

## ONE

### A SENSE OF RENAISSANCE ARCHITECTURE

Why publish a book on *Architecture and the Senses in the Italian Renaissance* at this particular moment, as we enter the third decade of the twenty-first century? Perhaps the year 2020, with its reference to visual acuity or a perfected vision, is an auspicious time for such an investigation. The study of not just the architecture of the Italian Renaissance, but of the humanities in general, needs to be better explained and justified in the context of a globalized, technological, market-driven economy that has a tendency to judge the study of the liberal arts as elitist and remote from contemporary concerns. How can the study of this material be considered relevant to our present condition? In what ways do the sensory experiences offered by the buildings and urban spaces of the Italian Renaissance have a direct bearing upon our interaction with and experience of the environments that surround us today? And why does any of this matter? This chapter sketches out some of the reasons why the close study of the sensory experience of architecture, and of the buildings and urban spaces of the Italian Renaissance in particular, merits investigation. In exploring ways of thinking about this material, it also seeks to point out how this book marks an advance on what has come before. My aim with this study is to generate some possible answers to these fundamental questions.

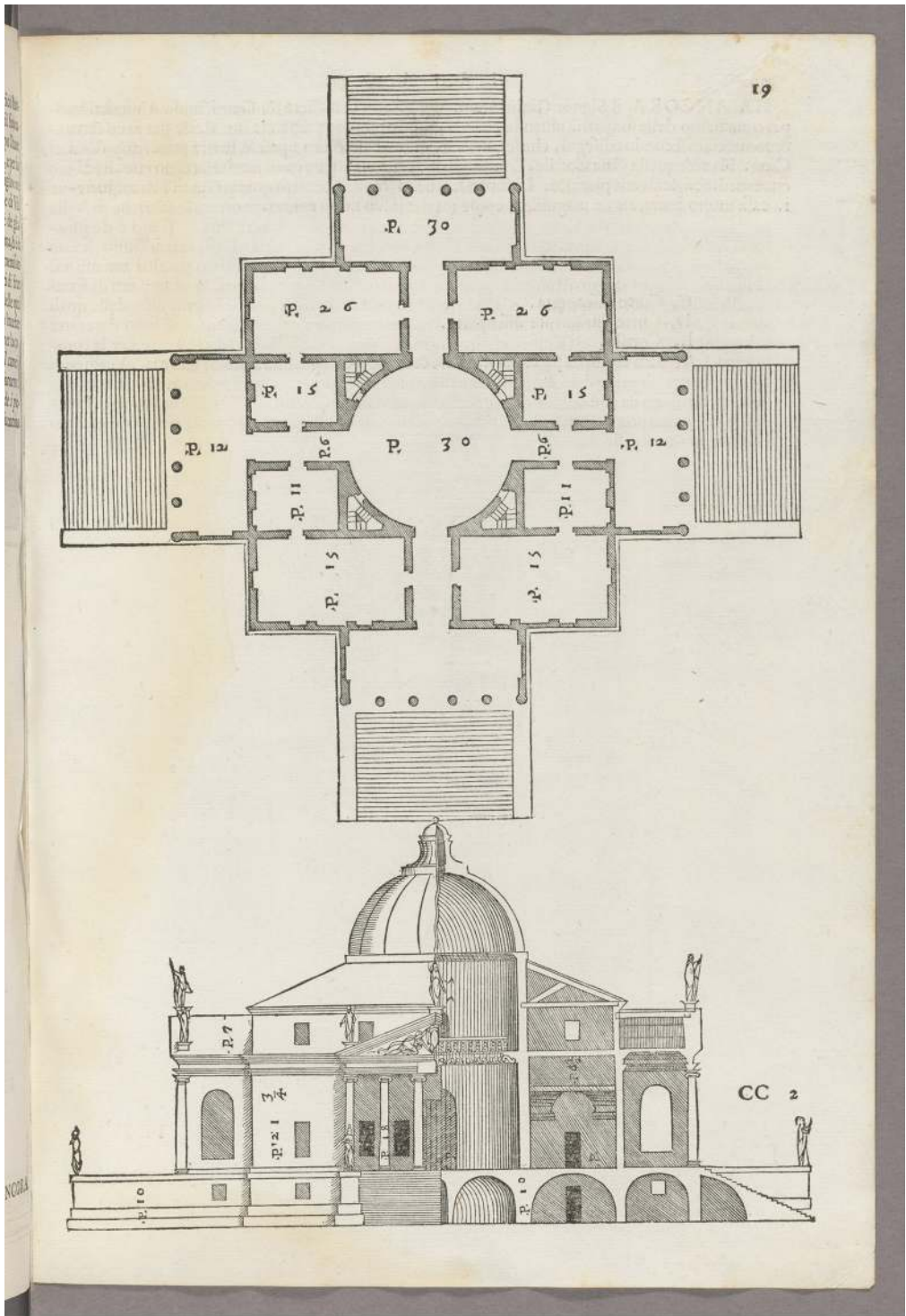
To begin, I introduce a key source that provided inspiration not only for my general approach, but also for the title of the book, *The Varieties of Religious Experience* by William James. This leads to a discussion of the burgeoning field of sensory studies, and in particular the history of sensory experience. Sensory

