

The Ecology of the Ideal Villa

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Hundreds of years of study document our appreciation of the villas of Palladio and other Renaissance humanist architects for their geometric, proportional value and their compositional novelty and invention in adapting ancient Roman architectural forms. We stop short, however, if we consider the villas harmonious merely based on their geometries. Our fascination with the villas also derives from their ecological nature—that is, how they achieve balance and self-sufficiency in the landscape, how people live harmoniously with nature within them, and how they seek to beautify or perfect the land.

Palladio's Veneto, a region that underwent significant transformations over the course of the Cinquecento, is an interesting case: over two thousand villas remain in the Veneto today as an index of the cultural meaning and power of this architectural form.¹ We will seek to redefine the notion that villa architecture strives toward harmony by broadening our understanding of it to include questions of ecology. Philosophical texts from Plato to Heidegger as well as modern scholarship and contemporary travel writings will guide our investigation of the ecology of the villa as the social and architectural means by which villas accommodate the relationships and agents that maintain ecological harmony within them, rendering the villa a place for them to dwell together on the earth.

Oikos//Ecology

Our modern science of *ecology*, the study of the interrelationships between living things and our world, derives its meaning from principles which are most of all social and

¹ Reinhard Bentmann and Michael Müller, *The Villa as Hegemonic Architecture*, trans. Tim Spence and David Craven (London: Humanities Press, 1992), 3.

architectural. The ancient Greek *oikos*, the word from which *ecology* originates, was a common house type and referred more widely to the idea of the *household*, which comprised the house itself, the family, the land, the property, the servants, and all of the relationships working between them. The aspirations of ecology—to document and elucidate how various life forms exist and coexist in nature—find their conceptual roots in the scale of household operations and the scope of a unitary family within a single house.

What is more, it seems that the word *villa* arose from *oikos*, by way of the Latin term *vicus*, denoting a district.² With an awareness of this genealogy we can take the villa under consideration not merely as an object of artistic or compositional achievement, but as a *house*—as a domestic, familial apparatus that gives form to internal relationships [between individuals of a family] and external relationships [between the family and the workers, the family and the landscape, and the family and the animals].

Let us call the villa an *ecological* typology as we begin to reinterpret the centuries-old appreciation of *harmony* [realized through proportions, symmetry, and Platonic form] in Palladio's villas as *ecological harmony*, wherein balance, wholeness, self-sustaining cycles, and natural rhythms form the underlying syntax.

Definition of the Villa

A straightforward characterization of the villa is difficult to identify. Most simply, the villa is a periodic rural residence for urban élites who seek to escape the city and engage in agriculture and contemplation. However, the villa is not the house of a farmer,

² Bartolomeo Taegio, *La Villa*, ed. and trans. Thomas Beck (Philadelphia: Penn Press, 2011), 30.
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nor the manor of a feudal lord, nor a hedonistic pleasure palace, nor a fortification, despite the fact that the mythologies and forms of each of those types may make their way into the design of villas. A set of ecological interrelated governing principles allows us to explain why:

Peripheral locus: the villa is situated carefully in a rural landscape, rendering it fundamentally a nonurban typology and place.

Urban patrons: at the same time, the villa's builders are people who live principally in cities and have derived wealth and learning from urban sources.

Humanistic conception: the villa's builders, seeking not merely to erect a habitation on their rural lands, give concrete form to their ideologies of virtue, the ideal, and nature.

Reciprocity of human and landscape processes: human intervention enlivens and improves the landscape while the landscape supports the flourishing of human art [that is, of the workings and efforts of humanity].

Thus, the villa is not a farmer's house [although typically farmers live at the villa] because its builders and primary dwellers are not farmers. It is not a manor because the builders are not feudal lords but urban humanists who seek to derive, in addition to wealth, some form of enlightenment from the landscape. Likewise, it is not a pleasure palace because its builders pursue virtue and self-improvement rather than self-gratification. And it is not a fortified dwelling because its existence is contingent upon the peaceable and harmonious political, social, and economic conditions that allow its inhabitants to dwell safely there and cultivate its landscape.

The lives of villa builders are made fuller by the addition of the villa to their urban existence. This new life offers an alternative set of values and an alternative source of wealth to those of the city. It offers refuge from the mundane, temporal aspects of the city, its debased or absent values, its social responsibilities and formalities, and the spiritual strain that the villa patrons' dignified position in society forces them to endure. These patrons go to the villa to nourish their spirits with the enchantments of nature, to

find an environment more agreeable to their physical health, to spend time alone, to spend time together as a family, and to engage in some form of agricultural activity.

Like the *oikos*, the villa is composed of all the structures, landscapes, and materials convenient to its functions and the relationships between its agents. Ultimately, *the fundamental purpose of the villa is ecological accommodation—through built, cultivated, and untamed form—of those relationships and agents.*

Agricultural Humanism

Preceding and contemporaneous with the career of Andrea Palladio was a revival in Northern Italian humanism of an agricultural ethos derived from a large body of ancient texts. Xenophon [in the *Oeconomicus*], Virgil [in the *Eclogues* and *Georgics*], Cato [in the *De agri cultura*], Varro [in the *Rerum rusticarum libri tres*], and others expounded through treatise and poem upon methods of cultivation and agricultural production, the domestic role played by agriculture, the moral virtue of agriculture and its attendant hard work, and the notion of achieving harmony with the earth through agriculture.

In the *Georgics*, Virgil suggests that cultivation is what makes us civilized—if we were no longer able to cultivate our food, we would revert by necessity to hunting and gathering in the wilderness.³ Regarding the competition of urban and rural values, Virgil proposes that the farmer's life should be a model for our own lives, that the farmer's life is more *real* than the abstract economies of the city,⁴ that men of the city are ignorant of

³ David Slavitt, *The Eclogues and the Georgics of Virgil* (Garden City, NY: Doubleday, 1972), 97.

