

# **Inside/Outside: The Interior Façade as the Stage of the Architectural and Urban In-between**

## **Abstract**

The archetypal figure of the enclosure represents the primordial action of inhabiting interior space: this construction creates an inside, as opposed to the outside, and at the same time defines a line (the enclosure) both imaginary and tectonic, that creates the threshold between interior and exterior, and the space of the intermediate and of the in-between. The façade, not only a line or a surface, has this role, containing the realm of the architectural scale and the urban scale, but also playing the role of a theatrical “fixed stage of the vicissitudes of man:” and this happens not only in the urban sphere (the street, the courtyard, the piazza) but also inside the building. Since Renaissance, in fact, theatrical action is staged bringing the outside world inside the interior. In theaters, the city is recreated inside the building as a montage of urban elements (e.g. the façade, the street, the square) that define the stage and the auditorium. Using this historical and theoretical framework the paper explores some contemporary projects where the montage and the reinvention of interior façades bring and transfigure the city inside the building as a stage for everyday life activities, practices, and rituals. These interiors are defined by thresholds and inbetween spaces both real and imaginary, ambiguous metaphors and allegories of openness, suspended between open and close, inside and outside, private and public.

## **Keywords**

Façade, Theater, Interior, Renaissance, City

## Introduction

The archetypal figure of the enclosure may represent the primordial action of inhabiting interior space: this construction creates an inside, and, by consequence and definition, an outside, and a line (the enclosure) both imaginary and tectonic, that creates “not boundaries, but the space of the intermediate. A figure both in space and in time, the threshold, which is in the middle, is an interval between things. A medium, in a way, that by allowing entry, opens up the possibility of being in-between” (Teyssot 2013, p. 87-88). This threshold is the façade and its specific articulation defines the degree of openness between inside and outside, which, in the urban environment means between building and city, inducing also the “simultaneous awareness of what is significant on either side. An in-between space in this sense provides the common ground where conflicting polarities can again become twin phenomena” (Van Eyck 1962, p. 602). *natatio*

The concept of the façade as a thick threshold and in-between space is not limited, then, to the line (in plan) or the surface (in elevation). As expressed in past investigations,<sup>1</sup> it can be an inhabited space through which it is possible to experience the relationship between interior and exterior, between private and public, architecture and city: not only through the physical movement of going inside, stepping outside, walking through, but also through the act of staying,

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<sup>1</sup> My Ph.D. dissertation at University Iuav of Venice focused on the theme of the “inhabited façade” in the work of Le Corbusier. Excerpts of this research, further developed over the years, have been presented at the 106<sup>th</sup> ACSA Annual Meeting, in Denver (USA), in March 2018, and published in Martinelli, P.M., 2020. Inside the façade: the inhabited space between domestic and urban realms. *Journal of Interior Design* 45 (2), 55-75.

living, and enjoying it as a space and a place that allows relationships, and even performances, between inside and outside (Martinelli 2020). This is what Sheila O'Donnel defines as "the theatrical character of the in-between," of those spaces between the open street and the indoor rooms "that anticipate the play, that prepare us for the work, places of coming and going, accommodating stillness and solitary onlooking." These spaces, O'Donnel argues, "are the spaces through which a building introduces itself, their function is to welcome, releasing us from a world overfocused on intensity of purpose. The key point is their in-betweenness: a loose fit between public and private, between old and new, between inside and outside, and a comfort in occupation" (O'Donnel 2021).

The façade and the spaces that it defines (both exterior and interior) assume the theatrical role of a backdrop for the performances of our everyday life, keeping together the human scale of the experience, the architectural scale of the building, the urban scale of the street and the city.

This essay focuses on the dialogues between these polarities and dichotomies as well as ways in which they blur one into the other as, for example, is represented by René Magritte's 1936 painting "L'Éloge de la dialectique," ("In Praise of Dialectics"). Magritte's painting depicts the open window of a house, wide open so that the viewer can see inside. Inside, we see (at a smaller scale) the façade of the same house, with the same colors, the same details, and the same windows. The theme of Magritte's house-inside-the-house, here expressed on canvas (Boyer 1984), addresses an important aspect of architectural and urban composition and evokes the Renaissance idea of the "house as a small city, the city as a large house." In turn, Magritte celebrates

the dialectics, mentioned in the painting's title, between scales, between public (the bigger house) and private (the smaller one,) reality and its representation, built and imagined space, open and closed, and inside and outside. The staged character of this image is also essential within this context because through the lens of the theatrical conception of life and space that the painting evokes, it is possible to investigate, through theoretical investigations and the analysis and interpretation of several case studies, an idea of the interior that transcends the scales and the practices of our experience and intertwines with architectural and urban realms. If the façade defines the degrees of openness of a building and its performances between domestic and urban, the action of bringing it within the interior, as a whole or fragment, represents a way to open and reinvent the interior as a stage. This notion, as expressed by Ludovico Zorzi in his studies on theatrical representation, "represents the miracle of an unfathomable urban dimension (...) where past and future stop in a metaphysical time," that "tells us that in the well-ordered space of the mind, life is theater" (Zorzi 1977, p. 31-32. Translated from Italian by the author).

Conceived as the insertion, or interior juxtaposition, of a building inside a building, Magritte's painting is also a perfect application of the compositional strategy of montage that I analyzed, in this paper, through examples from the Renaissance and contemporary architecture.

