

# Misprision of Precedent: Design as Creative Misreading

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## PRELUDE

We dwell with satisfaction upon the poet's difference from his predecessors, especially his immediate predecessors; we endeavour to find something that can be isolated in order to be enjoyed. Whereas if we approach a poet without this prejudice we shall often find that not only the best, but the most individual parts of his work may be those in which the dead poets, his ancestors, assert their immortality most vigorously.<sup>1</sup>

The striking compositional affinity between two photographs, taken in different decades, continents and political contexts, of two buildings that differ dramatically in size, program, site and materiality, presents a conundrum for any conventional understanding of the relationship between a work of architecture and its precedents (Figure 1). It is not surprising that Peter Eisenman represented House II, a two-story house he designed for a couple in Vermont in 1969, in a self-conscious homage to the work of Giuseppe Terragni, whose work the American architect studied at great length in a doctoral dissertation completed six years earlier.<sup>2</sup> Yet what are we to make of Eisenman's choice to model the image of the private house in Hardwick on an iconic photograph depicting ecstatic masses gathered at a rally in front of Terragni's fascist party headquarters in Como?<sup>3</sup> What do we learn about the Casa del Fascio and House II from this juxtaposition, and how do we understand the process that joins the critical appreciation of the former to the design of the latter? How does a work of architecture effect changes to projects that precede it? We need to adapt our as-yet insufficient vocabulary of precedent and analysis to account for a process best described by literary theorist Harold Bloom with the term *misprision*.

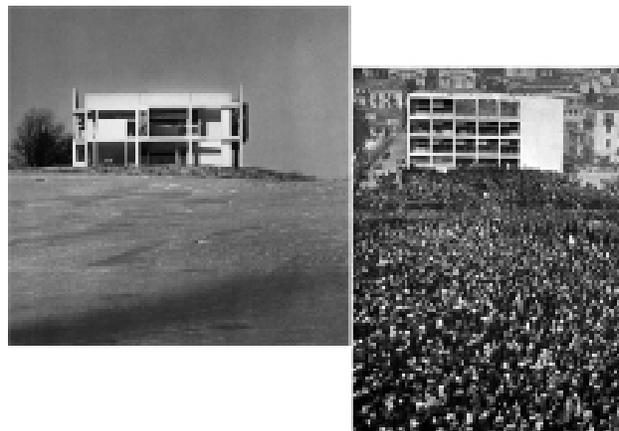


Figure 1 - Peter Eisenman, House II, Hardwick, VT, 1969, as published in *Five Architects* (1972), and Giuseppe Terragni, Casa del Fascio, Como, 1932-36, as published in *Quadrante 35* (1936).

## ARGUMENT

Architects and historians engage architectural history differently. Yet while historians frequently discuss historiographic methodologies and architects have developed standardized analytical processes that emphasize program, site and spatial organization, neither fully accounts for the processes of creative misreading through which so many architects have grappled with the work of others in order to generate new knowledge and critically engage precedents. Examining these processes enriches both design criticism and design pedagogy.

The conversation architecture has with its own heritage is marked by *misprision*, a mode of critical engagement in which architects interpret the built environment through design as active criticism.

Misprision is a creative misreading that generates new knowledge. Bloom introduced poetic misprision in his widely-cited 1973 book, *The Anxiety of Influence*.<sup>4</sup> While chiefly concerned with poetry and intra-poetic relationships, Bloom develops a concept that is important to understanding the ways architects engage the work of their predecessors and peers.

*The Anxiety of Influence* deals chiefly with the ways “strong poets [...] clear an imaginative space for themselves” by creatively misreading the work of their predecessors.<sup>5</sup> Bloom introduces six tropes (which he terms revisionary ratios) through which poets wrestle with precedent.<sup>6</sup> Misprision emerges as the most important revisionary ratio, and is understood as a poetic misreading of source material akin to the swerve of atoms described by Lucretius with the term *clinamen*. “A poet swerves away from his precursor,” Bloom explains, “by so reading his precursor’s poem as to execute a *clinamen* in relation to it. This appears as a corrective movement in his own poem, which implies that the precursor poem went accurately up to a certain point, but then should have swerved, precisely in the direction that the new poem moves.”<sup>7</sup> Each new work transforms and completes its precedents through a critical process of interpretation.

Bloom presents misprision, in part, as a corrective to the cult of originality promulgated by Romantic authors.<sup>8</sup> Whereas Emerson extolled authors to express themselves without recourse to other writers and the history of literature, Bloom argues that, “poetic influence need not make poets less original; as often it makes them more original, though not necessarily better.”<sup>9</sup> Bloom adopts T. S. Eliot’s notion that every poem participates in a “living whole of all the poetry that has ever been written” and in so doing develops a theory of production and reception, of creativity and criticism, that is simultaneously heuristic and hermeneutic.<sup>10</sup> Bloom explains:

Poetic Influence – when it involves two strong, authentic poets – always proceeds by a misreading of the prior poet, an act of creative correction that is actually and necessarily a misinterpretation. The history of fruitful poetic influence, which is to say the main tradition of Western poetry since the Renaissance, is a history of anxiety and self-saving caricature, of distortion, of perverse, willful revisionism without which modern poetry as such could not exist.<sup>11</sup>

Misprision enables the study of historical precedent to escape the trap of treating history as an encyclopedia of solutions to problems defined by programs, sites, cultural contexts and aesthetic preferences. Misprision approaches history through an open-ended process of interpretation and criticism, in which precedents serve as multivalent sources of knowledge, rather than through the more instrumentalized and constrained process of treating precedents as models of programmatic problem-solving. Misprision recognizes that every creative act is also an act of criticism, and that any sophisticated work of architecture synthesizes knowledges gained from close readings of disparate sources.

