

The Loggia of Palazzo Valori-Altoviti

The Reuse Project for a House in Borgo degli Albizi in Florence

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Abstract

“At the third floor there is a covered large Terrace that follows the entire extension of the Hall of the Noble Floor and from that one a room is reachable right hand; from this one other three rooms with an airy and spacious roof are accessible. Behind the latter spaces there is a large room used to work the straw which is corresponding to the facade of Pazzi court.”¹ The previous description refers to the state condition of the Loggia of Palazzo Valori-Altoviti, the so-called “the Terrace”, precisely at the time of the signature on the 4th of April 1727 at the notary Panciatichi, of the *Solemn inventory of the inheritance of Gio Gualberto by Luigi Guicciardini made by him heir Reg. Jacopo di Vincigliano Vinci*, currently preserved at the State Archives of Florence. The events reconstruction of the building, known specially due to the Visacci’ statues embedded in the main facade, currently allows to consider the large covered terrace, characterized by an absence of the rich decorative apparatus that distinguishes instead the rest of the building, as an upper environment corresponding to the main halls of the noble floors below and from which some rooms for the servants and working spaces are accessible. The three bays of the Loggia have been tamponed with an intervention that at the moment is possible to date in the past two centuries. Their legibility in the facade is allowed by the pilasters and the columns, the latter partly incorporated into the masonry, and by the three large windows from which, between the roofs of the other street front of Borgo degli Albizi, the towers of Bargello and Signoria, the bell tower of Badia Fiorentina, the Church of San Miniato, the hills on the other side of the river Arno are still visible. The study case proposal concerns the ongoing re-functionalization project of the space of the Loggia and those ones obtained in the attic, in a house that allows the recognition of the original and significant characters of the property renewing its residential vocation in a contemporary language.

Keywords: Loggia, Borgo degli Albizi, House

Florence

“Observing a map of the city of Florence, one can clearly discern in its central core the layout of the castrum of ancient Roman Florentia, which can be outlined as a quadrilateral bordered by today’s Via Tornabuoni to the west, Via de’ Cerretani and the northern side of Piazza del Duomo to the north, Via del Proconsolo to the east, and—towards the south—an imaginary line between Piazza San Firenze and Piazza Santa Trinita running along the flank of Palazzo Vecchio. This area, as was customary, was divided into four sectors by the

cardo, running north–south along the axis of today’s Via Roma and Via Calimala, and the decumanus, corresponding to Via Strozzi and Via del Corso, which intersected at the site of the ancient Forum, now Piazza della Repubblica.”²

After a period of demographic decline following the Roman era, roughly between the 8th and 9th centuries, the city gradually regained its earlier form so that the defensive wall built in 1078, associated with Countess Matilda of Canossa, essentially “coincided with the perimeter of the Roman castrum, marked by four gates roughly halfway along each side of the previously described [...] quadrilateral. [...] In 1172, due to rapid population growth, the city resolved to construct a new circuit of walls to encompass the now densely populated suburbs that had developed along the extensions of the old city gates. To the east, the new gate—still named San Piero—was moved to the location of today’s Piazza Salvemini, making the Borgo di San Piero (later Borgo degli Albizi) the natural continuation of the decumanus beyond the Roman walls, extending into the countryside toward the Cassia Vecchia and in the direction of the Upper Arno Valley and Arezzo.”³ Borgo degli Albizi can therefore be understood as the natural extension of Via del Corso—a continuation of the Roman decumanus into a suburb that developed along the route descending from Fiesole, underscoring the strategic importance of this street.

Borgo degli Albizi

In particular, as Paolini explains in *Borgo degli Albizi. Casa e palazzi di una strada fiorentina*, archaeological and historical evidence confirms the existence of an extra moenia settlement along this axis already in Roman times. Later, “during the Byzantine and early medieval periods, following the fate of the city, the area was largely depopulated, if not entirely abandoned”⁴. The road would resume its saturation process from the 11th century until the Black Death of 1348. The densification process led to the consolidation of numerous tower houses and palaces. Between the 15th and early 17th centuries, “urban development was characterized not by new foundations but by the merging of adjacent buildings”⁵ of which Palazzo Valori-Altoviti is a prime example. The street’s urban significance is documented in numerous historical maps, such as the famous *Pianta della Catena* (1471) where the crowding of Borgo degli Albizi already appears in 1471 such as in the later and equally well-known representation of the Florentine city by Stefano Bonsignori, the *Nova pulcherrimae Civitatis Florentiae Topographia* (1594), which shows a series of historiographically, or at least plausible, reliable volumes, confirming what is painted of Borgo degli Albizi in previous centuries.

