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Past exchanges in the work of Romaldo Giurgola in Australia

On the occasion of his ninetieth birthday

ABSTRACT

Romaldo Giurgola brought to the design of the New Parliament House in Canberra, Australia several nuanced exchanges within the European tradition he inherited from an education in Rome, and from a long experience of making architecture in the USA and in Sweden. The vehicle for these exchanges is firstly through what Giurgola describes as an ‘itinerary’, or a structured narrative thread. Giurgola also writes of the ‘constants’ that inform his work, of the rhetorical structures of his architecture. In the early 1980s, one of Giurgola’s most significant projects was the Volvo Headquarters in Sweden. When he came to seek a model for the design of the New Parliament House, he was confronted with a new landscape, and without a real precedent for the kind of building he needed to design. He found inspiration in the work in Gothenburg and in the Swedish landscape. This paper explores several of these exchanges observed in Giurgola’s work at New Parliament House, Canberra, especially relating to the development of the building’s art program.

Past exchanges in the work of Romaldo Giurgola in Australia

Before the opening of the New Parliament House in Canberra, Australia in 1988, Romaldo Giurgola was already engaged on several levels in an exchange of cultural settings, mediating and embodying the past in his work. These settings are in part a reflection of the global nature of his enterprise, with staff and clients from many different parts of the world. Their creative interaction is impressive, not just limited to the domain of architectural production, but inclusive of those who make things. For example, Giurgola had a pivotal role in the rejuvenation of craft traditions in the commissions for his Australian projects, especially the New Parliament House and St Patrick’s Cathedral in Parramatta. These exchanges are made possible by Giurgola’s awareness of the rhetorical function of architecture. His architecture is dependent on internalised narratives that he calls an ‘itinerary’, narratives supported by allusions to past works, as well as the contemporaneous exchanges of architects, artists and those who make craft. In his article of 1979–81, ‘Notes on Buildings and Their Parts’, Giurgola wrote:

In all of these instances, architectural forms depend on the definition of an itinerary; they are forms bound to complex conditions rather than generalized assumptions, and composed in such a way that they allow a continuity between episodes and fragments. They come into being as a result of the intention that one who walks through them should feel, as in a poem or in music, as if one is in the midst of an endless environment.¹

Giurgola wrote in the 1983 Rizzoli publication of the work of his architectural firm,

1. Giurgola, 1981, pp. 172–175.

Mitchell Giurgola, of the ‘constants’ that inform his work. These include:

- (1) the definition of a place through sequence of rooms as constituent parts, (2) the language of space understood as an internal or external definition in the formulation of an itinerary, (3) resonance as an essential quality of architecture and (4) the development of an architectural aesthetic based upon a building’s accessibility, clarity and power to elucidate its meaning and relationships.²

The constants continue to inform Giurgola’s work undertaken in Australia. What Giurgola means by the term ‘resonance’ is the capacity of a work of architecture to link itself with the past, the ‘long historical traditions of people and places’, a capacity he describes as the ‘most essential quality of architecture’.³ Such resonance is also related to the capacity of a building to embody its ‘beginnings’ with a clarity of purpose. He differentiates ‘constants’ from ‘principles’ through the affirmation of the material ‘physical solutions found for a building’, rather than the focus with principles on ‘values upon which judgements are made: they tell us in architectural terms what is significant, what represents an example upon which to draw and what deserves to be a model.’⁴

The other significant exchange is indebted to Giurgola’s experience of Scandinavia. The continuing connections of Giurgola’s architecture to Scandinavian exemplars is important to the understanding of his architectural work while in Australia. Giurgola’s work in Australia also provided him the opportunity to develop narrative or episodic strategies within his projects. In these nuanced strategies, Giurgola relies upon semiotic or rhetorical terms reflected in the decorative schema within his work. In the New Parliament House in Canberra, this led to a close wedding of the architecture and the art program for the building, each reinforcing the rhetorical qualities of his architecture.

