

# Review Article: Palladio Exhibition

by

JOHN BOLD

*Andrea Palladio – His Life and Legacy*, Royal Academy, London, January-April 2009.

The 500th anniversary of the birth of one of the best known and most influential of architects was marked by an exhibition in Vicenza, organised by the Centro Internazionale di Studi di Architettura di Andrea Palladio (September 2008-January 2009) which was shown subsequently at the Royal Academy (in a collaboration with the RIBA), before travelling to Barcelona and Madrid, where sixteen months of celebration of his achievement are scheduled to end in January 2010.



Fig.1

Model of the Church of Il Redentore, Venice, with model of the Villa Barbaro at Maser to the left, with Veronese's *Susanna and the Elders* above.

*Installation photograph of Royal Academy exhibition: copyright Royal Academy of Arts, London; photographer Marcus Leith*

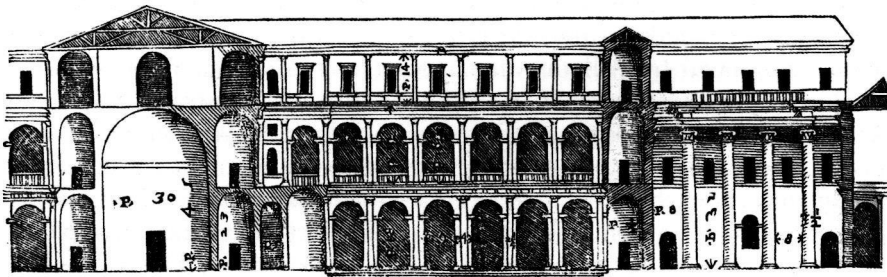
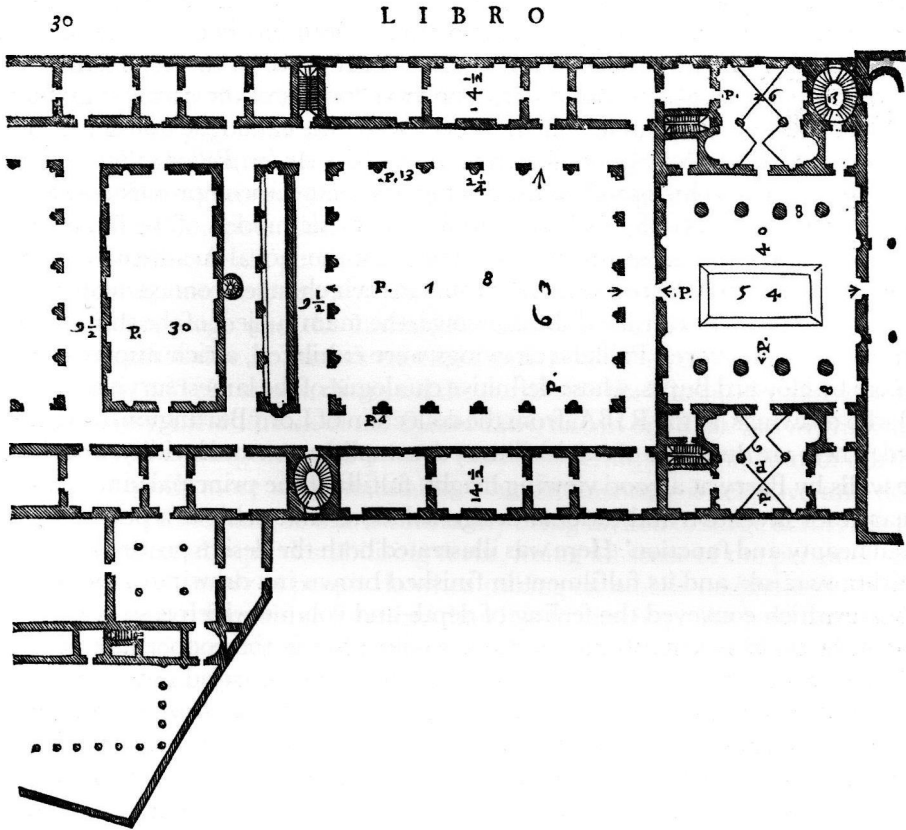
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Through the publication, wide dissemination and numerous translations of *I Quattro Libri dell'Architettura* (1570), Andrea Palladio (1508-1580) has become the best known architect on paper in Europe and North America. Indeed, in the eighteenth century, even those few diligent English Palladians who travelled to the Veneto to see his buildings tended to see them as if mediated by their presentation in his treatise: beautifully proportioned façades, with accompanying plans, flat upon the page, divorced from context. Although it was through his designs for villas that Palladio came to international prominence, only one of the four books (Book 2) is devoted primarily to these and to his palaces (correcting the exigencies of site where necessary and offering them, with 'brevity and simplicity', as models to follow). The others treat respectively of the construction of walls, the Orders and staircases (Book 1); bridges, squares and basilicas (including his own in Vicenza) (Book 3); and the temples of ancient Rome, recorded and reconstructed (plus Bramante's Tempietto) (Book 4).

