

AnnMarie Brennan Perspecta and the Mediatic Manufacture of a Postmodern American Architecture

Abstract

The journal that would have the most lasting impact in establishing a coherent movement of Postmodern American architecture was a student-edited journal named «Perspecta», no. 9/10, published by the Yale School of Architecture and edited by Robert A.M. Stern. Stern, accomplished architect and former Dean of the School of Architecture at Yale University, assembled a cadre of author-architects to contribute to the journal, a group who would go on to shape the U.S. architectural scene for the next 20 years. His editorial objective was to present new emerging 'talent,' which consisted of young architects who defined a new American movement in architecture. Three significant contributors of this particular «Perspecta» issue were 'undiscovered' Robert Venturi, Charles Moore, and, most interestingly, Romaldo Giurgola, who was an Italian architect and academic but had immigrated to the U.S. after receiving the Italian Fulbright scholarships. Looking back at this moment, it is intriguing to discover what defined the work featured in these magazines as 'American,' especially since one of its central figures, Giurgola, established his reputation as an educator teaching architectural history and theory subjects based on Italian precedents and treatises at the University of Pennsylvania and Columbia University.

Keywords

Postmodern American architecture — Architecture magazines — Perspecta: Yale School of Architecture Journal — Media

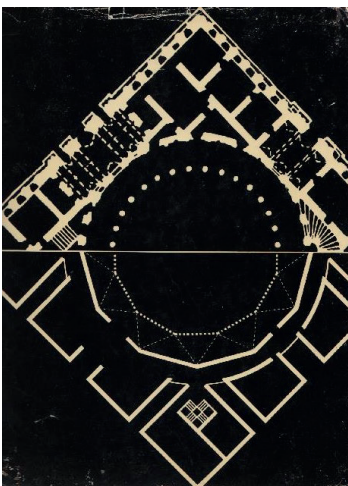


Fig. 1
Cover of «Perspecta» Journal of the Yale School of Architecture 9/10, 1965. Edited by Robert A.M. Stern.

Introduction (Fig. 1)

To understand the significance of a single issue of a student journal, one must understand the environment from which it sprang. Founded at the Yale School of Architecture in 1952, «Perspecta» is the oldest and longest running student-edited architectural journal in the United States. What set this journal apart from other architectural periodicals is that it was one of the first to approach the topic of design from artistic, historical and theoretical vantage points. And in many respects, the journal could be cited as the venue in which architectural theory disembarked onto American shores via Italy.

The journal is produced by Yale architecture graduate students, who solicit and edit articles from distinguished scholars and professional practitioners. The architectural historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock, a contributor to «Perspecta» 6 stated in 1960: “*Perspecta* has never offered the last word on any subject, but quite often it has uttered what (in the context, at least) was the first word. This is a service which the professional journals, burdened with other intellectual responsibilities, have in our country been reluctant to perform, and one which the scholarly journals, by their very nature, are vowed not to attempt.”¹ Years later, as Dean of the Yale School of Architecture, Robert Stern claimed that «Perspecta» “marked the beginning of a new kind of critical discourse about architecture. Although «Perspecta» was never a mass-market publication, its impact on the field has belied its numbers. The journal was – and continues to be – an intellectual showpiece for the Yale School of Architecture and an important presence in the design community.”²

In a publication celebrating the 50th anniversary of the «Perspecta», Stern

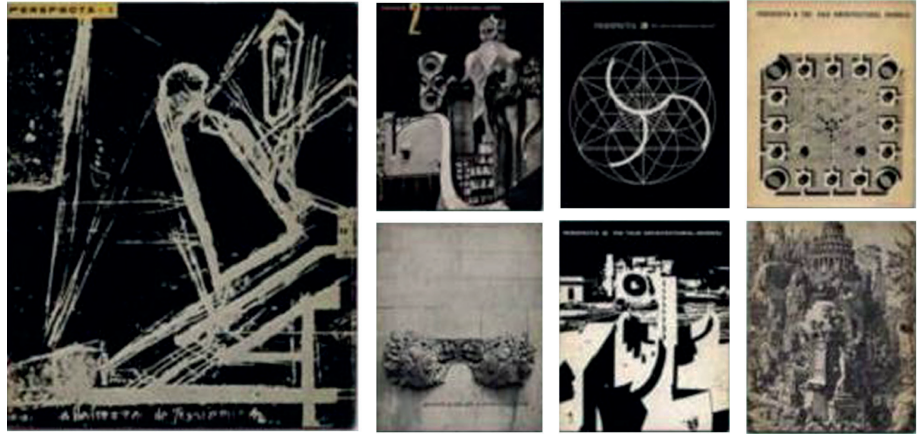


Fig. 2
Covers of early issues of Perspecta 1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7.

