

Architecture as Signs and Systems

For a Mannerist Time

Robert Venturi & Denise Scott Brown

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Architecture as Sign rather than Space

New Mannerism rather than Old Expressionism

ROBERT VENTURI

A New Mannerism, for Architecture as Sign

So here is complexity and contradiction as mannerism, or mannerism as the complexity and contradiction of today—in either case, today it's mannerism, not Modernism.

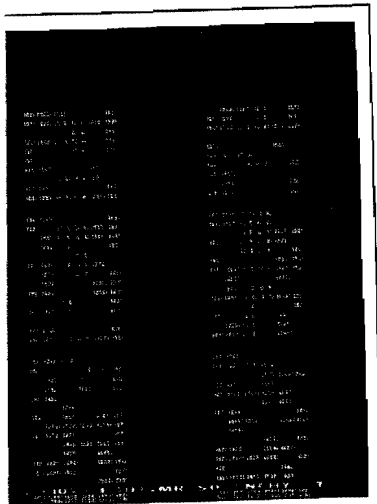
At the beginning of the twentieth century, an aesthetic revolution made sense via a Modern architecture that was a stylistic adaptation of a current vernacular/industrial way of building—just as in the mid-fifteenth century an aesthetic revolution made sense via a Renaissance architecture that was a stylistic revival of an ancient vocabulary, that of Roman architecture. At the same time, in the Modernist style an industrial vocabulary was paradoxically accommodated within an abstract aesthetic, just as in the Renaissance style a pagan/Classical vocabulary was paradoxically accommodated within an explicitly Christian culture. And can it now be said that an aesthetic evolution makes sense at the beginning of the twenty-first century, engaging a mannerist architecture evolved from the preceding style, that of classic Modernism—just as an aesthetic evolution made sense in the mid-sixteenth century engaging a mannerist architecture evolved from the preceding style, that of High Renaissance?

In *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* I referred to

a complex architecture, with its attendant contradictions, [as] not only a reaction to the banality or prettiness of current architecture. It [can also represent an] attitude common in . . . mannerist periods [and can also be] a continuous strain among diverse architects [in history]. Today this attitude is again relevant to both the medium of architecture and the program in architecture. First, the medium of architecture must be re-examined if the increased scope of our architecture as well as the complexity of its goals is to be expressed. Simplified forms or superficially complex forms will not work. Instead, the variety inherent in the ambiguity of visual perception must once more be

Shanghai, China, 2003

—and for Shanghai, the multimedial, today, and tomorrow! This is a city of LED media, juxtaposing symbolic, and graphic images at the same time. Each is a loft *and* a tower of information where dramatic fanfare is achieved by rather than from formal



上海浦东新区大团镇曹路村罗合服务点
AND AND RYDME IN LED DISPLAY

acknowledged and exploited. Second, the growing complexities of our functional programs must be acknowledged.¹

In that work, I described, through comparative analysis, historical examples of mannerist architecture, explicit and implicit, that acknowledge complexity and contradiction in their composition, but I did not prescribe a resultant architecture for the time. This lack of prescription was noted by Alan Chimacoff and Alan Plattus as positive in their essay in *The Architectural Record* of September 1983.² But here and now, through a reconsideration of complexity and contradiction as it currently evolves, I wish to prescribe a specific direction, if not a style—that of Architecture as Sign—and describe a specific manner, that of mannerism, explicitly appropriate for our time. I shall rely again here on analyses of historical examples of mannerist architecture and urbanism—plus one example of our own work—to verify and clarify the evolutionary idea of mannerism and the complexity and contradiction it inherently embraces.

WHAT IS MANNERISM?

Mannerism—not discovered or acknowledged as a style until the mid-nineteenth century—is, according to Nikolaus Pevsner, “indeed full of mannerisms.”³ And it is by definition hard to define: Arnold Hauser has written, “It can be rightly complained that there is no such thing as a clear and exhaustive definition of mannerism.”⁴ Is not that an appropriate acknowledgment for our own era—exemplified by multiculturalism and by technologies evolving by leaps and bounds? But here is my attempt at a definition of mannerism in architecture appropriate for now:

Mannerism as Convention Tweaked—or as Modified Convention Acknowledging Ambiguity. Mannerism for architecture of our time that acknowledges conventional order rather than original expression but breaks the conventional order to accommodate complexity and contradiction and thereby engages ambiguity—engages ambiguity unambiguously. Mannerism as complexity and contradiction applied to convention—as acknowledging a conventional order that is then modified or broken to accommodate valid exceptions and

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Accommodation

Ambiguity

Boredom

Both-and

Breaks

Chaos

Complexity

Contradiction

Contrast

Convention broken

Deviations

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acknowledge unambiguous ambiguities for an evolving era of com-
 plexity and contradiction—rather than acknowledging no order or
 acknowledging a totality of exceptions or acknowledging a new
 order so as to be original.

These characteristics are what can distinguish a mannerist approach
 appropriate for today from a Neomodernist approach, which abhors
 convention as ordinary and adores originality as anything to be different.

So convention, system, order, genericness, *manners* must be there in
 the first place before they can be broken—think of the British aristoc-
 racy’s tendency to break the rules of etiquette in order to imply confi-
 dence about knowing them so well and therefore ease in not following
 them consistently. Later I shall describe what I consider a parallel man-
 nerist trend in British architecture throughout its history.

