

Nuns and Architecture in Renaissance Reggio Emilia

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Abstract

A convent plan dating from approximately 1519 raises a series of questions concerning architectural production and the role of women in Renaissance Italy. This paper examines the plan in question, its authorship, the history of the convent depicted, and the relationship of the plan to the convent as built. The paper then addresses the role of women in architectural design in Renaissance Italy, and challenges the long-standing assumption that women did not design buildings then because they were not permitted to do so.

The discovery during the summer of 2009 of a convent plan dating from approximately 1519-1524 opened up a series of methodological and research questions concerning architectural production in Renaissance Italy.¹ The large document illustrates, partly in plan and partly in elevation, a project for the convent of Santa Maria della Misericordia in Reggio Emilia. While the plan had been inventoried and cited in a few publications regarding sixteenth century Reggio Emilia, scholars paid little attention to the provenance of the document. The assumption appears to have been that because it is a plan, it must therefore have been produced by a man.¹¹ Our examination of the document, in particular the captions and room descriptions, have led us to the inescapable conclusion that the author of the plan was one of the eleven nuns then living in the convent. The methodological and research questions therefore concern on the one hand, the document and its production, and on the other, the more general question of the participation of women in architectural design. Did a woman draft this plan, and if so, can we draw any conclusions, even provisional ones, about the participation of women in architectural design and construction? Before turning to the methodological issues, a brief description of the project is in order.

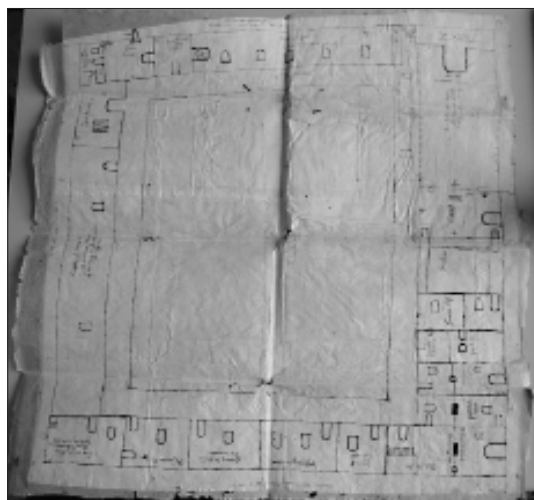


Fig. 1. Anonymous, Plan of Convent of Santa Maria della Misericordia, Reggio Emilia, ca. 1519.

The document was produced at a large scale by gluing together at least three large pieces of paper, which was subsequently glued to a blue backing during the eighteenth century, possibly in a misguided effort to preserve it. This backing makes it difficult to identify a watermark on the papers, although there is an illegible one partly visible, and it also makes it impossible to determine exactly how many pieces of paper were glued together. Nonetheless, using several pieces of paper made it possible to work out the details more carefully. The plan illustrates a two-story convent whose outline was drawn with a ruler, but only the ground floor is illustrated; however reference is made at several points to the use of several rooms for the dormitories and other living spaces on the absent second floor. Measurements in units of *cavezzi* and then *pertiche* are included for nearly every room. The ground floor consists of a church dedicated to St. John the Baptist, a smaller one to St. Joseph, kitchen, parlor, refectory and storage spaces. Most extant convent plans date from the eighteenth or nineteenth centuries, so this project affords a rare look at the activities that were to take place in each room on the ground floor. While none of the columns that would form a loggia around the courtyard appear on the plan, at several points the document indicates the presence of such a loggia. Entrance to all of the ground floor rooms was from the loggia, with the exception of the kitchen and hearth room, the church, the storerooms for wood, and the area where visitors could be received on the west wing.

Because the political and cultural norms of the era resolutely barred women from direct participation in architectural design, the woman who drafted the plan was unaware of the conventions by which to indicate doors and windows. She therefore developed her own, indicating both in elevation, and presumably the location of the doors in a wall indicated in which direction she meant the door to open. Notable too, is the fact that the windows are symmetrically placed within their respective walls and are also in alignment with one another and in relation to the doors. Other features, such as the fireplace chimney and the iron grates used to separate the cloistered nuns from the sight of visitors, are also rendered in elevation. The designer took especial care with the organization and representation of spaces in the zone of the parlor, or *parlatorio*, the several rooms in which nuns could receive visitors. Here both the iron grates, which would be woven through with fabric to block the view from both sides, and the wheels, or *rode*, with their triple panels for passing objects back and forth without being seen, are represented in detail. This set of rooms is not linked by interior doors, so that

most must be entered individually from the loggia or for visitors, from the street. Finally, although the stairs are not drawn, the designer noted where they should go, and indeed, they are placed precisely where one would expect, diagonally across from one another near the church and the refectory. This arrangement rendered access to the upstairs rooms equally convenient, and also facilitated movement of the nuns to their two major group rooms – dining room and church, which they would arise during the night to visit and pray.

