Out of the Worlds of Truth and Falsehood: The Facade of Il Redentore

ANN MARIE BORYS
University of Cincinnati

I never learned from any corpse the lesson of my own flesh, that man is a vile, wretched animal unless he redeems the ignobility of the body with the nobility of the soul...

- Petrarch

INTRODUCTION

The Venetian genius for processions and pageantry reached its height in the sixteenth century. While Italian civic and religious rituals throughout the medieval period and the Renaissance all reflect communal values and some image of social structure, those of Venice are particularly definitive. The Venetian government used the elaboration of a processional protocol as its primary means of reinforcing and continually recreating its own constitutional structure. A large corps of experts regulated and controlled the symbolic aspects so that traditions were maintained. Against this standard, even minor deviations were pointedly significant. Therefore, when the Venetian Senate vowed in 1576 to build a new church as a propitiatory measure to help bring to an end an outbreak of plague, and simultaneously instituted an annual procession to the new church, we can be sure that the details of the procession were carefully determined relative to the myriad of other processions which filled the sixteenth century Venetian calendar.

The church, Il Redentore, rose relatively quickly between 1577 and 1592 following the design of Andrea Palladio. However, the annual procession did not await the completion of the church. The first took place on July 21, 1577. The route was altered in 1578, and has remained the same ever since. Although the model for the church was probably constructed between February and May of 1577,1 Palladio would have had the opportunity to witness the procession before his own death in 1580. As a terminus to the procession, Palladio created a facade for the church which both develops certain formal themes previously essayed in Venice at San FrancescodaVerna and San Giorgio Maggiore2 and responds quite specifically to the processional program.3 In the watery approach to the church, the facade flickers slightly like a reflection or a mirage. Using an ancient classical language of highly articulate, formal definition, Palladio mysteriously composes an ephemeral Byzantine presence. Goethe says of Palladio: "There is something divine about his talent, something comparable to the power of a great poet who, out of the worlds of truth and falsehood, creates a third whose borrowed existence enchants us." The aim of this paper is to expose the world created by Palladio in the facade of Il Redentore, a world which lies between the reality of a plague-ravaged city and the representation of redemption.
THE BODY BETRAYED

The particularly harsh outbreak of plague in 1575-1577 reduced the Venetian population by one quarter to one third.\(^1\) Despite a tendency among the healthy to try to maintain a normal daily life,\(^6\) commerce in the city was virtually at a standstill. Official civil structures were completely overturned during plague years.

"Naturally, all of the apparatus that invariably accompanied epidemics appeared: the Public Health Magistracy, the hierarchy of functionaries created ad hoc, the lazarets, the mass graves, the barred doors, the quarantine... In official memory the forms of social reorganization mobilized to counter the threat to the city are as inevitable and natural as the course of the contagion itself.\(^9\)

Restrictions and regulations imposed by public health officials touched every aspect of public and private life. When the plague entered a household, citizens lost their liberty to state-imposed procedures.\(^10\) Family structures disintegrated as the sick were relegated to the lazaret or the grave, and their family members were banned. Often, the sources of daily necessities were interrupted, and new ways to get food or medicine had to be devised. The very conception of space in the city was altered by the frequency of barred doors and quarantines. As with the spread of AIDS before the means of transmission were verified, the most innocent of social exchanges became suspect as a potential for infection: a handshake, a conversation, a purchase from a merchant. Fear, accusation, and denunciation became instead the social currency.

A personal account of the 1575-7 plague in Venice by a notary named Rocco Benedetti gives a vivid image of the physical transformation of the city:

"The plague continued, lulling more people with every hour that passed, and every day inspiring greater terror and deeper compassion for its poor infected victims. Onlookers wept as these people were carried down to their doors by their sons, fathers and mothers, and there in the public eye their bodies were stripped naked and shown to the doctors to be assessed. The same had to be done for the dead... It was a fearful sight to see the thousands of houses around the city with doors crossed with wooden planks as a sign of plague. But even more horrifying was the spectacle of so many boats plying continuously back and forth: some being towed by other boats to quarantine at the Lazzaretto Nuovo; some heading out to certain appointed places, loaded up with the mortal remains of the wretched and luckless victims; some returning to the city laden with poor unfortunate widows and orphans who had completed their quarantine... All these things represented a sad and sorrowful triumph of death. It seemed all the more horrible and cruel in that it appeared that Divine Justice had sent it deliberately as the other side of the coin to the splendid and sumptuous celebrations held previously to welcome the Most Christian King of France."\(^11\)

