

Joseph Connors, “L’ ‘architettura aperta’ di Richard Pommer e la geografia culturale della storia dell’arte a New York nell’immediato dopoguerra”, in *Architettura del Settecento in Piemonte. Le strutture aperte di Juvarra, Alfieri e Vittono*, BY RICHARD POMMER, ed. GIUSEPPE DARDANELLO, Turin, Allemandi, 2003, pp. XV–XIX.

Introduction to the Italian translation of Richard Pommer, *Eighteenth-Century Architecture in Piedmont: The Open Structures of Juvarra, Alfieri and Vittono*, New York, 1967

*Eighteenth-century Architecture in Piedmont* is a work of stunning originality that first began to take shape in the mind of a young American in his late twenties who visited Piedmont for the first time in the summer of 1958. Richard Pommer (1930-92) had come to Turin to write a monograph on Vittono, but he discovered an interpretative key of great power that shed light on a century of architecture and tied together the three giants of the period, Guarini, Juvarra and Vittono. This key is the idea of open structures. It refers to an architecture that is not solid and Roman, but perforated, bored through, skeletal, full of air and light, mildly reminiscent, in the minds of early theorists, of the gothic. The buildings are covered by domes and vaults that are tents of webbing, flooded with light, floating as if weightless over aerial cages. As different as Guarini is from Juvarra the central theme of both architects was the exploration of open structures. But it was Vittono who best expressed their common ideal: “The eye has full liberty to range down the church at its pleasure”; “that satisfaction which [vision] receives when extending through a great space to enjoy the variety of the objects, with fewer obstructions to impede it.” This is the guiding theme of the book, “the pleasure of unhindered vision.”

Pommer conducted two years of research in Turin between 1958 and 1960, but since he began his work in New York and finished it there, it is interesting to reflect for a moment on the cultural geography of art history in New York in the immediate postwar period. This is the world so charmingly described by Erwin Panofsky in his essay, “Art History in the United States.” The center of gravity was the newly founded Institute of Fine Arts of New York University. Walter Cook, the first director, had built up his faculty largely by hiring German scholars who had lost their positions or fled Germany after the Nazi takeover. “Hitler is my best friend,” Cook used to say; “he shakes the trees, and I collect the apples,” was his witty description of the situation. Walter Friedlaender, Karl Lehmann, Richard Offner, and Panofsky, who was based in Princeton but often taught at the Institute, were his acquisitions during the Depression and the war. But the architectural history blossomed only after the war with the arrival of Richard Krautheimer (1897-1994) who first began teaching as a visiting professor in the late 1940s and who came permanently to the Institute in 1952.

Krautheimer was a medievalist whose life’s work was the great five-volume *Corpus* of early Christian basilicas in Rome, which occupied him from the mid-1930s to 1977. But his interests

were universal. He was formed in the shadow of the Bauhaus and always admitted it as an ideal. He wrote authoritatively on Byzantine and baroque architecture and on the urban history of Rome. In the mid-1950s he was intensely concerned with Italian gothic and Renaissance sculpture; his great monograph on Lorenzo Ghiberti, written in collaboration with his wife, appeared in 1956. Students at the Institute at this period--Howard Saalman, Isabelle Hyman and Marvin Trachtenberg--followed him into Tuscan subjects. This was the path originally mapped out for Richard Pommer.

After finishing his undergraduate work at Columbia in 1953, Pommer thought of studying anthropology, but a short time later he changed course and entered the Institute of Fine Arts as a graduate student in the history of architecture. Following Krautheimer's interests he wrote a brilliant master's thesis on the projects of Giuliano da Sangallo for the facade of S. Lorenzo in Florence. At first he intended to write a doctoral dissertation on the Palazzo Pubblico in Siena. But by 1958 he had switched his topic to Vittone, and was about to embark on a Fulbright fellowship for study in Turin. What changed his direction was the arrival on the New York scene of another titan of German émigré scholarship, Rudolf Wittkower (1901-71).

Wittkower had worked alongside Krautheimer when both were young assistants in the Bibliotheca Hertziana in Rome in the 1920s, but in the diaspora of the 1930s they had gone different ways. Wittkower had British citizenship through his father and so, when the time came to leave continental Europe in 1933, he went to England. The Warburg Library arrived in London in 1934, and Wittkower joined its staff. He was the co-editor, along with Edgar Wind, of the Institute's new journal, and along with Fritz Saxl he prepared the Institute's atlas of British Art and the Mediterranean. Well known as a specialist in Michelangelo and Bernini, in the 1940s his interests began to turn to more abstract and Warburgian topics, particularly to the role of harmonic proportion in architecture. He began to investigate the theory of Alberti and Palladio. This work was to bear fruit in his famous book of 1949, *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism*. It achieved an extraordinary and quite unexpected success, among architects as well as art historians, largely because of the interest aroused in proportional systems by the publication of Le Corbusier's *Modulor* in 1948.

