

EXHIBITION REVIEW

Carlo Promis. *Insegnare l'architettura*

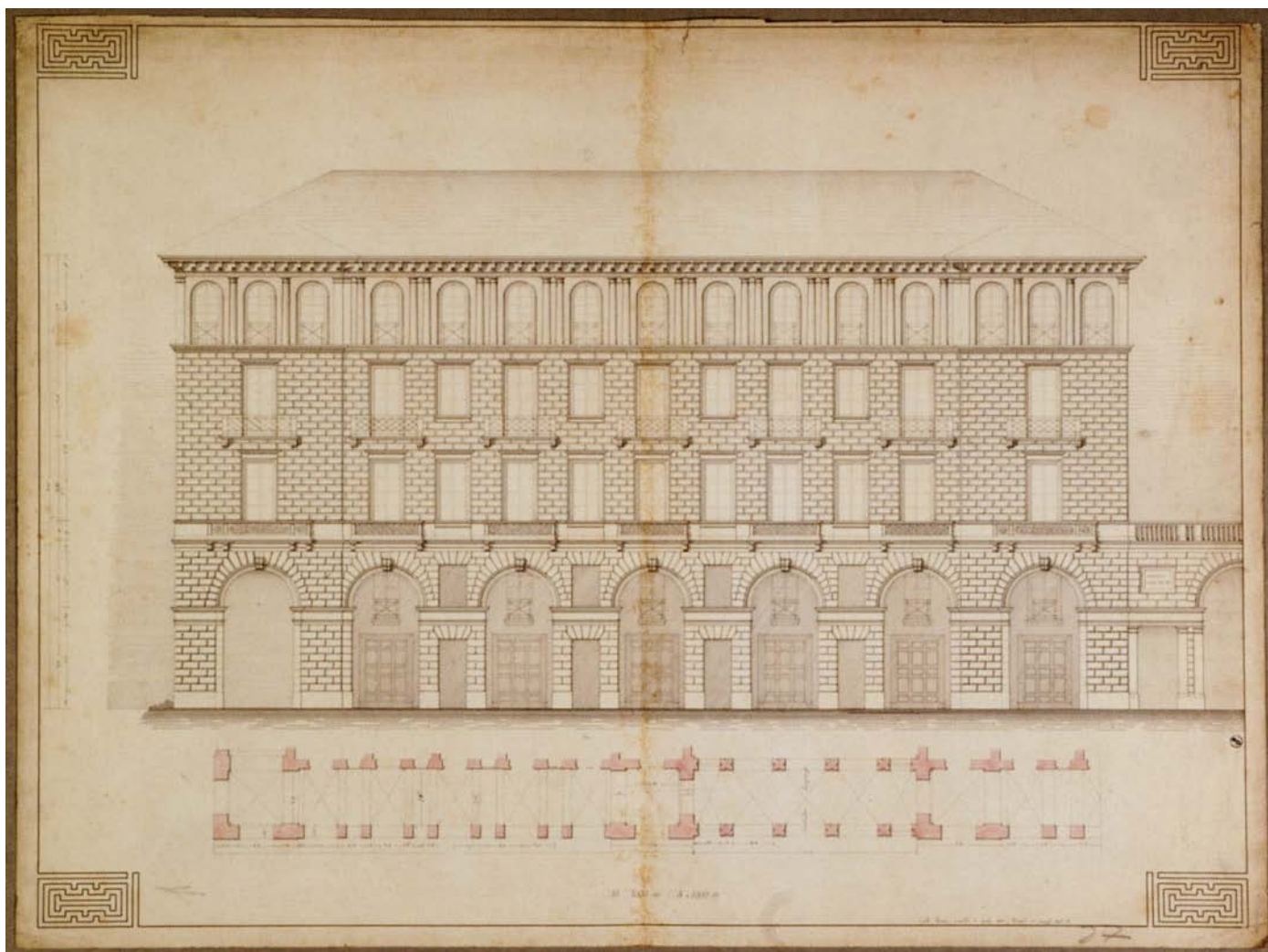
Curators: Vilma Fasoli and Clara Vitulo

Biblioteca Reale, Torino

23 June to 12 July 2008

Held in Turin during the first days of July 2008, the twenty-third UIA World Congress offered an opportunity to stage different cultural events connected to the conference's main theme: "Transmitting Architecture." One of the most interesting was a group of five exhibitions in different locations, all dedicated to *La città disegnata dagli architetti* (*A city shaped by architects*, according to the official translation, but in fact *The city designed by the architects*). Until 14 September the most ambitious among them - *Guarini, Juvarra, Antonelli: Signs and Symbols of Turin* (Palazzo Bricherasio) - will show a number of drawings produced by the most famous (but also by some of the least known) architects working in Piedmont from the late seventeenth through the early twentieth century. Although equally interesting, other exhibitions were smaller in size and dedicated to more specific subjects: the drawings for the Royal Archives by Filippo Juvarra (Archivio di Stato), some contemporary