Architecture and Charity. Paradoxes and Conflicts in the Construction of the Scuola Grande di San Rocco in Venice (1517–1560)[1]

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Summary: *This article examines the role of architectural patronage at the Scuola Grande di San Rocco and explores the relationship between building and charity. The San Rocco confraternity hall underwent many changes during its design and construction phases, suggesting that confraternity members were uncertain about the role it should play and the message it should send. Specific events point to a conflict during construction phases. One faction of members wanted a simple, sober building in accordance with evangelical austerity, while the other aspired to grandiloquent architecture. This article examines these conflicts in the relationship between architecture, ritual and institutional ideology.*

At first glance, the meeting house of the Scuola Grande di San Rocco looks like a chaotic juxtaposition of different architectural languages (Fig. 1). This unsystematic appearance is the result of continuous changes to the original project and interruptions of activity at the building site. These difficulties reflected conflicts within the confraternity about the role of the building as an institutional "self-portrait" of the patrons. The aim of my essay is to demonstrate how the building represents the institutional identity of the scuola, and how the stones themselves reflect the tensions within the city on the role and function of the Venetian scuole grandi.

In accordance with the will of the governing patrician class, the role of the scuole grandi in urban policy in the early sixteenth century was the formal translation into practice of a model of social harmony.[2] However, as demonstrated by Manfredo Tafuri, in the late fifteenth century the reconstruction of the headquarters of the scuole sparked a sense of competition between the Scuola Grande di San Marco and that of San Giovanni Evangelista.[3] Thirty years later, another rivalry, this one between the Scuola di San Rocco and the Misericordia, resulted from a complex series of events in which the brothers vacillated between building a simple and modest structure or a rich and

[1] I wish to express my gratitude to Nicholas Terpstra for inviting me to publish this paper, to Peter F. Howard and the other participants at the panel for the discussion and to Meryl Bailey, Caroline A. Bruzelius, Lorenzo G. Buonanno and Elizabeth Carroll for the revision of my English text and for their illuminating insights.

[2] Pullan, "The Scuole Grandi of Venice: Some Further Thoughts", esp. 287–288.

[3] Tafuri, *Venice and the Renaissance*, 89.

sumptuous one. Caught between internal conflicts and subjected to comparison with other buildings under construction, the Scuola di San Rocco struggled to develop a recognizable independent architectural form.

The project proposed by Pietro Bon in 1517 (Fig. 2) was inspired by the typological model of the Scuola di San Marco.[4] On the upper floor, a small *Albergo* was to be used for the restricted meetings of the brothers. Below it, at the ground floor level, was a *Sottoportico delle Arche* for the brothers' tombs. Two large rooms were stacked alongside the Albergo wing. The lower hall, divided into three aisles by rows of columns, was designed as a modest multipurpose room, both for the reception of important guests and for the daily activities of the scuola. Bon had designed a simple and relatively low space similar to the ground floor of the nearby Scuola Grande di San Giovanni Evangelista. The upper room, however, was more sumptuous because it was conceived as the final destination of confraternal processions, the locus of plenary meetings of the scuola, and the site of major religious ceremonies.[5] Bon's plan thus expressed the values of a confraternity still tied to the principles of solidarity and poverty, where wealth was allocated to welfare programs rather than to the construction of a sumptuous building.

In 1520, the consistency of Bon's project was threatened by the *procuratore alla fabbrica* Francesco di Giovanni dalla Seta, who proposed raising the height of the floor.[6] The reason for this change during construction was to insert pedestals beneath the columns of the ground floor room (fig. 3) and to add a high base to enhance the design of the four exterior façades. The aim was to obtain a more triumphant building, the four exterior façades of which would be raised on an "all'antica" pedestal (as in Roman triumphal arches), while the interior columns would be elevated on high octagonal pedestals.

Francesco di Giovanni, however, was not an architect and had not foreseen the consequences of raising the ceiling on the recently begun building.[7] Supported by the powerful brother Bernardo di Marin, Pietro Bon pointed out to the brothers all the technical difficulties that would result from the change which Francesco di Giovanni, in his inexperience and ambition, had

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[4] On the scuola's foundation see Tonon, *Scuola dei battuti di San Rocco*; Tonon, *La Scuola Grande di San Rocco nel Cinquecento*; Wiel, "I luoghi del primo culto di San Rocco a Venezia."

