The Rear as an Unintentional Façade

The Farnesina ai Baullari in Rome

The design for Thomas Le Roy’s palace in Rome, although conditioned by the small, irregular site, was conceived as a C-shape plan around a square courtyard, in order to provide a sophisticated, celebrative route leading from the opaque, solid facade in Vicolo dell’Aquila to the loggia at the noble floor. When the building was still under construction, Paul III Farnese promoted urban works that caused the demolition of part of the insula the palace belonged to and exhibited its previously hidden rear on Via dei Baullari, turning it into the most visible part of the palace. From that moment onwards, both the works of the different owners and the graphical interpretations provided by artists from XVII to XIX century contributed to connote the verso as the new recto. While the original experience of the palace is being gradually lost, the rear is elected as an unintentional façade, conditioning the Farnesina’s role and development till the 20th century.
In Western art, the *rear view* is a consequence of the *spatial turn* that marks Italian painting in the Middle Ages. Somehow, it makes its appearance in Giotto’s frescoes in the Basilica of Assisi. His pictorial space breaks with the ancient iconographic tradition centered on symbolic and hierarchical values that frame man in a complex metaphysical structure. It begins to imitate the quality of the physical space in which the observer moves and gradually it becomes an extension of it. The exhibition of the rear of the wooden crucifix in fresco of the Presepe di Greccio demonstrates how Giotto conceived his compositions as actual three-dimensional spaces in which the figures act and relate to each other and the observer, too. More than a century later, the convex mirror inserted at the bottom of the room of the Arnolfini Spouses reveals, like in a car, the same scene from an opposite point of view, certifies the three-dimensionality of the space, attributes to the frame the task of ordering it and shows the presence of the painter Van Eyck and a fourth figure, who can be interpreted as the observer himself captured into the image.

This unprecedented pictorial spatiality is constantly translated into architecture through the application of the Florentine perspective. While developing as a tool for a *scientific* representation of three-dimensional space on a two-dimensional sheet, perspective ends up influencing the very way of conceiving space in terms of representation. The projective techniques at the basis of perspective, through tools such as the square grid, the projection of columns onto the walls and the scalar relationship of the construction system of the arch flanked by the orders, introduce the possibility of a space in which the human movement is no longer necessary for its meaning. Such a space can be easily measured, understood and experienced even while remaining still, as a form of representation. Paradoxically, this sort of homogeneous and isotropic space, which reaches its apex with Bramantesque centric designs and painted temples, seems to aim at the dissolution of any tension, of any antagonism between directionality and centrality, between inside and outside, between above and below and between front and rear. Yet Bramante himself is fully aware of the contradictions implicit in this *mathematical* extremism and introduces elements to make his works *dynamical*, capable of invol-
This conflict between a projective, mathematical concept of architecture and a kinetical, sensorial one can be observed in many civil and religious buildings of the 16th century, which were largely influenced by the ideal models developed in treatises, paintings and scenes. The authors of these models were concerned not only with the issues related to the correct application of the architectural orders, but also with the relationship between buildings and urban space, which, in the case of Rome, was far from the harmonious pictures of the ideal city. The small Palazzo LeRoy in Rome (Fig.1), whose historical key episodes are here described and analyzed, deals with these topics, presenting the conflict between an ideal, mathematical composition with a choreographic program and the unpredictable urbanistic events which were to upset these goals and to turn its rear into an unintentional façade.

The Farnesina ai Baullari

The Breton prelate Thomas Le Roy, whose name was latinized in Tommaso Regis, came to Italy following Charles VIII in 1494. He played important political roles both in Italy and France. He was present in the Roman Curia continuously from the pontificate of Alexander VI to that of Clement VII and, simultaneously, to the Court of the Kings of France. His decisive role in the stipulation of the Concordat of 1516 between Leo X and Francis I assured him high clerical positions in the Papal States and noble titles at the French Court. Around 1520, he chose a lot for his small palace in Campo Marzio. It was near the Palace of Cardinal Raffaele Riario, which had assimilated the ancient church of S. Lorenzo in Damaso at the beginning of the century and which became the seat of the Apostolic Chanceller-y in 1517. The area of Campo Marzio was crossed by the medieval trident from Ponte Sant’Angelo formed by Via Peregrinorum, Via Recta and Via
Papalis and was marked by Campo de’ Fiori, which Sixtus IV had promoted as the main city market.¹

