

ALBERTO PRATELLI*

ARCHITECTURAL PLAY.
A DIFFICULT GAMEARCHITEKTONICZNA ZABAWA.
TRUDNA GRA

Abstract

The concept of play in various architectural forms. After a brief introduction discovering the existing relationship, even ironic, between ideas and realization, the paper studies some designs created by Bibiena (around 1709), where games and festivities were the real content of the designed buildings, and something like a *game-machine* was the “incredible” way they worked in order to realize their unbelievable achievements.

Keywords: Architectural drawings, Design and architecture, Francesco and Ferdinando Galli Bibiena, Open festival and theatres (eighteenth century)

Streszczenie

Artykuł opisuje koncepcję zabawy w różnorodnych formach architektonicznych. Po krótkim wprowadzeniu, w którym odkryte zostają istniejące relacje, nawet te ironiczne, pomiędzy ideą a realizacją, tekst analizuje projekty stworzone przez, Francesco i Ferdinando Bibiena (ok. 1709 roku), w których zabawa i świętowanie były prawdziwą treścią projektowanych budynków, a *maszyny-gry* pomagały w osiągnięciu niezwykłych efektów.

Słowa kluczowe: rysunek architektoniczny, projekt i architektura, Francesco i Ferdinando Galli Bibiena, otwarte festiwale i teatry (XVIII w.)

* Full Prof. D. Sc. Arch. Alberto Pratelli, Università degli Studi di Udine.

Game or play?

Each good design necessarily contains a good amount of both. But we need to distinguish; and perhaps we can try to discover when we meet play and when we meet a game. Many plays are beautiful, especially because they contain a game you are playing with yourself. I really appreciate the whole thesis of the organizing committee, but for one little thing: I think (and know) that the drawings – as with all the correlated work – are the actual core, and real origin, of architecture. But architecture has to be built. If not, it is something different, even if of extreme importance. Drawings have to be beautiful, but not from the visual point of view. Drawings, like landscapes, have to be *undertaken*, not only seen or perceived. Being an old person I could pretend to be modern (modernism is a mental form from 80 years ago...), but I can't pretend to be contemporary (and I would even prefer not to be)! My view, for this reason, will not be *contemporary*!

Sometimes you need to design an object produced so many times, so old and at the same time perfect, that you need a new design, not for pure functionality, but only looking for something new. This is the case, for instance, with chairs; or coffeemakers... In the eighties M. Graves and A. Rossi made their coffeemakers for Alessi: they chose to *play* (in the good sense). Probably their best design work, which is a good new; and from many points of view, also their best architectural work, which is perhaps not such a good new.

But you can discover far more if you try to investigate below the surface. In 1991, in Helsinki, I attended a Design conference. There, Mr. Alessi, himself in person, explained: *people speak a lot of the phallic symbol in designing our objects; this time we are not working with a symbolic communication, but we are simply producing a "phallus"*, and, on the blackboard he sketched something like a cylinder, rounded on top, with a un upper "nipple"... exactly what was to come: A. Rossi's design for the Alessi coffeemaker ... perfect, the *Cupola* (after the *Conica*). And what was to be the real explanation given by A. Rossi? A form taken from Antonelli's dome of the San Gaudenzio Basilica in Novara (1844-1878)... That (the dome) in reality is one of the most impressive and unsurpassed pieces of architecture ... of masonry structure. This (and Antonelli) a real masterpiece in architecture ...

But you can also discover that the ironic and iconic communicative mechanism that we find in these designs is certainly part of a programmatic approach, decided over the years by the firm itself (Alessi), before many other designers. Now Alessi is explaining his work as: *the useful art* ... as we can see today in its advertising. It is not by coincidence that, in the same way, I continue to think that Design is basically what in the past we used to call *Arti Applicata* (Applied Art)... But departing from the communication's contents, we can go now to the real contents of design. I would like here to stress the idea of *playing*, in a *game* made through more specific projects, directly intended to produce some real play.

