

# *In the World, but not of It: Quaker Influences on Robert Venturi's Chapel for the Episcopal Academy*

En el mundo, pero no de él. *Influencias cuáqueras en la capilla de Robert Venturi para la Episcopal Academy*

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## ABSTRACT

Robert Venturi has repeatedly noted in several interviews and conversations that his upbringing was as a Quaker. The Quakers (or the Society of Friends) have deep historic ties with the state of Pennsylvania and the city of Philadelphia and have had a significant presence in Venturi's life. I propose to examine the inconspicuous and largely overlooked intersections between the Quaker aesthetics and beliefs and Venturi's 1950 thesis project, a Chapel for the Episcopal Academy in Merion, Pennsylvania. «*In the world, but not of it*», Quakers have situated *paradox* at the core of their material culture: while the physical world was stripped of metaphysical content, craftsmanship was highly valued; while meetinghouses were never sacred spaces, they have always acted as depositories of historical and cultural genealogies. Through the lens of Quaker doctrine and aesthetics, I will examine the role of *paradox* in Venturi's design for the Chapel for the Episcopal Academy.

## KEYWORDS

Robert Venturi, Quakers, Sacre Architecture, Paradox, Context.

## RESUMEN

Robert Venturi ha señalado repetidamente en varias entrevistas y conversaciones que su educación fue como la de un cuáquero. Los cuáqueros (o la Sociedad de los Amigos) tienen profundos lazos históricos con el estado de Pennsylvania y la ciudad de Filadelfia y han tenido una presencia significativa en la vida de Venturi. Propongo examinar las intersecciones discretas y en gran parte pasadas por alto entre la estética y las creencias cuáqueras y el proyecto de tesis de Venturi de 1950, una capilla para la Academia Episcopal en Merion, Pensilvania. «*En el mundo, pero no de él*», los cuáqueros han situado la *paradoja* en el núcleo de su cultura material: mientras que al mundo físico se le despojaba de contenido metafísico, la artesanía era muy valorada; mientras que los centros de reuniones nunca fueron espacios sagrados, siempre han actuado como depositarios de genealogías históricas y culturales. A través de la lente de la doctrina y la estética cuáquera, examinaré el papel de la *paradoja* en el diseño de Venturi para la capilla de la Episcopal Academy.

## PALABRAS CLAVE

Robert Venturi, cuáqueros, arquitectura religiosa, paradoja, contexto.

## VENTURI'S QUAKER UPBRINGING

Robert Venturi repeatedly noted, if unassumingly, in several interviews and published conversations over the years, that his upbringing was as a Quaker. For his master's thesis at Princeton in 1950, Venturi designed a chapel for the Episcopal Academy, his alma mater in Merion, Pennsylvania. While scholarship in the field has focused mostly on the question of context in relation with Gestalt psychology in Venturi's thesis project, I propose to examine the inconspicuous intersections with the Quaker aesthetics and beliefs, particularly through the concept of *paradox*.

The Quakers (or the Society of Friends) have historic ties with the state of Pennsylvania in general and the city of Philadelphia in particular. Critics have largely overlooked their influence on Venturi's work and their implications for his theoretical position. An exception is a short article by Esther McCoy, Venturi's long-time friend, who proposed that his connection with the Quakers offered possible clues to his «strict code of ethics and his love of simplicity» (McCoy 2012, 293). Commenting on the plans of the Vanna Venturi House, the Guild House, and the North Penn Visiting Nurses Association, McCoy remarked they were in disagreement with the Modernist space, and carried a conflict between «the German mysticism of the universal space», on the one hand, and Venturi's Italian roots and Quaker education, on the other. Further, she interpreted the plan of the Vanna Venturi House as a «safe and sound Quaker letter in second person singular» (McCoy 2012, 294).

Against the general background of Quaker Philadelphia, the Society of Friends has had a significant, though discreet presence in Venturi's life. In several interviews, he has unassumingly mentioned his affiliation with the Friends, however without further elaborating on any possible influence they might have had on his thinking.

Toward the end of his architectural studies, Venturi was planning to join the American Friends Service:

«I was brought up as a Friend. I acquired my training from the sympathetic attitude and convictions in my home and at Friends Meeting which my family joined in 1931. (...) I have been influenced

by no one individual, the Society of Friends has no ministers – but have relied generally upon the principles of my religious education» (VSB Archives, 225.RV.113)<sup>1</sup>.

Probably part of a local tradition, but perhaps also related to Venturi's family's affiliation with the Friends, a catalogue of Quaker publications was sent to the newlyweds Venturi and Scott Brown after their wedding in July 1967 (VSB Archives, 225.II.F.1553). Venturi has been exposed to Quakerism in his education (he attended grade school at Lansdowne Friends School) and at home. Although his parents were of Italian Catholic descent, his mother initiated the conversion of the entire family to Quakerism and the three of them began to attend Quaker meetings on Sunday. Describing his upbringing in a book celebrating the Italian heritage of noted Americans, Venturi explained his parents' conversion to Quakerism:

«My mother and father were born Catholics but did not practice. When I was about five years old, they decided they needed a religious affiliation for my sake. Being a pacifist, my mother was attracted to the Quakers because of their stand against the war, and so she became a member of the Society of Friends. My father went along with her and the three of us went to meeting on Sunday morning. I was sent to a Friends School in Philadelphia. (...) I went to Lansdowne Friends School until I was ten years old» (VSB Archives, 225.II.F.1037, Box 70)<sup>2</sup>.

In an interview from 1995, Denise Scott Brown attributed the concern with social justice that she shared with her husband to her African upbringing and Venturi's Quaker background:

«A heritage of Socialism and Quakerism in Bob's family and my African social and racial concerns, tied in with movements for social justice in America of the 1960s, have caused us to try in our practice to join social concern with design and to remain committed as architects to achieving social justice» (Scott Brown 1995, 29).

In an interview published in *Perspecta* in 2008, Venturi simply stated: «I was an Italian-American Quaker» (Scott Brown and Venturi 2008, 38). In a 2009 conversation posted on the architectural website *ArchDaily*, Denise Scott Brown credited her

mother-in-law for her husband's support of her own commitment to social issues. Scott Brown described Vanna Venturi as «a socialist and a pacifist». To which Venturi added: «And a Quaker» (Jordana 2011).

## THE QUAKER DOCTRINE

The Quaker doctrine derives, and at the same time, distances itself from the tenets of the Puritan Revolution of the mid-17th century England. Unhappy with the teachings and practices of the Church of England, George Fox, the son of a puritan churchwarden, began to seek salvation outside the official church. He founded the Religious Society of Friends, or the Quakers, and spent his life traveling and preaching throughout Britain, Europe and America<sup>3</sup>. American Quakerism began with the English-born Quaker William Penn who came to North America in 1682 and later founded the province of Pennsylvania and the city of Philadelphia.

