

# LOW COST CLASSICISM

BY WITOLD RYBCZYNSKI

*Selon James Ackerman il est l'architecte le plus imité de l'histoire. De qui s'agit-il? Nul autre que Andrea de Pietro della Gondola, dit Palladio. Sa popularité à travers les siècles est due en grande partie à la publication de *I Quattro Libri dell'Architettura*, suite à l'invention de la presse. Aussi doit-il sa popularité pendant son époque à ses bonnes pratiques et manières architecturales. Il savait construire pour se satisfaire sans toutefois vider la bourse de ses clients.*

He has been described by James Ackerman as the most imitated architect in history. Alberti? Wren? Many would argue that the (dubious) honour should be laid at the feet of Mies van der Rohe, copies of whose buildings proliferate the world, from Chicago's Loop to Lagos. But if Mies was the most imitated architect, it was an imitation that has, at least for the moment, not proved to be particularly long-lived. The old man was barely in the grave and Skidmore, Owings and Merrill, surely his most ardent imitators, were already dropping the characteristic steel and glass box in favour of more stylish designs. Nor will there be any public appeal for a revival of the Mies' style, judging from the Mansion House Square Imbroglio in London. This is not to say that the I-beam may not yet stage a comeback — given the vagaries of architectural fashion, and the shallow conceits of today's young fogies, it is by no means impossible — but not even the most ardent Mies disciple would dare to hope that the van der Rohe style could survive four hundred years after its creator's death, that is, until the year 2369.

Nevertheless, four hundred years after his death, "the most imitated architect in history" is still going strong, more admired than ever. Andrea di Pietro della Gondola, also called Palladio, a sixteenth century Veneto architect, has not just survived, his is the unique case of an individual architect giving his name to a comprehensive, and long-lived style — Palladianism. This recognition was the result of a modern phenomenon: the printing machine — Palladio was the first architect whose international reputation was based not on people visiting his buildings, most of which were in remote locations, but on reading about them. His fame, in other words, was the result of a book. Resurrected by Inigo Jones, Palladio's *I Quattro Libri dell'Architettura* was published in England at the beginning of the eighteenth century, and formed the basis for the durable Georgian neo-Classical style. *I Quattro Libri* is also recognizably modern because, except for an introduction to basic principles and a historical section, it is largely a self-promotional catalogue of the author's work.

Except at the end of its creator's lifetime, Palladianism has never been altogether out of fashion. It influenced Kent at Chiswick, Jefferson in Virginia, and Ledoux in Paris. From Leningrad to Montreal, any building with a pedimented,

columnar central porch owes something to Palladio. A recent book on contemporary English "country houses" lists more than two hundred stately homes that have been built in the last thirty years. What is surprising, apart from the large number, is not that few are in the Modern style (as one wag once suggested, large Modern houses inevitably look like small office buildings or community clinics) but that the majority are neo-Georgian, hence, to some extent Palladian. So, if there has recently been a renewed popular interest in his work, it would be incorrect to speak of a Palladian revival, but of a continued fascination.

Last year, a well-known Italian magazine published a *Domus* that consists of a punch-out cardboard model, at 1:100 scale, of a Palladian villa. A Milanese publishing house has recently produced a facsimile edition of *I Quattro Libri*. Edizioni Cartoleria Zamperetti has published a handsome poster that illustrates over thirty of the great architect's buildings. Nor is the interest in the architect confined to the profession. The Baker Furniture Company of Grand Rapids, Michigan last year introduced a Palladian Collection. This is a quirky idea since, as far as is known, Palladio designed no furniture, still, if a highrise office building can emulate a Chippendale tallboy why not a drop-leaf commode that resembles a building?

