



History

The urban, historical and artistic context of Strada Nuova

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The critical historical problem represented by the construction of Strada Nuova and the associated residential neighborhood, consisting of palaces that border the same street, all of them built for a few families of noble origins and enormous wealth in a short period of time from about 1558 to 1570, was outlined, after the insightful intuitions by Labò¹, in an almost definitive manner by Poleggi², with the documental reconstruction of the complicated urban vicissitudes, achieving a few notable results.

One of the most important results was the departure, as general planner and director of the operation, of Galeazzo Alessi, not mentioned in the documents, and the arrival, in Alessi's place, of Bernardino Cantone da Cabbio, chamber architect from 1546 to 1576 and 'Magister de Anelamo', an artist belonging to the endless team of master builders, stonemasons, sculptors, painters and architects who came to Genoa from the Lombardy region, specifically from the lakes area (fig. 1).

Other people of absolute prominence involved in the operation, such as Giovanni and Domenico Ponzello, craftsmen who worked in Palazzo Grimaldi (Doria Tursi), or Rocco Lurago and Bernardo Spazio, author of Palazzo Spinola Gambaro, do not belong to the nucleus of major sixteenth-century architects. The same thing can also be said of the main decorators who worked on the buildings in Strada Nuova, the brothers Semino and Calvi, highly appreciated by the patrons since they evidently reflected both their taste and preferences.

Poleggi's lesson is that the history of architecture and art is compiled with documents rather than hierarchies, and that every piece of verified truth is permanently acquired

in the realm of knowledge

The genial imprint of Giovanni Battista Castello, called the Bergamasco (Crema, 1526/27) – true protagonist of the mannerist language first in Genoa and then in Spain (fig. 2), where he died in Madrid in 1569 – can be seen in the palace of Tobia Pallavicino (Chamber of Commerce) and in the architectural scheme of Palazzo Lomellino (fig. 3). The Strada Nuova project took on the shape of an exceptional example of urban expansion in the sign and taste of the times, with strong traits of representativeness, which was for the most part unavoidable for a financial aristocracy such as the Genoese one, enriched beyond expectations through loans and the exploitation of New World's resources.

On the contrary, however, the need to use proceeds from the sale of buildable lots for the reconstruction of the cupola of San Lorenzo cathedral, a work by Galeazzo Alessi, introduced the concept of public corrective action that would typify any project subsequently undertaken by the oligarchic republic of Genoa.

This clear and intended contradiction goes hand in hand with another inconsistency: the fact that the most exclusive and noble residential neighborhood, which had required enormous sums of money, was and still is a public street, open to traffic and for many reasons tied to the framework of the medieval city, which is nearby and reachable through cross alleys that connect the city network preventing inconvenient separations. This is the case with the Palazzo delle Torrette: built in 1716 in front of Palazzo Grimaldi (Doria Tursi) (fig. 4) for the purpose of enclosing the minute buildings of the Maddalena, the palace takes

1. Strada Nuova in Genoa as seen from the west, in the second half of the twentieth century



2. Courtyard of the palace of the Marquis de Santa Cruz in Viso del Marqués (Spain), attributed to Giovanni Battista Castello, called the Bergamasco © Marquesa de Santa Cruz



on the shape of a frontispiece, while the alley Vico del Duca remains and coincides with the access to the residence that already belonged to Nicolò Grimaldi, called the Monarch because of his enormous wealth.

We cannot ignore the fact that the *ex novo* lotting from which the “neighborhood” originated, peripheral to but outside the medieval structure, was the only lotting that allowed the adoption of an architectural typology half way between the urban palace and the villa.

In fact, it is obvious that the distinguishing feature of many buildings in Strada Nuova is a garden or a courtyard with a *nymphaeum* for the same purpose, whereas the closely woven network of buildings in the ancient part of the city would have never allowed such complements and a similar expansion of the panorama.

The afore-mentioned typological innovation, which the critics do not seem to have emphasized enough, can be held accountable for several of the representative elements that adorn the palaces, and it appears to be in any case responsible for the “tone” of the same buildings, especially when compared to architectural projects developed in Genoa during the same time period. A rather large percentage of the distributive and formal innovations of which the buildings are a paradigm is in fact ascribable to going beyond the architectural type of palace which in Genoa’s ancient city center could only express itself through a “re-

placement” of several medieval houses, sometimes even reaching the end of the block.

In other words, the renewed relationship with the surrounding environment and with nature appears to be a different way of meeting functional, but also taste-related, requirements, tied to the increased financial resources and to the refined sensibility of the Genoese noble classes halfway through the sixteenth century.