In those years, the area was affected by a complex process of transformation driven by the real estate and diplomatic interests of popes, by the growth of foreign communities and religious congregations careful to build a specific identity² in the cosmopolitan townscape, and by the antagonistic intents of noble families.³ Most of these interests involved the growing importance of the Via Papalis. The route the Pope’s procession followed during his movements was a sort of urban theater in which Roman civil and religious communities actually stage their conflicting relationship through the iconographic and symbolic support of architecture. A place along this route was fundamental for those who wanted political visibility. Thus, Thomas Le Roy chose to build his own palace in Via dell’Aquila which constituted a section of the Via Papalis.

The beginning of the construction of Palazzo Regis is established with certainty by the two epigraphs on the ashlar of the base which mention the name of the client, who, by virtue of his services, was allowed to use the heraldic emblems of the lilies, here placed alongside the stoats of Brittany in the Le Roy’s coat of arms.

The design of the palace dates back to 1520–21, under the pontificate of Leo X, while works probably began in 1522, arriving in 1523 at least at the height where the two epigraphs are located.⁴ At the time, the lot was located on the corner of an insula with an empty space in the middle. The palace had only three sides, two public on the street and one private, inside the insula, with an ideal fourth side in common with the adjacent building. It was a building with a front, whose design also affects the lateral side, and a rear of a different nature.

The elevations define a pseudo-cubic volume cut by the courtyard and declare four levels: a semi-basement floor; a raised ground floor; the noble floor, with gables on the windows alternately triangular and curved, and a second floor. The main facade in Via dell’Aquila shows five windows, with the door in the center, as well as the side facade, with the difference that the second and fourth windows on the noble floor are blind. Doors and windows on the ground floor have a round arch with the ashlers that merge into the bands of the travertine ashlar that goes up to the sill decorated with ripples of the windows on the first floor. Above this line, the building is covered in light brick, with ashlar at the corners and travertine bands on the second floor. The third elevation, the rear, shows the loggia in the courtyard between the two wings, with an irregular disposition of the windows because of the two stairways.

The C-shape plan reminds of a typical suburban villa. The wings house the staircases and service rooms, with side entrances for servants, riders and carriages. The sequence on the main axis interprets the Roman domus through the pages of Vitruvius. It includes: an entrance from Via dell’Aquila; a vestibule marked by pilasters resting on a high base and covered by a barrel vault; a three-span portico under the loggia covered by a barrel vault with lunettes; a small courtyard, marked by elegant Serliana motifs on half-columns and by a door in the external wall; a major courtyard or garden inside the insula (Fig. 2).

Although the irregularities of the trapezoidal site, a mathematical rigor permeates this spatial sequence, entirely composed of only two modules: the narrow entablature module, which may house a niche, a window or a door; and the large arched module, corresponding to barrel vaults of vestibule and portico (Fig. 3). The combination of two modules produces the Serliana motif, which allows, through the smaller spans, to compensate for the irregularities dictated by the presence of Medieval, pre-existing masonry.⁵ At the end of the portico, a staircase runs parallel to the northern wall of the courtyard, leading first to the main floor, whose communicating rooms overlook the outside and the internal loggia, and then to the second floor.

A different façade

Thomas Le Roy died in 1524, before seeing his palace completed. He left it
Fig. 3. Genetic diagram of the plan; 3D diagram of the architectural orders at ground floor. Drawings: author.

Fig. 4. Urban evolution of the area in 1523 / 1536 / 1915 / Guj’s unbuilt proposal (a. Palazzo della Cancelleria; b. Via dell’Aquila; c. Via dei Baullari; d. Via Papalis; e. Corso Vittorio Emanuele II; f. Piazza S. Pantaleo). Drawings: author.
under construction to his nephew and universal heir Raoul Le Roy (or Rodolfo Regis), who fixed the damage suffered during the Sack of Rome in 1527, completed the work and endowed the palace with rich furnishings. Yet, while the building was probably still incomplete, the boundary conditions changed radically (Fig.4).