In the early 1980s, Giurgola’s office in New York was doing work all over the United States. There were also two significant projects from this time in more far-flung climes: the first was the work for Volvo (1984) in Gothenburg, Sweden, and the second, Australia’s Parliament House (1988), in Canberra. Pehr Gyllenhammar was the President of Volvo and, at that time, a young man. Volvo was one of the last of the large family companies in Sweden, and Gyllenhammar was a member of the family that held the company. He approached the Mitchell Giurgola office looking for an architect to do an extension on the Volvo factory in Chesapeake in Virginia. It was an assembly line factory, with material being assembled from parts made in Sweden. Giurgola says Gyllenhammar wanted someone who didn’t know anything about

2. Giurgola, 1983, p. 16.

3. Giurgola, 1983, p. 16.

4. Giurgola, 1983, p. 17.

factories. Gyllenhammar came to Giurgola's office, looked around and liked what he saw. Giurgola reflects:

There was a certain empathy between us, as there is with some artists when you meet them. We were really engaged in time and in the work. Several members of the office went to Sweden to study Volvo manufacture. We started to make sketches for the new plant in Virginia. We started to know people there ... it was an attractive experience. We designed the factory, and did one module of a larger project before the economy changed, and the rest wasn't built. They also had opposition from the unions when they stopped. By that time we were good friends. We went to Sweden to do the headquarters of Volvo, and then a masterplan for their factories at Gothenburg.⁵

Giurgola's office found working in Sweden difficult, feeling some prejudice towards a capitalist firm employing foreign architects in a country with a dominant socialist ethos. Giurgola observed that the exception to this was the England-based architect Ralph Erskine, who was part-Scandinavian and described by Giurgola as being 'very "quirky" as you say in Australia'.⁶ Giurgola said:

I learned a lot from my experience in Sweden. I am very grateful to them. The press wasn't very good — they criticised all that. I wrote at this time the article titled 'The Discrete Charms of the Bourgeoisie'. The paper wrote a critical article on me using the same title, and it related to my patronage by capitalists and so on. Swedes like to know what is going on, while here there is more general acceptance of matters.

'The Discrete Charms of the Bourgeoisie' was a significant riposte to the architecture of the architects known as the 'New York Whites'. These included Peter Eisenman, Michael Graves, John Hejduk, Charles Gwathmey, and Richard Meier, whose work was the subject of an exhibition at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, organised by Arthur Drexler in 1967. Their work was subsequently published by MoMA in a 'whites' catalogue of 1972.⁷ In the May 1973 issue of *Architectural Forum*, an edition of essays called 'Five on Five', written by architects Romaldo Giurgola, Allan Greenberg, Charles Moore, Jaquelin T Robertson, and Robert AM Stern, was published. As a group, they became known as the 'Grays'. 'The Discrete Charms of the Bourgeoisie' was critical of the lack of social and political engagement in an architecture stressing largely formal qualities, and whose range of work was dominated by the commissioned beachhouses for a wealthy clientele on Long Island. It is not surprising that Giurgola found himself an easy critical target in Sweden as the architect for one of the wealthiest families in Europe.

5. Giurgola, 2000.

6. Giurgola, 2000.

7. Museum of Modern Art, New York, 1972.

One of the most productive outcomes from the Volvo project was the cultural exchange between Gyllenhammar, Giurgola and his staff. Gyllenhammar commissioned the firm Mitchell Giurgola to undertake the design of a new headquarters in Sweden. He argued that the architects should make the headquarters building like a villa, and not like an office building. Giurgola remembers that Gyllenhammar anticipated guests visiting, and wanted to be able to demonstrate the Volvo company's social programs, as well as the sophistication of its robotic operations. Giurgola said that:

We did the work with another architect, Öve Svärd, for a factory on the coast down on the Baltic in Kalmer, with a production line going in a curve around a central area where all the pieces for manufacture were stored. The assembly teams were independent units. It was quite complicated, and it needed buffers, or a waiting area where the car could be stored while team members finished one stage of the work before commencing another. We adopted the same principle in a linear rather than a circular way in the States. This allowed the buffer to be more easily accommodated.⁸

Giurgola observed that the use of the image of a villa changed the office building's relation to the landscape, saying: 'The light in Sweden is different from here. It is diffuse, very "white," even in summer. This is especially when there is fog. When the light it hits the surface of a wall, it is really wonderful.'⁹ Giurgola on several occasions has made a reference to the unique qualities of light in Venice, to where his mother retired, and the buildings of his youth in Rome. The rooms in Venice have windows to the edge of the room, not in the centre, which casts light raking across the walls. By comparison, the windows in Rome are centred, leaving dark shadows in the corners of the room. Of the Volvo Headquarters, Giurgola says:

That is why the Scandinavians like the window near the edge of the wall, not in the centre ... I did this building with that in mind. In Scandinavia it is as if the building is painted into the atmosphere ... so I introduced colour into that. The treatment of the wall, and the introduction of stonework into the wall helped to introduce stone into the Parliament into a wall otherwise rendered. There are continuous grey days in Sweden ... the sky is grey, or there is fog. The colour of the wall is the same colour as the sky. In Sweden you see villas in the landscape painted red or yellow. The introduction of colour is like painting a building in red or yellow into the landscape. You can also make a design with it. At the

8. Giurgola and his office also undertook with Öve Svärd an extension to an existing factory in Uddevalla near Gothenburg, whose planning sought to overcome the boredom of Fordist production lines, with teams moving from space to space with the vehicle being constructed. See: Giurgola, 2000.

9. Giurgola, 2000.

corners you can introduce a dark marble ... like a colour introduced into a canvas.¹⁰

It is with this background at the conclusion of the work in Sweden that Mitchell Giurgola entered the competition for Parliament House in Canberra. Other exchanges were also at work in the office at the time: Mitchell Giurgola were finishing a factory at Uddevalla in Sweden, and at that time were working with architect Öve Svärd (they generally had close contact with the profession in Sweden). The office was also engaged to undertake the master-planning of a section of Gothenburg, which became very familiar to Giurgola. It was a very compact city, with 300,000 people, about the same as Canberra. Giurgola reflects that Gothenburg was like an old Dutch town, and extraordinarily well built. Giurgola's particular focus was in urban design projects in areas by the Lake. He says they were not realised, but influenced later work that went on there.

The kind of exchanges that took place also affected the staff who worked in Sweden, and who came to Canberra when Giurgola moved there, such as the architect Ann Cleary, who worked on the Parliament project and went on to teach at the University of Canberra. Another person who brought some of the lessons from Sweden was a principal of the Mitchell Giurgola office from New York, Pamille Berg. Giurgola pays tribute to Berg's coordination of the art program for Volvo. She managed to have the company finance art and craft around Västergötland, and Volvo asked Berg to stay in Sweden. However, she came back with Giurgola's office to live in Canberra, and her contribution to the art program of the Parliament has been immense.

Parliament House, Canberra

Giurgola acknowledges that the design of the Parliament in Canberra was assisted by lessons learned working with Volvo, and the design and cultural environment that supported this work. Before undertaking the design of the Parliament, as Giurgola had never seen anything of Australian life, he first read Patrick White, noting: 'When I do something like this I try to read books, especially novelists. I found that better than city photographs and the like. It gives you an image of the place through description, through events that take place.'¹¹ Giurgola also read *Voss*, which he considers White's masterpiece: 'I enjoyed his descriptions of sun-burned plains. Then there was the brief that came from the competition, with photographs and so forth. Then there was the sentimental remembrance of Quaroni, of all people.'¹²

Ludovico Quaroni (1911–87) was one of Giurgola's teachers at La Sapienza University in Rome. He gave lectures at the university just after the Second World

10. Giurgola further commented in 2010: 'You don't see the volume of the thing ... you see the colour. The use of colour always says "welcome" — it has a presence. I started to work with marble in a building all masqueraded by a kind of fog.'

11. Giurgola, 2000.

12. Giurgola, 2000.

War, and after lecturing he showed Giurgola a plan of the city of Canberra by Walter Burley Griffin. The plan stuck in Giurgola's mind, and he was impressed with 'its geometry, its order between the landscape'. He further noted that: 'The drawings of Burley Griffin were always fascinating.'¹³ Burley Griffin's work always provoked the question when Giurgola was undertaking the competition: 'How do you work with the landscape?'

