

(In) (Out) Si(d)(t)e

Reconsidering the Boundaries Between Old and New

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Abstract

This paper moves from Robert Venturi's analysis of three Renaissance churches in *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture* (1966) and applies it as an operative reference for contemporary adaptive reuse. Within his discussion of inside-outside relationships, Venturi presents Santa Maria delle Grazie al Calcinaio (Cortona, 1485-1525), Santa Maria di Canepanova (Pavia, 1500-1557), and the Sanctuary of Saronno (1498-1666) as different variations on a fundamental architectural problem: how the façade mediates the separation and continuity of interior and exterior. These buildings have been carefully studied and redrawn by Eagles of Architecture through *Friday I'm In Love*, a self-initiated research practice that extracts operative knowledge from historical precedents. Three strategies emerge: perfect correspondence between inside and outside (Cortona), clear separation through contrasting layers (Pavia), and autonomous orientation allowing programmatic differentiation (Saronno). The paper demonstrates how these paradigms inform three contemporary projects of the authors: the Mortsel City Hall, where a preserved brick façade generates new interior organization through geometric correspondence; the row house in Dendermonde, where an original 1930s frontage conceals radical spatial reconfiguration; and the proposal for the Grimbergen church library, where a new addition establishes a neutral urban interface for a contemporary and multi-ethnic neighborhood. Each project treats the façade as an active device managing contradictory requirements: institutional representation and heritage renewal, urban continuity and individual freedom, devotional space and public inclusion. These multiple approaches suggest a common shift from what Alois Riegl identified as the tension between age-value and historical preservation, toward what Marvin Trachtenberg describes as building-in-time: an acceptance of transformation as constitutive of architectural identity, proposing design coherence over archaeological stratification.

Keywords: Inside–Outside, References, Difficult Whole

Three References and Three Projects

In Chapter 9 of *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, titled *The Inside and the Outside*, Robert Venturi addresses the relationship between interior and exterior space as a fundamental question of architectural composition.

Against the modernist orthodoxy of spatial continuity, which implies in turn the idea that «the inside should be expressed on the outside», Venturi identifies a more nuanced tradition

in which interior and exterior negotiate their differences through various strategies (Venturi 1966, 70). This negotiation becomes particularly evident in three Renaissance churches analysed by Venturi: Santa Maria delle Grazie al Calcinaiò in Cortona, Santa Maria di Canepanova in Pavia, and the Santuario della Beata Vergine dei Miracoli in Saronno¹. The first is characterised by a formal continuity achieved through material correspondence; the second shows a complex layered systems based on formal contrast; the third results from the accumulation of multiple interventions articulating devotional intimacy and urban monumentality.

Modern architecture's pursuit of literal transparency and the related dissolution of the wall into glass differs from the phenomenal transparency that Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky identified through spatial layering². Venturi's Renaissance examples seem to present a third possibility: the outer wall as an architecturally significant threshold, mediating between different realms. This threshold becomes what Venturi calls «the point of change»: an architectural device where interior and exterior forces meet and negotiate (Venturi 1966, 86).

This paper examines three contemporary adaptive reuse projects through the lens of Venturi's Renaissance examples, as an investigation into how historical references can be used to address current architectural challenges. Each project, the Mortsel City Hall, the Dendermonde row house, and the Grimbergen church library, engages a specific modality of inside-outside relationship while responding to the particular demands of heritage preservation, thermal performance, and social accessibility. These projects suggest that the principle of «both-and» which Venturi champions can be applied also to the temporal dimension, where preservation and innovation become complementary rather than contradictory operations.

