

Erasing Invisibility: The History and Theory Program at the University of Houston

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*Projects for the Biennale
Palmanova Project from Mark
Schneider's studio, University of
Houston. From top to bottom:
"Palmanova Walking Tour: A
Helpful Story," Martin B. Axe;
"Tondo in Winter," collage drawing
toward the "Fountain of
Reflection," Yoshinobu Yokono; "A
Theater to Face the Cut," Mark
Cronander. Top, right: "A Clock for
Palmanova," Mackombo Omoile.
Upper right: "Fountain of
Reflection," Yoshinobu Yokono*

Tolstoy was wrong in complaining about his wife; she rendered him some services. A woman is always useful to a novelist, even to a philosopher. Nietzsche used to bless Xanthippe who was helpful to Socrates; she forced him to stay in the street where he discovered so many things. - Jacques Chardonne (Eva, p. 71)

The graduate history and theory program at the University of Houston's College of Architecture is a studio-based investigation which tries to understand the terms under which architecture as theater for poetic dwelling can be extracted from the existing milieu of urban Houston.¹ Supporting seminar courses are given in architectural criticism, the phenomenology of architecture, and the history of Western thought and architecture from Heraclitus to the present.

The studio program is a sequence of projects aiming, in the first instance, to make *revisible* that part of Houston which is not normally seen. In this project, it seeks to engage all of those who are seriously interested in the question of dwelling. Historically, it would appear that the words "landscape" and "country" had a negative connotation. The etymology of the French word "*paysage*" (as compared to "passage") can reinvoke the question of whether the landscape is "mere stuff" to be got through, or a *place* in its own right. Historically, the founding of a city would appear to have been lived and understood as a replication of the original, cosmogenic act - the setting aside of a sacred place or cosmos for dwelling in the midst of chaos, or, perhaps, country. In the end it therefore becomes necessary to ask the question about the ground of dwelling.

What perhaps remains is the task of finding the most helpful story. Today, one such story reports that the expressways, ghettos, industrial districts, and waste areas of Houston are in fact a kind of

chaos in the midst of which isolated pockets of civilization or cosmos occur. City planning then becomes an endless project of annexing chaos by converting it into cosmos through aesthetic beautification. But it would seem that there are never enough trees. Implicit in this strategy would seem to be the view that the underside of the city is to remain unseen, like the genitals of an immodest statue.

The program for the history and theory studio aims to investigate with clinical precision what may be left out when the strategy of erasing the undesirable is taken as the norm in the design of cities. Da Vinci already has taught us that such investigations need not amount to dwelling in the macabre, even when they show things rather unlearned. In the *Notebooks* we read: "When you look at a wall spotted with stains or with a mixture of stones, if you have to devise some scenes, you may discover a resemblance to various landscapes beautified with mountains, ruins, rocks, trees, plains, wide valleys, and hills in various arrangements, or again you may see battles and figures in action; or strange faces and costumes, and an endless variety of objects which you could reduce to complete and well-drawn forms."² Thus it becomes possible to ask where and how building might regain what Merleau-Ponty called the "full weight and thickness of life," so that it ceases to be a decorated program - a short answer to a cerebral hydrolics problem. Considered from this point of view, the task of architectural understanding becomes one of inspecting for leakage the cracks and stains which are normally considered closed to inquiry in the search for cosmos.

In Vitruvius, it is possible to hear an answer to this question in his explanation of the origin of the Corinthian capital:

Now the first invention of that capital is related to have happened thus. A girl, a

*native of Corinth, already of the age to be married, was attacked by disease and died. After her funeral, the goblets which delighted her when living were put together in a basket by her nurse, carried to the monument, and placed on the top. That they might remain longer, exposed as they were to the weather, she covered the basket with a tile. As it happened, the basket was placed on the root of an acanthus. Meanwhile, about spring time, the root of the acanthus, being pressed down in the middle by the weight, put forth leaves and shoots. The shoots grew up the sides of the basket, and, being pressed down at the angles by the force of the weight of the tile, were compelled to form the curves of volutes at the extreme parts. Then Callimachus, who for the elegance and refinement of his marble carving was nick-named *catatechnos* by the Athenians, was passing the monument, perceived the basket, and the young leaves growing up. Pleased with the style and novelty of the grouping, he made columns for the Corinthians on this model and fixed the proportions.³*

