with the parish church, Igreja da São Pedro, in the distance. Nicolas Lamasse

The landowning families here felt the pressure, as well. It takes vast sums to maintain large historic estates, and their fortunes were made during Portugal's centuries of rapacious colonization, which, in the wake of the country's 1974 revolution, meant that the families have already sold their land to large-scale winemaking operations; others have let their properties rot fallow.

Vasconcelos e Sousa's family had lived in the Dão region in Sátão, Cinfães of Santar, in Magalhães, who died in 2010 at age 80 and through whose lineage the house was passed — his father, José Luís Andrade de Vasconcelos e Sousa, was equally vital — was able to maintain the estate's garden but had trouble keeping up with the surrounding property, which was in a state of gradual ruin. Its remaining original outstructures — in the ornamental idiom, with touches that prefigure the Baroque, and an Orientalist fanciful cast crowns the site — in the late 1200s, 1300 or so, when a mere modern kitchen was installed, the family used the ground floor of the house as a storage for agricultural equipment, fountain and basin once used to rehydrate salt cod brought by fishing boats from Norway.

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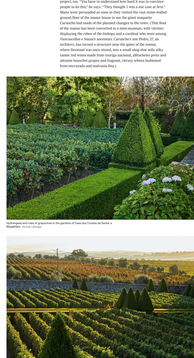

In the gardens of Isabel Costa's home in Magalhães, a pyramid of rosemary and rosebushes, pruned to an amount of sensibility. Nicolas Lamasse

An ancient olive wall borders a lily-ringed pond in the Caruncho-designed Santar home. Nicolas Lamasse

STILL, TRANSFORMING SANTAR into a cultural destination — Vasconcelos e Sousa and his brother, Pedro, 58, an agronomist, who has been working with the family's olive groves since he was an anchor a nonprofit foundation — has been laborious and costly. Vasconcelos e Sousa began the project when he was still working as a bank in Lisbon (he and his partners Patricia Pinjas, 50, live primarily in their Estoril home, not far from there), financing it with his own money. Caruncho, who lives in Madrid, and Costa, who had to another of Santar's great estates. They spent the first few years developing their plans with Caruncho and bringing neighbors on board. A turning point was when the Braganza royal family — whose ancestors Catherine de Braganza became queen of Portugal and Charles II of England — decided to sell the land, and turn their once-elegant Casa da Falagua into a 25-room hotel and spa. (The Santar hotel, as yet unnamed, is due to be completed in the spring.)

Because of his family's long involvement with the town, it was easier for Vasconcelos e Sousa to convince the locals to join the project, too. "You have to understand how hard it was to convince people to do this," he says. "They thought I was a nut case at first." Many were persuaded as soon as they visited the vast stone-walled ground floor of the manor house to see the giant magnetic resonance imaging machine that occupied the space. (This floor of the manor has been converted to a mini-museum, with vitrines displaying the robes of the bishops and a cordoba who were among the estate's previous owners, and a wall of tiles, 1,000 or so in all, arabesque, but turned a structure into the gates of the manor, where firewood was once stored, into a small shop that sells alfaj tamale cut wines made from marigin nutmeat, albuferiera grain and alicante bouscher grapes and linguiset, citrusy white fashioned from encrusada and mahrana Mea.)

Lush grapes and vines of grapevines in the gardens of Isabel Costa's home in Santar's Magalhães. Nicolas Lamasse

Rows of raspberrys pyracantha with slender shaped tapestry. Nicolas Lamasse

But the gardens, which are irrigated entirely by the underlying aquifer, required a different kind of transformation. Caruncho transformed a property in New Zealand into overlapping sculpted mounds of eucalyptus to conquer the lava flow of a nearby volcano, and a golf course in Marrakech, Morocco, into a Minimar grid of water and turf. Dear interior ventilation, by comparison, seem subtle. Caruncho's approach to landscapes is rooted in the arts and culture as well as the sun, he is made to impose a signature style on the landscape, instead allowing its natural contours — the quality of light, the prevailing winds, the flora — to dictate the design of a lengthy period of contemplation. His work is both sculptural and scholarly. Caruncho is convinced that society is returning to a pre-20th-century understanding of how humans are meant to live with nature. Through his namesake practice, started in 1979 when he was 23, he has sought to create a new kind of landscape, agricultural cultivation with purely aesthetic pleasures, a balance of elements that vanished before the Industrial Revolution but begins disappeared once the means of production became devoted alone to the "human." Caruncho's way is to combine the simplicity of the Spanish Civil War years with the complexity of bringing it into the 21st century to ensure it can be sustained "for eyes.

