



Reconstruction of Livia's private domestic garden  
Illustration courtesy Arch. Giuseppe Morganti

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## CREATION, RE-CREATION AND UNDERSTANDING OF THE VILLA OF LIVIA IN PRIMA PORTA

Attempts to reconstruct ancient Rome date back to over five centuries. In fact, starting at least from 1430, when Poggio Bracciolini exhorted the study of the Ancients, the representation, interpretation, and reconstruction of the original appearance of the ruins, together with the study of the sources, have since the age of Humanism become a fundamental component of studies on the civilization of ancient Rome, in particular of its architectural production.<sup>1</sup>

The architects of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries were primarily surveyors and designers of ancient buildings. Bramante, Sangallo, Peruzzi, Raphael, Palladio (all born between 1444 and 1508), have “intimately joined the study of the ruins with that of the ancient writers and inscriptions,” in order to learn from them for the new architecture and with the goal of achieving a magnitude similar to that of the ancients. The lessons learned were the basis of their projects and their treatises.<sup>2</sup>

The representation was aimed at ruins, and therefore constituted a necessarily limited and incomplete knowledge base, but the premise for thoroughly investigating the nature and meaning of the buildings was believed to hypothesize their original consistency, recreating them in

their entirety. This is why Renaissance architects employed a “fervent reconstructive imagination” in their work.<sup>3</sup>

Most of the time this has resulted in a ‘transfer’ of spatial culture and the architectural conception of the viewer into the objects represented. An eloquent example is the ‘completion’ with three apses of what has remained of the Basilica of Maxentius in the aftermath of the 1348 earthquake, in turn, the root of the projects for St. Peter’s.<sup>4</sup> In the same way, Pirro Ligorio or Flaminio Ponzio, primarily in a spirit of antiquity, ‘rebuilt’ the Temple of Apollo, the Stadium of Domitian or the Domus Augustana on the Palatine Hill.

The ideal philological reconstruction of ancient buildings starting from ruins always remains a chimera that stretches from Humanism – through Piranesi and the architects of the *École des Beaux-Arts* – to Viollet-le-Duc and the totalitarian regimes of the last century.

Beyond the ideal or ideological factors, the reconstruction of ancient monuments – moreover impracticable in concrete factuality for technical and compositional reasons – has been definitively condemned by the detachment from the construction tradition due to the industrial

revolution and the advent of modern materials, with the symmetrical affirmation of historicism on which modern theories of architectural restoration are based. Concurrent factors that have definitively exorcised any hypothesis of coincidence of the restoration with the restoration.

However, the need to ‘understand’ ancient architecture has not disappeared, in an attempt to experience its space. Cairoli Giuliani states:

Architecture is a matter of atmosphere, ideas, space, time, not plants or elevations, orders or decorative elements. A building is crossed in successive times, living in it are the various parts of the day depending on the light, climatic conditions etc.; space, that is the third dimension, needs time, the fourth, which implies the memory of what has been seen before and the imagination to foresee it in some way, before verifying it directly, will be seen immediately after. This complexity of elements cannot be addressed by means of abstraction relating to plans or sections ... their study needs reading and interpretative means different from those in use with such positive results in other fields of archaeology. A building sends different messages, in a different language, from an amphora or a statue: therefore a different key is needed. There is a duty to look for it even if it is not said that it is possible or that it exists.<sup>5</sup>

The closest approximation is the ‘model’ (what, in other words, we are also used to call ‘plastic’). With the limit, however, of not appreciating the experience of the interior spaces, if not to a very limited extent, or unless we push the reconstruction up to the ratio of 1:1, which would bring us to an idea of reconstruction of the truth. This type of operation is never or almost never attempted, if not with very few exceptions, the most representative of which is the reconstruction of the Villa dei Papiri in Herculaneum within the Getty Museum in Malibu. Such an operation is valid if

seen as a didactic alternative which does not touch the non-original monument, being out of context and without claims of originality.

Thus, the information technologies applied to this sector of the study of ancient architecture find full legitimacy, and above all efficacy, by offering those “means of reading and interpretation,” the “key” that Cairoli Giuliani talks about.

This is particularly true for a ‘young’ monument such as the Villa of Livia. A complex that remained unknown until the mid-nineteenth century, long known only for the paintings discovered in 1863 in the semi-underground summer triclinium (removed and placed in the museum in the 1950s), and the subject of systematic and extensive excavations that achieved their current consistency from the 1980s onwards.

An exploration that, despite having made it possible to define in an exhaustive way its layout and architectural-decorative events, does not allow us today to view – following centuries of devastation – other than a set of floor plans and wall structures that rarely exceed one and a half meters in height. Moreover, for stringent conservation reasons, the site is covered by a large extension of flat roofs on pillars. A state of affairs that limits an understanding of the Villa of Livia primarily to specialists, for in order to see the building that once was the Villa of Livia, the mental representation of what must have been the original appearance of the villa must be conjured up, before its destruction.

An integral reconstruction of the Villa of Livia using information technology is therefore desirable to effectively proffer the presentation of this monument to the public. A reconstruction based on solid scientific foundations that findings and new archaeological knowledge over the last forty years through excavations and studies have made possible.<sup>6</sup> A work must be done so as to allow even the common visitor to understand the monument in its entirety, mentally reconnecting the concretely visible remains, and giving him or her the possibility of wandering around inside it, through its atriums, arcades, rooms, and gardens



photo: Andrea Venier, Soprintendenza Speciale di Roma

until he understands the link with the surrounding landscape.

