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Let's Talk About Palladio
A Brave Attempt to Understand a 16th-Century Architect

Introduction

To understand the 16th-century architect Palladio and his architecture, we must create some context. Where did he live, when, with whom, and what did he do to be of significance even now, five centuries later? How did he differ from his colleagues? What happened in architecture to break with the classical tradition, and what happened in the architectural debate to abandon the search for beauty? Talking about Palladio, there are basically three points worth considering in today's architecture debate. The first is the lost relationship between image and building. When construction methods become disconnected from the image, the image seeks independence in icons whose value represents an idea rather than being one. Secondly, what happened to the concept of beauty? Suppose we accept the abundance of these ideas. Can we still conclude that architecture is not a result of functionality but that it exists despite it? And finally, what does it mean to be an architect? A relevant question we try to ignore by answering an architect can be everything but not a *homo Universalis*.

1
Europe, 1490 A.D.

Part I

Why is it that so many people feel connected to the work of Palladio, and why should we architects be? In the beginning, we must refresh our memory and get some context of 15th-century Europe [fig. 1], which changed from a medieval Gothic society into the Renaissance. It was a complex environment ruled by many royal houses and kingdoms. The land that we now know as Italy was divided into many smaller states [fig. 2]. Starting with a potpourri of city-states in the north: the Republic of Venice, the Duchy of Milano, the Republic of Genova, and the Republic of Florence. In the center were the Papal States, and in the south, the (only) kingdom of Napoli, including Sicily.

Mighty families dominated the city-states in the north. They were proud to be independent and not royal, allowing free trade, which ultimately brought them great wealth. So much

2
Italy c. 1490.

wealth, in fact, that by the end of the century, they had become the bankers of half of Europe and gained even more power. The families were very competitive, not only in armory but also in art (including jewelry and crafts), music, theatre, architecture, innovations, and discoveries. This competitive focus on culture was fertile soil for the artists and the arts, and it also made the families demand ever higher quality.

As a result, artists, musicians, actors, architects, world explorers, and scientists were strongly bound to the families. Follow the artists' moves, and you will find the journeys and politics of the families. Filippo Brunelleschi (1377–1446), Leon Battista Alberti (1404–1472), Leonardo da Vinci (1452–1519), and Michelangelo Buonarroti (1475–1564) are just some of many artists who flourished through the wealth-power of the ruling families in a relatively stable environment. Many significant works of art, discoveries, and changes marked the 15th century. Three events, in particular, have extraordinary importance for the field of architecture: the discovery of the *Ten Books on Architecture* of Vitruvius by Bracciolini in 1416, the introduction of the perspective by Brunelleschi in 1415, and the invention of the Gutenberg printing press in 1455.

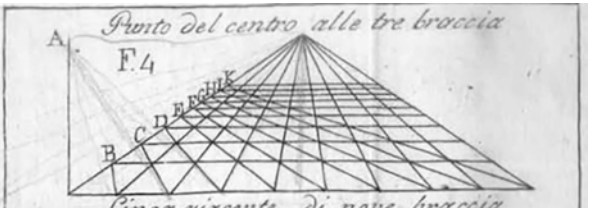
Gian Francesco Poggio Bracciolini (1380–1459) was an early Renaissance humanist and scholar. Despite his birth town being Florence, he served seven different popes in Rome, contributing to the strong connections between the two states. He continued to keep in touch with his city and was called back to become appointed the Chancellor of the Florentine Republic. In the early 15th century, in 1416, Poggio Bracciolini discovered a manuscript copy of Vitruvius's treatise *De Architectura* in the monastic library of St. Gallen in Switzerland.[1] This was very significant since the architecture of Roman antiquity could previously only be understood by studying the ruins. The discovery of the Vitruvian scrolls is considered the start of the High Renaissance or rebirth of the Roman Antiquity.

