

DONATO BRAMANTE AND THE PRINCIPLE OF BEING CONTEMPORARY

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How did it come about that Bramante left the service of Ludovico il Moro shortly before Louis XII's troops made their triumphal entrance into Milan? Despite appearing trivial at first glance, this question begins to take on the relevance it demands when we consider that Leonardo da Vinci, unlike Bramante, remained in Milan only to witness the destruction of the masterfully sculpted horse he had envisioned as the culmination of his ambition as engineer and artist. The French saw this monumental sculpture as a mere symbol of the Sforza dynasty they had come to overthrow. From this moment on, Leonardo began a sort of peregrination across Italy: he went to Mantua, passed through Venice, travelled to Florence and from there to Rome, where he made a rapid sketch (seen from below!) of Innocent VIII's villa that Bramante would later include in his grandiose plan for the Cortile del Belvedere, conceived from above in the Vatican Palace.

Bramante would also have had good reason to stay in Milan. By that date, he had become the Sforza family's direct point of reference, its interpreter perhaps, in the field of architecture. He had played a significant role in the debate about the construction of the lantern for Milan Cathedral, synthesizing the proposals that had been put forward by, among others, Leonardo. He had accompanied the latter to Pavia, becoming Cardinal Ascanio Sforza's representative in the design of the city's cathedral, and had also begun the construction of the lantern of the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie, which was to become the Sforza family's mausoleum. So why did he leave Milan?

Such an intriguing question demands a response. Finding one would allow us to better understand Bramante; we would be able to appreciate the reason why he was able, on arriving in Rome, to

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substantially change his architectural language, or, to put it another way, to achieve an astonishing *renovatio* (as shown so evidently in the engraving in which he stands naked, surveying ancient architecture with a square ruler and plumb line).

To seek an answer to this question, in the absence of documents – and we will soon realize why this could only be the case – we have no choice but to ask another question. How is it possible that the architect of a so-called tyrant imprisoned by the French king was able to obtain, almost immediately on arrival in Rome, two commissions as prestigious as the design of a cloister in the city's centre and of a martyrrium to be built on the Montorio Hill, the place traditionally believed to have been the site of the execution of St Peter, the founder of the Roman Church?

To give rise to a debate about these issues, we have no choice but to focus briefly on the patrons of these two Roman projects. Both were Spanish cardinals, members of the “Spanish party” responsible for the rise of the Spaniard Rodrigo Borgia to the papacy in 1492. The differences in political attitude identifiable in these two prelates were due not only to the calamitous turn of events that undermined the balance of Italy in the final decade of the 15th century, but also to their alternating allegiance to the choices made by their fellow countryman, Pope Alexander VI. However, these fluctuations may also have been determined by a combination of external events. For Cardinal Carvajal, one of these events was his visit to Milan in 1496 as legate to Maximilian I of Habsburg, at a time when the Holy Roman Emperor was arranging to bring his army down into Italy to hinder the progress of the French king, who was determined to cross the Alps and conquer Milan. On this occasion, Carvajal, a guest of Ludovico Sforza, fell under the spell of the duke's personality. If the Borgia pope himself had reason to say – as noted by the Venetian ambassador – that Carvajal (“a friend of Messrs Ludovico and Ascanio”, Marin Sanudo explained) “had developed a fascination while a legate in Milan”, it is not difficult to imagine that in order to win over the influential prelate from Rome, Il Moro would have taken the opportunity to show him his architectural ventures and celebrate the virtues of his architect, Donato Bramante. Carvajal may also have heard Bramante's name in Vigevano, which he visited on his way to Genoa shortly afterwards.

It is likely that Cardinal Carafa would also have heard mention of Bramante, if only because he held the position of “cardinal protector”



Prospettivo milanese
dipintore, *Antiquarie
prospettiche romane*, 1499–
1506, Venice, Fondazione
Giorgio Cini (elaborated)

of the Dominican Order until 1498, when it was taken over by Cardinal Carvajal. Carafa therefore must have been informed of the renovation works initiated by Ludovico il Moro in the Dominican church of Santa Maria delle Grazie, with the construction of the imposing tribune designed by none other than Bramante.

