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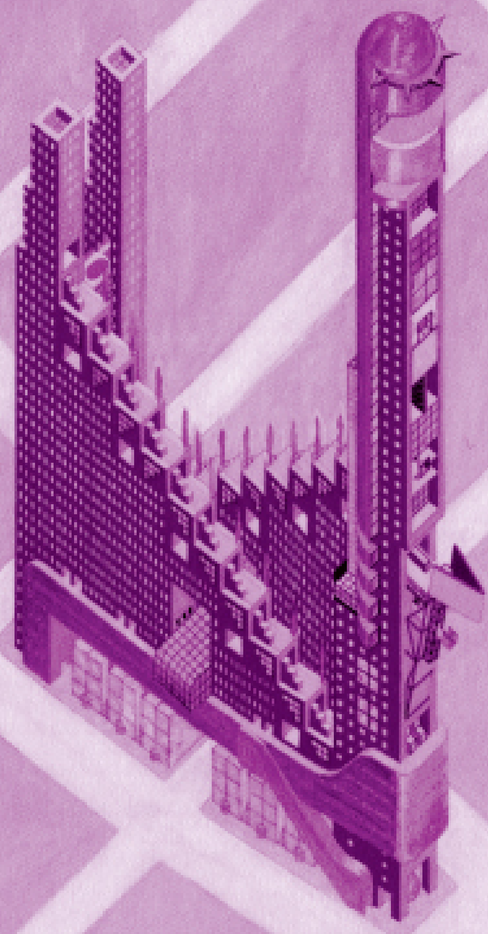

THE POSSIBILITY OF AN ABSOLUTE ARCHITECTURE

PIER VITTORIO AURELI

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PIER VITTORIO AURELI

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CONTENTS

ACKNOWLEDGMENTS vii

INTRODUCTION ix

1. **TOWARD THE ARCHIPELAGO** 1
Defining the Political and the Formal in Architecture

2. **THE GEOPOLITICS OF THE IDEAL VILLA** 47
Andrea Palladio and the Project of an Anti-Ideal City

3. ***INSTAURATIO URBIS*** 85
Piranesi's *Campo Marzio* versus Nolli's *Nuova Pianta di Roma*

4. **ARCHITECTURE AS A STATE OF EXCEPTION** 141
Étienne-Louis Boullée's Project for a Metropolis

5. **THE CITY WITHIN THE CITY** 177
Oswald Mathias Ungers, OMA,
and the Project of the City as Archipelago

NOTES 229

INDEX 247

2 THE GEOPOLITICS OF THE IDEAL VILLA

ANDREA PALLADIO AND THE PROJECT OF AN ANTI-IDEAL CITY

In 1944 Rudolf Wittkower published two essays on Andrea Palladio's architecture. The essays, later included in his book *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*, featured eleven schematic drawings of Palladio's villas that Wittkower used to reinforce his argument for reading Renaissance architecture in terms of irreducible rules or principles.[1] These drawings showed that architectural artifacts such as Palladio's villas were not merely episodic formal studies but were systematic variations of the same compositional logic. Architectural principles were thus implicitly proposed as an intellectual framework for architectural form, superior to the functional, programmatic, or aesthetic goals to which architectural history was then still bound.

As a core component of architecture's emerging historiography, Wittkower's reading of Renaissance architecture quickly proved to be influential far beyond academic historical scholarship. Within postwar reconstruction in England, for example, his project established a point of reference for a generation of architects searching for formal legitimacy beyond the technocratic impetus of functionalist modernism. In particular, his drawings, reducing Palladian villas to proportional and spatial schemes, offered the possibility of defining a more profound rationality than could be provided simply by technology. This commitment to seeing and interpreting a contemporary condition through a

Renaissance precedent was reinforced five years later (and more radically still) by Colin Rowe, whose "Mathematics of the Ideal Villa" famously established a comparison between Palladio's Villa Foscari in Malcontenta and Le Corbusier's Villa Stein in Garches.[2]

While Wittkower's impact on a wider, contemporary architectural discourse was as unsuspected as it was unintentional, Rowe's iconoclastic comparison of two villas—one from the sixteenth century, the other from the twentieth—seems to have been a deliberate attempt to interfere with the trajectory of postwar architectural modernism. This desire to subvert is seen not only in his argument for the comparable nature of Renaissance and modern architecture, but also in his pointing to the possibility of a rigorous close reading of architectural form independent of its historical circumstances. For this reason, Rowe deliberately extrapolates the villas of Palladio and Le Corbusier from their geographical and political context; he even argues that the architects' lyrical site descriptions celebrating their best-known villas—"La Rotonda" and the Villa Savoye at Poissy—offer too easy a point of entry for comparison. In this way, Rowe's text reinforces Wittkower's radical denial of Palladio's site specificity, apparent in the removal of the *barchesse* (barns) in his schematic drawings of the villas. These adjoining loggias were adapted from local Venetian agricultural sheds and were an essential component of Palladio's villas, providing both a sense of context and a semiotic distinction that allowed these buildings to be classified as villas rather than palaces. The *barchesse*, in this sense, are Palladio's geopolitical context because they figure as the key metonymical register for the whole typology.

Palladio's villas themselves were commissioned at the high point of widespread social and economic reforms advanced by the Serenissima Republic in the sixteenth century, and their particular formal composition—a central palace flanked by two barns—is

deeply embedded in the political, social, and formal impetus of these reforms. If, as James S. Ackerman has argued, the villa is one the most radically ideological architectures because it hides its economic dependency on the city by claiming self-sufficiency within the countryside, then Palladio's palace-plus-*barchesse* composition openly signals the villa's relation with its regional and agricultural economic context.[3] This immediately suggests an alternative interpretation of Palladio's architecture to the ones advanced by Wittkower and Rowe. This counter position does not define Palladio's relevance to contemporary discourse in terms of proportion or the "mathematics" of its architectural composition, but reads the villa as one element within a larger, latent project. Rather than taking Palladio's "ideal" as a model for an equally ideal urban configuration, it views the geography and politics of the villa as a framework for rethinking and retheorizing the significance of Palladio's work as a project for an anti-ideal city.

First, however, let's deal with the name, Palladio—bombastic and slightly ridiculous in its overloaded pretension. This was the name conferred on Andrea della Gondola when he was already in his thirties, having completed a long apprenticeship in a stonemason's workshop. The man who named him—the Renaissance poet, humanist, and diplomat Giangiorgio Trissino—was making clear from the outset that Palladio was invested with a program.[4] For Trissino, this program was the reinvention of Vicenza as a model for an imperial Roman city—that is, in his classicist terms, a new Italian civilization finally liberated from the Goths, whose ascendancy, he believed, had paralleled the decline of the Roman Empire and Italy's descent into political and cultural chaos. Drawing inspiration from Trissino's classicist urban ideology, Palladio's early architectural designs include a classical facade for a series of city houses and a proposal for the Palazzo Civena—austere, simple, and thus repeatable prototypes,

ready to be disseminated within the Gothic fabric of Vicenza.[5] The palazzo was fused with the more modest merchant house to form a new quasi-bourgeois *domus*. The centrality of the house and thus of secular domestic life, along with the systematic recovery of Roman architecture, provided the core of Palladio's attempt to define a universal formal grammar for the city.

But Palladio's first intellectual mentor was politically at odds with the Venetian republic. Trissino saw the fragmented city as a symptom of the larger political, cultural, and social fragmentation of the nation after the collapse of the Roman Empire. Like Dante in *De monarchia*, he called for a universal civic government, identifiable in Palladio's time with the singular figure of Holy Roman Emperor Charles V.[6] This universal government was to represent a new Roman Empire, a secular power free from both feudalism and ecclesiastical authority. Fundamental to these aspirations, the city and its architecture remained a key priority, and set against the Gothic fabric of the medieval city, Trissino promoted Roman architecture as the appropriate language for his political project.[7] Palladio made four research trips to Rome with Trissino as exercises in generating form through firsthand experience. The careful study of Roman antiquity was the express goal of this research, and the drawings Palladio made during these visits would become the source book of his architectural grammar. What is important to note here is Palladio's drawing method. Influenced by Raphael's recommendations about the depiction of ancient ruins, he avoided pictorial perspective and instead used a flat orthogonal technique that anticipated modern conventions of orthogonal projection—a method that contributed enormously to his systematic approach to the architecture of the city.[8] Architecture was not visionary and picturesque but scientific, the product of carefully defined rules. This fundamental distinction enabled the original form to be reconstructed out

of the ruin, emancipating it from its reality as a fragment and giving it a new status as a component in a potential imperial city in Vicenza, and later across the Veneto.

