The villa Rotonda by Sinead Cameron

This is an essay on the Villa Capra otherwise known as the villa rotunda due to the centralized dome. It was designed by the highly influential Renaissance architect Andrea Palladio for the wealthy Vincentian cleric Paolo Almerico to retire to after his extensive traveling in his pursuit of glory. The villa rotunda is situated in Vicenza which at the time of the villa rotunda being built Vicenza was a province that was very wealthy in relation to its size and home to the ruling-class who were well-educated, involved in professional activities, trade and open to new ideas weather religious or architectural.¹ However Palladio was not a wealthy man until his final years which I find curious due to his main clientele of well-respected affluent men in the Vicenza area. Palladio originally began as a stonemason in the Pedemuro workshop in Vicenza. This wealth of experience is evident in his villa Rotunda as it displays his expertise in materiality and construction methods. As an architect he had the vision and goal to revive the tried and trusted constructional principles of classical antiquity and through is study of Vitruvius’ ideas and theories he was able to demonstrate a delicate and sophisticated revival of ancient roman design principles and orders within the villa rotunda.² The Villa was built as a monument to Almerico’s glory. The site adds greatly to the monumental air of the villa as it is situated on top of a hill surrounded on all four sides by beautiful views leading to one of the most notable design choices of having four identical loggias on each facade of the villa each with six ionic columns. Palladio described the site as a “theatre”³ with the Rotunda acting as an actor of sorts, elegantly strutting on a podium, costumed in the paraphernalia of a glorious past. Repeating the entry is justified to take advantage of the beautiful panoramic views with the chief function to promote gazing at the scenery.⁴ The four identical facades also add to the sense of monumentality that the villa creates as no matter which direction you approach the villa in you are always greeted with the splendour of it. The site definitely was close to Palladio s vision of the overall beauty of the villa rotunda as he said, “The site is one of the most agreeable and surrounded by other charming hills that give the effect of a huge theatre, and they are all cultivated... And because it enjoys the most lovely views on all sides, some screened others more distant and others reaching the horizon, loggias were made on each face.”⁵

The plan of the villa Rotunda is completely symmetrical with a centralized circle the most

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perfect and beautiful of all shapes in Palladio’s mind as it represents infinity and heaven. Surrounding this central circle is a perfect square symbolizing earth and from the central circle the plan is extended on four sides to from the six ionic columned loggias which are reminiscent of the temple fronts used in ancient Roman religious architecture. At the end of the loggias are statues by Master Lorenzo Vicentino who Palladio described as, “a most excellent sculptor.” The sense of monumentality and indication of the owners wealth is exaggerated in the form of the centralized dome exuding an air of grandeur and superiority as you flow towards the highest point seamlessly you are reminded of your insignificance in relation to this building. Domes were previously only used in religious architecture such as the Pantheon with its oculus. The dome allows the villa Rotonda to echo the power and majesty of the church while also creating an experience for the inhabitants that is both well-grounded and inspirational. Palladio’s plans and facades are assemblages of the ‘ideal’ shapes with the characteristic of having harmonious dimensions. As well as using mathematical proportions musical proportions are used which are proportions derived from music because it was believed that proportions beautiful to the ear were equally beautiful to the eye. Palladio stated that, “just as the proportions of voices are harmony to the ears, so those of measurement are harmony to the eyes.” The reason why Palladianism work is so widely influence is partly to do with the fact that he used a whole new range of effective solutions to design problems which he faced. He used classical orders derived from the work of Vitruvius and ancient roman buildings, drawing from the basic principles of design; he uses the orders of ancient roman architectural motifs to create a rational, functional and visually attractive system.

Palladio held the opinion that the ancient romans had greatly surpassed all those who came after them in building well. He believed that when the grandeur of the Roman Empire began to decline architecture, having abandoned its original beauty and sophistication deteriorated more and more until it could get no worse. In his book, ‘the four books on architecture’ he includes plans and sections of Donato Bramante’s Tempietto along with plans and sections of classical roman antiquity as he believed that Bramante with his Tempietto was the first architect to make known of the beautiful proportions and sophistication of classical antiquity due to its emphasis on the harmony of proportions, the simplicity of volumes, the sobriety of the Doric order and the use of a circular plan to symbolize Devine perfection the Tempietto acts as a homage to antiquity.

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As mentioned before the Pantheon in Rome was the main source of inspiration for Palladio’s villa Rotonda it is clear when you compare the two as they both follow the same basic guidelines of simplicity over complexity, balance and symmetry over asymmetry, and the idea of perfection in a form being linked to the ideal shape. The ideal shapes for Palladio were the circle and the square. The circle emulates infinity and the definitive power of god. Whereas the square gives a sense of stability and presence, thus together the shapes represent heaven and earth.

Palladio employs geometry and directionality in planning as all his rooms and plans radiate from a central focal point. Public and circulation spaces dominate the plan as this was a house for spectacle and admiration to be adored by many. The writer and poet J.W. Goethe displayed his utter delight at the villa Rotonda as he quoted after his visit that, “Maybe never architectural art has reached such a level of magnificence”. There is a vast quantity of interior walls used to subdivide the space within the rotunda however they are not part of the structural makeup that helps hold up the building. Relatively small windows in the outer walls help maintain the integrity of the masonry structure.

Candelabra are located throughout the interior providing illumination in the night time. The Villa Rotonda’s interior is filled with ornamentation in the form of plaster pediments, and mantles. The ornate nature of the artwork amplifies the feelings of grandeur and majesty expressed in the villa, while also communicating the owner’s status. Frescoes throughout the villa depict religious scenes representing repentance, high fidelity, kindness, persuasion and even act as a symbol of respect to god because after all this was a house built for a cleric.

In conclusion the villa Rotonda stands as Palladio’s idea of the perfect building as it represents the beauty and proportionality of Classical Roman antiquity in a refined and sophisticated manner, while acting as a blueprint for future generations to detail the careful integration of geometry and Hierarchy.

Bibliography


