ARCHITECTURE VIEW: SERLIO INFLUENCED FIVE CENTURIES OF ARCHITECTURE

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ARCHITECTURE VIEW

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Serlio Influenced Five Centuries Of Architecture

This might be called a radical piece on the relevance of history. Or it might be looked at as an excursion into pure, selfish pleasure. What it concerns is the work of Sebastiano Serlio (1475-1555), the Bolognese theorist, architect and painter of the Italian Renaissance, as seen in a small rare exhibition of his books and drawings from the incomparable collections of Columbia's Avery Architectural Library.

The show is on display now in the rotunda of the Low Memorial Library on the Morningside campus, a wonderfully apt setting since this great, solemn, crepuscular pantheon by McKim, Mead and White, built from 1895-97, represents the end of the line of the Classical-Renaissance tradition that Serlio formalized and propagated in the books that disseminated it so successfully for the next three centuries. It is almost unreal that his volume "On Classical Antiquity" (1540) chooses the Pantheon as its first example, with the statement, "Among all the ancient buildings to be seen in Rome, I am of the opinion that the Pantheon is the fairest, wholest, and best to be understood. . . ." It goes on at great length; Serlio is a master of the run-on sentence). The effect is positively spooky.

The occasion of the exhibition is the 500th anniversary of Serlio's birth and the fact that his one unprinted book (there were seven altogether), a text and drawings in his own hand called "On Domestic Architecture," is now being prepared for facsimile reproduction. It was written and illustrated from 1541-48 and is one of Avery's treasures.

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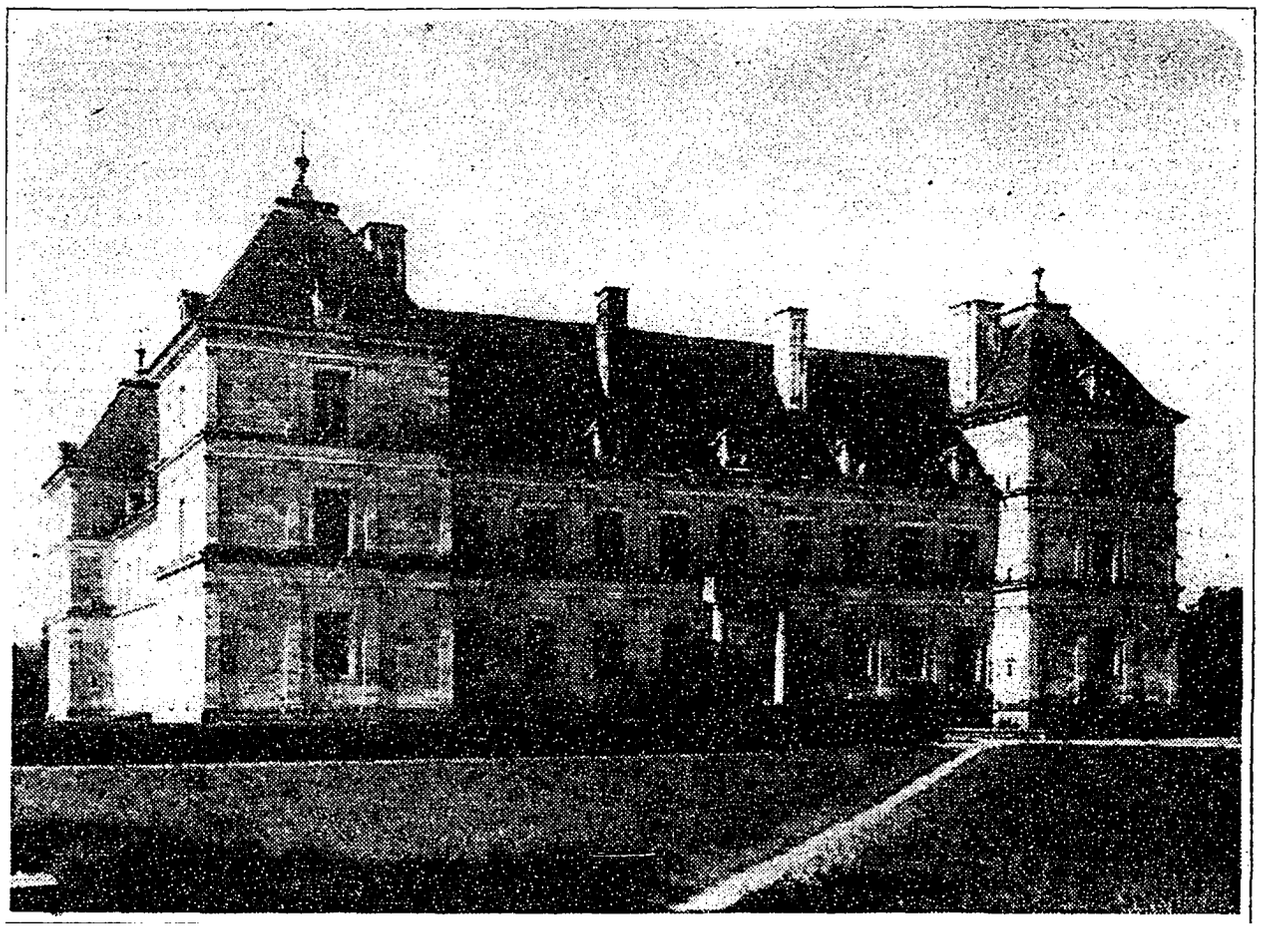
The relevance is that Serlio's work, circulated widely as "Tutte le Opere d'Architettura," was the first illustrated treatise on architecture in a popular language and the most influential text since Vitruvius codified the classical orders in the first century A.D. It did much to determine the style and substance of the built world from the 16th to the 20th centuries, and I, for one, am not about to throw those centuries, or that world, away. (Neither are some of the most sophisticated young architects.)

