

The Church of San Giacomo di Rialto in the Sixteenth Century: Architecture and Founding Myth of the City

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Abstract The essay discusses the chief architectural transformations affecting the church of San Giacomo in the sixteenth century, before the radical transformation that began in 1598. In this period, the church space became one of the models for Venetian Renaissance architecture, its meaning connected and intertwined with the founding myth of the city and with the reconstruction of the Rialto area. It presents a case of 'spatial memory' that enriched itself over time, gaining layers of meaning. Starting from the fire of 1514, its development must be contextualised in the events of the reconstruction of the Rialto market, first, and the Rialto bridge, later.

Keywords San Giacomo di Rialto. Venetian early modern architecture. Urban History. Architectural History. Religious architecture.

The implementation of the *quincunx* in sixteenth-century Venice seems strongly conditioned by the model of the Basilica of St. Mark; indeed, Francesco Sansovino indicates the 'cuba di mezzo' ('middle cube') of the palatine basilica as the model for the Romanesque church of Santa Maria Formosa (Sansovino 1581, 10), and for the modern ones of San Salvador¹ and Santa Maria Mater Domini.² Yet it is the same Sansovino who sees the prototype of the Basilica in the church of San Giacomo di Rialto, "la [cui] compositura della testudine è così ben raccolta insieme et mantenuta da i volti che sostengono gli archi, che è mirabile cosa a vedere et può dirsi che ella fosse il modello della chiesa di San Marco" (Sansovino 1581, 196). In a recent essay (Günther 2021), H. Guenther thoroughly discusses in depth what had already been claimed by W. Wolters, namely that the quick spread of *quincunx* spaces in Venice between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries expresses a long and uninterrupted tradition that sees the church of San Giacomo, and not the Basilica of St. Mark, as

1 "Modello [...] imitato dalla parte di mezzo della Chiesa di S. Marco", Sansovino 1581, 47.

2 "Et restaurata à tempi nostri su la forma de la cuba di mezzo di S. Marco", Sansovino 1581, 74.

the main model (Wolters 1997, 253). On the other hand, adopting the *quincunx* in structures that were rebuilt on pre-existing foundations³ meant reiterating a pre-existing Romanesque layout consisting of a Greek-cross plan inscribed in a square with a dome atop the intersection of nave and transept.

The church of San Giacomo is a small building, the perimeter of which is limited by a series of adjacent structures (shops and offices) that forced opening the church's windows on the upper part of the walls, directly under the ceiling vaults [figs 1-2]. These openings, however, were added after the church was rebuilt in the late 16th century (see later); the church depicted by Jacopo de Barbari was certainly lower and darker [fig. 3]. The small dimensions of the building allowed the masonry vaults to be supported not by massive pillars (as is the case in the Basilica of St. Mark) but by slender, marble columns [fig. 4]; this way the light spreads downwards into the building more effectively since it is not hindered by columns or partition walls. All of these features were shared by many small parish churches that were rebuilt between the fifteenth and sixteenth centuries, making San Giacomo an ideal model for a large number of new projects. In particular, the structural system of San Giacomo, stripped down 'to the bone', seems especially suitable for a translation into the typical frame structures of the architectural orders. This is the case of churches such as San Giovanni Crisostomo, San Geminiano, San Nicola di Castello, San Giovanni Elemosinario, Santa Maria Mater Domini, and San Felice, which all present

a *quincunx* configuration set upon slim pillars recalling those of San Giacomo. It is clearly a particularly versatile spatial system that can be adapted to devotional buildings of different sizes, relevance, and nature (parish, monastic and collegiate churches) thanks to the possibility of 'cloning' the same structural cell on different axes and connecting it to peripheral spaces (presbytery, chapels, naves, external porticoes) in very efficient, functional ways. But it is also possible to adapt this light structural system to others divided by partition walls (as Mauro Codussi does in the church of Santa Maria Formosa).