⁴ Slavitt, *Georgics*, 138.

their roots and the sources of their wealth,⁵ and that the farmer reads with ease the signs of the earth—the directions of the winds, the movement of the stars—that govern the fortunes of our lives.⁶

The Quattrocento and Cinquecento obsession with Roman texts led naturally to the fervent adoption of these ideals, particularly in the Veneto in the Cinquecento under the pen of Alvise Cornaro, who advocated *la vita sobria* [the sober, or temperate, life], and Daniele Barbaro, who considered agriculture among the virtuous pursuits of a proper gentleman.⁷ The new moral, ethical project of agriculture found the villa, itself a revived form from Roman antiquity, ideally suited to lend concrete form to an agricultural humanism laden with ecological principles regarding the cultivation of the landscape as a primary source of harmony and virtue.

Genesis of the terraferma and the villa veneta

Starting in the second half of the Quattrocento, the longstanding marine mercantile power of the Republic of Venice began to diminish significantly. Suffering economically and psychologically, Venice turned to its *terraferma*, the mainland region of the Veneto, to exploit agriculture as a potential source of new income which could replace its seafaring trade. The Republic, however, found there a terrain of marshy, non-arable, malarial lands. To address this and to ensure the viability of *terraferma* agriculture, the humanist Cornaro established the Magistrato dei beni inculti [magistracy of uncultivated lands], an enterprise which, through land reclamation, large-scale irrigation draining, canal-building, and hydrology, together with the engineering of new

⁵ Ibid., 120.

⁶ Ibid., 99, 105.

⁷ James Ackerman, *The Villa* (Princeton, New Jersey: Bollingen, 1993), 93.

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roads, totally reordered and rendered the Venetian landscape fertile. The result, which still covers much of the Veneto, was a vast, rationalizing patchwork of straight roads and regularized canal grids serving well-ordered parcels of land. As Venice's mercantile power dwindled, the cultivation of the *terraferma* landscape filled the gaping economic void left by the demise of a grand tradition of Venetian trade.

Agricultural humanism advanced in tandem with the economic, political, and technological investments made in the *terraferma* landscape and represented an equally significant cultural investment in the making of an agricultural way of life. The aristocrats of Venice, Padova, Vicenza, Treviso, Rovigo, and Verona who financed the transformation of the uncultivated lands subsequently embraced the ethos of agricultural humanism by cultivating estates and building villas on them, giving concrete form to virtuous and harmonious alliances between the villa builders and the new landscape.

Daniele Barbaro and the Villa at Maser

Daniele Barbaro—friend of Cornaro, Aristotelian scholar, commentator of Vitruvius, and Patriarch of Aquileia—was, along with his brother Marcantonio, one of the great villa builders in Palladio's Veneto. In few other places is the idea of the villa as an object in the landscape that mediates the reciprocal ecology between its inhabitants and nature more legible and thoughtfully developed than in the Villa Barbaro at Maser at the foot of the Asolani hills.

Begun around in 1560 for the Barbaro brothers, Palladio's design for the Villa at Maser synthesizes elements of the vernacular working-farm architecture of the Veneto and the Classical language of architecture characteristic of Italian Cinquecento building.

The central block of the house, a pedimented volume fronted by deep-relief frieze sculpture and ionic half-columns, is flanked by two long arcaded *barchesse* [traditional storage porticos typical in Veneto farm building] containing stables, granary storage, and other spaces. The *barchesse* are bookended by dovecots whose front faces are adorned with solar and astrological dials. The sloped site allows the *piano nobile*, which is raised to the second story, to let out onto an enclosed nymphaeum and garden behind the house, set directly against the forested hills beyond. The front of the house faces south and opens onto sunbathed formal garden plots which begin a gentle descent to the approach road below, parallel to the long axis of the house. An *allée* of trees aligned axially to the front of the house creates a long perspectival view from the *sala* of the *piano nobile* and is bounded on either side by orchards and vineyards. A chapel—called *tempietto* and resembling the Pantheon in Rome—is found immediately to the east of the house along the access road. Paolo Veronese was responsible for the interior frescos of the main block of the Villa, which feature many scenes of Arcadian landscape imagery, mythology, and villa life, framed by fictive architectural *trompe-l'œil*.

Otium//Negotium

The Barbaro brothers were urban clients who, having inherited their father's estate in Maser, wanted to build for themselves an alternative place of dwelling—an opportunity to leave Venice, where they had many official obligations on their time and efforts. To flee the *negotium* of the city, they created a place for the deliberate enjoyment of *otium*. *Otium*, which is not *ozio* [the Italian for *idleness* or *sloth*], is the condition of leisure that allows us to engage in mental and physical pursuits like thought, study, and

exercise. *Negotium* is the opposite condition: the entanglement in the busyness and enterprise of urban life that render leisure impossible.

Aristotle tells us in the *Nicomachean Ethics* that leisure is necessary for contemplation, which, because it leads to reason, virtue, and the divine nature within us, brings happiness to our lives as a result—a sentiment of pleasure not self-gratifying, but self-edifying.⁸ The Villa realizes this Aristotelian aspiration by making a place ideally suited to the practice of *otium*, toward the self-edifying pursuit of knowledge that humanistic study requires through sustained contemplation, reading, and discourse, far from urban cares.

The long arcades of the *barchessa* serve as an ambulatory, adapted to the practical needs of farming, not unlike that of a cloister wherein an individual may stroll and meditate peripatetically. The sequence of garden plots, cultivated fields, and *allées* in front of the house and of enclosed garden, nymphaeum, and meandering wooded paths behind the house all encourage slow, quiet, and reflective contemplation, whether in solitude or together. The interior rooms of the house are spacious, well-lit, and oriented primarily toward the south, endowing the spaces with finely tuned conditions for reading and conducting extended conversations with family members and the small number of guests who may be present.

