The Politics of Postmodernism: Parody and History

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> That postmodern theses have deep roots in the present human conditions is confirmed today in the document on architecture issued by the Polish union Solidarity. This text accuses the modern city of being the product of an alliance between bureaucracy and totalitarianism, and singles out the great error of modern architecture in the break of historical continuity. Solidarity's words should be meditated upon, especially by those who have confused a great movement of collective consciousness [postmodernism] with a passing fashion.
>
> Paolo Portoghesi

What both its supporters and its detractors seem to want to call "postmodernism" in art today — be it in video, dance, literature, painting, music, architecture, or any other form — seems to be art marked primarily by an internalized investigation of the nature, the limits, and the possibilities of the language or discourse of art. On the surface, postmodernism's main interest might seem to be in the processes of its own production and reception, as well as in its own parodic relation to the art of the past. But I want to argue that it is precisely parody — that seemingly introverted formalism — that paradoxically brings about a direct confrontation with the problem of the relation of the aesthetic to a world of significance external to itself, to a discursive

world of socially defined meaning systems (past and present) — in other words, to ideology and history.

My focus will be on postmodern architecture, since it is the one art form in which the label seems to refer, uncontested, to a generally agreed upon corpus of works. And, as has been the case for most commentators, the characteristics of this architecture will constitute my model for postmodernism at large — from historiographic metafictions like Salman Rushdie's *Midnight's Children* or D.L. Doctorow's *The Book of Daniel* to metafilmic historical movies like Peter Greenaway's *The Draughtsman's Contract*, from the video art of Douglas Davis to the photography of Heribert Berkert. And all of these art works (that others too have called postmodernist) share one characteristic: they are all resolutely historical and inescapably political precisely because they are parodic. I want to argue that postmodernism is a fundamentally contradictory enterprise: its art forms (and its theory) use and abuse, install and then subvert convention in parodic ways, self-consciously pointing both to their own inherent paradoxes and provisionality and, of course, to their critical or ironic re-reading of the art of the past. In implicitly contesting in this way such concepts as aesthetic originality and textual closure, postmodernist art offers a new model for mapping the borderline between art and the world, a model that works from a position within both and yet within neither, a model that is profoundly implicated in, yet still capable of criticizing, that which it seeks to describe.[1]

Such a paradoxical model of postmodernism is consistent with the very name of the label, for *post*modernism signals its contradictory dependence upon and independence from the modernism that both historically preceded it and literally made it possible. Philip Johnson probably could not have built the postmodern Transco Tower in Houston if he had not first designed the modernist purist form of Pennzoil Place — *and* if he had not begun his career as an architectural historian.

All architects know that, by their art's very nature as the shaper of public space, the act of designing and building is an unavoidably social act. Parodic references to the history of architecture textually reinstate a dialogue with the past and — inescapably — with the social and ideological context in which architecture is (and has been) both pro-

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1. See Linda Hutcheon, "Beginning to Theorize Postmodernism," *Textual Practice* 1, no. 1 (1987), forthcoming.

duced and lived. In using parody in this way, postmodernist forms want to work toward a public discourse that would overtly eschew modernist aestheticism and hermeticism and their attendant political self-marginalization.

I am fully aware that my last sentence constitutes a kind of "red flag" in the light of the current debate on postmodernism being argued out on the pages of the *New Left Review*. In reply to a 1984 article by Fredric Jameson, Terry Eagleton[2] recently found himself in an oddly inverted Lukácian position, championing that very hermetic modernism in his rush to join in on the now fashionable attack on postmodernism. Without ever giving an example of what, to him, would be an actual postmodernist work of art (and there is considerable disagreement on this topic in both theory and practice), Eagleton simply states that postmodernism will not do, that the only way to develop an "authentically political art in our own time"[3] would be to combine somehow the revolutionary avant-garde with modernism:

> An art today which, having learnt from the openly committed character of avant-garde culture, might cast the contradictions of modernism in a more explicitly political light, could do so effectively only if it had also learnt its lesson from modernism too — learnt, that is to say, that the "political" itself is a question of the emergence of a transformed rationality, and if it is not presented as such will still seem part of the very tradition from which the adventurously modern is still striving to free itself.[4]

I want to argue here that, were Eagleton to look at actual postmodernist art today — at architecture, in particular — he would see that the art for which he calls already exists. Postmodernist art is precisely that which casts "the contradictions of modernism in an explicitly political light." In fact, as architect Paolo Portoghesi reminds us, it has arisen from the very conjunction of modernist and avant-garde politics and forms.[5]

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2.   Fredric Jameson, "Postmodernism, or the Cultural Logic of Late Capitalism," *New Left Review* 146 (1984): 53-92; and Terry Eagleton, "Capitalism, Modernism and Postmodernism," *New Left Review* 152 (1985): 60-73.

3.   Eagleton, 72.

4.   Ibid., 73.

5.   Paolo Portoghesi, *Postmodern: The Architecture of the Postindustrial Society* (New York: Rizzoli, 1983), 35: "Those who fear a wave of permissiveness would do well to remember that the ironic use of the quotation and the archaeological artifact as an *objet trouvé* are discoveries of the figurative avant-garde of the twenties that have landed on the island of architecture sixty years late."

But it also suggests that we must be critically conscious of the myths of both the modernists and the late-romantic avant-garde. The "elitism" of Dada and of Eliot's verse is exactly what postmodernism paradoxically seeks to exploit and undercut. But the theorists/practitioners of post-modernism in all the arts — from Umberto Eco to Karlheinz Stock-hausen — are emphatic in their commitment to the formation (or recollection) of a more generally shared collective aesthetic code: "It is not just the cry of rage of a minority of intellectuals who want to teach others how to live, and who celebrate their own solitude and separateness."[6]

Furthermore, Edward W. Said has argued that we must realize that all art is discourse-specific, that it is to some degree "worldly," even when it appears to deny any such connections.[7] The paradox of postmod-ernist parody is that it is *not* essentially depthless, trivial kitsch, as Eagleton and Jameson both believe,[8] but rather that it can and does lead to a vision of interconnectedness: "illuminating itself, the artwork simultaneously casts light on the workings of aesthetic conceptualiza-tion and on art's sociological situation."[9] Postmodernist ironic recall of history is neither nostalgia nor aesthetic "cannibalization."[10] Nor can it be reduced to the glibly decorative.[11] It *is* true, however, that it does not offer what Jameson desires — "genuine historicity," that is, in his terms, "our social, historical and existential present and the past as 'referent' " as "ultimate objects,"[12] But its *deliberate* refusal to do so is not a naive one: what postmodernism does is to contest the very possibility of there ever being "ultimate objects." It teaches and enacts the recognition of the fact that social, historical, and existential "reali-ty" is *discursive* reality when it is used as the referent of art, and so the only "genuine historicity" becomes that which would openly acknowl-edge its own discursive, contingent identity. The past as referent is not bracketed or effaced, as Jameson would like to believe: it is incor-porated and modified, given new and different life and meaning. This

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6.   Portoghesi, *Postmodern*, 81.
7.   Edward W. Said, *The World, the Text, and the Critic* (Cambridge, Ma.: Harvard Univ. Press, 1983), 4.
8.   Jameson, 85; Eagleton, 61, 68.
9.   Charles Russell, "The Context of the Concept," in *Romanticism, Modernism, Postmodernism*, ed. Harry R. Garvin (Lewisberg, Pa.: Bucknell Univ. Press, 1980), 189.
10.   Jameson, 67.
11.   Kenneth Frampton, "Towards a Critical Regionalism: Six Points for an Archi-tecture of Resistance," in *The Anti-Aesthetic: Essays on Postmodern Culture*, ed. Hal Foster (Port Townsend, Wash.: Bay Press, 1983), 16-30.
12.   Jameson, 67.

is the lesson taught by postmodernist art today. In other words, even the most self-conscious and parodic of contemporary works do not try to escape, but indeed foreground, the historical, social, ideological contexts in which they have existed and continue to exist. This is as true of music as of painting; it is as valid for literature as it is for architecture.

