

The Contrary Value of The Riddle, The Subjunctive, The Mannered Lessons on Architectural Resistance from Genoa and Italy

MATTHEW H. RICE
Clemson University

Michel Foucault opens the Preface of *The Order of Things* with a description of his response to Borge's taxonomy of animals found in a "certain Chinese Encyclopedia" . . . (a) belonging to the Emperor, (b) embalmed, (c) tame, (d) sucking pigs, (e) sirens, (f) fabulous, (g) stray dogs, In the wonderment of this taxonomy, the thing we apprehend in one great leap, the thing that, by means of the fable, is demonstrated as the exotic charm of another system of thought, is the limitation of our own, the stark impossibility of thinking *that*" (Foucault, xv).

The limitations of our ways of thinking were brought to light for me by colliding with the *that* of Genoa, Italy, where I have lived and taught for the past four years and which I find at least as strange and wonderful as Borge's taxonomy. While for Americans Italy has been largely packaged and hyper-realized for easy touristic (and academic) consumption, Genoa resists categorization at every turn. Henry James wrote with regard to Genoa in his *Italian Hours*, "But as . . . I wandered for a long time at hazard through the tortuous byways of the city, I said to myself, not without an accent of private triumph, that here at last was something it would be almost impossible to modernise" (James, 394). At an urbanistic level Genoa is rich with critical themes of the day with regard to the history of the traditional city, the effects of modernization, and its attempts to come to terms with a post-industrial economy. Within this difficult site and against its obduracy I have had broken most of my beliefs about architecture, teaching, and culture.

Genoa does not fit into an easy category for an American, and instead of simply seeing it on my terms as a quick visitor might, I have over the course of time had to learn to see it on its terms. Genoa is a riddle. It is not a city of piazzas, but of passageways: streets, stairs and ramps, narrow alleys, public elevators buried in hillsides, metal bridges that connect horizontally from street



Fig. 1. View of Genoa from the Spianata of Castelletto.

level to the roof tops of six-story apartment buildings. Unlike Rome or Florence, Genoa is not a repository of perfect monuments, exemplars of particular styles, or the masterpieces of particular architects, but is a rich agglomeration of intricate patterns, imperfect gems. Like the two-faced Roman god Janus (patron of ports and god of beginnings and endings) from which Genoa may have received its name, the Ducal Palace is a study of faces, having had three facades in three different positions: the first to form an enclosed, protective court; the second the façade made when the city achieved a degree of stability and the wall of the court was removed, making the interior wall of

the court an exterior face; and finally, the east wall, a minor elevation, which became a major face when Piazza de Ferrari, the new center of the nineteenth century city, was formed on its flank.

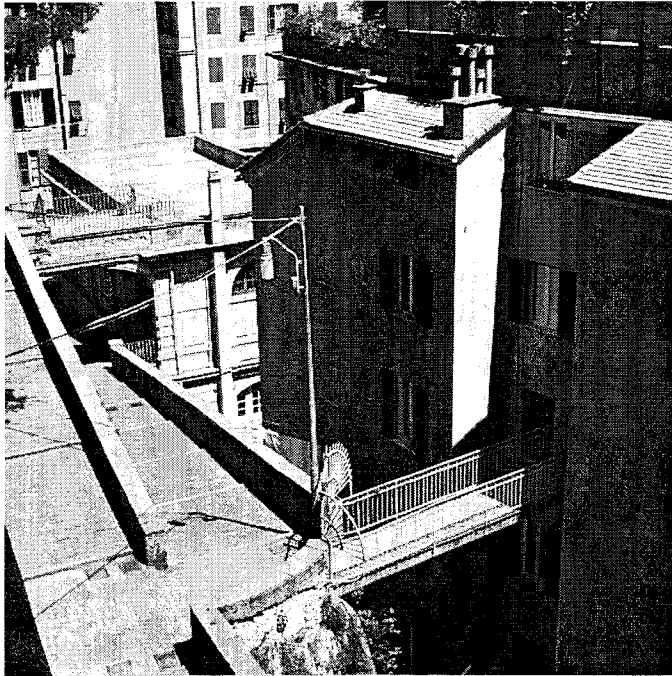


Fig. 2. Ramps and pedestrian bridges, Genoa.

