

# *Athens Journal of Architecture*



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# Athens Journal of Architecture

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The current issue is the third of the tenth volume of the *Athens Journal of Architecture* (AJA), **published by the [Architecture Unit](#) of ATINER**

Gregory T. Papanikos  
President  
ATINER



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*A World Association of Academics and Researchers*

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## Neo-Baroque Flowers in Contemporary Architecture

By Francesco Del Sole\*

*Many historians have attempted to define Neo-Baroque in contemporary architecture. Yet, leafing through the manuals, it is not possible to find a definition of this phenomenon, described as “a hypothesis waiting to be developed”. This paper attempts to enter the debate, defining Neo-Baroque not as a mere citation practice, but as a cultural style that identifies today’s society, made of instability and restless expectations. To better understand the contemporary Neo-Baroque soul, the architectural historian must move using those same tools that animate Baroque aesthetics, trying to connect different times and concepts in order to realize relational subtleties that, in Baroque treatises, “are called flowers”. The formal value of Baroque architecture was rehabilitated in the 20th century by architects such as Paolo Portoghesi who, in parallel with the writing of the first manuals on the Baroque, intrinsically re-proposed neo-Baroque forms in his projects, making his architecture “blossom” through that dynamic of folds that is well described by the philosophy of Gilles Deleuze. This folding will become a real working method for architects of the caliber of Frank Gehry who stretch and distend forms to replace the lost center with the fragmentation of viewpoints. Through an excursus of the most important “neo-Baroque flowers” of contemporary architecture, the contribution is an invitation to reflect on that aesthetic in which fold upon fold, fold within the fold, the neo-Baroque flowers express the same qualities as the flowers present in 17th-century architecture in plan and ornament: ephemeral, precarious, but also cultured citations and, in the words of Eugene D’Ors, “forms that fly”.*

### Introduction: on the Notion of Neo-Baroque

In the pages of the “Enciclopedia Treccani”, Neo-Baroque is described in a few lines as a current of taste in society between the 19th and 20th centuries that falsifies Baroque forms while waiting to find its own *esprit nouveau*.<sup>1</sup> In this wake, studies have also recently sprung up such as that of Stephen Calloway, who speaks of Neo-Baroque as a *Baroque Baroque*, a twentieth-century revaluation of the (Baroque) culture of excess.<sup>2</sup>

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1. “Neobarocco”, Treccani, accessed January 17, 2024, <https://www.treccani.it/enciclopedia/neobarocco/>.

2. Stephen Calloway, *Baroque baroque: the culture of excess* (London: Phaidon Press, 1995). They seem to echo the definitions of Baroque that have been known since the 18th century and survived until Benedetto Croce, according to which everything Baroque “responds to the law of libitus, of convenience, of caprice”; Benedetto Croce, *Storia dell’età barocca in Italia* (Bari: Laterza, 1929), p. 25.

Gillo Dorfles, in an essay published in 1951, was one of the first to find analogies and derivations of the Baroque age in contemporary architecture, not only on a formal level but above all on a spiritual one.<sup>3</sup> The author specifies that “the Baroque is something well-defined and linked - historically and aesthetically - to a particular era (the 17th century) of which our age can be considered as the extension and extreme offshoot”.<sup>4</sup> Dorfles’ intuitions have been accompanied over the years both by a rehabilitation of the historical value of Baroque architecture, and by Omar Calabrese’s acute investigation who, in 1987, published *L’età Neobarocca*.<sup>5</sup> The book, which has had great critical success, outlines an analysis of today’s world that, thanks to a series of analogies, unconsciously rediscovers Baroque values not only in the academic field.<sup>6</sup> Just as in the 17th century Galileo, Copernicus, and Kepler challenged the certainties of science and described a world in which man lost his centrality, so today physics is knotted around the theory of chaos and mathematics speaks of phenomena that resist universal laws, introducing concepts such as turbulence, fluctuations and conflicts.

The moment we realize that chaos is not only the prerogative of infinite space but also of the inner universe of each of us, Neo-Baroque is born. It is an aesthetic wave (associated by some with the metaphysics of chaos) traceable in artistic, literary, philosophical and mass-media production, with behaviour, oriented towards fragmentariness, instability and the fascination of complexity. There is a hint of nostalgia for that idea of speed that intoxicated the Futurists with optimism a hundred years ago and which today leaves us in an uneasy expectation, as if the 21st century should still give us what we think we deserve.

Calabrese’s study intentionally closes without claiming to draw precise contours around the term Neo-Baroque, described as “a provisional definition, a hypothesis waiting to be developed”.<sup>7</sup>

What we intend to propose here is an attempt to pursue what the author has proposed to the young historians of the various disciplines, namely to investigate the chaotic complexity of the phenomenon by providing not an overall image, but a few peculiar characters, a particular point of view that is capable of producing “arrows, connecting signs, hatching lines that establish rhymes”<sup>8</sup> between the Baroque era and today’s world.

