

Inventing the Tridentine Utopia: Two Sixteenth-Century Urban Projects in the Duchy of Milan

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Summary Statement

The decrees of the Council of Trent (1545-1563) provided an unprecedented degree of authority and autonomy to the bishop, making him the primary agent for change. This was a fundamental element in a utopian vision for Catholic society that prelates and princes endeavored to achieve. The expression of that ideal in urban form is seen in projects for the cathedral in Tortona (and its predecessor, the Dominican friary in Bosco Marengo).

Topic and Scope

Is it possible to talk about a "Tridentine Utopia"? Didn't the decrees of Trent just reiterate dogma and demand enforcement of existing rules? According to Church historian John O'Malley, the council participants professed fidelity to tradition but in fact they demanded change, especially for the episcopal office. Both pastor and bureaucrat, the bishop historically directed a corporate clerical organization. Many sixteenth-century bishops abdicated responsibility to a vicar or the cathedral chapter. Trent sought to rectify negligence by demanding personal fulfillment of duties, yet it did more than enforce the old model. O'Malley stated: "Those ordinances [about bishops and the diocesan clergy] taken cumulatively amounted to a program, which in its comprehensiveness and in the detail and sharp clarity of its provisions resulted in something new."¹ If we consider this as the foundation for the social discipline that characterized the following 200 years, then we begin to see an ideal that was, for the Catholic hierarchy, utopian: a scrupulous bishop directing a disciplined clergy that served and controlled an orthodox, faithful laity.

Did this new conception find expression in contemporary urban design? The city-states of central and northern Italy (whether republics or duchies) alternated between two sources of political legitimacy and military support: emperor and pope. Congruently, the citizens and rulers calculated and carefully planned the architectural expression and urban siting of the monuments that housed and represented secular and religious offices and institutions. The cathedral was usually the city's largest and finest building. Frequently it dominated a city's central square, while also sharing it with civic or governmental institutions (examples include Milan and Pienza). In a few cases, the cathedral sat on its own square that was secondary (in size and design) to the primary civic square (Florence, Siena).² These solutions read as statements about religious devotion and respect for the bishop, but also about secular autonomy. In a cultural context in which architectural and urban design expressed political and religious conceptions, the Dominican friary at Bosco Marengo and the projects for the cathedral at Tortona (Illus. 1) can be interpreted as expressing Tridentine ideals about ecclesiastical authority and Catholic society.

¹ John O'Malley, *Trent and All That. Renaming Catholicism in the Early Modern Era* (Cambridge: Harvard U P, 2000), 132.

² See, for example, Luisa Giordano, "Milano, Pavia, Vigevano: Le piazze lombarde: Linee di sviluppo di tre esempi storici," in *Fabbriche, piazze, mercati: La città italiana nel Rinascimento*, ed. Donatella Calabi (Rome: Officina, 1997), 103-129. Marvin Trachtenberg, "What Brunelleschi Saw: Monument and Site at the Palazzo Vecchio in Florence," *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 47.1 (1988): 14-44.

Bosco (a farming village) and Tortona (its diocesan see) both suffered during the wars of the early sixteenth century, and both benefitted when two native sons commissioned buildings. Michele Ghislieri (1504-1572), born in Bosco, began his ecclesiastical career as a Dominican friar. When he was elected Pope Pius V (reigned 1566-1572), he decided to build a large, wealthy and beautiful friary for his hometown. It was not located in Bosco but rather in the open country, on the road to the neighboring village. Such a rural setting is unusual for a Dominican house, yet Pius had big plans: he hoped to stimulate growth and development so that the two villages could expand and merge around the friary.³ While this scheme had no articulated urban design, it would have given the Dominicans preeminence in the enlarged town.

Pius also participated in the project for Tortona's new cathedral with Gian Paolo Della Chiesa (1521-1575), a native of Tortona. Della Chiesa first had a career as a successful lawyer and Senator in Milan. Following the death of his wife, he accepted Pius' invitation to serve in the Curia and was elevated to the cardinalate.⁴ Their first plan for Tortona was to expropriate the suburban friary of S. Francesco, enclose it within new city walls and adapt it to serve as cathedral, episcopal palace and canonry (Illus. 2). Considering the megalomania of Pius' goals for Bosco, even the most grandiose urban schemes for connecting the new cathedral with the existing city are imaginable.⁵ This project was about to begin when Della Chiesa changed his mind: he decided to demolish a small church and square (and nearby residential buildings) in the middle of the city, build a new cathedral and open a large, regular piazza. No drawings for either project are known to exist, but Pellegrino Tibaldi (1527-1596), the preferred architect of the reforming archbishop of Milan, Carlo Borromeo (1538-1584), was probably their designer.

