

The Shape of Doubt

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Architecture is by its intrinsic nature a never-ending process of negotiations between diametrically opposite, sometimes paradoxical forces and – often constrained or reckless – conciliations. The built product generates from the amalgamation of diverse and sometimes incompatible conditions imposed by site, client, budget, desires, technology, scale, politics, ambitions... and so on. The matters of Baldassarre Peruzzi and of Palazzo Massimo alle Colonne, though dating almost five centuries and certainly not being an exception in the history of Architecture, are in many ways a fitting example of such a claim.

The (hi)story

In 1527 Rome, the center of the Catholic world, is going through one of the most tragic moments of its millennial history: on May 6th the city is captured, plundered, teared up and almost burned to the ground by the imperial army of Charles V. Pope Clemente VII Medici witnesses the tragedy secluded within Castel Sant'Angelo and will be soon forced to pay a considerable sum for the withdrawal of the invaders and escape to Orvieto dressed up like a farmer. These catastrophic events confirm the decline of the Italian peninsula, at the mercy of foreign troops, with a humiliated and weakened Catholic Christian Church.

The year following the Sack is dominated by plague and famine, with the population decimated and several of the survivors fleeing the city. Among the noble households that have dramatically suffered from the Sack is the aristocratic family Massimo, which claims a mythical ancestry back to the Roman Empire. Even if reduced to only three brothers and with several properties destroyed in the aftermath of the tragic events, the family is still living in the Rione Parione, more precisely along the Via Papale – a sequence of streets linking San Pietro with San Giovanni in Laterano, where a palace is

synonym of prestigious social position and strong political power. It is here that one of the brothers, Pietro Massimo, moved by political ambitions and desire of redemption, decides to build on the ruins of his *domus antiqua* a new private residence meant to celebrate the claimed descent of his family from Fabio Massimo – the man who defeated Hannibal¹.

In 1532 Baldassarre Peruzzi, who has just returned to Rome, is chosen as the architect to realise the ambitious self-representation project of Pietro and one of the first palaces to be rebuilt after the sack. Being one among the most diverse and polytropic artists of the late Renaissance, a period when Italy was unprecedentedly prolific of geniuses, Peruzzi incarnates the “universal man” as per the ideal Albertian conception of the architect as a humanist and a generalist. Throughout his career he reveals his talent as architect, mosaicist, scenographer, painter, sculptor and literate. Arrived in Rome as a young painter with a great culture of ancient Roman archaeologies, he became a pupil of Raffaello, a collaborator of Bramante and the protégée of Agostino Chigi – for whom he built one of the most harmonious Renaissance villas which would become the paradigm of the urban villa typology, the Villa Farnesina.

During the Sack, apparently due to his elegant manners and handsome figure, Peruzzi was mistaken for a nobleman, kidnapped and tortured for a ransom. He finally managed to flee to his hometown, Siena, where he arrived with few clothes on after being robbed on the way. Only a few years later, thanks to the intercession of the pope Farnese, he will manage to return to Rome.

Palazzo Massimo alle Colonne, which will be Peruzzi's main commission once back in the city, is therefore a sort of personal reconciliation with the city and is rightly considered to be his masterpiece: it reflects all the experience, the culture and the sense of beauty as well as the preoccupations, struggles and uncertainties following the Sack, which characterised his late years,



spent in great poverty and amidst rivalries with fellow architects and painters, eventually leading to his death, due to poisoning.

A dramatic procession through space

Peruzzi finds himself to deal with a difficult site into which he “casts” his intervention. The many peculiarities of the plan show continuous negotiations with the pre-existing buildings but also with the ambitions of the client who was trying to re-establish his power and social status. The existing palazzo prior to the Sack was laid in a constrained irregular plot in between Corso Vittorio Emanuele II and Piazza Navona, with only one limited exposure to the public street and divided by a public passage. Peruzzi chooses to maintain two major elements of the previous building in their respective location – the courtyard and the loggia – transforming them into a completely new articulation.