3. Gillo Dorfles, *Barocco nell’architettura moderna* (Milan: Tamburini, 1951). In Dorfles’ analysis, the true Neo-Baroque, nourished throughout the 20th century by “preparatory movements” such as Art Nouveau and leading figures such as Mendelsohn, is realized in the organic rationalism of Alvar Aalto.

4. Ibid, 17.

5. Omar Calabrese, *L’età neobarocca* (Rome-Bari: Laterza, 1987). The book was republished in 2013 under the title *The Neo-Baroque. Form and Dynamics of Contemporary Culture*. In addition to containing a preface by Umberto Eco, the volume collects Calabrese’s subsequent reflections on the Neo baroque in a single tome.

6. It echoes Eugenio D’Ors’ theory of *constants* according to which if the Classical produces genres, the Baroque degenerates and produces imbalances, especially sentimental ones. See Eugenio D’Ors, *Del Barocco*, edited by Luciano Anceschi (Milan: Rosa & Ballo, 1945).

7. Stefano Jacovello, “Appunti per domani”, in *Il Neobarocco. Forme e dinamiche della cultura contemporanea*, ed. Omar Calabrese (Lucca: Volo Publisher, 2013), 412.

8. Ibid.

In architecture, the use of metaphor is the *fil rouge* that allows us to understand how Baroque form (made not only of ellipses, spirals and folds of matter, but above all “of spatial liberation, mental liberation from rules..., from elementary geometry and from staticity”<sup>9</sup>) has been transformed into a neo-Baroque formula,<sup>10</sup> which has produced today those same fantastic fabrications that, in seventeenth-century treatises, are called “flowers”.<sup>11</sup>

### The Century of Flowers

The flower is the metaphor chosen by the *literati* to represent the baroque era in its entirety. This is not just a linguistic game, considering that there was a real fashion that involved the whole of seventeenth-century society. Stimulated by the invasion of exotic plants from America and the Orient, the European world proposed the flower garden as a new type of exhibition typology, supported by specialist literature such as Giovan Battista Ferrari’s famous treatise on floriculture (1633).<sup>12</sup> There could not have been a better metaphor to illustrate a world that celebrates the ephemeral and *humana fragilitas*, in which the Baroque intellectual himself seems to have the sole aim of “frolicking in a lonely garden”.<sup>13</sup>

The natural world speaks to men as if it were a great poetic book, making the boundary between reality and artifice ever more uncertain: the motions of the soul are likened to the swaying of meadows in the wind, and flowers themselves are “elegant figures and lively witticisms of ingenious nature”.<sup>14</sup> The flower thus becomes the epicentre and pretext for innumerable linguistic artifices: from botanists to scientific illustrators, all the arts feed on this metaphor, since wit “illustrates its sayings with [...] flowery beauties”.<sup>15</sup> Gian Battista Marino himself, in his *Adonis*, makes the flower the means of psychological consolation, because when man transforms himself into it, he resolves all contrasts within himself.

Even the post-Tridentine Church allows itself to be overwhelmed by the Baroque spirit, boasting that it has “finally found a demure flora that does not

9. Bruno Zevi, *Saper vedere l'architettura* (Turin: Einaudi, 1983), 86.

10. An important role plays, in the revival of Baroque forms, the so-called *aesthetics of repetition*, made up of variations within repetition, repetitions within repetition. See on this subject Calabrese, *L'età neobarocca*, 21-48.

11. “Le argutie dei poeti si chiamano fiori” [The witticisms of poets are called flowers]; Emanuele Tesauro, *Il cannocchiale aristotelico, o sia Idea dell'arguta et ingenua elocutione...* (Venice: Baglioni, 1663), 67.

12. Giovan Battista Ferrari, *Flora, ovvero cultura dei fiori* (Rome: Facciotti, 1638).

13. Pietro Sforza Pallavicino, *Trattato dello stile e del dialogo* (Rome: 1646 – ed. 1828), 76.

14. Tesauro, *Il cannocchiale aristotelico*, 73.

15. Sforza Pallavicino, *Trattato dello stile e del dialogo*, 131. Writing is a “sowing of words over the page” and the individual terms with which the poet plays in order to receive “the applause of the hearers for the words” are mere *leaves*, raw material on which to build modernity: Tesauro, *Il cannocchiale aristotelico*, 18, 123. Gracián speaks precisely of the existence of a *foliage of words* at the beginning of Baroque composition. See Baltasar Gracián, *L'acutezza e l'arte dell'ingegno*, trans. Giulia Poggi (Sesto San Giovanni: Aesthetica, 2020).

contaminate customs, but sows flowers in the souls better than in the earth".<sup>16</sup> It is no coincidence that the collections of texts useful for ceremonies of worship are called *florileges*, in which those flowers of holiness that define the "flowery way to walk to Heaven"<sup>17</sup> are displayed. Architects of the calibre of Cosimo Fanzago and Giuseppe Zimbalo display all their originality in the decorative efflorescence of their architectural works, visually translating the Counter-Reformation doctrine, permeated with botanical symbols and floral references in the orations as in the sermons. The blossoming of the new creed therefore also involved the sacred space, which, from the 17th century onwards, was nourished by fresh flowers, marble and stone flowers, silver branches on altars and floral arabesques even in liturgical vestments.<sup>18</sup>

