The Art of Building, Or the Building Of Art?

by Witold Rybczynski

> On the corner of La Huerta Road was a miniature Rhine castle with tarpaper turrets pierced for archers. Next to it was a highly colored shack with domes and minarets out of the Arabian Nights. Again he was charitable. Both houses were comic, but he didn't laugh. Their desire to startle was so eager and guileless.
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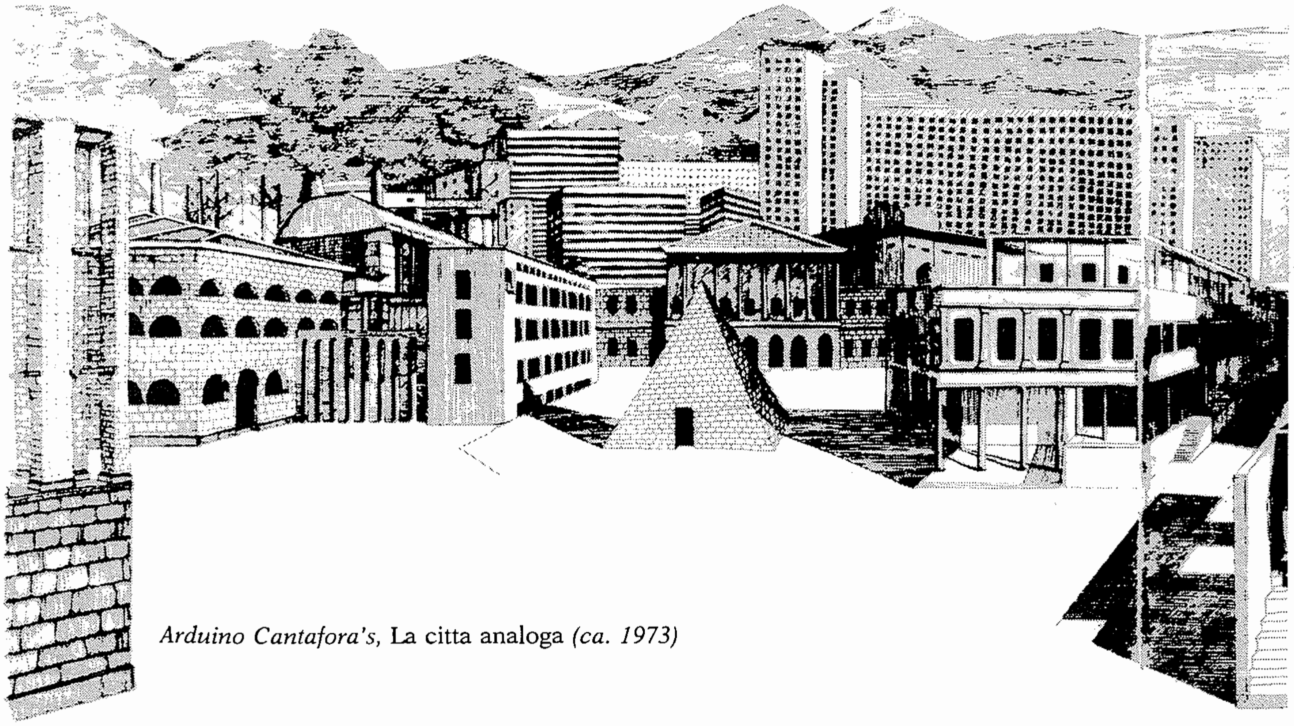
> It is hard to laugh at the need for beauty and romance, no matter how tasteless, even horrible, the results of that are. But it is easy to sigh. Few things are sadder than the truly monstrous. —Nathanael West, *The Day of The Locust*