Physical and rational health

The leisure that the villa affords is accompanied by the many health benefits of rural life. In addition to the mental clarity and lucidity that come from the tranquil, quiet

⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics* 10.7.

locus of the villa, Bartolomeo Taegio tells us in his *La Villa*, a dialogue on the superiority of villa life, that bad humors are eliminated from the body upon one's departure from the city and arrival at the villa.⁹ Without a doubt, and particularly in contrast with the case of dense urban centers from antiquity to the rise of industrialization, rural villas possess healthier atmospheres than cities. The fresh air at the villa is ventilated by means of unobstructed breezes and allows one to breathe air not plagued by urban pestilences.

The Villa Barbaro is open to the passage of breezes and, oriented south, is immersed in sunlight. Not surrounded by the encroaching shadows of neighbors, its interior receives ample and uniform light. Much of the daylight directed into the house is reflected from the greenery of the landscape surrounding it. Taegio tells us that the perception of green is beneficial to our vision and congenial to our physical comfort.

The spaciousness of the villa and its landscape are also conducive to physical exercise and make room for hunting, running, and riding [as well as fishing at villas with bodies of water]. At the villa, it is easy to engage in these activities and to maintain and improve one's physical condition in the same way that *otium* promotes the improvement of one's mind and spirit.

Antidote to the city

The villa derives its identity and purpose from its peripheral condition outside of a rural center. Since its inhabitants must leave the city in order to dwell in the villa, it must be understood within an urban//rural dialectic. For the inhabitants of villas, the city assumes an ill-defined position, being the primary home of the inhabitants and the source

⁹ Bartolomeo Taegio, *La Villa*, ed. and trans. Thomas Beck (Philadelphia: Penn Press, 2011), 241.

of their cultural and political status. Those patrons, the same ones who embraced agricultural humanism, recognized the presence of many of the city's ills and felt a draw toward the rural life of the villa.

As early as Plato, the city was understood as a profane place, governed by debased values and the chaos, noise, anxiety, and evil of conflict.¹⁰ A standard code of formal dress and address determines one's behavior in the city, and all are subject to artifice and flattery. Necessity dictates human action and constructs rigid systems of commerce and *negotium* which impose countless constraints on one's time and energy.

The villa offers refuge from the city's problems. It is a place to unbutton the stiff garments of the city and lead a less formal life. To dress and address in whatever way you please, to control the use of your own time. To be in a setting which is quiet and free of crowds. To replace the chaos, clangor and odors of the city with the fuller sensory experiences granted by the rustling of leaves, the babbling waters of fountains, the perfumes of the forests and the vines, all carried by the cool breeze descending from the hills. While the castle is the seat of a lord's authority, the villa is a retreat far from those duties.¹¹ The villa [unlike the castle and the fortified manor] is devoid of conflict. During the inhabitants' sojourn from the city, it creates a setting for moral goodness and peaceful living, if only temporarily.

Encounters with untamed nature

Nature, taking many forms at the villa and allowing multiple kinds of interaction with the villa's inhabitants, may be presented in its *untamed* state, in which trees, rocks,

¹⁰ Plato, *Timaeus*, trans. Desmond Lee (London: Penguin, 1965), 85.

¹¹ Ackerman, *Villa*, 63.

streams, slopes, and grasses are casually composed by the serendipities of terrestrial forces and processes. It is an *artless* nature—that is, a nature untouched by the hand or designs of man.¹² In the Villa Barbaro, untamed nature is manifested in the forested hillside that comes into direct contact with the back of the villa. The tops of the trees crown the enclosed garden and nympheum and draw the inhabitant from the house to the meandering paths through the woods.

The forest is a trace of the land's existence prior to man's intervention upon it.¹³ The inhabitant who travels within this presentation of nature experiences a sense of separation from the present, awakening visions of a distant Edenic//Arcadian past. It was Petrarch who expressed this ecology—between man and wilderness—with the purest and most pious voice. His was a hermetic, perhaps antisocial, rapport with nature characterized by solitude, wandering, and unmediated corporeal contact with the earth. With the soft ground as his bed and the canopy of trees, supporting the starry dome of the cosmos, as his roof, Petrarch discovered within the rough materials of nature a divine harmony based upon the natural workings of the earth.

That ecology sustained Petrarch's eternal pursuit of knowledge and contemplation—an effort that would be shared by Italian villa builders for centuries—which required him to detach himself from society and human settlement in order for it to germinate and flourish. If the sojourn in the villa is an isolation from the city in favor of a more natural dwelling, then the sojourn in the wilderness is a continuation of that journey into ever-more natural states of being.

¹² Bentmann and Müller, *Hegemonic*, 75.

¹³ *In the Veneto, of course, this is a tenuous historiography, since so much of the "natural" landscape was in fact manmade.*

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Prospects of cultivated nature

The *piano nobile* of the Villa Barbaro is oriented such that, from its windows, the long expanse of cultivated fields and orchards is highly visible and symmetrically disposed. The house serves as a *belvedere* whose vantage reaffirms the centrality of cultivation to the identity and maintenance of the Villa. Its prospect is not oriented toward wilderness, but toward the ordered and manmade reshaping of the landscape. Taegio and hundreds of Aristotelian Northern Italian villa builders had begun to find aesthetic beauty in cultivated fields—in their intervallic parallel rows and the visible cycles of growth—which revealed the virtue of agriculture and its attendant *utilitas* as sources of ethical beauty.¹⁴ Like the atmospheric *sfumato* of landscape painting, the cultivated lands facing the Villa Barbaro unfold and stretch toward the horizon in rational parcels.

So we see that the Villa is also a working farm. The house is the central node of administration and operations, but is only one cog in the mechanisms of the entire estate, which operates on an expanded but still domestic scale. Architecturally, the Villa Barbaro adopts the principle of *oikos* by housing the workers who maintain the farm, the horses that assist the workers, and the tools and implements necessary for the work, and by providing storage for grain and other fruits of the harvest.

The topos of cultivation, however, assumes broader meaning beyond the tilling and planting of crops in the earth. As we work the land to make it productive, so we cultivate our minds and spirits. Heidegger attributes more architectonic meaning to cultivation by saying that the old German *bauen* “means at the same time to cherish and

¹⁴ Bentmann and Müller, *Hegemonic*, 40.

