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From Invention to Convention in Architecture

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THE THOMAS CUBITT LECTURE

From Invention to Convention in Architecture

ROBERT VENTURI, MFA

of Venturi, Rauch and Scott Brown, Philadelphia, USA

*Delivered to the Society on Wednesday 8 April 1987,
with Sir John Sainsbury, Chairman, J. Sainsbury plc, in the Chair*

LORD ASHCOMBE (Chairman, Thomas Cubitt Trust): This is the tenth Thomas Cubitt Lecture, and once again I should like to thank the Royal Society of Arts for their help and encouragement in mounting it. We have had a very distinguished list of lecturers in the past, but this year we have, I think, achieved a left and right in having as Lecturer and Chairman, Professor Venturi and Sir John Sainsbury, who are connected with possibly the most important site in London.

THE CHAIRMAN: It is a great honour to be asked to preside at the annual Thomas Cubitt Lecture here at the Royal Society of Arts, and a particular pleasure to do so when the lecture is to be delivered by Bob Venturi. As a commercial man with a very real interest in architecture, I am conscious that I am following a pattern set by Thomas Cubitt, who so clearly recognized the close connection between successful commercial development and good architecture. The qualities to be seen in his developments of Belgravia and Pimlico are evidence both of his skills as the foremost property developer of his day in London and of his enthusiasm for good architecture.

As far as I know, Cubitt had no particular views about the National Gallery, but his most famous and distinguished patron certainly did. Prince Albert believed that the National Gallery should be moved, lock, stock and barrel, to a new building in South Kensington. That might have saved us all a great deal of trouble, and certainly made it unlikely that today I would be your Chairman and Bob your lecturer! But, if Princes cannot move buildings, we have all learned recently that they can have considerable effect on public opinion of additions to them.

As you may know, when my brothers and I announced the gift to the nation of an extension to the National Gallery, we said that we would join with the trustees in selecting the architect. This was done after much searching, travelling and consulting. We were much helped by having the advice of the famous Ada Louise Huxtable from the United States, and nearer home, by the distinguished critic, Colin Amery. The selection of a short list of six architects was a unanimous choice of the donors and trustees. Even

more important, when the selected architects put forward their outline schemes upon which we based our choice of architect – choosing, I emphasize, the architect, not the final design – there was again unanimity on the choice of Bob Venturi as our architect. And I should add that there was no ranking of the shortlist – just one name selected and no second or third choice.

Next week the plans will be unveiled for all to see. Let me take this opportunity to say in advance that there is yet again unanimous enthusiasm and admiration by the donors, the trustees and staff of the National Gallery for what we believe to be the brilliant designs by Bob Venturi and his colleagues. We have in our architect a man of the greatest sensitivity, not only for the works of art to be housed in the new building, but also for the setting and surrounding of the site. Whilst being under no illusion that there is always criticism by some, I personally believe that the quality, originality and appropriateness of the design will win widespread admiration.

I fear I can say no more on that subject before next week, but in introducing our speaker, let me first say that I believe Robert Venturi's influence on contemporary architecture is undeniable. It is as long ago as 1966 that the Museum of Modern Art in New York published his book, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*. In the introduction to that book, Vincent Scully wrote that Venturi's primary inspiration would seem to have come from 'the urban façades of Italy, with their endless adjustments to the counter-requirements of inside and outside and their inflection with all the business of everyday life: not primarily sculptural actors in vast landscapes, but complex spatial containers and definers of streets and squares'.

In a sense that sums up Bob's appropriateness for his task in Trafalgar Square.

Venturi's writings helped to liberate architecture from the sterile debate between modern and post-modern – and gradually his buildings in America have shown that it is possible to design and build humane, gentle and elegant buildings that acknowledge tradition, decoration and an intelligent awareness of their context.

In his newest book (1984), *A View from the Campidoglio*,

written with his wife and partner, Denise Scott Brown, many of the architectural lessons of thirty-two years of practice are examined. They have learned from their experience, and I know that we will learn a great deal this evening from Robert Venturi's talk.

He is probably now busier than he has ever been. There are major museums he is designing in Seattle, Austin and La Jolla, as well as the National Gallery. In the University field, he is building three scientific research buildings at Penn, Dartmouth and UCLA as well as an Economics

building at Princeton. His first venture into the commercial field is a high-rise block of flats on the Boston waterfront, currently on the drawing board.

Robert Venturi has called his lecture 'From Invention to Convention in Architecture' – and I am certain that it will be intriguing, intelligent and responsive. All of us present are delighted that we should have the chance of hearing a major lecture from an architect who will shortly be showing us that he is to contribute a great addition to London's architecture.

My thanks to Sir John for his generous words. We have been working hard on the design of the National Gallery extension – Sir John and his brothers Timothy and Simon Sainsbury, along with representative trustees and staff of the Gallery, and with the offices of our esteemed associates on this project, the firms of Sheppard Robson and Ove Arup & Partners – working hard within a process that is inevitably difficult and uneven when your approach is realistic and your goals are high. Bismarck said of the law, it is like sausage – better not to be in on the making of it. The same might go for architecture. But our clients have had the stomach, while in on the making of it, to withstand tensions and digest complexity.

I want to start by thanking the Board of the Thomas Cubitt Trust for inviting me here, but I should warn them, and you the audience too, to beware of architects making speeches. On the other hand, perhaps the Board was expecting me to speak not as an architect, but as a theoretician. But I *am* an architect. I *was* a theoretician – when I was young – and had little work. I had to talk and write then to keep busy, although not to keep out of trouble; writing about complexity, contradiction, ambiguity, decoration, symbolism, Mannerism, Las Vegas, and even, in the late hours of pure Modernism, writing about Lutyens got me into trouble.

But busy old architects do not theorize and probably should not – there is always the danger of lapsing into ideology – or they should theorize only as an accompaniment to their work. Yet I was explicitly requested by the Board of the Cubitt Trust to philosophize, not just to show our current work, and the Trustees of the National Gallery will not allow me to show the design of the Gallery until next week, and also I appropriately promised the RIBA that my first lecture-presentation of that project would be before that body – and yet for this to be a good talk I must deal with what is on my mind now, which is

our current work, especially the National Gallery.

