Anchoring the House:

Early Augustan Residences Between Tradition and Innovation

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Project: Residences of power: Anchoring political innovation through imperial residences (44 BC – AD 337)

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Introduction

Since a fire had destroyed his previous imperial residence in 1873, Meiji the Great, emperor of Japan, founder of a new dynasty and the champion of Japan’s political, social and industrial revolution (known as the Meiji Restoration), found himself in need of a new accommodation. After much debate, and in accordance with a revived

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2 Emperor Meiji (1852 – 1912), 122nd Emperor of Japan, ruled from 1867 until his death, on July 30th 1912. Up until 1873, he had inhabited the so-called Edo castle (Edo-jo) in Tokyo, originally built in 1457 and place of residence of the Tokugawa shoguns, who run the Edo government up until 1867.
interest in traditional religion that marked the first period of the Meiji era, it was finally decided that the new palace should be erected following the guidelines of traditional Japanese architecture. The construction took place not long before the ratification of the first law for the restoration or rather, the rebuilding (in Japanese kaitaishūri) of ancient religious buildings of national significance. The nation and the empire were portrayed as if emerging out of a traditional past, yet, simultaneously, significant efforts were made to modernize Japan with the intent of connecting it to a wider political network with the West. Indeed, Emperor Meiji, while presenting himself as the champion of ancestral religion, was ultimately celebrated as ‘the great modernizer’.

This paper does not aim to compare Roman and Japanese imperial systems. It is, however, interesting to note that there existed some similarities between Octavian Augustus and the Emperor Meiji, especially at the beginning of their rule, and using the house of Meiji as an eye-opener might lead to a better understanding of some nuances of their actions. Both rulers, in fact, faced similar challenges, with the difference that the responses and the actions undertaken in the wake of these challenges are less thoroughly documented when it comes to Octavian. Both men had to confront a society which was not only deeply rooted in tradition, but, as such, characterized by a certain “disinclination to novelty” – as phrased by Van Groningen first, and echoed more recently by D’Angour, in reference to Greek and Roman

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3 The construction of a new palace did not start until 1884, due to financial constraints, and another four years would pass thereafter before its completion. Opinions on the style in which the palace was to be built were conflicting, swinging between Western-style design plans and more ‘traditional’ ones. Finally, a palace consisting of 36 buildings linked together by a common corridor took shape, which was ‘primarily Japanese in inspiration, built of wood and with roofs fashioned in the classical Irimoya style’; Fujitani (1996), 77. See also Wendelken (1996), esp. 30-31.

4 The Law for the protection of ancient shrines and temples (Koshaji Hozon Hō) was passed in 1897, and with it the first funding for the restoration of historic buildings was ensured; Wendelken (1996), 34.

5 On the ‘construction’ of tradition during the Meiji period, see Fujitani (1996), with reference to the pivotal work of E. Hobsbawm and T. O. Ranger on ‘the invention of tradition’ [Hobsbawm – Ranger (1992)]. On the appearance of an ‘ancestor religion’ supported by the imperial household, see Morioka (1977).
societies. No matter how necessary the change in order for the nation, the state, or the res publica to survive – resistance was to be expected. Drastic changes being impossible, both rulers coated their innovations with the allure of a fictitious continuity with the past by presenting some parts of society as “unchanging and invariant”, and some of their actions as ‘traditional’. Bearing these concepts in mind, I will hereafter attempt to answer the core question of my research – that is, what kind of architectural and decorative choices did the first emperor of Rome operate when it came to his private dwelling, and how was the residence of a newly established empire conceived, and perceived?

*Octavian and the implementation of the Palatine as ‘mnemonic site’*

In order to understand Octavian in his private sphere, it is necessary to take first a step back and to analyze how he chose to respond to the need for continuity among his fellow citizens, and how he behaved on a public level when it came to building policies. Standing “between the Republic and a new order”, Octavian chose to appeal to Rome’s traditional past, and the shared values of the mos maiorum, by re-inventing a mythological ‘golden age’ of Rome, populated by the ancestors of Roman senatorial families. A sign of the value of tradition was expressed in particular through the restoration of ancient religious buildings, especially those bearing more prominent public significance. By 28 BCE he had already restored 82 temples around