It is not surprising that a post-Saussurian kind of pragmatics or semiotics has had a strong appeal for those studying this kind of parodic art. Postmodernism self-consciously demands that the "justifying premises and structural bases" of its modes of "speaking" be investigated to see what permits, shapes, and generates what is "spoken."[13] According to one important, but often neglected aspect of the Saussurian model, language is a social contract: everything that is presented and thus received through language is already loaded with meaning inherent in the conceptual patterns of the speaker's culture. In an extension of the meaning of "language," we could say that the *langue* of architecture is in some ways no different from that of ordinary language: no single individual can alter it at his or her own will; it embodies certain culturally accepted values and meanings; it has to be learned in some detail by users before it can be employed effectively.[14] The architecture of the 1970s and 1980s has been marked by a deliberate challenge to the conventions and underlying assumptions of that *langue*, but it is a self-conscious challenge offered from *within* those very conventions and assumptions.

Here, the formal and the ideological cannot be separated, for that architectural *langue* is part of a broader, cultural discourse that is the product of late capitalist dissolution of bourgeois hegemony and the development of mass culture. But the uniformization and commodification of mass culture are among the totalizing forces which postmodern art tries to confront — from within. It knows it cannot escape implication and so turns this fact to its own use. It contests uniformity by parodically asserting ironic difference instead of either homogeneous identity or alienated otherness. The pluralist, provisional, contradictory nature of the postmodern enterprise challenges not just aesthetic unities, but also homogenizing social notions of the

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13. Russell, 186.
14. Geoffrey Broadbent, "Meaning into Architecture," in *Meaning in Architecture*, ed. Charles Jencks and George Baird (New York: Braziller, 1969), 51.

monolithic (male, Anglo, white, Western) in our culture. And parody is one of its mechanisms for doing so: what appears to be an aesthetic turning-inward is exactly what reveals the close connections between the social production and reception of art and our ideologically and historically conditioned ways of perceiving and acting. As a way of textually incorporating the history of art, parody is the formal analogue to the dialogue of past and present that silently but unavoidably goes on at a social level in architecture, because the relation of form to function, shape to use of space, is not a new problem for architects. It is in this way that parodic postmodern buildings can be said to participate, in their form and their explicitly social contextualizing, in contemporary challenges to the bases of critical theory of bourgeois society. Any study of the actual aesthetic *practice* of postmodernism quickly makes clear its role in the crises of *theoretical* legitimation that has come to our attention in the now infamous Lyotard-Habermas-Rorty argument.[15] Perhaps it is at this level that the ideological status of postmodernist art should be debated, instead of at that of an understandable, if knee-jerk, reaction against its implication in the mass culture of late capitalism.

To rage *à la* Jameson and Eagleton against mass culture as only a negative force may be, as one architect/critic has remarked, "simply continuing to use an aristocratic viewpoint and not knowing how to grasp the liberating result and the egalitarian charge of this [postmodernist] profanation of the myth" of elitist romantic/modernist originality and unique genius.[16] In fact, the architecture of the 1970s began to signal a conscious move away from the modern movement or the International Style as much for overtly ideological as for aesthetic reasons. The social failure of the great modernist housing projects and the inevitable economic association of "heroic" modernism with large corporations combined to create a demand for new architectural forms that would reflect a changed and changing social awareness. These new forms were not, by any means, monolithic. They did, however, mark a shared return to such rejected forms as the vernacular

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15.   Jean-François Lyotard, *The Postmodern Condition: A Report on Knowledge*, trans. Geoff Bennington and Brian Massumi (1979; Minneapolis: Univ. of Minnesota Press, 1984) (which includes his response to Habermas, 71-82); Jürgen Habermas, "Modernity — An Incomplete Project" in Foster, 3-15; Richard Rorty, "Habermas, Lyotard et le postmodernité," *Critique* 442 (mars 1984): 181-97.

16.   Portoghesi, *Postmodern*, 28.

(that is, to local needs and local architectural traditions),[17] decoration and a certain individualism in design, and, most importantly, the past, a turning to history. Modernism's great "purist" monuments to the corporate elite and to the cultural seats of power (museums, theatres) gave way, for example, to the Centre Pompidou's (at least stated) desire to make culture part of the business of everyday living.[18] What soon became labelled as *post*modernism challenged the survival of modernism by contesting its claims to universality: its transhistorical assertions of value were no longer seen as based — as claimed — on reason or logic, but rather on a solid alliance with power, with what Portoghesi calls its "identification with the productive logic of the industrial system."[19] Just as modernism (oedipally) had to reject historicism and to pretend to a parthenogenetic birth fit for the new machine age, so postmodernism, in reaction, returned to history, to what I want to call "parody," to give architecture back its traditional social and historical dimension, though with a new twist this time.

What I mean by "parody" here is *not* the ridiculing imitation of the standard theories and definitions that are rooted in eighteenth-century theories of wit. The collective weight of parodic *practice* suggests a redefinition of parody as repetition with critical distance that allows ironic signaling of difference at the very heart of similarity.[20] In historiographic metafiction, in film, in painting, in music, and in architecture, this parody paradoxically enacts both change and cultural continuity: the Greek prefix *para* can mean both 'counter' or 'against' AND

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17.   In his attack on postmodernism, Frampton (20) seems to ignore the fact that the "critical regionalism" he calls for is indeed part of the postmodernist enterprise as well.

18.   Cf. Jameson, 85. Since his main example of a postmodernist architect is, curiously, John Portman, Jameson not surprisingly still sees postmodernism as replicating, reinforcing, and intensifying the logic of late capitalism in a negative sense. While historically it is true that this architecture is contemporaneous with multinational capital, so is Jameson's own discourse, of course. Contemporaneity need not signify wholesale implication without critical consciousness. Also, had he not chosen Portman (whom he admits to be "uncharacteristic" but uses anyway [80]) for his cursory examination of this subject, he might have reached other conclusions. This limitation is a serious one only because Jameson claims that his own ideas on postmodernism grew from architectural debates (54), debates which he seems to have followed from an odd angle.

19.   Paolo Portoghesi, *After Modern Architecture*, trans. Meg Shore (New York: Rizzoli, 1982), 3.

20.   See Linda Hutcheon, *A Theory of Parody: The Teachings of Twentieth-Century Art Forms* (New York: Methuen, 1985).

'near' or 'beside.' Jameson argues that in postmodernism "parody finds itself without a vocation,"[21] replaced by pastiche, which he (bound by a definition of parody as ridiculing imitation) sees as more neutral or blank parody. But the looking to both the aesthetic and historical past in postmodernist architecture is anything but what Jameson describes as pastiche, that is, "the random cannibalization of all the styles of the past, the play of random stylistic allusion."[22] There is absolutely nothing random or "without principle" in the parodic recall and re-examination of the past by architects like Charles Moore or Ricardo Bofill. To include irony and play is *never* necessarily to exclude serious-ness and purpose in postmodernist art. To misunderstand this is to misunderstand the nature of much contemporary aesthetic production — even if it does make for neater theorizing.

In order to understand why ironic parody should, seemingly para-doxically, become such an important form of postmodernist architec-ture's desire to reinstate a "worldly" connection for its discourse, we must look briefly at what the tyranny of "heroic" modernism has meant in the twentieth century. There have been two kinds of reactions to this modernist hegemony: those from architects themselves and those from the public at large. Perhaps the most eloquent and polemi-cal of the recent public responses has been that of Tom Wolfe in his *From Bauhaus to Our House*[23] which opens with its own wonderfully parodic lament:

> O beautiful, for spacious skies, for amber waves of grain, has there ever been another place on earth where so many people of wealth and power have paid for and put up with so much architec-ture they detested as within thy blessed borders today?

