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Palladio in time: Fictitious pasts and imagined futures

Palladio
palladian
theory
classicism
historiography

Andrea Palladio has attracted an unparalleled amount of scholarly attention and has provided, by way of his treatise the *Quattro libri dell'architettura*, very many architectural practitioners with a fount of inspiration, and a pivotal point of reference between past accomplishments and future endeavours. This article examines the writing on Palladio to determine the extent to which it has arrived at a full and objective understanding of his architecture, and why certain aspects of it have remained underinvestigated. It also explores how it was that the treatise came to have such an influence on the architect's 'Palladian' followers and what they would have understood from it about Palladio's architecture and its relevance to their times. It considers, finally, how in recent writing Palladio has become ever further disconnected from his own time to become conceived as mythic figure to whom modern architects and their buildings can be regarded as being connected. Throughout is an emphasis on time: on how perceptions of Palladio and his work have changed over time, on how Palladio and his followers saw the best kind of architecture as being rooted in the past but ever relevant to the present and future, and on how Palladio's past architectural achievements are still perceived as providing a model for present and potentially future endeavours.

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Corrected digital edition

18 October 2026

The production PDF supplied for this online edition had no image for Figure 1. Its caption on p. 309 and the reference in the article are retained so that the omission is visible. No substitute image has been created.

Corrections recorded in this edition

The unrelated footer DOI and a production placeholder have been removed. Note 44 now cites Bak Mortensen 2015. The Burger reference now gives its complete title, Leipzig, 1909. A duplicated references page and an isolated repeated line have been removed. This edition spans pp. 306–329.

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The preeminent Renaissance architect Andrea Palladio (1508-1580) has continued to attract immense, and ever increasing, amounts of scholarly attention. At the same time, he has provided many architectural practitioners with an enduring source of inspiration, and a pivotal point of reference between past accomplishments and future endeavours. As recounted here, these two matters are intimately connected, and what follows will also explore how and why Palladio has come to occupy so important a position in the architectural imagination. What emerges is that the writing on Palladio does not, in the end, provide an understanding of him and his architecture that is as complete and comprehensive as might be expected. It has established, unquestionably, that he did more than any of his contemporaries in conceiving of a kind of architecture that was directly comparable with antiquity, one which would prove irresistible to architects of later times; but, in being so bound up with the passage of time and the accretion of new perspectives, it has also generated ways of thinking about him and his architecture that he himself could never have anticipated.

Fig. 1 Eisenmann, Figura 1, Opera dell'autore, 2026.

Image absent from the supplied PDF; see editorial note on p. 308.

Almost half a century ago, it was observed that probably more had been written 'about Palladio than about any other great architect'.[1] This writing was inaugurated by Palladio himself with the publication in 1570 of his treatise *I quattro libri dell'architettura*, which was reissued in various subsequent editions before being partly translated into Spanish (1625), into Dutch (partly in 1646), into French (partly in 1645 and fully in 1650), partly into German (1698), and, eventually, into English (partly in 1663 and fully in 1715/1720 and 1738).[2] Scholarly enquiry into Palladio himself and his architecture came with his increasing fame and was

commenced in the 18th century, which was when a lengthy biography of him, based on then-available documentation, was compiled by Tommaso Temanza,[3] and when his buildings began being scrutinised, in works by Francesco Muttoni and then Ottavio Bertotti Scamozzi, with differences being noted between them and their illustrations in the Quattro libri.[4] After a succession of monographs on the architect dating from the mid- 19th century onwards,[5] and further studies too of his buildings,[6] the highpoint of Palladio scholarship came at around the midpoint of the following century (fig. 1). This saw the appearance of foundational works on his buildings, now more firmly dated, and his drawings and documented career, by Giangiorgio Zorzi and Lionello Puppi,[7] as well as publications resulting from the first major exhibitions on the architect,[8] and monographs on individual buildings, beginning with his celebrated Villa Rotonda (1566) near Vicenza (see fig. 7).[9] Other studies piloted new approaches such as focusing on the theoretical rationales of his works and their socio-political contexts,[10] while yet others began to re-examine Palladio's distinctive architectural outlook, his design sources, and the affinities of his works with antiquity, notably Rudolf Wittkower's which also investigated his conception of dimensions and proportions.[11] Since that time, new publications on the architect have continued apace and without any sign of abating. They have included substantial and detailed studies on Palladio's buildings in Venice and on his patrons,[12] collaborative ventures coinciding with major exhibitions.[13] and a great many more-specialised enquiries covering numerous aspects and facets of his life, achievements and works.[14] Tellingly, however, the last extended account of the architect and his career, one that

aims to provide a complete and coherent coverage of his architecture, was published now over three decades ago.[15] It was the first for almost half a century,[16] and none has been attempted since.

