TEN CANONICAL BUILDINGS 1950–2000

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1. Profiles of Text
Luigi Moretti, Casa “Il Girasole,” 1947–50

One of the first critical articles to appear in English on Luigi Moretti’s Casa “Il Girasole” was written by Peter Reyner Banham in 1953. Banham’s article, published in the February issue of Architectural Review, labeled Casa “Il Girasole” the defining monument of “Roman eclecticism,” which was an eclecticism that Banham considered operated within the confines of the vestiges of modernism. If the label eclecticism has different connotations today, in 1953 it implied that Moretti’s work could be seen as a haphazard collection of classical tropes and architectural strategies lacking any single organizing principle other than having been assembled by Moretti in a single building. In this sense Banham’s argument was prophetic, though his use of the term eclecticism, it will be argued here, was flawed. It is interesting to note that as early as 1953, Banham proposed that modern architecture had already become a style, and thus he was able to cite Moretti as deviating from its formal and supposed social imperatives. Moretti’s Casa “Il Girasole” would subsequently earn an important citation in Robert Venturi’s 1966 book Complexity and Contradiction in Architecture, a citation that would become physically manifest in Venturi’s own Vanna Venturi House (see chapter 5). One important distinction between Banham’s conclusion and a possible present reading is that prior to 1968, and the rethinking of the idea of a text proposed by Jacques Derrida’s Of Grammatology, it was not possible to propose a textual reading of what appeared to Banham to be mere eclecticism. Post-structuralism offered methods of analysis and composition as a new lens through which to understand complex phenomena; in certain cases, these phenomena defy a clear reading altogether, and instead represent a condition of what can be now called undecidability.
In this context, Moretti becomes neither an eclectic nor a modernist; rather, his work defies any easy categorization, even as one of the first, if rarely acknowledged, postmodern architects. It is this condition of what can be termed *undecidability* that emerges in his Casa "Il Girasole" and will develop as one of the defining themes of this book.

Completed in 1950, Moretti's Casa "Il Girasole" incorporated the first appearances of historical allusion in the wake of modernist abstraction. This overture to history is not, however, why Casa "Il Girasole" is the first building in this book. Rather, it is because Casa "Il Girasole" represents one of the first postwar buildings to manifest a hybrid condition of both abstraction and literal figured representation. These simultaneous yet seemingly antithetical positions are never resolved as a single narrative, meaning, or image. Rather, it is the dialectical relationship between the two positions that is questioned in a postwar climate that challenged the innate value of such a dialectic. Furthermore, it could be argued that Casa "Il Girasole" represents one of the first buildings after World War II to embody the undecidable nature of truths in attempting the parallel use of both abstract and figured tropes. It is here that an idea of what might be considered a text in architecture might be introduced. While the abstract and the figured refer to what is usually described as the *formal*, the distinctions between the formal and the textual in what follows will be seen to be important. The term *formal* describes conditions in architecture that can be read not necessarily in terms of meaning or aesthetics, but in terms of their own internal consistency. This internal coherence involves strategies that have nothing to do with the primary optical aspects of the aesthetic (proportion, shape, color, texture, materiality) but rather have to do with the internal structure governing their interrelation. Formal analysis looks at architecture outside of its necessarily historical, programmatic, and symbolic context.

The term *textual* can be defined in relationship to one of post-structuralism's key concepts in the Derridian idea of text. Derrida suggests that a text is not a single linear narrative, but a web or a tissue of traces. While a narrative is unitary, continuous, and directional, a text is multivalent, discontinuous, and nondirectional. In the context of this book, the idea of a text, like the idea of a diagram, helps to initiate a change from the idea of reading a work as a unitary entity to understanding a work as an undecidable result of varying forces. In my work on Giuseppe Terragni, for example, the idea of a text reoriented my analysis of Casa Giuiani-Frigerio from essentially formalist interpretations to a more textual reading.

Texts, therefore, do not deploy the same internal consistency as in the formal.

