

Desmond Guinness and Julius Trousdale Sadler, Jr., *Palladio a Western Progress*, New York: Viking, 1976, 184 p., illus., \$17.95
Walter Muir Whitehill and Frederick Doveton Nichols, *Palladio in America*, Milan: Electa, 1976, 128 p., illus., \$9.50

Pierre du Prey

Volume 3, Number 2, 1976

URI: <https://id.erudit.org/iderudit/1077296ar>

DOI: <https://doi.org/10.7202/1077296ar>

[See table of contents](#)

Publisher(s)

UAAC-AAUC (University Art Association of Canada | Association d'art des universités du Canada)

ISSN

0315-9906 (print)

1918-4778 (digital)

[Explore this journal](#)

Cite this review

du Prey, P. (1976). Review of [Desmond Guinness and Julius Trousdale Sadler, Jr., *Palladio a Western Progress*, New York: Viking, 1976, 184 p., illus., \$17.95 / Walter Muir Whitehill and Frederick Doveton Nichols, *Palladio in America*, Milan: Electa, 1976, 128 p., illus., \$9.50]. *RACAR : Revue d'art canadienne / Canadian Art Review*, 3(2), 101–102. <https://doi.org/10.7202/1077296ar>

Desmond GUINNESS and Julius Trousdale SADLER, Jr., *Palladio a Western Progress*, New York: Viking, 1976, 184 p., illus., \$17.95. Walter Muir WHITEHILL and Frederick Doveton NICHOLS, *Palladio in America*, Milan: Electa, 1976, 128 p., illus., \$9.50.

“Yet two more books on Palladio”! That was my initial reaction when the titles under review arrived within a short time of one another. Of all architects, I thought, Palladio has surely been the most written about. The bibliography on him in 1973 already ran to hundreds of items. Italy declared that year as the *Anno Palladiano*, and this gave rise to a new surge of publications on the architect. A major monograph by Lionello Puppi appeared in order to coincide with the 1973 *Mostra del Palladio*, which had its own extensive catalogue. The *Mostra* in turn spawned two further exhibitions, in Vienna and London, each with a scholarly catalogue. Presently, the famous wooden scale models of Palladi buildings, made for the *Mostra*, are touring the world. They will be visiting a number of cities in the United States during the bicentennial year — alas not in Canada. It is this combined bicentenary and Palladian fever that, I suppose, accounts for the two books under review. Their merit, I discovered, consists not so much in their scholarly contribution to an already vast literature, but in that they point to the investigation of Neo-Palladianism in North America as a possible new direction for serious Palladian studies.

As an almost natural outcome of Desmond Guinness and Julius Sadler's recent *Mr. Jefferson, Architect*, they have made another joint effort in *Palladio a Western Progress*. Jefferson, a colourful historical figure, provided a cohesion to Guinness and Sadler's first book that eludes this second one.

Part of the problem has to do with the ambitious scope of *Palladio a Western Progress*. Within the narrow confines of 179 pages, the authors try to cover the entire Palladian output in Italy, as well as to trace Neo-Palladianism in England, Ireland, the United States, and the West Indies besides. Much as they might have liked to develop in more detail a single building or architect, they race on in order to make a rather breathless “photo finish”. Buildings follow one another pell mell, often with only the briefest of descriptions. Many examples that are included among the illustrations are never discussed in the text, and no system of reference exists to the excellent plates.

Guinness and Sadler begin in Italy, but they fail to convey to the reader an overall grasp of Palladio's style, except to say that it defies strict categorisation. This may be true — Palladio has many more sides to his work than have been acknowledged — but so indecisive a note hardly seems the way to start a book that will trace the spread of Palladio's ideas. As a result, the reader, despite Mr. Guinness's excellent anecdotes and humorous turns of phrases, becomes confused about what is or is not strictly Palladian about English or Irish Neo-Palladianism. Well over half the book falls into the chapter on North America, the province of Mr. Sadler. He is to be commended on his discriminating choice of examples, but the chapter does not hold together. It lacks a rational progression of any sort — except in a vaguely chronological way. Dividing the structures into regional groupings, or according to building types, might have helped to sharpen the blurry focus. Most of all, Sadler fails to demonstrate the way in which his examples show Neo-Palladianism in North America. He too infrequently cites specific