Even despite an overall picture of the architect remaining rather elusive, it is the sheer weight of all this past scholarship that has given rise to the modern-day consensual understanding of Palladio. This mainstream view of him has concerned itself with many aspects of his architecture, with recent considerations of constructional materials and techniques becoming particularly prominent, but it has paid curiously little attention to other major priorities of his. Perhaps the most notable and surprising of these omissions pertain to his conception of the architectural orders, which are treated so prominently in the *Quattro Libri*,[17] and to his highly distinctive approach towards dimensions and proportions, as presented in the treatise illustrations of his own designs (see fig. 8), which, despite being drawn attention to well over eighty years ago, was never assimilated into the mainstream consensus.[18] Otherwise, this mainstream accord has very much been generated by past and previous scholarship, while becoming ever-more marginal, fragmented and specialised, and rather lacking in any governing and unifying vision of what Palladio's overall aims as an architect actually were. It has also created a rather distorted portrayal of Palladio as a figure somehow separated from the architectural world around him and as unchanging in his goals. What it has not done is to position him in the developmental flow of the architecture of his day, and to recognise that, although he came to be especially preoccupied with the revival of antiquity, his approach was not at all static – which is how it has come to be regarded –



Fig. 2 Vicenza, Palazzo Porto (source: author).

but underwent a very considerable amount of revision and refinement.

A re-examination of Palladio's career reveals that it traversed various easily-defined phases and that his architecture changed in its character accordingly – despite this being scarcely noted in the

literature.[19] After an initial schooling in building construction and architecture, Palladio began his career by following an approach that was similar to those adopted by many of his leading contemporaries, including Raphael, Jacopo Sansovino and, especially, Michele Sanmicheli, with whom he may have been closely acquainted. Such an approach underpins the façade design of Palladio's early Palazzo Porto in Vicenza (ca.1547), with its rusticated basement and its *piano nobile* set out with Ionic half-columns (fig. 2). Palladio then, around 1550, abandoned this outlook and adopted an approach based on an increased usage of freestanding columns and on principles for column spacing deriving from the ancient treatise of Vitruvius. This way of designing would be employed for villas Palladio designed for Venetian patrons, such as Villa Cornaro at Piombino Dese (1552), with its double-storey porticoed and pedimented façade (fig. 3), and Villa Badoer at Fratta Polesine (ca.1555), with its imposing frontal loggia and colonnaded side wings. Later still, from around 1560 and for the final two decades of his life, Palladio came increasingly to view architecture as being comparable more generally to antiquity, signalling this equivalence through an ever-more assertive usage of the orders. Such an approach was initially manifested in schemes for churches in Venice, such as the façade of San Francesco della Vigna (1563/64) and the rebuilding (from 1566) of San Giorgio Maggiore (fig. 4), both with giant-sized and coupled lower-level orders, although it was later extended to buildings of other kinds. It was one that was now very different form the outlooks that were being championed by leading contemporaries, such as Michelangelo and Jacopo Barozzi da Vignola, who were much less concerned with the imitation of antiquity. It was



Fig. 3 Piombino Dese, Villa Cornaro (source: author).

consistent, however, with the view of architecture that was set out in the Quattro libri, which Palladio completed and published in 1570, and which was intended to serve as a theoretical justification for his own buildings (in contrast with those of many of his contemporaries) – and for those designed by like-minded architects of the future.

