

The Partial Vision

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Circa 1938, between the time Disney released the fairy tale *Snow White and the Seven Dwarfs*, in the USA and the Nazis unleashed the horror of *Kristallnacht* in Germany, the Russian movie director and film theorist Sergei Eisenstein wrote an essay that I read half a century later in the architectural journal *Assemblage*.¹In the essay's opening paragraph Eisenstein introduces the concept of film itinerary which he defines as

“...the path followed by the mind across a multiplicity of phenomena, far apart in time and space, gathered in a certain sequence into a single meaningful concept.”

It is of little consequence that at the time of my reading in New York City, I was trying to form a meaningful concept of my own itinerary or, to put it simply, to make sense of my formal education completed ten years earlier and that, at the time of this writing, more than twenty years hence in Honolulu, the concept seems to have shaped my architectural sensibility. Such is the sad destiny of tenacious, albeit slow learners whose life is governed by circumstance.

But irony aside, life is not a movie nor is architecture a film, notwithstanding the similarities. Because the late 1930's were exhilarating, angst filled times one could excuse Eisenstein's exuberance for a faux pas in intellectual rigor (the Russian revolution was a promise still alive in Prokofiev's 1944 Fifth Symphony, already turned satirical angst in Mikhail Bulgakov's *Master and Margherita*. World War II was pounding on the door and film was in its infancy. But with film, like a child, having learned how to speak, and then to read and write, everything that followed is icing on the cake of expression.)

In the following statement, beginning with an off-the-cuff, “in the past,” as if it were axiomatic truth, he rushes headlong into a kind of differential equation between film and architecture:

“In the past, however, the opposite was the case: the spectator moved between carefully disposed phenomena that he absorbed sequentially with his visual sense.”

The similarities between architecture and film are limited to the realm of the artistic making of both. When it comes to experiencing them, there are no spectators in architecture as there are immobile spectators in a movie house. In architecture everyone is an actor.

¹ See http://cosmopista.files.wordpress.com/2008/10/eisenstein_montage-and-architecture.pdf

Eisenstein applies his theory of montage (editing) to the art of architecture. Like his successful father, he studied architecture and engineering, although father and son did not share common beliefs in architecture or in politics. He then quotes a passage from Auguste Choisy's magnum opus *Histoire d'architecture* (1899) about the planning and architecture of the Acropolis in fifth century B.C. Athens. Choisy's analysis of the Greek monument is as precise and rigorous in structure as it is sensitive and delicate in tone. It is a refreshing display of how certain individuals have the special gift of transporting themselves across centuries and cultures.

Eisenstein's commentary is mindful of Choisy's sensibility, taking it a step further with the addition of his own cinematic sense of time. He makes the reader feel "the rhythm of the building itself." It is humbling to realize that to understand a civilization, it is even necessary to feel how fast its citizens walked, or walk, on this earth. Goethe famous analogy that architecture is frozen music is a witty generalization that doesn't seem to stand the test of time in more ways than one.



View of the Acropolis by Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres

If being attuned to the "rhythm of a building" helps us open a window into the heart and mind of the past, understanding the fundamentals of a civilization, e.g. its concept of time, can be just as enlightening: that the ancient Romans counted their history starting *ab urbe condita* (from the founding of the city of Rome), should tell us, perhaps as much as their creational mythology, not only about how to understand them but especially how they understood themselves. And just as enlightening to understand ourselves is the fundamental shift in values brought about by the introduction of the *Anno Domini* (A.D.) which asserts the sacredness of the individual over that of the Roman collectivity.

To illustrate the Greek concept of dynamic (or balanced) symmetry introduced by Choisy, Eisenstein features four little vignettes, labeled a, b c & d, in Eisenstein's own hand, executed with extemporaneous penmanship. These vignettes appear to contrast with Choisy's masterful drawings which, far from being improvisations on the back of a napkin, were a meticulous and distilled illumination of the essence of architecture. Yet both Choisy and Eisenstein share a belief in the power of montage, in the partial vision edited [film-]shot by [film-]shot to create the architectural *itinerary* or, to use the terminology of film, the *path*, or the literary *narrative*.