studies have had an important impact upon the study of the built environment, led by such theorists as Juhani Pallasmaa who have raised critical awareness regarding the role of the senses in contemporary design. We step back to consider the so-called “Great Divide” theory, and its significance for the study of architecture and the senses, as well as for our understanding of Renaissance architecture. We will also consider the legacy of Christian Norberg-Schulz and architectural phenomenology as an important paradigm for the study of architectural experience that continues to resonate today, especially in the context of professional design programs, and examine how the approach taken by Norberg-Schulz differs from that taken here. Finally, I want to consider the potential risks and benefits of acknowledging and integrating my own personal and subjective experiences of buildings and urban spaces into this analysis. If historians of the senses have underscored the essential relevance and value of subjective experience for the study of history, adapting this approach to the study of Renaissance architecture will raise important methodological concerns for many scholars. The chapter concludes with a map to the book as a general outline for the remaining chapters. My hope with this chapter and those that follow is to assist the reader in acquiring “a sense of Renaissance architecture” (Figure 11).

#### THE PLURALISM OF WILLIAM JAMES

In developing the title for this book, *Architecture and the Senses in the Italian Renaissance: The Varieties of Architectural Experience*, I was inspired by *The Varieties of Religious Experience: A Study in Human Nature*, the title of the classic study by the eminent nineteenth-century American psychologist, philosopher, and pragmatist, William James.<sup>1</sup> Published in 1902, James’s study sought to investigate religion as “the feelings, acts, and experiences of individual men in their solitude, so far as they apprehend themselves to stand in relation to whatever they may consider the divine.”<sup>2</sup> James’s assessment of religious experience is striking for its liberality and its tolerance of a wide range of individual positions. It is clear that he did not seek to impose any preordained notions regarding what constituted religious experience, but instead sought to understand the mysterious phenomenon of religion as it was lived, from the perspective of a range of different individuals. This was a radical new approach for a work on religion. James’s resolute focus on individual religious experience represented a challenge to traditional religious scholarship in the early twentieth century, which emphasized more general questions regarding theology, ecclesiasticism, or the history of religious institutions.

For James, religion, at its most fundamental level, deserved to be considered in terms of one’s personal understanding of spirituality, and for this reason, scholars were under an ethical obligation to attend to the experience of



11 Andrea Palladio, Villa Rotonda, *I quattro libri dell'architettura* (Vicenza, 1570).  
 Courtesy of Houghton Library, Harvard University, call number: f Typ 525.70.671

religion, and to consider it on these same individual terms. As James insisted, religion could be encountered and lived in diverse, multiple ways, and this could be demonstrated by examining the experience of religion as it was lived on an individual, case-by-case basis. In this light, his choice of subtitle was significant: for James, the study of religious experience was “a study in human nature,” and thus it was to be expected that there should be numerous varieties of religious experience. That there should be as many varieties of religious experience as there are individuals did not attest to the presence of unorthodox or aberrant beliefs and practices. On the contrary, this multiplicity of religious experiences was wholly consistent with the complexity and variety that James identified as a fundamental and defining characteristic of human nature itself. James’s wide-ranging approach demonstrated his commitment to pluralism, and his acceptance of different positions and outlooks. His good-natured tolerance and humanity of vision explains why he remains such an attractive and endearing philosopher.

