Aurora Scotti Tosini, editor

Storia dell’architettura italiana. II Seicento


Storia dell’architettura italiana, the ambitious series published by Electa, covers the history of the past six centuries of Italian architecture in volumes that are chronologically defined, one or two per century. Four volumes have already been reviewed in JSAH.1 For each volume, an editor has devised a structure and assembled a team of scholars to write individual essays. Il Seicento, edited by Aurora Scotti Tosini, shares the handsome format of its companion volumes—lavishly illustrated with both black-and-white and color photographs—as well as shortcomings that other reviewers have mentioned—no figure numbers and therefore no references from text to illustrations, and footnote reference numbers smaller than any that my ophthalmologist has ever asked me to read. It also presents the problem, addressed by each of the previous reviewers, of how to write a history of a particular segment of Italian architecture at this point in the life of our discipline.

Scotti Tosini’s introduction anticipates many issues a reviewer might address. The chronological definition, chosen by the editor of the series, presupposes a certain “concrete materiality and formal specificity” (9). As with other volumes in the series, Il Seicento inevitably must be seen against the magisterial volumes in the Pelican History of Art, and for Scotti Tosini, this means a direct comparison with Rudolf Wittkower’s Art and Architecture in Italy 1600–1750 (1958). She lays out the early (largely German) historiography, from the pioneering constructs of Gurlitt, Wölfflin, and others through interwar documentary collections to a “vertiginous increase” of studies between 1940 and 1960 that includes monographs on artists and corpora of drawings by an international array of scholars (10). Throughout, investigators dealt with the definition, development, and evaluation of “baroque” as a style but also as a synonym for the seventeenth century. Wittkower’s synthesis, which included painting and sculpture as well as architecture, attempted to provide a coherent stylistic narrative that could be discerned in the works of the great protagonists (Bernini, Borromini, Pietro da Cortona, and Guarini) and lesser artists throughout the Italian peninsula, though with variations owed in part to an organic growth through early, high, and late phases, and in part to modifying currents. His systematization became the basis for many in-depth regional and monographic studies and then for an amplification of methodologies and themes, all noted by Scotti Tosini. In 1998, in L’architettura del Seicento, Daniela del Pesco presented a work of synthesis intended not to replace but to stand alongside Wittkower. Less interested in a debate about the baroque, she divided her book along political-geographical lines (with almost a third devoted to Rome and the papal territories) and emphasized the variety of tendencies at the opening of the seicento, the many kinds of persons involved in the production of architecture, and the richness of architectural solutions throughout the century.

Scotti Tosini sees her own task as both simpler, because she can take del Pesco’s analysis as a model, and more complex, because the division of the project among many authors means that it is difficult to maintain a coherent general argument. She has recruited twenty-eight authors—many of them acknowledged authorities in their fields and others at earlier stages of their careers—for the thirty-one independent essays, ranging from six to forty-six pages in length. Her description of the structure and content of the essays seems to be a combination of a grand design and a rationalization of the result.

A quick glance at “Printed Sources” and the bibliography reveals the difficulty of writing a history of seventeenth-century Italian architecture following the past half century of vigorous and far-reaching scholarship. What form might that history take, and what readers might come to Storia dell’architettura italiana to discover it? Surely Il Seicento is not a reference book or a textbook, nor is it the place to find the most recent research in the field or comprehensive treatments of individual architects or buildings. Still, the abundant footnotes and documentation point to a scholarly audience, and the heft of the two volumes militates against casual bedtime reading.

If the charge of the editor is to consider the history of Italian architecture in the seicento, one might look for themes that weave through the peninsula and the century, embracing the particular results of earlier (or ongoing) investigations, posing questions and proposing structures for understanding historically the abundance and variety of architectural production. Scotti Tosini does this in
part, defining five thematic essays. At the same time, she specifically steps away from it, listing in her introduction several themes that have not been assigned their own essays: the “theaters of power” and related urban developments of many seventeenth-century Italian cities as well as military architecture, villa architecture, gardens, festivals, interior decoration involving stucco work and painting, and kinds of spaces that become increasingly prominent in the seventeenth century and prefigure building types of the eighteenth century—theaters, libraries, galleries, and cabinets of curiosities (13). (Many of these themes are major undertakings of architects in the seventeenth century, and in spite of the editor’s restriction, they push forward in several of the individual essays.) In her generic guidelines to authors, she identifies two other themes—a focus on dominant cities in their regional context, and the “professional qualification of architects, the development of the profession and the worksite” (15)—to which many authors have contributed. However, she leaves the synthesis to the reader. Other themes, such as the dominance of individual artistic personalities and distinctive regional developments, are implicit in her organization; still others remain to be inferred.