The success of the San Giacomo model is also related to the process of elaboration of the foundation myth of Venice, which, from the second half of the fifteenth century, assigned the foundation of Rialto and that of its church overlap to a single, specific date (25th March 421). In fact, despite this symbolic connection, more ancient chronicles present different dates for the two events: 25th March 421 indicates the day on which the city of Venice was founded, and 8th January 429 indicates the date of the establishment of the church (*Venezia, 25 marzo 421*, 2022). The juxtaposition of these dates, and their relative symbolic meanings, has been testified by Bernardo Giustiniani in his *De origine Urbis Venetorum* (1477-81) and by all subsequent chroniclers.⁴ In 1557, Niccolò Zen⁵ added new details to the foundation myth of the city: he came to include the figure of the Greek architect Entinopos, to whom the stone construction of the church of San Giacomo is attributed, as a result of a vow that was taken for the miraculous extinguishing of a fire.

³ As speculated by W. Dorigo, nine churches were built in the Middle Ages following a central plan (coinciding more or less with a *quincunx* system); and of these nine at least five seem to have maintained this layout model even after their reconstruction in modern times: San Felice (1123), San Geminiano (1172-78), San Giovanni Confessore o Elemosinario (ante 1051), San Giovanni Crisostomo, Santa Maria Mater Domini (1149), San Giovanni in Oleo (ante 1152). The others are San Bartolomeo (1070) and the chapel dedicated to All Saints in the patriarchal palace of San Silvestro (ante 1070), Dorigo 2003, 1: 255-8. See also Rossi, Sitran 2010, 68-75.

⁴ Giustiniani 1722, 108. For a recent review of the issue, see Günther 2021, 278-82. See also Howard 2020, 81-3.

⁵ Zen 1557, 192, reiterated by Sansovino 1581, 72r. See also Gaier 2019, 299-300.



Figure 1
Church of San Giacomo
di Rialto, Venice, frontal view.
Photo © Böhm



Figure 2
Church of San Giacomo
di Rialto, Venice, lateral view.
Photo © Böhm



Figure 3
Jacopo de' Barbari,
View of Venice, detail

Having become a fundamental part of the myth of Venice, the shared foundation date of the city and its first church came to highlight the sacred character of the city's destiny; in the unique blend of civil, political, and religious motifs that was to become so important in the consciousness of the Venetian elite from this moment on.

It is in the context of this progressive 'mythification' of the role of San Giacomo in the history of Venice that the church emerges unscathed from the fire of 1514. Marin Sanudo himself read this circumstance as a confirmation of the special sacrality of the church:

the only thing that remained standing was the church of San Giacomo, covered in lead and in the middle of the fire [...]. God did not want such a grand misfortune as that of burning the most ancient church in the city.⁶

The mood of the city was already vulnerable because of the ongoing Wars of the League of Cambrai, which made the public sensitive to all kinds of omens. This is only one of the many miracles that seemed to have marked the fate of the church, such as the one that occurred in 1511, when a strong wind hit the church's portico with an iron cross, which however became stuck on its roofing and was read as a sign of Venice's role as saviour against the "barbarians" threatening Italy at the time (Sanudo 1879-1903, 12, 80). In the second decade of the century, the church's miraculous destiny grew into a true *topos*, becoming official when two Pontifical Briefs by Pope Leo X, dating between 1516 and 1520, granted the parish priest Natale Regia particular privileges on the occasion of the celebrations of Holy Thursday and Holy Saturday.⁷

Therefore, at this time San Giacomo was undergoing a transformation from a simple place of worship for merchants, artisans, and guilds into an actual sanctuary of the State. It is precisely this new symbolic role that explains the long dispute over the election of the church's rector, which had always been a patriarchal privilege: first (in the fifteenth century) the right was claimed by the 'provveditori al Sal', and afterwards by the doge who obtained the patronage of the church under Pope Clement VII. Thus, San Giacomo became an annex to the Basilica of San Marco, with a parish priest who was not under the canonical authority of the patriarch but of the primicerius (chief priest of San Marco). Natale Regia (Gardani 1966, 16-17), the last parish priest appointed by the patriarch, may have played an important role in this change of jurisdiction. The parish priest had a fundamental role in formalising the synchronisation of the foundation myths of the city and the church: the inscription placed inside the church, commemorating the parishioners' election of their priest in 1503, is a physical reminder, as is the more eye-catching inscription [fig. 5] that was placed under the portico in 1531 on the occasion of the church's completed construction work. Indeed, the rector had been the promoter of significant renovation work, aimed at 'restoring the original shape' of the church's interior, which is adorned with precious marbles while also preserving the mosaics of the apse, as described by Francesco Sansovino in 1581 (Sansovino 1581, 196). Natale Regia boasted of having made the exterior of the church more monumental, as shown in the painting by Bonifacio de' Pitati, *Nascita della Vergine*, which in 1554 presents an image of the façade that is significantly transformed

⁶ "Solum restò in piedi la chiesa di San Giacomo di Rialto coperta di piombo qual era in mezo dil fuoco, e ita Deo volente si preservò", Sanudo 1879-1903, 17, 461.

