Author(s)  Serlio, Sebastiano  
Title  *[Libro sesto di tutte le habitationi...]*  
Imprint  New York, Columbia University, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, AA520 SE 694 F  
Localisation  Domestic architecture  
Subject  Consult in image mode  Transcribed version of the text  

There are two extent manuscript versions of *Book VI* which was never published. The earliest, a preparatory manuscript, on paper, is located in the Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University, New York (AA520 Se 694 F). The presentation manuscript on vellum, is held by the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek, Munich (Codex Icon 189). There are also printer’s proofs of the illustrations made in France in the seventeenth century from a third missing manuscript which is in the Nationalbibliothek, Vienna (72.P.20). The above title is taken from Book IV, *Regole generale d'architettura di Sebastiano Serlio bolognese sopra le cinque maniere de gli edifici*, folio Vr. The Avery and the Munich manuscripts have no titles for the whole work.

The preparatory manuscript of *Book VI*, was acquired in 1920 by William B. Dinsmoor, the Librarian of the Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library of Columbia University, from the London rare book dealer, Bernard Quarich, Ltd. The firm of Bernard Quaritch had bought the Avery manuscript in 1917 on the London art market. Whereas the manuscript for *Book VI* which is now in the Bayerische Staatsbibliothek in Munich (Cod. Icon 189) probably was sold by
Serlio to Strada during his second trip (1552-1553), the Avery manuscript stayed
in France until the beginning of the eighteenth century, owned by Androuet du
Cerceau (Thomson 1984; Rosenfeld 1989), by Salomon de Brosse, grandson of du
Cerceau, in whose atelier it was probably consulted by Pierre Le Muet: there is
ample evidence of the influence of Serlio's urban dwellings for modest and well-
to-do members of the merchant class in Le Muet’s Manière de bastir (Mignot
1981, pp. xii-xv, 6, note 6). In the nineteenth century the manuscript had been in
several private collections in Scotland.
The New York manuscript is an unfinished preparatory manuscript, executed on
nine types of French paper which were in use, according to their watermarks,
between 1530 and 1555. Three types of southern French paper were used for the
drawings and six types from Paris, Orléans, Saint-Germain-en-Laye, and south-
western France for the text. All the sheets of illustrations and text vary in size
(between 385 mm and 835 mm in height and 365 and 667 mm in width). Serlio
must have begun the Avery manuscript soon after he arrived in France in the
spring or fall of 1541 to take up his position as architect to Francis I on December
27, 1541. He probably was still working on the manuscript in 1551, the year of the
publication of the Extraordinario libro in Lyon by Jean de Tournes (Dinsmoor
1942). The illustration of Le Grand Ferrare (1542-046) in Fontainebleau, the house
of Cardinal Ippolito II d'Este, was re-drawn by Serlio on the same type of French
paper made in Lyon which was used for printing the Extraordinario libro.
According to the letter which Cardinal Ippolito II d'Este wrote to his brother
Duke Ercole II d’Este on May 16, 1546, he had asked Serlio to take the drawing of
the Le Grand Ferrare out of Book VI because he thought it was too modest. The
cardinal left Lyon for Italy in 1549. In contrast to Dinsmoor, I believe that Serlio
had gone with the Cardinal to assist in the organisation of King Henry II’s entry
into Lyon on September 23, 1548. In 1552, Serlio was listed as taking part in the
entry of the Cardinal François de Tournon into Lyon on September 28, 1552.
Serlio did not return to Fontainebleau until 1553.
The seventy-three folios of illustrations and sixty-three sheets of text in the New
York manuscript were not bound during Serlio’s lifetime. Serlio's original
order was mixed up when the sheets of text and illustrations were bound in the
eighteenth century and then re-bound in 1919. Serlio initially put letters in
alphabetical order along with consecutive Arabic numerals for country houses (A
1 to 31) and capital letters in alphabetical order (A-T, V-W) for the city houses on
the rectos of the illustrations. Each illustration has on the verso the indicator of
the one to follow. Each text folio has the indicator of the corresponding
illustration. On one sheet of text, Serlio put the wrong number of the illustration
(pl. XXV, project V 20) and thus related it to plate XXIII, project T 19. This mistake
was corrected in the 1978 facsimile of the New York manuscript for Book VI. Le
Grand Ferrare has no identification number (pl. XI). Dinsmoor gave it a number
N13a and added it to the series of country houses for noble gentlemen. He placed
Le Grand Ferrare before project O14, plates XII and XIII, since Serlio had called
project O 14 a “House for a noble gentleman similar to the past project”. Both
projects have similar plans. Dinsmoor re-established Serlio’s original order of the
drawings and text folios which was reproduced in the reduced facsimile of the Avery manuscript first published in 1978. The plates of the seventy-three folios of illustrations are numbered in Roman numerals in the 1978 facsimile with the corresponding text opposite each plate. A concordance between the New York and Munich manuscripts as well as the 1919 bound volume was published in the 1978 facsimile. Vaughan Hart and Peter Hicks (Serlio 2001) believe that plate LXIII in the Avery manuscript, which was identified by Dinsmoor as part of project S, the Palace of the Podestà, belongs to the Palace of the King, project W, starting on plate LXXI.