In an essay about montage and construction in architecture, Italian architect and academic Gianugo Polesello writes, "Construction needs unity, (...) construction is an operation, simple or complex, that aims to unity. Montage is an essential part of this process of construction. We can say," he pointed out, "that construction/composition is the result of the process of montage of

elements/parts. Which can be made of the same material, characterized by homogeneity, or could be heterogeneous. Or they could belong to different and distinct categories of ‘things’, coexisting in the unitary world of architecture” (Polesello 2000, p. 2. Translated from Italian by the author), such as the tectonic grid system opposed to the free-form figure of flowing space in the work of Le Corbusier and Mies. Or, he continues, like Picasso’s sculptures, conceived as the montage of signs belonging to different realms, like the bull’s head, made of a seat and the handlebars of a bicycle.

According to this interpretation, montage is strongly related to the concept of construction and building techniques (the domain of architecture and engineering), and to the spatial composition of elements (the sphere of architecture and interior design/architecture). This relation is clear in all the phases of building construction but is also essential in the moment of the invention and conception of an architectural and spatial idea, as it will be evident in the case studies I will discuss in the following pages. The first series of examples belong to Renaissance, when montage was an essential compositional method in architectural practice, whereas the final part of the essay investigates examples designed and built in Europe and in the USA in the late 1970s and 1980s, when montage, collage, and capriccio became relevant design strategies in the architectural discourse, along with the rediscovery of metaphor, symbol, allegory, and figurative expression.

## **The City Inside**

In an essay published in 1980, Aldo Rossi describes the project for the elementary school at Fagnano Olona, completed in 1976, and openly declares the strong connection between the urban and domestic dimensions:

This comparison between the form of the house and the form of the city is for me quite important and complete, since reinforces an analogy and a continuous transition and filter between the life of men in the city and the life of men in the public or private dwelling: which means that the hallway is a street, and the courtyard is a square. I believe that this connection between building and city, this projection of the urban universe inside a single urban artifact is a fundamental principle of architecture (Testi 1980, p. 158. Translated from Italian by the author).

The other fundamental principle in Rossi's poetics is defined in a statement he elaborated on in his seminal book *The Architecture of the City*:

Architecture, attesting to the tastes and attitudes of generations, to public events and private tragedies, to new and old facts, is the fixed stage for human events. The collective and the private, society and the individual, balance and confront one another in the city (Rossi 1984, p. 22).

Therefore, through such analogical reasonings, the architectural interior is informed by the architecture of the city as a backdrop and stage for the plays and performances of life, and as well as a repository of individual and collective memory.

The city, in Rossi's reflections, is a constant presence in the architectural interior.

Even if it is merely a vision from a window, as we can see in the sketch "Milanese Interior with Person observing the Duomo with Fog" (1989) where a

room is furnished with a red couch, a lamp, a painting on the wall, and a window is open overlooking the Duomo of Milan.

The presence of the city is stronger in another sketch, “Milanese Interior with the Couch” (1988) where the same interior elements are visible (couch, lamp, painting), but not the window. The opening is now from floor to ceiling, the view of the Duomo and the high-rise buildings is not framed as something to look at, but is part of the interior as one of the elevations of the room, almost as a theatrical scenery installed within the interior.

It is noteworthy to note the origins of this approach, which overlaps the idea of the analogy between architectural interior space and urban space (the room is a square, the hallway is a street) and the intention of bringing within the architectural space the elements of the city, using theatricality as the intellectual and pragmatic tools of design.

As pointed out in recent investigations by Dagmar Weston,<sup>2</sup> in Imperial Rome the façades of palaces were used as the model for the illusionistic mural paintings inside the houses, such as the House of Augustus in Rome. Even imaginary theatrical *scenae frons* became very popular as decorative motifs inside the houses, as we can see in the remains of Pompeii’s urban fabric, where variations on the theme of the theater stage evoke fragments of imaginary cities, populated by human figures, framed inside *aediculae* and columns, almost ready to enter the rooms as in a domestic theatrical play.

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<sup>2</sup> Prof. Weston presented her research “The Roman Theatre’s *scenae frons* as Thematic Edifice” at the Frascari Symposium V “Theatres of Architectural Imagination” (May 27-29, 2022), organized by the Faculty of Architecture, University of Manitoba and the Centre of Design, Université du Québec à Montréal.

(Figure 1: House of Augustus, Room of the Masks)

The insertion of an urban façade (of a palace, or, better, of its transfiguration in theatrical terms: the *scenae frons*) into an interior space was not only limited to the private domestic sphere. One remarkable example of this approach is visible in one of the most popular public facilities in Imperial Roman times, the Baths, and in particular in one of its largest spaces: the *natatio*, the huge open-air swimming pool. The interior wall of the *natatio nymphaeum* (that now survives as a ruin, without any decorative elements) of the Caracalla Baths in Rome was conceived as a façade decorated with columns, niches, windows, statues whose “architectural sources and prototypes appear to be the stage buildings of Roman theaters (...) and monumental civic *nymphaea*” or even the Septizodium, a celebratory building that was located nearby the Baths (Ghenseimer 2018, pp. 192-193). The idea of bringing inside a space an urban fragment that also evokes a theatrical intention seems “to have been an innovation on the part of Caracalla and his architect in terms of Roman bath architecture” (Ghenseimer 2018, p. 204). Simultaneously it reveals the celebratory intention of this interior façade, and the need for a theatrical backdrop for the gathering of the community and the representation of the self (Goffman 1956) implicit in the rituals of collective bathing. “Roman baths become opportunity centers of sorts, places where a variety of people could meet, bathe, chat, snack, drink, and relax” (Fagan 1999, p. 10), as in a square or a *piazza*, surrounded by building and palaces.