Wittkower came to the study of Piedmontese architecture obliquely, through his work on the Renaissance central church. He had of course known the work of Brinckmann, whose *Theatrum Novum Pedemontii*, with its wonderfully perceptive paragraph on Vittone and its many photographs, appeared in 1931. But Wittkower began to probe Vittone in depth only in the latter 1940s. Vittone suddenly made sense to him as the last representative of the great tradition of the central church, the heir of Florentine neoplatonism and of Renaissance theories of musical proportion. It seemed quite natural to him that Vittone, in true Renaissance spirit, should dedicate his treatises, published in 1760 and 1766, to God and the Virgin. With Vittone the 300-

year-old tradition of Renaissance architecture came full circle.

Wittkower was immensely proud of having introduced Vittone to the anglo-saxon world in the later 1940s. When Anthony Blunt invited him to lecture at the Courtauld Institute around 1946 he chose Vittone as his subject, even though he was convinced that no one in the audience, not even even specialists in the history of architecture, had ever heard the name. When he first visited the churches in person his breath was taken away. He was awed by the element of the mysterious and the magic. Nothing could diminish his admiration for Vittone's genius, not even the reticence of the architect's own treatises, which are long and loquacious and sometimes pedantic. To the end Wittkower venerated the mysterious side of Vittone, the genius in the backwater, like his contemporary Francesco Guardi. Wittkower, lecturing on Vittone in Turin in 1970, the year before his death, wondered whether we would ever find his lost writings on domes, or whether Vittone had taken his secrets with him to the grave.

In the decade following the publication of *Architectural Principles* Wittkower was at work on the huge, immensely important volume on Italian baroque art and architecture for the Pelican History of Art. It was the ideal place to synthesize his views on Piedmontese architecture. In fact Piedmont, alongside Bernini and the other giants of the Roman high baroque, forms the centerpiece of the book. Guarini's dome of S. Lorenzo appeared as the photograph on the dust jacket of the first edition. Wittkower's passion for Vittone was distilled into pages of great poetic power. Vittone was for Wittkower the man who kept alive the ideals of Alberti and Leonardo and the whole tradition of the Italian central church, as well as the almost miraculous synthesizer of the antithetical geniuses of Guarini and Juvarra.

Wittkower had been a visiting professor at the Institute of Fine Arts in New York in the spring of 1949. (There survive a fascinating series of letters from that period describing the art historical and émigré scene in New York.) But his real influence began to be felt in the United States only when he returned in the mid-1950s, first in the summers of 1954 and 1955 as a visiting professor at Harvard (where he met his future students Howard Hibbard and Henry Millon), and then from 1955 as a professor in the Department of Art History and Archaeology at Columbia University. His arrival in New York coincided with Pommer's, and the younger man was swept up in the enthusiasm of the great German scholar.

In July 1958, just at the time the Pelican volume appeared, Wittkower offered a seminar in Turin, jointly sponsored by the Institute of Fine Arts and by the American Academy in Rome. Among the eight or nine participants were three young men who would go on to make their mark on the study of baroque architecture. Henry Millon was then a fellow at the American Academy in Rome, engaged in the writing of a monumental dissertation on Palazzo Carignano, submitted to Harvard in 1964; he was also beginning what would turn out to be a lifelong relationship with

Juvarra. Leo Steinberg, famous in later life for his work on Picasso, Michelangelo and Velazquèz, was then working on a thesis on Borromini's S. Carlo alle Quattro Fontane. Richard Pommer, freshly arrived on his Fulbright fellowship, took part in the seminar as well. Together they visited many of the buildings which would later feature in Pommer's book. Days of long drives in the countryside alternated with days in Turin, with the students indefatigably exploring churches and palaces and clambering up into galleries and in and out of domes. There was an air of reverence for the erudition of "the Professor," but also moments of levity and an appreciation of Piedmontese food and wine: "As the Professor was once heard to remark," one student wrote, "asceticism and a love for art rarely go hand in hand."

Pommer was launched by the 1958 seminar. He spent the next two years in painstaking research in dozens of archives, libraries and drawing collections. Arch. Mario Passanti took him under his wing, and Pommer's debt to the older man, who was the first to examine the physical fabric of Guarini's buildings closely, was amply acknowledged both in the book and in his splendid review of *Il mondo magico di Guarino Guarini*. Passanti's son Francesco would later become a close friend of Pommer's and a colleague with whom he could share a passionate interest in the work of Le Corbusier.

Pommer travelled back to the small towns he had first seen in the seminar, and spent many days and weeks in parish archives. This commitment to archival work, to establishing an accurate *Baugeschichte* for every building mentioned in the book and a reliable biography for every architect, was a habit that Pommer would never lose. Like an edifice built on foundations as deep as it is high, the book would eventually contain, in its notes and appendices, capsule histories of the most important buildings by Juvarra and Vittone and a wealth of new documents on their careers. Some of the notes are amazing mini-monographs that probe topics in great depth: the history of the Soperga, the careers of the major followers of Guarini, the drawing collections of Cardinal Albani, the hospitals of the Savoy and princely charity, the sources of Stupinigi, and many more. One senses the influence of Krautheimer in the restless erudition of these notes and their bulldog hold on problems.