In fact, the street, and the Palazzo Valori-Altoviti still show a marble effigy in one of the kneeling windows on the ground floor of the facade, is the subject of various representations as a background and a close and real place of an event, or of the miracle of San Zanobi. The episode recounts the resurrection of a French pilgrim’s son by the saint. This scene is immortalized in the *predella of the Miracle of San Zanobi*, of the *Altarpiece of Santa Lucia dei Magnoli* painted by Domenico Veneziano in 1445. In the background behind the event of the miracle, the urban vibrancy of houses and buildings is clearly perceptible and will then be more likely to be found in the *Pianta della Catena*. Not dissimilar to the idea of a typical Florentine street is the one that also appears in San Zanobi resurrects a boy from Bigordi Ridolfo known as Ridolfo Ghirlandaio (1516-1517), where behind the crowd gathered around the young man on the ground are represented tower houses and buildings animated by windows, caves and battlements.

Closer and more idealized is the version of the palace on the street which represents Sandro Botticelli in the series of paintings linked to the miracle that are *Last Miracle and Death of San Zanobi* (1500-1505) and *Three Miracles of San Zanobi*, (1500-1505). In both cases, the painter punctuates the pictorial composition with precise architecture aimed at identifying, giving clear readability, three episodes of miraculous interventions by San Zanobi and choosing to represent a small palace of evident Renaissance setting for that of the boy killed in the street by the passage of a cart. Thus if the operation carried out by Botticelli may be uncertain in fidelity to the built reality, he likewise delivers a precise canonized idea of a Renaissance palace of his, effectively sublimating and defining an aesthetic. The building is characterized by high windows above string courses, asymmetrical main door, street bench, plaster and filaretto finish: a credible freedom in the idealized representation of a building in Borgo degli Albizi.

Palazzo Valori-Altoviti

It will be shortly after Botticelli's works, starting from the first half of the sixteenth century, that the palace begins to take on its current connotations through the reunification of various medieval houses that include the residence of Rinaldo degli Albizi, so much so that on the facade it would be possible to reread the aggregate of houses that formed it: in the center that of Rinaldo degli Albizi from the early fifteenth century, on the right a smaller house identified by a coat of arms, on the left a third house with the Pazzi coat of arms, (two darting dolphins placed in the middle of five flowered crosses), behind which the Piazzetta dei Pazzi is hidden. "The current character of the palace, however, was conferred at the end of the sixteenth century, when the cultured senator Baccio Valori the Younger, new owner of the palace and custodian of the Laurentian Library as well as president of the Academy of Drawing Arts, had the façade redesigned by the architect and sculptor Giovanni Battista Caccini, decorating it on the basis of an iconographic program defined by himself, with fifteen herms depicting illustrious Florentines in the sciences and arts. With the extinction of the Florentine branch of the family, the property passed to the Guicciardini family in 1687 who, based on a design by Antonio Maria Ferri, undertook important interior modernization works (1698-1702), including, among other things, the staircase towards Borgo degli Albizi (currently in use) and notable stucco decorations by Giovanni Martino Portogalli. Passed by inheritance to the Altoviti, the palace was renovated and enriched again: the new decoration of the covered gallery dates back to this phase, with a fresco depicting the *Apotheosis of the Altoviti house*, attributed to Andrea Landini [...]. The façade overlooking Borgo degli Albizi, as mentioned, is strongly characterized by the succession of herms. Fredianelli's analysis in *I palazzi storici di Firenze: dalle austere dimore dei banchieri e dei mercanti agli splendori degli edifici rinascimentali, dai capricci del Barocco agli eclettismi dell'Ottocento e oltre*: "Caccini brought out this beautiful, solid, imposing palace, merging three pre-existing houses as can be seen if you look carefully at the facade. In the centre, in fact, two worn fourteenth-century coats of arms of the Albizi (a shield with two concentric circles) denounce the primitive home of the "rebellious" Rinaldo; on the left a second house is denounced by the coat of arms of the Pazzi [...]; the third house is signaled by another very ancient coat of arms, but illegible due to wear and tear. Once the façade was unified, Caccini equipped it with beautiful kneeling windows and a monumental stone door on the ground floor. He also provided it with sturdy architraved windows from the

