

## “L’architecture n’est pas un art rigoureux” Jean Nouvel, Postmodernism and Meta-Architecture

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When thinking about ‘meta-architecture’, the first thing that springs to mind is postmodernist architecture: its collecting and combining diverse historical styles from different epochs in a very conscious way are a clear sign of a highly self-referential attitude. Considered in the context of the present volume’s terminology, postmodernist architecture appears, moreover, as seemingly critical but actually quite ‘harmless’ metareference. However, the underlying assumption, namely that architecture is a medium in which metareference can occur, may appear debatable. This assumption is discussed here with the help of a historical as well as a methodological survey of the efforts to view and analyze architecture as a means of communication. Finally, the dilemma of postmodernist metareferential architecture is focussed by comparing it to another form of more critical meta-architecture which has been developed by the French architect Jean Nouvel: coming to terms with the reasons and motives that generated postmodernist architecture, but without adopting its solutions, Nouvel conceived an ‘architecture critique’ which uses postmodernist strategies in order to voice critique and protest.

“Une architecture parlante, et qui fera parler.”  
(Chaslin 2008: 25, on Jean Nouvel’s “Collège Anne Frank”)

### 1. The dilemma of postmodernist architecture

According to the architect and historian Charles Jencks modern(ist) architecture<sup>1</sup> died on the 15<sup>th</sup> of July 1972 at 3.32 p.m., when the sub-

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<sup>1</sup> Jencks’ nomenclature is far from being consistent or well sorted: thus, he talks about “modern” architecture where he obviously means ‘modernist’, deliberately confusing the term ‘modern’, which usually refers to contemporary architecture, with ‘modernist’, the notion used for a specific architectural movement of the first half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. This gives him the possibility of opposing ‘modern’ to ‘postmodern’ and thus of making the latter look like the rightful successor of all ‘modern’ architecture. Cf. in this context also the critique by Lampugnani 1986: 195. Fischer therefore corrects Jencks by stating that he actually describes the death of functionalism and that he wrongly equates the destruction of Pruitt-Igoe with the death of modern(ist)

urban housing complex Pruitt-Igoe in St. Louis, Missouri was blown up (cf. 1977: 9). Conceived and built according to the advanced ideals and principles of the architect Le Corbusier and the CIAM, the Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne (a series of international conferences of modern architects between 1928 and 1959), the design of Pruitt-Igoe had been awarded a prize by the American Institute of Architects in 1951 and had been realized in the following years, between 1952 and 1955 (cf. also Newman 1996: 10). However, a mere twenty years later it turned out that the rationalistic and puristic style thought to equally promote rationalistic and morally pure behaviour among its inhabitants<sup>2</sup> had actually been perceived by them as cold, sterile and anonymous, and instead of provoking virtuous behaviour, it had made them turn their frustration and aggression against each other as well as against the surrounding architecture itself: the Pruitt-Igoe complex had the highest crime rates in St. Louis, and at the time the buildings were blown up, they had been badly damaged, besmirched and disfigured over the years by their inhabitants (cf. *ibid.*: 9–11).

Although Jencks' claim that with the demolition of Pruitt-Igoe the "Death of Modern Architecture" (1977: 9) had taken place seems rather exaggerated (since, e. g., even after the destruction of these buildings, equally rationalistic examples of the modernist style continued to be built)<sup>3</sup>, it is clear why he interpreted the end of this architectural complex in such a dramatic way: with it, the failure of some of the most central ideals of the modern(ist) movement in architecture became seemingly evident. Rational and simple forms, following function rather than the dictate of sumptuous décor, and ornament-less purity – all believed to turn the inhabitants' minds toward an equally

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architecture (cf. 1991: 9). For the fundamental distinctions between 'modern' and 'modernist' see also Heynen 1992.

<sup>2</sup> For the idea of a positive influence of 'good' architecture on its inhabitants cf. Taut 1929: 7; the central idea behind this concept has been aptly put into words by Theodor W. Adorno, who in his 1965 lecture "Funktionalismus heute" states that an architecture worthy of human beings thinks of them than better they actually are (cf. 1967: 120).

<sup>3</sup> Opposing Jencks' position, Vittorio Magnago Lampugnani, e. g., refutes the latter's rendering of the case by stating – among other things – that the failure of Pruitt-Igoe did not only have architectural but also political, social and administrative reasons, that the ominous date of 1972, which Jencks named as the dying-hour of modernist architecture, is more or less arbitrary and that Jencks' use of the term 'modern' is rather vague and confusing (cf. 1986: 194–197 and see fn. 1 above).

pure honesty and rationality – had apparently been perceived as boring, dull and even oppressive.

No wonder Jencks proclaims the evident crisis and the death of modernist architecture in the early 1970s, a period that saw the birth and rise of postmodernist architecture, whose full bloom, according to Jencks himself, coincided with the fall of modernist architecture (cf. 1977: 81–132). Postmodernist architecture had thus not merely been prepared for during the late 1960s but can, from Jencks' perspective, also be described as the response and exact counter-movement to modernist architecture.

Hence, modernist architecture mainly promoted credos such as Louis Sullivan's "Form follows function"<sup>4</sup> and Mies van der Rohe's "Less is more" (an absence of ornament was felt to come as a relief after the often exaggerated décor of the 19<sup>th</sup> century), which postmodernist architects – in the wake of earlier critics such as Saul Steinberg, Ernst Bloch and Theodor W. Adorno<sup>5</sup> – turned into critical responses such as "Less is a bore" (Venturi 1966: 25). They considered merely rational and aesthetically severe design as leading to desolate and meaningless results. While modernist architects had expected the viewer and visitor of a building to be influenced and impregnated by its rationality, the postmodernists pointed out that viewers and visitors did not feel anything in front of such buildings. It was thus claimed that architecture, instead of waiting for the viewer to approach it and be influenced by it, had to try to actively communicate with the recipients again, to actually make a communicational 'move' towards them by approaching them through signs and elements they know and are familiar with<sup>6</sup>. This also explains the heavy recourse of postmodernist

<sup>4</sup> A minimal use of material was promoted in opposing the 19<sup>th</sup>-century practice of paying exaggerated attention to aesthetic ideals that led to the material actually used often being hidden or camouflaged.

<sup>5</sup> See Steinberg's 1954 caricature "Graph Paper Architecture" of a skyscraper consisting of nothing but a blank piece of graph paper; cf. Bloch 1977: 20–29; 1959: 858–863 and Adorno 1967: 110f., 114, 123.

<sup>6</sup> The concept behind this idea had already been voiced before by Jacques-François Blondel in his *Cours d'architecture civile*, published in Paris in six volumes between 1771 and 1777, in which he stresses the fact that beauty does not lie in the object itself (as someone holding an idealistic point of view would argue, a position which was then taken up by the modernist architects), but in the experiences of the beholder; in the wake of Boffrand (cf. 2002: 8) objects thus have to show a certain 'affirmative'

architecture to the rich and multifaceted tradition of architectural styles and symbols that were considered to appear as familiar and easily recognizable for the viewer.

Yet, if taken seriously and followed rigidly, this recycling of tradition would only have resulted in a revival of 19<sup>th</sup>-century architectural historicism which had chosen certain, seemingly appropriate traditional styles for given building projects (e. g., the style of Gothic cathedrals for railway stations or of Greek and Roman temples for banks or museums). Given, however, that already in the 19<sup>th</sup> century uncertainty had arisen concerning questions of how to adequately answer the demands of new building forms<sup>7</sup>, and since postmodernist architecture wanted to escape rules and regulations in favour of a playful, surprising and humorous appearance of its buildings, eclecticism as well as free, provoking variations were the key notions. It thus becomes understandable why architecture itself and its history were often made the topics of postmodernist buildings: not only was the old topos that the façade of a building corresponds to a human face (with the eyes being the windows of the soul and the mouth the passage way for communication)<sup>8</sup> frequently taken up, but one also often encountered the iconic forms of a house inside a house<sup>9</sup>.

Moreover, it also becomes clear why a prominent forerunner of the movement such as Robert Venturi found a prime inspiration for postmodernist architecture in the aesthetics of the Las Vegas Strip with its loud, big and heavily symbolic, ornamental and decorative advertising

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and 'appealing' character (cf. Blondel 1771–1777: vol. 2, 229f.). Cf. also Kruff 1985: 162, 167.

<sup>7</sup> See the programmatic title of Heinrich Hübsch's 1828 publication *In welchem Style sollen wir bauen* and also Walther 2003: for the general context cf. Schwarzer 1995: 51–53 and see Walther 2003.