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6 Van Groningen (1953), 22, as cited in D’Angour (2011), 41.
8 The expression ‘mnemonic site’ is borrowed from Fujitani (1996), 18, as: “a calculated transformation of the physical appearance of various shrines, buildings and other public places”, in order to give “new meanings to the acquired territory.” On the same topic, Fujitani himself (250) draws a connection between his definition of mnemonic sites and Pierre Nora’s lieux de mémoire, where “memory crystallizes and secretes itself at a particular historical moment, a turning point where consciousness of a break with the past is bound up with the sense that memory has been torn – but torn in such a way as to pose the problem of the embodiment of memory in certain sites where a sense of historical continuity persists.”; Nora (1989), 7.
9 Barchiesi (2002), 1.
the city of Rome, as he himself states in the Res Gestae, and in the year 9 BCE he had sponsored the restoration of the Temple of Jupiter Optimus Maximus on the Capitoline Hill. His program of temple renovation and its connections to the past were fittingly summarized by Horace in the third book of his Roman Odes when he says, addressing Octavian Augustus himself, ‘You will pay for the crimes of your forefathers until you have repaired the sanctuaries and the crumbling temples’ (3.6). As Paul Zanker rightly points out in his seminal work on Augustus, at the time when Octavian took control of the city Rome was long in need of such an enterprise, but restoring ancient temples was not, by late Republican standards, as remarkable and politically valuable as building new edifices. Octavian took on the task, and fitted it into his own political discourse. While re-appropriating religious buildings – and re-instating (while completely re-inventing) religious rites and orders – he went even further and exploited historically and religiously significant locations, purposely creating a ‘topography of memory’ around the city that had not been there before and that completely transformed its appearance. Octavian Augustus’ ‘mnemonic policy’ involved not only physical but also literary spaces, as is well testified by the work of contemporary poets such as Vergil and Propertius.

11 As seen in Heslin (2015), 289.
13 It is the case, for example, of the reintroduction of the orders of the flamines, or the Fratres Arvales. Such reintroductions all took place in the years comprised between 44 and 28 BCE. See in part. Galinsky (2005), 180-182. Drawing once more from Fujitani’s work on Imperial Japan, rituals can also be viewed as mnemonic sites, through which i.e. “Japan’s governing elites invented, revived, manipulated, and encouraged national rituals (...) Through rites the rulers hoped to bring this territory, which had been segmented (...) under one ruler, one legitimating sacred order, and one dominant memory.”; see Fujitani (1996), 11.
14 On the close literary connection between topography and memory in the landscape of Augustan Rome, see, for example, Debrohun (2003), 90 – 91; Seider (2013). Octavian’s ‘mnemonic’ policy was also acknowledged by his contemporaries, as testified by Vitruvius (1, praef. 3): “I observe that you (i.e. Augustus) have built much and still are building and that in the future, too, you will show a concern for both public and private buildings commensurate with the greatness of our history, so that
Mnemonic sites referring to the mythological and historical past of Rome were not only re-used, but also created, and one such place can be identified in the Temple of Apollo on the Palatine. First announced in 36 BCE, after the naval victory of Naulochos, the temple was only officially dedicated in 28 BCE upon Octavian’s return to Rome, beside the location where Evander had first settled in the 12th century BCE when he had first arrived in Italy, and even closer to the site where Romulus had also allegedly built his hut, on the south-west corner of the hill. It is still debated whether the temple faced south-west towards the Forum Boarium, another location of prominent historical significance, or north-east, towards the inner space of the Palatine hill (possibly inside the perimeter or Romulus’ Roma Quadrata?). The temple, although new, was dedicated following very traditional practices in Roman temple building, as already thoroughly analyzed by Oliver Hekster and John Rich in their 2006 article ‘Octavian and the Thunderbolt’. In Suetonius’ words:

‘He [Octavian]erected the temple of Apollo in that part of his Palatine house which, when it had been struck by lightning, haruspices had declared to be desired by the god’.

Suetonius’ passage brings into play the residence of Augustus in the same ‘mnemonic site’ as the temple, and in close connection to it. Velleius Paterculus additionally informs us that Octavian ‘declared that he was making over for public use they will be consigned to memory for the benefit of our descendants”; as cited in Foubert (2010), 65, note 6.