In addition to provoking formal reading, buildings can equally be read as textual, offering different modes of reading, which may challenge established architectural vocabularies. For example, Alberti’s superposition of the Arch of Titus over the vernacular Greek temple-front at Sant’Andrea becomes textual, because this montage of architectural forms from different historical periods destabilizes a singular meaning. The textual provokes a reading outside of the facts of an object’s physical presence, or the underlying structures which govern its being; in the case of Alberti’s Sant’Andrea, the superposition of historical tropes creates this disturbance in presence that takes the building out of the category of the conventionally formal. If the formal begins from a conception of presence that is both a linear narrative and what can be called fixed or decidable, then the textual suspends the narrative of presence, in which a hierarchy is implicit, and offers instead undecidable relations rather than a single static condition. It is this undecidability of relations with both historical and modernist tropes that Moretti invokes to produce an initial critique of modernism.

The abstract languages of cubism and futurism were subjected to a critique, which first took form in Italy through neorrealist cinema and its unvarnished view of Italy and the detritus of five years of war. Neorealist films like Open City and The Bicycle Thief were a form of empirical existentialism, in that they represented attempts to move the language of abstraction toward a language more closely associated with what could be considered “the real.” Moretti’s postwar work, which also proposed a didactic view of architecture that now critiqued abstraction, evolved out of such a neorealist sensibility. However, it is to Moretti’s credit that little of his first postwar work can be considered neorealist, just as it cannot be dismissed as eclectic.

The subtlety of Moretti’s critique of modernist abstraction was articulated in his now much sought-after magazine Spazio (Space) in the early 1950s. Spazio followed in the tradition of architects’ little magazines, which began with Le Corbusier’s magazine L’Esprit Nouveau in 1920 and Mies van der Rohe’s magazine G, with Theo van Doesberg and El Lissitzky, in 1923. While Le Corbusier’s magazine referred to a new spirit, and the G of Mies’s magazine stood for Gegenstand (object) and effectively addressed ideas about objecthood, Moretti’s Spazio made an important distinction between the object-thing and the object of containment as space or volume. An object can be seen and analyzed as
a geometric abstraction, but space is difficult to analyze as a physical entity because it is usually defined by other things. While space is a conceptual entity, its container is formal. Such a redefinition of the modeling of space was among the issues Moretti broached in *Spazio*.

It was Moretti's article "Valori della Modanatura," (The Value of Modeling) in *Spazio* 6 (1952) that challenged the modernist conception of space. The article suggested that surface had the capacity to be modeled in such a way as to create a dialogue between volume and flatness, and therefore that the modeled surface could engage the affective potential of light and shadow. The article challenged the boxlike abstractions of modern architecture by raising the issue of profile, which is articulated through both hard edge and figured form.

Profile is the edge of a figure—in other words, how a surface in architecture meets space:

the edge of a volume seen against the sky is a literal profile. This means that all architecture, because it is three-dimensional, will have some sort of profile. While in architecture a profile is the edge of a plane or the edge of a surface, it is also either the edge of the containing surface or the edge of the exterior space in relationship to the containing surface of the interior. In either case, profile tends to be the result of figured form, which in turn produces shadows. Moretti was not referring to a literal profile per se but to a conceptual profile, which was made thematic in the design. Moretti made profile thematic in his work by suggesting that profile becomes more than just the edge of a three-dimensional volume and instead serves to question the clarity of boundaries between edge and volume. In Moretti's terms, profile is not a narrative device, revealing shape or figure, but rather can be disassociated from any shape or figure; this disassociation is not
merely a line but can be, for example, the dark edge of cast shadows. By calling attention to profile in architecture, Moretti suggests its role as a marker of undecidable relationships and engages space as an object for close reading. As hierarchy and singularity of meaning are made problematic, the rhetoric becomes textual rather than formal.

