

THE URBAN DEVELOPMENT
OF ROME IN THE AGE OF
ALEXANDER VII



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University of Tennessee



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INTRODUCTION

The study of urban architecture breeds a certain tension: On the one hand there is the city itself as a built environment, and on the other there are the individual buildings that define the built environment. It would seem that to focus on one component is to ignore the other. In fact, scholarly study of a city is not unlike the physical experience of the city. Both enterprises call for a bifocal approach predicated on an appreciation of the city as the monument and architecture as the medium of its creation. Urban architectural “bites” are relatively small, but their accumulation takes on a form and content the exact nature of which is complex beyond that of any one unit.

This book is about the city of Rome and the nurturing of its urban development by Pope Alexander VII Chigi (1655–1667). It is also about the impact of Alexander VII’s plans on the development of new ways of understanding planning and designing architecture in the urban environment. Alexander VII enlisted architects of the first rank to design and thereby promote his concept of a New Rome. These include Gianlorenzo Bernini, Pietro da Cortona and Carlo Rainaldi. Other accomplished designers also played a part – among them Giovanni Antonio De’Rossi and Antonio del Grande – as did lesser known personalities, including Felice della Greca, Camillo Arcucci and Simone Brogi. Likewise, the rank and caliber of private patrons who supported the pope’s program ranged from the princes Camillo Pamphili and Nicolò Ludovisi to minor figures like Angelo Paracciani and Marc’ Antonio de’Grassi. Architects and patrons alike depended for their licenses and exemptions on the Office of the Presidenza delle Strade, administered under the president by the *Maestri delle strade*. An office of public works, this institution supervised the mechanics of building and planning in Rome.

The list of players is substantial, but no one individual, no one building is the focus of this study. Rather the focus is on the process of building, on design decisions – to build as well as not to build – in order to understand the pope’s vision and his pragmatism. In the course of this study the small dramas of individual projects are revealed, and a number of subplots concerning matters of style, iconography, public amenity and private interest emerge. Fascinating in their own ways, these episodes combine to establish a clearer understanding of Alexander’s Rome, in concept and in fact, and of the attention to the relationship of building and planning that characterized Roman baroque architecture by the end of Alexander’s pontificate in 1667.

Modern interest in Alexander's Rome has been steady. In the first half of the 20th century, Leandro Ozzola (1908) and Vincenzo Golzio (1939) directed their attentions to the publication of primary materials documenting the art and architecture of the Chigi pope and his family members in Rome. Ludwig von Pastor's volume on the pontificate of Alexander VII (1929), a product of substantial archival retrievals, remains an invaluable source. Rudolf Wittkower in his collaborative study with Heinrich Brauer of Bernini's drawings (1931) uncovered the graphic documentation for the many Chigi commissions with which the artist was involved. Wittkower went on to explore a number of these architectural projects individually, most notably in his article on Carlo Rainaldi and the High Baroque style in Rome (1937).

With documentation closer to hand by midcentury, architectural historians set about the study of many of Alexander's more remarkable building campaigns, supplementing the archival record and narrating in detail for the first time the histories of a number of key sites. Hellmut Hager's study of the twin churches at Piazza del Popolo (1967–1968), T. K. Kitao's of Piazza S. Pietro (1974), Hans Ost's of the facade and piazza at S. Maria della Pace (1981) and, more recently, the studies of the rebuilding of S. Maria in Campitelli by Klaus Güthlein (1990) and of the design, construction and iconography of the Scala Regia by Tod Marder (1997) form a corpus of exemplary, monographic treatments of the pope's major initiatives in church architecture. The palace projects of the Chigi family have also attracted interest. Renato Lefevre began his lifelong work on Palazzo Chigi at Piazza Colonna in the late 1950s, and Patricia Waddy has established the history of Palazzo Chigi-Odescalchi in the context of her broader study of 17th-century Roman palaces.