What is fame, after all? Many a public career has been promoted, or at least given a nudge, by a widely acclaimed poster — Farrah Fawcett, for instance. The wearable poster, the illustrated T-shirt, is found around the world; African dictators and British rock stars — Mobutu and Jagger — both maintain their public presence with T-shirt icons. I have not seen James Stirling's face adorning any architectural torsos, but there are "Classical" and "Post-Modern" T-shirts being marketed by a London architectural bookshop (no "Modern," thank you very much). Big Jim was recently featured in *House and Garden*, but in terms of mass appeal, architects are still small beer. At most, a famous architect may have a street named after him. There is a *Boulevard Le Corbusier* in Montreal — a drab street of warehouses and industrial sheds in the suburbs — although Le Corbusier never built anything in Montreal, never honoured it with one of his napkin master plans, never even visited the place. There is not, as far as I know, a *Rue Nobbs* in Montreal, a Lutyens Mews in London, or a Richardson Drive in Boston. But, in Vicenza, Palladio's adopted home, not only is the main street named Corso Andrea Palladio, there is also a Palladio Real Estate Company, a Palladio Trucking firm and a Palladio Hair Salon. In a small square — named the Piazzetta Palladio, of course — stands a statue of the architect himself. A sturdy, no-nonsense type (just the man to entrust with your florins), he is shown in robust middle-age ... but this is speculation, no one really knows what he looked like.



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There are more than two dozen buildings by Mies van der Rohe in Chicago, but in that huge metropolis even such a large body of work scarcely makes an impact. In Vicenza, a small provincial capital with a population of slightly more than one hundred thousand, the visitor encounters a Palladian building around every corner, at least in the old city centre. At one end of the Corso Palladio are two bays of the unfinished Palazzo Porto — Breganze, at the other end, scarcely half a mile away, the large Palazzo Chiericati (now the Museo Civico), dominates a tree-filled square. Across the street a large gate leads to the Teatro Olimpico, which is still occasionally used for performances. Elsewhere in the city there are five more palazzos and a chapel, not to mention the Casa del Palladio, whose doubtful authenticity, like that of Juliet's house in nearby Verona, is more disturbing to the historian than to the tourist. The main square, the Piazza del Signori, is dominated by the great copper-roofed Basilica (a public meeting-hall, not a religious building, recalling the proper, pre-Christian meaning of the word), and facing it the Loggia del Capitaniato, a civic pavilion — both are by Palladio. Thirteen buildings in all, the first built when he was thirty-two, the last — the Teatro — completed forty years later, just before his death.

The most famous of Palladio's buildings is not in Vicenza but on its outskirts, situated on a hill overlooking the city. It is best approached not by the modern highway that leads beside it to the busy *autostrada*, but by foot along a narrow, steeply climbing lane. The rocky track, hemmed in by tall stone walls, is much as it was four hundred years ago; we can imagine Palladio and his patron visiting the building site on donkeys. The arrival at the building is at once self-effacing and dramatic. Without warning a pair of large iron gates opens onto a long ascending ramp cut into the hill — what appeared to be a garden wall is really a retaining wall — and squarely (how squarely) at the top of the ram is the porticoed villa. When Goethe climbed the ramp, in 1786, he was moved to write, “Never, perhaps, has art accomplished such a pitch of magnificence.”

The Villa Rotonda that Goethe described is a reminder that Palladio was above all a domestic architect, the first architect whose reputation was founded not on religious buildings but on homes. Of course, he did build churches, one of them — Il Redentore — a masterpiece, and every visitor to Venice has admired the magnificent white facade of San Giorgio Maggiore, shimmering across the water of the Canale di San Marco. But he was fifty-seven when he designed the monastic complex of San Giorgio, and another decade passed before he was commissioned to build the Redentore. Meanwhile, he had built dozens of palaces and villas in and around Vicenza, in that part of Italy which is today known as the Veneto, and which was then a part of the Venetian Republic.

The sixteenth century is usually called the golden age of the Venetian Republic. It *was* a golden age of art, but politically and economically the Republic was no longer the power it had been in the fourteenth century. A series of exhausting wars with the Turks, a decline in commercial prosperity thanks to the discovery of the Cape route to the Indies and the resultant reduction in Mediterranean trade, and the ganging-up of her European enemies, who formed the Any-one-But-Venice League of Cambria in 1508 (the year of Palladio's birth), signalled the beginning of her economic decline. This economic decline was slow, and obviously did not affect the visual arts — Veronese, Tintoretto and Titian were all contemporaries of Palladio — but it did affect architecture, not so much in its design, which was as splendid as ever, but in its execution.

