Chapter 7

Palazzo Dei Tribunali in Via Giulia: Design, Survey, and Analysis – The Footprint of a Building Designed by Bramante

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ABSTRACT

The study presents the very first results of research carried out on the Palazzo dei Tribunali in via Giulia, designed by Bramante but realised only in part. The only fragments that have survived are a few portions of a massive ashlar masonry structure, which characterized the base of the palace. The objective of the research was to carry out an analysis of the site but one that would combine the documentary biblio-iconographic aspect of the study – which would take full account of existing and published articles – with an enquiry based on a direct approach to the site within the metric and perspective-visual frame of reference. This type of analysis can be carried out through direct observation “in situ” and through an integrated digital survey campaign on various levels. This study can be considered an important contribution to the knowledge of the Palazzo and to the documentation of Cultural Heritage.

INTRODUCTION

This essay presents the initial results of a study on Palazzo dei Tribunali in Via Giulia, designed by Bramante in the early sixteenth century and only partially completed. The only existing remains in situ – now part of later buildings – are fragments of the solid ashlar base; big, impressive travertine parallelepipeds rise from ground hinting at a morphological principle of solid, majestic architecture.

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The main aim of the study was to carefully analyse the site and combine a direct metric, metrological, perspective and visual study of the area with the results of a bibliographical and iconographical documentary review which, in addition, unearthed several new sources and remarkably interesting published contributions. The in-depth study and analysis of the Palazzo dei Tribunali complex used direct observation and an advanced, integrated survey of the building to verify and integrate not only a vast collection of bibliographical contributions regarding the history of the building, but also the design and survey drawings executed during its construction. This involved gathering and comparing data from scholars with different viewpoints so as to produce a new basis on which to perform future in-depth studies on the building and, implicitly, on the many similar, extremely complex and stratified buildings located all over the Eternal City¹.

The study was conducted as part of the celebrations for the 500th anniversary of the death of Bramante,² the brilliant Renaissance architect who designed so many architectural works in Rome, including the long, straight road called Via Giulia where Palazzo dei Tribunali is located. The anniversary was commemorated during the numerous meetings and study days held primarily in several well-known Roman institutions, including the Academia Nazionale di San Luca³ and the Biblioteca Hertziana.

During these meetings and study days discussions were held regarding the problem of how to solve the open-ended urban issues affecting Via Giulia, one of the most important roads in the old centre of Rome. In fact, over the years many public and private projects have been presented, competitions launched and officials been made responsible for the reorganisation of this area. However, to date everything has remained on paper, possibly because it’s difficult to intervene on such an important urban space.

This study is part of a more extensive research initiative focusing on architectural and urban heritage; the goal of the research is to verify, understand and review the compositional intentions behind the design of all the buildings involved, even if only very few fragments or traces still remain. This kind of study uses integrated methodologies including drawings and the technologically advanced tools best suited to each stage of the survey; this method has been used since the eighties by many research groups active within the disciplinary sector of drawing.

**BACKGROUND**

*Wherefore Bramante made a beginning with the palace that is to be seen by S. Biagio sul Tevere, wherein there is still an unfinished Corinthian temple, a thing of rare excellence. The rest of this beginning is in rustic work, and most beautiful; and it is a great pity that a work so honourable, useful, and magnificent, which is held by the masters of the profession to be the most beautiful example of design in that kind that has ever been seen, should not have been finished. (Vasari, 1550)*

The construction of Palazzo dei Tribunali is just one of the numerous events which, in the early sixteenth century, led to the creation of Via Giulia, the main street of an urban plan for the City of Rome. The urban plan, commissioned by Pope Julius II and designed by Donato Bramante, was obviously political in nature.

The idea that inspired the creativity of both the Pope and Bramante was to modify the compact medieval fabric of the city and build wider, straighter roads between the main political, religious, economic and cultural sites of the city⁴ (Bruschi, 2010, pp. 178-184), the old directional axis. The main axes of said circuit were: the new Via Giulia and Via della Lungara (which already existed and was to be restored