## **The Theater inside the City/The City inside the Theater**

In terms of theatricality, it is well-known that the theatrical representation belongs to the city far earlier than its expression and realization as an architectural form. As Bernard Rudofsky points out, always “the street is where the action is (...), the street itself has been the great world theater. Drama and comedy, both spontaneous and contrived, were supplied by daily life” (Rudofsky 1969, p. 123). On the streets, in the open air, with real buildings as a backdrop, takes place, even in contemporary times, the spontaneous representation of the citizens’ life with funerals, weddings, religious processions and secular festivities and triumphs, and the theatrical plays of actors and dancers. Theater is significant in classical culture: for instance, as Lisa Landrum (2016) argues, in ancient Greece the concept of theatricality relates to the practice and process of knowledge that involved the capacity of “seeing what things are” (during a period of traveling to foreign places) and the moment of performing this knowledge in theatrical settings. Theater informed Renaissance interpretation of the world (Curtius 1983, p. 138-144), as a real performance (set in the city fabric) and a conceptual idea of the human existence. In Florence, for instance, the Uffizi palace and its *piazza* can be read as theater and stage (Fleming 2006). In Venice, according to recent investigations, “anyone who enters a Venetian *campo* (small square) is subconsciously aware of the scenic effect of the public space, struck by a sense of having stepped onto a stage” (Bürklin 2002, p. 15). Similarly, in Venice the system of the Scuola Grande, the church and public spaces (*calli* – narrow alleys – and *campi* – small squares) organize the dramaturgy of the experience of public space (Kleine 2018, p. 14-67). Even Le Corbusier, when in 1934 he

attended the representation of *The Merchant of Venice*, in an open-air theater arranged in Campo San Trovaso, understood the theatrical character of the city. “I can assure you: it has been extraordinary, staggering, to attend that play,” he said at a conference on theater and dramaturgy, in 1948. “I got crazy, in a sort of fantastic unreal status. (...) There are some mathematical places of consonances that I would call places of visual acoustics, places where things are crucial” (Le Corbusier 1950, pp. 154-155. Translated from French by the author).

This character of the urban environment, interpreted as a theatrical stage, also informed the representation of the city and the lives of its citizens. Many examples can be analysed, in this regard. In “The Miracle of the Cross at the Ponte di Rialto” (c. 1496), by Vittore Carpaccio, the “theatrical action” of the miracle takes place in Venice, on an elevated loggia, conceived as a stage, while the spectators attend on the sidewalks facing the water (the *fondamenta*), on the *gondolas* on the canal, or even on the wooden Rialto bridge (later rebuilt in stone) on the background. In Pietro Perugino’s “The Miracles of San Bernardino. Miracle baby born with one dead” (1473), and Piero Della Francesca’s “Flagellation” (1455-1460), which both share a similar spatial composition, architecture is represented as a “fixed stage for human events,” and as an ambiguous theatrical stage which is an interior with strong relations with the exterior.

Even earlier than these examples, the backdrop of the “Miracle of San Zenobio,” by Domenico Veneziano, is represented as an urban street with overlooking buildings: the painting dates to 1445, a century earlier than

Sebastiano Serlio's codification of stage design as a "reinvention" of urban space (Magagnato 1951).

(Figure 2: Domenico Veneziano, Miracle of San Zenobio)

At this point, it is important to highlight that the word "scene," according to Renaissance scholar Leone de' Sommi, derives from the Hebrew *scèhonà*, which means "street with several buildings" (de' Sommi 1968, p. 14.

Translated from Italian by the author). Fragments of urban contexts, streets, buildings, and tiny squares constitute the Renaissance theatrical space that Serlio, Palladio and Scamozzi theorize and build (Zorzi 1977).

These aspects, not by accident, in my opinion, informed the activity of a famed architect from the Veneto Region, Andrea Palladio. Traces of this idea of the world informed by theatricality are visible in his projects for the villas commissioned by Venetian aristocrats, which were complex buildings that kept together the functions of agricultural production and territorial control and the need to affirm and communicate the elevated social standings of their inhabitants. This much is evidenced in Palladio's writings in which he describes the core space of the villa as an actual theatrical apparatus for acting and seeing what is represented:

The halls serve for feasts, entertainments and decorations, for comedies, weddings, and such like recreations; and therefore these places ought to be much larger than the others, and to have the most capacious form, to the end that many persons may be therein commodiously placed, and see whatever is done there (Palladio 1965, p. 27).

The hall becomes a square, a *piazza*, a Venetian *campo*. Not by accident, in my opinion, in the Villa Pisani, Bagnolo, in the countryside near Vicenza, the central hall is defined by interior façades designed with rectangular and thermal windows even if they do not look out, since they enclose interior spaces. The composition and elements of the external elevation are recreated inside the building, almost with the intention of evoking an interior “hall-as-*piazza/campo*” where receptions and celebrations can take place, where people can see and be seen, like that of a public urban space.

