

"For who will not marvel that our body, a moment ago imperceptible in the bosom of the whole, should now be a colossus, a world, or rather a whole, compared to the nothingness beyond our reach."

Blaise Pascal, Pensées.

PAOLO PORTOGHESI'S eminence as a widely published architectural historian, teacher, critic and architect of note places him in a rather unique position. The exhausting research that he has pursued into specific periods of architectural history, although not directly paralleling his work as an architect, has profoundly influenced a number of his major projects. This direct link with the past was a sensitivity maintained by few other architects during the 1950's and 1960's. Portoghesi's ability to interpret the past and to play contrary historical ideas off against one another, while retaining a distinct twentieth century character, has placed him in the forefront of the movement which Charles Jencks labels 'Late Modernism'.

The influences of the Italian Baroque, Art Nouveau, Frank Lloyd Wright, German Expressionism and the Modern Movement, subjects he has written a great deal about, can be traced in many of his projects. Portoghesi, however, along with his partner Vittorio Gigliotti, often delights in juxtaposing these influences with more contradictory and obscure notions. As with his writings, each project stands as a step in an ongoing research process. His houses, in particular, bear witness to his most fruitful experiments, marking definite theoretical changes, although maintaining a common 'Late-Modernist' thread.

As an historian, Paolo Portoghesi is respected most for his knowledge of

Baroque Modernism

Examining its master, that Italian Scholar:

Paolo Portoghesi

by Graham D. Livesey.

the Italian Baroque, with particular emphasis placed upon the work of Francesco Borromini, the Baroque master who is best known for his brilliant spatial compositions and manipulations of the classical orders. Indeed, of all of the influences to which Portoghesi openly professes, Borromini looms as the most apparent.

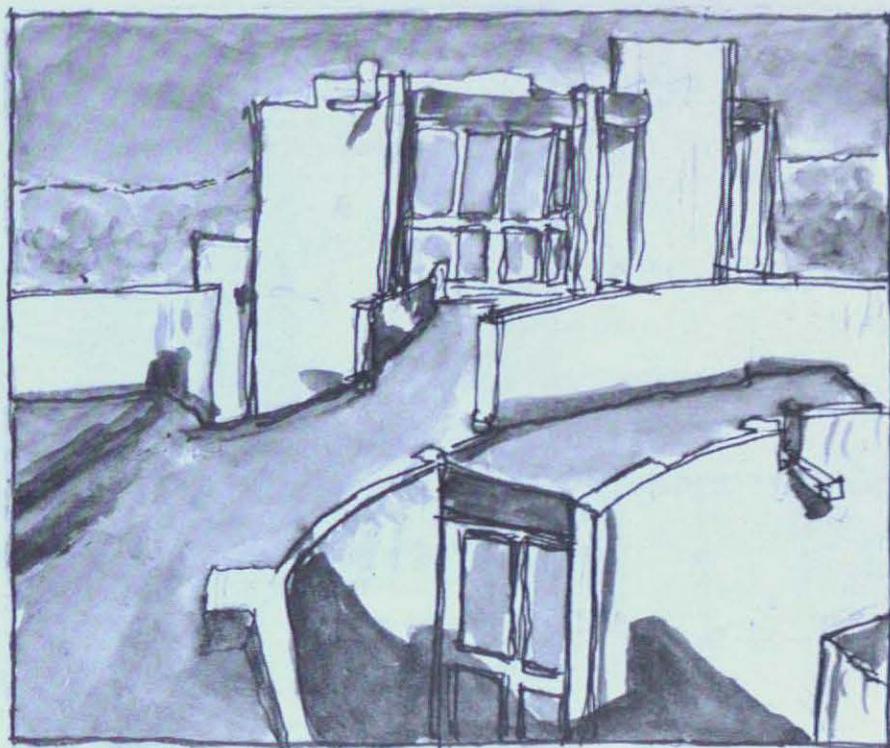
The understanding of space as a compositional factor is the strongest basis of comparison between Portoghesi and Borromini. Both architects, have carried out experiments with space as a psychological reality, able to control the thoughts and emotions of those experiencing their buildings. A fascination with the geometry of curves and how the use of undulating walls produces contracting and expanding spatial forces runs rampant in their work. Also, the use of light, to produce a powerful dynamism, as well as the manipulation of spatial dynamics to create specific visual foci and a sense of movement to the infinite, are overly prevalent in both Baroque Architecture and Baroque Modernism.