It can certainly be said that the Baroque man, both in the sacred and profane spheres, identifies himself with a peregrine flower that intends to "compete with the vagueness of the heavens" in order to "fabricate for the century of flowers almost a new world".<sup>19</sup>

### Paolo Portoghesi: The Neo-Baroque Flower Garden

If the Baroque intellectual not only celebrated the beauty of the flower, but also codified it mathematically - see Guido Grandi's volume entitled *I fiori geometrici* - the Neo-Baroque architect understands that, before seeing a flower blossom, "a copious fruit of labour" is required, because "not everything every terren produces".<sup>20</sup>

The first sowers, those who rehabilitated the formal value of the Baroque and its architecture during the 20th century, were prominent figures such as Wölfflin, Brinckmann, Calcaterra, Morpurgo Tagliabue, Argan, Maurizio and Marcello Fagiolo. It was realized as early as the 1960s that the 17th century had to be brought up to date and that there was a great modernity in that Baroque demonized by Croce aesthetics. Step by step, the apparent seventeenth-century irrationality was codified as a superior rationality, as "from the logic and geometry of common notion we pass to transcendental logic and geometry".<sup>21</sup>

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16. Ferrari, *Flora, ovvero cultura dei fiori*, Introduction. Ferrari's *Flora* is now purified of all ancient elements of pagan licentiousness, because it belongs to that same poetic universe, Christian and anti-Marxist, that fuels the literary *otia* of Urban VIII and his nephew Francis.

17. *Ibid*, 2.

18. On this subject see Maria Concetta Di Natale, "Frasche e fiori d'argento per gli altari", in *Arredare il sacro. Artisti, opere e committenti in Sicilia dal Medioevo al Contemporaneo*, ed. Maria Concetta Di Natale, Maurizio Vitella (Milan: Skira, 2015), 63-80.

19. Ferrari, *Flora, ovvero cultura dei fiori*, I, 38.

20. *Ibid*, 73.

21. Giulio Carlo Argan, *Storia dell'arte italiana* (Florence: Sansoni, 1968), 374.

It may well be said that the season of intense flowering began precisely in 1980.<sup>22</sup> In that year, the Baroque flourished again, both with the multiplication of conferences and debates on Gracián and his notion of *agudeza*, and with international initiatives aimed at the dissemination of new lines of historical-artistic research on the subject (see the numerous Baroque Study Centres that sprung up all over Italy, promoted by Marcello Fagiolo).<sup>23</sup> At the same time, Paolo Portoghesi inaugurated a *Strada Novissima* from which to start again, a place where twenty architects captured images and suggestions from the *presence of the past* in that year's Biennale.

It is not possible to understand Portoghesi's architecture if one does not perceive the weight he attaches to the Baroque tradition that is a constant presence in his projects. The neo-Baroque that has blossomed in Portoghesi is a "fruit of delight". It is a graft that combines the rediscovery of Baroque architecture - from a very young age he wrote monographs on Borromini and Guarini<sup>24</sup> - with an attempt to bring to life in "modern language fragments deduced from the experiences of past eras, distant in time and space and chosen as (...) prophecies of modernity".<sup>25</sup>

It could be said that Portoghesi has created, over the course of his professional career, a very personal garden of neo-Baroque flowers: of different varieties and colours, cultivated at different times and in different ways, his flowers appear to be connected by sharpness, acts of genius that have created unexpected approaches, as in a great composition in which "at the top of the goal rises the most beautiful flower".<sup>26</sup>

Reasoning on the words of masters such as Bruno Taut, who, in *The Dissolution of Cities* (1920), called for a destruction of the "houses of stone producing hearts of stone"<sup>27</sup> so that the earth would once again generate "valleys in the shape of flowers"<sup>28</sup>, Portoghesi does not demonize the architecture of his time, but makes a critical judgement on it, demonstrating that it is possible to go beyond righteousness. He thus constructs those floral crystals imagined by Taut by starting out precisely from the Baroque architects who, centuries earlier, had skillfully used the curve

22. Marcello Fagiolo, "Argan, il Barocco e il Centro di Studi su Roma presso l'Accademia Nazionale dei Lincei", in *Giulio Carlo Argan intellettuale e storico dell'arte*, ed. Carlo Gamba (Milano: Electa, 2012).

23. In 1982, the Study Centre on the Baroque in Sicily and the Study Centre on the Baroque in Lecce were established. In the following decades, six more Baroque Study Centres were established in Naples, Tuscany, Umbria, Liguria, Calabria and Malta.

24. The first monograph on Guarino Guarini is from 1956, the one on Borromini (recently reprinted with additions and clarifications) is from 1967.