The idea of space as volume was illustrated in Spazio by Moretti's series of cast models of historical buildings, churches, and villas. Moretti broke with the conventions of architectural models by representing a building's interior space as a solid volume and dispensing entirely with its exterior enclosure, structure, facades, or any other indications of an exterior skin. These volumetric models seemed to deny a relationship to the exterior. Rather, they embodied space itself, conceptualizing space by turning void into solid. In the history of architecture, analysis usually begins from the geometric, and from elements that can be touched and defined, physically—linear elements such as structure and walls—and subsequently broaches the spatial, that which is contained within physical boundaries. The history of architecture has been largely defined by this progression from object or geometry to space. Moretti's models inverted this convention by taking space, rather than its enclosing surface, as a starting point for analysis. On the one hand Moretti deals with the edge of the surface—its profile—and on the other he engages volume without surface in these model studies. Moretti's notion of profile and space, as articulated in his volumetric models, raises formal and conceptual issues that refuse resolution as a single narrative or meaning. These models prefigure a radically new diagram of space that Moretti further developed in Casa "Il Girasole."

The first impression of Casa "Il Girasole" is a dynamic tension between volume and edge. The cut in the center of the front facade is the
first postwar use of the aedicule motif, whereby a spatial division occurs between two solids, which nevertheless remain related across its void. Moretti's use of the aedicule comes out of an historical tradition, from the Palladian window to Carlo Rainaldi's Santa Maria in Campitelli. Moretti's facade cannot be considered a pastiche of history, however, because he uses historical motifs in a new way. The aedicule divides the planar surface of the facade of Casa “II Girasole” into two volumetric pieces which, though paired, are not identical, nor do their edges align across the void. The physicality of the facade is equally ambiguous, in that it appears to be a cleft volume when viewed frontally, but when viewed obliquely, the facade becomes attenuated at the edges, resembling a screen.

The tension between the facade seen as a screen and as a volume is further developed at the corners of the facade. If the corner was a dominant motif of the neoclassical, and if the frontal picture plane was a dominant motif of the modern, then Moretti's Casa “Il Girasole” uses elements of each while breaking with both traditions. The corners of Casa “II Girasole” are sites of fractures: both the front and rear facades overhang the main mass of the building as thin screens, separated from the main volume of the building. The corner is also shadowed by an undecidability as an assembly of concrete solids and voids. This develops from the idea of profile that Moretti put forward in Spazio, yet the layered character of the facade creates a different understanding of profile. Casa “Il Girasole” is no longer a building where profile can be said to define a continuity, as would be the case in classical architecture where profile and shape were one and the same thing. One of the important theoretical propositions set into play at Casa “Il Girasole” is that the profile does not equate to the shape of the building.
Another theoretical proposition resides in the problematic of the corner: Casa "Il Girasole" does not present a clearly subjective view of the object, seen perspective as Greek space, nor does it offer a frontal view as modern Roman space. It is something other, and makes an argument of its otherness, similar to the manner in which Adolf Loos disarticulated the exterior envelope from inner volumes. For Moretti, the play of solid, void, and edge are simultaneous conditions. Thus Casa "Il Girasole" is one of the first didactic examples of the idea of the profile as breaking up the regular outline of the modernist box: the modernist envelope is confronted by its opposite in the idea of contained volume.

In modern architecture's free plan, columns were usually the same size and shape as functional grounding elements. At Casa "Il Girasole," the columns become figured, changing shape and size as they move through the building, signaling difference. The paired volumes and paired sets of columns speak to a formal order that is different from an abstract or neutral column grid. The pairing of the columns creates a play between symmetries in two different axes while at the same time disrupting an abstract nine-square grid and a plaid grid of servant and served spaces. In this, Moretti's plan critiques the uniformity of space in the free plan. The importance of these two forms of notation lies in the breaking down of historical continuity, which for Moretti was the Renaissance villa, the baroque palazzo, and the nineteenth-century *hôtel-de-ville*. This is an evolution of the idea of the whole as a consistent relationship of parts, as would be the case with any idea of type to a condition no longer described by a dominant whole.

