

AN IMPOSSIBLE TOUR

THE ENTRANCE HALL - NOMINA SUNT CONSEQUENTIA RERUM

Beware: you are now entering an historical landmark
Many uses has this building
many are the minds that cross it
and leave a dream behind

Nobel Prize Laureates
politicians
academics
poets and writers
artists and designers
people who talk talk talk
and write write write
and think think think
and if they're here
they deserve that time for thinking

Together with caterers, brides, mourners and party goers

Because this is a beautiful building, inside and outside. Let me explain

You are now entering
a place born out of a dream
of poor Italians who became rich Americans,
their names a lullaby on these plaques.
A long time ago they acquired
a fine piece of land from Columbia
and on it they built
their most beautiful idea of a building
- La Casa Italiana -

It was 1926 and by 1927 the dream came true
three renowned architects designed ¹
the magnificent replica of a Florentine Palazzo
in the heart-bursting Gotham City
where every other building is replica
if not
stone by stone
transplanted²

¹They were McKim, Mead and Whit

²The public ones you can see are **The Cloisters**, a
the way uptown and a diverse array at the Met: th
Tomb of Perneb, ca. 2350-2323 B.C.E., Saqqar;
Egypt; one **Spanish Cloister**; the **Chinese Garde
Court**; the **Mihrab**, 1354-55, Isfahan, Iran; th
**Doorway from the Church of San Nicol
Sangemini**, 11th century, Umbria, Italy; and probabl
more, that I forge



THE ITALIAN ACADEMY

AN IMPOSSIBLE TOUR

THE HEADROOM

The last room on the fifth floor, the Headroom hosts exactly as many round ceiling lamps as are heads of the distinguished fellows who partake of luncheon in here once a week, usually on Wednesdays.

Notwithstanding the fact that every one of them speaks beautiful Italian, whether mothertongue or not, each meeting is held in English: papers translated, words whispered, notes passed across the table, visibly and invisibly, so that the beauty of the Italian language is dutifully diluted into the Anglo-Saxon tongue. The Headroom is an oblong room of some 18 by 36 feet with a gorgeous view onto Amsterdam Avenue and the very sexy bronze depiction of *Bellerophon Taming Pegasus*¹ by Jacques Lipchitz². On sunny days, this very chunky piece of meat, cast in bronze with a dark green patina becomes ever more arousing as the light hits its mighty curves. This very appealing sculpture embellishes the facade of the Jerome L. Greene Hall, also outside the very same window.

The Jerome L. Greene Hall was designed by Max Abramovitz, who also designed the United Nations; it is home to many of America's most distinguished legal scholars and is the site of one of the most comprehensive law libraries in the world.

Another distinguished view inside the Headroom is *Mount Etna Seen from the Ruins of Tauramina* depicted by Frederick Catherwood in 1823 and generously donated by the grandchildren of a Columbia Trustee. A romantic bucolic view of ruins and shepherds in an Italy very far from its actual present. Quite a contrast with the stark architecture of the East Campus Building that looms outside the window, made of raw bricks and square-cut windows, which actually reminds us of a prominent Italian, the Pritzker Architecture Prize Laureate architect Aldo Rossi³. The Headroom goes live on Wednesday at noon, when the director, staff and fellows sit happily around the table for a luncheon seminar, eating panini with exotic names such as: *Ronaldo*⁴, *Loretta*⁵, *Diabolik*⁶, *Pontius*⁷ and *Goffredo*⁸, reminiscent of our beautiful country and its grand historical past. Do bear in mind that this is quite an exceptional sight, since only two visitors are allowed in the Headroom per week, invited by a fellow and/or the director for the seminar luncheon.

If you are interested in taking part in a luncheon seminar, please enquire at the reception desk. Unattended vacancies may be fulfilled.

¹ Aided by Pallas Athene, Bellerophon tame Pegasus, the winged horse of Zeus. It sprung from the body of the Medusa after Perseus decapitated her. Riding Pegasus, Bellerophon performed many heroic deeds. When he set out to take Olympus by storm, however, Pegasus shook him off, and Bellerophon went mad. Thus he became a symbol of boundless ambition and of pride before a fall. *Kunsthistorisches Museum Wien*

² Fleeing the fascist regimes of Europe, Lipchitz (1891-1973) arrived in America in 1941. He spent the majority of his life working in New York. During this time he executed many important public commissions; his 38-foot-high *Bellerophon* conceived in 1964, remains one of the largest public sculptures in America. *Christie's Auction Record, New York, 2000*

³ "Rossi has been able to follow the lessons of classical architecture without copying them; his buildings carry echoes from the past in their use of forms that have a universal, haunting quality. His work is at once bold and ordinary, original without being novel, refreshingly simple in appearance but extremely complex in content and meaning. In a period of diverse styles and influences, Aldo Rossi has eschewed the fashionable and popular to create an architecture singularly his own." *Citation from the Pritzker Juror*

⁴ Brazilian soccer wonderboy, relevant because of the extreme importance of football in Italian daily life

⁵ Named after Loretta Goggi, Italian showgirl, born on September 29, official website does not specify year of birth. More on www.lorettagoggi.it.

