CHAPTER EIGHT

Use and the Art of the Plan

Life in seventeenth-century Roman palaces is characterized by movement—in contrast to the seeming stolidity and immutability of their grand exterior forms. Walls and floors provide a framework for the coming and going of guests and the finely tuned movements of host and gentlemen in receiving those guests; the movable ritual of dining, itself performed with a parade of food from the distant kitchen; transferral from apartment to apartment according to the season of year, along with the taking down and putting up of wall hangings and window shades; discreet movements of servants through hidden stairs and passages to bring water and carry away wastes; noisier movements of horses and carriages as they enter and maneuver in the courtyard; the arrival of the quantities of food and other supplies, and their distribution; the daily passage of the numerous famiglia through the portals of the palace to their workplaces and perhaps to their meals in the tinello; movements of scholars to libraries at the top of the house or other visitors to the ever-growing collections of art.

Yet nothing was left to chance. The framework for both public and private movement was articulated so as to order and control it. The heart of a palace was the apartment of the noble person housed therein, with its articulate linear sequence of public and private rooms. Each important resident had his or her own apartment, and alternate rooms or even complete apartments were provided for comfort in winter or summer. The apartments were supported from below by all the services requiring ready access from the outside, whether for supplies, persons, horses and carriages, or water.

Above were those parts of the palace to which access should be restricted—private quarters, women attendants’ apartments, the guardaroba. The apartments were connected with their many subordinate parts and to the city beyond by stairs—grand and expansive for ceremonial entry, and small, hidden, and efficient for private movements. The apartments were amplified by loggias, galleries, ball courts, libraries, and rooms for art collections. They extended outward to gardens, piazzas, and vistas. Even beyond the limits of the property, they found support in stables, carriage houses, and quarters for the famiglia. Each part of the palace had its own identity, and access to it was carefully controlled. While the framework of the palace was very generous and admitted of much flexibility, that flexibility was always qualified. A noble apartment might be used by a man or a woman, by a cardinal or a secular prince, but it would not double as an apartment for women attendants. A theater might be arranged temporarily in a sala or anteroom, but not in a guardaroba or tinello. A bathing room would not be installed in the attic,
nor women’s quarters on the ground floor. Lib-erati’s metaphor for the famiglia could well be extended as a description for the architectural framework within which the household lived and functioned: “one body composed of many members, informed by a single spirit, in service of the prince.”

How shall this generic description be translated into actual buildings? The several activities that take place within a Roman palace—the subject of the first several chapters of this book—are but part of the raw material of a building. To them must be added materials, constructional technology, the size and configuration of the site, civil laws (whether restrictive or enabling), finances, time, personal preferences, current fashions, cultural traditions, architectural theory. These many factors are brought together and given form through design, a process as much in evidence in the plan of a building as in its façade. The plan of a building has to do with organization and movement: organization of parts and of the whole; and movement between outside and inside, within a room or other part of a building, and from part to part. It is therefore an especially significant aspect of the design of a Roman palace, in which organization and movement are crucial. Design involves choices, and several designers confronted with a single set of circumstances are likely to develop as many different formal solutions. The failure to choose may be just as distinctive a characteristic as a decisive, even idiosyncratic, choice. Artistic personalities may be in evidence as much in plan as in elevation.

The plan has always been of primary importance to architects. Yet it is an abstraction in the sense that visitors never actually see the plan of a palace as they would see its façade or a wall of one of its rooms; rather, they comprehend it through the intellect aided by movement through the building. The drawing of a plan is a representation of that abstraction, and the abstraction itself is truly subject to the operations of design as any façade. Church planning is especially concerned with the shaping of a single large space, often in relation to its vaulting or other covering; in palaces, while single rooms may receive special attention, the ordering and interrelationship of many spaces on several levels is important.

The designers whose work is explored in the second part of this book confronted a number of choices—aspects of their respective styles. The organization of an individual part of a plan involves its shape, its proportions (whether general or specific), the nature of its boundary (open or closed, continuous or discontinuous, smooth or plastic), and its articulation to reinforce or alter the fundamental properties of its shape. The organization of the whole palace involves relationships of various sorts among the parts. There may be some underlying organizing armature, or each connection may be seen as an isolated incident. Axes of organization may or may not be the same as axes of vision or movement. Symmetry may be present with respect to a wall (a picture-like field) or with respect to a spatial axis. The three-dimensional organization of a palace may involve vertically continuous walls or other supports, or it may involve transformations from level to level. Interior order and exterior order may or may not coincide, at such critical points as doors and windows, loggias, and major formal divisions. Similarly, interior shapes and exterior shapes may or may not correspond, for the walls between the two may be conceived of as controlling or yielding: the designer’s conception of the relationship between space and substance comes into play.

Organization and movement go hand in hand, for one way of understanding organization is through movement through the building, and one result of organization is control of that movement. The very act of entry can be sharp and decisive, or gradual and modulated. The visitor is propelled or impeded, directed or diverted, according to the shaping of the plan. There may or may not be extended sequences of rooms or spaces. Stairs can be important explorations of the three-dimensionality of the building.
Visual access can encourage physical access or can imply that access even when it is not actually possible.

The drawing is the architect's medium, through which he organizes and quantifies structure, substance, spaces, and paths of movement. In the drawing, he can see the organization of a space or group of spaces, which will not be seen in the building but rather understood through movement, memory, anticipation, and ordering of experiences in the mind. As long as the three-dimensional organization of the building is simple — that is, as long as it is essentially a two-dimensional design projected vertically — the conventions of plan drawing readily convey the design: continuous line = edge, surface; dark = solid; light = void (see Fig. 184). When the designer conceives a complex three-dimensional scheme, then the medium of drawing is stretched to its limits. It is not just a matter of perspective drawing (showing the three-dimensional configuration that the eye sees from any given position), for the plan remains abstract and insists on relationships that are not visual. Maderno and Borromini in particular were faced with the problem of representing three-dimensional plans in the two-dimensional medium of drawing (see Figs. 146, 147).

However abstract, the drawing is still seen and manipulated by the designer, with some visual value in addition to its abstract value. The inevitably linear nature of the medium and the individual's way of manipulating it (a dynamic gesture, a slow and sensuous line, a ruled line) have something to do with the results. Patterns are developed. Forms that are visually satisfying are taken to be physically satisfying as well.

In the detailed studies of palaces that follow, the general uses discussed in the first seven chapters are joined by particular uses of the owners or residents of the palaces. The lives of persons are interwoven with the lives of their buildings. Designers are thrust into the history of those persons and buildings, and much of their effort is directed toward planning — that is, designing for the organization and movement that characterize the lives of the palaces. At successive moments in the lives of those buildings, the design problems shift and new interpretations emerge. Plan and image may sometimes go hand in hand, but at other times they seem to ignore one another, with only the substance of the wall as a mediator between the two. In the end, a whole building results, and the artistry of the designer, working within the inevitable circumstances of the commission, emerges.