*Paradox.* While having set themselves apart from the world as a separate group, the Quakers embrace a set of beliefs that is inclusive of all human beings, welcomes diversity, and is non-judgmental (Verplanck 2009). The contradictory nature of «being in the world, but not of it» complicates the relationship between the physical and the metaphysical where the latter is not manifested in the former. The Quakers aesthetics originates in the larger Protestant views on *plain style* born in the 17th century in reaction to the Catholic Baroque. Historian Susan Garfinkel has argued that «Quaker theology has within it a fundamental crisis of representation. All expressive behaviors, whether spoken, enacted, or built, function as embodiments of this conflict» (Garfinkel 1995, 85). Recent scholarship has begun to acknowledge the complex nature of this tension and the constant travails of the Society of Friends to reconcile their theology with the pressures and demands of modern life. This paradox has been at the core of the Quaker material culture: while the physical world was stripped of metaphysical content, craftsmanship was highly valued; while meeting houses (the Quaker places of communal worship) have never been sacred

spaces, they have always acted as depositories of historical and cultural genealogies.

«The paradoxical elements in Quaker thought and activities have often led to a misunderstanding of the Friends. (...) Quakers could be intellectuals and yet anti-intellectual, social activists and mystics, evangelical and quietistic, complacent and insecure, intent on making money and anxious to avoid being wealthy, dogmatic and nontheological, tolerant and strict (Frost 1973, 217).

The expression «live in the world, but not of it» is attributed to Fox as a way of describing the inherent tension present in the Quaker way of life (Garfinkel 1995). The paradox of being «in the world, but not of it», a simultaneous condition of inclusion and exclusion, has shaped Friends' attitudes toward all the manifestations of material culture from exterior garb to architecture. Quaker clothing from the 17th century, for instance, removed the dress ornamentation characteristic to the age of Stuart kings (Brinton 2002), but that same simplification made the members of the Society of Friends appear more conspicuous than they would have wanted. (As the dress code has relaxed over centuries, today there is no visible difference between Quakers and non-Quakers.)

*Context.* Quaker meetinghouses are not sacred, transcendent spaces, but their role is central to keeping alive genealogies, as well as personal and collective histories. The common perception is that their design does not distinguish itself from domestic architecture. Although «there are no inherently sacred objects or spaces», once a proper spiritual understanding is achieved through the Inner Light, the distinction between the sacred and the secular disappears and «all aspects of life are encompassed by the sacred» (Garfinkel 1995, 78). So rather than a secularization of sacred spaces, we are, in fact, witnessing the elevation of all spaces, profane and sacred, to a spiritual level.

Friends' attitude toward their worship spaces reflects the paradox inherent in the Quaker doctrine: on the one hand, meetinghouses are not regarded as relevant historic and cultural artifacts, but on the other hand, they are maintained, reused, and rebuilt as a way of preserving the integrity and the continu-

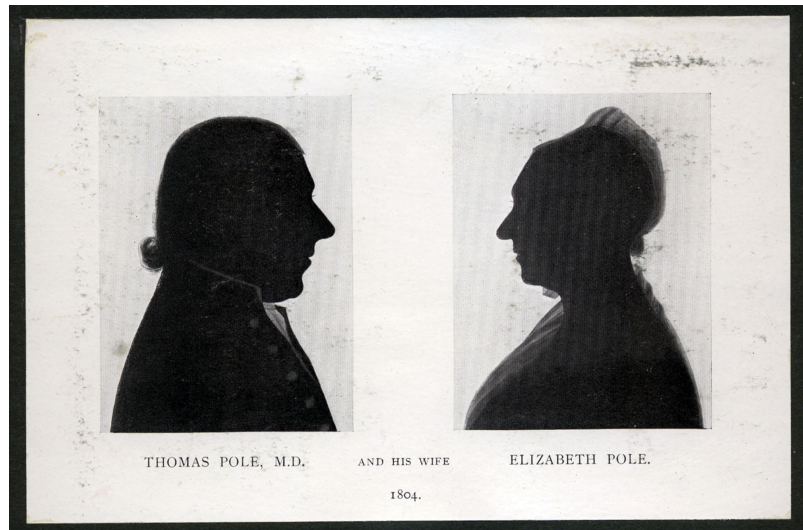


Fig. 01. Quaker silhouettes.

ity of the community (Lavoie 2012). Clever ways of recycling and re-purposing building parts and materials from meeting houses that are no longer in use reflect concerns for resources and economy of means as aspects of simplicity, but also reinforce ideas about continuity, genealogy and legacy (Lavoie 2012).

When possible, the old meetinghouse was and is saved in its entirety and adapted for another use such as a school, stable, shed, or even a residence. When new construction becomes unavoidable, materials from the old structure are generally incorporated into the design or sold and the funds applied to the cost of the building campaign (Lavoie 2012).

Historian Susan Garfinkel has identified a series of polarized concepts and attitudes at work within the Quaker meeting houses such as nurture/nature, private/public, inside/outside, plain/worldly, equality/hierarchy, etc.<sup>4</sup> Friends' worship spaces act as contested spaces where tensions are performed and re-enacted in every meeting: between silence and speaking, action and meditation, between the individual revelation through Inner Light and its communal understanding through the larger group, between saving material artifacts as depositories of memories and discarding the same objects as spiritually irrelevant.

*Congregation.* Four main principles or testimonies guide Quaker life: *community*, *equality*, *simplicity* and *harmony* (Brinton 2002). Unlike other religious practices that exercise silence as a form of worship (such as Zen meditation), what distinguishes the Quakers is the idea of the *community*. The worshipers sit together in silence waiting for the divine message to descend upon and utter through one of them. The silent worship requires a patient waiting, which is sometimes followed by a message heard, recognized, understood, verbalized, and then communicated to the community. The act of recognizing the «still, small voice» is of crucial importance in Quaker worship, but «there is no sure test of divine guidance in this or any other undertaking» (Brinton 2002, 103-104) and «no rules can be laid down for Quaker ministry» (Brinton 2002, 21). A tension thus emerges between silent reflection and the need for communication (Garfinkel 1995). Quaker *harmony* infers the unity of action without force. *Equality* does not imply egalitarianism in terms of economic or social status, but respect and consideration across class, race, social or religious distinctions (Brinton 2002)<sup>5</sup>. Of the four tenets, *simplicity* is probably one of the most debated topics in Quaker doctrine. The general understanding of this testimony is that



