City as Theatre:
Rome, Chicago and New York

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INTRODUCTION

During the Renaissance and up to and including the late Baroque and Rococo, artists and architects in Rome such as Bramante, Michelangelo and Bernini were asked to create architectural and landscape settings for plays, spectacles and other forms of pageantry.[1] In some cases this could mean transforming the city or landscape into a temporary theatre that might last a mere day. In some instances it meant building dedicated places in classically inspired theatre houses or gardens where perspective representation of places, both real and imagined, provided the background. In still other situations it meant conceiving of the city *itself* as theatre that would then become, almost imperceptibly, the setting for everyday life as well as the stage for special occasions. In the process of designing for the theatre in the context of the city, reality, illusion and allegory merged into one seamless experience that gave profound meaning to places in Rome. This paper explores Rome's theatrical urbanism and then speculates on its relevance to the American urban experience exemplified in Chicago and New York.

The first published account of the modern theatre appears in Sebastiano Serlio's 1545 treatise, *Architettura*.[2] The illustrations for the comic, tragic and satyric stage sets appear in scientific, linear perspective (Figure 1). Each features a brief commentary by Serlio based on his reading of Vitruvius who in turn derived his dramatic guidelines and system of classification from Greek sources, most prominent among them being Aristotle.

The three scenes are remarkable for their display of linear perspective in the aid of a nascent stagecraft that would dominate Western theatre for the next four hundred years.[3] More importantly for our purpose, these scenes depict contemporary visions of the city and the country that would have a profound influence on the course of architecture, urbanism and landscape design. These scenes reveal the Renaissance belief in decorum which holds that outward appearance and

Fig. 1. The Comic, Tragic and Satyric Scenes, woodcut by Sebastiano Serlio, c. 1537.

inner being are inextricably linked and that appropriate ''character'' should be manifest in our environment just as it is in the individual. With these scenes, we are witness not simply to a skillful image for the stage nor to a literal prescription for proper building design but to an evocation of three related but distinct psychological states of mind — comedy, tragedy and fantasy. For Serlio and his contemporaries transcendent laws determined the ranking of human feeling and action no less within the individual than within society, assigning to each its divinely ordained setting. The existing city, the ideal city and finally nature herself are the three paradigmatic views of the city which ultimately inform the Renaissance world view — a humanist view that has forever lingered in the Western imagination.

THE COMIC, TRAGIC AND SATYRIC STAGE SETS

A comparative analysis of the three stage sets can help reveal their deeper meaning, for each becomes a foil against which to define the other two. Serlio tells us that the comic scene depicts houses for private persons, such as lawyers, merchants and ordinary citizens. ''Above all, the scene should have its house of the procuress or *ruffiana*, its tavern, and its church.'' Serlio's print illustrates an urban scene with bordello and an opposing porticoed house in the foreground defining an embryonic proscenium while a deep perspective recess in the form of a street runs perpendicular to this frontal plane. The resulting street is ''carefully careless'' to use Robert Maxwell's ironic terminology. The bordering structures provide a heterogeneous architectural mix which features Gothic buildings, further enlivened with waving pennants, heraldic signs, and other traces of everyday life (note especially the details of the Tavern of the Moon). Contributing to the ''messy vitality,'' a church located at the end of the street on the central vanishing point, which reveals a classical façade and closes off the vista just as the bordello introduces it. The pendulum swings from the sacred to the profane, from high art to low art and underscores its inclusive, ''non-judgmental'' approach toward all that, we might say, is human.

The tragic scene deliberately contrasts with the comic. Its setting, we are informed, must be for great persons ''because amorous adventures, sudden accidents and violent and cruel deaths…have always taken place in the house of lords, dukes, grand princes and particularly kings.'' Serlio depicts a second urban scene framed by a nearly symmetrical shrine and porticoed palace both in the classical style. Like the comic set, the *frons scaenae*, or frontal plane, is cut by a deep spatial cleft that recedes in a rather uniform fashion to a prominent triumphal arch. The tragic set replaces the planned for the ad hoc and the Classic upstages the Gothic. Antique statuary rather than banners enliven the silhouette of roofs and the terminating obelisk, as the vertical accent in the scene, corresponds to the slender medieval campanile featured in the comic scene. Regularity, uniformity and repose evoke a formal sobriety in the tragic set and provide a striking contrast to the informal gaiety in the comic set. If one flirts with the id, the other stakes out a higher moral ground for the superego.

