Andrea Memmo's Project for the Prato della Valle

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Andrea Memmo's project for an artificial island in the city of Padua produced what is still one of the most unusual urban spaces in the world. This project turned the neglected, swampy area of the Prato della Valle into a viable site for many different kinds of activities, from markets and other public events to quiet Sunday walks. In this brief discussion of the project, my focus will be on its multi-layered program and the way in which this program reflects Memrno's desire to promote mingling and differentiation, both materially and socially.

INTRODUCTION

Every city has a unique set of natural and historical conditions that accompany its location. Projects executed in the city can exemplify its specific identity and the self-image of its inhabitants, or they may represent smaller or larger groups, from a few individuals to national and international interests. In the following discussion I shall consider the ways in which natural conditions and individual, local and outside interests figure in a project for one site in the Italian city of Padua, whose history has long been linked with that of its more famous neighbor, the city of Venice.

THE WATERS OF PADUA AND VENICE

Padua lies just west of Venice in the region once known to the Venetians as the ***terraferma.*** This territory of cities, farmlands and forests, located to the west, north and south of the lagoon of Venice, corresponds roughly to the region now known as the Veneto. Although translated as mainland, ***terraferma*** connotes a more powerful image: of a single, still, firm, fixed and motionless earth, contrasted with the constant flow of many waters through, around, and over it. Yet the distinction between water and land in this region is far from clear. The ***terraferma*** was once full of meandering rivers and swampy areas whose drainage was effected and maintained only through artificial means, a work of separation known as *bonificazione* or improvement. At the same time the lagoon itself also mingles land and water, as it is made up of shallow, marshy areas cut by deeper channels that continue the natural pattern of the mainland rivers.

Surrounded and permeated by water, Venice is defined by its presence. The briny smell and the slapping sound of the canals are characteristics even of remote parts of the island, far removed from the familiar monuments. Venice, however, is only one of several Veneto cities in which canals are a prominent urban feature. As the Roman city of Patavium, Padua was founded upon a mainland island created by the meanders of the Medioacus Maior and Minor, two branches of the river that in modem times is known as the Brenta.[1] Waterways once wound through and around the city, and even those that no longer exist have left their mark on its urban character.

Over the course of the centuries Venetians, Paduans and other residents of the Venetian territories developed a number oftheories about ways that intervention in the hydrological conditions of the area might improve or preserve the land and the lagoon. These theories generated public discussion and often bitter disputes, as each proposal inevitably entailed an uneven distribution of benefits and harm. Prominent among them were the proposals to drain swampy areas, straighten the rivers, divert them from the lagoon, and raise the embankments along their sides.

In their discussions of the hydrological conditions of the lagoon and the ***terraferma,*** the Venetians were concerned with both sweet and saline water. Sweet water served as the basis of all nourishment, and saline as the bearer and neutralizer of waste. The Venetians sought to separate the two, to maintain the purity of the potable water, to protect the lagoon and its channels, and to avoid relying on outside sources. While continuing the long Veneto tradition of manipulation of water and land resources, eighteenth century Veneto policies regarding water took into account new scientific methods and technologies and changing political, social and economic conditions.

ARCHITECTURAL THEORY, SOCIAL AND POLITICAL PROGRAMS: CARLO LODOLI AND ANDREA MEMMO

Overshadowing all technological innovations was a threat to Venetian society that a few Venetians had begun to under-

stand, although their warnings had been largely ignored. The centuries-old Republic of Venice was in danger from both internal and external forces. Venetians had begun to take their wealth for granted and avoided innovation just when it was most needed. The Republic suffered a decline throughout the entire eighteenth century, and the response of Venetians was to throw more energy and expense into the games and festivities that had always been a part of the life of the city. The nobility spent their nights gambling away family fortunes, fueled by the popular stimulant, coffee. They did not easily recognize or accept the social changes that were occurring here as in other parts of the world, and continued to wield exclusive power and seek political preservation in stasis.

One of the few Venetians to strike a position counter to the frivolity of Venetian life was Carlo Lodoli, a Franciscan Friar whose bare face, rough garments and austere habits contrasted with the ostentation of the society in which he lived.[2] Lodoli advocated a sober architecture, in contrast with the ornate forms of the recent past. He did not, however, embrace the imitation of classical forms that would come to be known as Neo-Classicism. Instead, Lodoli argued for a new way of understanding the relationships between form, material and use.

Lodoli's motto was *devonsi unire e fabrica e ragione, e sia funzion la rappresentazione:* "building and reason must be united, and the function should be the representation." In the Venetian arsenal near his childhood home, Lodoli had seen ships built out of wood, shaped in harmony with the nature of the material and the use to which the vessel would be put. He concluded that buildings, too, could and should be built according to such considerations, rather than adherence to past forms. Fundamental to his theory was the observation that every material has its own *indole,* its character or nature, a term that verges on indicating personality.

