Edinburgh and Venice: Comparing the Evolution in Communal Living in Geographically Challenged Mercantile Communities

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In the early modern period, the spatial organisation of Edinburgh and Venice – a craggy north European burgh and a Mediterranean maritime powerhouse – showed remarkable similarities. Whilst Edinburgh was compared by Englishman Thomas Morer, visiting in 1689, to an ivory comb with its narrow teeth perpendicular to the grand High Street, and directly connecting the two royal residences of the Castle and Holyrood Palace (Figure 22.1), Venice's equivalent structure is curved to follow the meandering of the Grand Canal (Figure 22.2). Around these main thoroughfares, all forms of transportation, commerce and public life were organised. Geographical obstacles, a lack of terrain fit for building, and defensive considerations all meant that very limited space was possible for expansion, and residency within the agreed perimeter was essential to enjoy the benefits of citizenship. Edinburgh and Venice's architectural responses to these constraining circumstances were, I argue, comparable: dense, flexible, commercially and residentially viable high-rise buildings. It would be only Edinburgh, however, that would both question and develop that model in the eighteenth century and afterwards with its extramural expansion – the New Town.

#### <INSERT FIG. 22.1 AND FIG. 22.2 NEAR HERE>

With clear differences in size, wealth and areas of influence, both cities' economies were based on a network of productive and trading activities, at scales from local to international. Economic dependency, competitive comradeship and collective gain from an individual's success created a sense of shared goals and cohesion, reflected and enhanced by physical proximity.<sup>6</sup>

In Venice, the combination of a stable governmental system monopolised by a few noble families, plus a civic pride in its nominally egalitarian status of republic, meant minimal chance of class mobility and discouraged internal animosities.<sup>7</sup> As the Scottish nobility resided primarily in country estates and acquired or leased town properties when needed, 8 Edinburgh lacked the political equivalent of the closed Venetian oligarchy, and coveted positions in urban administration were assigned to prominent guild members on a rotating basis. In such socially settled societies, with rank and prospective occupations largely decided at birth, visual signifiers such as personal and architectural ornamentations were not necessary to declare one's superiority, and compliant blending-in was, at least nominally, appreciated. <sup>9</sup> In Venice, a sober black toga was worn by patricians and citizens alike, visually emphasising the ethos of group consensus. 10 Similarly, older patrician palaces were often not significantly different from more popular complexes in structure and design, grouped around a corte or calle and without visible boundaries from the rest of the community. 11 Even with the showier fashions of the early seventeenth century, a restrained architectural style remained for some an appreciative nod to the myth of social harmony and equality, while a more daring one was appropriate to public buildings. 12 For example, the use of crenellations and other military-related, if merely ornamental, language was often applied to symbolic communal buildings, such as the Arsenale or the civic granaries. <sup>13</sup> Comparably, in Edinburgh, ostentatious extravagance was also frowned upon by cautious business partners, and discouraged by Reformed teachings, while simplicity of dress, frugality and sobriety were valued qualities. 14 It became the role of public buildings, such as the Tron Kirk or the Tolbooth, to interrupt the uniformity of the urban fabric with prominent siting in the High Street, and their turrets, crenellations and towers declaring their practical and symbolic importance. 15 Everywhere but the High Street and the Canal Grande, the narrow closes/rii and calli, and semi-public squares/corti limited the options for ostentatious façades, and the

maze-like articulation was perceived at its best through direct engagement with the rich, varied sequence of solid and void spaces, thick with areas of darkness and light.<sup>16</sup>

# <INSERT FIG. 22.3 AND FIG. 22.4 NEAR HERE>

For much of the early modern period, and taking differences in wealth, culture and structural limitations into consideration, the dwellings of the Edinburgh and Venetian merchants in these space-hungry cities were substantially comparable: creative, compact, vertically organised responses to trading needs. Until at least the sixteenth century, the typical house of the Venetian merchant was the Veneto-Byzantine casa-fondaco of Arab inspiration, working as lodging and as place of commerce and storage. <sup>17</sup> The ground floor generally had a loggia for the disembarking and selling of goods, and an entrance hall (androne) giving access to storerooms on the sides and to the back courtyard; while the placing of openings on the façades responded to the internal organisation. <sup>18</sup> In a single-property unit, a staircase (usually in the courtyard) gave access to an elongated main room (portego) on the piano nobile, the family's main common room and distributive space with a loggia overlooking the front. Further vertical circulation was provided by internal wooden staircases, or at times by freestanding spiral ones. 19 The commercial-under-residential structure applied, with differences in size, number of storeys, complexity of structure and articulation of the façade, to most Venetian buildings, from modest houses built for rental to the fashionable singlefamily palazzo, deriving from a similar Veneto-Byzantine origin.<sup>20</sup>

