



The Lombard *Broletto* and Communal Architecture in the Alpine Areas, 15th–19th Centuries

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The *broletto*, the medieval building that housed the communal administration of the Lombard cities, has long been the subject of studies that examine it from ethical, political, stylistic, and formal points of view. In recent years, focus in medieval studies has shifted to areas of the ‘margins of the communal world’, territories that, although relevant to historical change, have been neglected by historiography. In this contribution, I consider the architecture of buildings in fringe areas from the valleys in the Rhaetian and Bergamasque Alps that date to the communal age and that were significantly transformed between the 15th century and the early contemporary period. I begin with general remarks about the context and then use the communal palace of Clusone in Bergamo and the Palazzo Pretorio di Chiavenna (Sondrio) as case studies, drawing on unpublished documents in the municipal archives of the two cities.

Keywords: communal palace; *broletto*; Lombard Alps; Clusone; Chiavenna; modern age



The *Broletto* Lombardo

In a 1943 article entitled *Il 'broletto' dei comuni lombardi* published in *Lingua Nostra* (Serra, 1943: 1–5), Giandomenico Serra documents the 13th-century origin of the word 'broletto', arguing that it is a diminutive of 'brolio' or 'broilo', a word meaning 'orchard' or 'garden'. Indeed, a by-now vast bibliography confirms that since the early Middle Ages the term referred to an open and delimited space, a meeting place to discuss legal matters; in documents it was sometimes associated with the *palatium communis*, the building that housed the communal government after the Peace of Constance (1183).¹ To support his claim, Serra published an anthology of sources including segments of essays written by scholars, engineers, and architects after 1861, a time when, following the unification of Italy, documents and monuments were being studied with the aim of preserving the memory of the communal past of the main cities in Lombardy.² Their objective was to establish a clear continuity with the Middle Ages by enhancing municipal identity, and promoting the modern redesign of monumental areas in the most important urban centres.³

Serra cautions his readers against using the term 'broletto' to refer to the 'image' of buildings constructed after 1228 in Lombardy and, at the same time, he suggests considering a broader geographical area, one that also included eastern Piedmont that reflected the cultural meaning of the adjective 'lombard'.⁴ The documents he references suggest a terminological and architectural complexity: the *broletti* that were connected to houses, churches, cathedrals, arcades, loggias, squares, and markets were understood as relational spaces, not as formally predefined objects. Consequently, while reflecting on the spread of this term, he also warns against analogical interpretations: 'It was not artistic reasons, nor the imitation or architectural reproduction of Milan's Broletto Nuovo that determined the fortune of the term 'broletto' but solely its political prestige' (1943: 4). In short, Serra is careful to avoid reductive types of correspondence between words and objects suggesting that new functions and structures do not necessarily simply derive from existing models or prototypes.⁵

As more recent studies show, amongst the many notable protagonists who worked in various capacities on projects connected with the Lombard *broletti* between 1861 and 1930 were politicians and administrators, ministerial officials, provincial or regional superintendents, intellectuals and scholars, teachers, librarians and archivists — lay and ecclesiastical — architects and engineers, technicians employed in public offices, private citizens, and art amateurs.⁶ Articles, essays and monographs as well as summaries of conferences and communications by these figures animated the public opinion on issues regarding the preservation, restoration, and reuse of communal buildings.⁷

Although the aim of this paper is not to review this lively period, it is worth highlighting an interesting contradiction that generally characterises the prevailing lines of thought. On the one hand, *broletti* and municipal buildings were chosen as monuments worthy of historical and scientific investigation because they were seen as symbolic, ethical, and political as well as stylistic and formal examples. On the other, these buildings were also viewed as cryptic and silent artefacts that highlighted a lack of documentation owing to their status as composite, stratified buildings that had been damaged or destroyed by the passage of time ('mutilati', 'sconciati') and transformed by oppressive power and revolutionary devastation ('sanculotti', 'giacobini') but also by cowardly compromises between private individuals and public administrations who in selling portions of these buildings (e.g., porticos), had rendered the space hybrid with regard to its functions, ownership, and jurisdiction.⁸

The *broletto's* structure was defined by the superimposition of two large hall-like spaces — the lower one with a portico, the upper one illuminated by large triple lancet window and covered by wooden structures — connected vertically by external staircases, overpasses, or stairwells inserted in adjacent buildings. The shorter sides of the building were characterised by a gable and a double-pitched roof. The only variables were a tower and battlements. This was the definition adopted by encyclopedia entries such as Ferdinando Reggiori and Francesco Brandileone's entry titled 'Arengo' in the *Enciclopedia italiana* published in 1929 in the middle of the twenty-year fascist period, and the entry 'Broletto', a laconic description contained in the *Dizionario enciclopedico di architettura e urbanistica*, published in 1969, a very different time period ideologically speaking from the 1920s.⁹ Pio Francesco Pistilli's entry in the 1992 *Enciclopedia dell'Arte medievale* similarly provides a neutral description, thus consolidating the field of study.¹⁰

Historiographical Accounts of Communal Palaces in Lombardy

In the post-World War II period, monographs based on surveys and diagnostic investigations dealing largely with the criteria architects, engineers, and superintendents used to design and restore interior spaces expanded our knowledge of material aspects relating to the municipal complexes in the main cities in Lombardy. As the role of these buildings was to represent municipalities, their function was again redefined in these years; they now housed museums or cultural activities.¹¹ In these same years new comprehensive researches in the field of medieval studies also appeared.

In his 1980 'Les palais publics dans les communes italiennes (XIIe–XIIIe siècles)', Pierre Racine, noting that 'no comprehensive study exists on public palaces in Lombardy', argues the cities of the Po valley and the central Apennines form a varied

but unified geographical area and interprets the construction of the palaces in these places as reflecting the spread of a shared mentality, an 'esprit communal', also expressed by symbols of popular power. Racine also extends the period by considering not only the origin of the commune but also its development and later acquisitions, highlighting complex 'liaisons' with bishops, merchant guilds and urban aristocracies that demonstrate that these palaces were part of a rapidly evolving system capable of doubling or multiplying to accommodate the evolution of structures designed to control power and not instances of an isolated type of architecture.

