An American architect observed in an essay that “it is a physical impossibility to transport buildings as one does paintings. Therefore, to experience the dome of the Cathedral of Florence by Brunelleschi or the apse and dome of St. Peter’s by Michelangelo, one must be within the space itself.” To assert architecture’s inherent immobility and three-dimensionality is largely uncontroversial, but the next sentence is more contentious: “Architects, in order to explore the problems of contemporary architecture, must necessarily have a specific cultural background which should qualify them for an appreciation of the valid works of the past.”

Taken together, these axioms require architects to recognize the authority of select historic monuments and to absorb their lessons through direct phenomenal experience.

It seems only proper that such statements come from a fellowship application to the American Academy in Rome, established in 1894 to buttress the fin de siècle classical revival known as the “American Renaissance.” But this essay dates to 1960, when seeing and venerating history firsthand was not such an obvious requisite for architects. Its author, Michael Graves, is now a household name thanks to his populist high-design products for Target stores (fig. 1). As an architect, he is best known for his historically allusive works of the 1970s onwards. His prominent career has contributed to the reputation of the post-World War II Academy as an ‘incubator’ of postmodern historicism, a category in which he is generally included by critics. However, when Graves visited Rome in 1960 he was not a “proto-postmodernist,” but a modernist. He had just finished his master’s degree at Harvard’s Graduate School of Design (GSD), famous for its functionalist, neo-Bauhaus orthodoxy, and his earliest works of the late 1960s reinterpret the 1920s machine-age modernism of Le Corbusier. Thus,
Graves’s youthful statement of purpose for the Rome Prize introduces a non-trivial question: why would a modern architect want to go to Rome in 1960?

Graves’s conception of an architect’s necessary background reflects the discipline’s centuries-old practice of educational travel. His pairing of history and experience argues that imagery alone cannot convey a building’s full aesthetic content: direct, physical knowledge of exemplary works is essential for mastery of a spatial and physical medium. What Graves elides, however, is an epistemological gap dividing the precedent-based historicism that drove traditional pilgrimages to Italy, and modern architecture, a movement which claimed validity through supposedly ‘universal’ principles and aesthetics, detached from any specific culture or location. The primary task of ‘modern’ architects stood in contradistinction from the Grand Tour’s raison d’être: no longer called to eloquently apply an eternally valid language of classicism gleaned from ‘sacred’ sites like Rome, their task was to capture and construct an ever-changing Zeitgeist.

Accordingly, the gospel of modern architecture was primarily disseminated through the disembodied, mechanically reproducible media of text, photographs, and drawings. The movement’s abstract aesthetic of planar walls, machined details and (putative) mass production facilitated its reduction to two-dimensional imagery and simple compositional formulae. Le Corbusier summarized his philosophy into only “Five Points” in 1926, while Hitchcock and Johnson’s book The International Style distilled an aesthetically and ideologically varied movement into just three stylistic principles. Of course, Le Corbusier’s ‘points’ were physically realized in works such as the Villa Savoye at Poissy-sur-Seine, and The International Style accompanied a tangible event, the Museum of Modern Art’s “Modern Architecture: International Exhibition” of 1932 (fig. 2). However, the exhibition’s attendees were still exposed to the new
architecture through photographs and models, second-hand representations divorced from such phenomenal realities as scale, interior space, materiality, and physical context.

In addition, those North American architects who might wish to study the movement’s European precedents firsthand during these years faced many obstacles: the Depression, World War II, and the Iron Curtain would keep major works practically inaccessible for decades. Furthermore, many buildings revered by later generations were ephemeral structures constructed for temporary exhibitions, preserved only through drawings and period photography.

Importantly, just as portable as images were their human creators. That many of the chief founders of the Modern Movement had fled Nazi Germany and were living, working, and teaching in the U.S. from the 1940s to the 1960s further reduced the apparent necessity of educational travel for American architects—not just to Rome, but anywhere.

In light of such seismic shifts in architecture’s centre of gravity away from Europe towards the U.S., it is understandable that some authors have characterized the postwar Academy as more architectural “exile” than “opportunity.” Yet Michael Graves was one of forty young architects who accepted Rome Prize fellowships between 1947 and 1966. Despite its history of staunch support for classicism in the arts, the Academy had drastically altered its cultural mission after the war to align itself with an ascendant modern architecture. Like Graves, most architecture fellows came from prominent modernist programs, in particular those of Harvard, Yale, and MIT. Among the senior architects involved with the postwar Academy as trustees, Rome Prize jurors, and architects in residence, the brief residency of Louis Kahn is best known after decades of critical emphasis. But he is part of a fraternity of major mid-century modernists, including Harrison and Abramovitz, Nathaniel Owings and Gordon Bunshaft of SOM, Pietro Belluschi, Edward Larrabee Barnes, and Eero Saarinen, among others, all of whom
lent the Academy their names, reputations, and time. Philip Johnson even orchestrated the Academy’s transition to modern architecture from behind the scenes while at MoMA in 1947.