The satyric scene is set within nature and thus is literally and figuratively removed from the conventions and constraints of the city. Serlio recommends this scene ''be composed of trees, rocks, hills, mountains, herbs, flowers, and fountains, — together with some rustic huts….'' He notes the role of the ancient satyr play as one of reproving and castigating contemporaries for licentious and evil behavior and asserts that the rustic's innocence — a premonition of the primitive hut and the noble savage ? — allows him to speak freely on these matters without fear of reprisal. As the satyric scene evolved during the Renaissance, it came to represent a pastoral retreat, a never-never land of myth, an Arcadian home for the subhuman and the superhuman alike, a place for shepherds, shepherdesses, satyrs, nymphs and gods and goddesses. However, the satyric scene retains a measure of its architectonic form as revealed by the crumbling forward wall that steps down to the orchestra. Trees parallel to the stage act as the *frons scaena* and serve to screen the rustic dwellings that lack any apparent architectural style. Nor is there any other building type that might suggest a civic use or denote some shared civility. The obligatory spatial recess cuts into the depth of the forest revealing a kind of primitive *allée*, all of which clearly recalls the previous urban scenes. Nature is revealed as a distinct but nonetheless related phenomenon to the city.

As Giulio Argan has pointed out:

> ''The characters of tragedy are historical figures, whose actions and sufferings are of interest to everyone, to the *polis*, and they can be the cause of happiness or sadness to all. The characters of comedy are ordinary people, whose doings depend upon chance, not upon supreme laws; if they are to be of any interest, this is only because they represent ordinary people as the playthings of chance. This explains why 'historical' art aims at the ideal and 'genre' art the characteristic. The first imitates the best, the second the ordinary, even the inferior.''[4]

By contrast the characters of the satyr play are mythic, their historic dimension dissolves in a far off time and place.

Despite these obvious contrasts, the three stages clearly establish ''a place of public appearance'' to use Louis Kahn's apt phrase. The prominent spatial corridor common to all, whether irregular, regular or wooded accomplishes this. This ''stage within a stage'' with its windowed eyes and enframed space, underscores the fundamental precept made at the beginning of this paper: for a physical and spatial construct to act as theatre, it must provide for both the spectacle and the spectator.

Since the 16th century, these scenes have insinuated their way into our ideas about the urban and natural landscape with tenacious regularity, reflecting, in the process, the vicissitudes of changed historical and cultural sensibilities. And the protagonists of each, the People, the Architect and the Noble Savage have populated their respective stages with just as much determination. The staying power of these three theatrical views could be culturally based or it could indicate some deep human affinity with the psychic power that they have come to represent. Either way, their interpretation by any given age provides an illuminating measure of its values and ideals.

Within this conceptual framework 16th century artists and patrons could freely interpret Rome's peculiar *genius loci*. The seven hills and the Tiber offered a varied topography. Its ancient monuments and medieval strongholds created episodes in the center that seemed more natural than human made. During the Renaissance through the nineteenth century, a vast open space within the ancient Aurelian walls surrounded Rome's compact center, called the *disabitato*, it consisted of vineyards, pasture and wildly overgrown classical monuments lying in ruin. This created a perimeter of open space that stretched beyond the walls to the Roman *compagna*. Punctuated in the center and encroached upon on every side, Rome provided a wonderful opportunity to interweave building with nature, a quality that persists in the modern city today.

THE CAMPIDOGLIO

The Campidoglio, the secular heart of Rome, rises above the medieval city on one side and simultaneously overlooks the ancient Roman forum on the other. The transformation of this place during the 16th century represents one of the most remarkable metamorphoses in urban design history. Michelangelo's intervention has
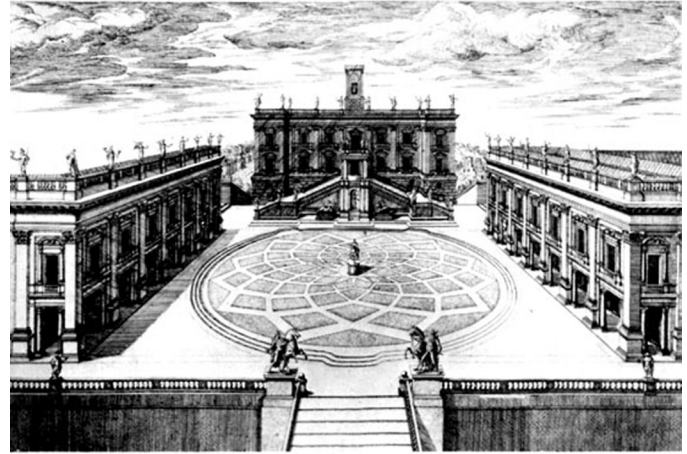

Fig. 2. View of the Campidoglio, engraving by Du Perac, 1569.

