

# Villa Anguillara Sabazia

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## Abstract

In this paper I look at the “Villa Anguillara Sabazia” near Lake Bracciano in South Etruria and attempt to shed light on its peculiar design by examining the ways in which it functioned, was experienced and was perceived, as well as by drawing analogies with modern architecture. Scholars have noticed the villa’s unusual plan and atypical façade; they have followed, however, formalist comparisons with contemporary buildings rather than addressing the villa’s design.<sup>1</sup> I will point to qualities of the architectural design of the villa, which may have been appreciated in Roman times, and which we need to consider in order to increase our understanding of this Roman villa.

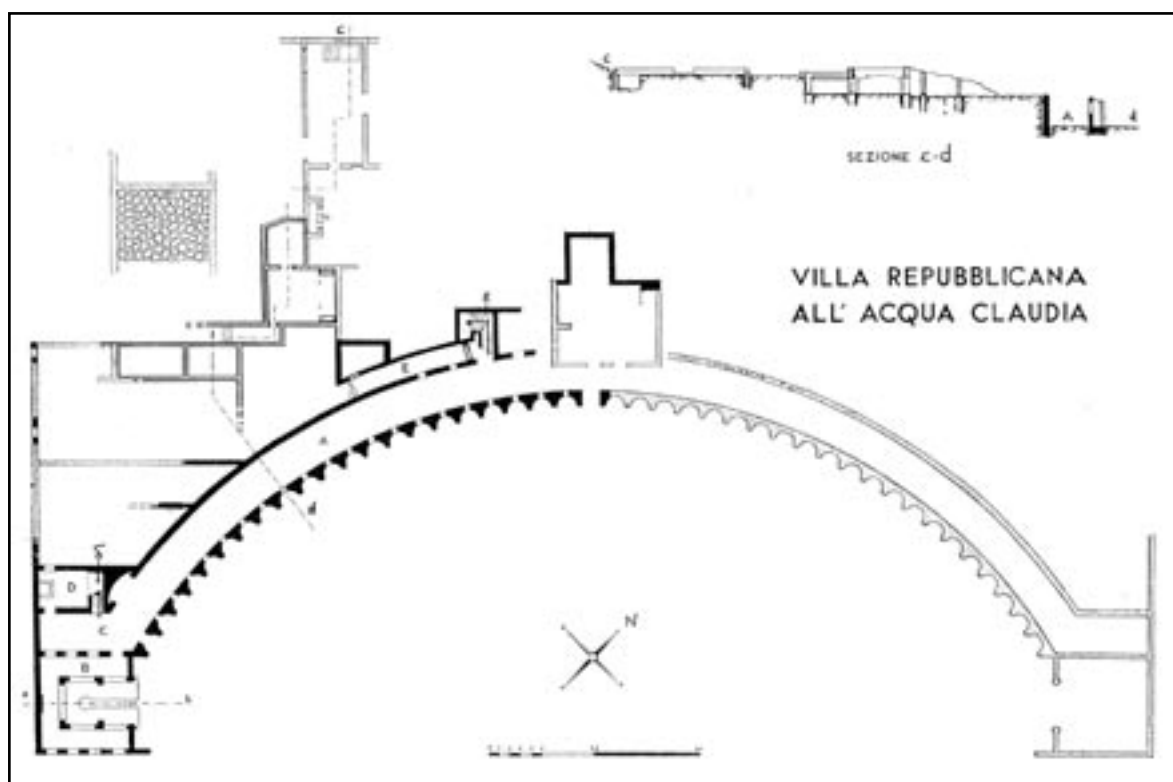


Fig. 1. Plan and section of the villa (Vighi, 1941, 148, fig. 4).

