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John E. Moore
Smith College, jmoore@smith.edu

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Books

Italian Architects

Sarah McPhee

Bernini and the Bell Towers: Architecture and Politics at the Vatican

New Haven: Yale University Press, 2002, xii + 352 pp., 22 color and 142 b/w illus. $48, ISBN 0-30008-982-1

However ill-starred, the bell towers of St. Peter's constitute an architectural endeavor that spanned most of the first half of the seventeenth century and thus merit the full-scale study under review here. Discovering overlooked yet revelatory details in drawings and prints, exploring the visible and hidden fabric of the Vatican basilica itself, and patiently examining consistencies and discrepancies in narratives preserved in archival and printed sources, Sarah McPhee deftly reconstructs the professional and bureaucratic rhythms of architectural practice while attending to larger issues of patronage and symbolism. She intends to locate the story of the bell towers "within the institutional context that produced [them]" (2). To do that leads her—as has been the case now for some decades in scholarly studies of Roman Baroque architecture—to focus on competitions, on committee deliberations, and on the often lavish yet discontinuous patronage of individual popes. These subjects do not, however, lead the author to slight artists' efforts, triumphs, or failures.

The art world under scrutiny was intense and exacting, as an Italian document transcribed by McPhee attests. With respect to the baldachin at the crossing of St. Peter's, an edict invited those "who [have] thoughts about architecture, ideas [*inventioni*], or something else [*altro*]" to submit designs "within fifteen days" (218; my translation). We must imagine either that information about upcoming competitions was leaked to the advantage—and detriment—of certain artists, or that designers in Rome generally knew how to think and draw with remarkable speed. Papal ambitions, too, were frequently monumental. An anonymous 1608 proposal by Carlo Maderno for the façade of St. Peter's (12, fig. 11) includes a frieze inscription that omits *any* mention of the titular saint; even in the inscription we see today, the oblique invocation of Saint Peter is truncated so that "Paul V Borghese, Roman" can be spelled out completely.

Gianlorenzo Bernini envisioned paired towers standing nearly as tall as the cross that surmounts the basilica's majestic dome; the south tower was still incomplete when, bedecked with candles, it was unveiled on 29 June 1641, the feast day of Saints Peter and Paul, Rome's patron saints. The tower's pyramidal summit consisted not of carved stone and other permanent materials but of a gesso-coated wooden model, parcel-gilt and painted to imitate travertine and lead, elements of facture that evoke ephemeral architecture. Even in that state, the tower quickly awakened criticisms that led to the removal of the wooden model months (if not days) after it was hoisted, piece by piece, into place. Work on the north tower commenced but never progressed beyond the first level. McPhee argues that the cessation of building activity was prompted not by concerns about structural integrity but by the tumultuous and ruinously expensive war of Castro that clouded Urban VIII's last years as pope.

Visible cracks in the façade occasioned the taking of soundings to examine the foundations and became the subject of five meetings held between 1645 and 1646 by that congregation of cardinals (the Fabbrica di S. Pietro) charged with the oversight of building projects, outfitting, and other such matters related to the church. Innocent X, the new pontiff, was himself at times in attendance to weigh the evidence presented and to hear artists' testimony. Bernini thought that settling was the culprit; as McPhee suggests, Francesco Borromini, with the help of mixed-media drawings stunning in their clear and tendentious communicative power, faulted his rival for having built an overly tall and dangerously heavy bell tower inappropriate for a site originally intended to support a single-story, less ponderous construction. For the committee members, the Oratorian priest Virgilio Spada produced extensively researched reports. Spada's analyses of structure and the centuries-long building history of St. Peter's led him to identify essential flaws in Maderno's façade foundations as the true cause of the cracks, thus largely exonerating Bernini and mitigating Borromini's pointed critiques. Indeed, although Spada is primarily remembered as a champion of Borromini, McPhee demonstrates that both Bernini and some of his biographers later and unjustly turned Spada into a villain.

