

**ALL MEMORY HAS TO BE REIMAGINED:
THE VILLA AND ARCHITECTURAL IMAGINATION**
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A villa is a place we visit to remember that life is not only constant negotiation, and that pleasure is also a serious aspect of the human condition. The tradition of building a villa extends from the Romans as a project of moral devotion. Building a villa is an act of commemoration of ethical values that are compromised by political life. Ancient writers associated villa-life with something archaic, and villas were an active recreation of a mythical ideal in which *Rur et Urbi* co-exist in harmony (Fig. 1). Roman politicians returned to the soil each summer to engage in physical labour, Virgil & Pliny tell us, and this devotion reconciled the cultivated mind with the cultivation of the soil (Rykwert). A villa 'fills a need that never alters... it is not material but psychological and ideological' (Ackerman) As a consequence, the style of villa architecture varies from the rustic museum of Hadrian (Figs. 2, 3 & 4), to the bucolic neo-classicism of Palladio (Figs. 5 & 6), whilst the essentially representational values of the villa remain the same:

The same repertory of the benefits of villa life echoes down the centuries: the practical advantages of farming, the healthfulness provided by air and exercise – particularly hunting – relaxation in reading, conversation with virtuous friends and contemplation, and delightful views of the landscape. (Ackerman)

As a consequence, the virtues of villa patrons appear doubly in their acknowledgement of this tradition of enlightened patronage and in the patronage of young architects for this purpose. 'The villa is typically the product of an architect's imagination and asserts its modernity', Ackerman believes, and re-imagining the villa is a task for each generation. Commissioning a villa is a mark of the sophistication and duty of newly acquired wealth. The act of patronising contemporary artists reconciles the conflicted demands of old and new cultures. A villa is part of an ancient and unique building tradition, whose morphology owes less to a functionalist, ergonomic view of planning and more to what Robin Evans called a sense of 'gregarious sensuality'. Villas are not pure types that can be defined by their morphology or programme alone. In fact the new designs of Italian villas in the 16 & 17th centuries occurred simultaneously with re-imagining of the Antique gods within a Christian, specifically Reformation context. Renaissance architects did not copy Roman examples (Comito), but sought instead to place the remaining fragments (context) into an imaginative framework where myth and religion could work at once upon the visitor, stirring memories within them of what has been called 'the survival of the pagan Gods'. Commissioning a villa involves all parties in interpreting a tradition and in rejecting and accepting those characteristics that still make sense today.

The introverted nature of a villa is challenged by the need for interpretation of precedents that comprise the tradition of villa design, which can be summarized as at once eclectic and eccentric, idiosyncratic and deeply contextual. The creation of a villa is not only a test of the modernity of its creators, but also of the capacity of the architect and inhabitant to adjust to the twin demands of tradition and context, or contemporary life generally. A villa is in many ways an escape from the modern world and the complex compromises of city life. Its authenticity relies upon the degree to which modern life is situated in relationship with the traditional qualities of a villa's representational programme, such as the way in which nature and culture are presented and viewed (Vesely). The degree to which narrative elements in a villa can be situated within a coherent approach to daily life is the measure by which we judge the efficacy and power of such projects as The Villa Mairea by Alvar Aalto (Figs. 7, 8 & 9) or the villas of Le Corbusier (Figs. 10 & 11). And I would suggest that this is also the problem that Renaissance architects were faced with in their recreation of an ideal archetype within their own political setting. The task that the creator of a villa faces is a paradox that illuminates the problem of creativity in general, which has been summarised by the poet Wallace Stevens as the need to play 'a tune beyond us, yet ourselves/A tune upon the blue guitar/Of things exactly as they are'¹. This paradox can be compared to the role narrative plays in the reconstruction of past events: 'All memory has to be reimagined. For we have in our memories micro-films that can only be read if they are lighted by the bright light of the imagination' (Bachelard). Constructing a villa characteristically requires an ear for the contemporary resonance of essential typologies and an awareness of the distance between these archetypes and life today.

