Kaiser-Wilhelm-Gedächtniskirche dissolves into shadow, Germany’s imperial past eclipsed by the brashness of neon signage and streetlights.

A recurring theme that emerged from the Stadtmuseum exhibitions concerned the vital role played by the “modern woman” in performing the modernities figured by the *Grossstadt*. The military precision of the immensely popular “girl” revues staged throughout the city invoked the standardized production of the assembly line. Out and about in the street, adorned with the latest perfume, legs clad in nylon stockings, woman’s body became the enticing vehicle for parading new chemical discoveries through which natural substances (silk, as well as plant- and animal-derived scents) were replaced by synthetics. Exhibition viewers were thus reminded of the extent to which entertainment and luxury industries (such as perfume) were not simply diversions from the nation’s growing industrial and military might, but rather its necessary corollary.

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Related Publications

Notes
1. The film *Tanz auf dem Vulkan*, directed by Hans Steinhoff and starring Gustaf Grundgens in the role of an actor and singer (it is he who sings “Die Nacht ist nicht allein zum Schlafen da”), is set in Paris in 1830. There was an earlier silent film (1920) of the same name, directed by Richard Eichberg and starring Bela Lugosi.
3. Museums and art galleries are increasingly including perfumes in exhibitions and events. The Museum of Arts and Design in New York now includes a Department of Olfactory Art. The subject is of growing interest also among architects and urban planners. See, for example, Victoria Henshaw, *Urban Smellscapes: Understanding and Designing City Smell Environments* (New York: Routledge, 2014).

Figure 1 Jupp Wiertz, *Berlin bei Nacht*, 1928, Stadtmuseum Berlin (photo by Michael Setzpfandt).
meaning and “uniqueness” and whether a “Renaissance design approach” can still be valid today. The seventy-two exhibits were then laid out in a broadly chronological sequence, beginning with schemes by Palladio himself and ending—emphatically—with a wide range of works dating from very recent times. These various items were clustered under such headings as “Reinventing Antiquity,” “Spreading the Word,” “Statement Architecture,” “Postmodern Palladianism,” and “Abstract Palladianism,” which also appear in the accompanying catalogue. The contention, therefore, was that “Palladianism” is not just a historical style or period that formed an important part of the classical tradition (particularly in England) but a phenomenon that continues to find wide expression today.

A large number of the exhibits were drawn from the RIBA’s own collections, which happen to be extremely well furnished with drawings by Palladio and the English “Palladians.” This coverage was augmented by early architectural publications as well as by facsimiles of other drawings and photographs of buildings. Pride of place went to two large and spectacular models, one of 1721 for James Gibbs’s St Martin-in-the-Fields in London and the other (borrowed for the occasion) documenting an unexecuted scheme of 2008, the work of OFFICE (Kersten Geers and David Van Severen), for a mostly subterranean villa in the city of Ordos in China (Figure 1). A key element of the exhibition’s agenda, therefore, was to exploit the RIBA’s own resources in line with the commendable wish to reconnect architectural practice with history.

The exhibits were mainly disposed around the perimeter of the display space, some on the walls but many, such as the books, on custom-made wooden fittings rather resembling workbenches. This strategy, devised by London architectural firm Caruso St John, undoubtedly assisted in the close grouping of objects of such diverse kinds, and the overall effect was reasonably harmonious. Some of the more sizable exhibits, however, such as the two large models, had to be accommodated on workbench islands in the middle of the space, and so outside their designated order. For some reason, moreover, the perimeter sequence was organized in a counterclockwise, rather than clockwise, direction, meaning that the exhibits and the accompanying narrative of the text panels were destined to be viewed—rather unnaturally—from right to left.

Despite the seeming coherence of the exhibition and its agenda, various conceptual ambiguities were glossed over. The trouble with the term Palladian is that it is so very elastic—it can refer to certain strands of English architectural history nurtured in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries by Inigo Jones and Lord Burlington (who both took particular inspiration from the Palladio drawings that they owned and that are now held by the RIBA) or to a wider stylistic phenomenon owing some kind of debt to Palladio that flourished in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries across mainland Europe and America, or else it can simply indicate that a particular scheme has some visual or notional connection with Palladio, however tenuous that connection may be.

