

Material and Immaterial Architectures: The Clocktower Controversy

REBECCA WILLIAMSON
University of Pennsylvania

This paper will examine the parallels between architecture's material and immaterial dimensions in the case of the controversy over alterations to the clock tower (*torre del orologio* or *torre dei mori*) in Venice's Piazza San Marco. The clock tower itself dates from the late fifteenth century and is now generally attributed to Codussi. In 1755, coinciding with restoration of the clock itself, Venetian authorities commissioned Giorgio Massari to add an attic story to the two wings attached to the tower, an intervention meant to regularize the roof line. The resulting additional load on the building prompted the authorities to contemplate added support at the lower level. The architect Tommaso Temanza and the mathematician/theorist Giovanni Poleni, among others, called for additional columns in the ground floor facade, but in a different plane than the attic story addition.

The decision to add the columns was controversial and generated debate among architects, engineers and others prior to their placement. The argument was over whether any columns were necessary at all, how many should be added, where they should be placed, and whether the need for the columns was based in structural, visual, or some other criteria. A rejected proposal featured one column at the center of each opening. The idea of placing two columns in each opening, close to the existing pilasters, eventually prevailed, and this is the current state of the facade.

Today the entire building is covered by a seemingly uniform patina that hides the different origins of its various parts. Few of the millions of visitors to Piazza San Marco are aware that the eight added columns are some two hundred and fifty years newer than the rest of the lower facade. At the time of their placement, however, their shiny

shafts stood out against the darkened stone on the rest of the building, reminding passersby of the recent intervention.

In the period immediately following the placing of the new columns, the reception of the changes was acrimonious. Accusations followed the posting of graffiti ridiculing the shiny new columns. The language of the graffiti was ambiguous, leaving open two interpretations: 1) that the columns themselves serve no purpose within the structure of the building; and 2) that the columns remind passersby of members of the nobility who serve no good purpose within the society.

Entangled in this debate were notions of truth in architecture that were undergoing a severe test in the face of the emerging sciences of statics and strengths of materials. Familiarity of image and habitual practice came into question in the face of new ways of judging correctness in building, and new aspirations to purity and sobriety of form. A new understanding of the materials of construction led to a challenge of received forms of building, analogous to the contemporaneous critique of social and political structures.

This paper will rely on unpublished archival material to flesh out the debate noted in contemporary texts of Tommaso Temanza, Francesco Milizia and Andrea Memmo. It will place the controversy in the context of a history of close relations between architecture and political and social programs in the Veneto. Finally, it will demonstrate that the material and immaterial expressions of a building are tightly entwined, forming an entity that plays a role in the social and political dramas of the society in which it exists.

Editor's note: The full text of this paper was not available at the time of publication.