THE ROLE OF POLITICAL POWER IN ARCHITECTURE

THE REAL AND THE IDEAL AT THE DUCAL PALACE OF URBINO

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In 1472 Volterra, an ancient but modest city in Tuscany, was placed under siege by forces in the paid service of Florence. Once a flourishing independent commune, Volterra had been conquered by Florence in 1361 as part of its acquisitive expansion program. Representative of the growing power of the major city-states and their desire for influence, this also literally, and perhaps more significantly, demonstrated their pressing need for income, the new domains subject to a harsh and unilateral taxation. In addition to financial necessity, the excuse for such oppression was based on simple practicality. It was right because it was possible.[1] Revolt against this state resulted in the siege of punishment and, on May 10, 1472, the sack of the city.

The siege was successful, though only in part due to military strategy Volterra's governor had agreed to terms of surrender but the besieging army reneged on their contract. In a better offer the mercenaries defending the city presented it to the attackers in exchange for a share of the spoils.[2] The subsequent sack was remarkable in its destructive and murderous savagery.

The campaign's victorious general, Federico da Montefeltro of Urbino (1422-1482), is celebrated by his biographers as an icon of Humanism. A patron of the arts, he carried out the requirements of an ideal prince, supporting the creation of culture and manifesting a dedication to its ideals. Underlying this generosity were his activities as a successful mercenary soldier. Urbino and its mountainous surroundings were fairly poor agriculturally, and Federico's military activities provided its primary source of income. Compared with other *condottiere* he had a reputation for honesty. Though regularly changing sides mid-conflict, as was conventional, he was known for honoring his contracts. His treatment of his subjects, according to his biographers, was a model of civility.

While the necessity of military activity, and perhaps a different sense of the sanctity of human life, distinguish us from them, it remains that Federico's reputation and wealth were founded on selling violence. He presents an enigmatic moral figure: the ideal Renaissance prince or the mercenary; the humanist patron or the butcher of Volterra. These ambiguities become especially perplexing when addressing the relation between architecture and the expression of power. If architecture is a direct expression of political authority then Federico's buildings should manifest this paradoxical situation. But what if this is not the case? What if his architecture demonstrates different virtues, distinct from these dialectical extremes? Does or should architecture represent political fact directly, and thus be judged according to the morality of its patron? More fundamentally, do issues of political context even matter within architectural appreciation? This paper investigates the Ducal Palace of Urbino as an ambiguous or, more specifically, a non-literal representation of authority. Federico's career and ambitions, and the architecture of his palace, provide a rich field for these speculations. Rather than tracing parallels between the patron and his building, however, it is proposed here that the politics of the building itself must be addressed, in addition to and perhaps in replacement of those of its inhabitants. It is possible that the building manifests a different society from its historical one, though brings them into a relationship for their mutual benefit. The question of the real and the ideal is taken into account — the actual society of the patron, and the propositional society of its architecture.

In its simple existence the palace demonstrates authority. It is large, expressing the virtue of magnificence so crucial to Renaissance ideals of princely authority. It also housed a large court (five hundred mouths to feed according to a contemporary observer). Grandeur demonstrated personal authority, and generosity inspired awe. Yet beyond this simple existence the building's expression of power is a subtle and complex one. It manifests a spirit of negotiation and reconciliation, a model of contextual appropriateness, stitching itself into the city in a variety of intriguing ways. This demonstrates an ideal of authority rather than brute force, supporting an elevated architectural vision rather than expressing power solely for its own ends. A symbolic transformation results, developing from the circumstantial and actual to the intentional and propositional.

A contrasting example can be found nearby. A road leads to the centre of the city, linking it with its formal entrance below. With no subtlety in its form, it projects a simple authority upon the fabric, implying ownership. Though this might attempt to create a coherent urban

Fig. 1. The Ducal Palace seen from the City Gate.