Architecture both challenges and expands the notion of creative misreading in important ways. Architecture questions Bloom’s insistence, for example, that images and ideas are not important to poetic misprision. Architecture also disputes his contention that misprision ought not be concerned with politics or the history of ideas. What’s more, Bloom’s insistence on a genetic model of “filial” bonds between a predecessor poet and his successor fails to account for the synthetic manner in which architects join and juxtapose disparate source material. Nevertheless, while Bloom’s theory of misprision does not easily translate from poetry to architecture, it offers great insight into the passage of formal and conceptual concerns from one work to another through a process of creative misreading.

## SWERVE

Some architectural precursor “poems” have humble origins. Italian engineer Giacomo Matté Trucco designed the FIAT factory in Turin’s Lingotto district according to utilitarian and programmatic criteria based on the automobile manufacturing process (Figure 2). Le Corbusier, however, read the building’s spectacular rooftop test track as a lyrical expression of a metropolis transformed through automotive transport.<sup>12</sup> The sweeping curve in the ground floor of the Villa Savoye,

for example, echoes the test track’s banked turns, and marks the mid-way point on an oval circuit that reinforces the allusion to the factory roof. The connections to Lingotto continue inside the villa’s entrance, where the visitor encounters two vertical paths – a ramp and a stair – whose forms both



Figure 2 - Le Corbusier's visit to the FIAT Lingotto factory (Giacomo Matté Trucco, Turin, 1919-26) and his design for the new colonial city of Algiers, 1931, as published in *Quadrante 13* (1934).

make reference to the helical ramps which lead to the factory's roof (Figure 3). Le Corbusier creatively misread the Lingotto factory in a way that embeds within the Villa Savoye a larger search for appropriate architectural form in a world where the relationship between city and building had been radically reconfigured by the emergence of the automobile.

The dramatic *promenade architecturale* assembled from vehicular and pedestrian movement at the Villa Savoye demonstrates another key aspect of architectural misprision – the synthesis of multiple poetic sources. Like the mixtilinear skyline of the building's rooftop solarium (simultaneously taken from the visual language of ocean liners and the everyday objects Le Corbusier studied through his Purist paintings), the circulation paths through the villa draw on several sources. The *promenade architecturale* first emerged from Le Corbusier's interpretation of the processional route to the Acropolis in Athens, which he encountered on his formative



Figure 3 - Le Corbusier, Villa Savoye, Poissy, 1928-31, entry. Photograph by Barry Bergdoll.

voyage through the Mediterranean in 1911 (Figure 4). By the time of the Villa Savoye's design, the serpentine passage through the house came to evoke not only the Panathenaic Way, but also the labyrinth of Daedalus and the "Law of Meander" (developed from aerial observations during a 1929 trip to Paraguay and Brazil).<sup>13</sup> This plurality of sources invests the *promenade architecturale* with poetic depth and richness, and illustrates a synthetic vision in which criticism is rendered through the transformation of precedent.

Le Corbusier's writings are filled with provocative misreadings of precursor poems, which offer the reader keys toward unpacking the many examples of poetic misprision in his work. For example, rather than duplicate the ornamental language and organizational syntax of classical architecture like his neoclassicist contemporaries, Le Corbusier identified qualities in the ancient precedents – the mechanical precision of the Doric order, the elemental

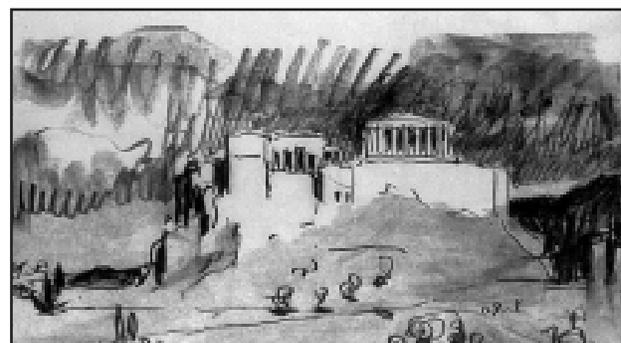


Figure 4 - Le Corbusier, sketch of the Acropolis, 1911.

geometries of Roman architecture – that enabled him to transform, rather than transcribe, classicism.<sup>14</sup> Similarly, he re-imagined the monumental machines of his day in classical terms, as when he captioned an image of the Empress of India ocean liner with terms previously used in relation to the architecture of Egypt, Greece and Rome, “Architecture is the masterly, correct and magnificent play of masses brought together in light.”<sup>15</sup>

Le Corbusier’s oeuvre also provides examples of another facet of misprision, in which a successor author renders multiple criticisms of a precursor poem. Le Corbusier returned to the theme of the Lingotto test track numerous times. The viaduct urbanism of his proposals for the regional reorganization of Rio de Janeiro and Algiers transforms the FIAT factory from an isolated monument to an integrated system in order to re-imagine the metropolis as a regional infrastructural network. The building and rooftop test track that signaled the integration of architecture and automotive infrastructure was thus misread into an urbanism of infrastructural architecture at a regional scale. The roofscape of the Unités de Habitation, and particularly that of the block realized in Marseille between 1946 and 1952, interpreted Lingotto differently. Here Matté Trucco’s roof became a solemn district raised above the surrounding city, an Acropolis studded with small concrete temples and, because Le Corbusier’s visual synthesis drew on so many sources, the funnels of ocean liners.

