

Fleeting Moments, Floating Monuments. Ritual Machines of Performativity: Reading Ptolemy Philadelphus and Aldo Rossi

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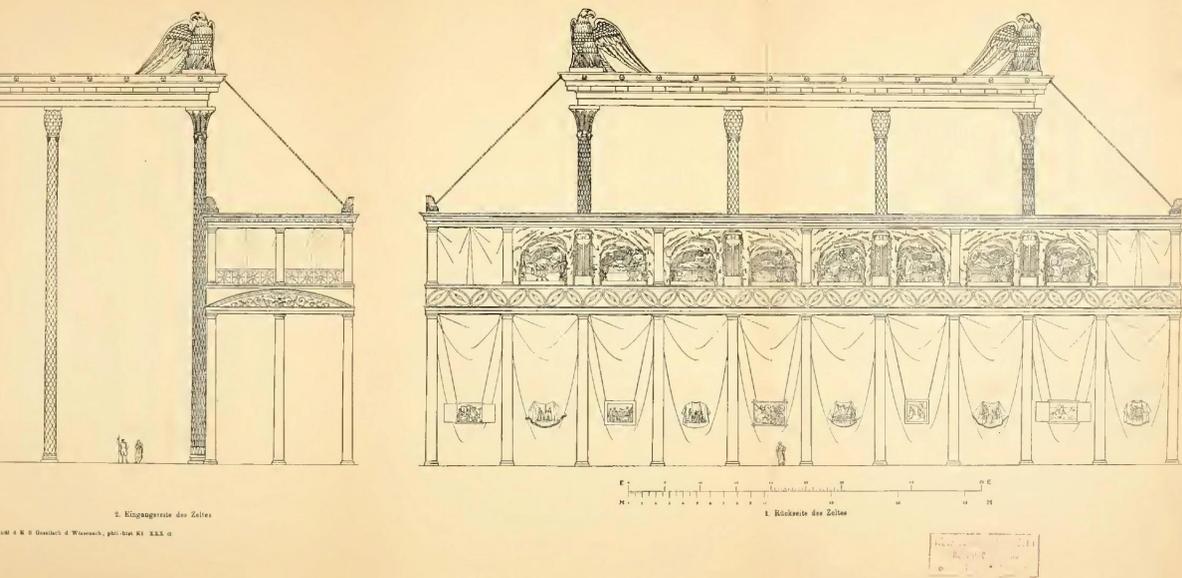
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In this article – a tale of two architectures – we probe into the whys and wherefores of ephemeral architecture by juxtaposing two case studies whose similarities are striking and whose differences are no less informative. One is the pavilion built by Ptolemy Philadelphus in the third decade of the 3rd c. BCE for a festival in Alexandria. The other is Aldo Rossi’s iconic building, the *Theater of the World*, designed for the 1979-1980 Venice Biennale. We argue that these structures belong to the same historical arc. Not merely because they were equally short-lived, or in view of certain formal resemblances. The reasons must do, rather, with the way they demonstrate that aesthetic and ideological programs are flexible in virtue of a building’s temporary character. Case in point, both buildings mirror the specific taste of theatricality of an epoch, on the one hand, and incorporate triumphal overtones, on the other. Interestingly, they even have in common a floating dimension. Indeed, Rossi’s theater was built on a barge, and dismantled after being tugged across

Fig. 1: Bronze bust of (most likely) Ptolemy Philadelphus. Naples, National Archaeology Museum, inv. 5600. From the Villa of the Papyri, Herculaneum.





the Adriatic to Dubrovnik and back, while Ptolemy's Egyptian pavilion belongs to the same architectural continuum as Hellenistic royal flagships, designed as floating Nile palaces.

I. The Pavilion of Ptolemy Philadelphus

Ephemeral architecture in antiquity is best introduced here by the study of a most unusual construction erected by Ptolemy Philadelphus (284-246 BCE; Fig. 1) which can be used to discuss experiments in the theatrics of art and power in Hellenistic times.¹ This building is a *skene*, a term variously translated in English as *pavilion* or *banqueting tent*, in German as *Prachtzelt* or *Festzelt* and which in Greek also means "stage building."² It was designed to house a Dionysiac feast at the terminus point of the arguably most lavish and eccentric pageant in all of Antiquity. This famous Grand Procession prefaced the Ptolemaea festival, either the very first one in 279/278 BCE, or perhaps the second one, in 275/274 BCE.³

- 1 Works on Ptolemy's pavilion range from Frank Studniczka, *Das Symposion Ptolemaios II nach der Beschreibung des Kallixeinos wiederhergestellt* (Leipzig: Teubner, 1914), Ellen E. Rice, *The Grand Procession of Ptolemy Philadelphus* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1983), esp. 31-34, 148-150, F.E. Winter and Adrienne Christie, "The Symposium-Tent of Ptolemy II: A New Proposal," *Echos du monde classique: Classical views* 29/4.2 (1985): 289-308, to Elena Calandra's studies, "L'occasione e l'eterno: la tenda di Tolomeo Filadelfo nei palazzi di Alessandria. Parte prima. Materiali per la ricostruzione," *LANX. Rivista della Scuola di Specializzazione in Archeologia – Università degli Studi di Milano* 1 (2008): 26-74 and "L'occasione e l'eterno: la tenda di Tolomeo Filadelfo nei palazzi di Alessandria. Parte seconda. Una proposta di ricostruzione," *LANX. Rivista della Scuola di Specializzazione in Archeologia – Università degli Studi di Milano* 2 (2009): 1-77 as well as Timo Klär, "Das Symposion Ptolemaios' II. Zur Repräsentation des Herrschers beim Bankett am ptolemäischen Königshof," *Les Études classiques* 86 (2018): 207-249. For the general context, Frank W. Walbank, "Two Hellenistic Processions: A Matter of Self-Definition," *Scripta Classica Israelica* XV (1996): 119-130 and Paul McKechnie and Philippe Guillaume (eds.), *Ptolemy II Philadelphus and His World* (Leiden: Brill, 2008).
- 2 *Skené* designated a "rectangular structure behind the orchestra, which allowed actors to move in and out of sight and change their costumes" and eventually "the stage-building," Tyler Jo Smith and Plantzos, Dimitris (eds), *A companion to Greek Art* (Malden MA: Blackwell, 2018), 149, 558; "(bâtiment de) scene," "décor de théâtre," Marie-Christine Hellmann, *Recherches sur le vocabulaire de l'architecture grecque, d'après les inscriptions de Délos* (Athènes: De Boccard, 1992), 373.
- 3 Various other dates have been proposed, among which 271/270 BCE, see works in note 1. Yuri Kuzmin, "New Perspectives on the Date of the Great Festival of Ptolemy II," *Klio* 99, 2 (2017): 513-527 argued most recently for a date of 275/274, due to the presence of highly unusual *thyreoi*, Celtic shields, in the pavilion's

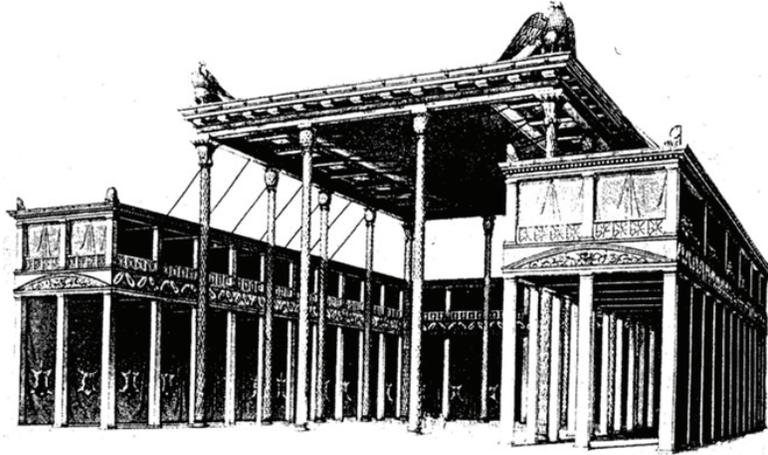


Fig. 2: Graphic reconstruction of Ptolemy's Pavilion by Frank Studniczka, from Studniczka (1914). Elevation
 Fig. 3: Graphic reconstruction of Ptolemy's Pavilion by Frank Studniczka, from Studniczka (1914). Detail of
 front facade; Backside.

