

Outside and As If

Judith Wolin

The invitation to write this article was accompanied by a sketch definition of narrative architecture which included the suggestion ... "Many architects have something to say in their architecture, a story to tell. There are a variety of means architects employ in expressing their own, or their clients values, thoughts, wishes, beliefs, and desires. They often communicate a unifying theme elaborated throughout the "plot." It is not useful to stretch the definition of "narrative architecture" until it includes any architectural project that could claim to express something. Used in such an inclusive way, the term can no longer serve to expose aspects of architectural production which have not yet been closely observed or described by twentieth century architectural theory. In rejoinder to the editors of this journal, I make a counter-proposal: a limited, exclusive definition of narrative architecture which considers only those architectural productions which can be said to depend directly on a textual program (not authored by the architect).

Already, by using the concept of a "textual program," I have indicated the dependency of the concept of narrative architecture on an extensive body of intellectual work to which anthropology, semiology, film and literary criticism, and psychoanalysis have all made substantial contributions. As a result of semiological discussion, we have come to accept the notion that architecture can be understood as a system of signification; a language which can be conceived alter-

natively as enclosed and self-referential or as engaged in active dialogue with its larger culture. How and why people tell stories and how those stories act to secure social cohesion are the central questions of the inter-disciplinary field of *narratology*.¹

One of the key concepts of narratology, deriving from anthropology, is the notion of liminality. The term derives from the Latin word, *limen*, which means threshold, and in the context of the study of culture, it is used to describe those ritual practices which are culturally understood as "outside" of everyday life.² Not only are they "outside," they are "as if," that is to say, fictive or symbolic. Very frequently they involve the ritualized reenactment of an important myth — a creation story, a foundation story, or a hero voyage which provides the justification or explanation of a culture's political structure or social hierarchy. The liminal

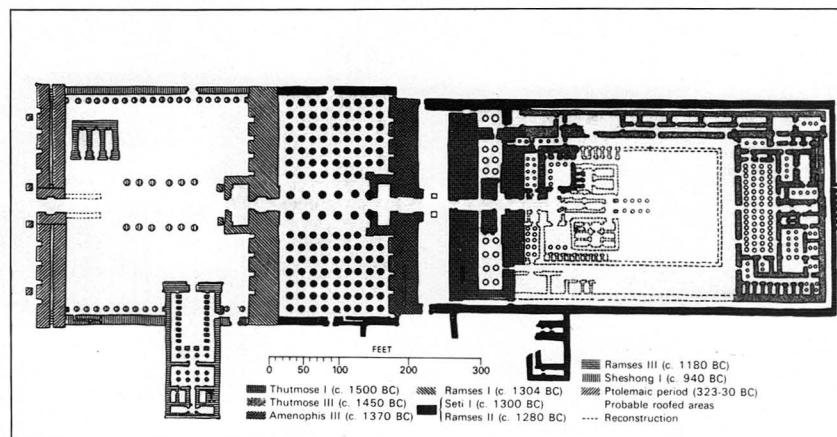
episode can be said to have not only its own space (a wilderness, a labyrinth, an underworld, a paradise) but its own time — a kind of magic time in which important transformative processes can be foreshortened or distended in relation to "ordinary" time. In some cultures, the physical definition of the liminal realm may be as virtual as a line inscribing an enclosing circle on the ground; in others it may involve the construction of vast and enduring stage sets for ritual action.

By definition, then, the liminal realm is not ordinary. It is *extra-ordinary*. And although a culture may devote a great deal of wealth and time to the construction of these "other" places, they are necessarily exceptional, not common. Still rarer are the places whose form derives from or is used to support the retelling of a specific story.

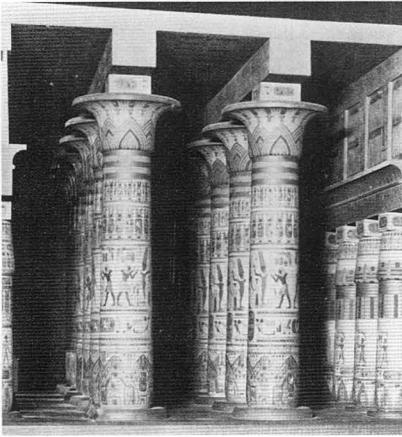
Victor Hugo's often-quoted passage from

Notre Dame de Paris 1482 concerning the printed book's supercession of the cathedral as the primary vessel of memory and meaning in European culture is not to be taken lightly in this context.³ It may be more literally true than Hugo intended. If we search back into the origins of Western building culture, that is, to the temple compounds of ancient Egypt, we will remember again that there was a time when the book and the building could be said to have been a single thing; when it was stone that supported the inscription of historical and mythical narratives. The hypostyle halls, pylons, and obelisks, covered over every surface with hieroglyphs, were testaments in stone; yet they were not simply books — they also provided the *mise-en-scene* for important ritual processions devoted to the securing of prosperity and safety for the Egyptian people.

