THE WALL STREET JOURNAL.

http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703453804575480303339391786

MASTERPIECE

Michelangelo, Radical Architect

His Laurentian Library toys with traditional forms, challenging our expectations of what buildings can do

By **CAMMY BROTHERS**

Updated Sept. 11, 2010 12:01 a.m. ET

The corner-turning lines to see Michelangelo's David at the Accademia in Florence or his Sistine Ceiling and Last Judgment at the Vatican Museums in Rome testify to the artist's continuing allure. But on any given day it is possible to stroll into his architectural masterpiece the Laurentian Library in Florence and experience it alone. How different from Michelangelo's time, when his contemporaries would throng to study his latest architectural invention. Each new structure became a school for aspiring architects, a training ground in the innovative modes of the master.

The Laurentian Library was built between 1524 and 1559 in the cloister of the church of San Lorenzo for the Medici Pope, Clement VII, to house the illustrious family collection of manuscripts and printed books. It was constructed on the top level of the existing convent, and comprised two connected parts: a two-story vestibule with a monumental staircase and, on the upper story, a long reading room housing the books for quiet study.

Why are audiences today so much less receptive to Michelangelo's architecture? The principal reason is that it is deceptively difficult to understand. Contemporary commentators referred to the *difficoltà* of all his work, meaning that it was challenging to look at, and that it drew attention to the skill required to create it. Still, this does not detract from the present-day appeal of his painting and sculpture—his tense, muscular

The vestibule and staircase of the Laurentian Library.   *ALINARI / ART RESOURCE*

figures have an immediate, visceral impact. The Laurentian Library, too, has the power to move the uninitiated. Just as someone ignorant of the philosophy and intentions of Mark Rothko can still be affected by the scale and color of one of his paintings, so the library visitor with no background in Michelangelo's architectural thought is still likely to experience a sense of tension and compression while walking through the vestibule, and of tranquility and release while crossing into the reading room.

On a deeper level, Michelangelo's architecture engaged in a playful dialogue with classical style—the columns, capitals, bases and myriad other elements that formed the lingua franca of architecture from classicism's invention in ancient Greece to the dawn of modernism in the 20th century. To understand just how radical Michelangelo was, therefore, some knowledge of this tradition is necessary. In 16th-century elite circles, that knowledge was commonplace; today, apart from trained architects and historians, it is much less so.

Fundamentally, Michelangelo turns on its head the modernist mantra that "form follows function." He takes elements that are apparently simple, such as a door or a window, and toys with our expectations by making them enormously, needlessly

complex, often using them in ways contrary to their nature. This might not seem like a virtue—but the complexity yields tremendous visual interest for the visitor willing to engage.

Take the tabernacles, the elements set between the pairs of columns in the vestibule. Among other things, these show how difficult it is to name the forms Michelangelo creates. Are they blind windows? Or are they empty niches? Architectural historians have followed the earliest commentators in calling them tabernacles, but this does not resolve their ambiguity. Windows would allow us to look through them, and tabernacles traditionally hold sculpture. Instead of one or the other, Michelangelo creates a large, complicated element that serves neither purpose.

The Laurentian Library's reading room.   *GETTY IMAGES*

A similar pattern is followed by the brackets, the fluted, scroll-like elements attached to the walls below the columns. These are typically placed below a window frame, as if they are supporting what is above. But here Michelangelo puts them some distance away from the elements they are supposed to "support," exposing this conventional association as a fiction and the brackets as merely ornamental. At the same time, their scale and refined moldings give them a visual prominence such elements do not normally have.

Beyond these particular elements, Michelangelo fundamentally challenges the definition and appearance of the wall. We are used to seeing columns on the outside of buildings holding up the roof. He takes these monumental structural elements, brings them inside, and transforms them into what appear to be decorations. Set within niches that would typically be used for sculpture, they appear to be useless adornments. At the same time, Michelangelo projects the portions of the wall in between forward, so that rather than neutral surfaces they seem to be activated, operating almost as massive supporting piers. I'm using words like "appears" and "seems" for a reason. Michelangelo tricks us into believing that a certain structural logic is operating in the library vestibule when, in fact, an opposite one is in play: Structural analyses have established that contrary to their appearance, the columns are actually the load-bearing elements, while the wall is filled with loose rubble.

The most striking example of Michelangelo's approach to architecture are the stairs

leading from the vestibule to the reading room. Their purpose could not be simpler, but Michelangelo makes them into a dynamic, startling form that defines the room. Photography cannot render the strangeness of the stairs and the way they invade the space of the visitor. Rarely has architecture before or since conveyed such a sense of dynamic movement and drama. With the stairs Michelangelo created architecture that was both theater and stage, and the visitor becomes both audience and actor. It was the first free-standing staircase in European architecture, redefining its role from a utilitarian to a symbolic one.

What motivated Michelangelo's unusual approach? Much of it sprang from an irreverent attitude toward ancient Roman architecture. While his contemporaries were in its thrall, studiously imitating its forms and striving to understand its meanings, Michelangelo not only manipulated its forms beyond recognition but gave the lie to several of its central tenets. At least since Vitruvius claimed in the first century B.C. that stone architecture had its origins in a primitive wood post and lintel system, classical architectural forms had been perceived as representing if not embodying structural necessity. Michelangelo reveals this to be false. He emphasizes the arbitrary nature of forms, and their lack of structural logic. (In a similar vein, modernist hero Mies van der Rohe used I-beams, the basic structural unit of 20th-century building, decoratively when he placed them on the exterior of his skyscrapers.) At the same time, by questioning the founding assumptions of classical architecture, Michelangelo renewed its potential for the next generation of architects, freeing them from the need to slavishly imitate models from the past and allowing them to arrive at their own forms of expression.

The Laurentian Library is also a triumphant demonstration of how an inventive architect responds to constraints by seeing them as opportunities rather than hurdles. The library's physical conditions were highly limited. It had to be narrow and light enough to fit on the second story of the pre-existing convent. Thus by creating an architecture composed of recesses and voids alternating with vertical supports, Michelangelo arrived at a solution that was not only unusual in its appearance but an ingenious response to the structural challenges of the site.

By challenging our expectations and defying the accepted sense of what architecture can do, Michelangelo started a debate about architecture's proper role that is still going on today. For example, should a museum's architecture be in the foreground, like Frank Gehry's Guggenheim Museum Bilbao, or in the background, like the many designs of Renzo Piano? Should it frame the art or be the art? In his Laurentian Library, Michelangelo demonstrated that he could be both Gehry and Piano, attention-grabbing

in the vestibule and self-effacing in the reading room.

This aspect of Michelangelo's achievement became clear to me recently when I visited Zaha Hadid's newly opened MAXXI museum for contemporary art in Rome. It is a stunning building, with flowing ramps and dramatic curves cutting through the interior spaces at improbable angles. But it has only one register—loud. Compared to it, Michelangelo's ability to create a raucous visual symphony in the vestibule and to tone down the volume in the reading room seemed all the more remarkable.

—Ms. Brothers, an associate professor at the University of Virginia, is the author of "Michelangelo, Drawing and the Invention of Architecture" (Yale).