

Visible Cities: A Theoretical Approach to Rome

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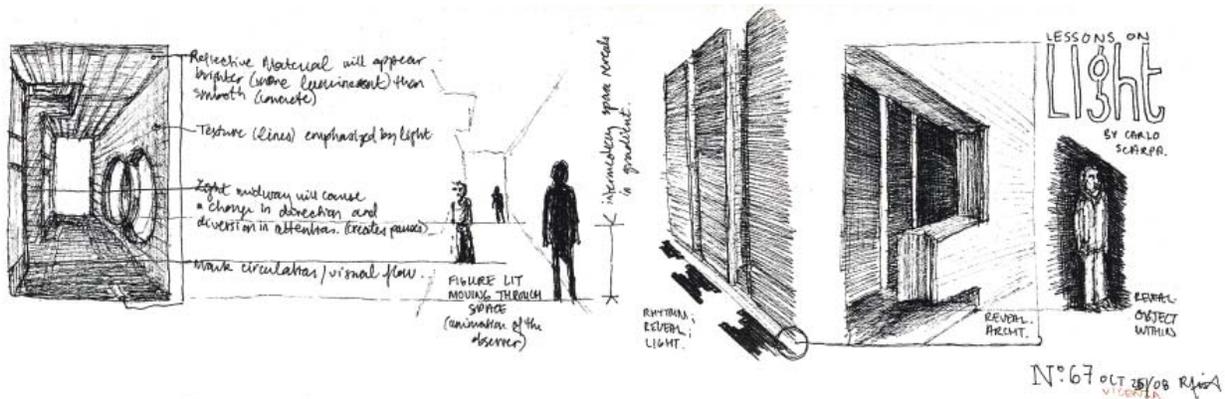


Figure 1. From the sketchbook of Reena Mistry: Brion Cemetery, Carlo Scarpa

1. GOING ABROAD

Distantiation is a concept from hermeneutics used to describe an observer's displacement from their habitual setting, to deliberately estrange an experience and make it stand out for purposes of study. Without the introduction of this framing artifice, and lacking awareness of that part of experience that is 'transparent' or taken for granted, interpretation may ignore or distort it.¹ This model, applied to studying abroad, provides the foreigner with a creative social role, while its implied dialectical structure offers a redemptive meaning to relativism in cultural values.

This concept is deeply embedded in cultural history. When Thomas More published his *On the Best State of a Republic and on the New Island of Utopia* in 1516, he used a device that runs from the *Epic of Gilgamesh* and Homer's *Odyssey* to *Star Trek*, of the traveler who encounters a society and culture alien to his own, but devises a common language to compare and contrast modes of existence, em-

ploying this external lens to reach a profound and critical understanding of the home environment. The traveler is thus a Janus-headed figure who in the process of his own formation mediates and critiques two cultural conditions.

Historically the idea can be traced to a Mediterranean concept of the eighth century BC. The *theoros* was an ambassador in the city-states of Ancient Greece, elected to journey to another *polis* in order to observe the festivals celebrated there, though without participating in the rites, or sent as an emissary to consult the oracle. *Theoros* — one who sees a vision — is a word derived from the same root as *theatre*: with the overtones of a spectator's analytical and critical distance from the cultural phenomenon under observation, but the nuance of gazing at a scene with amazement and wonder. *Theoria* meant sightseeing with a purpose: making a sea-journey with the intention of seeing the world, and returning home with an important message for one's city. This relational pattern compares to the archetypal myth of the hero: a calling