In order to detail 'villa characteristics', I shall refer to two sources that articulate the social aspirations of Renaissance villa patrons and architects. For Robin Evans, Renaissance domestic architecture differs

from modernist architecture in the planning of representational and private rooms and that this difference can be read as an index of a society's attitudes towards public life generally. He suggests in his essay, 'Figures, Doors and Passages' (London), that the subdivision of a house into discrete served and serving routes and rooms is a modern phenomenon. He cites Alberti, who considered that, 'It is also convenient to place the doors in such a Manner that they may lead to as many parts of the edifice as possible'. Evans describes the Villa Madama by Raphael & Sangallo near Rome (Figs. 12 & 13) as a network of relationships between people and spaces:

'... as in virtually all domestic architecture prior to 1650, there is no qualitative distinction between the way through a house and the inhabited spaces within it... From the circular central court, there are ten different routes into the villa apartments, none with any particular prominence... Once inside it is necessary to pass from one room to the next to traverse the building... Thus despite the precise architectural containment offered by the addition of room upon room, the villa was in terms of occupation, an open plan relatively permeable to the numerous members of the household, all of them—men, women, children, servants and visitors—were obliged to pass through a matrix of connecting rooms where the day-to-day business of life was carried on... it was the rule of Italian palaces, villas and farms that hardly affected the style of architecture (which could equally well be gothic or vernacular), but which most certainly affected the style of life.'

He goes on to connect the development of modern academic architectural theory, with general trends towards the compartmentalization of life into distinct zones of public and private, objective and subjective realms; 'company was the ordinary condition and solitude the exceptional state.' Evans concludes:

'The matrix of rooms is appropriate to a type of society which feeds on carnality, which recognizes the body as a person and in which gregariousness is habitual... it would be foolish to suggest that there is anything in a plan which would compel people to behave in a specific way towards one another, enforcing a day-to-day regime of gregarious sensuality. It would be still more foolish, however, to suggest that a plan could not prevent people from behaving in a particular way, or at least hinder them from doing so.'

Evans suggests that the plan of a villa, in this case enfilade, may reveal the relationships felt between individuals and their society. Villa architecture represents the way we view ourselves, and how, paradoxically, we wish to be viewed by others in our most relaxed and yet self-conscious manner.

A villa is traditionally a theatrical setting and a microcosmic representation of both city life and rural cultivation. As well as operating as a repository for art, a villa enables architecture to act in tandem with art works elaborating our sense of identity and the mutable character of *Rur et Urbis*, public and private, mundane and ideal. Villas typically include also settings to incorporate the creation of garden-theatres, made up of fragments of walls, stairs, caves, grottos; natural and supernatural realms co-existing in imagination and play, suggesting the potential transformations of life into festival. A staircase Belvedere is ambivalently also a stage and a courtyard too (Fig. 14). The Vatican Belvedere court was the prototype of such *cinquecento* gardens as the Villa Lante or the Palazzo Farnese (Figs. 15 & 16). It connects the garden and the villa both physically, enabling movement and performances, and emphasizes 'cultivation of potentialities that extend as far as the eye can see'. For example, at the Villa Lante in Bagnaia (Figs. 17 & 18), 'the progression from uncultivated nature to the triumph of art is the explicit basis for the garden's iconographical programme', (Comito). The humanist garden articulates literary and painterly themes elaborated in the frescoes of the interior. In the loggia overlooking the garden Cardinal Gambara is depicted as Hercules performing four of his labours, implying that priestly devotion and patronage can be compared to Cicero's pun on the two senses of cultivation. The slopes of the site are articulated through the flow of water and the curls of verdant topiary. The Renaissance Villa emphasized the increased importance of corporeality and perception over the abstract and textual space of medieval cloister gardens. Texts are made spatial in drama; and Renaissance theatricality, like antique tragedy, established the spatial conditions of congruence of cosmic, natural and political concerns. Both phenomenal and imaginative, the Villa operated as a gateway, figuratively and metaphorically, between the city and the countryside.

