Spatial Manipulations in Italian Mannerist Architecture:
Challenging the Boundaries of Renaissance Ideals

AR2A011 Architectural History Thesis
MSc Architecture, Urbanism and Building Sciences, Delft University of Technology

Celina van der Raaf

5563135

17 April 2025

Art History
Supervisor: mr.dr. Everhard Korthals Altes

Abstract - Mannerism has for a long time been associated with primarily painting and sculpture. Its role in architecture has as a result been overshadowed, even though it offers a unique way of working with space. This thesis explores the question: *"How did different Italian Mannerist architects use spatial manipulation to challenge Renaissance ideals and shape the viewer's experience?"* Through a comparative analysis of four Italian case studies—the Laurentian Library, Palazzo del Te, Palazzo Massimo alle Colonne and Villa Farnese—it becomes clear that Mannerist architects didn't simply reject classical principles, but rather challenged their boundaries in their personal and inventive ways. While existing studies mostly discuss Mannerist architects separately, this thesis highlights the variation within Italian Mannerism itself by not only revealing their shared characteristics, but also the individual approaches. It shows that, aside from their differences, the Mannerists were united by a mindset of experimentation, challenging Renaissance ideals and the viewer experience. This approach includes unusual shapes and distortions like elongated proportions or irregular layouts. These were not simply random or decorative, but rather intentional and well-thought-out design choices.

Key words - mannerist architecture, palazzo del te, laurentian library, palazzo massimo alle colonne, villa farnese, spatial manipulations

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Chapter 1 – Introduction

For a long time, Mannerism has primarily been associated with painting and sculpture, with its discussions often overshadowing its role in architecture and treating it as less important. According to art historian Nikolaus Pevsner[1], this may be due to the greater difficulty in defining and analyzing Mannerist characteristics in architecture than in the visual arts. As a result, the architectural side of Mannerism has remained underexplored or secondary in broader discussions of the style, even though it offers valuable insights into how space and form were used in new and inventive ways during this period.

While detailed studies on Mannerist architecture do exist, they tend to only look at the architects and their works individually, instead of comparing them or putting them in conversation with one another. The focus is rather on how it differs from earlier styles like the High Renaissance, emphasizing the stylistic shift instead of exploring the variety that exists within Mannerist architecture itself. This approach overlooks the complexity and diversity within Mannerist architecture, one that cannot be reduced to a single architect, project or formula.

This thesis aims to fill this gap by focusing on Italian Mannerist architecture and comparing how different architects approached the style. The goal is to explore not only how it challenged Renaissance ideals, but also how it varied within itself. In doing so, the study seeks to uncover both the common characteristics employed by Mannerist architects and the individual innovations that distinguish each architect's approach. This way, the study engages with the broader, difficult challenge of defining and analyzing Mannerist characteristics in architecture.

The research question central to this thesis is:

"How did different Italian Mannerist architects use spatial manipulation to challenge Renaissance ideals and shape the viewer's experience?"

To answer this question, the thesis will engage in a comparative analysis of four case studies: the Laurentian Library, Palazzo del Te, Villa Farnese, and Palazzo Massimo alle Colonne. These buildings were chosen to focus specifically on Italian architecture and represent a diverse selection of architects, working in different regions and at different moments within the Mannerist period. This comparative approach draws on both primary sources, such as architectural plans and visual representations, and secondary literature on Italian Mannerism and Mannerist architecture.

Before turning to the case studies and the comparative analysis (chapter 3), the thesis will first provide a brief overview of the broader historical and cultural context in which Mannerism emerged (chapter 2). At the end, a reflection on the findings and their broader implications will conclude the thesis (chapter 4).

Chapter 2 – The Emergence of Mannerism

Mannerism is derived from the Italian word maniera, which means "style" or "manner." At first, it was used to describe a specific Italian painting and sculpture style that was influenced by High Renaissance artists. Mannerism's definition however grew over time and by the late 1500s it had come to characterize a whole artistic movement in Italy and throughout Europe. By the 1920s, art historians had acknowledged Mannerism as a separate late 16th-century movement that connected the Baroque and Renaissance.[2]

The painter and art historian Giorgio Vasari (1511–1574) played a significant role in forming the concept of maniera during his era. He used the phrase "bella maniera" to describe a graceful style in which artists studied and blended the most beautiful aspects of classical art and nature to produce perfected forms.[3] However, maniera was not just a visual art concept. Even before Vasari, critics used the term to describe polished writing and to influence social behavior. Baldassare Castiglione's book Il Cortegiano (1528) expanded on this, introducing what the Italians call sprezzatura: the idea of doing things gracefully without appearing to try too hard. This concept also became essential to Mannerism, where artists attempted to make their creations appear effortless and natural, even if this required a high level of skill.[4]

The period was viewed with optimism by historians of Vasari's time, who saw it as a period of thriving creativity that built on the accomplishments of the High Renaissance. Today's art historians, however, often hold a different perspective on Mannerism and see it as a break from the Renaissance's balanced ideals. They frequently connect Mannerism to a feeling of stress and anxiety, which reflects the period's larger social and political turmoil, especially in the aftermath of the Sack of Rome in 1527.[5]

The devastating Sack of Rome had altered Italy. Italy's political independence came to an end when troops from the Holy Roman Empire invaded and plundered Rome, demonstrating the growing influence of foreign powers.[6] At the same time, Europe was experiencing religious divisions as a result of the Reformation, which led the Catholic Church to lose some of its influence as Protestant ideas developed. In response, the Church started the Counter-Reformation to strengthen its authority and uphold Catholic beliefs. The Jesuits, founded by Ignatius of Loyola in 1540, became a leading force in promoting discipline and loyalty. Meanwhile, new scientific and humanistic ideas, such as Copernicus's heliocentric theory caused even more uncertainty.[7]

Mannerism emerged from this chaotic environment. Mannerist art is characterized by tension and distortion in contrast to the dramatic Baroque or the balanced beauty of the Renaissance. This style reflects a world in crisis, divided by religious wars, strict belief and changing ideologies.[8] Because of this, Mannerism is not always perceived as appealing, especially when compared to the High Renaissance. Some call this period horrific and exaggerated, but also the inevitable after a high period. Nikolaus Pevsner[9] even goes as far as writing that "The Mannerist proportions carefully, but with the aim of hurting, rather than pleasing, the eye."

