

# The Long Perspective

The terms 'narrative' and 'architecture' may not at first seem to be natural bedfellows. In today's sense they suffer from slightly oppositional problems: the former proliferated and diluted, the latter restricted and reduced. In the media, reference to 'narrative' is now so commonplace as to evade meaning. In its tightest form it indicates a literary sensibility, but often dissolves simply into an 'idea'. In the communication age, narration invades the everyday: 'What's happening?' is a question answered by every tweet on Twitter.

Much 20th-century architecture pursued an abstract aesthetic that married well with functional ideals. Modernism celebrated the fact that it had broken free from the 'tyranny' of decoration. And yet despite this, the built environment inevitably 'communicates' – it cannot avoid doing so. Like nature the city can speak primordially, its fabric tacitly conveying its rich and potent history. A financial centre – the City of London, or New York – expresses its economic power through its glossy tallness as much as derelict buildings disclose their story of decline.

And we have stories of our own; the curious citizen can easily discover architectural narrative everywhere. Narratives arise spontaneously in the course of navigating the world – from inside to outside, private to public, personal experience to collective myth. This reading of architecture doesn't require an architect to have 'written' it. Even unplanned settlements such as shantytowns or medieval villages contain complex narrative content; for an inhabitant they will configure a three-dimensional map of social relations, possible dangers and past events. Mental maps situate fragments in a time–

space continuum: a house where you once lived, or the scene of an accident. The city constitutes a rich theatre of memory that melds all the senses in ways that suit every single one of us, in our capacity to combine instinct and knowledge, rational understanding and the imagination.

Personal narratives build on the cognitive mechanisms that arise from existing places and spaces. Narrative has its roots in the world we inhabit, and occurs at the interface between our own experience and complex signs, like the little red pointers that smother other data on Google maps. It does not necessarily manifest as appearance; the fields in Flanders where so many First World War battles took place have an emotional significance as a site of loss but today look much like any other. We are walking encyclopaedias of architecture not because we've shaped it, but because we experience it.

This chapter asks how narrative applies to architecture. We shall see how narrative in space as opposed to literature or cinema has a firm basis in the way each of us learns to navigate and map the world around us. Within the framework of these personal spatial geometries, we will explore how narrative constructs can engage with the medium of space. This will provide a framework for how architecture can be invested with narrative as a means to give it meaning based on experience.

## Narrative: from storytelling to spatial practice

Storytelling is as old as the hills. Even before the help of writing, universal myths were shaped by the oral tradition. From the Songlines of the Australian Aboriginals to the proto-myths of the Greeks, mankind has searched for answers to the mysteries of the universe, painting them on walls and encapsulating them in stories. Narratives enabled phenomena powered by the unseen forces of nature to be 'explained', and corralled into a system of beliefs. Their overarching themes lie at the heart of the major religions. Narratives that personify ethical or existential questions have profoundly shaped our understanding of space; these mythical tales and parables have the power to mediate between the spatial configuration of the universe, of heaven and hell, and the everyday world and its reality of survival, sustenance and territory. Within the framework of these spatial geometries, narratives can engage with the medium of space, and form the basis on which architecture can be given meaning.

With roots in the Latin verb '*narrare*', a narrative organises events of a real or fictional nature into a sequence recounted by the 'narrator'. Along with exposition, argumentation and description, narration is one of four

categories of rhetoric. The constructed format of a narrative can extend beyond speech to poetry, singing, writing, drama, cinema and games. Narration shapes and simplifies events into a sequence that can stimulate the imagination, and with its understanding comes the possibility of the story being retold – verbally, pictorially or spatially. Though they may involve shifts of time, location and circumstance as the dynamics of a plot unfold, for the viewer or the reader, stories progress along a sequential trajectory.

In architecture the linearity of the narrative function dissolves as the spatial dimension interferes with time. In architectural space coherent plot lines or prescribed experiential sequences are unusual. The narrative approach depends on a parallel code that adds depth to the basic architectural language. In a conventional narrative structure, events unfold in relation to a temporal metre, but in architecture the time element is always shifting in response to the immutability of the physical structure. While permanence should be celebrated as a particularly architectural quality, inevitably we should be curious about its opposite. The difference between a mere image and a work of art lies partly in its endurance – of existence but also of meaning. In architecture, that endurance is both positive and negative, depending on whether the public buys into it or not.