Wolfe's is a negative aesthetic response to what he amusingly calls "the whiteness & lightness & leanness & cleanness & bareness & spareness of it all."[24] But it is also an ideological rejection of what can only be called the modernist architects' "policing" of the impulses of both the clients and the tenants of their buildings. This is the tyranny of the European the-orists working in their "compounds" (be they the Bauhaus or, later, the American universities). This is a tyranny — both moral and aesthetic

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21.   Jameson, 65.
22.   Ibid., 65-6.
23.   Tom Wolfe, *From Bauhaus to Our House* (New York: Farrar, Straus, Giroux, 1981).
24.   Ibid., 4.

— over American clients. In Wolfe's terms: "No alterations, special orders, or loud talk from the client permitted. We know best. We have exclusive possession of the true vision of the future of architecture."[25] The clients — even if they did foot the bill — were still considered the "bourgeois" to be despised and, if possible, confounded by the architectural clerisy's elitist, esoteric theories.

The *users* of the building were also to be controlled. Although Gropius and Le Corbusier both designed worker's housing, neither seems to have felt the need to consult those who would live there: it must have been tacitly assumed that the intellectually underdeveloped would allow the architects to arrange their lives for them. Not surprisingly, many of the worker housing projects of "High Modernism," like the infamous Pruitt-Igoe one in St. Louis, degenerated into shabby welfare housing and were finally and literally blown up, when their social failure was acknowledged. Similarly, those so-called non-bourgeois concrete and glass skyscraper apartment buildings and hotels became the housing of the bourgeois — the only ones who could afford to live there. But the control of the architect was often even more extreme: in the Seagram Building, Mies allowed only white blinds on the plate glass windows and demanded that these be left in only one of three positions: open, shut, or half-way.

Modernist architects seemed to set themselves up in one of two privileged positions with regard to the groups that were actually to occupy their designs. One position is what George Baird[26] has called that of the *Gesamtkünstler* who took for granted an ability to enhance the lives of the future tenants by dramatically heightening their experience of their environment. This position is one OVER and ABOVE them; the attitude is a paternalistic one toward the tenant/child. On the other hand, some modernists saw themselves as, in Baird's terms, the "life-conditioners." Not ABOVE, but now OUTSIDE the experience of the tenant, the scientistic architect regarded the tenant as object and the building as an experiment. Be the stance one of indifference or arrogance, it is certainly not hard to see how it could come to be labelled as elitist. And one need only recall Le Corbusier's oddly Platonic Nietzschean view of society controlled by the enlightened businessman and the architect, both the products of an impersonal,

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25.   Ibid., 17.
26.   George Baird, " 'La Dimension Amoureuse' in Architecture," in *Meaning in Architecture*, 78-99.

universal, transhistorical force symbolized by the machine. The lessons of the past were rejected in the name of this new brand of liberal elitism or idealistic paternalism.[27] Although Le Corbusier saw himself as the apolitical technocrat, the ideological assumptions behind his aesthetic theories of purist rationality might be seen to have played a role in his collaboration with the Vichy government and the failure, in practical terms, of his rather simplistic theory of social good through pure form. We must, of course, beware of making our own simplistic associations of architectural style and single ideologies.[28] Portoghesi reminds us that "[h]istory proves that forms and models survive the type of power that produced them, and that their meaning changes in time according to the social use that is made of them."[29] And such was indeed the case with the modernist premises which postmodernism used — but transformed.

What we should not forget is that the act of designing and building is always a gesture in a social context,[30] and this is one of the ways in which formal parody meets social history. Architecture has both an aesthetic (form) and social (use) dimension. The odd combination of the empirical and the rational in modernist theory was meant to suggest a scientific determinism that was to combat the cumulative power and weight of all that had been inherited from the past. Faith in the rational, scientific mastery of reality implicitly — then explicitly — denied the inherited, evolved cultural continuity of history. It is perhaps a loss of faith in these modernist values that has led to *post-modernist* architecture today. The practitioners of this new mode form an eclectic grouping, sharing only a sense of the past (though not a "random" one) and a desire to return to the idea of architecture as both communication and community (despite the fact that these two concepts, from a postmodern perspective, now have a distinctly problematic and decentralized ring to them). The two major theoretical spokesmen of this mixed group have been Paolo Portoghesi and Charles Jencks — both practicing architects.

As early as 1974, in *Le inibizioni dell'architettura moderna*,[31] Portoghesi

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27.   See Charles Jencks, *Le Corbusier and the Tragic View of Architecture* (London: Allen Lane, 1973), 51-4, 72.
28.   Portoghesi, in *Postmodern*, calls this kind of relationship often one of "reciprocal acts of instrumentality" (37).
29.   Ibid., 140.
30.   Baird, 81.
31.   Paolo Portoghesi, *Le inibizioni dell'architettura moderna* (Bari: Laterza, 1974).

argued for the return of architecture to its roots in practical needs and in the (now problematized) aesthetic and social sense of continuity and community. Memory is central to this linking of the *past* with the *lived* (*il vissuto*). As an architect who lives and works in Rome, Portoghesi cannot avoid direct confrontation with the layers of history in his city and with the example of the baroque architects before him. History is not, however, a repository of models: he is not interested in copying or in straight revivalism. Like all the post*modernists* (and this is the reason for the label) he knows he cannot totally reject modernism, especially its material and technological advances, but he wants to integrate with these positive aspects of the immediate past the equally positive aspects of the more remote and repressed history of forms. All must be used; all must also be put into question, as architecture "writes" history through its modern re-contextualizing of all of the forms of the past. Surely this is exactly what Jameson and Eagleton[32] are calling for, but failing to see in postmodernist architecture, where the collective architectural language of modernism is put into ironic contact with "the entire historical series of its past experiences" in order to create an art that is "paradoxical and ambiguous but vital."[33]

An example might make clearer the form taken by this kind of historical interrogation or ironic contamination of the present by the past. Portoghesi's early Casa Baldi is a direct parody (in the sense of repetition with ironic distance) of Michaelangelo's Capella Sforza in S. Maria Maggiore. The exact structural echoing is made parodic — that is, ironically different — by the use of new materials: brick and stone, instead of plaster (fig. 1 and 2). The church's interior shaping of corners has become the house's exterior form. Another kind of formal echoing occurs in the relation of this building to its environment. Portoghesi inverts the eighteenth-century taste for inserting ruins into the garden: the nearby (real) Roman ruins, overrun with vegetation, are echoed in his allowing nature to overrun the house as well. In his other designs, Portoghesi re-contextualizes and literally inverts the forms of the past in an even

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32. Eagleton, 73; Jameson, 85. Jameson argues for a need for art to intervene in history and so transform society. Postmodern theorists like Portoghesi also argue for precisely this kind of social intervention, especially in architecture — an art form whose social and economic ties in everyday life are perhaps clearest.

