

THE INEVITABLE PROJECT: AVOIDING THE FORMALLY  
ARBITRARY THROUGH ANALYSIS AND POETICS  
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## Introduction

If there has been a sea change in architectural education and discourse over the last quarter century, it has been the ascent of the arbitrary as a legitimate tactic of design. We can track its evolution from the disappearance of history as an informing aspect of architectural invention just a few years after the Venice Biennale's *The Presence of the Past* in 1980; while subsequently Deconstruction itself privileged the subject over the object, it also presumed certain (if spurious) techniques of analysis, grounding projects at least in some sort of reference outside the architect's will. But it didn't take long for the often strange forms generated by these techniques to sponsor arbitrariness—"what's cool now?"—or what has been called "post-critical" thinking, as a desirable quality, mediated only by the judgment of architectural faculty and critics. While a critique of the post-critical hasn't really been made, nor perhaps can it be made (what, in the end, is one critiquing apart from a disinterest in criticism itself?), one can certainly list its deleterious consequences:

- the abandonment of any interest in the city, or the collective generally, at the expense of the object (albeit objects that sometimes have urban pretensions)
- a disinterest in space per se, or space beyond the object
- the distancing of architecture from construction (or, the over-dependence on adventurous, counter-intuitive engineering)
- no objective standards of evaluation, whether in academia or the critical press
- the shutting down, therefore, of dialogue in academia and the profession

Arbitrariness may be beyond critique, although that is not to say one cannot disagree with it. But the only alternative is to posit its antithesis as an article of faith, if only so that the city can be rescued from individual egoism. Responsibility must be a prerequisite of both citizenship and architecture in the public realm (which I would define as any environment which groups of people are constrained to experience). Responsible architecture must, therefore, ground its choices in something comprehensible, and debatable: if it is beyond discussion it means it is the product of individual will, or divine revelation. Rejecting the former, and recognizing the rarity of the latter, one is forced to realize that all formal choices, of whatever kind, even the classical, are arbitrary if they are not grounded in something other than the architect's taste. The poetic dimension, I would argue, satisfies this role of ground or foundation for the formal.

Many, if not most, architects with classical predilections today are suspicious of the word "poetic" because it had been co-opted by certain modernist critics to justify any sort of formal choice. What I hope to show is that a true poetics depends per force upon language, and indeed was natural or proper to the classical tradition before the nineteenth century. It was the Ecole des Beaux-Arts' system that sapped the poetics

from both classical language and form, replacing it with an institutionalized judgment or taste. Joseph Rykwert has tracked the development of this system from the eighteenth century, and I will only quote him summarily to suggest why we must look beyond the nineteenth century for the answer to our current academic and practical dilemma:

In so far as a tradition in architecture can be called classical, it must rest on two analogies: of the building as a body, and of the design as a re-enactment of some primitive—or if you would rather—of some archetypal action to which our procedure might refer. From Vitruvius to Boullée, the texts suggest something of the kind, always in different contexts, since such ideas do not contain, or even imply, the repertory of norms and procedures which the constant alteration of circumstances forces you to renew, to rethink and to alter.... Insofar as we can isolate something which in architecture can be called a classical tradition, then the Ecole des Beaux-Arts had very little to do with it.... [T]he Ecole des Beaux-Arts has stood for a century and a half as an all-too solid monument to the classical tradition. But some of us think that if it were dismantled, the tomb might turn out to have been empty all the time. —Joseph Rykwert, “The Ecole des Beaux-Arts and the Classical Tradition,” *The Beaux-Arts and Nineteenth Century French Architecture*, ed. Robin Middleton, MIT Press, 1982, p. 17

The humanist tradition that obtained before neo-Classicism saw form as a conveyor of content, a content arriving from outside architecture itself. In other words, the architect’s role was to articulate, with the language of building rather than words, those ideas and issues that had always formed the subject of speculative thought in classical culture: Man’s relationship with Man (including himself), Man’s relationship with Nature, and Man’s relationship with the divine. How architecture could articulate this depended on the capacity of building elements to be bearers of meaning, from the Orders to rustication to the very materials of which the building was made. Decorum and iconography, the music and words of architecture, allowed buildings to be read in ways available at a basic level to anyone, and at a deeper level to an informed audience.

