

THE VILLAS OF PLINY

Reflections on the Exhibition by Its Guest Curator

by Pierre de la Ruffinière du Prey

Les lecteurs du numéro précédant de *THE FIFTH COLUMN* ont eu un aperçu de l'exposition *Les Villas de Plinie*. Ce texte ne reprend donc pas l'analyse de certains de ces points mais se concentre plutôt sur trois aspects qui se sont révélés importants au fil des siècles: l'émulation comme modèle d'étude; l'essence du classicisme en architecture ainsi que le lien entre les oeuvres littéraires, comme celle de Plinie, et leur influence sur l'architecture.

Depuis leur rédaction vers l'an 100 après J.-C., les descriptions architecturales de Plinie furent maintes fois imitées ayant apporté à l'écriture architecturale une dimension littéraire contrairement à l'approche plus technique de son illustre prédécesseur, Vitruve. Ces textes nous sont parvenus grâce aux transcriptions des moines de la période médiévale, reproduisant inlassablement les écrits de Vitruve et de Plinie, non pour le caractère théorique mais plutôt pour le vocabulaire spécialisé qu'ils employaient.

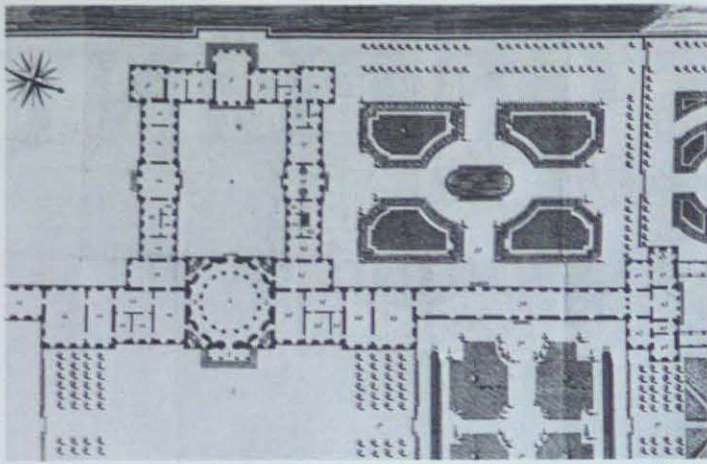
Les idées de cet homme d'état Romain se sont donc dispersées graduellement à travers le développement de villes comme Montréal. Artisans et planificateurs de certaines régions montréalaises du début du siècle (Verdun, Maisonneuve) ont indirectement subi ces influences. Cette correspondance idéologique est l'aboutissement naturel d'un processus d'émulation et d'un commun attachement aux modèles classiques, transmis d'une génération de bâtisseurs à une autre.

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Readers of the preceding issue of *THE FIFTH COLUMN* will have seen reviewed the exhibition *The Villas of Pliny and Classical Architecture in Montreal* (Musée des Beaux Arts de Montréal, October 14 - December 11, 1983). It is not my intention to repeat any of the points already made in that detailed analysis. Rather I would like briefly to dwell on the three aspects of the show that emerged more and more strongly as time went along, almost to the point of taking on an independent direction of their own. The three aspects are: emulation as a model for study; the essential nature of architectural classicism; and the relationship between literary works, such as Pliny's Latin letters, and their influence on architecture. Dealing with these points in reverse order, let me begin with Pliny the Younger as an example of writing about architecture.

Ever since he put pen to parchment around the year 100 A.D., Pliny's evocative architectural descriptions have had imitators. This is not surprising. As far as is known, Pliny virtually invented the idea of writing about architecture from a literary standpoint, as opposed to the more technical one of his great predecessor, Vitruvius. Medieval monks working in their *scriptoria* are to be thanked for the fact that Pliny and Vitruvius's texts survived. Again it is a question of writing; the physical act of writing in this case. The monks laboriously copied out Vitruvius and Pliny by hand, not because they were interested in their architectural content but on account of a specialized architectural vocabulary they used.