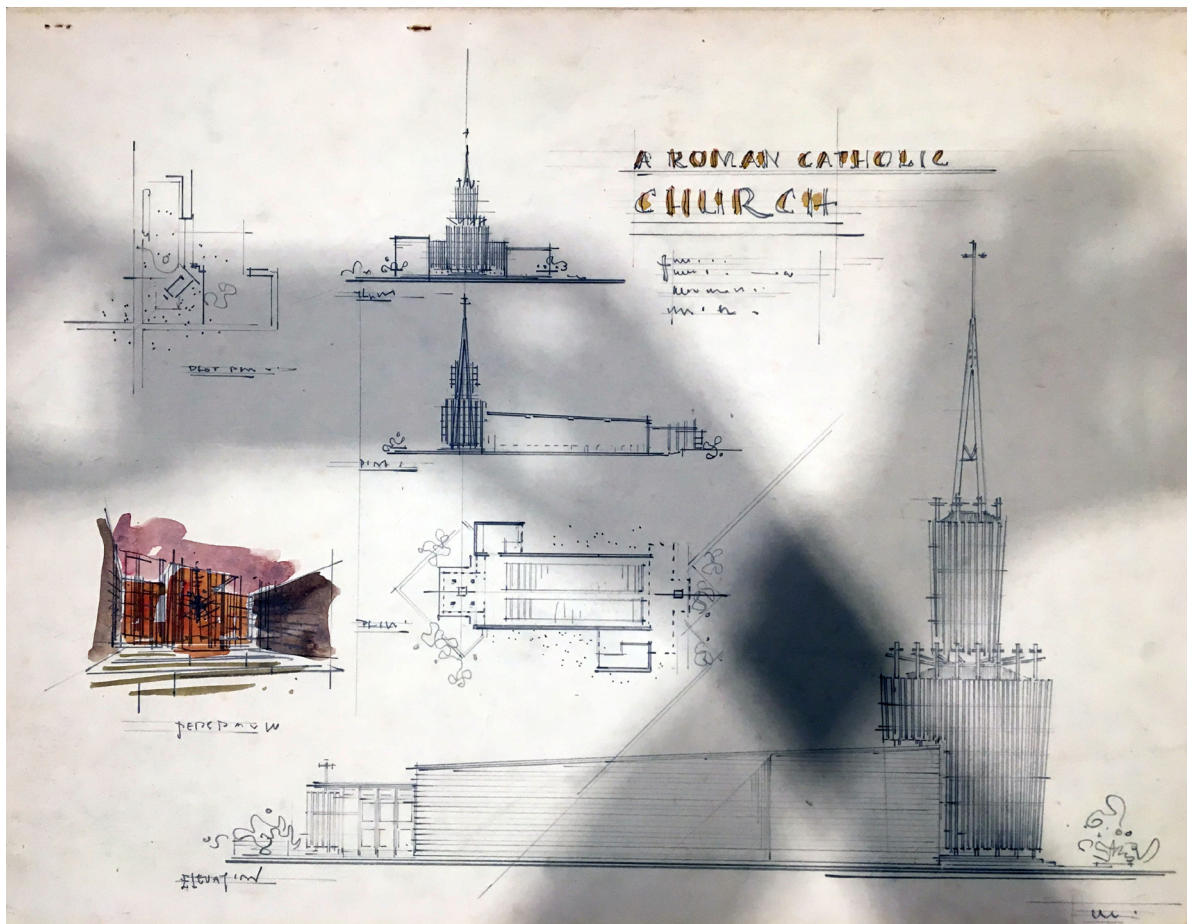


Fig. 02. Robert Venturi, Undergraduate Project for a Roman Catholic Church.

*simplicity* must be understood as the absence of the unnecessary, of the superfluous, of those things that clutter life. Rather than an exterior expression, *simplicity* is a form of sincerity and genuineness (Tolles 1959; Brinton 2002; Lavoie 2012).

While the Quaker tradition appears to resist representation, it embraces a different dimension of the artwork. It engages, in fact, with art forms that operate in a two-dimensional space and tend to flatten the three-dimensional world. During the first couple of centuries after the foundation of the Society of Friends, the Quakers have disregarded mainstream visual arts perceived as images of life threatening to take over life itself (Brinton 2002). They have appropriated, instead, modes of representation consistent with their doctrine. In 19th century Philadelphia, for instance, the Quakers privileged silhouettes over traditional oil paintings (Fig. 01) (Verplank, 2009). A particular form of portraiture, silhouettes were either drawn freehand or traced directly from the outline of a head or a shadow with a physiognotrace, an instrument designed to trace a person's physiognomy (Verplank 2009).

The silhouettes were simultaneously figurative and abstract, specific and universal: as they outlined the character of the sitters, the profiles gave them an identity, but also stripped off the particular details that usually make the difference between an individual and a generic figure. Silhouettes fitted the Quaker conceptions about material life: plain, simple and economical (Verplank 2009). Collected in albums, they were bringing together not only members of the same family, but also friends, ancestors, and figures from the past. The cut-outs could be exchanged, mailed, and offered as gifts. The activity of assembling them in albums required the participation of the immediate or extended family and this act of sharing reinforced kinship and identity. At a larger scale, the albums also traced the lineage and genealogy of the Quakers, thus legitimating their position in history (Verplank 2009). Quaker art forms, even when depicting the individual, maintained the collective dimension and the emphasis on community and congregation.

## THE CHAPEL FOR THE EPISCOPAL ACADEMY

Venturi's interest in religious architecture dates back to his undergraduate studies at Princeton. In a project for a Roman Catholic church he assembled the conventional features of traditional Catholic worship spaces: open narthex, basilical plan, longitudinal axis, a tower (Fig. 02). At the same time, he experimented with asymmetries and the positioning of the tower above the altar rather than at the entrance or adjacent to it. In what appears to be a quick 6 —or 9— hour long sketch problem<sup>6</sup> he enclosed the altar with a timber structure that filtered down the light: the only light source of the church, as shown in the interior rendering.

Venturi's thesis begins with a prologue that states the main intent of the project: «to demonstrate the importance of and the effect of setting on a building». The main questions seem to revolve around the issue of context. Venturi writes:

«A building is not a self-contained object but a part in a whole composition relative to other parts and to the whole».

«Change in context causes change in expression. Change of a part (addition or alteration) causes a change in the other parts and in the whole».

«These relationships are constantly relative to the observer's visual reactions, limit of attention and situation».

«The architect accepts and creates context» (VSB Archives, Venturi's thesis project).

The case studies presented at the beginning of the thesis, as well as the design proposal that follows, illustrate the relationships between a building and its context, where the latter is understood mainly as physical and built presence, rather than as a larger and more complex cultural, social, and historical reality. Although Venturi explicitly draws on the principles of Gestalt psychology, and his formalist approach is highly indebted to the Gestalt figure-ground studies, I believe that Quaker values, although never overtly stated, have been critical in shaping his approach.

