Take Me to the River
On Andrea Palladio's Villa Foscari

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Andrea Palladio, Villa Foscari, Malcontenta, 1556–1560.
Photograph by Flavio Vallenari, 2017.

Villa Foscari at Malcontenta (1556–1560), by Andrea Palladio, is well-known among architects because in 1947 it starred in one of the most influential essays on architecture written in the last century: Colin Rowe's "The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa."[1] In this essay Rowe compared it to Le Corbusier's Villa Stein at Garches (1926–1928). The goal of putting these two villas side by side was, for Rowe, to demonstrate that once reduced to formal composition, Modern architecture was comparable to the architecture of other historical periods. Rowe's comparison was a major contribution to our appreciation of Palladio and consolidated the power of his work as a benchmark in judging even Modern architecture. The shortcoming of such an approach was the erasure of the contingent dimension of architecture: the idea that every architectural form—no matter how timeless it seems—is always the product of its time. Perhaps this is what it is always at stake in Palladio's architecture: its formal clarity makes it appear as something that has always been there, serene, imperturbable, indifferent to the accidents of life. And yet, Palladio's architecture was not only the outcome of a specific political project; this project was itself the outcome of an economic and ecological crisis. It is not an exaggeration to argue that the making of Palladio's architecture depended on its context, and such a condition is not an obvious thing for a villa. Both in Roman and Renaissance times, villas were idealized worlds meant to stand apart from the reality in which they existed—think of the elaborate sequences of plants, steps, and pavilions in villas such as Villa Lante in Bagnaia or Villa D'Este in Tivoli. This was not the case for Palladio, whose "*case di villa*" were in direct relationship with their extensive agrarian surroundings. This is why the form of Palladio's villas, including Villa Foscari, cannot be disentangled from the context—social, political, and environmental—that produced it. In the notes that follow, I approach Villa Foscari from what was the essence of the Venetian *Terraferma*: water.

1 Colin Rowe, "The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa," in *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa and Other Essays* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1976), 1–27.

THE NOMOS OF THE LAND

On the evening of October 9, 1963, a disaster occurred in the northeast of Italy, between the provinces of Belluno and Pordenone, a place known as the Vajont Valley. A large portion of Monte Toc dropped into an artificial reservoir and spawned a gigantic wave that destroyed several villages and killed 1917 people. After years of investigation, it was concluded that the Vajont disaster was provoked by the dam designers' negligence in assessing the geologic conditions of the mountain and the risks of storing water at its feet. Since then, the Vajont disaster has been seen not only as a tragedy in its own right but also—and especially—as a paradigmatic case of deadly mismanagement of water infrastructure with serious consequences on the delicate equilibrium between nature and urbanization. However, we can also situate the Vajont disaster as the concluding episode of another story, a long saga that starts with the containment of hydrogeological risk in the sixteenth century and the 'Villa-mania' that affected Venice's *Terraferma* in the last three centuries of La Serenissima. Today, we are accustomed to thinking of villas and their connection to uncontrolled building saturation of the countryside as one of the main culprits of hydrological disasters. But in the history of the Venetian mainland, the villa symbolized, at least ideologically, the Venetian elite's commitment to the opposite: the care of the land and of its water infrastructures.

Cristoforo Sorte, Map of the Trevigiano, 1556. From Archivio di Stato, Venice.

This story is a long process of territorial reform that was undertaken by the Republic since the sixteenth century and that focused on the valorization of agriculture and its corollary of water management as the precondition for the appropriation and maintenance of a rural territory.[2] It is possible to argue that hydrogeological risk has always been the nomos of Venice's Terraferma. Here I use the term *nomos* in its original sense, as the concrete territorial organization through which land use is organized. As Carl Schmitt argued, the way communities organize their land use is the primordial source of the political order.[3] In other words, we can't understand how a community is politically governed if we don't look at the way land is organized, divided, and distributed. In the Veneto, land use is defined by the extensive and ubiquitous road system that has existed

2 For a history of water management in the Veneto, from the times of the Republic to the present see: Elisabetta Novello, James C. McCann, "The Building of the 'Terra Firma': The Political Ecology of Land Reclamation in the Veneto from Sixteenth to Twenty-first Century," in *Environmental History*, Vol. 22, No. 3, (July 2017): 460–485.

