

**Villa Giulia**  
a formal analysis



## Introduction

Just a ten minute walk from both the city center and the Vatican, in an area named 'Vigna Vecchia' (Old Winery) lies the Villa di Papa Giulio, better known as the Villa Giulia. Now the home of the National Etruscan museum, it was built for pope Julius III, being more of a patron of the arts than a theologian<sup>1</sup>, as a party villa. The pope acquired the land on which the villa stands, including several wineries, even before he became pope. Its contemporary function as a museum is quite appropriate, as pope Julius III was an adamant collector of precious sculpture and antique art. The villa was used for parties, official functions, art display and preservation, and housed some of the finest collections of art of its time. It also functioned as a therapeutic bath for the pope, who allegedly suffered from the gout<sup>2</sup>. A number of architects were involved with the project, each one wanting to be in the pope's

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1 Wikipedia, Villa Giulia

2 R. J. Tuttle - Vignola e Villa Giulia, Casabella, vol. 61, p 50, 1997

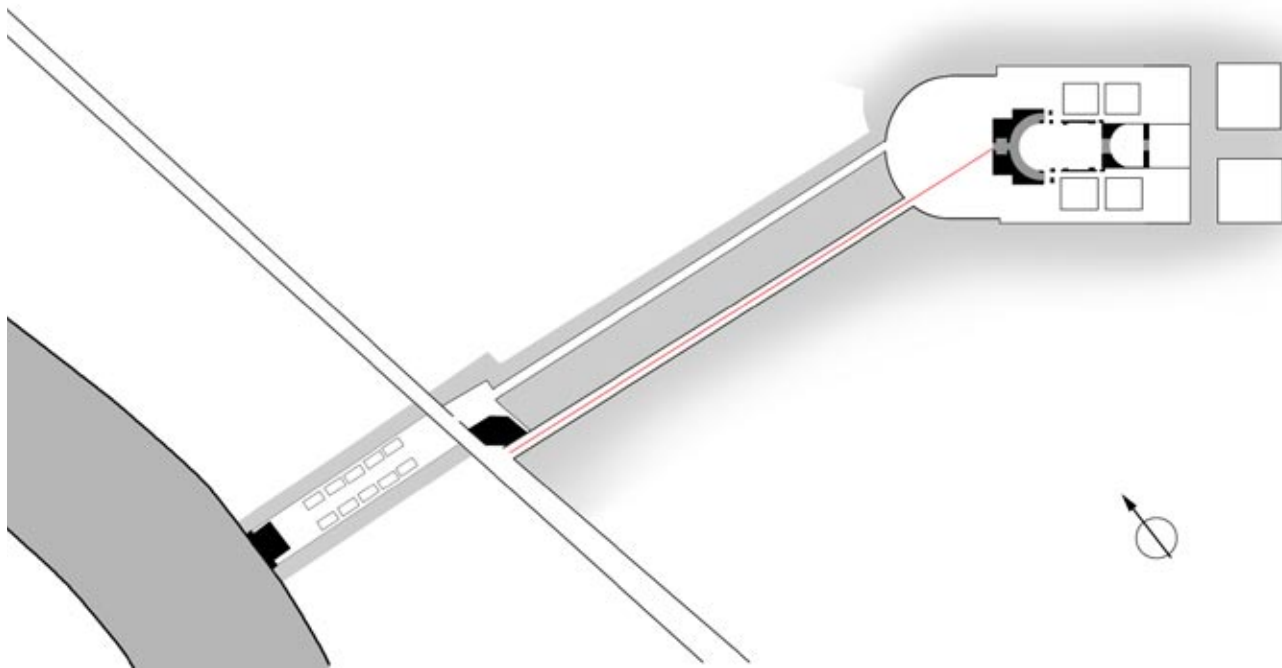


fig. 1 - Landscape

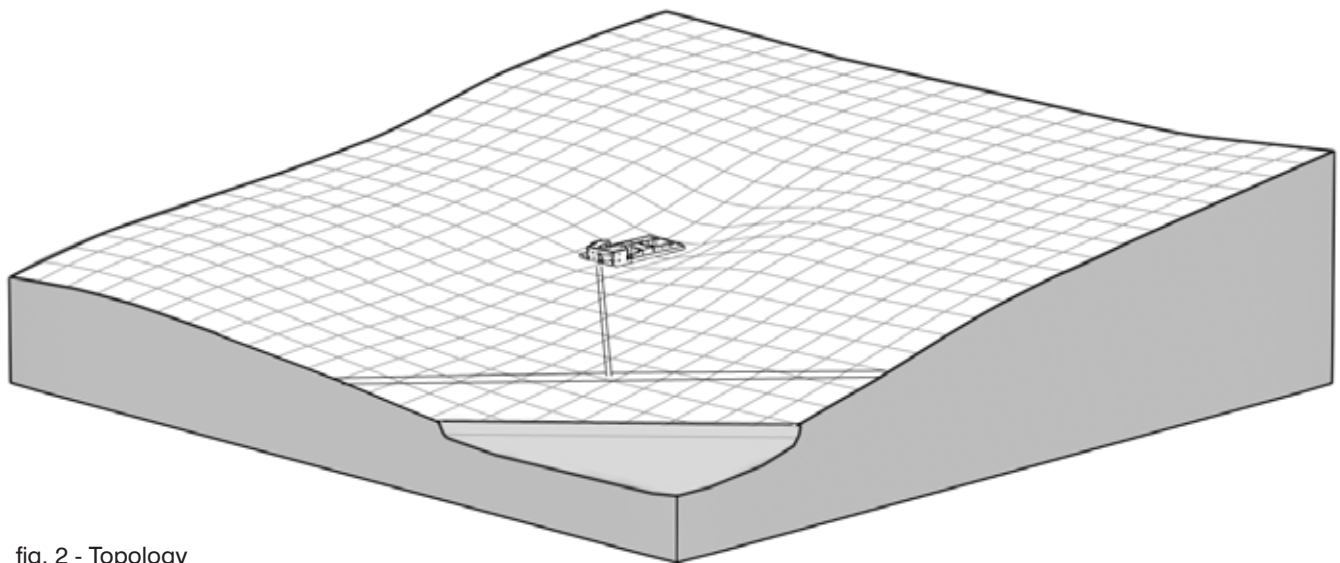


fig. 2 - Topology

sphere of influence, each one trying to feed their egos the most, and making somewhat of a (interesting) *ratatouille* in the progress<sup>3</sup>. It has been generally accepted, however, that Giacomo Barozzi da Vignola has been the main and final architect, with help and under teachings of Bartolomeo Ammanati, Georgio Vassari and Michelangelo. There is much disagreement about the role of these artist for certain parts of the building, and even though it doesn't interest me as much, it will play a minor role here as it is important to the understanding of some of the moves in the building.

The villa was built in only two years between 1551 to 1553 and has been regarded as complete in most of the scholarly texts and discussions, although there is much forgotten evidence that it might not be, as we shall see. It is difficult to pick a version of the villa to analyze, since there are a number of varying plans, and some items were not executed. Although containing various versions as well, I will use the design as found in Mario Bafile's Archeological analysis Villa Giulia, and augment this with photographs from before the modern museum additions.