The various physical parts of a space signify as a result of the actions – and experiences – of the participant, who assembles them into a personal construct. The narrative coefficient resides in a system of triggers that signify poetically, above and in addition to functionality. Narrative means that the object contains some ‘other’ existence in parallel with its function. This object has been invested with a fictional plane of signification that renders it fugitive, mercurial and subject to interpretation. If a conventional narrative in a work of fiction binds characters, events and places within an overarching plot framework, in an environment narrative carries all of the above, but the fictional or self-constructed might be tested against physical reality. Narrative ‘fictionalises’ our surroundings in an accentuation of explicit ‘reality’.

Like the system of trip wires and pressure-sensitive buttons hidden in the folds of a Baroque fountain, narrative in architecture is rarely a prescribed sequence of meanings, but is instead an anti-sequential ‘framework’ of associative meanings held in wait to ‘drench’ the unsuspecting visitor. In whatever form, it communicates subtly and unpredictably, and often works better when hidden rather than overt. In a physical environment, narrative construes what philosopher and novelist Umberto Eco (b 1932) calls a ‘connotative’ rather than a ‘denotive’ meaning that is close to function. The temple represents the god it houses rather than the denotive meaning of the act of worship.<sup>1</sup> In a world of postmodern, post-Structuralist understanding,

the term 'narrative' has come to signify a level of meaning that substantiates the object, and yet contains an animated inner quality that interprets human events in relation to place.

The beginnings of architecture have been variously interpreted as the primitive hut,<sup>2</sup> or – according to Eco – the recognition that a cave can provide protection and shelter.<sup>3</sup> By the time the cave or the hut had fully formed as concepts, they must have featured as anecdotal homes. Myths and religions alike narrate the origin of the world in terms of everyday phenomena: in light and dark, in landscape and animals, and in men with supernatural powers. Since architecture can be manipulated and interpreted through narrative, it follows that the architect can invest architecture with a proportion of narrative alongside a response to the context and the programme of activities. Ancient temples of course tell stories, or highlights from them, as any visitor to the Louvre or the British Museum will appreciate.

Indeed, it is buildings that need the most potent symbolic content which make the most use of narrative strategies. Churches accumulate narrative as a result of the desire to reflect the story of God in every way possible, including the configuring of the body of Christ in their plan, their decoration, painting and sculpture. Northern Europe's great medieval cathedrals also tell complex stories of configuration, veneration and extremes of heaven and hell. With the help of the pointed arch, the multiple column and the flying buttress, every Gothic cathedral exhibits a rational organisation of the world through its geometry and, with its enormous soaring windows, the 'light of heaven'. Every aspect of these buildings has symbolic purpose, from the cruciform plan to details of capitals and windows.

Despite architecture usually being thought of as the art of articulating spaces, connotative meanings abound in its multi-various territories, and have done so from the outset. In architecture, narrative is a term that has risen in usage since the mid-1980s, but to grasp its implications, it would be valuable to visit some examples drawn from disconnected historical and physical contexts. What follows is distinctly not a history but a series of vignettes drawn from diverse times and places that together help define a context for narrative in architecture as an approach to practice. They are separated into the three gestalts; each one reveals narrative as the translation of a narrative spirit into a tangible, physical form.

## Narrative awakenings

In the Palazzo Pubblico, the town hall of Siena in Italy, there is a frescoed state room that celebrates the relationship between the populus and



Ambrogio Lorenzetti,  
*The Allegory of Good  
Government*, Palazzo  
Pubblico, Siena, Italy,  
1338–40.

