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978-0-521-62438-1 - The Italian Renaissance Palace Facade: Structures of Authority, Surfaces of Sense

Charles Burroughs

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## THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE PALACE FACADE STRUCTURES OF AUTHORITY, SURFACES OF SENSE

The architectural facade – a crucial and ubiquitous element of traditional cityscapes – addresses and enhances the space of the city, while displaying, or dissembling, interior arrangements. In this book, Charles Burroughs tracks the emergence of the facade in late-medieval Florence and then follows the sharply diverging reactions of Renaissance architects to new demands and possibilities for representation in both residential and governmental contexts. Understanding the facade as an assemblage of elements of diverse character and origin, Burroughs explores the wide range of formal solutions available to architects and patrons. In the absence of explicit reflection on the facade in Renaissance architectural discourse, Burroughs notes the theoretical implications of certain celebrated designs, implying meditation on the nature of architecture itself and the society it serves and represents, as well as on the relationship between nature and culture. He also explores the resonance between shifts in architectural form and social space, and the ideas articulated in the literary production of the period.

Charles Burroughs is Professor of Art History and Director of the Center for Medieval and Renaissance Studies at Binghamton University, SUNY. A scholar of Italian Renaissance architecture, he is the author of *From Signs to Design: Environmental Process and Reform in Early Renaissance Rome* and has published extensively on early modern Italian visual culture and urbanism, emblems and architecture, and architectural theory.

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**THE ITALIAN RENAISSANCE  
PALACE FACADE**

**STRUCTURES OF AUTHORITY,  
SURFACES OF SENSE**

**CHARLES BURROUGHS**

*Binghamton University, SUNY*



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*For Christine and Inna*

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## PREFACE

In any academic book, a preface is expected, requiring an author to announce and even defend the ensuing text with a certain degree of self-consciousness. This is especially so in the present case, for this book is dedicated to the historical moment in which such an expectation arose, and the genealogy of the literary preface is intimately related to that of the architectural facade. In a sense, indeed, this book is itself preface, or at least prolegomenon. Others are better qualified than I to analyze the facade as a design project or task; I have sought to address puzzles that pressed into my consciousness whenever I turned my attention to Renaissance architecture, a built world in which the facade was a conspicuous element, yet in some ways also a highly obscure one.

The book is less a forensic performance, therefore, than a many-tracked exploration. Nevertheless, certain convictions are crucial in my approach. First, departing from the familiar preoccupation with Renaissance architecture as fundamentally mimetic, i.e., defined by its emulation of “antiquity,” I return the focus to the social milieu and to practices of assigning and locating meaning evident within it. Second, I adopt a skeptical attitude to unilinear and downward (i.e., “trickle-down”) paradigms of the transmission of culture, preferring to privilege evidence for relatively dialogic and dynamic processes. Third, I am interested in a wider standard of evidentiality than is often accepted in scholarly work on the built environment (though architectural historians have been known to venture opinions on the social and cultural meanings of their objects of study on the basis of relatively exclusive consideration of those objects themselves).

Issues of historiography and method apart, I have written this book while on the faculty of a major public university with a highly diverse student body and rapidly evolving pedagogical agenda. As director of interdisciplinary programs in medieval and Renaissance studies and in global studies, I have been closely associated with the struggle to maintain the humanities as a central ele-

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ment of the curriculum, indeed of the institutional culture, while recognizing the need for creative and self-critical responses to the challenges faced by the humanities. Many of the graduate students with whom I have worked, moreover, come from “non-Western” backgrounds, and bring remarkably fresh perspectives to the consideration of European art and architecture. Such a milieu, which is common enough in higher education in the US and Europe, seems far removed from the world out of and for which most Renaissance architectural historians tend to write. I have also been struck by a deepening gulf between academic architectural history and architectural education, and hope that this book may reach today’s more “theory-conscious” practitioners and students.

