# INTRODUCTION

This book is deliberately and literally superficial, "stopping at the surface, the fold, the skin."[1] Typically, of course, architectural history penetrates and explores, whether the object of study is a building, a treatise, or a roll of drawings. In some contexts, however, the front of a building demands attention, if not decoding, as part of the surrounding street or even city, rather than as part of a particular architectural configuration. Such a facade is logically quite distinct from the mere front wall of a building, and indeed may result from a separate construction project, perhaps involving the exterior transformation of an unremarkable and/or unfashionable structure. A facade, then, is an elaborated surface, implying the reduction of architecture to "mere" image.[2]

This is at best a partial definition. In most cultures with a monumental building tradition, buildings were designed to impress from outside, often through their bulk; indeed, Renaissance theorists disparaged the emphasis on sheer size (e.g., in the pyramids of Egypt) as a sign of primitivity.[3] The idea of facade presupposes, not just a single privileged view of a building, but rather, specifically, a privileged front, usually at the main entrance. As such, a facade frames and enhances the point of intersection of interior and exterior space, dividing but also allowing passage between contrasted functional and symbolic realms. With their soaring and lavishly decorated facades and deep portals lined by saints and heavenly beings, the great Gothic churches of medieval Europe famously exemplify such a model.

Though this book begins with medieval Europe, there is little mention of cathedral architecture or the embellishment of sacred space. While certainly concerned with the place of architecture in a symbolic order, I focus on secular, mostly residential buildings, and on conceptions of the exterior capable of extension to the city as a whole, or at least more affluent urban districts. In the densely settled environment of medieval Italian cities, the front wall of a house was often all that was visible in the street. Urban congestion alone, however,

cannot explain the preference for regular and rectilinear house fronts evident, notably, in late-medieval Florence. The emergence of such facades is bound up with crucial transformations both within and outside the enveloping walls of houses, that is, in the wider built environment as well as in domestic space. It is closely connected to the evolution and standardization of conventions of planning and design applicable at different levels, from a city or urban district as a whole to a house or room. In the long view, these are part of a history of modernization that leads, needless to say, to the effective abolition of the distinction of sacred and profane, and to the emergence of cultural and spatial boundaries, like that between public and private, that have remained crucial to this day.[4]

In contrast to the analysis of sacred architecture, the study of housing and urban space – of the human "habitat" – is generally marked by expansiveness of focus. Certain major recent studies of Italian medieval urban environments have focused on processes of development within the city as a whole, including "vernacular" or ordinary building beyond the major palaces and architectural set pieces. The archives of Florence, in particular, have yielded important information about patterns of real estate development and the evolution of the economic and statutory environment.[5] Though this painstaking work is crucial for any attempt to understand the evolution of Italian cities, my own discussions will concentrate on qualitative rather than quantitative issues, applying broadly semiotic strategies of analysis to often quite familiar, indeed canonic buildings and designs.

The typical residential facade of an Italian urban mansion or townhouse possesses a particular semiotic character that contrasts, in significant respects, with that of the facade of a Gothic cathedral. The contrast turns on the relationship of exterior and interior. While a cathedral facade, on the one hand, generally registers the position of the nave and aisles, the body of the cathedral itself is extended horizontally toward the sacred, but spatially peripheral, center at the far end from the facade. The hierarchical succession of spaces traversed, (e.g., by solemn processions) is not manifested in the arrangement, though certainly hierarchical, of the facade. Like its analogues and models in secular public architecture, on the other hand, the town-house type that emerged in Italian commercial cities is organized vertically, that is, through stories stacked one above the other on the inner side of the "facade." In principle, but not necessarily in practice, the interior is legible from outside.

Two logically distinct, though in practice not incompatible, principles are operative in early modern facade design. Categories of analysis first proposed by the great philosopher and semiotician C. S. Peirce, notably the tripartite classification of signs as symbols, icons, and indexes, are useful in the distinction of crucial features.[6] A facade may qualify primarily as an outer surface, aesthetically and compositionally part of the street or square in which it stands, and carrying various kinds of information and cues for decoding by different interpretive communities. In Peircean terms, then, a facade is a "sym-

bol," its meaning assigned by convention, though certainly the interest of certain important facade designs lies in their marked "iconic" or mimetic character, as noted later.

