



Beyond Typologies: Early Modern Italian Town Halls in Comparative Perspective (14th–17th Centuries)

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By challenging the traditional, typological, approach to the history of town halls, we aim to place Italian civic architecture at the center of a cross-disciplinary study focused, on one hand, on the uses and functions of these buildings, and on the other, on their cultural and identity meanings. The papers gathered in this special collection do not present a history of architectural models and persistencies, but rather one of continuous transformations, conversions, and adaptations, shaped by the material and symbolic functions that public buildings fulfilled, and often continue to fulfill, in the places where they were built.

Keywords: Town Halls; Civic Architecture; Public Buildings; Italian Palaces; Building Types



In identifying Italian town halls as the first government buildings built in medieval Europe in his *History of Building Types*, Nikolaus Pevsner draws on a solid tradition dating back at least to the mid-19th century, if not earlier (1997: 27–29).¹ This tradition had its roots in the period of Italian unification and was deeply influenced by the aspirations, ideals, and slogans typical of that time, such as the myth of communal autonomy as the ‘ideal principle of Italian histories’ (Sismondi 1818) and the glorification of the communal age as a period of incubation of that love for the small homeland that many at the time regarded as the possible cement of a fragile unification that lacked solid national foundations (Cattaneo 1858). This background makes it clear why 19th-century Italian town halls were celebrated as an expression of local civic identity and why so many restoration campaigns were launched during that period to return these palaces to their ‘original’ forms. The hope was that they could perform the function they were believed to be predestined to perform: to serve as a stronghold of the values upon which the new Italian kingdom was to be founded (Zucconi 1997; Balestreri and Folini 2024).

Another factor that contributed to the historiographical fortune of Italian town halls between the 18th and 19th centuries was the debate on the ‘national style’ of the new Italian architecture and the role played in it by the ‘Lombard or municipal architecture of the 14th century’ (Boito 1871: 770–771), which greatly influenced the activities of the new institutions responsible for protecting the state-owned historical and artistic heritage.² An equally influential model in this context was that of the French *mairies*, which after 1789 became among the public buildings most directly affected by the revolutionary and later Napoleonic rhetoric and served as the main local presidium of the ethical-civic principles on which the nation-state was based, leading often to their elevation as national monuments (Burolet 1986).

From the other side of the Alps came not only cultural and operational models (as well as institutional and legislative ones) but also the main handbooks on the art of building. These handbooks served as a fundamental resource for generations of architects, engineers, and municipal technicians in Italy. From Durand’s *Précis* (1802) to Gourlier’s *Choix d’édifices publics* (1825–1852), Quatremère de Quincy’s *Dictionnaire* (1832), and Reynaud’s *Traité d’architecture* (1850–1858, 2: 376–380), these books all advocated, to varying degrees, a typological approach that was presented to their readers as the most up-to-date and functional way of interpreting the development of public architecture. Discussion of town halls in the 19th century and beyond in Italy — whether it concerned ‘medieval palaces of the 19th century’ that had been brought back to life (Zucconi 1995) or new ‘city palaces’ that were supposed to embody all the modernity of the post-unification peripheral administration — inevitably called up this tangle of tensions and stereotypes.

Whether Pevsner was aware of the ideological nature of the studies on which he based his assumptions is not clear, but what is certain is that — as is always the case in such syntheses as the *History of Building Types* — he summarised and simplified the studies on which he relied, transforming into axioms what were in fact often only impressionistic assertions that followed from unsystematic studies or that were dogged by late 19th-century historicist mindset. The authoritative Pevsner thereby legitimised a number of clichés that would become commonplaces in architectural historiography in Italy and beyond, starting with the idea that there were two distinct, if not opposed, models of town halls. The first, the so-called broletto of Lombard origin, well established as early as the beginning of the 13th century, was a largely horizontal structure with a market loggia on the ground floor that was connected by an external staircase to a council hall on the first floor (Pevsner 1997: 27–28; Guidoni 1980). The second, which spread to Tuscany at least 50 years later, was a building with a closed, compact, fortified appearance and a vertical projection. Strangely enough, historians do not seem to have questioned the reasons for such a significant typological gap within a few years, and although this idea of two palatial models proves quite inadequate to describe an extremely complex and varied body of cases — such as those discussed in this collection — very few scholars have openly disregarded it (Maire Vigueur 2010: 427–431; Yunn 2015: 189–191).

