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di Storia Urbana

# SU

# CITTÀ CHE SI ADATTANO?

# ADAPTIVE CITIES?

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a cura di  
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# **CITTÀ CHE SI ADATTANO? ADAPTIVE CITIES?**

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4

**STRATEGIE DI ADATTAMENTO  
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**ADAPTIVE STRATEGIES AND  
CRITICAL HERITAGE**

a cura di  
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**Rosa Tamborrino**

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# INVISIBLE CONNECTIONS. RECONSTRUCTING VENETIAN ARCHITECT GIORGIO MASSARI'S INTERNATIONAL NETWORK (1687-1766)

MARCO FELICIONI

## Abstract

*In a context marked by deep international contacts, Venetian architect Giorgio Massari demonstrates through his architectural works that he was exposed to and operated within a network made up of exchanges, influences, and profitable interferences. Despite the absence of biographical documentation about his travels, also given his critical misfortune among his contemporaries, the essay attempts to reconstruct this very network, reading his architectural works and the sources documenting his constructions.*

## Keywords

*Massari, Venice, XVIII-Century, international, interferences*

## Introduction

Despite lacking and scarce knowledge about the biography of Giorgio Massari, this paper aims at reconstructing his network and cultural references by inserting his figure into the thriving 18<sup>th</sup>-century Venetian context. The late-*Seicento* and early-*Settecento* in Europe are characterized by growing exchange, as international travelling is intensified among cultured men of the time. Far Eastern influences come into fashion in Europe, while at the same any aspiring architect must reach Rome to study and draw antiquities, while confronting with the works by Bernini and Borromini.

At this time, some architectural drawings likely display measurement in more than one unit typology, in a quest for comprehension even in different regions far apart, making it possible to analyze or study in Turin a villa being built in the Venetian state. What happens in Rome has now consequences on the architecture of Venice as well. And the city on the lagoon now starts to attract foreign students or academies' *pensionnaires* who wants to study and draw its architecture.

International relationships are fostered among Venetian noblemen, who expect to become ambassadors abroad as a necessary step in their *cursus honorum* towards the title of Procuratore di San Marco. On the opposite, the city officially welcomes ambassadors with triumphal temporary installation, often floating in the Grand Canal. Notable, in

this sense, is the scenography designed by Muttoni in 1709 to welcome king Frederick IV of Denmark in Vicenza. And diplomatic travels imply a return; thus, ambassadors who come back from Germany, Wien, or Constantinople, bringing back books and knowledge to share. A journey that is limited in time might lead to a long-term exchange of cultures, especially in a city like Venice, thanks to its being at an intersection of international markets.

Precisely in this context Giorgio Massari works as an architect. He likely travels outside the city, being exposed to supranational contacts. However, his biography lacks written evidence and can hardly be reconstructed: he is born near Lake Garda in 1687, to a father who makes furniture (*marangon*), with whom he works and is trained. Other, meager pieces of information can be gathered from his correspondence exchanged with his patrons, such as Paolo Tamagnini, for whom he builds his first work, a villa in Istrana, in 1712. When Tamagnini dies, Massari is appointed his heir and marries his widow, moving to a house near S. Giovanni in Bragora, in Venice. Despite the numerous works he builds, architectural critics of the time induce a sort of *damnatio memorie* against him, due to his substantial lack of adherence to the emerging classicist theories. Tommaso Temanza avoids including him in his *Lives* [Temanza 1778], just as Francesco Milizia never mentions him in his biographies [Milizia 1768]. He dies childless in 1766, leaving an astonishingly modest estate, which includes only movable property and reflects a sober lifestyle, an uncommon modesty.



*Plan de la Bibliothèque de la République de Venise, sur le Grand Canal à S. Samuele. | Plan de la Bibliothèque de la République de Venise, sur le Grand Canal à S. Samuele*

1: Plan of the floor plan and of the piano nobile of Palazzo Grassi, as illustrated in [Cicognara, Diedo, Selva 1858].



Massari builds churches, convents, villas, and palaces throughout the domain of the Venetian state, from Brescia to Dalmatia: his works display ability to combine *Palladianism* with international, Roman, or local influences, depending on where he builds. His range is comparable to that of the Turinese Bernardo Antonio Vittone who, despite attending the academy of San Luca, works substantially in his homeland, referring to the architecture of Guarini and Juvarra. Similarly, Massari – a ‘provincial’ architect working in his own land for small and medium-sized clients – succeeded in producing valuable *local* architecture, still with an *international* scope.

