Quoting Palladio

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Abstract
Palladio’s treatise I quattro libri dell’architettura, first published in 1570, was well received and widely successful in its own time and afterwards. Palladio achieved a perfect balance of lucid text and meticulous woodcut illustrations. Having both intellectual and visual appeal, the treatise opened new ppaths for the dissemination of knowledge in architecture. However, an inconsistency can be found between what he wrote and what can be seen in his drawings. Furthermore, inconsistency exists between the text and drawings and Palladio’s buildings “as executed “. This particularly applies to one of the world’s most influential buildings – Villa Almerico Capra Valmarana, widely known as La Rotonda. Many generations of visitors have written about the magnificence of the surroundings in which La Rotonda is located; and Palladio himself described the site as “one of the most pleasing and delightful that one could find “. However, his drawings of the Villa do not include any aspect of the location so highly valued and praised in the text. La Rotonda’s shape, symmetries, and axes are absolute and do not appear to derive from any aspect of the location. Also, although designed to be a perfect geometrical form with four virtually identical façades, porticos and broad staircases, La Rotonda on two sides cannot be approached at all. So, one of the most “quoted” buildings of all times in many ways confuses us if we want to learn how to translate architectural design principles into built form. Taking Palladio as its reference point, this paper will focus on methodological questions of quotation and evaluate misquotation as a legitimate tool in architectural history, theory and practice.
Introduction

Two events prompted our decision to write this paper. First, the 2017 Conference of the Society of Architectural Historians (June 7-11 in Glasgow) includes two “roundtable” sessions dedicated to answering questions about the audience for architectural history in the 21st century, and about what we (architectural historians and teachers) teach and why; and how methodologies gained from an understanding of history, historical processes, and research problem-solving might usefully serve architectural design and practice today.1 These themes will be continued at the 2018 SAH Conference in a session titled “The Audience for Architectural History in the 21st Century “.2 Secondly, the Journal of Art Historiography in June 2016 released a thematic issue devoted to the history of architectural historiography.3 Only one of the eight published papers was in a pre-twentieth century topic in architectural history. A concern that modern scholarship might forget its earlier legacy and lose interest in design experience conducted, and so rigorously explained in the early treatises and debates on architecture, brought us to Andrea Palladio. We believe that methodological questions of inconsistency and misquotation associated with Palladio’s treatise I quattro libri dell’architettura have something important to say about practical and theoretical problems in architecture that are relevant for us today.

Palladio conceived his treatise as a guide for practitioners of architecture (“for those who study the profession of architecture”). Architectural drawings as an assistance to understanding building principles and ideas occupied a particular place in sixteenth-century Italian treatises, supplementing the text or – as was the case with Palladio – often substituting for it. They provided the opportunity for a more detailed analysis of the building structure, impossible by written discourse only.

In all these books, I shall avoid being long-winded and will simply provide the advice that seems essential to me ...4 One learns much more rapidly from well-chosen examples, when measuring and observing whole buildings and all their details on a sheet of paper, than one does from written descriptions, when reliable and precise information can only be extracted slowly and with a considerable mental effort by the reader from what he is reading and can only be put into practice with great difficulty.5

Because Palladio’s theoretical position was formed as much from his own prolific practice experience and personal archaeological surveys of ancient Roman buildings as it was by Vitruvius, his acknowledged master and guide, in I quattro libri dell’architettura the extended theoretical discussions about architecture characteristic of earlier Renaissance treatises are almost completely absent.6 While Book I is devoted to a “brief discourse on the five orders and on those rules which are essential to building . . . “,7 the following three Books consist of wood-cuts, with related text, of (with few exceptions) executed buildings – Palladio’s own and from antiquity – and it is the images in particular that have exerted influence on later generations of architects and patrons. Both in his detailed historical surveys (in Book IV) of Roman temples – the first systematic publication of these works – and with his own contemporary projects (in Books II and III) Palladio, in accompanying text with images has declared his particular interest, as a practitioner, in the physical formation of architecture:

Unlike the publications by many of his predecessor and successors, [I quattro libri] achieves an effective balance between words and images: his writing is direct and to the point, his bold large-format woodcuts equally so. Compiled in the last decades of his life, it combines first-hand observation with years of experience in every aspect of building.8

In writing I Quattro libri, Palladio often quoted. He quoted Vitruvius, Alberti and Barbaro, as he also “quoted” antiquity itself. However, throughout his treatise, between text, drawings and executed work, inconsistencies can be found. The first section of this paper focuses specifically on Palladio “quotes” that seem not always to match with his drawings and buildings “as-built “. We have grouped them in three episodes of “inconsistency “, investigating “the higher reasons” for them. In the subsequent
section of the paper we discuss if, and how, those “inconsistencies” can justify misquotation as a legitimate tool in quoting Palladio today.