Clearly, the idea of a ‘Rome experience’ had some perceived value for architects young and old during these years—but what value exactly? The most direct accounts of Italy’s expected architectural value come from essays like Graves’s, submitted with Rome Prize applications. In fact, the portions we heard from Graves’s statement neatly summarize their most common themes: that Italy’s cultural, artistic, and urban traditions are still of instructive value for architects, and that firsthand experience of its monuments—such as the vertigo felt when standing at the rim of the Pantheon’s oculus, which necessarily provides an entirely new, unique, and bodily measure of the building’s scale—is indispensable to fully fathom architecture as a medium (fig. 3). Significantly, most applicants ignored Italy’s own Fascist-era modernism and contemporary scene, primarily framing Rome as a gateway to the haptic experience of history.

This is quite surprising for a generation inculcated in high modernism, with its emphasis on the aesthetics, sociology, and technologies of the present moment. Yet, although Walter Gropius had notoriously eliminated architectural history courses from the GSD, history was never entirely absent even during his tenure. In fact, one of the most influential architectural texts of the 1940s to the 1970s is Sigfried Giedion’s *Space, Time and Architecture*, a book that entwined polemic with history, and had direct connections to Harvard. A Swiss architectural historian in the rigorous Germanic tradition, Giedion was also a prominent proponent of modern architecture whose writings defined the movement as an embodiment of the spiritual conditions of a new age. Nonetheless, his book introduced the notion of architecture as *Zeitgeist* through examples drawn primarily from the Italian Renaissance and Roman Baroque. Born out of lectures delivered at Harvard in 1939, this book that married Italian history to the modern cause
was fully absorbed at the GSD and every other school. Giedion even taught at Harvard from 1954 through to the early 1960s, when Graves was a student there.  

Giedion’s interweaving of modernist ideology and architectural history was influential in its innovation, and consistent with the general direction of postwar architectural discourse. The boundaries of modern architecture, America’s ‘official’ style during these years, were challenged from many directions, one of which was the reintroduction of overt historical references, as when Philip Johnson introduced his subversively Miesian Glass House in New Canaan, Connecticut via Neoclassicism, the American Colonial vernacular, and the Acropolis in 1950. Architecture as collective and subjective experience enriched by memory came to the foreground just as the Pax Americana provided the safety and prosperity to travel again. New pilgrimages to Western Europe would resume and redefine a centuries-old practice of measuring today’s architecture against the past.

Yet creative discovery through travel was already embedded within the modern movement, as in far earlier avant-gardes. Brunelleschi and Alberti had uncovered the Quattrocento’s ‘new’ architecture in Rome’s still-buried ruins, and Stuart, Revett, and LeRoy would find the eighteenth century’s ‘purified’ Neoclassicism in the newly accessible temples of the Athenian Acropolis. For the ‘classical’ tradition, against which modern architects reacted, was an evolving, unstable construct continually reshaped by each generation’s offering of more precise measurements, alternate reconstructions, and newly discovered or re-identified monuments. Thus, the search for a more ‘authentic’ architecture had long been an intellectual, a creative, and a physical journey.

The hunt to replace historically-based architectural sources with radically modern ones often involved the same practice of exploratory travel and the bodily experience of instructive
architectural environments. Dozens of Europeans like Erich Mendelsohn journeyed to architecture’s future in New York and Chicago during the 1920s.\(^2^8\) In his youth, Frank Lloyd Wright disdained sponsored study in Paris and instead chose Japan for his first trip abroad in 1905.\(^2^9\) Such revolutionary voyages burnished avant-garde credentials, but the very act of travel inescapably mirrored one of the academic system’s central methods.

Moreover, traditional destinations and monuments proved irresistible even to those determined to rewrite architecture’s meaning. By 1910, Wright was overlooking Florence from Fiesole and absorbing Italy on his own terms.\(^3^0\) Perhaps most influentially, Le Corbusier’s *Vers une Architecture* of 1923 forever redefined classical perfection in machine-age terms.\(^3^1\) This book, truly the ‘gospel’ of modern architecture since its publication, documents how its author’s physical experience of the Parthenon, the Pantheon, and Hadrian’s Villa during his youthful “voyage à l’Orient” shaped his vision of the ‘new’ architecture.\(^3^2\) Le Corbusier spent decades processing these antique sources through his work, which would be consistently animated by the promenade through space that he performed on the Acropolis. His photographs, sketches, and diagrams immortalized but could never substitute for such a bodily experience, beckoning later disciples to literally follow in his footsteps.