## **Landscape and Facade**

The Villa is built to the north-east of the Via Flaminia, an important road in Rome at the time. The villa is tucked into the landscape by virtue of it being sited in a valley (fig. 2). The public access way to the villa, delineated in red in fig. 1, runs exactly towards the entry gate of the villa from the via Flaminia, assuring a continuous view of the facade. The private way runs, sheltered by trees and vegetation, towards a small park on the river side of the via Flaminia, where a private dock structure would assure a swift arrival for the pope. It is worth noting that the pope would not be able to see the Villa Giulia for the entire trip towards it, and only at the last moment would it appear around the corner.

The main facade is quite sober in comparison to the internal garden facades. This is an indication of the building turning in on itself instead of reaching out to the natural environment. This can be led back to Palladio, whose conviction was that country houses should be places for quiet contemplation of literature and the arts, something the bustling and

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3 R. J. Tuttle - Vignola e Villa Giulia, p 56



fig. 3 - Facade at an angle

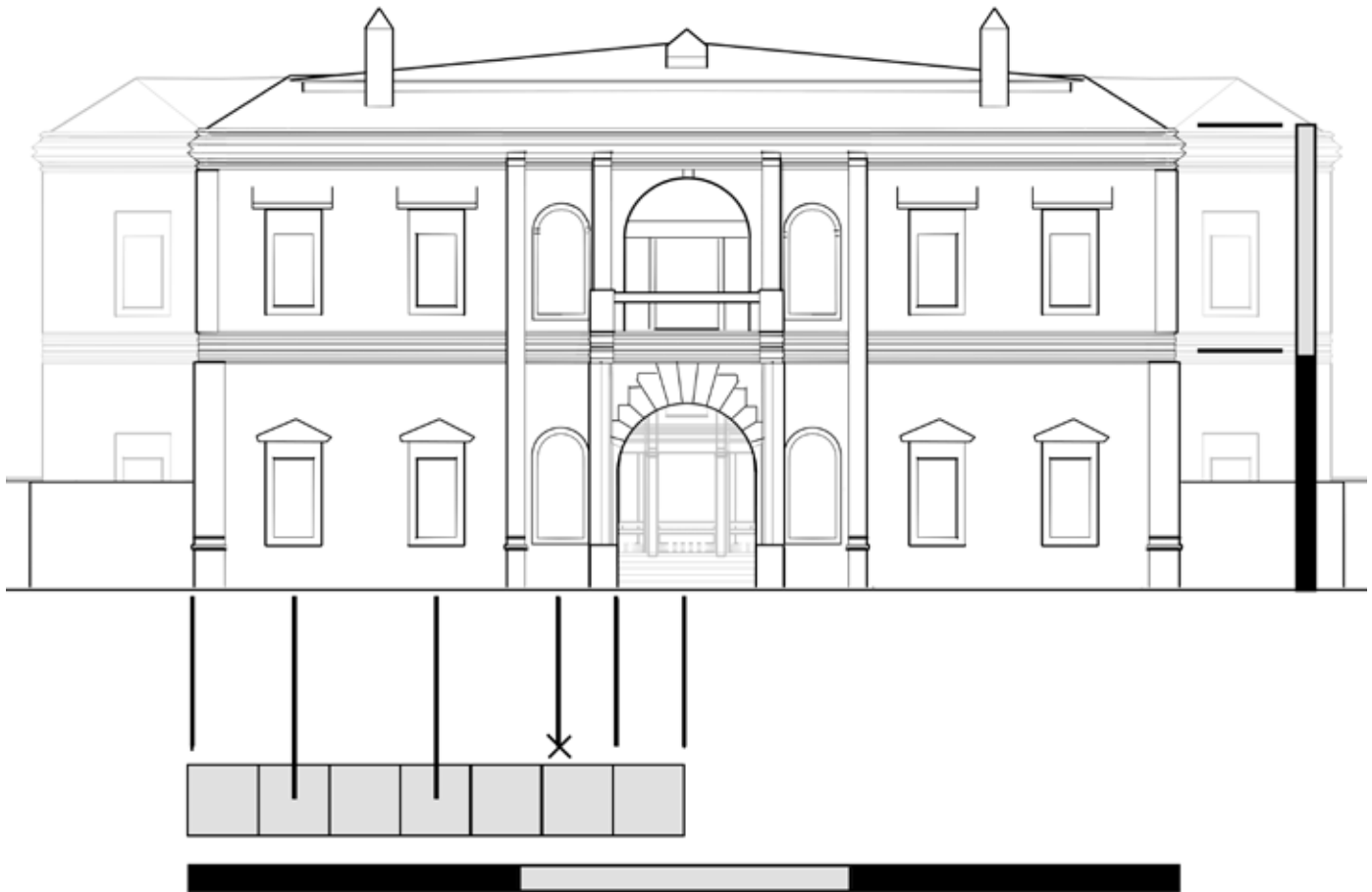


fig. 4 - Facade relations

noisy city life was not suited for. We will see further indications of this later on. The sober facade can have another purpose as well. The public access way inhibits all views except that of the facade. Running straight towards the villa, it could be that the facade is meant to look perpendicular to the access road, only to reveal its wider form on the fore court. This would not be a strange concept as the garden ornamentation was full of trompe l'oeil's, and Vignola being counted among the Mannerist architects, with whom dealing with distorting and bending reality in different ways was one of the characteristics. Figure 3 attempts at simulating this, and it is not hard to imagine that first time visitors would be fooled by this trick of the eye. A plate by Giuseppe Vasi supports this theory, as in the plate one is looking straight down the public access way, but the villa is clearly drawn perpendicular to it, not at an angle (see Appendix I). In that plate one can also see the small entrance palace to the Villa Giulia, attributed to Pirro Ligorio<sup>4</sup>.

The *casino* consist of two levels, each treated equal (fig. 4). The main facade is generated from two geometries, a division in three (*tréparté*) for the main horizontal division, and a division in fourteen, or seven per flank. This division of seven starts to play a role in the outer two sides of the *tréparté*, where it defines the position of the windows. Perhaps in a nod to Palladio's ungeometrical churches, the center line nor the sides of the secondary arch match up with the division in seven or three.

The arches in the facade announce the multitude of arches in the rest of the scheme, which also uses arches in plan.

## Organization

The villa consists of four main parts, descending as the hills surrounding the villa ascend. In that way the hills take over the task of the walls by providing privacy and seclusion. Fig. 5 outlines the main geometries involved forming the spaces. Here we can clearly see that the accent lies on the open spaces of the design, and not on the covered spaces. Therefore the open spaces are carved out of solids, that give way to a tall arc, a short arc and a square.

