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The Problem of Stripes

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On a busy street in the Shibuya district of central Tokyo sits Mario Botta's Watari-um Museum of Contemporary Art. Commissioned in 1985 and completed in 1990, the small gallery extends just five storeys above street level and all but fills its tiny 157m<sup>2</sup> triangular site. Yet despite its compact size, the Watari-um exerts an emphatic presence and a monumental sense of scale, looming over the street, seemingly massive and impenetrable. In a letter written to his client after the completion of the building, Botta describes the design as a confrontation with the city: 'a strong and precise sign that had to resist the confusion and the contradiction of languages, styles and forms present in Tokyo'. In the architect's own words, the building's elevation manifests its very existence. What Botta neglects to mention is that this facade is entirely covered in stripes. Formed by the contrast of smooth concrete panels inlaid with horizontal bands of black granite, the stripes disguise the organisation of the Watari-um's height and exaggerate the extent of its breadth, creating an impression much greater than its built reality.

The Watari-um facade is certainly impressive, but what is more surprising is that there is so little engagement with its stripes. A monograph published to accompany the museum's inaugural exhibition of Botta's newly completed design makes very little mention of them. In fact, more references can be found to Japan's fire regulations and their impact on the building's design. And it seems this is not an isolated oversight. A review of later publications on the Watari-um and other similarly banded projects shows that critics continue to sidestep the matter of Botta's stripes. Their relative absence in existing studies of Botta's architecture appears to be symptomatic of a broader ignorance – perhaps even an active marginalisation – of stripes in architecture. This is despite a long history, particularly in western architecture, of expressed horizontal bands of coloured materials organised into decorative dichromatic oppositions, often over entire building facades. The widespread use of such a particular decorative device for nearly two millennia would seem to warrant some attention.

Early striped construction first emerged with the Roman practice of alternating brick and stone courses, known as *opus vittatum*. These bands of brick often formed lacing courses to reinforce the wall construction, but they also commonly appear as a facing to walls made from concrete and rubble. The technique allowed for the relatively expensive brickwork to be interspersed with poorer quality or re-used materials, but the resulting decorative finish cannot be overlooked as an equally important determinant. The banded technique was later used across the Byzantine Empire for its decorative and structural merits. In particular, it is said to be effective in resisting the forces of earthquakes.

# The Problem of Stripes

Ashley Paine

The resonance of these early practices was widespread. The Byzantine adoption of horizontally banded construction almost certainly influenced the use in Islamic architecture of contrasting courses of light and dark masonry, known as *ablaq*. According to Andrew Petersen, the emergence of *ablaq* is typically associated with southern Syria, where an abundance of pale limestone and black granite was used in striped construction as early as 1109. The technique spread across the Arab world, with notable examples including the banding of the Sultan Qaitbay Mosque in Cairo and the alternating coloured *voussairs* of the Great Mosque in Cordoba.

The Byzantine precedents also led to the parallel emergence of stripes in western architecture, namely on the famed Gothic churches of northern Italy in the twelfth and thirteenth centuries. This includes the celebrated – and very stripy – cathedrals of Siena, Genoa and Orvieto. Like their Roman predecessors, these medieval stripes were built both as an integral part of the wall construction (often using brick and stone) and as a veneer of banded stone applied over a concealed masonry structure. English architect George Edmund Street would later define these respective practices as part of the 'constructional' and 'encrusting' schools of polychromy. The latter is also linked to the Venetian use of patterned stone veneers, which is usually traced back to the early Christian and Roman use of geometric stone claddings and coloured tile mosaics. The encrusted Italian stripes seem to combine this tradition with the decorative aspects of banded Byzantine construction. Stripes also have an extended history in England. In addition to some remains of Roman construction, stripes can be found on a small number of medieval churches, such as the thirteenth-century Church of St Katharine in Irchester. They also feature predominantly on Rushton Triangular Lodge, a late-sixteenth-century architectural curiosity, and on the remains of the fifteenth-century Dent De Lion Castle gatehouse.

