



## Dissimulation: the Piazza della Santissima Annunziata in Florence

Campomarzio

1. Baldassare Castiglione, *The Book of the Courtier* (Mineola: Courier Dover Publications, 2003), 35.
2. Manfredo Tafuri, *Interpreting the Renaissance: Princes, Cities, Architects* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2006), 59.
3. Niccolò Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990), 281.

There is a kind of premeditated indifference that can be described as a voluntary refusal to exhibit or manifest something through an appearance of intentional calmness and studied carelessness. One of the best examples of this sort of calculated unconcern is expressed by the Italian word *sprezzatura*, an early-16th-century term coined by the Italian statesman Baldassare Castiglione meaning an absence of affectation or artlessness. In his manual about how to be an ideal courtier entitled *Il cortegiano* (The Courtier), *sprezzatura* is defined as “a certain nonchalance that shall conceal design and show that what is done and said is done without effort and almost without thought”.<sup>1</sup> In the same years in which *Il cortegiano* was being written, sometime between 1508 and 1516, Niccolò Machiavelli was composing his famous *Il principe* (The Prince), probably the first modern dissertation about political philosophy. The book was dedicated to Lorenzo di Piero de’ Medici, grandson of Lorenzo the Magnificent and nephew of Giovanni de’ Medici, who became pope Leo X in 1513. It is quite relevant that even in this handbook for statesmen and rulers we find the description of a form of intentional concealment: the art of *dissimulazione*, or dissimulation. According to Machiavelli, a prince must be “a great feigner and dissembler”. Both *sprezzatura* and *dissimulazione* imply that true qualities and real intentions should remain partly concealed, intentionally masked by an apparent indifference. Nonetheless they substantially differ from secrecy or deception because they do allow people, and especially properly prepared ones, to see what lies beneath the surface. In other words, those who are attentive can unequivocally interpret the real purpose of the dissimulator if they are able to read the subtle signs given. It is not unimportant that these two forms of artificial concealment were conceived in the context of advice for the courtier and the prince, because they established a sort of parallel channel of communication that could be understood only within the elite circles of the courtly life.

In this article we will try to analyze the development of the Piazza della Santissima Annunziata (Square of the Church of the Most Holy Annunciation) in Florence through the lens of the new dissimulating strategies emerging during the first decades of the 16th century, when *Il cortegiano* and *Il principe* were being written. In particular the construction of the Loggia dei Servi around 1516 will be used as a case study in the attempt to interpret the social and political implications of these new forms of artificial concealment. It is during this period that new protagonists and conflicts were determining an important change in the political use of the city. As Manfredo Tafuri pointed out in his last book, *Ricerca del rinascimento* (translated into English as *Interpreting the Renaissance: Princes, Cities, Architects*), this transitional period marked an important historical shift in urban and political strategies. The book aimed “to isolate, in the period extending from the end of the fifteenth century and the first decades of the sixteenth, the means by which this administrative network was modified when new protagonists, ideal representations and political subjects entered the scene”.<sup>2</sup>

To properly understand the constitutive process of the Piazza SS. Annunziata through the emergence of such notions as *sprezzatura* and *dissimulazione*, we have to consider its premises in the previous century. The entire 15th century had been dominated by the notion of *magnificenza*, or magnificence, an idea exemplified by the Florentine court of Cosimo de’ Medici. The civic virtue of magnificence, that is to say the ability to commission and display great things, had been theorized in *De virtutibus morabilibus* (On moral virtues; 1457) by Marsilio Ficino, a scholar and member of the Medici court. If we consider that architecture is evidently the best medium through which *magnificenza* can be expressed, an account of Cosimo’s achievements can be found in Machiavelli’s *Istorie fiorentine* (Florentine Histories):

His magnificence appeared in the abundance of buildings built by him; for in Florence, the cloisters and churches of San Marco and San Lorenzo and the monastery of Santa Verdiana, and on the hills of Fiesole, San Girolamo, and the Badia, and in the Mugello, a church of the Minor Friars—he not only initiated but built anew from the foundations. Besides all this, in Santa Croce, in the Servi, in the Angioli, and in San Miniato he had very splendid altars and chapels built. Besides building these churches and chapels, he filled them with raiments and everything necessary to the adornment of divine service. In addition to these sacred buildings were his private houses, which are: one in the city of a sort befitting so great a citizen; four outside, in Careggi, Fiesole, Cafaggiuolo, and Trebbio—all palaces not of private citizens but of kings.<sup>3</sup>