Vitruvius (born between 100–80 BC) wrote *De Architectura* in the Augustan age of Roman antiquity, probably 25–23 BC. Some parts refer to a period at least ten years before that, when he mentioned his service to Julius Caesar. He recorded for his emperor the architectural and engineering achievements of the Greeks and early Romans and the harmony they had sought between nature and architecture, which he hoped to revive. The text gave information about how ancient buildings were conceived and built with factual information about the materials used, the construction techniques, and the design intentions. The findings were of considerable importance as they would ultimately lead to the Renaissance style in architecture. They are set out in ten books, of which the first one is concerned with defining what an architect and architecture are. Vitruvius explains that an architect must be both a master craftsman and a scholar. He is unequivocal in his statement that without the one, the other will never be convincing:

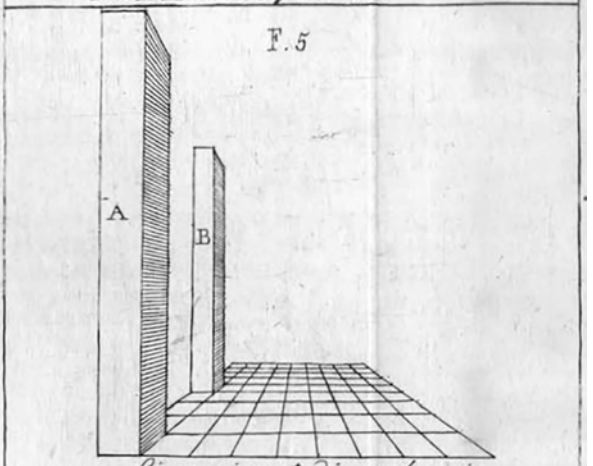
"The architect should be equipped with knowledge of many branches of study and varied kinds of learning, for it is by his judgement that all work done by the other arts is put to the test. This knowledge is the child of practice and theory."[2]

"Practice is the continuous and regular exercise of employment where manual work is done with any necessary material according to the design of a drawing. Theory, on the other hand, is the ability to demonstrate and explain the productions of dexterity on the principles of proportion."[3]

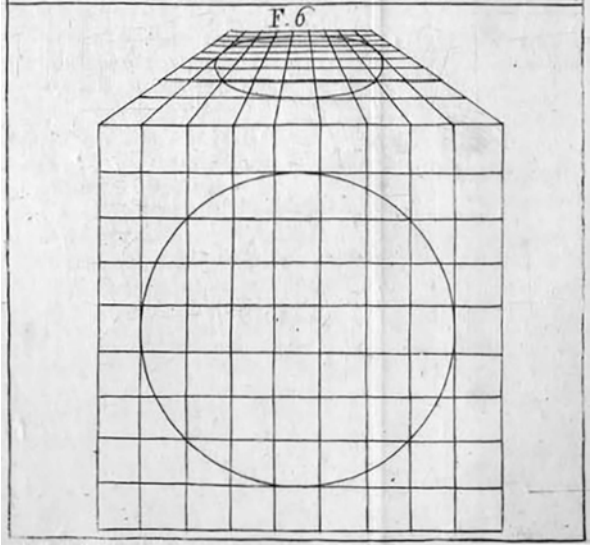
"It follows, therefore, that architects who have aimed at acquiring manual skill without scholarship have never been able to reach a position of authority to correspond to their pains, while those who relied only upon theories and scholarship were obviously hunting the shadow, not the substance. But those who have a thorough knowledge of both, like men armed at all points, have the sooner attained their object and carried authority with them."[4] Vitruvius named all the disciplines that the architect had to



A. punto della veduta alto tre braccia. B.C.D.E
F.G.H.I.K. linee parallele



AB Pilastri o muri alti dieci braccia



acquire and studies he must learn, which are numerous: drawing, geometry, history, philosophy, music, medicine, law, astronomy, and the theory of the heavens. Unfortunately, the text was difficult to comprehend fully as it was handwritten, not illustrated, and incorporated obscure technical terms in Latin and a mixture of Greek and Latin.

The introduction of the linear perspective by Filippo Brunelleschi in 1415, one year before discovering the Vitruvian scrolls, was another important moment. The theory was registered in (still hand-) writing by Leon Battista Alberti in 1435 in the book *Della Pittura* [fig. 3]. Alberti was a scientist, writer, artist, architect, and diplomat at Pope Eugenius' IV court. He is most famous for his registration of Brunelleschi's linear perspective and his own ten books on architecture in 1452, *De re aedificatoria*, handwritten in Latin. Alberti criticized Vitruvius, as he considered his books unclear, unreadable, and failing to explain.[5]