Without entering into the intricate political and diplomatic events that determined the withdrawal of the Venetian and Habsburg troops defending Milan, which opened the city's gates to Louis XII's army, it seems likely that it was a member of the Spanish party that dominated the Roman Curia at that time, albeit controversially, who warned Bramante of the inevitable fate of Ludovico il Moro, and more importantly offered the architect support in Rome.

Bramante must have had guarantees or convincing prospects of work to have decided to leave behind projects as important as the ones for which he had direct responsibility as an architect. But he would not have taken a step so full of implications and risks with the speed he demonstrated at the end of 1499 unless this kind of behaviour had become second nature to his way of thinking. Always and almost instinctively being "contemporary" with history was in fact a special "quality" of his. (In contrast to the definition of the word "contemporary" in current usage, I intend this to mean an act or a work carried out in the time in which we live and not, other than by analogy, the concepts underlying the theory of actualism.)

Bramante had the extremely rare ability to clearly recognize the crucible in which history was shaped, and the almost instinctive ability to manoeuvre himself towards it, like a moth to a flame glimpsed in the twilight or darkness. Bramante moved towards that point without hesitation, attracted by a perfect combination of intellectual curiosity, ambition and pragmatism. Yet, he would not recognize it as his ultimate destination, his "destiny", as a Spaniard might say; rather than grow roots he would simply pitch a tent. It was as if Bramante had a precise notion of the instability of history, which was particularly changeable on Italian soil in the final quarter of the 15th century. He remained in a state of mobility, ready to follow the tide of history and to shape his own life in parallel – to be, as defined above, "contemporary".

If he appears prophetic, it is only because the shifts affecting institutions, ruling classes and public opinion are slower than those of history. Men cultivate their roots, social groups their customs and ruling classes their interests, and all of this serves to slow the pace of change, if not to obstruct it. Committed to salvaging something,

none of these people succeed in adapting to the current of history, in following the permanent dislocation of its crucible.

It was this aspect of Bramante's character, thanks to his ability to perceive reality without prejudice, that had led the young Donato (the name given to him by his parents as if he had been a gift, or a "donation", from God) to leave the farm on which they had dreamed he would settle. Short in physical terms but decisive in every other way, he chose the path that led him from a small settlement in the countryside of the Marche to a centre of unrivalled excellence: Urbino during the rule of Federico da Montefeltro.

There, in the workshop of a painter (possibly Fra Carnevale), he learned painting and the principles of perspective, but that was not all. He took note of the many reasons that required intellectuals and artists to be free from social conditioning and unnecessary forms of loyalty to their origins – in short, to be mobile. Luciano Laurana, Francesco di Giorgio, Leon Battista Alberti and Piero della Francesca all passed through Urbino without settling within its walls. Raphael, another mind fertilized by the extraordinary intellectual climate under Federico da Montefeltro, would also move on. If this was the scenario with which Donato became familiar in his youth, it is clear that Urbino itself, in its excellence, could not be his *destino*.

Just as he would leave Milan when he sensed the imminent end of il Moro, so he left Urbino before the death of Federico, a humanist, *condottiere* and head of state of the greatest magnitude. It was as if Bramante had understood that the fall of Constantinople into Islamic hands would mark the end of that humanism of which Urbino was a shining example. The epicentre of history would soon move beyond the Apennines to the banks of the Arno and the Tiber.