stone blocks on the first floor.”⁶ Later the same author comments on the presence of the herms on the facade, reporting on the great humanist culture of Baccio Valori so much so that “it is therefore not surprising that his house ended up reflecting all these virtues and manifesting them publicly so much so that it became a sort of monument to the culture of the time”; probably, the author clarifies, “we must assume that they are the cultural figures that Baccio preferred.”⁷ In 1687 the Valori family died out and the Palace was inherited by Luigi Guicciardini, who, as Fredinelli also reports, intervened in the previously Pazzi part by entrusting the intervention to Antonio Maria Ferri of the expansion of the palace towards the small square behind it⁸, a fact also confirmed by Bevilacqua M. and Romby G.C., in *Atlante del barocco in Italia*. The latter authors specify that other interior decorations and finishes were carried out by Andrea Landini, Giovan Martino Portogalli, Lorenzo del Moro, Matteo Bonechi. Specifically, they inform that “in the summer of 1702 after the approval of a wooden model realized by Ferri on a design by Antonio Malesci, the staircase overlooking Borgo Albizi was built, with simple shapes and similar to what was created by the architect, based on a design by Francesco Fontana, in Palazzo Panciatichi in via Larga. After an initial payment for work in the mezzanine, Giovan Martino Portogalli was involved, in 1703, in the decoration of the staircase where he created two overdoors defined by festive cherubs to support curtains and the coats of arms of the Guicciardini and Valori families. In 1708 the model of the *Galleria del Piano Nobile* created by Massimiliano Soldani Benzi was approved; in that gallery Portogalli carried out simple decorations with human heads. The artist’s hand can also be found in the golden stucco decorations of the alcoves on the first and second floors. Between 1713 and 1717 he was involved in the plastic layout of a space called «new room».”⁹ Subsequently Virginia Guicciardini married Giovan Battista Altoviti and “the palace passed to this other historic family who held it almost to this day”¹⁰, very important and numerous as well as active in the profession of arms, trading, notary, exchange and banking activities. Among the most significant rooms are the hall on the main floor, the gallery and the new room obtained from one of the extensions of the Palace, all enriched by significant baroque stucco inserts. What is certain is that while the documentary sources of the main reception rooms are rich and well-stocked, much less is known about the large loggia that surmounts the palace. However, it is mentioned in a notarial deed in which the last upper rooms and the attic are examined.

The Loggia

“Once up the third floor there is a covered terrace which holds the entire extension of the *Sala del Piano Nobile* and from that you go to a straight hand room from which there are three rooms although with ventilated roofs behind which there is the large room for use of the corresponding straw on the facade and on the Pazzi Court. On the left hand there are two roof bedrooms and other closets and a large kitchen corresponding to the courtyard and the large courtyard with pure water up to it and accompanied by good shutters and windows and on the floor of the same terrace there is a comfortable wardrobe also roof but vented well and on the Piazzetta dei Pazzi there is a passage that leads to two bedrooms that remain underneath the main floor for the service of the existing servants in the left B. on the courtyard of it House.”¹¹ The previous description refers to the state in which the Loggia of Palazzo Valori-Altoviti, the so-called “Terrace”, is located, precisely at the time of the signing on the 4th of April 1727 at the notary Panciatichi of the *Solemn*

inventory of the inheritance of Giò Gualberto by Luigi Guicciardini made by him heir Reg. Jacopo di Vincigliao Vinci, currently in the State Archives of Florence. A comment referable to the same notarial testimony is offered by D. Smalzi in *Palazzo dei Visacci XV-XX*: “The third floor was therefore intended, in addition to the women’s kitchen, for the servants’ quarters located in the roof rooms towards Borgo degli Albizi and to the wardrobe overlooking the Piazzetta dei Pazzi. In the center of the facade, identified by stone columns, there was «a large terrace [...] at the Pazzi Court». This terrace was closed and divided into rooms after the 1820s, perhaps even in the 20th century, when the palace no longer belonged to the Altoviti family.”¹² In recent years the Loggia and some adjacent rooms in the attics of the palace have been recovered and used as a private residence. The encumbrance of the current state of the entrance floor of the property still reflects the main hall of the main floor below. The large room has been divided with a band of services close to and parallel to the spine wall of the building while the main room with the main view is used as a living room for roughly the first two bays of the loggia and as a bedroom/study for the last module of the same. The stairs that allow access to the upper floors are located between the latter room and the services. On the upper floor, the division of the property keeps the tripartition identified by the loggia visible on the street front side, while on the internal side the rooms follow the less controlled conformations of the perimeter walls. Further considerations are possible from the relief of the flooring of the access floor. In fact, in the structure of the terracotta on the ground, it is possible to identify traces of a possible previous subdivision of the rooms compared to the current one with dimensions that do not correspond to the module that regulates the spans. These considerations are made possible by the fact that the existing terracotta tiles flooring appears ancient and of interest. There are no architectural elements or finishes of particular importance, neither original nor added, in subsequent interventions with the sole exception of the wooden load-bearing beam of considerable size which divides the transversal dimension of the loggia into two bays, in continuity with what happens in the hall of the main floors below. In the upper rooms, the recent roof in wooden joists and terracotta tiles is adequate for the historical and architectural value of the rooms below. Through some videoscopic investigations in the false ceiling of the access floor, it has been possible to verify the absence of fine finishes possibly covered. In conclusion, the rooms considered, especially those on the access floor, are significant for the reading of the void of the loggia, of the “covered terrace”, which is decisive in establishing the compositional relationships of the facade according to the consolidated and traditional canons of the historic Florentine palace. Undoubtedly it’s a legacy of relevance that the proportions of the “room”, corresponding to the halls below, can still be guessed behind the necessary and current distribution elements of the spaces. The recently added upper floor has the merit of continuing to offer significant views of the major emerging monuments of the historic center of Florence and the surrounding hills, so much so that from the residence it is possible to admire the Bargello and Signoria towers, the bell tower of the Badia Fiorentina, San Miniato, the Oltrarno as well as the dome of the Duomo and Fiesole on the opposite side. The street elevation obviously remains the front of the main rooms, illuminated by the openings obtained inside the infills of the loggia positioned in axis with the windows of the floors below. The modules of the loggia do not correspond to the cadence of the openings below, this original asymmetry of layout has led to the current mismatch between the three windows of the access floor and the center line of the infills in which they are inserted.

