

Layers of Memory: On an Urban, Architectural, and Sculptural Scale (*Spolia*)

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This volume originates from a webinar that was held at the Ca' Foscari University of Venice in the midst of one of the most severe waves of COVID-19 that struck Italy, on 25th March 2021, entitled: *La chiesa di San Giacomo a Venezia. Studi di architettura, scultura, storia*.

The aim of the seminar was to study, with an interdisciplinary approach, the intriguing and challenging architecture of the church of San Giacomo di Rialto set in its own context, the Rialto area, between the Middle Ages and the Modern Age. The success of the event led us to expand our research and involve scholars who would have been able to explore the different layers of meaning that the urban and architectural context encompasses, thus contributing to a deeper understanding of the building's importance in the Medieval and Modern Ages.

This relationship is made evident in the way in which the Venetian brotherhoods were involved in the arrangement of the church's altars and burial spaces. We therefore opted to investigate more specifically the memorial character of the architecture and furnishings of the church in the context of the history of Venice. The volume thus took the form of a fruitful dialogue involving different generations of scholars from diverse disciplines. Art, architectural and urban planning historians, geologists, archaeologists and historians, all converse in the volume without conflict, each offering his or her own contribution to the discussion, to the development of specific arguments and to the investigation of ongoing problematic issues. The scholars who contributed to the volume also belong to differ-

ent schools of thought and present different levels of academic experience: for instance, together with the essay by an internationally renowned expert such as Lorenzo Lazzarini, there is an article by Dorothy Collins, a King's College of London graduate student, who wrote her degree thesis at Ca' Foscari focusing on the architecture of the church of San Giacomo di Rialto.

For the city, the celebration of the 1600th anniversary of Venice in 2021 meant the triumph of a legend over history. Indeed, the date of the city's foundation on 25th March 421 AD is a component of a genuine imaginary tradition, a myth elaborated between the 13th and the 14th century - in other words, what today might appear to us as a conscious historical distortion, as well as the narrative that wants the church of San Giacomo di Rialto to have been founded a few years later. As Venetians, or Venetians by adoption, we appreciate the value of a tradition that, however feeble, is still alive, but we would like this book to attempt to build a bridge between the strength of tradition (even if invented) and the uncertainty of the future function of an area of the city that through the centuries has undergone radical transformations in its social aspects and in the use of public spaces. The close intertwining - historically attested and critically reconstructed in this volume - between the church and the area of the market could not only shed new light on the deep sense of such tradition, but could also help define a potential future role for this area that would not underestimate the intricate and persistent multilayering of meanings that are deep-rooted in the Venetian identity.

We believe that this volume therefore offers a greater understanding of the multiple layers of meaning that have been superimposed between the Medieval and Modern Ages in the Rialto area, detecting as the leitmotif of analysis the memorial component that each operation of architectural reuse has always carried in the history of the church of San Giacomo di Rialto. Adopting

this principle, in their semantic sophistication we could interpret the persistence of the spatial model, the reuse of individual architectural and decorative elements (such as the mosaic in the high altar, probably recalling the mosaic decoration of the pre-existing apsidal calotte) but also, on a larger scale, the different configurations of the urban context (the Rialto market) through the centuries, after repeated destruction, reconstruction and transformation. With this multi-scalar approach, the church, a sort of an architectural 'relic', played a key role in the narrative strategy adopted to perpetually renovate the myth of Venice. In its urban dimension, the church of San Giacomo di Rialto appears to scholars as a seismograph of the role that the *forma urbis* has constantly played in connection with a myth that is progressively enriched with new themes. The building thus takes on a conceptual and polysemantic dimension where each component (objects, contexts, meanings, functions, images) constitutes an element of cultural memory and where each era leaves a tangible trace.

For instance, this is the case of the architectural reconstruction carried out between the 16th and the 17th century, where, in order to maintain the architectural shape - so deeply rooted in the collective memory - by adapting it to the new lighting system requirements, the entire structure (floor, columns, vaults, roof) was elevated, maintaining the perimeter walls but leaving rough-hewn stone ashlar under the columns as a memory of the operations carried out. The documentary evidence on the 17th-century renovation - published here for the first time - opens up further questions in addition to all the other research paths we wish to start with this volume. Indeed, our first goal has been to assess the knowledge acquired in recent decades on the church of San Giacomo di Rialto, clearly pointing out the many still unsolved riddles that only appropriate archaeological investigations could start to unravel. In the context of the most up-to-date historiography on the vicissitudes of

the ‘myth of Venice’,¹ this volume therefore represents a starting point for further and more in-depth research on the church within its urban context, which we would like to encourage, not least on the basis of the images collected at the end of the volume, resulting from a remarkable photographic campaign specifically carried out by Francesco Turio Böhm.

In recent years, this positive approach toward the interdisciplinary investigation of the urbanistic, architec-

tural and sculptural aspects of the Rialto area has been promoted by a number of events and publications aimed at imagining the future of the Rialto market, starting with the ‘Progetto Rialto’;² the decision to publish the volume in English is also motivated by cultivating a vivid idea of the future thanks to the consciousness of having to keep the fire of tradition – as Gustav Mahler once said – without fearing the cult of ashes.

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1 Ortalli, G. (2021). *Venezia inventata: verità e leggenda della Serenissima*. Bologna: il Mulino. See also Calvelli, L.; Cresci Marrone, G. (2022). “Oltre la leggenda. Il 421 d.C. nella Venetia”. *Ateneo Veneto*, 209, 3(21/I), 81-104, especially fn. 4 for further bibliography.

2 Calabi, D. (2020). *Rialto, l’isola del mercato a Venezia: una passeggiata tra arte e storia*. Sommacampagna: Cierre edizioni; *Rialto: centro di una economia mondo: Archivio di Stato di Venezia, mostra documentaria* (23 marzo 2019). A cura di D. Calabi, L. Molà, P. Morachiello. Venezia: Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali, Archivio di Stato di Venezia: Rialto novo; Venezia Lido: Supernova, 2019.

