

Palladianism: From the Italian Villa to International Architecture

by Carsten Ruhl

Andrea Palladio has shaped the development of European architecture as no other architect of the Italian Renaissance. More than two hundred years after his death he was still regarded as an undoubted authority. The cultural transfer between Italy and England played an essential role in this success. From the early 17th century English architects regarded Palladio's work as the epitome of a classical architecture modelled on the ancient world. Palladianism spread from England to Germany, and then to Northern Europe and the United States, where, despite changes in aesthetic views, it continued to exercise a strong influence well into the 19th century.

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Palladio and the Grand Tour

The unprecedented enthusiasm for the architecture of Andrea Palladio (1508–1580) (→ Media Link #ab) can only be understood in the context of a general interest in the Italian peninsula. It wasn't until the era of the Grand Tour, which in the early 17th century, and especially in England, was declared to be an indispensable part of the wealth of experience that constitutes the *complete gentleman*,¹ that Andrea Palladio's architecture became well known beyond Italy's borders. An important mediator in this regard was the English diplomat and politician Henry Wotton (1568–1639) (→ Media Link #ae). Living in Venice, he made the English public familiar with the buildings that Palladio had constructed in Venice's hinterland, the *terra ferma*. His essay, published in 1624, with the simple title *The Elements of Architecture*,² revealed an intimate knowledge of Italian Renaissance architecture and its theoretical foundations. Here, in an accessible manner, Wotton gave the English public its first critical introduction to the main categories of Italian architectural theory.

▲ 1

Nevertheless, Palladio's architecture soon became an obsession. This is especially true of the villa architecture that Palladio erected for a large number of the Venetian *nobiltà* in the second half of the 16th century.³ For this purpose he developed a comparatively new building type. As the example of the Villa Emo (→ Media Link #af) demonstrates, the main building (*casa di villa*) is framed by two wings or arms (*braccia*) and the principal axis is emphasized by a portico borrowed from temple architecture. If in this way Palladio appeared to meet congenially the growing need of the Venetian upper class for representative buildings in rural areas, his Villa La Rotonda (→ Media Link #ag), begun in 1565, was soon seen as the embodiment of the ideal of architectural perfection.

▲ 2

The great influence that these examples would attain had already become clear by the beginning of the 17th century. Among the first English travellers that Henry Wotton took to see Palladio's villas was Inigo Jones (1573–1652) (→ Media Link #ah), the court artist who would later prepare the way for Palladianism in England. At the time of his visit he was primarily known for his theatre projects at the English court, the so-called *masques*. During his trip to Venice he made his first acquaintance with Italian Renaissance architecture which, up to that time, had hardly influenced English architecture. During his stay in Italy he also acquired a copy of the *Quattro Libri Dell' Architettura*,⁴ which Palladio had

published in 1570. These books played a decisive role in introducing what Jones had seen in Italy into the practice of English architecture. As the first systematic text books of classical architecture, they provided a comparatively simple introduction. Beyond this, Palladio's architecture books also have the particular quality of demonstrating how the reader can make the principles they expound fruitful in his own projects. For, in addition to the depiction of Roman temples and basilicas, Palladio presents his own projects of palaces and villas, which he self-confidently places in the tradition of ancient architecture. The numerous marginalia in Jones's copy of the *Quattro Libri* testify to the fact that it was through intensive study of Palladio that he gained the knowledge he needed to develop into one of England's most important architects.

▲3

Inigo Jones and Early Palladianism in England

Within a few years of his return from Italy, Jones received the opportunity to apply what he had learned. In 1616 James I (1566–1625) (→ Media Link #ai) commissioned Jones to design a new palace in Greenwich for his wife Anne of Denmark (1574–1619) (→ Media Link #aj).⁵ In view of the fact that the site was very distant from the city, Jones turned to Palladio's villa architecture. Other projects, that were a direct result of his study of Palladio's books on architecture, soon followed. Three years later, Jones's blueprint for a banquet hall in Whitehall (→ Media Link #ak) took its orientation from Palladio's villas and from his reconstruction of an Egyptian temple (→ Media Link #al) reproduced in the *Quattro Libri*. In the 1630s important commissions ensued such as the Covent Garden Church (1630), an adaptation of Palladio's depiction of the Tuscan temple, and the redesigning of the Gothic St Paul's Cathedral (1633–1640) (→ Media Link #am), which made use of Palladio's interpretation of the Sol and Luna Temple (→ Media Link #an) in the *Quattro Libri*.