This transformation is not simply metaphorical. Each act of creative misreading changes its precedents, or, as Eliot wrote, “the past [is] altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past,” and thus the Acropolis cannot be the same after the Villa Savoye.<sup>16</sup> Nor does the house remain static, since it, in turn, serves as a precursor poem for numerous projects by students of Le Corbusier’s work. One example (among a great many) is Bernard Tschumi’s Acropolis Museum in Athens.<sup>17</sup> Superficially, the two buildings share several formal traits: both involve a stack of three layers, with the uppermost level perched pavilion-like on the mass of the layer below, and a forest of piloti structures both. Tschumi’s major misprisonive gesture, however, is the circulation path through the museum, which draws the visitor along a chronological display of artifacts climaxing, though not culminating, in the room of Parthenon friezes on the uppermost level.

Tschumi set the entire building into motion, transforming Le Corbusier’s *promenade architecturale* – previously a discrete circuit contrasted against more static volumes – into a single, spiraling procession. Here in Athens, within sight of its “source poem” at the Acropolis, the *promenade architecturale* is creatively misread to layer new understanding on the relationship between Le Corbusier’s architecture and its ancient precedents.

## IMAGES AND IDEAS

Architecture challenges Bloom’s insistence that images and ideas are not important to poetic misprision. “The profundities of poetic influence cannot be reduced to source study, to the history of ideas, to the patterning of images,” Bloom maintains. “Poetic influence, or as I shall more frequently term it, poetic misprision, is necessarily the study of the life-cycle of the poet-as-poet.”<sup>18</sup> In the case of architecture, however, images offer important clues to a larger affinity between precursor and successor, and can be read as manifestations of deeper connections between a work and its precedents. Consider, for example, another image of the Casa del Fascio.

Terragni published a photograph taken on the Casa del Fascio’s second-floor balcony in the same issue of *Quadrante* (October 1936), dedicated to the recently-completed building, that provided the image appropriated by Eisenman (Figure 5). The photograph is one of many in the issue by Terragni’s apprentice, Ico Parisi, and it depicts a glancing view of the building’s main façade, in which the open end of the Casa del Fascio’s botticino-clad colonnade frames a prospect of Lake Como and the mountains beyond.<sup>19</sup> The image is beautiful. It is also a fabrication.

The lake is not visible from this vantage point. An adjacent apartment building terminates the vista in Parisi’s original photograph.<sup>20</sup> Terragni altered the image for publication, and in so doing offered the reader a clue to decoding the deeper affinities between the Casa del Fascio and its precedent – the Parthenon. Terragni modeled the upper-story loggias of the Casa del Fascio on the spaces between the peripheral columns and cella wall of his Greek precedent. The fact that one building has multiple stories while the other has one, or that the two buildings accommodated such different programs and sites is not important. Terragni was interested



Figure 5 - Terragni, Casa del Fascio, second floor balcony, as published in *Quadrante* 35 (1936).

in more than a specific formal gesture or spatial relationship, such as the way exterior ambulatory spaces frame distant landscapes. He sought to imbue his work with a Hellenic sense of order that he

learned to appreciate through the compelling misreadings of the Periclean temple by Le Corbusier. Terragni's Parthenon was the one he inherited from Le Corbusier, a solemn and austere work ruled by mechanical precision and mathematical proportion. The photograph that best demonstrates this concern – the one altered by Terragni for publication – is based on the only image that appears twice in Le Corbusier's *Towards a New Architecture*, a view of the distant mountains framed by the columns and cella of the Parthenon (Figure 6).

Terragni and his fellow Italian Rationalists came to love classical architecture through Le Corbusier's writings. Stripped of its ornament, classicism no longer evoked the social exclusivity of the academies of fine arts to the polytechnic-trained members of the Gruppo 7, the Rationalist group Terragni co-founded in 1926. Instead, through Le Corbusier's eyes, the Rationalists learned to see the architecture of ancient Greece and Rome as the concrete expression of such timeless values as order, hierarchy and harmony. It was Le Corbusier's misprisivision of Hellenic classicism that Terragni sought to emulate, and the images reproduced in *Quadrante* trace the multiple layers of his references.<sup>21</sup>