The Venetians, while severe in their political life, had been unrestrained in their enjoyment of beautiful buildings, a penchant which their material prosperity allowed them to indulge in. The Basilica of San Marco was assembled from assorted plunder taken during holy wars waged against the infidel. Its exterior resembles, in Mary McCarthy's words, an Oriental pavilion — half pleasure-house, half war-tent. Although San Marco was built out of brick (lightweight brick is the predominant Venetian building material, as it is of that other city built over the water on piles — Amsterdam) it was covered in an astonishing patchwork veneer of marble, alabaster, porphyry and mosaic encrustations. The famous checkerboard facade of the adjacent *Palazzo Ducale* — the Doge's Palace — was clothed in white Istrian stone and pink Verona marble. The old palazzos that line the Grand Canal were also clad in stone — marble above and water-resistant Istrian limestone below — and all the important details were carved in stone. The delicately Gothic Cà d'Oro was so named because its stone tracery was originally gilded.

Only one of Palladio's buildings — the Basilica in Vicenza, his first large commission — was built entirely out of stone. Dressed masonry was, and is, an expensive technology, and, if enough funds were unavailable construction tended to drag on. Work on the Basilica dragged on for sixty-eight years, long after its architect's death. The lesson was not lost on Palladio, who never again designed a building using stone; all his later buildings were constructed out of brick. This did not mean that the brick was left visible as it had been in medieval times. A building of importance such as San Giorgio was provided with a marble-covered facade, although the structural brick of the sidewalls, the adjoining monastery buildings and the *campanile* was left exposed. Lesser buildings incorporated stone only in selected areas, at the base of columns or around windows. But the solution that Palladio and his contemporaries used most was to duplicate the style that they admired most — that of ancient Rome — not in stone but in stucco plaster. Columns, pilasters, rustica-



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tions, friezes, metopes and quoins — the vocabulary of stone masonry — were all built out of brick, and rendered in plaster. Even the statues and decorations that adorned the cornices and pediments of the palazzos were stucco.

Using plaster to imitate stonework was cheaper and faster than the real thing, but still required a considerable amount of skilled workmanship. Consequently, none of Palladio's large urban palaces in Vicenza was finished according to his plans; usually, as in the case of the Palazzo Valmarana, only the front block was built, and money ran out before the large Roman-style courtyards could be enclosed on all sides. The Palazzo Thiene, the most complete, has only two wings out of a projected four. Construction of the Porto-Breganze was stopped by the financial crisis of the 1570's, leaving only two bays out of a planned seven, and producing a queer, one room wide building. Even publicly-financed buildings such as the Loggia del Capitaniato were affected by economic recession — only three bays out of five were built.

Unlike the urban palaces, Palladio's country villas, of which some twenty examples survive, were generally finished as planned. The reason for this was owing to the nature of the clients. The gentleman-farmers who engaged Palladio were not traditional landowners, they were what would be called, today, agro-businessmen. These were Venetian noblemen who had settled on the mainland, and were involved in a large scale attempt to develop progressive agricultural estates that would diversify the sagging economy of the Republic. They had been awarded unused public lands, in return for which they invested in land reclamation, irrigation, new crops and new methods of cultivation. Like the fictional Ewings of South Fork, whom they resembled, these sixteenth century venture capitalists wanted homes which would bring a measure of grandeur to their provincial lives. But one imagines that these businessmen were hard-headed enough to insist on an architecture which would be inexpensive, and easily and quickly built. A major part of Palladio's success as a country-house architect was his ability to satisfy these aspirations.

It is important to appreciate that these rural villas were not, on the whole, country homes in the English tradition. A summer pavilion like the Villa Rotunda was exceptional — most of the villas were intended as permanent residences and the centres of large, agricultural estates — the Villa Emo continues to function this way, inhabited by descendants of the original clients. Its great flanking wings contained barns for live-stock, equipment and grain storage. The broad "terrace" in front was really a threshing floor. The wonderful curved gables at each end of the Villa Barbaro at Maser contained dove-cotes. The landscape that stretches on each side of the great poplar-lined, axial *allée* in front of both of these houses does not consist of parks or gardens, but of cultivated

fields. The effect is not so much of a rural palace, but of a larger, more sophisticated farmhouse.