The essays in this collection adopt a very different point of view from the typological approach advocated by Pevsner and so popular in subsequent decades, underscoring that the builders of the public palaces that were erected almost everywhere in the Italian communes during the late Middle Ages did not set out to follow one or more identifiable types but rather empirically adopted a great variety of solutions, motivated primarily and above all by functional requirements, though they did not wholly overlook aesthetics. It was precisely these requirements, much more than the supposed adherence to uniform models, that accounts for the family resemblance that seems to have characterised, at least judging from their remains, many of the buildings belonging to the first generation of town halls, namely, those built roughly between the late 12th and the late 13th century (Tosco 1999; Tosco 2021: 142–178). We can assume that after the Peace of Constance (1183) when medieval Italians found themselves ‘sleepwalking into a new world’ (Wickham 2018), their first priority was to create a covered space, open to the market square, in which certain activities, commercial and otherwise, deserving special consideration, could be carried out. Foremost among these was the administration of justice, the impartiality of which could only be guaranteed if it took place in full view of the public, that is, in a dedicated place (the courthouse), on public land, freely accessible to the citizens and not subject to pressure from this or that neighbourhood faction. With the increasing institutionalisation of local government, the need for a meeting place for town councils

(which in many cases continued to meet in churches or private palaces for a long time) also became more pressing, as did the need to designate a building as the recognised and recognisable residence of the highest magistrates of the commune (starting with the *podestà* and his family) so that it could stand as a symbol of the aim of the local authorities to establish a ‘good government’.

However, even these similar exigencies yielded a number of different solutions, apart from the recurring use of a porticoed structure to house an assembly hall and possibly a courtroom on the upper floor (if it could not be accommodated on the ground floor). Such diversity was due not only to material factors (building practices, urban layouts, pre-existing features), but also to deliberate — and sometimes deliberately antagonistic — communication goals. Assisi and Gubbio in Umbria, for example, are both situated on hills a few dozen kilometres apart and of the same size, at least at the end of the Middle Ages (Ginatempo and Sandri 1990: 151). But while the commune in Assisi centered its urban renewal on the area of the ancient Roman forum, in Gubbio, the local authorities opted to break away from their past. The Assisan authorities redesigned the ancient forum as the *platea nova communis*, around which the palaces of the city’s magistrates lined up to crown the Temple of Minerva (**Figure 1**), which was converted into the communal headquarters and praised as representing the heart of the city’s urban image because of its antiquity (Grohmann 2003; Carannante 2023). The Gubbian authorities abandoned the old civic center and relocated the city’s main magistracies to two imposing palaces overlooking a new hanging square, built from scratch in an area made available for construction at the cost of massive earthworks that would dramatically alter the city’s structure and image (**Figure 2**) (Capannelli et al. 2013; Micalizzi 2009). The so-called Palazzo Vecchio in Florence and the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena (**Figures 3 and 4**) are also chronologically and geographically close to each other and yet so different not only with respect to architectural forms, structures, and building materials but also with respect to uses, functions, decorations, and relationships with the urban context, showing a deliberate, ostensible desire to stand out and embody local identity in a recognisable monument that was markedly different from others (Rubinstein 1995; Bartalini and Piccinni 2020).



Figure 1: The palace of the *capitano del popolo*, Assisi. Photo by Marco Folin.



Figure 2: Palazzo dei Consoli, Gubbio. Wikimedia commons.



Figure 3: Palazzo della Signoria (Palazzo Vecchio), Florence. Private collection.

In the centuries that followed, the need for new living quarters for the commune's representatives, rooms for archives and offices, spaces for the storage and sale of salt and other public monopolies, warehouses, prisons, and armories as well as theaters, libraries, and academies also became apparent, to name only the functions most frequently mentioned in the documents (Barbera 2024). The variety of recorded examples — corresponding, not surprisingly, to variety of terms and appellations — makes it hard to reconstruct a coherent evolution. However, two more or less constant phenomena, seemingly contradictory but often coexisting, can be observed almost everywhere: first, buildings where the aforementioned functions were to be carried out multiplied and, second, they were continually adapted to the changing

needs and demands of the rulers who alternated at the head of the city as well as the social groups that supported them.³ Multi-functionality will anyway remain a hallmark of Italian town halls throughout their history (Svalduz 2010).

