The Houses of the Bourgeoisie (1879)
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1. Casa Dolfini, Strada Castiglione, Bologna, 1476. Photograph by Andrew Shanken.

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The other day I looked at the old hovel on via Malcontenti, leaning on its worm-eaten gallows poles, the one on whose ruins will soon rise new palaces *[palazzi],* or at least the neat and orderly houses of the bourgeoisie (Figure 1).[1]

I wished that the architects who are building anew would look for inspiration at the honest houses of today's bourgeoisie, rather than at those houses that clumsily pretend to be palaces.

It seems to me detestable, these prideful sins committed in such great number in the art of Italian cities in our day, by those *parvenus* of architecture, who covet the property of others and want at any cost to dress them up in the orders of Vignola, or to give them the pretense of a direct ancestral lineage going back to the beautiful buildings of Athens.

There is as much Greek dignity and grace in them as in the choristers and extras in theater, who, dressed in the clothes of Athenian nobility, Roman senators, or the ladies of Corinth, play the roles of mechanics' assistants or hawkers in the market. Truth is not a matter of appearances.

Greek orders and ornament are as respectable a tradition as any other, offering a trove of symmetry, proportion, and moldings in favor today, but which must be recalled in the correct time and place, with great caution and intelligence.

They are part of a classical aristocracy of a monumental nature, and when, in the more inspired times of the Renaissance they came to be recalled with vigor and applied to private buildings, it was by knowing masters who always used them in cases of exceptional dimension and magnitude. These masters made palazzi fit for kings, and not as some rental apartment occupied by a schoolmaster, a purveyor of Tuscan wine, and a magistrate on the first floor, a shoemaker, carpenter, and a policeman on the ground floor . . . and an attic granary used promiscuously for chickens, bundles of wheat, and the huddled family of the municipal streetsweep.

As I see it, a building must tell us what it wants to be, who can live there, and what purpose it serves. It makes me laugh when churches appear like houses and houses resemble churches.

In a city not everyone is a millionaire; on the contrary, we must admit that we can count the millionaires on one hand. Most people belong to the middle *[mediocritas],* to that middle called the *aurea mediocritas,* the source of the genius of the

Italian bourgeoisie in which we have delighted and of which we have boasted, but of which we are now ashamed.[2]

They have multiplied their palazzi. . . . but they have emptied their wallets. What would that old, beloved wig of ours *[quell buon parruccone piacevole di marchese nostro]* say now, who always remarked of Bologna that it was rich at the office of the census and poor at the mortgage office?[3]

Certainly it would be possible, my friend, to tell this story differently. A venerable Frenchman, with silver spectacles and white hair, a veritable facsimile of Thiers,[4] whom I sat next to one night at the Teatro Comunale and who presented himself to me as a habitué of the salon of M. Thiers, marveled at the great number of palazzi, old and above all new, that he had found in Bologna, no less than in other Italian cities, and added: what richness each one of these grand palazzi represents? My neighbor for the evening could not be persuaded by my response. . . . and you know, it still seems to me today that I was correct in my assumption.

This could be an ingredient, one of many, in the recipe for creating that brilliant illusion that is called *credit* . . . : but I am a *verista.*[5]

And as a *verista,* this morning I felt stunned by the pompous pedantry of the current state of affairs that prevail in our architecture.

I felt the need to take up the pen and to write to you, who possess the bent and fine taste of the critic, to join in a proposal to make it the order of the day in our artistic life to find a genuine and honest type of house for the bourgeoisie.

A number of good reasons whirl in my head like the kaleidoscope of whites, reds, and yellows in Venetian glass.

But lost in the same moment is the hope of telling you everything.

In the first place, there is a moral question, inasmuch as art must have one. For me a house that, in a fit of piers, columns, sphinxes, metopes, rosettes, and moldings, appears like a palace, is not one; for me it is a lie . . . one with short legs, as are all lies.[6]

Just a step into the main door. . . . that's enough. Here you search in vain for porters or uniformed staff. . . . One is lucky to find an errand boy with dark eyes and blackened eyelids, ironing and humming: next, almost always there is a cobbler beating leather or his apprentice . . . and who takes the letters with his sure hands . . . Oh! What hands!