**Inconsistency 1 – Between Palladio’s surveys of Roman antiquity and his drawings**

And although one can see only portions of some of them standing above ground, I have nonetheless proceeded to deduce from them what they must have been like when they were complete . . . Vitruvius has helped me immensely in this because, by comparing what I have observed with what he teaches us, it has not proved too difficult for me to arrive at an understanding of their appearance and forms. But, as for the ornaments, that is, bases, columns, capitals, cornices, and such like, I have included nothing of my own but have measured all of them myself with scrupulous care using various fragments found on the sites where the temples were. . . and the decoration inside as I imagined they would have been . . .

Having carried out detailed surveys of ancient Roman temple ruins and, guided by Vitruvius and the limited circumstantial evidence of surviving architectural fragments, Palladio has ‘reconstructed’ these buildings in his imagination. His was not an antiquarian stance – he could have carefully recorded in drawings the temples exactly as he found them, in their in-situ, ruined-state condition, and compiled Book IV as an historical document of record. But Palladio’s purpose was to represent findings in a form beneficial to his future readers:

> I considered it worthy of man, who is not born for himself alone but also to be of use to others, to make public the designs of those buildings that I have collected over such a long period and at such personal risk and to expound briefly what it is about them that seemed to me to be most worthy of consideration, and also the rules that I have followed and still follow when building . . .

For Palladio, antiquity was a source of inspiration in his own architectural practice. He clearly believed in its constant study and evaluation as the means by which its principles could be applied in contemporary time. However, the way in which he depicts the temples in Book IV reveals his deliberate idealization of history. They are presented as ideal architectural forms separated from context. Furthermore, Palladio often applies his own building logic, trusting in his own judgement – informed as it was by close readings of Vitruvius. From his own position in history, it seems that Palladio assumed the right to critique the work of antiquity and make ‘corrections’ according to his own convictions about the application of the classical language – often contrary to what his surveys indicated had been common Roman practice. (Figure 1)

Some scholars have questioned whether Palladio made mistakes in recording his findings, or he relied upon faulty, second-hand information, although most agree that he had visited those sites and that his published alterations were deliberate. As Boucher puts it, Palladio “did not hesitate to tailor the evidence to meet his expectations”. Another historian comments that “his drawings show how he often reconstructed ruined buildings graphically, seeking a regularity and harmony of proportion that was not always present in the original”.

Yet his beautifully detailed representations in Book IV of temples in completed form are as much imaginative as they are imagined. John Summerson has commented that Palladio’s enquiries into the past “were more strongly tinged with imaginative awareness of what might have been than we should think quite proper”. Significantly, though, he goes on to commend these ‘restorations’ as being among the most exciting things in I quattro libri.
A similar approach is apparent in Book II. Included with descriptions and images of his own villas and city houses are Palladio’s depictions of the ancient houses of the Romans, and Greeks. However, unlike his detailed archaeological surveys of temple ruins, Palladio had little or no circumstantial physical evidence to work from: the ordinary Roman house had not been excavated in his day. Working only from the limited written descriptions supplied by Vitruvius and, beyond that, his own imagination Palladio’s generously-proportioned, two-storeyed atrium house designs are – as excavations at Pompeii and elsewhere would eventually show – anything but typical. “It is characteristic of his view of antiquity “, says Ackerman, “that he represented [the Roman house] mostly in terms of super-human grandeur “.17

Inconsistency 2 – Between Palladio’s drawings and his buildings as executed

I have included the designs of [Palazzo della Ragione] because the porticoes around it were devised by me and because I have no doubt at all that this building can be compared to antique structures and included amongst the greatest and most beautiful buildings built since antiquity. . . There is no need to include the dimensions of every part since they are marked on the designs in appropriate places.18

