

Leoni Haunts Palladio's Tomb
'Necessary Corrections' to Four Books
Continue to Distort Palladian Legacy

by Charles Brownell

Giacomo Leoni (c. 1686-1746) was a minor architect in eighteenth-century England, but he uniquely altered the Palladian heritage in ways that persist today.

Like Andrea Palladio, Leoni was a native of the Veneto region of Italy, and he seems to have tied his career to the work of his countryman from an early age. By 1708 Leoni was in Düsseldorf, participating in a minor local German Palladian movement. Arriving in England sometime before 1715, Leoni identified an interesting market opportunity: Although Inigo Jones (1573-1652) had pioneered English Palladianism a century earlier, there was no English translation of Palladio's seminal *I quattro libri dell'architettura* (The Four Books on Architecture).

Leoni set about producing the first complete English edition of Palladio's *Four Books*. He released his work in installments from 1715 to 1720 under the title *The Architecture of A. Palladio; in Four Books*. The magnificent folios included English and French translations prepared by a military engineer and architect, Nicholas Dubois (ca. 1665-1735), as well as the original Italian text. Leoni himself redrew the illustrations.

The standards of this production recall Hollywood epics in the days of Cecil B. De Mille. For instance, the title page promises that the English is 'Translated from the *Italian* Original,' but this is merely one of Leoni's falsehoods. His translator, Dubois, actually worked from the French edition of *Four Books* which Roland Fréart, Sieur de Chambray (1606-76), had published in Paris in 1650. Some vivid mistranslations sprang from this second-hand procedure.

For instance, in an all-important passage in Book 2, chapter 16, Palladio relied upon his theory of the origins of architecture to justify his use of pedimented temple porticos on houses. Palladio believed that the ancients invented houses first and then modeled their temples on those buildings. Palladio thus concluded (mistakenly) that the remains of temples gave a good idea of the ancient houses that he wished to recreate. Nonsensically, the Leoni-Dubois version gets things exactly backwards, having Palladio say that it is legitimate to use pedimented porticos on houses because ancient houses imitated ancient temples. The overall issue with the English text, though,

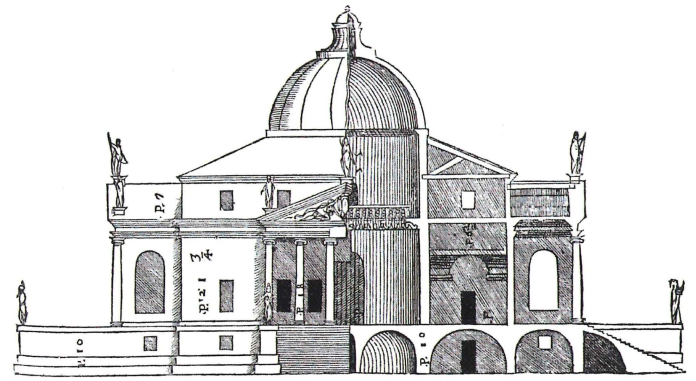


Fig. 1. Villa Rotonda as published by Palladio in *I quattro libri dell'architettura* (1570) (detail).

is not individual gaffes. Rather, it is the fact that the translation as a whole was simply never one to rely on.

Neither were the illustrations, which is more important still, for Leoni was publishing the equivalent of a lavish modern-day art book. Leoni wanted his book to sell, and he wanted it to advertise his services as an architect. He dressed the illustrations up with a variety of extra features. These even include a portrait which Leoni labeled a likeness of Palladio painted by the great Venetian artist Paolo Veronese (1528-88). In fact, the picture is a fake which Leoni commissioned.

Most significantly, Leoni 'improved on' Palladio's illustrations. He bragged in his Preface that 'true Judges' who compared his plates with Palladio's would 'easily discern a vast difference,' and that he had made 'so many necessary Corrections with respect to Shading, Dimensions, Ornaments, &c. that this Work may in some sort be rather consider'd as an Original, than an Improvement.' At least here Leoni came close to the truth. He made endless changes—large, middling, and small—to the plates. He did this for various purposes, not least to correct discrepancies which abound in Palladio's illustrations. In the end, though, Leoni's changes rested on one reason above all: Leoni was aggrandizing himself at Palladio's expense.