The idea of open structures was a key that unlocked many doors, and also one that led to architects in France and Germany as well as Piedmont. Pommer's book is in many ways an answer to Brinckmann's plea, made in the *Theatrum Novum Pedemontii* of 1931, to put Piedmontese architecture in an international context. Pommer explores the roots of open structures in German practice and French theory, especially in the 1673 Vitruvius edition of Perrault, which celebrates "l'apparence du merveilleux" and the love--part gothic, part modern--for "l'air, le jour et les dégagemens."

And there are striking ties with the Roman Renaissance and baroque. Pommer not only shows

how important Borromini was for the ideal of open structures, but finds an unnoticed source for Borromini's Oratory in a church by Girolamo Rainaldi, S. Teresa in Caprarola. In the chapter on the new cathedral of Turin there is a flash that lights up the whole history of Italian church design. Pommer contrasts the ideals of Juvarra and Vittone, who sought to prolong the delight of the eye as it penetrates through unfolding spaces, with Roman classical taste. He published two critiques of Juvarra's design, one written by Cardinal Albani in Rome and the other by an anonymous pedant ("who knew architecture in the way Polonius knew love"). Albani criticized the projects as "true reliquaries, like labyrinths with a hundred nooks and crannies and hiding places." The cardinal thought the whole interior of a church should be taken in at a single glance. Pommer traces this conflict back to Michelangelo's critique (in a letter first published in 1696) of Sangallo's model for St. Peter's, with its hiding places for thieves and molsters of nuns.

Juvarra is the true hero and center of the book, the resister until his late years of the Guarinian inheritance but in his own way a brilliant proponent of open architecture. Pommer explores Juvarra's contribution to this ideal in brilliant chapters on Venaria Reale, the new cathedral of Turin, and Stupinigi, but the cornerstone of his argument is the small church of S. Andrea in Chieri. The building was destroyed by French troops at the beginning of the 19th century but Pommer reconstructs it from drawings. It is the undoubted source for Vittone's masterpiece, S. Chiara in Bra. And for Pommer it is proof that Vittone was not a revolutionary, but rather an extraordinarily talented follower of Juvarra with his own brilliant sense of light and of the vital detail.

The students at the Institute of Fine Arts in the 1950s had some of the greatest teachers the field had ever seen, but they also prided themselves on their pluck. At their best, the aim was to shoot beyond the masters. Appropriately enough their journal, *Marsyas*, was named after the satyr whom Apollo flayed alive because he dared to think his music was more beautiful than a god's. Drenched in the documents like no one had ever been before him, intimately familiar with the monuments after his years of research and equipped with a powerful interpretive key, Pommer cast off the influence of Wittkower. There are many passages in the book where disagreement skirts the edges of polemic. In particular, he formed an entirely different picture of Vittone in the magisterial chapter, almost a full monograph, that closes the book. Vittone was not an obsessed and solitary genius. He was not drenched in neoplatonism. He wrote the overblown prose of a self-taught man, a provincial savant who, engrossed in his work, comes to lead the lay equivalent of a priest's life. "He had no terms for the *bizzarria* that he understood, and too many for the academicism that he did not." The section on music in the *Istruzioni diverse* was written by a hired pedant, G.B. Galletto, and the books were dedicated to God and the Virgin because they found no patron; for the most part they went unsold. He was a shrewd small-town businessman; he was intensely pious; his sisters who became Clarisse directed patronage his way but he never achieved the status even of an Alfieri. He was an intensely visual architect who found a system

of open structures ready to hand in the work of Guarini and Juvarra: “He did not have to invent or rebel, but rather to perfect.”

Wittkower must have been stung by the book, for all its erudition and its brilliance. He cannot have liked the many contradictions it offered to his ideas, and he must have felt that it robbed Vittone of his mystery. He referred to the book only twice, both times for minor details. When he lectured at the Vittone congress in 1970 he spoke with, if anything, a heightened admiration for Vittone’s poetic genius, for his “fantasia mai insterilita.” Wittkower died in 1971, but even to the end of his life he hoped to write a book of studies on Juvarra and Vittone.

Pommer finished his thesis in 1961, and joined the faculty of the Institute as an assistant professor in 1962. He was a brilliant teacher. But all was not well. There was a certain dissatisfaction both with his personal life and with his scholarly direction. In 1966, the year before the book came out, he quit his position at the Institute and moved to Vassar, a progressive women’s college in the Hudson Valley, about two hours from New York, famed for its brilliant art history department. He divorced in 1967, and in the following year married Linda Nochlin, the scholar of French Realism who would go on to become a pioneer of feminist art history. A conversion was underway in his intellectual life. Ever more committed to the study of the political meaning of architecture, his restless mind was turning to subjects of more immediate relevance to his troubled times. His article of 1968 on Costanzo Michela’s church in Agliè, which he had visited with the Wittkower seminar a decade before, is in some sense a farewell to Piedmont. He was gratified when his book won the Hitchcock Prize of the Society of Architectural Historians, but henceforth his work would be on the architecture of the 20th century.

Followed by the second part of the Introduction by Chris Otto.