## Location and Dating

The so-called “Villa Anguillara Sabazia” (Fig. 1) lies in the modern location of Anguillara Sabazia, about 4 km from Lake Bracciano, in South Etruria. The villa is situated near a big source of mineral water, which today is exploited by the mineral water factory *Acqua Claudia*. In fact, the villa is located within the property of the *Acqua Claudia* factory near the train station of Anguillara

<sup>1</sup> “Villa Anguillara Sabazia” has been mentioned in the standard publications on ancient Roman villas: Mielsch 1999, 52–53. Förtsch 1993, 44, n. 479, 488; 45, n. 497, 502; 47, n. 526; 58, n. 672. Gros 2001, 301. Romizzi 2001, 111–115. Förtsch’s discussion of the villa is an exception, which however, aims at understanding the villa-letters of Pliny the Younger.

Sabazia. It is assumed that a 2-meter wide section of a Roman road, found 50 meters northeast from the villa, is the remains of a side road from the *Via Clodia*, through which the villa was accessed.<sup>2</sup> On the basis of its construction technique and inscriptional evidence, the villa is dated to the second quarter of the 1<sup>st</sup> century BCE.<sup>3</sup>

<sup>2</sup> Vighi 1940, 399.

<sup>3</sup> “Epigraphic evidence”: The letter shapes, in fragments of two different inscriptions found on the site, have Augustan characteristics: one fragment of inscription (no. 10) in Augustan characters found by Vighi, and another fragment of inscription (no. 19) in Augustan characters found before the excavation of the site. Vighi 1940, 415; 419. Construction technic: The villa is constructed in *opus quasi reticulatum* and regular levelling of tiles is employed in the semi-columns of the lower level: Vighi 1941, 146. The republican villa, which is incorporated