Paolo Portoghesi makes a strong use of basic geometry in his planning, although the flowing plastic walls and spaces tend to de-emphasize this. The inherent sculptural and organic nature, which produces a powerful interior-exterior relationship and lends to an easily readable building, contradicts current Post-Modern theories, which seek intellectual stimulation through ambiguity.

"Infinite space is endowed with infinite quality, and in that infinite quality is lauded the infinite act of existence".

Giordano Bruno, *L'Infinito Universo e Mondi*

The creation of the sense of the infinite, and infinite space, is a Baroque measure achieved through the use of curvilinear walls, dynamic space



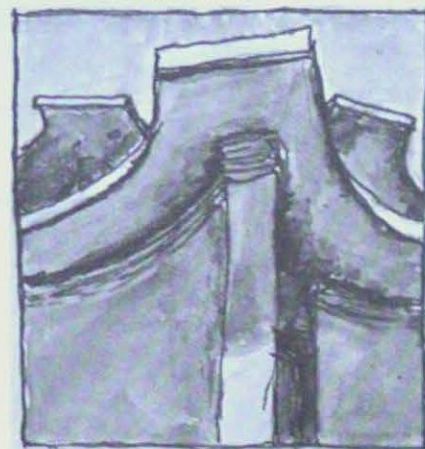
Andre's House

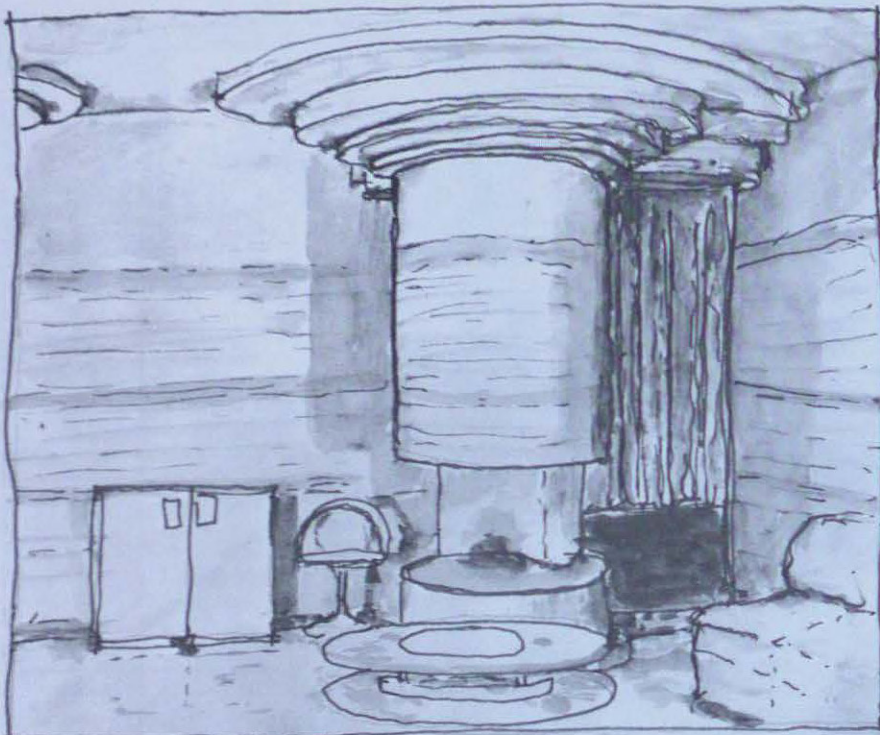
and ornament. A judicious use of ornament enhances these qualities by guiding eye movement across major structural changes, endowing a building with a sense of timeless harmony confined within its own dynamism.

