
Postscript: Alberti as Architect

It is with some hesitation that I comply with the request of scholars and friends familiar with my work to attempt a comparison between Alberti's literary and aesthetic theories and his architectural projects. I hesitate because we move into an area where there is little historical evidence to sustain interpretation. Alberti rarely remarked on his projects in his writings, a circumstance that should not be taken lightly given his propensity for self-projection. Scholars have all too easily glossed over this by constructing precarious parallels between the built work and promising passages in *De re aedificatoria*. In actuality, the relationship between that text and the built work is far from clear and cannot be reduced to the simplistic equation of theory and practice. To take *De re aedificatoria* as the authentic voice of the author speaking in a theory mode is to read all too innocently (see "The Humanist and the Artist"). Nor are there many documents extant that would help us unravel Alberti's intent. The Rucellai facade, for example, is connected to Alberti by circumstantial evidence alone; for S. Sebastian there is only a letter; for S. Maria Novella and S. Pancrazio, merely a statement by Vasari; and it is still uncertain what, if any, Alberti's contribution was to Nicholas V's rebuilding projects at the Vatican.¹ When it comes to plans we are on even thinner ice; there is only one (showing only modest architectural skills) for a bath house that was never built.² Even the buildings yield few decisive cues. S. Andrea was begun *after* Alberti's death; and the Arco del Cavallo in Ferrara, attributed to him from circumstantial evidence, was moved from an as yet undetermined location. S. Francesco was never finished, and S. Sebastiano underwent mutations almost from its conception and was largely completed after Alberti's death.

For all these reasons investigations into Alberti's architecture can only exist in the realm of speculation. Scholars of Wölfflinian provenance can advantageously rely on their connoisseur's eye: "One look at the Volta del Cavallo," a scholar states, "is enough to convince one it is the work of Alberti, though there is no documentary evidence to prove it."³ But if one wants to go beyond merely identifying Alberti's hand to arrive at a critical understanding of his thoughts on architecture, one ar-

rives at a dead end, a circumstance which has led many scholars to clutch at Alberti's classicism, as it seems the most secure aspect of his work. But since the Renaissance is defined in these terms anyway, a tautological argument results that leads nowhere.

Alberti's cultural and aesthetic theories, ciphered as they are, might help in moving beyond the commonplace Renaissance themes of proportion, harmony, and classicism. For example, we would expect from earlier chapters that Alberti viewed each commission as a separate experiment in an overarching program. Keeping his literary works in mind, we would look for certain salient features such as distancing, social masking, irony, dual languages, medieval and classical elements in a dialectic, fragmentation, biographical notations, covert and overt meanings, an ecclesiastically styled skepticism toward the classical past, and last but not least context displacement, that is, the personalization of given public elements.

Let us then look at one of Alberti's earliest works, S. Francesco in Rimini, begun around 1448 and commissioned by Sigismondo Malatesta (figure 10). Whereas it is often held that Alberti was attracted to the court of Sigismondo because the vivacious and energetic ruler of Rimini had numerous humanists in his employ, it appears very likely that Alberti, as friend of Pius II, viewed Sigismondo with reservations similar to those of the pope, who openly denounced Sigismondo for his cruelty, sadism, greed, and sexual perversion.⁴ It might seem strange that Alberti, the paragon of morality, would accept a commission from such a man. However, did Sigismondo, a sort of Megalophos, not epitomize the *civitas perversa* that figures so greatly in Alberti's writings, and would that not offer an opportunity to make manifest the dialectic between the humanist program and the frenzied world?

The assignment given to Alberti was to transform a humble Franciscan church into a structure *all'antica*. That it was a Franciscan church must have, more than anything, attracted Alberti to the commission, as Franciscan thought was an important component of his philosophy. But if he interpreted the structure as that "simple and unadorned flute" that, though costing much less than the ornate one, has a more beautiful

