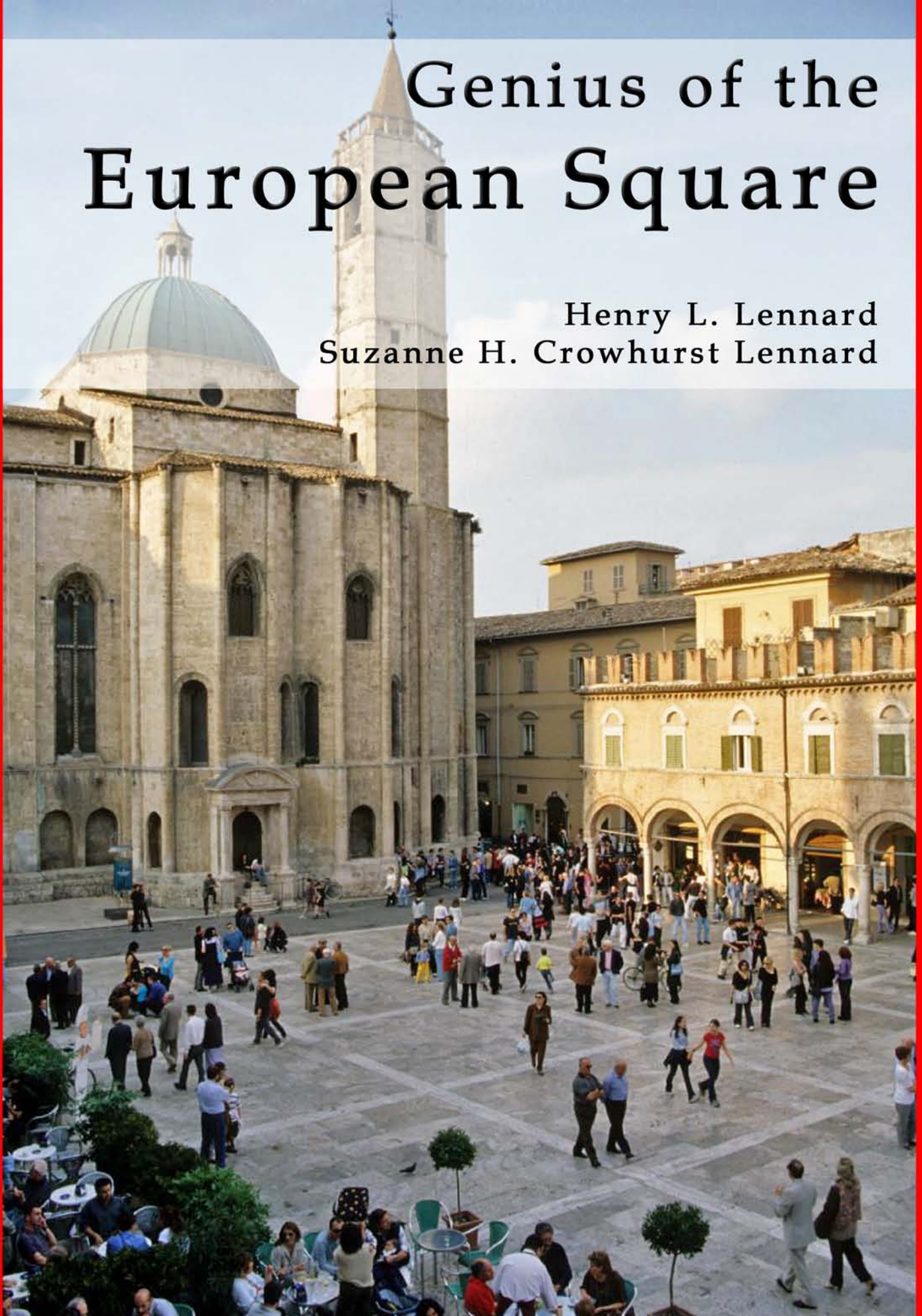


Genius of the European Square

Henry L. Lennard
Suzanne H. Crowhurst Lennard



Gondolier Press

GENIUS OF THE EUROPEAN SQUARE

How Europe's traditional multi-functional squares support social life and civic engagement. A guide for city officials, planners, architects and community leaders in North America and Europe

Suzanne H. Crowhurst Lennard
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Gondolier Press

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Foreword

How this book came about

Ever since Henry and I began working together in 1973, the focus of our work was the relationship between social interaction and the context within which that interaction occurs.

