

OVERVIEW

Cities around the globe seem to be in a state of confusion about how to make their urban centers “whole” (at least, few would say they don’t desire wholeness) and at the same time introduce bold new architecture that will “energize” them. Mostly, the former aspiration is sacrificed to the latter, in large part because there is no clear sense about how both can be achieved. Historically, however, cities were decidedly able to do both, and those “object lessons” from the past show how the problem of new urbanism doesn’t stop at the plan, or at volume and density, nor that codes are the answer, but rather that a dynamic architectural culture that draws on time-tested models can allow cities to have it both ways. Examples of successes and failures will be drawn from Chicago, Philadelphia, London, Paris, and Rome.

BEYOND CONTEXTUALISM

A Critical Approach to Stitching Cities Together

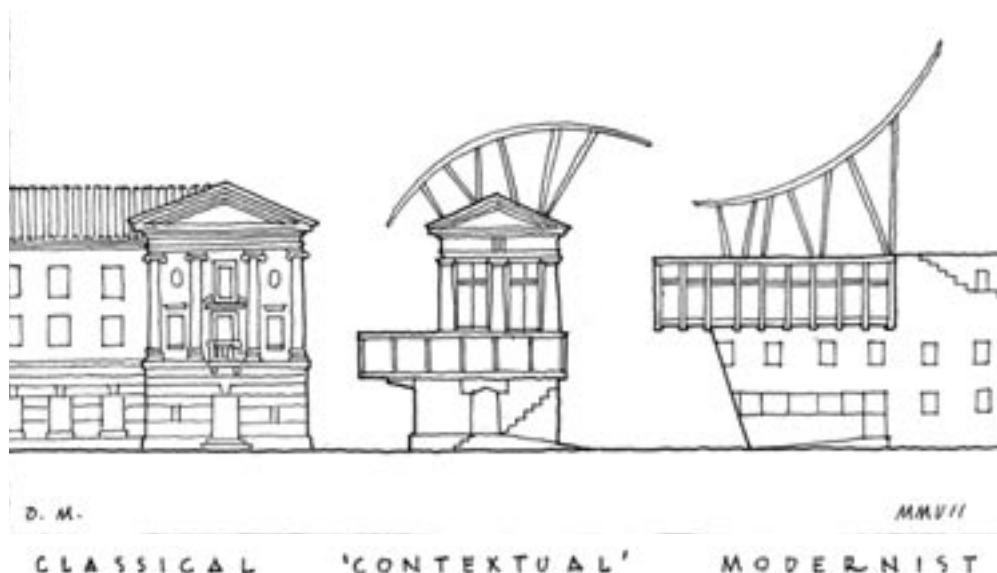
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REBUILDING OUR CAPACITY TO BE BOTH GOOD CITIZENS AND ADVENTUROUS

Codes and Context are Not a Culture

In Woody Allen's film *Zelig* the title character suffers from a neurotic tendency to take on the personality of whomever he happens to be near; humorous as the film is, it also makes a critical point about confusing context and the self. Contextualism is a poor substitute for cultural identity, and historically is not how dynamic traditional cities and towns were built.



CALVIN COOLIDGE (ZELIG (WOODY ALLEN)) HERBERT HOOVER

THE PROBLEM WITH 'FITTING IN'....



CLASSICAL 'CONTEXTUAL' MODERNIST

Beyond Contextualism: A Critical Approach to Stitching Cities Together

Theories of contextualism arose, like historic preservation, in response to Modern destruction of historic neighborhoods and buildings. And, contextualism is just as flawed as preservation as a starting point for thinking about new traditional neighborhoods and buildings.



The Place de Vosges and the Pompidou Center in Paris are, as regards urban interventions, similarly radical. However, the seventeenth century intervention yielded a space that is at once critical of its surroundings and a complement to them, whereas the nineteen seventies intervention was, and remains, brutally antagonistic to its context. The difference is not radicalism per se, it is the concern for the continuity of architectural language.

Rome: Continuity and Discontinuity

Rome represents perhaps Western culture's most resilient and layered urban environment. Without a master plan, or form-based codes, the paradigmatic palimpsest became (before modern amnesia set in) the richest of all urban ensembles, composed of a wide variety of architectures. Hardly contextual or historically sensitive, Roman builders over



the millennia often radically supplanted, while literally building upon, their predecessors. Rudolfo Lanciani's maps of the city from the early twentieth century document the evidence of pre-Renaissance and later impositions. Two poles of devotional focus at opposite ends of the city, the Vatican and the Lateran, exhibit these transformations clearly; but a closer look at their architectural echoes reveals how the legacy of the past, and each other's architectural DNA, created a fertile exchange across the city fabric that did for citizens and pilgrims what urban design could not: stitch the city together. The following is a brief synopsis of my article "Urban Echoes: Listening to the Lessons of Rome" in the forthcoming issue of *The Classicist*.

