

# Colin Rowe's Gospel of Modern Architecture



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By

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*For Aila*

*Modern architecture, for better or worse and not so many years back, was quite literally a gospel – meaning a message of good news. It was not so much a collection of buildings as an injunction to a new way of life.*

Colin Rowe, lecture manuscript (undated)

*Modern architecture is surely most cogently to be interpreted as a gospel – as, quite literally, a message of good news: and hence its impact.*

Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, *Collage City* (1978)

*It may still be suggested that, almost certainly, it is only this eminently dramatic and ultimately Hebraic conception of history in terms of architectural sin and architectural redemption which provides any real accommodation for the emotional preconditions of modern architecture's existence.*

Colin Rowe, *The Architecture of Good Intentions* (1994)

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## Prologue

A visit to any populated beach will invariably be met by blissful and ecstatic children. It may be the most immediate site of play, since no additional or prosthetic object is required. Barefoot in the sand, the very earth on which one stands is also the toy. The beach is truly a play-ground.

Understood as such, the inexhaustible resource of sand can be overwhelming. Where, and how, to begin? Many children pursue the popular activity of building sandcastles. Sometimes entire villages are erected, with similarly constructed neighbors like turtles and dragons looking on. Forms of these structures are shaped by hands, cast with plastic buckets, and carved with fingers or other tools for accuracy. Other children – driven by less obvious ambitions and with no clear intention – seem content to dig holes. Their hands become spoons rhythmically scooping layers of increasingly cool sand from underfoot. Sometimes interesting artifacts are found, but they only serve to remind that discovery was never the objective. A depth is reached, and after some pause, the hole is filled in.

The castle builders have crafted their structures to remain. Large waves and rogue frisbees are potentially catastrophic events. If there is hope the castles will remain after the child is reluctantly forced away from the beach, then it has been a good day. The hole diggers have no such aspirations for permanence. Their purpose never seemed to be the manipulation of sand into something recognizable. Rather, they are interested in the nature of the sand itself. Feeling the interaction of the body with substance is always more important for hole diggers than it is for castle builders, who seem more concerned with the product than the matter from which it was produced. Castle builders are fueled by the logic of means and ends. Hole diggers thrive off the promise of continuing curiosities. One group takes pride in making things while the other takes pleasure in asking questions.

Colin Rowe possessed the skills to become an architect. His talents, however, resided in teaching. More frequently called a critic or historian, the key to understanding his work is recognizing that his criticism and historiography were dimensions of his teaching. No conversation, letter, or sketch was carried out void of this educational effect. In short, everything Rowe did, taught.



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# Introduction

The architecture critic Ada Louise Huxtable once wrote that Colin Rowe and Vincent Scully were the two most influential historians of their time. Both had an immense impact on students of architecture in the second half of the twentieth century. The labels of “Whites” and “Grays” were attributed to groups of architects associated with (if not originating from) Rowe and Scully, respectively. If the postmodernity of the projects these groups produced can be traced back to the teachings of each historian, then the postmodernity of their teaching is essential to understanding the influence Huxtable noted. While the architecture of the Grays turned to view the past as an aesthetic catalogue, the work of the Whites at least partly reflected Rowe’s dual adoption and critique of modern architecture. The gospel of modern architecture according to Rowe was a perennial and pedagogical lesson of the old and new, the past and future, invading each other and producing the most curious of effects.

Colin Rowe (1920-1999) was born in Yorkshire, England, and attended Liverpool University as a student of architectural design from 1938 to 1942, and in 1944 to 1945. During the gap, he served for the parachute regiment in the Second World War, leaving with a permanent back injury. Rowe graduated from Liverpool in 1946 and went to London where he completed his M.A. in Art History under Rudolf Wittkower at the Warburg Institute. His thesis was a speculative study on the theoretical drawings of the seventeenth century English architect, Inigo Jones. Rowe’s seminal essay “The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa” was published in the *Architectural Review* in 1947; it was both heralded and criticized. The essay revealed the fallacy of modern architecture’s alleged severing from the past, at least in Rowe’s parallel of Andrea Palladio’s sixteenth century villa designs with those of Le Corbusier’s in the twentieth century. Wittkower’s influence is clear in Rowe’s argument. Rowe then taught in the department of Architecture at Liverpool University from 1950 to 1952, when he left to study with historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock at Yale University on a Fulbright Scholarship. The years 1953 to 1956 were pivotal in Rowe’s career. During this time he was an instructor in Architecture at the University of Texas in Austin, where the effects of his teaching and the

pedagogical methods themselves aligned with other faculty who, collectively, became known as the “Texas Rangers. Rowe taught as an instructor at Cooper Union and Cornell University briefly before taking a position back in England, at Cambridge University (1958-62). In 1962 Rowe returned to Cornell University as an instructor, for good this time. He helped to launch the Urban Design Studio at Cornell, and it began a gradual shift of his interests from architecture as buildings to architecture as the city. Rowe’s work with CASE (Committee of Architects for the Study of the Environment) produced an event at the Museum of Modern Art in New York City in 1969 on the “New York Five,” and the subsequent book publication, *Five Architects*, included an influential introduction by Rowe.