The villa, designed as a theatrical stage, becomes a means to represent, even in the countryside, the wealth and the magnificence of urban life, as playwright Carlo Goldoni wrote, emphasizing a costume still very common in 1700s: “The ‘villeggianti’ (vacationers who spent some time in the villas) bring with them, in the countryside, the pomp and the turmoil of the city, ruining the pleasure of peasants and shepherds, who learn the misery and arrogance of their masters” (Goldoni, p. 2).

(Figure 3: Andrea Palladio, Villa Pisani)

Likewise, in Palladio’s project for the Olympic Theater, the theatrical action takes place inside an existing building, in which is inserted the Vitruvian theatrical archetype codified by Vitruvius (slightly distorted and adapted to the existing envelope of the building: see the diagrams in Magagnato 1992, pp. 19-23). In front of the auditorium, the *scenae frons* is designed as a triumphal arch, or the façade of a palace.

Architectural historian Licisco Magagnato argues that Palladio wanted to recreate on the stage an urban public space defined, as the Greek and Roman squares, by porticoes where people could stand and watch the theatrical representations, like the ones described in the *Four Books*. Magagnato even mentions Renaissance poet and dramatist Angelo Ingegneri, for whom the stage of the Olympic Theater could be interpreted as a *piazza*, a street, or another kind of public urban space, and the *scenae frons* as the urban loggia, or the classical *peristylum*, that defines this ideal square where the actions and performances take place (Magagnato 1992): “an architectural curtain behind which move and change the perspectives of the *periaktoi*” (Magagnato 1951, p. 218), realized as a system of urban streets, almost a fragment of the city that Palladio was building, with several private palaces and the Basilica, in Vicenza. The montage of these urban fragments, in particular the façade/loggia on the stage, within the building ideally transforms the interior into a metaphorical exterior. The existing building’s envelope and ceiling, painted as a cloudy blue sky, dematerialize in the spectator’s experience. The enclosed space of the theater becomes an open space *par excellence*, a square in the city of Vicenza. Similarly, in the Teatro all’Antica (Theater in the style of the ancients), in Sabbioneta, designed by Vincenzo Scamozzi at the end of the sixteenth century (Barbieri 1952; Mazzoni and Guaita 1985; Paolucci and Maffezzoli 1993) a fragment of an imaginary city is recreated on stage, like in the Olympic Theater. Views of Rome’s Capitol and Castel Sant’Angelo are painted on the sides of the stage, ideally transforming the interior of the theater into a fragment of Rome’s ideal urban fabric. These paintings, as Stefano Mazzoni asserts, “bring our attention to the real/symbolic value of the scenographic motif of the

‘urban scene,’ an essential element in the development of the theater of the fifteenth and sixteenth-century” (Mazzoni and Guaita 1985, p. 74. Translated from Italian by the author). And this urban scene is both real (Rome, with its representations) and ideal: or, better, it reflects the “ideal city” taking shape outside the building, Sabbioneta.

On the theatre, Tommaso Temanza writes that “the *proscenium*, and the perspectives of the buildings represent a huge *piazza*, with a very noble street in the middle, and some others on one side and the other, with many and different buildings made of wood, colored to resemble real buildings” (Temanza 1778, p. 434. Translated from Italian by the author). And the auditorium, like in the Olympic Theater in Vicenza, is surrounded by a light airy loggia with columns and statues: another urban fragment, a classical *peristylum*.

In the Farnese Theater, in Parma, built in the early seventeenth-century inside the existing Palazzo Farnese, the auditorium is also defined by an urban element: not by a colonnade, as seen in Palladio’s and Scamozzi’s theaters, but by a two-story arcade which is an accurate wooden replica of the façade of the Palladian Basilica, in Vicenza (Ronconi *et al.* 1992; Di Palma 2001).

The first iteration of the project, “with its architectonic rigor, is extremely faithful to its Palladian model, but is at the same time revolutionary, with its plan for boxes in corridors for the entire length of the loggias” (Dell’Acqua 1992, p. 339). As the façade of Basilica in Vicenza defines the piazza, in the Farnese theater the interior wooden façade becomes like a building, within a building, that defines the public space where audiences sit to watch the theatrical performances on stage. Here we see the overlapping of real and metaphysical places: a reversal and weaving of terms and meaning, as noted by

Kurt W. Foster, where “the artificial townscapes were the favorite theater set and real townscapes were transformed and lavishly adorned for festive entries and processions” (Forster 1977, p. 85).

Following the evolution of the theater type, during the seventeenth-century we see that the *cavea* is realized as a vertical montage of loggias, the actual urban façade of a multi-story imaginary collective building open towards the public and collective space of the stage (as we know, a reinvention of the urban square or “street where the action is,” paraphrasing again Rudofsky). This architectural composition also becomes an opportunity for performance and display (of wealth and status) even for the audience, as in the extraordinary example of Municipal Theater, in Bologna (1754-1763), designed by Antonio Galli da Bibbiena. As eighteenth-century intellectual Jacopo Riccati wrote, “in the theater every box is like the home of the spectator, in which he can be alone, or meet with a little group of friends, he can eat, play, and enjoy conversations” (*Teatri e scenografie* 1976, p. 64. Translation from Italian by the author).