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protect, to preserve and care for, specifically to till the soil, vine”.¹⁵ When we choose to cultivate the earth, we do not assume a neutral activity. Rather, we initiate a virtuous project that transforms the earth while safeguarding it.

The passage of time

Capping the dovecots at the extreme ends of the Villa Barbaro we find solar and astrological dials. These devices employ the sun to register the passing of time. But there are no clocks at the Villa. The clock—which keeps time by spinning mechanical gears and hands—is an urban phenomenon, a chronic pendulum keeping temporal record of the mundane *negotium* of the city governed by human authority alone.

At the villa, on the other hand, time is dictated only by the authority of natural processes. Ovid tells us that since the Age of Jove, the nature of dwelling has depended on the seasons.¹⁶ As weather changes and the length of the nights varies, we seek different forms of engagement with the interior and exterior spaces of our dwellings. Likewise, the inhabitants of villas plan their visits around meteorological and agricultural [and astrological] factors.

While at the villa, we rely on our familiarity with the signs of the earth to measure the passing of time. The changing heights of the crops, the changing colors of the leaves, the changing habits of the animals, the arrival of the festive and anxious period of the harvest, the movements of the sun, and the motions of the moon, the planets, and the stars—these are the signs [operating on daily, monthly, seasonal, annual, and centennial cycles] that allow us to dwell deliberately in time and in space. When an inhabitant

¹⁵ Martin Heidegger, *Poetry, language, thought*, trans. Albert Hofstadter (New York: Harper & Row, 1971), 147.

¹⁶ Mary Innes, *Metamorphoses of Ovid*, (London: Penguin, 1955) 29.

desires to know the hour, he must read it in the length and direction of his shadow upon the face of the earth.

If the villa seems timeless, it is because natural processes and signs remain constant despite the rapid shiftings of the cultural patterns [across different geographies and eras] that dictate how we spend our time. By reading natural signs, we reawaken within ourselves a state of being that predates *negotium* and our anthropological anxiety of time.

Reciprocity and harmony

On dwelling in the landscape, Heidegger tells us that

*“... the basic character of dwelling is to spare, to preserve ... Mortals dwell in that they save the earth ... Saving does not only snatch something from a danger. To save really means to set something free into its own presencing. To save the earth is more than to exploit it or even wear it out. Saving the earth does not master the earth and does not subjugate it ... ”*¹⁷

The Barbaro brothers and other villa builders saved the Veneto. First they invested in the land. Then they dug into the land to cultivate and construct upon it. Therupon the land yielded productively for them and nourished their bodies and spirits, weakened by urban strain. In return, they cared for the land and preserved it. A reciprocity was established between villa builder and nature. Harmony in the dwelling of the landscape, first elaborated by Petrarch and subsequently advanced by the agricultural humanists in the Veneto, solidified in the form of the villa, an object that not only represents the link between man and landscape but above all concretizes that link into physical and built form. In other words, the villa makes a *site*¹⁸ for the dwelling together

¹⁷ Heidegger, *Poetry, language, thought*, 150.

¹⁸ Heidegger, *Poetry, language, thought*, 154.

of nature and human art and is achieved by way of the symbiosis between, on the one hand, a landscape ordered by human stewardship and, on the other hand, human art supported by the fruits of the earth. Varro gives us that “divine nature gave us the country, and human art built the cities,”¹⁹ but we see that the villa is a product of both sources. The builders reciprocate the economic, social, and intellectual gains made from intervening in the landscape by virtuously cultivating the land in beautifully ordered fields, gardens, and habitations.

Ultimately this harmony and reciprocity *are* the ecology of the villa—a web of relationships and their concrete forms that establishes concordant and sustainable balance. The villa’s fundamental purpose is the ecological accommodation [through built, cultivated, and untamed form] of those relationships and agents.

Various lives at the villa

Those who build villas give form to the ideology of living that they wish to carry out there. Since the villa does not need to perform many functions beyond its agricultural mandate, its morphology is free to reflect and shape the kind of dwelling that occurs within it, lacking, perhaps, the rigid requirements of better-defined building typologies. That is not to say that the functional ideology of the villa must be any less strict or specific [or even prescriptive] than any other building type, but that the villa’s makers have a unique opportunity to manifest in physical form their philosophy and aspirations. Common to most ideologies of villa-dwelling are: deliberate, *self*-conscious, reflective

¹⁹ Taegio, *Villa*, 68.

living; pursuit of philosophy and the contemplation of abstract thought; virtue and the processes of improving one's own being.

Petrarch advocated the *vita solitaria*, a contemplative, isolated existence that evolved from hermetic monastic models and would seem to produce dwellings of spare, unadorned austerity that allowed the most direct rapport possible with the landscape.

Also isolated but less ascetic than the *vita solitaria* was the *vita rustica*, the more general conception of country life that derived from the ancient Roman texts and, after its evanescence in the Middle Ages due to the insecure conditions of rural territories in Europe, was revitalized, as we have seen, by humanists in Italy beginning in the Trecento. This initiative effectively led to the reemergence of villas in the Quattrocento: no longer were enlightened aristocrats concerned with constructing feudal castles. Instead, they sought to devise places where they could suitably practice the *vita rustica*. Seeing that the life God made for Adam was rustic, builders could now speak of the villa in Christian terms and consider the *vita rustica* as a moral and virtuous lifestyle.²⁰

Alvise Cornaro further developed the notion of an ethical country life into the idea of *vita sobria*, a chaste, temperate life disdainful of sloth and corporeal pleasures.²¹ Alberti laid the foundations for this ethos in the *Libri della famiglia*, wherein he expounds upon domestic economics and best practices of familial living, and the *De re aedificatoria*, in which he identifies among the benefits of the villa its ability to provide food for one's family, its prevention of "lusty youth," and its remoteness from false flattery.²²

²⁰ Bentmann and Müller, *Hegemonic*, 72.

²¹ Ibid., 14-16.

²² Leon Battista Alberti, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, trans. Rykwert, Leach, Tavernor, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1988), 125.

