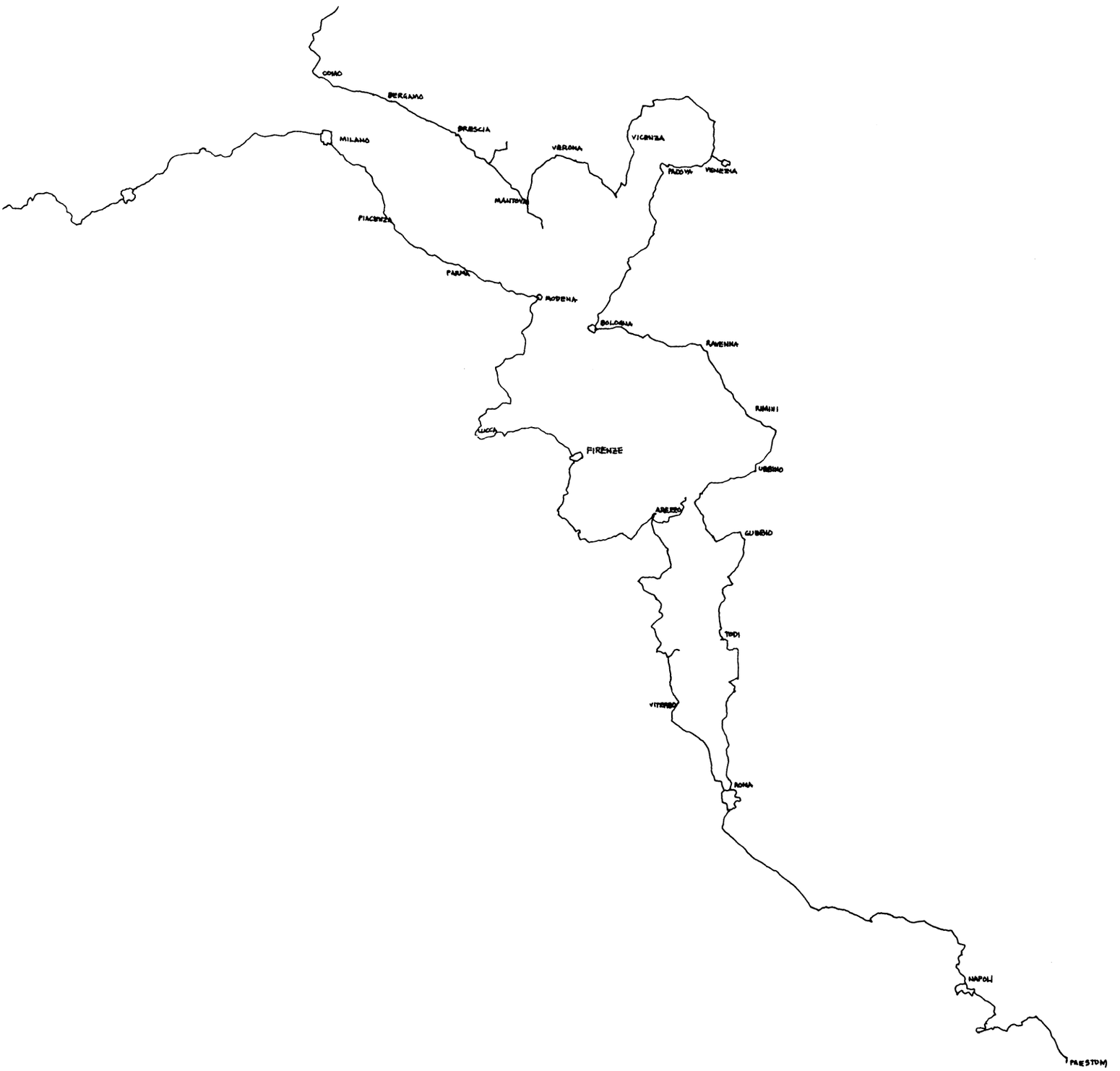

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INTERVIEW WITH PETER EISENMAN

THE LAST GRAND TOURIST: TRAVELS WITH COLIN ROWE

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The idea of the grand tour in architecture is an English—if not a European—tradition, in which an older experienced traveler initiates a young person to the cultural splendors of southern Europe. In the mid-eighteenth century, Robert Adam established his architectural practice in London after traveling extensively in Italy with his tutors, and Goethe described his 1786–87 travels to Italy in his book *Italienische Reise,* published in 1816–17. While the Grand Tour has come to be seen as an essential part of an architect's education, my travels with Colin Rowe were part of an "accidental" education, but they had a profound impact on the manner in which I would subsequently practice.