For the purposes of the present book, with its focus on the lived experience of the built environment, James’s *Varieties of Religious Experience* provides a salutary model. Despite the fact that buildings inevitably create a whole host of complex architectural experiences, architects have been much less attentive to the various kinds of experience produced by their designs than practitioners in related fields. As Jonathan Hill observes, contemporary art practices – Hill points to installation art in particular – have little hesitation when it comes to undermining the authority of the artist and the art institution. Contemporary artists often underscore the importance of their audiences as essential makers of meaning in the experience and understanding of their own work. But members of the architectural profession have been very reluctant to adopt this kind of approach, or to relinquish their authority to the user in any comparable way. In contrast to contemporary artists who often express particular interest in the multiplicity of responses generated by their work, architects are less open to the notion of multiple responses. Instead, they are more accustomed to think of the user in generic terms, as a stable, centralized, passive subject. In fact, it is not uncommon for architects to equate the outlook and experience of the building’s users with their own.

According to Hill, this curious lack of interest in the user by architects, and the unwillingness of architects to cede any of their authority, may be explained by the porous borders of the architectural profession. Unlike the clear disciplinary boundaries imposed by the fields of law or medicine that prevent aspiring outsiders from claiming the professional status of a lawyer or a doctor, architecture is an amorphous, less well-policed field. The permeability of the practice of architecture – where some contractors and remodelers may design their own buildings without ever consulting a professional architect – makes architects perceive their field as more vulnerable to the unauthorized intrusions of

interlopers. This ingrained professional anxiety helps to explain why architects are so suspicious of alternative or multiple experiences of their designs. In seeking to shore up their own authority, they prefer to focus on one experience, that is to say, the one that was intended for its users as conceived by the architect.<sup>3</sup>

Architectural historians, when they have treated the issue of experience, have also prioritized the architectural experience as defined by the building's designer. While this is above all the case when architectural historians are concerned with the work of Pritzker Prize-winners and other "starchitects," the discipline still tends to follow the established tradition of attempting to reconstruct the designer's intent, and to articulate the specific goals of the designer in preparing an experience for the user. In some ways, the tendency by architectural historians to promote a specific, sanctioned interpretation of architectural experience is not unlike the position of learned theologians who likewise promote one specific, sanctioned interpretation of religious experience. Such an approach seeks to define architectural experience in terms of a definitive and final explanation, rather than venturing into the more confusing, open-ended, and sometimes contradictory aspects that inevitably emerge when one takes multiple experiences and interpretations into account. Yet just as James's notion of "varieties" of religious experience overturned the prevailing hegemonic approach to the study of religion, so we can further expand and enrich our approach to architectural history by attending to the extraordinary "varieties" of architectural experience. While it is often very helpful to consider the designer's intent, whenever possible, it is also important to acknowledge that it is impossible to convey the complexity of architectural and urban spaces in terms of one unique or preferred experience. Given the larger and often collective impact of these spaces and structures, the decision to emphasize only one preferred experience does them an injustice, and slights the complexity of the different constituencies and communities that they serve. The study of architecture and the senses further expands the interpretive lens by moving our attention beyond the visual analysis of architecture. By adopting a more inclusive, multisensory approach to the study of buildings and cities, this book seeks to foreground an even more varied panorama of architectural experience, emphasizing the dynamic response of all the senses to architectural and urban stimulation.

As we embark upon the study of architecture and the senses in the Italian Renaissance, I would like to reaffirm two of the core ideas that support and animate the argument of this book. The first of these is that sensory interactions with the built environment have been a fundamental aspect of the human condition at least since the time when people began to build shelters and live in settled communities. The second idea, as a corollary to the first, is that the varieties of architectural experience must be considered by definition infinite.