A counsel of perfection might suggest that the proper appreciation of architecture should go behind the outer face which the architect has chosen to present or illustrate, to consider the internal volumes and sequences of spaces (described graphically in plans and sections), the surrounding context of street or landscape, and the function which the building is designed to fulfil, with all the consequent intentions, restrictions and ramifications. But most buildings are not seen in the round. Rather, in a media culture, whether print or electronic, most buildings are seen as images and it is tempting to see the illustration as a substitute for the building itself. Even in an era of cheap mass travel, there are far more things to see than we could reasonably expect to reach in one lifetime. But this was true long before the age of EasyJet and Ryanair presented the illusion of universal access to new sites. The constraints of time and distance have always influenced the appreciation of architecture and have limited the number of buildings to be considered worth seeing, that is, worth travelling at some inconvenience and expense in order to see. It is not the least indicator of the genius of Palladio that he recognised the value of self-promotion. In publishing illustrations of his buildings, attractively presented with an accessible text, he was capitalising on the growing importance of a print and publication culture in the sixteenth century (particularly significant in Venice), making his architecture available to many who would never see it in the round, and implicitly, creating the circumstances in which first professionals and connoisseurs, and then everybody, would come to see his buildings rather than those by others which might have been of equal merit, simply because they now knew about them through the print medium and knew in advance what they were looking for, and where to go to find it. Thus does publication present a paradox, making images of certain buildings more widely available while at the same time limiting the number of buildings which might be considered worth going to see. Although the two buildings by Palladio which surely now are the best known to visitors to Venice, the great churches of San Giorgio Maggiore and Il Redentore, were not included in his own compilation, they are so well known through topographical painting and photography, that even those who stay at home might claim familiarity.

One of the repeated criticisms of the Palladio exhibition was the inevitable problem of mediation which occurs when one sort of artefact, in this case a building, is represented by another – a drawing or a model. We lose the sense of scale and the enormous power



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DELL'ATRIO

Fig.2

Monastery of the Carità, Venice, from Palladio's *I Quattro Libri dell'Architettura*, 1570.

