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ADAM AS A PALLADIAN

Giles Worsley

Robert Adam was a great self-publicist. Few architects even today could match his careful manipulation of his image. In fact one cannot help feeling that he would fit easily into the media-dominated world of late-20th-century architecture. Just imagine the elegant monographs from the specialist architectural presses with their beautiful photographs; the reverential retrospective on the South Bank Show; the heavy self-justification at architectural symposia; the witty repartee on *Loose Ends*. But just as modern journalists worth their salt should not trust an architectural image maker's estimation of himself so architectural historians should be warily sceptical when looking at Adam.

Adam had no doubt – at least none that he expressed in print – that he had revolutionised architecture: “The novelty and variety of the following designs,” declared the introduction to *The Works in Architecture of Robert and James Adam* (1773) “will, we flatter ourselves, not only excuse, but justify our conduct to the world . . . We have not trod in the path of others, nor derived aid from their labours . . . To enter upon an enquiry into the state of this art in Great Britain, till the late changes it has undergone, is not part of our present design. We leave that subject to the observation of the skilful; who we doubt not, will easily perceive, within these few years, a remarkable improvement in the form, convenience, arrangement, and relief of apartments; a greater movement and variety, in the outside composition, and in the decoration of the inside, an almost total change.”

It is an opinion which modern commentators have tended to take at its face value. Adam is seen as the architect who broke away from the trammels of neo-Palladianism, and who more than anyone else introduced neo-Classicism to this country. “Adam set out to revolutionize English domestic architecture, which for thirty years had followed the pattern laid down for it by Lord Burlington. In place of the rigid grammar of the orders as described by Vitruvius and interpreted by Palladio, he substituted a new and elegant repertoire of architectural ornament based on a wide variety of classical sources ranging from antiquity to the Cinquecento. The success of the new style was immediate, and within a few years it had taken the place of the older Palladianism and become the common property of the London builder.”

But the more one looks at Adam's buildings alongside those of his contemporaries the uneasier one becomes. If Adam was quite so novel, why do his buildings display so many features which in another architect would be explained as neo-Palladian: numerous Serlian windows, particularly in recessed arches, rustication, especially of the ground floor, the common use of the *piano nobile*, porticoes both attached and freestanding? Why is so much of his work – including exteriors, planning and interior decoration – anticipated by Lord Burlington and subsequent neo-Palladians, particularly James Paine and Sir Robert Taylor? Could it be that for all Adam's anxious, self-proclaimed novelty his work was more firmly based in contemporary architecture than he would have us believe? In fact was Adam really a neo-Palladian?

We will not find the answer to this question in Adam's writings. Adam was not an architect who ever credited a source. In fact it is a common feature in his writing that he tends to disparage anyone whose work parallels or anticipates his own. The best known examples of