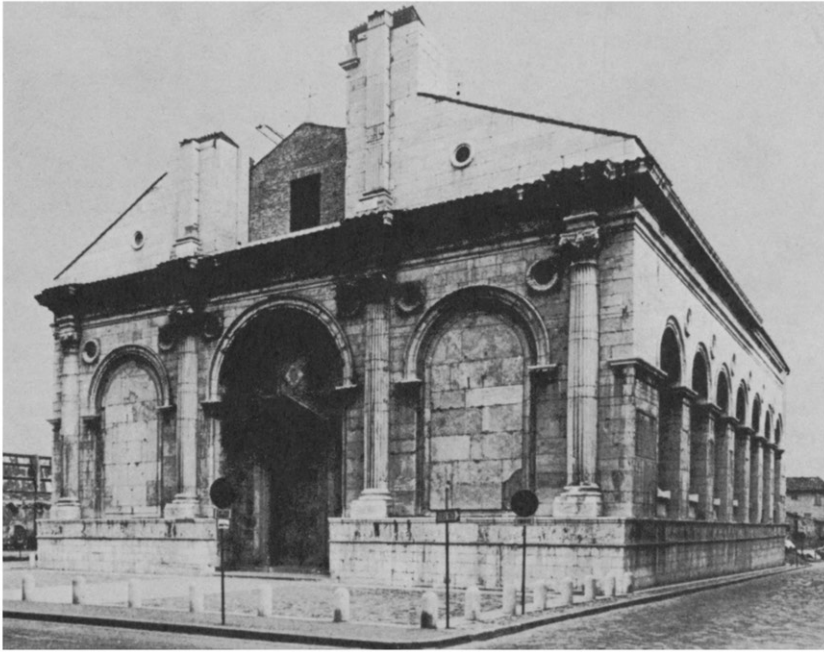


Figure 10
S. Francesco, Tempio Maletestiano (Electa), Rome.

sound—which is how he saw his writings—how was he to renovate the structure without destroying its essence?⁵ He solved the problem by providing its dialectical opposite, a “classical” neopagan realm (literally a defunct realm) of sarcophagi, each framed by an arch. The old structure, visible through the classical screen, appears untouched by the new, for churches, Alberti explains, should not be “infected by the contamination of secular life,”⁶ and, in this case, so one could add, the contamination of Sigismondo’s court. Creating a building that negates itself, Alberti invented a design where the old structure haunts the new one, throwing the latter into doubt (figure 11). The defunct society fails to bury the “pure and simple” that, in dignified repose, still remains intact. As an ensemble, however, it is an anxious proposition, much as the one of Leopis and Libripeta.

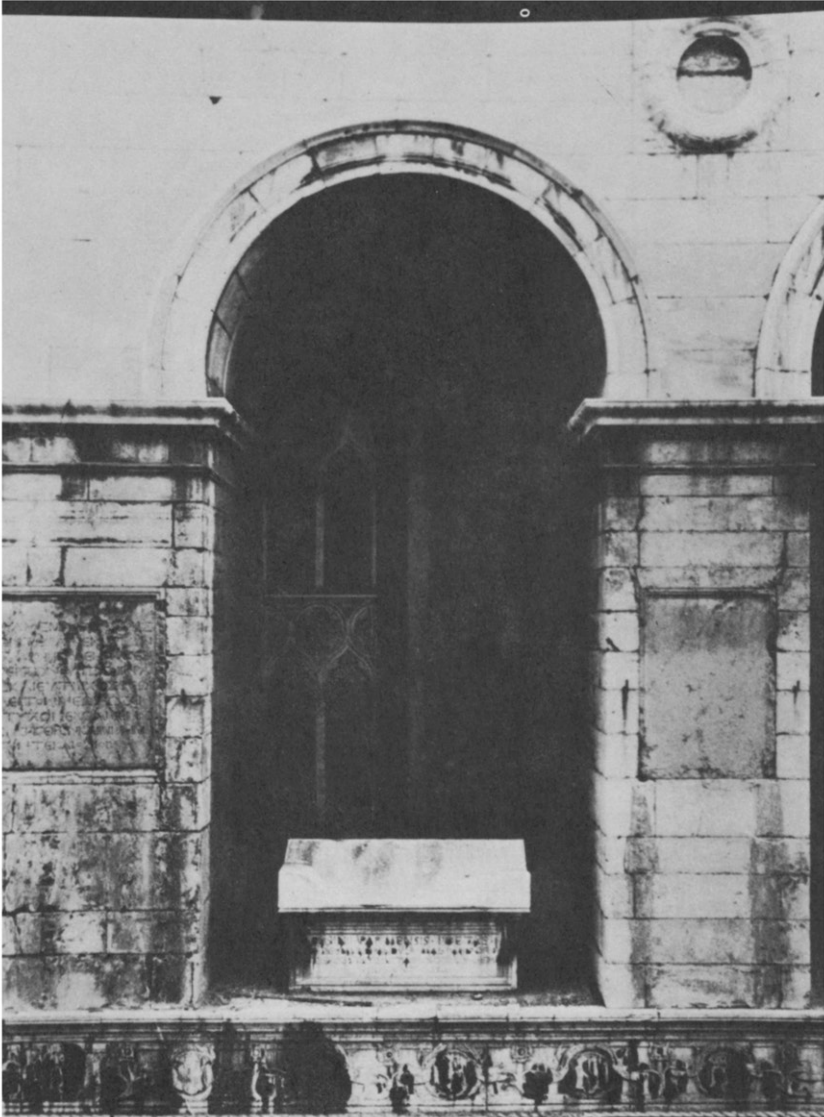


Figure 11
Side view of Tempietto Malatestiano (Electa).