Palladio had to adapt his designs to the economic reality that he, or rather his clients, faced. Probably because these were rural buildings he felt free to experiment. He developed a stripped-down architecture that did not rely on fine materials or careful detailing for its effect, but on proportion and overall composition. It was also, and this was surely no coincidence, cheaper to design; then, as now, reduced budgets meant reduced architectural fees. The roofs were simple — undisguised village tiles. The construction was still out of plastered brick, but there was no attempt to imitate stone. Instead, the plastered wall was rendered flat, and given a coat of paint. The results are curiously Modern (and markedly un-Postmodern) in their almost complete lack of exterior ornament. There are no frames around the doors and windows, which are simply punched-out of the wall in a Corbusian manner. The white walls of the Rotunda are unrelieved by pattern or ornament. The arcades of the colonnaded wings of Emo have a vestigial capital, just a block, and no mouldings. Those of the Villa Barbaro are similar, although a nominal keystone is added at the top of the arch. The sole exception is the entrance porch, invariably columnar and pedimented and surmounted by a triangular frontispiece. This not only gave prominence to the front-door, always an architectural issue, but also, in Palladio's words, was a convenient place to stick the owner's family coat of arms. Like the grille of a Rolls-Royce, every Palladian villa had this distinctive feature, inexpensive but prestigious.

It is important to say immediately that Palladio's international reputation did not rest on the economic aspect of his work. An eighteenth century reader of *I Quattro Libri* would have assumed that what he was looking at were buildings of stone, and my 1929 edition of the *Encyclopaedia Britannica* still maintains that although executed in brick, the buildings of Palladio were intended to be built out of stone. This erroneous view misses precisely one of Palladio's architectural achievements.

The interiors of Palladio's villas, being difficult to photograph, have not received the attention they deserve. Unlike the exterior, the rooms are elaborately decorated with classical architectural motifs. Tall Corinthian columns support the roof beams, stone dadoes with carved panels surround the rooms and the famous broken pediment crowns doors and windows. Niches contain allegorical statues, and busts are placed on carved stone brackets; garlands hang between the pilasters. An octagonal room in the Villa Barbaro has a decorated vaulted ceiling that springs from a balustraded gallery, high above the floor. We have entered the room through a door on one side, and symmetrically across the floor is an identical door, this one half-open, with a boy mischievously