In his 1999 'Potere civile e architettura', an important study on Piedmontese cities, Carlo Tosco argues that the original architecture of the buildings, often unrecognisable, is ductile and multifunctional. Drawing on documentary sources, he shows how communal complexes were built in stages as already existing buildings were connected to newly constructed parts added to meet practical or jurisdictional needs over the course of time. Tosco calls for a reconsideration of the municipal architecture of 12th and 13th centuries, maintaining that the fact that it had so many functions and so many different owners reflected the limitations, opportunities, decisions, and unstable political balances that very often characterised the cities' organisation. He maintains that the buildings he describes were not conceived as having a monumental function and confirms Serra's point that their symbolic power cannot be identified with the adoption of any model.

A 2020 volume of articles edited by Simone Balossino and Riccardo Rao titled *Ai margini del mondo comunale* focuses, as the title suggests, on 'architectural developments that have been neglected' by the prevailing interpretative paradigm. The contributions are dedicated to an extended area ranging from southern France to western Piedmont and cover minor centres in Veneto, Friuli, Istria, central Italy, Sardinia, and Corsica, and they highlight the centrality of communal buildings, drawing attention to three fundamental functions: governing the community, exercising justice, and creating archives. They also underscore the role of architecture and of decoration in the preservation of memory, showing how they provide cities of varying sizes, from the capitals of regions to minor centres and villages, with an identity. The contributions encourage broadening the field, investigating the variety of examples, and reassessing the validity of established terms of comparison by showcasing late interventions and geographical areas far from those identified as receptive to classical models and by considering unrealised interventions.

Communal Palaces in the Pre-Alpine and Alpine Valleys of Lombardy

In this essay, I focus on municipal architecture in areas in Lombardy that have been viewed as on the 'margins of the communal world', not because they are peripheral

territories but because the seats of the municipal government have so far been investigated mainly from a local perspective and have been neglected by more wide-ranging studies.¹² The buildings date to the communal age but acquired a more stable layout only between the 15th and 18th century and were then adapted and transformed during the early contemporary period.

The geographic area I analyse is rather vast: it includes the valleys in the Rhaetian Alps as well as those in the Bergamasque Alps. These areas historically bordered the Duchy of Milan (today in the provinces of Sondrio and Bergamo, respectively): they extended north towards the Republic of the Three Leagues in Swiss territory (today Canton Graubünden) and east towards the Republic of Venice. Following complex national and international political changes in 1427–1428 for the valleys in the Bergamasque Alps and in 1512 for those in the Rhaetian Alps, these regions became part of areas governed by neighbouring states, remaining so until the last years of the 18th century. While these areas are geographically, historically, and culturally diverse, the presence of mountains and passes is a shared element: for centuries both local and international traders as well as troops and garrisons crossed them. Here towns, villages, and hamlets developed that were open to trade but that were also closed to outsiders.¹³

Over time, the Valchiavenna, Valtellina, and Val Seriana Superiore — through which run the Mera and Liro, Adda, and Serio rivers respectively — witnessed the development of urban settlements with different strategic functions. Chiavenna, ancient Piuro, Teglio, Tirano, and Bormio (all in the province of Sondrio) and also Clusone (Bergamo) are traditionally regarded as minor centres of present-day Lombardy, but they might be better described as ‘quasi città’, a term coined in 1990 in the context of late medieval and modern age studies (Chittolini 1990). Unlike the *civitas*, the *quasi città* was not the seat of an episcopal see and was not necessarily prominent in a political territorial sense, but its origins were noble, and it was characterised by considerable demographic, social, and economic vitality and played an important role in the administration of large productive areas. The *quasi città* often shaped their identity by undertaking ambitious construction plans that reflected the expectations of their inhabitants (Folin 2000; Svalduz 2004; Longhi 2013).

The scholarly literature has described Valchiavenna, Valtellina, Valle Seriana Superiore, and Val di Scalve in terms of two recurring historiographical topoi: the importance of the origins of the commune (or the ‘laboratorio’) (Keller 2014) and its capacity to preserve the autonomy it gained over time. The topos regarding the origin of the commune is supported by the monumental monolithic baptismal font preserved in the complex of the collegiate church of San Lorenzo in Chiavenna, sculpted by 1156 and commissioned by the consuls who represented the community at the time (Aureggi Ariatta and Ariatta 1982–1983).¹⁴ Testifying to the symbiosis between the

religious and secular dimensions of the society of the time, the font was housed in an ancient baptistery evidently also intended as a civic space, which was demolished only in 1699 when plans were implemented to renovate the spaces in front of the basilica. The relative independence of the *quasi città* is attested, in the first place, by statutes implemented in the medieval period and by privileges, exemptions, and tax reductions granted to them by governments from the Middle Ages through to the modern period. These measures enhanced the *quasi città*'s autonomy, enabling them to form political alliances, cultivate personal or corporate interests, and develop an awareness of the importance of the administration of public goods (Besta 1945; Bonaldi 1982; Centro Tellino di Cultura 1996; Silini Previtali 1997: 13–14; Scaramellini 2000: 11–14).

Indeed, according to historical studies, municipalities located in mountainous areas, especially strategic areas, were subject to a 'densità statutaria' (Chittolini 2002: 77). Other studies have demonstrated the continuity of municipal institutions from the 1400s to the late 1700s: 'patti di alleanza' shaped relations between local administrations and governments in Chiavenna, Teglio, Bormio, and Clusone for centuries, contributing to and even modified the way districts and provinces were organised (Progetto Civita 1999b: 9–14 17–22; Progetto Civita 1999a: 16). According to Massimo Della Misericordia, the public nature of the spaces used to sign agreements or hold assemblies in Valtellina in the 15th century, venues that took the form of urban environments and generic 'architectural structures', owed to the different type of relationship established by communities with the representatives of power (e.g., the Sforza *podestà*, the castellans, the feudal lords) there (2006: 341–342).¹⁵ In addition to a function, these spaces also had a symbolic value that allowed them to represent the varying degrees of a community's subordination or autonomy.