It is certainly significant that the most vivid manifestation of man-
 nerism occurs immediately after the High Renaissance, where conven-
 tion as a style was most explicit and therefore most vividly breakable. So
 here is a definition of mannerism where convention is inherent but at
 times given up on and made thereby exceptionally unconventional—a
 definition that does not involve originality or revolution, which is for
 our time a bore. Here is a list of elements of a mannerist architecture
 that acknowledges and accommodates the complexity and contradiction
 of today (appropriately, in no order except alphabetical):

- Accommodation
- Ambiguity
- Boredom
- Both-and
- Breaks
- Chaos
- Complexity
- Contradiction
- Contrast
- Convention broken
- Deviations

Difficult whole
 Discontinuity
 Disorder
 Dissonance
 Distortion
 Diversity
 Dualities
 Dumbness
 Eclectic
 Everyday
 Exceptions
 Generic broken
 Imbalance
 Inconsistency
 Incorrect
 Inflection
 Irony
 Jumps in scale
 Juxtapositions
 Layering
 Meaning
 Monotony
 Naïveté
 Obscurity
 Ordinary
 Paradox
 Pluralism
 Pop
 Pragmatism
 Reality
 Scales (plural)
 Sophistication
 Syncopation
 Tension

Terribilitá
 Vernacular
 Wit
 Wrestling

I refer here not to the
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Contorted
 Excessive
 Ideological
 Mannered
 Minimalist
 Picturesque
 Polite
 Willful

There are two kinds
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 be pure—and spelled the
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 in varying historical eras
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Explicit Mannerism is
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 But it also embraces the ar
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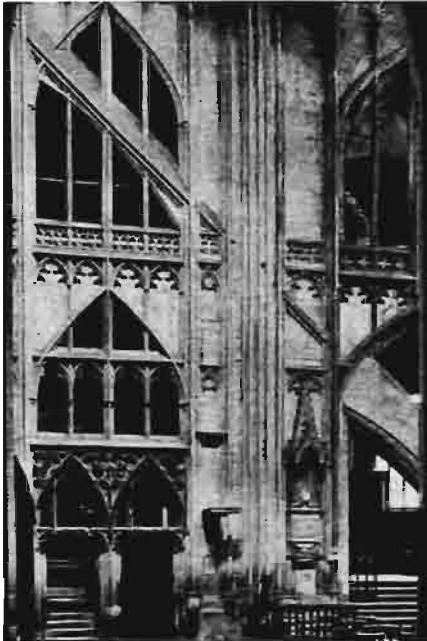
Terribilit 
Vernacular
Wit
Wrestling

I refer here not to the total inconsistency of recent Decon architecture, for example, which ends up as total consistency, and not to the *dramatique* inconsistency of current Neomodern architecture, for example, which ends up as abstract sculpture. So here is a further list of notes concerning what mannerism is *not*:

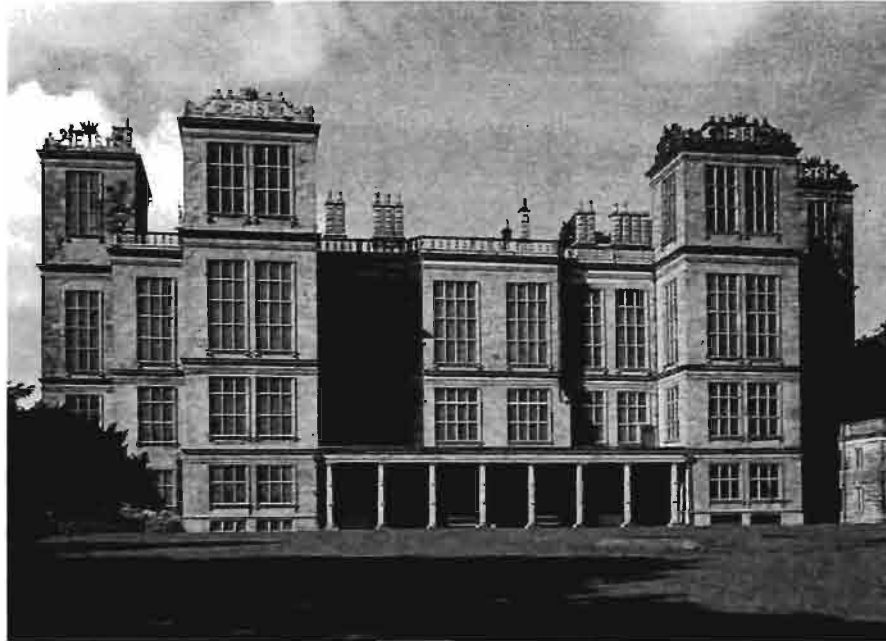
Contorted
Excessive
Ideological
Mannered
Minimalist
Picturesque
Polite
Willful

There are two kinds of mannerism in architecture that can be acknowledged: Explicit and Implicit. Explicit might refer to the particular style of a particular period, that of the mid-sixteenth century in Italy in its purest and predominant form—to the extent mannerism can be pure—and spelled therefore with a capital M. Implicit mannerism, spelled with a small m, refers to what can be called traces of mannerism in varying historical eras and varying places and can be interpreted as either naïve or sophisticated in its manifestation.

Explicit Mannerism is exemplified in the sixteenth-century work of Giulio Romano, acknowledged as *the* Mannerist architect by historians. But it also embraces the architectural work of Michelangelo and Palladio. Implicit mannerism I also find to be an enduring and endearing characteristic of much English architecture, from Late Gothic to Sir Edwin Lutyens—or was he explicit? This is why I adore and learn from English architecture, from Gloucester Cathedral to Lutyens' manor houses.



