Branko Mitrovic

Learning from Palladio

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Reviewed by Kim Williams

If any architect in history has lessons to teach, it is Palladio, and few have made themselves more accessible, in terms of both the number of buildings built and still standing as well as a corpus of written work and drawings to study. One thing that makes Palladio so attractive to scholars of architecture as well as to the general public is the beauty of his architecture, a beauty of forms and composition that doesn't require narration or explanation to be appreciated. Palladio himself makes a charming teacher. Where architectural treatises of the 1400s were mainly literary and philosophical exercises, treatises of the 1500s were of a much greater practical usefulness. Palladio's intention in his *Quattro libri* was certainly to provide practical information to architects. Additionally, for those with eyes to see, his buildings provide lessons in the application (or sometimes non-application) of that information.

Branko Mitrovic, like Palladio, is also an excellent teacher, and one thing that I so appreciated about this present book is that he not only tells us what he will be teaching us, but he tells us why he is teaching it. In the Introduction, after the story of Palladio's life and career and a short description of the materials about Palladio available for study, Mitrovic tells us about two parallel trends in architectural history: one dealing with how architecture is designed and built, that is, questions related to visual forms; the other dealing with the role of architecture in culture and society, that is, questions of meaning. Mitrovic sustains that Palladio divorced formal elements from meaning for aesthetic reasons (in order, for instance, to be able to translate the triangular pediment from the Roman temple to a Venetan villa), thus the study of Palladio has to be concentrated on form and not on meaning. It is precisely the study of form that allows the modern, contemporary, architect to learn from Palladio in a way that can be of constructive use. Whatever cultural or societal meaning that was attached to Palladio's architecture in the 1500s can only be a metaphor for meanings attached to architectural forms today, while formal concepts lessons learned from Palladio are as relevant in the twenty-first century as in they were in the sixteenth.

The formal lessons in Palladio are apparently simple, involving single elements (spatial elements such rooms, staircases and courtyards, structural elements such as columns, and organizational elements such as axes), sequences or groupings of elements, and dimensional relationships both within single elements and among related elements. But behind the apparent simplicity are found a range of complex problems with which Palladio has grappled that require careful analysis and detailed background.

Palladio used mathematical tools as devices to aid his designs: concepts such as symmetry and proportion are key to understanding Palladio's architecture. It is generally accepted that the theory and practice of applying musical proportions to architecture during the Renaissance was a way of endowing the building with cosmic harmony. But Mitrovic argues that "while the narrative about the harmony of the world may have been attached to successful works of architecture at the time, it still does not follow that architects derived their design principles from it" (p. 87), therefore the use of mathematical concepts in Palladio's architecture should also be considered from the point of view of formalism rather than that of meaning.

Chapter I of *Learning from Palladio* addresses the buildings types and their compositional elements in Palladio's oeuvre. This involves the distinction between the palazzo and the villa, for instance, and between kinds of rooms (Palladio distinguished room type by size—small, intermediate, and large—rather as we would today by function). Once these basic building blocks are defined, we can begin to consider how they might be combined. In treating sequences of rooms in the Palazzo Antonini, Mitrovic provides the following verbal description: "circulation from one end to the other includes a narrow entrance, a sunny courtyard, a shady loggia, defined by a double grid of columns, another sunny courtyard, and a narrow exit." An architectural plan is, of course, already a form of abstraction, and rooms in plan appear as shapes in the plane, a kind of mathematical model—in this case, a small narrow rectangle, a large rectangle, a square, another large rectangle, and a last small narrow rectangle. The relationships between the spaces are far from casual, however: they are related to each other sequentially, as well as by their common relationship to an axis, and they are further related to each other dimensionally. It is to the articulation of those relationships that the latter half of Chapter I, and all of Chapters II ("Proportions and Harmonies") and III ("Classical Orders") are dedicated.

Chapter II is a detailed discussion of the musical theory of proportion, and the mathematical ratios of the respective intervals of the various systems, including equal temperament and the diatonic, chromatic and enharmonic scales. Although the theories are intriguing, and although they form the basis of the accepted theory of Renaissance proportions as set forth by Wittkower, Mitrovic argues that in the end Palladio developed his list of preferred ratios empirically rather than in accordance to a theory.

Similarly, Chapter III is a detailed discussion of the development of the orders, which compares Vignola's attitude towards the orders to that of Daniele Barbaro, Palladio's mentor, and describes Palladio's approach as a combination of the two. But after the theory comes the practice, with Mitrovic sustaining that the use of the orders and its imposition of a module as a design tool was really only a means of grappling with the creation of a pleasing visual result: intercolumnations that were neither too wide nor too narrow, floor heights neither oppressively too low or airily too high.

In Chapters II and III Mitrovic makes clear his expertise in dealing with the formal technicalities underlying Palladio's architecture. In Chapter IV on "Palladio's Platonism" he takes on the metaphysical technicalities, which are no less challenging. The question that Mitrovic raises is whether we primarily perceive objects of architecture through our experience of them, or as reflections of an ideal form (actually, the pertinent question here is how Palladio perceived architecture). Here he discusses the differences between Aristotelian and Platonic philosophies and shows Palladio to be a materialist who believed in absolutes: for instance, Palladio did not discuss optical corrections in his *Quattro Libri*, and he preferred orthogonal architectural representations to perspectives.

The appropriateness today of Classical architecture, which is discussed in Chapter V, left me perplexed. I studied architecture in the 1970s, at the end of the wave of modernism and the beginning of post-modernism, when we were learning from Las Vegas with Robert Venturi and Denise Scott-Brown, whose book was perhaps the first book that made me think that historic architecture was worth studying. While I really appreciate the beauty of the Classical vocabulary, I would wonder at its use today, in the same way that, while I appreciate Latin, finding a Latin version of *Harry Potter*, leaves me rather speechless.

Ultimately I think most architects share Mitrovic's wonder in the face of Palladio's buildings: his architecture is so perfect, perfect for its time, perfect for its settings, perfect within itself. What architect wouldn't want to design buildings that perfect? (I admit, I'm writing this review at a table in the sala of the Villa Cornaro, and it is very hard not to wax poetic.) Does Mitrovic succeed at unveiling Palladio's recipe for perfection? This book requires careful attention, and is not an easy read, but ultimately takes us steps further in the right direction.

About the reviewer

Kim Williams is the editor-in-chief of the *Nexus Network Journal*. She is the author of *The Villas of Palladio* (Princeton Architectural Press, 2003).