

# Afternoon House II: Radical/Conservative

Text Carl Douglas

The Afternoon House series is an ongoing research project leveraging belated or obsolete architectural techniques and ideas to explore the way that architecture makes world-order perceptible. What is the nature of the world, and how do we fit into it? Is it a chaos to be protected from? An ecology we must not upset? A pleasure-garden to marvel at? A blank canvas? A pool of resources with economic value?

Architecture answers this question over and over again. Andrea Palladio, for example, believed in a stable and orderly world, with humans its most important occupant. Thus his Villa Rotonda is an orientation device, a compass rose inhabited by a rational and dignified subject. Postmodern philosophy, by contrast, tended to describe the world as essentially incomprehensible. For some this was intoxicating, a world of unrestricted play; for others it was frightening, a world without ethics or purpose. This view, premised on disconnection and fragmentation has given way in the twenty-first century to interconnection and complexity: ecologies; networks; programmes.

Afternoon House II is a revision of Palladio's Villa for a world the architect could not imagine. It consists of a black shell of layered in-situ concrete, enclosed, partitioned, and furnished in light timber and fine steel joinery. The shell is formed by linear rhythms of solid and void. One rhythm establishes three semi-circular spaces: a library at the east end; a salon; and a dining room. As these spaces intersect with the niches, vestibules, and skylights of the longitudinal corridor, they break up the mass of the house, allowing the afternoon sun to break in. Complexity develops as simple rhythms slip in and out of phase with each other, converge and interfere. Although each pattern is rigorous and repetitive, no two of the resulting spaces are identical.

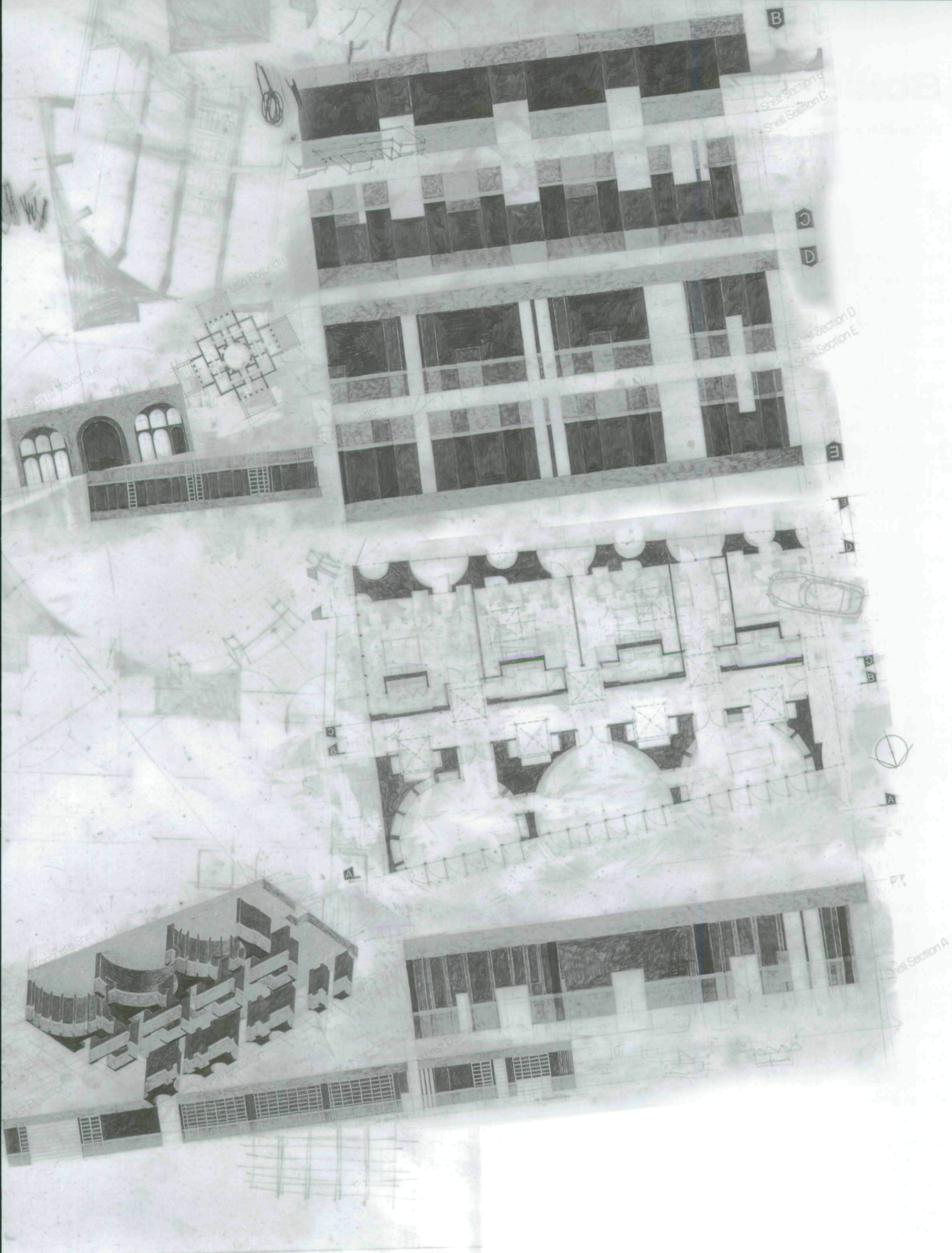
This abstract geometry played out in plan may seem to be an intellectual exercise. After all, nobody experiences a plan, do they? In response to the high level of conceptual abstraction in late twentieth-century architecture, a number of architects have emphasised the direct realities of perception – the warmth of sun on stone, the fragrance of a garden drifting in through a window, the weight of a door. This school is sometimes referred to as 'haptic'

or 'phenomenological'. But this is a misunderstanding of perception (to say nothing of phenomenology). Perception is a cognitive operation. Your eyes, for example, are not cameras sending fully-formed pictures to the brain. Sight is an active process. Streaming data from at least two types of optical sensor in the eyeball, the brain constructs an approximate working model which is continually being refined or redefined. New sensory data is either assimilated to the model or requires it to be updated. Gaps, ambiguities, or contradictions in the model prompt the brain to direct further sensory resources to the problem. The sense that you are seeing one cohesive world is an illusion your neural systems work very hard to produce.

No perception is 'direct', and there is no reason to accord simple perceptions a greater degree of reality than complex perceptions, like that of a plan. Although the plan is not sensed directly in the way that heat, darkness, or solidity are sensed, it is nonetheless perceived. It is not a matter of the mind against the senses: it is incorrect to oppose cognitive order and sensory experience. Experience is also cognitive and order sensory.

Palladio wants the body's model of the Villa to coincide directly with the geometry used to construct it. This order is to be disclosed as quickly as possible: lucid geometry presented directly to the mind's eye. Beyond seeing the house, he wants us to recognise it (believing, wrongly, that in this way the rational mind, feeding on sensory data, had access to ultimate natural realities). The perception of architectural order in Afternoon House II is the slow subconscious piecing together of consistencies and inconsistencies, repetition and difference. It may take some time – many visits, or the intimate engagement of long-term inhabitation – to form a coherent model. Rather than a centring machine like the Villa Rotonda, Afternoon House II is carved by orders that originate at a distance, and are only passing through on the way to somewhere else.

Afternoon House II, hand drawn, generated in plan and devoid of context, is belated in every respect but one: insistence on a world of complexity perceived from within, not Renaissance anthropomorphism or postmodern fragmentation. It aims to be the inverse of architecture that is radical in form but conservative in substance.



Carl Douglas: Afternoon House II (2006/09); pencil on film.

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