Battista degli Alberti has done in our period, they were not much more than generalities. However, the invenzioni – those things peculiar to the master – were in large part the product of empirical investigation or of his own [theoretical] efforts.

Returning to the excavations of Filippo and Donato: they were generally called “the treasure hunters” as it was believed that they spent and looked for treasure. They said: The treasure hunters search here today and there tomorrow. Actually they sometimes, although rarely, found some silver or gold medals, carved stones, chalcedony, carnelians, cameos, and like objects. From that in large measure arose the belief that they were searching for treasure.

Filippo spent many years at this work. He found a number of differences among the beautiful and rich elements of the buildings – in the masonry, as well as in the types of columns, bases, capitals, architraves, friezes, cornices, and pediments, and differences between the masses of the temples and the diameters of the columns; by means of close observation he clearly recognized the characteristics of each type: Ionic, Doric, Tuscan, Corinthian, and Attic. As may still be seen in his buildings today, he used most of them at the time and place he considered best.

11 LEON BATTISTA ALBERTI

from On the Art of Building, Prologue and Book 1 (1443–52)

Alberti was not only the first great theorist of the Renaissance but he, more than anyone else in this century, personified what came to be known as humanism. He was a man of great classical erudition. Born to a Florentine father-in-exile and to a Genoese mother, he studied Greek and Latin in Padua and earned a doctor of law at the University of Bologna. He seems to have dabbled in the arts in the 1420s, and even considered a literary career before becoming a cleric or secretary, first to Cardinal Carthusian Niccolo Albergati. In 1428 the Florentine ban against the Alberti family was lifted and Leon got to see firsthand early Renaissance works, especially those of Masaccio, Donatello, and Brunelleschi. He responded in 1435 with a treatise on painting, De pictura, dedicated to Brunelleschi. By this date Alberti had already traveled to Rome as a secretary to Pope Eugenius IV, where he became the first humanist to prepare a survey of the classical monuments of the city. These archaeological studies formed but a prelude to further classical studies in Rome after 1443, and it was around this time that he began his architectural treatise, in which he now sought to interpret the principles of classical Roman architecture. Around mid-century he also turned his attention to the practice of architecture with a number of important designs, among them the church of San Francesco in Rimini (1450–60), the facades of the Palazzo Rucellai (1450s) and Santa Maria Novella (1458–71) in Florence, and the church of Sant’ Andrea in Mantua (begun 1470).

Alberti possessed literary skills in addition to classical learning, and he was rather critical of the talents of Vitruvius. He disliked in particular the architect’s conceptual ambiguity and, moreover, he felt that classical theory
had achieved much greater heights of refinement in such writers as Cicero, whose rhetorical concepts he gladly redirected toward architectural theory. Nevertheless, he borrowed the 10-book structure of Vitruvius and even organized his study around the three Vitruvian concepts of durability, convenience, and beauty. As the first Renaissance treatise on architecture, Alberti’s effort stands alongside that of Vitruvius as one of the twin pillars of classical theory. The first selection from the opening pages of Book 1 presents a few of the basic definitions of architecture and its general elements of practice. His definition of building as “a form of body” consisting of both matter and lineaments (lines, or more generally design) maps out a philosophical distinction on which his theory of beauty will reside. Matter relates to nature, but the power to wield lineaments (or make designs) resides in the architect’s mind.

Before I go any farther, however, I should explain exactly whom I mean by an architect; for it is no carpenter that I would have you compare to the greatest exponents of other disciplines: the carpenter is but an instrument in the hands of the architect. Him I consider the architect, who by sure and wonderful reason and method, knows both how to devise through his own mind and energy, and to realize by construction, whatever can be most beautifully fitted out for the noble needs of man, by the movement of weights and the joining and massing of bodies. To do this he must have an understanding and knowledge of all the highest and most noble disciplines. This then is the architect. [. . .]

