The Essence of the Belvedere: *Ambulatio* and Representation

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Never before has there been greater emphasis in society to embrace the natural environment and to make as little impact as possible on the ground we walk on. The time to reconsider the relationship between built space and natural space has been rapidly approaching and is now eminently upon us. The discussions that underlie the specific correlation between architecture and nature reveal hope for a fresh approach toward meaningful dwelling. The architectural object that stands poised to pioneer that endeavor is the *belvedere.*

Originating from and literally meaning "beautiful view" in Italian, *the belvedere* commands the unique position in the built environment designed and constructed precisely for the enjoyment of a view or intellectual connection to the landscape. In 18th-century French garden theory, the belvedere means "a place where you discover a beautiful view" and "a pavilion erected on a site where you discover a beautiful view."[1] A modern scholar compared the *belvedere* to "the place where one goes to verify that the landscape really looks like a postcard."[2] He was speaking of a built object situated within the landscape such that the visitor could enjoy the beauty of the natural view. This belvedere was sited with such specificity that, without the intervention, the postcard-like view would have been entirely impossible. The belvedere provided both an access point and perceptual balance; a place between being *in* nature and being *without* nature altogether.

The concept of the constructed belvedere gleans its original richness from early domestic Italian architecture. The ancient atrium house, or *domus*, was an inward facing city house; a windowless structure derived from Etruscan tomb architecture.[3] Hot summers and disease within the cities caused those who could evacuate to take up more "healthy" country residences along the Bay of Naples.[4] These country villas and their subsequent Hellenistic transformations[5] mingled together the later compact platform-villa with the less restricted seaside villas of the first century BC.[6] These villas, now unencumbered by the lack of space, were allowed to spread out and connect with nature at an unprecedented level that was impossible within the city.

Beginning as a simple farm house, the Villa of the Mysteries stood on a rectangular platform called a *basis villae*, a term used by Cicero in a letter to his brother.[7] The basis villa is essentially a terrace that wraps the building, affording the inhabitants a place to enjoy the view—a *belvedere.* Each change at the Villa of the Mysteries marked an increased desire for the view within the Roman culture. While original atrium houses stood flat on the ground, this villa was already displaying a developing trend in the late 3rd century BC to raise the building off the ground in reverence for the beautiful view that lay in the distance. The subsequent addition of two belvederes towards the middle of the first century AD marks a critical transformation in the history of the atrium house,[8] and opened outward toward the magnificent view of the bay (Figure 1).[9] The very identity of the villa was transformed by the addition of the belvedere and the ability to experience the distant view.

At the Villa of the Mysteries, there is a strong correlation between the constructed belvedere and the active, ambulatory participation of the visitor. Research has specifically described this villa "which stood southeast of modern Castellammare and commanded an extraordinary view of the Bay and of Mt. Vesuvius, the principal portico overlooked an *ambulatio* nearly seventy meters in length."[10] The term *ambulatio* in Latin means to stroll or walk about. The terrace space built for the enjoyment of the view was undoubtedly ample and would have been large enough for walking or strolling (Figure 2). While the two L-shaped terraces were believed to contain hanging gardens,[11] the space around the perimeter clearly encouraged active participation in both the garden view at hand as well as the distant view of the Bay of Naples to the southwest. In addition to the open garden terrace, a

porticoed terrace rests along the perimeter of the house on three sides, offering opportunity for a covered stroll and a framed view through the portico.

Subsequent renovations added before the earthquake in 64 AD enlarged, increased and covered the newest belvedere. The large exedra, almost 33 feet in both directions, was the grand addition, giving the villa enormous presence while providing the occupants more covered space for viewing the bay in the distance. Interestingly, while the interior renovations reduced the size of most rooms, there was an obvious and intentional effort placed toward increasing the exterior amenities, both in size and in function. This is an excellent example of the prevailing trend to add greater emphasis to the importance of the view.

