

Arts & Letters

EXHIBIT

Architect of the Republic

By Harry Mount

THERE'S ONLY ONE disappointment in the exceptional new show of 31 original Palladio drawings at the Morgan Library, only seen once before in the United States. It's the disappointment that comes with all architectural drawings: not being able to see the actual buildings.

If it's any consolation, the greatest American Palladian of them all, Thomas Jefferson, never saw a single Palladio building either. In 1787, he did a grand tour of northern Italy, visiting Turin, Milan, and Genoa, but he was recalled to his ambassador's job in Paris before he could get to Palladio's heartland, Venice, Vicenza, and the Veneto.

So the designs for Jefferson's Virginia home, Monticello, and his unrealized 1792 design for the White House were transmitted via paper only from Palladio's drawings and books. (Monticello's design and its name, which means "the little mountain," were both borrowed from Palladio's Villa Rotonda outside Vicenza.) That's why the drawings at the Morgan are particularly significant: they are the means by which northern Italian ideas became American stone.

No wonder Jefferson called Palladio's written works his Bible and, in his library at Monticello, he had two London editions of *The Architecture of A. Palladio* by Giacomo Leoni (1715-20

and 1742). His devotion was so great that in addition to the Palladian University of Virginia in Charlottesville and the Virginia State Capitol in Richmond, Jefferson designed a second Palladian home at Poplar Forest in Lynchburg, Virginia in 1806. It has four octagonal rooms around a square top-lit parlor and porticos to north and south.

His quasi-religious devotion to the 16th-century Italian master was so great that Jefferson spent much of his fortune on Monticello. His building debts bankrupted the estate, consigning the house to a century of decay after his death in 1826.

But it's not just Jefferson who fell for the genius of Andrea Palladio. America, more than any other country on earth, is a Palladian nation.

At the time of independence, Palladianism was the fashionable architectural style. By the late 18th century, British and European Palladianism had reached full maturity, so the American incarnation could absorb all the aesthetic and pragmatic lessons of two centuries of Palladian buildings across the Atlantic.

It helped, too, that the Founding Fathers admired the Roman Republic, and so also admired the Roman architectural principles that lay at the heart of Palladio's buildings. The American love of Rome—or, more specifically, Roman Republican virtues—intensified with the birth of the American Republic after the Revolution. The Founders sought a virtuous model of government that could be separated from the monarchy they had just overthrown. The Roman Republic seemed at one and the same time pure, but not too dangerously democratic. Thomas Jefferson and the two John Adamses were particularly keen on the Greek and Roman idea of rule by

the *optimates*—the best or, in Jefferson's phrase, a "natural aristocracy" based on the most talented.

The fashion for all things Roman continued after the Revolution. George Washington's triumphs and celebrity eventually meant that the passion for Rome deviated from ardor for Republican Rome to a cult of Imperial Rome. The first president, who did his best to limit the powers of his office, did not encourage the cult, but he could do little to stop it. A bust of Washington in the Met, by Giuseppe Ceracchi, shows him dressed like a Roman emperor—a Hadrian or a Marcus Aurelius—with a toga pinned at his right shoulder by the traditional rosette brooch. He could hardly look more Roman or more imperial. Gone is the usual wig, replaced by the fashionably short hair of Roman emperors. His wide, strong torso and the incised eyes are recognizable from ancient Roman sculptures. All that's familiar from the famous Gilbert Stuart pictures are the lips, pursed with the pain of badly fitting false teeth.

But Washington and Jefferson's Roman ideals were most clearly manifested to the world in classical buildings. In 1791, Jefferson advised Pierre Charles L'Enfant, the architect who designed the grid and diamond plan for Washington, D.C. and remodeled New York's Federal Hall with its Doric portico, to follow classical designs for the Capitol: "I should prefer the adoption of some one of the models of antiquity, which have had the approbation of thousands of years." A handsome plaster model of the Capitol appears in the Morgan show alongside one of Monticello.

The only problem was, ancient Greek and Roman buildings weren't immedi-

ately practical in late 18th-century Washington. The solution was to borrow from the man who had already adapted classical buildings to suit modern living—Andrea Palladio.

The Founding Fathers appreciated the great Palladian buildings in Britain sponsored by the Whig aristocracy, not least Houghton Hall, Norfolk, the Palladian home of Robert Walpole, Britain's first prime minister. Jefferson in particular was much taken with the Whig Enlightenment ideals of political liberty and republican civic virtue.