What Genoa offers is in many cases contrary to what Americans expect, or want, from Italy. If the personal American attributes of honesty and directness, the architectural requisites of clarity and functionality, or the broader cultural traits of cleanliness and efficiency were to be used as values by which to judge Genoa, it would fail. Genoa's resistance to easy description and decipherment allows it to act as a kind of dark mirror in which we may reflect upon our own cultural prejudices, seeing our *this* revealed in juxtaposition against an other's "out-land-ish" *that*. Perhaps I am already suggesting that we turn our eyes to those things that do not support or reinforce what we hold to be true, with the hope that these things might teach us how to see in more ways than we have acquired by habit and custom.

I am reluctant to treat architecture exclusively or particularly as a discipline of one concern, especially a matter for the application of technical and scientific knowledge, the exercise of social activism, or as an essentially esthetic discipline. I encourage a more inclusive approach based not on application of knowledge but action grounded in knowledge. Fundamental to this is breadth and depth of different types of knowledge because understanding does not lie in the accumulation of useful facts, but in the ability to form relationships among diverse areas of knowledge, developing an analogical mind, if you will. For this type of knowledge, I turn to the liberal arts, which may be defined as "academic disciplines, such as languages, history, philosophy, and abstract science, that are presumed to develop general intellectual ability and judgment

and provide information of general cultural concerns, as distinguished from more narrowly practical training, as for a profession" (American Heritage Dictionary, 753).

I would like to gently tug at the roots of the words "liberal arts" to rephrase them as "liberating artifices" to suggest that the liberal arts are the expressly contrived means of defining and extending the conditions of our being human. These subjects address ideas, qualities, values, and give us the means and references by which to conduct dialogue on such matters. Their value is fundamental, their direct application limited, hence their small value in the marketplace and their near abandonment in the practice-oriented education of the architect. They are all "artificial", that is, human artifices of and about the actions and belief constructs of various cultures. If the liberal arts adamantly explore this aspect of knowledge and present it as an ongoing enterprise, then architecture, or better, the degree of architecturalness, is the degree to which a work accepts and critically explores its own artificial character as a manifestation of cultural conventions, making them subtly legible to keep them from becoming habitual and invisible, or conceived as natural.

If one were to begin to see the glimmer of legitimacy of an other's *that*, confidence in the monolithic certainty of one's *this* is questioned, and new systems of values and conceptual constructs may become visible. In Genoa one wanders down streets in which the facades of the palazzi are ornamented largely through trompe l'oeil frescoes. As the Genoese are noted for being extremely thrifty, Italy's Scots some say, these painted treatments may have started as a bow to economic restraints, or as a means of flattening a deep architectural treatment in response to the narrow streets, but they became a tradition in Genoa and Liguria. For an American architect raised unconsciously by the light of Ruskin's "Lamp of Truth", it is virtually impossible to even consider a painted façade as architecture: one cannot get past its flagrant "dishonesty". We judge by our habituated values and cannot see other ways of doing or thinking, and make no allowance for what we may call the superficial or ornamental to be essential.

We Americans are often described by Europeans as being direct, individualistic, and competitive. We are industrious, pragmatic, and good at problem-solving. The majority of our national values derive from north-European, Anglo-Saxon Protestant (if not Puritan) influences, and not only are these values "good", they are also, for us, "truths". While from the European perspective these qualities have given us the strength and brashness to win world wars, it has also given us the pride or gall to involve ourselves with the affairs of the world when and how it suits us. Our capitalistic culture is a juggernaut, implacably steamrolling other cultures, large and small, local and national. The world is our market to open and exploit, even when we wrap our efforts in the guise of other concerns (human rights, protection of national interests). We approach the world

as a resource to be used, and as a problem to be fixed. We are prone to think in binary oppositions, simple extremes, and to imply a necessary and correct choice between one option and its implicitly wrong obverse. In our insistence upon treating matters solely from our own viewpoint, we are perceived, notwithstanding with our many positive traits, as being a bit immature in the sense of being a nation and participating with the world.

Within our architectural culture, we are more aligned with a Germanic rather than Mediterranean mode of existence. Our emphasis on work, rigor, efficiency, minimalism, and process are all common themes in our field. We use “function” to describe only the most immediate “use” by the most literal of occupant. We habitually consider a “site” to be a piece of land upon which to build, not a physical and cultural situation with a number of diachronic connections. Our definition of “client” is the person or party who pays for the project and determines the needs, not the collective needs and desires of all of the participants living in urban environments. A “project” is a problem-solving exercise, and by extension, all aspects of life become problems for analysis and rectification.