In the spring and summer of 1959, I was working for The Architects' Collaborative in Cambridge, Massachusetts. At the time it seemed like heaven, working for Walter Gropius and living in Cambridge. This was supposedly the *summa* of an architect's life, but I soon realized that even Gropius and his associates had no real ideological or philosophic commitment to what I thought was architecture. TAC was so unsatisfying that I went to see a former employer, the architect Percival Goodman. Percy said, "Look Peter, why work your way up the ladder in an office to become a junior partner or maybe a partner? Why don't you come back to graduate school at Columbia?" At the time I was twenty-seven years old. I had been in the army for two years in Korea, I had done my three years of apprenticeship, and I was studying for my architectural license. Because I was in Boston, I applied to MIT as well as Columbia. I was accepted at both, but Goodman wanted me back at Columbia. He said, "You can graduate in one year rather than two." At the time, this was important to me.

But I need to go back to the fall of 1959, when Jim Stirling came to Yale for his first visit. Stirling came down to New York and I was introduced to him through my then roommates, John Fowler (who went on to work with Paul Rudolph) and Michael McKinnell. Jim said, "You know, you ought to go to England. That's where things are happening." New Brutalism was in vogue, and the Smithsons and Team 10 were generating a new energy in England. In the spring of 1960, I applied for a Kinney traveling fellowship, which was worth $7,500, which in today's dollars was a lot of money. At the same time I also applied for a Fulbright to France. I received both fellowships and decided to go to France. My brother was living in Paris at the time. I arrived on the *Flandre* in Le Havre and took the "boat train" to the Gare du Nord. When I asked a taxi driver, in French, to take me to Rue Git-Le-Coeur, where my brother was living, the driver turned to me and, in the most condescending tone possible, suggested that it would be better if I spoke English. At that moment, I realized that France was not for me. I spent a night with my brother, then turned around and accepted this other fellowship at Cambridge to be a research assistant. Unwittingly, of course, this decision would lead me to Colin Rowe.

I remember our first meetings. I would go to Colin's flat two or three times a week, and he would pull out books, Campbell's *Vitruvius Britannicus,* Letarouilly's *Edifices de Rome Moderne,* and other books with a series of fantastic plans from the Renaissance. I was taught how to read these plans and to see that specific plans showed certain ideas. I was taught how to understand the nuances of these plans, how they constituted the essence of what is architectural, of what has become the persistencies of architecture. We were not analyzing their function but rather the architectural relationships in these plans. This lay the groundwork for the trip. After several months, Colin suggested that I was the "noble savage" to his Robert Adam, and proposed that we travel in Europe for the summer.

Where did you go?

I was the one who researched the trip. As I was interested in De Stijl and the Bauhaus, we started off in Holland, against Colin's better judgment. We

saw all of Rietveld, Van Tijen and Maaskant, Bijvoet and Duiker at a time when rarely anybody had gone to see this work. We saw the Van Nelle Factory, the Oud Siedlung, Bijvoet and Duiker's Zonnestraal Sanatorium, and of course the Schroeder House. It was then that I realized how much Colin did not like modern architecture.

After Holland, we went down the Rhine, stopping in Krefeld to see Mies's Lange and Ersters houses, which Colin had never seen. In Stuttgart, we saw the Weissenhofsiedlung. I did all the driving in my white Volkswagen Bug while Colin read incessantly to me. Twelve hours, night and day, we did nothing but look, and I would drive while he read, much of it useless trivia, like the shields of popes, the number of Piccolomini popes, etc. It was a total immersion experience. Next came Zurich, where Colin wanted to visit one of the old Texas Rangers, Bernhard Hoesli, who had worked with Le Corbusier and had taught at Texas with Rowe.

In Zurich, we had dinner with Hoesli and his wife. Hoesli had taken us around to see Le Corbusier's work in Zurich, and then showed us his own work in his office. Hoesli was a very bright person, but on this occasion, I became Colin's attack dog. Bernhard asked me, "Well, what do you think of my work?" We had seen that his work was a cross between Wright and Le Corbusier. I immediately said, "Bernhard"—and this is what endeared me to Colin—"Bernhard, I have never had a more exhilarating day. It was the most amazing experience looking at Le Corbusier with you. But I cannot understand how a person who knows so much about architecture can do such bad work." And there was silence. Boom...it was an amazing moment.