We are not yet speaking of the entry hall and of the staircase . . . with its narrow steps, less than four feet wide, perfectly dark and threatening to collapse: here is what remains of the palazzo, hanging by its hinges. . . . *Mentita est iniquitas sibi.*[7]

In the second place, there is a question of aesthetics. Art without a moral, without truth . . . deviates also from the true standards of beauty.

These houses, which happily raise the incomes of their owners and give a false idea about public wealth, these neo-palazzi, after all, are also ugly, truly ugly.

I speak in general, as you know: but the educated critic, who happily possesses a sense of style, does not laugh long at the grotesque hodgepodge of elements; he will laugh at them so as not to cry over the steep cost, and seeing over there the good public with its nose in the air watching it all ecstatically. . . . he feels his lips move involuntarily into a pitiful smile . . . and thinks maybe of Lorenzo De Medici or Luca Pitti!

I am hitting on the sin of the epoch, but I do not have in mind a sinner. It is not in my nature.

And to say that in each one of our cities, in Florence, Venice, Siena, and here also in Bologna, where there is a noble tradition and a shared concept of what is moral, varying in form on the Arno, in the lagoon, and here in the shadow of the towers, there is a tradition, I mean to say, of the old houses of the bourgeoisie.

Why not consider it? Why not reform the type of habitation that measures beauty with the wallet with one that looks to sincerity and good taste for its appearance, that resigns itself to being simply a beautiful house rather than ponderously imitating a palazzo or the Theater of Marcello or S. Giovanni Laterano?

Take the old houses of the bourgeoisie of Florence, with their massive courses of quarry-faced *pietra serena* on the ground floor, and a wall of smooth stone that rises one, then two stories to the roof, which thrusts out ever so broadly on well cut and planed beams; with its windows set in pointed arches formed from *voussoirs* of the best *macigno*.[8] Historical windows, through which Bice would have taken the air,[9] and from which the gentle women of Florence, who knows how many times, would have gazed peacefully at their husbands or fathers or lovers gathering into turbulent knots in the streets below at the tolling of the bells of the Palazzo Vecchio.

Or take the old houses of the bourgeoisie of Venice, which fish in the verdigris waters of the canals, with a door off to one side and the double loggia on colonettes, with Byzantine capitals and rosettes. . . . Simple and picturesque like a whimsical sigh of oriental splendor, but tempered by the modest housewives *[casalinga]* and by the foresight of the Christian *borghesi* and western merchants.

In Tuscany and also in Venice, in their good name the tradition was maintained: they never stopped building in this manner.

In time, two stories became three to better satisfy the growing population as well as changes in taste and in the comforts of life. And they obtained all of this in that type of popular and generous construction, flexible, uncontrived, informal, and without the pedantry of rules . . . precisely like the heart of the people for which art was a form of sincere and gracious expression.

I am not an architect, and do not have the right to tell our masters how to do their work.

But with regard to that kind of wandering *[po' di vagabondo],* as Giusti called it,[10] that constitutes one of the contemplative habits of the artistic life, when one roams the streets with eyes wide open to all impressions, and hundreds of reflections are born and die on the pupils of the eyes, before even entering the realm of thought . . . how many times I remember asking myself why the architects do not liberate themselves a bit from the memory of the Academy? From that eternal jumble of orders and Greek ornament piled up one on the other? Why not make them go out in the open air, turning to the streets like us, observing the buildings of various centuries, some disfigured obscenely from the privations of centuries of disapproval, and restoring them at least in thought, if not with the hammer, to their original glory? Why do they not study in order to develop in themselves a new erudition, steeped in historical experience and a culture more original, more sincere, and open . . . rather than one based on the monotonous and narrow ideas acquired by following the formulas of the work of Bramante, Palladio, Vignola, and Bibbiena?

