

Chapter 72

Conoids and Hyperbolic Paraboloids in Le Corbusier's Philips Pavilion

Alessandra Capanna

The Expo 1958

The Philips Pavilion at the Brussels World's Fair (Fig. 72.1) is the first of Le Corbusier's architectural works to connect the evolution of his mathematical thought on harmonic series and modular coordination with the idea of three-dimensional continuity (Capanna 2000).¹ This propitious circumstance was the consequence of his collaboration with Iannis Xenakis, the famous contemporary musician working at that time as engineer in Rue de Sèvres.² Xenakis's very deep interest in mathematical structures was improved on his becoming acquainted with the Modulor, while at the same time Le Corbusier encountered double ruled quadric surfaces.

At the beginning of 1956, Louis Kalf, the art director of Philips Industries, proposed to Le Corbusier a new kind of participation in the World's Fair: their intention was not to expose their products, but rather they wanted a bold show of sound and light effects, to illustrate what Philips's technical progress was able to lead to. "I won't design a pavilion with façades, I'll give to you a *Poème Électronique* and the bottle containing it!", answered Le Corbusier (Xenakis 1976). He designed a building that represented a real synthesis of arts: coloured lights, contemporary

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¹ Precisely the use of ruled surfaces was yet foreseen for enveloping Chandigarh's assembly hall, designed during approximately the same period as the Philips Pavilion with the contribution of Xenakis, as one can learn reading the letters conserved at the Fondation Le Corbusier, Paris.

² For more about Xenakis, see (Capanna 2001).

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Fig. 72.1 View of the pavilion. Photo: Wouter Hagens



music, the projection of enormous warped images in a space without architectural quality. It could be, at the minimum, even a scaffold.

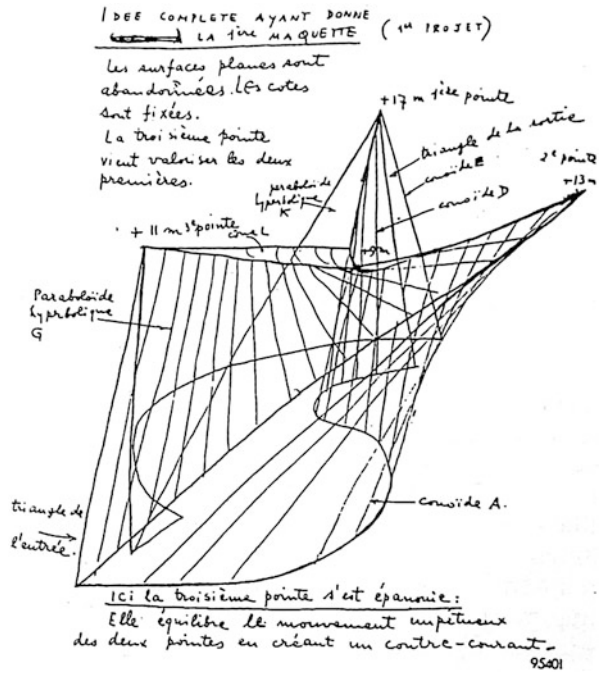
Minimal Surfaces in Three Space

The idea of a container without an aesthetic claim allowed Le Corbusier to think only about the show; in the meantime he entrusted Xenakis with a “mathematical translation” of his sketches, which represented the volume of a rounded bottle with a stomach-shaped plan (Xenakis 1976).

Synthetically, the form of the pavilion had to comply with the following principle: there was to be a maximum of free volume for a minimum of enclosing surface. The classical answer is the sphere, but the sphere, beautiful in itself, is bad for acoustics and is less perceptibly rich than some other double-curved, warped or skewed forms. In that large family of surfaces they had to single out those conforming self-loadbearing shells, easy to build in a common reinforced concrete yard.

Xenakis planned a first solution of the stomach-shaped volume defined by conoids and hyperbolic paraboloids (Fig. 72.2). The pavilion was enveloped by the conoid *E*, a composite surface formed by two conoids *A* and *D*, the hyperbolic paraboloids *K* and *G*, the connecting cone *L* and a couple of empty triangles for the entrance and the exit. Those warped surfaces culminated on three cusps, 17, 13 and 11 m high.

