

## World Architecture Case study 2: Piazza San Marco/St. Mark's Cathedral

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Piazza San Marco is the main square on the island of Venezia, Italy. In more casual terms, it is located on the belly of the fish geographically. Most recognizable by such landmark buildings as Saint Mark's Basilica, an Italian Gothic and Byzantine style cathedral in the town center, which began its construction in 1063 when the 30th Doge of Venice Domenico Contarini commissioned an unknown architect, likely greek, to design the church (1). To the right of which is the Doge's Palace, a Venetian Gothic palace where the Doge of Venice would reside as the head of the once Republic of Venice. This building doubles as a courthouse and connects to a prison via the famous Bridge of Sighs which passes over the Rio di Palazzo canal. The palace is now a museum (2). In front of the Basilica is the San Marco Campanile, the town bell tower and the tallest structure in piazza (3). Surrounding the Plaza center on both sides are 2 shopping complexes that can be walked through on ground level. The above levels are currently empty (4). Between the two shopping centers there is an adjunct museum known as the Museo Correr, one of the 11 civic museums in Venice (5).



I chose this particular square because it was the first Italian square I ever visited. As soon as I walked into the main piazza from a back road I could see why this was such a universally loved site. It was so full of life and energy, I felt like I was walking around back in time. My favorite feature of the entire complex is that every building has such a distinct style that compliments the building next to it, particularly the Doge's Palace and St. Mark which are actually connected to one another from the back. Both buildings have completely unique designs but don't look awkward next to one another. Walking between every building from the inside made it clearer just how well connected these buildings are. Finding the points where they connected was difficult. They all just flow together like a symphony of patterns. Big rows of arches like the drums beating in a song and the detail of the vertical columns like the wind instruments. If I were to make an analogy to architecture and music that would be my best.

Architect: Unknown, assumed to be of greek heritage

Commissioner: Domenico I Contarini

Date of construction: c.1050-1094 CE

Dates of Refurbishment: Has undergone aesthetic modification throughout 12<sup>th</sup> and 13<sup>th</sup> century.

Location: San Marco, 328, Venezia, Italy

Geographic Cordinates: 45.434464° N, 12.339570° E

Site: An urban setting near water, ideal for trade and public workabout

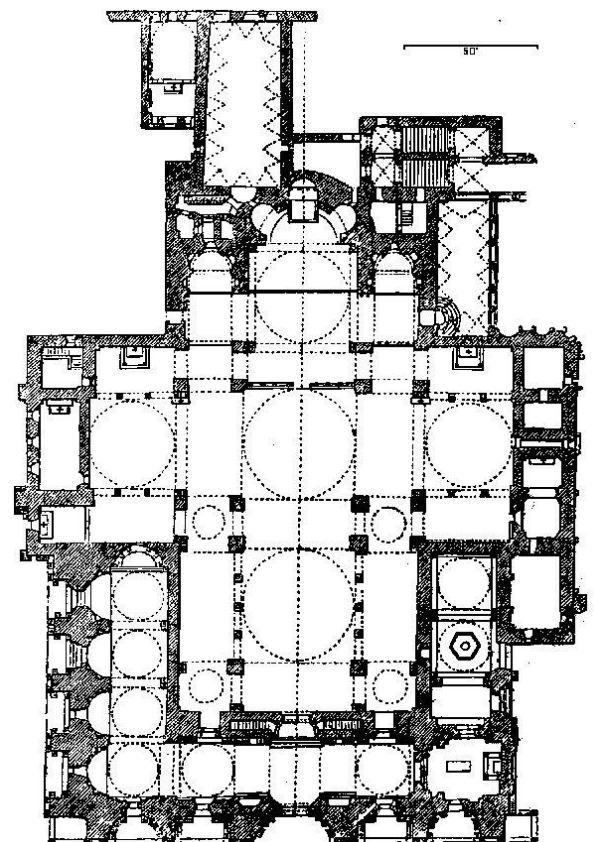
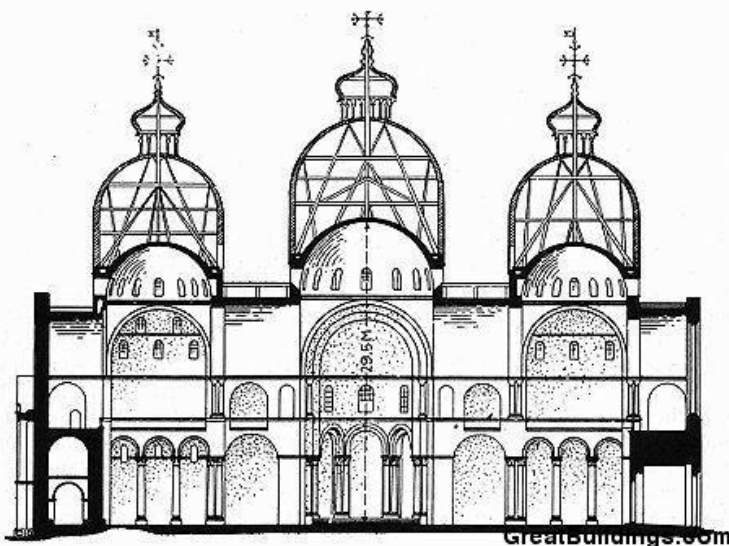
Materials: Various marble types, stone brick, clay brick, iron bars, wooden logs, stone