There was only one place where that intellectual ferment so favourably described as the "Adriatic Renaissance" could survive in the east of the peninsula: in the republic that claimed for itself the role of political heir to the Byzantine Empire, the city to which dozens of cultured men had fled from the banks of the Bosphorus. Bramante, however, did not move to Venice, where he might have risked getting lost in a maze of alleyways and canals, and where social and political life was regulated by a complex and changing balance between different magistracies. Instead he accepted the invitation and commission from a Venetian rector with a recognized humanist background to decorate with frescoes the façade of the palace in Bergamo where the latter had taken up office as a representative of Venice. And here, he painted (as

if to signify that philosophy and architecture, when combined, were an expression of good governance) figures of ancient philosophers before an imaginary architectural backdrop that resembles a three-dimensional loggia.

From Bergamo – which is close to Milan – he sensed the vital importance of the “Milan problem” to Italy’s political landscape: Venice, the Emperor Maximilian and the French king all had their sights firmly set on this nerve centre in the Po Valley. Bramante understood the replete contemporaneity of the city’s political instability, and that what would happen here would be decisive for the fate of the entire peninsula. Given these assumptions, it was not by chance that he presented himself in Milan with a manifesto; how else should one describe the publication of an image reproduced in a medium – print – which allowed for the unlimited production of copies of what could be understood as at once a design proposal and a research programme?

If Bramante came to Milan almost immediately to be at the centre of the “problem”, it was because he was not held back by reticence, shyness, modesty or workshop interests; he had chosen not to have a workshop so his freedom of movement and action would not be tied down. He was able to recognize, without hesitation, where this centre lay and could move towards it without fear, motivated by a keenness to test his abilities in a place where, objectively speaking, reality could be found. With this in mind, he immediately approached the most problematic yet at the same time most symbolic figure in terms of the quickness of his intellect: Leonardo. When several geniuses – Leonardo, Giovanni Antonio Amadeo, Francesco di Giorgio and others – compared their thoughts, Bramante had the natural authority to make a summary of their views. He did this with an independence of thought and balanced judgement, almost as if he were experimenting with his ability to govern complex decision-making processes of the kind involved in the construction of major buildings.

This is not the place to analyze Bramante’s works in Milan, but two points are worthy of note. The first is the influence of the Lombard tradition clearly identifiable in these works. The use of brick and a certain decorative redundancy are evidence of his respect for the splendour of a Gothic tradition that had yet to completely disappear in the Po Valley. It is not easy to say whether this choice was due to the absence at that time of alternative models of architectural language, or to a form of ideological pragmatism. (It would indeed not be at all surprising to find that an attachment to tradition – albeit in the context of innovative

and experimental works – was a convenient option for a ruler who had to entrench in tradition a power he had usurped.)

The second consideration may prove to be more interesting. When it came to designing, Bramante demonstrated in these early projects an openness not found in the work of either Leonardo or Francesco di Giorgio, the two *maestri* with whom he had become familiar in Milan. He neither acquired nor developed an interest in the typological research that led Manfredo Tafuri to describe Francesco di Giorgio as having practised an early form of eclecticism. Nor did he follow Leonardo's notion of designing projects as an aggregation of archetypal cells. Both of these options would have generated ideas that could never have served as precursors to the synthesis that was the conceptual, rather than pragmatic, objective Bramante was keen to pursue. By doing so, he was convinced that this was the only way to combine architecture, intended as an autonomous discipline, with history, seen as the only real given.

If we focus our attention on a drawing of almost unrivalled significance and interest, drawing U20A preserved at the Uffizi, it is possible to appreciate how Bramante understood the inherent potential in the typology of the sacellum of San Satiro, with which Leonardo had failed to come to grips, so to speak. Bramante moved beyond his fascination with the structure and measurements of this valuable relic, believed at that time to date from antiquity, to reveal the “*archeo*”, namely the conceptual value of a centrally planned architecture based on a cruciform diagram. It was actually an *exemplum*, the only *exemplum* that could be taken as a point of contact (of “concordance”, according to Arnaldo Bruschi) between the pagan and Christian worlds.

