

**The Royal Society of Edinburgh**  
**Architectural Politics in Renaissance Venice**  
**Professor Deborah Howard, University of Cambridge**  
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*When we visit Venice and marvel at some of her most beautiful buildings, we may assume that they were planned and built in a measured and coherent way. But this is not necessarily the case, says Professor Deborah Howard, who in a fascinating lecture to The Royal Society of Edinburgh described the 'messy' and 'intricate' processes which led to some of the city's most famous landmarks, exploding some myths in the process.*

Venice in the 16<sup>th</sup> century was the scene of some of the most ambitious public building programmes in early modern Europe. What is more, there are contemporary parallels. Professor Deborah Howard's Edinburgh audience winced, for example, when she asked if public confidence could be sustained by elaborate building projects or sapped by their failure. This, of course, is a question which has particular resonance in a country still smarting from the over-budget Scottish Parliament building.

Many myths and ideas have grown up around the politics of architecture. These include the idea that states use the magnificence of their public buildings to help communicate their political ideals to the public and the wider world – and that the nobles apparently making the building decisions are selfless individuals, dedicated to the state.

Seeking to scrutinise these ideas, using the example of later 16<sup>th</sup> century Venice, Professor Howard showed how other influences were brought to bear on the building process. These included factors such as religious feeling, a growing admiration for technical advances over traditional classical erudition and, importantly, the workings of democracy, including lengthy consultations.

Professor Howard used four case studies. These were the building of the Redentore, a votive church built as a result of a vow taken during the plague of 1575-76; the restoration of the Doge's palace after the fire of 1577; the rebuilding of procurators' lodgings in St Mark's Square; and the rebuilding of the Rialto Bridge. All illustrated how political processes and changing ideas could lead to outcomes widely at odds with initial visions. They also showed how the classical influences brought to bear by the architect and *proto* (building supervisor) Sansovino (responsible for many great Venetian buildings) in the earlier part of the century were to fade away.

### **The Redentore**

The plague of 1575–77 wiped out a third of the population of Venice. At its height, the Senate vowed that it would build a votive church to Christ the Redeemer, which the Doge would attend annually to mark the end of the plague. But there was huge debate over where it should be and how it should be built.

There were two main opposing factions: the politically radical *Giovani* (literally youth), who were nevertheless culturally conservative and the *Vecchi* (old), who were politically conservative but had broader cultural horizons and aspirations.

Debate raged over such issues as whether a magnificent design by the famous classical architect Palladio should be chosen to 'reflect the dignity of the Republic' or whether a more austere approach should be taken. Eventually it was decided to build Palladio's design but at a site associated with the highly ascetic Capuchin friars. The church was supposed to cost 10,000 ducats but cost seven times that amount, leading Professor Howard to draw comparisons with the rising costs of the Scottish Parliament building. The church was built at a time, however, where natural and other disasters such as floods, fires and, of course, the plague, made the 'wrath of God' something to be feared. It was, said Professor Howard, difficult to question expenditure in these circumstances.

### **Rebuilding the Palazzo Ducale**

Palladio was less successful in winning support for his proposed radical rebuilding to the Palazzo Ducale or Doge's Palace, following the fire of 1577. Proposals for a grandly classical new building were thrown aside in favour of a simpler – and much cheaper – reconstruction of the existing medieval palace. Many technical experts were consulted and Palladio had powerful advocates,

particularly Marc'Antonio Barbaro, a prominent patrician, who, according to a contemporary diarist, spoke for days in his favour. Despite this filibustering, he failed to win support. This, said Professor Howard, was partly because of the urgency of finding somewhere for 2,000 nobles to meet every Sunday. A restoration project would be quicker and easier than a rebuild. But it was also because of the outcome of the consultation of technical experts, in which a majority favoured restoration.

### **Procurators' houses on the south side of Piazza San Marco**

In Venice, the Procurators de supra were essentially in charge of the buildings of Piazza San Marco (St Mark's Square), with the exception of the Doge's Palace. Theirs was a wealthy organisation, richly endowed and with lucrative rents. The procurators themselves were elderly patricians who generally got the job (for life) because of long service to Venice. Sometimes, however, to replenish the coffers, people were 'elected' after paying donations, such as Federico Contarini in 1571, who was 33 and, two years later, Andrea Dolfino, who was 32. Both paid 20,000 ducats.

This particular case study shows the difference between the elderly patricians and the young blood, which 'bought' its way on to the august body. Or, as Professor Howard put it, exposes the myth of the 'erudite and selfless body of men dedicated to the state' and shows the 'value of youth and energy'.

The idea of this project was to renew the accommodation for the procurators themselves on the south side of the square. The process began in 1581 and Barbaro was supposed to be supervising it. He was chosen in his absence, however, which leads Professor Howard to believe he was reluctant. Certainly he resigned more than once and seems to have been reluctant to take responsibility.