An iconic example of Mannerism that showcases this is Madonna with the Long Neck (figure 2.1) by Parmigianino, who alongside Pontormo was a leading exponent of Mannerism. In this painting, Mary's neck is stretched unnaturally, her fingers are long and delicate, and the Christ Child lying across her lap, looks unusually large and limp. He appears weak and almost lifeless due to the strong contrast of light and shadow. The composition also feels out of balance, with crowded figures on one side and a tiny figure of Saint Jerome standing in the background.[10]

This painting can be compared to Madonna and Child with Book (figure 2.2) by Raphael, one of the greatest artists of the High Renaissance, alongside Michelangelo and Leonardo da Vinci. Raphael painted in contrast with harmony and balance. His figures feel both divine and human because they are delicate, well-proportioned, have rounded shapes and there is a loving bond between Mary and Jesus.[11]

Figure 2.1: Parmigianino, *Madonna with the Long Neck*, 1534–1540. Oil on panel. Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

Figure 2.2: Raphael, *Madonna and Child with Book*, ca. 1502–1503. Oil on panel. Norton Simon Museum, Pasadena.

The transition from Renaissance harmony to Mannerist exaggeration is also visible in the three works by Raphael, Andrea del Sarto and Pontormo. Raphael's The Virgin with a Fish (figure 2.3) adds more movement while maintaining the High Renaissance's signature harmony and balance. A dynamic yet restrained composition is produced by the figures' natural interactions through their looks and gestures. The Madonna of the Harpies (figure 2.4) by Andrea del Sarto, on the other hand, leans more toward Mannerism by demonstrating symmetry and ideal beauty, but the figures appear somewhat isolated from one another, giving the painting a more formal and less organic feel. Finally, Pontormo's Madonna and Child with Saints (figure 2.5) is the most Mannerist of the three. He distorts proportions, elongates the figures and creates a space that feels artificial as the figures do not interact in a realistic way.[12]

Figure 2.3: Raphael, *The Virgin with a Fish*, 1513–1514. Oil on panel, transferred to canvas. Museo del Prado, Madrid.

Figure 2.4: Andrea del Sarto, *Madonna of the Harpies*, 1517. Oil on panel. Uffizi Gallery, Florence.

Figure 2.5: Pontormo, *Madonna and Child with Saints*, 1518. Oil on wood. San Michele Visdomini, Florence.

After talking about the characteristics of Mannerism in painting, it is crucial to examine how this artistic movement appeared in architecture as well. Similarly as with the paintings, Mannerist architecture diverged from the harmonious and orderly forms that characterized earlier Renaissance buildings.

The designs of architects like Michelangelo, Giulio Romano and Raphael set the groundwork for this shift. Many of the early Mannerist architects were followers of Bramante (1444–1514), a key High Renaissance figure, and were greatly influenced by his architectural style. However, this group was disrupted in 1527 by the Sack of Rome and scattered throughout Italy. This change signaled the start of a shift in architectural style as well as the spread of Renaissance innovations to new areas. As these architects developed their individual styles, which varied greatly because there were no common standards, the balanced ideals of the Renaissance gradually gave way to the more exaggerated and artificial characteristics of Mannerism.[13]

Chapter 3 – Mannerist Architecture: Four Case Studies

From the group that had been scattered throughout Italy due to the Sack of Rome, four architects have been selected to further examine, each active in a different region and moment within the Mannerist period. The case studies include, as shown in the timeline in figure 3.1, Giulio Romano's Palazzo del Te in Mantua, Michelangelo's Laurentian Library in Florence, Baldassare Peruzzi's Palazzo Massimo alle Colonne in Rome and Vignola's Villa Farnese in Caprarola.

This chapter is divided into two parts. The first subchapter looks at the exteriors of the case studies, while the second focuses on their interiors. Each section will end with a comparative analysis, revealing both the similarities and differences in the architects' approaches.