Leoni's modifications to the Villa Rotonda illustrations are his most illuminating alterations. Some of the changes place Leoni's engravings at the start of a new and lasting special interest in the building. Palladio's own illustration (Fig. 1), a single plate with both a plan and a combined elevation/section, is overshadowed by the more ample illustrations of Palladio's palaces which precede it. This subordination clearly troubled Leoni. To avoid it, he cleverly split the image into two handsomely decorated pages, one with the plan and the other (Fig. 2) with a full elevation and a full section set against an artful *trompe-l'oeil* ground. Leoni elaborated on other Palladio illustrations in various ways, but he did nothing quite comparable to the spotlight that he threw on Villa Rotonda.

Whatever other forces may have played a part, Leoni's emphasis is inseparable from the unprecedented rise of Villa Rotonda-inspired designs, built and unbuilt, first in Britain and then, later, in Jefferson's orbit. Leoni's role is underscored by the persistence of an influential change which he imposed on his representation of Villa Rotonda. With his eye on quite un-Palladian Baroque sources, Leoni inserted a set of elliptical windows or skylights, resembling immense portholes, into the dome of the structure.

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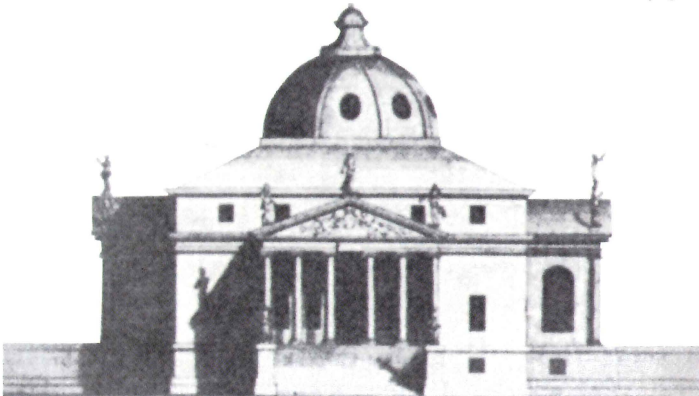


Fig. 2. Leoni's 1715-20 edition of Palladio's *Four Books* added porthole-like openings in the dome of Villa Rotonda.

Continued from page 6

"... most who have wrote on this subject, have raised nothing but Palaces, glaring in decoration and dress; while the Cottage, or plain little Villa, are passed by unregarded." Morris's book may have played an important role in promoting the fashion for the Palladian villa in America. Indeed, the first three plates in *Select Architecture* depict villas.

Battersea is part of a group of houses in Virginia and Maryland inspired by Morris's design for a villa on Plate 3 of *Select Architecture* (Fig.3). At Battersea, the resemblance is most apparent when one views the back, or north, elevation of the house, which still retains its original window arrangement. Even the attic windows on Battersea's pavilions may have been derived from Morris. The unidentified designer of Battersea merely omitted the walled courtyards of Morris's Plate 3 and moved the pavilions inward. This brought Battersea much closer in appearance to Palladio's five-part villas, suggesting that Battersea's designer had a familiarity with Palladio.

Battersea represents a shift in taste in America during the second half of the eighteenth century away from the massive, blocky houses of previous decades, derived from English Restoration houses of the 1600s, toward the more intimately scaled villa as designed by Roger Morris and represented in the patternbooks of Robert Morris. Prior to that time, the standard model for large American houses had comprised a massive central block flanked by two dependencies, often brought forward to form a courtyard. In Virginia, the Governor's Palace in Williamsburg (1715) appears to have been the initial inspiration for this arrangement. Patternbooks such as James Gibbs's *Book of Architecture* (1728) further promoted this type house.

Robert Morris's interpretation of the villa initiated a new style of Palladian house in America which was more streamlined and compact, with the entire house laid out on a single axis. Battersea, together with Brandon (1765) in Prince George County, are the two earliest surviving examples of this new Morris-style Palladianism in Virginia. The rise in popularity of the Morris-style house in America during the mid-eighteenth century coincided with the rise of the villa in England in the 1750s and appears to have been part of the same trend.