3 Carl Schmitt, *The Nomos of the Earth in the International Law of the Jus Publicum Europaeum*, translated and annotated by G. L. Ulmen (London: Telos Press, 2006), 67–85.

since colonization by the ancient Romans and by the abundance of water streams descending from the Alps towards the Venice Lagoon. There may be no better image of this nomos than the map drawn by Cristoforo Sorte of the Venetian rural territory between the rivers Brenta and Piave. Here we see a myriad of small landholdings irrigated by a complex web of canals and side canals that branch off from these two rivers. Sorte's maps are the best summary of the hydrogeological project carried out by the Venetian Republic, which started with the establishment of two important institutions: the Collegio delle Acque (council of the waters), founded in 1505, and the Provveditori sopra i Beni Inculti (the agency that oversaw land reclamation), founded in 1556. The Collegio's main focus was the preservation of the lagoon from silting up and to maintain its navigability. However, such a task implied a careful management of the mainland rivers that feed the lagoon. For this reason, the college was responsible for expanding the management of the Venetian ecosystem from the lagoon to the mainland. Controlling the course of rivers and eventually designing their 'diversion' away from the lagoon was the only way to keep the lagoon—in the words of nobleman Girolamo Priuli—"from becoming mainland."[4] Because of its focus on rivers and canals, the Collegio's initiatives became intertwined with the efforts to revitalize agriculture by reorganizing its water system, a goal pursued by the Provveditori sopra i Beni Inculti. The latter institution was focused on advancing land reclamation and supporting the Venetian elite's agricultural interests.

GENTRIFICATION

Why, since the sixteenth century, was the Serenissima, whose immense political and economic empire was built over the sea, so keen to invest in agriculture? To answer this question, we need to briefly mention a few salient episodes within the history of the Republic. Between the eleventh and the sixteenth centuries, Venice rose to become the richest city in Europe thanks to its colonial conquests within the Adriatic and Aegean seas and its extremely lucrative trade with the Near East and Asia. Starting with the Ottoman conquest of Constantinople, Venice underwent a sequence of catastrophic events such as the Ottoman blockade of trade towards the East, Portugal's circumnavigation of Africa to directly link with Asia without passing through Venetian ports, the Republic's defeat by the League of Cambrai—which ended Venice's influence on the Italian peninsula—and, last but not least, Columbus's arrival in the Americas, which empowered Portugal, Spain, and, later, England as new maritime Empires. Confronted with this geopolitical situation, the Venetian ruling class understood that the Republic was going to enter a period of crisis that could not be halted but only slowed down by turning its main focus from the sea to the land. The days of optimistic maritime entrepreneurialism were over, and as a reaction, Venice considered the benefits of a stable agricultural economy. But such a change of priorities was easier said than done because, since the fifteenth century, both the Lagoon and the Terraferma were deteriorating. While the lagoon was increasingly polluted by the uncontrolled deposits carried by the rivers, the Terraferma was invaded by marshes. It is for this reason that in sixteenth-century Venice expertise in water and territorial management was no longer considered as mere technical know-how but as crucial to cultural and political projects. Cartographers, such as Sorte, or water engineers, such as Cristoforo Sabbadino, became more than technical experts. As argued by Manfredo Tafuri, their attitude toward 'planning' was supported and developed as a practice with strong political and even humanistic implications.[5] While in

4 As quoted in Christian Mathieau, *Inselstadt Venedig, Umweltgechichte eines Mythos in the Fruhen Neuzeit* (Vienna: Bohlau Verlag, 2007), 67–58.
5 Manfredo Tafuri, *Venice and the Renaissance*, translated by Jessica Levine (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1990), 103–138.

Renaissance Italy humanists were essentially learning from the ancients, in Venice they were also dealing with extremely contingent problems such as the precarious ecological situation of the Venetian territory. At the same time, the 'agricultural turn' in the Serenissima needed a greater ideological motivation, an ideology capable of rendering the land a nobler investment than the sea. Alvise Cornaro, more than anyone else at that time, provided the most effective ideology for the embracement of rural life with his idea of 'Santa Agricoltura' exposed in his magnus opus *Discorso sulla Vita Sobria*.[6] For Cornaro, agriculture is a complex of technical and humanistic knowledge in which taking care of the land is a source of stability and sobriety. Yet these values are potent ideological dress for the ruling class's entrepreneurialism in rural production. This ideology was very similar to the one promoted by the classic authors of ancient Roman rural life, such as Varro and Columella, in whose works the nostalgia for living like a virtuous farmer, as opposed to the mundane city dweller, was a subtle invitation to the urban ruling class to gentrify a potentially rebellious countryside.