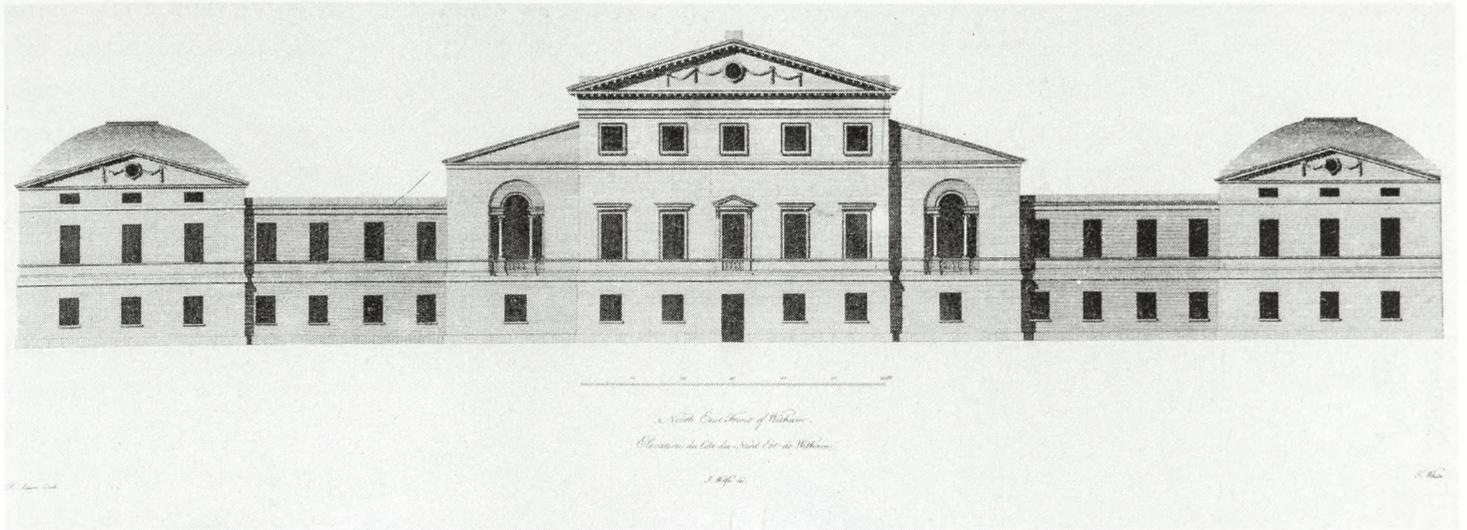


Fig. 1. Robert Adam, Witham Park, Somerset (c. 1762).

this, of course, are his dismissive remarks about James Stuart whose work at Spencer House was “pityfulissimo” and his designs for Kedleston “so excessively and ridiculously bad”² that they “beggared all description”, but the same tendency can be found when he mentions Palladio and the later neo-Palladians. In Italy he dismissed Palladio in a letter as “one of those fortunate geniuses who have purchased reputation at an easy rate”³ and promised “in imitation of Scotch heroes, to become author, to attack Vitruvius, Palladio and those blackguards of ancient and modern architecture, sword in hand”.⁴ But you would not have guessed this opinion from his designs for the Royal College of Physicians in Edinburgh, one of the first buildings he worked on on his return to London in 1758. Anyone informed in architecture in the mid-18th century would have been well aware that such interlocking pediments derive from Palladio’s Venetian churches. The library was never built, but Adam returned to the theme with his first (unexecuted) design for Great Saxham House, Suffolk, of 1762,⁵ and at Witham Park, Somerset, which was begun in the same year but never finished (Fig. 1).

Similarly, Burlington and Kent are the obvious targets of one particular attack in the introduction to the *Works*: “The massive entablature, the ponderous compartment ceiling, the tabernacle frame, almost the only form of ornament formerly known, in this country, are now universally exploded.” But this statement sits strangely with the fact that one of the rooms most extensively illustrated in the first volume of the *Works*, the entrance hall at Syon House, Middlesex, (1762–69) is graced with a massive entablature and ponderous compartment ceiling, while the (admittedly unillustrated) dining room has a tabernacle frame over the chimneypiece. Nor is this alone. The library at Harewood House, Yorkshire, of about 1769 has a similar tabernacle frame over its chimneypiece; so does the great eating room at Headfort House, County Meath of 1775. There are more in the entrance hall at Wormleybury, Hertfordshire of 1777. Just because Adam condemns a motif or the work of a specific architect is no reason to assume that he did not use that motif nor was influenced by that architect.

Adam more than any other 18th-century English architect realised the importance of novelty as an enticement for clients and of publishing as a means of self-promotion, as Eileen Harris demonstrated in *British Architectural Books and Writers* (1990). Any stylistic comment he makes, whether in a private letter or printed book, needs to be compared with his executed work (and that of his contemporaries) before being accepted as a true statement of fact.

If Adam can be defined as a neo-Palladian I do not think it is because the direct influence of Palladio is strong in his work. Indeed, there seems to be no evidence in Adam’s buildings of a considered study of Palladio. Instead the link, even between Palladio’s Venetian churches and Adam’s interlocking pediment designs, is at one remove. Interlocking pedi-