Any attempt at an analysis of this plan gives rise to a range of methodological issues. Dating from nearly five hundred years ago, the plan is accompanied only by the most limited documentation for its subsequent history, a matter further complicated by the general disinterest at the time (not to mention in subsequent centuries) in matters having to do with women. In general this has led to the archiving of fewer records associated with them, whether patrician women or others, and this includes materials related to convents. Likewise, relatively few female monasteries survived the Napoleonic invasions and sales of ecclesiastical properties, and the subsequent speculative boom of the nineteenth century. Such is the case with this convent, which no longer exists.^{III} How then does the scholar undertake to understand the history of such a building, in the absence of reasonably complete documentation? Our approach has been three fold: a close study of the existing documents related to the convent; an analysis of additional documentation where the convent is mentioned by subsequent commentators; and a comparison of this convent with others known to us from elsewhere.

We begin with the issues raised by the plan:

- evidence for female authorship
- relationship between this plan and a second

one dating from about the same time period and conserved in the same file

- the unique features of the plan

•relationship between this plan and the building eventually erected on the site

•the relationship between this convent and other sixteenth century convents.

The evidence for female authorship begins with the caption by which the author presented it to the city fathers of Reggio: "This is the design according to the idea of the mothers when [in response to] the prayers of this magnificent community the Observant [Clarissans] were brought here."^{IV} The ideas behind the plan, then, are emphatically attributed to the nuns themselves. By itself, this is not conclusive evidence that the hand that drafted the plan was that of a woman. Our further argument that a woman drew up the project hinges in part upon the caption by which the church is designated: "our church."^V Had a man drafted the project, whether a monk or a builder, he would certainly not have referred to the church as "our." The hand that drafted the plan also drafted a small brochure of the convent's book of memories, where the same terminol-

ogy about "our" church and "our" convent, is evident.

^{VI} As noted above, the unit of measurement adopted in the plan initially was that of a *cavezzi*, a unit of measurement common in the region of Lombardy and the town of Cremona, but not in Reggio Emilia.^{VII} The nuns destined to inhabit the convent were transferred from a convent in the city of Cremona, where the *cavezzi* was a standard unit of measurement. As the plan indicates, at some point the *cavezzi* were translated into the standard unit of measurement in Reggio and elsewhere in the duchy of Ferrara, the *pertica*.^{VIII} This too suggests that a nun from Cremona drafted the plan according to the units familiar to her, but then transferred them into those of Reggio at some later point, probably to facilitate communication with local builders.

If the first plan provides an elaborate and detailed description of the organization of a convent, complete with loggia, church, storage, kitchens, refectory and parlors, the second is a puzzling, partial documentation of what appears to amount to little more than a small house. When the city fathers summoned the nuns from Cremona, there was already a much smaller convent inhabited by eight nuns on the site. It is possible that this plan refers precisely to that smaller convent, because it illustrates a church, a chapel or smaller church dedicated to the Madonna, two courtyards, three chambers and two loggia, with an indication of stairs to otherwise unspecified rooms on the second floor. The problem is that there are no evident relationships between the two plans. If the first plan was meant to be a remodel of an existing convent, this second plan could not fill that role, since there is absolutely no overlap between the two. Although we puzzled at length over this, we ultimately could find no relationship between the two, so we concluded either that this represented a temporary abode for the nuns while the new convent was being constructed, or, that it had nothing at all to do with either the early convent or the one being erected after 1519.

There are a number of unique features to this plan. First, it looks toward the future by anticipating a room where silk will be produced. Silk production had only been introduced to Reggio in 1502, but the master silk maker had already abandoned the city by the end of the second decade.^{IX} That the nuns already anticipated taking up this activity indicates an astute sense of the fashion tastes of the time, and an awareness of the economic advantages of producing silk with the aid of unpaid labor. In fact, the Observant Clarissans were distinguished by their strict vows of poverty.^X Unlike many other religious orders, these nuns refused to hold property in the name of the convent, and stressed that the women cloistered within their walls were meant to earn their livelihood through the labor of their hands, not from rents collected from tenants. The nuns who transferred from Cremona included several from extremely prominent families, including the Aymi of Cremona, the Albizzi of Florence, the Anguissoli of Piacenza, and the Pallavicini of Cortemaggiore and Monticelli. It is no sur-

prise, then, that the women were knowledgeable about trends in luxury fabrics and fashion.

