

Romaldo Giurgola's 'Ideal' Island Home

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Best known in Australia as the architect of Australian Parliament House (1988), Romaldo Giurgola (1920–2016) was raised in Rome and lived most of his working life teaching and practicing architecture in Philadelphia and New York. Yet the only house he designed for himself, la casa di campagna, was located just outside Canberra near the remote village of Lake Bathurst, Bundong, in Mulwaree Shire, New South Wales. There in 2005, Giurgola realised a modest family home for himself, his daughter, and their dog, which offered axial views of the lake, as he described it, “on land surrounded by bush and hills, 600 metres above sea level, a microcosm between the earth and the sky.”¹

In 2004, Giurgola's perspective drawing of that house (Figure 1) formed the cover of *UME 17* magazine, in which his architectural drawings, sketches and two photographs of the building by John Gollings were published alongside the architect's statement. Critical commentary compared the remote dwelling with its centralised, square plan, to the two villas connected by Colin Rowe in his well-known essay from 1947, “The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa”: Palladio's Villa Capra-Rotunda (1565/6–69) near

Vicenza, and Le Corbusier's design for the Villa Savoye (1929–31) at Poissy on the outskirts of Paris. Giurgola's analytical sketches of his project helped to illustrate geometric continuities with those “ideal” houses from Italy and France, with all three rural dwellings located around an hour's drive from memorably designed cities. Specifically, his diagrams emphasised a diagonal division also evident in the square plan for the Villa Savoye between open, public areas, and more private cellular spaces. Further, all three designs located a primary central room at the intersection of x, y and z axes that framed a point from which to survey the wider situation, and in each case was designed in measured relationship with its striking landscape setting. As Rowe noted, commenting on Le Corbusier's description of the site for the Savoye House: “The suggestive reference to the dreams of Virgil may put one in mind of the passage in which Palladio describes the Rotunda ... [whence] its owner, from within a fragment of created order, will watch ... the harmonious ordering of his life and his estate will be an analogy of paradise.”²

However, in 1975, almost thirty years earlier, Giurgola had submitted the draft

1. Romaldo Giurgola, “A House To Be Built, A Home To Live In,” *ISSA Review* 11, no. 2 (2012): 52.

2. Colin Rowe, *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa and Other Essays* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1976), 2, first published in *Architecture Review*, 1947.



Figure 1:
Romaldo Giurgola, Perspective Sketch of House,
Lake Bathurst, New South Wales.
(Papers of Romaldo Giurgola, National Library of
Australia, MS 10655, File 4.1.20.7)

of an article titled “Medieval Swedish Churches in Västergötland” to the senior editor of *Progressive Architecture*. In the paper he had articulated a series of architectural preoccupations that, we argue, also resonate with the home he designed for himself. It described characteristics he had observed in a systematic study of those Swedish structures, noting compelling connections between the buildings and their surroundings, the considered dimensions and siting arrangements, and the varied materials, such as stone and timber, well-crafted according to simple, available construction methods. He commended, for example, the way the entrance was located “as a rule on the ... [facade] which faces the sun,”³ and that the small church buildings “form a perfect whole with the trees ... for the trees are an essential component of the grouping.”⁴ His paper commented on the means through which these modest, yet refined buildings located inhabitants within a “paradise,” an imaginary room conceived in relationship to the wider landscape. The article was not published but exists in manuscript form among his papers.

Newly available archives in the National Library of Australia contain his early

unpublished writings together with design drawings, watercolours, sketches, and construction documents for this small country house. Examination of these materials in sum suggests strong connections between Giurgola’s earlier work and his less discussed later projects in Australia, frequently seen in terms of their physical location and the cultural distance separating three continents. Through the lens of his own perspective in the unpublished text on rural buildings in Sweden, this paper offers a close reading of Giurgola’s late “ideal” villa at Lake Bathurst, conceived as a meaningful fragment that subtly framed a precise microcosm: an “island home” within the vast Australian landscape.

3.

Romaldo Giurgola, “Medieval Swedish Churches in Västergötland,” in Papers of Romaldo Giurgola, National Library of Australia, MS 10655, Box 4 File 2.1.7, 4.

4.

Romaldo Giurgola, “Medieval Swedish Churches in Västergötland,” 2.