Urban Echoes: Innovation and Reverberation

The Possesso Route was the processional path across the city of Rome taken by a newly elected pope, since the Renaissance beginning at the Vatican (where the election took place) and terminating at S. Giovanni in Laterano, the city's actual cathedral. Only at S. Giovanni did the pope assume his title as bishop of Rome and spiritual head of the Church (*urbi et orbi*). The route is mapped out on the slide; for a more detailed discussion of the route please see my book *Timeless Cities*. Suffice it to say the route was both rich and tortuous. My focus here is the two anchors at either end of the route, S. Pietro and S. Giovanni. The sequence of interventions beginning

in the Renaissance is this:

1. rebuilding of St. Peter's, beginning with Bramante's projects
2. Domenico Fontana's transept facade of the Lateran for Sixtus V
3. Carlo Maderno's nave and facade of S. Pietro
4. Alessandro Galilei's east facade of S. Giovanni

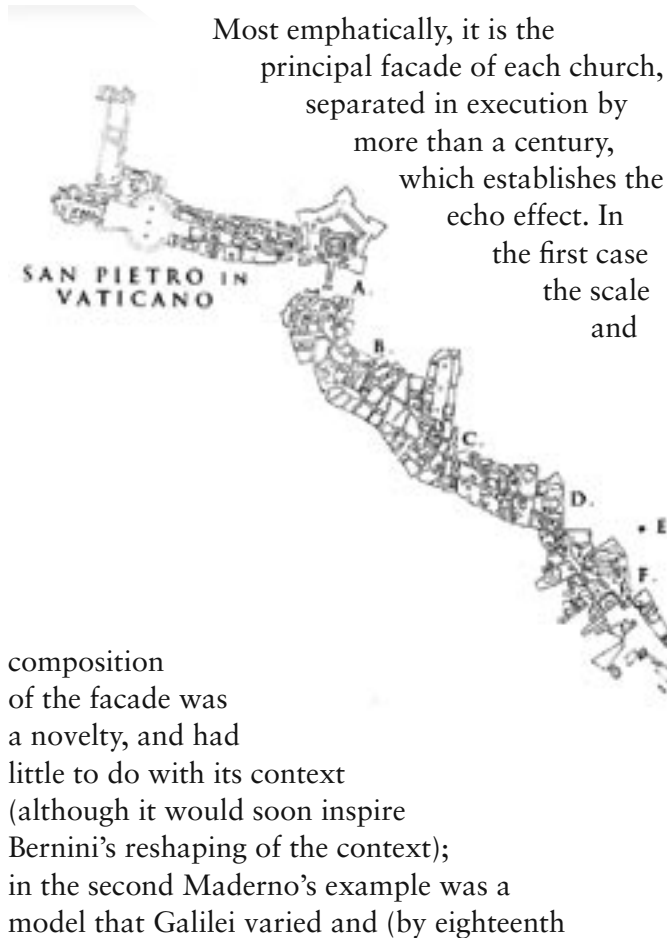
In a nutshell, the sequence of facades of the Lateran, Vatican, and Lateran refer back to each other and build and vary each other, creating echoes across the city that reverberate in the mind of pilgrim—mnemonic devices if you will, in lieu of a linear connective urban sequence.

The Possesso Route

- A. Ponte Sant' Angelo
- B. Via del Governo Vecchio
- C. S. Andrea della Valle
- D. Gesù
- E. Column of Trajan
- F. Capitoline
- G. Colosseum
- H. Sta. Croce in Gerusalemme



Rome: *Urban Echoes and Innovation*



Most emphatically, it is the principal facade of each church, separated in execution by more than a century, which establishes the echo effect. In the first case the scale and

composition of the facade was a novelty, and had little to do with its context (although it would soon inspire Bernini's reshaping of the context); in the second Maderno's example was a model that Galilei varied and (by eighteenth century standards at least) improved upon. Both were perceived in their day as radical, adventurous, and successful—in no way were they especially “sensitive” or contextual. They are successful on their own merits, but in particular for their cross references—surely this is a form of urbanism.

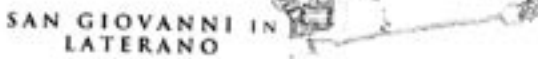
Paris and Ordered ‘Private’ Space: the Place de Vosges in elevation and plan

The Place de Vosges replaced a royal residence and tournament yard where a king (Henry II) had been mortally wounded, and in that sense it deliberately eradicated the memory of the site. Moreover, it stood in stark contrast, both in plan and elevation, to the jumble of its Marais neighborhood. Radically uncontextual, therefore, what it offered was an alternative urban vision—better ordered in plan and elevation—intended to notably improve the context. Today one would have to say the Marais would be poorer without it, but it would

have been forbidden by contextualism.