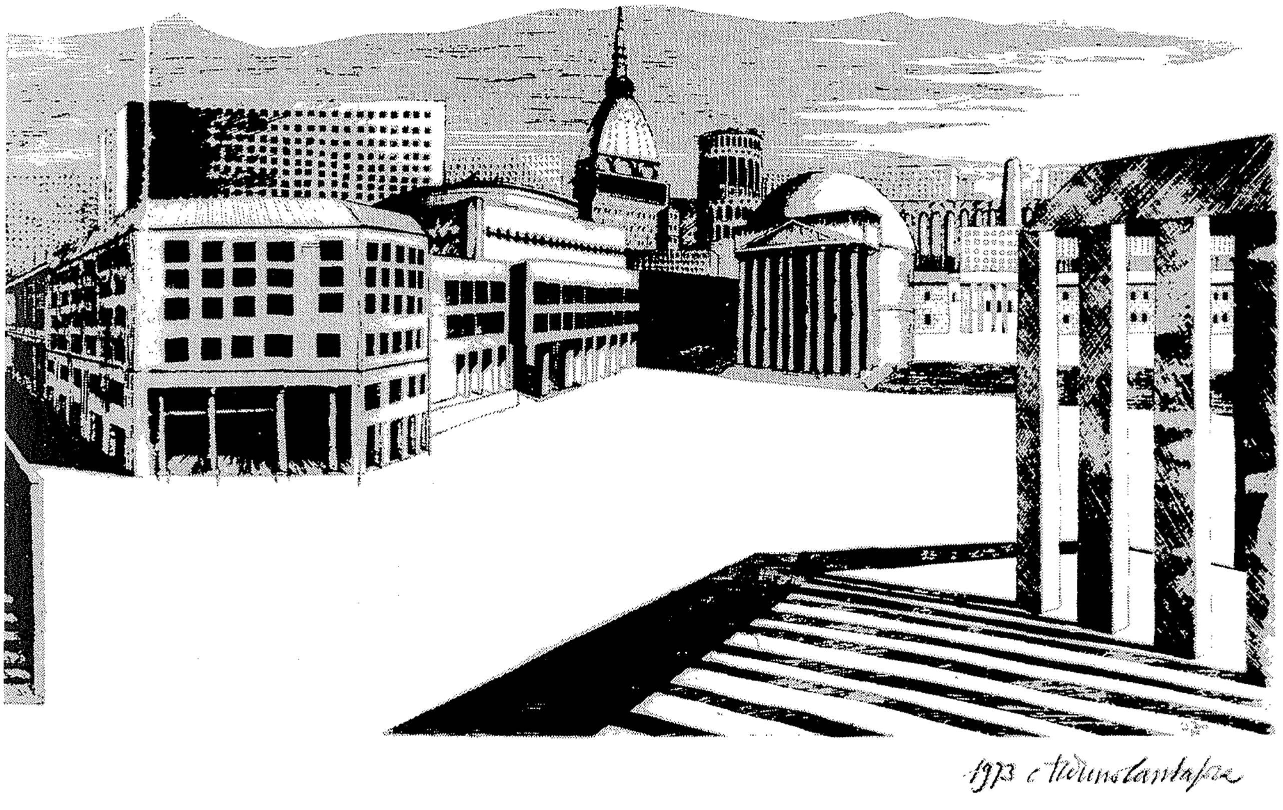
Arduino Cantafora's, La citta analoga *(ca. 1973)*

La città analoga, 26/30

The title of this essay poses a question that would have been unthinkable 90 years ago—or even, for different reasons, 30 years ago. At both of those moments in our century, architects and their patrons agreed about what constituted good architecture. This is no longer the case.

Perhaps I feel this lack of agreement more acutely because I teach in a school of architecture, and at McGill University, as at all schools in North America, there is no longer an accepted canon of architectural principles. Instead, a multitude of contradictory intellectual positions jostle for primacy. This disarray is evidenced, first of all, in the content of the courses. Until 1941, architectural teaching at McGill was influenced by ideas from Britain, chiefly Scotland. The school was founded in 1896 by Stewart Capper, who, although an Englishman, was educated and trained in Edinburgh, where he lived and worked before immigrating to Montreal. The next two directors, Percy Nobbs and Ramsay Traquair, were both Scots and brought with them an approach based largely on the Scottish Arts and Crafts movement. They also inculcated the school with a curiously Scottish mixture of romanticism and pragmatism. Architecture was taught as a discipline founded on historical examples, responding to local conditions (such as a rigorous climate, which Montreal shares with Edinburgh), and requiring the learning of particular skills, especially sketching, drawing, and modeling.

After 1941, under the leadership of John Bland, a Canadian, the course was modified to stress functional requirements, modern construction techniques, and a modernist aesthetic. The new curriculum loosely followed the lines of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's 1937 program at the Illinois Institute of Technology. Regarding his teaching goals, Mies wrote: "It is the business of education to implant insight and responsibility. It must turn irresponsible opinion into responsible judgment and lead from chance and arbitrariness to the rational lucidity of an intellectual order." The emphasis at Mies's school was on understanding construction and building materi-



als, studying functions, and learning how to integrate these to produce complete architectural forms. Courses were organized sequentially to bring the student slowly to the realization, first, of what was possible, second, of what was necessary, and finally, of what was significant.

Both the Arts and Crafts and Miesian approaches represented an integrated, comprehensive method of teaching architecture whose basic assumptions were shared by the staff. The widely varying content of courses in architecture schools today is a function of how different professors interpret the subject. In rapid, bewildering succession, a student is taught that buildings should represent their function; that buildings are really personal essays in which function plays a secondary role; that the responsibility of the architect is to respond to the needs of the client; that the duty of the architect is to challenge societal values; and that commercial concerns or user preferences must be ignored if the purity of the architectural ideal is to be maintained. One teacher sets a problem in which students are required to explore a specific historical style; another denounces any historical references as mere pastiche. It is difficult to teach students about housing, as I have tried to do, when they have been told in another class that housing is not the proper concern of an architect—indeed, that housing is not really architecture at all.

This confusion is reflected in the work that students do for their final projects. The final project represents a long tradition in architectural education. At the end of the program, the student is asked to design a building of his or her own choosing. It is an opportunity for students to demonstrate the skills they have acquired in the previous three-and-a-half years. It can also be considered the architectural equivalent of the free program in figure skating: After many imposed exercises, students are let loose to strut their stuff.

Students' choices tend to mirror the concerns of the moment. During the early 1960s, when social issues were paramount, the final project was usually an ambitious housing development. In the late 1960s, there were a lot of idealistic projects for low-income housing, community centers, and small-scale neighborhood infill. Revolutionary rhetoric replaced traditional architectural discourse, and discussion concerned sociology rather than construction. The 1970s, in reaction to this radicalism, saw a revival of interest in architectural history and in the design of traditional types of buildings, such as city halls, libraries, and museums. Beautifully rendered drawings, up to Beaux-Arts standards, made a comeback.