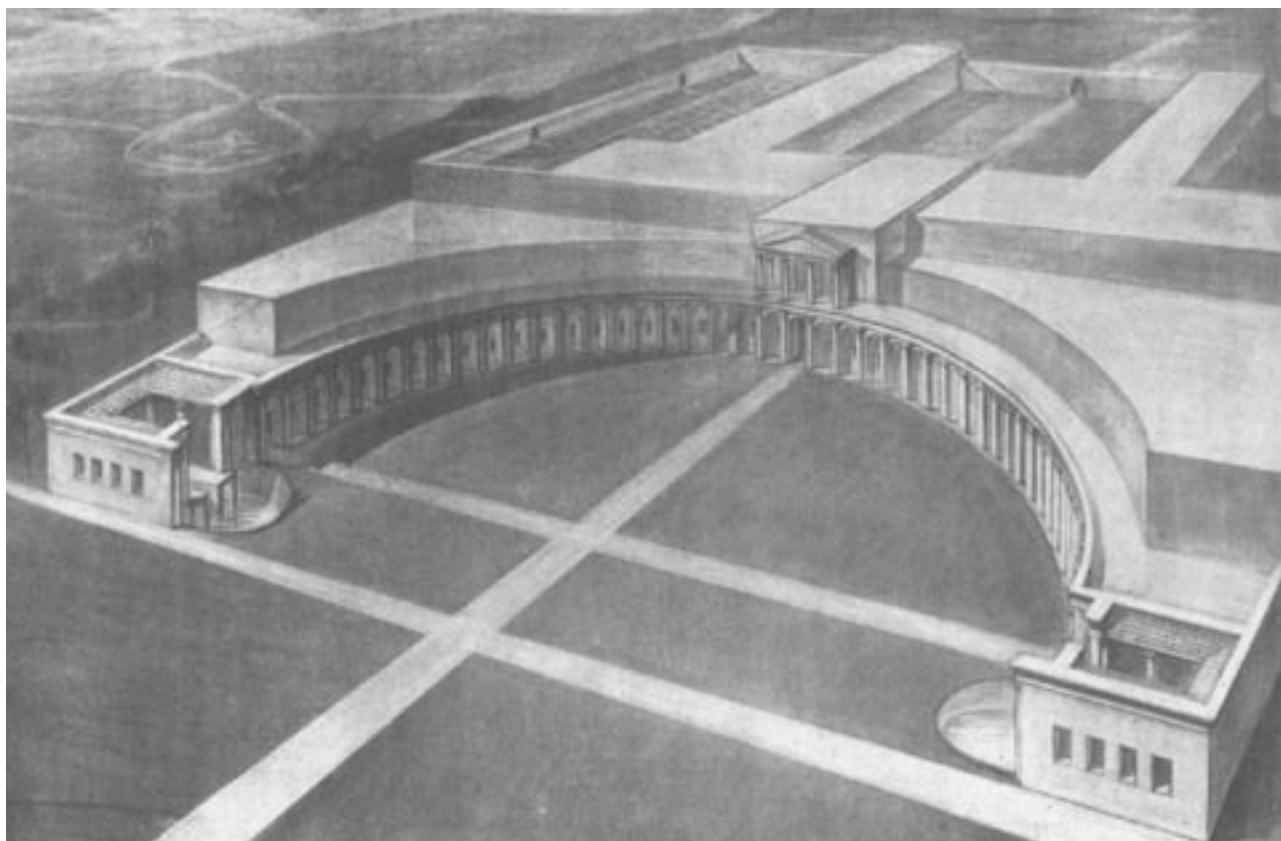


Fig. 2. Perspective overview of the villa, reconstruction by C. Alberto Carpiceci (Vighi, 1941, 150, fig. 5).

## Modern History of the Villa and its Curvilinear Peculiarity

“Villa Anguillara Sabazia” was found in 1934, when the Acqua Claudia factory undertook building construction at the site. Roberto Vighi excavated the site and published the excavation report in *Notizie degli Scavi* in 1940.<sup>4</sup> Vighi published further a fundamental study of the villa’s architecture in *Palladio*, in 1941. His intention was to address the instrumental role of the curved line in the architectural composition of the villa;<sup>5</sup> however, he focused on the result of the curved line on the villa’s appearance, that is, the curvilinear form of its exedra (Fig. 2). In Vighi’s analysis “Villa Anguillara Sabazia” marked the intermediate moment between the exedra of the Sanctuary of Fortuna Primigenia in Praeneste, and the semicircular niches in the Forum of Augustus.<sup>6</sup>

in Hadrian’s villa, has a similar construction technique and was originally dated to the Caesarian period; Vighi 1940, 411. In more recent studies this construction technique is dated between c. 100-60 BCE. The proposed dating (75-50 BCE) is based on the later inscriptional evidence in combination with the construction technique dating.

<sup>4</sup> Vighi 1940.

<sup>5</sup> “La definizione di «architettura curvilinea» va intesa, a mio parere, non con il significato limitato di architettura dell’arco e della volta, ma nel valore più completo di architettura in cui la linea curva entra come parte sostanziale nello sviluppo planimetrico.” Vighi 1941, 158, n. 13.

<sup>6</sup> Vighi 1941, 151.

Aside from the evolutionary agenda of this reading, I would like to point that the two structures are not comparable to the “Villa Anguillara Sabazia.” The semicircular niches in the Forum of Augustus are on the opposite sides of a forum and their relation is limited to the enclosed space within the forum; and the exedra of the Sanctuary of Fortuna Primigenia, is a theatre structure at the top of a sanctuary complex on a steep slope.

Unfortunately, since 1941 “Villa Anguillara Sabazia” has not merited much attention due to its incomplete excavation and its poor archaeological remains. Furthermore, the fact that it is not easily accessible has resulted in people knowing the villa as a plan rather than an archaeological site. Still, its unusual design has attracted some interest. However, instead of looking into the design of the villa, scholars have added more formalist comparisons. For example, Harald Mielsch compared it to the so-called “Nero’s villa” at Anzio. Or, when making a typology of villas, the villa formed its own category. For example, Lucia Romizzi introduced a subcategory in the “Tipi Eccezionali” of her villa typology, the “Tipo con Fronte a Emiciclo o a prospetto curvilineo,” in order to place “Villa Anguillara Sabazia” and “Nero’s villa” at Anzio in a group of their own.<sup>7</sup> If we knew more about “Nero’s villa” at Anzio we could make productive comparisons with “Villa Anguillara Sabazia.” However, the traces of a plan on the ground do not allow us to go further than just to mention it.

<sup>7</sup> *Supra* n. 1.



Fig. 3. View of the *cryptoporticus*' façade from the south (author's image).