To further elucidate his vignettes, Eisenstein uses the qualifier *picturesque*, an adjective repeated from Choisy's earlier description of the path up and into the Acropolis:

“The apparent asymmetry of [the] Acropolis is only a means of lending picturesqueness to this group of buildings...” And he continues “...nothing could be more uneven than this plan, but in fact it constitutes a completely balanced whole in which ...the optical symmetry is impeccable...”

It is my experience that nothing seems to cause more sudden and violent fits of paroxysm in contemporary practitioners, professors, students, and critics of architecture than the word *picturesque*.

One must admit that the word, sounding picaresque, is not a felicitous one but it is more than adequate in its etymological meaning in the context of moving pictures. The opprobrium that it evokes may be due to a mental association they make with much vituperated decorations, the same building incrustations that Eisenstein abhorred in his own father's buildings and which were summarily executed by the romantics of architectural modernism starting with Le Corbusier. Yet the same people are frequent flyers to, and lovers of, Italy, a preferred destination of architecture students enrolled in the study abroad programs the world over. Hence the adage “Tourists don't know where they have been, travelers don't know where they are going.”

So why is this *picturesqueness* much loved but seldom practiced? It is an oxymoron for modernist architects to strive for the picturesque without a fundamental shift in values. A Pindaric flight in space and time from ancient Greece, by way of the Italian Renaissance, through post war Europe and the American dream, ending with the global architecture of the present, should illuminate the issue and at the same time bring solace to the multitude of architects from Beijing to London no matter which way one faces the setting sun.

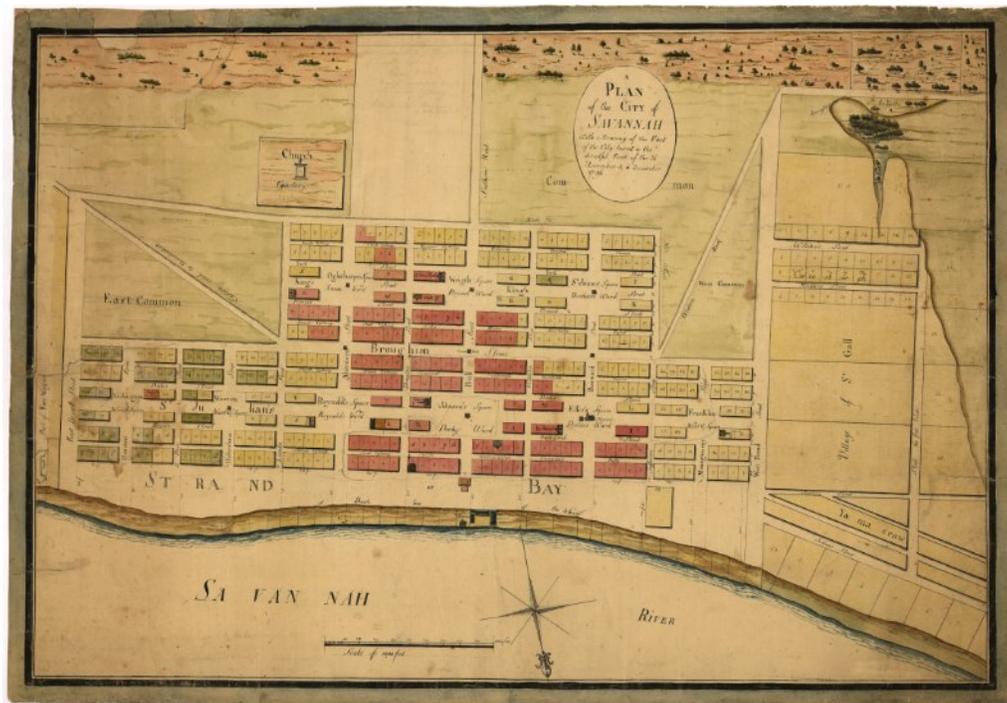
As Choisy so patiently explains “...the Parthenon...faces the spectator obliquely. The ancients generally preferred oblique views: they are more picturesque, whereas a frontal view is more majestic.” Oblique views are often not only more elegant (a woman would certainly prefer a three quarter portrait of herself than being immortalized by a mug shot) but also more informative of the building volume. If volume is at the core of architectural expression, frontal views are the least capable of expressing it without having to resort to acrobatic histrionics that theatrically create a sense of depth: at best, an illusion. In addition, the oblique view, which was preferred throughout the Middle Ages as well, with no need to borrow ancient decorations as crutches to stand on its own, offers the opportunity to invent them.