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4 Wikipedia, Villa Giulia

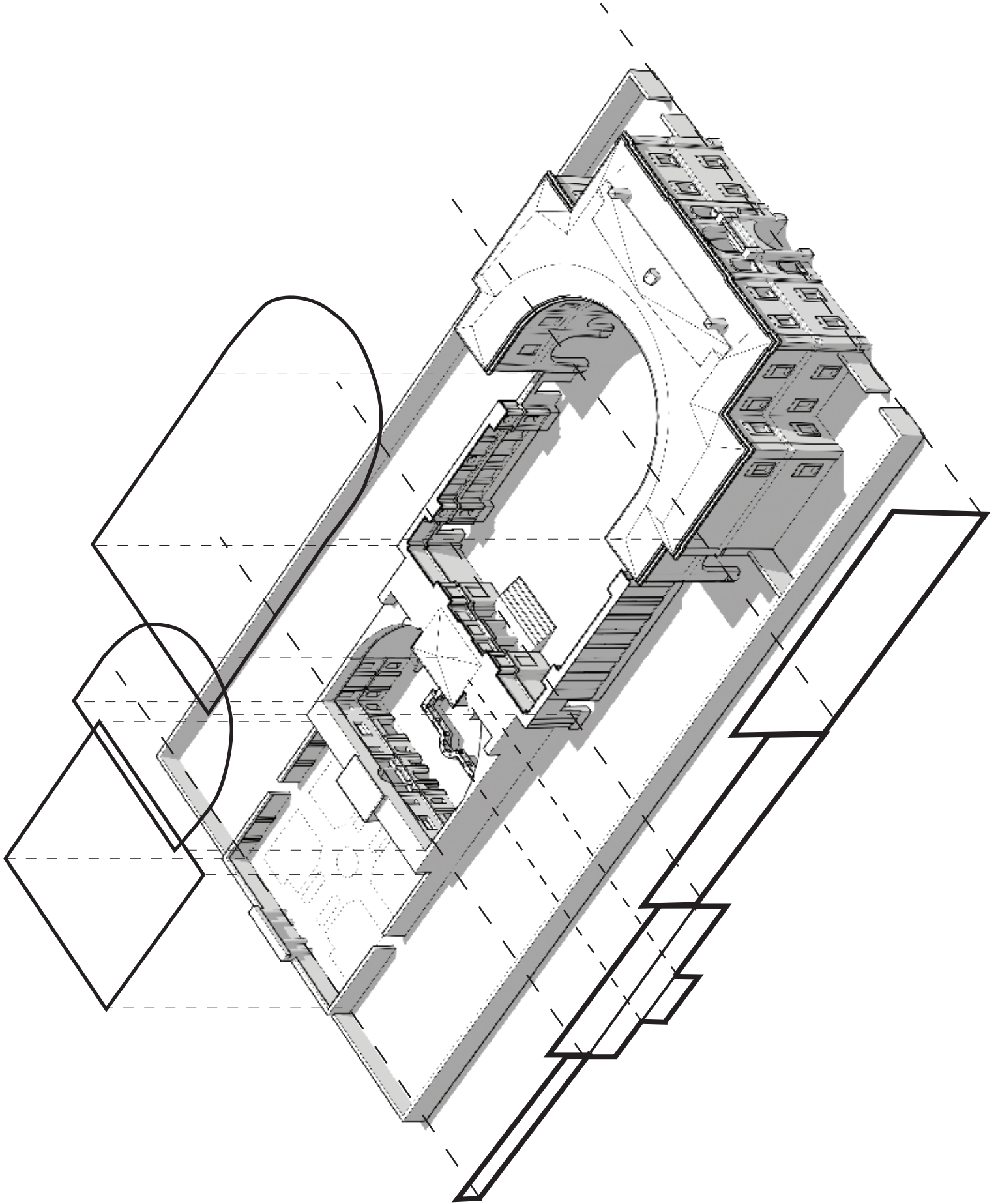


fig. 5 - Main Organisation



There does not seem to be a correlation between the geometry of these three forms, but we shall investigate this further later on. History informs us that Ammanati squared out a once dual demi-circle main courtyard and thereby destroying the visual and processive harmony between the main building and the heart of the complex, the nymphaeum. The reason for this was that Vignola's design (fig. 6) was not as well suited for the display of art pieces, and the square end made more room, unfortunately it turned it into a dead end that has to start up again in the nymphaeum. Because the same arc shape reappears here in plan, an echo of the spatial disharmony haunts the otherwise much more elegant nymphaeum. The four sections descend in height when looking at the courtyard walls, but the third section, sinks into the ground. In the middle of this the hidden nymphaeum sinks into the ground and becomes virtually invisible from anywhere except the nymphaeum itself. This is the most private space of the building, and it received the most attention in building complexity, waterworks, extravagant ornament and artwork.

The circulation of the complex is the first hint that the building we are looking at does not seem to be finished. Although the nymphaeum can be reached on axis from the *casino*, the rear courtyard cannot, nor can one enter into the side gardens from the nymphaeum. The side and rear (square) gardens seem to be an afterthought circulation wise, but formally they make a lot of sense. They balance out the long main axis, and provide a datum for the perception of the level changes happening in the middle sections. However, as the design stands they can hardly be seen from the *casino*, and they remain completely unnoticed when traversing the lavish main axis of the gardens, and although they balance out the gardens, the main *casino* is still awkward in size, especially considering the size of the semi circular courtyard, which doesn't leave much room for actual habitual spaces (on the ground floor there are only three humble rooms on the ground floor, the rest is taken up by a colonnade) (fig. 5).

The walled in nature of the design is preceded by many thermal and public baths designs. In this light the Villa Giulia is partly a baths-prototype<sup>5</sup>.

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5 R. J. Tuttle - Vignola e Villa Giulia, p 56

