A balcony with arches

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The “Villa” is one of the highest expressions of Italian Humanist and Renaissance architecture, an architectural feat, which most clearly shows the new philosophy of life and the new relationship between man and nature and between man and society.
Before we reach the Renaissance building described in the works of Giovanni Villani and Boccaccio, the farmstead building that already existed in the countryside had undergone continuous trasformation around the turn of the fourteenth century.
Up to the end of the fourteenth century the buildings of the Florentine countryside had been built on a pattern based on previous local traditions which had developed as a result of political, economic and military events that, from the fall of the Roman Empire, had continually reshaped the countryside giving both bad and good results. The old “Habituri acti a fortezza” (dwelling places which could be used as fortresses), built in the ninth century to defend their territories from the raids of both the Hungarians and the Saracens, had kept their original defensive features until the fourteenth century.
In the age of the city-state the urban authorities decided to replan the countryside and the road network in order to encourage trade and to control and protect the countryside, which has by now become an extension of the city-state. A number of fortifications were thus created, restoration and alteration works to the habituri was carried out in order to make them suitable for their new functions and at the same time to make

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A frescoed room

the best use of the surrounding agricultural land. We thereby see the birth of the “Resedo”: a group of buildings whose central body is for the personal use of the owner and is also intended as a possible refuge during difficult times, with the adjoining buildings used for agricultural activities (farmhouses, stables, barns, etc.).
The owners came partly from the old land-owning aristocracy, but mainly from the new rising classes: tradesmen, the bourgeoisie and craftsmen who also invested their profits in the land, understanding its value as an investment.
The fifteenth century sees the transformation from the farmhouse or resedo where agriculture took place, to the villa, “luogo di delizia” (place of delight), a sort of holiday resort, which combined the function of “otia atque negotia”, as essential parts of country life. It is in fact from now onwards that the rich Florentine bourgeoisie and the leading families of the city, in their desire to emulate the late medieval land- owners, began “going on holiday”, settling during a certain period of the year in their rural estates.
The creation of the architectural prototype of the “villa” derives from the new relationship created between the building and the surrounding landscape.
The planner, who initially dealt exclusively with restoration works and alterations, created a new relationship between the house and the countryside, the house and the garden, and carefully fulfilled the client’s new requirements. The ancient closed and gloomy buildings, with defensive

Detail of a frescoed wall

communication trenches and hard, sullen, bare stone walls, with few modest loopholes, which made the building inside dark and unconfortable, were slowly being transformed; thanks to careful acconcimi (alterations) they become “luogo di delizia” for the new owners who wanted to enjoy themselves and entertain guests. The villa thereby becomes a symbol of their economic power and of their being men of culture. Those same buildings now open up to the sun and acquire new spaces in which to relax and to be together.
The “Italian style garden” is the continuation of the new building and represents the product of fifteenth century man’s desire to give a rational order to things, including nature, lending the necessary dream- like quality to the surrounding “luogo delle delizie”.
The plain which extends from the further reaches of the Careggi hills right up to the walls of Florence and to the bridge of Rifredi, is still strewn with those villas which had sprung up during the Renaissance. The prestigious buildings that closely surround the Villa-Castello whose reconstruction Cosimo il Vecchio had entrusted to Michelozzo di Bartolomeo (1396-1472), with the intention of placing there the centre of the Platonic Academy.
The chiasso Macerelli (Macerelli Lane), now Via Alderotti, is the road that goes up from Rifredi to Careggi and leads to Villa Medici; where the road crosses the La Lastra stream we find the farmstead where the Tornabuoni Lemmi Villa is situated.
The Villa, too, derives from an ancient fortified habituro, which can be