ceramic sculptures juxtaposed with the baroque sculptures of the Sacro Monte of Oropa (MIAAO, San Filippo Neri), some drawings and documents for the ducal and royal residences (Palazzo Reale) and Carlo Promis's teaching activity (Biblioteca Reale) - *Carlo Promis. Insegnare l'architettura* (*Carlo Promis: Teaching Architecture*).

So who was Carlo Promis (Turin, 1808-73)? His name does not appear in the various histories of contemporary architecture, not even in those explicitly dedicated to the European nineteenth century. Moreover, the Italian fragmentation of places and histories before unification in 1861 often implies that some major characters seem destined to be regarded just as local heroes. And Promis has been one of them, of course. A civil engineer since 1828, an architect and a teacher of architecture since 1843, but also an urban planner, an antiquarian / archaeologist, a civil servant and an untiring scholar: actually, Promis was all these things and



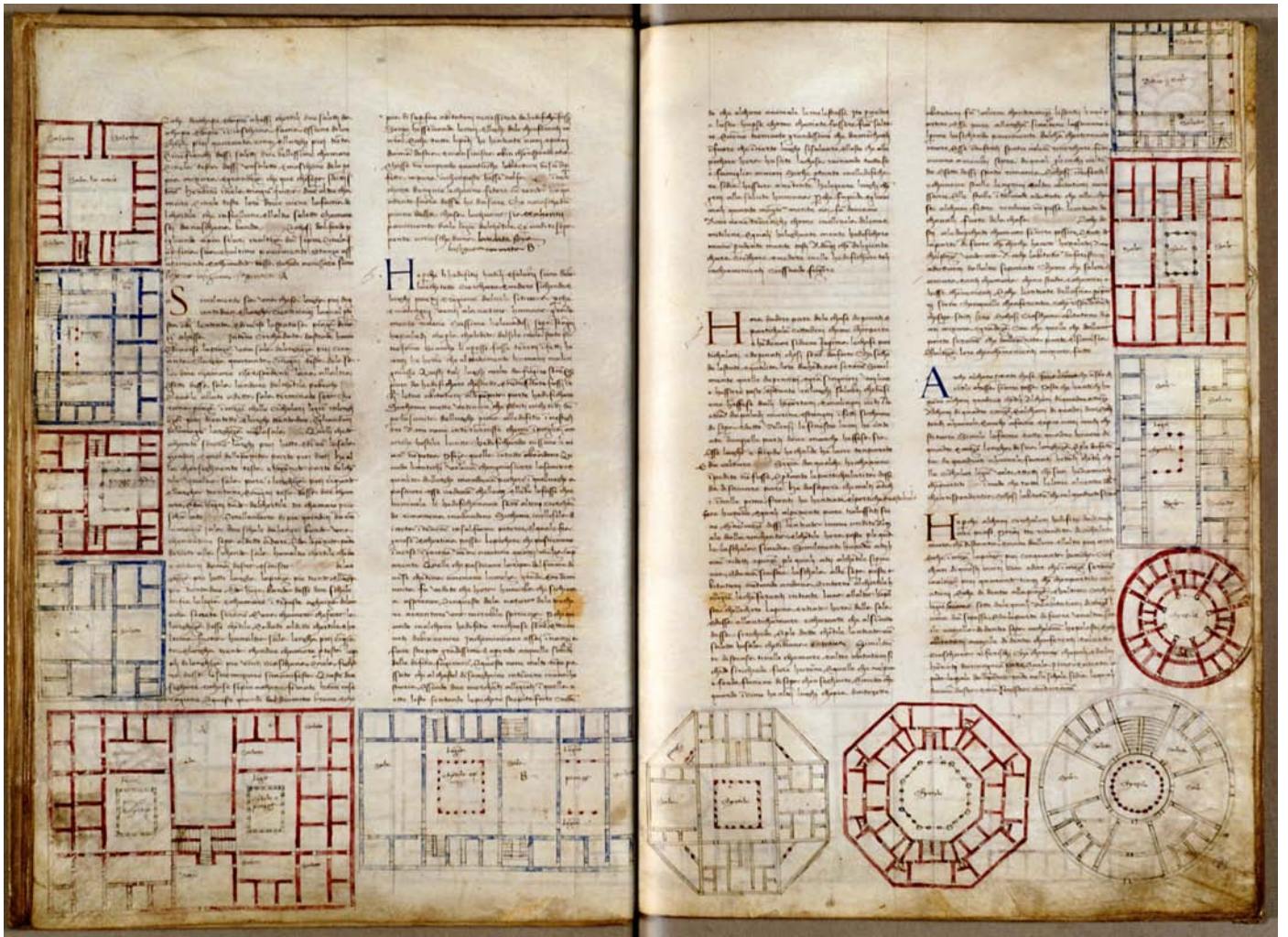
Carlo Promis, houses near Porta Nuova, Turin, with varied arcade solutions, 1850-51, Biblioteca Reale di Torino, Archivio Promis, Fondo grafico
Photograph: Biblioteca Reale, Torino