remarked that the idea of the journal came to the architect George Howe after he was appointed Chairman of the Yale Department of Architecture in January 1950. Paraphrasing Howe's introduction to «Perspecta» 1, he notes "Yale's students, though professionally inexperienced, were nonetheless clear-sighted observers of the contemporary architectural scene. He believed that students, and not the establishment, were able to seize upon new ideas and to interpret the work of the past and present as a single continuity."³ (Fig. 2)

However, Norman Carver, one of the editors for the inaugural issue of «Perspecta», along with Joan Wilson and Charles Brickbauer, refuted the notion that the journal was the idea of Howe. "The first reason [for the journal,]" writes Norman Carver, "was our boredom with the commercial architectural magazines of the time – their lack of stimulating projects and their total absence of intellectual content. "The second reason," Carver continues, "follows from the first in that we were enjoying, and [...] taping, the stimulating lectures, discussions with visiting critics, and informal studio debates with prominent figures such as Lou Kahn, Phillip Johnson, and Bucky Fuller. While most of this interesting material was ephemeral, some of us found it to be a most significant part of our architectural education and we felt it should be preserved and disseminated in a more useful form."⁴

Italian architecture was always an underlying influence in American architectural pedagogy. However in the immediate aftermath of World War II, with an influx of European émigrés architects espousing the principles of a modernist architecture and eliminating architectural history classes from the curriculum. Slowly, historical pieces on Italian Renaissance appeared in the journal.

For example, some issues are theoretically driven by a particular Italian architect or historian/critic. Peter Eisenman, with his study of Giuseppe Terragni's Casa del Fascio, along with radical utopians Paolo Soleri and Manfredi G. Nicoletti, contributed to «Perspecta» 13/14. Issues from the late 1980s and early 1990s have a distinct viewpoint toward Italy and the Venice School, with volumes 23 soliciting articles from Francesco Dal Co and George Teyssot discussing the historiography of architecture and the origins of program in the discipline. These articles, accompanied by American authors and historians such as George Hershey, Jennifer Bloomer, and Robert Segrest, elaborated on Italian topics such as Vitruvius, Piranesi, and Filarete. Despite this common thread of Italian historical architecture studies, along with an early 90s infusion of Continental theory

from Venice, Manfredo Tafuri never contributed to the journal, and his name was rarely cited in any of the journal's first fifty years of existence. It is not until later, with «Perspecta» issues published at the beginning of the 21st century is he referred to in the text. With the uncanny absence of Tafuri aside, there is one issue of «Perspecta» in particular which aimed to establish an American Architecture movement, yet was inspired by another magazine of Italian origin.

Significance of «Perspecta» 9/10

«Perspecta» 9/10 was a significant issue as it was the journal's first double issue. Edited by a young Robert A.M. Stern, it assembled a line-up of authors who would go on to shape the architectural scene for the next twenty years, leading to what has become known as the White/Gray Debate and, most importantly establish what Kate Nesbitt has termed “postmodern historicism.”⁵ This paper endeavours to explore «Perspecta» 9/10 and its background in an attempt to demonstrate that through the selective curatorial acts of an “editor,” this student journal intended to define an American postmodern architecture movement; one analogous to the rise and success of post-war American Art. While early Modern Architecture quite often paralleled many of the theoretical and conceptual ideas of Modern Art, for Postmodern architecture, the gaze was elsewhere, perhaps inward. Nevertheless, it is evident that the field of post-war architecture was not looking at the *content* of post-war American Art. Rather, it is more likely that these young architects, under the tutelage of Modern Art and Architecture guru Philip Johnson, were mentored and coached on how to promote themselves as the height of American culture within the post-war environment, much like their art world counterparts.