In most versions of the Egyptian creation legend, the earth begins as a watery chaos from which emerges a mound of earth. A papyrus reed sprouts from the mound, and a bird god descends and perches on the reed, or a lotus flower opens beside the mound, from which the god emerges. This is the beginning of the world, a beginning which is reiterated every year with the periodic and life-sustaining flood of the Nile. The core of the temple compound, the inner sanctum, recreates that original mound. The processional sequence mounts steadily towards it through the vast thicket of papyrus and lotus-headed columns of the hypostyle hall. The walls, gates, columns and beams



Plan of the Temple of Amen-Re, Karnak

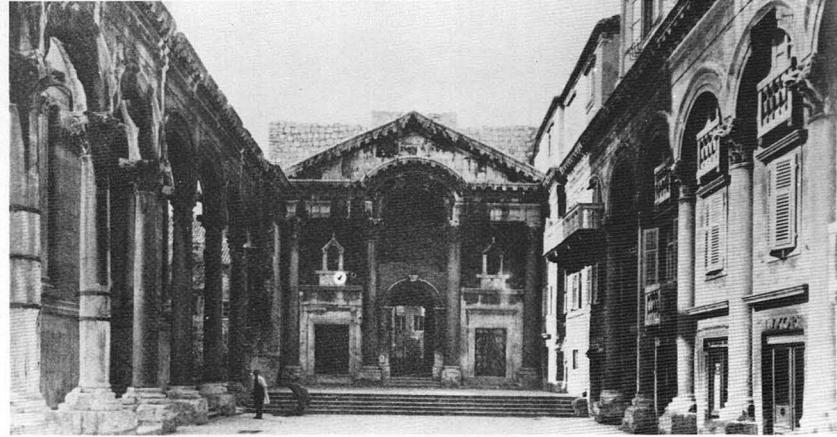


Hypostyle Hall

of the hall are incised over their entire exposed surface with hieroglyphs that retell the creation myth and subsequent historical narratives. Each day the priests tend and “feed” the god/king figure in the inner sanctum; annually, after the harvest, the figure is taken out through the temple and on a “journey” across the Nile, accompanied by the Pharaoh, his court, and priesthood and witnessed by the peasants who have just completed their season of toil. The taxes are paid; the god/king is maintained and appeased; the benevolent flow and ebb of the river is secured.

The time of the Egyptian festival journey is a moment held in brackets within a year measured into reliable thirds — the flood, the growing season, and the drought. At festival time the regimen of labor is relaxed, and the peasant leaves his space of toil for the liminal space of the god/king’s “fictive” journey. The figure and its journey are understood to be symbolic, yet the belief prevails that the manipulation of the symbol will effect the absent-thing-symbolized “as if” it were present.

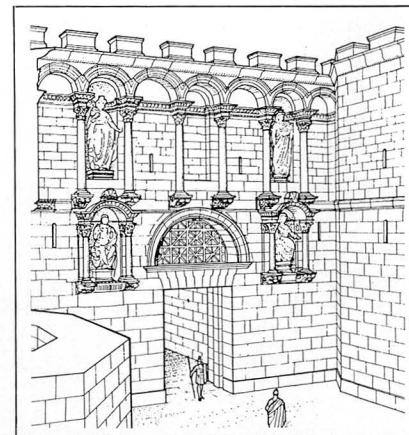
Early twentieth century histories of architecture tended to explain architecture as a resultant of the technical possibilities or functional demands of a culture. We were told, for example, that the Egyptians, ignorant as they were of the arch as a way of spanning space, had to build those huge columns so close together and in such astonishing numbers



Palace of Diocletian, Split

because they had no other way to span. This kind of narrative overlooks the possibility that the primary reason to build columns 33 feet in circumference in such number and density was in order to have the surfaces on which to inscribe the stories which justified the Egyptian order of things. Carved into the stones of the sacred precinct, the text stands as witness, or perpetually retells itself, even in the absence of the priests. Not only the hieroglyphs and the statuary, but the very form of the complex — the reed/columns and mound/temple — are a testament, a profession of the piety of the Pharaoh and his people.