⁶ A gentleman thief, hero of an Italian comic strip

⁷ Pontius Pilate, Procurator of Judaea, who, very Italianly, washed his hands of the Christ affair

⁸ The name of many; Goffredo Fofi immediately comes to mind, a well-known contemporary Italian sociologist, intellectual and film critic

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THE COLORFUL CORRIDORS

They look exactly the same so you can get confused.
Yet there are many ways to avoid this inconvenience.

You could, if you really wished,
count the steps necessary to go up to the first colorful corridor.
There are surely fewer to get to the first one (87) & more to get to the next (105).
The same of course happens with the elevator, which the British cousins call a "lift".
If you press 5, it will take you to the top one; if you press 4, you get to the one on the lower level.
Yet, it does not really matter where you land, since there are other ways to get confused.
Take the colour of the curtains, for instance. And the rooms they hide. They all look the same, except for the chaos they veil, which you may, or may not, see through.

The rooms are called *studioli*, to honour the most famous studiolo in Italy and one of the seven wonders of the world: the studiolo of Duke Federico of Montefeltro, inside the Ducal Palace in Urbino. It is a place intended for meditation and study, executed in the second half of the XV century. Its walls are decorated with a wood-inlay technique known as intarsia; they show the contemporary interest in linear perspective. The cabinets display objects reflecting Duke Federico's wide-ranging artistic and scientific interests, and the depictions of books recall his extensive library, together with emblems of the Montefeltro.

If one really hoped to see one of these wonders, one could find the studiolo's twin brother at the Met. It is the **Studiolo from the Ducal Palace in Gubbio**, a Period Room from the 15th century, available to the viewer every day from 9:30 till 5:30 except for Mondays, January 1, Thanksgiving Day and December 25.

All of *these* studioli hide a room and a fellow inside them.
The curtains' colour code goes as follows:

Light blue = High
Pink = Violent
Yellow = Vigorous
Green = Ecstatic
Purple = Moody
White = Thoughtful

The fellows enter a room each day according to their mood – or, maybe, the opposite.
Let's say if one feels lazy, one might enter the vigorous room, or if one feels low, one might enter the high room. And so on and so forth.
So you never really know how a fellow feels that day.
Yet feelings are evanescent and arbitrary, so things may be really different in the afternoon from what they were in the morning.

How do you feel today?



AN IMPOSSIBLE TOUR

THE VIRTUAL AND THE OLD LIBRARY

Subtitled: The Virtual and the Old Building

The line that divides them is invisible, yet it is immediately clear on which side you stand. Walls are white in the virtual library and the carpet is blue on the floor. The computers that should have been there are missing whereas we have the portrait of the brave knight that should have looked upon them. His spirit inhabits the library and he lights up the rooms for visitors as they come in. The only lights that he cannot reach without making himself known are those on the oblong study table. Visitors can light them themselves.

Void is the most stubborn inhabitant of the library. Void takes up most of the rooms, of the shelves, of the plush Frau armchairs. It is seldom interrupted or disturbed. Maybe once a day a fellow comes for a quick coffee, or to flick through the Italian newspaper. (You can do the same if you wish to) As one cuts through the void, one is immediately enveloped by it, silently enclosed, the air that exits the nostrils gently sucked away.

Sound and the lack of it are important in the library. There are only 3 sounds –
fortuitous steps
lights switched on
pages flipped through
that one could hear here.

With one demonstration I will now make you hear all of them. And I will take the opportunity to show you the least favourite book of my favourite author in here: *Petrolino*, by Pierpaolo Pasolini. It is not yet a novel. It is the plan for a novel: a plot, ideas, sketches. He was killed. The book was published and some said it should not have been.

In a letter never sent to Alberto Moravia, Pasolini says about this book:
“This novel is not really useful for my life (as are novels and poetry written when young). It is not a proclamation: Listen, men! I exist. It is the preamble of a testament, the evidence of that little knowledge that one has accumulated, and is totally different from what one imagined/expected.”



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THE SECRET STAIRCASE

Backstairs, it sounds clandestine, something pertaining to an intrigue. And, well, is that the case in here too?