For its readers, the *Quattro libri* provided a core theoretical basis for an architecture of the most estimable kind. This it did, its readers were given to understand, by propagating two fundamental messages.[20] One was that Palladio's buildings, especially the many domestic schemes illustrated in the second of the treatise's four books, were closely comparable with the antique; and the other was that this comparability was contingent on the exemplary deployment of the architectural orders, which was why in the treatise's first book



Fig. 4 Venice, San Giorgio Maggiore (source: author).

the orders were depicted in so commanding a manner (fig. 5).[21] Moreover, in being founded, as Palladio was at pains to emphasise, in the practices and achievements of times long passed, it was the orders above all else that were able to conjure up potent associations both for buildings of his own time and for those of times to come. That he had the future very much in his mind was strongly inferred by his remarks that 'those who come after' him would follow his 'example' by directing their own talents at adding the 'true beauty and elegance of the ancients to the magnificence of their buildings',[22] and by his claim that what he had himself 'put into practice he was now publishing for general use'.[23] His vision overall was thus that the

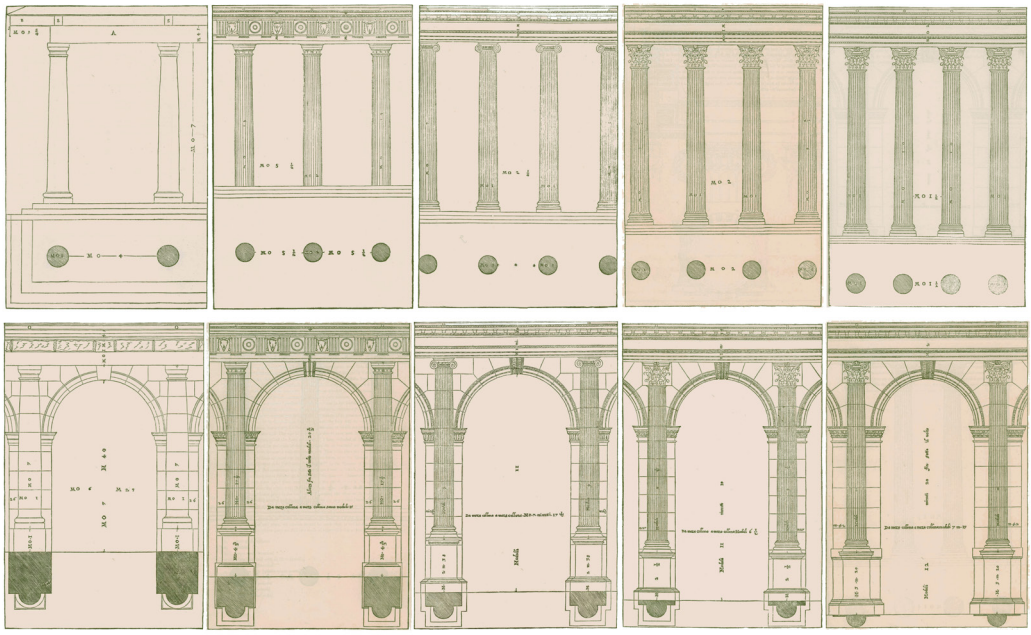


Fig. 5 The architectural orders as presented in the *Quattro libri*.

'most beautiful architecture' (*bellissima architettura*), as he called it,[24] had originated in antiquity before being brought back to light in his time,[25] so that, on the basis of this and especially of his own efforts and 'example', such architecture could be perpetuated by subsequent practitioners. In this way, he was able to construct and promote a compelling myth about the 'most beautiful architecture', which could be regarded as being rooted in remote antiquity, as being rational, authoritatively grounded and historically validated, and, thanks to his own efforts, as being of proven validity for both the present and the foreseeable future.

Palladio himself, although eventually committed to an understanding of architecture of this kind, had not always been of such a view but, rather, had arrived at it as a result of the vicissitudes and changing circumstances of his career.[26] Early on, he had been perfectly content to conform to

the approach established by his leading contemporaries, and devise works such as his Palazzo Porto in Vicenza (see fig. 2) that were resolutely modern in being conceived in a discerningly *all'antica* vocabulary and based on comparable modern works by Bramante and Raphael of acknowledged merit. Later. however, he abandoned this position in good part so he could attract commissions for villas from Venetian patrons. He could, it can be supposed, tempt Venetians to become patrons by playing on their cherished belief that they were like ancient Romans, or even directly descended from ancient Romans, as in the case of the Cornaro family, the patrons Palladio's Villa Cornaro at Piombino Dese (see fig. 3), who considered themselves to be the progeny of the ancient Cornelii, and thus related to the renowned Roman general Scipio Africanus. The villas he designed for these Venetian patrons were, in consequence, suitably Roman, by being firmly anchored in Vitruvian theory with their freestanding columns and their pediments, which, as explained in the *Quattro libri*, were not only seen in the 'remains of temples and other public buildings' but had probably been also employed by the ancients for their domestic buildings.[27] Such an approach, as it was observed at the time, allowed architecture 'to be seen in its ancient form'.[28] Later still, as Palladio then shifted his position yet further, it seems that he came to think that a kind of architecture that was more generally comparable to antiquity was especially well suited to Venice, in view of the city's supposed foundation by Romans and its subsequently uninterrupted history and seeing that Venice in the *Quattro libri* is described as the 'sole remaining exemplar of the grandeur and magnificence' of the ancient Romans, and as where 'buildings of distinction' were again being