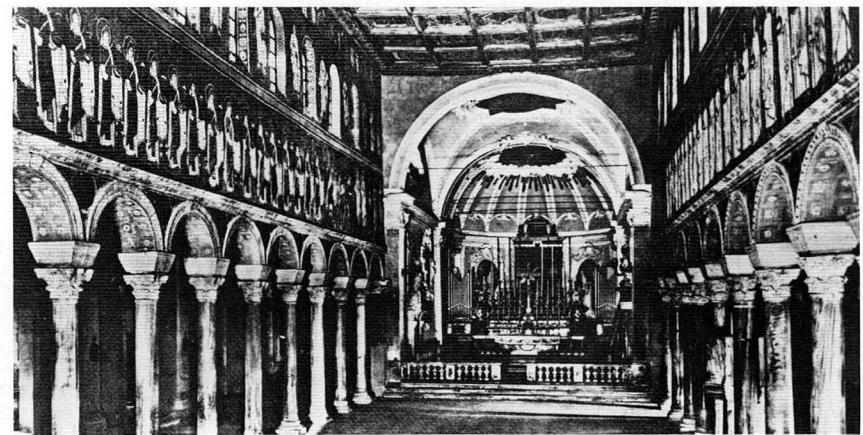
Key elements of the definition of a “narrative architecture” can be identified: the presence of a significant myth or story that serves to secure religious, social, or political cohesion; the liminality or “outsiderness” of the temple precinct and therefore its “fictional” or “as-if” nature;



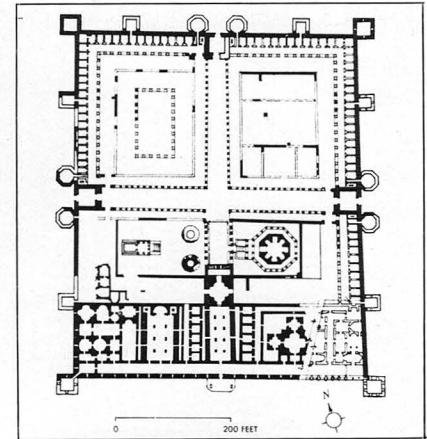
Palace at Diocletian's (restored view)

its extended temporality (and, usually, its extended, sequential spatiality) or processional character; and what can be loosely called its theatricality.

In the period of the Late Roman Empire, we again find a social structure where the emperor is held to be a kind of demi-god. Certain ritual conventions and their attendant physical setting evolved during that period which were transposed into Early Christian practices. E. Baldwin Smith outlines the migration of imperial to Christian symbolism in careful detail in his *Architectural Symbolism of Imperial Rome*.⁴ Crudely recapitulating his argument, we can take one example, Diocletian's palace at Split (ca. 300 AD), to illustrate how elements such as the city gate, the processional street and the *excedra*, or throne room, were transposed into the new and evolving form of the Christian church.



St. Apollinare Nuovo



Plan of Diocletian's Palace

Diocletian's palace combines the formal attributes of a city, a fort, and a palace. One side faces out to sea; the other three sides have high, fortified walls with twin-towered gates spanned by arcades. The gates are called the Iron, Silver and Golden Gates; they open to the *cardo* and *decumanus*, the principal cross axes of every Roman-founded town or military encampment. The Golden Gate gives entry to the main processional street, with the throne room (*excedra*) of the emperor at its terminus. On coinage and imperial seals, the power of the emperor is symbolized by the image of the twin-towered gate. In his essay, “Heavenly Mansions,” Sir John Summerson points out another late Roman convention of representing imperial or sacred figures inside diaphanous architectural enframements, or *aediculae*, in Pompeian wall painting, and demonstrates the persistence of that motif in Early Christian manuscript illustration and mosaics.⁵



