INTRODUCTION: FLORENCE – THE DYNAMICS OF SPACE IN A RENAISSANCE CITY

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THE SOCIAL LIVES OF EARLY MODERN FLORENTINES WERE diversely connected to the spatial realities of their city. Throughout any given day, the citizens of Florence found themselves participants or witnesses, actors or spectators on various stages within the constantly changing urban and suburban theaters that made up the physical and psychological spaces of the city and its countryside. The streets and piazzas of Florence, its private residences, governing rooms, churches, mercantile localities, guild-halls, and confraternal structures were the places in which Florentines lived their lives, freely moving from one to another and between the socially structured behaviors demanded by each. Florentine material and visual culture responded to these various, coexisting, and mutually influential places of existence, subtly (and sometimes not so subtly) reconfiguring them over time. This book is about those individual though interconnected spaces, the social activities that took place in them, and the physical forms that gave them shape and meaning. We have taken the position that space in Florence was not rigidly bounded, despite the severity of the city's architectural forms, but rather that it constituted an urban theater where human activity was as much a definer of space as was architecture, either in its actual form or in its fictive renderings in painting and relief sculpture. Indeed, Karen-edis Barzman, in writing about Renaissance spectacle, takes a similar position by locating it "'everywhere' in palaces and churches, public streets and squares, entire neighborhoods and zones of cities – wherever individuals entered the fields of visual and material culture."[1] The "everywhere" of space is not the same as the particularities of site, whether that site is actual or fictive, as in painting or relief sculpture. Rather, it is about the rich relationships between those articulated spaces and the human encounters across the social spectrum that gave Florentine life its distinctive character.

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The challenge of all of the essays in this book lies in seeking to see with new eyes – to "re-vision" both the "everywhere" and the particularities of space. Our conception of the dynamics of space that drives the essays in this book needs some explanation at the outset. Forty-five years ago Frank Brown described antique Roman architecture as "an art of shaping space around ritual."[2] He saw even the most disparate of Roman buildings as parts of a uniform pattern of behavior, giving voice to the activities that took place within them. Although clearly tied to a notion of form following function, Brown's thesis was important in suggesting that space was sculpturally modeled – a malleable frame for human activity that enhanced the interactions between viewers and between the viewer and the events of this social environment. Space, then, as the authors of the present volume further demonstrate, is *not* to be understood simply as enclosure. It is *not* a void. And it is certainly *not* empty.

A cluster of publications at the outset of the 1980s marked a defining moment in our changed perceptions about how alive with meaning space could be in a Renaissance city. In 1980 Richard Trexler delineated the performative aspects of Florentine ritual life as ways of ensuring security for the city.[3] Among other influential approaches, Trexler's social anthropology has deeply influenced both where scholars of Renaissance Florence look for evidence and how they read the functional life of the environments and objects that they study. Perhaps more than any other work, Trexler's has had the particular impact of de-aestheticizing works of art and placing them in the lived environment where they functioned as part of the varied social rituals of the day.

Perhaps more than any other scholar, Trexler also encouraged many writers and teachers in the field to widen the lens of their looking to include objects and rituals that were integral to the visual field of the Florentines (and others) but that had been isolated outside the canon, at least in part because of their populist nature. For example, Edward Muir in 1981 delineated the formalities of civic ritual in Venice. Processions in that maritime republic, as he saw them, marked out civic space and mirrored the social order of the city in an organization that unfolded sequentially over time as ranks of public officials moved through carefully prescribed routes and reinscribed the myths of the city in public memory.[4] Where Trexler and Muir dealt with the performance of ritual through space, Richard Goldthwaite's work of 1980 on the economics of the building trades in Florence was concerned with the most tangible aspects of construction, such as carting stone, removing dirt, and the sheer number of laborers and pack animals that were necessary for the erection of major architectural projects. Goldthwaite's researches also

served to focus attention away from the aesthetics of the built forms and onto the working procedures that allowed for the major transformation of the city of Florence during the period under consideration here, reminding us of the practical nature of any craft production.[5] Each of these views from outside the strictly defined borders of art history was instrumental in providing new ways to think about the built environment in terms of spaces that were encompassed and traversed (and thus continuous) and as places marked sometimes by definable objects and boundaries and at other times by the indefinite nature of those same material realities.