One of three major frescoes that together make up the Sala dei Nove, this televisual composition uses the framework of Siena's collective architecture to weave daily events typical of a harmonious society.

its government, as had been expressed in the writings of contemporary chronicler Dino Compagni (c 1255–1324). The cycle of frescoes, *The Allegory and Effects of Good and Bad Government*, was painted by Ambrogio Lorenzetti (c 1290–1348) in the mid-14th century at a time when there was a need to stabilise civic ambitions. These two paintings representing good and bad face each other on opposite walls.

In the *Allegory of Good Government* everyday life is portrayed as a set of events occurring simultaneously. Unlike the extraordinary, usually religious occurrences represented in most painting of the period, this is an everyday scene with no apparent mishaps or strife. A narrative dimension builds on the commonplace. As opposed to blueprints of the architectural kind, in the painting the buildings constitute a backdrop, and in many ways their purpose was exactly that – a naturalistic *mise en scène* for the families that lived, and hopefully flourished, in and between them. On the opposite wall, the *Effects of Bad Government* includes decaying buildings, burning and a lot of cloak-and-dagger stuff. The painter's use of the whole room as a conceptual matrix reinforces this dialogue between good and bad. Although flattened by its blocked representational technique, the sense of space in these frescoes is palpable, with people in the foreground and buildings and towers in a very three-dimensional middle distance. Despite the absence of precise architectural representation, Lorenzetti employed a plausible vocabulary of building types. You can sense the narrow alleyways between the buildings, reinforcing what you might experience when walking back through the city. This room establishes a thoroughly accurate 'narrative' that has relevance today.

In mid-15th-century Florence, Giovanni Rucellai, head of a prominent wool merchant family, commissioned Leon Battista Alberti (1404–72), the leading exponent of the classical revival that came to be known as the Renaissance, to build a palace where, according to Rucellai’s testimonial, ‘out of eight houses, I made one’.<sup>4</sup> Alberti and his contemporaries were experimenting with building in the style of earlier, more poignant classical models. His design for the Palazzo Rucellai (1446–51) took its cue for the treatment of the orders of its pilasters from the Coliseum in Rome, with Tuscan capitals on the ground floor, Ionic on the first floor and Corinthian on the second. Rediscovered classicism was at the cutting edge of contemporary thinking to the extent of obsession and bitter rivalry.

The facade of the Florentine church of Santa Maria Novella (completed 1470), where Alberti also intervened on behalf of the Rucellai, famously charts this transformation of ideas, with Gothic arches near the ground level of an original 13th-century elevation, and higher up, his classical

#### Ancient Forum, Rome, Italy.

In its suspended ruined state, the Foro Romano – with its earliest parts dating back to around the 8th century BC – still captures the need for a civilisation to visualise its mythical narratives, which are all the more seductive since they have to be rediscovered through the mists of archaeology and conjecture.



pilasters and a magnificent simplified pediment. Here the classical narrative of a harmonious rediscovered world had a new invigorating power. While it drew on past glories, it enabled a degree of order and refinement absent from most medieval buildings. More importantly it provided a readymade narrative vocabulary with which Florence could give substance to its cultural, political and ethical ideals. As though reversing the process of ruination, Alberti completed the retrospective Gothic foundation of this facade with visionary forward-looking classicism.

According to the evidence, in ancient Rome they were good at lacing buildings with narrative. As if postmodern – or should I say post-classical – in their own time, ancient Romans looked backwards and eastwards towards their cultural forebears, to Egypt and Greece. Many of their finest sculptures are based on now-lost Greek originals; in every Roman territory, buildings complied with Greek prototypes. Architects and sculptors relished enlarging and improving Greek models, and investing them with a mythological aura. On a visit to the Forum in Rome, it is not difficult to picture the intensity of this place as it was: with every conceivable deity housed in its temples, political life in its courts and palaces, fruits of the empire in the markets, and triumphant routes marked by massive arches and columns. Conversely, in every imperial outpost, an engineer's precision imposed infrastructure, militaristic control and enslavement. Architecture was understood as both organiser and communicator, and was used to the full. Even today the ruins of the Forum stack narrative high. Within this now museumised, cordoned off enclave, terraces are still laden with craggy remains and truncated columns. Outside the modern fence containing it, traffic thunders along the Viale dei Fori Imperiali, past snack vans and modern gladiators in leggings and trainers. The modern tourist city has built this heritage into its mythology.

