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Aemulatio and *Sprezzatura*: Palladio and the Legacy of Vitruvius

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IL QVARTO
LIBRO
DELL'ARCHITETTVRA
Di Andrea Palladio.

NEL QVAL SI DESCRIVONO,
e si figurano i Tempij Antichi, che sono in Roma,
ET ALCVNI ALTRI, CHE SONO
in Italia, e fuori d'Italia.

Tension and unease stirred in the minds of the 15th and 16th-century architects in Italy. Though surrounded by the physical remains of antiquity, they were unsure of how to make use of the most substantial treatise on architecture from ancient Rome, Vitruvius's *De Architectura*. Written around 27 B.C.E., it gained fame during the Renaissance due to both the learned commitment to Ancient art and the critical new technology of the printing press (Fig. 1). This renown increased the sense of the book's authority, but also amplified its inadequacy. Writers such as Leon Battista Alberti, author of a 1443 treatise on architecture first printed in 1486, and Sebastiano Serlio, author of a popular treatise on architecture published in 1537, grappled with the legacy of antiquity. However not until the ascendance of Andrea Palladio (Fig. 2) in the 1550s did anyone embark on a sustained and intensive critique of Vitruvius through ruthless editing and reformatting of Vitruvius's descriptions, and in the production of what he believed to be a perfected form of architecture. In the process, he sought to promote his own theories and practice. The concepts of *aemulatio*— the act of improving and building upon another's creative production, and *sprezzatura*, or nonchalant expertise, were central to Palladio's strategies. This thesis will explore Palladio's writings, illustrations, and one of his most significant built structures to see how he purposely used the legacy of Vitruvius to complete his self-fashioning as an architect.

In 1416, Italian humanist scholars Poggio Bracciolini and Cencio Rustici discovered copies of the original Vitruvian manuscripts from *De Architectura*.[1] In the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, humanist scholars held Vitruvian architectural theory in high regard due to the unusual way Vitruvius described building processes. Leonardo da Vinci even produced a drawing known as the *Vitruvian Man* (Fig. 3), in which he reconstructed

Vitruvius's metaphor relating the ideal proportions of the human body to architecture. Renaissance architects sometimes sought to re-create ancient Roman buildings on the basis of these ekphrastic descriptions, but for the most part Vitruvius proved difficult to follow in actual building practice.[2]

Leon Battista Alberti and Sebastiano Serlio took different routes to incorporate the work of Vitruvius into their treatises. Alberti's treatise was largely based on architecture he had actually seen, and he used *De Architectura* anecdotally, and only with difficulty.[3] He described Vitruvius as "A Writer indeed of universal Knowledge, but so maimed by Age, that in many Places there are great Chasms, and many Things imperfect in others. Besides this, his Style is absolutely void of all Ornaments, and he wrote in such a Manner, that to the Latins he seems to write Greek, and to the Greeks, Latin." [4]

Serlio described himself as a follower or disciple of Vitruvius, revering him in almost a religious way.[5] "All those architects who might condemn the writings of Vitruvius," he wrote, "…would be architectural heretics."[6] Serlio sought to create a harmony among the extant ruins of ancient buildings and what was recorded in *De Architectura*, but even he had to admit, "I find a great discrepancy between the buildings in Rome and other places in Italy and the writings of Vitruvius." When correcting De Architectura, he nonetheless deferred to the ancient authority, writing that "we should uphold the doctrines of Vitruvius as an infallible guide and rule, provided that reason not persuade us otherwise."[7]

A new kind of critique entered the architectural dialogue when Andrea Palladio published his *Quattro Libri* in 1570 (Fig. 2). He had already published two earlier treatises on architecture both published in 1554. . Palladio already knew from reading Alberti and Serlio that *De Architectura* was full of instructions about how to construct buildings that would last in various climates and other useful information, but was lacking in separation between structure and appearance. Unlike