Figure 12

The facade of the Rucellai Palace. (Sergio Anelli, courtesy of Elemond, Milan)

The Rucellai facade also deals with the problem of masking, though here enacted by Alberti for a patron Alberti admired (figures 12, 13). Even though the facade is an obvious expression of temporal society, which for Alberti is by its very nature masked, it is not a deception as it is employed in the context of a humanist functionary. Since the two right-hand bays were built in a second building phase and possibly not under Alberti's direct control, it has been argued that further expansion had been planned, but I find it unlikely that the carefully crafted unfinished edge of the facade, an architectural delight revealing the individual cross-sections of the various component parts of the facade (architraves, string courses, moldings, and arches) was accidental. One might conjecture that the incomplete facade may have been purposefully designed to evoke a state of ruin. Incompletion, facing the future, and fragmentation, facing the past, are the curses associated with the tem-

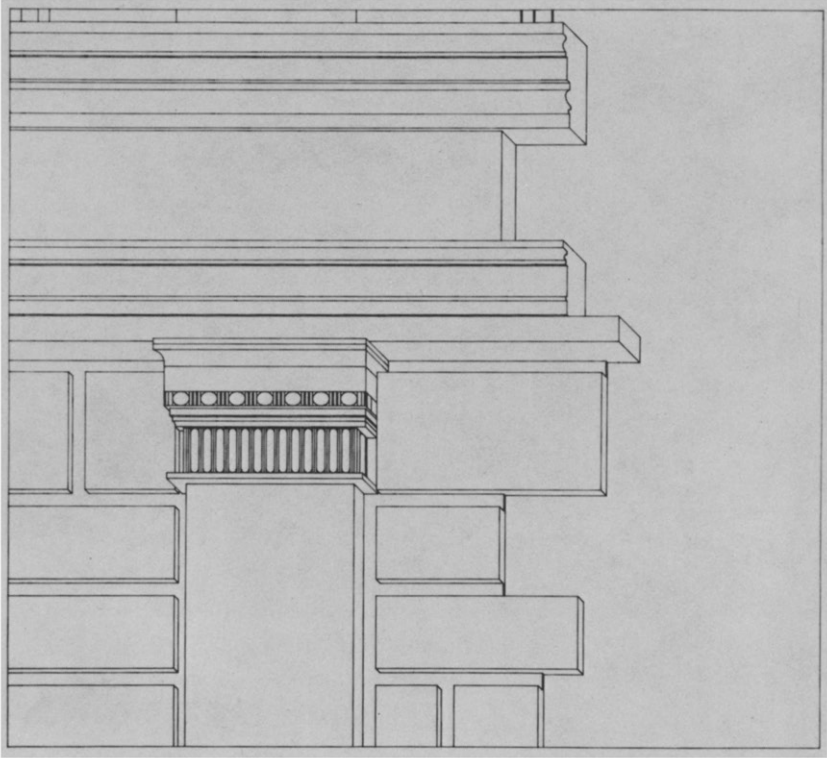


Figure 13
Detail of facade of Rucellai Palace (drawn by Lee Gray).

poral world. Just as Alberti's writings discuss this issue and indeed thematize it (see "Libri Disvoluti"), this facade presents this both-and situation as an architectural problem.

With the facade of S. Maria Novella (1458), Alberti again had to cope with the given, and again he saw this as an opportunity to express the dialectic of the spiritual and the temporal—in this case, in terms of earthly Fame and heavenly Glory (see "Philodoxeus" and "The Prince") (figure 14). When Alberti took over the commission, only the lower part of the facade with the six niches for sarcophagi had been completed. They were, so one might conjecture, the realm of earthly fame, but not that one alienated from eternal Glory as at S. Francesco. It is the Fame of the humanist city (Genipatro), interlocked by means of the new design with the realm of the eternal, that is represented by the pediment temple above; the facade is an ideogram of the ideal unification. We are reminded of a passage in *Della Famiglia* (see "Prince And His Ottimo Artefice"):