In 1980, Richard Krautheimer published *Rome: Profile of a City, 312–1308*. This masterful study was conceived as the first of three volumes chronicling the urban development of the city. Volume two, projected to cover the years 1300–1560, was abandoned in the interest of time, and volume three, to span the years 1560–1700, was collapsed.¹ Fortunately, Krautheimer, who had already mined Alexander's diary and published with Roger Jones the portions relevant to art and architecture (1975), as well as two shorter pieces, on Piazza Colonna (1983) and projects for Palazzo del Quirinale (1983), committed to publishing his findings and his ideas about Alexander VII. Rich in its own right, *The Rome of Alexander VII, 1655–1667* (1985) is a scant fragment of Krautheimer's astoundingly ambitious scheme to complete an examination of all of Rome from the early 4th through the 17th century.

In this seminal work Krautheimer demonstrated Alexander VII's appetite for building, in addition to advancing three major theses about the pope's building program. In aesthetic terms Krautheimer argued the formative role of stagecraft and theater as sources for the shapes of a number of the *piazze* ordered by Alexander as well as for the relationships between the viewer and the urban action that these imply. He also recognized in Alexander's building program a political agenda to bolster the image of Rome and the Church within the European arena in compensation for the Church's real loss of political power by midcentury.² Further, he attributed to Alexander the ambition to celebrate the city as a cultural capital,

readied under his watch to accommodate not just religious pilgrims but also tourists with a taste for historical and contemporary architectural drama. Written for a general audience and annotated for the specialist, the book offers the first effort to examine Alexander VII's building program in a comprehensive fashion. As such, it forms a critical base for more recent treatments, as Krautheimer's theses remain valid. For example, Marder (1999) has now proofed the theme of political agenda in much greater detail. The ramifications of the *teatro* aesthetic also have been explored by Paul Wilson (1996) in his study of Giovanni Battista Faldà's famous compendia of engraved views of the city, prepared for the pope and published under his auspices, as further support for the theme of Rome as a tourist destination.

In the final analysis, Krautheimer understood Alexander's Rome as the product of a surfeit of projects. He categorized the projects by building type, identifying streets and *piazze* as the major elements of planning, and he sought themes in the accumulation of building. Krautheimer's archival finds indicated the existence of additional material to support a further reclamation of the facts of Alexander's building initiatives and of those undertaken by others during Alexander's reign. One goal of this study is to flesh out the pope's interventions in an effort to establish a more accurate and more complete record of what happened; when events occurred; when they occurred relative to each other; and in some instances why decisions were made when they were made.

Roman life in the 17th century, as does life in Rome today, yielded a remarkable paper trail. Rarely was the original the only copy of either a personal, public, financial or legal document. As a result, the surviving records are abundant. There is also great variety to the types of records that are extant, as every party produced some testimony to their stake in the urban process. The documentation recovered here includes papal instruments, notarial acts, memoranda, real estate contracts, inspection reports, payment records with receipts and deposits and parochial records confirming the habitation of buildings, as well as survey drawings of property, working drawings for builders and presentation drawings for clients. More personal testimonies also narrate the activities of key personalities. Alexander's own diary is the most remarkable of these for its time and its type. Here the pope logged his every interaction and concern, and his passion for architecture is thoroughly documented by the many entries narrating, in the shorthand manner of a busy administrator, his daily meetings with architects and officials overseeing the details of his many directives for the city. There are also the diaries and letters of others that often reveal in much greater detail the determination with which Alexander pushed his initiatives. *Avvisi*, the news dispatches that report on the pope and his court to the larger world, are a rich source for confirming the chronology of activities as well as for suggesting the behind-the-scenes negotiations that these necessitated. This mass of documentation is what the historical anthropologist Peter Burke calls the testimony of "insiders," the individuals working directly either to complete the pope's assignments or to respond to these.³ "Outsiders," in 17th-century Rome usually foreigners, also left a trail of commentary. Apparently, they watched intrigued as the pope orchestrated his movements about the city and the built environment where these took

place. The official reports of the Venetian ambassadors and the descriptions of Rome by other visitors furnish an important corrective to the records of those deeply mired in the daily operations that new building requires. Finally, Alexander himself made public various kinds of documents of his plans for Rome – foundation medals; official printed images of projects and events; maps of the city produced to make clear the larger matrix for the pope's schemes; and books of engraved views of Alexander's Rome, authored by Falda and published by G. G. De' Rossi (1665–1669).