Cosimo’s magnificence, as exemplified by Michelozzo’s Palazzo Medici (1445–60), was not a rarity in the mid 15th century: rather, it was copied as a virtuous *exemplum* by all the other

4. Filippo di Cino Rinuccini, *Ricordi storici di Filippo di Cino Rinuccini dal 1282 al 1460 colla continuazione di Alamanno e Neri, suoi figli, fino al 1506* (Florence: Stamperia Piatti, 1840), XC.

5. Pius II, *Commentaries* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 2003), 317.

6. Luca Landucci, *Diario fiorentino dal 1450 al 1516* (Florence: Del Badia, 1883), 59.

7. Machiavelli, *Florentine Histories*, 361.

8. See Caroline Elam, "Lorenzo de' Medici and the Urban Development of Renaissance Florence", *Art History* 1 (1978), 43-66.

9. Caroline Elam, "Lorenzo's Architectural and Urban Policies", in *Lorenzo il Magnifico e il suo mondo*, ed. Gian Carlo Garfagnini (Florence: Olschki, 1994).

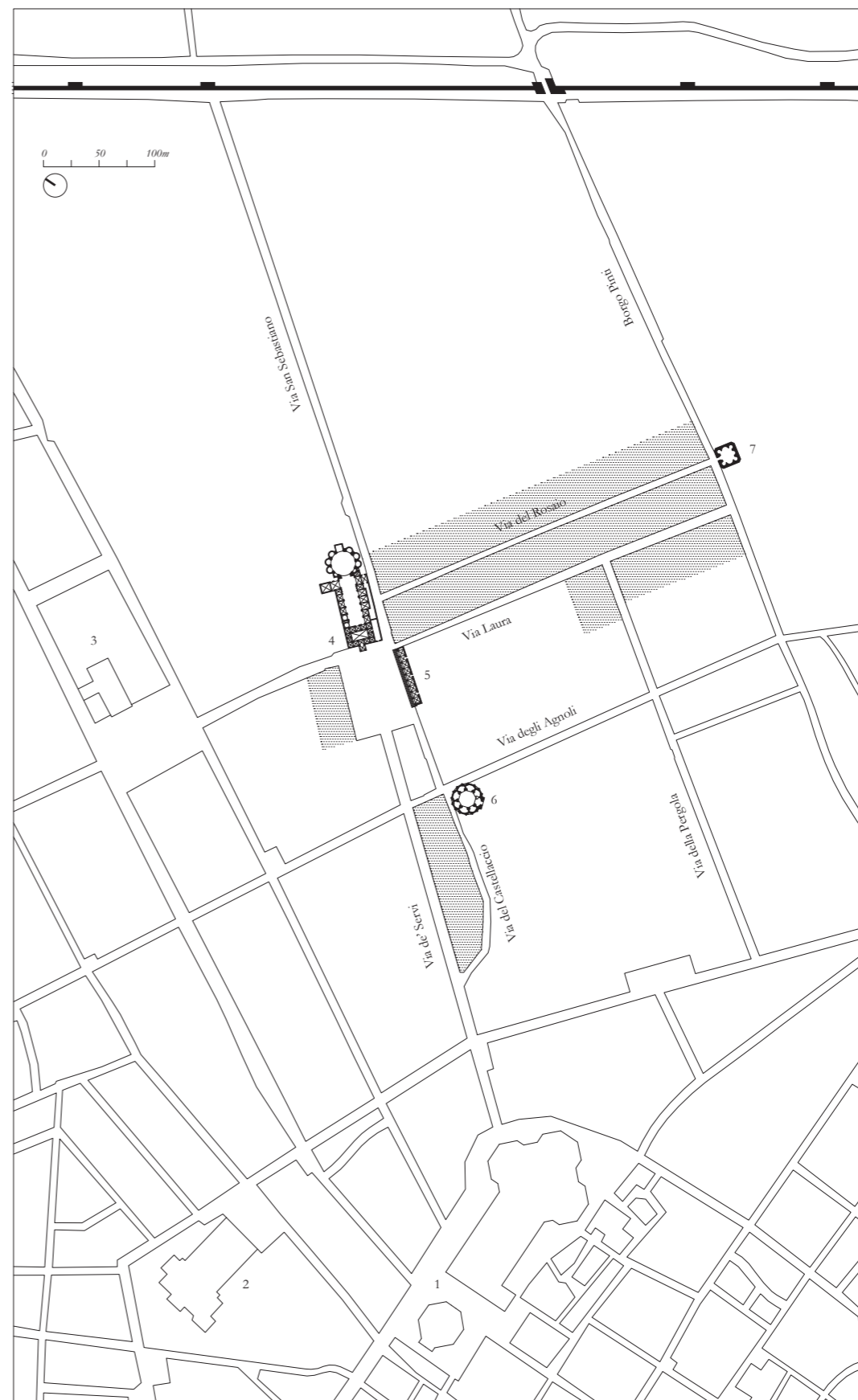
ancient, and sometimes self-proclaimed, noble families of Florence. It is enough to recall here the construction of the Palazzo Pitti (begun in 1446), the Palazzo Rucellai (1446-51), the Palazzo Pazzi (1458-69) and later on the Palazzo Strozzi (begun in 1489) and the Palazzo Gondi (1490). Each of these magnificent rusticated palaces, usually built along the most important streets, were conceived as a sort of civic manifesto to express the political status of their families. In many cases Cosimo and his grandson Lorenzo had clearly encouraged these families to build their residences, helping them in the expensive and diplomatically complex process of acquiring the parcels on which to build. We have to consider that all these colossal buildings required the occupancy of many of the small and narrow parcels which constituted the urban fabric of a medieval city.