With the invention of one point perspective in renaissance Italy, the perspective articulation of the façade became a paradigm for giving the illusion of depth to an otherwise two dimensional surface with calibrated use of elements borrowed from classical orders - columns, pilasters, entablatures, the all arsenal – layers of mural decorations diminishing in size towards the middle of a symmetrical composition. Experimented by Leon Battista Alberti in Sant’Andrea in Mantova in 1470, it was perfected with muscular elegance by Andrea Palladio at Il Redentore exactly one hundred years later in Venice and repeated *ad infinitum* with exquisite variations by the masters and *ad nauseam* by the rest for years to come.

It is no wonder that, devastated by two world wars, disillusioned with empty promises of revolutions of every color, and grasping for new ideals and a better future, Eisenstein’s generation of artists and architects discarded the decorations of the past in mystical rapture with modernism. The aspirations and ideals of the Renaissance so poetically and precisely represented by Raphael in the School of Athens became history. Out went the baby with the bath water, but not the façade.

The obsession with the view *en face* was left with the conundrum of a flat façade. A case in point is the 1916 *tabula rasa* of the façade of Villa Schwob, the first published work by Le Corbusier.

It did not help that from the New World, together with *Pax Americana*, Lucky Strikes and Hollywood movies (Eisenstein returned to Stalin rather than direct them, although he did enjoy Disney) came the grid iron of urban planning and the mine-is-bigger-than-yours skyscraper. The ideal American city was planned as a military encampment patterned on the Roman *castrum*, as if the Illiniwek Indians were still circling the wagons of Chicago. One worthwhile example of the ideal is the lovely city of Savannah, Georgia.



1732 Plan of Savannah, Georgia by James Oglethorpe

In every American Pleasantville, all orthogonal intersections between Main Street and Wall Street, the American *cardo* and *decumanus*, were then filled with boxes, and in every large city with skyscrapers: like temples to *Juno Moneta*, these sported not one but four identical undecorated façades. Not even the counter-reformation of a force of nature like Daniel Burnham, who gunned down Wright and Richardson at high noon, was able to save his beloved Beaux-Arts decorations from immolation at the altar of the in-god-we-trust capitalism. The last vestiges of the classical orders became the unfortunate collateral damage of his conservative pragmatism.

Likewise, 50 years earlier, the neo-conservative planner Baron Haussmann emasculated Paris by butchering most of the medieval filigree of the city with military boulevards, forever altering the sensibilities of an era, with the unintended result of letting in the fresh air of *avant garde* impressionist painters who preferred to paint air rather than the boredom of his rationalism.

The Newtonian law should be corrected to read “Every action is accompanied by an equal and unintended reaction.”



Boulevard des Capucines by Claude Monet

Thus left without decorations and with four façades to boot, the modernist architect perhaps found the new paradigm more lucrative than all previous since the pyramids. If he was paid in full for designing only half of a symmetrical façade, now he could quadruple his profits for repeating it four times around. Truly, he/she, but mostly he had to apply his talents to the tricky

task of designing an infinite repetition of the building middle, vertically bookended by a beginning and an end. Sometimes due to budget constraints, lack of talent, or both, he did away with one, the other, or both. A masterful example is Eero Saarinen's 1965 CBS Building in New York City and an exception to the rule is the Penn Mutual Building in Philadelphia by Romaldo Giurgola, who shares with Alvar Aalto an impeccable sensibility and exquisite humanism unencumbered by romantic ideals of modernism.