A second inconsistency can be found in the fact that in many examples the published plans of Palladio’s own projects in I quattro libri do not correspond with actual buildings “as executed “. His earliest public commission, the Palazzo della Ragione (Basilica Palladiana) in Vicenza is a case in point. He brilliantly resolved the difficult aesthetic problem of wrapping a two-storeyed loggia around the medieval building’s irregular, ‘out-of-square’ plan and structure, yet in I quattro libri Palladio depicted the building and his intervention in regular rectilinear form (Figure 2) – a decision commented upon by Ackerman:

The Basilica plan that Palladio illustrated in the Quattro Libri is a fantasy, a unique instance of the publication of an ideal and impossible project for a building already constructed in another way. It eliminates the very difficulties that brought the design into being and without which it would not have been commissioned.19
The published plans of many of Palladio's Vicenzan palaces have likewise been idealized and 'corrected' – depicted without any surrounding context and purged of all site-specific influences that would compromise his ideal formal intentions. For example, Palazzo Valmarana, built with façade aligned to the angled street of its irregular site, has been drawn with façade realigned to the rectilinear floor plan (Figure 3); and although we know that Palazzo Barbaran da Porto was almost finished as I quattro libri was going to press, Palladio nevertheless illustrated it with the much larger ground floor plan of an early design iteration, and not that of the actual building.

There is an opposite argument between Palladio's scholars here as well, about his tendency to idealize reality in his drawings. Namely, Gian Giorgio Zorzi comments on Palladio's drawings from I quattro libri as unreliable arguing that they may be work of unknown xylographers (wood-etchers) employed by the publisher, or even that they may represent Palladio's later style and were not original ideas at the time the buildings were executed.20

Inconsistency 3 – Between Palladio’s site descriptions and his buildings as executed

The site is one of the most pleasing and delightful that one could find because it is on top of a small hill which is easy to ascend; on one side it is bathed by the Bacchiglione, a navigable river, and on the other is surrounded by other pleasant hills which resemble a vast theater and are completely cultivated and abound with wonderful fruit and excellent vines; so, because it enjoys the most beautiful vistas on every side, some of which are restricted, others more extensive, and yet others which end at the horizon loggias have been built on all four sides …21

Scholars have taken two opposing positions regarding the relationship of Villa Almerico Capra (also called Villa “Rotonda”) with its site. James Ackerman has suggested that this “villa” is not a villa at all but, rather, a belvedere – deliberately placed on the crown of a hill and designed “as if its chief function were to promote gazing at the scenery “. In this argument, the four porticoes of this bi-axially symmetrical, centrally-domed building were intended to primarily serve as viewing platforms: “If the site is, in Palladio’s words, a theatre, the Rotonda is an actor of sorts, elegantly strutting its role on a
The counter-position asserts, notwithstanding Palladio’s lyrical description of the site, that his design of Rotonda was not informed by any aspect of its location:

The drawing presents an architectural idea whose form may accidentally relate to or conflict with some aspect of the site, but the design is certainly not derived from its specific properties. In reality, the villa is not even placed [directly] on the hilltop; it sits on a platform built on the hill.23

Palladio’s “ideal” representation of the villa is taken as evidence: the Rotonda is depicted in I quattro libri devoid of any hint of context and (Figure 4) – as Branko Mitrovic has pointed out – although beautiful, the site was artificially altered to accommodate the building.24 Is the platform on which it rests a compromised response to the problem of placing this perfectly bi-symmetrical object into a topographically imperfect setting? Whatever the answer might be, it is true that the physical relationship of Rotonda to the platform is confusing: steps from two of the four porticoes end abruptly at the edges of the platform.

Evaluating the inconsistencies

It should be noted that around each of the three inconsistences many (at least two) opposing arguments and explanations of scholars have been raised. Subsequently, many questions have been left unanswered as well. The significance of Palladio’s inconsistencies or misquotations of his own words and drawings have been an ongoing subject of debate. And are misalignments detected in I Quattro libri really inconsistencies? Why does Palladio appear to misquote himself in the translations from as-built project to drawing, or between drawing and text?

