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The Ritual Frame and the Limits of Spatial Enclosure in the Early Modern City

Saundra Weddle

- 1 For those who consider architecture and the city as vehicles for interpreting culture, an ordinary building or space can prove to be more revealing than an extraordinary one because it has the potential to represent a fuller range of everyday experience. However, when historians consider the early modern period, fragmented material and documentary evidence presents formidable challenges to such studies. This paper foregrounds previously overlooked places by analyzing the role of built space in early modern ritual, specifically Pope Leo X's entry into Florence in 1515.
- 2 Historians have long recognized that early modern architecture and cities express complex social relationships, but their investigations have focused on monuments whose connections to the powerful elite limit our view of the societies and cultures that shaped the built environment. In comparison with the heroic buildings that represent centers of influence, more mundane buildings have typically been disregarded as common—either they appear unsophisticated or their inhabitants lacked significant status. This evaluation of ordinary architecture both results from and perpetuates the marginalization of such works.
- 3 As the example of Florentine convent architecture demonstrates, the physical evidence sometimes invites this neglect. The convent's public face expressed ideals that prescribed the enclosure of women for both religious and social purposes, resulting in an architecture that was practically pre-destined to be ignored. As a whole, the convent's function was to ensure and enforce its inhabitants' humility and obedience and, as such, demanded modesty of form and materials. In particular, the exterior enclosing wall's function was to denote the separation of the holy virgins within from the world outside, and connote the chastity promoted by an ideology that linked the enclosure of both nuns and lay women with the preservation of their reputations. These demands contributed to an architectural form that was monotonous and almost

completely without relief, and thus rarely justified the hiring of an architect. Instead, early modern convents generally developed through a process of accretion that resulted in the unification of buildings and spaces by means of the enclosing wall that served as the complex's defining feature. This combination of banality and anonymity fulfilled the intention of patrons, and of ecclesiastical and civic authorities, to create monastic complexes that, although situated in the heart of the city, would isolate the architecture and its inhabitants from their profane surroundings.

- 4 Because ordinary buildings—and perhaps especially convents—of the early modern period present significant documentary and material challenges, one is obliged to locate their history between the lines in sources where they appear almost accidentally. An important opportunity for such study is offered by accounts of the public rituals that moved through the urban environment, crossing mundane territories along with exalted ones. Because they take place in the public realm, rituals serve as a nexus where social and political practices coincide with the built environment, shaping and expressing ideologies that were instrumental in the development and functioning of architecture and the city. Indeed, Leo X's entry into Florence reveals that the correlation of ideology and architecture is far more complex than mere formal analysis suggests. Examination of the ways that the papal entry intersected with convent architecture and spaces results in a more nuanced understanding of how the built environment was understood and employed during the early modern period.
- 5 Although papal processions coming from or going to Rome are generally understood to have begun and ended at Porta Romana, this was not the case (fig. 1). Instead, arrivals and departures took place at the extra-mural convent of Santa Caterina di San Gaggio, located less than a kilometer outside Porta Romana. All of the popes who entered Florence during the quattrocento and cinquecento stopped at San Gaggio, either on their way into the city (as Eugenius IV, Pius II and Leo X did) or (as in the case of Martin V) on their way out. The convent provided a staging ground for greetings and farewells issued by civic representatives and, as such, the visit to San Gaggio must be considered part of the papal entry ritual *per se*. The zone between the city gate and the convent was a liminal space where the Florentine Republic and the popes negotiated their roles, with San Gaggio functioning as the threshold of a kind of urban vestibule that led to the reception hall of the city within the walls.¹
- 6 That San Gaggio was part of the extended ritual is confirmed not only by the actions of the Florentines, but also of the pontiffs themselves. The precedent of Martin V's visit to San Gaggio is significant. When he left the city on September 9, 1420, Martin was accompanied by a group of eight prominent citizens including Giovanni di Bicci de' Medici, sixteen young men, and thirty-two "famegli."² The party proceeded around the city center, crossing the Ponte Vecchio and exiting through Porta Romana. Martin was accompanied by his official Florentine escorts only until they reached San Gaggio.³ The nuns there were said to "spare no expense" in their reception of the pontiff, which included a meal for Martin and the Florentine representatives. In return for their hospitality, Martin extended to the nuns a plenary indulgence *in articulo mortis*. Finally, "without banners or canopies or standards" he set off for Rome on the back of a mule, carrying only a cross.⁴ The image of the pope riding away on the back of a mule is a powerful one that suggests a sort of "entry into Jerusalem" in reverse, indicating that, for Martin at least, the display did not end at San Gaggio. Leaving his Florentine escorts

behind, he created a ritual context of his own definition. In this instance, San Gaggio provided a threshold giving on to the ritualized space extending beyond Florence.