of great structures when they are represented as here in the rather poorly-lit and unexciting, although originally Palladian, enclosed spaces of Burlington House, rather blandly decorated for the occasion by Eric Parry. The sense of reality of the buildings; the function of the villas as working farms; and the context of the rural economy of the Veneto, were all better captured, if memory serves and the catalogue by curator Howard Burns confirms, at the Arts Council exhibition of 1975, *Andrea Palladio 1508-1580 – The portico and the farmyard*, which profited from being held in the uncompromisingly barn-like spaces of the Hayward Gallery where the specially made models of the buildings from Vicenza were shown to great and thrilling effect. At the Royal Academy these models made a return visit, looking rather domesticated in their changed context, along with new white maquettes which translated the drawings, the main subject of the show, into three dimensions. Seventy-seven Palladio drawings were exhibited, a rich display elucidated once more by Howard Burns, whose definitive catalogue of the largest surviving collection of Palladio drawings (at the RIBA, from the collection of Lord Burlington) has been long awaited. These are drawings of extraordinary accomplishment and lucidity, well displayed on the walls by Parry at a good viewing height, fulfilling the principal aim of the show: the ‘search for inventive and rational design solutions that achieve a perfect marriage between beauty and function’. Here was illustrated both the design process (in charcoal, pen and brown ink) and its fulfilment in finished brown ink drawings with brush and sepia wash which conveyed the feeling of depth and volume which is so conspicuous a feature of the buildings themselves and was so often lost in the copperplate engravings (harder-edged and less subtle than the original woodcuts) carried out for Isaac Ware in his English edition of the *Quattro Libri*, sponsored by Burlington and published in 1738. There was some attempt to contextualise the drawings by the adjacent showing of photographs of the buildings but these were too small and often too low down for ease of reference. Photographic limitations were most apparent in a missed opportunity: it would have added greatly to the experience of Palladio’s spaces to have had large colour photographs of interiors.

Further contextualisation was offered through the inclusion of paintings: Vicenza Catena’s portrait of Palladio’s early patron Trissino; Titian’s *Giulio Romano*, whose Palazzo Thiene was continued by Palladio after the architect’s death; Veronese’s portrait of Daniele Barbaro, the translator of an edition of Vitruvius illustrated by Palladio; and an El Greco portrait which is now believed to be of Palladio (an identification which is discussed at length in the catalogue), depicting him as a scholar with his hand on a book rather than with either the usual architectural attributes of compass and square, or the drawing, signifying invention, held by Giulio. The most surprising of the paintings on show, very well displayed above the model of the Villa Barbaro at Maser, was Veronese’s *Susanna and the Elders* of c.1585-8. Here the monumental elders, dressed in the deep red of Venetian senators, appear to bear the features of the Barbaro brothers, Daniele (who had died in 1570) and Marcantonio. They stand, framed by two giant columns, in a garden with the façade of a building to the rear which seems to be modelled on the villa which Palladio designed and Veronese decorated. The brothers gesture towards the heavily-draped Susanna whose pose, in the words of the catalogue entry by Sergio Marinelli, ‘rather than suggesting that she is protecting her honour, seems to indicate the acceptance

of a polite invitation'. It is further suggested in this unconventional reading of the subject that she might be being consulted as the allegorical figure of Wisdom or Architecture. This painting is one of a group based on Old and New Testament themes. Nothing is known about the commission: the paintings do not appear in an inventory until the early seventeenth century. Neither the exhibition texts nor the catalogue entry do justice to the oddness of this picture and to the disjunctions of scale between the observers and the observed. Why Veronese appears to have been (but was surely not) depicting the Barbaro brothers in a potentially unflattering light is unexplained: perhaps this is not *Susanna and the Elders* at all; perhaps these are not the Barbaro brothers.

This was in some respects an exhibition for those already familiar with both the architectural language and the Italian Renaissance, although there was a notable attempt to contextualise in Burns's excellent commentary in the audio guide. Here he explained plans and elevations; discussed the purpose of the Vicentine palazzo; the villas as working farms, the diffusion of the *Quattro Libri*, and so on. This was my first attempt at listening to an audio guide and using it made the irritating behaviour of other users at exhibitions much more understandable. The commentary is selective and does not follow the order of the hang so one is constantly being invited to surge across the flow of visitors, or to make abrupt, destabilising turns, losing all sense of the personal space of oneself and others, rather as people do when talking on mobile telephones in the street. It is moreover more of an aid to listening than it is to viewing – the level of information actually distracted from the act of trying to work out what one was seeing. Like reading the catalogue, the audio guide might be best left until the end of the show.