The untimely deaths of both Pius and Della Chiesa deprived the cathedral of its patrons, but Archbishop Borromeo and the new pope evaluated the latter project, approved it and decided to proceed. Construction resumed and it was completed within forty years. Buildings on one side of the square were radically renovated to serve as the episcopal palace (Illus. 3).⁶ As a result, the city was centered on a new piazza dominated by the cathedral and episcopal palace. The space was exclusively ecclesiastical, proclaiming Tortona to be a diocesan see yet conforming to neither of the more common urban settings for cathedrals.

These examples correspond to theoretical directives, but only in part. Most theoreticians of the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries followed Alberti's lead in advocating that a city's principal church be free-standing and face an urban space (as Tortona's cathedral does). Among those who discussed a city's *central* piazza, however, only Alberti and Filarete described an exclusively ecclesiastical square (and just as one option).⁷ Tibaldi also weighed in: at the end of his life, he penned commentaries on Vitruvius and Alberti, including prescriptions for the capital city of a Catholic prince. Clearly relying upon his experience as Borromeo's architect, he described a thinly-veiled version of an improved Milan with a reorganized configuration of institutional buildings, larger and more regular piazze, and better architecture. His model did not, however, include an exclusively ecclesiastical central piazza: the cathedral dominated the main square,

³ Antonella Perin, "Problemi e prospettive di ricerca per Bosco Marengo e il suo convento tra XVI e XVIII secolo," in *Santa Croce di Bosco Marengo*, eds. Fulvio Cervini and Carlenrica Spantigati (Alessandria: Cassa di Risparmio di Alessandria, 2002), 67-69.

⁴ John Alexander, "The Family of Gian Paolo Della Chiesa," *Iulia Dertona* 66.2 (2015): 5-21.

⁵ Antonella Perin and John Alexander, "Per Pellegrino Pellegrini a Tortona. Pio V, il cardinale Della Chiesa e la cattedrale a San Francesco (1570-1572)," *Arte Lombarda* 173-174 (2015): 89-101.

⁶ Antonella Perin and John Alexander, "Office and Patronage in Mid-Sixteenth-Century Tortona," in *Episcopal Reform and Politics in Early Modern Europe*, ed. Jennifer Mara De Silva (Kirkville, MO: Truman State U P, 2012), 63-87.

⁷ An ecclesiastical piazza was also central and preeminent in specific drawings of Francesco di Giorgio and Fra' Giocondo. Giorgio Simoncini, "L'idea della città cristiana negli scritti di Pellegrino Tibaldi," *Arte Lombarda* 94-95 (1990): 57-59, 62-63. Hanno-Walter Kruft, "L'idea della piazza rinascimentale secondo i trattati e le fonti vive," *Annali di architettura. Rivista del Centro internazionale di studi di architettura Andrea Palladio* 4-5 (1992-1993): 215-227.

but shared it with complexes serving the prince, civic institutions, and commerce.⁸ Rejecting Tortona's example, Tibaldi devised an urban form for the Tridentine age that developed upon a more typical scheme for shared use of the central square.

Intended Conclusions

The projects envisioned by Pius V and Della Chiesa were clear examples of architecture and urbanism serving the ideal Catholic society, as it was understood by the intentions and decrees of the Council of Trent. There is no evidence that their model was ever considered for imitation, and perhaps few other cities could have accommodated an exclusive and preeminent position for ecclesiastical authority because of pre-existing conditions. Nevertheless, the examples of Bosco and Tortona, so closely connected in terms of location, chronology, patronage and goal, merit attention as utopian visions.

⁸ Simoncini, "L'idea," 55-64. Aurora Scotti and Cino Zucchi, "Il 'Discorso d'Architettura' di Pellegrino Pellegrini. Ipotesi di restituzione grafica della 'piazze della città cioè il foro'," *Arte Lombarda* 94-95 (1990): 75-80.



Illus. 1: Seventeenth-century engraved view of Tortona.
Property of Giuseppe de' Carlini; used with his permission.



Illus. 2: Map of Tortona's lower town, with hypothetical walls encompassing the suburban friary of S. Francesco.
 Drawing by Roberto Cartasegna and Antonella Perin; used with their permission.



Illus. 3: View of the Piazza del Duomo (Tortona), the sixteenth-century cathedral and episcopal palace (to the right).
Photograph by Antonella Perin; used with her permission.