When land pressure increased and economic interests diversified, Venetian houses could be subdivided, with the same building being shared by related and unrelated individuals, and by landlords and tenants.<sup>21</sup> A traditional-looking façade could then hide a fractioned, asymmetrical structure, its flexible layout constantly being altered to adapt to the owners' changing uses for the rooms behind them.<sup>22</sup> The large store rooms at ground floor and the mezzanines could be used for different activities, or rented out independently; and the

private staircase – moved if necessary to the back courtyard beyond the now shared *androne* – could become of communal use.<sup>23</sup>

In Edinburgh, buildings were also strongly shaped by commercial considerations and convenience of use. While the ground floor was generally for trade and the floors above for habitation, many modest residential spaces could double up as workspaces or shops, blurring any distinction between residential and commercial use.<sup>24</sup> Wealthy merchants could be associated with an entire building: after the improvements and extensions by merchant Thomas Gladstone between 1617 and 1620, four-storeyed Gladstone's Land had a commercial sequence of rooms at ground floor, with an arcaded loggia for displaying the goods facing the High Street (Figure 22.5). A projecting forestair enabled rather ostentatious independent access to the decorated first-floor apartment; the upper storey was lit by a projecting gallery, later divided into independent, windowed spaces.<sup>25</sup> Annuity tax rolls show how multi-storey buildings such as Gladstone's Land could be divided and used for multiple occupiers (and occupations), with rooms at different floors arranged into dwellings of various sizes and values, for owner-occupiers and tenants alike.<sup>26</sup>

# <INSERT FIG. 22.5 NEAR HERE>

Struggling to cope with land pressure, both Edinburgh and Venice developed comparable strategies to obtain more space, growing in height, filling in back courts and moving façades forward to encroach on public space. In Venice, the form of added storeys varied from the planned addition of living quarters in upper-class Ca' Loredan (Figure 22.6), Ca' Farsetti and Ca' da Mosto, where progressively later styles appear as the building was expanded upwards, <sup>27</sup> to the makeshift attitude of the inhabitants of the dense, popular Jewish Ghetto. Here storeys were hazardously added, larger apartments divided, cellars dug out and staircases added on frontages (*scala matta*) to create and connect more lodgings. <sup>28</sup>

### <INSERT FIG. 22.6 NEAR HERE>

In Edinburgh, upper extensions were also the norm; the (so-called) John Knox's House, still standing on the High Street, was initially a two-storey building with a projecting stair, heightened to three storeys, attic and garret in the mid-to-late sixteenth century with the addition of a separate house accessed by a spiral staircase. <sup>29</sup> Light timber structures offered the option of quickly built and informal upper extensions; dendrochronology has demonstrated that the timber-framed building surviving at 302 Lawnmarket was built upwards in precisely this way. <sup>30</sup> As an alternative, further land could be found in one's own back court. In Venice, unused ground-floor service spaces, and backyard shacks and sheds, could be improved or rebuilt and rented out as apartments or workshops, being given independent access from the side alleys. <sup>31</sup> Opening up these side entrances transformed a space previously for the private use of neighbouring land owners into space for public transit, promoting the creation of a denser urban fabric. <sup>32</sup> Similarly in Edinburgh, the closes (passages) on the sides of a plot giving access to a back enclosure became semi-public alleyways when newly built extensions, often filling the back yards and gardens, needed suitable access. <sup>33</sup>