These are concerns not only because of the deadening world they generate, but also the near impossibility of our being able to discuss these things in an architectural, social, or political context because of a lack of understanding of the cultural backgrounds of these values, a paucity of conceptual means with which to express complexity of relationships, and an incapacity to live with a number of partial and contradictory value systems, or an unwillingness to acknowledge that we do so. If much of our thinking relies on cause-and-effect logic, a rationale grounded on mechanistic thinking, I am reminded of Calvino’s description of the author Carlo Emilio Gadda, who avoids the fallacy of searching for single causes that determine specific events, and

tried all his life to represent the world as a knot, a tangled skein of yarn; to represent it without in the least diminishing the inextricable complexity, or, to put it better, the simultaneous presence of the most disparate elements that converge to determine every event (Calvino, 106).

While the simple and direct certainly have value, our tendency to simplify is inevitably reductive to the magnificent complexity of the world and to the difficulty of the conditions we face as architects and citizens within the intersecting communities that make our many worlds. Similarly, the value of the direct, the frontal attack, is a claim of certainty and authority, but is limited in that many matters may be best approached obliquely.

Italo Calvino recounts the myth of Perseus in the essay “Lightness” in his *Six Memos for the Next Millennium*, and describes the use of the shield as a mirror so that he “fixes his gaze upon what can be revealed only by indirect vision, an

image caught in a mirror” (Calvino, 4). But with regard to his fate to carry in a bag the head of Medusa, he continues, “Perseus’s strength always lies in a refusal to look directly, but not in a refusal of the reality in which he is fated to live: he carries the reality with him and accepts it as his particular burden” (Calvino, 5).

In an effort to face reality, what models of indirectness do we have? We can only be as sophisticated in thought, or as effective in action in complex situations, as our language and conceptual tools allow. And a language as practical as English has certain ranges and possibilities. In a speech to the Association of American College and University Programs in Italy in Florence during the fall of 2000, the then American ambassador to the Netherlands Dr. Cynthia P. Schneider said, “He who knows one language, knows no language.” For being one of the world’s leaders, Americans are notorious for being mono-lingual, and by extension, not particularly open to the ways of other cultures. As the ethnic mix in the United States continues to change, and as it becomes more difficult to remain isolated in an increasingly interconnected world, it behooves us to learn how to be a participant in the world, with a greater sense of accommodation of the ways of others. What we seem to lack as well as literal ability with languages and the insights that multi-lingual ability might give us into other cultures, is a sense of the conceptual underpinnings that accompany language. Not only can we not know the ways of others, but as Ambassador Schneider is suggesting, we cannot even know our own language or ways.

As an indicator, consider the subjunctive mood in the English language. The *Harbrace College Handbook* states, “Especially in formal English, use the subjunctive to express wishes or (in *if* or *as if* clauses) a hypothetical, highly improbable, or contrary-to-fact condition (Hodges, 84). The subjunctive is no longer found in common usage, however, and we use the indicative mood to communicate this aspect of expression. The English language does not have a special form of the verb to perform the subjunctive function, and relies on additional words, context, and tone.

The Italian language has a full case for *il congiuntivo*, the subjunctive, which addresses a similar range of conditions: belief, hope, uncertainty, possibility. The *congiuntivo* is used primarily in formal, written Italian, but is spoken as well. In American English we generally write as we speak, that is, casually, with the ensuing erosion of distinctions among forms and contexts. In Italian the *congiuntivo* is used not only to communicate a condition of content within the sentence, but also expresses the level of education of the speaker, and bestows respect upon the listener.

To explore cultural conditions that express or determine values and systems of thought, and the accompanying possibilities of life and dialogue, I have used as an example the case in the

Italian language of the indicative and subjunctive, where the certain and the possible are allowed distinction and rapport with one another. With the blurring of these two in American English, our opinions, beliefs, or ruminations may be confused with statements of fact, or perhaps we would like them to appear to be so. Our preference for using the indicative mood may reflect our bias for fact and directness, our bias, culturally and architecturally, for "truth", "honesty", and authenticity". We value clear speech, the Italians, *la sfumatura*: shaded, nuanced. We are a judgmental, moralistic culture, and if a statement is not expressly right it is wrong, if not true, it is, by implication a "lie".