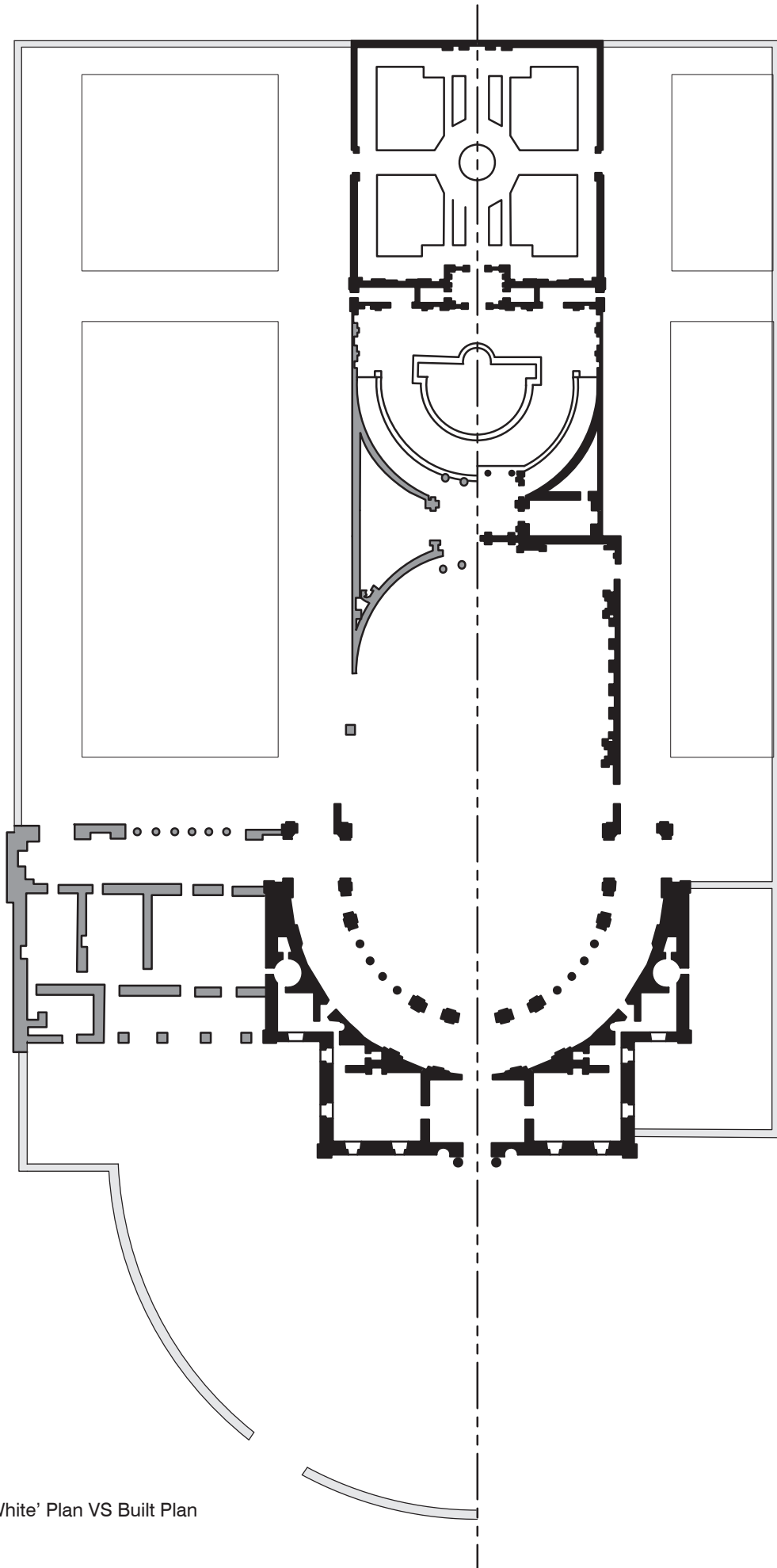


fig. 6 - 'White' Plan VS Built Plan

## The White Drawing

The 'White' drawing surfaced in 1914 when Gorham Phillips Stevens published an etching of it in the Journal of the American Institute of Architects, after which the original 12 by 6 foot drawing was lost. It had never been studied before, and although still overlooked in the studies about the Villa Giulia it is almost certain the White plan had papal approval and that it forms the formal base of the Villa Giulia. It is attributed to Vignola, and explains some of the strange relations and moves in the villa as built. Figure 5 shows a reconstruction of the White drawing on the left (in grey), whereas everything in black is what has been built. The first striking difference is the addition, or rather, presence of a set of wings. These wings clarify the strange proportions of the casino, as well as generate a cruciform shape of the overall scheme that is obviously highly relevant for a pope's residence. With the wings added, the balance between the cut out inner courtyard and the rest of the building is restored. The strange useless flanks now serve an important connecting function, and the hitherto inexplicable setback in the main facade now makes perfect sense. The addition of the wing ties the perimeter wall back to the building in a more geometric understandable way as well, and the demi-circle fore court ties the whole together in a comprehensive manner. In addition to this the side gardens now receive their logical purpose as guest gardens and the formal design is completed. There is no question that the White drawing shows pieces of a missing puzzle, and that the construction of the villa must have been aborted at a certain point. Perhaps it was known that the pope was ill, since he passed away four years after it was built, and the design was finished before it was finished to have him enjoy it. We can conclude that the decision to cancel the wings was made during construction because of the staircases. They are placed so that both wings and the center section can all make use of them. This also affirms the notion that the wings were to have two floors, like the center part. In the white drawing we also see a different approach to the entry to the nymphaeum. Where the built design has a flat facade at that end of the court, the White drawing shows a demi-circle echoing the circular main courtyard, and the space is now more separate from

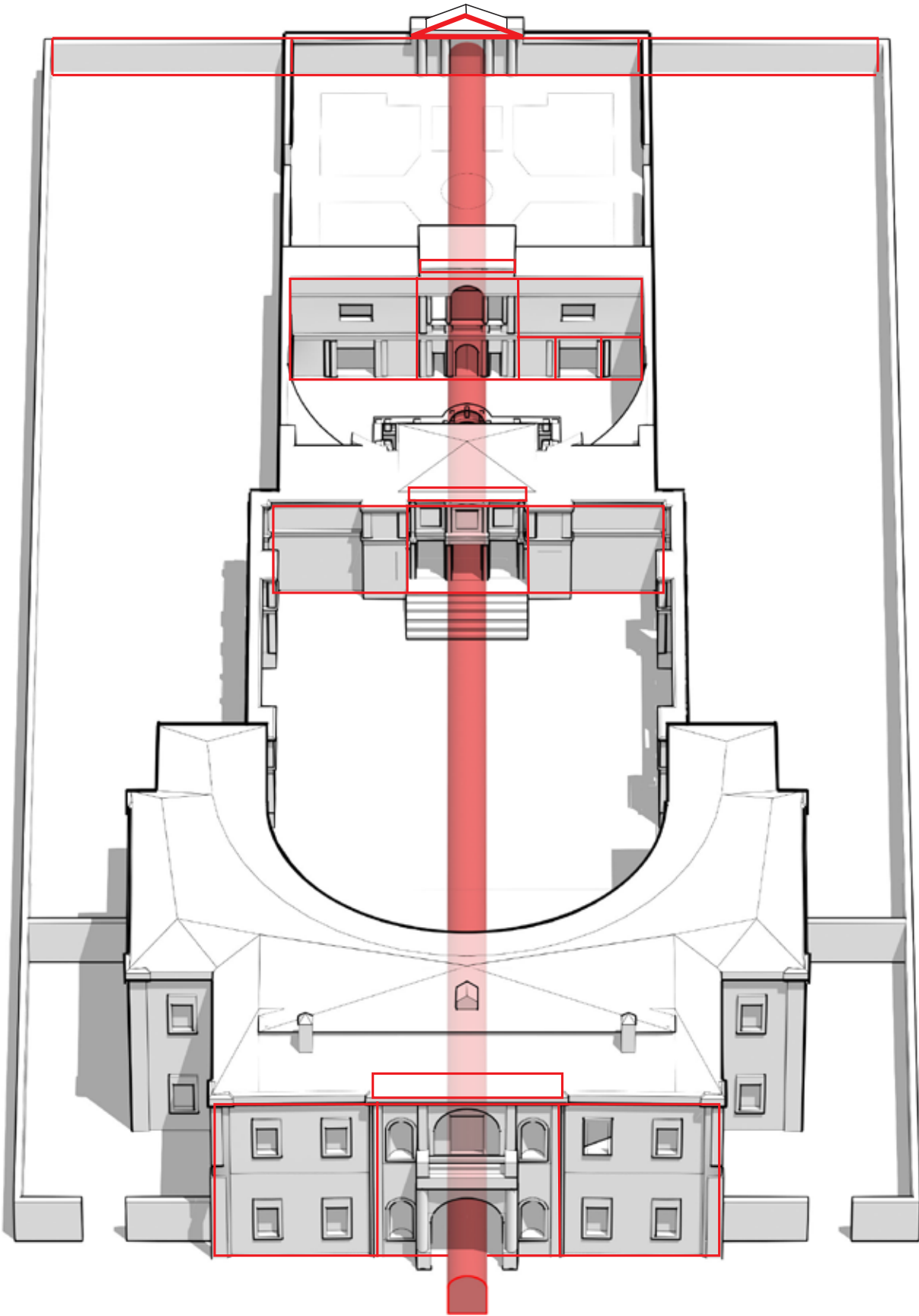


fig. 7 - Tréparté's and the main view path

the nymphaeum, giving it even more privacy. An extra set of columns precedes the entry to the nymphaeum, and an extra enclosed space is created.