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Palladio—pointing in the *Quattro libri* to the villa's spiritual ease, affinity with nature, healthiness, beauty, and amenities—refers to being at the villa as simply *the good life*.²³ His adoption and adaptation of vernacular agricultural building elements in the design of villas attests to his idea of the role of farming in good villa life. In Taegio's dialogue, the interlocutor who advances the cause of the villa is named *Vitauro*, which surely comes from the Italian *vita* + *aurea* or *vita d'oro*, both meaning *golden life*, and indicates that the character's claims had already become manifest in his own existence.

Aspirations of the ideal villa

Thus far, we have discussed ways of living in the villa and how villa builders strive toward ecological harmony with the earth. We see that the villa is not a neutral form but one charged by the philosophies, ideologies, and dreams of its makers. As a result, it is perhaps the architectural medium best suited to give concrete form to ideas and myths of the *ideal*.

Vitauro enjoys a golden life because the villa, as we have seen, grants him harmony with nature. Beyond that, the villa serves him as a medium through which to aspire to the ideal in many aspects of his existence—to aspire to cosmic harmony, to the perfection of his *self*, to the perfection of his life, to the construction of perfect form, and to the creation of a perfect place. To re-create a lost Paradise and to propose a perfect future.

Perfection of the self awakens notions of virtue and immortality, while perfection of form raises questions of beauty, geometry, and order, and perfection of place brings

²³ Andrea Palladio, *Four Books*, trans. Tavernor and Schofield (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1997), 121.
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forth ideas of creation, utopia, paradise, and dwelling. If the villa builders' humanism was characterized by its sensibility for agriculture, its dedication to the ideal must be equivalently noted. What sources or myths brought agriculture [or *vita rustica*] and the ideal together as impetuses for building and how did builders begin to give concrete form to their concurrence?

Platonic Nature

Looking for the roots of the villa's aspirations to natural harmony, we find creation myths in Plato, Ovid, and Genesis, among others, that propose such narratives. In the *Timaeus*, Plato describes the making of the cosmos, which is composed of two worlds: the physical world and the model, eternal world. The physical world [the world of becoming] is fleeting, mutable, sensible, temporal – while the eternal world [the world of being] is abstract and governed by reason and clarity. The physical world, he says, is simply a material likeness of the eternal world's supremely ordered and immutable rational forms. *Nature*, then, is the order and rationality that govern forms, being, and becoming in the universe. To experience harmony with Nature is to approximate its laws and forms, thereby achieving eternity and harmonic rest. Discord with Nature, on the other hand, is characterized by chaos, unrest, and mortality.

This suggests that abstract truths are latent within abstract forms and that biological and geological nature are simply the result of mundane material processes which, being random and apparently disordered, lack rationality. Barbaro and Palladio, like many of their humanist contemporaries and antecedents, believed in the “certain

truth” of mathematics.²⁴ In other words, it was mathematics that provided the grammar governing cosmic order, from the vastest to the minutest of scales. In building, this ideology found expression through the symmetrical disposition of rooms according to the proportions of Pythagoras’s arithmetic, geometric, and harmonic means. This method of designing established mathematical relationships between each individual part of the building, as well as between part and whole, thus providing the architect with a rationale for determining and justifying all of the measured dimensions within the scheme.

Beauty, in this conception, is an inherent quality of an object which can be evaluated by the presence of correlated proportions and symmetry. These attributes, being legible and undeniable, render the determination of beauty an *objective* activity—the validation of mathematical truth irrespective of human perception.

Palladio worked and studied in circles that advanced this objective view of beauty. While we see in his villas a mastery of geometry and harmonic syntax, Palladio’s faith in numbers did not compromise his ability to conceive of a form which is congenial to human use and ecology. Cases like the Villa Barbaro and the Villa Emo [which we will investigate below] illustrate Palladio’s use of geometric harmony [applied even to vernacular agricultural building elements] in the service of the productivity and maintenance of the working farm.

Among Palladio’s villas, the most salient and problematic, regarding Platonic Nature, is without a doubt the Villa Capra, called La Rotonda. The house is characterized by its white, cubic form adorned on its four sides with pedimented ionic porticos raised a story above the ground atop a high podium. The plan is a perfect square and features a

²⁴ Rudolf Wittkower, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*, (New York: Norton, 1971), 72.
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central circular hall crowned by a dome. Its composition is *in the round* and its exterior is symmetrical across four axes [its interior is symmetrical across two perpendicular axes]. The interior rooms are related to each other by a sequence of harmonic proportions that governs their width, length, and height, and all of the rooms fit neatly into the square perimeter of the plan.

But the Villa Rotonda is not truly a villa. In the *Quattro Libri* Palladio includes it not in the chapter on villas but in the chapter on urban palaces “because it is so close to the city that one could say it is in the city itself.”²⁵ Reservations in the taxonomic classification of this building, however, derive not only from its close proximity to the city of Vicenza. Built in 1566 as the retirement home of the Monsignor Paolo Almerico, the Villa Rotonda is an entertainment palace more than a *home*; a belvedere more than a *farm*. It does have cultivated lands, but their convenient use is not provided for in the design of the villa, which conceals the select agricultural functions that it accommodates by relegating them to the passageways within the podium. This fundamental infrastructure, so essentially integrated into the conceptions of the Villas Barbaro and Emo, is given form in the most begrudging and suppressed way at the Villa Rotonda.²⁶

Cubic, “Platonic” villas like the Rotonda are often called “a foil to the natural environment” because they are raised up and separated from the terrain and because their [often white] prismatic form appears antithetical to the “organic” topography surrounding them.²⁷ Considering the design, for instance, of ancient Pompeian villas and of the rural

²⁵ Palladio, *Four Books*, 94.