Alberti's historiography and short edits and Serlio's devout following of Vitruvius, Palladio undertook the first sustained and intensive critique of *De Architectura.*

Palladio grappled with Vitruvius's separation between appearance and structure in Vitruvian theory. In the first book of the *Quattro Libri,* Palladio states, "That work, therefore, cannot be called perfect, which should be useful and not durable, or durable and not useful, or having both these should be without beauty."[8] He realized that the Vitruvian methods of measurement that relied mostly on the anatomy of the human form would lead to a building that was perhaps beautiful to look at but would lack a durable structure. He also refused to agree with Vitruvius's opinion that columns should reflect the human body.[9] This problem is evident from a 1999 translation of *De Architectura* where author Ingrid Rowland attempted to illustrate the Vitruvian method of creating columns (Fig. 4); while imaginative, Rowland's illustration is not structurally viable. Vitruvius's approach seemed too abstract and realistically unattainable for Palladio.

While earlier editions of Vitruvius were not illustrated, in 1556 Palladio designed images, including a title page, for a new translation and commentary by his patron Daniele Barbaro (Fig. 1).[10] A triumphal arch frames the title page, its austerity strongly adhering to the Classical tradition. These illustrations were corrective actions in themselves. It could even be said that in creating images that corresponded and highlighted the text of Vitruvius, Palladio had already begun to improve what had been outlined only in writing by the ancient architect. He drew from but did not strictly adhere to the principles and measurements set out in Vitruvius's work.[11] He even stated his intent: "The measures and proportion of each of these orders [of columns] I shall separately set down; not *too much* according to Vitruvius…"[12] Palladio thus imitated Vitruvius only to a point, and he felt obliged and authorized to edit and perfect his predecessor. The rhetorical concept of *aemulatio*

The rhetorical concept of *aemulatio* is commonly misunderstood as only being the desire to imitate the work, persona, and other attributes of another, but is more properly understood as the mastery of the work of a person to the extent that authoritative improvements and additions can be made.[13] By picking and choosing what aspects of Vitruvius' work to endorse and reject, Palladio engaged in aemulatio within a larger act of self-fashioning.

In contrast to his severe renderings for the edition of Vitruvius, the title page of his own 1570 publication of the *Quattro Libri* is imaginative and detailed, rich in allegorical symbolism that moves beyond Classical architectural style. The Queen of Virtue splices the pediment in half and sits enthroned, as winged angels announce Palladio's fame. At the sides, two female personifications of architecture raise their architectural tools in salute to Palladio.

The pediment is supported by the revision of the famous Corinthian order column that Palladio constructed after mastering Vitruvius's calculations (Fig. 5). This is noteworthy because he directly denounced the measurements Vitruvius sets forth in *De Architectura* regarding the Corinthian order, and placing them on the title page of his own architectural treatise shows a definite break with Vitruvian tradition. Below the banner bearing the title and dedication is an inset cartouche with Lady Fortune, standing and holding a sail to direct a ship carrying a king, symbolizing the height of patronage and honor.[14] Palladio also included a depiction of Father Time to symbolize the legacy of his treatise in the bottom left-hand corner, and in the bottom right-hand corner is a depiction of Jupiter and Io, perhaps to signify the connection with antiquity.

One never-before noted detail on the armband of the personification of architecture sheds light on Palladio's endeavor (Fig. 6). The tiny inscription, written in Greek

says "λοις" or "improvement" in Greek. Through this subtle element, one might suggest that Palladio acknowledged his aim to not only imitate but exceed the accomplishments of his predecessors. Palladio believed himself to be an architect superior to Vitruvius, and wished his audience to understand that his purpose for writing the treatise was to fashion himself as an architect who bested even the most renowned ancient Roman architect.