Alberti wrote his book in the rhetorical style, which resulted in not only describing the architecture but explaining (rather forcefully) how and why an architect should act:

"I should explain exactly whom I mean by an architect; for it is no carpenter that I would have you compare to the greatest exponents of their disciplines: the carpenter is but an instrument in the hands of the architect."[6]

"Him, I consider the architect, who by sure and wonderful reason and method, knows both how to devise through his own mind and energy, and to realise by construction, whatever can be most beautifully fitted out for the noble needs of man, by the movement of weight and the joining and massing of bodies."[7]

3
Leon Battista Alberti, Treatise on painting (Study of perspective). In: Alberti 1435, 182.

"To do this he must have an understanding and knowledge of all the highest and most noble disciplines. This is the architect."[8]

Alberti, in contrast to Vitruvius, was a statesman. He traveled a lot and was the only architect for three projects for the banker Giovanni Rucellai, a close relation of the Medici family. That is perhaps why he made a great effort to make a treatise telling others how to build, in which he warns architects of many possible political and contractual troubles. Nevertheless, Alberti's book reads like a novel and was, until the late 19th century, still the basis of all architectural education.

The last of the 15th century inventions mentioned above is probably the most important: the Gutenberg printing press in 1455. It was the press that made it possible to print and copy the Vitruvius scrolls all over Europe. This provoked a whole stream of dedicated enthusiasts that now had the means to interpret the remnants of ancient buildings, measuring them and then restoring their forms in drawings. With this information, they too could build in the ancient manner.

At the end of the 15th century, Europe had changed. Then the reformation occurred, and the Roman church suddenly lost its undisputable power. Instead of many, now only three dynasties ruled Europe while the Italian republics suffered major defeats, ultimately leading to the Italian city-states' downfall. The families had to deal with their loss of superiority over Europe.[9]

The 16th century requested another mindset. Many families embraced Italian Humanism (or Renaissance humanism), which accepted Roman antiquity as the superior period of Italy's history that they hoped to revive. The Academies in Florence and Rome were famous and promoted classical literature and wisdom. These academies were based on three pillars: study, arts, and virtue. In antiquity, virtue meant excellence and good action. Thus, virtue was preceded by study and knowledge of the arts.[10] Many clergymen were humanists, and many young nobles also enjoyed a humanist education.

Andrea di Pietro Della Gondola was born in Padua in a humble family on November 30th, 1508. There, until the age of 16, he was apprenticed to a sculptor before moving to nearby Vicenza and enrolling in the guild of the bricklayers and stonemasons. He was employed as a mason in workshops specializing in monuments and decorative sculpture. When the humanist, statesman, poet, and scholar Count Gian Giorgio Trissino decided to rebuild a villa in Cricoli, just outside of Vincenza, in the Classical style, it was a lucky course of events that Andrea was one of the workers between 1530 and 1538. The villa was Trissino's interpretation of the ancient Roman architect and theorist Vitruvius. It was planned to house an Academy for his pupils, who lived a semimonastic life studying mathematics, music, philosophy, and classical authors. Trissino noticed Andrea and the count undertook to expand his practical experience with a Humanist education.[11] When Andrea finished his education at the Academia, he was given the name Palladio, after a Humanist habit, as an allusion to the mythological figure Pallas Athena and a character in Trissino's poem *L'Italia liberata dai goti*.[12] The poem, first published in 1547, talks about an archangel called Palladio, an expert on architecture. It indicates both Andrea's respect for Trissino and the hopes the count had for his protégé.

Next pages

4
Cesare Cesariano, Diagram showing Vitruvian principles applied to the design of Milan Cathedral. In: Vitruvius Pollio 1521, Liber primus, XV, verso.