28 Years of I know that we're only being tempted to fly burgers in Burger King or McDonald's or hold doors for students like them that will probably live in those buildings on Madison Avenue. And so I'm wondering if I'm actually serving those people. This American Life
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To unify the village, each grand property now includes a well-tended vineyard, each with rarely planted or revived orchards, a flower garden, a kitchen garden, and a pyramid of rosemary and rosebushes, pruned to an amount of sensibility. Nicolas Lamasse

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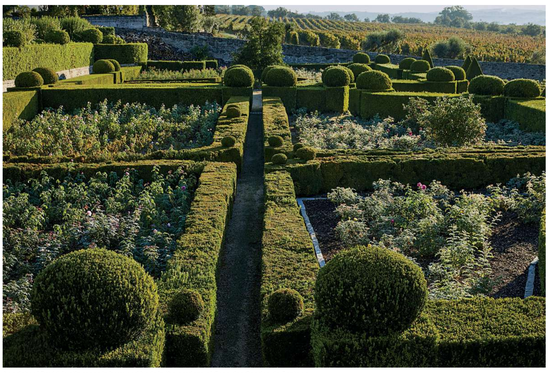
the espaliered grapevines' geometry and orderly fruit trees create a thematic structure. For the capacious acreage of Casa das Fidalgas, Caruncho planted the vines in undulating waves instead of the usual straight rows; from a distance it resembles a vast Op Art dreamscape. On the land of the early 19th-century Casa Ibérico Nogueira, there are now also 18 vegetable gardens, each 650 square feet. Four of them are cultivated by local families, with eggplant, peppers, kale, strawberries and crimson gladioli lining the edges like sentinels. Globe artichokes tower on six-foot-tall spikes topped by lapis blue centaurea-like flowers. Four boxwood parterres in the Linhares garden are now a meadow of California poppies and Cosmos bipinnatus in fluorescent shades of tangerine and yellow that bloom from May through October.

A pathway along ancient granite garden walls and olive trees in the gardens of Casa das Fidalgas. Ricardo Labougle



A variety of David Austin roses in boxwood beds in the gardens of Casa dos Condes de Santar e Magalhães. Ricardo Labougle

Caruncho's small gestures to link the properties are perhaps the most trenchant changes, challenging the country's complicated attitude toward land ownership and privacy. "The Portuguese are very territorial," says Vasconcellos e Sousa. "We love walls. The idea of going through someone else's gate, of walking on their land, has always been unthinkable." But now, a rustic wooden staircase of Caruncho's design, with an unlocked gate at the top, leads from the garden at Casa dos Condes de Santar e Magalhães to the neighboring 17th-century Casa de Magnólia, named for the 200-year-old tree at its center. To connect the former to the garden of the neighboring Casa Ibérico Nogueira, Caruncho, who rejects what he believes is an artificial division between formal geometric landscapes and more profuse natural ones, built a wisteria-covered pergola atop a ramp. And at the end of a path through the new Casa das Fidalgas vineyard, there sits an elevated, covered pavilion, with views of the entire town and the mountains beyond. Twenty feet tall and 40 feet long on granite pillars, it has open sides made from the trunks and twisted limbs of a Scots pine, pieced together like an airy geometric lattice. Around the base, Caruncho has planted a mix of Macassar ebony and osmanthus. Eventually the fragrant, flowering trees will grow tall enough to make the platform appear to be floating above the vines.

For Caruncho and Vasconcellos e Sousa, the pandemic delayed the project in some ways. But it was also a boon, proving that nature gives, even as it takes away: Many of the plantings that Caruncho oversaw before Covid-19 have had the time to reach near-maturity, now lush in the radiant Portuguese sunshine. As planned, it's almost impossible to spot the landscape architect's hand. This season's harvest is expected to be among the best in recent memory, making it all the more satisfying that where there were once dusty, quiescent fields, new vines now thrive, laden with fruit. "You have to have an enormous amount of faith to do something of this scale," says Vasconcellos e Sousa. "You have to believe that this is your purpose, what you were born to do."

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Sept. 18, 2019

Nancy Hass is a writer at large for T Magazine.

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