122. Gloucester Cathedral, Gloucester, England.



123. Hardwick Hall, Chesterfield, England.



124. Inigo Jones' St. Paul's Church, Covent Garden, London.

IMPLICIT MANNERISM: EXAMPLES

What I am describing as a mannerism to evolve via complexity and contradiction for our time is more on the explicit side than the implicit side—it is more capital M-oriented than small m. But I shall first review some historical examples of implicit mannerist precedent in England that I have subjectively chosen—many of which were illustrated as examples of complexity and contradiction in *Complexity and Contradiction*:

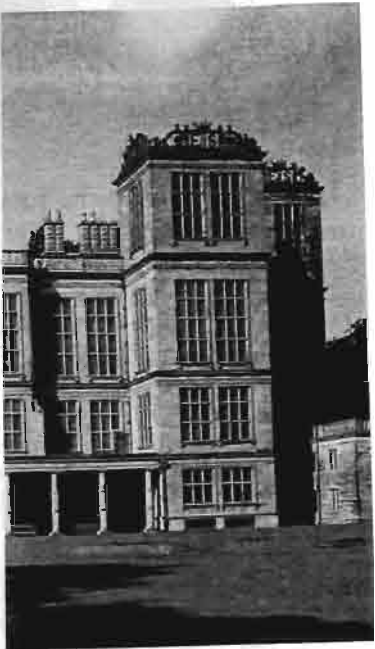
- Gloucester Cathedral, whose buttresses expressed within the walls of the nave are essentially structural and horrendously incorrect, within the hyper-rational architectural order that is Gothic.
- The architecture of most Elizabethan and Jacobean manor houses, whose tense compositions embrace bearing walls that consist mostly of window openings, as well as compositional dualities, iconographic



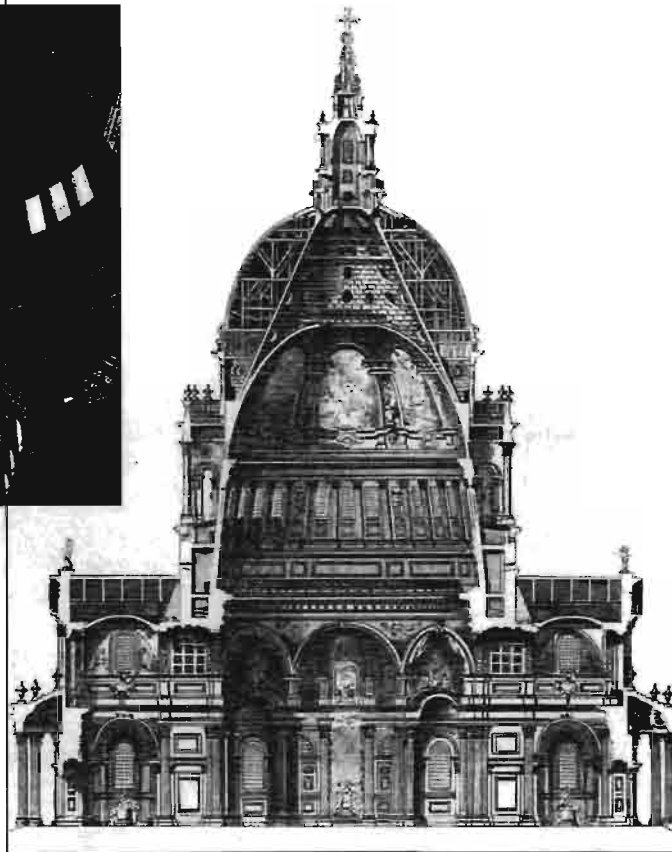
125, 126. Sir Christopher Wren's St. Paul's Cathedral, London.



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naïve or sophisticated? Is
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• Inigo Jones' St. Paul's, C
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125, 126.
Sir Christopher
Wren's St. Paul's
Cathedral, London.



127. Sir Christopher Wren's St. Stephen's Walbrook,
London.

EXAMPLES

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I Jacobean manor houses,
ing walls that consist mostly
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signage at the scale of billboards, and stylistic ambiguities. Are they
naïve or sophisticated? Is this Late Gothic or Early Renaissance, as at
Longleat House, Montacute House, Hardwick Hall, Hatfield House?

- Inigo Jones' St. Paul's, Covent Garden, an adorable church as a
temple, whose incorrect Classical proportions create sublime tension.
- Saint (rather than Sir) Christopher Wren: *viva* St. Paul's Cathedral,
whose ultimate Baroque dome and drum are supported by a kind of
incorrect/ambiguous pendentives inside (naïve *and* sophisticated?)!
And Saint Stephen's Walbrook, whose similar configurations com-
bine convention and originality to create tension!



128. Nicholas Hawksmoor's Christ Church, Spitalfields, London.



129. Nicholas Hawksmoor's St. George's, Bloomsbury, London.



130. Sir John Vanbrugh's Blenheim Palace, Woodstock, England



131. Sir John Soane's House and Museum, London.

- The façade of Nicholas... a façade or is it a tower... rical classical temple bu
- Sir John Vanbrugh's B... first day in Europe. Or... or a dilatory pediment
- Sir John Soane's arches... hanging rather than su

Similar analyses can be... their vocabularies but val... masters like that of Will... and Lutyens. And could... explicit Mannerists?

Other examples—not E... small m:

- The longitudinal elevat... Francesco Borromini's... of the Palazzo di Propa... pose dualities that are t... of the hall as they spatia
- Luigi Moretti's Casa del... tion of Rome, via the du... it one building or two? I... inflection atop each of it
- The plans of Guarino G... Immaculate Conception... Vaccaro's San Gregorio... each composes at once c
- Alvar Aalto's church in... involving a conventional... well as contradictory lay



St. George's, Bloomsbury, London.



Soane's Museum, London.

