The Fall 2, 2017, photograph

House of Virtues: Domesticity, Corporeality, and Performativity

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Architecture can be read as a space of action – a space that reaches its realization through people's actions. An aesthetic consideration of the architectural space as a mere visual object severs it from the main meaning for which it was designed, namely, action. This notion is manifested in the distinction between "space" and "place": while "place" refers to the physical structure and its characteristics, "space" holds the potential for relation and a personal and interpersonal experience. This is the origin of the political significance of space as an expression of diverging fields of power. The space embodies the potential for action, an expression of the dynamics between the open and closed, the empty and full.[1]

As a performance artist, I am aware that every action, even static acts of duration like being present, sleeping, or looking, are influenced by and at the same time affect the structure of the space, simultaneously shaped by it and shaping it. The blueprint of movement and the sequence of actions that I choose to carry out in space as a performance artist are formulated as the counterpart of the architectural blueprint: performance as the delineation of space, as demarcation, the creation of a relational space. I intervene in the space, work with it, and at times against it. An action in space, an action as projection (looking at the landscape through a window, for example), a static or dynamic action, a fixing, repetitive, disjointed, impulsive, steady, precarious action... in contrast with the prevalent space-time discourse, the visual body embeds a rhythm, temperament, and relation in the physical place, imbuing it with qualities and distinguishing it.

[1] Space stretches between the walls of an element or between elements, meaning, it is defined by the physical objects that demarcate it. Consequently, we can identify a dialectical tension between the physical, built object and the empty space. The void, by its very nature, summons an action or event. See Yi-Fu Tuan, *Space and Place: The Perspective of Experience* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2001 1977), 6.

Villa Almerico Capra La Rotonda has been on my mind – or rather, has been preying on my mind – for the last four years. I could not stay indifferent to the tensions between the ideals manifested in Renaissance architecture, and most of all in the spatial ideas of the architect of the Villa, Andrea Palladio, and instances of quotidian life. How can one live in an Idea of a house? Fall in love, raise children, feel pain, experience frustration, and so on. The radical nature of performance challenged the complete and the harmonious. In my second visit to Vicenza, I realized that the aspiration for absolute order is not complete without the impulse to undermine and unravel it, even more so for me as an Israeli, for whom the visual and cultural values based on the Classical orders are so foreign. Without any advance planning, I found myself walking, with a noticeable limp, along the paths of the garden, slumping my body as though falling on the staircase in front of the grand building, laying between the columns of the portico[2] and serving as the human connector to the stone building.

The ideal space of Villa La Rotonda has become the foundation for my piece as an act of mediation between the Ideal and the earthly, the intimate body and the symbolic space, the private body and the public space, or in other words – La Rotonda and me.

Palladio's La Rotonda, which is based on the principle of a circle within a square (a straight cross versus a diagonal cross), confers on the Palladian villa aesthetic values of perfection and harmonious proportions, resonating the idea of the Vitruvian Man.[4] The analogy between the human body and basic geometrical shapes is rooted in the assumed existence of an intrinsic relationship between man and his architectural space. The human body is presented in this canon in two superimposed positions, symmetrically enclosed by a square (straight cross) and a circle (diagonal cross).

The dynamics of La Rotonda's interior is influenced by the shape of the (straight) Greek cross, which divides La Rotonda's main story, the *piano nobile*, into four large guest rooms and a round space at their center. The four entrances face East, South, West, and North accordingly, establishing the fundamental experience of the building as a crossroads that facilitates orientation and directionality.[4] Orientation also embodies a potential for action, including the monitoring and regulation of the mansion's space. In other words, orientation establishes affinity between the interior of the house and its surroundings.

The experience of looking from the inside villa out is unparalleled. When the four entrance doors to La Rotonda are open, the bright light and the surrounding landscape pour into the inner round space. The four "landscapes" can be seen from every direction. Framed by the same shape and size, they form an interrupted panorama. And so, in order to look at them, the viewer has to spin around like the hands of a clock; he finds himself standing at the heart of a clock-like space-time mechanism. Jonathan Shohet Gluzberg and I have tried to convey this experience with the panoramic video projected in the "inner rotunda" of the exhibition space.

In the 1960s, philosopher Otto Friedrich Bollnow coined the term "space of action" for the space people use when they perform significant actions like working or resting.[5] Bollnow also ascribes particular importance to directionality. Building on Aristotle's perception of directionality, he argues that directionality is perceived from the perspective of the standing, i.e. immobile, man. Even when one spins around, the space around him (spatial axis) remains fixed, as well as the vertical axis, which in La Rotonda's case is represented by the rays of light that enter through the round opening at the top of the dome that crowns Villa La Rotonda – the oculus. This situation, which places man at the center of the various landscape prisms that unfold around him, requires a symbolic cartographic perspective.