A striking example of this is the design for Palazzo Grassi, commissioned by a family from Chioggia as soon as it acquired the Venetian noble title in 1748. The façade features the traditional Venetian system, albeit simplified, alluding to a *portico* passing through the center with wings closed laterally. However, the floor plan shows a striking new solution, revealing a different structure: behind the very narrow vestibule with a *serliana* opening onto the Grand Canal, an atrium – almost Vitruvian – with three naves is concealed, echoing 16th-century Roman models such as Palazzo Farnese, mixing the courtly reference with Venetian examples such as Domenico Rossi’s Ca’ Corner della Regina and Gaspari’s Palazzo Zenobio ai Carmini. In addition, a columned courtyard opens behind the atrium: the entire ground floor of the palace is structured almost as a succession of colonnades, emphasizing the richness of the entrance. While the influences of the Roman Baroque could be mediated by Gaspari, with whom Massari has already worked at the *Chiesa della Fava*, it is likely that Massari himself travelled to Rome and had the opportunity to engage in a direct study of architecture there.

## Projects’ approvals as a chance for exchange

Unlike in Rome or in Bologna – where design drawings are usually submitted to the *Accademia di San Luca* or the *Accademia Clementina* – there is no academy in Venice: for such reasons clients usually turn to experts when in need for an opinion on a project: Massari was reached by the architect Francesco Muttoni, to whom Countess Teresa Capra had commissioned a palace in S. Stefano di Vicenza. In a handwritten note by Muttoni, preserved in a file on Palazzo Capra at the Bertoliana Library in Vicenza and later reproduced in an essay [Franco 1962, 149], we learn of the architect’s esteem for Massari<sup>1</sup>. From the latter he received suggestions for the plan, the elevation, the staircase, and the interiors: it is perhaps because of this exchange of views that a detail of the staircase here makes explicit reference to Juvarra’s stair for Palazzo Spadafora. In a letter

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<sup>1</sup> «Tra gl'altri ho più lungamente e colla più seria occupazione conferito col Signor Giorgio Massari, che tiene il primo luoco fra tutti, et è distinto per il proprio merito e virtù» [Franco 1962, 149].

of reply dated September 1737, Massari recounts that Muttoni had visited him in Venice with a roll of drawings to receive what he calls his «humble opinion»<sup>2</sup>.

Further exchanges with other architects of his time occur, for instance, in 1743, when Cardinal Rezzonico – then bishop of Padua – submits to him the designs of Giambattista Savio for the reconstruction of the seminary of his city. Massari proposes modifications and his suggestions are accepted along with those of Marquis Giovanni Poleni [Lorenzoni 1963, 60]. In 1747, moreover, he diligently evaluates and approves the project outlined by Zenone Castagna, a member of the Dominican Congregation of Venice, for the church of St. Mary of the Angels in Poreč, the foundation stone of which is laid in September of the same year. In July 1748 he answers a series of questions, formulated by Antonio Marchetti, regarding the second order of the façade of the Brescia Cathedral: Massari indicates the proportions he considers most suitable for the membranes and windows, and dwells on the possibility of a triangular tympanum frontispiece [Boselli 1951]. Marchetti too isn't satisfied with epistolary correspondence and traveled to Venice to have drawings examined and approved.

## The role of transnational religious congregations

Although on one side the above-mentioned exchanges mostly delimit the territory of the Republic of Venice, on the other side Massari works for religious congregations, such as the Dominicans and the Oratorians, who represent further fruitful opportunities for comparisons on an international scale.

For the Dominicans, Massari designs the church of Santa Maria del Rosario (or *Gesuati*), perhaps his most significant work: the construction works last almost twenty years of time and present a series of complexities that Massari masterfully manages to solve. The tetrastyle façade directly overlooks the *Zattere* and presents a simple layout: the rectilinear entablature supports a triangular tympanum, pierced in the center by an oval. The central span is occupied by the portal, with a semicircular tympanum, and an inscription. The two lateral spans, instead, host four statues within niches. In the inside a single nave with three chapels on each side dominates the space, leading to a square presbytery covered by a dome without a drum and, at the back, a choir where the Dominican friars gather to sing and pray during the mass.

Andrea Palladio's *Redentore* church constitutes the main reference model: the same proportions of the rectangular nave, as well as the number of chapels and the way they face the nave with a scansion of paired semi-columns also return here, although the position of the sacristies is reverse with that of the two apses of the presbytery. Massari assembles and disassembles Palladian elements: he breaks down Palladio's architecture into

<sup>2</sup> «Dissi qualche parere sopra varij particolari [...], e ciò ho fatto urbanamente, e senza alcun ben che minimo interesse, ma puramente per amicizia e stima che professavo e tutta via professo verso il detto signor Francesco, e la presente dichiarazione l'ho fatta ad istanza del medesimo e per segno di verità mi sottoscrivo» [Franco 1962, 149].