In the early '70s, we spent several summers in a friend's apartment in Venice and a great deal of time on our local campi, marveling at the diversity of social interaction that took place there, the rich community life, and the intense pleasure that was obviously felt by young and old. While Henry watched and talked with people, I studied the architecture, building uses and streetscape. Together we discussed why squares elsewhere, especially in North American cities, were unable to support the rich community social life that we observed on the Venetian campo.

For thirty years, we crisscrossed Europe looking for places that supported social life and community. We found that if a square was available, this was where people gathered, rather than on a street, unless the square was used for other purposes such as parking or was inhospitable for social interaction.

Henry, who was an incomparable sociological field researcher, would watch what was happening on the square and who was there,

whether residents, business people, tourists, children or older people. He would note whether people greeted one another, whether conversations developed, who was interacting with whom, and the quality of those interactions. He noticed whether people were paying attention to each other or were perfunctory, whether they were smiling politely or in pleasure, whether they developed a conversational theme or contributed disjointed comments. And he would select someone to talk to about their experience of life on the square. Henry often quoted Margaret Mead's dictum that you could learn everything about a culture by talking to one person – but it had to be the right person, and he was uncannily intuitive in picking the right person!

While Henry focused on people, I would examine the built environment, the stage upon which this social life took place. What brought people to this square? Were there markets and shops that served a local community? Were there apartments close enough that many could walk to the square? Was the square hospitable for longer stays, with freedom from the noise and dangers of traffic, shelter from the elements, places to sit or pause, focal points around which people clustered? Was the architecture of the square beautiful and of a human scale enhancing a sense of well-being? Were there "eyes on the street", making the square safe and sociable? What was

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the significance of this square for the city's inhabitants? What did it represent for them?

Why was the square for us the most important aspect of a city's livability? It was self-evident to Henry, and I came to understand, that every individual needs to be acknowledged as a human being and responded to, even (or especially) the homeless, the alcoholics, the "undesirables". For some groups, such as children and older individuals living alone, this acknowledgement and opportunity to interact with a community network are essential. We were also concerned with the lack of community and civic engagement in North American cities and suburbs, compared to European cities with squares that function as a powerful catalyst for community life.

We believed that in promoting the multi-functional town square in North America we would in some measure help to rebuild community and civic engagement, ease the pain of isolation and anomie, and help children and young people to become full human beings.

Over the years, Henry and I talked at IMCL Conferences and other venues about these issues and the need for multi-functional squares on the European model. We published articles and books dealing with different aspects of our work - social life in public, farmers' markets, community festivals, public art, the design of squares, seating, children in the city, case studies of Italian piazze, etc.

We had planned this book for several years. Everything I wrote, Henry edited, and everything Henry wrote, I edited, and the material kept growing.

Since Henry died on June 23rd, 2005, it has fallen to me to shape the final version of this book alone. He was a tough critic, but I think Henry would have been satisfied with the final editing. I can hear him saying "It's finished. Let's go!"

I hope you, the reader, will find in it some of the pleasure and sense of discovery that was ours in working on this book.



Piazza San Marco

Chapter 9

Piazza San Marco, Venice

Stage Set and Drama

Piazza San Marco has always been consecrated to welcoming foreign potentates and visitors, celebrating victories, and dramatizing civic life through festivals and processions, jousting matches and state ceremonies. It is the heart of Venice, the place that every Venetian feels represents his city's incomparable heritage.

Carpaccio, Bellini, Bella, Canaletto, Tiepolo, Guardi, Longhi and other Venetian painters loved to record the life of their beloved city, especially life on the Piazza – market stalls, passeggiata, business deals, and innumerable festivals. Bellini's "Procession in San Marco" is an almost ethnographic representation of the diverse guilds, societies and social groups that played a role in Venetian life in 1496. Tiepolo painted a series of Carnival scenes in the Piazza that show with exuberant detail dancing figures, acrobats, clowns, festive masked and costumed revelers.