## Brief Description

The villa consisted of three levels that stretched out on ground which sloped at a gradient of 10%. On the upper level of the villa were the living quarters, on the intermediate level were the service quarters, and on the lower level were the gardens of the villa.

The lower level of the villa is the one that has been best preserved and the one that attracts our attention. It is an *exedra*, delineated in the northwest by a large curvilinear *cryptoporticus*; but we do not know its limits towards the southeast. The *cryptoporticus*'s ground plan is constructed as an arc of a perfect circle with a chord of 87 meters and a depth of 25.5 meters; however, only half of it has been brought to light (Fig. 1). A 3.80-meter wide walkway (A) runs beside the *cryptoporticus*' curvilinear façade. The walkway terminates at a *nymphaeum* (B) in the southwest,<sup>8</sup> and presumably at a symmetrical room in the northeast, which has not been excavated.<sup>9</sup>

The façade of the *cryptoporticus* is not plain, but consists of 84 semicircular niches (Fig. 3). The niches are 1.80 meters wide and are joined by semi-columns, 45 centimetres wide. They are closed and have a 0.60 me-

ter wide central window opening at 1.20 meters above ground level.<sup>10</sup> Every niche has a cutting on its floor, in which fragments of clay pots have been found. This indicates that the niches were decorated with flowerpots at their base.<sup>11</sup>

Vighi had noticed details in the architectural design and construction of the villa that were conducted with some sort of "optical correction" in mind (Fig. 4, 5 and 6). First (Fig. 4), the southeast wall of the *nymphaeum* (a) is prolonged 1.30 m. from wall b towards the northeast, and the inner limit of this wall (a) slightly curves towards the inside of the curvilinear façade. In this way, it provides a symmetrical image with the semi-column at the other side of the *nymphaeum* and presents to the observer a smooth transition between the curvilinear form and the rectangular form at the end.<sup>12</sup> Second (Fig. 5), each niche has a flat front façade; the front façades of the niches meet each other on a wide angle and create non-flat pilasters; the semi-columns camouflage the non-flat pilasters. In this way the geometrical regularity of the niches is assured and at the same time the observer perceives the sequence of the niches as part of a continuous curvilinear line (Fig. 6).<sup>13</sup>

Vighi's analysis indicated that there was intention in the design process to accentuate the perception of the villa's form. However, it does not explain why a curvilinear form and non-portico façade were chosen. There are examples of villas with huge portico structures extending in the landscape; and there are at least two-dimensional representations of generic landscapes with curvilinear

<sup>8</sup> The *nymphaeum* consists of three levels: level 1, the level of access and circulation, which is almost the *ambulacrum*'s level, and goes around the room in the form of a "Π"; and levels 2 and 3, which are associated with the water features of the *nymphaeum* and run along the inner side of this Π. On the southwest wall there is a fountain and through the northeast wall the *nymphaeum* opens on to the open space of the *exedra*. From the fountain, water fell into level 2, until the northeast edge of the "Π" and through a small waterfall-feature fell into level 3, which is 1.70 meters lower than the *exedra*-level.

<sup>9</sup> There are three exits from the *ambulacrum* to the garden. One in the middle and two at the extremes of the *ambulacrum*'s arched course (the third is not shown in Vighi's plan in fig. 1). The middle opening is 1,90 metres and the two openings at the extremes of the arc are 1,80 metres.

<sup>10</sup> The interior wall of the *ambulacrum* has been preserved to a height of 4.70 meters. Judging from the rather small width of the walls, 50 centimeters the exterior wall and 60 centimeters the interior wall, it must have been covered by a wooden roof. Vighi 1940, 399.

<sup>11</sup> Vighi 1940, 398.

<sup>12</sup> Vighi 1941, 148.

<sup>13</sup> Vighi 1941, 149.