15 For the complete discussion on the architecture and the most up-to-date bibliography on the temple, see Claridge (2014).
17 Suet. Aug. 29.3 (transl. by J. C. Rolfe). On the temple of Apollo, see also Vell. Pat. II 81.3; Dio 49.15.5. On the excavations of the area of the temple, see Carettoni (1966-67); id.(1978).
several houses which he had purchased through agents to make his residence more spacious, and promised to build there a temple of Apollo.”18 Thus, we know that in 36 BCE Octavian had deliberately chosen to discard any grander plan for his private dwelling while focusing on turning the temple into the focal point of his establishment on the Palatine. It seems then that he wished for the attention to be rather on the public building than the private residence, a theory that is confirmed if we read further into the sources. When Vergil praises Octavian in the Aeneid as a triumphator, he depicts him on the steps of the temple (Ipse sedens niveo candentis limine Phoebi).19 When Ovid describes the Palatine as it stood at the time of Augustus, he halts at the entrance of the house, embellished by the laurel of the triumph and the corona civica, as confirmed by Octavian Augustus himself (’et laureis postes aedium mearum vestit publice coronaque civica super ianuam meam fixa est’).20 The house is a façade imbued with the values of republican virtues. There, on the threshold of his house, and in the temple Octavian could then be presented as a ruler, if not even a god.

Modestia versus luxuria: the decoration inside Octavian’s house(s)

When it came to his private persona, however, Octavian pursued an image of ‘modesty’, accurately detected by Cassius Dio and expressed fictitiously through the mouth of Maecenas: ‘so far as you yourself are concerned, permit no exceptional or prodigal distinction to be given you’.21 Be a pius man. And where should pious men live?

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18 Vell. II.81.3. The information is confirmed by Dio 49.15.5.
20 Ov. Fasti, IV, 951-954; Tristia III, 1.31 ff. Aug. Res Gestae, 34.2. Scholars have tended to use Ovid’s elegy, a description of the route from the Forum of Augustus to the temple of Apollo on the Palatine, in order to locate the exact location of the entrance to the house of Augustus, see Wiseman (1987), 403 ff.; id. (2009); Coarelli (2012), 397-399. Following Ovid, C. Cecamore maintains that the public, open space of the Palatine complex must have included the temple and the buildings to its east (the libraries), while the wing to the west (the actual house) remained closed and inaccessible from the Clivus Palatinus in its pre-Neronian state; Cecamore (2002), 216.
According to Horace, they should prefer the modesty of a ‘humilis domus’ and seek the solace of the peaceful countryside (again, a symbolic space). In the first of the Roman Odes, the poet states: ‘Why should I build a house in the latest style with an imposing courtyard and doorposts that will incite envy?’.

When Suetonius describes the residence of Octavian Augustus on the Palatine, ‘modest’ is indeed the word he chooses to describe it:

“In the other details of his life it is generally agreed that he was most temperate [continentissimum] and without even the suspicion of any fault. He lived at first near the Forum Romanum, above the Stairs of the Ringmakers, in a house which had belonged to the orator Calvus; afterwards, on the Palatine, but in the no less modest dwelling [aedibus modicis] of Hortensius, which was remarkable neither for size nor elegance, having but short colonnades with columns of Alban stone, and rooms without any marble decorations or handsome pavements.”

In a later passage, Suetonius also informs his readers that Augustus never changed his residence again for the next 40 years, until his death in 14 AD. Was this house truly as unpretentious as Suetonius’ described it? It certainly wasn’t ‘modestly’ small, as the excavations, started in 1956 and conducted by Gianfilippo Carettoni, have proved. It is clear, however, that according to the intentions of its owner it was to appear ostentatiously modest, as recently pointed out by Peter Heslin. Octavian had

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22 Hor. Od. III, 1, 45-48. Although Horace’s house is a metaphor for his own poetry, P. Heslin has aptly seen in his comparison between a humble residence (his poetry) and a grandiose temple (Vergil’s temple of epic?) a possible comparison between the ‘modest’ house of Augustus and the “gleaming Temple of Apollo next door”; Heslin (2014), 284. See also Nisbet – Rudd (2004), 20.

23 Sue. Aug. 72.1: In ceteris partibus vitae continentissimum fuisse constat ac sine suspicioneullius vitii. Habitavit primo iuxta Romanum forum supra Scalas anularias, in domo quae Calui Oratoris fuerat; postea in Palatio, sed nihil minus aedibus modicis Hortensianis, et neque laxitate neque cultu conspicuis, ut in quibus porticus breves essent Albanarum columnarum et sine marmore ullo aut insigni pavimento conclavia’ [transl. by J. C. Rolfe.]

24 For a comprehensive history of the excavations, see Carettoni (1983); Tomei (2014).
no plan of building a palace, he actually avoided such action deliberately. As also underlined by P. Heslin, while at the time other Hellenistic buildings promoted by Octavian made their appearance around Rome which can be linked to the buildings in the royal quarter of Alexandria, the only construction that Octavian did not replicate was, indeed, the palace. He preferred his house rather to bear the mark of continuity with a certain idea of the Roman past, at least from the outside – hence the display of the corona civica on the door.