Fig. 72.2 First project.
Sketch: I. Xenakis



Some constructive difficulties brought about work on a new project. First of all, it was necessary to change all conoids³ into hyperbolic paraboloids, whose straight-lined generatrices made statics calculation easier. This second project was the fruit of a hybrid of analytic and descriptive geometry.

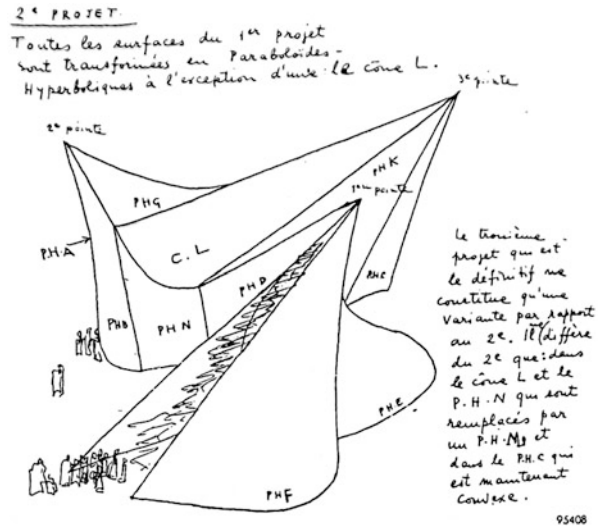
As a matter of fact it is impossible to arrange all the surfaces of this kind only working with its algebraical functions. The refinement in curvature and surface dynamism cannot be imagined by studying its equation. The pavilion must be plastic, above all; for this reason in an infinity of possible curves we had to choose the best composition of warped surfaces (Xenakis 1958: 7).

Thus, the new height of the cusps and their consequent projections were established accordingly on the horizontal plane, so as to increase the dimension of the central cone *L*. The first cusp was fixed at 21 m from the ground, the second at 13 m and the third at 18. Afterwards, all paraboloids were modelled in accordance with the condition that the intersection with the horizontal plane conformed to the primitive scheme of a “stomach-shaped” plan.

Compared with the first one, this project introduced unchanged the hyperbolic paraboloids *G* and *K*, conforming the principal surfaces for filmed projections; it redefined and visibly widened cone *L*, and conoids *A*, *E* and *D* were transformed in five paraboloids: *A*, *E* and *B*, *N* and *D*. Moreover, the paraboloids *C* and *F* had been

³ Conoids are those ruled surfaces defined by a curvilinear directrix and a couple of straight-lined directrices.

Fig. 72.3 Second project.
Sketch: I. Xenakis



inserted. This last one, approached to the curved wall E, delimited the space necessary for the room of the automation of the show, technical spaces and services (Figs. 72.3 and 72.4).

This volume still required two pillars for the stability of the whole building. Xenakis later said that, with the assistance of Mr. Duyster, the Strabed engineer who suggested building the pavilion in pre-compressed concrete, he decided on some final modifications in order to abolish all the vertical supports:

Mr. Duyster thought that the cone L and the hyperbolic paraboloid N formed the only hyperbolic paraboloid later on defined with the M. Geometrical clearness was so improved. . . . I suggested to him a further slight change to the hyperbolic paraboloids M and B. . . . Moreover I changed the concave paraboloid C into a convex one: the stability of the very steeply sloped third cuspid was so improved as well. Then I remoulded the hyperbolic paraboloids up to the edges of the exit-entrance triangles. The pavilion became completely self-loadbearing, lightweight and pillarless (Xenakis 1958: 10–11).

From this comes the configuration that makes use of hyperbolic paraboloids, thus shaping a kind of enveloping form, closed and opened to the world at the same time through the convergence of its geometrical construction (Fig. 72.5).

Correspondence of Geometrical and Mechanical Properties in Hyperbolic Paraboloid Shells

In my opinion the fascination of forms derived by the minimal surfaces in design is based on several properties:

Fig. 72.4 General plan of the pavilion

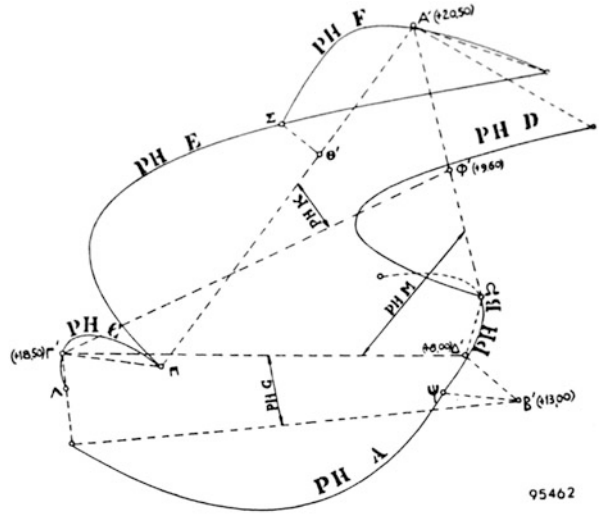
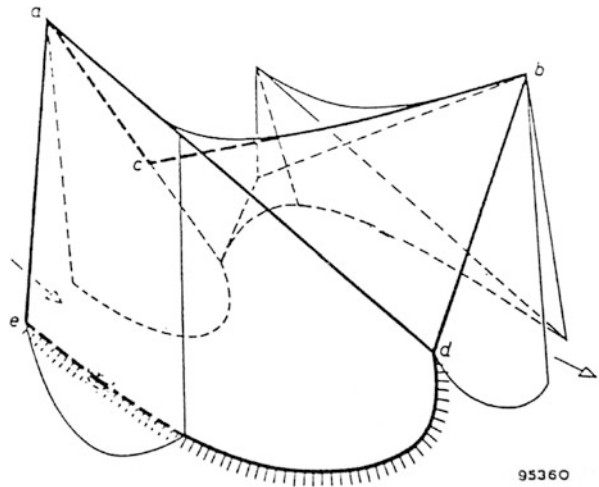


Fig. 72.5 Volume



1. the shapes of minimal surfaces can be astonishing from the aesthetical point of view;
2. the shapes of minimal surfaces allow the optimal use of materials;
3. the structural surfaces with a saddle shape are very stable and resistant;
4. the structures of minimal surfaces have natural geometric rigidity (Almgren 1982).

In 1935, B. Lafaille and E Aimond published their research on the distribution of forces in thin curved walls, vaults and shells defined by simple ruled quadric surfaces such as hyperbolic paraboloids and conoids. Mathematicians had long known those kinds of surfaces, but architects only began designing with this geometry after the accepted use of reinforced concrete to build modelled roofings. Frei Otto pointed out the influence of Bernard Lafaille in the

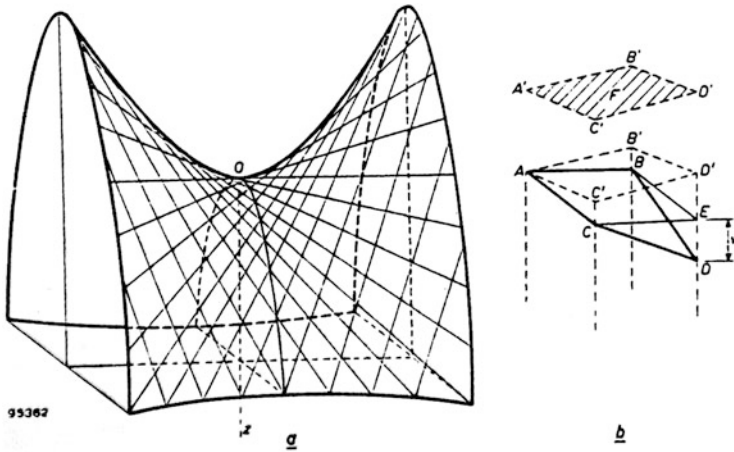


Fig. 72.6 (a, left) The double-system of generatrices of a hyperbolic paraboloid; (b, right) Part of the surface delimited by the intersection of four generatrices: AB, CD, AC, BD

development of lightweight roofing and tensile structures; he also remarked that at the Brussels World Fair about 20 pavilions made use of saddle surfaces positively corresponding to the aims of temporary buildings.

The coincidence of saddle surfaces with minimal surfaces was later denied.⁴ However, C.G.J. Vreedenburgh, from the University of Technology of Delft, confirmed all the positive characteristics of such structures. He mathematically verified that hyperbolic paraboloids, rigidly fixed to the ribs, fulfilled the requirements of building⁵; he then provided some charge tests.