Leaving Zurich, we proceeded south through Switzerland to Como. Now we need to go back to Como because that is a major part of my story. Unlike Goethe, who reveled at the Lago di Garda, Colin said it was to be avoided at all costs, except for a brief stop in Sirmione at the foot of the lake, because it was now full of *Tedeschis* of a somewhat different ilk than Goethe. Mussolini had ruled from Salo, on Lago di Garda, in 1944–45, just north of Sirmione. Such was the kind of history that Colin would read as we traveled. I, this so-called noble savage who did not know anything, even though I had been reading *AD* during my year at Columbia and had learned about Brutalism, and even though I had been meeting regularly with Stirling, Smithson, Banham, and other members of the English scene in London, I was still a neophyte.

When Sandy Wilson had come back from Yale, he gave me, as a present for filling in for him, the *Encyclopédie de L'Architecture Nouvelle* by Alberto Sartoris. In that book I saw Giuseppe Terragni's work for the first time—his Casa del Fascio, the Asilo Infantile, and the Giuliani Frigerio apartment block. There was also Cesare Cattaneo's apartment block in Cernobbio just up the road from Como. This fired my imagination and my desire to see these buildings. Thus, when we arrived in Como, we immediately went to the square in front of Casa del Fascio, and, as Colin said, I had a revelation. After having seen De Stijl, Mies, Corbu, the Weissenhofsiedlung, all of these monuments of modern architecture, to see the Casa del Fascio in the flesh was amazing. I was blown away. After Como, we drove to Milano, where we saw the Terragni apartment buildings which nobody really knew at the time. They were only in the Sartoris book. We also saw Terragni's two houses in Seveso and Rebbio on the way.

My mania for collecting architectural magazines from 1918–39 began in Milano. Much of what was modern prewar architecture had been published in Giuseppe Pagano's magazine *Casabella*. This was the focus of my search in used bookstores. I would walk in and say, "Vecchie riviste di Casabella della prima della guerra?" I looked in every little bookstore from Milan to Naples and back to Torino. During that time we discovered many small antiquarian bookstores, some of which I can still visit to this day. But it was only on our last day in Italy that we hit the jackpot in the galleria in Torino, but that is another story.

After Milan, Colin programmed the rest of the trip with High Renaissance and Mannerist architecture and painting, but very little Baroque. I was not allowed to look at Borromini or Bernini. The work we had to see was the basis of the Cambridge course that Colin was giving, called "From Bramante to Vignola," that is, from 1520 to 1570 in northern Italy, both painting and architecture. Of course, this was all new material for me.

We went east to Bergamo to see the *citta alta* and the Scamozzi loggia on the way to the Veneto. We also detoured below the Milano-Venezia autostrada to Mantova, where we stayed for three days. We were now in the heart of Colin Rowe country. We saw Giulio Romano's Palazzo del Te, with the faux rustication and the giant frescoes bursting out of their panels. We spent an afternoon sipping San Pellegrino Aranciatas in front of Alberti's facade for San Andrea. We went to see the little-known church of San Benedetto Po, with its interior by Giulio Romano and its baptistery covered with his frescoes. Twenty years later, when I returned, there were no frescoes, only a restored "original" Romanesque baptistery. The work by Giulio Romano had fallen victim to the "restoration" impulse. Next came the Veneto and the Palladian villas. At that time none of the villas had been documented or catalogued, but Colin knew their locations from his previous visits. We would ask for directions in our primitive Italian and we found—and I still have the slides—ten or twelve Palladian villas that had been previously undocumented in any books at the time, certainly not in the old Baedeker and Michelin Guida Rossa guides that were our constant companions.

How were you documenting the buildings? Were you taking slides or drawing?

I was taking slides, but not drawing. Learning to see requires something other than slides or drawings. My most important lesson in architecture was the first time I saw a Palladian villa. I cannot remember which one, somewhere in the Veneto. It was hot, probably ninety-six or ninety-seven degrees, and humid, and Colin said, "Sit in front of that facade until you can tell me something that you can't see. In other words, I don't want to know about the rustication, I don't want to know about the proportion of the windows, I don't want to know about the ABA symmetries, or any of those things that Wittkower talks about. I want you to tell me something that is implied in the facade." I remember this moment as if it were yesterday. This is how Colin began to teach me to see as an architect. Anyone can look at window-to-wall relationships, but can anyone see edge stress, the fact that the Venetian windows are moved outboard from the center to create a blank space—a void between the windows—which acts as a negative energy? Such ideas are not found in any books. They are found in seeing architecture.

