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Jordan Hillier
Trinity College

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The Duomo: The Touchstone of Florence

Jordan Hillier

While European societies coped with the loss of the Roman Empire in the Middle Ages, Florence, Italy began an age of augmentation in transnational trade, city infrastructure, and wealth. Medieval Florence signifies an era in which the small Roman town transformed into one of the most powerful, populated cities in Europe with the help of the manufacturing and trading industries. Florence grew exponentially in size as Europeans began traveling to the city for vocational opportunities as well as a way to escape the rule of elite families, which led to the conquering of surrounding communities as well as the construction of monumental buildings. The growing wool industry and promise of international trade in the eleventh century, as well as the attempt of Europeans to escape feudal lords imperial power, led to the urbanization of Medieval Florence. The urbanized city's power and wealth was ultimately displayed through the construction of the Duomo, the touchstone of Florentine architecture.

The Roman Empire crumbled in the sixth century, resulting in the continual disintegration of the Empire's centralized political system, as well as other Roman policies, throughout European cities. As a result of the lack of authority that plagued Europe, wealthy individuals and families became influential factors in a country's political system, as well as protectors and providers for peasants. However, this created a level of dependency on the wealthy, which often led to unfair treatment of the poor as well as a feeling of insecurity. The urbanization of cities throughout Europe began to take place as peasants started looking to escape this feeling of bondage to feudal lords. This migration into different cities, including Florence, was not only an attempt to escape reliance on the affluent, but also to achieve a better lifestyle through the trading possibilities that urban environments promoted. Florence's population growth was a product of this logic, as people began to migrate into the city from the countryside because of the wool industry that began to prosper in the midst of the medieval era.

Florence's ability to succeed economically despite its location in the center of the Italian boot promoted its title "as one of the pearls of Tuscany"[1] as the city began to flourish as a trading capital in the eleventh century. Florence's largest industry was the manufacturing and exporting of wool, which was collected from "the hitherland and [was] sold [in] rapidly growing urban markets nearby; but as production increase[d], merchants went farther afield for raw materials, and as quality improved, they expanded into new markets"[2] in other areas of Europe. Because of its location on the Arno River, Florence citizens who worked in the wool industry could easily clean the material and use the rapidly flowing river to help operate the mills. The Arno River also allowed for "access to the sea at the port of Pisa, [where] the entire Italian commercial network abroad, from northern Europe to the Levant, could be exploited for both the supply of raw materials and market outlets for production."[3] The wool industry gave Florence "one of the strongest economies in medieval Europe,"[4] which contributed greatly to the understanding of the city as a source of power amongst other Tuscan towns.

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[1] Christopher Hibbert, *Florence: The Biography of a City* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1993), 13.
[2] Richard A. Goldthwaite, *The Building of Renaissance Florence: An Economic and Social History* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1980), 31-32.
[3] Ibid, 31.
[4] Ibid, 31.

Florence gradually grew with the continual arrival of merchants, who, with their immense numbers, inhabited the area surrounding Florence, creating suburbs of the city and ultimately expanding the metropolis' territory. Merchants, who came to sell at Florence's markets but were denied access at the city's gates, would line the roads that led to the city's core, creating small living communities called *faubourgs*. As the *faubourgs*, or suburbs, swelled with merchants it became necessary to expand the wall, which originally surrounded and defined the city's nucleus, to encompass a larger section of land. When the wall was moved in 1175 for the fifth time to include the growing population, it "circumscrib[ed] an area well over twice the size of the Roman town and divided it into six neighborhoods, known as sestieri."[5] The distinction between different regions of the city allowed for greater control over Florence and also greater protection considering that every region of Florence, those on the perimeter and in the core, had its own militia. The necessity of expanding the city's limits to encircle a greater area of land only proves the ways in which the Florentine economy led to the urbanization of the city. Florence transformed from a neatly defined Roman grid, with streets perpendicular to each other and small, defined town centers, into a rapidly growing urban city.

