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ARCHITECTURAL OBSERVATIONS

Spalatro and Robert Adam



Etching of the "Ruins of the palace of the Emperor Diocletian at Spalatro" by Robert Adam, 1764

We recently visited the remains of the Palace of Diocletian in modern day Split Croatia. The palace is the largest and most significant relatively intact example of Roman Domestic Architecture. It was built between 295 and 305 CE as the Emperor's place of retirement. He died there in 311 CE, and it contains his mausoleum.

While researching the history of the palace buildings, I realised that the first measured drawings were carried out by Robert Adam, a Scottish born architect who eventually published a folio of engravings in 1764, based on sketches and measured drawings carried out with the help of his collaborator, Clerisseau, and the draftsmen who accompanied him.



Oil Painting of Robert Adam

It is remarkable, how Robert Adam came to accomplish this large and complex work in such a short time, a proof of his ambition and capacity for hard work.

The renaissance was perceived in most ways, as a rebirth of Roman civilisation. The Roman monuments and the recent excavations at Ercolano, made it possible to experience firsthand these together with some Greek examples, a civilisation that formed the core of the Roman one. The monuments in Greece itself were difficult to visit, due to the occupation of Greece by the Ottoman Divine Porte.

The publications of the 10 books of Vitruvius, gave impetus to the development of a contemporary style based on Roman elements, and the extensive illustrated works of Palladio made Roman architecture more legible. The idea of the "Grand Tour", made possible by the safer travel conditions, became the cultural finishing school for educated diletante of Europe as well as serious artists. They were often accompanied by a guide "Cicerone", and after extensive preparation made the often quite dangerous trip, from Northern Europe to Rome, Naples and some of the recently excavated sites.

They came to see firsthand these ancient monuments, rather than studying them from the illustrations available (by then printing and engraving became affordable) and enjoy the climate and more leisurely life.

Although Rome was a half empty city, and the buildings were not excavated, it had the largest concentrations of monuments Republican and Imperial. It was Louis XIV himself who established the Prix de Rome, originally for artists and craftsmen to encourage the development of arts in France. He was very conscious of the need to bring the Renaissance to France. Eventually most rich nations established similar accommodation for scholars, architects and gave stipends generally for at least 2 years of study.

Many aristocrats made the Grand Tour, thought necessary for an educated gentleman, and spent their time immersed in culture and a more liberated lifestyle of the Italian city states. On their return they brought back sculptures, fragments, and paintings, engravings to display in their houses, a proof of their cultural education. There was a cohort of dealers and artists supplying artefacts, paintings and engravings.

Robert Adam, born in 1728 in Scotland, was the second son of William Adam, a successful architect builder based in Edinburgh. His sons were trained by him and followed him in the business. Robert was considered the most ambitious and talented in the family, so the family agreed to finance his Grand Tour, and he left England in 1754, in the company of Charles Hope. He was hoping that the well-connected Hope would introduce him to the aristocracy, in the countries they visited, as well as opening doors back in Britain following their return. Robert became a friend companion, and cultural guide to Hope. This arrangement lasted well enough until Hope decided the pursuit of pleasure was more to his taste, as Robert's studies consumed more of his time.

It's useful to give a brief outline of conditions at this time. There was relative peace before the Seven Years' War broke out. Travel became possible and safe for the rich thanks to passable roads. Useful guides existed, both published and persona. The war that eventuated was limited to the Northern Countries, the Veneto, and the Americas. Fertile land was still the basis of wealth, and land ownership remained mostly in the hands of the aristocracy. Britain was entering a prosperous period. Although united in 1707, Scotland lagged behind, Robert and his brothers knew their prospects were much better in Britain.

Robert Adam initially had ambitions to become a painter, studied law but finally decided to join the family business, learning both the design and practical aspects of the profession (Architects often undertook the building direction). He worked on the reconstruction of Fort George, following his father's footsteps, who was considered a competent architect, without much inspiration.



