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Daniel Sherer on Peter Eisenman's Palladio Virtuel


PETER EISENMAN'S LATEST BOOK offers a provocative interpretation of Andrea Palladio's reinvention of classical order that has as much to say about the present predicament of architectural practice as it does about the sixteenth century Veneto in which the celebrated Renaissance architect lived and worked. Eisenman's analysis of this "virtual" Palladio—which, as the author explained in a recent lecture about the project, reflects the strata (power of invention) of the humanist architect rather than any transcription of his work into digital media—manages to invent a body of work created nearly five centuries ago with an astonishing actuality by taking a fresh look at its inner grammar. Indeed, Eisenman's thesis, which echoes throughout every page of this closely argued book, is that Palladio—seemingly the most parsonage of classical architecture—was in fact fundamentally anticlassical.

Though at one level Palladio's work exemplifies a strict set of compositional rules, largely derived from Greek and Roman theories of proportion and symmetry, he subverted these norms in wildly inventive ways, and in Eisenman's subtle reading it is this virtuosity that renders Palladio so startlingly contemporary. Displacement is the engine of this undoing, and drawing, both analog and digital, is an medium. Eisenman carefully constructs a series of analytic diagrams to trace out processes of spatial dislocation in Palladio's villas and palaces, giving the lie to the inherited—yet misguided—image of him as a purely classical figure.

Both Palladio's built work and the Palladianism that emerged from it are dominated by this tension between the real (the physical building as it exists in the world) and the ideal: the proportional and harmonic systems that regulate its composition through drawing. Indeed, Palladio famously redrew many of his projects for The Four Books on Architecture of 1570, making them seem more ideal, more harmonious, and hence more paradigmatic for future generations of readers and architects than they actually were. Many well-known historical studies have emphasized this drive to idealization and its underlying proportional framework. Rudolf Wittkower's seminal Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism (1948) and James S. Ackerman's authoritative Palladio (1966), for example, elaborated reassessing -jetter readings of Palladio that inscribed the humanist architect within the matrix of Western classicism. For these historians, it was essential to remind a generation shaken by global conflict that one of the world's most famous architects upheld a universalizing idea of harmony. To this end, Palladio was given the task of inaugurating an unbroken continuity in the classical tradition from the Renaissance to the present.

But this narrative had been questioned as early as 1947, when Colin Rowe published his essay "The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa," which maintained that the formal invention and functional amenity of Palladio's villas present unexpected affinities with (allegedly obvious) differences from the formal and spatial innovations of Le Corbusier's villa designs, especially those of France's Villa Stein in Garches (1927) and Villa Savoye in Poissy (1931). Eisenman was Rowe's student in the early 1960s in Cambridge, UK, and he acknowledges a profound debt to the critic in his preface to Palladio Virtuel. Equally influential, if less explicitly acknowledged, are the Palladian studies undertaken in the 1970s and '80s by Manfredo Tafuri. Unlike Rowe, Tafuri introduced a theoretical dimension into the analysis by describing Palladio's combinatory logic as producing an Eco-esque "open work," thereby presupposing a variable compliance with classical norms. Eisenman, in a sense Rowe's ideal heir (at least from the late 1960s to the early 80s, before he fell under the sway of that most decentering of thinkers, Jacques Derrida), grapples with the heritage of reading Palladio as both a humanist architect experimenting with proportionality and centrality and an unorthodox bridge figure to the modern.

Synthesizing these disparate sources of inspiration, Eisenman provides a compelling account of the transgressive possibilities of Palladio's work, starting with his reading of the Villa Rotonda, built outside Vicenza, Italy, in 1566. Although Eisenman is alert to the strategies of invention that inform Palladio's language, he downplays a rather well-known deviation from classical proportion systems in the plan of the Rotonda: the different widths of the lateral and transverse corridors that penetrate the center of the villa, which offer a divergence that becomes legible when one compares the major front-to-back axis with the minor side-to-side axis, and which is hidden by the external symmetries of the facades.

