

Enrico Prandi
Traveling for Ourselves, Traveling for Architecture

Abstract

The editorial essay explores the importance of travel as a formative tool for architects, arguing that direct experience of architecture, through physical presence, remains irreplaceable even in the digital age. Travel triggers a creative process where “memory” and “invention” merge: memory records subjective interpretations of reality, which then generate architectural invention: classic examples include Frank Lloyd Wright, Le Corbusier, and Louis Kahn, who modified their poetics after important journeys. The multisensory experience of architecture – perceiving spaces, proportions, light, and sounds – cannot be visualised. Finally, the case of Luigi Vietti illustrates how formative travel led to the conviction that modern architecture derives from Mediterranean architecture, demonstrating how physical encounters with places and cultures provide raw material that architects creatively metabolise in their design approach.

Keywords

Educational journey — Architectural experience — Memory and invention — Grand Tour

[...] forming architecture presupposes the formation of men (Rogers 1961).

No work of architecture can be conveyed through words, nor do photographs barely capture the experience of those who have participated in the spaces by physically inhabiting them (Rogers 1955).

Two complementary quotations by E.N. Rogers provide the background for the editorial that introduces this issue: *Architectour. Memory and Invention of the European Built Environment* aims to open reflection, among other things but not exclusively, on the importance of travel as a formative act both at a general personal level and at a particular architectural level. In conclusion of the first edition of the *Valsarena Seminars*, a symposium held in Parma in October 2024, I argued that our training as architects, including theoretical aspects, reflects our experiences and our opportunities for encounter. And what is travel if not a continuous sequence of encounters with places, cultures and traditions even before people and their opinions?

We can therefore affirm that *we are (also) what we have encountered* and *we will become (also) what we will encounter*. In times of rampant virtuality, advocating for the necessity of travel as a formative act in architecture may sound anachronistic. Even more so because in the past, as *FAM*, we have committed ourselves to encouraging alternative and experimental forms of teaching.

But the current theme is *Travel*, and particularly formative travel. It is but a short step to recalling specific cultural experiences, the *Grand Tours*, which originated in seventeenth-century England as journeys reserved for