In this way I began to understand how to look at Palladio, at a portico in relationship to the main body of the building, at the flatness of the facade and its layering. Of course it was very different from looking at Giulio Romano's Palazzo del Te, which displayed different kinds of architectural tropes: a different flatness, a different layering, the implied peeling away of the stone, and the real stone making stone appear thin. We talked about frontality, rotation, and the difference between Greek and Roman space. All of these lessons I learned through looking at the subtleties of the Palladian villas. In Vicenza we saw the Palazzo Godi, which Scamozzi finished after Palladio's death. We saw how much drier Scamozzi was than Palladio. To be able to see dryness was as important as being able to taste dryness in a wine.

We then went to Venice. In retrospect, in Venice, interesting differences between Rowe and Tafuri became clear. Tafuri thought that Sansovino was important, while Rowe infinitely preferred Scamozzi. We saw two Palladian churches, San Giorgio and Redentore, and the layering and compression that occurred on the facades, their frontality. Now I was beginning to see things. And of course we were still doing twelve hours a day. I said, "Hey Colin, come on, let's go to the beach." But no, we could not go to the beach. For Colin, it had to be total immersion. This kind of mentoring would be absolutely impossible today.

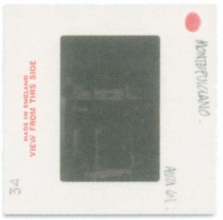
We went into the Veneto, then down to Vicenza, to Verona to see Sanmicheli's city gates, to Padua to see the cathedral. This is where the story also gets interesting, as far as Colin is concerned. He said we could not go to Florence until we had seen Rome, because I needed to understand the influence of Rome on Florentine and Bolognese painting, what he would later call Mannerist painting. In other words, we had to see Raphael, Michelangelo, and Peruzzi before going to Florence. On the way to Rome, we went to Urbino to see the *cortile* of the Ducal Palace and the Piero della Francescas. The next stop was Arezzo, where we ate in the Buca di San Francesco, across from the Vasari Loggia. We went to Borgo San Sepolcro—another one of the things that only Colin would know—which is a little town near Arezzo, with a small church, not yet restored, with frescos done by Piero della Francesca. Many years later I went back and saw them when they were completely restored. But who had been to Borgo San Sepolcro? Colin was meticulous in knowing what to see and where to see it.

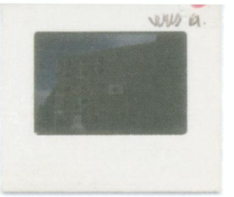
Down through Toscana we went. We made an important stop in Gubbio, which is a tough hill town lacking the saccharine qualities of Assisi and San Gimignano. From there we went to Todi, where I had my first *spaghetti carbonara* in a restaurant called Da Umbria, with a magnificent view of the valley. Of course, we made the obligatory stop at Sangallo's Santa Maria della Consolazione. From Todi we went to Perugia, Orvieto, and Viterbo, to the Villa Lante, to, finally, Rome, which was a literal feast for Colin. We saw the *Stanze di Raffaelo,* in which I began to understand the three periods of Raphael's paintings, and *The Fire in the Borgo* by Giulio Romano. I began to understand how this late period led to the painting of Parmigianino, Pontormo, and Bronzino. Painters were an integral part of understanding the architecture. Piero della Francesca was the first to bring a certain layered frontality of space that architects like Bramante pick up. Rome is a chapter by itself. Included in our tour was every Roman wall church of the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, including Carlo Rainaldi's Santa Maria in Campitelli. It was in Rome that I got my first introduction to Luigi Moretti. We went to the Fencing Academy, which was in pristine condition, then to Casa Girasole and Casa Astrea. Colin had been impressed by Moretti's magazine, *Spazio.*

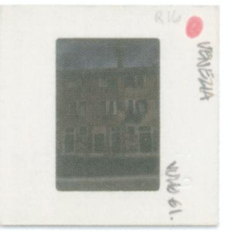
After a detour to Naples, we started north from Rome. I remember this was one of the highlights outside of Siena. By this time I was pretty beat, really exhausted, and particularly tired of being lectured, read to, and told what to do twelve hours of every day. We were driving along just outside of Siena when Colin said—and this was the way he would say things—"In 2 kilometers we're going to take the right bifurcation." A couple of minutes later he said, "Now remember, in 1 kilometer we're going to take the bifurcation to the right." And I began to steam. So when we reached the bifurcation, I went speeding by to the left. I had had it. It was done. And Colin said, "I said right." I said, "I heard you." He said, "I said right," again. I said, "I heard you." He said, "Stop the car." So I said OK. I stopped the car. And he got out, closed the door, and I continued on.