The hallmark of the 1980s was an intense individualism. What is striking is the way in which this impulse asserted itself architecturally. Buildings with strict functional requirements, such as houses and apartment buildings, office buildings, factories, schools, and hospitals, were rarely undertaken as final projects. Even at McGill's conservative School of Architecture, students were encouraged to explore problems that incorporated a large emotive component. This resulted in a rash of exhibition pavilions, opera houses, and churches, and such esoteric buildings as monasteries, cemeteries, and monuments. Some ventured even farther afield: a hospice, a meditation center, a museum of ecology, and a floating theater. Not only were projects imaginative, but they were often imaginary: "A Church for a New Religion" or "An Airship Terminal." I think that students were attracted to such unusual buildings because their functional requirements were marginal—sometimes nonexistent. This allowed the tyro to deal with what was increasingly seen as purely architectural concerns.

And what were these concerns? Above all, self-expression, the individuality of the designer. The users of the building and the client were scarcely mentioned. Such personal expression in a building manifested

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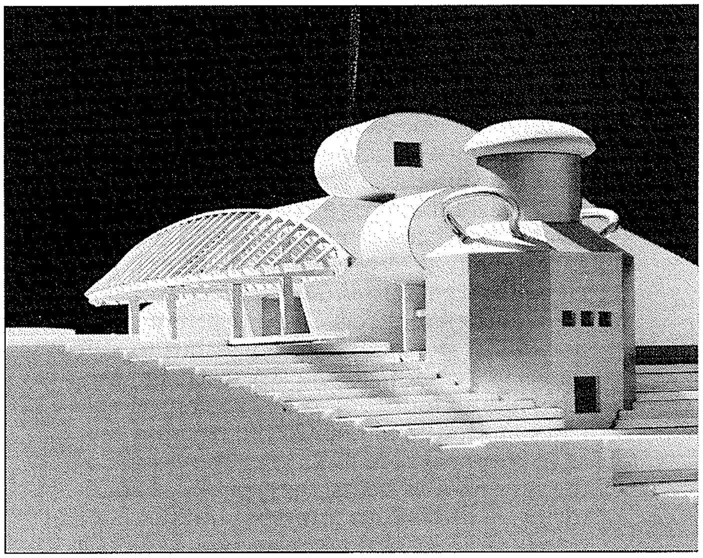
itself chiefly in the creation of unusual forms. One student produced an odd-looking office building that turned out to be based on television components—tubes, circuitry, speakers—that had been copied from a manufacturer's repair manual. The bits and pieces were greatly enlarged and assigned building functions. The student's rationale for this appropriation was that the project would house the Canadian Broadcasting Corporation. Another memorable project involved a center for political retreats—a sort of grandiose Meech Lake—whose form was derived from an interpretation of Pliny the Younger's description of his seaside villa at Laurentum.

The 1990s promise a continuation of this self-indulgence. There is no longer any consensus among students or teachers on what the societal role of architecture is—or indeed that it has one. There is no general agreement on whether the responsibility of the architect is to the community, to the users of the building, to the client, or merely to himself. There are no more universally accepted rules for the making of buildings, which is why I would say that, at least in the traditional sense, there is no more teaching.

Am I perhaps exaggerating? Is this a simple case of a middle-aged professor's burnout? Or maybe this architectural ferment is a temporary outbreak of youthful exuberance and delayed adolescent rebellion, students sowing architectural wild oats before getting down to the serious business of a professional career. In any case, one would like to think, the general public need not be concerned about the confused state of architectural education. That is the concern of teachers. But what if the academy mirrors the state of architecture in the outside world?

To answer this question, let me describe my own outside world, the campus of McGill University, with its rich heritage of late-19th-century architecture. The first building—the original McGill College, now the Arts Building—with its Doric porch and central position on the main axis of the campus, is still the most recognizable McGill landmark; its cupola appears on the credit card I carry in my wallet. Built in 1865, it was for many years the only building on campus.


Postmodern playfulness characterizes Frank O. Gehry's design, Camp Good Times. But do wit and whimsy make for satisfying architecture?

Radiating from this center, and embracing the campus green like two extended arms, is a magnificent series of limestone buildings, most of which were built between 1890 and 1910. On the east side the styles are a mixture of Scottish Arts and Crafts and neo-Romanesque, the latter derived from the great American architect of that moment, H. H. Richardson, and his disciple Bruce Price, then active in Montreal building Windsor Station and McGill's Royal Victoria College. Like Price's work, the McGill buildings are picturesque compositions with arched windows, circular towers, and steep roofs topped with gables, dormers, and clusters of chimneys. They include Andrew Taylor's Chemistry Building (which now houses the School of Architecture) and his Physics Building, as well as Percy Nobbs's Engineering Building. On the west side there is a greater variety of styles. The Redpath Museum is a classical shed with a pedimented front designed by Hitchinson and Steele. Then there is J. J. Browne's neo-Gothic Presbyterian College, followed by the medieval-looking Redpath Library—Taylor again—which contains the splendid hammer-beamed hall that now serves as the chief assembly space of the university.