Frank Lloyd Wright's revolutionary turn of the century work provides further inspiration. His conception of flowing space, regard for the site and enhancing the use of colour and ornamentation have left their distinct imprint on Portoghesi's work. Art Nouveau and especially the designs of Antonio Gaudi and Victor Horta have reinforced the curvilinear and organic nature of his buildings. German Expressionism and American industrial design have added a streamlined look to some of his later projects, and Bruno Taut has given Portoghesi inspiration with regards to the use of colour in the modern context.

A major concern for Portoghesi, in his design work, is responsiveness to a particular site, be it rural or urban. His method entails a careful study of the site and its environs in order to identify the character of the place and utilize it as an educational device to reflect the area's nature back onto its inhabitants. Portoghesi is particularly aware of how people, through the workings of the mind, will respond to a building.

Baldi House, detail





Papanice House, interior

In several designs, Portoghesi and Gigliotti have made rather unique use of a curvilinear stair motif, traceable back to roman amphitheatres, Borromini's S. Ivo alla Sapienza and Frank Lloyd Wright. It produces a diminishing and expanding effect, shifting slices in an uprising towards a never to be reached climax. They have employed it in an amphitheatre-like manner and, inverted, as a roofing technique.

The following are some of Portoghesi's more influential works, unique in their intertwined and dynamic spatial relationships, use of colour and fantasy:

The Baldi House of 1959 constitutes Portoghesi's first major experimental endeavour. It sparked interest and discussion, particularly in Europe, where his work tends to be better known. Its disjointed walls are united by strongly emphasized cornice lines, as the building shifts between sculptured fluidity and harsh linearity.

The Andreis House of 1964-67 is the work, although still experimental, of a more mature architect. Here again, a series of diverse styles have been synthesized to produce sequences of interacting interior and exterior spaces. The surroundings are well reflected by the large windows which

act to disjoint the curvilinear concrete walls.

The Papanice House of 1967, influenced by Borromini, Taut and vernacular buildings in Rome, has on several occasions been used as a science-fiction movie set. The exterior, much more fluid than the earlier work, is covered in a profusion of organ-pipe-like tubes of various colours. Although introverted from the outside, the flowing interior walls constantly draw the eyes of the onlooker to the windows and beyond. Radiating pools of space are defined by circular stalactite-type structures penetrating them at key points.

The Church of the Holy Family of 1968 makes an overall use of the curvilinear stair motif to create various interlocked, pulsating spaces.

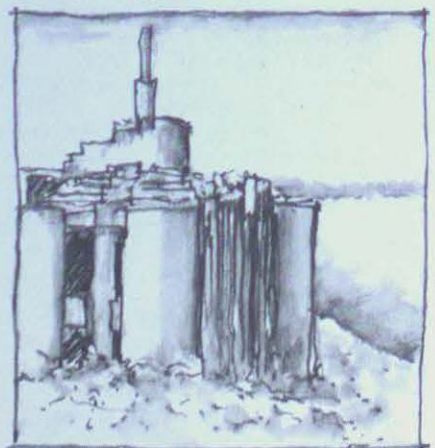
The Bevilacqua House of 1964-72, generated by interacting oval shapes, combines both strong convex and concave planes with the stair pattern. Its fortress-like appearance harmonizes well with the rocky seashore site.

As an historian, Paolo Portoghesi takes a strong, anti-internationalist position, for history as a continuity, relating to the context within which a building falls. In this time of shifting theories, he stresses the importance of

a building's relationship to the influences of the period in which it was constructed, and in fact, how it influences that which is outside its own time and place. Portoghesi, in dealing directly with historical fact without succumbing to the threat of imitation and in employing and expressing modern building methods, is now recognized after twenty-five years of work as a leading theoretician in the search for an expressive architecture ●

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Bevilacqua House