What is more Italian than a real "sagra"? Perhaps a good translation of this word could be a *folk local cuisine festival*. And with this premise, what is more *bolognese* than a *porchetta festival*? Here is the project for the *Festa della Porchetta*, the 24th of August 1683, in the main square, in Bologna¹. With a central perspective, very accurate, and the real measurement reported to the projection plane, the engraving shows the spectacular capacities of E. Rivani in

¹ Marco Antonio Chiarini, da Ercole Rivani, *Macchina per la festa della Porchetta*, 1683 (etching; cm 56 x 42,4). Bologna, Biblioteca Comunale dell'Archiginnasio, Gabinetto Disegni e Stampe, cart. Gozzadini, 27, p. 192

producing extraordinary machines and on the same time the cultural environment Ferdinando Bibiena was to grow in.

The complex and imposing apparatus supported the Caucasus Mount, where Prometheus was chained, and at a second time was to transform itself into a garden with three fountains. Over each fountain you can see the statues of Hercules liberator. In the last scene the great machine returns to be Mount Caucasus, closes, and becomes a huge triumphal, that, drawn by four horses, carries Pallade and Prometeo into the Public Building.

Here a question comes in mind: 330 years ago, the common people attended folk festivals with *Prometeo*, *Pallade*, or *Hercules*; can we suggest what kind of heroes would act as a *testimonial* today? Somebody taken from pop music... soccer... or from somewhere else, even more indecent than that? It is better to *run*, to see something by Galli Bibiena. I had occasion to study some drawings done by *the Bibienas*. If you have the time to go through them, looking into each millimetre, you will discover a whole world! Each of them is a real play. In all the possible senses: being a play also the architectural scenography he intended to realize... Here are three examples.

All the historical information is taken from Deanna Lenzi's researches², as perhaps the most important – and I like to think influential – scholar of the Bibiena architects. The details I would like to show, small and articulate, are possible to be shown only during a spoken session, with many moving subsequent slides; in this written paper I'll basically quote the drawings and the historical notes useful to recognize them. For this reason all the notes are taken from Deanna Lenzi's fundamental book, and I'll quote this singular researcher who explained each drawing in it. All the paper sheets are small, designed in great detail, hand drawn in pen, with a very fine nib, which permits very fine writing (more than 6 letters per cm).

In all three examples, *play* is the subject, and *game* is both the possibility by the author to realize it, and the possibility by the reader to discover the whole project in a single drawing, complete and full of details and explanations. With the maximum of paper spare, the maximum of details! From the structure to the architectural and decorative details!...Picture – hand – drawing ... In the eighteenth century people didn't speak of globalization, but the cultural world used to be international. The metric system was a long way off, and he draws the scale, in feet, both of Paris and Bologna (*Schala di piedi di...*). Interesting to note that Bologna's feet are far bigger in dimension, in accord with the old Italian peasant proverb: *scarpe grosse e cervello fino* (the peasant: *big shoes and smart brain*).

