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VISUAL AND HISTORICAL GEOGRAPHIES
Essays in Honour of Denis E. Cosgrove

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Table of Contents

List of Figures	vii
Acknowledgements.....	viii
About the Contributors.....	ix

Introduction: Visual and Historical Geographies.....	1
<i>Veronica della Dora</i>	

PART I: VISIONS OF ARCADIA AND WILDERNESS

1. Classical Traditions and Cultural Geographies	9
<i>David Atkinson</i>	
2. The Post-Palladian Landscape: Iconographies of a New Rurality in the Venetian Mainland.....	21
<i>Francesco Vallerani</i>	
3. Putting the History in Natural History: Buster Simpson's <i>Host Analog</i> and Alan Sonfist's <i>Time Landscape</i>	28
<i>Paul Kelsch</i>	
4. Armaments and Art: Holographic Histories at Fort Worden	38
<i>Susan Digby</i>	
5. Re-Presenting Native Identities: Images as Rhetoric in Struggles over the Arctic National Wildlife Refuge	50
<i>Joel Geffen</i>	

PART II: VISIONS OF COSMOPOLIS AND MODERNITY

6. Alexandria ad Aegyptum: Cosmopolitanism and Renaissance Cartographic Visions	63
<i>Veronica della Dora</i>	
7. Memories, Images, Cosmopolitan Pasts: Galata and Pera in Nineteenth-Century Istanbul.....	75
<i>Begum Basdas</i>	
8. Urban Landscape and Amenity in the Modernising City: Nineteenth-Century Yokohama Foreign Settlement.....	87
<i>Aya Sakai</i>	
9. 'Majesty and Multitudinous Resource': the British Empire Panels in Swansea, 1934	95
<i>Pys Gruffudd</i>	
10. In the Light of History: Modernism and Landscape Vision in Early Twentieth-Century South Africa.....	105
<i>Jeremy Foster</i>	
11. Iconographies Elsewhere: Reading Sri Lankan Landscape in Translation	119
<i>Tariq Jazeel</i>	

12. Art, Architecture, Artifice and the Imagined Landscape: Reflections on Los Angeles and Denis Cosgrove	130
<i>Glen MacDonald</i>	
Coda: Geography's Compass.....	139
<i>Stephen Daniels</i>	
The Role of Geography in the Twenty-First Century: Interview with Denis Cosgrove	147
<i>Helen Sooväli-Sepping</i>	

List of Figures

- 1.1. Edward Poynter, *Faithful unto Death*, 1865 (courtesy of National Museums Liverpool).
- 2.1. Andrea Palladio's Villa Saraceno, 1545 (photograph by the author).
- 2.2. Post-modern copy of Villa Saraceno, 1998 (photograph by the author).
- 3.1. John Glashan, 'History and Natural History' (source: *Spectator*, 29 January 1994, p. 17).
- 4.1. Military battery in the Fort Worden State Park (photograph by the author).
- 4.2. Richard Turner's meditative sculptures in Fort Worden State Park (photograph by the author).
- 4.3. Unsanctioned art: graffiti at Fort Worden (photograph by the author).
- 5.1. 'Will the caribou go the way of the buffalo?' Gwich'in poster (source: <http://www.gwichinsteeringcommittee.org>).
- 5.2. Image of Inupiat 'whale harvesting' (source: <http://www.kaktovik.com/>).
- 6.1. Georg Braun and Franz Hogenberg, *Bird's-eye view of Alexandria*, 1572 (The National Library of Israel, Shapell family Digitalization Project, and The Hebrew University of Jerusalem, Dept. of Geography, Historic City Project).
- 7.1. Yüksek Kaldırım Street, Galata, Istanbul, c. 1900 (courtesy of Keystone-Mast Collections, California Museum of Photography).
- 7.2. Karaköy Square, Galata, Istanbul, c. 1900 (courtesy of Keystone-Mast Collections, California Museum of Photography).
- 8.1. Drawing of Yokohama Honmachi Miosaki (courtesy of Yokohama Historical Archives).
- 9.1. British Empire Panel No.5 by Frank Brangwyn (City and County of Swansea: Glynn Vivian Art Gallery Collection; reproduced by courtesy of copyright holder David Brangwyn).
- 9.2. British Empire Panel No.3 by Frank Brangwyn (City and County of Swansea: Glynn Vivian Art Gallery Collection; reproduced by courtesy of the copyright holder David Brangwyn).
- 10.1. Spier Outbuildings, nr. Stellenbosch, early 1900s (Arthur Elliot, Cape Archives #E491).
- 10.2. House Stern, Houghton, 1935 (Rex Distin Martienssen Archives, University of Witwatersrand).
- 11.1. View over Cinnamon Hill at Lunuganga, taken from the main house (photograph by the author).
- 11.2. View over Cinnamon Hill at Lunuganga, taken from the middle ground (photograph by the author).
- 11.3. *Paradise*, a temporary installation by Thamotheerampillai Shanaathanan at Lunuganga, 2003 (photography reproduced with permission from Anoli Perera and the Theertha Artist's Collective, Colombo).
- 12.1. Medical Offices, 696 Hampshire Road, Thousand Oaks, California (photograph by the author).
- 12.2. Storer House, 8161 Hollywood Boulevard, Hollywood, California (photograph by the author).
- 13.1. David Allan, *The Geography Lesson*, 1785 (anonymous private collection, reproduced by Sotheby's permission).