The political and urban process of self-affirmation achieved by these families had many consequences within Florence. The most tangible effect of the palace boom was the progressive dispossession of small urban parcels and the increasing lack of low-budget housing. Today we would refer to this situation as an ongoing process of gentrification. The Florentine diarist Alamanno Rinuccini noted that the population was suffering from a shortage of houses caused by the construction of large and beautiful palaces.<sup>4</sup> A more subtle effect of *magnificenza* was the generation of envy between enemies and rival families. Pope Pius II clearly explains the consequences of Cosimo's projects in his *Commentaries*:

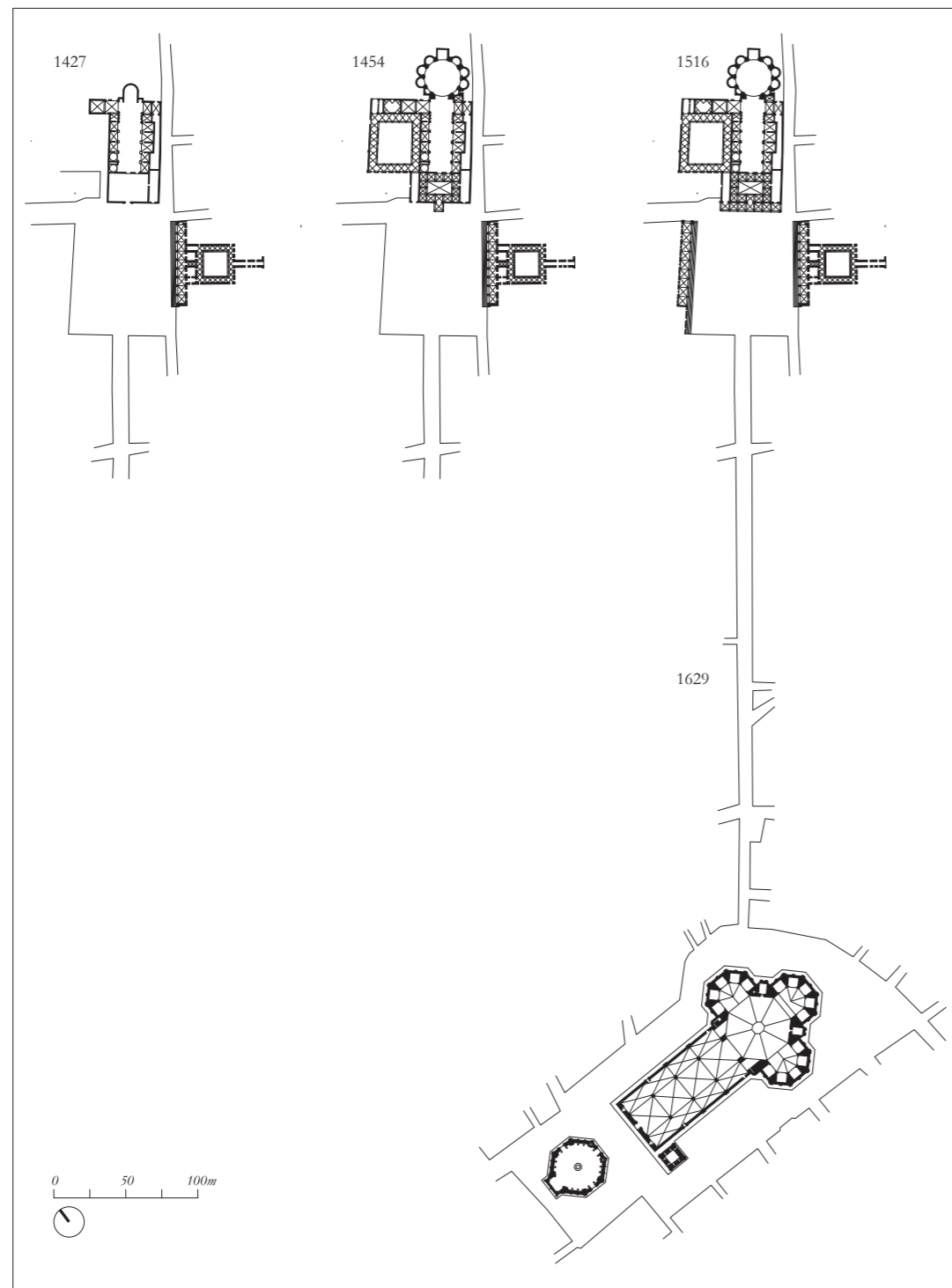
The palace he built for himself in Florence was fit for a king; he restored a number of churches and erected others; he established the splendid monastery of San Marco and stocked its library with Greek and Latin manuscripts; he decorated his villas in magnificent style. By these noble works, it seemed that he had almost triumphed over envy, but the people will ever despise an outstanding character. There were some who claimed that Cosimo's tyranny was intolerable and tried various means to thwart his projects; some even hurled abuse at him.<sup>5</sup>

It was probably in the context of an attempt to mitigate these consequences that important changes in the urban and political strategies could emerge. A significant protagonist of these transformations can be surely identified in Cosimo's grandson, Lorenzo de' Medici. After a first attempt to solve the lack of rental housing through new legislation in 1464, one year before Cosimo's death, and