Palladio also challenged Vitruvian architecture in his built structures, when he created expanded upon ancient Roman principles through his own license. One of Palladio's most significant commissions was the Villa Barbaro (Fig. 7 and Fig. 8), which he designed and constructed between 1560 and 1570 for the brothers Daniele and Marcantonio Barbaro.[15] Daniele, as noted earlier, was the humanist scholar and translator of Vitruvius whose publication Palladio illustrated. Thus, it is not surprising that the engagement with Vitruvius is quite evident. The front of the Villa is akin to an ancient temple façade with four evenly spaced Ionic columns and a pediment with nude figures. However, it differs from anything seen in antiquity in placing a balcony above the central doors, and the fact that the arch of the balcony breaks through the entablature. Palladio indicated in the *Quattro Libri* that he used measurements for the columns of the Villa Barbaro that were not in accord with those of Vitruvius, but instead blended Vitruvian ideas regarding temples with contemporary ideas regarding homes for the wealthy.[16] He stated, "ancient temples are to be seen, that have fixed columns in the front, and have no porticos round them…"[17] Here, rather than porticos Palladio added loggie that extend horizontally, expanding his temple front. He thus showcased his flexibility in adapting Roman forms and styles to cater to the demands of his antiquarian patrons for a modern country villa.

As we have seen to this point, Palladio engaged with the legacy of Vitruvius in multiple forms—writing, illustration and built structures—establishing himself as a superior architect through a process of *aemulatio* and self-fashioning. In closing, I would suggest that Palladio went beyond *aemulatio*, augmenting his project of self-fashioning by performing in the Renaissance courtly manner of *sprezzatura*, or nonchalant expertise, that was defined by Baldassare Castiglione's *Book of the Courtier,* published in 1528. This book by Castiglione, portrayed by Raphael in a masterly portrait (Fig. 9), quickly became one of the most popular publications of the sixteenth century. It becomes clear that Palladio tried to improve the calculations of Vitruvius not only for his own interest but also for the utility of his book to other architects. Surely he gained not only popularity but also some personal satisfaction in projecting himself as the superior architect. In this way, Palladio set himself apart from his contemporaries and constructed an identity for himself as an intellectual who believed he could challenge the ancient authority, perhaps because he understood him better than others, and thus was able to recognize Vitruvius's shortfalls more acutely. Palladio's interpretation of Vitruvian architecture was unprecedented in scope and sustained engagement, and that enabled him to nonchalantly dismiss ancient precedent whenever he desired. The criticism and refinement in the *Quattro Libri*, and Palladio's illustrations and built structures support the idea that he not only endeavored to improve upon the measurements and calculations of Vitruvius, but that he was able to do it so audaciously that his own and better measurements seemed effortless, virtually subsuming the ancient elements with his own stylistic flair.

Palladio fashioned himself as an intermediary between *De Architectura* and his own time. The emulation and improvement of Vitruvian architectural theory were premised less on the idea that his structures stood in the

place of ancient architecture and more on the concept that he was justified in fusing antiquarian understanding about planning and design with his idiosyncratic revisions to those calculations. This type of self-fashioning allowed Palladio to present his genius to his audience. Though he described Vitruvius as his mentor in *Quattro Libri*, Palladio made an intentional and definitive improvement upon the calculations and ideas outlined in *De Architectura* and in so doing, presented himself as the greatest architect of all time, ancient or present.

NOTES

[1] Carol Hersell, *Seventy-Eight Vitruvius Manuscripts*, London, 1967, 26.

[2] Alberti mentions the Church of Saint Mark in Venice c.1092 (12); Serlio mentions that parts of Europe closely adhered to the "doctrine of Vitruvius" in the architecture (155); and Palladio mentions his own structures of the Basilica Palladiana c.1549 and the Villa Barbaro c.1560-1570 (49); (Leon Battista Alberti, *De Re Aedificatoria*, Florence, 1443).