Palladio surveyed many of Rome’s ancient buildings – in ruins after centuries of neglect, destructive natural events and human intervention. Yet Book IV of I quattro libri is not only (or even) an historical record of selected existing buildings from Roman antiquity for archival purposes, but consists of carefully selected examples depicted in clear and detailed graphic form intended to serve as accessible precedents for the intelligent, informed use of the classical language in contemporary work and for a future audience. Palladio has done the hard work: visiting, measuring, sketching and, for the first time, illustrating these buildings for the benefit of others; both architects and patrons. Based on circumstantial evidence and with reference to Vitruvius – Wittkower commends the “imaginative and
penetrating interpretation of Vitruvius” evident in his illustrations for Barbaro’s edition of 1556 – Palladio extrapolates from existing ruins to graphic restorations of these buildings as they once were, or could have been.25 He conceptually “restores” the buildings in his drawings, imaginatively filling in absences, and “correcting” perceived misuse of the classical language. Are his depictions of these buildings fanciful reconstructions or scholarly representations? If Palladio’s motivation had been to present these buildings in an original, ‘as executed’ condition, he would have been obliged to fill in the absent content according to his mature understanding of Vitruvius. But he is not operating only out of a bookish knowledge of Vitruvius, but also from knowledge tempered and matured in a practice lifetime of translating and interpreting Vitruvian aesthetic theory in his own considerable body of work.

So – he didn’t, nor could he, present these buildings as they had been constructed in the Augustan age of Rome but only as an experienced practitioner with scholarly and applied knowledge of Vitruvius looking back from the vantage point of late 16th century, informed by his experiences and observation of the work of recent generations of architects and near contemporaries. And how could he stop himself from correcting in this work what his experience suggested were aesthetic mistakes wrought by the original designers?

Site-specifics and surrounding context are purposely excluded, not only from the drawings of Villa Rotonda, but from all drawings in I quattro libri (of both - his own work and the buildings of antiquity). Absent of such particularities, they are universalized as ideas. And while architectural ideas are inevitably subject to (compromised by?) the realities and vagaries of site and program, Palladio drew his projects as originally imagined in ideal form, rather than as-built. For example, that he should represent the Rotonda without the particularities of the site which he describes in the accompanying words offers evidence of his purposes – while Palladio’s words explain its context, the building is drawn as an exemplar of composition, according to his understanding of the classical language. The podium on which it is placed may still be a mystery of scholarship, but Palladio perhaps considered it visually important to raise the Rotonda above the ground plane, thus “regularizing” its immediate site with allusion, if not deliberate, to the purpose of the crepidoma of a Greek temple.26 The constructed building platform on which any Greek temple is placed, in a restless landscape, distinguishes the building from its immediate surroundings.

And Palladio’s deliberate and apparently perverse corrections of essential irregularities in his Basilica project supports our view that I quattro libri was not intended to be an historical record of “as-built” work by the ancients and from his own career, but rather was published to achieve a more ambitious purpose – the transmission of ideas to present and future audiences about architecture – exemplars in the artful use of the classical language – in a manner readily applicable by them: a guide to contemporary practice which usefully synthesized and gave visible support to the theoretical writings of Vitruvius. It seems that Palladio wanted to say to his future readers: “This is how the best of antiquity once looked, and my palaces and villas also presented here show how the architectural language of antiquity may be used in contemporary practice: and these illustrated examples might be useful to you as informants”.

Palladio was intent on transmitting his intellectual convictions about the making of architecture derived from his studies of Vitruvius and the architecture of antiquity to future generations of practicing architects, in a form most helpful to them in their designs of modern buildings. His drawings of Roman temples, based in diligent, detailed personal archaeological surveys and selected by him as exemplars in the Vitruvian application of the classical language, provide a convenient means for others to access and appraise for themselves the best architecture of the past. He does not prescribe a companion set of rationally precise design rules – instead, Palladio invites the reader to derive personally applicable rules following their own careful study of the examples provided. His own architectural works – included, “because we have very few ancient examples to refer to”27 and based in his own scholarly appraisal of antiquity – serve as exemplars in the contemporary use of the classical language of architecture:
I am longing to say that I have perhaps shed so much light on this area of architecture that those who come after me may be able, with my example before them and using their own intellectual acuity, readily to add the true beauty and elegance of the ancients to the magnificence of their buildings.28

**Coda: “Misquotation” as legitimate tool in architectural history, theory and practice**

History writing sometimes reveals more about its author’s own concerns than about the topic it allegedly pertains to ... A more modest perspective would be that it is very hard to be careful enough and clean history writing from one’s own frailties and denials — that questioning the past requires self-questioning as well. The conclusion has to be that a historian’s job is much harder and more intellectually demanding than it will appear to many, including many historians.29

So, where do we stand now? Or, better: What does Palladio have in store for architecture today? How can we quote Palladio’s words and drawings in a way that recognises the “artful use of the classical language”, while also being sufficiently careful with our questioning and quoting of the past?

