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SOUTH AFRICAN ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

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Frontispiece: Architectural Composition, Cape Province ..... photo RM

THE SOUTH AFRICAN ARCHITECTURAL RECORD

The Journal of the Transvaal, Natal and Orange Free State Provincial Institutes of South African Architects and the Chapter of South African Quantity Surveyors.

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HON. EDITORS: G. E. PEARSE, REX MARTIENSSEN. SECRETARY: A. S. PEARSE



THE YEAR IN REVIEW

BY contrast, the year 1938 has been quieter for architects, but the breathing space has been appreciated by all in the profession after the bustle of the previous years, and hopes are entertained that many years of quiet progress are before us. The speed with which buildings have been erected has not been conducive to the production of works of great architectural merit, and one trusts that the public will afford the profession in the future the necessary time to prepare architectural projects in order that the primary aim of the architect, excellent building, can be striven for and attained.

The above comment is of some importance in view of the fact that the Transvaal Provincial Committee has decided to establish a fund for an award of merit in the design of buildings in the Transvaal on the lines of the "London Architectural Medal." The award will not take the form of a medal, but of a plaque to be affixed to the buildings selected from time to time.

Only one competition has been decided during the year, that of the Nigel Town Hall. Arising out of this competition an opportunity has been afforded to some of the younger practitioners to express their views to the Central Council on the conduct of competitions, and it is to be hoped that a closer liaison between the members of the profession and its governing bodies will be maintained in the coming years. Competitions either in progress or to be issued shortly include the "Schotse Kloof" housing scheme in Capetown and a new Municipal office building in Durban.

A decision of great importance from the practice point of view was reached in the Supreme Court, Pretoria, on the question of architects' fees. In brief, it has been decided by this Court that architects' fees, as laid down in the Regulations, are not binding on the public. A decision was sought by the Central Council on a case in which the issue was confined to this one point and one point only, i.e., whether the scale of fees be binding on the public or not. The decision of the courts is, in the opinion of the writer, a very good thing for the profession.

A false sense of delicacy prevents many members of the Institute from entering upon immediate discussion as to fees with their clients, but it must be remembered that the vast majority of these clients are business people, and they will appreciate the necessity for clear cut terms of reference. The most important factor fostering this false sense of delicacy is the fact, and very regrettable fact, that the architect is afraid that a statement as to fees before commencing the execution of the commission will possibly drive the client to the architect next door, who will undercut his fellow practitioners, or to the unregistered "jerry" architects, who practise in great numbers. It would appear conclusive that members should not expect the laws of the country to save them from themselves and their professional delicacy with regard to money matters, which is possibly the only reason, unconscious perhaps and unconsidered, influencing us as a profession, to desire that the fees be made binding on the public. The specific remedies for avoidance of fee disputes lie within the Institute itself. Members must be loyal to each other, and not undercut. Members must be fair to the public and produce work of the highest standard. A satisfied client never seeks, and an unreasonable client will not obtain, the sympathy of the courts.

It is hoped in the Transvaal to bring into service in the first months of the New Year the "Small House Service Bureau." The objects of this bureau have been clearly enumerated in the Journal in its previous issues. It is necessary to launch this project as soon as possible, as many building societies and other public bodies, it is believed, will welcome the establishment of the bureau.

It is desirable that the protection of the work of an architect, as well as the title, be obtained from Parliament, and it is possible that the Central Council

will take steps shortly to approach the legislature in this connection. During the year discussions took place with the engineering profession on this question, and it is to be hoped that we will have their support when it is decided to move in this matter.

The establishment of a Joint Practice Committee of architects and surveyors to discuss mutual difficulties with the builders has been a progressive step in the Transvaal following the example of the Cape Provincial Institute.

The profession is again indebted to the Transvaal Provincial Administration for the work which has been given to practitioners in the past year. The results, one trusts, will induce other public bodies to entrust their work to members.

One must congratulate the Journal on a very successful year, and express the hope that the editors' onerous task will be relieved by contributions from members in the future. A proposal that the Cape, Natal and Orange Free State Provincial Institute establish local committees to collect material for the Journal from their members should not come amiss as a suggestion for the New Year.

