

The Return of the Building and the Problem (and Potential) of the Comprehensive Studio

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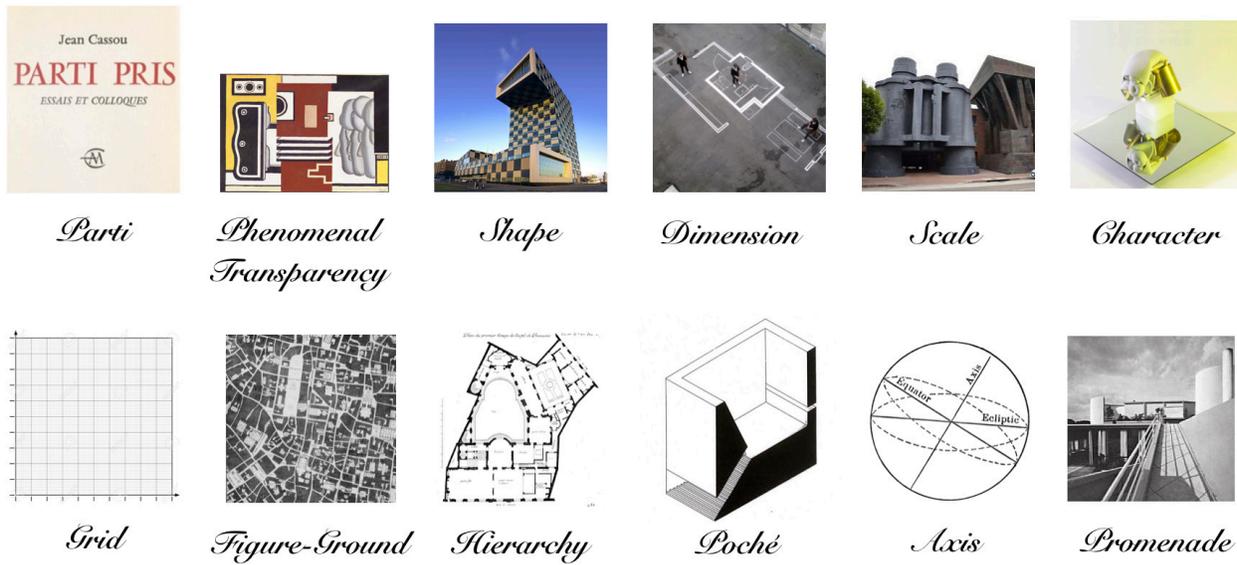
Ever since the crisis of high modernism in the postwar era, the gap between academia and the profession has slowly but surely widened over the decades. Possibly more symptomatic in the United States than the Continent, the reasons for this gap are, of course, complicated. One by-product has been the weakening of architecture's disciplinary identity and an abdication of expertise to supporting fields or sub-fields, for example. However, the recent publication of José Aragoz's anthology, *The Building*, is a clear sign that the tide is turning. Published in 2016, the anthology should be seen not as a new direction, but as the culmination of collective voices, since the millennium, on topics like the projective (Sarah Whiting), operative history & theory (Sylvia Lavin, Robert Somol, Jeff Kipnis and Todd Gannon, for example), and the rise of experimental and collaborative practices, engaging political, social, and ecological concerns, in tandem with formal issues (The Open Workshop, Lateral Office, Interboro, LCLA, among others). With its collection of essays by architects *on* architects, Aragoz's timely book is an irrefutable sign of academia's bid to reclaim the building as belonging to its own critical terrain. In this light, it is perhaps important, now more than ever, to reflect on the problem of the Comprehensive Studio, which too often falls short of its potential to develop compelling projects and critical positions around the building. Indeed, what is often at risk in the Comprehensive Studio is precisely the gap between academia and the profession, between critical thinking and the standardization of practice as it becomes corporatized through applications such as Revit.

In what follows, this paper does not so much present the agenda of a specific studio, as it reflects on teaching pedagogy in the face of challenges, like addressing the baseline of NAAB criteria related to technical, programmatic, ecological, structural, site, sustainable and even health concerns. In the recent draft on NAAB Conditions, only two criteria require the submission of student work to demonstrate learning objectives and outcomes, and they are titled 'Design Synthesis' and 'Design Integration.' The crux of these two criteria is how students integrate a range of skills and knowledge within pragmatic constraints. While the latter is a comparatively straightforward affair, a matter of learning and understanding the given facts; the former is the black box of design. Indeed, it is because design is 'opaque' that we get enigmatic judgements, such as Reyner Banham's claim

that Nicholas Hawksmoor was an architect but Christopher Wren was not.¹ Banham's judgement may seem extraordinarily pretentious, but there nevertheless remains a kind of amnesia when it comes to architects having to communicate what they do to the broader public. Most architects intuitively know that the diagrams of OMA, BIG and MVRDV are retroactive fictions of how they came up with the design of their buildings, and that metaphors, such as Bird's Nest (Herzog and de Meuron) and Hokusai Wave (FOA), are marketing or communication ploys divined *after* the design was a *fait accompli*. In their winning design for the Yokohama Terminal, FOA did not start with the idea of a Hokusai Wave, but discovered once the design had been finalized, in an attempt to post-rationalize the design process to their clients.