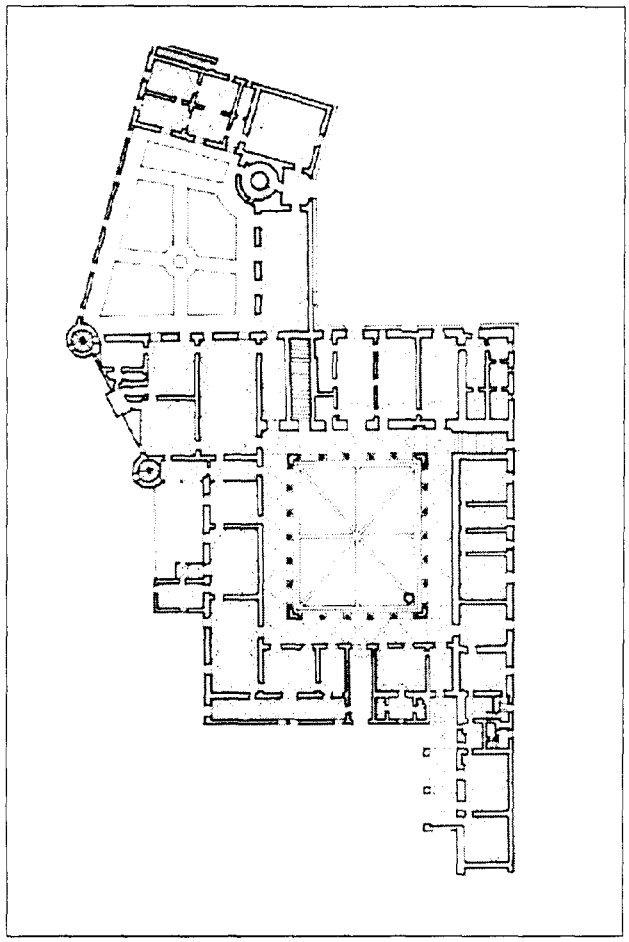

Fig. 2. Ground floor plan.

whole, the intervention reads more clearly as a figure intended for political effect. Here there is an expression of literal power. No higher ideal is manifest, nor is there a sense that it deals with major practical or political responsibilities.

In contrast the palace accommodates a variety of existing conditions, presenting a complex image rather than a perfect form. Different facades relate to their localized concerns. While this renders the overall image of the building somewhat formally unclear, it also demonstrates an empathetic relation to its found circumstances. Not quite mimetic but almost, the faces of the palace negotiate very directly with both the reality and the potential of each neighboring aspect.

Most famously, the facade directed outwards across the valley towards the road to Rome is pictorially conceived. Framed by two circular towers and housing special balconies, it is a place to see from and a thing to be seen, projecting a beacon of benign authority across the landscape. Yet it isn't the principle entry to the palace and indeed remains external in its impact, invisible within the city itself. Though recognizing the Renaissance fixation with glorious image, the building limits its expression to this single external instance.

The entry to the palace occurs off a small piazza within the city, through an L shaped wing which seemingly deforms itself to the demands of the public space. Its image at this point is urbane and modest, though this is partly accidental. Constructed of the same brick as the surrounding town, the intent (begun but not completed) had been to clad the facade in white marble, classically articulated. Even in this more formal image, however, the building remains locally defined. Its entry does not project over the city but relates solely to the immediate piazza.

This apparent modesty is more clearly evident in the facade facing the narrow piazza on the east side. Part of an earlier construction it follows the scale and expression of its neighbors. Rather than projecting authority, it accepts a more modest decorum; a participant within the city rather than an obtrusive model. It is not crude but its virtues remain subtle. The windows show a careful construction, as well as a concern for luxurious image, contrasting themselves with their setting. More refined in form and material than the surrounding walls, yet accepting of their context, they can be read as visual metaphors of the building as a whole. The edge to the south is even less obtrusive. Through the combination of topography and its privacy, the building here melds into the fabric of the city. Its valley edge is stern, appearing more as infrastructure than as building facade. Indeed the building at this point serves as a retaining wall for the upper city: power supporting rather than intimidating.
n this negotiation the palace presents a model of

Fig. 3. Urban facade.

