

A living monument

# RUINS

The British  
Museum

of the Palace of the Emperor  
Diocletian in Spalatro in Dalmatia

by Robert Adam

ITP  
2016

26 August 2016 –  
26 October 2016

ROOM 3  
Admission free



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A living monument

# Ruins

as the touchstone of the Antiquity



One of the great books of the eighteenth century is *Ruins of the Palace of Diocletian in Spalatro in Dalmatia* by Robert Adam. He is best known today as a designer of magnificent British country houses and interiors.

Adam's journey to Split at the eastern coast of the Adriatic Sea (today a part of Croatia) was very unusual for the Grand Tourists of those days. His purpose of visiting Diocletian's palace in Split, a living ruin that dates from late Antiquity, was to discover an authentic model of domestic architecture that he hoped he could employ in his own work.

Engraved plates in his volume captured the building itself and the impression it made on two sons of the Enlightenment: himself and his co-worker Charles-Louis Clérissseau.

Robert Adam, *Ruins of the Palace of Diocletian in Spalatro in Dalmatia*, London, 1964, Plate I

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A living monument:

# Ruins

of the Diocletian's palace, today



In 1979, Diocletian's Palace was inscribed in the UNESCO World Heritage List, as a part of the historical core of the city of Split, Croatia.

As one of the oldest continuously-inhabited buildings in the world, Diocletian's palace has experienced a great deal of cultural and political change.

However, its simple but powerful ancient layout was stable and adaptable enough to endure, and the Palace has retained both its residential and public character to this day.

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The Peristyle; The Diocletian's palace – aerial view /  
photo credit: Zoran Alajbeg, 2015



A living monument:

# Ruins

and Robert Adam



Robert Adam investigated Diocletian's Palace for five weeks in late July and August of 1757, with a team of distinguished collaborators.

His resulting book *Ruins of the Palace of Diocletian* described the structure in words and images.

His written descriptions were accompanied by rich - almost romantic - perspective depictions of the topography and landscape he discovered.

Through his direct experience of the Palace and creation of new visual vocabulary for the *Ruins*, Adam became the first to introduce the Palace to the world.

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Robert Adam, attributed to George Willison, oil on canvas,  
circa 1770-1774, NPG 2953 © National Portrait Gallery, London







## RUINS AND THE GRAND TOUR

From the late sixteenth century it was fashionable for young aristocrats to enrich their classical education by travelling to continental Europe, and above all to Rome. Thus was born the idea of the Grand Tour, which reached its peak in the eighteenth century. Antiquity was the most powerful cultural infrastructure of this period in Europe. The contours of the European Grand Tour are lines that join places with those traces of an idealised past. Although its focus was Rome, the Grand Tour's exploration of the ancient world expanded to include other parts of the Roman Empire. Among these, Dalmatia, a region along the eastern coast of the Adriatic Sea (and today a part of Croatia), occupied an important place. Undoubtedly, the most powerful magnet for Grand Tourists in Dalmatia was Diocletian's palace in Split, a living ruin that dates from late Antiquity.

Books published as a result of the Grand Tour, like the *Ruins of Palmyra* (1753), *Ruins of Balbec* (1757), *Antiquities of Athens* (1762), and *Ruins of the Palace of the Emperor Diocletian at Spalatro in Dalmatia* (1764) contributed to the spread of a popular appreciation for history and passion for Antiquity. Grand Tourists made a number of architectural drawings of Antique ruins as well as creating architectural fantasies based on real ruins. These ruins helped to create a new architectural vocabulary of beauty.

### THE RUINS OF DIOCLETIAN'S PALACE

The original Roman structure of the Palace was built at the turn of the 3rd and 4th centuries in the shape of a trapezoid. Its dimensions were 175 m x 181-216 m. The Palace was situated in a protected bay on the southern side of a little Adriatic peninsula, and was designed according to the topography and the pre-existing settlement.

The Palace was constructed of local white limestone and marble of high quality. Some of the materials used for decoration were imported, including capitals produced in workshops in the Proconnesos, Egyptian granite columns, and numerous 3500-year-old granite sphinxes. The sphinxes originated from the site of the Egyptian Pharaoh Thutmose III, and one of them remains in the Peristyle, or central square of the Palace, today.

Diocletian's palace underwent a huge transformation at the beginning of the 7<sup>th</sup> century. At this time it served as a refuge for people from nearby Salona, who were fleeing attacks from the nomadic tribes of the Avars and Slavs. Like an abandoned shell, the Palace provided protection to the refugees, and the framework for a new city.

Over the course of time, the city spread outside its original boundaries. The Palace was fortified by Baroque star-shaped bastions when Robert Adam, famous British architect and its most distinctive researcher, came to Split from Rome.

### RUINS AND ROBERT ADAM

Robert Adam investigated Diocletian's Palace for five weeks in late July and August of 1757, with a team of distinguished collaborators. His resulting book *Ruins of the Palace of Diocletian* described the structure in words and images. His dry, technical, written descriptions were accompanied by rich, almost romantic, perspective depictions of the topography and landscape he discovered.

In his book Adam creates three distinctive styles of drawing to depict different aspects or states of the Palace. The first, shown here in the View to Peristyle, shows the 'ruins' of the Palace as a living monument and integral part of the living city, with layers of medieval and early modern additions, populated by people and their everyday activities.