<sup>8</sup> This reminds one of a statement by Louis Sullivan (qtd., e. g., in Joedicke 1991: 6) that behind every façade the face of the person who designed it becomes visible. For the topicality of this approach see, e. g., the Los Angeles conference "Faces and Façades: The Structure of Display in Renaissance Italy", organized by the Renaissance Society of America in March 2009; the conference organizers stressed the same etymological origin of the two notions and the early modern sources and compare them.

<sup>9</sup> As another example see, e. g., Oswald Matthias Ungers' architecture for the Deutsches Architekturmuseum in Frankfurt am Main (1979–1984) which features a house stretching along the full length of the building in order to emphasize the fact that it is a museum about architecture. For this motive and the project cf. Ungers 1983: 59–67.

signs and buildings, which, as Venturi puts it in his book tellingly entitled *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, “accommodate existing needs for variety and communication” (1966: 49). But apart from the resulting frequent combination of diverse and often heterogeneous elements which should guarantee the “variety” and a pluralism of possible ‘meanings’<sup>10</sup>, it was still felt that a building also had to take into consideration its architectural surroundings. While the projects of the modernists were accused of often having ignored this, thus having ‘arrogantly’ placed (as it was felt) architectural solitaires in a context for which they were unsuited, the postmodernists claimed to be more aware of the importance of achieving a pleasant and harmonious result when inserting a new building into a given context<sup>11</sup>. This, however, sometimes caused complications, as, e. g., when, upon designing the Clore Gallery (an extension to the London Tate Gallery), the architect James Sterling had to revise its façade five times in order to match it with the continuously changing appearances of the buildings in the neighbourhood (cf. Jencks 1977: 166).

All these aims are summed up by the postmodernist battle cry of the three closely related notions “wit, ornament and reference” (Klausner: online), the “wit” often being achieved by making “reference” (i. e., architectural self-reference) to historical elements and their “ornament[s]”, presenting and mixing them, however, in an unexpected and surprising way.

The nature and quality, but also the shortcomings, of this approach can perhaps be best illustrated with “the most telling example of post-modern architecture” (Rosenblum 1996: 53): Charles Willard Moore’s

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<sup>10</sup> One of Venturi’s other books (Venturi/Scott Brown/Izenour 1972) carries the telling title *Learning from Las Vegas*. See also the exhibition “Signs of Life: Symbols in the American City” organized by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown in 1976 at the Smithsonian Institute in Washington, D. C. Its intention was defined as “to show that the elements of architecture have symbolic meaning and give messages about the environment that makes it comprehensible and therefore usable by people in their daily lives” (Venturi and Rauch, *Architects and Planners* 1976: s. p.).

<sup>11</sup> Jencks (cf. 1977: 110) refers to the movement of ‘Contextualism’, which started in the early 1960s at Cornell University, and he quotes Graham Shane’s 1976 article as an example of discussing its possible concrete architectural implications. For the current development of Contextualism see Tomberlin, ed. 1999 and Stanley 2005.

“Piazza d’Italia” (see *Illustration 1*), designed and built between 1976 and 1979 in New Orleans, Louisiana<sup>12</sup>.



*Illustration 1: Charles Willard Moore, “Piazza d’Italia” (1976–1979). New Orleans, LA.*

When the project was accepted, it was supposed to serve three main purposes. First, it was meant to foreground the Italian community’s contribution to New Orleans’ multiculturalism. Up until then, the Italians had felt rather eclipsed by their French, Spanish and Afro-American compatriots, which is what the inscription “Popoli Italiani Novae Orleaniensae fecerunt hanc fontem” on the entablature refers to. Apart from thus being a sort of monument for the Italian community, the “Piazza d’Italia” was, secondly, meant to grant the Italian as well as other inhabitants of New Orleans a space where they could gather and spend time together. Finally, since the city was concerned about the increasing demolition rates in the central business district, the “Piazza d’Italia” was welcomed as a sign of revitalisation, which is why the city was immediately ready to subsidise the project.

<sup>12</sup> For the “Piazza d’Italia” cf. especially Douglas 1979: 255, Klotz 1984: 137–140, Johnson 1987: 78f. and Jencks 1988: 146.

Moore created an architecture that takes up all these implications. The need for revitalisation was, for instance, articulated by the fact that the whole square as well as the architecture is dominated by the water from the St. Joseph's fountain, which at the same time forms the centre and the apex of the entire complex. While quoting classic elements from Roman Antiquity and the Italian Renaissance such as the five historic orders – Tuscan, Doric, Ionic, Corinthian and Composite – that lead hierarchically up to the fountain, Moore seizes the opportunity to playfully develop and term new architectural forms emerging from the connection between architecture and water such as his 'wetopes', i. e., a form of metopes (the rectangular spaces above the architrave between two triglyphs) normally consisting of a painted or sculpted block of stone, but in Moore's case empty squares filled with water shooting up from small nozzles at the bottom of each square.

Moreover, seen from above, the irregular platforms and steps of the fountain's basin turn out to depict the boot of Italy. At the same time, all this is closely embedded into the context of the complex at large: not only do the references to Italy match the fact that the American Italian Renaissance Foundation has its museum and library adjacent to the "Piazza d'Italia", but the architecture is also visually embedded into its surroundings. Thus, the concentric stripes of the pavement, encircling the fountain and leading towards it, connect the square and the black and white surface of a modernist skyscraper in the background (cf. Jencks 1988: 146).

As can easily be shown, Moore's "Piazza d'Italia" meets all the demands of postmodernist architecture by trying to oppose the criticized "univalence" of the modernist architecture (Jencks 1977: 15) with complexity, often achieved by aiming at double encoding (cf. Jencks 1988: 5f.):

- 1) Postmodernist architecture is pragmatic and functional, yet at the same time funny, playful, ironic and full of surprises. Instead of merely presenting a bare, simple fountain or a historically correct, however dated and boring neoclassical ambiance, this architecture develops traditional and as such recognizable ornamental forms further, modernizing them, moreover, through combination with contemporary materials (such as steel or neon-lights) and strong colouring.

- 2) As always in postmodernist architecture, the setting is modern without, however, appearing puristic, while it is at the same time conventional without being conservative.
- 3) As is typical of postmodernist architecture, the "Piazza d'Italia" is popular and elitist: it is popular inasmuch as it is accessible to every viewer and visitor not only by providing the fun of a vivid fountain, but by also inviting communication via easily understandable forms and shapes such as the elements of classical architecture or the boot of Italy. On the other hand, it is elitist inasmuch as there are numerous references which are lost on those without a broader architectural and/or art-historical background<sup>13</sup>: not many will recognize auto-portraits of the architect in the fountain's water-spouting heads, nor will everybody understand that the aesthetics of the "Piazza" with its flat and shallow scene-like, colourful arches and walls intermedially refer to Giorgio de Chirico's "Piazza d'Italia"-paintings from the 1950s, but especially to his "Gare Montparnasse – La Mélancolie du départ" from 1914 (see *Illustration 2*), whose clock tower in the background is almost literally quoted in Moore's ensemble (see *Illustration 3*)<sup>14</sup>.

Yet on the other hand it is due to these very self-references and set-like designs that postmodernist architecture itself was soon criticized and finally considered a mere short-term fashion<sup>15</sup>. The quotations from other eras and styles were soon perceived as rather arbitrary, self-indulgent and as having an end only in themselves; the facades were condemned as being but flat cosmetics behind which the actual emptiness and lack of truly original ideas were concealed ('architec-

<sup>13</sup> Cf. also Douglas: "It seems inconsistent that the vernacular 'pop architecture' of the Piazza – with its academic references – is too obscure for the general public. [...] Perhaps with the Italian Piazza, 'pop architecture' has advanced into 'elite architecture'; and that may be the ultimate architectural paradox" (1979: 256).

<sup>14</sup> For a view of the "Piazza d'Italia" as "a walk-through reconstruction of de Chirico's Italianate motifs" in general cf. Rosenblum 1996: 53. For de Chirico's "Piazza d'Italia"-paintings cf., e. g., the version in Toronto (Art Gallery of Ontario) from ca. 1950 in Taylor 2002: 209, no. 36; for the "Gare Montparnasse – La Mélancolie du départ" from 1914 cf. Schmied 1980: 286, no. 34.

<sup>15</sup> See for this, e. g., the criticism below (in fn. 45) or the view voiced by Fischer (cf. 1989: 88), who sees the present ruinous state of Moore's "Piazza d'Italia" as a symptom of the fact that it was the ideal incarnation of postmodern architecture and thus had to suffer the fate of all short-termed fashion.