The four rooms of the exhibition covered Palladio's development from stone mason to established architect in Padua and Vicenza; new patrons and new projects in Venice and the Veneto, where his work included low-cost housing as well as the more familiar grand ecclesiastical projects and the villas; his later years in Venice and Vicenza, including his abortive design for the Rialto Bridge (shown in an animated fly-through film), together with the *Quattro Libri* and his influence: Scamozzi (with a model of the Villa Pisani), Inigo Jones, Lord Burlington *et al*; and lastly, 'making a new architecture: the architect's mind', stressing the importance of his investigations into structure. While following much the same trajectory, the magnificent catalogue (Guido Beltramini and Howard Burns, eds, *Palladio*, Royal Academy of Arts, 2008), unconstrained by the layout of the galleries, is better able to structure the presentation by placing influences on England, Russia and America at the end. In the exhibition they appeared as a peculiarly sited, poorly contextualised afterthought, possibly driven by the need to explain the Burlingtonian relevance of the location. In the catalogue, in a section which enlists the expertise of other scholars, they have more point and weight. The final drawing, discussed by Kurt Forster, shows Le Corbusier's response to Palladio's mastery of scenography, a pertinent conclusion in view of Burns's emphasis on Palladio's 'Making a new architecture'. In the catalogue, Burns places Palladio in his architectural context, emphasising the mastery of dimensions which distinguished his compositions from his contemporaries and from those of later Palladians; his gift for abstraction – the great plain vaulted spaces of the villas, the towering mass of San Giorgio, the apse and bell towers at the rear of Il Redentore, the sculpted convex corners of the Tempietto Barbaro at Maser; his rational distribution





Fig.3

Monastery of the Carità, Venice, now the Gallerie dell'Accademia.

*Photograph Author*

of rooms; and his innovative use of the façade with the pedimented portico (a piece of special pleading here by Palladio, referring to its presumed use by the ancients, which was recognised as such by the enthusiastic portico-builder John Webb in his notes in his copy of Serlio: 'In all this booke of houses there is not one fayre Loggia with frontispiece the wch Palladio so much affected & it may bee the Ancients did not use them but in Temples and Publique works ...').

In a contemporary climate in which classicism is deployed by some architects in the manner of a man putting on a well-cut suit whatever the circumstances, Burns makes the important point that Palladio's engagement with ancient architecture, demonstrated in both his theory and his practice, obscures his modernity: imitation and comparative examination led ineluctably to a design process based on a controlled vocabulary. In his foreword to Book 1 of the *Quattro Libri*, Palladio recounted his assiduous investigations of ancient Roman remains: 'I repeatedly visited various parts of Italy and abroad in order to understand the totality of buildings from their parts and commit them to drawings ... I considered it worthy of man, who is not born for himself alone but also to be of use