Patronage studies have become arguably the most vital of recent methodologies brought to bear on the history of the Florentine Renaissance and on the usurpation of urban, political, and ecclesiastical spaces by private individuals. Martin Wackernagel's *The World of the Florentine Renaissance Artist*, first published in German in 1938,[6] continues to be important both as a groundbreaking study of family artistic patronage in Florence and as a mine of information connecting works of art to specific families. However, considerably expanded access to archival sources and new ways of thinking about patronage beyond the client–artist model have indicated that individual commissions might have been linked to diverse social patterns and that the totality of a single individual's commissions might reveal consistent strands of meaning. These strands can not only influence our reading of an individual patron's intentions but also how we interpret individual objects as carrying these intentions as well. In this sense we are now experiencing a (re)turn from the whole to the particular.[7] F. W. Kent's close study of Lorenzo de' Medici's interventions in communal building enterprises has indicated how intensely involved Lorenzo was from a very early age with civic and private projects that could be used to assert his control over the minds of the Florentines. As a *maestro della bottega,* Lorenzo used a production model for his political control that was at the heart of Florentine commercial life, one immediately sympathetic to the population he addressed with his work.[8] Dale Kent recently published a study on the artistic patronage of Cosimo de' Medici that seeks to balance the political interpretations of artistic patronage with the religious drives that she rightly asserts lay behind Cosimo's commissions.[9] Studies of corporate commissions in the arts have looked at the funding of major public monuments as part of the practices of elite institutions in Florence to assert their presence in the urban scene in a forceful manner. They have also demonstrated the interlocking networks among social, commercial, and political groups within the larger theater of what we might now call civic propaganda, networks that, by definition, tied widely disparate spaces together.[10] And the patronage roles of social groups low in the hierarchies of Florentine social

structures are also being clarified in the work of historians such as Samuel Cohn, Nicholas Eckstein, Stephen Milner, and Michael Rocke, reminding us that the transformations of urban spaces were not always top–down developments. What have hitherto passed as amorphous if not anonymous areas on the map of Florence could and did exert powerful forces within the lived experiences of its citizens.[11] Even newer historical strategies – feminism and gender studies being among the more obvious – have enlivened approaches to the history of visual culture in Renaissance Florence and of the spaces where that culture was created, placed, and received.

The excitement of this renaissance of diverse and challenging scholarly activity lies behind the essays in this book. Yet it is important to note that, for all the attention given to new methodologies, our authors have based their work on an intense and penetrating focus on the visual object, whether that object is an altarpiece, a boundary marker, or a guild-mandated sales route through the city. Their close attention to the structure of the object, if not always in the strictest sense of formal stylistic analysis, signals the need to consider meaning as it is vested in modes of presentation. Close reading of forms of presentation are absolutely necessary if, in attempting to reinstantiate social groups who seemed until recently to be all but invisible in our histories of the period, we hope to come anywhere near a reasonable reconstruction of their histories. Needless to say, such an approach also enriches the study of those works and patrons who have been traditionally most familiar in the literature.

Notable for the discussion of space in this volume is the work of the French philosopher Henri Lefebvre, who maintained that the *production* of space is an ideologically structured process. This process creates a social space that "ceases to be indistinguishable from mental space (as defined by the philosophers and mathematicians) on the one hand and physical space (as defined by practico-sensory activity and the perception of 'nature') on the other."[12] The invisible space between the working of the mind and resulting physical structure helps our understanding of both. Lefebvre also contends that space as a social product "serves as a tool of thought and of action; that in addition to being a means of production it is also a means of control, and hence of domination, of power. . . ."[13] Interestingly for this book, Lefebvre cites a notable move from mental space to physical structure in Florence. He describes the first of these as a "representational space" in which the city plan functioned symbolically as, let us say, a heavenly Jerusalem; the physical he describes as a "representation of space," culminating in what he simply terms perspective, and to which we might add cartography.[14] Thus, for Lefebvre, the physical (or the scientific) eventually replaced the symbolic.