D. S. HADDON

PRESIDENT
TRANSVAAL PROVINCIAL INSTITUTE OF S A ARCHITECTS

OVERLEAF:

PIAZZA DEL DUOMO PIENZA
ANALYTICAL INTERPRETATION

TOP: PALAZZO PICCOLOMINI
LEFT: DUOMO
BOTTOM: PALAZZO VESCOVILE
RIGHT: PALAZZO PUBBLICO


martienssen

PALAZZO PICCOLOMINI

A CRITICAL EXCURSION

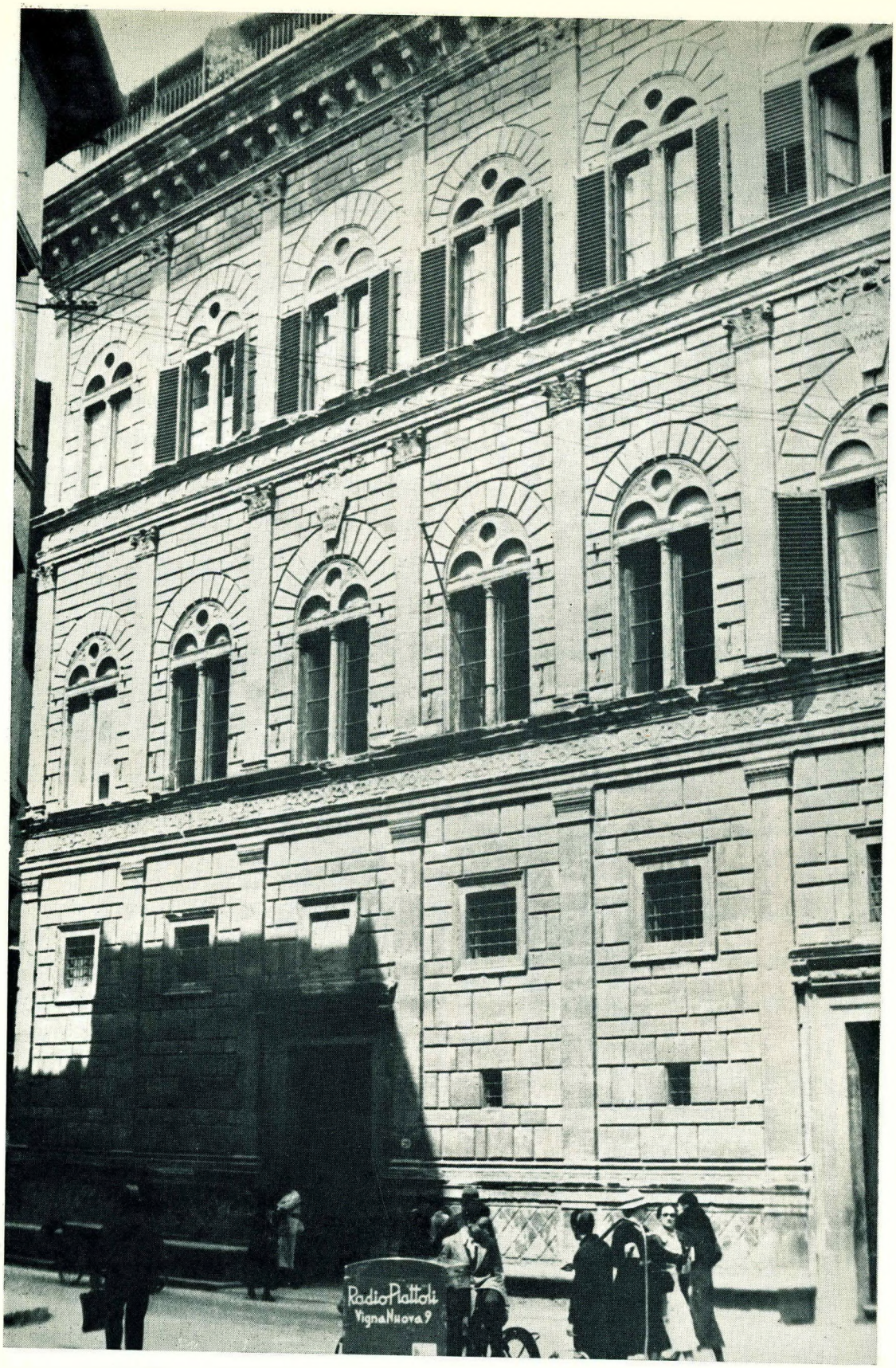
BY REX MARTIENSSEN

Travel in Italy is apt to become wearisome where masterpieces are too thickly spread, but Pienza offers in its comparative isolation a refreshing change from its better known and more congested neighbours. The determined tourist who "does" churches and paintings with a quantitative zest, it is true, would not find very much in this small town. It has a population of only fifteen hundred, and can be viewed (according to Baedeker) in twelve minutes. So far as I know it has no hidden Lorenzettis or Duccios, no breath-taking riches in