In the event it was the young procurators, Contarini and Dolfino, particularly the former, who were to take charge (and also resign). But again there was much consultation and argument throughout the process of the form that the project should take and whether, for example, a third storey should be added to Sansovino's neighbouring library.

Scamozzi, a renowned 'scholar architect' was appointed to design the work, but a local *proto*, Sorella, was made the building superintendant, thus separating the roles which had been combined in Sansovino. Still there was huge debate and many people were consulted.

Eventually the senate stepped in to tell them to get on with it and the first stage (offices) was completed, but again, when work on the housing began, there were concerns about incompetent site supervision and poor accounts. According to Professor Howard, the whole story illustrates that although the procurators were the elite, the internal disagreement and reluctant management characterised their patronage in the late 16<sup>th</sup> century. In addition, their independence was reined in by the elected assemblies.

### **The Rialto Bridge**

The process of consultation was extended still further during the design and building of the new Rialto Bridge. Not only were technical experts asked their opinion on factors such as how safe competing designs would be relative to their beauty, but the public was questioned too. Bystanders, including sausage makers and brandy sellers, were asked their opinions on the soundness of the pile-driving techniques being used by the workmen, for example.

The full Senate had taken the decision to rebuild the old wooden Rialto Bridge – an idea which had been discussed since 1507. But it was 80 years later that planning began in earnest, starting with an argument over whether it should have one arch or three.

Even the idea of replacing it in stone raised some objection, notably from Leonardo Donà (later Doge) who provocatively said that it should be rebuilt in wood to save money for the defence budget. Architects including Palladio (before his death in 1580) and Scamozzi submitted elegant designs.

Three magistrates were elected to be in charge of the project: Foscarini and Barbaro, who favoured three arches and Alvisio Zorzi, a puritanical man, with poor eyesight, who wanted one arch. Over 30 technical experts, including 17 *proti*, were consulted. Following much debate – in which Barbaro spoke long and vigorously in favour of three arches – a design with one arch was

chosen. Eventually he got just eight votes and the decision was taken to base the decision of the views of experts – which were pretty contradictory.

In the end, a design by the 78-year-old, practically illiterate Antonio da Ponte was chosen – partly because it was the most economical bid – and he was put in charge.

The controversy did not end there, however, as questions were raised about the nature of the design and whether the construction would be sound. The three magistrates continued to have an uneasy relationship and Barbaro in particular was often absent, with Zorzi giving most day-to-day support.

In the end, the bridge (incorporating elements from many influences, such as balustrades from Scamozzi's design and rustication from the Roman arena in Verona) was a success. The senate even granted da Ponte a patent. But this was only after a process which Professor Howard called 'dynamic and erratic'. The image of the republic was therefore portrayed by technical innovation rather than classical erudition.

Professor Howard concluded that towards the end of the 16<sup>th</sup> century, attempts to refine the Roman identity set in motion by Sansovino under Gritti had faded beneath the more pragmatic, technologically orientated cultural programme of the *Giovani*.

She also said that the contribution of prominent individuals such as Barbaro had been overestimated. It was perhaps surprising, that in a patrician oligarchy, the views of 'mere *proti*', and even members of the public, were held in such high regard.

She added that the lengthy consultation processes could have been paralysing, but "played a crucial role in winning political acceptance for extravagant adventures in public building".

### Questions

Professor Howard was asked how the building industry was organised in Renaissance Venice. She responded that each building site had its own *proto*, who would make up briefs for each task and invite tenders from tradesmen, such as stone masons, who were organised into guilds and who provided their own materials. The *proto* would then supervise the work according to the brief – which would have to be signed off by noble magistrates – although sometimes the final result, particularly in detail, could vary from the original design.

She was asked, with particular reference to the Arsenal, if there were rival projects going on at the time of the four case studies outlined in the lecture. She replied that there were, but not on the scale of these four. Nevertheless, there would have been competition for materials, particularly wood, which was scarce and also needed for ships – vital for defence and in times of war.

The final questioner asked about the differences in decision-making between the late 16<sup>th</sup> century and the 1530s and whether it was over-simplistic to ascribe this to the personality of the Doge (Gritti).

Professor Howard said that in her view Gritti's role had been exaggerated and that circumstances had been different generally. In the late 16<sup>th</sup> century Venice had been shaken by factors such as the Plague, whereas in the 1530s there was more a sense of triumphalism; of wishing to restate Venice's magnificence.

### Vote of thanks

The vote of thanks was delivered by Professor Charles McKean of the University of Dundee, who made particular reference to the valid comparisons between Renaissance Venice and Scotland. Lessons which he felt that politicians could heed included the notion that the one who spoke the longest (Barbaro) gleaned the fewest votes. He also appreciated the debunking of the architect as grand, all-powerful master of the design, replaced in these instances by the power of technical innovation.

Jennifer Trueland