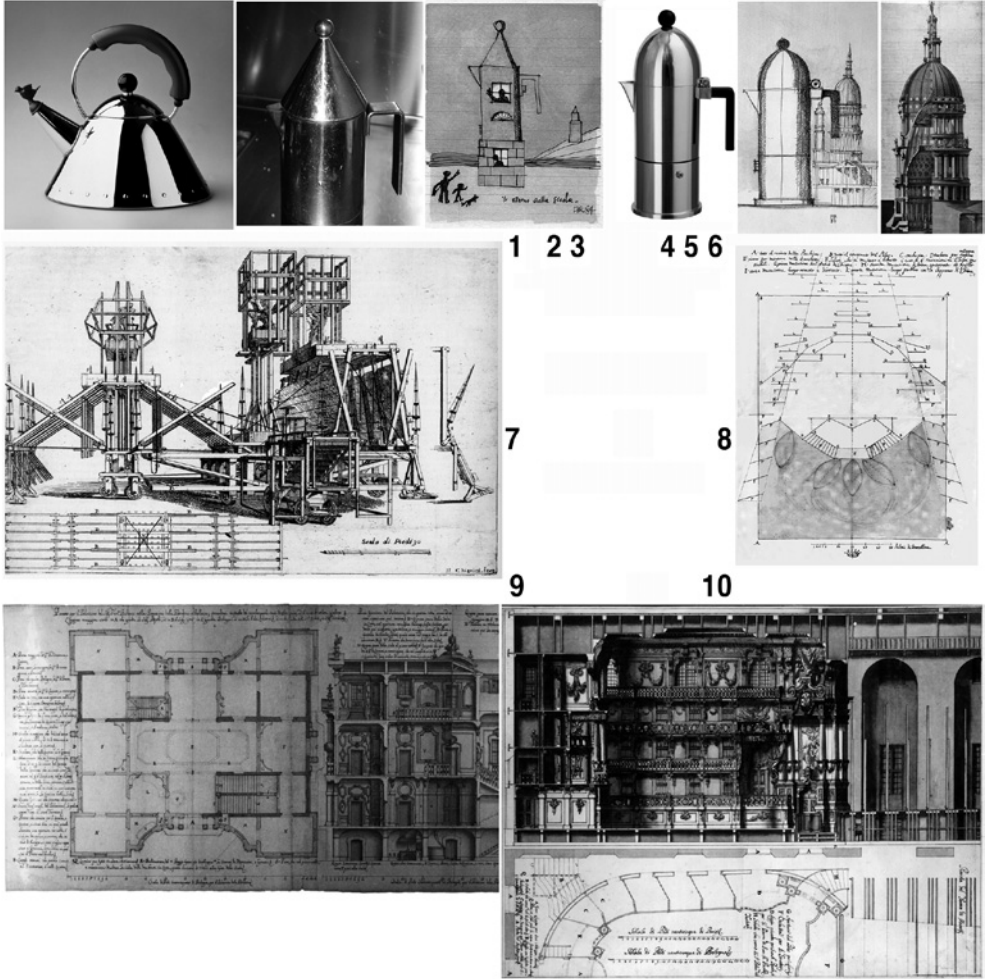
1. The open theatre on the pond della Lonja in Barcellona. 1708

A little sheet, about A4 dimension³. Related to this are the sketches describing four *mutazioni*, or what we would now call the *scenography* of the four following acts⁴. Here we can see the plan of a big festivity. I'll not try to describe the theatrical narrative, but I prefer to

² D. Lenzi, J. Bentini (a cura di), *I Bibiena, una famiglia europea*, Marsilio Ed. 2000.

³ Idem, Ferdinando Galli Bibiena, *Spettacolo sulla Peschiera della Lonja a Barcellona. 1708. Pianta della scena*. (pencil, pen, watercolour light blue; cm 29,8 x 20,9). Monaco, Staatliche Graphische Sammlung. (Specific comment to the drawing by Elena Tamburini)

⁴ Idem. *Antro di Chirone* (cm 16,2 x 20,4). *Arena consacrata ad Apollo* (cm 16,9 x 20,2). *Luogo remoto e diroccato* (cm 17,2 x 20,1). *Capanna di Chirone* (cm 17,1 x 19,8)



III. 1. Coffeemaker for Alessi, M. Graves, 2. 3. Coffeemaker for Alessi, *The Conica*, A. Rossi, 4. 5. 6. Coffeemaker for Alessi, *The Cupola*, A. Rossi, and Antonelli's Basilica in Novara, 7. Marco Antonio Chiarini, da Ercole Rivani, *Macchina per la festa della Porchetta*, Bologna, 1683, 8. Ferdinando Galli Bibiena, drawing for the *Spettacolo sulla Peschiera della Lonja a Barcellona*. 1708. Stage's plan, 9. Francesco Galli Bibiena, *Progetti per il Palazzino della Redondina*, Bologna (1714 - 1739), 10. Francesco Galli Bibiena, *Opéra di Nancy*, 1708. Spaccati trasversali e parziali.

note that the little sheet contains all the necessary information. If you read the legend carefully, you get a clear description of the whole event: the position of the pond, the specific *telari* (frames) of the subsequent acts, the stairs for getting in and out of the boats, the small cave where actors will disappear... and the *telari fissi*, the fixed frames that open like a book,

and turning them without necessity of replacement, you get the first new appearance of the new mutation.