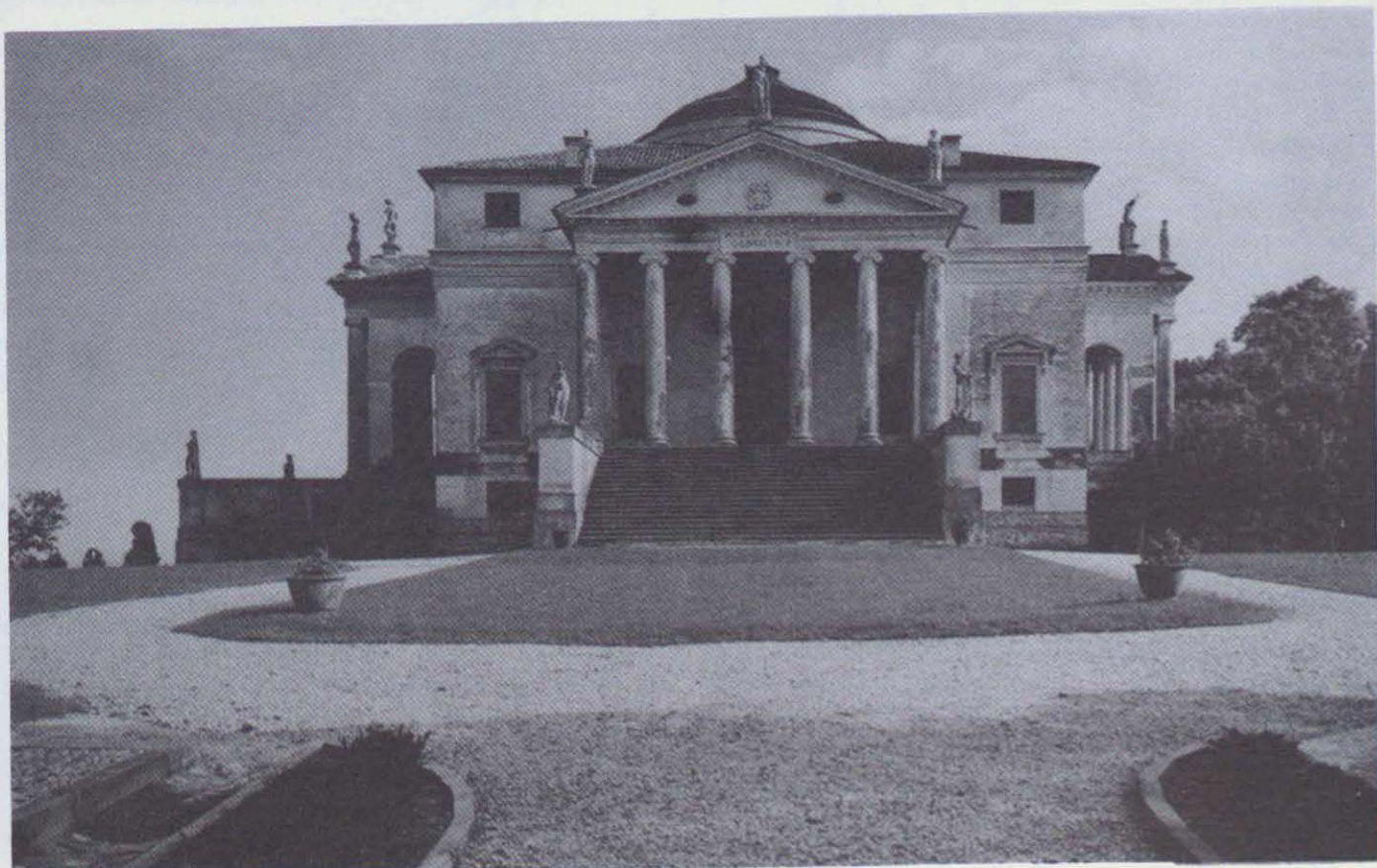
*"...Veronese was responding to the limited resources of his clients. If they could enjoy the sense of space afforded by the trompe l'oeil simulation."*

looking out. He does not move; he has been peeking out of that door for more than four hundred years, ever since Paulo Veronese painted him on the wall. There are more figures relaxedly leaning over the gallery railing. Everything here, the columns, the statues, the lifelike figures, even some of the doors and windows (those required by symmetry, not function) are only fingernail thick — a coat of paint.

Like his collaborator and friend Palladio, Veronese was responding to the limited resources of his clients. If they could not afford a gallery, they could enjoy the sense of space afforded by the *trompe-l'oeil* simulation. Far from the sophisticated charms of Venice, their homes could at least offer their eyes the sensual delight they were accustomed to. These paintings, whose first stimulus was economic, are much more than large scale *faux-marbre*. They are also a mirror of their owners' lives, for the figures that look down from the gallery or stand in the doorway are real people: the lady of the house, her husband and children. Their presence simultaneously reinforces and undermines the effect of the painted interior, for Veronese has transformed what might have been simple decor into a disquieting and moving work of art. This house within a house, peopled by magical ghosts, makes us feel like interlopers.

A sad poignancy is present, also, in the buildings themselves. It is less literal than the melancholy of the frescoes, although the sculptured human figures that have been placed on and around some of the villas seem likewise to inhabit, or at least to guard these houses. But Palladio, because he was an architect, not a painter, could not resort to trickery, his brick and plaster capitals notwithstanding; someone once said that artists can allow themselves to paint square wheels, but architects must build round ones. Obligated to observe a restraint in his design — by economic necessity, not by choice — he mourned his loss, but, and herein lay his greatness, he did not conceal it. Hence his classical farmhouses. His respect for the past was too great to permit tinkering; he skillfully retrieved what he could, and unwillingly discarded the rest. We, of all people, should be able to understand his achievement.

Witold Rybczynski, travelled in the Veneto last spring. His latest book *Home*, on the evolution of the idea of domestic comfort, is published by Viking-Penguin. He is also a professor of architecture at McGill University.



*Villa Rotonda, Vicenza*



# THE HOUSE