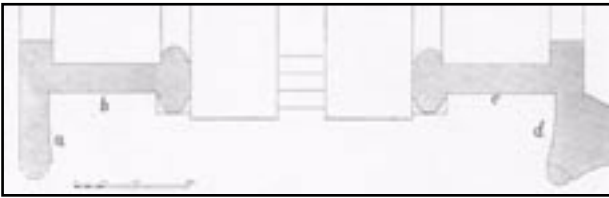


Fig. 4. Plan and perspective reconstruction of the *nymphaeum* by Vighi (Vighi, 1941, 153, fig. 9).

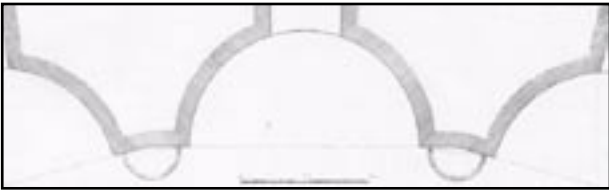


Fig. 5. Plan of a niche and corresponding front image by Vighi (Vighi, 1941, 152, fig. 7).



Fig. 6. Perspective front view of the villa by Lorenzo Ferri showing the continuity of the curvilinear façade (Vighi, 1941, 154, fig. 10).

porticoes.<sup>14</sup> However there are no examples of a villa with a curvilinear non-portico façade, adorned with flowerpots and extending its wings to embrace the landscape. In the case of portico façades we know from Pliny the Younger that they emulate public architecture; and scholars have made notice of their likeness to gymnasia structures and to palatial architecture. But I know of no other parallel to “Villa Anguillara Sabazia.” Why did this villa assume this particular form and design?

### Walking through the Villa

Let us see how this curvilinear design worked and how it was experienced. Let us walk through the villa.

The curvilinear exedra was accessed from the upper level. At the northwest side of the exedra, a ramp alongside the *cryptoporticus*' northwest wall (Fig. 7, E in Fig. 1), provided access to the *cryptoporticus*. There is also a staircase beside the ramp (Fig. 8, ε in Fig. 1). The fact that there is also a staircase right next to the ramp indicates intentionality in providing both. Why would that be? A ramp today is used either to accommodate access to people with special needs or to enhance the experience of ascending. I do not think that the first reason is the one that explains why this ramp was put here.



Fig. 7. View of the ramp (author's image).



Fig. 8. View from the *ambulatory*, through the opening to the ramp (on the left), towards the staircase that is situated beside the ramp (author's image).

<sup>14</sup> An architectural landscape painting from Pompeii and Roman gem from North Africa, now in Rome. Cfr. Rakob 1974, 85, Taf. 76.2.



Fig. 9. Villa Savoye: views from the ramp (author's image).



Fig. 10. View from the *ambulacrum*: from left, the two windows that follow the ramp and the opening to the ramp (author's image).

There is a well-known example of a ramp within a modern villa, Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye (1928-30) at Poissy, an hour's drive from Paris. The ramp in this villa is also right next to a staircase. Here, however, the writings of the architect document his intentionality: for Le Corbusier, the ramp enhances the experience of passage and provides an architectural promenade (*promenade architecturale*) within the house.<sup>15</sup> This architectural promenade provides glimpses through openings to both the upper and lower level, to what you have already reached and to what you are anticipating to reach (Fig. 9).

In Villa Savoye the visitor walks the ramp upwards in order to reach the upper levels. In Villa Anguillara Sabazia, however, the visitor would have walked the ramp downwards. Two windows follow the course of the ramp (Fig. 10). These two windows not only provide light but also fragmented and disoriented views into the garden through the windows of the *cryptoporticus* (Fig. 11). The fact that the exterior wall of the *cryptoporticus* is curved and is – instead of a portico colonnade – closed, intensifies the fragmented and disoriented view of the exedra.