It is in this context that we should position Andrea Palladio's architecture and especially his villas. The purpose of these buildings was not simply to offer a 'second home' to the elite of La Serenissima, but also—and especially—to symbolize their taking possession of the Terraferma as the new economy of Venice. The fact that Palladio designed and built so many villas is a testimony not only to a 'villa-mania' among Venice's elite but also to the ideological commitment felt by both the elite and the state in reclaiming its mainland. It is astonishing to see how many families, sometimes even in competition or open conflict among themselves, chose the same 'language' embodied by Palladio's classicist sobriety.

THE ABSOLUTE AND THE CONTINGENT

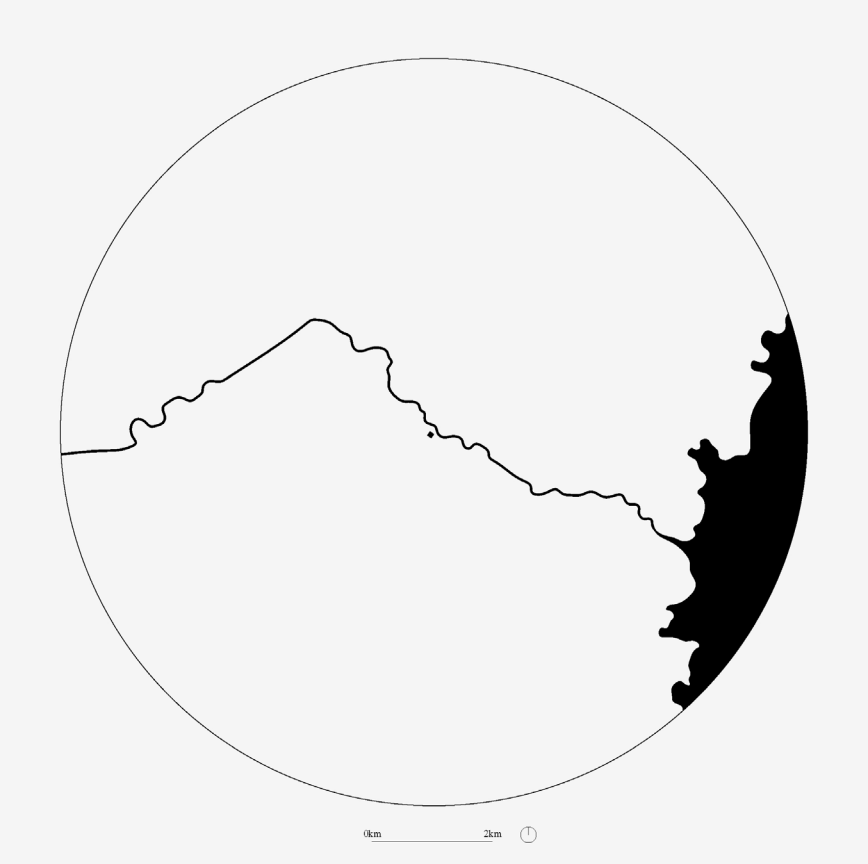
In introducing his 'case di villa,' in the second book of his *Four Books on Architecture* (1570) Palladio put unprecedented emphasis on the choice of the site and on the relationship between the form of the villa and its context.[7] Palladio argued that in terms of siting, the best situation for a villa would be in proximity to a river or canal.[8] For Palladio, such proximity had the advantages of both facilitating shipping of what was produced in the villa's farmland and enhancing the delight of dwelling in an environment refreshed by water. Yet, in light of what was mentioned above, we could argue that the proximity between villas, rivers, and canals celebrated the role of these water infrastructures in the transformation of the Venetian Terraferma. In such a way, the villa was not only an outpost overlooking rural production but also a theatrical stage opened towards the system of water channels, the deus ex machina of the Terraferma's farming system. Palladio was seldom able to achieve this proximity. Among the few cases in which the villa-water proximity was realized in utmost dramatic terms is Villa Foscari at Malcontenta.[9]

6 The ideological role of Alvise Cornaro's idea of 'Santa Agricoltura' has been analyzed in Reinhhard Bentmann and Michael Muller, *The Villa as Hegemonic Architecture*, translated by Tim Spence and David Craven (London: Humanities Left, 1992), 18–20. See also Manfredo Tafuri, *Venice and the Renaissance,* 139–160.