In the nineteenth century Italian stripes were 'rediscovered' by English architectural tourists and appropriated by proponents of the high Victorian movement. However, as historian Neil Jackson has noted, it was a slow and hesitant process from their (re)discovery to their later widespread application. It seems

that the earliest tourists in the first half of the century disregarded or simply ignored the stripes – John Ruskin cites one contemporary commentator's declaration that 'a practice more destructive of architectural grandeur can hardly be conceived'. Nevertheless, stripes were to find some early support in Ruskin's writings (he was particularly fond of the expression of the horizontal) and in the work of another eminent proponent of Victorian polychromy, William Butterfield. Some of the key buildings of this period include Butterfield's All Saints, Margaret Street, Richard Norman Shaw's New Scotland Yard and Street's All Saints, Maidenhead. Such was the popularity of this polychromatic architecture that it was copied widely – in places as diverse as India, Canada and Australia – well into the twentieth century.

Stripes also made an appearance in modern architecture, including Willem Greve's *Betondorp* Housing and some of Josef Hoffmann's work. Notably, they also appear on a small number of projects by Adolf Loos, including the Spanner Country House in Lower Austria and a few intriguing unbuilt works such as the black- and yellow-striped project for the Vienna War Ministry or his famous design for the Josephine Baker House. Curiously, the stripes on the latter have been associated with everything from primitive tattoos and the representation of the reclining female form to modernity itself, through the regular repetition of precisely scribed lines. While we can only speculate on Loos's exact intention, his third wife, Claire Beck Loos has said that the stripes were to be made from bands of black and white marble – a technique that, materially at least, appears to locate the work within the 'encrusted' Italian tradition.

In the second half of the twentieth century the practice of striped architecture expanded more widely, with notable projects including Marcel Breuer's extension to the Cleveland Museum of Art (recently extended with more stripes by Rafael Viñoly) and the Church of the Annunciation in Nazareth by Giovanni Muzio, alongside countless post-modern reinterpretations of the English and Italian precedents by the likes of Venturi & Scott Brown, James Stirling, Terry Farrell, Robert A M Stern and Michael Graves. But none have used stripes as persistently as Botta. First emerging as alternating bands of coloured concrete block on the Single-Family House in Ligornetto, Ticino, completed in 1976, stripes have since found their way into dozens of his projects in banded block, brick, concrete and stone, enveloping the facades of institutional, sacred and public buildings around the world.

While such an account of stripes necessarily falls short of forming a comprehensive survey – examples are too fragmented in time and too varied in kind (ie, not stripy enough) – it does

expose some contradictions, opening up a number of questions, speculations and insights on their use in architecture, and on their marginalisation in architectural discourse. To explore this further, we need to refocus, moving from a historical account of stripes to a re-evaluation of their appearance on the surfaces of architecture.

To begin, significant variations can be witnessed in the use of stripes even where a direct line of influence is purported to exist. Compare, for instance, the stripes of the medieval Italian tradition with those employed by proponents of the high Victorian movement. Formally, the Italian stripes are characterised by regular dichromatic bands of brick and stone used uniformly and insistently. In contrast, and despite their ostensible origins in the Italian tradition, the Victorian stripes typically consist of thin, unevenly sized and irregularly distributed bands of coloured brick or stone within a dominant dark-red brick background. But there is also a wide range of variation within the English practices. Butterfield, for instance, would often use three colours in a seemingly haphazard manner, alongside diapers and other more complex patterns. The Italian stripes were admired for their 'serene countenance': Butterfield's can only be described as dissonant, overwhelming and, as John Summerson admits in his famous essay on the architect, 'ugly'. Street's stripes, on the other hand, follow his conviction for the expression of truth and constructional logic. As George Hersey has noted, 'Under Street's rules the stripes might have been irregular but would have unequivocally expressed the inner divisions of the building.' Like Street, Norman Shaw also used stripes to assist the legibility of floor levels, but the overall effect is much more playful. Despite a common use of materials, and acknowledging developments in building technology, the core difference between the Italian and the English use of stripes is one of expression. The Victorian stripes simply don't look like the Italian ones – their variation in type and approach according to personal idiosyncrasy and ideology marks a clear discontinuity where a connection is meant to exist.

Pursuing the comparisons still further, many of the stripes used in the late twentieth century are understood as exercises in historicism, mediating both English and Italian precedents. Yet, again, they rarely resemble either. Instead, many architects appear to develop their own personal language of stripes: Botta's stripes never look like Stirling's, which never look like Graves', which never look like Venturi's. Certainly, Botta's stripes most closely resemble their (sometimes) alleged Italian origins – this includes certain chromatic parallels – and they feature dominantly in regular bands across his facades. Stirling's stripes, by contrast, tend to be

fatter and arguably less elegant than Botta's – consider, for example, the particularly brash pink and blue stripes of the Berlin Science Centre. Graves' stripes, on the other hand, are much more subtle, and often look more like a colourful form of rustication. Similarly, Venturi's stripes are mostly subservient in composition, but are carefully and explicitly determined as contextual and scaling devices.