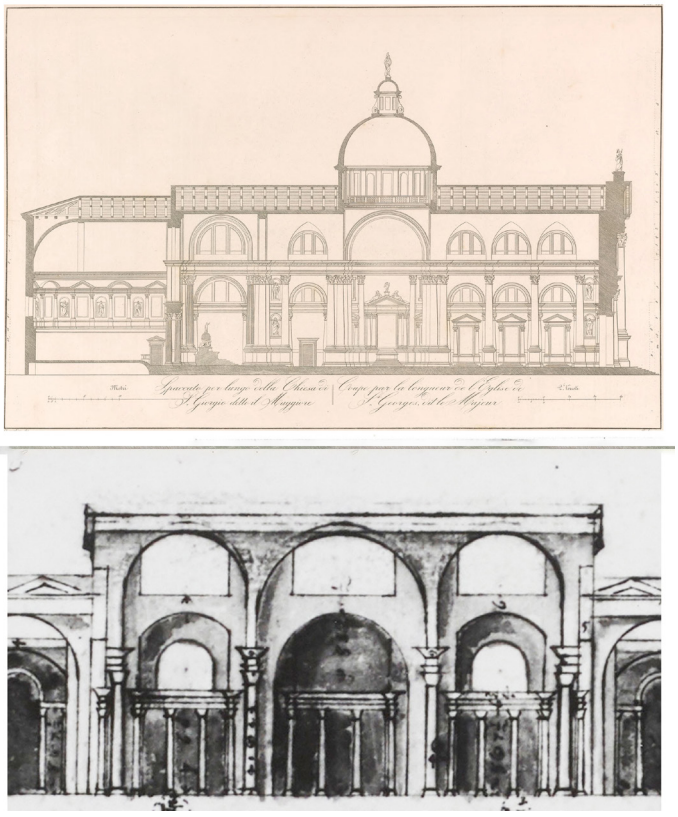


Fig. 6 Top: Longitudinal section of San Giorgio Maggiore (from Cicognara, Diedo & Selva 1815-1820); and bottom: Longitudinal section of the *frigidarium* of the Baths of Diocletian (from a drawing by Andrea Palladio: London, R.I.B.A., Palladio V, 2; source: London, Courtauld Institute).

realised.[29] In his mind, therefore, the buildings conceived for this city needed to be especially Roman, as was very much the case with his scheme for the rebuilding of the church of San Giorgio Maggiore, where he turned to the *frigidarium* of the ancient Baths of Diocletian in Rome as his ultimate point of reference, which similarly had a groin-vaulted interior with arched openings to either side, two levels of windows, and architectural orders of two different sizes (fig. 6). In the *Quattro libri*, however, such a view of architecture would be stretched, so that it was presented, wilfully and misleadingly, as if it applied to schemes of his from the entirety of his career. It was thus as if not only his late works but also his early works – including

Palazzo Porto (see fig. 2) – were all based on the same principles, which were their close comparability with the antique and their exemplary deployments of the architectural orders.

If Palladio had expected the *Quattro libri* to have an impact on future architecture, then he would have hoped its messages would be welcomed, and future circumstances would be such that an architecture rooted in the same principles could be re-created. This, of course, proved to be that case. Those subsequent architects such as Inigo Jones (1573–1652) and, later, Richard Lord Burlington (1694–1753) who gave great attention both to Palladio's architecture and to his *Quattro libri*, as well as many others including Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) who said that Palladio was his 'Bible',[30] all found his architecture and the ideas propagated by the Quattro libri – that is an architecture rooted in remote antiquity which was rational, authoritatively grounded and historically validated – to be eminently well suited to the worlds in which they lived. For them, such an architecture could



Fig. 7 Vicenza (near), Villa Rotonda (source: author).