The drawings were executed in pen with brown ink and wash over stylus and pencil under drawing. There are eight folios of drawings which are made of individual pieces of paper which were glued together by Serlio himself (pls. XIII, XV, XVII, XVIII, XXIX, XLI, LXXI, LXXIII). There are also flaps with enlarged details of several façades and plans which were glued onto four folios (pls. XXXIV, LXVIa, LXXI (four flaps), LXXIIIa/b). Three unfinished drawings of ground plans on the versos of plates LV, LVI, and LXVII may have been used by Serlio to transfer the drawings onto another sheet of paper. That on plate LXVII is not by Serlio.

The sixty-three folios of text were not originally attached to the drawings. Eleven sheets of text are missing. Dinsmoor identified the handwriting in both the New York and Munich manuscripts as that of Serlio himself, by comparing it to several of Serlio’s letters, in particular, one he wrote in Venice to Pietro Aretino in 1538-1539. I discovered that the text was written after the final order of the drawings was established by Serlio. He must have begun the text in 1547 before the death of King Francis I, since all the allusions are to King Francis I Serlio must have finished the text of the Avery manuscript between 1549 and 1551 during the reign of Henry II (1547-1559). Some pages of text were written on pieces of paper in use from 1547 until 1555. There is no title page, introduction, or notice to the reader as in the Munich manuscript for Book VI. Serlio must have started to revise the text of the Avery manuscript before he abandoned it, since project L11 on plate VI and project M12 on plate VII have a variant texts, with titles like the explanatory texts in the Munich manuscript for Book VI. The explanatory texts of projects A-F, urban houses in plate XLVIII of the New York manuscript also have titles.

Serlio organised the thirty-one country houses and the twenty-one urban dwellings of the Avery version of Book VI according to a monarchical structure of society from the poorest citizen to the king, first in the country, and then in the city. There are country houses for nine levels of society from farm houses for poor and middle class citizens to a country house for King Francis I. The urban residences are for eleven levels of society from hovels for poor artisans to a project for the Louvre for King Francis I. Serlio amalgamated the structures of French and Italian society. The positions of “Podestà”, “Capo di Parte” and “Capitano” are found in of the city states of Italy. The post of the Governor of Paris was created by King Louis XI. In each category, starting with plate II, houses of the poor artisan in the country and with plate XLVIII, projects E and F, houses of the modest artisan in the city, Serlio juxtaposed types of houses found in France and in Italy, the first time such a comparison was made in a Renaissance theoretical
treatise. There are four basic types of country dwellings and five basic types of city dwellings divided between European, French, and Italian types. Serlio’s houses would not have been built in separate sections of the city. Houses of the wealthy were built alongside those of the poor and middle classes in cities in France and Italy in the Middle Ages and Renaissance.