“In the dense texture of activities undertaken by Arciduca Carlo d’Asburgo, the call of Ferdinando Galli Bibiena (1708) – already famous for its splendid theatrical festivals of Parma and Piacenza and the considerable amount of activities carried out in other Italian cities – was probably the main tool and the new king wanted to affirm and disseminate his right to sovereignty...⁵ and that he believed in this function by the *Bolognese* artist is shown by the fact that four years later, as successor of brother Joseph on the Habsburg throne, he would summon him to a similar position at the Vienna court. The chronicles of these years recall the image of a court in exceptional and spectacular artistic ferment.

This is an outdoor show, which recalls the theme of the centaur Chiron – a symbolic educator’s image – as hope for a future heir in the dynasty. A theatrical show in a pond certainly showed the limits from the technical scenographic perspective, starting with the fact that it lacked a proscenium and attic. But the “Bibienna family” was able to solve most brightly this kind of problem, and the pond showed significant benefits, reflecting the water scenes and lights, and lending itself naturally to movement – generally made by artificial means, such as naval battles (*naumachie*), marine scenes, and so on. The effect of idyllic suggestion, almost dream, resulting therefore, perfectly matched the pastoral and mythological inspiration prevailing at the time for theatre festivals.

This plan appears to be a key document, clearly indicating the complex and articulated positions of the various pieces, during the four *mutations*. The rectangular pond is totally occupied by the scene; the bottom prolonged beyond its borders, stretching along the edges with two rows of side stable *telari*, which will change like *booklets*, leaving the central water space as a real practicable proscenium. The pond’s foreground enables the movement of two or three boats (sketched in the drawing), in which the actors, climbing up and down the stairs on the central platform, run a series of evolutions, finally disappearing under the stage, through the caves on the side.

2. A similarly impressive amount of information can be seen in the project for the *Redondina House*⁶

See the design he prepared for his house (here is Francesco)... Astonishing details: the way the light, goes indirectly to open the ceiling’s space, intended – of course – to bear a fantastical fresco... or the way you can get water from the well, perfectly organized in the cellar, near the big kitchen, from all the different floors, ground, first, second...

The building, intended for the renovation of an existing building, was to be built on the first hills of Bologna. Conceived between 1713-14 (Francesco’s transfer to Bologna) and 1739 (his death), the *palazzino* (little palace) aspires to be a tangible sign of his professional luck, and emerges from some formal connotations that tend to characterize it as the home of a family of artists-designers. Once more a place to organize wonderful celebrations!

⁵ *Idem*. (Specific comment to the drawing by Elena Tamburini)

⁶ *Idem*. Francesco Galli Bibiena, *Progetti per il Palazzino della Redondina, Bologna (tra il 1714 e il 1739)*. *Pianta e sezioni parallele*. (cm 42,3 x 87), *Facciata laterale* (cm 42 x 43,7), *Facciata principale* (cm 42 x 47,5). Lisbona, Museo Nacional de Arte Antiga

“The central ceiling, the symbolic fulcrum on the organization of the interior space, was often identified as the architectural implementation of the *opened perspective*, deriving from the *quadraturistica* tradition, already experienced in the Bologna area...”,⁷ but is also truly a space, worthy of a nice Palace dedicated to *theatrical shows*, or parties, as you might call them today. The space itself and the way the balconies are made always allow a full and indirect lighting of all stairways and large ceilings, which, according to the Bibienesca tradition, will certainly be covered with magnificent frescoes, *true* and first *virtual* realities.