⁷ Gardani 1966, 66-72. In 1516, mention is made of an 'ecclesiam quae miraculose edificata existit' ('a church that miraculously exists'). In 1520, it is specified that both the construction and survival of the fire were clear signs of divine protection.

compared to its previous state (illustrated by Jacopo de' Barbari's map of Venice, 1500), with a new bell gable on the top of the roof.

The monumentalisation of the facade maintains the medieval relationship with the market arcades whose shape is inspired by the medieval tradition of making market squares 'permeable' to the city by means of arcades; but this operation highlights the importance that this space assumed in the context of the reconstruction of the Rialto market after the fire of 1514. Indeed, the churches of San Giacomo and San Giovanni Elemosinario both became key points in the renovation project,⁸ but with significant swings in the decision-making processes. The first urban layout, as defined by Giovanni Giocondo, placed a church at the centre of the piazza; a church that, however, disappeared in the second layout, in which it was relocated "under the loggias so as not to block the piazza".⁹ It is important to note that Scarpagnino, who executed the final design, arranged the reconstruction of the piazza around the church of San Giacomo, with a series of arcades that seem like a natural extension of the church's portico [fig. 6]. The monumentalisation of the church pursued by Natale Regia, however, did not eliminate the shops that almost enveloped it completely, forming a sort of 'shell' around the sacred space, entirely managed by state authorities. The shops, for example, provided an important funding source for the State but they could also be converted into office

spaces (such as that of the Razon Nove) (Calabi, Morachiello 1987, 96). In short, the church of San Giacomo is one where the secular and sacred characteristics, as well as the architectural and urban dimensions, are inextricably interconnected.

The apostolic visit of 1581¹⁰ describes a building in good condition, detailing the presence of marble columns dividing the three aisles and an orderly sacristy showing no particular signs of maintenance issues. The vaulted main chapel is described as adorned with a crucifix 'in frontispicio'; on the main altar, dedicated to San Giacomo, although not consecrated, stood a gilded wooden tabernacle and an altarpiece. As for the side altars (each equipped with an altarpiece), one was dedicated to San Marco, whereas all the others were dedicated to the Madonna: to the Beatissima Vergine, the Natività della Vergine, and the Annunciazione. Subsequent events led to the replacement and rededication of all these altars,¹¹ but the original Marian program seems to refer to an immediate superimposition of the Virgin Mary and the city of Venice, a fundamental theme of the mythopoeia that had been established between the fourteenth and the beginning of the sixteenth century.

It is in this phase that the events regarding San Giacomo became even more closely intertwined with those regarding the construction of the Rialto Bridge and the repercussions on both sides of the Canal.

⁸ Cessi-Alberti, 99-102. For San Giovanni Elemosinario Calabi, Morachiello 1987, 106.

⁹ "Sotto le logge perché non impedisse la piazza" (Vasari 1906, 5: 271).

¹⁰ ASPVe, Curia patriarcale di Venezia, Archivio 'segreto', Visite apostoliche, cc. 276rv, published in Gardani 1966, 77-84.

¹¹ See the *Visita primiceriale* of 1609, ASVe, Cancelleria inferiore, reg. 259, cc. 1rv, published in Gardani 1966, 85-8. Also see the essay by Luca Siracusano.