Unlike Princeton, whose campus buildings display a largely consistent neo-Gothic style, McGill chose variety in the architecture of its buildings. Nevertheless, in hindsight it becomes clear that the diversity of styles did not represent a divergence of views on what constituted correct architecture. These architects chose different styles not out of personal willfulness but to suit different programs. The Presbyterian College, like all four Protestant theological colleges at McGill, is neo-Gothic because that style is appropriate to its use. The facade of the museum, as befits a repository of antiquities, exhibits an unusual mixture of Greek, Roman, and Egyptian motifs. Nobbs gave the Engineering Building a robust, masculine appearance, fitting its practical mission. His Student Union is a more elegant and urbane building, patterned on a London men's club, at that time an appropriate model for a student center.

Since the construction of those buildings, much has been added to McGill. There are flat-faced stone-and-glass boxes from the 1950s and busy precast-concrete compositions from the '70s. Most universities have at least one circular building; the one at McGill houses the medical sciences. Students reside in three Corbusier-like slabs abutting Mount Royal. A recently completed bookstore incorporates trendy pinnacles and round windows.

None of these newer buildings measures up to the more substantial products of the initial burst of building activity. The limestone blocks of the older buildings appear as solid as the mountain in the background; by contrast, the more recent additions seem flimsy, tentative, almost temporary. The older buildings also welcome the people who use them. The Victorian and Edwardian architects incorporated outdoor steps, which not only provide a special sense of entrance but also serve in summer as convenient lounging places. By contrast, the new buildings are entered without ceremony, through prosaic lobbies with suspended ceilings of acoustic tile. Taylor and Nobbs adorned their buildings with evocative figures and mottoes; the new architecture adheres to the abstract geometry of international modernism.*

The change that took place on the McGill campus is by no means unique. In *India: A Million Mutinies Now* (1990), V. S. Naipaul describes a similar decline in the quality of an entire nation's architecture:

> Indians have been building in free India for 40 years, and what has been put up in that time makes it easier to look at what went before. In free India Indians have built like people without a tradition; they have for the most part done mechanical, surface imitations of the international style. What is not easy to understand is that, unlike the British, Indians have not really built for the Indian climate. They have been too obsessed with imitating the modern; and much of what has been done in this way—the dull, four-square towers of Bombay, packed far too close together; the concrete nonentity of Lucknow and Madras and the residential colonies of New Delhi—can only make hard tropical lives harder and hotter.
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> Far from extending people's ideas of beauty and grandeur and human possibility—uplifting ideas which very poor people may need more than rich people—much of the architecture of free India has

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*A curious footnote: My own department recently moved from a building constructed in 1958 to one completed in 1896. There had been minimal renovation of the mechanical and electrical systems, but the original building was little changed. Both staff and students agree that our new home is vastly superior to our old one—in spite of the fact that the bland 1958 building was designed expressly as a school of architecture and our present quarters were planned for the Department of Chemistry.

> become part of the ugliness and crowd and increasing physical oppression of India. Bad architecture in a poor tropical city is more than an aesthetic matter. It spoils people's day-to-day lives; it wears down their nerves; it generates rages that can flow into many different channels.
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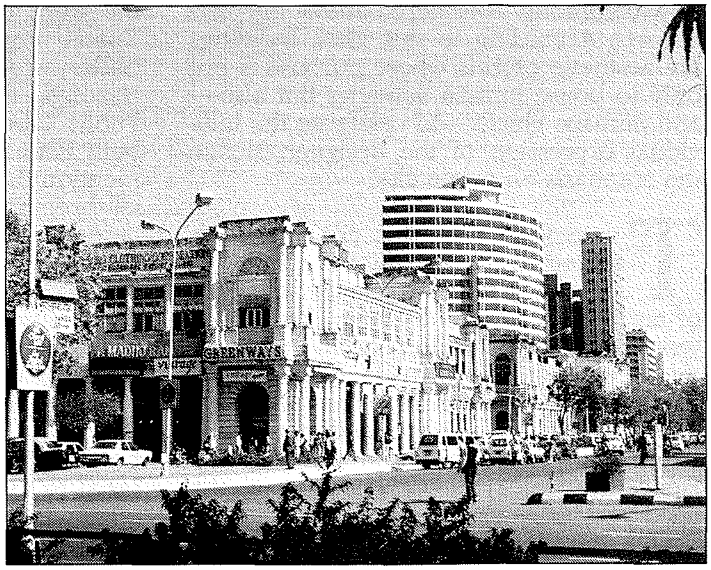
> This Indian architecture, more disdainful of the people it serves than British Indian architecture ever was, now makes the most matter-of-fact Public Works Department bungalow of the British time seem like a complete architectural thought. And if one goes on from there, and considers the range of British building in India, the time span, the varied styles of those two centuries, the developing functions (railway stations, the Victoria Memorial in Calcutta, the Gateway of India in Bombay, the legislative buildings of Lucknow and New Delhi), it becomes obvious that British Indian architecture—which can so easily be taken for granted—is the finest secular architecture in the sub-continent.