again in 1474; a new and more effective law was approved in 1489. Through this *provisione*, a forty-year exemption from taxes was given to houses built on new foundations. According to Luca Landucci's *Diario fiorentino* (Florentine Diary), this initiative generated such a building boom of construction and houses for rent that there was a shortage of masons and building materials at the time.<sup>6</sup> But behind this administrative act there was probably a clear urban plan. In his *Istorie fiorentine*, Machiavelli confirms that Lorenzo "turned to making his city more beautiful and greater; and for this, since there was much space in it without dwellings, he ordered new streets to be lined with new buildings: hence, the city became more beautiful and greater."<sup>7</sup> Cosimo's strategy of exhibiting the Medici's *magnificenza* through prestigious and prominent buildings progressively shifted, in Lorenzo's mind, toward a more complex and less evident approach: that is to say, toward an urban-design plan. Caroline Elam has noted Lorenzo's strategy bearing fruit in a sophisticated urban design for the area extending between the Duomo and the church of SS. Annunziata.<sup>8</sup> These two important religious poles were connected by the Via de' Servi, one of the most important pilgrimage routes through Florence. At that time the Piazza della Santissima Annunziata was a sort of suburban area embellished only by Brunelleschi's Foundling Hospital along its east side. The lack of proper paving and the unclear definition of its west side gave to this area a sort of rural appearance which is well portrayed in Ghirlandai's frescoed *Annunciation* in the Cappella dei Priori in the Palazzo Vecchio.