Fig. 3. View of the Campidoglio framed by the Via d'Aracoeli and the Campo Vaccino, detail of Pianta di Roma, engraving by Giovanni Falda, 1676.

recast the Capitoline as *caput mundi*, the center of the world's stage. The contemporary engraving by Du Perac (Figure 2) invites comparison with Serlio's tragic set. One notices immediately the same perspective rendition of a defined space, here designed more as a square or piazza rather than street. The elevated proscenium connects to an implied orchestra by way of a monumental stair and the symmetrical arcades and campanile continue the comparison to the tragic set. The classical language and the formal perfection of the composition suggest a heightened, more utopian interpretation then Serlio has put forward but nonetheless it intensifies rather than departs, from the theatrical idea. This idealization of the city was clearly meant to represent a public space, a *res publica*. As caput mundi the Campi-
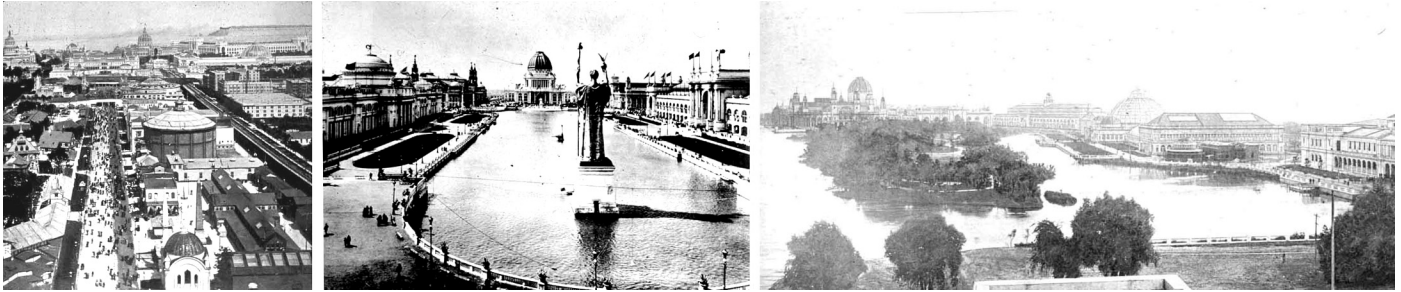
Fig. 4. View of the Midway, Court of Honor and Lagoon, photographs of the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition, 1893.

doglio is clearly intended as a setting for Argan's historical figures, ''whose actions and sufferings are of interest to everyone, the *polis*''.

There is a topographical context that is frequently ignored in most commentaries on the Campidoglio that bears directly on the subject at hand. For this 'tragic' setting is both literally and figuratively framed by the existing, medieval city to the north and the bucolic Campo Vaccino or cow pastures, all that remained of the classical, mythic city to the south (Figure 3). The Campidoglio, Janus-like, simultaneously faces the contemporary city, and the ancient city — or rather its overgrown remains — and presents itself as a mediator for them both just as the tragic set might be seen as a mediator between the comic and the satyric sets.

The spatial disposition of the ensemble establishes a sequential relationship along the Via Papalis that was made real during the highly theatrical papal procession, *il possesso*. The 'comic' urban scene of the existing city extends along the Via d'Aracoeli, ascends to the 'tragic' scene of the Campidoglio and then descends to the 'satyric' scene of green pastures, rustic huts and ancient ruins. On the forum side, notice in particular, the tree-lined ancient Via Sacra that stretches between the arch of Septimius Severus and the Arch of Titus at the far south end. The resulting triad — existing city, ideal city and nature — parallels Serlio's commentary for the theatre and by implication the city itself.

CHICAGO AND HE WORLD'S COLUMBIAN EXPOSITION OF 1893

Commentators such as Sigfried Giedion have noted the theatrical quality of the Chicago World's Columbian Exposition of 1893 in largely negative terms. The Chicago Fair provided an American audience a dazzling example of stage art made ''real'' in the semi-permanent context of an international exposition designed by Daniel Burnham and a team of Beaux Arts inspired architects (Figure 4). The Fair has achieved mythical status in the 20th century. Although a major popular success, the Modernist view has seen the ''White City'' as the altar upon which an indigenous, progressive and democratic modern American architecture was sacrificed. Louis Sullivan and Frank Lloyd Wright have attacked the Fair for its stylistic depravity; Sigfried Giedion has compared the Fair unfavorably to the Loop and dismissed it for technical timidity; and finally Lewis Mumford has vilified Chicago's exposition for its presumed lack of social responsibility.