The particular challenge in archival research of any urban setting is to determine what detail and how much is necessary to understand a city.⁴ My archival searches have been guided by earlier scholars whose monographic studies laid the groundwork for archival reclamation. I have searched the finds of these scholars in directions that led beyond the immediate confines of a given building site. The yield was rich and exciting from the first. With time, my determination of when to arrest the pursuit seemed to fall logically when I began to find information that I had learned from other parallel sources or that I had suspected existed based on previous finds.

A further issue in this reconstruction of events is the synchronicity of activities at multiple building sites. As my research progressed, it became increasingly apparent to me that decisions made at one building site affected those at another, and for this reason I have reconstructed the activities not just year by year but also month by month and on occasion even day by day. As a study based on archival records, this examination of the pope's building initiatives calls for patience and tolerance for detail.

In addition to a careful examination of archival records, the study also depends on close reading of the physical fabric of the city as it existed during Alexander's time. Building sites have been surveyed relative to each other and relative to projected building in an attempt to reassess what was built as well as what might have been built. In short, every effort has been made to appraise the spatial realities of the city: the nature of the interstices of streets and *piazze*, the relationship of the actual as well as projected buildings to these and to each other, the sight lines between buildings as well as between distinct zones of the city and the architectural responses to these. The aggregate of this range of intrinsic data is remarkable for what it reveals about Rome during Alexander's time when the tradition of the "builder-popes" was still vital, but the consequences were novel.

This history revisits the Quirinal (Chapter 1), Piazza del Popolo (Chapter 2), Piazza Colonna (Chapter 4) and Piazza S. Pietro (Chapter 6); it deals afresh with projects for Piazza S. Marco (Chapter 3) and via del Corso (Chapter 5); and it uncovers speculative activities at these and other sites around the city. A more complex picture of Alexander's determination and skill as both visionary and administrator emerges, as does an alternate reading of Alexander's city. In lieu of Krautheimer's accounting of the projects, this history recognizes the pope's conception of a coordinated building program for the city, focused on three major sites, at Piazza del Quirinale, at the Corso and at St. Peter's. And, this discovery reveals Alexander's vision of a New Rome reminiscent in its component parts – palace (Quirinale), hippodrome (Corso) and temple (S. Pietro) – of the great capital cities of



FIGURE 1. Bust of Pope Alexander VII, terra-cotta, Melchiorre Caffà, 1667 (Ariccia, Palazzo Chigi, inv. 748)

the late-antique Roman East. The most prominent of these, as well as the most germane to Rome, was Constantinople. Alexander, in a bold, even counterintuitive strategy, seems to have endeavored to break what Marvin Trachtenberg has called in his work on the Renaissance, “the closed semiotic circle in Rome in which all reference was to itself.”⁵ Opting instead to refashion Rome according to the architectural formulae of Eastern capital cities in antiquity, Alexander hoped through his building campaign to reclaim the heritage of the Church as an institution and of Rome as an idea. In short, Krautheimer’s recognition of the political agenda in Alexander’s building program is given new force by recognition of the pope’s adoption of a novel architectural analogy for the city. By drawing on the architectural legacy of Roman Asia and of Constantine’s founding of Constantinople as a new, Christian capital for the imperium, Alexander hoped to marshal testimony outside of the experience of his political rivals within western Europe to support a claim to sustained political and spiritual power.

Born in 1599 in Siena, Fabio Chigi was a collateral descendent of Agostino Chigi (1466–1520), personal banker of Pope Julius II Della Rovere (1503–1513) and, like his papal sponsor, a patron of the High Renaissance in Rome. In fact, Agostino had been adopted by Julius II, and the addition of the oak tree to the Chigi mountains and star of their family arms was an important reminder to mid-17th-century viewers of the historic association between these two families, a reminder necessitated by the collapse of the Chigi family fortunes later in the 16th century.⁶ A student of theology, Chigi began his academic work in his native city where he also was attracted to the study of literature as well as of art and architecture.⁷ With his transfer to Rome in 1626 to continue his studies, he seems to have seized on the ambition to reclaim his family's earlier prominence in the city. Ironically, this campaign was initially fueled by a rapid succession of diplomatic assignments outside of Rome, first at Ferrara, then on Malta and culminating in his appointments as papal nuncio at Cologne and finally as nuncio extraordinary to the negotiations for the Treaty of Münster (1643) and the Peace of Westphalia (1648). Although this last assignment was hardly successful as the power of the Church within Europe had been seriously compromised, Chigi's experience in foreign affairs recommended him for the position of secretary of state to Pope Innocent X Pamphili (1644–1655) in 1651. This appointment required his return to Rome, and this afforded Fabio Chigi his first real opportunity to revive the memory of his forebear, the legendary Agostino Chigi.