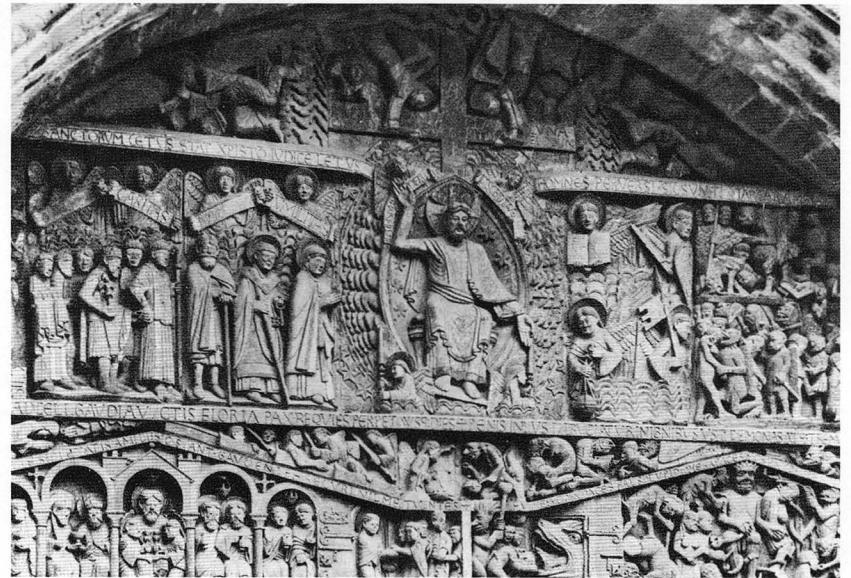
St. Foy, Conques

In Early Christian churches such as St. Appollonuovo in Classe in Ravenna (directly across the Adriatic from Split) we can see both in the mosaics and in the architectural form the reflection of imperial imagery. The city of Classis is represented in the mosaics as a walled city with a twin-towered gate; the clerestory of the nave is lined with images of processions of saints and virgins; above them stand the apostles, each within an aedicular enframing. Moreover, the basilica itself bears a striking resemblance to the processional street of Split, with its archivolted colonnades and terminal excedra. Here triumphant Christian martyrs form the procession, and here Christ is enthroned. Once pointed out, the polemics of this substitution are hard to ignore.

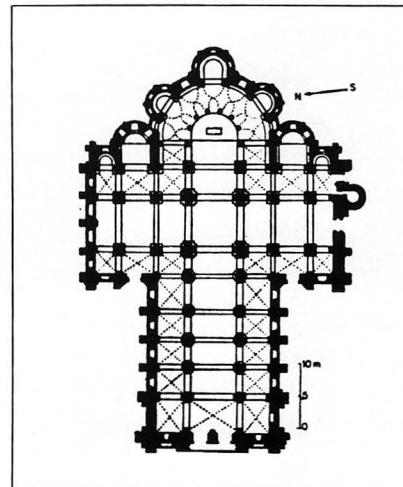
As the form of the Christian basilica evolved in the north, especially along the great pilgrimage routes, a stronger, more inclusive metaphor of the Church as both

the Fortress and the City of God seems to have emerged. At the church of St. Foy in Conques, for example, lofty twin towers frame the portal to the church. The message of the sculpted relief in the tympanum could not be more explicit; it is a Last Judgement, with an inscription from Matthew:⁶ Only the blessed shall enter the City of God; they alone shall dwell in His heavenly mansions. They pass on the right hand of the Lord; they find orderly shelter in archivolted aediculae on His right. Those on his left, who He turns away from his twin-towered City, are damned to Chaos; no architecture for them.

The cruciform plan of churches such as St. Foy can certainly be understood as emblematic of the crucifix. But it may also be enlightening to read them as new incarnations of the *cardo* and *decumanus*, the crossing streets with their Iron, Silver and Golden Gates that open to gather in the souls of the faithful. Those who