25. Paolo Portoghesi, *Roma/Amor* (Venice: Marsilio, 2019), 34. It is the same Baroque intellectuals who suggest how important the poetics of theft, of imitating "but with improvement", of emulating for the creation of "the admirable fake"; Sforza Pallavicino, *Trattato dello stile e del dialogo*, 89, 92.

26. Ferrari, *Flora, ovvero cultura dei fiori*, 396.

27. Bruno Taut, *La dissoluzione delle città*, trans. Giacomo Ricci (Naples: Archigrafica, 2008), 5.

28. Cities flourish, according to Taut, literally. He himself, after the subtitle the earth as a good habitation, in fact says that "of course it is only a utopia and a brief entertainment, though provided with documentation in the literary appendix for the gentle reader. A parable, or (albeit somewhat premature) paraphrase of the third millennium A.D."; *Ibid*, 5.

and, at the same time, from the archetypes of centrality par excellence: the star, the flower and the interpenetration of both.

Just think of the recurring motif in Borromini's masterpiece, the church of Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza; everything revolves around star symbolism, from the plan to the dome to the ornamentation.<sup>29</sup> In Portoghesi's research, in Sant'Ivo "what weighs seems to rise into the air with primitive, natural energy" and the star dome is compared to a Germanic Iris due to the compositional affinity of the forms, made of "two groups of three equiangular symmetry axes rotated by 30 degrees" (Figure. 1a-b).<sup>30</sup>

If in Sant'Ivo the star is transformed into a flower, in the Calcata garden it is the flower that crystallizes into a star. Standing out amidst the greenery of a garden made of memories is a stone tulip, a "fountain of eternal youth" that opens up to the sky in the form of a star, whose angular silhouette is also projected horizontally onto the geometric design of the boxwood beds.<sup>31</sup> Referring back to a Marian symbolism that often recalls the flower-star dynamic in the litanies of the Rosary,<sup>32</sup> this combination seemed the best form for the construction of the church of S. Maria della Pace in Terni (1997-2003). The building is designed as a space pressed outwards by the folding walls and modelled by the light roof so that it expands outwards, almost as if to represent the complementary relationship between prayer rising upwards and divine love descending downwards.

Over time, the star motif became recurrent in the architect's works,<sup>33</sup> until it was masterfully repeated in the early 2000s in the Church of Saints Cornelius and Cyprian in Calcata, where the alternation of tufa and wood in the tiburium creates a chromatic play that recalls the silhouette of a flower with a yellow pistil and white petals, a real star of Bethlehem (Figure 1c-d). If the beauty of lotus flowers immersed in water inspired the winning design of an international competition for a new jetty on the Fregene waterfront (2006-2007) (Figure 2a), the German iris

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29. The plan, central but with a complex geometry, is obtained by interpenetrating two triangles, so as to obtain a six-pointed star motif, which includes a regular hexagon in the centre. The points of the base star are treated differently: three turn into concave semicircular niches, the others are mixtilinear, with convexities broken up by small niches. The star shape is maintained up to the dome, which is set directly on the walls, eliminating connecting elements with the body of the building, and is still decorated with stars, alternating eight and six-pointed. Finally, all the stars in the dome, alternately eight and six-pointed, are gradually smaller and create a perspective effect that suggests an immense height.

The church of Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza was also the starting point for the composition of the church of the Holy Family in Fratte, Salerno. In that case, forgetting the stellar symbolism, the geometric symmetry of Borromini's plan was broken down by linking the various parts according to "a process of growth and fractal self-similarity"; Paolo Portoghesi, *Poesia della curva* (Rome: Gangemi, 2020), 187.