If architecture could therefore be rhetorical, that is eloquent and not merely legible, it was also capable of being poetic: architecture could, through metaphor or analogy, articulate concepts in ways that drew on a wider culture of references, from other buildings to other times and places. This is how I intend “poetic,” as the allusive or metaphorical capacity of architecture. Architecture can be metaphorical with respect to other things—a cathedral as forest—and with respect to other works of architecture—a library as a theater. In order for metaphor to work, therefore, one needs more than an architectural language, one needs an architectural and humanist culture, a broad body of references upon which to draw. The audience needs this, of course, but even more so the architect needs it in order to be able to invent fluidly and meaningfully. It was this that Vasari and the *Accademia del Disegno* celebrated in their tomb for Michelangelo in S. Croce: Painting, Sculpture and Architecture mourn the great master, and the tomb itself is composed of all those arts. While it might be this integration that is represented in the three intertwined laurel wreaths on either side of the figures, the fact that the laurel crown is the particular symbol of the poet suggests it was through poetics (in addition to his poetry proper) that Michelangelo managed to integrate the arts not only in his production, but in himself, and it was this poetic dimension that raised his production from a manual to an intellectual activity.

### Site, Program, Type, Language

The methodology I am advocating begins with formal and poetic analysis of each of the four categories of Site, History, Type, and Language, as in Figure 2. Each is served

- Figure 1 Michelangelo’s Tomb, S. Croce, Florence; author photo
- Figure 2 (top) Diagram of the Formal and Poetic Analyses of an Inevitable Project
- Figure 3: Altar of S. Andrea al Quirinale; author photo
- Figure 4: S. Andrea al Quirinale, exterior; author photo
- Figure 5 (above): Temple of Romulus, Via Sacra, Foro Romano; author photo

<b>arbitrary</b>		<b>INEVITABLE</b>				<b>arbitrary</b>	
<i>Formal (shape)</i>				<i>(metaphor) Poetic</i>			
Site	Program	Type	Language	Language*	Type	Program	Site
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• geometry</li> <li>• context</li> <li>• terrain</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• adjacencies</li> <li>• hierarchy</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• "parti" ("choice")</li> <li>• precedents</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• which?</li> <li>• grammar/syntax</li> <li>• decorum</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• rhetoric</li> <li>• expression (incl. materials)</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• analogous types? (e.g. library-theater)</li> <li>• origins</li> <li>• trajectory/history</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• metaphor (analogy)</li> <li>• narrative structure/sequence</li> <li>• nature of use (e.g. "to read")</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• history</li> <li>• narrative</li> <li>• allusions to other sites</li> </ul>

\*which aspects are inherent in the language generally (e.g. classical tripartition) and which are proper to program/site/type?



by the designer's knowledge of history, of the particulars of the site and program, but also of the larger typological and linguistic framework. While the analyses, in an academic context, are addressed independently, the goal is finding a formal response to site issues, for example, that also embodies a poetic dimension appropriate to the place. The formal analysis of the site would investigate, among other things, its geometry, the nature of the context, and the terrain; the poetic analysis might investigate the site's history, potential narrative readings, and its allusions or references to other sites.

The synthesis of these disparate analyses should then be available in the *parti*, which, as the French origins of the word suggest, is a choice: the architect does not in that sense “create,” or make something out of nothing, but rather “invents,” discovers or uncovers a *parti* that already exists. Clearly, this depends on an understanding of type (the palazzo, for example), but also purely formal dispositions (a bar attached to a U). What makes it an invention and not an imitation is the complexity of the response to the particulars of the problem, a choice of not one *parti* option but rather a resolution of several different *parti* types into something uniquely appropriate and “inevitable.” It is the single underlying idea or *concetto* that can be at once described in words and represented graphically as the generator of the architectural form. Every particular aspect of the building should follow from the *parti* and the *concetto*.

### Exempla

Gianlorenzo Bernini considered this poetic idea or *concetto* as the artist's primary task, which underlies every aspect of his artistic production. Perhaps nowhere more compactly and completely did Bernini realize the architectural *concetto*—in the form of the *bel composto*, or the “beautiful whole” that integrated all the arts—than at his church of S. Andrea al Quirinale, the place where his son famously recounted he had found his father deep in meditation, comforted there by his “least bad” work.