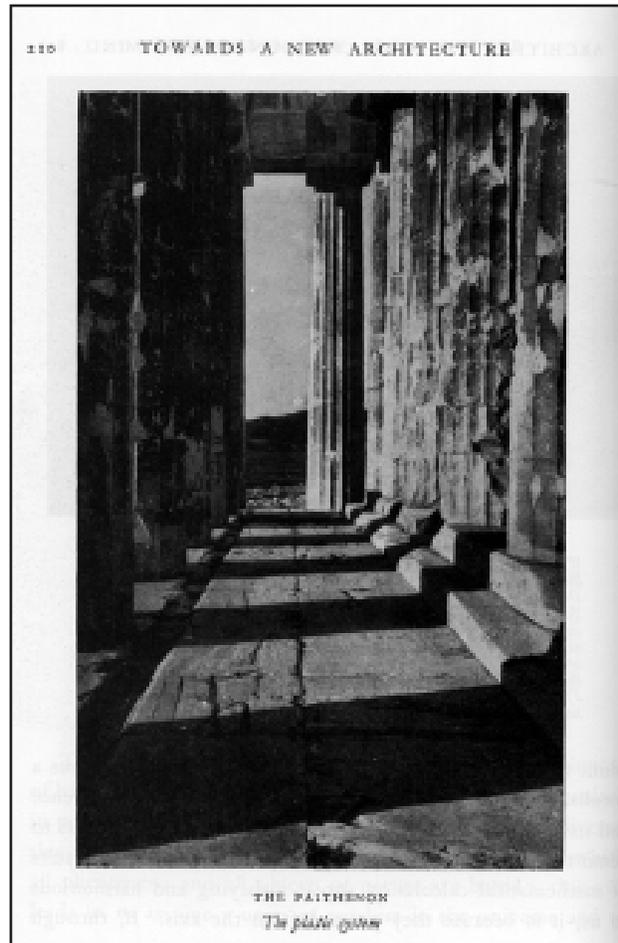


Figure 6 - The Parthenon, as published in *Towards a New Architecture* (1923).

Terragni's colleagues celebrated the classical sources for the Casa del Fascio in their writings. The building's completion contemporary with the seizure of Addis Ababa, Pietro Maria Bardi maintained, paralleled the Athenians' construction of the Parthenon in the wake of their victory over the Persians.<sup>22</sup> Carlo Belli asserted that the Como headquarters sprang from the same harmony between Athena and Apollo, beauty and wisdom, which had given birth to the Parthenon.<sup>23</sup>

Bloom, however, would insist that misprision extends beyond poetic reference to incorporate revisions to the precursor poem. The swerves between the Parthenon, the Villa Savoye and the Casa del Fascio comprise critical emendations to each work's precedent. Bloom further explains the relationship between precursor and successor in his second revisionary ratio, *tessera*, an antithetical act of com-

pletion. "A poet antithetically 'completes' his precursor," Bloom argues, "by so reading the parent poem as to retain its terms but to mean them in another sense, as though the precursor had failed to go far enough."<sup>24</sup> As with misprision, tessera describes a process of close reading and imaginative transformation in which the later work presents an alternative conclusion to its predecessor. Terragni's work completes Le Corbusier's, just as the latter completes the Parthenon.

Bloom's idea that each poem is an act of criticism toward (that is, a critical reading of) its precursor poems parallels Octavio Paz's position that poetry comprises not a representation of, but rather an intervention in, the world:

A poem is not only a verbal reality; it is also an act. The poet speaks, and as he speaks, he makes. This making is above all a making of himself: poetry is not only self-knowledge but self-creation. The reader repeats the poet's experience of self-creation, and poetry becomes incarnate in history. [...] The conception of poetry as magic implies an aesthetic of action. Art ceases to be exclusively representation and contemplation; it becomes also an intervention in reality. If art mirrors the world, then the mirror is magical; it changes the world.<sup>25</sup>

## POLITICS

Architecture also challenges Bloom's contention that misprision ought not be concerned with politics or the history of ideas.<sup>26</sup> Bloom criticizes these analytical frameworks as unnecessarily reductive. "The issue is reduction and how best to avoid it," Bloom writes. He continues, "Rhetorical, Aristotelian, phenomenological, and structuralist criticisms all reduce, whether to images, ideas, given things, or phonemes."<sup>27</sup> Architecture's ability to operate on multiple levels – to engage the political and to wrestle with contemporary thought while simultaneously speaking diachronically to the heritage of the discipline – demands a multivalent criticism. Misprision adds new dimensions to the historiographic analysis of architecture's roles in affirming or negating power relationships. Another example drawn from interwar Italy helps illustrate this point.

The 1934 competition to design the Palazzo del Littorio in Rome provided the most prominent opportunity for architects to explore the question of what a "fascist architecture" should look like. As the national headquarters of the fascist party, the Palazzo del Littorio would mark the center of power

in state affairs, and it would focus on the charismatic dictatorship of Benito Mussolini. The fascist party intended its permanent seat to manifest the hierarchical structure of the fascist state, climaxing in the Duce's *arengario* (rostrum) above the ruins of imperial Rome.