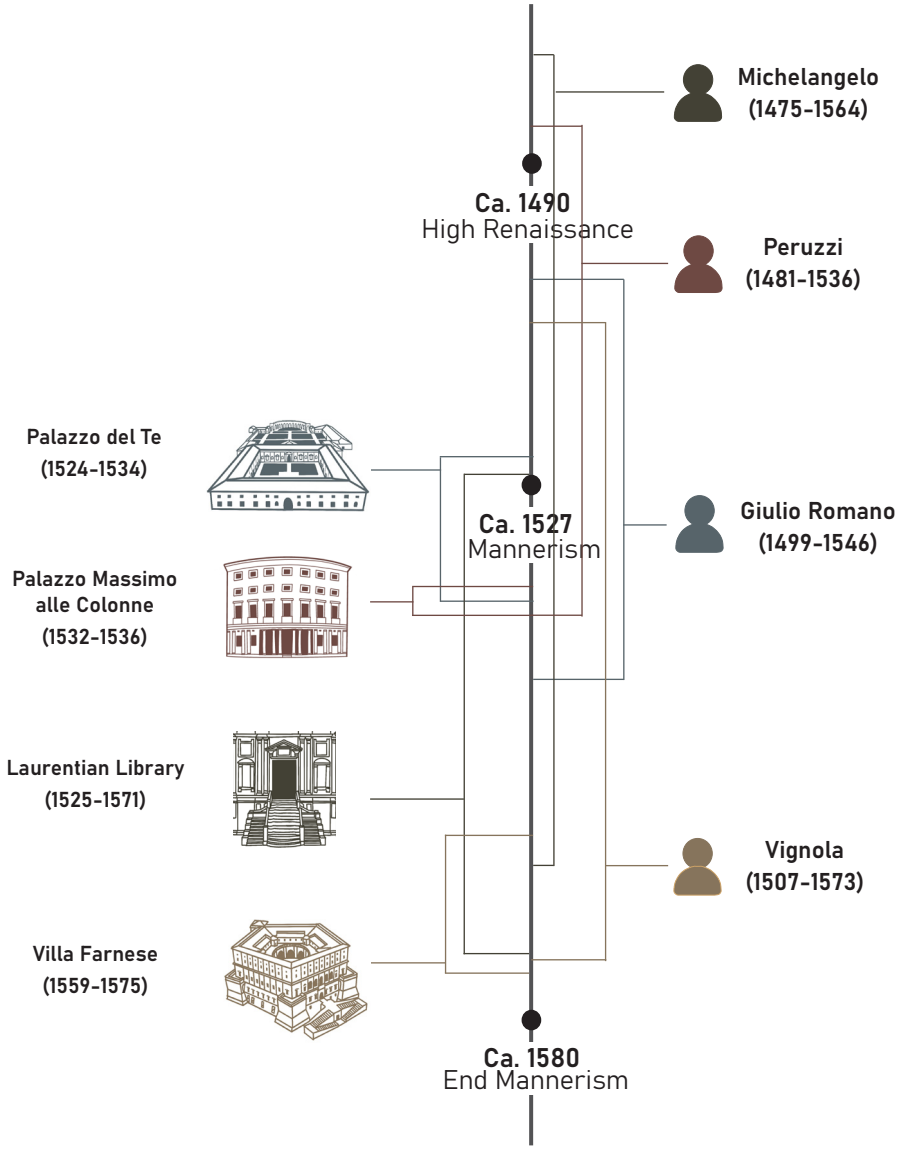

Figure 3.1: Timeline case studies and architects. Created by author.

3.1 – Exterior: Facades and Architectural Expression

3.1.1 Palazzo del Te

The first case study takes place in Mantua, where Giulio Romano was invited in 1524 by the new Marquis Federigo Gonzaga and had permanently settled after the Sack of Rome. Here his first major commission was to transform a set of suburban riding stables into a grand palace, now known as Palazzo del Te.[14]

At first glance, the exterior appears to have the perfect symmetry that was so desired during the Renaissance. A closer inspection however, reveals numerous minor inconsistencies and distortions. This is especially visible in the north, where the pilasters split the façade into irregular sections, the windows are positioned off-center and the distances between the corners and central loggia are unequal (figure 3.2 & 3.3).[15]

Forster and Tuttle[16] suggest that these inconsistencies are the result of the difficulty of working with the irregular structure of the preexisting site. Rather than mistakes, they see the irregularities as creative solutions to the site's limitations, arranged in a way that they still convey a sense of balance.

This view implies that Romano intended to apply the rules of classical order, but was simply constrained by the site. However, this understates the interpretation that Romano was deliberately experimenting with the viewer's expectations of classical order. Pevsner[17] argues that Romano challenged how far classical rules could be pushed. Not by completely disregarding them, but rather by testing how far he could go while maintaining a balanced architectural expression.

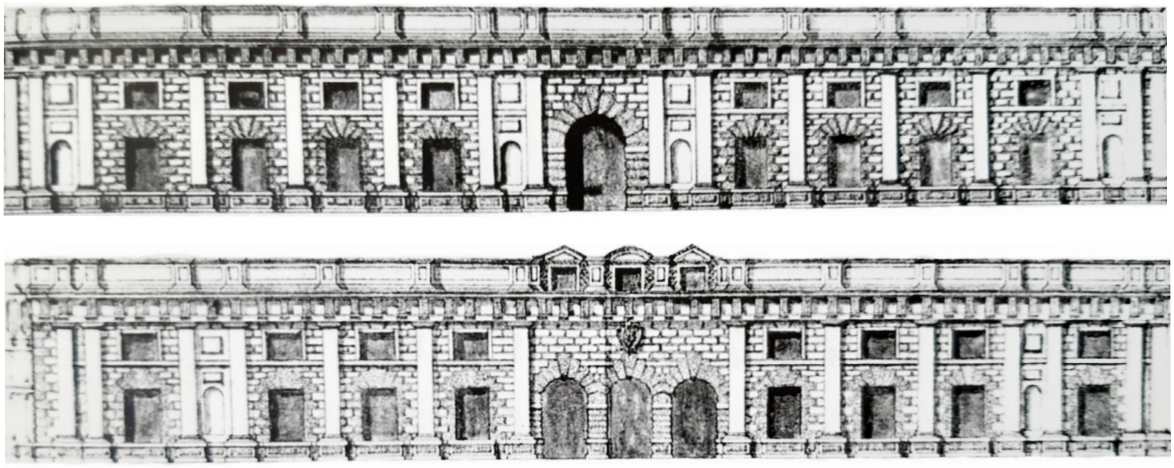

Figure 3.2: North and west façades of *Palazzo del Te*, top: north, bottom: west. Source: Tadgell, *Reformations*, 2012, 123.