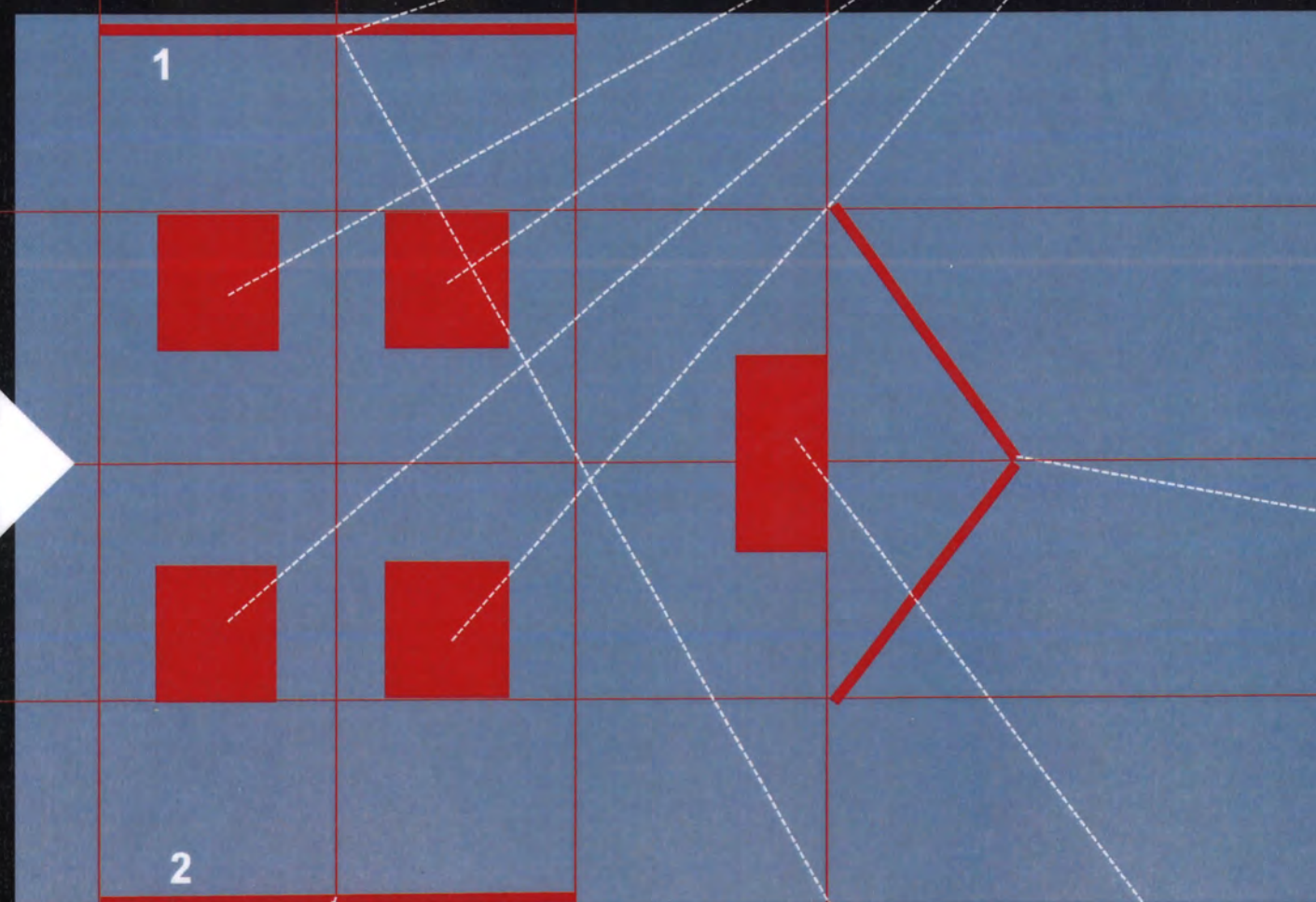
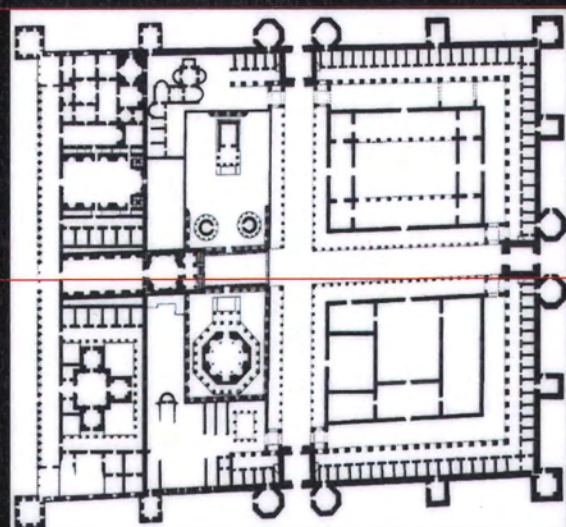
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# RUINS

of the Palace of the Emperor  
Diocletian in Spalatro in Dalmatia

by Robert Adam

ROOM 3



Four showcases  
symbolizing four quadrants  
of the Palace, with the  
objects that relate to the  
Palace and its history (H 90  
cm)

Projection on 2 LCDs  
which simulates leafing  
through the book placed  
in front the projection

**OBJECT IN FOCUS:**

A BOOK / a showcase on which the book is  
exhibited



2 PARALEL READINGS  
in wallcases:  
1 The British Museum  
objects & objects from the  
Diocletian's palace

2 Diocletian's palace  
in Robert Adam's  
book  
and as it is today

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