Queen's House in Greenwich Park, London. Designed by Inigo Jones in 1617

Inigo Jones led the classical revival in Britain, he and his followers looked to Palladio and Vitruvius for knowledge and inspiration. Robert Adam was ambitious and anxious to make a name, by going to the original sources, to go beyond the rigid Palladian model, to achieve movement and freer interpretation of the classical models. His theory was later confirmed by his observation and study of the original. En route some time was spent in Paris, studying buildings, but more importantly enjoying the theatre, music and the sophisticated social life. Robert spoke some French, but found the French Aristocracy frustrating, overly interested in gambling and games, and not particularly welcoming. However, he loved the furnishings, fabrics and outfitted himself in finery.



Portrait of Clerisseau

Travelling on to Marseille, he especially found the landscape of Provence enchanting. After reaching Genoa, they took a boat to Pisa past Viareggio, a sea voyage being much safer than the roads and avoided pirates by hugging the coast. A typical journey of most Grand Tour participants. Unimpressed by Pisa, they visited Florence in the middle of a bitter winter, the Arno was frozen solid. They found the social life and the Carnival exciting, much dancing and going to the Opera. However, he found time to buy much art. Drawings by the greats, Michelangelo, Veronese, and Pietro da Cortona, a first-rate collection. Most importantly, Robert was introduced to Clerisseau. Clerisseau was a highly accomplished French architect-artists, a Prix de Rome recipient at the end of his scholarship. Robert decided to employ him to teach him drawing, and they journeyed together finally in Rome in 1755. He set up quarters in the house belonging to an Englishman, the house had views to St Peters, Castel Sant Angelo, the hills behind, and had room for Clerisseau, the staff as well as a suite for himself.

At this time Rome was a somewhat empty city, but there was a large foreign population, interested in furthering their classical knowledge and enjoying the amusements Rome offered. It was not unusual to set up temporary lodgings.

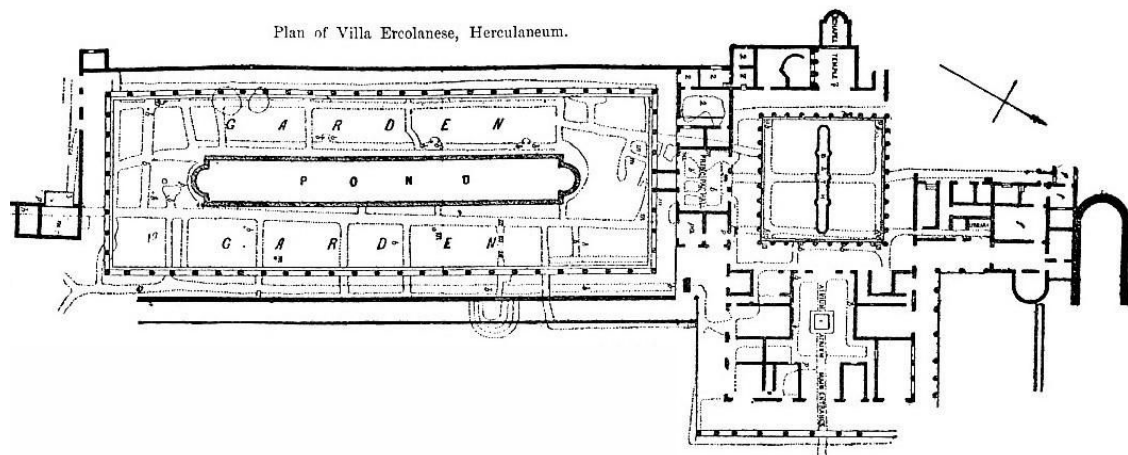


Modern Rome "Campo Vaccino", Joseph Mallord William Turner, 1839

He engaged servants and a coach as needed, and called on important collectors and engaged with the leading protagonists of the time. He became friendly with Piranesi, then having a successful career as an illustrator, creator of fantastical classical compositions, as well as accurate depictions of the important buildings (ruins). His engravings were sought after, being one of many artists supplying high class souvenirs to the tourists. Robert Adam was taking drawing lessons, measuring buildings during the day. A difficult balancing act between scholarly study, balanced with his social life involving important collectors, aristocrats, both Italian and English, as artists were not considered polite society. He was busy till the early hours each day. He knew

his finances provided by his family were finite, but was determined not to miss any opportunity to further his career.