its constituents and then reassembles them in a totally different way, but still making its matrix recognizable. In his altar, he even replicates the presence of the columned apse, which in Palladio was an autonomous element closing the presbytery, as an autonomous element at the back of the high altar. A reasoning therefore that originates from Palladio but leads to a new solution, to a different development in elevation from a similar plan. The back of the altar immediately refers to the *Redentore's* apse, where the altar is isolated, and a transenna of free-standing columns forms a screen between the presbytery and the choir behind. In the case of the *Redentore*, these columns are an integral part of the church; in the *Gesuati*, on the other hand, they become a scaled-down element inserted inside the altar, just like in Bernini's altar in the church of San Paolo in Bologna, which houses a sculptural group by Alessandro Algardi. Two languages merge into this element, coming from the seventeenth-century Rome and from the sixteenth-century Venice, declaring two worlds and two hemispheres of reference only apparently distant. Massari's work breaks down that schematic preconception according to which eighteenth-century architecture would stand as the antithesis of that of the previous centuries. For an architect as cultured and uninhibited as Massari, Bernini and Palladio are by no means two antithetical worlds; on the contrary, they can be integrated and mixed. Even on the outside of the building, a reference for the two bell towers by the dome may be found in Juvarra's academic gift of 1707, or in the Vatican Temple published in 1694 by Carlo Fontana, which Massari may have read.



2: The church of Santa Maria del Rosario (photo by Nicolas Janberg)



3: The interior of Santa Maria del Rosario (photo by the author)

The Observant Dominicans in Venice are dependent on the General *Curia* in Rome, which implies a continuous exchange of drawings between Venice and the main head-quarter to obtain approvals before proceeding. It is no coincidence that an entry in the church ledgers shows the cost of shipping the drawings to Rome in a tin tube<sup>3</sup>, or that the Dominican archives in Santa Sabina still contain handwritten correspondence from Giorgio Massari with the explanations of his designs attached<sup>4</sup>.

The other major order Massari worked for – the Oratorians – commissioned him to design the *Chiesa della Pace* in Brescia. The same Oratorians had been patrons of Borromini in Rome, of Gaspari and Massari in Venice's *Fava* church, of Guarini and Juvarra in Turin. As a congregation with great interest in architecture, the Oratorians were at the center of

<sup>3</sup> Venice State Archive, *Santa Maria del Rosario*, b. 59, f. 3, c. 2v: «1725 Esito di Luglio. 5 detto. Spesi in un canon di latta per mandar li disegni a Roma L. 1: -4».

<sup>4</sup> Rome, Santa Sabina, Archivum Generale Ordinis Praedicatorum, XIV, PP, I pars, cc. 283: «Spiegazione del disegno formato da me suddetto di tutto il sitto...». In this letter, Giorgio Massari describes the drawings of his design for the convent of the Dominicans by the Zattere, January 22<sup>nd</sup> 1750.



positioned in the two bays, before and after the large central dome. The system of walls, deeply articulated by niches or half-columns, recalls the plans for St Peter's in the Vatican; the diagonal cuts in the impost of the dome are reminiscent of the cut edges of the pylons designed here by Bramante. Massari here creates a space, and the walls simply feature the negative result of his reasoning about space. In Brescia, he designs according to the stylistic features of Lombard architecture: the architect's eclecticism leads him to behave differently depending on the context in which he is designing. As far as the hybridization of central and longitudinal plan is concerned, he looks at the example of Sant'Alessandro church in Milan, built in the 17th century by Lorenzo Binago for the reformed Barnabite order: here too, the pillars under the dome display a diagonal cut, while the colored marble columns stand out from the wall surface. The secondary domes, which in Binago are in the side spaces, are instead positioned by Massari above the chapels as small domes with an oval shape.

Two important personalities, who appear on the building site, reveal that Massari stands at the center of a dense network of exchanges and communications: at the request of the fathers, Massari's initial project is approved by Girolamo Frigimelica, who at that time has a more established reputation within a network of international contacts. The same happens in 1729, when the *Pace* church building site is already well advanced: Filippo Juvarra, called to build the city's New Dome, passes through Brescia. On the same occasion, the Oratorians invites Juvarra to visit the building site in progress; and he expresses his approval, claiming Massari's project has no defects.

Among Oratorians, the circulation of drawings is facilitated: Juvarra's drawings for the oratory in Turin probably circulate and are shown to Massari as a possible model to emulate, both for the *Pace* and for Santa Maria della Fava in Venice; similarly, Massari's drawings possibly reach – through copies – Juvarra's gaze in Turin. This circulation of models, drawings and ideas characterizes 18th century architecture and takes place thanks to the patronage of the Oratorians, who are up to date on architecture and ask their architects to consider what other architects are building for the same order in other parts of Italy. Massari himself lies at the center of this network of exchanges and consultations: an 18<sup>th</sup> century architect can no longer manage the building process alone; his freedom decreases, when trying to put into practice personal ideas. Clients and other expert architects now count as well in the process, being called upon to have their say on the work of others.

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