The frequent Venetian spectacle of official ceremony gave way to an unceasing spectacle of death. The sick or dead body was subject to public inspection. The waterways, source of Venetian livelihood and commerce, became a specter of hopeless indignity. Handling the holocaustal quantities of the sick and the dead overwhelmed governmental provisions:

"The Lazzaretto Vecchio seemed like Hell itself. From every side there came foul odours, indeed a stench that none could endure; groans and sighs were heard without ceasing; and at all hours clouds of smoke from the burning of corpses were seen to rise far into the air."\(^12\)

Death and sickness manifested themselves in sight, sound, and smell, even for the unafflicted. Everyone knew the presence of the plague physically, in addition to all of its social, emotional, and psychological effects.

Benedetti concludes that "in maintaining so many people and bearing such expense the Doge spent a huge sum of money. Administration became chaotic, so that all the Savi were bewildered.\(^13\) The clergy and the state were often forced into adversarial positions by the requisitioning of monasteries or by official disregard for the religious rites of burial.\(^14\) The potential for even greater controversy lay in the popular desire to hold propitiatory religious processions in the hope of divine intercession. The clergy naturally supported these measures, but the health officials banned any form of public gathering in order to reduce the possibility of the spread of contagion. What was likely regarded as the most effective means to end the plague by the populace was forbidden for its opposite potential. In Venice, a city defined by processions, the most natural response to a crisis was thwarted.

Processions in the normal Venetian calendar occurred in two major cycles. From November to June, universal Christian celebratory cycles filled the winter and spring seasons. Whereas from June to October, festivals more particular to Venice took place—commemorations of historical events such as military victories and saints’ days of particular significance to Venice. These were all annual rites in which the structure of the city’s social relationships were constantly reiterated. In addition, ritual events were often devised to address special circumstances, such as the arrival of foreign dignitaries. Certain processions were intended to be propitiatory, influencing misfortunes such as too little or too much rainfall. In 1500, seven days of prayer and procession were held in order to counter misfortunes in a war with the Turks.

These one-time spectacles looked much the same as the others, but in fact had a completely different social function than annual memorial events. "Unlike the more political ceremonies, which emphasized social distinctions, group-crisis rites bound the community together as one."\(^15\)
Spatial aspects of the normal ceremonial life of Venice were twofold: within the procession, "position was everything;" and in sixteenth century Venice, the frequency of processions rendered certain parts of the city as something more than just public urban space. The Piazza San Marco and other highly charged ceremonial centers were regarded as ritual space. The representational space of the procession itself consisted of an unequivocal hierarchy which mirrored the structure of the official life of the city. The doge and the symbols of his power occupied the center of an power pyramid which descended in both directions to the periphery. Before the doge came civil and ecclesiastical ranks, while the noble aristocracy followed. Ducal processions usually started from the Doge's Palace, traversed Piazza San Marco, and ended at the basilica. More elaborate ones proceeded from there by foot or boat to another site of significance to the event. The representational space of the procession itself and the ritual spaces defined by the course of the processions were two vital elements in the city's image of itself. The plague disrupted the stasis of Venetian ceremonial life in several critical ways: it replaced the governmental structure which processions were designed to represent with an alternate line of authority; it transformed the spatial possibilities of the use of the city; and, perhaps more critical for Venice than other cities, it forbade the very act of procession as a means to maintain public life.