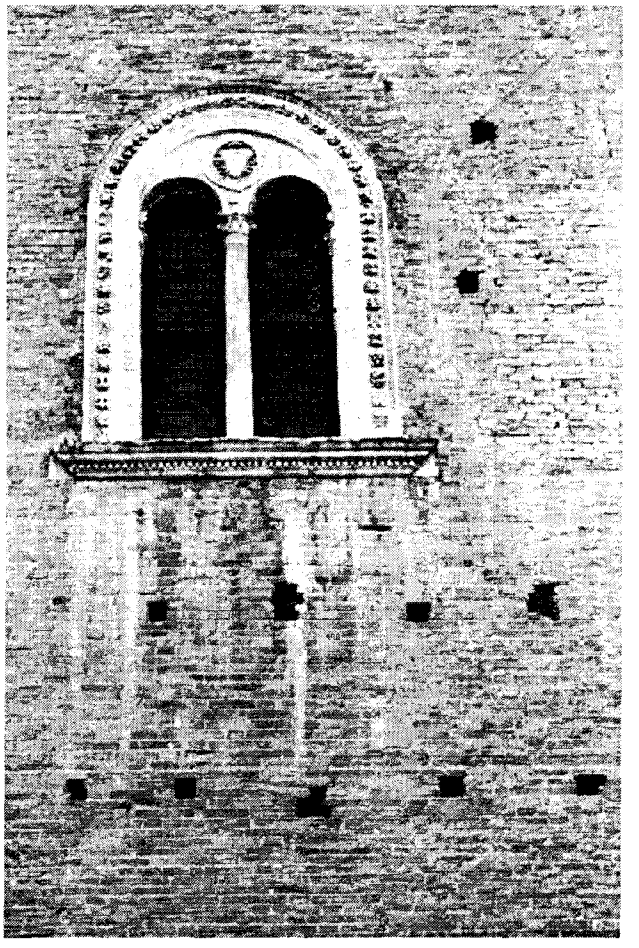

Fig. 4. Facade detail.

appropriateness. It isn't reticent, nor exclusively modest. Though large, it does not exert power directly on to the city, but fits into its fabric. It clearly distinguishes between the situations requiring pure representation (its landscape facade) and the spaces of literal urban activity. This demonstrates a form of acceptance, joining the palace to the actions of the city. In favor of a dignified conversational spirit the palace avoids the literalness so often connected with architectural expressions of political authority, seen for example at the Castello Farnese at Caprarola.

This flexibility of edge might imply a building with no personality of its own, demonstrating a simple subordination to external factors. Indeed, this could even be perceived as a form of architectural hypocrisy, hiding within the city through a simultaneous mimetic response to each neighboring condition. Here, however, it manifests a different intent, as each perimeter condition is resolved in relation to a perfect centre: the courtyard. While the exterior is circumstantial in the positive sense, the court demonstrates a harmonious order seldom equalled. It is perfect in its form and articulate in its language, manifesting the virtues of purity and proportion so dear to the Renaissance.[5] Like most courts it presents a more controlled facade than the building's exterior, framing a geometric version of nature within an ideal of architectural expression. Yet it remains internal. It does not project its geometry dogmatically outwards to control the perimeter of the palace, nor even the surrounding rooms and gardens. Rather it remains a relatively independent figure; providing a destination within the building rather than a rule for its form.

The private garden of the palace is a foil to the court; less centered geometrically and more charged programmatically. It is poised between the apartments of the Duke and Duchess, as well as between the body of the palace and the landscape. More idiosyncratic aspects of the palace converse through its specific edges, compared to the abstracted values of the court. Yet between the court and the garden there is no geometric affinity. They express different ideas of open space, each manifesting different versions of the order of parts.

Through its harmonious image the court proposes an ideal of perfection, which can be desired personally and socially as well as architecturally. This vision of order is not inflicted upon the city bluntly, however. It must be achieved through passage. A conscious destination, the centre is discovered at the end of the journey from the external and found, the "natura"' in urbanistic terms, towards an idealized construct. This passage implies the potential for analogous individual transformation as well. The court contrasts its own architectural context, the rest of the palace, and its larger setting, the city, thus demonstrating an intentional transformation; a method

Fig. 5. Courtyard.

rather than simply an example. This image of perfection isn't, however, necessarily representative of the building's inhabitants. It can be read as an object of desire, a provocation rather than an accomplishment already achieved. The building thus clarifies a model for its society; humane and ordered, but not dogmatic; intelligent and ambitious, but reasonable. This expresses a transformative spirit within the palace rather than a literal expression of its occupants. It is an ideal to strive for, a shared pilgrimage supported by but not limited to the patron. The building, therefore, uses political authority as its means or material rather than its purpose, and places that authority in a greater intentional context.