As seductive as Lefebvre's arguments are, our contention is that the mental spaces of the city were not (or not immediately) supplanted by hegemonic measure; rather, they existed in the lived memory and shared experiences of the Florentines, even as the social order and the visual manifestations of that order were in processes of change. In this light it is notable how resistant Florentine painting was to perspectival control of the entire illusionistic pictorial field. However rigorous the geometrical structures of the foreground of compositions where figures are clustered, space tends to move openly and freely behind these figures in a way that opposes the locked-in measures of the perspective. In the few instances where a single-point-perspective scheme was used to control the entire pictorial space, as in the cityscape panels in Urbino, Baltimore, and Berlin, the result is an arid spatial environment with virtually no one moving in the cities, producing surreal spaces that read more as mathematical demonstrations of a formal ideal than as any possible view of lived experience.

Brunelleschi's two perspective panels of c. 1417–20 are another case in point.[15] According to Brunelleschi's biographer, Antonio Manetti, the upper edge of the panel that depicted the Palazzo della Signoria was cut out along the skyline of the building. Were the viewer to hold the panel up to block the actual view of the palace, and then to drop it down to reveal the town hall, the images would be deceptively alike, provided the viewer stood in exactly the same physical place at the entrance to the Piazza della Signoria that Brunelleschi himself had chosen for his viewpoint in first place. Brunelleschi's panel was clearly directive. By positioning the viewer in space – literally – Brunelleschi distanced the Palazzo della Signoria and insisted that the viewer see the piazza – that is, the open space – that spread before the building on both sides as integral to its structure, as well as intermediary to one's approach to the building. It was this very piazza that held the body politic at critical moments in the city's history, whether peaceable or not, a space where individual status might be leveled out within the crowd. Thus, the space depicted on Brunelleschi's panel, though apparently empty, was one that inevitably held compelling symbolic meaning of inclusiveness and political sociability for many a Florentine.[16]

As abstractions of ideal models that would fit Lefebvre's claims, Brunelleschi's perspective panels bear little relationship to lived reality, however. They even provide evidence for an overlap of the "representational" or symbolic space with the "representation" of the actual. Manetti's account of the panels says nothing about figures in the images, even though the spaces they represent – the Piazza della Signoria and the area around the Baptistery – were certainly among the most active in the city. Nor does his description

of the Baptistery panel mention the cemetery that then existed in the small piazza between the cathedral and the Baptistery. It would appear, then, that Brunelleschi carefully edited his views of essentially enclosed urban spaces in order to accommodate the perspectival point of his demonstration. While interesting at a theoretical level, Brunelleschi's perspective panels tell us very little about what concerns us in this book: how the Florentines created and appointed spaces and how spaces affected their perceptions of themselves. For us, Renaissance space is not simply the rationalization of a chaotic visual field into a mathematically ordered – and, one must insist, artificial – perspectival frame for the presentation of a narrative, even a symbolic narrative. Space in Florence was palpable and real. It was defined by the energizing interaction of the physical forms that give it shape and by the actions and events that occurred in and around those forms.

Leon Battista Alberti's formula for the depiction of single-point perspective in his *De pictura* of 1435 (translated by the author into Italian as *Della pittura* in 1436), however, adds a component that, as far as we know from Manetti's account, was absent in Brunelleschi's panels, and that supports Lefebvre's concept of perspective as an assertion of hegemonic control over space. Alberti based his whole *costrutiva legittima* on the human figure, a fictive individual set up outside the frame of the painting, who provided the numerical measure for the entire perspectival system. This figure, standing on an extended baseline of the incipient painting, was divided head to foot into three equal units. These units, laid along the baseline of the image, were then used as the points from which to extend spatial orthogonals to a central vanishing point in the composition. That vanishing point was itself the same distance from the bottom edge of the painting as the measuring figure was high.[17] Thus whatever the subject matter of the painting, it was ordered presumptively on human proportions (understood as an ideal average), thus establishing a relationship between space and the human actions that would populate it. As a metaphor for human control of framing space, Alberti's image could not be more clear.