A particularly elegant entry to the competition by six of Terragni's friends (under the collective pseudonym "Gruppo Quadrante") creatively misread the urbanism of Classical Athens and Rome in order to invest the relatively young fascist regime with the timelessness of those ancient precedents.<sup>28</sup> They sought to define a sacred precinct in which to celebrate the "secular liturgy of fascism" amidst the ruins of imperial Rome.<sup>29</sup> The solemn spaces, strict geometries and traditional materials of their project exemplified what the team called the "classical spirit" animating modern architecture and the Spartan discipline that "binds the aesthetic to the ethical."<sup>30</sup> No building in interwar Italy came closer to realizing the "noble spirituality" Le Corbusier ascribed to the Parthenon (Figure 7).<sup>31</sup>

The Gruppo Quadrante raised a twenty-three-foot-high plinth over the triangular site, and carefully placed four pavilions accommodating different programmatic functions on the platform.<sup>32</sup> Three of these elements defined the *piazza d'onore* (plaza of honor) on the plinth, which the architects envisioned hosting mass rallies of 15,000 people.<sup>33</sup> The *piazza d'onore* approximated a modern acropolis, elevated above the surrounding city and dedicated to ritual participation in the collective myths of fascism. Yet unlike its Athenian precedent, this acropolis did not open toward the entire city; the backdrop of an administrative wing ensured that the view outward from the complex would focus on monuments important to the party's identification with imperial Rome, such as the Coliseum and the Basilica of Maxentius, with whose "apse" the piazza aligned axially. The *piazza d'onore* thus more closely resembles the nearby Campidoglio, another space elevated above the city, enclosed on three sides by buildings and centered on an equestrian statue.<sup>34</sup>

The Gruppo Quadrante competition entry synthesized dramatic misreadings of two sources, the Greek acropolis and the Roman Campidoglio. Here, too, Le Corbusier played a part, as the young architects from Milan looked both to the Athenian Acropolis, and to other sites, such as the promontory in

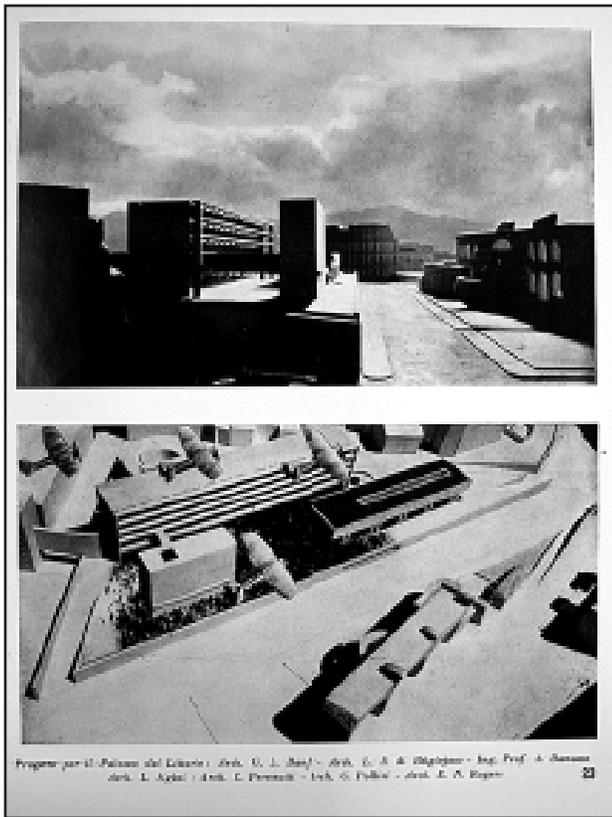


Figure 7 - Gruppo Quadrante, competition entry for the Palazzo del Littorio, Rome, 1934, as published in *Quadrante* 16/17 (1934).

Cape Sunion, which members of the *Quadrante* circle had visited during the epic 1933 journey of the *Patris II* during the fourth CIAM conference.<sup>35</sup> The view of the distant landscape through the Doric columns of the temple at Cape Sunion resonated with the comparable view of the Stuttgart suburbs through the piloti of Le Corbusier's double house at the 1927 Weissenhof siedelung exhibition, as well as the view of the horizon through the steel structure ringing the promenade of the *Patris II*. These precedents provided multiple levels of reference for the Gruppo Quadrante's use of piloti to raise a building – a museum dedicated to the fascist seizure of power – above the acropolis-like plinth. Another ancient site on the CIAM conferees' itinerary, the theater at Epidaurus, provided a model (in terms of geometry, arrangement and proportion) for the Palazzo del Littorio's auditorium (Figure 8).<sup>36</sup>

The competition entry by the Gruppo Quadrante illustrates how the creative misreading of sources expands the conventional understanding of precedent



Figure 8 - Acropolis at Cape Sunion and theater at Epidaurus, visited during the IV CIAM, as published in *Quadrante* 5 (1933).

analysis. Neither the Acropolis, with its religious rites rooted in pre-Periclean ritual observations, nor the Campidoglio matches the political context, programmatic uses and site conditions of the Palazzo del Littorio project. Instead, the architects were concerned with a set of spatial relationships that mirrored power relationships (speaking broadly to the qualities of authority and hierarchy specified in the competition brief) and with the difficult task of imbuing modernism with the sense of timelessness associated with classical architecture. Misprision, the creative misreading of precedent through analogy and poetic reference, enabled the Gruppo Quadrante to argue that their work exhibited the "spirit of classicism" without recourse to the eclectic reflex of cloaking buildings in classical ornament.<sup>37</sup>

Eisenman's misreading of Terragni's work further demonstrates how misprision enables architecture to operate politically, without reducing the work of architecture to an essay in political accommodation or resistance. For Eisenman, the Casa del Fas-

cio and other works by Terragni (notably the Casa Giuliani-Frigerio) exhibited a formal syntax without reference to extra-architectural sources, a radical position that liberates architecture from its subservience to both programmatic and rhetorical functions.<sup>38</sup> Although Terragni never diagrammed the formal shifts and displacements discovered in his work by Eisenman, the buildings in Como could be read as referring only to themselves with the kind of autonomy Eisenman claimed for House II. Unlike Terragni and the Gruppo Quadrante, Eisenman's political concerns involve disengaging architecture from the representation of social and cultural relationships. Eisenman divorced Italian Rationalism from one political context and inserted it into another, equally charged debate over the discipline's obligations to external concerns.