The design as built is governed by arches. From the entry all the way through to the back arches follow the visitor's path, or rather, his line of sight (fig.6). In addition to that, each section of the villa is marked by a *tréparté* which is crowned by a rectangular device, except for the last one, where the only large pediment in the villa is used (there are four small pediments above the windows in the front facade). Everywhere in the villa where there is a sight line in the direction of the main axis, there is a *tréparté*, so too the large openings in the back wall of the nymphaeum (now bricked up).

## **Proportion and Procession**

In Renaissance architecture proportion and internal relation play a large role. From the basic components, for instance the classic orders (incidentally as defined by Vignola), to the larger whole, geometric relationships keep the Renaissance architecture together. Mannerism saw a change in that notion, where designs tended to diverge slightly from these strict rules, but still used them to make exactly that point. Just like Palladio's Il Redentore and Giorgio Maggiore churches however, this building has hardly any geometric relations. But while Palladio's churches deal with compression and expansion in terms of geometric relations, his villas are most famous for exactly the opposite, where the nine square and meticulous harmonic relations govern every inch of the property. In the case of the Villa Giulia there doesn't seem to be an overall deliberate geometric plan as a consequence of the bickering architects. Whereas the White plan at least shows formal relationships in terms of geometric form, the villa as built hardly even shows that, save for the two arches in plan, which are even dissimilar in size. The casino in relation to its courtyard is a five to four proportion, which is not a geometric whole, not even in harmonics. The whole complex versus its individual components all show such odd proportions which have no relation to one another whatsoever (fig. 8). Keeping in mind the multitude of phases this project must have gone through, its patron being an arts connoisseur himself and probably meddling in the design, and four architects changing each other's plans constantly, it might be futile

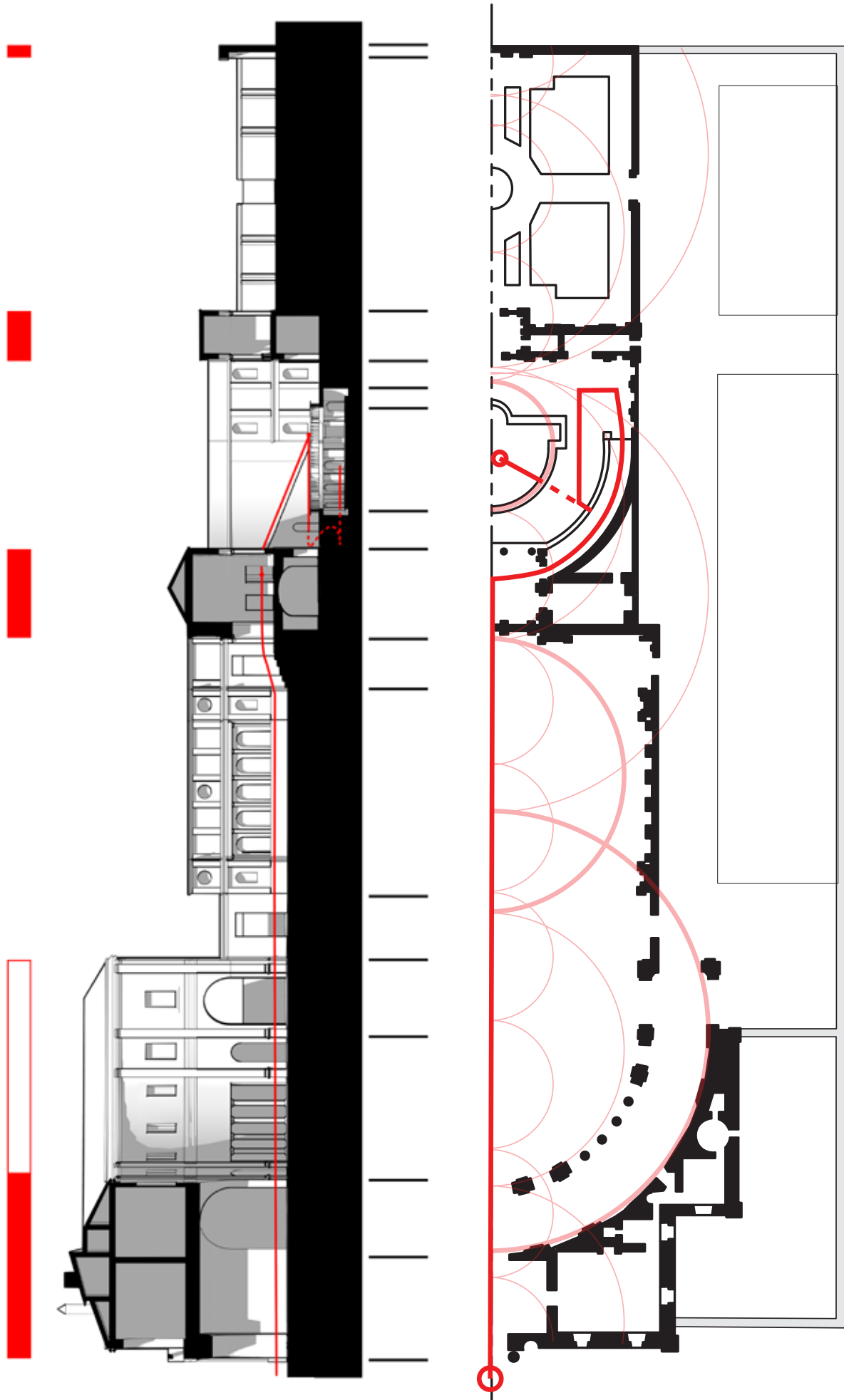


fig. 8 - Geometric relations and sectional procession

to search for any geometric relations, because if there are any, they might as well be coincidental. The lack of geometric relations does not make the house un-planned however, as some of the processional qualities of the White drawing are certainly still present. There seems to be a relation in terms of covered and open spaces (fig 8, top of section), where the covered spaces diminish further away from the *casino*, perhaps to signify the taking over of nature as shelter away from the house.

The movement directly through the house through the internal courtyard, where one enters the first loggia, announcing the nymphaeum, permits a view into the back garden (as shown in fig. 7), but no direct movement. Leaving the loggia and entering the steep ramp one makes a right angle turn. This right angle turn signifies entering into a more private domain. Scooting down the steep ramp (made steeper by Ammanati from Vignola's design<sup>6</sup>, removing some processional qualities) the verticality of the space is accentuated. This grand movement gesture is very important to the space, as one is visually forced to the recessed center, the nymphaeum. At the bottom of the ramp, two right angle turns break the procession and define the middle plateau of this courtyard. Heading towards the humble archway underneath the ramp the main fountain underneath the loggia fills the view. Entering the archway and spiralling down in a dark and cool basement structure creates the third stage of privacy. One is now in the inner sanctum of the Villa Giulia. Emerging from the small tunnel one is surrounded by sculptured columns and refreshing water falls. In this nymphaeum the guests and the pope were surrounded by art, cooled by the numerous fountains and waterways, and largely in shade from the hot summer sun by virtue of the high walls and the sunken nymphaeum.

