ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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Rome and Artistic Fantasy

A new form of cruel and unusual punishment has been invented; architects are writing as much as they are building, and those of us who report on their activities are forced to struggle through masses of pretentious and glutinous prose, seeking the flash of insight, the buried diamond of revelation, the key to the architectural revolution that is rumored to be in process now.

They should try doing it on a deadline. There ought to be a formula fixed by law about time wasted and information gleaned. If architects put buildings together with the same obscure gropings, the same appallingly unnecessary complexity and dubious detail, the same lack of understanding of the basic beauty of an expressive economy of means, architecture would be in a very bad way. (I have just had a chilling thought; some really do build the way they think, if that is the right word for what is going on in their heads.)

These comments are inspired by "Roma Interrotta," an exhibition resulting from an unusual venture in visionary planning and design that took place in Rome and is now touring the world. The first stop in this country is the Cooper-Hewitt Museum (2 East 91st Street, through Aug. 12), before going on to other American cities.

"Roma Interrotta" is already a celebrated project in the tight circles of today's international architectural cognoscenti. The undertaking, sponsored by an Italian group devoted to urban studies called Incontri Internazionale d'Arte, brought a number of European and American architects to Rome, where they were presented with a very famous and much-admired 18th-century map of Rome called the Nolli Map, drawn by Giovanni Battista Nolli in 1748.

The map was printed in 12 sections, and one section was given to each of the participating architects, with instructions to devise 20th-century "interventions," or changes in the plan through insertions of new uses and buildings. These additions were to be integrated into the historical and traditional framework of Nolli's city. It was, literally, "Rome Interrupted" at a point in its past for a radical excursion into the 20th century. Billed as an exercise in urbanism, it was, from the start, an elite and erudite game.

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It was also more or less understood that the emphasis would be on the ideal city, or some form of futurism, or at the least, a highly personal kind of commentary. The architects were free to fantasize about architecture and the environment in any way they chose. Those who took part in the project were Romaldo Giurgola, New York City; Michael Graves, Princeton, N.J.; Colin Rowe with Peter Carl, Judith diMaio and Steven Peterson, Cornell University; James Stirling, London; Leon Krier, London; Robert Krier, Vienna; Antoine Grumbach, Paris; Aldo Rossi, Milan; Paolo Portoghesi and Vittorio Gigliotti, Rome; Constantino Dardi, Rome; Piero Sartogo, Rome; Robert Venturi and John Rauch, Philadelphia. They were an elite and erudite group.

At first, second and third glance, the results as seen in the exhibition are largely incomprehensible, and so is much of the handsome American catalogue, as well as the double issue of the English periodical Architectural Design devoted to the project. (Editor Haig Beck, guest editor Michael Graves, publisher Rizzoli International, New York.) Nor is anything helped by the installation at the Cooper-Hewitt, where space limitations have split the show in half, on two separate floors. To aggravate things further, the pivotal part of the display — the 12 sections of the original Nolli Map and the participants' redrawing of those sections, are on opposite walls, and no amount of head-swiveling can coordinate them visually. Architectural Design has put them on facing pages at an unreadable scale, but even that is better.

I suspect that it doesn't make all that much difference, since most people are not going to get much out of it anyway. Which raises the central question — if "Roma Interrotta" is so obscure, technical, parochial and private, why bother to show it, publish it, or write about it? Why the international tour?

The answer is that the results of this undertaking are as interesting to the professional as they are baffling to the layman. This is one of those studies that has already become legend; the kind of theoretical exercise that takes a permanent place in the more esoteric annals of art and architectural history. Although the "interventions" are often more capricious and arbitrary than realistic or practical, the work is extraordinarily inventive and beautiful. That it has been a labor of love for most of the participants is made clear by the incredibly extensive and painstakingly detailed studies that have been produced.

This is particularly true for a number of the "radical" architects who are so highly esteemed within the profession that they have almost become cult figures, and whose unconventional projects have exerted a great influence, even when unbuilt — particularly among students. "Roma Interrotta" is an intensive exposition of the art and ideas of such practitioners and theoriticians as Aldo Rossi and Leon Krier, to pick two in the show. Both create haunting, suggestive, and even frightening worlds.

For his "Roma Interrotta" project, Rossi has chosen to redesign and update the Baths of Caracalla in his own inimitable style, to "provide bathing facilities dedicated to amusement, love and gymnastic activities." For this benign purpose, his images, as usual, are eerie and surreal. Giant