The modern tradition as codified and taught at mid-century was punctuated by a sufficient number of such prophetic epiphanies that they constitute an “alternative” Grand Tour tradition, related but parallel to its traditional counterpart. Le Corbusier began his travels emulating his own early hero, John Ruskin, who found his ‘true’ architecture in the medieval Italy marginalized by the academic establishment.\(^3^3\) Louis Sullivan would dramatize his own rejection of the École des Beaux-Arts and subsequent embrace of Rome: fleeing Paris in disgust, he spent two days in the Sistine Chapel, where he found the still-vital heart buried within the
corpse of academicism by communing directly with the creative spirit of Michelangelo.\textsuperscript{34} Even the hyper-mediated International Style-exhibition and books were born of pilgrimage: Johnson, Hitchcock, and Barr had conducted their own ‘alternate’ Grand Tours of European modernism in 1930 to 1931, personally visiting nearly all the buildings and architects they would immortalize in print.\textsuperscript{35} Later notorious for viewing European modernism as stylistic connoisseurs to the exclusion of social or political intent, their knowledge was not merely visual, but fully ‘aesthetic’ in the word’s most physical, Kantian sense.

This fact points to an issue arising inescapably from any reference to the Grand Tour: its inherent elitism. It was only Johnson’s great personal wealth that permitted an extended study tour of the new architecture at the height of the Great Depression.\textsuperscript{36} His American colleagues could never repeat this experience, nor claim such direct and encyclopedic knowledge of the major exemplars of the International Style. For Johnson, who had studied classics as a Harvard undergraduate, such travel provided his only ‘real’ architectural credentials until he entered design school in 1940. So Graves’s mention of “a specific cultural background” in his Rome Prize essay is a reminder that the purpose of architectural travel has usually been both knowledge and prestige. The Grand Tour culminating in Italy was always an investment in elite status for its participants, whether young European aristocrats, American \textit{nouveau-riches}, or aspiring artists in any medium. As Samuel Johnson knew painfully well from personal experience in the eighteenth century, “A man who has not been in Italy is always conscious of an inferiority, from his not having seen what it is expected a man should see.”\textsuperscript{37} What you saw determined to a great extent who you were and what you could do. The Beaux-Arts \textit{Prix de Rome} upon which the American Academy modeled its own fellowships had always divided a privileged echelon of architects.
who knew and studied antiquity firsthand from those left behind, determining very different professional trajectories for each.

By 1960, Rome was no longer viewed as the heart of an eternally valid classical tradition, but it remained charged with the aura of architectural greatness. For mid-century architects, Italy’s art and environment promised both the inspiration and the legitimacy—Pierre Bourdieu’s famous concept of ‘cultural capital’—that would establish their creative judgment as authoritative. To underscore the temporal power of Rome’s reflected glory is not to discount the sincerity of pilgrims like Graves, or denigrate his or anyone’s experience as cynically careerist strategizing. But it is useful to recognize that exigencies beyond disinterested aesthetic appreciation drove, and still drive, architects’ determination to refract Rome’s significance through the lens of modernity.

Graves’s use of the two greatest domes of the Italian Renaissance as examples of enduringly ‘valid’ canonical works in 1960 is highly significant. These feats of structural engineering and spatial imagination by acknowledged ‘geniuses’ embodied the heroic modernist ideal of technologically progressive creative vision. Graves and other Academy fellows generally defined Italy’s architectural relevance in abstract, highly Giedionesque terms, celebrating its wealth of expressive and dynamic spaces, harmonic proportions, varied urbanisms, and stylistic juxtapositions, all issues directly relevant to ‘contemporary practice’. The manner in which Graves’s drawings x-ray Renaissance ideal geometry, turn baroque ornament into nervous visual energy, and otherwise abstract the Eternal city through minimally expressive gestures, is clearly a reflection of his own artistic moment, and visibly different from the more classical stability of form and composition characteristic of his later drawing style (fig. 4-7).
These efforts to elicit modern meaning from a city of abandoned traditions also reflects the highly conflicted picture of Rome presented by Le Corbusier. He finds it an overcrowded city of ‘horrors’, declaring that “Rome is the damnation of the half-educated. To send architectural students to Rome is to cripple them for life.”38 Yet under the marble, stucco, and putti, he too found inspiration in pure geometries of daringly engineered concrete, in St. Peter’s embodiment of the genius of Michelangelo (“the architect of the last thousand years”), and in the controlling urban visions of the caesars and the popes. Appalled and mesmerized, he states: “The lesson of Rome is for wise men, for those who know and can appreciate, who can resist and can verify.”39 Le Corbusier’s Rome presents a tantalizing challenge to architects of any generation: do you have eyes that can see? That can learn from history without being subsumed by its seductively treacherous surfaces?