[5] Sansovino, *Venezia città Nobilissima et singolare*, c. 102v. On the construction of the Scuola Grande di San Rocco, see Paoletti, *L'architettura e la scultura del Rinascimento a Venezia*, 1: 275–292; Soravia, *Le chiese di Venezia descritte ed illustrate*, vol. 3; Nicoletti, "Illustrazione della Chiesa e Scuola di S. Rocco in Venezia"; Malsburg, *Die Architektur der Scuola Grande di San Rocco in Venedig*; Willmes, *Studien zur Scuola di San Rocco in Venedig*; Tafuri, *Venice and the Renaissance*, 84–101; Guidarelli, "*Una giogia ligata in piombo*"; Guidarelli, "Sante Lombardo"; Guidarelli, "L'architettura della Scuola Grande di San Rocco"; Guidarelli, "La sala terrena," 203.

[6] On Francesco di Giovanni dalla Seta, see Massimi, "Jacopo Tintoretto e i confratelli della Scuola Grande di San Rocco.," 166.

[7] So for example, the two ramps of the staircase would have become so steep that they would be virtually unusable.

suggested. Bernardo di Marin was the most prominent representative of those brothers who wanted to focus on the charitable aims of the confraternity rather than on ostentatious construction.[8] From their point of view, the considerable resources invested in the project were inevitably to be taken from funds otherwise intended for the charitable activities of the scuola, and this would have betrayed its objectives.

The confraternity split into two competing factions: one wanted to keep Bon's modest, simple, traditional project, and other wished to transform the project into a triumphant and majestic building inspired by ancient architecture. They, like the brothers of the Scuola della Misericordia, had to decide which image of their scuola should be expressed in architecture at a moment when the scuola was turning from a simple devotional confraternity into a rich and socially influential "piccola Repubblica" (to quote Francesco Sansovino).[9] As Brian Pullan has demonstrated, the Venetian state was at this time gradually delegating the administration of welfare policies and the co-management of other urban programs to these semi-public institutions.[10] As observed by Adriano Prosperi, the most immediate implications of this transformation were religious in nature.[11] The considerable financial resources invested in the construction were inevitably excluded from the charitable activities of the scuola, which could thus not continue to fulfill its original objectives. The brothers of the Scuola di San Rocco divided into two factions which reflected different levels of ambition and experience, and the split was so great that it put the building project itself at risk.

The most dramatic and resounding echo of this controversy would later come in a poem entitled *Il Sogno* (The Dream), published in 1541 by Alessandro Caravia, a jeweller and brother of the Scuola di San Rocco:

> Ma ben ti vo contare i molti errori
> D'alcun; che di superbo abito veste
> Anchor che non ti dica i nomi lori
> Parte ne son dil santo da la peste
> che à la superba schola fat' han si bei lavori
> Fogliami, Harpie, e tante belle teste
> Colonne stratagliate a foggie nuove
> Per voler far ogniun di Proto pruove.
>
> E che 'l sia il ver ogni banca novella
> Bel'inventor ogniun si vuol mostrare
> Mutando hor quella scala, et hora quella

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[8] On Bernardo di Marin, see Massimi, "Jacopo Tintoretto," 25–30, 140.

[9] Sansovino, *Venezia città Nobilissima*, c. 99v.

[10] Pullan, *Rich and Poor in Renaissance Venice*, 84–98, 132–193.

[11] Adriano Prosperi, "Solidarietà e prestigio: la Scuola di San Rocco."

E gorne e porte facendo disfare
Luno a l'altro dandosi querella
Dicendo; il tal non ha saputo fare
E questi tali, che fan si il sacente
Voglion sapere il tutto, e non san niente.[12]

Long before Caravia's 'dream', Venice's Council of Ten weighed in on the controversy and demonstrated just how high the stakes were for the city as a whole. Francesco di Giovanni's ambitious project received more support among its members, and so in 1524 his variant of the project was approved, and Pietro Bon was fired.[13] Instead of a *proto* (project manager), linked to the world of traditional Venetian masons, the scuola chose as architects Sante Lombardo and his father Tullio Lombardo, who was the finest and most innovative architect then practicing in Venice.