The Renaissance man, the ideal well-proportioned man, stands at the center of the universe – and in this case, at the center of the house – like a microcosm of creation. The plan of the house is a schematic and harmonious abstraction of the relationship between the self and the world, like a road map of sorts.[6] Four "roads" unfold from the center of the house towards the surrounding space. Bollnow conceived the various possibilities for action facing man as expressions of the choice of a path. As mentioned above, the choice of a landscape also represents an act of grasping, controlling, or owning the subject of our gaze. The choice to act in a certain direction is imbued, then, with a moral value:

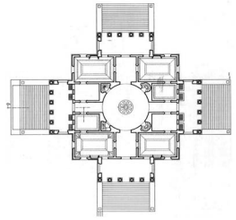
> Movement on one's way acquires at the same time a directly moral character, and from this there immediately arises the figurative meaning. [...] here man must look around himself in order to find his true path. And it is only here that the full extent in width of the terrain becomes apparent [...] for the journey is not some temporary or occasional resting place, but describes a basic situation, perhaps the basic situation of man in the world, and thus becomes one of the great primal symbols of human life, which pervades its whole interpretation to such an extent that one can hardly draw a line between its "literal" and "figurative" meanings. Life is perceived as a life long journey and man as a traveler on this journey, a "homo viator."[7]

[2] A colonnade or covered ambulatory at the entrance of a building.

[3] In his treatise on architecture, *De Architectura*, Vitruvius stated that the plan of a temple is based on proportions, i.e., a given ratio between the components and the whole, and a balance between the "organs" of the temple and the organs of the human body. Vitruvius also set the canon on which Leonardo da Vinci would base his famous drawing, *The Vitruvian Man*, 1500 years later (1490).

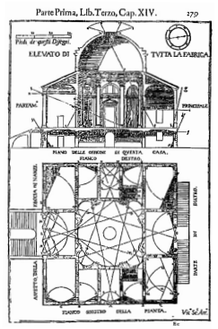
[4] The term "orientation" is derived from the relation of a certain location to the east, i.e. the orient. Today it is associated with the north, meaning with the compass, which is derived from the Latin *compassus*, meaning to walk in a steady pace, usually the pace of a horse, or measure with paces.

[5] Otto Friedrich Bollnow, *Human Space* (London: Hyphen Press, 2011), 173.

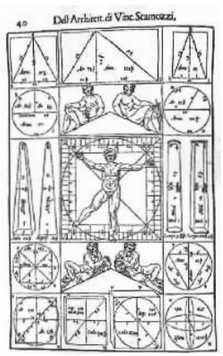


Andrea Palladio, **Villa Capra La Rotonda**, floor plan, 1567

[6] This anthropocentric approach was typical of ancient maps, in which we find an analogy between the world and the human body (for example, Bünting Clover *Leaf Map* (1585) where Jerusalem is depicted as the "navel of the world" – *Umbilicus Mundi*). This thought emerged in the Neoplatonist humanistic context in Renaissance Italy, and sees man as the central element that influences his surroundings.



Vincenzo Scamozzi
Rocca Pisana, section and plan, 1615



Vincenzo Scamozzi
Anthropomorphic drawing, 1615

Like the architectural structure and the landscape, light also carries a conceptual function and symbolic value (beyond its significance as a means for illuminating and heating the interior of the house). The decision to illuminate the center of La Rotonda with the oculus creates a sense of grandeur, by strengthening the vertical axis connecting heaven and earth. Since the word *oculus* is derived from the Latin for "eye," we can attach to the light pouring from above the status of divine providence.

Already in his lifetime, Palladio's creation was subjected to criticism, particularly the limited light that could come into center of the building. Eight years after the construction of La Rotonda began (1567) and before it was completed, Palladio's student and follower, the architect Vincenzo Scamozzi, started working on a separate and "revised" version of Villa La Rotonda in the city of Lonigo – 28 km from Vicenza.[8]

While Scamozzi left in Villa Rocca Pisana (1576) only one portico façade, he widened the openings on the four sides of the building, as well as the diameter of the oculus. The drawing on the left, printed in Scamozzi's book *L'Idea della Architettura Universale* (1615), published a year before the architect's death, illustrates the light distribution throughout the building.

Another plate portrayed a man at the center of the rotunda, like an average of the two poses of the Vitruvian Man. In Scamozzi's version, the circle and the square merge. We can also see the rays of light as analogous to the human figure, like a five-pointed star (pentagram). This correspondence between the building and the human body continues, then, to serve as a source of inspiration for Scamozzi as well, demonstrating the prominence of anthropomorphic architecture in High Renaissance, and the profound Ideal link between the image of the house and the human body.

Beyond the functional aspect of letting light in, the expansion of the openings in Scamozzi's building demonstrates the meaning of the relationship between the inside and the outside of the house. The degree of the building's isolation and condescension, or alternately, its assimilation in its environs, introduces the issue of privacy and publicness. It is worth remembering that real intimacy was nonexistent in the 16th century, even in the homes of Renaissance nobility, and the line between the private and the public was not absolute.[9] Various private functions took place in the public space. Openings, particularly doors, had a crucial role in light of the conflict of interests between the need to protect the inside of the house and the need to expose the house to light, warmth, public conduct, and spatial domination.

[7] Bollnow, 51-52.