A collection of Rowe’s essays was published by the MIT Press in 1976 under the title, *The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa and Other Essays*. Previously published exclusively in Britain or not published at all, this made Rowe’s writing accessible to a wider readership, and only two years later was it accompanied by the publication of *Collage City*, written with Fred Koetter (1978). *Collage City* highlighted the main interests and motifs investigated in Rowe’s teachings at Cornell, which encapsulated his urban theory in general. After a visiting professorship at the University of Virginia in 1984, Rowe was made full professor at Cornell in 1985, and later emeritus in 1990.

Rowe was not the only historian emigre who had an impact on the culture of design education in America. Twentieth century American academies saw an influx of European historians who transformed the way students viewed buildings and spoke about their own designs.<sup>1</sup> Shifting from the discipline of art history in Europe to teaching the history of architecture to design students in America presented a new environment with different challenges. These historians were forced to engage with a problem unique to design education in America, where buildings of the past tended to be seen as less valuable than those of the present. Sublimated to design, history is rendered tertiary and cast either as a theoretical means to design’s end, or plainly irrelevant. Such was the framing condition for the struggles that European historian emigres encountered in America. It would seem that the historians who were most effective at producing innovative design in their students were those who employed teaching practices that

denied and resisted the inferior and instrumental positioning of history in relation to design.

Colin Rowe's ambitions might best be encapsulated in a combination of Latin terms, *Ianus Architectus*, Janus the Architect. The ancient Roman deity Janus was a god of ends and beginnings. The first month of the western calendar, January, takes the god's name, as it ends one year while beginning another. Janus was thus manifest on earth as a god of doorways, passages, and archways – the fundamental architectural thresholds that divide space, through which one must pass in order to end one place and begin another (Janus's two heads were often featured in the keystone of arched passages). Equipped with two faces, not only could Janus see in two directions at once, but also into the past and future simultaneously. Rowe exhibited this duality – I will henceforth call it ambichronous (both temporalities) – that operated on both design history and practice at the same time. He saw the linkage between precedent and invention as *a priori* to architectural education. In this way Rowe's attitude was akin to that of the eighteenth century philosophers of the Enlightenment, since, according to Carl Becker, both were concerned with “the fate of posterity; and this interest, needless to say, was intimately associated with their interest in history,” for, “the past, the present, and the future state of mankind were for them but aspects of the same preoccupation.”<sup>2</sup> For Rowe, the importance of studying significant examples from the past for innovative design in the future was so obvious it hardly needed to be discussed.

Much has been written on the formalism of Rowe's analytical techniques, as well as the use of two opposed images in his lectures and essays. Much of it seems to converge on a singular interpretation of Rowe's historiography as flatly pictorial, since, to compress the four-dimensional art of architecture into two dimensions is surely one of the worst violations a historian and critic could commit. A more balanced and nuanced understanding of Rowe's work is lacking. There is more to the story of Colin Rowe, and the most valuable part of that story for the discipline of architecture is to be found in the methods of his teaching. For, if Rowe was such an influential figure in architecture culture, then exposing the strategies by which he influenced so many students might help in the teaching of design and history today.

It could be said that Colin Rowe was the most active participant in the interface between histories and practices of architecture. However, his strategies of engaging designers with that interface has not been fully historicized. Recent literature does indicate a growing interest in themes associated with Rowe. Anthony Vidler's *Histories of the Immediate Present* (2008) focused partly on Rowe (as well as Emil Kaufmann, Reyner Banham, and Manfredo Tafuri) and his particular invention of "mannerist modernism." Christoph Schnoor's essay, "Colin Rowe: Space as well-composed illusion" (2011) examined Rowe's methods in the context of Heinrich Wölfflin, Sigfried Giedion, and the "ways of seeing" that produced his multivalent perceptions. Rowe's old friend Robert Maxwell published *Ancient Wisdom and Modern Knowhow: Learning to Live with Uncertainty* (2013), much of which is indebted to Rowe's mannerist and urbanistic contributions. Emmanuel Petit's *Irony: Or, The Self-Critical Opacity of Postmodern Architecture* (2013) addressed Rowe's unique use of irony in contrast with other postmodern authors like Robert Venturi, and Petit's *Reckoning With Colin Rowe* (2015) allowed ten architects the opportunity to address the influence of Rowe directly; this latter publication benefited from first person experiences and anecdotes that prove to be especially valuable for understanding the lore that surrounds Rowe. Daniel Naegele's *The Letters of Colin Rowe* (2016) was a welcome publication that shed light on the impressive brevity of Rowe's interests and aptitude for written correspondence.