For example, The Villa Lante (Figs. 19 & 20) extends the town into a space in which both the mind and the body are rejuvenated through laughter inducing fountains exhibiting 'an Ovidian capacity for

transformation.' Comito asserts that 'In the Renaissance garden cosmic order is not something to be decoded by a process of abstraction. It is realized, made actual, in the stuff of the physical world in sights, sounds, odours, textures.' The Bosco (or sacred wood) and water gardens combine to create a setting for vision to attain an orderly experience, which articulates 'humanist dialogue... situated in the real world. And it is essentially situated, incarnate.' Yet the villa should not be considered solely an Epicurean endeavor. Despite the deliciously carnal sensuality of a recreated Golden Age, trees running with honey, cool arbors, ardor inducing nymphaea, etc., 'Villa gardens... presented themselves, ideologically, as sites less of holiday or escape than of home coming; they were places where thought comes home to itself', Comito insists. Whilst the villa can be said to exhibit painterly and literary rather than textual space, its architecture is visually dramatic in both a perceptual and analogous sense, *things are brought to appearance there*. Visibility is sought simultaneously in what the eyes and the mind perceive to be there, and often jokes and tricks combine each to confuse the other. How we see and think is made visible for the first time as an achievement of individuality and human capacity generally. The villa 'is not seen as a reproduction of a timeless archetype but, in its contingency, its historicity, as the creation of human power and imagination, an instance in fact, of that capacity for self creation, self cultivation', an instance which marks the beginning of modern consciousness. Perspective unites house and garden in a narrative completion of imagined, intimated and ritualistic space, 'what is involved is a shift not merely in design but in the "cognitive style" of the gaze with which the world is regarded'.

In sum, the villa offers us in microcosm an image of a society, and the commentary upon contemporary societies that the values of villa life proffer, acts as a check to the hubris of contemporary culture. For the Romans and the Athenians also imagined a Golden age before ignoble wars and commerce corrupted us, and the villa survives as a psychological antidote to the coarse causality and opportunism of modern business and the eternal compromises of political life. In other words, a villa is an ideal image, in miniature, of all that we have forgotten of our origins, and the myths of our origins. A villa resuscitates our imagination through the simple pleasures of walking and talking. In a villa we remember how to remember, which may account for the potency of images from our holidays, we live more intensely there then, even if nothing remarkable occurs to us.

The task of the villa architect seems to be to reconstitute some sense of the continuity between a building and its setting. In doing so we are free to reinvent old forms of spatial typologies as well as to adopt a rather generous and loosely fitting mode of design. Rooms have less distinct functions than offices or schools, and rather, large family groups can appropriate an enfilade plan in quite creative ways, much as children occupy spaces in their games. The effects of good food and wine and daily siestas invoke a sort of dream-like state in which we remember to remember who we are, unfettered from the demands of work and status, the imagination wakes up slowly to inhabit the villa with associations and minor monuments. A villa is a sentimental topography of small triumphs and commemorative meals. As such, a villa compresses experience into intensely poetic moments, time seems to slow down, life is laminated into simple spaces that echo with the presence of other events.

Perhaps unsurprisingly, patrons of villas tend to be sensitive to this sort of experience, and the three projects presented here are all for artist friends based in London.

CASA VASEUR

A holiday house for two London artists near Viterbo, north of Rome, this very small house is complimented with a number of red concrete cast objects that create rooms in the landscape for children and adults to escape and to play. Close to the grotesque statues in the Baroque garden of Bomarzo (Figs.21-22), this modern version of the villa celebrates the ambiguities between life and art, seeming-to-be and being that typified Renaissance villas and gardens. Our clients have planning consent to demolish and to reconstruct only the exact same volume as the previous dwelling (60m²). The 2-story house is just big enough for a kitchen and living space at ground floor and a large bedroom above (Figs. 23-32). However, the seasonal use of the house means that we can expect al fresco dining to occur from March until October, and so the dining room is external as are various other spaces for siestas and for guests to camp. The dining space is extended to form an outside fireplace, accessed via a pool. As well as these practical concerns the wild wooded hills of the 2-hectare site are to be festooned with 3 follies. A large concrete table situated 30m from the house; 3 times life size will act as a playpen for children and enable them to sleep out at night with visiting friends. A sentinel sits atop the hill behind the house, to be formed from a concrete spiral. Father will retreat here to spy on his

neighbours and to inspect his property. A miniature wall and seat, acting as a sort of solid 'Claude Glass' sits at the western border of the site, framing the village beyond in a naturally false perspective.