Illustration 2: Giorgio de Chirico, "Gare de Montparnasse – La Mélancolie du départ" (1914). Museum of Modern Art, New York, NY. (Orig. in colour.)

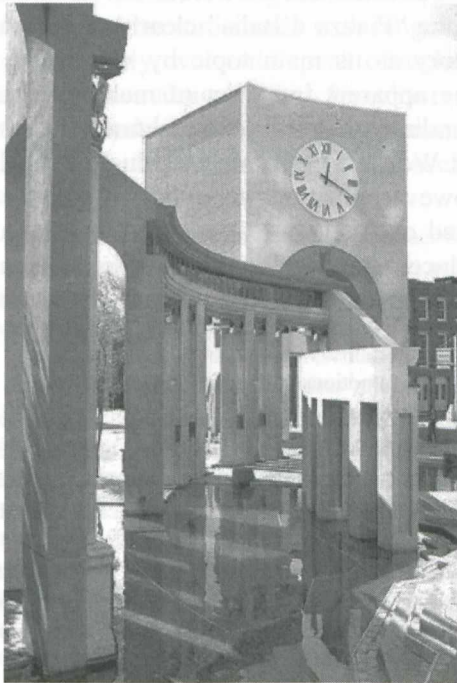


Illustration 3: Charles Moore, "Piazza d'Italia" (1976–1979), view of the clock tower. New Orleans, LA.

ture mensongère' or 'facadism' were the negative keywords here<sup>16</sup>); their colourfulness was soon considered tiring, and the whole movement was in the end accused of ironically toying around with the actual problems without, however, developing a clearly defined position towards them, which in the end made postmodernist architecture a playful but blind alley.

## 2. Architecture, language and the question of (explicit) metareference

The inherent dilemma of postmodernist architecture, which started as a way out of the modernist dead end but turned into a dead end itself, becomes clearly apparent from a metareferential point of view<sup>17</sup>, from which it appears as a form of explicit and originally critical metareference.

However, before drawing conclusions, the question of whether architecture can be considered capable of explicit metareference in the first place has to be raised and answered. Given that a postmodernist creation such as the "Piazza d'Italia" clearly defines architecture and architectural history as its main topic by way of its media-specific means<sup>18</sup>, with the apparent intention of making a critical statement about the surrounding modernist architecture, this seems to be the case. As Werner Wolf states in his introduction to this volume (cf. 44), there are, however, positions according to which explicit metareference is restricted exclusively to the verbal media, and this "would automatically reduce all metareference outside at least partially verbal media (such as literature, film, the musical theatre etc.) to implicit

<sup>16</sup> For the tradition of these notions cf. Pennini 2008: 155.

<sup>17</sup> As far as I can see, up to now the only effort to discuss architecture in metareferential terms has been made by Susan Wittig, who tries to present the works of architects such as Michael Graves, Peter Eisenman and Robert Venturi as examples of "metalingual", "metaderivational" and "metacommunicative" strategies (1979: 972–974). Yet despite the fact that in her theoretical introduction, she establishes the terminology used throughout the article ("channel", "code", "information") more or less consistently, in the end her distinct analysis appears as based on vague literary analogies to certain poets and authors rather than as relying autonomously on the previously defined notions. For one of the rare occasional occurrences of the term 'meta-architecture' cf. also below (334), Preziosi 1979b: 65.

<sup>18</sup> "*Explizite Metareferenz: Die Metaisierung wird mit den medienspezifischen Mitteln klar angezeigt [...]*" (Wolf 2007a: 44)

reference" (ibid.)<sup>19</sup>. Nevertheless, Wolf already envisions the possibility of degrees of explicitness and in particular that 'explicitness' could alternatively be defined and understood as an obvious (i. e., negative and contradicting or positive and affirmative) reference to "conventional world-knowledge" (ibid.). "Explicit metareference would then be the quality of representational signs or sign configurations that are clearly metareferential owing to a conventional meaning in a given context, a meaning that unmistakably refers to (aspects of) a medium." (Ibid.) Beyond the status of 'quasi-explicit' metareference, bestowed upon a number of paintings in Wolf's introduction, this definition can be fruitfully applied to architecture without trying – as has repeatedly been done in the past – to force architecture, as it were, against its grain into the same category as language and thus regard it as similar to a verbal medium. However, it is certainly not by chance that Jencks tries to do exactly that: in the central second chapter of his book on postmodernist architecture he does not only play with metaphoric notions such as "the classical language of the Doric" (1977: 39) or "architectural grammar" (ibid.)<sup>20</sup>, but goes so far as to state that "there are various analogies architecture shares with language and that if we would use the terms loosely, we could speak of architectural 'words', 'phrases', 'syntax' and 'semantics'" (ibid. [emphasis in the original]). Jencks defines these 'words' as "known units of meaning" (ibid.: 52) and identifies them with architectural elements such as doors, win-

<sup>19</sup> This argument is also often used with reference to the fact that architecture does not generally resort to using representational signs. However, as Mitchell has already stated: "Representation is an extremely elastic notion which extends all the way from a stone representing a man to a novel representing a day in the life of several Dubliners" (1995: 13). In fact, architecture has its representational aspects, too, inasmuch as all its elements can be interpreted as more or less referring back to the so-called "Primeval Hut" (a concept introduced by Vitruvius and then emphasized again in 1753 by Marc-Antoine Laugier in his "Essai sur l'architecture") and its original materials and features (such as columns standing for tree trunks etc.). Moreover, it will be argued here (cf. below: 347) that the different and specific reading habits of each medium should be respected: what in the eyes of literary scholars might hardly appear as 'explicit', since they apply their own, language-based frame of communication, might strike architectural scholars as blatantly 'explicit' (and the other way round). I would thus plead in favor of an approach which covers these differences instead of ignoring them or limiting itself to only language-based explicitness.

<sup>20</sup> See this direction continued, e. g., by Mitchell 1990, especially ch. 8, where he tries to define the "Languages of Architectural Form" by showing, e. g., that architectural orders can be understood as a grammar.

dows, columns etc. (cf. *ibid.*). How these ‘words’ are combined more or less depends on “certain rules, or methods of joinery” (*ibid.*), which are partially also dictated by functional necessities and the laws of gravity and geometry, and Jencks labels them as the “syntax of architecture” (*ibid.*: 63). Finally, ‘architectural semantics’, in Jencks’ view, describes the way in which given styles are associated, understood and interpreted by a society (cf. *ibid.*: 64–79), which makes an architect choose – to return to the aforementioned examples – e. g., the Gothic style for a railway station (which should be viewed as a cathedral for technical progress and velocity) and the model of Greek or Roman temples for banks or museums (as they should look dignified and sublime, but at the same time firm and sober).

Jencks was not the first scholar to interpret architecture as a proper language – his efforts are rather to be considered in the context of the long-lasting and close relationship between language and architecture<sup>21</sup>, a relationship that has often been associated with communicating information, memories, impressions and emotions. Already in antiquity architecture was conceived of as supporting human memory by providing blueprints for a sort of mnemotechnical building which helps orators to remember certain arguments by linking them to distinct stations along a purely imagined walk through that mental architecture<sup>22</sup>. When outlining the technique of transforming the elements of an elocution into vivid images (“imagines”), Quintilianus – while crediting the poet Simonides of Keos with the invention of this method (1975: 590)<sup>23</sup> – tells us that some orators focus on certain points of a familiar, imagined building in order to pick up on them later during their speech, a process conceived of as a virtual walk through a mental architecture in order to retransform the images back into language (cf. *ibid.*: 592–594).

In later times, this close association between words, images and architecture turned less intellectual and more poetic and architecture became expected to create a constructed, physical equivalent to poetry. Thus, in 1743 Giovanni Battista Piranesi wrote about “parlanti ruine” (‘speaking ruins’; 1972: 115, 117<sup>24</sup>), meaning that they should

<sup>21</sup> For a brief, recent survey see Schöttker 2006.

<sup>22</sup> See Samsonow 2001, Tausch, ed. 2003.

<sup>23</sup> For the context see Goldmann 1989.

<sup>24</sup> Piranesi 1972: 115 (for the Italian original) and 117 (for the English translation followed here).