Rowe's gravity is growing, but what remains to be elucidated are the pedagogical strategies he deployed that provoked his audience to be curious and critical of the built environment in which they live. The use of the term pedagogy here does not mean didactic instruction or philosophies of teaching. As it applies to Rowe's strategies, pedagogy has less to do with learning than it does with leading. This is at least etymologically apt, as we get pedagogy from the Greek *paedo* (child) + *agōgós* (leading)<sup>3</sup>, and, as much of this book demonstrates, Rowe's performances of irony, paradox, ambiguity, refutations, and modernomy are best defined as forms of leading, not teaching. The aim is to elucidate those strategies, and in so doing, inspire the further provocation of art and design curiosity and criticism today.

Anecdotes about Rowe abound in almost suspicious volumes, and while such testimonies are undoubtedly entertaining, they are also undeniably (at



least) second hand. This book focuses specifically on Rowe's *verbal opus*: his writing on history, criticism, and architectural education, as well as letter correspondence, lectures, and informal conversations. Not unlike the reasons for analyzing architect's drawings more than the buildings themselves, Rowe's verbal opus is the work he himself produced, and bound within are all the intentions and attitudes directly and immediately communicated. For example, the role of the Bible as both an essential instrument for Rowe's pedagogy as well as the best instrument through which to understand the strategies of Rowe's verbal opus is a unique perspective taken in the book. If the biblical angle at first feels awkward or forced let it be known that no gates have been jumped; the paths down which the book proceeds were taken first by Rowe himself, whose consistent and sincere use of the Bible is more than enough to warrant its inclusion.

Indeed, the title of the book more than hints at a relationship between Colin Rowe's teaching and the teaching of the Judeo-Christian Bible. A terminological distinction should be made at this time: despite the seemingly broad scope of the phrase, Rowe uses "modern architecture" to reference the inventive projects of the early twentieth century, specifically the concentration of work in continental Europe in the 1920s, with particular preference for Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, and Walter Gropius. The society-saving power of modern architecture, its gospel in other words, was the temptation Rowe taught. The same meaning of modern architecture will be used so as to avoid confusion; there are moments in the second half of the book, however, in which this is expanded for Rowe's implication of twentieth century modern architecture as a "second coming," hence stretching the definition to the Renaissance as the "first coming" of modern architecture. Importantly, Rowe all but refuses to use the term "modernism." It can scarcely be found in his verbal opus. This is likely due to the term's stylistic connotations which do not exclude the "International Style" and "High Modernism" of the mid-twentieth century and for the same reason interested Rowe little with regard to educating; he did not think the root term "modern" could be associated with architectural production after about 1930.

Two parallels between the teaching of the Bible and Rowe's teaching ought to be briefly introduced. The first was an outwardly conscious contribution of Rowe's, and the second is part of this book's contribution

concerning Rowe's value today: 1) Rowe believed that the story of modern architecture is best understood in parallel to the stories of the Old and New Testaments in the Bible, and his teaching practice reflects this; 2) Rowe's verbal opus is best interpreted in parallel to postmodern interpretations of the Bible. The former has not yet been addressed by scholarship and the latter is an analysis unique to this book.

The first parallel manifests in several ways, some blatant and some subtle. There are references, for example, to figures from modern architecture that Rowe casts as biblical characters like Moses; such a parallel is made in order to illustrate, in this case, the outrageous promise to liberate and deliver us from bondage if only we give ourselves to this blind hope. The promises made by modern architecture, in other words, were not unlike the promises made in the Book of Exodus. Analogies of this sort are more blatant, as they liken actual people and artistic movements to actual characters and events depicted in the biblical scriptures. Liberty will be taken, then, to extend these parallels beyond what Rowe has given in order to further elucidate the parallel; hopefully the reader will not object to the creative use of biblical figures like Eve, Job, John the Baptist, and St. Paul, purely as a way to clarify Rowe's intentions while drawing attention to their merits. The more subtle parallels Rowe made between the story of modern architecture and the stories of the Bible rely less on characters with names and more on abstract forces central to its narratives, such as temptation, sin, faith, belief, redemption, and salvation. For instance (and this was one of Rowe's favorites), the defining feature of the New Testament comes in the quote, "the Word became flesh." These references are at times not as obvious in Rowe's writing, and they will be addressed explicitly as they are relevant at different moments in the book.

