

LOUKAS KARENTSOS

THE CONFLICT AND FUSION OF THE IDEAL AND THE PRAGMATIC IN PALLADIO'S VILLA ROTONDA

Approximately in the middle of the 16th century, in Book II of his 'Quattro Libri' Andrea Palladio wrote on the Villa Rotonda, its patron, the way it sits on the land, and its plan: "Amongst the most respected Vicentine gentlemen is Monsignor Paolo Almerico, a man of the church who was referendary to the two Supreme Pontiffs, Pius IV and V, and who, because of his distinction, merited being made a Roman citizen with all his family. This gentleman, having traveled for many years in his desire for honor, eventually returned to his homeland when all his relatives had died; to enjoy himself he retired to his place on a hill outside the town [**suburbano**] less than a quarter of a mile away from the city, where he built according to the following project, which I did not think appropriate to include with buildings in the country [**fabricha di villa**] because it is so close to the city that one could say it is in the city itself. The site is one of the most pleasing and delightful that one could find because it is on top of a small hill which is easy to ascend; on one side it is bathed by the Bacchiglione, a navigable river, and on the other is surrounded by other pleasant hills which resemble a vast theater and are completely cultivated and abound with wonderful fruit and excellent vines; so, because it enjoys the most beautiful vistas on every side, some of which are restricted,

others more extensive and yet others which end at the horizon, loggias have been built on all four sides; under the floor of these loggias and the hall are the rooms for the convenience and use of the family. The hall is in the middle and is circular [**ritondo**] and receives light from above..."¹

This is a very critical passage, as it explicitly reveals the clear intentions of the architect when he was designing the Rotonda. In order to understand more fully, however, the manner in which all these elements of site, design, and patronage came together, a more extensive analysis of this particular time period of the *cinquecento* and the social conditions that prevailed is required. Read and understood in this mode, the villa that Palladio designed is a product of its time and place, a paradigm of all the values held dear in this part of the High Renaissance world; the fusion of the ideal conditions set by a society which anxiously sought to lead an illustrious existence find their complete representation in the Rotonda. At the same time another layer is unavoidably present in the synthesis of this building. It is the more pragmatic one, co-existing with the humanist symbolism of the villa but addressing the every-dayness of its reality. This part of the design does not attempt to aspire to something higher; it rather accepts the *de facto* veracity of life on, as well as from, the earth. The fact that the

“real” and the “ideal” are present in one entity, contrasting and completing one another at the same time, presents a real challenge, and changes the perception and appreciation of this building by implying a much more complex and rich reading of it.

From the way the text in the ‘Quattro Libri’ discusses the location of the building and everything that is present around it, it is evident that ‘place’ is celebrated in this design, and Palladio is trying to directly relate the man-made to the natural. This is partly due to a renewed interest on the land in the Veneto, a situation that stems from the military defeat that Venice suffered on May 15, 1509, by the French troops at Agnadello. The League of Cambrai, created in 1508 and comprising of France, Spain, the Empire, the Papacy, as well as the city-states of Milan, Florence, and Naples, was looking for a way to check the expansionist ambitions of the Republic of St. Mark. After their victory in Agnadello, they pushed the war all the way to the lagoon, took brief control of cities that belonged to Venice, and the war did not stop until 1516. Eventually, Venice regained its territories, and realized that, for the first time in its long history, it could not be content with just being a maritime force. Portugal and Spain on the West, and the Ottoman Empire and the Barbary corsairs on the South and the East made the maintenance of the undisputed hegemony of the Mediterranean basin and its trade routes very difficult. On the land, it was facing new, dangerous rivals that would try to eliminate its influence and importance. Confronted with this new state of affairs, it was almost obliged to focus on maintaining its territory, and making the most out of the existing situation.²

Thus, after approximately ten years of recuperating from the war, Venice turned its attention to the *terraferma* and began to reshape it. Most of its great patrician families, as well as the local aristocracy of the dependent cities (Padua, Vicenza, Verona, Treviso, etc.) started to cultivate their landholdings, and acquire more whenever they were able to. Discussing this new trend in his book “The Palladian Landscape”, Dennis Cosgrove writes: “During the same period [the 16th century] Venetians were taking ever

greater interest in their landed territories on the Italian mainland, both to defend their city against military attack and excessive waters draining into the lagoon, and for investment in land improvement and increased agricultural production. An important debate over the destiny of the city and its future policy direction became bound up with matters of land so that for the first time in the history of the maritime republic Venetians looked to the land as part of the self-definition of their state and their world.”³

Accompanying this shift, the art of the era, and indeed beginning half a century before the period this paper is concerned with, made landscape one of its very important themes, continuously recurring. The idea of humans in the land became a *genre*; in the paintings of the main Venetian artists of the 15th and 16th centuries, such as Giovanni Bellini, Paolo Crivelli, Palma Vecchio, and Giorgione, nature was either background or setting. Paintings such as the “Tempest” revealed the extent to which man’s physical and spiritual involvement in the *cosmos* became of essential importance. Sometimes the representations were very specific, recordings on the canvas of actual settings. This fascination with the theatrical aspect of nature, and the way people and buildings are placed in it so as to enhance its meaning and, ultimately, signify a desire to interact with it, becomes a part of the Palladio design of the Villa Rotonda. The author himself designates the setting as theatrical; in the footsteps of the artistic tradition that precedes him, he sets his creation on top of a hill, making it the focal point of the ensemble. Thus, this architectural, ‘artificial’ volume effortlessly integrates with the natural and at the same time distinguishes itself in it, so that the viewer is aware of this special moment in which the Rotonda “acts” its part and elates the setting by ordering its composition around the central position which the building holds.