30. Paolo Portoghesi, *Natura e architettura* (Milan: Skira, 1999), 354.

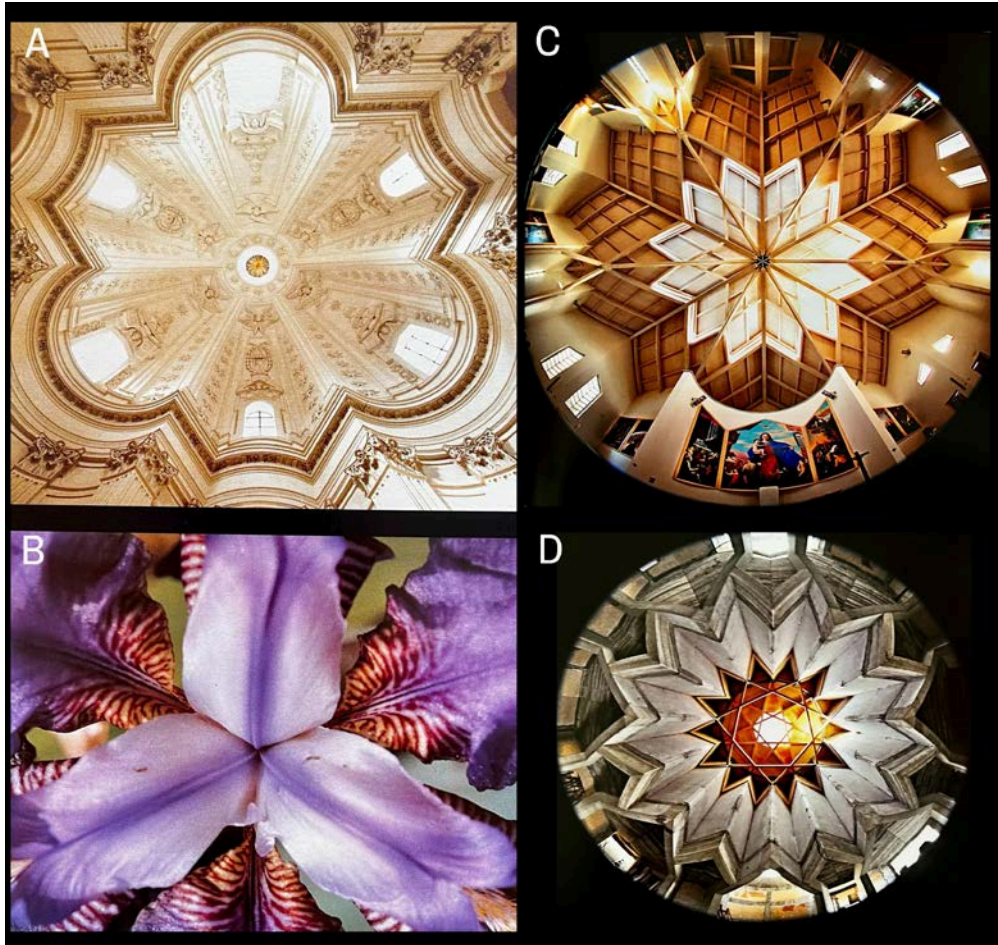
31. Bruno Taut also combined the construction of the *great flower* (a sanctuary to absorb solar energy with glass plates, lenses and burning mirrors) with the *great star* (a crystal temple).

32. In the litanies recited during the rosary, Mary is both *Mystical Rose* and *Morning Star*.

33. See for example the glass roofing of the central atrium in the headquarters of the Academy of Fine Arts in L'Aquila (1978-95), the project for the unification of the Vallo di Diano municipalities in the province of Salerno (1980), the Piazza Madonna delle Grazie in S. Marco in Lamis (1987-2000) and many others.

inspired a design for a car park along Rome's eastern ring road (1988) (Figure 2c). The design for a "megastore" (2004), on the other hand, is a gerbera with enormous petals (Figure 2b), while there is no shortage of studies on the theme of the rose, understood as a "turbine of petals" (Figure 3b).

The Breathing Tower in Shanghai synthesises the "dualism of life" in a living but still immature bud, a virtual movement of dilation and contraction suggested by the course of the three curved surfaces enclosing the central void (Figure 3c); the upward-facing, not yet blossomed lily of an office tower in Treviso (2003; Figure 2d) belongs to the same category.



**Figures 1a-b.** *The Dome of Sant'Ivo alla Sapienza (Rome, Italy) Compared to the Form of a German Iris*; **Figures 1c-d.** *The Star Shape of the Domes by Paolo Portoghesi in the Church of S. Maria della Pace in Terni (Italy) and in the Church of Saints Cornelius and Cyprian in Calcata (Italy)*

The key to Portoghesi's projects is a tight opposition to the unique and invariable right angle. As Argan wrote, his historical method demonstrates that "poetics is not the premise, but the ethical necessity of the commitment to the

operational level of art”.<sup>34</sup> His compositional research is nourished by folds of matter that internalize the Baroque lesson and reflect the secret that Gilles Deleuze discovered in the same years, that of the *folds of the soul*. The philosopher, analytically rereading Leibniz, affirms that “there seems to be a long Baroque line that passes through the fold, bringing together architects, painters, musicians, poets”;<sup>35</sup> and it is precisely there, among the folds of substance, that we must seek the forms of style. The fold is power that opens up infinite possibilities.

If the Baroque, in the words of Deleuze, “continually produced folds”<sup>36</sup> by inventing the infinite operation of stretching/distending, contracting/dilating, the neo-Baroque architect does not have to ask himself the problem of how to finish the fold, but how to take it to infinity. In fact, a continuous fold defines Portoghesi’s hand when he imagines a new bouquet of flowers in 2019, made of only dahlias (Figure 3a). Situated in the heart of Rome’s Talenti district, the Belvedere “Le Dalie” complex expresses a perfect match with both the Rione Rinascimento (the project completed by Portoghesi ten years earlier) and the landscape in which it is located: a large park that retains the connotations of the Roman countryside. The building is a tribute to the topicality of Borromini’s work: two blocks dialogue in a relationship of harmonic tension thanks to the curvilinear course of the balcony overhangs. In Portoghesi’s words, it is important that “it has been given a name that identifies not so much the inspiration as a characteristic that is undoubtedly of this architecture, that is, the fact that it takes up the regularity and at the same time the richness that is characteristic of flowers”.<sup>37</sup> We are faced with a veritable intellectual alliteration: the Baroque is distinguished by a transcendental dimension aspiring to the infinite, and Portoghesi represents the demiurge of the non-earthly who, through a language of which Borromini remains the paradigm and the flower the metaphor of his own inspiration, inaugurates that neo-Baroque line that helps us not to forget how necessary it is to *inhabit the Earth poetically*.<sup>38</sup>

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34. Giulio Carlo Argan, Mario Pisani (eds.), *Il punto su Paolo Portoghesi* (Rome: Gangemi, 1993).