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From the outset, Bramante seems to have been well aware that such a paradigm as the planimetric framework of the sacellum of San Satiro would lose its conceptual essence if it were manipulated, or even if it were reproduced or multiplied. With this firmly settled in his mind, he would later evoke it on a gigantic scale by transforming it into the ordering model underlying the metamorphosis of an ancient architectural work of monumental historical dignity – the Vatican basilica built by the Emperor Constantine – into a centrally planned building intended to be the fulcrum of Christianity. Only in such a grandiose process could this *archeo* fully demonstrate its potential. Therefore, what we witness on the Vatican Hill is none other than the explosion of the atom of the small sacellum of San Satiro.

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This was possible because when Bramante was at work he did not countenance any distraction. He focused, almost instinctively, on

the conceptual essence of the project to be undertaken and, having acknowledged this essence, he acted with the almost implicit inner conviction that there was only one way of giving it architectonic form: by exalting the unrepeatable specificity of that essence. This is how, in seeming paradox, his works acquired a universal character.

A mental process of this kind relies on the awareness of a man who had spent long hours, throughout his youth and early adult years, representing illusory buildings in which new spatialities were dreamed of, desired, awaited. It was this long experience of intellectual unease produced by the immateriality of images, and by a virtual quality that embodied an intrinsic sense of frustration, which generated in Bramante the almost existential need not so much for the intellectual stimulus of architecture, but rather for its materiality, its tangible physicality. It was in this state of mind that he lived in Milan, and, having reached Rome, that he moved "alone with his thoughts" (Vasari) among the ancient Roman ruins, reflecting on the lessons he had learned from Filippo Brunelleschi during his brief stay in Florence.

It was this frame of mind that allowed Bramante to understand and capture the historical dimension of the present. He promptly recognized the value and practicability of stimuli and opportunities (namely situations arising through *occasio*), and instinctively sought out these opportunities, aware that they provided the motive and the trigger for every possible "project". There was a sort of continuum between thought and action in Bramante's mind, in his *forma mentis*, and he expressed his creative process primarily through concrete action.

Starting from this assumption, it is not difficult to realize that Bramante was quick to see the implications of the arrival in Milan, in 1496, of a cardinal for whom the strength of the French army was all too familiar since he had seen it in action at the time of Charles VIII's invasion. Appointed by the Roman pontiff to carry out a diplomatic mission on which Ludovico il Moro's fate would depend, the cardinal's actions on this occasion had significant personal implications since the thought of succeeding Cardinal Borgia to the papal throne was never far from his mind.

This supposition is backed not least by the fact that Carvajal was the person who decided to disclose the secret concealed in the work written by Blessed Amadeo who had prophesied the coming of an "angelic pope", a figure to which Carvajal himself aspired. More significantly, the reputable prelate had decided to erect a building on the Janiculum Hill, in the exact location in which Peter, *vicarius Christi*

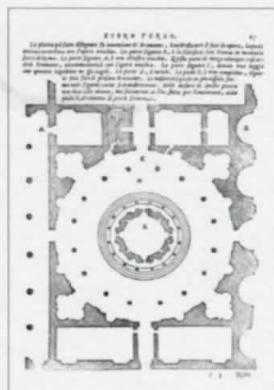
(Christ's first vicar), had been martyred. This alone could be interpreted as an ideal expression of his aspiration – I am tempted to say his determination – to celebrate mass in the Vatican, the very place where Peter was buried.

That the interpreter of this project would not be a Roman architect but rather one he had met in Milan – a man who had been taught by Piero della Francesca and Mantegna, and who had interpreted the desires, in Milan, of Gaspare Ambrogio Visconti (his first noteworthy patron), Cardinal Ascanio Sforza and Duke Ludovico – should not come as a surprise after what has been said. It should also not be surprising that this man, described by Giorgio Vasari as possessing a “vigorous intellect”, immediately grasped the implications of Carvajal's desire for power and with astonishing rapidity conceived a work that was both a paradigm and a theoretical statement (in the same way that the architecture illustrated in Prevedari's engraving had been both a project and a research programme).