The clearest demonstration of this preoccupation with the virtues of education and moral example is the studiolo, a small room for private reflection, adjacent to the valley facade. The studiolo presents a dense iconographic field, supporting the ambitions of a cultured life. In the intarsia panels the attributes of a perfect prince, or more generally, the perfect noble life are presented.[4] Arms and armor are combined with musical instruments, books, and the machines of the mathematical arts. Though small, the space is extended perspectively past and through the representations of idealized knowledge to a figural landscape beyond. It presents a condensed and rhetorical version of the palace; negotiating between different demands in support of a cultured life.

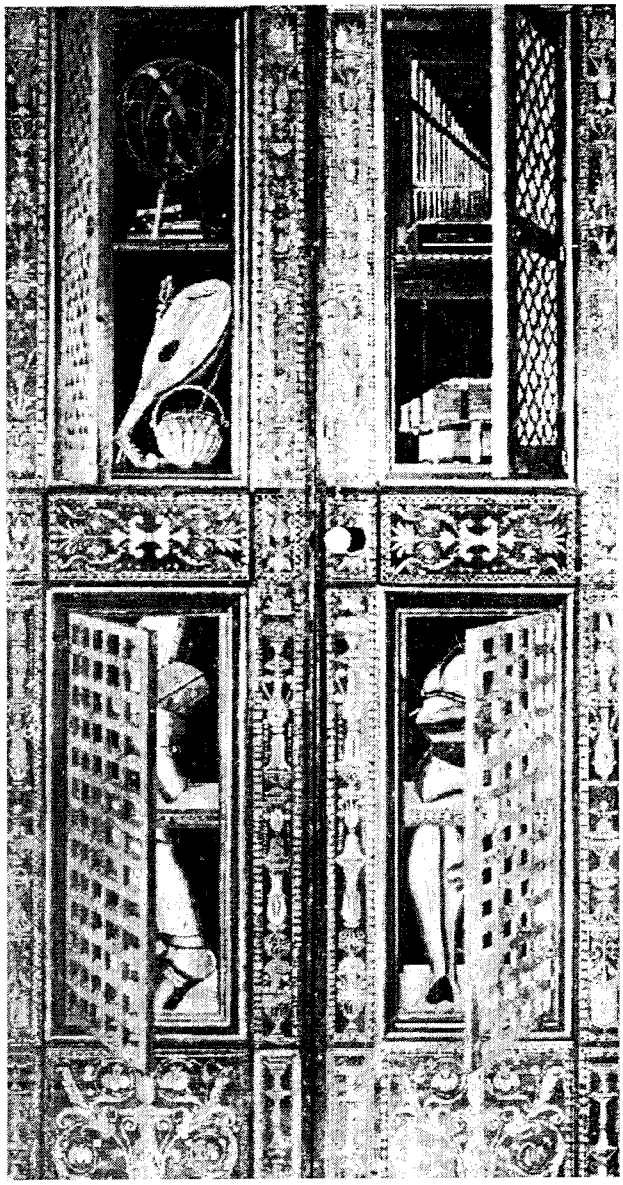

Fig. 6. Studiolo, detail.

Above these panels were portraits of famous men. Setting examples in their various fields, their mutual presence establishes a collective model of civilized life. Old and New Testament figures, Greek philosophers, Roman rhetoricians, medieval theologians, and poets coexist to demonstrate a coherent totality of knowledge.[5] Residing above the tangible means of culture (images of books, musical instruments) and the tools of practical life (armor) they form its model, an idealized pantheon. By implication those engaged in similar studies within the same space are linked by material and intent.

This is a fairly literal representation of the ideals of the building, expressed more architecturally elsewhere. Power, understood through the images of arms, is placed in service of cultural ideals, providing the necessary practical foundation for intellectual activity. Indeed, the combination of arms and the arts, like Christianity and classical mythology, is the Renaissance ideal manifest so

clearly in Federico's biographic image. The two chapels located immediately beneath the studiolo demonstrate a similar idea of reconciliation. "Here you see the two small temples divided by just a small space; one is dedicated to the Muses, the other to God" reads the inscription in their shared vestibule.[6] The chapels balance the building's founding cultures, within a plan outline identical to the studiolo.