Second, the perimeter walls on the interior of the church of St. John the Baptist is scored by a series of hatch marks, marking out forty spaces. Because the convent planned to house no more than forty nuns, it seems obvious that the forty spaces indicate forty seats for the women. However, St. John the Baptist was also meant to be a public church, meaning that the neighborhood, including men, would sit inside during services. Cloistered nuns would not have sat around the perimeter of such a space in the presence of men – so if the signs do not indicate seats, what do they illustrate? We have proposed everything from flooring to beams, but for a variety of reasons, none of these hypotheses work. Moreover, the church of St. John the Baptist entirely lacks access from within the convent; the public could enter from the main doors to the south, while the priest could enter from the sacristy and a his courtyard. But where would the nuns have entered were they meant to sit in the chairs? Perhaps the chairs were only utilized on certain private occasions, when the nuns would have entered from the priest's quarters and sacristy. But in any case, the nuns had no private access from their convent from which to enter the church and prepare hangings, linens, or other objects for services, let alone from the upstairs dormitory. Unless, perhaps, they enjoyed access to a choir above the altar on the second floor, from where they might have moved down the staircase. We cannot know the answer to this puzzle, because the second floor is absent, so it could even be as simple a matter as the nun having forgotten to mark that particular door.

From the organization of the plan, and in particular, the wall between the two churches, it appears that the nuns would have stayed inside St. Joseph's church during services in St. John the Baptist, because here a window for communion, another for passing linens back into the convent, and a grate above the altar are depicted.

What was the relationship between the structure envisioned on the plan, and the convent as built? Here all of the problems associated with ferreting out information about female spaces in Renaissance Italy come to the foreground. The city elders designated the original convent dating from the fourteenth century as the site of the new one planned in 1519, situated in the southeast corner of the city, adjacent to the old city walls on via Ponte Levone.^{XI} Although the nuns from Cremona arrived in 1519, the evidence suggests that major parts, including the church, had not been completed five years later. The representative of the Duke of Ferrara in Reggio, Hector Sacrato, notified the Duke about a conflict between the convent and the city, and the convent's neighbors.^{XII} The city Elders had accepted the nuns' request to close off the small street, via Ponte Levone, so as to enlarge the building and make room for the church, because the site was an exceptionally cramped one. Those with properties backing up on the street objected, and they also objected to the proposed transfer of an outdoor shrine to the Madonna inside the convent's church. The Duke supported the street closure.

Nothing further emerges about the status of the convent until more than two decades later. A book of construction expenses and payments maintained by the nuns has survived for the years 1542-43.^{XIII} We thought this would be a boon. Instead, the booklet includes details on purchases of such materials as sand, stucco and tiles, as well as payments to masons and occasionally, a reference to the construction of a wall – and that is it. In other words, the booklet is more an accounting of materials and labor payments than a construction record. Huge amounts of money were spent during this two year period, however, so we believe that work on the convent and church may have been concluded precisely in those years. The absence of other records leaves open the question of whether similar construction may have been ongoing throughout the twenty-three years since the first nuns arrived, or indeed, whether it continued afterwards.



Fig. 2. *Veduta Camuncoli*, 1591, detail. Santa Maria della Misericordia is at n. 14.

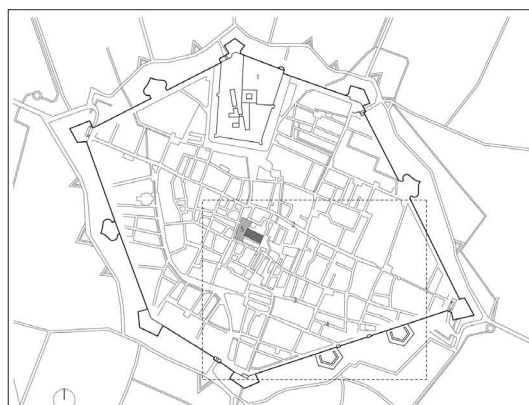


Fig. 3a. *Plan of Reggio*, 1660, [drawing by Joseph Flynn]