It's no surprise, then, that all the iconic buildings of independence were Palladian. George Washington's Mount Vernon home is a classic mid-18th-century Palladian villa. The great imperial architect of Washington, Benjamin Latrobe, who adapted the plans for the Capitol, indulged his love of Palladio elsewhere across the country. He was behind the first Catholic cathedral in America, the Palladian Baltimore Basilica, and, in conjunction with James Hoban, the White House. (The White House, by the way, was built on the banks of a little stream given the grand—and distinctly Roman—name of Tiber Creek.)

There was more to it, though, than mere slavish copying of Palladio. Latrobe was a great one for Americanizing his classical influences, taking the Corinthian capital and inserting corn-cobs between the leaves. For the capitals of the columns of the vestibule and rotunda of the Senate wing of the Capitol, he removed acanthus leaves and replaced them with the leaves and flowers of the powerhouse crop of the American economy, the tobacco plant. But for all these flourishes, Palladio lay at the heart of his work.

Over the next century, Palladian taste migrated from these iconic buildings across Washington—and America. Jefferson, when he was secretary of state, insisted that Washington's federal buildings should be classical-cum-Palladian. The style then spread from federal to state level—from the grand, like the Massachusetts State House in Boston,

designed by Charles Bulfinch in 1795, to the smallest courthouses. Practically every town in New England has a church with that familiar combination of a classical spire soaring straight up from the apex of a pediment below. The first example of this combination is St. Martin-in-the-Fields, the church overlooking Trafalgar Square in London, designed in 1721 by James Gibbs, a British architect who straddled Palladianism and the Baroque. Jefferson's library at Monticello also included a copy of Gibbs's *Rules for Drawing the Several Parts of Architecture* (1732).

Palladio's own buildings—palaces, villas, churches, and even a block of four small domestic houses in Venice—enjoyed a range of size, cost, and function that was immensely adaptable to American conditions. Monticello and Mount Vernon were built very much on the same sociological and financial basis as Palladio's best-known buildings in the Veneto: rural villas in hot, marshy climates, attached to a farm and estate, owned by affluent landowners with political and business interests in the nearest city. The way Palladio dismembered the elements of antique buildings and rearranged them to suit a later age was also borrowed across America. He had studied ancient buildings in Rome and combed the works of the Roman architect Vitruvius (80-15 B.C.) to develop a style rooted in antiquity but not slavishly derivative of it. The Morgan show includes rare Palladio sketches of the Emperor Trajan's warehouses at Ostia, the Lateran Basilica in Rome, and Assisi's Temple of Minerva, all rich in elements that Palladio adapted for his own buildings.

Infinitely flexible, Palladianism was the bridge from the classical language of architecture to its modern dialect—a bridge that stretched beyond 18th-century America into recent times. Late 19th- and early 20th-century buildings such as the Supreme Court—a model of which appears in the Morgan show—the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C., and the New York Stock Exchange all borrowed heavily from Palladio.

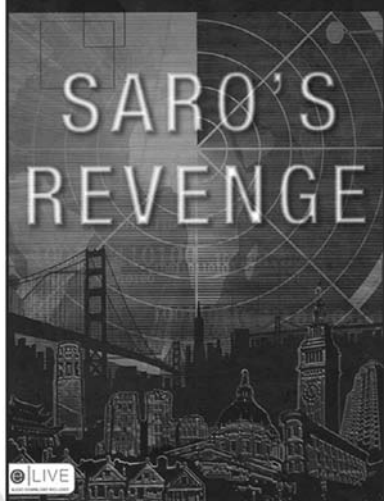
Even modern minimalism has its Palladian roots. Le Corbusier, the Swiss-French minimalist pioneer, took a tour of Palladio's buildings in Vicenza and Venice in 1922 and filled an album. There's a fair degree of playful imagination in those sketches. One, of the Villa Rotonda, is drawn at a severe, raking angle, with the dome mutilated, one side of the building removed, and most of the classical elements stripped away.

Jefferson would not have approved of such sacrilege, but he would have appreciated how robust his hero's eternal principles are and how easily they can be reinvented, in any part of the world, by any architect. ■

Harry Mount is the author of Carpe Diem—Put a Little Latin in Your Life. Palladio and his Legacy—a Transatlantic Journey is at the Morgan Library and Museum, 225 Madison Avenue at 36th Street, New York, N.Y. from April 2 to Aug. 1.

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BOOKS

[*The Death and Life of the Great American School System: How Testing and Choice Are Undermining Education*, Diane Ravitch, Basic Books, 296 pages]

Is Our Children Learning?