Figure 4
Church of San Giacomo di Rialto, Venice, inner view.
Photo © Böhm

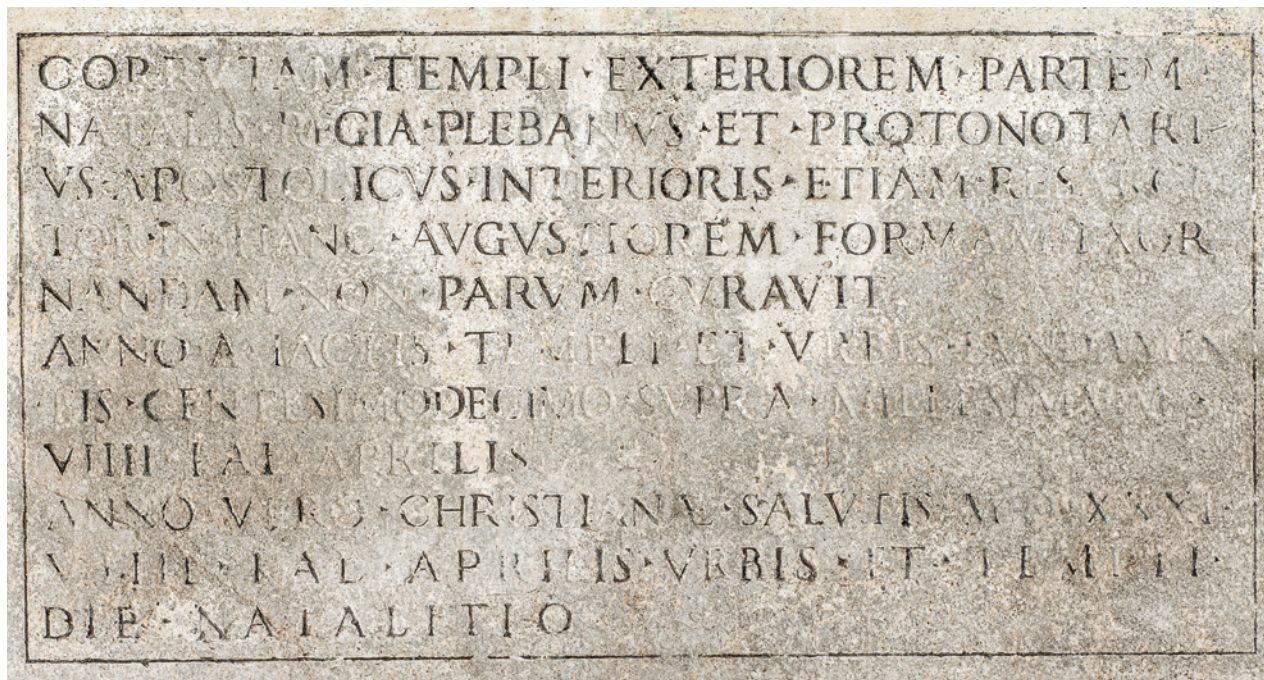


Figure 5 Church of San Giacomo di Rialto, Venice. Inscription in the portico. Photo © Böhm

As is well known, the first idea for the construction of the stone bridge dates back to 1503. The fire of 1514 and the collapse of the bridge in 1524 were clear signs of the urgency of the intervention. However, it was not until 1551 that a commission of supervisors announced a public tender and examined the submitted projects for a new bridge.¹² During the very long decision-making process, and while the standing wooden bridge still required constant restoration work, the most important architects of the time proposed new projects, in a debate on the shape of the structure that involved the likes of Jacopo Sansovino, Andrea Palladio, and Vincenzo Scamozzi, and a series of *proti* who

tirelessly criticised the many structural shapes and ideas. In the meantime, in July 1587, the collapse of some houses and shops owned by the patriarch adjoining the nearby church of San Bartolomeo triggered a reconstruction process that was favoured by the Signoria thanks to a loan.

The reconstruction of the bridge and the transformation of the buildings on both sides of the Grand Canal are probably connected, although not necessarily contained in one general reconstruction project. Nonetheless, it is a fact that the two churches of San Giacomo and San Bartolomeo underwent a long and simultaneous reconstruction process.

¹² Calabi, Morachiello 1987, 196-206; Calabi 2022; Howard 2010; 2011, 131-67.



Figure 6 Campo di San Giacomo di Rialto, lateral view. Photo © Böhm

The fire of 1572 that broke out in San Bartolomeo, destroying the sacristy and the archive of the patriarchal registries (on the eastern side of the church), prompted a long process of reconstruction. The overall reconfiguration of the presbytery, initiated in 1582, also extended to the three terminal chapels, with the demolition of the main altar and the reconstruction of the church in 1624 (Guidarelli 2011). The Senate's decision of 1588 to change the direction of the new stone bridge (compared

to the alignment of the existing wooden one) sparked a heated debate regarding the position start of the abutments of the bridge on the bank of the canal, on the Riva del Ferro. This, in fact, entailed reorganising a large portion of the urban fabric between the church and the new bridge, with extensive demolitions and reconstructions. The rebuilding process, which indirectly involved the church of San Bartolomeo, began with the preliminary survey of the church's perimeter, presumably carried out