The Post-Palladian Landscape
Iconographies of New Rurality in the Venetian Mainland
 Francesco Vallerani



Figs. 2.1 and 2.2. Andrea Palladio's Villa Saraceno, 1545 and post-modern copy of Villa Saraceno, 1998 (photographs by the author).

Villa Saraceno (fig. 2.1) is located in the province of Vicenza, in the Veneto region (north-east Italy). Named after the aristocratic family who commissioned its construction on a pre-existing agricultural annex, the villa is among the earliest and probably most iconic works by Andrea Palladio (1508-1580). A wide pathway leads to the entrance of its main building, whose sober symmetrical façade epitomises the ideal of harmony and equilibrium sought by one of the greatest masters of Italian Renaissance architecture. A few kilometres away from Villa Saraceno is a faithful replica of the villa's main building constructed in 1998 and currently privately owned (fig. 2.2). It is a bizarre landmark within the increasingly commodified landscape of Veneto. Two villas, two visions of arcadia: Villa Saraceno serves as the vanishing point of a wide prospect; as a theatrical stage looking over a carefully engineered harmonious landscape. Its twentieth-century copy, by contrast, exists in a fenced self-enclosed microcosm. A high gate and hedge separate this privatised Arcadian retreat from the surrounding world.

The images of the two villas speak respectively of a famed historical iconic landscape and of its contemporary fetishised re-appropriation. Their juxtaposition is just one of many examples that increasingly characterise the landscape of the Veneto region. This essay explores emerging tensions within this landscape. In particular, it considers how the economic boom of the past two decades has been redefining the historical dichotomy between city and country, producing new iconographies that are aimed more at 'selling places' than at creating the social awareness of 'a common good' as envisaged by Renaissance makers.¹

Veneto and the Palladian landscape

Veneto is the eighth largest region in Italy, with a total area of almost 18,400 square kilometres. Historically, the region included a significant part of Venice's territorial possessions. However, it was only in the fifteenth century, after establishing an extensive maritime domain along the coasts of the Adriatic and of the eastern Mediterranean (extending as far as Crete and Cyprus), that the imperial city-state turned its economic and military interests to the vast plain in the hinterland. This change of expansionistic orientation from the sea to the mainland was well justified: a complex geopolitical configuration of city-states including Verona, Padua, and Treviso started to be perceived as a possible threat to Venice's hegemony.² But there were also other (and intrinsically geographical) reasons. The Veneto plain is bounded by a pre-Alpine limestone range which rapidly rises before the massive Alpine barrier of the Dolomites. These features result in a thick network of rivers characterised by relatively short courses and irregular flows. The rivers flow into the characteristic amphibious morphology of the Venetian lagoon, producing significant sedimentation.³ By the fifteenth century, such morphological dynamics had started to constitute a serious danger to the integrity of the lagoon, which risked being completely filled, thus reducing the military safety of the city.

