

# Where does inspiration come from, and why do architects often deny its source?

## Critique

By Robert Campbell, FAIA

You can't visit Richard Meier's Getty Center in Los Angeles without thinking of Hadrian's Villa, the palace built near Tivoli, a few miles east of Rome, by the great Roman emperor in about the year 120.

Everything about the Getty reminds you of the villa. You can't look at the plan of one without thinking of the other. In both, grids collide at angles, often with round elements as knuckles where two grids meet. There are similarities in the water features and in the way white accents seem to gather the sun and bring it down to earth—accents that are mythological statues at Hadrian's Villa and abstract architectural elements at the Getty.

### Of curves and axes

Sir Banister Fletcher's description of Hadrian's Villa, in his *A History of Architecture*, first published in 1896, could equally describe the Getty:

"It is still possible to experience ... the skillful way in which Hadrian and his architect have contrived the meetings of the axes, the surprises that await the turning of a corner, and the vistas that open to view. It was possible here to experiment with new forms and new types of spatial composition ... The most characteristic feature is a constant play upon curves and countercurves in place

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of the rectilinear shapes used in most earlier planning."

A few weeks before the Getty Center opened, I lunched with Richard Meier on one of its terraces. Architects, like other artists, can be deceptive about their sources. I decided I'd play a game with Meier. I would talk a circle all around Hadrian's Villa, but I would never mention it. Would he volunteer it as a source?

I'd once been architect in residence at the American Academy in Rome, where Meier is on the board of directors. So at our Getty lunch, I talked about the Academy. I'd visited the stonecutters' yard in Bagni di

Tivoli, only a few kilometers from Hadrian's Villa, where I saw the giant "guillotines" that split the travertine for the Getty, so I talked about that. I brought up the Villa d'Este and its gardens in Tivoli. And so on.

Meier mentioned other sources: Francesco Borromini, his favorite architect; South German Baroque churches; Sir John Soane. But he never mentioned Hadrian's Villa.

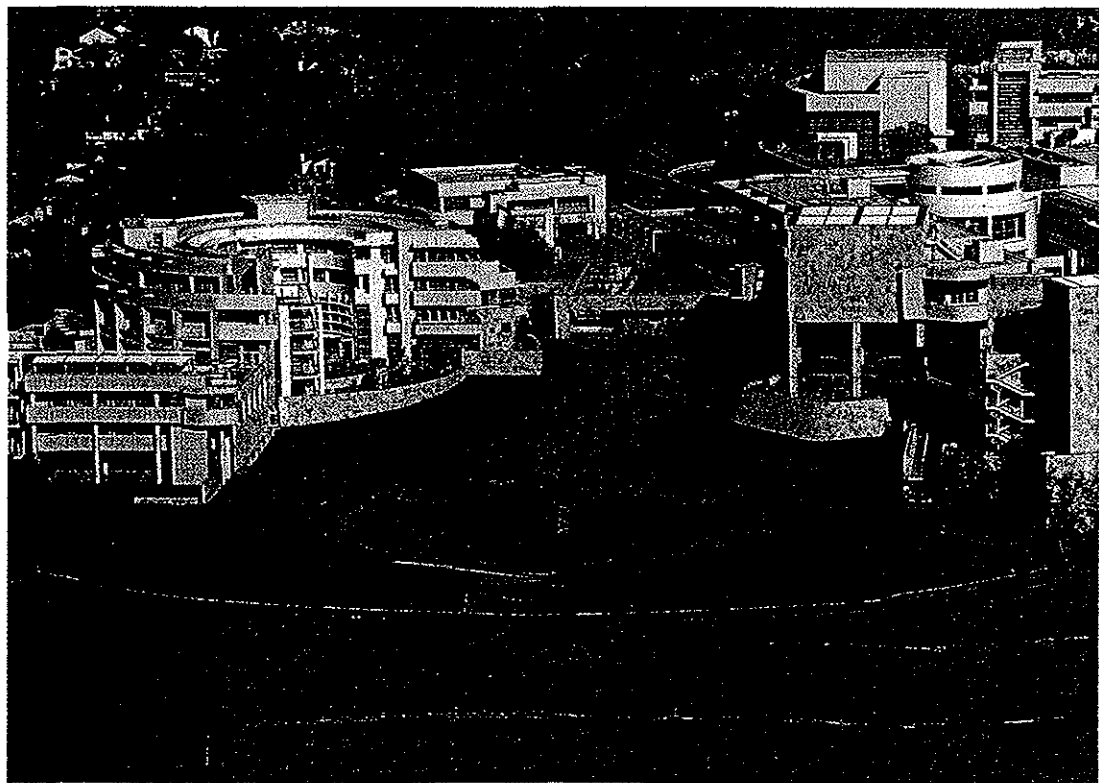
### See, Absorb, Forget, Create

A few weeks later, I was again at the Getty. On that visit I spoke with Harold Williams, the Getty's director. I asked him whether, during the process of design, the subject of

Hadrian's Villa had ever come up.