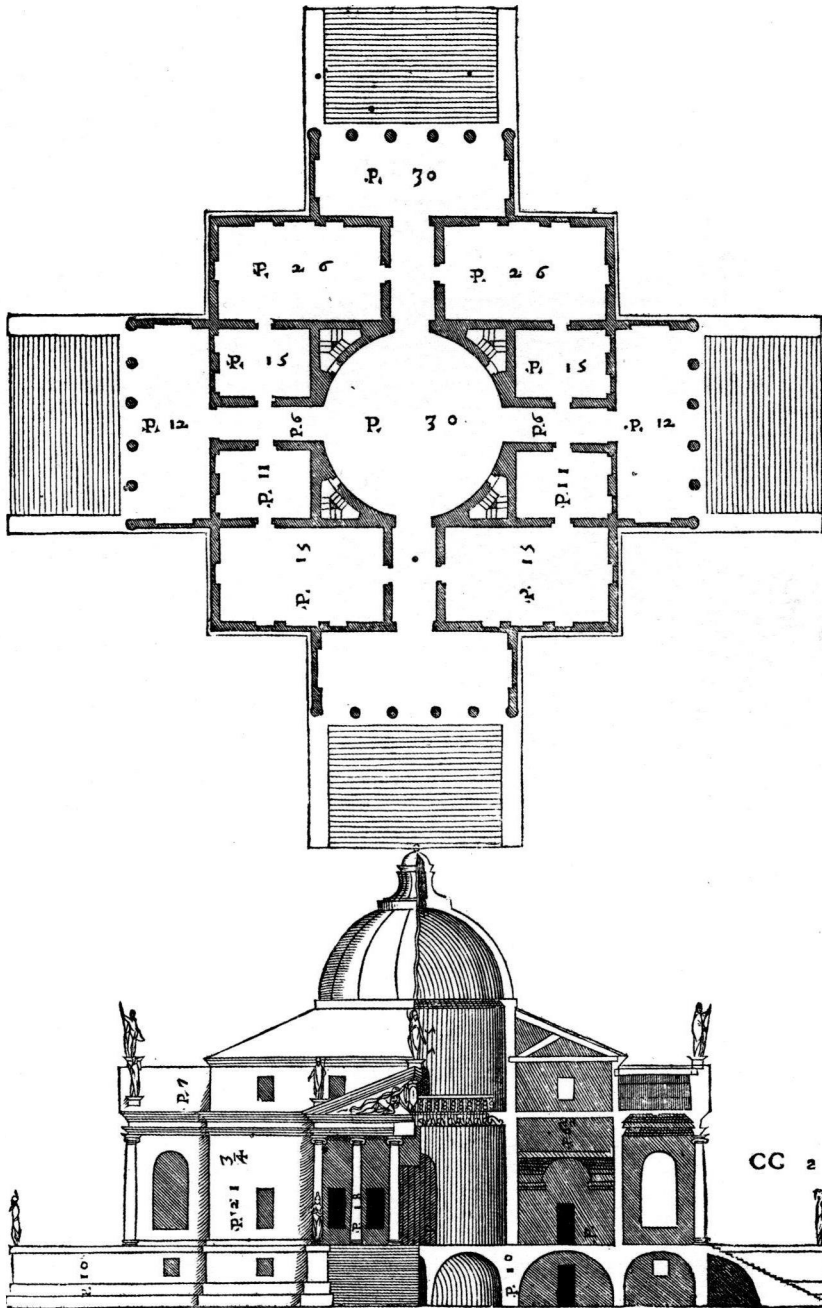


Fig.4

Villa Capra (La Rotonda), Vicenza, from Palladio's *I Quattro Libri dell'Architettura*, 1570.