In his essay "On Truth and Lie in Architecture", Karsten Harries presents an argument to expose our insistence on "truth" and its problematic status within architecture. Starting from the assertion that there is something that architecture possesses which is neither exclusively esthetic nor representational, he presents the idea of the "re-presentational", in which the work presents itself as both signifier and signified. But while this re-presentational status might explore the authentic realm of material and structure and speak to the truth of gravity and world, for Harries it must give room as well for the work to be more than what it appears to be: to re-present, a building may need to "lie". To counter Ruskin's fear of "the glistening and softly spoken lie", Harries quotes Nietzsche as writing, "We possess *art* lest we *perish of the truth*.", and adds, "According to Nietzsche, we need the lies of art to transfigure and to interpret reality" (Harries, 53).

The suspension of the truth imperative is necessary for an understanding of the essential relationship between the prosaic and poetic aspects of language and of architecture. Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefavre write,

(The) function of poetry, as of all art, is to counteract the destructive impact of everyday social life, of the established social relations. It is to arrest and cleanse that which in the words of Tolstoy, 'devours works, clothes, furniture, one's wife, and the fear of war': the deadening effect of routine and its implacable almost algebraic predictability (Tzonis, 277).

Thus the *poetic* identity of a building depends not on its stability, or its function, or on the efficiency of the means of its production but on the way in which all the above have been limited, bent, and subordinated by purely formal requirements . . . The resulting quality of *architecturalness* is not a portrait of reality. It is its critical reconstruction (Tzonis, 276).

Before I introduce architectural examples I must explain that these particular cases are expressly used because they would be easy to judge by custom or by one's education as being one thing and very different from understandings that direct

experience and knowledge of their conditions might offer, and the role they might therefore play in the context of this paper. First, I want to refute the tendency to present "important" architects as masters of only one dominant value of the interpreting culture, which might restrict the richness of lessons the works themselves might possess. Secondly, these are all examples from architects working in Italy, or working from an experience of having studied in Italy. They all worked in a very constricted area for the majority of their lives. And lastly they are all part of what we now call Old Europe, from which, it now seems to be commonly believed, one can only learn tradition and nostalgia, the things an adolescent might say of a parent. The three architects are Carlo Scarpa, Jozse Plecnik, and Andrea Palladio.

While deified as the god of tectonic detail and craft, Carlo Scarpa was also influenced by the classical tradition. Along with his magnificently obsessive articulation of materials and joinery, one might look as well at his mastery of composition as demonstrated by the façade of the Banca Popolare in Verona with its ghosts of base, middle, and top, the exercise of doubling, splitting and rejoining of elements, and its elaborate tapestry of symmetries and alignments within a complex play of axes. In the Castelvecchio in Verona, the asymmetrical composition of a new window is juxtaposed upon the more conventional order of the existing gothic arches to produce a composite that does not subside entirely into calmness.

The Slovenian architect Jozse Plecnik, a student of Otto Wagner and with a similar resistance to classification, has been heralded as a precursor to modernism and as a figure outside of modernism because of his lifelong embrace of both classical and vernacular sources and his love of ornament. But his value might not be in the particular idiom used as much as the mastery of its multiple interpretations and subversions. The paired, needle-like flagpoles at Prague Castle are monumentalized by each being carved from a single tree (originally) from a forest revered by the local culture and set on a brass Attic base. The monolithic stone basin in the Rampart Garden is poised on its base as if to render it as both weighty and weightless, and acts as a pivot between the house of the president of the new Czech republic and the city of Prague. In his home of Ljubljana, Slovenia, Plecnik fashioned the exterior wall of the National and University Library out of a mix of brick and rough stone, the stone referring to the existence of an earlier palace on the site, giving to a new building a face that has echoes of ruin and reconstruction written across its surface.