Palladio's last trip to Rome in 1557 provided the material for two books, one of them a guide to the city's antiquities that would remain the standard reference for tourists for the next two centuries, the other a curious guide for pilgrims that documented Rome's many churches.[9] Whereas Roman antiquity offered the source for Palladio's universal architectural grammar, the mapping of churches—many of them located in typically suburban and depopulated, fragmented context—enabled him to present the city as an archipelago of monuments. These finite, autonomous artifacts carried a highly charged ritualistic geography, even when presented in isolation. But Palladio went beyond this by ordering the descriptions of the churches according to the pilgrim's peripatetic approach to the city. The guide does not describe these churches as monumental forms removed from their context, but addresses them within site-specific patterns of an urban itinerary. In addition to his study of antiquity, therefore, Palladio's interest in compiling a pilgrim's guide is of exceptional interest because it signifies his familiarity with the geographic symbolism of the city. And it is precisely this act of locating and marking that seems to underpin Palladio's ability to define the city through its architecture.

The heroic mission of Trissino and Palladio to recast Vicenza as a latter-day imperial city was prompted, somewhat more prosaically, by a fleeting celebration of religious authority: the entrance of Cardinal Ridolfi to the city in 1543. For this occasion, Palladio designed a sequence of temporary markers to delineate the cardinal's procession toward the cathedral. Two of the most exemplary urban landmarks of the Roman city—the triumphal arch and the obelisk—symbolized the veritable analogous Roman

city generated by this circuit; Palladio considered them to be ideal and instant devices for urban reinvention, radically transforming the Gothic form of the city into a classical landscape.[10] The theme of the triumphal procession also highlights the city as a contested field of directions to be mapped and manipulated by a series of punctual interventions. Palladio's approach to the city, then, as his temporary installation for Vicenza makes clear, is based not on an overall urban plan but on the strong formal continuity and universalism evoked by his classical references. Yet, in contrast to the Roman city model, Palladio's universalism is defined by the concrete figure of architecture as a clearly circumscribed artifact, distinct from the ground of the city spaces surrounding it.

Palladio's mapping of Roman churches and his processional installation for Vicenza together anticipate his later mastery of the programming of architectural sequences. The variety of contexts in which he operated—the city of Vicenza, the Veneto countryside, and the Venetian Lagoon—offered an array of urban situations of various scales in which he could test the seamlessness of an architectural language against the inexorably fragmented nature of a city. The strategic link between the two extremes—continuity and discontinuity—is precisely the core dialectic of Palladio's urban design methodology.

In the sixteenth century Vicenza was one of Italy's most violent cities. Infighting among the most important families and political turmoil among the populace made it a theater of almost perpetual mayhem and murder.[11] The physical manifestations of this violence also unfolded within a larger conflict involving the local oligarchy, the colonial power of Venice, and the adversarial relationship between the church and the Veneto (at that time, Vicenza was the Italian epicenter of Calvinist and heretical sensibilities). Given this context, Trissino and Palladio's attempt to recast Vicenza as a model for an imperial city that evoked the *Pax*

Romana seems a very obvious and deliberate provocation—or, conversely, an attempt to use the unifying architectural language of classicism to project a self-harmonizing sense of civic calm.

The grammar of this classicism lay in Palladio's impeccable use of the five orders as a way to make architecture intelligible as form, in contrast to the irrational patterns of the medieval city. There is an interesting parallel between Palladio's systematic use of the five orders and Trissino's political vision, based on the idea of a unifying secular government. Trissino (ever the poet and diplomat) was especially concerned with the reform of the Italian language, as evidenced by his letter to Pope Clement VII about the urgent need to address vernacular or colloquial Italian, and by his translation of Dante's *De vulgari eloquentia*. In many ways, Trissino's interest in the idea of grammar as a metahistorical political tool can be seen as the inspiration for Palladio's systematic approach to architecture, for Palladio used classicism not simply as a means of representation and authority but also as an ordered set of repeatable elements whose influence could extend beyond the construction of buildings to embrace the whole manifestation of the city itself. However, in order to be established, a grammar relies on clear examples. It is not by chance that Palladio's debut as an independent architect, under Trissino's mentorship, resulted in a design for the most important public monument in Vicenza: the completion of the Palazzo della Ragione, a vast civic hall built in the fifteenth century, and significantly renamed by Palladio as the "Basilica." Palladio's intervention was nothing more than a lintel-arch-lintel device, stacking two *serliane* orders built in white stone so that they wrapped the existing hall and shops underneath. The irregular structure of the existing building was absorbed by varying the length of the lintel without altering the arches. The building was thus conceived as a didactic display of the orders and their ability to support, correct, and mask the

existing irregular Gothic structure. Moreover, his restructuring of the Basilica placed classicism at the heart of the civic space of the city as the hegemonic and universal architectural language of a long-desired *civitas*.

The Basilica, like many of Palladio's buildings, would not be completed during his lifetime. A permanent state of instability defined by wars, economic crises, disease, and, more spectacularly, the tormented vicissitudes of the families for whom Palladio worked, delayed or prevented their construction. It is easy to imagine that a desire to counteract this flux was the key impulse behind Palladio's *I quattro libri dell'architettura* (*The Four Books on Architecture*), which sets out all of his projects in order and according to his original design, regardless of alterations made during their construction. The four books, in this sense, suggest the emancipation of the idea of architecture from its material realization. Confronted with an unstable and complex environment, the language of building cannot tame the city in all its manifestations, but can only insert exemplary forms into its unstable body. As with his experiment for the triumphal route for Cardinal Ridolfi, Palladio's confidence in the city is revealed by the way he positions a building, even if he never proposed any ideal urban scheme. The architectural historian Franco Barbieri has suggested that although Palladio never predetermined the site of his projects, the location of his buildings seems to follow the Roman axial grid that was still legible in medieval Vicenza (it remains legible today—the intersection of a north-south *cardo* axis and an east-west *decumanus* is provided by the Corso Palladio and the route that goes from the ruins of the Roman Berga theater to the Pusterla bridge on the river Bacchiglione).[12] Trissino's utopian vision of Vicenza as a Roman city thus seems to be carried out in Palladio's insistence on this layout as the ordering principle of his interventions.

2.1
Andrea Palladio, Basilica, Vicenza, 1549 onward. The classical orders "correct" the irregularities of the preexisting Gothic structure of the Palazzo della Ragione rather than masking them. The Basilica can read as sublimating Trissino's political project of universal government within the formal inner workings of architectural form.