The materiality of Casa "Il Girasole" lodges another critique of modernist abstraction. Material here is used rhetorically, but not in the tradition of formal rhetoric, as material in and of itself, nor for its purely phenomenological value, as in Peter Zumthor's use of stone or wood. Rather, material functions here as notation, articulating difference in a manner reminiscent of Loos's turn-of-the-century Viennese interiors. Loos juxtaposed marbles, granites, woods, metals, and stuccos to articulate their iconic value as individual materials. Loos's interiors are not about the richness of the materials but their juxtaposition.

The lobby of Casa "Il Girasole" is a riot of materials—metal, stone, glass, wood—that obeys no structural or compositional logic. No dominant material system can be discerned, and there is no governing color palette. The use of material is both notational and didactic, to call attention to the possibility of material as text. Material elements refer back and forth to one another, yet they do not represent anything other than the mere fact of their existence. While this could be considered a form of neorealism in architecture, in their refusal to refer to any external systems...
of material meaning, the materials function textually.

The stonework of the base takes on a notational quality in its use of false rustication, varied patterns, and sculptural motifs. In Casa "Il Girasole," the "rusticated" base turns out to be a play on rustication. Rustication in a Florentine palazzo follows a logic of mass: heaviest at the base and increasingly thinner at upper levels. Countering this convention, the rustication at Casa "Il Girasole" harkens back to Giulio Romano's sixteenth-century Palazzo del Te in Mantua, whose paper-thin rustication does not look like stone and whose keystones seem to drop out of their holding positions, questioning how the stone arch is structurally supported. The state of suspension between support and collapse, between heavy and paper-thin rustication, calls the materiality of stone into question.

Moretti inverts the conventions of rustication by putting heavy stones on thin stones, incorporating stony blocks within window openings, or cutting rusticated stone in chevron patterns that deny their structural logic. The sculpted remnant of a human leg is incorporated into a window jamb as if a relic from an early classical sculpture had found its way into the fabric of Casa "Il Girasole." This historicizing motif triggers a thought about the past, but it is not aimed at a nostalgic or adulatory remembrance. Rather these sculptural elements are archaic and anarchic, as if the arbitrariness of everyday life, as portrayed in neorealist film, informs what Banham might consider the arbitrary, whimsical, and unsystematic use of materials. The sculptural leg has no meaning and could be considered purely arbitrary, but this is an order of arbitrariness divorced from an expression of will, historicism, and expressionism. Moretti's calibrated arbitrariness calls attention to its own condition as arbitrary in an internal referencing that is textual rather than purely meaningful.

Moretti's Casa "Il Girasole" uses historical motifs to make a critical commentary on the formal coherence of architecture. Historicizing
references such as the aedicular motif of the facade and the rusticated textures of the base point toward postmodern practices, yet at Casa “Il Girasole” these belong to a wholly different order. Such conditions make Casa “Il Girasole” both formal and textual; certain formal coherences are emphasized and simultaneously displaced. In Casa “Il Girasole” Moretti does not thematize proportions, materials do not cohere into narrative, and the masses of the building remain a series of juxtaposed volumes and screens, if not random notations, which replace the formal conventions of the plan. Many of the possible readings are undercut by other readings, and therefore do not provide any synthesis. If the notion of a text posits the breakdown of a decidability leading to closure or synthesis, then the textual in architecture suggests a breakdown in the notion of the meaningful organization of a single narrative.

Casa “Il Girasole” has many possible contingent readings as a textual work; it does not sustain a single, dominant view of architecture, which may explain one reason why Moretti’s work has gone almost unnoticed in the intervening years. Moretti’s Casa “Il Girasole” rewrites the conditions that suggest architecture itself, and which this book argues, relate canonic buildings to close reading. While Moretti’s building transitions from the abstractions of modernism to a sensibility more closely related to neorealism, it proposes methods of close reading of a different kind, methods no longer tied to modernism’s formal lexicon but rather to an undecidability of the text. Casa “Il Girasole” is the first and perhaps the earliest exemplar of such a discourse.
15. Casa "Il Girasole" in Rome sits on a nearly rectangular block bounded by two major streets, Viale Bruno Buozzi to the south and Via Schiaparelli to the west. While the front facade is orthogonal to Viale Bruno Buozzi, the rear facade of the building is parallel to its street, thus deviating at a slight angle from the front facade. Other disreptions of symmetry that occur in the building include the central north-south axis, which is not a continuous axis and bends at the stairs.