However, if we step inside the house, or rather, the houses on the Palatine belonging to Octavian, this idea of republican ‘modesty’ ceases to be true. Some scholars, influenced by Suetonius’ account, when discussing the interior decoration of the House of Augustus still have a tendency to dismiss it as ‘modest’ on the basis of Suetonius’ account or ‘too lavish’ to belong to the house of Augustus. Indeed, the decoration on the walls of what has been identified as the House of Augustus, as well as the so called House of Livia and Aula Icisa (part of the Augustan complex on the Palatine), is not only lavish, it is innovative. It marked – if not spurred on – the transition between two styles, conventionally termed as the Second and Third

26 Octavian’s properties on the Palatine, which must have extended all over the west and north sectors of the hill, comprised, as well as the site of the so-called House of Augustus, of the so-called House of Livia [see Coarelli (2012), 336 ff. with previous bibliography]; the so-called Aula Icisa [see Iacopi (1997).] The presence of a series of houses does not necessarily prove the existence of a single and coherent ‘palatial’ unit, although it is clear that the process of transformation of the Palatine hill into the new centre [unless American spelling is deliberate?] for political and religious power was prompted first by Octavian [see Haensch (2012), esp. 270-272.] The state of the archaeological remains as well as indications from literary sources point towards a series of separate houses, intended for use by various member of the Julio-Claudian family. Octavian seems to be following the Republican tradition of incorporating adjacent properties, and avoiding the construction of any new (private) building.

27 Their discoverer, G. Carettoni, described the painted decorations belonging to the House of Augustus as characterized by “una grande sobrietà di rendimento”; Carettoni (1987), 111. The same view is shared by Leach (2004), 110. T. P. Wiseman, on the contrary, suggests the house near the scalae Caci might not actually be that of Augustus because its decorations are “too lavish”; Wiseman (2009), 537.

28 For a monographic overview of the decorations in the House of Augustus, see Iacopi (2007), and Iacopi (1997) for the wall paintings from the Aula Icisa. For a recent discussion on the Augustan decorations from the Palatine and their dating, see Bragantini (2014).
Pompeian style, and, following Irene Bragantini, it constituted “a deliberate and carefully considered transformation, a kind of ideological leap that outweighed and concealed the continuity of an artistic tradition.”

Depicted on the walls of Octavian’s properties on the Palatine are themes connected to the ongoing discourse on tradition set, however, in a new stylistic frame coming especially from Alexandria and most likely derived from Hellenistic models. Of these themes, the most prominent was that of religion, expressed, primarily, through the representation of generic ritual landscapes featuring religious objects, such as the baetylus in the Room of the Masks, a symbol connected to the cult of Apollo. Larger mythological scenes, set in similar rural settings, also make their first appearance, although exclusively in the House of Livia where a room appears (or appeared – the pictures are now almost completed faded) to be decorated with two central pictures framed by aediculae: Io and Argo on one side, Polyphemus and Galatea on the other. Luxuriant garlands, symbolizing peace, were (and still are) also depicted in this house years before their more famous marble counterpart on the Ara Pacis. The chronological framework for the decorations on the Palatine has indeed been recently reappraised and assigned to the years between 42 and 36 BCE, instead of 36 – 28 BCE, both for the House of Augustus and the House of Livia.

A second, conspicuous theme is characterized by decorations referring to the world of Egypt. These, however, were most likely painted before the battle of Actium in 31 BCE, and must have only provided that Alexandrian stylistic framework I mentioned earlier. Interestingly enough, they make their appearance particularly in those parts of the Palatine complex where the adoption of a new decorative style is undeniable and much more prominent. This is the part of the house that contains

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29 Bragantini (2014), 327.
30 The Hellenistic model is confirmed by Bragantini (2014), 321 – 322.
31 Bragantini (2014), 321, 326.
the famous *studiolo* (study-room) of Octavian Augustus and the inner ramp connecting the house to the Temple of Apollo.\(^{33}\) Incidentally, Egyptian decorative elements did become very popular after Actium, when Augustus introduced other, more noticeable Egyptian elements (such as the obelisk currently in Piazza del Popolo, Rome), testifying to the possibility of attaching multiple layers of interpretation even to simple decorative elements.

The private buildings of Octavian, therefore, bear more prominently the signs of change and the influence of political models sought beyond the borders of Rome. By balancing traditional and innovative systems, Octavian was elevating Rome to a more ‘international’ level. His house, though ideologically traditional from the outside, became increasingly innovative on the inside, where Roman and Hellenistic elements were inter-mixed to support the new political claims of Octavian. Hellenistic art was thus ‘localized’, or ‘anchored’, to serve the purposes of a new style that was Roman in its concept.