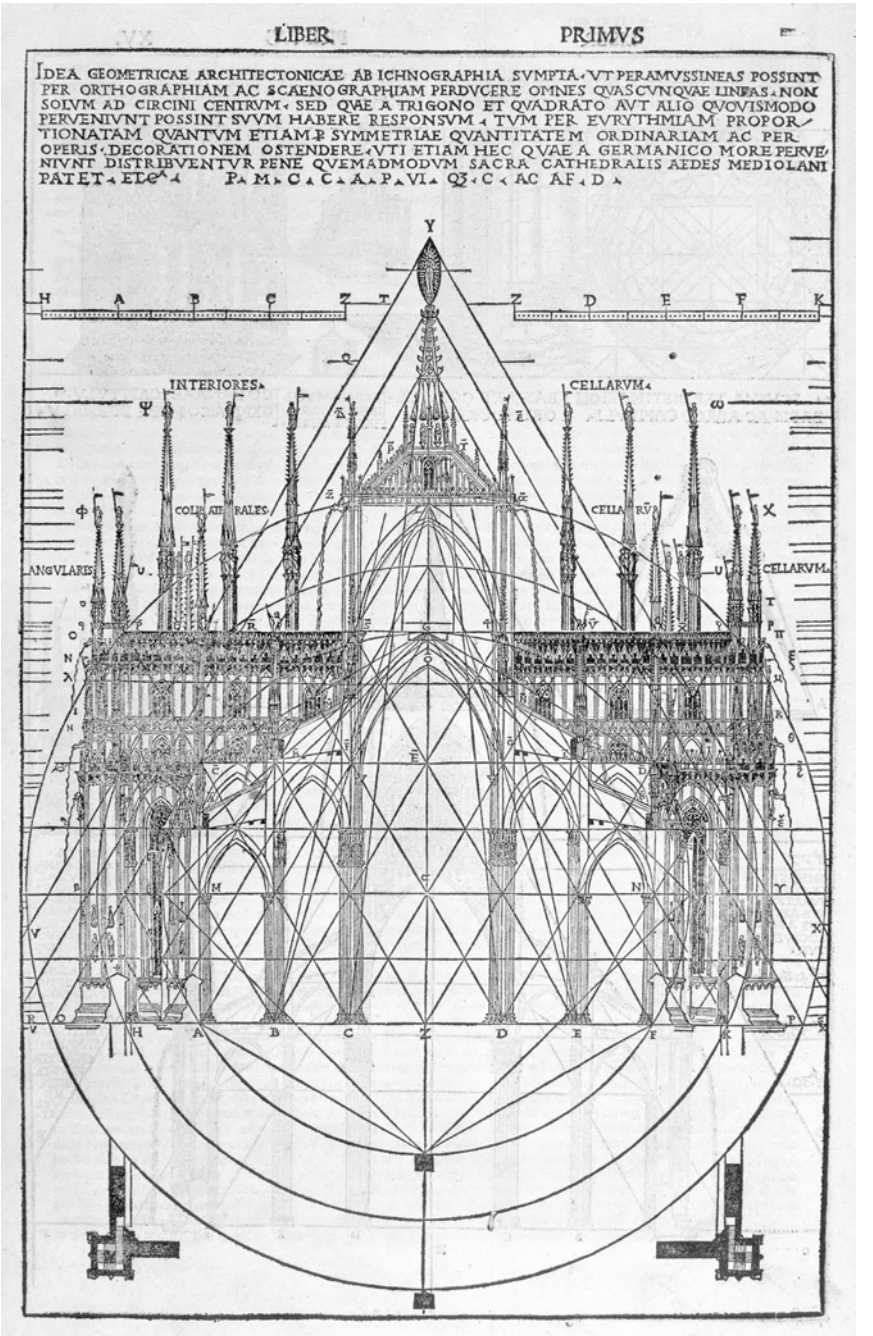
5
Cesare Cesariano, The Vitruvian Man. Ideal proportions revealed to be based on the human body. In: Vitruvius Pollio 1521, Liber tertius, L, como.