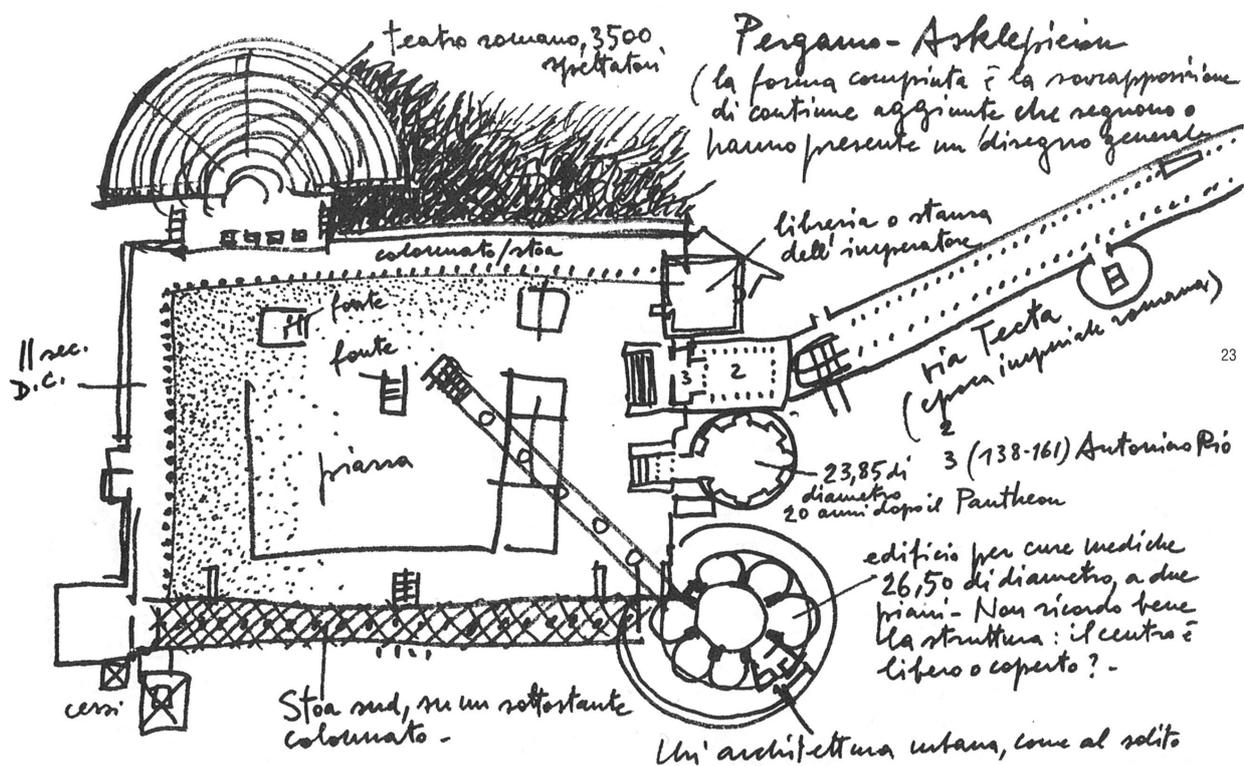


Fig. 1
Carlo Aymonino, Redrawing of the Asklepeion of Pergamon with notes. From: Carlo Aymonino, *Disegni 1972-1997*, Federico Motta.

young British aristocrats with the aim of completing their education through direct exposure to European art, history, and culture, mainly Italian. Following the model of the *Grand Tour*, the *Prix de Rome* was established and developed, as an award that European academies granted to the most deserving architecture students with the objective of analysing and studying Italian architecture. This tradition, more or less institutionalised, has remained inherent in the architect's education and has touched many authors, who have seen their poetics deviate, if not change completely (certainly enriched), upon returning from a journey.

This happened to Frank Lloyd Wright after his infatuation with Japan (which he visited repeatedly from 1905 to 1922), to Le Corbusier after his "Voyage d'Orient" into the Balkans, Turkey and Greece (1910-11), or again to Louis Kahn after his journey to the Mediterranean and particularly to Italy as a guest of the American Academy in Rome (1950-51). On this occasion, Kahn paid tribute to Italian architecture, writing to his studio:

I am definitively realizing that the architecture of Italy will remain the source of inspiration for future works, those who do not see it this way should look at it once more. Our things seem small in comparison: here all pure forms have been experimented with in all variants of architecture. One must understand how the architecture of Italy relates to what we know about building and needs.

Travel also triggered theoretic inspiration, such as Bottoni's *Architectural Chromatisms*, which he experimented with in the Civic Center of Sesto San Giovanni, interpreting the characteristics of mosaic art discovered years earlier during his 1926 journey to Pompeii (Ferro-Iarossi), or Aymonino's (impracticable) idea of «architecture entirely sculpted from a block of marble» derived from his 1988 journey to Petra in Jordan.