In addition to the expansive exedra, two *diaetae,* were added to each side of the semi-circular exedra. Located on the periphery, these day rooms provided a more private enclosed space while maintaining spectacular views to the sea. One scholar described them as "belvedere rooms"; "little viewing pavilions" that stressed precise views from the perspective of one lounging on a daybed.[12] These two rooms with carefully placed windows illustrate an increased desire for the *framed* view of the natural landscape. The devotion to the framed view, in addition to the panoramic view, would continue to grow exponentially for the next two centuries, becoming more sought after in architecture as it continued to develop through the literary works of Pliny the Younger and later in *Silvae* by Statius.

Finally, and perhaps most notably, the new addition of a large double colonnaded portico belvedere enveloping the south side of the building provided an inviting covered promenade looking out to the countryside and the allure of green vistas. This is significant in terms of understanding certain rituals where the belvedere played a considerable role. The interior lines of passage and view within the home were significant for the reception of visitors. While a visitor may have glimpsed an axial view to the garden upon their arrival, their main objective would have been to be invited into the garden itself to experience both the garden at hand and the panoramic view in the distance. Both space and social structure were embedded in rituals that determined who was allowed to move from the public to the private sphere depending on their current social status.[13] The addition of the portico allowed certain invited guests to enjoy a decisively different ritual of the *ambulatio*, or walk around the portico belvedere with magnificent views of both the garden and the distant landscape. This correlation of strolling within the belvedere carries through from the basis villa belvedere to the portico belvedere and manifests itself inside the villa where the wall paintings portray a kinetic sense of spatial provocation.

The ambulatory nature of the ancient belvedere is expressed in the wall paintings of a bedroom at the Villa of the Mysteries called Cubiculum 16. Research has revealed that the manner in which angles are drawn encourage viewers to move toward the back of the room to look first at the back wall from the room's main axis of entry (Figure 3). The directional orthogonal angles seem to originate from the back wall, as if the three walls were conceptually unfolded in the artist's mind, and then folded back again to enclose the space of the room.[14] This form of kinetic engagement is consistent with other perspective constructions that use either this technique or multiple viewpoints, to achieve a sense of movement in the space.

This type of visual exchange is again evident in the details within the architectural painting on the rear wall of Cubiculum 16. The perceptual depth of the architecture in the background, viewed through multiple layers of porticoed belvederes, is intentionally intensified through the use of multiple convergence points, as opposed to a single vanishing point (Figure 4). By using multiple convergence points, the artist intentionally maximized the content of the painting while minimizing perspectival distortion. The repeated use of multiple convergence points in wall paintings is consistent enough to consider them intentional. Likewise, the frequent use of columned portico

belvederes in wall paintings attests to the desire for the simultaneous distant and nearby view. The intricate layering of space in paintings is undoubtedly drawn from actual space.

This style of wall painting, known as the Second Style, makes a clear departure from the previous interior decoration of the First Style. The First Style was in use from the 2nd century BC to around 80 BC and characterized by the use of solid color or continuous surface decoration to delineate the boundaries of each space. Conversely, the Second Style, used from approximately 80-30 BC, took a dramatic advance and opened up the windowless walls.[15] By utilizing the geometry of the available wall space, multiple convergence points, and layering conventions, the viewer is asked to choose between focusing on either the illusionistic remote view or the view at hand. This sophisticated system of representation places the most important emphasis on the experience of the spatial image rather than following strict conventions of drawing. The experience of the view represented in painting is consistent with that of the constructed belvedere in actual space.

Artists also used color, composition and multiple layering techniques to encourage movement within the room. For example, a *tholos*, painted in one of the alcoves is farthest away in terms of layering, but because of its compositional position and color, it can be perceived as being much closer to the viewer. This cylindrical building, commonly considered a temple or shrine, stands centrally poised; allowing for the intentional shifting between the remote view and the immediate. This perceptual shifting is consistent with the manner in which both the early and late belvederes were designed and constructed at the Villa of the Mysteries.