Stage Set

The illustrious history of this great city-state is embodied in surrounding buildings. In Piazza San Marco life's apparently irreconcilable opposites are not merely reconciled, but rather, juxtaposed in such a way that they compliment and celebrate each other,

lifting the viewer to a vision of a higher and more joyful synthesis of reality.

Basilica San Marco, the "masterpiece of Byzantine architecture", creates a backdrop of exuberant joy. The Basilica's interior conveys a profound and mysterious sense of reverence, but its exterior expresses an equally intense sense of wonder and delight in the variety and richness of life. Gloriously domed and pinnacled, clothed in silken marbles, emblazoned with golden mosaics and crowned with four bronze horses, the Basilica shimmers like a jeweled dreamlike painting, setting the stage for dramatic events on the Piazza. If elaborate and ornate processions of Doges no longer parade, colorful and elegant Venetians and visitors still gather, and it is still



Gentile Bellini's "Procession in San Marco"

In the thirteenth century there was a law which obliged every Venetian merchant, coming back from a voyage, to bring with him something for the adornment of the basilica. Thus it is that St. Mark's has come to be one vast mosaic, in which every piece of marble is itself a precious thing, perhaps brought from the other end of the world, and a kind of votive offering. The church is like an immense jewel, a piece of goldsmith's work, in which the exquisite and the fantastic are carried to so rare a beauty, in their elaborate mingling, as to attain almost to a perfection in spite of themselves.

... it has the changing colours of an opal, and the soft outlines of a living thing. It takes the reflection of every cloud, and, in certain lights, flushes into a rose, whitens to a lily. You enter, and your feet are upon a pavement which stretches away in coloured waves like the sea; over your head is a sky of pure gold, a jeweled sky, in which the colours and the patterns are the history of the whole world. The gold, when the light strikes it, glitters in one part like rock-crystal, in another like gilt chain armor. Rosy lights play upon it, and the very vault dies away in soft fire.

Sean O'Faolin

the setting for occasional concerts and ballets, stimulating encounters, political demonstrations, Festa della Sensa and Carnival.

Enclosing the Piazza are the arcaded "Procuratie", originally quarters for high ranking city magistrates. These buildings create an orderly setting for the crowds milling around the numerous little shops and cafes. The horizontal phalanx of columned arcades and arched windows expresses the rational humanist vision of harmony on earth.

Palazzo Ducale, with its calm pink and white façade surmounting two floors of white marble arcades, appears to float, so lightly does it touch the earth. The wide arched windows and small circular lights cut into the smooth pink and white surface seem at first to be symmetrically placed. Closer observation reveals numerous exceptions to the rule and evidence of earlier structures that interrupt the pattern. Yet the palace is a seamless unity, an organic whole which appears merely – to take a breath. This was the administrative center of the Republic, housing large and small meeting halls for the city's varied councils, and offices for city government. The power these councils wielded would seem to be benign and gentle!

The severely vertical brick campanile surmounted by a marble loggia raises our eyes to heaven. Here there are no soft curves, no decorations, only slender vertical lines reaching upward to the pointed roof pinnacle and a golden angel wreathed in sunlight. In fact, the campanile was important for military and civic purposes, being used as a watchtower and lighthouse for returning ships and to call citizens to the general assembly on the Piazza.

Here in Piazza San Marco are four buildings, each unique in character, scale, method of construction and material. Each is a supreme articulation of a profound principle, yet together they create a single unity. In Piazza San Marco the varied facets of that state which is called "being fully human" seem epitomized in architecture with an intuitive clarity of vision and with exuberant beneficence, a life-embracing spirit that the Venetian poet Diego Valeri calls "a grain of generous madness".¹

As Camillo Sitte pointed out, it is not only the unique beauty and majesty of each individual building that creates the "unexcelled grandeur" of Piazza San Marco, "...it is the felicitous arranging of them that contributes so decidedly to the whole effect. There is no doubt that if all these works of art were

The Ducal Palace is Gothic made sprightly and sunny; Gothic without a hint of solidity or gloom. So light and fresh is the effect, chiefly the result of the double row of arches and especially of the upper row, but not a little due to the zig-zagging of the brickwork and the vivid cheerfulness of the coping fringe, that one has difficulty in believing that the palace is of any age at all or that it will really be there tomorrow. The other buildings in the neighborhood – the Prison, the Mint, the Library, the Campanile: these are rooted. But the Doge's Palace might float away at any moment. Aladdin's lamp set it there: another rub and why should it not vanish?