On the other hand, any facade accommodates intensive interaction between interior and exterior space, allowing the passage of people and their possessions, as well as light, air, sound, glances from windows, and so on. It can and to a degree must manifest interior spatial arrangements, and its design may call attention to functional elements, like windows and other apertures, that mediate between public and domestic space. Such a facade "indexes" the interior, though the elaboration of details may well disturb a facade's basic indexical and, as such, denotative character, introducing not only formal but also connotative complexity and abundance. Of course, restraint may also carry connotative value, but that is an issue for a later chapter.

This is clearly an ideal classificatory schema, since most Renaissance facades are semiotically composite and multiple. Indeed, the analysis of individual cases must grapple with the logical and aesthetic ambiguities of the facade as a space and site intermediate between surface and structure, exterior and interior, public and private. If the concept of facade requires and reinforces such dichotomies, it troubles them in the variety of its manifestations, some the result of sophisticated and self-conscious design work, others simply arising, as if "naturally," within a specific milieu. A particular problem, needless to say, is the term "facade" itself, both in historical and contemporary usage. Currently, indeed, "facade" may operate as a key term in architectural polemic, as we will see, but it is more likely to serve in an entirely unproblematic, even banal, way to register an apparently everyday aspect of a built environment.

The modern city is an array of functionally and typologically differentiated buildings that city dwellers mostly enter and exit casually, with no special effort of reorientation, though intermediate spaces and devices often ease such transitions. Usually these are at least potentially architectural, like an atrium, lobby, or front porch. Modern technology, however, has contrived new kinds of threshold: we need only consider the role of the automobile as a means of psychological transition as well as physical transportation between the contrasted environments of work and home.[7] Unchecked by a recent nostalgic backlash, the age of the automobile has seen the elimination of the front porch as a culturally and architecturally pervasive element of North American residential areas.[8] The facade too emerged at a time when, in many cities, intermediate spaces and structures – porticoes and loggias – were disappearing as integral elements both of the urban environment and of a respectable urban house.[9] In contrast, the facade precisely marks the threshold between distinct domains, often dramatizing this with architectural and other elements functionally and symbolically related to the act of entry, but reduced to elements of an essentially planar configuration.

There is an obvious tension between such an essentially two-dimensional conception of the facade and the venerable tradition of relating building and

body. The inscription of the human body in architectural configurations, especially as a legitimating basis for both formal and proportional characteristics, has of course a central and much-discussed place in the architecture of Western classicism.[10] There are even rare but famous cases of buildings literally in human form, illustrating, in extreme form, the idea that, whatever the differences of scale, a classical building confronts a beholder as another body in space, often with features (e.g., symmetry) that augment the resonance between them.[11]

The facade, on the other hand, may well disguise the volume of the building that it fronts. Nevertheless, facades contain elements – notably apertures – designed to accommodate and frame actual or imagined human bodies, while at least in classical architecture, the idealized human body, through a process of abstraction, supplies a source for the proportions and/or shape of columns and other details, or even for the overall composition. At least for male beholders, this makes possible a degree of self-recognition and self-celebration in the engagement with architecture.