Tympanum, St. Foy



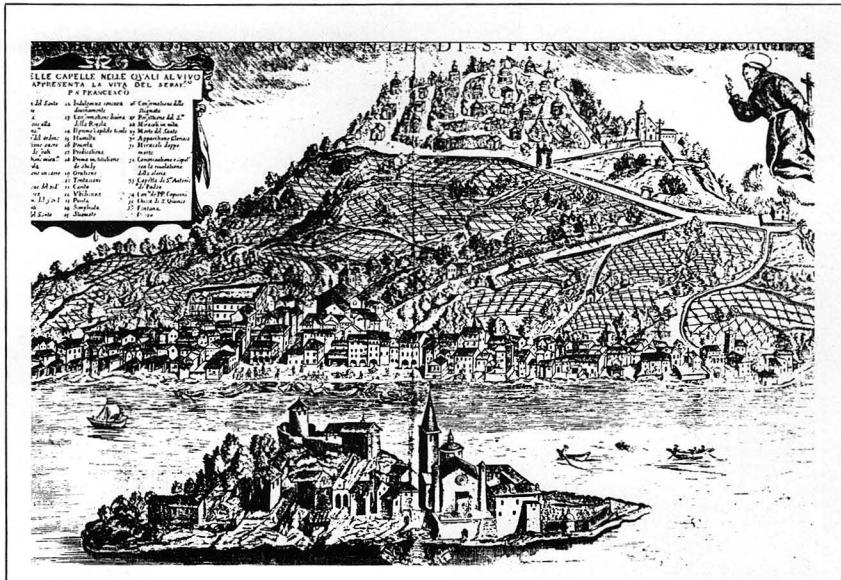
Plan of St. Foy

entered to pray or to observe the sacraments of the Church entered "as if" to heaven, "as if" into the City of their God. They moved in procession, repeating the tenets of their faith; after their pilgrimage they returned to the "ordinary" world rededicated as Christians. Both the principles that bound them as a social community and the faith that would admit them to an eternal life were secured. At Conques, the sculptural ornamentation of the interior explicitly illustrates important episodes of the New and Old Testaments; it was to these "lessons" that Hugo and Male were referring when they employed the analogy of the cathedral as a species of book.⁷ But the twin towered Golden Gate, the arcaded processional "street," and its

culminating excedra can also be understood as coherent narrative elements, creating the enframing metaphor for a whole series of specific representations.

The custom of Christian pilgrimage has been a rich field of study for both anthropologists and literary critics. Victor Turner, in his *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture*, refers to the pilgrimage as a "liminoid" or "liminal-like" phenomenon.⁸ By this he means to suggest there are strong structural similarities between the rites of passage described by anthropologists studying tribal cultures and the rites and customs of the Christians who leave behind their fixed status in a community to embark on a journey of penitence or rededication. The two great early pilgrimage destinations were, of course, Jerusalem and Rome, followed by an alternative "journey to the end of the Earth," the pilgrimage to Santiago di Compostella. The suspension of toil, the comradeship of the trek, the juxtaposition of hardship, pleasure, and awe in the voyage, and the transformed status of the pilgrim ("holier than thou") upon his return are some of the "liminoid" features of the pilgrimage.

By the end of the fifteenth century, there were good reasons to search for surrogate ("as if") pilgrimage destinations to stand in the stead of Jerusalem. First among these was the tightening control of the



Sacro Monte, Orta

Turks on the eastern Mediterranean. A Franciscan Minorite prelate, Bernardino Caimi, who had supervised the pilgrimage shrines in Jerusalem, proposed to Pope Innocent XXIII the foundation of a "Nuovo Jerusalemme" above the town of Varallo in the foothills of the Italian Alps, at the frontier of influence of the Papacy. During the subsequent century of growing heresy and Counterreformation activity, a number of these *sacri monti* were built. They were both ambitious and popular, artistically innovative and explicitly narrative in form and purpose.⁹

The Nuovo Jerusalemme at Varallo is by far the most inclusive and complex of the *sacri monti*; its narrative begins with the Garden of Eden and the Fall of Adam and Eve as a prologue reminding us of the necessity of a Redeemer. Life-size terracotta figures, with illusionistic frescoed backdrops illustrate, scene by scene, the story of the Life of Christ. The first eighteen tableaux are housed in small freestanding structures along a winding path through the woods; they are viewed through carved wooden grills with face-sized peepholes that establish the spectators fixed point of view. Some can be seen only in a kneeling position. The eighteenth chapel depicts Christ's triumphant entry into Jerusalem. From there the path ascends steeply to the *Porta*



Sacro Monte, Varallo

Aurea — the Golden Gate — and the pilgrim finds himself in a sun-drenched piazza, dazzled by the spectacle of a fictive Jerusalem. The sequence of tableaux continues, growing ever more dramatic and artistically accomplished. The perspectival effects in the frescoes are directly related to the contemporary techniques of theatrical settings.¹⁰ At the end of the sequence, which includes over forty scenes and a penitential staircase that the pilgrim can climb on his knees, one witnesses heart-rending scenes of the Deposition and Entombment of Christ, after which one proceeds to the church to pray for one's own salvation and to deliver votive prayers and offerings to the ancient and sacred Madonna enshrined in the church.

The other *sacri monti* in the region are based on other narratives such as the life of St. Francis Assisi or the life of the Virgin. There was a vast, seven-mountain



Great Labyrinth, Versailles

"Palestine of the Piedmont" with one hundred and one cappelli projected for the sanctuary at Graglia. Although the subject matter may vary, and although Varallo is by far the most complex extant example, the *sacri monti* share many attributes that serve to define a narrative genre in architecture. The most distinct of these is its extended, sequential and episodic temporality. Another is the empathic toil of the voyager. Yet another is its didactic or exhortative program.