- The façade of Nicholas Hawksmoor's Christ Church, Spitalfields: is it a façade or is it a tower? Or his St. George's, Bloomsbury—a symmetrical classical temple but with its huge tower halfway down one side.
- Sir John Vanbrugh's Blenheim Palace, a building I visited on my first day in Europe. On its front façade: is that a broken pediment or a dilatory pediment?
- Sir John Soane's arches inside his house and museum, which are hanging rather than supported.

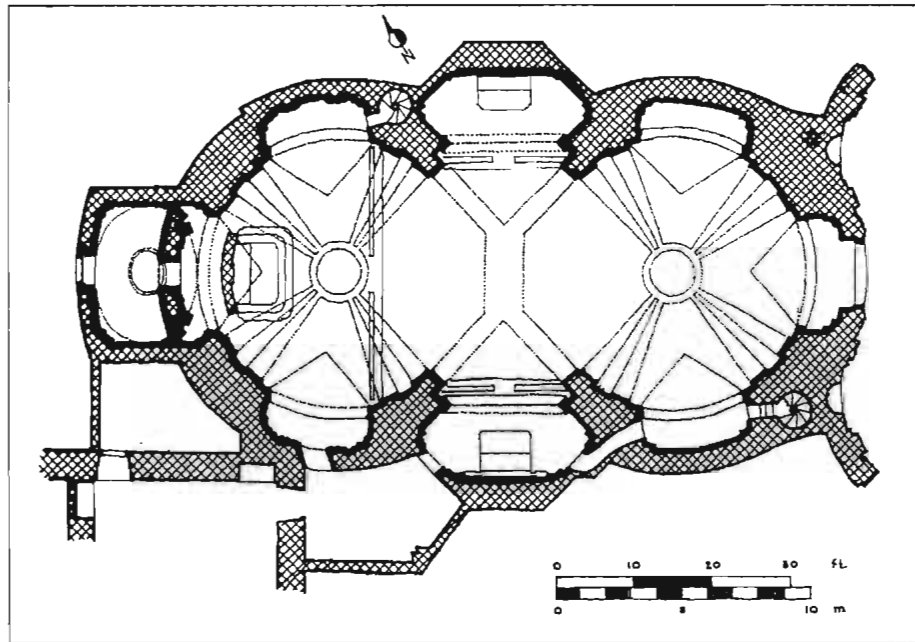
Similar analyses can be made concerning the work—not original in their vocabularies but valid for their mannerist quality—of other British masters like that of William Butterfield, Charles Rennie Mackintosh, and Lutyens. And could it be argued that some of these Brits were explicit Mannerists?

Other examples—not British—that evoke implicit mannerism with a small m:

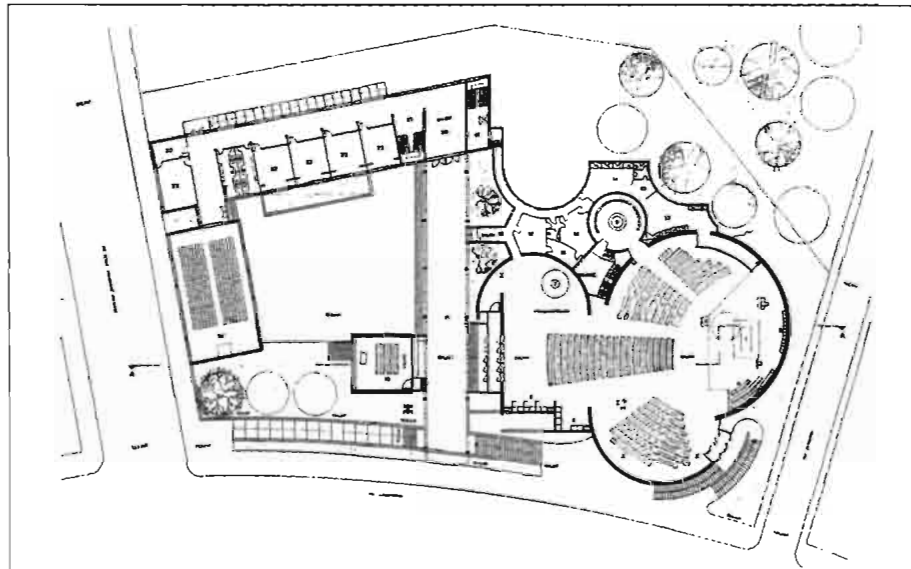
- The longitudinal elevations of the interior of Francesco Borromini's Baroque chapel of I Re Magi of the Palazzo di Propaganda Fide, whose piers compose dualities that are then mollified by the corners of the hall as they spatially evolve.
- Luigi Moretti's Casa del Girasole in the Parioli section of Rome, via the duality of its front elevation: is it one building or two? Probably one, because of the inflection atop each of its two segments.
- The plans of Guarino Guarini's Church of the Immaculate Conception in Turin and Giuseppe Vaccaro's San Gregorio Barbarigo in Rome, where each composes at once dualities and wholes.
- Alvar Aalto's church in, Vuoksenniska, near Imatra, involving a conventional but asymmetrical nave as well as contradictory layers inside.



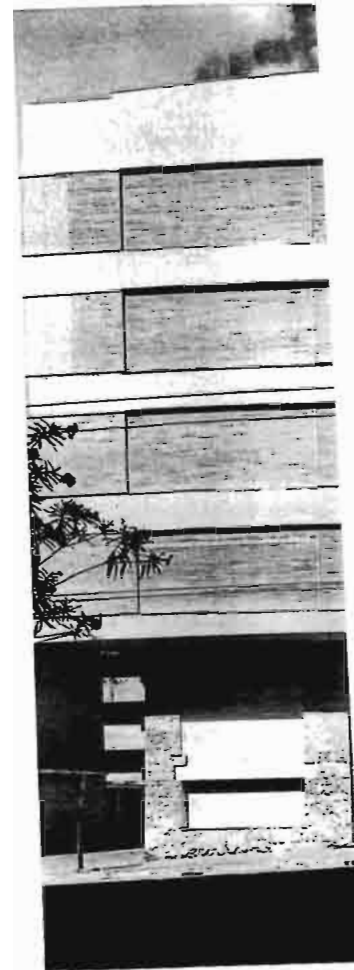
132, 133. Francesco Borromini's I Re Magi chapel, Rome.