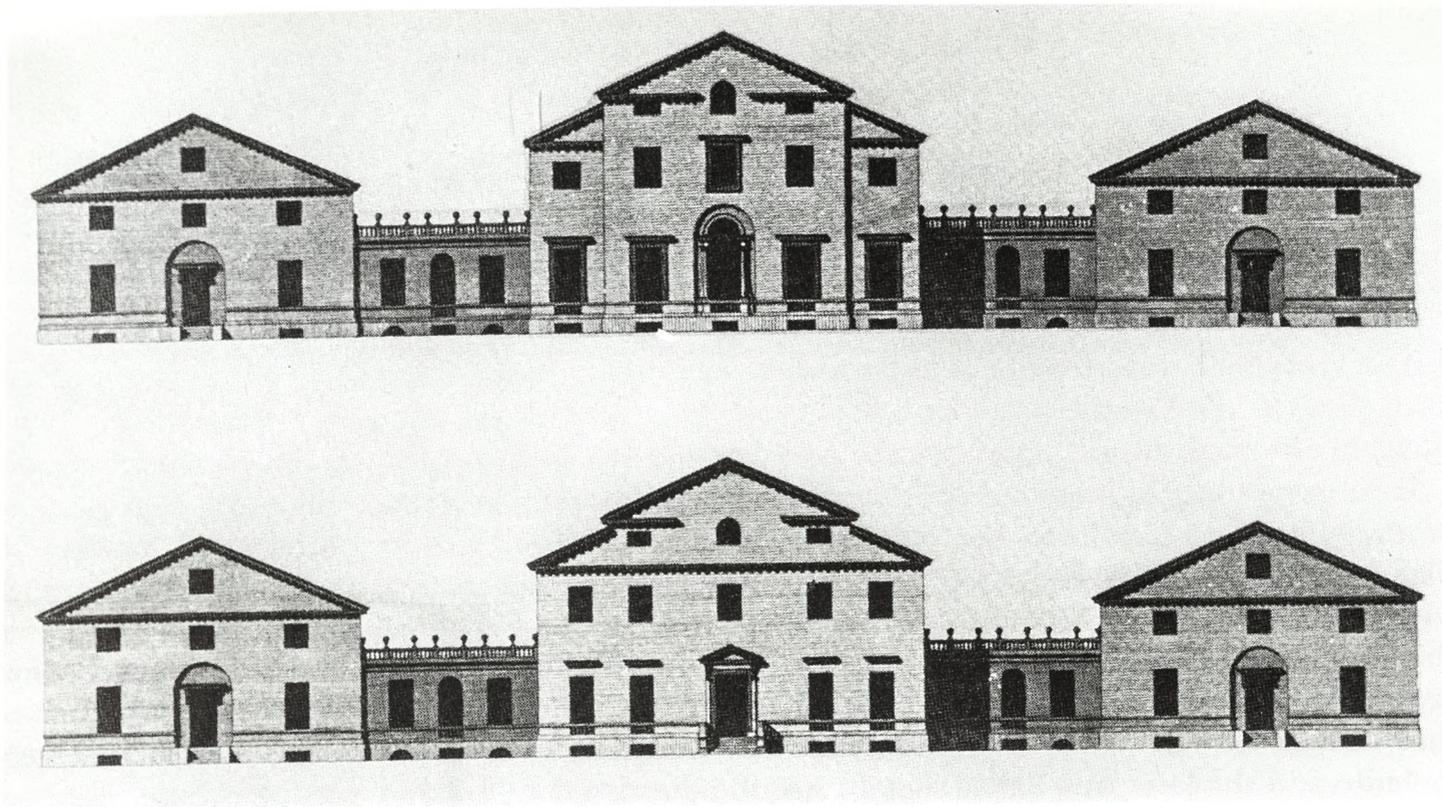


Fig. 2. James Paine, Serlby Hall, Nottinghamshire (1754).

ments had already been anticipated in the circle around Lord Burlington with the Orangery at Chiswick, Burlington's designs for the Council House at Chichester and Kent's Temple in the Woods at Holkham Hall, Norfolk, and by James Paine at Serlby Hall, Nottinghamshire, (1754) (Fig. 2) and probably at Milnsbridge Hall, Yorkshire (c.1750).⁶ The Palladian tenor of Adam's work derives from the English neo-Palladians who formed the dominant architectural school during his formative years and on his return to England.