Figure 1 Installation view of Palladian Design: The Good, the Bad and the Unexpected, The Architecture Gallery, RIBA, London, 2015 (courtesy of the RIBA; photo by Ioana Marinescu).
This problem is then compounded by the fact that connections between “Palladian” buildings, even those of Palladio’s most devoted followers, and the works (and ideology) of the historical Palladio are often simplistic and formulaic, and sometimes there are no intentional links at all. The exhibition made little attempt to elucidate what should usefully be meant by the term Palladian, and, in fact, it exacerbated the problem by extending the term’s remit to include several works that have little or no dependence on Palladio. These included Gibbs’s St Martin-in-the-Fields, which is “Palladian” only by virtue of its having a pedimented portico, and schemes such as Duncan Macleod’s Mereworth Castle (1927) in Belfast, which have little to do with Palladio—or with the English eighteenth-century “Palladians”—other than in having, again, pedimented porticoes. This conflation between what might helpfully be termed Palladian and what is just a generically classical design was perhaps best illustrated in the exhibition by a drawing made for a row of three-story terrace houses in London (ca. 1790) by the architect and developer Michael Searles, a scheme placing a modest emphasis on the center and ends, but otherwise lacking in any feature of a specifically “Palladian” pedigree or even a “Palladian” parallel.

Such conceptual problems were especially acute in relation to the exhibition’s coverage of the more recent schemes. A couple of twentieth-century buildings, a country house of 1992 by Alan Greenberg in Connecticut and a smaller villa of 1994 by Duncan Stroik in Indiana, were juxtaposed early on with schemes by Palladio and then Lord Burlington and others, as if the aims of these eighteenth- and twentieth-century architects were somehow equivalent. Other domestic schemes, one in the form of a model for Julian Bicknell’s Henbury Hall (1984) in Cheshire (strikingly similar to Colen Campbell’s Mereworth Castle in Kent of 1723), were then included much later on, but in the company of other works of very different style, ancestry, and association. This resurfacing of classicism, with its sporadic referencing of Palladio and the “Palladians,” was then differentiated from the themes of the final two sections, where the term Palladian now took on yet other significances. “Postmodern Palladianism” grouped together recent schemes that quote (or were purported to quote) features from Palladio’s buildings, but whether this kind of design strategy should be usefully regarded as a further manifestation of “Palladianism” is open to serious question. “Abstract Palladianism” then stretched the viability of the term even further. This final section focused on various schemes that have, visually, little or nothing in common with Palladio’s, such as the Brick House in London (2005) by Caruso St John (the exhibition’s designers) and the OFFICE scheme for a largely subterranean villa, which was here compared—bafflingly—to an upside-down section of Palladio’s Villa Rotunda. Yet we can also begin to see from these schemes in particular just why it is that certain architects continue to view (or claim they view) Palladio with such reverence: Palladio’s works, over time, have accrued associations with concepts of architecture that appear to justify the rhetorical positions adopted by many modern-day practitioners, concepts such as architecture’s “universal language” and its “archetypal and geometric qualities,” which may be extremely nebulous but nonetheless have great power.

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Related Publication

SubUrbanisms: Casino Urbanization, Chinatowns, and the Contested American Landscape
Museum of Chinese in America, New York

Museum of Chinese in America, New York

If the United States, sprawling and diverse, can be difficult to see, the milieu of new immigrants, especially poor ones, is even less visible. A pair of exhibitions at the Museum of Chinese in America helped bring that world into focus: SubUrbanisms, which explored the lives of Chinese immigrants in twenty-first-century Norwich, Connecticut; and Chinese Style, which documented the mid-twentieth-century career of Chinatown-born architect Poy Gum Lee. SubUrbanisms, curated by Stephen Fan, a young Chinese American architect who grew up, in part, in Norwich, told the fascinating story of Chinese workers lured from New York City beginning around 2001 to work at Mohegan Sun, the massive casino complex developed by the Mohegan Tribe in the late 1990s on the site of a shuttered plant that made components for nuclear reactors. Norwich, like much of southeastern New England, industrialized early. A century ago, its bustling mills attracted thousands of new immigrants from the Lower East Side, mostly Italians and Jews (including several of my great-grandparents). As industry waned, however, downtown faded, and those who remained, like Americans coast to coast, spread out to a new ring of tract houses and commercial strips. It is here, rather than in the sagging duplexes that earlier generations of immigrants inhabited, where Fan found them. Immigrants in suburbia are not a new phenomenon in the United States. Since the 1965 reforms that reopened the nation’s doors, the majority of arrivals have skipped urban ethnic enclaves for the periphery, even in cities like New York. But apart from demographic data we have collected astonishing little information about the trend, especially in terms of architecture. Scholars like Shenglin Chang, writing a decade ago about the houses of Taiwanese binationals in California, and David Ley, who two decades ago deconstructed the so-called monster house, have explored the complicated relationships among design, ethnicity, and nationality, but mainly for small numbers of upper-income households.1 Most of what we know about the material environments of ordinary immigrants in suburbia comes from the eleven o’clock local news when tragic fires strike.

With Fan’s keen eye for the physical, quasi-ethnographic approach to research, and evident talent for convincing tenants to invite him into their homes, SubUrbanisms, which in an earlier run won the Vernacular Architecture Forum’s 2015 Buchanan Award, drew visitors’ attention to the difficult to discern—such as dirt paths that now wind