If we follow this hypothesis diachronically, we find along the *decumanus* the highly abstract forms of the Palazzo Chiericati (1550), the sophisticated facade of the Casa Cagollo (1559–1562), and the Palazzo Pojana (1560–1561). Nearby was the intended site of an unrealized project for the Palazzo Capra (1563–1564) and, at the end of the *decumanus*, directly opposite the Palazzo Chiericati, another Palazzo Capra. Following the perpendicular *cardo*, we start at the ruins of the Berga theater (itself a strategic precedent for Trissino and Palladio in their vision of resurrecting Vicenza's latent Roman plan) and then pass the bridge of San Paolo (which in the sixteenth century was believed to be another Roman structure), before arriving at the loggias of the Basilica and the Capitaniato at the intersection with the *decumanus*. The *cardo* would then lead us to two of Palladio's most impressive buildings—the Palazzo Montano Barbarano (1569–1570) and the Palazzo Porto (1549). Finally, we would end up at the Casa Bernardo Schio (1565–1566). Following the streets that run parallel to the *cardo*, toward the east we would find the Palazzo Da Monte (1541–1545), Palazzo Thiene (1542–1546), a project for a palazzo for Giacomo Angarano (1564), and a fragment of the Palazzo Pojana (1555). Similarly, following the streets that run parallel to the *decumanus*, on the north we would find projects for the Palazzo Trissino (1558) and a palazzo for Giambattista Garzadori, along with other minor but significant works such as Palladio's youthful interventions during his apprenticeship at the Pedemuro workshop with the church of Santa Maria in Foro (1531) and Vicenza's cathedral (1534–1536). Collectively, these interventions can be summarized as the mediation between two opposite forces which constitute the two major ingredients of all of Palladio's projects: on the one hand, an abstraction of the orders, proportion, and symmetry; and on the other, a site specificity, with each building being carefully inserted into the tight and complex medieval fabric of the city.

The project that most fully articulates this mediation is the Palazzo Chiericati. Strategically located on the edge of the Isola (the beginning of the *decumanus* and thus at the city gate approaching from Padua and Venice), the main facade of the palazzo consists of two superimposed loggias powerfully framed by the orders. But what is most striking about this design is that for the first time in the Renaissance the composition of the facade is rigorously projected into the interior. The elevation thus becomes a veritable index of the workings of the plan and section. At the same time, the space onto which this utopian architectural language is projected is far from ideal—the loggia is directly at odds with the narrow and long form of the site, derived in turn from the city's complex topography. Forcing the building to fit into its unlikely site generated an unprecedented compression in the plan, which reads as a kind of sixteenth-century barcode, with its sequence of compressed versions of atria, internal loggia, and a garden.[13] Moreover, within this logic, the facade's classical form may be understood as a clear political maneuver. Expanding the building's transverse section by only a few meters, the loggia occupies a portion of the Isola, not only creating a noble public gesture in one of the city's most important civic spaces, but also projecting a highly formal grammar. The generative principle of the building (the rule) and the peculiarities of the site (the exception) are thus intrinsically linked and mutually reinforced, producing a paradoxical combination of formal abstraction and radical site specificity.

It is precisely Palladio's mastering of the dialectic between continuity and discontinuity that theatrically emphasizes the urban role of his buildings as civic actors within Vicenza's analogous city—a dialectic also perfectly depicted by Canaletto in his own analogous city in the form of the painting he made of the Rialto Bridge. Rather than the actual bridge, Canaletto shows the bridge as designed by Palladio and presented in his *Quattro*

2.2
Antonio Canaletto, *Capriccio, or a Palladian Design for Rialto Bridge, with Buildings at Vicenza*, 1740s. In this painting, Canaletto depicts Palladio's project for an anti-ideal city made not by overall plans but by a coherent, yet disposable, architectural program. The scene depicts an imaginary view of Venice's Grand Canal with Palladio's unbuilt design for the Rialto Bridge framed by two buildings of Vicenza: the Basilica (right) and Palazzo Chiericati (left).

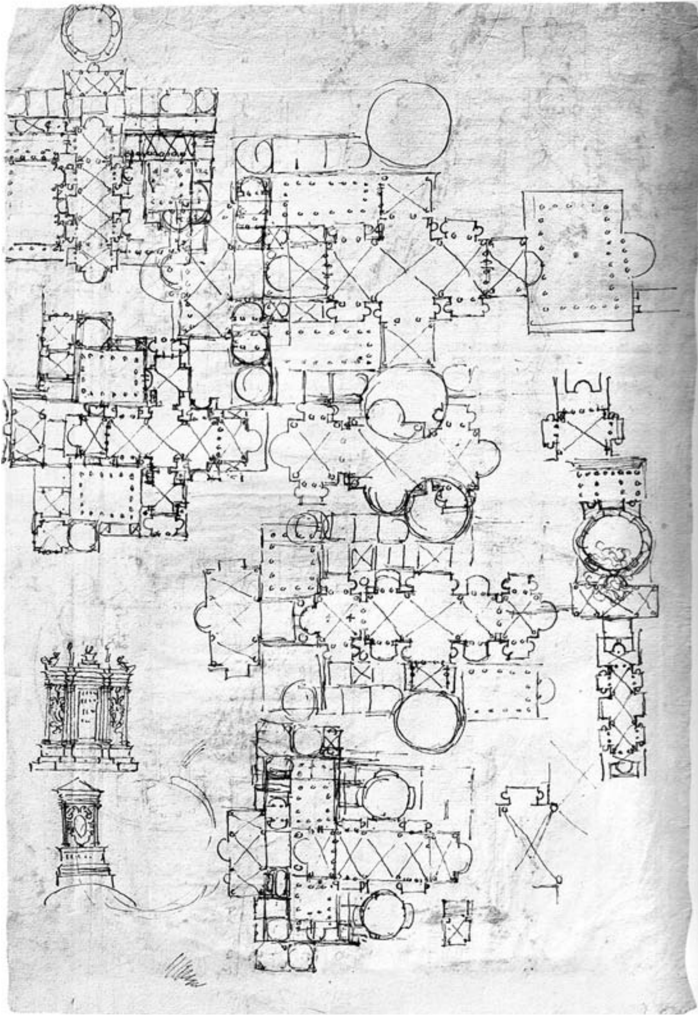
libri—a synthesis of two buildings, the Basilica and the Palazzo Chiericati, through a singularity of language and absolute forms. These forms are therefore precise in their paradigmatic integrity and yet disposable, to be used and combined according to the geography of the site.

More than his bridges and palazzos, however, the villas in the Veneto region are the most celebrated of Palladio's work. What is impressive about these buildings is not so much their architectural quality as their quantity. With the exception perhaps of Frank Lloyd Wright, no other architect has offered a portfolio filled with designs of such impressive continuity. The penchant for villas, a patrician typology of the Roman Empire, was revived in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries.[14] In a rural economy, the villa's reappearance marked the transition from feudalism to the economic power of the estate. Fueled by this succession, Palladio assigned the villa a position of exceptional importance in his *Quattro libri*: five chapters of the second book are devoted to the architectural principles of this type, which is treated with the same attention to detail as other crucial city types such as palaces and religious buildings. By the time the *Quattro libri* was published, Palladio had already designed a large number of villas, and the serial nature of the solutions he developed (akin to the repeating rules he employed in his palaces in Vicenza and churches in Venice) had allowed him to define a consistent formal lexicon. Although made up of very few principles, this language was very strict in its application—notably, a clear symmetry of plan, an abundance of loggias in the form of belvederes and barns, the unconventional use of pediments, and the spatiality of imperial Roman baths (Palladio's most striking typological cross-contamination for rural buildings).

A number of historians have addressed Palladio's mixing of classical motifs, discussing his use of vernacular elements

and his villa typology as providing both a country retreat and an economically and culturally productive rural hub. Much, too, has been written about his use of the pediment, which, but for one exception, had previously been confined to religious buildings (with the implied argument that temples and houses share the same origin).[15] Much less, however, has been said about how the interior space of Palladio's villas appropriated the spatiality of the imperial baths which he obsessively mapped, drew, and reconstructed during his field trips to Rome, and whose organization—a sequence of monumental spaces juxtaposed along axes of symmetry—lent his countryside villas a quintessentially metropolitan air. In many ways, the theatrical spatial complexity of the Roman bath offered an indoor miniaturized city. It is thus possible to speculate that Palladio's appropriation of the imperial bath and the pediment, and the conflation of these typologies with an agricultural context, are part of a strategy that goes beyond erudite references to Roman classicism and the accommodation of the material demands of the estate. Instead, it seems to have more to do with the idea of figuring the ground as an assemblage of metropolitan structures where the political and economic power of the Venetian archipelago (until then constituted by the sea) is projected analogically—that is, via the example of imperial Rome—toward the Veneto countryside. It is precisely this complex of analogical appropriations that made Palladio's architecture so successful and influential as an urban model.