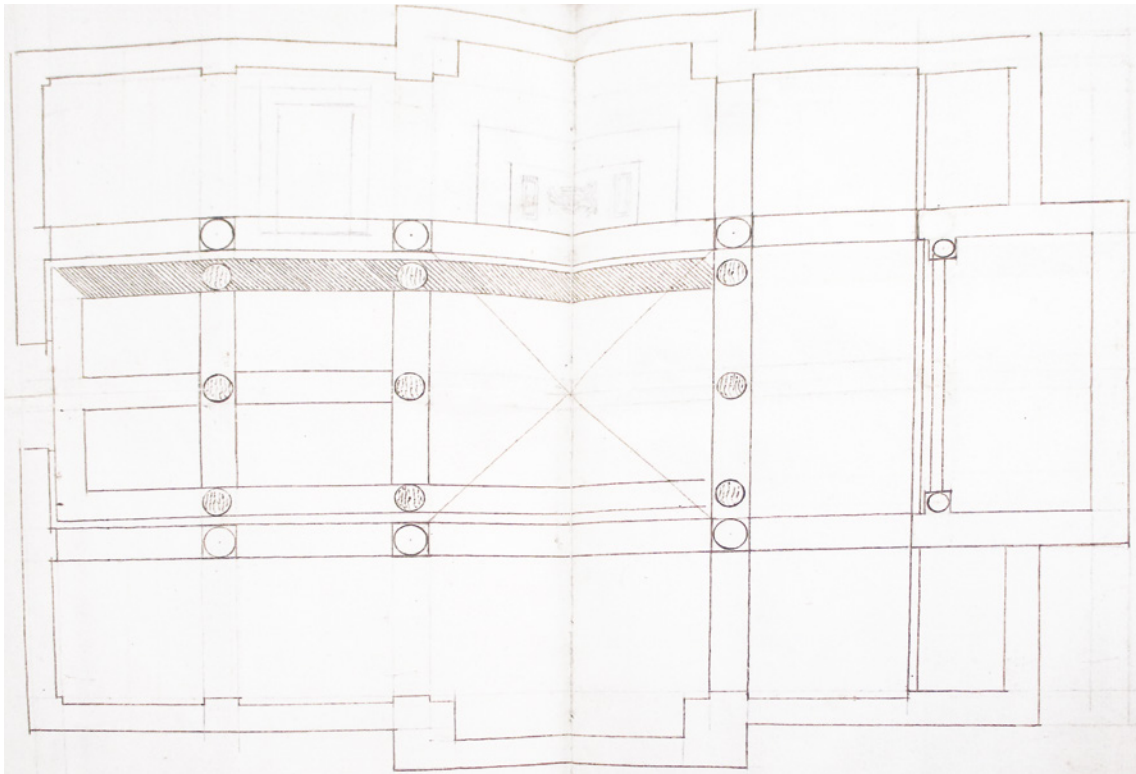


Figure 7 Antonio da Ponte, Preparatory plan of the rise of the floor of the Church of San Giacomo di Rialto, ASVe, Provveditori sopra il ponte di Rialto, dis. 17. Photo © Guidarelli

by Antonio da Ponte in 1587-88 and now preserved in the State Archives of Venice, in the dossier on the construction of the Rialto Bridge.¹³ At the same time, on the other bank of the Grand Canal, the church of San Giacomo underwent a significant renovation. Once again, it was the parish priest who took the initiative by addressing a plea to the Signoria, asking for the intervention of the

Magistrati al Sal to finance the elevation of the church floor. The priest Francesco di Allegri complained that the construction of the seat of the Razon Nove above the space of the church (occupying a third of its surface) had led to structural failures that required a consolidation of the foundations. Furthermore, the drop in the floor level that seemed to have been a consequence of this structur-

¹³ ASVe, Provveditori sopra il ponte di Rialto, dis. 17, published and discussed in Calabi 1982, 62 fig. 46.

al intervention, made the church increasingly more exposed to high water, which hindered liturgical celebrations (Calabi, Morachiello 1987, 96-7).