A way out of this dilemma is to continue speculating archly on this subject of architects' talking versus architects' showing, until it is time to conclude with 'Any questions?'. But I shall try to instil some substance here by discussing what is currently on my mind, and the minds of my associates, in a general way – admitting that this will correspond to what is on the drawing boards in our office in a particular way – and this is the phenomenon of the popular art museum in the centre of town. It is a phenomenon widely acknowledged today; the Art Museum as the archetypal building type of our time, as the cathedral of today, is almost a cliché. But Sylvia Lavin in the November 1986 issue of *Interiors* has described the phenomenon profoundly and succinctly. She writes:

For every age there is a building type that sits on the apex of an architectural hierarchy and most completely expresses the aspirations and desperations of its time. In the Renaissance, cultural values were embodied in sacred architecture, while Le Corbusier's explorations of various forms of housing reveal the social upheavals of the early twentieth century. As western civilization has become increasingly complex it has become more difficult to pinpoint where our values lie, yet the museum is perhaps the building type that best reveals our cultural agenda. Certainly the war between the Modernists and the Post-Modernists is, in significant part, being fought on the battleground of museums. More important, in this age of general comfort, if not affluence, where social inequities are often expressed in sophisticated and subtle terms that are at home in the world of art, the museum has taken on a highly charged significance. Not only does the character of the contemporary museum come close to the core of recent shifts in architectural theory and ideology, but defining it as an institution now involves confronting a wide range of social and political phenomena.

I shall categorize, as I see them, some architectural implications of our archetypal museum – of the popular

art museum in the centre of town – which involve sometimes dilemmas, always challenges – with some reference to the four museum projects in our office that are in the design stage now. I shall end with an approach to the façade as a manifestation of urban context and as an example of evolving Classicism. This latter will be explicitly a justification of an aspect of our National Gallery design, an apologia for our work, which is what you might expect from any talking architect, in the end.

The popular art museum in the centre of town is not only a repository for the conservation and display of works of art, it is an explicitly didactic institution, involving educational components – places for instruction via lectures, cinema, television, computers, as well as books. It includes perhaps an artist's studio. It accommodates a big staff beyond that of the traditional curators and conservators to administer the new programmes. It has a shop and a restaurant with kitchen. It is often a place for entertainment (especially in America) – a presumably beautiful and monumental environment for openings and other ceremonies. The ratio of space for art versus support space in the nineteenth-century museum was something like 9 to 1; today it is more like 1 to 2 – that is, only one-third of the total space might be for displaying art.

The art museum today has expanded its market – it is no longer a place for a cultural élite; where attendance at the National Gallery was a little over half a million visitors per year in the mid-nineteenth century, its attendance is now over 3,000,000 per year – spanning a wide range of taste, cultures and nationalities – accommodated of course by active educational programmes.

Many art museums in the United States are moving downtown. The site for the new building we are designing for the Laguna Gloria Art Museum is in the centre of town: it is moving from an idyllic but remote suburb of Austin, Texas. Our Seattle Art Museum is moving from a kind of élitist park at the edge of town to a dense urban site in the central business district, essentially to attract a wider range of people, to increase the museum's attendance and enhance its influence. By this juxtaposition of art and commerce it will perhaps also promote an immediacy between fine art and everyday life which has been lost in the modern experience. The creation of the image of the museum building in a dense urban setting is, of course, a significant architectural challenge.

Part of the challenge lies in the need to reassess the nature of art exhibition today. Whereas in the past collections were relatively static, today they are relatively

changeable, owing to increased purchasing programmes, the ever-increasing supply of new work available to museums that exhibit contemporary art, and the advent of the temporary and travelling exhibition where new art is displayed or old art is combined in new ways according to a theme. This requires various degrees of flexibility in spatial configuration and lighting and promotes various approaches to the architectural setting for art, including spaces that are symbolically neutral or historical or modern-mechanistic, that are contained or flowing in character.

Lighting has always been of the greatest significance in the display of art, of course. Most museums combine daylight, with its chromatic and dynamic quality, and artificial light, with its more or less sophisticated opportunities for control and variation. And there is the important consideration today of conforming to strict conservation standards for controlling light levels and minimizing exposure to ultraviolet rays harmful to pigments.

I should like to list some of our responses as architects to the issues I have enumerated – issues deriving from the current role of the art museum as a didactic, popular, urban institution, requiring complex approaches to display. Some of these issues may seem easy to define and simple to handle, but you will note they occur in combination with each other and, when combined, they become sometimes contradictory and often complex.

The enormous didactic ingredient in the art museum programme makes for inevitable spatial complexity. Whereas the original Wilkins fabric of the National Gallery is essentially a series of rooms *en suite*, more or less of the same size, with the first floor corresponding spatially and structurally to the ground floor, our art museum is a combination of various-sized spaces, open and closed, with extremely complex and varied relationships with each other. This complexity is compounded by the vertical configuration of spaces required on a dense urban site. The loading bay for the huge service vehicles, for instance, might sit above the lecture theatre, be adjacent to the museum shop on one side and the security offices on the other, be below the computer library, which is in turn below the gallery containing the Masaccios; and all of this must fit in with Ove Arup's very significant structural and mechanical requirements and accommodate to necessary governmental codes for safety. In our office we call this aspect of design the Chinese puzzle.

Now the Chinese puzzle, although it must be solved, is not the greatest challenge. An ingenious Swiss watch-

maker could solve it. More significant architecturally is the resultant remoteness of the art. When you enter the museum you might wonder, are you in a museum or an airport? And by the time you reach the art, you are either worn down by the banality of the maze you have traversed, or jaded by the drama of the spatial, symbolic, or chromatic fantasies the architect has ejaculated you through. The art, when you reach it, has become a kind of anticlimax – in fact, dull as you perceive it with your, by then, constricted pupils, jaded sensibilities, and loss of orientation.

But besides the spatial complexity and remoteness of the art is the probable lack of institutional identity as you enter the building, where you are immediately confronted by an information desk, a maze of graphic communication, a commercial shop, cloak room counters, and security arrangements. All of this can be convenient and reassuring for the visitor, but can make for an effect that is mean.