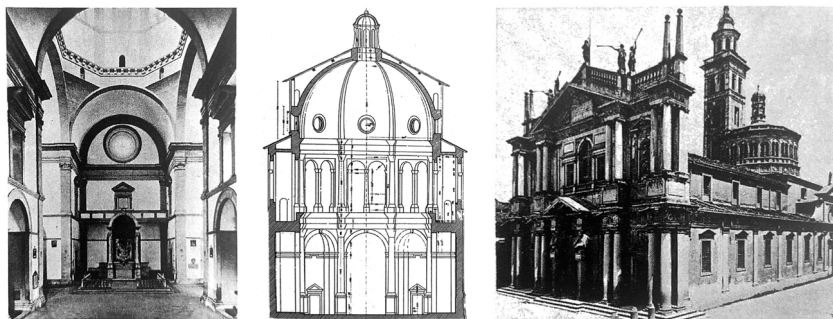


Fig. 1-2-3. Reference images of Santa Maria delle Grazie al Calcinaiò (137), Santa Maria di Canepanova (169), Santuario della Beata Vergine dei Miracoli (111), from: Robert Venturi, *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, 1966

Continuity and Correspondence

Venturi describes the church of Santa Maria delle Grazie by Francesco di Giorgio Martini as achieving continuity through material and formal consistency: «the interior vocabulary of pilasters, cornices, and drip mouldings is almost identical in scale and sometimes in material with its exterior vocabulary» (Venturi 1966, 70). In the architecture of the church, identical classical elements articulate both external massing and internal spatial sequence³.

The result is «subtle modification but little contrast and no surprise», maintaining consistent architectural language across the threshold (Venturi 1966, 70).

This kind of continuity differs fundamentally from Modern architecture's flowing space, where walls dissolve into transparent membranes. The church maintains the essential purpose of building interiors: «to enclose rather than direct space, and to separate the inside from the outside» (Venturi 1966, 70). The wall remains what Venturi calls architectural event: «Designing from the outside in, as well as the inside out, creates necessary tensions, which help make architecture» (Venturi 1966, 86).

The adaptive reuse of Mortsel City Hall (Eagles of Architecture, 2018) incorporates similar principles of continuity. Where the church at Cortona achieves continuity through replication of identical vocabulary in stone, Mortsel achieves it through geometric correspondence: the brick façade's proportions generate interior spatial organization. Both strategies maintain the wall as threshold while establishing coherence between inside and outside.

This approach proves particularly significant for civic architecture. The façade becomes a permeable boundary between citizen and institution, and therefore a spatial metaphor for democratic governance: welcoming and accessible but at the same time distinct.



Fig. 4. Santa Maria delle Grazie al Calcinaio and Mortsel City Hall

Distinction and Divergence

Venturi identifies Santa Maria di Canepanova as an exemplary case of productive separation between inside and outside. Cristoforo Solari's church presents a restrained exterior while internally revealing a centrally-planned space that opens into an octagonal dome with radiating niches. Venturi notes that the spatial logic of the church operates according to independent principles in relation to its interior and exterior (Venturi 1966, 76). This divergence of principles is articulated by what Venturi calls «detached and contrasting layers», an architectural strategy that acknowledges the differing demands of inside and outside without resolving them into a unified expression (Venturi 1966, 76). The exterior envelope provides urban coherence and sobriety while the interior volume delivers spatial and liturgical complexity.

The row house in Dendermonde (Eagles of Architecture, 2010-2013) transposes this

principle to the domestic scale and to the particular constraints of adaptive reuse within a protected historic district⁴.

Behind the preserved 1930s façade, the interior was subjected to radical transformation. Floors, walls, and partitions were removed and selectively reassembled according to a new spatial grammar organized around a central cast-in-place concrete column. The corresponding spatial sequence no longer respects the original floor heights nor the geometry of the outer shell. Stairs ascend and descend in an unorthodox choreography, weaving together living, working, and private spaces across multiple levels. Intermediate floors act as balconies overlooking lower volumes; circulation cuts across window lines at unexpected heights; spaces connect through diagonals that dissolve conventional hierarchies of domestic movement. Yet this divergence is not arbitrary disruption but strategic separation. The façade functions as an outer layer that «enhances the enclosed inner spaces by making them seem protected and mysterious» (Venturi 1966, 76).