A few fragments are enough to provoke a hundred ideas. A tiny window, a bit of frieze eaten away by the intense cold and weeds, or an arch filled in with stone could be the point of departure for conjuring up a graceful and new whole.

A house bearing the scars of many centuries, perhaps hundreds over hundreds of years of restoration or expansion evident on its face, which by chance have created a felicitous eclecticism and given vitality to the interlacement of various and pleasing elements. They are pleasing, I said: But tell me why *I* like this, asked a passerby?

Why, above all, do these architects forget the beautiful houses of the *borghese* from the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries? It is unfortunately true that for the most part, after the pestilence of the seventeenth century, after the earthquakes, after the epidemic of the Baroque, in ignorance the foolish proprietors mutilated the crenellations, closed up their arches and windows, or silenced them unrelentingly with whitewash.

But not all of them suffered such misfortune: under the vile layers of white lead, under the cracked plaster, one catches

sight of the beautiful old lines and they seem to laugh at the artists as if they were the prisoners of a stupid, impertinent pasha behind the veils of the seraglio.

It seems that they are asking our geniuses in the arts to free them . . . But the owner does not always understand that the house needs to be restored, nor always does he have the money for it.

What remains to be done? To restore them with imagination and with common sense applied to the subject; and remember them when the *Comune* widens a street, when we build anew, from the foundations, when the architects are asked for a design by one, two, or three citizens who, not being obligated to leave a monument, *non tantum domino sed patriae ornamentum,*[11] instead need to rebuild their houses with a sense of duty to reconcile private utility with beauty, civil considerations with perpetuity.

(Parenthetically, it must be said: inasmuch as consideration of beauty is not a rebellion against modesty and economy, so is it true that all the sumptuousness of bad taste costs double that of the true and fresh work of genius.)

In Bologna, for example, it seems to me that there exists an inspired type of *borghese* house: the question will be what form it should take today.

There is the house, for example, of the 1400s. The portico has wide arches that span boldly with minimal bracing, locked in place with powerful keystones, and resting on cylindrical or octagonal columns that are slim but sturdy, making the vaults as resonant as bronze.

The long arcades, all open-air, are sculpted with ornate bands of shells, cherubs' heads, dentils, or with the dense sort of interlacing patterns in which the medieval artists exercised both their good taste and the mystery of their imaginations (Figure 1).

In the capitals . . . the maximum freedom of choice. The oldest houses have cardoon thistles that flower into pointed arches *[il caspo di cardo della flora ogivale],* which the Middle Ages substituted for the tiresome Greek acanthus; the wild thistle of our meadows, which, from the center of its symmetrical husk, with its leaves unfurling over the neighboring grass, thrusts a rigid stalk, fearsomely armed by a fortress of foliage crowned at their tips with flowers, of which the Gothic pinnacles of the old cathedrals of Germany and Italy bear a likeness (Figure 2).[12]

Our houses of the 1400s also have pointed arches, but in reality they are ample and open balconies out of which flowed the broad-mindedness and brilliance that informed city life and in time came to diminish the need to maintain our private

2. Terra-cotta cardoons, 19 Via Santo Stefano, Bologna. Photograph by Andrew Shanken.

houses as fortifications. The struggles between the Guelfs and Ghibellines were finished.

They are beautifully ornate windows with elegant terra-cotta on the outer edge of the arch or intricate designs carved into the stone itself, with perpetual spirals that descend to the end of the balustrade.

Some of these houses are rich, while others are very simple: as the people wanted and according to their means.

A terra-cotta cornice runs under the roof. Out of the kilns that furnished these ornate materials came well-cooked bricks, each one presenting on one of its faces an ornamental element, but in a way that allowed the imagination of the architect to bring out various combinations and with the same material give variety to the cornice.

With other embellishments of art came novel modifications.