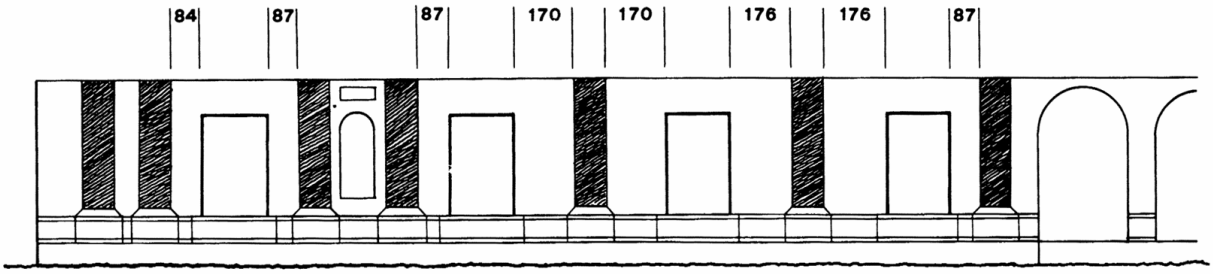

Figure 3.3: Schema of eastern half of north façade of *Palazzo del Te*, measurements in cm. Source: Forster & Tuttle, *The Palazzo Del Te*, 1971, 273.

An example of this can be seen in the west façade (figure 3.2), which was inspired by Antonio da Sangallo's Palazzo Farnese and also carries a certain Bramante influence.[18] The usual classical order is disrupted by the doric plasters in the corners, which are placed unevenly and give the building a false sense of height. The decorative band also separates the two stories, yet the pilasters cut through it, making it unclear whether the façade has one level or two.[19]

Similarly, is a playful approach to classical rules also seen in the inner courtyard façades, where every third triglyph is lowered into the upper window space (figure 3.4), making the structure seem unstable. The masonry here is also larger, more irregular and extends further outward compared to the outer façades.[20]

Figure 3.4: *Palazzo del Te*'s fallen triglyphs. Source: Images of the *Palazzo del Te*, Mantua, Italy, 1527–34, by Giulio Romano.

Overall, it can be concluded that there is a mix of both order and disorder present in Palazzo del Te. Contemporaries of Romano, like Serlio in 1537, called the palace because of this "only partly a work of the artist."[21] Though critical, his remark confirms Romano's success in challenging the expectations of classical order.

3.1.2 Laurentian Library

In contrast to the other case studies, the Laurentian Library in Florence does not have its own distinct facades. The library is, after all, part of the San Lorenzo complex and is therefore integrated into an already existing architecture. The Mannerist presence of this case study is rather more defined in the internal spaces, especially in the vestibule and its walls with a façade-like appearance (figure 3.5).[22]

Similarly to Palazzo del Te, the vestibule is often seen as intentionally distorting classical order. Smart[23] argues that its features, such as tapering pilasters, blind windows and exaggerated verticality, hint at an "anti-classical" approach.

Pevsner[24] also notices that the vestibule is much taller than it is wide, comparing it even to a mine shaft. He mentions that the columns appear trapped in the walls and that ornamentations like consoles don't seem to have an obvious function. He sees this not only as a reaction against classical order, like Smart, but also as Michelangelo rejecting Bramante's ideas.

Compared to these two authors, Tadgell[25] offers a more nuanced interpretation. He describes the vestibule not as anti-classical, but more as "counter-classical," arguing that Michelangelo challenges the usual classical order.

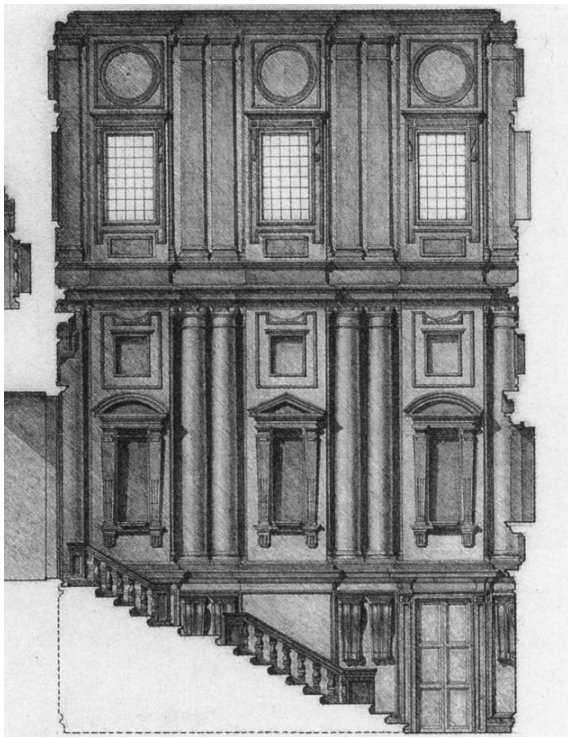

Figure 3.5: North-south section vestibule. Source: Cooper, "*Michelangelo's Laurentian Library*," 2011, 75.

Michelangelo challenged, for instance, the expectations of support and structure. The columns of the vestibule appear to be sunk into the floor, and the brackets extend past the columns instead of supporting them.[26]

Tadgell's interpretation stands out as the most convincing, especially when considered alongside the earlier discussion on Giulio Romano's experimentation with classical order. Like Romano, Michelangelo seems not to reject classical order but rather plays with its rules in unexpected ways. He reshapes it to create a space that feels both tense and controlled, instead of completely rejecting it, as Smart and Pevsner suggest.