The Roman emperor Hadrian (AD 76–138) provided perhaps the first example of a consciously narrative disposition of buildings, spaces and landscapes that freely represent faraway places. In a bid to protect himself from the tumult of Rome itself, he remodelled landscapes experienced on campaigns in the Middle East, and rebuilt them in miniature at his villa a few kilometres outside the capital at Tivoli. His objective was not only to build an isolated compound at a comfortable distance from the city, but also to reconnect it to places that otherwise would have been consigned to memory.

It was many centuries later that Tivoli proved an inspiration for a group of British designers. In the early half of the 18th century, William Kent (c 1685–1748) and his followers discovered the Arcadian narrative of evocative decline at Tivoli, and how it corresponded to the cultural and social aspirations of the owners of some of England's country houses. At

Chiswick House in West London (built and landscaped to Kent's designs in 1726–9) and Rousham in Oxfordshire (a Jacobean mansion with 1738–41 extensions and landscaping by Kent), the gardens needed to at least match the invention of the house, if not surpass it. The makers of



**William Kent, Rousham House landscaping, Oxfordshire, England, 1738–41: garden and stream.**

Not only do classical moments occur in strategic slopes and clearings, but the visitor is guided by a flowing stream only a few inches wide; an artery for the life force that flows through the entire garden.



William Kent, Rousham House landscaping, Oxfordshire, England, 1738–41: garden bower.

In a subtle half-stated choreography, our own spirit comes face to face with the gods themselves. Apollo blends perfectly with the picturesque qualities that Kent was after.

such environments were not so impressed by the Cartesian framework of Versailles or Hampton Court, the perfection of which was no match for the romantic sense of abandonment to be found in the ruins of ancient Rome or the villas in nearby Frascati. Their decadent state heightened the sense of rediscovery. Kent must have felt a privileged connection to a past golden age of culture, artistry and thinking that matched his modern aspirations. The pleasure of ruins far outshone the French taste for geometry. His apparently found (though usually new) *objets trouvés* took the form of tombs, temples and statuary. These could be re-discovered by the visitor or the owner every time he took a stroll in the garden, as if stumbling across a piece from antiquity only partly visible above the ground.

Rousham's landscape garden orchestrates a romantic literary score with mythical fragments paced out in the woods. Here clearings and bowers of a particularly verdant English kind collude to draw the visitor through a variety of contrasting situations. Since they are never visible simultaneously, and even though they are fixed in space, they succeed in evoking a sense of the unique moment. Unlike the tightly packed buildings of the city, Rousham's network of narrative components has a looseness

that is conducive to the work of the imagination in its quest for the sublime experience.

Stretched along a deceptively narrow strip of sloping woodland, it exploits its location to dramatic yet intimate effect. Essentially it is organised around an upper and lower path that interconnect in several clearings with pools, channels and statuary portraying mythological incidents. The visitor's first Roman encounter is with statues representing the Imperial games. Returning to the woods, a path leads to the so-called Venus Vale, with statues of Pan, a faun, and Venus. In another glade, a terrace overlooking the river is named the Praeneste after the ancient temple complex in the modern town of Palestrina outside Rome.

Although subtle in its use and occupation of the landscape, this garden fuses its storytelling with its abundant English flora. For the conceptual art commentator Simon Pugh, Rousham reinforces the role of the visitor in its system of eye catchers, paths and manipulations of nature.<sup>5</sup> It is a highly tuned spatial instrument for bodily and perceptual awareness that would be hard to match in the confusing and overloaded context of a city.

## Narrative and the city consciousness

If in Britain we saw the use of narrative begin as a countryside sensibility in the 18th century, by the 20th century it was more strongly embedded as an urban experience. This desire to imitate literary landscapes suited the English, whose approach to power had by the mid-18th century evolved into a gentlemanly language that listened as well as commanded. Their picturesque and random nature enabled British cities to retain some sense of naturalistic mystery. Despite the shock caused by infrastructures imposed to accommodate the needs of the new industrial age, these cities had enshrined the randomness of nature in their matrices of parks, squares and gardens. London, particularly in the well-to-do west, was a loose fusion of development and parkland that had once been hunting grounds well before the invention of the Garden City at the end of the 19th century.