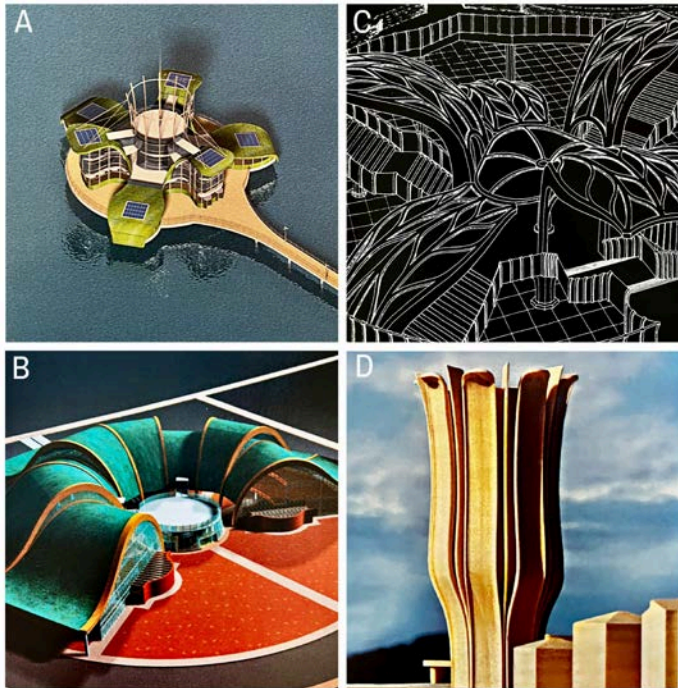
35. Gilles Deleuze, *La piega. Leibniz e il Barocco*, trans. Davide Tarizzo (Turin: Einaudi, 2004), 57. For a closer look at Deleuze’s philosophy and Bernini’s work see Maria João Moreira Soares & Clara Germana Gonçalves, “Gilles Deleuze and Bernini’s Bel Composto: From Theatricality to a Living-montage,” *Athens Journal of Architecture* 8, no. 4 (2022): 315-336.

36. *Ibid.*, 5.

37. The architect’s words come from an interview during the inauguration of the architectural work. See: <https://www.arketipomagazine.it/complesso-residenziale-belvedere-le-dalie-roma-paolo-portoghesi/> (Accessed January 26, 2024).

38. One of Portoghesi’s latest publications, in collaboration with his wife Giovanna Massobrio, is precisely entitled *Abitare poeticamente la terra. La casa, lo studio e il giardino di Calcata*. This locution has been transferred to architecture by the author taking as reference other studies in the literary and philosophical field by scholars such as Giachery who, in turn, proposes a series of variations on a single theme taken from a phrase by Friedrich Hölderlin (Voll Verdienst, doch dichterisch, wohnt der Mensch auf dieser Erde, “Full of merit, but poetically, dwells man on this earth”).





**Figure 2a.** P. Portoghesi, *Project for an International Competition for a New Jetty on the Fregene Waterfront (2006-2007)*; **Figure 2b.** P. Portoghesi, *Project for a “Megastore” (2004)*; **Figure 2c.** P. Portoghesi, *Project for a Car Park Along Rome’s Eastern Ring Road (1988)*; **Figure 2d.** P. Portoghesi, *Project for an Office Tower in Treviso (2003)*



**Figure 3a.** P. Portoghesi, *View of the Belvedere “Le Dalie” complex (Rome, 2019)*; **Figure 3b.** P. Portoghesi, *Studies on the theme of the rose*; **Figure 3c.** P. Portoghesi, *Project for the Breathing Tower in Shanghai*;

### Frank Gehry: From Garden to Neo-Baroque Flower Field

Paolo Portoghesi's work has been distinguished by a renewed enthusiasm attributed to historical citation, understood as the analogical juxtaposition of fragments.<sup>39</sup> This is the greatest legacy of post-modernism:<sup>40</sup> to produce a reflection on the true nature of the discipline of architecture, which must be understood first and foremost as an aesthetic process, not an exclusively utilitarian one; an architecture that has a different attitude towards the past and is capable of creating flowers of various species that "imitate embroidery (...) with the arrangement together and with the diversity of colours".<sup>41</sup> The architects of the turn of the century enriched the flower garden inaugurated by Portoghesi more and more. By means of an unconscious something-or-other, the neo-Baroque curves that seemed to be intentional and controlled have unknowingly become everyday practice: architects have made bending a method for replacing the lost centre with fragmented views.