## NEW DIRECTIONS IN SCHOLARSHIP

When Karl Marx declared that “the forming of the five senses is a labor of the entire history of the world down to the present,” he recognized the fact that sensory experience is not simply an organic or biological process, but one mediated and inflected by history, as well as by a wide range of cultural and social forces.<sup>4</sup> Although it has taken scholars time to catch up with the profound significance of Marx’s observation, there has been a steady uptick in the attention to sensory experience in scholarship, and over the past few decades the trickle of publications on the topic has grown to become a steady stream.<sup>5</sup> While the systematic study of lived experiences and psychological perceptions received a critical advance with the *Einfühlung* or “empathy” scholarship of the late nineteenth century, this work developed further with respect to the study of history in the twentieth century, especially with Alain Corbin’s trail-blazing study of historic sensibilities.<sup>6</sup> Scholars in sensory studies are also indebted to the work of Constance Classen and David Howes, whose concept of a “history of the senses” and an “anthropology of the senses” is based upon the premise that “sensory perception is a cultural, as well as a physical, act.”<sup>7</sup> In recent years scholars working at the intersection of various disciplines, including history, anthropology, sociology, psychology, and literary criticism, as well as the history of art and architecture, have explored the study of sensation and cognition as a means to explore the implications of Marx’s statement in terms of spatial experience and understanding. New attention to the mediated sensorium has helped to transform the study of architecture and urbanism by addressing these topics as material structures that shape the human sensory experience of the world at both conscious and unconscious levels on a daily basis.<sup>8</sup>

In addition to the work of William James, *The Eyes of the Skin: Architecture and the Senses*, first published by Juhani Pallasmaa in 1996, offers important inspiration for this book.<sup>9</sup> Pallasmaa’s book is a critical manifesto that argues for the urgent need to integrate greater sensory sensitivity and awareness into contemporary architectural design practice. Pallasmaa exhorts practicing architects to consider the holistic sensory experiences created by architectural environments, urging them to reject the “retinal architecture” that permeates contemporary architectural practice.<sup>10</sup> Pallasmaa makes use of an extraordinary wealth of architectural, literary, and theoretical sources to explain how ocularcentrism gained its hold over Western architectural culture, not only addressing its debilitating impact upon contemporary architecture, but also exploring the multisensory complexity required to create a meaningful architectural experience. His text remains a staple in design schools, as well as an essential source for both architects and historians, exposing the negative effects of the distancing and detaching sense of vision upon the design of the built environment.<sup>11</sup>

In some ways, Pallasmaa's book recalls Steen Eiler Rasmussen's classic study, *Experiencing Architecture*, published in 1959.<sup>12</sup> Both Pallasmaa and Rasmussen adopt a thoughtful and engaging tone, and even the images illustrating their arguments have a similar quality, as unusual and arresting photographic details selected to convey the fleeting and improvised nature of architecture and sensory experience. Both books highlight the work of Alvar Aalto, suggesting the profound and enduring impact of Aalto's sustained interest in multisensory experience upon Scandinavian designers and authors.

Rasmussen draws particular attention to the architectural experiences of children. For example, he reports watching a group of schoolboys playing behind the Basilica of Santa Maria Maggiore in Rome, bouncing a ball against the monumental exterior wall of the apse, and then chasing it down the curved flights of stairs to retrieve it from the square below. By following the children's movements in this complex architectural setting, Rasmussen notes that he "sensed the whole three-dimensional composition as never before."<sup>13</sup> Rasmussen also affirms – invoking the subtitle for this book – that, "by a variety of experiences [the child] quite instinctively learns to judge things according to weight, solidity, texture, heat-conducting ability."<sup>14</sup> We unconsciously integrate these architectural experiences into our knowledge of the world very early in our lives, and our interactions with architecture in turn shape our capacity to make key sensory distinctions. Rasmussen also notes the pleasure children derive from building shelters for themselves. Children invariably "desire to build some sort of shelter. . . this 'cave game' can be varied in a thousand ways but common to them all is the enclosing of space for the child's own use."<sup>15</sup> The fundamental pleasure generated by the creation of a protective enclosure for one's own body is also connected to a heightened kind of sensory engagement with one's surroundings. By illustrating this book with images of my own children interacting with these various architectural settings, I hope to communicate something of this unconscious sensory experience and the understanding of certain basic elements of architecture that we may acquire as children.

