WHIMSY: An Allegory of Urbane Patronage
From Rome to Montreal

In Celebration of Phyllis Lambert’s Eightieth Birthday, January 24, 1927*

Irving Lavin
Institute for Advanced Study, Princeton
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When Sylvia first invited me to speak on this occasion, I said NO WAY. Not just for the obvious reason, but for the more substantial one that I know nothing about modern architecture. When she said she thought I might say something about patronage, however, I thought, well maybe. She did not explain what she meant, and I did not ask her to. But it did make me think that I have, after all, spent virtually my whole life in the no man's land between one of the greatest patrons and one of the greatest artists of western history, Urban VIII Barberini and Gianlorenzo Bernini, who almost single-handedly (and I use that phrase advisedly), inaugurated a new era of Roman urbanism. Here I did see some food for thought, although I readily admit that the idea of linking a notorious modern Jewish Princess with a notorious seventeenth century Catholic Pope is whimsical, to say the least.

The analogy could hardly be a greater stretch, and I have no illusions about convincing anyone that it is anything else. Nevertheless, the plot thickened at least a little when I recalled that years ago during her frequent stops in Rome to visit the man she really loved, Richard Krautheimer (I, for one, never got to first base with her), she stayed at the Hotel Bernini (Fig. 1). Now the Bernini, though not the grandest hotel in Rome, is deluxe, and it lay a few short blocks from the Krautheimers' apartment at the Bibliotheca Hertziana (Fig. 2). But I like to think that another reason she stayed there was that she liked the view of the Piazza Barberini in front and the adjacent palace, whose character and name were largely determined by the aforementioned patron and artist. The rather weird plot thickens a little more when you think about the legacy of the design of the Palazzo Barberini. Soon after his election the pope acquired a palace built some decades earlier for the Strozzi family, situated in what was then a near suburb of Rome, on the slope of the Quirinal hill with a view overlooking the ancient city and the Tiber River toward the Vatican (Fig. 3). Barberini added a middle block fronted by three stories of open arcades,

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perpendicular to the Strozzi palace, devoted to grand ceremonial spaces, and an additional wing of living quarters equal in size and parallel to original building (Fig. 4, Fig. 5). The result was revolutionary. The U-shape itself was nothing new: the Villa Farnesina built a century earlier just across the Tiber, where projecting wings also flank an arcaded centerpiece, was surely an important model (Fig. 6, Fig. 7). But the Palazzo Barberini broke with tradition by reversing the usual orientation so that the open, informal, suburban facade faced the city, in place of the traditionally closed, formal, imposing, often forbidding urban palace facade that was a legacy of the medieval palace as fortress. Implicit in this simple but profound reorientation and transparency was a new attitude toward the urban fabric, which instead of confronting, embraced the life of the city.

From her window in the Hotel Bernini Phyllis could catch a glimpse of the Palazzo Barberini at her left. But the piazza that first welcomed her on her way to see the Krautheimers was no less revolutionary than the palace itself (Fig. 8). Piazza Barberini, far larger than its predecessors, it is not in front of the palace but at the side, not reclusively isolated in the city but at the confluence of important thoroughfares, an integral part of the of the city’s life. In the center of the Piazza stood Bernini’s famous Triton fountain, the second major public fountain in Rome exclusively of organic forms with no architectural or geometric elements except the retaining basin at the bottom (Fig. 9). Such wholly “natural” fountains had a long tradition in suburban and artificially rustic settings such as grottoes but never in the heart of the city and on such a monumental scale. Similarly, aquatic themes had long been conventional for fountain designs, but never with such simplicity, dramatic concentration and eruptive power. The great water beasts suck up the liquid through gaping mouths, concentrate it in a narrowing spiral and thrust it upward through an Olympic hybrid who blasts it sky-high through his sounding conch, calling his thirsty followers to assemble. Compare the small, intimate piazza before the Palazzo Mattei, is filled with the delightful Fountain of the Turtles by Giacomo della Porta and Taddeo Landini, 1581-84, in which ephebic sprites create a balletic, delicately balanced transition between amorphic half-shells below and thin ribbons of water streaming from the basin above (the turtles were added in a 1658 restoration by Alexander VII, perhaps by Bernini). (Fig. 10). Perhaps the most distinctive feature of Bernini’s design is its openness in every direction. The pressurized jet of water thrust heavenward cascades down into bivalves spread wide like the wings of a bird on which the triton seems to ride or rather float forth on some fantastic
crustaceous flying carpet. In fact, nothing had ever been seen in any context quite like this triumphant sound-blast announcing the arrival of a new era overflowing with benign, munificent refreshment.