Only with the early Renaissance did the imagery the words conjured up begin to be reassessed. The Italian humanist Michele Vieri leads us to believe that Pliny's letters were his bedside reading. The Florentine poet Poliziano not only imitated Pliny's epistolary style but also contributed to the intellectual climate that had made possible the first reconstruction of a villa in the antique manner, built for Giovanni de' Medici at Fiesole around 1458. Another Medici patron, Cardinal Giulio (later Pope Clement VII) asked Raphael to design for him the *Villa Madama* on the outskirts of Rome as a free interpretation of Pliny's house in the countryside near Ostia. And Raphael in turn wrote his client a letter describing the villa-to-be in Plinian terms. Meanwhile the first printed edition of Pliny's letters had appeared in Venice in 1471. Vincenzo Scamozzi was the first to publish an architectural rendition in 1615. By the very end of that century the antiquarian Jean-François Félibien des Avaux had contested Scamozzi's reconstruction and come up with one of his own. In 1728 the

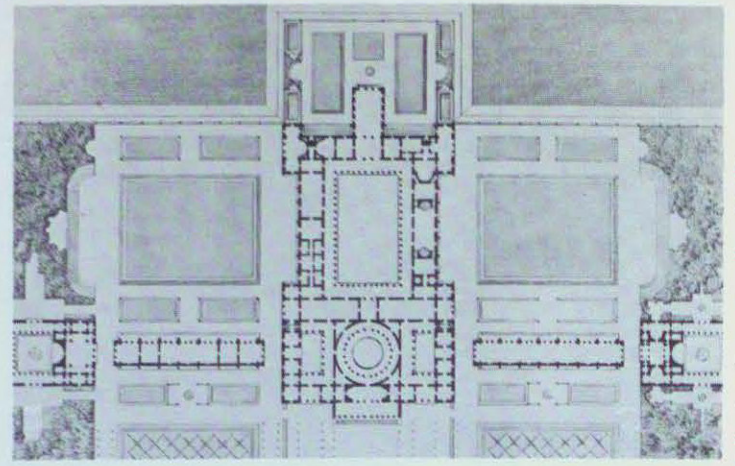
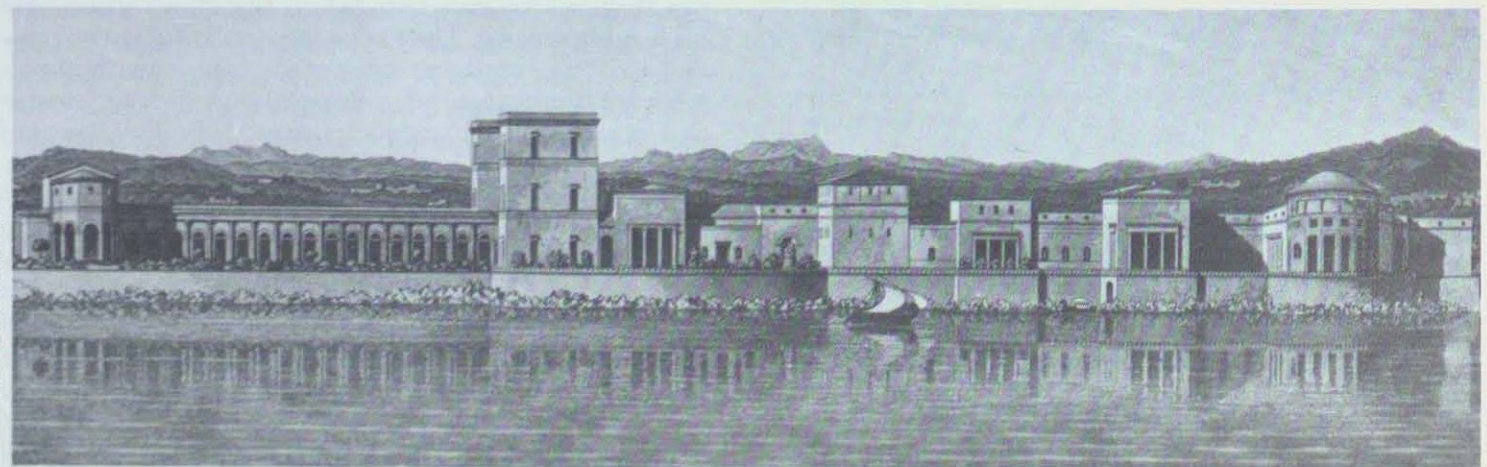


Jean-François Félibien des Avaux, *Laurentine Villa Restitution*, plan, 1699. Engraving from Félibien's *Plans et Descriptions*.

English scholar Robert Castell had read not only Pliny but every other Roman author on villas and had attempted a synthesis based on all their texts. A hundred years later, the archeologists Luigi Canina had created his kind of synthesis, this time between the literary and the recently discovered archeological evidence. Louis-Pierre Haudebourt followed Canina's lead by referring to Mazois' book on the ruins of Pompei, but he did so in the form of a surreal dream sequence written in a romantic prose reminiscent of Chateaubriand. Finally, in 1852, Jules-Frédéric Bouchet assembled the whole array of previous writings and reconstructions, including Haudebourt's of 1838, and arranged them according to the comparative method. It is this same methodology that has been pursued right down to the present in Pierre Pinon's contribution to the catalogue *La Laurentine et l'invention de la villa romaine* (Paris, 1982).