Our architectural approach to these three problems of spatial complexity, remoteness of the art, and loss of institutional identity is to make the spatial system hierarchical – perceptually simple in its major order if actually intricate in its minor order; to make the long progression up to or over to the art direct, simple, and imageful – often with a very big, single-run stair; and to design the entrance lobby so that visitors at first perceive simple architectural forms with generous scale that bespeak an institution; and then soon after, they can be reassured by the clutter of specific functional and communicative elements which will then look good and work well in their larger context.

All of this comes down, in the end, to questions of clarity and scale – of clarity in the sequential and progressional experience of reaching the art, of scale in the crucial combination of big and little elements in the complex arrangement of today's art museum. We have tried to avoid creating a maze of medium-scale elements without that hierarchical order which creates the clarity and tension of good architecture and makes the building appropriately institutional inside and civic outside.

Concerning the galleries themselves as a setting for art:

The galleries should be rooms for looking at paintings in, not contraptions for containing them. The architecture should not overshadow the art.

Art museums have followed two distinct traditions in the display of paintings: one where paintings are set in an explicit architectural context generally analogous stylistically with the period of the painting; for example,

the rooms of the Pitti Palace, where Pietro da Cortona's mural on the ceiling and his easel painting on the wall are found in the same gallery. The other extreme is the early Museum of Modern Art, where neutral and flexible spaces encourage changing exhibits and provide a background that is not analogous with the historical imagery of the painting. Here, natural light is usually eliminated and the background is designed as a stage set to be manipulated by the curator and changed at frequent intervals. The walls are usually white.

Our approach lies between these two extremes. It allows some flexibility and yet suggests an abstraction, an elemental expression, of the setting that the artists anticipated when painting the pictures. A positive, associative context, we think, renders the paintings real and memorable for viewers, whereas an 'anonymous', early-MoMA context tends to make the art resemble reproductions in a book. However, we feel the gallery setting should not replicate the chapels or palace rooms in which historical paintings were originally hung but should recall instead the substantial architectural character and the air of permanence of these spaces.

Concerning the galleries as rooms:

In palaces, paintings were displayed in rectangular rooms and lit by windows. Nineteenth-century galleries were based on these palace rooms but windows were replaced by roof monitors. In the twentieth century, galleries tend to be designed as flowing space or space that can be temporarily defined, and the technical requirements of lighting are expressed as positive architectural elements.

In the National Gallery, to suit the character of its Renaissance collection, but also in our other art museum designs, we have returned to the earlier tradition. Galleries that are rooms defined by familiar, traditional walls, floors, ceilings, doors, and windows are more appropriate, we feel, for exhibiting paintings than are galleries where the forms and symbols are original, mechanistic, and modern.

A further question of architectural scale lies in the design of gallery spaces in relation to the size of the paintings, the scale of their images, and the number of people looking at them. In the Early Renaissance collection of the National Gallery, for instance, we have relatively small paintings with intricate images. They were created for small chapels or the relatively small rooms of Quattrocento palaces and burghers' houses, and were seen originally by perhaps several dozen people a day. These paintings, as artistic icons, are now seen by thousands of

people per day – the over-three million visitors a year to the National Gallery correspond to about one-third of the whole population of the Italian peninsula in the fifteenth century. The galleries themselves must accommodate, then, small objects and large crowds. The rooms must be large enough to take the crowds but small enough not to overwhelm the paintings. Doors between galleries must be relatively wide but the axial vistas, seen through room openings, must not be too long or Baroque grand, to respect the scale of the early Renaissance paintings. I think part of the secret here is (like God for Mies van der Rohe) in the details. Architectural detail in the galleries must be small in scale and highly refined to relate to the scale and intimacy of many of the paintings.

In lighting the galleries we must accommodate other sets of contradictory requirements, this time of architecture and science: each gallery space should be an elemental room, yet, at the same time, it must admit light in a way that does not harm the paintings.

In our current work we have tried for:

- Natural daylight in the galleries but no direct sunlight or ultraviolet rays on the paintings.
- Illumination (a mixture of natural and artificial light) at the lower wall surface where the paintings hang, but no halo of bright light at the top of the wall.
- No overt, mechanical expression of the means of admitting and controlling natural or artificial light.
- Daylight that is recognizable as daylight – and therefore no horizontal daylight systems of skylights, but rather clerestories with recognizable windows in them, and, of course, appropriately protected to control the amount of daylight. Also night or late winter afternoon lighting that does not try to replicate natural light.
- An image of window as symbol. An art museum can have few windows – this is because of the need for wall space inside to hang the paintings and for protection against excessive daylight to conserve the paintings. Security is also an issue. But an occasional opportunity to look out while in galleries is desirable for two reasons: a window in this context is what makes a gallery a room, a room for art rather than a tomb for art; it makes of the gallery a true place – by making the gallery familiar and by giving the viewers the chance occasionally to be reminded of where they are, to see the real world and identify with it while within the magical world of art; this makes the magic more magic through the comparison. This we have

accomplished through spatial layering, where the window is in an inner wall set back from the exterior wall which has its own window: so you see the inner symbolic window juxtaposed on an outer ‘true’ window, and thus the inner window of the gallery is shielded from direct rays of the sun.

Now for the exterior of the popular art museum in the centre of town.

Seen from outside, a building without windows almost inevitably looks stark and hostile – associated with forts or jails; yet a popular museum must look open and inviting. Thus the quality of the entrance is important and the ornamentation of the exterior walls significant. Wilkins did well in the National Gallery with his central open portico, which is inviting, and his walls decorated with pilasters, mouldings, and those niches which are a symbolic form of window.

Then there is the question of presence. The art museum in the centre of town is a building of high civic importance, but it is smaller than the buildings around it. This is especially true in the United States, where the low museum is often framed by high-rise office buildings. Also the location of the art museum may not be special in the hierarchical plan of the city – it may not, for instance, be a focus at the end of an axial boulevard. As an institution in the thick of things, it is along a street. This is the case with the Whitney and Guggenheim museums and the Museum of Modern Art in New York City and with our museum in Seattle.