The Reuse Project

In this sense, the project intends to reread this external tripartite division staggered in the internal space through the scanning of different environments corresponding to the bays identified by the external columns. In particular, the first module, the access one, corresponds to the entrance and living room, the second to the kitchen and lunch, and the third to the room and service. Even in the transverse direction, the division of the pairs of rooms reflects a precise structure, namely that identified by the two large longitudinal load-bearing beams, a fact that allows to trace the 3x3 span matrix of the halls on the floors below. Specifically, a third of the bays are occupied in order by the entrance, kitchen and service while the remaining two thirds are occupied by the living room, the lunch and the bedroom. On the axis of the beam closest to the entrance, parallel to Borgo degli Albizi, lies the corridor onto which the various rooms overlook in series, to the right and left, until they lead to the staircase for the upper floor intended for the remaining bedrooms. To ensure both the legibility of the current intervention and the historical relevance of some architectural elements, beyond the undoubtedly spatial one, it was decided to intervene by recovering the window frames and the terracotta floor, both through restoration operations and appropriate replacements when recovery was not possible. The legibility of the current intervention, which brings the scans of the façade columns back into the domestic space, is evident in the internal score covered with a shiny light metal plating that reverberates the air and light entering from the three large openings, declaring itself with such reflections with respect to the white plaster of the original perimeter walls and the ceiling. Behind the latter are the kitchen, service, and bedroom spaces, while the interior space houses the living room and corridor. The space of the entire loggia has been completely freed from the previous incongruous subdivisions with the exception of a partition significantly placed between the second and third modules of the loggia, appropriately resting on a beam in the slab below, as some essays have been able to highlight. Over time, this masonry has absorbed part of the efforts of the longitudinal beams, acquiring a significant structural role. The project has included its consolidation; by reiterating the external position of the penultimate column, it became the reference point for separating the living area from the sleeping area. Materially, the project is pronounced in front of the plaster of the walls and the terracotta of the ancient floor, with the reflections retained by the metal. On the precise mesh of the geometries characterizing the property, a long, light and luminous superfetation envelops the space, renewing that manner of intervention that has embellished the spacious rooms on the main floors with stucco decorations over time and entrusting this hope to the reflections luminous lights of the sun and sky that once again cross over inside the ancient loggia of the palace.



Fig. 1. Loggia di Palazzo Valori-Altoviti, cross perspective section 2025



Fig. 2. Loggia di Palazzo Valori-Altoviti, longitudinal perspective section 2025

Notes

1. Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Fondo Panciatichi, cassetta 197 inserto 33.
2. Paolini Claudio, *Borgo degli Albizi. Casa e palazzi di una strada fiorentina*, in *Quaderni del Servizio Educativo* 24, Edizioni Polistampa, Firenze 2008, 10-12.
3. ibidem
4. ibidem
5. ibidem
6. Fredianelli Antonio, *I palazzi storici di Firenze: dalle austere dimore dei banchieri e dei mercanti agli splendori degli edifici rinascimentali, dai capricci del Barocco agli eclettismi dell'Ottocento e oltre*, Newton Compton, Roma 2007, 369.
7. ibidem
8. ibidem
9. Bevilacqua Mario, Romby Giuseppina Carla, *Firenze e il Granducato. Province di Grosseto, Livorno, Pisa, Pistoia, Prato, Siena*, in *Atlante del barocco in Italia*, De Luca Editori d'Arte, Roma 2007, 425.
10. Fredianelli Antonio, *I palazzi storici di Firenze: dalle austere dimore dei banchieri e dei mercanti agli splendori degli edifici rinascimentali, dai capricci del Barocco agli eclettismi dell'Ottocento e oltre*, Newton Compton, Roma 2007, 371.
11. Archivio di Stato di Firenze, Fondo Panciatichi, cassetta 197 inserto 33.
12. Smalzi Daniela, *Palazzo dei Visacci XV-XX secolo*, Edizioni Polistampa, Firenze 2012, 71.

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