Communal Architecture from the 15th to 18th Centuries

Using the term 'architectural structure' allows us to avoid positing a superficial relationship between the words used in documents and the built objects and to avoid equating building and spaces. In fact, until the end of the 15th century, citizens living in communes preferred to hold their assemblies in open spaces that included markets or trade areas like squares, streets and also meadows, fields, and courtyards. Citizens in these areas also championed the construction of dedicated buildings that were often added on to pre-existing buildings. These structures, which were probably wooden buildings, perhaps with stone in the supports, included porticos or loggias (frequently called *coperti* [covered] in Lombardy), covered and delimited spaces but also enhanced their visibility (Della Misericordia 2006: 342). In other cases,

however, closed rooms were built or created including *solaria* (heated spaces located on the top floors of already existing buildings) and *stua* (underground spaces such as cellars). These structures were probably also used for different purposes according to the weather and season. Documents and archaeological traces indicate that these structures were often houses (*domus*), towers, and keeps (Teglio, Clusone, Vilminore di Scalve) and *palacia* (of which, however, no descriptions, measurements, or sites have survived).

The terms ‘palatium’ and ‘palatium communis’ (Bracchi 2001: 224) possibly only began to refer to a type of representative architecture at the end of the 15th century. These buildings, once the meeting places of consuls, became the residences and offices of the *podestà* and later, between the 15th and early 16th centuries, the residences of government commissioners and then prefects and sub-prefects. However, although the tenants changed, ownership did not, and the buildings continued to belong to the municipalities, which were required to look after them.

The inclusion of the Bergamasque territories in the Venetian republic and Valchiavenna and Valtellina in the Swiss republic unquestionably influenced the transformations of the *quasi città*. Following violent destruction or a fire (e.g., Chiavenna, Clusone), communities were forced to redesign buildings and took advantage of what already existed but also made new investments and purchases (e.g., Sondrio, Vilminore).¹⁶ These changes may have triggered new forms of planning and a new aesthetic sensibility, especially with regard to decoration (e.g., Clusone). What is certain is that the symbolic meaning of municipal buildings changed as a result of their being turned into praetorian palaces. Buildings that had been meeting rooms became above all places for the exercise of power and the administration of justice, manifested in the construction of prisons that changed the relationship between magistrates and citizens.¹⁷

While formal analogies can be made between the palaces of Clusone and Vilminore di Scalve, (Figures 1 and 2), it is nevertheless difficult to speak of emulation, circulation of models, or development of theoretical patterns or to rely on examples provided by larger cities. The municipal palaces of the valleys of central Lombardy, which can be viewed as falling into historical category of *broletto*, are rather the result of the skilful exploitation of the specific conditions presented by sites and contexts. They share fundamental properties because the people who built them deployed simple and rational building methods: the delimitation and covering of a portion of space, the exploitation of appropriate materials and techniques, and probably also the adoption of dimensions and measurements rooted in tradition.



Figure 1: Communal palace, Clusone, south façade.



Figure 2: Palazzo Pretorio, Vilminore di Scalve.

An indication of the functional transformations these palaces underwent in the modern age can be deduced by analysing surveys and project drawings found in the archives of the provincial superintendencies that were drafted in the last quarter of the 20th century for maintenance and adjustment works.¹⁸ On the basis of these materials, it is particularly difficult to analyse the original layout of the spaces, especially those

on the ground floors, and it is very difficult to understand the system of openings, porticoes, passageways, and thresholds, as well as the location of windows. On the other hand, it is easier to get a sense of the original layout of halls on the upper floors that presumably featured very wide spans and roofing that over time were divided according to their function, as in the cases of Teglio, Chiavenna, and Clusone (but not in the case of the beautiful hall in the palace of Vilminore), although they make it very difficult to assess the internal and external vertical connection systems and staircases, as well as the public and private ones (in the case of officials' apartments). The plans of the palace in Teglio, however, do allow us to hypothesise that those vertical systems played a pivotal role in the organisation of spaces. Here the stairs enabled other free-standing constructions to be added around the medieval tower. Its structure is still discernible today; it was evidently built with great skill, its angular 'cantons' made of almost isodomic orthogonal blocks of stone.

Towers were usually used to house statutes, public acts, and archives and to store money and arms; in Teglio, Clusone, and Vilminore, they were also used as prisons (Comunità Montana di Scalve 2009). Meeting rooms and courts were in separate quadrangular blocks, and in Clusone, Vilminore, and perhaps Chiavenna were built above porticoes.¹⁹ Buildings were extended to create officials' apartments, which typically contained rooms, a hall, and a *stua*; these spaces were continuously adjusted, and over time, they were also equipped with stables and cellars (Motta Di Pierro 1998; Bracchi 2001). Information on gardens is scarce, but certainly in the 19th century the Palazzo Pretorio in Chiavenna must have included a vineyard of a certain size that it perhaps inherited (Mappe del Catasto Lombardo Veneto, Chiavenna district maps, 1853, ASSo; Fabbricati di Chiavenna, ASSo). Taverns, shops and generic warehouses were also integral parts of these systems in Bormio and Clusone along with dairies in Teglio.²⁰ In Bormio as early as the 16th century and then subsequently in Teglio, the Palazzo Pretorio housed the schools and the teacher's residence. No altars or chapels seem to have been present inside these buildings. Rather religious buildings, such as convents, or plebeian churches with churchyards and bell towers were located a short distance from the palaces and houses in the commune. Especially from the 16th century onwards, when government representatives resided in communal offices, these sacred spaces were frequently used for assemblies, and the bell tower became the main signalling system and an important symbol of a community, which was expected to build and maintain it (Chiavenna) (Deliberazioni, Stabilimenti consolari 1694–1724, 1774–1776, 1797, ASCCh).

The communal buildings that remain today indicate that builders used local materials in constructing them, including conglomerate stone and rubble obtained by

different means for the external walls and vaults on the ground floors (e.g., Chiavenna), wooden beams for the roofing systems of the rooms, and ‘pietra viva’ for structural elements and embellishments such as rusticated pillars or columns in the porticoes, portals, and fireplaces. The provision of all these materials depended on complex negotiations between various parties.