The work of Andrea Palladio is customarily cited as an example of clarity and purity of formal composition primarily due to the role of his printed treatise in which he himself made perfect his built works, and which were further purified by the Georgian architecture of England and its colonial versions in the United States. But one might look at his mannerist tendencies as a

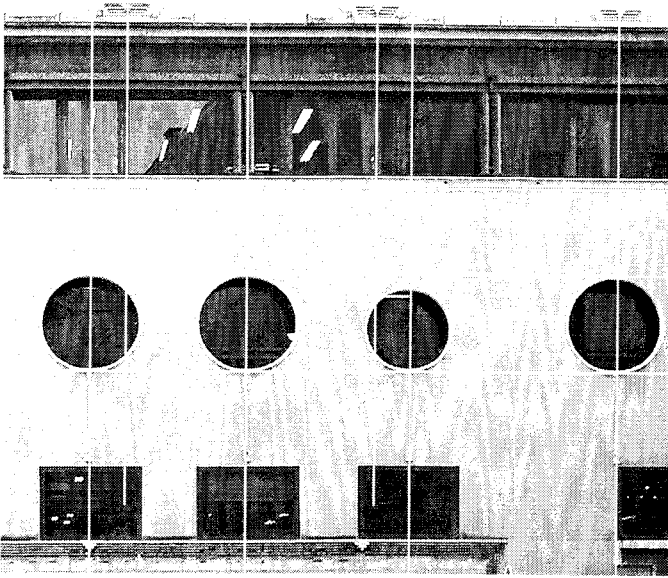


Fig. 3. Façade of the Banca Popolare, Verona. Carlo Scarpa.

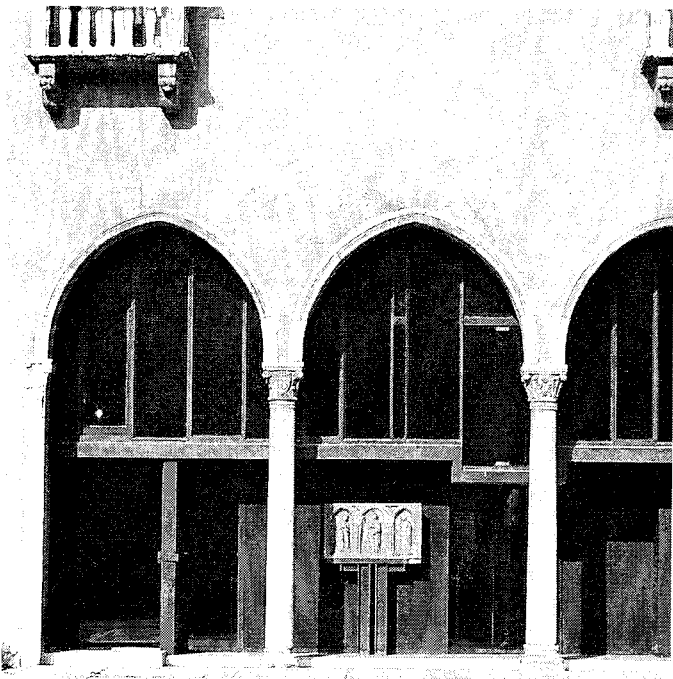


Fig. 4. Window of the Museo Castelvecchio, Verona. Carlo Scarpa.

complementary voice in his work. With regard to our expectations of classical completeness and perfection, the Loggia del Capitaniato in Vicenza, with its series of balconies supported by triglyphs/brackets suggesting the entablature of a subtle second order offers lessons of ambiguous wholeness. The Palazzo Porto Breganze, which is itself only a fragment of a larger unfinished whole, has multiple plays of bases that confuse an easy identification of the conventional tripartite arrangement of base, middle, and top.



Fig. 5. Stone Basin in Rampart Gardens, Prague Castle. Jozef Plecnik.