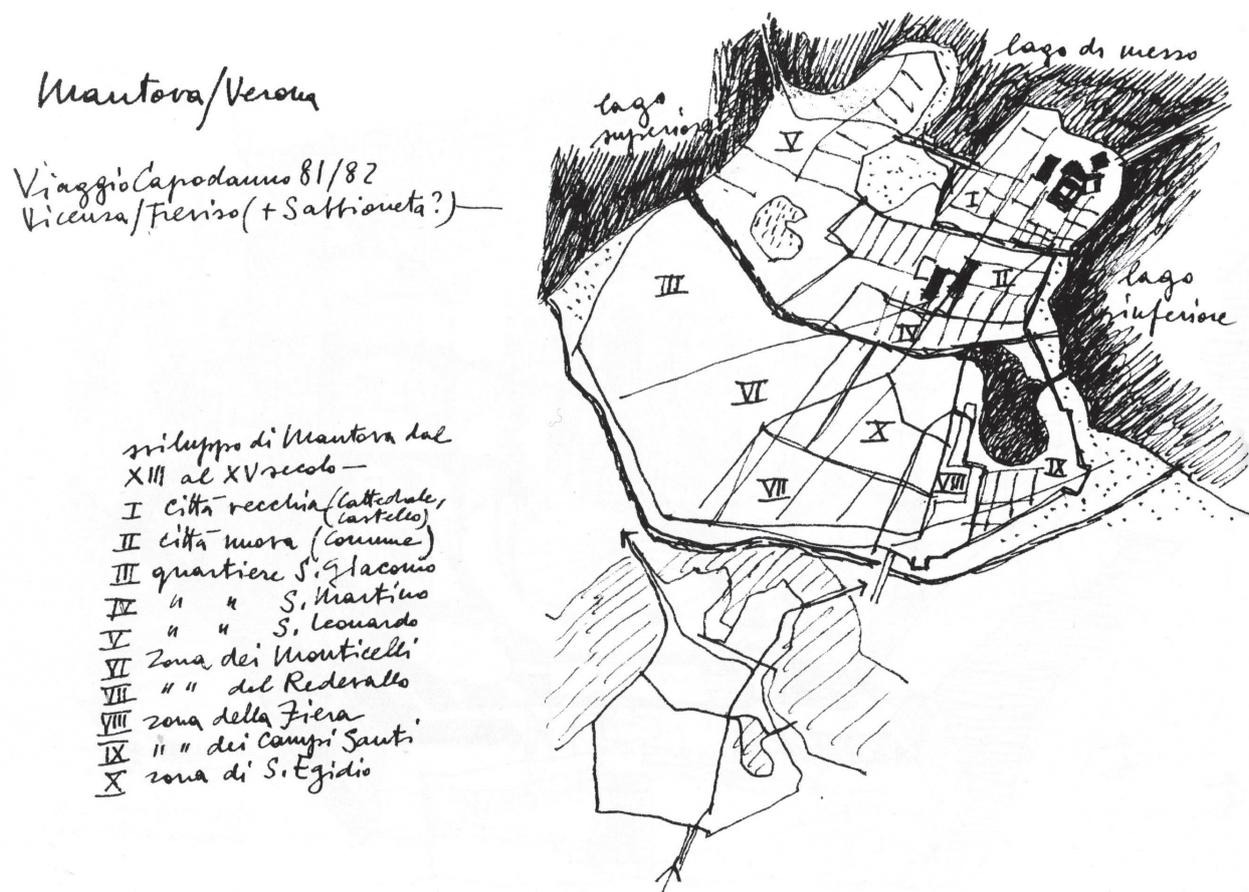


Fig. 2

Carlo Aymonino, Notes for a journey to Verona/Mantua, New Year 1981/82. From: Carlo Aymonino, *Disegni 1972-1997*, Federico Motta.

Those who have encountered masters, visited buildings, or lived different cultures carry this heritage – in part or in whole – into their own way of thinking and designing space. Equally important, however, is the manner in which these encounters were elaborated, filtered and reinterpreted through individual sensibility (and experience).

Thus the themes of “memory” and “invention” come into play, two terms that burst into the title, hybridising and specifying it. Operationally speaking, for architect these two aspects merge in the single moment of design. But let us proceed in order.

In travel, the first aspect to consider is that of recording (a place, an architecture, a sensation, etc.) which may occur through different techniques (from drawing to photography, to video, up to written diary, just to mention a few). While these techniques require a manual effort, memory activates automatically through the senses. Like a black box, memory records without our awareness in an articulated and often unfaithful process. Indeed, what we memorise is an interpretation influenced by lived experience (both current and past). Memory is an invention, understood as a reworking of what is remembered over time. Since memory is always biased (we remember what we have perceived even if this is not exactly real) we can speak of invention insofar as we bend memory to our inventive capacity that is enriched with experience from time to time.