What Phyllis could not see from her window was another feature added forty years later to the south side of the palace by a nephew of the pope, but probably also conceived by Bernini and wholly in the jocular spirit of his works under Urban, that is, the famous ruined bridge connecting the piano nobile to the adjoining garden higher on the slope of the hill (Fig. 11, Fig. 12). The arches of the bridge appeared to be not simply ruinous but collapsing, until a wooden drawbridge was lowered; with its open iron railing the whole affair must have seemed precarious indeed (its stability was assured by hidden metal chains). 2

On her way to the Krautheimers’ Phyllis saw, as a kind of marginal footnote at the northeast corner of the piazza, another equally astonishing fountain innovation that opens the piazza in another way, that is, to the visitor, merging two heretofore distinct categories, relief and freestanding (Fig. 13). Now again the bivalve opens, this time vertically to yield its glistening treasure close to the ground for all its visitors, parched in the Roman sun, to share, including animals, and notably the three bees of the Barberini coat of arms (Fig. 14). Originally installed at the corner of a building at the northwest corner at the entrance to the piazza, the fountain was dismantled in the nineteenth century and later reconstructed, free-standing at the far northeast corner; (Fig. 15). The upper shell serves double duty as an inscription attached to the wall, defining the point of this engaging witticism and the rationale for its extraordinary design:

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2 The bridge was attributed to Bernini by two contemporary writers and has never been questioned, except by Patricia Waddy, Seventeenth-Century Roman Palaces. Use and the Art of the Plan, Cambridge MA and London, 1990, 269-71. In fact, the concept of the bridge closely recalls the disastrous stage scenery that formed the central conceit of Bernini’s "bella idea" for a self-caricaturing comedy (1644) about a famous stage designer and impresario whose wonderful illusionistic contraption collapsed (from theatrical sky to earth), and therefore created the perfect illusion (see my Bernini and the Unity of the Visual Arts, New York and London, 1980, 152-7, and Donald Beecher and Massimo Ciavollela, “A Comedy by Bernini,” in Irving Lavin, ed., Gianlorenzo Bernini. New Aspects of His Art and Thought. A Commemorative Volume, University Park, PA, and London, 1985, 62-113, cf. 100-2. Contemporary with the execution of the ruined bridge was Bernini’s Ponte Sant’Angelo whose openwork railings (also revolutionary in a monumental city bridge), were inspired by a temporary wooden truss bridge in Paris (for which see Irving Lavin, “Bernini at Saint Peter’s: singularis in singulis, in omnibus unicus,” in William Tronzo, ed., St. Peter’s in the Vatican, Cambridge, etc., 2005, 197-9, where, however, the bridge in question was wrongly identified; the correct bridge, also a wooden truss and also called Pont-Rouge, is identified and discussed in a revised and greatly expanded version of the study in course of publication by Pindar Press, London).
“Urban VIII, having built a fountain for the public ornament of the city, ordered this one for the utility and especially the convenience of the individual.”

Finally, having left the Krautheimer’s place and descended the hill to the Piazza di Spagna (Fig. 16), she encountered what must surely have seemed the most astonishing of all urban creations, or should one say creatures, the first major wholly organic fountain in Rome—known fondly since it was installed early in Urban’s reign as the Barcaccia, from its resemblance to a type of humble work-boat, double-prowed for going up and down stream without turning around, used in hauling freight on the Tiber (Fig. 17, Fig. 18). From antiquity on there had been naval fountains in Rome, but never in post-classical times in so conspicuous a site and always in the form of an imposing warship, whether an archeological relic, or a detailed replica of a modern galleon (Fig. 19). In Bernini’s version the water pouring over the sides suggests that the poor awkward craft is about to sink beneath waves; at the same time, the morbid shape of the gunwales suggests the lips and gaping mouth of some great sea monster swallowing the thing in one voracious gulp. But in fact, the situation might just as well be the opposite: the monster could be vomiting it up, in effect saving it from a watery death. Gun emplacements fore and aft, trickle forth harmlessly limping ribbons of clear, cool, gentle water. This ironic portrayal of an unlikely object in an unlikely situation in an unlikely place—one of the major city squares—was a delight to one and all and surely contributed to its immediate baptism with its endearing, cuddly name in the common Romanaccia dialect of the city.