Conceptually, the thesis has three parts, which, almost in a scientific manner, construct the demonstration through hypothesis, testing, and conclusions:

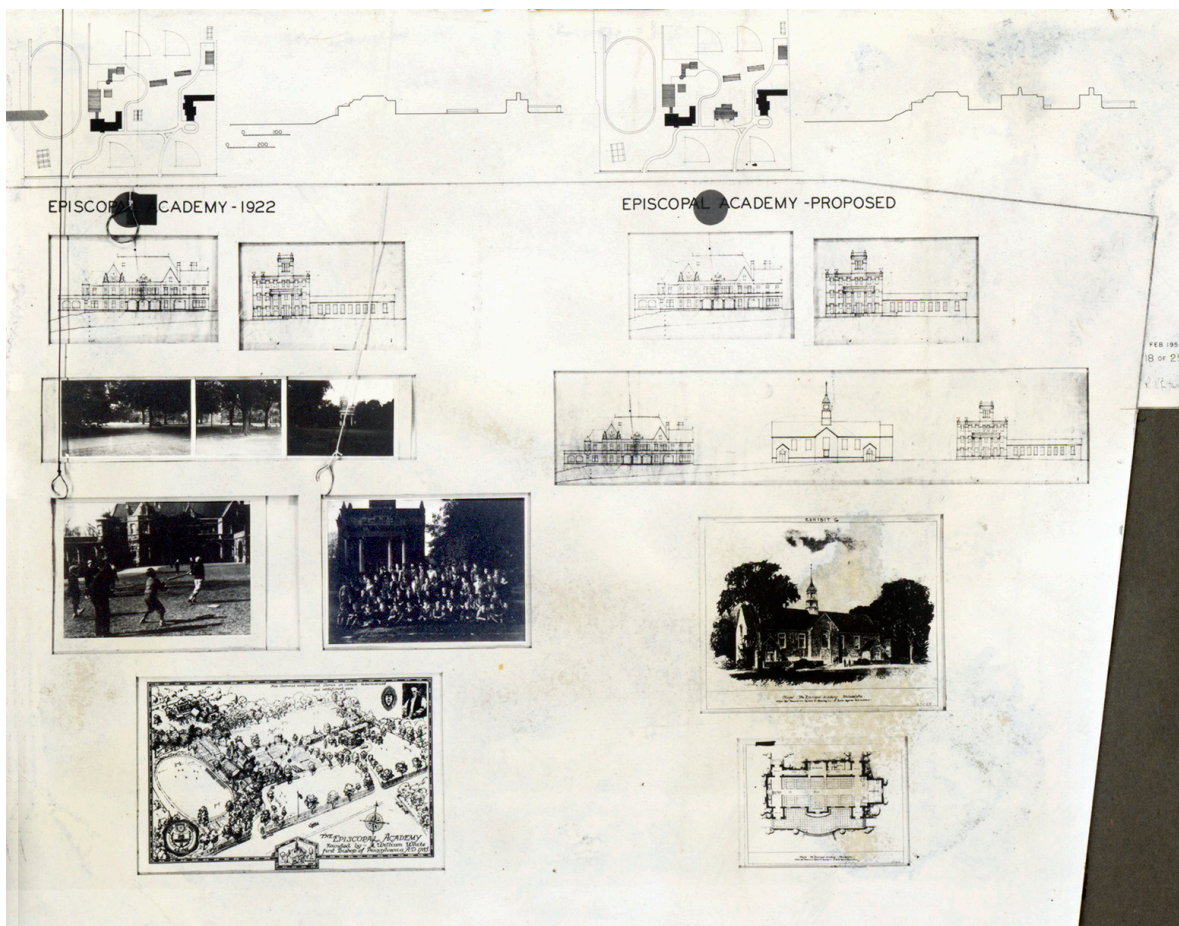


Fig. 03. Robert Venturi, Chapel for the Episcopal Academy, Merion (PA, USA). Thesis Project, Princeton University, 1950.



the theoretical premise stating the focus on context, a series of case studies that bring supporting evidence, and the concrete application of these ideas: the design of the Chapel for the Episcopal Academy. Visually, Venturi organizes a storyboard through horizontal and vertical connections between various parts of the project. Two parallel horizontal threads follow the ideas that «context gives a building expression» and «change in context causes change in expression». These horizontal lines begin with general composition principles (such as priority, juxtaposition, direction, etc.) and conclude with the chapel design. Vertical strips show—in the precedents section—changes over time in the context of the same building.

It is relevant to observe the case studies, organized based on the comparative method that Venturi will continue to employ throughout his entire career. Although they are divided into two sections, Rome and contemporary domestic architecture, the section entitled «Rome» includes two examples from other locations, i.e. Paris and Philadelphia<sup>7</sup>. The section on domestic architecture shows mostly precedents from the 1930/40, with the exception of the 1830 Hoffman-Simpson House from Salem, Massachusetts. None of the precedents in either category is identified by their architect, although some of them do have notable authors: the apartments in Aluminum City, Pennsylvania were designed by Walter Gropius and Marcel Breuer, and the apartments in Leipzig (or the Siedlung Rundlung Leipzig) were designed by the German modern architect Hubert Ritter. Implicit in Venturi's work is a claim for academic rigor, so in this context the lack of authorship, whether an imprecision or a deliberate omission, might also be attributed to a certain Quaker ethics that tends to de-emphasize the individual in favor of the community.

The very notion of *context* (although not necessarily formulated as such) has been at the core of Quaker thought. To be «in the world, but not of it» suggests both a sense of belonging to and one of alienation from the environment. The same Quaker attitude that embraces the everyday while aspiring to receive the higher Inner Light, guides the unlikely association between precedents drawn from the most ordinary architecture and those set in a highly sophis-

ticated city like Rome. The very idea of looking at domestic precedents for an ecclesiastical building might appear unusual, but, from a Quaker standpoint, the worship house (or the meeting house) belongs, in fact, to everyday life and architecture; therefore such precedents are not only accepted, but legitimate. Quaker meeting houses do not stand out in their environment, but, as we have seen, preserve the notion of history as genealogy.

The proposed chapel is intended to act as a mediator between the existing buildings on campus:

«This country day school consists essentially of two converted eclectic mansions. These buildings in their present function are unrelated in their position and form».

«The new chapel in its position and form is conceived as a changed context which causes a changed expression – meaning».

«Two mansions become one institution».

«The whole is articulated and unified by the addition of a part» (VSB Archives, Venturi's thesis project).

Whether the chapel does accomplish its intent is controversial. Venturi places it in-between the two mansions that it seeks to articulate, thus creating a linear sequence of three buildings (Fig. 03-04). Most of the precedents presented at the beginning of the thesis show urban configurations that create public spaces. So one could argue that the chapel fails to create an urban plaza in relation to the other two buildings. On the other hand, however, smaller, semi-enclosed public spaces come into existence through the siting of the proposed chapel between the two existing mansions. The siting does not seem to be the most obvious choice in the given context. The main body of the chapel is not parallel to the other two buildings; instead, it is only the enclosure of the entry courtyard that references the existing buildings (Fig. 04).