In the absence of any prescriptive method for teaching the design process, we do well to reflect on strategies that might begin to make the black box of design a bit more transparent, if not for architects (who simply know) or for the wider public (who do not need to know), than for design educators and our students. Of course, there are many strategies, but the one proposed here is a lexicon of elements. This lexicon, however, is not the one most people think of in architecture. That is, the elements proposed here do not relate to *building* elements (such as roof, walls, ceilings, floors, columns, etc.), but to the elements of an architectural *composition*. Historically, there is a significant, yet often overlooked, difference between these two sets of elements. Whereas building elements in the Beaux-Arts system were the fundamental units for building typologies, the elements of a composition, in contrast, constituted the unwritten vocabulary employed by architects engaged in teaching and criticism. According to Jacques Lucan, when this lexicon was finally written down, it appeared as an appendix to academic treatises on building elements and typologies.² The English translation of French terms was meant to help the American student both to understand their French professors and adapt to a foreign culture. *Parti pris* therefore appears alongside words one would use to order food at a restaurant and the correct terminology for essential drafting tools and supplies (figure 1). As such, the lexicon proposed here is closer in spirit to *Possible Mediums* or Sylvia Lavin and Helene Furjan's *Crib Notes*, than, say, Rem Koolhaas's 2014 *Fundamental Elements* for the Venice Biennale.

The elements we have found indispensable in teaching Comprehensive Studio includes the following: *parti pris*,



Figures (clockwise): Jean Cassou; Fernand Léger, *Three Faces*; Neutelings Riedijk, *Shipping and Transport College* in Rotterdam; Frank Gehry; Andrew Holder, *Tchotchkes*; Noll, *Plan*; Hotel Beauvais, Paris; Aldo Rossi, *Monument to the Resistance* in Cuneo; Le Corbusier, *Villa Savoye*.

style, hierarchy, dimension, scale, axis, grid, figure-ground, poché, promenade, character and entourage. Together they constitute principles that have emerged out of a living language, stemming from the very act of designing actual buildings—from a fundamental negotiation between form and function. These elements, moreover, are the stuff of every architectural proposition worth its weight in salt.³ *Parti pris*, after all, means to take a position. Although their definitions may evolve over time, and the contexts in which they deploy do vary, there is something about them that one implicitly recognizes as architecture. They are like the basic ingredients of a recipe; or the key components of an academic essay, of which Gordon Harvey has perspicaciously identified twelve; or the archetypes of the journey motif in genres like literature, film and ballads, from *The Odyssey* and *The Way of Bodhisattva*, to *The Seven Samurai*, *Apocalypse Now*, and the lyrics of *Hotel California*. Architects who make arguments and take a position rarely spend time explaining their unique vocabulary to their audiences no more than writers or poets do (we have critics who do that work), for the elements do not constitute statements in and of themselves. Rather, it is how they assemble and actualize other things that matters when it comes to the question of agency. As such, they form the backbone of an architectural argument, derived from the practice of designing buildings, elevated to an art.

When a student is given a program and asked to design a building based on performative goals, the experience is often baffling, and in the absence of any sophisticated approach to a complex problem, it leads to space-planning and simple extrusions of walls. In writing, this problem is the equivalent of reducing the equally complex art of essay-writing to the formulaic level of the five-paragraph essay. The elements of an architectural composition might therefore be profitably

compared to Gordon Harvey's aforementioned "Elements of an Academic Essay."⁴ Just as the elements of an academic essay — *thesis, motive, structure, style, stitching, reflecting*, etc. — are the components of all well-written arguments, the elements of an architectural composition can be similarly construed as the essential ingredients that enable the architect to challenge and re-organize the given facts of a building's program, context and structure in order to make new arguments. Taking the comparison further, academic composition need not necessarily be the passive instrument of power, but can offer alternative scenarios as a challenge to the status quo through the innovation of more compelling, complex and novel forms and compositions.