Among Lodoli's disciples, one of the most faithful and most successful in the public realm was Andrea Memmo. In 1775 Memmo had an opportunity to make his own mark on the urban landscape of Padua, and he did so mindful of the lessons he had learned from Lodoli. He was appointed *Provveditore* or Supervisor of Padua, a position which he held as a representative of Venetian authority. He served in this position from March 1775 to July 1776, when he was recalled to Venice and sent to Constantinople. In the brief time he spent in Padua, he worked feverishly to generate interest and capital for two large civic projects, a new hospital and the alterations of the area known as the Prato della Valle. Both projects were significant additions to the city not only as large and imposing physical structures, but also as new responses to problems of hygiene, public order and decorum.

Entering as an official of the dominant Venetian state into a city that, despite its independent history and institutions, was largely owned by Venetians, Memmo interpreted his role as supervisor broadly. He saw it as his mission to boost the local economy, encourage tourism and improve the health and welfare of the citizens. He chose to effect his reforms through architecture. His writing and that which his secretary, Vincenzo Radicchio, executed for him are characterized by a level of attention to details and pragmatic questions that is remarkable for someone whose involvement in the actual construction and day-to-day functioning of the projects would have been quite limited, and whose schemes appear, on first inspection, to be visionary rather than pragmatic.

Memmo's mentor, Lodoli, had introduced an activist interpretation of the role that virtue would play in the life of the architect, and the role that architecture would play in the life of the virtuous person. He taught his students, who were destined for public careers, that architecture was a way of intervening concretely in civic life. As they matured, his disciples came to represent a dissident group within Venetian society, seeking to reform the government and society. Among Lodoli's disciples were a few whose radical approaches led them into direct conflict with the Venetian authorities. Memmo chose to work within the existing structure, and although equally motivated by a desire for reform, he had a long and relatively tranquil public career.

THE PRATO DELLA VALLE

Memmo brought to Padua a sense of urgency in effecting political, economic and social reform through interventions in the built character of the city. It was on the southeastern part of Padua, between the inner and outer rings of walls and canals, that he focused his attentions. He made his most tangible mark on the area known as the Prato della Valle, a vast, low, open area, rimmed by religious and civic buildings and by aristocratic and more popular residential structures (including that in which Memmo would live during his time in Padua). In Roman times the site had been on the margins of the urban area, yet had already been identified with public functions. On the site a sepulchral area, a circus, and a theater known locally as the Zairo once stood, although all had been destroyed long before Mernmo's time.[3]

Prior to Memmo's intervention, the *prato* or field, as it was known, had indeed been an ill-defined, unpaved area, rather than a piazza. It had long been marshy and was prone to floods, which would leave in their wake huge populations of frogs and mosquitoes, and the stink of stagnant water and putrefaction. A particularly severe episode of flooding in 1772, combined with changing theories about hygiene and odor, convinced Paduan authorities that the existing state of the area was intolerable. Coinciding with this was a decline of the seasonal parish fairs, which took place in the Prato and nearby piazzas. The fairs had been weakened by competition with one another and threatened by the success of the fairs of other, more economically aggressive Veneto cities.

Shortly before Memmo arrived in Padua, the local government obtained jurisdiction of the Prato, seized from the religious order that had controlled it. Memmo saw an opportunity to intervene and he acted quickly. He proposed a new

configuration of the site and concurrent reform of the administration of the fairs that together would affect many aspects of Paduan life, including health, commerce, tourism, and social organization. In his plan the parish fairs would be merged into one, located on and around an elliptical artificial island placed in the center of the Prato. The fairs would promote a Venetian identity with the new name: *Fiera di Venezia in Padova,* the fair of Venice in Padua For the sale of luxury items including fabrics, mirrors and precious metalwork, Memmo proposed a ring of wooden *botteghe* or shops to be located on the island. Replacing the poorly constructed wooden bleachers that had been erected over the years for races and other events in the Prato, he also proposed a new set of bleachers made of wood and metal that could be quickly erected and dismantled, and easily moved to any location.

Soil excavated for the creation of the canals around the island raised the level of the water-logged center of the Prato. The canals offered an efficient drainage route connected with the city's existing water system. Underground conduits brought water from the nearby river and returned it downstream, or diverted the flow away from the elliptical canal to allow for draining and prevent overflow and silting in periods of heavy rain. In periods of drought the grass would be watered by jets mounted on small boats floating in the canal.

