Jefferson via Eisenman

contemporary reception of Palladian proportional theory used by Jefferson in the Academical Village

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3. Villa Emo, Eisenman, *Palladio Virtuel*, 130
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Introduction

In 1570, Andrea Palladio first published *I quattro libri dell’architettura* (*The Four Books on Architecture*). This treatise is replete with proportional rules and systems for the design and construction of Classical buildings. Palladio’s writings and accompanying illustrations became widely popular amongst European neo-classicists for its purity and clarity. By the 18th century, his work had grown in popularity and extended to North America, most notably influencing Thomas Jefferson, one of America’s seminal architects.

Jefferson loved Palladio and his work, once even referring to him as the Bible.1 By the age of twenty-four, Jefferson had already read Palladio in its original Italian and named his house, Monticello, after Palladio’s work. So, when it came time to design his new university, Jefferson of course turned to Palladio for inspiration. Though no longer his only source, Palladio was the standard reference for Jefferson in the later years of his career. When designing the Academical Village in 1817, he wrote to James Madison:

We are sadly at a loss here for a Palladio. I had three different editions, but they are at Washington, and nobody in this part of the country has one unless you have. If you have, you will greatly aid us by letting us have the use of it for a year to come.2

Undoubtedly, Jefferson referenced the *Quattro Libri* in his design of the Lawn. In his treatise, Palladio “communicated an idea of architecture as a system able to express the mathematics of ancient Roman architecture, made up of constructional blocks (rooms, colonnades, stairs, portals, and windows) bound by rules, types and proportional ratios.”3 Jefferson, convinced that this treatise was an efficient tool to provide three-dimensional control over a building, set out to create a new typology of education at the University of Virginia. But to what extent are Palladio’s designs replicated in Jefferson’s?

In order to answer this question, I turned to a contemporary source—Peter Eisenman. In 2013, Eisenman exhibited his research on Palladio’s villas at the Yale School of Architecture. Eisenman looks past the exhausted study of ideal proportions and symmetry, and instead focuses on the more sophisticated layering of spaces and interrelations in Palladio’s villas. Instead of studying the intricate details of the Classical Orders, Eisenman looks at the overarching layout of a villa and the intentional layering created by Palladio. He proposes “a complex Palladio of indeterminate internal relationships, not founded on a known, classical language, but rather oscillating between possible interpretations of a hypothetical virtual as opposed to an ideal norm.”4 In his study of twenty villas, Eisenman subverts the claims of a static geometry in Palladio’s villas and instead looks to the “virtual” conditions of these Palladian spaces.

In 1570, Palladio published his treatise. In 1817, Jefferson, through analog techniques, referenced Palladio in his designs. In 2013, Eisenman, through digital techniques, re-evaluated Palladio. This research aims to reinterpret Jefferson’s work as it relates to Palladio using the same digital techniques as Eisenman to see how extensive Jefferson’s references are.

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2 Qtd. in Id. 31
3 Id. 32
This research began by studying Palladian spaces in the Veneto region in Northern Italy. By visiting these iconic spaces, I was able to have a corporeal and tangible understanding of the proportions discussed, critiqued, and analyzed by Eisenman and Jefferson. Standing in the spaces and measuring the proportions by hand allowed me to understand the proportional theories used by Palladio and Jefferson in a more physical manner.

Scala to Monte Berico: entire space built off of proportioning of the capital
Comparison of interior axes in Villa Rotonda
Villa Rotonda
Study of proportional system of Palazzo Porto - Corinthian Order
Eisenman’s Analysis

The choice to study Jefferson through Eisenman was a deliberate one because of Eisenman’s unique analysis of Palladian villas. While historians like Colin Rowe have often looked at Palladio as concerned with absolute geometric ideas of symmetry and proportion, Eisenman attempts to understand Palladio’s relational and topological ideas of location and adjacency. He maintains that, within Palladio’s projects, “a given architectural unity is always fictitious, fabricated by Western metaphysics to sustain ideas of truth, reality, and origin” and instead Palladio introduces “overlaps and superpositions as a blurring of one space over another, thus making the relationship between spaces—rather than the geometry of individual spaces themselves—more important.”