Eisenman comes within a hair's breadth of acknowledging the discrepancy by referring to the transverse corridor as narrow, but he does not speak of it as narrower than its longitudinal counterpart. It is as if this feature of the villa is simply taken for granted, as an over-simplistic explanation, unlike the more latent anomalies for which he searches. Eisenman's attention is drawn to the radical topological conditions generated by...
by his own virtual analytic models than to any conspicuous spatial exceptions within the actual building.

Indeed, the fact that Eisenman glosses over this point suggests that he is less interested in reading the villa against the grain of traditional analyses than in realizing a broader range of critical potentials by focusing on the activity of reading itself. For example, as he points out, two competing analyses are equally legitimate as far as the organization of the plan is concerned: a three- and a five-part organization. What is at stake here is not the ultimate validity of either reading, but the continuous oscillation between the two—and the coconspirant spatial dislocation that can be unlocked by disparate interpretations of the same plan.

In shifting the terms of reference for the reading of Palladio’s plans, Eisenman is able to see the architect through a lens that is both more flexible and less specific than previous interpretations. Function is almost entirely excluded from Eisenman’s analysis, while form becomes the visible result of invisible shifts of spatial vectors. In fact, the anti-functional aspect of Eisenman’s argument is the one that does the least justice to Palladio’s radical innovations, as Palladio is arguably the most attentive of all humanist architects to questions of functionality. His villas, with few exceptions (the Rotonda being the most conspicuous), are working farm buildings that have often been ennobled and classicized only on the surface, with temple-like pediments and centralized facades. Yet even if Eisenman seems to assume that functional considerations must be put aside to enable his close reading of architectural form, he also manages to turn the very premise of architectural formalism, and its privileged instrument, the diagram, against itself by subordinating the visible formal composition of the buildings to a reading of latent displacements that are at once spatial, topological, and virtual.

The emphasis on spatial latency is one implication of the rather idiosyncratic use of the term virtual. This sort of projective perception might be illuminated by the insight of Henry James, who associated this pattern-based seeing with the trope of the “figure in the carpet”: a figure that is potentially there, prior to any viewing, though everybody sees it differently (the carpet in this case standing for the Palladian plan). Another implication is the primary one: the gradual emergence of the void as a spatial signature of the late villas. The best example—indeed, the most paradigmatic—is the Villa San Gerardo near Verona, Italy, built in 1610. Here, the center cannot hold, and most of the villa is reduced to a perimeter of outbuildings strung around a huge, empty space. Eisenman rightly underscores the profound destabilization associated with the villa collapsing in on itself, releasing an energy that sweeps away all the forms, spaces, and defining elements previously accumulated by the villa typology.

Given his highly formal emphasis, there are some inevitable blind spots in Eisenman’s analysis. He entirely neglects the villa’s dialogue with landscape, for example. This limitation becomes especially apparent when one recalls that Palladio is among those rare humanist architects who establish a genuine reciprocity between landscape and architecture while managing to preserve the absolute geometric purity of his forms. Yet instead of being an oversight, this suppression is a strategic choice. In other words: Plans, sections, and elevations suffice for Eisenman’s analysis, which is largely conceived yet rooted in close readings of unexpected and heterodox spatial transformations. At the same time, this would seem to be a lost opportunity to argue for a contemporary vision of Palladio, given the increasing importance being accorded to landscape and site in architectural discourse and practice. The elision of site seems rooted in Eisenman’s profound, quasi-Futurist distaste for materiality in general and for the material embodiment of architectural ideas in particular. This is something that, far from suppressing, Eisenman is quite proud to acknowledge: After all, he is the paladin of an almost entirely immaterial “cardboard architecture,” as readers of the theoretical position he constructed around Numbered Houses of the late 1960s and early 70s are aware.

Kurt W. Forster has observed that every era discovers its own Palladio. Eisenman’s account affirms the architect’s endlessly malleable syntax and its propensity to elicit dramatically different readings over time. But the startling specificity of Eisenman’s vision diverges more sharply from inherited historiographic and critical assumptions than do previous analyses. Only time will tell whether Palladio Virtual succeeds in renewing the project of reading Palladio—now ongoing for almost half a millennium—by providing it with a new set of critical priorities alongside allied strategies of interpretation. Clearly, we are in urgent need of such a shift, at a moment when the humanist project espoused by Palladio seems increasingly extraneous to the concerns of contemporary architects.

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