In 1652 Fabio Chigi was elevated to cardinal. Three years later, after a conclave protracted by political conflicts between those cardinals partial to the Barberini and France, those with allegiance to the Pamphili and Spain and those with an independent agenda (the so-called *Squadron volante*, or “flying squadron”), Fabio Chigi, a compromise candidate with tepid support from all sides, was elected pope (Fig. 1).⁸ His attraction as a papal candidate supported in the end by foreign, especially French, interests may have been that not only had he spent little time in Rome at the seat of papal power, but he also had witnessed at first hand the degradation of that power and accepted this by signing the Peace of Westphalia on behalf of the Papal States. Eschewing what might have been an obvious choice of name to ally himself as his ancestors had with Julius II, Cardinal Chigi, reportedly stunned and disappointed by his election, chose Alexander for his name, citing reference to fellow Siennese Alexander III Bandinelli (1159–1181) who reigned during the Babylonian Captivity.⁹

Although previously on the margins of the papal court in Rome (or perhaps because of this!), Alexander VII set about a deliberate program of administrative and spiritual reform, with broad implications but decidedly local effects. New stringency was established in nearly every quarter of papal operations in Rome.¹⁰ In truth little changed in the missions of these governing bodies, but the reform brought about a new energy and urgency to their operations. Offices that had grown sleepy were revived. Administrative offices, the duties of which had become lax, were reorganized. Two of these arms of papal administration were especially critical for the urban development of the city. Alexander recharged the Sacra Congregazione delle Visite Apostoliche with its original mission to supervise and regulate the administration of each and every church in the city, an assignment that was to include review of the physical fabric and decoration of their sites.¹¹ Likewise the Office of the Presidenza delle Strade, a key

interface between papal and municipal governance, was redirected to oversee every aspect of the physical fabric of the city including all building activities, both public and private. As a result, the two *maestri delle strade*, or masters of the streets, charged with executing the orders of the president, also enjoyed renewed power. Under Alexander's immediate predecessors, Urban VIII and Innocent X, these appointments had become more matters of honor than ones for action, and building more a matter of opportunity than for regulation.¹²

In addition to redirecting the work habits of others, Alexander set about his own menu of papal reforms. Immediately upon election he renounced the nepotism of his predecessors, a policy that he was to rescind just a year later.¹³ More successful was his reinstatement of the regulations and decorum of the *cappella pontificia*, the ceremony of the papal chapel, requiring the proper number of attendants and their appropriate attire. He established an exhausting program of papal audiences; he made great ceremony of his travels about the city to insure his visibility before his local subjects; and he made every effort to couch his projects in terms of their social welfare. Most earlier 17th-century popes had opted to live at Palazzo del Quirinale, a hygienic choice given the salubrious air on this remote hill, usually rationalized by the pontiff's health and well being, but few risked any confusion about their primary residence, which remained Palazzo del Vaticano. In Alexander's case the choice to live and to administer his office at Palazzo del Quirinale, as recounted by his biographer Pietro Sforza Pallavicino, was deliberate; the motive was literally to gain a fresh perspective (and prospect, as we shall see) on the Church and on the city.¹⁴

In 1660 Ambassador Angelo Correr recorded details of Alexander's personal appearance and habits for his constituents in the Republic of Venice.¹⁵ Relatively short in stature, with black hair beginning to turn white, the pope, according to Correr, was fastidious about his diet as well as his wardrobe. Having lost all of his teeth, Alexander was forced to eat his foods mashed, which also aided his digestion as he had long suffered gallstones, an ailment that the ambassador further notes was especially common among Romans. In dress Alexander preferred austere outfits with an exquisite drape. Such descriptive details, coupled with contemporary portraits, the survival of his personal diary and the abundance of documentation to his personal style of leadership, evoke an image of a prelate who was as tireless in his appetite for his choice of activities close to home as he was self-conscious of his appearance and image.¹⁶ His style as pope seems unchanged from that as cardinal, when it was recorded that he preferred a black velvet carriage with silver ornaments, the effectiveness of which Burke describes as "a splendid modesty showing the owner to be unworldly in outlook and high in status."¹⁷