[8] Scamozzi inherited from his master several projects whose construction was not completed, including Villa Capra La Rotonda and Teatro Olimpico.

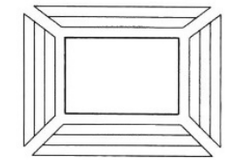
[9] Roger Chartier, *A History of Private Life – Passions of the Renaissance* vol. 3 (Cambridge and London: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1989), 414.

I wish to argue that Villa La Rotonda is a scenaric space. Scenario is the sequence of actions that form an event or social situation, hence, social, state, and religious rituals, including everyday quotidian ceremonies, which took place in the manor house on the hill, were exposed for all to see. Private relationships were entwined with public associations, and were presented, if only partially, on the "stage" of La Rotonda. James Ackerman, a leading scholar of Renaissance architecture, wrote: "If the site is, in Palladio's words, a theatre, the Rotonda is an actor of sorts, elegantly strutting its role on a podium, costumed in the paraphernalia of a glorious past."[10]

The space in which the event takes place has a crucial influence on the mode of operation, the ritual, the power relations, the degree of privacy, the public roles/status of the protagonists, etc. Due to its geographical attributes, we can equate Villa La Rotonda with the stage of an arena stage, which one can enter and exit from all four directions.[11] Stages of this kind were used in rituals in the distant past, for instance the Mesopotamian ziggurats[12] or elevated platforms in Teotihuacán, Mexico.

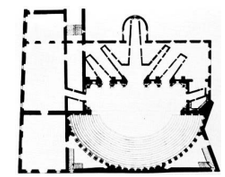
The centrality and transparency of a space of action of this kind imbue it with a ritualistic status of a communal action in which the "backstage" of the ceremony is exposed to the gaze of the viewers. While the Palladian house may be closed to the outside gaze, due to its prominence in the landscape, and opening the doors only during formal receptions, ceremonies, and banquets, every action that takes place in it is characterized as a public event, if not a spectacle.

The dynamics between the outside and the inside gains a surprising and fascinating expression in the design of another Palladian building – Teatro Olimpico (Olympic Theater, 1580-1585). Located in Vicenza not far from Villa La Rotonda, Teatro Olimpico is the first ever indoor theater in the world. Palladio chose to base the stage and hall on two Roman theaters whose ruins still stand in the cities of Pula and Verona. The front of the stage in fact represents a city square (piazza) in front of the façade of a palazzo, in which five gates open to the city streets. Palladio died before he could complete this project, which was also finished by Scamozzi. He was the one responsible for the perspectival design of the inner streets, which become smaller as they converge into one distant vanishing point. I see the conceptual reversal between the outside (piazza) and the inside (theater hall) as one that accompanies the ambivalence of demarcating the public space and the private space. The Greek theater faced the landscape, representing faith in the gods and the forces of nature, while the Roman theater placed the façade of the



Arena Stage, schematic plan

Ziggurat, 10th century BCE



Andrea Palladio
Teatro Olimpico, 1580 – 1585

[11] James S. Ackerman, *Palladio* (London: Penguin Books, 1966 [1991]), 73.

[12] In an arena stage, the entrances and exits are usually on the sides of the stage, and not the center of each side.

palace on stage, shifting focus from nature to man. Setting the backdrop of a city inside the theater creates a fundamental reversal between the inside and the outside. The public square – a public space *par excellence* – is now used as an intimate stage for portraying private acts, exposing emotions, and expressing personal desires. In the Renaissance theater, the private becomes a public matter – a testament to the shift in the perception of social and political power centers. While this spatial change takes place on stage, it nevertheless embodies a far-reaching political understanding.

Stately homes served as a stage for the drama of life, salons of cultural and social conduct. The order of actions in a building like La Rotonda was shaped hierarchically due to its centralist structure. The architectural planning gives the rotunda at the heart of the house a central social role. Thus for example, Palladio's Villa Capra La Rotonda was chosen as the location for shooting Joseph Losey's 1979 film *Don Giovani*, based on Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart's opera. Central scenes like the banquet scene and the ballroom scene take place at the center of the villa, while the façade of the building serves as the backdrop for many other scenes. Similarly, the rotunda of Lubostron Palace in Poland was declared a public building, and now serves as a regional cultural center, in which gatherings for lectures or concerts take place in the central, round space.

As I proposed in the introduction, architecture should be read as a space of action *space in actu*. Here I join Wolfgang Meisenheimer's call to architects to shape the buildings they plan with the body and action in mind. While his appeal is phrased as a futuristic manifesto,[13] it seems that we can trace its roots all the way to the legacy of Renaissance architecture. To paraphrase the three unities of Aristotle poetics – unity of action, unity of time, unity of place – here we have the unity of action, space, and body.

[13] "Architecture, providing the constructed room, must decisively take up the body reference as a perceptual reference and as a reference for activity in its structure." Wolfgang Meisenheimer, "Body Scheme and Conception of the World," in: Conrads Ulrich (ed(, Body and Building (Berlin: Bertelsmann Fachzeitschrifted GmbH, Daidalos, 1992), 55