Urban Baroque: The Aesthetics of Power

This volume will be of great interest to historians of early modern Europe, to social and cultural historians, and to specialists in the history of architecture and urban planning. It brings together ten papers presented at a conference held in September 2003, whose purpose—as the book’s subtitle indicates—was to examine the development of baroque architecture and town planning in a variety of urban contexts. Most of the cities studied here are located in the Holy Roman Empire and Poland, with Rome, Naples, and Madrid thrown in as comparative studies. The volume is copiously illustrated, but would have benefited from the inclusion of detailed maps (not just reproductions of early plans and views) to permit the reader to follow the changes in the physical layout of these cities. The contributors (four historians of art, and six social and cultural historians) analyze the “baroquization” of fifteen different cities; this slightly clumsy term describes the process by which the original urban fabric was remodeled to create an architectonic environment that gave concrete expression to the new concept of absolutist princely power, the spirituality of resurgent Counter-Reformation Catholicism, and the pride of the mercantile elite. As the editors, Gary B. Cohen and Franz A. J. Szabo, explain in their introduction, the volume’s guiding theme is the “conventional view” that equates “the baroque” with these new social and political forces (p. 3).

In his chapter on Graz and Innsbruck, however, Mark Hengerer proposes a more nuanced approach. These cities shared a common destiny as former princely seats left vacant by the departure of their rulers, offshoots of the ramified Habsburg dynasty. The resulting absence of a clearly defined center of princely power allowed the church and the leading burgher families to leave a clearer imprint on the built environment. Hengerer shows that the result was incomplete “baroquization,” whose workings he examines through a “polydimensional” analysis that goes beyond the simple equation “baroque = power” to accommodate the interaction of several contending sources of patronage: princely, ecclesiastical, and mercantile (p.13).

The conclusion one draws from this volume is that “baroquization” was a process governed by the balance of social and political forces in a particular city, and that it, therefore, produced a broad spectrum of outcomes. At one end of this spectrum we find cities like Wroclaw, or Nuremberg as examined by Jeffrey Chipps Smith, dominated by mercantile patriciates slow to embrace the new aesthetic. Here, “baroquization” was at best partial, confined essentially to a few grand residences designed to proclaim the wealth and status of the families that built them.

At the other end of the scale were the capital cities—Salzburg, Munich, Vienna, Prague, and, to a lesser extent, Kraków—whose rulers consciously followed the tenets of baroque aesthetics in reconfiguring the urban fabric to reflect their absolute authority and project an image of
grandeur and order. Here, too, the Counter-Reformation was all-pervasive, dotting the cityscape with imposing new churches, so that the total impact of “baroquization” was profound. Militant Catholicism was inextricably allied to rising princely power, as the social, political, and aesthetic transformation of Prague after the Habsburg victory at the White Mountain in 1620, described by Howard Louthan and Jiri Pisek, amply demonstrates. And, as a result of their political status, these princely capitals enjoyed economic and demographic growth, while the older mercantile centers tended to stagnate.

In between these two extremes we find a variety of cities where the interplay of social and political power produced mixed architectonic outcomes. Dresden provides a particularly interesting case study of the clash of contending political and religious imperatives, explored in the contributions by Barbara Marx and Jan Harasimowicz. The elevation to the Polish throne of its Saxon ruler, Augustus the Strong, in 1697, and his attendant conversion to Catholicism, set up tensions with the city’s Protestant burghers, who did not share his dream of remodeling the city along absolutist lines. Though his elegant pleasure park, the Zwinger, took shape, many of the monuments celebrating his newfound royal rank and religious faith could not be displayed in public, and his new palace remained unbuilt. The burghers meanwhile responded with a building program of their own, crowned by the magnificent Frauenkirche, which deployed the full panoply of baroque aesthetics to proclaim their Protestant faith.

Baroque aesthetics originated in sixteenth-century Italy, and, for much of the next century, Italian architects played a prominent role in designing the central European cities described here. Later on, French influence made itself felt, notably in the plans for the new royal palaces at Berlin and Dresden, products of the competition between two rising dynasties, Wettin and Hohenzollern. But this cultural dependence gradually waned. In the early eighteenth century, Papal Rome and Louis XIV’s Versailles, powerful offstage presences throughout this volume’s architectural narrative, were eclipsed by the rise of an indigenous school of architects—Mathaeus Pöppelmann, Johann Fischer von Erlach, the Asam brothers, Cosmas Damian, and Egid Quirin—who forged the dynamic late baroque style that came to dominate princely and ecclesiastical building in central Europe for much of the century to come. St. Peter’s basilica in Rome had been a formative icon of the new baroque aesthetics, whose influence resonated powerfully north of the Alps. Thomas Dandelet’s chapter casts startling new light on how St. Peter’s was built. If his figures are correct—and there is no reason to doubt them—most of the money that paid for St. Peter’s, and that underwrote the construction of several other churches and monuments in Papal Rome, came from Spain and its empire, testimony to the piety and largesse of its sovereigns. Their piety was also on show in Spanish Naples, as John Marino demonstrates. However, he departs from the volume’s theme by focusing not on how the urban environment was constructed, but on the ephemeral architecture of triumphal arches and allegorical figures that formed the setting for religious processions led by the Spanish viceroys, glorifying Spanish “good government.”

Finally, David Ringrose takes us on a tour of the seat of Spanish imperial power, Madrid. Under its Habsburg rulers, who evinced little interest in grand urban projects because they conducted their ceremonial life within the confines of their palaces, it remained a squalid, rambling town with few public spaces or monumental features. With the advent of the Bourbon dynasty, and the growing influence of the Enlightenment, however, Madrid was transformed. Avenues and parks were laid out, museums and galleries were constructed, and, everywhere, dignified government buildings announced the sovereign’s watchful presence. Eighteenth-century Madrid was indeed an embodiment of power, but no longer the absolutist power that had directed the planning of the central European capitals in the preceding century. Along with the authority of a benevolent, enlightened sovereign, eighteenth-century Madrid bore witness to a new, embryonic form of power, that of the citizens who sought pleasure in its public spaces and intellectual improvement in its new museums. The public aspect of Madrid—open, elegant, and sociable—revealed an unmistakable shift in the locus of power, away from the political and religious institutions that had directed the development of urban form under the Old Regime. “Baroquization” had assumed a new form—or, perhaps it would be better to say that the term no longer applies, in the original sense employed in this volume.

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