Such strong distinctions even exist between practitioners in much tighter knit groups of contemporaries, such as the Ticinese architects in southern Switzerland, who include Ivano Gianola, Aurelio Galfetti and of course Botta. Here, a nineteenth-century regional practice of two-tone striped masonry is said to have been rediscovered by Gianola in the mid 1970s – although there is probably also a connection to the Italian tradition, given Ticino's proximity to northern Italy. And again, the Ticinese stripes vary considerably. For example, Botta uses stripes extensively and evenly over his facades, with bands typically continued around building corners, edges and voids: the result suggests an original, solid striated mass from which fenestration is carved out as a second order procedure. But this is quite distinct from Galfetti, whose stripes are largely confined to the outermost parts of the facade, stop suddenly at corners, and are not continued on re-entrant surfaces: an approach that undermines the solidity of the wall by highlighting its surface. Gianola's stripes are different again and tend to be thinner, less extensive on the facade than Botta's and less contingent on the location of fenestration, but share with Botta a concern for the expression of constructional depth. These comparisons not only reveal a disconnection between works and their ostensible historical referents, but also begin to suggest that the marginalisation of stripes in architectural discourse may be related to the fact that they have been used to construct individuated styles and recognisable identities. Understanding stripes as something 'styled' locates them in the margins of practice, distinct from architecture's 'core' social and intellectual concerns.

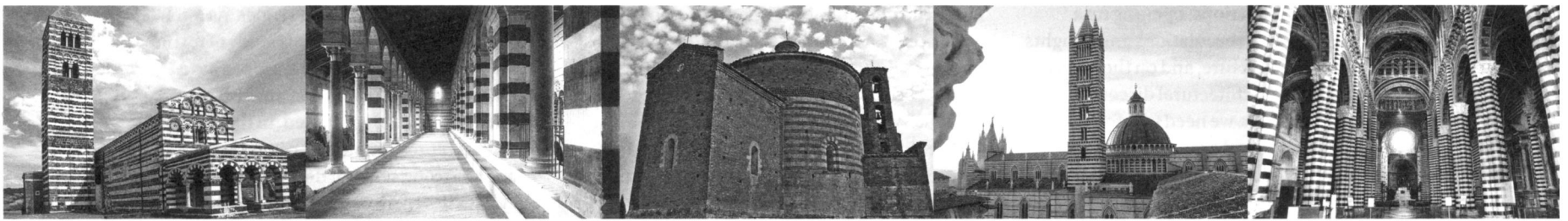
But the distinctions also tell us something of the stripes themselves. Rather than maintaining a consistent historical meaning, stripes seem to accept a wide range of conceptual attachments. In architecture, stripes have been argued variously as an expression of the natural strength of striated geology (and of a divine presence in their formation) by Ruskin; as tattoos and the symbolic representation of both women and modernity, as we have seen in the work of Loos; and as a mannerist form of rustication in Botta's work by the likes of Charles Jencks. Interestingly, however, these attachments don't seem to stick – they shift and change. The result is a semantic discontinuity and inconsistency that also emerges within

a broader cultural history of stripes. As Michel Pastoureau has revealed in his study of textile stripes since the middle ages, stripes have oscillated between a range of positive and negative associations. Indeed, in their earliest medieval representations, stripes typically carried a strong sense of deception, and it seems they have never entirely lost this pejorative association with the fraudulent, as witnessed even today in the familiar representations of clowns, tricksters and criminals in striped attire. Perhaps these themes of suspicion and deception, along with the ideational slipperiness of stripes, have helped to cement their questionable position in architecture.

And yet there may be a further explanation for the marginalisation of stripes, which has to do with the sense that they offer an all too easy visual reward, with their attractive display of colour, pattern and materiality. In addition to the influence of Italian Gothic, it was a desire for colour that propelled the Victorian interest in striped architectural polychromy. Street criticised nineteenth-century English architecture for its lack of warmth and richness. By promoting the use of horizontal bands which, in his opinion, best displayed constructional colour, he highlighted the sensual pleasure of polychromatic stripes. It is an association that risks the dismissal of stripes as a pleasure of the senses, rather than contributing to the intellectual pursuits of the mind, and to the fortitude of architecture.