## What to make of it

When considering the Villa Giulia as a structure contemporary to architecture such as Palladio's villas, the critical elements of it can be properly assessed. The procession through the structures and gardens, without any religious motivation, is certainly a first of its kind. Also, the way the building deals with outdoor space is highly critical. The outdoor space ranges

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6 R. J. Tuttle - Vignola e Villa Giulia, p 54

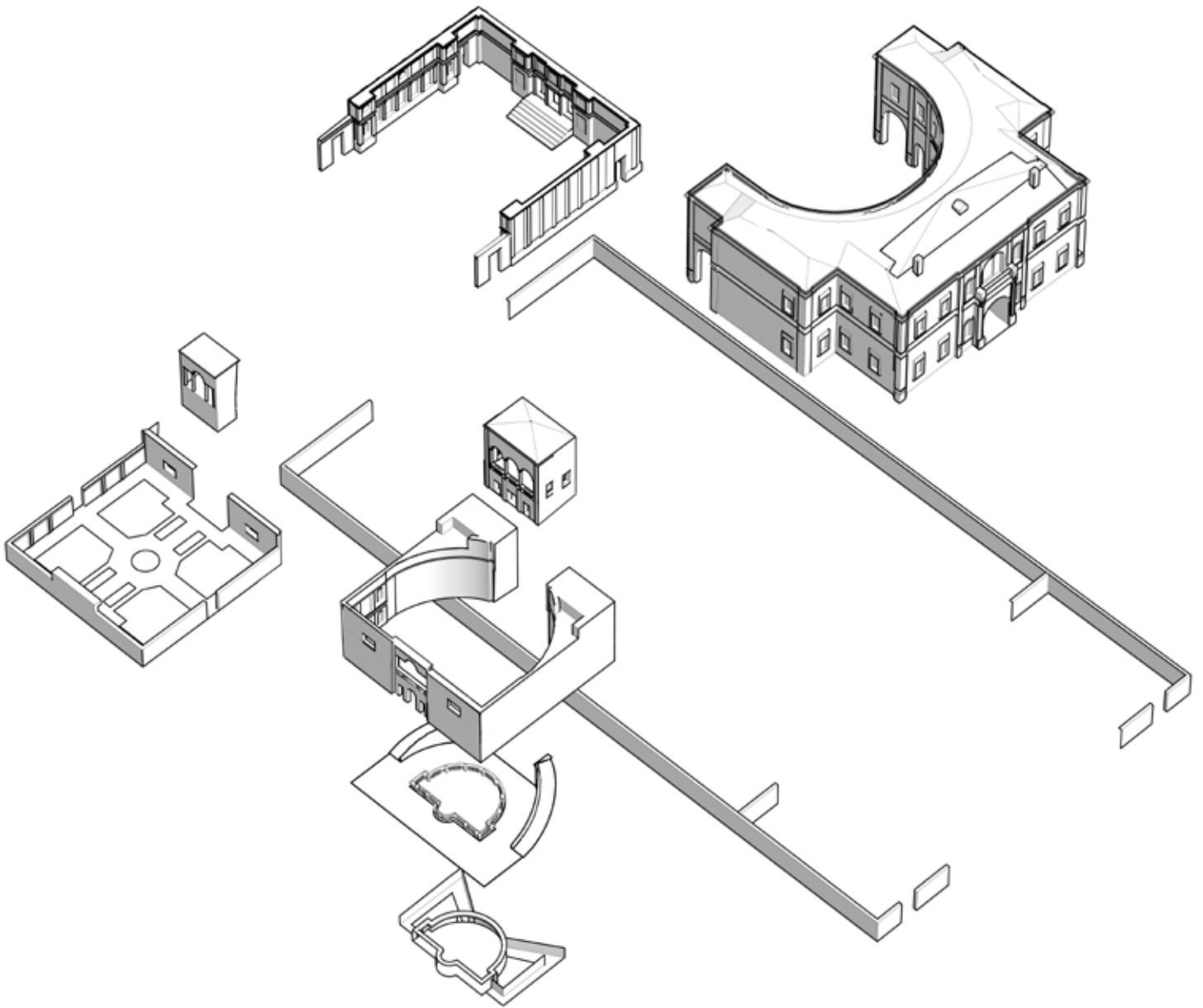


fig. 9 - Unrelated elements



from a treatment of uncovered indoor space to open garden. A great number of gradations can be found between those and the way the villa sculpts the space by the shape of the buildings and the negative shape of the gardens is very important. In addition, section plays a major role in the building, not only in an organisational sense, but also for motion through the building, viewing angles and so forth. In a way, the Villa Giulia can be seen as a precursor to Le Corbusier's '*Promenade Architecturale*'. Also, the way the building deals with style, whether or not intentional, is critical. In many places the official rules of the orders are broken, and even the standard rules of aesthetics are treaded upon in places. This also makes it hard to distill more detailed critical aspects of the building. This is however a treasure trove for the art historian. The Villa Giulia is obviously an anomalous appearance in Renaissance and Mannerist architecture. The strange contradictions, such as simple Doric orders by Vignola on one side of the first loggia, and Ammanati's complex Corinthian's on the other make for a highly interesting study topic for the historian. In formal terms there is less to be discovered, although the building remains mesmerizing in its processional qualities. In terms of symbolic properties one might detect an overall plan wanting to enclose and regulate nature as a whole (outer wall), and create a thematic journey from 'society' (main courtyard), to water, pleasure and the body (the nymphaeum) towards nature (rear garden). The main courtyard being the reception and reflection of society shows from Le Tarovilly's drawing of the space being used for horse and carriages and formal dress (appendix IV). In formal terms the plan as portrayed in the White drawing would make for a much better design, both in organization, geometric and spatial terms. It is unfortunate this drawing is overlooked by almost all investigations of the Villa Giulia, even prompting certain historians to imagine cupola's on top of the recessed parts of the casino (Appendix IIIc). The somewhat tunnel-vision-like design and movement of the whole can be better understood having the intention of the wings in mind, but I still find it a ghastly building to be in. I perceived it not so much as sheltering you from the environment and turning you towards reflection and contemplation as intended, but more like a prison and a claustrophobic space, increased by the sunken nature of the nymphaeum. But there remains something unworldly and un-touchable by the Villa Giulia. Perhaps it is its sheer size and grandeur, but there is also the sense that there was something going on in the nymphaeum that no one was allowed to see, being trifold protected from all sides from visual and physical intrusion. Something to think about for the next visit to the Villa Giulia.