Burlington and Kent are pervasive influences in Adam's work. The influence comes both in direct borrowings, sometimes of whole facades, and in attitudes towards planning and the antique. As it was with James Paine, Holkham (extensively published in 1761 and possibly visited by Adam in 1759) was a particularly important influence. The entrance front of Adam's February 1767 scheme for Luton Hoo with its hexastyle portico flanked by corner pavilions with Venetian windows and pyramidal caps, for instance, is taken directly from the garden front at Holkham. At Gosford House, Lothian, of 1791, Adam took the essential form of Holkham with its great central villa-like structure flanked by smaller tripartite wings, but used the north front of Chiswick with its three Venetian windows in recessed arches, interspersed by niches and topped by a central dome with the addition of a central portico and pilasters as the framework for the west elevation. (It is ironic that John Adam commented about Holkham that "the designs we did not much approve of, particularly the court front. There are too many Venetian windows, breakings and pediments which mince a great thing into too many small pieces".⁷) The triple-pavilioned wings at Holkham were a motif which had a distinguished progeny. Adam imitated them at the fishing lodge at Kedleston of 1770. He also probably took the idea of a sculpture gallery with plain niches along the walls – which can be found at Croome Court, Shelburne House and in the dining room at Syon House – from the Sculpture Gallery at Holkham. The dining room at Syon also has an apsed end, as at Holkham. Finally, the hall at Kedleston, one of Adam's great *coups de theatre*, is the child of that at Holkham, although here the midwives were Brettingham and Paine.

Burlington and Kent are intimately mixed at Holkham, but the influence of Kent

alone can also be seen in some of Adam's interiors. One of Adam's most successful spaces is the imperial staircase, with its niche at the landing, at 20 Portman Square. This was probably inspired by Kent's 44 Berkeley Square. Nor should it be forgotten that Kent anticipated Adam in designing complete interiors, furniture as well as the architectural framework and decoration. One also cannot help wondering whether Adam's designs for Lincoln's Inn of 1771 do not reveal the influence of Kent's designs for the Houses of Parliament, with their impressive curved colonnaded screen, which he could have seen in the Office of Works.

One could probably chase other specific quotes from Burlington and Kent but I do not think there can be any doubt that Adam borrowed directly from them and that that borrowing was as deliberate as it was in the work of more conventional neo-Palladians such as Paine. Equally important is the precedent they provided for Adam's interest in neo-Classicism. Adam is generally seen as a pioneering neo-Classicalist but in an English context there is nothing radically new about Adam's neo-Classicism. Burlington anticipated Adam in collecting drawings of Classical remains and in using them as sources for his designs. Indeed, in buildings such as the York Assembly Rooms Burlington was a far more thorough-going neo-Classicalist than Adam. Similarly, at Holkham, Chiswick and York Burlington, taking his cue from the Roman Baths, anticipated the variety of shapes of room – octagonal rooms, circular rooms, rectangular rooms with apses at each end, rooms with niches – for which Adam is often praised.

One feature particularly associated with Adam does not seem to have been used by Burlington, apses screened by pairs of columns carrying an architrave as in the library at Kenwood. (The first-floor room in the link building at Chiswick does have pairs of columns at each end supporting an architrave but the walls behind are not curved.) However, this motif was not introduced by Adam. Kent used it externally on the facade of the Temple of Venus at Stowe (1729) and Burlington's protégé Isaac Ware included a hall with a pair of columned apses in his competition design for the Mansion House of 1737. But it was not until the late 1750s and early 1760s that the fashion for columned apses suddenly emerged. James Stuart included one in the Painted Room at Spencer House of 1759, while in the same year Paine exhibited his designs for Kedleston with columned apses at either end of the staircase hall. In 1762 he exhibited his Banqueting House at Forcet Park, Yorkshire, which has three colonnaded apses. That year he also designed Worksop Manor, Nottinghamshire, which was intended to have a great room in the west range with colonnaded apses. Adam planned such apses at Compton Verney, Warwickshire in 1760 and Witham Park in 1762, and they first seem to appear in his work in the dining room and hall at Syon of 1761.