Before proceeding to the final construction in the assigned exposition area, two models were required: one at a scale of 1:25 made with plaster, which served for studying deformations due to accidental loads, proper weight and the eventuality of fire; another at a scale of 1:10, built to simulate the reality of setting up the thin shells; this one was also used to individualize the lines along which to put in tension the cables, that coincided with the generating geometry. Again, the spirit of geometry and mathematical theory adhere perfectly with constructive practice.

By testing the elementary deformations, it was possible to verify that in the enclosing hyperbolic paraboloid shapes, a uniform system of solicitations on the whole surface takes place: they were all funicular strains up to the edges, along which the loads are transferred to the foundations in the form of normal efforts.

Owing to the large dimension and to the steep slope of the surfaces, it was impossible to build them in one piece, therefore experiments with a sort of assembly

⁴ See Emmer (2015 ('Periodical Minimal Surfaces')); compare with the unconditional statement taken from Otto (1973).

⁵ For the detailed exposition of the demonstration coming down from the equation of hyperbolic paraboloids, see Vreedenburgh (1958).

system were undertaken. The big paraboloids were divided in portions of around a square metre, cut according to the irregular network constituted by the intersection of the generatrices (Figs. 72.6 and 72.7) and then temporarily fixed to a framework (Fig. 72.8).

Mathematics, Music, Architecture: The *Poème Électronique*

In any project such as this, scientific thought is a means with which to realize ideas that have been born of intuition or of some kind of vision, even if they are not of scientific origin.

In 1954 Xenakis was composing *Metastasis*.⁶ He declared that he had some visual fantasy: straight lines representing the geometrical form of glissandi, which transformed themselves into an auditory fantasy.

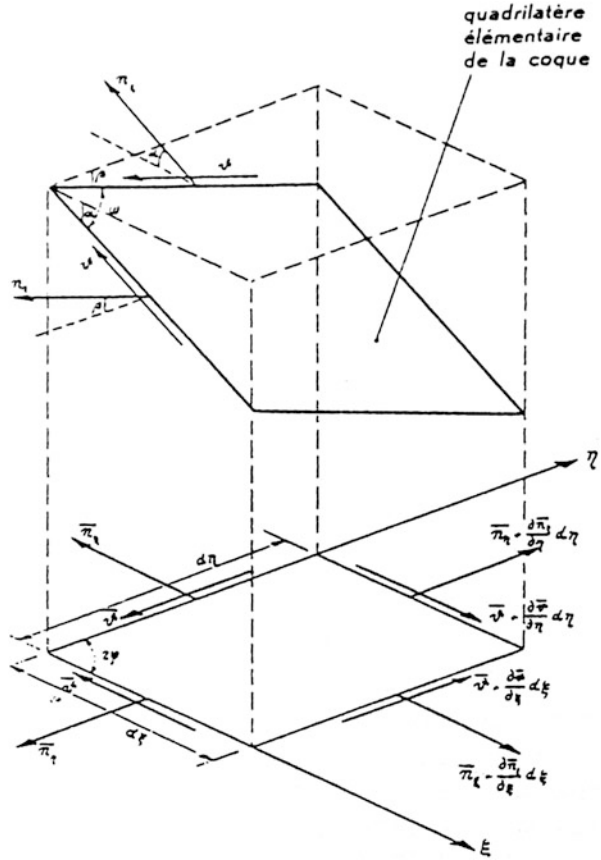
I started from a very simple serial problem: that is how to reach through the 12 sounds a different formulation of chords. I sketched some lines connecting every other single sound deriving from a chord of 12. Suddenly I thought of those lines as if they were glissando; this effect of sonorous continuity was linked together with my remote experiences with mass internal transformations (Restagno 1988).

Metastasis was the starting point for his compositional research in which science and mathematics are applied. Paradoxically, he declared that this work was not inspired by music itself or by some logical principle, but by the impressions gained during the Nazi occupation of Greece. He listened to the noise of the masses marching towards the centre of Athens, to the shouting of slogans, to the intermittent shooting of guns, superposing each other in a chaos. He never forgot the unforeseeable transformation of the regular, rhythmic noise of a hundred thousand people into some fantastic disorder.

From the beginning of the 1950s, Xenakis was interested in two compositional themes. First of all, he wanted to write a kind of dodecaphonic music with the help of computations, which builds the macroforms out of a few basic principles. In *Metastasis* he made computations based on the permutation of intervals, with the help of the axiomatic approach known in mathematics. In the second place, he was interested in the continuous change of chords. Let us take, for instance, 6 of 12 notes. We get a harmonic colour. Then let us take the complementary pairs of those six notes. Once again, we get a harmonic colour. The change between the two occurs without any transition, abruptly.