The following analysis replicates Eisenman’s geometric analysis of the Palladian villas. It acts as a critique of the banal nine-square analysis, which gives little theoretical insight to the work. Instead, Eisenman presents a series of geometrical diagrams that assert the heterogeneity of space within the villas. These diagrams begin with a square “drawn to define as closely as possible the literal limits of the plan. The subsequent shifting front to back and side to side and scaling of the original square reveals the impossibility of reducing the plans to a single, synthetic geometric diagram.” Using these same methods, I have diagrammed the plan of Pavilion III to see if Jefferson used the same dynamism and heterogeneity in his work.

1 Eisenman, Palladio Virtuel, 18
2 Id. 21
3 Id. 27

Pavilion III

Pavilion III was the second of the pavilions to be constructed on the Lawn of the University of Virginia in 1819. Jefferson designed the first three pavilions as physical models of the Classical Orders (Doric, Ionic, and Corinthian), with Pavilion III representing the Corinthian Order, the most ornate of the three. Jefferson was very explicit about duplicating Palladio’s dimensions for the Corinthian Order, stating, “I have examined carefully all the antient Corinthians in my profession, and observe that Palladio, as usual, has given the finest members of them all in the happiest combination.” I chose to analyze this pavilion because of its conspicuous Palladian references in ornamentation. Eisenman’s analyses eschew ornamentation, so looking at the pavilion, stripped of its ornament, will reveal if Jefferson’s layout is inherently Palladian or if it reveals a more complex system.

1 Qtd. in Beltramini 32
The first diagram shows an internal square that organizes the central lecture room and the back hallway of the dining room. This reading is subtle, but does not account for the entrance hall, portico, and remaining portion of the dining room.

The second diagram uses a square of the same proportions but shifts to reveal the relationship of the portico and lecture room as it connects to the adjacent student room.

The third diagram expands the square to encompass the portico (excluding the columns), the entrance hall, and the entire lecture room.

The last diagram overlays two squares onto the plan to express the geometry of the back portion of the pavilion, including the dining room, and the relationship of the back entrance, the front entrance, and the columns. This diagram reveals the lateral relationship of the spaces in the pavilion, though its ideal is interrupted by the fireplace wall.
Conclusions

In creating these diagrams, I found the overlaying of ideal geometries was forced. Palladio’s villas elicit a more fluid and facile geometrical analysis of this type. Jefferson’s Pavilion III does not want for dynamism or heterogeneity, but it does not envelop the same sophisticated spatial propositions as Palladio. There is no doubt that Jefferson successfully ornamented Pavilion III with the Palladian Corinthian Order, but “that Jefferson truly reproduced the Palladian building system is questionable, given—among other things—the lack of correspondence between the internal distribution and the elevations of the buildings.”¹ The layout of this pavilion is not based on a Palladian system. Jefferson was instead influenced by his broader concepts for academia and American pragmatism. Looking more broadly at the entire Lawn, one can see that “by balancing the individual power of the parts in the collective dimension, that principle can be seen as representing the democratic order of the new American nation.”² While Jefferson appreciated the writings of Palladio, his designs were more inherently democratic in nature and reflected the future he envisioned for America.

It should also be noted that Eisenman’s analysis of Palladio is incomplete. It does not include any sectional or elevation analysis. While planometrically Jefferson’s design is not Palladian, continual analysis is required beyond Eisenman to determine potential sectional similarities. Eisenman’s analysis of Palladio is finite, while Jefferson’s analysis is accommodating, including other sources, designers, and concepts.

Palladio’s writings and theories were already built on layers of history, reaching all the way back to Vitruvius in Antiquity. Jefferson and Eisenman continued this layering of thought and history, and this layering of theory will continue throughout history, evolving and accommodating new technologies and cultural ideals.

¹ Beltramini 33
² Id. 47