Glory springs up in public squares; reputation is nourished by the voice and judgment of many persons of honor, and in the midst of people. Fame flees from all solitary and private spots to dwell gladly in the arena [together with Glory] where crowds are gathered and celebrity is found; there the name is bright and luminous of one who with hard sweat and assiduous toil for noble ends has projected himself up out of silence, darkness, ignorance, and vice.⁷

At first glance the facade seems to express no more than the standard medieval topos differentiating Fame from Glory. This brings us to the entablature separating the two zones, a frieze ornamented with fifteen square panels. Recalling Alberti's historiography and the mediating role of the writers-saints, I am tempted to recognize this middle zone as their realm. Perhaps, in light of Alberti's autobiographical imagination, I can even be so bold as to suggest that the fifteen panels might stand for the fifteen letters of his name: BAPTISTA ALBERTI.

In S. Sebastiano (begun around 1460), in Mantua, Alberti could not establish this type of dialectic, as his assignment consisted of erecting a new building. The chapel was commissioned by Lodovico Gonzaga to house a relic of St. Sebastian, the patron saint evoked in times of plague. Is it coincidental

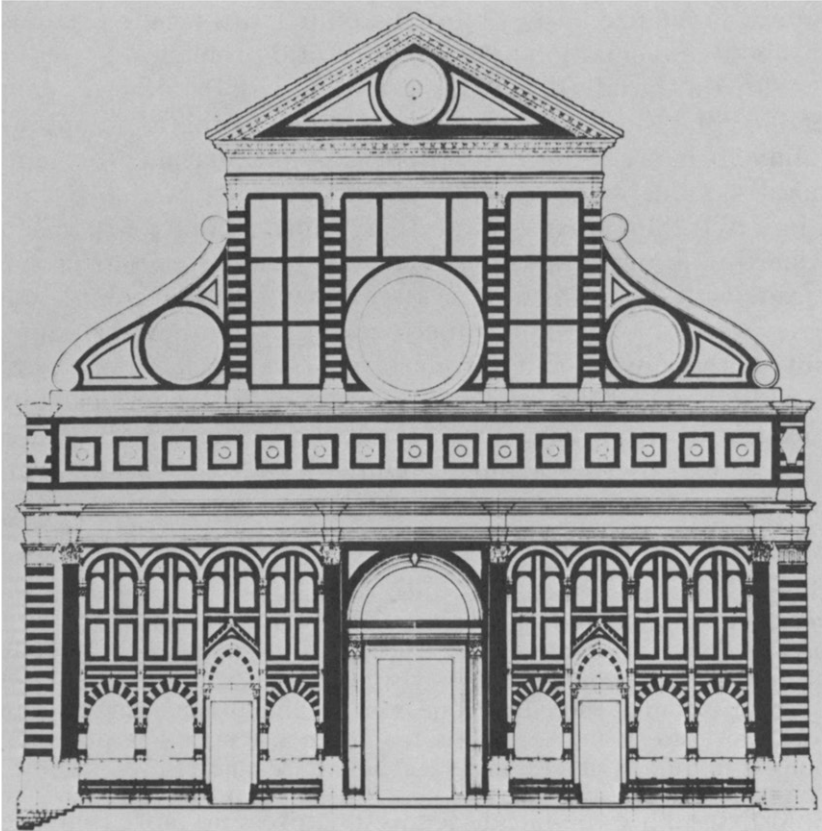


Figure 14

The facade of S. Maria Novella (adapted and redrawn by the author from Franco Borsi, *Leon Battista Alberti* [New York: Harper & Row, 1977]).

that Alberti designed churches dedicated to St. Sebastian and St. Francis? Both figure prominently in his iconography of the saintly humanist, as they represent a state of protracted suffering, of enduring. At any rate, St. Sebastian's martyrdom, translated into the protracted suffering of the humanist saint, constituted a theme that greatly stimulated Alberti's autobiographic fantasy (see "The Twelve Rings").

It seems that only the lower part of the building was completed during Alberti's life. It had five openings, as can be seen on a photograph made before the addition of the stairs. Whether the upper part conforms to Alberti's original design is unknown. A plan drawn by a certain Antonio Labaccon, seemingly copied from the original, shows three entrances as opposed to the present five on the piano nobile (figure 15).⁸ Therefore, instead of an awkward three openings on both levels, as some reconstructions have it, I see five on the ground floor and three on the upper (figure 16). Howard Saalman has convincingly argued that access to the chapel was not from the front but from the sides.⁹ A classical precedent for this is the fourth-century Temple of Clitumnus near Spoleto, on the road between Rome and Urbino. It too has four pilasters on the facade. Alberti may well have known this building, as Nicholas V had completed a castle there.