But Pallasmaa's book raises important questions for the study of architecture and the senses in the Italian Renaissance. In particular, as Pallasmaa argues, the architectural culture of the Italian Renaissance – as codified and promoted by the publication of architectural treatises – represents the critical nexus around which the ocularcentric biases of our own architectural culture took form. This is a provocative and intriguing idea, but one that I argue needs to be qualified. As I explain in the next section, Pallasmaa's joining of the Renaissance with the rise of ocularcentrism has a history that can be traced back to the so-called "Great Divide" theory advocated by media theorist Marshall McLuhan. McLuhan argued that the Renaissance marked a critical sensory transition for Western culture, as the moment when new

communications media transformed what had been a traditional oral culture into a modern visual culture. While Pallasmaa is primarily concerned with contemporary design, he has an acute awareness of the distinctive sensory characteristics of early modern environments: as he notes, “the echo of a Renaissance city differs from that of a Baroque city.”<sup>16</sup> Nonetheless, his book tends to downplay the significance of multisensory architectural experience in the Italian Renaissance, both in terms of the priorities of the thinkers who laid the groundwork for much of modern architectural theory, and in terms of the experience of Renaissance buildings and urban environments themselves.<sup>17</sup> In the following pages I want to consider how Pallasmaa’s analysis can be reconciled with a multisensory approach to both the design and experience of Renaissance buildings and cities.

While scholars have long defined the sensory drama of Baroque architecture as the antithesis of the intellectual refinements of Renaissance architecture, the study of architecture and the senses in the Italian Renaissance has made important advances in recent years.<sup>18</sup> From Alina Payne’s study of Renaissance architectural treatises, we know that sixteenth-century architectural theorists such as Gherardo Spini sought to explain classical form as a means to make the act of construction comprehensible to the senses.<sup>19</sup> Payne’s more recent work on the shifting values assigned to architectural ornament over time, elucidating the close connections between empathy theory and the study of Renaissance art and architecture, as well as her essay on the unsettling affective power of Renaissance architecture, offer key points of departure for the study of Renaissance architecture and the imagination.<sup>20</sup> Other recent contributions have focused on religious art and architecture and the senses in the early modern period, such as Deborah Howard and Laura Moretti’s reconstruction of the acoustic experiences created in Venetian Renaissance churches, Marcia Hall and Tracy Cooper’s volume on the senses during the Counter-Reformation, and Wietse De Boer and Christine Göttler’s work on early modern religion and the senses. François Quiviger’s study of the senses in Renaissance art also presents new material and insights, as do the collected essays edited by Siv Tove Kulbrandstad Walker, Alice Sanger, and Allison Levy on the senses and early modern art and cultural practice.<sup>21</sup> Both Bissera Pentcheva’s study of Hagia Sophia and Nina Ergin’s work on Ottoman architectural and urban settings explore questions relating to architecture and the senses for cultures close in time and space to the world of the Italian Renaissance.<sup>22</sup>

Not only individual architectural monuments, but the study of the sensory experience of the early modern city as a whole has attracted new attention among scholars. The study of urban sensory experience reinforces links with the social sciences, inviting examination of the wider urban setting as a material record of broader social and cultural patterns and preferences. Richard



Sennett's *Flesh and Stone: The Body and the City in Western Civilization*, described by the author as a "history of the city told through people's body experience," remains a classic point of reference.<sup>23</sup> Other important contributions include the collected essays in *The City and the Senses: Urban Culture since 1500*, edited by Alexander Cowan and Jill Steward, and Niall Atkinson's *The Noisy Renaissance: Sound, Architecture, and Florentine Urban Life*, a full-length study of the acoustic experience of early modern Florence, as mediated, amplified, and transformed by the urban physical environment.<sup>24</sup> Atkinson's book in particular is a milestone for the study of early modern urban acoustic culture, where the recovery of the cultural significance of sound provides a key to unlock the rich acoustic culture of Renaissance Florence. *The Noisy Renaissance* gives us a much better idea of acoustic experience as a complex and layered urban phenomenon that played a fundamental and defining role for early modern Florentines. Acoustic experience not only provided a means to advance social and political goals, but shaped a sense of identity for both the individual and the larger community.

