The Certosa di Pavia was built as a monastery for the monks of the Carthusian order by the Duke of Milan, Gian Galeazzo Visconti. The Certosa is a mixture of Lombard renaissance and gothic styles. It is centered around two courtyards, one before the church, and one surrounded by 24 monastic cells. Also on site are the Palazzo Ducale, and various service buildings.

The Carthusian monks lived a mostly solitary day, with all of their activity taking place within their 5 room house/workshop which also included a garden. Meals were delivered via a revolving door from the cloister. Holidays and Sundays were spent in the refectory, however, and some activities were conducted outside of the monastery. The monastery was eventually taken over by the Cisterrian order.

certosa di pavia

giacomo da campione
with cristo foro di beltramo da conigo, bernardo da venezia, and giovanni antonio amadeo

near pavia, lombardy, italy
1396 - apx. 1500

karen chang and george kypreos
The Certosa is constructed out of masonry bearing walls. The church is classic gothic in plan, based on a latin cross. Along the nave are several small chapels. The transept is marked by a dome and cupola. The facade is ornately decorated within renaissance proportions, and is oversizes.

In section the church is somewhat squat by gothic standards. It is supported by buttressed piers.

The New Sacristy, where the monks have services, is adjoined to the church, and is a simple, vaulted building.

The two story monks' houses have large decorative front doors, and tall unusual chimeneys. The cloister is surrounded by a vaulted walkway in which the monks' houses are served.

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The repetition of various forms at a large difference in scale is a driving force in the design and organization of the Certosa.

The monks’ houses, with their exaggerated chimeneys acting as steeplees become 24 small duplicates of the main church. The scale of the one main building versus the 24 smaller buildings is striking, and speaks to the nature of monastic life and church hierarchy.

From within the church the same design strategy is utilized. The main volume of the church is juxtaposed against the 16 identical chapels flanking the nave. Again, there is a striking regularity between the repeated smaller elements, and a great difference in scale. Here it illustrates the role of the collective, civic place of worship versus the smaller private chapels.

juxtaposition of scale on the Certosa complex, and within the church

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Acting as a sanctuary from the outside world, the Certosa makes clear distinctions between the the civic realm, and the sacred world.

The entrance courtyard, used by all who visit, is a public square similar to one in any Italian town. It is marked by an ornate church facade, the house of government leaders, and by shops. The facade not only acts as part of the courtyard, but as the separation between this world, and the sacred one behind it, where the sanctuary of the church is found.

The cloistered courtyard is quite different from the entrance courtyard because it is a peaceful space, at the center of ethereal life. This is the sacred courtyard, whereas the former is the profane courtyard.

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The visitor to the Certosa experiences a move through various spaces that mark a departure from the public, earthly world, moving towards the more sacred. They begin through an imposing arched entrance, move into the entrance courtyard, through the church entrance into the nave, and their journey culminates at the sanctuary/choir.

The journey into the heart of the monastery, the realm of the monks, is marked by a procession through courtyards. The first is public, the second is transitional, and the third is sacred and private. Again, the move is from the outside, material world, into the protected spiritual world.
Because of the nature of the activities done by the monks, there is a clear system of separating service and served space within the monastery.

The houses surround the cloister and are served by the walkway which connects to the service and administration buildings which separate them from the public domain. Each house is a place of prayer and work, the center of monastic life. The cloister arrangement allows for them to be served without being disturbed. These spaces are separated by large doors and revolving windows.

A secondary served space is the Palazzo Ducale. This building is the house of distinguished guests and of the Lombard rulers.

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