There comes a moment in all adventurous and reckless journeys when the traveler finds himself in uncharted territory, *terra incognita*. Like Dante following Virgil's advice "When you come to a fork in the road, take it," I leave behind my rocks of Gibraltar, from Choisy, to Wittkower, Benevolo, and Pevsner, and with only the stars to guide me, venture into today's global architectural universe.

After a brief and annoying bout of hiccups with postmodernism, the architectural theater of today has seen a worldwide proliferation of phantasmagorical buildings of such extravagance that they have yet to be anointed with their own -ism. My candidate, "Icon-ism", sounds too much like a medical condition. With computer technology powerful enough to design virtually anything anywhere, including Mars, there seems to be no boundary to the imagination and the size of the imagined. I am humbled by the sheer creativity of the new generation of architects. Yet everywhere I look, I see that the four façades have now morphed into one single envelope, either jagged, crumpled, ripped, crushed, deformed, or curvilinear, bulging, swelling, imploding, twisted, but still one, and all of pharaonic proportions.

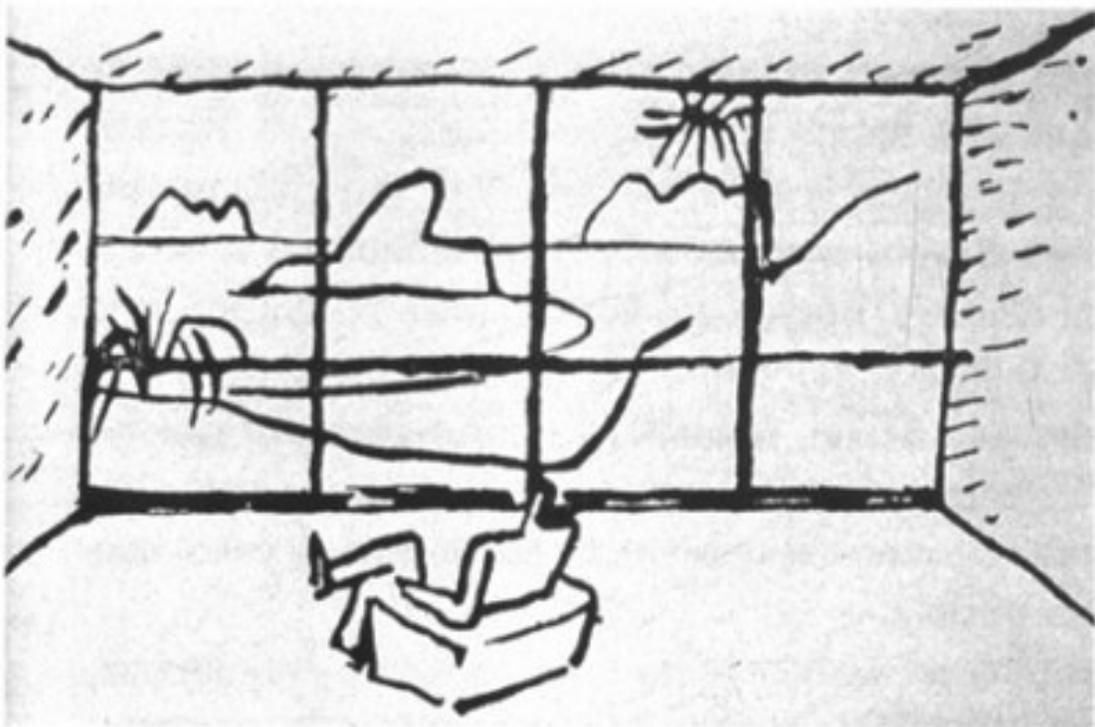
I'm not impressed. My skepticism is not with either size or form, but with the reduction of design to a single totalitarian idea -- what Hannah Arendt would have called the Banality of Evil.