Beyond the threshold, on the other hand, the relationship of body and building is very different. A building shapes space around the body of a visitor, supplying an envelope and setting rather than analogue. It is true that corporeal metaphors are central to a familiar Western tradition of monumental architecture, involving the representation of the crucified body of Christ in the plan of many medieval and even some postmedieval churches.[12] Even where it occurs, however, such literal iconism hardly contributes now, if it ever did, to the sensually available experience of entering and moving through a building. Instead, as in Leon Battista Alberti's treatise on architecture, the body – not even necessarily a human body – serves as paradigm of the orderly articulation of elements within a coherent structure or indeed, in its premodern sense, a "machine."[13]

It is of course in Alberti's treatise that we encounter an early and typically brilliant articulation of the fateful distinction of structure and surface. I will return in Chapter 5 to Alberti's engagement with the concepts of beauty and ornament, bones and flesh.[14] In Renaissance practice, certainly, the facade tends eventually to loosen itself from the built fabric that it fronts, becoming a mere supplement or, in the astute phrase of Pietro Aretino, clothing or dress for the building's body.[15] This association of architectural surface with clothing connects it to the dynamics of fashion and taste, in a world characterized by an unprecedented flood of available commodities, at least for the elite, and encompassing the sectors of housing and of domestic furnishing and decoration.[16] The facade, then, is a place where, in the service of rhetorical effect, the corporeality of architecture is compromised. Nevertheless, as we will see, it may well rely on the emphatic inclusion of material substance, even if faked, as an especially powerful expressive device.

The study of the facade has become especially urgent in the light of postmodern developments in the built environment and architectural thinking. A

1. Strada Nuova, Genoa. Nineteenth-century photograph.

key point of reference has been the famous Strada Nuova in Genoa (Fig. 1), an elegant and exclusive street lined by aristocratic palaces.[17] The Strada Nuova, dead straight and very wide by the standards of the day, was a new foundation of the mid-sixteenth century, designed as an appropriate setting for grand palaces, all of which meet the street with an imposing, fashionable, and in most cases ornate facade.[18] Through design or accident, these facades balance the requirements of overall consistency for the street as a whole and the interest in self-representation of the individual proprietors.[19] This was possible, needless to say, through the exploitation of a peripheral, almost suburban site, high on a hill overlooking the distant harbor and crowded old city studded with the traditional compact enclaves of the leading families. Though of outstanding architectural quality and coherence, the resulting urban space was typical of the noble quarters or enclaves emerging in the era. It was an aristocratic utopia repressing all visible evidence of ancillary or subordinate populations and

functions, and asserting the solidarity and mutual allegiance of the patrons' families and lineages. It helped maintain the fiction that Genoa itself remained a free city-state, controlled by an aristocracy of birth and taste, rather than subject to a dominant foreign regime. Such fictions were common enough in Renaissance Italy.

None of this was of relevance in the postmodern reception of the Strada Nuova. It was grist to the mill of polemics against the purist vision, central to architectural modernism, of functional and technological conditions as determining form. In modernist principle, at least, a design was generated from within, so that, in Le Corbusier's memorable formulation, the perfect building assumed the quality of a bubble, its exterior profile entirely and transparently a product of interior spatial manipulation, of which it was also a sign.[20] In postmodernism, on the other hand, architecture was reduced to imagery, or even pastiche.[21] The leading theorist of the movement, Robert Venturi, proposed the absolute divorce of the semiotic and containing or sheltering functions of buildings, allowing the flexible adjustment of the exterior to changes of a building's function, not to speak of wider cultural changes.[22] Such a radical disjunction of architecture and building – or between the semiotic/decorative and tectonic aspects of architecture – was hardly new, with its distant echoes of Alberti's distinction of ornament and beauty.

Venturi's ideas, of course, drew sustenance from studies of the largely classical church and palace facades of Renaissance and baroque Rome. The result was a conception of classicism, or at least of classicizing decor, as admitting formally and semantically flexible procedures of design and redesign not only responsive to, but also even defined by, social and commercial exigencies. There is no need to emphasize the absolute contrast of principle between such a conception and the Neoplatonist doctrine of metaphysical absolutes once dominant in the historiography of Renaissance architecture. If only out of a positivistic suspicion of theory, more recent scholarship has largely turned away from metaphysics, to offer reassessments of one major figure after another as attentive to strategic logic and rhetorical effect, even while maintaining, perhaps also with strategic cunning, the semblance of absolute perfection.[23] Indeed, the tension between essence and expression lies, we might say, at the heart of the great tradition of Western architecture, and it lives on in more recent polemics.