Certainly, stripes construct an incredibly strong visual presence, drawing attention to themselves and their architectural supports. As such, they inaugurate a kind of theatre and drama on the facade – qualities that have again been routinely dismissed for their dishonesty and the simple visual gratification they offer. Stripes could also be said to highlight – even celebrate – the surface, which has long been treated with distrust in western culture through an association with inauthenticity and superficiality. Once again, these latent themes reinforce the peripheral framing of stripes, providing yet more evidence for their absence in the collective architectural consciousness.

While we might continue these speculations on the nature of stripes in architecture, in the end their marginalisation in existing discourse is perhaps due to another, larger problem of stripes: the fact that little can be said of them in a general sense. What does seem certain is that stripes cannot be adequately described as historical artefacts – they carry with them no fixed meaning, no firm association, no defined significance. Perhaps all that can be reasonably said of them concerns only their behaviour and appearance on the facade, and the realisation that stripes are nothing more, and nothing less, than visual tools for architectural composition, devoid of their own specific content.



Basilica of Saccargia, Sardinia, 1116

Pisa Cathedral, Twelfth Century

San Galgano, near Siena, Thirteenth Century

Siena Cathedral, Thirteenth Century

Siena Cathedral, interior, Thirteenth Century



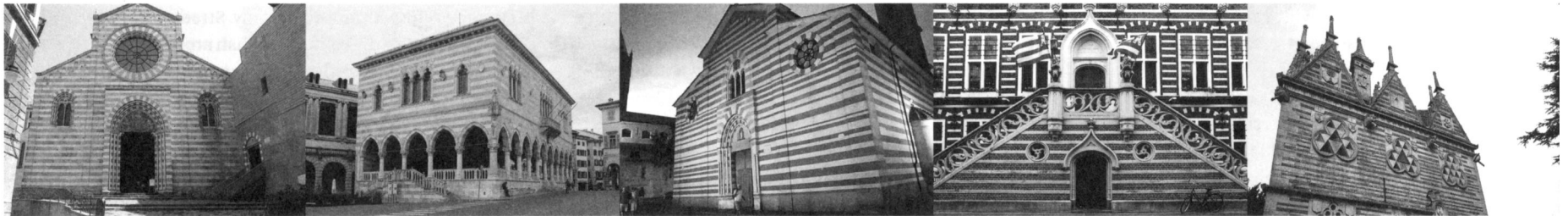
Orvieto Cathedral, Fourteenth Century

Baptistry, Pistoia, Fourteenth Century

Church of San Giovanni Battista, Monterosso, 1340

Baptistry of San Giovanni, Pisa, 1363

Church of San Giovanni Fuorcivitas, Pistoia, 1344



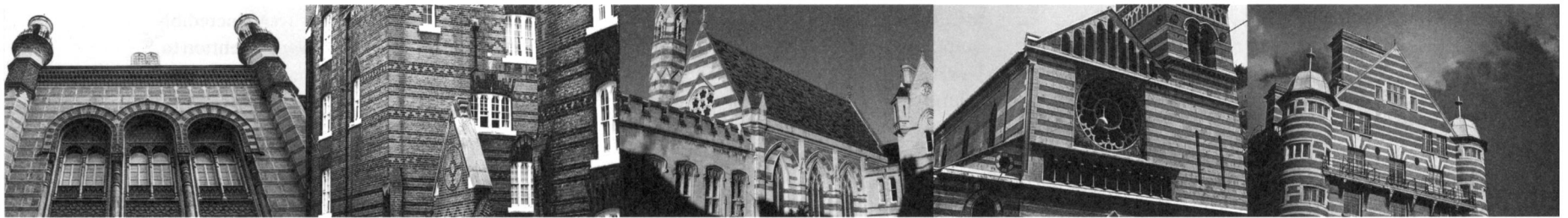
Sant'Agostino, Genoa, Thirteenth Century

