

AUTHORITY IN PUBLIC SPACES

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Abstract: The notion of political and religious authority in public spaces is examined and illustrated by two case studies of the Roman Forum and the Piazza of San Marco.

Introduction

What is authority? Authority is a decision taken as precedence; an individual cited or appealed to as an expert; power to influence or command thought, opinion or behavior. However, to critical theorists “authority is synonymous with authoritarianism, which invariably connotes oppression, tyranny, and uniformity” (Inland Architect July 1993). In fact, the English word "authoritarian" gives a negative connotation and calls attention to a genuine uncertainty about the idea of authority. When someone is considered an authority on music or mathematics, it does not suggest that they are tyrants or dictators. Rather, their opinions regarding their practices are considered trustworthy, and novices in those practices acknowledge them as mentors. While authority does not allow equal power among the two groups, it does constitute a controlled relationship.

“The authoritarian relationship between the one who commands and the one who obeys rests neither on common reason nor on the power of the one who commands; what they have in common is the hierarchy itself, whose rightness and legitimacy both recognize and where both have their predetermined stable place” (Arendt, 93).

In many situations, architecture embraces an authoritative position over both the surrounding environment and the people present. The Roman Forum, for example, is composed of political buildings and temples dedicated to the pagan gods, and the area is controlled by political authority. Because the Roman Forum was originally used as the seat of the government, politics have a strong influence over the people and the buildings present. In another instance, the Piazza San Marco in Venice is controlled by religious authority which is present because of the large basilica on the main axis. The Roman Forum and Piazza San Marco represent examples where a citizen’s behavior is controlled and influenced by the dominant architecture present in the community center.

Located in the valley between the Palatine Hill and the Capitoline Hill, the Roman Forum was the administrative, legislative and legal center of the city of Rome (Figure 1). The area was originally a marshland that was used by nearby villages as a cemetery, but the Etruscans conquered the

region, drained it, and built the Forum. The Etruscans selected a monarchy as the city government, and a king along with the assistance of a senate that governed the city until 509 BC. During this time, the Forum evolved into the political core of society. The residence of the King was located in its center, and it appears to have been part of a larger complex that included the House of the Vestals and home of the *rex sacrorum*, “who in the Republican period assumed some of the religious duties of the king” (Guidobaldi, 4). The king served as head of state, war leader, and high priest, and governor of all religious activities and rituals.

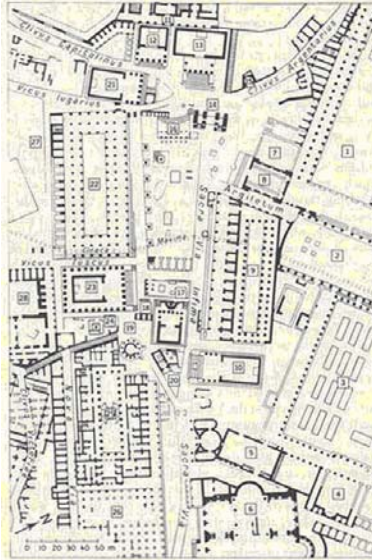


Figure 1. The Roman Forum

Soon, the patrician senators grew tired of the tyrannical rule, and in 509 BC, there was a rebellion. They established the Roman Republic and created a constitutional system where two leaders, known as Consuls, shared authority and were assisted by the Senate which was composed of three hundred Proletariat men. The Senate was more powerful than the Consuls, and it conducted foreign policy, passed laws, and handled the government’s finances. After a twenty year civil-war, in 27 BC, the Republic was destroyed, and an Empire was established. The Emperor had complete power, and while the Consuls and Senate still existed, they did not have as much authority over the people as they did during the Republican Era.