- 7 In the case of Leo X's triumphal entry the San Gaggio precedent was strictly adhered to. First, although the pope was meant to arrive in Florence by way of Siena, a diplomatic disagreement led him to approach from Cortona instead. This change in route led him along the Arno river valley, which enters the city from the southeast, directing him to Porta San Niccolò. Although the Florentines charged with making arrangements for the papal visit changed their plans for receptions and chaperones along the pope's approach to Florence, they did not alter the route of the entry procession itself, arranging his entry along via Senese through Porta Romana. Second, the pontiff himself suggested that he put on his ceremonial vestments at the convent of Monticelli instead of at San Gaggio, which was farther from Porta Romana, apparently protesting that he did not wish to walk the extra distance bearing the weight of the papal tiara.⁵ This proposal was rejected. Papal herald Paris de Grassis reports that Leo was met at San Gaggio by a group of cardinals, and there he put on his stole over his alb, and "in this way followed the example of Eugenius IV."⁶ Adhering to the precedent was one of many ways that Leo X could communicate his legitimacy in the long line of successors to the throne of Saint Peter, and it is likely that the Signoria, dominated by Medici sympathizers, wished to reinforce Leo's authority—both secular and religious.
- 8 The convent's position as the start of the ritual entry was not lost on San Gaggio's nuns. Their account books reveal that they were keenly aware of the significance of particular points of transition from public spaces to private ones, and of places within their complex where they were likely to have contact with the pontiff.⁷ For example, the door that gave onto the street was decorated with paper coats of arms, marking the start of the pope's visit to the convent and proclaiming the convent's special status to others who passed or entered there (fig. 2). The nuns also adorned the church door with festoons decorated with *foglie d'orpello*—a sort of tinsel—and hung more paper coats of arms within the church itself, punctuating the end of the pope's formal itinerary within the convent and designating the entire complex as a territory dominated by him. These decorations marked degrees of enclosure within the complex: although the door to the street marked the outer edge of the site, on any regular day it was not uncommon for lay persons to enter into semi-private spaces such as the entry courtyard or the church; at the limit of such semi-private spaces, one would encounter the true boundary of the enclosure beyond which no lay person could pass (fig. 3). The marking of thresholds demonstrates that the nuns acknowledged and observed these degrees of enclosure and that they communicated their observance of them to their superior. That the climax of Leo's visit to San Gaggio occurred in the convent's church was signaled by the nuns' reception of the pontiff there, whereas they would typically have observed activities in the church from their choir. On this occasion, the abbess presented to the Pontiff vestments sewn by the nuns: a cincture with gold thread and a silk alb. The moment the pope put on these ceremonial clothes indicates a transition from a simple papal visitation to the beginning of an exceptional event. The nuns' handwork, then, was instrumental in changing the pope's status and his role. Thus, the interior of the San Gaggio complex and the church in particular functioned as the formal beginning of Leo's ritual entry.
- 9 The nuns also used the occasion to improve the convent in more permanent ways. They rebuilt a church wall because, the records say, "the pope would enter there." They also

repaired a window through which they received communion and mended the woodwork on their confessional.⁸ Even these interventions marked spatial limits and points of contact between the nuns and the pontiff, reflecting the importance the community placed on those elements and their awareness of the heightened attention they would receive on this particular occasion.

