The other day I looked at the old hovel on via Malcontenti, leaning on its worm-eaten gallows poles, the one on whose ruins will soon rise new palaces [palazzi], or at least the neat and orderly houses of the borghesi.¹

I wished that the architects who are building anew would look for inspiration at the honest houses of today’s borghesi, rather than at those houses that clumsily pretend to be palaces.

It seems to me detestable, these prideful sins committed in such great number in the art of Italian cities in our day, by those parvenus of architecture, who covet the property of others and want at any cost to dress them up in the orders of Vignola, or to give them the pretense of a direct ancestral lineage going back to the beautiful buildings of Athens.

There is as much Greek dignity and grace in them as in the choristers and extras in theater, who, dressed in the clothes of Athenian nobility, Roman senators, or the ladies of Corinth, play the roles of mechanics’ assistants or hawkers in the market. Truth is not a matter of appearances.

Greek orders and ornament are as respectable a tradition as any other, offering a trove of symmetry, proportion, and moldings in favor today, but which must be recalled in the correct time and place, with great caution and intelligence.

They are part of a classical aristocracy of a monumental nature, and when, in the more inspired times of the Renaissance they came to be recalled with vigor and applied to private buildings, it was by knowing masters who always used them in cases of exceptional dimension and magnitude. These masters made palazzi fit for kings, and not as some rental apartment occupied by a schoolmaster, a purveyor of Tuscan wine, and a magistrate on the first floor, a shoemaker, carpenter, and a policeman on the ground floor … and an attic granary used promiscuously for chickens, bundles of wheat, and the huddled family of the municipal streetsweeper.

As I see it, a building must tell us what it wants to be, who can live there, and what purpose it serves. It makes me laugh when churches appear like houses and houses resemble churches.

In a city not everyone is a millionaire; on the contrary, we must admit that we can count the millionaires on one hand. Most people belong to the middle [mediocritas], to
that middle called the aurea mediocritas, the source of the genius of the Italian bourgeoisie in which we have delighted and of which we have boasted, but of which we are now ashamed.² […]

And to say that in each one of our cities, in Florence, Venice, Siena, and here also in Bologna, where there is a noble tradition and a shared concept of what is moral, varying in form on the Arno, in the lagoon, and here in the shadow of the towers, there is a tradition, I mean to say, of the old houses of the borghesi.

Why not consider it? Why not reform the type of habitation that measures beauty with the wallet with one that doesn’t look beyond sincerity and good taste for its appearance, that resigns itself to being simply a beautiful house rather than ponderously imitating a palazzo or the Theater of Marcello or S. Giovanni Laterano?

Take the old houses of the borghesi of Florence, with their massive courses of quarry-faced pietra serena on the ground floor, and a wall of smooth stone that rises one, then two stories to the roof, which thrusts out ever so broadly on well cut and planed beams; with its windows set in pointed arches formed from voussoirs of the best macigno.³ Historical windows, through which Bice would have taken the air,⁴ and from which the gentle women of Florence, who knows how many times, would have gazed peacefully at their husbands or fathers or lovers gathering into turbulent knots in the streets below at the tolling of the bells of the Palazzo Vecchio.

Or take the old houses of the borghesi of Venice, which fish in the verdigris waters of the canals, with a door off to one side and the double loggia on colonettes, with Byzantine capitals and rosettes…. Simple and picturesque like a whimsical sigh of oriental splendor, but tempered by the modest housewives [casalinga] and by the foresight of the Christian borghesi and western merchants.

In Tuscany and also in Venice, in their good name the tradition was maintained: they never stopped building in this manner.

In time, two stories became three to better satisfy the growing population as well as changes in taste and in the comforts of life. And they obtained all of this in that type of popular and generous construction, flexible, uncontrived, informal and without the pedantry of rules…precisely like the heart of the people for which art was a form of sincere and gracious expression.

I am not an architect, and do not have the right to tell our masters how to do their work.

But with regard to that kind of wandering [po’ di vagabondo], as Giusti called it,⁵ that constitutes one of the contemplative habits of the artistic life, when one roams the streets with eyes wide open to all impressions, and hundreds of reflections are born and die on the pupils of the eyes, before even entering the realm of thought…how many times I remember asking myself why the architects do not liberate themselves a bit from the memory of the academy? From that eternal jumble of orders and Greek ornament piled up one on the other? Why not make them go out in the open air, turning to the streets like us, observing the buildings of various centuries, some disfigured obscenely from the privations of centuries of disapproval, and restoring them at least in thought, if not with the hammer, to their original glory. Why do they not study in order to develop in themselves a new erudition, steeped in historical experience and a culture more original, more sincere, and open… rather than one based on the monotonous and narrow ideas
acquired by following the formulas of the work of Bramante, Palladio, Vignola, and Bibbiena?

A few fragments are enough to provoke a hundred ideas. A tiny window, a bit of frieze eaten away by the intense cold and weeds, or an arch filled in with stone could be the point of departure for conjuring up a graceful and new whole.

A house bearing the scars of many centuries, perhaps hundreds over hundreds of years of restoration or expansion evident on its face, which by chance have created a felicitous eclecticism and given vitality to the interlacement of various and pleasing elements. […]

What remains to be done? To restore them with imagination and with common sense applied to the subject; and remember them when the Comune widens a street, when we build anew, from the foundations, when the architects are asked for a design by one, two, or three citizens who, not being obligated to leave a monument, non tantum domino sed patriae ornamentum, instead need to rebuild their houses with a sense of duty to reconcile private utility with beauty, civil considerations with perpetuity. […]

These, our traditional borghesi houses, have to my eyes an entirely special character of beauty that in the moment cannot be defined other than with the vocabulary of—the picturesque.