Serving as the political core of Rome, the Forum was in constant use by the Senate and other government officials. “The Forum first took shape as an all-purpose open space” acting as a center for social congregation (Boethius, 20). As the Forum grew, many legislative buildings such as the basilica, the curia, and the comitium were constructed on the north-western area of the Forum and took architectural shape as independent buildings grouped around the open space of the Forum. The curia, also known as the Senate House, was a large building where the senators would meet to discuss legislation. The staircase leading to its entrance overlooked the comitium, a large piazza-like open area that was used for political gatherings. From the top of these stairs, many speeches and important announcements were delivered to the public who gathered in the comitium below. This arrangement was the precedence for other Roman forums in cities such as Paestum and Cosa. By 300 BC, the comitium had become an amphitheater which was used for assemblies and faced the open courtyard of the Forum. A small stage, known as the rostrum, was built in front of the amphitheater and was used as an orator’s platform to deliver speeches to the senators in the comitium and the curia. Initially, an orator would speak facing the comitium and curia and disregard the common people situated in the open area directly behind the rostrum. Until the second century BC, all

“Popular orators... while speaking, turned their heads towards the curia of the Senate and the traditional place of public assembly, the comitium. But it seems in 145 [BC] – a politician set a new example by turning towards the forum as he harangued the people..., thus by a slight deviation and change of attitude... changing the constitution from an aristocratic to a democratic form; for his implication was that speakers ought to address... the people behind the rostra, not the senate” (Boethius, 149).

By addressing the common citizens of Rome, the message of the speech was no longer communicated solely to the government officials sitting in the comitium and curia. As a result, the citizens were incorporated in the affairs of the legislative process, and became the students of the speaker. In consideration that the rostrum granted authority over senate to the orator who graced its stage, the orator also assumed authority over the public.

The rostrum was used as the platform to exude authority over the senators, and eventually the common citizens and the entire forum, but it was used in a manner that was not representative of a tyrannical form of government. “Authority implies an obedience in which men retain their freedom,” and the public retained the right to choose whether or not they wanted to listen and obey (Arendt, 106). The citizens are free to choose, but are also respectful of and submit to the political authority inherent in the architecture. Before this event, it was well-known that orators would make announcements to the senate from the rostrum, and it was a respected area of the Forum. Just as “those endowed with authority were the elders [of the] senate,” the historical past of the rostrum awarded authority over whomever was being addressed (Arendt, 122).

Anyone who enters the Forum has an appreciation for the architecture, the history, and the politics of the space. The buildings are so grand and spectacular that it is almost impossible to remain unaffected by them, and I imagine that seeing the original Forum before it became a ruin would have been a magnificent site. Standing in the comitium with the curia on one side and the basilica Julia on the other would overwhelm even the most naive visitor and allow them to understand how powerful the Roman government once was. The feeling one would have might be similar to the reaction of being in Washington DC and seeing the White House, the Washington Monument, or the Jefferson Memorial, as it is easy to appreciate and become influenced by the strong sense of government in both situations. The political authority of the Forum is implicit and understood by all who visit. Even those who do not feel that a Republican or Democratic government is the correct type, they still have a deep appreciation for the achievements that the Romans accomplished. The Forum has become an authoritative example for most nations, and has influenced everyone who steps onto its grounds.

In 1171 AD under the direction of the Doge Sebastiano Ziani, the area now known as Piazza San Marco was transformed into a public square. The piazza did not take its present shape until the sixteenth century when the campanile, library, Procuratie Vecchie, and Nuove were constructed. With a mixture of Byzantine, Islamic, and Renaissance architecture, the piazza is quite overwhelming. The imposing basilica of San Marco which sits at the head of the piazza and governs the site, is dedicated to Saint Mark, the patron saint of Venice and was originally built as a chapel for the Doge (Figure1). What makes San Marco so unusual are the drastically different forms of architecture that decorate the façade and the interior. The gothic pointed arches and carvings along the roof-line of the main façade are heavily contrasted by the round Byzantine arches and garish mosaics that dominate the base of the basilica. The many columns that decorate the façade are of a variety of different colors and each has a different capital on top, showing that these were taken from previous structures and later attached to San Marco. In addition, during the Crusades, Venice invaded Constantinople, raided the city, and displayed the treasures on the exterior of the basilica to prove what a powerful and wealthy civilization it was. While the piazza is the focal point of Venice, the basilica corresponds to the role of the center of the piazza.

