

# Architectural projects of Marco Frascari: The pleasure of a demonstration

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## Architectural Projects of Marco Frascari: The Pleasure of a Demonstration 2015, Sam Ridgway

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This is a useful collection of commentaries on the fascinating work – both written and built – of the Italian architect and academic Marco Frascari, who died in 2013. Frascari, born in 1945 “under the shadow of the dome of Alberti’s Sant’ Andrea in Mantua,” graduated as an architect from the IUAV in Venice in 1969, initially working in both the design office and the teaching studio of his mentor Carlo Scarpa. After completing his PhD at the University of Pennsylvania, he taught at a number of North American universities, including Georgia Institute of Technology, Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University, and again at the University of Pennsylvania alongside Joseph Rykwert and David Leatherbarrow in the mid-1990s. His final appointment was Director of the Azrieli School of Architecture at Carleton University in Ottawa.

Like Scarpa, throughout his career Frascari had something of an obsession with the articulation of the construction detail, which he saw as a kind of compositional unit from which whole buildings could be progressively assembled. But what raised his work beyond the crude idea of repetition – the building as a simple ‘piling up’ of individual details – is a deeper understanding of the detail itself as a kind of hybrid composition of elements. In a typically mischievous move, Frascari preferred to call these hybrids ‘monsters’, which allowed him to play various etymological games that linked terms like *demonstration* (which can mean both a drawing or a building) with the Italian word *mostre* (exhibition). If the detail is a monstrous union of dissimilar materials brought together into some sort of unlikely expressive relationship, Frascari likewise treated the building as a whole as a collage-like composition of distinctive fragments. It is this idea that drew him towards working with historic buildings, again in an echo

of Scarpa’s approach to the layering of historic and contemporary fabrics – perhaps best exemplified at the Castelvecchio Museum in Verona. The three projects featured in Ridgway’s book all involve new interventions within existing structures; for example, the Stanza Rossa involved a major remodelling of a disused silk factory in Vicenza, just a few hundred metres from Palladio’s famous theatre, the Teatro Olimpico. The focal point of the reconstruction is the insertion of an altar-like central bathroom, raising the normally mundane act of bathing to a self-consciously spiritual level. In place of what in a cooler climate would more likely have been a central fireplace, the reference to a sacred well-spring at the centre of the house recalls Gaston Bachelard’s meditations on the archetypal four elements.

Also featured in the book are two projects from Frascari’s time teaching and practicing in the USA: a remodelling of a Master’s Apartment in a student hall of residence at the University of Pennsylvania and a major reworking of a single-family house for his own use on the outskirts of Alexandria in Virginia. In both cases the spaces are transformed by a single dominant idea, which in the first is the opening up of a central light-filled stairwell that allows the journey up to the main living space to take on a ceremonial quality. In the Villa Rosa in Alexandria an alternative approach is taken, effectively wrapping the existing volume in a series of discrete but distinct new elements. The plan geometry is the driving principle in this latter example, with the aim of reorienting the kitchen and master bedroom to align with the north-south axis. The rotation of these key elements highlights another of Frascari’s design preoccupations: the role of geometric drawing instruments in the ‘drawing out’ of an idea. The humble compass becomes an instrument of divination in Frascari’s very personal history of the ‘crafty art of architecture’, where he makes a direct connection between the geometric construction of the drawing and the actual setting out of the building at 1:1 on site. The compass therefore takes on the role of mediator or messenger between the realms of the actual and the possible, a function analogous to that performed by angels in the art and literature of the Christian tradition. Frascari again makes much of the play on words between *angel* and *angle* in one of his best known published writings, while many of his drawings feature compasses with angelic wings

attached, transforming them into quasi-magical tools of discovery and communication.

As a book, its format as an essay collection brings with it some minor if obvious drawbacks, one of which being a degree of repetition in the introductions and conclusions to the early chapters. By contrast the book cuts off rather abruptly at the end of Chapter 6, without an overall conclusion to draw the various strands of the story together. But overall it still constitutes a much needed and timely reminder of the singular achievements of an influential figure. For me, as a former student of Frascari's as well as an occasional collaborator, his work has been a huge source of inspiration, as well as an ongoing challenge to try to continue. I am happy to say that Sam Ridgway has also taken up this important task and offers here a highly engaging and insightful analysis that should make his work available to a new generation of researchers.