In a plenary address titled *A Sense of the Past*, delivered at the Society of Architectural Historians in Chicago in 2010, Alice Friedman pointed to the study of architecture and the senses as one of the most innovative and promising interdisciplinary methodologies now emerging in the study of architectural history. As Friedman affirmed: "by gaining access to this sort of almost incidental, everyday impression and association, we historians can come to better understand the habits of mind and the ways of seeing that give texture and meaning to spatial experience."<sup>25</sup> Important scholarly contributions such as *The Noisy Renaissance* and others have gone a long way toward fulfilling these expectations, opening up innovative and intriguing approaches to the study of architectural history. These approaches have been particularly welcome in Renaissance studies where, as Nicholas Terpstra suggests, scholars have felt for some time that the monuments of the Renaissance, even as they are researched and examined in ever greater detail, have continued to recede into an experiential vacuum, growing ever more isolated, abstract, and remote from current experience. The study of architecture and the senses has helped to counter this alienating, intellectualizing tendency, and promises to restore something of the animated and improvised lived experience that was an essential part of the history of Italian Renaissance architecture and urban spaces.<sup>26</sup>

Despite this progress, we still lack a book-length study that seeks to address the early modern built environment in terms of a complex, multisensory, immersive experience. In general, scholars still tend to adhere to a more conventional approach in sensory studies that examines the five traditional modes of sight, sound, smell, taste, and touch as separate categories. This research has critically advanced our knowledge not only about the operation

of the senses, but also about the complex ways that humans have perceived and interpreted buildings and urban spaces in different places and at different times. Nonetheless, the individual sensory investigation is not an adequate model to explain how we interact with built environments. Far from experiencing the environment through one isolated sense at a time, in such experiences we employ all our of senses simultaneously. As Mark Smith notes, the phenomenon of intersensoriality, or the ways that the different senses interact and reinforce each other, further complicates the process of distinguishing and individuating the specific contributions of the different sensory modes.<sup>27</sup> The senses are deeply intertwined not only among themselves, but also with feeling, emotion, affect, and cognition.<sup>28</sup> The term somaesthetics, which refers to the sensory perception of the body itself, moves beyond the particular contributions of the individual sense organs to consider the experiences and uses of the living body (or soma) as a whole.<sup>29</sup> This book seeks to acknowledge this greater sensory complexity by exploring the multiple and dynamic interactions between the body, the senses, and these different emotional and intellectual processes in its investigation of the lived experience and interpretation of early modern buildings and urban environments.

#### RENAISSANCE ARCHITECTURE AND THE “GREAT DIVIDE”

What is the so-called “Great Divide” theory, and what is its relevance for the study of architecture and the senses in the Italian Renaissance? In *The Gutenberg Galaxy: The Making of Typographic Man*, Marshall McLuhan argued that the invention of the movable type printing press by Johannes Gutenberg in 1439 had a direct and permanent impact upon the hierarchy of the senses in Western culture.<sup>30</sup> According to McLuhan, Gutenberg’s invention represented a critical watershed between two primary modes of perception, marking the precise moment of transition when an oral culture instead became a visual culture. As McLuhan argued, prior to the invention of the printing press, “primitive” human culture relied upon speech for communication, but with the invention of typeface print, and “the making of typographic man,” human culture turned toward visual forms of expression. The use of the printing press meant that the acquisition of information and knowledge was no longer contained by the limits of oral modes of communication, but instead circulated much further via visual modes of communication, such as the printed text and the printed image. As this very brief sketch of the “Great Divide” theory suggests, McLuhan resorted to the well-worn historical explanation that identified the Renaissance as the turning point for Western civilization and the critical formation of modern perception and modern experience.

McLuhan’s “Great Divide” theory, despite its somewhat sensationalist claims, has had an enduring influence upon our thinking about the Western