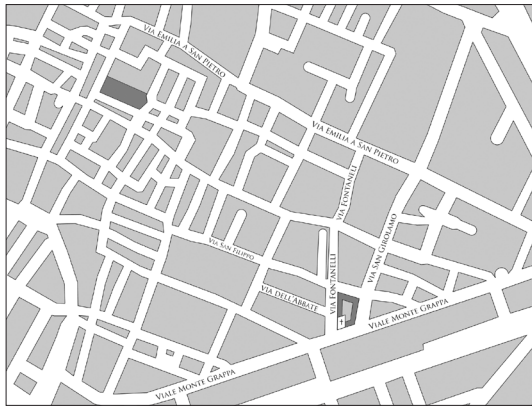


Fig. 3b. Plan of Reggio, 1660, detail [drawing by Joseph Flynn]

We reviewed visual materials on historic Reggio to determine how, and whether, the plan drawn by the nuns might have related to the convent as built. We assembled city views beginning with the late sixteenth century, and maps of the city from the seventeenth century forward. Try as we might, we could not manage to make the plan as drawn correspond to the fragmentary visual materials illustrating the convent. Initially, we concluded that the convent was not built in line with the plan as drawn by the nuns. We were able to fix its location in 1555 as occupying the block bordered by via Fontenelli, via San Filippo, via San Girolamo, and via Monte Grappa, but we could not relate the church envisioned in the plan and the disposition of the convent in 1555 – or so we thought. We subsequently uncovered evidence that because the city walls were being worked on, the city required the nuns to demolish the existing convent and reconstruct the entire complex on the other side of the street – as it would appear in subsequent city views and maps.^{xiv} Originally, the church had faced via Monte Grappa with via Fontanelli on the left – much as was envisioned in the plan drafted by the nuns. Such fragmentary evidence means that we cannot state with confidence that the convent was erected as the nuns envisioned it, but we can say that at least the location and orientation of the church respected their vision.

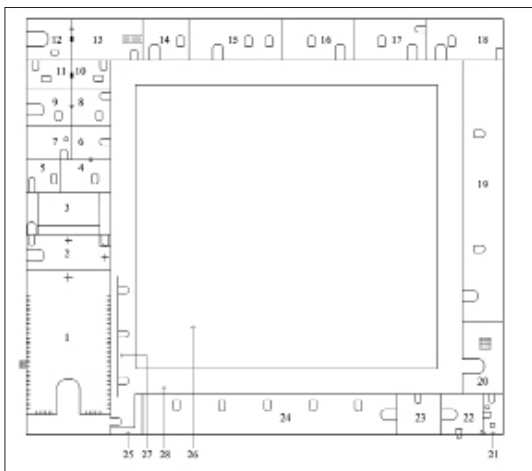


Fig. 4. Santa Maria della Misericordia, Reggio, ca. 1519 [drawing by Joseph Flynn]

As noted at the outset, our third resource includes comparisons with other convents, specifically regarding construction and design issues. While there appears to be no other documented case of nuns drawing up a plan for a new convent, there is instead a growing body of evidence that demonstrates heavy involvement in remodeling, rebuilding, and adding to their convents. In her study of three convent chronicles, K. J. T. Lowe demonstrates how Sister Orsola Formicini, once elected abbess of the Clarissan convent of San Cosimato in Rome in 1598, initiated a massive and ongoing building campaign.^{xv} Refashioning the refectory was the first of a long series of building interventions Sister Orsola undertook during her various terms as abbess, including building a fountain in the courtyard, lifting ceilings, building cellars under the refectory, redoing the ovens in the kitchen, inserting new windows, rebuilding staircases, and whitewashing the entire complex at least twice. Her activities spurred other nuns in the convent to similar undertakings, including decorations in the church and other embellishments. Closer to home, the Benedictine convent of San Silvestro in Ferrara underwent several phases of expansion between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries. Other than repairs and complete reconstructions after an earthquake in 1570 and a massive fire in the seventeenth century, the nuns also extended and enhanced an ornamental garden with benches, pergolas and other amenities, and added a second dormitory at an unspecified time.^{xvi} In both cases, the documentation makes it clear that the building activity was done at the behest of the nuns, not their male supervisors. At the very end of the sixteenth century, the Benedictine nuns at Le Murate in Florence decided to erect a new bell tower with two bells, and between 1594 and 1595 they raised the funds to do just that. Here too the convent records demonstrate that the nuns were the active agents in choosing to undertake the construction project, in determining its configuration, and in seeing to the construction.^{xvii}

Secular patronage as documented by McIvler for the Pallavicini women and Ghirardo for Lucrezia Borgia also occurred on a significant scale, even if the historical memory of the participation of women in the design of spaces has been lost. While no plans drawn by women survive in either case to document these women's active roles in their architectural enterprises, considerable evidence illustrates their direct engagement, including decision-making, at all phases of the building enterprise.