One of the main enigmatic and innovative solutions as well as a contradistinctive feature of the Palazzo is its subtly bent façade, seamlessly connecting the two adjoining buildings in a continuity that resolves all conflicting angles. Another architect from the Renaissance would have placed on the plot an ideal relentless and generic object that could have been displaced anywhere else; Peruzzi goes for a deeper level of complexity deforming the building into an architecture that existentially belongs to that very place conciliating the plot irregularities. Being a master of perspectives, he achieves to convert objective design problems into valuable aesthetic solutions. It is believed that the ancient *Odeum* by the Emperor Domitian was built underneath the palace, perhaps determining the curvature of the plot; in this view the unusual shape of the façade would acquire an even more fascinating value, as it would imply an immediate reference to the actual ground onto which the

palace is built making visible the hidden, yet actually existing. However still no real proof exists of this ancient pre-existence and therefore the curved roman ruin appears to be more an idealized reference than a real determinant constraint. This image of the façade is also given by the Roman Teatro Marcello that Peruzzi himself contributed to define. Thus, on one side the urban context explains the functional reasons behind this configuration and on the other the model and the confrontation standard to rely on is the antique. The recurrent explicit if not flaunted reference to the ancient world is the clear expression of the desire, which Peruzzi shares with Pietro Massimo, to bind to ancient Roman history and defend the endangered identity of the Roman tradition.

Palazzo Massimo is also paradigmatic of the transition happening during the XVI century between Renaissance and Baroque, a period which goes under the name of Mannerism. Deriving its intellectual values from the former and prefiguring the sensual values of the latter, Mannerism seems an evolution from the characters of the Renaissance to those of the Baroque².

The façade is a first example of this transition; *in primis* through its curvature the building performs actively on its surroundings, with the outside influenced and given a new character by the inside and vice versa. Moreover, in order to maintain the symmetry to Via del Paradiso – running perpendicularly to the entrance – Peruzzi annexes part of the adjacent Palazzo enveloping it with the new facade. Therefore, in an exquisitely baroque *ante litteram* gesture, the façade is much bigger than the actual building, resulting in an enhanced visual effect. The treatment of the surface is also conceived with the same criteria: the linear *bugnato* which extends evenly like a skin pulled over the building enhances visually the curving facade; the lack of differentiation at the edges augments



2. Caroline Constant, Mannerist Rome from Roma Interrotta, Architectural Design, Vol 49, No 3-4, 1979

3. Ibidem



the fragmental character already suggested by the curvature.

A noticeable inversion is produced: the “heavy” *bugnato* order and the “light” column order are vertically flipped in contrast to the classical rule of superimposition of architectural orders. Having to deal with a tight budget, the *bugnato* surface of the lower level is built out of travertine whereas the upper levels are realized in stucco, a cheap surrogate of stone, still resembling that of the ground floor in order to provide a homogeneous continuity.

The façade of Palazzo Massimo is not only convex, it also has a depth. In order to enter the palace, one has to go through a bent loggia space, high and decorated with ornaments that recall Roman bas-reliefs. This space is the first of a sequence which is the second major element proving the deflection from the Renaissance values and from the classical rules; Peruzzi chooses indeed to build an “urban interior”, keeping the previous public passage within the palace by implementing a sequence of linked voids carved into the mass of the building, becoming its backbone and hierarchically prevailing over the private rooms of the palazzo.

The procession happens within a single space which has been fragmented. The hierarchy of major and minor spaces disappears in favor of a series of major spaces to be experienced incrementally and mediated by the minor ones. The space contracts and changes direction continuously revealing itself as an eccentric system of coherent fractions. The bent loggia is much more than an entrance, it is not a space to traverse but rather a space to stay, as suggested by the sudden inversion of the conventional proportions of the *atrium* – its enhanced longitudinal character. That feeling is confirmed also by the two benches, symmetrically disposed at the two sides of the entrance and the two small apsidal-like niches, each housing a roman statue representing the mythical

ancestors of the Massimo family.