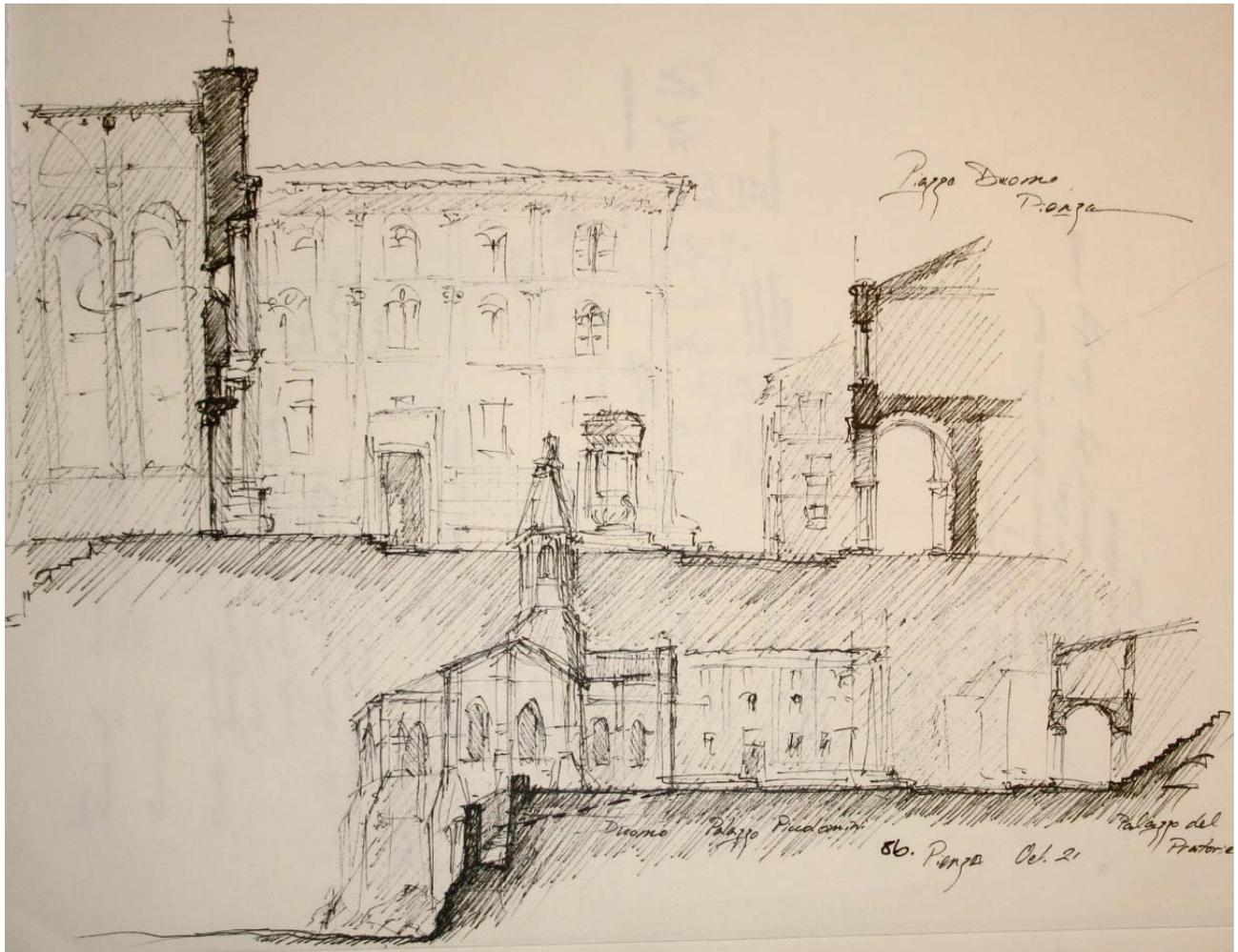


Figure 2. From the sketchbook of Jeffrey Cheng: Pienza

to venture into unknown territories, the winning of initiatory knowledge, followed by the return to contribute this wisdom to society.² The ability to understand and engage in this overview results in the possibility of theory.

The utopian fiction requires an Odyssean captivity: dwelling for substantial durations, immersed beyond a sightseeing visit that only skims the surface, yet drawing back from habituation. Academic tourism is buffered by institutions like AACUPI³ which counts more than 80 North American programs in Italy. Although many students are only 21 or 22 years old, Waterloo's co-op work program, which places them in architects' offices across the world from their second year, has helped prepare them. This encourages development of intellectual flexibility and resourcefulness, and an ability to re-

spond appropriately to new situations and information, a kind of active thinking that education can instill and promote.

2. EXPERIENCING HISTORY

Peregrinations in search of knowledge imply a broader definition of education, but at their core lies the premise that there is no substitute for first hand embodied experience; this is especially true in the study of architecture as a spatial and sensual medium. No literature can substitute for ten minutes in the Pantheon, or in Bernini's Cornaro chapels, each a distinctive concrete translation of a coherent, articulate worldview, and the itinerary includes historical sites and artifacts spanning from antiquity to the present day.