First we observed that the building is a form of body, which like any other consists of lineaments and matter, the one the product of thought, the other of Nature; the one requiring the mind and the power of reason, the other dependent on preparation and selection; but we realized that neither on its own would suffice without the hand of the skilled workman to fashion the material according to lineaments. Since buildings are set to different uses, it proved necessary to inquire whether the same type of lineaments could be used for several; we therefore distinguished the various types of buildings and noted the importance of the connection of their lines and their relationship to each other, as the principal sources of beauty; we began therefore to inquire further into the nature of beauty – of what kind it should be, and what is appropriate in each case. As in all these matters faults are occasionally found, we investigated how to amend and correct them. [. . .]

Let us therefore begin thus: the whole matter of building is composed of lineaments and structure. All the intent and purpose of lineaments lies in finding the correct, infallible way of joining and fitting together those lines and angles which define and enclose the surfaces of the building. It is the function and duty of lineaments, then, to prescribe an appropriate place, exact numbers, a proper scale, and a graceful order for whole buildings and for each of their constituent parts, so that the whole form and appearance of the building may depend on the lineaments alone. Nor do lineaments have anything to do with material, but they are of such a nature that we may recognize the same lineaments in several different buildings that share one and the same form, that is, when the parts, as well as the siting and order, correspond with one another in their every line and angle. It is quite possible to project whole forms in the mind without any recourse to the material, by designating and determining a fixed orientation and conjunction for the various lines and angles. Since that is the case, let lineaments be the precise and correct outline, conceived in the mind, made up of lines and angles, and perfected in the learned intellect and imagination.
Alberti’s theory of absolute beauty is of paramount importance to Renaissance theory in that it lays an intellectual foundation that will remain largely intact for almost three centuries. The issue of beauty had been problematic for Vitruvius. On the one hand he made allusions to the harmonic ratios of Pythagorean musical theory, suggesting there was a higher cosmic order underlying the judgment of beauty. On the other hand he gave architects the right to vary proportions if the “eye” calls for corrections, or as the arts make progress. Such freedom assumes that judgments of beauty are relative and even subjective — a logical inconsistency unacceptable to Alberti and Renaissance aesthetics. From his classical perspective, Alberti prefers the Platonic belief that there is a higher reality to the physical or phenomenal world, namely Ideas; he accepts as well the Neoplatonic argument that art and architecture can symbolize these higher Ideas through their adherence to universal mathematical laws or harmonic proportions. Beauty is thus the correct mirroring of transcendent Ideas, and — as his reference to a passage of Cicero shows — it is rarely found, even in nature. The mediating element between raw nature (materials) and the ordering lines of the architect is ornament. This term possesses a meaning for Alberti quite different than its general meaning today. It is indeed something “attached or additional,” but it is not inessential or something that can be dispensed with. Ornament is the correct orchestration of the lineaments of design, the judicious choice of the material, and the polishing and refinement of appearance — in short, the corporal manifestation of those higher Ideas.

Of the three conditions that apply to every form of construction — that what we construct should be appropriate to its use, lasting in structure, and graceful and pleasing in appearance — the first two have been dealt with, and there remains the third, the noblest and most necessary of all.

Now graceful and pleasant appearance, so it is thought, derives from beauty and ornament alone, since there can be no one, however surly or slow, rough or boorish, who would not be attracted to what is most beautiful, seek the finest ornament at the expense of all else, be offended by what is unsightly, shun all that is inelegant or shabby, and feel that any shortcomings an object may have in its ornament will detract equally from its grace and from its dignity.

Most noble is beauty, therefore, and it must be sought most eagerly by anyone who does not wish what he owns to seem distasteful. What remarkable importance our ancestors, men of great prudence, attached to it is shown by the care they took that their legal, military, and religious institutions — indeed, the whole commonwealth — should be much embellished; and by their letting it be known that if all these institutions, without which man could scarce exist, were to be stripped of their pomp and finery, their business would appear insipid and shabby. When we gaze at the wondrous works of the heavenly gods, we admire the beauty we see, rather than the utility that we recognize. Need I go further? Nature herself,
as is everywhere plain to see, does not desist from basking in a daily orgy of beauty – let the hues of her flowers serve as my one example.