The procession instituted in conjunction with the building of Il Redentore was a hybrid: while associated with the plague, it was not intended as a measure to end the plague. The promise of a procession, rather than the procession itself, was counted upon to influence the course of the epidemic. The plague was officially declared to be over on July 13, 1577 and the first procession took place two weeks later. Furthermore, this was an annual procession, rather than a one-time supplication. It therefore took on some commemorative aspects, both of the losses suffered and the final triumph of the survivors. Amid the scale and splendor of the typical Venetian ceremonies, Edward Muir tells us that the newly inaugurated procession was "immense," that it attracted "enormous crowds," and was a "favorite occasion for the display of precious liturgical objects and relics." This procession marked for all of Venice a restoration of normal life, the reappearance of the body politic after two years of living at the brink of the abyss. Normal lines of authority could be reestablished, tears in the relationship between state and church repaired, and daily social and commercial relations resurrected. It also initiated the resumption of the normal cycle of processions which constituted Venetian public life. A procession was the most appropriate form for the re-birth of Venice.

Muir tells us that the typical ducal procession involved a parade around Piazza San Marco and often a continuation, either by foot or by boat, to another site. Obviously, the final destination of this new procession was the new church. Since both church and procession were vowed simultaneously, the procession route must have been a major consideration in the selection of the site. Two senators were entrusted with the task of finding a suitable site, and three sites were eventually carefully considered. Timofiewitsch notes that an unchosen site on the Campo San Vitale was both less costly and "would have also measurably facilitated the progress of the procession." He gives several plausible explanations for the final choice on the island of Giudecca, the most expensive of the three options considered. Certainly, the visibility of the site from the center of the city was likely a factor. In addition, Timofiewitsch finds the Giudecca site to be the closest analogy in Venetian geography to a place outside the walls, the typical relationship for a plague church to the city. While these considerations no doubt influenced the decision, it seems most probable that the very scale of the effort required to form a procession to the Giudecca site was also a primary factor. Annual ceremonies such as the marriage to the sea were hardly orchestrated strictly by expediency. For instance, during the Festival of the Twelve Marys, a procession was conducted from Piazza San Marco to Santa Maria Formosa by boat down the Grand Canal, with a continuation on foot to reach the church. However, the easiest route would have simply been to travel a much shorter distance solely on foot. A dramatic journey to the new Redentore would in fact heighten the significance of the event.

In the first year of the Festa del Redentore, a temporary wooden bridge was constructed to connect the Piazzetta in front of the Doge's Palace to San Zuanne on the eastern tip of the Giudecca. From there, the site would have been approached obliquely, the procession traversing a line perpendicular to the main axis of the canal-front site. A temporary structure was erected within the foundations of the new church to serve as a destination for the ritual. It consisted of a wooden frame covered with cloth and leaves, formed into two distinct spaces. The terminus of the procession was described as being in the form of a theater.

The route was changed in the following year to take advantage of a new bridge over the Grand Canal. Although this was a permanent bridge, a temporary processional bridge was still needed for the last leg of the journey to traverse the Giudecca Canal. The major difference between the two routes is that the latter provided a frontal approach along the main axis of the site. Another significant aspect of the altered route, however, was that the church remained hidden from sight entirely until the strictly frontal view was reached.

Perhaps the most curious aspect of the procession is the choice to traverse a relatively large expanse of water, in the first year the San Marco basin and in subsequent years the Giudecca Canal, by means of a temporary wooden bridge rather than by boat. Since the procession has been described as "immense," the answer may simply be that boats were impractical for a larger number of people. But there may have also been a concern for the continuity of the processional order. The maintenance of strict order was a special feature of Venetian processions which was remarked upon by foreigners familiar with similar processions in other...
Italian cities. Unlike the typical Venetian bridge which arches over the canal to allow passage of boats beneath, this bridge was quite low, being supported by a series of moored boats. This may have added a miraculous dimension to the procession: walking on water. Whatever the reasons, impossible to judge now, the effect would have been central to the experience of the procession. As a floating bridge, it was subject to movement, both from the buoyancy and current of the water and from the shifting weight of the procession as it moved across. It was not on solid ground, but on unstable sea legs that one made the final approach to Palladio’s church.