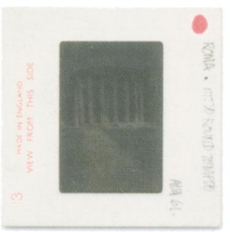
He walked back?

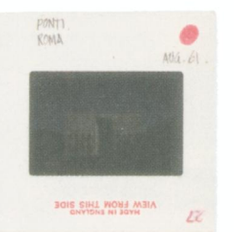
No, he hitchhiked to Siena, where we met up at the hotel, both having cooled off. After Siena we went to Florence, then Bologna. Bologna is memorable because we looked at Vignola's Loggia dei Banchi and at the Carraccis and Guido Reni in the Bologna Gallery. Then we went to Lucca to see the Pontormos. We looked at a lot of painting, but at the same time, I was trying to collect issues of *Casabella.* We arrived in Torino on our last day in Italy. I remember this distinctly. We went to a shop in the glass galleria in Torino, an old white-haired man with a fascist beard, split in the middle—clearly an old fascist—was sitting outside the bookstore. We asked him if he had any old *Casabella* magazines, and he replied that yes, he did. And I said, "Could we see them?" So he goes into the store and tells the assistant to go downstairs to the basement. And he said, "Look, I don't want to bring them all up, which ones specifically are you looking for?" And I said, "Why don't you just bring up some magazines from 1932?" So he brings up a complete year, in mint condition. So I asked if there were more,

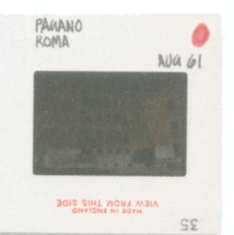


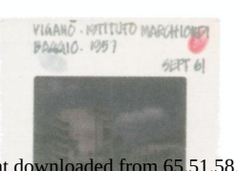


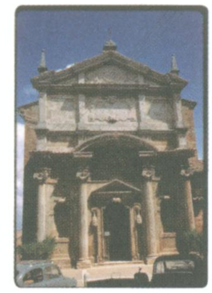


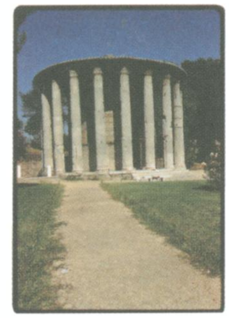


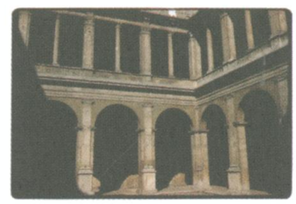


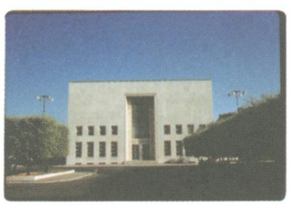
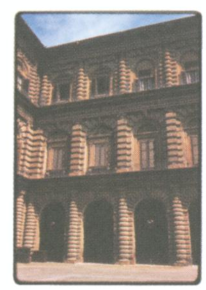


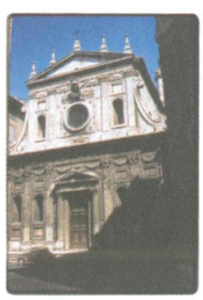
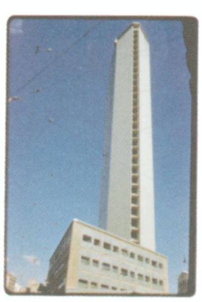






and he said yes. So I said, "Why don't you bring them all up?" He brings up a hundred plus issues. It was amazing. I mean, a trove of mint-condition magazines from the 1930s. Now, I knew they were worth $10 apiece, that is, 6,000 lire. But if I bought a hundred magazines, that would be $1,000. I didn't have that much. I was making the equivalent of $2,000 a year, and with my fellowship for $7,500 we had bought a car, traveled, etc. We did not have much money at that point. So I asked what he wanted for them. He said, really quickly, 60 lire a piece. Not 600 but 60. I said, "Too much, I'll give you 20." We agreed on 20 lire a copy. He had never sold these magazines, nobody had ever asked for them. I could have bought the entire store, which had all of the Futurist and Fascist material one could ever want.