Around this time the excavations at Ercolano began, he visited the Scavi, en route to Naples. Naples being a much livelier city at the time, a large court and more important than Rome. He visited Mount Vesuvius, in awe of its power and refers to the writings of the “ancients”, such as Pliny.



“Ercolano” Plan of Roman Villa

He quickly realised that very little is known about Roman residential architecture. He crawled through the excavations at Ercolano, in tunnels and mud, to see for himself the planning and details of the Villas of the rich.

He went on sketching expeditions with the knowledgeable Piranesi. Their relationship was important, he was able to meet collectors and engravers, and became fluent in Italian. This allowed him to engage with local society, as well as expatriates. It might have been Piranesi who suggested exploring Spalatro. He became very close to a British woman, his sole temptation to become attached.

He realised that in order to become successful in London, he had to go beyond the correct interpretation of classical architecture as described by Palladio following on from Vitruvius.

He was aware of the publication of the “Ruins of Palmyra” by Wood in 1753, and this must have given him the idea to publish buildings never described before. He was aware of Diocletian’s Palace remains, probably from Piranesi, however the city was under Venetian Rule, and like Greece under Ottoman rule, was impossible to visit freely. He was comfortable now having learned Italian, and improved his French, through Clerisseau. He was interested in submitting a scheme for the rebuilding of Lisbon after the 1755 earthquake, delusionary under the circumstances but showed his ambition.

The Seven Years’ War, involving England, France and the German states, might have prompted him to go to Venice in May 1757 while travel was still possible. En route he visited Padua and visited Palladio houses on the Brenta Canal. He was keen to receive as many honorary titles as he could and be considered an antiquarian. Winckelman whose interests centred on the Greek ideal of beauty, mostly male, was dismissive of Roman culture, considering it coarse. Robert set out to prove the late structures built for example by Diocletian were more

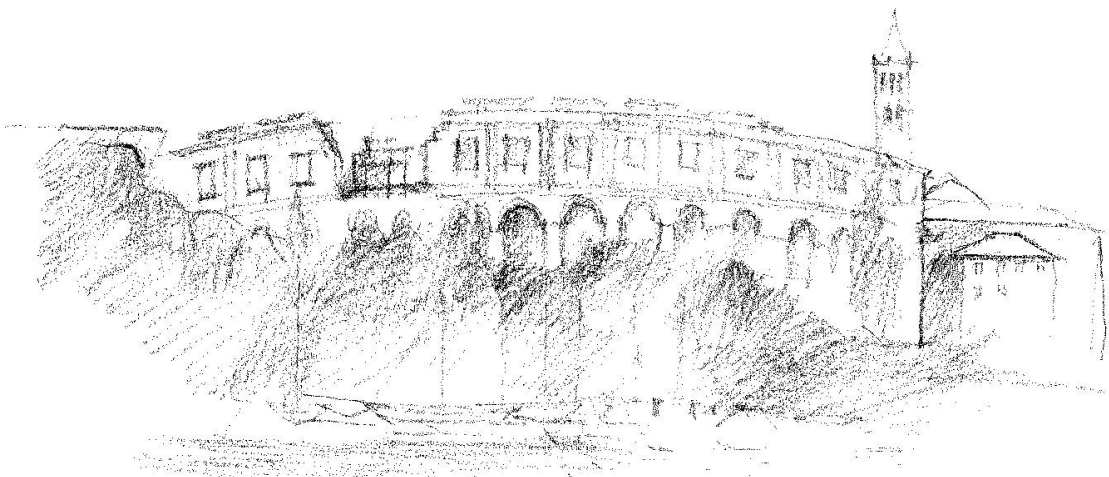
refined, a late flowering. Robert was keen to do a great work, like “The ruins of Palmyra”.