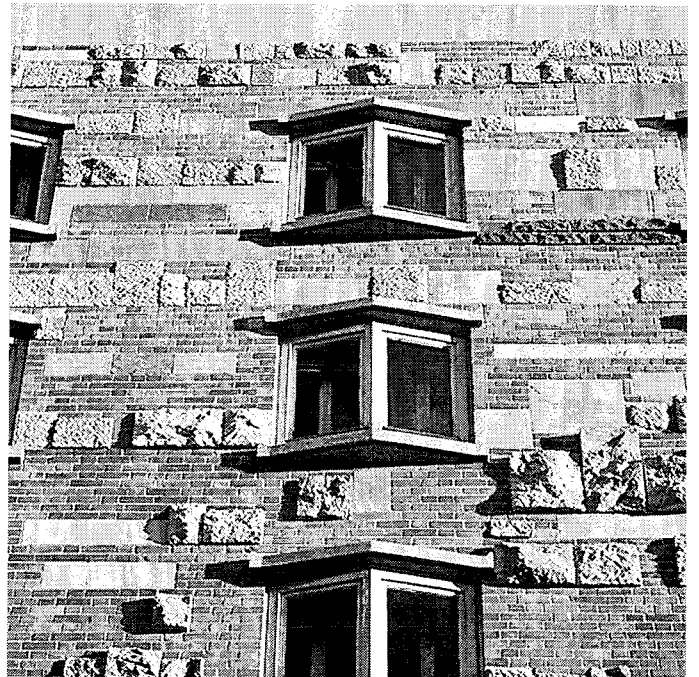


Fig. 6. Façade of the National and University Library, Ljubljana, Slovenia. Jozef Plecnik.

Perhaps all of these may be seen as manneristic, self-indulgent treatments that do not address the “primary issues” of building-making and use, but they are not destructive, but rather disruptive within their respective canons in order to enliven the language. Tzonis and Lefaivre write that architecture may “be seen as bringing about a catharsis as tragedy does. It reflects the existing reality that through foregrounding reorganizes on a



Fig. 7. Loggia del Capitaniato. vicenza. Andrea Palladio.

higher cognitive level. It provides a new frame in which to understand reality, in which to 'cleanse' away an absolute one. The means are formal, the effect is cognitive, the purpose moral and social" (Tzonis, 278).

As I find myself figuratively lost in a culture in which I am the alien, I find rationalism and functionalism to be wholly inadequate to the situation. I follow instead, as best I can, the lead of Walter Benjamin, whose practice of *flanerie*, a kind of aimless wandering, was not to find evidence and proof of ideas, but to gather provocative objects, books, ideas. As Hannah Arendt describes,

... this thinking, fed by the present, works with the 'thought fragments' it can wrest from the past and gather about itself. Like a pearl diver who descends to the bottom of the sea, not to excavate the bottom and bring it to light but to pry loose the rich and the strange, the pearls and the coral in the depths, and to carry them to the surface (Benjamin, 54).

A city of complexity and nuance, in Genoa these rich and strange figures and motifs abound but never as clear demonstrations. The Church of Santo Stefano is a Romanesque church from the 7th century that has been rebuilt repeatedly and now sits, asymmetrically with only one aisle, on a piazza above the neo-gothic portico of the main road of the modern city, Via XX Settembre. The church is immediately visible, hardly noticed, and difficult to access. Its axis is a response to a long-departed force, and is contrary to the axis of the street, and beneath the church there is a modern cinema. Here is an elaborate demonstration of questions of authenticity, juxtaposi-



Fig. 8. Palazzo Porto Breganze. Vicenza. Andrea Palladio.

tions of ceremonial/theatrical space, and shifts of social and cultural value, all played out through a variety of figures, motifs and arrangements. They are engaged in the complexity of a difficult to read, provisional whole. I would like to advance that as an old idea perhaps relevant to our times.

Genoa was the site of the 2001 G8 conference, which prompted a peaceful anti-globalization protest and was marred by riots that left one dead and many wounded. While praising the spirit of demonstrations such as this, Hardt and Negri write in their book *Empire* that the fault of many such protests is that they are founded on a "false dichotomy between the global and local, assuming that the global entails homogenization and undifferentiated identity whereas the local preserves heterogeneity and difference" (Hardt 44). This oversimplification leads to a defense of the romanticized idea of the local as something "natural". Instead, Hardt and Negri explain:

Globalization, like localization, should be understood . . . as a *regime* of the production of identity and difference, or really of homogenization and heterogenization. The better framework, then, to designate the distinction between the global and the local might refer to different networks of flows and obstacles in which the local moment or perspective gives priority to the reterritorializing barriers or boundaries and the global moment privileges the mobility of deterritorializing flows. It is false, in any case, to claim that we can (re)establish local identities that are in some sense outside and protected against the global flows of capital and Empire.