- 10 Leo X's entry also reveals shifting concepts of enclosure within the urban realm. Although enclosure regulations prescribed physical separation of nuns from the outside world, and convent architecture was understood as the material embodiment of enclosure regulations, the papal herald's accounts reveal that the pope agreed to the nuns' apparently unprecedented request to leave their enclosures to view the procession.⁹ Paris de Grassis reports that the pope granted the nuns "the permission to come to honorable places (*ad loca honesta*) so that they might see [the procession], but not be seen, as indeed communities of cloistered nuns did come."¹⁰ I wish to emphasize the phrase *ad loca honesta*, because it distinctly indicates *motion toward* decent places rather than *placement in* them. It would be incorrect to assume that the nuns went to suitable places within their own convents to view the procession—a solution that would, in any case, have been available only to those few houses that lined the route—because Paris de Grassis reported that "many communities of cloistered nuns did come," in other words, they gathered at a place outside their cloisters.¹¹ "They came altogether," the master of ceremonies continues, "and they were visible."¹² He is quick to point out that "they did not, however, walk through the streets in these processions."
- 11 Although leaving the cloister *with* papal permission is less shocking than doing so without it, the sight of nuns converging on the city center and gathering to witness the papal procession seems extraordinary. Thus, it is surprising that none of the many other sources I have so far consulted note the presence of women religious at Leo's entry. Could it be that public appearances by nuns were more common and, therefore, less noteworthy than has traditionally been assumed? In a forthcoming article, Sharon Strocchia discusses an early trecento episcopal dispensation that permitted the nuns of San Pier Maggiore to make discreet trips into their neighborhood to attend to convent business.¹³ In addition, Strocchia reports that Dominican and Augustinian nuns left their cloisters on occasion.¹⁴ But active enclosure was certainly enforced more rigorously (if still sporadically) over time, and these unorganized forays were the exception rather than the rule. In contrast, it is now known that nuns were occasionally made to process in a ceremonial context, especially when being transferred from one house to another. Appearing in public while surrounded by a protective entourage of secular and religious authorities legitimized these nuns' public appearance by means of a kind of mobile human enclosure that framed their activities, making a kind of *locus honestus*.
- 12 To what extent and how frequently nuns appeared in Florentine public ritual contexts is not yet clear. What is clear is that examining the ritualized architecture and spaces of Florentine convents reveals more nuanced interpretations of the enclosure of women than formal analysis of monumental architecture can ever manage to uncover. When nuns and their convents did play a role in early modern rituals that role, like so many components of ritual activities, was subject to conventions and precedents expressed in a wider range of urban activity. Indeed, the organized and controlled nature of such appearances, along with the resonance of the ritual frame's repetitive qualities,

legitimized nuns' presence, making it not the transgressive act we might expect, but a recognizable aspect of the discursive environment of early modern Florence.

NOTES DE FIN

1. See S. MANTINI, *Lo spazio sacro della Firenze Medicea: Trasformazioni urbane e cerimoniali pubblici tra Quattrocento e Cinquecento*, Florence, 1995, p. 88.
2. Bartolomeo DEL CORAZZA, *Diario Fiorentino (1405-1439)*, ed. Roberta Gentile, Rome, 1991, pp. 62-4.
3. *Ibid.*
4. *Ibid.*
5. I. CISERI, *L'ingresso trionfale di Leone X in Firenze nel 1515*, Florence, 1990, p. 291.
6. ASF, *Carte di Corredo* 61, pp. 3v-4r.
7. ASF, *Corporazioni Religiose Soppresses dal Governo Francese* 234, filza 43, pp. 43v-44r.
8. *Ibid.* They also went to some expense to provide a catered meal that included special breads, sweets, and many flasks of Trebbiano wine for the pope, cardinals, and other members of the pope's retinue, which some have numbered at over 200. *Ibid.*, p. 44r.
9. D. MORENI, *De Ingressu*, pp. 7-8 and repeated in the *Zibaldone di Scipione Ammirati*, Biblioteca Nazionale Centrale di Firenze, Palatino 988, f. 540v.
10. *Ibid.*
11. *Ibid.*
12. *Ibid.*
13. Personal communication via e-mail, March 10, 2004.
14. *Ibid.*

RÉSUMÉS

Architectural historians have shown that common buildings merit our attention, and yet no cohesive body of scholarship exists for the everyday architecture of the early modern period. This article examines Florentine convent architecture by analyzing the role of built space in early modern ritual, specifically Leo X's 1515 entry into Florence. Although nuns are believed to have been definitively separated from public life by their enclosures, more nuanced interpretations result from study of the ritual context. The convent of San Gaggio was the formal starting point, for every papal entry into Florence during the quattrocento, as well as Leo X's. This ritual communicated the Popes' legitimacy and allowed the nuns to express their recognition of their enclosure to their superior. Second, the 1515 entry also reveals shifting concepts of enclosure in the urban realm as Leo granted unprecedented permission for nuns to leave their convents to view his entry procession.

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Index géographique : Europe, Florence, Italie

Mots-clés : rituel, architecture conventuelle

Index chronologique : XVI^e siècle, époque moderne, XIII^e-XV^e siècle

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