The pointed arch disappeared from the windows of the story above the portico, replaced with a round arch: there emerged *bifora* of exquisite elegance (Figure 3).

The memory of Classical Greece and Rome was recalled in the ornamentation of the cornices, corbels, rosettes, dentils, and egg-and-dart patterns: but with full freedom of choice in their arrangement. They enriched the capitals, not only with thistle, but each with a different design, a diverse interlacing of coats of arms, acanthus leaves, and carved heads *[testine]*, while never disturbing the harmony of the whole.

These, our traditional *borghese* houses, have to my eyes an entirely special character of beauty that in the moment cannot be defined other than with the vocabulary of—the picturesque.

This is better explained if one thinks of who furnished the designs to the master masons. Most often in the fourteen and fifteen hundreds it was the painters.

And in fact so many of our houses, like the Palazzo Fava, the noble house at the corner of Via Grade, are the true *Francias* of Bolognese architecture (Figure 4).[13] I cite the case of Bologna, but my words fit every city in Italy that left a trace of itself in the history of art.

The Italian spirit made it possible to maintain the noble arts in a harmonious whole, because art remained art instead of splitting into branches, one independent from the other: what held for art also held for science. But it was all in vain: as things grew specialized, they divided and subdivided infinitely, in art as in science, amplifying the horizons of research and deepening the elementary analysis. This was no less true for being part of a hierarchical order in which the arts and the sciences had lost their way. The decorative arts, for example, have forgotten that they were subordinate to architecture, as the sciences have lost track of the fact that philosophy is their natural master.

3. Bifora, 15–13 Via Galliera. Photograph by Andrew Shanken.

The sense of the total work of art, the effect of picturesque excellence, was lost in the art of building: as the concept of order, that most eminent philosophical concept, dimmed in the arts, anarchy visited the sciences.

The continuity of buildings, which together constitute the city, inevitably creates an entirely artificial environment, where

4. Cortile, Palazzo Fava (now the Museo Civico Medievale). Photograph courtesy Sailko, Wikipedia Commons.

every square inch is the work of man. Nature—grand, beautiful, invigorating nature—does not smile upon the city except from the heights between the roofs in a faint smear of blue sky or from some small green area of dusty laurel trees or magnolias, seen through the railing of a fence.

And it is instead the open fields, where all is varied and all is part of a harmonious whole, that perennially renew the thoughts and inspiration of man.

To study only the city adding layers to itself, new buildings on top of old, is perhaps to fall into the error that Leonardo

da Vinci condemned in his immortal injunction. Leonardo, a *verista* and idealist in his own time, wrote: "Artists, do not imitate the manner of others: they will call you the grandsons rather than the sons of nature. One must turn to nature in its great abundance, from which all the masters have learned."

The aesthetic disciplines found this wise. And our Bolognese artists, for example, who paint their figures as if done in the open air rather than in the studio, endowing each painting with a vast horizon of countryside filled with light, poplar trees, cascading water, mountains and *palazzine,* one sees at their exhibits how much they esteemed these aesthetic standards by comparing their images with nature.

Those *palazzine* that harmonize well with the green fields of the countryside, they give license for building them the same way in the city. Conceived originally by artists as ornamental accessories of the picturesque landscape, they transferred them into the artificial ambit of the city, with all their native character, and nevertheless they appeared to us picturesque.

Similar things took place right under our eyes. Where the modern mind tried to solve entirely new problems of construction with new materials and with new resources, as, for instance, in the buildings of the universal expositions, it is easy to ascertain when the fantasies of the architects instinctively searched outside of the city, far away in the villas or countryside, for a way to recast into a single whole, which was at least picturesque, all the various elements, old and new, for building and for ornamenting them.