The irony is plain to see if one considers that that the flagship symbol of the Catholic church as an institution was precisely the noble ship, as the ship of state, Christ’s earthly domain guided by the pope at the helm. The theme was so central to the ideology of the church that one proposal offered at the outset of Urban’s reign for furnishing the newly completed basilica of St. Peter’s actually enclosed the high altar and the choir for the cardinals in a ship under a sail blown by the crucifixion (Fig. 20). The Barcaccia’s astonishing, quasi-persiflage of this exalted concept was rooted—no less surprisingly—in a minuscule, rather crude object in which, as if providentially, all the fundamental themes of the maritime metaphor seemed to have been

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4 On the naval project by Papirio Bartoli, see Irving Lavin, Bernini and the Crossing of St. Peter’s, New York, 1968, 43.
distilled. This was a small cut gem mounted in what was thought to have been an episcopal ring, evidently from the early Christian period (Fig. 21). Newly discovered then but soon lost, the gem was unique in design and subject matter. Inscribed Jesus and Peter with abbreviations in Greek letters, the carving portrays a ship carried shoreward on the back of a gigantic sea monster; a figure at the rear mans the rudder, while another figure, perhaps a fisherman casting a net, appears in the prow. Raised on a mast in the center is a smaller ship, perhaps the ship’s flag, surmounted by a bird, which seems to communicate with another bird mounted on the main vessel’s poop. The birds surely allude to the raven and the dove that Noah sent forth from the arc on Mount Ararat to see if the waters had dried up (Gen. 8:12). The open mouth of the great beast inevitably suggests that of the whale casting Jonah up onto dry land (Jonah 1-2); and at the right, beneath the inscriptions, Peter walks the waters from the ship to take the extended hand of Christ on shore.

The ring was the subject of a very scholarly monograph published by Girolamo Aleandro, a member of the papal court, dedicated to the pope’s nephew Cardinal Francesco Barberini, with a learned commentary relating the gem to all the piscatorial, naval, and marine themes attesting the miraculous institution of the church and the salvation it offered. The book appeared in 1626, the same year Urban dedicated the new church of St. Peter’s and the year before the Barcaccia was begun. The Barcaccia morphed the vessel, the sea monster and the water into a coherent, organic image of Urban’s offering on behalf of the church to the people of Rome—a rippling and continuous flow of grace as aquatic succor for body and soul.

Bernini’s biographers make two points about the fountain that are especially relevant here. They note that the whole idea sprang from the fact that the water pressure in the Piazza was inadequate for a regular fountain, so that the solution illustrated one of the cardinal points of Bernini’s idea that the test of a good architect was to treat obstacles in such a way that if they had not existed you would have invented them on purpose. The second point is that Bernini made the fountain at the Pope’s behest, and there can be no doubt in this case because we know that Urban insisted on this location despite the lack of water. The Barcaccia floats smack in the middle between the two preternatural Superpower rivals, with the Spanish embassy on one side of the piazza, and the French enclave with the Villa Medici up the hill on the other. The papacy was often caught uncomfortably in the middle, especially in seeking to reconcile and unite the antagonists in the struggle against the Protestant heretics. In this light and in this place, the
Barcaccia is an emblem not only of the pope’s diplomacy but also of his diplomatic method. When the work was completed, Urban himself celebrated with a distich that explained its meaning:

The papal warship does not pour forth flames,
But sweet water to extinguish the fire of war.  