With the sole exception of the main façade of the palace in Clusone, only fragments of the painted external and internal decorative elements have survived, but it is nevertheless possible to argue that large plastered and painted surfaces were typical of many public civil and sacred buildings in the same areas (the ‘macabre dance’ painted on the outside of the Oratorio dei Disciplini in San Bernardino in Clusone is an example [Frugoni and Facchinetti, 2016]). In the medieval period, paintings were a way to assert the identity of local governments and represented sacred and profane subjects (Ferrari 2022: 31); in the modern age, images were used to communicate and represent control by the Republic of the Three Leagues or the Serenissima. The walls of the inner and entrance halls and above all the façades of the palaces were used as dynamic screens on which were depicted the emblems of the families that expressed the *podestà* and the government commissioners, who were replaced every two years (Crollanza 1867: 206; Giussani 1917; Leoni 1964; Foppoli 1999).

The temporary display and elimination of older emblems contributed to a long-lasting, decidedly anti-monumental phenomenon that was the result of economic limitations but perhaps not only that. The overall effect was a colourful heraldic mosaic that was intended to give a solemn and elegant appearance to the austere administrative buildings. Although the characters depicted were not particularly popular, the complex decoration was realised respecting conventions shared by the entire population.

The Communal Palace of Clusone: Historical Notes and Unpublished 19th-Century Documents

The historical centre of Clusone is spread out on a gentle slope and the communal palace is located almost at the top of the ancient settlement. The building occupies most of a large block and over the centuries has developed around a courtyard, acquiring a trapezoidal layout. The courtyard is overlooked by two main buildings oriented along an east-west axis, following the elevation contour lines. The two constructions, which are almost parallel, were built at different altitudes (with a difference of about four metres) and are connected transversally by two fronts that have two entrances. Just above the administrative centre, a sacred monumental complex that follows the natural slope developed beginning in the early Middle Ages. Today the municipal building

overlooks two orthogonal squares and is adorned by Pietro Aliprandi Fanzago's 1583 planetary clock (Addomine 2008) (**Figure 3**).²¹ Its appearance is the result of a series of restoration campaigns carried out in the 1970s that brought to light several fragments of pictorial decorations dating to the 15th–17th centuries as well as traces of pointed arch windows (**Figure 2**). What can be admired today is above all the result of a series of interventions that by the early 19th century had transformed it into a large block building. The main façade faces south and is characterised by the presence of the tower in the southwest corner. The lower half of the front is punctuated by arcades supported by pillars (*ceppone*).²² Underneath the arcade, five bays with round arches correspond to five shops, almost all of which were built in the first half of the 19th century (**Figure 4**). These rooms were built using half of the previously open space where the market was held. As unpublished documents demonstrate, in one part of the complex it is possible to identify a construction that recalls the model of the *broletto*. It was a building with a room illuminated by lancet windows on the top floor and a vast rectangular space below with a multi-level floor articulated in geometric modules formed using stone columns, bases, and capitals decorated with leaves that today are incorporated into the walls of the workshops (folders 136, 295/1, ASCCI).²³ The tower and the *broletto* were eventually connected by an archway (that can be identified by the segmental arches) and by rooms that were added on the upper floor. The façade facing the city was transformed into a large surface on which were displayed sacred and profane figures, emblems, and coats of arms, whose purpose was to give expression to a large, colourful, and continuously evolving tale. The iconography of the stratified pictorial fragments added between the 15th and 18th centuries has been analysed in detail (Bonandrini, 1993), but no recent research has been dedicated to the paintings that have been brought to light in the rooms of the building.

At the present time, what we know about the history of the complex largely comes from local 19th and early 20th century memoirs, as few medieval or modern sources exist (Brasi 1828; Olmo 1906).²⁴ However, we do have access to a manuscript of Filippo Fogaccia (1849–1923), mayor of the city between 1914 and 1923, a work that gathers a large amount of information taken from documents that are no longer available.²⁵ From this manuscript, we learn that the year of construction of the building, 1008, was engraved in gilded letters on the portal of the chamber that housed the Council of Valle, that in 1119 a bell was placed in the tower that today is the clock tower, that the medieval building was destroyed following a fire that broke out in 1485 during civil unrest caused (according to some) by Podestà Giovanni Francesco Contarini, that the building was then rebuilt in a late Gothic style that was maintained until the early 19th century, that the palace was later connected with the tower, which housed the arsenal for the entire

valley until at least 1588, that the 'Cisalpine' revolutionary troops were responsible for the disappearance of all the insignia, both sculpted and frescoed, representing the previous governments, and that during the 19th-century restoration of the municipal building, one floor was raised, a new roof was put in, new rectangular windows were opened up, and all painted façades were plastered (Fogaccia 1923: 1:16, 155, 245, 257; 4: 395–409).



Figure 3: Communal palace, Clusone, tower of planetary clock.



Figure 4: Communal palace, Clusone, arcades with shops and columns.

Today it is difficult to verify these claims, but certain episodes can be linked to the history of Clusone: it was a centre influenced by episcopal power which enabled the birth of the commune before 1190, the capital of the Valle Seriana Superiore area, which was of strategic importance in the territories governed by the Visconti and Malatesta families, and then part of the Venetian Republic in 1427–1428 (Progetto Civita 1999a: 119–123). Given the official enactment of new statutes in 1460, we cannot rule out that around this date the architectural complex was modified according to a new plan. This new project probably connected the older tower, the *broletto*, the *podestà*'s rooms (documented in 1546 but certainly built before this date), and perhaps also the tavern and the workshop, located in the eastern end of the market portico (Fogaccia 1923: 3:331; 4:302, 650).²⁶

Unfortunately, the most reliable representation of the whole complex dates to 1802: it is a painting of modest quality by an anonymous author depicting an event that happened, setting it in the urban context.²⁷ The two squares are visible along with the south and east sides of the *broletto*. The arched portico is visible and above it the hall and its windows. The hall could be accessed via an external staircase in part set against a natural slope that corresponds to today's Piazza Sant'Andrea. Next to the arched ashlar doorway that led to the room on the upper floor near where the staircase is located is another monumental stone entrance leading to a courtyard. Both the *broletto* hall and

the east front are topped by an upper level with windows, a balcony, and a loggia with four arches supported by small columns. On the south façade there is a balcony framed by a painted surface, decorated with what is possibly a sculpted coat of arms. On the southwest corner one can make out the sloped shape of the clock tower and at the top a small tower with a bell.