How do these important institutional buildings surrounded by less important but bigger private buildings achieve presence? Again, through architectural scale – by being small buildings with big scale. But again, the big scale must be juxtaposed with little scale – the big scale for presence, the little scale for friendliness – to make you comfortable as an individual in a monumental context: this is a truly Italian delight. But is is also English: in Trafalgar Square there is the poignant juxtaposition of Nelson’s huge Corinthian column with the much smaller Corinthian columns of the portico of the National Gallery; these are almost country-house-domestic in their size and scale.

What I say here about urbanity and scale may seem obvious, but it implies an opposite approach to that of some recently designed galleries. The designs of urban museums in Stuttgart, Mönchengladbach and Los Angeles employ combinations of medium-scale elements in a spatial play of pavilions and plazas to be experienced sequentially, as in a medieval village or a Hadrian’s Villa.

In these museums scale is extended, not through the juxtaposition of big and small within the confines of the urban block, but, as it was in Modern architecture, through a breaking of the limits of the urban block – skyways span streets, outdoor public routes bisect the building.

Besides these questions of the small building with architectural presence, the inviting building with windowless walls, and the urban building conforming to the ordinary spatial system of the city, there is the question of context. An urban building should be designed from the outside in as well as from the inside out – a tradition that was temporarily forgotten in the anti-urban days of Modern architecture. Attention to context in the design of urban architecture promotes harmony and a sense of the whole. Harmony can be achieved through contrast or analogy – that is, the grey suit with the grey necktie or the grey suit with the red necktie – or through both – the grey suit with the grey necktie with red polka dots. Then also there is room for disharmony in artistic, contextual composition – this to acknowledge valid contradictions and discontinuities within the whole and to make the overall harmony more sweet.

Many museum projects today are extensions of older museums. Respect for the whole in these cases is especially significant, and here the idea of the building as fragment, the building that inflects, is important. You will see that the National Gallery extension as we have designed it, although separate from the original Wilkins fabric, inflects toward the main building. It is a kind of fragment; it could not stand alone, or make sense if the old building were somehow to disappear. At the same time we hope the new building is not subservient in its acknowledgement of the old building. It forms part of a greater whole, but it is also a building on its own and of its own time, contrasting tensely with, and being analogous to, the original building.

Lastly, symbolism and graphics. Today's art museum with its changing shows is like a theatre and needs graphics, outside and in, that are sometimes the equivalent of a marquee – or should the graphics outside be explicitly instructive like the billboard façade of the Bibliothèque Sainte-Geneviève engraved with the names of hundreds of scholars? I also like the old, now destroyed, Neue Pinakothek in Munich with its great mosaic depiction of a picture on its front façade. But don't worry, we've not tried these graphic ideas out on the National Gallery; Trafalgar Square is not to become Leicester Square.

This paper has been full of conjunctive yet's and but's – but that's natural in any analysis of a current urban art museum which is popular *yet* esoteric, closed *but* open, monumental *yet* inviting, an accommodating setting for the art *but* a work of art itself, and so on, and so on.

This could have been my first lecture without slides – but I shall wake you up with a coda of slides – a short description of an architectural idea that is good to remind ourselves of – and which, as I have said, might be taken as an anticipatory apologia for aspects of our National Gallery design.

The idea is that today's deviation is tomorrow's convention. I shall refer to a few evolutionary changes as I see them within the history of Classical architecture. The emphasis will be less on any consistency of the elements of Classicism or rigidity of their rules of combination, and more on their inherent flexibility and their potential for achieving lively art.

Here are some now familiar Classical conformations involving more or less symbolism and form:

Fig. 1. The pilaster: What did the first critic who saw one of these say? What! A column stuck on a wall – a structural element as a decoration – what kind of oxymoron is this – or is it a joke? (Perhaps artists are never so serious as when they are accused of joking.)

Fig. 2. The giant order: Juxtaposed pilasters of different sizes and orders! How confusing the forms and scale! (But this Michelangelo outrage initiated *the* monumental tradition for promoting hierarchies of scale for aesthetic and community expression in architecture.)

Fig. 3. And then there is St Martin-in-the-Fields – a medieval spire on a Roman temple? How uncomfortable! (But didn't it become *the* archetypal church of the later eighteenth and early nineteenth centuries in the United States?)

Fig. 4. A church as a basilica? How can a Roman law court correspond to a Christian sanctuary?

Fig. 5. Superimposed temples reflecting the basilica inside? Muddling through, Italian-style!

Fig. 6. An archaic temple as a Christian Church? Good gods!

Fig. 7. Malcontenta – a country house with a temple-front! – which became a prototype for stately houses and Southern plantations.

Fig. 8. Frank Lloyd Wright said of St Peter's: Michelangelo built a temple, slung the Pantheon on top

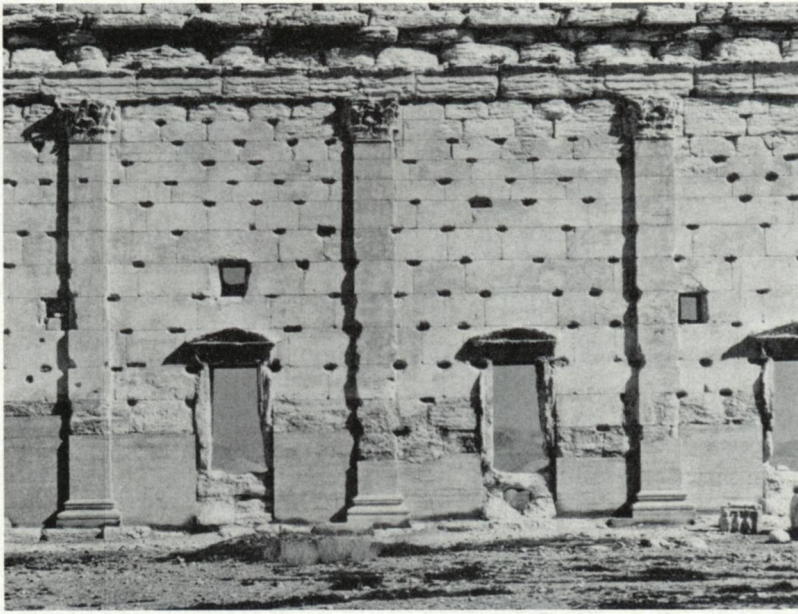


Fig. 1. *Temple of Bel, Palmyra*
(Photo: Yvan Butler)