Generally, Adam did not follow Burlington's interpretation of Roman interior decoration, the internal use of complete entablatures taken from specific temples as at Holkham. What he did favour, especially in the early years after his return from Italy, was decorating ceilings with paintings in imitation of those found in antique tombs. But again Adam did not introduce this to England, Kent had done so 30 years earlier at Kensington Palace and at Rousham and, it can be argued, at Houghton and Stowe. Adam was aware of this but typically dismissed his works as "evidently those of a beginner".⁸

Burlington and Kent form the foundation on which much of Adam's work stands but the most interesting parallels are with his immediate contemporaries, particularly James Paine and Sir Robert Taylor, the two architects who, according to Thomas Hardwick, "nearly divided the practice of the profession between them till Mr Robert Adam entered the lists". Of the two it was Paine, who had been practising for well over a decade and had more than a score of houses to his credit, many for aristocratic clients; whom Adam was keenest to displace; as he did at Kedleston Hall, Derbyshire, Nostell Priory, Yorkshire, and Alnwick Castle, Northumberland.



Fig. 3. Robert Adam, Kenwood House, Middlesex (1767).

But it would be wrong to think that Adam displaced Paine because his architecture was exciting and new while Paine's was old-fashioned and dull. When you compare individual buildings it is often similarities that are most apparent. Take Kenwood House, Middlesex of 1767 (Fig. 3). If its prominent position in the *Works* is evidence, this is a house of which Adam was particularly proud. And yet the composition of the south front – two-and-a-half storeys with a rusticated basement, a pediment supported by paired pilasters and a facade defined at each end by further paired pilasters set over niches – was one that appeared repeatedly in Paine's work from his first independent commission, Heath House, Yorkshire in 1744. Gosforth Hall, Northumberland of 1755 (Fig. 4) is a particularly close comparison with Kenwood. The only feature that distinguishes Kenwood from examples by Paine is the decorative treatment of the pilasters and the plaques above the first-floor windows.

Or take the largest design for a country house Adam ever made, the south front of Stowe House, Buckinghamshire, of 1771. This can be read as a combination of the hexastyle portico of Paine's north front at Kedleston with the flanking Venetian windows and twin attached columns (reduced to pilasters) of the south front. The wings of the Stowe design would have had three Serlian windows above a low rustic framed by pilasters, with a balustraded cornice, a combination – with the pilasters replaced by pairs of attached columns – considered by Paine for the west front of Sir Matthew Fetherstonhaugh's house in Whitehall (illustrated in the first volume of Paine's *Works* in 1767). One could even argue that Adam's Deputy Ranger's Lodge in Green Park of 1768 should be read as a reduced and simplified form of Paine's garden front at Kedleston with a central, domed, circular room, expressed externally by a colonnade above an arcade, breaking out of a rectangular block.

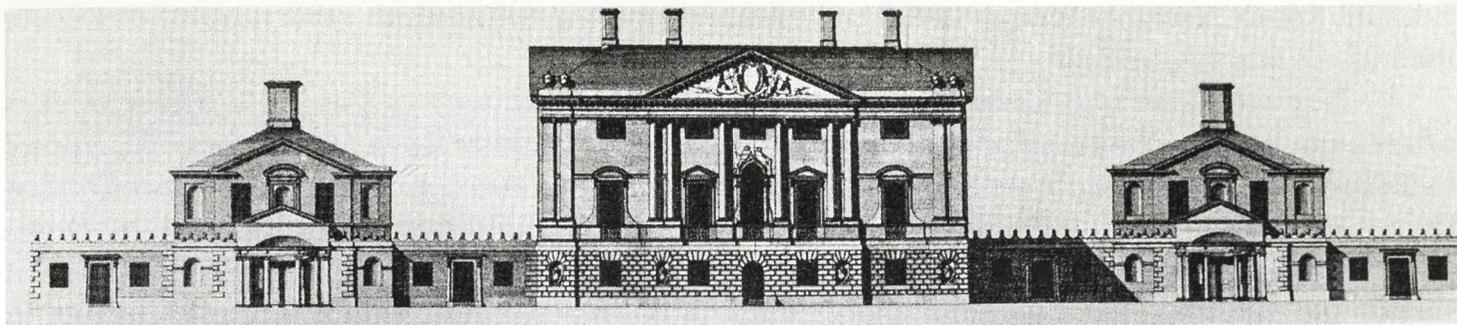


Fig. 4. James Paine, Gosforth House, Northumberland (1755).