In our own fascination with novelty – in this case the invention of single-point perspective – and with Brunelleschi's craft, his science, and mathematics, it is easy to forget that the implications for a *continuous* space within his two perspective panels were rarely realized in Florentine painting until the end of the century, and then by Leonardo *after* he had moved to Milan. The standard mode of spatial presentation in Florentine altarpieces shows instead figures standing close to the frontal plane of the composition with the background space blocked off by some form of wall or vegetation. This composition creates a sense of pictorial relief (*relievo*) or a modeled surface that one

might relate to sculptural relief.[18] In instances where a spatial axis is continuous into the distance, it tends to be framed, discontinuous with the foreground space, and sometimes even defined by a distinctly different viewpoint. One might also note that in such paintings, regardless of how convincing the perspectival rendering of a spatial box may be, the subject matter itself is unnatural: artificially grouped saints from different historical periods and places arranged around a central devotional image like a Madonna and Child. In depopulating the familiar urban spaces depicted in his two panels, Brunelleschi disallowed the accidental in order to clarify the space and its reconstruction. He may have provided a critical tool in the history of pictorial representation, but his depicted spaces were apparently lifeless images of deeply symbolic places. In Brunelleschi's perspective panels – quite unlike his built architecture – space had become denatured and symbolic, just as the ideated spaces of altarpieces were constructed to mediate the divine and the secular as an idealized symmetrical stage that had little relationship to the real world.

Such carefully ordered depicted spaces have unfortunately become our image of the Renaissance, an image that this book seeks to revise and expand by concentrating on the inhabited and active spaces of the city and the enlivened spaces between image and viewer.

The actual boundaries of Florentine spaces were permeable, merging imperceptibly from public to private (terms that had very different meaning for the Renaissance than they do now), from the secular to the religious, from the mundane to the sacral.[19] At the ragged end of a religious procession, for example, the mundane began to filter back into the actions of the participants as the space in which the viewer stood – unchanged physically – collapsed back into the everyday after having been transformed briefly into an extraordinary other world, as when giant puppets moved through the streets on the feast of Saint John the Baptist or when the holy image of the Virgin of Impruneta was carried in procession as a ritual plea for heavenly intervention in the endangered lives of the Florentine people. Official neighborhood governing bodies, including those that assigned taxes, often met in the very church spaces that had been built to offer a place of transcendence within the ever-present demands of daily life. This movement between one clearly defined character of space and another equally defined order of activity – what George Kubler called the "rupture between past and future"[20] – defined the elusive nature of spatial definition and the vitality of its power to frame human activity and understanding, an elusiveness that gives the spatial and social interactions of the period their fascination. In this book the participating authors rarely address an either–or situation, but rather the possibilities of both–and.

In Renaissance Florence, creators and participants, objects and events all added to the meaning of spatial environments through something like what Edward Muir and Ronald Weissman call "networks of space-based sociability and symbolic geography."[21] Once formed, these networks existed in a continuum not only of space but of time as well. Space in Florence, as in other places, contained within it social activity or ritual that both determined its form and was in turn given meaning by that form. Space was thus a form (in both sense of that word, as object and as mold) *and* a forum for historically informed, social exchange. Seen this way, space in Florence functioned as a container for historical memory as well as an environment that helped to shape that remembered history.

As spaces entertained first one use then another, they accreted a history. Sometimes that history was accidental and ephemeral as, for example, a personal epiphany during a religious ritual, known to only a few and unrecuperable by modern historians. At other times, that momentary history, through repetition, became part of the lived history of the society at large, as when a large group of people saw the beneficent effects of parading a religious icon through the city and decided to repeat the ritual either on a regularly defined schedule or in response to particular need, such as drought or threat of invasion. In such cases the authority of the image extended from its habitual locus of placement throughout the space of the city.[22] A place *over time* became the kind of space that we can now describe not as a simple linear development of styles or practices, but as a constant interaction of past and present events enacted with an eye to the future. The idea of the extension of space and the exchanges that occurred in different spaces between viewers and objects – whether those objects were as large as an urban palace or as small as a pilgrim's badge carried home from a sacred site – provided the day-to-day reality of Renaissance Florence and now provides the skeletal structure of this book.

In this light one might think of the interior for the Florentine cathedral, under construction for the entire period this book considers. Within the mind's eye the building incorporates a complex field of visual forms, some now unfortunately lost to us: statues and paintings of saints whose commemorative feasts were celebrated on an annual basis; pennants from important Florentine military victories; the tombs of some of its most important civic, religious, and military leaders, intended not only to record the past but, like the images of the saints, to give assurance to future political fame and security; portrait busts of the city's most notable artists, musicians, and writers, whose work spread the fame of the city; and temporary festival decorations that marked either recurrent important religious feasts, the arrival in the city

of important visitors, or, late in this period, dynastic marriages. Not all of these objects or events in the cathedral were equally active in the visual field of the Renaissance viewer at all moments. Focus on one caused others to recede. Yet the entire space of the cathedral accumulated meaning because of the presence of each. Saintly protectors and all-too-human military leaders were both necessary for the continuity of the city over time; their neighboring images throughout the building provided a metaphor for interconnected strands of civic well-being, a dialogue across space that was engaged by the component elements of Florence's greatness.