Il Seicento begins with two thematic essays on potentially rich topics, which do not live up to the promise of their titles. Both “The World of Representation,” by Lucia Nuti, and “Illusory Architecture,” by Filippo Camerota, are severely limited in their conceptions of these major seventeenth-century themes. In her introduction, Scotti Tosini explains that she does not intend these introductory essays to be comprehensive but “to suggest particular problems or points of departure, from which to gather a reality however complex” (12), apparently relying on the reader to generate more examples and make the necessary connections.

Having excluded urban issues from this history of architecture, Scotti Tosini nevertheless includes Ennio Poleggi’s “Urbanism in the Seicento as Evidenced in Ports.” Poleggi considers only five ports, all on the western side of the Italian peninsula (Genoa, Livorno, Naples, Messina, and Palermo), though inexplicably there are three illustrations of Ancona, on the Adriatic coast. The five port cities are also discussed later, in their separate regional chapters.

“The Architecture of the New Religious Orders,” by Richard Bösel, addresses a topic that is supraregional, involves many architects, and is quintessentially important for the late sixteenth and seventeenth centuries in the wake of the reforms after the Council of Trent (concluded in 1564). Bösel is well known for his penetrating studies of Jesuit architecture throughout Italy, and in this chapter he extends his inquiry to include the full range of regular and reformed orders, both male and female communities. With references to many specific examples, he distinguishes functional pragmatism and, sometimes, brilliant solutions.

A fifth thematic essay appears at the very end of the book—“Idea and Norm: The Character and the Diffusion of Writings on Architecture” by Tommaso Manfredi. Alerting us to the coming dialectic between text and image, Manfredi deftly lays out the arc of architectural publications, as well as unpublished texts, in the cultural context of a century that remained secure in the tradition of Vitruvius, Serlio, Vignola, and Palladio. At the end of the century, in the several publications of the protean Carlo Fontana, text and image come together to reveal history, or process, so that neither the a priori theory nor the design but “the architect became the single, incontestable, protagonist” (630).

The group of eleven essays dedicated to Rome opens with the only chronologically defined contribution in the book: “Rome 1600–1623: Theories, Clients, Architects,” by Aloisio Antinori. Antinori begins with the restoration of early Christian churches in Rome, a discussion tantalizing in its brevity. This topic, along with the beginnings of Christian archaeology, is as important as that of architecture for new religious orders in the context of post-Tridentine Italy. It extends well beyond the years of 1600 to 1623 and the city of Rome and could easily have been the focus of its own essay. Antinori, however, must turn his attention to other issues, and he proceeds with a survey structured according to successive papacies (Aldobrandini, Borghese, Ludovisi), with the emphasis on architects.

Three chapters are dedicated to individual buildings in Rome. Sandro Benedetti, in “Carlo Maderno and the Worksite of San Pietro,” gives Maderno’s work a sympathetic reading based on his own investigations during the recent restoration of the façade, completed in 1999.2 Antinori, in a very short chapter on Palazzo Barberini, provides a brief, straightforward account according to recent scholarship. In the “Palazzo Nuovo” at the Campidoglio, Klaus Güthlein presents a distillation of his study published in Römisches Jahrbuch für Kunstgeschichte in 1985. Here we see not a seventeenth-century design but a seventeenth-century political phenomenon: a sixteenth-century architectural design was usurped as communal autonomy was suppressed in favor of papal absolutism.

The section on Roman architecture is dominated by six chapters on individual architects, distinct artistic personalities who emerge from the hundreds of professionals at work in the city and can be seen as major protagonists. In 1958, Wittkower identified three of them—Bernini, Borromini, and Cortona—and gave them monographic treatment. In the present volume, Tod Marder chooses a single focus for his essay on Bernini, defining the artist’s genius by his use of preexisting ideas, forms, and circumstances as the materials of invention throughout his long career. Augusto Roca De Amicis provides a formal appreciation of Borromini’s complex compositions and architectural elements, only occasionally engaging the wealth of research in recent years, especially around the time of the architect’s four hundredth birthday in 1999. For Cortona, Chiara Baglione presents an
admirable mini-monograph of the artist as architect, closely connected with his studies and sensibilities as a painter.

