

Talman, Chatsworth House of the Duke of Devonshire, Derbyshire, England, 17th Century

Style: English Renaissance

Description: Chatsworth House is a cube-like stone structure with a large central courtyard hollowed out. It sits as an imposing mansion dominating the Cavendish lands in Derbyshire. Originally built in the late 16th century by Sir William Cavendish and his wife Bess of Hardwick, the Elizabethan structure's façade was redone in the 17th century in the Renaissance style by their descendant, the 4th Earl and later 1st Duke of Devonshire. The house has three main levels, with the bottom partially embedded due to the slope of the ground, and gradually increasing ceiling heights from bottom to top.

Visual Analysis:

- **Plan Configuration & Organization:** The organizing principle of the house is its square donut shape with the central courtyard replacing its center core. To the extent that dedicated circulation space exists, it runs around the perimeter of this courtyard. The interior is otherwise a series of rooms that lead into each other, in some cases a series of rooms for entertaining and in others a suite associated with a particular bedroom. The “module” of the house, such as it is, is merely the coincidence of interior walls with the breaks between windows. Four full-height stairwells provide access across floors from various parts of the house, in addition to two spiral stairs embedded in the east façade and two grand gestural stairs between the first and second floors on the east side. Rooms associated with welcoming and feeding guests are arranged on the first floor, those for entertainment and study on the second, and the sleeping quarters at the top. (This clashes with the ceiling heights somewhat with respect to purpose, since the tallest ceilings are on the top floor, whereas ideally they would be in the main entertaining areas.)
- **Structure & Materials:** Load-bearing stone masonry, interior fitted with wood and paint for the walls, stone and tile for the floors.
- **Exterior Elevations:** Following the Renaissance style, the façade exhibits regularly-spaced large rectangular windows topped with prominent keystones. The bottom level uses rusticated masonry with little detailing and slightly arched window lintels as a visual base for the more elaborate upper levels. The upper levels use smooth ashlar masonry with Ionic pilasters between windows emphasizing their rhythm and linking the pattern of the façade with the corners. Above the pilasters is an entablature with a decorated frieze. The façade is finally topped along the edges of its flat roof with a balustrade, which is interrupted above each pilaster below by a pedestal that supports a large stone vase-like sculpture which punctures the sky. On each side the façade is divided into three parts, with the central part receiving a special treatment: a temple front on the west (viewing across the River Derwent), a large curved bay on the north, a slight depression fronted by a split staircase on the south, and a slight protrusion on the east.
- **Sections:** Sections emphasize the height of the rooms, the centrally-separating effect of the courtyard, and the thickness of the stone walls.
- **Axon:** The rooms have a variety of sizes and shapes, mostly rectilinear except in the curved bay to the north. The building as a whole is similar to a centrally-cored cube.

- **Site:** Chatsworth House is built on the banks of the River Derwent, amidst a grassy expanse that provides commanding views from the house of the surrounding countryside.
- **Spatial Effect:** High ceilings and relatively narrow, opulently-decorated rooms that open up into each other give a sense of imposing, endless grandeur while the tall windows admit light and reveal within their deep recess the picturesque & controlled English countryside.

Conclusion: The building contrasts sharply with the surrounding lawns, rising up suddenly three very tall storeys above the ground in a blocky structure that imposes itself upon the grounds. It communicates power and wealth with its mass and elaborate decoration and “stateliness” through the orderliness of its symmetrical, Classical design. This orderliness, however, fails to inform the interior planning, which rambles around the building’s hollowed-out square outline, confined by the pattern of its windows and the outline of its central courtyard but otherwise failing to sort itself into an understandable spatial intention.

Contextual Analysis: During the late 16th and 17th centuries the Cavendish family gradually increased its wealth and socio-political ranking in English society. In the meantime, Renaissance influences infiltrated the English consciousness from abroad, bringing Classical designs and detailing from Italy. Chatsworth reflects a sort of incomplete assimilation of this Classical language of architecture, having fluently executed it on the façade of the building but failing entirely to adopt its principles to inform its interior space-planning or to modulate its blocky, fortification-like relation to the world outside.