In retrospect, Graves’s Rome Prize essay reads like a self-fulfilling prophecy, presciently indicating the city’s relevance to his own future of historically inspired contemporary practice. The monumental symmetry, platonic volumes, overt symbolism, and neo-Tuscan colour palette of his signature style indisputably helped ‘re-Italianize’ late-twentieth century architecture. A recent book presenting drawings and photography from Graves’s Academy fellowship is most appropriately subtitled Images of a Grand Tour.40 But was his Grand Tour ‘alternative’, traditional, or somehow both at once? Graves and the other Academy fellows were among countless other young postwar architects who journeyed in search of what Joan Ockman has memorably termed “the shock of the real.”41 That so many chose to construct architectural identities via the realities and mythologies of Rome is a testament to the city’s continuing role as an altered but still-efficient source and signifier of creativity, cosmopolitan sophistication, and power within modern culture.


Brian Ambroziak has situated Graves’s Academy experience within the Grand Tour tradition; see his essay “The Necessity for Seeing” in Ambroziak, Michael Graves: Images of a Grand Tour (New York: Princeton University Press, 2005), 1-14. While he also analyzes Graves’s graphic style in relation to contemporary artists such as Willem de Kooning, he emphasizes continuities, not ruptures, with architectural tradition.


Eleven models were displayed at MoMA exhibition, including Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye, Mies van der Rohe’s Tugendhat House, Gropius’ Bauhaus, Frank Lloyd Wright’s House on the Mesa, and Howe & Lescaze’s Christie-Forsythe housing project. See Terence Riley, The International Style: Exhibition 15 and the Museum of Modern Art (New York: Rizzoli, 1992), 68 and 201, n. 4.

Examples of such ephemeral icons include Bruno Taut’s Glass Pavilion for the Werkbund Exhibition of 1915, Le Corbusier’s Pavillon de l’Esprit Nouveau for the Paris Exposition des Arts Décoratifs of 1925, and Mies’ German Pavilion for the International Exhibition in Barcelona of 1929. The reconstruction of the latter in 1986 is a testament to the power of images to keep these structures alive and relevant in the architectural imagination.

Prominent architectural émigrés from the closed Bauhaus in the U.S. at this time included Walter Gropius, Marcel Breuer, and Ludwig Mies van der Rohe.


Of forty architecture fellows, twelve earned their terminal professional degrees from the GSD, eight from Yale, six from MIT, and five from Princeton. Both the predominance of Harvard (30% of the total) and the high representation of these four schools (81% of the whole) are noteworthy.

The thesis that Kahn’s brief sojourn at the Academy in 1950-51 fundamentally redirected his creative work began with Vincent Scully’s Louis I. Kahn of 1962 (New York: G. Braziller) and has remained a continuous thread of discussion in Kahn studies ever since.

On Harrison, Abramovitz, Owings, Belluschi and Barnes, see their respective entries in Kohl, et. al., Centennial Directory. Documents held by the AAR indicate that Bunshaft served as a Rome Prize juror in 1958-59. Eero Saarinen accepted an invitation to serve as Architect in Residence in 1956, but cancelled at the last minute because of the demands of his practice; see letter dated March 28, 1956, Robert Venturi to Louis I. Kahn, Venturi Scott Brown and Associates Collection, Architectural Archives of the University of Pennsylvania, and letters to Warren Platner dated January 16, 1956 and May 22, 1956 in the Eero Saarinen Collection, Manuscripts and Archives, Yale University Library. Saarinen came to the Academy as a “notable visitor” ca. 1951.
Johnson helped arrange for the prominent American modern architect George Howe to serve as the Academy’s first architect in residence from 1947 to 1949. See Laurence Roberts to George Howe, March 4, 1947, George Howe Papers, Avery Architectural and Fine Arts Library, Department of Drawings and Archives, Columbia University; see also Philip Johnson to Louis I. Kahn, March 27, 1947, Louis I. Kahn Collection, Architectural Archives of the University of Pennsylvania. Howe’s presence publicly furthered a shift in the institution’s postwar image away from that of staunch Beaux-Arts bastion to one welcoming the cause of modern architecture.