Güthlein treats Girolamo Rainaldi and his son, Carlo Rainaldi, as a team whose architectural activities extend throughout almost the entire century, from around 1590 until Carlo’s death in 1691.

It is Carlo Fontana, the consummate professional, who bridges the mid-century heroic period of Roman architecture to the early years of the eighteenth century, and Hellmut Hager gives an exhaustive chronological account of his long career, from his earliest work to his death in 1714 and beyond, in the works of his many students. The range of Fontana’s designs is staggering (and paralleled by Hager’s own extensive research)—churches, chapels, large public projects, urban schemes, St. Peter’s, utilitarian buildings, waterworks, archaeological studies, ephemera, publications, and finally teaching.

Vittorio De Feo’s essay on Andrea Pozzo shows us that the impulse to cross over from architecture into painting in Il Seicento is irresistible. The notion of architecture stretches to include painted illusions that contradict the boundaries of the masonry walls and vaults on which they are painted. Like Fontana’s professionalism, Pozzo’s vision spoke to artists well into the eighteenth century.

Allowing three-quarters of seventeenth-century Rome to be dominated by these six great protagonists, the editor admits that many interesting architects “remain at the margin of the panorama” (14), even those who, like Martino Longhi the Younger and Giovanni Antonio De Rossi, constructed significant buildings for a range of clients. It is left to Giovanna Curcio in “The Client and the Architect: Worksites and Buildings in Rome in the Seicento” to show the full extent of architectural activity in the city during those decades. In the first half of her essay, we are almost exhausted by her rehearsal of the hierarchy of clients, from the twelve popes and their families through dozens of cardinals, countless papal officials, feudal families, newer Roman families, ambassadors, exiled royalties, and various corporate bodies who sponsored not only dwellings but also chapels, churches, and ephemera. Suddenly, at the end of the century, we are drawn short by changes in patronage owing to the abolition of nepotism and venal offices, economic difficulties, and the reform of state magistracies.

Curcio then turns to the second half of the equation: the architects. The Lombard and Ticinese masters who dominated the building industry at the beginning of the century were countered by members of the Accademia di San Luca, who held that architects should form themselves first as painters or sculptors with an understanding of disegno. The architectural office of the papal palaces, as reformed by Urban VIII, provided a framework for the professional development of many architects and master builders. These men produced architecture of continuity and consonance, rather than of innovation and dissonance, in keeping with their wish to belong to an emerging professional class. They, not the great protagonists who have received their own chapters, became the predominant builders of seventeenth-century Rome. Bernini, however, in his studio directed a number of students—foremost among them Fontana—to the exclusive practice of architecture by joining direct experience on the building site with the constant exercise of disegno.

But what about the rest of the Italian peninsula? The authors of the following thirteen chapters show that Italy was still far from a political or architectural unity. Yet architects and craftsmen who traveled from place to place, religious institutions that transcended a single location, common concerns like fortifications and hydraulic works, and rivalries in which architecture was an important tool of self-representation all made interconnections. The authors of these chapters, experts in their regions, take different approaches.

In “The Medicean Grandduchy,” Luigi Zangheri gives a simple chronology in which works of note either come from Florentine designers who traveled abroad or from artists based in Rome. External influences, however, do not invigorate but instead dilute traditional Florentine strengths. It is a rather dispirited view, which parallels the decline of the Medici dynasty.

Francesco Ceccarelli describes the seventeenth-century consolidation of the Papal States and the fortifications and extensive hydraulic works that were built throughout the Po Valley. Such projects were frequently parts of architects’ work, and it would be interesting to know whether they were innovative or somehow distinctive in the history of architecture. In Bologna, local architects worked in the tradition of Vignola or Palladio, but the cardinal legate brought architects from Rome, and others came with the great expansion of religious communities in the first half of the century. In the second half of the century, the senatorial patriciate modernized its city and country residences, updating them in accord with the evermore complex and splendid ceremony of the times. These spatial explorations were complemented by the resurgence of Bolognese quadriatura painting and its extension into scenographic constructed architecture.

Three north Italian duchies are treated in chapters by Bruno Adorni (Modena and Reggio Emilia), Carlo Mambriani (Parma and Piacenza), and Giuseppe Stolfi (Mantua). The three ruling families, and therefore their architectural patronage, were in different situations in the seventeenth century. Yet, all three courts made the most of their limited resources by sponsoring theatrical and festival productions and tying into the Emilian tradition of quadriatura painting. Artists were called from Rome, and Emilian artists moved from one city to another. In the last decades of the century, stage design and illusionistic painting led to stunning spatial explorations in built architecture, especially for aristocratic families, whose patronage increased as that of the ducal dynasties declined.