Although many ideals were sought in an idealised version of nature, by the late 19th century capital cities like London or Paris were acquiring a temperament of their own. The search for the sublime could be fulfilled amongst the grime, confusion and big crowds of the burgeoning city. There was a prevailing notion, expounded by the French poet Charles Baudelaire (1821–67), that the congested urban environment could trigger a bewildering and poetic state of mind which could be accessed through the technique of soaking up impressions of the city while wandering.<sup>6</sup> The *flâneur* – a

‘paradigmatically male stroller who, equipped with his encyclopaedic knowledge of the city and its denizens, travels incognito through the most varied milieus’ – could be both voyeur and participant.<sup>7</sup>

In the early years of the 20th century the Italian Futurists were able to blend this bewildering impression of crowds with the galvanising effect of the machine. These seething masses might have been shoppers on Christmas Eve, an audience leaving the theatre and mingling with people on the already teeming streets, or indeed troops caught in the smoke and confusion of battle. Later, the Situationist International, a predominantly French art and political movement based on Marxist principles that was formed in 1957 and dissolved in 1972, would advocate the undertaking of the *dérive* – a technique of urban wandering which, as cultural commentator Tom McDonough has observed, has its roots in the poetic *flânerie* practised by Baudelaire and other 19th-century inhabitants of the metropolis.<sup>8</sup>

The intensity of urban growth during the 19th century also accentuated the development of the urban park, a place designed for strolling, albeit as respite from (rather than joining up with) the urban throng.

**Antoni Gaudí, Parc Güell, Barcelona, Spain, 1900–14.**

A master of illusion, Gaudí brought all his skills to bear on his landscape masterpiece. To stimulate the imagination, he exaggerated an already dramatic topography with artificial terraces, decaying structures and fabulous creatures.



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Ralph Hancock, Derry & Toms roof garden, Kensington, London, England, 1936–8.

Cosmopolitan cities like London wanted to connect with exotic experiences available abroad, an ambition that went well with the efforts of department stores to bring the Empire to every shopper. Six storeys above the ground, this Alhambra in miniature would provide a break from the bustle below.

Many of these, like the Royal Parks in London and Central Park in New York, went to elaborate efforts to imitate nature, if in an innocuous form. But when Antoni Gaudí (1852–1926) was commissioned by the Güell family to design a public park on a steeply sloping site in the north-eastern Gràcia district of Barcelona, he wanted to inject fantasy into people's idea of nature. Like Italian hilltop towns and Rousham before it, Parc Güell (1900–14), Gaudí's landscape masterpiece, made clever use of the dramatic topography.

The slopes provided the opportunities for a variety of interlacing terraces, with meandering paths, projecting roofs and incongruous plazas that offset nature with a vibrant fantasticality. Gaudí used tried-and-tested landscape techniques in which a network of paths activates a variety of experiences, but he also incorporated so many artificial natures that real nature paled into a supporting role. The manmade was to collude with the visitors to outdo nature with the bizarre – including stairs with giant reptiles, roofs with shell-like stalagmites, and colonnades that had apparently been eroded over millennia. And everywhere there are suggestions of social gathering that could never correspond to reality: a plaza defined by large stone spheres, an undulating bench covered in his hallmark broken tiles, and beneath it, a cavernous space where giants would feel more at home than mortals. In Parc Güell mythical time and real time coincide on a daily basis. In these ultra-imaginative surroundings, relationships are free to coalesce.

