

Carlos Plaza

**Españoles en la corte de los Medici: Arquitectura y política en tiempos de Cosimo I**

Madrid: Centro de Estudios Europa Hispánica, 2016, 562 pp., 60 color and 165 b/w illus. €33.66, ISBN 9788415245568

Recent research about early modern Spanish Italy has yielded fruitful results for architectural history. For instance, we now know more about a Castilian cardinal's patronage of Donato Bramante in Rome, and we have new evidence of correspondence between viceroys and a Spanish king about building a royal palace in Naples.<sup>1</sup> Carlos Plaza's *Españoles en la corte de los Medici* also contributes new knowledge about Spanish patrons of architecture in Florence during that city's transformation by Cosimo I de' Medici (1519–74) and his successors into the site of a ducal court. This is a book with many protagonists, beginning with Cosimo, his first wife, Eleanora of Toledo (1522–62), and his sons Francesco I (1541–87) and Ferdinando I (1549–1609). The cast of characters expands to include three Spaniards whose Florentine palaces

form the core of the study: the courtiers Antonio Ramírez de Montalvo (d. 1581) and Fabio Arrazola de Mondragón (1530/35–86), and the merchant and *balli*, or grand master, of the Order of Santo Stefano, Baltasar Suárez de la Concha (d. 1620). Plaza's ambitious project probes the biographies of these three Spaniards and elucidates the processes by which they built monuments to glorify the Medici dukes and elevate their own status. Plaza also reevaluates existing scholarship on Bartolomeo Ammannati (1511–92), who emerges as another principal figure.

In the book's prologue, Howard Burns commends Plaza's attention to little-known Spanish patrons and to the political, cultural, and architectural contexts in which they operated. Indeed, context drives Plaza's introduction, where he provides wide-ranging information about Florence and its relation with Spain from the late Middle Ages through the sixteenth century. During the Renaissance, according to Plaza, Italy and Spain formed "a common territory" for the circulation of ideas, models, and persons that helped shape architectural practice (22). Following the installation of the first Medici duke in 1531, many Spaniards residing in Florence forged their careers in the ambit of the ruling family. Cosimo's rise to power after his succession as duke in 1537 was accompanied by the establishment of a dazzling court, to which Spaniards contributed significantly. Although Plaza focuses primarily on these Spanish patrons, he also examines their palaces as examples of private Florentine architecture, along with their individual uses, urban context, financing, construction, phases and strategies of design, and spatial configuration. In the end, this long list of objectives results in protracted analyses that reveal the book's origins as a dissertation.

The first section, titled "España y Florencia en el siglo XVI," comprises three chapters, the first of which surveys the waning Republican era and early ducal period in Florence. Plaza explains Cosimo's marriage to Eleanora as a declaration of allegiance to Charles V and Spanish political interests. He also uses the marriage to introduce a discussion of the viceregal court in Naples headed by Eleanora's father, the Spanish viceroy Pedro de Toledo, as a model for court life in Florence. The

chapter includes a subsection on villas and gardens in Florence, Naples, and Castile, purportedly to help the reader understand the Toledo family as architectural patrons, but given that it does not address larger issues, such as the role of architecture in a networked empire, this section could perhaps have been omitted altogether.

A second contextual chapter explores the economic, religious, militaristic, and cultural impact of Spaniards in ducal Florence via topics ranging from the Castilian wool trade to patronage of the University of Pisa to membership in the Order of Santo Stefano, created by Cosimo in 1561. Chapter 3 focuses on the political ends of architecture in ducal Florence, beginning with a consideration of the Medici pope Leo X's practice of empowering *gens nova*, or new men, rather than established noble elites at the Vatican. Cosimo followed this model, and the new men of Florence included this book's protagonists, whose buildings in turn contributed to Cosimo's image as a metapatron, or patron of patrons, a concept Plaza borrows from Howard Burns. Plaza shifts the chapter's discussion to a general survey of late sixteenth-century architecture in Florence before introducing the three palaces that are his principal focus.