Eight architects submitted designs for the bell towers in this same period. Some used Mattheus Greuter's 1613 engraving of the façade as a literal back-

drop for their proposals, which acknowledges the power of prints to render concrete one's understanding of a building. As it happened, more than prints were recycled: motifs from one tower design migrated to others, a phenomenon the author links to "the cumulative nature of the design process" (156) within a limited field of competitors. Carlo Rainaldi and Bernini proposed not only decorative but also significant structural alterations to Maderno's façade that would have turned the towers into freestanding elements and removed weight from the foundations. Andrea Bolgi, too, wanted to separate the towers from the façade and to set colossal niche sculptures in their bases. Had that detail been realized, it would have reflected formal arrangements in the crossing of St. Peter's, where Bolgi's statue of Saint Helen is still to be seen, along with Bernini's Saint Longinus; Bolgi calls attention to his Saint Helen in the pen-and-ink inscription transcribed by McPhee (274). Indeed, Bernini—in his incompletely built south tower and in his numerous revised projects of 1645 (including the winning but never-built design)—included four sculptures of the doctors of the church that eventually found an echo in his Cathedra Petri (1657–66) in the basilica's western apse. McPhee does not make these latter points, but they remind us of the protean *longue durée* of artists' ideas.

Despite this flurry of proposals and meetings, on 23 February 1646 the decision was taken to demolish Bernini's incomplete south tower. Between 1653 and 1701, travertine that had lain on the roof of the basilica was dispersed, to be reused in Sant'Agnese in Piazza Navona, the dynastic church of the Pamphilj family (1655–57), in the twin churches of Santa Maria di Montesanto and Santa Maria dei Miracoli in the Piazza del Popolo (1662), in the south arm of Bernini's portico in St. Peter's Square (1667), and in the portico of Santa Maria in Trastevere (1701). Two pairs of marble winged victories can still be seen over the entrances to prominent chapels within St. Peter's, in each instance supporting, with no little irony, the coat of arms of Innocent X.

In the final chapter, the author addresses why it was believed that new St. Peter's needed bell towers in the first place. Although its precise form still remains a matter of conjecture, a two-story structure marked by two towers formed the easternmost element of the Constantinian basilica complex. There, a chapel dedicated to the Virgin played a significant role in rituals associated with the coronation of the Holy Roman emperors, as did porphyry disks set within the nave floor of the basilica itself. The memory of these towers was fresh in the minds of Bernardo Rossellino, whom Nicholas V (1447–55) commissioned to devise a campaign of renovations, and of designers such as Donato Bramante, Raphael, and Antonio da Sangallo the Younger, all famously involved in planning and building new St. Peter's in the sixteenth century. However, the desire to maintain this historical and archaeological link between the Constantinian and the modern basilica ran contrary to the realities imposed by the marshy site on which the new towers were to rise. And with all the powerful forces bearing down upon those who visit and take in St. Peter's, the absence of towers, in my view, is an aesthetic relief. I cannot imagine that towers designed by Maderno, Bernini, or anyone else would have made a positive addition to the building. Michelangelo apparently agreed, for part of his thoroughgoing critique of Sangallo's overbusy ideas was to remove the projected towers.

The 212 pages of the book's main text are followed by forty-nine pages of transcriptions of forty-three documents (mostly in Italian, a few in Latin) from various Roman archives. Some of the endnotes needlessly recapitulate either large portions of documents transcribed in the book or documents transcribed and published elsewhere; a better use of the notes would perhaps have been to provide concise summaries in English of those documents' substance, as in fact occurs now and again.

A thirty-one-page catalogue includes forty-four entries that collectively treat fifty-two drawings, mostly those related to the 1645–46 meetings of the Fabbrica. These drawings record (among other things) structural data gathered from soundings and design proposals for the never-completed bell towers. In the catalogue, McPhee helpfully refers readers back to illustrations in the main text, but it would also have been a boon to find catalogue numbers in parentheses after the illustration captions, thus obviating the need for much flipping from main text to endnotes to documents and then to the catalogue.

As is the case with many Yale University Press publications, the production qualities of this volume are lavish: the margins of facing left- and right-hand pages are often more than two inches wide, and the bottom margin is nearly as ample. Such generous dimensions permit large-scale photographic reproductions of the prints and drawings whose rich analysis lies at the heart of the argument. And fully one-third of the book is given over to a scholarly apparatus consisting of transcribed documents and the catalogue of drawings and prints. In these sources as well as in McPhee's cogent narrative, scholars will find much to illuminate fascinating moments in the history of a venerable building and a no-less-venerable institution.

JOHN E. MOORE
Smith College

Branko Mitrović
Learning from Palladio
New York: W. W. Norton, 2004, 224 pp., 202 b/w illus. $60, ISBN 0-393-73116-2

The life and work of Andrea Palladio, like that of Frank Lloyd Wright, has generated a small industry in architectural history, and one may question the need for another addition to this daunting scholarly corpus. Branko Mitrović's *Learning from Palladio* focuses on the architect's design theory and as such is heir to the classic studies of Rudolf Wittkower, Colin Rowe, and, more recently,