But if this quality is desirable anywhere, surely it cannot be absent from buildings, without offending experienced and inexperienced alike. What would be our reaction to a deformed and ill-considered pile of stones, other than the more to criticize it the greater the expense, and to condemn the wanton greed for piling up stones? To have satisfied necessity is trite and insignificant, to have catered to convenience unrewarding when the inelegance in a work causes offense.

In addition, there is one particular quality that may greatly increase the convenience and even the life of a building. Who would not claim to dwell more comfortably between walls that are ornate, rather than neglected? What other human art might sufficiently protect a building to save it from human attack? Beauty may even influence an enemy, by restraining his anger and so preventing the work from being violated. Thus I might be so bold as to state: No other means is as effective in protecting a work from damage and human injury as is dignity and grace of form. All care, all diligence, all financial consideration must be directed to ensuring that what is built is useful, commodious, yes – but also embellished and wholly graceful, so that anyone seeing it would not feel that the expense might have been invested better elsewhere.

The precise nature of beauty and ornament, and the difference between them, the mind could perhaps visualize more clearly than my words could explain. For the sake of brevity, however, let us define them as follows: Beauty is that reasoned harmony of all the parts within a body, so that nothing may be added, taken away, or altered, but for the worse. It is a great and holy matter; all our resources of skill and ingenuity will be taxed in achieving it; and rarely is it granted, even to Nature herself, to produce anything that is entirely complete and perfect in every respect. "How rare," remarks a character in Cicero, "is a beautiful youth in Athens!" That connoisseur found their forms wanting because they either had too much or too little of something by which they failed to conform to the laws of beauty. In this case, unless I am mistaken, had ornament been applied by painting and masking anything ugly, or by grooming and polishing the attractive, it would have had the effect of making the displeasing less offensive and the pleasing more delightful. If this is conceded, ornament may be defined as a form of auxiliary light and complement to beauty. From this it follows, I believe, that beauty is some inherent property, to be found suffused all through the body of that which may be called beautiful; whereas ornament, rather than being inherent, has the character of something attached or additional.

This granted, I continue: Anyone who builds so as to be praised for it – as anyone with good sense would – must adhere to a consistent theory; for to follow a consistent theory is the mark of true art. Who would deny that only through art can correct and worthy building be achieved? And after all this particular part concerning beauty and ornament, being the most important of all, must depend on some sure and consistent method and art, which it would be most foolish to ignore. Yet some would disagree who maintain that beauty, and indeed every aspect of building, is judged by relative and variable criteria, and that the forms of buildings should vary according to individual taste and must not be bound by any rules of art. A common fault, this, among the ignorant – to deny the existence of anything they do not understand. I have decided to correct this error; not that I shall attempt (since I would need detailed and extended argument for it) to explain the arts from their origins, by what
reasoning they developed, and by what experience they were nourished; let me simply repeat what has been said, that the arts were born of Chance and Observation, fostered by Use and Experiment, and matured by Knowledge and Reason.

13 LEON BATTISTA ALBERTI
from On the Art of Building, Book 9

The fullest elaboration of Alberti’s theory of beauty, and indeed of his whole architectural conception, comes in Book 9, when he introduces the Ciceroonian notion of concinnitas or concinnity. In his Orator (xxiii), Cicero notes that “words when connected together embellish a style if they produce a certain symmetry (concinnitas) which disappears when the words are changed, though the thought remains the same” (Loeb trans.). Concinnity is that perfect harmony or grace that appears when the architect has perfectly composed his design, in such a way that it demonstrates the three qualities of correct number, outline, and position. Number relates to the addition or taking away of parts; outline controls their size and configuration; position adds the criteria of correct placement. Alberti was convinced that in concinnity he had found the “absolute and fundamental rule of Nature” as well as the design secret known to classical antiquity. And like a good Platonist, Alberti next draws upon the numerical ratios of Plato’s Timaeus to gather the harmonic ratios that should also underlay architecture. Alberti’s belief in an absolute numerical scheme for beauty and proportion was his most important contribution to Renaissance theory. Through these passages, architectural beauty now comes to reside principally in proportions.

