

Renaissance Reconstructions of Ancient Architecture: The Baths of Caracalla at Rome

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This talk will present the hypotheses, methodology and preliminary results of a research project whose subject is the Renaissance reconstruction of ancient architecture. In the context of this project, the word "reconstruction" refers to an attempt, either in the form of a drawing or an engraving, to represent the visual

aspect of a given antique monument or architectural complex as it originally appeared. Despite Rudolf Wittkower's contention that "the history of reconstruction . . . forms a not insignificant part of the history of architecture," the

reconstruction of ancient architecture represents an aspect of Renaissance architectural culture that has not been sufficiently studied.

The principal hypothesis of this study is that Renaissance attempts to reconstruct ancient monuments parallel and complement the contemporary effort to comprehend the orders: whereas the orders provided the key to the parts of a building, reconstructions were necessary to understand the assembly of the parts into complexes and planning ensembles. But the widespread and intense activity of Renaissance reconstruction also shared with the study of the orders a common problem: in both cases, architects and theoreticians were handicapped in their pursuit of knowledge by the incomplete and sometimes contradictory state of their sources, whether textual or actual physical remains. Given this set of circumstances, interested parties were forced to exercise their own invention in order to reconcile the perceived discrepancies between written sources and the architectural remains. Hence, the Renaissance ambition to reconstruct ancient architecture frequently combined, as did the study of the orders, scientific research with pure imagination. It follows that Renaissance reconstructions of ancient architecture, the imperial baths at Rome in particular, must be studied, not only in the context of early archeology, but also in relation to contemporary architectural design, since they are, in effect, as much an exercise in design as any architectural project of the period.

The project consists in the comparative analysis of selected reconstructions of the Baths of Caracalla (e.g., those of Palladio) using a unique system of computer imaging developed by the Groupe de recherche en CAO (Conception Assistée par Ordinateur) at the Université de Montréal. Each reconstruction will be represented

in the data base by a three-dimensional image that can be readily understood and examined at virtually any point and at any level of detail. Computerized imagery facilitates comparison by making it easier to identify differences, not only among Renaissance reconstructions, but also between such historical reconstructions and modern archeological studies. Thus it is anticipated that the present project will demonstrate that the reconstructions undertaken during the Renaissance are to be valued today not so much as documents of ancient architecture, but rather as revelations of their makers and of Renaissance architectural culture.