Before explaining the second parallel (Rowe is best understood through postmodern interpretations of the Bible) allow a definition for what is meant by "postmodern": opposed to the singular or one-directional semiotic of the modern, the postmodern allows and encourages plural or multivalent interpretations. Or, to borrow from Frederic Jameson, modern "homogeneity is here displaced, less in the name of a random heterogeneity, a set of inert differences randomly coexisting, than in the service of a new kind of perception for which tension, contradiction, the registering of the incompatible and the clashing, is in and of itself a strong mode of relating

two incommensurable elements, poles, or realities.”<sup>4</sup> The contradiction of paradox, the tension of ambiguity, the clashing of opposites, together sum up both the productive efforts of Rowe's pedagogy and the provocations of the Bible. What is called the *kerygma* (proclamations or teaching) of the Bible, can be broken into two dimensions: in one, there is a dynamic system at work in the logic of the Bible that Paul Ricoeur and others call the “economy of the gift”; in the other, there is the wider interpretive analysis of the Bible's text that may be called postmodern hermeneutics. The “economy of the gift” in the Bible has to do with the gift of God's love. The economy of this gift comes from the conflicting logics of God's commands. We are commanded to treat others as we would want to be treated, and we are commanded to love God. These are conflicting logics of “equivalence” and “superabundance,” respectively; they are in conflict because, while we may reciprocate to others what others do to us, we could never reciprocate God's gifts of creation and redemption. The divine command to love others regardless of their actions toward us establishes an extra-human covenant that, ironically, makes human capability possible and makes human existence meaningful. Similar conflicting logics appear in Rowe's verbal opus that enable its own “economy of the gift” – the gift of freedom to invent – and establish a parallel covenant between modern architecture and the contemporary design student. It is the law of modernity that the design student is expected to invent.<sup>5</sup> What will here be called modernity, in other words, requires a response to the central values of modernity in its wake.

Just as the biblical symbols of creation and redemption are revealed as gifts that cannot be reciprocated to the giver, it will be argued that the liberty to invent is revealed in the wake of modern architecture as a gift as well. In the Bible, the conflicting logics of love (superabundance) and justice (equivalence) act on the reader by “familiarizing and de-familiarizing,” and “disorienting and re-orienting.” Ricoeur argues, “Parables, paradoxes, hyperboles, and extreme commandments all *disorient* only in order to *reorient* us.” Such a jarring act is directed to our faculty of imagination, not our will. For while the will follows orders and obeys law, “our imagination is the power to open us to new possibilities, to discover another way of seeing, or acceding to a new rule in receiving instruction of the exception.”<sup>6</sup> Any gift, it will be shown, ironically disrupts the economy into which it was inserted; impossible to return as a calculable service, one is forced to

respond and in this imbalanced economy the imagination is called upon to help determine just how one should respond, how one should act otherwise, bypassing the norm and circumnavigating what was expected.

The twenty-first century design student needs to become a more critical thinker and thus needs first to be made curious. Rowe's teachings effectively make the student aware of the gift they have been given by the modern movement: free experimentation for the sake of endless invention. The consequence of participating in this gift economy is the responsibility to do good with one's innovations, so as the student enters into the economy of the gift they also enter into ethics. This will have little gravity, however, without immersing the student in the possibility of free experimentations based on a certain faith of modern architecture, of which, in turn, they can be skeptical of, doubt, and critique. The use of irony, paradox, ambiguity, and refutations as pedagogical devices enables the teacher to suspend the student in the law of modernity, thereby igniting their curiosity and provoking critical responses.

Hopefully there will be no confusion: no claims are being made either to Rowe's religious attitudes or to any agency of religion in architectural education. Rowe's personal beliefs (or lack thereof) have no bearing on the validity of the arguments in this book, which propose a parallel between the written teaching of the Bible and the written leading of Colin Rowe. Not only will light be shed on Rowe's repeated and pedagogical use of the Bible as a source of quotation and analogy for the good intentions of modern architecture, but it will also be argued that by understanding the particular kind of teaching written into the Bible we can better understand his methods which, at the same time, have been heralded for their influential effects and derided as either reductively formal, esoterically nebulous, or both.

Hermeneutical readings of the Bible made possible by postmodern methods of analysis unlock the hidden value of Rowe's teaching. The postmodern skepticism toward truth and objectivity renders an image of the historian as one who invents as much as finds, whose narratives recount more than discover. According to Ricoeur, historical representation stands in the place of that which was but no longer is. There is an actuality, in other words, beyond and outside the historical text, ultimately inaccessible and thus in need of re-presentation. The reader must participate with the *theopoetic* of the text in order to inhabit and perform the text with their

imagination. This book will try to show how this interpretive imagination is required of both the reader of the Bible and the reader of Rowe, who avoided objective representation of history in favor of more provocative presentations that required curiosity, imagination, and critical action. There is much more to be gained in this kind of participation with Rowe's verbal opus than the less nuanced and reductive criticisms of him so common until now.