By way of example, we offer definitions of three major elements of a composition—definitions whose origins are deeply connected to the comprehensive the studio and the act of designing actual buildings:

PARTI PRIS

According to architectural historian, David van Zantan, the term, *parti pris*, originated at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts in the latter half of the nineteenth century as a closely related term to composition. Curiously, however, van Zantan's definition derives from Georges Gromort's *Essai de la théorie d'architecture*, published in 1946. Notwithstanding the essay's anachronistic appearance at the height of modernism, Gromort (1879-1961) provides us with a sufficiently concise explanation of the distinction between *parti* and composition: "In the genesis of the plan," he wrote, "the choice of the *parti* is of greater importance — especially at the outset — than what I shall call composition pure. This latter is mostly a matter of the adjustment of the elements, while the *parti* plays the role of

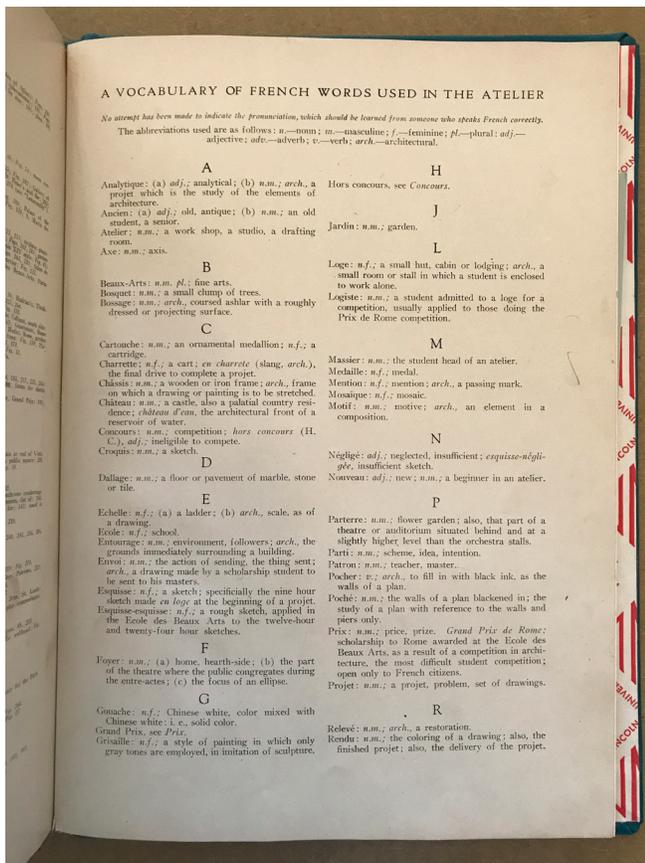


Figure 2: Page from John Harbeson, *The Study of Architectural Design* (New York: Pencil Points, 1952).

inspiration in a musical composition and applies principally to the layout and relative importance given to the elements.”⁵

Gromort’s comparison with music is significant, for it suggests that the parti is a decision one arrives at in a moment of inspiration. It is a hunch. To take the analogy further, if a theme in a musical composition is something the composer discovers by way of improvisation, then a parti in an architectural composition is similarly the result of inspired play. This kind of play is not effortless, although it may appear that way. As musician ‘Rich the Tweakmeister’ explains, “We exert effort looking for that shred of illumination, digging and sifting through debris until something tweaks us internally and we realize we have stumbled on something oh-so-indefinitely cool.”⁶

More than just an arbitrary abstraction, then, the parti pris is a governing idea that gives shape to facts and things like context, program and materials. Rooted in inspiration, its motive may appear to be arbitrary, a happy accident, but its effect is not. It is, as Robert Somol has noted in regard to shape, projective. Although the inspiration behind the parti can be just about anything – a stack of slabs, a carpet, a donut, a moebius strip, a shish-kabob, a zodiac sign, a box-in-a-box, a blob-to-box, a shrink-wrap, even a pile of potato chips – its formal expression

is visual and spatial, precisely because it must be capable of further architectural development. Its configuration must be decisive enough to give direction to an investigation of a problem, as well as malleable enough to negotiate conflicting elements and constraints.⁷ For this reason, as a shape, figure or icon, the parti (not unlike a thesis statement) finds its affirmation not at the outset of the design process, but retroactively, at the end, once the design solution to a complex problem has been fully worked out.

This brings us to two common misperceptions about the parti. The first is the erroneous notion that a parti is a subjective concept. To be clear, a parti is not a personal whim or wilful metaphor. And the second is the complementary notion, equally misguided, that a parti is a diagram derived from an assembly of objective facts. On the contrary, the hallmark of a good design is that it has a parti that excites, not only because it looks cool, but also because it is able to demonstrate that it effectively works on multiple levels. One might therefore say that a parti is more like a quilting point where diverse elements, form, function and style, visibly bind together in a configuration or composition.