[3] "I like Vitruvius's Method too, which I find was observed by the ancient Architects all over Rome…" (Alberti, 12); "Vitruvius says, that the Holm Oak and Beech are very weak in their Nature against storms, and do not endure to a great Age" (Alberti, 29); "It is Vitruvius's Opinion, that Sand, especially that which is in Tuscany…" (Alberti, 38); "Vitruvius and Pliny are for mixing sand thus…" (Alberti, 45); "These Things already mention'd, we have gathered from Pliny and Vitruvius especially…" (Alberti, 62); "In other Respects I am very well pleased with Vitruvius, who says the Wall ought to be built thus…" (Alberti 73); "Vitruvius says that in Winter Parlours it is ridiculous to adorn the Ceiling…" (Alberti 106); Leon Battista Alberti, *De Re Aedificatoria*, Florence, 1443.

[4] Alberti on Vitruvius: "A Writer indeed of universal Knowledge, but so maimed by Age, that in many Places there are great Chasms, and many Things imperfect in others. Besides this, his Style is absolutely void of all Ornaments, and he wrote in such a Manner, that to the Latins he seems to write Greek, and to the Greeks, Latin", Leon Battista Alberti, *De Re Aedificatoria*, Florence, 1443, 111.

[5] Sebastiano Serlio, *Tutte l'opere d'architettura et prospetiva,* Venice, 1537, Volume 2, xxxiv-xxxv.

[6] Serlio, 1537, fol. 69v.

[7] Serlio, 1537, Book III fol. 69v.

[8] Andrea Palladio, *I Quattro Libri,* Venice, 1570, 1

[9] Marcus Vitruvius, *De Architectura*, Italian edition published in 1498, Book IV, i. 11.

[10] It is worth noting that Palladio's books printed in 1554 were not heavily illustrated, which points to his desire to improve upon Vitruvius's works with his illustrations for the Barbaro translation and commentary, as well as his own treatise on architecture, the Quattro Libri.

[11] Palladio, 1570, Book I Chapter XII, "The measures and proportion of each of these orders I shall separately set down; not so much according to Vitruvius, as to the observations I have made on several ancient edifices."

[12] Palladio, 1570, 11.

[13] "Rivalries also occur between a living artist and an acknowledged master of the past, a phenomenon known as aemulatio (emulation)" Oxford Art Online Grove Dictionary Entry "Competition", 2007-2017.

[14] This is not included merely by accident, and most likely done as a reminder for the patron that Vitruvius worked for Augustus who paid him very well.

15. For further reading on the Villa Barbaro, see David Watkin, *A History of Western Architecture*, 2005, 246.

16. For further reading on Classical-styled villas built for Venetian aristocrats see Watkin, *A History of Western Architecture*, 2005, 246.

17. Palladio, 1570, 83.

Fig. 1
Title page of Daniele Barbaro's translation and commentary on *De Architectura* illustrated by Andrea Palladio published 1556.

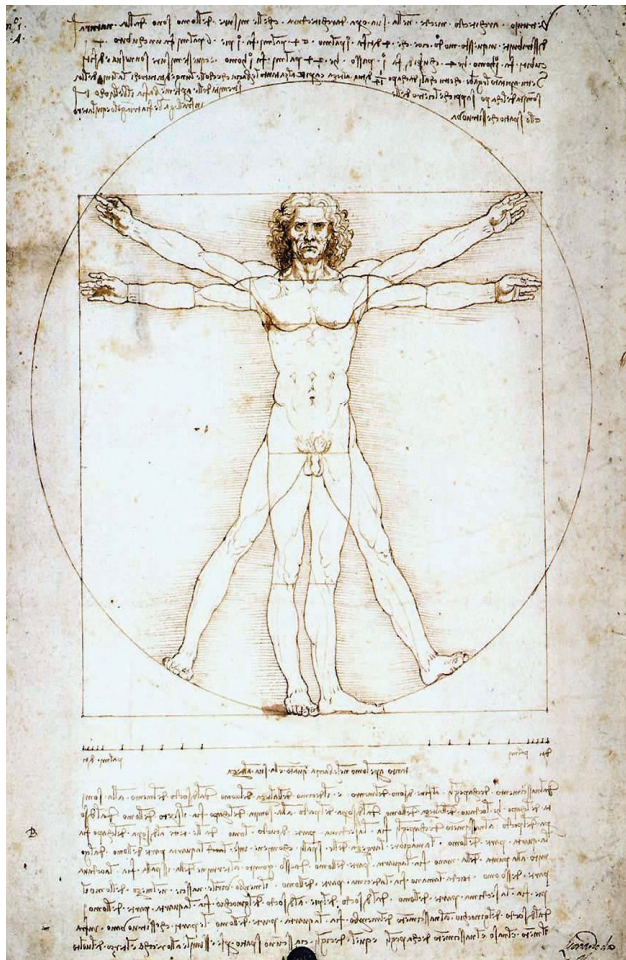
Fig. 2
Andrea Palladio, *I Quattro Libri* Title Page, 1570 edition.