In this same year then, seven years after construction had begun, Pietro Bon's original project was altered to present a very different image of the confraternal patrons. After changing the interior space, staircase and façade on the *campo*, the brothers concentrated on redesigning the façade on the canal (Fig. 4). Moreover, the need for a monumental façade on the canal commensurate with the importance and character of the façade in the *campo* stemmed from its importance in the scuola's public ceremonies. First, the confraternity's procession in honour of San Pantalon, one of the most magnificent and important of its annual processions, filed from the bridge over the canal. Second, the bank of the canal was where the doge disembarked during his annual *andata* to the scuola. A dignified and spacious landing stage was thus needed to meet both the scuola's daily needs and its celebratory public occasions.[14]

Based on these requirements, Sante and Tullio Lombardo devised a sumptuous façade. It is divided into three bays on two levels. At the second level a central aedicule and two side light windows open up above the arches on the ground floor, while at the sides it has a simpler niche. The architectural language is dramatically different from the first level of the façade on the

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[12] "But I want to tell you the many errors / of some; who dress in proud vestments / I won't yet tell their names / They are part of the saint of the plague / and have done such good works at the arrogant school / Foliage, Harpies, and so many beautiful heads / Columns carved in the newest manner / so as to prove everyone a Master. // So that every new bench will be a real one / Everyone wants to show himself a great inventor / Changing now this stairway, and now that / Dismantling gutters and doors / Quarrelling with one another / Saying, "so-and-so didn't know what he was doing" / and these so-and-so's, who pretend to be so wise / Want to know everything, and don't know anything." Quoted in Tafuri, *Venice and the Renaissance*, 81; for Italian text, see Clementi, *Riforma religiosa e poesia popolare*, 191–192; on Alessandro Caravia and his *Il Sogno* see also Firpo, *Artisti, gioiellieri, eretici*, 180–211.

[13] Guidarelli, "*Una giogia ligata in piombo*," 35–42.

[14] Guidarelli, "Sante Lombardo," 14–15.

campo which Pietro Bon had designed and already constructed. The original *proto* had conceived of the façade as a planar surface articulated by an architectural frame of pilasters and entablature. Instead, Lombardo thought in terms of volumes, using a cultured and refined language both overall and at the level of small details.[15]

Yet the coherence of the language of Sante and Tullio Lombardo cannot entirely conceal the technical difficulties that resulted from the clash between the two factions and the two projects. The façade on the canal had already been partially constructed by Bon, as part of the initial project launched in 1517. Called to intervene in a building which had been subject to a drastic change in elevation, not even Lombardo could resolve the problem. The difficulties are clear in the unresolved relation of the side archway to the pillars, and in the awkward misalignment of the two trabeations. These "grammatical mistakes" do not appear in any of Tullio Lombardo's other work. As a result, at the Scuola of San Rocco, the very stones themselves reveal the conflicts that had divided the brotherhood.

We can see the façade on the canal as not only a 'manifesto' of the cultural and social ambitions which the brothers endorsed in 1524, but also as a testament of the conflicts that emerged soon after the inception of the project. In this regard, the project displays all the variables of the process of institutional self-definition, like a palimpsest where different levels of meaning, formal themes, and symbolic references were superimposed, one on top of the other. For example, the central aedicule recalls the presence of the altar on the counter-façade in the upper room. In this way, the original devotional nature of the confraternity is also evoked "per architecturam," in the context of a façade that is otherwise dangerously pagan.

In 1527 the façade was completed. Francesco di Giovanni dalla Seta once again played a decisive role as Guardian Grande by replacing the Lombardos with Antonio Scarpagnino. His action and the events around it showed that the old conflict between the two factions of confraternal brothers was still a live one. Not long before, the faction that supported the inexpensive and more modest project had convinced the governing bodies of the scuola that it was no longer necessary to have a project manager, given the advanced state of construction. Five months later, the promoters of the more elaborate plan, represented by Francesco di Giovanni dalla Seta as Guardian, secured the hiring of a new *proto*. This decision marked the final victory against the faction of those promoting modesty and economy, and it was surely Francesco di Giovanni who must have chosen Antonio Scarpagnino as a new proto of the scuola. Scarpagnino, with Jacopo Sansovino, was at the time the most important architect in the Venetian scene, and was already acting as the *proto* for the Palazzo Ducale and the Rialto bridge, two prominent public posts noted explicitly in the text of the resolution that the

[15] Guidarelli, "Sante Lombardo," 5–81.

brothers had voted on.[16] The choice of Scarpagnino was consistent with the aims that the Guardian Grande had been pursuing for a long time. In fact Scarpagnino was the architect who most heavily influenced the outward appearance of the building, permanently altering what still remained of the initial project of Pietro Bon.