much more. For example, he was the one who conceived, designed and oversaw the transformation of the city in the 1840s and 1850s, when Turin was longing to become the first Italian capital. It could be anything but an easy task to organize an exhibition about him, even if focused primarily on his teaching activity. Vilma Fasoli and Clara Vitulo faced the challenge quite brilliantly.

The show was presented on two levels. In the main room of the venerable Biblioteca Reale a good number of rare volumes were exhibited, from Vitruvius and Alberti to Letarouilly and Gailhabaud. Most of these books were listed in Promis's personal library, a true wonderland for any nineteenth century architectural historian, and a good part of them were marked as textbooks for his lessons. The sequence itself is striking: the only unquestionable principle seemed to be the continuity of architectural culture, as if an architect always had to answer the same essential questions, although in different terms.

Downstairs in the library cellar, many documents from Promis's personal archives were shown, especially manuscripts illustrating his teaching activity at either the university or the Scuola d'applicazione for engineers. Pages and pages, densely written and drawn albeit without remarkable artistic skills, witness an outstanding ability to think about past and present architecture(s) and manipulate a long-standing tradition of facts and forms. Two objects in particular captured the viewer's attention: first, the manuscript copy of the *Trattato di architettura civile e militare* by Francesco di Giorgio Martini, which had belonged to Cesare Saluzzo and which Promis edited and published in 1841; and second, what remains of the *Trattato d'architettura civile* begun by Promis in 1844, revised many times, but finally left unpublished. Was it completely out of fashion to plan a treatise in the mid-nineteenth century, when (for instance) others were writing just *entretiens* instead? Maybe, somehow. But it is almost irrelevant, given that the aims of the treatise were the discussion and transmission of a uninterrupted system of knowledges. In Promis's day it still held that the past must become the present and the present had to be an updated version of the past: the fatal crack of modernity had not occurred yet.

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Francesco di Giorgio Martini, *Trattato di architettura civile e militare*, 1478-1486
Photograph: Biblioteca Reale, Torino