As secretary of state, Fabio Chigi had been responsible for all negotiations that prepared the conversion of Christina, queen of Sweden, to Catholicism. As pope, Alexander VII orchestrated the queen's travels from northern Europe to Rome in planned stages that culminated with her triumphal entry into the city on 23 December 1655. Although she proved a difficult subject in both spiritual and political terms, Christina was something of a "war trophy" for the Church.¹⁸ Her conversion and the publicity that accompanied this were perceived as testimonials to the continuing power of the Church within the European

arena. Alexander also instituted more savvy, and ultimately more significant, reforms in his initiative to transform the papacy, too often ruled as “a personal fief,” into a modern state.¹⁹ Marie-Louise Rodén has recently argued a revisionist history of Alexander’s reforms, including not only his initial rebuke of family members as papal administrators but also the consultative process that he instituted within the College of Cardinals in his rescission of this. In these kinds of internal political maneuvers Rodén finds evidence “that the Catholic church made a swift, deliberate, and necessary adjustment to the European political constellation imposed by the Westphalian Peace.”²⁰

If his election in spring 1655 was met with excitement among Romans who hailed Alexander for his initial renunciation of nepotism as well as for the speed and effectiveness with which he tackled the challenge of eradicating the city of plague within a year’s time of its insurgence in 1656, his papacy turned sour for the populace of Rome (as had those of most of his predecessors) by about 1660. By then for every encomium there was a pasquinade. Compared by some in importance to Romulus and in grandeur to Augustus (among other legendary heroes of Rome and elsewhere), he was tagged in the streets as the “papa di grande edificazione,” a biting wordplay not on his intellectual capacity and achievements but on what some deemed his outrageous building exploits.²¹ Outsider John Bargrave, the soon-to-be canon of Canterbury, reported on this degeneration of Chigi’s promise after his final visit to Rome in 1659–1660.

In the first months of his elevation to the Popedom, he had so taken upon himself the profession of an evangelical life that he was wont to season his meat with ashes, to sleep upon a hard couch, to hate riches, glory and pomp, taking a great pleasure to give audience to ambassadors in a chamber full of dead men’s skulls, and in the sight of his coffin, which stood there to put him in mind of his death. But as soon as he had called his relations about him he changed his nature. Instead of humility, succeeded vanity; his mortification vanished, his hard couch was turned into soft featherbed, his dead men’s skulls into jewels, and his thoughts of death into ambition – filling his empty coffin with money as if he would corrupt death, and purchase life with riches.²²

It should not escape our notice that by 1660 Alexander’s urban program for Rome had coalesced, and it may have been this, coupled with a growing awareness that Rome itself had been cast aside in the newly drafted balance of European power drawn up in the Peace of the Pyrenees, completed without Vatican participation in November 1659, rather than the accommodation of his family members in Rome that fanned the scorn and impatience of Romans and foreigners alike.

The political difficulties of Alexander VII and of the Papal States have been outlined elsewhere in greater detail.²³ What is clear is that Alexander found himself wedged between two moments in time. He enjoyed the tradition of the immediate past in Rome with its long line of modern popes, many of whom like himself were builder-popes, whose agendas for building, just like his, were religious and economic, political and personal. However, earlier papal building programs were rarely questioned for their appropriateness and value. That Alexander’s were scrutinized reflects a new political reality for Rome and the papacy, first

heralded by the Treaty of Münster (1643), maintained by the Peace of Westphalia (1648) and solidified by the Peace of the Pyrenees (1659). From this point on, the spiritual allegiance of Europe no longer weighed in favor of the Catholic Church, and as a result the Papal States, never having held either substantial territory or a majority population, struggled to hold a politically viable position within Europe.²⁴ Alexander VII, witness at the first two accords and absentee at the third, surely knew this well. These experiences spawned his leadership in church reform, of which his urban development program was a part.