Recently found documents and drawings produced in the 1840s, at the time of the Lombardo-Venetian Kingdom, for the renovation of the tower provide information about its condition and functions (folders 136, 171, 295/1.39–42, ASCCl). They document a large rectangular construction that features an entrance from the square and several flights of stairs (possibly originally made of wood) leading to upper floors and other rooms on three different levels with communicating staircases and accessible via independent paths. As is still the case today, the tower serves as an intersection between vertical communication and different flows: this highly functional layout, which was almost certainly established in previous centuries, reflects the role of the ‘caneva’ housed in the tower: a warehouse for storing common resources, perhaps an armoury, and also an ancient treasury. Other documents and drawings describe the design and construction between 1845 and 1847 of the four workshops in the northern part of the portico of the *broletto*, at that time used as a dump, that still exist today. The drawings confirm that the weekly market was held on the main street, parallel to the portico, while the cattle market was held in the square on the east side (folders 136, 295/1, ASCCl) (Figure 5). The various functions and the layout of the rooms located at the level of the courtyard of the palace, including the rooms created in the original upper hall of the *broletto*, are documented by drawings dating to 1874 (Figure 6). The result of different construction phases, the courtyard appears to be the heart of the municipal palace; it functions as a barycentre with respect to the various quarters. It is accessible from the main east entrance and from the west back entrance. Two external staircases (still visible today) and elevated connections permit the passage between the different levels. In the drawings it is possible to make out a divided hall with the square room that housed the archive to the south, service spaces partially created to take advantage of the slope in the north, a communal cistern in the western section, and offices and apartments for various types of officials on the elevated floors. Also of interest are drawings showing the tavern and prisons, spaces that were created as early as the 16th century.²⁸ Other documents, project drawings, and accompanying reports that date to 1927 record further adaptations and the ‘formazione’ (i.e., the restoration or building) of the loggia in the eastern section, together with the demolition of a stone balcony above the east entrance arch (folder 363, ASCCl).

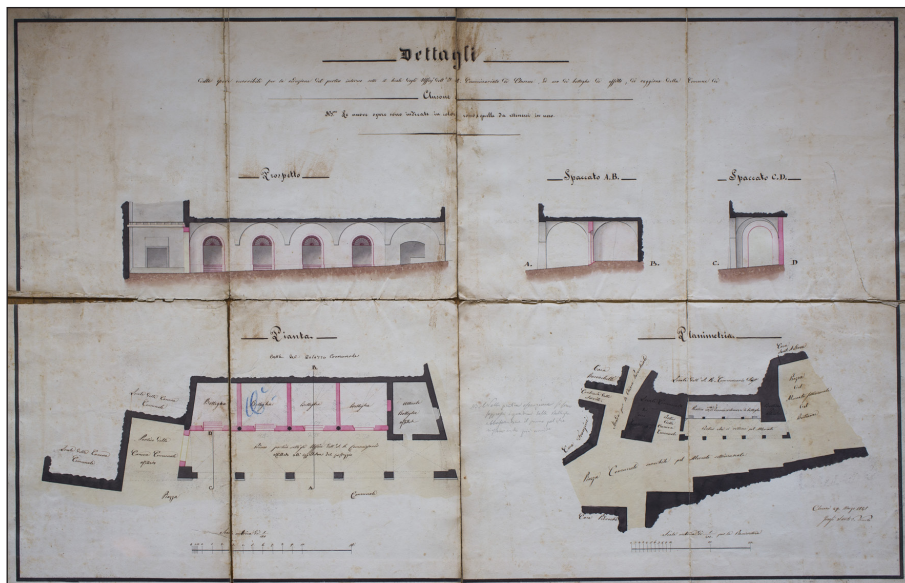


Figure 5: Santo Grassi, 'Dettagli delle opere occorribili per la riduzione del portico interno sotto il locale degli Uffici dell'I. R. Commissariato di Clusone ad uso di botteghe di affitto, di raggione [sic] del Comune di Clusone', folder 295/1, Archivio Storico Comunale. Comune di Clusone (BG).



Figure 6: G. Dell'Acqua, 'Planimetria di parte del palazzo Comunale in Clusone coll'indicazione delle stanze ora in affitto della Provincia per gli Uffici di quella Sotto Prefettura e dei cambiamenti proposti dall'affitto in corso', folder 357/1, Archivio Storico Comunale. Comune di Clusone.

The Praetorian Palace in Chiavenna: Communal Origins and Modern-Age Functions

Chiavenna is the capital of the valley that bears the same name and is situated at the junction of routes that through the Spluga, Julier, Septimer, and Maloja passes allow communication between the southern slope of the Rhaetian Alps facing Lake Como and the Adda, and the northern slope facing the Rhine valley and the Engadine. Bound to the bishops of Como and Chur by alternating feudal ties, from the early Middle Ages Clavenna, its Latin name, was a trading centre transit destination for armies. Its main activities were the production of artefacts made with local stone and the cultivation of vineyards and wine production. Beginning in 1045 it was the site of a *palatium*, a term that probably did not indicate the existence of a building with specific architectural characteristics but rather to the seat of a public power (Rao Zoni 2021: 94).²⁹ Chiavenna had a consular communal organisation at least from the end of the 11th century (Progetto Civita 1999b: 68; Becker 2002: 51–54); it became a commune governed by a *podestà* in 1213, and during the 13th century it established offices entrusted with the administration of common goods (Buzzetti 1929; Becker 2002) based on types of organisation that had been created by the mid-12th century (Keller 2000; 2014). Throughout the Middle Ages and later in the modern age, it was the seat of numerous offices, as it occupied a central position with respect to the community and the *contado*, that is, the superior body that governed the entire valley.

