

Palladio, the column,
and the utilisation of
columnar forms from
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Palladio, the Column, and the Utilisation of Columnar Forms from Late Imperial Roman Architecture Palladio, the Column, and the Utilisation of Columnar Forms from Late Imperial Roman Architecture Palladio revered the column. It was his favourite structural element and architectural ornament. Palladio also revered antiquity. He thoroughly documented the five orders in the first book of *Quattro Libri*, and devoted the fourth book to “ the ancient temples” where columns are presented in their original settings.

If we consider the symbolism and meaning inherent in the column, this may give us insight to why Palladio was so drawn to the architecture of Late Imperial Rome. According to the scholar John Onians, columns are a material means of expression that helped formulate and develop man’s relationship with gods. [i] Their origins are in Greece, but they were codified in Italy. Columns are first described by Vitruvius (*De Architectura*, 25 BC), then by Alberti (*De Re Architectura “ On The Art of Building”*, 1443), by Serlio[ii] (7 *Libri* in 1540), Vignola (*The Five Orders of Architecture*, 1563) and finally by Palladio himself (*Quattro Libri*, 1570).

Onians posits that it was only in the sixteenth century that written architectural theory, through treatises, became influential. He identifies Serlio’s treatise as the first “ to seriously affect taste and shape responses to architecture, first in Venice and then in Europe as a whole. ” Another scholar, Gunter Bandmann[iii], posits that the power of the column lies in its double metaphor. Since the beginning of recorded history, the role of the column, in the middle of the dwelling, was that of support, devoid of any representational meaning.

It only had a structural or tectonic role. Later, in Egyptian architecture, it signified a tree or plant image that stood beneath a roof symbolizing the heavens. The foliage capital was adopted in the Middle Ages, and eventually transformed into a symbol for a human being—" a meaning that had last borne fruit in classical speculations regarding proportion. "[iv] The column-as-person had in fact appeared centuries earlier, before the Christian allegory, with the caryatids of Greece. Is this evolution of the column significant to our analysis? Perhaps.

It's conceivable that Palladio considered the column in two modes— structural and/or ornamental. Gunter Bandmann cannot pinpoint when the column made the transition from a discrete object to ornament, which he called " the column-as-part-of-a-building". However, Bandmann states " What is certain is that such a connection becomes possible only when the building deals with hierarchical relationships that can be expressed metaphorically. " This need to reference hierarchical relationships and bring order to architecture may in part explain why thought-leaders such as Vitruvius began to document and codify columns.

It is probably around Vitruvius's time that the column made that transition to " the column-as-part-of-a-building". However, there must be more to columns, beyond their structural and/or ornamental role. Palladio must have recognized the column as a bearer of meaning and a transmitter of values. This upholding of values would explain the driving force behind Palladio's determination to extract everything that he could from the syntax of antiquity and incorporate it in contemporary forms. Vitruvian and Palladian

Values

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Architects have always known that architectural forms can be exploited for political advantage. “ From the time the orders were first given names which carried particular associations in ancient Greece, there was a continuous attempt to replace the meaning inherent in forms, with meanings attached by words. Architecture could be made to embody or express [values]. “[v] This was well understood by Augustus who sponsored an aggressive program of civic architecture, with the sole purpose of communicating Augustan values.

Whether we attribute Palladio’s fascination with antiquity to a “ nostalgia for first principles” (Wittkower) or a desire to participate in the “ production of meaning” (Tafuri) we do know that Andrea Palladio believed in the authority of classical rules. Boucher described Palladio’s modus operandi eloquently: “ The remains of antiquity were his constant measure of permanent values. “[vi] Palladio’s belief system was arguably based on the values that flourished in antiquity. If Vitruvian values were commodity, firmness and delight, then Palladian values would be these, along with order, tradition and authority.

In Palladio’s world, a column was not merely tectonic, or even ornamental; he used columns to pay homage to the past and in doing so, preserved and advanced the values associated with the past. An examination of a number of monuments, some no longer extant, but documented in the Quattro Libri, will show us how Palladio gave new life in his architecture to old forms of antiquity. The antiquities of the past are viewable through the prism of Palladio’s architecture, and in particular through the prism of the Basilica of Vicenza..

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The Basilica Commission The Basilica was an important commission for Palladio, one which he received in 1546 while he was still in his late thirties. At this point, he had already made a number of trips to Rome^[1] and was thoroughly indoctrinated in Vitruvius by his patron Trissino. He was also part of an influential circle of artists and mentors that included Michelangelo. The commission was an important opportunity to put into practice all that he admired about ancient forms.

It would be logical in our exploration of Palladio's reinterpretation of ancient forms to look at what Palladio wrote about basilicas in general, and then look at the related exempla he documented and studied. If our premise is correct, we will see that Palladio reinterpreted many of those ancient forms in the Basilica of Vicenza. Palladio devotes only a small section (Chapter XX: On Contemporary Basilicas and the Designs of the one in Vicenza) of the *Quattro Libri* to a discussion of the basilica as an architectural type.