The pavilion would be unknown to us were it not for the *Deipnosophists*, wherein Athenaeus excerpted in the early 3rd c. CE its description from Callixenus's (now lost) work on Alexandria. While this passage, Ath. V, 196a-197c,⁴ was written by Callixenus of Rhodes no less than half a century after the events, probably even somewhat later, under Ptolemy VI, he, however, resorted to archive documents.⁵

Reconstructing a Hellenistic Pavilion

Many attempts have been made to root in it a visual model of Ptolemy's tent, by corroborating – with various degrees of ingenuity and methodological legitimacy – Athenaeus's text with artifacts of varied iconography and excavation data of architectural sites, bring to bear on the issue anything from silverware hoards to temples.⁶ Studniczka's classical reconstruction, now over a century old, puts forward a plan of 32.55 x 43.05m and a total roof height of almost 30m.⁷ (Fig. 2 and 3). From Athenaeus, we learn that this monument boasted 14 wooden columns, which stood 50 cubits tall (22m) and were arranged in a 5x4 scheme. The pavilion was, in fact, a glorified banqueting tent, filled with couches (*klinai*) for the guests, mainly foreign ambassadors from the Eastern Mediterranean (the number of couches is indicated in

decoration, which may have alluded to the victory of Ptolemy over his rebellious Celtic mercenaries (hypothesis endorsed by Klär, "Das Symposion").

- 4 In this article, we shall be using the widely available text in Athenaeus' *Deipnosophists*, trans. C.B. Gulick, Loeb Classical Library, 7 vols. (London and New York, 1927-1941). The passages relevant here can be found in volume 2 (1928, reprinted 1967). A recent translation can be found in volume 2 of Athenaeus, *The Learned Banqueters*, trans. S. Douglas Olson, Loeb Classical Library (Cambridge, Massachusetts and London, 2007-2012), 8 vols.
- 5 Ath. 5.197d. Rice, *Procession*, 1983 and Filippo Coarelli, "La *pompé* di Tolomeo Filadelfo e il mosaico nilotico di Palestrina," *Ktêma: civilisations de l'Orient, de la Grèce et de Rome antiques* 15 (1990): 225-251, esp. 249, argue these were not only written documents, but figurative ones as well, such as sketches.
- 6 For a discussion on the incommensurability between excavation and textual data, emphasizing the role of visual models (particularly digital reconstructions) as a key heuristic instrument for resolving the discrepancies between the two categories of sources, Cătălin Pavel, "Visual models in archaeology and the harmonization of archaeological and literary data," *Archaeology and Text* 1 (2017): 67-94.
- 7 Studniczka, *Symposion*. The pavilion plan has been also seen as much bigger (80m x50m, by Yves Perrin, "D'Alexandre à Néron: le motif de la tente d'apparat. La salle 29 de la Domus Aurea," in *Neronia IV. Alejandro Magno, modelo de los emperadores romanos*, ed. J.M. Croisille (Brussels: Latomus, 1990), 211-229, or much smaller (Calandra, "Una proposta," 34.37 x 26.39m, without the podium).

our source first as 130, then as 100). It was surrounded on three sides by a portico of some thirty columns⁸ with a vaulted roof, and was decorated in the most luxurious fashion.⁹ It seems well established today that this decoration, which cannot detain us in detail here, was probably not on the outside, as envisaged by the earlier research, but on the inside.¹⁰ The roof was an *ouraniskos*, a circular canopy symbolizing the dome of heaven, while Phoenician curtains acted as pavilion walls, possibly leaving the front side open, so that the show inside could also be enjoyed from outside.

The tent was erected in a grove in the royal parks of the royal palace complex of Alexandria (close to the Palace and the stadium), on the promontory of el-Silsilah, ancient Lochias.¹¹ After the Grand Procession, it is conjectured that it housed various banquets for about a year and then it was dismantled.¹² Indeed, from a functional point of view, the pavilion is a ritual banquet hall (*bestiatorion*), and it fits well, formally, with what we know of Greek *bestiatoria* with peristyle courtyards.¹³ It has been argued that the design of this eclectic and theatrical construction was instrumental in the crystallization of the Alexandrian Hellenistic style in art. Indeed, Elena Calandra, who produced the most thorough recent analysis of the pavilion, perceptively branded it “una delle creazioni più originali nella fase iniziale dell’arte ellenistica.”¹⁴

It is hard to eschew the question as to the archaeological remains of the pavilion. The possibility of retrieving its location in the ground – based on the foundations its columns surely must have required¹⁵ – is remote, to say the least, given the particularly poor preservation of Hellenistic remains in Alexandria. Attempts have also been made to identify an ancient work of art that may depict, at least partially, Ptolemy’s *Prachtzelt*. In 1990, Filippo

8 Athenaeus does not mention their number. They are distributed in a 9x9x13 format by Winter and Christie, “The Symposium,” 10x10x9 by Eugenia Salza Prina Ricotti, “Le tende conviviali e la tenda di Tolomeo Filadelfo,” in *Festschrift in Honour of Wilhelmina F. Jashemsky*, ed. R.I. Curtis (New Rochelle, 1988-1989), 199-231; 13x13x11, by Perrin, “D’Alexandre à Néron,” etc.

9 In terms of such accoutrements, Athenaeus 196a-197c lists cups of gold, Delphic tripods of gold, a hundred gold couches with feet shaped like Sphinxes, purple rugs, embroidered counterpanes, Persian, three-legged tables of gold etc. He also mentions “painted panels set in order [...] At the columns [...] were placed marble figures, a hundred in all, [...] In the intercolumniations were paintings by artists of the Sicyonian school [...]; also there were tunics of cloth of gold and [...] military cloaks. [...] Above these [were] oblong shields [...], alternately of silver and of gold. [...] In the recesses [there were] representations of drinking-parties, composed of figures taken from tragedy, comedy, and satyric drama.”

10 Winter and Christie, “The Symposium,” indicate as parallels for the placement of such decoration the Lesche of the Cnidians at Delphi, the Stoa Poikile, Stoa of Zeus, Bouleuterion, and Tholos in the Agora at Athens, as well as Philopator’s river-barge (for which *v. infra*).

11 Judith McKenzie, *The Architecture of Alexandria and Egypt, c. 300 B.C. to A.D. 700* (New Haven, Conn.: Yale University Press, 2007), 49.

12 Elena Calandra, “A proposito di arredi. Prima e dopo la tenda di Tolomeo Filadelfo,” *LANX. Rivista della Scuola di Specializzazione in Archeologia – Università degli Studi di Milano* 5 (2010), 5, 9, and 27.

13 Generally, Birgitta Bergquist, “Sympotic Space: A Functional Aspect of Greek Dining-Rooms,” in *Sympotica: a symposium on the symposion*, ed. O. Murray (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1990), 37-65. Calandra, “Una proposta,” 9 quotes the old suggestion of A. Frickenhaus that the *klinai* in the pavilion would be best reconstructed as in the great hall of the *bestiatorion* in the Asklepieion at Troizen. Burkhard Emme, *Peristyl und Polis. Entwicklung und Funktionen öffentlicher griechischer Hofanlagen* (Berlin, Boston: De Gruyter 2013), 9, aptly compares it with the banquet hall in the sanctuary of Hera Lacinia in Crotona, but also invokes the Leonidaion in Olympia. Henri Lavagne, *Operosa antra. Recherches sur la grotte à Rome, de Sylla à Hadrien* (Rome: de Boccard, 1988), 99-100, focuses in turn on the Arsinoeion at Samothrace, a banquet *tholos* built in the second decade of the 3rd c. BCE – almost at the same time as our pavilion. The latter building was remarkable for the lack of internal supports (J. J. Pollitt, *Art in the Hellenistic Age* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1986), 238-239).

14 Calandra, “Una proposta,” 45. Something similar was said about the Tuch el Karamus hoard, which is no more than half a century earlier and no more than half a century older than our pavilion. Indeed, Michael Pfrommer, *Alexandria. Im Schatten der Pyramiden* (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1999) branded it the “Anfang ptolemäischer Kunst.”

15 See Pausanias 1, 32, 7: “Above the lake [at Marathon] are the stone stables of Artaphernes’ horses, and marks of his tent on the rocks.”

Coarelli speculated that the pavilion might feature in the lower right section of the 2nd c. BCE Nilotic mosaic from Palestrina. He suggested that Egyptian artists produced something resembling it by copying in that mosaic some painting which commemorated the Grand Procession, perhaps itself based in turn on some contemporary sketchbooks archived in Alexandria.¹⁶ The pavilions in the mosaic, while allowing us a tantalizing glimpse into how such a monument may have looked like, are, however, no more informative as to the actual appearance of Ptolemy's *Festzelt* than, say, the frescoes in the Villa of P. Fannius Synistor in Boscoreale, with their dreamlike wooden architecture.