When asked about the rhetorical content of architecture, especially of the Parliament in a civic setting, Giurgola's response was to suggest that in architecture rhetoric should 'not be a rhetoric based on an abstract emphasis'.¹⁴ He sees the interpretation of architecture as necessarily having a local measure, a *misura*,¹⁵ what Alberti called 'just proportion':

The past is something physically having a *misura* — a measure. This is the first thing you learn in architecture school. A *misura* is limit that is also the conception of measure of the whole thing. If you have not accounted for the *misura* as an architect, then you have not done your job. It is a limit, a stop, from which once you have reached in your design you cannot go beyond, as you do not have the measure of time. What you do today does not necessarily last forever. A city does not die immediately.¹⁶

Giurgola sees limit in an experiential sense: 'The sense of limit is not an absolute, it is when you have exhausted the necessity of reaching a point, the second step, not made *a priori*.'¹⁷ Exchanges with the past are physically charged, Giurgola bringing a phenomenological character to interpretation; '*La misura*, is the same as *senso*, which can be translated as "the feeling", with affinities to "sensual", the material of building considered as tangible. This notion has a little more presence than in English, with a sense of the whole setting.'¹⁸

With the design of the New Parliament House, Giurgola was conscious of the lack of exemplars on which he had to draw. Much of the inspiration for the office areas of the Parliament can be seen, not in other Parliaments, but in the villa-inspired scale of the Volvo headquarters. Giurgola observed that 'We designed it in New York without other exemplars to draw from ... There were long discussions ... it was not an Opera House ... there was no example really of a new Parliament.'¹⁹ However, there was direct local knowledge provided by Rick Thorpe, whose partnership with Mitchell and Giurgola became MGT. Thorpe had grown up in the town of Tumut, not far from Canberra, and knew the city. Some of the main participants at that time apart from the principals of the firm were Hal Guida and Pamille Berg in New York, as well as John

13. Giurgola, 2000.

14. Giurgola, 2009.

15. Purini, 2008.

16. Giurgola, 2009.

17. Giurgola, 2009.

18. Giurgola, 2009.

19. Giurgola, 2000.

Kurz and Fred Foot. Others who came a little later also made a significant contribution, such as Tim Halden-Brown, and Steve Moseley, who with Hal Guida subsequently established the architectural office Guida Moseley Brown in Canberra, undertaking large commercial and residential projects in the region and in Asia.

It was Berg's task to steer the art program funded by the Parliament project. There were a few well-known artists commissioned, such as Arthur Boyd and Marea Gazzard. An Art Advisory Committee was established to find appropriate artists. The program budgeted \$13 million for more than sixty commissions involving over 200 artists and craftspeople, as well as over 2,500 acquisitions of individual works. Berg observed that this was an 'astonishing opportunity', and wrote that the Committee 'approached that process through looking for artists who were at the right moment in their creative lives for a major "leap"'.²⁰ Berg explained in 1994 that

This potential 'leap' expressed itself in numerous ways, whether through working in an entirely new medium in a cross-disciplinary way, as in painters such as Lesley Dumbrell designing for hand-woven rugs, or through craftspeople who normally produce 'one-off' designs working in isolation, suddenly having the opportunity to experiment with the economics and scale of limited production runs of hand-made benches. Rather than arrogantly conceiving of the ideas of what should be made, and then trying to find the right artists to do the work, we attempted to educate ourselves in the riches of 'who was available in Australia to do what', and then to find the synthesis of opportunities within the building design and the wonderful possibilities shown by the contemporary work of artists and craftspeople.²¹

Those who later came to prominence through this collaborative program include weaver Kay Lawrence, jeweller and sculptor Robin Blau, sculptors and marquetry artists Tony Bishop and Michael Retter, mosaic Papunya artist Michael Tjakamarra Nelson, and rug artist Liz Nettleton (whose work included designs by John Firth Smith, Alan Leach Jones, Nola Jones and Jenny Kee).²² Significant furniture designers and craftsmen on the project were David Emery and Kevin Perkins, the latter named by Craft Australia as an Australian 'Living Treasure' in 2008–10. Perkins and Blau later collaborated with Giurgola on the Parramatta Cathedral, an exchange reinforcing the vibrancy of Australia's craft traditions.

