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Palladio Reassessed by Eisenman

By Anthony Vidler
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Peter Eisenman's current exhibition at Yale School of Architecture leaves behind the mathematical analysis of Palladio's villas espoused by Colin Rowe and replaces it with a volumetric analysis. In so doing, Eisenman overturns much of the traditional thinking around Palladio, and shows him to be an endlessly parametric experimenter and a paradigm for the present.

Under the slightly misleading title of Palladio virtuel, Peter Eisenman has constructed one of the most instructive, intellectually challenging, myth overturning, and it must be said, beautiful, exhibitions of recent years. It is instructive because it does not assume the viewer knows everything, and its didactic texts, drawings and models tell a story on many levels.

It is intellectually challenging, because at the level of disciplinary architectural knowledge, it demands serious attention and a willingness to revise commonplaces. It is myth overturning because it sets out to critique many of the truisms attached to Palladio studies over the past half century. And its beauty stems from its impeccable presentation, superb model-making and drawing, and an inventive spatial installation. The models, indeed, in their apparent simplicity, their volumes coloured in white, grey and black, and set in illuminated frames within the pilasters of what seems to be a centralised Palladian villa, would be enough of an exhibition in themselves.

The organisation seems simple enough: 20 Palladian villas from all moments of his career, modelled in three dimensions, are framed vertically in emulation of pages of Palladio's own Quattro libri, joined, in an annexe, by as many analytical line drawings of the villas. Seemingly equally simple, because effortlessly represented, the central space of the exhibition is composed by the conjunction of two apparently disparate volumes: that of Palladio's project for the Palazzo Dalla Torre (1555) and the church by Carlo Rainaldi, Santa Maria in Campitelli built a century later − a sign of imminent destabilisation that will characterise the exhibition as a whole.

The effect of the framed models in their niches, the abstracted columnar space that encloses them, allowing controlled glimpses into and out of the Rudolph gallery beyond, with a glowing golden light infusing the whole, is breathtaking and in itself a major aesthetic experience: Palladio within Palladio within Rainaldi within Rudolph − at the very least an exercise in architectural demonstration that bears witness to a profound and knowing architectonic sensibility. This, however, is where the simplicity ends and close reading has to begin.

First, some historical context. It is well known that it was in meeting Colin Rowe at Cambridge in 1960 that Eisenman was confronted with an interlocutor whose intellectual reputation as a formidable critic of contemporary and modern architecture had been publicly established 13 years earlier by a now canonical article in The Architectural Review entitled 'The Mathematics of

the Ideal Villa. Palladio and Le Corbusier Compared'. We might, for the purposes of this review, assume that Eisenman's introduction, not to Palladio, but to an intellectually interpreted Palladio, stemmed from this meeting and the ensuing friendship and Italian journeys. It is also well known that Rowe had derived the initial inspiration for this article from an earlier publication by his teacher Rudolf Wittkower in the Journal of the Warburg and Courtauld Institutes of 1946, that incorporated a diagrammatic chart of the typical plan forms of Palladian villas, reduced to rectangles and squares, modulated in a grid that operated according to an ABABA rhythm. Rowe, taking this grid for his armature, applied it to a witty comparison of the Palladian plan schema to that of Le Corbusier's villas – Villa Malcontenta to Villa Stein at Garches, Villa La Rotonda to Villa Savoye at Poissy. We may also assume that Eisenman's understanding of the spatial relations joining and differentiating the late Classical villa and the Modernist villa stem from this interpretation.

There was much debate in Britain after the war as to the correct formulation of modern architecture, still in the shadow of the 'masters' − Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Aalto – and especially, given the pressure for post-war productivism and standardisation, to the correct mathematical ordering of the elements of architecture. This debate was divided between those who took the Gropius view of massproduction standards and those who espoused (mainly for aesthetic and cultural reasons) the new humanist mathematics propounded by Le Corbusier in the first volume of his Modulor, published in 1953.

A further note was added by the translation of Matila Ghyka's Nombre d'Or as The Geometry of Art and Life 1946, a diagram from which Rowe published the next year in his Palladio/LeCorbusier article. The debates were intense, and no more so than at Cambridge in the period 1950-60, when the literal mathematisation of architecture and its future adaption to computer design was being strongly advocated first by Christopher Alexander, then by Lionel March, and supported from 1956 in order for architecture to gain a reputation as a scientific discipline, by the new Professor, Sir Leslie Martin.

Martin, as Sean Keller has recently noted, was a friend of Gabo and Nicholson, and therefore understood Russian Constructivism as a first step towards the science of the art, but it is clear that Rowe and then Eisenman were not in agreement. For Rowe 'mathematics' was more a device for the parti submitted to cultural/spatial interpretation, and not to be taken as a rule or fixed parameter − he was more interested in the relation between the formal structure of the plan and its implied visual and actual movement patterns − centroidal for Palladio, peripheral for Le Corbusier, thus Classical and Modern. For Rowe, the fundamental link between the Mannerist architect and the Modernist architect was both architects' 'late' relationship to their epoch, and their ability to 'reduce' the language of their age into formulae that were easily transformed, project by project − 'types' one might say.

They were also important for their ability to publish internationally, idealising and presenting their work to those who had not experienced it in person in an easily reproducible way. In Cambridge in the period 1960-62, this paradigm worked, at least for those tutored by Rowe. Eisenman's characteristic 'slice and dice' formal method, for example, was derived from two other canonical articles by Rowe, 'Mannerism and Modern Architecture' (1950), and, with Robert Slutzky, 'Transparency: Literal and Phenomenal' (conceived 1956-58 but not published until '63).