Andrew Hopkins, in his essay on
Venice and its domain, sees the devastating plague of 1630 as a pivotal event ironically turned to celebration in Baldassare Longhena’s Church of Santa Maria della Salute. Longhena is unquestionably the hero of this chapter, and Hopkins presents many issues, as well as the full range of building types, in juxtaposition with the architect’s long career.

Scotti Tosini contributes the substantial and densely written chapter on “The State of Milan.” True to her instructions to the authors, she devotes considerable attention to the profession of architecture, architectural education, and the resultant dynasties of capable architects who, however, rarely made new forms. Under the leadership of Cardinal Federico Borromeo, Milan was a hotbed of post-Tridentine church design. Francesco Maria Ricchino was “undoubtedly the greatest architect of the Lombard seicento,” and the fertility of his architectural explorations can be seen not only in extant buildings but also (and especially) in his many surviving drawings (440).

Piedmont, with Turin as its capital after 1563, is treated by Giuseppe Dardanello. He sees “a reciprocal relationship between the affirmation of a system of dynastic and absolute government, and the form of the architecture of the city and the state” (470). A new Office of Buildings and Fortifications developed norms of building and defined the formal aspects of the city as it grew, in controlled phases, from its modest medieval boundaries. The result was a remarkable orthogonal order in plan with uniform arcaded facades along the streets, providing a setting for court ceremonies and the representation of public decorum. Within this regimented matrix, Guarino Guarini inserted his astounding structural and illusionistic constructions.

The republic of Genoa, a small city of merchants and bankers without a court, is described by Emmina De Negri as one big organism, with much creativity and distinctiveness, rather than an assemblage of discrete monuments or artistic personalities. In the many palaces, there is consistency of type along with inventiveness in individual situations.

Daniela del Pesco’s chapter on Naples presents a very different Tyrrhenian port city: “a fortified capital, seat of the political and administrative functions of an incumbent central power”—that is, Spain (510). With narrow streets and vertical development of housing, the increasing population led to great congestion. Between 1580 and 1620, about one hundred palaces were built, but the urban situation meant that they could not have rational, symmetrical plans or coherent façades. It would be interesting to see the plans of some of these buildings to see how designers dealt with the difficult urban sites and requirements of aristocratic life in the capital city. Del Pesco identifies Cosimo Fanzago as the dominant architect and decorator in Naples, but he worked in a complex network of many building professionals. For churches, some types (the portico façade, stairs, central plans) seem almost collaboratively developed in the cosmopolitan context of the capital.

For the provinces of Abruzzo and Molise, northern frontier of the Spanish Regno, Lorenzo Bartolini Salimbeni presents a comprehensive account with awareness of recent research and documentation. Yet, his modest subject proves problematic because of the destruction of many seventeenth-century buildings in earthquakes. The seicento appears as a period of cultural stasis here, and the architectural scene opens only slowly and partially to the innovations of major centers.

Mario Manieri Elia, writing about seventeenth-century Apulia, takes a different approach to a peripheral area. In this liminal territory where the built legacy of the sixteenth-century external power of Spain existed in tension with an autochthonous, multilayered, Mediterranean artistic culture, he chooses to focus on just three projects. The theme is “duplicity” (538), or cultural “revenge” (550), expressed in two architectural lexicons: the structural aspects of Roman and Neapolitan models, and the ornamental forms rooted in the complex interweaving of local traditions.

Maria Giuffrè’s essay on Sicily presents Messina and Palermo as rival capital cities of culture in which major urban works provided a solid base for architectural development. Jesuits and Theatines contended for the best places, especially in Palermo, and royal and municipal institutions created signs of their power. In the second half of the century dominant architects were members of religious orders, and many of these carried late-baroque architecture and decoration into the eighteenth century.

Though major architectural personalities appeared in the thirteen chapters on political/geographical areas, only two receive their own chapters. The first is Vincenzo Scamozzi, treated by Guido Beltrami. This is a curious editorial choice, given that most of Scamozzi’s life and career falls outside the seventeenth century and is properly treated in Il secondo Cinquecento. Scamozzi is the author of the only major treatise on architecture published in the seventeenth century (L’idea della architettura universale, 1615), but the text is also included in Manfredi’s essay on the literature of architecture.

