intend to be the greatest architect who has yet lived, but the greatest who will ever live.”

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Turin

John Beldon Scott

Architecture for the Shroud: Relic and Ritual in Turin


When the chapel of the Holy Shroud in the cathedral of Turin was incinerated in 1997 in an electrical fire, the object it had been built to house escaped destruction. But the symbiotic relationship of the relic and the chapel built for it in the seventeenth century under the patronage of the dukes of Savoy, which had been sunken already in the nineteenth century. John Beldon Scott diplomatically avoids comment on the authenticity of the relic itself, carbon-dated to the fourteenth century but venerated as the actual shroud that wrapped Christ’s body. The focus of this lucidly framed and monumentally lavish book is the coming together of relic and building and their subsequent separation. Scott’s objective, brilliantly fulfilled in the painstakingly careful text and extensive illustrations, is to survey the architectural ways in which the Shroud was housed and displayed indoors and outdoors, and to demonstrate the intimate links between its religious and secular uses.

It is unusual for a historian to offer a study that takes the reader through the development and achievement of a major building and then continue the discussion through its demise. The book additionally provides a complete history of a single object. The author’s driving concept is to examine the political function of the Shroud in the enhancement of dynastic prestige and in state building, and its role in the “identity formation” (59) of the divided lands of the duchy of Savoy, as well as offering an assessment of the architectural imagery of the reliquary structures.

The core of the book, chapters four through seven, is devoted to a close analysis of the architectural designs and discussions that culminated in the construction of the chapel by Guarino Guarini. Scott’s contribution to the already extensive historiography of this exceptional edifice consists of careful readings of the projects and the realized building. He interprets the chapel as the outcome of an intricate program, which took a long time to formulate and then to carry out. Along the way he clarifies earlier oversights, misreadings, and rhetorical assumptions, persuasively interpreting the chapel as perfectly suited for its multiple and contradictory functions. The ownership of the Shroud, associated with God as king, strengthened the case of the dukes of Savoy in their quest for the royal title. The rebuilding of Turin into a significant major building and then continue the discussion through its demise. The book additionally provides a complete history of a single object. The author’s driving concept is to examine the political function of the Shroud in the enhancement of dynastic prestige and in state building, and its role in the “identity formation” (59) of the divided lands of the duchy of Savoy, as well as offering an assessment of the architectural imagery of the reliquary structures.

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The question that Scott asks is not what the chapel means but how it works. Thus the “compelling emotionalism” of the Shroud, the “majestic horror of the chapel” (in the words of an eighteenth-century visitor) (214), and the telescoping focus of the space are discussed and explained within the context of the requirements of the ostension and preservation of the relic. Perhaps the most vivid contribution is Scott’s comparison between pictorial and architectural design methods; Guarini’s design parallels in abstract nonfigural form the concentric system of dome paintings practiced in Rome and Bologna earlier in the century. The author demonstrates that the architect drew inspiration from Gianlorenzo Bernini’s Baldacchino at Saint Peter’s Basilica, and from the perspectival successes of the lavish forty-hour displays of the Host, which he would have seen during his stay in Rome, compositions that pulled the spectator vertiginously toward a richly adorned illusory space. The whole chapel can be seen as a giant reliquary.

Guarini’s geometrical approach is evaluated as primarily intent on engaging human psychology through controlled perception in whose service the architect marshaled the most “extensive array of perspective devices” assembled in “Baroque optical manipulation” (120). This miraculous architecture—a feeling he hoped to instill in visitors to the chapel and one that he admired in Gothic churches—masks the structure of the dome, and this “feigned disregard of structural engineering is the essence of Guarini’s originality in architectural thinking” (153). The exterior appearance of the chapel does not prepare the visitor for the startling illusion of the telescoping dome and its vertical expansion. Reinforced buttresses, not illustrated in any of Guarini’s graphic images and working sketches but discovered during the post-fire evaluation of the chapel (154), further disguise the structure that supports such daring.