Underlying all of Palladio's architectural output was the biggest crisis then facing the Serenissima Republic. Founded some time during the first decades of the eighth century and developed as a mercantile city-state, Venice's raison d'être had been economic transaction in the form of maritime commerce. Throughout its early history, this trade was bolstered not only by the city-state's



2.3
Andrea Palladio, study of the Baths of Agrippa (with a detail of the Loggia del Capitaniato), 1570s.

geographical position at the edge of the Adriatic and the defeat of other maritime republics such as Genoa, but also by the influence of the Byzantine Empire, which helped to establish Venice as a privileged economic hub linking the Mediterranean basin with commercial routes toward the east. However, Venice's impetuous rise came abruptly to an end with two major events. The first was the War of the League of Cambrai (1508–1516), when the most important European superpowers—Pope Julius II, Emperor Maximilian I, and King Louis XII of France—united against the Serenissima in order to limit its land expansion. The second decisive event, whose consequences would only slowly become apparent over the course of the sixteenth century, was the discovery of the New World and the consequent shift of major maritime traffic from east to west.

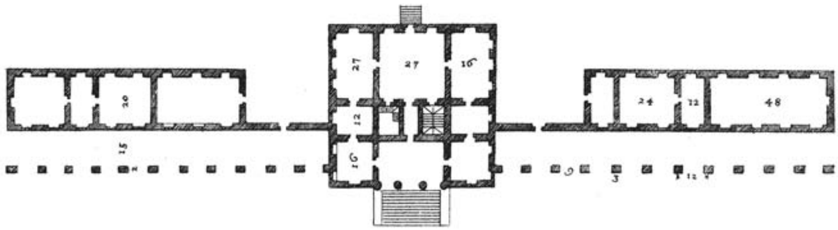
Confronted with this crisis, the Serenissima's oligarchy became convinced that they were about to enter a period of decline. What is interesting about their response is that they accepted the prospect of their diminishing fortune and, rather than seeking to reverse what seemed inevitable, they did something politically and conceptually far more radical: they attempted to slow down the decline, so that instead of precipitating a sudden collapse, the republic's waning influence could be tamed and governed as a utopian condition of "duration."[16] Their response consisted of a complex series of strategic maneuvers, all of them predicated on a shift of Venice's economic basis from the sea to the land—from maritime commerce to agriculture. Within this transfer, the ground or *terra firma* suddenly took on the status of a territorial project—one that included land reclamation, cartographic mapping, and the hydrological control of the network of rivers that descended into Venice from high in the Alps.[17] And so, rather than projecting itself solely toward the sea as a *stato del mar*, Venice turned inward, toward its territorial lands—a (re)discov-

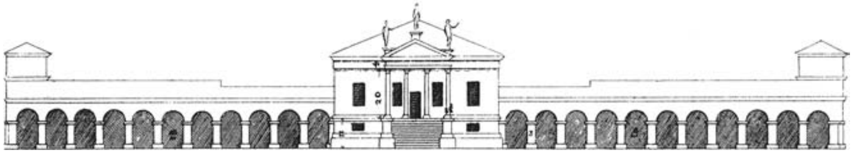
ery of its more earthly influence that must be seen as the defining context for Palladio's unprecedented succession of countryside villas, each commissioned by patricians of the Serenissma regime, and which would ultimately give Venice's project of duration its most enduring historical form.

Offering a kind of theoretical legitimacy to this shift from sea to land were the ideas of the theorist and patron of the arts Alvise Cornaro (1484–1566), who argued, in particular, for the promotion of agriculture as an alternative to Venice's existing mercantilist economy. Author of *La vita sobria*, a treatise on the virtue of living in the countryside, Cornaro was one of the most active political thinkers during the Veneto's economic crisis. His ideas largely concerned the reclamation of land and the promotion of agriculture over trade as the basis for a more solid relationship between power and territory.[18] Before Cornaro, country life (of which the villa was the most idealized form) was typically understood as radically antipolitical because it turned its back on the political space par excellence, the city. After Cornaro, however, this image was subverted. Rather than being predicated on the fundamentally apolitical ideas of disinterest and denial, the countryside became highly politicized by its promotion of a new formal model and its explicit rejection of the existing one—Venice. To represent his vision of civic life, Cornaro built his own analogous city near Padua, Palladio's birthplace. In the 1520s, he commissioned the Paduan painter Giovanni Battista Falconetto to produce a garden loggia, and a year later a stage was built next to it to host the performances of a famous local dialect actor, Angelo Beolco (better known by his pseudonym, Ruzzante). In Cornaro's garden it is possible to see an attempt to elevate the rustic countryside to the level of a new, cultivated civic condition—one that lay beyond the city's monumental spaces but had a competing measure of cultural and social charisma. Falconetto's

loggia—the first example in the Veneto of architecture *alla romana*—was clearly built as a highly symbolic prototype, an example. Its key feature is the formal theme of the loggia itself, with its generous openings, didactic exposition of the orders as a new lingua franca of civic life, and theatrical framing of the garden, which made the loggia both the scenery and the spectators' tribune. This compositional dialectic between subject and object, between a point of view and a space framed within it, would be the basis of Palladio's own unique approach to landscape. In all of his work, the encircling territory is not a passive ground waiting to be activated by the imposition of a figure, but a specific site made of existing natural and artificial elements of which the object—the villa—becomes a theatrical frame. In this sense, Palladio's villas are not simply objects enclosed within a reconstructed context (like the Medici villas in the Florentine hills or Pirro Ligorio's Villa d'Este), but are specific objects that frame and redefine the existing landscape as an economic, cultural, and political counter to the city.

The Villa Emo in Fanzolo (1556) perhaps best shows the radicalism of Palladio's approach to the relationship between the villa and its immediate landscape. It is his simplest and most obviously minimal villa, and yet its structure, like all the others, is based on the clear juxtaposition of the *casa dominicale* (palace) with the flanking *barchesse*, which served as storage and as a covered gallery passage between the central body and the symmetrical *colombare* along its two sides. Unlike his other villas, however, this juxtaposition is revealed along the same frontal plane, a device that accentuates the Villa Emo's perpendicularity against the horizontality of the surrounding Veneto plains. In its simplicity, the villa heightens the importance of directing the landscape, not by imposing on it a new, meticulously regulated ground arrangement, but by figuring it through the simple act of





2.4
Andrea Palladio, plan and facade of Villa Emo (1555–1565), as engraved in the *Quattro libri dell'architettura* (1570).

framing. Palladio does this by developing one side of the villa as a continuous row of loggias and the other side as a row of windows, thereby establishing, in a very powerful way, the experience of front and back within the vastness of the building's landscape.