Thus space not only had a physical dimension, but an imaginative and an intellectual one as well. Although our time frame, roughly 1300–1600, is conventional and admittedly arbitrary, it does allow an examination of the city during a time when its urban profile responded to a transformation from a citizen republic (as variously as that polity can be understood) to a hereditary duchy. During this time, some patterns of social order – such as the structuring of the family – remained remarkably consistent, while others – such as the control of the political order – underwent fundamental change. The spatial fabric of the city, as a mirror of the social fabric, gives an exciting and clarifying insight into the daily lives of the Florentines during this period and provides a framework for understanding the forms of some of its preeminent monuments. The enormous scale of building enterprises such as the cathedral, Santa Croce, and the Palazzo della Signoria, all begun in the 1290s, is provocative simply on an economic basis. These examples become linked when we understand that the commune funded all of them. Spatially, however, the buildings tell a good deal more about how the Florentines conceived their social order at the beginning of the fourteenth century. The cathedral and the Palazzo della Signoria, for example, are roughly at opposite ends of the major old Roman north–south street axis through the city. The two major mendicant churches of Santa Croce and Santa Maria Novella anchor opposite ends of the city from east to west, enclosing its urban center with protective prayers offered equally for Florentine civic and spiritual well-being – as well as for the churches' individual patronal benefactors.[23] The period ends with the essential takeover of all four of these structures by Duke Cosimo I: He placed his image on the living quarters of the Palazzo della Signoria after displacing the traditional governors of the city by his occupation of the building in 1540, and he supported the remodeling and redecoration of the three ecclesiastical sites in a homogeneous style that marked his control over the city and its social structures.

In addition to these extensive building projects that physically transformed the urban fabric of the city, Florence also assumed a number of metaphorical

descriptors (as did other major European cities). It was seen as a new Rome, a new Jerusalem, or evocatively as the site of a mythical golden age. Whatever the reasons for the individual characterizations, Florentines believed, as Donald Wilcox asserts, that "the history of a visible city . . . must be given concrete form before it can acquire another dimension."[24] As Wilcox further points out, "the *civitas* of which [Bartolomeo della] Scala writes is not only an abstraction, but a concrete entity of walls, buildings, and persons. . . ."[25] As historians we must know the physical character of the city before we can know its meaning and how that meaning adheres to or ignores the "facts" of the events that occurred there. In order to know the city of Florence better we have organized the individual chapters of this book to work from the macrocosm of the city seen as a whole – both physically and historically – to its individual components, comprising neighborhoods with elements like palaces and religious institutions. Our intention is to delineate both the overarching structures of the body politic and how its individual members acted within such structures.

We must keep in mind that at the beginning of the period covered by this book, there was not even a word in the Italian vocabulary that would translate to our word "art," and that artists were referred to in documents of the time simply as painters, carvers, and even as "people who tap on stone" (*picciapietre*), placing them well within a craft tradition until late in the fifteenth century. This was so despite the fame of individual artists like Giotto or Donatello. It is not surprising, then, that names of artists are so infrequently connected to actual works of art in contemporary sources and that the efficacy of the crafted object was most often its patron's primary concern. Of course, since we are dealing with a mercantile culture that took pride in the excellence of its products, whether banking or wool and silk manufacture, it is also not a surprise that excellence in craft – only part of what we now refer to as style – was highly prized and sought after as a manifestation of the patron's market power (his financial ability to buy the very best) as well as the craftsman's skill. Craft excellence should be viewed in the positive sense that it carried during the Renaissance, not in the slightly patronizing sense that it sometimes carries today in a world of art that is hierarchically structured according to very different aesthetic and market criteria.

Although artistic style as a set of formal principles does not play a large role in the discussions of this book, it is important to keep in mind that style is one vehicle that carried messages from the object to the viewer, or, more important, even from those responsible for the object – artist and patrons – to the multiple audiences they wished to address. In all of this, the site for which an object was intended and the typology of its subject matter also played a role in the style chosen by the artist and patron. Thus objects that