Construction Type: Bearing masonry, timber frame domes

Culture: Various

Style: Byzantine with Gothic accents

Plan: (shown left) Dotted lines represent 2<sup>nd</sup> story



This is a very peaceful square. Even at it's most crowded there was always enough room for everyone and I never felt stressed or compressed. Nighttime though was far more active with a live band playing every night and foreign cart salesmen every 20 meters, not to mention the more authentic tourists who show up. Many of the main congested roads do not directly meet up with the square. Most often you must shimmy in through a side path or, as we did most often, walked down the Calle Larga Ascensione from our hotel, a road paralell to the Museo Correr, which has a mostly open ground level which you can walk through to. To the left is a picture of myself standing underneath this building at midday with a view of the cathedral behind me. St. Mark was unfortunately being refurbished at the time so we have no interior pictures. (6)



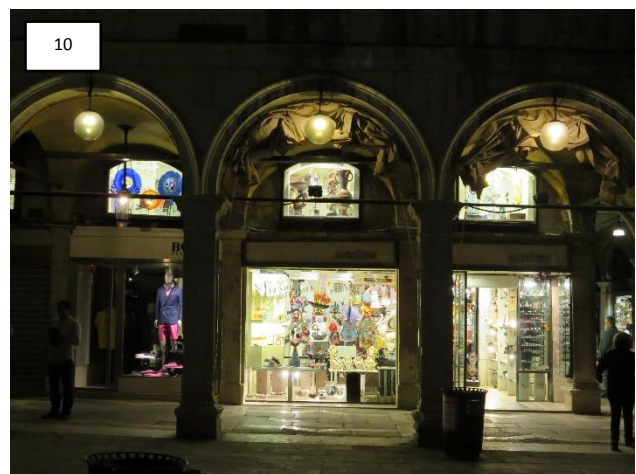
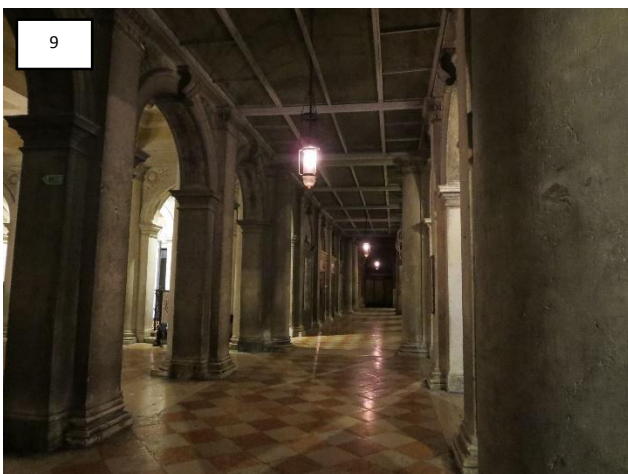
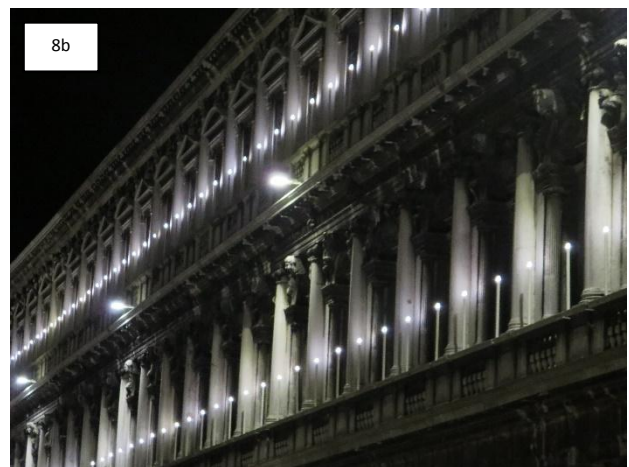
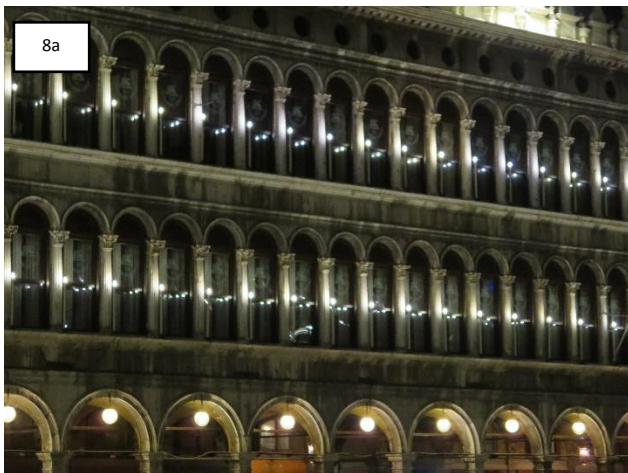
The patterns at which people move also change from day to night. During the day more extroverted people, as well as those who gather courage from traveling like a herd of flamengos in a matching tourist group can be observed to move in an almost circular pattern around the square, occasionally branching off to take pictures or to take a breather. These people make up about 80% of the visible tourists. More introverted people tend to walk through the colonnades of the side market or streight down the center to the church in a linear path. After about 5:00 to 7:00 pm (GMT+1), depending on the time of week, the square empties out and the tourists scurry to their mother ships and you can walk about freely untill about near sundown when the smart tourists and locals come out (7). Because there is no center landmarks in the square, there is no right or wrong path to walk about. If there were, say, a fountain or obelisk in the center as can be seen in many roman forums, there would likely be more organized movement around the area, as opposed to the mess of people moving in no general direction that you tend to see. This is the only real problem with a completely open square with no paths. Some grass might have also been nice. It was incredibly rare to see any grass or trees outside of intentional parks, though we did find some on back roads or smaller sub-squares that exist within little connected adpartm. The whole center felt a bit dark, even during the day because of concrete's tendency to obsorb heat and light, though I think grass might take away from the seriousness of the place. Overall, the ideal time to visit this square is after dark.