PROMENADE ARCHITECTURALE

In the 1920s, Le Corbusier pointed to the concept of the promenade architecturale to explain the organization of a work of architecture around the sequence of spatial experiences that unfolds as one progresses through it. As with many aspects of his new architecture, in conceiving of the promenade architecturale, Le Corbusier was both working from and overturning a well-established Beaux-Arts technique, in this case, marche. This was the axial enfilade, or suite of figural spaces, around which a Beaux-Arts composition was arranged. In conceiving the promenade architecturale, Le Corbusier retained the orchestrated sequence of marche while shedding the formal rigidity of the axis in favor of the indirect, more picturesque meander. He held the promenade to be the fundamental lifegiving ingredient of buildings, asserting that a design would be dead without one. His 1931 Villa Savoye features a sequential ascent via a set of stacked ramps up from the entrance, through the floors, to top of the building, where it terminates with a framed view of the landscape. Many modernist architects besides Le Corbusier make use of the meander, from 1929 Mies Van der Rohe’s Barcelona Pavilion (1929) to the works of Aldo Van Eyck in the 1950s. In such case, we are allowed to meander through the sequence, left to discover the unfolding rather than be corralled through it. In the 1980s Rem Koolhaas and his Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA) injected the cinematic quality of montage to architecture. Koolhaas, who came to architectural studies from a background in cinema, rejected the difficult modernist impetus for consistent formal language in favor of an architecture of desperate quotational scenes, arranged in a manner akin to the film editing techniques of the jump cut. In OMA’s Villa dall’Ava (1991), Le Corbusier’s Villa Savoye itself is cut up and rearranged into a composition that rises above irony to become just as new and compelling as the Villa Savoye was in