7 Andrea Palladio, *The Four Books on Architecture*, translated by Robert Tavernor and Richard Schofield (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1997), 121–122. For an interesting discussion on the relationship between Palladio's villas and their site, see Adriano Ghisetti Giavarina, "Le Ville di Palladio 'invention secondo doversi siti,'" in Franco Barbieri et al., *Palladio 1508–2008. Il simposio del cinquecentenario* (Padova: Marsilio, 2008), 279–283.

8 Ibid., 122.

9 For an incisive reading of Villa Foscari in its context, see Erik Forssman, *Visible Harmony: Palladio's Villa Foscari at Malcontenta*, translated by Gordon Irons (Stockholm: Sveriges arkitekturmuseum, 1973).

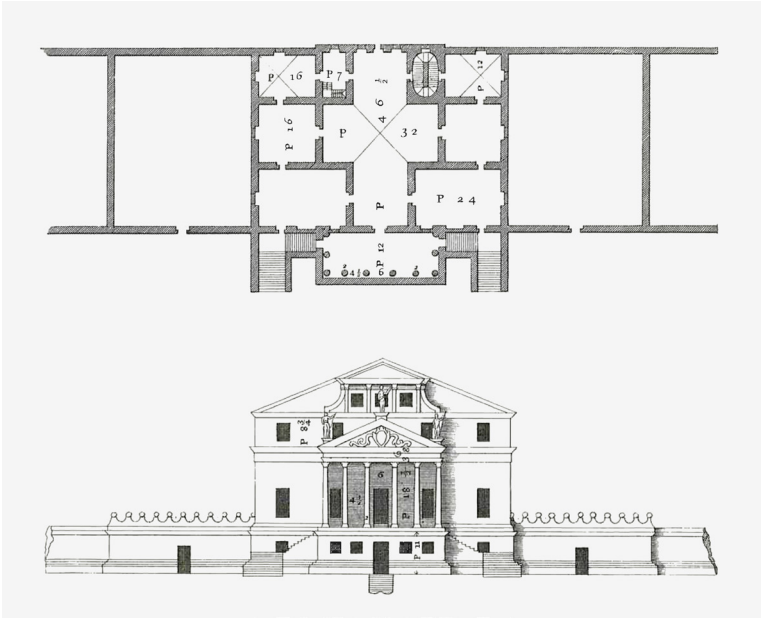


Villa Foscari as a 'gatekeeper' of the Venetian lagoon. Drawing by Romain Barth.

The villa is a three-story building based on a rectangular plan fronted by an imposing pedimented loggia made of eight slender Ionic columns. Contrary to villa custom, the loggia is oriented north to face the canal, which was meant to be the main point of access to the villa. The novelty of this portico is that it is no longer encased in the building as in previous villas (think of Villa Cornaro) but projects forward, a solution that anticipates the four pedimented porticos of Villa Capra, known as Villa Rotonda, near Vincenza (1566–1567). Within the sequence of Palladio's villas, Villa Foscari is therefore a turning point that marks the passage from the more rustic setting of previous villas such as Villa Saraceno (circa 1545), Villa Pisani at Bagnolo (1542–1545), Villa Poiana at Poiana Maggiore (1548–1549), and Villa Cornaro at Piombino Dese (1553) towards the classicist drama of Rotonda. Like Rotonda, Villa Foscari seems to have been conceived by Palladio not as a *villa rustica* but as a *villa suburbana*.[10] As in the tradition of Ancient Rome, the villa rustica combined the owner's residence with farming annexes such as barns and storage rooms. This kind of villa was reinvented by Palladio by flanking the house of the owner with the *barchesse*, long barns fronted by austere porticos. Contrary to the villa rustica, the villa suburbana was a house devoid of farming facilities and exclusively dedicated to the leisure of its residents. The location of Villa Foscari, not far from Venice, seems to support the suburban function of the villa. However, in Palladio's villas the dichotomous relationship between villa rustica and villa suburbana is not always straightforward. In the case of Villa Foscari, it is known that the clients—Nicolò and Alvise Foscari—owned farmland near the villa.[11] Moreover, in the room located northwest of the entrance, there is a fresco representing Santa Agricoltu-

10 For a discussion on this aspect of Villa Foscari, see Guido Beltramini, "Villa Foscari 'La Malcontenta,'" in Guido Beltramini and Howards Burns, eds., *Palladio* (Padova: Marsilio, 2008), 130.