▲4

From this point on the orientation to Palladio became an integral part of the history of English architecture. Indeed, even the blueprints of architects who are generally associated with the Baroque period, drew repeatedly on the Italian model. Sir Christopher Wren (1632–1723) (→ Media Link #ao), for example, who next to Jones was the most successful English architect of the 17th century, in his blueprint for the Trinity College Library in Cambridge (1676), adapted Palladio's cloister of the Venetian convent of S. Maria della Carità (1560–1570), and Sir John Vanbrugh's (1664–1726) (→ Media Link #ap) Howard Castle (begun in 1699) (→ Media Link #aq) combined the style of Palladio's villas with the tradition of the English country residence.

▲5

Palladianism as an Aesthetic Norm

It wasn't until the beginning of the 18th century, however, that Palladianism was established as an aesthetic norm in England. This was closely connected with the rise of a new political elite. In 1714 the House of Hanover ascended the English throne and brought an end to the longstanding struggle between the Tories and the Whigs. The Whig nobility in particular profited from the change of power out of which a new elite emerged that was steeped in the ideals of the English Early Enlightenment. As a result of a compromise between aristocratic and middle class interests, a constitutional monarchy came into being that succeeded the old order which had been briefly revived during the Restoration. It in turn created the conditions for a new national consciousness that stood in direct opposition to the ideas that reigned on the continent. Naturally, this consciousness also included a view of the arts. Both Baroque architecture and garden design were criticized as symbols of the Absolutism which the new view opposed. Their place was taken by an ideal of moral philosophy that was based essentially on the notion of the self-determined process of perfection of the enlightened individual. Along with the English landscape park the Palladian villa was thought to express this new self-consciousness.⁶

▲6

As early as 1715 the English architect Colen Campbell (1675–1729) (→ Media Link #at) published an elaborate book of engravings that tried to combine the, by this time traditional, preference of English architects for Palladio, with the effort to create a *Vitruvius Britannicus*.⁷ In this sumptuously illustrated book Campbell was the first to unfold a panorama of English architecture since the 17th century. Palladio's architecture was presented as the great model and Inigo Jones as Palladio's worthy follower. In the brief introduction to *Vitruvius Britannicus*, Campbell rejected Italian Baroque architecture as licentious. The English architect took the view that, due to the general moral decline on the continent, Italy

could no longer be taken seriously as a model. In accordance with this judgment, the Grand Tour was relegated to one of the "Mistakes in Education".⁸ Henceforth it would be up to England to carry on the heritage of humanism.

▲7

Just how much Campbell's sentiments echoed those of the new elite became apparent in the great reputation that the architect enjoyed after his work was published. In the following years he received numerous commissions, especially for the building of country residences. His structures range from a comparatively free interpretation of Palladio's villa architecture, to the literal copying of Palladio's Villa La Rotonda. Among Campbell's more prominent patrons were Richard Boyle, the 3rd Earl of Burlington and 4th Earl of Cork (1694–1753) (→ Media Link #au). As a descendent of a Whig noble family that had given important support to William of Orange (1650–1702) (→ Media Link #av) during the Glorious Revolution (1688/1689), Burlington had been raised in the new spirit of post-revolutionary England. A short time after the House of Hanover came to power Burlington commissioned Campbell to renovate his London townhouse and, gradually, Burlington himself evinced a growing interest in architecture.

▲8

Palladian Classicism

The reception of Palladio's works played an essential role in developing "Palladian Classicism". During his trip to Italy Burlington had acquired an extensive collection of Palladio's drawings from which he published a selection under the title of *Fabbriche Antiche Disegnate da Andrea Palladio* in 1730.⁹ Upon his return from Italy Burlington tried to establish Palladianism as England's state architecture.¹⁰ On the one hand, he felt authorized to do this because he was in possession of the newly acquired collection of Palladio's projects and studies of ancient architecture, on the other hand he also had the influence and the means to bring the new aesthetic to the public's attention in such ambitious works as the *Designs of Inigo Jones*¹¹ or Isaac Ware's (d. 1766) (→ Media Link #aw) *Four Books of Andrea Palladio's Architecture* (1738).¹² In consequence, at the start of the 1730s, Burlington made a concerted effort to establish the new aesthetic in the sphere of public building. To this end he not only placed his architect friends in key positions at the Royal Office, but, designed, in competition with the Baroque architect Nicholas Hawksmoor (1661–1736) (→ Media Link #ax), an ambitious building for Parliament. It consisted of a rigorously classical architecture on a monumental scale that was never realised – in contrast to the Parliament building for Dublin, designed by the Palladian architect Sir Edward Lovett Pearce (ca. 1699–1733) (→ Media Link #ay) and built between 1729–1731.¹³

▲9

Even if such dilettantes as Burlington, in accord with their newly acquired self-image, liked to think of themselves as architects in the tradition of Vitruvius, it would be incorrect to speak of them as architects in the classical sense of the word. Indeed, although the Earl enjoyed being celebrated as the English Vitruvius, or the English Palladio, he took very little interest in the practical problems of architectural construction. The process in which Burlington created his projects reveals that he looked upon architecture primarily as an aesthetic object.¹⁴ This attitude was expressed on two levels. On the one hand, Burlington turned over the concrete realisation of his projects to architects from his Palladian circle. On the other hand, Burlington's projects developed in essence out of a combination of motives which he took from his collection of Palladio's drawings. Thus, for example, Burlington's own house in Chiswick (1725–1729) (→ Media Link #az) consisted essentially of the combination of three different Palladian blueprints, to which, to cap it all, Palladio's studies of Roman bath architecture were added. In this way, Burlington presented Europe for the first time with an architecture whose Classicism was praised by his contemporaries.