Poleggi’s monumental contribution calls to mind the imposing construction yard of the palaces in Strada Nuova, and also accounts for the main modifications carried out in the subsequent centuries: The image of the street’s high representativeness, reasonably compared to the views of other model cities, such as the famous perspective table of the National Gallery of the Marche in Urbino, is the synthesis of one of the most important late-Renaissance complex in Italy and in Europe, which is precisely how it was intended by Peter Paul Rubens, who included six buildings in his Palaces of Genoa of 1622 and added five more in the second project carried out by his Atelier in 1626 with preceding documents, in other words almost all the buildings existing at that time.

And it is precisely the somewhat exemplary value of the street, proof of a mature, refined and opulent civilization of residential living, that led to almost all the palaces being included in the “*rolli*” (registers) of public residences that, fol-

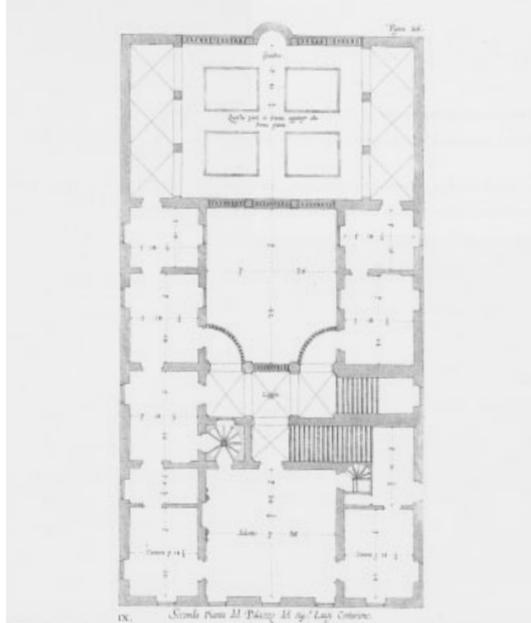
lowing a drawing and at private citizens' expense, hosted the high-ranking guests of the Genoese Republic³ (fig. 7). The five Rolli that followed one another in the modern era, from 1576 to 1664, each one divided into three or more units depending on the level and size of the edifices, define building spheres and typologies suitable to the public service of State hospitality: a burdensome task that could be forced upon private citizens only by applying a rigorous criterion of impartiality and randomness as to the selection. The world opened by the accounts of the ceremonies and the hospitality of a Republic that was just as characterized by splendor and liturgies as it was jealous of its aristocratic and elective traditions appears fascinating and prone to further analysis; while it is not as easy to establish the necessary connection with the buildings, in the architectural and physical sense of the word, each one with their own unique history of modifications and degradation, with their own functions, survivals and with the tangible signs of the endless events that developed over them.

At this point perhaps we need to remember, in addition to the well-deserved role of the studies and of the University, the role of Liguria's Service for Architectural Estate and Landscape, which for more than a century has been carrying out a capillary activity of safeguarding the historical city center and for which the inclusion of a building in a list, as in the case of the "rolli", is certainly an important indication of value, but it is not the only one.

Without an institutional conservation project, it is impossible to say how much could have been preserved of this monumental patrimony; let it suffice as a starting point for future reflections to observe that, for example, the inner-city green protected in Genoa almost exclusively belongs to the controlled villas.

Since December 2003, the preservation history of Strada Nuova has seen new developments. After the first round of works carried out for the International Summit of 2001, known as the G8⁷, involving the buildings on the western side toward Piazza della Meridiana, the jobs on the eastern side are now in the process of being completed.

This is a very positive outcome, especially if we consider the fact that a sequence of palaces must be perceived as such, without the nuisance of the diffused degradation or the nuisance, just as annoying, of the different state of conservation of the components that make up the sequence. It is a particular circumstance that has to be pointed out at the very least; this obviously does not mean underestimating the uniqueness of each single edifices, which on the contrary to-



3. Peter Paul Rubens, plan of the palace of Luigi Centurione Marchese de Morsascho (taken from *Palazzi Antichi e Moderni di Genova raccolti e designati da Pietro Paolo Rubens*, Genoa 1622)

4. Façade of Palazzo Grimaldi (Tursi) in Strada Nuova, Genoa



5-6. Façade of Palazzo Spinola in Strada Nuova, Genoa, after the 2004 restoration



day stand out, in an autonomous manner, thanks to their peculiar traits.

