

# Response to “The Transformations of Giulio Romano”

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Very few architecture students across the United States have the opportunity to study buildings of the Renaissance in any depth. Many go on study trips to Italy, but without the training to know what they are looking at, Renaissance churches and palaces can seem like so many Madonnas, so many crucifixions, so many façades, so many columns. Boring, indistinguishable, repetitive. It is only when one allows one’s eyes to adjust to the light, so to speak, that all the subtle operations become visible and apparent.

This is a predictable effect of the ways in which architects are educated. Whereas Italian architects are trained in courses on “Modern Architecture” that begin in 1400, U.S. schools of architecture have come to define history in an increasingly narrow way, in all senses—chronologically narrow, in the sense that history is taught as if it begins at an ever-later starting point in the twentieth century; and intellectually narrow, in the sense that it is rarely seen as a font of ideas. While architecture students today clutch their Moleskins and iPhones, they no longer know what to do with them, and how the practices of drawing and photographing existing buildings might be pertinent and productive for them as designers. This blindness in part reflects a hazardous division in some schools of architecture between “history” and “theory”—history is where you get the facts, maybe the “precedents,” and theory is where you do the thinking. Mark Rakatansky’s essay, [“The Transformations of Giulio Romano: Palazzo Stati Maccarani”](#) tramples such preconceptions, demonstrating that closely looking at a rich, historic building can uncover

Renaissance art historian Cammy Brothers offers a response to Mark Rakatansky’s essay “The Transformations of Giulio Romano: Palazzo Stati Maccarani,” which draws from their conversations during Aggregate’s transparent peer review of this piece.

TAGS

pedagogy

layers of ideas, both visual and conceptual, and as much theory as you could possibly want.

In this essay, Rakatansky sees Renaissance architects as they saw themselves: as moderns. He shows that a close analysis of as rich a building as Palazzo Stati Maccarani can reveal a series of geometric permutations with close analogies to how architects work today. To do so, Rakatansky does at least three unfashionable, important, and interconnected things: close reading, formal analysis, and description. In English departments, all of these approaches are back in style. (See, for example, Sharon Marcus and Stephen Best, “Surface Reading” in *Representations* [2009] and a conference at Columbia, “Description across the Disciplines,” in April, 2015).<sup>1</sup> These practices, which should be foundational to the work of historians of art and architecture, have become sources of embarrassment and unease in the long wake of Marxist art history and New Historicism. Yet, as Rakatansky suggests with reference to Tafuri and in his text, close reading is by no means at odds with a consideration of social and political factors, but rather a means through which these realms can be placed in conversation.

In Giulio Romano’s Palazzo Stati Maccarani, Rakatansky finds a worthy object of study—a palace so complex in its conception that generations of architectural historians have only haltingly been able to describe its appearance, much less analyze its character. Rakatansky undertakes a dialogue with the foremost interpreters of Giulio’s work: Ernst Gombrich, Manfredo Tafuri, and Howard Burns . He amplifies, amends, and corrects their claims, contributing his keen observations and visual analyses. In so doing, he brings it to life for a new generation of historians and architects.

Among the delights of thinking about sixteenth-century architecture in our own age is imagining a culture in which architectural ideas had a much broader reach than they do now. This was architecture made for an audience that cared passionately about it, and got every “in joke” the architect could throw their way. Rakatansky recovers the way a sophisticated sixteenth-century viewer would have understood Giulio Romano’s many subtle operations at Palazzo Stati Maccarani. Giulio is too often characterized as a mannerist and a court jester, his early work seen retrospectively through the lens of what he did in Mantua—the pleasure palace of Palazzo del Te with its lewd visual references and openly subversive take on architectural norms. What Palazzo Stati Maccarani shows is Giulio the

Thinker, and Giulio the Intellectual. He takes a seemingly simple question, such as “What is a wall?,” and complicates it infinitely for us.

Rakatansky’s essay, and *Aggregate*’s publication of it, is also innovative because it takes on the hard problem of how a viewer (whether architect or art historian) can re-enact his or her way of perceiving and interpreting a building for an audience. The innovative short films, or animations, Rakatansky has produced help us see the building as he has, relying on visual means rather than exclusively verbal description. I appreciate the abstraction of the films, and that they embrace their status as interpretive tools. A number of classicists and historians have come to rely on digital reconstructions as tools of historical analysis and as crucial elements of their analysis. The problem is twofold: the possibility of producing highly realistic, materially specific reconstructions often tempts historians into producing reconstructions that are more detailed than the evidence allows; and once made, these visually persuasive images take on the mantle of truth and objectivity. Rakatansky shows an alternative: embracing abstraction in digital renderings, so that much is left to the imagination, and using them dynamically to reveal process rather than product.

Rakatansky’s essay represents a provocative challenge to the current practice of architectural history. What if architectural historians attended closely to buildings, and treated them as documents of equal merit to textual documents? What if digital tools were used not only as modes of reconstructing lost buildings, but also of representing historical interpretations? Rakatansky’s diagrams and animations do not claim to represent the origin of Giulio Romano’s ideas, but rather allow us to see the buildings through a series of transformations.

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<sup>1</sup> Stephen Best and Sharon Marcus, “Surface Reading: An Introduction,” *Representations* 108, no. 1 (2009): 1–21, doi:10.1525/rep.2009.108.1.1. [↑](#)