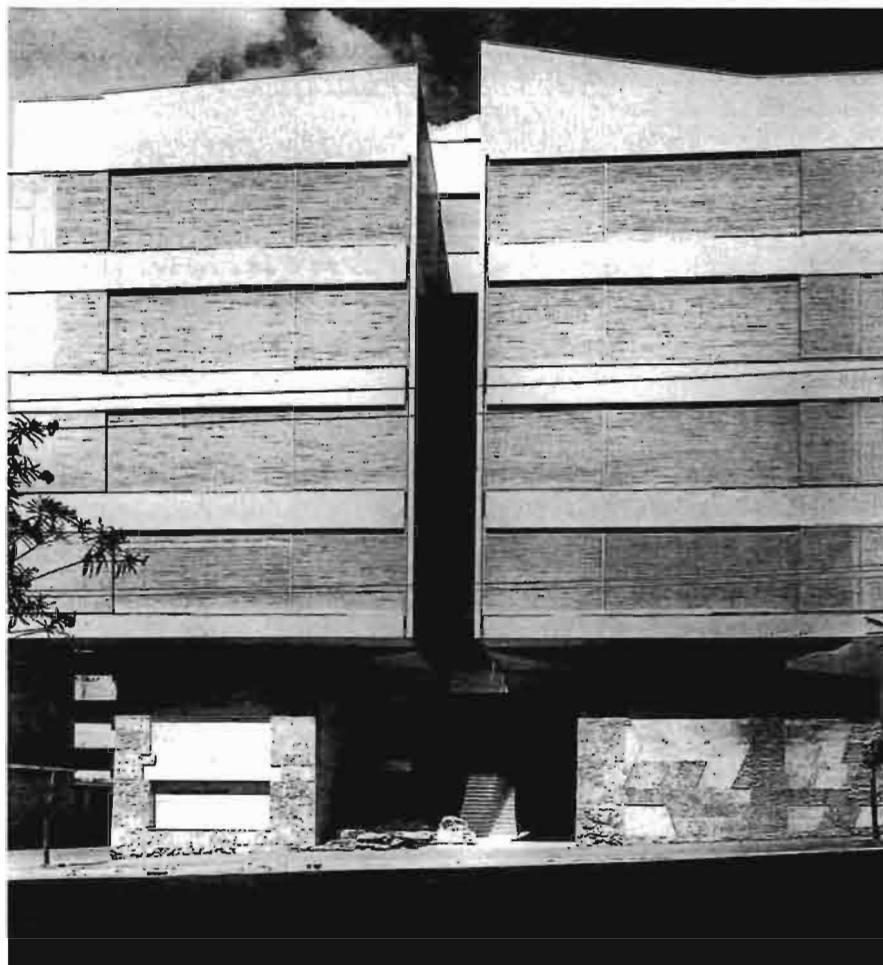
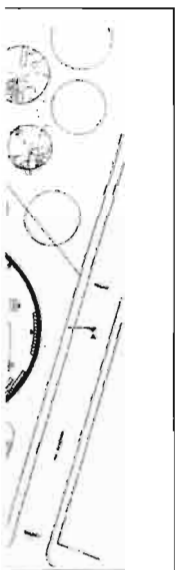
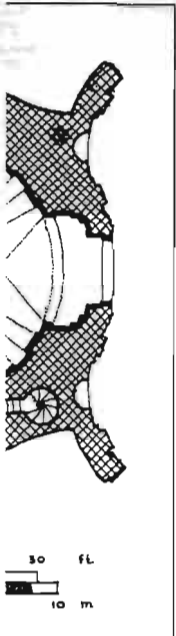
135. Guarino Guarini's Church of the Immaculate Conception, Turin, Italy.



136. Giuseppe Vaccaro's San Gregorio Barbarigo, Rome.



134. Luigi Moretti's Casa del Girasole



134. Luigi Moretti's Casa del Girasole, Rome.



137, 138. Alvar Aalto's church in Vuoksenniska, Imatra, Finland.



139. Church of the Jacobins, Toulouse, France.



140. Cathedral, Cefalù, Sicily.



141. McKim, Mead & White's Low House, Bristol, Rhode Island.

- The Gothic church of the columns/piers marching it an example par excellence
- The mosaic figure of Christ Pantocrator—it is eloquently
- The slopes of the pediment of McKim, Mead & White the long elevations and but the house as iconic :
- And the work of Frank Lloyd Wright as in the Pennsylvania State Bank for the Republic is demolished—for being
- And Armando Brasini's Santissima in Rome, full dynamic classical composition its name is too long.
- And finally the ultimate Tokyo itself, whose aesthetic demolitions and its evolution exemplary city of today!



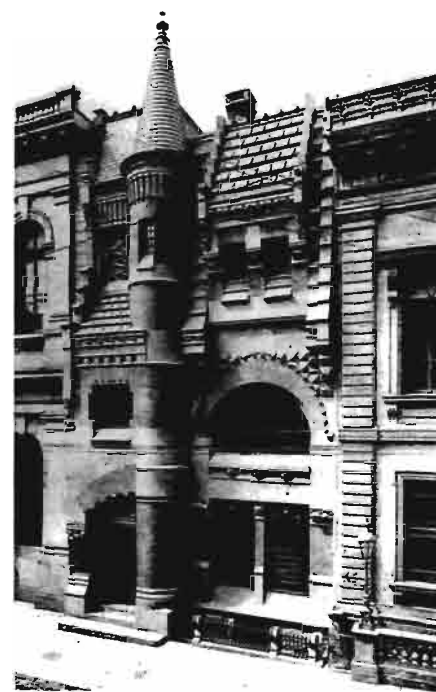


and.