3.1.3 Palazzo Massimo alle Colonne

The third case study can be found in Rome, where Baldassare Peruzzi designed Palazzo Massimo alle Colonne. After the Sack of Rome in 1527 he went to back to his hometown Siena to work on unrealized projects, but returned after the situation stabilized under Pope Paul III.[27]

The name Palazzo Massimo alle Colonne hints at a distinguished feature of the facade (figure 3.6) that was not very common in its time. "Colonne" refers to the freestanding columns, which were given a rather unusual form. They have a cigar-like shape that does not have its widest point at its base, but at one third of their height.[28]

The most distinctive feature of the facade, however, is its slight curve that follows the form of the street. Tadgell[29] sees this as a practical response to the site, a step towards what later would be referred to as "contextualism". This involves integrating the palace into its surroundings rather than giving it a dominant presence.

Pevsner[30], on the other hand, offers a more complete interpretation. He sees the curve not just as a response to the site, but as something that gives the façade a strange lightness. He argues that, instead of showing the usual Renaissance structural clarity and weight, the design appears like a paper screen. This effect is even enhanced by the thin window frames, the lack of hierarchical scaling between stories, and the continuous ashlar stonework. Pevsner also presents this as Peruzzi rejecting the principles of the Renaissance. However, just like Romano and Michelangelo, this does not necessarily seem a case of simply following or disregarding the rules, but rather of testing their boundaries.

Another aspect worth noting is how Peruzzi appreciated variety within a single building. According to Jones[31], the variety in the façade has mostly been achieved through variations in decorations rather than form.

Figure 3.6: Façade of Palazzo Massimo alle Colonne. Source: Jones, "*Palazzo Massimo and Baldassare Peruzzi's Approach to Architectural Design*," 1988, 96.

All the doors, for instance, follow the same double-square system, but each one has its own combination of moldings and materials. The same goes for the windows. They are all the same size, but the upper row has simple frames, while the row underneath is much more unusual and curved, symbolizing their more important function, which is lighting the main salone.

3.1.4 Villa Farnese

The final case study is Villa Farnese in Caprarola, redesigned by Vignola in the 1550s as a luxurious residence for the Farnese family. The building was originally designed by Antonio da Sangallo the Younger as a military stronghold, but construction stopped after his death and only continued when the Farnese family gained more political power.[32]

The most unusual feature of the villa is its pentagonal shape, a remainder of the original fortress layout. Xuereb[33] sees this shape as a symbol of political control, which emphasizes the Farnese family's monumental presence. This raises, however, the question to what extent the final result was shaped by symbolism, or simply by the limitations of the existing foundation.

Despite the irregular base, the façade (figure 3.7) appear symmetrical and almost rectangular at first glance. This was achieved by simplifying the outline of the building, which created a more balanced and classical appearance. Xuereb[34] interprets this as Vignola's way of combining classical order with the difficult layout of the site. While this seems convincing, it can also be argued that the design is much more focused with its appearance than with expressing the actual structure.

The façades are also divided in a way that reflects the building's mixed identity. The rusticated base and corner bastions still hint at its defensive past, while the upper levels use more refined elements like pilasters to create a sense of luxury. Affanni et al.[35] argue that the limited use of decoration was an intended choice to keep the building clear and well-ordered.

Another important part of the design is the approach to the villa. Vignola redesigned the village of Caprarola by replacing the narrow medieval streets with a straight road leading directly to the villa.[36] Built on the town's highest point, the villa looks over Caprarola. Xuereb[37] argues that this reinforces the Farnese family's authority, while also physically and symbolically separating them from the everyday town below.

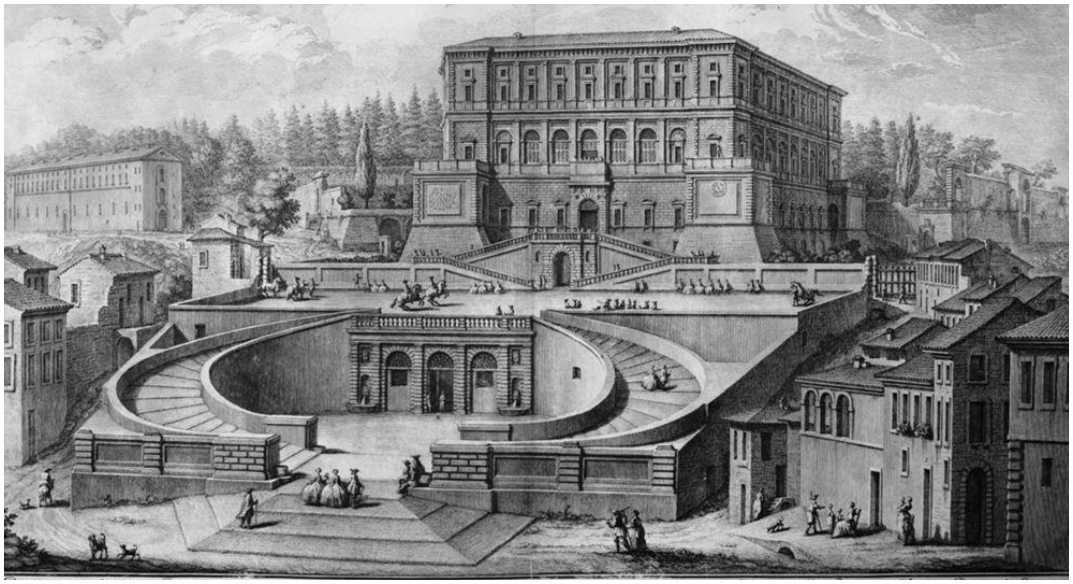

Figure 3.7: Principal view of Villa Farnese in Caprarola. Source: Elizabeth Barlow Rogers Collection, New York.

3.1.5 Comparative Analysis

Each of the four case studies shows how Mannerist architects approached classical architecture in their own ways. They all either experimented with or broke away from the usual Renaissance rules and focus on symmetry, harmony, and order.