The tendency, reinforced in paintings, is to assume that the studiolo was literally functional; an intellectual retreat for the hard pressed warrior. Yet one may doubt whether the studiolo was primarily used for study. Built to accompany Federico's renowned library, it can be seen as a self contained wonder cabinet, intended to be shown to visitors for their amazement.[7] It literally housed nothing, presenting a sight to behold rather than a room for use.

It is also possible that Federico's reputation for scholarship is overstated. His biographies tend to the hagiographic, just as his painted images present the ideal humanist figure of arms and culture. Though he was clearly a significant patron, these representations derive from court painters and writers whose livelihood depended upon pleasing the prince. The ideal of princely authority was well established, and its affirmation artistically assumed. Indeed, it is even possible that Federico's images as a reader and humanist protest too much, presenting in paint what may have been tenuous in reality. Though it isn't necessary to discard the biographical records, it remains rash to accept them as fact. They can, however, be clearly read as conventions of desire.

The building is not naive in this. The foundations for its authority are clearly expressed in pictorial terms. A frieze of sculptural panels on the entry facade describe the machines and practices of war. Compositions of armor adorn door frames throughout the palace. FE DUX, inscribed over its lintels, reminds one of the owner who was able to orchestrate the operation. It is significant that when Federico calls attention to himself through inscriptions they refer to his military accomplishments and titles, not his learning. The text encircling the studiolo ceiling notes what supported the room, not its activities. "Federico da Montefeltro, Duke of Urbino, Count of San Leo and Durante, Captain General of the Very Serene King of Sicily, and Gonfalonier of the Holy Roman Church. 1476"[8]

Yet these martial accomplishments are not presented as ends in themselves, but as the means from which a more idealized construction can spring. Here the coexistence of the real and the ideal is made explicit. The building accurately recognizes power, through its militaristic images, its strategic approach to the city, and its scale. Cognizant of this reality, the palace then transforms it into a vision of a model society; a cultural ideal manifest in the architectural experience.

This metamorphic intent coherently relates the different parts of the building, in their form and their embodied activity. It also demands that one address the architecture directly. Concern for whether the actual society of the building ever met these ideals is difficult, if not impossible, to determine, and leads to questions of

Fig. 7. Military frieze.

social history rather than architectural interpretation. The building's morality and its expression of authority are the issues that architects, as architects, must address, not the biography of the patron nor the explicit social circumstances of its construction.

This transformative condition might be considered as hypocritical, fraudulently expressing virtues and obscuring vices. Indeed, architecture always runs this risk, legitimizing power through a benevolent expression. It is also possible that Federico saw his activities in this light as well, transforming necessity to a higher end. If this is the case then the building may be read as a more faithful representation of his personality, recognizing the possible and the necessary in the service of an ideal. Clearly, however, this is more subtle than perceiving a simple image of power. In its ideals of negotiation and coexistence the Ducal Palace of Urbino demonstrates a morality of power, not its raw expression, whether this was ever socially true or not.

Not all patrons or situations are capable of such treatment. In extreme cases personal judgment should preclude participation with any expression of certain people or their activities. It is also possible that some clients and their building's functions can't participate within any imagined ideal. Yet this decision is largely a mark of personal morality, not architectural. They are not the same, and to ignore the distinction does a disservice to the experiential presence of architecture. This does not imply that there is no social or ethical responsibility in one's actions; quite the opposite. An architect is responsible for what he builds, its implications and effect. The challenge is to address the moral implications of architecture directly, through its embodied experience. To ignore power is wilfully naive. Public building is an expensive and provocative act, requiring authority for its initiation. In this respect power is an architectural ingredient, like gravity or structure. Whether consciously considered, questioned or expressed, all buildings manifest some form of authority in their simple constructed existence. Yet beyond that fact architectural experience doesn't necessarily express authority solely nor directly. In contrast architecture should be considered as a propositional construction, making use of the raw