There is a curious parallel between Naipaul's observation that the buildings by British architects in India were superior to those the Indians would build themselves and the contrast between the first buildings at McGill and what followed. Despite their short acquaintance with Canada, the Scots Andrew Taylor and Percy Nobbs produced better work than their native-born descendants. By better I mean not only more appealing, more comfortable, and more humane buildings but structures that paradoxically are more at home—more characteristically Canadian.

I am not arguing here that the British Victorians in Canada or India had an innate architectural talent that their colonial subjects lacked. Rather, their approach was responsive to their new environment and produced successful architecture.

The architectural successes and failures at McGill could stand as a microcosm of similar failures in our cities and towns. I have always thought that the present strength of the heritage movement across the continent results at least partly from the public's disaffection with contemporary architecture. The unspoken argument of many conservationists is that all new building should be resisted on the grounds that the new inevitably will be a poor substitute for the old.



In New Delhi, architectural legacies of the British Raj once created a pleasing urban ambience, but it has been destroyed by the looming presence of characterless post-independence structures.

I believe that this skepticism is related to another issue. One of the greatest architectural shortcomings of our cities today is the apparent inability of contemporary architects to produce large numbers of unassuming but satisfying buildings to form the backdrop for the occasional important monument. We need good background buildings, but who wants to design them? (Judged by their high-flying final projects, not the current generation of students.) Everybody wants to be a star. Is this a product of the individualism of the 1980s? A result of the celebrity that some architects now enjoy? Or is it the result of the way in which architects—and their clients—think about buildings?

The leading American journal, *Progressive Architecture*, publishes an annual issue featuring outstanding houses. It is interesting to see how the houses are presented. In many cases the rooms are empty, photographed before the owners have moved in and spoiled the architect's design. In other illustrations, the furniture is so studiously arranged that the effect is even more bizarre. The absence of the slightest sign of the owners' personalities makes these interiors appear uninhabited. In a house designed by Richard Meier for a couple with an extensive collection of art and craft objects, the caption notes that because the architect did not approve every artifact in the collection, some pieces were temporarily removed when the photographs were taken. Le Corbusier's famous statement that "life always has the last word" appears quaint and old-fashioned in this context.

In the same issue of the magazine is an interview with the noted Italian architect and industrial designer Ettore Sottsass, best known as one of the founders of the Memphis group. Sottsass describes a resort village he is designing in Colorado. The houses were to be bought, he says, "not as speculation houses, but the way you buy a painting, or a sculpture."

Leaving aside the issue of whether or not paintings and sculptures are bought precisely for speculation, Sottsass's characterization is a reminder that architecture is now commonly considered one of the plastic arts. According to this view, buildings are aesthetic objects whose purpose is not only to house human activities but also—and perhaps chiefly—to celebrate the individual expression of the designer. Hence the emphasis on originality.

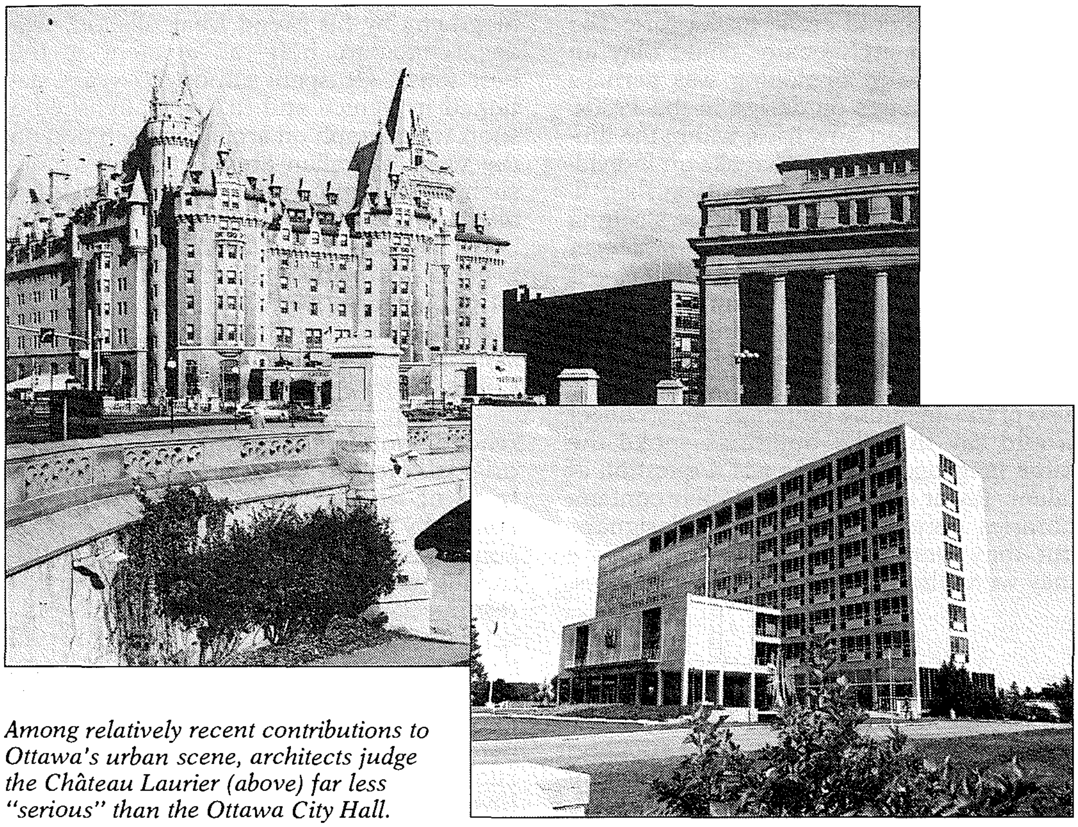
To explain how this concept infiltrated architectural thought, it is necessary to underline the influence of art history on architecture. Art history was traditionally the study of all important art. In the case of architecture, it was easy enough to identify the important buildings: They were those built by the important institutions, the church and the nobility. Hence the history of architecture was the history of religious buildings and palaces.