Fig. 3
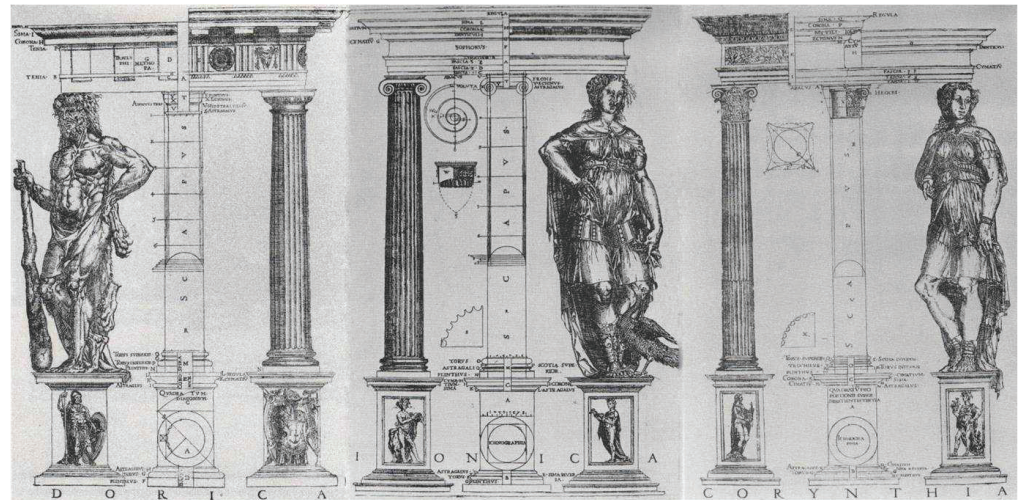Leonardo Da Vinci, *Vitruvian Man,* Gallerie dell' Accademia, Venice, c. 1490

Fig. 4
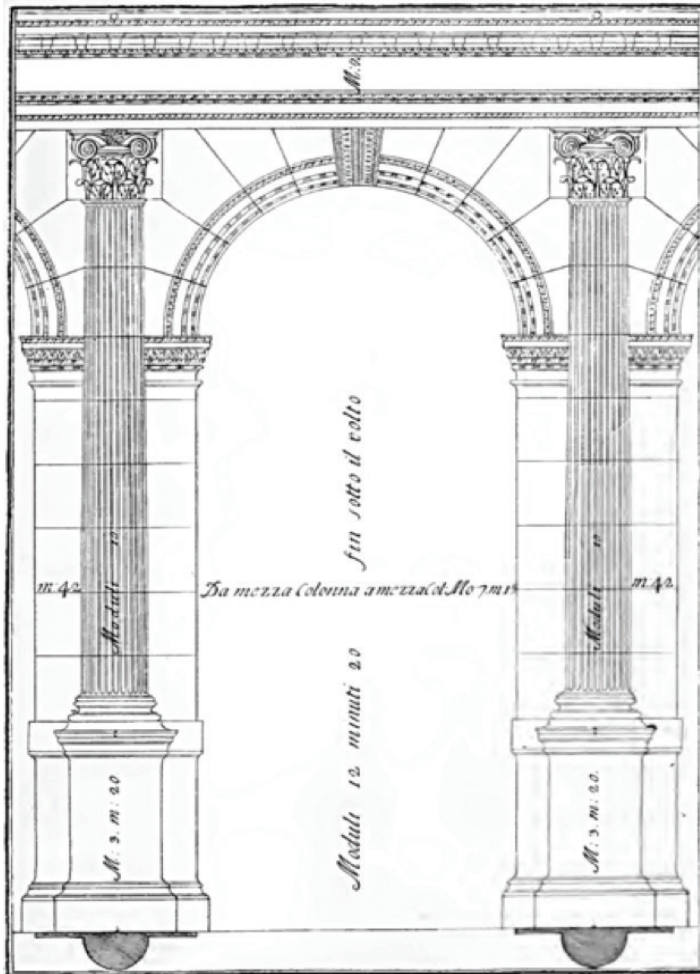Ingrid Rowland, *Vitruvian Columns,* published 1999.