Basic cultural references help contextualize the experience for the students so they can most benefit from the physical environment, the one thing they get here that is not available elsewhere. Therefore the emphasis in this program lies on forming a preliminary conceptual framework, within which personal research can take place,⁴ and which later on can be further developed. The foundations for this framework are laid years in advance, through Waterloo's core studies in Cultural History, loosely structured as a 'great books' program, intended to situate architecture within culture in general by identifying patterns. By the time the students come to Rome, they have read critically Virgil's *Aeneid*, Ovid's *Metamorphoses*, the Bible, the *Confessions* of Saint Augustine, Dante's *Divine Comedy*, Alberti's *Della Pittura*, and so on. In Italy, readings include Marguerite Yourcenar's *Memoirs of Hadrian*, Goethe's *Italian Journey*, Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities*. The emphasis is on fiction, in the Aristotelian tradition of considering the poetic a synthetic representation of lived experience.

In Rome, legible within a single building or complex, the trajectory of western culture is manifest in the form of a story. There is a rich build-up of elements or programmatic uses from different ages in the church of San Clement, or Diocletian's Terme, or the Teatro di Marcello, or the public space of Piazza Navona. Following the interpretive model or metaphor, we can see the city as a textual object, one that legibly communicates, and does so in a poetic idiom whose meanings are multiple paths. Every architectural act is a hinge⁵ which inscribes a future world in the ground of its historical context, in the process reforming not only what pre-exists in the physical sense, but also our perceptual relation to it.

Over thirty years, Waterloo has approached the program of study as an evolving process responsive to shifts in both local and global environments. While its foundational ethics are rooted in its period of origin (i.e. following the deconstruction of high Modernism, in a new era of Italian cultural politics), over time, its conceptual vocabulary has undergone shifts in emphasis. Historical research is anchored by strengthening relations with present-day Rome through exhibiting its work each year and supporting active programs of teaching, research and design in collaboration with academic, government and private organizations.⁶ The student proj-

ects address problems of wide interest to the local community and specific to the condition of contemporary Rome: the treatment of archeological sites, the creation of cultural institutions and the development of new public spaces.⁷ The 4-month program itself, like a hermit crab, works similarly on semi-integration, becoming a fixture in Rome's architectural scene through intense engagement with the community, while cultivating innate flexibility.

In the program's earliest years, the climate of modernism in architectural discourse had shifted to focus around Aldo Rossi's anti-functionalist post-modernism. His book *The Architecture of the City*⁸ introduced the urban artifact, collective memory, archetypal elements, monument and typology, the pathological or propelling permanence, locus and context, coagulating the vision of the city as a spatial structure defined primarily by its geographical and topographical features, monuments and connecting routes. In Rossi's archetypal forms, even in transformation, the city had a legible order that gave direction to its future builders, linked with a collective historical consciousness that evolved through the citizens, always active and metamorphic. The city was the *fons et origo*, and the foundation of all that architecture was and could be.

In 1978, the exhibition *Roma Interrotta* (reprised this year at the Architecture Biennale in Venice) was staged to re-imagine a 'Nuova Roma' by intervening directly in the city's historical fabric. The interventions were made in the celebrated 1748 plan by Giambattista Nolli who contributed to urbanism his vision of the city's unified public space, inside and out.⁹ The project's name and form implicitly critiqued the two intervening centuries of development. Its title was coined by the renowned historian of art and architecture, Giulio Carlo Argan, elected mayor of Rome in 1976, who stated: "*Roma è una città interrotta perché si è cessato di immaginarla.*"¹⁰ It was in this climate of re-imagining the city that, in 1979, the School of Architecture first brought students to Rome. It was a critical moment in the history of the modern city, because Argan and his confederates called on an international group of architects to theorize in urban form. Thus Waterloo adopted the *renovatio* of Rome as a kind of founding myth.

Argan also adopted the proposal to create a great archaeological park in the centre of Rome to be linked