In this ‘elevated’ landscape, the Almerico villa received its place among other creations that exemplified the change of values of its era. It is hardly surprising when we consider the fact that Palladio grew up exactly at this critical time of transformation. He was witnessing it constantly, as the projects of irri-

gation and land reclamation taking place in the territories in which he was active were rapidly transforming the earth. Moreover, one of his early and influential acquaintances, Alvise Cornaro, was, as James Ackerman describes him, "a great figure in Padua; a successful farmer, a generous patron and a scholar, but one who preferred action to rumination and devoted much of his life to a vigorous campaign for the reclamation of the river deltas along the Adriatic coast, writing books and urgent memoranda on the salvaging of arable areas..."⁴ This man was one of the most important and forceful advocates of the need to embrace what was termed 'holy agriculture'[*santa agricoltura*]; he was the first one to describe it as such, in one of his many endeavors to persuade the Council of Ten to invest in the *terra firma*. The humanist education that the architect himself received was always stressing the evidence of God's creation all around us, and how humans had to dwell in this world, trying to beautify it with their skills. St. Augustine, in his writings, describes the work that the humans do on the land not as a burden, but as "*exhilaratio voluntatis*"; the will's joyful participation in Divine Creativity; his texts, among others, became the core of humanism. Palladio, who followed such ideas that were prevalent in his circle of acquaintances and patrons, was taking commissions for country dwellings, the *villas*, from aristocrats who embraced this new tendency to live in, as well as from, the countryside. The name given by Palladio to this type of person was "the great Republican gentleman" or "the gentleman of great splendor and ease". These individuals chose a life which was characterized by a constant self-awareness of social position and did their utmost to maintain this status; owning a dwelling that becomes a manifestation of the noble living in the land and of the dignified existence in nature was consequently becoming a matter of the utmost necessity and importance.

The Rotonda is situated in a part of the Veneto that has a great concentration of villas belonging to noblemen, the majority of them being part of the aristocracy of the city of Vicenza. These were members of great patrician families, like the Thiene and the

Valmaranas, that patronized Palladio. The greater part of the number of these noblemen had their ancestral estates in little villages around Vicenza, which were their original seats of power. The new dwellings that the architect designed sought to consolidate this rule by creating an inextricable bond with the land. Architecture ordered the surrounding area through an act of artificial perspectivation by the way it located itself and received the environment, thus dignifying nature by a newly attached layer of significance which ennobled the land in order to acknowledge the magnitude of these great persons. These buildings became marks of authority over a broad area, while at the same time they were also depending on that same area to confirm and legitimize their owners' claim to power. Dwelling as an act of revealing and affirming one's status was instrumental for the manifestation of the social importance of Palladio's contemporary "great Republican gentlemen."

Monsignor Almerico, from the few contemporary sources that mention him, fits the general description of such a personage, although there is a peculiarity in the case of his commission to Palladio. So far as the records at our disposal show, he never meant to be involved in agriculture as a means of sustenance. He was a man at the end of his career, seeking to return to his native area to pass the remaining years of his life. The Rotonda did not have dependencies around it originally; the structures that we see today date from the century after its construction, when the owners had changed. The Rotonda, thus, cannot be totally seen as a *villa* in the Venetian sense of the world, because there was no direct connection with the produce that the land could yield. On the other hand, it can also not be totally viewed as a *villa* in the Roman understanding. What is meant by this is the use of this term in ancient Rome, by Pliny the Younger when he is writing of his villa in Tuscany, for example, to describe a temporary dwelling in the countryside where one would seek to pass some time away from the cares of the city—the *vita attiva* of the urban center versus the *vita contemplativa* of nature. All over Italy, wealthy aristocrats were re-discovering these ancient descriptions

as part of the revered past, and sought to emulate this tradition. The term that applies to this situation is *'villegiatura'*. Every summer, privileged citizens and church prelates, even the Pope himself, would leave the city of Rome and spend three, four months sometimes, escaping the foul air and atmosphere of the city, living in the clear air of the nature, and very often exchanging visits with one another. The Almerico estate, however, was not merely accommodating the needs and wishes of its owner for a temporary departure from his principal residence. It was the only dwelling of the churchman, as he sold his family's house in the city in order to finance this commission, and the Rotonda was the sole house that he left, by a codicil added on July 13, 1571, to his 1569 will, to his only natural son, Virginio Bartolomeo.⁵

Therefore, the best way to describe the purpose of this *villa* is as a rather unique combination of the two previous definitions of a villa. The owner would live there permanently, but not out of his need to oversee the production of the estate, because there was no such thing. In the same time, it is a sort of permanent *'villegiatura'*, located in a delightful site, detached from the city (although the passage from the *'Quattro Libri'* states that it is as if the Rotonda is in the city itself), and enjoying vistas of the surrounding area. The site itself has all the requirements that Palladio sets in Chapter XII of Book II of his treatise, entitled *'On Choosing the Site for Buildings on Country Estates'*: "it will be most convenient and attractive if it can be built on a river...this [the river] will make it very cool in the summer and will be a lovely sight...But if one cannot have navigable rivers, one must try to build near other forms of running water, which must, above all, be at a distance from water that is stagnant and does not flow, because it produces foul air; we can easily avoid it if we build in elevated and healthy locations, that is, where the air is moved by the continuous blowing of the wind, and the land, because of its incline, is cleansed of its damp and noxious vapors so that the inhabitants remain healthy, happy, and of good complexion...When it is essential to build on a hill, one must select a site that faces a temperate region of the sky and does not lie

continually in the shade of the larger hills..."⁶

A preoccupation with 'healthy' locations is revealed in this excerpt, and the Rotonda is certainly part of this whole tradition that is rooted in ancient treatises. Vitruvius and his *'Ten Books on Architecture'* especially come to mind; Palladio would have been very familiar with it. He participated in the 1556 edition of Daniele Barbaro's Vitruvius, and in his own writings he keeps mentioning instructions given in the Roman text, and how they should be followed. The 1st century author, in Book I, Chapter I wrote: "The architect should also have a knowledge of the study of medicine on account of the questions of climates (in Greek κλίματα), air, the healthiness and unhealthiness of sites, and the use of different waters. For without these considerations, the healthiness of a dwelling cannot be assured."⁷ From this passage, and from Palladio's own, there could be no doubt on the intentionality of positioning. The site on the hill, near a river, not overshadowed by the nearby Berici hills, displays a conscious attempt to understand and adhere to the advice of the architect's earlier colleague. The building itself can be looked at as the full emergence of these principles, which in turn become a part of a greater cosmological viewpoint which is based on the existence of the four elements [στοιχεΐα], namely air, earth, water, and fire. Everything in the world was believed to be a mixture of these, from antiquity on. By positioning his building so as to achieve a balance of the elements, Palladio aimed at making his creation part of the larger continuum around it, harmonically relating and incorporating it in the Creation.