To emphasise this idea, we could, in an improvised manner, attempt to draw a work by Le Corbusier, such as the Chapel at Ronchamp, and observe how it resembles the original «no more than a daughter resembles her mother» (the quotation is a paraphrase of a concept expressed by Luciano Semerani (2000)).

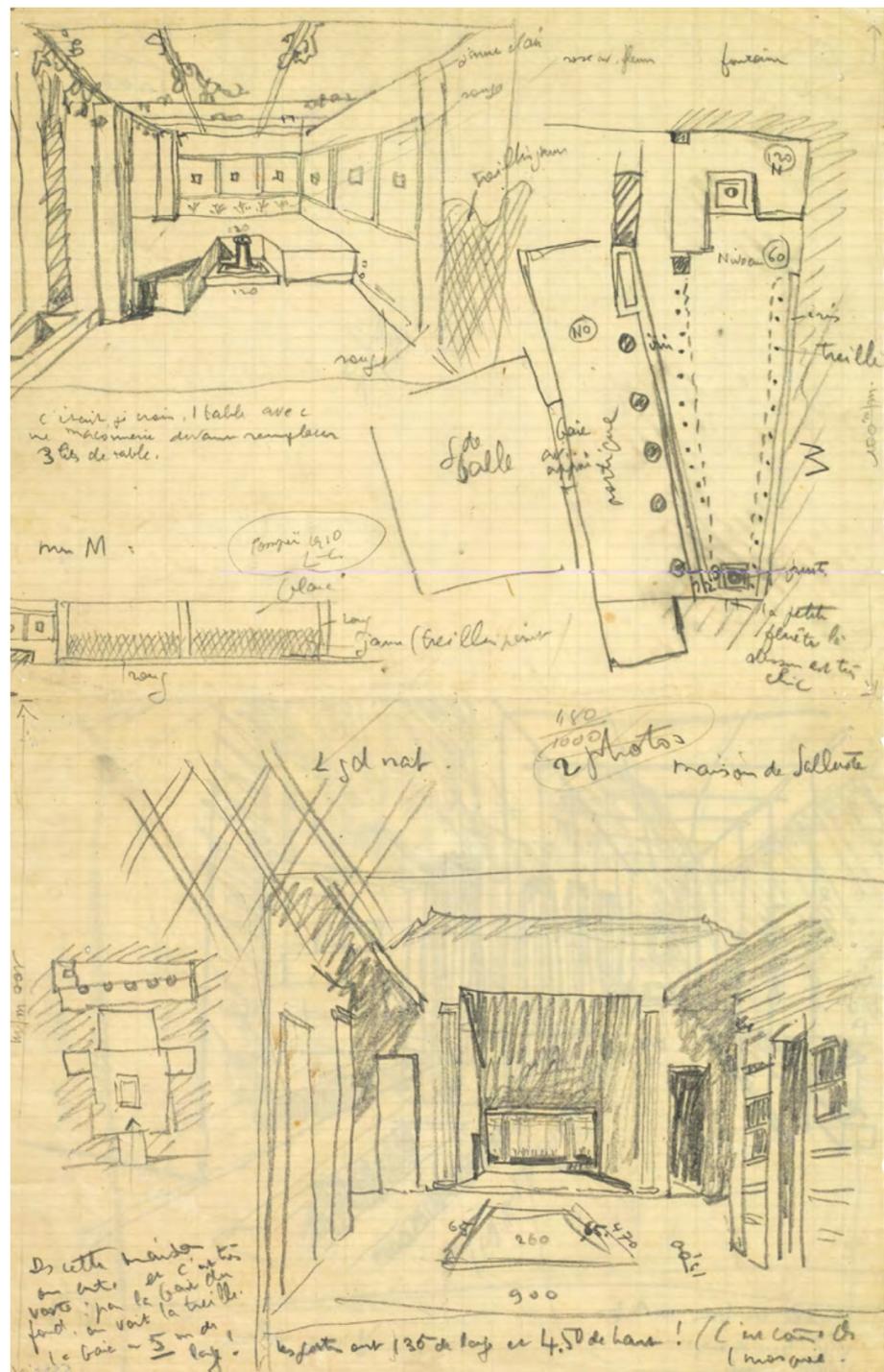


Fig. 3

Le Corbusier, Sketches of a house in Pompeii, 1911. From: Le Corbusier, *Voyage d'Orient*. Carnet IV. Fondation Le Corbusier.