Some secular Italian gardens of the sixteenth century — the Villa Lante, or the Sacro Bosco of Bomarzo, for example — also could be said to be built on a literary or narrative program which unfolds over an extended period of time. The design of both these gardens exploits the "wilderness" of the site, as did the plan of the *sacro monte* at Varallo, not particularly as an amenity, but as a metaphor and a way of establishing the "other-worldliness"

of the garden. Later, and with considerable alteration of political program and physical form, these themes (the wilderness, the voyage, the didactic program) reappear in eighteenth century English picturesque garden and its early offspring in Germany and France. All these examples have been described and interpreted elsewhere, but there is one seventeenth century garden, also well-documented, which because of its physical form is not often linked to the "picturesque" tradition. The Great Labyrinth at Versailles (demolished in the eighteenth century) was an early feature of the bosquet architecture flanking the main axis of the palace garden. It was intended for the amusement and instruction of the Dauphin, a "problem child" who was given to violent tantrums and was a recalcitrant student. Imbedded in the maze of high hedges are thirty-two fountains, each based on an episode from Aesop's fables, which had just been re-



Ruintheater, Sanspareil

presented in French verse by La Fontaine. Each wry, gently chiding fable both amuses and instructs.

The conjunction of amusement and instruction also motivated the creation of a didactic novel for the same Dauphin. *The Adventures of Telemachus* was written by the prince's tutor, Francois Fenelon, in order to provide him with the moral lessons he would need to become a good and wise king. A generation later, Wilhelmine of Bayreuth, sister of Frederick the Great, used the novel as the program for the adventure garden she created at Sanspareil. She was aware of the literary garden experiments of Alexander Pope in England where the "revolution" in garden design was closely entwined with progressive politics and moral philosophy.¹¹ The secularization of the content of these narratives reflected the cultural changes around them, including the emergence of free-masonry — a voluntary secular "brotherhood" whose initiation rituals combine a ritualistic mysticism with the narrative structure of

an adventure story. In the floor drawings of their lodges and the few fantastical initiation garden descriptions that survive there is a self-conscious mimicry of the ancient rituals of passage — the treacherous voyage, the learning of secrets, the vows of brotherhood, and the transformation of status. Both at Sanspareil and at later French picturesque gardens such as the Desert du Retz, the patrons were freemasons; whether or not the parks were actually used for initiation rituals remains uncertain, yet the form of the gardens themselves clearly mirrors not only the form of the episodic "Robinsonades" (adventure stories) but also the architectural mysticism of the freemasonic creed.

The space and time of these narrative environments defy generalization. They belong to different centuries, different religious and cultural milieus, different physical situations. Yet there are a few important points of commonality between them. They are "artificial" destinations; that is, they exist only to be visited, to be

"taken in." They have almost no productive or sheltering function, and are often placed in situations physically removed from everyday life. Their stories are well-known ones within their culture, and those stories are selected for rhetorical purposes — to admonish, instruct, or inspire the erstwhile pilgrim. The boundaries of the narrative realm are clearly marked, either by geological form or by portals and walls, and are thus both physically and psychologically isolated from ordinary life. Whether the story is represented explicitly, as in the sacri monti, or only suggested by name or caption as at Sanspareil, the visitor moves from episode to episode; the degree or type of exertion required often parallels that of the story. The physical movement from space to space over a substantial period of time distinguishes the mnemotopia (literally, memory place) from a room made over to a cycle of narrative frescoes such as one might find in the royal library of the Escorial or from a singular though elaborate sculptural representation such as Titon du Tillet's

Parnasse. Most narrative environments can also be called "theatrical" in the sense that exaggeration, illusion, and fantasy are used for emotional effect, and in the more general sense that the primary function of the built forms is the provision of a setting for the enactment or re-enactment of a story.

It is not surprising, given these parameters, that modern architecture has had little to contribute to the narrative genre. This is not to say, by any means, that the genre is extinct, only that it has been exiled from the realm of "legitimate" architectural production. The popularity and financial success of the American theme park is at its zenith; the technical ingenuity, and in the case of some history parks, the meticulous scholarship that has been invested in them far surpasses that which we have committed to our cities. The theme park is the direct heir to the devolution of the sacri monti, yet there now exists a cultural split between high art and popular culture that did not exist during the Counterreformation. Nevertheless, the most haunting and provocative architectural project of the twentieth century, Gieseppe Terragni's *Danteum*, demonstrates the continued presence of the problem (and possibility) of narrative within the formal canons of modern architecture.