▲10

Among the many admirers of the new English architecture was the German architect Friedrich Wilhelm of Erdmannsdorff (1736–1800) (→ Media Link #b0). Indeed, after accompanying Leopold III Friedrich Franz, Prince and Duke of Anhalt-Dessau (1740–1817) (→ Media Link #b1) on a Grand Tour of England, he even praised Chiswick House as the embodiment of the "goût de l'ancienne Grèce".¹⁵ After the prince returned home, he gradually developed the idea of turning his comparatively unimportant state into a "small England". At the centre of the first landscape park developed outside of England, and in place of a hunting lodge, the prince commissioned Erdmannsdorff to create a modern villa in the style of Campbell and Burlington.¹⁶

▲11

Palladianism as State Architecture

By this time Palladianism had long become the object of art criticism in England itself. In his *Analysis of Beauty* (1753)¹⁷ William Hogarth (1697–1764) (→ Media Link #b2) associated Palladian architecture à la Burlington with aesthetic monotony and contrasted it to the richness of the Baroque and Picturesque. Motivated by a similar attitude, the writer and art collector Horace Walpole, 4th Earl of Oxford (1717–1797) (→ Media Link #b3), built in the immediate vicinity of Chiswick House a country residence which can only be understood as the structural anti-manifesto to Burlington's classicism. Here the simplicity of the beautiful irregularity of Neo-Gothic forms took the place of the classicist aesthetic associated with Palladianism.¹⁸

▲ 12

But if, in this way, the overwhelming dominance of Palladianism was slowly undermined, Classicism nevertheless continued to shape English architecture well into the late 18th century. Especially in the years just before the American Revolution, London was the scene of various major building projects that decisively changed the city's profile. In 1769 the Scottish architect Robert Adam (1728–1792) (→ Media Link #b4) leased a large tract of land on the Thames where he built so-called terraced houses.¹⁹ This project marked the first attempt to give the shoreline a unified form. As in the villas that Adam built, here too the influence of Palladianism is still traceable, even if now, in place of the direct adaptations, the new international Classicism appears. This is also true for the second prominent urban development project of the 18th century, Somerset House (→ Media Link #b5), built by Sir William Chambers (1723–1796) (→ Media Link #b6).²⁰ In 1776 Chambers, next to Adam the most influential British architect in the second half of the century, was commissioned to design a modern administration building on the Thames. In keeping with England's newly acquired importance as a world power, upon its completion in 1786, this complex, closed on four sides, constituted a classical residence building.

▲ 13

Nevertheless, such major projects could not disguise the fact, that at this time, England, as a great power, was undergoing its first crisis. While Somerset House was being built, the American colonies won independence from the British mother country. But, initially, this was not coupled with cultural emancipation. Quite the opposite: in architectural matters, the 18th century American architects generally continued to follow the English example.²¹ Already in the 1740s, the architect dilettante Peter Harrison (1716–1775) (→ Media Link #b7) made his designs on the basis of English engravings of buildings erected in the Palladian classicist style, and even Thomas Jefferson (1743–1826) (→ Media Link #b8), who was to become president of the United States, modelled his own home on the Palladian villa (→ Media Link #b9). When the Capitol (→ Media Link #ba) was built at the beginning of the 19th century, Palladianism was transformed once and for all into a state architecture of monumental proportions.

▲ 14

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Appendix

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13. ^ On the Irish Parliament building, see: Casey, *Dublin* 2005, pp. 380ff.
14. ^ Ruhl, *Palladio* 2003.
15. ^ ("the taste of ancient Greece" transl. by W.P.), quoted in Weiss, *Gartenreich* p. 187.
16. ^ Cf. Rüffer, *Das Schloss* 2005.
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18. ^ Miller, *Strawberry Hill* 1986.
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20. ^ On Chambers, see: Harris, Sir William Chambers 1996.


21. ^ On the influence of Palladian architecture in the U.S.A., see: Köster, Palladio 1990.

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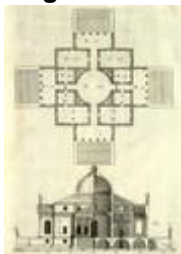
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