After the Revolution, the five-part Palladian villa proved to be a popular model for high-style residences in America, reaching a peak of popularity during the 1820s. During this period, five-part houses, like Homewood (begun 1801) outside Baltimore, Maryland, were built with Federal style detailing.

Colonel John Banister (1734-1788), who built Battersea, was one of Virginia's great eighteenth-century statesmen and one of Petersburg's early industrialists. One of the framers and signers of the Articles of Confederation in 1778, he became Petersburg's first mayor six years later. Battersea remained a private residence until 1985 when it was deeded to the City of Petersburg, the current owner.

The property was listed on the National Register of Historic Places in 1969 and designated as a site of national significance in 2006. The Center for Palladian Studies in America has supported community efforts to preserve and rejuvenate the endangered structure.

The five-part Palladian villa became a house type upon which decoration of any style could be applied—like icing on a cake—and remained popular as long as classical revival styles were still in vogue. By the 1840s, five-part villas were incorporating Greek Revival detailing and taking on the appearance of Greek temples. By mid-nineteenth century, the idea of the villa remained as fashionable as ever, although its Palladian associations by then were replaced with more picturesque and Romantic images of what an Italian villa should be—such as the villas of Andrew Jackson Downing. Battersea is one of the earliest progenitors of this legacy in American architecture.



Fig. 4. A tour group sponsored by the Center for Palladian Studies in America examined Battersea in 2006.

- Notes**
- 1 John Summerson, *Architecture in Britain, 1530-1830* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 9th ed 1993), p. 346.
 - 2 Giles Worsley, *Classical Architecture in Britain: The Heroic Age* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 1995), p. 229.
 - 3 Worsley, p. 113.
 - 4 Summerson, p. 339.
 - 5 Adolf K. Placzek, Forward to *Select Architecture*, 2nd ed., by Robert Morris (London: Robert Sayer, 1757; repr. ed., New York: Da Capo Press, 1973).

- Other references**
- Loth, Calder, "Palladio in Southside Virginia: Brandon and Battersea," in *Building by the Book* (Charlottesville: Center for Palladian Studies in America, 1984), p. 25.
- Naranjo-Lupold, Leslie, "New Efforts Prompt Hope for Petersburg's Battersea," *Palladiana*, vol. 1, no. 1 (Fall 2006), p. 2.

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Now an endangered structure

Petersburg's Battersea fostered Palladian villa form in America

by Christopher Novelli

The five-part massing of Battersea, the country home built by John Banister at Petersburg, Virginia, in 1768, reflected advanced new ideas in architectural design in Britain and America—namely, the rise in popularity of the villa (Fig. 1).

Battersea is one of the earliest and best preserved examples of an American Palladian villa. A novelty in England in the 1720s, the Palladian villa superseded the traditional great house as a fashionable house type in the 1750s and reached its height of popularity in America during the late 1700s and early 1800s.

The first generation of Palladian Revival architects in England frequently resorted to five-part schemes for grand country houses, inspired by Palladio's five-part villas. However, for smaller houses and villas, they usually omitted the wings and focused on just the central block.

This dichotomy began with Scottish architect Colen Campbell, who between 1715 and 1725 established a number of important new models for Palladian houses. These were of two types. The first was the great house, or "house of parade," derived from the great formal houses of the 1600s. Characterized by their long enfilades of rooms, Wanstead (1713-20) and Houghton Hall (begun 1722) exemplified this type. The second type was the villa, represented by Stourhead (c. 1721), Mereworth (1723), and Chiswick (begun 1725).¹ These represented the first generation of neo-Palladian villas and were characterized by their compact, cubic form. Since the idea of the villa was still somewhat new, they were considered subsidiary houses of the great—an occasional resort or rural retreat, not a primary residence.