After Torino, we went back up through France, to Chambéry and Nancy—a city Colin loved. Then we went into Paris and looked at what he considered to be French neoclassical architecture by the architects Duc and Duban, people who are hardly known. We looked at Le Corbusier, of course. And I remember, also going to his office at 35, Rue de Sevres. We stood outside on the doorstep, and I looked at Colin and said, "What the hell am I gonna say to this guy?" He said, "Ring the doorbell, come on, come on." And I said, "No, no, no, I can't do that, I don't know what to do." So we turned around and walked away.

What happened when you returned to Cambridge?

Leslie Martin, asked me if I would stay on to teach a second year. At the time I did not want to be a teacher, I wanted to be an architect, so I asked if I could work as an architect. Martin suggested that since I already had my license, I would not want to work as a draftsman, and that it would be difficult to find any other architectural work. Then he said, "I will do something which is highly irregular. Why don't you do a Ph.D.? You can do it in two years instead of three and still teach first year." Being a teacher at Cambridge, one was supposed to be sitting at high table in college, but as a research student, one was supposed to be sitting with lesser mortals. Martin, with his political acumen, was able to work it out, suggesting I do a Ph.D. under his guidance.

I had never thought about getting a Ph.D., but I decided to do the thesis. This was perhaps another example of my accidental education. I also saw that there would be some problem for me in establishing my distance from Colin Rowe. Rowe's last year in Cambridge was from the fall of 1961 to the spring of 1962. During that time I decided to write about the formal basis of modern architecture as an analytic work on four distinct architects: Terragni, Le Corbusier, Aalto, and Wright, much to Rowe's chagrin. I finished my Ph.D. in 1963, the year after Colin left.

How did the trip with Rowe influence your work?

Without it, I would not be who I am today. There is no question that my education made it impossible for me to be what I would call an ordinary practicing architect. The two trips—Colin and I made a second tour in the summer of 1962—and the Ph.D. were all part of it. My idea of what it was to be a practicing architect changed completely. Even today, I am amazed that I have done major buildings.

Being mentored by one of the three great historians and critics of the latter part of the twentieth century—those being Banham, Rowe, and Tafuri—was the most intensive experience I had. The time I spent with Rowe was my education. In those two years, those two trips, I received an education that would be impossible to have in any other way. I both carried this education forward and needed to react against it.

Later, there were other mentors, Tafuri and Jacques Derrida. Percival Goodman had been my first mentor. I was open to being mentored, and the times were such that mentoring was possible. This would be impossible today. With Rowe I learned about much more than architecture, from the Carraccis and Guido Reni in the Bologna gallery to the Vignola loggia in Bologna.

This was the time that Rowe was writing about Le Corbusier's La Tourette. He took me to the Cistercian monastery Le Thoronet, which is the formal

underpinning of La Tourette. How many students even know about this, much less have been there? All of this information was practically imprinted on my brain, because it was passed to me in a very passionate way. I truly was a "noble savage," like a sponge soaking up this material. The thought of having a Ph.D., the thought of teaching had never ever occurred to me. I also did not realize that it was going to put me off of the conventional route to becoming a practicing architect.

Why did you decide to leave England?

First of all, it was too claustrophobic, too homogeneous. I missed a certain sense of humor that was American. I also missed a certain capacity to be able to be "me." I could not live forever as an expatriate. Even though I could have stayed, I never would have practiced architecture in England. I knew I wanted someday to build buildings. That was very important. I could not become a historian like Colin.

Is this kind of learning still possible? Why don't you travel with your advanced studios, if you are trying to teach your students to see in the same way that Colin taught you? Or maybe you're not trying to do the same thing?

The first-year class that I teach at Yale is an attempt to teach students how to see architecture as architects. It is something that does not come naturally. Yale's Dean Robert Stern has said there is a disjunction between the first and third year in the studio. We needed to find a course that mediated between first year and third year. How does that knowledge move into the studio?