the Conxolus tradition of Mr. Aldous Huxley. But in situation (not far from Siena) it is dramatic and delightful, and for the architect there is ample reward in the splendid Piazza. In this hollow nucleus stands the Palazzo Piccolomini, the chef d'oeuvre of Bernardo Rossellino, and built by him in 1458.

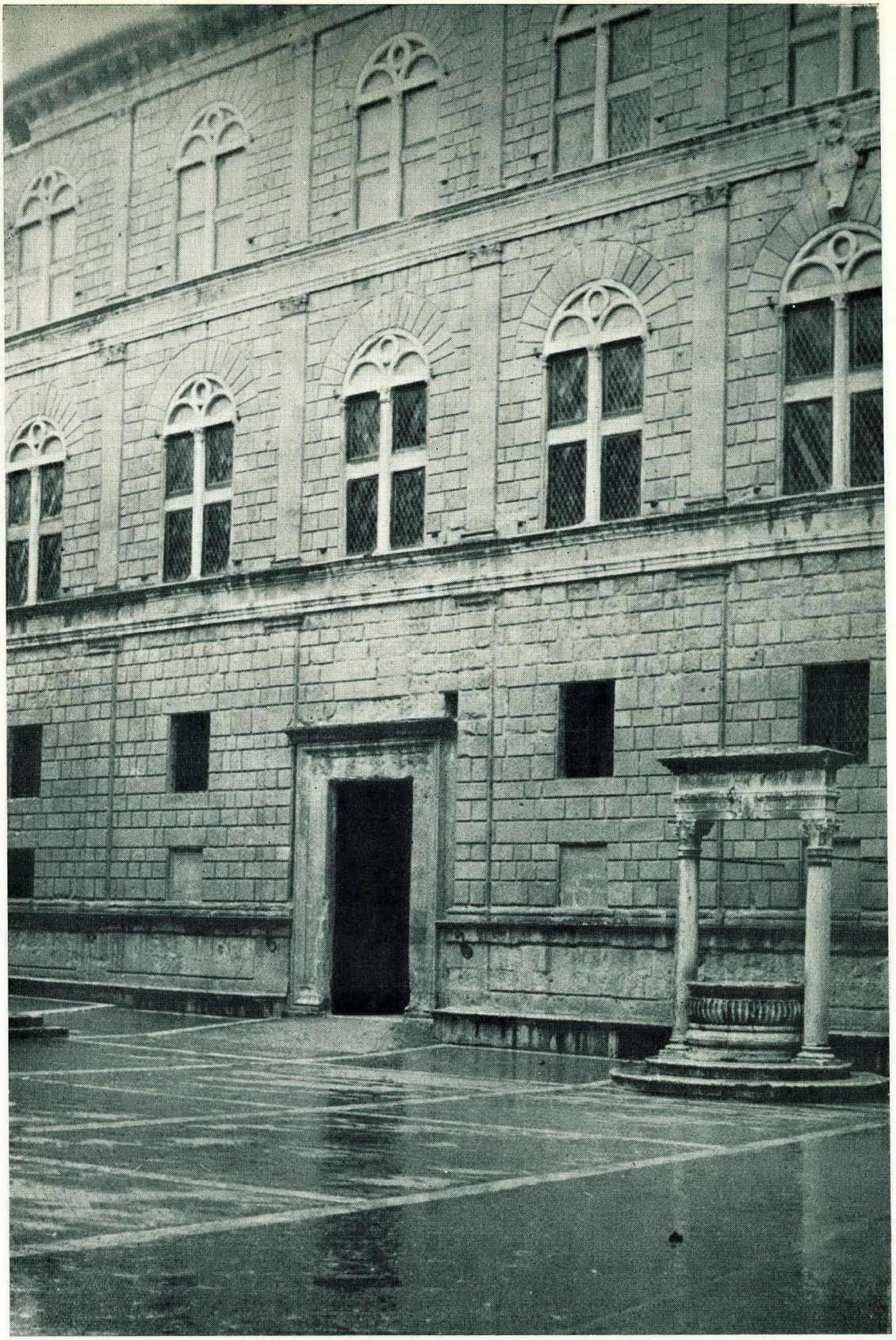
I did not come upon Pienza by chance; my interest in the Piccolomini had guided me there, and it was to make a brief investigation and record my impressions that I turned off the Rome—Siena road at S. Quirico d'Orcia. In Pienza there is no traffic and very little movement. A few town-dwellers standing out of the rain on the portico of the town hall (if so small a building can carry the name) and children just out of school provided for us the background which is usually lacking in the recognised centres of tourist investigation.