Theatricality and Ptolemaic *Tryphe*

In a seminal book, Jerome Pollitt described Hellenistic architecture as expressing a “theatrical mentality” in its 1. “choice of dramatic settings for temples,” 2. “fondness for dramatic vistas,” 3. “exciting, unexpected spatial changes within buildings,” and 4. “taste for a kind of façade architecture, possibly influenced by stage settings.”¹⁷ Granted, Pollitt did not mention Ptolemy's pavilion, but, in his ensuing discussion of the style of architects from Rhodes, he concluded that “theatricality was in the blood of the Rhodians.” Is it far-fetched to conjecture that, when describing the tent, Callixenus of Rhodes must have vibrated recognizing in that work the penchant for theatricality so familiar to him? His main ambition was, of course, to glorify Alexandria and its rulers, and that in itself was reason enough to engage in a praise of the pavilion, but perhaps an additional reason was his particular understanding of architecture. Be it as it may, he produced the only description of the *Festzelt* to be found in our extant sources, although other ancient authors – Diodorus of Sicily? – must have surely described it as well. Perhaps the architect of the pavilion was Rhodian as well. Calandra had previously hypothesized that he could have been Sostratus of Cnidus himself.¹⁸ This is by no means impossible, however, such an approach reflects what Anthony Snodgrass has once called “a positivist fallacy.”¹⁹ (Cnidus is, in any case, only some 50km from Rhodes).

Callixenus (as excerpted by Athenaeus) describes, as we have seen, the pavilion, and then proceeds to report (Ath. 5, 197 C-203 B) on the Grand Procession itself. The tent, as the ultimate destination of the procession, must surely have been symbolically and ideologically compatible, indeed consubstantial, with the procession itself. Or, as made abundantly clear by our source, this procession – a discussion of which would be beyond the scope of this article – is itself nothing other than a staged Dionysiac triumph, theatrical in its rhythm, paraphernalia and performative character.²⁰ Of course, the procession, and the pavilion along with it, celebrated the deified Ptolemaic dynastic house of Egypt in general, including Alexander the Great (himself associated with Dionysus, the divine ancestor of the Ptolemies) – but at its core was the celebration of Dionysus.

Now, any Dionysiac procession is inherently theatrical²¹ and the *Festzelt* is replete with Dionysiac imagery. The *symposion* represented, in fact, its key decorative scheme, and the guests there “were

16 The Palestrina mosaic also shows, among its many animals, a few whose presence Athenaeus (V, 201 b-c) also noted in the Procession (giraffe, lynx, rhinoceros), Coarelli, “La *pompé* di Tolomeo Filadelfo,” 230 n.35.

17 Pollitt, *Art*, 230. For Ptolemaic theatricality beyond architecture, Paul Goukowsky, “Fêtes et fastes des Lagides,” in *Alexandrie IIIe siècle av. J.-C.*, eds. C. Jacob and F. de Polignac (Paris: Autrement 1992), 152-165.

18 Calandra, “L'occasione,” 53.

19 This can be described as a tendency to mechanically equate what appears to be significant in the archaeological record with what appears to be significant in the textual evidence (Cătălin Pavel, “Homer and archaeology – perspectives from the East Aegean / West Anatolian interface,” in *Homère et l'Anatolie*, II, eds. M. Mazoyer and V. Faranton (Paris: L'Harmattan, 2014), 45 sqq.

20 Walbank, “Two Hellenistic Processions,” 125, points out the theatricality of the procession as reflected in “carnival *reversals of normality* common to such processions at all times — children in adult roles, small girls clad as warriors.”

21 Calandra, “L'occasione,” 45; Klär, “Das Symposion,” 209.

sharing in a celebratory symposion in the sanctuary of Dionysos²² All in all, the tent, just like the procession, was imbued with a Dionysian sense of magnificence and extravagance, two qualities that are specifically Ptolemaic, even beyond any association with Dionysus. The golden tripods themselves allude to victory, and, while the procession may have also celebrated a military victory (against the Celtic mercenaries? in the second Syrian war?) the tripods could have alluded to a different kind of victory, since they were traditional prizes in the performance of Dionysian dithyrambs.²³ The pavilion was erected in a grove and was itself a “Dionysiac bower, for feasting in a secluded, luxurious, tree-shelter.”²⁴ The vegetal universe of the *Festzelt* – the branches of myrtle and laurel, and especially the profusion of flowers, point to the same god of the wilderness, as do the animal pelts hanging in between columns. Finally, and as a fact of paramount importance, the central columns of the pavilion take the unusual shape of *thyrsoi*, that is, of Bacchic wands. Such markers are tantamount to a full and exclusive appropriation of the pavilion’s space (or, indeed, stage) by Dionysus. To sum up, the *Festzelt* is nothing other than a Dionysian basilica designed to express Hellenistic *tryphe*.²⁵

Athenaeus also reports (V, 198d) that in the procession, a four-wheeled cart carried “a statue of Dionysus, fifteen feet tall” under “a canopy decorated with ivy, grape-vine, and the other cultivated fruits, and hanging to it also were wreaths, ribbons, Bacchic wands, tambourines, fillets, and satiric, comic and tragic masks.” In turn, the pavilion appears to have been a monumentalization of this mobile *tableau*, and it ought to be imagined that the “missing” statue of the god will have been the king himself, even if his presence at the banquet is not explicitly acknowledged in our ancient source. In a logical extension of the procession’s theatrical imagery, in the recesses of the pavilion’s epistyle there were “representations of drinking-parties arranged to face one another, composed of figures taken from tragedy, comedy, and satiric drama.” (Ath. V, 196f)²⁶

Our pavilion was, indeed, a magnificent stage. Its ephemeral character is, of course, not an argument against this – after all, the first stage in stone had only been built a mere 40 years before it, in Athens (the Theater of Dionysus). There has been a lot of discussion around the possibility that the stage of the Greek theater was, originally, inspired by the tent of Xerxes, captured by the Greeks at Plataea in 479 BC.²⁷ After the Persian defeat, Aeschylus’s *Persians* and other plays were staged in such a way that the façade of the tent – a façade common in the Orient, but alien to the Greek spirit – became the backwall for the stage.²⁸ That is how an Oriental word for *tent* allegedly

22 J. Richard Green, “Theatrical Motifs in Non-Theatrical Contexts on Vases of the Later Fifth and Fourth Centuries,” *Bulletin of the Institute of Classical Studies* 66 (1995), 116. A summary of the Dionysian details in the tent can be found in Rice, *The Grand Procession*, 31-34.

23 Rice, *The Grand Procession*, 32. The tripods may of course be interpreted as an Apollonian allusion, perhaps corroborated by the symbolism of the four palm-tree columns, Calandra, “Una proposta,” 33.

24 Rice, *The Grand Procession*, 32.

25 It may be too much to propose that Roman basilicas were derived from such Lagid prototypes. But Lavagne, *Operosa antra* and others noted that the *oecus Aegyptius* as described by Vitruvius (something like the House of the Mosaic Atrium at Herculaneum) was inspired by buildings such as our pavilion, themselves comparable to the Palace of Columns at Ptolemais (Cyrenaica).

26 Interestingly, this is a stage that combines tragedy, comedy, and satyric scenes, in a specifically Ptolemaic eclecticism. We know from Vitruvius (5, 6, 9) that “tragic scenes are ornamented with columns, pediments, statues,” that the comic scene represents “private buildings and galleries” and the satyric scene is ornamented with “trees, caves, hills.” Most of these can be found in the pavilion’s decoration.

27 Her. 9, 82, 1-3; see *Plut. Alex.*, 20 on Darius’s tent captured by Alexander, on whom it made a deep impression. According to Paus. 1.20.4 and *Plut., Per.* 13.5-6, Pericles’ Odeon in Athens was also inspired by Xerxes’ tent. Since the Odeon (just like the Telesterion in Eleusis) had an *apadana*-like floor plan, it cannot be architecturally related to Ptolemy’s pavilion, which had an empty space in the middle, rather than the characteristic forest of columns. A space encumbered by columns would have accounted for a dramatic vista, but would have made it difficult for the banqueters to communicate throughout their ritualized performance. Some scholars (Salza Prina Ricotti, “Le tende conviviali,” Perrin, “D’Alexandre à Néron”) have, however, turned to the Odeon as a possible source of inspiration for the roofing of the pavilion.