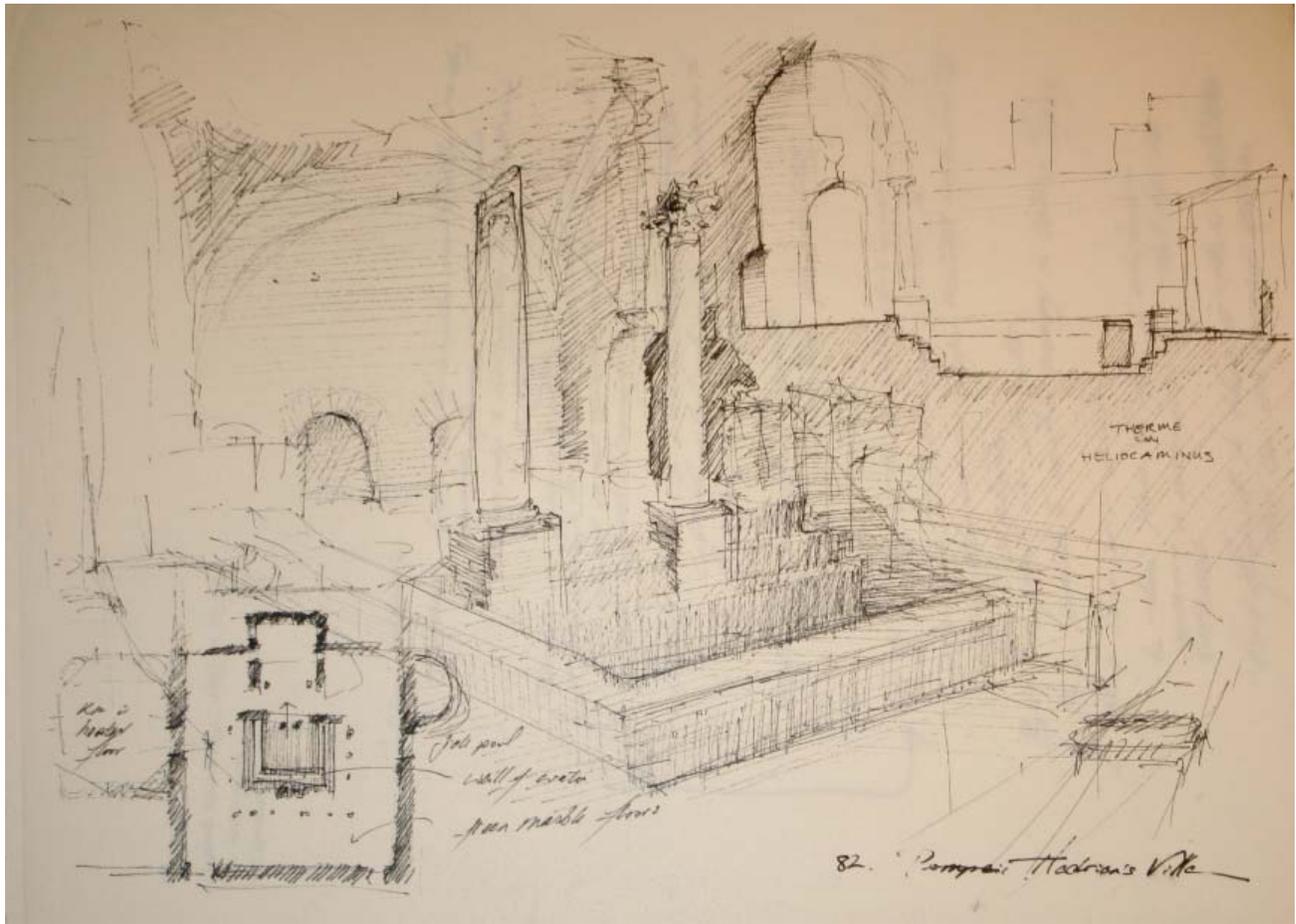


Figure 3. From the sketchbook of Jeffrey Cheng: Hadrian's Villa

to that on the Appia Antica. This, alongside Paolo Portoghesi's *Roma Interrotta* project that dovetailed with Norberg-Schulz' sensibilities, foregrounded Rome's characteristic intra-urban green space in counterpoint to the continuously built 'consolidated city', and acknowledged her Etruscan roots.

Filling the void left by the dismissal of international modernism, the new strategies rejected functionalism, determinism, and positivism. The first Waterloo projects bore the imprint of Aldo Rossi's conceptual frameworks being assayed in their ideal environment. Exploring the meaning of Monument, Palazzo, Town, Piazza, signaled a recuperation of an urbanism showing the early indications of today's environmental consciousness. Every morphological descriptive issued in a subjunctive. And yet, these studies had an unintended consequence. Within a couple of years, the apparent clarity of the theory the students had come to study was undermined

by the creative work they were producing in their drawings.

As the program's founder put it, in Rome, blood was flowing out of the rocks.¹¹ This architecture could never be confined to Rossi's more rigid formalism, nor could its plenitude of meaning be contained by the auto-referential framework explored during the 1980s by Eisenman, who wrote the introduction to the first English translation of Rossi's book. In 1976,¹² Joseph Rykwert re-published *The Idea of a Town: the Anthropology of Urban Form in Rome, Italy and the Ancient World*. Rykwert's interdisciplinary approach, while harder to translate into architectural language, acted powerfully on the imagination. As *The Idea of a Town* was read, adding to the critique of functionalism a critique of formalism, the interpretation of typology swung towards the symbolic and metaphorical potentials it opened up for a poetics of architecture.

