

What Palladio might have built in Venice

Antonio Foscari

Andrea Palladio: Unbuilt Venice.

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Hybrid populist-scholarly books aimed mainly at the so-called well-educated public seem to come in two forms: one, written by the Ross King's of this world that take advantage of other's research transforming it into pot-boiled populism, and the other – with which it is not to be confused – written by scholars of serious intent who have an honest wish to set out an important argument in clear, ordinary language, avoiding the academic jargon that so weighs down the field. Antonio Foscari's *Andrea Palladio. Unbuilt Venice* falls between these two categories but well below the company of his most notable, recent predecessor in the field of Palladio studies: Witold Rybczynski who, just over a decade ago, took millions of readers on a *Journey with the Renaissance Master* towards a better understanding of Palladio's 'Perfect House'. Yet books without footnotes are always tough to review and this one is no exception as Foscari presents controversial new hypotheses for Palladio in and around piazza San Marco. Without immediate recourse to traditional scholarly apparatus the reader simply has to take on trust the author's assertions and reconstructions which make the two most provocative proposals he sets out here worth examining in detail.

AFTER SANSOVINO

After being regularly rebuffed in his many attempts to obtain prestige commissions and posts in Venice, Palladio's luck changed distinctly after 1570 when Jacopo Sansovino, Proto ai procuratori di San Marco, died. Palladio was not selected to replace him in this post, which was one of two that might be best described as Chief government architect (the other being the proto of the Salt Office). Nevertheless with Sansovino no longer in the running for major government projects that fell outside the remit of the procurators, Palladio, whose treatise conveniently was also published in 1570, could finally use to advantage his design skills and count on his influential supporters to conjure up winning proposals such as those for the church of the Redentore in late 1576.

Plague was not the only calamity to strike Venice in this decade and two fires, in 1574 and 1577 respectively, destroyed significant parts of the Ducal Palace prompting much debate about restoring or rebuilding the Serenissima's seat of government. If Foscari is right, Palladio came up with not one but rather two highly ambitious projects for rebuilding on and adjacent to Saint Mark's square. While his proposal to rebuild the Doge's Palace in contemporary architectural form is well-known as it is referred to in contemporary documents, no securely attributed architectural drawings have ever been convincingly associated with this initiative.

Foscari, an architect as well as an architectural historian, here audaciously offers a visual reconstruction (*fig. 1*) of Palladio's ambitious proposal to replace one of the most important and symbolic buildings at the heart of Venice with a new palace that was to be shortened to just fourteen bays on both the piazzetta and bacino sides so as to separate it physically from the ducal chapel of San Marco. Foscari also believes that Palladio wanted to

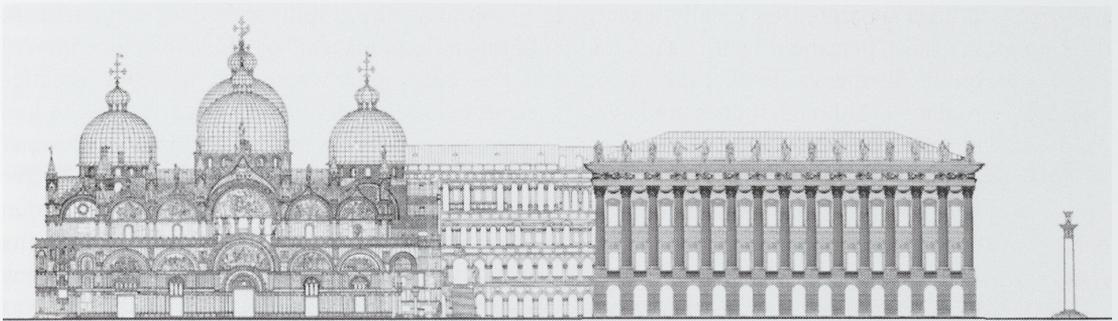


Fig. 1 Antonio Foscari, Rekonstruktionsvorschlag des Palazzo Ducale nach eventuellem Entwurf Palladios (Abb. 222)

insert into the gap opened up on the piazzetta facing Sansovino's Loggetta a triumphal arch that permitted views into the courtyard from the area around the belltower, but this seems improbable as 'the people's view in' to match 'the ruler's view out' is prompted by an idea of democracy that was still to be invented (and the visual reconstruction offered seems a rather egregious 'cut and paste' job).