Loggia del Lionello, Udine, 1457

Church of Santa Maria, Albenga, Thirteenth Century

Town Hall, Alkmaar, Sixteenth Century

Sir Thomas Tresham, Triangular Lodge, Rushton, 1597



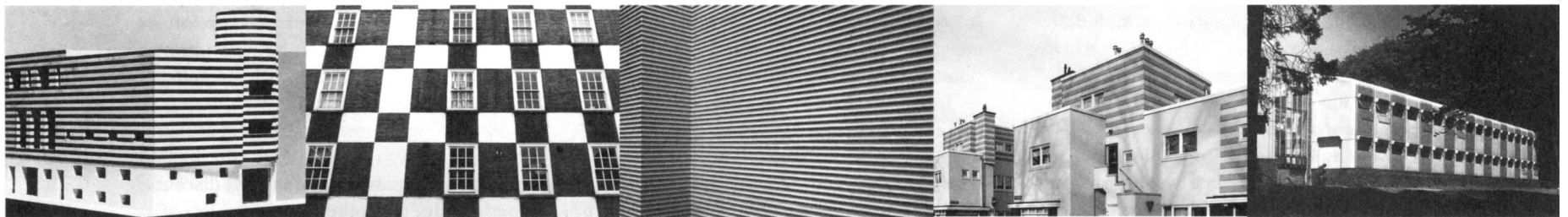
Otto Wagner, Rumbach Street Synagogue, Budapest, 1872

William Butterfield, All Saints, Margaret Street, London, 1852

William Butterfield, Balliol College, Oxford, 1857

George Edmund Street, Saint Paul's Within the Walls, Rome, 1873

Richard Norman Shaw, Albion House, Liverpool, 1898



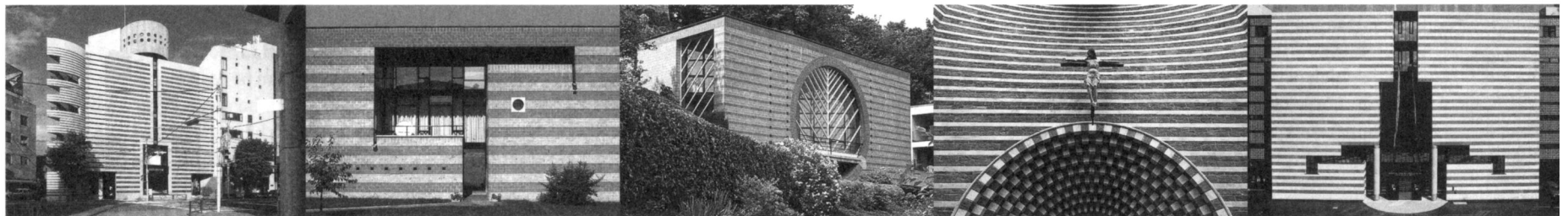
Adolf Loos, Josephine Baker House, 1928

Edwin Lutyens, Housing, Page Street, London, 1930

Josef Hoffmann, Austria Pavilion, Venice, 1934

Willem Greve, Betondorp Housing, Amsterdam, 1927

James Stirling, Olivetti Training School, Haslemere, 1969



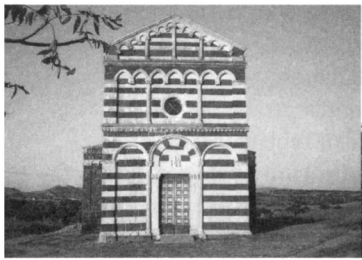
Mario Botta, Watari-um Museum, Tokyo, 1990

Mario Botta, House in Ligornetto, 1976

Mario Botta, House in Massagno, 1979

Mario Botta, Church of John the Baptist, Mogno, 1995

Mario Botta, Mediathèque, Villeurbanne, 1988



San Pietro delle Immagini, Bulzi, c 1225



St Clement's Church, West Thurrock, Fifteenth Century



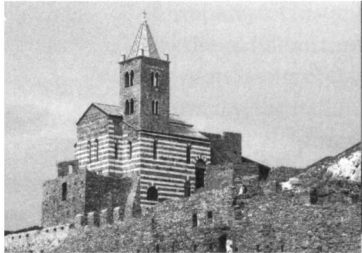
San Matteo, Genoa, 1278



Great Mosque, Cordoba, Tenth Century



Palazzo del Mercato Vecchio, Verona, Thirteenth Century



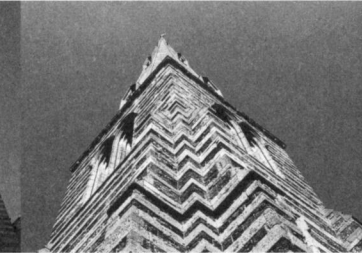
Church of St Peter, Portovenere, Thirteenth Century