I will follow the scenario that the owner invites a visitor to the *nymphaeum*. First, the visitor descends to the level of the *cryptoporticus* through the ramp – there is another staircase (δ) beside the *nymphaeum* (B) next to its service room (D) (Fig. 1); but this one probably served the



Fig. 11. View from the ramp, through its side window to the *ambulacrum* and the *cryptoporticus*' window to the garden (author's image).

service room. Back to our walk: Once the visitor reaches the level of the *cryptoporticus* – led by the owner or by servants – he/she turns right into the walkway of the *cryptoporticus* (*ambulacrum*). Now notice that the entrance of the ramp is not directly opposite to the central exit from the head of the *cryptoporticus* to the garden (Fig. 1). Since the curved *cryptoporticus* does not give you the repetitive images that a linear *cryptoporticus* would have given you, the visitor does not have a full view of the garden but continues to have fragmented and disoriented views through the windows of the curved wall (Fig. 12). The visitor following the curvilinear *ambulacrum* will continue to have these fragmented views until reaching the *nymphaeum*. It

<sup>15</sup> Ackerman 1993, 276.



Fig. 12. View from the *ambulatory* to the garden and the *cryptoporticus'* window to the garden (author's image).

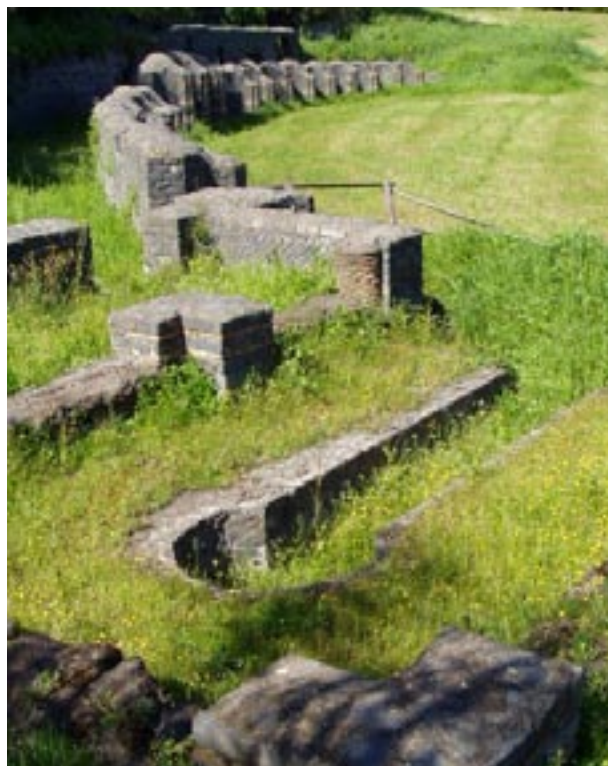


Fig. 13. View of the façade from the *nymphaeum* (author's image).

is only there that the visitor will perceive the complete forms of the *exedra* and the *cryptoporticus* (Fig. 13). It is only there that he or she will understand the spaces, of which he or she has had glimpses, and in which he or she has been walking for the last five minutes or so.<sup>16</sup>

A similar surprise-effect can be also noticed in the Villa of Livia at Prima Porta. The visitor followed the ramp to the underground level, with the only source of light coming from the entrance to the ramp – no window-openings here; at the end of the ramp, upon entering the chamber to his left, he or she encountered the famous garden paintings lightened by the dim light from the clerestory windows.<sup>17</sup> Although there is no anticipation in this case, the artificial underground garden is revealed at the end of the visitor's course.

<sup>16</sup> There is another staircase near the *nymphaeum* but this probably served the service room of the *nymphaeum*. If there is a big ramp in such a prominent place, I doubt that the short cut of the staircase next to the service room would have been used to access the *nymphaeum*.

<sup>17</sup> The masonry of the boundary wall's substructures and of the underground complex are in *opus quasi reticulatum* and the mosaic before the entrance to the underground *triclinium* is Republican as well. Calci and Messineo 1984, 23–36. For a full discussion on the dating: Clark Reeder 2001, 16–29. The use of ramps was also effectively used in the Auditorium of Maecenas, in the Casa del *Cryptoportico* in Pompeii, and in the House of Livia on the Palatine. For a full discussion on the typology of these underground and semi-underground rooms: Clark Reeder 2001, 45–66.

In Villa Anguillara Sabazia though, there is an additional effect: it is only at this point that the visitor will perceive the curvilinear façade adorned with flowerpots. Note that this is a side view and not a frontal one. The visitor will first perceive the gentle oblique relation of the curvilinear form to the landscape, and then – after exiting to the garden space and moving some distance – he or she will perceive the curvilinear façade with the flowerpots from the front side.