11 Ferigo Foscari, "La Formazione di un possedimento fondiario 'non molto lungi dal Gamberare,'" in Giulia Foscari, editor, *Prima di Palladio. La formazione di un possedimento "non molto lungi dal Gamberare"* (Venice: La Malcontenta, 2005), IX–XVI.



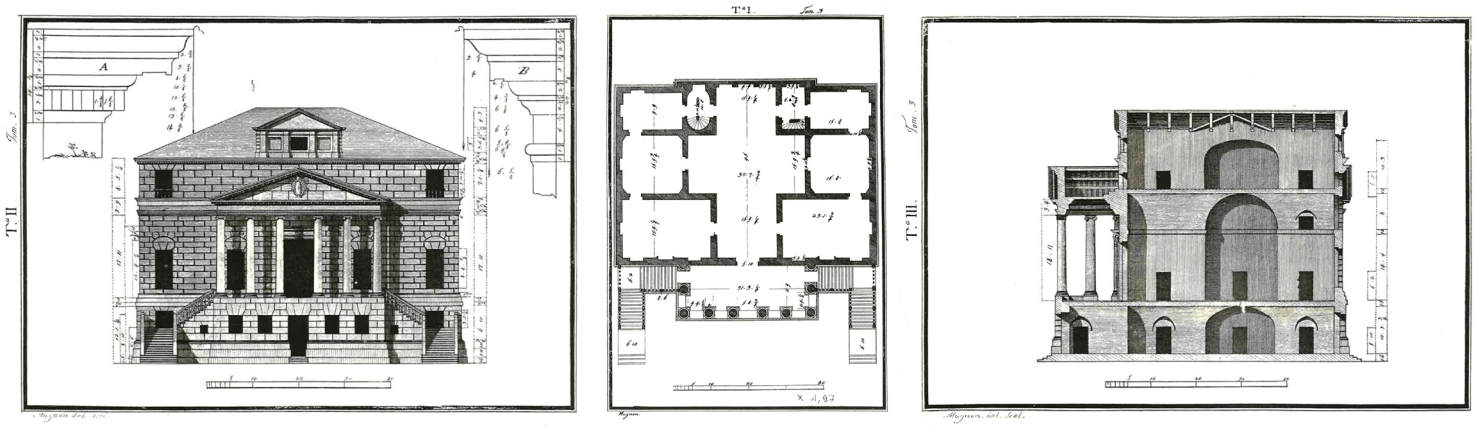
Andrea Palladio, Villa Foscari, Malcontenta, 1556–1560, plan and elevation.
From Andrea Palladio, *I quattro libri dell'architettura* (Venice: Franceschi, 1570), second book, 50.

Andrea Palladio, Villa Foscari, Malcontenta, 1556–1560.
Photograph by Esther Westerveld, 2016.

Andrea Palladio, Villa Foscari, Malcontenta, 1556–1560, detail of the plinth.
Photograph by Hans A. Rosbach, 2007.

ra, a reminder of the productive purpose of countryside life. Another link between villas and farming annexes is the way in which Palladio draws the plan of the villa in his *Quattro Libri.* The walls that enclose the gardens located at the two short sides of the villa go further as they seem to reach buildings located at a certain distance from the villa. In the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, these garden walls linked the villa to adjacent structures—a farm and a chapel—as is visible in the view of Villa Foscari engraved by Gian Francesco Costa and presented in his series of *vedute* of the Brenta Villas. Even the monumental columns on the north façade seem to escape the classicist purity with their shafts made of exposed bricks, as in the severe and utilitarian plinth.