28 Oscar Broneer, “The Tent of Xerxes and the Greek Theater,” *University of California Publications in Classical Archaeology* 1, 12 (1944), 305-312 and Hellman, *Recherches*, 374. See now generally Andrew Collins, “The Persian Royal Tent and Ceremonial of Alexander the Great,” *The Classical Quarterly* 67.1 (2017), 71–76. Broneer also provocatively discussed the possibility that timber from the Persian ships

became the Greek word for *stage*. Whether this theory holds water or not, designating Ptolemy's *Prachtzelt* as a *skene*, the appropriate name for such a tent, would have instantly brought to mind to the ancient speaker the world of theater, as *skene* also designated, as we have seen above, the stage building. No surprise that some researchers have even compared Ptolemy's tent with the theater stage in Thassos.²⁹ Now, could we posit that the pavilion's prototype was Alexander's tent at Susa, itself inspired by local audience halls? Probably not. Its 50 columns (Ath. 12, 538 B-539 A and 539 D-E) did make for an impressive venue for wedding feasts and other banquets, and for an impressive throne room as well. But Calandra is right to point out that the central space of our pavilion was too open for it to be inspired by hypostyle hall design (as often assumed by earlier researchers), be it a Persian *apadana* or a Greek model. However, it is manifest that the pavilion of Alexander's continuator, Ptolemy the Great, was itself imbued with the same sense of showmanship and shared the theatricality of public ceremonies of power.

It would of course be difficult to see how applicable Pollitt's criteria are to a building that has not left any physical traces. It is however a sure bet that our *Festzelt* enjoyed a "dramatic setting" (1) and offered "dramatic vistas." (2) First, it must have been overlooking the sea, second, it was in the proximity of the royal palaces, and third, it surprised the viewers by offering them, in an urban setting *par excellence*, the oasis of a Dionysian grove. Built in the middle of this grove, the pavilion's floor was also strewn profusely with flowers; in fact, Callixenus' description devotes to the discussion of these flowers more space than to anything else. Then, within a space that cannot possibly be compared to what is achievable in stone architecture, there were still some unexpected spatial changes, (3) not so much horizontally, between the main hall and the portico, but on a vertical axis, as one gazed towards the canopy and towards the four enormous eagles. These were almost 7 m in length, crowning the building, made of gilded bronze, or perhaps gold foil or even papier-mâché. The play of light and shadow must have enhanced the impact of such spatial changes; Winter and Christie have spoken of clerestory windows, but other possibilities (*oculus*) have been discussed in this respect.³⁰

Let us dwell on the final criterion, the "taste for a kind of façade architecture, possibly influenced by stage settings" (4). We have seen above the general relation between our pavilion and the stage. However, we know basically nothing about its façade, which is rather odd, as we would normally assume that, for the viewer, this must have been the truly arresting dimension of the building. It would be interesting at this point to compare the pavilion with the Tomb of Lyson and Kallikles in Lefkadia, built around 200 BCE.³¹ This monument's façade is plain, but in the main chamber, the walls accommodate 22 burial niches in the intercolumniations of a painted colonnade. Not unusually for Macedonian art, orders are blended, the Doric architrave being paired with a type of Ionic capital.³² It should be noted that the propylon of Ptolemy II at Samothrace presents with identical façades, but non-identical colonnades (Corinthian and Ionic).³³ It would appear likely that Macedonian prototypes were indeed considered by the architect of the tent, out of aesthetic or ideological criteria. And perhaps also because of the rivalry between two heirs of Alexander the Great: on the one hand, the pharaoh of Egypt, a Macedonian born on foreign soil, Ptolemy Philadelphus, and on the other, the very ruler of Macedon, Antigonos Gonatas, with the former trying to outdo the latter in Macedonian-ness. Palaces at Aegae/Vergina, large banquet halls articulated around a peristyle courtyard, and later at Pella, may have been these prototypes (most

destroyed in the battle of Salamis was used for the wooden seats of the first theaters in Athens. A luxurious ceremonial tent in the sanctuary of Delphi is described in Euripides' *Ion*, 1128–1166, metrologically related (the canonic 100) to the tent of Alexander in Susa and Ptolemy's pavilion.

29 Lavagne, *Operosa antra*, 99, quoting F. Salviat, "Le bâtiment de scène du théâtre de Thasos," *Bulletin de Correspondance Hellénique* 84 (1960), 300-316.

30 Winter and Christie, "The Symposium."

31 For similarities, see Stella Miller, *The tomb of Lyson and Kallikles. A painted Macedonian tomb* (Mainz: Philipp von Zabern, 1993), 17-18.

32 Calandra, "Una proposta," 35, pointed out further analogies with another Hellenistic tomb, discovered in Sveshtari (mid-3rd c. BCE), where the architrave is carried by columns alternating with nymphs, similar to the load-bearing nymph figures in our pavilion.

33 Alfred Frazer, *Samothrace, 10. The propylon of Ptolemy II* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1990).

recently this was asserted by Emme³⁴). It is, at any rate, only possible for us to speculate on the façade of our pavilion. Here the ephemeral character of the monument – reflected in e.g., the possibility of replacing walls with curtains, or simply doing away with some of them altogether and bringing the interior to the fore across osmotic surfaces – engendered a new visual aesthetics, for which the very concept of a façade was less operational.

Our source does not clarify what other events took place in the pavilion after the royal banquet. For example, we do not know whether any plays were staged in it. It is not implausible, though, that certain cultural activities may have come to pass in this iconic space. Some have even suggested that the tent was an ephemeral equivalent of the Museum, and that it was in fact organized under the supervision of specialists from that famous institution of learning in Alexandria.³⁵ Others have conjectured that the translators of the Pentateuch, brought to Alexandria by Ptolemy, convened in this very pavilion soon after the banquet.³⁶ We know that one of the royal ships of Hieron II included a library (Ath. V, 207f) – and between such ships and our *Festzelt* there is a remarkable parallelism, as we shall see presently.

Floating Royal Pavilions

We come now to the relationship between this pavilion on the Egyptian shore and the ceremonial ships of the Lagids, which boasted gardens, temples, libraries and so on.³⁷ These fantastic Hellenistic flagships were indeed floating buildings and, to be sure, Plutarch resorts to this precise comparison when discussing Ptolemy Philopator's largest ship: "she differed little from a stationary edifice on land, being meant for exhibition, and not for use" (*Demetr.* 43.4–5; the ship was well over 100m long). The whole Hellenistic world – Demetrios Poliorcetes in Macedon, Hieron II in Syracuse – understood the vast image potential of such barges, but royal craft with war and ceremonial purpose was nowhere as developed as it was in Egypt throughout the Ptolemaic dynasty; Cleopatra's final example in the series is evoked by Plutarch (*Ant.* 26.1–3). Unsurprisingly, in his days, Ptolemy II Philadelphus was unrivalled in this respect, disposing over "800 vessels [...] for the pomp of war" (App. *Praef.* 10; Ath. 5.203c–d). He also prized his naval architects enough to erect statues for them, as the one in Paphos for Pyrgoteles, son of Zoes.³⁸ His flagships were later to be outclassed by the floating palaces of Ptolemy IV Philopator, and it is relevant that the description of his ship comes down to us from the same Callixenus of Rhodes, "whose account of Philopator's ships presents similar paradoxographical characteristics – the detail, concern for size, number, material, all forms of excess, and the unexpected"³⁹ to his description of the pavilion.⁴⁰ This ship, we are told, had a main reception room (the *oikos megistos*) with twenty couches and columns all around it; on the upper deck there was a *tholos*-shaped

34 Emme, *Peristyl und Polis*.

35 Calandra, "Una proposta," 62–63.

36 If this were the case, then the festival must have been the first Ptolemaea, not the second, Livia Capponi, "Riflessioni sulla data e il contesto della traduzione dei LXX. A proposito di Nina L. Collins. *The Library in Alexandria and the Bible in Greek*," *Quaderni di Storia* 63 (2006), 307–333.

37 Generally, Rice, *The Grand Procession*, 139–148, and particularly D.J. Thompson, "Hellenistic royal barges," in *The Ptolemies, the Sea and the Nile. Studies in Waterborne Power*, eds. K. Burselis, M. Stefanou, and D. J. Thompson (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press 2013), 185–196. Another one of these royal ships (Max. Tyr. 31.57–104) had an orchard on board, with pomegranates, pear-trees, apples, and vines; Maximus even calls it "a city." Hieron's ship had "garden-beds of every sort... bowers of white ivy and grape-vines" (Ath. 5.206d–209e).

38 Only its inscribed basis was discovered (*Oriens Graeci Inscriptiones Selectae*, 39).

39 Thompson, "Hellenistic royal barges," 189. Already Studniczka, *Das Symposion*, 67–68 was aware that the description of this ship resorts to architectural terminology ("peristyle" etc.).

