Palladio holds a most exalted place in the history of Renaissance architecture. Generally regarded as the greatest Italian architect of the Renaissance, he is also quite possibly the most influential architect who ever lived — if one dares to count the many allusions to aspects of his style. His numerous buildings across the northeastern Italian landscape compose a virtual Mecca to which every architect yearns or promises to make a pilgrimage. His literary corpus comprises a body of writings both educated and classical in their bearing.

Andrea de Pietro della Gondola was born in Padua in 1508 and at the age of 13 was apprenticed to a stone carver. At 16, however, he broke his contract and moved to nearby Vicenza, where he continued his training in stone-cutting. By the early 1530s he had advanced to the status of master and then set his sights on practicing architecture. This ambition was realized in a dramatic way in 1537, when, as a worker, he became engaged in remodeling the villa of Count Giangiorgio Trissino — a distinguished scholar, dramatist, poet, and humanist. He was invited to join the count’s household (which functioned as an academy) and thus began his classical education, which he christened by assuming the name Palladio. Through Trissino, Palladio became familiar with the work of Serlio (whom Trissino knew well), and in addition he met Jacopo Sansovino, Michele Sanmicheli, and Alvise Cornaro. In 1541 Palladio joined Trissino on his first trip (the first of three in the 1540s) to Rome, where he was able to study the ruins of antiquity, in addition to the fruits of the high Renaissance. All of these experiences combined to create one of the best educated and talented architects of the Renaissance.

The theoretical side of Palladio’s development was also enhanced with his meeting of Daniele Barbaro around 1550. Barbaro was another prominent humanist who had just returned from a two-year ambassadorship in England. In the countryside of Maser in the 1550s, Palladio designed for Barbaro perhaps the most famous of his grand villas. Since 1547, Barbaro had been involved in preparing a new critical translation of Vitruvius, for which Palladio was encouraged to make the illustrations. The result, which was issued in 1556, was a treatise unsurpassed in the sixteenth century for its beauty and scholarship. This success no doubt encouraged Palladio to compose his own tome on architecture, of which four books appeared in 1570. This heavily illustrated work (consisting largely of classical monuments and his own designs) immediately became one of the great documents of the Renaissance and represents the apogee of fascination with the Vitruvian tradition. The two passages presented here testify to his quintessential classical reasoning. In the first, taken from the opening chapter of Book 1, Palladio re-presents the Vitruvian triad of convenience, duration, and beauty — the last of which is now defined as Vitruvian symmetry. In the second, the Preface to Book 4, Palladio states his belief in absolute beauty or cosmic proportions, which should underlay all good design.

Chapter I: Of the Several Particulars that ought to be Consider’d and Prepar’d before we Begin to Build

Great care ought to be taken, before a building is begun, of the several parts of the plan and elevation of the whole edifice intended to be raised: For three things, according to Vitruvius,
ought to be considered in every fabric, without which no edifice will deserve to be commended; and these are utility or convenience, duration and beauty. That work therefore cannot be called perfect, which should be useful and not durable, or durable and not useful, or having both these should be without beauty.

An edifice may be esteemed commodious, when every part or member stands in its due place and fit situation, neither above or below its dignity and use; or when the loggia’s, halls, chambers, cellars and granaries are conveniently disposed, and in their proper places.

The strength, or duration, depends upon the walls being carried directly upright, thicker below than above, and their foundations strong and solid: observing to place the upper columns directly perpendicular over those that are underneath, and the openings of the doors and windows exactly over one another; so that the solid be upon the solid, and the void over the void.

Beauty will result from the form and correspondence of the whole, with respect to the several parts, of the parts with regard to each other, and of these again to the whole; that the structure may appear an entire and compleat body, wherein each member agrees with the other, and all necessary to compose what you intend to form.

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The Preface to the Reader

If upon any fabric labour and industry may be bestowed, that it may be comparted with beautiful measure and proportion; this, without any doubt, ought to be done in temples; in which the maker and giver of all things, the almighty and suprem God, ought to be adored by us, and be praised, and thanked for his continual benefactions to us, in the best manner that our strength will permit. If, therefore, men in building their own habitations, take very great care to find out excellent and expert architects, and able artificers, they are certainly obliged to make use of still much greater care in the building of churches. And if in those they attend chiefly to conveniency, in these they ought to have a regard to the dignity and grandeur of the Being there to be invoked and adored; who being the suprem good, and highest perfection, it is very proper, that all things consecrated to him, should be brought to the greatest perfection we are capable of. And indeed, if we consider this beautiful machine of the world, with how many wonderful ornaments it is filled, and how the heavens, by their continual revolutions, change the seasons according as nature requires, and their motion preserves itself by the sweetest harmony of temperature; we cannot doubt, but that the little temples we make, ought to resemble this very great one, which, by his immense goodness, was perfectly compleated with one word of his; or imagine that we are not obliged to make in them all the ornaments we possibly can, and build them in such a manner, and with such proportions, that all the parts together may convey a sweet harmony to the eyes of the beholders, and that each of them separately may serve agreeably to the use for which it shall be appointed. For which reason, although they are worthy to be much commended, who being guided by an exceeding good spirit, have already built temples to the suprem God, and still build them; it does not seem, nevertheless, that they ought to remain without some
little reprehension, if they have not also endeavoured to make them in the best and most noble form our condition will permit.

Hence, because the antient Greeks and Romans employed the utmost care in building the temples to their Gods, and composed them of the most beautiful architecture, that they might be made with so much greater ornaments, and in greater proportion, as that they might be suitable for the God to whom they were consecrated; I shall shew in this book the form and the ornaments of many antient temples, of which the ruins are still to be seen, and by me have been reduced into designs, that every one may know in what form, and with what ornaments churches ought to be built. And although there is but a small part of some of them to be seen standing above-ground, I nevertheless from that small part, (the foundations that could be seen being also considered) have endeavoured, by conjecture, to shew what they must have been when they were entire. And in this Vitruvius has been a very great help to me; because, what I saw, agreeing with what he teacheth us, it was not difficult for me to come at the knowledge of their aspect, and of their form.

But to the ornaments, that is, the bases, columns, capitals, cornices, and such like things, I have added nothing of my own; but they have been measured by me with the utmost attention, from different fragments, found in the places where these temples stood. And I make no doubt, but that they, who shall read this book, and shall consider the designs in it carefully, may be able to understand many places, which in Vitruvius are reputed very difficult, and to direct their mind to the knowledge of the beautiful and proportionable forms of temples, and to draw from them various very noble inventions; making use of which in a proper time and place, they may shew, in their works, how one may, and ought to vary, without departing from the precepts of the art, and how laudable and agreeable such variations are.

But before we come to the designs, I shall, as I usually do, briefly mention those advertences, that in building of temples ought to be observed; having also taken them from Vitruvius, and from other very excellent men, who have written of so noble an art.

19 JUAN BAUTISTA VILLALPANDO
from Ezekiel Commentaries (1604)

Renaissance theory up to this point has been viewed largely as a secular phenomenon, but its biggest supporter in Italy had indeed been the Papacy, which quickly adopted the style as a mark of its universal ecclesiastical authority. What remained for sixteenth-century theory, then, was to forge a more compelling synthesis of classical theory with the biblical elements of the Christian religion. This was the task attempted by Juan Bautista Villalpando. This Spanish Jesuit was a native of Cordoba, and he had been trained in architecture under Juan de Herrera, who was in charge of building the Escorial. After entering the Jesuit order, however, Villalpando...