Villa Giulia (Villa di Papa Giulio), Rome, Italy (1551-1553)

Giacomo da Vignola, principal architect

In 1550, Cardinal Giovanni Maria del Monte was elected Pope as Julius the Third (1550-1555). He owed his election to the political penetration he had demonstrated in generations with Charles V and the Holy Roman Empire, and his ascension to the papal throne led to a minor resurgence of the Renaissance spirit. It was during those years and in that spirit that he decided to transform a farm outside the city walls into his personal country villa, known then as Villa di Papa Giulio and today as Villa Giulia. He directed most of his efforts to holdings that his families had assembled in the area between the Tiber and the slope of Monte Valantino, today the hill of Paroli holdings that had been steadily extended, coming to include, aside from numerous farms, vineyards, and the holy bural place of Sant'Andrea. From the very beginning, three well-known architects - Amin matrimon, Vasari and Vignola - merged around the Pope, responding to the whims of this patron and sharing and exchanging ideas in such a complex arrangement that their contributions can no longer be easily distinguished. Furthermore, Michelangelo is mentioned in a Florentine document in which “nothing was done without the advice of Buonarroti.” Vasari gives himself credit for being “the first to plan the villa” and for making the designs “according to the Pope’s ideas,” although he admits others carried out the actual work. Indeed, direction of the work was entrusted to the Bolognese painter Prospero Fontana (1512-1597), whom the Pope had met in 1534 when he was still cardinal and serving as papal legate in Bologna. Various letters he wrote in that period reveal that even he was thinking about the potential of the villa. As early as 1539, he discusses both the importance of exploiting agricultural possibilities and the intellectual pleasures that might be enjoyed within such an ideal setting.

The absence of an overall plan and the mingling of so many different architects and artists in the effort make it diffi-
cuit to assess the history of the construction of Villa Giulia. However, Giacomo da Vignola (1507-1573) eventually became the Pope’s favorite architect. It was Vignola who began work on the construction of Villa Giulia, whose walls concealed the delights of a worldly court, such as those of the Medici in Florence. For instance, every day he acquired antique statues to install somewhere throughout his villa. Work on Villa Giulia was completed in only two years. Its exterior presents a face in keeping with the times, in conformity with the strict rules of decorum; its interior is a creation of rich fantasy, conducive to the celebration of antiques hidden by a high wall, a hortus conclusus in which to indulge, far from the eyes of the world, the personal expressions of an intense antiquarian passion.

The courtyard, enclosed by a broad semicircular portico, provided the original spatial layout for the main body of Villa Giulia. The ground floor was frescoed by the celebrated workshop directed by Taddeo Zuccaro. In the Sala dei Sette Colli, the artist painted scenes following the nascent style of landscape painting, while the decorations were characterized in
general by playful references to the classical. The artists who worked on the second-floor Stanza dell Quarto Station and Stanza dell Arty. Liberal certainly belonged to the sphere of the Zackary brothers, the principal heirs of the style of decoration popularized by Perini del Vaga, but the identification of individual artists is made difficult by the homogenous pictorial elegance. Another courtyard led from the villa to the theatrical nymphaeum, made by Ammanati, a lively setting with walls originally covered by precious marbles, hammered metals, and an opulent profusion of gold and stuccoes that descended all the way to the grotto below, forming an exuberant "water theater." This was the center of the villa and its most heavily decorated spot. Its creation, completed by the end of 1553, had been part of the earliest plans, as indicated by a document from 1552 that records the presentation of a model for the fountains to the Pope.

To provide water for this elegant aquatic complex, the Pope commissioned a large-scale project designed to bring water from the Acqua Vergine aqueduct right up to the steps of the villa.

The appearance of the complex today had been altered by large-scale restoration work performed in the eighteenth century.

The Pope personally oversaw the project in all its various details, even choosing the species of fruit tree to be used. Over a period of five years, this immense property, which originally covered all the hills from the Aurelian walls to the Milvan Bridge, materialized. The site was once covered with smaller structures that no longer exist. The Tempio designed by Vignola, today bordered by Via Flaminia, was once buried in a dense forest of laurels. Nearby stood three villas. A spacious garden surrounded the main building, its area strewed with ancient relics and inscriptions, while the park was designed with "places for repose and tables in the shade or most commodious loggias of greenery or masonry," according to Ammanati's writings.

Open to the public as the seat of the Etruscan museum, the Villa Giulia has, following restoration of those portions that survived all of time's ravages, a new dignity. But its appearance for the most part does not convey the grandiose plans of the man who first envisioned it.

(Textual information and several photographs from The Palaces of Rome, Benzi, 1997)
(Illustrations from Edifices de Rome Moderne, L'etamois, 1984)
(Photographs from The Bryn Mawr College Database, 2003)