The number of such buildings was relatively small, as was the number of architects. In the late 18th century, growing prosperity made architecture accessible to many more clients, and the range of buildings that architects designed expanded with the size of the profession. Beyond churches and grand houses, architects were being commissioned for public buildings such as hospitals, prisons, libraries, and museums. They were also designing factories and even farm buildings. That is to say, the work of architects now included buildings whose monumental and symbolic role was often secondary, or even nonexistent.

This was all very well for the profession, but it complicated the work of the art historians. Not only was the sheer quantity of buildings increased, but aesthetic and theoretical concerns were often superseded by engineering and commercial considerations. It was no longer clear which buildings were important, and the art historian's role changed accordingly: He was required to be not only an observer and a chronicler of the past but also a critic.

As in the plastic arts, the identity of the artist who created the work determined the canon. The study of architecture could now be described not as the study of all important buildings but as the study of the work of a relatively small number of important architects. Who were the important architects? Naturally, those whose work accorded with the art historian's values. Hence the modernist historians' disdain for the work of eclectic architects like John Russell Pope, who designed the National Gallery of Art in Washington, D.C.; Thomas Hastings, the architect of the New York Public Library; and Charles McKim, who built Pennsylvania Station in New York. I mention these particular buildings because all three house, or housed, important institutions and are major urban landmarks, successful in their function, much beloved by the people who frequent them. But none was considered a work of art in the modernist sense, and consequently all were ignored by modern art historians.

Here begins the disparity between the buildings that made the greatest impression on the public and those that were recognized as "serious" architecture by historians and critics. The Ottawa City Hall, for example, was acclaimed because it adhered to the modernist dictum; the nearby Château Laurier, a much better example of sensitive and clever urban design, was dismissed as unimportant because it was in a



Among relatively recent contributions to Ottawa's urban scene, architects judge the Château Laurier (above) far less "serious" than the Ottawa City Hall.

historical style.

The 19th-century art historian described the past as a succession of styles (Romanesque, Gothic, Renaissance), and modern architectural criticism has adapted that approach. Hence we have modernism followed by late modernism, postmodernism, deconstructivism, and so on. Since the identification of styles is based chiefly on the visual attributes of buildings, it follows that buildings are studied as isolated objects. Not surprisingly, the three buildings identified as masterpieces of modernist architecture—Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye, Wright's Fallingwater, and Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House—are all isolated houses in country settings. Each can be appreciated without reference to anything except the surrounding landscape.

Because they played an important role in the evolution of architecture, art historians have had a significant influence on contemporary architectural theory. Nikolaus Pevsner, Henry-Russell Hitchcock, and Siegfried Giedion were the advance men of the modern movement. They became propagandists, establishing the intellectual pedigree of the new ideas in architecture. Books such as Pevsner's *Pioneers of Modern Design* (1936) and Giedion's *Space, Time and Architecture* (1941) became de facto who's whos of the new architecture. The exhibition on the International Style organized by Hitchcock and Philip Johnson at the Museum of Modern Art in 1932 played a similar accrediting role.

Just as in contemporary painting and sculpture, critics were interested in the avant-garde. Hence the focus on originality, on the shocking and the new, the risqué and the unusual. Books and exhibitions also stressed the visual aspects of architecture at the expense of issues such as function, clients' needs, and the relationship of buildings to their surroundings.

More recently, architecture has been taken with its own glamour. In an increasingly visual culture, it is not surprising that architecture should come to the fore. The discovery that architecture could play an important role in marketing was perhaps the chief influence on design in the 1980s.

Each architect now tries, within the limits of budget and talent, to make an individual statement. Like the students in their final projects, professionals, too, are strutting their stuff, and the urban result—whatever the merits of the individual buildings—is chaotic and muddled. By contrast, the Victorian and Edwardian buildings at McGill exhibit a sense of compatibility. Their architects were respectful of the occupants, and also of the adjoining buildings. An architect would say that the buildings spoke the same language. This was not a question of talent. Taylor and Nobbs and their contemporaries certainly were gifted designers, but they were better architects because they were playing the game by better rules.

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In 1989 I was invited to talk about my book, *The Most Beautiful House in the World*, on a public television program hosted by Lewis Lapham, the editor of *Harper's* magazine. At one point Lapham turned and asked me a blunt question: "Is architecture an art?" Most of my mumbled and inadequate answer mercifully was edited from the final program. Later, reflecting on what I had said—or, rather, not said—I tried to understand why the straightforward question should have rattled me.