Vignola's Villa Farnese leans the most towards a classical style, influenced by Bramante. While the exterior follows symmetry and order, these elements were adjusted to emphasize the power of the Farnese.[38] Peruzzi, on the other hand, departs more openly from Renaissance ideals in Palazzo Massimo alle Colonne. He rejects the strict mathematical order by Vitruvius and instead achieves variety in the façade through decoration. He made each part of the façade slightly different, while still maintaining an overall sense of balance.[39]

Michelangelo rejected the ideals even more and, according to some, moved even further toward an anti-classical style. He found Vitruvius' rules too strict and preferred to create tension and movement in his design. His vestibule plays with expectation, columns seem trapped in the walls, and decorative elements don't serve their usual function. However, as Tadgell[40] notes, this is more counter-classical than anti-classical, as he plays with the expectations of classical order rather than simply rejecting them.

Giulio Romano's Palazzo del Te also breaks classical rules but in a more playful and different way. While influenced by Bramante, he disrupts Renaissance ideals by using irregular spacing, exaggerated rustication and details that make the structure appear as if it's falling apart. However, Gulio Romano subtly manipulates these irregularities while still maintaining a sense of balance, just like Peruzzi, demonstrating his ability to challenge Renaissance symmetry without completely rejecting it.[41]

Across all four, challenging classical order seems the most evident recurring characteristic in Mannerist architecture, each architect however approaches this in a different way. Another notable feature that is shared across the architects is the use of texture, decoration and materials to give each building a distinct identity. Peruzzi used for example decoration to create variety in the fa çade, avoiding the uniformity typical of Renaissance architecture. Similarly, Giulio Romano played with details and mixed rough stone with refined details, using rustication to create a sense of instability. Vignola's Villa Farnese also played with contrasts. He combined fortress-like rustication on the lower levels with refined classical detailing above to create a balance between strength and elegance.

3.2 – Interior: Manipulating Space and Perspective

Architecture involves more than just façades and ornamentation; it also concerns how space is experienced. According to Pevsner[42], this experience is much harder to describe than to photograph, and only by wandering through a building with one's eyes can the true essence of its interior be revealed. This is especially true in Mannerist architecture, where interiors often manipulate space and perspective. Despite the difficulty of capturing such experiences in writing, this subchapter examines how the interiors of the four case studies express Mannerist ideas.

3.2.1 Palazzo del Te

In the interior of Palazzo del Te, Giulio Romano continues his playful experimentation with classical order, just as seen in the facades. The palace follows an axial plan (figure 3.8) and includes a courtyard surrounded by a semicircular colonnade. According to Linda[43], this courtyard is given intentionally irregular spacing and subtle breaks in symmetry to create a dynamic and playful environment for the Gonzaga family and their guests.

The inside of the palace includes dramatic and illusionistic spaces that are created by merging painting and architecture. These rooms are decorated with visual tricks, stucco and frescoes, with the Sala dei Giganti (Hall of Giants) being the most well-known. In this room, the frescoes are based Ovid's Metamorphoses and show giants getting crushed by falling boulders (figure 3.9). Tibaldi[44] argues that the viewer feels as if they are part of the scene, as the room is covered in one single and continuous painting, pulling them into the chaos. The off-center fireplace and the oval shape, which enhances sound in the room, add to this instability. Pevsner[45] even goes as far as stating that the room creates the impression of collapsing.

Different interpretations exist of this space. Pevsner[46] sees the fresco as a warning that even the most powerful empires can fall, pointing to the chaotic scenes and collapsing architecture as signs of downfall.

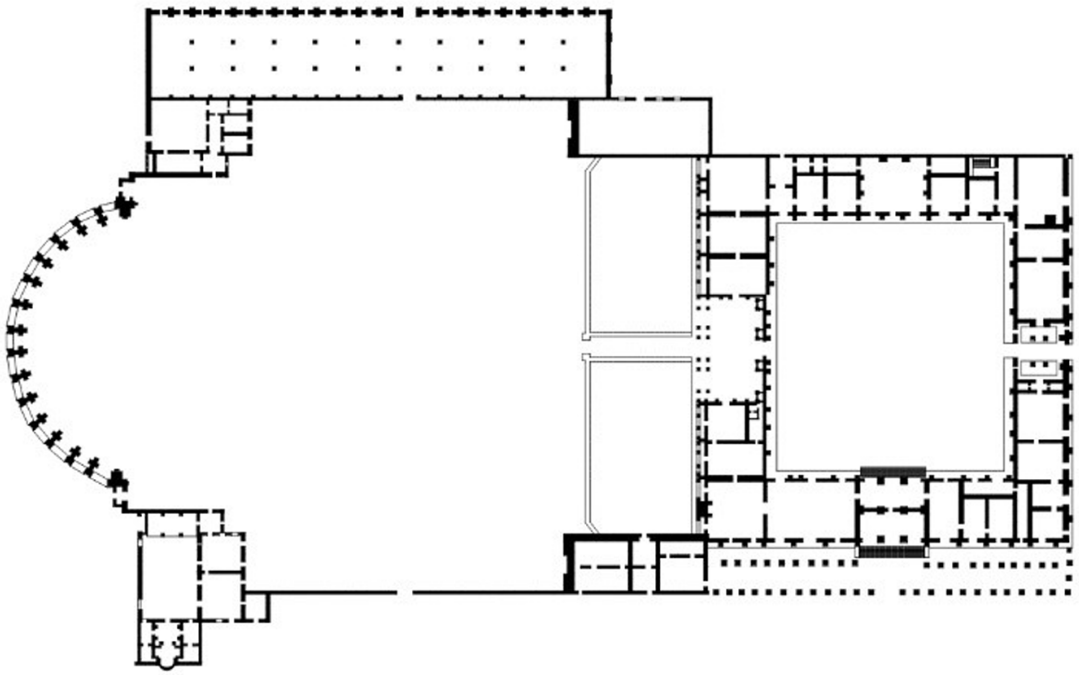

Figure 3.8: Ground plan of Palazzo del Te. Source: Linda, "*The Mannerism of Giulio Romano,*" 2023, 49.