There is more than this link, nonetheless, between the *'Quattro Libri'* and the *'Ten Books'*. The woodcut of the plan and elevation of the villa in Palladio's Book II, the idealized version of what was finally built (only one of Palladio's designs for buildings was actually constructed exactly the same way as it appears in his writings) and especially the domed central portion of it is intentionally reminiscent of round temples of antiquity (Fig. 1). Vitruvius stated, when discussing circular temples in Book IV, that "the proportions of the roof in the center should be such

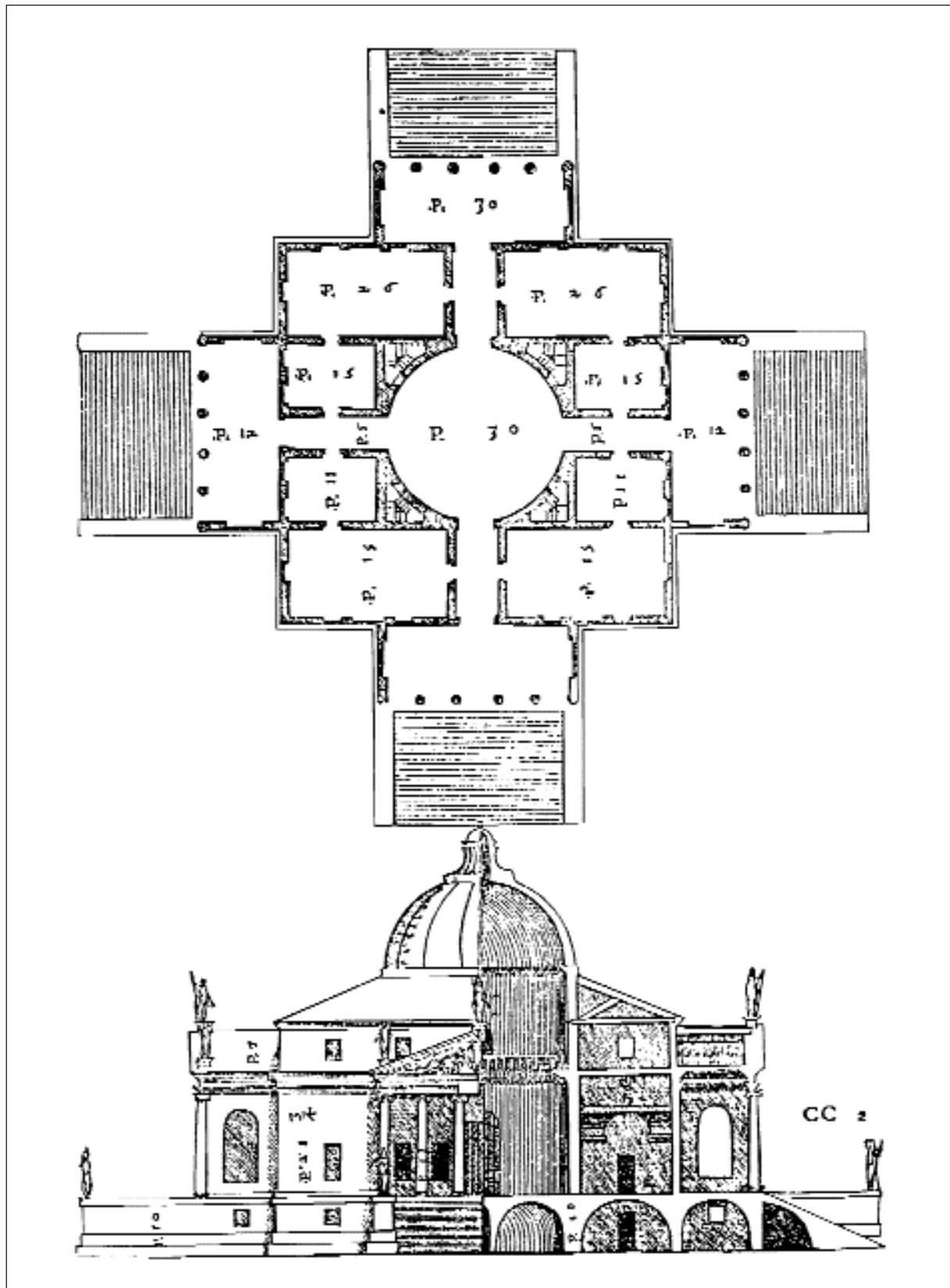


Fig. 1. Plan and section of the Rotonda, as it appeared in the Ouattro Libri, Book II.

Εικ. 1. Κάτοψη και τομή της Ροτόντα όπως εμφανίζεται στο Quattro Libri, τόμος 2ος.

that the height of the rotunda, excluding the finial, is equivalent to one half the diameter of the whole work.”⁸ Palladio, when he conferred his views on rotund temples in Book IV, writes that “the dome or cupola is built above the architrave, frieze, and cornice of the corridors and is half the height of the whole building. That is how Vitruvius laid out round temples.”⁹ This passage suggests a direct connection between the ideal and the built, as the representation of the Villa Rotonda in the ‘Quattro Libri’ follows these proposed dimensions.