Why did Rowe teach like this? Why the ambichronous historiography? The answers to these questions reside in Rowe's conception of what an architect should be. Rowe believed an architect ought to be a philosopher in action. Hence the student of architecture ought to be as intellectually engaged as materially interested. This Renaissance conception of the architect-philosopher suited Rowe; his preference for expressions of invention and disdain for claims of totalization led to a lifelong appreciation for architecture of the Italian *cinquecento* and an unabashed distaste for elitist modern rhetoric. There was a joyful struggle, for Rowe, in the disassembling and reassembling of Michelangelo and Le Corbusier not unlike the inner tussle affected by the biblical theopoetic. The student-reader has no choice but to participate and inhabit what Rowe offers. The pleasure he took in the analysis of architectural invention blossomed in his teaching. Rowe was roughly no more and no less aware of his own pedagogical inventions than Michelangelo and Le Corbusier were aware of their architectural inventions.

The five chapters of the book are structured by four of Rowe's primary methods (irony, paradox, ambiguity, refutations) and one underlying motif (modernomy). Taken in sequence, they are roughly chronologically ordered as well. *Chapter One: Irony* addresses Rowe's early education in architecture at Liverpool, his graduate studies at the Warburg Institute, and his writing and teaching in Texas in the 1950s. *Chapter Two: Paradox* focuses on a series of Rowe's writings that reference biblical themes as a way to undermine modernist rhetoric. *Chapter Three: Ambiguity* traces the word-image dialectic in Rowe's practice through the 1970s and attempts to take his analytical style even further. *Chapter Four: Refutations* applies parts of Karl Popper's philosophy to Rowe and Koetter's book *Collage City* and other products of Rowe's work that subvert the modern city. *Chapter Five: Modernomy* departs from the main points of the previous chapters in order

to crystallize the argument for Rowe's use of modernity's free gift in his verbal opus and how it is understood in relation to his Biblical references as well as the kerygmatic teaching in the Bible itself.

"Colin Rowe inspired not only me," wrote former student, colleague, and editor Alexander Caragone, "but many students and colleagues who knew and admired him."<sup>7</sup> What do Rowe's strategies tell us about the pedagogy of producing and uncovering meaning in the built environment? Rowe was a successful teacher because he understood the value of participating in the economy of the gift of free invention, an economy best illustrated in parallel to that of the kerygmatic teaching of the Bible, which is the key that unlocks both the value of Rowe's teaching and the interpretation of his historiography. Hopefully this opens to a more balanced appreciation of Colin Rowe as an educator while also serving to rethink attitudes to education at large. The aim has not been to offer another re-examination of modernism. Indeed, the value of this work may be related more closely to the philosophy of pedagogy and epistemology than modern architecture or Rowe himself. The arguments that follow examine the possibility of alternative approaches to knowledge and meaning based on ambivalence instead of certainty and mischief rather than hierarchy.

# 1 IRONY

Some children start with mounds of sand and progress to castles, towers, and whole beachside civilizations of sand buildings. Sometimes they willfully lay waste to their kingdoms merely in order to begin again. They build and build, sandcastle after sandcastle. Some progress this way, but not all. The first castle does not ordain or necessitate more castles. Sometimes, surprising even himself, the boy who started building sandcastles walks away and starts digging holes. Intentions do not guarantee outcomes and outcomes are often unintended.

One may learn without having felt taught just as one may teach without feeling to have taught. Everything Colin Rowe did had the effect of teaching even if teaching (at least in the didactic sense) was not the cause. One is educated regardless of whether one is aware of the education and regardless of Rowe's awareness to have been educating. But he was not always an educator. Initially, Rowe set off to be an architect. It was not until an accident during service in the Second World War that Rowe transitioned to studies in history, shifting from practice to academia. This unexpected reorientation of Rowe's career trajectory would eventually have an immense impact on generations of students and designers.

The ironic dimension of this shift perhaps best represents Rowe's methods early in his career and beyond. As his lecture notes tell:

I think there is nobody in this room who doesn't know that the modern movement was involved with the wildest fantasies of a cataclysmic end and a new beginning. The prophetic books of both the Old and the New Testaments do not discuss – indeed they scarcely approach – the millenarian intensity of the arguments which proponents of 'modernism' offered as the irrefutable conclusions of both science and rationality.<sup>1</sup>

Rowe brings the Bible into the discussion not for its relevance but for its irrelevance. The Old and New Testaments do not meet the criteria Rowe himself set for his statement. The Bible is included, ironically, because of what it excludes (which should indicate the rhetorical importance of the Bible for Rowe), and this excerpt serves nicely as an example, albeit subtle,

of his irony. But if the reader is to be convinced that Rowe found valuable ways to participate with modernity's gift of free invention, then the question is, how exactly did Rowe perform irony within the economy of that gift?