Fig. 2. *Palazzo dei Conservatori, Piazza del Campidoglio, Rome*
(Photo: Leonard von Matt, Buochs)



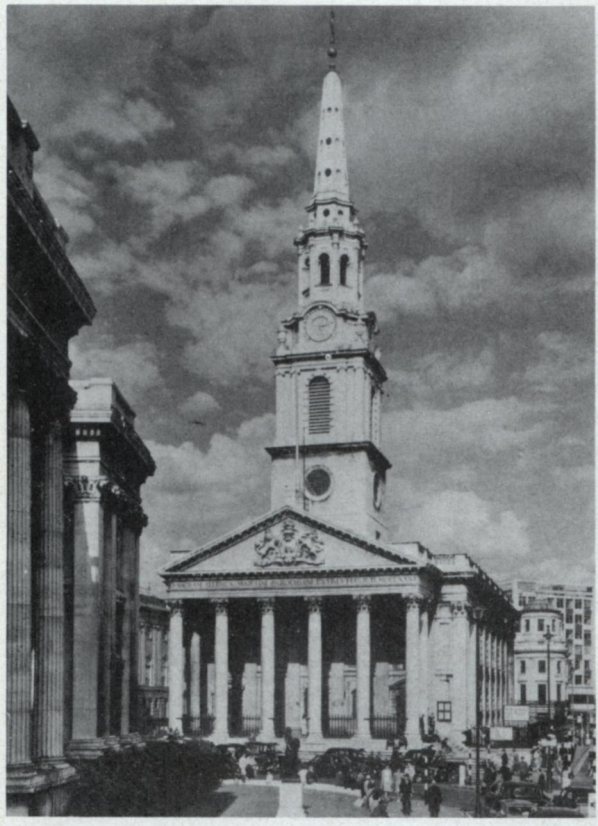


Fig. 3. *St Martin-in-the-Fields, London*
(Photo: A. F. Kersting)



Fig. 4. *S. Spirito, Florence*
(Photo: Anderson, Rome)

Fig. 5. *S. Giorgio Maggiore, Venice*



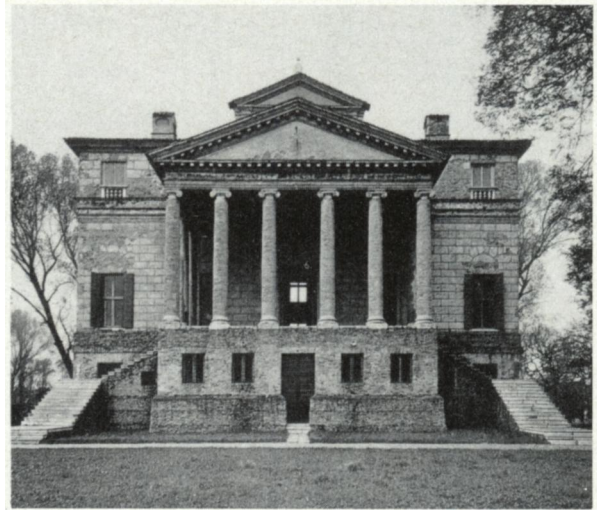
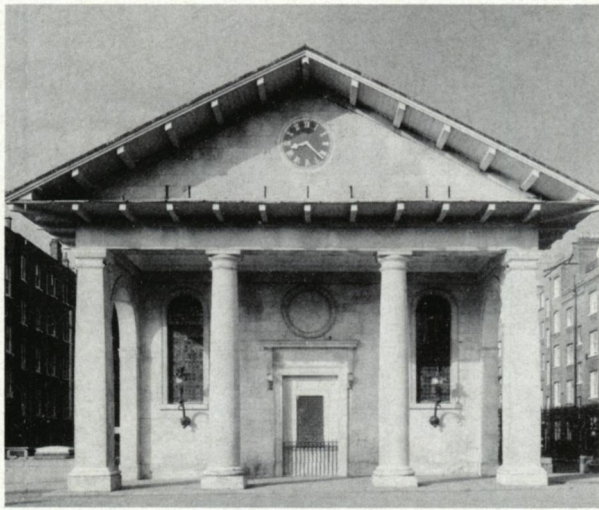


Fig. 6. *St Paul's, Covent Garden*
(Photo: Colin Westwood)

Fig. 7. *Villa Foscari, 'La Malcontenta',
Vicenza*

Fig. 8. *St Paul's Cathedral, London*
(Photo: Royal Commission on the Historical
Monuments of England)