'talk' to the beholders and bestow upon them the emotions usually evoked by lyrical poetry. This concept was taken up and further developed forty years later by an anonymous German author, who in 1785 published *Untersuchungen über den Charakter der Gebäude* ('Inquiries into the character of buildings'), in which architecture was not only explicitly paralleled with poetry, but actually praised to have the artistic primacy in evoking feelings in the audience since it was considered as "unter allen bildenden Künsten die einzige, die eigentlich auf die Einbildungskraft wirkt" (Anon. 1986: 17; 'the only one among the fine arts to really work upon the imagination'<sup>25</sup>). These ideas were then adapted and shifted into the direction of a more precise communication of meaning in the context of the so-called Revolutionary architecture in France. In his treatise on architecture, written before 1793, Étienne-Louis Boullée demanded that public buildings should be like poems, evoking in their beholders a feeling that exactly corresponds to the purpose for which they were built (cf. 1968: 47f.), and it was in this respect that the notion of an 'architecture parlante' ('speaking architecture') was coined (cf. Krufft 1985: 162f., 185)<sup>26</sup>.

Despite architects such as Germain Boffrand and Francesco Milizia having claimed as early as in 1745 and 1781, respectively that the elements or materials constituting a building are like the words in a discourse<sup>27</sup>, it was not until the development and emergence of linguistic and semiotic methods at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> and the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries that the parallelization between language and architecture could draw upon more than mere metaphors, analogies and comparisons (cf. Guillerme 1977: 22).

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<sup>25</sup> Unless otherwise indicated, all translations are mine.

<sup>26</sup> Vidler traces the notion back to Léon Vaudoyer, the son of a Ledoux-epigone, who introduced it in a pejorative sense in order to criticize the designs by Claude-Nicolas Ledoux (cf. 1988: 8).

<sup>27</sup> "The profiles of mouldings, and the members that compose a building, are in architecture what words are in a discourse." (Boffrand 2002: 9) "I materiali in Architettura sono come nel discorso le parole, le quali separatamente han poca, o niuna efficacia, e possono esser disposte in una maniera spregevole; ma combinate con arte, ed espresse con energia muovono, ed agitan gli affetti con illimitata possanza." (Milizia 1785, vol. 1: IX-X) A century later, Ferdinand de Saussure also compared an "unité linguistique" to a specific part of a building, e. g., a column, in order to illustrate his notions of "rapport syntagmatique" and "rapport associatif" (1916: 171).

In trying to find answers to the questions “*how* does architecture produce meaning, and *what* meanings can architecture produce?” (Dunster 1976: 667 [emphasis in the original]), Umberto Eco broke ground with his 1968 book *La struttura assente*, in which he systematises and clarifies earlier efforts (such as, e. g., those by Giovanni Klaus Koenig and Christian Norberg-Schulz<sup>28</sup>). Instead of merely establishing the vague and often criticized direct parallel between architecture and language<sup>29</sup> (as earlier as well as later authors have done<sup>30</sup>), Eco analyzed architecture as a form of communication and thus addressed it not as a language, but rather as a code<sup>31</sup>. Interpreting architecture as a “*sistema di segni*” (1968: 197; ‘system of signs’) and examining the functions, interactions and meanings of these signs, he drew up an expansible catalogue by means of which he analyzed architectural elements and (historical) styles in terms of syntactic and semantic codes<sup>32</sup>. He came to the conclusion that ‘architecture is thus

<sup>28</sup> See Giovanni Klaus Koenig’s *Analisi del linguaggio architettonico* from 1964, which is mentioned by Eco (cf. 1968: 198) and Christian Norberg-Schulz’s *Intentions in Architecture* from 1965, one chapter of which (III.5.) is – similar to Jencks’ later approach – entitled “Semantics”.

<sup>29</sup> For a critique of these approaches see Guillerme 1977, which appeared in the same year as Jencks’ *The Language of Post-Modern Architecture*, where exactly these parallels are drawn. Furthermore, Guillerme (cf. 1977: 23) refers to the critical objections raised by Gilles G. Granger in 1957 and by Guido Morpurgo-Tagliabue in 1968. Recently, Thomas A. Markus and Deborah Cameron have taken yet another approach by warning us that “treating architecture as a language has the unfortunate effect of obscuring the role played by actual language, speech and writing, in shaping our understanding of the built environment” (2002: 8). They thus plead in favour of an “interactive rather than an analogical” (ibid.) relationship.

<sup>30</sup> Cf., e. g., Fischer (1991: 17), who lists parallels such as heterogeneity of products in both language and architecture (ranging from newspaper text to drama and from a museum building to a simple garage), the different styles that have been used, the long process in which they have been developed in both language and architecture, their repertoires and rules, the existing rhetorics and typologies, their definable dialects, sociolects and idiolects and finally their integration into social processes.

<sup>31</sup> Jencks uses the notion and concept of the “visual code” (1977, e. g.: 42), but without specification, which is why he can take recourse to the less general analogy between architecture and language at the same time.

<sup>32</sup> Eco thereby practices what Guillerme still reluctantly envisions as a possible methodological approach: “Theoretically, one could try to construct codes of architectural forms, which are distinct and even classifiable in paradigmatic series and which

a rhetoric in the sense<sup>33</sup> that it (continuously fluctuating between redundancy on the one and information on the other hand [cf. *ibid.*: 87]<sup>34</sup>) ‘encodes only those unexpected relations that, as unusual as they might be, *can still fit into the listener’s system of expectations*’<sup>35</sup>.

Indeed, architecture usually follows certain rules (partly dictated by practical necessities, partly established by aesthetic traditions) and thus also shapes habits and expectations in the beholder<sup>36</sup>, who, thanks to the context of a building and its ‘architectural code’, is able to classify and understand it as belonging to a certain type:

[...] if these type characteristics are then linked with certain other characteristics, such as those of function, economy, or ritual, they evidently generate meaning in such a way that a cultivated observer looking at a building belonging to his cultural universe has the ability to come close to grasping the architect’s intention, or more precisely, the intention of that particular social collectivity that has incorporated and determined the architect. (Guillerme 1977: 23)

However, a building, respectively its architect, might break rules and habits with rhetorical intent, thus making the beholder actively aware of these rules while at the same time provoking him or her to wonder and try to understand why and with what intention they have been broken. Or, to put it in the words of Donald Preziosi:

Communication consists of the transmission of information regarding the perception of similarities and differences. The system of the built environment, like any

take into account the necessity of discontinuity in the process of establishing meaning. Each series thus formed could be called an ‘architectural type’” (1977: 23).

<sup>33</sup> “[...] architettura è allora una retorica, nel senso [...].” (Eco 1968: 225)

<sup>34</sup> Eco calls this the “curiosa contraddizione della retorica” (1968: 87; ‘peculiar contradiction of rhetoric’). In order to convince a listener, rhetoric must on the one hand tell him something he did not know before (information), but in order to do so it has to start with something the listener already knows (redundancy), which then allegedly leads to the desired conclusion. I do not have the necessary space to critically discuss Eco’s concept in all its strengths as well as weaknesses. However, the critical objections raised by Guillerme (1977) are too general and not concise enough to really refute Eco’s approach.

<sup>35</sup> “[...] codifica solo quelle relazioni d’inaspettanza che, per quanto inusitate, *possano integrarsi al sistema di attese dell’uditore.*” (Eco 1968: 88 [emphasis in the original])

<sup>36</sup> Jacques Guillerme speaks in this context of “the systems of expectation in the domain of perception within a given community” (1977: 23).

semiotic code, is a complexly-ordered device for the cueing of such perceptions. (1979b: 1)<sup>37</sup>

Moreover, while it is certainly exaggerated that “every architectonic object comprises a commentary upon, and interrogation of, its own code” (Preziosi 1979a: 54) which it is a realization of, such metareferentiality may well be claimed in certain cases. In these, metareference may, for instance, be

[...] realized architectonically through historical reference, as when a formation consciously alludes to a set of stylistic characterizations of non-currently-dominant formations. *Historical allusion* takes many forms in architectonic systems [...]. Such a function, which we may term *meta-architectonic*, since in the broadest sense it calls into conscious attention an architectonic code itself, coexists with the aforementioned functions to a greater or lesser degree of dominance. A formation may function meta-architectonically to a very minimal degree, wherein allusory reference is confined to details of material articulation such as baseboard moldings, or maximally, as in the case where a house in Wisconsin purports to be a Spanish hacienda. Allusory reference may also be quite subtle [...] (Preziosi 1979b: 65 [emphases in the original]).

Such metareferential subtexts may also be observed in cases in which the proportional scheme or plan of a building from another historical or national context is quoted (as an example cf. the analysis of such references in Le Corbusier’s architecture by Rowe [1976: 15]).