As time progressed the approaches to the Pliny texts obviously became more analytic and critical. The amazing thing that remains unchanged is the unbroken chain of writings, each one relying on the other. Thus Pliny's letters represent a literary tradition with its own rich historiography. More ink has been spilled on their account than over just about any other single group of buildings unsupported by archeological finds. What could be a better proof of the power of mere words! A sizeable literature has been founded on the hypoth-

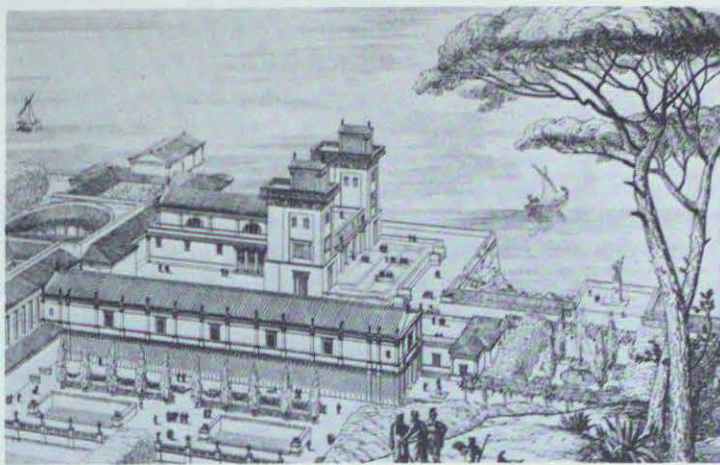
Karl Friedrich Schinkel, *Laurentine Villa Restitution*, elevation, 1841. Lithograph from Schinkel's *Architektonisches Album*.



Amable Macquet, *Laurentine Villa Restitution*, plan, 1818. Engraving from J.-F. Boucher, *Le Laurentin*.

esis that Pliny's villas were actually built. For a long time this supposition was taken on faith. It now seems more likely, however, that Pliny's descriptions were based on his imagination.

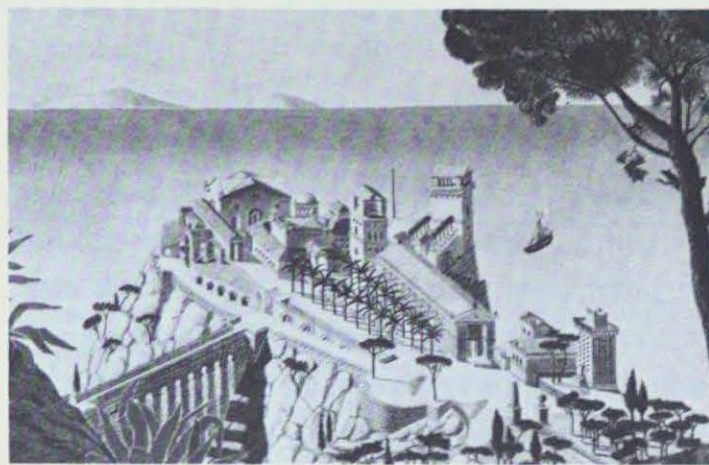
Regardless of whether the villas of Pliny really existed, they have created an architectural legacy at least as important if not more so than the literary one just discussed. Starting with the glosses Medieval monks wrote on their Pliny manuscripts the fine points of Pliny's exact meaning have continued to be debated. The greatest controversy has centered on whether the Laurentine Villa had a circular courtyard, as was believed in the Renaissance, or a *D-shaped* one, as more modern philologists have contended. Architects have fortunately tended away from these details of interpretation and have exploited the vagueness of language to their own artistic ends. But with few exceptions they have also tended to respect the antique style of architecture the villas would have been constructed in, supposing them to have ever been built. Such a bias was perfectly normal for the Renaissance but it became less so with the passage of time, especially with the advent of the Gothic revival in the nineteenth century. Nevertheless, in 1818 a *concours d'émulation* held at the Ecole des Beaux Arts used Pliny's letter to Gallus for its program without even bothering to specify columns or trabeation, so obvious was the choice of style. All three front-running contest-



Jules-Frédéric Bouchet, *Laurentine Villa Restitution*, perspective, 1852.
Engraving from J.-F. Bouchet, *Le Laurentin*.