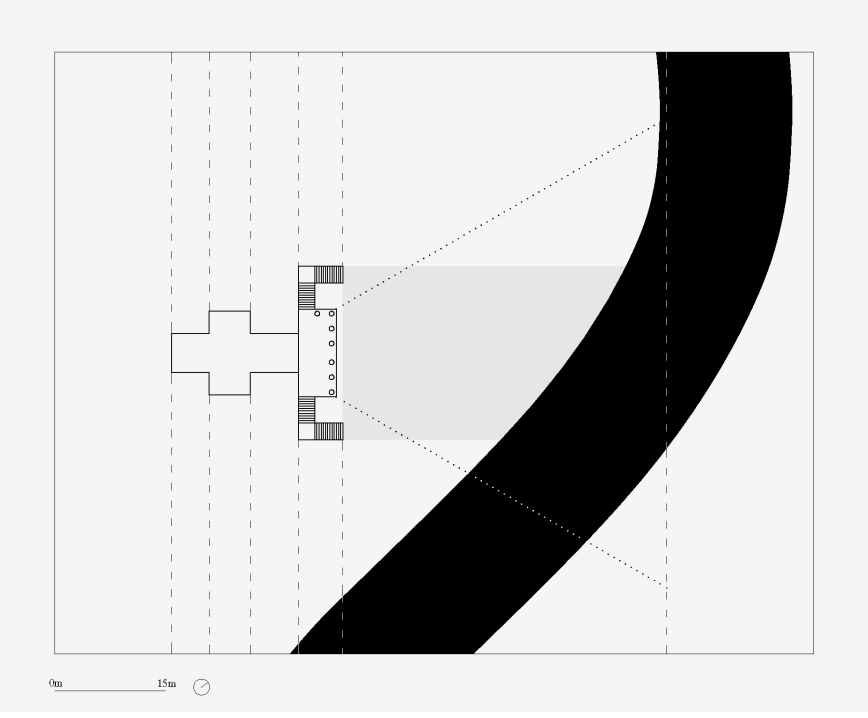
And yet, Villa Foscari is remarkable for its absence of the flanking barchesse. Villa Foscari is thus a 'transitional' villa that seems to move from the farm-like logic of the villa rustica to the 'splendid isolation' of a suburban palace. Villa Foscari's isolation is defined not by an all-round symmetry as in Villa Capra, but by a one-sided relationship with the Brenta, the real protagonist of this villa. The tall pedimented loggia seems more like a balcony overlooking the river than a monumental entrance to the villa. Once disembarked, visitors would be confronted by the portico's imposing monumentality. This monumentality was enhanced by the fact that the ground floor that contains the service rooms was designed by Palladio as a tall plinth. Seen from the exterior, what is impressive about this villa is its verticality, as if its function were to be visible from a distance as a landmark. It is important to note that Villa Foscari is located not far from the mouth of the Brenta as it empties into the lagoon. Among Palladio's villas, it is the closest to Venice and marks the threshold between mainland and lagoon. As such, Villa Foscari was the forerunner of the many villas that in the course of three centuries populated the 'Brenta Riviera' and can be interpreted as a 'gatekeeper' for both those going from the mainland to Venice and vice versa.



Andrea Palladio, Villa Foscari, Malcontenta, 1556–1560, plan, section and elevation. From Ottavio Bertotti Scamozzi, *Le fabbriche e i disegni di Andrea Palladio* (Vicenza, 1796), Tom. 3, T.aI, T.aII, T.aIII.

Unfortunately, today Villa Foscari is hidden by overgrown trees that make the site resemble a park. The image of the villa estate as a 'park' is antithetical to both how Palladio conceived his villas and how the villa appeared until the beginning of the last century. A photograph taken in 1910 shows the villa in its complete isolation surrounded by a bare landscape. In their seminal study of the relationship between Palladio's villas and their surrounding landscapes, Gerrit Smienk and Johannes Niemeijer have reconstructed the original setting of the approach to the villa

along the course of the Brenta from both Padua and Venice.[12] The villa was visible from a distance from both directions, yet the gently meandering course of the Brenta would offer to the approaching visitor a kinetic image. From far away the villa appeared as a tall and simple cube in stark contrast with the relentless flatness of the surrounding landscape. By getting closer, the cube would reveal its austere short sides with their asymmetrical composition of unadorned openings. Only at a short distance does the loggia reveal itself in all its majestic scale. This means that to those travelling through the Brenta, Villa Foscari was a fully classicist building only for a moment, while for the rest of time, it would look like a tall but unremarkable block. The monumentality of Villa Foscari is thus a sudden surprise and not a static image, as in the case of other villas in which pedimented loggias and other classicist tropes were visible from far away. For this reason, it is possible to argue that at Villa Foscari, Palladio seems to contradict the entire tradition of 'Palladian Architecture,' in which pediments and porticos make the front façade the main focus of the villa. Contrary to this tradition, the villa/river proximity so much invoked by Palladio as the perfect setting implies a more dynamic and unstable perceptual approach that challenges the symmetrical organization of Palladian architecture. Here, perhaps, emerges one of the most salient aspects of Palladio's architecture, which is the confrontation between the 'absolute' and the 'contingent.' The absolute is the resolute way in which Palladio conceived his buildings as self-contained cubic forms defined by symmetrical relationships and harmonic proportions. There is no doubt that it was this aspect that Palladio wanted to emphasize when he presented his own designs in the second book of his *Four Books* where his villas are presented through the diagrammatic clarity of orthogonal projections. The contingent is the use of these villas and, above all, the site location, which Palladio made the fundamental starting point for their design.