«Perspecta» 9/10 sets the foundation for many of Stern's polemical texts that would later follow in his career as the spokesperson for “the Grays,” or rather, an American postmodern historical architecture. Such publications include the exhibition and catalogue for *40 Under 40: An Exhibition of Young Talent in Architecture* (1966), *New Directions in American Architecture*, (1969), “Gray Architecture as Post-Modernism, or Up and Down from Orthodoxy,” (1976) and “New Directions in Modern American Architecture: Postscript at the Edge of Modernism,” (1977).⁶ All of these publications serve as a sort of retroactive editorial for *Perspecta* 9/10 by reiterating the major themes of its author/architects and re-publishing their work.

During the mid-1960s and early-1970s, there was a series of similar publications which chose to focus on the historical development of American architecture, such as Vincent Scully's *American Architecture and Urbanism* (1969), Edgar Kaufmann Jr.'s *The Rise of an American Architecture 1815 – 1915* (1970), as well as the themed journal issues of «Casabella Continuità» published in 1963 and «Architecture d'Aujourd'hui» in 1965 dedicated to contemporary American architecture. (Fig. 3-4)

Unlike previous issues of the journal, which published interviews and articles from established architects who were teaching at the school, Stern's editorial line looked to publish articles from architectural historians Vincent Scully and George Hershey and searched to discover young architects who would come to define a new movement. The issue did not include an editorial statement or introduction; however, the suggestion of a new movement in American architecture is deciphered from the curated table of contents listing the names and a brief biography of each contributing author/architect.



Fig. 3
Cover of USA-themed issue of Casabella Continuità, edited by Ernesto N. Rogers, 1963.

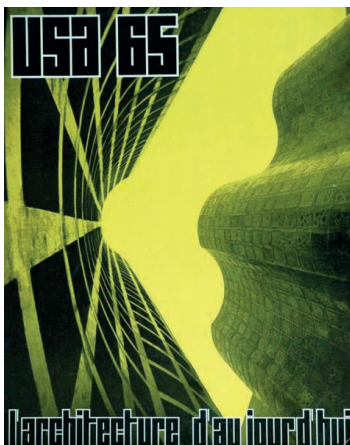


Fig. 4
Cover of USA-themed issue of l'architecture d'au jourd'hui, 1965.

Soliciting Authors: the Philadelphia School (Fig. 5)

Robert Venturi, Charles Moore, and Romaldo Giurgola were three architects contributing articles to «Perspecta» 9/10; they also happen to be short-listed for the position of Dean at the Yale School of Architecture, filling the position left vacant by Paul Rudolph. According to Stern, “these architects were largely unknown except for «Perspecta» 9/10.”⁷ According to Stern, the manner in which he learned of these new young architects was by way of a series of introductions and chance encounters by friends, teachers, and other architects.

Denise Scott Brown claimed in the article, “Team 10, *Perspecta* 10 and the Present State of Architectural Theory,” described the contents of the issue and advocated for this new American group of architects as one that best defined this shift in American architectural values, which included Venturi, Moore, Giurgola, and Kahn. *Perspecta*, according to Scott-Brown, “catches the spirit of a moment in what may or may not be a new point of departure for American architecture.”⁸ While not an official group, these architects were a “series of individual heads of small firms and part-time teachers whose work has something in common.”

The use of architectural history within the architectural pedagogy during this post-war moment was treated in a very different way. For example, schools such as the GSD at Harvard under Gropius did not have architectural history classes as part of the curriculum. Venturi, as a recipient of the Rome Prize and attended the American Academy for two years, from 1954 – 56, had a deep appreciation for the history of Italian architecture.⁹ At that time he studied the architectural masterpieces of Michelangelo and Borromini. Charles Moore was very well-travelled, and he would also visit Italy to conduct research for his Ph.D. at Princeton on “Water and Architecture.” For these figures, Italy became an eye-opening experience providing insight into how history brings *meaning* to architecture. Whereas Giurgola, as an Italian, already valued architectural history within the historically-rich environment of Italy, and therefore an appreciation for history and tradition was part of an innate sensibility, a prerequisite to making what he would later describe in another student journal *Precis* as an ethical approach to architecture.¹⁰