The *Danteum* was intended to be both a monument to Dante and to the poet's prophecy of a second Roman Empire. It was commissioned by Mussolini and intended for a site within the ruins of Imperial Rome, along the avenue that had once been the route of great triumphal processions. Terragni developed a building whose geometry, numbers, and iconography derive from the structure and story of the *Divine Comedy*. It is a decidedly modern project, not simply in the stylistic sense but in the sense that it is the structure of the literature, rather than its imagery, that forms the basis of the transposition of the epic poem into architectural language.¹² Associational representation is suppressed but latent, for instance in the hypostyle "Paradise"

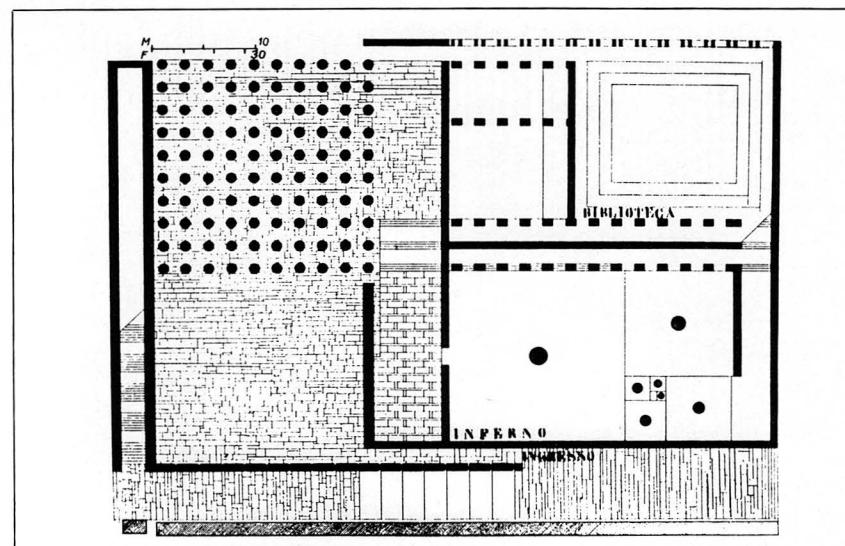
hall of one hundred and one glass columns. In his monograph on the Danteum, Tom Schumacher points out both the possible source of the image of the glass columns in a painting by Bertola (Sala del Bacio, Palazzo Ducale de Parma, 1566-77) and the structural similitude of the number one hundred and one to the number of cantos in the Divine Comedy. But perhaps another interpretation can be added to these, if we accept that hypostyle itself, in its Egyptian version, was a book; in Terragni's version, the text is transparent to the space itself ... and that is Paradise.

It is probably inevitable in a contemporary intellectual culture obsessed with the presence and absence of meaning, that the signifiatory function of architecture should come under active scrutiny and that at least a few projects should attempt to explore the path opened by Terragni. Bernard Tschumi's "Garden for James Joyce," John Hejduk's projects for Venice, Jorge Silvetti's proposal for Leonforte, and many school projects are evidence of the investigation. Unlike the historical mnemotopias to which I have referred, the majority of these projects attempt to overlay themselves upon an existing urban condition — their frame has been rendered deliberately ambiguous — and there is fair amount of self-authorship involved in the development of the textual program. Nevertheless, they have retrieved a forgotten (or censored) role for architecture — they have stepped over the threshold, leaving (for a while) the ordinary, "productive" role of architectural work for the liminal territory of symbolic action.