Not by accident, a key text in the history both of modernism and of the late twentieth-century antimodernist reaction emphasizes the Platonist–Pythagorean conception of an architecture grounded in transcendent formal values, an integral and orderly classicism resonating with an imagined integral and orderly wider world.[24] In his enormously influential *Architecture in the age of humanism,* first published in 1948, Rudolf Wittkower associated such a conception with leading architects of the Renaissance, with fateful consequences for historiography. Indeed, Wittkower thereby detached the study of the Renaissance built environment from the social and broadly cultural forces that attended and conditioned its production, leaving no possibility for the serious engagement with

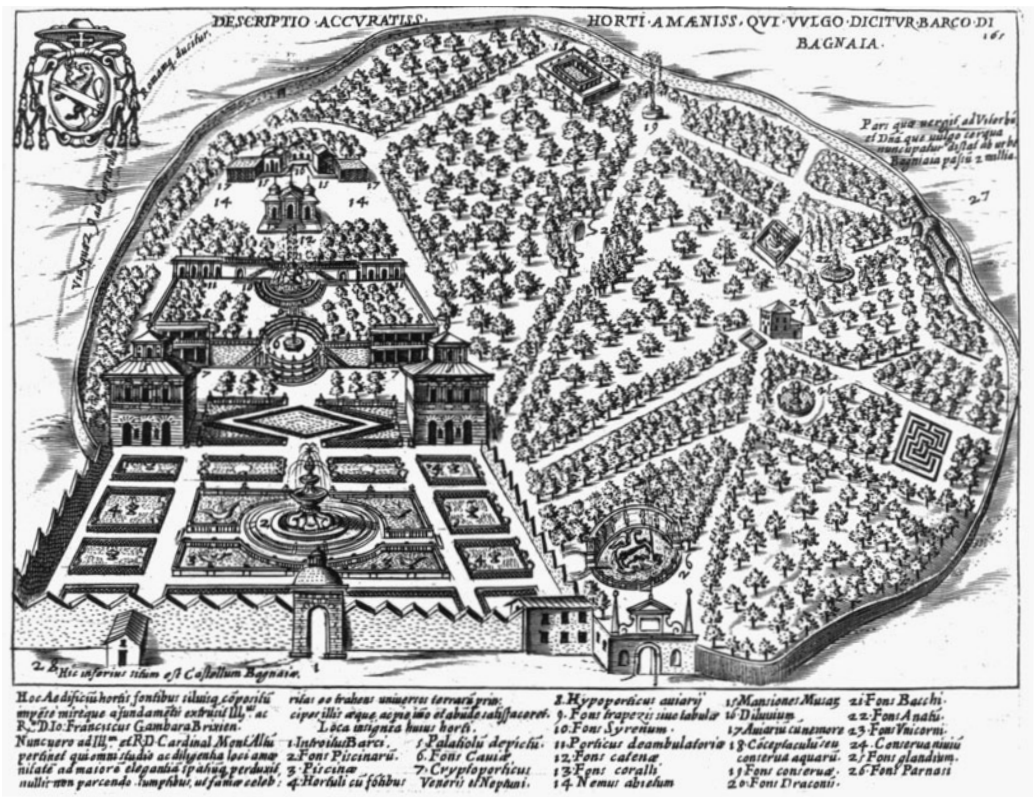
the issue of the facade, which is inherently subversive of Wittkower's entire approach.[25] Nevertheless, it was also Wittkower who drew attention to the ambivalence of crucial classical architectural forms in the most ostensibly Platonist theoretical and constructive contexts, opening the way for interventions, especially those of Colin Rowe, that were ultimately fatal for modernist orthodoxy.[26]