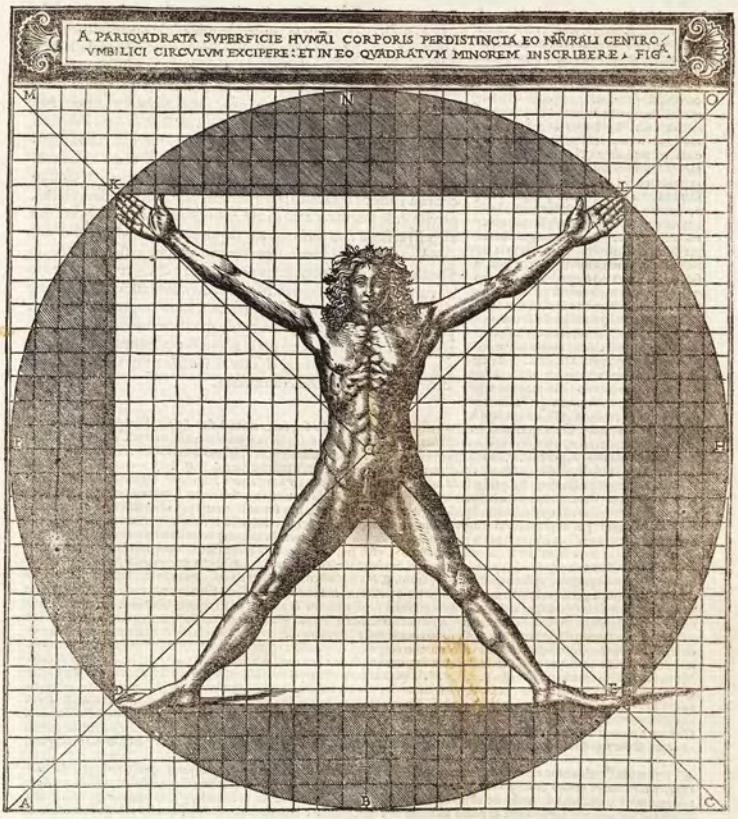
It was Palladio who later illustrated the publication, translation, and interpretation of Vitruvius's books by Daniele Barbaro[13], his mentor, after Trissino's death. Palladio's work was dedicated to the search to understand the proportions of beauty in architecture, taking lessons of Vitruvius as guidelines [fig. 4, 5]:

"There are three things in every building (as Vitruvius says) that have to be considered, without which none deserve credit; these are: usefulness or convenience, durability, and beauty."[14]

"For one could not describe as perfect a building which was useful, but only briefly, or one which was inconvenient for a long time, or being both durable and useful, that was not beautiful."[15]

IDEA GEOMETRICAE ARCHITECTONICAE AB ICHNOGRAPHIA SVMPTA, VT PERAMVSSINEAS POSSINT PER ORTHOGRAPHIAM AC SCAENOGRAPHIAM PERDVCERE OMNES QVASCVNQVAE LINEAS, NON SOLVM AD CIRCINI CENTRVM, SED QVAE A TRIGONO ET QVADRATO AVT ALIO QVOVISMODO PERVENIVNT POSSINT SVVM HABERE RESPONSVM, TVM PER EVRYTHMIAM PROPORTIONATAM QVANTVM ETIAM PER SYMMETRIAE QVANTITATEM ORDINARIAM AC PER OPERIS DECORATIONEM OSTENDERE, VTI ETIAM HEC QVAE A GERMANICO MORE PERVENIVNT DISTRIBVENTVR PENE QVEMADMODVM SACRA CATHEDRALIS AEDES MEDIOLANI PATET, ETC. P. M. C. C. A. P. VI. QZ. C. AC AF. D.





¶ Aduncha si la natura ha cosi cõposito il corpo del homo: Q uestelectione si sorse altramente le uolesse qualcuno fusseno distinctep ordine: como alcuni phifici hano scripto: Ma per le supradicte: si etiam per le psente ratione che Vitruuio qua insequemi pareno assai explicare: Ma considerando che potressemo fare grandissima scriptura in explicare la insequentia de quisti numeri: le quale cose a me pareno facile: & cosi penso debeno essere a tuti li periti de Arithmetica: cum sia apertamente si tracta per la compositione de li numeri simplici: potere peruenire a formare uno composito de qualũq; quantita uoglia si sia: Poi de epso ut alias supra diximus: per potere epsa quantita diuidere proportionatamente in diuerse portione in le quale si dice consistere la symmetria: Et di questo Vitruuio da lo exemplo præcipue in li nostri humani corpi trouasse: uel per epso potere perducere tute le ratione de li numeri & proportione de le symmetrie tanto per potere componere quanto etiam discomponere una integra quantita numerabile: si como in uno corpo de uno animale: uel de uno homo cõmensurare ogni membri principali: & intendere le in apparente cose & intermodatione & altre parte como molti phifici hano descripto: ut puta da uno brazo uno cubito: & dal cubito: la mane: & da epsa li di?