This performance is best exhibited through an investigation of a series of episodes from Rowe's early career. So as to avoid a generalized blanket use of the term irony, each episode will detail specific ways it operated in Rowe's teaching, such as: *displacement* irony (or the "architect manqué"), *Socratic* and *tectonic* irony (Rowe's "Mathematics" and "Mannerism" essays), *ambichronous* irony (during his teaching in Texas), *drawn* irony (the Louis Kahn episode), *enframed* irony (Rowe's "Chicago Frame" essay), and *erasure* irony (or the *éminence-grise*).

Some definitions for irony should be introduced before synthesizing one for use in this chapter. In his *Irony and the Discourse of Modernity* (1990), the German philosopher Ernst Behler describes the ironic expression as "attempting to transcend the restrictions of normal discourse and straightforward speech by making the ineffable articulate, at least indirectly, through a great number of verbal strategies, and accomplishing what lies beyond the reach of direct communication."<sup>2</sup> Charting the course of irony through the history of literature, Behler views Socrates as one of the first to employ indirect communication as a strategy. Moreover, irony, for Behler, is not merely another form of communication, but indeed a better means of communication, at least when it comes to "making the ineffable articulate," thereby establishing the value of ironic expression.

The American philosopher Richard Rorty theorized a personified "ironist." The history of philosophy is a sequence of culturally conditioned worldviews, or vocabularies, insofar as they are articulated, each usurping and taking the place of the former. Seen not only as *a* vocabulary, but (not without some arrogance) as *the* vocabulary, they are at their time taken to be the last, or final, worldview. Kant's vocabulary, Hegel's vocabulary, Heidegger's vocabulary, and so on – each expresses their worldview in a language which also impresses the worldview itself. For Rorty, the ironist is aware of language's grip holding human expression and is thus able to move outside of it by avoiding allegiance to any one vocabulary. This ironist, then, would operate accordingly: 1) recognizing that many "final vocabularies" have been used in the past, the ironist exercises "radical and continuing doubts about the final vocabulary" presently used; 2) the ironist



thus realizes that any theory or position put forward in the present vocabulary “can neither underwrite nor dissolve these doubts”; 3) consequently, the ironist “does not think that her vocabulary is closer to reality than others.” In other words, Rorty’s ironist makes no value judgments pertaining to different vocabularies for expression since there was no relative value in the first place. One method of description is not better than any other; rather, in different historical scenarios, different methods appeal as more useful. Operating indirectly and navigating circuitously, the ironist acts by “simply playing the new off against the old.”<sup>3</sup>

Playing the new off against the old would be an apt description of Colin Rowe’s *métier*, for he had long been aware of the built-in contradictions that accompany the modern search for utopia. Emmanuel Petit’s research on the manifestation of irony in the work of several late-twentieth century architects referenced Rowe in order to define the intellectual background for such manifestations. “There is still an element of irony which attaches itself to any realization of the Utopian vision” wrote Rowe, and this is when many, Petit included, typically align this statement with Rowe’s introduction to *Five Architects* (1972) and his argument for modern architecture’s “physique-flesh” over its “morale-word”<sup>4</sup> (I will address in detail “physique-flesh” and the *Five Architects* introduction in chapters three and six, respectively). But, while Rowe’s appraisal of the modernists’ utopia as inherently ironic – it should persist, says Rowe, “as possible metaphor rather than probable social prescription” – is by now a common one, what is uncommon is Rowe’s own understanding of irony. Continuing his argument on utopia, Rowe writes that “Utopia becomes increasingly compromised as it becomes increasingly acceptable.”<sup>5</sup> The closer one gets to a place that does not exist, or the more real something becomes that is in fact unreal, the more it undermines itself.

For Rowe, irony performs on a scale. Irony has a behavior determined by the proximity between the traveler and her destination. This is significant because Rowe apparently does not understand irony as a static outcome of an event, or as a consequence. Rather, he sees irony as a temporal phenomenon that moves, adjusts, reacts, and changes according to other agents and conditions. In short, irony may be performed. Synthesizing Behler, Rorty, and Rowe, the performance of irony will here be defined as

*playing the new off against the old with a variety of verbal strategies in order to articulate that which lies beyond direct communication and disturbs its common presumptions.*

## **Displacement Irony and the *Architect Manqué***

“I had received my architectural education at the University of Liverpool during the years 1938-1942 and 1944-1945,” says Rowe, “and it is from this connection that I derive two of my greatest friends, the late James Stirling and Robert Maxwell.”<sup>6</sup> Stirling would become a prolific architect, mostly in the United Kingdom but also notably in Stuttgart for his Neue Staatsgalerie (1984), and Maxwell would become immensely influential in academia, largely through his leadership at Princeton University. Rowe and Maxwell met in 1940, Maxwell’s first year at Liverpool. The Corbusian influence was strong in their design work, and although Rowe claimed that he was brought to Le Corbusier via Maxwell, Maxwell has said it was just the opposite. Rowe, forever invested in Italian architecture, said that Maxwell by contrast was “Frenchified.” Maxwell’s design thesis, in fact, was described by himself with reference to Le Corbusier’s infamous villa: it was a department store with “two stories, then the Maison Savoye” on top.<sup>7</sup> And, as well known as Rowe was for his use of *partis* (an abstract diagram or sketch expressing the main idea for a design), Maxwell claims he “did Rowe’s *partis* better than him.”

