Nuns and Architecture in Renaissance Reggio Emilia

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Abstract

A convent plan dating from approximately 1519 raises a series of question 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 longstanding 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. 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. 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.

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 cavezzì 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

Fig. 1. Anonymous, Plan of Convent of Santa Maria della Misericordia, Reggio Emilia, ca. 1519.
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 ma-
jor 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 accompa-
nied 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 subse-
cuent 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 oth-
ers, and this includes materials related to convents.
Likewise, relatively few female monasteries survived
the Napoleonic invasions and sales of ecclesiasti-
cal properties, and the subsequent speculative boom
of the nineteenth century. Such is the case with this
convent, which no longer exists. How then does the
scholar undertake to understand the history of such a
building, in the absence of reasonably complete docu-
mentation? Our approach has been three fold: a close
study of the existing documents related to the convent;
an analysis of additional documentation where the con-
vent 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 con-
served in the same file
• the unique features of the plan
• relationship between this plan and the build-
ing 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.” 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.” 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.

As noted above, the unit of measurement adopted
in the plan initially was that of a cavezzi, a unit of mea-
surement common in the region of Lombardy and the
town of Cremona, but not in Reggio Emilia. 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 stan-
dard unit of measurement in Reggio and elsewhere in
the duchy of Ferrara, the pertica. 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 facili-
tate 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, refec-
tory and parlors, the second is a puzzling, partial docu-
m entation 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 pos-
sible that this plan refers precisely to that smaller con-
vent, 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 be-
tween 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. That the nuns already antic-
pated 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. 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 trans-
ferred 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. 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. 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. 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]
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. 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.

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. 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. 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.

Secular patronage as documented by McIver 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 ques-
tion all assumptions, not just those that are convenient. 
Secondly, do not dismiss unsophisticated or visually 
uninteresting documents or plans. Often these are pre-
cisely the ones that hold such interesting secrets as 
being having 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 anonym-
ous 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 ques-
tions 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 six-
teenth and seventeenth centuries, allows us to assert 
that women were far more active in shaping their sur-
roundings, including the architecture itself, than has 
been previously thought. We also believe that there are 
probably other unlabeled drawings in archives through-
out 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 Re-
naisance Italy is that women were barred from activi-
ties 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 
incrocio on the prerogatives of males by engag-
ing in various forms of activity regarding architectural 
production remains open. The best recent accounts of 
women and architecture are K.J.P. Lowe, Nuns’ Chron-
icles and Convent Cuture 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 communi-
ties.

4ASRe, Raccolte Mappe, Archivio dei Monasteri Sop-
pressi, Dallari 120/10.10, Plan of the Convent of Santa 
Maria della Misericordia, caption: “Questo sie el desi-
gno secundo la mente dele madre che furono a pregi 
di questa magna comunita qui cundute dala santa 
osservantia.”

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), Corpora-
zioni Soppressi (CS), Santa Maria della Misericordia 
(Misericordia), b. 120, 1, “1519-1555. Libro delle memo-
rerie della fondazione del monastero di Sta. Maria Mis-
ercordia, con la memoria della chiesa del Pontelevone,” 
hereafter Libro.

7“Cavezzi” in the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries 
was the length of the piece of rope used to draw the 
oven 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 cen-
tury or later; in the duchy of Ferrara, it simply meant a 
lengh 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 recom-
mended 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 
till 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 
alle reggio Emilia, dal sec. XVI al sec XIX. Atti e memo-
rie 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 Bortolomei Romagnoli, “Il francese sonno 
finimivole dalle origini al concilio di Trento,” in Aleksand-
er Horowski, All’ombra della chiera luce (Rome 2005), 
11-85.

11Quido Agosti, “Monasteri femminili pre-Napoleonici a 
Reggio Emilia,” Bollettino Storico Reggiano XL, fasciculo 
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 riorma cinqucenteasca delle mura 
de Reggio,” Bollettino Storico Reggiano, 11 (April 1971), 
1-24.

15Lowe, Lowe, Nuns’ Chronicles, 68-70.

16Two chronicles drafted by nuns from San Silvestro 
report the reconstructions: Biblioteca Comunale Ar-
ioopew, Manuscript Collection Antonelli, n. 528, “Memorie 
del Monastero di San Silvestro di Ferrara,” and Archivio 
Storico Diocesano di Ferrara, Corporazioni Soppress, 
San Silvestro, 11, “Libro de Memorie delle Monache 
de San Silvestro, 1662.” For more details, see Andrea 
Faro, “L’abbazia di San Silvestro e il suburbio orientale 
de Ferrara. Ricerche di topografia e urbanistica medieva-
li,” 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 Ghiroardo, “Lucrezia 
Borgia’s Palace in Renaissance Ferrara,” Journal of the 
Society of Architectural Historians, 64, 4 (2005), 474- 
497.

17Lowe, Lowe, 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
23. Site for the closet for meals, 1 cavezo. Storage box.
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