been preserved and now suggest past glories that served the needs of rulers, poets, artists, and sufis, among others. One of the most elaborate contemporary projects is the vast al-Azhar park and garden in Cairo, a successful reclamation project and congenial blend of playground, restaurants, green grass and flowers, and places to stroll. But it has much more in common with nineteenth- and twentieth-century urban parks and gardens in Europe and North America than with the walled paradises of Islamic history that are so effectively examined in these two important publications.

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Note

Christine Smith and Joseph F. O’Connor
Building the Kingdom: Giannozzo Manetti on the Material and Spiritual Edifice
Tempe: Arizona Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies, and Turnhout, Belgium: Brepols, 2008 (Medieval and Renaissance Texts and Studies, Volume 317), 518 pp., 24 b&w illus. $95.00 (cloth), ISBN 0866983627

If Sixtus V can be said to have left his personal imprint on the cityscape of Rome more systematically than any Renaissance pope before him, then arguably it was Nicholas V who did the most to lay the groundwork.1 Tourists today can easily recognize the stellar plan of Sistine Rome in the long radiating avenues terminated by vertiginous obelisks. In the case of Niccoline Rome, the evidence is less physical than literary, much of it composed by prelates in epi- deictic prose. Several early Christian monuments—San Teodoro, Santo Stefano Rotondo, and San Lorenzo fuori le Mura among them—were partially restored. As for the basilica of St. Peter’s and the Trevi Fountain, the later history of these monuments has obscured almost entirely the contributions of Nicholas. And much the same is true for the Vatican palace, where only the defensive ramparts, now nestled behind the Porta de’ Palafrenieri, give testimony to his extensive campaign to modernize the urban fabric of the Borgo district. To judge from his secretary and biographer, Giannozzo Manetti, this pope’s ambitions were just as far-reaching as those of Sixtus—less “to edify and educate,” as Christine Smith and Joseph F. O’Connor point out, “than to impress and even intimidate” (251). The pontificate of Tommaso Portinelli lasted eight years, scarcely longer than that of Felice Peretti. Nonetheless, as popes they were equally autocratic. Most telling, the execution of their respective master plans were put in the hands of men known more for their engineering than architectural expertise: Bernardo Rossellino and Domenico Fontana.

To assess the importance of Nicholas’s patronage, architectural historians have rightly shifted their focus to the experimental and tentative nature of the design process in mid-quattrocento Rome. Architects were treading on terra incognita: their bold innovations, cloaked in the new style all’antica, had not been fully tempered. Buildings failed, like the great Torrione inside the Vatican complex. Critics attacked the new forms for their lack of structural integrity. Projects got rebuilt, and so an architectural language evolved through trial and error. As Smith and O’Connor’s study shows, the situation was not much different for contemporary humanists. Texts were routinely presented to one patron, then rescinded or retracted, and redelegated to another—most notably in the case of Alberti’s De re aedificatoria. For this reason, the reception of new ideas—even those grounded in classical ekphrasis—was as mutable as the courts in which these humanists circulated.

The authors center their study around three of Manetti’s Latin texts: a firsthand account of the ceremonies surrounding the consecration of Florence cathedral on the feast of the Annunciation, 25 March 1436; and more extensively, book II and book III of the Vita Nicolai Quinti, treating the achievements of his pontificate and his testament, respectively. Just as the archbishop of Florence, Antonino Pierozzi, concerned himself with the religious imagery of painters, so Manetti does not refrain from describing architectural marvels such as Brunelleschi’s soaring cupola and the stained-glass oculi in the tambour below. Manetti’s symbolic reading of the Duomo largely rehearses the writings of Durandus of Mende, a thirteenth-century theologian, and St. Augustine. The authors provide Latin texts and translations of De pompis and De gestis in the appendix.2 Dissecting Manetti’s vocabulary, the editors reveal how Manetti framed his visual and spatial understanding of the built environment within the context of Holy Scripture. Admittedly, this is not the picture of a discriminating observer, but of a critic who saw the need to defend the magnificence of his patron by ornamenting his arguments with references to Biblical tradition—specifically, the archetypal temple of King Solomon.3

Ironically, Manetti arrived in Rome at the behest of Nicholas only in 1453, so that he had but two years to witness the sweeping changes underway before the pope’s death in 1455. This has left scholars to debate whether the Vita is to be interpreted as an Apologia addressed to Nicholas’s critics, who objected to his megalomaniac tendencies, or as a series of guidelines laid out for his successor, Calixtus III. (The authors subscribe to this latter view.)

Although Smith and O’Connor have produced a near seamless book, the chapters follow different themes, alternating between textual exegesis and architectural ekphrasis. It is where these intersect that the discussion is most illuminating.

