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Teaching Architecture in Rome: Part I

April 8th, 2014

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It is good to be back in Rome showing our Notre Dame students the great lessons in architecture and urbanism that Italy in general, and Rome in particular, offers them. For 46 years, third-year undergraduate students have spent an academic year here and, since the early 1990s, when Thomas Gordon Smith brought a new Classical curriculum to the campus, our students in Rome have done something that other architecture students rarely do here: they study the Classical city and its buildings not simply as historical documents or abstract patterns and types, but as precedent and models to be emulated.



The new home of the University of Notre Dame School of Architecture Rome Studies Program in the Celio neighborhood one block from the Colosseum. The newly renovated early-20th-century building includes studios, classrooms, library and other academic facilities, as well as a host of technological tools to facilitate learning. All photos by the author.

Want to understand the Roman palazzo? Or the baroque church? Or a successful piazza? Design one, using the same theoretical premises, structural systems and decorative languages that the 16th- and 17th-century architects used. That way, you learn traditional architecture "from the inside," and whether or not you decide to pursue this kind of design in your later career, there is no question that this preparation will set you apart from those whose course of study largely involves having all conventional notions of place-making or visual representation subverted.

I tell my students, "there are three primary gifts that Italian architecture has given to American design: the palazzo, the church and the villa with its garden. All three types have given birth to a wide variety of different expressions in the American landscape:

- the palazzo was imported to serve its original purpose as a princely urban dwelling, as in the Villard Houses of McKim Mead & White in New York, but later was transformed to accommodate other uses, such as apartment houses, office buildings, department stores, private clubs and university buildings;
- the Italian church in all its stylistic variation has continued to influence American religious building, either directly or filtered through the English experience of James Gibbs (whose Saint Martin-in-the-Fields in London is the direct model for many churches in the colonies);
- and the villa, with its Renaissance garden, has been adapted directly for private residences – from Thomas Jefferson's Monticello to Paul Chalfin, Burrall Hoffman and Diego Suarez's great Vizcaya in Miami, to more recent versions in the work of contemporary classicists

– but has also inspired public parks, university campuses, and a range of institutional settings.

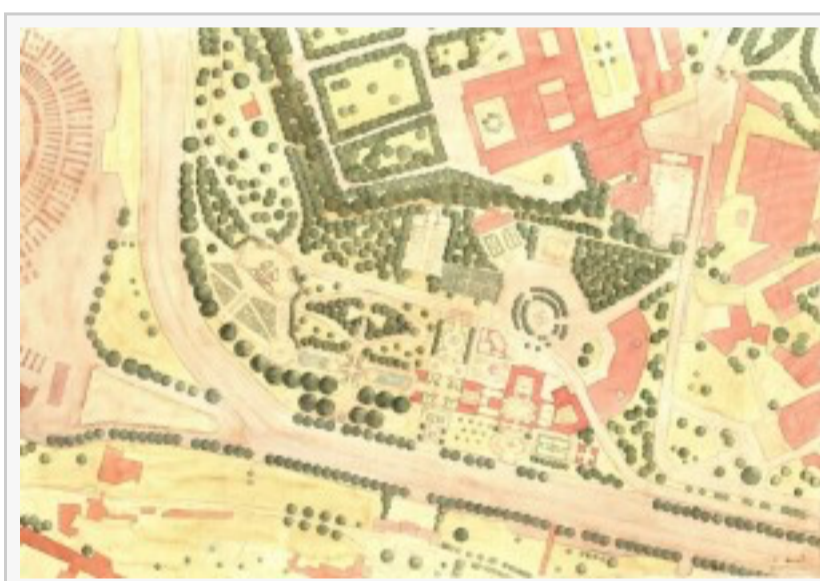


Villa Lante, Bagnaia, Italy. The 16th-century villa and garden was designed by Giacomo Barozzi da Vignola for Cardinal Gambara and later modified by the next owner, Cardinal Montalto. One of the greatest Italian Renaissance gardens, it is the inspiration for the students' design project for a hilltop in Rome.

During their year in Rome, our students are asked to analyze a historical example and then design a new iteration of each of these three types.