The program's renewed mandate became a quest to 'invent', in the Latin sense, the relationship between history and the imagination, returning to architecture its purpose of storytelling, and thus situating questions of style or linguistic reference within the discursive realm of rhetorical ornament, while focusing on architectural design as a constructive principle that holds together the layers of meaning. Forging a habitat steeped in a thickened temporality.

Experimenting in the laboratory of research by design that a good undergraduate program can become, ideas behind the pedagogy continued to reflect Rome's constantly renewed civic character in dialogue with theoretical literature. The architecture of the city transcended reductive formulations¹³ to engage its own history, the future, time and eternity, creation and the human imagination, the passions, rhetoric and myth,¹⁴ and in response, design was rethought as a synthesis that could incorporate the mythical in life, poetics in the everyday; architecture was a fiction that once built would remake reality. Lectures and projects evolved to reflect these theoretical shifts, as the Canadian students began to envision the future according to Argan¹⁵ even before the Italians themselves could contemplate the possibilities: projects like the recuperation of the Imperial Fora by designing new buildings for the space. These bold models of thought could overwrite the arms-length, abstract morphological studies and engage the gritty textures of the metamorphic urban landscape. The outcome was to open up the field of critical enquiry and promote a much more open current discourse.

3. PEDAGOGICAL CULTURE

In this present space, enriched with the imaginary space of legendary and historical pasts, the senses are stimulated and provoked. You smell the morning, *pizza bianca* baking in ovens burning aromatic hazelnut shells, run fingers over a piece of ancient veined marble, feel bewitched by the golden light, the flavour of *caffè*, listen to the layered soundscape of tolling bells, traffic, clattering cobblestones, and gypsy accordions, in between the strange and the familiar. Fifteenth-century philosopher Nicholas of Cusa represented the mind as a city, with each of the five senses a gate into which messengers were welcomed.

The problem of translating cultural data into architecture was addressed in Tommaso Campanella's utopian vision known as *The City of the Sun*. The city's seven concentric walls are built as legible records of all branches of knowledge: laid out according to the Roman art of memory such that all human knowledge can be read out of the ornamental surfaces. There, the pilgrim finds mathematics and the alphabet; inset are mineral crystals and flasks of liquids; at the centre rises the Temple of the Sun, constructed and ornamented to model the heavens and the Earth's relation to them.

A successful pedagogical program allows these sensibilities, all the historical data, the imaginary along with the real, to exist as the fundament of the architectural project: the lesson of living well, and the holistic character of culture. It also sees the student as giving something back: making a contribution by playing a mirror to the host culture, sensitively and ecologically. This means taking in the multifarious inspirations of history, but always tackling topical problems of interest to the community, particular to the conditions of the individual site and to contemporary Rome. The deeper the engagement at the program and the personal level, the more interesting the results. This is not to say that the pedagogy is uniformly successful; success depends on a student's willingness to immerse themselves reflectively, to integrate and digest the built environment, and not remain a passive recipient of information. There is a strong correlation between the quality of a student's design project and their sustained urban research in sketchbook form.

This year, the Waterloo Program marks thirty years in Rome. The Rome program, like the school, was founded by a cultural historian, considering this expanded canonical field a vital foundation for architectural education. Grasping 'where architects get their ideas' provides focus to the study of how architecture crystallizes its historical context, and the values that it conveys. An architect's willful design is only the tip of the iceberg, in that broader, conventional cultural currents, transparent to its creator, are embedded in every built work as signatures enabling us to identify periods and styles.

The pedagogical program is layered in its objectives. Primarily, it is to provide a flexible conceptual framework (not a methodology) for the latter, through which the student may begin to record

