

## The ultimate Italian villa

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If, when his reign came to an end in AD138, the Roman emperor Hadrian's villa had come up for sale, the estate agent's details would have been something to behold: 900 rooms, indoor and outdoor swimming pools, gyms, theatres, libraries and even underground parking for chariots, set in more than 120 hectares of landscaped gardens with elaborate waterworks and sculpture.

The villa, located near Tivoli, outside Rome, was one of the grandest private residences ever built. Even in ruins, it remains an inspiration for architects and others.

More than a home, Hadrian's Villa was also a political and public building far more nuanced and complex in its architectural message than, say, the palace of Versailles. It was standard practice for each new emperor to build himself a sumptuous residence, if not more than one. Inevitably these buildings were a reflection of the emperor's character and of imperial intent. Hadrian's predecessors, such as Domitian, aimed for simple expressions of sheer power in the capital, Rome. But Hadrian was a notable patron of architecture (he was also responsible for building the Pantheon in Rome as well as the wall that bears his name in the UK) and his country villa came to represent something quite different.

By bringing the elements of classical architecture into unprecedented harmonious and playful arrangement, Hadrian created a monumental advertisement for his new regime. His villa was "a model for living rather than conquering", suggests the architect and planner Sir Terry Farrell.

Parts of the villa still stand three or four storeys high. This site, rather than continually built-upon Rome, therefore became a focal point for the rediscovery of the glory of the Roman empire during the Renaissance. The buildings, and the unusual way they are grouped together, inspired Palladio in the 16th century, Piranesi in the 18th and Le Corbusier in the 20th.

"It's a sort of ancient architectural zoo," says the classicist architect Robert Adam, "with bits got from here and bits from there, containing enormous variety with very relaxed planning of the site."

According to one Roman writer, the villa recreates architectural treasures from far-flung Greece and Egypt. Ironically, however, the much-travelled Hadrian – the only emperor who could claim to have seen most of his empire – spent little time at his villa and the view of it as a kind of

model village has now been discredited.

“He wanted to indicate the significance of these places; he didn’t want to reproduce them literally,” explains Benedetta Adembri, the director of the site. “He wanted to have elements that were cultural symbols of exotic places in the empire.” It is perhaps more accurate, therefore, to think of Hadrian’s villa as a showcase of entirely new structures imaginatively representing the known world.

The sheer bravura of the buildings encourages this notion. “What’s so exciting is that they are so novel,” says Thorsten Opper, the curator of *Hadrian: Empire and Conflict*, a new exhibition at the British Museum in London. “It was a period of great advance in design and technology.” The Pantheon, for example, remains to this day the largest roof span achieved in unreinforced concrete.

“At the villa,” Opper continues, “there are domes, semi-domes and segments that are playful and innovative. Some buildings simply have no precedent. Many of the structures are for entertaining, which made it very influential, as visiting senators went away full of ideas.”

Apart from the technical and stylistic invention, there is also the sheer scale of the project. For the architectural historian Joseph Rykwert, the appeal lies in “the hugeness of it, and the fact that it was obviously meant to be both a place for work and leisure, but also a representative place. It all ties together and is very elaborately arranged for how different visitors would arrive and be welcomed.”

One reason that Hadrian’s villa continues to beguile visitors today is that it is quite unlike emblematic political residences today, be they democratic or totalitarian. It’s not bombastic like Ceausescu’s palace, nor does it strive to be folksy, like Camp David.

So for modern-day equivalents of Hadrian’s villa we should perhaps look not to dictators’ dachas or even presidential libraries but to the museums erected by great art patrons.

The Getty Center in Santa Monica, California, designed by Richard Meier, is a grand hilltop jumble of geometric buildings directly influenced by classical precedents. Meanwhile, Abu Dhabi’s plans to transform an island into a cultural district with a Guggenheim museum by Frank Gehry, a Louvre by Jean Nouvel and other buildings by British architects Zaha Hadid and David Adjaye show a stylistic pluralism similar to that of Hadrian’s retreat.

The villa went up relatively quickly but probably not without pain. There is an apocryphal story that Hadrian had one architect executed for daring to criticise his taste. “Hadrian was an architect but he had a team of unnamed architects,” says Adembri. “So he was like a master planner today.” They would have overseen not only the complex structural work but also the elaborate supply of water to the many pools and baths as well as the massive earthworks required to create the grand terraces and slopes that give the site much of its drama.

With his long absences from the construction site, it is impossible that Hadrian was responsible for every detail. Nevertheless, the extraordinary variety and harmony of the final composition attests to the emperor’s aesthetic judgment. As Edward Gibbon wrote in *The Decline and Fall of the Roman Empire*: “The public monuments with which Hadrian adorned every province of the empire were executed not only by his orders but under his immediate inspection. He was himself an artist; and he loved the arts, as they conduced to the glory of the monarch.”

The villa is of course classical in style but breaks many of the rules laid down by Vitruvius, the permanent arbiter of Roman architectural taste. “You can use it to defend classicism and anti-classicism,” says Adam. The site appeals equally to modernists and traditionalists. “It’s just interesting and flexible.” It includes many highly original interpretations of standard Roman building types. Yet little space is wasted, with odd left-over areas between grander rooms often utilised as individual lavatories – an unheard-of luxury in Roman times.

But it is how the major elements relate to one another and to the landscape that is the key to the pleasure of the place. You stroll from one architectural tour de force to the next along almost accidental paths. A central feature such as the Maritime Theatre – the little island house ringed by its own little canal that Hadrian used as a summer retreat – is approached from a modest side alley, not along a grand vista, for example. As a consequence, one is delighted by what one sees rather than discounting it because it has been looming in advance. The free composition subtly transmits a message of greater political freedom.

This idea of having “architecture mark out a series of extraordinary interior and exterior episodes in the landscape,” as Richard MacCormac puts it, transcends periods and styles.

MacCormac's firm, MJP Architects, has endeavoured to follow a similar pattern in the clusters of university buildings it has designed as well as in its large-scale plan for the expansion of the University of Cambridge.

These days, Hadrian's Villa inspires not only architects but any visitor who responds to its heady mix of ruins, greenery, views and water. It contains all the elements of what Rykwert calls "idyllic landscape".

For the landscape architect Kim Wilkie, water is the essential element. "Water is such an ageless surface and reflections play so artfully with surviving structures that it makes it seem easier to slip back through time. A pool for pleasure is immediately familiar, and then the arches and statues do the rest." Wilkie recalls a visit to the site earlier this year. " 'Villa' had made the place sound rather sweet and Arcadian, so the scale was a wonderful shock. The vastness was somehow made better by the uncertainty over the purpose of each ruin and confusion of how everything fitted together. If there is no definite knowledge it frees you to make it up for yourself. You are drawn into a childlike mood of exploration."

*'Hadrian: Empire and Conflict'* is at the British Museum, London, until October 26;  
[www.britishmuseum.org](http://www.britishmuseum.org)

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