... The strategy of local resistance misidentifies and thus masks the enemy. We are by no means opposed to globalization of relationships as such. . . . The enemy, rather, is a specific regime of global relations that we call Empire. More important, this strategy of defending the local is damaging because it obscures and even negates the

real alternatives and the potentials for liberation *within* Empire. We should be done once and for all with the search for an outside, a standpoint that imagines a purity for our politics. It is better both theoretically and practically to enter the terrain of Empire and confront its homogenizing and heterogenizing flows in all their complexity, grounding our analysis in the global multitude (Hardt 44-46).

The use of the term “multitude” throughout Hardt and Negri’s work is important in that the multitude is contrasted to the idea of “people” and expanding on what Hobbes has already laid out in the seventeenth century, they write:

The multitude is a multiplicity, a plane of singularities, an open set of relations, which is not homogeneous or identical with itself and bears an indistinct, inclusive relation to those outside of it. The people, in contrast, tends toward identity and homogeneity internally while posing its difference from and excluding what remains outside of it (Hardt 103).

While there are a number of social/political points that can be spun from this distinction, I want to return to an architectural aspect that would be analogous. The suggestion for us here is that there is no “we the people” comprised of architects or teachers of architecture. We are a multitude and we should seek to articulate our “internal” distinctions and our “external” similarities.

But I want to extend this distinction as well to the discipline of architecture. Our habit of classical models of taxonomy and a hierarchical categorization of objects define architecture as a specific, closed class of objects. The word “architecture” as the name of a class is both overstuffed with the weight of addressing everything related to the production of buildings, as well as exhausted by broad and casual usage. The lesson from Hardt and Negri is mirrored, earlier in time and in this paper, by the model of Borge’s taxonomy, and I want to use not only the lesson, but the role that literature, or architecture, can play in presenting to us, in the manner that it is suited, these aspects which disrupt our habit and call us to think both through its message and through its medium.

In this manner, the word “architectural” as descriptive (and suggestive) of conditions and relations may be more insightful than “architecture” as the name of a class. As with the examples from the writers and architects I have enlisted, there is an acceptance of a condition, even a tradition, of their respective discipline. They are immune to the illusion of escape and total freedom. In different manners they work to subtly disturb convention, but because of the wealth of references and forces that are integrated in the work, the disturbance is not an occasion for “self-expression”. The self is lost in the work, and

the work is sufficiently rich and strange to be noticed by Benjamin on an evening stroll.

The role of the “architectural” is to infect the world, to insert within it small treasures, obscure riddles, dense encryptions, never as stand-alone objects but as aspects, elements, and details of a larger effort that addresses the everyday concerns of life and work, building and architecture, materials and environment, and attempts to form critical models of practice from within the capitalist system. These aspects are challenging particulars that deter easy, unconscious consumption, and play an ethical role in the public sphere. While such architectural qualities or aspects are not meant to provide opportunity for self-expression per se, and certainly no excuse or defense of high-profile name-brand architecture, it does provide a space for the architect and builder, both now of the proletariat class, a place for *work* in the sense that Hannah Arendt defined.

As the capitalist model has extended as well into the academic world, we have now become workers in a system of production: we teachers are the interchangeable factory workers in an assembly line process, and our students are products to be consumed by a paying public. The “open market” may be suggested as a grand model that promotes exchange, but its insidious side is that everything is for sale, and short term gain will outweigh long term benefit every time. In such a condition, education gives way to job-training.

I have used the idea of mannerism in architecture, and of the subjunctive within language because I believe that our work has an ethical role to build up the texture and density of our lives to counter the tendency to homogenize and level. And where borders have solidified, we may provide the means by which edges become part of complex system of permeable interfaces, not hindrances to movement of bodies or thought. There will be no dominant model, no simple polarity of values with easy choices.

What is set out here is box of fragments, a series of knots, a cracked mirror, because I do not believe it could be otherwise, and all of this is not only an attitude but a suggestion for a pedagogical approach. Its direction is not linear and it has no conclusion, and in consciously making it so I am trying to undermine several conceptual models that determine our expectations and limit our thinking. I am not trying to propose anything totally new, original, or radical, in a manner that would be overly simple or direct, in order to express something adamantly correct or right, although I am trying to fabricate something that is not quite what you have heard or expected. This endeavor makes no attempt to establish a new normative. This does not indicate a lack of interest on my part in making a contribution to the dialogue, but its role is admittedly, consciously, and deliberately particular and restricted.