33. Portoghesi, *Postmodern*, 10-11. Portoghesi refuses to limit this historical past to *post*-industrial periods and has been attacked for this as "reactionary, unrealistic" by Frampton (20).
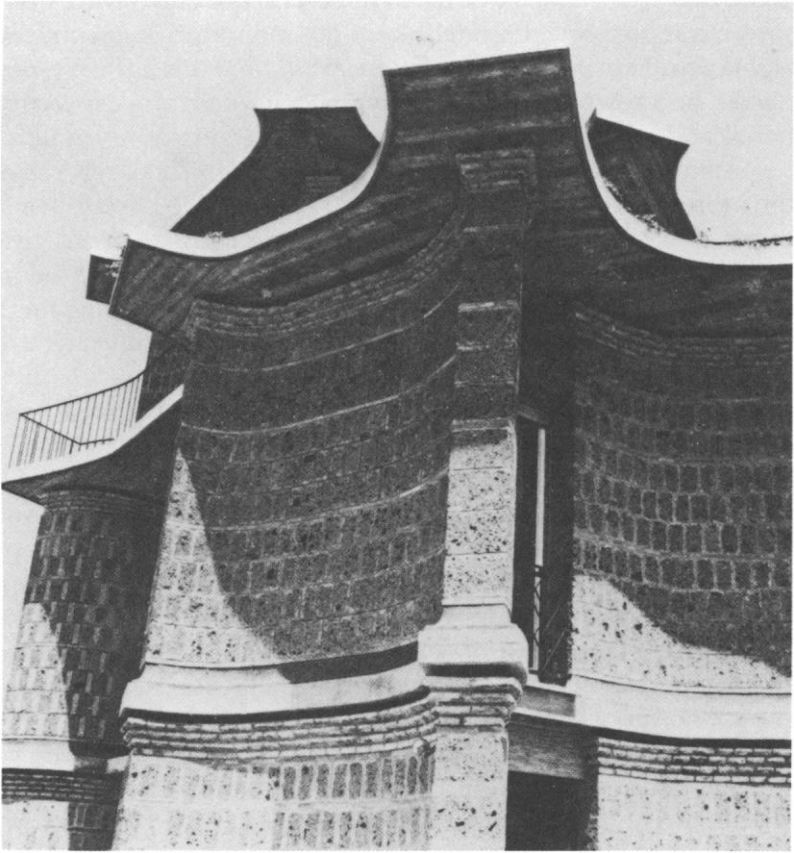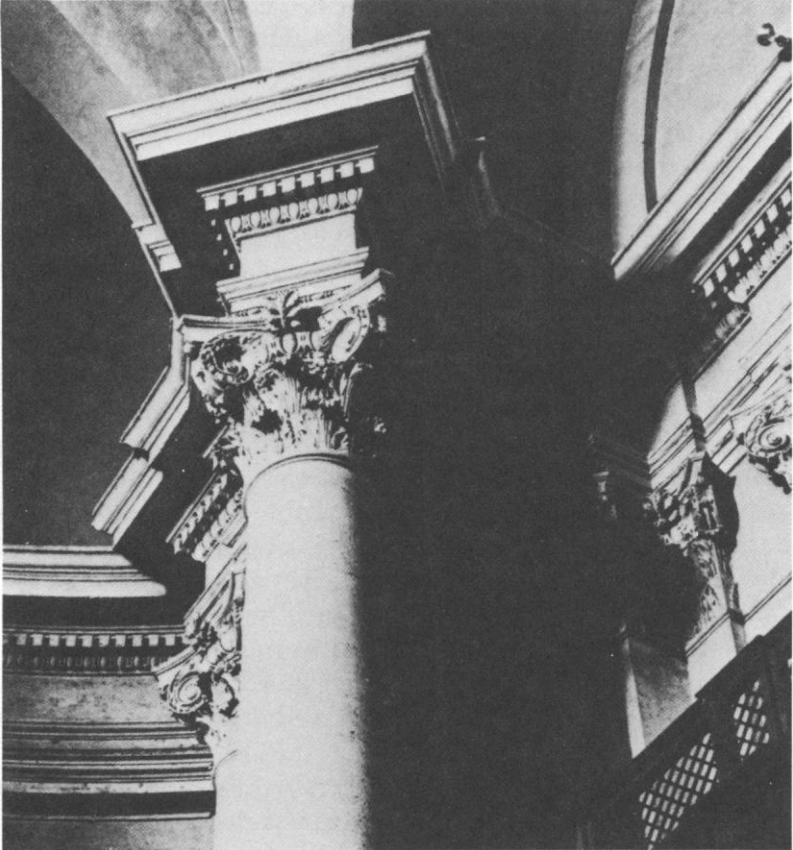
fig. 1
Paolo Portoghesi, Casa Baldi

fig. 2
Michelangelo, Capella Sforza, S. Maria Maggiore

more radical way: a baroque church ceiling (in Borgo d'Ale) can become the basis of a Portoghesi floor plan — ironically, that of the Royal Palace of Amman.

The implications of this kind of relationship to the historical forms of the past are perhaps best expressed by architect Aldo van Eyck:

> Man, after all, has been accommodating himself physically in this world for thousands of years. His natural genius has neither increased nor decreased during that time. It is obvious that the full scope of this enormous environmental experience cannot be contained in the present unless we telescope the past, i.e. the entire human effort, into it. This is not historical indulgence in a limited sense, not a question of travelling back, but merely of being aware of what 'exists' in the present — what has travelled into it.[34]

The naiveté of modernism's ideologically and aesthetically motivated rejection of the past (in the name of the future) is not countered here by an equally naive antiquarianism, as Jameson and Eagleton assert. On the contrary, what starts to look naive is this reductive notion that any recall of the past must, by definition, be sentimental nostalgia.

By its doubly parodic, double coding (that is, as parodic of both modernism and something else), postmodernist architecture also allows for that which was rejected as uncontrollable and deceitful by both modernism's *Gesamtkünstler* and its "life-conditioner": that is, ambiguity and irony. Architects see themselves as no longer *ABOVE* or *OUTSIDE* the experience of the users of their buildings,[35] they are now IN it, subject to its echoing history and its multivalent meanings — both the result of the "recycling and creative transformation of any number of prototypes which [have] survived in the western world for centuries."[36] In Portoghesi's words: "It is the loss of memory, not the cult of memory, that will make us prisoners of the past."[37] To disregard the collective memory of architecture is to risk making the mistakes of modernism and its ideology of the myth of social reform through purity of structure. Jane Jacobs has clearly documented the failure of

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34. Aldo van Eyck, "The Interior of Time" in *Meaning in Architecture*, 171.
35. The Atelier of Research and Urban Action (ARAU) in Brussels is an example of this. This group of architects acts as consultants and offers technical assistance to any neighborhood council that wants to combat non-consultative urban planning.
36. Portoghesi, *After Modern Architecture*, 5.
37. Ibid., 111.

this myth in her *Death and Life of Great American Cities*,[38] and even the opponents of postmodernism agree on the ideological, social, and aesthetic effects of modernism on major urban centres.

Yet postmodernism does not entirely negate modernism. It cannot. What it does do is interpret it freely; it "critically reviews it for its glories and its errors."[39] Thus, modernism's dogmatic reductionism, its inability to deal with ambiguity and irony, and its denial of the validity of the past were all issues that were seriously examined and found wanting. Postmodernism attempts to be historically aware, hybrid, and inclusive; the architect's new motto might be "responsibility and tolerance."[40] Seemingly inexhaustible historical and social curiosity and a provisional and paradoxical stance (somewhat ironic, yet involved) replace the prophetic, prescriptive posture of the great masters of modernism. An example of this new collaborative position would be Robert Pirzio Biroli's rebuilding of the Town Hall in Venzone, Italy following a recent earthquake. An elegant re-reading of the local structural models (mostly Palladian) of the Veneto region is here filtered through both the modernist technology best suited to a structure built in a seismic area and the particular needs of a modern administrative centre. Even more significantly, perhaps, this building was designed with the help of a cooperative formed by the inhabitants of the destroyed village — who also literally worked at the rebuilding themselves. Here memory played a central role: both the material and cultural memory of the users of the site and the collective architectural memory of the place (and architect).

What Tom Wolfe sees as postmodernism's failure to break completely with modernism[41] is interpreted by Portoghesi as a necessary and often even affectionate "dialogue with a father."[42] What Wolfe sees as Robert Venturi's empty ironic references, Portoghesi sees as a way of involving the decoding observer in the process of meaning-generation through ambiguity and multivalence.[43] It is also a way to mark an

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38.   Jane Jacobs, *Death and Life of Great American Cities* (New York: Vintage, 1961).
39.   Portoghesi, *After Modern Architecture*, 28.
40.   Baird, 97.
41.   See Wolfe, *From Bauhaus to Our House*, 103-9, 127-9.
42.   Portoghesi, *After Modern Architecture*, 80.
43.   See Russell, 192. Postmodernist art in general directly engages audiences in the processes of signification. It therefore denies the alienation and transcendence of social milieu that characterized modernism: "the artist and audience will seek to make

ideological stance: the Venturis, in their work on Las Vegas, for instance, can be seen — as Jencks notes — to "express, in a gentle way, a mixed appreciation for the American Way of Life. Grudging respect, not total acceptance. They don't share all the values of a consumer society, but they want to speak to this society, even if partially in dissent."[44] What to Wolfe is just camp historical reference in the work of Charles Moore is seen by Portoghesi as revealing the nearly limitless possibilities for recycling historic forms.[45] Moore's famous Piazza d'Italia in New Orleans[46] is perhaps the best example of what is both a homage and a kind of ironic thumbed nose to the past.[47] With none of modernism's iconoclasm, this parodic project shows both its critical awareness and its love of history by giving new meaning to old forms, though often not without irony. We are clearly dealing here with classical forms and ornamentation, but with a new and different twist: there is no hand-crafted decoration at all (this is not a celebration of romantic individuality or even gothic craftsmenship). The ornamentation is here, but it is of a new kind, one that partakes, in fact, of the machine-tooled impersonality and standardization of modernism (fig. 3 and 4).