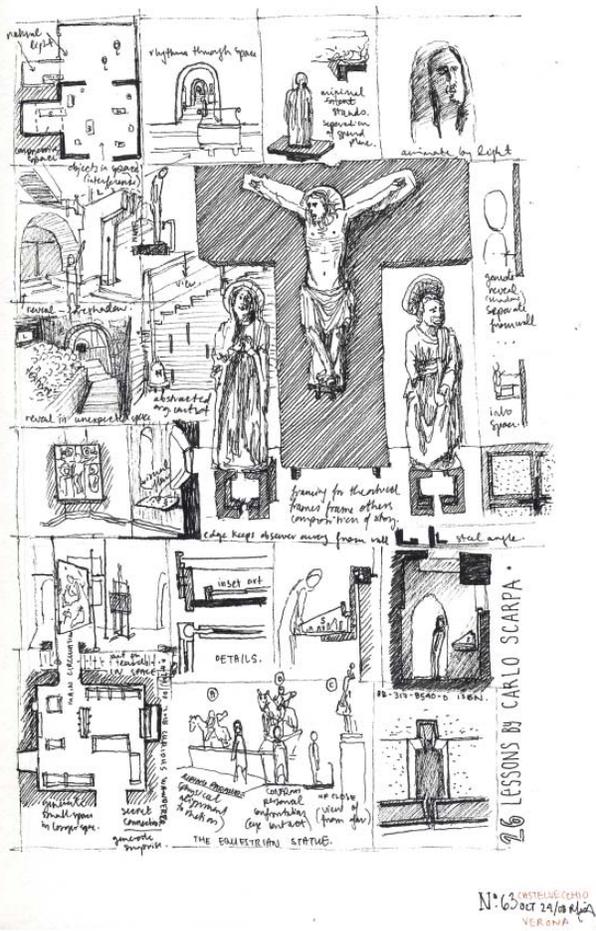


Figure 4. From the sketchbook of Reena Mistry: Castelvecchio in Verona, Carlo Scarpa

their own informed, critical perceptions of the urban landscape, building a conceptual vocabulary to enhance ways of seeing. Once students grasp historical phenomena or concepts like architectural *spolia*, *perspectiva artificialis*, the Ideal City, imaginary space, or urban landscape, everyday experience is easily integrated in to their knowledge framework to found an inventory of ideas. Architectural investigations can begin from motifs like threshold, surface, definition, enclosure, urban armature, wall, ruin, *disabitato*.

The second objective, in order to flesh out those percepts, is to focus this arena for sustained immersion. Approaches include time-intensive site visits, case-study projects at the urban as well as the architectural levels, and a daily sketchbook to record personal research.

Built form is never treated as an isolated material object. On the field trips and *in situ* lectures, the students are encouraged by example to seek out the broadest possible context for grasping urban settlements and architectural works. Architectural history of a place begins by examining the geological conditions relevant to the origin of the site as a site, and its geographical configurations.¹⁶ Its shape and its place in collective memory must appeal to mythology and legend as well as recorded history, acknowledging the porosity between these. The fact that the 'architecture' of an historical building may not be restricted in its *physical* elements amplifies the possibilities of intervention.

This brings me to a third aspect: to actively engage with the built environment, which is the task of the Design Studio, and the projection of urban and architectural design which acts as a bridge between Rome's history and future. Dialectical structure of interpretation becomes visible through participation. (In the urban history course, students learn how architecture, whether drawn or built, acts rhetorically to argue, validate, and instantiate a worldview. This is particularly apparent in the production of perspectival drawings which embody a set of spatial relationships and values. Obviously, this approach is strongly political in its broadest sense.)

The final layer involves cultivating an awareness of oneself as a critic, able to formulate and sustain a theoretical position vis-à-vis the site. In the projects, this position is validated through design, but we reinforce it by placing the students on each other's juries, alongside the invited Italian architects, for the final design reviews. In this setting, theory (within the relativism of individual experience) produces a discourse to refine and advance architectural ideas.¹⁷

4. A FUTURE BUILT ON THE PAST

The lived space of historical precedent is the foundation of new design. Some of history's great spatial innovators designed in a chain of inspiration: Richard Serra based his giant tilted arcs on Borromini's church of San Carlo all Quattro Fontane; Borromini studied the curved forms in the ruins of Hadrian's villa, where the architect-emperor had translated his experiences of every province in the Empire. Our word 'invent' comes from the Latin *invenio*, to discover something that was always already there.