The different articulations that Venturi proposes, though purely formal, do not derive exclusively from the objective principles of *Gestalt* psychology. *Gestalt* does emphasize complexity of meaning, as well as an ambiguous figure-ground relationship in a way similar to the technique of silhouettes. Venturi's



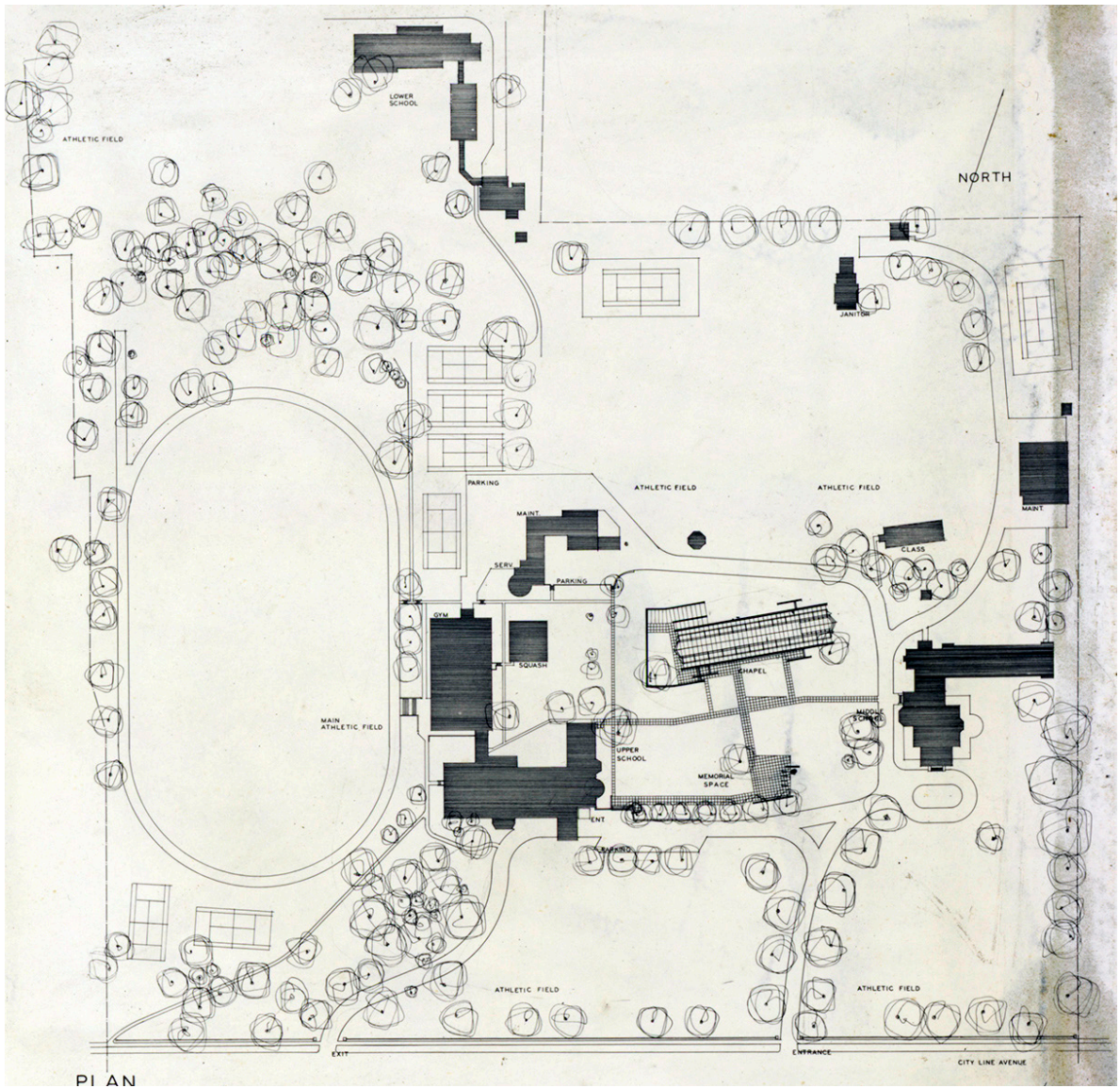


Fig. 04. Robert Venturi, Chapel for the Episcopal Academy, Merion (PA, USA). Thesis Project, Princeton University, 1950: proposed site plans.

proposal introduces a certain tension between new and old elements of the architectural composition that finds its roots, if implicitly, in Quaker beliefs. The paradox of being «in the world, but not of it», of being at once part of and remote from the environment, of blending in while inadvertently standing out, reflects the overall attitude of Quakers toward the world. A sense of discomfort with the outside world, of unease and tension has characterized Friends' behavior throughout centuries. To translate an internal state, most of the times unspoken and concealed, into a physical reality is not an easy task. Venturi projects, if unconsciously, elements he is familiar with from his own upbringing onto a project that requires a different level of introspection and sensitivity than more conventional, lay architectures.

In addition to the chapel, the scheme includes a *war memorial space* that utilizes in its composition «an existing large dead tree trunk to create an atmosphere expressive of war as tragic» (VSB Archives, Venturi's thesis project). While the use of *spolia* has a long tradition in architectural history, modern architecture, however, was largely indifferent to the recycling of elements carrying a certain history as a way of constructing meaning. In 1950, at the time of Venturi's thesis, incorporating *spolia* was highly uncommon. On the other hand, we have seen that Quaker building traditions embraced the re-use of old architectural elements in new projects with a twofold purpose: for economic reasons and as a way of carrying through the history and genealogy of the place. While today Venturi's intention of incorporating a large dead tree trunk in his composition would go unnoticed, in the context of his thesis it was most likely an unusual approach, which reveals subtle influences of Quaker practices on his work.

However, where the Quaker mark is probably the most noticeable is in the organization of the interior space of the chapel for the Episcopal Academy. After the American Revolution, the Episcopal Church separated from the Church of England. More recently, it has described itself as «Protestant, yet Catholic»<sup>8</sup>, stating: «Anglicanism stands squarely in the Reformed tradition, yet considers itself just as directly descended from the Early Church as the Roman

Catholic or Eastern Orthodox churches» (The Episcopal Church 2004). In his design, Venturi proposes a plan that is a hybrid between the typology of Roman Catholic churches and Quaker meetings houses (Fig. 05). Geometrically, the plan is a longitudinal volume that consists of five squares. Spatially, it constructs the sequence of spaces that in a Roman Catholic church (which Venturi has studied in the past, as his earlier student projects show) create the transition from the most profane to the most sacred: outdoors courtyard, narthex, nave with two aisles separated by a central circulation, and sanctuary.