Now I come to a matter with which we have promised to deal all along: every kind of beauty and ornament consists of it; or, to put it more clearly, it springs from every rule of beauty. This is an extremely difficult inquiry; for whatever that one entity is, which is either extracted or drawn from the number and nature of all the parts, or imparted to each by sure and constant method, or handled in such a manner as to tie and bond several elements into a single bundle or body, according to a true and consistent agreement and sympathy – and something of this kind is exactly what we seek – then surely that entity must share some part of the force and juice, as it were, of all the elements of which it is composed or blended; for otherwise their discord and differences would cause conflict and disunity. This work of research and selection is neither obvious nor straightforward in any other matter, but it is at its most ambiguous and involved in the subject about to be discussed; for the art of building is composed of very many parts, each one, as you have seen, demanding to be ennobled by much varied ornament. Yet we shall tackle the problem to the best of our ability, as we have undertaken. We shall not inquire as to how a sound understanding of the whole might be gained from the numerous parts, but, restricting ourselves to what is relevant, we shall begin by observing what produces beauty by its very nature.

The great experts of antiquity, as we mentioned earlier, have instructed us that a building is very like an animal, and that Nature must be imitated when we delineate it. Let us...
investigate, then, why some bodies that Nature produces may be called beautiful, others less beautiful, and even ugly. Obviously, among those which we count as beautiful all are not such that there is no difference between them; in fact it is precisely where they most differ that we observe them to be infused or imprinted with a quality through which, however dissimilar they are, we consider them equally graceful. Let me give you an example: one man might prefer the tenderness of a slender girl; yet a character in a comedy preferred one girl over all others because she was plumper and more buxom; you, perhaps, might prefer a wife neither so slender of figure as to appear sickly nor so stout of limb as to resemble a village bully, but such that you might add as much to the one as you could take away from the other without impairing dignity. Yet, whichever of the two you prefer, you will not then consider the rest unattractive and worthless. But what it is that causes us to prefer one above all the others, I shall not inquire.

When you make judgments on beauty, you do not follow mere fancy, but the workings of a reasoning faculty that is inborn in the mind. It is clearly so, since no one can look at anything shameful, deformed, or disgusting without immediate displeasure and aversion. What arouses and provokes such a sensation in the mind we shall not inquire in detail, but shall limit our consideration to whatever evidence presents itself that is relevant to our argument. For within the form and figure of a building there resides some natural excellence and perfection that excites the mind and is immediately recognized by it. I myself believe that form, dignity, grace, and other such qualities depend on it, and as soon as anything is removed or altered, these qualities are themselves weakened and perish. Once we are convinced of this, it will not take long to discuss what may be removed, enlarged, or altered, in the form and figure. For every body consists entirely of parts that are fixed and individual; if these are removed, enlarged, reduced, or transferred somewhere inappropriate, the very composition will be spoiled that gives the body its seemly appearance.

From this we may conclude, without my pursuing such questions any longer, that the three principal components of that whole theory into which we inquire are number, what we might call outline, and position. But arising from the composition and connection of these three is a further quality in which beauty shines full face: our term for this is concinnitas; which we say is nourished with every grace and splendor. It is the task and aim of concinnitas to compose parts that are quite separate from each other by their nature, according to some precise rule, so that they correspond to one another in appearance.

That is why when the mind is reached by way of sight or sound, or any other means, concinnitas is instantly recognized. It is our nature to desire the best, and to cling to it with pleasure. Neither in the whole body nor in its parts does concinnitas flourish as much as it does in Nature herself; thus I might call it the spouse of the soul and of reason. It has a vast range in which to exercise itself and bloom – it runs through man’s entire life and government, it molds the whole of Nature. Everything that Nature produces is regulated by the law of concinnitas, and her chief concern is that whatever she produces should be absolutely perfect. Without concinnitas this could hardly be achieved, for the critical sympathy of the parts would be lost. So much for this.

If this is accepted, let us conclude as follows. Beauty is a form of sympathy and consonance of the parts within a body, according to definite number, outline, and position, as dictated by concinnitas, the absolute and fundamental rule in Nature. This is the main object of the art of building, and the source of her dignity, charm, authority, and worth.