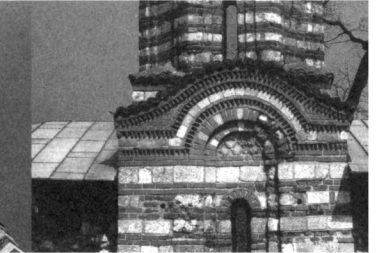
Prato Cathedral, 1356



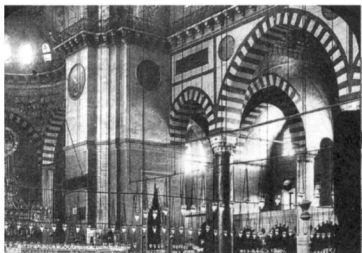
San Lorenzo Cathedral, Genoa, 1312



St Katharine's Church, Irchester, Thirteenth Century



Church of Saints Peter and Paul, Nikopol, Fourteenth Century



Süleymaniye Mosque, Istanbul, Sixteenth Century



Main church of Rila Monastery, Sofia, Nineteenth Century



Christian Friedrich Ludwig Förster, Dohány Street Synagogue, Budapest, 1859



Cathedral of Christ the Saviour, Banja Luka, c 1930



Carlo Maciachini, Cimitero Monumentale, Milan, 1866



John Francis Bentley, Westminster Cathedral, London, 1903



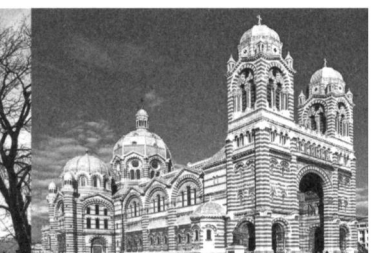
William Butterfield, St Augustine, London, 1871



Richard Norman Shaw, Alliance Assurance Offices, London, 1888



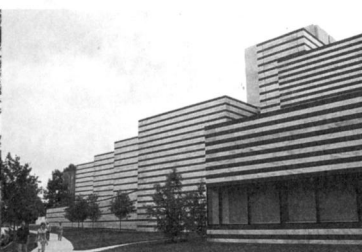
George Edmund Street, All Saints' Church, Boyne Hill, Maidenhead, 1857



Léon Vaudoyer & Henri-Jacques Espérendieu, Marseille Cathedral, 1896



Marcel Breuer, Education Wing, Cleveland Museum of Art, 1970



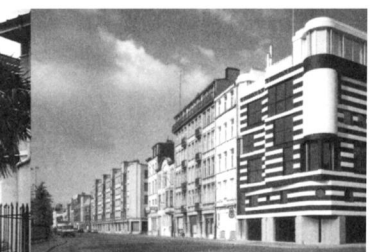
Rafael Vinoly, East Wing, Cleveland Museum of Art, 2009



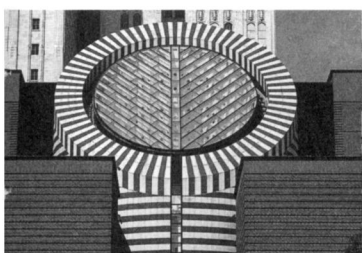
James Stirling & Michael Wilford, No 1 Poultry, London, 1986



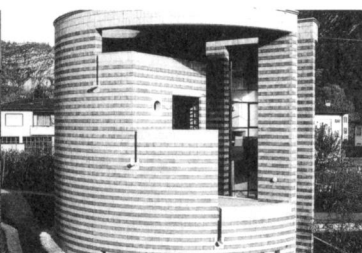
Aurelio Galfetti, Villa in Via Mirasole, Bellinzona, 1985



AWG Architecten, Van Roosmalen House, Antwerp, 1988



Mario Botta, Museum of Modern Art, San Francisco, 1994



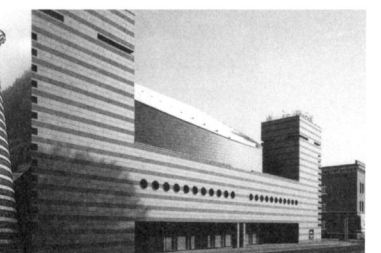
Mario Botta, House in Losone, 1989



Mario Botta, UBS Bank, Basel, 1995



Mario Botta, Theatre and Cultural Centre, Chambéry, 1987



Mario Botta, Harting Offices, Minden, 2001