Wall paintings of the Second Style presented a spatial experience. The formal structure and composition of their wall paintings denotes that artists during this period valued the role of perception and showed an apparent preference for diversified representations of space. Artists were conveying the subjective and intellectual aspects of sensory experience and this suggests that they sought to actively engage viewers. It is evident that the use of layering and perspective in wall paintings were not simply used to record visual impressions on a two-dimensional surface.[16]

It is worthwhile here to examine the intentions of representation, to *re*-present. Why do we need to re-present what is already there to experience? Why do we feel the need to build a physical place that is meant specifically for viewing? Is the landscape itself not enough? Can we not stand on any hill or at any window and view the landscape quite effectively? Can we not appreciate the view and feel the spirit of the land from multiple viewpoints? Why then would designers go to such lengths to build the belvedere, a place intentionally created for viewing the landscape? The motives behind representation extend to the depths of dialogue.

Representation is an active engagement undertaken by the artist who is interested in the expression of a particular point of view or experience. It is often considered the beginning of a conversation, where the viewer has as much to do with the depth and outcome of the work as the artist. The belvedere builders were quite specific in the planning and construction of these spaces for viewing. While the specificity of their individual intentions continues to be examined through careful cultural study, it is not too early to begin to think about the belvedere as a multi-dimensional form of landscape representation, realized within the very particular scale of the human.

Different from traditional two-dimensional representation, the constructed belvedere commands participation through the movement of the human body and mind. The resulting perception comes through immediate physical experience at the scale of the person while the landscape still remains somewhat incomprehensible in its monumental and scale-less totality. The belvedere acts as a liaison; assisting in the transport between near and far. But different from that of an arbitrary point in space, the belvedere implies where you stand and what you see; in effect, re-presenting the landscape to the viewer from a specific assemblage of planned viewpoints.

The belvederes constructed at the Villa of the Mysteries were designed with this constant visual exchange at play, a persistent, intentional shuttling between the remote view and the

immediate. Each of the belvedere additions, such as the *exedra*, *diaetae* and colonnaded portico, made possible a space that was experienced and perceived through the frame of the portico with the beautiful view in the distance. This visual drama is played out through extensive layering of physical space, and mutually reflected in the wall paintings inside the villa. The belvedere thus becomes the stage where the perceptual discourse between near and far complements the ambulatory activity within the belvedere; the viewer becomes engaged in his own mind and body through the belvedere.

What the belvedere provides is therefore not an isolated building object, but rather the ambulatory experience of participation within a meaningful spatial sequence. With the projected view towards nature, the belvedere provides a means by which human beings re-present the landscape for poetical dwelling.