- The Gothic church of the Jacobins in Toulouse, whose row of columns/piers marching mysteriously up the center of the nave make it an example par excellence of duality—and of ambiguous beauty.
- The mosaic figure of Christ in the apse of the cathedral in Cefalù—it is eloquently too big.
- The slopes of the pedimented roof of the Low House, an early work of McKim, Mead & White in Bristol, Rhode Island, which occur on the long elevations and therefore on the “wrong” sides of the house, but the house as iconic shelter is thereby eloquently enhanced.
- And the work of Frank Furness, teeming with ambiguous dualities, as in the Pennsylvania Academy of the Fine Arts and the National Bank for the Republic in Philadelphia. Much of his other work was demolished—for being mannerist?
- And Armando Brasini’s Church of the Cuore Immacolato di Maria Santissima in Rome, full of “too muches” and “too littles” in its dynamic classical composition inside and out—not to mention that its name is too long.
- And finally the ultimate example of mannerist *urbanism*—the city of Tokyo itself, whose aesthetic of chaos derives from its revolutionary demolitions and its evolutionary multiculturalism, making it an exemplary city of today!



142. Frank Furness's Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts, Philadelphia.



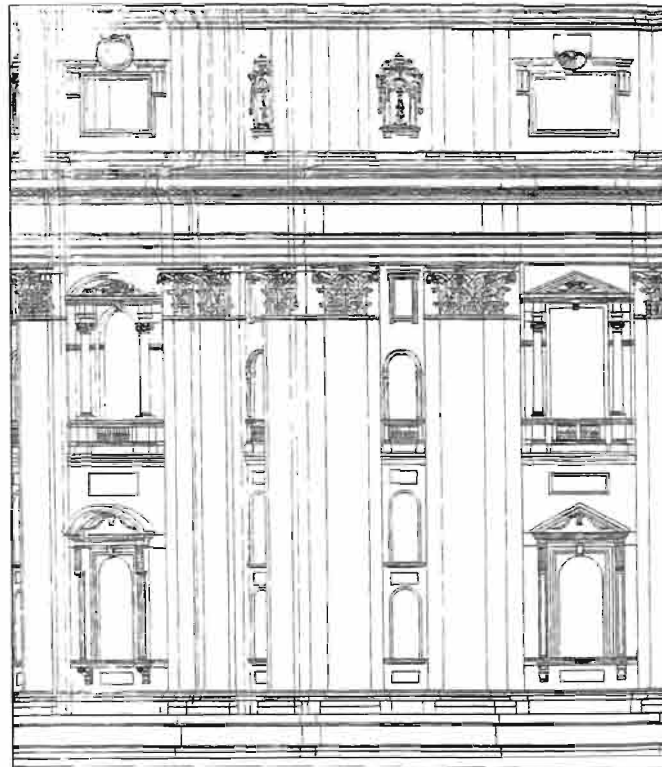
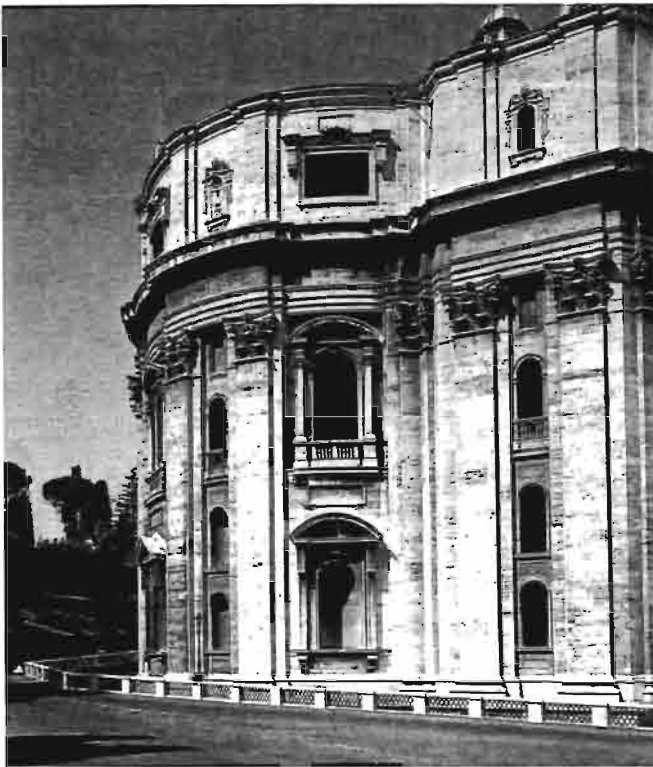
143. Frank Furness's National Bank of the Republic, Philadelphia.

144. Armando Brasini's Church of the Cuore Immacolato di Maria Santissima, Rome.

EXPLICIT MANNERISM: EXAMPLES

Here are some historical examples of explicit Mannerist precedent that I consider relevant and that “turn me on”—many of which also were illustrated as examples of complexity and contradiction in *Complexity and Contradiction*.

First of all, the architectural work of Michelangelo, whom I love the most and learn the most from, and whose architectural work in the sixteenth century, along with Palladio's, I consider explicitly Mannerist. I can refer to the rear façade of St. Peter's, with its grand scale confirmed and yet humanized by the height of its false attic windows, which matches that of the capitals of the adjacent pilasters; to the Laurentian Library, whose interior pilasters are columns individually niched within



145, 146. Michelangelo's St. Peter's, Rome.