The architect would have been familiar with such edifices; he took several trips to Rome and made careful notes of what he saw there. He presented a lot of these buildings, as reconstructed by him, in Book IV. In particular, there is one reconstruction, now in the R.I.B.A. in London, that essentially has the Vicentine villa crowning a hillside religious complex: this is the plan and elevation of the Temple of Hercules *Vincitore* at Tivoli (Fig. 2). The resemblance is striking, and the Renaissance design receives its legitimacy as the heir to the past of antiquity. “Round and quadrangular ones are the most beautiful and regular forms, and are those from which the others derive their dimensions” writes Palladio on Temples in Chapter II of Book IV¹⁰. The Rotonda, after the manner of the ancients, was perceived a combination of these two forms, a temple design *par excellence* (Fig. 3).

The edifice alludes to temple iconography, but is named a villa; at the same time, the residential element is suppressed. The rooms

for the use of the family are subordinated under the floor of the main level. They become part of a secondary world, included in the podium on top of which the central dome revolves and opens itself to the land with its four porticoes (Fig. 3). Although there is no written record specifically naming it as such, this could well be intended as a Temple to the Muses, a little *casino* where the intellectual Vicentine nobility would hold literary, musical, and other celebrations. Palladio justified the use of the pedimented front for houses in his treatise, by supporting that “the ancients also used them in their buildings, as may be seen in the remains of temples and of other public edifices. And, as I said in the preface to the First Book, it is very likely that they got the invention and the concept from private buildings, that is, from houses.”¹¹ With this literary evidence, one could say that it is a house iconography as well as a temple, and its ambiguity lies in the fact that, in the main level, it “houses” the Arts. We know that the use of the principal spaces in the time of Almerico’s life was such. In addition, the owner himself might have been a member of one of the *Academie* of Rome when he was living there. This was the trend not just in Rome, but in other cities of Italy, including Vicenza, whose *Accademia Olimpica* included its most prominent citizens and Palladio’s patrons, as well as the architect himself. This makes a connection with another reason why Almerico chose to return. He left his employment because he was no longer able to serve under the conditions imposed by Pius V. This was a man who brought about the rigid rules

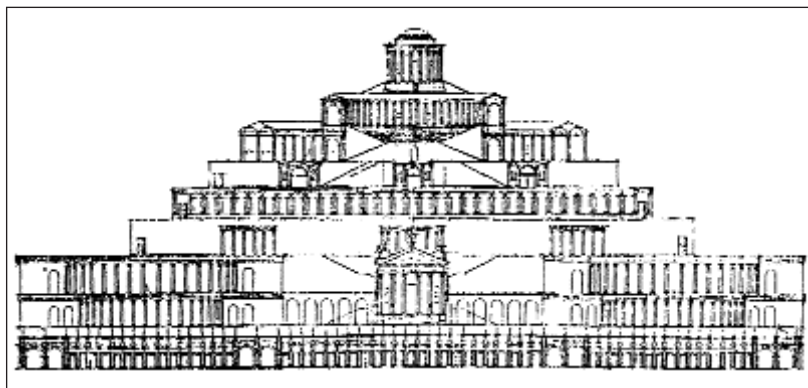


Fig. 2. The reconstruction by Andrea Palladio of the Temple of Hercules *Vincitore* at Tivoli.

Εικ. 2. Αναπαράσταση του τεμένους του Ηρακλή *Vincitore* στο Tivoli από τον Ανδρέα Παλλάδιο.



Fig. 3. Aerial view of the building and its surroundings

Εικ. 3. Αεροφωτογραφία του κτηρίου και του περιβάλλοντος χώρου.

of the Counter-Reformation, one who constantly chastised his cardinals for over-indulgence in splendor and magnificence; during his time, the Vatican was stripped of its sculptural decorations, because of their pagan allusions. Such behavior could drive off a man like this church prelate, one who was evidently very fond of such works of art, as the commission for his own house shows.

At the same time as embodying an exalted mode of existence and cosmic perception, the Rotonda was a place of abode of humans, the family and servants of the owner. They occupied the spaces under the central hall (Fig. 4). These are rooms of modest height that follow the division of the plan directly above them, but share nothing of its magnificence or spaciousness (Fig. 5). These 'cavernous' rooms bear witness to the everyday life that would take place between the vaults that hold the structure together, as if this domain, firmly rooted on the ground, is holding the concreteness of reality and supports what is above

it, a place of dreams, halfway between heaven and earth.

Visually and conceptually apart, yet representing a vertical continuity, these two distinct elements—the base of the temple and the temple itself—communicate only with flights of steps that are hidden in the corners of the main *salone*, compressed in the thickness of the structural elements (Fig. 6). This intensifies the separation, as these two worlds are not supposed to be seen joined. The 'belvedere' idea that prevails in the main floor, an idealized circle within a square, the divine locked within the terrestrial, is not to be disturbed by the mundane daily existence of the world of the grotto below it. Yet, the rays of light and the rainwater that entered the oculus of the dome would fall in the middle of the building, through the circular opening of the floor, into the vaulted apartments below, and disappear inside the earth. It could well be that the idea of an 'axis mundi' was intended in this gesture of the architect (Fig. 4 and 11). There is a willingness to show the reciprocity of heaven

Fig. 4. Central hall of the Rotonda.

Εικ. 4. Ο κεντρικός χώρος της Ροτόντα.

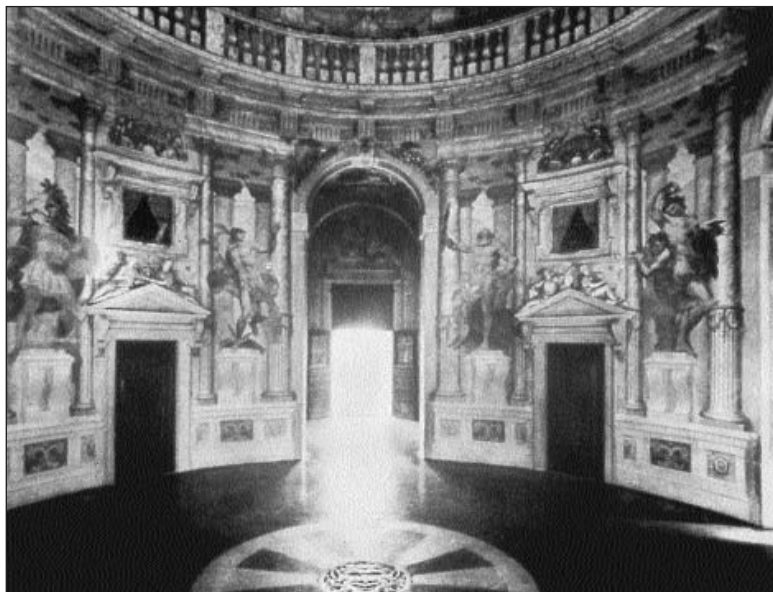


Fig. 5. The vaulted spaces of the lower part of the building.