We could suggest that memory insinuates between reality and its recollection, transforming into architectural invention. This is one of the few forms of architectural invention, for the peace of mind of those who are convinced that absolute invention exists in architecture¹.

The contemporary architect, inherently equipped with a strong critical capacity (whose development remains, now more than ever, the main focus for each school of architecture), must study and comprehend architecture by analysing it within the existing socio-cultural and contextual complexity. This is a difficult operation to perform at a distance because architecture can only be fully understood by living it, perceiving it with all the senses, including smell (Dewey *docet*). Such bodily experience does not translate well into modern dematerialisation and virtualisation. Walking through spaces, perceiving proportions, observing how light interacts with mate-

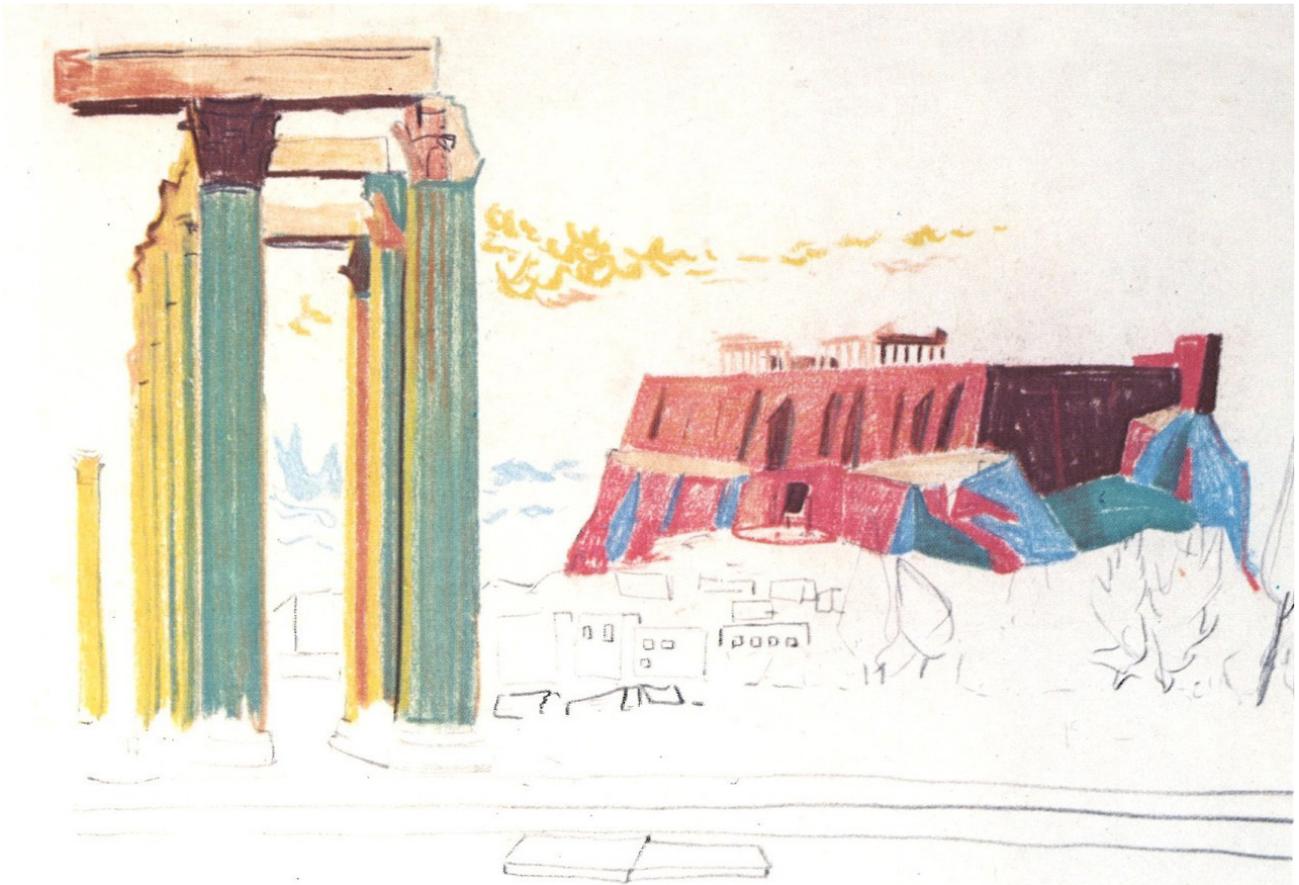


Fig. 4
Louis Kahn, Athens Acropolis from the Olympieion, 1951. From: Louis Kahn, *The Importance of a Drawing*.

rials and feeling the acoustics of an environment are characteristics that can only be understood through physical presence.

Similarly, presence guarantees a greater understanding of the context and the relationships that are established, since as we know a good architectural work is always in dialogue with its cultural, historical, geographical and social context. Traveling, therefore, allows for a better understanding of how a building relates to the surrounding urban fabric, to the landscape and to local traditions.

Travel is an experience (*of architecture* as Rogers would say) of study, analysis, and deepening accomplished personally with the most disparate techniques, including redrawing: it can also induce preliminary preparation, as Carlo Aymonino did for his numerous travels, starting from the essential information provided by the Touring Guides (the book too is an encounter), he then filled notebooks with drawings, noting the distinctive features of a city's structure and the distinctive characteristics of its monuments (even those remained unbuilt). An even more interesting aspect of this process is the fusion, along the thread of analogy, with current reflections on design problems. So that alongside the redrawing of the façade of the central Tempio for the sanctuary of Caravaggio by Pellegrino Pellegrini, Aymonino writes «The city needs different squares» (14), while under the sketch of the plan of the Asklepeion of Pergamon «the completed form is the superimposition of continuous additions that follow or have present a general design», he writes «An urban architecture as usual» (Aymonino 2000).