The directionality specific to Roman Catholic churches is contradicted by the setting of the pews: instead of facing the sanctuary, as it is common in both Catholic and Episcopal worship spaces, the two aisles of pews are, instead, facing each other, a layout specific to Quaker meeting houses (Fig. 05). Therein, Friends have oriented the benches toward each other to construct a stronger sense of interaction between the members of the congregation, a configuration still preserved in contemporary architecture. This layout is a direct consequence of the Quaker canon that puts the community at its core and where the lack of ministry or priesthood is translated architecturally into the lack of sanctuary or altar. Venturi's chapel for the Episcopal Academy embraces both Roman Catholic and Quaker characteristics. The drawings indicate a stepping up in section in two directions: as one moves from the narthex through the nave toward the sanctuary, and within the nave itself. Spatially, the nave is separated from the narthex and the sanctuary, but the two aisles of pews are also stepping up above the central horizontal circulation. This arrangement is not simply a matter of furniture layout, but a deliberate decision to focus the design on the congregation. Moreover, this being a chapel for an educational institution, Venturi chooses to emphasize the educational aspect and to focus on the space of the community, rather than the sanctuary.

The section and the rendered interior perspective give us more indications on how to interpret the space. The structure consists of a series of trusses spanning between the lateral walls that create a



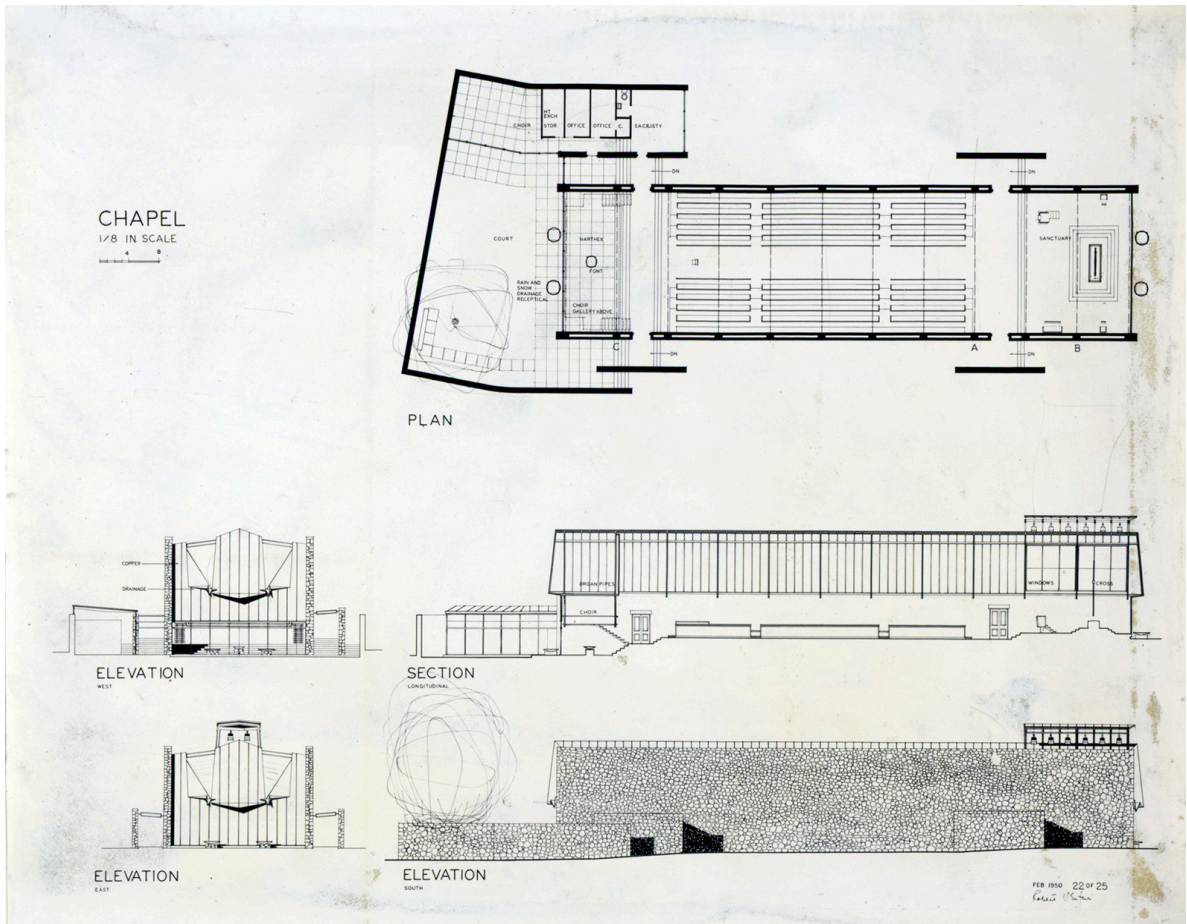


Fig. 05. Robert Venturi, Chapel for the Episcopal Academy, Merion (PA, USA). Thesis Project, Princeton University, 1950; plan and sections.

strong roof form, which is continuous along the length of the entire chapel (Fig. 06). The roof/ceiling is identical over the nave and over the altar, thus reinforcing the reading of the space as non-hierarchical. Venturi's note reads: «All compressive members are wood. All tensile members are steel. Truss color scheme is blue, green and violet which are floating colors and make a vibrating contrast» (VSB Archives, Venturi's thesis project). This color scheme might appear rather unusual in a worship space, but it puts an emphasis on the continuity of the truss that visually and spatially connects the narthex, the nave, and the sanctuary (Fig. 07). The truss also acts as a lighting mechanism through which the nave receives an indirect lateral light that washes the walls, whereas the sanctuary, raised above the level of the nave, is flooded in light.

In Quaker doctrine, light has a particular nature and relevance: individuals have access to spirituality not through their own will, but through what is called the *Inner Light*. Manifested only through revelation, the Inner Light does not engage with the sensible world. Quakers passively wait for and receive revelation in a physical world devoid of spiritual qualities. There are no corporeal mediators between the divine and the human. (This act of passive waiting might contain the seeds of what Venturi and Scott Brown will later refer to as «deferred judgment».) Just as the Inner Light constitutes the unseen core of Quaker theology, the truss with its «vibrating contrast» constitutes the spine of the chapel: suspended, floating, illuminating. Moreover, the roof gently casts light on the sidewalls, rather than through the dramatic central spine. If the sidewalls are relatively bright from the roof lighting, then people sitting in the pews will be backlit and appear like silhouettes to those sitting across the aisle. Built on the tension between the seen and the unseen, light and matter, spiritual world and physical world, the chapel embodies the motto of the school: *Esse Quam Videri* («To Be, Rather than to Seem to Be»).