Serlio's dissertation on the classical orders and examples drawn from antiquity, filtered through the Renaissance mind, represents the principles of all Western architecture from the ancient to the near-present, except for those two stunning aberrations, medieval and modern. This work has the relevance, the absoluteness, of sources and beginnings. Society cannot jettison them if it tries, any more than it can scrap the cumulative culture of its cities. Only Palladio's "Quattro Libri dell'Architettura," which followed in 1570, carried the message further. (And you will find the "Palladian Window" in one of the Serlio drawings on display.)



The main facade of Serlio's Chateau of Ancy-le-Franc in Burgundy

The selfish pleasure comes simply from being afforded the personal experience of the original material that led to such a universal flowering and diffusion, and from the surprising freshness of the artist's images and words. How a few books and drawings in display cases can conjure complete worlds! The pleasure is one of beauty, immediacy and awe.

It should be mentioned that this kind of pleasure is available to an extraordinary degree at Avery, where the library's director, Adolf Placzek, has built up one of the world's great collections, open to all for legitimate scholarly use. It is a particularly prestigious adornment of the university. It is my (no longer) secret home, source of refreshment and revelation, restorer of confidence in the values of man.

The exhibition, by Dr. Myra Nan Rosenfeld, is an equal pleasure—with such significant parallels included as Vesalius's treatise on anatomy of the same period (this edition fits in the palm of one's hand), another high point of the Renaissance's excursions into enlightened didacticism. She has also uncovered, in the Avery drawing collection, earlier sketches by Domenico Beccafumi that are obvious sources for some of Serlio's examples. Her straightforward, scholarly catalogue is a valuable reference. The installation is by Jane Sabersky, curator of the Office of Art Properties.

The star of the show is clearly Avery's unique, preparatory manuscript of Serlio's book, the treatise on domestic architecture (a later version exists in Munich). It consists of 73 folios of elegant, original drawings and 64 folios of handwritten text executed in sepia ink and wash on French paper. The work was produced at Fontainebleau, where the architect spent the years 1541-47 as Royal Architect and Painter to Francis I. He also executed some buildings at that time, including the Salle de Bal and Grotte des Pins at Fontainebleau, and the Chateau of Ancy-le-Franc in Burgundy.

The manuscript contains 32 examples of country houses and 40 examples of city houses arranged according to a strict hierarchy of social categories, all drawn with precise, sensitive refinement. Dr Rosenfeld makes much of the fact that Serlio designed humble dwellings, calling this consideration of housing for the poor quite radical—an early example of architectural social consciousness.

In a kind of Renaissance lower-middle-upper income formula, there are simple, rustic houses for farmers, houses for workers in and out of the city, more pretentious dwellings for "citizens" and "merchants," and still better ones for those listed simply as "più ricco," stepped up again for those who are richer yet. The houses are designed in both the Italian and French manner, with text in both languages.

The studies become much more elaborate and detailed as they progress up the ladder of position and money to "houses" for "gentlemen" and "dwellings" for "princes" and finally "palaces" for "kings." Palaces are obviously Serlio's favorite, and he lavishes much care and attention on them. Dr. Rosenfeld notes that the Louvre owes something to one of these projects and that Ledoux's late 18th-century city of Chaux also had sources here. At the other end of the scale, Serlio's modest row houses for workers became standard in the 19th century.

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The more ambiticus schemes are fascinating and often quite beautiful. The noted architectural historian James Ackerman speaks of Serlio's "contrast of extremes: black shadow against flat neutral walls." The plans are a wonderful, intricate, abstract geometry of salons and courtyards and galleries in interlocking circles, ovals, rectangles, polygons and squares. Facades are rich in the meticulous, orderly and sophisticated interplay of classical elements. Wall planes of great refinement contrast solids and voids, light and dark, moving from delicately paneled flats to deeper niches, the shallow relief of frames and pediments and the full plasticity of columns. There is rigid symmetry, with subtle rhythms. These buildings are like Euclidian Chinese boxes.

The show is completed by Serlio's other volumes: "On Geometry and Perspective" (Paris, 1545), "On Classical Antiquity" (Venice, 1540), "On the Orders" and "On Churches" (Paris, 1547), "On Accidents" (Frankfurt, 1575), and Polybius's "Description of Roman Military Camps" (Frankfurt, 1576). The "Extraordinary Book on Doors" (Lyons, 1555) is truly extraordinary in the almost endless fantasy and variety of its plain and rusticated gates and portals.

The appropriate sequel to this exhibition is in London right now—the major Palladio show at the Hayward Gallery—but it will not cross the ocean. Most New York museums have dropped architecture from their schedules. Too bad, because Serlio opens a door on the world. He makes history immediate and art its natural consequence.

Books and drawings by Sebastiano Serlio in the rotunda of Low Memorial Library at Columbia University, through Oct. 29. Open 9 A.M. to 5 P.M. Monday through Friday.