

"What's wrong with my villa?" is a photographic research on a recent trend in the vernacular architecture of the Veneto suburbia. The Italian region, once the cradle of the Palladian civilization, went through economic highs and lows since the economic boom of the 60s. Once one of the richest and more productive regions of Italy, it is now facing a silent economic recession. What once was the idyllic landscape of the Palladian Villas is now the territory of urban dispersion; an endless series of empty warehouses, shopping malls and residential areas with a nostalgic touch of Palladian splendour.

The society of Palladian villas has been read as the result of the crisis Venice had to face after the discovery of the Americas when the "Serenissima Republic" lost its dominant role of port and market of the known world (the Mediterranean sea). The economic crisis pushed the venetian aristocracy to search for their roots and alternative economic profit in the hinterland. Moving from the city to the countryside was a political gesture of re-appropriation of the territory and an opposition to urban life. This specific situation gave birth to an unprecedented typology: the Palladian villas.

The residences were positioned in the most strategic points of the rural landscape and their plans and façades were designed following fixed proportional rules. Despite their modest dimensions, the strict symmetry, the use of neoclassic elements and their relations with the context made them a worldwide known prototype of functional and distinguished architecture: a symmetric colonnade front with tympanum, the floors and façades were respecting precise rules of proportions. The emphasis of the main axis created the connection with the rural landscapes, often enhanced with a tree-lined road. The Palladian Villas were a conjunction of rural and noble world, reference points in the Serenissima countryside.

Almost 500 years later, after WWII, Veneto's family owned industries became one of the protagonist of the Italian economic miracle but, at the end of the 21st century most of the industrial production has been relocated to areas of the world where labour is cheaper, and the region is facing a new economic crisis. Since then, Veneto is again searching for its traditional identity and Palladian villas seems to be the best piece of history it can rely on.

Neoclassic reference to ancient democracy and civilization made new-Palladianism the perfect style for every ideology and context: from Stalinism to Liberalism, from the Soviet Union to the United states, from housing to monuments. Now everybody who can afford it, wants a monument to his personal freedom and wealth (even though sometimes it has to be shared with other inhabitants). Everybody wants his Villa with its prestige, noble, elegant and sophisticated flavour.

In Veneto, a new trend appeared: Palladian villas have been used as a collection of architectural elements and they have been superimposed on anonymous façades. Most of their qualities and meanings are gone. "Villa" is no longer a typology, it is an aim. You can find single houses as well as apartment buildings and little shopping malls in "Villa" style. The Villa style is exactly this post-modern/neoclassic language of elementary figures and a-temporal compositions resembling the splendour of Palladian times.

Round windows, useless columns and ornamental tympana: in this research of identity some vernacular elements of the local tradition got mixed to Hollywoodian influences. Like postmodernism it is a loud refusal of the standardized modern movement architecture, of its minimalism, its exposed concrete and flat roofs. Postmodernism was ironic. The Villas look like a joke repeated to the point it is not fun anymore.

In 1972 Robert Venturi, Denise Scott Brown and Steven Izenour wrote that "learning from the existing landscape is a way of being revolutionary for an architect". But what can we learn from this landscape?

Italian architects are horrified. In their refusal to call this architecture they define it as: urbanization, construction, real estate speculation etc.. They even refuse to look at it and accept they have a problem. From their perspective, the new villas represent the failure of the architect pedagogical attitude. The distance between what architects prescribe and what people really like is unbridgeable. And who is to blame for this?

This photo-story is an important starting point to reflect on the role of architecture and of the architect in contemporary society. How can he stand against the will of its clients? How can he refuse to build concrete doric columns? Isn't his role to make the client happy?

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