⁶The orchestra opus in which the Modulor defines a strict relationship between tempo and sound. The name derives from “meta” that means beyond, after and “stasis” that means immobility. The problem fascinated the ancient philosophers, beginning with Parmenide and Zenone. Their paradox about Achille and the turtle illustrate the very problem about the contrast between movement and immobility. At the same time the whole word *metastasis* recalls the medical way to speak about the proliferation of carcinogenic cells, as if one can indicate that they are similar to the improvement of the mass density.

Fig. 72.7 Elementary quadrilateral

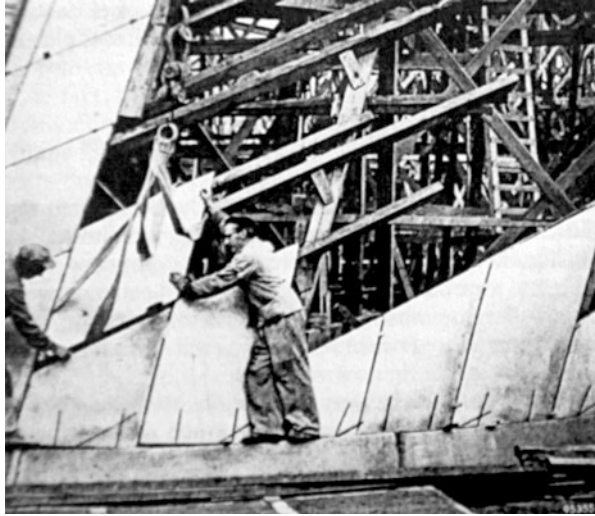


Coming from the theory of geometrical transformation and from the study upon sonorous masses—and its regular and irregular variations—the question is whether it was possible to get from one point to another without breaking the continuity.

In music, if we remain in the same scale, the only solution is a *glissando*. From the first six-note group toward the second one we can start in the direction of any note and in each case we get a different perceptive result. Moreover, if we have talked about the idea of continuous variation (“continuity charge”), in *Metastasis* the parallel development of the idea of discontinuous variation (“discontinuity charge”), represented by the permutation of intervals and the organisation of time based on the Golden Section, is very interesting.

In Le Corbusier’s studio, Xenakis ran into fertile ground for his compositive obsessions. Le Corbusier’s lessons on the mathematical spirit of the Modulor—about the opposition between the harmony of nature and the intellectualism of rules—joined forces with his researches on the Golden Section applied to dimensional changes of scales. Music becomes the image of a continuous movement produced by its own geometrical structure: a held note becomes a particular case of sonorous

Fig. 72.8 Shell's assemblage



curve (that is, the straight line) and, on the contrary, we find that the *glissando* makes perceptible a perfect continuity that can go on to infinity.

In *Metastasis* and in the Philips pavilion, Le Corbusier and Xenakis proved that the forms used in music and in architecture are closely linked: in the musical work, this problem led to *glissandi*, while in the pavilion, it resulted in the hyperbolic paraboloid shapes. The difference between physical and musical space is that the former is homogeneous: both dimensions are lengths and distances. In music the natures of two dimensions (pitch and time) are alien to one another, only connected by their ordering structure.

In the *Poème Électronique* the correspondence between music and architecture is not only a matter of geometry. It was projected by Le Corbusier as if it were an orchestral work in which lights, loudspeakers, film projections on curved surfaces, spectators' shadows and their expression of wonder, objects hanging from the ceiling and the containing space itself were all virtual instruments. Architecture played, at the same time, the role of orchestral instrument and of sound box, container and contents.

The *Son et Lumière* Show

The *Poème Électronique* is an alchemy of 10 min length. Going into the pavilion, one's sight was lost in a neutral and disquieting space delimited by screen-walls largely displaying their geometrical construction. Loudspeakers, electro-acoustics and lighting sets were combined with the strained cable network in a curved interior where architecture was losing its character to become an allegorical and

apocalyptic show. The *Poème* was composed therefore from seven sequences, projected according to a rigorous script.