Because this is a public area for the Italian community of the city, Moore encodes signs of local Italian ethnic identity — from Latin inscriptions to a parody of the Trevi Fountain. That particular corner of Rome is a complex mix of theatrical stage, palace, sculpture, and nature (rocks and water). In Moore's parodic rendition, the same elements are retained, but are now executed in new media. Sometimes even structures are refashioned and "re-functioned": a Tuscan column becomes a fountain, with water running down it. Despite the use of modernist materials like neon, concrete, and stainless steel, there is still a challenge to modernism. This appears not just in the eclectic (but never random) classical echoing, but also in the use of color and orna-

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explicit their existence within language and cultural discourse. Each statement, written and read, need assert its particular message and reflect on its context."

44. Charles Jencks, *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture* (London: Academy, 1977), 70.

45. Portoghesi, *After Modern Architecture*, 86.

46. My very real debt to the extensive cataloguing work of both Charles Jencks and Paolo Portoghesi will be apparent in all subsequent discussion of postmodernist buildings in this paper.

47. This image is taken from John Fowles's "The Ebony Tower." A young artist studies the painting of an older master parodist and sees in it both a "homage and a kind of thumbed nose to a very old tradition" (*The Ebony Tower* [Boston: Little, Brown, 1974], 18).
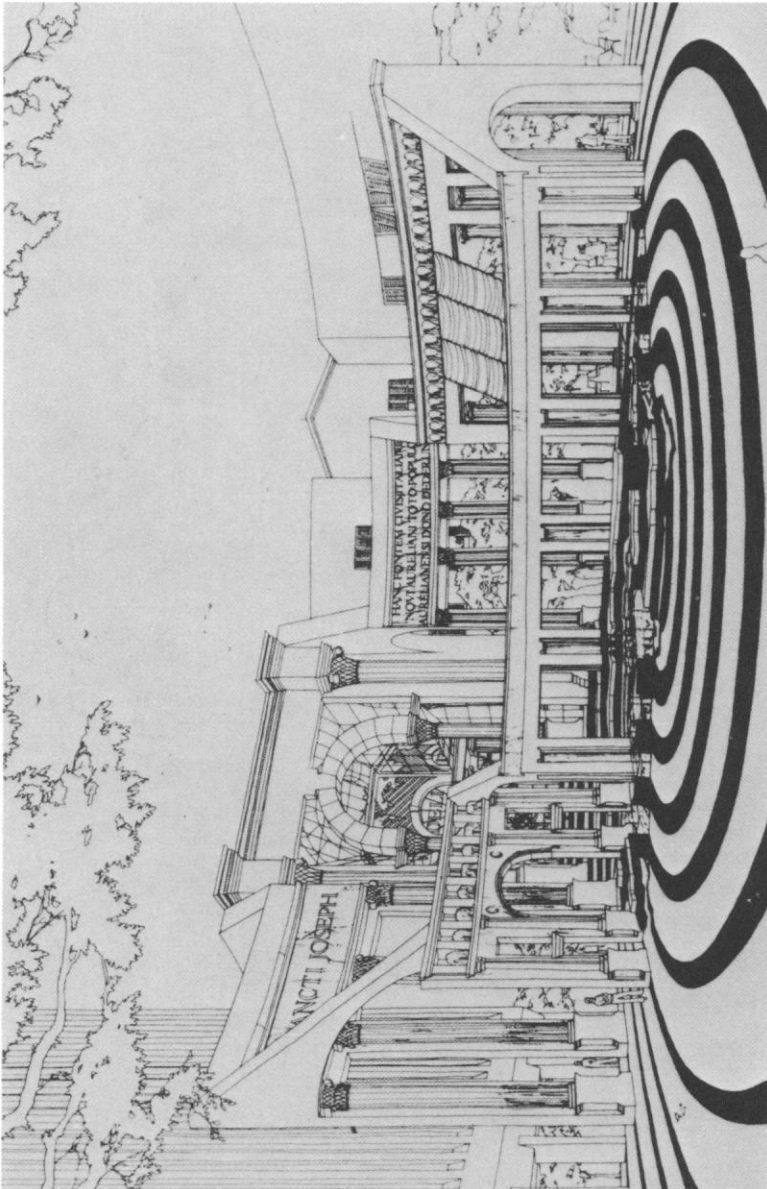
fig. 3
Charles Moore, Piazza d'Italia, New Orleans
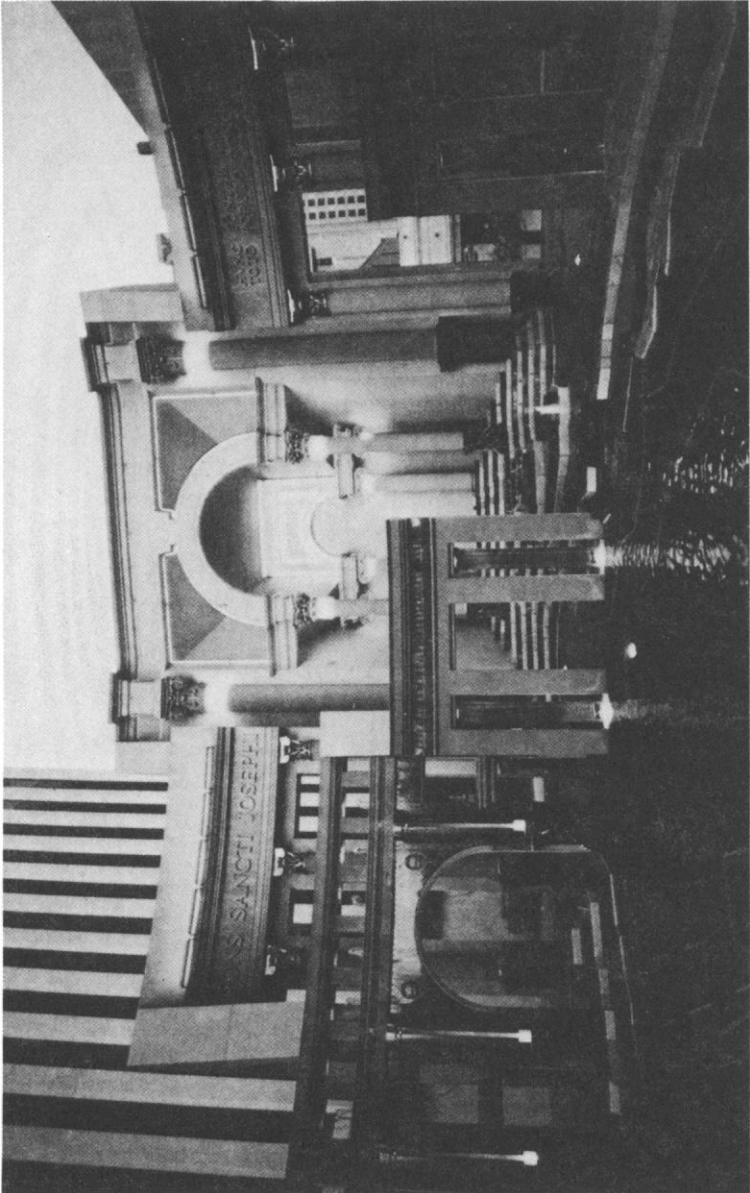(perspective drawing by William Hersey and John Kyrk)

fig. 4
Charles Moore, Piazza d'Italia: Neon Panorama
(photo Charles Jencks)

ment in general. The same challenge is also to be seen in the deliberate contextualizing of the piazza into the local architecture. From a nearby skyscraper, Moore took the black and white coloring of the concentric rings, themselves reminiscent of the Place des Victoires in Paris. But what he does with these rings is new: the bull's-eye form draws the eye toward the center, leading us to expect symmetry. But this symmetry is denied by the incompletion of the circles. As in much postmodernist art, the eye is invited to complete the form for itself; such counter-expectation urges us to be active, not passive, viewers.