Between 1477 and 1478 Lorenzo decided to acquire the *tiratoio*, a long shed owned by the wool and merchants' guilds and placed along the right side of the Via de' Servi, together with the western portion of the piazza. Arguably his intention was to enclose the Piazza della Santissima Annunziata on the opposite side of the Foundling Hospital and to regularize the Via de' Servi with new houses for rent to be built on the site of the *tiratoio*. According to Elam this urban renewal project coincided with the completion in 1476-77 of the cupola of the SS. Annunziata.<sup>9</sup> In 1491, one year before his death, he also acquired from the Foundling Hospital the big area between the Piazza della Santissima Annunziata and the Cestello towards east with the intention of building new houses for rent, probably between 80 and 100. This urban plan was based on a



[1] Diagram of the area between the Duomo and the Piazza della Santissima Annunziata in Florence, with the properties obtained by Lorenzo de' Medici from 1477 to 1491 (reconstruction by Caroline Elam; drawing by Demus Dalpozzo): 1. Piazza del Duomo; 2. San Lorenzo; 3. San Marco; 4. Annunziata; 5. Portico degli Innocenti; 6. Rotonda degli Angeli; 7. Oratory of Cestello.



grid layout formed by two new streets, Via Laura and Via Ventura, intersected perpendicularly by the Via della Pergola. The first four houses were built at this intersection. The construction of a larger and straighter Via de' Servi, the completion of the Piazza della Santissima Annunziata and the new urbanization along Via Laura were indubitably part of a larger urban scheme whereby the two perpendicular axes were intended to form an "L" shape that hinged on the Piazza della Santissima Annunziata, almost the way a *cardo* and a *decumanus* intersect the Roman forum. It is only if we consider the model of an ancient forum that we can understand the attempt to create a unified enclosing portico through the construction of the Loggia de' Servi in front of its earlier Brunelleschian counterpart.

Even if this entire scheme was completed only partially and only after Lorenzo's death, it is possible to extrapolate here some analyses from Lorenzo's strategy. It is important to note that his clear and rational urban scheme was surely unprecedented in Florence. For the first time urban development was not based on incremental decisions made by guilds and corporations, as it had occurred in the preceding centuries. According to Tafuri, "this time . . . it was a single, powerful individual, ready to assert and affirm his own political-ideological role, who gave new impetus to the 'act of faith' in the development of the Florentine *civis*. This, moreover, was a carefully orchestrated operation – one as specialized, ordered, and decorous as Machiavelli would have us believe."<sup>10</sup> More importantly, in Lorenzo's intention to build houses for the lower and middle classes we can recognize an intentional coincidence between private interest and public welfare. According to Elam, "At all events, what should be stressed at this point is that Lorenzo was in 1477–1478 initiating an urban scheme of a kind which one would expect to be part of a wider government project. It was a personal intervention, but one that could not be accused of being overbearing or *signorile*: it did not involve dispossession either of the poor or the powerful."<sup>11</sup> Lorenzo's dismissal of *magnificenza* and his embracement of a broader urban strategy could arguably be considered as a deliberate act of calculated indifference: a clear *dissimulazione* in the face of his enemies and a sophisticated manifestation of *sprezzatura* in terms of architectural patronage. As Tafuri notes:

In any case, the fact that decoro was out of step with the aristocratic projects undertaken by the Gondi and the Strozzi, or alternatively, that it represented a sort of complement to them, is significant. Lorenzo appears to have tried to counter these acts of familial self-aggrandizement by deploying his own strategy of "low level" assertion. Wary of magnificent gestures glorifying the Medici, he took great pains to seem beholden to the public good. His "concealed tyranny" found the "correct" means of expression through the meticulous guidance of urban development, just as it did in other sectors.<sup>12</sup>

