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Art History 202

14 April 2015

Once in a Blue Moon: Andrea Palladio's Critique of the Royal Crescent

Com'e' possibile? How can I, Andrea Palladio, be standing before this Britannic edifice that



Figure 1: The Royal Crescent - Source: Google Images

goes by the name of “Royal Crescent”? It was only last night that I was reminiscing about the *Teatro Olimpico* (1580-1585) and *Villa Capra* (1566-1571) under the crescent moon in Vicenza, Italy! I may be in this transposition of time, but viewing the Royal Crescent has made this cryptic situation most agreeable. The simplicity of the façade and

its approach to Classicism impressed me. Its plain basement story supports one-hundred-and-fourteen enormous engaged Ionic columns that rise from the *piano nobile* for two stories before being crowned by an entablature (Fig. 1). The columns on either side of the central bay is doubled to reinforce an emphasis on the center (Avery 20) (Fig. 2). *Bravo!* The architect, John Wood the Younger (1728-1782), has designed in accordance to what I have preached in the



Figure 2: The Royal Crescent – Source: Google Images



Figure 3: Villa Barbaro – Source: Google Images

second book of *Quattro libri dell'architettura*.¹ I strive to design villas as one organized entity dominated by an eye-drawing center and two

flanking symmetrical wings. Similar to my *Villa Barbaro* (c. 1560) (Fig. 3), the Royal Crescent features a central bay with coupled columns on either side to induce a “palace” front (Avery 17). An imperfection in this practically perfect design is that beyond the uniform terrace and front façade, the row of thirty terraced homes feature varied internal arrangements. I praise Wood the Younger whose intuition led him to take precautions and present strict subleases to potential homebuyers. The subleases contained standard clauses to ensure that the Royal Crescent would not “at any time or times afterwards be ever altered or varied” but allowed for one to “cleanse and tone down the stonework on the outside” in order for “the whole building ... be of one color” (Forsyth 148). I applaud his effort to obtain the simple and uniform exterior albeit elaborate and variable interiors.

The application of Classical architecture incorporated into the design of a uniform façade is reminiscent of the theater. In fact, the Royal Crescent reminds me of *Teatro Olimpico* (Fig. 4). Because the edifice had originally been *Castello del Territorio*, I had to accommodate its wide shallow space in order to fit the stage of the theater. To do so, I flattened the semicircular seating area of a Roman theater into the shape of an ellipse. *E guarda!* Look at the half-ellipse arrangement of the Royal Crescent – it evokes the shape of the crescent moon *and* of half of *il Colosseo*! In Leon Battista Alberti’s architectural treatise *De re aedificatoria* (1452), he even points out that

theaters take “the shape of a moon in its decrease”.² In addition, the grandeur of the one-hundred-and-fourteen engaged Ionic columns lends to an even more explicit suggestion of the theater. The Royal Crescent *theatrically* embraces its elevated site and commands a view

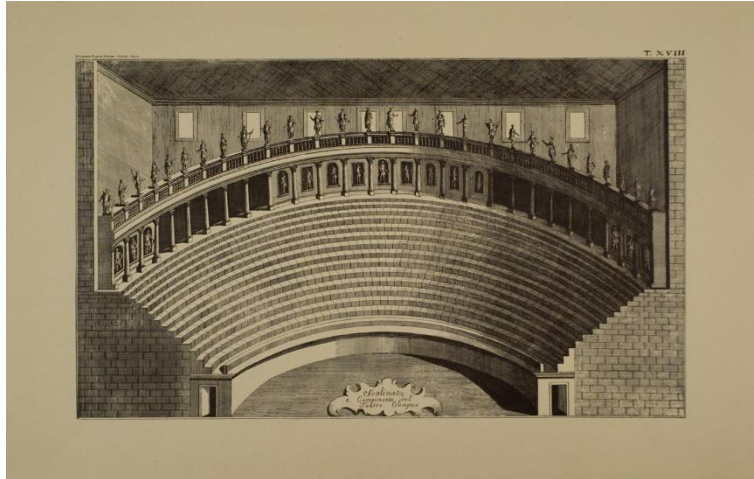


Figure 4: Teatro Olimpico – Source: Google Images

of – as if it were a stage set - the landscape beyond (Forsyth 147). Although the structure of the Royal Crescent resembles that of *Teatro Olimpico*, its relation to the site echoes that of the *Villa Capra* (Fig. 5). I designed the latter in order for it to exhibit a sense of perfect harmony with the landscape by allowing each façade to complement the surrounding asymmetrical landscape and topography. In a similar manner, the surrounding landscape of the Royal Crescent has modified



Figure 5: Villa Capra – Source: Google Images

its design (Green 146). Its plan permits communication between the urban building and the “nature unadorned” by providing a *rus in urbe*: a rural view for each resident of the Royal Crescent (Forsyth 19).

My disappointment in the discrepancy between the uniform exterior and the variable interior is further provoked by the anachronistic element of Druidic references in the Ancient Roman architecture. Although Leon Battista Alberti drew a connection between the crescent moon and the architectural plan of a theater, one could argue that the Royal Crescent's circle of homes verges on the shape of the new moon (Fig. 6), which is often associated with pagan worship. If one believes this theory as relevant, then even the name of the Britannic edifice has Druidic allusions: *Royal Crescent!* This is certainly plausible considering that the father of the Royal Crescent's architect, John Wood the Elder (1704-1754) discussed this architectural feature in *The Essay Towards a Description of Bath* (1742).³ As a sixteenth-century Italian, I cannot discredit John Wood the Younger's decision to express Druidic motifs. In fact, I appreciate the Britannic architect's attempt to revive the splendor of a Roman city in addition to glorifying British antiquity. Bath, after all, may have roots as a *pre-Roman* city ruled by King Bladud, the mythical founder of Bath (Forsyth 18). For this reason, I respect the architect's decisions in regards to the design of the Royal Crescent. As an Italian, I draw inspiration from Ancient Rome; as an Englishman, Wood the Younger draws inspiration from Ancient Bath. Nevertheless, he rightfully did not disregard the fundamental tenets of Classicism. Actually, the resemblance between the Britannic architecture and my own is so prominent that I cannot help but want to classify it as "Palladian"... *che ne dici?*



Figure 6: The Royal Crescent – Source: Google Images

Endnotes

1. Andrea Palladio, *The Four Books on Architecture*, (North Chelmsford: Courier Corporation, 2013) available at <https://books.google.com/books?isbn=0486132927>
2. Michael Forsyth, *Bath*, (New Haven: Yale UP, 2003) 147; Leon Battista Albert, *On the Art of Building in Ten Books*, (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1991), available at <https://books.google.com/books?isbn=026251060X>
3. Michael Forsyth, *Bath*, (New Haven: Yale UP, 2003) 18; John Wood, *An Essay Towards a Description of Bath*, (Bath: W. Frederick, 1742), available at <https://books.google.com/books?id=9C9cAAAAQAAJ>

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