Apparently Palladio also wanted to 'correct' the upside-down exterior of the Ducal Palace with its open two-storey loggias surmounted by solid upper walls, an idea here reconstructed as consisting of a robust ruggly-rusticated continuous ground floor of arched piers surmounted by a giant order of Corinthian columns supporting a classical frieze and enframing and closing in the first floor loggia and walled upper storey. Taking such a reconstruction on face value what one can say is that like Palladio's earlier proposal for rebuilding the Rialto bridge of the 1550s, here too the immense strength and weakness of such a proposal resides in the inability to think contextually and only apply indiscriminately personal design principles to each and every project while failing to convince one's peers. My worry about Foscari's imaginative reconstruction in such a book without notes is that it will end up being taken as fact, just as the reconstructions offered in the Alberti exhibition in Mantua in 1994 tended to migrate from possible and potential to philological and persuasive reconstructions in the minds of the unsuspecting public (Joseph Rykwert/Anne Engel [eds.], *Leon Battista Alberti*, Milan 1994).

A DEPENDENCE FOR THE DUCAL PALACE?

One interesting consequence of this part of Foscari's proposal is that he implicitly rejects an identification long-held by Howard Burns for the impressive drawing of the Dukes of Devonshire at Chatsworth in Derbyshire (inv. SOS/B; fig. 2), that Burns attributes to Palladio for the same rebuilding of the Ducal Palace in Venice (catalogue entry in: Howard Burns et al. [eds.], *Andrea Palladio 1508-1580: the portico and the farmyard*, London 1975, 158-160; catalogue entry in: Guido Beltrami/Howard Burns [eds.], *Palladio*, London 2008, 361-363). In fact, Foscari's second controversial hypothesis in this book is precisely to identify this problematic drawing instead with a project by Palladio to design a new dependence for the Ducal Palace to be located on part of the Terranova site facing the bacino to the west of Sansovino's Mint where there was a massive fourteenth century warehouse.

Measuring about half a metre by a metre this large presentation drawing clearly represents a proposal for an important public building that has never been identified convincingly. Foscari without criticism accepts Palladio's authorship, something called into question here, but at least some of the visual evidence on the drawing potentially supports his identification of the location for this project: the three central superimposed arches surmounted by a pediment framing an emblematic image of the lion of Saint Mark directly recalls the specifically Venetian tradition of joining with an arch set at the uppermost point of a building just below the roofline

adjacent buildings separated by a calle, exactly the situation that pertained with the four warehouses on the Terranova site that this project would have replaced. Although it does not have a scale drawn onto it, according to Foscari's calculations, the building represented would have fitted precisely between the outermost two warehouses once the central two were demolished to make way for it.

Certainly, as a proposal to construct a new building housing within it a replica of the Sala del Maggior Consiglio of the burnt Doge's Palace so that the Venetian patricians could continue their government business in the same manner as before while they decided exactly how to restore or rebuild the original palace now damaged by fire Foscari's is an ingenious interpretation. But his attempt to link this magnificent drawing with a sketch plan by Palladio (RIBA, XVI, 5) to offer a more detailed reconstruction of the various internal spaces and levels is based on the rather tenuous identification of the latter and the supposition that it is really linked to the former, a reading which is vitiated by trying to read out of the minuscule indications on this very small sketch information in relation to a much larger drawing representing a very large and complicated project.

To further confound things, in 2010 a rival proposal was published by the late Giorgio Bellavitis who believed that the same drawing is by Vincenzo Scamozzi and represents a variant elevation of his proposal of 1610 for the Podestà's palace at Vicenza, a proposal hitherto associated only with three drawings securely attributed to him (two of them signed) and held in the Museo Civico of Vicenza (D 42, D 41, D 557; see Bellavitis, „Lo sconosciuto progetto dello Scamozzi per il Palazzo del podestà di Vicenza e l'equivoco del Palazzo Ducale palladiano“, in: *Studi veneziani* 58, 2009, 137-175; Ilaria Abbondandolo/Guido Beltramini, „Progetto per il Palazzo del Podestà a Vicenza (1610)“, in: Franco Barbieri/Beltramini [eds.], *Vincenzo Scamozzi 1548-1616*, Venice 2003, 431-434).

