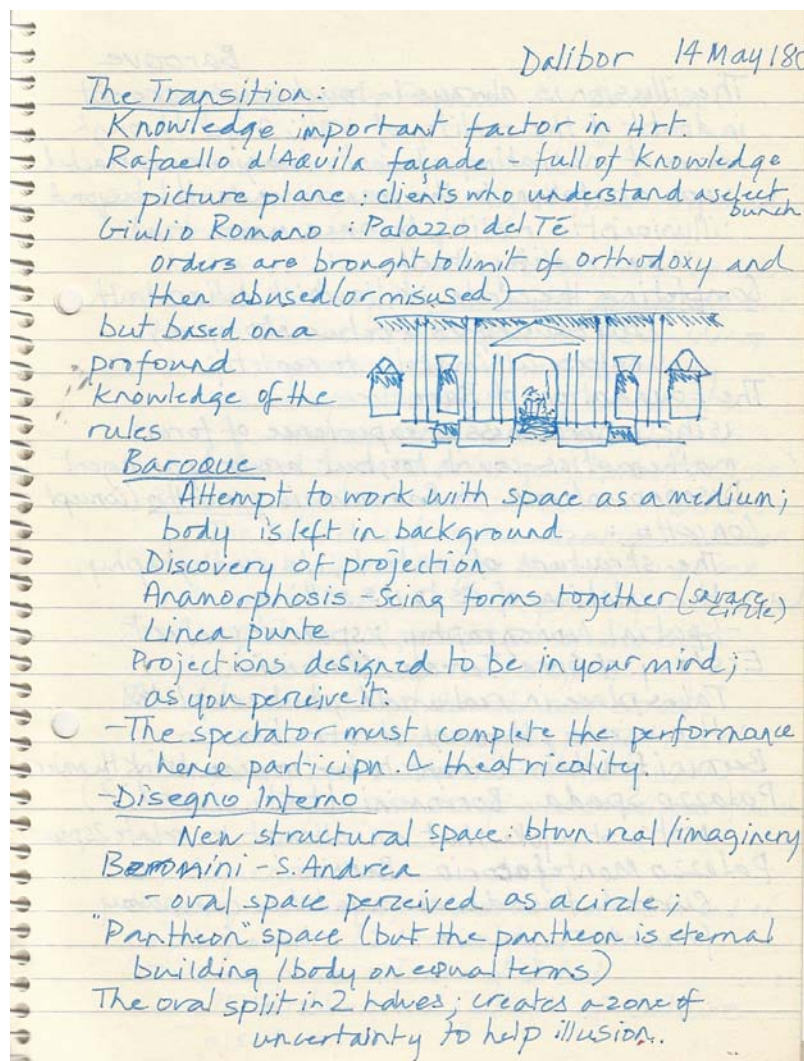


Sitopia: a tribute to the teaching of Dalibor Vesely

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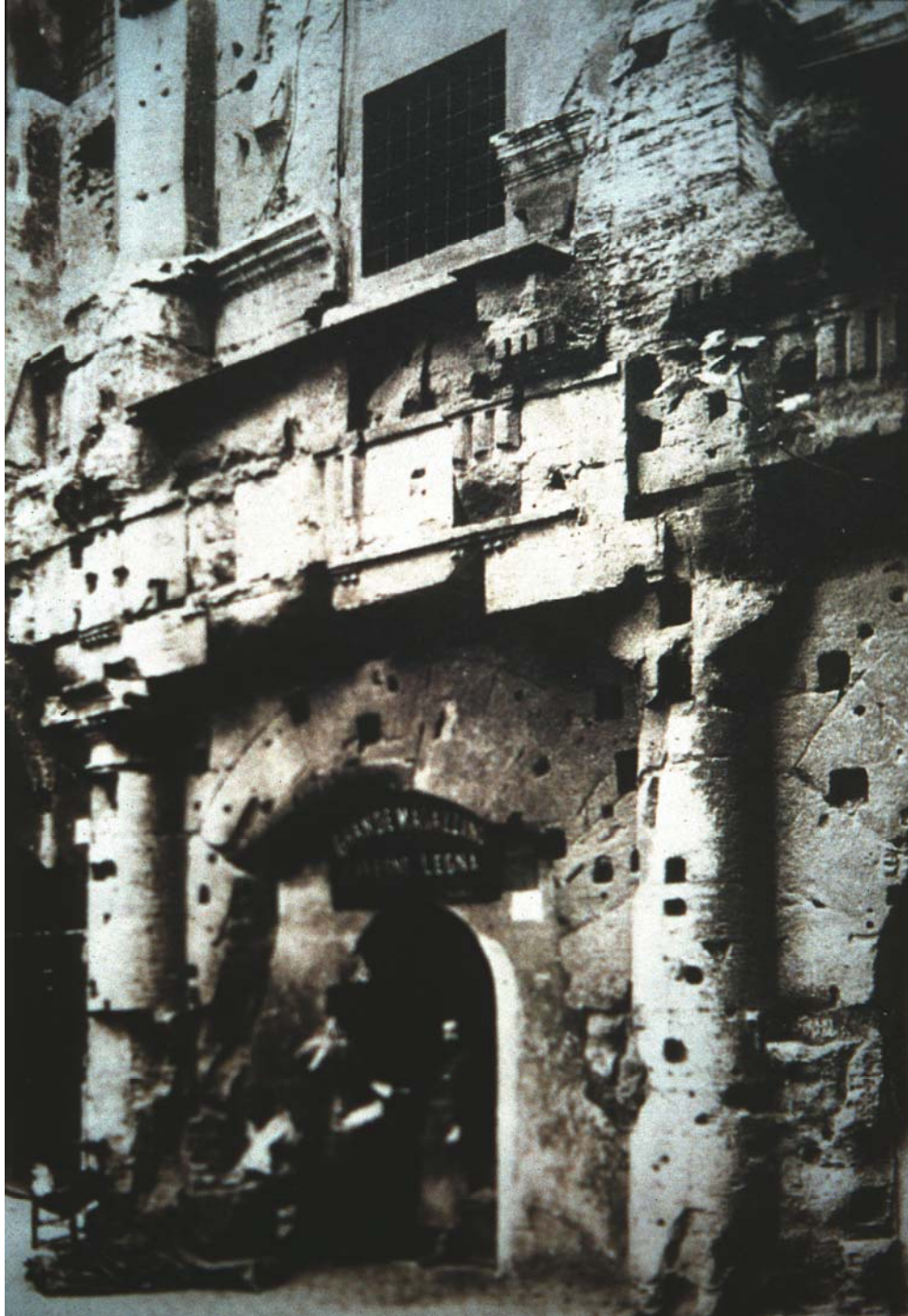
Being taught by Dalibor was never easy. By the time he arrived in Cambridge in 1978, his thinking was already so deeply embedded in the broadest possible cultural enquiry and his ambition for what architecture could achieve in a fragmented age so far ahead of his students – and most of his colleagues – that the earliest encounters at Scroope Terrace had the quality of a slow explosion.

From the very first lecture, it was clear that it would take us a lifetime to absorb the ideas that flowed from Dalibor like water from a burst main. Waves of cultural history, art, architecture and philosophy washed over us; only later would we realise how Dalibor's many specialisms – Plato and Aristotle, Cubism and Surrealism, the Medieval and the Baroque, Hermeneutics Phenomenology – were woven together when, 25 years on, he would publish his defining work *Architecture in the Age of Divided Representation*. For Dalibor, however, design was always the medium through which such ideas were best explored: architecture was, for him, the supreme art, because it could embody a latent world that, even if fragmented, was still present through the paradigmatic situations of the everyday.



Early encounters with Dalibor: notes from my Second Year.