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The compositional and formal coherence of the project Bramante developed for Carvajal is such that some scholars have seen it, and many continue to view it, as the product of a process of evolution – the term “maturation” has been used – that can only have been gradual. Instead, it is more stimulating, and in my opinion more appropriate, to think of it as the product of what we have already recognized as one of the most distinctive traits of Bramante's cultural identity: his ability to be, with complete coherence, both actor and interpreter of history in the very moment that it unfolds.

Owing to this condition of being contemporary, he understood, fully and immediately, the conceptual and disciplinary potential of the circumstance. This is why there is no spatial articulation and no hint of any dialectic inflexion in the architecture designed to achieve this potential. This was not the time for citing or evoking an *exemplum* of classical architecture. Instead, Bramante defined a paradigm that was unprecedented in the ruins he had hastened to explore on reaching Rome, stripping himself quite literally of all his accustomed ways of thinking. Moreover, the language used to decline its forms was consistent with the conceptual rigour of the Tempietto. Bramante spoke Latin, without any concession to a fascination with the classics or any claim to erudition or virtuosity. The only way I can describe his language is as courtly prose declined with a rhetorical expertise that left no room for improvisation: it simply adhered to the “truth” of the paradigm it established.



Sebastiano Serlio, *Plan of the Tempietto of San Pietro in Montorio*, from *idem, I sette libri dell'architettura* (Venice: Francesco Marcolini, 1544), Book III, p. 67

This required more than just intelligence and experience. It required a precise understanding of the twists and turns of history and the conviction that architecture is – must be – history itself. It is this historical nature that makes the Tempietto a work that, from the moment of its conception, was so deeply imbued with the contemporary as to be “timeless” (to the extent that Palladio had no qualms in placing it among the works of the ancients). It is a building that implodes into the centre of its planimetric composition and explodes outwards, ideally shaping the surrounding space (as demonstrated by Sebastiano Serlio). Time alone has a minimal dimension, the instant, and a maximal dimension, eternity.

In this architecture, whose form permits no epithets or anything that could be categorized as figurative, there is only one detail that cannot be traced back to the rigour used to define each element of the order. On the frieze of the entablature supported by a series of Doric columns surrounding the Tempietto, instead of metopes there are symbols of the Christian religion. It is a clue that links Carvajal to Oliviero Carafa, who also entertained ambitions to succeed to the papacy after Borgia. This reminds us of the chapel built by Cardinal Carafa in the Roman church of Santa Maria sopra Minerva in which, above the virtual architecture frescoed by Filippino Lippi, there is a similar type of ornamentation. (Another significant clue, which also establishes a link between Carvajal and Carafa, is the fact that it was Carafa who asked Carvajal to take on the role of cardinal protector of the Dominican Order after he had had to resign as a result of becoming too closely enmeshed in the thorny issue of Savonarola.)

This is not the place to highlight how these circumstances may be used to back the thesis that Bramante's transfer to Rome was the result of an orchestrated plan devised by the two cardinals at the centre of the powerful group that Arnaldo Bruschi has called the “Spanish party” (thereby also hinting that some of Bramante's other commissions in Rome must also be referred to this group, including – according to Vasari – the fountain of Santa Maria in Trastevere and the church of San Giacomo degli Spagnoli). Instead, this is the moment to turn our attention to the project commissioned from Bramante by a prelate – none other than Oliviero Carafa – who, thanks to the financial resources at his disposal, had made artistic patronage the pivotal instrument through which he wielded power.

If there is no external drawing of Santa Maria della Pace, the Augustinian monastery of the Congregation of the Canons Regular

of St John Lateran, it is because Bramante used the void of its inner cloister as the compositional fulcrum of his project, thus turning the cloister into the focal point of his architecture. However, he did not respect the traditional concept of a monastic cloister. Instead he saw this empty space as "a theatrical place", to use Chastel's apt description. This becomes clear once we realize that the Latin epigraphic letters of the inscriptions carved around the first-storey frieze are reminiscent of those in the square courtyard of the Ducal Palace at Urbino, and the second-storey loggia recalls the one in the courtyard of the palace that the duke of Calabria, heir to the Kingdom of Naples, had recently built at Poggioreale.