The intent may not be evil, but the result is banal. Lack of sensibility, let alone critical thinking, up and down the chain of command seems to be at the root of the problem. An apropos example is The Absolute Towers designed by MAD, both appropriately named: the residential project consists of two almost identical towers, over 500 ft tall, with an elliptical plan gradually rotated at every floor giving each building a spiral twist. An analysis of the first and last sentences in the project narrative from MAD website, is revealing:

"Modernism has a famous motto: A house is a machine for living in....Our aim is to evoke the city dwellers' aspirations for nature, and getting them in touch with the sunlight and the wind."

I agree about the wind, but just because the building is one continuous curve both vertically as well as horizontally doesn't mean it evokes nature. Instead, it is a travesty of the dwellers' aspirations regarding nature, in the same way the terms "sustainable" and "organic" have become a mockery of values when used as catch words in the corporate marketplace with its insatiable hunger for rate of growth. The preposterous web commentary is either nonsense or sheer propaganda which begets the questions: How a machine is ever going to get us in touch with nature? Who would want to live in a machine? Why should a house be conceived as a machine when for most humans it is and has been since the caves of Lescaux the repository of our most bitter and sweetest memories?

This is a regression to the already discredited notions promoted in 1942 by Le Corbusier in his writing *The Home of Man*. One of his sketches exemplifies all too well his romantic relationship with nature: a one point interior perspective, the drawing depicts a man seated in the middle of an empty room overlooking Guanabara Bay, separated by a gridded glass wall, contemplating nature. (The only detail missing is his signature biplane crossing the sky as a symbol of progress.)



Sketch in "*The House of Man*" by Le Corbusier

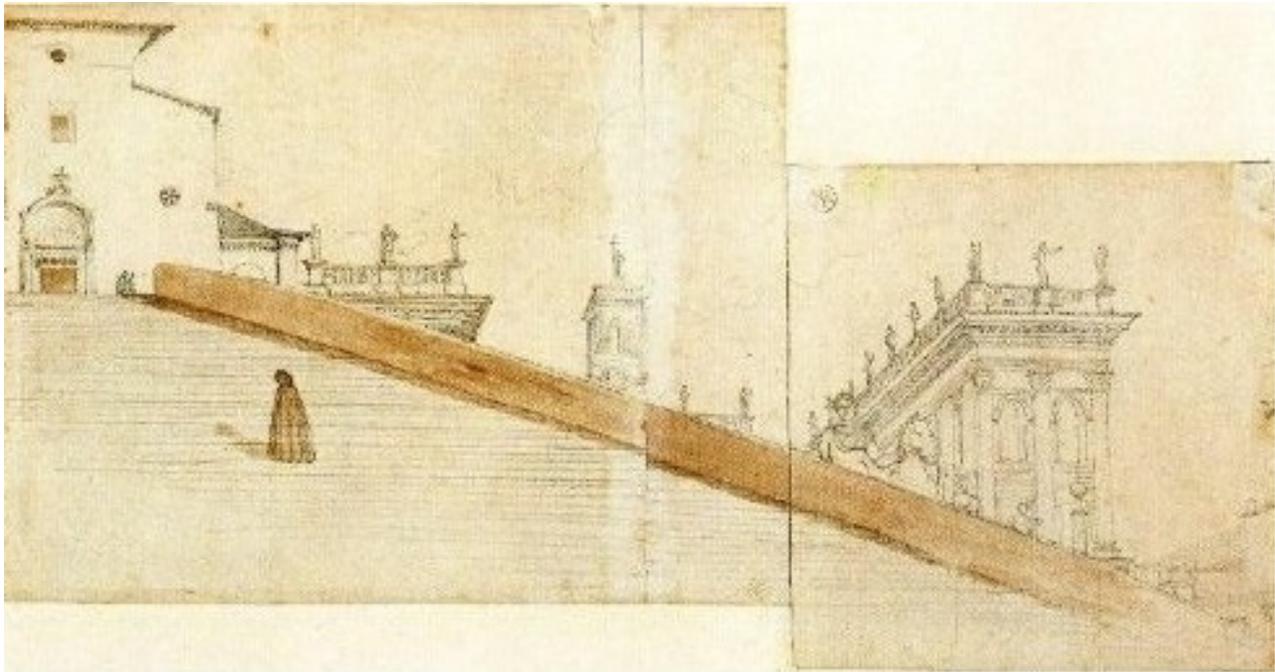
Man is reduced to a viewer, a spectator in a movie house. Man the doer, the actor in the Acropolis, or the man walking out of the loggia in Raphael's *Villa Madama* onto the adjacent gardens, is a different man.