The interior space is organized around a great living hall, through a cruciform plan, whose middle zone, running up the entire edifice, allows different views *a loggia*, from the upper floors. The spatial mechanism, with its *telescoped* widening, achieves a clever effect of natural light, starting from the *pure light* captured by the square openings placed at the mezzanine. Even if it is easy to understand the hierarchical placement of the two stairs, a bigger one for the master apartment, and a second one for other apartments and servants, it is rather a surprise to discover that you can clearly see the different decorations for the various rooms, different in décor and importance; or to see the positions of the chimneys, the kitchen chimney’s occupancy, the location of the well, or of the various kitchen instruments, such as the *secchiaro* (great sink). On top of the master’s stairs a large lobby (*attrio*) acts as a fulcrum for the main floor spaces. If the large central hall was to be a space for “parties”, the many various ways to present the spaces on the main floor (*the noble floor*) had to open to different views and events. The terminal exterior volume closes on four fronts with a *head*, adorned with a curved tympanum. Here stand out four figures of rosters that, with lilies crowning the towers, are a sculptural representation of the family insignia. The oldest way to communicate your power, through architecture.

3. And you can admire (Francesco) Bibiena’s capacity in what was his better mission (to use a contemporary expression): a theatre. Here the *Opéra di Nancy*, 1708⁸

This extraordinary theatre was built by the Duke Leopold I, who promoted a complex program of musical and theatrical services of the court, and, after charging Henri Desmarests as superintendent (1707), decided to build *d’une salle d’opéra*, and got in touch with Francesco Galli Bibiena. By 1708, even if forced to change a project, and, possibly, to return to Vienna for the opening of the Grosses Hoftheater (April 21), Bibiena concluded the essential structures of the large theatre and gave a start to the work of painting, gilding and staging. Inaugurated in 1709, it did not actually have a spectacular and intense life. In a very long and morphologically simple building, inserted within the town’s walls and the convent of the Cordeliers, the theatre, according to tradition, was built entirely of wood; there were multiples galleries, with profiles and balconies always different, as in his Grosse Hoftheater in Vienna (1704). But compared to the latter, here the ornaments were lighter, perhaps to suit a more classicist or *French* taste, for the Lorraine court. Of this now destroyed theatre, we

⁷ *Idem.* (Specific comment to the drawing by Francesco Ceccarelli)

⁸ *Idem.* Francesco Galli Bibiena, *Opéra di Nancy*, 1708. Spaccati trasversali e parziali, all’altezza del palco ducale e del proscenio; rilievo di metà del soffitto; pianta della sala e del palcoscenico. (pen, brown ink, watercolor; cm 41,8 x 51,4). New York, The Metropolitan Museum of Art (Specific comment to the drawing by Deanna Lenzi)

know many drawings, but I would like to go through the two drawings of the Metropolitan Museum in New York that, for the date 1709 and for the double scale in feet of Paris and Bologna, were presumably done after the inauguration and resumed the project in the richest and most complex way.

The plan, very detailed, lies on the old walls embankment, and develops a long block of 62 x 18.50 metres. On the short side the entrance led into the auditorium, not equipped with very special services, while the stage had a depth and complexity worthy of the most magnificent *salles de machines*. You can recognize 52 moving panels for the scenes, a convenient central lighting cauldron, large rooms for actors, machines and scenes, while a possible rear opening on the bottom stage allowed the entrance of machines, carts and animals.

The other drawing perfectly describes the *bibienesca* theatre's hall structure, woodened, very light, but compact and completely isolated from the masonry compartment in which it is contained. In the thickness of the wooden coffered ceiling is possible to detect *cassette* furniture, for the air changes; and the unique system of anchoring the wooden structure to the masonry walls.

In these sheets for one of the most important designs in Francesco Bibiena's career, the drawings and details are so accurate that Deanna Lenzi⁹ would not exclude (or hope?) a reference to the manuscript *Architettura maestra delle Arti (Architecture teacher of Arts)*, that included more than a hundred tables, that F. Bibiena, dying, left ready for printing and is still unknown. Will it never be possible to discover it? That is the next *game* for historians and architecture lovers.

References

- [1] Lenzi D., Bentini J. (Ed.), *I Bibiena, una famiglia europea*, Marsilio 2000.

⁹ *Idem.*