Wittkower notoriously developed his argument in relation to a highly select group of buildings set apart from the city, most notably Palladio's villas. He proceeded, further, to abstract these from any topographical context or even architectural framing that they might have had, in a discursive move reminiscent of the modernist project of the dissolution of the traditional city and the emergence of the villa as a paradigm for architectural design.[27] The ideal modernist villa, of course, was set within and formally responsive to a rural idyll, allowing an interpenetration of interior and exterior space, or even suggesting the elision of any such distinction. In practice, needless to say, the most exemplary modernist "villas," notably those of Le Corbusier, turned out to be about representation and image-projection as much as transparency, and some were even equipped with undeniably facade-like elements.[28]

Similar issues and equal sophistication in the solutions occur, however, already in the architecture of the sixteenth century. To refer to a prophetic observation of Alberti, villas allow a maximum degree of freedom in the elaboration of a design, even when accommodated to the topographical context.[29] Long before modernism, though certainly with different means and expressive objectives, Renaissance architects contrived the opening of the architectural interior into "natural" landscape, or the irruption of the exterior into the interior (Fig. 2).[30] In general, villa architecture offered opportunities to evade the particular disjunction of architecture and clothing, structure and surface, which was by then prevalent in the architecture of urban residences. In an increasingly restrictive and rule-bound urban world, the villa provided for architects as well as patrons a sphere of liberty, or even, on occasion, libertinism.

This study takes as its primary material a range of facades produced in the "long Renaissance," mostly in Florence and Rome, sites of the most precocious and influential facade solutions. The major objective of the book is to present a broadly anthropological understanding of the facade as cultural phenomenon, in all its complexity. I seek in the opening chapter to map the relevant conceptual field, an undertaking that necessarily involves forays into material usually excluded from the disciplinary confines of architectural history. This is not just a matter of contriving a methodological or historiographical strategy appropriate to the topic as defined in more expansive terms, but also of engaging with the almost complete absence of discursive treatment of the architectural facade in Renaissance treatises on architecture.

In a society preoccupied with self-representation, it is indeed remarkable that so conspicuous a vehicle of self-representation as the facade remained for




2. Villa Lante, Bagnaia, seventeenth-century view. The "main house" of the villa comprises two identical structures separated by a sloping section of garden with diagonal ramps.

the most part implicit, as it were below the surface of discourse about architecture, as crystallized in treatise literature. On the other hand, the built work of certain architects embodies a self-conscious resistance to the separation of interior and exterior central in the idea of facade. Immanent in some design projects, indeed, is a conception of architecture that presupposes, as a central axiom, the transparency of a building, making the interior legible on the outer skin. The house front as index becomes a matter of principle, then, while the paradox emerges that the facade and its critique belong to the same historical moment. From a late twentieth-century perspective, such a paradox raises the issue of the ambiguous place of Renaissance architecture in the genealogy of modernism, in which it may equally register as a pioneer phase or a model to be overcome.

Throughout the book, further, I appeal to discourse beyond the specific domain of architecture, and to a rich array of conceptions and formulations relevant to the issues about which architectural writers proved so laconic. In scholarship on the Renaissance environment, indeed, there has previously

been remarkably little intersection between architectural and cultural history, even when the terms of the discourse seemed to require it.[31] In Chapter 2, I explore the spatial as well as interpersonal relations and conditions indicated in one of the most celebrated tales of Boccaccio's *Decameron*. Boccaccio does not refer to "the facade" as such, but his text provides evidence of styles of conceptualization available in fourteenth-century Florentine literate culture, that is, among lay circles who both prized the *Decameron* and were interested in the ordering and enhancement of their domestic environment. The link between the latter and a highly wrought literary work is obviously indirect, but the very slippage between these two domains of cultural production compels a confrontation with the issue of the larger epistemological regime in which both occur.