If Portoghesi's curve arises from a fracture of the circle that loses its integrity (also symbolically)<sup>42</sup> but combines, fragment after fragment, continuing the fold between concavity and convexity, other architects come to terms with a world in which the curve has become intricately complicated in the papers of scientists who have come to understand the physical and mathematical value of nodes (closed curves intertwined in space).

Frank Gehry, ever since his fragment of *Strada Novissima* in 1980, is one of those protagonists who, internalizing post-modern teaching, does not seek to untangle the knots of life, but to indulge "the line of life itself, which contorts, extends and accumulates and pushes and drips, which is heavy and rough and sweet and stupid like life itself".<sup>43</sup> Reading the articles, essays and interviews of those who attended the opening of the Louis Vuitton Foundation in Paris in 2014, different and changing impressions emerge: some described it as a cathedral of light, others as a fish, a cloud, a sailboat, or simply a snow-white flower blossoming in the context of the Bois de Boulogne (Figure 4a). Gehry was enthusiastic about the multitude of suggestions, stating that the aim was to create an architecture that would internalize all kinds of metaphors of ephemerality and fluidity.<sup>44</sup> Just as in a garden where "various kinds of colours (...) in most flowers are desired",<sup>45</sup> Daniel

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39. Historical citation has been joined, more and more recently, by the dangerous tendency towards *pastiche*, i.e. the handling of historical baggage in order to repeat the past but very often in an a-critical manner, lacking its historical depth.

40. In many manuals, post-modernism is regarded as a mere "architecture of nostalgia (...), an expression of an expressionless and grotesque mask of consumer society". See Alessandra Muntoni, *Lineamenti di storia dell'architettura contemporanea* (Bari: Einaudi, 2005), 336-337.

41. Ferrari, *Flora, ovvero cultura dei fiori*, 20.

42. See the design of *Dikaia*, a utopian city of the future imagined in 1968. The urban space is subdivided by walls that are portions of a circle marking "the desert of the possible".

43. [https://spazioinwind.libero.it/freedom\\_mind/Mind%20Food/Frank\\_O.Gehry/FrankO.Gehry.html](https://spazioinwind.libero.it/freedom_mind/Mind%20Food/Frank_O.Gehry/FrankO.Gehry.html) Accessed March, 16, 2023.

44. See the 2014 interview with the architect: <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BG0y07wNNqU> Accessed January 26, 2024.

45. Ferrari, *Flora ovvero cultura di fiori*, 457.

Buren has provided for this need in 2016 with a temporary work (Figure 4b). The French artist covered the building's twelve iconic sails with 3600 pieces of glass in thirteen different colours. A mosaic of shapes and reflections has been created, destined to appear and disappear according to the various times of day and seasons; that "miracle of various colours in the same plant"<sup>46</sup> that Giovan Battista Ferrari attributed to the "talent [of the sowers] of representing by the diversity of colours a new rainbow"<sup>47</sup> seems to have been realized. The same chromatic dynamic resonates in the link between the dark red bricks on the ground and the white plaster of the Marta Museum in Herford, East Westphalia. If the inner core of the building, a former textile factory, remains largely unchanged in its architectural language based on lines and right angles, the undulating dynamic of the external forms is much more than a compositional choice. We are faced with a neo-Baroque ligament that expresses concern for the environment (a founding characteristic of the museum, also expressed in the acronym Marta) through the undulating roof landscape that reflects the adjacent course of the river Aa. With its abundance of water, the river creates "a land that (...) all year round becomes a happy mother of a very vague offspring of flowers";<sup>48</sup> for this reason, the same curves which, taken individually, are the rivulets of water of the river, joined together by compositional links, represent the petals of an enormous shining flower visible in the landscape thanks to the stainless steel, the material of which the roof of the entire building is made (Figure 5).

Gehry's entire design path is studded with metaphorical choices, first and foremost the desire to disguise his real name (Frank Owen Goldberg) because, as he himself states, his work is the result of a great healthy insecurity that is reflected in the architecture, sometimes leading the visitor to get lost in labyrinths made up of different trajectories and collisions. The perimeter of the Disney Concert Hall in Los Angeles, for example, is composed of a series of green crossing paths that form a veritable public garden around the building which, with the outdoor spaces that wedge around the concert hall, is reminiscent of the petals of an open rose (a flower much loved by the commissioner, the widow Disney). The Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, on the other hand, is the most striking example demonstrating Gehry's ability to make a real urban node bloom; a project commissioned at a time of severe economic crisis for the city of Bilbao.<sup>49</sup> In a choice at once symbolic and strategic, an abandoned site of the old port was selected for the new building. The visitor arrives at the building from the main road running through Bilbao, only to lose himself in its titanium-covered structure with complex volumes: bridges crossing the spaces, tunnels, stair towers and glass lifts ensure that the work has no flat surfaces. If, looking at it from the river, the Guggenheim appears to be shaped like a ship, thus paying homage to the port city, the shiny panels resemble the scales of a fish. In fact, to quote the "New York Times", the Guggenheim Museum more than anything else resembles a true miracle that made the economy of a decaying city

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46. Ibid, 457.