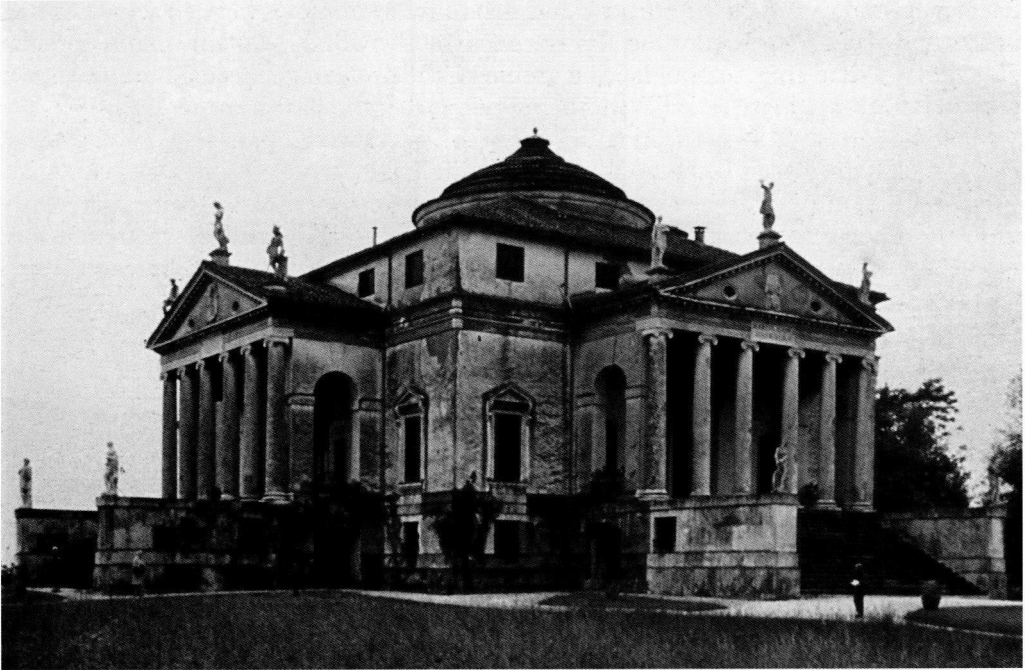


Fig.5  
 Villa Capra (La Rotonda), Vicenza.  
*Photograph Author's collection*

to others, to make public the designs of those buildings that I have collected over such a long period and at such personal risk, and to expound briefly what it is about them that seemed to me to be most worthy of consideration ... so that those who read my books may benefit from what is useful in them ...'. He later recalled his 'long hours of immense effort' in organising the fragments of ancient buildings into comprehensible form: 'one learns much more rapidly from well-chosen examples, when measuring and observing whole buildings and all their details on a sheet of paper, than one does from written descriptions ...'. This was the basis for making a new architecture, and as Burns argues in an impassioned conclusion to the catalogue, that architecture and this architect remain relevant: 'For centuries he has been the architect's architect – their eternal contemporary – read, observed, imitated or criticised. Today ... we may not need Palladio's capitals or his ideas about the Roman house, but we still need his company, still need to enlist him as our contemporary'.

How far visitors to the exhibition alone will sympathise with this assertion of continuing relevance is surely open to question. This was a fascinating but rather sober exhibition, a scholarly 'catalogue-on-the-wall', although less strikingly presented than the catalogue itself, demanding close attention and lacking visual impact notwithstanding the intense visual pleasures supplied by the well chosen drawings, models and paintings. Was this just because we were having to look at substitutes for the buildings themselves, unique



in their harmony, fitness-for-purpose and sheer architectonic power or was something missing? By coincidence, running almost concurrently with the Palladio exhibition, the career of another great self-publicising architect, the protean genius memorably shown at the Hayward Gallery in 1987, was being reprised at the Barbican: *Le Corbusier – The Art of Architecture*. This was a thrilling show comprising drawings, paintings, photographs, electronically-displayed sketchbooks with turning pages, tapestries, models, ceramics, film and furniture (with reproductions available at competitive prices for the truly unreconstructed modernist). Displayed on two levels around a stairwell in an architecture



Fig.6  
San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice.  
*Photograph Author*

much more sympathetic to the work on show than Burlington House is to the grandeur of Palladio, there were frequent opportunities for glimpses of things to come, tangential views of pleasures deferred. It has been suggested recently by Jeremy Till in his beguiling discussion of the contingencies which disable any idea of architecture's autonomy as object or practice (*Architecture Depends*, 2009) that: 'It is the apparent ease with which the standard modes of representation suppress the contingency of architecture that is both their strength and their weakness. The strength lies in the restraint that the drawing and model apply to the external flux within which architecture is ultimately situated. They are a means of control, and the architect is the agent of control in a display of professional authority'. Both of these London exhibitions sought to celebrate and to explain the roots and ramifications of that professional authority primarily by using the architects' own controlling tools. This is why architecture exhibitions, even if they are as good as the Royal Academy's *Palladio* or the Barbican's *Le Corbusier*, inevitably flirt too readily with self-referential simulacra. We need to travel to Venice and to Poissy, to Maser and to Ronchamp – we need the buildings themselves in all their contingent glory in order fully to grasp why we should care.

(Note: Quotations from Palladio are taken from the edition of the *Quattro Libri* translated by Robert Tavernor and Richard Schofield: *Andrea Palladio – The Four Books on Architecture*, MIT Press, Cambridge, Mass., and London, 1997.)