Going to the theater, then, was not only about the play on the stage, but it was also about something greater and more participatory and performative: the spectator, in his “box-as-home,” becomes an actor. In this sense, we perceive the strong relationship and interchangeability between private domestic interior and public urban interior, between theatrical *mise en scène* and the individual presentation of self (Goffman 1956).

In conclusion, we can recall what Manfredo Tafuri argues, that in Italian Renaissance theaters “the city is the subject of the scene, where illusionistic space and classicist re-enactment, where natural and artificial space are reunited. Theater and city” – he continues – “are two terms of an equation, and

expression of a civic society that recognizes itself in the celebration of the classical artifact represented on the stage” (Tafuri 1976, p.26. Translation from Italian by the author). But the montage of urban elements within the interior is something that involves not only secular theater but also religious buildings. According to the investigations of Ludovico Zorzi, the *mise and scène* of religious rituals was arranged with the reproduction of elements belonging to the urban environment, temporarily installed inside the space of the churches. Filippo Brunelleschi has been an active designer of these theatrical sceneries called “ingegni.” The dome, the loggia, the urban façade, archetypes of the urban scene reproduced in wood as “machines” and interior sceneries, are transfigured into the backdrops for the theatrical religious representation. They are also devices that represent the city, its society, and the values of its citizens, in which the citizen is both spectator and actor of the play.

Aside from the case of these illusionistic machines, conceived by Filippo Brunelleschi for the specific event of the reenactment of the miracle, another example of the theatrical character inside the religious buildings is represented by the interiors of the churches designed by Palladio in Venice.

In these projects, as Magagnato points out, “we can see an effect almost of stage design in his insertion of space within space: certainly, the fruit of his loving study of late Roman architecture.” In the Redentore and San Giorgio churches, he continues, “we have the most striking illustration of his use of these ample spaces seen through great colonnades that have the effect of walls” (Magagnato 1951, p. 218). The colonnade, or *perystilium*, through which we can perceive the intimate space of the choir (Magagnato 1992, p. 49), works also as a backdrop for the ritual of the mass, celebrated in front of the



spectators, sitting in the nave. This spatial arrangement, very similar to Palladio's proposal for the Olympic Theater (the backdrop for the theatrical play that frames the space behind it), is clearly discernible.

### **Aldo Rossi and the Architectural Interior as “Fixed Stage”**

The work and design principles of the Roman and Renaissance masters and the theme of theatricality are an active presence in Aldo Rossi's theoretical speculation and design explorations (Furlong 1997; Celant 2012).

The idea of bringing a fragment of the city inside an interior space is evident in 1981 for the exhibition “Architecture/Idea” at the Triennale in Milan where he recreated within the pavilion a street that is, using one of his analogies, also a corridor, as the room is a house.

This design strategy since the late 1970s is paired with the theme of theatricality in projects such as the 1979 “Theater of the World,” the floating small wooden theater that, moving on the Venetian lagoon (and also in Dubrovnik), reinvented unexpected fragments of urban fabric and monumentality. Unrealised projects such as the “Little Scientific Theater” (1976) represented a domestic interior as a stage, whereas the abstract “Interior with a Theater” (1982,) just a room defined by the arrangement of the sitting spaces, reinvents the theme of the *cavea*. Rossi was able to develop this theme even further in an unbuilt villa in the Roman countryside (Moschini 1982), whose core area is defined by an interior double-height space with windows that look down (almost like the Villa Pisani's one, mentioned earlier.) Surrounded by stairs where the inhabitants could sit, this space could be interpreted as a smaller-scale version of the interior of the “Teatro del Mondo.”

Similar investigations are developed in the project for the “Domestic Theater,” at the 1986 Triennale of Milan exhibition entitled “The Domestic Project.” The installation consists, as Rossi writes, of a wooden structure that represents a multi-story “residential building of which we can see the façade, with an interior staircase and three rooms on three different levels” (Rossi 1987, p. 285), outfitted with a table, chairs, doors, wallpapers, windows, and oversized coffee pots. As a reflection on domesticity, Rossi builds an inhabitable façade he calls “theater.” In the same year, he used the same architectural composition, the inhabited façade, for a theatrical play, the scenery of the opera “Madame Butterfly,” at the Rocca Brancaleone in Ravenna: each room is populated by objects, memories, or metaphorical symbols like the American and Japanese flags.

More recently, Diane Ghirardo linked these two projects to an autobiographical recollection of bombed-out buildings in Milan after World War II, in which the absence of the exterior façade reveals silent, abandoned interiors (Ghirardo, 2019). With these memories in mind, and also with a reference to the houses, damaged by the 1951 floods in the Polesine areas he was studying and surveying in 1960, in 1997 Rossi designed and built another domestic interior, “La casa abbandonata” (“The abandoned house”), installed in the “Parco delle Sculture” in San Donà di Piave (Tinazzi 2012): this building is conceived as a ruin, with collapsed walls that reveal the interiors, and the interior façades, and traces (real and evoked) of the interior everyday life of the inhabitants.