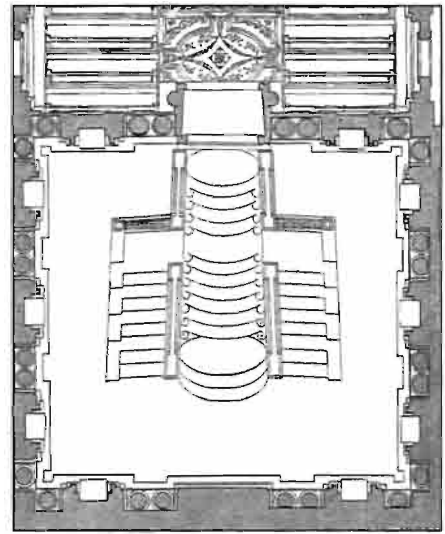
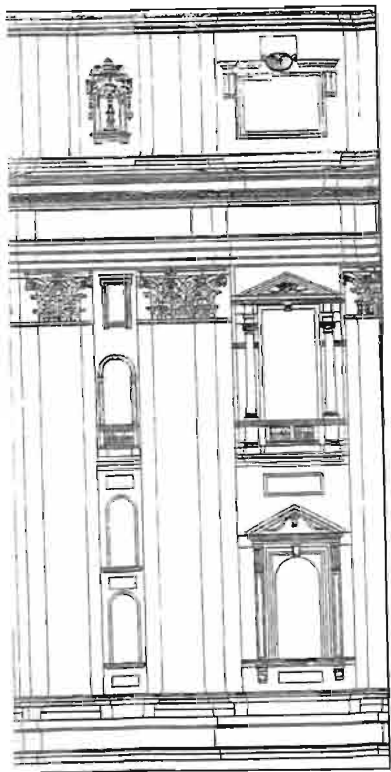


the wall and whose vestibule to the façades of the facade through their giant and miniature monumentality; to each of whose side walls as space by implication expanded as bigger than it is small space; to the Porta Pi

EXAMPLES

licit Mannerist precedent that
1"—many of which also were
d contradiction in *Complexity*

Michelangelo, whom I love the
architectural work in the six-
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with its grand scale confirmed
s false attic windows, which
nt pilasters; to the Laurentian
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147, 148. Michelangelo's Laurentian Library,
Florence.

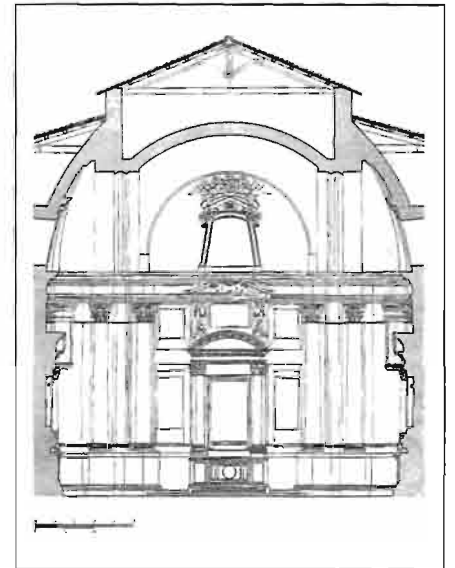
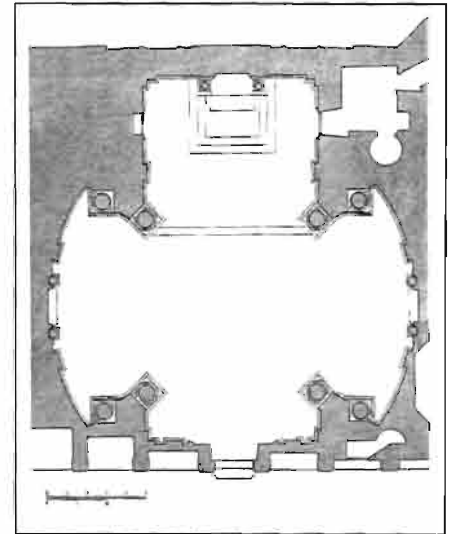
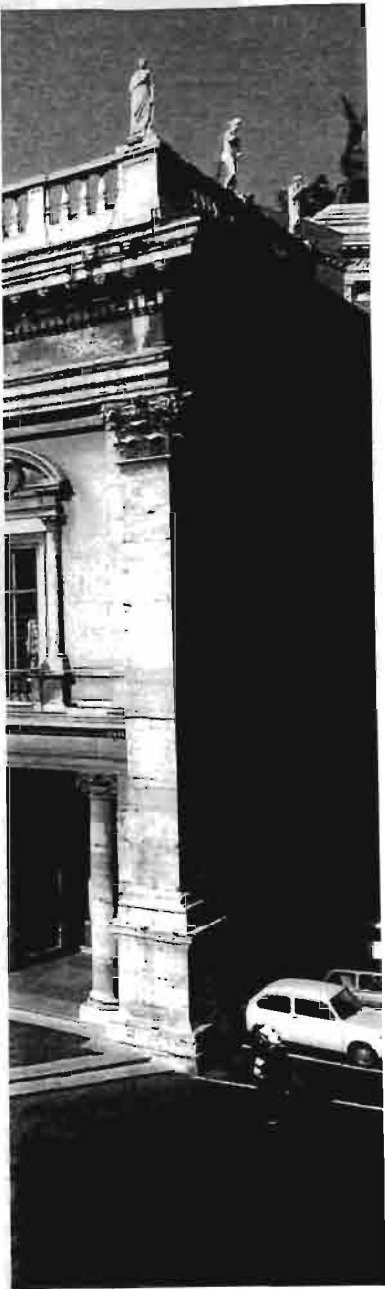
the wall and whose vestibule is a room and a staircase at the same time;
to the façades of the facing buildings of the Capitoline Hill, which,
through their giant and minor orders, glorify vagaries of scale and create
humane monumentality; to the Sforza Chapel in Santa Maria Maggiore,
each of whose side walls as a niche, via its huge radius in plan, makes the
space by implication expand beyond itself, and the space is therefore per-
ceived as bigger than it is and therefore as a monumental as well as a
small space; to the Porta Pia, with its varying combinations of scales and