Stern claimed that he discovered the work of Charles Moore through an article by Donlyn Lyndon published in the American themed issue of «Casabella», and it is here, within the pages of this 1963 issue, where we can see what was perhaps the fount of inspiration for Stern, and connect the thematic and theoretical threads with «Perspecta» 9/10. In 1965, Lyndon, who was a partner with Moore in the architectural firm Moore Lyndon Turnbull Whitaker, wrote the lead article titled, “Philology of American Architecture,” which called for a new type of architecture that rebelled against the accepted norms of previous generations, specifically a watered-down and demoralized modernism that used a “facile, glib vocabulary,” and functioned as a type of “slang,” communicating with other architects, but failing to “explore significant patterns of living.” Lyndon, pointing out the vital relationship between architects and the media of architectural discourse states, “The International Architectural Press keeps professionals more in touch with each other than with their society and its problems, and there is a consequent tendency to develop in-group languages of form that are significant only to the like-minded.”¹¹

In a reproach to the inherited, prevailing modern architecture of post-war era, Lyndon claims that this new generation of young architects

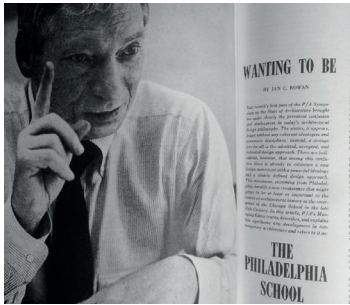


Fig. 5

A 1961 Progressive Architecture article on the architectural phenomenon known as “The Philadelphia School,” picturing Louis Kahn.

featured in his article share a growing dissatisfaction with the majority of contemporary architecture, which has, “too easily to have formalized its approach, applying thoughtless canons.”¹² The architects he described were “heretical” as their work was viewed as a protest against both the concepts and forms of the previous generation; an architecture of empty modernism which had led to “ineffectual ends.”¹³

Two Americas in One

Lyndon’s overview of the current state of architecture in the U.S. presented many of the same architects and projects that Stern would feature in his «Perspecta» issue. Similar architects described in both Lyndon’s article and Stern’s «Perspecta» include Louis Kahn, Robert Venturi, Philip Johnson, Mitchell Giurgola, Kallman, Mc Kinnell, and Knowles (both on the Boston City Hall project), and Charles W. Moore. Moreover, the «Casabella» issue contained an enlightening editorial by Ernesto N. Rogers, which perhaps planted the seed, and foreshadowed the White/Gray debates that would follow in the 1970s. Titled, “Two Americas in One,” Rogers states the following, “Americans no longer think only about their present and their future; they have been trying to grasp a tradition on which to construct, through its multiple words, a unified language, a language capable of expressing an autonomous reality owing nothing to others.”¹⁴ Despite this search for a unified language, Rogers notes that two different Americas succeed in coexisting, and in fact, the country is rich in “dialectical clashes.” However despite this success, they are unable to discover a “figurative” environment, or language to express its diversity. He claims,

This society is attracted by two opposite poles: on the one hand there are the problems of a metropolis sprung of the industrial development of the country, both those met in dealing with the big themes of its practical needs and those arising from the technical instruments of the same organisms; on the other hand, opposition to the metropolis calls for small, modest architecture built in wood and other simple materials.¹⁵

Many years later, in the article “New Directions in Modern American Architecture: Postscript at the Edge of Modernism,” Stern would continue Lyndon’s “philology” of architecture, by calling for a communicative architectural language embedded with cultural meaning.¹⁶ Like his previous writings, Stern cites Venturi and Moore as the originators of postmodern historicism, signaling a change from an autonomous modern formalism to a new mode of architectural design that premised cultural meaning. This conversion was accomplished through the façade, as viewed in the work of Venturi, and in the spirit of Giurgola’s work, the city context, followed by the idea of cultural memory. These three issues were synthesized by Stern as contextualism, allusionism, and ornamentalism.

Conclusion

Stern was drawn to architects Venturi, Giurgola, and Moore since he considered them designers who understood the value of architectural history in design practice. He states, “These were cultivated people who could speak about architecture, not just in terms of nuts and bolts or the current work of the day, [or simply in] reference to Mies or Le Corbusier or Wright, but in reference to Michelangelo, urbanism, and context. This was in contradistinction between the self-referential architecture of those days.”¹⁷ And not unlike Soane, or Alberti, or Palladio, these architects

were beginning, again, to write about their work in a self-reflective, systematic way.

