THE MAKING OF THE IDEAL TEMPLE: 
THE PAVEMENT OF THE DUOMO OF SAN MARTINO 
IN LUCCA

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INTRODUCTION

The history of the Duomo of San Martino in Lucca is one of growth and transformation. It is a kit of parts, shaped by the varied impulses of each succeeding age. In the briefest possible summation, it was a paleo-Christian basilica to which was added a Pisan-Romanesque facade, a Gothic apse and transept, and an interior furnished and articulated in the Renaissance (figs 1, 2) This “layering” of architectural elements provides a record in stone of what went on behind the scenes during the construction of the cathedral, which was carried out over several generations: construction techniques were developed and refined; political developments led to the adoption of an architecture with a Florentine rather than Pisan aesthetic; architectural tastes changed. San Martino provides us with an opportunity to compare and contrast the architectural ideas of each building phase. Most of the phases of construction may be recognized by their stylistic characteristics; the Gothic era, for example, is signalled by the pointed arches and the octagonal piers of the nave and transepts. The ornamentation and furnishings of the cathedral belong to the Renaissance. The pavement was also realized at this time. Yet in the pavement we find a contradiction: the rhythm of the pavement contradicts the rhythm of the architecture it is meant to enhance. Why would such a discordant solution have been chosen? The answer is found by reflecting on Renaissance architectural ideals.

The influence of the Renaissance in San Martino is subtle, a matter more of attitude towards the architectural creation than of style. After all, by the time Renaissance architects began their work in San Martino, they could do very little to change the style of the all-but-completed cathedral. They were nevertheless able to express their ideals through the decorative treatment of the existing architecture.

Clara Baracchini and Antonino Caleca have written that the Duomo of Lucca "is not comprehensible if not as a rethinking of that great cycle of (Gothic) architecture which arose in Florence between the second half of the Duecento and the first decades of the Trecento. . . ." Between the medieval period and the Renaissance, ideas about sacred architecture were radically revised. This involved more than architectural style; it involved fundamental ideas about what sacred space should be. At its best, in every age, sacred architecture not only provides a place where a religious experience takes place, but shapes that experience as well. The furnishings of San Martino are indicative of a particular philosophy of architecture as a sacred medium: the architecture is no longer merely a theatre for religious celebrations but is itself a metaphor for the universe created by God.