16. The mass of the building is cut in two through most of its center, essentially creating a U-shaped building condition. The central void creates the initial appearance of an axial symmetry running through the building, but the implied symmetry is belied by the actual configuration of the side blocks, which are not parallel to each other. Rather, the volumetric sidepieces are splayed from the central axis of the building. In addition to marking this destabilized symmetry, the void registers as a vertical cut in the facade.
17. The massing of Casa “Il Girasole” alludes to certain classical ideas: its tripartite organization comprises a seemingly rusticated base; a middle portion that is accentuated in the facade as a glazed zone; and an upper zone that resembles a pediment crowning the upper portions of the building. The pediment is divided by a central cut that recalls a classical aedicule. The broken pediment is asymmetrical in that the right piece rises slightly higher than its corresponding segment on the left.

18. The vertical division in the facade, as well as the facade’s extension beyond the body of the building, produces a profile. The vertical cut creates the idea that the facade is volumetric, revealing the corner and inboard edge at its center. Yet at the outer edges of the facade, this presumed mass becomes an attenuated screen. On the upper three residential floors, the building's two long sides are fractured by three minor cuts. The building thus presents a series of conditions which literally and conceptually cut into the modernist box.
19. The analysis of the ground plan reveals that the front and rear facades extend beyond the building base. Both facades are screenlike, but the front facade resembles a screen cleaved in two, while the rear facade hangs off an intermediate boxlike volume. Immediately apparent in the ground-floor plan are the two curved walls, which disrupt the axis of symmetry and appear to displace the staircase.

20. In Casa “Il Girasole” profile no longer defines a continuity; this contrasts with classical architecture, where profile and shape were conceptualized as one and the same thing. Here profile and shape are disjuncted from one another; that is, the profile is not the shape of the building.
21. The facade of Casa "Il Girasole" breaks down the unity of the modernist frontal plane into a series of compressed layers. The complex articulation of these layers is apparent at the corners, which are no longer legible as singular entities. An oblique view demonstrates that the facade is not just a thin plane but rather is composed of three layers: a screen as the outermost layer, a void slot between the screens, and a glazing layer.

The void between the screen and the building mass articulates the edge of the facade as a distinct element, and creates what could be considered a gasket space especially apparent in the side views of the building. This layering, along with the deep cut in the front facade, further erodes the physical presence of these layers, since they fluctuate between two volumes and a series of layered planes.
22. For analytical purposes, it is necessary to examine the columnar organization. Columns are numbered 1 to 4, from left to right, and A through K from front to back. Column line 1 initially appears reciprocal to column line 4, and column line 2 reciprocal to column line 3. This sets up an initial symmetry. However, column lines 3 and 4 relate to each other because they are skewed at the same angle from the orthogonal, while column lines 1 and 2 are related because they remain on the orthogonal. In column lines 2 and 3, the A column is a slab column. Columns 2B and 3B are also slab columns that on three sides still reed much as columns. Columns 2C and 3C are different: 2C is a square column; 3C is a freestanding slab.

23. Other pairings involve columns in line 1 and line 4: columns 1A/1B and 4A/4B are thin rectangles. Columns 1C/1D and 4C/4D are square columns, which are slightly smaller in column line 4. In both cases they are attached in a way that makes them seem to bleed into an external wall poché. Column lines 1E/1F (4E/4F) and 1G/1H (4G/4H) consist of paired rectangles, which alternate extend out into wall poché or bend into a splayed exterior plane. Columns 2D and 4D, 2E-F and 4E-F, and 2G-H and 4G-H are each small square paired columns, except for the additional column beside 2D. In 2J and 3J there remains the slight trace of a column, provided by a slight articulation in what is otherwise a seemingly solid wall.
24. An organization of paired columns occurs from the front to the back. This begins with the freestanding columns 1A and 4A. Columns 3A and 3B begin as a pair with 2A and 2B as orthogonal and freestanding. There is no longer an orthogonal alignment between 2A and 3A. Rather, 3A is slipped toward the right while remaining the same distance from both exterior faces. Further pairings occur among square columns. In modern architecture’s free plan, columns were usually the same size and shape; they were ground elements. Here the columns have become figural, changing shape and size as they move through the building, signaling their internal differences.