### LIMITS OF MISPRISION

Misprision in architecture challenges other precepts of Bloom's theory. Bloom's insistence on a genetic model of "filial" bonds between a predecessor poet and his successor fails to account for the synthetic manner in which architects join and juxtapose disparate source material. The richness of architectural poetics stems from the surplus of meanings possible in a single reference, and from the plurality of precedents embodied in any gesture. Even though Bloom allows for the idea that "some of the fathers [...] are composite figures," the notion that one poet or poem "begets" another narrows the possibility of artistic production in a manner that forecloses the possibility of richly synthetic practices like the work of Balkrishna Doshi, which is densely layered with references to multiple sources, or Richard Neutra, whose residential designs integrate parallel misreadings of the spatial sensibilities of both Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Frank Lloyd Wright.<sup>39</sup>

While *The Anxiety of Influence* profits from a detailed adaptation of Sigmund Freud's theorization of defense mechanisms, which underlie Bloom's six revisionary ratios, Bloom's critics have challenged his insistence on an Oedipal conflict between authors, in which each successor metaphorically slays his predecessor. "Battle between strong equals, father and son as mighty opposites, Laius and Oedipus at the crossroads; only this is my subject here," Bloom contends.<sup>40</sup> Yet misprision in architecture reveals more complex webs of analysis, interpretation and

synthesis. The creative misreading of precedent – as, for example, when Francesco Borromini distorts Michelangelo's muscular Capitoline facades into the sinuous frontispiece of S. Carlo alle Quattro Fontane – is neither submissive nor nihilistic.<sup>41</sup>

As both a heuristic and hermeneutic stance, misprision must be approached with caveats. One limitation of this theory is that it treats history as a mine from which to draw forth nuggets useful to the present. This instrumentality creates a form of operative criticism in which examples are sought and analyzed in terms of their utility to contemporary concerns, potentially limiting the range of both subjects and interpretations. As in the historical materialism described by Walter Benjamin, historic events are shaped by the demands of the present. "History is the subject of a structure whose site is not homogenous, empty time, but time filled by the presence of the now."<sup>42</sup>

Yet such an instrumentality has historiographic advantages. Paul Ricoeur, who challenged the human sciences' Kantian claim toward objective truth by examining the paradox of historicity, argued that meaning was rooted in an experience of existence anterior to methodology.<sup>43</sup> Such an experience was possible precisely because the historian is embedded in history. "If the historian can measure himself against the thing itself," Ricoeur argued:

if he can compare himself to the known, it is because both he and his object are historical. [...] What was a limit to science – namely, the historicity of being – becomes a constituting element of being. What was a paradox – namely, the relation of the interpreter to his object – becomes an ontological trait.<sup>44</sup>

Misprision suggests an intersubjective relationship between architects, or between architect and critic, in which engagement, not detachment, creates knowledge.

Another threat that hangs over misprision is the potential lapse into eclecticism. However, misprision is more than simple borrowing. Reference is not the same as quotation, and transformation should not be confused with transcription. The intra-poetic relationships described by the swerve between precursors and successors result from a critical process of interpretation.

The vitality of the past as read through the works of later poets is a concern adapted by Bloom from

Eliot, who explained that tradition demanded not slavish devotion to specific forms, but rather careful critical study of “the whole of the literature of Europe from Homer.”<sup>45</sup> Eliot argued that, “the historical sense involves a perception, not only of the pastness of the past, but of its presence.”<sup>46</sup>

This historical sense, which is a sense of the timeless as well as of the temporal and of the timeless and of the temporal together, is what makes a writer traditional. And it is at the same time what makes a writer most acutely conscious of his place in time, of his contemporaneity.<sup>47</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Misprision does not account for every relationship between works of architecture, nor does it exclude other historiographic methodologies. However, the concept of misprision holds great potential value for both historians and practitioners of architecture. The processes of creative misreading described by misprision reveal levels of poetic richness that elude other interpretive methodologies, and explain a kind of analogical vision common to the work of many architects.

Seen through this lens, every work of architecture is an act of interpretation. Each project has the potential to excavate new understandings about the artifacts of the past, which themselves may offer new insights of value to the future. “[T]here is interpretation wherever there is multiple meaning,” Ricoeur argues, “and it is in interpretation that the plurality of meanings is made manifest.”<sup>48</sup> Misprision is the expressive mode of a discipline constantly examining its own heritage.