In another implicitly anti-modernist gesture, Moore also takes the actual social use of the square into account in his formal structures. The shape that interrupts the concentric circles is a familiar boot-shaped map of Italy, with Sicily at the point of the bull's eye. Such a focus is appropriate because most of the Italians in New Orleans are, in fact, Sicilian. On that spot there is a podium for speeches on St. Joseph's day. Piazza d'Italia is meant as a return to the idea of architecture as intimately related to the res publica, and the awareness of this social and political function is reflected in its echoing of classical forms — that is, an echoing of a very familiar and accessible public idiom. In an implied attack on the earnest seriousness of "High Modernism," such relevance and function here go together with irony: the boot-shape is constructed as a new Trevi fountain, a cascade of broken forms in which water flows from the highest point (the Alps) to the lowest, along the Po, Arno, and Tiber rivers. This celebration of ethnic public iden-tity is brought about by a formal reworking of the structures and functions of both classical and modernist architecture. The dialectic of past and present, of old and new, is what gives formal expression to a belief in the possibilities of change within continuity. The obscurity and hermeticism of modernism are abandoned for a direct engage-ment of the viewer in the processes of signification through re-con-textualized social and historical references.

The other major theorist of postmodernism has been Charles Jencks. Influenced by modern semiotics, Jencks sees architecture as conveying meaning through language and convention. It is in this context that he situates the parodic recall of the past, the context of the need to look to history to enlarge the available vocabulary of forms. His description of Robert Stern's design for the Chicago Tribune Tower is typical in revealing his interest in the language and rhetoric of architecture (fig. 5):
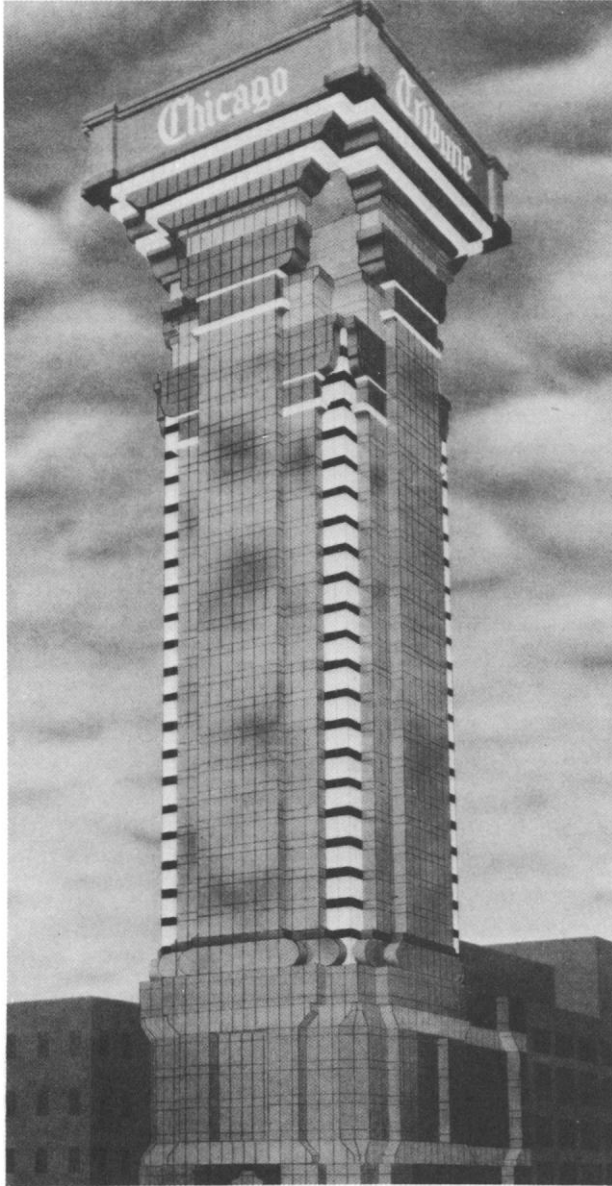
fig. 5
Robert Stern, Chicago Tribune Tower
(perspective drawing by Mark Albert and Charles Warren)

> The skycolumn, one of the oldest metaphors for the tall building, is used very effectively here to accentuate the vertical dimension and emphasise the top. Unlike the [Adolf] Loos [1922] entry, from which Stern's tower derives, it ends with a flourish . . . . Unlike the Michelangelo pilasters [from the Palazzo Farnese in Rome], to which it also relates, it sets horizontal and vertical faces into extreme opposition by changing the colour and texture . . . . [T]he building seems to ripple and then burst upwards towards its 'shower' of grey, gold, white and red — its entablature and advertisement. Since the building is to be made from coloured glass, one would experience an odd oxymoronic contradiction — 'glass/masonry' — that, in a way, is as odd as the basic conceit: the skycolumn which supports the sky.[48]

The pun on newspaper columns is deliberate; the black and white of the building are meant to suggest print lines and, of course, the *Chicago Tribune* is red/read all over. The same punning occurs in Thomas Vreeland's World Savings and Loan Association building in California. The formal echoing of the black and white marble stripes of the campanile of the Cathedral in Siena gives an ironic religious edge to the bank building's large and simple sign: "World Savings."

That such a complex combination of verbal and architectural languages also has direct social implications goes without saying to Jencks. Even without the verbal connection, the ideological dimension is clear. In his discussion of Late-Modern architecture, for instance, he points out how the "Slick-Tech" forms of "Corporate Efficiency" imply effortless mechanical control of the users of the buildings.[49] But this industrial aesthetic of utility, exchange, and efficiency has been challenged by a postmodernist return to the historical and semantic awareness of architecture's relationship to the *res publica*, for example, with its very different associations of communal power, political process, and social vision.[50] In other words, the self-reflexive parodic introversion suggested by a turning to the aesthetic past is itself what makes possible an ideological and social intervention. Philip Johnson returned the city street to its users in the plaza of his AT & T Building in New York precisely through his parodic historical recalling of the *loggia* as shared public space.

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48.   Charles Jencks, *Post-Modern Classicism: The New Synthesis* (London: Academy, 1980), 35.
49.   Charles Jencks, *Architecture Today* (New York: Abrams, 1982), 50. Jameson mistakenly associates this style with postmodernism in his discussion of Portman (80-3).
50.   Ibid., 92.

The actual buildings and theories of Venturi, Johnson, and Moore, among others, offer a serious commitment to both the past and present, and to both time and place. Architects are no longer the saviors, the guides of the uneducated, or the tyrants. Speaking from WITHIN the experience of the environment which they design, they are now activists, the voices of the users. Tom Wolfe is certainly right to point to the ideological naiveté of any return to pre-capitalist art forms as a direct way of magically attaining the inevitable and natural impulses of something called "the people." He acutely remarks that the "Rats" (Rationalists) used, as models, buildings which were usually commissioned by kings, despots, pontiffs, and the like. As Wolfe ironically notes: "At least, they weren't capitalists."[51] This is a valid attack, but should not invalidate all turning to the past for answers to the problems and queries of the present. For instance, one of the reasons for this parodic return to history is the hermeticism of modernist intellectual and aesthetic elitism. Postmodernism, in both architecture and literature, is marked by an increase in accessibility and didacticism — what some call an increase in communication. As such, it can work to stop us from accepting discourse naively, and force us to look to the social ideologies of which we are the products and in which we live, perceive, and create.