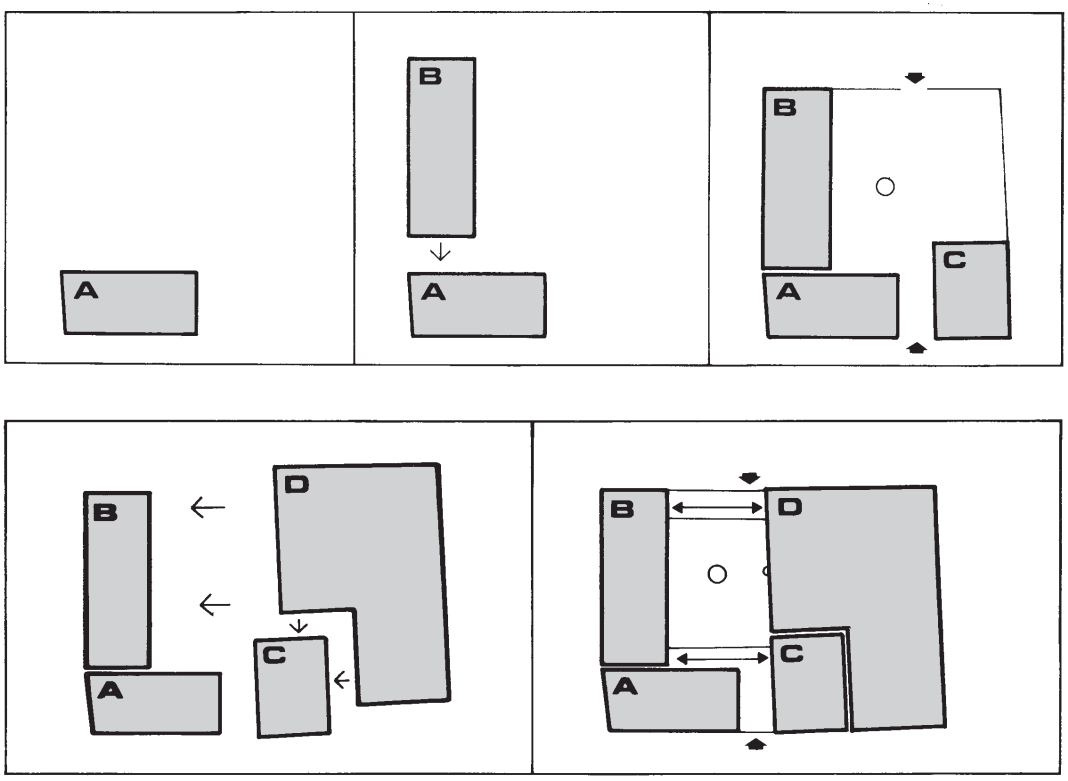
Fresco - Florence, Palazzo Capponi

traced back to the eleventh century. It has gradually changed with time, acquiring, through various extensions, the characteristics of the fourteenth century resedo, which is made up of three buildings, A, B and C situated around the courtyard. In the fifteenth century another great building, D, with its arcades opening up, on the ground floor, onto the courtyard, took up the whole of the western side of the Villa. In the seventeenth century a further wing was added, with a small balcony at its extremity on the first floor facing the entrance avenue. After this last addition the Villa appears much as it does today.

While some sections of the plaster work were being repaired during restoration, various remains of the ancient habituro tower were found in the A building, following the discovery of some filaretti (cours of bricks) that constituted the walls of the tower.

Further architectural elements that can be traced back to the same period are to be found in the basement: groin vaults that mark off different sections, the capital in “pietra serena” (a kind of bluish-grey sandstone) of simple workmanship and the architrave made up of large ashlars of yellowish-grey sandstone. This material has also been used for the external walls.

The frescoes that can be found still today in the room on the ground floor of the C building are contemporary to the other conversion works of the fourteenth century and together evoke the appearance and the simple “light and dark” atmosphere of the rooms of that period.



Diagrams ilustrating the development of the Villa Tornabuoni Lemmi up to the fourteenth century.

