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Architecture and Gentility: the cult of the villa

‘Nothing can more distinctly mark the character and taste of a man, than the kind of dwelling he shall choose to erect for the place of his particular residence. In that will indisputably be seen whether his taste, his judgement, or his wealth, was predominant; or how far all together were called into action.’

James Malton, *A Collection of designs for rural retreats, as villas* (1802)

This paper explores how in the late Georgian period domestic architecture was enlisted to express the concept of Gentility, and examines how the idea of the villa - and of villa life - was enthusiastically embraced by the middling sort, newly wealthy and conscious of status, who seized the opportunity formerly confined to the élite, to use their houses as both mirror and celebration of self. Rather than questions of architectural style, the focus is instead upon the values and aspirations which the villa represented, and the response of the architectural profession to this phenomenon. The paper draws on two types of printed media from this period - the new genre of popular architectural pattern book, and the property advertisements carried in the regional and national press of the time - which shed light on the role and significance of the villa beyond its purely architectural context.

The villa is a concept which needs to be understood in terms of function rather than form: a term describing a mode of living rather than a specific style of architecture. By the eighteenth century the concept of *villeggiatura*, retreat from the discomforts and responsibilities of town life to a secondary, less formal house in the countryside, was an established practice of the élite; but it was a habit which was increasingly being copied by the mercantile and professional cadres, and one which demanded a new approach to the design of the smaller house, not in terraces in the town, but individual houses often in proto-rural colonies on the town fringes.

The discourse revealed by the villa books coalesces around ideas of ‘appropriateness’, ‘elegance’ and ‘gentility’, as well as ‘comfort’, ‘retirement’ and ‘utility’, in a judicious mixture of practicality and aspiration. But in addition to emphasising outward physical appearance as a signifier of taste and standing, these publications collude in suggesting that the supposed simplicity of villa life was itself imbued with improving moral qualities, and not least its essential rurality as a means of connection with nature.

The advertisements reinforce the language of the villa books in revealing the preoccupations of middle-class home-making, concepts of ‘Neatness’ and ‘Gentility’ being paramount; but they carry the further implication that the villa was seen not just a reward for diligence and financial or professional acuity but as means of bestowing status upon its occupants, by provenance or association. The aspirations of villadom were not however without their detractors, identified by some commentators with petty snobbery, sentimentalism and naïveté of taste.

Yet, it is argued, despite the villa’s progress appearing to be one of downward social mobility, the values enshrined in the original aristocratic model were preserved and cultivated, if nuanced in scale and sophistication.