In Venice, through his aristocratic connections, he received a letter of introduction to the Governor of Spalatro and the British Garrison Commander.

He made his way to Pula, seeing the ruins, aqueducts, before embarking for Spalatro on the 11 July 1757. They took provisions and rented a house for the 5 weeks they spend there.



Engraving of Rome by Piranesi



Pula Amphitheatre

It's useful to recount the history of Roman Spalatro, where the remains of Diocletian's “retirement home” is situated.

By the fourth century most Roman Emperors came from the provinces, Hadrian from Spain, Diocletian, was born in Salona, close to present day Split. He rose through the ranks of the army. His troops crowned him emperor in 284 CE. After achieving peace throughout the Empire, he set about reorganising its administration. He undertook and shared the responsibility of the far-flung Roman Empire with 3 co-emperors. There may have been precedents in the early republic and its consuls, yet the arrangement was revolutionary though ultimately did not work. One of the few Roman Emperors not to die in office, he

retired in 305 CE, having commenced to build his retirement home, near his birthplace, Salon. The palace was built in large blocks of limestone quarried in Trogir, it was essentially a small fortified self-sufficient city. It contained the apartments, baths, state rooms of the Emperor, facing the sea, a full military garrison, a Temple of Jupiter, mausoleum, and a temple of Aesculapius. It had large basement storage areas, workshops and the like. Its preservation is an accident. During the Avar invasion of Dalmatia in the sixth century, the population of Salon took refuge in the fortified palace, and defended it against the invaders. Previously like other Roman buildings, the palace was mined for the perfect marble blocks used in its construction. That's why so few residential buildings survived the invasions, due to systematic mining of ruins for ready made building materials. The new occupants, repurposed the buildings. The Temple of Jupiter and the mausoleum were given a belltower to become a church.



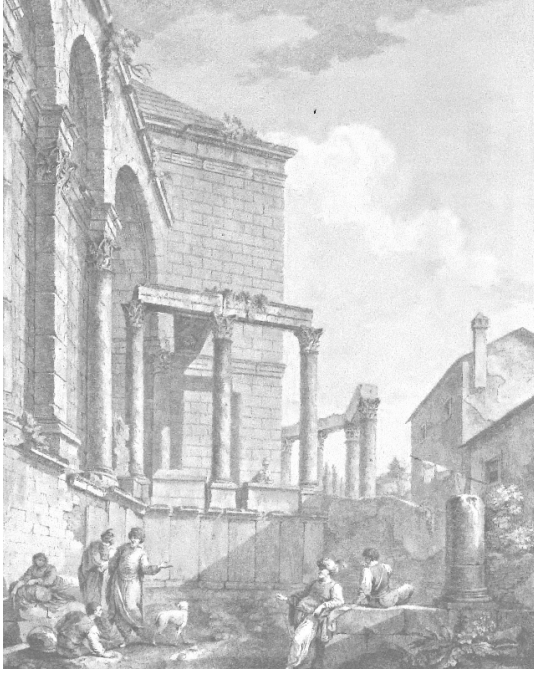
Plan of Salona near Split by Robert Adam