What do we have to say about research strategies? It will come as no surprise to researchers to hear that we believe the first and most important step is to abandon presuppositions and assumptions based upon historical generalities. Just because women were not permitted to do things does not mean that they obeyed such dictates, and just because we assume that until the nineteenth century only men designed buildings does not mean that this is true. Faced with

a plan, a design or a drawing, researchers must question all assumptions, not just those that are convenient. Secondly, do not dismiss unsophisticated or visually uninteresting documents or plans. Often these are precisely the ones that hold such interesting secrets as having been produced by a woman – not because a woman would not have been capable of producing a sophisticated design, but because she was not given the tools to do so, and therefore had to invent her own, often rudimentary tools, as in the case of our anonymous nun.

To return to our original questions, then, what can we now say about the participation of women in architectural design and construction in Renaissance Italy? We can assert with great confidence that the plan for a new convent in Reggio was certainly drafted by a woman, but we cannot express equal confidence about whether the subsequent construction followed the document as they had designed it. We believe that this was probably the case, based upon the references to the fate of the original building in 1555, particularly with respect to the location of the church. Nonetheless, we are on less sure ground here. As to the larger questions about women and architecture in Renaissance Italy, we believe that the discovery of this plan, along with a growing body of evidence from later in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, allows us to assert that women were far more active in shaping their surroundings, including the architecture itself, than has been previously thought. We also believe that there are probably other unlabeled drawings in archives throughout Italy that could reasonably be attributed to women, and that the willingness to consider such possibilities is only now opening up.

End Notes

¹The plan in question is located at the Archivio di Stato Reggio [ASRe], Raccolte Mappe, Archivio dei Monasteri Soppressi, Dallari 120/10.10, Plan of the Convent of Santa Maria della Misericordia.

²The general view of women in the scholarship on Renaissance Italy is that women were barred from activities such as medicine, scholarship, law and architecture, a fact about which there is little dispute. However, the question of whether, and how much, women actually *did* in fact encroach on the prerogatives of males by engaging in various forms of activity regarding architectural production remains open. The best recent accounts of women and architecture are K.J.P. Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles and Convent Culture in Renaissance and Counter-Reformation Italy* (Cambridge 2003), and Katherine McIver, *Women, Art and Architecture in Northern Italy, 1520-1580* (Burlington VT 2006).

³The convent was closed during the eighteenth century in a move to consolidate women's monastic communities.

⁴ASRe, Raccolte Mappe, Archivio dei Monasteri Soppressi, Dallari 120/10.10, Plan of the Convent of Santa Maria della Misericordia, caption: "Questo sie el disegno secundo la mente dele madre che furono a pregi di questa magnifica comunità qui cundute dala santa observantia."

⁵Two of the references to the church mention "our church," the description of number 1 [To St. John the

Baptist this our church is dedicated] and to the loggia in front of it, number 26 [This is the loggia in front of our church] on the redrawn plan.

⁶ASRe, Archivio del Comune di Reggio (ACR), Corporazioni Soppresse (CS), Santa Maria della Misericordia (Misericordia), b. 120, 1, "1519-1555. Libro delle memorie della fondazione del monastero di Sta. Maria Misericordia, con la memoria della chiesa del Pontelevene," henceforth *Libro*.

⁷"Cavezzi" in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries was the length of the piece of rope used to draw the oxen into a harness; they appear always to have been of a specific length. This term is still used in the southern Veneto region and in the parts of the province of Emilia Romagna, the region where Reggio is located, but it was not an official unit of measurement in the sixteenth century or later; in the duchy of Ferrara, it simply meant a length of fabric.

⁸A pertica is a unit for measuring length; in Ferrara it was a bit more than four meters, 4.03, while in Modena it equaled 3.13 meters. Giuseppe Trenti, *Voci di terre estensi. Glossario del Volgare d'uso comune (Ferrara-Modena) da documenti e cronache del tempo secoli XIV-XVI* (Vignola 2008).