The Quirinal Hill in Rome, dedicated to Romulus in his guise of Quirinus (the name he assumed after his apotheosis), is the site of this chapel serving the Jesuit novitiates. The fact of S. Andrea's name being linked specifically to its site on the hill dedicated to Quirinus evokes iconographic readings of site and history that include:

1. Romulus/Quirinus had a (twin) brother, Remus, who rivaled him for the right to found a new city
2. Andrew was the brother of Peter, the first pope, who was martyred in Rome and whom Renaissance humanists considered a second Romulus
3. the bringing of the relic of Andrew's head to Rome (reunited with Peter) after the fall of Constantinople was one more reason Renaissance Rome saw herself as heir to both ancient Rome and its Byzantine successor
4. Romulus' apotheosis as Quirinus was thought, in some stories, to have occurred on the Quirinal; in any event, that hill was dedicated to him in his deified (post-apotheosis) form
5. Bernini, on the high altar of S. Andrea, shows the saint in the altar painting at the moment just before his death, with a vision of angels and brilliant light; those angels are re-presented in gilt stucco immediately above the painting, and on the dome a stucco Andrew is shown in triumphant ascent into heaven; the linked scenes are therefore of a kind of Christian apotheosis
6. the form S. Andrea presents to the street has been recognized as perhaps inspired by the so-called Temple of Romulus in the Roman Forum—where two



curved wings also frame a portico grafted onto a round drum; now, the Romulus of the temple is not the founder of Rome, but a late antique namesake (the son of the Emperor Maxentius, whose pre-mature death was memorialized by a temple and his deification); the temple was linked to the archives occupying the old library of the Forum of Vespasian, and converted to a church dedicated to Cosmas and Damian

Bernini's S. Andrea al Quirinale, for all of its Christian iconography, is thus rooted in the Roman mythology of its site. This may explain Bernini's choice of planimetric geometry: the disposition of S. Andrea's oval plan and the embracing wing/arm walls toward the street recall clearly the Temple of Romulus. Since Quirinal hill is named after Romulus who assumed the name Quirinus upon his apotheosis from that same hill, Andrew's "apotheosis" in Bernini's church recalls Romulus', and since Andrew was the brother of St. Peter, who the church often claimed had "re-founded" Rome as a Christian capital, this double, familial allusion to Rome's two founders enriches the humanist content of Bernini's otherwise Counter-Reformation conceit. Bernini may have thought the dedication to Andrew enough of a connection to warrant the deliberate allusion to the founder of Rome. He would have known the ancient building in the Forum in part because his earlier patron Pope Urban VIII was responsible for redoing and raising the pavement of the church, and creating a crypt. Until the 16th century an inscription with a dedication by Constantine was visible in the area (he was known to have rededicated many of Maxentius' works); the archives, incidentally, were the site of the famous marble map of Rome, the *Forma Urbis*. Bernini could have also known the building from coins, which seem to have shown the temple with various numbers of columns in front; the similarity between these images and the round so-called Tomb of Romulus on the via Appia is partly responsible for the association of this temple with Romulus.

Apart from the poetics of site, S. Andrea draws poetically on the dedication to a martyr of a church for young Jesuits who themselves would be often called to martyrdom in the seventeenth century; simultaneously, his dependence on the oval amphitheater form both heightens the capacity for drama in the depiction of Andrew's sacrifice painted above the altar, and alludes to the Colosseum as the site of so many Christian martyrdoms. In terms of the classical language, the deployment of the Corinthian order internally, with its polychromy, makes reference notably to the Pantheon, paradigmatic centrally planned temple and Christian church dedicated to S. Maria ad Martyres; even the red marble and Sicilian jasper evoke flesh and visceral sacrifice. St. Andrew's diagonal cross is marked in plan by the diagonal disposition of chapels, a consequence at the same time of the pilasters disposed to close the cross axis.