(Figure 4: Aldo Rossi: La casa abbandonata)

In addition to this reflection, I see these latter projects by Rossi as a transfiguration of the nineteenth-century representations of inhabited sections, that Georges Teyssot calls “exteriorized interiors,” in which “the building was represented as a dissected body, allowing the eye to penetrate its interior in order to study its life, its functions, and its organs” (Teyssot 2013, p. 101). These images, very popular in French books and magazines between 1845 and 1911, inspired Saul Steinberg in the 1950s (the famous American building represented in the book *The Art of Living*), Robert Doisneau in the 1960s (the 1962 photograph *La maison des locataires* is a photo montage of a picture of a building and scenes of everyday life staged in domestic interiors), and Georges Perec during the 1970s and 1980s (*Life: A User’s Manual*, *Species of Spaces*). All these interiors (and interior elevations) are conceived and represented as theatrical stages (or boxes of a theater) where the performances of everyday life take place.

(Figure 5: L'Electricité chez soi)

The “Domestic Theater” was not the first time when Rossi conceived an interior which brought inside the building a fragment of urban architecture. In 1978 he designed a funeral chapel, the Cappella Marchesi all’Ospedale: this small volume is defined by a solid brick envelope with small windows, completely open on the entrance, covered with a gable roof. A monumental staircase creates a podium, and gives access, at the same time, to the underground spaces of the funeral chamber. Inside the elevated chapel, a monumental façade defines the interior space: an abstract interpretation of the

façade of a classical temple, or a Palladian façade, with columns, cornices and pediment.

(Figure 6: Aldo Rossi Cappella Marchesi)

Though an unrealised project, it became the starting point of another funeral chapel designed by Rossi in 1980, for the Molteni family, in Giussano.

Whereas the exterior looks like a monolithic brick volume with just a cornice, a door, and two small windows, the small interior is defined by a beautifully carved reproduction of the Roman Borsari Gate in Verona. An urban element, the gate that defines the threshold between city and countryside, becomes the interior façade of the house of the dead. Rossi explained this idea in an interview: “In the entrance, there is a recomposition of Palladio’s Porta Romana<sup>3</sup> – but it is not a philological reconstruction – which is a passage between what is and what is not there. Behind the Porta there is a blue sky, which, if you wish, is decoration, scenography, is invention” (Eccheli 2017, p. 7). Not by coincidence, I think, Rossi used the term “invention” which derives from the Latin noun *inventio*, whose root is the verb *invenire* that means “to find,” “to come upon,” “to discover” (what is already there.)

Palladio used this term to define his projects (built and unbuilt,) which were actual montages of architectural elements, parts, and components.<sup>4</sup> Eighteenth-

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<sup>3</sup> The Porta Romana gate was built between 50 and 40 BC and was called Porta Jovia. Palladio surveyed and drew the gate: this drawing was used by Aldo Rossi for the reconstruction of the Porta Romana.

<sup>4</sup> Just a sample, from Palladio’s *Four Books* (second book, chapter XVII): “I made the following invention at the request of the Count FRANCESCO, and Count LODOVICO DE TRISSINI, brothers, for a situation belonging to them at Vicenza.” About Palladio’s “inventions” see also Foscarini 2010.

century architect and theorist Quatremère de Quincy considered “invention” as a synonym of creation: to invent is to find new compositions (montages) based on a set of rules that allows a series of combinations of preexisting elements,<sup>5</sup> as represented in the compositional methods and practices developed by Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand (whose lesson is a fundamental reference in Aldo Rossi’s poetics). Palladio is the main protagonist of another spectacular interior designed by Rossi. After the 1996 arson that partially destroyed La Fenice Theater in Venice, Rossi was chosen by Venice municipality as the architect for the reconstruction and renovation of the building.

(Figure 7: Aldo Rossi La Fenice)

In the context of this very complex intervention, Rossi designed a small rehearsal room (called “Rossi Room,” after his death in 1997) where one of the interior elevations is a reproduction in wood of a fragment of the façade of Palladio’s Basilica in Vicenza (Fois 2005). Like the Renaissance masters did, and like in the Farnese Theater in Parma, a façade that defines a piazza (Piazza dei Signori in Vicenza) is recreated inside the building and becomes the interior façade and “fixed stage” of the interior of the room (which resembles and functions as a tiny theater). Like Palladio, Rossi brings the city inside the architectural interior, using the facade as a deliberate and tangible device. Rossi chose the façade of the Basilica “not only because it is beautiful, but also because it is an attempt to recreate inside the building that specific Venetian

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<sup>5</sup> See “Invention” in Younés 1999.

world, between history and invention” (Rossi 1997. Translated from Italian by the author).

Again, the word “invention.” And again, the montage of elements, like in Palladio’s architecture, and in the works of 1700s French rationalist architects; even like in Canaletto’s paintings, such as “Capriccio with Palladian buildings,” that Rossi recreated in several sketches and drawings, and here, as a small fragment, within La Fenice Theater.

### **The Interior Façade as Reinvention of the Openness of the Urban Scene**

Besides the work of Rossi, other examples show architectural interiors designed as ideal open spaces, that evoke the metaphor of the urban sphere and the theatrical staging of everyday private rituals and public performances.

The work of American architect George Ranalli well exemplifies this strategy. In his 1976 project for the Chicago Tribune Tower Competition Late Entries, the top of the skyscraper is designed as a vaulted glasshouse that contains a “miniature city,” a six-story high building with porticoes, windows, terraces, and balconies. In the same year, he designed in New York the First of August Boutique, whose interiors are arranged as an interior street with a double height layered thick wall that resembles an abstract portico.