Furthermore, the conquest of the plain and of the pre-Alpine range would have granted the increasingly populated city a secure supply of cereals. At the same time, pre-Alpine forests would have also provided Venetians with wood for ship construction—the key to Venice's success as a maritime superpower. Finally, the Venetian countryside represented an excellent opportunity to fruitfully invest the revenues obtained from trade with the Orient. From the beginning of the sixteenth century, a new class of Venetian landowners started to purchase land in the plain and on the gentle hills of Veneto and to commission delightful residences equipped with stables, barns and granaries. Their goal was agrarian profit as much as the fulfilment of the exclusive aspirations of a new 'erudite *otium*'.⁴ It is in this context that we can situate Palladio's role as one of the great craftsmen of a vast territorial project; a project that sought to redefine the economic and cultural rural landscape not only of Venice, but more generally of Europe itself.

Palladio's work clearly defines the particular landscape unit of the '*villa di campagna*' (countryside villa) as a constitutive element of an aesthetically pleasing and at the same time economically highly productive environment.⁵ As shown by Denis Cosgrove, Palladio's design work was connected to a rich array of local meanings that were in perfect harmony with the socio-economic and cultural aims of a European power in decline in terms of overseas relations, but in powerful expansion in the functional and aesthetic construction of a hinterland providing some of the highest rural incomes in Europe.⁶ The iconographic method employed by Cosgrove in the Veneto area took his studies into philosophy, literature and art, as well as into the agronomy, hydraulic engineering and trade of the mainland, thereby making a complete analysis of the semantic sedimentation in which the Palladian 'signature' is set.⁷ The recent fate of this 'signature' represents a good starting point to reflect on changing economic and rural aspects of the Veneto region, a region in which the chaotic expansion of private planning and pliant production anarchy paid little heed either to the symbolic capital of the inherited landscapes or to the ecological and

geophysical vulnerability of the local environment.

From eulogy to outrage

The muddled, largely unplanned, economic expansion of the 1960-1990 in the Veneto region had the merit of bringing economic well-being and a higher standard of living in general, lifting most of the rural population out of the depressed conditions in which they had found themselves since about the mid 1950s. As recent research suggests, the dramatic increase in living standards is in many respects comparable to the radical transformation of the region that took place at the time of Palladio.⁸ During and after the post-war boom, however, the land has been envisaged and used as a simple support, as a source of resources, without any consideration for environmental impacts with often dramatic consequences.

After decades of reckless development, Veneto is now witnessing the emergence of a new movement to rediscover the traditional countryside. This is essentially a photographic promotion of stereotypical Veneto landscape beauty. Images provide a reactionary propaganda that uses the apparent objectivity of the camera to conceal from the reader, or rather the picture 'consumer', the real and irresponsible dynamics of environmental waste, building speculation and misuse, and social collapse that were beginning to alter the region's rural order.

The end of the millennium saw the emergence of a new multi-centred mosaic of activities and functions which various scholars compared to similar earlier developments in different parts of the world, including Randstaadt (Holland), the Ruhr, and the Los Angeles area.⁹ Today, Veneto is characterised by a complex heritage of historical landscapes, which recent urban developments are turning into an eclectic mixture of old and new. Although the spreading urbanisation and the fracture of traditional town-country relationships is undeniable, it is also true that a different sense of the land has taken shape, one that is less related to local ties but is more global and sustained by a new geography of flows.¹⁰

Recent years have also been marked by the expansion of a new 'green' consciousness, with the growth of committees for the protection of the environment and careful restorations, not only of patrician villas, but also of more modest farmhouses. This, however, has primarily been a time of attentive, prolific promotion of the recreational opportunities provided by a widespread network of river routes, cycle tracks, riding trails and walking paths; in other words, with infrastructures associated with the new, self-gratifying ideology of sustainable recreation and with the demand for more authentic tourist experiences.