In 1517, Via dei Baullari, the so-called Strada Nova dei Farnese, had been opened to connect Campo de’ Fiori to Piazza Farnese, where Antonio da Sangallo the Younger had already begun to carry out the construction of the new palace. At the beginning of 1530s, the Pope decided to extend the Strada Nova towards Piazza Navona. At that point, "a straight 200 meters long and ten meters wide way allowed those who walked the Via Papalis to see Farnese’s monumental residence in the background.” In 1536, the procession of Charles V, the Holy Roman Emperor, inaugurated the new route along Via dei Massimi, passing under their new palace just finished by Baldassarre Peruzzi, turning in Via dei Baullari and heading to Campo de’ Fiori where it takes Via del Pellegrino to get to St Peter’s church. Two years later, Paul III Farnese also changed the route of his urban movements and began to pass directly through Piazza Farnese: "After the opening of Via dei Baullari, it was more convenient going along Via della Valle and Via dei Massimi to S. Pantaleo and then reaching Campo de’ Fiori through the new road.”

The continuation of Via dei Baullari also caused the demolition of a part of the insula the small palace belonged to, cutting away its garden. On the one hand, Thomas’s heirs were forced to give up their privacy and areas inside the insula; on the other, they got a front row seat on the new papal way. After the demolitions, their loggia found itself at the end of a sort of accelerated perspective gallery open on Via dei Baullari. The rear of the palace, conceived for a strictly private use, was suddenly promoted to the main facade of the building. The square courtyard of Palazzo Regis, previously hidden in the insula, ceases to be the secret heart of the organism inside the main spatial sequence and is exhibited, revealing the internal organization of the Palace well beyond the original intentions of the anonymous designer. This configures the rear elevation as a sort of cross-section of the building, almost a materialization of that parete di dentro that Raphael had advocated as the third graphic mode for the representation of the architecture, after plan and elevation. At the same time, its brick walls marked by the Serliana motif appear as a variation of the rhythm given by the windows on the facades, with the orders that seem to emerge gradually from under the corner ashlar, in a way that make the courtyard and facade look like two "strictly related, complementary structures.”

Seen from Via dei Baullari, the building appears to be the result of the superimposition of a brick body above a base marked by horizontal travertine bands: two overlapping autonomous entities are perceived. Entering the courtyard, the reading of the building changes radically. Although the ground floor is characterized by the widespread use of travertine cladding and decorations, the vertical continuity given by the succession of the three orders of the loggia and the repetition of the Serliana motif prevails. This revelation forces the observer to reformulate the previous hypothesis and to interpret the building as a monolithic body excavated (Fig.5). This ambiguity allows more than a consistent reading, depending on the point of view (physical or philosophical) that is considered. To describe similar phenomena in some of Le Corbusier’s architectures, Bruno Reichlin evoked the rhetorical figure of the enjambement (from the French enjamber, "going beyond someone else’s field"). In poetry, this term denotes the infringement of the parallelism between syntax (end of a sentence or part of it) and meter (end of the verse); in architecture, it appears suitable to designate "those effects of interference, double belonging or spatial ambiguity (at choice) for which Rowe and Slutzky proposed the term of phenomenal transparency.” But obviously these ambiguities are extraneous to the original conception of the building because the passage from the original facade to the courtyard would have been mediated by the sequence of spaces measured and bound by the architectural orders and for the courtyard would have been seen only from inside.
A rear with a view