Similarly remarkable is the renovation of the Callender School in Newport (Rhode Island, USA) transformed by George Ranalli between 1979 and 1981 into a residential building with six houses intricately and carefully inserted into the two-story late nineteenth-century existing building, a National Register Landmark Building.

## Figure 8: George Ranalli Callender School

In this project, we see strong connections with the design strategies discussed earlier. As a precedent to develop the project, the clients suggested some relevant buildings: in particular, the Renaissance Davanzati Palace in Florence and the Isabella Stewart Gardner Museum (1903) in Boston, which is a contemporary reinvention of a Venetian palace (Ranalli 2015). Inside the existing building, the architect inserted a core element that crosses through the entire structure and contains the kitchens, bathrooms, stairs, and the more private rooms of the new apartments. The living rooms have double and triple heights strongly defined by this inhabited core that takes the shape of an interior façade with openings, balconies, windows, and portals. It is a house inside the house, an urban fragment facing the public space of the living rooms. As Anthony Vidler argues, “the apartments take on the form of abandoned palaces whose balconies overlook the deserted piazza below or out, outwards the empty countryside” (Vidler 1988, p.10). Ranalli, in the suburban American fabric that lacks collective public spaces, recreates within the building the idea of an interior piazza (as in Renaissance theaters,) defined by interior urban facades which emphasize the theatricality of the domestic interior through “a magnificence of scale” and “a brilliant piece of scenography” (Sorkin 1988, p. 6). As Ranalli points out, the project represents an example of the “confluence of town and building” in the “transition from building to interior (...) toward the synchronicity between buildings and their environment” (Ranalli 2015, p. 14), with cabinets and furniture (we can interpret this way the interior façade: as a built-in equipped wall) that work as an “extension to building and interior design (...) intimately connected to the larger-scale ideas

of their environment” (Ranalli 2015, p. 16). Even in these words, it is evident on one hand the intention of blurring interior and exterior, almost dematerializing the brick envelope of the existing former school; on the other to re-invent within the building the concept of public collective space, as a response to its absence in the urban fabric of the American suburbs.

Ranalli kept on working on these architectural themes, after the project for the Callender School.

Between 1983 and 1984 he designed the interior of a double-height apartment on 15<sup>th</sup> Street, in New York, with the insertion of a block that provided what he called “hideaway bed upstairs, an anchor for a green dining table downstairs, and a bathroom and kitchen” (Ranalli 2015, p. 190). The abstract composition of this element is conceived as an interior façade open to the office and study on the first floor.

We can recognize similar design strategies in the Morphosis project for the Beverly Hills restaurant “Kate Mantilini,” built in the mid-1980s (Wayne 2003, p. 224-231; Cook and Rand 1989, p. 132-143).

The intervention is the adaptive reuse of an abandoned bank. But it is not the building or the function that fascinated Thom Mayne (Morphosis co-founder): “we were much more interested” – he declared – “in the whole idea of the public nature of the space than we were specifically of the restaurant” (*The New Modernist* 1993). In a context characterized by the deficiency of urban form and public space at the human scale, Morphosis proposed the projection of the character of a collective place inside the interior. In fact, the restaurant is a huge open room, defined by a tall façade overlooking the interior, which evokes the urban archetype of the portico, with the rhythmic and abstract geometrical



composition of openings and windows. This façade is not only a figurative or metaphorical gesture that recreates a fragment of an ideal urban palace, but also an equipped wall – that contains the boots for the clients – and creates a tension with the opposite wall where a mural is installed. This is another element that evokes the urban imagery of the American city, where murals and graffiti painted on the façades of the buildings participate in the collective experience and dimension of public spaces.

The designers even designed an orrery (paired with a skylight), a mechanical model of the solar system, that I see, in my interpretation, as a reinvention of the classical domes, with the *oculus* open to the sky, and frequently painted as skies populated by stars.

Therefore, even this architectural interior is designed as a montage of urban elements that create a square in which, as Mayne explicitly declares in the project brief, “the open hall-like space becomes a theater for observing the swank and swagger of the local glitterati” (Morphosis 1986). The dissection, reinvention, and montage of these specific architectural elements (façade, mural, orrery) remind me even of Filippo Brunelleschi’s “ingegni,” built within the churches I discussed earlier: the theatrical spiritual rituals of religion are, in Morphosis project, transformed (through metaphors and symbols, even playfulness and irony) into the secular activities of a contemporary open public space, an interior piazza.

The themes developed in this paper are relevant also in the case of the extension of existing buildings, realized through the addition/juxtaposition of new architectural volumes to existing ones. Here, I would like to briefly present two case studies, which consider the role of the existing façade, reinvented as

interior elevation that define very specific qualities of the interior spaces. The first example is the extension and renovation of the Museum of Fine Arts of Boston, designed by Norman Foster and completed in 2010 (Foster 2013). The so-called “Art of the Americas Wing” is a freestanding glass box inserted between the existing two main volumes of the museum, which also encloses the existing courtyard.

(Figure 9. Boston Museum of Fine Arts)

This design device creates a triple-height interior public space of multiple uses, including circulation for people, exhibitions, activities, spaces for visitors’ orientation and a café: an interior square, a public covered *piazza*. The main feature of this space, aside from the glazed envelope, is the existing façade of the old building, that, as a fragment of the architectural past, and in creative tension with the contemporary architectural language, is reactivated as a theatrical backdrop for the square activities, and evokes an urban environment, reinvented by Foster.