The building's theoretical importance lies, however, not so much in the facade as in the volumetric organization of its parts. Much as in *Philodoxeus*, where Alberti gave the academicians what they wanted, and in *Vita St. Potiti*, where he gave the Vatican what it wanted while simultaneously developing his own ideology, this building also has two layers of meaning. One reading is intended to satisfy the patron; the other spells out the Albertian masterplan. For the patron Alberti designed a project that certainly appealed to Gonzaga's vanity, as it exalted him to the rank of king by alluding to the conflation of a king's two separate natures, the divine and the earthly (see "Writer-Saint"). Kings and bishops were considered *personae mixtae* (combining spiritual and secular) or *personae geminatae* (human by nature and divine by grace). Howard Saalman's research confirms my thesis that Alberti translated this image of theological duality into architectural form. The building is

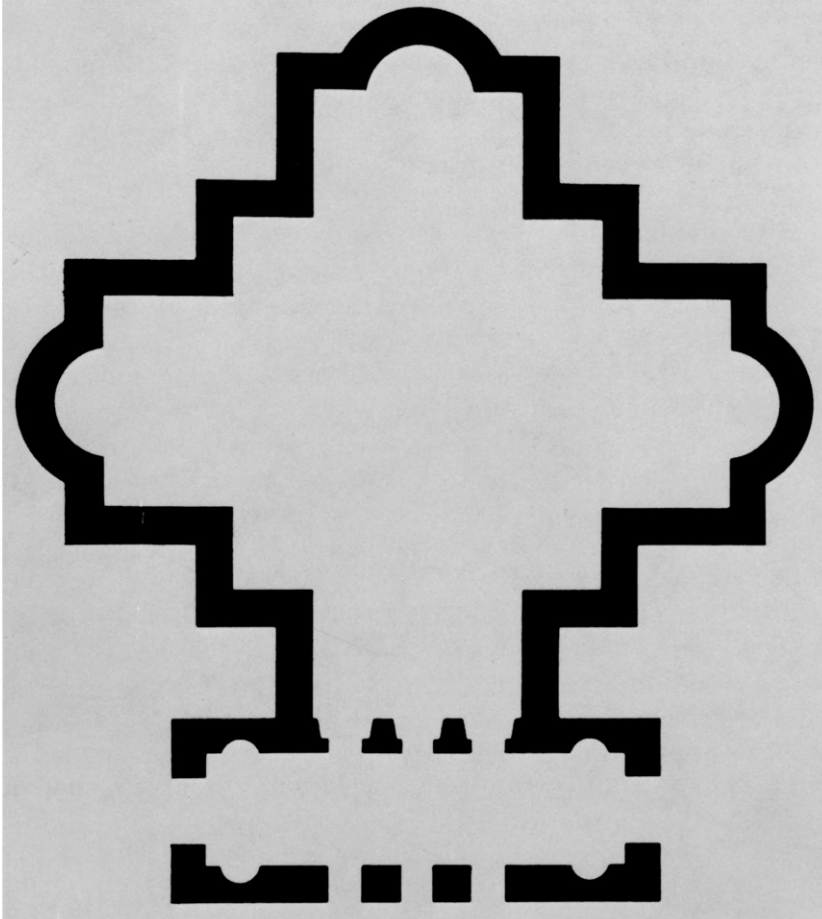


Figure 15

The plan of S. Sebastiano, redrawn by author according to the measurements in the Antonio Labacco sketch (drawn by Lee Gray).