Like the decorations that were fashionable in the Florentine nobles' homes, the paintings represent an imitation tapestry that hangs curtain-like thanks to a close-knitted net: through the net and above it one can see a little arcade with small columns which opens up into a garden in blossom. In the trilobate arches, trees laden with pears, apples, figs and pomegranates are painted.
On the painted border we can find a red cross on a white background, a standard which had become the insignia of the Florentine people after the Ciompi revolt. These frescoes can thus be dated around 1375-1378.
There is also a red and white half shield, coat- of-arms of the city-state, which indicates that the decoration was carried out during the period of city-states.
The first owners of the Villa which is now called Tornabuoni Lemmi, of whom we have knowledge from historical sources and documents, is an ancient Guelph family that, like the Medici, came from the Mugello area: the Da Galliano family, whose coat-of arms was `a red lion, in silver, crossed with black bands".
In the fifteenth century a part of the family joined the list of the noble families in Florence and obtained its own chaplaincy in the S.S. Annunziata church, which was partly restored by Michelozzo during that period.
The architect, according to Vasari, was "unequalled in restoring with the greatest care palaces, convents and houses" following the aesthetic and practical rules of the early Renaissance.

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Detail of a frescoed wall

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Sacristy room

In all probability, Da Galliano family entrusted Michelozzo, or the workmen who usually collaborated with him, with the transformation of the resedo into a villa, around 1450.
Michelozzo had, in fact, already altered many ancient habituri (the villas of Careggi, Trebbio, Cafaggiolo) for the Medici, and Cosimo had assigned to him the task of contructing a palace in the Via Larga (Palazzo Medici-Riccardi). While working on the Da Galliano villa the architect carried out the task with the same techniques of “acconcimi” and additions he had already used “per assaissimi modelli di edifici”.
By analysing the style in which the Villa was built, and by taking into account the historical period and the people who commissioned the work, it appears even more likely that it was Michelozzo who worked on the Villa. The artistic language used by Michelozzo can in fact be found in various parts of the decorations and structure. Having examined other buildings of this artist and by comparing them with this particular one, one has a clearer idea of the harmonious ensemble the architect intended creating.
Compared to other architects who developed humanistic ideas, Michelozzo appears in an atypical light: in all his works he expresses a personal interpretation of the new fifteenth century architecture, the “renovatio” which is the new figurative idea that Brunelleschi and Alberti had conceived. He integrates this new conception and renders it less academic thanks to a cultured and flexible language, made elegant by the numerous quotations from the past, thus blending the different elements

Villa Tornabuoni - The courtyard

into an architectural ensemble, century ideal of perfection, through a plan built on a square courtyard.
The new pattern sees the courtyard as the axle around which the old and the new architectural elements turn.
The courtyard is the core of the building where the new ideals and the interpretation of the style of living are contained; it is the formal coming together of the transformation from the resedo into the villa, from private life in the forteenth century to public life in the fifteenth century.
The open space becomes the centre of social life, where banquets for the artists and the guests of the Villa took place.
The architect's desire is to create new emotions stemming from a new concept of space; he adds to the court a loggia and a gallery. The two elements are the clearest espression of the alchemy between old and new that Michelozzo is particularly skilful in conveying, and at the same time help create a cubical structure.
The loggia is situated where the ancient "claustrum" used to be, and its pillars and groin vaults support part of the fifteenth century building on the first floor (building D). The vaults separate the space and are held up where facing the courtyard by three octagonal pillars in "pietra serena". The columns end in capitals that represent a new geometric interpretation of the classical capital, recalling late medieval ones: underneath a square listel decorated with dentils, a typical decoration used by Michelozzo, are four shields. The same vaults, on the side where new spaces open up on the

Western façade

ground floor, transfer their weight directly onto the walls through the corbels, an element which can be found in many other decorations on the ground floor of the Villa. Together with other decorative elements these ornamentations represent Michelozzo's "concinnitas".
The courtyard, full of these numerous decorative elements, is also the starting point of a spiral stairway that gradually winds up from the ground floor to the topmost level. This spiral is characterised by a architectural feature whose vast new spaces Michelozzo introduces into the ones of the ancient habituro (building A).
In 1469 Da Galliano family sold the villa to Tornabuoni family with Cosimo de' Medici's son Piero, known as il Gottoso (the Gouty), acting as a go-between. The latter had actually married a member of the Tornabuoni family, Lucrezia di Francesco, the mother of Lorenzo il Magnifico and the sister of Giovanni, the powerful treasurer of Sisto IV. In 1480 the property register office described the Villa as « a property situated in the village and parish of Santo Stefano in Pane, a neighbourhood called Amasciarelli lane: a home for a lord and his workers ».
With the Tornabuoni family the building saw its period of greatest splendour: it was Giovanni himself who commissioned Sandro Botticelli to paint the frescoes of the loggia that today can be found closed up behind brick walls, on the second floor of the Villa (building B). In 1824 three scenes of these frescoes were discovered underneath whitewash.
In the first one, Lorenzo Tornabuoni is introduced by Grammar to the other