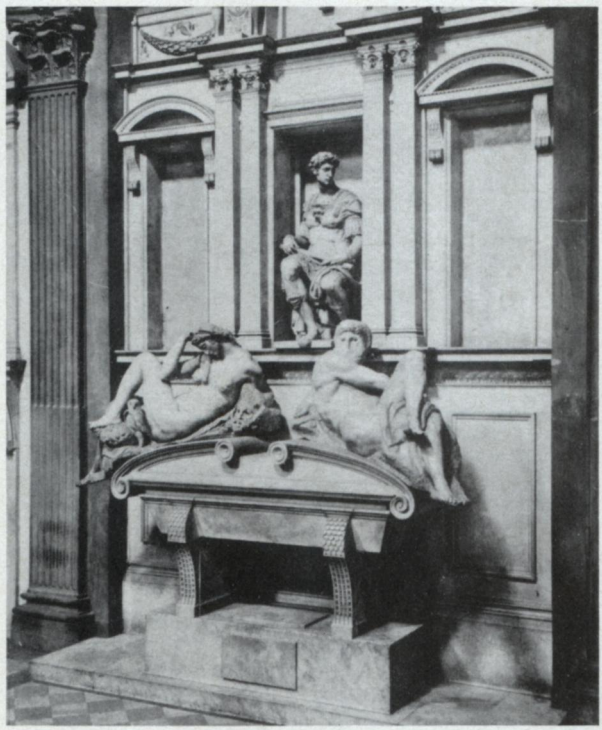
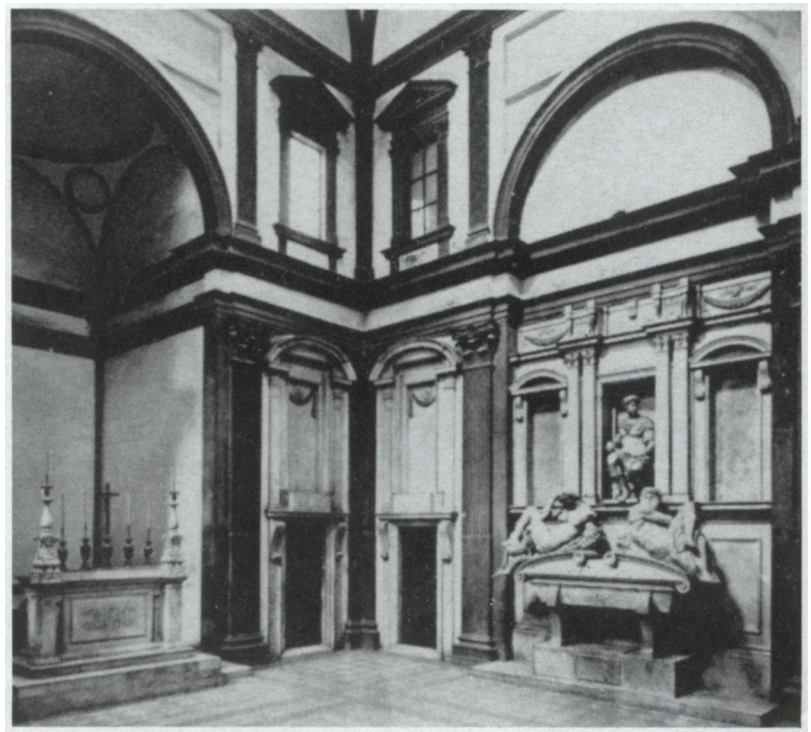


Fig. 9. Medici Chapel, Florence
(Photo: Alinari, Florence)



Fig. 10. Doorway, Castleward House, County
Down, Ireland
(Photo: Desmond Guinness and William Ryan)

Fig. 11. Medici Chapel, Florence
(Photo: Alinari, Florence)



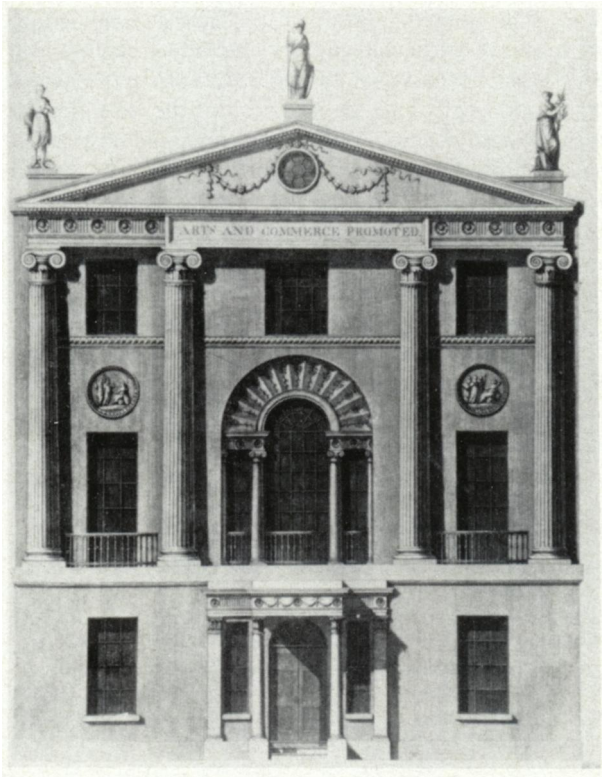


Fig. 12. *The Adelphi*. Elevation of the Royal Society of Arts. Engraved 1775
(Photo: Joe Thompson)

Fig. 13. National Gallery, Berlin
(Photo: David L. Hirsch)



and called it a day. (Actually, Brunelleschi did it first.) (I know this is not St Peter's.)

Fig. 9. Reclining figures on a pediment? I hope they don't doze off and fall down.

Fig. 10. A broken pediment? 'Tis a pity she's a half.

Fig. 11. Classical cornices designed to control dripping rain and modulate shadows in the sun – inside? Another one of those architects' tricks.

Fig. 12. Delicate interior Roman plaster work – on the outside? How fussy, Mr Adam.

Fig. 13. And lastly, if I may consider Mies van der Rohe a Classical architect in spirit: an old-fashioned industrial vernacular vocabulary for a modern civic building?

We now love these examples of what were once deviations but are now archetypes; but let us remember that evolutionary variation is sometimes harder to accept than revolutionary invention in architecture.

You will note I have not included Mannerist deviations that did not become archetypes. Mannerist architecture is architecture that was strange then and is now. This is because in Mannerist architecture deviation is intrinsic; deviations in Mannerist buildings are usually system-wide rather than expedient; they form part of a whole approach to composition which embraces the strange or ambiguous.

You will note lastly that many of the examples illustrated above are English. The genius of English Classicism in architecture derives largely from its deviations from the norm. Some of the deviations accommodate the intrusion of circumstance, while others represent evolu-

tions that shift the norm. All Classical architecture balances the particular and the individual against the general and the universal. In England, the balance is often subtle and oscillating; the incursion of the exceptional, even the idiosyncratic, on the elemental and abstract is barely resolved, and equilibrium is precariously maintained. As a result, a tension and richness of composition are achieved that enliven the basic Classical vocabulary and make English Classicism supremely vivid and poignant.

In this context, the essential purism of Lord Burlington and his circle is an exception within a tradition that is more accurately represented by the mannerist (not Mannerist) tendencies of Wren, Hawksmoor, Vanbrugh, Archer, Soane, Greek Thomson, and the Lutyens of 'the high game'.