Webster defines *art* as creative work—which architecture certainly is—and distinguishes the "fine arts" from the merely useful on the basis of their aesthetic purpose; moreover, the dictionary specifically mentions architecture as an example of a fine art. Herbert Spencer listed architecture with sculpture, painting, music, and poetry as a mark of civilized life. And Goethe called architecture frozen music. Hence the simple answer to Lapham's question is: "Of course architecture is an art."

One of the oldest definitions of architecture was introduced to the English language by Sir Henry Wotton, a 17th-century English diplomat. Wotton, who is remembered as an angler and as the subject of a biography by his friend Izaak Walton, was an architecture buff—an amateur in the best sense. He spent almost 20 years stationed in Venice and in 1624 published a short monograph on architecture, based on the work of Italian architects and writers such as Giorgio Vasari, Andrea Palladio, and Leon Battista Alberti. Wotton called his book *The Elements of Architecture*, and he began it as follows: "In Architecture as in all other Operative Arts, the end must direct the Operation. The end is to build well. Well building has three conditions. Commoditie, Firmeness and Delight."

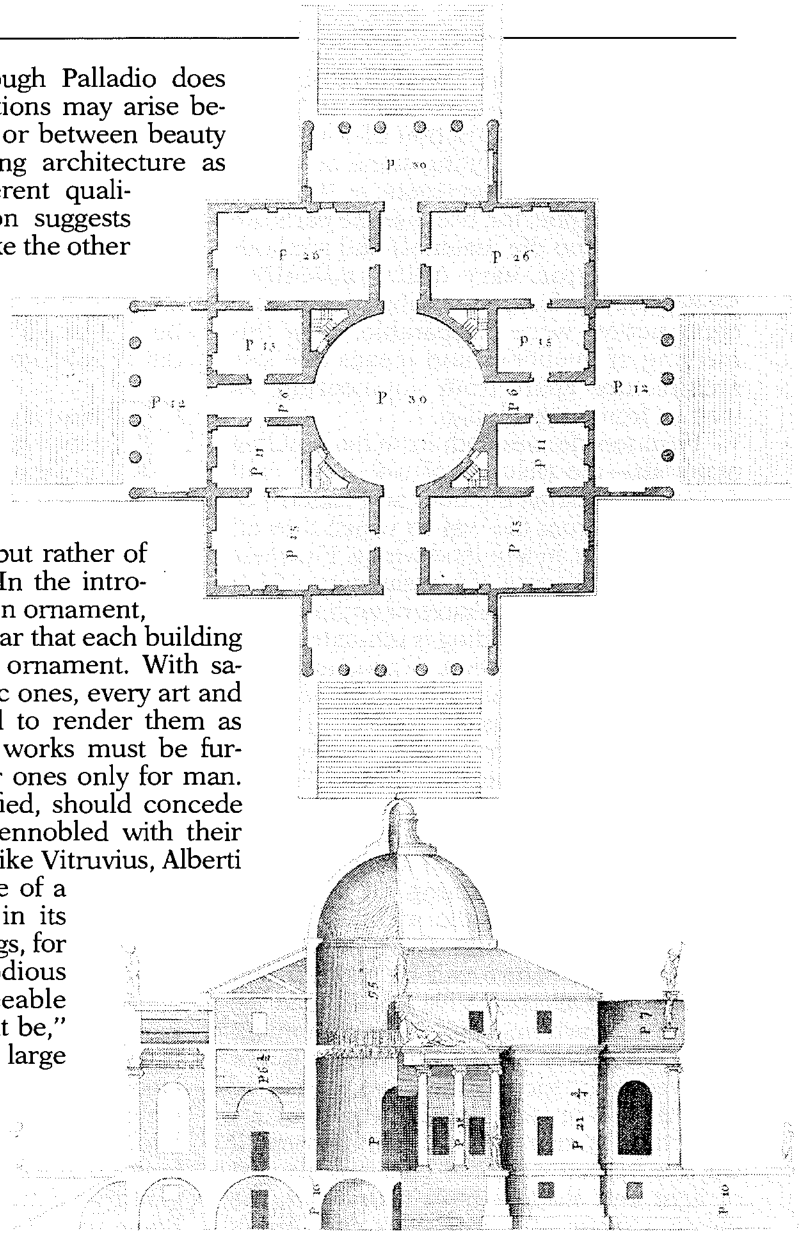
Though novel to an English-speaking reader, Wotton's description was hardly original. He was paraphrasing the famous triad of *utilitas*, *firmitas*, and *venustas* coined by the Roman architect Vitruvius. A contemporary of the emperor Augustus, Vitruvius wrote a treatise on architecture that resurfaced in the 15th century—the only survivor of its kind. *Utilitas*, *firmitas*, and *venustas* showed up in the books of Alberti, written in the middle of the 15th century, and of Palladio, who published his influential work in 1570; Wotton wrote 54 years later. By the time my professor, Peter Collins, taught me about *utilitas-firmitas-venustas*, the concept was almost 2,000 years old.

I think two aspects of Vitruvius's definition of architecture explain its durability. The Vitruvian triad describes the complex nature of architecture. *Venustas*—delight or beauty—deals with aesthetics and situates architecture with the fine arts. *Utilitas* and *firmitas*—commodity and firmness—concern practical issues and suggest that building might be, despite its dictionary definition, described as one of the useful arts.