I suppose the first reference to the Palazzo Piccolomini which aroused my interest was a statement by Professor Simpson in his "History of Architectural Development. In a footnote he asserts that although "the design of the Rucellai is sometimes attributed to Rossellino . . . the manifest inferiority of his building at Pienza, as regards its proportions, spacing of pilasters, etc., disproves this. The Piccolomini is a copy of the Rucellai without the touches which give distinction to the latter." A strong statement, which, as he does not illustrate the Piccolomini, we are required to take on trust. Until this year I was familiar only with the Rucellai, I knew the Piccolomini from Haupt's photographs and drawings,[1] but these were insufficient for a definitive comparison. To compare a retained impression of actuality on one hand with a photographic interpretation on the other is not a satisfactory process of criticism, and I have awaited a direct experience of both buildings before expressing my convictions.

That Simpson underrates Rossellino's performance can, I think, easily be proved. I should like to go farther and show that in the Palazzo Piccolomini we have a building of even greater architectural



PALAZZO RUCELLAI FLORENCE

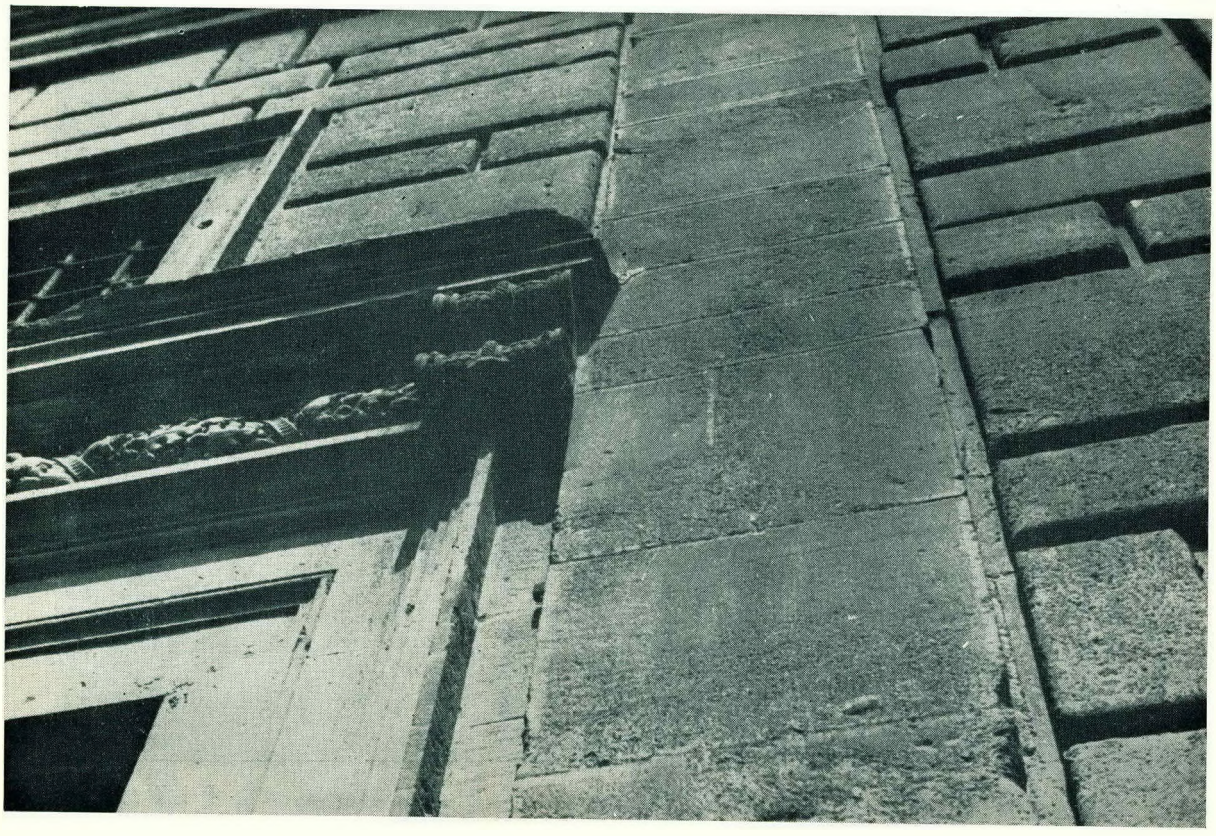


PALAZZO PICCOLOMINI PIENZA

significance than the Rucellai. I am convinced that in spite of an analysis which may attribute to the Rucellai a greater degree of pedantry and more "correctness" in detail, the Piccolomini emerges not as an indifferent copy but as a conception, more complete, more sensitive and far subtler than its prototype. Alberti created a masterpiece in S. Andrea at Mantua. It would be impertinent to question his genius. This paper is not an attempt to estimate the worth of two architects; it is concerned with two buildings only. On that assumption let us approach our problem and focus the most obvious data as a basis of comparison.