Ten years after the beginning of construction, with the conflicts that had hindered its smooth progress behind them, the confraternal brothers of the Scuola Grande di San Rocco were more united in support of the building program. There were still points of tension, however, and the final turning point came only in 1535, when control of the faction in favour of a greater display of wealth passed from Francesco di Giovanni dalla Seta to Alvise da Noale and Constantino Todero Marcorà. These two *confratelli* were rich, educated and influential, and together they managed to consolidate control of the site in their hands and effect the final breakthrough.[17]

In order to complete the program of Francesco di Giovanni, this small circle of brothers had first to solve the problem of the staircase. In 1545, they decided to demolish the "tribunale" staircase and build a new, ample, and much more monumental one in its place. Scarpagnino's new 'imperial staircase' featured two parallel flights up to a broad landing, where separate processional queues could unite in a single line that would proceed together up the third central ramp leading to the Chapter Hall (Fig. 5).

This type of staircase was an absolute novelty in the history of Western architecture. It was inspired, as suggested by Tafuri, by the staircase designed in 1535 by Jacopo Sansovino for the Scuola della Misericordia. Yet the Misericordia brothers rejected the design in 1544, only a year before its adoption at San Rocco.[18] This was not the first of Sansovino's ideas to appear at San Rocco after being rejected at the Misericordia; another was the solution of exterior façades surrounded by freestanding columns (Fig. 1). The formal solution of freestanding columns has its origins in antiquity, and specifically the triumphal arches and the "colonnacce" at the Forum of Nerva in Rome. Scarpagnino proposed to add two levels each of four columns on the left side of the façade, corresponding with the two largest rooms inside. In this way, his plan maintained the division of Bon's façade but it completely changed the architectural idiom, as shown by comparison with the surviving part of the original façade.[19] Clear evidence that the columns are a later addition to an earlier façade is found in the connection between the pedestal of the first column on the left and the pedestal of the

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[16] "proto del palazo duchal, ett dela fabricha de Rialto." ASVe, Scuola Grande di San Rocco, II cons., b. 45, f. 56v.

[17] Tafuri, *Venice and the Renaissance*, 87–88.

[18] Morresi, *Sansovino*, 108–111. On the evolution of the "imperial staircase," see Sohm, "The Staircase of the Venetian Scuole Grandi and Mauro Coducci," esp. 148; Vliegenhart-van der Valk Bouman, "The Origin of the Imperial Staircase"; Marias, "La escalera imperial en España."

[19] Morresi, *Sansovino*, 103.

corresponding pilaster. An even more obvious sign is the lack of uniformity between the capitals of the columns with those of the pre-existing pilasters. The result is particularly disturbing in the first register, where anthropomorphic figures carved in place of the scrolls seem to "beat" their heads against the volutes of the pilasters created by Pietro Bon (Fig. 6).

Although Scarpagnino managed to complete the transformation of Bon's plan, this was at the expense of the building's formal coherence, and was only achieved by using the traditional local approach to the classical language of the orders. The final appearance of the façade of the Scuola di San Rocco attests to the series of compromises achieved only after a long process of debate about the mission and identity of the confraternity. This was a cultural war in which architecture was the "battlefield" of different factions.

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Fig. 1 Scuola Grande di San Rocco, façade on the campo (photo Gianmario Guidarelli).

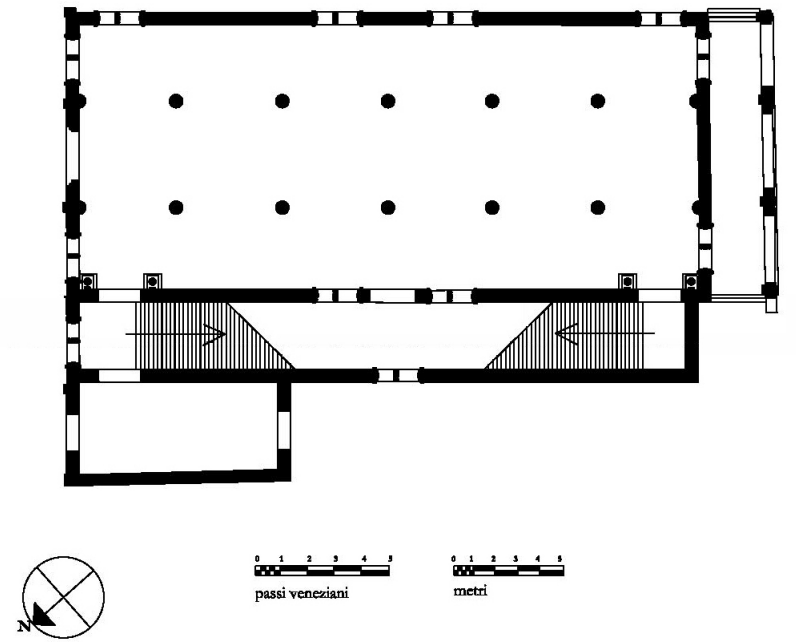

Fig. 2 Scuola Grande di San Rocco, project by Pietro Bon (1517), ground floor (Reconstruction by Gianmario Guidarelli).