On the way to the theater downstairs, let me now remind you of some of the reasons backstairs are so useful in any building of reasonable size. In fact, traces of backstairs are found in most ancient palaces, in Italy as elsewhere.

In the octagonal church of San Vitale at Ravenna, for example, two pairs of stairs lead up from the west entrances. They are hidden behind vestibules – the visitors are disoriented by the different orientations of the walls inside the church and will hardly notice them. However, they are the only access to the exclusive gallery above and they are useful to select those who will appear from the balcony to the congregation gathered on the floor.

Backstairs are often the site of the closest physical contacts between the very top visitors to a palace and those who run the building. They offer quick access right to the place of action – as you will see descending two flights of stairs shortly – but, in negotiating backstairs, you need to trust those in charge – they could, in fact, lead you anywhere.

Here, at the Italian Academy, they are used to go from the kitchen to the library, and from the headroom to the “*studioli*”.

Because of them, the director is able to appear almost simultaneously in his office on the top floor and down at the entrance.

Fellows may use them to avoid the director, or vice versa, and look studiously present or absent, as needed, to the events at the Academy. This is where the real action takes place and this long flight is the true artery of the building.

Now, go down two flights and follow the arrows that will lead you to the theater!



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PENSARE INSIEME - THINK TOGETHER *please*

Introduction to the Italian Academy

Ladies and gentlemen what you see now
is the dutiful result of perseverance
amalgamated with great will and a touch of creativity

It was 1989, it was Warsaw, where two other dreams met
an Emeritus Professor (a woman she was)
and a Minister of Foreign Affairs discussed Cicero

It was the end of the cold war
it was the end of winter
and they decided this would be the place
“for a new Academy without boundaries”¹

An institute
that would host
the new frontier of high culture,
fellows of all disciplines united in searching,
in dialogue with each other,
with the university and the city

Italo Rota came and listened and created
a building
identical outside to the first dream
hosting, inside, the new one

The city could, the city can
come right through.
to the Theatre, the Salone²,
the Library,
the Exhibition Hall
and it does, on a non-regular basis

Fellows on the top floor fill and fulfill studioli,
conference rooms, the loggia, with their projects,
on a regular, ongoing basis

And what do they do?

THEY THINK TOGETHER

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¹Samuel G. Whit
Architect, grandson of Stamford Whit
who designed the Casa Italiana (1926
co-Author of the “Academy” Project
with Italo Rota (1991)

²Salone
1 hall; large hall; reception room
2 showroom: Salone dell’Automobile, Motor Show
car showroom; fashion showroom
3 hairdresser’s (shop), hairdressing, beauty salo



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THE KUBRICK TOUR

The meeting point is a vase of dubious origin donated to the Casa Italiana at some point. All the furniture here, in fact, has been donated.

If it looks old it is a replica sent by Mussolini; if it looks new (and plush and comfortable) it has been donated by Poltrona Frau.

Yet underneath the Italian Academy, lies a very peculiar basement, which inspired Stanley Kubrick in the late '60s for a few crucial scenes of his most important movies.

The basement appears in *2001: A Space Odyssey* (1968), *A Clockwork Orange* (1971) and *The Shining* (1980).

You never know it's the same place, though.

Let me show you:

Right in this bathroom Kubrick shot one of the most infamous scenes of *A Clockwork Orange*. Do you remember when Alex and his terrible *droogs*¹ drink *moloko*² to get ready for action? It was exactly here on this Escherian floor. Amazing, huh?

Then lamps. They are close to the elevators upstairs too: they are magnetic vertical gas lamps, always in pairs - one positive, one negative, it doesn't work otherwise; Kubrick used these on the set of *2001: A Space Odyssey*.

And in 1980 Kubrick came back again with Jack Nicholson and the whole crew to shoot the basement scenes of *The Shining*, the ones where he follows the Grady twins from underneath before killing them. It's that dramatic scene where the camera tracks Jack from the back as he listens to the steps of the little girls and their laughter. Reverse shot, and we see his face, wild-eyed, coming up and calling the girls, two pretty identical twins in their blue dresses and then WHAM! a blood-chilling sound effect and a red sea all over the place.

The passage underneath was shot here.

Well, now, let me take you back up before this becomes all too claustrophobic.

Thank you for your time and attention, ladies and gentlemen.

We really hope you enjoyed the tour of the Italian Academy.

Do visit us again.

I leave you now in the Salone; enjoy your cocktails!



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¹ *Friend* in **Nadsat**, a constructed set of Russian-based slang invented by the linguist, novelist, and composer Anthony Burgess. It is a transliteration of the Russian suffix for "teen"

His novel, *A Clockwork Orange* (1962), is the basis for the 1971 film by Stanley Kubrick

² *Milk* in **Nadsat**