This is perhaps a story with no basis in fact. But could it be that to ask whether it is true is to miss the point? Vitruvius presents a *historia*, the word for which, in Latin, still meant an *enquiry*, even as late as Alberti.⁴ The goal and project was self-understanding, aided and promoted by a helpful story. Could it be that what Vitruvius tells us about the origin of the Corinthian column is not a fact but a helpful story? And, could it be that the story is helpful, in the end, because it enables us to catch a glimpse of what it is, or was, to be an architect? According to the story, Callimachus was called a *catatechnos* by the Greeks. In Greek, an architect is an *architecton*; as we say, a master-builder or chief-artificer. But how far do these translations record the actual *idea* or *intention* of the word as it was lived by the Greeks? This is a question we could ask, not to find out just what the Greeks thought, but to find out what is thinkable, above all, for ourselves. In Greek, the word for "architect" is "*architecton*." To be a *technon* is to have *techne*, or "know how." The *technon* knows how to do it, whether to be a shoemaker or a maker of some other kind. In Greek, the prefix *cata* means "down from the highest." Thus the *cata-technon* is someone who has the know-how to bring something forth from the highest or most primordial source.

Like da Vinci and Callimachus, we in the history and theory program have found in the mimetic act of drawing a way of making *revisible*, out of the chaos of the discarded ordinary, a weight and thickness which remains inaccessible to those who vainly struggle to make something out of nothing. Such attempts always amount to a challenging-forth rather than to a bringing-forth or husbanding-forth, as Heidegger calls it in "Building, Dwelling, Thinking,"⁵ for they always pretend to set the terms under which an object may appear. This is the technological mentality. Drawing, on the other hand, if it is to be truly that and not mere "graphics," which is also a form of "challenging-forth," requires a submission to the object - a surrender of control to its whimsy and seduction. In this way architecture begins in a true phenomenology and is thus also an ontology - a making visible of *what there is* - and is thus a true *mimesis* rather than a snapshot.⁶ This is why the studio work begins with drawing as a search for "thickness."

Yet that making which is truly a *making* requires a transformation of what is extracted by drawing from life. The work shown here is representative in various ways of this process of extraction and transformation as it was undertaken for the Palmanova project of the 1985 Venice Biennale Competition. The basic strategy for what developed as a joint submission was that any significant intervention for the city of Palmanova was acceptable, regardless of scale. In an age where the meter-scale pretends to measure all, the *lived scale* might even remain ambiguous. Is the "real" clock for Palmanova 300 feet in diameter, or is it just the working model itself - a thing to be placed in a non-existent, city museum in order to tell time in a different way, which is, perhaps, more telling? Is the balloon ride from Venice to Palmanova real or imaginary? In which form would it show us more

about ourselves? In which form would it be more profoundly poetic? A water fountain is made which the architect wants to be 20 feet high; but can it be so? Once the thought is taken seriously that what has been made already sets its own scale, quite often in spite of what is desired, the scale is set free to become the reality which is found last or merely surrendered to in exhaustion. These projects thus become a way of asking about the price of closing the gap between what has actually been made and what is merely planned by means of a risky venture and prediction grounded somewhere in the nebulous zone between a wish and a hope.

The several interventions are grounded in a guidebook for the city of Palmanova. The guidebook plays the role of a *historia* (a helpful story) rather than a mere guide to the history of the city. The book interweaves fact and fiction in order to make the sleepy town of Palmanova a visible object once again for its 2,000 inhabitants and the future tourists who will visit it. Could this also be a form of urban renewal? Could it be a form of urban renewal which has about it the additional virtue of modesty, in that it does not presume either to know "all of the facts," or to impose upon the city a "foreign" architecture from "other lands and other customs?" These were the questions we began with in trying to understand how to approach the project. We could not visit the "site;" above all, even if we had, we could not have presumed to have lived there as if "to the manor born." Upon what genius or form of life can one presume to ground an international competition entry? We chose the form of life called the *story* because, today, perhaps it alone remains "international." It cannot be denied that Chaucer, Dante, and Shakespeare still speak to us today from a greater distance than Palmanova. And if they do so it is because they tell us a story which is worth reliving like the myth of Oedipus.