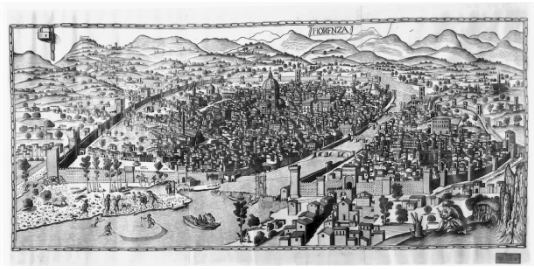

Figure 1: Medieval Florence with surrounding wall, 12th-14th century.

The Roman street grid that draped the city of Florence limited the size and scale of most structures, making it particularly difficult for the city to develop monumental buildings. Large sections of the city were devoted to Florentine housing, which was comprised of very "humble timber structures [however], two major building typologies developed in the [eleventh and twelfth centuries] that were to have profound impact on the appearance of the mature medieval city: churches and tower houses."[6] The tower house, a characteristic structure of Medieval Florence, was constructed of stone masonry for the purposes of fireproofing and was often used as refuge during times of pandemonium. The necessity of some form of safe haven for citizens living in Florence in the Medieval era sheds light on the condition of Florentine politics during the Middle Ages, which experienced centuries of political turmoil due to inner-city conflicts of interest. Churches, on the other hand, were considered essential in many European communities since Christianity's influence grew and resulted in the urbanization of the area as people thrived around them. The Duomo, or Florence Cathedral, also caused the city to urbanize and grow into one of the most powerful areas in Europe.

The Duomo, "cathedral" in Italian, is the touchstone of Florence's architectural achievements and was built to serve forever as a symbol of Florence's power and prosperity to the surrounding Tuscan communities. Constructed to replace the primary cathedral of Florence, the Santa Reparata, the Duomo was and remains one of the most immense and recognizable structures within Florence and across Europe. The Santa Reparata Cathedral was originally constructed in the sixth century along an area of Florence known as the "sacred axis" which contained other religious structures including the baptistery and three churches, of which the Santa Reparata was one. Mimicking the form of a Roman basilica, the Santa Reparata had a long nave, defined by two arcades that led to an apse where the altar was located. Many of the building's structures and details displayed Romanesque designs that remained through a variety

[5] Christopher Hibbert, *Florence: The Biography of a City* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1993), 17.
[6] Richard Goy, *Florence: The City and its Architecture* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2002), 23.

of confined and extensive renovations. Before the new cathedral was constructed, the original cathedral underwent one final renovation in the tenth century, which added two towers around the apse, a design often seen in areas of the Roman Empire. However, despite its restorations, the Santa Reparata began to look trivial compared to the cathedrals of Pisa and Siena, Florence's main economic and political competitors. As a result, suggestions were made to revolutionize the structure into a monument that could outshine Florence's rivals.

The construction of the Florence Cathedral that would transform "the entire image and, indeed, the very identity of the city, and ultimately [become] Florence's greatest monument,"[7] was not a project that even the most affluent economies could easily afford. As a result, the Commune, comprised of a variety of Florence citizens, was responsible for the funding of this immense structure and leveraged its power over the feudal lords by requiring they "make a token of submission to the cathedral church of Florence."[8] The plan was heavily funded and the project commenced between the years 1293 through 1296, led by the master architect, Arnolfo di Cambio.

While the beginning stages of the construction and planning of the Duomo commenced under his leadership, Arnolfo di Cambio died shortly after the scheme was produced, having left the majority of the building's construction process in the hands of other architects. Arnolfo's overall influence on the outcome of the Duomo is doubted by many art historians because of the reality that, given the approximate date of his death, he could have only spent a maximum of seventeen years on a project which took over a hundred years to build. Those who argue against Arnolfo as the author of the Duomo often protest that the building had no individual designer but is rather the product of many different ideas coming together throughout the time of its construction. This theory often comes to light because of Brunelleschi's addition of the cupola to the cathedral in 1420, the most recognizable aspect of the monument, which gives the impression that it is unjust to claim Arnolfo as the main author, especially since he did not ever get to view this architectural masterpiece. However, Arnolfo "must have produced an early design, for on April 1, 1300, the communal council of Florence declared itself well pleased with the 'magnifico et visibili principio' of the Cathedral that Arnolfo had already manifested."[9] Other architects controlled the project following the death of Arnolfo in the early fourteenth century, however Arnolfo's name is never absent from the discussion of the mastermind(s) behind the creation of the Duomo.