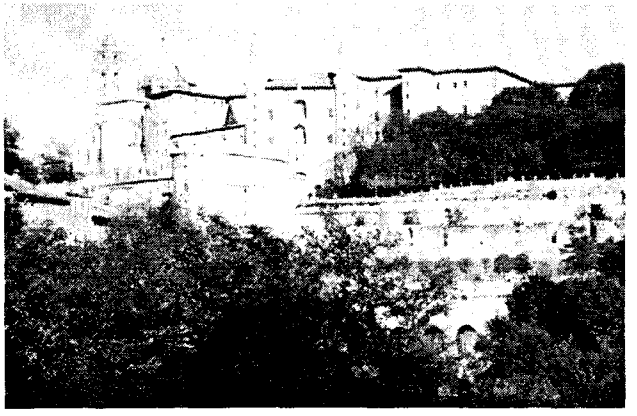

Fig. 8. The Ducal Palace, general view.

material of power for other, non literally representative, purposes. This brings political power into the service of an imagined ideal. If, however, that intention is lacking then it is the building which is morally suspect, not the patron or their society.

The moral building transforms the raw materials of any project (scale, program, structure, etc.) into an image of a possible future. Through the underlying potential in these materials a comparative state is proposed, a means for reflecting upon the different realities of the building. Without the real the ideal can't exist. Without the ideal the real expresses raw unfiltered power to the world. To privilege the latter runs the risk of understanding architecture as simply illustrative of realities understood historically or biographically, rather than representative of desire. This "honest" expression of situational fact is really a cynical abdication to power itself, as it implies an acceptance of reality as sufficient for artistic ends. By implication, reality becomes correct; a natural state. No further reflection, judgment, or imagination, is required since its demonstration axiomatically represents truth, though one limited to the simple realities of power. Thus the truly immoral building is the one that exposes power directly, devoid of any transformative imagination. Not only does this perjure the medium, by extension it makes the architect a literal conduit of forceful authority.

This abdication to fact (power in this case) also leads to major theoretical problems. It demands the avoidance of a key architectural issue, the expression of the concerns of operative authority. One of the functions of buildings is the demonstration of the ideals and desires of their owners. Whether a modest house, a bank, or a government office, buildings necessarily relate these activities to some form of social communication. Paradoxically, assuming a direct relation between authority and architecture removes the question of authority from the expressive concerns of the building, rendering the issue artistically impotent. This is similar to avoiding the qualities of structure or program within architectural form. It limits architecture's expressive material in favor of a reduced and non participatory 'aesthetic' approach. Secondly this updates a strange modernist legacy, the belief in linear progress. The realities of experience are sacrificed to a sequential clarity, in order to mark the stages of historical progression. If a period is controlled by a strong authority, then to be true architecture must be its faithful, transparent messenger. Once that social moment is passed its architecture is conceptually expendable, only valid as an illustration of its historical context or stylistic concerns. This leads into the realm of historicist allegory, where experience is subordinate to a 'text', the social or biographical fact. The architecture becomes limited to that temporal moment and its actual experience, including its specific relation to power, disappears.

This paper proposes not an avoidance of power but an approach which questions its responsibility and expressive potential. Here architecture has a unique role. It displays the workings of authority within the city, revealing its operation. It may also, however, remind those in power of their responsibilities. A transformative strategy can be a corrective to pure power in itself, presenting moral lessons to the patrons and inhabitants of a building in addition to its larger surrounding context. In this case architecture is no longer the transparent tool of authority but its foil, making use of the realities of the world in order to propose their improvement. The Ducal Palace of Urbino demonstrates one example of how this is possible.

NOTES

[1] Martines, *Power and Imagination* (New York: Vintage Books, 1980), Chapters 11 and 13.

[2] Mallett, *Mercenaries and Their Masters: Warfare in Renaissance Italy* (London: The Bodley Head, 1974), p. 195.

[3] The courtyard of the Ducal Palace of Urbino was described by Sir Kenneth Clark as one of the most humane spaces ever devised by man. In formal architectural terms it is the court that solved the problem of the interior corner column, bringing an added stability to the space and becoming the model thereafter.

[4] Intarsia refers to a specific technique of wood inlay, used pictorially.

[5] A related idea of the totality of knowledge was expressed at a similar studiolo at the Ducal Palace at Gubbio, also owned by Federico da Montefeltro. In this case the decorative scheme depicted the Seven Liberal Arts, the codified and comprehensive image of knowledge operative at the period.

[6] Cheles, *The Studiolo of Urbino: An Iconographic Investigation* (University Park: The Pennsylvania State University Press, 1986), p. 13.

[7] Ibid., p. 23.

[8] Ibid.