Therefore, fully aware that the theme of the courtyard had already been proposed in innovative forms by others, in this project Bramante limited himself to giving a lesson in method, and did so with a degree of experimentation (I would almost say "lightness") in no way inferior to his rigour. To appreciate this we need only note (following Bruschi's analysis) how he organized an ideal superimposition of the orders, articulating their spatial sequence in accordance with Vitruvian precepts. (He did this with the same lightness he would later use in the Belvedere courtyard, where he arranged this sequence not in space but in the time it took to climb the famous spiral staircase.)

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In attempting to explain the disciplinary rigour exercised by Bramante in this project, the personality of his patron must have contributed in no small degree: this was a prelate whose high-ranking calibre was borne out by the type of persons he frequented and by the countless works and other compositions dedicated to him by renowned scholars and literati. (Moreover, evidence that a discussion between Cardinal Carafa and his architect took place during the design phase is provided by the fact that in the cloister of Santa Maria della Pace there is an opening, in the second storey, that reproduces a detail of the imaginary architecture depicted by Filippo Lippi in the cardinal's own chapel in Santa Maria sopra Minerva.)

It is challenging but undoubtedly intriguing to try to understand how, in the brief interlude of Todeschini Piccolomini's pontificate during which the cloister was completed, Bramante could have drawn on or absorbed the ideas of a political and intellectual militant like Carafa, in whom the Roman imperial tradition had accumulated and fused with the memory (still very much alive in Naples) of the *auctoritas* of the man whom Jacob Burckhardt described as "the first ruler of the modern type who sat upon a throne".

Everything points to the likelihood that Oliviero Carafa (nephew of Diomede Carafa, who had enjoyed such standing at the Aragonese court as to prompt Lorenzo de' Medici to describe him as the "second king") found in Frederick II, the Swabian emperor in whose southern Italian castles he had stayed on numerous occasions, the ideological parameters that he thought would inspire him to exercise absolute power if elected pope. This modern conception of the State and an understanding of plenitude of power was the presupposition – and not only in ideological terms – for a *renovatio imperii*. Moreover, with Carvajal's support, Carafa could also have transferred these models and conceptions to the man who would be elevated (with the backing of the "Spanish party") to the throne of St Peter following the death of Pius III.

That man would be Giuliano della Rovere who, in 1494, had escorted Charles VIII for some time when he descended into Italy en route to conquer the Kingdom of Naples, and who had then ridden into Milan alongside Louis XII in 1499. However, until the moment of his election he had not consciously united his intense political and military activities with the historical and cultural vision that would provide the ideological foundation for the exercise of papal power.

However, this did not prevent Bramante from approaching the new pontiff with the naturalness that had taken him from Urbino to the Veneto, from Bergamo to Milan and from Milan to Rome. Once again he followed – one might say pursued – that burning crucible in which history is forged in all its fullness. He soon realized that the concentration of power now firmly held by a man who "proceeded impetuously in all his affairs" and who "found the times and affairs so much in conformity with his way of proceeding" (the words are Machiavelli's) would assure the correspondence of thought and action which would allow him to achieve the contemporaneity that was the prime objective of his work. Proof of the intellectual lucidity underlying this choice is the fact that Bramante, finding himself in the presence of absolute power, avoided formulating any paradigm or giving any lesson in method: instead he experimented with other parameters. To understand how, we need to turn to the first project that he managed for Julius II.

What is the grandiose Cortile del Belvedere, that structure that runs from one high point to another, "embracing a little valley that ran between" (Vasari), other than a statement of the physical and, to an even greater extent, the conceptual value of "scale", namely the dimensional measurements that govern the conception of a project?