Εικ. 5. Ο αψιδωτός χώρος στο κάτω τμήμα του κτηρίου.



above and the earth below, making the human structure the mediating element in which the two meet, connected in their disconnectedness.

Read horizontally, the Rotonda displays another attempt to unite and at the same time keep apart the town and the nature. Upon closer examination of the northwest and northeast facades, facing the city and its river, it is apparent that the temple form is supposed to be the main focus (Fig. 7). The two approaches to the building, the main one from the street and the carriage-way from the Stradella Valmarana, are sloped up gently, revealing the edifice as a crown on top of its little hill, in Palladio's own description (Fig. 8). The main floor would be prominent to the guests and fellow *literati* that



Fig. 6. One of the staircases hidden in the thickness of the corner walls of the central hall.

Εικ. 6. Ένα από τα κλιμακοστάσια μέσα στο πάχος των γωνιακών τοίχων της κεντρικής αίθουσας.

would arrive to be part of the gatherings. But on the other two facades, the space around the volume of the building ends abruptly, and there is a steep drop with retaining walls (Fig. 9, 10). This reveals the artificiality of the elevation, and what is more interesting, the dwelling spaces under the dome. On the southwest side, there is even a door that leads from the retaining wall to a lower plateau, today a kitchen garden (Fig. 10). These are the views to nature, and the inhabitants of the building were meant to dwell in it and partake in its everydayness (Fig. 9). They were more directly involved with it, being able to step outside the boundaries of the idealized structure above them and not just view, but be part of the land. In the form of the villa, all levels of existence were accessible, and

how one was to perceive and be part of it depended solely on his involvement with the entire assembly, which in itself finally became a question of status.

The conclusion that is inevitably drawn is the idea of conflict and reconciliation in one structure. It strives for perfection, with clear references to the Pantheon and other circular temples of antiquity, and it certainly shows a concern to reach and embrace the divine. Its form is exemplary in the fact that its centralized circle within the square becomes the focus of the entire plan, where the axes meet (Fig. 7). This space captures the fantastic, becomes didactic in what is the new reality that the patron is attempting to bring about. Its mere existence legitimizes this attempt,

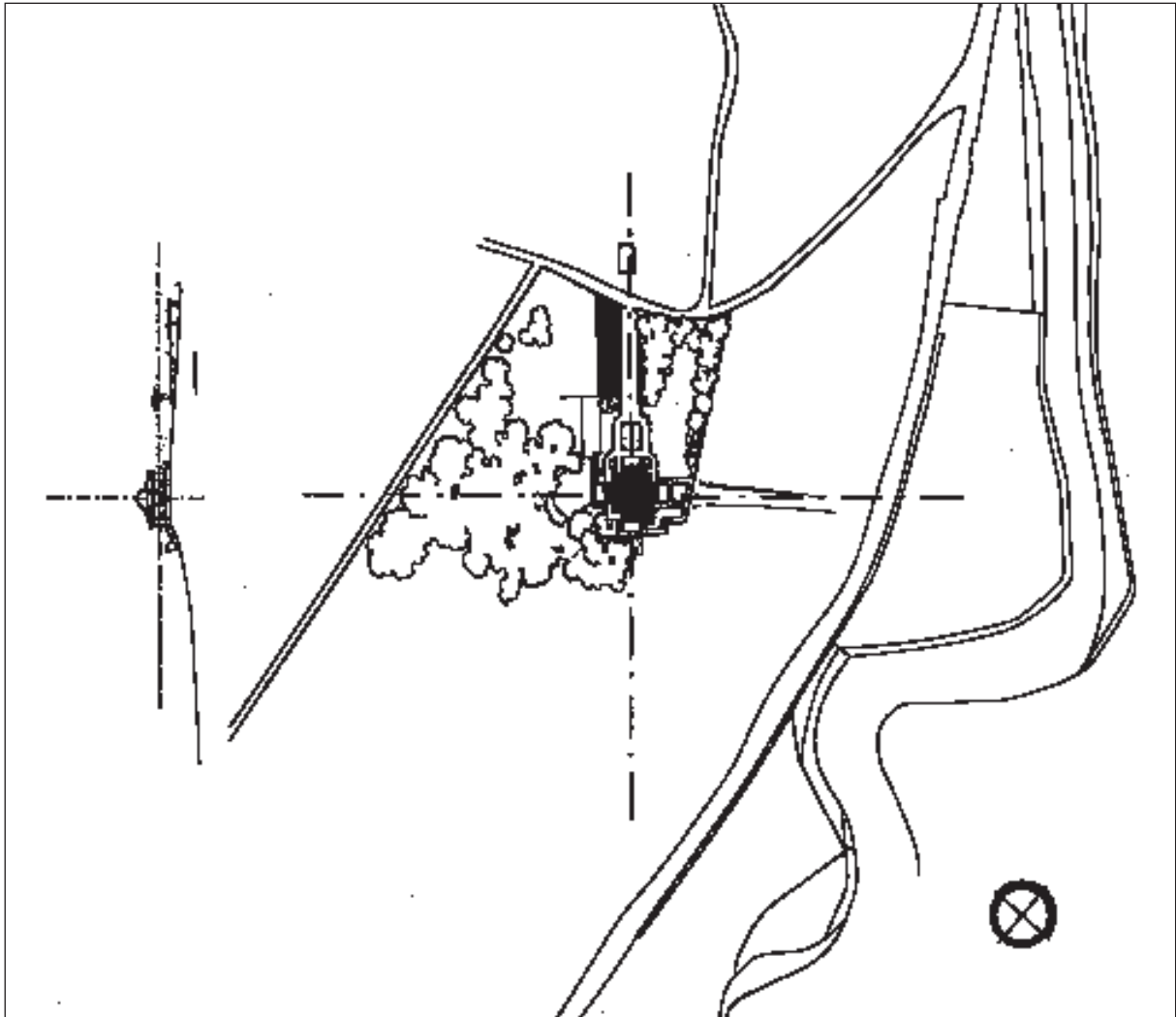


Fig. 7. The building and its environs; plan and section.

