

Palaces: spatial expression of political power  
Brasília, 19-20 October 2017

All political power which is structured and established in a capital city is exercised from some form of palatial building.

According to Norbert Elias, all the social units or forms of human integration can be characterized by spatial arrangements, of which they are the tangible representation<sup>i</sup>. To understand palaces is, thus, to understand the organization and exercising of political power, by means of one of its most concrete symbols.

As an architectural category and social phenomenon, however, the palace has not been studied to a sufficient extent – and that was particularly the case in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Academic literature tends to approach these buildings in the context of discussions about the relations between architecture and power – be it political, economic, religious or ideological power. Little distinction is made, in general, between palaces, castles, citadels, monuments, temples, noble residences and – in the present day – museums, administrative or commercial buildings, or any other building that serves a representative purpose or whose large dimensions do not derive from strictly functional needs.

Moreover, under the influence of egalitarian and functionalist spirit of 20<sup>th</sup> century modernism, as well as of issues of identity stemming from the process of decolonization and from the traumatic integration of entire populations into the global economy and the modern State model, analyses often drift into normative and evaluative considerations about (in)authenticity, (in)human scale, gratuitousness, ostentation, universality versus localism, traditionalism versus modernism, in a quest for the just measure in the expression of power and national identity in architecture. This is apparent, for example, in the difficulties international architecture critique experiences in approaching the urban project of Brasília.

Such considerations do little to help us achieve an effective understanding of this particular category of building – one that is ubiquitous in our political systems and which, notwithstanding its symbolic qualities, fulfills very concrete functions, providing spaces for work, meetings, shared meals, artistic presentations and, last but not least, for living space.

A palace, however, is not an office building or a convention centre, even if those can also be of monumental dimensions.

One of the elements that makes palaces unique is what might be called their triple architectural program:

a) The first, of a symbolic nature, determines the grandiose scale, the richness and symbolic value of its artistic collection and of its interiors, and its location in the urban setting.

b) The second, of a social nature, stems from by the grand political rituals and the minute daily social-distinction mechanisms that develop around political authority: the many ceremonial and security concerns that restrict access to the ruler by means of all kinds of spatial access-limiting devices, like private passageways, guardrooms or secretaries' rooms, - or conversely, public image considerations that request large halls, balconies, staircases, etc.

c) The third is the architectural program itself, commissioned by the ruler or proposed by the architect, and which involves the functional aspects of the palace.

Understanding how a palace functions spatially, therefore, is inseparable from understanding its symbolic weight and the social-distinction mechanisms rites practised by its dwellers.

In the same way, the interiors of the palace are subject to symbolic and ceremonial constraints. Works of art, many of which are integrated into the structure of the building, perform not only a decorative function but also communicate values and ideals, and interpret – or even rewrite – the history and identity of the body politic.

The role of furniture is to set the stage for public ceremonies or ritualized private gatherings, distribute the participants appropriately across the physical space and induce their bodies into upright positions. In the palace environment, daily actions such as speaking or remaining silent, sitting or standing, approaching or be approached, entering or leaving, become signs of political power.

A promising starting point for a methodology for the study of palaces is provided by some of the studies of Renaissance and Early Modern buildings that analyse architecture alongside the social life that took place within the palace walls (M. Baillie - *Etiquette and the Planning of the State Apartments in Baroque Palaces*; Monique Chatenet - *La Cour de France au XVIème siècle: vie sociale et architecture*; *Public Buildings in Early Modern Europe*; Gérard Sabatier - *Le Palais d'État en Europe, de la Renaissance au Grand Siècle; Lieux de pouvoir et résidences royales en France, XVème - XVIIème siècles*)<sup>ii</sup>.

In such instances, an in-depth knowledge of the social life of the time is essential because, with the passage of time and changes in habits, rooms lose their original function and appear arbitrary to a modern observer. It suffices to remember that 17<sup>th</sup>-century sovereigns would grant audiences and hold meetings in their bedrooms.

When it comes to modern palaces, temporal and geographical proximity tends to hide the fact that the social-distinction political rites that determine how these buildings function, in spatial terms, continue to be restricted to a privileged few.

The seminar 'Palaces: spatial expression of political power' proposes a discussion of the palaces as an architectural and social phenomenon, taking as its starting point analyses of palatial buildings built in different eras and under different political systems, from Versailles to the headquarters of international organizations.

The first session will be devoted to the examination of a number of palatial buildings from the perspective of the aforementioned triple program (symbolic, social and functional). In the second session the discussion will be extended to the relationship between the palace and the *polis*, as a stage and symbol for the debate and decision-making process of the body politic. The third session will focus on palatial interiors – their works of art and their furniture.

The fourth session will be devoted to a discussion of how a palace is defined, and to methodological approaches that contemplate the palace as an architectural, social and aesthetic phenomenon. This session will look at the experiences of the Palace of Versailles Research Centre, which takes a multidisciplinary approach, ranging from architectural studies to musicology, to studying the seat of the French monarchy in the 17<sup>th</sup> and 18<sup>th</sup> centuries.

The last session will discuss the future of palaces. New technologies and new forms of communication, based on the immateriality of the image and the speed and informality of virtual networks, bring about important changes in the way the power of the State is represented. Ceremonies are no longer organized around the actual participants but instead serve the imperatives of photographers and television, which bring the ruler close to the viewer. The aim is no longer to inspire awe but to eliminate the distance between the leader and the population through the projection of charisma. These transformations have brought about important changes not only in the spatial functioning of palaces but also in the role the palaces themselves perform within the symbolic apparatus of the State.

The starting point for the debates will be the project for Itamaraty Palace, the headquarters of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs that was conceived by Oscar Niemeyer in 1958 when Brasilia took over the mantle of capital city from Rio de Janeiro. Its architectural program and the history of the project illustrate many questions of the problematics of the palace.

The program of Itamaraty Palace is inseparable of the three traditional roles of the diplomat: to represent their country, to negotiate, and to inform. In performing those three functions, diplomacy alternates between the strict protocol of formal situations and the creation of informal situations of interaction that allow for the exchange of information and ideas and the advancement of negotiation processes, in a less structured but no less productive way. The project is also inseparable from Brazil's history: in the 1960s, the country experienced a period of accelerated industrialization, a higher international profile for its arts and culture, and the diversification and intensification of its diplomatic agenda.

The Brazilian diplomatic corps is a permanent bureaucracy with a strong institutional culture. The plans for the Palace were discussed in detail with Oscar Niemeyer and the more than 20 artists and designers involved in the project. Itamaraty Palace in Brasilia was thus conceived as a ceremonial space aimed at representing a nation undergoing accelerated processes of modernization and, on the international stage, ascension. It was designed to serve the permanent objective of Brazilian foreign policy – projecting the country abroad, while also serving the operational requirements of state protocol and providing Brazil's diplomats with environments in which to interact at various different levels of formality. Brazilian diplomacy has shaped, and today is shaped by, the spatial configurations of its headquarters, a symbiotic relationship in which use and structure are mutually reinforcing and mutually legitimizing.

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<sup>i</sup> Not all the social units or integrating forms of men are at the same time units of accommodation. But they can all be characterized by certain types of spatial arrangement (....) And so the precipitate of a social unit in terms of space and indeed, more narrowly, in terms of rooms is a tangible and—in the literal sense—visible representation of its special nature” Elias, Norbert. 1983. *The Court Society*. Oxford: Basil Blackwell. P. 41-44.

<sup>ii</sup> Baillie, H. M.: *Etiquette and the Planning of the State Apartments in Baroque Palaces*, in: *Archaeologia* 101

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