A later public garden in London further detaches reality by imaginatively sampling various iconic garden types from around the world. In the inter-war period, a narrative of health-obsessed existentialism was a back note to Modernism, while a new determination to consume went hand in hand with Hollywood escapism and Art Deco extravagance. In the spirit of Britain's vast empire, Derry & Toms department store would bring the exotic Spanish garden to Kensington in West London. The roof was exploited not as a piece of antiquity, but much more exotically, as a Mediterranean garden based on the Alhambra, although it also included Tudor and British woodland gardens. Created in 1936–8 by landscape architect Ralph Hancock (1893–1950) on the instructions of store owner Trevor Bowen, this extravaganza of geometric pools, ogee arcades and leafy walks unfolded a trans-story as light relief from the intense activity of shopping. Once you'd made your purchases, you could pretend to leave the country in a loose cinematic experience of places few people could ever hope to see. And what did it matter? No one quite believed that it was any more real than the interior of an Alhambra-styled cinema. At Derry's Roof Gardens you could have tea and cakes in exotic surroundings, and then wander freely in a living movie set. Like the picture palaces, it stimulated

the imagination by immersing the visitor in an otherwise inaccessible world. Being aware of the illusion was part of the experience.

## Narrative as an architectural pursuit

The narrative of flight translates well into pure structure. Though an engineer, Pier Luigi Nervi (1891–1979) inspired many with his soaring naturalistic structures, including his exact contemporary Giò Ponti (1891–1979) with whom he collaborated on the Pirelli Tower (1960) in Milan. But it took an émigré American to fully engage the flight narrative in an airport building,



**Eero Saarinen, Trans World Flight Center, John F Kennedy International Airport, New York, USA, 1962.**

Post-war advances in engineering triggered much more invention when it came to the architectural envelope. Long before brands had any direct effect on buildings, the sweeping structure of TWA's terminal suggested that the glamour and excitement of flying began on the ground.

and make full use of the 1950s' glamour that went with it. In the Trans World Flight Center at New York's John F Kennedy International Airport (1962), the Finnish-born architect Eero Saarinen (1910–61) applied concrete shell construction to expressing the aeronautical experience. Every TWA passenger would begin or end their journey in this building. These previously unachievable soaring curves are not only eagle-like; they suggest flight itself in their trajectories. Flying while still earthbound, the structure keys the experience of the city into the system of airports and aircraft that completes an international and inter-urban reach which, by the 1960s, was becoming a reality. Here engineering and artful aspiration combine with elegance and an unrestrained libido for modernity.

On the smaller domestic scale, landscape assumes a different meaning in which narrative can be used just as effectively. As in Gaston Bachelard's seminal work on the psychological effects of the house, *The Poetics of Space* (1958), Frederick Kiesler (1890–1965) was interested in giving form to the liberated state of mind that had been unlocked by Sigmund Freud (1856–1939). To both, the house was a complex three-dimensional container of all our dreams and fears. Kiesler, a multi-talented Austrian-American iconoclast, theoretician, architect and theatre designer, spent much of his career designing spaces that had a sense of time as well as place. In his Endless House – never built, but influential nevertheless after being exhibited in maquette form at the Museum of Modern Art, New York

**Frederick Kiesler, Endless House, large model, 1959.**

Though never realised, this exercise in psychological formation challenged the tenets of Modernism, applying Freudian thinking free from the conventions of walls, roofs and floors. The inhabitant would be able to wander from room to room as the mind shifts from thought to thought.



in 1959 – he wanted to realise a building that you could inhabit as if it were your own body: ‘man and his environment are caught up in a total system of reciprocal relationships’.<sup>9</sup> Elevated on stilts, its loops and interstices are uncompromisingly curvaceous and body-like. Moving from ‘room to room’, you would leave one psychological space and, although physically entering another, there would be a lingering trace of the one you had occupied only moments earlier.

Right-leaning Italian writer Curzio Malaparte (1898–1957) wanted his home to express his own supremacy. Hardly flowing in its elongated pier-like formation, the Casa Malaparte (1938–42) sits on a rocky outcrop on the eastern side of Capri looking out to sea. The original designs for the house were provided by architect Adalberto Libera (1903–63), but Malaparte reputedly rejected them and built it himself with the help of local stonemasons. If Kiesler’s house is all about flow, Malaparte’s Rationalist villa is all about the eye of its owner. Even today its stacked spaces have a pervasive air of control; guests stay in cells below stairs rather than bedrooms. His lovers would stay in the room next to his, but his room alone had access to his study which is in a commanding position on the ‘prow’ of the building with the best view out to sea. Neither Kiesler nor any of his contemporaries were searching for this degree of compartmentalisation; indeed, the opposite.