It is worth remembering that all things, even those that appear most unnatural and evil, are part of nature. There are two natural phenomena that, rather than being in dualistic opposition, seem to be layered, as if one is the carrier of the other: the former comprises all events forever repetitive and permanent, e.g. night and day; the latter comprises all unique and transient things, like you and me. Their relationship is similar to that between blank sheets of staff paper with pre-printed staves and the musical notes written onto them in every imaginable variation. Hopefully endowed with creativity and invention, wouldn't the MAD architect prefer to be composing the notes rather than being satisfied with flipping through a madness of blank music sheets?

It seems to me that the beauty of nature lies in its infinite variety among all things and beings, and within each one of them. The totalitarian, single minded idea embraced by so many architectural projects of today is in fact the opposite of what is beautiful, regardless if they are

round or straight, broken or continuous. They are monotone and immobile, frozen sheets devoid of music.

Since infinity is a concept that can only be contemplated, architecture should (and can only) strive for a measure of variety expressed in the itinerary of experience in a measured passage of time. Its music, far from being frozen, is played in all its variations: here *forte* and *moderato*, there *pianissimo* and *allegro*, harmonious or dissonant, to borrow from musical terminology. This itinerary should guide the architect through design as if it were a movie, shot by shot, frame by frame, a montage of partial visions which tell the story to be told in a dialog (even shouting if necessary) with its surroundings across space and time. The startling experience felt when visiting the courtyard in Louis Kahn's Salks Institutes is in fact the cosmic dialog the building establishes with the open ocean and beyond, so much so that the vanishing point, the fulcrum of the project is indeed transposed outside of itself.