This subdivision was not, however, in some way perceptible: the show flowed instead without solution of continuity with the exception of two pauses during which obscurity and the total silence went down, followed by the apparition of the *object mathématique* and of a mannequin that were lit up with ultraviolet light. In the place of the synthesis of the arts, the organic world of the living subject and the rational, concerning the intellect, were represented separately. The 8 min of Le Corbusier's sequence of images was accompanied by the music of Edgar Varèse and preceded by a brief interlude, composed by Xenakis: 2 min of concrete music destined to accompany the projection of an introductory text in English, French and Dutch. The most intense moments of this brief composition are those in which the most rapid rhythm succeeds to mix a feeling of granularity and powderiness of the sound with that of perceptive continuity. The organization of time and rhythm are introduced here as continuity in the discontinuous, as a mass of single discreet elements. The result is the presentation, also in this very inner detail of the poem, of the general theme of the work, that of continuity. The introduction of the acoustic phenomenon as the element of dominion of the forms confirms the theory according to which the geometric-mathematic rule constitutes the common base of the architectural and musical compositions.

The novelty of the twentieth century, expressed in the Philips Pavilion, is the overcoming of a geometry that governs the simple repetition of crystallographical elements, in order to adopt more complex systems with independent and not homogeneous variables in comparison to the unit of measure. The introduction of the fourth dimension in the built space, after having discovered it in the abstract but equally real realm of mathematics, is not an automatic operation. To the three dimensions of Euclidean geometry is generally added the unit of measure of the time to make perceptible the effect of movement. A pictorial representation, or at least a sculptural one, of architecture, such as in a work of Boccioni, cannot exhaust the search of new spatial quality in architecture.

For Le Corbusier, the expression of beauty would still seem to derive from exactness, from a strong resistance to discord and from an iron will to oppose randomness—as is apparent from his reflections on the form of houses and cities; but the creation of the Philips Pavilion sketches the advent of sceneries in which the rule can be also that of the random or that of light and sound diffusion. In fact, the *Poème Électronique* predicted the deconstruction of music and of architecture: the same necessity, more than 10 years after the demolition of Philips Pavilion, was demonstrated, for example by John Cage, in the refusal of both dodecaphonical tyranny and the rigidity of the roles inside the places appointed for the listening. In the same way the space of the pavilion was flexible and the public could assume different positions to follow the show. Music and noise were always on the point of trespassing the one into the other. Deformity not only represented an ugly alteration of the form, but also constituted a first idea in the studies on the modification of architectural geometry. Double ruled quadric surfaces had freed the plastics of the

volume, and with it the sonorous materials, conducting composition to the limit of disorder, without yet going beyond it.

“The splendid result was the natural gift of numbers. The implacable and magnificent play of mathematics” (Le Corbusier 1954: 55). Music and architecture are thus inserted once again in the historical-scientific tradition that from pre-Socratic philosophy leads to contemporary mathematics, assuming eternal forms and innovating subject matters.

Acknowledgment The images in Figs. 72.2, 72.3, 72.4, 72.5, 72.6, 72.7, and 72.8 are reproduced from the author's personal archives.

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Contents for Volume II

48	The Revolutionary, The Reactionary and The Revivalist: Architecture and Mathematics After 1500	1
	Michael J. Ostwald and Kim Williams	
Part VII Theories of Representation		
49	Architecture, Mathematics and Theology in Raphael’s Paintings	31
	David Speiser	
50	Raphael and the Pantheon’s Interior: A Pivotal Moment in Architectural Representation	43
	Kristina Luce	
51	Design and Perspective Construction: Why Is the <i>Chalice</i> the Shape It Is?	57
	Richard Talbot	
52	Perspective in António Rodrigues’s <i>Tratado de Arquitectura</i>	73
	João Pedro Xavier	
Part VIII 1500 A.D.–1900 A.D.		
53	Ottoman Architecture: Relationships between Architectural Design and Mathematics in Sinan’s Works	95
	Zafer Sağdıç	
54	The Mathematics of Palladio’s Villas	107
	Stephen R. Wassell	
55	Golden Proportions in a Great House: Palladio’s Villa Emo	121
	Rachel Fletcher	
56	The Hidden Pavement Designs of the Laurentian Library	139
	Ben Nicholson, Jay Kappraff, and Saori Hisano	