The reconstruction of the villa should be integrated by a restitution – also virtual, projected on the walls – of the pictorial decoration (now in the museum) originally present on the walls of the summer triclinium, here too recreating the spatial quality and the symbolic contents of those ‘deceptive walls’ which represent an irreplaceable part of universal cultural and artistic patrimony – currently largely unexpressed – in the present-day Villa of Livia.<sup>7</sup>

### Restoration of the peristyle mosaics in the Villa of Livia

The main uncovered space of the built core of the villa, dating to the first Augustan phase, is the large peristyle, which was surrounded by a portico (22 x 18 m), supported by brick columns resting on travertine stylobates, covered with red and white stucco and probably fluted.

At the center of the open area there was the rectangular basin of the *natatio*, a very large

swimming pool (9.36 x 5.62 m, 1.09 m deep), built in the Flavian age.

The verdant grass strip between the edge of the pool and the portico (the existence here of a third *viridarium* of the villa would be evidenced by the discovery of planting holes and *ollae perforatae*), was raised and decorated with a later black and white mosaic in the Severan phase of the villa, and at that time the tub was equipped with a marble coating and three steps to step down more easily inside.

On the short northern and southern sides and on the long eastern side, the decoration represents a marine *thiasos*, with seahorses and monstrous creatures moving towards the focus of the composition: the Oceanus mask in the center of the north side. On the long western side, in place of the marine cortège, there is a geometric hexagonal motif, to be attributed to a slightly later phase, perhaps a makeover, or an afterthought by the architect.

The state of conservation of both the mosaics and the basin is difficult to appreciate today. The published photographic documentation does not provide clear indications, but, from the little that is available, the mosaics are not in excellent condition.



On the occasion of the 2014 anniversary exhibition marking two thousand years since Augustus' death, the mosaics were covered with pedestrian wooden planks, upon which the most relevant representations of the mosaics were reproduced (Oceanus, the hippocampus, the sea creature). The positions of the columns of the peristyle were marked on the planks with wooden discs. The bottom of the basin was covered with a layer of pozzolan in large grains to protect the remains of the footprints of the marble slabs.

For the reasons just illustrated it is not possible, at this stage, to formulate a real restoration project. This will be possible only after the removal of the wooden structures and the re-illumination of the surfaces (mosaics, cleaning of the mosaics and marble slabs, remains of plaster and perhaps marble slabs, etc.), as well as the in-depth analysis of their state of conservation.

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However, it is generally possible to state the following:

Prior to any other operation, a detailed archive search must be carried out to recover the existing documentation, as well as a photographic documentation of the current state should be effected.

For the walking surfaces, a careful global intervention of archaeological removal / cleaning shall be carried out, aimed at bringing to light the ancient floors, freeing them from encumbering materials, from accumulated materials and debris, from any vegetation, from biological weeds and any outcrops or efflorescence settled there. The operation must be performed by specialized restorers, carried out manually with the aid of broom brushes and with the assistance of archaeologists.

At the end, once the surfaces have been brought to light, it will be necessary to proceed with a complete documentation of the plans (graphics, with accurate surveys in adequate scale, both traditional and digital in 3D, and photographic,

even with the aid of drones), all of which today as far as is known - seem to be missing, at least in detail.

This will be followed by a revision of the mosaic walking surface, through a careful cleaning of the surfaces and the re-filling of the fissures, to restore the floor surface in as intact and unified a way as possible and thus avoid the possibility of growth of plant weeds and their root systems in the cracks. In order to allow easier accessibility where it is possible by bringing the passage back to level, re-filling the joints between stone elements and filling the gaps with other stone elements or color-matched mortars (at the discretion of the construction management), also to eliminate or reduce, as far as possible, any dips or hollows in the floor that cause (in the event of important meteoric events) stagnation of water that is certainly harmful and a harbinger of further degradation.

Similarly, work will be carried out on the bedding surfaces of the marble coating of the tank (and any remains of the marble coating itself), with the careful cleaning of the surfaces and - also in this case - at the subsequent survey of what is still in place, carefully restoring and realigning where necessary the stone slabs, while with the other portions we will proceed in a consolidation of the floors and the subsequent protection with a non-woven fabric that also serves as a base for the casting of a layer of mortar based on natural hydraulic lime with the addition of fragments and earthenware powders and stone and marble powders to obtain a chromatic definition that suggests the ancient marble top.

## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Poggio Bracciolini, *Historia de varietate fortunae libri quatuor*, 1430 (1513).
- <sup>2</sup> Jacob Burckhardt, *La civiltà del Rinascimento in Italia* (Firenze: G. C. Sansoni, 1953).
- <sup>3</sup> Albert J. Ammermann, “Adding time to Rome’s *imago*,” in “Imaging ancient Rome. Documentation, visualization, Imagination,” edited by Lothar Haselberger and John Humphrey, *Journal of Roman Archaeology*, supplementary series number 61 (2006): 308.
- <sup>4</sup> Udo Kultermann, *Die Maxentius-Basilika. Ein Schlüsselwerk spätantiker Architektur* (Weimar: VDG, Verlag und Datenbank für Geisteswissenschaften, 1996), 25.
- <sup>5</sup> Cairol Fulvio Giuliani, “Note sull’architettura delle residenze imperiali dal I al III secolo d. C.,” *ANRW (Aufstieg und Niedergang der römischen Welt)*, II.12.1 (1982): 233-34.
- <sup>6</sup> A first step in this direction has been made based on the research undertaken in the first part of the twenty-first century, in Maurizio Forte et al., eds, *La Villa di Livia. Un percorso di ricerca di archeologia virtuale* (Roma: „L’Erma” di Bretschneider, 2007).
- <sup>7</sup> Salvatore Settis, *La Villa di Livia. Le pareti ingannevoli* (Milano: Mondadori Electa, 2008).

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