ants came up with remarkably similar plans featuring a round column-lined court backing onto a rectangular peristyle garden and a large wing extending out onto the seashore. The similarity suggests the students had some illicit foreknowledge of one another's schemes. More remarkable still is the resemblance that these plans have to that of Félibien. Amable Macquet's plan is the closest, most derivative, of the three. Inevitably one questions a teaching system that fostered Macquet's reliance on past precedent. Yet the 1818 competition was clearly the model on which the 1982 *concours* was based, and out of which grew the original Paris exhibition. It would, nevertheless, be incorrect to see that show, let alone the Montreal one, solely as a plea for Beaux-Arts methods. In fact the 1982 program was constructed in such a way as to avoid a question of style. The reasons were far different from what they had been in 1818. In 1982 an attempt was made to stress the transcendent relevance of classicism to all times and places without direct reference to the antique orders of architecture *per se*.

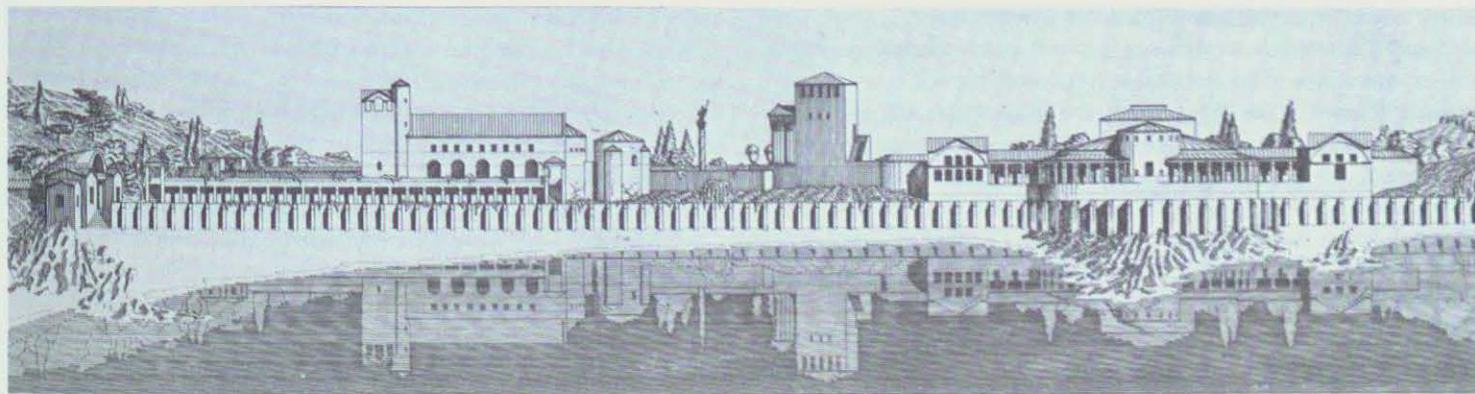
Léon Krier, one of the foremost participants in the Paris *concours*, made clear his personal interpretation of classicism during a lecture in Montreal this past October which was followed by a group discussion held at McGill University. For Krier, classicism has to do with a state of mind above all else. It involves a recognition of history without enslavement to it.



Rita Wolff after Léon Krier, *Laurentine Villa Restitution*, perspective, 1982.

Insofar as the villas of Pliny represent time-honoured tradition they may, in his view, justifiably be explored again in a spirit of fresh enquiry. Like his predecessors, Krier knows his Pliny well, almost word for word in some instances. That knowledge, coupled with an awareness of such previous reconstructions as those of Félibien or Bouchet, has prompted Krier's wish not to replicate Pliny if it does not suit him. To Krier's way of thinking the actual surroundings at Ostia are uninspiring - flat, marred by gas stations and cheap seaside pizzerias. These banal realities have little to do with the *ideal* Pliny villa as Krier sees it. That villa exists somewhere off in metaphysical mid air. It is like a rhetorical figure of speech from one of Plato's dialogues, akin to the Good, the True and the Beautiful. Therefore Krier does not feel constrained to respect the letter of Pliny's description by situating the villa anywhere in particular. His rocky promontory combines recollections of the Adriatic shoreline near Sperlonga with the bluff on which his native city of Luxembourg is located. Krier's villa is more than a rich man's retreat. It is a humanely proportioned city in miniature, an ideal state or republic in which master and servant live in supposed harmonious balance with one another. Balance, harmony, proportion, variety without confusion, these aesthetic concepts are key to Krier's classic design. In this sense he was right to intimate that style as such was irrelevant. He chose to prefer mixing

David Bigelman, *Laurentine Villa Restitution*, elevation, 1982.