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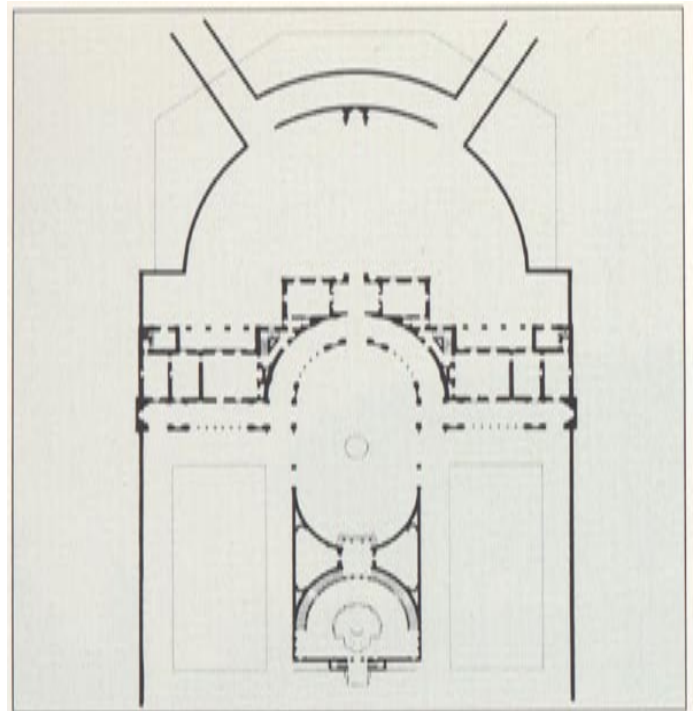
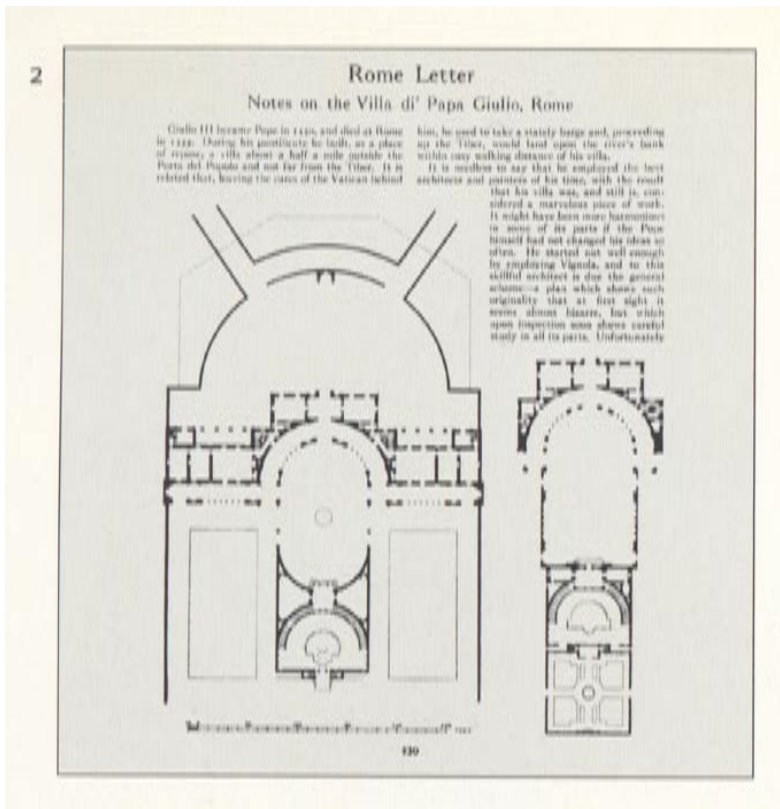
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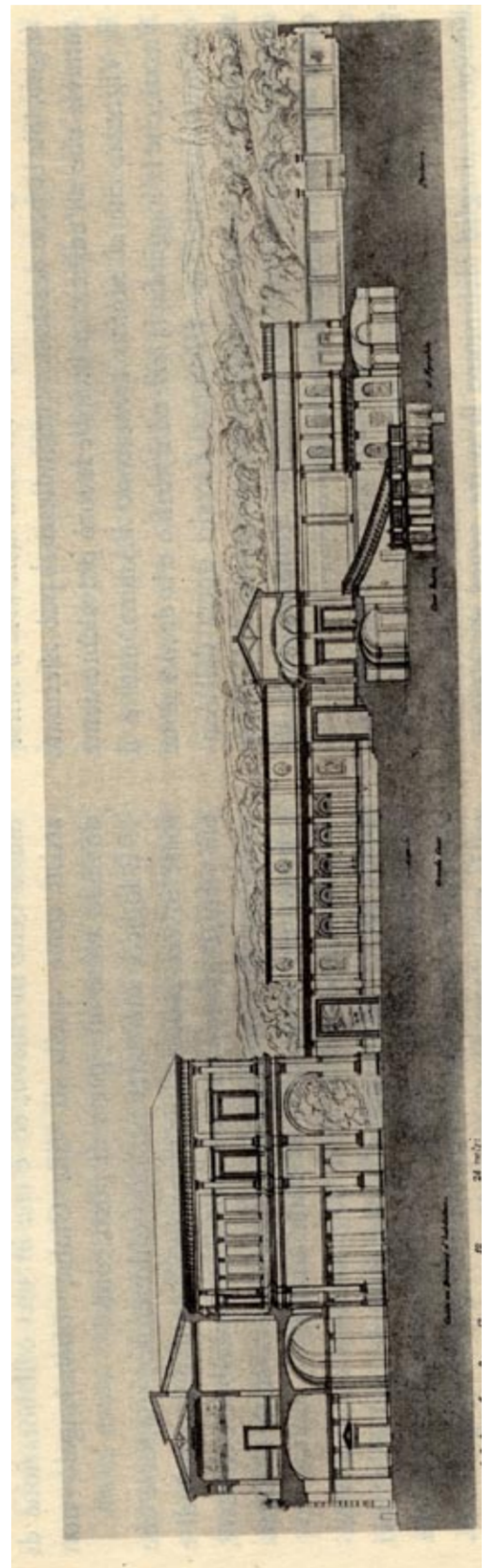
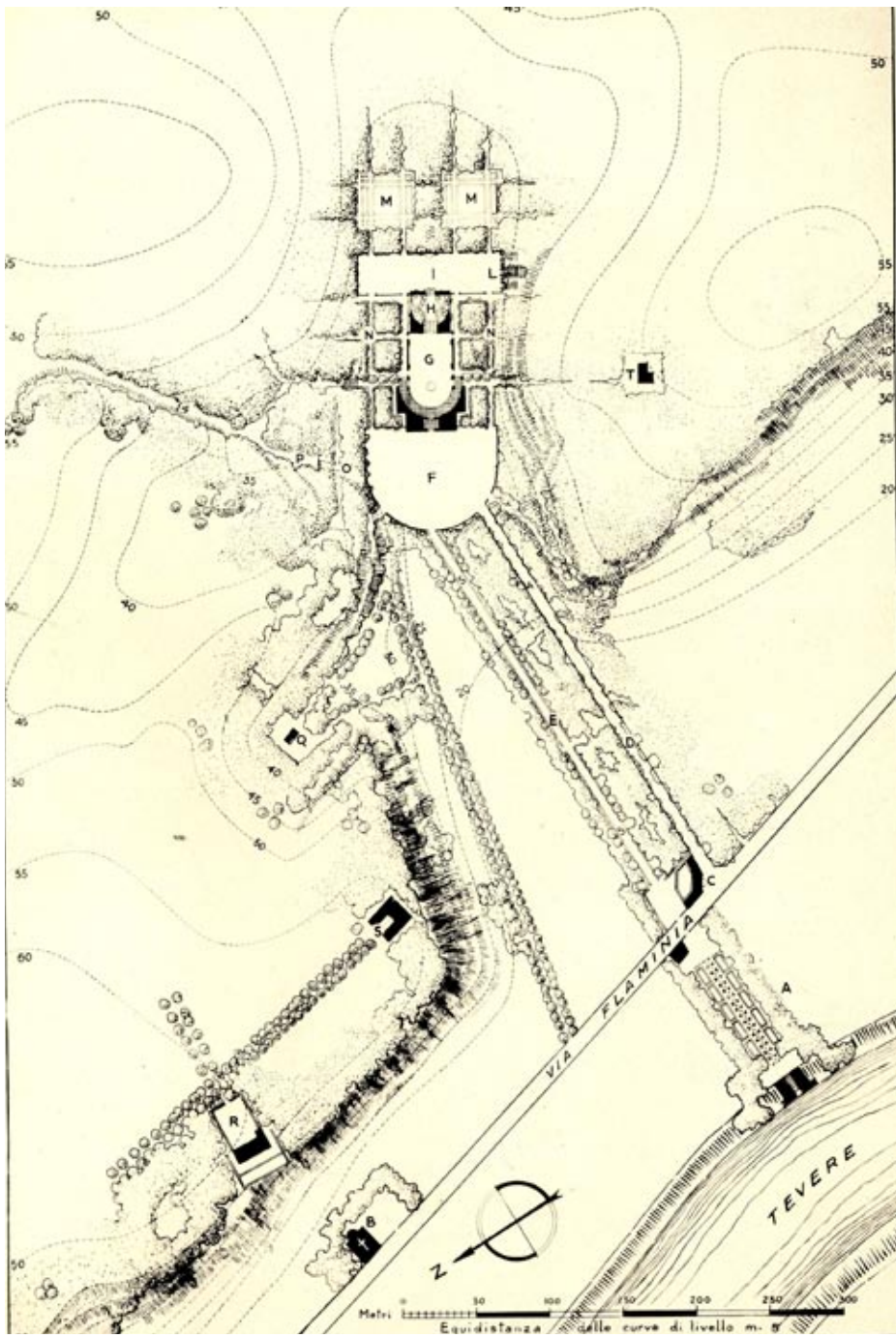