Serlio’s hierarchy of dwellings owes much to those already elaborated by Alberti, Filarete, and Francesco di Giorgio who combined republican and monarchical systems of government in their treatises. Like Francesco di Giorgio, Serlio started his hierarchy with the poorest dweller. However there are several important differences. First, there are no categories of dwellings specifically for members of the church, as there are in the earlier Italian treatises, since Ippolito II d’Este’s house (pl. XI) was called the house of a noble gentleman in the Avery Manuscript. Serlio’s anti-clerical attitude can be related to his friendship with a group of people in Italy and France who were sympathizers of the Evangelicists and who wished to reform the Roman Catholic Church: Cardinal Gaspare Contarini, Lorenzo Lotto, Jacopo Sansovino, Pietro Aretino, and Marguerite de Navarre, who paid Serlio a stipend between 1540 and 1547.

In contrast to his Italian predecessors, Serlio paid much more attention to housing for the poor and middle classes and also included some communal houses where services, like kitchens and toilets, are shared. Serlio’s interest in housing for the poor and middle classes was not only a result of his knowledge of the writings of Alvise Cornaro and Martin Luther, as suggested Marco Rosci, but was also influenced by his contacts with those who had become Protestants like his friend Jacques Androuet du Cerceau, and Jean de Tournes his publisher. De Tournes had travelled back and forth between Lyon and Geneva and could have acquainted Serlio with Calvin’s ideas. Furthermore Serlio was also familiar with examples of communal housing built between the third quarter of the fourteenth and middle of the fifteenth century in Venice and during the second quarter of the sixteenth century in Augsburg (Carpo 1992).

Serlio’s Book VI is important from the point of view of the development of Renaissance architectural theory. Serlio’s acceptance of French Gothic and vernacular architecture on the same level as Italian sixteenth century architecture is a contrast to the condemnation of the Gothic style of architecture called “maniera tedesca” by Raphael in his Letter to Pope Leo X (1518-1519) and by Vasari in the two editions of his Lives (1555, 1568). Serlio shows that French domestic architecture with its elements of Gothic decoration and French vernacular planning had the same value as Italian sixteenth century architecture. Neither Raphael, nor Vasari ever spoke of the planning of the buildings whose decoration they considered to be in the Gothic style. Serlio’s openness to French Gothic and vernacular architecture was most likely a result of the fact that he had lived in Bologna and Venice, cities in northern Italy which still had a vibrant Gothic tradition even in the sixteenth century. Serlio had collaborated with Baldassare Peruzzi in 1522 on a project for the completion of the Church of San Petronio in Bologna for which Peruzzi had designed a façade in the Gothic style.

Serlio’s desire to accommodate the needs of the French climate and its traditions
of planning and decoration caused him to design buildings which did not fulfil the aesthetic criteria in decoration (“decoro”), or planning (“commodità”) of sixteenth century Italian architecture or the principles of Vitruvius. If one reads closely the text of the Avery manuscript, this was a constant problem for Serlio. In the description of the façade of a villa inspired by the Château of Blois, illustrated in plate XLI of the Avery manuscript, Serlio said that he had to create a “armonia la quale sara discordia concordante” in the placement of the columns in between the windows on the façade. Serlio added that the placement of the windows had to follow that of the rooms. In France, the rooms were placed “en enfilade” in instead of being placed symmetrically around a central axis as in Italy. Serlio’s absorption of the elements of Italian Renaissance architecture into the French Gothic tradition was followed by Androuet du Cerceau (1559, 1561, 1582) and Philibert De l’Orme (1561, 1567).

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Critical bibliography


P. Le Muet, Manière de bastir pour touttes sortes de personnes..., introduction and notes by C. Mignot, Aix-en-Provence, Pandora, 1981.

M. Rosci, Il trattato di architettura di Sebastiano Serlio; Il Sesto libro, delle habitazioni di tutti li gradi degli homini (facsimile of the Munich manuscript of Book VI), Milan, ITEC Editrice, 1966.


M. N. Rosenfeld, "From Drawn to Printed Model Book: Jacques Androuet Du Cerceau and The Transmission of Ideas from Designer to Patron, Master Mason and Architect in the Renaissance", RACAR (Revue d’art canadienne), 16, 2, 1989,
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10. Architecture. From Prehistory to Postmodernity - By Marvin Trachtenberg, Isabelle Hyman.