Williams stared at me as if I were crazy. "Richard took us to Hadrian's Villa," he said. "We spent a whole day at Hadrian's Villa."

That's the mystery of the creative process. Scholars of the imagination write about four stages of creativity: To See, to Absorb, to Forget, and to Create. The creative person must forget his sources, lest he feel he is merely imitating them. They must become an integral part of him before he can use them. Yale professor Harold Bloom puts the thought another way. Talking of writers, he says the creative person unconsciously



At the Getty Center in Los Angeles, Meier played a Neoclassical game of connecting axes with curves.

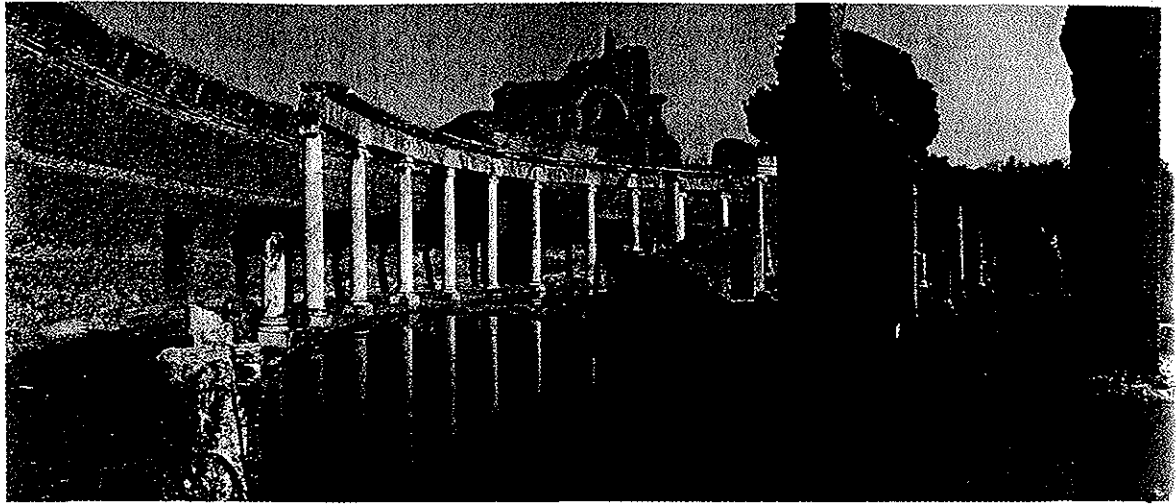
## Critique

misinterprets and distorts his sources, with a sort of Oedipal combativeness, in order to develop an independent voice of his own.

I might have believed Richard Meier had forgotten Hadrian's Villa—if Harold Williams hadn't told me about the visit there. But maybe by the time we talked, Meier had half submerged his awareness of his primary source.

### Creative denial

The truth is that any creative person is a sponge in denial. Frank Lloyd Wright sopped up architectural influences from the Arts and Crafts Movement and from Tuscany, Secessionist Vienna, and Bauhaus Cubism, not to mention Japan and Tibet. Yet he wrote, in *A Testament* in 1957, "No practice by any European architect to this day has influenced mine in the least." The poet T.S. Eliot was more candid. He



Were the curves and water features of Hadrian's Villa, circa 120 A.D., the inspiration for Meier's Getty?

wrote: "The bad poet borrows. The good poet steals."

There was one other memorable moment in my lunch with Meier. The Getty at that time consisted of five separate related organizations, the art museum being only the most public of them. Most were still in the process of formation during the time of design. Meier thus had the diffi-

cult—or maybe impossible—task of designing buildings for clients who hadn't yet quite figured out who they were and what was their program.

I asked him if things might not have turned out better if he'd done an overall master plan and then allowed the different parts of the complex to be designed by other architects, one by one over time, as

each subcenter came into clear focus. Each architect would then have a defined program to work from, and each architect (except the first) would have a context to relate to.

Meier paused a moment, then said, "If I hadn't got the commission, I might have said the same thing." It was the only time he seemed to drop his guard.