40 The very fact that Athenaeus himself quotes these descriptions of royal ships *after* he presented the excerpts about the pavilion (and about the Grand Procession) suggests that, in his eyes, there was some degree of continuity between all of them (ships of Ptolemy IV, Ath. 5, 203 F–204 D and Ath. 5, 204 D–206 C, ship of Hieron II mentioned in note 32 above). What they have in common is, of course, on the broadest level, their potential to illustrate the richness and power of the Ptolemies – but there is a sense that the pavilion and the ships are also taxonomically related.

temple with a statue of Aphrodite, and a thirteen-couch room for Dionysus with a *grotto*. The pavilion of Ptolemy the Great, discussed here by us, is perhaps itself a glorified Bacchic room. It is in any case clear that, under the Ptolemies, the viewer – just like our Callixenus – would have instantly grasped the conceptual and formal similarities between the king’s flagship and his ephemeral pavilion on land. After all, Dionysus himself – the god who turned the pirates to dolphins – is very much at home on a ship.

To sum up, Ptolemy’s pavilion is at the same time a banquet hall, a Dionysian basilica, a theater, a sanctuary, a flagship, and a museum. Not coincidentally, the list is as long as the pavilion’s lifespan was short. All in all, it was “la prima esibizione temporanea del mondo antico,”⁴¹ and also a stage of power and *tryphe*. Its plural semantics could not have been articulated so freely if this monument, an architectural hapax, had not been ephemeral in nature.

II. The Theater of the World... *to improve the strength and intrepidity of the Heart*

“And this edifice will be very lovely to look at and its location will be very convenient because it will be made on the bank between the Giudecca and the Custom House Point, there where the open sea comes up on the shore, coming up on the land so far that for a few hours of the day it is covered with water [...] and this edifice will be easily seen when one is standing in the Piazza San Marco and it will be a very beautiful view and an edifice of a type that is no longer found in any other City [...]”⁴²

This is how Alvise Cornaro described his rather fantastic proposal for building a theater on an artificial island supposed to be erected in the middle of the Venetian Laguna around 1560.⁴³ Part of his larger plan of restructuring and “embellishment” of the whole Bacino di San Marco,⁴⁴ the island-theater came after many attempts, starting in the late 15th century, to revive the theater of the Antiquity. In his treatise on architecture, Alberti opens the chapter⁴⁵ dedicated to the ancient theater by defending the moral usefulness of public shows and praising the necessity to renew the ancient tradition of the theater, for

“the people, by thus meeting frequently together at public feasts, might grow more humane [...] so I imagine our ancestors instituted public shows in the city, not so much for the sake of the diversions themselves, as for their usefulness [...] to revive and keep up the vigour and the fire of the mind, and [...] to improve the strength and intrepidity of the heart.”⁴⁶

41 Calandra, “Una proposta,” 58.

42 Alvise Cornaro, *Scritti sull’architettura (1566)* (Padua: ed. Paolo Carpeggiani, 1980), corrected transcription by Manfredo Tafuri, *Venice and the Renaissance* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 1989; first Italian edition Einaudi, 1985), 159-160.

43 In his seminal book *Venice and the Renaissance*, Tafuri offers a detailed account of Cornaro’s project as an epitome of the constant battle between a desire to modernize and renovate and the more dogmatic, conservative view on Venice’s *imago urbis*. See especially chapter 6, “A Project by Alvise Cornaro for the Restructuring the Bacino of San Marco”: 146-158.

44 That included an artificial island built on the canal between San Giorgio and San Marco, a fountain in the Piazza San Marco, together with a complex project for the restructuring of the whole water system of the Serenissima. See Tafuri, *Venice and the Renaissance*.

45 The theater as a form of pagan spectacle was abolished by the Christian church after the fall of the Roman Empire: plays were seen as manifestations of idolatry and spectacles were replaced with the liturgy as a form of ritual drama. But since the religious ritual was often performed in public spaces, as would pageantry and ceremonial processions, the festival-esque dimension of the city required a more and more elaborate decorum that would, at times, engage the entire space of the city. About ephemeral structures for spectacles, ceremonials and festivals in Europe during the Renaissance see, among others, Pamela H. Smith, Tianna Helena Uchacz, Sophie Pitman, Tillmann Taape, and Colin Debuiche. “The Matter of Ephemeral Art: Craft, Spectacle, and Power in Early Modern Europe,” *Renaissance Quarterly* 73, 1 (2020), 78–131. doi:10.1017/rqx.2019.496.

46 Leon Battista Alberti, *Ten Books on Architecture* (translated into English by James Leoni, 1755, reprinted and edited by Joseph Rykwert, 1955).

Part of the humanistic culture of the Renaissance, the revival of classical authority meant also staging plays by antique authors (such as Plautus, Terence), that would take place in temporary architectural structures. In 16th century Venice, such attempts at reanimating theater as a public show, combined with the grandiose, festive dimension of religious rituals, ducal processions, public ceremonials, and pageantry coalesced into a spectacular image of a stage-set-like city. Cornaro's idea of building a permanent theater on water would have been then an eccentric and innovatory proposal that took into account the fundamental instability of the city itself (built on platforms pegged into the mud by wooden piles) and the novelty of a permanent architecture to host the freshly reinvented performative arts.

Bystanders in the Piazza San Marco, on the Fondamenta del Zattere or the banks of the Giudecca on 11 November 1979 would have assisted at this unexpected, spectacular event: the arrival in the Bacino di San Marco of a strange, dreamlike toy-edifice, seated on a barge and towed by a tug up to the point of the Punta della Dogana (Custom's point).

This floating enigmatic machinery made of painted wood would perhaps have both scandalized and amused Cornaro, since it was meeting his ambition to build a theater on the water, but it would have done so in an impermanent manner that responded graciously, if somewhat whimsically to the many centuries of public spectacle as paragon of the Serenissima.

In 1979, Paolo Portoghesi curated together with Manlio Brusantin an exhibition at the Palazzo Grassi that was intended to accompany the next edition of the Theatre Venice Biennale: *Venezia e lo spazio scenico*. This exhibition marked the revival of the Venice Carnival, almost two centuries after it had been interrupted by Napoleon's entry into the city and the end of the Venetian Republic in 1797.⁴⁷ On the occasion, Portoghesi and Maurizio Scaparro, then director of the Theater section of the Biennale, decided to activate the entire city as it had once been the case with the carnival: different piazzas throughout Venice would become outdoor stages, with small scenes built for the occasion, where actors could interpret or improvise. It was, as Portoghesi recalls, "a way to affirm this idea of Venice as a theater-city,"⁴⁸ and in order to strengthen this feature they decided to build a small floating theater, that would connect with the tradition of the 16th century carnivals. The choice for building this temporary theatrical structure was Aldo Rossi who (together with Gianni Braghieri), was given the difficult task of imagining and constructing it in a short period of time.

Portoghesi recounts how Rossi's first sketch had started from an older project and one of his long-term obsessions: the *Teatrino scientifico*,⁴⁹ the little scientific theater-capsule as an experiment, as a "symbolic object of pure representation." Portoghesi also recalls how remote this proposal was from his own expectations for a floating theater that would resemble those built during the 16th century, about 5-6m high, while Rossi's sketch indicated from the start a necessary height of 20m at least, so that the theater would visually and physically connect with the golden globe and the figure of the Fortuna on the top of Punta della Dogana. Suddenly the scale and grandeur of the floating object would touch a completely different level, visually and

47 Napoleon's troops entered Venice in 1797, on his way to confront Austria during the Revolutionary French Wars. Threatened by a devastating war and inside rebellion, the Venetian Senate abdicated and the last Doge, Ludovico Manin, resigned on May 12, abolishing the 11 centuries of existence of the Serenissima.

48 Paolo Portoghesi, *Aldo Rossi. Il teatro e la città* (Genova: sagep editori, 2021), 47.

49 *The little scientific theater* was an idea inspired by Raymond Russel's *Impressions d'Afrique*, and by the mobile, temporary scenes of the fairs, combined with the scientific dimension given by the skenic machinery and the Paduan anatomical theater as scene for the study of human anatomy. The *Teatrino* can be found recurrently in Rossi's notebooks, the *Quaderni azzurri*, and resurfaces often in his *Scientific Autobiography*. However, Rossi is not the only architect to employ this idea of a theatrical, experimental performing arts capsule: in the summer of 1979, during the third manifestation of *Estate Romana*, Franco Purini and Laura Thermes built a wooden spectacle pavilion for events, with the same name: *Il teatrino scientifico nella via Sabotino* (the little scientific theater on Via Sabotino). It was dismantled in 1981. For an account of the *Estate Romana*, see Renato Nicolini, *Estate romana. 1976-1985: un effimero lungo nove anni*. (Roma: Città del sole, 2011).