Aduncha si la natura ha cosi composito il corpo del homo si como cõ le proportione li membri de epso respondeno a la sũma figuratione. Cum sia li antiqui si uedeno hauer constituito quella: acio che ancora in le perfectione de ciascuni membri de le opere le figure habiano a la uniuersa specie la exactione de la cõmensuratione. Aduncha cũ

"Beauty will derive from a graceful shape and the relationship of the whole of the parts, and of the parts among themselves and to the whole, because buildings must appear to be like complete and well-defined bodies, of which one member matches another and all the members are necessary for what is required."[16]

Durability implies longevity, as opposed to the nowadays fashionable sustainability or circularity, which both accept the short lifecycle of buildings. Palladio's buildings were meant to stand as the ancient architecture did. The choice of location, position, carefully selected materials, and the simple stacking of weight on weight made the buildings truly durable.

Usefulness or convenience is understood as the architecture's ability to properly host the client's needs. These needs do not dictate the form and dimensions of the architecture. Therefore, the architecture is not a result of functionality but exists despite it.

The metric system, the mathematical shapes, the dimensions, the playful use of views and light, the steps from graceful entering to privacy, the decorations, colors, and art, applied with craftsmanship, give the architecture an independent quality.

Like Alberti before him, Palladio also wrote a treaty, although he was neither a statesman nor from a noble or wealthy family. He was a hardworking fortunate child of his time. He understood the needs of his clients and had both the knowledge and the craftsmanship that Alberti did not. Palladio's style is very different from Alberti's. He did not write about education in terms of what others should do or be. His ambition to note down his instructions had very different motives. He wrote factual and straightforward instructions without bias and motivated his intentions as follows:

"I considered it worthy of man, who is not born for himself alone but also to be of use 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 most worthy of consideration, and also the rules that I have followed and still follow when building; so that those who read my books may benefit from what is useful in them and supply for themselves those things […] which I will have overlooked."[17]

During his life, the four books were never published altogether, but one by one. It is not even sure whether Palladio intended to write only four books. He could also have intended to write ten resembling Vitruvius.

It is conceivable though he considered the four books sufficient. This would be consistent with the promise he makes in the introduction of the first chapter:

"In all these books I shall avoid being long-winded and will simply provide the advice that seems essential to me, and will make use of those terms widely used nowadays by craftsmen."[18]

Palladio's drawings prove that he understood what is essential to understand a building. The drawings were compact, not too many, and described exactly what was needed and nothing more. In the 16th century, it made sense to limit the number of drawings to a minimum, considering the time, skill, and concentration needed to make one. The drawings did not only have to be drawn but made in a woodcut (in mirrored plan) to get printed. Consequently, one had to think ahead and know what should be on them before starting. The importance of preparing well is stressed in the first chapter of his *First Book*:

"One must consider carefully every aspect of the plan and elevations of a building before starting to build."[19]

Palladio thought it wise only to use what was needed but not less. He wanted to spend his clients' money wisely and was careful not to waste time or materials while building. Although he did not expressly distance himself from Alberti and spoke of him with high regard[20], he preferred Vitruvius as his master. As he points out to the reader in the foreword of the *First Book*:

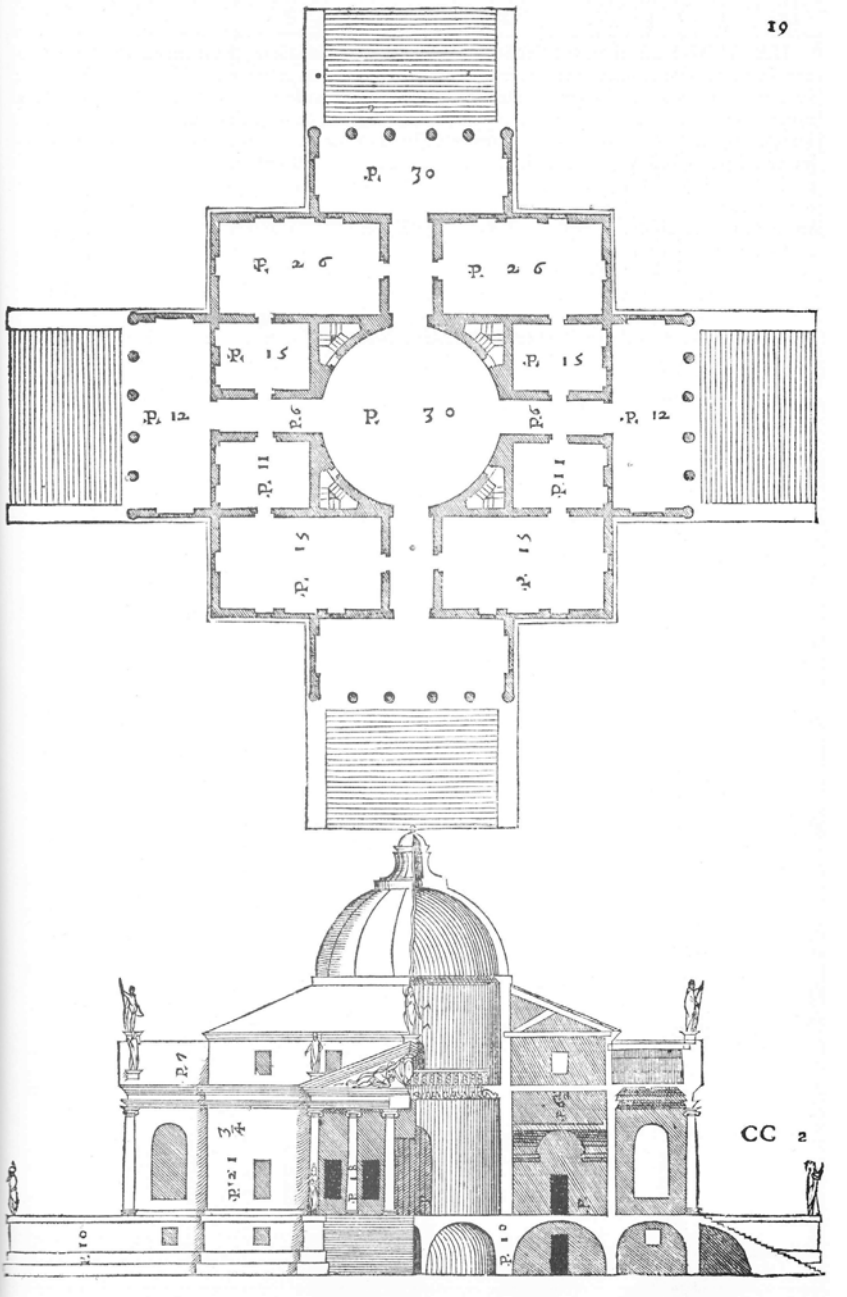
"I elected my master and guide Vitruvius."[21]

His dedication to architecture was humble. Acknowledging the unity of God and nature as the lead, everything in his books was about understanding, not telling. He considered himself one of many to seek perfection and understanding.

"For my part, I can promise no more than long labour, great diligence, and the devotion which I put into understanding and practicing what I offer; if it pleases God that I have not worked in vain, I shall give thanks to his goodness, with all my heart, while still remaining greatly indebted to those who, through their own ingenious inventions and the experience they gained, have bequeathed us the rules of this art, for they opened up an easier and more direct route to the study of new things, and thanks to them we know of many things that would perhaps have remained hidden."[22]

Andrea Palladio is regarded as the greatest architect of the 16th century in northern Italy. When he died in 1580, Palladio left a series of unfinished projects. Among them is the Villa Rotonda, often considered one of his most famous projects. The Villa was finished by Vincenzo Scamozzi (1548–1616) when many of Palladio's clients turned to Scamozzi to finish the Palladio projects. The simple, clear structures and plans made it possible to complete the buildings as faithfully as possible to Palladio's original intentions [fig. 6].

6
La Rotonda (Villa Almerico Capra), Vicenza: plan, half elevation and half section. In: Palladio 1570, II 19 (Cap. III).



Part II

A. Image and building

For many decades classicism has been the leading architecture depending on the textbooks of Alberti and Palladio until the industrial revolution led to a radical break, and the modern movement was born in the late 19th century. The construction methods changed so dramatically, that the simple stacking weight upon weight was no longer applicable. If quotes from classicism were used, this could only be done as decorating elements, which led to the mockery of modernists. Production methods led to the form that followed function, and perfecting functionality reached ultimate efficiency, i.e. efficiency in controlling the production process.