The research involved in this book has turned up important materials hidden in plain sight. An example is the view of Turin in the gallery of maps in the Vatican palace, which offers a dazzling new image of how the Shroud was displayed and received by its worshipers in its early Turin years. But Scott also found early projects for the chapel designed by Pellegrino Tibaldi, the architect of cardinal Borromeo, who took a keen interest in the housing of the Shroud. All the early projects tacitly illustrate the intense negotiations at the core of the long search for the ideal site of the chapel. The eventual solution, above the choir of the cathedral and at the level of the ducal palace’s main floor, turned the chapel into a hinge linking the palace and church indelibly together. Buried between the two buildings, the chapel incurred a potential lighting
they always seem to melt into the shadows, so that my experience of the space is duly intimate and somber. Scott’s reconstruction of the circulation pattern reminds us that it was meant to be densely populated. While the definitive qualities of Baroque design are evident, especially in the surprise one feels after climbing the steep staircase and stepping under the spell of the upward-lifting dome, the chapel is also withdrawn. One is lured toward it rather than having it burst forth into the space of the cathedral. In his detailed description of the procedure of the ostension, Scott fulfills his intention to “reinvest the ceremonial space of Guarini’s chapel with its original function” (117), thus helping us to understand the space and its history.

In contrast to previous authors, Scott insists on the practicality of Guarini’s design, recognizing the architect’s keen awareness of “site reality,” and the two principal programmatic requirements: the courtly ritual of relic display and the promotion of the House of Savoy as custodians of this object. The “fictive immensity” of Guarini’s “illusionistic machine” (199) gives precedence to the experience of the eye, but though the architect could be called a “magician of the irreal” (209), he does not lose sight of the visitor. The psychological aim of the design is viewer manipulation through fictive perspective, but this optical ruse aims to enhance devotion and augment the religious experience of the worshippers. Unlike trompe-l’œil painting, Guarini’s three-dimensional architectural illusion keeps the visitor deluded and convinced of its reality (214), whereas the architectural historian can see in the section of the chapel that this building is really made of two structures stacked on top of one another. Guarini’s ornaments shift from the naturalistic mode of imagery in the lower part of the chapel to the more abstract expressive mode in the pendentive zone and the cupola. The chapel, then, is an optical machine that eminently fulfills its programmatic functions.

The structure and form of the chapel are closely examined in the chapter “Faith in Geometry.” Here the constituent parts of the building are relentlessly unpacked and studied. The transition from the base, designed by Bernardino Quadri and Amedeo di Castellamonte, to Guarini’s realignment and dome reveals the fascinating overlap of geometry and the rules of classical architecture. Scott’s masterly description of Guarini’s definitive geometrical design brings a new level of order to our understanding of the building.

The author has made earlier contributions to the scholarship on Guarini that are incorporated in this volume. Among them, his examination of the Passion capitals of the pilasters in the lower level of the chapel, now completely destroyed, typifies his impeccably close and detailed readings.

The history of the Shroud prior to its arrival in Turin in 1578 forms the first part of the book, and supports Scott’s claim that the decades it spent in Chambéry, the capital of the Savoy part of the duchy, “were a time of formulation for the court ceremonial surrounding the relic and its cult” (53).

The discussion of Guarini’s astonishing chapel is followed by an important section on the outdoor public ostensions on the Shroud. This involved temporary structures and transformation of streets and squares into vast public theaters. Here Scott makes a significant contribution to the interpretation of Turin’s urban form, which he labels “culti-urbanism,” to define the impact of religious practices mixed with dynastic prerogatives in the public domain. Just as the section on the building of the chapel is organized around a major architect, the section on cultic urbanism adds greatly to our understanding of Filippo Juvarra’s contributions to the definition of Turin’s “command” center. Transposing a popular saying, Scott writes that in “Turin all the major roads led to the Shroud and its happy custodian” (260).