At the end of the 16th century, the verso of the Palazzo Regis had become its recto. Its three-story loggia squeezed between the two service wings not only became the facade de facto but also the subject of studies and reproductions, both thanks to its unusual design and by virtue of the favorable observation field from Via dei Baullari. The sheet 4096A at the Uffizi, dated to 1573 and already attributed to Jacopo Barozzi da Vignola, presents a survey with measures of the longitudinal section and an excerpt of the main facade, perhaps in function of the plates Giovann Battista Falda engraved and published in 1576. Among them, a "veduta di dietro del Palazzo del S. March. Silvestri incontro l’Orat. Di S. Lorenzo in Damaso nel rione di Parione" shows an idealized rear elevation by means of a quadratura affecting both the design of the Serliana and the proportions of the entire elevation. Falda records some of the irregularities and asymmetries of the palace. For example, he cuts the facade on the right, where it was actually covered by another building, and exhibits the asymmetrical axis of the windows of the left wing (Fig.6). Although disharmonious and picturesque, Falda’s picture certifies the importance assumed by the rear of the palace.

Sebastiano Silvestri, prior of Jesi, had moved into the palace a few years before and his family settled throughout the 17th century. In the meantime, the building, considered a sort
of scale model for Palazzo Farnese, began to be called first *Piccola Farnesina* and then *Farnesina ai Baullari*. These nicknames combine a misinterpretation of Thomas Le Roy’s lilies with the fact that it was visible from the Strada Nova, more important than Via dell’Aquila. They also distinguish it from the other *Farnesina*, the Villa of Agostino Chigi at Lungara, which the Cardinal Alessandro Farnese had purchased in 1580.

Palazzo Regis-Silvestri’s conditions in the 17th century are documented in a sketch preserved in Würzburg and in a meticulous survey made by the Swedish architect Nicodemus Tessin the Younger. His ground floor plan reveals the acquisition of a room from the adjacent building to be used as a stable, while secondary doors connect both the staircase and the service rooms in the opposite wing to the outside. To Tessin, who thanks to his friendship with Cristina of Sweden could attend the workshop of Gian Lorenzo Bernini and Carlo Fontana, the building is above all the Casa di Vignola, as his son will write under his copy of the plan. “And it is not unreasonable to assume that Tessin compared himself with Vignola and considered ‘Vignola’s Residence’ a suitable model for his own” innovative museum-residence in Stockholm, now known as Tessinpalast. Although the analogy between the two buildings mainly concerns the facade on the narrow street, Tessin also studies the rear of the Farnesina. His section on the courtyard shows, for the first time, a balcony overhanging the external wall of the courtyard. This balcony is accessible from an open door in the wall of the courtyard, through the side span of the upper Serliana, in correspondence with the internal staircase landing.

The sketch in Würzburg records the addition of this balcony and its parapet, too, in apparent contrast with the anonymous artist’s intent of providing and idealized view of the small palace, which is given a square proportion and a symmetrical disposition between wings and loggia. Here, the external masonry parapet, possibly perceived by the anonymous artist as an original part of the building, is crowded with vases, suggesting a hanging garden. While in the sketch it is configured as an additional screen against the introspection of people walking in the street, the
balcony itself appears instead a necessary integration for the new role of the rear: a useful device for the game of seeing and being seen as a function of the public role the Silvestri family intended to play in the context of the Via Papalis (Fig. 7). The balcony may have been built in the same years in which the vault of the loggia on the first floor is painted, to celebrate the marriage between Federico Silvestri and Caterina Malaspina of 1623 - an event with which the groom's family acquired a very prestigious position - with frescoes that symbolize the protection and privileges granted by Urban VIII Barberini and that were visible from the street below.

The Farnesina between building and idea

The drawings that show the building from the 18th century onwards, also fueled by the arbitrary attributions to Bramante, Michelangelo, Baldassarre Peruzzi, Antonio da Sangallo il giovane, Vignola or Giulio Romano with Raphael, often focus on the rear. The draftmen generally try to harmonize elements and proportions in order to optimize the composition. Often, the entire building is regularized on the basis of a square, turned into a symmetrical scheme, corrected in all its apparent irregularities, isolated from its insula and equipped with a fourth elevation as a reflection of the others, in order to be presented as a rational, Roman residential model to imitate. This process is particularly evident in the plate drawn up by the French architects Charles Percier and Pierre François Léonard Fontaine and published in 1798. The plan, extrapolated from the urban environment, does not show the characteristic trapezoidal shape but is traced back to a
square scheme, useful for reduce the asymmetries of the rear and perfectly corresponding to the squared elevations. Likewise, doors and windows are rectified to align with an invisible grid; the roof becomes a terrace; the window pediments are uniformed, and so on (Fig. 8). With the intent of offering the Parisian wealthy bourgeois an elegant residential model, the two architects extensively alter the actual shape of the small palace. In this vision, the rear becomes an alternative facade, with a high base and a courtyard useful for bringing light and air into the depth of the narrow lots of the Medieval urban of Paris. Some further results of this Percier and Fontaine’s arbitrary adaptation can be found in the contemporary residence model of the architect Urban Vitry.17