Of these two models, the great house had, at first, the most success. The derivatives of Houghton and Wanstead were highly popular from the 1720s to the 1740s. However, in the

1750s these huge houses started to lose their appeal. During the same decade, the villa increasingly displaced the great house as the ideal for the seats of landed families, using as its models the villa designs of Colen Campbell, Lord Burlington, and Roger Morris. The key period for this development was the decade between 1755 and 1765. In the fourth and fifth volumes of Campbell's *Vitruvius Britannicus*, published in 1767 and 1771, the villa clearly predominates.²

Roger Morris (1695-1749) was part of the first generation of core neo-Palladian architects in Britain. Morris developed a distinctive form of neo-Palladian villa characterized by its cubic shape and pyramidal roof which derived from Palladio's villas—particularly Villa Pisani and Villa Emo.³ These two aspects were repeated at Battersea. Whitten Park (1736-39), located west of London, represented Roger Morris's typical villa plan. FIG. 2. It featured a cubic central block with a pyramidal roof, but also incorporated wings, giving it a five-part form. Devoid of columns and porticos, it represented an astylar form of Palladian expression more accessible to the common house builder.

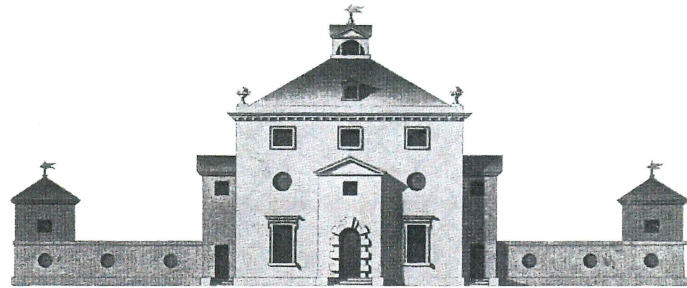


Fig. 2. Roger Morris, Design for Whitten Park (1736-39), Middlesex, England, about eight miles west of London.

Many of Roger Morris's ideas on villa design were borrowed by his kinsman, Robert Morris (c. 1702-1754), who is considered the most important theorist of the British Palladian movement and who published several patternbooks for Palladian buildings.⁴ His *Select Architecture* (1755) became one of the most influential patternbooks in the American colonies. It was one of the few available which deliberately included Palladian-style designs for small buildings.⁵ In his preface, Morris stated,

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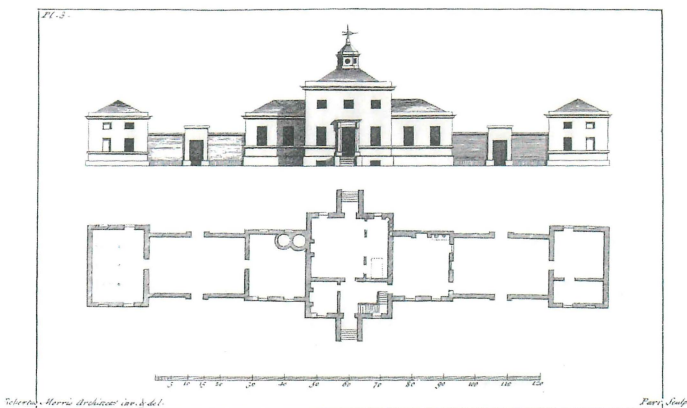