Fig. 4: Different images of the construction of the Teatro del Mondo and its installation, from the exhibition Aldo Rossi. *L'architetto e le città*, curated by Alberto Ferlenga, 10 March- 17 October 2021, MAXXI Roma. Fig. 4-1. Wooden model of the Teatro del Mondo, from the same exhibition. (following page)

symbolically as well as an entirely different level of technical complexity. It related directly to the long tradition of maritime architecture and naval structures so typical for Venice, and appealed to a very specific construction knowledge. Initially supposed to be made of wood, the final choice was to use a metal framework welded on the barge, covered in carpentry. The wooden cubic volume of 9.5m on the side and 11m high was topped by a timber-clad octagonal tower of 6m; an open rooftop terrace surrounding the tower allowed one to have a panoramic view of the Giudecca, the bay of San Marco, the island of San Giorgio Maggiore and of course, of the golden globe of the Fortuna that crowns the Punta della Dogana. Typologically, the theater consisted of a combination of galleries and grandstands, organized around the central stage. The capacity would have been of around 250 places (but had been largely overcome during the representations⁵⁰). However, on the ground level the stage was more of a corridor that connected a window and the entrance, and was perceived as a central stage from the upper galleries, that could be accessed through the two staircases adjacent to the main cube. (Fig. 4)

In his *Scientific Autobiography*, Rossi writes:

“... the stage is a corridor which joins a door and a window. It has no centrality on the ground level; the centrality exists in the circulation of the balconies and in the incline of the pointed roof. I liked the idea of this interior incline so much that I built a structure in which common elements and joints were disengaged as in a temporary construction, and this in fact is what gives the theater its temporary appearance. Thus, in the structure the rods and brass joints, which look almost gilded, move closer together and become superimposed, creating a skeleton, a machine, a living device that no longer has its original shape and cannot be compared to a scaffold. Iron and wood become two parallel structures, recalling for me the onion-shaped sections of Byzantine domes and the narrow towers or minarets where the interior and exterior are two complementary but not necessarily distinct architectures.”⁵¹

50 Aldo Rossi and Gianni Braghieri, *Aldo Rossi*, 4th ed. (Zürich: Artemis, 1993), 116.

51 Aldo Rossi, *A Scientific Autobiography*. MIT Press, 1981: 69. He writes his *Scientific Autobiography* (his second important book after *Architettura della Città*) during the construction and thinking about the Teatro del Mondo - his personal notebooks often intercalate thoughts about the autobiography and the concerns for the construction of the theater. Like the Little scientific theater, the Teatro del Mondo is another very personal, autobiographic project.



Theatrum Anatomicum - a Metaphor for the World

Rossi cites the Anatomical theater of Padua as an inspiration for both the little scientific theater and the Teatro del Mondo. It may be then useful to briefly revisit the scope and history of this medical and architectural apparatus. The anatomical theater as a place for the study of human anatomy⁵² was developed starting with the early Renaissance. A first recording of such an anatomical auditorium dates back in 1497 with the Paduan anatomist Alexander Benedictus. It was inspired by the spatial type of the amphitheater but reduced to the scale of a smaller public and a focus on the object of dissection that takes center stage: the body. Such temporary structures became popular during the 16th century in Italy,⁵³ and were usually dismantled after the dissection was performed. Seats surrounded the stage where the body was being cut up. The first permanent anatomical theater was built in Padua in 1594, establishing the spatial type for the later designs of medicine auditoriums.⁵⁴ It was a wooden amphitheater capable of hosting around 200 visitors (roughly 8,5x10m, with a height of 12m), with a narrow central stage for the dissection table, equipped with a trapdoor where the body could be lowered, and surrounded by six rows of upper galleries – not quite so different from the internal volume and spatial organization of the Teatro del Mondo.

The human figure is thus stripped bare of its appearance, that is, un-masked of its last defense that is the skin, with the hope that the mystery of its internal functioning and construction will be, at last, revealed. And this disclosure shall have its fair share of audience.

It comes as no surprise that the development of the interest for the theater of dissection as an effort of understanding the human body gains momentum at the same time⁵⁵ as the resurrection of the theater as an institution for spectacle, but also as a mnemonic device as well as a moral allegory for the world, a cosmos where every human plays a part. Rossi:

“I was interested in how the anatomical theaters and the Globe Theatre made the human figure central as in fact all small amphitheatres do. The Roman theater, on the other hand, had a fixed back wall, and this wall was comparable to the *retablo* in the Spanish churches, which serves as both the altar and the backdrop for liturgical action. Yet in the amphitheater a back wall was not necessary because all the interest was focused on the play and principally on the animal, man or beast. The same thing was true of the anatomical theater, where the boards of the stage, because of the focus of the action, rose mechanically from below with the cadaver. Here too was the body of a man, a man already deposed, painstakingly studied by a still humanistic science. Actually, the actors were not viewed differently in the Globe Theatre.”⁵⁶

52 As derived directly from the study of dissections on the human body as opposed to the late antique method of Galen (130-201) who was conducting his studies on animal bodies and inferring from these the consequences for the human body. The human dissection was established during the Renaissance by the Belgian Andreas Vesalius (1514-1564) but had already been performed during the previous centuries in rather improvised settings. For the history of the anatomical theater as a medical and architectural device, see Gert-Horst Schumacher, “*Theatrum Anatomicum* in history and today,” *International Journal of Morphology* 25, 1 (2007), 15-32.

53 *Ibid.*

54 The only dissections on humans ever performed before the “modern” ones in Bologna around 1300 took place in Ptolemaic Alexandria. We are ignorant as to the specific venues – whether temporary tents, or permanent architecture – of such medical endeavors in Hellenistic Egypt. It is certain, however, that the scientist behind them was Herophilus, around 300-280 BCE, in other words, into the early years of the reign of Ptolemy Philadelphus. See Heinrich von Staden. “The discovery of the body: human dissection and its cultural contexts in ancient Greece,” *Yale Journal of Biology and Medicine* 65 (2009), 223–241.

55 This first permanent *Theatrum anatomicum* was designed by Fabricium ab Acquapendente, a Paduan anatomist, in 1594, whereas in 1596 is printed in Metz Jean Jacques Boissard’s *Theatrum Vitae Humanae*, a volume containing discourses and poems in Latin, accompanied by moral and religious emblems and engravings. The cosmic relation between the theater as a metaphor for human life is represented in a series of engravings by Theodor de Bry. About Boissard and his influence on English theater, see Frances Yates’s seminal book *The Theatre of the World* (London: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1969), especially Chapter IX. “The Theatre as Moral Emblem,” 162-168.

56 Rossi, *A Scientific Autobiography*, 68.

Death, just like poetry, is often present in Rossi's work and writings.

Theater is an allegory for the universe as the body is an allegory for the world and a vessel for the spirit – staged and laid bare in the center just like the theater is placed in the center of Venice, a city that, in its turn, has been identified ever since the times of the Doges with the center of the world.⁵⁷ This multiple analogy is like a machine that reveals a series of telescopic analogies – like a perfect instrument for fascinated observation but also a childish toy, at the same time humanistically savvy and ingeniously disruptive.

Magnificence and Theatricality

The tradition of building floating “World Theaters” (*teatri del mondo*) originates in the early Venetian 16th century. They would have carried out a double role: as temporary festive devices constructed to honor the arrival of foreign dignitaries, or as stages for spectacles (concerts, dances, and sometimes festive dinners) during the masked carnivals, alluding to the idea of totality for which the Renaissance theater was an emblem.⁵⁸

One must not forget the ritualistic dimension of such festivities. Deborah Howard points to the incredible number of such celebrations, that honored 65 saint days and at least 10 movable feasts every year, to which must be added the coronations and funerals of the Doges, the entries of foreign dignitaries, ambassadors, and personalities etc.⁵⁹

This continuous and movable ceremonial have entirely transformed the city into a visual setting for such festivities, and this would have happened every other 5 days, as Howard reminds us. Political, religious events and entertainment were all closely intertwined, and they provided a sort of continuous but ephemeral mask for the entire city of Venice: temporary canvas settings and architectures would be like a constant mask to be applied to the city in order to fit the ceremonial necessities. This would have also provided a recurrent endeavor for architects and artists alike: besides building temporary static architectures, another essential stage set was the water – since the processions would move along the Grand Canal and quite often take place in the Bacino di San Marco.