47. Ibid, 467.

48. Ibid, 73.

49. <https://smarthistory.org/frank-gehry-guggenheim-bilbao/>. Accessed March 16, 2023.

flourish again. And it is precisely a flower that the visitor sees when, inside the large atrium, he turns his gaze upwards; the same neo-Baroque flower that is realised when looking down from above, fold after fold, thanks to the twisting of the facades one on top of the other (Figure 6).

Observing other works by Gehry (such as, for example, the extraordinary case of the Hotel Marqués de Riscal in Elciego)<sup>50</sup>, it is possible to think that after all, Bruno Taut's utopia is not so unrealizable, and that architecture can flourish in a natural way. Gehry's flowers are humanized buildings, implicit metaphors for a peculiar conception of the world. His architectures lead the visitor to interface with his own nodes, passing through a seemingly hostile, decomposed, unbalanced and inexorably closed environment. It is only by looking at the building with a conscious gaze, *from above* and *from afar*, that one perceives instead that the architect has made a piece of the city flourish.



**Figure 4a.** F. Gehry, *View of the Louis Vuitton Foundation (Paris, 2014)*; **Figure 4b.** D. Buren, *Observatory of Light, Louis Vuitton Foundation (Paris, 2016)*

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50. The hotel is a building that rises above the vineyards, evoking the shape and gestures of the vine with its twisted branches.



**Figure 5.** *F. Gehry, Aerial View of the Marta Museum (Herford, 2005)*



**Figure 6.** *F. Gehry, Aerial View of the Guggenheim Museum (Bilbao, 1997)*

## Conclusions

The metaphor of the flower makes one realize how bluntly Baroque *deja vu* is nowadays, but it is only one of many links that can be traced if one tries to “bring about a great deal of mutual harmony between the parts”. It would be necessary to modify that meagre “Treccani” definition by pointing out that Neo-Baroque is not a mere citation practice in the field of arts and architecture, but a state of survival. Moving the definition of the phenomenon away from that generic nineteenth- and twentieth-century revival tendency, it is necessary to focus attention on that precise spiritual affinity with the Baroque that has evolved more and more since the middle of the last century and was definitively triggered in the 1980s, when the rediscovery of Baroque culture (in poetry, philosophy, architecture) had an explosion that travelled in parallel with the renewed enthusiasm for historical citation, of which *Strada Novissima* is the most emblematic example. Since then mathematicians, physicists, poets, historians and architects have continually contaminated each other, making Neo-Baroque a true cultural style that identifies today’s society made up of forces that bend, flex and undermine existing systems.<sup>51</sup> Architecture, poetry and philosophy feed on scientific terms to elaborate metaphysical concepts and, conversely, physics and mathematics have come to use terms such as *landscape* to grasp certain concepts.<sup>52</sup> The aim of intellectuals, whether physicists or architects, is the same: to study and propose connecting *links* between complex and apparently closed components;<sup>53</sup> exactly what in the 17th century were ligaments, points, sharpnesses, all attempts to associate opposing elements “like strangers among citizens”.<sup>54</sup>

Since it is therefore an aesthetic process, in today’s architecture the flowers can only be grasped by looking from above and from afar, the fruit of a perspective that invests not only the technique but above all the metaphors used by the architect to best render the precarious equilibrium that is before our eyes. As Deleuze’s philosophy teaches us, in our own small way we believe we are made of imbalances and conflicts; it is only when we learn to know our folds, to live *fold by fold*, to transform insecurities into strength that it is possible to make our innermost essence bloom; and it is thus, by following the folds, that architects build flowers.

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51. The notion of Neo-Baroque is therefore not opposed to the definitions attempted by historians to catalogue today’s movements, such as deconstructivism or liquid architecture, but encompasses them. While very often such definitions group together the experiences of architects for a different use of construction techniques, means and design technologies, Neo-Baroque focuses on the aesthetic reasons that lead the architect to want to build following the rules of folding.

52. String theory is a branch of theoretical physics that aspires to answer several profound questions about the foundations of physics. One of the problems with the theory is that the complete formulation is not always satisfactorily defined in all possible theoretical scenarios. Another is that it is believed to describe an enormous “landscape” of possible universes, which makes attempts to identify particle physics within the theory complicated.

53. In mathematics, and more specifically in knot theory, a *link* is a collection of nodes in space.

54. Jon R. Snyder, *The Aesthetics of the Baroque* (Bologna: Il mulino, 2005), 33.

## Acknowledgments

I would like to dedicate this essay to Paolo Portoghesi, who passed away last year.

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