⁹Duchess Lucrezia Borgia Estense of Ferrara recommended that the city fathers permit Antonio da Genova to develop the art of silk production in a letter of 2 August 1502. ASRe, Archivio Comunale, Registro dei decreti e delle lettere, 1477-1516, b. 641, cc. 41v/42r, Lucrezia Borgia to the Elders of Reggio, 2 August 1502. Antonio and his wife taught women and girls the art of silk making until 1518, when he left the city after not having received the promised salary from the city fathers for several years. Odoardo Rombaldi, "L'arte della seta a Reggio Emilia nel secolo XVI," in *L'arte e l'industria della seta a Reggio Emilia, dal sec. XVI al sec. XIX. Atti e memorie del convegno di studi* (Modena: Aedes Muratoriana 1968), 42-73; for Antonio's departure, 47.

¹⁰The literature on the vows of poverty adopted by Observant Clarissans is extensive; most recently, see Alessandra Bartolomei Romagnoli, "Il francescanesimo femminile dalle origini al concilio di Trento," in Aleksander Horowski, *All'ombra della chiara luce* (Rome 2005), 11-85.

¹¹Guido Agosti, "Monasteri femminili pre-Napoleonici a Reggio Emilia," *Bollettino Storico Reggiano* XL, fascicolo n. 133 (April 2007), 17.

¹²ASRe, ACR, Misericordia, b. 120. F. 1, letter from Hector Sacrato to Duke Alfonso I d'Este, 24 July 1524.

¹³ASRe, ACR, Misericordia, Spesa di fabbrica.

¹⁴Vittorio Nironi, "La riforma cinquecentesca delle mura di Reggio," *Bollettino Storico Reggiano*, 11 (April 1971), 1-24.

¹⁵Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles*, 68-70.

¹⁶Two chronicles drafted by nuns from San Silvestro report the reconstructions: Biblioteca Comunale Ariostea, Manuscript Collection Antonelli, n. 528, "Memorie del Monastero di San Silvestro di Ferrara," and Archivio Storico Diocesano di Ferrara, Corporazioni Soppresse, San Silvestro, 11, "Libro de Memorie delle Monache di San Silvestro, 1662." For more details, see Andrea Faoro, "L'Abbazia di San Silvestro e il suburbio orientale di Ferrara. Ricerche di topografia e urbanistica medievale," *Deputazione Provinciale Ferrarese di Storia Patria, Atti e Memorie*, 4, vol. 15 (1999), 29-86. San Silvestro was transferred in 1520 into a palace commissioned by Lucrezia Borgia; see Diane Yvonne Ghirardo, "Lucrezia Borgia's Palace in Renaissance Ferrara," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians*, 64, 4 (2005), 474-497.

¹⁷Lowe, *Nuns' Chronicles*, 131.

Appendix: Captions for Fig. 4

On the reverse

With the consent of the first overseers.

This is the design according to the mind of the mothers who were conducted here in holy obedience by the prayers of this magnificent community.

In that design, are understood two dormitories, one by the church, with the refectory, kitchen, chapter room, and with all other necessary rooms as you can see and the loggias around [the courtyard] below, as pleases God, that it pleases your lordships to whose prudence and best judgment about everything about the building I place my judgment in all.

It is well that I advise that other than the rooms contained in this design [and] wanting this monastery to be outfitted with all of the offices necessary noted below they can be accommodated here, that is, by the infirmary and the places necessary to it, the room for medicinal herbs and spices, the laundry, the dressing room, the room for looms, the room for making silk, the oven, the buttery, the pantry and the chicken coop.

1. To St. John the Baptist this our church is dedicated. It measures 4 cavezi and 4 arms long, 18 arms wide.
2. St. Joseph
 - a. little wheel for the linens
 - b. little window for communion
 - c. sacraments
3. little cloister
- 4 & 5. rooms for the fathers
6. Room of the abachucha [?]
7. Well for the fathers
8. [no caption]
9. Outsiders
10. [no caption]
11. Private parlor
12. Parlor for seculars
13. House of the neighbors, wheel for the nuns
14. The mother's room
15. Dispensary for charity
16. Room for the community's infirmary
17. Wood room
18. Here is a staircase that goes to the dormitory when the nuns are warm
19. Chapter room 6 cavezi with the dormitory above that will be organized like the one above the refectory.
20. Room measuring 3 cavezi
21. Kitchen courtyard measuring 2 pertiche cavezzo
22. Kitchen [with] fireplace [and] oven [and] storage box.
23. Site for the closet for meals, 1 cavezo. Storage box.
24. Door of the refectory. Refectory of 6 pertiche. Above is a dormitory [measuring] 10 pertiche.
25. Here will be the staircase for the dormitory. Exit of the piazza.
26. This is the loggia in front of our church.
27. Loggia adjacent to the church, 1 cavezo.
28. Loggia above and below
29. Cloister