Paris and Ordered ‘Private’ Space
[Isolated] Abstract or Geometric Order: Palais Royale, Place des Victoires, Bourse

In the case of the Palais Royale an aristocratic palace became royal, and in its amplification generated public space. What had been the backs of adjacent buildings became ordered fronts onto a public garden, a public/private space that also blurred the distinction between architecture and urbanism. Its ideality or regularity, again in contradistinction to its context, was meant as both a critique and a solution. The nearby circular Place des Victoires was nearly perfectly ordered in plan and elevation (with one exception), and recalibrated the nearby street network; while the later Bourse building provided the figure/ground inverse to the seventeenth century space, an inversion available to



anyone experiencing them today in sequence. Their ideality, and the ways they echo each other, are powerful tools of urban continuity even as they rupture the texture of the fabric.



London: *The Tail and the Dog*

Inigo Jones' Queen's House was a graceful, delicate pavilion away from the urban fabric of London when it was built in 1618. When, less than a century later, Christopher Wren began the project that would create a royal naval hospital as a counterweight to his Royal Army Hospital in Chelsea, he used Jones' building as the focus of his symmetrical composition; but his new buildings vastly outclassed the Queen's pavilion in scale and ornament, yet simultaneously framed and amplified its presence and connection to the Thames. As an addition to the earlier building, the Royal Naval Hospital is an architectural tail wagging the dog; but as an urban intervention it enriches the object building by framing it and amplifying its perceived scale from the river. Only a knowing classical architect could do this—codes written to protect the earlier building would have precluded such an intervention *a priori*.

Delirious London: *The Urban Carnival*

While Wren's violation of the scale of Inigo Jones' landmark building ultimately enriched all



of Greenwich, the same cannot be said of the violations of London's skyline now progressively blotting out the presence of Wren's St. Paul's. Oblivious to Wren's building and its very language, the hoped for serendipity of surrendering to economic delirium (here deliberately recalling Rem Koolhaas's take on New York) is just a tawdry illusion. The infamous London Eye looming over Kent's Horse Guards tells the tale more subtly.

Philadelphia: *Figure/Ground Reversal*

William Penn's plan for Philadelphia famously envisioned five squares locking down both the overall city grid and four distinct neighborhoods. When, roughly two hundred years later, the city dropped a massive new city hall building into the central square, something fundamental about the original urban conception was interrupted and inverted (albeit with a courtyard that created another kind of figural void).

Philadelphia: *Classicism and Continuity*

And yet, even though the hulking stone French Second Empire pile had little stylistically to do with its predecessor's restrained brick and stone Georgian, the new building's classicism inevitably linked it to a wider architectural tradition, and the city's later classical eclecticism ultimately made the



French note less of an anomaly. Hardly deferential, Philadelphia's City Hall speaks to classical architecture's inherent capacity for continuity, even in spite of itself. Perhaps nowhere is this more evident than along Chicago's Michigan Avenue.

Chicago: *Michigan and the Millennium*

Novelty is a temporary thrill. How long the bloom will stay on the rose of Frank Gehry's Millennium bandshell in Chicago is anyone's guess, but it has precious little in common with the enriching variety of Michigan Avenue's earlier architectural parade. What allows the riotous variety of the latter to cohere while Gehry's intervention remains aloof is the simple fact that mature, traditional languages of architecture are rooted in principles and a palette of materials that virtually guarantee a modicum of harmony no matter how diverse they are, whereas Gehry's self-referential rebellion will never allow itself to be folded into the nearby palimpsest.

CODES ARE NOT A CULTURE

Cities like Chicago around the globe seem to be in a state of confusion about how to make their urban centers "whole" (at least, few would say they don't desire wholeness) and at the same time introduce bold new architecture that will "energize" them. Mostly, the former aspiration is sacrificed to the latter, in large part because there is no clear sense about how both can be achieved. Historically, however, cities were decidedly able to do both, and those "object lessons" from the past show how the problem of urbanism doesn't stop at the plan, or at volume and density, nor that codes are the answer,