The construction of the building began in 1296, when "the city council decided to erect a new cathedral worthy of the prosperity of the citizens. [The building was erected to emphasize] the importance of Florence and the ambition of her [citizens] during the Middle Ages."[10] Following Arnolfo's death, construction on the project was paused until the mid fourteenth century when architects Giotto, Pisano, and Talenti each began to take part in perfecting the project. When work began on the Gothic cathedral in the 1330s, Arnolfo's design was altered, eliminating the urban influence and axiality of the structure within the city. Arnolfo designed the Christian church so that the cupola of the structure would reside exactly where the Via dei Servi, a street within Florence that connects the Piazza del Duomo to the Piazza della Santissima

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[7] Richard Goy, *Florence: The City and its Architecture* (London: Phaidon Press Limited, 2002), 36.

[8] Christopher Hibbert, *Florence: The Biography of a City* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1993), 15.

[9] Franklin K. B. Toker, "Florence Cathedral: The Design Stage," *The Art Bulletin* 60. 2 (June 1978): 215, accessed October 24, 2011, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3049777.

[10] Sir Banister Fletcher, *A History of Architecture* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), 613.

Annuziata, terminates. The axial relationship that Arnolfo tried to create, which framed the dome of the cathedral along one of Florence's main passageways, was lost when the cupola was enlarged approximately fifteen percent, leading to the shifting of the center of the dome twenty meters to the east.[11] The Duomo was composed by an assortment of different architects using a variety of different architectural techniques such as rib-vaulted basilica, and other characteristics that integrate "vocabularies [from] Early Christian, Byzantine, Romanesque, Gothic, Italian [and] French"[12] cultures. The construction of the Duomo took over two centuries to complete because of the influence of different authors as well as the driving desire to make this building the epitome of perfection within Florentine architecture.

When construction of the Duomo resumed following the death of Arnolfo, the Santa Reparata remained standing and embodied essentially the skeleton of the new structure. The original cathedral continued to function for seventy years following the ground breaking of the Duomo, all the while the new immense walls of the improved Florence Cathedral enclosed the minuscule monument. The Duomo slowly over took the Santa Reparata, erasing it from the site of the sacred axis by burying the insides with the soil from the birth of the Duomo. It was not until 1375 that the Santa Reparata, a building that had served as a symbol of Florence's religious fervor for over six centuries, finally ceased to operate and the structure was completely overtaken by the new monument.

The Duomo was completed, and the structure embodied many architectural characteristics, which the Florentine's wanted it to symbolize economically. The characterization of the Duomo as a gothic building was not because it outwardly resembled gothic structures like the Cathedral of Milan, but because it possessed similar characteristics of pointed arches and vaulting systems, and was constructed in the Medieval era. The monument contains a central nave that is approximately 270 feet long, which guides individuals into the building from west to east, culminating at an octagon in the eastern end of the building. The rib-vaulted nave comprised of four bays, was not as elaborate in Arnolfo's design, originally only containing three bays and possessing a non-vaulted ceiling. However, the vaulting became a common feature in many other Florentine buildings, such as the baptistery, and was added to the structure because it was seen as a symbol of wealth and a declaration of accomplishment. The octagon in the eastern section of the plan is defined by "three tribunes of identical design, each opening into five rectangular chapels,"[13] all of which are protected by the overarching presence of the Brunelleschi dome. The central nave, down which people process towards the altar, is defined by an immense

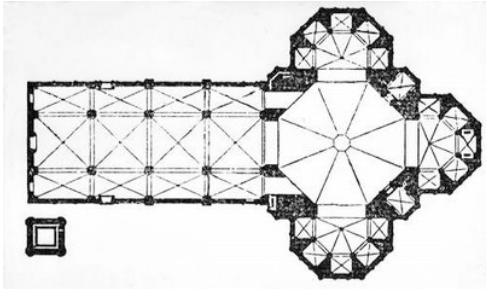

Figure 2: Plan of the Duomo, 14th century

Figure 3: Interior image of the Duomo, showing nave and apses.