Many friends and colleagues have often unwittingly given support to or otherwise conspired in the production of this book. I began work on this project at the Institute for Advanced Study in Princeton, for which I thank the NEH, as well as the Institute itself, for financial support. By fortunate chance, or perhaps with cunning deliberation, Irving Lavin assembled a remarkable group of scholars with interest that overlapped with mine, and then and subsequently I have benefited much from my interactions with Anthony Cutler, George Gorse, Pierre Du Prey, and John Pinto. I have much therefore for which to thank Irving Lavin and Marilyn Aronberg Lavin, whose interest in and encouragement of my project were crucial.

I owe a particular debt to two long-standing friends, Leon Satkowski and Lynette Bosch, who invited – or rather incited – me to give presentations that turned out to be central to the progress of my ideas, and otherwise acted as gadflies. In a project such as this I have drawn on the work of many excellent scholars; only David Friedman and Brenda Preyer, for instance, can measure the debt I owe to their work. I often found myself working in James Ackerman’s wake, and looking back to long-ago conversations at the Warburg Institute with Michael Baxandall and, occasionally, the late Ernst Gombrich. For important intellectual stimulus and moral support over the years I thank especially Robert Adam, Liana Cheney, David Chambers, Thomas Cohen, Sam Kinser, Leatrice Mendelsohn, John Paoletti, Alina Payne, Linda Pellicchia, Sheryl Reiss, Robert Tavernor, and Barbara Wisch.

At Binghamton I benefited from a lively atmosphere of debate and innovation, even when economic times were tough; I have learned much from my colleagues Barbara Abou el Haj, Karen Barzman, John Chaffee, Rosmarie and Parviz Morewedge, Sandro Sticca, John Tagg, Dale Tomich, Richard Trexler, Jean Wilson, and especially Anthony King. Many students pushed me to rethink positions, notably Cosimo Calabrò, Deborah Cibelli, Kim Evans, Preminda Jacob, Laura Foster, and Abidin Kusno (now happily a colleague). I am also grateful to the SUNY Faculty Development Grant Program for financial help, especially for the illustrations, and to the Dean of Harpur College, Binghamton University, for a much-needed sabbatical leave. Also at Binghamton, I am grateful to Christopher Focht for photographic work; to Lucius Willis of the Binghamton University Geography Department, as well as

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## PREFACE

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to Terry McDonald, for cartography; and to my secretary Ann Di Stefano for keeping the office going when my thoughts were elsewhere. Claudia Goldstein of Art Resource Inc. provided much assistance in locating photographs, and the cover image was provided by Ralph Lieberman, through the good offices of Claudia Lazzaro. Finally, I acknowledge the generosity of the Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Columbia University in the City of New York, and Angela Giral, its director, for allowing me to use images in the Library's possession without a fee.

This book takes its place in a series whose editor, Francesco Pellizzi, and associate editor, Joseph Rykwert, have been enormously important not only in the preparation of this book, but also for my own intellectual trajectory. I am especially grateful to Joseph Rykwert for finding time to review manuscripts, and for offering both encouragement and criticism – to my great benefit, at least when I didn't stubbornly stick to my guns. A preface usually includes the author's expression of gratitude to others for assistance and a declaration of his/her own responsibility for mistakes; this is more than usually the case here. As editor of *Res*, moreover, Francesco Pellizzi has published some of my more adventurous work, as has József Grabski, editor of *Artibus et Historiae*. I owe a particular debt to these extraordinary editors, whose journals have consistently welcomed innovative and unconventional work, and have opened up a space for those operating, as I seem fated to do, on the fringes of current academic formations and fashions. At Cambridge University Press, Beatrice Rehl showed great patience as I struggled to complete the book, and admirable insistence on the contracted length; there is no doubt that the pruning that I carried out at her behest greatly improved the text. I also thank Larry Meyer and the staff of Hermitage Publishing Services for their careful oversight of the production process, including the final editing.

This book, finally, has been long in the making. It was begun in a white temple-as-house, a Greek Revival *aedes* with box columns in the front porch that overlooks the banks of the Susquehanna River. It was completed in a more prosaic ranch house, high on a hill, a transition that gave me plenty of opportunity to meditate on the psycho-social effects of architecture and domestic space. In my journey in housing styles from the 1840s to the also very distant 1960s and, in my research, from the thirteenth to the sixteenth centuries I was accompanied and patiently supported by my wife and daughter. Every good preface requires a dedication: this one is dedicated to them.