Finally, in both Edinburgh and Venice, advancing the façade into the public space was a possible – if tightly controlled – option. In Scotland, the construction of jettied frontages was a common practice, more substantial extensions onto the street being supported by timber galleries. These galleries could later be refashioned as stone arcades, on condition that public access was maintained under their covered passage. Severe scrutiny was also applied to the construction of forestairs and turnpikes in public land, to give access to newly extended properties. <sup>34</sup> In Venice, extra space could be obtained through a *fabbricato a barbacani*, sloping outwards as it goes up and supported by wooden or stone corbels. <sup>35</sup> For more significant extensions, a *sottoportego* could be created with a house being built over the public street – here also on condition that the short arcade beneath would remain for public

use. These space-saving approaches were used across the board, from the grand portico built by Jacopo Sansovino to advance Palazzo Dolfin in 1538 to the line of the Grand Canal, to the small-scale projections paired with staircases leading to the apartments atop ground-floor workshops in modest Salizzada San Lio.<sup>36</sup>

In cities where buildings and the surrounding urban fabric could be so creatively adapted, expanded and heightened, the issues of accessibility and privacy were paramount. In a model single-property Venetian palace, the traditional central *portego* acted as a distributive common space within the suite of shared rooms, but by closing or opening doors and corridors, different combinations of rooms and properties could be arranged in case of a subdivision between cohabiting relatives, heirs or paying tenants, <sup>37</sup> connected by the repurposed processional – now communal – staircase, and by smaller service ones. Horizontally, independent accesses to the plot (main frontage, side lane, by water, by land, main stair, service staircases) guaranteed a level of independence for the different kinds of users (family members, guests, servants, tenants, customers, business partners), with the back courtyard also acting as a distributive filter. In Edinburgh, the shared turnpike staircase – encroaching onto the street, within walls, or hidden discreetly in back courtyards – helped the prodigious vertical growth, and worked in conjunction with timber galleries to facilitate ready access, and some standardisation and optimisation of space.<sup>38</sup> Where independent access was needed, additional vertical distribution would be creatively added: staircases jetting out onto the public pavement or occupying back yards, or as internal single-flight, light timber staircases granting a level of privacy from one's neighbours.<sup>39</sup> Here, also, semi-private courtyards and access lanes, hidden by the tall façades and accessible via a maze of narrow passages, provided horizontal filters and shared access for those living in the back apartments.

Both cities' development depended upon legislation compatible with flexible forms of land occupancy. Visiting Edinburgh in 1689, Englishman Thomas Morer noted that 'Most of the houses, as they are parted into divers tenements, so they have as many landlords as stories; and therefore have no dependence on one another, otherwise than as they stand on the same foundation'. 40 This might have been caused by a combination of 'scantiness of room' as suggested by Morer himself, but in itself a common phenomenon in many walled cities – and particularly stringent citizenship requirements. 41 With the requisites for citizenship shifting in time to ownership of property rather than of the whole tenement (grounds) or 'land' (confusingly enough, the building), partitioning of properties could have been a solution to the ownership needs of an increasing number of prospective citizens. 42 In Venice also, circumstances almost forced a flexible, layered understanding of property. A peculiarly Venetian form of co-ownership between cohabiting heirs – the *fraternal*, intended to preserve the family legacy and avoid fractioning the residence/business – meant in the long run complex property subdivisions between numerous loosely related kinsfolk.<sup>43</sup> Contracts dating from the twelfth century already showed how houses could be bought and sold independently from the renting or ownership of the land. 44 Also, 'proper' ownership of land and buildings was the privilege of Christian citizens, while religious minorities such as the inhabitants of the Jewish Ghetto had access only to a limited form of possession of the properties they inhabited (casaca' more hebreorum).45

In sixteenth-century Venice, mercantile expansion lost momentum, and merchants preferred the security of land investments and positions in administration and government for their sons, rather than a career in trade, now seen as old-fashioned and undignified. <sup>46</sup> The city authority created a body of statutes to control and direct private works, and to promote coherent development. <sup>47</sup> Affluent families invested in rental speculations, and in their own palaces used architecture to distance themselves from Venetian tradition, demonstrating their

modernity by incorporating elements from Florentine, Lombard and Roman Renaissance. An elegant front door would emphatically take the place of the commercial arcaded spaces of old, and the articulate façade became more restrained, less responsive to mercantile activities, shaping it from behind and more concerned with rhythmic use of architectural details. <sup>48</sup> The more comfortable style of living expected by this new class of tenants (clerks from the public administration, office workers, government officials and businessmen) drove the demand for more suitable accommodations, although in Venice charitable bodies such as the Scuole Grandi also concerned themselves with respectable but more modest developments. <sup>49</sup>