²⁶ *A detached barchessa, not unlike those found in adapted form in the Villa Barbaro, was built to the northwest of the villa from designs of Vincenzo Scamozzi in the years following the completion of the villa in order to better accommodate the villa’s cultivation [Smienk and Niemeijer, Palladio, the Villa and the Landscape, 130].*

²⁷ Ackerman, *Villa*, 22.

and suburban houses of Frank Lloyd Wright, whose compositions were shaped by the contours of the terrain and its irregularities, the idea that cubic villas refute the landscape is defensible. However, and particularly in Palladio's case, ecological principles do govern certain characteristics of cubic villas. Strikingly, the villa Rotonda is not oriented axially with respect to the cardinal axes. Rather, it is rotated forty-five degrees in order to allow all four of the porticos to receive direct sunlight during the course of the day in all seasons. What is more, each portico frames a view of the landscape—of cultivated fields and untamed woods. So, although a cube may be a poorly suited form to exploit the particularities of nature, the Villa Rotonda has been composed within its landscape in order to do just that.

We may also justify the Platonic villa's deference to nature [that is, to *Nature*] by understanding that the villa, belonging to the world of *becoming*, is a likeness of the higher order of the cosmos. Indeed, perhaps the villa's geometric form renders it *more* rather than less congenial to nature because it adheres to and re-presents that order elaborated by Plato and Pythagoras.

The nature of the Platonic villa, then, is a nature constructed by man in an attempt to re-create the form of the cosmos. It is an attempt not unlike the Cinquecento undertakings in the Veneto to put nature in order by imposing coherent grids of canals and patterned rows of cultivated fields. The cosmic order—which served as the model of both the Platonic villa and the Platonic Venetan landscape—is rational and eternal. This landscape, then, not only achieves the Nicomachean virtues of its rational form,²⁸ but also the Virgilian virtue of its cultivation.

²⁸ Aristotle, *Nicomachean Ethics*, 6.1.

Enlightened today by Bacon and empirical science, we will likely dismiss the æsthetic and cosmological suppositions made by the Platonists and Pythagoreans in their pursuit of perfect form. We cannot deny, however, that virtue and ecology guided the Cinquecento genesis of Palladio's Veneto.

Sublime nature//Subjective beauty

The science of Bacon and Descartes that developed after the age of Palladio leads us to a *subjective* conception of beauty wherein the source of beauty is displaced from the object. No longer is beauty an essential or certain property that resides *within* it. Instead, it is a judgement made by human perception upon encountering the object. Our increased understanding of the limitations of human vision and our refutation of the “fundamental supposition {in the Cinquecento} of a total system of correspondence (earth and sky, planets and faces, microcosm and macrocosm)” discredited our superstitious notions of the potency of proportion and geometry.²⁹

In this new æsthetic, beauty concerned the evocation of human sentiments and psychological responses to outside stimuli. Earthly forms like stones, trees, meandering streams, and jagged mountains were notable among these *sublime* forms. The Platonic critique of these forms as the mere physical remains of material processes was overturned: biological and geological forms are the product of a long sequence of cosmic *becomings*—serendipitous aggregations of atomized orderings. *Natural* forms, then, are those forms which are *found in nature*. Perhaps the contours of a stone are irrational—their order being illegible or unintelligible—but, being generated by the earth, they are

²⁹ Michel Foucault, *The Order of Things*, (New York: Vintage Books, 1970), 55.

nonetheless natural, beautiful, and, therefore, worthy of contemplation. Of course, the appreciation of natural forms was not novel to the Enlightenment—indeed, it was surely one of man’s very first preoccupations—it simply had not enjoyed scientific justification until that period.

In the building of villas, natural forms may be replicated through the use of earth tone pigments and horizontally attenuated volumes that appear to emerge like geological strata from the plane of the ground. Such techniques oppose the white, cubic types of Platonic forms that are often considered “foils” to nature. On a more profound level, sublime beauty is congenial to the ecology of the villa because it is characterized by human interaction with natural forms, particularly in the landscape surrounding the villa. While the beauty of Platonic forms has no need for the presence of a human observer, the beauty of sublime forms is not activated until it is perceived by the eye and mind of the observer.

The relationship between man and mountain, for instance, that renders the latter a beautiful sublime form also renders beautiful the tools of the farm, the implements of the kitchen, and the doors of the house, as these objects, like the forms that man finds in nature, augment the good life that he enjoys in the villa. With respect to sublime forms, the villa builder is able to establish a closer—perhaps more *familial* or *domestic*—rapport than was ever possible with perfect Platonic forms. And if those perfect Platonic forms refer, in their supreme order, to the genesis of the cosmos, then sublime forms refer to the creation of the earth. Through our perceptual and tactile contact with stones, trees, meandering streams, and mountains, we experience the earth at once in its most elemental and its most highly ordered manifestations.

Apotheosis

Plato tells us that if

*“a man’s attention and effort have been centred on appetite and ambition, all his opinions are bound to have become mortal, and he can hardly fail, in so far as it is possible, to become entirely mortal, as it is his mortal part that he has increased. But a man who has given his heart to learning and true wisdom and exercised that part of himself is surely bound, if he attains to truth, to have immortal and divine thoughts, and cannot fail to participate in immortality as fully as is possible for human nature; and because he has looked after the divine element in himself and kept his guardian spirit in good order he, above all men, must be happy.”*³⁰

One of the villa’s primary aspirations is the apotheosis of its builders, a process that involves the perfection of oneself and, in certain ways, the perfection of one’s property. As we have seen, the villa is *made* as a place for inner perfection by providing for the pursuit of knowledge through contemplation and *otium*, the pursuit of virtue through agriculture and ecological living; and the pursuit of physical perfection through exercise and the breathing in of healthy air. Alberti tells us that virtue and truth “{liberate} the intellect from ignorance and the mind from contagion by the body {...}”; through this, then, we will reach a blessed existence, and an almost godlike state.”³¹ Even Genesis agrees that through the knowledge of virtue and evil “ye shall be as gods.”³²

Harmony, the aim of the contemplative endeavors undertaken at the villa, is the state of approximating the order of the eternal cosmos. To achieve harmony is to achieve *being*, to transcend the inherently mortal world of *becoming*. The villa, then, is a temple for the dwelling of humans being made immortal through virtue and rationality. The apotheosis of the builder receives iconographic form in the villa itself, which is an object

³⁰ Lee/Plato, *Timaeus*, 88-89.