Fig. 3 Scuola Grande di San Rocco, the lower hall at the ground floor (from Gianmario Guidarelli, *"Una giogia ligata in piombo": la fabbrica della Scuola Grande di San Rocco in Venezia 1517-1560.* Venice: Helvetia, 2003).

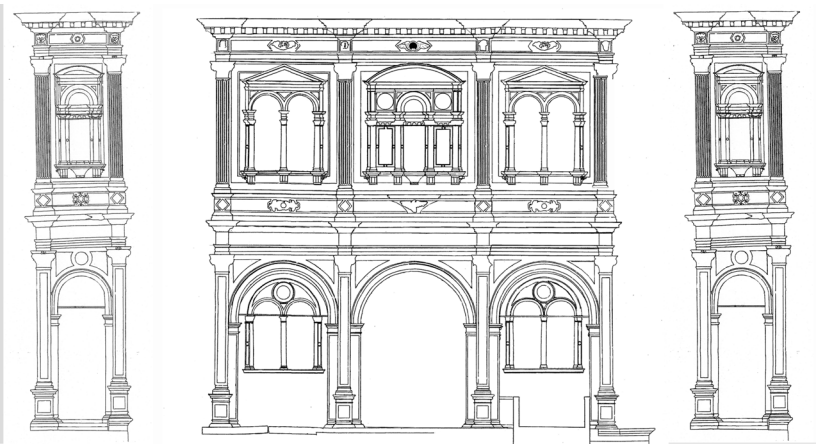

Fig. 4 Scuola Grande di San Rocco, façade on the canal (from: Gianmario Guidarelli, "L'architettura della Scuola Grande di San Rocco." In *La Scuola Grande di San Rocco*, eds. Salvatore Settis and Franco Posocco. Modena: Panini, 2008, 43-64.)

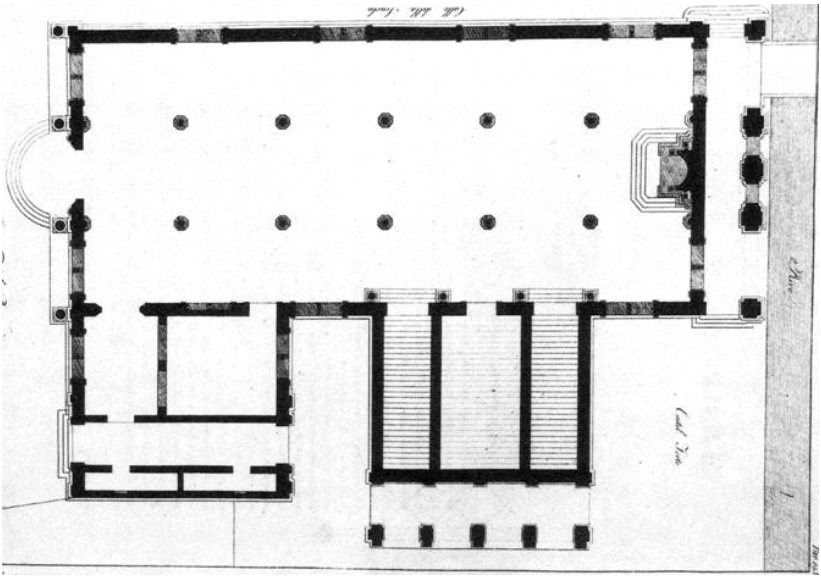

Fig. 5 Scuola Grande di San Rocco, plan of the ground floor at present (from: Leopoldo Cicognara, Antonio Diedo, Giannantonio Selva, *Le fabbriche e i monumenti cospicui di Venezia*, Venice: G. Antonelli, 1858).

Fig. 6 Scuola Grande di San Rocco, façade on the campo, capital of one of the free-standing columns (photo Gianmario Guidarelli).