Critical self-examination has been a hallmark of architecture since the Enlightenment. Bloom’s study of intra-poetic relationships offers new insights into a key aspect of that auto-criticism: the transformation of ideas through creative misreading. Eliot, the poet-critic whose reflections on the creative basis of his own discipline inspired Bloom’s essay, argued that this process always transforms the content of past works:

[...] what happens when a new work of art is created is something that happens simultaneously to all the works of art which preceded it. The existing monuments form an ideal order among themselves, which is modified by the introduction of the new (the really new) work of art among them. [...]Whoever has ap-

proved this idea of order, of the form of European, of English literature, will not find it preposterous that the past should be altered by the present as much as the present is directed by the past. And the poet who is aware of this will be aware of great difficulties and responsibilities.<sup>49</sup>

Robert Venturi, a contemporary of Bloom’s who shares his admiration for Eliot’s criticism, described processes of misprision in his landmark text, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*.<sup>50</sup> Venturi’s trans-historical analyses of formal gestures and spatial relationships imply patterns of creative misreading in the work of scores of European and American architects. Misprision helps shape Venturi’s critical vision, thus contributing to both his work as a critic interested in the development of formal concerns over time, and as an architect concerned with the levels of meaning suggested by each gesture.

Architecture and its history challenge Bloom’s theory on numerous grounds. Misprision often offers profound insights into the relationships between works of architecture, yet Bloom’s theory does not fully account for the creative misreading that links the work of one designer to another. Architecture, along with the visual and performing arts, calls for revisions to the theorization of misprision relationships.

How do we employ misprision as a design methodology? We can’t, but drawing on the examples cited here, we can expand the lenses through which we read precedent. This requires a level of comfort with analogical thought processes that treat historical artifacts through poetic tropes – such as metaphor, synecdoche and irony – rather than through the prosaic processes whose empiricism is intended to ward off the specter of subjectivity. It requires, above all, imagining the possibility of what a work could have been. Paz argued that, “[i]magination is the condition of knowledge: without it there could be no link between perception and judgment.”<sup>51</sup> Misprision is the actualization of that imagination, the concrete expression of new knowledge drawn from the critical misreading of precedent.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

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## ENDNOTES

- 1 T. S. (Thomas Stearns) Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," (1919) in *The Sacred Wood: Essays on Poetry and Criticism* (London: Methuen, 1922), 43.
- 2 Peter Eisenman, "The Formal Basis of Modern Architecture" (PhD diss., Cambridge University, 1963).
- 3 Peter Eisenman, "House II," in *Five Architects* (New York: Wittenborn & Co., 1972), 36. *Quadrante* 35/36 (October 1936): 19.
- 4 Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence: A Theory of Poetry* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1973).
- 5 "Poetic history, in this book's argument, is held to be indistinguishable from poetic influence, since strong poets make that history by misreading one another, so as to clear imaginative space for themselves." Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence*, 5.
- 6 Bloom names six revisionary ratios: misprision, completion and antithesis, repetition and discontinuity, counter-sublime, purgation and solipsism, and the return of the dead.
- 7 Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence*, 14.
- 8 Among architects, Frank Lloyd Wright exemplifies the figure of the self-proclaimed designer *sui generis* who denied any debt to precedent.
- 9 Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence*, 7.
- 10 Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," 48. Eliot's work, particularly this essay, is equally important to Bloom and his contemporary, Robert Venturi. See Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 1966), 13.
- 11 Bloom, "Clinamen or Poetic Misprision," *New Literary History* 3:2, On Interpretation: I. (Winter, 1972), 381.
- 12 An unidentified news clipping reproduced in *Quadrante* quoted Le Corbusier as saying, "The FIAT factory anticipates the urbanism of the new mechanized civilization." *Quadrante* 13 (May 1934): 37.
- 13 Le Corbusier, *Precisions, On the Present State of Architecture and City Planning*, trans. Edith Schreiber Aujame (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1991), 5. Cited in Adnan Morshed, "The Cultural Politics of the Aerial Vision: Le Corbusier in Brazil (1929)," *Journal of Architectural Education* 55:4 (May 2002): 204.
- 14 Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, trans. Frederick Etchells (New York: Payson & Clarke, Ltd., 1927), 131-173. Originally published as *Vers une architecture* (Paris: Crès, 1923).
- 15 Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, 101. Two pages earlier Le Corbusier presented the ocean liner Lamoricière as a lexicon of "new architectural forms" described in similar terms ("good contrast between the solids and voids; powerful masses and slender elements") to the Parthenon.
- 16 Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent." 45.
- 17 Projects that adapted the promenade architecturale to other contexts appeared soon after the publication of the Villa Savoye. For example, Luigi Figini and Gino Pollini arranged a serpentine processional path leading to their kindergarten for the children of Olivetti employees in Ivrea (1939).
- 18 Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence*, 7.
- 19 Parisi's photographs are conserved in the Fondo Ico Parisi, Musei Civici, Pinacoteca Civica, Como.
- 20 Flavio Mangione, *Le case del fascio: in Italia e nelle terre d'oltremare* (Rome: Ministero per i beni e le attività culturali, Direzione generale per gli archivi, 2003), 221.
- 21 I discuss the photographic representation of the Casa del Fascio at greater length in David Rifkind, "Furnishing the Fascist Interior: Giuseppe Terragni, Mario Radice and the Casa del Fascio," *arq - architectural research quarterly* v.10, n.2 (June 2006), 157-170.
- 22 Pietro Maria Bardi, "Prima conclusione di una polemica," *Quadrante* 35/36 (October 1936): 2-3.
- 23 Carlo Belli, "Dopo la polemica," 4.
- 24 Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence*, 14.
- 25 Octavio Paz, *Children of the Mire* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1974), 59.
- 26 Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence*, 94.
- 27 Ibid.
- 28 The "Gruppo Quadrante" was a collaboration of partners Luigi Figini and Gino Pollini, with BBPR (Gianluigi Banfi, Ludovico Belgioioso, Enrico Peressutti and Ernesto Nathan Rogers) and engineer Arturo Danusso.
- 29 The Gruppo Quadrante reprinted their explanatory text in a double issue of *Quadrante* devoted to their submission. See Gruppo Quadrante (Banfi, Belgioioso, Danusso, Figini, Peressutti, Pollini and Rogers), "Relazione al Progetto del Palazzo del Littorio," *Quadrante* 16/17 (August/September 1934): 13.
- 30 Gruppo Quadrante, 14.
- 31 Le Corbusier, *Towards a New Architecture*, 147. Like Le Corbusier, the Gruppo Quadrante equated the visual refinement of Hellenic architecture with the mechanical precision of contemporary engineering. "The absolute mathematical relationships," they wrote, "that have dictated the laws of the pyramids, of the Parthenon and of the Coliseum, will tie together the masses of the Palazzo del Littorio with a constant module." Gruppo Quadrante, 14. Compare this statement with Le Corbusier's discussion of the "legislation" at play in such Roman monuments as the Colosseum and the Pyramid of Cestius. "Simple masses develop immense surfaces which display themselves with a characteristic variety according as it is a question of cupolas, vaulting, cylinders, rectangular prisms or pyramids." Le Corbusier, 158.
- 32 Gruppo Quadrante, 13, 17.
- 33 Carlo Belli, "Atto di fede," *Quadrante*, 16/17 (August/September 1934): 9. The project's spare vocabulary, which Belli lauded for its "purity of expressions," reflected its designers' belief that the "spirit of classicism" consisted of geometry, proportionality, composition and refinement. The same issue as the Gruppo Quadrante's relazione also included Figini's article on Mediterranean settlements