Although Preziosi calls this “a meta-codal function, patently correlative to the metalinguistic function of verbal utterances” (1979a: 54), and despite the fact that he also points out that verbal language and built architectural code are both panhuman phenomena<sup>38</sup>, sharing “features by virtue of their generic functions as human semiotic systems” (1979b: 70), he rightly emphasises that in the realm of the architectural code “not everything is meaningful in quite the same way” (ibid.: 2) and points out that, on the contrary, “the study of architectonic meaningfulness is a mare’s nest of conflicting opinion” because “the medium of the linguistic system is relatively homogenous and narrowly circumscribed compared to the architectonic medium” (ibid.: 61). Thus it is not only meaningless, but also wrong and misleading to expect architecture to communicate messages which could

<sup>37</sup> Preziosi also considers the “architectonic code” as being a “system of relationships/relational invariance” (1979b: 2).

<sup>38</sup> “Like verbal language, the *built environment* – what will be called here the *architectonic code* – is a panhuman phenomenon.” (Preziosi 1979b: 1 [emphases in the original]).



rival with clear verbal utterances (unless they are, e. g., incorporated into the building<sup>39</sup>). Here, a distinction such as the one suggested by Gillo Dorfles (1971: 93) between “lingua” (meaning the specific verbal language) and “linguaggio” (denoting particular means of expression for communicating messages in, e. g., science and art) comes at hand because it makes clear that the messages articulated by architecture should not be mixed up with those expressed through words. However, Dorfles does at the same time not deny architecture’s communicative capacity – and this capacity should be acknowledged.

As shown above, the architectural ‘linguaggio’ is – thanks to its institutionalized code – capable of communicating what Dorfles calls “hinreichend präzise Mitteilungen” (ibid.: 94; ‘sufficiently precise messages’). These might become even more obvious in the context of breaking rules that were established out of (former or current) necessity. A column, for example, is generally supposed to fulfil a static function; it may, however, also serve as a merely decorative element, in which case the notion of its firmly supporting another structural element nonetheless remains. Since architecture – as opposed to other art form such as literature – primarily has to serve a pragmatic purpose and is thus always rigidly considered under this aspect<sup>40</sup>, purely aesthetic elements that blatantly contradict any practical function (such as a column supporting nothing or hanging down from the entablature instead of carrying it) strike the beholder accordingly. They will immediately make him or her aware of the fact that rules were not only broken with a very specific intention, but that this transgression is, moreover, obviously staged in order to be noticed at any

<sup>39</sup> As an example see Robert Venturi’s “Guild House” from 1960/1963, a residential home, the name of which, written onto the building, is part of its architectonic design, as Venturi explains (cf. Venturi/Scott Brown/Izenour 1972: 100f.). For a more contemporary example see the use of words by Jean Nouvel in his design for the building complex “Anděl” in Prague from 1999/2000 (see Keazor 2009, forthcoming).

<sup>40</sup> See Jan Mukařovský 1970 and 1989, who distinguishes five functions of architecture: 1) its direct, current purpose; 2) its historical purpose (i. e., its relationship to a given canon and its respective norms as well as the comment a building thus makes about, or implies with regard to, history); 3) the way identity and territoriality of the builders and users are manifested (and, e. g., symbolized) in architecture, and the question of how a building situates itself in that context; 4) the individual functional horizon (i. e., the question whether and how a building deviates from the traditional norms); 5) the aesthetic function of a building (which might have a dialectic relation to its direct, current purpose).

cost. At the same time, since the elements used (to stay with the example of the column) are thus defamiliarised and isolated from their usual context, the beholder will understand them as mere set pieces, making him or her aware not only of the rules they break, but also of the realm to which they belong, i. e., architecture in general. Or, to say it with the (slightly adapted) words of Charles Jencks: “They call attention to the [... ‘linguaggio’] itself by misuse, exaggeration, repetition, and all the devices of rhetorical skill” (1977: 64). The architectural ‘linguaggio’, if considered in its own right and contexts, is thus capable of metareference and even of approaching the quality of explicit metareference to a certain extent.

Depending on the context and the way architectural metareference is presented, the deviation might be understood as harmless, funny toying or as a critique – in the way that also postmodernist architecture had conceived of itself as a critical movement. As shown above, it mainly started and was understood as a reaction to modernist architecture, which was accused of being monotonously puristic, faceless and of having lost all meaning. Thus the postmodernist architect was supposed to “communicate the values which are missing and criticise the ones he dislikes” (ibid.: 37) in his architectural message. Given this aim, it is no wonder that Jencks repeatedly made the (problematic) claim that architecture can be equalled to language<sup>41</sup>. This notion of linking architecture and language – which has been propagated throughout history in order to ennoble the architect’s profane profession and raise it from mere builder to humanistic scientist<sup>42</sup> and to distinguish him from the engineer<sup>43</sup> – can, however, also be seen as a re-

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<sup>41</sup> Cf. Jencks, who continues the above quoted passage as follows: “But to do that he must make use of the language of the local culture, otherwise the message falls on deaf ears, or is distorted to fit this local language” (1977: 37).

<sup>42</sup> Guillerme (cf. 1977: 22, 24) explains the association of architecture with language from such a sociological point of view, stating that the profession of the architect was enhanced in its prestige by linking it with the humanistic reputation and making the architect appear as an artist-architect.

<sup>43</sup> “It might be said that the success of the analogy between architecture and language occurs during critical periods of socio-professional stratification, expressively when the task of the architect appears to be taken over by the activity and talents of the engineers.” (Guillerme 1977: 24) Thus, Guillerme sees the rise of the linguistic analogy closely linked to “the upsurge of technological rationalism which marked the emergence of the first generation of polytechnicians; and again during the last twenty

curring symptom of a crisis that Manfredo Tafuri already observed in 1968: “the semantic crisis that exploded in the late eighteenth century and early nineteenth century still weighs on” the development of modern architecture (1980: 173) and it also conditioned the earlier as well as later stated pleas for an architecture featuring a ‘legible’ physiognomy and character, even a face<sup>44</sup>, and which communicates once more with the beholder and carries ‘meaning’. As mentioned above, postmodern architects considered “wit, ornament and reference” the means to achieve this goal. However, the critical impulse behind this slogan was constantly in danger of fading away, a dilemma also to be sensed in Moore’s “Piazza d’Italia”, where the entrances, abstractly quoting classical architectural elements (such as temple-like structures and allusions to rustica-forms which – given that here they are not made of stone but painted – appear as purely decorative), anticipate the fact that visitors are about to enter a space concerned with architecture, its history and the continuation of its classical heritage in the modern era. The “Piazza” in its colourful, playful and vivid appearance can be understood as a critique of the dull and boring modernist skyscraper in the background that does not seem to ‘respect’ the architecture surrounding it. However, due to the visual connections Moore establishes between the “Piazza d’Italia” and the modernist building, the latter is included and welcomed into the new complex and thus aesthetically ‘redeemed’. It therefore becomes apparent that the “Piazza d’Italia” may not only be understood as a benign complex harmlessly toying with slightly modernized, historical references, but as a piece of architecture that downplays the fundamental problems posed by its times instead of critically visualising and tackling them<sup>45</sup>.

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years or so, when a crisis in the doctrine, teaching, and practice of architecture has developed in successive waves” (ibid.).

<sup>44</sup> See, e. g., the writings of Paul Schultze-Naumburg, who as early as in the 1920s, in the presence of ‘faceless’ industrial buildings and modern houses, called for an architecture with legible ‘vivid features’ and ‘faces’. This idea already becomes apparent in the telling titles of his publications such as “Die Physiognomie der Industriebauten” (1923) or *Das Gesicht des deutschen Hauses* (1929).

<sup>45</sup> Cf., e. g., Joedicke 1991: 6, who criticises postmodernist architecture for its mere indulging in the beautiful surface.

### 3. Towards a post-postmodernist meta-architecture: Jean Nouvel

Given the problems linked to postmodernist architecture, it is not surprising that the architects of the following generations displayed a rather ambivalent attitude towards this kind of architecture: Jean Nouvel, e. g., on the one hand considers Robert Venturi one of the 'most important contemporary architects'<sup>46</sup> while on the other hand accusing him of condemning modernist architecture in too general a way and of being inconsistent when he, despite this, designs buildings with simple, clear and modernist forms (cf. 1984: 9f.). Moreover, according to Nouvel, Venturi – perhaps without wanting to – became the mental father of architects such as Robert Stern and Michael Graves, whom the French architect simply considers as proponents of 'phantoms', providers of an 'alibi for the historicists'<sup>47</sup> and of an architecture that loses all its sincerity because Venturi's recipes and formulas have been over-used and falsified.