At this point it is instinctive to wonder why Lorenzo didn't manage to complete his plan before his death. According to Elam, his project might have been diverted and decelerated by the Pazzi conspiracy and the war that followed it. Instead, according to Tafuri, Lorenzo's interests might have shifted toward an even more "radical" outcome for his political and urban dissimulation: in other words, retirement to the *otium* of his countryside villa at Poggio a Caiano. However, Elam notes that the Poggio estate was bought in 1474, three years before the acquisitions in the SS. Annunziata area.<sup>13</sup> In any case, the fact that his urban plan was carried out after Lorenzo's death demonstrates that it was based on a thoughtful long-term strategy and that his real intentions were completely understood and shared by his descendants and by the architects in his circles: in other words, those who could read between the lines of his dissimulated understatement. The final decision to build the Loggia dei Servi and the realization of the project for the Piazza della Santissima Annunziata should be attributed to Lorenzo the Magnificent's second son, who became Pope Leo X in 1513. In the attempt to expand the Medici's political and cultural influence, Leo X had also commissioned two excessively ambitious projects to Giuliano da Sangallo: one for an impressive Medici palace to be built on the Piazza Navona in Rome and one for a grandiose villa on Via Laura in Florence.<sup>14</sup> These two projects seem to divert substantially from Lorenzo's low-profile strategy, for they appear to revive an attitude of *magnificenza*. However, the fact that they were never built might suggest that these design schemes had been strategically conceived as mere "intellectual exercises" with the intention of demonstrating the ability of the Medicean architect and the potentiality of Leo X's patronage. Leo's interest for ephemeral architecture was demonstrated by the triumphal ceremony of *posse* enacted in 1513 after he became

10. Tafuri, *Interpreting the Renaissance*, 63.

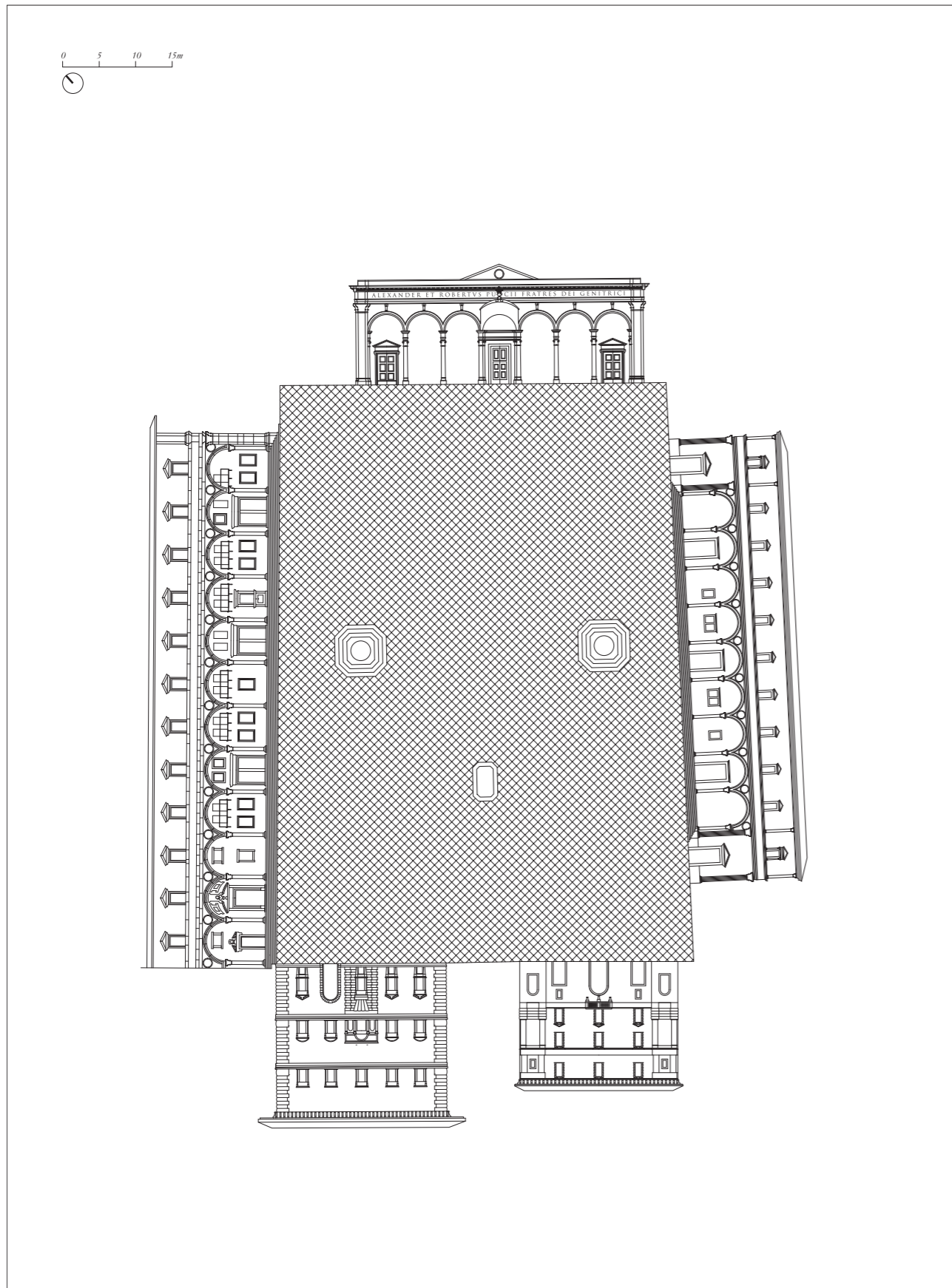
11. Elam, "Lorenzo's Architectural and Urban Policies", 368.