In the last decade, several palaces in Strada Nuova have been subjected to restoration jobs of interiors that have also involved important series of paintings: Palazzo Cattaneo Adorno (Angelo and Giovanni Spinola) where some paintings by Tavarone and by Ansaldo were restored; Palazzo Spinola (figures 5-6) of the Deutsche Bank with the restoration of other works by Tavarone and of an extraordinary view of the façade of the palace with its painted decorations; smaller restoration jobs were also carried out on Palazzo Lercari Parodi, Palazzo Campanella (Baldassarre Lomellino) and on the Banca Popolare di Brescia building (Agostino Pallavicino). All this, which cannot be analyzed in detail at this time, confirms the strong vitality possessed by the buildings and represents the start of a new season

Today's results were made possible by an agreement, signed on March 5, 2002, between the Municipality of Genoa, the Service for Architectural Property and Landscape, Assedil and the Rolli Association of the Genovese Republic. By the following June 19, the requests to participate in the first call for bids were received, soon followed by two additional calls for bids for a total of sixty buildings restored, limited to the main façade.

The main motivational factor employed was the economic incentive for expenses related to maintenance and restoration works. A dutiful attention to the ownership structure of the buildings allowed contributions to private citizens but not to credit institutions, plentiful in via Garibaldi. These entities, however, can take advantage of state funds as per law 1552/61, which was intended to motivate a responsible ownership of real estate properties of historical and artistic quality.

The approach to the problems related to the restoration of each building started with the specificity of the materials and the techniques with which it was built. This approach was also the result of the obligatory close-up inspection that usually does not fail to point out phases, conservative history, causes and extent of the degradation and, consequently, to suggest the most suitable plan of action.

It is perhaps unnecessary to note that in many cases the jobs involved a restoration of another restoration, since most of the time they were carried out on previous restorations accomplished by using different techniques at different times, going back even entire centuries. In any case, the target was the respect of the authentic parts, giving the appropriate consideration to the different phases of the buildings' conser-

vative history, obviously eliminating, where necessary, old restorations or additions that were no longer in line with contemporary sensibility.

The same thing can be said of the materials employed, such as the famous acrylic resin called Paraloid used in the past decades, which the current restoration does not plan on using for the exteriors, or in any case in very small amounts, and which was eliminated as a result, where it was possible. The severity reserved to the analyses of pigments and of the sequence of plaster and color layers was mitigated, in the selection of hues and of ways to restore an appropriate image to the landscape, by the ascertainment that the final outcome would not be satisfied by what, in the technical jargon, is called securing and consolidating the degradation, at least unless we wanted to mortify the joined efforts of public bodies and private owners.

The mandatory need to preserve the materials and the validity of the integrative and restorative choices, together with the recognizable quality of the authentic parts, seemed to be enough of a guarantee to attest the scientific nature of the results. The attainment of a captivating and pleasant appearance of the restored facades can be ascribed to the choice to re-qualify the city, to the important financial commitment of the jobs and the decision to free the ancient buildings from an aura of degradation and decadence; which, for Genoa, means a definite change in attitude compared to a long season of inertia and abandonment.

Another important re-qualifying process involving Strada Nuova is the creation of a Museum Hub that includes the Bianco, Rosso and Tursi palaces. The latter will be turned into an exhibition area after an imposing series of restoration and restructuring works are finished, without stopping its town-hall functions. Thus we end up acknowledging that exceptional trait of monumentality that characterized the street, within which the individual building appear as element of a sequence and as architectural entity of absolute and autonomous prestige.

The actual museum contents, of a high level and coherent with the Genoa's role in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, and although important in themselves, can also be viewed as a representation of the furnishings and of the decorative elements that embellished the noble residences⁵ and, above all, as an exemplification of the representative and self-celebratory modes, of symbolic, religious, mythographic, historical and political contents of an entire civilization.

In that sense, the opening of the restored museum complex



7. Detail of the ornamental mask on the façade of Palazzo Rosso in Strada Nuova, Genoa

and public access to the first state floor of Palazzo Lomellino must be regarded as a change for the better in the quality of a city's cultural offerings, a city that finally is once again what it always used to be: an Italian and a European artistic capital.

¹ M. Labò, *Strada Nuova (più che una strada un quartiere)*, in *Scritti di Storia dell'Arte in honor of Lionello Venturi*, I, Rome 1956.

² E. Poleggi, *Il palazzo di Nicolosio Lomellino (Podestà)*, in *Strada Nuova, una lottizzazione del Cinquecento a Genova*, Genoa 1968, pages 245-253.

³ E. Poleggi, *Una reggia repubblicana. Atlante dei Palazzi di Genova, 1576-1664*, Torino 1998.

⁴ AA.VV., *I Palazzi di via Garibaldi – Speciale G8*, supplement to "Arkos", n. 1, year 2, 2001, pages 46-53 and G. Bozzo, *Palazzo Grimaldi Doria Tursi – Special G8*, supplement to "Arkos", n. 1, year 2, 2001, pages 54-59.

⁵ P. Torriti, *Tesori di Strada Nuova*, Genoa 1982.