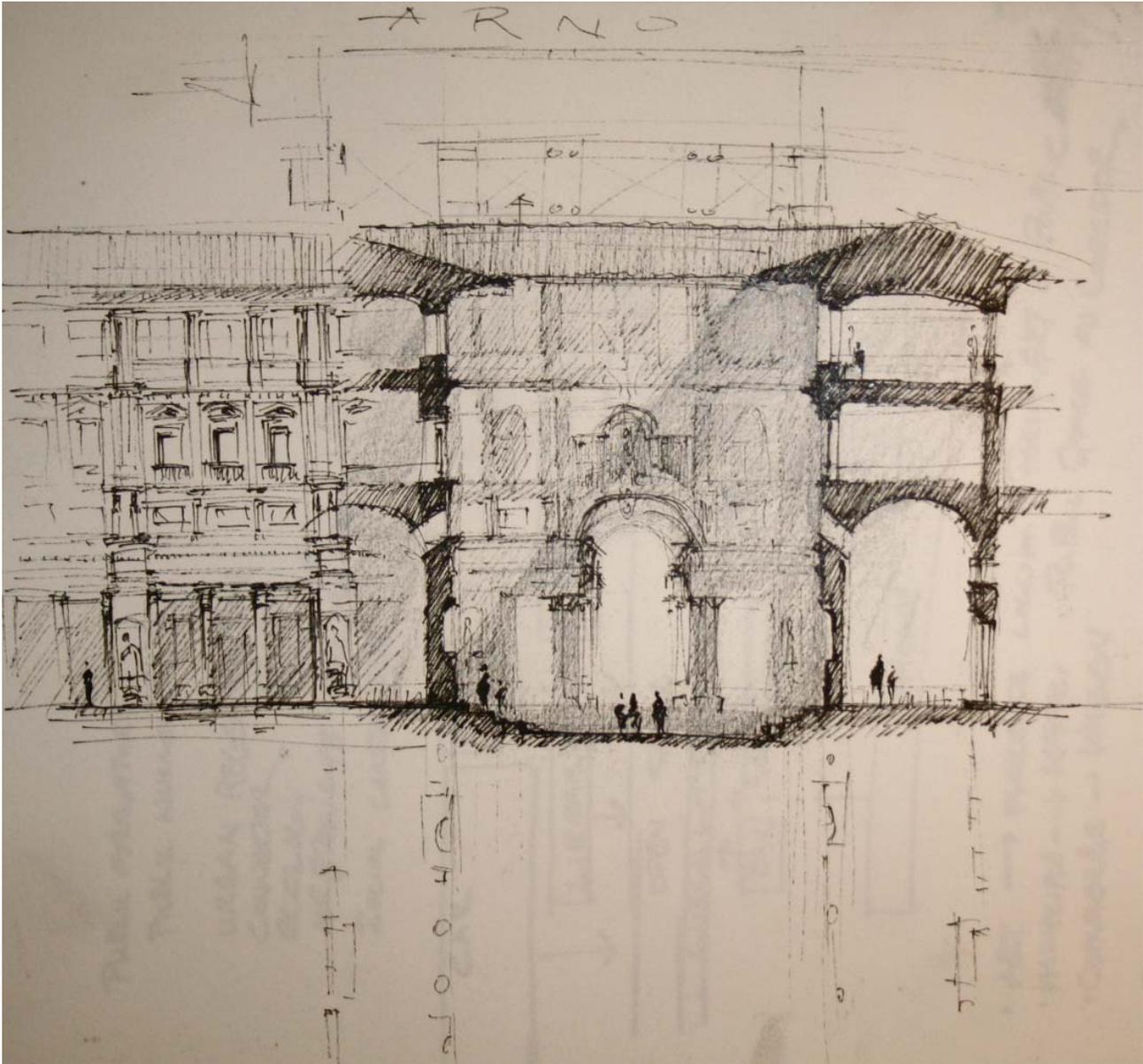


Figure 5. From the sketchbook of Jeffrey Cheng: Uffizi, Florence

To do so, sometimes requires a fresh pair of eyes. And that requires a merging of horizons, a language of analogy, the adaptation, the hybrid.

Every age recognizes in history or historical artifacts images of its own concerns and makes them present again. This is a tested principle of preservation in Roman architecture; only buildings continually reused and reinvented by being re-imagined have survived centuries of social and cultural changes. This is not only true for the physical city;

its cultural artifacts remain relevant insofar as their values become genetic material for new architectures of the future.

In 2003 the city of Rome publicized its new *Piano Regolatore*, a very unusual master plan in any city, most of all in Rome. The ingress of foreign theory is evident in a new conceptual vocabulary modeling the city as an ecosystem, and transforming older categories of building blocks and public spaces into a new language of landscape urbanism, replacing

zoning with mixed-use fabrics, clear typological taxonomies supplanting hybrid buildings, exchanging conventional areas for 'strategic spheres', the *centro storico* for the much broader 'historical city', an environmentally conscious transport network linking hubs within a polycentric archipelago-figure, the historical monuments within the walls with new inclusions like EUR. Despite its recent emergence elsewhere,¹⁸ this globally proliferating theory responding to what the contemporary city is becoming owes much to the older Rome, mediated by foreign theorists who visited Rome in the past century.