With the Villa Emo we see the classic Palladian paradox of a building that has been designed according to its own compositional logic (typically based on symmetry), yet at the same time is also inflected so as to react to its specific site condition. This paradox is further radicalized in Palladio's most famous (and most bizarre) building, the Villa Capra, or La Rotonda (1567). In the *Quattro libri*, this villa is included in the section dedicated to urban palaces, an aspirational characterization that further reveals Palladio's attempt to transform a building in the countryside into a veritable civic form.[19]

Palladio's equation of city and countryside is already visible in the very obvious formal similarities between his rural villas and civic palaces (apart from the absence of the barns, the palaces are the same as the villas—for example, the Palazzo Antolini in Udine bears a striking similarity to the Villa Pisani in Montagnana). And yet at the Rotonda, the unity of city and countryside is further radicalized, as if the building were a kind of manifesto. Situated on a hilltop just outside Vicenza, the villa was clearly designed as an ideal "observatory" of the landscape (a conceptual and iconoclastic program revealed by the long description of the site that prefaces this project in the *Quattro libri*). The vastness and variety of this landscape is exemplified in the form and peculiar composition of the villa itself: it is a rather small building with four huge porticos made up of colonnades, pediments, and ramps. As is well documented, this unusual form for a house was inspired by the temple at the top of the Sanctuary of Fortuna Primigenia in Palestrina, a building Palladio had visited while in Rome. Yet with the Rotonda, the monumentality and depth

of the villa's porticos appear exaggerated against the scale of the actual building—a contrast that suggests that rather than being grand entranceways into the villa, they are actually oriented outward, toward the surrounding countryside. Thus, the porticos act more like theaters for a spectacle that predates the building: the landscape all around. If we follow this reading, then the classical view of Palladio's Rotonda as a pyramidal composition in which the building forms the pinnacle of the hill is subverted, if not inverted: the diagram of the villa is not about a conventional architectural relationship in which the outside is drawn toward the inside but is a relationship in which the inside is always projecting outward. The formal symmetry of the building is thus an index of the Rotonda's territorial site specificity. Moreover, the fact that the building's symmetry required all four sides to have a portico, and Palladio's placement of a dome over them (the first time such a detail was used in a residential building), convey not a unidirectional aspect but a roundness that suggests an analogy with the infinity of the landscape outside. The result is that the Rotonda subverts both architectural convention, with its inversion of the dominance of the building over its site, and the conventions of Renaissance drama and the rigidities of proscenium front-to-back projection. Fundamentally, then, the building is as radical theatrically as it is architecturally.

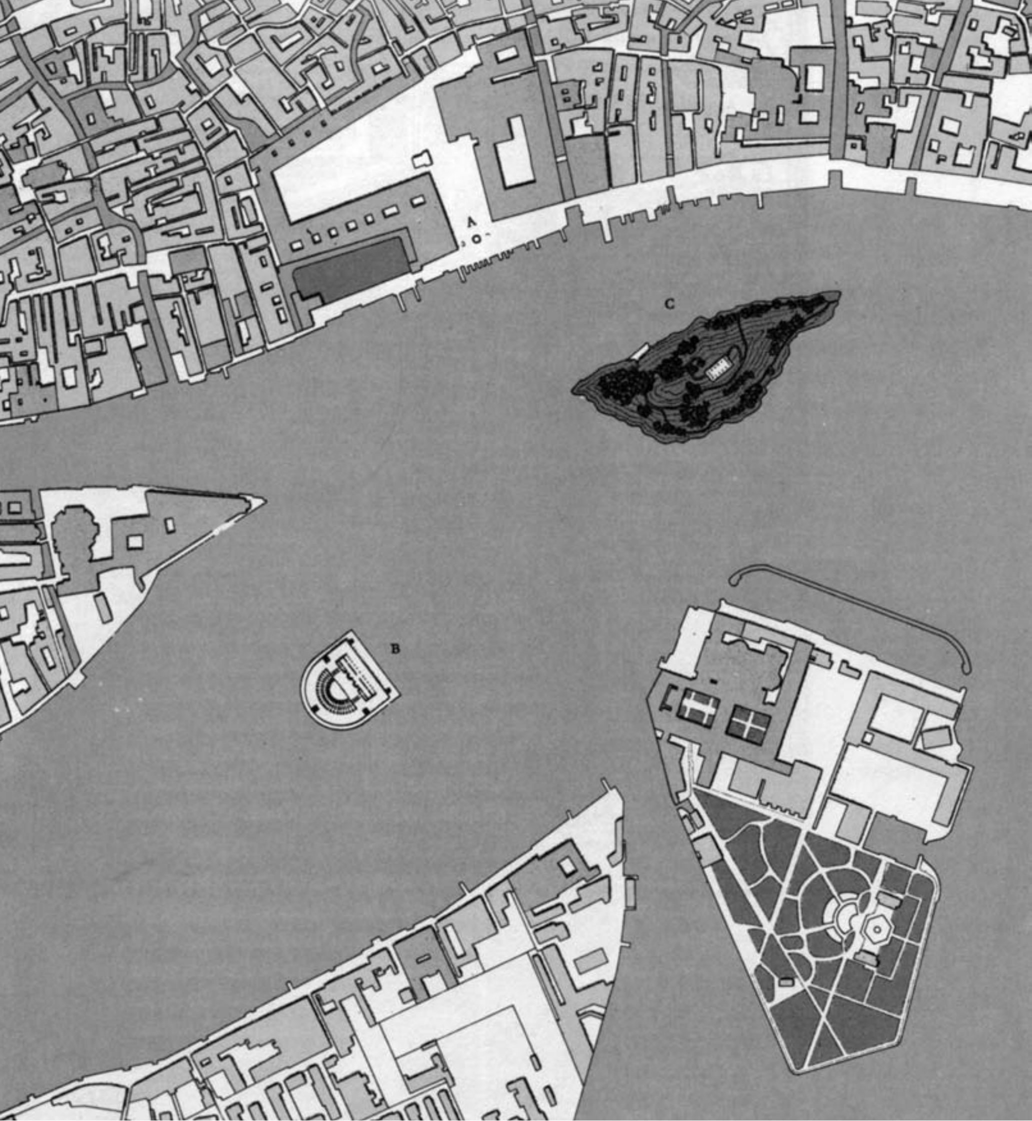
Ultimately, and to a certain extent, naturally, it was in Venice that Palladio finally seemed able to satisfy his project of the city. His buildings constructed there, which are mostly churches, can all be seen against the backdrop of Venice's economic, geographic, and political crises, but more immediately they relate to two significant proposals for restructuring and preserving the city in the wake of the Serenissima's demise. The first was a project initiated by Cristoforo Sabbadino (1489–1543), Venice's first and most illustrious hydraulic engineer, who began to develop the city's

borders in the form of a ring of waterfront *fondamenta*—large embankments that would enclose and define Venice's *forma urbis*. (The Fondamenta Nuove and Fondamenta Zattere, two of the city's most suggestive sites, still visible today, were the result of this proposal.) Sabbadino envisioned this ring not only as a functional element and a necessary limit to the city, but as a new monumental space that, if realized in its entirety, would have opened up the city toward the vastness of the Lagoon.[20]

The second visionary project, culturally more complex and sophisticated, was an elaboration by Alvise Cornaro of the concept of the theater he had constructed in his garden in Padua. Like Sabbadino, Cornaro aimed to synthesize two apparently contradictory forces by opening the city toward the Lagoon while at the same time insisting on a clearly defined urban edge. The project itself was articulated in two parts. The first consisted of a man-made grove of trees planted on a linear island, built in the form of a floating city wall. Besides being proposed as a defense system, offering protection from military attacks and the forces of the sea, this wooded isthmus would also have served as social infrastructure for the city—in effect, a gigantic park. The project's second part focused on the most strategic and monumental point in the city: the basin of San Marco, the vast and monumental space triangulated by the Piazzetta of San Marco, the Punta della Dogana, and the island of San Giorgio Maggiore. Within this space Cornaro imagined another triangulation—a floating theater *alla romana*: an artificial island in the form of a "shapeless little hill," built out of the mud extracted from the city's canals, planted with trees and topped with a loggia; and a spring-water fountain set on the edge of the piazzetta, right between the two monumental columns featuring Venice's twin patrons, the lion of St. Mark and the statue of San Teodoro of Amasea, which framed the view of the basin from St. Mark's