Fig. 5. Santa Maria di Canepanova and the Row House in Dendermonde

The result is a deliberate acknowledgment that inside and outside respond to different requirements. Where the church at Pavia achieves this separation through the accumulation of distinct geometric layers, Dendermonde achieves it through the insertion of an autonomous interior structure within an existing shell. As in the Viennese houses designed by Adolf Loos, the façade becomes an active element that mediates between urban obligations and interior possibilities, but also between collective heritage and individual occupation, between the continuity of the streetscape and the autonomy of domestic space.

Extension and Neutrality

Venturi considers the Santuario della Beata Vergine dei Miracoli in Saronno as an architecture in which «there is contradiction in style as well as in scale between the façade and the rest of the building» (Venturi 1966, 86). The sanctuary began in 1498 as a small pilgrimage chapel attributed to Giovanni Antonio Amadeo. This was subsequently expanded through successive interventions that added a dome, extended naves, and ultimately attached a monumental façade by Pellegrino Tibaldi in 1596, further reworked by Carlo Buzzzi in 1630. The final result, which was ultimated in 1666, is an architecture of accumulated layers in which the original chapel, the expanded sanctuary, and the urban-facing façade

operate according to distinct logics. This accumulation produces what Venturi recognizes as «overlapping spatial hierarchies and contradictory levels of relationship» (Venturi 1966, 86). Within this composite system, the façade functions as an autonomous urban element, a public interface that mediates between the sacred precinct and the surrounding urban context.

The design proposal for the reuse of Sint Amandus church in Grimbergen (Eagles of Architecture, P•A•N, Onsitestudio, 2024) addresses a similar problem of mediation under very different cultural and programmatic conditions. The program called for the transformation of the church into a public library and community facility while maintaining the possibility of liturgical use for the reduced religious community of the neighborhood. The competition brief explicitly requested neutrality in the approach to the church in order to accommodate diverse publics and uses without privileging any single religious or cultural identity.

To do this the project proposed the addition of a new volume, compact, thermally efficient and architecturally neutral, which acted as a public interface between the market square and the preserved church. This building accommodates library functions and entry facilities, providing accessible, heated spaces that contemporary public programs require. On the other side, the existing church remains unheated and its monumental proportions preserved for activities that can take advantage of these conditions: the liturgical use first of all but also concerts, exhibitions and ceremonial gatherings.

Similarly to the Santuario di Saronno, the new civic pavilion of the library functions as what Venturi would recognize as an independent urban figure, a façade that «accommodates to its particular urban setting» (Venturi 1966, 86).

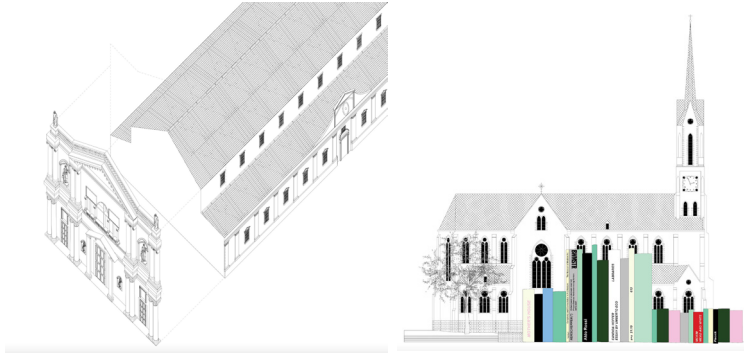


Fig. 6. Santuario della Beata Vergine dei Miracoli in Saronno and repurposing of Sint Amandus church in Grimbergen.

Where the sanctuary's contradictory façade is the result of successive needs and historical interventions, Grimbergen achieves a similar result through deliberate programmatic differentiation. In both cases, the façade functions as autonomous interface between interior possibilities and exterior obligations, but also between the church's spatial preservation and its adaptation to contemporary realities.