S. Andrea al Quirinale therefore embodies the four categories of formal and poetic analyses I am suggesting constitute the foundations of the inevitable project: Site, History, Type, and Language. Each can be described as a discrete investigation, but ultimately the project that emerges from this process synthesizes those four independent categories formally and poetically. For an artist like Bernini, that process of synthesis is simultaneous, and almost instantaneous, and it is his capacity to impart a meaningful response to all of them with an economy of means—the generative form itself, the *parti*, distills them seemingly effortlessly—that distinguishes him as a master of the arts, a worthy heir to Michelangelo. Indeed, it could be argued that Michelangelo himself never achieved the synthetic integration of the arts in any one work the way Bernini managed to do. At the same time, Bernini only represents the

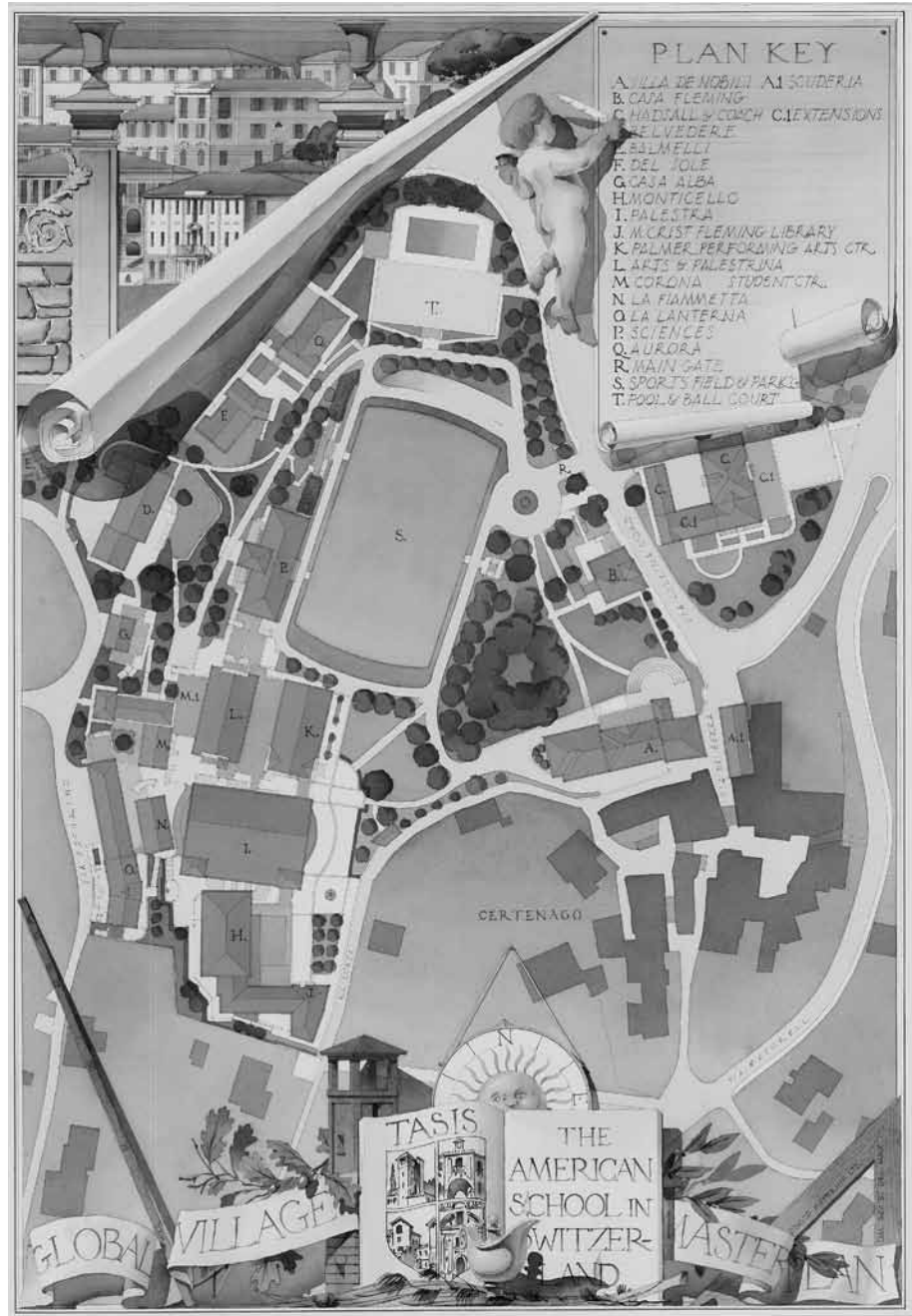
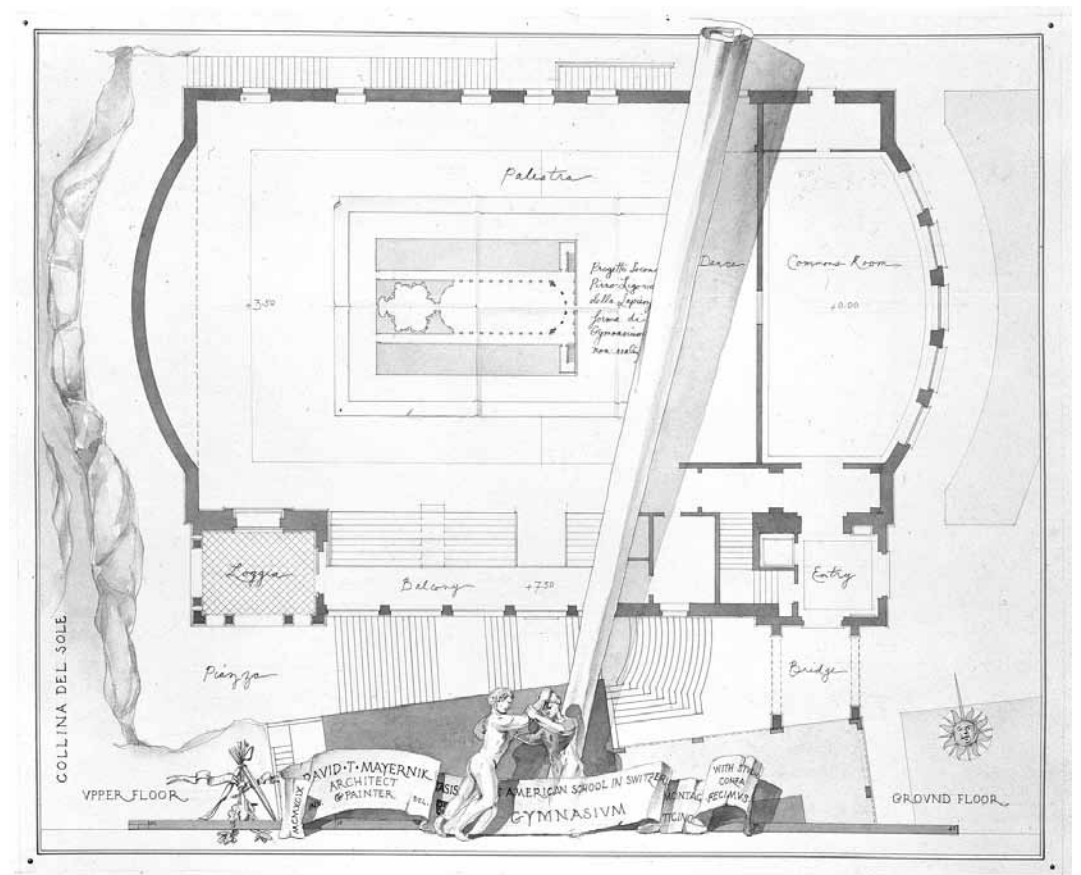