The Palazzo Rucellai was begun in 1451, and although designed by Leon Battista Alberti, it was carried out by Bernardo Rossellino. The total height of the building—69 feet—is small compared with the generous 105 feet of the Strozzi, or with the almost incredible grandeur of the Pitti with its cliff-like facade of 116 feet. But the building does not suffer by comparison, because its height bears some relation to its setting. The Pitti has a vast sloping forecourt to give horizontal completion to its height;

PALAZZO RUCELLAI FLORENCE



the Strozzi faces the ample Via Tornabuoni; the Rucellai, however, is crowded on to a narrow street. Greater height would only irritate without increasing the architectural effect. The abstract conception of the facade as a geometric pattern achieves only partial expression in reality. It is impossible to stand back and survey the facade as a whole. The broad sweep of repeated bays (as in the case of the unfortunately built-in Palazzo Lante at Rome) must be adduced by a piecemeal inspection. Add to this the buildings which crush it on either side and reduce it to a mere interposed surface without apparent third dimension, and the incompleteness of the Ruccelai will be obvious.

I have previously attempted an analysis of the Renaissance facade elements[2] but without specifically discussing the use of repeated pilasters. In the Rucellai we may note two or three points. Alberti uses a dark coloured stone for the ground floor, with a light coloured sandstone above. Perhaps this is intended to suggest, if not provide, a base of sufficient "weight" for the building, and thus fulfil an established tradition. The division of tone, however, is unhappy, and the gain is offset by the destruction

PALAZZO PICCOLOMINI PIENZA





PALAZZO PICCOLOMINI PIENZA EAST FACADE ARCHITECT BERNARDO ROSSELLINO



1. CORTILE PAL. PICCOLOMINI
2. PALAZZO PUBBLICO
3. PALAZZO VESCOVILE

PIAZZA DEL DUOMO

PIENZA

all photographs taken in april 1938

2.



3.