My guess is that challenged to do so an astute and imaginative architectural historian could trace a line, however wiggly and often faint, from the House that Urban VIII built in Rome to the House that Phyllis Lambert built in Montreal. As the Strozzi palace was incorporated into the Palazzo Barberini, so the Shaughnessy House (a beautiful old mansion that was about to be demolished) was incorporated into the Canadian Center for Architecture (Fig. 22, Fig. 23). The north, or city facade of Peter Rose’s building faintly echoes, though in a more formal and imposing way, the symmetrical projecting wings that faced the city in Rome. (southview) But at the south side, with the auditorium on the left and the scholar’s wing on the right, the echo becomes a veritable embrace within an embrace (Fig. 24). And as in Rome the embrace of the protruding wings extends to the city itself, down the slope of the Mont-Royal to the Autoroute Ville-Marie and the Canal de Lachine toward the St. Lawrence River in the distance (Fig. 25, Fig. 26, Fig. 27) (To my mind, the spectacle of those rushing highways is what makes the CAA truly modern and relevant.) Here at the rear, instead of the traditional landscape garden Melvin Charney’s work for the CCA creates a quite unprecedented relationship to its environment. In what follows I have depended largely on Charney’s own meditative and I think deeply philosophical essay on his work in the 1992 volume on the Building and Gardens of the CCA.

The underlying principle was not to contrast with the urban environment, but rather to co-opt it, first of all by grounding the layout in a synthesis of the regular pattern of streets, including party or boundary walls, that previously occupied the site (i.e., based on the CCA’s immense

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project to retrieve, organize and publish virtually the entire documentary history of Montreal from its beginnings) (Fig. 28, Fig. 29).

Carefully collocated within this historically, archeologically, determined framework is a series of objects (I use this term deliberately to obscure the difference between sculptural and architectural forms) that in themselves echo, rather than contrast with the urban context that preceded and surrounds them. These objects, in turn, function urbanistically in two ways, retrospectively and prospectively, both metaphorically and literally. Retrospectively, in that at the center of the garden two parallel concrete “arcades” echo the front and the rear of the Shaughnessy House itself, whose main features have been disassembled, as it were, into transparent screens (like the arcaded galleries at the Palazzo Barberini) through which the proper, cultivated garden transpires. (Fig. 30, Fig. 31).

Prospectively toward the south on a platform that edges the escarpment down the hill to the city beyond, are ranged two regular rows of objects also in the form of architectural fragments that comprise two kinds of structures, often commingled: (Fig. 32, Fig. 33, Fig. 34) monuments as abstract, architectural types, such as temples and columns; and quasi-real structures—a construction crane lifting architectural icons, an obelisk become industrial chimney billowing forth a constructivist cloud of smoke—that can actually be seen in the city.

In garden-historical terms you might say that they are follies about follies. And so the CCA garden is a sort of memory theater, the term used by the great psychological theorists of the Renaissance to describe an imaginary structure of the mind consisting of distinct locations that they called “luoghi deputati,” “assigned places,” places in an imaginary (or image) structure, which they called a theater, assigned to locate and preserve those fragments of experience and thought which the mind deems worthy of future recollection. This theme, which might here be called not just a theater of memory but a theater of architectural memorabilia, is uniquely suited to an institution devoted to the preservation and study of architectural history, that is, the human legacy of what is nowadays commonly called the built environment.

I must confess that I have a particular affection for the CCA garden because its urban embrace resonates in an uncanny way with a personal experience of my own. Some years ago I was asked to write an essay about another great monument garden, at Storm King mountain, a
beautiful site on the Hudson just below West Point (Fig. 35, Fig. 36). The former owner of the property had built a house on the crest of a hill overlooking the valley westward toward Storm King mountain at the horizon. The house became the Storm King Art Center and a great collection of modern sculptures was distributed around the high rolling hills at strategic points, usually chosen by and sometime created by the artists themselves. What could be more ideal? The only trouble, according to the presiding landscape architect and a leading member of the Board of Trustees (two of the least whimsical people I have ever met), was that the site bordered directly on the New York State Thruway running through in the valley and spoiling the view of the mountain and “natural” setting in which the sculptures were meant to be seen. To me instead, the spectacle of the Thruway vibrant with rushing twenty-two wheelers and automobiles, was indeed part of the landscape, a work of modern art accompanying the park, no less magnificent and expressive and no less a product of our culture and way of life than the elegant and ingenious expansion bolts that made large scale concrete construction cheaper and more reliable (Fig. 37) manufactured by the Star Expansion Company, which created the wealth of its owners, who created the foundation that created the Storm King Art Center itself and acquired the sculptures it treasures inside the park. Despite my passionate plea to love and embrace the magnificent Thruway in its magnificent setting, they decided to hide it behind a row of huge trees along the ridge in front of the house. But not before I had extracted a promise to allow me to begin and end my essay with views up toward and down from Storm King Art Center with the New York Thruway coming and going full speed ahead.

