



The Palazzo Ruccellai

By Alex Hancock

The Italian renaissance can be described as the rebirth of the classical form. The revival of the classical form consisted of many architects studying the influential architecture of the Greek and Roman period. Studying classical architecture created a focus upon specific components that were then considered in Renaissance architecture. The impact of this period has meant that classical form is still considered in design today. For example, the use of lighting, the dividing of internal spaces, spatiality and also balanced proportions are still used. These are components which can be directly related to the design of the many renaissance facades. More direct references to classical architecture are the use of the Roman arch in structure and the Greek idea of centrally planned buildings. One of the greatest architects of the early renaissance period was Leon Battista Alberti (Alberti). "Archaeologist and painter, musician and scientist, and moreover fascinated by mathematics – to call Leon Battista Alberti multi-talented would be an understatement. Particularly since the Genoese Alberti also found time to dedicated himself to architecture, and thus definitively secure his reputation as a Renaissance "universal man"." (Kuhl, I. Lewis, K. Thiel-Siling, S (2009). *50 Architects you should know*. Munich: Prestel. 14-15.)

Furthermore, Alberti was also a theorist he studied the ten books of architecture by Vitruvius and from this created his own literature; the *De Re Aedificatoria* which was the first architectural book to be printed.

The Palazzo Ruccellai is a four storey townhouse located in Florence, Italy. It is classed as a townhouse yet is considered to be more of an urban mansion due to its vast size. It sits upon the Via della Vigna Nuova and was designed by Leon Battista Alberti (Alberti). The design was commissioned by the wealthy Ruccellai family and construction was completed between the years of 1446 and 1451. Elements of Roman architecture are used to give the building a certain dominance over the rest of the street. This was common during these times as many wealthy families tried to represent themselves through their buildings hence why Roman elements are used to show strength and solidarity. This was all because they sought after the rights of being the most powerful family in Florence. The elements clearly visible upon the façade include "the arches, pilasters and entablatures, and in the larger blocks on the ground floor" (<http://isiflorence.org/the-history-of-palazzo-rucellai>). "The grid-like facade is achieved through the application of a scheme of trabeated articulation. The stone veneer of this facade is given a channeled rustication and serves as the

background for the smooth-faced pilasters and entablatures which divide the facade into a series of three-story bays.” (https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Palazzo_Rucellai#Description)

“On the first tier, they are of the Tuscan order. On the second and third tiers, Alberti used smaller stones to give the feeling of lightness, which is enhanced by the rounded arches of the windows, a typically Roman feature. Both of these tiers also have pilasters, although on the second tier they are of the Ionic order, and on the third they are Corinthian.”

(<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/renaissance-reformation/early-renaissance1/sculpture-architecture-florence/a/alberti-palazzo-rucellai>)



Figure 1.

Internally the building contained four floors despite only having three levels upon the façade. “the first was where the family conducted their business; the second floor, or piano nobile, was they received guests; the third floor contained the family’s private apartments; and a hidden fourth floor, which had few windows and is invisible from the street, was

where the servants lived.” (<https://www.khanacademy.org/humanities/renaissance-reformation/early-renaissance1/sculpture-architecture-florence/a/alberti-palazzo-rucellai>)

In addition internal rooms had vaulted ceilings and the whole building was centrally planned around a courtyard. The aspect of central planning within the design can be related back to the studying of Greek architecture and more specifically the Greek temple. The central plan also couples with the humanist view that buildings should be designed around the human needs.

Furthermore, the historical context in which the Palazzo Rucellai was designed and constructed was the Italian renaissance and more specifically is classed as early renaissance. Despite this the Palazzo Rucellai is considered to be one of the finest and purest examples of the renaissance ideology. The Renaissance period was essentially derived from the intellectual ideology of humanism and truly changed the perception of architecture and its purpose. Prior to the Renaissance period architectural styles were dominated by a religious ideology and the belief that all architecture was to be for god and the purpose of religion only. This can be shown by the emphasis upon verticality within design and examples of this are evident from the Paleo-Christian period through to the gothic style. A style that was widely popular across Europe. However, this way of thinking changed as humanism focused upon human progress and the needs of people. Religion was still held in high regard yet it was collectively understood that architects should create buildings for the inhabitants and users therefore focusing on design related aspects. Such as: repetition, hierarchy and order, sequences, rhythm, harmony, the use of lighting, the dividing of internal spaces, spatiality and also balanced proportions which can be directly related to the design of the many renaissance facades. Furthermore, more direct references to classical architecture include the use of shapes and their specific proportions such as the golden rectangle, cubes and half cubes.

In addition, the Santa Maria del Fiore by Filippo Brunelleschi is another fine example of the humanist effect upon architecture and this can be shown through the dividing of internal spaces and also the use of light including the dome lantern also designed by Brunelleschi at a later stage. Brunelleschi tended to specialise in designing churches and Alberti in facades therefore it is difficult to compare these two buildings considering they have very different uses. Humanism's influence had only been portrayed through public buildings such as the

Santa Maria until Alberti designed the Palazzo Ruccellai which is known to be one of the first private dwellings designed under humanism influence.

The Palazzo Ruccellai can be compared to the Palazzo Medici as they are intended for the same purpose. The Palazzo Medici was designed by Michelozzo just ten years prior to Alberti starting the Palazzo Ruccellai. The façade design upon each building is designed in similar fashion. Both consist of three levels, however it is what makes up these levels that differentiates the two palaces.



Figure 2

The façade at ground level of the Palazzo Medici consists of rough stone that imposes upon its environment whereas the Palazzo Ruccellai uses smooth stone. The difference between the two buildings could be described as the Medici being the more dominating and the Ruccellai being more sophisticated in its approach. However, moving upwards upon the façade of the Palazzo Medici it seems the building becomes lighter and less dense and this therefore increases the contrast between the three levels of façade. This is similar to the Palazzo Ruccellai as the use of lighter stone increases the verticality of the overall building. Both palaces aim to dominate their landscapes as they were both designed for very wealthy families who aim to show a powerful impression.

To conclude it can be said that the Renaissance was the most progressive period in architecture and this can be classed as a turning point in architectural history. The Palazzo Ruccellai is the possibly the pivotal point in the Renaissance period where medieval and gothic influences were not existent in design and Alberti had shown that through the

detailed and in-depth studying of the classical forms and the principles originating from Greek and Roman architecture accompanied by a humanist approach he could improve the standards of architecture at the particular time and also set a high standard for the future. This can be shown by the effect Alberti and his designs had on future developments for example “The Palazzo Rucellai, in turn, influenced such later buildings as the Palazzo della Cancelleria (later the Papal Chancery, in Rome).”

(<http://www.britannica.com/topic/Palazzo-Rucellai>)

References

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Images used

Title page image - <https://upload.wikimedia.org/wikipedia/commons/c/cc/Rucellai.jpg>

Figure 1 - <http://www.poderesantapia.com/images/city/firenze/palazzorucellai700.jpg>

Figure 2 - <http://www.florencewebguide.com/images/palazzo-medici-riccardi-exterior.jpg>