The consolidation of these shared social attitudes coexists with the recent spread of new chaotic rural dynamics. These are based on the usual processes of land revenues that continue to eat away at the efficiency of the regional system. This concerns not only the region's environmental aspect, but also (and especially) the road network and residential satisfaction. A journey along a good many of the roads in Veneto takes you through an uninterrupted urban strip, distinguished by a relentless formal and functional confusion that makes the usual place names accidental and insignificant. The collective perception of places is increasingly obscured by the plethora of flashy signs advertising manufacturers, shops, restaurants and recreational diversions.¹¹

Post-Palladian landscape and post-productive country

The gradual weakening of traditional farming vocations and the subsequent, overwhelming migration of urban population to the country can also be observed in the Veneto. But it occurs with a kind of low-cost suburbanisation, with house sizes similar to those of dormitory suburbs, quite different from the much more prevalent European trend of idealised rural areas. These are seen not only as providing attractive recreational and tourist opportunities, but also as evocative backgrounds against which new existential strategies may be planned and effected. The superiority of country life is another aspect of the Palladian legacy that has influenced the development of European taste for the landscape and holidays. Palladio helped create the moral superiority of the countryside with his villa designs, setting the basis for an attitude to the country that was to take root throughout the Western world.¹²

Beyond this aspect, Cosgrove does not hesitate to relate the Palladian heritage to the current dynamics responsible for the rapidly developing urban sprawl. The rural organisation begun in Palladio's time effectively provided the framework for the current propagation of manufacturing activities, enabled by a well-populated and easily inhabitable area.¹³ The villa, like a business structure of today, was a dynamic hub and a driving force for a more efficient use of nature, which was the outcome of rational alterations to the morphology of terrain. This can be read especially in the careful choice of sites and the effective management of water, meaning that not only the noble building, but also the out-buildings, the water works and the irrigated and reclaimed fields are all prestigious forebears of the current agropolitan model of the Veneto.

The prototype of the scattered city launched in the Palladian era was, however, governed by strict public control of the business activities centred on the villas, whether involving farming or pre-industrial concerns. It was necessary to keep to a strict body of law, which ensured the correct use of the resources on which the delicate operation of the mainland system rested. These ranged from the felling of trees to the hydro-geological balance of the slopes, from the quality of the water to protection of the shores, and were intended to ensure that the advantages of the individual would not be to the detriment of the public good. In short, this way of planning the landscape was very different from what is commonly seen today.

The problem with today's landscape of the Veneto region (and consequently with the economic model by which it has been shaped) is primarily one of environmental degradation. The rural advantages inherited from the centuries-old Palladian tradition, which is still present and can still be defended and repaired for use as a prestigious and environmentally sound tool of urban innovation, are therefore being penalised. The precious potential of the landscape as a cultural good is being wasted, the rural marketing potential abandoned, and the growing post-modern demand for pleasantness, or an enjoyable background against which to work and live, ignored.¹⁴ Most of the locals on the Venetian mainland perceive the Palladian legacy as a completely foreign, if not actually hostile, symbolic surplus.

Indeed, the post-Palladian landscape is an intrinsic part of the formal and functional explosion of the post-modern. We are now seeing widespread 'privatopias', cellular territoriality, monumental microcosms and fragments of beauty detached

from their context, whose preservation and conscious defence is removed from the collective imagination, unless it is a question of the places of mass liturgies held in the name of tourism. Palladio is only a hindrance, a reference to the rural order that disturbs the insuperable, incremental choices transforming the quality of the places. It is possible to analyse central Veneto with the cultural idea of an epochal landscape, from the widespread Arcadian landscape of Palladian stamp to the 'urbanised Arcadia' of the more than 300 environmental grassroots committees, a disturbing *summa* of damaged landscapes, from which voices that demand to be heard call for a shared rural policy.¹⁵