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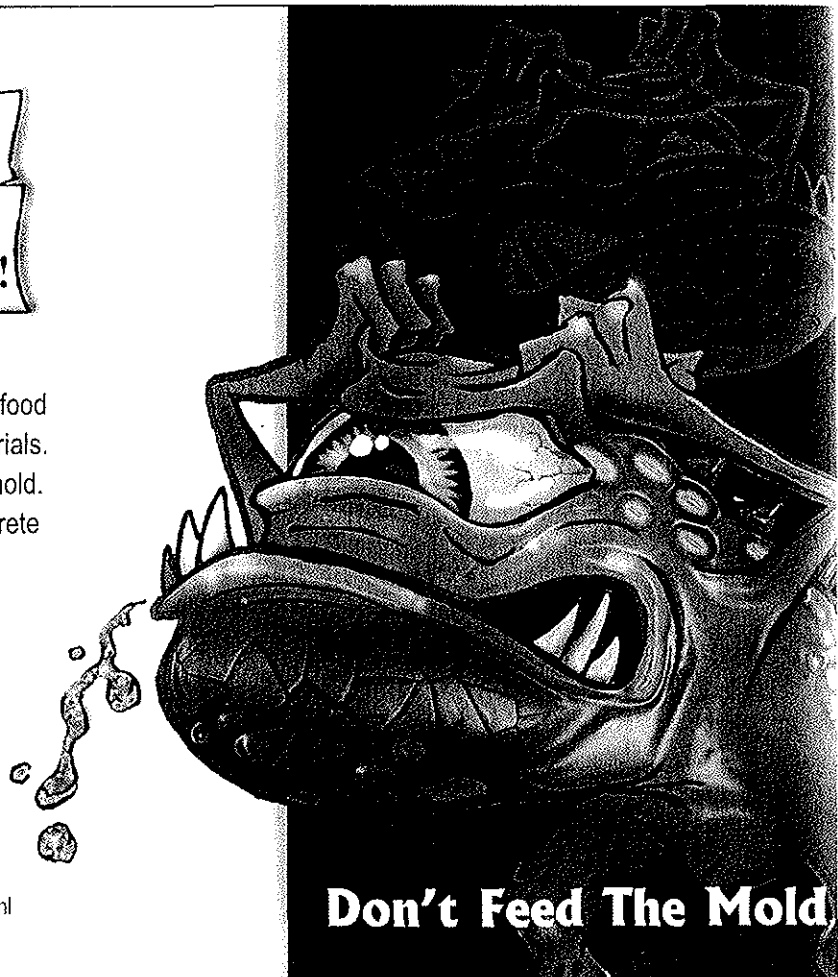
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## Don't Feed The Mold

### Washed up at 62

Going back for a moment to Wright: I've just been reading Lewis Mumford for another project, and it's interesting to note that around 1930 everyone but Mumford believed Wright, then 62, was washed up. Philip Johnson wrote to Mumford in 1931: "Wright was a great pioneer, but he is a romantic and has nothing to do with architecture today." But Mumford stuck to his belief that Wright was the greatest living architect. Gratefully, Wright called him "lieber L Lewis," doubling the L to honor Mumford with a Welsh name like his own. No one knew then that Fallingwater (note the F L L W in that name, too) and Johnson Wax were just over the horizon.

What's amazing is that the Johnsonian kind of bias against Wright still exists. A couple of years ago, Jerzy Soltan, an acolyte of Le Corbusier who for decades taught architecture at Harvard, said to me: "I despise Frank Lloyd Wright." Soltan, a very nice man, virtually hissed the verb. European elitists

like Soltan (born a Polish aristocrat) tend to view America in one of two ways. Sometimes they fall in love, in a patronizing manner, with its gamy frontier image—think of poets W.H. Auden and Christopher Isherwood and their fascination with gangsters and Los Angeles beaches, or of Reyner Banham, who dressed like a ranch boss and doted on grain elevators, or of French intellectuals and

ect for Boston, eventually built as International Place. I'd been architecture critic of *The Boston Globe* for only a couple of years and was the smallest possible dot on the great man's horizon. But when I called his office in New York, Johnson, master of marketing that he is, came to the phone himself and invited me to visit him at his famous Glass House in Connecticut.

## THE CREATIVE PERSON MUST FORGET HIS SOURCES LEST HE MERELY IMITATE THEM. THEY MUST BECOME AN INTEGRAL PART OF HIM BEFORE HE CAN USE THEM.

their infatuation with the films of Jerry Lewis. At other times they view us, as does Soltan, and as did the young Europhile Johnson, with the snob disdain of an older culture.

### A visit to the Glass House

I'll end with another anecdote of Philip Johnson. Back in the middle 1970s, Johnson and his partner were working on a huge office proj-

ect for Boston, eventually built as International Place. I'd been architecture critic of *The Boston Globe* for only a couple of years and was the smallest possible dot on the great man's horizon. But when I called his office in New York, Johnson, master of marketing that he is, came to the phone himself and invited me to visit him at his famous Glass House in Connecticut. Talk about sources. As others have noted, Johnson's estate is modeled, in part, on Sir John Soane's house in London. Johnson explodes Soane's house across the landscape. Soane's glassy front room becomes the Glass House; both dwellings feature an art gallery with paintings on hinged panels; both include a cryptlike underground sculpture gallery; and

Soane's breakfast parlor, with its suspended vault, becomes Johnson's guesthouse. One wealthy architect-collector interprets another with wit and skill. But Johnson remains too conscious of his sources, I think, to be as truly creative as, say, Wright.

Johnson toured me through all this on an afternoon in late winter. There were no leaves on the trees and no clouds in the sky. The sun was low and bright. After the tour, we sat in the Glass House, with a single flower on the glass table, sipping two perfect martinis. The sun was invisible behind the brick cylinder that contains the bathroom and fireplace. But slowly, like a stalker, the sun was edging out of hiding. Suddenly it smashed our faces with the kind of appalling glare that can only be generated by the collision of a winter New England sun and a glass house.

"There's that bleeping thing again," said Johnson. And he rose and led us, and our martinis, to a shadier part of the room. ■

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