There are obviously borderline cases, however. Jencks has trouble dealing with Michael Graves's Fargo/Moorhead Cultural Bridge with its admitted echoes of Ledoux, Castle Howard, Serliana, Wilson's architecture at Kew, Asplund, Borromini, and others. He adds other parodic reworkings which Graves does not mention, but which he himself notices: of modernist concrete construction, of mannerist broken pediments, and of cubist colors. Jencks acknowledges that the meaning of these historical references would likely be lost on the average citizen of the American mid-west. He seems to want to call this esoteric, private game-playing, but then stops and claims, after all, that "there is a general penumbra of historical meaning which would, I believe, be perceived."[52] Like all parody, postmodernist architecture *can* certainly be elitist, if the codes necessary for its comprehension are not shared by both encoder and decoder. But the frequent use of a very

51.   Wolfe, 128.
52.   Charles Jencks, *Late-Modern Architecture and Other Essays* (London: Academy, 1980), 19.

common and easily recognized idiom — often that of classicism — works to combat such exclusiveness.

The double coding of "Post-Modern Classicism," to use Jencks's phrase, is obviously classical and modernist. An amusing ironic example would be Robert Stern's McGarry/Appignani bedroom, where the public discourse of the classical idiom is transported into that most private of places, the bedroom. A cliché is actualized here: this is literally a temple of love. Irony arises from the (indoor) citing, then breaking, of the (exterior) building conventions of classicism: the scale has been altered, for obvious reasons; the columns are made to taper both ways and have a mirror-image capitals at their base; the keystone sinks under the bed. The constant play of ironies here is primarily due to the fact that classicism is the idiom of the public order, of the outside of grand monumental buildings (fig. 6).

Other postmodernists also play on this same kind of public/private tension, though in different and more clearly political ways. At first sight, Ricardo Bofill's Arcades du lac project in St. Quentin-en-Yvelines has a rather odd plan for a suburban French, middle-class housing project: it resembles nothing less than Versailles, complete with its public gardens. Bofill's complex parodic echoing here involves an ironic turning around of not only the urban, social utopian ideal of the last century, a Versailles for the masses, but also of the massive building-as-monument idea of modernism (and, specifically, of Le Corbusier's Unité d'habitation as a palace for the people). From Versailles come the symmetry, the *parterres*, the almost monotonous rhythmic system of its forms. But mixed with the royalist classical imagery is modernism's system of industrial production — prefabricated concrete panels. Even here, however, Bofill alters the conventions: the precisionist reinforced concrete is tinted several shades of earthy brown and alternated with brown ceramics, in an attempt to tune into the vernacular of the French street, to avoid the disruptive effect of those grey, blank modernist structures. Similarly, corners are not emphasized for their structural function, but are rounded into decorative classical columns. Ornamentation and mouldings are not scorned, but are reworked into new forms.

Bofill's aim was to instill a sense of collective civic pride by his historical borrowings. He sought to recall a past and to recontextualize it in a new urban setting with a system of proportions and textures that would correspond to — but not ape — the classical aesthetic of the
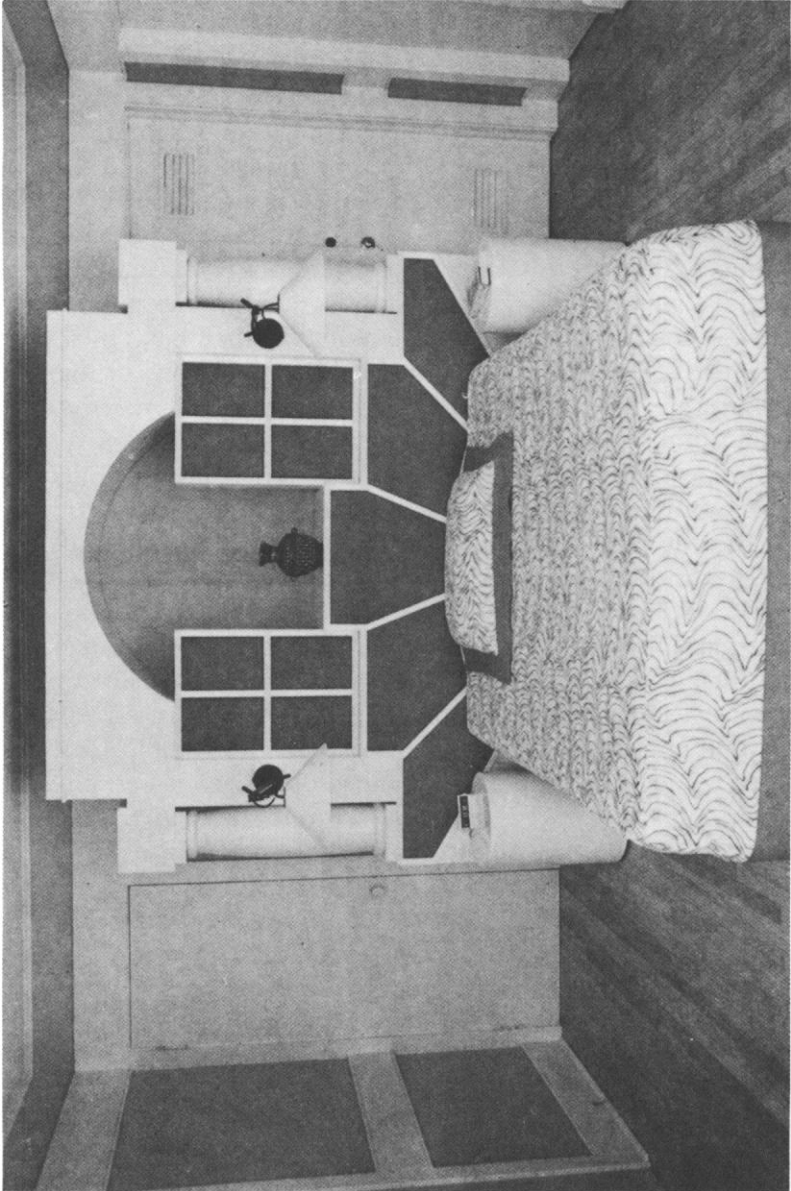
fig. 6
Robert Stern, McGarry/Appignani Bedroom
(photo Spinelli)

French national château style. His Viaduct Housing attempts something different. The interest of its parody of the form of a viaduct like the Pont du Gard lies in its "re-functioning" of an architectual object (straight line over water) into a dwelling place that allows, as he says, "a way of entering a landscape or marking a territory."[53] The other implication is perhaps that it is still possible to build even the symbolic structures of the past (such as, here, triumphal arches), if you make them ironic, that is, habitable or functional. The past clearly can offer an entire new — and not reactionary or nostalgic — vocabulary for enriching the idiom of both public and private architecture.[54]

Classicism has perhaps been the most plundered of these historical parodic reservoirs. This is in part, obviously and significantly, because it is easily recognizable by most viewers, and not just by architects. Such explicit clues as columns and arches counteract any tendancy to privacy of meaning — or modernist hermeticism. Like the "misprision" of Harold Bloom's poets, burdened by the "anxiety of influence,"[55] postmodern classicists "try hard to misread their classicism in a way which is still functional, appropriate and understandable."[56] It is this concern for "being understood" that replaces the modernist concern for purism of form. The search is now for a public discourse that will articulate the present in terms of the "presentness of the past" and of the social placement of art in cultural discourse. Parody of the classical tradition offers a set of references that remain meaningful to the public but also continue to be compositionally useful to architects.

Parody of this kind, then, is one way of making the link between art and what Said calls the "world," though it appears on the surface to be distinctly introverted, to be only a form of inter-art traffic. It is significant that postmodernist architects do not often use the term parody to describe their ironically recontextualized echoing of the forms of the past. I think this is because of the negative connotations of trivialization caused by the retention of a historically limited definition of parody as ridiculing imitation. It is to this limitation of the meaning of parody that Jameson falls prey. But there appear to be many possible pragmatic positions and strategies open to parody today — at least if we

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53. Bofill, cited by Jencks, *Post-Modern Classicism*, 53.
54. See, as well, defenses of Bofill's politics in Portoghesi, *Postmodern*, 143 and in "La forze della chiarezza" in *Eupalino* 5 (1985): 7-17.
55. Harold Bloom, *The Anxiety of Influence* (New York: Oxford, 1973).
56. Jencks, *Post-Modern Classicism*, 12.

examine actual contemporary works of art: from reverence to mockery. And it is this very range that postmodernist architecture illustrates so well. The mockery is something we always associate with parody; but the deference is another story. Nevertheless, deference is exactly what architects like Thomas Gordon Smith suggest in their loving, if ironic, refunctioning of previous architectural conventions.