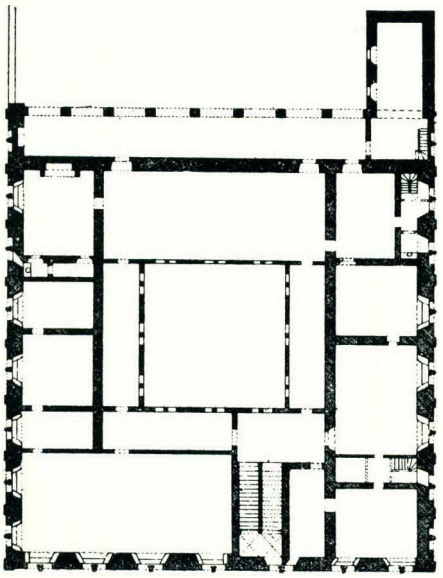


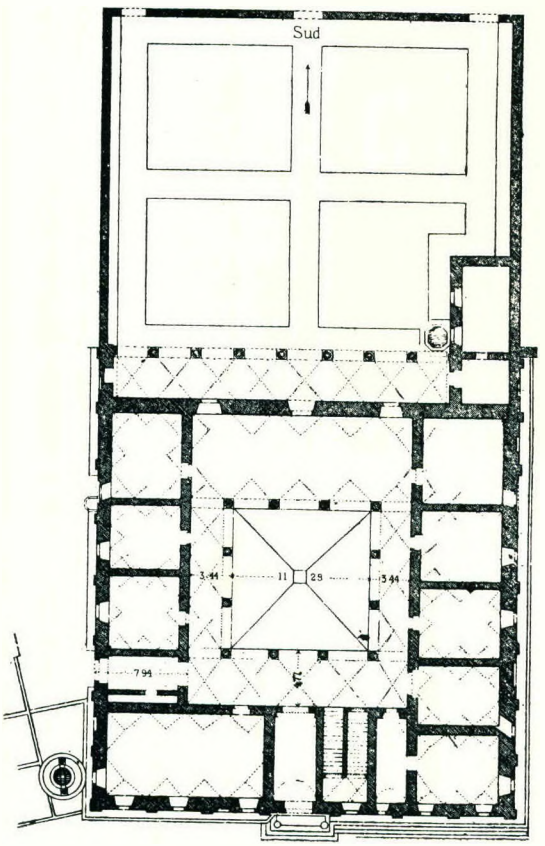
of surface unity which results. In the entablature he is more successful in solving the problem which arises where a single cornice has to crown not only the topmost order but the whole facade. A design which would be adequate for the order would be mean in relation to the whole. One proportioned to the whole would naturally be overpowering in contact with the top order. Alberti compromises with a small entablature given vigour by a bold succession of corbels in the frieze, which, in Simpson's words, " unite the three divisions of the entablature, and give it the appearance of one great cornice."

The general ordinance of the facade is clear from the photographs; points for detailed comment will be introduced, more suitably, I think, when we consider the minutiae of the Palazzo Piccolomini. Rossellino had built the Rucellai for Alberti before turning his attention to the creation of a new building in Pienza; and we know that he prepared a model for the scheme. His advantage was undoubted. He was in a position to weigh up the degree of success or failure in the first work, to emphasise or diminish any parts which required modification, and to correlate the abstract design (the unreal, geometric) with the ultimate and real. Every accent and surface was accessible for scrutiny and could be subjected to the test of appearance as solid form.

That Rossellino availed himself of this opportunity is patently clear in his design for the Piccolomini.

PALAZZO PICCOLOMINI PIENZA
LEFT: FIRST FLOOR PLAN
RIGHT: GROUND FLOOR PLAN





Where the main framework of architectural treatment is so restricted, where by accepted convention the possible variations are minute, the knowledge which was possible to Rossellino was of critical importance in his new venture. In the Rucellai he interpreted and fulfilled Alberti's intentions. In the Piccolomini he extended the promise of Alberti's genius and added his own impeccable judgment.