The link between our Catholic Pope and our Jewish Princess is certainly a stretch, but I do think a really savvy researcher could actually trace, maybe through Richard Krautheimer, who certainly knew both characters well, the line that connects them. The passionately affirmative outward reach, and the wry wit they share are not only matters of individual personality, they also embody a sort genetic cultural heritage (Fig. 38). The word I would choose to describe this public-minded sentiment is simply, urbanity, in the loftiest and most far-reaching sense of the word. And here again the pope played the lead role.

The contemporary sources give two main reasons why Maffeo Barberini chose to call himself Urban: first, because of his special affection for Rome, the Urbs par excellence. And

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7 “Storm King: The Genius of the Place,” in H. Peter Stern, et al., Earth, sky and sculpture. Storm King Art Center, Mountainville, N.Y., 2000, 53-64.
second, because he wished his name to be a perpetual reminder (to himself) that he must curb his own natural inclination toward sternness. Barberini was from Tuscany, where urbanity is native, but he clearly adopted the capital in affection when he moved there as cardinal and he incorporated his love for the city, along with his debonair manner and personal charm, into the conduct and the very image of his papal office. The extraordinary fact is that these affective psychological qualities were translated into practical measures of state policy—even in a formal state portrait, where Urban is shown bidding an obeisant visitor to rise and engage in conversation, as a contemporary observer observed. There developed a reciprocal affection between the pope and his young protégé, visualized in a frescoed scene that constitutes a kind double-portrait signature depicted in the grotto beneath the crossing piers of St. Peter’s while Bernini was designing and supervising the execution of the Baldachin and the area around the high altar (Fig. 39). Bernini is shown presenting and explaining to the pope his design for the aediculae in the upper niches in the crossing piers that would contain the relics of Christ’s passion. Bernini is explaining and the Pope is commenting, and in fact the niches as executed are quite different (Fig. 40).

If the thesis I have been pursuing has any merit, it will come as no surprise to learn that Phyllis’s whole essay in the CCA volume, is almost entirely devoted to the strictures imposed on her (for she is an architect) and the other creators of the CCA, by the problems of the site and the effort to preserve and display as much and possible of the Shaughnessy House. Photographs of her with the architect Peter Rose and Mel Charney speak volumes about the relationship between patron and client, and the thin line, or is it a great flow, of social and cultural development I have been trying to trace (Fig. 41).

I do not know how Sadie and Sam Bronfman came to name their second daughter Phyllis, or whether they were conscious of the name’s origin. Phyllis—the Greek word means leaf, as in a leafy plant—was, as devotees of the soul singer Phyllis Hyman know, a Goddess of Love, presiding over spring, trees, wisdom, women's secrets and the genetic knowledge contained in seeds: there she sits, Urbano-Triton-like enthroned on the wings of her plush red Gaetano Pesce labiate bivalve chair (Fig. 42). But she is perhaps most familiar from the story, famous in the middle ages and infamously revived in modern times, which goes like this, and I quote: “Aristotle was the philosopher friend and tutor of Alexander the Great, and of Phyllis, Alexander's favorite courtesan. Aristotle thought it wise to end the debilitating relationship of
his protégés, and warned Alexander that women had often been the undoing of strong men (Fig. 43). Phyllis, to gain revenge, aroused the passion of the philosopher himself and demanded, as proof of his love, that she be allowed to ride on his back as on a horse. The incident was witnessed by Alexander who learned thereby to distrust women, against whom even old philosophers were powerless. The story became a universal allegory of woman's domination of man.” I too am an old man, and remain, still, captivated by Phyllis, along with lots of other people, as this event attests.
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