Only on a scale that overrides all normal dimensions does this project's empty space become innovative. Bounded on all sides by buildings that only contain circulation space, extending over immense lengths (three hundred metres, to be precise), it shows an indifference to the orography of the site that would prompt Le Corbusier to absorb this *exemplum* in the design of some of his most visionary projects of the 1930s. The "vacuum" delimited by these buildings evokes ancient concepts (the hippodrome, the theatre) and prefigures functions of a modernity that at the time were merely an intuition. It is thus not the façades of these structures that represent the key architectural theme of this huge construction, but rather their serial arrangement, exemplary in the calibrated perfection of their design, encouraging the gaze to run over their entire length.

It was following the experience of the Belvedere courtyard "invention" that Julius II and Bramante took a decisive step: they transferred their research on the "large scale" from the merely physical sphere to the conceptual one. How else can we interpret the decision to demolish the basilica built by Emperor Constantine on the Vatican Hill – an imposing testament to imperial Roman architecture – and to erect a building conceived as the fulcrum and symbol of a religion that presented itself as a universal power? It would be a challenge that would engage all the pope's aspirations for power and all the architect's creative drive, and both men were well aware of the fact that they themselves would not live to see their undertaking completed.

To fully understand what this entailed we should focus once again on drawing U20A. On this sheet Bramante drew the plan of the basilica constructed by Emperor Constantine, with its central nave flanked by double side aisles, and its transept and semicircular apse. On top of it he sketched the foundations of the new transept and the magnificent presbytery conceived by Bernardo Rossellino to eliminate the ancient choir in the central nave that prevented the faithful from seeing mass take place at the high altar above the tomb of St Peter.

With these two outlines – which already symbolically condense a dozen or so centuries of history – Bramante created a design that con-founded the axiality of the ancient basilica (an axiality that Rossellino's project would have further accentuated and that Michelangelo intended to exploit in order to enhance the visibility of the magnificent tomb he was designing for Julius II). Instead, for Bramante, rather than the destination of an ideal itinerary, St Peter's tomb had to be the fulcrum around which the new temple would revolve, the emblem of Christianity itself.