25. The paired columns can be read as reinforcing the rhythmic progressions from the wider column groupings in A and B at the front of the building to the more tightly paired groupings at the rear of the building. While this progression can be read in plan, it has little to do with the organization of the functional spaces. As evidenced in the ground-floor plan, column line 3 is where much of the wracking, splaying, and distorting is concentrated. This column line serves not so much as a reading datum as a receiving datum, not so much the static place where vectors originate as the dynamic place where vectors are recorded.
26. Ground-floor vector analyses. An analysis of the interior volumes following the column subdivisions allows one to track several vectors. An erasing arc or force (A) seems to push against the mass defined by column lines 3 and 4 until only column 3C remains, but in a flattened and distorted state. This erasing arc (A) is joined by the partial S-curve of a second curved surface (B), which is also dislocated from its former linear position. This conjunction of forces creates a figure that seems to have been compressed to the rear and expanded outward to the center. The bulging part of the figure seems to affect the alignment of the main staircase with the central axis.

These forces suggest two different ideas of form: one as the product of a vector coming from the inside and causing a convex form; the other as produced by a vector originating outside of the space, which carves away the solid to create a convex form. Space is simultaneously positive and negative. The two curves play against one another, as the result of these forces. This is purposeful, typical of Moretti’s articulation of the active nature of space as carved away or compressed by a solid. The play between the carved out and projecting space can be seen as two opposing ideas embodied in the same form.
27. The organization of columns, alternately paired and single, creates an ABABA rhythm that suggests a compression at the back of the building and a sense of extension at the front. The columnar relationships are both partial orders and symmetries.

The pairing of the columns also creates a play between two abstract nine-square grids and a plaid grid of servant and served spaces. Moretti’s idea was clearly a critique of the free plan, where space was uniform.
28 a-d. Certain conditions on the south or front facade on Viale Bruno Buozzi complicate a more traditional reading. The facade (a) can be read as a classical, vertically tripartite, rusticated base, fenestrated body, and solid cornice. However, once this general type is accepted, deviations can be seen, for example, in the facade (b) in which the middle zone actually sits on steel columns rather than on the base. There is an articulated slot between the base and the main body. Moretti exposes the actual structural elements between the rustication and the underside of the floor (c).

Traditional rustication in a Florentine palazzo obeys a structural logic: heavy at the base, with increasingly refined rustication in the higher floors. Moretti confounds these conventions by placing heavy stones on thin stones, and by adopting a vertical chevron pattern for the implied rustication (d). This chevron pattern indicates that the rustication is not structural, but iconic. The stone base is rhetorical: it is not a Greek plinth, which implies a datum, nor is it in the modern idiom of piloti.
29 a-b. The side elevation on Via Schiaparelli complicates the readings already established on the front elevation. First, the heavy rustication continues around the corner, again marking the line of the structural columns behind. The same paper-thin chevron-like stone pattern appears, echoing the patterning on the right front base element. Second, the columns are again revealed, this time in the horizontal slot that runs across the top of the facade. Moreover, the alignment of windows is partially determined by the implied line of columns running behind the screen-like plane of the facade.

30 a-b. The various types of rustication, both smooth and rough, at Casa "Il Girasole" deny a structural role for one that is notational. The diagonals of the chevron-shaped rustication reappear in the geometry of several textured blocks (a). The windows in the back facade register the cut of the front facade, and seem to compress the space toward the center (b).
1. Profiles of Text