An architect who had a more liberated – and even libertine – agenda is the Torinese polymath and late Surrealist, Carlo Mollino (1905–73). As



**Curzio Malaparte and Adalberto Libera, Casa Malaparte, Capri, Italy, 1938–42.**

At first this remarkable house appears to comply with Rationalist principles, but everything about it is perverse or inverted: while the entrance stair leads to an expansive sundeck, the house, complete with cell-like guest rooms, is buried beneath it.

**Carlo Mollino, Casa Devalle, Turin, Italy, 1939.**

Mollino's furniture is well known for its body-like tension, but his small apartments were equally inventive. Multi-layered, multi-textured and conceived as chambers of seduction, this *garçonnière* fuses Surrealism with clean modern economy.

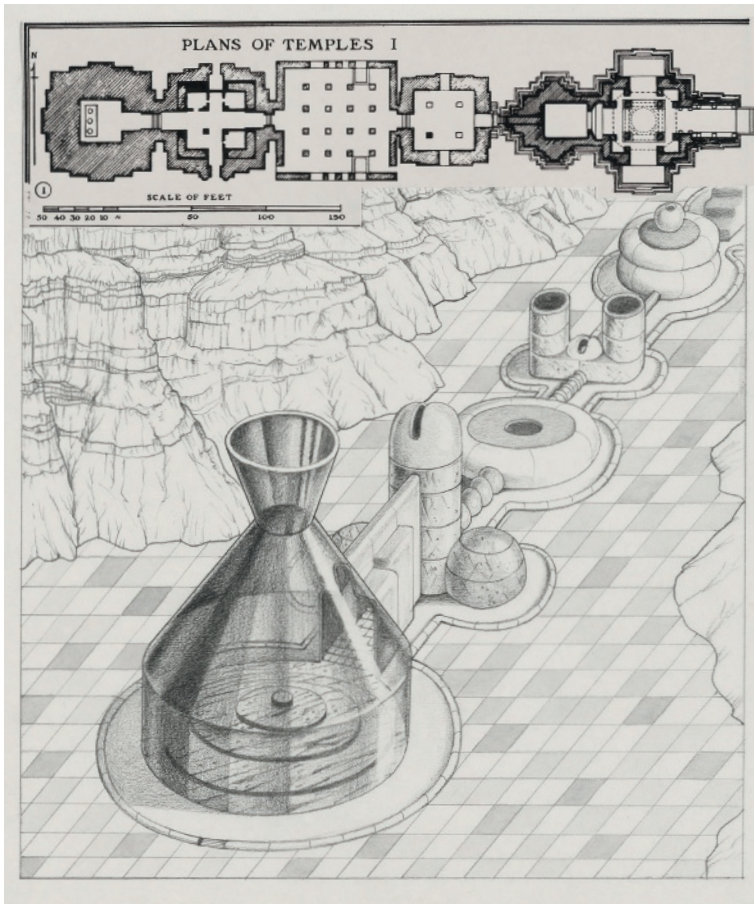
an architect and furniture designer he put his skills to good use in his tiny *garçonnières*. They were louche spaces to be shared with no one but his partner for the night. The Casa Devalle (1939) in Turin is an essay in erotic staging on a domestic scale. In the spirit of sensual performance, this complex of intricate spaces constructs a playground of shapes, textures and functions. Every piece has stereoscopic consequences, with mirrors at angles, deep shadows and clever combinations of objects that encourage role-reversal. Mollino was a master at the body-narrative replete with erogenous zones.

Also a great racing driver and pilot, Mollino managed to load his work with every one of his interests. He was unusually skilled at expressing anthropomorphic movement, in his buildings of course, but perhaps more eloquently through his furniture. His architecture shows a Modernist vocabulary in a state of transformation towards dynamic abstraction with an extraordinary level of taste and harmony. The dynamic models evident in his furniture had the potential to be applied to much larger structures; even



though he was a pilot, he was more interested in the hedonism of flying than in looking at the city as though it were itself an object.