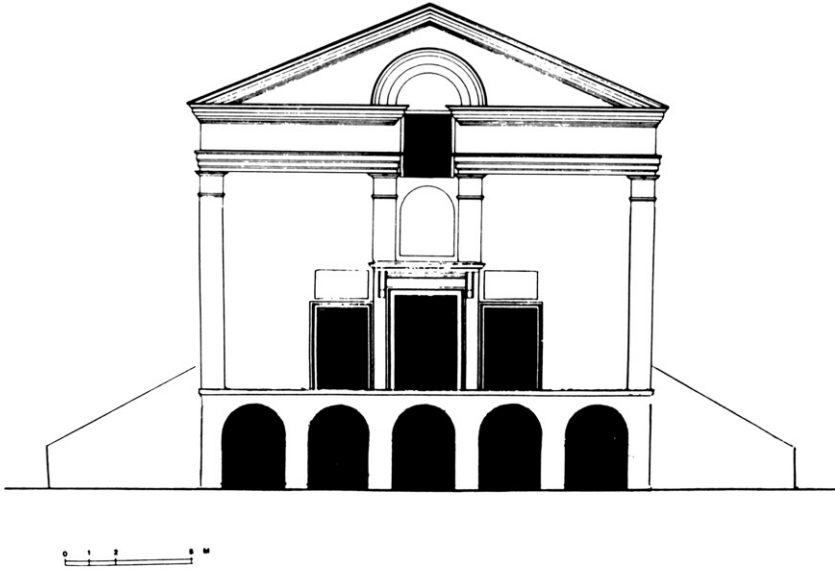


Figure 16
The facade of S. Sebastiano. (author)

actually a double chapel. The lower chapel, opening out onto a piazza, is for the exhibition of the sarcophagi and relates to the physical nature of the patronal family; the upper chapel, an emblematic Greek cross, refers to his divine nature. Thus the building bestows on the family of a onetime *condottieri* the essential attributes of theologically defined kingship.

This, however, is only one reading of the architectural text; we still have to discern the covert meaning. Much as the zone on the facade of S. Maria Novella (according to my theory) represents that of the mediating humanist saint, here too one finds a third architectural element. Above the entrance portico is a chamber where the relic of St. Sebastian was stored, an idiosyncratic space largely ignored by historians. Obviously a sacred realm, the room has a single window which opens onto the piazza. It was from this window, equivalent to a divine eye turned toward the secular, that on the appointed day the relic was ritualistically exhibited for public adoration.¹⁰ Furthermore, given Alberti's homonymic style, the building can be

read as symbolizing the crucification; the window then serves as the *speculum* into the divine heart.¹¹ A paradigm of the intact humanist realm, St. Sebastian could be equated with Philoponius, the ideal writer-saint and Albertian humanist *non plus ultra*, himself a *deus-homo* with two natures. The iconography and its homonymic conflation brings into focus the vanishing point toward which all of Alberti's thought strives, namely the miraculous interlocking of the terrestrial realm with humanist sainthood.

Let us turn now to Alberti's last work, S. Andrea, also in Mantua (figure 17), designed in 1470 but begun after Alberti's death and not completed until 1702.¹² As is well known, this work shows Alberti's growing familiarity with classical forms and details. The interior draws on the volumetric monumentality of Roman structures and its facade brings to mind a Roman triumphal arch. These forms are often heralded as typical examples of Alberti's classicism.

What instantly disqualifies the building from being an ideal Renaissance church is that it is not freestanding but integrated into the urban fabric (figure 18). In fact, documents show that the building was started at the left-hand corner of the facade where it abuts the late-Gothic bell tower constructed in 1413.¹³ No attempt was made to make the church appear to be freestanding. Presumably Alberti could have shifted the facade a bit or changed it in some way if he had wanted to create that impression.

In S. Francesco, Alberti, serving an evil patron, had to create a symbol of the defunct world opposing the primordially simple; in S. Andrea, working for a patron of moral stature whom he respected, Alberti had the opportunity to represent the positive aspect of his dialectic, rendering a microcosmic model of the intact realm. As there were no Roman ruins to speak of in Mantua, he compensated by delivering an "Etruscan temple," as he himself called the church. The structure thus imparted to Gonzaga historical legitimization and *grandezza* while at the same time affording Alberti a platform to stage a historical event within the given context. In S. Francesco the classical, representing the frenzied world, was not allowed to touch the sacred. Here, in a very different political setting, the



Figure 17
S. Andrea. (author)