It is relevant to compare Venturi's thesis project with his firm's much later design for the Episcopal Academy Chapel, Newtown Square (PA, USA) completed in 2008. Founded in Philadelphia in 1795, the

Episcopal Academy had established two campuses, in Devon and Merion, PA. The two campuses were consolidated into one and relocated in Newtown Square. It was for this new campus that VSBA designed the new chapel, conceived as «an iconic campus landmark – immediately identifiable and symbolic of the new campus, yet also a well-used and highly-functional school facility» (VSBA 2008). Unlike Venturi's 1950 thesis project whose emphasis on community was translated in a non-hierarchical architectural composition, the 2008 chapel proposes a different order. The fan-shaped plan has a clear orientation toward the altar, which is marked volumetrically by a prominent tower. The relationship between different pieces and the altar/tower offers a different reading from Venturi's thesis project. Despite the claim that the plan «allows the worshippers to face each other as well as the altar, nurturing a sense of togetherness and community» (VSBA 2008), the 2008 chapel shows, in fact, a hierarchical relationship, where the community and its space are subordinated to the ministry and its altar.

## CONCLUSIONS

The influence of Quaker doctrine, though never made explicit, is present in Venturi's thesis project for the Chapel for the Episcopal Academy in subtle, yet powerful details that construct a space difficult to categorize under an unequivocal religious denomination. The tension inherent in the Quaker doctrine, the complex definition of context, and the central role of the congregation are elements that Venturi translates into a spatial and visual vocabulary. While the chapel does stand out among the other buildings on campus, it also registers as an everyday space. The perimeter of the entrance courtyard sets aside the entry moment from the rest of the space, but at the same time, through its orientation, it references the surrounding buildings. The interior space, although organized in long horizontal sequences, proposes an unusual orientation of the pews toward each other rather than toward the sanctuary, thus emphasizing the primacy of the community. The wood and steel trusses act both as a unifying element of the space and a diffuse source of light.



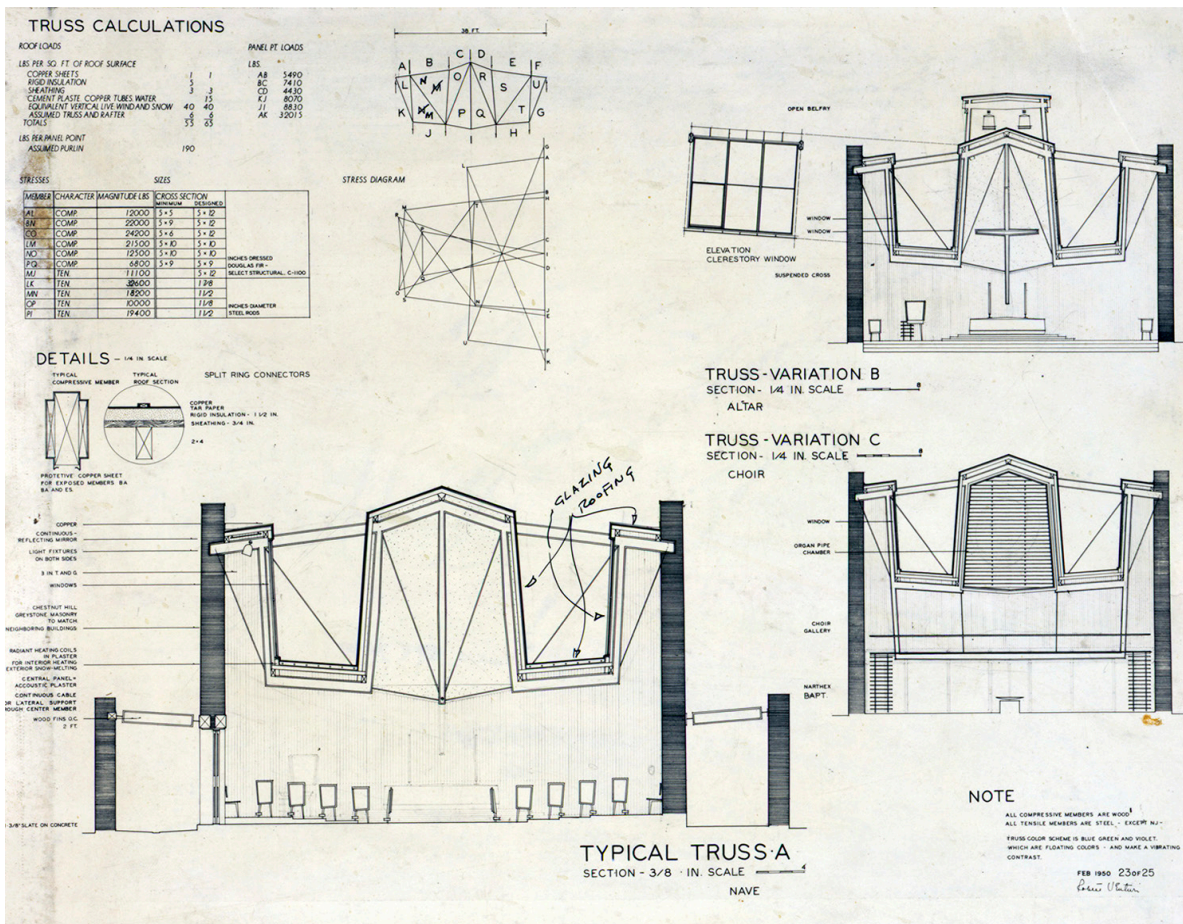


Fig. 06. Robert Venturi, Chapel for the Episcopal Academy, Merion (PA, USA). Thesis Project, Princeton University, 1950; sections.

Going beyond this early project in Venturi's body of work, there is reason to believe that Quaker principles have had a discreet influence on his architectural theory. For example, how are we to interpret the apparent contradiction between his emphasis on flat surfaces and his explicit bias for Mannerism, Baroque and Rococo, both outlined as early as the publication of *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* in 1966? On the one hand, he championed flat surfaces in architecture, but on the other hand, he turned toward an architecture of complex and convoluted surfaces. How are we to explain this paradox? How are we to understand this apparent inconsistency of thought? Are these two positions contradictory or do they perhaps stem from the same source? Is the paradox of *both/and* first articulated as a theoretical position in the *gentle manifesto* from *Complexity and Contradiction* and later illustrated in his own practice, a rhetorical device meant to validate any type of approach, or, perhaps, does it spawn from a different source? The Quaker influence, I suggest, accounts for Venturi's particular understanding of *paradox*, of a world in which apparently opposite positions coexist simultaneously, where a theory of *both/and* is not only legitimate, but, more important, resourceful.

## NOTES

(1) This letter shows the commitment of the young Robert Venturi to the cause of the Friends and was found in an undated document from the Architectural Records of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown at the Architectural Archives, University of Pennsylvania (225.RV.113).