Implementation of Villa Foscari as a series of spatial sequences, from the Brenta River to the cruciform hall. Drawing by Romain Barth.

12 Gerrit Smienk and Johannes Niemeijer, *Palladio*, *The Villa and the Landscape* (Basel: Birkhauser, 2011), 77, 80.

As demonstrated by Smienk and Niemeijer, once located within their landscape, each villa reveals how its organization is inflected by its siting while maintaining its resolute formal autonomy.[13] For example, when looking at Villa Foscari within its context, it is clear that despite that resolute autonomy from the surrounding area so much celebrated by Rowe, its planimetric organization is bespoke to the bending form of the Brenta. Starting from the river, the plan can be read as a sequence of well-calibrated spatial intervals: the riverbank, the lawn, the loggia-balcony, and finally the cruciform hall. The latter's plan has a longer arm towards the river and a shorter one in the opposite direction. Such an asymmetrical cross allowed Palladio to compose a sequence of different side-rooms whose proportions—from bigger to smaller—are defined by their position towards the entrance. Understood in this way, the plan of Villa Foscari seems a reverberation of the riverbank. Another remarkable aspect is the contrasting relationship between the four elevations. Utmost contrast emerges, as we have seen, between the utilitarian simplicity of the side façades and the monumentality of the front façade. A subtler contrast is created between the north and south façades. The latter is defined by the clustering of the central openings that give light to, and reveal to the outside, the central hall. The upper part of this clustering forms a thermal window that breaks the lower part of a pediment drawn on the façades. The latter element is evoked almost like a ghost, since it is a delicate projection of the monumental pediment on the north façade. This pediment projection, together with the cornice that "goes all around the house," as Palladio put it, binds the elevations together as a unitary form. Once interpreted in this way, Palladio's Villa Foscari appears in all its metamorphic beauty as something suspended between the absolute and the contingent, unity and fragmentation, modesty and monumentality, austerity and delight, symmetry and asymmetry, and above all, stability and precarity. The latter was the fragile Venetian ecosystem which, in the course of time, would be increasingly stressed, lacking a systematic territorial project.

Left: Andrea Palladio, Villa Foscari, Malcontenta, 1556–1560.
Photograph by Hans A. Rosbach, 2007.
Right: Andrea Palladio, Villa Foscari, Malcontenta, 1556–1560.
Photograph by Hans A. Rosbach, 2007.

13 Ibid., 81.

This lack of a systematic project of the territory was made evident sixty years ago with the Vajont Disaster and continues to this day with the recurring floods that plague the Italian territory. There is no doubt that, like in the sixteenth-century Serenissima, we are in urgent need of a new class of technicians and planners that can approach this problem with the same competence and with the cultural breadth of Sorte and Sabbadino. And yet, we also need a cultural project, something that transcends the technical and becomes an *idea*. Of course, such a project should be the opposite of the one advanced by Palladio and his patrons. The Palladian villa was essentially an elitist project of reform driven by the strong class interests of the landed Venetian aristocracy. However, any project of territorial reform should nonetheless aspire to the same degree of impact. The current consequences of climate change should be understood not only as an ecological crisis but also as a political and cultural crisis. It seems that, confronted with these consequences, society fails to link the infrastructural measures needed to mitigate the consequences of climate change with a vast political and cultural project that can eventually inform a new idea of the urban territory. When measured against today's environmental urgencies, architecture becomes a mere 'solution' in which the technical and the functional requirements are the only boxes to tick. But as the history of the Serenissima demonstrated, a crisis cannot be reduced to a matter of survival: it should also be understood as a dramatic call for cultural imagination.

First published in: Giulia Foscari, ed., *Villa Foscari La Malcontenta* (Venice: Wetlands, 2025).

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