Letters to the Editor

To the Editor

I read Matthew Cohen’s article “How Much Brunelleschi? A Late Medieval Proportional System in the Basílica of San Lorenzo in Florence” (JSAH 67, no. 1 [2008], 18–57) with great interest and admiration for his innovative research of the proportional system of San Lorenzo. Yet, in the end, my doubts about his conclusions prevailed. Cohen’s exceptionally detailed analyses reveal a sophisticated proportional system based on a late medieval tradition with roots leading to Boethius. Since the proportional system evident in San Lorenzo differs profoundly from that employed in Brunelleschi’s church of Santo Spirito, he is inevitably faced with the question of “how much Brunelleschi?” in San Lorenzo.

Cohen rejects Brunelleschi as the author of the overall basilica floor plan of San Lorenzo and attributes that role to Matteo Dolfini, the prior of San Lorenzo. Cohen argues that Brunelleschi’s contribution was limited to modernization of Dolfini’s design. “He contributed,” Cohen says, “the designs of all the present columns, pilasters, and other architectural articulations” (42).

Cohen insists on the necessity of combining documentary research with rigorous observation in the study of architectural proportion. However, the documentary evidence contradicts his fundamental assumption that the “nave was built in two distinctive phases” (1446–50 and 1461–64), yet based on a uniform plan dating to circa 1420. A long time ago I pointed out that the intent “circa 1420” was not to erect an entirely new church, but only to build an addition to the proto-Renaissance church of Old San Lorenzo, which was to be preserved (Volker Herzner, “Zur Baugeschichte von San Lorenzo in Florenz,” Zeitschrift für Kunstgeschichte 37 [1974], 89–115). Cohen quotes my article but does not acknowledge the building history of San Lorenzo described there.

After the Old Sacristy and the adjacent Medici Chapel were erected, from 1421 on, construction work at San Lorenzo ceased. It resumed when Cosimo de Medici pledged in August 1442 to complete within six years the main chapel and the nave, located west of Old San Lorenzo (San Lorenzo is oriented toward the west). The old main altar, the nave, and the aisles of Old San Lorenzo were to remain unaltered. When finally the addition to the west, which comprised the whole transept with its chapels, and the cupola had been largely completed, the dedication of San Lorenzo took place on 9 August 1461. Old San Lorenzo remained untouched, and the new addition meshed seamlessly with the eleventh-century structure.

The south aisle chapels, erected beginning in 1457, abutted the basilica of Old San Lorenzo as evidenced by the straight joint between the corresponding parts of the façade. On the north side the straight joint reaches only halfway up, continuing above as homogenous masonry. This physical evidence indicates that only during the construction of the first northern aisle chapel was it decided to destroy the old building of San Lorenzo and replace it by a new structure. This decision can be dated back to the months of August–September 1465, which places it during the rule of Piero de Medici, whose father Cosimo had died on 1 August 1464.

Had there been a uniform plan for construction of an entirely new church, without any doubt the first thing to be torn down would have been the campanile because it was located on the site of the western addition to Old San Lorenzo. But in August 1421 the foundation of the new parts were excavated behind the campanile, which evidently was to be conserved. In fact, in 1464—three years after the dedication of the new church—the campanile remained standing; only during the 1480s was it finally demolished.

Every step of the building history of San Lorenzo until May 1465 clearly shows an intention to preserve the old structure and to seamlessly integrate the new building parts to the west. As a result, the measurements and proportions of the old structure were imposed on the new structure. Compelling differences between the proportions of San Lorenzo and Santo Spirito resulted, but there is no reason to introduce the prior of San Lorenzo, Dolfini (who probably was not even an architect), to explain these differences. Without doubt Brunelleschi was the author of the plan that guided construction of the sacristy and the Medici Chapel beginning in 1421, and the addition to the church of Old San Lorenzo from 1442 on.

Volker Herzner
Karlsruhe, Germany

Matthew Cohen’s Reply

I am gratified that Volker Herzner accepts the San Lorenzo proportional system that I have identified as the likely basis for the design of the basilica. However, I attribute this proportional system, along with the overall design of the basilica/Old Sacristy complex, to Brunelleschi’s predecessor as capomastro, Matteo Dolfini, while Herzner attributes it to Brunelleschi.

Herzner claims that my attribution of the San Lorenzo proportional system to Dolfini is based on the differences that I have noted between it and the Santo Spirito proportional system. In fact, my Santo Spirito comparison serves primarily to help resolve the problem of the column shaft height discrepancy (33–37), and only in a minor way to support my Dolfini attribution.

I attribute the San Lorenzo proportional system to Dolfini primarily based on the precise correspondences between the measurements of the present San Lorenzo floor plan and the dimensions specified in Dolfini’s successful petition.
of 1418 to the *comune*. In the petition, Dolfini requests a piece of land behind the diminutive old Romanesque basilica of San Lorenzo to accommodate an “enlargement and improvement” of it. In addition to these dimensional correspondences, substantial evidence indicates that before Brunelleschi became *capomaestro*, Dolfini began construction of his basilica design not merely around the perimeter of the new land acquired in 1418, but in internal parts of the new transept constructed therein that are today thoroughly incorporated into the San Lorenzo proportional system. Thus I conclude that the San Lorenzo proportional system must have determined the dimensions specified in Dolfini’s 1418 petition.

If one wants to attribute the San Lorenzo proportional system to Brunelleschi instead of Dolfini, one has to explain how Brunelleschi’s proportions could have become inscribed into Dolfini’s petition of 1418—a date too early for any major involvement by Brunelleschi. The possibility that all of Dolfini’s work, including foundations, might have been demolished before Brunelleschi took over as *capomaestro* in about 1420–21 is virtually excluded by documentary evidence to the contrary (41 n. 80–82) and by the predominant medieval practice of incorporating pre-existing work into new construction for reasons of economy.

The new proportional evidence presented in my article thus supersedes Herzner’s estimate that the present floor plan dates to “circa 1420,” and pushes the likely date of the plan (not including the present nave chapels) back to 1418 or earlier. For extensive documentary evidence that the nave was indeed built in two distinct phases, see my article “Ugly Little Angels: Deliberately Uneven Construction Quality in the Basilica of San Lorenzo in Florence,” *arq: Architecture Research Quarterly* 11, no. 3–4 (2007), 276–89.

Brunelleschi’s contemporary and biographer, Antonio di Tuccio Manetti, clearly states that Dolfini was an accomplished architect (41). For an alternative to Herzner’s view regarding “Old San Lorenzo” and its campanile, see my Appendix 8 (www.spokane.wsu.edu/Academics/Design/CohenMatthew).

MATTHEW A. COHEN
Washington State University, Spokane