Behind and Beyond the Façade

The three projects examined here engage with tensions in architectural reuse that Alois Riegl identified in 1903 as central to the modern relationship with historical monuments⁵. The contemporary projects at Mortsel, Dendermonde, and Grimbergen navigate these tensions through strategies that privilege neither romantic decay nor archaeological restoration, but rather what Marvin Trachtenberg describes as «building-in-time»: an understanding of architecture as inherently temporal, accepting transformation as constitutive of identity rather than corrupting it (Trachtenberg 2010).

Across the three projects, the architectural treatment of buildings' façades articulates distinct negotiations between inside and outside, preservation and transformation, tradition and inclusion. The necessity of accommodating contemporary programs within existing structures generates diverse responses, more or less conservative, that nonetheless establish substantial relationships with the pre-existence. In Mortsel, the historical façade mediates civic accessibility and becomes the guiding architectural principle of the whole renovation; in Dendermonde, the preserved street frontage conceals domestic transformation; in Grimbergen, the new wooden addition establishes a public threshold to the reused sacred space. Each project compounds existing structures as foundations for renewed «difficult wholes of multiple temporal fragments», refusing both archaeological preservation and tabula rasa replacement (Venturi 1966, 88).

Beyond their specific strategies, all the three projects share a fundamental approach to the relationship between old and new, an approach that finds illuminating references in historical architecture but also emblematic parallels in contemporary artistic practice. Among these last ones, Mimmo Paladino's recent intervention on Beato Angelico's Polittico Guidalotti demonstrates an analogous approach to temporal stratification⁶. «Paladino treats the remote visual text as subject to reactivate. It does not force him into a univocal deposizione.



Fig. 7. Mimmo Paladino, D'après Beato Angelico (Courtesy Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria, Marco Giugliarelli, 2025)

He questions it. He uses it as a starting point. He messes with it. He profanes it, to the point of making it unrecognizable. He betrays it, enriching it with other presences. He uses it for an authentic stream of consciousness. In this way, he enhances its aura.» (Trione 2025, author's translation)'. The three architectural projects operate through a comparable method. As in the *ripetizione differente* proposed by Trione for Paladino's work, they engage pre-existing artworks by fusing together historical and contemporary elements in new syncretic wholes.

Notes

1. Santa Maria delle Grazie al Calcinaiio, Cortona (1485-1525); Santa Maria di Canepanova, Pavia (1500-07); Santuario della Beata Vergine dei Miracoli, Saronno (1498-1613).
2. Rowe and Slutzky distinguish between literal transparency (the physical property of glass) and phenomenal transparency (the effect produced by the organization of spatial planes in depth). Their analysis demonstrates how spatial complexity can generate perceptual layering independent of material translucency (Rowe and Slutzky 1997, 33).
3. In Chapter 10 of *Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture*, Venturi further elaborates that the church «is composed of a limited number of elements which are uninflected», maintaining formal independence and symmetry that «add up to a greater whole» (Venturi 1966, 90).
4. The project is situated in the Begijnenhof, a medieval beguinage whose modest streetscape and domestic scale are integral to its heritage designation. The preservation of the 1930s façade maintains both the material character and the urban alignment of the surrounding context.
5. In *The Modern Cult of Monuments*, Riegl described three distinct and often conflicting values: age-value, which finds aesthetic meaning in material decay; historical value, which seeks to preserve documentary evidence of original states; and use-value, which demands new possible repurposing (Riegl 1903).
6. *D'après Beato Angelico*, the artwork by Paladino presented in 2025 at the Galleria Nazionale dell'Umbria, was created in the absence of the original panels by Beato Angelico, which were on loan to Florence.
7. «Paladino considera quel testo visivo remoto come un soggetto da riattivare. Non lo costringe a una deposizione univoca. Lo interroga. Lo usa come punto di partenza. Lo pasticcia. Lo profana, fino a renderlo irrecognoscibile. Lo tradisce, arricchendolo di altre presenze. Se ne serve per un autentico flusso di coscienza. In questo modo ne accresce l'aura» (Trione 2025).

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