[11] Franklin K. B. Toker, "Arnolfo's S. Maria del Fiore: A Working Hypothesis" *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 42. 2 (May 1983): 116, accessed October 24, 2001, http://www.jstor.org/stable/989825.
[12] Franklin K. B. Toker, "Florence Cathedral: The Design Stage," *The Art Bulletin* 60. 2 (June 1978): 214, accessed October 24, 2011, http://www.jstor.org/stable/3049777.
[13] "*Florence: IV. Buildings,"* Oxford Art Online, accessed October 24, 2011, http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T028591pg4#T028623.

arcade supported by columns that "is surmounted by a corbelled walkway that runs around the vault springers, continuing into the octagon, and the clerestory."[14] The architectural elements and structures within the interior of the building are accented with grey limestone to highlight the main structure and design of the building. However, while the interior decoration within the cathedral's central nave may appear rather banal and somber, simply outlining the Duomo's features, the fresco within the Brunelleschi's dome brings to life the Florentine appreciation for art and literature that came to life during the Renaissance.

While the building was a large addition to the Roman grid of Florence's central core, its interior elegance and thoughtfulness promoted the building's vision as a symbol of wealth and encouraged its appearance as not only a structure but a piece of art. Brunelleschi's addition of the cupola to the Duomo was the result of an architectural competition he won in the early fifteenth century. The dome he created now symbolizes one of the most prestigious buildings in Florence "is a miracle of design which triumphantly blend[s] a Renaissance dome with a Gothic Building and set a crown on that master piece of Medieval Florence."[15] The dome was executed using a Roman technique that contributed to the Romanesque attributes, which consisted of two shells of brick supported by stone ribs that help "concentrate the load on to the supporting piers, so that the dome can also be read as a cloister vault."[16] The entirety of the interior of the dome was coated with a fresco that depicted the *Last Judgment*, designed by Giorgio Vasari in the late sixteenth century. The fresco wraps around each curvature of the dome and was painted by Vasari's student, Frederico Zuccari, and finished in 1579. The dome that pierces the Florentine skyline, making the Duomo over three-hundred feet tall, is the "first major dome since antiquity and chief harbinger of the Italian Renaissance"[17] and remains one of the defining features of Florence and the period of wealth and growth it experienced during the Middle Ages.

Figure 4: Image of Brunelleschi's Dome and Vasari's Fresco.

The Duomo marked a period of transition in Florence's history. The Cathedral of Florence symbolized the continual and growing importance of religion to the Florentine community as well as the wealth and power of the city that contributed to the heavy urbanization of the area. Today, the Duomo functions as a reminder of that period of prosperity that Florence experienced in the medieval era, which made the city into the metropolis it is today, and as an artifact that displays to all the history of the city and where it came from. While the Duomo is no longer the revolutionary, immense structure it once was due to the modernization of architecture and society that took place around the world, it carries on as the jewel of Florence that people travel from all over to see. The structure has been excavated many times to determine the history of the Santa Reparata as well as hopefully gain an answer to the seemingly unanswerable question of the true author of the building, however it is an artifact from the city forever representing the transition of Florence into the brilliant city we know today.

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[14] Ibid.

[15] Sir Banister Fletcher, *A History of Architecture* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1961), 677.

[16] "*Florence: IV. Buildings,"* Oxford Art Online, accessed October 24, 2011, http://www.oxfordartonline.com/subscriber/article/grove/art/T028591pg4#T028623.

[17] Franklin K. B. Toker, "Arnolfo's S. Maria del Fiore: A Working Hypothesis" *Journal of the Society of Architectural Historians* 42. 2 (May 1983): 101, accessed October 24, 2001, http://www.jstor.org/stable/989825.

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