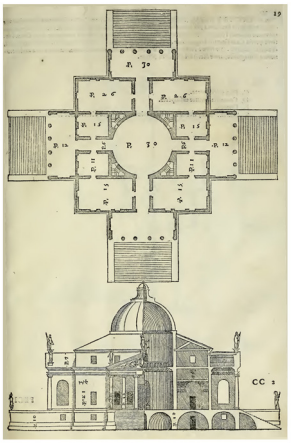


Fig. 8 Villa Rotonda as illustrated in the *Quattro libri*.

thus signal a reinstatement of fundamental principles that tallied with the fundamentalist outlooks of their nations and societies. Buildings, therefore, such as Jones's Whitehall Banqueting House (1619), Burlington's Chiswick House (1725/26) and Jefferson's Monticello (begun 1768), would not only resemble Palladio's and other works illustrated in his treatise in many ways, but they would rely on his publicised architectural vision and achievement as well. Their designs would, consequently, be indebted to Palladio above all others for formulating ideal rules for the orders, and for revealing how the orders had been discerningly deployed in ancient buildings while demonstrating how they could be judiciously applied likewise to modern ones. They would thus embrace his architectural vision, and attest to his achievement as the instigator of the best kind of architecture imaginable – in the very way that Palladio himself had probably wished. Once such an architecture became established, however, as it did in Britain especially in the 18th century,[31] then the buildings we now call 'Palladian' became ever less attuned to the messages provided by the *Quattro libri* and were ever more the result of the treatise being used simply as a corpus of design prototypes.

Much later, in the 20th century and long after the decline of Palladianism, the *Quattro libri* provided the stimulus for a very different way of thinking about architecture. It arose from the investigation, by Wittkower in his much republished study, of the proportionally related dimensions found on the plans of the Palladio buildings featured in the treatise illustrations (see fig. 8), and from his conclusion that they were akin to musical harmony, and even that they belonged to a preordained harmonic sequence.[32] Such a deduction – even though

it turns out to have very little basis – was liberating, not least because it allowed Palladio's designs to be examined and analysed without any reference to the architectural orders or to the 'classical' tradition, and in a way that meant that they could be compared to modern buildings, which is what happened, and what conferred on Palladio a new relevance for a new age.[33] The crucial step was taken in 1947 in a much vaunted essay by the theorist Colin Rowe,[34] which revolved principally around a supposed proportional comparison between Palladio's Villa Foscari near Venice (ca.1555), as illustrated in the *Quattro libri*,[35] and Le Corbusier's Villa Stein at Garches (1926–28), imagining (mistakenly) that Palladio's building was designed on the basis of a proportioned grid of a kind that had been conjectured previously.[36] It also saw Palladio's Villa Rotonda (fig. 7) being likened to Corbusier's Villa Savoye at Poissy (1928). Such thinking, now detached from the historical realities of Palladio's practice, then unleashed numerous hypotheses about possible design methods that Palladio could be imagined as having followed (however implausibly), supposing them to be prerequisites for a fuller understanding of his architecture. They would include the supposed use of the proportions of 1 to √3 and other incommensurable ratios,[37] and the conjectured employment of the 'golden proportion';[38] and, especially as regards Villa Rotonda and its depiction in the *Quattro libri* (fig. 8),[39] the envisioning of a notional dependency on geometric diagrams (fig. 9),[40] which may appear to correlate with the building to an extent – but only to an extent and without corresponding with the scheme's given dimensions. In some investigations, including one on Villa Cornaro,[41] the view is taken that it is the building's actual dimensions rather than those

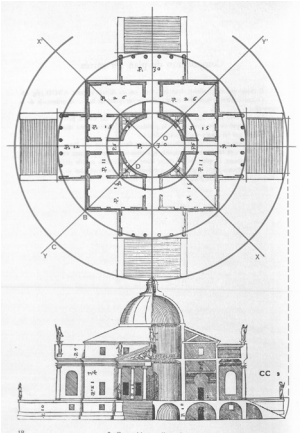


Fig. 9 Analytical diagram of *Villa Rotonda* by Robert Streitz.