Whether or not these criticisms are justified is not the point I wish to discuss in this paper. I would simply note that for the most part critics focus exclusively on the Court of Honor and the individual structures, which surround it (the exceptions being Louis Sullivan's Transportation Building and the Ho-o-den Japanese pavilion, both bordering the wooded Lagoon and not the Court of Honor). It is perhaps inevitable, given the modern preoccupation with the individual building rather than with building ensembles, that these critics would concentrate on the part rather than the whole. Their analysis seems incomplete for two reasons. First it ignores the totality of the Fair and second it does not acknowledge important planning and technical innovations. These included advanced ideas about public transport, integration of landscaped parkland and real structural audacity (the Ferris Wheel was first unveiled at the Fair and was intended to be Chicago's answer to the Eiffel Tower built for the Paris Exposition of 1889). Surely the City Beautiful Movement which it spawned is the last time in American history when aesthetic considerations were deemed to be an important part of the urban design equation.

The Chicago Fair as planned by Daniel Burnham was more inclusive than its detractors admitted, for it comprised not only the court of Honor, but also the honky-tonk Midway Plaisance and Frederick Law Olmsted's pastoral wooded Lagoon.[5] The three parts of the Fair constitute a remarkable parallel to Serlio's theatric vision. We seem to have a late nineteenth century American reincarnation of Serlio's stage sets taken through a French filter with a Victorian twist: the Court

of Honor is a kind of "tragic front room" or parlor for honored guests, for polite talk and tea; the Midway Plaisance is the "comic back room" for friends, for cussin', drinkin' and smokin'; and the wooded lagoon is the "satyric garden" as a release from both.

As Colin Rowe has pointed out in his critical essay, "Chicago Frame," Chicago in the 90's was far from having a single theatre of architectural production. The Loop was a rough and tumble arena dominated by the entrepreneur. And its protagonists, the architect-engineers, typically demurred of any aesthetic pretensions if they wanted to get the job. This is the reason why Chicago's startling achievements in skyscraper design were both successful and destined to be eclipsed by the Fair. For it was uninhibited economic expediency rather than principle that created the loop. Lacking a consciously applied theoretical agenda, the architects of the Loop could not withstand the onslaught of a more vigorous and accessible aesthetic. And it was the leafy suburbs designed by Olmsted, not the Loop, where Frank Lloyd Wright created his revolutionary architecture. The Fair alone was a deliberate Utopian statement about improving the existing city and it directly contributed to a series of important developments that followed.
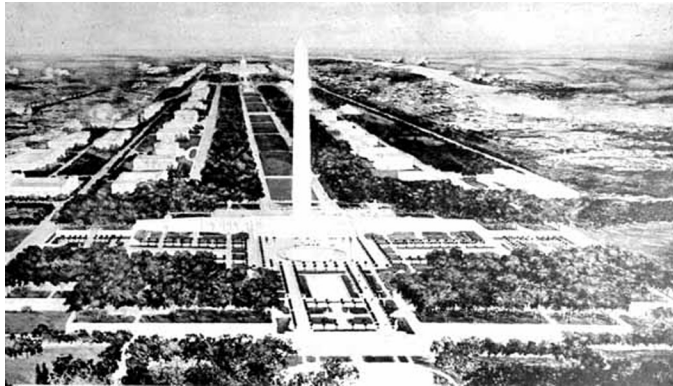

Fig. 5. The Mall, Washington D.C., rendering from the McMillan Commission Report, 1901.

AFTER THE WORLD'S FAIR

Following the Fair, practitioners and critics tended to advocate some favored part of the Fair while ignoring or denying its whole. The City Beautiful Movement grew directly out of the public's infatuation with the Fair's Court of Honor and the elevated civic presence it promised. Washington D.C. was radically transformed through the efforts of Fair collaborator, Charles Follen McKim, who built on the momentum of public and official interest to redesign the Mall as a kind of tragic stage for events of national import (Figure 5). Although criticized for its "imperial scale" and its "austere

formality" by its detractors, in the 20th century the Mall has served splendidly as a stage for Civil Rights demonstrations, anti-war protests and AIDS commemorations. Some of the most memorable public spaces in American cities can be traced back to similar initiatives begun after the Fair, including San Francisco's civic center. The Garden City Movement and related developments for the urban park might be seen as operating within the boundaries of the Lagoon with advocates for both the "clipped" and "unclipped" traditions of landscape design. The honky-tonk Midway (with "Little Egypt" as the "hootchy-kootchy" girl) was, after all, the all too frequent existing state of the American city raised to a hyper-reality. It provided an example for the unabashed entrepreneur in quest of a quick buck, setting the stage for amusement parks such as Coney Island and numerous others. Almost 60 years after the Fair Walt Disney cartooned all three theatrical moods into a single vision, demonstrating that Disneyland and the theme park owe a real debt to Chicago, if not to Serlio, for generating its thematic settings.[6]