However, he doesn't neglect to praise his own basilica: " This building can be compared to antique structures and included amongst the greatest and most beautiful buildings built since antiquity, both for its size and its ornaments..." This we can take as evidence that Palladio believed his architecture reached the ranks of the great monuments of the past. His strategy to create monumental architecture was achieved through two tactics: 1 - the codification of architectural elements, and 2 -making use of ideas and techniques from specific exempla from antiquity. We will use the Basilica to test this premise.

Codification of Architectural Elements While Palladio codified many architectural elements and practices, we will focus our attention on those that are pertinent to a study of the Basilica, namely (a) intercolumniation[vii], (b) loggias[viii], and (c) basilicas[ix]. Although the rules of intercolumniation (ideally less than three column diameters) do not apply to the Basilica due to the constraints imposed by an existing structure, the recommendation of an even number of columns on the facade does hold true: Palladio's Basilica has ten columns along the length, and six columns along the width (See Figure 1).

An examination of Palladio's recommendations for loggias reveals that they were applied to the Basilica project: 1 The thickness of the piers is no less than one-third of the space between one pier and another (See Figure 2); 2 The thickness of corner piers must be two-thirds of this space (See Figure 2).

Similarly, an examination of Palladio's recommendations for basilicas reveals that they were applied to the Basilica project: 1 The width [of a basilica] must be no more than half their own length (See Figure 1); 2 The columns are as long as the portico is wide (See Figures 1 and 3); 3 The upper porticoes have columns a quarter shorter than those below (P19 3/4 vs P17 ? , see Figure 3) 4 The pedestal between the lower and upper columns must be made a quarter less tall than the upper columns (See Figure 3). This establishes that Palladio designed according to basic rules.

However, rules do not produce timeless architectural design. Palladio's unique ability to synthesize exempla into one unifying architectural solution is called to action. Problem-solving through Ancient Columnar Exempla The

Basilica commission was a challenging assignment. Palladio faced two design issues. The primary issue was to deal with the fact that the loggias of the existing structure had collapsed, presumably making heavy piers a requirement in the redesign. The secondary issue was how to incorporate heavy piers while maintaining a graceful design to the loggia. Palladio liked to cluster columns around a corner.

We see this favourite design device in many of his buildings (See Figures 11, 12, 13, 14). The corner piers of the Basilica presented a unique design challenge because of the high visibility of the building. Not only was it located in the main square, it was the most important civic structure of its day. Four sources of inspiration (three known exempla from antiquity) contributed to the design solution for the corner piers. 1. The Theatre of Pompey (sketched first by Serlio and then by Palladio—See Figure 4), 2. The Basilica Aemilia (sketched by Sangallo – See Figure 5 — and referenced by Palladio in his Guide Book to Rome); and 3.

The Arch of Sergii in Pula c. 27 BC (See Figure 6). In these three examples, we can see the solution used by Palladio in the Basilica, namely a “ pier with engaged column” (See Figure 7). One academic stated: “ This coupling of an engaged column and pilaster supported by a pedestal is a very rare motif in ancient architecture. “[x] And yet, it was adopted and re-elaborated by Bramante, Sangallo, Sansovino, and ultimately Palladio. The solution could not be stated more poetically than “...two paired vertical elements meet at the pilaster; the external one concludes the rhythm, turns, and begins the sequence at the side. [xi] The fourth source of inspiration for a corner

solution was Sansovino’s Library of San Marco in Venice, c. 1537, a building
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that Palladio would have been familiar with (See Figure 8). Sansovino's treatment of the corner pier lacks the cluster effect of columns that is 'signature Palladio', but the use of heavy corner piers and engaged columns is similar, and undoubtedly a comforting precedent for Palladio.

Reinterpretation of Ancient Columnar Exempla Not only did Palladio study design solutions from antiquity, he also sought out the best examples of architectural elements from ancient monuments. He studied them, documented them and reused them in his designs. As a specific example, he documented the ionic columns of the Temple of Fortuna Virilis in his fourth book. Palladio wrote: The volutes of the capitals are oval and the capitals at the corner of the portico and the temple have volutes on adjacent sides, which I do not think I have seen anywhere else; I have made use of it in many buildings because it seems to me a beautiful and graceful invention; the way in which one constructs it will appear in my design. See Figures 9 and 10.) **Conclusion** The column was Palladio's favourite structural element and architectural ornament. He used columns to solve both structural and aesthetic problems. He liked to cluster them around corners. Sometimes his use of columns were both structural and ornamental, and sometimes they were solely ornamental—but always Palladio produced powerful, timeless, design statements. He continuously sought the best examples from antiquity, and when he found them, he incorporated them repeatedly in his contemporary designs.