Εικ. 7. Το κτήριο και το περιβάλλον του. Κάτοψη και τομή.



Fig. 8. NW façade of the Rotonda, view from the carriage approach.

Εικ. 8. ΒΔ όψη της Ροτόντα όπως φαίνεται από την κύρια (αμαξωτή) πρόσβαση.



Fig. 9. SE façade of the Rotonda.

Εικ. 9. ΝΑ όψη της Ροτόντα.



Fig. 10. SW façade of the Rotonda, view from the kitchen garden.

Εικ. 10. ΝΑ όψη της Ροτόντα όπως φαίνεται από τον κήπο της κουζίνας.

because it is instantly recognizable as part of a tradition that is re-invented in the 16th century, and adjusted to the social demands of the era. Alongside these distinguished aspirations, though, the concreteness of reality is ever present in the almost subterranean apartments of the inhabitants and servants. In this gesture, one cannot help but notice the attempt to suppress their existence; at the same time, they are to aspire and attempt to grasp the new message that is conveyed just above their quarters. This is a unique concept, because man does not rule over the elements in the Rotonda, but is hierarchically placed below their place of union, humbling himself before the force of Creation. The land that he is part of and has access to receives and is received by the four pediments. The forces of nature enter from above in the semi-circular room; night and day are visible through the oculus. This *tholos* becomes a register of

eternal time and place, uninhabited and yet full of existence (Fig. 11). The possibilities to learn from it were there; it was up to the individual to decipher their messages, proceeding towards a fuller understanding of the cosmic order.



Fig. 11. The dome over the central hall.

Εικ. 11. Ο τρούλλος πάνω από τον κεντρικό χώρο.

FOOTNOTES

1. Palladio, Andrea, *“The Four Books on Architecture”*, 94.

2. Cosgrove, Dennis, *“The Palladian Landscape”*, 30-35.

3. Ibid. 45.

4. Ackerman, James, *“Palladio”*, 22.

5. Semenzato, Carlo *The Rotonda of Andrea Palladio, Corpus Palladianum, Volume I*, 43.

6. Palladio, Andrea, *The Four Books on Architecture*, 121-122.

7. Vitruvius, *Ten Books On Architecture*, 10.

8. Ibid. 124.

9. Palladio, Andrea, *The Four Books on Architecture*, 219.

10. Ibid, 216.

11. Ibid, 69.

* Illustrations 1,2,4,5,7,8 are reproduced from the book *“The Rotonda of Andrea Palladio. Corpus Palladianum, Volume I”* by Carlo Semanzato. Illustrations 3 and 6 are reproduced from the book *“Andrea Palladio”* by Lionello Puppi.

Λουκάς Καρέντζος

η συγκρουση και η ενωση του ιδεατου και του πραγματικου στη βιλλα ροτοντα του PALLADIO

ΠΕΡΙΛΗΨΗ

Με βάση την γραπτή μαρτυρία του Andrea Palladio, καθώς και με τα επιμέρους ιστορικο-θεωρητικά στοιχεία που υπάρχουν για τον 16ο αιώνα, η πολύ ενδιαφέρουσα αρχιτεκτονική της Villa Rotonda παρουσιάζει μια πολυμορφία ως προς τον σκοπό της κατασκευής της. Μέσα από τις συνθήκες που δημιούργησε ο επαναπροσδιορισμός του ιστορικισμού στην Αναγέννηση με βάση τις ιδιαίτερες ανάγκες αυτής της εποχής στην Ιταλική χερσόνησο έγινε μια αξιωματική προσπάθεια να μεταφερθούν και εκφραστούν πάνω στο ίδιο κτίριο στοιχεία και προτάσεις πολλές φορές φαινομενικά αντίθετα μεταξύ τους, αλλά που στην πραγματικότητα αλληλοσυμπληρώνονται. Κατ'αυτόν τον τρόπο, η Rotonda μπορεί να ερμηνευτεί ως μια περίπτωση αρχιτεκτονικής εκφράσεως όπου κατά την συνύπαρξη πολλών ετερόκλητων επιδράσεων και επιλογών η σύγκρουση του ιδεατού και του ρεαλιστικού υπάρχει με μια πρώτη ματιά

αλλά και συγχρόνως καταργείται σε μία ιδιόμορφη συμφιλίωση των δύο. Στηριζόμενη πάνω σε μία πρώτη και αρκετά στοιχειώδη ανάλυση βασισμένη στα παραπάνω η μέχρι πρότινος αντίληψη ως προς τον σκοπό και έκφραση αυτού του κτιρίου είναι αναπόφευκτο να μεταβληθεί, υποδεικνύοντας μία πιο πλούσια και περίπλοκη τάξη πραγμάτων.