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Sandro Botticelli's fresco representing Giovanna degli Albizzi receiving some flowers from Venus - Paris, Louvre Museum.

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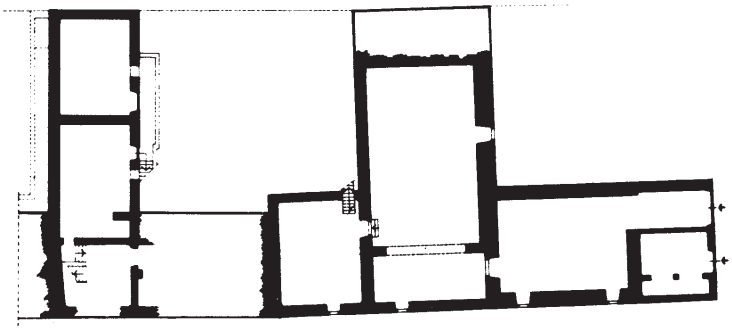
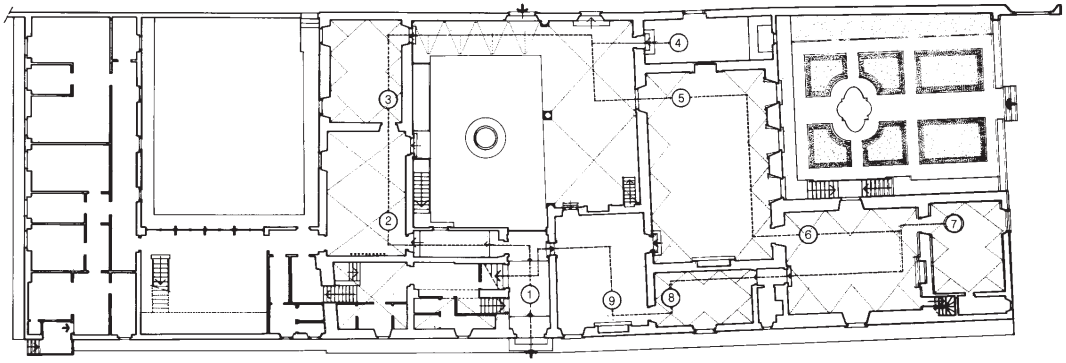
Villa Tornabuoni Lemmi di Careggi Villa Tornabuoni Lemmi di Careggi Villa Tornabuoni Lemmi di Careggi

The ancient lane which leads to Saint Martha, now Via Incontri with the high fourteenth century walls which separated the gardens: the Tornabuoni Lemmi Villa overlooks it

using the Villa as a centre for cultural relations and for personnel training. Various renovation and reconditioning works have been carried out, including the conservative restoration of the monumental part of the building and the complete reconstruction of adjoining farmhouses.
With the new layout which is being carried out according to a functional policy that will satisfy the needs of a modern complex, the interior spaces are being restored and their original splendour reinstated; the different parts of the building have been refurnished with the precious furniture that already existed in the Villa; to render each piece unique a careful selection of the furniture has been made, also taking into account the particular affinity between the materials and the historical period to which they belong. A careful choice of contemporary copper and bronze furnishings, paintings, carpets and a valuable majolica collection is a clear example of this new method of artistic restoration.
The rooms have thus returned to the original harmony existing between the architectonic elements and the furniture, and the whole complex plays a new functional role once more housing cultural events within its walls.

Paliotto room - Florence, Villa Tornabuoni





The basement floor - The ground floor