Plate 186, by Giuseppe Vasi



The last remains of the engraving of the 'White' drawing. Taken from : Richard J. Tuttle - Vignola e Villa Giulia: il disegno White, Vignola, Villa Giulia , Casabella, vol. 61, no. 646, pp. 50-69, June 1997



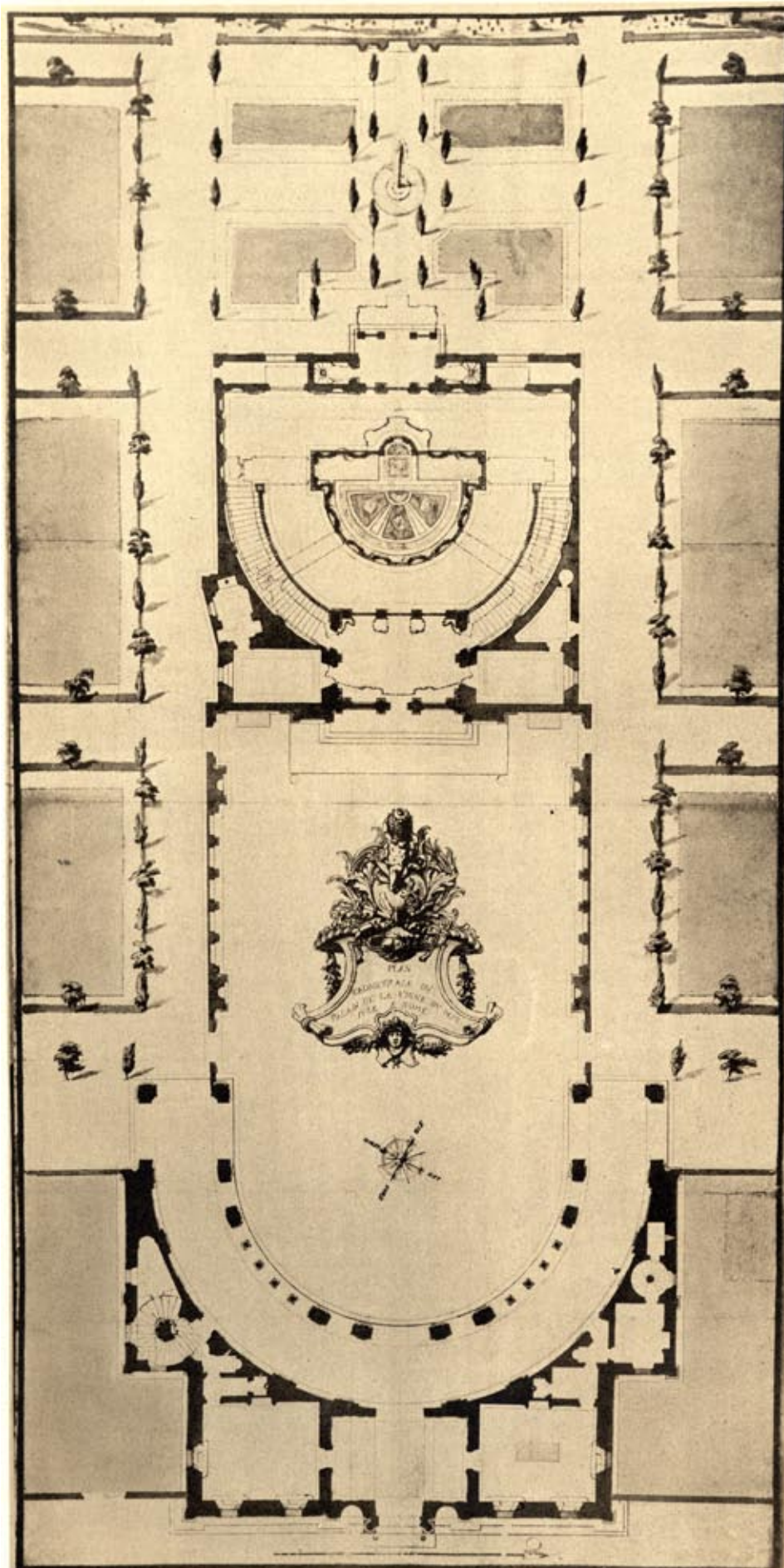




## Appendix III

Plans & Sections  
taken from:

Mario Bafile / Istituto D' Archeologia  
E Storia Dell'Arte,  
Opere D'Arte - Villa  
Giulia; l'architettura,  
il giardino. 1968





A



B



## Appendix III

Photographs taken from:

Mario Bafile / Istituto D' Archeologia E Storia Dell'Arte, Opere D'Arte - Villa Giulia; l'architettura, il giardino. 1968



C

## Appendix IV

Le Tarovilly, Inner Courtyard Villa Giulia (date unknown)