THE BODY REDEEMED

Palladio could have only endorsed both the choice of site, and the change of processional route. Following Vitruvius, his recommendations in Book 4 of the Quattro Libri dell’Architettura for the siting of important churches stem first from decorum and second from visibility in the city. Furthermore, his chief models for the design and ornament of Christian churches were the temples of ancient Rome, buildings whose formal energy was concentrated on frontality. The final form of the church was subject to Senatorial debate, for which Palladio prepared two different schemes. We know little of the actual designs debated, except that one was centralized and the other rectangular. It is presumed on the basis of Palladio’s own stated preference for the centralized form in Book IV, Chap. II of his treatise that Palladio supported the centralized scheme. However, Palladioreadily acknowledges that the cross form is suitable for a Christian church, and that the basilican model used for early Christian ritual had certain virtues. Palladio was never so rigid in his theoretical position that the ideal, in this case a centralized church, was presumed to be the only or even the best choice for a set of real problems. He valued the judgment of the architect over any set of presupposed rules.

The proportion of the site assembled by the senators in charge is a double square—20 paces by 40 paces—a site which hardly suggests a centralized plan. Two other considerations favored the rectangular scheme: the linear nature of the procession itself, which the final design clearly responds to, and the establishment by the Council of Trent of the appropriate form for Catholic churches of the Counter-Reformation. But in the rich historical imagination of Palladio, another consideration invariably took precedence: the axial nature of the Roman imperial bath building which was a principal formal model. While the connection of formal motifs within the Redentore to Palladio’s study of the bath structures of Rome has been convincingly made, there has been little speculation on the reasons for this choice. It could be supposed that once the rectangular form was mandated by the Senate, Palladio “made the best of a bad situation” and looked to the bath structure for ways to incorporate the rejected centralized plan into a longitudinal scheme. The Baths of Caracalla and the Baths of Constantine, for instance, both incorporate a terminal rotunda, the caldarium, in an axial sequence of rectilinear spaces. However, the centralized space of Il Redentore takes more from the frigidarium than the caldarium in these precedents. In any event, Palladio was not merely borrowing convenient forms and devices for defining space. He was always mindful of the original significance of the forms he chose. The therapeutic dimension of the Roman bathing ritual could not have escaped his attention. Palladio certainly intended that the procession would emerge from the water of the Giudecca Canal only to enter the frigidarium of a Roman bath, there to be cleansed of the sickness which had devastated Venice.

A common topic in Palladian scholarship, especially with regard to his villas, is the tension between the appearance of an independent formal system governing all of the designs, and the discovery that each one responds to particular circumstances of client and site. It would seem that the same is true of his Venetian church facades. They have been celebrated as an inventive solution to a problem shared by all Renaissance architects: finding a convincing fit between the antique temple facade and the stepped basilican section of the Christian church. As such, Palladio’s scheme bookends Renaissance design along with Alberti’s first convincing solution at Santa Maria Novella in Florence. Wittkower traces the most important of the formal attempts by Bramante and Peruzzi which prefigure Palladio’s. He demonstrates that the Palladian solution is a synthesis of two independent pedimented porticos of different scale (one for the nave, and the other for the side aisles.) Such a convincing formal analysis can hardly be ignored, and subsequent scholars are essentially obliged to stand with Wittkower or dispute him. Puppi supports Wittkower, but would add that the presence of an attic story at Il Redentore binds in the other major antique model for church facades, the triumphal arch. The triumphal arch was also a common feature for civic processions, and a temporary one had been designed by Palladio himself for a Venetian procession several years before the Redentore commission. Howard Burns disagrees completely with Wittkower on the grounds that two temple fronts of different scales would not fit with Palladio’s theoretical stance on proportion and the relationships of part-to-part and part-to-whole. He suggests that the solution grows instead out of orthographic representations of temple and forum, in which the elevated monumental columns of the temple portico are juxtaposed to the columns of the perimeter colonnade with no visual key to the spatial depth between the two. This is a convincing argument for the source of the solution, and can be seen in the drawings of Book IV of the Quattro Libri. But the origin of the form is ultimately not crucial in terms of its final effect—intended or not, we see two pediments. Timofievitsch argues against Wittkower on other grounds entirely. He sees the facade as resulting from the unique interior spatial arrangement of the church, rather than a universal solution applicable to any basilican church.