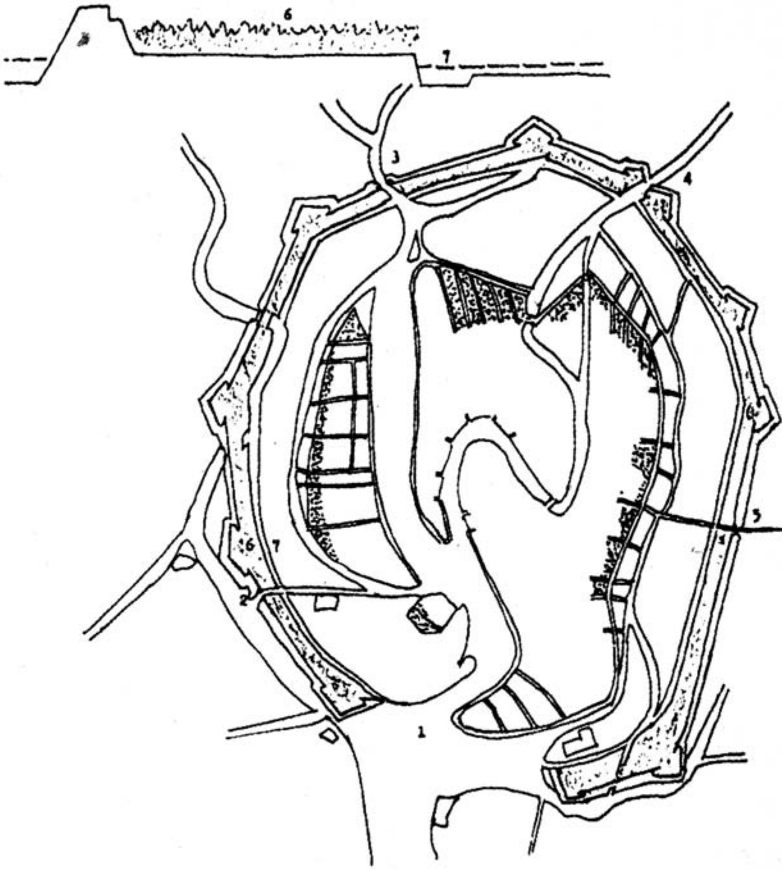
Square. The rationale for this composition (and, as Manfredo Tafuri has noted, its powerful ideological resonances)[21] seems to have been to introduce a territorial condition into Venice's largely aquatic universe. Yet what is interesting about this insertion is that it is formalized not by destroying Venice's insularity, but by theatrically emphasizing the silhouette of the Lagoon as an archipelago.

The schemes of both Sabbadino and Cornaro were designed to expand the city beyond the limits of its traditional monumental spaces, which until then had been iconographically controlled by the Piazza San Marco. Elements of Cornaro's urban vision—notably the freshwater spring and the linear wooded glade—were also clearly meant to introduce, analogically, the theme of agriculture and land management into a city that had previously developed only through its maritime economy. Moreover, the island theater, imagined as a place of public spectacle and thus, like the archipelago of trees, conceived as a piece of social infrastructure, emphasized the performative character of the entire project. Within the context of the Serenissima Republic, the theater was the most popular formal register of a kind of intrinsic, collective art of memory, which made it the most effective formal typology for staging broader political and cultural ideas. Significantly, Cornaro's theater on water was imagined according to the precepts of Vitruvius's ancient Roman theater as reconstructed by Daniele Barbaro in his 1556 edition of *De architectura*—an edition illustrated by Palladio. Thus, an island (Venice's defining urban form) in the shape of a theater (the classical type par excellence) offered the centerpiece of Cornaro's territorial project for Venice, and made explicit precisely what was also at the core of Palladio's analogical language: the utopian and timeless abstraction of architecture, and its ability to evoke potential or even pregnant geographic and political scenarios. The difference between



2.5

Graphic reconstruction of Alvise Cornaro's project for the Basin of San Marco: (A) the fountain; (B) the theater; (C) the "shapeless little hill." (Drawing by Luca Ortelli, from Manfredo Tafuri, *Venice and the Renaissance*, fig. 115.)



2.6
Reconstruction of Venice surrounded by walls in the Lagoon according to Cornaro. (From Manfredo Tafuri, *Venice and the Renaissance*, fig. 117.)

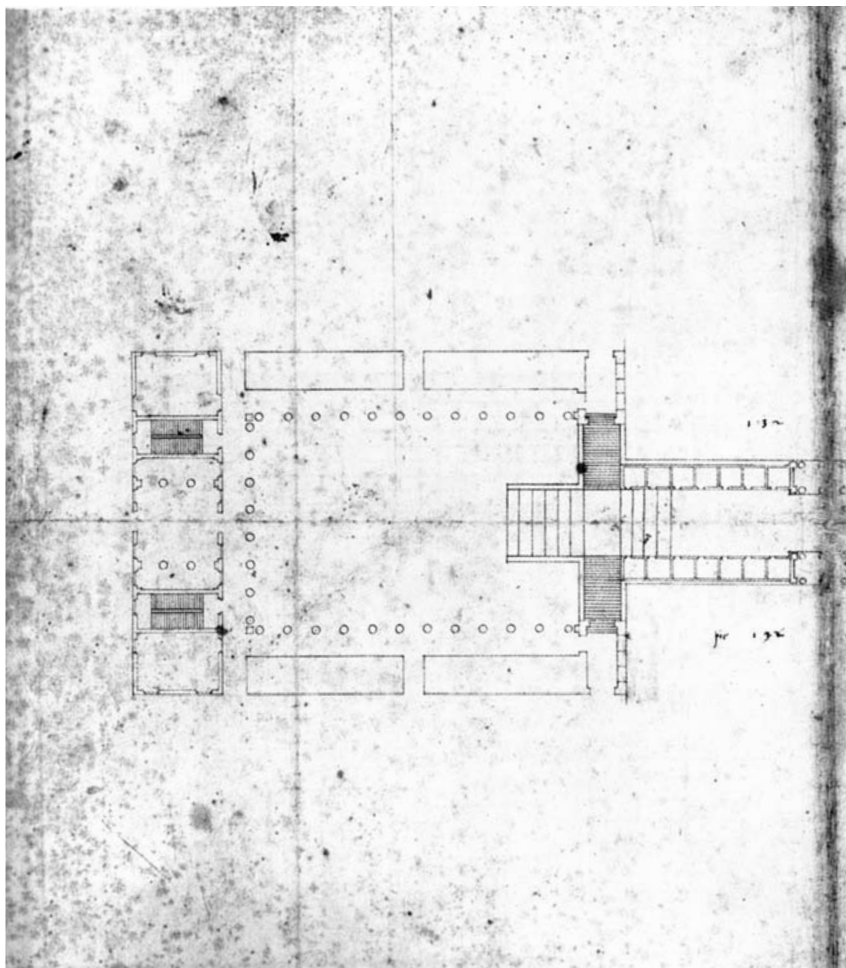
Sabbadino's urban project and Cornaro's vision is that while Sabbadino aimed at the consolidation of the existing city, Cornaro imagined a new Venice that radically invested architecture by stressing the analogy between the singularity of the architectural artifact and the insularity of the city form.