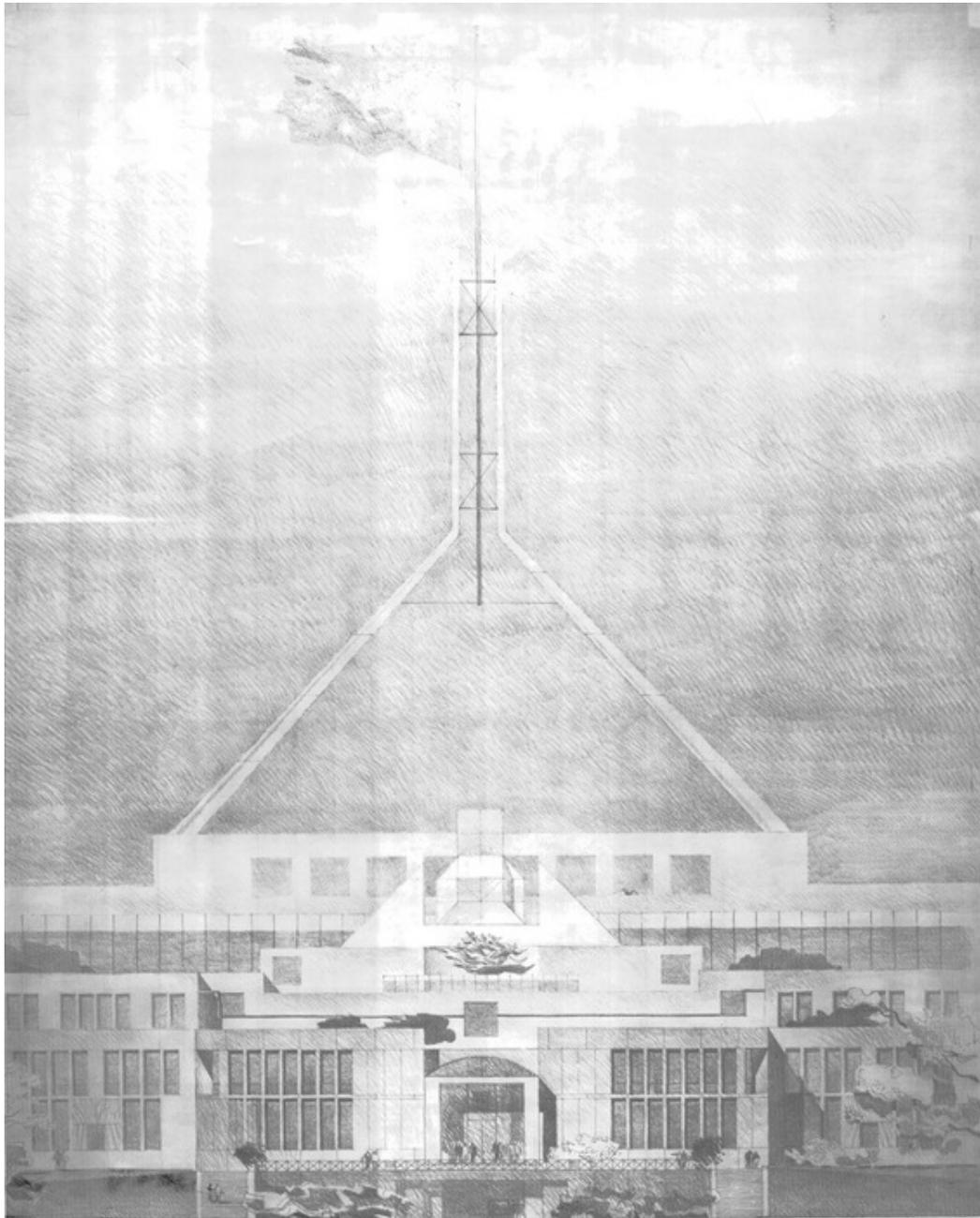


Santa Maria in Aracoeli by Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres

One of the most poignant [film]-shots I know of is a beautiful pencil drawing of the Capitoline Hill by Jean-Auguste Dominique Ingres done during his visit to Rome in 1806. (He may have done better for himself if he had kept traveling rather than return to the court of Napoleon in Paris). His choice of point of view is impeccable and totally unconventional in more ways than one: not only he chooses not to look axially up the more famous stair leading to the Campidoglio but he totally hides it behind the stair to the Aracoeli thus distilling the view by removing the incongruous architectural redundancy. He also chooses an oblique view establishing a dynamic and formidably ambiguous dialog between the two sites. Michelangelo's buildings and the equestrian statue of Marcus Aurelius in the background are presented so as to be seen only partially, as if they were sails of a ship coming into view above

the horizon. Yet, the historical reference could not be clearer: Ancient Rome and Rome of the Renaissance are seen in movement, in becoming, announcing by transposition the new era of the Napoleonic empire.

Just as dynamic is the [film]-shot created by Romaldo Giurgola, the architect of the Australian Parliament House in Canberra. The layered composition, similar to the one by Raphael in the School of Athens, sets a common goal for an entire nation in the direction of the Australian flag. Its mast held high, suspended above the building, allows the axial view to pierce through into the open space beyond as if to offer infinite possibilities to the aspirations of its people.



Parliament House, Canberra entry detail drawing by Romaldo Giurgola



The School of Athens by Raphael

As a coda, I would like to remove a pebble from my shoe. In Hawaii where I presently live, (heavenly oblivious of all said above), the post colonial mentality, pervasive among colonized and colonizers alike, has frozen aspirations for the future in preservation of the “past” by the dogmatic establishment of a borrowed architectural style. Suffice to say, if you have to borrow style, you don’t have it. Kingdom Lost.

Honolulu, September 1st, 2012