E. V. Lucas

disposed separately according to the modern method, straight in line and geometrically centered, their effect would be immeasurably decreased. Imagine S. Marco isolated, with the Campanile set on the axis of its main portal in the middle of a huge modern square – the Procuratie, Library, etc., standing about separately in the modern ‘block system’ instead of forming a tight enclosure – and to top it all, a boulevard of almost 200 feet in width running past this so-called plaza. One cannot bear the thought. Everything would be destroyed, everything! After all, the two things do go together: beautiful structures and monuments, and the correct placement of them.”²

In previous centuries the small shops around the Piazza served Venetian needs. Today every shop is dedicated to tourism. Upper floors on the north side are offices for the Assicurazione Generale. The Correr Museum, with its magnificent collection of paintings, sculptures and manuscripts recording Venetian history, takes up the upper floors on the south side. The Sansovino Library facing the Piazzetta serves scholars researching Venice’s history.

Amongst the greatest impacts which St. Mark’s Square delivers can be counted the approach. This epitomizes the ‘surprise approach, explosion of space’ concept used in so many of the Italian squares; it is carried here to the ultimate. Down a narrow, somewhat tortuous sidewalk lined by high shops on either side, one sees a small arched opening beckoning in the distance... As one draws nearer, this arch form takes precise shape and, drawn on by the magnetically sharp perspective of the Procuratie Nuove on the right, the splash of vivid colour on the distant Doge’s Palace, the temptation of the Campanile disappearing upward, and the promise of free unconfined space, one is impelled forward with an irresistible urge... And there, before one, dancing and sparkling in the brilliant sunshine, in a fusion of architecture, space, colour and pageantry, lies the greatest square in the world.

G.E. Kidder Smith

Today the Doge’s Palace no longer represents the center of city government. Some administrative offices are still housed here, but the Mayor’s office is located in Ca’ Farsetti on the Grand Canal close to Rialto. Much of Palazzo Ducale is open to tourists and used by city government only on prestigious ceremonial occasions and festivals. Its significance for the Venetian is now more symbolic than functional, representing the magnificence of Venice’s former glory as “La Serenissima”.

Daily rhythm

There was a time, within living memory of older citizens, when Venetians still possessed their Piazza, when an evening stroll might be taken there to see and to be seen, to meet friends and acquaintances. At that time, to walk through the Piazza a lady had to make sure she was well dressed, wearing gloves, and carrying no shopping bag. Those times have passed, along with the fashions. Today, a Venetian may take an evening stroll on Campo San Stefano or on her local campo, but rarely on the Piazza.

Of course, tourism has existed in Venice since the Crusading pilgrims passed through on their way to the Holy Land. Even then, the hostels that accommodated them were centered around Piazza San Marco. Florian’s Café, opened in 1720 under the name “Triumphant Venice” (Venezia Trionfante) and Café Quadri boast an illustrious clientele including Goethe, Lord Byron and Casanova.

Life on the Piazza has a daily rhythm and seasonal cycle. As the sun rises the Piazza is being swept clean by men with birch twig brooms, Venetians are on their way to work, and the piazza echoes to individual footfalls and a scratchy whoosh of the brooms. This is the only time of day when the Piazza really belongs to the Venetian.

By ten in the morning from May to September the Piazza is filling up with tour groups led by ladies with umbrellas, men with flags. They are tall and blond or short and stocky, with features from every continent, and skin colors of every shade, conversing in every imaginable language, their guides intoning the Piazza’s history in Danish, Bulgarian, Greek, or in one of the languages of

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