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Author:

[Jacobs, Allan B](#)

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Being Apart

Allan B. Jacobs

At Caprarola, across a small ravine from the Palazzo Farnese and the sloping ridge on which the main street of the town is located, are a church and its attendant buildings, maybe a monastery or a school. They are arranged around and behind a terrace, which sits atop a retaining wall that rises steeply from the ravine. The buildings facing the terrace form a welcoming, semi-enclosed, rectangular entry space.

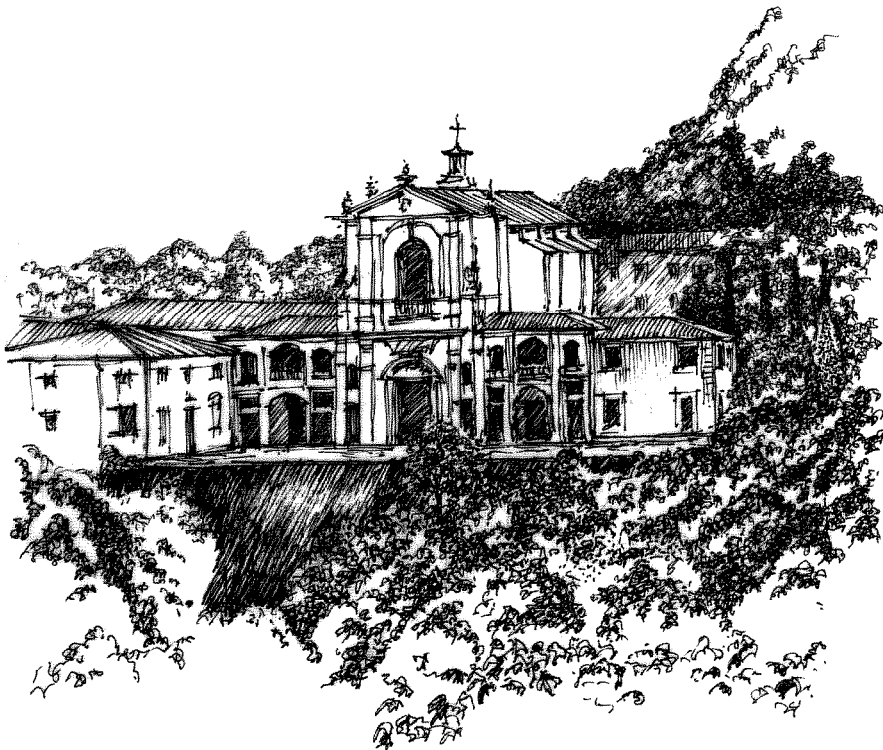
The church complex is within easy sight of Caprarola, yet it is so strongly separated from the town by the ravine. There are no visible walks directly between the two, across the ravine. If you want to go from the town to the church, you have to take the long way around, walking away from both town and church then doubling back on a reasonably level path. It would not be an overly long walk, maybe twenty minutes.

That complex has the best of two possible worlds. It is so very close to the community, close enough to be a part of it, within sound and even sight of the town's comings and goings. At the same time it is apart, distant enough to be separate, distinct, solitary. How nice, I thought. Wouldn't I like to live in that situation. To be sure, my reaction had something to do

with the inviting nature of the terrace — a complex of buildings with its own semi-enclosed plaza, urban its own right, looking across the ravine to the more urban small town that climbs the ridge of a hill and ends in the Palazzo Farnese.

Then, as I continued looking across the ravine, another set of thoughts demanded attention. Only a few can be so well situated, apart but not apart. And who shall they be? If that location is indeed privileged (and it is), wouldn't everyone like to have it, or one like it? But if everyone were indeed able to be slightly apart from all the others, then there would be no one in Caprarola, no climbing central street lined with terraces and small stores, no small piazza at which to gather, and, almost certainly, fewer stores (because they would have to be further apart and not enough people would pass any one of them). Men and women, being apart, might not know each other as well as they do now, and it is doubtful that they would meet in large numbers on the main street as they do now every evening and on Sunday mornings. Or, maybe there would be one institution, say a church or school, or one family left in Caprarola, but it, too, would be slightly apart, like all the others.

It strikes me that the church or monastery, or whatever it is, mirrors the story of the evolution of urban life in the United States. It is not only the rich, or the powerful, or the special who have wanted to be apart yet somehow attached to an urban community — it has been most people. And in the U.S., in large measure, most people have had the technical ability and wealth to be apart. Where they have done that, exercised the option to be apart, the city has diminished or ceased to be.



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Drawing by Allan B. Jacobs.