Manetti recognized Nicholas’s two greatest achievements as the collection of Greek, Latin, and Hebrew manuscripts, today the core of the Biblioteca Apostolica Vaticana that is housed in the wing of Sixtus V, and the rebuilding of St. Peter’s. Nicholas deliberately patterned his library on that of Ptolemy II Philadelphus at Alexandria, as Manetti states, and O’Connor considers what this might signify in terms of the balancing of classical (pagan) and Judaico-Christian texts. Given Manetti’s level of architectural literacy, Smith conjectures that he would have relied on graphic representations, such as the Ptolemaic maps disseminated through the workshop of Piero del Massaio, in
describing the topography of ancient Rome. She extends this argument to Manetti’s oft-cited description of the new St. Peter’s, over which scholars continue to disagree owing to its discrepancies with the dimensions given in De gestis (alternately in passi and cubits). Smith offers the intriguing hypothesis that Manetti’s account fuses observations from different architectural models made at successive stages in the project. However, to sort through the various modern reconstructions of Rossellino’s project, several of which are illustrated, is beyond the scope of their study.

Smith also leaves aside the question of Rossellino’s polygonal choir, allowing that Bramante’s well-known drawing for new St. Peter’s, Uffizi Arch 20, records not the extant foundations but one such modello then on hand. In fact, Manetti describes the tribuna in some detail, dwelling on the stained-glass windows (subvented at considerable expense by the bank of Tommaso Spinelli). According to the contemporary chronicler Mattia Palmieri, it rose thirteen braccia before Alberti counseled the pope to cease construction. One is left to wonder whether the walls had reached the point of the extrados for the transept vaults, and whether models of the interior structure might have informed Manetti’s perception of the space. Could Rossellino’s solution have anticipated the Halleskirche he devised for the Duomo in Pienza less than a decade later?

Still more problematic is the loose aggregate of buildings comprising the Vatican Palace. Plans drawn in the Bramante workshop give an accurate record of the complex before the interventions of Julius II. Smith disentangles the individual components as laid out by Manetti—the curia prima (“curtit”), the first garden (“palatium inferior”), “theatrum” (an open loggia facing onto the Cortile del Pappagallo), atrium (“aula prima”) and chapel—explaining how they are interconnected by subebe shifts in elevation. The discussion is engaging, if difficult to follow in places. Reconstructed ground plans clarify the relationship of old and new structures, but the reader needs corresponding sectional diagrams as well, particularly along the rise in grade from east to west.

The vexing issue of Alberti’s presence within this flurry of building activity lingers uneasily throughout the book. Generally Smith and O’Connor do not see his role as ideator, as first proposed by Bill Westfall. Rather, following the more recent arguments of Eugenio Garin and Manfredo Tafuri, they characterize Alberti as a marginal figure in the urban renewal of Rome and the Borgo. Much of this hinges on the satire Momus, in which Alberti thinly veils his contempt for the bombastic Nicholas in the guise of a ranting Jupiter. In the view of Smith and O’Connor, Alberti composed this text after the pope’s death in 1455, when it was all too clear to Romans that Nicholas’s building mania (libido aedificandi) had far exceeded any practical measure. Until at least 1453, it appears that Alberti shared enthusiasm for the pope’s initiatives, as evinced by his original dedication of De re aedificatoria to Nicholas. More tenuous is the notion that Alberti harbored a particular animosity for Manetti. In his famous letter to Matteo dei Pasti on the completion of the Tempio Malatestiano in Rimini, Alberti refutes the opinion of a certain “Manetto” that cupolas should properly be twice as tall as their width. Possibly he was referring to Antonio di Manetto Giaccheri, capomaestro of the Duomo and San Lorenzo in Florence. Smith quotes the next passage in which Alberti lays into this critic on the matter of round windows (“occhi”) and how they should be inserted, with the structural integrity of the wall in mind. Alberti complains that one “who makes [architecture] a profession ought to know his trade.” To take this as a swipe at Giannozzo Mannetti may be to overstate the influence of a cleric, one with virtually no formal knowledge of architecture (apparently not even Vitruvius), within the papal entourage.

This book amply showcases the extraordinary historical range of both authors—not the least in the critical apparatus to De Pompis and the Vita. The text is mostly free of errata, although the confusion of Alessandro “Sforza” for Alessandro Strozzi as the author of the map of Rome in the Biblioteca Medicea-Laurenziana bears mention (123–24).

While there is no shortage of scholarship on the place of rhetoric in Renaissance letters, our knowledge of how architectural drawings, models and in conversation—is far less complete. This book attempts through close textual analysis to open a window onto that lost world, where patrons, architects, humanists, and clerics came together in discourse.

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**Notes**


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Accompanying its eponymous exhibition, *Modern Times: The Untold Story of Modernism in Australia*, is an engaging, scholarly, and visually inviting book. It comprises essays by multiple authors on an array of topics circling around the complex topic of Australian modernism in the domains of art, design, and architecture between 1917 and 1967. The publication is orchestrated by the authoritative voices of the three editors: Ann Stephen (art historian and curator at the Powerhouse Museum, Sydney and the principal...