Internally, Paine's suggestions for the decoration of Kedleston anticipate many of Adam's neo-Classical features there⁹: the hall was to be lined with Corinthian columns flanking statues in niches; the circular saloon was to have a coffered ceiling (Paine's preliminary saloon design suggested octagonal coffering such as Adam used); while the staircase was to have apsed ends with colonnaded screens.

But it is in the elevations of Kedleston that Adam is generally seen to have broken away from Paine's dull Palladianism, replacing it with his own concept of "movement". By April 1760 when Adam took over the commission building had already begun and so it has been assumed that he had to accept the neo-Palladian formality of the north or entrance front, but was able to redesign the south front as he preferred. However, as Leslie Harris has shown, the house was not built from north to south, but from east to west. According to Harris "Adam would have had ample time to make serious changes to the north front had he or Lord Scarsdale decided to do so".¹⁰ Despite its neo-Palladianism Adam had no objections to the north front. Indeed, he went on to repeat it in the second design for the entrance front of Luton Park, Bedfordshire, for the Marquess of Bute in December 1766.

So what of the south front of Kedleston which is usually held up as the model of "movement". This was the quality which according to the *Works* Adam introduced to architecture: "*Movement* is meant to express, the rise and fall, the advance and recess, with other diversity of form, in the different parts of a building, so as to add greatly to the picturesque of the composition."¹¹ The south front is probably best seen as a novel variation on the classic tripartite Palladian villa with its rustic and piano nobile but replacing the standard *templa* front of the centrepiece with a triumphal arch topped by a dome. This is always hailed as a masterpiece, but looked at objectively I wonder if we would say that if it were not by Adam. For all the acclaim it now receives Adam cannot have considered the south front a great success: he never illustrated it in his *Works* and the triumphal arch motif only reappears once in his buildings, in the unexecuted design for the north front at Luton Park of 1772. One could argue that Adam's scheme was a rather forced attempt at novelty by an inexperienced architect.

The result certainly has a greater sense of "movement" than his own north front, but can it really be said to have more "movement" than Paine's intended south front with its circular, colonnaded, domed rotunda breaking from the square mass of the house? Barely a square foot of wall in Paine's scheme is without some form of ornament, some advance or recession of the wall plane, some contrast between solid and void – emphasised by the colonnade and the Venetian windows.

Looking at Paine's design for the south front of Kedleston and at houses by him such as Belford Hall, Northumberland, one sees all the attributes of "movement" in Paine quite as much, if not more so, than one does in Adam. And what about Taylor? Could any designs epitomise the concept of "movement" more effectively than Taylor's villas such as Harleyford House, Buckinghamshire, of 1755 or Asgill House, Surrey, of 1761, with their subtle use of canted and semi-circular bays, their sense of advance and recession, their varied use of

height? Adam certainly found Taylor's intricate planning fascinating, returning to the same idea in his late villa plans.

Nor are Paine and Taylor alone among successful architects of the 1750s whose work is often best described through the concept of "movement". Henry Keene is another. While one can credit the Adam brothers for defining and publishing the concept of "movement" what they were saying was hardly novel by the time it was published in 1773. Given that James Adam first composed the passage for his unfinished essay on architecture in 1762 this is not surprising. But even then what he was describing was an aesthetic which was at its height in the 1750s. By 1773 the concept of "movement" was positively old fashioned for advanced architectural thought had reacted against it in favour of a much greater sense of austerity. If one wants to find innovative architectural ideas one should not be looking at Adam's *Works* but at the writings and buildings of the much-undervalued Robert Mylne whose "fastidious restraint" Eileen Harris has shown did not arise by chance but was the product of the radical functionalist principles of the Venetian Carlo Lodoli.¹²