As in other cases, most of the drawings of the students, Italian artists and European travelers, including those of Pierre-Adrien Pâris, Henri Labrouste, Prosper Barbot, Augustin-Théophile Quaintinet, Paul-Marie Letarouilly to mention only the French ones, present the Farnesina ai Baullari as an isolated building. Even François Philippe Louis Boitte, who made a watercolor in perspective of the building seen from Via dei Baullari in 1847, refused to represent the buildings around the palace and restored it to its ideal 16th century form.18 On the contrary, almost two decades later, the sketches of the German architect Carl Jonas Mylius show the Farnesina in its actual condition, with the buildings around it and the superfluation it has been suffering over time.19 His plan, in which the original vestibule is missing, testifies that the palace is accessed through the courtyard. This sort of sincere document, possibly encouraged by the picturesque character assumed by the building over the years (Fig. 9), comes only a few years before the Farnesina is involved in the works for the opening of the Corso Vittorio Emanuele II. This new avenue, conceived since the 1873 Master Plan of Rome, comported the destruction of many buildings in Campo Marzio: while the ancient Palazzo Regis was saved, the insula it belonged to was demolished.

In 1887, the engineer Enrico Guj won the competition for the restoration of the palace. His project included a fourth facade on Corso Vittorio Emanuele II maintaining the style of the building and a round terrace facing the courtyard with steps going down to the Corso. Guj did not propose a fourth side entirely with ashlar work and windows, implicitly respecting the original organization of the building, but added a second loggia, in the corner between the original facade in Via dell’Aquila, which remains unaltered, and the fourth facade. Already prefiguring the palace conversion into a museum, he actually cloned the most recognizable motif of the building from the protected, private, convex area of the courtyard to the exposed, public, concave corner. While indirectly depriving the original loggia of its uniqueness and peculiarities, he may be assumed to intend to make it even more visible and public to emphasize the new function of the palace. Guj proposed also to extend the project and to demolish the building opposite on Via dell’Aquila to create a fenced garden for the palace. The garden, located by the original facade and not the rear, would have confirmed once again the inversion between recto and verso, but it remained undone (Fig. 3, last).20

Somehow, the destiny prefigured in so many drawings became reality and the Farnesina ai Baullari turned into an isolated palace. No longer leaning against other buildings, it looked like skinned and its fourth side was reinforced with cut walls, which however were not enough to avoid some internal injuries. This structure, together with all the superfluation grown over time, is evidenced by the first photographic pictures (Fig. 10) produced on the occasion of the demolition works. To complete the new urban infrastructure, the Farnesina was expropriated as a work of public utility on February 7th, 1886. The report written on that occasion reads that the original entrance had been closed, the vestibule had been used as a warehouse and the entrance was from the courtyard, of course.

The result of Guj’s works, which began in 1898 and ended in 1908, is that the Farnesina ai Baullari is currently facing a shapeless open space in
the middle of the Corso, without the protection and the enclosure provided the context it was conceived in. The entrance of the Sicilian Giovanni Barracco’s collection into the rooms of the Farnesina took place after the Second World War and involved some more interventions, consisting mainly of the arrangement of partitions and infills and plastering works. The Barracco Museum opened to the public in November 1948 but Guy’s wish to have the entrance through the new loggia on Corso Vittorio Emanuele II lasted for a few years. Even today, for logistical reasons, visitors are asked to enter the museum by the courtyard on Via dei Baullari, the original rear of the palace, without fully enjoying the original sequence of spaces.