The case studies here collected provide more than one example of this. In Pistoia, in particular, we find a remarkable example of continuity in the use of spaces and buildings that were created in the 14th century and that remain the political-administrative heart of the city today. But underneath these material persistencies, argues Marco Folin, very different uses and practices have developed over the centuries. Typical is the case of the palace

originally built as the seat of the *anziani* (the city's highest magistracy), which was later converted into the residence of the *priori* under Florentine rule, the headquarters of the 'community' in the Lorraine period, and finally a town hall after the unification of Italy in the second half of the 19th century. Shifts in the way buildings were used, how they were appropriated, and in the symbolic investments people put in them accompanied these changes, impacting the overall image of the building. Born as an emblem of communal autonomy, within little more than a century the palace became one of the main strongholds of the Pistoiese patriciate and its class privileges, whom the Florentine rulers supported in exchange for their recognition as sovereigns of the city. The long persistence of the urban forms and façades that framed the communal square was thus accompanied — indeed, it was in many ways the other side of the same coin — by the relentless alteration of buildings and interior spaces to adapt them to the changing needs of the times.

The theme of continuity is also central to Jean-Baptiste Delzant's paper on the public palaces of central Italy. These buildings, erected at the end of the Middle Ages as the headquarters of the authorities ruling the communal city-republics, remained the core of local government even when these cities fell under seigniorial rule first and then under the control of papacy. In general, in fact, after conquering a city, it made much more sense for the new rulers to take over the old communal buildings and re-purpose them to their own advantage rather than to create new hubs of power from scratch, which would have been much more costly and potentially unpopular with the citizens. The old



Figure 4: Palazzo Pubblico, Siena. Wikimedia commons.

structures were thus preserved, though often substantially altered to suit the use and communication needs of the new owners. Original buildings were often merged with adjacent ones or connected to others by overpasses, galleries, and elevated walkways, forming heterogeneous and composite building conglomerates both architecturally and in terms of ownership that reflected the informal, flexible, ‘consociational’ nature of city politics. Thus, seemingly paradoxically, in the cities of Umbria and Marche (but the point could be extended to other regions), the end of communal freedom did not lead to the decline of communal palaces. On the contrary, it often coincided with their expansion, if not proliferation, in forms that were certainly different from those of the past but no less central to the urban landscape.

In the case of Milan under the Sforzas, studied by Jessica Gritti and Francesco Repishti, we observe somewhat different processes (and among the reasons for this difference, the size of the city, then one of the largest in Europe, seems to have had been important). The dukes attempted to take control of the old civic centres that revolved around the large squares of the *arenigo* and the new broletto, but only partly succeeded. Thus a dichotomy was created between the central areas of the city, where the old strongholds of communal power (as indicated by the names by which they were still commonly called in the 15th century) were located, and the new dynastic clusters, which tended to be located on the outskirts of the city, near the Sforza Castle, and in a number of settlements scattered throughout the territory. The Sforzas only undertook the construction of large architectural complexes in the clusters; in the central areas, they instead preferred to display their authority mainly through legislative measures implemented in the name of city decorum, ephemeral arrangements for feasts and civic ceremonies, donation of buildings, and other ad hoc measures that — while motivated by similar political aims — were one-off endeavours that did not result in an organic and coherent urban strategy.

Isabella Balestreri focuses on the valleys of western Lombardy, where during the early modern period the geography of spaces and buildings for collective use tended to crystallise into more stable and common architectural structures. However, Balestreri speculates that the similarities in form did not necessarily stem from the circulation of common models, as historiographical tradition suggests, but could be instead the result of similar building customs. The archival evidence, in this case, above all reveals the porosity of public buildings with regard to a wide range of collective functions that were carried out within them according to circumstances and community needs. Municipal-owned buildings could host the schools and the teacher’s residence, the armoury and the prisons, the archives and the treasure chamber along with inns and shops, meeting rooms and pawnshops, salt warehouses, and post offices. These operations were often managed under contract by the leading families of local notables, who passed down the honours and burdens of municipal administration from generation to generation. This multi-functionality resulted in a stratification of uses, structures, and configurations,

the previous layers not ever being completely erased, leaving traces still very evident today not only in the architectural structures but also particularly in the decorative elements (coats of arms, plaques, paintings, inscriptions, and commemorative epigraphs) that encrusted these buildings both inside and outside, transforming them into palimpsests of local memory.