The second part of the book, composed of four chapters, provides detailed considerations of these three Florentine palaces, as well as more summary comments about three additional villas and a nearby feudal palace, all built by Cosimo's *gens nova española*. Chapter 4 considers the Palazzo Ramírez Montalvo, a richly ornamented building along the Borgo degli Albizi, for which construction documents do not survive and authorship is debated. Plaza makes a solid case for an attribution to Ammannati, but his process of arriving at this conclusion demands the reader's patience. Exploring new documents in a family archive, Plaza first proves the Castilian origins of both the Ramírez and Montalvo families before, more usefully, reconstructing Ramírez de Montalvo's ascendancy in Florence, first as a member of the entourage of Eleanora and then as a trusted adviser to Cosimo. The subsequent discussion of the palace weaves together a history of the building site, debates about authorship, and a laborious account of the building's construction beginning around 1568. Although helpful

plans of each of the building's three stories are provided, these are inexplicably relegated to an appendix. Nearly eighty pages into the chapter, Plaza begins a focused analysis of the palace's design that characterizes the project as a masterful case of problem solving, in which Ammannati overcame preexisting conditions to create a successful design featuring innovative architectural features as well as carved and painted ornament. After reviewing the allegorical program for the painted portions of the façade designed by Giorgio Vasari, Plaza describes the Palazzo Montalvo as an homage to Cosimo rather than arguing for its status as a ducal monument.

Chapter 5 turns to the palace of Fabio Arrazola de Mondragón, a courtier who began service as a tutor to the prince Francesco. The Palazzo Mondragón occupies a prominent, triangular site on the Canto dei Cini, with one of its three façades visible from the piazza fronting Santa Maria Novella, a storied Dominican monastery of special significance to Florence's Spanish community. Although the chapter offers a close reading of Ammannati's architecture, it adds little to the larger claims about Spaniards in Florence that the reader might expect to lie at the heart of this book. As with the previous chapter, the author provides an exhaustive description of the building and its site, but without much interpretation.

Chapter 6 explores the little-studied palace of Baltasar Suárez de la Concha, the Palazzo del Baliato, sited on the Via Maggio. Unlike the other two courtier patrons Plaza discusses, Suárez was a wealthy wool merchant. Named master of the Order of Santo Stefano in 1590 and consul of the Spanish nation in Florence in 1607, Suárez owed his social rank to his 1573 marriage to Maria Martelli, sister of Cosimo's second wife. Notably, the nuptials were brokered by Ramírez de Montalvo. Complicating the story of the Palazzo del Baliato is the fact that Suárez purchased three separate properties—in 1576, 1582, and 1590—and then joined them. Among the palace's notable features are remnants of a fourteenth-century loggia incorporated into the ground level of the courtyard. Plaza compares the extensive use of rustication in the palace façade to Ammannati's contemporary expansion of the Palazzo Vecchio for Ferdinando I. Although he makes no claims of authorship for the palace, he convincingly

suggests that the building ought to be considered within the context of court patronage.

The book's final chapter surveys three villas in the vicinity of Florence owned by Ramírez de Montalvo, as well as the feudal palace of Sassetta near Piombino, which he acquired in 1563. Plaza offers new documentary evidence for some of the buildings and revisits existing scholarship on others. The book ends on page 483 in the midst of Plaza's comments about seventeenth-century interior features of the Sassetta palace; he provides no concluding remarks for the chapter or for the book as a whole. Instead, the reader finds three appendixes, including family trees, documentary transcriptions, and a series of plans and elevation drawings that, as noted, would have been better placed within the body of the text.

More thorough editing would have eliminated this book's repetitive passages and also better highlighted its novelties. While Plaza deserves admiration for bringing these stories of architectural patronage to light, the decision to provide such extensive background material raises the question of the book's intended audience. Is Plaza writing for readers who might not be familiar with the history of Renaissance architecture, or is he seeking to engage with experts in the field? If the latter is his aim, his assertions about the significance of Spanish interests and political maneuverings in Florence could have been more forceful, as the city still occupies a central position in early modern architectural history.

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## Note

1. Jack Freiberg, *Bramante's Tempietto, the Roman Renaissance, and the Spanish Crown* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Ximo Company, ed., *Bramante en Roma, Roma en España: Un juego de espejos en la temprana edad moderna* (Lleida: Universitat de Lleida, 2014); Sabina De Cavi, *Architecture and Royal Presence: Domenico and Giulio Cesare Fontana in Spanish Naples (1592–1627)* (Newcastle upon Tyne: Cambridge Scholars, 2009).

Cosimo di Giovanni de' Medici, called "the Elder" (Italian: il Vecchio) and posthumously "Father of the Fatherland" (Latin: pater patriae) (27 September 1389 – 1 August 1464), was an Italian banker and politician, the first member of the Medici family that de facto ruled Florence during much of the Italian Renaissance. Despite his influence, his power was not absolute; Florence's legislative councils at times resisted his proposals throughout his life, and he was always viewed as primus inter pares.

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Review: *Españoles en la corte de los Medici: Arquitectura y política en tiempos de Cosimo I*, by Carlos Plaza. Jesús Escobar.