57	Measuring up to Michelangelo: A Methodology	151
	Paul A. Calter and Kim Williams	
58	António Rodrigues, a Portuguese Architect with a Scientific Inclination	165
	João Pedro Xavier	
59	Villalpando's Sacred Architecture in the Light of Isaac Newton's Commentary	183
	Tessa Morrison	
60	<i>Coelum Britannicum</i>: Inigo Jones and Symbolic Geometry	197
	Rumiko Handa	
61	The Science Behind Francesco Borromini's Divine Geometry	217
	John G. Hatch	
62	Transformational Geometry and the Central European Baroque Church	231
	John Clagett	
63	Are There Connections Between the Mathematical Thought and Architecture of Sir Christopher Wren?	243
	Maria Zack	
64	Robert Hooke's Fire Monument: Architecture as a Scientific Instrument	257
	Maria Zack	
65	Practical and Theoretical Applications of Geometry at Claude Perrault's Observatoire de Paris (1667–1672)	269
	Randy S. Swanson	
Part IX 1800–2000		
66	Geomantic (Re)Creation: Magic Squares and Claude Bragdon's Theosophic Architecture	289
	Eugenia Victoria Ellis	
67	Mathematics and Music in the Art Glass Windows of Frank Lloyd Wright	305
	Leonard K. Eaton	
68	Fractal Geometry in the Late Work of Frank Lloyd Wright: The Palmer House	325
	Leonard K. Eaton	
69	Characteristic Visual Complexity: Fractal Dimensions in the Architecture of Frank Lloyd Wright and Le Corbusier	339
	Michael J. Ostwald, Josephine Vaughan, and Chris Tucker	

70 From Cosmic City to Esoteric Cinema: Pythagorean Mathematics and Design in Australia 355
 Graham Pont and Peter Proudfoot

71 The Ruled Geometries of Marcel Breuer 367
 John Poros

72 Conoids and Hyperbolic Paraboloids in Le Corbusier’s Philips Pavilion 377
 Alessandra Capanna

73 Oscar Niemeyer Curved Lines: Few Words Many Sentences 389
 Benamy Turkienicz and Rosirene Mayer

74 Dom Hans van der Laan and the Plastic Number 407
 Richard Padovan

75 Louis Kahn’s Platonic Approach to Number and Geometry 421
 Steven Fleming

76 The Salk: A Geometrical Analysis Supported by Historical Evidence 435
 Steven Fleming and Mark A. Reynolds

Part X Contemporary Approaches to Design and Analysis

77 Architecture and Mathematics: Soap Bubbles and Soap Films 449
 Michele Emmer

78 Aperiodic Tiling, Penrose Tiling and the Generation of Architectural Forms 459
 Michael J. Ostwald

79 Paving the Alexanderplatz Efficiently with a Quasi-Periodic Tiling 473
 Ulrich Kortenkamp

80 Generation of Architectural Forms Through Linear Algebra 483
 Franca Calìo and Elena Marchetti

81 The Praxis of Roman Geometrical Ordering in the Design of a New American Prairie House 497
 Donald J. Watts

82 Exploring Architectural Form in Perspective: A Fractal Hypercube-Building 513
 Tomás García-Salgado

83 The Compass, the Ruler and the Computer: An Analysis of the Design of the Amphitheatre of Pompeii 525
 Sylvie Duvernoy and Paul L. Rosin

84	Correlation of Laser-Scan Surveys of Irish Classical Architecture with Historic Documentation from Architectural Pattern Books	541
	Maurice Murphy, Sara Pavia, and Eugene McGovern	
 Part XI Theories and Applications of Computer Sciences		
85	Mathematics and Architecture Since 1960	553
	Lionel March	
86	BiOrganic Design: A New Method for Architecture and the City	579
	Alessandra Capanna	
87	Formal Mutations: Variation, Constraint, Selection	593
	Andrzej Zarzycki	
88	The Role of Mathematics in the Design Process Under the Influence of Computational and Information Technologies	609
	Arzu Gönenç Sorguç	
89	Generative Design Grammars: An Intelligent Approach Towards Dynamic and Autonomous Design	619
	Ning Gu	
90	Ethics and Geometry: Computational Transformations and the Curved Surface in Architecture	633
	Michael J. Ostwald	
91	Equiangular Numbers	649
	Henry Crapo and Claude Le Conte De Poly-Barbut	
92	<i>Architecture as Verb</i> and the Ethics of Making	661
	Alberto Pérez-Gómez	
	Index for Volume II	675
	Index for Volume I	683



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