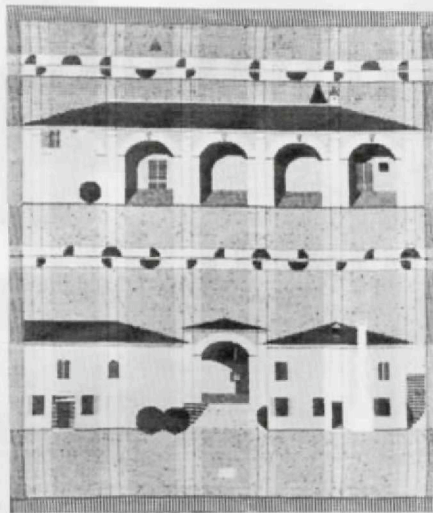
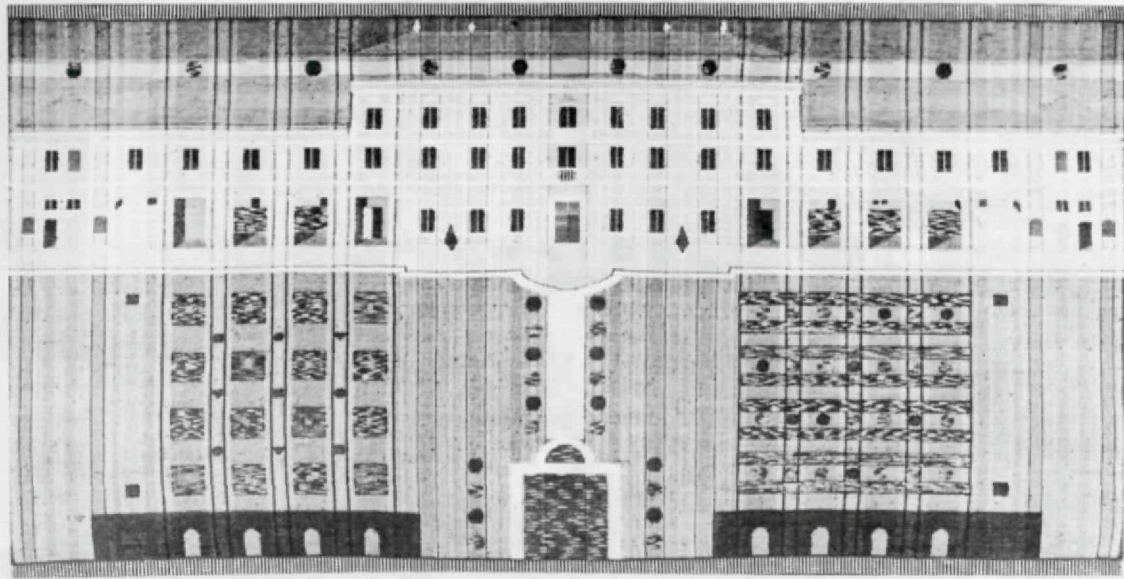
Our aim was to make the guidebook and projects for Palmanova a bringing-forth rather than a challenging-forth. The guidebook invites the tourist or visitor to submit to a story and an artifact, both of which perhaps merge into a single artifact which turns the city into a theater once again - a theater in which the fundamental project of life as self-understanding is played out in all its variations, vagaries, and vicissitudes, like a ticking clock in search of a *time* to tell. At work is always the principle of theater - the suspension of disbelief - the involuntary submission to the story as a thing to be lived through by catharsis or abreaction, through which something more than the predictable becomes available for living.

Theory is thus fundamentally an inquiry into the relation between building and being - a poiesis of action and action - a making of the as yet unmakeable and a saying of the as yet unsayable. And this would be the task of thinking at the end of philosophy, where the comet of metaphysics reaches its *epoché* in the quest for certainty, somewhere between the vacuum and the stars.

History, if it would be *history*, might then be asked for its account of the progressive erasure of the artifact. Could it be that what is truly history must either help erase the invisibility of the object or die with metaphysics as a past not fit for the present? If the thunderbolt of Zeus turned out not to be the one that split the roof of the Erechtheion on the acropolis at Athens, would it matter? Suppose it turned out to be the Trident of Poseidon. Before both, the artifact stands mute, speaking all the while of something these "facts" seem unable to contravene. Reversing Wolfgang Köhler, it thus becomes possible to ask for the place of facts in a world of values. ■

Notes

- 1 See Frances A. Yates, *Theatre of the World*, Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1969.
- 2 Leonardo da Vinci, *Notebooks*, Ms. 23, B.N. 22 V.
- 3 Vitruvius, *The Ten Books on Architecture*, New York, Dover Press, 1960, 104.
- 4 Leon Battista Alberti, *De Pictura*, London, Phaidon, 1972, 99.
- 5 Martin Heidegger, "The Question Concerning Technology," *Basic Writings*, New York, Harper, 1977, 296.
- 6 John Ruskin, *The Elements of Drawing*, New York, Dover Press, 1971, 25.