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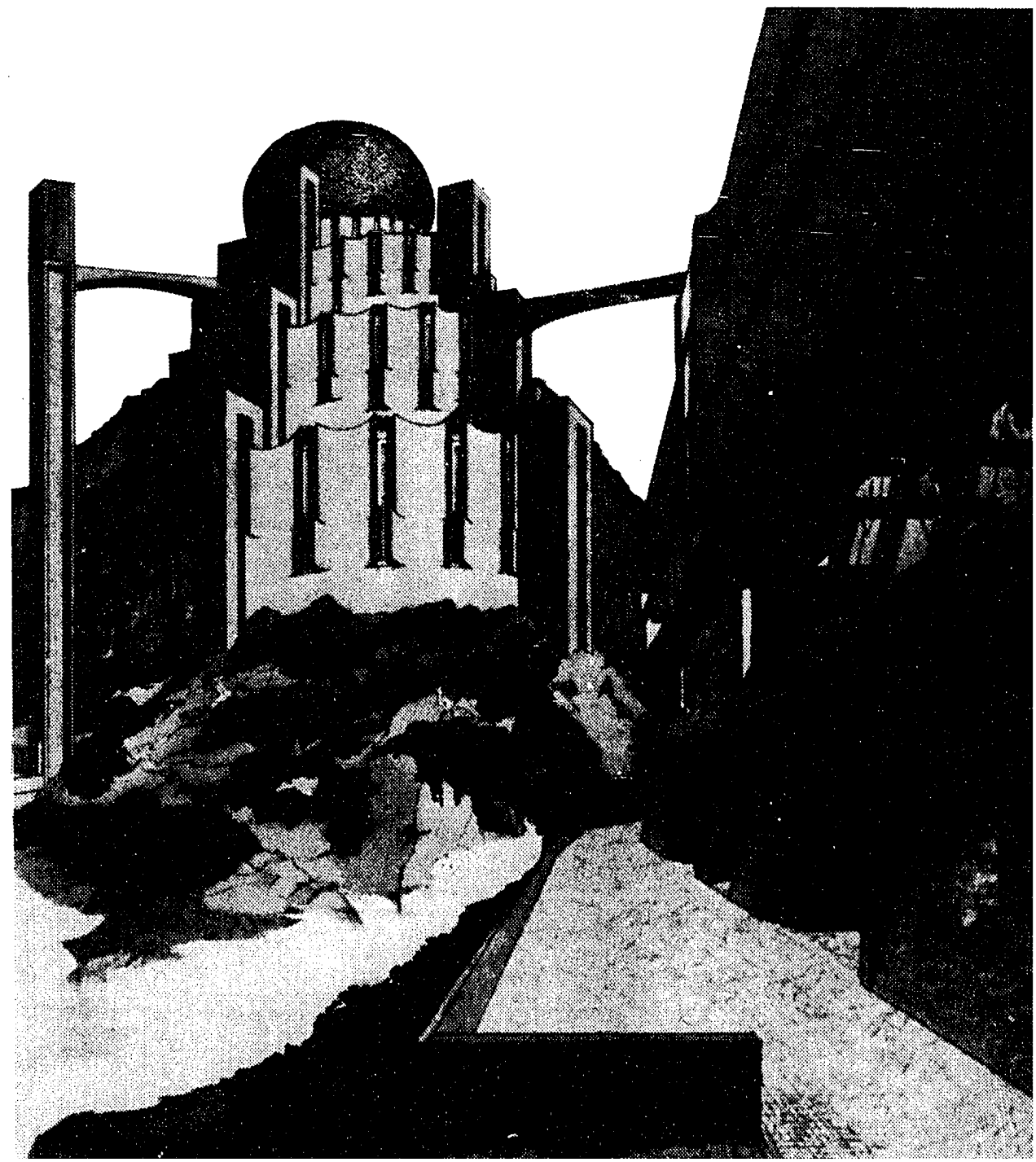

Paolo Portoghesi's proposal—"softly sensuous views of local landscape formations"

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blockhouses fly tiny pennants; the arcaded rhythms of huge, aquaduct-like structures, immense flights of stairs and isolated slabs furnish spaces filled with their own extraordinary emptiness and framed by their unrelenting geometry. Rossi has carried these designs to the point of rendering them in oils. They are incredibly beautiful paintings, with a precise imagery and suave surface that are totally seductive as art.

Leon Krier deals in equally surreal themes. He designs "popular pavilions" of monumental scale and an austere, rigid formalism, immense brick towers under truss roofs that are placed within Bernini's St. Peter's portico or at one end of the Piazza Navona. These powerful constructions coolly upstage the great Roman monuments; they are as destructive in their impact as they are compelling in their visual forms.

Paolo Portoghesi presents a series of softly sensuous views of local landscape formations, with parallel formations of Roman streets and buildings. Michael Graves offers delicate, toylike sketches of classicized artifacts and topiary. Antoine Grumbach's "reverse archeology" is eloquently delineated. Aldo Giurgola's assured, panaramic vistas come closest to urban reality.

All of these superbly executed renderings are worthy of collectors or museums. The way to enjoy this show is not to try too hard to understand it; the drawings are their own reward.

I doubt very much that this exercise in the beautiful and the outrageous was what the Incontri Internazionale d'Arte people had in mind as urban studies. Among other things, they got Venturi and Rauch's obvious transplant of the Vegas Strip and Jim Stirling's naughty superposition of all of his major projects on Nolli's Rome.

In the words of Giulio Carlo Argan's wonderfully succinct introductory essay for the catalogue — which proves that the subject can be written about with grace, intelligence and flair — "Roma Interrotta" is not urban planning at all, but "a series of gymnastic exercises for the Imagination whose course runs parallel to that of Memory. The contributions to this exhibition are a group of adventurous, fantastic research studies on the urbanistic womb of Rome, and of probes into the Roman currents of time, as secret as its subterranean rivers. It is the dramatic opposite of a Redevelopment Plan; not one of these architects would actually like Rome to become as he imagines it today."

And what of Rome itself, with its layers of time and style, its juxtaposition of grandeur and intimacy, of large plans and little accidents, its mixture, in Argan's words, of "epics and idylls?"

"Luckily for Rome," he concludes, "it has never feared muddles. It is a city which belongs to Providence, and Providence tidies up messes. Rome's future lies in the fact that it has been muddled and sorted out innumerable times." Each visitor constantly makes his own "interventions" of experience and interpretation, and is, in turn, transformed by what he sees and feels. Rome may belong to Providence, but in some measure, it belongs to us all. ■