Governed by a small secret council and a large general council, Chiavenna convened its first assembly in 1227, in the square of the Montano neighbourhood situated not far from the collegiate church and enclosed by fortified walls (Buzzetti 1929: 33–34; Copes 2007: 75).³⁰ According to *Storia del Contado di Chiavenna* (Crollanza 1867: 110, 377), in later years the general council met in the church of San Pietro, which was also located not far from the San Lorenzo complex. According to scholarship, a communal house existed as early as 1176, and a ‘portico dei consoli’ that was probably located in front of the collegiate church of San Lorenzo, the heart of an articulated sacred complex, appeared some twenty years later along with a structure called ‘assemblatore’ that was perhaps a wooden structure (Buzzetti 1929: 33–34; Salice 1997: 25). The *assemblatore* was probably built next to or annexed to a tower-shaped house, mentioned in documents as early as 1264, and located in the Contrada San Pietro, that is, in the area of the borough that already at that time was the administrative centre and where the praetorian palace stands today (Copes, 2007: 65, 66) (Figure 7).³¹

At the moment we are unable to match the words found in the documents with our archaeological knowledge of the Palazzo Pretorio, which still exists today and still belongs to the city.³² We do know, however, that between 1311 and 1339 the statutes

of the commune were continuously revised, until they acquired their definitive form under the Visconti family, which extended its rule to the Alpine areas starting in 1335 (Progetto Civita 1999b: 68–71). It is therefore not far-fetched to hypothesise that during the 14th century the tower and portico of the palace were modified so as to make them fit to become the residence of representatives of the government institutions entrusted with controlling the communities, primarily the *podestà*, along with his vicars and commissioners.³³



Figure 7: Palazzo Pretorio, Chiavenna.

In 1403, Caterina Visconti, widow of Gian Galeazzo Visconti, granted the fee of Chiavenna to the Milanese nobleman Baldassarre Balbiani, and the title remained in the family for about a century. Studies on architectural developments in Chiavenna in the second half of the 15th century have focused on the erection of fortified structures, on the one hand, and on the role of the Balbiani feudal lords, on the other. Cristian Copes (2007), for example, has shown how in the second half of the 15th century the spaces reserved for assemblies and their transformations were affected by those owned or used by the family, which were close to or perhaps bordered them. In 1464, notarial deeds related to the Balbiani family were drawn up that read ‘in domo regiminis comunis Clavene et ressidentie praefatorum dominorum’ and ‘domo regiminis comunis Clavene et ressidentie prefati domini comitis sita in contrata Sancti Petri’ (Copes 2007: 117). According to Guido Scaramellini, moreover, during the raids of the Graubünden soldiers in 1486 and 1487, the headquarters of the *podestà* were severely damaged and could not

be immediately repaired due to the simultaneous financial commitment to fortification works.

In March 1488 we read that the general council of the commune convened ‘in domo iuris Communis Clavena’, while in December the ‘consilio communis’ convened in the church of San Antonio, and a year later met ‘sub pergula filiorum quondam Zarini de Sancto Petro de Clavena’ (Scaramellini 2000: 257, 265, 271). Records dating to the years between 1490 and 1496 show that the *podestà* resided in different houses (Copes 2007: 117), and so it was probably only after 1512–1513, with the military occupation of the Graubünden and the subsequent changes in the political context, that the Palazzo Pretorio was chosen to house the commissioner, who was sent every two years by the Republic of the Three Leagues. Documents from the mid-16th century, in fact, show that it was now called ‘palatium iuris’ (Copes 2007: 152–153), indicating that it had become the place for the administration of justice and the exercise of governmental power. While the commune retained ownership of the building and was in charge of its maintenance, it was probably during this transition that it was no longer able to use its rooms or to symbolically identify itself with what the building signified. It is not possible for us to know whether these changes led to material transformations, although there are documents that describe the palace as having a *stua* (Copes 2007: 153), that is, a winter room intended for study and thus also for the signing of notarial acts, similar to other rooms in the main residences of the time in Valchiavenna (Scaramellini 2011).

Drawings carried out in the last decades of the 20th century show how the room on the ground floor, with cross-vaulted ceilings and painted plaster cladding, still today corresponds in size to an upper room that could be accessed via a staircase that was perhaps external or else located inside a tower (‘Ristrutturazione Palazzo Pretorio Chiavenna (Sondrio)’, table 3, plans, 1: 100, 11 December 1976, arch. Antonio Scaramellini, Chiavenna, folder T/7517, Palazzo Pretorio, SAPAB, CO-LC-MB-PV-SO-VA), suggesting that perhaps the core of the Palazzo Pretorio lies in the vertical association of the two halls. The present structures and construction technique (a traditional heterogeneous mix of stone and mortar), however, do not provide sufficient evidence for us to argue there was a loggia or open portico on the ground floor. Today the palace is accessible through a carved stone portal that dates to 1715 and that is closed by a wooden door with iron studs that leads to a large painted vestibule.³⁴ This room was probably added to an earlier structure that contained the two halls at the two levels. During the 19th century a stone staircase was also added where probably an older one stood.

The hall facing the square in front of the church of San Pietro features emblems and coats of arms of the families of the Graubünden commissioners, local feudal lords,

their wives, and their vicars or attendants (**Figure 8**), while the exterior of the building was no doubt painted with figures that would only be vaguely identifiable today. Along the entire façade towards San Pietro, traces of decoration running along the top are visible, with coats of arms and inscriptions; the façade may have been decorated by a layered horizontal pattern. Above the entrance, which contains two juxtaposed volumes that perhaps correspond to the late medieval towers, other emblems of varying measurements and formal characteristics can be discerned.



Figure 8: Palazzo Pretorio, Chiavenna, ground-floor hall.

No documents have been found pertaining to the architecture and the pictorial and sculptural decorations, but the minutes of meetings of the municipal consuls that decided what was necessary for the community (called *stabilimenti consolari*, or consular acts), which were written between 1694 and 1793, can be of help. They record requests for the maintenance of the Palazzo Pretorio from the commissioners who lived there, who occasionally asked that changes be made to the spaces and furniture of their lodgings. These petitions were mainly modest — the tone was that of a tenant — and concerned, for example, the creation of rooms for the family, the renovation of the cellar and stables, and the purchase of *mobilia*. As owner but perhaps also as a subject obliged to support the rulers, the council usually responded positively, albeit with the recommendation ‘not to exceed, as usual’ (*Deliberazioni, Stabilimenti consolari*, 1694–1724, f. 16; 1774/1776, f. 38/40, ASCCh).