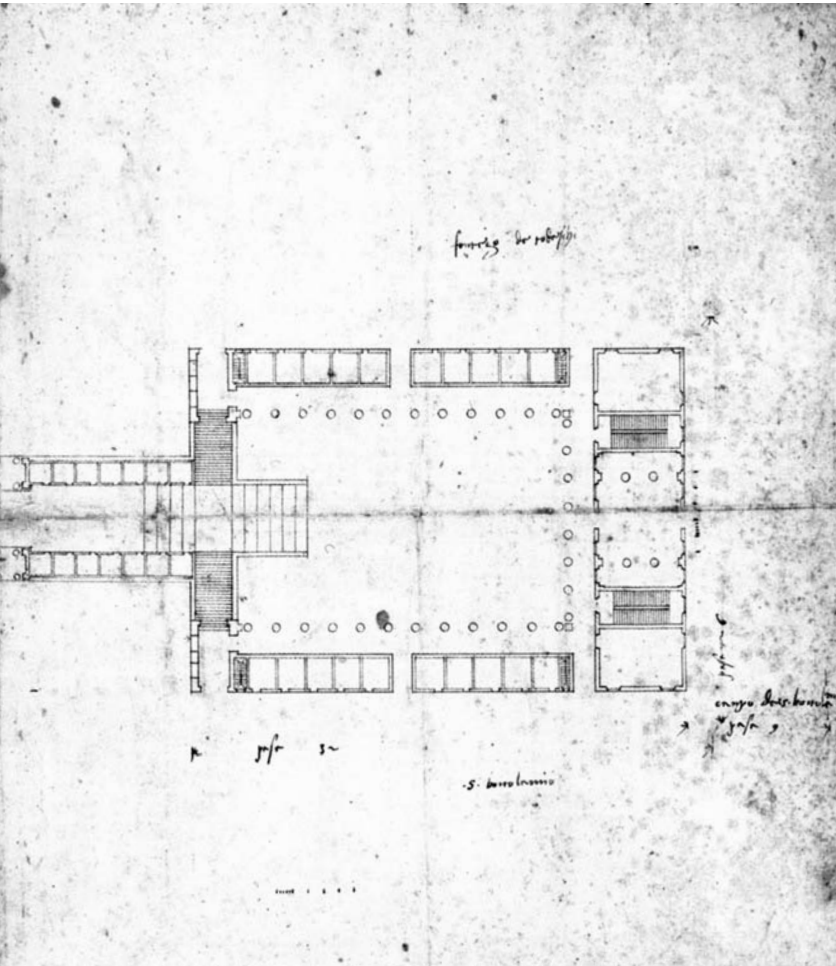
Both projects, however, were united in introducing an urban theme that is key to Palladio's monumental interventions in Venice: the idea of the urban edge not just as city form but also as a new monumental space linking the city to its territorial context—in this case, the Lagoon. In other words, there is a link between the idea of the edge, as introduced by the projects of both Sabbadino and Cornaro, and the physical location of all of Palladio's Venetian buildings. Of course, Palladio never actively chose the site for any of these projects (the site always came with the commission), but in retrospect it is impossible not to see that nearly all of his interventions in Venice were situated on the edge of the city—for example, the facade for San Pietro di Castello (1559), the facade of the church of San Francesco alla Vigna (1564–1565), the church and monastery of San Giorgio Maggiore (1560–1565), the church of the Redentore (1592), and the church and hospice of the Zitelle (1574). Besides their occupation of the periphery, all of these projects also share the same formal language and, above all, a common lexicon for the facade: an austere and hieratic classicism made of the rigorous use of the orders; the superimposition of facades (a technique invented by Palladio but clearly inspired by Bramante as well as by Vitruvius's description of the Fano basilica); and, most obviously, the unprecedented use of *pietra d'Istria*, a white stone that renders the buildings in marked contrast to the vernacular brick, plaster, and wood colors of the city. Visually pronounced, then, not simply by their removal to the edge of the city but also by their striking white stone elevations, Palladio's churches—in particu-

lar San Giorgio Maggiore, Redentore, and Zitelle—also radiated their difference through their foreground, the open Giudecca canal or basin. If the palaces in Vicenza are still flanked by the existing medieval fabric, and the villas across the Veneto are mediated by vernacular elements such as the *barchesse*, it is only in Venice—through the wide open expansiveness of the Venetian Lagoon and the loaded, neither-sea-nor-land archetype of the archipelago—that Palladio was able to establish his architecture as an absolute geopolitical form.

In the end, in order to fully understand Palladio's analogical Venice, we need to go back to his earliest failed assault on the city and the first of two proposals he made for a new Rialto Bridge (1556). In this project Palladio programmatically established an approach to the city that is anything but classical. The bridge—a central theme of Roman urbanism where infrastructure and monument are indissolubly linked—is conceived here as a civic hub made up of two parallel rows of shops spanning the Grand Canal. On either side, two identical, gigantic squares frame the approaches to the bridge, enclosed by an uninterrupted columned gallery. Though only ever illustrated in plan, the form of this project is impressive. And, as with everything Palladio produced, it should be seen not *in vacuo* but in relation to the tight and intricate Gothic fabric of the city—as absolute space miraculously emerging out of the existing dark, labyrinthine city structure.

In the second version of the project—the one published in the *Quattro libri* and painted by Canaletto—Palladio focused only on the bridge. At its center he placed a classical square flanked by two symmetrical colonnaded galleries that would host the various shops. By moving the theme of the city square from the entrances to the center of the span, Palladio transformed the bridge into a forum, a microcosm dialectically linked to the city by virtue of its radical autonomy as a city within the city.



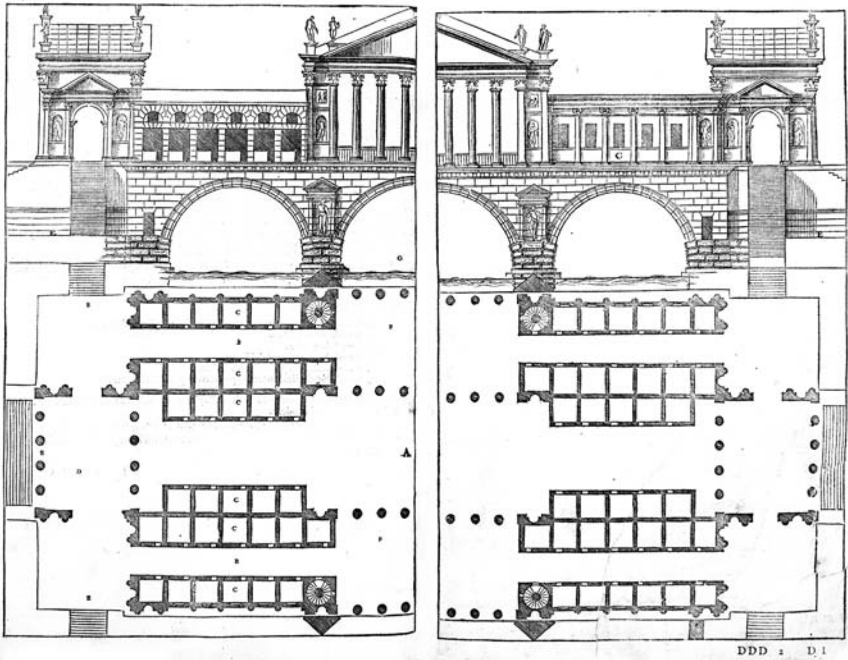


2.7
Andrea Palladio, first design for the Rialto Bridge, 1551–1554. The rigid geometric form of this scheme evokes *per via negativa* the topographic intricacy of the context.

The analogical motive of the Rialto Bridge—as Tafuri once noted—is the radical contrast that Palladio established between the static, somewhat sober character of the forum/square (the elevation of which was designed in the form of a temple, topped by a pediment) and the everyday hustle and bustle of the canal activities below—a contrast perfectly captured in Canaletto's painting. According to this analogy, Palladio's bridge acts as a frame for Venice's constituent elements—a "mental montage," as Tafuri describes it—that defines Palladio's approach to the city.[22] Tafuri argues that "the utopian character of the Rialto project seems to have been generated by a design principle that transformed the city into a territory. In this city-territory the heroic image of architecture entered the city in the form of finite parts, of points that defined the city, without reducing it to an all-encompassed form."[23]

It is precisely this characteristically modern dialectic between the absoluteness of architecture and the openness of the city that Palladio's unique architectural approach sought to establish. Using forms and typologies to effect contextual relationships and political visions, he fundamentally reimagined not only the physical manifestation of the city but its very idea. Significantly, however, unlike most other key theorists of architecture—such as Vitruvius, Alberti, Filarete, or Serlio—Palladio never produced a comprehensive theory or plan, or even a general view of the city. Even though his architecture takes the form of repeatable prototypes, his projects are always rigorously site-specific. As a result, Palladio did not take part in one of the topics through which architectural culture in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries is repeatedly defined—the "ideal city."