Guarino Guarini is the subject of a lucid essay by Giuseppe Dardanello. His best-known works are in Turin, but he is superregional in both the sources of his architecture and the locations of his many projects. Dardanello beautifully describes Guarini’s complex, geometrically founded designs, and his descriptions simultaneously explain structure, vision, and relativism in aesthetic judgment.

In the political/geographical structure of most of the book, the political turns out to be especially important, as rulers (the pope, the duke, the civic government, representatives of foreign powers) not only exercise patronage but also determine the conditions under which work will be done, and their fortunes affect the timing of architectural projects. The geographical component (topography, local materials, climate) is cited only occasionally, for example the hilly terrain around the port of Genoa in relation to the three-dimensional internal arrangement of palaces, or the lightweight stone and pozzolana mortar that made possible the tall buildings in Naples. The travel of architects and clients and the superregional structure of
religious orders often transcend geography. The volume's chronological definition is not uniformly appropriate throughout the peninsula. Some areas experience a long seventeenth century, as a certain kind of artistic activity continues well beyond 1700, in others it is a short century, as building diminishes; and in others a great hole appears in the middle because of economic depression and the plague of 1656.

Whatever the geographical or chronological boundaries, it is especially gratifying to see the results of recent (and often ongoing) resourceful archival work. Many authors have responded to the editor's desire “to focus on the professional qualifications of architects, on the development of the profession and professional qualification of architects, at worksites.” We see the education of architects with distinct artistic personalities, a succession of professionals as a project extends through time, and significant instructions or critiques from the client (whether individual or corporate). Craftsmen too have something to do with the ultimate form. Who, then, is the designer? And how confidently can we assign a stylistic feature to a particular person even when his name is mentioned in a document? The desire to identify architects with distinct artistic personalities is seen throughout the book, most obviously in the chapters dedicated to individual masters, but also in many chapters on political/geographical areas: Ricchino in Milan, Fanzago in Naples, Bedeschini in L’Aquila, Zimbalo in Apulia. What do we look for when identifying a personal style? Proportion? Decorative motifs? Transformative ability? I would like to see more attention paid to planning, in particular in multiroom buildings like palaces; in this book, however, few plans of this sort are included.

What, then, about the larger question of style? Part of Wittkower’s task in 1958 was to construct a kind of stylistic tree with a trunk and branches. Scotti Tosini accepts the premise of the chronological framework of the series with its implication of a certain “concrete materiality and formal specificity.” Yet many (perhaps most) of the authors assume the existence of a coherent style called “baroque” that may be modified as pre-baroque, late baroque, Neapolitan baroque, or even the “absent baroque” of Genoa. How is this style defined? By the summation of the architectural characteristics of those great masters who have received chapters of their own? Or maybe only certain of their works? Or the most prominent and celebrated commissions (St. Peter’s in Rome, Santa Maria della Salute in Venice)? Or the works not of the extraordinary few but of the majority of architects (those swept together in Curcio’s virtuosic chapter on Rome, the nameless designers of palaces in the density of Naples)? And can it be applied equally to all genres of seventeenth-century architectural production or even of a particular designer? Should we even call it “baroque”? Or do we set aside the problem and not use the word or simply accept it as a synonym for “seventeenth century”? If so, we as architectural historians are still left with the problem of understanding our material as designed by individuals in time. I think that Il Seicento, fifty years after Wittkower, should have confronted this question.

This question is in addition to all the other compelling issues that we, collectively, have been addressing in our work, many included in the worthy essays in this book and others of necessity set aside. The history of Italian seicento architecture is an ongoing project, as several authors have indicated with reference to their assigned topics. Even in a large book like this, with contributions by many authors, only a partial view can be given. We continue, happily, to be in the midst of a “vertiginous increase” of studies.

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Notes

Architectural historians and theorists have been looking forward to this book for many years. Simon Stevin (1548–1620), the mathematician from Bruges famous for his numerous publications on arithmetic, algebra, geometry, and hydraulics, allegedly intended to publish a monograph on architecture but only left behind fragments and parts for this book. Several of these were scattered and became the property of his son Hendrick Stevin, the scientist Isaac Beeckman, and Constantijn Huygens. Charles van den Heuvel, who has written about the introduction of Italian urbanization and fortress building in the Low Countries, now presents what no one had dared to do: a reconstruction of Stevin’s missing treatise based on fragments, letters, and unfinished manuscripts, treated in a detailed and critically “scientific” way.