Nighttime is my personal preferred time to traipse around the city. There are actually quite fewer tourists and pickpockets counter to what you might normally assume. The smell in the air changes significantly from that of a mixture of sunscreen, cigarette smoke, and some body odor to just cigarette smoke and sea water. There appears to be very little crime during the night. Aside from pick pockets (I watched six people pickpocketed during my trip in real time) I never felt afraid wandering the streets at night, though this may have been because I wore a black kung fu uniform most every day. Never once were we in any form of danger, even when lost in the far outskirts of the island. Considering how expensive of a place Venice is to maintain and visit you can expect no real worries, aside from possible difficulty finding immediate medical attention.

The lighting at night is also worth discussing. Each story of the shopping centers had bright, spherical lights hanging under every arch on the ground level and between every window of the second and third levels, with street lights hanging off and over the roof about every 15 meters (probably to light up the 3 step drop from the buildings to the piazza so people don't fall). The ground level lights are about twice as large and appear to use incandescent lights, while the upper stories use fluorescent (8a). I like that they did this because it makes the differences in each row of arches stand out. The position of the lighting also seems to bring out the detail in the carving of the arches and windowsills (8b). To add even more variety, hanging from the ceiling of the first floors of some buildings surrounding the piazza was these dim, slightly red, tube-shaped lights that hung every 5 or so columns in some places. Though these lights were hung behind the columns, so that they would not interfere with the light from the sphere shaped incandescent lights mentioned prior (9). Lastly are the cute lit-up street shop windows with smaller, slightly arched windows right above, displaying extra merchandise (10).



So Piazza San Marco is undoubtedly the heart of Venice, but squares are something that Venice does well no matter where you are. Small groups of apartments connected to one another in less visited parts of town centralize in a sort of decongestant sub-square where people living in the same houses can communicate with their neighbors before walking out into the street. These are very common sights; partially closed off little parks or squares that meet the road with one entranceway but connect several people's doorsteps to one central, familiar location. It's sort of like the Italian equivalent of, say, a cul-de-sac, in the sense that instead of calming vehicle traffic, it calms people traffic. Below are 2 pictures of what I am describing. Most of these areas are walled or gated off in some way (11)(12)





Below is a picture myself standing between a street of houses where local Venitians live (13). Similar to Amsterdam or Mons, Belgium (another location I visited on the same trip) these houses sat right on the street. Here there isn't much need for any sort of mediating space considering how far these residences are from traffic. It's likely that the neighbors here know one another.

Shockingly, farther from the tourist attractions and main roads the streets actually *widen*. You'd think that the main parts of the city would have the widest roads but no no no, you actually have much more freedom of movement the farther you get from the Venice you see in the tour books. In fact, while I'm on the subject, the food was not only a tad cheaper, but of much higher quality when you end up where the locals live. One of my favorite memories of the trip was when my father and I happened upon a small restaurant at night much further north of San Marco. That may have been the best I'd eaten in all of Italy. Around here there were almost no english speakers so you have to speak in body language.

That's all there is to say about the rest of the city.



## Bibliography

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All ground pictures were taken by myself or my father.