Throughout the history of the Shroud’s peregrinations, the author focuses on his main idea: the uses of the Shroud made by the dukes of Savoy in their sustained and successful bid for
power and recognition. Curiously, once the architectural and urban sites for the storage and display of the relic were definitively completed, the desire to display lessened. The tightly bound relationship between relic and dynasty was dealt a severe blow during the Napoleonic occupation between 1798 and 1814. In the nineteenth century, the Shroud receded as its space was occupied and transformed into a Savoy pantheon. Left behind when the dukes of Savoy became kings of the united Italy and moved first to Florence and then to Rome, the Shroud of Savoy became the Shroud of Turin, and was slowly integrated within a modern and nonmonarchical context. The loss of the relic’s dynastic association was then matched by irreparable damage to the building that identified it. Nonetheless, the “common political identity” that the Shroud performed for the inhabitants of the duchy from the sixteenth century survived to reinforce the identity of Turin as a modern tourist and religious destination.

Successive chapters bring the story up to the present, showing the transformation of the chapel from reliquary to dynastic pantheon and describing its recent incineration. The introduction of large funeral monuments of white marble altered the chapel from a “courty devotional space” into a “patriotic tourist site” (290), while the drastic reduction of the processional component of nineteenth-century ceremonial ostensions, so important in the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries, signaled the relic’s diminished political importance. The historiography of ostensions began in 1931, when the Shroud was accompanied by an exhibition on its historical displays, followed in 1973 by the first televised ostension, and in 1998 by a large-scale public display. The view into the fire-damaged space is now masked by a trompe-l’oeil painting by the scene designer of La Scala, which ironically captures the original visual effect and resembles the forty-hour ostensions that inspired Guarini in the first place (326–28). Echoing in his writing Guarini’s suggestion for an architectural design that pleases the senses, John Beldon Scott has offered a thoroughly fitting memorial to the ravaged building. Martha Pollak

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England

Clare Graham

Ordering Law: The Architectural and Social History of the English Law Court to 1914


English law courts have been an integral part of popular literature over the past century with scenes ranging from dramatic revelations in Dorothy Sayers’s Peter Wimsey novels to more subtle confrontations between the waggish barrister Horace Rumpole and a host of lugubrious judges in London’s Old Bailey. A familiar venue for suspense and wordplay in novels and films, English courtrooms nonetheless have had few chroniclers to describe their evolution or explain particular forms such as the prisoner’s dock and magistrate’s platform. Court procedure, language, costume, and fittings suggest the timeless quality of a conservative legal culture steeped in tradition. The gowns worn by the judges and the barristers conform to dress codes established in the seventeenth century. Yet, as Clare Graham asserts in Ordering Law: The Architectural and Social History of the English Law Court to 1914, the apparent fossilization of the law court is deceptive. Like so many other institutions, the English legal system has clothed itself in outmoded rituals even as it has abolished ancient forms such as grand juries and assizes. Court buildings too, have changed dramatically in the four hundred years since they first appeared as a distinctive building type. Graham’s account of this transformation is cast as a cultural history of the English legal system, concentrating on how shifting perceptions of the law and its role in society affected court design.

This study divides the architectural development of English law courts into four distinct periods. The first appears at the time when legal redress ceased being delivered by the peripatetic retinue of the king and began to be conducted by professional judges in fixed locations in London and major royal strongholds. In the late medieval and early modern period, the English law court generally functioned smoothly in a variety of surroundings. Court business was a seasonal activity that required little in the way of specialized fittings and was conducted in castles, guild halls, or other administrative centers long associated with royal or provincial authority. Even in the late seventeenth century, the high courts in Westminster Hall in London sat in makeshift fittings little better than temporary fair booths. By the late sixteenth century, Graham sees these ad hoc arrangements giving way to more permanent structures with specialized fixtures to accommodate the increasingly bureaucratic procedures that came to guide the conduct of civil and criminal trials. As royal castles lost their prestige and were allowed to decay following the civil war, borough governments built costly shire or county halls to attract the lucrative business associated with the assizes—the regional courts composed of judges from Westminster Hall who traveled a circuit of counties to administer the king’s justice. Investing in civic structures promised handsome dividends in an age when the business of the law courts became integrally bound up with the social pursuits of a rising genteel society. Graham’s second period of development—the century following the Restoration—is better-known than her first, since the classical buildings erected in most major county towns have been explored by Peter Borsay and Mark Girouard in recent studies of the social landscape of Georgian cities.1

The assize courts not only provided