Smith's Matthews Street House project in San Francisco incorporates into an unremarkable stucco bungalow the front of a quite remarkable asymmetrical temple, with a Michelangelesque broken pediment. The single column in the middle of the garden is a parody of a historically previous habit of setting classical ruins in the garden or grounds of grand homes. (It is also, therefore, an ironic comment on the modern vulgarization of this habit: the presence of flamingos, dwarves, and lawn jockeys.) What is interesting, though, is that this column is precisely the one that is missing from the portico of the house. The same witty play and reverence are seen in his Tuscan and Laurentian Houses where he again uses classical fragments in an ironic way, beginning with the use of saturated colors (fig. 7). His time studying in Rome might account for the impact of Borromini on his work, and likewise, his study of the buildings of Kilian Ignaz Dientzenhofer seems to have conditioned his own use of detached motifs. The pragmatic and the playful meet in the mix of Doric, Ionic and Tuscan colored columns — some of which are used to hold up the houses' structures, while others are functionally useless. This is clearly not straight nostalgic revivalism (like Quinlan Terry's upper-class English country houses). It is closer to Martin Johnson's more extreme Ovenden House, with its definitely ironic echoes of the Victorian polychromatic church, of flying buttresses, and of medieval gunslits in its thick masonry.

Parodic echoing of the past, even with this kind of irony, can still be deferential. It is in this way that parody marks both continuity and change, both authority and transgression. Postmodernist parody, be it in architecture, literature, painting, film, or music, uses its historical memory, its aesthetic introversion, to signal that this kind of self-reflexive discourse is always inextricably bound to social discourse. In Russell's words, the greatest contribution of postmodernism has been a recognition of the fact that "any particular meaning system in society takes its place amongst — and receives social validation from — the
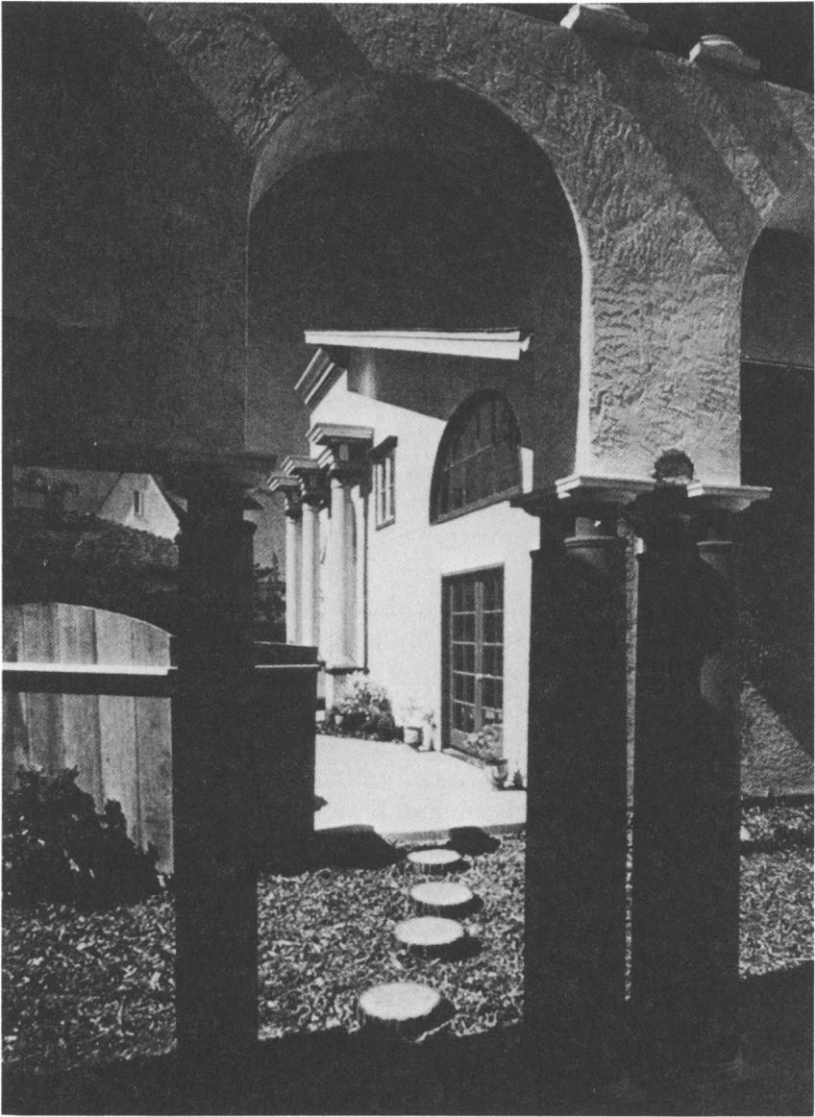
fig. 7
Thomas Gordon Smith, Tuscan House
(photo Douglas Symes)

total pattern of semiotic systems that structure society."[57] If the self-conscious formalism of modernism in many of the arts led to the isolation of art from the social context, postmodernism's even more self-reflexive parodic formalism reveals that it is language or discourse *as form* that is what is intimately connected to social discourse.

Parody has perhaps come to be a privileged mode of formal self-reflexivity because its paradoxical incorporation of the past into its very structures often points to these ideological contexts somewhat more obviously, more didactically, than other forms. Parody seems to offer a perspective on the present and the past which allows an artist to speak TO a discourse from WITHIN it, but without being totally recuperated by it. Parody appears to have become, for this reason, the mode of the marginalized, or of those who are fighting marginalization by a dominant ideology. This is clearly true of contemporary architects trying to combat the hegemony of modernism in our century. But parody has also been a favorite literary form of writers in places like Ireland and Canada, working as they do from both inside and outside a culturally different and dominant context. And parody has certainly become a most popular and effective strategy of black, ethnic, and feminist artists, trying to come to terms with and to respond, critically and creatively, to the predominantly white, Anglo, male culture in which they find themselves. For both artists and their audiences, parody sets up a dialectical relation between identification and distance. Like Brecht's *Verfremdungseffekt*, parody works to distance and, at the same time, to involve both artist and audience in a participatory hermeneutic activity. *Pace* Eagleton and Jameson: only on a very abstract level of theoretical analysis — one which ignores actual works of art — can it be dismissed as a trivial and depthless mode.

David Caute[58] has argued that if art wants to make us question the "world," it must question and expose *itself* first, and it must do so in the name of public action. Like it or not, contemporary architecture cannot evade its representative social function. As Jencks explains: "Not only does it express the values (and land values) of a society, but also its ideologies, hopes, fears, religion, social structure, and metaphysics."[59]

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57.   Russell, 187.
58.   David Caute, *The Illusion* (New York: Harper and Row, 1972).
59.   Charles Jencks, *Architecture Today*, 178. Also see Jameson: architecture is "of all the arts that closest constitutively to the economic, with which, in the form of commissions and land values, it has a virtually unmediated relationship" (56).

Because architecture both is and represents this state of affairs, it may be the most overt and easily studied of modern forms of postmodernist discourse, that is, of a discourse which may perhaps at first "appear to be merely the next logical step in accepted art history, but which subsequently must be seen as revealing the fatal limitations of current patterns of seeing or reading, and as having, in fact, effected a fundamental transformation of the practices of art."[60] Postmodern architecture may even prove paradigmatic of our seeming urgent need, in both artistic theory *and* practice, to investigate the relation of ideology and power to all of our present discursive structures.

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60.   Russell, 182.

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