This is better explained if one thinks of who furnished the designs to the master masons. Most often in the fourteen and fifteen hundreds it was the painters. And in fact so many of our houses, like the Palazzo Fava, the noble house at the corner of Via Grade, they are the true Francias of Bolognese architecture. I cite the case of Bologna: but my words fit every city in Italy that left a trace of itself in the history of art.

The Italian spirit made it possible to maintain the noble arts in a harmonious whole, because art remained art instead of splitting into branches, one independent from the other: what held for art also held for science. But it was all in vain: as things grew specialized, they divided and subdivided infinitely, in art as in science, amplifying the horizons of research and deepening the elementary analysis. This was no less true for being part of a hierarchical order in which the arts and the sciences had lost their way. The decorative arts, for example, have forgotten that they were subordinate to architecture, as the sciences have lost track of the fact that philosophy is their natural master.

The sense of the total work of art, the effect of picturesque excellence, was lost in the art of building: as the concept of order, that most eminent philosophical concept, dimmed in the arts, anarchy visited the sciences.

The continuity of buildings, which together constitute the city, inevitably creates an entirely artificial environment, where every square inch is the work of man. Nature—grand, beautiful, invigorating nature—does not smile upon the city except from the heights between the roofs in a faint smear of blue sky or from some small green area of dusty laurel trees or magnolias, seen through the railing of a fence.

And it is instead the open fields, where all is varied and all is part of a harmonious whole, that perennially renew the thoughts and inspiration of man.

To study only the city adding layers to itself, new buildings on top of old, is perhaps to fall into the error that Leonardo da Vinci condemned in his immortal injunction. Leonardo, a verista and idealist in his own time, wrote: “Artists, do not imitate
the manner of others: they will call you the grandsons rather than the sons of nature. One must turn to nature in its great abundance, from which all the masters have learned.” […]

Those palazzine that harmonize well with the green fields of the countryside, they give license for building them the same way in the city. Conceived originally by artists as ornamental accessories of the picturesque landscape, they transferred them into the artificial ambit of the city, with all their native character, and nevertheless they appeared to us picturesque. […]

And here in substance is the theory of the picturesque. It is the freedom that nature grants to the conceptions of the genius, according them the right to be admired as true works of art, even though they do not have precedents in the history of art. One part nature, one part accident, one part the heart of the people who for the first time arise to applaud, and a new art takes shape in spite of the reluctance of the Academy and despite the resistance of conventions.

We are approaching a new epoch of taste: of symmetry we have tired, that equalitas numerosa of Saint Augustine. Modesty aside, we are capable of sensing beauty, or more properly, harmony, even when our eyes do not immediately see it in the expected form of classical proportions and formulas.

Therefore let us enlarge the horizons of art: and when a building appears picturesque, brought forth from the bosom of nature but transplanted into the city, then one can say: it was made neither by Vignola, nor by Tibaldi, Sansovino, or Bramante.

Sons of nature and not grandsons they must be, as Leonardo da Vinci said. I do not doubt the results of following his advice: our cities must be ours and not made in the styles of previous generations, who had other ideas, methods of construction, economics, and needs: the city must be born of the living, not of the dead.

And if I sing the praises of the houses of the bourgeoisie from the fourteen or fifteen hundreds, it is not because I want to return to the houses of the Middle Ages, as you well understand; it is because they demonstrate the wisdom of my thesis, giving historical proof of the freedom behind all of our arts, because they are the sons of the picturesque as I would like to see the picturesque taken on, as a movement for the renewal of the works of the so-called genio civile (the state office of public works); whose “genius” we can now question whether it was real or the routine of the most mediocre. 8 […]

1 Via Malcontenti, a street in Bologna that was undergoing rapid modernization in the 1870s. Borghesi is literally the bourgeoisie, or more loosely translated, the middle classes.

2 Aurea mediocritas: literally “golden mean.” Rubbiani creates a play on words between mediocre and the highly refined mathematical proportions of the golden mean as a way to elevate the modern standing of the borghesi.

3 Pietra serena is a dark, grayish green Tuscan sandstone often used for sculptural elements in architecture, as well as for arches and columns, especially for its polychromatic effects, as in Brunelleschi’s loggia at the Spedale degli Innocenti. Macigno is another Tuscan sandstone.

4 Bice di Folco Portinari or Beatrice Portinari (1266-1290), Dante’s inspiration for his Vita Nuova.
Giuseppe Giusti (1809-1850), Italian poet and revolutionary. Here Rubbiani is calling forth an Italian version of Baudelaire’s *flâneur*.

Not only for God, but also for country.

Palazzo Fava is more commonly called the Palazzo Ghisilardi Fava, and is now on Via Manzoni, 4. Francesco Francia (1450-1517), a Renaissance goldsmith, medalist, and painter born in Bologna, he became court painter in Mantua. Rubbiani might have said “the true Raphaels” of Bolognese architecture, but with the expression “i veri Francia” he positioned a son of Bologna as the Renaissance genius.

Genio civile is a play on words that refers to the office of civil engineering or public works in the 19th century while recalling the earlier references to genius (*genio*), with the intention of poking fun at the former.