In May 1587, the Collegio examined the matter and referred the issue to the Senate which, after hearing the opinion of the *proto* of the Provveditori al Sal, decided to allocate 150 ducats to “raise the floor of the church, which today can be accessed by descending a few steps”.¹⁴ The difference in elevation between inside and outside was also due to the paving and therefore raising of the external footfall level. The Provveditori al Sal had been consulted the previous February and had received Antonio da Ponte’s expert valuation in April. The *proto*, confirming the parish priest’s claim, indicated the need to raise the floor and fix the perimeter walls: “it is necessary to restore the walls, which are in bad shape, and raise the level of the floor”.¹⁵

The drawing [fig. 7] attached to da Ponte’s appraisal is a plan of the church’s foundations (Calabi, Morachiello 1987, fig. 41). It shows the existence of continuous sections of masonry supporting the two rows of columns, and an underground vaulted ceiling below the second bay of the main nave (therefore showing that the cavity is maintained in the reinforcement project for the floor). Da Ponte designed a system of vertical supports connected to a foundation frame (necessary to support the raised floor) that seems to extend to the presbytery. As a result, while providing for an elevation of the overall floor, the *proto* centred the new foundations under the central nave (shown in the drawing by a different ink). He also marked, in pencil, some tombs that were to be

maintained on the left side wall. The operation entailed an overall renewal of the church interior and is the primary reason why all the altars were reconstructed (see Siracusano in this volume). However, this intervention did not require changing the interior¹⁶ and did not affect the upper structures thereby maintaining the ‘antica forma’ (‘ancient shape’) of the church, simply adapting it partially to external transformations. Yet, these first operations were a gateway to a series of other interventions that, after minor works on the roof in 1593, intensified in 1598 when the Senate allocated 330 ducats for a first consolidation of the vaults and main altar. Thanks to the documentary corpus later published here by Nicolas Moucheront, it is possible to confirm what is stated in the inscriptions inside the church: under the supervision of Antonio Contin, the entire system of vaults and columns was raised, maintaining the perimeter walls and building a dome on a drum [figs 8-9] to replace the previous one placed under the roof pitches. The floor was then further raised, which forced the elevation of the access portal toward the portico, reaching a height of more than 160 cm above the original outer footfall level (as verified during the 1937 restorations) (Marzemin 1937, 270-1).

This entire operation occurred *Prisca eius forma servata*; that is, preserving the spatial form that was so closely linked to the Venetian identity, albeit with a substantial aesthetic renewal. Indeed, the elevation of walls, columns, vaults, and dome could not be raised above the level of the new adjacent buildings, which in the meantime had themselves also been raised. The opening of three large semicircular windows on the upper

¹⁴ “Alzare il pavimento della chiesa al quale oggi si giunge scendendo alcuni gradini”, ASVe, Senato, deliberazioni Terra, *filza* 102, alla data 5 June 1587.

¹⁵ “E fare beogno reconzar i pare atorno, molto mal condizionadi unde per alzar suso il pavimento”, ASVe, Senato, deliberazioni terra, *filza*, alla data 4 April 1587.

¹⁶ Stringa 1604, f. 155v, writes that even after this intervention, and before the construction work that took place at the end of the century, the internal floor was still three steps lower than the level of the outside street level.

part of the façade, presbytery, and southern transept walls helped to stream light into the church, emphasising the precious marble of the newly built altars. This new organisation of the light changed the perception of the church space, which went from being a seemingly confined one to a spacious, monumental environment, all without changing the overall shape or means of access. The same dome was raised on a drum, pierced by four new circular windows, and crowned by a lantern [figs 10-11]: this allowed the penetration of new sources of light while also maintaining the shape of the preexisting dome. The rationality and efficiency of this solution would make it a prototype for dozens of subsequent restorations, as it allowed the admittance of new light into preexisting churches by simply opening semicircular windows under the ceiling vaults without upsetting the support structure or spatial organisation.

In this way, the *visita primiceriale* of 1609 (when compared to the Apostolic Visit of 1581) describes a building with the same spatial layout and altar arrangement (although these had been rebuilt and dedicated to new saints), despite the fact that the entire church had been dismantled and rebuilt.¹⁷ The church's fate of being repeatedly manipulated to preserve its original shape finds

its fulfillment in the restoration works that took place between the mid-nineteenth century and the 1940s. Thanks to an important archival dossier,¹⁸ it is possible to reconstruct the course of these various transformations, starting with the almost complete reconstruction of the portico (partial replacement of stone blocks and restoration of the roof), the painting of the façade, the partial restoration of the church roof, and the main altar restoration from 1858 to 1860. The portico roof was then completely reconstructed between 1884 and 1885 (and later in 1905), when general maintenance of the interior (walls, altar, and floor) was also carried out, especially around the organ loft located on the counter-façade.