It was this last insight which was to prove most fruitful in my own work. The interface between built form and human activity had always fascinated me: the dialogue, as Dalibor might have put it, between our visible and latent worlds. In 1995, I made a study of everyday life in Rome: the mundane activities which, repeated over thousands of years, had registered in the city fabric and created urban order. It intrigued me that the word mundane, which we take to mean everyday, dull or routine, is derived from the Roman *mundus*: worldly, cosmic, universal. Why, I wondered, did we consign the cosmic to the dustbin of tedium?



Mundane order of the city: a butcher in the Theatre of Marcellus, c. 1900.

For me, the question became urgent. There was surely something in our failure to account for our everyday actions – eating, sleeping, sitting, talking, making love, washing, relieving ourselves, dying – that was significant? Why couldn't we see such acts for what they were: the very stuff of life? The

answer, it seemed to me, was that they were so much part of us, so universal, that they were too big to see. If that was the case, we needed a better way of seeing them: one that would allow us to grasp life, not just as an abstract concept or as a series of snapshots – or, indeed, a scattering of Letraset figures across a page – but in its vital, earthy, lived reality. It was then that I had the idea of trying to describe a city through food. I shall never forget that moment – it was the most significant of my life.

It so happened that the site in Rome that I had chosen – around the Theatre of Marcellus and the Jewish quarter – was steeped in food. Close to the site of the ancient *Forum Holitorium*, it became a butcher's quarter and, for more than a thousand years, the site of Rome's main fish market. I had, half-consciously, been drawn to the area because of food: such a lively sense of the city had leapt at me from images depicting all this victualing – where there is food, there is life. Only now, however, did I realise that I could make food the focus of my study. The question of how a city feeds itself (not just a vast metropolis like ancient Rome, but *any* city) suddenly gripped me: where does all the food come from, how does it travel in, how is it bought and sold, cooked, eaten and disposed of? This, surely, was a new way of thinking about cities – one that could bring our visible and latent worlds together.

Hungry City, published in 2008, was my attempt to answer that question. It took seven years to write: a time of constant revelation and persistent anxiety. Within days of my 'light-bulb moment', I realised that the subject that I had stumbled upon was far too big for me to tackle: I was supremely unqualified to deal with it, yet, I also realised, few people were likely to be more so. Besides that, I was far too fascinated to stop: I knew that, after years of searching, I had finally found my metier. Sixteen years later, I feel much the same. To ask how cities are fed is a bit like asking how civilisation evolved: the question is so vast that it feels impertinent to ask; yet that is, I have come to realise, its great virtue. By thinking through food, we can address questions that we may otherwise feel unqualified to ask. Food transcends scale, time and place. It is the great connector: a metaphor for life so close to life itself that sometimes the two are indistinguishable.



The city shaped by food: London's Smithfield Market in 1830

Towards the end of working on *Hungry City*, I was researching the history of utopianism when it struck me how sad it was that our greatest tradition of holistic thought on the question of how to live should produce solutions that, by definition, can't exist ('utopia', from the Greek *eu* + *topos* or *ou* + *topos*, means both 'good place' and 'no place'). It occurred to me that food could offer another way of thinking about life: as holistic as utopianism, yet embedded in reality. I called this approach 'sitopia' (from Greek *sitos*, food + *topos*, place). Writing *Hungry City* had taught me how powerfully food shapes our lives: it moulds our landscapes, cities, houses, bodies, habits, societies, minds. We already live in sitopia, but a version of it that we have allowed to unfold unconsciously. If we were to take food, however, and place it back where it belongs, at the centre of our thoughts and lives, we could create a better sitopia – that is to say, a better world. Without Dalibor's friendship, generosity of spirit and audacity of vision, it is a thought that I would never have dared begin.



Sitopia as Utopia: Ambrogio Lorenzetti's *Allegory of the Effects of Good Government*, Siena 1338