A beautiful three-dimensional view, created in 1628 to celebrate the pastoral visit of the Como bishop Lazaro Carafino, depicts the palace, although without listing it among the city's notable places (*Curia vescovile, Visite pastorali*, b. 47, 'Disegno de la terra et sito di Chiavenna', ASDCo) (Figure 9). We do not know the reasons for this omission. We do know, however, that in the 17th and 18th centuries, due to the transfer of the communal palace to the Graubünden commissioners, the councils representing the institutions of the community had to meet in different places and for this reason experienced a sort of silent nomadism. The 16 members of the secret council met in the 'stua' of the consul's residence or in that of his vicar, while the general council, which had many more participants, met in the churches of San Lorenzo and especially San Pietro, where decrees, deeds, and sentences were signed (*Deliberazioni consiglio generale e consiglio segreto*, 1626; *Stabilimenti consolari*, ff. 10/16, 1694–1724, II, 1, B2, file 1, 5.2, ASCCh).

The spatial and social connection between civic and ecclesiastical institutions throughout the modern age evidenced, for example, by the civic contribution to the construction and maintenance of bell towers and the supplying of bells and also the later support for the clock in San Bartolomeo (*Donazione di Francesco Paravicino, viceconsole, per la costruzione del campanile della collegiata*, 1606, folder 14, s. 5, file 1, ASCCh). By the end of the 17th century the general council was able to use a 'sala terranea del venerando Hospitale di Santa Maria Rotonda', a secular and civic institution that had taken shape in the 15th century, with a seat very close to the Pretorio Palace, which had been modernised by 1694. Using the 'sala terranea' became critical to the functional stability and political identity of the city (*Deliberazioni consiglio generale e consiglio segreto, Stabilimenti consolari*, f. 10, 13 February 1694, II, 1, B2, file 1, 5.2, ASCCh; *Crollalanza 1867*: 420, 425/426; *Della Misericordia 2021*: 120). Thanks to the institutional reorganisation of the early 19th century that came with the creation of the Lombardo-Venetian Kingdom, Chiavenna went back to being a municipality and district capital. Other functional changes to the palace's spaces and the customary removal of painted surfaces by early contemporary governments probably date to this period. The palace was represented and recorded in the survey initiated by the Austrian government; the maps of the Lombardy-Venetia Cadastre depicting Chiavenna around 1853 attest to considerable enlargements: at that date the 'building housing the municipal offices' was found to have five floors and 21 rooms (*Mappe del Catasto Lombardo Veneto del distretto di Chiavenna*, f. 30, ASSo; *Libro dei Fabbricati*, vol. 2, p. 55, ASSo) (Figure 10).



Figure 9: 'Disegno de la terra et sito di Chiavenna', Como, Curia vescovile, Visite pastorali, b. 47, Archivio Storico Diocesano. Archivio Storico Diocesano Como.



Figure 10: Chiavenna and Sondrio, Mappe del Catasto Lombardo Veneto, Chiavenna district maps, 1853, f. 30, Archivio di Stato. Archivio di Stato Sondrio.

Notes

- ¹ On the *broletto*, see Andenna 1994, 2011, 2017.
- ² Serra cites the studies on the *broletto* in Brescia (Valentini 1896), the Arengario in Monza (Sacchi and Ceruti 1890), the communal complex in Novara (Viglio 1928), and the *broletto* in Pavia.
- ³ The studies on medieval revivalism in the Lombardy area during the second half of the 19th century include Zucconi 1997, Selvafolta 2005, and the contributions in Grandi 2012. Among the sources on *broletti* and their reinterpretation in the 19th and 20th centuries, see Rosa 1883 (Brescia), Frigerio 1923 (Como), Fornoni 1895 (Bergamo) Caversazzi 1919 (Bergamo), Annoni 1928 (Pavia), and Viglio and Lazanio 1930 (Novara). In their notes accompanying the restoration project they had undertaken, Archimede Sacchi and Giovanni Ceruti state that 'above the old communal buildings we see, as if looking in a mirror, our national political consciousness depicted, with its disordered and undefined features' (1890: 95).
- ⁴ On the cultural meaning of 'lombardo/lombard' in relation to sacred architecture see de Dartein 1865–1882, Rivoira 1908, Porter 1917, Iacobone 2012, and Devoti and Naretto, 2012.
- ⁵ For an overview of Italian and European communal palaces built between the Middle Ages and the modern period, see Zaggia 2008, Svalduz 2010, Albrecht 2010, Arciszewska 2010, Bosman 2010, Dargaud 2010, Grujić 2010, Günther 2010, Liévaux 2010, Longobardi 2010, McKean 2010, Schmidt 2010, Vlaardingerbroek 2010, Salamagne ed 2015, Longhi and Rao 2020, and Longhi 2022.
- ⁶ Mongiat 2011 (Novara), Giustina 2022 (Brescia), Russell 1995 (Bergamo), Guarisco 2016 (Milan and Como), Donà 2015 (Como), Grimoldi 1983 (Milan) and Santoro 1993 (Cremona).
- ⁷ See, for example, Pavesi, 1901 and Vaccari 1928.
- ⁸ In his study of the Arengario in Monza, Sacchi argues that because of their history, Italian communal palaces are necessarily 'incomplete or sketched' (Sacchi and Ceruti, 1890: 99). Ambrogio Annoni (1928: 36) emphasises the 'abus' by the municipal administration in the case of the *broletto* in Pavia, while Paolo Donà (2015) explores the different kinds of ownership in Como. Regarding the 'sanculotti' see Viglio 1928: 22. The *broletto* that was 'mutilated' is described in Frigerio 1923: 32.
- ⁹ See also Visconti 1930.
- ¹⁰ On the terms used to refer to communal architecture see Salamagne 2015.
- ¹¹ The restoration of the Palazzo della Ragione in Milan (Guarisco 2016) and of the *broletto* in Brescia (Coccoli, Strada, and Treccani 2009) sparked heated debates; the restoration of the *broletto* in Novara received greater support (Unità Tecnica di Missione 2011).
- ¹² An exception is Della Misericordia, 2006: 341–350.
- ¹³ This geography also includes the Val di Scalve, which today is part of the province of Bergamo, connected to the Val Seriana via the Presolana pass: one of the best-preserved communal palaces, today known as the Palazzo Pretorio, is in Vilminore.
- ¹⁴ The baptismal font is a soapstone basin with a circumference of six metres. Figures of clergymen and laymen (the nobleman, the feudal lord, and the blacksmith are clearly identifiable) symbolising the unity of the community are carved along its walls.
- ¹⁵ For a comparison on similar issues see Longhi and Rao 2020 and Varanini 2020.
- ¹⁶ The case of the Palazzo Pretorio in Sondrio is complex; it cannot be compared to sites of medieval origin because its construction is traditionally dated to the 1650s, when privately owned buildings were purchased and transformed into the site of the valley council. In this contribution, its history is treated as marginal. Almost no studies exist on the Palazzo Pretorio in Vilminore di Scalve, and at this stage of research I am unable to provide any documentation (Comunità Montana di Scalve 2009).
- ¹⁷ The Palazzo Pretorio in Chiavenna and the one in Vilminore still house 19th-century prisons, which subsequent governments probably created by adapting pre-existing spaces. On the adaptation of public buildings of medieval origin during the early modern age in the cities of the Venetian Republic see Svalduz 2010: 137-144.
- ¹⁸ These documents are held in SAPAB, CO-LC-MB-PV-SO-VA (Chiavenna, folder T-7517, Palazzo Pretorio; Bornio, folder G/6/1839, Palazzo Pretorio piazza Cavour; Bornio, folder T/7561, 'il kuerc'; Teglio, folder I/4 28/5, Palazzo Comunale).
- ¹⁹ Even in 1990 Lionello Costanza Fattori, the superintendent at the time of Chiavenna, proposed opening the arches in the perimeter walls of the hall on the ground floor of the praetorian palace so as to restore the 'typological image of the