By contrast, the interventions that were carried out in 1936-38 were more structural, with a consolidation of the presbytery and the replacement of a large part of the external walls. In particular, the main façade was subjected to significant external restoration work (brick replacement, plaster removal, and reorganisation of the façade openings), while the internal counter-façade was freed of the organ and organ loft.

Once again, the transformations (even the more radical ones) were aimed at maintaining the 'Prisca forma' ('ancient form'), to renew the ancient significance of the church of San Giacomo di Rialto.

¹⁷ ASVe, Cancelleria inferiore, reg. 259, cc. 1rv, published in Gardani 1966, 85-8.

¹⁸ Soprintendenza ABAP di Venezia. Archivio Antico, A 8 San Polo; *busta* 5 Sestiere di San Polo "chiesa di San Giacomo. Campanile di San Tomà". The modern restorations of San Giacomo will be the subject of a dedicated future publication.



Figure 8
Church of San Giacomo di Rialto, Venice,
view of the inner vaults. Photo © Böhm



Figure 9
Church of San Giacomo di Rialto, Venice,
view of the inner vaults. Photo © Böhm

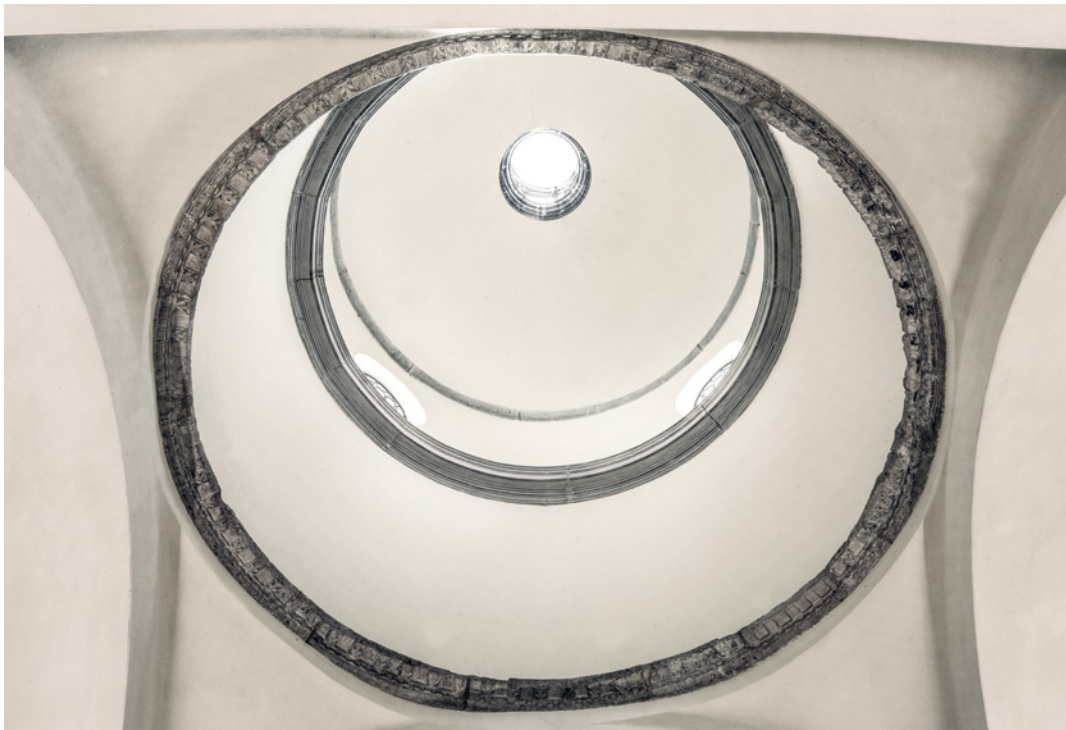


Figure 10
Church of San Giacomo di Rialto, Venice,
view of the inner dome. Photo © Böhm



Figure 11
Church of San Giacomo di Rialto, Venice,
view of the external dome.
Photo © Böhm

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