My last example takes us momentarily into travels of the mind. Not long after the optimistic Americanisation of Europe in the 1950s, some like Kiesler were more interested in how architecture could be a vehicle for a more personal journey. There had been numerous calls to arms in a string of passionate manifestoes occurring throughout the 20th century, but architect Ettore Sottsass (1917–2007) frequently held architecture at arm's length. Yet he constantly adhered to the discipline by testing it against every other conceivable medium – photography, ceramics, furniture and of course his famous red Valentine typewriter (designed for Olivetti in 1969).



Ettore Sottsass, 'The Planet as Festival', *Study for a Temple for Erotic Dances*, 1972–3.

In the wake of the counter-culture revelations of the 1960s, architects everywhere considered dropping out as a serious option. Sottsass spent long periods in India, and translated his experiences into totemic architecture that described a state of mind.

Far from the cosmopolitan conditions that had inspired much of the architecture of the 20th century, by the early 1970s Sottsass had turned towards ideal imaginary forms with a self-sustained temple-like singularity. Influenced by the counter-culture thinking of the 1960s, Sottsass 'tripped out' on an introspective hippie otherworldly vision. The series of drawings known as 'The Planet as Festival' (1972–3) depicts architecture as totems and evokes a utopian land in which human consciousness is awakened through freedom from work and chores and the use of technology to heighten self-awareness. Firmly rooted in the imagination, and deliberately detached from any idea of context, these are experiments in a spiritual form of travel that, despite the freedom, retain complete control. His architect's sense of social responsibility had moved on to a higher artistic plane.

To move the concept of the city forward, some architects began to stand back from it. Only then could they translate the complex post-industrial decay that by the late 1970s had enveloped the Western metropolis. The demise of traditional industries, coupled with new ways of distributing goods that took warehousing out of urban centres, had resulted in a Postmodern form of urban decline that left many buildings devoid of purpose and vast areas eerily abandoned. There was room for an approach to architecture that would ultimately eclipse functionalist ideology.

## Narrative as an architectural methodology

Though always designed according to economic or functional criteria – even when they overshoot or fall short of them – clearly not all buildings are designed with the intention of narrating. Social relationships rarely outshine commercial interests. Every client has a set of expectations, including what they want their building to convey to the broader public; but the architect–client relationship depends hugely on a closed system of engagement, often leaving the effect on the public to planning and consultation. Sadly the interests of the public are relatively marginal compared with the needs of the employees or the image of the business to be housed.

But the work of architecture can be a vehicle for this narrative layer and has the potential to engage human experience in ways that mere style does not; architects who work with narrative will be aware of all these possibilities, and the need to project ideas towards the viewer through the 'medium' of architecture. On the one hand the physical nature of architecture makes it comparable to the physical object of a book, which sits between the author and the reader. On the other hand, buildings can be invested with narrative content by the architect in ways that are only possible through the

medium of space. Having both substance and void, content and relations, space is a medium ready to soak up associative meaning.

Whether the end result is to be an entire neighbourhood or the reconfiguration of a room, narrative can indeed set the design process in motion. Narrative is not an option selected from a pattern book or looked up on the Internet. It relies on your ability to draw on the world around you, and render it light enough to move into the territory of the imagination – and what English writer and critic John Ruskin (1819–1900) termed an ‘associative imagination’ at that.<sup>10</sup> In the next chapter, I will investigate the seeds of narrative in the semiotic sense, and how over the 20th century experiments by some artist-architects into the language of cities laid out the territory for narrative to become a *modus operandi* in its own right.

# References

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- 7 Tom McDonough, ‘Introduction’, in *The Situationists and the City*, Verso (London), 2009, p 11.
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- 9 *Frederick Kiesler: Artiste-architecte*, exhibition catalogue, Editions du Centre Pompidou (Paris), 1996, p 167.
- 10 John Ruskin, *Modern Painters*, Volume II, Smith, Elder & Co (London), 1846, *passim*.