Conclusions

Palazzo Le Roy, although very small in size, embodies the model of the Renaissance palace, with the external façade ordered by regular rows of windows and a square courtyard closed on three sides and open on the back. The vestibule-portico-courtyard sequence is structured onto a grid in which the architectural orders measure the space and accompany the visitor from the main door to the upper rooms. Conversely, urban planning events have condemned the building and the experience of its space to a different destiny.

First, the demolition of a part of the insula with the opening of Via dei Baullari, subtracted the garden from the building and revealed its rear, like in Giotto’s fresco. Farnesina’s rear is eventually elected as its main facade, at least from a visual point of view. The addition of a balcony on the external wall of the courtyard as well as the frescoes on the vault of the loggia in the 17th century confirm its importance in relationship with the Via Papalis.

Second, the work of artists, from Tessin to Percier, identified the building as a model to be replicated: by isolating it and transforming its proportions and elements, it was presented as an accessible, Roman residential type that gives a new value to the rear, connoting it both as an effective, elegant façade and as a stratagem to bring light in the narrow lots.

Third, the demolitions for the opening of Corso Vittorio Emanuele II
effectively isolate the building, eventually fulfilling the graphical speculations of many artists. Somehow, this transformation contested not only the primary idea of palace but also the accomplished inversion between *recto* and *verso*. Guj’s restoration definitely altered the small palace by adding a terrace that breaks the direct connection between Via dei Baullari and the courtyard, and a fourth façade with a new loggia – a sort of signal of the new public nature of the building – that furtherly bothers the hierarchy of the original palace.

Somehow, the palace has never been inhabited and experienced according to its anonymous designer’s original idea. Rather, it has been affected by a number of events that have contributed to let it be received and questioned as a resilient living matter, as a typological laboratory and as a didactical residential structure open to extensions, transformation and interpretations.
Notes:


5 Cfr. Carla Benocci / Paola Ciancio Rossetto / Gabriella Cimino / Susanna Le Pera: Museo Barracco. Storia dell'edificio. Quaderno 1. Roma, 1995, p. 15. Irregularities have been confirmed in the recent survey directed by G. Paganelli and W. Troiano, and realized by M. Marino, S. Scarchilli, A. Barbagallo, M. Baiocchi, P. Cappelli, F. Giammusso, L. Martelli, V. Vannozzi, L. Cerone, P. Serra, G. and S. Lucarelli between 2010 and 2014. Models and other results have been verified and integrated by M. La Mantia, V. Nuccitelli and the author under the supervision of C. Cundari.


7 Simoncini, 2007 (note 6), p. 125. In 1548, while paving via dei Baullari in view of the Jubilee, an extension of it to Piazza Navona was also conceived "perché la vista della porta principale [di Palazzo Farnese] vada a ferir in Agone". However, apart from a few demolitions along Via della Cuccagna, it was unsuccessful. Luigi Spezzaferro / Richard J. Tuttle: "Place Farnese: Urbanisme et politique." In: Le Palais Farnese. Rome, 1981, p. 115.


11 Pietro Ferrerio / Giovanni Battista Falda: Palazzi di Roma di più celebri architetti, Roma, 1655-1670, pl. 35.

12 "Profilo della Casa de vignola hogg detta il Silvestre appeso il palazzo Farnese." Stockholm, Nationalmuseum, NMH CC 1598 v.


14 Stockholm, Nationalmuseum, NMH THC 3169.

15 Würzburg, Martin von Wagner Museum, inv. n.8500.


17 Urbain Vitry / Auguste Hibon: Le propriétaire architecte… . Paris, 1827. pls. 41, 42.

18 "Palais dell'Aquila, façade extérieure et détail de la corniche de la cour." Paris, Musée d’Orsay, Dessins, Album des vues de Rome, Palais dell’Aquila, façade extérieure et détail, 99-010755, F3457C-1130


20 Carla Benocci et al., 1995 (note 5). pp. 44-49.