Trogir

Trogir 3/5, 73

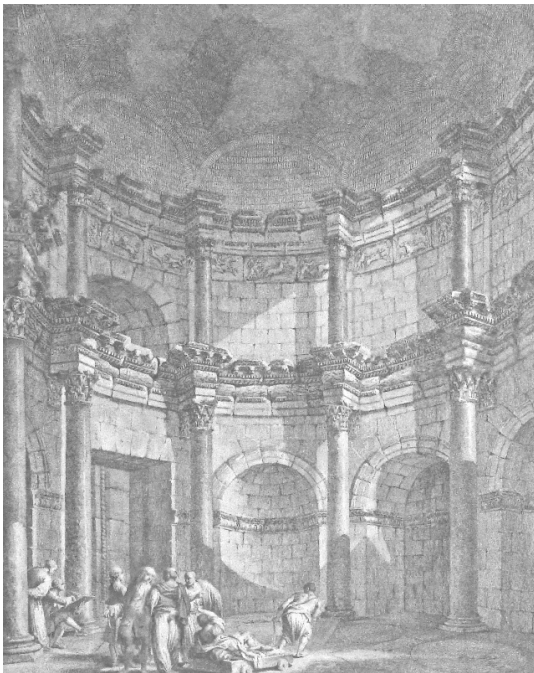
Adam, Clerisseau and two draftsmen in the heat of summer measured and drew the palace. They drew the detailed decorations, but were frustrated being unable to excavate with the Venetians suspicious of his motives. The idea may have come from Piranesi in the first place.



Sketch of the Temple of Jupiter by Robert Adam



Photo of the church today



View inside the Temple of Jupiter by Robert Adam



Photo of the inside today

They returned to Rome after this prodigious effort to collect his possessions. He packed up the antiques and crated the fragments and drawings. He worried about the war, uncertain if the delivery would succeed. He asked Clerisseau and a couple of Italian draftsmen to join his proposed office in London, where he intended to set up practice with his brother, in Mayfair, the newly fashionable west end of London.

London was a different city, unsafe and poverty stricken in some areas. Gentle folk practiced fencing and often carried swords for defence. Popular entertainment was coarse, the well to do living in defensive neighbourhoods.

After setting up his office, Robert spent a lot of his time energetically calling on potential clients, at that time the nobility, to show off his drawings, his learning. Palladian restraint was popular with the aristocracy since the 1720s and he was determined to change that.

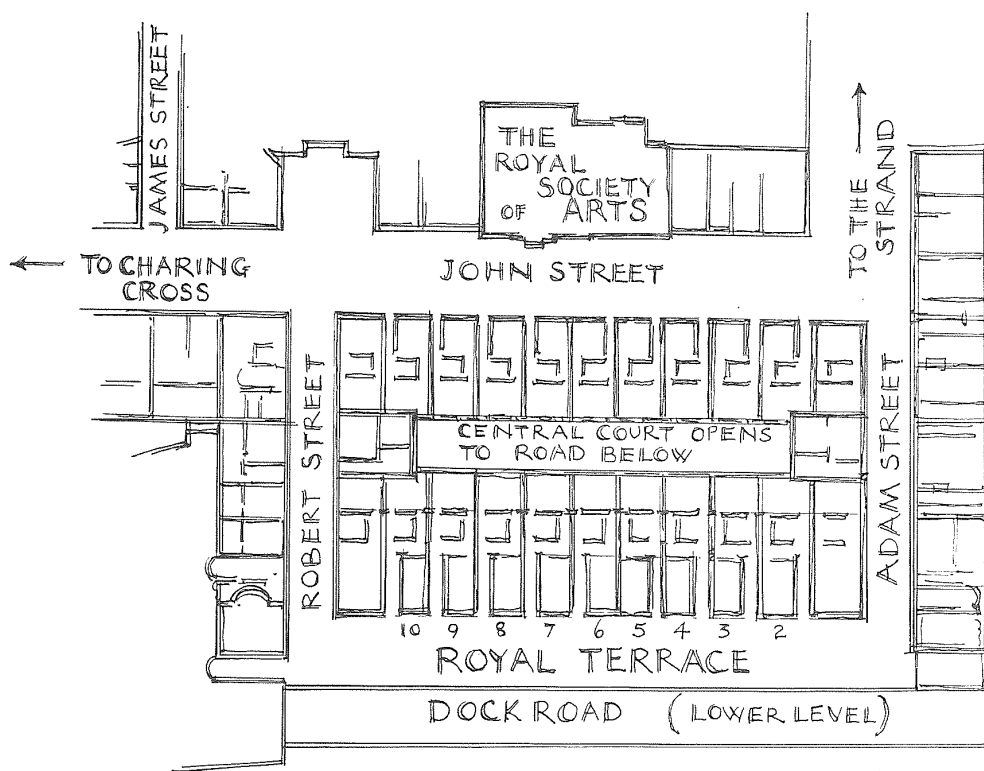
Scots were not particularly popular, and the King in particular took a dislike to Robert. Nevertheless, he was made joint director of the King's works with Chambers. However large civic works were denied him. He nevertheless developed what is known as the "Adam Style" and was successful in remodelling many a great house, concentrating on the interiors. He was able to call on the best craftsmen, including Chippendale and Wedgwood to design the smallest details, including "footscrapers" according to Simpson's history of architecture. Their practice was pre-eminent and Robert was frantically busy with numerous commissions. The Adam Brothers decided to make their own contribution to redeveloping London. Initially smaller projects, but they wanted to leave a large civic legacy, and purchased land to develop a series of terrace type houses with warehouses opening to the regulated riverfront along the Thames. They called the quarter Adelphi, meaning brothers, and hoped to sell the completed buildings. The side streets were named after the brothers, the general concept resembles the façade of the palace of Diocletian, facing the sea.