I am trying to set up a series of case studies to show how Rem Koolhaas moves from Palladio and Schinkel to Le Corbusier to Rem Koolhaas. I am trying to define the persistencies of architecture. What are those things that do not change, what things have changed, where are the fertile areas for change? How do you take the knowledge of Bramante and Palladio and use it in a studio with Zaha Hadid? How does Hadid do it? How does Frank Gehry do it? I want to show examples where masters have been able to take material from the discipline of architecture and manipulate it so that it becomes present. How do you produce work that does not rely on graphics or Photoshop or computers, work that relies on the capacity to integrate architectural knowledge into the present? In other words, what are the present situations? Venturi, Moneo, Koolhaas, Porphyrios, Krier, Graves, all these architects have had very good educations and have integrated that education into their practice, whether you agree or not with their current directions.

You said earlier that this kind of travel is no longer possible, that you cannot travel today the way that you traveled with Colin Rowe as your *"cicerone."* Is it not desirable, or is it simply not possible? And if it is not possible, why is that? What has changed?

The world was much smaller in those days, and slower. One knew everybody that there was to know. One does not know everybody in the world anymore. In those days you either went to college at Harvard, Yale, or Princeton, or you were out. When I applied to college, for example, I applied to Harvard and Cornell—that was it. I did not apply to six schools or eight schools. The world has become more varied and diffuse and the old days of what it was like at Yale are not same as what it is like today. Peter Eisenman, for one, does not have the time or money to take off and travel for two or three months. And I am married. You have to be an unmarried architectural critic who is willing to spend their time for nothing, *for nothing,* to do this. Nobody paid Colin to do it. We each paid our own way. Do I think that it is a way to learn? Absolutely. Do I think one should be paid to mentor? Absolutely. But I think the world has changed.

What is interesting is that I married my first wife that summer after Rowe left. We were on the road going from Florence to Arezzo, repeating, as our honeymoon, the trip that Rowe and I had taken. We drive off the main road to a little place, and there is a side road coming in from Cortona. We go by and I pull up in the parking lot of this restaurant where there are no other cars, and I look in the rear view mirror and there is a little green MG, which is what Rowe was driving, and I said to my wife, "Liz, you won't believe this but Colin Rowe has just pulled up behind us!" And it was true. Rowe was with Alvin Boyarsky, who was then the next in line to take this grand tour. The danger about mentoring is the risk that you never get out from under it.

Because the mentor is doctrinaire, or because it is an intellectual shadow?

Usually the mentor produces an intellectual shadow. Colin Rowe was never doctrinaire. He never insisted on anything but the way you learned. The way the trip was programmed was according to an attitude that Colin had about Mannerist painting and architecture and the way it related to modernism. I still see through Mannerist eyes. For example, when we were in Rome the first time, we saw no Borromini and no Bernini. Instead, we saw Carlo Rainaldi and Vignola. We went to Santa Maria in Campitelli, by Rainaldi. It was only a few years ago that I realized that Rudolf Wittkower, Rowe's mentor, had written a long article on the intersection of Palladio and Borromini with Rainaldi in 1935. Rainaldi had haunted me without my understanding until I read Wittkower's article, which Rowe never told me about.

If it had not been for Rowe, I would not be who I am today. But also, if I had not escaped from Rowe, I would not be who I am today.

It seems that architects today are traveling out of a professional rather than an intellectual interest. For example, many architects from our generation are building their careers in European offices. A stop in Rotterdam has become *de rigeur.* Do you think that travel has become more of a tool for professional advancement than intellectual development?

There is a reason for this kind of travel, and that is because people do not know how or what to see today. I know people who have spent a year in Rotterdam and have never gone to see the Zonnestraal, for example. They would not even know where the hell it is. They haven't gone to see Oud's houses in Scheveningen because for some reason that history has eluded them. Nobody has taught them about those things. In other words, nobody has analyzed Johnson's International Style show and asked "Where did he get these things? Where did he pick up these pieces? Johnson was so literate, he saw and knew everything. Just being around Philip, I learned a lot about the 1930s in Europe and his travels and why he made the choices he made for the 1932 show. Students today can go and work with Rem, Zaha, Herzog and de Meuron, but students are not curious as to how these architects put this information together.

Meaning the source material that supports the intellectual position of these architects?

How else does one become free of stylisms of convention, unless one has an education? To me education is the most important thing.