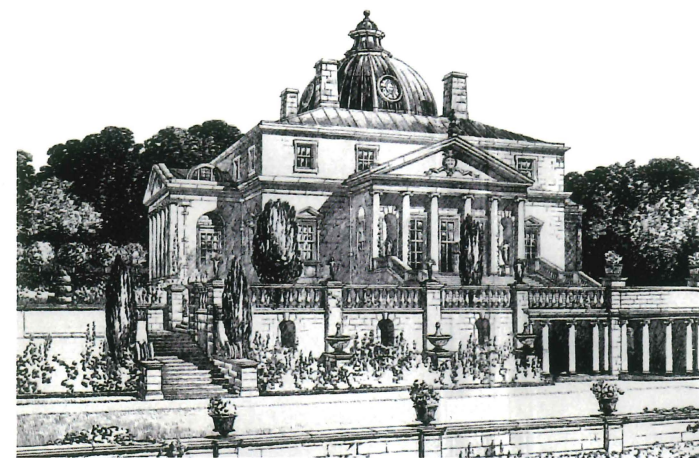
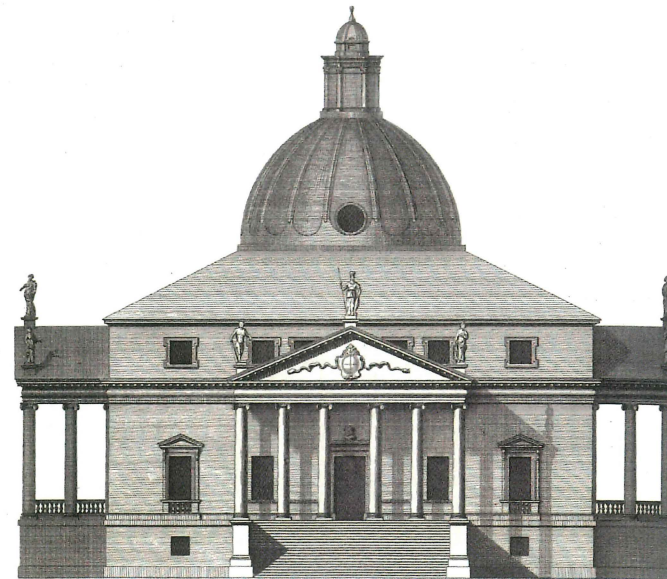
Fig. 3. Robert Morris, *Select Architecture* (London: Robert Sayer, 1757), Plate 3.

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Leoni's *Palladio* was a commercial success, encouraging him to other publishing endeavors such as a translation of the architectural treatise of Leon Battista Alberti. He brought out a second, more usable edition of his *Palladio*, in English only, in 1721, and then published a French edition at the Hague in 1726. In 1742 he produced a third English edition of his *Palladio*, now inflated with questionable 'extras' in a defensive attempt to outdo two new competing translations. The key addition was a transcription of the marginal notes which Inigo Jones had written in his own Italian copy of *Four Books*. Alas, the transcription is only a grossly erratic approximation of what Jones wrote.

Leoni's books did not gain him a flourishing career as an architect. Richard Boyle, the Third Earl of Burlington (1694-1753), not Leoni, took command of architectural reform in Britain, and Burlington loved Palladio and Jones without Leoni's self-indulgent embroidery. Leoni died a poor man, and most of his design work—country houses—is lost. Giacomo Leoni matters, not for his own buildings, but for his changes to another man's book, and for what ensued from those changes.

The sequels began with the unprecedented series of Villa Rotonda offspring which British architects designed from the 1720s onward. Of the six overt derivatives which reached



Figs. 3 and 4. Mereworth Castle (above), c. 1720-25, and Fooks Cray Place (below), 1752-55, both utilize the 'porthole window' motif which Giacomo Leoni imposed onto Palladio's design for Villa Rotonda.

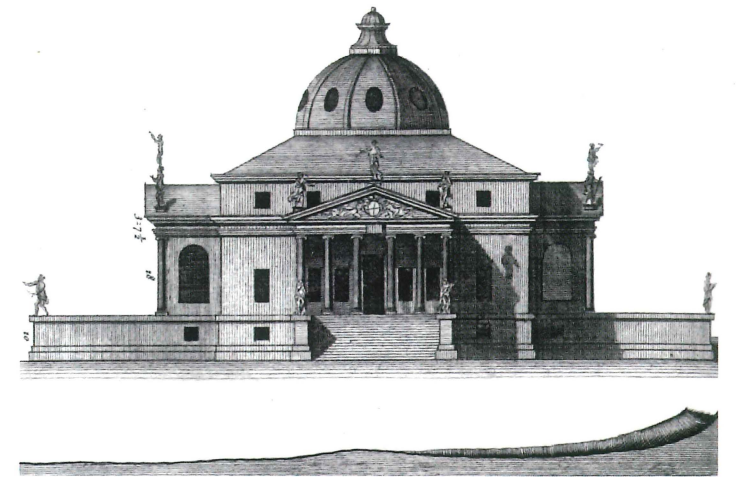


Fig. 5. In Andrea Palladio's *Architecture in Four Books* (1735) Benjamin Cole and Edward Hoppus continued the use of Leoni's 'porthole' dome.