From three apologists for artful use of architectural language in words and drawings we learn about possible approaches to doing that. Colin Rowe was a scholar widely known for his comparisons in the famous essay “The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa” (first published in 1947) of Palladio’s geometry and proportional system with those of Le Corbusier and modern architecture. Rowe “quotes” the villas of Palladio and Le Corbusier (Figure 5) applying free and bold interpretations of originals (which can be called “misquotation” within the meaning used in this paper). He often follows the same procedure in his own teaching practice: “I would like to make a lecture entirely of quotes, a lecture in which all I had to do was to arrange their choice and their sequence... taking what already exist and rearranging it to construct a story, a fiction, which provokes the student into curiosity.”30

![Figure 5. Rowe’s analytical diagrams - comparison of Palladio’s Villa Malcontenta and Le Corbusier’s Villa Stein (Colin Rowe, *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa and Other Essays* (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London: The MIT Press, 1976), 5, 21)](image)

The idea behind Rowe’s free use of quotes was the rearrangement of existing facts to construct a new story, a new totality, what Braden Engel calls “Rowe’s ambichronous historiography”.31 Do we see a similar approach in the three “inconsistencies” discussed above, where Palladio’s historical research provoked him always to be more curious about what he learned from the past, and allowed
him to construct a new totality? Can we, today, consider this a scholarly approach, which does not necessarily take into account every aspect of cultural history that stands behind the quoted words, but rather gives freedom to use one’s own reasoning and opinion, encouraging inventiveness in research, and raising interest in history? And what level of intellectual rigour do we apply or expect when we structure our position in accordance with the argument we want to make?

Rudolf Wittkower in “Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism” (first published in 1949) asserted that major Renaissance architects based their design decisions on a belief that they should use dimensional ratios that correspond to musical intervals. He analysed the plans of eight buildings by Palladio, drawing attention to the repeated use of such ratios. However, later scholarship has not confirmed his assertion. It has been shown that, of the 44 designs illustrated by Palladio in his treatise, it is only in the eight buildings analysed by Wittkower that formal ratios correspond to musical intervals.32 It appears that Wittkower employed ‘selective quotation’ in order to support his argument.

Another illustration of a similar, but more current teaching methodology may be the approach to learning from Palladio that Peter Eisenman developed and published in his book Palladio Virtuel.33 Moving beyond the plan and grid patterns explored earlier in Rudolf Wittkower’s typological research on Palladio and Colin Rowe’s comparisons of the plans and façades of Palladio and Le Corbusier, Eisenman used three-dimensional volumetric models (Figure 6). He identified three fundamental volumes characteristic of twenty Palladio’s villas, coded them by color and examined them in order to reveal adjacencies, overlays, and juxtapositions among their parts. In this way, volumetric typology replaced traditional geometry. Hence Eisenman introduced an essentially different way of understanding Palladio’s work, not only without relying on ideal symmetry and proportion, but in deliberate contrast to them. This approach is seen as giving radical analysis without precedent in scholarly work, which changes all existing notions of the ‘ideal form’ in Palladio’s work, and proposes that it is possible to redraw the very boundaries of the discipline of architectural history in order to still learn from an architect whose life and work has been so exhaustively analyzed by both architects and historians.34

The three engagements with Palladio discussed above are not unrelated to the focus of this paper. Misquotation is evident not only in the perceived inconsistencies of Palladio’s treatise, but also in how architectural historians and scholars have responded differently to those inconsistencies and drawn sometimes opposing conclusions. We have raised a question about the difference between fanciful
reconstructions and scholarly representations in Palladio’s work; yet, taking into account the work of Rowe, Wittkower and Eisenman, we can conclude that deliberate misquotation and selective quotation of pre-twentieth century historiography has been legitimized as a methodological approach in architectural pedagogy and practice, assisting in making architectural history and historiography relevant as a source of inspiration for students and practitioners today.
Endnotes

19 Ackerman, *Palladio*, 92.
22 Ackerman, *Palladio*, 68, 70, 73.
23 Mitrovic, *Learning from Palladio*, 141.