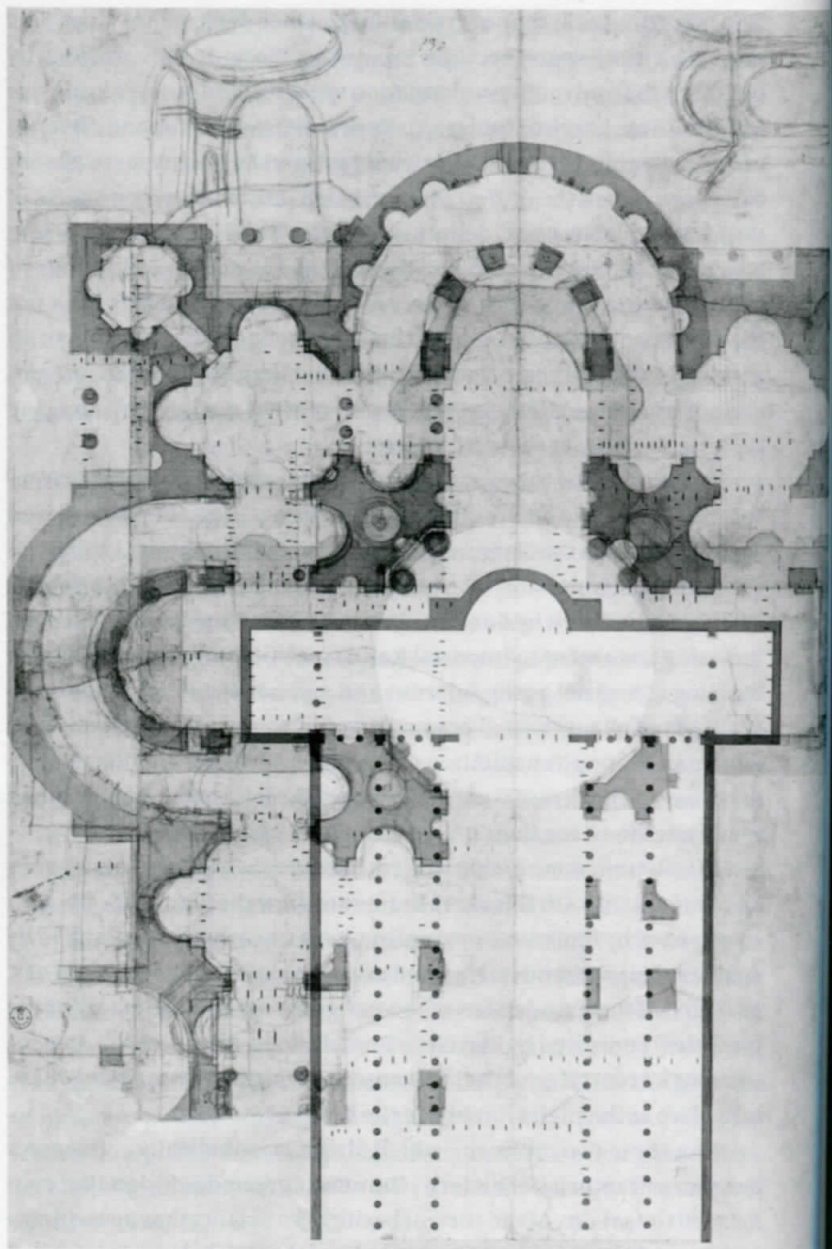


Le Corbusier, *Sketch of the Belvedere Courtyard*, from *L'Atelier de la recherche patiente* (Paris: Éditions Vincent, Fréal & Co., 1960), p. 39



Le Corbusier, *Sketch of São Paulo, Brazil*, 1929

Bramante's project for St Peter's, Florence, Uffizi, U20A (elaborated by the author): the Constantinian basilica, Bernardo Rossellino's work (foundations) and Donato Bramante's preliminary study



Bramante wanted to build a church with a central plan. He understood that an operation of this kind could be achieved by evoking the plan diagram of the sacellum of San Satiro, but on two conditions: firstly, by vastly expanding its minimal dimensions; and secondly, by recreating the centrality of its (planimetric) layout. The latter operation was undertaken by replicating, evidently on a different scale, the solution devised for the cathedral of Pavia, namely by rounding off the corners of the intersection between the central nave and the transepts. By opting for this choice it was possible to allow for the construction of a huge cupola that would rise above the axis of St Peter's tomb.

Bramante followed and recorded this decision-making process with extraordinary clarity in the Uffizi drawing. When the time came for a detailed design, mindful once again of the floor plan of San Satiro, he would inscribe this first proposal within a square to ensure that the volume of the temple would only produce semi-cylindrical volumes on the façade. But let's not stray too far from drawing U20A.

In revealing the planimetric layout of the four pilasters supporting the weighty dome, the drawing reveals Bramante's acknowledgement that in order to build a structure capable of withstanding such a load, he would have to revive the specific and extraordinary structural wisdom of the ancients, prior to referencing any architectural detail of Roman orders.

Bramante's later drawings for St Peter's can thus be apprehended as the progressive and thrilling discovery of the potential formal articulations that could be generated by the rebirth of the *ars aedificatoria* explored for its structural and expressive potential rather than, as it was custom at the time, for the declination of the architectural orders.

Bramante did not create a synthesis of all these data. Instead he made a composition, because this is the mental process that, better than any other, enabled him not to compromise the specificity of each element while at the same time transforming their individual conceptual essence. By doing so he launched a grandiose adventure that would later involve Antonio da Sangallo, Michelangelo, Raphael and Peruzzi. Through his project Bramante truly aimed to combine the present, past and future. This reveals the contemporaneity of his work.

Translated from the Italian by Lucinda Byatt and Laura Bennet