- building' (Costanza Fattori to the Chiavenna City Council, 27 March 1990, Chiavenna, folder T/7517, Palazzo Pretorio, SAPAB, CO-LC-MB-PV-SO-VA).
- ²⁰ A communal 'hosteria' with a 'kitchen' must also have existed in the complex in Piazza dei Mercanti in Milan on the ground floor of the building, which in the 1560s was transformed into Palazzo dei Giureconsulti. See the drawing with the plan in ASCMi-BT (Raccolta Bianconi, t. I, f. a c.11). On c. 10 of t. I, the plan is marked 'fonte del broletto'. On the building and piazza dei Mercanti in the modern period see La piazza 1991; for a general chronology and a repertoire of images see Mezzanotte 1989.
- ²¹ In 1581 Pietro Fanzago acted as consultant for the Torre Civica in Bergamo (Zonca 2019: 509); for the tower see Iacobone 2004..
- ²² The portico with arches supported by stone pillars with bays covered with cross-vaults made of conglomerate is similar to that of the praetorian palace in Vilminore di Scalve, and the arrangement of the building with respect to environment is also similar. But it is not necessarily the case that one palace was imitating the other; rather, it seems likely that both palaces were faced similar problems and came up with the same solutions. The term 'ceppone' is used in documents by writers to describe the pillars in the context of the question of how to modify the portico ('Descrizione delle opere occorribili per la riduzione del portico interno sotto il locale del I. R. Commissario a botteghe d'affitto', 29 March 1845, folder 295/1, ASCCI).
- ²³ The traces of the arched windows brought to light do not show any axial relationship with the arches below, except for the first window on the east.
- ²⁴ I am currently studying the *Libri del designamento e di caneva* (1502–1791), ASCCI, kept at the Museo Arte Tempo in Clusone.
- ²⁵ This manuscript is deposited in the Circolo Culturale Baradello in Clusone: a reproduction is available at the Biblioteca comunale in Clusone.
- ²⁶ The workshop is described in the 1845 document 'Dettagli delle opere occorribili per la riduzione del portico interno sotto il locale degli Uffici dell'I. R. Commissariato di Clusone ad uso di botteghe di affitto, di raggione [sic] della Comune di Clusone' (folder 295/1, ASCCI). A *podestà* was elected in Clusone starting in 1197, and in 1404 the same office was established for the valley.
- ²⁷ Anonymous, *Fucilazione di Luigi Bana*, July 1797, 1802, oil on canvas, Museo della Basilica, Clusone. A copy of the painting is kept in the communal palace of Clusone.
- ²⁸ 'Planimetria di parte del palazzo Comunale in Clusone coll'indicazione [sic.] delle stanze ora in affitto della Provincia per gli Uffici di quella Sotto Prefettura e dei cambiamenti proposte dall'affitto in corso'; 25 May 1874; 'per l'Ing.re Capo Dell'Acqua G.o Ing. Di [Leg ...]' and 'Planimetria di parte del palazzo Comunale in Clusone coll'indicazione [sic.] degli ambienti destinati per l'Ufficio della R. Pretura Mandamentale' (folder 357/1, ASCCI). The rooms of the prisons and the tavern are described in drawings dated 26 January 1841 ('Pianta de' piani superiori del Locale comunale d'affitto ad uso Osteria ed in parte già in uso di carceri ora abbandonate, coll'indicazione [sic.] degli occorrenti ripari', folder 171, ASCCI).
- ²⁹ It could have been an episcopal, imperial, or feudal power; in the 11th century Chiavenna must have had a castle or rather a fortification with two gates that enclosed dwellings inside and outside the city walls (Rao Zoni 2021: 94).
- ³⁰ Chiavenna was divided into four quarters and also included five 'vicinanze', or neighbouring areas. According to Cristian Copes, the square is the one that today is in front of Palazzo Balbiani. Expenses for the bell that summoned the council date to 1219 according to Pietro Buzzetti (1929: 32–34) and to 1256 according to Giovanni Battista Crollanza (1867: 376).
- ³¹ On issues and problems related to the transformations of communal palaces in the medieval age see Ferrari 2018, which focuses on the case of Brescia but also mentions those of Milan, Pavia, and Bergamo.
- ³² I did not have access to the documents in the Archivio Capitolare Laurenziano in Chiavenna consulted by Guido Scaramellini (2000).
- ³³ Changes to the chambers of the *podestà* and his deputy in the palace were made in 1323 and to the roof and the living room in 1338 (Salice 2000: 65).
- ³⁴ Another stone portal is located on the first floor; it features three coats of arms, possibly evoking the Three Swiss Leagues.

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Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare

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