A couple weeks ago, the students completed their Villa/Garden project, a master plan for a public park and a more specific design for an institutional building and private garden set within it, all sited on the hilltop of the Celio overlooking the Coliseum and the Roman Forum. It is a strange site, so well-located with such panoramic views of so many monuments and yet isolated and almost abandoned. The students proposed panoramic terraces, shady groves, formal parterres, fountains, nymphaea, and other elements of the Classical Italian garden. The villa building itself, intended to house an academy of archeology, took various forms, from relatively straight appropriation of historical models by Vignola or Palladio to place-specific configurations embracing a series of

outdoor rooms, but all sought to shape exterior space and organize a formal landscape on a large scale.



Third-year design studio project for a villa and gardens on the Celio hill, Rome, watercolor rendering on paper, by Marc Gazda, 2014. The site is bisected longitudinally by an existing street and streetcar line, and affords panoramic views of the most historic monuments of the city. To the northwest (toward the left) is the Colosseum and a view to the Roman Forum, to the southwest is the Palatine, and to the northeast is the church of Saints Giovanni and Paolo. A public park surrounds an academy of archeology (with the ground floor plan indicated) with its private gardens.

The students' investigations revealed how gardens are laid out very much like traditional cities – as a sequence of rooms connected by paths forming a network of varied places of diverse character. In the great Renaissance gardens of the 16th century, such as the Villa Lante, the Villa Farnese or the Villa d'Este, the sequence is typically organized by a narrative or some kind of iconographical journey.

The students took this idea as a starting point for schemes based on the movement between urban and natural environments, the history and evolution of the city, mythological stories and figures, etc. Finally, architectural elements were designed making use of the Classical language of orders and ornaments to root their conceptions in the building culture that has come to us from the Renaissance.

Among the issues that were discussed at the reviews (with guest critics Taeho Paik and Luigi Del Sordo) were questions of separating public and private areas, dealing with enclosed outdoor spaces at different scales and intended to be occupied by different numbers of people, the difference between "garden" and "landscape," the difference between

intimate and panoramic views, and the relationships between formal (i.e., geometrical) and informal (i.e., naturalistic) treatments of exterior spaces, and the relation of the outdoor rooms to those inside the buildings.



Third-year design studio project for a villa and gardens on the Celio hill, Rome, watercolor rendering on paper, by Secilia Jia, 2014. This site is developed as a series of diverse landscapes and a villa building that forms a series of outdoor rooms. Both formal geometry and picturesque composition are used to organize the site and provide changing views at different scales.

Presentations, in a variety of media but all completed by hand and many demonstrating skill in watercolor wash rendering, gave the students opportunities to represent landscape elements not often included in more strictly urban settings, so there was a great proliferation of umbrella pines, oaks, laurel, clipped hedges and olive groves. In addition to the customary plans, sections and elevations, students were asked to present their schemes in perspective and axonometric views that allowed more realism in the handling of slopes and level changes.

In follow-up conversations with the students, they confirmed that the experience gave them a new way of looking at gardens and landscape, as well as the relation between these and the buildings that, in part, enclose them. It is an important part of their education and one that, I believe, can be undertaken here in Italy better than anywhere else in the world.

The students have just begun work on their final project for the year: a replacement for an unfortunate Modernist structure that overlooks the Ludus Magnus (the ancient training camp for gladiators) and, a little farther away, the Coliseum. They will consider the role of this building site in the surrounding urban tissue, both ancient and modern, and develop schemes for an alternative to the existing building, so clearly out of place in that spot.

This new project site, like that for the villa, is just steps from our new home on Via Ostilia and represents an effort to explore the neighborhood and engage with it. Our old location, in a 15th-century palazzo redecorated in the 19th, was embedded in the historic center half-way between the Pantheon and Piazza Navona.

Now, in a better-equipped but less endearing early 20th-century building, the ceilings are lower, there are no frescoes (at least, so far) and the details are standard contemporary. While the Coliseum and the entrance to the Roman Forum are just around the corner, and San Giovanni in Laterano a short walk away, opportunities for immediate engagement with the Renaissance and Baroque city are fewer or require travel time. So undertaking two projects of such different scope within a few blocks of our front door is a way of capitalizing on what the new location offers – in particular, greater access to the Classicism of antiquity and engagement with the early modern city, parts of which are worthy of study though not in any way a substitute for the masterworks of previous centuries. Still, Rome is Rome and teaching architecture here is often a matter of simply pointing in any direction and saying, "Look! Now draw."

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