This explains Nouvel's rejection of Moore's "Piazza d'Italia", which for him falls into the exact category of the 'Venturian recipes gone wrong': 'a little bit of pop art, three symbols, two historical references, all this bound together by sociological sauce and sprinkled with irony'<sup>48</sup> which in Moore's hands becomes 'a very basic and redundant symbolism, a scenography made of cardboard, a farce of a

<sup>46</sup> "Venturi, Rauch et Scott-Brown. Ils sont pour moi parmi les architectes contemporains les plus importants." (Nouvel 1984: 9)

<sup>47</sup> "[...] il [Venturi] est, malgré lui peut-être, devenu le papa – naturel ou adoptif – des architectes du simulacre, des Stern et des Graves, l'alibi des historicistes [...]." (Nouvel 1984: 10)

<sup>48</sup> "De fait, j'aime bien les cocktails venturiens bien dosés: un peu d'art pop, trois symboles, deux références historiques, le tout lié à la sauce sociologique et saupoudré d'ironie. Mais depuis que la recette est appliquée dans tous les fast-food, pour peu qu'ils se trompent dans les dosages, ça donne des aigreurs d'estomac. Arrêtons..." (Nouvel 1984: 10) Despite Nouvel claiming that he likes the Venturian cocktails, his wording shows a certain contempt for their formula, which becomes evident when he introduces 'Venturi and Co' as generally 'intelligent' and worth discussing with the words "Et pour conclure disons, sans ambiguïté [...]" (ibid.: 10), hinting at the fact that his former statements have been rather ambiguous and ironic.

kind of “*commedia della architettura*”, a scene for a musical comedy.<sup>49</sup>

This, however, does not make Nouvel an advocate for a return towards modernist architecture, whose representatives such as Mies van der Rohe or Le Corbusier he, on the contrary, frequently criticises in his writings<sup>50</sup>. He also contradicts their proponent, the historian and architecture critic Siegfried Giedion, who in his writings claimed that (as Nouvel sums up) “architecture is a rigorous art, subjected to strict laws”, by turning these words into the exact opposite: “L’architecture n’est pas un art rigoureux, soumis à des lois impérieuses”<sup>51</sup> (1993: s. p.) – a phrase that could have also been voiced by a postmodernist architect. And Nouvel even stated his opposition against the typical academic position while taking sides with a communicating architecture in the wake of 18<sup>th</sup>-century Revolution architecture when stating in an interview that “[a]cademicism renders the architect expressively speechless. I would much rather produce a referential architecture – une architecture parlante – even if it verges on the loquacious [sic]” (Garcias/Meade 1983: 44).

Given this, Nouvel’s violent attack on the postmodernists and their, in his view, slapdash use of irony as a merely decorative and self-protective ingredient<sup>52</sup> is even more surprising, especially since he himself, at the end of a 1984 fictitious and ironic self-interview, upon accusing himself of not being serious enough, replied: “Pourtant je le suis, j’ai toujours fait de l’architecture comme Borgès dit qu’il écrit: ‘avec le sérieux d’un enfant qui s’amuse’ [...]” (1984: 14)<sup>53</sup>.

<sup>49</sup> “C’est une symbolique primaire et redondante, une scénographie de carton pâte, une farce de la ‘comedia (sic!) della architettura’, un décor d’opérette [...]” (Nouvel 1984: 12)

<sup>50</sup> Cf., e. g., Nouvel (1993: s. p.), where he contradicts Le Corbusier’s definition of architecture as “le jeu savant, correct et magnifique des volumes assemblés sous la lumière” (‘the skilful, correct and magnificent interplay of masses assembled under light’).

<sup>51</sup> ‘Architecture is not a rigorous art, subjected to strict laws [...].’ Nouvel does not give a precise source for the wording.

<sup>52</sup> Nouvel thus observes but denies postmodernist architecture its recourse to what Werner Wolf has called “protective irony” (see 2007b) – used here as a strategy in order to legitimize the decorative, historical references – by declining its “Solidarisierungssignale” (‘signs for pleading for solidarity’), as analyzed by Wolf (2007b: 43).

<sup>53</sup> ‘And yet, I am serious – I have treated architecture always in the way Borgès says he would write: ‘With the seriousness of a child amusing itself’ [...].’

The impetus of Nouvel's critique becomes clearer when looking at his earlier buildings from the late 1970s and early 1980s: at the very time Moore started realizing his "Piazza d'Italia", in 1976, Nouvel received the commission to build a private house at Saint-André-les-Vergers (in the vicinity of Troyes, Aube) for the gynaecologist Bernard Dick, a fan of contemporary architecture. Together with the client, Nouvel designed a house where round forms such as vaults and cupolas, supposed to make the whole "very warm and reassuring" (Boissière 1996: 36), were used in order to shape, e. g., the living-room and the area for the children. But the local authorities denied the building permit for the project arguing that the architecture as designed would not fit into the local context since its forms (usually known from church architecture) made it look "too Byzantine" (ibid.). Unwilling to concede, but determined to get the necessary permission, Nouvel sought an expedient (see *Illustration 4a*): without changing anything internally, he steeped the incriminated elements almost entirely in thick maroon brick walls. But in order to make the beholder aware of the fact that the few small fragments still peeping out are merely parts of entire hidden forms, he traced their concealed contours and volumes on the walls, using bright brickwork, thus pointing at that which remains covered by the murals; where parts of the hidden elements are still visible, Nouvel has made the stonework look wobbly and disturbed around the outlines, as if the forms were starting to rebelliously regrow through the walls, thus disrupting the masonry (see *Illustration 4b*). By using stonework in order to 'draw' and 'project' suppressed forms onto the walls that actually hide them, thus visualising these forms in the manner of architectural cross-section plans, as well as by seemingly animating the concealed elements, Nouvel tried to develop strategies of visual protest against the authorities and their aesthetic dictate. While in this case he already made architecture itself one of the main themes of the building by referring to the construction devices used in this discipline (plans) and by making the house a stage where paradoxically two of the main Vitruvian principles of architecture – "firmitas" ('firmness') and "venustas" ('delight', 'beauty') – apparently clash (the elegant rounds of the vaults and cupolas trying to break through the strong, plain stonework), Nouvel's metareferential intention in creating an "architecture critique" (1981: 56) became even more obvious with the "Collège Anne Frank" (see *Illustration 5*), a junior high school complex he was commissioned to design and built

between 1978 and 1980 in Antony, a municipality in the southern suburbs of Paris.

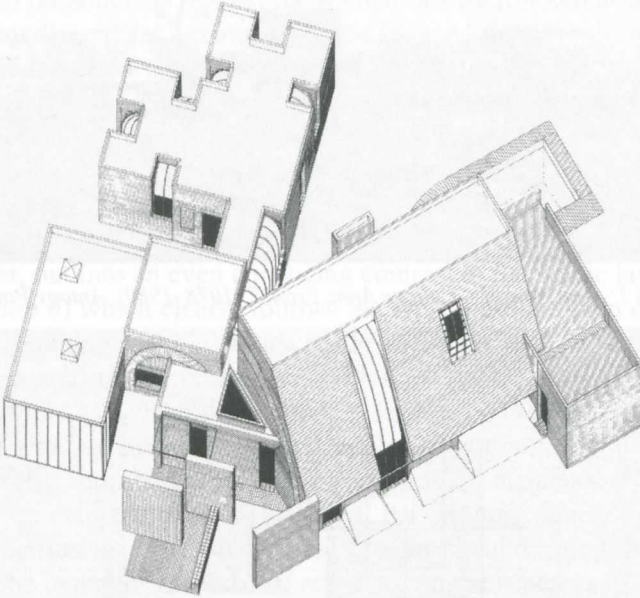


Illustration 4a: Jean Nouvel, "Maison Dick" (1976), south-east axonometry. Troyes.

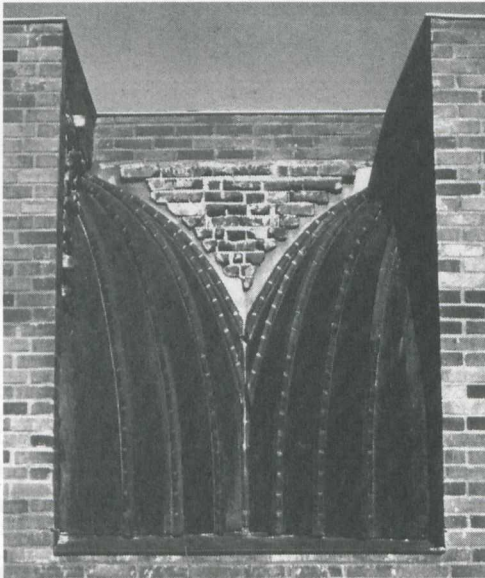


Illustration 4b: Jean Nouvel, "Maison Dick" (1976), detail. Troyes.