Περιγράφοντας την Villa Rotonda στο δεύτερο βιβλίο των *‘Quattro Libri’* στα μέσα του 16ου αιώνα και αναφερόμενος στον ιδιοκτήτη, την τοποθεσία, και το σχέδιο αυτού του κτιρίου, ο αρχιτέκτονας του Andrea Palladio προσέφερε μια πολύ κατατοπιστική μαρτυρία. Ο δημιουργός του εν λόγω αρχιτεκτονήματος ονόμασε την άποψη του σχετικά με τον τρόπο που αντιλαμβανόταν τις παραπάνω παραμέτρους, και με αυτό τον τρόπο υπέδειξε τις προθέσεις του κατά τον σχεδιασμό και την εκτέλεση. Το απόσπασμα από το βιβλίο μιλά για τον ιδιοκτή-

τη Paolo Almerico, μέλος της Αυλής του Πάπα και ευρύτατα ταξιδεμένο, ο οποίος αποφάσισε να αποσυρθεί στην γενέτειρα του, την Vicenza, μετά το τέλος της εκκλησιαστικής του καριέρας. Αναφέρεται στην τοπογραφία, και έτσι κάνει γνωστό τον “γοητευτικό και ευχάριστο τόπο” στον οποίο βρίσκεται το κτίριο, αν και πάρα πολύ κοντά στην πόλη. Τέλος, μιλά για την μορφή που δόθηκε στο ίδιο το κτίριο, και μέσα σε δύο προτάσεις αναφέρει την επιμέρους κατανομή του χώρου σύμφωνα με την χρήση: το επάνω μέρος, με βασικό σημείο σύνταξης και αναφοράς την κυκλική κεντρική μεγάλη αίθουσα η οποία “λαμβάνει φως εκ των άνω”, είναι προσαρμοσμένο σε ένα διαρκή διάλογο με το όμορφο φυσικό περιβάλλον που περιβάλλει την Rotonda, ενώ κάτω από το πάτωμα αυτών των χώρων βρίσκονται τα δωμάτια προς την καθημερινή χρήση της οικογένειας και του προσωπικού του κτιρίου.

Αυτές οι λίγες γραμμές υποδηλώνουν μία εμμονή στην περιγραφή της φύσεως, και δίνουν την εντύπωση πως το κτίσμα βρίσκεται σε μια ιδανική τοποθεσία, επιχειρώντας να ενταχθεί μέσα σε ό,τι το περιβάλλει. Δεν είναι καθόλου περίεργο που δίνεται τόση σημασία στο περιβάλλον. Αντίθετα, είναι μία προσέγγιση απόλυτα εναρμονισμένη στις ιδέες των χρόνων κατασκευής της Rotonda. Αν αρχίσουμε από το άμεσο πλαίσιο, την γεωγραφική περιοχή του Veneto, θα παρατηρήσουμε ένα νέο ενδιαφέρον για τις κτήσεις της ξηράς από την Βενετία, η οποία είχε στην επικυριαρχία της ένα μεγάλο αριθμό πόλεων, συμπεριλαμβανομένης και της Vicenza. Αυτό επήλθε ως αποτέλεσμα της στρατιωτικής ήττας που υπέστη η Δημοκρατία του Αγίου Μάρκου από τις υπόλοιπες μεγάλες ευρωπαϊκές δυνάμεις, ένα γεγονός που την ανάγκασε να επανεξετάσει την θέση της και να ρίξει το βάρος της στην λεγόμενη *terraferma*. Το μέλλον της πόλης άρχισε να εξαρτάται λιγότερο από τη θάλασσα, και μέσα σε πολύ λίγα χρόνια οι αριστοκρατικές οικογένειες στράφηκαν στην καλλιέργεια και αξιοποίηση της γης, η οποία ενδεικνυόταν όχι μόνο ως ένα μέσο συντήρησης και αντλήσεως πόρων, αλλά και για πρώτη φορά ένα ανδιαμφισβήτητο σύμβολο κοινωνικής επιτυχίας. Ένας από τους πατρώνες του Palladio, ο Alvise Cornaro, αναφέρθηκε στην “θεία καλλιέργεια της γης”. Ο

ίδιος ο αρχιτέκτονας, φανερά επηρεασμένος από την τάση της εποχής όπου ακόμα και καλλιτέχνες σαν τους Bellini και Giorgione χρησιμοποιούσαν το φυσικό τοπίο ως πρωτεύον ή δευτερεύον θέμα στους πίνακες του, περιέγραψε τον νέο αυτό τύπο του γαιοκτήμονα, για τους πιο γνωστούς από τους οποίους σχεδίασε αστικές ή εξοχικές κατοικίες, ως “ο μεγάλος ευγενής της Δημοκρατίας” ή “ο ευγενής με άνεση και μεγαλοπρέπεια”. Η οικία του μέσα στην φύση επιβαλλόταν να αντικατοπτρίζει το status του ιδιοκτήτη, και να είναι αντιπροσωπευτική των ιδανικών που ήθελε να πρεσβεύει. Κατ’αυτόν τον τρόπο, το πλαίσιο της Rotonda, η πόλη της Vicenza και το ευρύτερο περιβάλλον της, είναι διάσπαρτο από εξοχικές κατοικίες ευγενών, γόνων αριστοκρατικών οικογενειών που ήταν πατρώνοι του Palladio, όπως για παράδειγμα οι Thiene και οι Valmarana. Πρόκειται για κτίσματα τα οποία στοχεύανε σε ένα επαναπροσδιορισμό της σχέσης τους, άρα και του ιδιοκτήτη αφού πρωτίστως είναι σύμβολα της κοινωνικής θέσεως του, με την γη η οποία εξουσιάζανε, αλλά η οποία παράλληλα αποτελούσε και την πηγή αυτής της εξουσίας.

Αυτός ήταν ο σκοπός της εξοχικής κατοικίας, της *villa*, στην βενετσιάνικη τάξη των πραγμάτων: ένα κτίσμα στενά συνδεδεμένο με την καλλιέργεια της γης, από την οποία και προσελάμβανε την μείζονα σημασία του. Παράλληλα με αυτόν υπήρχε και ένας άλλος ορισμός, πολύ πιο γενικός και ολωσδιόλου προσαρμοσμένος σε μία αντίθετη φιλοσοφία. Είναι η λεγόμενη *villegiatura*, απόρροια της ουμανιστικής σκέψης και διάθεσης που επηρέαζε την Φλωρεντία και την Ρώμη κατά την Αναγέννηση, η οποία είχε να κάνει με τον ρόλο της εξοχικής κατοικίας στην αρχαία Ρώμη και τον τρόπο που οι γραπτές μαρτυρίες εκείνης της εποχής, με πιο σημαντική αυτή του Πλινίου του Νεωτέρου, έγιναν γνωστές και δημούργησαν μια καινούρια παράδοση κατά τον 16ο αιώνα. Η *villa*, σε αυτό το πλαίσιο, έγινε ένας τόπος φυγής και ξεκούρασης μακριά από τις ευθύνες της αστικής υπάρξεως, της *vitta attiva*, προς μια *vitta contemplativa*, ένα τρόπο ζωής αφιερωμένο στην μελέτη και την περισυλλογή.