The case of public buildings of the Terraferma Veneta, examined by Elena Svalduz through the example of Treviso, presents us with a further shift in scale. Svalduz focuses not so much on the uses that distinguish the palaces built in Venetian mainland (an overlap of administrative and judicial functions on the upper levels and commercial functions on the lower levels), but rather on the urban consequences of a continuous process of 'institutional negotiation', an idea developed by Joseph Connors (1989). During the early modern period the renovation and reconstruction of public buildings often provided the Venetian authorities with valuable opportunities to plan the urban renewal of subject cities, thus extending their sphere of influence and reshaping streets and squares in the city centre. In this context, architects such as Palladio played a crucial role: by linking what were then rather common solutions to ancient models, his treatise conferred a seal of approval to them. Equally decisive was the political culture of the itinerant magistrates sent from Venice to govern the cities of the Dominion that fostered a dialectic between adaptability and identity that represents one of the distinctive features of what has been defined as the 'Venetian environment' (Cozzi 1997).

The panorama offered by the essays in this collection is therefore multifaceted, nor could it be otherwise given the geographical and chronological gaps between the various case studies as well as the contrasting scales of observation adopted by the authors. Nevertheless, equally palpable is the family resemblance that seems to connect all the examples discussed in the following pages, evidently a result of certain recurring trends in early modern Italy. Three main threads, in particular, seem significant to us: the first concerns the urban role of Italian town halls. There is a wide range of cases: somewhere squares and buildings configured in the late Middle Ages have remained almost unchanged to this day, while elsewhere the renovation of buildings has triggered redevelopment projects that over the centuries have thoroughly transformed the central spaces of cities. One element, however, is almost universal: the idea that a fully-fledged city must have at its heart a public area — typically a square — where one or more buildings serve collective functions. Just as the cathedral represents religious cohesion and the marketplace embodies economic vitality, the town hall symbolises civic identity, serving as the third element of the triad that characterises the Italian urban landscape throughout the early modern period.

The second is the tendency of the urban elites to take possession of town halls to make them the material and symbolic bulwark of their power in the city. They used buildings

as a great stone palimpsest on which to inscribe the reasons for a political and social hegemony based on class, whether or not they exercised that hegemony in conjunction with (or under the patronage of) a superior sovereign. Of course, the forms and codes through which this hegemony was expressed could be very different, depending on the size of the city, its degree of autonomy, the type of state it was — republican or monarchical — and the economic base underpinning the city's hierarchies. However, the fact remains that nearly everywhere town halls — conceived and managed as the main buildings for collective use by the city community and its stakeholders — were entrusted with functions that were not only just political but also broadly social, economic, and image-related. As a result — and this is the third thread to emerge from the following papers — town halls often became hubs of urban sociability, reflecting the customs, inclinations, and idiosyncrasies of the local ruling classes. Particularly indicative in this regard is the use to treat town halls as aristocratic residences and to embellish their exteriors as well as, even more so, their interiors with prestigious features inspired by the domestic architecture of the period. This phenomenon is especially evident in cases in which one or more sectors of the building were designated as living quarters, but even when the palaces continued to be primarily used as office premises, the placement of circles and academies, theatres, and libraries within them betrayed the patrician imprint of the administrations that identified and self-represented in these spaces.

It is precisely this permeability that makes the concept of typology so unsuitable for describing the appearance, functions, and processes of transformation of Italian town halls.⁴ On the contrary, they seem rather to embody an emblematic example of that architectural practice that Marvin Trachtenberg referred to as 'building-in-time' (2010). In this case, however, unlike those described by Trachtenberg, the idea of 'continuous redesign' of a 'never final product', 'evermalleable and openended' (2020: 145), does not seem to derive from building practices of supposedly 'medieval' or pre-Albertian origin, but rather from the functions — material, symbolic, communicative — that town halls came to embody on the stage of Italian cities. Here, in the absence of strong monarchical powers, the management of public buildings remained throughout the early modern period a primary arena for negotiation, mediation, and power sharing among the different authorities vying for control of the city's institutions.

When, in the second half of the 19th century, the young municipalities of the Kingdom of Italy faced the problem of equipping themselves with new (or renovated) headquarters that could be both representative and modern, they did so by attempting to break with the old practices. They reinvented a type of town hall that — although formally inspired by the vestiges of a more or less mythologised medieval past — essentially embodied new uses, values, and concepts.

Notes

- ¹ See, among others, Rohault de Fleury 1874, Toesca 1913–1951, Swoboda 1919, Haupt 1922, Reggiori and Brandileone 1929, Samonà 1935, Serra 1943, and Paul 1963.
- ² On Boito and the debate about national style in Italy after unification, see Mangone 2015 and more generally Zucconi 1997.
- ³ For a European frame of reference, see Chatenet, De Jonge, and Ottenheim 2010.
- ⁴ For a point of comparison, see Albrecht 2010.

Competing Interests

The authors have no competing interests to declare.

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