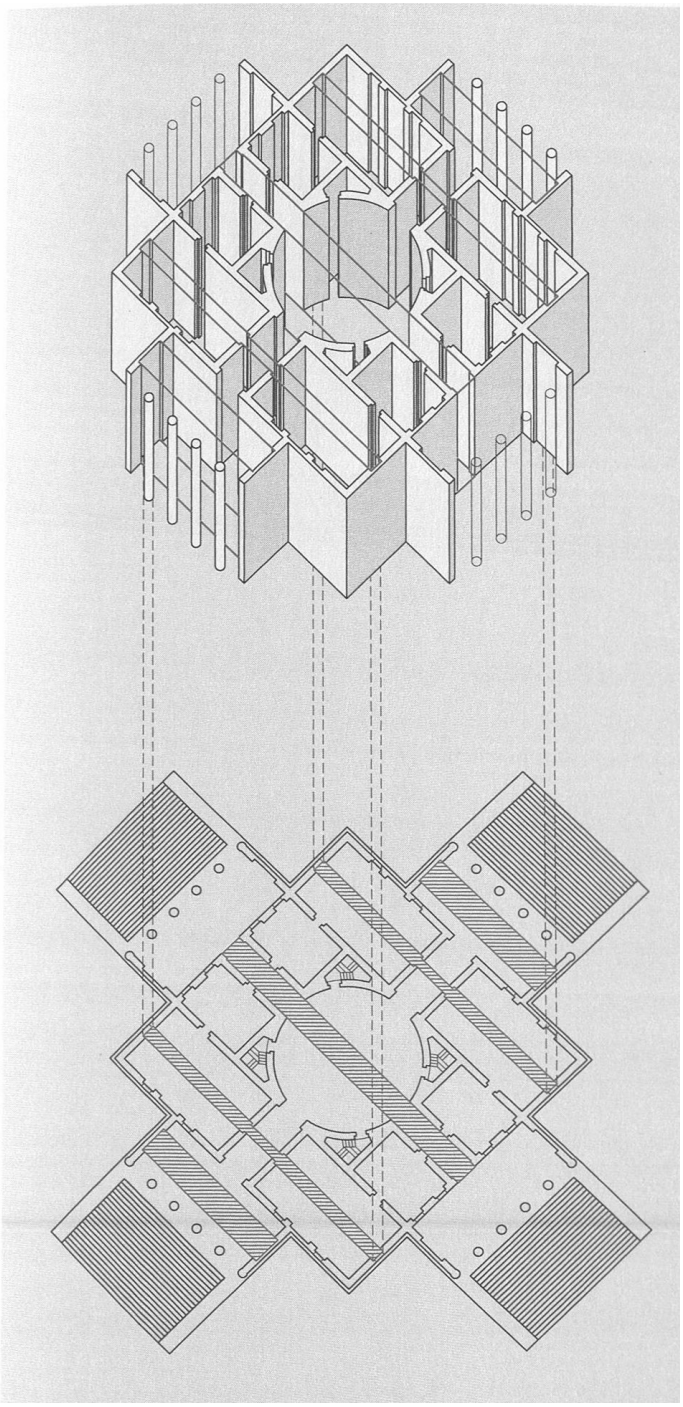


Fig. 10 Analytical diagram of Villa Rotonda by Peter Eisenman.

recorded in the *Quattro libri* which encapsulate Palladio's design intentions. Another study, by the contemporary architect Peter Eisenman, would analyse Palladio's villas as volumetric constructs, and thereby redefine Villa Rotonda as displaying a conceptual 'instability' and a 'disarticulation' from an ideal (fig. 10).[42] The fundamental problem with all such theories and stances, however, is that they do not match with the likely design methods that Palladio had actually followed or the design objectives he had set himself.[43] The past realities of the historical Palladio are thus being manipulated to suit the inclinations and speculations of the present and an imagined future.

At the same time, Palladio has become viewed not merely as relevant to the present but, increasingly, as an archetypical architect for the present. Some practitioners of the recent past have looked back to Palladio or Palladianism as a grounding or justification of their own schemes and of their revivalist outlooks.[44] Sometimes, such schemes either quote, or are purported to quote, specific features from buildings by Palladio or his Palladian successors; but, often, they have little or nothing in common with Palladio's, visually or formally, and yet are still perceived as having somehow been inspired by Palladio. In a similar vein, certain recent writers and commentators have similarly been inclined to make connections between modern buildings and Palladio, as if he had provided a touchstone for distinctly modern ways of thinking.[45] Just why he has come to be regarded with such reverence depends in part on the commanding position he has now come to occupy in the continuum of architectural history, and in part on perspectives on architecture attributable to him, or imagined as being, such as in respect to his architecture's geo-

metric qualities or its universal language, which can be thought of as relevant to architecture's current and future directions.