execution, three have Leoni-inspired 'portholes' in the dome: Colen Campbell's Mereworth Castle, Kent (Fig. 3), c. 1720-25, the first of the series and one of the pinnacles of British Palladianism; a pavilion called the Belvedere Temple or Temple of the Four Winds at Castle Howard, Yorkshire, 1725-28, by Sir John Vanbrugh, the great Baroque designer who bowed to Palladianism late in his career; and Fooks Cray Place, Kent (Fig. 4), 1752-55, probably designed by Burlington's protégé Daniel Garrett. Rotonda villas are rarely very livable, but this infusion had practical consequences in the naturalizing of rotunda halls, Villa Rotonda-derived garden pavilions, and other offshoots in Britain. Influential patternbook writers on the order of James Gibbs (1682-1754) and Robert Morris (1703-54) promoted the use of these derivatives.

Palladianism was deeply a matter of books as well as buildings. The 'Villa Leoni' perforated dome traveled from one publication to another, starting with a second and much cheaper complete English *Palladio*, an amalgamation of materials meant for tradesmen and entitled *Andrea Palladio's Architecture in Four Books* (Fig. 5). Benjamin Cole (fl. 1723-67) and Edward Hoppus (d. 1739) created this concoction, which they largely pirated from Leoni, and which went into two editions (1735 and 1736). By the time that Isaac Ware (1704-66) and Lord Burlington (1694-1753) at last reproduced Palladio's Villa Rotonda plate faithfully in the purest eighteenth-century English edition of *Four Books* (1737-c. 1740), Palladianism in Britain was facing its decline. Still, British Palladianism was about to travel across the Atlantic, where another series of rotunda villas and another series of 'porthole' domes would materialize on paper and in wood or brick.

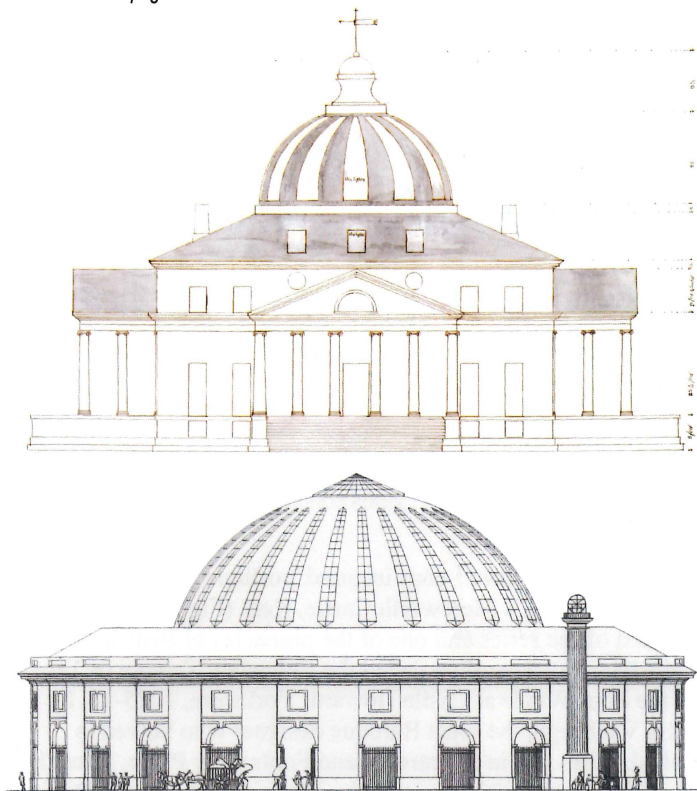
The central figure in North American Palladianism was, of course, Thomas Jefferson (1743-1826). As Winterthur's great Palladian scholar Frank H. Sommer has pointed out, Jefferson took the Leoni *Architecture*—he bought all three English editions—as his architectural Bible. (Jefferson also owned Fréart de Chambray's French translation of *Four Books*, with illustrations printed from Palladio's own woodblocks, but Jefferson never caught on to the reliability of that edition versus Leoni's.)