By Peter Wood

IGNORANCE IS EASY. Left to themselves, most children do not become literate. They don't learn math. They don't drink in large amounts of history. Basic ideas about how the world works remain beyond their reach. And ignorant children grow up to be ignorant adults—provided they survive the sometimes perilous passage.

To combat this natural frailty, every group of people from time immemorial has organized some way to get the little ones—squirming, distracted, cranky, bored, breathless, or all at once—to pay attention. “This is rock worth chipping, and here's how to chip it.” “Eat the root, not the leaves.” Civilization eventually acquired a lot of knowledge that seemed worth preserving. To get the children ready for this intellectual inheritance, civilization invented schools. They are an artificial contrivance intended to do a more or less difficult thing: organize the brains of young primates to perform unnatural acts such as reading and long division.

That's my view as an anthropologist. Schooling is, inevitably, difficult—and more difficult for some children than for others. The difficulty is a mystery only if you begin with the assumption that children are just so bursting with curiosity that, absent some external check on their eagerness, they will take to the alphabet as readily as infants take to climbing and crawling. But we are

climbers and crawlers by nature and alphabet spelunkers only by outside intervention. When we learn to read, we are at one end of a long cultural rope that extends back though history beyond Shakespeare's Stratford Grammar School, past Aristotle troubling young Alexander, to whatever lessons were taught in the cuneiform academy for Sumer's scribes. Literacy has always been an achievement—and often a precarious one.

I mention this by way of coming alongside a book of groaning frustration by one of America's best-known advocates of school reform. Diane Ravitch first registered on the national scene as the co-author with Chester Finn of the 1987 study *What Do Our 17-Year Olds Know?* It reported on a history and literature test administered to a national sample of 8,000 students. That was 23 years ago—an eon in educational reform—but Ravitch's and Finn's lucid examination of their findings remains the gold standard for this sort of enterprise. Back in 1986, a good 92.1 percent of students could locate the Soviet Union on a map of Europe, and 65.8 percent could pick out France. Geography, however, was one of the students' strong suits. Only 57.3 percent could place World War I between 1900 and 1950. Some 40.2 percent recognized Walt Whitman as the author of *Leaves of Grass*.

Ravitch and Finn ended up recommending—no surprise here—that “all schools teach a solid core curriculum of history and literature to all students at every grade level.” They also called for better textbooks, improvements in teacher education, and other measures that would seem uncontroversial. Ravitch, who served as assistant secretary of education under President George H.W. Bush, went on to write other important books, including *Left Back* (2000), a history of school reform movements in the U.S., and *The Language Police: How Pressure Groups Restrict What Students Learn* (2003), an evisceration of the textbook industry.

Her work *in toto* is a portrait of Amer-

ican schooling as a mighty engine of social assimilation pulling a trainload full of educational triviality. The school reform movements in the U.S. come off like the plot of Agatha Christie's *Murder on the Orient Express*. Who killed American education? Pretty much everyone aboard.

In her new book, Ravitch confesses that she, too, had her hands on the knife. *The Death and Life of the Great American School System* belongs to that fascinating genre, the I-changed-my-mind-and-am-switching-sides manifesto. Ex-atheist Sir Anthony Flew gave us *There Is a God*; Anita Hill profiler David Brock self-profiled in *Blinded by the Right: The Conscience of an Ex-Conservative*. Quite a few contributors found their way into *Destructive Generation: Second Thoughts About the Sixties*, and before them came the communists disenchanted by Stalin's gentle ways. Whittaker Chambers abjured his career as a Soviet agent to embrace both God and political freedom in *Witness*.

Ravitch's *volte-face* is less existential. She is now convinced that she erred about the means she pursued but not the goal. She continues to believe that the key to getting schooling right is a good substantive curriculum. But she has lost faith in the No Child Left Behind (NCLB, pronounced “nickel-bee” by those in the trade) regime of “high-stakes testing.” She has decided that teachers' unions are a good thing because teachers best understand what students need and because organized teachers can best resist the often wrong-headed nostrums of giddy reformers. Ravitch, once an ardent proponent of vouchers and school choice and then of charter schools (school-choice lite), now favors public schools. She has deep doubts about the role of wealthy foundations such as Gates, Walton, and Broad in promoting school reform. She is above all disenchanted with the idea that schooling can be improved by treating it like a business and using business-based ideals of accountability.

Ravitch's new views don't unanchor her two core convictions: that American