Since as early as the 15th century, paintings have been visual recorders of such Potemkin-cities and of the theatricality added to the urban spaces of the Renaissance during festivities. They were common throughout Europe,⁶⁰ and the unique, inherent theatricality of Venice only added to this spectacle.⁶¹ The whole array of scenographic devices would participate in this continuous masking and unmasking of the city, thus linking theatricality and the ephemeral via architecture: triumphal arches, floating theaters on barges (*teatri del mondo*, or *macchine*), scaffoldings covered by painted canvases, carpets hanging from the balconies or the *altane* (rooftop balconies) and of course the famous Bucintoro,⁶² the sumptuous Doge's ship that

57 The topic of Venice as the center of the world appears often as a theme in the ducal processions. For a detailed account of this subject, see Lina Urban, *Processioni E Feste Dogali: "Venetia Est Mundus"* (Vicenza: N. Pozza, 1998).

58 Here the links with the Shakespearean idea of the world as a stage - common for theater throughout Renaissance Europe – are quite obvious, as is of course Rossi's direct reference to the London Globe.

59 Deborah Howard, *Ritual and Display in Venetian Architecture* (public lecture at the AA School of Architecture, 29.05.1993), https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=u7RD_hg4I2M&ab_channel=AASchoolofArchitecture (accessed 22.09.2022).

60 Smith et. al., “The Matter of Ephemeral Art.”

61 This explains perhaps the overwhelming presence and attention for architecture in painting from Venice and the Veneto especially in the 15th and 16th centuries: these festivities needed representation and the participation of the Scuole delle arti at least in the major religious events (such as *Corpus Domini* or the *Feast of Saint Mark*). Visual evidence can be found in Giovanni and Gentile Bellini's large paintings illustrating the life of St. Mark for the Scuola Grande di San Marco. *Saint Mark preaching in Alexandria* (1504-1507, Pinacoteca di Brera) is set in a sort of fantastical Alexandria that is a combination of Constantinople and Venice.

62 Rubin De Cervin, *La flotta di Venezia: navi e barche della Serenissima* (Milano: Automobile, 1985).



*La ser.^{ma} Dogaresa dal suo Palazzo ascende nel Bucintoro et accompagnata da nobiliss.^{ma} schiera
 di gentil'onne pomposam.^{te} uestite et da infinito numero di Bregantini in vario e diverse forme call.
 arti auconciati et adobbati, uan nel Ducal Palazzo Franco Formo cō Privilegio*

Fig. 5 Giacomo Franco, 1610. Engraving. La serenissima Dogaressa dal suo palazzo...Bucintoro from "Habit d'huomeni et donne Venetiane". Harris Brisbane Dick Fund, 1947, Accession Number: 47.141.2(4). ©The Metropolitan Museum of Art.



Fig. 6: Anonymous, Venetian, 16th century, Drawing on paper, pen and brown ink, over black chalk.

would perform, every year on Ascension day, the symbolic marriage of Venice with the Adriatic Sea.

Giacomo Franco's engraving from 1610⁶³ (Fig. 5) shows a large, highly decorated floating barge transporting a circular roofed open pavilion, tugged by fantastic dolphins, and adorned with carpets and allegorical figures, probably similar to Giovanni Antonio Rusconi's design from 1564⁶⁴ (Fig. 6). Tafuri comments on how such floating or moving performative *macchine del mondo* only reinforce Cornaro's idea of building a theater in the Bacino di San Marco.⁶⁵ Palladio's ascending career⁶⁶ was also related to the construction of such ephemeral triumphal structures: for example, for the entrance in Vicenza of the Bishop Niccolo Ridolfi in 1543, Palladio built a scenography that for one day transformed the medieval city of Vicenza into a Roman-inspired white architecture.⁶⁷ A few decades later, in 1574, the same Palladio would erect at the Venice Lido a Corinthian loggia and a triumphal arch for the entrance of Henri III de Valois.

63 Giacomo Franco (1550–1620). *La serenissima Dogaresa dal suo palazzo...Bucintoro from Habiti d'huomeni et donne Venetiane*, <https://www.metmuseum.org/art/collection/search/401181> (accessed 22.09.2022). Franco's engravings offer ample visual evidence of such ceremonies and their performative machines. In *Habiti d'huomeni et donne venetiane con la processione della Ser.ma Signoria et altri particolari, cioè trionfi feste et ceremonie publiche della nobilissima città di Venetia*, 1610, Tavola XXV, Venezia, Biblioteca Marciana.

64 <https://www.britishmuseum.org/collection/image/225135001> (accessed 22.09.2022). Cesare Vecellio's engravings (1597) show similar scenes of naval processions and spectacles taking place on boats and barges. The most comprehensive study on the subject is L.P. Urban, "Teatri e Teatri del Mondo nella Venezia del Cinquecento," *Arte Veneta* XX (1966), 142-144. See also H. Tietze and E. Tietze-Conrat, "The Drawings of the Venetian Painters in the 15th and 16th Centuries," New York, 1944, no. 2224, 361, pl. CXXXVIII, 4.

65 Tafuri, *Venice and the Renaissance*, 260 (note 24).

66 "Although it is about a building with a relatively short life, it is not just a *capriccio veneziano*. In other times, one would call great architects in order to decorate the city." Aldo Rossi, *Teatro del mondo*, 154.

67 Guido Beltrami, *The Private Palladio* (Baden: Lars Mueller, 2012), 61.

Rossi, evoking his ideas for the Teatro del Mondo, refers to “a pre-monumental Venice, a Venice not yet white with the stone of Sansovino and Palladio. It is the Venice of Carpaccio, and I see it in the interior light, in the wood, and I am reminded of certain Dutch interiors which evoke ships that are near the sea. This Venice of wood is also closely related to the Po delta as well as to the bridges which cross the Venetian canals, of which the Accademia bridge, although of course a nineteenth-century construction, offers a better idea than the Rialto. But the rediscovery of this Venice was possible only through the intervention of some precise, discreetly colored object, representing an elementary but sure technology—for example, a barge or, indeed, a theatrical machine.”

Alberto Ferlenga observes how among all of Rossi projects, there is a certain “theatricalization” of architecture that is imbedded in his work, a theatricalization that involves primarily “recreating the vitality and memory of events and encounters by reproducing their architectonic contours.”⁶⁸ There is here a sort of a backward movement, a “shift of signification from the real stages of theatrical fiction to the equally real spaces of the city,” themselves reference for those stages.

This propensity for the theatrical is even more accentuated in ephemeral projects such as the Teatro del Mondo or the stage-sets created for opera spectacles, such as the set for Lucia di Lamermoor, where he makes use of the dramatic setting of the Rocca Brancaleone in Ravenna (1986) or the scenography for Richard Strauss’ Electra in the Greek theater of Taormina (1992).⁶⁹

Andar in trionfo: Traveling Architecture

The ducal procession during the 15th and 16th centuries Venice was known as *andar in trionfo*, a direct reference to the antique architectural scenery used to recompensate the glorious entries of victorious generals in Rome. It is then perhaps not coincidental that the Venetian reprint of Flavio Biondo’s *De Roma Triumphante*⁷⁰ (1459) came out at the same time as Fra Giocondo’s first illustrated edition of Vitruvius, in 1511.

The opening of the Theater Biennale in 1979 with a spectacle after Jorge Louis Borges’ *Aleph* inside the Teatro del Mondo could thus not have been more appropriate for the symbolic and poetic meaning of this surreal, floating object. It was afterwards integrated into the first edition of the architecture section of the Biennale, curated by Portoghesi and it contained, during this time, an exhibition of Rossi’s own designs.

After having served as a place for concerts and theater show during the Carnival and the Theater Biennale, and as a venue for exhibiting his own projects, in the summer of 1980 the Teatro del Mondo began its final journey. Tugged across the Adriatic Sea up to Dubrovnik,⁷¹ it symbolically re-conciled the Serenissima with its origin, as in the ancient Doge’s celebratory journey on the Bucintoro. Christopher Stead⁷² gives an impressive account of the majestic entrance of this traveling architecture into the bay of Dubrovnik, not unlike the solemn ceremonies that would have taken place along the centuries of ducal processions, festivities, and carnivals. Completing its final journey before being dismantled, it would have been a reiteration of the traditional *andar in trionfo*.