The history of facade architecture is part of a larger architectural history that is too well known to require retelling here. Nevertheless, while developing issues raised in the opening chapters, Chapters 3 to 10 engage these issues in relation to specific cases and historical processes. Proceeding roughly in chronological sequence, these chapters address the genealogy, inflections, and diffusion of the secular facade as a catalyst and condition for a radically new kind of urban environment and new conceptions of urban design. Thanks to the pioneering research of David Friedman, we know that the facade, in this sense, had a beginning, emerging in Florence in the fourteenth century.[32] At least implicitly, the basic issues in facade design were framed long before various major architects of the fifteenth and especially sixteenth centuries expended remarkable inventiveness and skill in the elaboration of diverse models. What changed, needless to say, was the self-consciousness with which such architects approached their task. This resulted especially from the engagement with the doctrine of Vitruvius, which not only did not provide models for facade design, but also, as we will see, suggested an approach to design that rejected the very idea of the facade.

In Chapters 3 to 5 I discuss the emergence and diffusion of facade architecture in late-medieval and early Renaissance Florence, noting the incidence of remarkably disparate approaches to facade design. The possible ideological resonance of diverse architectural idioms is an important theme of these discussions, along with the general intellectual or rather epistemological context. In particular, I devote a chapter to each of the two great pioneers of the new architecture, Brunelleschi and Alberti, one the upholder of an architectural grammar, the other of a rhetorical architecture. Much of the succeeding history of Western architecture can indeed be found, *in nuce,* in the opposition of the design approaches of these two innovators.

From Florence the discussion moves to Urbino, site of especially audacious experiments in the design and furnishing of a palatial residence. In Chapter 6 I consider the explorations of perspective drawing associated with the court of Urbino and manifested in the decorations and even architecture of the ducal palace itself. I explore the tension between new forms of projective representa-

tion using the technique of one-point perspective, implying or showing the recession of space beyond a given base plane (typically, the picture surface), and an interest in the evocation, emphasized by ancient writers, of material objects thrust forward from a base plane. The latter is inherent especially in various kinds of portraiture, linking the literal representation of an individual human subject and his or her metaphorical representation through emblematic and even architectural means. This leads to the idea of buildings as endowed with subjectivity, as quasi-agents rather than mere backdrop in the social drama, in contrast to standard conceptions of the place of scenography in Renaissance culture. Finally, the metaphoric association of architecture and human subjectivity leads to a conspicuous case of their metonymic deployment, that is, in contiguity: by way of a discussion of the issues arising or implicit in debates about the installation of Michelangelo's *David* in Florence, I consider the relevance for facade design of the emergence of colossal statuary in the Renaissance.

Two chapters examine developments in Rome, site of especially important associations of colossal statuary and architectural objects. In Chapter 7 I consider a single facade in the newly founded court enclave. Bramante's design for the Palazzo Caprini is of exceptional paradigmatic importance in later palace design, not least for its semiotic charge. In particular, it constitutes a remarkably self-conscious and self-reflexive projection of an architecture of binary contrast, conjuring dichotomies, notably that between nature and culture, central in the epistemological regime of the Renaissance, though often subjected, in the course of the sixteenth century, to witty and playful elision. In Chapter 8 I turn to the setting of the Palazzo Caprini, detailing the unplanned and unforeseen evolution of the court enclave around a pioneer parade street. In c. 1500 to 1527 this district became an incubator for an especially diverse and elaborate set of facades, creating the conditions for an enlarged conception of the architectural facade. This leads to the issue of the social and ideological implications of facade types chosen by different kinds of patrons for different kinds of site and setting. The emphasis is on tissues of alliance and rivalry rather than, as is all too common, on the determination of taste by a dominant court or other center of authority.

The concluding chapter presents a drastic change of topographic and, at first sight, conceptual focus. A major thesis of the book is the significance of facade architecture in the elaboration of formal and logical schemata of profound importance in the self-representation and self-comprehension of the elites of Renaissance Florence and especially Rome. In the course of the sixteenth century, facade architecture lost the logical and semiotic complexity apparent in the Rome of Bramante and Raphael. Crucial themes of the facade architecture of that remarkable epoch reemerged, however, in the work of Andrea Palladio, less significantly in Palladio's polite adaptations of facade types than in expansive, indeed rural, architectural projects. To a great extent this was a matter of the logic of architectural archetypes (or of architecture and