When forced by impossible circumstances to abandon the rules and precept of the Academy, the architects of the great palaces of the expositions had to trust their own good genius, and we have seen them confidently recast into new wholes the apses and naves of the Middle Ages with expansively wide windows, Moorish towers, crystal transepts with winter gardens, Greek peristyles, Babylonian ziggurats, the crescent-shaped arches of Arabia, all the sincere souvenirs of the past and the whimsical novelties of the present, in one building; and nothing worries them except that their building, as it towers over the leaves of the trees, between the rainbows of the fountains, against the blue horizon of the sky, and mirrored on the tranquil waters, would create an enchanting, picturesque scene.

The people cried out: beautiful, beautiful, gorgeous.

And the erudite, the immortals of the Academy could demonstrate that not one of the artistic precepts came from a respected architect, while in their heart of hearts they cannot deny that perhaps it is beautiful.

Habemus legem:[14] they exclaimed with horror, all the pedants in front of these new works of art, as the Pharisees

and Scribes before them. But the laws grow old and when political laws are in decline, one appeals directly to natural ones, taking them as the standard for new laws: when the precepts of art are in decline and fail to meet the needs of the day, appeals to nature free us to attempt new experiments in its virgin environment.

And here in substance is the theory of the picturesque. It is the freedom that nature grants to the conceptions of the genius, according them the right to be admired as true works of art, even though they do not have precedents in the history of art. One part nature, one part accident, one part the heart of the people who for the first time arise to applaud, and a new art takes shape in spite of the reluctance of the Academy and despite the resistance of conventions.

We are approaching a new epoch of taste: of symmetry we have tired, that *equalitas numerosa* of Saint Augustine. Modesty aside, we are capable of sensing beauty, or more properly, harmony, even when our eyes do not immediately see it in the expected form of classical proportions and formulas.

Therefore let us enlarge the horizons of art: and when a building appears picturesque, brought forth from the bosom of nature but transplanted into the city, then one can say: it was made neither by Vignola, nor by Tibaldi, Sansovino, or Bramante.

Sons of nature and not grandsons they must be, as Leonardo da Vinci said. I do not doubt the results of following his advice: our cities must be ours and not made in the styles of previous generations, who had other ideas, methods of construction, economics, and needs: the city must be born of the living, not of the dead.

And if I sing the praises of the houses of the bourgeoisie from the fourteen or fifteen hundreds, it is not because I want to return to the houses of the Middle Ages, as you well understand; it is because they demonstrate the wisdom of my thesis, giving historical proof of the freedom behind all of our arts, because they are the sons of the picturesque as I would like to see the picturesque taken on, as a movement for the renewal of the works of the so-called *genio civile* (the state office of public works); whose "genius" we can now question whether it was real or the routine of the most mediocre (Figure 5).[15]

I know that reform demands that we persuade *ab Jove,* that we must begin in the schools of applied design that serve architecture . . . but I always like to establish the impoverished need before suggesting modestly some corrective . . . never to lay bare that which is called—responsibility. It is this that too easily injures the individuals rather than easing the painful lessons learned from public humiliation.

5. House on wooden stilts, Via Marsala, Bologna. Photograph by Andrew Shanken.

Endnotes

Translated by Andrew M. Shanken and Francesco Ceccarelli. The article originally appeared as "Le case dei borghesi" in *La Pace* [Bologna] (June 6, 1879); this translation is based on the 1879 text as it appears in Alfonso Rubbiani, *Scritti vari editi e inediti* (Bologna: L. Cappelli, 1925). We would like to thank Matico Josephson for his help in translating the more nettlesome Latin phrases. We have tried to leave some sense of the rhythm and grammar of Rubbiani's writing, much of which comes through his endearing habit of punctuating the way one expects he might have spoken, with colons and semicolons offering the sorts of natural pauses of speech.

[1] Via Malcontenti, a street in Bologna that was undergoing rapid modernization in the 1870s. In this essay, the Italian *borghesi* is translated as "bourgeosie," which can also be more loosely translated as the middle class.