Top and left: *Silk and wool tapestries of the Villa Farsetti, 1985, Laura Nicholson, weaver.* Above, *Villa Farsetti, view of the villa and park, 1833 (Drawing by A. Lazzari)*

Houston at the Venice Biennale

"The Biennale," we wrote in the quadriennial program presented to the Board of Directors at the beginning of the present quadrennium, "has in its nature a double cultural vocation: one that originates from the very unusual quality of its territorial emplacement and one that rises from the historical role it has developed (and is declared in its statute), operating on a worldwide scene through an organization just about unique in its kind, that involves, in its cultural management, a great number of nations from the whole world." Internationality and "Venetianity" were thus placed at the base of the work in this quadrennium as an aim to reach, not only through alternation, but also through a synthesis that could represent the great contradiction of Venice, a floating raft on which is perpetuated the myth of a courageous community that has challenged the world and time with weapons of beauty that have helped put in communication and sometimes united opposed parts of the earth. Venice, in fact, is the protagonist of this exhibition... for one whole season Venice becomes, thanks to the Biennale, the capital of projectual hope. - Paolo Portoghesi, "The Projectual Offering," introduction to the *Third International Exhibition of Architecture of The Biennale di Venezia*.

Nine projects by Houston architects and artists were selected for exhibition in the Third Biennale International Exhibition of Architecture this summer. Responding to chairman Aldo Rossi's "thin work-program" to create designs and interpretations for 10 historical sites in and around Venice, over 1,300 architects

and artists from around the world submitted projects this year. Judges Aldo Rossi, Sandro Benedetti, Gianfranco Caniggia, Claudio d'Amato, Guglielmo de Angelis D'Orsat, Rafael Moneo, Werner Oeschlin, and Gino Valle had the Herculean task of sorting through the entries, making an initial selection of 500 projects for viewing. From these, 150 were displayed in the Pavilions of the Giardini di Castelli, the permanent exhibition space for the Venice Biennale.

Tapestry artist Laura Nicholson's submission of nine wool tapestries depicting a poetic reconstruction of the Villa Farsetti won a prestigious Stone Lion, one of 14 projects honored with this highest award.

Works from the studios of three faculty members at the University of Houston's College of Architecture also were selected for display. Projects from Ben Nicholson's studio undertook a transformation of the Rialto Market in Venice. William Taylor and his students worked on schemes for the Romeo and Giulietta castles and the Accademia Bridge. Mark Schneider's studio submitted a group of projects reinterpreting elements of the Renaissance plan for the ideal, fortified city of Palmanova.

Taylor and the Nicholsons visited the exhibition this summer; the Nicholsons made two trips, the first to view the exhibition and the second, a hasty trip, so that Laura Nicholson could accept her award.

A two-volume catalogue of the Biennale is now available in translation. *Cite* asked Taylor and Laura and Ben Nicholson to reflect on their participation. (B.C.W.)

Villa Farsetti: A Garden in Silk and Wool

Laura Nicholson

When the ten prospectuses for the Venice Biennale Exhibition fell across my desk last summer - my husband announcing his intention to enter the competition - I leafed through them, attracted perhaps by the photographs of crumbling Venetian architecture on their covers. One of the set caught my imagination: the Villa Farsetti, built in the mid-18th century by Abbot Filippo Farsetti.

He created a "garden of marvels," a collection of beautiful and wonderful things. He built gardens, mazes, orangeries, conservatories, and botanical gardens. He had two water ducts installed... for domestic purposes, fish ponds, and fountains. He commissioned copies of the most beautiful sculptures, models of the most famous buildings and temples; he erected the Temple of Thunderous Jove, he built baths, a naumachia, and an arena in rough stone in the middle of which he put a copy of Trajan's column, and planned the "ancient spina," a Roman road with a Roman bridge.

Although I am not a trained architect, having taken both my degrees in fine arts, I have become involved in the last five years with work that is concerned very directly with garden and architectural subject matter. My tapestries set stages for events, implying narrative; the Farsetti story provided a most fabulous script to work around. The liberal nature of this year's Biennale encouraged all with any sort of interest in the proposed themes to respond; in all it seemed a project designed with my interests in mind.

I made nine tapestries, in wool and silk, to describe Villa Farsetti, working over six months to produce them. Decisions were