149. Michelangelo's Capitoline Hill, Rome.



150, 151, 152. Michelangelo's Sforza Chap



150, 151, 152. Michelangelo's Sforza Chapel, Rome.



153, 154. Michelangelo's Porta Pia, Rome.



symbols and distorted conv
of my controversial book c

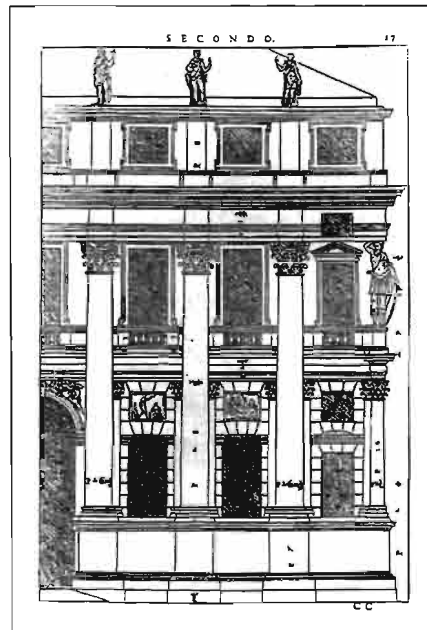
And then there is Palladio's architectural good manner. Mannerism via his palaces a Mannerist period. How the front façade of the glorious defines not by the macho defines the typical rhythm small-scale elements—a man and a statue in relief as a key all but one of the five or smaller in size than the three to the three stories of the rather than more delicate reversing this convention i



155. Andrea Palladio's Palazzo Valmarana

symbols and distorted conventions of vocabulary, illustrated on the cover of my controversial book of thirty-eight years ago.

And then there is Palladio, known throughout history more for his architectural good manners via his writings and his villas than for his Mannerism via his palaces and churches. But to me he is a Mannerist in a Mannerist period. How else can you acknowledge the corner of the front façade of the glorious Palazzo Valmarana in Vicenza, whose bay is defined not by the macho pilaster of the giant order that consistently defines the typical rhythmic bay of the rest of the façade but by several small-scale elements—a minor-order pilaster at the ground floor level and a statue in relief as a kind of caryatid at the *piano nobile* level. Also, all but one of the five openings vertically composed in this bay are smaller in size than the three openings of the typical bays that conform to the three stories of the rest of the façade. Corners are usually less rather than more delicate in wall-bearing façades—and the effect of reversing this convention is haunting.



155. Andrea Palladio's Palazzo Valmarana, Vicenza.

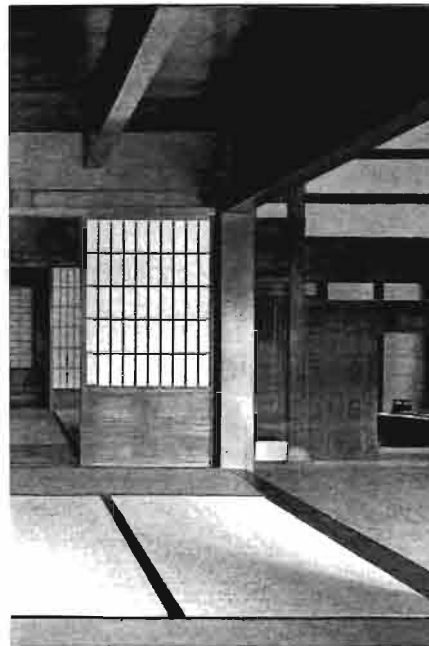


156. Andrea Palladio's San Giorgio Maggiore, Venice.



157. Andrea Palladio's Il Redentore, Venice.

And then there are the front façades of two of Palladio's churches in Venice—San Giorgio Maggiore and Il Redentore—teeming with complexities and contradictions that are valid. In each case here is a Christian church whose interior is based on a Roman basilica (a law court) and whose exterior is based on a Roman temple—or is it a juxtaposition of temples? And the combination of basilica and temple(s) makes for beautifully weird juxtapositions and layerings on the front, where each side of the basilican façade becomes a bisected fragment of a pedimented temple and where the buttresses of the interior vault become other kinds of fragments of temple pediments. And then the temple's front columns become pilasters of various scales on a wall, and the entrance becomes another little temple façade juxtaposed upon the center. And then the way that some of these elements, involving forms, symbols, and scales, hit the ground, combining bases, no bases, and steps, makes for other elements of architectural wonder in a Mannerist period—the Italian sixteenth century!



158. Traditional Japanese interior.



159. Japanese Buddhist Temple.

MANNERIST ARCHITECTURE TOMORROW'S MULTICULTURAL AN ARCHITECTURE

A mannerist architect in Japan—whose historical context is ignored by Modernism—there is not only a multidirectional aesthetic—no explicitly symbolic aesthetic.

A mannerist architect from Tokyo—a city of order. So we go from rebuilt in the last grandeur and evolution.



160. "Learning From Tokyo."