"Sometimes the stacking up of influences could be clearly seen, as if the architects themselves were standing on one another's shoulders to form an imaginary human pyramid... the cumulative effect of all the disparate images collected together in one gallery space was to stress the way in which architects have learned from each other."

antique and Palladian elements. But he implied his villa might have been expressed in a gothic manner. Or it could have been neo-Carolingian with a touch of Schinkel as in the case of David Bigelman; or sheathed in light reflecting glass as in the skyscraper rendition by Justo Solsona. The essence of classicism, then, is to achieve what the ancient Greek philosophers advocated as the ideal mean between extremes. Pliny's villa descriptions take on just this classic philosophical mantle. They reconcile in delicate counterpoise architecture with nature. The buildings sound as if they were neither too big nor too small. Rooms were set aside for winter or summer. The halls could ring with noisy reveling at the same time as it was possible for the owner to experience the tranquility he sought. The extent to which this basic classicism of Pliny is understood and respected marks the measure of success of any restitution attempted. It suffices to capture the essential classicism of Pliny's villas while perhaps avoiding repetition of the formal classicism of the past.

Examples from the past are, of course, unavoidable and at the same time instructive. Emulation of the past as a positive thing was amply demonstrated in the Villas of Pliny exhibition. The space between displays was left as fluid as possible in order to enhance movement between the various objects. The Melvin Charney construction, *Pliny on My Mind*, took into account and defined certain lines of sight without obstructing them. Didactic panels and labels describing books, photographs or drawings in the show made cross references to other works exhibited in different parts of the installation. Throughout the show the visitor was invited to become actively involved in tracing instances of emulation at work. Small clusters of objects formed pools or eddies off the mainstream in which it was possible to become engrossed. Sometimes the stacking up of influences could be clearly seen, as if the architects themselves were standing on one another's shoulders to form an imaginary human pyramid. At other moments, as in the case of a photographic sequence of temple fronts illustrating Montreal classicism, the relationship to Pliny's villas appeared to be more tenuous. Even so, the cumulative effect of all the disparate images collected together in one gallery space was to stress the way in which architects have learned from each other.

Emulation is the will to aspire to and excel the example of others. As such it has always been fundamental to the creative artistic process. The academic system of education recognized emulation and tried to fashion it into a hard and fast program of study, sometimes with counter-productive

results. But the excessive zeal with which the *Ecole des Beaux-Arts* pursued its goal does not obscure the underlying humanistic role history plays in the arts. It is a force that can liberate rather than stultify true innovation. It interconnects disparate, seemingly unrelated persons and events by defying geographical distance and the passage of time. A case in point relates to the Villa Madama. Raphael designed it in 1516 as an imaginative conflation of Pliny's tuscan hilltop villa and his seaside one with the circular courtyard. Less than a generation later, Palladio was inspired to draw the Villa Madama's plan. John Soane and Thomas Hardwick, two English students in Rome, did so again in 1778. Their French counterparts Percier and Fontaine followed suit during the next decade. In 1915, a young Canadian in Rome, Ernest Cormier, made a similar measured survey, probably unaware of how many others had preceded him to the site. After returning home, Cormier designed the Université de Montréal and his own house on the Avenue des Pins partly in subconscious reference to his Italian experiences. To understand Cormier fully is to grasp that his sources stretch back to Percier and Fontaine, Palladio and even Pliny, not to mention an indigenous tradition of building villas on Mount Royal that shares in a generic way many of the same aspirations as those expressed by Pliny centuries earlier.

Through a process of gradual, capillary action as just described, the ideas of a Roman statesman with a fertile literary bent have infused by direct and indirect means an entire city like Montreal. Artisan builders and city planners in such parts of the metropolis as turn-of-the-century Verdun or Maisonneuve are heirs to Pliny without perhaps ever having heard his name. The ties come about as a natural outcome of emulation and common adherence to classical design principles. The influence is transmitted by something like a laying on of hands; metaphorically speaking architect touches architect, builder touches builder. Much the same sense of continuity was generated by the Villas of Pliny exhibition itself, with so many examples gathered from the past and the present, all relating to the same theme. It took on the aspect of a giant *concours d'émulation* in which all the contestants had tried the same experiment of finding a classic new Plinian solution, only to learn that their solutions had in turn been superseded. Within a year, Krier's Laurentine seacoast promontory had become the *parti* for Erich Marosi's restitution which was subsequently added to the original participants' work brought from Paris. The process of emulating Pliny has gathered a momentum, or will-to-form, all its own. The works of art, exhibited side by side, seemed to enter into a dialogue across the ages. In a strange way it was as if the walls spoke.

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