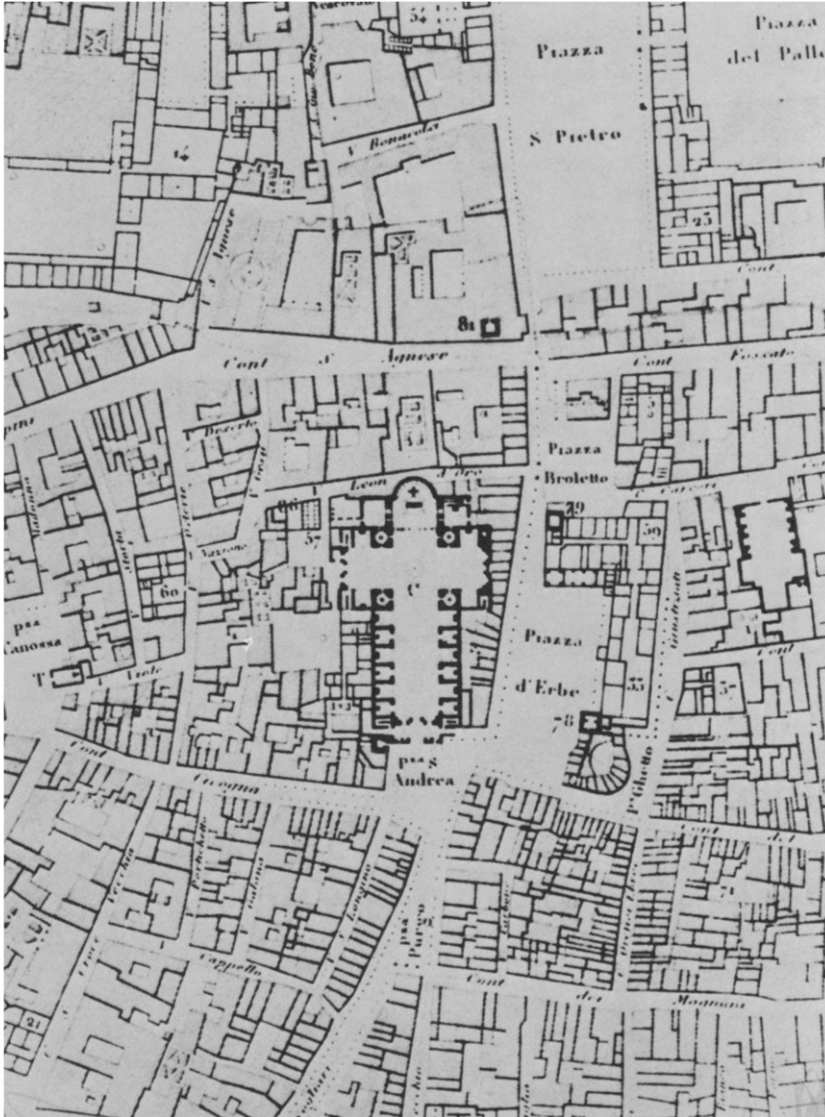


Figure 18
Site plan of S. Andrea. (Archivo del Stato, Mantua)

classical structure is interpreted as benign and as historically primary, with the city appearing to have built itself in its shadow. It thus demonstrates the successful interlocking—and not the dialectical opposition—of the spiritual and the temporal. As there were no other significant Roman ruins in the town there was no significant basis on which to contrast the real and the illusory. The substitution of the make-believe for the real was undetectable. The illusion was complete.

Alberti simulated the process of time. Ruins, as he would have known them from Rome, were frequently inhabited; bell towers were added or were incorporated into new structures (figure 19). Alberti evoked such an image by making the facade touch the bell tower, which, by means of a typical Albertian reversal, was meant to appear to have been constructed after the church. Furthermore, the building appears to have been nibbled into by the encroaching city, especially on the south, where a row of shops separated the wall of the nave from the Piazza dell'Erbe. The portico can also be read as an arcaded street, serving not only to provide axial entrance to the church but also to afford lateral access to an alleyway (now a courtyard) on the north side of the church. The building, therefore, reconstructs a simulated medieval context, demonstrating the ongoing presence of society's origins successfully embedded in the city (figure 20). In a sense, this could be viewed as the ideal humanist function implemented.

Alberti's "reconstruction" of the city of Mantua by means of a church projected backward in time (much as the "forgery" *Philodoxeus*) is equivalent to a miracle, for this ideal state could never come about naturally in chronological time, according to Alberti's cultural theory (see "Peniplusius, The True One"). But the process can be simulated as much as writer and text can be made to appear unified by means of a totalizing mask (see "The Humanist and the Artist"). Ironically, from an ecclesiastical point of view, S. Andrea was built to celebrate a miracle of its own: the liquification of the dried blood of Christ on Ascension Day. Beginning in 1401, when the vials were presented to the faithful, the church began to attract ever larger numbers of pilgrims; sometimes crowds of over 10,000 surged in, eager to benefit from the healing powers. Even Pius II, who



Figure 19
Jan Miel. *Porticus of Octavia*. ca. 1650. (Archives Photographiques, Paris)