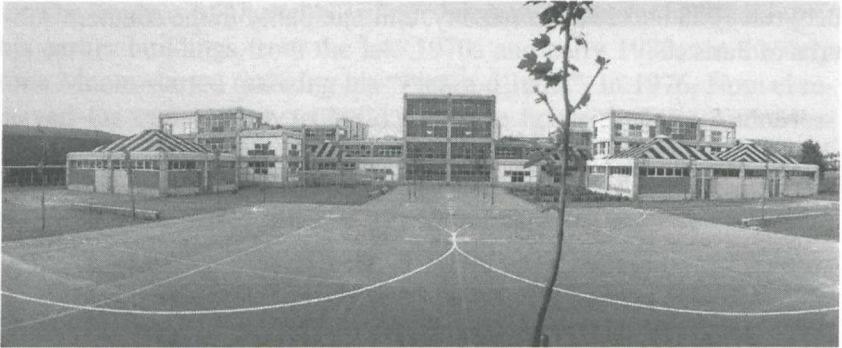


Illustration 5: Jean Nouvel, “Collège Anne Frank” (1978–1980). Antony/Paris.

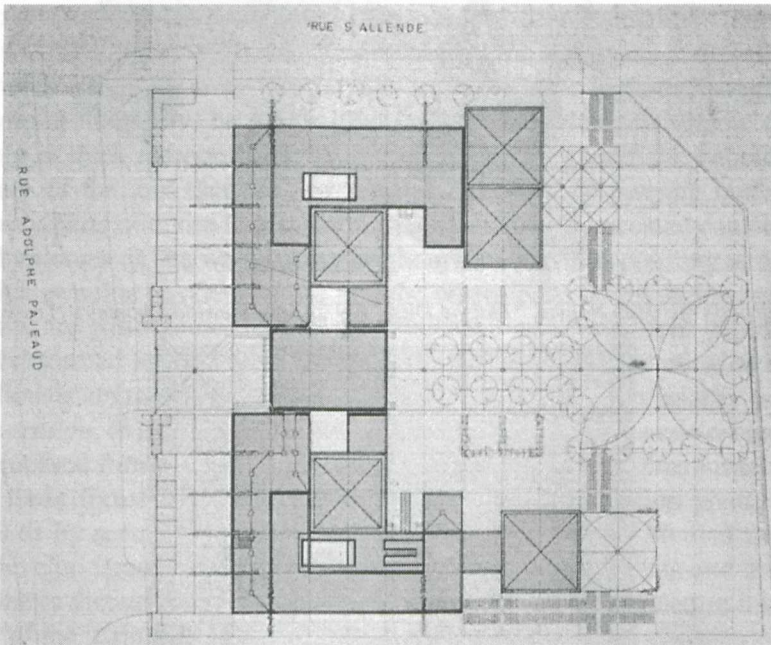


Illustration 6: Jean Nouvel, layout of the “Collège Anne Frank”.

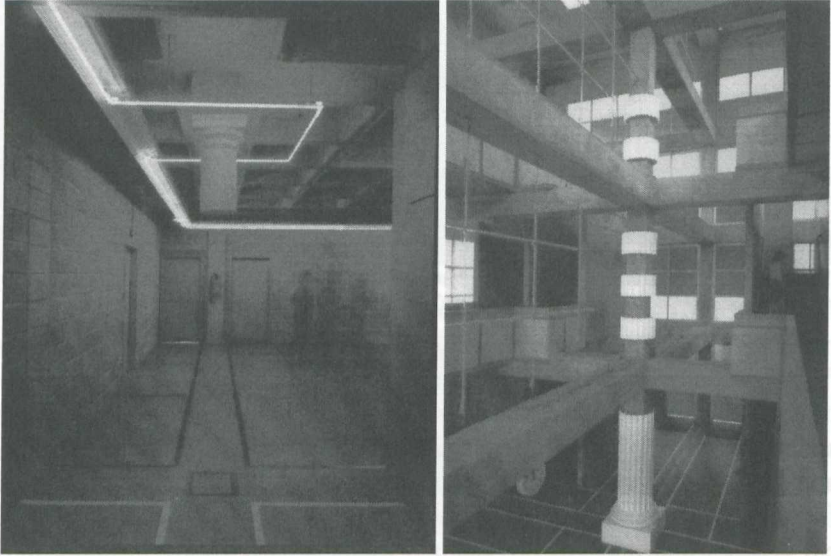
As in the case of the “Maison Dick”, Nouvel again suffered the fate that his ambition to include the future users of the building-complex (school children, their parents, teachers, administrators) into its design process was opposed by the authorities, who in France prescribe that school buildings have to be constructed from an industrialized modular system-kit of fifty prefabricated pieces. In order to (once more) synergistically merge the realization of his architectural goals with



rigid building regulations that he, at the same time, meant to protest against, Nouvel accepted the rules imposed on his project. He, however, also polemicized against the regulations by following them in so exaggeratedly radical a manner that he reduced them to absurdity and thus exposed them in a clearly metareferential way. Out of the fifty prefabricated and decreed pieces Nouvel only chose four – a post, a concrete beam, a façade panel and a truss (cf. *ibid.*: 63) –, which he excessively repeated, often combining them to a grid-like form that has become the main theme of the “écriture architecturale” (*ibid.*). Their repetitions as well as their brutal and bland functionality are, moreover, put into an even enhancing contrast to the whole layout (see *Illustration 6*) which clearly follows the typical ground plan of a symmetrically arranged 18<sup>th</sup>-century castle with two side arms extending from its central risalit. Nouvel thus refers to and stigmatizes the absolutistic power of centralism, which imposes given architectonical schemes without, however, granting at least the possibility of creating a beautifully adorned building out of prescribed elements. This is put further into evidence by the exterior of the building, where symmetrical geometrical patterns are painted to form a rigid, graph paper-like grid on the concrete ground that refers to typical schemes of 18<sup>th</sup>-century garden plans, while the actual and physical presence of classical beauty is reduced to a few draped statues, isolated and scattered on the roofs of the side buildings. This clash of the blandness of the prescribed industrialized elements with classical architectonical beauty is continued inside the building, where (sometimes excessively amassed or turned upside down and thus) meaningless numbers are stencilled onto the walls while only here and there short fragments of classical moulding are strewn above the doors. Moreover, the ceiling lights were hung from stucco paterae stuck into a bare concrete ceiling coffer.

The fact that architecture itself and the tension arising from its shortcomings, which are juxtaposed to its ideally free form, is the theme of the whole building becomes unmistakably clear when one considers the floor with its grid of coloured stripes that seemingly dictate the routes through the building. Those routes are, however, now and again obstructed by variations of classical columns, some of which are intact, while others have been severely mutilated and reduced to their cut-off upper parts that hang down from the ceiling instead of supporting it (see *Illustration 7*); even others (like the one prominently exposed in the central hall) have eroded and been sliced

up into pieces, which were then stuck onto the concrete beam like meat on a skewer (see *Illustration 8*).



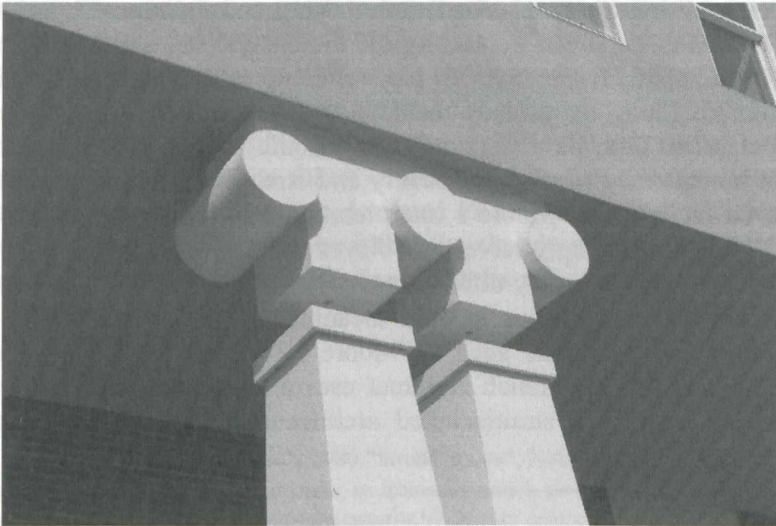
*Illustrations 7 (left) and 8 (right): Jean Nouvel, columns in the “Collège Anne Frank” (1978–1980). Antony/Paris.*

Yet Nouvel evidently does not want the beholder to get the idea that (s)he was witnessing the simple opposition between a brutal, bland modernity and beautiful, but helpless classical architecture. This is why the exterior as well as the interior of the complex feature depictions of the ‘Modulor’, a representation of the human body designed by Le Corbusier in 1943 to show that his modern buildings were made according to the measures of the human being. That this principle is in Nouvel’s view perverted when buildings such as schools have to be constructed from prefabricated industrialized elements becomes apparent when the ‘Modulor’ (like some of the numbers labelling the walls) is turned upside down and linked with a figure of typical Bauhaus-style appearance and thus reminiscent of the Bauhaus’ efforts to create mass-produced daily-use products of high aesthetic and qualitative standard – the “Collège Anne Frank” shows what can become of this idea if it is handled the wrong way.