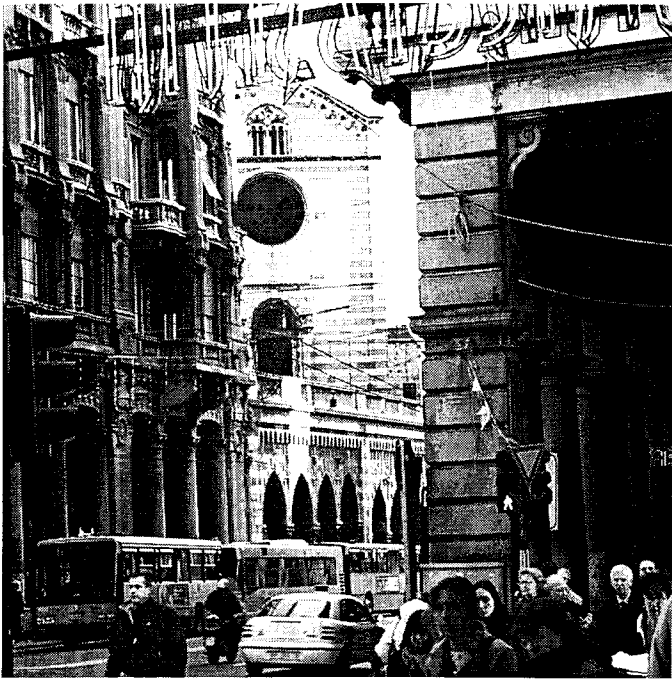


Fig. 9. Via XX Settembre and the church of Santo Stefano, Genoa.

In the realm of myth, constructing the tower of Babel did not lead to a second "Fall", but to the birth of a multi-cultural world, the world as it is. In the realm of history, another ancient name for the city of Genoa is Zena, from the Greek *xenoi*, a city of foreigners, its dense streets filled with their comings and goings and the exchange of goods and ideas, before the birth of capitalism. It seems prudent that we learn from the many ways of the world as it is and is becoming, allowing ourselves to become more complex and subtle, and developing forms of tolerance and understanding both inside and outside our borders, disciplinary, national, and otherwise. To this end, I encourage the task of the artisan with a contrary bent: where one finds borders, build doors, gates, bridges; where one finds emptiness or uniformity, draw lines, form edges, embroider patterns to give distinctness and distinction; where one finds chaos, insert a reference, an indicator, a provisional landmark; where one finds order, corrupt it beautifully.

We shall not cease from our exploration
 And the end of all our exploring
 Will be to arrive where we started
 And know the place for the first time.

T. S. Eliot, Four Quartets

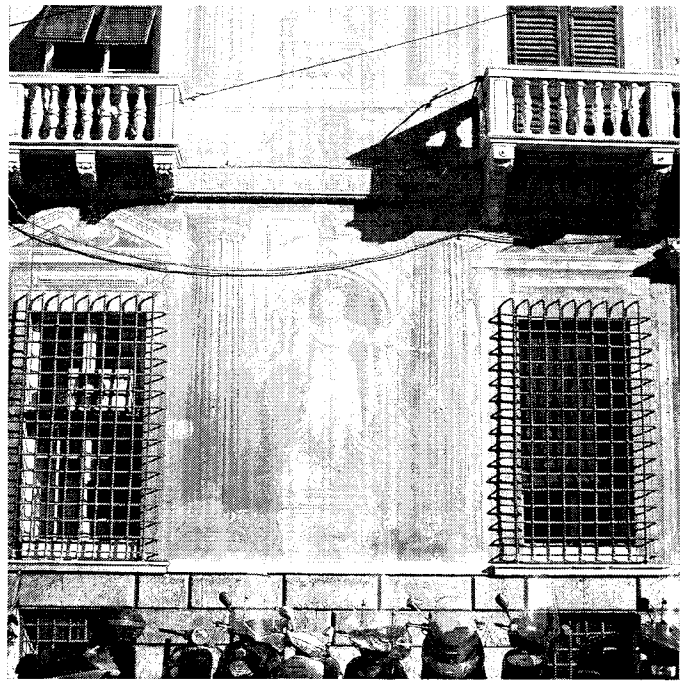


Fig. 10. Painted façade of Palazzo Interiano-Pallavicino, Genoa.

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