In the popular imagination, ideal cities are those rationally planned, perfectly harmonious Renaissance municipalities whose structure and image reflected the rediscovery of humanist



2.8
Andrea Palladio, "Stone bridge of my own invention," design for the Rialto Bridge as engraved in the *Quattro libri dell'architettura* (1570). The image of the temple contrasts with the hectic life of the Grand Canal. The project shows Palladio's dialectical montage of forms at its best.

values within a culture of civic coexistence. But in order to effectively understand how the radicalism of Palladio's project for the city subverted this image, we need to go beyond its conventional interpretation. What is traditionally referred to as an "ideal city" is in fact a complex of theories, projects, and actions for a city designed according to rational and scientifically intelligible criteria. Its origin dates back to Greco-Roman times and the founding of *ex novo* settlements according to repeatable principles independent from the context in which they were to be applied. These principles, often under the umbrella of a singular urban layout, aimed to more effectively link the internal social management of a city with its defense against outside enemy forces. Mediating between the ancient Greek *oikos* (household) and *polis* (city-state), the idealism of the city therefore incorporated everything from the private space of the family house to the militarization of the city-state.[24]

With the fall of the Roman Empire in 476 CE, however, a paralysis ensued in the evolution of the European city that lasted through the eleventh century, as settlements took the form of small, self-sufficient citadels or fortress cities—practically diagrams of the politics of feudalism. The feudal model, of course, proved to be as economically unsustainable as it was architecturally unnavigable, and it was against this model that the city as *civitas* was rediscovered as the fundamental structure for human coexistence from the fourteenth century onward. It is precisely this rediscovery—together with the recovery of the juridical implications of being a citizen as opposed to a feudal *subditus*—that prompted philosophers and, later, architects to retrace the legacy of antiquity as a model for the new city. Vitruvius's *De architectura*, rediscovered in the fifteenth century, was an emblem of this historicism, and supported not only an erudite antiquarianism but also a treatise on city manage-

ment covering all scales of the urban project from the design of houses to warfare.

It was in this context that figures such as Alberti, Francesco di Giorgio, and Filarete expanded the task of the architect from designing buildings to designing entire cities. Subsequently, the image of the ideal city as orderly and conceived according to a rational plan appears in many fifteenth-century paintings, precisely reflecting the political immediacy of urban design. Here the Renaissance invention of perspective clearly resonates, because it demonstrated the possibility of reducing the space of the city to the manageable logic of calculation and the mapping and organization of spatial and geographical facts. But for all the perspectival idealism exemplified by architects like Sebastiano Serlio, Italy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries was in reality so politically fragmented and unstable that an overall planning of its cities according to rational criteria was quite impossible. Those Italian cities that do appear as "ideal" (towns like Pienza in Tuscany or Vigevano in Lombardy) are in fact fairly restricted spaces enveloped by a medieval urban fabric. Interestingly, this is also the case with Rome, a city long predicated on a chaotic and somewhat haphazard model of urban growth. Although the city's papacy in the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries attempted to reconstruct Rome in accordance with its ancient splendor, such plans materialized only in the form of small interventions within the existing infrastructure. For example, Bramante's implementation of Pope Julius II's vision for Rome as an imperial city was (partially) realized, not in the form of an overall plan, but as a strategic positioning of large-scale architectural artifacts connected by an axial grid of roads. Given the limited scope of these interventions, architects like Bramante tended to overload the metonymical and microcosmic resonances of individual buildings in an architectural organism whose formal and spatial

composition (via the use of porticos, squares, forums, villas, and basilicas) exuded the exemplary characteristics of ancient cities. Consider, for example, his Belvedere in the Vatican, where the model of an ancient villa—with explicit references to the Sanctuary of Fortuna Primigenia in Palestrina—is translated into a massive, self-contained courtyard building. Through overly symbolic structures like these, Renaissance Italy's project for the city shifted away from the overall plan à la Filarete toward analogical representations based around contained, finite architectural compositions.

Palladio, like Bramante, looked to the ancient monuments of Rome not simply as sources for the correct interpretation of the orders, but as complex organisms that reproduced the rich architectural qualities of a city. It was for this reason that he so carefully studied the model of the Roman bath, an urban type to which he had planned to devote one whole book in his unfinished architectural treatise. Palladio viewed the bathhouse as a unique public structure because, unlike temples or basilicas, it grouped together multiple programs and activities, lending it an intricacy through its sequence of different spaces. This same spatiality is often evoked in Palladio's villas, palaces, and churches. Think, for example, of the interiors of the Redentore or San Giorgio Maggiore, the forms of which are the result of radically different spatial models, each developed according to its own autonomous geometries and linked together only by the symmetry and continuity of the orders. Or consider the two extraordinary projects for palaces in Venice, published in the second book, whose plans develop around the elucidation of a succession of spaces, the sequence of which is not simply reducible to the traditional tripartite Renaissance palazzo atrium or courtyard.[25]

The same miniaturization of city space into compound architectural artifacts also pushed Palladio to reconstruct Greek and

Latin squares (following Vitruvius's description) in the *Quattro libri*, as models for a variety of colonnaded indoor and outdoor spaces. Because they were associated with the forums of ancient Rome, porticos made by colonnades became the definitive architectural response in framing open, public civic space. Within this analogical context, as we have seen in the Palazzo Chiericati, the Basilica, or the Palazzo Civena, Palladio would often introduce a ground-floor portico, thereby instantly transforming the building from a simple, self-standing object to an entity that symbolically resonated with all of the formal attributes of the city around it. By incorporating public spaces, these buildings were not simply outstanding examples of architecture, but exemplars of an architectural relationship to the city. It is this explicit will to idealize that made Palladio's collective series of buildings the absolute embodiment of a project for the city. Yet the impact of these examples should not be viewed simply in terms of their role in establishing an architectural pattern book (a subservience to type and form that has made Palladio one of the most copied architects in the history of the discipline). Instead, Palladio's portfolio is more powerfully influential within a cultural understanding of the Renaissance city, offering specific architectural compositions that immediately evoke paradigms of city space.

As Giorgio Agamben has written, the act of making an example is a complex business because it presupposes that in order to represent the canon, an example has to be conceptually disconnected from the forms of its everyday use.[26] In the rhetorical mechanisms of an example, form is not simply an object in itself but an object that operates as a paradigm for something else. Agamben also reminds us that in Latin culture there was a distinction between an exemplar, something to be appreciated and understood only with the senses—and thus something destined

to be imitated—and an exemplum, a form whose interpretation requires additional intellectual or symbolic references.

It is exactly as an exemplum that Palladio's architecture operates, with its subtle references to ancient typologies and resonances to wider geographical and political contexts. Through Palladio, architecture extends its influence on the city precisely by being a finite and thus clearly recognizable thing, a "species"—in the sense that the Marxist philosopher Paolo Virno has used the term—consisting of a sole individual that can only be politically reproduced and never be transposed into an omnivorous general program.[27] The power of the exemplum resides in its ability to propose a general paradigmatic framework rather than a set of regulations or commands to be literally deployed. As an exemplum, Palladio's architectural form is not deployed onto a plan, nor is it an urban rule; rather, it is invested with the representation of an alternative idea of the city within the very space of the existing city.

Such an intuitively tactical understating of architecture, as both a coherent set of principles and a mobile element never tied to an overall plan, seems to have its origin in Palladio's passion for the art of war.[28] In the *Quattro libri* he notes that the imperative to construct perimeter walls is of little use to the successful defense of a city compared to the training of the soldiers and an accurate knowledge of the surrounding territory—thus demonstrating a militarized understanding of landscape and civic management which was also faithfully represented in his battle illustrations for the sixteenth-century publication of Polybius's *Histories*. What is interesting about these troop formation diagrams is the way they replicate his villas' own framing of the landscape. This mentality, which fused the stability of architecture with the fluid complexity of new urban spaces and forms, seems to have made Palladio deeply skeptical about any overarching urban plan, and

pushed him instead to frame his (implicit) project for the city in the same way he understood the art of war—as a project tactically open to the multiplicity of its territorial circumstances and yet resolute in its formal strategy. In this respect, Palladio's accessible geography of architectures can be read as exemplars of a city no longer constrained by its walled *civitas*, but as a territory whose form lies in its attempt to trace and make explicit the geographical and political conditions of its existence.