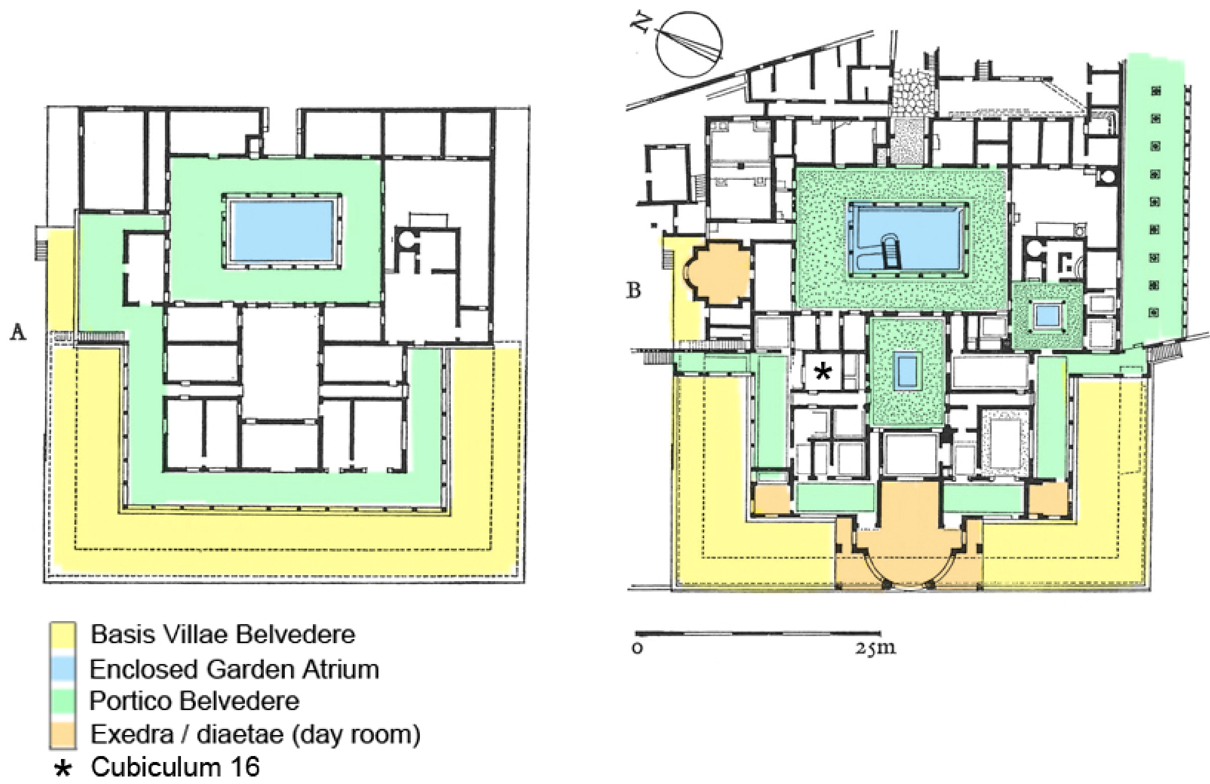

Figure1. Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii. (A) 2nd century AD; (B) just before the earthquake of 62 AD. Drawings from Axel Boëthius and J. B. Ward-Perkins, *Etruscan and Roman Architecture* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 320, Figure 123. Color coding and index by Phyllis Henderson.

Figure 2. Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii. Photo by Phyllis Henderson, 2002.

Figure 3. The fresco of Cubiculum 16, Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii, from Filippo Coarelli, Alfredo Foglia and Pio Foglia, *Pompeii* (New York: Riverside Book Co., 2002), 358.