One might think that depending on so impure a source would have compromised the results, but instead Jefferson's exposure to the Leoni *Palladio* had remarkably fertile results. Indeed, the Italian text of Leoni's first edition may have given

Continued on page 4



Fig. 1. Battersea (1768), Petersburg, Va., south facade. The second owner, Court of Appeals Judge John Fitzhugh May, added Palladian windows and other classical detailing in the 1820s.



Figs. 6 and 7. Thomas Jefferson's unsuccessful proposal for the American president's mansion (above) continued the Leoni concept of perforating a dome with windows, but opted for strip windows like those Jefferson had admired at the Halle au Blé in Paris (below).

Jefferson the name Monticello: Palladio wrote that Villa Rotonda stands 'sopra un monticello' ('on a hillock' in Dubois' translation), and, of course, Jefferson owned Leoni's first edition which included the Italian text.

In purely architectural terms, Leoni's *Architecture of Palladio* had a vast effect on Jefferson. Determined that American public buildings should set models for his countrymen to imitate, Jefferson chose Villa Rotonda as the pattern for a magistrate's residence, and he made a series of projects for official dwellings based on that prototype. The crucial proposal is the one he submitted in the competition for the design of the president's mansion, our White House, in 1792 (Fig. 6). Jefferson adapted the project from Villa Rotonda, but he changed the openings in the dome to a kind that he had learned to like even better than the 'portholes' he thought were Palladio's. He imitated the strip skylights that the firm of Legrand and Molinos had added to the grain market or Halle au Blé in Paris in 1782-83 (Fig. 7), which had captivated him during his French stay. Jefferson had become a stickler about the correct forms for domes, but the Villa Rotonda illustrations

had taught him to accept the pierced kind, not for imitations of ancient architecture, but as part of 'modern' architecture, that is, Classical architecture as revived from the Renaissance onward.

Jefferson's White House project did not win the competition. He transferred his hopes for building a perforated dome with Halle au Blé skylights, now on a grand scale, to the Hall of Representatives at the U. S. Capitol. At the Capitol his



Fig. 8. Old Senate Chamber, U. S. Capitol, Washington, D. C.

protégé B. Henry Latrobe (1764-1820), a member of the Neoclassical Movement rather than a Palladian, created one of the greatest suites of classically inspired interiors in America, working in collaboration with Jefferson much of the time. Jefferson and Latrobe wrestled for years over the idea of a skylit dome. Faced with Latrobe's resistance to skylights on practical and aesthetic grounds, Jefferson wrote him in 1805 to ask whether the House dome could at least 'be a little lightened by windows in the stile of those of Americo's [Almerico's] house in

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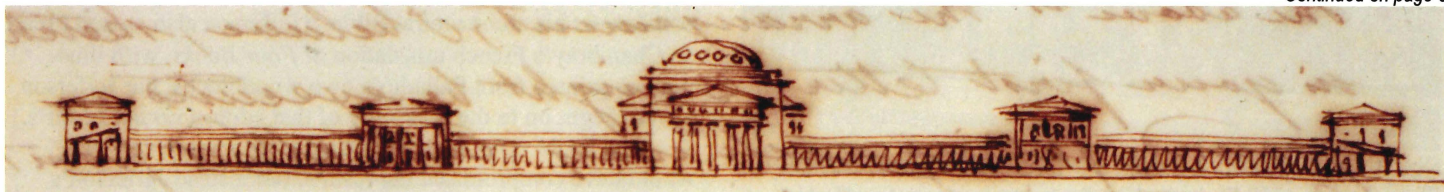


Fig. 9. B. Henry Latrobe sketch, in an 1817 letter to Jefferson, for a University of Virginia rotunda with 'porthole' windows in the dome.