At Pienza he was fortunate in his site. Where Alberti had a lane Rossellino had a piazza and a view. Of his advantage he made full use. With such a situation there was a chance for a full, three-dimensional expression, and the possibility (if rightly and fully interpreted) of endowing the building with " commoditie firmenes and delight." My plan (which is approximate) shows the relation of the palace to the piazza. The broad plane of the latter is freed on either side of the church which makes possible a fine view of the countryside below. The Palazzo Pubblico, also by Rossellino, lies at a slight angle to the lateral facade of the Piccolomini, and directly opposite the church. The Palazzo Vescovile completes the quadrangle. The slight asymmetry of the enclosing surfaces of the piazza lends a certain elasticity to the whole arrangement. The effect, though difficult to convey by word or photograph, recalls that essentially Greek dynamism which qualifies the external relationship of buildings which in themselves are formal and symmetrical. I can recall no finer setting for a palace of this type. Too often the situation is merely indifferent, and either through inorganic development of the surroundings, or through fundamentally bad placing, the inherent quality of the building is never expressed.

The plan shows the arrangement of the palace with its entrance north and east, and its fine loggias which overlook first the garden then the distant prospect. There is an interesting echo of the Graeco-Roman house of Pompeian days, where from the peristyle one progressed through principal room and extended portico to the garden beyond. In its isolation, too, the site of the Piccolomini recalls the Roman insula. But in its great library and spacious cortile the palace far transcends its distant prototypes; it is conceived on the scale of the Renaissance. Both Simpson and Haupt regard the Piccolomini as demonstrably inferior to the Rucellai. Let us turn to a consideration of further factors which might, in their sum, reverse this judgment. The Piccolomini presents an extremely compact facade to the piazza. This surface compactness which one usually associates with buildings of the Strozzi and Riccardi type (and which is singularly lacking in the consciously drawn geometry of the Cancelleria and Giraud at Rome) results largely from the brilliant handling of the ground floor storey. Where Alberti interrupts the continuity of his surface by the introduction of smooth ashlar pilaster strips which bear no apparent relation in texture or structure to the wall, Rossellino wisely carries the vigorous pattern of the stonework through his pilasters. The gain in stability is enormous. The ground floor pilasters become

implied rather than actual; they complete the vertical intention of the spacing system, but still exist as an integral part of the wall. In the treatment of his ground floor windows, too, Alberti, by heavily moulding the surrounds, detracts considerably from the repose and continuity of this protective screen. Rossellino foreswears enrichment and pierces the wall with simple openings, finely proportioned and carefully placed. In the intermediate entablatures where Alberti tentatively enriches (on the horror vacui principle) Rossellino employs the bare classical minimum of defining planes. Where in the Rucellai the wall pattern runs to indecision in large surfaces of channelled stone, in the Piccolomini the relation of the major elements is much sharper. Compare the window heads on the topmost floor. There is nothing inevitable or closing in the relation of arch to architrave in the Rucellai. In the Piccolomini the architrave rests, final and conclusive on the extrados, sealing the pattern. Note how Alberti's doorway proclaims its presence at the expense of the general pattern. The unhappy encroachment of console and cymatium on adjacent pilasters irritates by its inconclusiveness. There is a calm adequacy about Rossellino's simple opening. The vigorous but sombre moulding, cleanly detached from the other facade elements, completes an austere harmony, its decisive articulation is symbolical of the whole design. Rossellino follows the rules, but his plastic sense orders the detailed relationship in a manner which imparts new values to recognised arrangements.

Minute analysis discloses more and yet more points of superiority. The conviction grows that here in Pienza we have a building which outstrips its better known prototype in Florence. On general conception, on classic precepts, on the score of unity and harmony, compactness and stability; in detail, in the rhythm of its sternly disciplined units of measure, in every test of the architectural assayer, the Piccolomini yields more.

Delight in picturesque architecture is, I suppose, a short circuit to the surface emotions that lie above the mind. Why decay and irregularity should be desirable and precision and formality at a discount; why, for instance, Ruskin in seeking beauty in the Ducal Palace found it only in the unevenness of the arches (and not in their postulated montony) is not to our immediate purpose. The Piccolomini has no charming nuances. Where there is decay it is unimportant. It is a pity—inevitable. Where there is irregularity it is not noticeable—certainly it does not increase the merit of the building. The Piccolomini has not the charm of the inorganic and the clumsily incomplete. It is artificial in the nature of all good architecture. It makes no concession to the whimsical, and it is conceived on a plane which is far above the common sense level of the practical hypothesis.

Even if we concede the germ of megalomania which infects every product of the Roman tradition, even

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