This is the façade of the villa towards the southeast. Below it, after some 100 meters, the sloping ground leads to the water spring. Even if the water spring might not have belonged to the villa's owner, the grounds of the villa enjoyed the fertile land and rich vegetation above the spring. We do not know if this southeast façade was visible from the road that accessed the villa – a possibility which would ruin my neat surprise scenario – nevertheless, we can be sure that it provided an opulent “face” towards the landscape; an appropriate one for a Roman luxury villa. However, why curvilinear?

The curvilinear outline of the villa sits on the sloping ground in a very settled way. Its almost amphitheatric relationship to the landscape recalls the way that Greek theatres employed slopes for their construction. When building on a slope one needs a substructure to support the upper level. Both orthogonal and curvilinear forms in this scale satisfy the desire for monumentality (Fig. 13, 14). The choice between the two forms might have been as simple as one of individual choice and taste.



Fig. 14. Comparison with the north façade of the Villa Oplontis (author's image).

### Design Process: the Case of Wolfson College

I would like to digress here and recount what happened in the design process of a 20th century structure: the main buildings of Wolfson College in Oxford, which were designed by Philip Powell and John Hidalgo Moya.<sup>18</sup> The two architects had designed orthogonal complexes of quadrangles, enclosed by tall buildings in concrete. Specifically, the south wing of the river quadrangle was a very long orthogonal building extending towards the river. After having seen the designs of the architects, Sir Isaiah Berlin, then the President of Wolfson College, sent a postcard to Philip Powell from Portofino, a pleasant harbour in Italy with curved margins, in which he said: “Can it be that the sylvan scenes of Cherwell, where everything curls and curves and the trees, branches, grass, stream, each pursues its irregular complex line and fantastic patterns – is it here that rectilinear rigors are most suitable? Let me persuade you to some gentle inclination to a shape less stiff.” After this communication the south wall of the river quadrangle came to assume its gentle curve (Fig. 15).<sup>19</sup> Sir Isaiah Berlin's intention was that the building had an appearance more gentle to the human eyes. Is this the answer to our case? I do not wish to assert this.

### Conclusion

In this paper, I have pointed to the unsettled ways in which design enhances the experience of architecture, landscape and the relationship between the two. My purpose was to stimulate the imagination about other reasons, sometimes random, why a specific form has been chosen – rather than the evolution of a specific form or type – and expand our understanding of the luxury villa, or *villa expolita*, design.

<sup>18</sup> The architects of the space age spire Skylon for the 1951 Festival of Britain in London.

<sup>19</sup> Jessup 1979.



Fig. 15. Wolfson College: side view of the south wall of the river quadrangle (author's image).

For the study of Roman villa architecture, there are no surviving plans or documents on the design process or on the designers' intentions, which would allow the architectural historian to approach the design process of a villa and study architecture as a physical, cultural and social product which can be decoded and read.<sup>20</sup> Scholars have produced archaeological and architectural commentaries on Pliny the Younger's villa letters,<sup>21</sup> and have written chronological and typological accounts of villa architecture.<sup>22</sup> They have focused primarily on the social structures within Roman villas,<sup>23</sup> on the perception of the villas' art and natural features,<sup>24</sup> on Roman villas as *loci* of agricultural production<sup>25</sup> and as mediums of display of wealth and status.<sup>26</sup> This paper has put forward an approach to the material evidence of Roman villa architecture, by using the analogies of modern architectural design processes and intentions.

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<sup>20</sup> Williams Goldhagen 2000; Beneš 1999.

<sup>21</sup> Förtsch 1993.

<sup>22</sup> Gros 2001; Romizzi 2001.

<sup>23</sup> Smith 1997; Wallace-Hadrill 1988, 1994, 1998; Hales 2003.

<sup>24</sup> Bergmann 2002.

<sup>25</sup> Carandini & Settis 1979.

<sup>26</sup> Purcell 1995.

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