NEW YORK'S ROCKEFELLER CENTER

In praising Rockefeller Center begun in 1931, Sigfried Giedion conveniently ignores its debt to the "tragic" urban design principles that had inspired both the Campidoglio and the derided Chicago Fair. Was Rockefeller Center the complement of both the "comic" Coney Island and Times Square on one hand and 'satyric" Central Park on the other (Figure 6)?

Rem Koolhaas implicitly acknowledges these theatres of operation in *Delirious New York*. His super-cool, libidinous account of New York's landscapes opens the debate to a Marxist, Freudian and Symbolist sensibility. Unlike Giulio Argan, however, Koolhaas does not plumb the moral depths these urban scenes may represent. In *Rockefeller Center: Architecture as Theatre*, also published the same year, Alan Balfour explicitly acknowledges the theatricality of New York's premier cultural and civic forum in a more proper scholarly mode.

By mid-century, a firmly established Modernist sensibility rejected any tragic urban vision. The lack of conviction in the possibility or necessity for accommodating tragedy is poignantly illustrated in the gulf that separates Rockefeller Center from its emasculated imitation, Lincoln Center. Perhaps Karl Marx was right, history repeats itself, first as tragedy and second as parody. A Post Modern "comic" attitude adopted by Pop artists who idealized the banal commercial world, paved the way for Robert Venturi's apotheosis of Main Street and the anti-heroic, "ordinary" architecture of the strip.

Fig. 6. Times Square, c. 1968, Rockefeller Center by Raymond Hood and others, 1931-39 and the Mall, Central Park by Frederick Law Olmsted, 1863

Perhaps Las Vegas *is* America's contemporary comic stage par excellence, replete with bawdyhouse, taverna and the ubiquitous (wedding) chapel specified by Serlio over 400 years ago. Meanwhile something like the ''satyric'' mode, the most elastic vision of the three, became the pervasive scene for both imported modern European architecture via Le Corbusier's notorious ''tower in the park'' and Frank Lloyd Wright's anti-urban Broadacre City. The garden is no longer just another option within the city but seen rather as its replacement. Whereas the civic, social and spatial dimensions of the tragic set are maintained and even amplified in Rockefeller Center, the limited and narrow values of the commercial strip and the privatization of formless suburbs have made it difficult to believe in either one. Few contemporary urban ensembles measure up to the promise of Serlio's vision where urban gaiety, civic decorum and pastoral fantasy could help structure human experience.

CONCLUSION

To insist on the validity of one dramatic form by excluding all others would certainly result in an impoverished theatre. Unfortunately this is exactly the type of self-imposed constraint adopted by contemporary architects, landscape architects and urbanists. If theatre is a valid metaphor for life and the inhabitation of the city and landscape — both spatial and psychic — then perhaps we should study this relationship to theatre and the stage more carefully for it could reveal a means by which our environment can become more fully human.

NOTES

[1] Annamaria Petrioli Tofani, ''From Scenery to City: Set Designs.'' *The Renaissance from Brunelleschi to Michelangelo, The Representation of Architecture*. Millon, Henry A. and Lampugnani, Vittorio Magnago, Eds. (Milan: RCS Libri & Grandi Opere S.p.A., 1994).

[2] Vaughan Hart and Peter Hicks, Eds., *Tutte l'Opere d'Architettura et Prospetiva* by Sebastiano Serlio (facsimile) (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1996).

[3] Donald Oenslager, *Stage Design: Four Centuries of Scenic Invention* (New York: The Viking Press, 1975).

[4] Giulio Argan,*The Renaissance City.* (New York: George Braziller, 1969).

[5] C.D. Arnold and H.D. Higinbotham, *World's Columbian Exposition issued by the Department of Photography* (Chicago: Press Chicago Photo-gravure Co., 1893).

[6] Walt Disney featured a film clip of the Fair in his promotional video at Disneyland. His narrative explains that his father, a construction worker in Chicago, worked on the Fair and regaled his family with stories about its many glories. Disney notes in the same clip that these memories directly inspired his thinking about the creation of Disneyland.

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