In the early nineties, the architecture and urbanism group Stalker¹⁹ started to make crossings of 'actual territories' in order to find within Rome this same valuable, resistant strangeness, the *mythos* preserving the city from transparent rationality. Stalker's trademarks borrow from the strangers in their midst: the nomadic and experiential approach to awareness, the interest in direct experience of unmapped, marginal areas, and using ludic models to construct collective experiences from alternative uses of these spaces, to create dynamic new shared meanings for these territories. They are interested in our need to represent our experiences, and the status of representation as a valid site for action.

Their mission, like the student's, is a type of Hermetic journey, in the sense that the passage through space is simultaneously an epistemological voyage. Rome's many hero narratives expound a secular form of pilgrimage in which the final objective is not geographical, but oneself. But the descent into the underworld has unintended consequences, one of which is the transformation of that most fertile realm of the dead, the geographical symbol for the creative imagination, with a very real gaze and a virtual mirror, the revivification of the self in the *renovatio urbis*.

ENDNOTES

1. Naturally, the roots of the journey play a similarly important role in forming perceptual frameworks.
2. The etymology of the word 'education' is from the Latin *educere*, to lead forth.
3. The Association of American College and University Programs in Italy.
4. The students spend one four-month term in Rome in the fourth and final year of their pre-professional architecture degree, with a normal course load of Design

Studio (1.5 CR) and three courses (0.5 CR): *Rome and the Campagna*, which investigates urban settlement, archaeology and Roman architecture, *Italian Urban History*, which considers the rise and representation of the ideal city and its relation to visual metaphors from Late Antiquity through the Baroque, and *Modern Italian Architecture*, treating the Enlightenment forward. All three courses as well as studio involve *in situ* lectures and field trips both within and around Rome and to the north and south of Italy.

5. Or a joint, a connecting detail, hence Carlo Scarpa's reveal (a proto-baroque design motif) which reveals the mystery of relation between things, or of the love that holds together the elements of architecture in a building.

6. In 1992, UW and the Faculty of Architecture at L'Università G. D'Annunzio in Pescara, Italy established a formal exchange. Though more than 30 North American schools of architecture offer their students an opportunity to study in Italy, the agreement between UW and Pescara is unique in providing the only opportunity for Italian architecture students to study at a North American university.

7. Eric Haldenby, Director

8. 1966 in Italian; first American edition 1981

9. Colin Rowe's *Collage City* reintroduced the importance of context in understanding architecture in the urban environment.

10. Exhibited worldwide, in time, *Roma Interrotta* offered an icon for urbanistic projects, and postmodernism reset the agenda at home and abroad with new precision. A link must be forged to the historical past, but not in the way Mussolini had rendered it.

11. Eric Haldenby, Director.

12. Originally published in 1963 by Aldo van Eyck.

13. "Where architecture merely aligns itself with its own conditions—exhibiting little more than economy, efficiency, and ambition—it fails to mediate between its own material existence and our need to locate ourselves in the world. Only acts of *imaginative transmission* allow us to figure out how we came to fall into the place we occupy and what prospects lie before us. The value we attribute to any building also implies a recognition of imaginative acts. Imaginative buildings speak about the realm of nature as a domain of civilization, not as something infinitely removed or heedlessly replaced, and they engage our senses by means of ingenious inscriptions of many-layered meanings no one can grasp, much less exhaust, at a glance." Kurt Forster, "Why Are Some Buildings More Interesting Than Others?" *Harvard Design Magazine*, Winter/Spring 1999, Number 7.

14. A professor of cultural history, Larry Cummings, founded the Waterloo Architecture program and cultural history has remained the core of its project up to the present day.

15. In the program's third year, a new mayor, Luigi Petroselli, continued Argan's project to requalify the urban fabric.

16. In his essay "Genius Loci" published in *Roma Interrotta*, Christian Norberg-Schulz addresses Rome's *genius loci* and *forma urbis* through an investigation of the significant forms of its urban landscape in the pre-historical past.

17. Even without expecting any individual student to master the field of study in a short time, the students' greatest resource is their variety of imagination and subjective perceptual programs.

18. For example I could cite Brian Hatton's "NATO's Building Regs" of 1985 developed as part of the AA curriculum in London, England.

19. Stalker has been active from 1990, taking the name in 1995.