

The Church of Il Redentore

In the year of 1575, Italy was struck by an outbreak of plague. Doge of Venice Giovanni Mocenigo made a vow to build a church to regain God's favor against the spread of plague. The Doge's prayers were successful, and the plague died down just two years later. Following the end of the outbreak, the Doge followed through with his promise and ordered a church be built in name of Jesus Christ "The Redeemer" (Il redentore). He tasked decorated architect Andrea Palladio to come up with the design of the votive church. The church's architectural landscape is unlike many of the time, featuring a decentralized construction, a less ornate decoration, and an almost colorless interior; reflecting the many economic and political hardships that strained the planning and construction of the church. Further, the traditions practiced inside the church reflect the attitudes people held towards plague during this period: From the spoken legend of Saint Sebastian's prophecy of salvation, to the Festa del Redentore to celebrate the end of the plague, these customs illustrated the people of Venice's humility towards God and the challenge of the plague. This paper will focus on the ways in which the church of The Redeemer expresses how plague has affected the population of Venice.

Analyzing the physical structure of the church we find that the church departs from the usual religious architecture of Italy. The church is designed in a longitudinal fashion, rather than the forma rotonda common in ecclesiastical buildings, a form used due to its symmetry and harmony (Aslet, 2020). Regardless of the reason, the façade of the building still evokes the forma rotonda with a central hemispherical dome located in the middle of the structure. Fresina (2012) states that this design was not Palladio's original vision and instead was a compromise taken due to the limited resources and space available at the time,

suggesting that the church's final design was made due to the economic constraints of the time. The structure thus serves as a permanent physical reminder of the struggle faced by Venice and its people: Its stand out design symbolizes the particularity of the situation they faced, while representing the commitment to their faith even when it's being tested.

The structure is divided into three sections, a nave, a crossing and a retro choir, all of which served a function for a subsection of churchgoers. The crossing towards the church was one of the first to be built. It was hastily put together during the construction of the church to allow passage for doge Sebastiano Verner, who had promised to visit every 3rd Sunday of July in remembrance of the plague (Howard, 2008). Doge Verner extended the populace and Doge Mocenigo's commitment by keeping his promise even when the church had not finished construction. This dedication began a tradition known as the Festa del Redentore, where every year on that same day, a floating bridge is put together and fireworks are lit in celebration and remembrance of the end of the plague.

The nave and retro choir were designed for the Capuchin friars who would hold procession. The friars held that austerity was appropriate considering the limitations of a still recovering Venice, so Palladio's grandiose design was fitted with uniform coloring and less ornamentation than was usual for churches of the time; as well as a lack of diversity in materials used (Fresina, 2012). This resulted in a somber and brooding design that focused on the shape and function of the architecture, rather than its embellishments. The more reserved visuals of the church did not allow for the congregational needs of Venice's people to go unanswered; in fact, Fresina suggests that the "sanitized" space retired from the city provided psychological relief from day to day reality. Palladino's nave design took after Roman bath's open spaces and light filled interiors, making congressions easy to carry out

without close contact and with natural air circulation as to not linger in miasma in case of a new plague outbreak. Furthermore, the placement of the church also reflects Renaissance views of disease. The decentralized location on the outskirts of the Guidecca canal is meant to symbolize a small pilgrimage undertaken by Venetian citizens in order to submit themselves to God, externalizing the Renaissance belief that disease was a struggle of divine origin. Its placement and elevation on a pedestal served a dual purpose, firstly to separate the house of worship from the mundane world, and to provide a clear view of the island, signaling that while it transcended the troubles of everyday life, it was nevertheless present in it.

Palladio's work is largely influential throughout Italy (Green, 1987), and it is in this design where we see the maturation of many elements of his stylistic vocabulary. The open spaces of the nave, the classical temple front, the symmetric façade even in a longitudinal foundation, and the more reserved decoration are all key tenets of Palladian architecture. This style of architecture is particularly prominent in the mid-Atlantic region of the United States, where many plantation houses and government buildings are modelled in this style, as well as in some parts of England. Some examples include the State Capitol in Virginia, the White House in Washington D.C, The Marble Hill historical museum in Twickenham, and the Chiswick house in London.

The Church of il Redentore stands as a fascinating example and reminder of Italy's struggle against plague outbreaks; and how the disease has shaped its faith, society, and architecture. Its restrained design, marked by austerity and restraint, expresses the woes of a still recovering Venice, both economic and political, yet in it also shines the unwavering spirit of its citizens, and the country's historical resilience against the Plague. Palladio's

choices, the decentralized location, the airy nave inspired by Roman baths, and the carefully planned procession areas not only address faithful needs of the population but also reinforce the Venetian view of disease as a divine challenge to be met with humility and reverence. It also symbolizes the pinnacle of Palladio's ecclesiastical work, which was, and continues to be, a constant source of inspiration for many architects. Through the Church of il Redentore, Venetians continue to honor the legacy of Italy's endurance, transforming the church into a lasting symbol of remembrance and resilience.

Bibliography

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