The former took the art-historical concept of Mannerism, newly imported into Britain by Wittkower and Pevsner, and applied its imputed formal distortions and inversions to Modernism, especially in the reading of the layers implied or stated in facades; the latter ranged from the Modernist notion of

'transparency' opposing the literal transparency of a Gropius at Dessau, to the implied, phenomenal, transparency of Le Corbusier's project for the League of Nations building. Referring to the complex layering of the picture-plane in Cubist painting, the authors identified a series of striations passing through the volumes of Le Corbusier's project, illustrated in axonometric.

This model of Modernism's Mannerism was disturbed, however, with Eisenman's discovery of Giuseppe Terragni's Casa del Fascio, Como. Here, and perhaps despite the presence of Rowe, he was confounded by a paradigm that did not seem to fit the Palladian/Corbusian model. A solid cubic block layered and cut as if made of compliant cheese − Mannerist in its depth of surface, but not at all Palladian in plan, and certainly not susceptible to analysis according to the principles of le plan libre. The shift that Eisenman worked was one that still remained within the Corbusian paradigm but that took off from an interesting and deliberate 'misinterpretation' of the formal principles set out in Vers une architecture: 'volume', 'surface', 'plan'.

In the English translation by Frederick Etchells in 1927, the word 'volume' was translated as 'mass'. Now obviously both Rowe and Eisenman were aware of this confusion, and indeed Eisenman continued to make 'volume' the linchpin of his emerging formal method. Now, in the light of the Casa del Fascio, volume is treated not as a volume of space created by internal pressures but as a conceptually solid mass. This 'mass' is then open to modification from two equally conceptual forces − the inner characteristics of the volume and the external pressures of implied movement.

The surface of the mass/volume is then eroded and layered accordingly, a layering that continues to have a ripple effect throughout the conceptual solid, thus explaining or framing the incidental and empirical moves of function within. The result, for Eisenman, was his magisterial doctoral thesis, completed at Cambridge in 1963, outlining 'The Formal Basis of Modern Architecture', which, with the shifted ABABA grid of House I, initiated the series of 'Houses' developed after 1965.

But in the Palladio exhibition under review, there has been a move away from the plan and three-dimensional grid patterns explored earlier, and reversion to a more fundamental use of the three-dimensional volumetric model of analysis. Rather than tracing the modifications of the Wittkower-Rowe ABABA grid, Eisenman has identified three fundamental volumes characteristic of all 20 villas: the portico, or entry space (white); the transition or circulation spaces (grey), and the central or main spaces (black).

A volumetric typology has thus replaced the traditional geometrical schema attributed by Wittkower to Palladio's villa typology. Further, Eisenman has not been content simply to model the villas as built, or the villas as redrawn by Palladio in the Quattro libri. Rather he has constructed a triple model for each villa − the plan as built or projected, the 'ideal' plan as redrawn by Palladio for publication, and the purported descriptive text accompanying these redrawings. The models and drawings in this exhibition present all these different modes of villa-representation, layered one over the other.

Eisenman then introduces a third move, one that complicates the scene still further. Wittkower and Rowe, and of course, Le Corbusier, as well as most neo-Palladian architects, have concentrated their attention on the idea of the villa as a pure, freestanding, geometrical object, secure in its mathematical harmony and aesthetic unity. Despite the efforts of more recent historians to emphasise the nature of these villas as standing at the centre of large-scale farms dedicated to the agricultural development of the Veneto, this idea of the ideal villa has persisted. Eisenman, however, has insisted on incorporating,

where appropriate, the outhouses, barns and other constructions that linked the central house to its working function and the surrounding landscape − the barchesse or estate buildings. These, he insists correctly, form an integral part of the architectural ensemble, planned and often drawn by Palladio, but ignored by architectural historians.

Thus for 13 of the villas, Eisenman includes the barchesse in his volumetric analysis, causing a considerable reformulation of their internal spatial composition. The deciphering of these moves, and the tracing of their impact on the reading of a Palladian 'villa', now put into question as a stable, unified, geometrically clear object, could, for the viewer of this exhibition, and the reader of the small catalogue, take many hours, if not days. But Eisenman's point is not to explicate one or another villa as having one or another formal structure; it is to demonstrate that none of the villas, however pure they seem at first glance, has any formal consistency − or rather has any formal typological consistency in relation to one another.

Such an analytical effect, however interesting, is not directed towards demonstrating the absolute ineffectivity of typological or formal rules. Nor is it simply a very successful attempt to confound the 'Palladio' of Rowe, or of his teacher Wittkower − this paternal assassination is carried out with exemplary tact, as a constantly shifting volumetric/mass analysis supplants plan/geometrical typology.

Rather, Eisenman's point, one which has been a consistent leitmotif of his theoretical practice from the beginning, is to open up what he calls 'the possibility of an architecture', one that emerges from a 'redrawing of the very boundaries of the discipline', a constant comprehension of undecidability, and an awareness of indeterminacy that underlies the architectural project from the outset. Eisenman's contemporary quest, that is consciously bound to unending irresolution, is aimed toward an architecture of formal ideas that live through the process of design, and continue to live through construction, and posthumous idealisation, in all the potential states represented by three-dimensional models, object, texts and drawings.

For Rowe, analytical conjunction of Palladio/Le Corbusier represented his perception of a continuing state of 'Mannerist' ambivalence toward Classical canonical, or Modernist codes (which he deemed stemmed from the same root), and their meaningful disruption. For Eisenman, these codes have always displayed their instability, have in some way, always been 'Mannerist', but without the stable, Classical reference that art historians attributed to the distortions of Mannerism. Eisenman's re-envisioning of Palladio as an endlessly parametric experimenter, as opposed to the pure geometrician he has been seen to be, presents Palladio as a paradigm for the present, a Palladio no longer virtuel, but insistently actuel.

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http://www.architectural-review.com/essays/palladio-reassessed-by-eisenman/8637478.article