Figure 6: Analytique of the TESIS Master Plan  
 Figure 7: The Gymnasium from Above; photo Roberto Paltrinieri  
 Figure 8: View of the Master Plan, version 1997  
 Figure 9: *The Choice of Hercules* fresco by David Mayernik; photo Roberto Paltrinieri  
 Figure 10: Analytique of the Gymnasium





fullest realization of a philosophy of design that obtained throughout the humanist tradition.

In my own work I have balanced theoretical projects that articulate concepts by relatively elaborate material means (almost never available in contemporary practice) with built work that achieves a poetic dimension within much more modest means. In particular, my work for TASIS The American School In Switzerland, near Lugano, is a place where the master plan, individual buildings, and their artistic embellishment are informed by formal and poetic responses to site, history, type, and language. A brief excursus through the campus will highlight those particularly poetic dimensions that, in the aggregate, represent a model of how meaningful projects are possible in the modern realm; indeed, the meta-textual aspects of the poetics, and some of their specifics, are expressive of a uniquely modern cultural condition.

The campus plan is conceived typologically as a village, a formal idea that responds to aspects of program (diversity of building type) and site (a hillside) while poetically expressing the nature of the school as a model community. Historically, the nearby villages of Montagnola and Certenago represent civilizing models in a challenging, albeit beautiful, natural environment; the oldest buildings on campus and the nearby villages furnished much of the raw material of the articulation of the new buildings, weaving them thereby into their context. A dialogue and hierarchy between the buildings is established by a judicious use of classical and vernacular elements. The simple, figural nature of the campus buildings is balanced with their role as space-defining elements within a larger ensemble, a formal solution to the desire for density that permits the conservation of the maximum amount of open space, and a poetic expression of the role of the individual in society.

A concise explication of some of the formal and poetic inspiration for the new buildings can serve as a synopsis of their manifestation of the model process I am arguing for. The first of the new buildings, the gymnasium, derives its plan form of double exedras from Pirro Ligorio's plan for the Sapienza in Rome, a place he conceived as evoking an ancient Greek gymnasium (and in fact derived from the Roman palestra). The building's restrained Ionic exterior, juxtaposed to its rustic Tuscan interior, expresses the building's multivalent urban and programmatic roles and finds figural expression in the cycle of frescoes on the eastern exedra's façade. The outdoor stair that climbs the hillside between the gym and the existing building called Monticello arrives at an upper loggia wherein a fresco of *The Choice of Hercules* reinforces the ethical dimension of the hillside ascent and the nobility of the athlete's labors. The library, meanwhile, is developed planimetrically as both a formal terminus to the piazza at the end of the campus sequence and a "*poché*" building between Monticello and the campus edge. Its façade expresses the library's place in a multi-function building by a colossal order through the first two stories, supporting a pediment whose inscription VERUM BONUM PULCHRUM describes the contents of the library and the goals of its readers; on either side of the first floor door and its balcony images of Ars and Scientia describe the classical categorization of knowledge that the collection represents and suggest the model reader who emerges on the balcony has synthesized that knowledge in themselves. Internally, the cross-axial disposition of the reading rooms affords an unfolding experience that alludes to the capacity of books to open new horizons, while the opening of the ceiling of the reading room on axis with the entry provides a literal expansion of space analogous to the one to be painted on the entry hall's ceiling. At the Theater, pairs of Muses painted in two niches on the





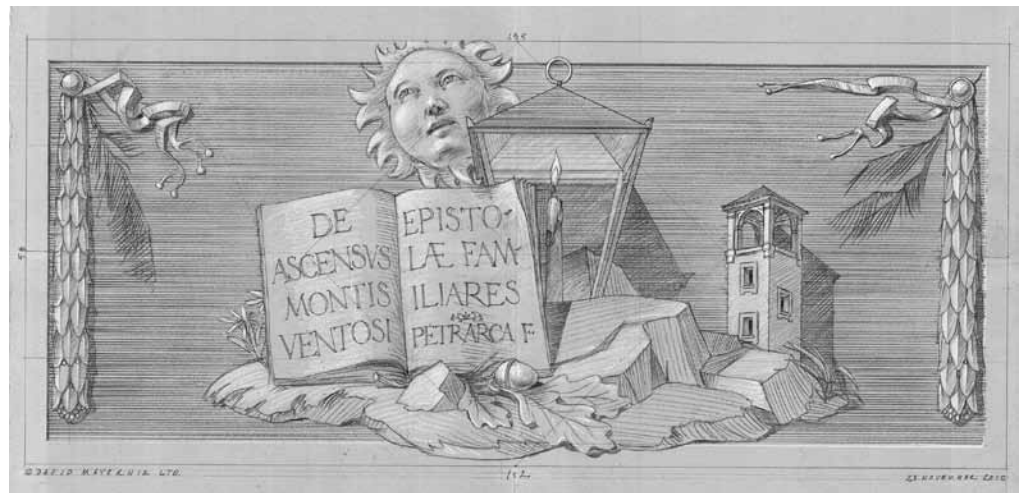
Figure 11: Facade of the TASIS Library; photo Roberto Paltrinieri  
 Figure 12: the Pritzlaff Reading Room, TASIS Library; photo Roberto Paltrinieri  
 Figure 13: TASIS Theater; photo Lorenzo Mussi  
 Figure 14: La Lanterna; author photo