Edinburgh showed a similar scenario, as after the Union of the Crowns in 1603 the city effectively lost its royal status but became increasingly a centre of government and administration, a northern 'capital'. A new generation of lawyers, judges, civil servants and government officials expected comfortable standards of living and a uniform, respectable architectural style. 50 Existing buildings were regularised, with sober, unified ashlar fronts and ground floor arcades (piazza) of specified sizes and proportions replacing organic timber additions, and hiding irregular shop frontages. 51 An ambitious, new building-regulation system and a body of tenement laws directed the Scottish capital's architectural development, for example concerning common gables. 52 While many of the existing buildings were modernised, in both cities purpose-built accommodation also became lucrative speculations. Land limitations were overcome in Edinburgh by offering legal options to supersede existing plot boundaries, and through state-financed compulsory purchases, and in Venice through state-controlled land reclamations and the building of new embankments.<sup>53</sup> In Venice's Terreni Nuovi, a variety of living accommodations could be offered on regular allotments following centrally laid-out networks of streets and canals, with spacious apartments ingeniously interlocked to more modest ones intended for artisans and manual workers to optimise space. 54 The regular uniformity of the façade design hid the subdivision in separate

households, and intentionally recalled traditional single-property palaces. <sup>55</sup> Another resourceful combination was of two smaller main-door apartments on the ground floor flanking a larger central one, developing vertically from the *piano nobile* to the *sottotetto*, for example in San Geremia in Riello (1540s). <sup>56</sup> This was the case in Edinburgh also, where speculative developments such as Mylnes Court (1690) offered good-quality accommodation hidden behind a sober façade with uniform, regular fenestration (Figure 22.7). <sup>57</sup>

### <INSERT FIG. 22.7 NEAR HERE>

In both cities, a new vertical distribution system made this possible. In Edinburgh, broad scale-and-platt staircases with straight flights and landings made internal circulation 'more decent and easie, and rids the street of an incumrance', <sup>58</sup> while in Venice an interlocking staircase or *alla leonardesca* gave two superimposed paired apartments access from separate main doors and independent vertical circulation, making the passage from modified *casa fondaco* to standardised multi-level, multi-occupant building possible. <sup>59</sup> In both cities, modularity and optimisation of space became essential concepts, but with an emphasis on maintaining a genteel illusion of privacy and status. Edinburgh New Town itself, an upper-class, planned urbanisation to the north of the burgh begun in the 1760s, elaborated on the spatial solutions experimented with in the seventeenth-century developments, with modular flats in buildings with shared staircases behind well-organised, decorous façades mimicking unified palaces, and flats served by spinal communal staircases set neatly above ground floor, 'main-door' apartments. <sup>60</sup>

Challenged by modern free trading and by the competition of booming west-facing Glasgow, Edinburgh looked both for a role within a unified Hanoverian Britain, and to retrieve something of its lost status.<sup>61</sup> Proposing developments outside the confines of the walled burgh – the town's request for extension of the Royalty was approved in 1767 – marked the acknowledgement that Edinburgh needed to reinvent itself and its way of life to

survive in a changing world.<sup>62</sup> This was not the case for Venice, which in the same period, similarly confronted with free-trade views coming from the *terraferma* and a diminished political role as backwater of the Napoleonic and the Austrian empires, stiffened its traditional position and retreated within its geographical boundaries, ending up underpopulated and in disrepair.<sup>63</sup>

# <INSERT FIG. 22.8 NEAR HERE>

While, I argue, the urban and residential models of Edinburgh and Venice started and developed from comparable premises and along comparable lines, Edinburgh's choice in the eighteenth century to boldly step out of the waning protection of geographical and man-made boundaries placed the city on a very different course from Venice and its impractical protectionism. While *La Serenissima*'s crumbling, faded charms became a major attraction for scholarly visitors à *la* John Ruskin, and architectural experimentations and developments all but stopped, Edinburgh confronted its own *terraferma* and, armed with a successful, well-tested residential model – now a fashionable New Town tenement – tried her hand at the new game.

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