But the war would pull Rowe from his education and pivot his path. While training as a parachutist for the Royal Air Force, which Rowe described as “a vast three-dimensional ballet, complete with the most elaborate pyrotechnics,” he suffered an accident that damaged two of his spinal vertebrae<sup>8</sup>:

I spent the years 1942-44 (or part of them) in a not very remarkable military service which was terminated, very effectively, on the occasion of my eighteenth parachute jump, by a fractured spine.

In some ways this was fortuitous, since most of those with whom I trained were killed in the Sicily landings and there was always Normandy to follow; but, in other ways, it was less than agreeable. A fractured spine, with some residual paraplegia in the left leg – and this was easily to be excited – rendered leaning over a drafting board the reverse of easy. Consequently, an

invitation from the Warburg Institute at the University of London to accept a junior fellowship could only be an attractive proposition.

So it was that I became an architect *manqué*; the result was my working for two years as, at the time, Rudolf Wittkower's only student on the preparation of a thesis, 'The Theoretical Drawings of Inigo Jones,' which, apparently, was just what those Warburgians wished to receive.<sup>9</sup>

Rowe says he became an "architect *manqué*," which is to say he never became an architect, or that he missed his career as an architect. The phrase could also be translated to suggest that he was a failed architect in the sense that, after the parachute accident, he lacked what he felt he needed to continue his path in architectural design. Another, and maybe more apt use of the term *manqué*, is to play down one's ability when in fact one is very good at what one does. All too aware of his influence on generations of architects, writing this self-appraisal in retrospect, Rowe can modestly claim success in architectural design without ever having been a successful architect himself. But how exactly did the injury make design impossible?

Architectural design may have been the "reverse of easy" after the injury, but apparently Rowe tried it for the academic year of 1944-45. One can't help but think that if he had wanted to practice architecture badly enough he might have managed an altered and more ergonomic drawing method. The typical architect's drawing desk in the mid-twentieth century featured a raised seat and an adjustable (tilted or horizontal) surface. Would a vertical surface – not unlike a painter's easel – have been more amenable? We cannot know what varieties of attempts were made to cope, if any, and this is not meant to question Rowe's threshold for the pain of a fractured spine. But it is a warranted question, since the alternative, although cast as a far better scenario, could hardly have been much less painful.

Could sitting and writing really have offered a distinctly different physical experience than sitting and drawing? It would seem unlikely. For while reading may be performed in a relatively relaxed posture, writing requires that one lean over a desk; the typewriter of the mid-twentieth century was not as mobile as the laptop of the twenty-first century. Furthermore, while architectural design has long held the reputation of a long and laborious effort at the drawing table, writing, for Rowe, was not exactly an expeditious enterprise in relation. One need only read a few paragraphs of a Rowe essay to feel the painstaking rigor applied to the text's

rhythm, cadence, and, for lack of a better term, composition. “If he was writing for publication he couldn’t let go of it until it was *just so*,” Colin’s brother David recalls, “whereas others like [Reyner] Banham could just do it, Colin’s need to hone what he was writing, to get the cadences the way he wanted them, was almost pathological.”<sup>10</sup> So the question begs to be asked: If design and writing did indeed present similar physical conditions, then why did Rowe turn from architectural design to art history? Perhaps it was history that interested him more than design. What Rowe dubbed a *manqué* (failure) may have been an epiphany.

After all, Rowe did work in the practice of architecture from time to time. After studying under renowned historian Henry-Russell Hitchcock at Yale, Rowe spent about two years on a North American tour visiting prominent buildings. And as the inherent relation between history and design grew stronger in him, it would only be natural to mix design practice into this architectural pilgrimage. As Rowe traveled, he remarked, he “sometimes worked in offices in Vancouver and in Bakersfield, California.”<sup>11</sup> So, although Rowe would like us to believe that it was a physical handicap that stunted his path to becoming an architect, he did work in architectural design, even if sporadically, only several years after the parachute injury. To summarize: since he did work in offices, one can reasonably infer that Rowe could have continued his initial path and become an architect himself. He had the potential to be an architect but set it aside for a career in historical and critical analysis. This opens to three interpretations of his decision to shift paths: Rowe either doubted his ability to design, or his desire for analysis was bigger than his desire to design, or both.