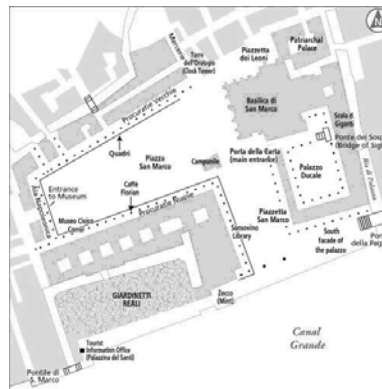


Figure 2 Plan of San Marco

Unlike the Roman Forum which has a political influence with government at the core, religion was the center of life in Piazza San Marco. While people still gathered to shop and participate in civic activities, the basilica had authority over the space and influenced much of the community. But when did the transition between politics and religion occur? After the fall of the Roman republic, the citizens were no longer included in governmental decisions and began to lose interest in the legislative process. They needed a new authority to put their trust in, and religion filled the void. Around 100 AD, many Romans focused their attention on the new Middle Eastern religions that promised salvation and happiness after death. By 300 AD, Christianity had drawn the largest following of the different religious beliefs, and life began to focus around a new spiritual faith instead of on politics. The influence of the Catholic Church continued to grow until “claiming for herself the old authority of the Senate” and naturally persuading the citizens to follow her (Arendt, 126). While Christianity continued to gain authority over the Empire, power and tyrannical behavior was left for the government to radiate to the public. In fact, near the fifth century, Pope Gelasius I wrote to the Emperor Anastasius I and said “Two are the things by which this world is chiefly ruled: the sacred authority of the Popes and the royal power” (Arendt 127). This statement implies that for the first time, the church and the state were separate, and while politics was enforced in a tyrannical manor, religion had a natural authority.

The Romans required a new form of public space to replace the political forum and accept the new ideals of Christianity. Rather than building basilicas in the already existing forums, piazzas were constructed throughout the cities as sites for religious buildings. This tradition was passed on to the Venetians, and they constructed one large piazza for the entire city to utilize. Like the Roman Forum, the piazza was the center of political, religious, and civic of life, but instead of focusing on politics and government, the piazza concentrated on religion.

The basilica is the first building that captures a person’s attention. Its brilliant gold mosaics, colorful columns, and balloon-like Islamic domes stand out in an extravagant manor that forces the citizens to take a closer look. It is obvious from the building’s appearance that it is a religious structure, and merely the site of it takes a person’s breath away. A person does not have to be a Christian or have another religious affiliation to appreciate, and respect the glorious church, and anyone who passes by may not become a believer but they recognize and understand why a person would choose this faith. Regardless of what occurs in the piazza, the moment a person witnesses the beauty of San Marco, they are affected and influenced by the power and authority that it has over the space.

The weight of a church in a piazza was not an immediate occurrence, and it was not until the fifth century that the Catholic Church began to exude such greatness over a space. The government was no longer controlling the citizens through the legislative process; rather the Catholic Church gained authority over regulation of the public, and God’s word was interpreted as the law.

Authority was given to the church and “God’s revelation could now be interpreted politically as if the standards for human conduct and the principle of political communities... had been finally revealed directly (Arendt, 127). Laws and rules were set to standards that were written in the Bible, and it was required that political order and human behavior be determined by God’s written word. Legislation was written according to religious beliefs, causing politics and religion to unite. Arendt feels that there “is scarcely anything that eventually was to assert itself with greater authority and more far-reaching consequences than the [merger] itself (128). The combination of religion and politics had an authoritative position over the Western World, and no other combination of two entities had ever been as successful. “The politicization of the church changed the Christian religion,” where the religious leaders became the authority figures from whom the church “would derive her own authority as long as she handed down their testimony” (Arendt, 126). As long as the church remained the precedence of all government legislation, it continued to be influential on the public. Given that religion became the foundation of politics during this era, it was a natural occurrence that the basilica San Marco would gain authority over the piazza, just as religion gained authority over legislation. Religious services were held in the church, the music of the choir filled the piazza, and the word of God was carried out into the streets, influencing all citizens through authority and respect of the basilica.

While political authority is not considered a stronger force than religious authority, or vice versa, the two unquestionably possess different qualities that allow them to influence those occupying public spaces. The community respects the power of the two authorities, and while the public may not feel they are the proper choice for authority, due to the architectural significance of the buildings, one can understand why authority is assumed. “Authority precludes the use of external means of coercion” and “where force is used, authority itself has failed” (Arendt, 93). In the Forum and the Piazza, authority was not forced upon the public. The citizens were free to walk away from the site and escape any and all influence, but those who chose to stay, chose to be submissive to the authoritative figure.

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