



Brunelleschi's Dome: How a Renaissance Genius Reinvented Architecture

By Ross King

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On August 19, 1418, a competition concerning Florence's magnificent new cathedral, Santa Maria del Fiore--already under construction for more than a century--was announced: "Whoever desires to make any model or design for the vaulting of the main Dome....shall do so before the end of the month of September." The proposed dome was regarded far and wide as all but impossible to build: not only would it be enormous, but its original and sacrosanct design shunned the flying buttresses that supported cathedrals all over Europe. The dome would literally need to be erected over thin air.

Of the many plans submitted, one stood out--a daring and unorthodox solution to vaulting what is still the largest dome (143 feet in diameter) in the world. It was offered not by a master mason or carpenter, but by a goldsmith and clockmaker named Filippo Brunelleschi, then forty-one, who would dedicate the next twenty-eight years to solving the puzzles of the dome's construction. In the process, he did nothing less than reinvent the field of architecture.

Brunelleschi's Dome is the story of how a Renaissance genius bent men, materials, and the very forces of nature to build an architectural wonder we continue to marvel at today. Denounced at first as a madman, Brunelleschi was celebrated at the end as a genius. He engineered the perfect placement of brick and stone, built ingenious hoists and cranes (among some of the most renowned machines of the Renaissance) to carry an estimated 70 million pounds hundreds of feet into the air, and designed the workers' platforms and routines so carefully that only one man died during the decades of construction--all the while defying those who said the dome would surely collapse and his own personal obstacles that at times threatened to overwhelm him. This drama was played out amid plagues, wars, political feuds, and the intellectual ferments of Renaissance Florence-- events Ross King weaves into the story to great effect, from Brunelleschi's bitter, ongoing rivalry with the sculptor Lorenzo Ghiberti to the near capture of Florence by the Duke of Milan. King also offers a wealth of fascinating detail that opens windows onto fifteenth-century life: the celebrated traditions of the brickmaker's art, the daily routine of the artisans laboring hundreds of feet above the ground as the dome grew ever higher, the problems of

transportation, the power of the guilds.

Even today, in an age of soaring skyscrapers, the cathedral dome of Santa Maria del Fiore retains a rare power to astonish. Ross King brings its creation to life in a fifteenth-century chronicle with twenty-first-century resonance.

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Editorial Review

Amazon.com Review

Filippo Brunelleschi's design for the dome of the cathedral of Santa Maria del Fiore in Florence remains one of the most towering achievements of Renaissance architecture. Completed in 1436, the dome remains a remarkable feat of design and engineering. Its span of more than 140 feet exceeds St Paul's in London and St Peter's in Rome, and even outdoes the Capitol in Washington, D.C., making it the largest dome ever constructed using bricks and mortar. The story of its creation and its brilliant but "hot-tempered" creator is told in Ross King's delightful *Brunelleschi's Dome*.

Both dome and architect offer King plenty of rich material. The story of the dome goes back to 1296, when work began on the cathedral, but it was only in 1420, when Brunelleschi won a competition over his bitter rival Lorenzo Ghiberti to design the daunting cupola, that work began in earnest. King weaves an engrossing tale from the political intrigue, personal jealousies, dramatic setbacks, and sheer inventive brilliance that led to the paranoid Filippo, "who was so proud of his inventions and so fearful of plagiarism," finally seeing his dome completed only months before his death. King argues that it was Brunelleschi's improvised brilliance in solving the problem of suspending the enormous cupola in bricks and mortar (painstakingly detailed with precise illustrations) that led him to "succeed in performing an engineering feat whose structural daring was without parallel." He tells a compelling, informed story, ranging from discussions of the construction of the bricks, mortar, and marble that made up the dome, to its subsequent use as a scientific instrument by the Florentine astronomer Paolo Toscanelli. --Jerry Brotton, *Amazon.co.uk*

From Publishers Weekly

Walker was the hardcover publisher of Dava Sobel's sleeper smash, *Longitude*, and Mark Kurlansky's steady-seller *Cod: A Biography of the Fish that Changed the World*. This brief, secondary source-based account is clearly aimed at the same lay science-cum-adventure readership. British novelist King (previously unpublished in the U.S.) compiles an elementary introduction to the story of how and why Renaissance Italian architect Filippo Brunelleschi (1377-1446) designed and oversaw the construction of the enormous dome of Florence's Santa Maria del Fiore cathedral. Designing its curves so that they needed no supporting framework during construction: a major Renaissance architectural innovation. Illustrated with 26 b&w period prints, the book contains 19 chapters, some very brief. Although the result is fast moving and accessible, King overdoes the simplicity to the point that the book appears unwittingly as if it was intended for young adults. (Donatello, Leonardo and Michelangelo, for example, "took a dim view of marriage and women.") This book feels miles away from its actual characters, lacking the kind of dramatic flourish that would bring it fully to life. Despite direct quotes from letters and period accounts, the "would have," "may have" and "must have" sentences pile up. Still, the focus on the dome, its attendant social and architectural problems, and the solutions improvised by Brunelleschi provide enough inherent tension to carry readers along. (Oct. 23)

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From [Booklist](#)

Like the poetry of Petrarch or the artistry of Giotto, the architecture of Filippo Brunelleschi radiates the talent of a Renaissance genius. King illuminates the mysterious sources of inspiration and the secretive methods of this architectural genius in a fascinating chronicle of the building of his masterwork, the dome of Santa Maria del Fiore. Unsurpassed by St. Peter's in Rome or St. Paul's in London, Filippo's sublime dome required an imaginative leap in its conception and a stubborn relentlessness in its execution. King details

how Filippo waged and won his 28-year battle to raise the magnificent structure, surmounting every technical, political, and artistic obstacle. And just as his dome created a visual focus for the city of Florence, his exploits in building it wove together numerous strands of municipal history--war, disease, intrigue, commerce--making one glorious narrative cord. King demonstrates a remarkable range, explaining everything from how Filippo engineered the hoists for raising stone to why the masons working on the dome drank diluted wine, but he always brings us back to the one incandescent mind performing the one matchless feat that would forever transform architecture from a mechanical craft into a creative art. *Bryce Christensen*
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Margaret Burton:

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Phyllis Greenfield:

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