He did this because he loved the grammar of antiquity, and by advancing it through his writing and his architecture, he believed it would become the universal lingua franca of architectural practice. This, he understood, was his

calling and his cause. The Basilica is an important monument in Palladio's portfolio, not solely because of the ' pier with engaged column' solution but also because of his clever inclusion of Serlianas in the loggias to solve a spacing challenge optically.

Here we witness the talent of Palladio in full force in spite of all the constraints imposed in situ (a damaged existing structure, an oddly shaped trapezoidal plan, a fixed height, and existing piers.) If we follow the evolution of the use columns by Palladio, we can see the maturing of a late style, when Palladio began to design with colossal orders reminiscent of Michelangelo. Twenty five years after the construction of the Basilica began, Palladio was given an important civic commission directly across from the Basilica – the Loggia del Capitaniato.

This gave him the opportunity to return to a site he knew so intimately, and complement his earlier loggia design with a new building. The Loggia del Capitaniato was a smaller structure, but heavier due to the colossal order—the perfect three bay counterweight to the complex nine bay double-loggia Basilica. That Palladio undertook a riskier approach with a colossal order, arguably a statement of domination, is indicative of his confidence as an architect. In his maturity, Palladio began to demonstrate that less can be more. Endnotes ————— 1] Ackerman indicates Palladio went to Rome in 1541, 1547 and 1554, p. 25; Wittkower indicates Palladio went to Rome between 1545-47; Barbieri indicates Palladio went to Rome for the second time in 1545. ————— [i] Onians, John. *Bearers of Meaning—The Classical Orders in Antiquity, the Middle Ages, and the Renaissance*,

Princeton University Press, 1988, p. 3. [ii] Barbieri, Franco. *Corpus*
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Palladianum, Volume II: The Basilica of Andrea Palladio, p. 52 The first two books by Sebastiano Serlio, who had been living in Venice since 1528, began to circulate in the Veneto between 1537 and 1540.

Palladio was fascinated by the repertory of architectural forms and ideas which were disseminated through his books. These forms and ideas became the most authoritative ones of the period, as well as the most tested. Their source was the influential circles of Roman “ classicism”; they were derived ultimately from Bramante but were filtered through the freer and more contemporary interpretations of Raphael and above all, of Peruzzi, culminating in the “ mannerism” of Giulio Romano. [iii] Bandmann, Gunter. Early Medieval Architecture as Bearer of Meaning, Columbia University Press, 2005. [iv] Bandmann,. p. 4 This development is viewed by Bandmann as one of the first declarations of art—” an exterior form indicating an indwelling one. ” [v] Onians, p. 6. [vi] Boucher, Bruce. Andrea Palladio, The Architect in his Time, Abbeville Press Publishers, 1998, p. 4 Also p. 76 “ His measure was always classical antiquity”. [vii] On Intercolumniation: 1 The intercolumniations may be made a diameter and a half of the column, taking the diameter from the lowest part of the column; or two, two and a quarter, three diameters, and also greater; but the ancients did not use intercolumniations greater than three column diameters. Columns must always be even in number on the facades of buildings, so as to have an intercolumniation in the middle which will be larger than the others. [viii] On Loggias: 1 If loggias are made with piers, they should be arranged so that the thickness of the piers is no less than one-third of the space between one pier and another, and the thickness of those to go at the corners must be

two-thirds of this space so that the corners of the building end up solid and strong. 2 When they have to bear an enormous weight, as in very large buildings, then they should be made half the thickness of the space between them. ix] On Basilicas: 1 Their width must be no more than half their own length 2 The columns are as long as the portico is wide 3 The upper porticoes have columns a quarter shorter than those below 4 The pedestal between the lower and upper columns must be made a quarter less tall than the upper columns so those who walk about in the upper porticoes cannot be seen by those carrying out their business in the basilica [x] Lehmann, Phyllis Williams, THE BASILICA-AEMILIA AND S-BIAGIO-AT-MONTEPULCIANO, ART BULLETIN, vol. 64, no. 1, p. 125, 1982 [xi] p 62, Corpus Palladianum [pic] | [pic] | | Figure 1: Plan of Basilica | Figure 2: Basilica Pier and Column Detail | | [pic] |[pic] | | Figure 3: Elevation of Basilica | Figure 4: Theatre of Pompey | | [pic] |[pic] | | Figure 5. Basilica of Aemilia | Figure 6: Arch of Sergii, Pula, c. 7 BC | |[pic] |[pic] | | Figure 7, Basilica of Vicenza | Figure 8: Sansovino's Library of San Marco, c. 1537 | |[pic] |[pic] | | Figure 9, Ionic Capital from the Temple of Fortuna Virilis (Chapter | Figure 10: Ionic Capital of Basilica of Vicenza | | XIII. Fourth Book, Quattro Libri, p. 60) | | |[pic] |[pic] | | Figure 11: Palazzo Chiericati | Figure 12: San Giorgio Maggiore | |[pic] |[pic] | | Figure 13: Il Redentore | Figure 14: Teatro Olimpico |