Linda[47], on the other hand, links the images to the power of Charles V. She argues that the fresco was painted during his political reorganization of Italy, and that Federico II Gonzaga, the patron, supported the emperor during this time. Still, this second interpretation seems less convincing. The room lacks any clear celebration of power or control. Pevsner's reading feels stronger, especially when considering the possibility that the fresco also acted as a quiet warning to Charles himself.

At last, the palace includes also grotto-like areas with man-made rock formations and water features. This gives the formal architecture a sense of natural contrast. Romano's fascination with opposites, such as natural vs. artificial and raw vs. refined, is for example highlighted by the contrast between the palace's elegant courtyard and the rough, cave-like entrance.[48]

Figure 3.9: Sala dei Giganti (Hall of Giants). Source: Tadgell, *Reformations*, 2012, 127.

3.2.2 The Laurentian Library

The Laurentian Library is made up of three main parts: the vestibule, the reading room, and the never-completed rare books room. The vestibule measures 9.5 by 10.3 meters and connects not only the library to the rest of the complex, but also serves as a dramatic entrance. Cooper[49] argues that especially its narrowness and tall proportions, intensify the dramatic transition into the reading room (figure 3.10). Smart[50] aligns with this view, noting that the staircase in the vestibule, with its irregular steps and rounded forms, also enhances this sense of drama and instability. He even compares it to a flow of lava, suggesting movement within solid stone.

On the other hand, the reading room, located above the monks' quarters, is very long and narrow. The room's verticality is also strongly emphasized, with gray pilasters and blind windows stretching up the white walls, creating a sense of constraint[51]. Cooper[52] suggests that the room is largely shaped by the supporting structure beneath, but it seems unlikely that the design of the reading room is entirely a coincidence. The contrast between the narrow space of the reading room and the dramatic, flowing forms of the vestibule feels rather deliberate. It makes the transition from the vestibule to the reading room even more dramatic.

Overall, the interior of the Laurentian Library can be called both inventive and unsettling. On one hand, Michelangelo plays with the rules of classical order and on the other, he creates a space that feels unfamiliar and even tense.[53]

Figure 3.10: View from the vestibule into the reading room. Source: Cooper, "*Michelangelo's Laurentian Library*," 2011, 80.

3.2.3 Palazzo Massimo alle Colonne

Unlike the façade, the ground plan of Palazzo Massimo is much less symmetrical (figure 3.11). Jones[54] suggests that Peruzzi believed that symmetry was only necessary where it could be clearly perceived, such as in façades or individual rooms, while circulation spaces could be designed more freely.

Another reason for the asymmetry, according to Jones, is the limitations of the site. Specifically, the narrowness and old parts of the palace created difficulties for the new design. As a result, unlike traditional palace layouts of its era, features like the vestibule and courtyard are not centrally aligned with the main axis of the façade. These central areas were moved off-center because the palace was too small to have rooms on either side of them.

In addition, the proportions of important interior spaces are elongated, with larger rooms having much longer lengths than widths. Spaces that were usually broad, like the vestibule, seem unusually narrow here, and its dimensions also seem not strictly proportional.[55] This supports Jones' view that Peruzzi chose functionality over mathematical precision. However, these irregularities may also just reflect a Mannerist tendency to challenge classical norms, influenced by site-specific conditions.

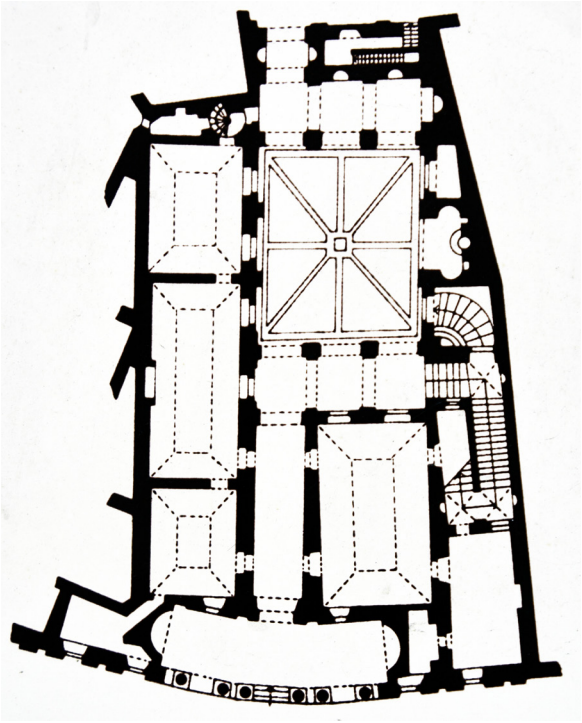

Figure 3.11: Ground plan of Palazzo Massimo. Source: *Baldassare Peruzzi, Palazzo Massimo alle Colonne,* 1532–1536.

3.2.4 Villa Farnese

The interior of Villa Farnese reflects the power of the Farnese family and the architectural vision of Vignola.[56] The circular courtyard stands out, as it was not a common choice for its time. The rounded design created practical challenges, which limited the natural light and complicated the flow within spaces. However, Vignola used the irregular areas effectively by integrating staircases and storage into the design.[57] One of them is the Grand Staircase (Scala Regia), located in the southern pentagonal corner. This Doric-style spiral staircase connects the carriage entrance to the piano nobile and leads towards the courtyard and apartments.[58]

In terms of decoration, Vignola stuck to early 16th-century Roman traditions. He decided to personally supervise the stucco artists to ensure that the architecture remained consistent with classical order.[59] The frescoes also make use of geometric framing, multicolored palettes, and narrative scenes based on Renaissance ideals. Despite the care in execution, Affanni et al.[60] note that Vignola's decorative choices had little influence on later styles. His strict adherence to classical clarity seems to have made his decoration feel outdated as artistic tastes moved toward illusion and drama.