Η Rotonda, κατά ένα μοναδικό τρόπο, δανείζεται και από τις δύο κατηγορίες της εξοχι-

κής κατοικίας. Σύμφωνα με την βενετσιάνικη παράδοση ήταν ένα σπίτι εκτός πόλεως, όπου ο ιδιοκτήτης έμενε μόνιμα, όμως χωρίς να έχει κανένα σκοπό καλλιέργειας της γης. Ο Almerico, στο τέλος της ζωής και της καριέρας του, ακολούθησε μάλλον την *vitta contemplativa*, ζώντας εμπνευσμένος από το εξιδανικευμένο περιβάλλον που περιείχε τα στοιχεία τα οποία, κατά τον Palladio, κάνουν ιδανική μία τοποθεσία. Αυτό είναι μία θεωρητική συνέχεια της αρχαίας παράδοσης για τον ιδανικό συνδυασμό των 4 στοιχείων της φύσεως και την επίδραση τους στην αρχιτεκτονική που σίγουρα επηρέασε τον αρχιτέκτονα, καθώς ήταν μέρος του πρώτου βιβλίου του Βιτρούβιου στην έκδοση του οποίου το 1556 βοήθησε και ο Palladio. Αυτή η villa ζητούσε —στα ίχνη μίας ιστορικής κληρονομιάς— να εναρμονίσει το κτίσμα με το περιβάλλον, και είχε ως έμπνευση παραδείγματα του μακρινού παρελθόντος. Ο Βιτρούβιος περιέγραφε πως ο κύκλος είναι το ιδανικό σχήμα για ναούς, και προσέφερε τις ιδανικές αναλογίες. Ο Palladio με τη σειρά του ανέφερε ως ιδανικά σχήματα για ναούς τον κύκλο και το τετράγωνο, και μελέτησε διάφορα παραδείγματα από την αρχαιότητα. Η Rotonda, ένας συνδυασμός κύκλου με τετράγωνο και σχήμα που παραπέμπει σε κτίρια της Ρωμαϊκής εποχής θα χαρακτηριζόταν ως ένας ναός, ίσως θυμίζοντας μία Ακαδημία αφιερωμένη στις Μούσες και την ύπαρξη του ανθρώπου μέσα την φύση. Στο επάνω κυρίως μέρος του κτιρίου γινόταν συγκεντρώσεις διανοουμένων της εποχής οι οποίοι, ακολουθώντας τον τρόπο ζωής και επαφής με τα 4 στοιχεία, μεταμόρφωναν αυτές τις αίθουσες σε μία τέτοια Ακαδημία, κάνοντας αυτό το αρχιτεκτονικό έργο ένα από μέσο προσεγγίσεως του ιδεατού, της αρμονικής εντάξεως της ανθρώπινης παρουσίας στον Κόσμο.

Μία ρεαλιστική ματιά στην καθημερινότητα της απλής ζωής ήταν βεβαίως το ίδιο παρούσα στην Rotonda, και χωρίς αυτήν δεν ήταν δυνατό να συνεχίζει να λειτουργεί ως οικία του Almerico. Τα δωμάτια προς χρήση της οικογενείας και του υπηρετικού προσωπικού ήταν τοποθετημένα κατά ένα τρόπο που τους προσέδιδε μία διακριτικότερη παρουσία στο όλο σύνολο, “βυθισμένα” κάτω από το πάτωμα της κυρίας σάλας και σε άμεση επαφή με την γη και, συμβολικά αλλά και πρακτικά, την εξάρτηση του ατόμου από αυτήν. Λειτουργούσαν ως το θερμέλιο και βάθρο του κτιρίου, πάνω στο οποίο στηρίζεται αλλά και “αιωρείται” πάνω από το έδαφος ο συμβολικός ναός που οπτικά κατέχει την πιο περίοπτη θέση εκ των δύο. Στενές σκάλες κρυμμένες μέσα σε χοντρούς τοίχους συνέδεαν τα δύο επίπεδα του κτιρίου, στην μέση των οποίων υπήρχε ένας νοητός άξονας φωτός, αέρα, και νερού της βροχής, που από το άνοιγμα της ημικυκλικής οροφής συνέχιζαν την καθοδική τους πορεία στο χώμα. Έτσι, ακόμα και σ’αυτόν τον συμβολισμό της σπηλιάς και μιας αρχέγονης κατάστασης υπάρξεως τα 4 στοιχεία του σύμπαντος ήταν πάντοτε παρόντα. Με βάση αυτό το συλλογισμό παρατηρούμε ό,τι δεν απομόνωσε ο αρχιτέκτονας αυτό το υπόγειο μέρος του γενικού συνόλου. Υποδηλώνεται στις δύο προσόψεις που βλέπουν προς την φύση, όπου δεν υπάρχει η γεμάτη θεατρικότητα επεξεργασία του εδάφους που συναντάται στην προσέγγιση από την πόλη και τον δρόμο με σκοπό να αναδείξει το ανυψωμένο τμήμα της κατασκευής.

Συνολικά, η Villa Rotonda αποτέλεσε μία αποδοχή και συγχρόνως μία υπέρβαση της ίδιας καταστάσεως. Λειτουργώντας σε δύο επίπεδα κατόρθωσε να προσφέρει ένα χώρο-μέσο ηθικής και πνευματικής ανύψωσης, χωρίς όμως να επιχειρεί την αποκοπή από τις υφιστάμενες συνθήκες και ανάγκες της πραγματικότητας.

