In the second half of the 15th century, for the first time architectural treatises described the kind of architecture fit for a prince. The very discussion of this issue is indicative of the demands made by patrons and of the possibilities offered by architects. These two elements were formulated in different ways and implemented in a period witnessing a general redefinition of institutions and administrations. The progressive transformation of Italy’s fragmented political chessboard into a more stable structure thanks to the Peace of Lodi (1454) went hand in hand with society becoming more aristocratic. The ruling classes consolidated their positions with new princely figures, though few of them could initially claim true legitimacy. The construction or renovation of their residences – combining residential functions with those of a place fit for exercising authority – played a central role in establishing the identity of a prince and the strategy chosen to display his magnificence. The palace represented the tangible image of the increasing importance in the modern era of power relationships and ideas of power.1

That image looked back to antiquity and to the history of the classical age, reflected in the name chosen as an expression of regality: *palatium*, a term used to describe the imperial residence on the Palatine since Augustus. It subsequently lost its specific meaning and was used to describe any manner of ‘palace’ with sovereign authority throughout Late Antiquity and the Middle Ages.2 In 15th-century Italy, ancient models were considered to be invaluable starting points in the development of modern taste. As far as architecture was


concerned, however, this objective seemed difficult to achieve. The humanist practice of reconstructing sources of knowledge was problematic to apply: the only surviving text from a vast classical tradition of technical texts, never forgotten during the Middle Ages, was De architectura, by Vitruvius. Moreover, in Rome it was difficult to distinguish the chronology of different parts of 15th-century residential buildings, as they had been much transformed since Roman times, while the late Republican house that Vitruvius mentions had by then completely disappeared. Examining the remains of great monuments and identifying them was very complicated; thus the compositional details of Renaissance palaces often derived from various different models and not from domestic examples of the Roman world. Thus, the inspiration for façades tended to come from public rather than private buildings, whose typical appearance (namely simple, since entirely made of bricks) was unknown to humanist architects, though the design of façades was a distinct and characteristic subject, inspired by antiquity. We should also recall that the 15th-century conceptualizations of the theme of the residence did not benefit from archaeological knowledge: the idea of the ‘Roman house’ can be traced back to the excavations in Herculaneum and Pompeii during the 18th century, and only after that time was the structure of the house properly understood. Research on ancient architecture and in particular on the domus was thus pursued to a great extent on the basis of literary sources, but this was not an end in itself. In fact, the originality of the inventions of Leon Battista Alberti, Michelozzo, Francesco di Giorgio Martini and Giuliano da Sangallo did not lie in the archaeological reconstruction of forms from the past, but rather in their use of the past linked to the history of the different towns in which they worked, in order to produce a new form of architecture: they devised an all’antica language to satisfy the requirements of the time, breathing life into a creative interpretation of the models (both theoretical and concrete) rather than producing mere imitations of them.

Renaissance studies of the Roman house were pursued following parallel lines of research in architecture, philology, and antiquarianism. The interaction

Augustus to the Age of Absolutism, eds. Michael Featherstone, Jean-Michel Spieser, Gülru Tanman and Ulrike Wulf-Rheidt (Berlin: De Gruyter, 2015), with bibliography.

3 On the evolution of the residence in the Republican period, see Emidio De Albentiis, La casa dei Romani (Milan: Longanesi, 1990).


5 Clarke, Roman house – Renaissance palaces.