

The Campidoglio: A Case Study

Robert Venturi

The architect has a responsibility toward the landscape, which he can subtly enhance or impair, for we see in perceptual wholes and the introduction of any new building will change the character of all the other elements in a scene. The Campidoglio in Rome has been injured through ignorance of this principle. A study of maps and drawings of its changing setting shows a group of buildings in themselves not significantly altered, but nevertheless revealing variations in expression and quality.

Michelangelo's design of the Campidoglio itself can be considered as an enhanced setting for the senatorial palace which was in existence in the mid sixteenth century. This he modified almost negligibly by the application of the pilasters, entablature, and window architraves. It was by means of the flanking buildings, their form and position, that the senatorial palace acquired new value. The contrasting elements of their colour and texture, and the neutral, even rhythm of their columned facades gave emphasis to the palace. Their unique positional arrangement created direction and an illusion of increased size; moreover, it gave a controlled approach to the palace, which contributed to its monumentality. The piazza which they form created an enriched space for the palace.

Since the end of the nineteenth century one has had to approach the Campidoglio group with eyes straight ahead, preferably equipped with blinkers. At the left and always influencing one's image looms the Victor

Emanuel Mounment, ludicrous in itself, but catastrophic in its effect on the neighbouring Campidoglio. In fact adverse criticism of the shiny monster should concern itself not so much with its form (which can appeal to one's sense of the grotesque), but with its effect on its architectural neighbours. By its size, scale and colour, it makes the Campidoglio a weak anti-climax. Furthermore, the monument's direction, creates for the Campidoglio a backstage position and causes it to lose any meaningful relation as capitol to the city plan.

Similarly drastic in effect was the substitution during Mussolini's era, of big boulevards and unenclosed spaces of monumental parks, for the intricate, small-scale neighbourhoods composing the original setting. The complex formerly afforded views tantalizingly interrupted with rich, unaffected architectural foregrounds. The experience of small spaces achieved by contrast an effect of power for the Campidoglio piazza when it was reached. The removal of the congested areas was of doubtful social advantage, and the substitution of the fragmentary highway, of no real value to the overall circulation system of the city. The vast Parisian spaces and other trimmings have robbed the buildings and their immediate exterior spaces of force. The modern planners' scrupulous respect for a Michelangelo design has caused them to leave the Campidoglio untouched physically, but they have, nevertheless, obscured its meaning and significance. A wrecking crew could hardly have damaged it more.