12. Tafuri, *Interpreting the Renaissance*, 63.

13. Elam, "Lorenzo's Architectural and Urban Policies", 367.

14. For a hypothetical reconstruction of the Medici home on Via Laura, see Linda Pellecchia, "Designing the Via Laura Palace", in *Lorenzo the Magnificent: Culture and Politics*, ed. Michael Mallett and Nicholas Mann (London: The Warburg Institute, 1996), 37–64.

[2] Diagram showing the construction phases of Piazza della SS. Annunziata



pope, when triumphal arches and monumental façades were temporarily erected in Rome along the processional route. The construction of the Loggia dei Servi in Florence starts in 1516, one year after another triumphal procession for Leo X: that of his entry into Florence.

To properly understand the project of the Piazza della Santissima Annunziata and its continuity with the original Laurentian strategy, we have to consider the relationship between Lorenzo and the architects in his circle. Giuliano da Sangallo was his preferred architect, and many of the projects attributed to Lorenzo were designed by him. Being part of the Medicean court, Giuliano was introduced to Neo-Platonism and to a large range of literary resources, including the works of Pliny, Cato and Leon Battista Alberti. His brother Antonio da Sangallo the Elder, a much more pragmatic and versatile architect specialized in the design of fortifications, was employed by Lorenzo in the construction of the Medicean fortress of Poggio Imperiale in Poggibonsi. It is probably significant that the project for the Loggia dei Servi in the Piazza della Santissima Annunziata was ultimately designed by Antonio, because his more rational and down-to-earth approach fit much better with the entire urban strategy and with the kind of calculated indifference that emerges from the intention to replicate Brunelleschi's loggia on the other side of the square. The Loggia dei Servi was not intended to be distinguished from the other buildings, nor to stand out from its urban surroundings. Consistent with Lorenzo's strategy, its design dissimulated any attempt to exhibit or manifest something behind a simple and rational urban scheme. It is noteworthy that the project was designed together with Baccio d'Agnolo, the architect and woodcarver who was also responsible for the urban project of the Piazza Strozzi.<sup>15</sup> It can be argued that after Lorenzo's decisions, urban projects progressively took the priority over the single buildings. Probably for the first time in Florence since the Middle Ages, urban and political unity was considered more significant than the visible expression of power of the individual families through their representative places. Moreover in the apparently "easy" solution of replicating Brunelleschi's loggia we can recognize a subtle architectural *sprezzatura*: behind the portico which replicates Brunelleschi's Foundling Hospital there was a completely different program and a quite innovative architectural typology. The building was indeed conceived as a low-budget residential block with eight "modern" row houses arranged around small courtyards. Thus it is not in the style of the building but in the less evident functional programme that we can recognize the fulfillment of Lorenzo's plan and particularly his attempt to solve the lack of low-budget housing. According to Emanuela Andreatta, who has written the most detailed analysis of this building, the construction of these houses represents the intention of re-establishing equality within the city.<sup>16</sup> In other words, quite similarly to the ephemeral façades commissioned by Leo X, the replica of Brunelleschi's portico was just a dissimulating mask – a mask, we could say, of calculated indifference.

15. Caroline Elam, "Piazza Strozzi: Two Drawings of Baccio d'Agnolo and the Problems of a Private Renaissance Square", *I Tatti Studies in the Italian Renaissance* 1 (1985), 105–135.

16. Emanuela Andreatta, "La Loggia dei Servi in Piazza della Santissima Annunziata a Firenze", *Rivista d'arte* 4 (1988), 168–253.

[4] Plan of the Piazza della SS. Annunziata with the enclosing façades