VILLA BLEES-LUXEMBURG

A summerhouse in photographer Rut Blee-Luxemburg's home village of Leiwen on the Mosel River in Germany, to be built on her family vineyard, this project amplifies the condition of a visitor in a familiar landscape. The memory of typical situations and the influence of childhood landscapes upon her photographs can be traced in the influence of them both upon the architecture (Figs. 33-45). 'Photo-Windows' focus attention upon the spaces in her images and then onto the world beyond. A concrete dam holds back the slate shale, and a curious image of a house is offered by the twisted timber-panel gable walls that her carpenter brother will build. The idea of home is stretched to the limit until the local building character becomes strange and aloof: 'A ship to take me home, and to take me away again', Rut claims. Our earlier exhibitions of her work explored the themes of site and the perception of spaces within images. In placing photographs beside windows and at the end of ramps and passages, we extended the spaces within the photographs phenomenally and imaginatively. You became conscious of the context of your perception. The summerhouse will also explore the topography of the site and of her imagination and seek to amplify the resonance of the typical and particular spatial characteristics that you find in her photographs of cities, such as the dynamic force of rivers and the co-existence of industry and nature.

The villa will echo the spaces within her photographs, exaggerating sensations of vertigo and of looking near and far at things of different scales, in order to disorient you as well as to amplify your sense of place. Simply put, Rut's work influences the way in which we think about context. Conventional architectural discourse teaches you to repress curiosity about the surface of things, to focus on the inner logic of an idea. Photographs can reveal the material richness of artifacts that we often dismiss as cliché, and to enable kitsch and local idiosyncrasy to appear mythical and strange. Rut is acutely aware of gauging the response of the viewer to the appearance of something. Working together allows us to fabricate monstrous versions of normal situations and to elaborate patterns of thinking which make sense of an invented scenario. This makes it easier to accept that we construct not only things you look at, but how you look as well.

MARSH VIEW

A villa for an artist in North Norfolk, this house echoes the local vernacular forms and creates a series of rooms in the landscape. An intense relationship with the views of the marsh are established through particular picture windows, and these let in light at certain times of the day suggesting what happens where in an intimated manner. You wander through and around the house tracking the sun and shade, engaging with the landscape in a relaxed and yet highly self-conscious fashion. The primary sensation of North Norfolk is the extensivity of the horizon (Fig. 46). The ground is often moist and subject to tidal fluctuations which blur an obvious distinction between coast and hinterland. Rare birds draw your attention across the broad sky, whilst human figures and buildings enable you to gain a sense of scale in the vastness of wind and watery light. Our design seeks to explore the building's relationship with the landscape and the *marsh view* (Figs. 47-75).

Marsh View is located in an 'area of outstanding natural beauty' on the North Norfolk coast amongst fresh and saltwater marshlands. It sits at the end of a lane beside four 1950s bungalows in a small hamlet close to fashionable Burnham Market. Our project comprises the demolition of a bungalow and the reconstruction of parts of this building within a new composition. We sought to relate the isolated scattering of bungalows together and to establish them on the horizon as a settlement. Alison Mitchell is a London weaver in her 50s. Alison's weaving explores three-dimensional space, and the house responds to this desire to see creating ways to gauge the depth of the horizon. Both the windows and the form of the building from afar enhance one's sense of scale. As well as enabling a visual connection to the horizon, the project encourages movement from inside to out in a variety of ways. A heated black concrete floor extends throughout the ground level and unites the various external and internal spaces as a sequence of 'rooms in the landscape'. These spatial conditions are seen less in terms of fixed functions and more as a fluid series of places for participation within the overall architectural setting, in which Alison's mother's sculptures and natural artifacts are juxtaposed. Marsh View is a house for inspiration for our clients and their friends who are fellow artists, filmmakers and writers. North Norfolk

has a peripatetic community of artistic weekend dwellers who make up an itinerant community sharing cinema nights and conversation.