³¹ Alberti, *Art of Building*, 127.

³² [King James], *Genesis*, 3.5.

whose composition was adapted—in the case of Palladio—directly from his understanding of the ancient temples of Roman divinities. His adoption of the pedimented portico for use in domestic building was novel and indisputably referential to temple architecture. The Villa Rotonda above all employs such a set of allusions: it resembles a shrine in its centralized disposition and highly elevated podium; its long series of exterior stairs recall those in front of temples like the Maison Carrée on which worship and animal sacrifice take place; and its immediate vicinity is delimited by a low wall not unlike the Greek *peras* which consecrates the district of a temple.

Palladio's villas seem to operate on a scale which is palpably grander than human scale. The monumental proportions of columns and interior volumes in, for example, the Villa Rotonda “somehow make {Peter Zumthor} feel larger”³³ while, in the Villa Cornaro, the American family that currently owns the villa has the sense that it “is not a place where mortals live.”³⁴

The reach of the villa builders' apotheosis extends still further into the making of the landscape. In the Veneto, villa builders could see themselves not only as individuals who achieved divinity through knowledge and virtue, but also as *creators*. As God constructed a Paradise from a shapeless mass of earth so too did the Cinquecento Venetan investors in the *beni inculti* transform infertile marsh into productive and rational systems. Villa builders were the “earthly guarantors of God's divine ordering of the ‘irrational’ countryside,”³⁵ giving form to the landscape, its built habitations, and the ways of life carried out therein. Their roles in the genesis and structure of the Veneto would ensure immortality for their names.

³³ Zumthor, *Atmospheres*, (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2006), 53.

³⁴ Gable, *Palladian Days* (New York: Anchor Books, 2005), 11.

³⁵ Bentmann and Müller, *Hegemonic*, 27.

Villa as ideal place

Interest in the Cinquecento Veneto in perfecting the landscape coincided with a new cultural investment in the conception of ideal places through textual and architectural speculations, advanced by Thomas More, Tommaso Campanella, and Vincenzo Scamozzi, among many others. Since “the poor and the rich alike no longer allowed themselves to be diverted by the medieval solace that one ‘could only enter utopias with death,’”³⁶ Petrarch’s old idea of *locus amoenus* was supplanted by earthly visions of paradise and utopia, two models that the villa more or less brings together.³⁷

Ideas of *paradiso terrestre* were fundamentally characterized by religious ideals and images of nature. Thus was the villa conceived as a re-creation of the Garden of Eden and the life that Adam and Eve enjoyed there [linking the villa again to the genesis of the earth]. It was a moral life predating the proliferation of human sin and the imposition of necessity and scarcity upon the world. The paradisiacal villa, surrounded by gardens and bordered by lush forests, provides its bountiful fruit generously to its inhabitants. It exudes the sense that everything necessary for and convenient to the good life of the villa builders has been miraculously brought together in a singular place at the site of the villa.

Arcadian imagery of an ancient pastoral, idyllic Golden Age often adorns the villa and reminds us that nature is the *source* of all the fruits enjoyed by its inhabitants. In keeping with the moral life of the villa, the inhabitants do not exploit Paradise to its detriment but simply take that quantity which they need to sustain themselves and their

³⁶ Bentmann and Müller, *Hegemonic*, 67.

³⁷ Ibid., 71.

happiness. The earth reciprocates the villa builders—having transformed a patch of land into *paradiso terrestre*—by providing this sustenance to them.

Utopia in the Cinquecento was a place governed by peace and devoid of all conflict and evil. As a social and economic dream, its inhabitants experienced happiness and goods were distributed so that all may receive what they need. The villa, then, is not quite a utopia. Visions of utopia typically depict an urban, futuristic place, while the villa idealizes a remote past and is necessarily nonurban. What is more, the villa establishes a social hierarchy at the top of which the villa builder unequivocally resides. The villa is an *ideal place* for a paltry few élites [coming by and large from a ruling urban class], rather than for the *people*. “The outskirts of Utopia and Nova Atlantis were not embellished by a garland of gleaming country houses” because utopian places did not accommodate the differentiation in wealth that permitted the villa’s existence.³⁸ In Campanella’s vision of the ideal city, the accumulation of property and the building of private homes aggravate the disparity among men and lead to many vices—among them treachery, presumptuousness, deceit, and thievery—that his ideal city seeks to eradicate.^{39,40}

By proposing the architectural foundations of new social orders, utopians hope to fix the problems that plague their contemporary cities. The villa, on the other hand, rejects the city by both locating itself far from it and evading utopian responsibility. Rather than address urban concerns, the villa constructs an external, independent, ideal place for the exclusive use of its builders. The villa assumes personal ecological ideals, then, at the expense of communal social ideals, achieving harmony not *among* men but *between* man and nature. Its ecology produces a place which: is peaceful, lacking conflict

³⁸ Bentmann and Müller, *Hegemonic*, 67.

³⁹ Campanella, *La città del sole*, (Los Angeles: UC Press, 1981), 39.

⁴⁰ *Ibid.*, 65.

and evil; is self-sufficient and sustainable; enjoys an equilibrium between scarcity and excess; and promotes the virtuous rapport between cultivator and cultivation. Thus the villa is no less ideal than a utopia; it simply embodies different principles.

Composing the landscape

The Villa Emo does not sit *upon* the earth but exists in a simple oneness with it, thereby attaining the highest order of building, dwelling, and thinking for its inhabitants. At first the house appears to resemble the Villa Barbaro's temple-fronted central block and elongated arcades, but in the Villa Emo we observe a different manner of composing landscape and built form.