After this space, another inversion is made: a long, vaulted corridor accelerates by means of its narrowness a visitor into one side of a cortile. Funnel of light are channeled through the pierced vaulted ceilings of the loggias on either side of the cortile. Rather than to its geometric center, the attention is shifted to a new axis of symmetry on the right side, determined by a fountain and a stair linking, through a new elegant loggia, the salone on the piano nobile with the cortile³.

In the cortile, the dominating dimension is the height; the space is perceived as narrow and becomes a new center of gravity for the rooms organized around it. The life of the palace happens mainly within that hollow space, since most rooms have no other window or opening but the ones facing it. It is a space that echoes what has been already traversed: the flooring is that of the public street, the columns replicate those of the loggia in the façade.

Light coming from a second cortile to the rear reveals the part of an older palazzo, maintained and incorporated by slightly bending the main axis. This provokes the illusion of a much longer space whose end is hidden and can only be reached by moving towards it. The connection to this second cortile happens with the atrium situation that is repeated in its effect and differentiated in its spatial character: the corridor propels again a visitor into a void space, preexisting to Peruzzi’s project and perfectly integrated into it. At the end of the last space, once again under a vaulted ceiling, a huge hole overlooks a small square at the end of which one can have a glimpse of Piazza Navona.

The sequence really is a continuation of the public street on one side and the square on the other, a dynamic axe for the palazzo to develop around. This public path in the heart of the palazzo is well accorded with its civic character which pays tribute to Rome simultaneously increasing the prestige of the family.

Conciliation as unity in diversity

Instead of presenting architecture as absolute in its objecthood with a clear and unequivocal plan, Peruzzi renders it relative through the changing perception of the subject, who is brought actively into the experience of understanding the building.

The traditionally self-sufficient palazzo is therefore transformed into the subordinate part, though intensively expressive, of a broader whole. It is a porous mass, opposed to its Renaissance ancestor, hermetic and massive, discontinuous from its neighbors, totally autonomous and sometimes redundant. In Palazzo Massimo one must move through the entire spatial sequence in order to assemble its organisation and bring together its fragments.

These qualities mirror the new psychological dimension of the contemporary man who, confronted with the disintegration of the ancient cosmic order, feels as deeply problematic all the fundamental aspects of his existence as well as his relation to other men, God and even himself. The political foundations of the renaissance civilization crumble and the division of the church confirm the disintegration of a unified and absolute world. Few years later Copernicus will scientifically remove the earth from the center of the universe. In Palazzo Massimo, order and harmony have disappeared; the forms are impregnated with tensions and conflicts. Compared to the Renaissance Palazzo whose parts conveyed a unitary and measured image, Peruzzi introduces an atmosphere of doubt, tragedy and conflict hitherto unknown in the history of art. It is a difficult reconciliation of the discrepancies of the Renaissance legacy and ambitions with the contemporary human condition and the meaning of its existence.

Hugo Riemann describes form in music as unity in diversity. This is the core of what Palazzo Massimo is and what will later explode in the Baroque: form is

reached accepting the multiplicities and binding them into a meaningful complex whole. The contaminations, negotiations and conciliations of preexisting site conditions and spatial elements, material diversities, ancient glories and contemporary concerns, private and public realms are condensed in an incredibly rich shifting moment for architecture: the expression of doubt of modern man.







This essay is part of an ongoing broader project on relevant works of Italian art and architecture.
Plans and section underline how the project brings into coexistence the two adjacent palaces as well as the apparent formal dissonance among the parts.
Images and drawings are produced by the authors.

With their work, through different mediums and disciplines, Marina Montresor and Stephan Lando attempt to explore the possibilities of architecture as a fragment of the realm of art.
Together they edited the book *Defining Criteria* published by Quart Verlag in June 2018.