But in order for the school to not merely remain a polemic architectural statement, but to become “a critical and at the same time positive design” (Garcias/Meade 1983: 44), Nouvel added elements that at least turn the complex towards the attractive, without, however,

indulging in smoothing placability. The bright colours of the façade panels might thus look friendly and inviting, but at the same time they remind us of the primary colours Le Corbusier used for his creations and which are here reduced to absurdity in order to reflect French bureaucracy. They, however, also clearly refer to the gaudy colours of children's toys (as, e. g., the Swiss construction toy 'Constri', which shows a remarkable similarity to Nouvel's school building not only in the colours, but also in the shape of its parts<sup>54</sup>). By taking up these colours, neon lights illuminating the staircases and corridors inside the building (see *Illustration 7*), in turn, contradict the image of a typical school and refer to adolescent culture.

In quoting classical architectural elements but altering and combining them with contemporary materials such as neon and steel, Nouvel thus drew on similar techniques as Moore in his "Piazza d'Italia". The French architect even states that irony is also "pointed up as a series of kitsch elements" in his building, but he claims that his irony "makes formal criticism of imposed bureaucratic brutalism" (Garcias/Meade 1983: 44f.), something he seems to miss in Moore's creation, which he obviously considers harmless and farcical.



*Illustration 9: Charles Moore, Williams College Museum of Art (1981–1987). Williamstown, MA.*

<sup>54</sup> Nouvel himself linked the prefabricated elements and their principle to the famous 'Meccano' toy (cf. 1981: 56 and Garcias/Meade 1983: 44).

These factual differences in their approaches become evident by focussing on a single detail used by both architects. Thus, in both Nouvel's "Collège" from 1978/1980 and in Moore's design for the extension of the Williams College Museum of Art in Williamstown, Massachusetts from 1981<sup>55</sup> a mutilated column appears which in both cases turns the original function of this architectonic element upside down: instead of supporting the ceiling or the entablature, its capital is stuck to them. In Nouvel's case (see *Illustration 7*), the fact that a fundamental and traditional architectonic rule is thereby violated is additionally stressed by the truncated shaft hanging down from the ceiling with all its weight, while Moore makes the cut directly below the capital (see *Illustration 9*), thus making the latter appear to float above the clipped shaft which is firmly standing on the ground. Nouvel, moreover, makes the mutilated element resemble a classical Doric column that usually represents manly beauty and strength<sup>56</sup> (both foiled here). In this case – as a quotation of classical architecture – it is, however, furthermore put into sharp opposition to the modern style surrounding it. Moore, instead, blends the classical with the modern style by reducing the capital to the typical outlines of a classical Ionic column, which traditionally stands for female beauty and daintiness<sup>57</sup>, so that the lightness, achieved by cutting off the capital and making it float above the shaft, fits in well. In Nouvel's case mutilating the column and emphasizing the already thematised opposition between modern and classical is to be understood as an ironic sign of protest against rigid bureaucracy turning the beauty and strength of architecture upside down, while in Moore's interpretation of it as an "I(r)onic Order"<sup>58</sup>, the motif simply serves as a clever and surprising gag.

It is perhaps this very difference not in the means but in their use, intended impact and thus in their meaning which angers Nouvel in postmodernist creations such as Moore's "Piazza" or his museum building. While the French architect uses architectonic set pieces in order to criticize a straitjacketed architectural formula and rebels

<sup>55</sup> For this building complex cf. Johnson 1987: 79–81.

<sup>56</sup> "Ita dorica columna virilis corporis proportionem et firmitatem et venustatem in aedibus praestare coepit." (Vitruvius Pollo 1987: 170)

<sup>57</sup> "[...] muliebri subtilitate et ornatu symmetriaque [...]." (Vitruvius Pollo 1987: 170)

<sup>58</sup> As Whitney Stoddard has baptized this element (qtd. in Johnson 1987: 81).

against it, postmodernism does not only tend to devalue such elements with their harmless twiddling, but even turns them into something positive and funny – or, to put it in even clearer metareferential terms: while Nouvel uses the inherent potential of (explicit)<sup>59</sup> architectural metareference to critically point out the precarious state of contemporary architecture and its modern(ist) heritage under certain administrative conditions, postmodernist creations such as Moore's "Piazza d'Italia" rather opt for a non-critical and therefore in some way affirmative use of explicit architectural metareference.

It is thus perhaps not surprising that after the completion of the "Collège Anne Frank" Nouvel did not return to his former strategies and devices, which he had obviously come to consider as compromised<sup>60</sup>.

One may therefore agree with Olivier Boissière, who described the "first phase of Nouvel's architectural career" as characterized by "the jubilant keynote" of a "modern post-modernism" (2001: 20). Taking up this terminology, one could understand Nouvel's subsequent approach as guided by a post-postmodernist perspective, as having – beyond simple partisanship for or against modernism and post-modernism – adopted a position which condemns neither in general (as Venturi did in the case of modernism). Nouvel's position rather reflects on the qualities as well as the shortcomings of either and tries to make the most of the lessons learnt. Like the postmodernists Nouvel demands of the responsible architect to consider the purpose of a new building as well as of its future context, and he therefore proposes a series of stages of reflection, designed to help him see the different possibilities given by a site, be it that the already existing architecture is sided, enhanced or counter-balanced in its effect by the new build-

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<sup>59</sup> See above, fn. 19.

<sup>60</sup> In the wake of Robert Stern's 1980 "Strada nuova", Nouvel returned to postmodernist forms but once more, in order to ironically mock them: in 1982 he used the whole range of postmodernist vocabulary for his leisure centre "Les Godets", a building complex which mainly serves as a playground for children. As if to show that this type of architecture could by then only be used in flippant, childlike contexts, Nouvel called up all the extravaganzas of postmodernist architecture such as the house inside a house, bouncing windows, absurd forms, a whole parade of variations on the history of the column and the clashing of different materials and colours. For "Les Godets" cf. Boissière 1996: 54–59.

ing<sup>61</sup>. Given that the architect will sometimes also find rather deplorable conditions, Nouvel – as his postmodernist predecessors – clearly envisions the possibility of giving his buildings an inherent critical impulse. At the same time, again like the postmodernists, he claims that architecture has to communicate with the viewer. But, unlike postmodernists such as Moore, he does not take refuge in the reservoir of classical architectural elements in order to do so – he, instead, on the one hand reflects about architectural history by hinting at his predecessors, without, however, copying them but rather by developing them further; on the other hand he tries to fulfil his claims of visualizing the values of society by making recourse to its images as presented in contemporary media, especially in the visual arts and film<sup>62</sup>.

In his buildings Nouvel thus realizes what he voiced in the above quoted context when taking up Giedion's words and turning them into their opposite: "Architecture is not a rigorous art, subjected to strict laws. [...] it enjoys great freedom of expression. It goes beyond the limits traditionally imposed by its era [...]. It is the very nature of architecture to go beyond these limits" (1993: s. p.). The fact that Nouvel does not merely transgress limits but, in his buildings, clearly renders such transgressions a comment on the history and function of architecture at the same time renders his buildings remarkable specimens of contemporary, post-postmodernist meta-architecture.

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<sup>61</sup> Cf. Nouvel 1993: s. p., where he explains a series of notions designed to help the architect in his choices and decisions when confronted with a given and already constructed site, pointing into the different directions of integrating a new building or making it stand out, and of thus changing, enhancing or opposing the already existing character of the surroundings.

<sup>62</sup> See for this Keazor 2009, forthcoming.

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Thomas Smith (\*1954) is one of the increasingly good renowned photographers to have emerged from the so-called Becher- or Düsseldorf School of photography, named after the analytically-documentary-oriented photo artist Bernd Becher (1931–2007) and Hilla (\*1934) Becher, who taught at the Düsseldorf Kunstakademie and whose conceptual photographic approach Smith as their student adopted. The

<sup>1</sup> For an exception see Wolf 2007 and Klinkenberg 2007 on self-reflexive self-referentiality.