In fact, the facade of the Redentore is a highly specific
particularization of the theme it shares with San Francesco della Vigna and San Giorgio Maggiore. While Wittkower’s diagram of the interlocking pediments can be traced on all three, important formal differences are equally compelling. Timofiewitsch correctly identifies a unique aspect of the Redentore facade: the layering effect that is achieved partly through a series of ascending triads. These triads can be assembled in a variety of ways: entry portal and flanking statue niches; nave and side aisles; buttresses and hipped roof; dome and bell towers. In contrast, the other two church facades are distinctly dual in nature. The articulation of two distinct temple motifs is less sharp at the Redentore. This is due in part to the vertical compression of the two figures. The entablature spanning the lower order at San Francesco and San Giorgio intersects the column shaft of the central nave order roughly midway, and in both cases the raking cornice of the "pediment" disappears just below the column capital of the taller order. At the Redentore, however, the entablature of the lower order strikes the taller one just below the column capital, and the raking cornice, rising at a diminished angle in comparison to the previous two churches, strikes the taller order just above the capital. The elements of the two distinct orders are bound together more tightly, so that their proportional independence is largely overcome. A related consequence contributing to the independence of the two pediment motifs at the first two churches is that the central nave motif stands free against the sky from the point of engagement at the raking cornice of the lower one, that is, from the bottom of the column capital upwards. This gives extra definition to the motif as a figure. At the Redentore, both are seen against a backdrop, which introduces ambiguity in the relationship of planes. This ambiguity is further teased by the change at the outermost columns of the central nave portico from the engaged half-column to an engaged square column. While more abruptly terminating the central figure and allowing the adjacent side aisles to be read as further back, they simultaneously establish a formal likeness with the pilasters of the lower order. This double reading contributes to a fluctuation in the reading of depth and planes on what is essentially a single wall.

The compression of the two orders, while necessitating a hipped roof to cover the nave, also keeps the dome in view longer as one proceeds along the ritual route than would be the case with a gable-end solution. By tilting back towards the dome, the hipped roof in fact gestures at a linkage in depth. The twin bell towers flanking the dome are perhaps the most unusual elements in the facade composition. By virtue of their position, the dome, an element usually perceived as a three-dimensional body at a singular point in space, participates in a plane established by three points. While centerpoints of dome and towers are not actually collinear, the profile of the dome against the sky is interrupted by the mass of the towers, and the three work together to fix both a plane and its perpendicular approach.

A final point of comparison is the relationship of the bases of the two orders in each of the three church facades. On this point, San Giorgio Maggiore is the most distinct, having the bases of the two orders of columns on two different levels. The lower order rests on a relatively low podium while the order of the central nave is elevated on heroically scaled pedestals. This is the least satisfactory of the three solutions, allowing the greatest dissonance between the two orders. Palladio himself stated his own preference in temple design for columns rising directly from the podium. At San Francesco della Vigna, the bases of the two orders are aligned by the creation of a podium equal to the height of the pedestals of the taller order. While more unified than the San Giorgio version, there are two ill effects from this solution: the entry portal at ground level must cut straight through the podium, and the order of the side aisles is miniaturized in relationship to the nave order. Therefore a greater discontinuity of scale prevails. The most synthetic solution is achieved at Il Redentore. Both orders spring from a tall podium which represents the floor level of the nave. The door therefore occurs on the same level and is accessed by a broad flight of stairs truly reminiscent of the approach to a Roman temple. Because of the compression previously discussed, the two orders are not as dramatically different in scale as they are at San Francesco.

These distinctive formal adaptations of the general scheme were made in specific response to the situation of the Redentore. The reiteration of the theme of three is clearly connected to the spatial development of the interior. The plan of the Redentore is unique in the clarity of the articulation of three distinct spaces within the church, unified only by the axis of the procession itself: the nave, the trefoil presbytery, and the monks choir. The number three is repeated in the chapels of the side aisles, the apses of the presbytery, the intercolumniations of the free-standing columns visible from the nave, and the windows of the curving rear wall of the monks’ choir. There are three steps up from the nave into the chapels and into the presbytery. Each pier of the nave is a threesome: two half-columns and a niche between them. Palladio designed a church which served three distinct programmatic needs simultaneously: processional, votive, and monastic. This triadic structure in depth is more significant to the development of the facade than the expression of the basilican section of the nave as a high central space flanked by lower side aisles. In fact, the depth suggested in the facade and the choice of spatially distinct side chapels rather than continuous side aisles for the nave support a different reading of the double pediment motif. The dominant central portico clearly still corresponds to the space of the nave. But the lower flanking wings, and their implied completion as in the Wittkower diagram, represent the facade of the spatially distinct presbytery at the end of the nave. Interior articulation of the walls of the nave matches the use of half-columns on the central pedimented portico, while the lateral apses of the presbytery are articulated with pilasters, as is the lower portico.
CONCLUSION