The second implication of the triad is often overlooked. Palladio is adamant that the three attributes are inseparable. He does not say that beauty will follow automatically from functional design or economic structure, as many modernists claimed. Nor does he say that one can forgive beautiful buildings a lack of utility—or beautiful chairs a lack of comfort, as Philip Johnson once suggested. Palladio is unequivocal: Perfection can be achieved only when a building combines all three elements of the Vitruvian triad.

One can surmise, although Palladio does not say this, that contradictions may arise between function and beauty, or between beauty and structure. By describing architecture as combining three very different qualities, the Vitruvian definition suggests that the art of building, unlike the other fine arts, is always an art of compromise. The questions of judgment and balance become central.

Both Alberti and Palladio recognized that a building's function directly affects its design. This was not a question of form following function but rather of form recognizing purpose. In the introduction to his eighth book, on ornament, Alberti noted: "It is quite clear that each building does not require the same ornament. With sacred works, especially public ones, every art and industry must be employed to render them as ornate as possible: Sacred works must be furnished for the gods, secular ones only for man. The latter, being less dignified, should concede to the former, yet still be ennobled with their own details of ornament." Like Vitruvius, Alberti maintained that the purpose of a building should be visible in its design. Large public buildings, for example, required commodious interiors. "What a disagreeable and unseemly thing would it be," wrote Palladio, "if in a very large building there should be small halls and rooms; and, on the contrary, in a little one, there should be two or three rooms that took up the whole."



Andrea Palladio's Villa Rotonda.

Decorum was essential to these Renaissance architects. A palace should look—and feel—like a palace; a church, like a church. A villa should not resemble a town hall. The former signified privacy and domesticity, the latter, civic pride and monumentality.

The difficulty for an architect today who wishes to design grand civic buildings is that monumentality has lost its ability to impress; imposing facades are just as likely to appear on boutiques and weekend cottages as on courthouses. Blame for this goes to the client as well as to the architect. If you pay extra for a pair of Calvin Klein jeans, you want people to notice. If you pay extra—and you do—for a Richard Meier or an Arata Isozaki, you want a building that will stand out.

Firmness, Vitruvius's second attribute of architecture, calls for great skill. As Alberti observed: "The construction of a building does not just entail setting stone on stone, and aggregate upon aggregate, as the ignorant may imagine; for, because the parts are different, so too the materials and methods of construction vary quite radically." Alberti took it for granted that design and construction were inseparable. It is this merging of intentions and means that sets architecture apart from engineering, as well as from stage design.

Firmness derives both from the building materials—the richness of wood, the cold precision of metal, the hues and textures of stone—and from the way in which they all come together in a unified whole. Firmness also conveys a sense of permanence, which is one of the chief pleasures of architecture.

The form of a building is intimately concerned with construction. A good architect is above all a builder; a bad architect designs first and then asks, "How am I going to build this?" When the link between design and construction is broken, as it is in so many modern buildings, architecture is the loser, and architects are cast adrift, searching for inspiration in history, philosophy, sculpture, and painting.

The concern that the architect shares with the artist is beauty. There is no question that architecture can be sublime. My first sight of Palladio's Villa Rotonda, in the haze of an early morning, was a moment that I will never forget. But beauty is not reserved only for masterpieces. It is—or should be—present in all works of architecture. It manifests itself in many small ways: a framed view, the changing pattern of light and shadow on a stone wall, the pleasing shape of a roof silhouette. Architectural beauty—perhaps delight is a better word—often has an everyday quality that is undramatic but precious.

Decorum demands that the architect be master of many aesthetics: the tragedy of Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial in Washington, D.C.; the heroism of Lutyens's Viceroy's House in New Delhi; the chaste beauty of Labrouste's Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève in Paris; or the modest charm of a country house. A mastery of scale is also essential. A wonderful explanation of the relationship between beauty and scale is attributed to the Italian architect Carlo Scarpa: "If you are making a corridor that is 20 feet wide, you can make it out of concrete; if it is 10 feet wide, you should use stone; if it is six feet wide, use fine wood; but if it is two feet wide, you should make it out of solid gold."

There is a final way in which the art of building differs from the fine arts. Buildings are attached to particular places. They must respond to topography and climate, and also to their position in architectural settings. Photographs in architecture magazines and books may block out these settings, but it is only a temporary ruse. For the architect-builder, the context is always a challenge, and sometimes an inspiration. For the artist-builder context is a constraint, an inconvenience, or, at best, a mere backdrop. The reader can judge which approach is likely to produce a more satisfying environment.

Suggesting a return to the Vitruvian ideal could be described as reactionary. The historian John Lukacs, in his wonderful memoir *Confessions of an Original Sinner*, has provided a marvelous definition of the reactionary: "A reactionary considers character but distrusts publicity... he favors conservation rather than conservatism; he favors the ancient blessings of the land and is dubious about the results of technology; he believes in history, not in Evolution.... A reactionary will recognize how, contrary to Victor Hugo's hoary 19th-century cliché, An Idea Whose Time Has Come may not be any good."

The idea that architecture consists of the building of art has produced a multitude of idiosyncratic and startlingly original work; it has made architecture glamorous. But the lifting of traditional constraints has also resulted in an ephemeral freedom that has not produced better architects, better buildings, or better cities. We desperately need all three.

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