The Palace of Diocletian from the harbour by Robert Adam

It was a huge and risky undertaking, employing 2000 workmen at times. After months of negotiation, the London Council agreed to the reconstruction of the ramparts. The river was a health hazard and the reluctance to accept the proposed improvements must have been political.

It consisted of 20 terrace style houses with the streets named after the brothers. It was to be the downfall of the family. The city of London did not lease the warehouses and the sales of the houses did not reach the projected valuations. The Scottish banking crisis sent the brothers into bankruptcy, only saved by a lottery, apparently not unusual at that time.



THE RIVER THAMES

Plan of the Adelphi as laid out in 1768-74

By 1760, the idea of an “Adam Style” was commonly talked about. The task of engraving the many drawings was difficult to arrange. Several cities specialized in providing this service, with the workshops in Germany most economical. Although as many as 300 persons of importance including King George, have subscribed, some more than one copy, it was not till 1764 that the folios were ready. It is said Piranesi may have planted the idea of Spalatro as a ground breaking novel project and also helped in arranging the engraving.

Engraving was quite common way to illustrate books and stand-alone works. It started from the decoration of armour, then adapted initially by Germans, using the traditional method of acid etching. Some cities specialized in providing expert etching workshops.

The folio, was magnificent, and the foreword by William Robertson and endorsement by other eminent scholars attested to the high esteem the work was held in. It confirmed that Robert was a noted scholar as well as an eminent architect. Not only did the folio contain measured drawings, but Robert was able to accurately reconstruct the original structure, in spite of permission to excavate denied by the Venetians.

The Scots in London were somewhat ostracised by the establishment, and the King’s dislike of Robert was personal. Indeed, he was a self-promoter, and sycophant, hovering between being a gentleman and an artisan. His taste ran to the decorative, and he did not secure the commission to design grand houses, more often redesigning and refurbishing existing structures. He keenly felt the lack of civic commissions, hence undertook to develop the Adelphi.



The Adelphi Terrace, London, as it was in the eighteenth century

His nemesis Sir William Chambers was tutor to the Prince of Wales, and continued his association after the prince was crowned. Actually George III was not a great patron of the arts. Robert's commissions often involved taking over projects already started, and often times involved decoration. He genuinely believed Roman architecture was more suited to residential architecture, more flexible and the arch open to interpretation. The trabeated Greek style did not become popular until access to Greece was available after 1821.



Admiralty Screen, Whitehall, London by Robert Adam

The concluding irony of the expedition to Spalatro is that there is an original copy of the folio in the State Library of NSW. When we requested permission to view it, we were given it without ceremony. They did not realise what they had till we pointed out its provenance, whereupon we were given white gloves and cushions to save the binding.

Julius

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