Palladian or English Neo-Palladian sources for the plans and elevations he discusses. Moreover, he never alludes to any parallels of a functional or sociological order that existed between North America and Italy or England. Here was a missed opportunity for productive investigation. With the Palladian villa, particularly, interesting comparisons come to mind. The gentlemen farmers of the Veneto, to whom Palladio catered, had a direct generic connection with the English and Irish gentry, plantation owners in the United States, and villa owners along the shores of the St. Lawrence and Lake Ontario, not mentioned by Sadler. It might be fruitful to explore farming techniques and the demands these made on the architecture, or similarities in the various ideals of villa life. All this could have enriched *Palladio a Western Progress*. Nevertheless, the initial conception of the book remains sound, and hopefully will cause other studies to be undertaken in greater depth.

The expressed purpose of *Palladio in America* is to serve as a companion guidebook to the exhibition of Palladian models now touring the United States. In this regard the book fails, though through no fault of its own. More models were sent over from Italy than was anticipated when the book was written, which is all to the good. But it is disconcerting to the reader attempting to use the book in conjunction with a visit to the exhibition. Despite this drawback, the book has considerable interest in its own right, especially for the armchair Palladian enthusiast.

Palladio in America begins with a brief life of the architect by Walter Muir Whitehill. In his introduction, Whitehill admits to being a recent convert to Palladian studies and, perhaps because of this, is able to compose clearly and eloquently one of the best brief overviews of Palladio that I have read. Despite the capsule form of the essay, Whitehill has sketched a warmly human portrait of the architect, enriched with personal insights about Palladio's works and character. Unfortunately, Whitehill fails to communicate his "recent enthusiasm" for Palladio in the rather dry catalogue entries that form the bulk of the book. The photos have nothing new to offer. One now grows tired of seeing the same shots of Palladian buildings pressed into service again by the Electa publishing house.

The section after the catalogue contains a three-part essay entitled *Palladio in America* by Frederick Doveton Nichols. Rather like Sadler, Nichols has the unenviable task of condensing to manageable size the Neo-Palladian movement in the United States. Nichols' approach, however,

differs markedly. He realises the importance of isolating elements of Palladian design such as the Serliana window motif, or the cross axial planning of the villa. He then goes on to demonstrate how American builders used these elements without necessarily understanding the proportions which were such an important part of Palladio's secret formula. Nichols' careful breakdown of Neo-Palladian structures makes quite clear the different components. The reader obtains a firmer understanding of the nature of Neo-Palladianism in the United States. Nichols then discusses the progress of the movement in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries. This part of the essay develops into a veiled plea for the continuing influence of Palladio today. Nichols, the eminent scholar of Thomas Jefferson's architecture, seems to imply that what was good architecturally for the young Republic still best summarizes the nation's deep-seated aspirations for order, stability, and balance. In order to bring home the point, Nichols has to pass off the Gothic Revival as a detour from the true path of American taste. He also has to dig deeply to exhume such latter-day exemplars of Neo-Palladianism as Charles Platt and William Lawrence Bottomley. The work of these men looks fine indeed, even in the inadequate illustrations, but they can hardly be described as being in step with developments in world architecture between the two World Wars. To call John Russel Pope's gigantesque Broad Street Railroad Station Neo-Palladian is stretching a definition to the breaking point. Like Guinness and Sadler, Nichols fails to see real Neo-Palladianism as a social as well as an architectural phenomenon. A paternalistic social framework, a humanistic sense of "the mean between the extremes", these are components indispensable to the successful Neo-Palladian aesthetic. Remove this framework and you have empty pastiches of Palladio.

Certain rare moments in history have been ripe for Neo-Palladianism. The period of the American Revolution was certainly one of them. Washington and Jefferson had, as part of their culture, an ingrained appreciation of Palladio's architecture. They also saw the applicability of it to the plantation houses and public buildings of a new nation. A happy bicentennial by-product of both *Palladio in America* and *Palladio a Western Progress* is the awareness the books create of the importance of architecture for the Founding Fathers.

Pierre du PREY
Queen's University
Kingston