When we try to embrace the beauty in forms, light, dimensions, and the choice of colors, art, and materials, we must deal with construction and buildings physics, sustainability included, that have very different laws. Building and expression, which was so understandable and clearly related to Palladio's architecture, have now become totally disconnected.

In this light, it is not surprising that form seeks its independence and becomes an image [fig. 7]. With the introduction of the media, first noticed by Marshall McLuhan in 1967 in his book *The Global Village*[23], the image has become the representation of who we are and who we want to be. It has become our brand, our icon.

A brand needs designing only, while construction, physics, and sustainability are part of the efficiency system that holds the brand.

7
La Rotonda. Digital collage by Magdalena Wierzbicka (2022).

B. Beauty

The concept of beauty was abandoned as beauty was no longer seen as the complex composition, the fragile balance, the incredible interchained system of nature that we try to understand, but as an icon that, in the end, could be any shape depending on the opinion of its creator. If beauty becomes an opinion, it loses its status and disappears in the architectural debate, and we can design anything we like. Ultimately, we became the masters of creation. Instead of trying to understand God and nature, we became the human God, the *Homo Deus*, that destroyed nature, as clearly explained in the books by the Israelian professor in history and futurism, Yuval Noah Harari.[24]

Nowadays, in the age of *Homo Deus*, we are used to the fact that architecture has become the expression of the client, the icon that represents the "brand", and by that, architecture is in great danger of losing its intrinsic quality: the quality of being architecture in itself—architecture that is strong in expression, form, and proportions as one coherent whole. Architecture that stands independently from fashion and time, the architecture we love and immediately recognize as quality, even when we are not trained architects.

Do we really accept such architecture as heritage only and beyond our contemporary reach? And if architecture loses its value as a complete and coherent whole, what will be the future role of architects? Do we accept a serious devaluation of the profession in becoming a designer of built images?

C. What is an architect?

Everyone knows what an architect is, and nobody knows. Even within the profession, we no longer have a united answer. If the question comes to the table, we try to ignore its urgency by ending the debate with weird answers like: "An architect can be everything but not a *homo universalis*". And yet, in the age in which we have to fear a serious devaluation from architecture

into the design and into mere opinion, there has never been a more relevant question.

Vitruvius, Alberti, and Palladio were clear in their answers about what an architect was. Palladio, with Vitruvius, believed an architect had to be both a scholar and a craftsman. Alberti considered the knowledge of the crafts more essential than the psychical mastering of the crafts. The architect should draw the plans that the craftsmen must execute. With this, Alberti proclaimed the separation of design and execution that is still subject to debate among architects.[25]

Conclusion

Palladio was a true child of Renaissance humanism. His oeuvre is made in pursuit of finding the laws of beauty in architecture. He considered himself one of many trying to capture this elusive answer. This was a dominant view in physics until the late 20th century with the concept of the theory of everything by Stephen Hawking, but it was abandoned in architecture long before. Palladio's search was to understand the creations of God and thus nature, not to become God as we do now.

By accepting the absence of beauty and the disconnection between building and designing in contemporary architecture, we risk losing the intrinsic quality of architecture.

This essay advocates that we try to understand and learn from the sincerity in the architecture and the books of Palladio; at least, we can make a brave attempt.

Endnotes

If not indicated otherwise, all translations are by the author of this paper.

1 Tavernor 1997, 7; Bracciolini 1974, 188.
2 Vitruvius 1914, 5.
3 Vitruvius 1914, 5.
4 Vitruvius 1914, 5.
5 Ottenheym 2022, 520.
6 Alberti 1988, 3.
7 Alberti 1988, 3.
8 Alberti 1988, 3.
9 Grataloup 2020, 238, 239, 240, 241.
10 Tavernor 1997, 10.
11 Richardson, 2022.
12 Trissino 1779.
13 Vitruvius Pollio 1567.
14 Palladio 1997, 6.
15 Palladio 1997, 6.
16 Palladio 1997, 7.
17 Palladio 1997, 5.
18 Palladio 1997, 6.
19 Palladio 1997, 6.
20 Palladio 1997, 5, 7, 12.
21 Palladio 1997, 5.
22 Palladio 1997, 6.
23 McLuhan/Powers 1989.
24 Harari 2015.
25 Alberti 1988, 315, 317.