With his position in architectural history being such, Palladio has come to assume an unassailably mythic status. This mythic Palladio, however, is not to be confused with the historical architect, whose remarkable achievements were firmly anchored in – although not subservient to – the ideas and expectations of his time; but the mythic figure still depends on the historical Palladio's unprecedented and unparalleled wish to gain eventual renown by being the author of a treatise, one that would both publicise very many of his own schemes, and also promulgate a kind of architecture and way of designing that was rooted in antiquity and dependent on the use of the architectural orders. Yet even Palladio himself could hardly have predicted the influence he would have on later architecture, or anticipated that he would eventually come to constitute the fundamental link between so many future architects and the architectural past. He could never have foreseen that he would come to be regarded as a fount of inspiration even for architects who have disavowed past traditions and any connection with 'classical' architecture and its antique origins. The mythic Palladio has thus subsumed the historical architect. He has transcended the boundaries of time to become a figure that any architect, of either the present or the future, can aspire to emulate.

NOTES

1. Howard 1980, p. 224.

2. See Howard 1980, pp. 228-229.

3. Temanza 1762.

4. Muttoni 1740; Bertotti Scamozzi 1776-1783.

5. Magrini 1845; Barichella 1880; Zanella 1880: Fletcher 1902; Loukomski 1927; Melani 1928.

6. E.g. Burger 1909.

7. Zorzi 1958; Zorzi 1964; Zorzi 1966; Zorzi 1969. Puppi 1973.

8. *Mostra* 1973; Burns 1975.

9. Semenzato 1968.

10. Forssman 1965; Ackerman 1966.

11. Wittkower 1973 (originally published in 1949), pp, 57-154.

12. Cooper 2005; Howard 2011.

13. Beltramini & Burns (Eds) 2008.

14. E.g. Mitrović 2004; Paternò 2015.

15. Boucher 1994.

16. Following Dalla Pozza 1943 and Pane 1948.

17. Palladio 1570, Book 1, pp. 15-51. See Hemsoll 2015.

18. Wittkower 1973, pp. 101-154. See Hemsoll 2025a.

19. Hemsoll 2025b. Puppi noted the three distinct phases of Palladio's career (labelling them *giovinezza*, *maturità* and *senilità*): Puppi 1973, pp. 27-38. Beltramini and Mitrović have drawn attention to conceptual changes in Palladio's architecture: Beltramini & Burns (Eds) 2008, pp. 9-10.; Mitrović 2004, pp, 112-127.

20. Hemsoll 2025b, pp. 48-50.

21. Palladio 1570, Book 1, pp. 15-50.

22. Palladio 1570, Book 1, p. 3.

23. Palladio 1570, Book 1, p. 5.

24. Palladio 1570, Book 4, p. 3.

25. Palladio 1570, Book 4, p. 64.

26. Hemsoll 2025b.

27. Palladio 1570, Book 2, p. 69.

28. Barbaro 1556, 279.

29. Palladio 1570, Book 1, p. 5.

30. See Beltramini 2015, p. 23.

31. See e.g. Worsley 1995, *passim*; Brindle 2023, 97-117, 151-169, 191-243.

32. Wittkower 1973, pp. 101-154; see Hemsoll 2025a, pp. 4-6.

33. See Millon 1972 and Payne 1994.

34. Rowe 1947.

35. Palladio 1570, Book 2, p. 50.

36. See Wittkower 1973, pp. 70–73.

37. Mitrović 1990, pp. 285–86; Mitrović 2004, pp. 65-67.

38. E.g. Fletcher 2000; and, for a contrary position, March 2001.

39. Palladio 1570. Book 2, p. 19.

40. E.g. Streitz 1973; García-Salgado 2009.

41. Mitrović & Wassell 2006; also Fletcher 2000.

42. Eisenman with Roman 2012.

43. See Hemsoll 2025a, especially p. 24.

44. See Bak Mortensen 2015.

45. E.g. Ebert 2024.

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