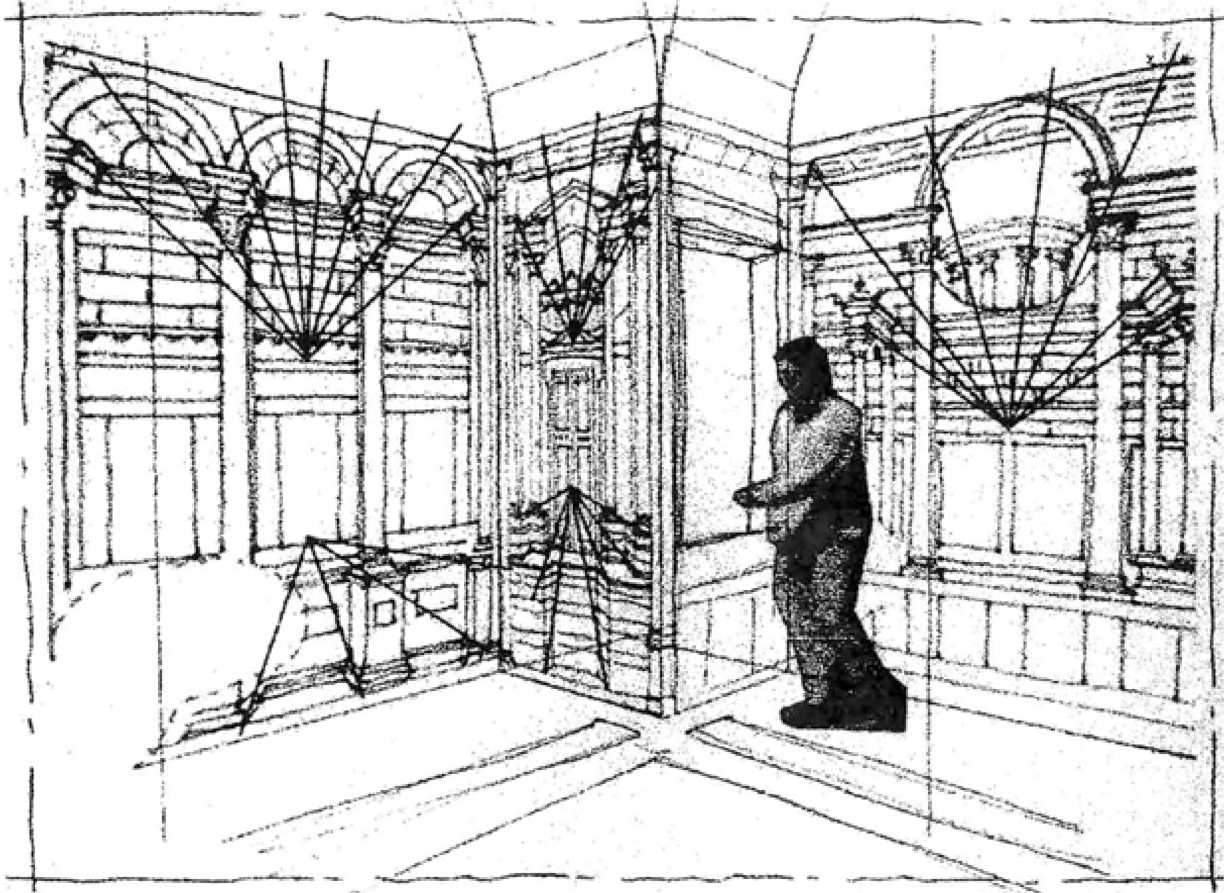

Figure 4. Perspective analysis of the fresco of Cubiculum 16, Villa of the Mysteries, Pompeii, from Philip Todd Stinson, “Light and Space in the Villa of the Mysteries,” a master’s thesis of the University of California, Los Angeles (2001), 75.

Endnotes

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[1] Michel Conan, *Dictionnair Historique de l'Art des Jardins* (France: Hazan, 1997), 38.
[2] Andre Corboz quoted in James Corner, *Recovering Landscape : Essays in Contemporary Landscape Architecture* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), 80.
[3] David James Stanley II, "The Origin and Development of the Renaissance Belvedere in Central Italy," a PhD dissertation of Pennsylvania State University (1978), 10.
[4] Judith Harris, *Pompeii Awakened : A Story of Rediscovery* (London: I. B. Tauris, 2007), 11.
[5] Stanley II, 12.
[6] Axel Boëthius and J. B. Ward-Perkins, *Etruscan and Roman Architecture* (Harmondsworth: Penguin, 1970), 319.
[7] Marcus Tullius Cicero and W. Glynn Williams, *The Letters to His Friends* (London: W. Heinemann, 1929), 552-54.
[8] Boëthius, 319.
[9] Wilhelmina Mary Feemster Jashemski, Appendices, *The Gardens of Pompeii : Herculaneum and the Villas Destroyed by Vesuvius*, vol. I (New Rochelle, NY: Caratzas Bros., 1979), 318.
[10] John H. D'Arms, *Romans on the Bay of Naples; a Social and Cultural Study of the Villas and Their Owners from 150 BC to AD 400* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1970), 128-29.
[11] Jashemski, Appendices, vol. II, 282.
[12] John R Clarke, *The Houses of Roman Italy, 100 B.C.-A.D. 250 : Ritual, Space, and Decoration* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1991), 12-20.
[13] Ibid., 19.
[14] Philip Todd Stinson, "Light and space in the Villa of the Mysteries," a master's thesis of the University of California, Los Angeles (2001), 22-37.
[15] Clarke, 33.
[16] Stinson, 1.