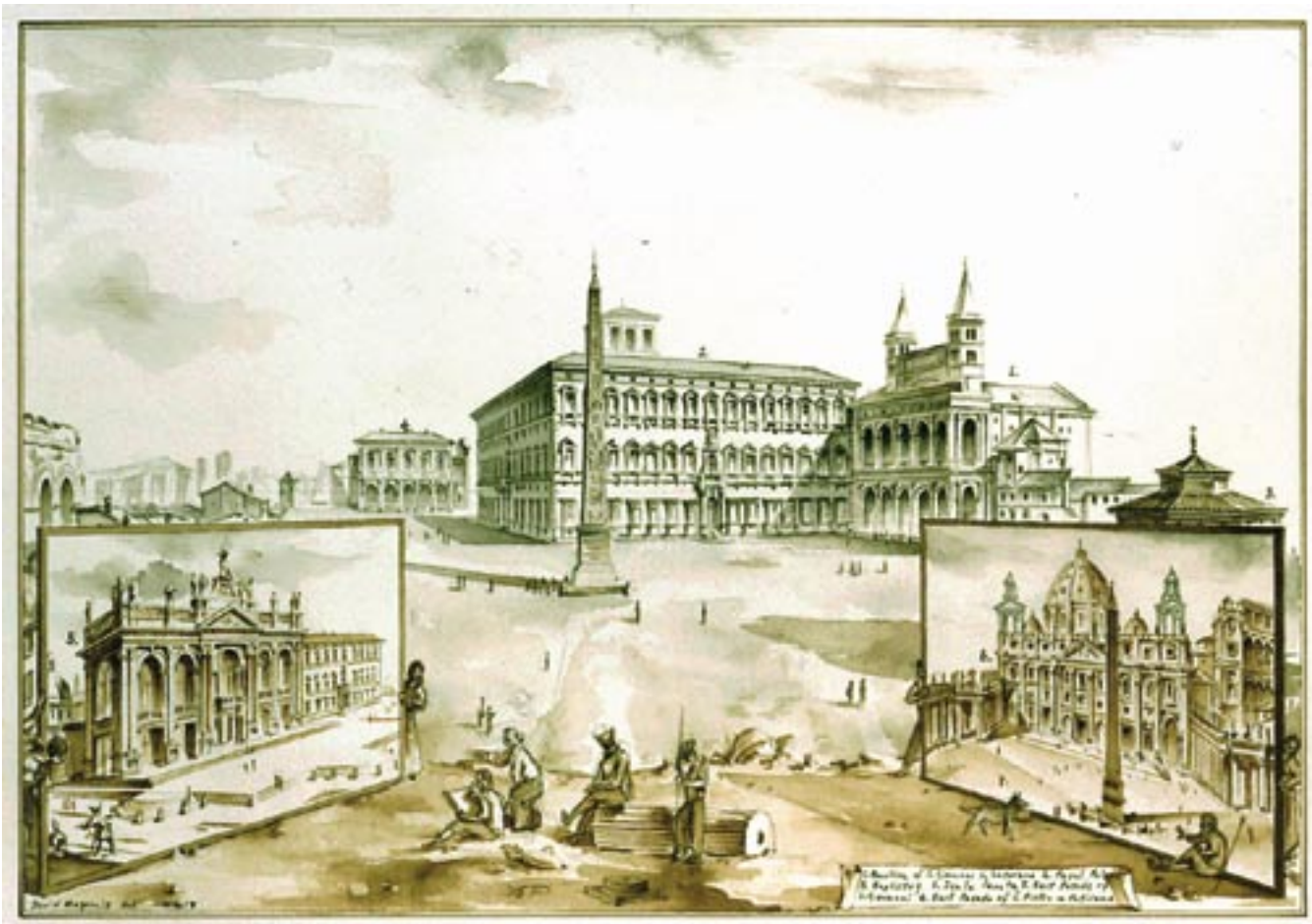
but rather that a dynamic architectural culture that draws on time-tested models can allow cities to have it both ways. New Urbanism's alliance with traditional architecture has privileged that way of building's capacity for harmony, but it has also implicitly eschewed the classical tradition's capacity to be adventurous. Mere contextualism is an abdication of responsibility, a timid deference to the immediate surroundings that only manages to do no harm, but neither does it offer a remedy to our increasingly meaningless urban environments. Only the recovery of a critical, adventurous classicism can generate the Renaissance's compelling definition of harmony: concordant discord.

Thank you.

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My drawing below illustrates the powerful, dynamic ways in which significant buildings echoed each other across the Roman urban topography; the views illustrated in this composite image are based on three views by Piranesi. Deliberately depending upon and reinventing the formal and symbolic intent of their models, St. Peter's and the Lateran offer a culturally mature rebuttal to the desperate attempts of cities like Chicago to “say something new.”



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Rodolfo Lanciani, *Forma Urbis Romæ*, 1901

Palais Royale, Turgot plan 1739

diagram of London skyline, British Airways *businesslife* magazine, March 2007

Philadelphia City Hall, from the Philadelphia Architects and Buildings Project, © Lutz Collection, Philadelphia

Athenæum (<http://www.philadelphiabuildings.org/pab/index.cfm>)