It is important to note that when many of these young architects were coming of age during the early 1970s, the U.S. economy was in decline and there was an urgent need to find work. There was also time to polemicize the contemporary moment, and fully utilize the medium of the magazine to proselytize their architectural beliefs. As Stern commented on that moment, “We wrote a lot. ... We had polemics about the collapse of, or the seeming collapse of, what we had called modern architecture, a seemingly dead end in big, anonymous, corporate office buildings. And so, young architects like myself or Peter Eisenman and others systematically tried to undermine the prevailing establishment – not deviously, but by challenging its belief on the basis of what I think is correctly said to have been a wider view of what architects’ responsibilities and possibilities are.”¹⁸

If architectural theory can be understood as a self-reflection of a design process on the part of the architect, combined with the ability to provide a textual and visual explanation, then this issue of «Perspecta» 9/10 and the articles by these three architects accomplish that. With the architect as a selective collator of information and editor, we witness the origins of an American architectural theory in the U.S., via Italy, through the medium of the magazine.

Notes

¹ Henry-Russell Hitchcock, “Food for Changing Sensibility,” «Perspecta» 6, 1960.

² Much of the information gathered for this paper was from an interview with Robert A.M. Stern in his Manhattan office in June 2011. Also see recent publication, Robert A.M. Stern and Jimmy Stamp, *Pedagogy and Place: 100 Years of Architecture Education at Yale* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 2016), 239.

³ Robert A.M. Stern, Peggy Deamer, and Alan Plattus, eds. *Rereading Perspecta: the First Fifty Years of the Yale Architectural Journal* (Cambridge, M.A.: MIT Press, 2005), xvi.

⁴ Norman Carver, email correspondence with author, February 11, 2000.

⁵ Kate Nesbitt, ed., *Theorizing a New Agenda for Architecture. An Anthology of Architectural Theory 1965 – 1995*, (Cambridge, M.A.: MIT Press), 26. For a discussion of the White/Grey Debate, see “White and Gray,” *a + u: Architecture and Urbanism*, 4 (52) (1975): 25-80; and in this periodical, Emanuela Giudice, “The Architecture Between ‘Whites’ and ‘Grays’ Tools, Methods, and Compositive Applications,” «FAMagazine», 30, Nov-Dec. 2014.

⁶ Robert A.M. Stern and the Architectural League of New York, *40 Under 40: An Exhibition of Young Talent in Architecture* (New York: Architectural League of New York, 1966); Robert A.M. Stern, *New Directions in American Architecture*, (New York: George Braziller, 1969); Robert A.M. Stern, “Gray Architecture as Post-Modernism, or Up and Down from Orthodoxy,” «L’Architecture d’aujourd’hui», 186 (August-September 1976); Robert A.M. Stern, “New Directions in Modern American Architecture: Postscript at the Edge of Modernism,” *AAQ*, 9, (2-3) (1977), 66-71.

⁷ Stern and Stamp, *Pedagogy and Place*, 239.

⁸ Denise Scott Brown, “Team 10, *Perspecta* 10 and the Present State of Architectural Theory,” «AIP-Journal», vol. 33, no. 1 (Jan. 1967), 42-50.

⁹ Denise R. Costanzo, “‘I Will Try My Best to Make It Worth It,’ Robert Venturi’s Road to Rome,” «Journal of Architectural Education», 70:2, Oct. 2016: 269-283.

¹⁰ Romaldo Giurgola, “Notes of Architecture and Morality,” *Precis* II, Columbia University Graduate School of Architecture, (1980): 51-52.

¹¹ Donlyn Lyndon, “Philology of American Architecture,” «Casabella Continuità», no. 281, 1963: 8.

¹² Lyndon, “Philology of American Architecture,” 8.

¹³ Lyndon, “Philology of American Architecture,” 8.

- ¹⁴ Ernesto N. Rogers, "Two Americas in One," «Casabella Continuità», no. 281, 1963: 1.
- ¹⁵ Rogers, "Two Americas in One," «Casabella Continuità», 1.
- ¹⁶ Robert A.M. Stern, "New Directions in Modern American Architecture: Postscript at the Edge of Modernism," *AAQ*, 9, (2-3) (1977), 66-71.
- ¹⁷ Robert A.M. Stern, interviewed by author, June 2011.
- ¹⁸ Nicholas von Hoffman, "Professionals: Robert A.M. Stern. The making of a Legend in the World of Architecture," «Architectural Digest», March 31, 2004. <http://www.architecturaldigest.com/story/stern-article-042004> (Accessed March 26, 2017).

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