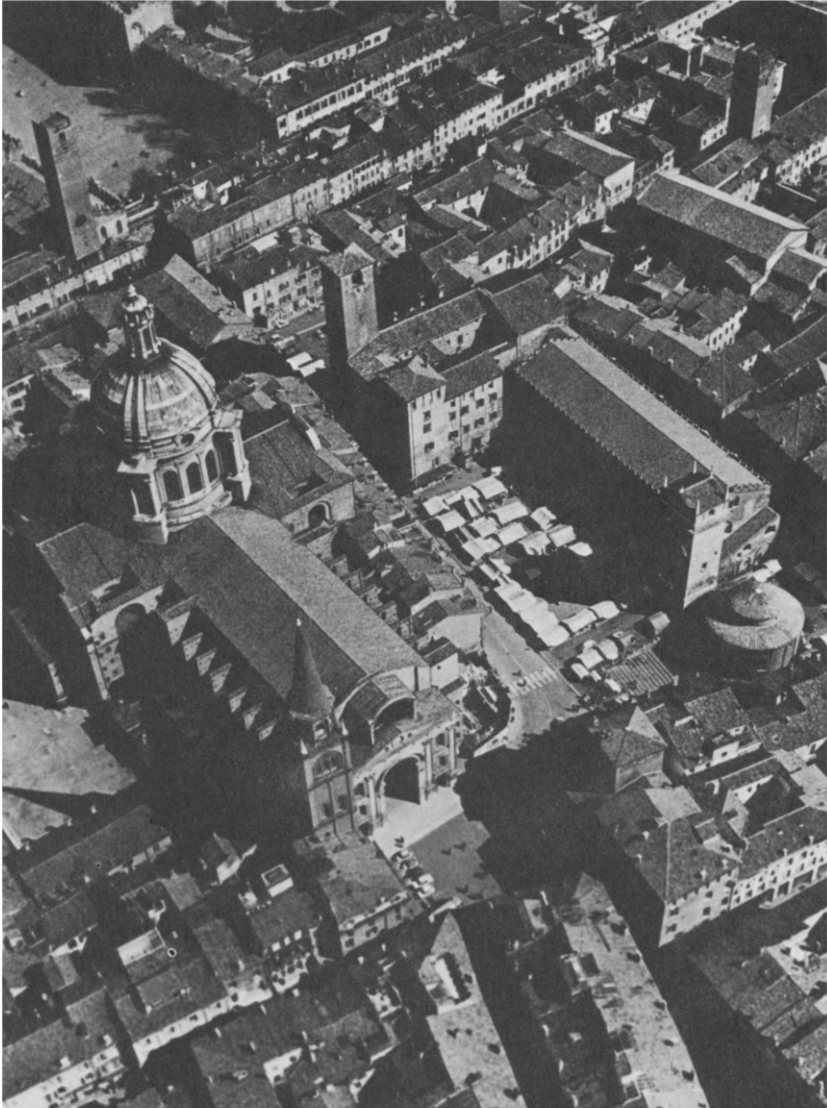


Figure 20
Aerial photo of S. Andrea. (Giovetti, Mantua)

is said to have fallen ill while in Mantua, recovered after having prayed before the relics.¹⁴ The contrast between the ecclesiastical miracle and Alberti's idea of a miracle is worth contemplating. The latter can, by definition, never occur in historical time, as it is the unattainable image of civic posterity. It can however be constructed as a "clever artifice" to simulate a version of historical time as it should have been.

This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/5114.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/5114.001.0001)

On Leon Battista Alberti

His Literary and Aesthetic Theories

By: Mark Jarzombek

Citation:

On Leon Battista Alberti: His Literary and Aesthetic Theories

By: Mark Jarzombek

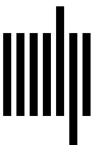
DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/5114.001.0001

ISBN (electronic): 9780262367899

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 1990

The open access edition of this book was made possible by generous funding and support from The National Endowment for the Humanities/Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Humanities Open Book Program.



The MIT Press

© 1989 Massachusetts Institute of Technology

All rights reserved. No part of this book may be reproduced in any form by any electronic or mechanical means (including photocopying, recording, or information storage and retrieval) without permission in writing from the publisher.

Open access edition funded by the National Endowment for the Humanities/Andrew W. Mellon Foundation Humanities Open Book Program.

The text of this book is licensed under a Creative Commons AttributionNonCommercialNoDerivatives 4.0 International License:
<https://creativecommons.org/licenses/byncnd/4.0/>

This book was set in Baskerville by DEKR Corp. and printed and bound by Halliday Lithograph in the United States of America.

Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Jarzombek, Mark.

On Leon Baptista Alberti : his literary and aesthetic theories / Mark Jarzombek.

p. cm.

Bibliography: p.

ISBN 0-262-10042-8

1. Alberti, Leon Baptista, 1404–1472—Philosophy. I. Title.

NA1123.A5A35 1989

195—dc20

89-33417

CIP