The new construction is clad in the main by an open horizontal rain screen that reveals the layers of construction beneath itself. Stained rough sawn softwood boards spaced apart are fixed to battens set on bituminous felt. The repetitive horizontal textures give scale to the large dark silhouette that is simultaneously miniature and massive, and often difficult to measure with the eye. We retain two walls of the old bungalow in which new windows modify the existing openings. The windows are set forward in the walls to emphasize the continuity of the surface and to reflect the surrounding landscape into the garden. This at once reinforces the coherence of the form as one single folding surface, and seeks to de-materialize the windows, as they become huge mirrors. Plywood is utilized as a structural skin inside and out. The parabolic roof forms are an architectural expression of the structural capacity of this constructional method. Throughout, references are made to the joints between old and new construction. Vertical slit windows one brick wide, connect existing to new brickwork and act as transparent damp proofing as well as allowing sunlight to penetrate the house. Paradoxically, the use of black paint to unify the fragments of old and new walls seeks to repress distinctions between original and recent construction, in order to create a coherent formal expression of a single building whose external spaces are powerfully volumetric.

This combination of an archaic appearance that exaggerates the effects of weathering and a formal arrangement of enfilade rooms that spill-out into the garden makes it hard to judge what is new and what is old. We wanted to create a sense of the past and the present infused within each other. Staying in the house for a long weekend you tend to drift into the rhythm of the day that a villa reveals to us all. Drowsily reading, you experience a strange sensation of life on the border of dreams and intensified reality. Meals eaten outside become momentous and memorable and you are intensely aware of remembering these events as they occur.²

CONCLUSION

A villa represents a mode of life that is characteristic of the theatricality and playfulness of the architectural imagination and of its expression of a society's attitudes towards pleasure, duty, tradition and culture. A villa engages us in appreciation of archetypal situations, of city and nature, of sacred and wild territory, of private and public realms, of human and cosmic scale and ultimately, like a festival, it renews our sense of time as cyclical and of nature as regeneration. Like a play, a villa re-enchants us and places our memories into active engagement with reality. Therein lies the capacity for authenticity of our experiences of a villa; dependent upon the context of both the physical world and the necessary enchantment of myth and poetry, a villa also disenchants us from the various conceits thrown up by the city and its potential for mass solipsism. The role of the villa might remain the space that enables contemplation to become an ethos, and for action to become reconciled with poetry. Perhaps the tradition of the villa suggests that we can invert Bachelard's observation: *all imagination has to be remembered.*

ENDNOTES

1 Tim Bell wrote about an exhibition of 3 London practices at The Architecture Foundation in Spring 2001 entitled 'Encounters Between Here and There', in which we exhibited Marsh View amongst other projects. He discusses in depth 'the relationship between ordinariness and poetry' in the work exhibited in particular to the English pastoral tradition of William Wordsworth and the poetry of Wallace Stevens; 'The aim of the architects in this exhibition, seems to be the creation of a kind of Heideggerean sense of unconscious use, of being in the world, of being real, which is suddenly illuminated by poetry.'

2 Our client, Alison Mitchell, wrote about the house: *'I longed for a tall section of roofing with a skylight at the top so the full moon would cast shadows into this high-up void. It felt vital that such a low building should have a place where it could reach up to the sky. Also, I wanted a window, which wrapped around two walls without a central support structure. I reasoned that because the view didn't stop, neither should the window. As the sun travels from room to room, the narrow windows cast strips of light across the black concrete floor and the whole building becomes a sundial... an extraordinary house which holds within it a mystical and spiritual peace which I hope will give inspiration to everyone who stays there – a stage on which to perform a piece of life, even if only for a weekend.'*

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