The work of these artists and craftspeople was tasked to fit harmoniously within Giurgola's schema for the architecture, and became one of the major vehicles for articulating the rhetorical narratives he established, often around the symbolic charge of landscape. Publications such as *Expressing Australia: art in Parliament House* (1989), focus on this theme, turning the colours of Westminster into the red and green

20. Berg, 1994, p. 18.

21. Berg, 1994, p. 18.

22. Berg, 1994, p. 19.

of the Australian bush.²³ The use of Australian timbers, such as Kevin Perkin's fitting of the Prime Ministerial offices in Huon pine, becomes seen as emblematic of our 'national character'.²⁴ For Giurgola, the rhetorical domain of his architecture is wedded to narrative constructions, seen in the progressive imagery of the decorative schema of the Parliament, a drawing upon the long tradition since Vitruvius of the transition of *phusis* to *nomos*, from the natural world to the world of culture. Giurgola always shies away from the politically direct rhetorical flourish:

For the Parliament, I remember once we made a comparison between democracy and government by the people, with closeness to the land ... I forget the exact wording, but the sense was that the [Parliament] building should always emerge from the people without an ideological context. This is why the building nested into the hill.²⁵

Giurgola brought a new sensibility to the perception of Canberra, due to his experience of Rome. He articulates experience of the past in terms of mnemonic fragments in the landscape. He commented:

Canberra is a lot like Rome in many ways, in a setting of hills. Rome was always a capital because of the church, and it was funny, because it was dealing with the rest of the world rather than with Rome itself. Their most important paper, *Osservatore Romano*, was an international paper, even during the Fascist period. The Rome that I knew as a young man was full of the natural world. Imagine what it must have been like in 1600, with vast spaces of natural ground and farms between the walls. There was a farm-house I remember near the Circus Maximus, which had some decoration on the front of it characteristic of rural farmhouses. It had been built all around, but this fragment of the former rural world was still there. Canberra has the same opportunity as Rome. The natural world intersects with the built world, just as in Rome. There is Walter Burley Griffin's plan. It was said that the inspiration for the Parliament came from the plan of Griffin's road geometries. The order there was given. But my architecture has a lot to do with the land ... the way the buildings sit in the landscape and respond to it.²⁶

In Giurgola's work, significant exchanges of a cultural kind take place through a considered response to the landscape, and the art program for the Parliament was responsive to this central theme in Giurgola's architectural work and in his writings. He interpreted the qualities of place in Sweden through recalling the way the bright reds and yellows of rural architecture in the snow that visually alleviate the long winter. He said of ancient Greek architecture, that 'because they developed the introduction of materials and their detailing, such as mouldings and other elements,

23. Parliament House Construction Authority, 1989.

24. Parliament House Construction Authority, 1986, p. 31.

25. Giurgola, 2000.

26. Giurgola, 2000.

that have a symbolic depth, and a certain response in their landscape. They can do this effectively even in small buildings, such as at Delphi.²⁷ Architecture mediates a landscape, giving it a voice within which architecture can be made, and it is this sensibility that he translates into the design of Australia's New Parliament House, which recovers or remembers the landscape of the former Capital Hill.

The means to enact such exchanges in Giurgola's architecture is through fragment, which maintains an allusive and aphoristic quality.²⁸ Giurgola wrote: 'We think of architecture very much as a coming together, in space, of fragments of things.'²⁹ He also quipped: 'You see, architects only make signs.'³⁰

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27. Giurgola, 2000.

28. Dalibor Vesely has commented on this phenomenon. He writes: 'The parallel between the nature of modern situation and the nature of aphorism is striking. In both cases, fragments are endowed with meanings and values once resident in the whole. It is by virtue of an immanent, that is to say, self-conscious interpretation that they cease to be fragments rather than by belief in a transcendent whole. See: Vesely, 1966, p. 12.

29. Giurgola, 1989, p. 27. Giurgola also wrote: 'The programs that generate buildings today involve a variety of operations within them, so that rather than a self contained, fixed entity of "building type," we should talk of "fragments": we should speak of programs for life which need a place in which to evolve. The inner structure of a building fragment will be as valid and will extend as far as its program extends, its geometry gradually becoming involved with programs and elements of other sites. It will be part of a continuum of diversified expressions as posed by different intentions, programs, and designs.' See: Giurgola, 1981, p. 174.

30. Giurgola, 1989, p. 27.

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