exterior wall of the auditorium at once describe the events that take place within and represent the juxtaposition of opposites—rustic and refined, scholarly and artistic, formal and informal—that are manifest also in the disposition of spaces within. Over the entry door a frieze with cherubs supporting a banner with the motto *CONCORDIA DISCORDS HARMONIA EST* reinforces the resolution of opposites that the elegant lobby sequence and workaday auditorium represent. Finally, crowning the hillside is a residential and classroom building called *La Lanterna* (an allusion to its lantern and the lamp of the school's crest). Its form splays to follow the street above, but also opens to afford spectacular views of Lake Lugano below; on either side of the arched stair passage painted cornucopia spill bountiful rewards to those who have made the Herculean ascent to the top of the campus, and above a door to the classrooms a fresco of the elements of the school crest will include a book opened to Petrarch's description of his ascent of Mont Ventoux. Thus the campus' formal response to the hillside site finds an allegorical reading that reinforces the mission of the school and draws on history, type and language to reinforce and enrich the message. The inevitability of each of the projects and the campus as a whole is a consequence of a formal strategy tested and informed by a poetic one, creating the impression that it all could be made in no other way.

### Conclusion

My agenda has been to describe a design process that immunizes its results from arbitrariness. While I have illustrated the process with descriptions of historical and contemporary buildings and their poetics, the analysis process that implicitly preceded those projects is left undefined. In academics we tend to treat analysis as a discrete operation; indeed, it is sometimes taught independently of design, and this is inevitable as students assemble their skills toward becoming architects. And yet, in the case of Bernini, analysis and synthesis were simultaneous operations, which suggests analysis is not a wholly objective operation, but rather prejudiced by design intent: the designer does not analyze in a vacuum, nor read the analysis as neutral data. Instead, analysis has an aspect of discovery, of invention in the older sense of the word, a digging for information one would like to find. To do this credibly—to immunize that prejudice from the purely subjective or willful—requires culture, that critical formation of the architect as a whole person in the Vitruvian sense, knowledgeable about history and the liberal arts generally, about geography, and of course about the language of architecture. An architect thus formed is equipped to think metaphorically, to see a chapel as an amphitheater or a temple, a library as a metaphor for reading, a theater as an essay on harmony. In that world we can legitimately ask the architect “Why?”, and receive a reasonable reply; and we can then critique whether the result is an inevitable response to the intent. Without that framework architecture is mere formal display, and without that sympathy for culture in the larger sense buildings—even classical buildings—can only be self-referential objects. The return to real urbanism, the city of memory that is Rome and all the places that depend on Rome, therefore depends as much on poetics as the recovery of formal order.

Figure 15: Cartoon for Fresco,  
La Lanterna



*I admired every detail, now relishing earthly enjoyment, now lifting up my mind to higher spheres after the example of my body, and I thought it fit to look into the volume of Augustine's Confessions which I owe to your loving kindness and preserve carefully, keeping it always in my hands, in remembrance of the author as well as the donor. It is a little book of smallest size but full of infinite sweetness. I opened it with the intention of reading whatever might occur to me first: nothing, indeed, but pious and devout sentences could come to hand. I happened to hit upon the tenth book of the work. My brother stood beside me, intently expecting to hear something from Augustine on my mouth. I ask God to be my witness and my brother who was with me: Where I fixed my eyes first, it was written: "And men go to admire the high mountains, the vast floods of the sea, the huge streams of the rivers, the circumference of the ocean and the revolutions of the stars - and desert themselves." [Augustine, Confessions, x.8.15] I was stunned, I confess. I bade my brother, who wanted to hear more, not to molest me, and closed the book, angry with myself that I still admired earthly things. Long since I ought to have learned, even from pagan philosophers, that "nothing is admirable besides the mind; compared to its greatness nothing is great." [Seneca, Epistle 8.5]*

—Francesco Petrarca: "The Ascent of Mount Ventoux," *The Renaissance Philosophy of Man*, eds. E. Cassirer et al. (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1948)