Upon this ingenious solution to the periodic flooding of the area, Memmo layered associations and incentives directed at virtually every sector of the population, including Paduans both rich and poor, Venetians and visitors from abroad. His description explicitly promotes commerce "so that there might be a place where citizens and foreigners would be summoned to purchase," and a mingling of people of all kinds within a structure that would allow for distinctions based on social status and affluence.[4]

Memmo provided for public festivities while offering a privileged experience for the nobility, and he derived his imagery equally from patrician villa forms and popular structures. Central to his program was a carefully employed hierarchy of materials, from heavy and enduring stone to lightweight, temporary and moveable parts of wood, fabric and leather. This matching of materials to uses, according to their individual natures, corresponds to the lessons Memmo had learned from Lodoli. Yet Memmo also proposed that the wooden *botteghe* be painted to resemble marble, an inversion curious for a student of Lodoli, who had specifically criticized the use of one material to represent another. Furthermore, his use of the orders in the *botteghe* and in other parts of the project went against Lodoli's rejection of such quotations. These deviations from the architectural theory Memmo claimed to embrace may be explained in part by the fact that these are temporary, festive structures: the props of a stage set rather than enduring edifices.

A decade later, while serving in Rome, Memmo reassessed the project. He commissioned new *vedute,* painted and engraved views, which showed new proposals intended to increase the distinctions that he had begun to indicate in his earlier project. Among these were the removal of the wooden *botteghe,* clearing the view and moving the sale of "noble merchandise" to a new stone structure along the southern perimeter of the Prato. With the removal of the *botteghe,* only the four kiosks would remain on the island, two of which would be for the rental of seat covers and two for the sale of novelty refreshments including coffee and flavored ices. These kiosks were intended as "oriental" elements, a blending of what was taken to be Turkish and Chinese imagery. Memmo recommended two of each type of vendor in the kiosks, to encourage competition for better service. At the same time, the four kiosks would create what Memmo called a "visual pyramid," a more monumental perspective effect than the enclosure of the earlier scheme.

The stone walls of the canal, which support the sponsored statues of people who have "contributed to the glory of Padua," were initially added for a pragmatic purpose: to prevent landslides along the canal embankments. The use of statues, a total of eighty-eight inexpensively produced, slightly larger than life-size figures, was introduced by Memmo as a means to finance the project, but he also intended them to carry a moral message, inspiring passersby to virtuous behavior. By sponsoring a statue, interested parties could promote the commemoration of a particular person and, in a sense, install him in history. The facts that there are so many statues, specifically sponsored by individuals and private groups rather than a single city or state government, and in a location removed from the central civic structures of the city, diminished the importance of any one statue in the group, allowing them to be read as a gathering of figures. This lack of centrality and monumentality in the initial conception of the project is reinforced by Memmo's choice of an elliptical rather than circular form, implying two foci rather than a single center, and by the choice of a fountain in a basin, referred to as a mirror of water, creating what he explicitely intended to be an empty center.

CONCLUSION

Mernmo's project is the realization of a fantastic vision of the city, the island image having its roots in the Renaissance visions of the Veneto writers Francesco Colonna, who wrote of a fantastic circular island in his *Hypnerotomachia Poliphili* and of Alvise Cornaro, who dreamed ofregularizing the form of Venice by encircling it with ramparts and placing a new artificial island off of Piazza San Marco.[5]

Memmo's version of the island is a display of technical ingenuity and control, mingling pragmatic solutions to long-standing problems with surprising and delightful devices. The intervention provided a truly social space which could be enjoyed by all members of society, whose experience of the place in Memmo's time differed according to their willingness and ability to pay for niceties such as rented seat cushions for the stone benches. The project served as an economic boost for the city, and it did so with the least possible pain to all concerned. Instead of taxes, the revenue generated by the rental of seating in the bleachers for special

events and of space in the shops would cover some of the costs of constructing and maintaining the island and its various features. The remaining expenses would be covered by sponsorship of statues, which allowed for an alternative means of local and foreign participation.

Finally, the project defined and regularized pre-existing functions of the area. It gave a clear path of circulation to what had once been an uncontrolled drift of traffic of pedestrians, carriages and animals through an indeterminate space. The Prato, analogous to the lagoon, had been a swampy *invaso* or vessel of space, in which the boundaries between water and land fluctuated. Memmo's intervention, like the swamp reclamation and river straightening in other parts of the region, promoted clear distinctions between water and land. The island that results plays on the analogy between Padua and Venice as island cities, Venice encircled by salted water, Padua by sweet. The artificial island mimics the way Padua resembles Venice, and thus reinforces the *Venezianita* of the mainland city. At the same time it inevitably reinforces the distinction between the two cities, as the sweet water that circulates through the Prato della Valle from and back into the city system and the surrounding solid ground are *terraferma* rather than lagoon components.

Memmo's project demonstrates the important role that design can play in the life, image and economy of a city, yet it is not without its flaws. Some of the principles of differentiation that underlie many of Memmo's decisions, both about land and water and about social groups, have long since fallen into disfavor. On the other hand, the commercialism that in Memmo's time was an innovation aimed at rescuing a faltering economy is now all too familiar. Nevertheless, while the political program and didactic content behind the project are now lost to most who visit the site, it has remained a popular and functioning site for markets, fairs, walks and rendezvous. Because Memmo was able to provide for the needs of the people of his time with an enduring vision of the potential of the place, his island in the Prato della Valle has successfully survived the changes wrought by time on the city and its inhabitants.

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