Thus one could argue that Adam did not arrive in London with a novel style which he quickly used to break the power of older established architects but that he took up and refined the dominant style which he found on his arrival.¹³ This is not to say that Adam did not differ from his neo-Palladian contemporaries, just as they differed from each other. Two distinguishing external features are his use of giant colonnades – as at Compton Verney in 1760; Bowood House, Wiltshire, in 1761 (although it is unclear how much Adam was following Keene's earlier design); and the unexecuted design for the entrance front of Luton Park of about 1771 – and his porticos supported at each end by pairs of columns: a motif which seems to appear first on the stables at Bowood around 1770, and which he used repeatedly during the 1780s and 1790s. This was something that Flitcroft had introduced on the stables at Woburn Abbey, Bedfordshire, illustrated in *Vitruvius Britannicus* in 1771. But what really distinguished Adam from his contemporaries, and was recognised at the time for being revolutionary, was his use of decoration both internally and externally.

Nor was neo-Palladianism a temporary influence on Adam. We have already seen how important Chiswick and Holkham were sources for Gosford in 1791. The same year saw Adam design Charlotte Square in Edinburgh, a scheme whose domestic element would have caused little surprise 40 years earlier. The central part of the north side, for instance, with its rusticated ground floor, its advance and recession, its pairs of attached columns at the ends, differs only in detail from the Kenwood elevation. It shows no real stylistic advance on houses of the 1750s such as Paine's Belford Hall or Axwell Hall.

Of course Adam cannot be explained solely with reference to neo-Palladianism. I have not talked, for instance, about French influence in his domestic planning, about his use of colour or about his integration of furniture and design. But to accept Adam at his own judgement as a revolutionary architect who marks a complete break with the architecture he found when he arrived in London in 1758 is absurd. If anything he remained firmly rooted in the 1750s for the rest of his life. Robert Adam, no less than James Paine, was a second-generation neo-Palladian, a disciple of Lord Burlington and William Kent. That is not to say he may not have been a genius, but he was a genius who can only be understood within the context of his own time.

NOTES

1. H. M. Colvin, *Biographical Dictionary of British Architects*, London, 1978, 47.

2. John Fleming, *Robert Adam and his Circle*, London, 1962, 258.
3. *Ibid.*, 273
4. *Ibid.*, 218.
5. Arthur Bolton, *The Architecture of Robert and James Adam*, London, 1922, I, 40.
6. Leach, 1988, pls.24 and 30.
7. Fleming, 1962, 264.
8. Giles Worsley, "Antique Assumptions", *Country Life*, August 6, 1992.
9. Although only one interior design believed to be by Paine survives among the Kedleston drawings, and none of his interiors were carried out, we know what he intended from the plan and section he published in the second volume of his *Plans, Elevations and Section of the Noblemen and Gentlemen's Houses*. While this was not published until 1783 it is unlikely that these designs postdate his involvement at Kedleston and the engravings were probably taken from drawings (believed to be of Kedleston) exhibited at the Society of Arts in 1761. (Lesley Harris, *Robert Adam and Kedleston*, London, 1987, 20.)
10. Leslie Harris, *Robert Adam and Kedleston, the making of a Neo-Classical Masterpiece*, London, 1987, 10.
11. *The Works in Architecture of Robert and James Adam*, London, 1778, preface.
12. Eileen Harris, *British Architectural Books and Writers 1556–1785*, Cambridge, 1990, 328–31.
13. Paine was not the only contemporary architect to influence Adam. When he arrived in London in 1758 the most important building being erected at the time was undoubtedly Spencer House which had been begun by John Vardy and was then being fitted up. Adam was to attack Stuart's designs furiously but the influence of the house can be traced in his work. An unusual feature of Spencer House was the low hexastyle Doric portico with attached columns on the Green Park front. Could this have given Adam the idea for the similar Doric porticos of the conservatories at Croome Court, Worcestershire, (1760) and Osterley Park, Middlesex, (1763)? In the tea pavilion at Moor Park, Hertfordshire (c.1764) Adam was to follow Vardy's use of palm tree decoration in the Alcove Room of 1757, while we have already noticed that Stuart's Painted Room anticipated Adam's use of the colonnaded apse. A popular motif of his was a pedimented pavilion flanked by pairs of columns or pilasters, the Royal Society of Arts in London of 1772 being a typical example. This was a motif adapted from the north front of Vardy's Spencer House and ultimately derived from the end bays of Campbell's Burlington House.