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- Figs. 9 and 11. Murray, Peter, *The Architecture of the Italian Renaissance*, London, Batsford, 1963, plates 109 and 108.
- Fig. 10. Guinness, Desmond, and Ryan, William, *Irish Houses and Castles*. New York, The Viking Press, 1971, p.71.
- Fig. 12. Beard, Geoffrey, *The Work of Robert Adam*. New York, Arco Publishing Co. 1978, plate 112.
- Fig. 13. Schulze, Franz, *Mies van der Rohe: A Critical Biography*. Chicago, University of Chicago Press, 1985, plate 206.

DISCUSSION

MR COLIN AMERY (Architecture critic, *Financial Times*): I am interested in your mentioning the associational qualities of architecture, something we are all concerned about as the modern movement moves away, because that movement seemed to lack associative qualities. What do you see as the associative qualities in a modern museum?

THE LECTURER: The Modernists of the heroic period did, of course, disown symbolism or associational elements in architecture. Their architecture implied that it derived from the requirements of function and structure. This kind of resultant aesthetic certainly eschewed any historical associative content. Their architecture was not a style; it did not admit to vocabulary as such, but rather forms evolved

automatically from functional and structural requirements, as I have said. They did not promote meaning in the work but rather expression. It is as if Modernist architects took the Vitruvian description of architecture – 'commodity, firmness and delight' – and revised it to read 'commodity and firmness equal delight'. But we all know that Modern architects didn't practise what they preached. Certainly those in the mainstream of the movement represented by the Bauhaus didn't, for instance, when they adapted an existing industrial vernacular vocabulary, a machine aesthetic, as identifiable as the Renaissance adaption of the Roman orders, which proclaimed their progressive-technical and social-utopian biases and their anti-historical intent.

Now that we can admit to an inevitable associational

element in our art as an important dimension for enriching it, what should association refer to – especially in museums? The answer is, I think, many things – and that depends. On the outside, the associational or symbolic content of the façades might derive from the particular urban context – evolving from it and/or contrasting with it or from regional tradition. On the inside, the immediate setting for the art might evoke the ambience the artist anticipated for his art or it might contrast with it. The analogous setting should probably not be historically literal, but symbolically allusive. Thus the gallery for contemporary painting might suggest the large loft space, New York SoHo style, where the artist painted under artificial light at 3 a.m. Our galleries for the Early Renaissance collection in the National Gallery will be associationally both loft-like and Quattrocento. But the opposite approach can work beautifully, as in post-war Italy where great museum architecture often involved the juxtapositions of Modern art in historical palatial rooms or historical art in abstract or industrial-like Modern interiors. So the answer is, I think, there is no one ideological stance – there is no place today for specific ideological symbolic promotions, like those of the Oxford and Cambridge movements in the last century – in the use of association, but there is on the other hand a recognition that association is inevitable in the perception of form, and in the creation of it, so relax and enjoy it.

MR GEORGE WEST (Architect): What do you think of the architectural subtlety or otherwise of Trafalgar Square? Could you give us some idea, when you stand in the square, of what you see as its architectural form and its dominant features, what you feel about the square and how you see the extension which runs out of the square? Would you like to tell us about the subtleties which you actually see in the square?

THE LECTURER: Well, Trafalgar Square is not easy to like, or identify, as a simple enclosed spatial entity; it is not like one of the Georgian squares London is famous for, like Bedford Square, for instance, but we should not hold that against it. Trafalgar Square derives its effect, its sense of place, largely from the dominance of the central sculptural form, that of the column. It is less an enclosed square than a space that accommodates to and is identified by the great vertical shaft – not unlike the high-reader signs of the American commercial strip that promote identity along those directional configurations.

The buildings around Trafalgar Square can therefore be much less unified, less enclosing as architectural elements than we would expect in the typical square, because of that column. There are also the sensitive modulations of the floor of the Square – I refer to the retaining wall at the northern end which does create a sense of enclosure there – evidently the original fields sloped up at this point. And while Canada

House and South Africa House are more free-standing than enclosing in their make-up, they are analogous to each other in style, material, scale and height. Denise Scott Brown has pointed out that the very focused activity of the Square, pedestrian and vehicular, contributes to its sense of identity and unity – and the consistent pattern of pigeons also helps. Another thing I like about Trafalgar Square is the juxtaposition of the super-sized Corinthian column cum Nelson and the normal-sized Corinthian columns of the portico of the National Gallery: this discord in scale contributes tension and vitality to this urban composition, and restores a balance between the ‘too big’ column and the ‘too small’ scale of the central building which is almost domestic, and that in turn is poignantly right for an English National Gallery. In our design for the extension, you will see we have tried to promote spatial enclosure for this corner of the Square via the shape of the plan, and a continuity with the original Wilkins façade through an inflection of the plan of the front and the rhythmic configuration of our pilasters on the façade. The pilasters are identical to Wilkins’, and their rhythm takes after that of Wilkins’ pilasters and columns which is the essential ingredient of his façade, and its glory – especially as seen obliquely. Our building, as you will see, does not attempt to complement St Martin-in-the-Fields but to extend the National Gallery.

MR FLORIAN BEIGEL (Architect): You made reference to Mies van der Rohe’s National Gallery in Berlin, showing us a photo of it in a series of slides which supported your argument about Classical architecture. In my view Mies’s classicism is largely based on his concern for structure and construction. How does his approach inform your design?

THE LECTURER: Mies van der Rohe combined flowing space and enclosed space, and the steel frame and glass, and the industrial symbolism of standard steel frame sections in glorious ways. We decided early on to make the new extension analogous to, rather than contrasting with, the old Masonry Neo-Classical building, although we have not been literal in our Classical interpretations, as I said in the apologia in my lecture. But the south side of our extension, as you will see, does employ a Miesian vocabulary with also Brunel-Paxton overtones – or at least we made that analogy as we designed it. The resultant contrasting façades, front and side, reflect the contextual approach of our building accommodating different urban contexts on each side of our complex urban site. And I love Mies most when he says ‘God is in the details’. Do you think he would have capitalized Details too?

MR BRENT RICHARDS (Architect): In making an extension to an existing major building in an important square such as this, the key issue must be to decide what the new relationship is – can it successfully be both a response

to the existing building and to the wider urban context?