68 Alberto Ferlenga and Stephen Sartarelli, “The Theaters of the Architect,” *Perspecta* 26 (1990), 195.

69 For a detailed account of Rossi’s performance sets, see Germano Celant, *Aldo Rossi: teatri* (Milano: Skira, 2012).

70 *De Roma Triumphante Libri Decem*, <https://gallica.bnf.fr/ark:/12148/bpt6k82783j> (accessed 17.05.2022).

71 The journey consisted in stops in several other former Dalmatian cities before arriving at the International Theater Festival in Dubrovnik: Parenzo, Rovigno, Osor, Zara, Nin.

72 Vimeo, “Aldo Rossi. Il Teatro del Mondo,” <https://vimeo.com/132710579> (accessed 17.05.2022).

Reuniting Venice with itself, with the myth of a Republic for which the city has become typological and thus an image of a political ideal unity a unity that is founded on a certain architectural idea about the city: and the image of this unity is given by Palladio. Paradigmatic architectures that rekindle a particular paduan neo-platon culture with a certain type of monumentality that is at the same time specific and neutral or generic enough so that it can be translated, collated or remixed elsewhere, without losing its meaning. In his comprehensive study about venetian cities from 1970, Rossi writes: “from the reality and from the myth of Venice we can build an *analogous* Venice.”⁷³ And this analogy is best enacted in the

“physical constitution of the landscape that is undoubtedly characteristic for every Palladian intervention — in the sense that it is defined and emphasized by them — and is also born out of a collective imagination that finds in the special continuity of the classical here an image that concretely contains both Venice and the cities on the mainland in one single frame of reference. The interpreters of this world are Palladio, Mantegna, Piranesi, Canova. From a certain moment on, there exists a precise reference that mixes venetian cities among themselves, and Venice itself together with them.”⁷⁴

For Rossi the precise interpretation that Manfredo Tafuri gives to Palladian architecture is central to his own reading of Palladio’s method as a justification or explanation for his own theory of the city made of parts⁷⁵. Here he cites Tafuri’s seminal study on Mannerism: “for Palladio the citation becomes definitory and even gets to a level where explaining the varied memories or references is written off in an organic synthesis.”⁷⁶ Memory is thus contracted into a sign, and then a method that absorbs citation, as Tafuri writes when paralleling Rossi’s Teatro del Mondo with Palladio himself.⁷⁷

Mise-en-abyme

There are several levels of self-reference in the story of the Teatro del Mondo, that might be read also as a story of unique objects traveling through the history of the European city and its architecture. First, the story of the Serenissima and the multiple ways to engage with its unique theatricality: we have seen how this relates to a long tradition of floating theaters of the world, to a world of stage-set architecture and spectacle, but also to its paradigmatic status for the development of other cities in Veneto. One should also not forget that Venice itself is mainly built on rafted platforms pegged into the mud of the laguna, so the land is reclaimed and built painfully, with effort, craft, and imagination. Its apparent stability – the stone architecture – is also pretty much an illusion since instability is also a condition of its existence. The floating theater is thus alluding at both an illusion and a consubstantial dimension of the city, an analogy of itself, as Rossi subtly remarks.

Second, the theater is itself a variant of self-reference – of the theater within the theater. A theater in theater, as Tafuri comments, is also Cornaro’s “fantastic object that could be appreciated *commodamente* or easily from the greater theater of the Serenissima, that is to say the Piazzetta.” Just like Cornaro’s fantastic project where the “theatrical function was extended to the entire space of the lagoon,” just so the Teatro del Mondo would enact this

73 Aldo Rossi, “I caratteri urbani delle città venete,” in *Scritti scelti sull’architettura e la città* (Milano: Clup, 1970), 391.

74 *Ibid.*, 393-394.

75 One of the main topics of the *Architettura della città*, the city in parts. The fragment is also a strong topic of the Venice Biennale of 1980, with its recovery of the idea of the street in the Arsenale’s Strada Novissima, made of architectural fragments of scenographic facades. Rossi’s participation in the Biennale consists of the triumphal entrance gate inspired directly from Carpaccio’s image of the Rialto.

76 Rossi, *Scritti scelti*, 391.

77 Manfredo Tafuri “L’éphémère est éternel. Aldo Rossi a Venezia,” *Domus* 602 (1980), 7-12.

double metaphor of spectatorship: the dualism between the observer and the observed, that is unique for Venice but is also true for most of Rossi's architecture, where the building is simultaneously a stage and a protagonist. Just like in historical Venice the ducal or religious processions that perambulated throughout the city could be seen from the balconies and the rooftops, from the banks of the canals, while the participants in the processions were looking at the people at the windows and on the rooftops, so we may say that the Theater of the World is a recurring sequence of Venice itself.

And third, this sort of *mise-en-abyme* is also quite pertinent as an internal reference for Rossi's own work: not just the *Teatrino scientifico*, but also a series of other projects that relate directly to his work with theater. In 1977 he would propose a project for a Business center in Florence that contained a small octagonal museum, a baptistery-like object as a vehicle for remembrance. The gates for the Biennale entrance at the Arsenale in 1980 are also a reference to wooden machines and triumphal temporary arches, as is his intervention for the 1985 Biennale – when he builds at the entrance of the Giardini a series of temporary triumphal arches, thus reasserting (in a postmodern line, of course) his links with the long Palladian tradition of Venice.

Ephemeral as Reconciliation

Rossi's comments on ephemerality when referring to the Teatro del Mondo poses unequivocally the problem of building in historical contexts. We should not forget the circumstances of the postmodern debate and a general recuperation of the historical city at the end of the 1970s.⁷⁸ The ephemeral thus becomes more than just a condition of the object and is explored as a method for intervening in historical contexts – a possibility to continue the city, to reconcile it with architecture.

For time is indeed the real object of theater, and its ephemeral quality, since unrepeatable, its only chance of enacting time. Such an architecture that enacts time (or, as Rossi often referred to, as the *locus* of the event) is thus an object defined by its temporality while defying time itself: "time is something that never returns [and so] [...] beginning and end are confounded with one another."⁷⁹

And so, the Teatro del Mondo lives on as a metaphor for time and disappearance, doubly marked by its temporality and long-lasting posterity, surviving as a memory both in the imagination and in the history of the Biennale and of modern Venice, while having completely disappeared as a tangible object.

78 Here we can briefly recall the large urban operation of the *Internationale Bauausstellung* in Berlin in 1977, under the direction of Josef Kleihues, aiming at a reconstruction of the destroyed parts of the city with a focus on the typological understanding of the historical city, or Giulio Carlo Argan's invitation to re-imagine a possible city in reverse, in the jigsaw board-game *Roma Interotta* in 1978. And of course, more to the point, Rossi's own incisive text on analogy that accompanied the panel *Città Analoga* for the Venice Biennale. "La città analoga: tavola/ The analogous city: panel." *Lotus International* 13 (December 1976), 5-8. All these endeavors point to a preoccupation for the possibility of reconnecting the city with its history and pose the problem of new architectural intervention in the city. The ephemeral quality of the Teatro del Mondo may accomplish this: "actually, the theater of the World and its history are significant for the evolution of historical centers. On one hand, the desire to introduce a new element, even provocative, into the old city - and more, into the old city that is Venice- that is usually only the subject of renovations, and on the other hand, [it is provocative] for what we may call the old mentality. [...] the Theater of the world, new intervention upon the city, has become a Venetian image on its own, and not anymore a provocative one, as one would expect. During its short lifespan, it had become a part of that touristic Venice, of the souvenirs and group photos, that is also one of the realities of Venice." Rossi, *Teatro del Mondo*, 153.

79 "il tempo... qualcosa che non ritorna...l'inizio e il termine si confondono." Aldo Rossi, *I quaderni azzurri* (Los Angeles: The Getty Research Institute / Milano: Electa, 1999).

Conclusion

The monuments discussed above (one Hellenistic, one from 1979) share elements of floating (and fleeting) architecture that include ritualized events, performativity, and the oneiric, some of which would have been moot points, or plainly lost, if translated into permanent structures. We argued that the strength and potential of these equally short-lived structures rely on, and at the same time elevate, the performative and theatrical dimension of architecture.

Specifically, both are event-oriented structures with a strong theatrical and performative dimension – Rossi's building by definition, while Ptolemy's pavilion was tantamount to a secular temple to Dionysus, god of the theater, decorated with statues of characters in tragedies and comedies, and in the center of which the king was on display during what could be termed a triumphal symposium. The triumphal dimension, re-enacting centuries of Venetian tradition, is also present in the poetic finale of the traveling architecture of the Teatro del Mondo. The ephemeral character of both buildings permitted aesthetic, respectively ideological experiments otherwise difficult to undertake.

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