If human art is—almost imperceptibly—more forceful than nature in giving form to the Villa Barbaro [evidenced in its syntactical use of Roman architectural elements and other *customary* details], the Villa Emo, on the other hand, grants no such preference to one or the other of the two agents. By making use of unmolded windows, Tuscan columns, and non-rusticated arches, the Villa Emo rejects representations of economic and political power [patent within the highly developed Classical orders] in favor of the simplest interpretations of these forms, lending the house a virtuous austerity. With the exception of its crowning pediment, the house is nearly devoid of all *human* symbols, allowing nature in many instances to filigree the substrate of its spare architectonic framework.

The use of a ramp at the entry [besides functioning as a threshing floor for the grain harvest] gives the house the suggestion of emerging from the surface of the earth, rather than being raised *out of* the earth and requiring the inhabitants to ascend stairs.

Shrubs and vines, real and painted, adorn the exterior and the vaults of the central hall and seem to buttress the entry ramp and the rear stairway of the house. Thus is human art *held up* by nature's growth.

Oriented north//south and lying perpendicular to the axis of the house's arcaded *barchesse* extends an *allée* of trees several kilometers long. While the pattern of trees is interrupted by the presence of the house, *nature* flows unimpeded from the southern horizon along this axis through the building. The open façade of the portico [also south-facing] contains the monumental, almost arboreal, shafts of ionic columns and is frescoed with abundant vegetal imagery which is extended through the apparent arbor of the vaulted vestibule and *sala* to the fenestrated north façade, where it descends the ivy-covered steps to continue its trajectory on the ground to the northern *allée* that terminates at the horizon. The alignment of windows and doors of the north and south façades allows light to filter through the house and illuminate its internal manifestations of the endless nature of the north//south axis.

But the *allée* must eventually come to an end. At its northernmost point, Palladio has placed the peak of a distant mountain. To the south, he has positioned the meridian of the sun; to the west, the church steeple of the adjacent village; and to the east, a family chapel. These landmarks, of course [with the exception of the chapel], predate the intervention of Palladio, but so integrally has the Villa been woven into their fabric that it seems responsible for their copresence. This landscape was *made* by the presence of the house, forging a new singularity or interconnectedness between elements which, prior to the Villa, were independent and seemingly casually disposed. The Villa Emo serves as a

Platonic nucleus from which is measured and generated the entirety of the landscape, bound together by the dwelling's nuclear force.⁴¹

Building dwelling thinking binding being

The boundaries that delimit the domain of the Villa Emo are indiscernible from the vantage of the house. It appears as if the property extends to and embraces the horizons in all directions. How then do the Villa Emo's inhabitants *dwell* on the earth? As the Villa binds the landscape together, how are the inhabitants bound to the earth?

From Heidegger we understand that *building* and *cultivating* belong to *dwelling* : that “the old word *bauen* , which says that man *is* insofar as he *dwells* ... *also* means at the same time to cherish and protect, to preserve and care for, specifically to till the soil, to cultivate the vine.”⁴² Recalling that the villa is a place to *dwell* , *cultivate* , and *think* [on the earth, in the landscape, in the house], the Cartesian *cogito ergo sum* is certainly brought to mind—that *being* depends upon *thinking* and *dwelling* , both of which we do in the villa—that “building and thinking,” too “are, each in its own way, inescapable for dwelling.”⁴³

And what of the earth and the landscape? Dwelling is “being on the earth” and “earth is the serving bearer” whose fruits sustain us.^{44,45} So the earth saves mortals just as

⁴¹ Giampaolo Bordignon Favero, *The Villa Emo* , trans. Douglas Lewis, (University Park: Pennsylvania State University Press, 1972), 25.

⁴² Heidegger, *Poetry, language, thought* , 147.

⁴³ Ibid., 160-161.

⁴⁴ Ibid., 147.

⁴⁵ Ibid., 149.

“mortals dwell in that they save the earth {So to} save really means to set something free into its own presencing.”⁴⁶

And what of the boundaries of the Villa and the earth? “A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something *begins its presencing*. That is why the concept is that of *horismos*, that is, the horizon, the boundary.”⁴⁷ *In this way, they are one*—the horizons of the earth, where the earth begins its presencing, coincide with the horizons of the Villa Emo, where the Villa begins its presencing. To *be* in the Villa Emo means to *dwell* on the earth. The boundaries of the Villa encompass the entire earth, the beginnings and ends of its presencing. So the Villa Emo itself inhabits the entire earth. *When we say Villa Emo, we are already thinking of the Earth along with it, but we give no thought to the simple oneness of the two.*

Harmony as ecology

Palladio’s villas embody a conception of *harmony* that far transcends the traditional Platonic or Pythagorean senses of the term. While Platonists and Pythagoreans sought geometric or harmonic discoveries, Palladio approached harmony, as we have seen, in a much broader and more human manner, allowing the builders and inhabitants of the villas to strive for harmony through a number of humanistic, agricultural, ideal, domestic, and hermetic ways, among others.

In the Veneto, the members of Palladio’s clientele were actually engaged in the *making* of a portion of their world. Technologically and culturally, they often managed to

⁴⁶ Ibid., 150.

⁴⁷ Ibid., 154.

achieve this is in an ecologically harmonious way. That is to say, they were equally concerned with deriving form from nature as they were with intervening in the landscape in a way that would improve or give order to it. They depended on the landscape for their wealth, and, by building villas and inhabiting them virtuously *paid the landscape back*. Meanwhile, they pursued perfection of themselves, of the architectural forms that they built, and of the landscape through various humanistic means and through pursuits of different conceptions of beauty. Their interventions in the landscape produced harmony ecologically because they operated on the scale of the *oikos* to establish balanced, self-sufficient, sustainable, healthy systems and webs of relationships.

Daniele Barbaro “saw architecture not as an isolated discipline but as one of the innumerable manifestations of the human mind all of which follow the same laws.”⁴⁸ The *mathesis* of the villa, the universal science whose principles for so long were sought exclusively in Platonic and Pythagorean terms, we understand now as the universal ecology that governs the ways that we interact with each other, with nature, with the world, and ultimately with the cosmos and the divine.

⁴⁸ Wittkower, *Architectural Principles*, 68.

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