[2] *Aurea mediocritas:* literally "golden mean." Rubbiani creates a play on words between mediocre and the highly refined mathematical proportions of the golden mean as a way to elevate the modern standing of the *borghesi.*

[3] The reference may relate to changes in taxation begun in Bologna in the late eighteenth century to tax the property and not just the earnings of the wealthy. The quip is essentially about wealthy landowners who obscured their holdings in order to avoid taxation; thus Bologna could be populous without a representative tax base. Here Rubbiani puts the words in the figure of the "old wig" or "*buon parruccone piacevole di marchese nostro,*" a member of the defunct *ancien regime,* as opposed to the true bourgeoisie that displaced him during the nineteenth century.

[4] Louis-Adolphe Thiers (1797–1877), a literary statesman who served as the president of the Third Republic in France from 1871 to 1873. Thiers would have been an accessible image in Italy for several reasons. The Frenchman was known in Italy from his extensive travel there in the 1830s and had just died two years before Rubbiani wrote his essay. Thiers also was short, "with plain features, ungainly gestures and manners, very near-sighted, and of disagreeable voice," hardly, in other words, the sort of person one might turn to in matters of taste. Rubbiani thus sets him up as a caricature in contrast to his readers, the common people, whom he later calls critics of fine taste. From *The New Werner Twentieth Century Edition of the Encyclopedia Britannica* (Akron, Ohio: The Werner Company, 1907).

[5] The reference to credit *(il credito)* is to the adoption of an abstract system of credit in the nineteenth century, including the substitution of gold and silver with paper money. Rubbiani likens the suspension of disbelief needed to accept paper as having value equal to precious metals or merchandise to the valuation of architecture based on its grandeur, and particularly, on pretentious façades. While the comparison may now seem a bit of a stretch, in a period still wrestling with the nature and value of paper money, this would have been a socially available metaphor for any form of dissimulation or falseness. The word *verista* refers to *Verismo,* a literary movement then emerging in Italy that favored a realistic approach to writing, calling attention to the everyday, the working classes, and what we might today call the vernacular. Here Rubbiani implicitly proposes an architectural equivalent, drawn from the everyday buildings of Bologna rather than from the falsely monumental palazzi of the recently wealthy.

[6] "A lie with short legs" cannot travel far and therefore will soon be discovered.

[7] *Mentita est iniquitas sibi:* to call them a lie does not do them justice.

[8] *Pietra serena* is a dark, grayish green Tuscan sandstone often used for sculptural elements in architecture, as well as for arches and columns, especially for its polychromatic effects, as in Brunelleschi's loggia at the Spedale degli Innocenti. *Macigno* is another Tuscan sandstone.

[9] Bice di Folco Portinari or Beatrice Portinari (1266–1290), Dante's inspiration for his *Vita Nuova.*

[10] Giuseppe Giusti (1809–1850), Italian poet and revolutionary. Here Rubbiani is calling forth an Italian version of Baudelaire's flâneur.

[11] Not only for God, but also for country.

[12] *Caspo di cardo* is probably the cardoon, a favorite local dish in Emilia-Romagna. It is a close relative to the artichoke, but instead of the flowering thistle, it is the stalky leaves that are eaten. The reference clearly replaces the classical, academic, and foreign acanthus with a common, local plant. He also uses it to imagine a cultural divide between the Classical tradition and the Gothic, linking Bologna, which looked north as much as south for its identity, to the latter.

[13] Palazzo Fava is more commonly called the Palazzo Ghisilardi Fava, and is now on Via Manzoni, 4. Francesco Francia (1450–1517), a Renaissance goldsmith, medalist, and painter born in Bologna, he became court painter in Mantua. Rubbiani might have said "the true Raphaels" of Bolognese architecture, but with the expression "*i veri Francia*" he positioned a son of Bologna as the Renaissance genius.

[14] "Finally we have a law." The reference is to *Habemus papam,* the phrase that the Cardinal Deacon utters when a new pope is elected.

[15] *Genio civile* is a play on words that refers to the office of civil engineering or public works in the nineteenth century, while recalling the earlier references to genius *(genio),* with the intention of poking fun at the former.