

# Stirring Memories

The RIBA Palladianism show evokes long-neglected trains of thought, says Barbara Weiss

I will never forget my general studies tutor's comment, neatly penned on the last page of my 2000-word history essay: "Good effort", it said, "but your next paper should probably focus on a less ambitious topic". Needless to say, it took me several months to recover from such a crushing rebuke.

Forty years on, I can well see what Robin Middleton was getting at. No doubt 'Palladio and Palladianism' is indeed a tad too broad a subject for even the keenest of second-year students to broach... And yet, looking back, the recollection of the enduring passion that my naïve little effort unleashed fills me with the very particular nostalgia one feels, as an older person, for the memory of all life's first major encounters.

If Brunelleschi was my first teenage love, Palladio soon took his place, becoming my companion for decades of architectural explorations. Already a presence in my Italian childhood, I rediscovered him many times, and in different ways, as my travels took me back and back again to the string of earth-shatteringly beautiful Veneto villas, to Vicenza, where the Teatro Olimpico never fails to surprise and delight, and to the Venice churches, bathed in the most extraordinary light.

Not to mention the impact of a few Villa Saraceno sojourns where, thanks to the Landmark Trust, it is now possible for common mortals to witness, in first person, the course of full days and nights spent in that magical Palladian combination of bucolic simplicity and the most sophisticated architectural setting.

The much-welcome RIBA exhibition 'Palladian Design' has reawakened long-neglected trains of thought. It is sad to think that "the only architect who has given his name to a style" (as the blurb asserts), has become so unfashionable as to be almost invisible to new generations of architects, discarded by a world that champions the temporary and the disposable, the gimmicks, and all that thrives on the excitement of novelty.

Looking at the breathtakingly perfect drawings on show feels like a rather emotional homecoming. The thought that the RIBA owns 85 per cent of surviving Palladio drawings gives an extra thrill, at the same time raising questions as to the appropriateness of a jewel-like scale for an exhibition that has potentially so much to say.

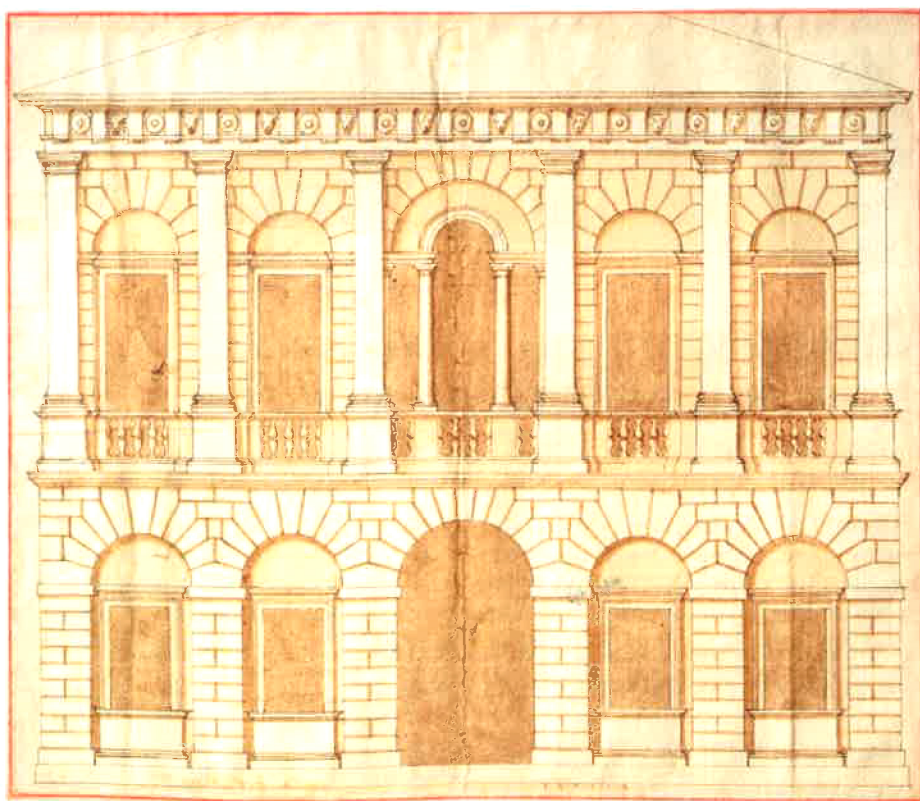
I left the beautifully curated show pondering the thought that Palladianism has much in common with the great religions; we have, on the whole, moved on, but our spiritual and cultural debts are immense. And as with religions, time has seen its ebb and flow, with its share of disputes, secessions, interpretations and appropriations.

The exhibition is keen to remind us that there are still architects — some better than others — who cling to the stylistic manifestations of Palladianism, endlessly repeating and copying, while refusing to recognise that the spirit has departed. By contrast, the quiet perfection of Palladio's original drawings stands as a potent reminder of the more profound aspects of his work, which still has much to teach us and the generations to come. *✓*

*'Palladian Design: The Good, the Bad and the Unexpected'*  
RIBA, London W1  
Until 9 January



**Above**  
'Palladian' entrance portico of the Viceroy's House, New Delhi, by Edwin Lutyens (1912, ph: RIBA Collections).



**Right**  
Design for a palace by Andrea Palladio (c1540s, ph: RIBA Collections). Curated by Vicky Wilson and Charles Hind and designed by Caruso St John, the show is organised chronologically into three parts: Revolution, Evolution and the Contemporary