3.2.5 Comparative Analysis

The interiors of the four case studies all share an interest in pushing the boundaries of architecture. Whether through illusions or unconventional layouts, each architect experiments in unique ways.

Just like the exterior, the interior challenges symmetry and proportions. Peruzzi for instance, priorities in Massimo alle Colonne functionality over mathematical precision. He believed that symmetry was only necessary where it could be perceived.[61] Similarly, Giulio Romano disrupted classical harmony in the courtyard with irregular spacing to create a more dynamic setting[62]. Lastly, Villa Farnese also breaks tradition by experimenting with form. Vignola's pentagonal structure and circular courtyard, rare for its time, result in rooms shifting away from the typical square or rectangular design.[63]

Elongation is another recurring characteristic in the case studies. Michelangelo's Laurentian Library is a prime example, where the reading room stretches into an unusually narrow and vertical space, emphasizing drama and tension. The staircase even enhances this sense of movement and instability.[64]

Mannerist interiors also often seem to be blending architecture with painting. Often frescoes are made in the rooms that extend beyond the walls, creating a seamless connection between real and painted space. The Sala dei Giganti in Palazzo del Te takes this further, where walls and ceilings make a chaotic scene and appear to collapse around the visitor. This interplay enhances the theme of instability, reinforcing the symbolic message of power and destruction.[65]

Symbolism is thus also a returning characteristic, with spaces being designed around broader themes. Palazzo del Te revolves for instance around ideas of instability and collapsing. In contrast, Villa Farnese represents power and order to enhance the authority of the Farnese family.[66]

Overall, the interiors of the four case studies are designed to be experienced, not just seen. Movement through the spaces feel unpredictable, and challenges its viewers. Unlike Renaissance interiors, which are orderly, Mannerist spaces play with perception and distortion, making architecture part of the story.

Chapter 4 - Conclusion

Mannerist architecture has often been overlooked, receiving less attention than painting and sculpture. It offers, however, a unique and experimental way of working with space. This thesis searched to answer the question: *"How did different Italian Mannerist architects use spatial manipulation to challenge Renaissance ideals and shape the viewer's experience?"* By examining the works of Michelangelo, Giulio Romano, Peruzzi, and Vignola, it became clear that these architects intentionally experimented with the boundaries of Renaissance principles to create spaces that surprise the viewer.

Based on existing literature, it is known that Mannerism developed during a time of political and religious conflict. The Sack of Rome in 1527 weakened Italy's political independence, which caused many architects to spread out across the country. As a result, Mannerist ideas began to evolve differently in various regions, also depending on the architect's background and surroundings. Scholars have shown that Vignola stayed relatively close to Renaissance ideals, while Peruzzi moved away from strict mathematical order. Michelangelo created visual tension through distortion and Giulio Romano favored theatricality and exaggeration. All of them responded to classical architecture in unique ways.

This thesis builds on that foundation but offers new insights by comparing these architects with each other instead of treating them separately. This approach made it possible to see not only what they had in common, but also how each developed a personal way of working within the broader Mannerist style. What becomes clear is that Mannerism cannot be reduced to one formula or definition, it was a flexible and varied approach marked by individual interpretation and experimentation.

A key insight that came out of this comparison is that the unusual shapes and distortions found in Mannerist buildings were not random or purely decorative. Instead, they were intentional design choices, that were used to guide movement and influence how the viewer feels. These manipulations, like elongated proportions, irregular layouts, or layered illusions, were carefully designed. Furthermore, rather than fully rejecting Renaissance ideals, these architects stretched their limits. They tested the boundaries of classical order to see how far they could go, using the same classical tools in new and unexpected ways. While each architect had a different approach, they shared a mindset of experimentation. This shared attitude is what defines Mannerist architecture. It is not a single style, but a flexible way of rethinking space and meaning through architecture.

This thesis explored the key examples of Italian Mannerist architecture, it needs however be noted that it is a much broader subject with many more architects and buildings that have contributed to it, even beyond Italy. Further research on these missing architects and case studies could offer even more insight into this subject. Even so, this study hopes to contribute to a deeper understanding of how Mannerist architects challenged not just the ideals of the past, but also the expectations of the viewer, offering new ways of thinking about space and architectural expression.

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Figure 2.1
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Raphael. *The Virgin with a Fish.* 1513–1514. Oil on panel, transferred to canvas. Museo del Prado, Madrid. https://www.museodelprado.es/en/the-collection/art-work/the-holy-family-with-raphael-tobias-and-saint/aec8373f-f502-4095-9c8f-d61b8b2fffc1

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Del Sarto, Andrea. *Madonna of the Harpies*. 1517. Oil on panel. Uffizi Gallery, Florence. https://www.uffizi.it/en/artworks/andrea-del-sarto-harpies

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Figure 3.2
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Figure 3.5
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Figure 3.6
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Figure 3.7
Giuseppe Vasi (Italian, 1710-1782). *Principal View of the Famous Palace of Caprarola Built by the Cardinal Alessandro Farnese*. creation date: 1748. 73.66 x 52.07 cm (29 x 20.5 inches). Elizabeth Barlow Rogers Collection (New York, New York, USA). https://jstor.org/stable/community.14691199

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Figure 3.10
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Figure 3.11
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