The advantage of retrospect allows us to look back across Rowe’s career as a teacher, historian, and critic as we consider his decision. One fact that is evident (perhaps *the* fact) is that Rowe’s influence on architectural design did not depend on him being a designer. Credit and notoriety, common aspirations for architects, was a low priority for Rowe. Yet the sway and potency he exercised was profound. In other words, Rowe operated an inverse proportion of attention and influence. By most accounts this was just the way he liked it. If doubt played a role in Rowe’s decision, it would have been a doubt in the merits of the publicly heroic architect characterized in modernist rhetoric and of which he was outwardly cynical. It was not that Rowe doubted his ability to design as much as he preferred to infiltrate it

from a less direct approach. The displacement from design to analysis, then, was not a change of aim, but a recalibration.

After Liverpool, Rowe completed a graduate degree at the Warburg Institute under the supervision of historian Rudolf Wittkower. His Master's thesis on "The Theoretical Drawings of Inigo Jones," was submitted in 1947. The eventual Harvard professor and historian Eduard Seckler would have been at the Warburg at the same time, writing his doctoral dissertation on "The Evolution of the Staircase in British Architecture" (1948). Rowe also met Alan Colquhoun in 1947, on a meeting arranged by their mutual friend Robert Maxwell. The two would become good friends and even shared a flat briefly. Colquhoun – an influential critic in his own right – recalled how Rowe adopted an upper-class English accent in an effort to better integrate himself in London. "He was trying to shed his provincial background. He came from muck and brass," which is to say, from working-class Yorkshire.<sup>12</sup>

Displacement irony permeated Rowe's relation to architecture, as he chose to design not by *designing*, but by questioning the supposed virtues of prevalent design attitudes as a historian, writer, critic, and teacher. This is, after all, where his talents resided all along. Less concerned with making things than asking questions, the boy on the beach leaves the sandcastle unfinished and begins digging holes. Ironically, the more he digs the more he understands building.

### **Socratic and Tectonic Irony in Rowe's Early Essays**

"Colin spoke always with a touch of irony," Maxwell recalled, "with complete knowingness."<sup>13</sup> Rowe's two early essays, "The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa" (1947) and "Mannerism and Modern Architecture" (1950), both published in the *Architectural Review*, have enjoyed a popular readership and abundance of critical analyses, especially the "Mathematics." There is no intention to provide yet another full analysis of these essays here; rather, the means by which Rowe deployed what may be called Socratic and tectonic irony will be detailed in each.

First, "The Mathematics of the Ideal Villa" is not about the mathematics of *an* ideal villa, but about the mathematics of *two* villas. The expectation for singularity is thus split to a comparative, a between. While this has

become obvious to the initiated, it still bears noting since the title fails to clarify to the uninitiated reader whether the essay will be about *the* ideal villa (singular object) or the category and *canon of the ideal villa* (criterion). Unexpectedly, it is neither. Rowe provides a comparative analysis of the proportions employed in not one, and not many, but two villas separated by three and a half centuries (one from 1560 and one from 1927). Irony wastes no time as it stretches the tension between essay title and essay content.

Then, the essay begins not with Rowe's voice but with another's, and it speaks neither from the sixteenth nor the twentieth century, but from the eighteenth. It is an epigraph from Sir Christopher Wren that sets the foundation for Rowe's argument. Wren, a prolific architect after the Great Fire of London in 1666 but also a respected scientific polymath, defines in the epigraph "natural" and "customary" beauty, and establishes the former as an objective, universal constant (ideal). Upon this basis, Rowe compares Andrea Palladio's Villa Rotunda in Vicenza (1550) and Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye outside Paris (1931) as best expressions of the ideal of "natural" beauty in the sixteenth and twentieth centuries. However, he then discards the two examples to develop a more complex comparison. "A detailed comparison is less easy to sustain between the two houses which, initially, seemed to invite their linking together" says Rowe, and despite the Villa Rotunda and Villa Savoye being more familiar to the architecturally initiated reader, "they are also, in each case, more obviously Platonic and easy to take."<sup>14</sup> So Rowe moves on to Palladio's Villa Foscari near Venice (1560) and Le Corbusier's prior Parisian project, the Villa Stein (1927), which together become the comparative focus of the entire essay (Fig. 1.1). The irony here is that while the Rotunda and Savoye comparison at first seems both most suitable to the criteria and more accessible to the reader, it is apparently too easy and obvious a task, provoking Rowe to favor a more subtle and nuanced comparison.

That digression proves to be an extremely persuasive maneuver. In shifting from an easier comparison to a more complex one Rowe prepares the reader for all the difficulties that are sure to arise when associating buildings from different times, of different sizes, in different places, and – since they are historically split by the industrial revolution – built with very different construction materials and techniques. The expectation, in other words, is difference. Rowe reinforces this by admitting that "Palladio's