Perceptual depth is what makes the facade of Il Redentore unique among Palladio's Venetian church facades. Through the play of depth in a wall, Palladio escapes the certain solidity of the classical temple. The body of the temple, like the body sickened by plague and the body of the recovering city is not, after all, a subject of certitude. The plague-ridden body betrays and is betrayed. Homo ad quadratum falters and something less concrete emerges as the image of the world. The plastic finitude of the Roman temple becomes a painted illusion, the boundaries of which are purposely vague.

Layering, multiplicity, and vagueness also characterize the Byzantine facade of San Marco, spiritual heart of Venice. The facade of Il Redentore is a mirror image of that facade, which it faces across the depth of ritual space defined by Piazza San Marco and extended by the route of the procession, reflected in the sensitive soul of an aging humanist.

NOTES

3 Timofiewitsch, The Chiesa del Redentore., 17.
5 Timofiewitsch, The Chiesa del Redentore., 38.
6 Quoted from Goethe's Italian Journeys by Deborah Howard, “Four Centuries of Literature on Palladio,” JSIH XXXIX (October 1980): 232.
7 The higher figure is from Muir, Civic Rituals in Renaissance Venice., 216; the lower from David Chambers and Brian Pullan, eds., Venice: A Documentary History, 1450-1630, (Oxford: Blackwell Publishers, 1992), 113.
9 Calvi, Histories of a Plague Year., 1-2.
10 "If plague is found, the whole house must immediately be placed under a ban, with all its inhabitants and others too who have had contact with it. Then the notary and an attendant at the Office must be sent to examine the inhabitants on oath and under threat of punishment. The master of the house must first be examined, and then the other separately, to establish the likely provenance of this disease...If the doctor has made only one visit to the sick person, no matter whether he has taken his pulse or merely stayed at the door and examined the urine, he shall be placed under a ban for twenty-two days...Those inhabitants who live beneath the dwelling of the sick or dead person shall be banned for twenty-two days, but, if they have been all together in a single rented unit with one kitchen, they too shall be under a ban for forty days." from the records of the Health Office: ASV Provveditori all Sanita, reg. 2, ff. 103r-104v. See Chambers and Pullan, eds., Venice: A Documentary History, 115-116.
12 Chambers and Pullan, eds., Venice: A Documentary History, 118.
15 Muir, Civic Rituals in Renaissance Venice, 243.
16 Muir, Civic Rituals in Renaissance Venice, 190.
17 Muir, Civic Rituals in Renaissance Venice, 240.
19 Muir, Civic Rituals in Renaissance Venice, 216.
21 Timofiewitsch, The Chiesa del Redentore, 36.
22 Timofiewitsch, The Chiesa del Redentore, 43.
23 Wittkower, Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism, 89-97; and Puppi, Andrea Palladio, 163.
24 Puppi, Andrea Palladio, 163.
25 Timofiewitsch, The Chiesa del Redentore, 34.
26 Timofiewitsch, The Chiesa del Redentore, 35.
27 Palladio, Bk IV Ch V: "In all fabrics it is requisite, that their parts should correspond together, and have such proportions, that there may be none whereby the whole cannot be measured, and likewise all the other parts."
28 Palladio, Bk IV Ch V.
30 Biographers of Palladio agree that the death of his two sons had a profound effect on the last ten years of his own life.
The Redentore Church was founded to call upon the Redeemer to deliver the city of Venice from a serious outbreak of the plague from 1575-1576. The church is sited on the island of the Giudecca, somewhat remote from the heart of Venice, but in a position where it is clearly visible from the Piazzetta di San Marco. The Venetian Senate promised that every year the Doge would cross the Canale della Giudecca on a bridge of boats to give homage to Christ the Redeemer, and the church massing and facade were designed as the culminating point of this annual procession. From the distance, the temple fron