So much so that one of the chapters of the collection of drawings is emblematically titled "Traveling as Studying". In the digital era, characterized by immediate access to images and information from around the world, it might seem that physical travel has lost importance.

Encounters supply the raw material, but the architect – like everyone else – is also the active process that transforms these inputs into something new and personal. Travel continues to be a moment of discovery and transformation, in which the architect can develop a deeper understanding not only of architecture, but especially of himself in relation to architecture and of his own approach to design.

As I emphasised at the beginning of this essay, if it is true that we are what we encounter, it is also true that we are not only what we have encountered. I would therefore say that we are the result of the interaction between what we encounter and our capacity to metabolise it creatively. Encounters supply the raw material, but the architect – like everyone else – is also the active process that transforms these inputs into something new and personal.

Some years ago, while studying the figure of Luigi Vietti (Dell’Aira et alii 2022), I came across an experience profoundly linked to formative travel in the rationalist era.

Luigi Vietti, fresh from graduation, departed in 1932 from Chiasso station, stopping in Zurich, Stuttgart, Frankfurt, Hannover, Hamburg, Copenhagen, Stockholm and Oslo. He visited architectures, dialogued with their respective authors, confronted himself with Giedion, developing the conviction that modern architecture drew its origin from Mediterranean architecture.

A particularity that characterises Vietti’s rationalist architecture (unlike other rationalists close to him and his contemporaries, such as Terragni for example) is his desire to experience closely the new architecture that permeated from magazines.

Following his journey into the north, Vietti undertook a trip to Southern Italy to explore the true roots of the new architecture. Gathering evidence, he argued with conviction that the real origin of modern architecture was Mediterranean architecture (traditional architecture, with or without architects, paraphrasing Rudofsky), which greatly influenced the great Masters of the twentieth century and remains an important lesson.

Notes

¹ On this aspect cf. Prandi 2004.

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