THE LECTURER: There is danger in any path you take. We decided early on, as I have said, to make the extension architecturally analogous to the original building and therefore also not contrapuntal to St Martin-in-the-Fields. St Martin-in-the-Fields, through its spire, remains the unique vertical focus and, as a kind of Classical temple, *the* forcefully complete composition at the edge of the Square. Our extension, complementary in position but not in form with the church, becomes truly an extension of the National Gallery, at once a continuation of it and, in its rhythmic configuration, an ending to it, at once a kind of coda and a diminuendo, we hope.

MR RICHARDS: Do you think, therefore, that becoming a good neighbour, in an urban context, is the more vital relationship?

THE LECTURER: I think you should always try to be a good neighbour in a city or a town, although sometimes being a good neighbour is not necessarily being analogous to your neighbour. Sometimes you really need to be different, if still a good, neighbour. This might be because the neighbourhood needs spicing up, or because the interior needs of your building demand an exterior that is very different from its neighbours. Cities are constantly evolving, and there are moments when there should be an uncomfortable confrontation expressing some inherent contradictions that come up in any evolving and dynamic situation. Valid discord is an old and basic phenomenon in art. How about the Piazza San Marco, where a strident Byzantine cathedral confronts a patterned 'Ruskinian' Gothic palace across from a highly relieved Renaissance library?

This kind of qualified architectural neighbourliness is one of the things that makes London different from Paris, where literal neighbourly unity is the norm. London's surprises and sometimes violent juxtapositions make it for today one of the most exciting cities in the world architecturally in my opinion – along with Los Angeles.

There is a danger in being too concerned with aesthetic urban composition, and not acknowledging inevitable contradictory evolutionary phenomena in cities: the naïvely 'do-gooder' urban design codes proliferating in the United States, along with design review boards, are going to minimize mistakes but maximize mediocrity in our cities. Louis Kahn once said a city needs bad spaces as well as good spaces; he might have added that if you insure against all bad building you will also preclude really good building. Thank God historical Italy did not practise urban design as an academic discipline or promote it through bureaucratic codification.

MR SHERBAN CANTACUZINO (Secretary, Royal Fine Art

Commission): You mentioned at the beginning of your talk that you were requested by the Thomas Cubitt Trust to philosophize and not to talk about your own work. May I say how remarkable it was to me that you showed a number of slides without showing a single one of your own work? May I nevertheless ask you a question about architectural language? We had a Cubitt Lecture about two years ago on the subject of the use of the classical language in architecture today. What is your attitude to the use of the Orders today?

THE LECTURER: We are in a time similar to the great age of English architecture, the nineteenth century, which was an age of eclecticism. There is no one way, no one vocabulary. Our aesthetic emphasis cannot include universality and unity. Our approach cannot be ideological. That is why I think classic Modern architecture, orthodox Modern architecture, is dated and inappropriate now, because of its basis as a universal system, with a harmonious unity of parts.

We value now richness and ambiguity over unity and clarity; we glory in heterogeneity over homogeneity. Our Classicism therefore can admit strict interpretation when appropriate but its major manifestation, I think, will be what has been called Free Classicism, involving what I have just called the deviant development that has made Classicism evolutionary and rich and tense in the past. But this isn't the time for only Classicism – even in the same building! The Queen Anne front and the Mary Anne behind is sometimes OK.

MR PETER J. WYLDE: I was interested in the early part of your lecture, when you seemed to say that we have elevated the museum to the building type which now seems to carry the greatest load of symbolism. I wonder if I detected an indication that within a museum there is not really quite the content to support the architectural pyrotechnics and symbolism which have often been added in recent years?

THE LECTURER: I think the architecture of an art museum has to do the almost impossible: be an appropriately recessive setting for the art inside and an appropriately positive piece of art itself as an important civic monument. I think this can work.

MR MICHAEL WIGGINTON (Architect): I would like to ask first whether you think the Lloyds Building is 'complex and contradictory' enough? Relating that to what Colin Amery said earlier about the Modern movement fading away, to what extent do you think the apparent fading of the Modern movement is to do with what 'modern' architecture, the Modern movement, associated with, rather than its failure to associate with anything?

THE LECTURER: I think the associative content of the Modern movement in its heyday was appropriate – that glorying in technical and industrial elements of construction was timely, but perhaps it was a too narrow path, too ideologically focused even for then. But we are in a time that must accommodate diversity and we need to be tolerant and inclusive in how we connect with things. If the Modern vocabulary is accepted as *one* of the appropriate vocabularies for now, then I think it is appropriate.

The Lloyds Building I admire in its art. I think it is exceedingly skilful and effective. But I do see some irony in its symbolic glorification of the industrial revolution which began in this country two hundred years ago and is over now.

MR TERENCE BENDIXSON: Could I ask you to switch your attention to the suburbs? You spoke of art galleries in the United States moving downtown from the suburbs. Could you say a little bit about what you see happening in American suburbs; are they still scatterings of buildings held together or held apart by trees, or is there something of architectural interest other than isolated buildings taking place in the suburban expanse of American cities?

THE LECTURER: It is a huge subject which I have not thought about much recently, but Denise Scott Brown and I

did a study at Yale called *Learning from Levittown* about fifteen years ago. It was not published. What we did was considered almost as nasty and vulgar as our study of Las Vegas which was published. You notice we did not study the original idealized versions of the suburb with their ideal origins in England in the nineteenth and early twentieth century, but the later versions of the American developers' phenomenon that accommodated the masses by then freed by their automobiles. We approached our subject positively and non-judgementally in terms of taste. Now, as we all know, the contemporary American suburb is despised as a phenomenon of spatial sprawl and for its vulgar architectural styles, but what we found then was that these configurations, looked at without condescension, acknowledging the relativity of diverse taste cultures, were held together in the end by their symbolic dimension, and the amenity of natural landscape; a sense of a 'man's castle' was on the whole sustained.

THE CHAIRMAN: My final and pleasant duty is to propose a vote of thanks to Bob Venturi for a lecture which has given us a great insight into his thinking and concern with the work which we are going to see unveiled next week. I hope it has whetted your appetite to see the models and drawings at the National Gallery next week.