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Palladio,' that is, Villa Rotonda. Neither Jefferson nor Latrobe, of course, realized that the windows were Leoni's, not Palladio's. In the end, Latrobe gave the Hall of Representatives a variation on the Halle au Blé lights (destroyed when the British burned the Capitol in 1814). To please Jefferson, Latrobe then created another perforated dome for the Senate Chamber (1808-10), and rebuilt that dome for the enlargement of the Senate (from 1816). Today the room preserves an approximation of Latrobe's intentions (Fig. 8). The round skylights are unmistakably Latrobe's variation on Leoni's skylights. We can no longer see a second, upper dome through these 'portholes,' as Latrobe intended. Still, the ravishing effect of this vault makes the room the consummate example of Leoni's influence in America.

The Jefferson-Latrobe interaction at the Capitol led to other episodes, built and unbuilt. We have space only for the masterpiece of Jeffersonian Palladianism. As is well known, in 1817 Jefferson asked Latrobe for suggestions for the design of the University of Virginia, and Latrobe recommended building a grand domed structure at the center. All Latrobe's finished drawings for the University have vanished, but a rough sketch survives in an 1817 letter to Jefferson (Fig. 9). Latrobe, although he was no admirer of Palladianism, obviously meant to please his old patron by lightening the big dome with 'windows in the stile of . . . Americo's house in Palladio.' In execution, though, Jefferson fused Latrobe's suggestion with an old idea of his own, that of building an American version of the Pantheon in Rome (c. 117-126/28), with a single skylight or oculus at the top of the dome. For Jefferson it was unthinkable to tamper with the form of the greatest ancient dome by inserting 'modern' skylights around the sides.

It might seem that, in shaping the profoundly fertile exchanges between Jefferson and Latrobe, the influence of the 'phony Leoni' dome had reached its apogee, but this influence had a future for generations. Among the further nineteenth-century manifestations, one stands out. In 1845 the city of Vicenza moved Palladio's remains to the city cemetery, the Cimitero Maggiore. Palladio's adopted town honored him by commissioning an allegorical monument (Fig. 10) from the eminent sculptor Giuseppe de Fabris (1790-1860), a papal favorite. An allegorical figure at right holds a sheet of drawings which symbolize Palladio's work. This detail tells us at once that Villa Rotonda was an established symbol of the master, but its perforated dome betrays the fact that the emblematic drawing on Palladio's tomb is not Palladio's, but Leoni's.

In the twentieth century, Leoni's *Architecture of A. Palladio* remained unchallenged until the 1950s. A striking case is Sir Banister Fletcher's *History of Architecture on the Comparative Method*, a venerable reference book first published in London in 1896. For at least fourteen editions (1924-1996) it has featured an illustration of Villa Rotonda taken from Leoni, complete with portholes, and labeled 'as designed.' Leoni's presumptuous elaboration on Palladio has been advanced to the dignity of being Palladio's original conception!

Fletcher's editors have had good company. Fiske Kimball, one of the founders of scholarly architectural history in the United States, swallowed Leoni whole in his seminal study, *Thomas Jefferson, Architect* (1916), and elsewhere. Hugh Morrison did the same in *Early American Architecture* (1952), the book that for many years remained the indispensable survey of its topic.

The turnabout in understanding Leoni came as part of the work of one of the greatest of all architectural historians, Rudolf Wittkower. In 1954, in the journal *Arte Veneta*, Wittkower exposed Leoni's *Palladio* for what it is, observing that 'throughout his edition Leoni had given Palladio's designs a Baroque flavour.' Wittkower contented himself, however, with giving only one illustration of Leoni's alterations and did not specifically mention Leoni's reworking of the Villa Rotonda plates.

With the modern renewal of classically inspired architecture, dazzling manifestations of the perforated dome, such as Henbury Hall, Cheshire (1984-87), designed by Julian Bicknell, Felix Kelly and Sebastian de Ferranti, underscore a point. Leoni may have been an unappetizing character, and he certainly was no Palladian purist, but his alterations to the illustrations in *Four Books* have at times engendered some truly beautiful results in the work of others.



Fig. 10. The influence of Leoni on Palladio's legacy extends even to Palladio's own tomb monument (1845), where 'porthole' windows lurk.

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