These statements are preserved with individual fellows’ application documents at the AAR.

Robert Venturi also took photographs from on top of the Pantheon dome; these are held in the VSBA Collection at the Architectural Archives of the University of Pennsylvania.

For further discussion of the fellows’ interests, see my forthcoming dissertation, “The Lessons of Rome.” A recent study has also argued that despite this overt historical emphasis, Italy’s contemporary architects would exercise an inspirational role in the development of architectural postmodernism: see Martino Stierli’s “In the Academy’s Garden: Robert Venturi, the Grand Tour and the Revision of Modern Architecture,” AA Files 56 (2008): 41-62.


Giedion was invited to lecture at Yale around 1942 and stayed in the U.S. until December 1945. He returned to teach at MIT in 1951, and came to Harvard in 1953 under Sert. Michael Graves took a course entitled “Urbanism” from Giedion while at Harvard (e-mail communication with author, February 27, 2008).


One symptom of this larger concern is the larger debate about “monumentality” during the 1940s. See, e.g., S. Giedion, “The Need for a New Monumentality” and Louis Kahn’s “Monumentality,” both in Paul Zucker, ed., Architecture and City Planning (New York: Philosophical Library, 1944), and the composite essay “In Search of a New Monumentality: A Symposium,” Architectural Review 104 (September 1948): 117-128.


Even Wright would discover his “own” Italy while preparing the Wasmuth portfolios in Fiesole, overlooking Florence, and the spirit of the Tuscan vernacular marks much of his later work. See Anthony Alofsin, Frank Lloyd Wright—The Lost Years, 1910-1922: A Study of Influence (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1993), 41-56.

First published in Paris in 1923 by Editions Crès, it was first translated into English as Towards A New Architecture in 1927. Frederick Etchells’ translation of 1931 is the most readily available in reprint editions (New York: Dover, 1986).
33 This is most clearly evident in Ruskin’s *The Stones of Venice* (1851-1853). Le Corbusier’s early artistic education was heavily Ruskinian, as are his early travel sketches; see H. Allen Brooks, *Le Corbusier’s Formative Years* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1997).
36 In 1930, Philip Johnson was twenty-four years old, Hitchcock was twenty-seven, and Barr was thirty-two. Philip Johnson’s father was an early investor in the Aluminum Corporation of American (ALCOA), and he transferred his stock to his son at age eighteen. Its value soared a few years later, making Johnson independently wealthy for the rest of his life. In fact, he was never paid any salary for his curatorial position at MoMA. See Franz Schultze, *Philip Johnson: Life and Work* (New York: Knopf, 1994), 33-34.
37 James Boswell, *Life of Johnson*, ed. R. W. Chapman (London: Oxford University Press, 1954), 742. Dr. Johnson’s famous aphorism (e.g., also cited by Ambroziak in *Michael Graves*, p. 6) dates to 1776, when “A journey to Italy was still in his thoughts.” However, Johnson’s travels took him no further than Scotland and France. Two centuries later, similar sentiments are echoed by Nathaniel Owings of SOM, who described his 1958 Academy residency as a palliative for a career spent among better-traveled colleagues: “I had never shaken my feeling of inferiority as a professional. I felt sincerely that only through full involvement in the American Academy in Rome could this block be removed.” *The Spaces in Between: An Architect’s Journey* (Boston: Houghton Mifflin, 1973), 146-147.
38 *Towards a New Architecture*, 172-173.
39 Ibid., 173.
Images

Fig. 1: Michael Graves in Rome, 1961. Courtesy Michael Graves & Associates.

Fig. 2: Installation view of the exhibition "Modern Architecture: International Exhibition." The Museum of Modern Art, New York. February 10, 1932 through March 23, 1932. (IN15.1)
Photo Credit: Digital Image © The Museum of Modern Art/Licensed by SCALA / Art Resource, NY.
Fig. 3: Michael Graves, View from the Pantheon Dome, Campo Marzio, Rome, Italy. Courtesy Michael Graves & Associates.

Fig. 4: Michael Graves, “Tempietto del Bramante, Janiculum Hill, Rome, Italy,” May 18, 1961. Courtesy Michael Graves & Associates.
Fig. 5: Michael Graves, “Sant’Ivo alla Sapienza, no. 3, Campo Marzio, Rome, Italy,” ca. 1961. Courtesy Michael Graves & Associates.

Fig. 6: Michael Graves, “Composite Landscape (Rome),” 1981. Courtesy Michael Graves & Associates.