Fig. 5
Illustration 2 following discourse on rejecting the Vitruvian plan for column construction, Andrea Palladio, *I Quattro Libri*, Book I, image IX

Fig. 6
"Λοις" "Lois" meaning "better" in Greek
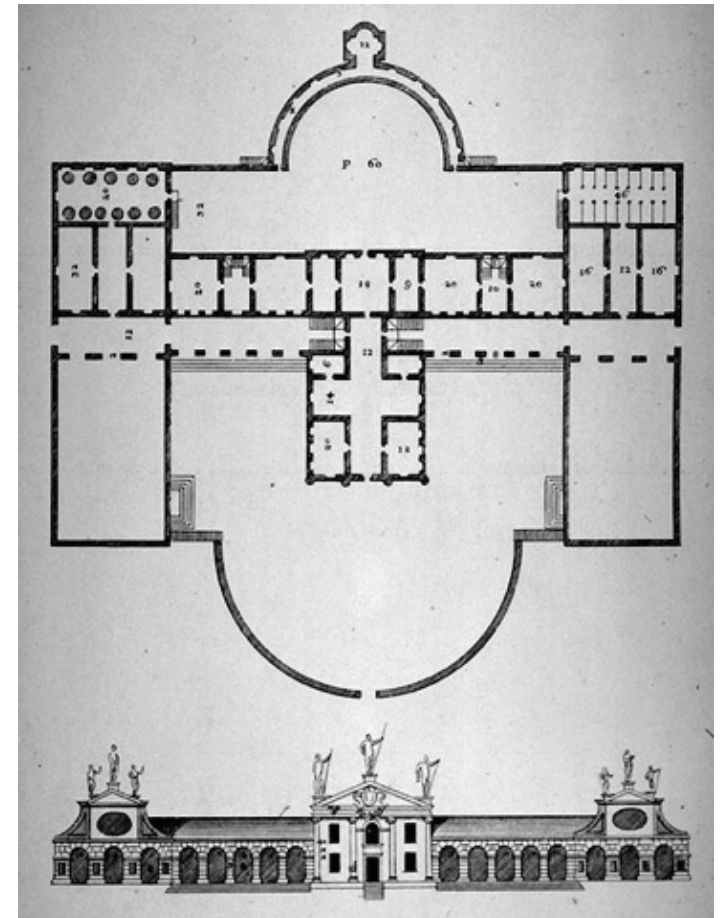
Fig. 7
Villa Barbaro, built by Palladio, c. 1560-1570

Fig. 8
Floor Plan of the Villa Barbaro, constructed
between 1560-1570, Andrea Palladio, *I Quattro
Libri*, Book II, p 51

Fig. 9
Raphael, *Portrait of Baldassare Castiglione*, c. 1514-1515, Musee de Lourve