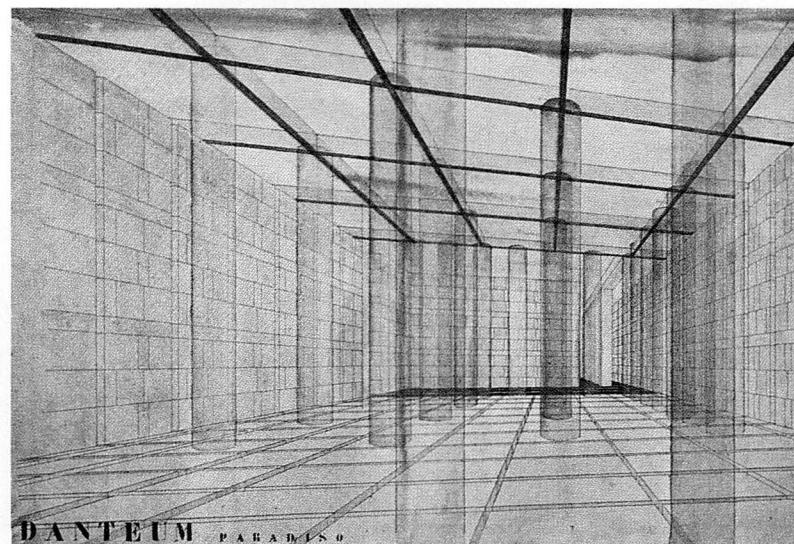
FOOTNOTES

1. Mitchell, W.J.T., ed. *On Narrative* 1980 Chicago, University of Chicago
2. Turner, Vicor and Edith. *Image and Pilgrimage in Christian Culture: Anthropological Perspectives*. 1978 Oxford Basil Blackwell
3. Levine, Neil. "The Romantic Idea of Legibility: Henri Labrouste and the Neo-Grec" p. 355 in Drexler, A, ed. *The Architecture of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts*. 1977 New York Museum of Modern Art

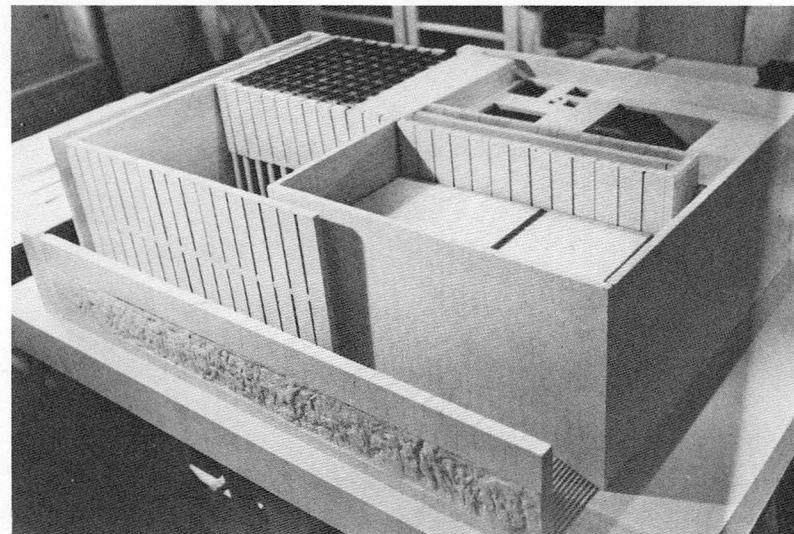
4. Smith, E Baldwin. *Architectural Symbolism of Imperial Rome and the Middle Ages*. 1956 Princeton Princeton University Press
5. Summerson, John. "Heavenly Mansions: An Interpretation of the Gothic" *Heavenly Mansions and Other Essays on Architecture* 1963 New York Norton
6. Matthew 25:31-46: "When the Son of Man comes in his glory ... he will sit on his throne ... all the nations will be gathered before him and he will separate the people from one another ... Then the King will say to those on his right, 'come you who are blessed by my father; take your inheritance, the kingdom prepared for you since the creation of the world' ... Then he will say to those on his left, 'Depart from me, you who are cursed, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels.'
7. Male, Emile. *The Gothic Image: Religion and Art in France for the XIIIth Century*, trans. 1972 New York Harper and Rowe
8. Turner, Victor and Edith. *op. cit.* pp. 1-39
9. Wolin, Judith. "Mnemotopias;" pp. 45-61 *Modulus 18* 1987. University of Virginia
10. Serlio's stage set of "The Tragic Scene," for example, forms the backdrop for the tribunal of Christ in Jerusalem in Cappella XXVII (1590) at Varallo. In only slightly modified form, it reappears as the setting for the penitence of St. Francis in Assisi in Cappella XIII (1660) at Orta. The perspectival techniques that are employed and the iconography of a Roman Jerusalem as the setting of tragedy closely link the tableaux of the *sacri monti* to the work of Palladio and Scamozzi on their theatres of the same period in Vicenza and Sabionetta.
11. Wolin, Judith. "The Garden of Enlightenment;" pp. 51-69 *Landscape* 1985 Princeton Princeton Architectural Press
12. Schumacher, Thomas. *The Danteum*. 1986 Princeton Princeton Architectural Press



Plan of Danteum, Rome (project)



Perspective of Paradise Hall, Danteum



Model of Danteum