Towards an ethics of common goods

Palladian classicism contains another message: the cohesion between ethics and aesthetics – the beauty that improves the world. Further studies derive from the consideration of the Renaissance treatise entitled *Le dieci giornate della vera agricoltura* (Ten days of real agriculture) by Agostino Gallo, first published in Venice in 1565 and certainly well-known to those commissioning villas from Palladio.¹⁶ The current socio-cultural reconstruction of the idea of the Veneto landscape, nourished by increasingly elaborate escapist notions aimed at the creation of domestic Arcadias, shows a number of not negligible points of contact with the sixteenth-century celebration of 'villa pleasures'. The number of those now living in a countryside detached from farm production life has enormously increased.¹⁷ In the sixteenth century it was rather a very small minority, which was also true of most rural areas in the Western world. Additionally rural tourism results in large seasonal increases in rural population.

Although Renaissance handbooks and the actual reality of villa life reveal a direct and careful control over the quality of the landscape, the post-modern democratisation of 'holiday house' ownership in the former countryside seems to have sanctioned a disturbing disengagement with the environmental impacts of rural urbanisation. This move is undoubtedly detached from the utilitarianism of primary obligations. It rather occurs on the basis of individualistic hedonism. And perhaps this is appropriate, as it confirms the dictates and international canons of 'country style' promoted by the glossy magazines, which have the same prestige as the ancient treatises on villa life.

Today, the most integral elements of the Palladian landscape are at risk; they are the object of requests for new developments, which are progressively eroding the Palladian quality, with new roads being opened in the hills and existing ones being widened (such as in Arquà Petrarca, Valpolicella, the Prosecco hills, quarries in the Berici hills etc.). Once the personal, private landscape has been obtained, far from the damage of the urbanised countryside and well protected by a vast array of fences, a dangerous social fracture takes place. This leads firstly to a withdrawal into the domestic microcosm, an impeccable Arcadian setting for family use, and then to a disengagement from, and fall-off in, interest for the social control of the land which is left to the mercy of speculators and the erosion of its environmental quality. This last aspect is much more evident in highly industrialised areas like the Palladian Veneto than in others, like Provence, Tuscany and Umbria, which still have large areas of predominantly traditional landscapes. These are effectively protected, thus restrict-

ing the contrast with the increasingly widespread scattering of pleasant middle-class retreats, which, like the ancient *poderi di spasso da gentiluomo*, allow escape from reality; they are gilt cages where it is nice to hide away and play at being 'farmers'.¹⁸

This new perception of the rural reality, no longer dominated by the ties of production, may be assessed by referring to the Renaissance paradigm of *renovatio*, or the almost utopian need for cyclical renewal, a growing desire for morality and justice, and the search for a new personal and social equilibrium by changing lifestyles, all within a new idea of nature, a new environmental culture.

The recent and recurring threats of global food contamination show the topical nature of the thoughts on health expressed in the *Discorsi intorno alla vita sobria* by Alvise Cornaro, once again within the humanist principle of *renovatio*. The sober life is another expression that is widespread in the West, or better, the noun 'sobriety', which along with the other key word, 'decrease', are the conceptual pillars of what will be the next ethical approach to more respectful and ecologically viable living. The ideal of an existence in harmony with nature has many more admirers now than in Palladio's day and, in the case of Veneto, many of these are rural locals who have recently transformed their traditional links with agriculture into a postmodern way of life. This is shown by the large consumer demand for products related to the 'health/sanctity' of organic farming; products that respect the regular rhythms of the seasonal cycles and that do not involve manufactured chemicals. But there is also an increase in farmhouse holidays, outdoor recreational pursuits on foot, bicycle or horseback, and a return to contemplation of the scenery.

The key to a better quality of life is to return to an ethical commitment, both in daily actions and political choices, reminding us of the duty of responsibilities that can turn the easy luxuries of immediate advantage into more farsighted strategies of prediction and the sharing of common duties. This will involve a search for less 'egotistical' and more 'public' geographies, where the sense of ideals and civil continuity can bring about a rural sociability and profound identification with an evolution of the landscape that is respectful of historic and ecological quality.

Notes

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