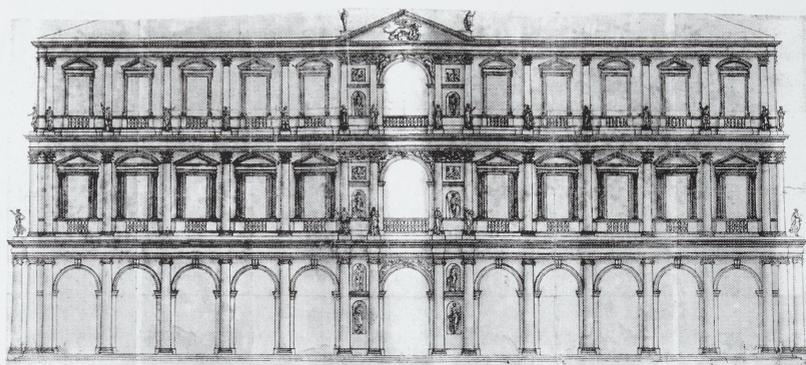
Although the graphic style does seem to me to be much closer to Palladio's circle than to Scamozzi, if the latter had wanted to win this prestige commission in Palladian Vicenza, where he had previously been busy in the mid-1580s finishing off his rival's Olympic Theatre, then he might well have presented a very ‚Palladian‘ looking presentation drawing. If this is the case, then overarching ambition resulted in Scamozzi's project never going ahead as, according to Bellavitis, the project was twice the size of that initially requested and would have incorporated Palladio's Basilica, then still being built. Because this enormous proposal would have cost too much, local technical experts instead were given the job of executing a much simpler project.

BIG NAMES IN RIVALRY

The real problem with both Foscari's and Bellavitis' proposals is the unconvincing attribution to the only two ‚big name‘ architects of the period, whereas already in 1980 Loredana Olivato plausibly had argued that the actual drawing – assuming it has a Palladian provenance – was executed at least in part if not wholly by a member of his shop, suggested by her to be Francesco Zamberlan, who is known to have done other drawings for projects including San Petronio at Bologna (catalogue entry, in: Lionello Puppi [ed.], *Architettura e utopia nella Venezia del Cinquecento*, Milan 1980, 102). Of course Palladio had a number of different people in his workshop who might have drawn up such a sheet, such as his son Marcantonio who worked on the Teatro Olimpico, and Bernardino India (Verona 1528-90) who drew many of the human figures that adorn Palladio's drawings, just as a distinct figurative artist has clearly added the statues that animate the two upper storeys of the Devonshire sheet.

If we exclude both Palladio's and Scamozzi's authorship, then what can be said about this drawing's attribution? In 1985 Manfredo Tafuri set out the arguments against a Palladio attribution and in 1990 he instead suggested attributing it to Cristoforo Sorte (Verona 1510-95; in: Tafuri, *Venezia e il rinascimento: religione, scienza, architettura*, Turin

Fig. 2 Palladio (zugeschr.),
 Aufrisszeichnung eines
 Palazzo. Chatsworth,
 The Devonshire Collection
 (Tracy E. Cooper, Palladio's
 Venice, New Haven/London
 2005, Abb. 214)



1985, 272-278; id., „Il disegno di Chatsworth (per il palazzo Ducale di Venezia?) e un progetto perduto di Jacopo Sansovino“, in: André Chastel/Renato Cevese [eds.], *Andrea Palladio: nuovi contributi*, Milan 1990, 100-111). In these two publications he also strongly cast doubt on the supposed identification of it being for the Ducal Palace of Venice, in particular because the number of bays represented is wrong and also because the single wider central opening over three levels is both unusual and weak, especially the triangular pediment, which suggests rather an important but secondary building (a new Ducal Palace dependence perhaps or something like the Procuratie Nuove, but not a newly rebuilt Ducal Palace).

Another obstacle also identified and discussed in detail by Tafuri was the major problem of the spiral-fluted columns supporting the pediments framing alternate windows on the first floor: these are first-hand visual evidence that contradicts or at least strongly prompts one to doubt both proposed locations for this building as these columns represent a specific reference to Verona, both its ancient and modern architecture by way of the Porta Borsari and drawings of the Arch of Jupiter Ammon as well as Michele Sanmicheli's Bevilacqua palace and Pellegrini chapel. Thus, as a piece of rhetoric and ideology, which is usually what such a splendid large presentation drawing is trying to convey to a patron, such specific details that refer to Verona do not make any sense in the context of a major new public building for the heart of Venice – certainly not for the Ducal Palace – or Vicenza, yet no plau-

sible Veronese alternative has ever come to light (see Paul Davies/David Hemsoll, *Michele Sanmicheli*, Milan 2004, 87-95; 188-191; 300-302; 337-338).

We know that this drawing was taken to England by Inigo Jones, who had obtained it from Vincenzo Scamozzi, who was supposed to have obtained it from Villa Maser where perhaps it had remained on Palladio's death in 1580. What we still don't know is who did this remarkable sheet and what project it represents, leaving us with no choice but to return to the drawing board and see if we can identify who was sitting at it.

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