Within this contradictory context the pope's vision for the architectural redefinition of Rome grew over time, emerging slowly as a certain project or group of projects offered opportunities that others did not. The period of gestation was relatively long. Inchoate in the first years of his papacy, his urban scheme emerged at some point between 1657 and 1658. The projects themselves spurred the concept; as they became components in a coordinated program of building, they became visually, stylistically and symbolically linked. For example, we will see that the scheme to open a route from Piazza del Popolo to Palazzo del Quirinale produced studies of Piazza del Popolo that redirected interest in this as a forecourt not to the Quirinal Palace, but to via del Corso and the heart of the city. This discovery provoked a separation of projects: Palazzo del Quirinale stood apart as the imperial palace, above the Corso, which was reborn in Alexander's mind as the hippodrome of the city. Likewise, as the design and construction of Piazza S. Pietro (and the related project to remake the Scala Regia) gained momentum, the power of the piazza to reinvest the church of St. Peter's with a renewed architectural presence in Rome fueled the pope's desire to mark this as the imperial temple of the city.

The program, then, evolved in a curious and seemingly backward fashion. It would seem haphazard except that Alexander VII's pragmatism was the constant. His passion for architecture was legend during his lifetime. For this he was dubbed a pope who suffered "mal di pietra," a reference at once to both his affliction with gallstones and his building mania.²⁵ The installation in his private apartments at the Quirinal Palace of a large wooden model of the city with buildings made to be movable pieces conjures up an image of gaming but actually documents his zeal for considering a number of alternative projects at a time.²⁶

He was also a pope who watched the city. This accounts for his attraction to Palazzo del Quirinale from the moment of his election. Perched high above the city and to the east, he could watch over both public and private building, calling for this or that adjustment as he saw fit. His position at this vantage point seems to have given rise to the identification of via del Corso as the hippodrome, for he alone could see the full stretch of the street from north to south, with the markers at each end as well as those projected for its length. From the Quirinal he could also gaze across the city to the great temple of S. Pietro in Vaticano. In many ways Alexander VII's vision for Rome smacks of tradition. In remaking the city he hoped to sustain its history and its health. His attempt to broaden its reference beyond antiquity and itself by drawing on the forms of Roman Asia was a new twist, but the endeavor as a whole has a familiar aspect. It is the pragmatism with which the Chigi pope executed his vision that is remarkable.

As we shall see, Alexander VII's urban program is fraught with irony. His ambitions were grand, but his vision proved fugitive. His drive was both political and personal, but the legacy of his efforts is primarily practical and aesthetic. Alexander's initiatives for the city gave rise to a new way of planning, characterized by a flexibility in thinking and a fluidity in process. Romanists have long had an appreciation for the survivability of planning schemes in the city. Proposals, especially papal ones, seem to have had a way of surviving, often for generations, as if patiently awaiting execution.²⁷ What is special about Alexander VII as the visionary of this comprehensive planning program is his consummate ability to accept and to respond to the vagaries of each and every project. Poised above the city in his apartments at Palazzo del Quirinale, the pope refused to consider any one project in isolation, any one solution as inevitable. The evidence proves that he requested feasibility studies; he schemed to involve as many parties as possible in hopes not only of defraying expenses but also of engendering support and investment in his vision for the city; and he remained absolutely flexible even in his own determination. Moreover, he seems to have recognized, as few of his predecessors did, that architectural design is only one aspect of urban planning, albeit the most visible. Matters of law and finance, inducement and procedure are more subtle but no less essential. Although this study concerns primarily architecture and topography in city planning, the primary materials on which it is based afford some insight into these corollary aspects.

The nature of the architectural assignments under Alexander's pontificate also bred a heightened degree of design response to conditions of building sites, to the topography and its effect on the image of a building and to the spatial sequence and elapsed time of viewing. In short, what emerged from the pope's grand and imperial ambitions is something of considerable consequence for the conception of both architecture and urban design. As had no previous builder-pope, Alexander VII understood the city as an architectural composition. To this end, he piloted a new aesthetic in which the city was the monument and architecture the medium for its creation.