(Luigi Figini, "Case di Libia-aerofotografia," *Quadrante*, 16/17 (August/September 1934): 43, 45, 49, 53, 57.) and Peressutti's photos of Greece (Enrico Peressutti, "Grecia," *Quadrante*, 16/17 (August/September 1934): 11.), along with an essay on Greek art by *Cahiers d'art* founder Christian Zervós (Christian Zervós, "L'arte in Grecia," *Quadrante*, 16/17 (August/September 1934): 55-60. See also Zervós's contemporary text, Christian Zervós, *L'art en Grèce des temps préhistoriques au début du XVIIIe siècle* (Paris: Éditions "Cahiers d'art", 1934).).

34 A mounted figure of Mussolini in front of the Palazzo del Littorio was intended to evoke the Campidoglio's sculpture of Marcus Aurelius, the only equestrian bronze to survive from antiquity.

35 Pietro Maria Bardi, "Cronaca di viaggio," *Quadrante* 5 (September 1933): 5; Le Corbusier, *The Athens Charter*, trans. Anthony Eardley (New York: Grossman Publishers, 1973), 21-25.

36 The issue of *Quadrante* dedicated to the 1933 CIAM had also featured numerous photographs from Greece, including the Doric temple on the promontory at Cape Sunion and the theater at Epidaurus. The former may have inspired the Gruppo Quadrante to raise the museum above the piazza d'onore on piloti, while the latter may have been a model for the team's assembly hall. *Quadrante* 5 (September 1933): 21.

37 I discuss the Gruppo Quadrante project at greater length in David Rifkind, "Architecture and Revolution on the Street of Empire," *Scapes* n.6 (Fall 2007), 26-40.

38 Peter Eisenman, *Giuseppe Terragni: Transformations, Decompositions, Critiques* (New York: Monacelli Press, 2003).

39 Bloom, *Anxiety of Influence*, 11.

40 Ibid.

41 "Borromini regarded Michelangelo and the Ancients as the two authorities to whom he could appeal with absolute confidence." Anthony Blunt, *Borromini* (Cambridge: Harvard University Press, 1979), 28. Blunt makes the specific comparison between San Carlo and the Capitoline palaces on page 74.

42 Walter Benjamin, "Theses on the Philosophy of History," in *Illuminations: Essays and Reflections*, trans. Harry Zohn (New York: Schocken Books, 1968), 262.

43 Ricoeur explains this paradox by posing the question, "how can a historical being understand history historically?" Paul Ricoeur, "Existence and Hermeneutics," trans. Kathleen McLaughlin, in *The Conflict of Interpretations*, ed. Don Ihde (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1974), 9.

44 Ricoeur, "Existence and Hermeneutics," 9.

45 Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," 44.

46 Ibid.

47 Ibid.

48 Ricoeur, "Existence and Hermeneutics," 13.

49 Eliot, "Tradition and the Individual Talent," 44-45.

50 Venturi, op cit. See also Robert Venturi, "Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture: Selections from a Forthcoming Book," *Perspecta* 9 (1965): 17-56. Venturi's work precedes Bloom's, and thus he does not use the term misprision, nor does he cite Bloom as a source.

51 Paz, *Children of the Mire*, 52.