Another example is the extension of the John Rylands Library, in Manchester (UK), designed by Austin-Smith: Lord and completed in 2007. The intervention consists of the addition to the neogothic edifice, inaugurated in 1900, of a new volume for the entrance, the lobby with a cafeteria, a bookshop and other library facilities. The connection between old and new is defined by an interior courtyard, illuminated by a skylight on the roof and by the presence of the monumental façade of the existing building. This is clad by a thick white stratification that emphasizes, thanks to the light coming from above and

the “virtual” removal of any decorative motif, the abstract geometrical framework of the existing openings.

(Figure 10: John Rylands Library)

This elevation is the backdrop for the flow of visitors and library users, evoking at the same time the public dimension of a small urban square. Because of this extension, the exterior façade becomes an interior façade; similarly, what was an urban outside uncovered space is transfigured into an architectural interior. The architecture of the past (represented by the library itself as a building and by its function as a repository of memories and documents), of the present, and of the future, can be perceived simultaneously in an archaeological and metaphysical stratification, as a “fixed stage” of a theater of everyday life and memory, for the individual and the collective.

## **Conclusion**

The relationship between inside and outside has always been a fundamental component in the construction of architectural and urban space. The façade is the most important element that can define this link and the variable degrees of openness between the two worlds. The façade of a building can completely negate the outside, creating an introverted interior; can be designed as a thin layer or as a transparent frame-like skeleton that allows the physical and visual extension of the interior into the exterior (and vice versa); as a thick and

inhabitable threshold that becomes itself an interior space; can be even conceived as an architectural canvas which represents the literal or technical manifestation of internal arrangements projected onto the external surface, in a sort of anticipation, from the outside, of the experience of interior space (Martinelli 2020).

My investigation considers another design strategy in the conception of the interior interconnected to the outside that draws from the theater, or better, from a theatrical idea of the world and of the city. As explained earlier, we can consider the city itself as a theatrical stage. Even a contemporary theoretician as Colin Rowe concluded, in the book *Collage City*, that the city “at one and at the same time, behaves, quite explicitly, as both as a theater of prophecy and a theater of memory” (Rowe and Koetter 1978, p. 49). The city, in his studies, is conceived as the outcome of a montage (*Collage City*) of elements, parts, and fragments, not so different from the imaginary city assembled on the stages and auditoriums of Palladio’s or Scamozzi’s theaters. An ideal city that transforms the interior space of the theater into an open space, a street, a square, a courtyard, surrounded by buildings (and their façades). The envelope of the real building dematerializes, and the inhabitant of the interior (the spectator) is transported, ideally, outside in this metaphorical urban environment. Therefore, in my interpretation, theatricality is a powerful tool to define the openness of the interior. I also recognized this strategy in contemporary projects, in which the montage technique, paired with the rediscovery of metaphor, symbolism, allegory, and analogy, allowed the designers to compose interiors as urban scenes. In these projects, the interior façade is also a sort of rediscovery and reinvention (even citation, in some of Aldo Rossi’s projects) of the traditional

thick, layered, deep walls that the Modern Movement neglected, and replaced with interior elevations designed as compositions of thin abstract planes, according to the “inhibitions” in using “thick-bearing walls” arisen “from the serious puritanism inherent in the initial theory of the 1920s” (Hodgen 1987, p. 40).

The reaction to this has been the reintroduction of a figurative approach to architecture and, in the case studies that I considered, of the idea of the interior as a reinvention of a theatrical stage, in which the interior façade (conceived as a fragment of the urban scenery brought within the building) plays the role of the backdrop of the life, activities, and performances of the inhabitant. This happens in a sort of ambiguous in-between, the enclosed interior transformed into an open space that alludes to the metaphorical urban dimension of the outside world. A world that, according to the playwright and poet, “is a stage. And all the men and women are merely players” (Shakespeare 2000, p. 124).

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### **Figure captions**

1. House of Augustus, Room of the Masks, Rome (Italy). Photograph by the author
2. Domenico Veneziano, "The Miracle of San Zenobio," 1445. Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge (UK)
3. Andrea Palladio, Villa Pisani in Bagnolo (Italy). Photograph by the author
4. Aldo Rossi, La casa abbandonata, San Donà di Piave (Italy). Photograph by the author
5. "L'électricité chez soi: coupe verticale d'une maison parisienne éclairée à l'électricité," published in *Magasin pittoresque*, 31 May 1891, p. 155. Creative Commons CC0 1.0 Universal Public Domain Dedication
6. Aldo Rossi, Cappella Marchesi all'Ospedale, 1978. Drawing by the author of the paper, after Rossi's archival drawings (Università Iuav di Venezia, Archivio progetti, Fondo Attilio Pizzigoni)
7. Aldo Rossi, Rossi Room at La Fenice Theater, Venice (Italy), 1997. Photograph by the author

8. George Ranalli, Renovation of the Callender School, Newport (USA), 1979-1981. Photograph by Nick Wheeler, courtesy of George Ranalli Architect
9. Norman Foster and Partners, Museum of Fine Arts, Boston (USA), 2010. Photograph by the author
10. Austin-Smith: Lord, John Rylands Library, Manchester (UK), 2007. Photocollage by the author