“Small Mice, Large Palaces”: From Urbino to Carpi

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City Palaces: Large Palaces for Small Towns

In the fragmented system of Italian politics, Urbino and Carpi stand out as two of the best-known princely courts of the Renaissance. The case of Urbino has been studied many times and, for a while, more intensely than Carpi. In effect, Urbino for this reason became an exemplary case of the Civilisation of the Renaissance to which Jacob Burckhardt gave such prominence in 1860. The chapter on “The State as a Work of Art”, although it had no immediate repercussions on the research trends of the time, contributed at least to the rediscovery of the cultural and artistic wealth of these two centres, as well as others, often considered “minor” in comparison with “major” cities such as Rome and Florence.

Subsequently, Urbino and Carpi were taken to be the result of unified programmes: that is to say, the outcome of single projects intended to shape small territorial states into great capitals. They were thus included in the group of cities known as the ideal Renaissance cities characterized for the most part by their regularly shaped urban structures. As a consequence, the profusion of

1 For an up-to-date review of this question, see Francesco Somaini, “The Political Geography of Renaissance Italy”, in Courts and Courtly Arts in Renaissance Italy, ed. Marco Folin (Milan: Officina Libraria, 2010), 35–61.
3 As an example of this view, though it consists of an analysis relative to the 19th century, see the preface of Donald J. Olsen, The City as a Work of Art. London-Paris-Vienna (New Haven, London: Yale University Press, 1986); see also Werner Oechslin, “Gottfried Semper e Jacob Burckhardt: deux approches différentes de l’architecture de la Renaissance”, in Le 19. siècle et l’architecture de la Renaissance, eds. Frédérique Lemerle, Yves Pauwels, and Alice Thomine-Berrada (Paris: Picard, 2010). Some considerations on Italian historiography which, according to Marco Folin, paid little attention to the question of princely courts until the 19th century, can be found in Marco Folin, “Courts and Courtly Arts in Renaissance Italy”, in Courts and Courtly Arts, 8–31 (13).
agents involved in the project, the dynamics, and altogether the difficulties encountered in the decision-making processes have long been neglected, rather focusing all the attention on some objects (the palace, the city, the state) taken as a whole and hypostatized as “works of art”.

Since the 1980s, numerous contributions originating from a local historiographical tradition have emerged, especially in the case of Carpi. They have brought out the need to reveal the web of political, artistic, and urban relations contained within the architectural shell. The challenge of reading the palaces as “texts” interwoven with complex intrigues seems to have been taken up by, among others, a generation of young scholars who, in their recent works, have probed their object of inquiry through close comparative analyses and thus uncovered a wealth of new insightful interpretations.5

It has thus been possible to see how, in Urbino as in Carpi, the series of building projects carried out by the Pio and the Montefeltro between the second half of 15th century and the first decades of the 16th started off with the transformation of their princely residences into a single large palace. In both cases, this undertaking altered the very image of the city as well as its structure and became emblematic of it. Some analytic parameters (patronage, architects, and plans) seem to strengthen the case for the comparison of the two cities. Federico da Montefeltro and Alberto Pio both proved to be aware of the importance of the new humanist culture, and both were keen to highlight the aesthetic and political potential of architecture.6 Moreover, in their respective courts there were artists and intellectuals capable of expressing themselves in the most up-to-date language and architects capable of reinterpreting already existing buildings by producing original and innovative solutions (from Luciano Laurana to Baldassare Peruzzi). Most of all, the geometric clarity of the building and the strong urban quality of these two princely palaces established a connection between them.

The concept of an “ideal city” has been reconsidered in recent years, and there have been a fair number of contributions intent on delving into specific questions regarding each city separately.7 In the wake of these new analyses,

5 Some contributions are found in this book. But see also, for example, Roberta Martinis, L’architettura contesa. Federico da Montefeltro, Lorenzo de’ Medici, gli Sforza e palazzo Salvatico a Milano (Milan: Bruno Mondadori, 2008), vii–ix with particular reference to the “school” of Manfredo Tafuri; and see my own considerations in: “Riflessioni a margine”, in Il Rinascimento italiano e l’Europa, vol. vi, Luoghi, spazi, architetture, eds. Donatella Calabi and Elena Svalduz (Treviso: Angelo Colla, 2010), xiii–xxx.


7 In both cases I refer to one of the most recent contributions containing a vast bibliography. For Urbino: Francesco Paolo Fiore, “Urbino: the Montefeltro and Della Rovere Families