**Conclusions**

Before I conclude, I would like to return for a moment to the new imperial residence of Emperor Meiji in Tokyo, where the rooms, beyond the traditional wooden façade, showed a mixture of Japanese and Western design: “*Japanese in conception, but not without features imported from the West*”, according to a British reporter of the time.\(^{34}\) In a colorful print dating to December 1888, the Emperor and his wife are depicted relaxing inside a classically Japanese pavilion, within the walls of the New Palace, together with court members. If the latter, however, are wearing traditional Japanese court dresses, the Emperor and his consort display clothes in accordance with

\(^{33}\) Carettoni (1983), 388 – 393.

\(^{34}\) *Japan Weekly Mail*, 6 February 1889; as cited in Fujitani (1996), 77.
Western fashion, while also sitting on very Western chairs.\textsuperscript{35} Interestingly for the scope of the present study, we know that the choice of mixing traditional Japanese design with Western elements was made consciously by the Emperor and his entourage, and that, while it started in the new palace, it would eventually influence all of Japan, and all classes, in the years to come until finally to appearing fully interiorized by the 1920’s-40’.\textsuperscript{36} The process of ‘Westernization’ was, hence, taken up slowly, and the reason lies partly in the necessity of overcoming a strong dualism between Japanese and Western elements, traditional and innovative. This difficulty was aptly summarized by the Meiji period architect Moriya Nobuo: “Unfamiliarity and novelty breed dislike. Craftwork for the Japanese must have been designed for the taste of the Japanese”.\textsuperscript{37} Moriya found a loophole in the system by transforming ‘modern’ Western decorations into local, ‘alternative’ products. Thus, the national leap towards a modern state, one able to compete with the Western Super Powers, could only be made acceptable by anchoring it to a shared, traditional past. The deliberate design choices made in the residence of the emperor reflected such a struggle, and through their spreading, interior decoration contributed to bringing the ideology of the emperor into the daily life of his subjects.

In conclusion, in the same way as Western art came to be accepted into the context of Japanese design by means of being transformed into something Japanese, Hellenistic art came to be widespread – while serving Augustan propaganda – by becoming rooted in Roman traditions. Augustus succeeded in creating new, cosmopolitan designs: Rome ceased merely to imitate, and started to be imitated on an artistic level. In this process, design functioned as an active agent and must be viewed as an

\textsuperscript{35} Maple Leaves at the New Palace, artist unknown, illustration published on December 20, 1888 (Museum of Fine Arts, Boston, inv. no. 2000.237 a – c.)

See http://ocw.mit.edu/ans7870/21f/21f.027/throwing_off_asia_01/emperor_02.html [9-3-2016.]

\textsuperscript{36} On the introduction of Western interior design to Japan, see Teasley (2003); McNeil (1992).

\textsuperscript{37} Moriya, Chiisaki shitsunai bijutsu, 4; as cited in Teasley (2003), 64.
important social marker when it comes to analyzing the character of Augustan political discourse and how it was carried out through the visual arts. Decoration should not be dismissed, as it is often the case, as a mere fashionable accessory. Mural art does have an ideological background and it does mirror the changes occurring around it.

Both the Roman and Japanese empires serve as an example that innovations, in order to succeed it, sometimes need to be anchored to familiar notions of continuity. Acceptance comes with time, although at first change may appear as a clash between the innovation needing to be anchored and the anchor that everyone is accustomed to appreciating. It is not always an immediate success, and resistance needs to be accounted for. When Vitruvius expresses his opinion on the new decorative style which was starting to become fashionable at the time of his literary enterprise (around 25 BCE), he describes its (innovative) design elements as ‘monstra’.38 Similarly, a Western architect who witnessed the impact of Western design on Japanese architecture called it a ‘monstrosity’.39 And it is tempting, in this light, to mention the critiques encountered not so long ago by Jeff Koons’ art installations inside the ‘temple’ of European modern culture: “In Versailles, the monstrous and the luxurious came together.” 40 Even around us some innovations, no matter how ‘anchored’, are not always easily digested.

38 Vitr. De arch. V, 3: “Nam pinguntur tectoriis monstra potius quam ex rebus finitis imagines certae.”
39 B. Taut, Houses and People in Japan (1st edn. 1937), Sanseido, Tokyo, 1958, 3; as cited in McNeil (1992), 284.
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