(2) This document is part of the chapter manuscript «Robert Venturi: Upbringing among Quakers», in Cateura 1987. The same information is provided in the interview with Robert Venturi that is part of the oral history project of the Archives of the American Art.

(3) The origin of the name *Quaker* is uncertain. According to Robert Barclay, a prominent 17th century writer belonging to the Religious Society of Friends, the name reflects the devotion of some members of the group who would start *quaking* while making their pronouncements (Tempe Montly 2002).

A different interpretation suggests that the name is a derogatory term that originated in a discussion between King George and William Penn: when the latter refused to take his hat off in front of his majesty telling him he should be «Quaking before the Lord», the king responded «Get this *quaker* out of here» (Bronner 1994). Another account states that George Fox, who had been imprisoned several times due to his beliefs, was doing time in Derby in 1650 when he asked Justice Bennett to tremble at the word of Lord, hence the latter called him «Quaker» (Brayshaw 1938).

(4) These «opposing modes and roles» are: «nurture/nature. Private/public, inside/outside, Inner Light/outward world, Truth/the World, plain/worldly, silence/speaking, personal inspiration/communal understanding, equality/hierarchy, member/minister, member /attender, male/female, artisan/businessman, businessman/politician, country/city» (Garfinkel 1995, 86).

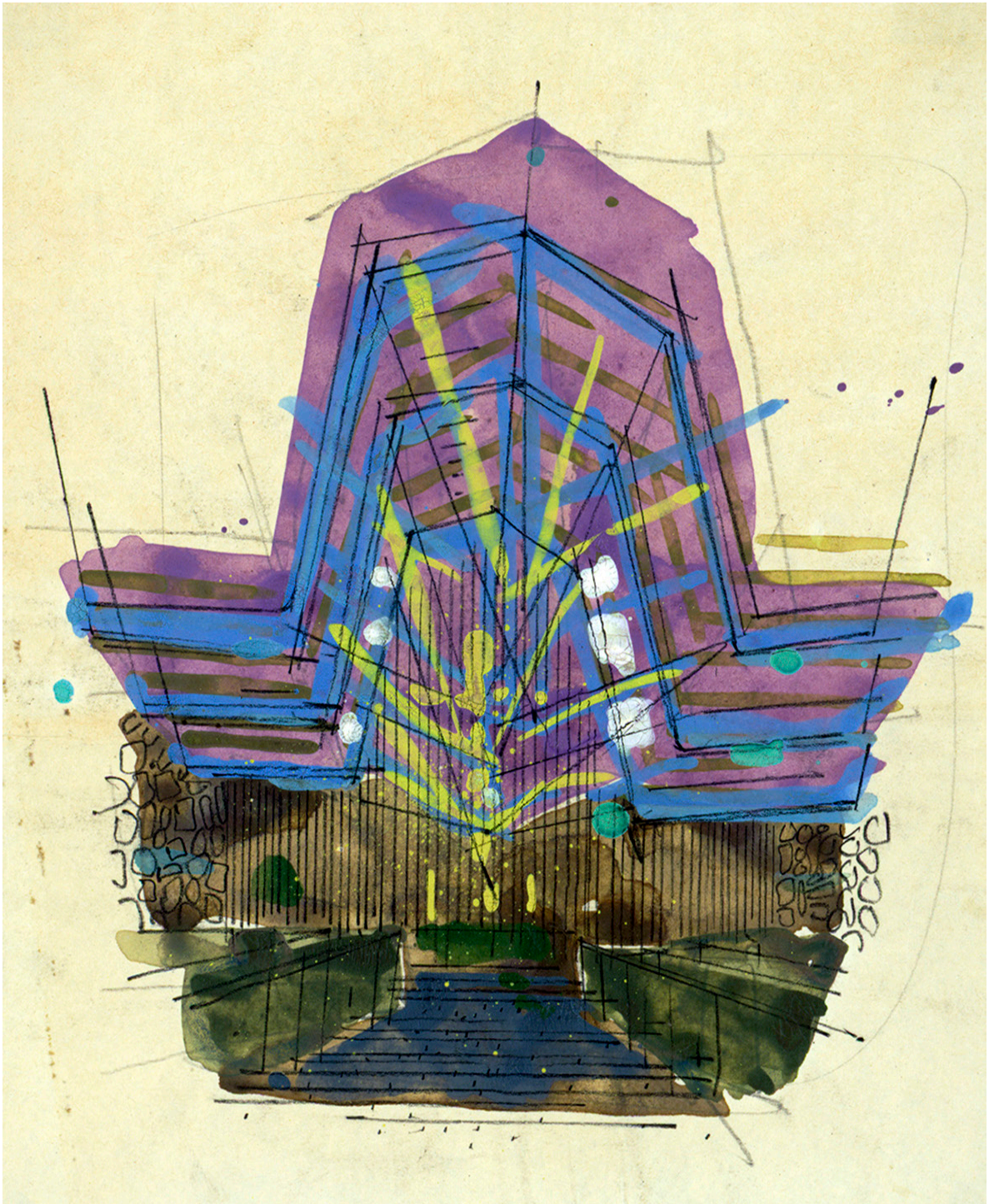
(5) Part of this attitude is the adoption of *plain language*, namely the use of thou instead of you, and that of *plain dress* (Brinton 2002).

(6) Following the *Beaux Arts* model, in architectural education the 6 —or 9— hour long sketch problem was a common design exercise in the curriculum. Students received the assignment usually in the morning and had to submit the project by the end of the day.

(7) The precedents grouped under the «Rome» section include the following pairs: Trevi Fountain and St. Michel Fountain in Paris; St. Ignazio in the 17th and the 18th centuries; Santissima Trinità in 1650 and 1725; Campidoglio in 1538, 1644 and 1938; the Pantheon, a building in Philadelphia and the University of Virginia. The precedents drawn from domestic architecture include: Johnson Site, Racine, WI, in 1936 and 1937; the Hoffman-Simpson House, Salem, MA, 1830 and the Keck House, Belmont, MA, 1940; apartments, Leipzig, Germany, 1935 [here the date is wrong, the correct year is 1930] and apartments in Aluminum City, PA, 1942.

(8) The Book of Common Prayer, the central publication of the Church that outlines its doctrine and worship services, has gone through several revisions,





the most recent dating from 1979, when the Church adopted many of the principles outlined by Second Vatican Council from 1962, including the restoration of the Eucharist.

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Fig. 01. Online source: <https://quakerstrong-rooms.org/2013/04/15/playing-with-shadows-silhouette-portraits-and-how-to-make-them/>

Fig. 02-07. *VSB Archives. The Architectural Archives*, University of Pennsylvania by the gift of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown.

Fig. 07. Robert Venturi, Chapel for the Episcopal Academy, Merion (PA, USA). Thesis Project, Princeton University, 1950; interior perspective.