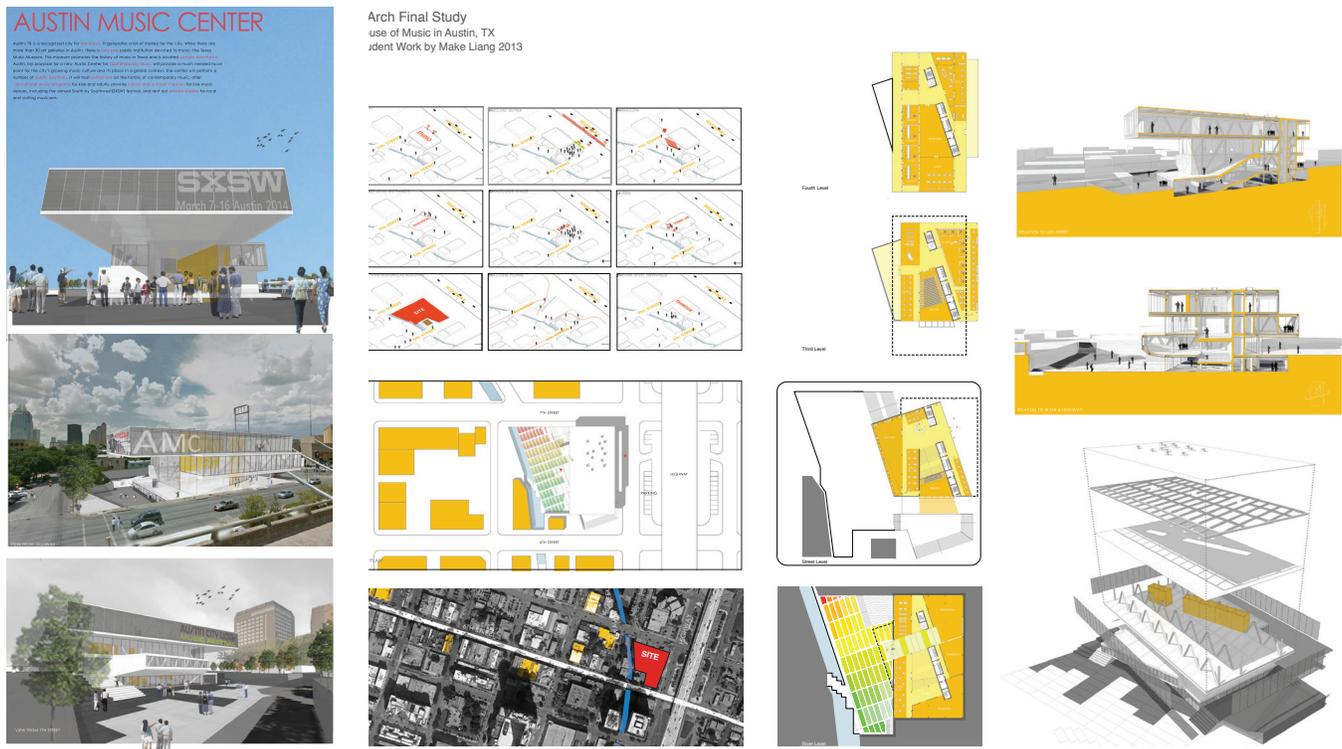


Figure 3. Make Liang, Comprehensive Studio at Texas A&M University. Instructors: Sarah Deyong and Craig Babe.

its time. The Dutch Embassy in Berlin (2004), the Seattle Central Library (2004), and the Casa Da Musica (2005) are three larger OMA projects among many in their oeuvre that make use of the scenographic rather than the picturesque to achieve wildly dramatic effects.

FIGURE-GROUND

Giambattista Nolli, in his 1748 *Pianta Grande di Roma*, shows the public realm of the street and special spaces such as squares and large rooms in buildings like churches that are generally accessible from the street, leaving the rest of the architecture, consisting of private spaces, blank to define them. Both in architecture and urbanism, the terms figure and ground are used to describe primary spaces and the surrounding interstitial form that defines them. Here, we refer to the discussion of figure-ground in Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter's iconic 1984 book on urbanism, *Collage City*. Rowe and Koetter point to Gestalt psychology to describe the oscillation between figure and ground as a means to give form to volume.

In architecture, figure exists as an interiority, and is traditionally conceived of and expressed in section, both horizontally and vertically. Sectional drawing conventions used in architecture share many traits with medical illustration, which developed with western medicine as a way to understand and visualize the interior workings of the human figure. The material surrounding and defining a spatial figure in architecture, which is called *poché* in Beaux Arts terminology, is analogous to the

flesh surrounding an organ in the body. Indeed, the Beaux Arts drawing convention for this ground material in plan and section was to make it red, and later pink, as if it were the flesh of the body of the building.

In the Beaux Arts, architectural compositions were formed around a primary sequence of figural spaces containing major programmatic elements. As a primary move the architect chose a *parti pris* in order to organize the primary spaces into a *marche* or sequence. In order to complete the composition, secondary interstitial elements such as vertical and horizontal circulation, transitional spaces, and structure were then added, thus introducing a hierarchical range of elements. When a Nolli plan is made of a building, figure and ground become readily apparent. Because all buildings require structure, as well as primary and secondary spaces, the use of figure and ground has continued though modernism to this day, with complexity and nuance being added to satisfy modernism's drive to eliminate, expose, or express the kind of artifice implied by figure and *poché*.

Le Corbusier, in the teens and early 1920's, became a proponent of the *plan libre* in opposition to the Beaux Arts system that was still dominant. He configured his walls independently from gridded systems of columns and horizontal floor slabs. Thus, in the *plan libre*, walls shed the cartesian and were freed to become figural, thus defining spaces, and implying direction to the meander of *promenade architecturale*. These curved and angled walls can be interpreted as partial tracings of the interior of more cellular Beaux-Arts room forms, such as the apse, but

now, because Le Corbusier eliminated the traditional *poché*, operating as two-sided figures differently on each side. This is apparent on the roof top of his 1931 Villa Savoye where, as first viewed from the ground, the composition's most opaque and heavy form is discovered on its opposite side to be, once we have ascended to the terminus of the promenade, a thin occupiable screen, much like the back of a stage set.

Louis Khan, educated in the Beaux Arts system at Penn, used figure-ground more literally in the 1950s through the 1970s, with the promotion of his poetic notion of "served and servant space." Khan exploited the potential of the space between his figures, proposing the interstitial as just as important as the figure itself. Khan used more traditional geometric figures than Le Corbusier, such as the circle, often expressed as disengaged shells in plan and section. He explored the potential of both ancient and novel structural systems, sometimes designing the structure itself to be occupied. In his 1961-82 National Parliament House in Dacca, Khan used interstitial space for shading and circulation, achieving the intensity of Piranesi's prison etchings, which he had known as a student. Indeed, at Dacca, the character of the building is expressed more strongly in its interstitial spaces than in the major figural rooms.... Contemporary architects, such as the Possible Mediums group and many others, are reinvesting in the figure, exploring all the expressions implied by figure-ground, *poché*, and the interstitial.

ENDNOTES

1. Banham, "A Black Box: The Secret Profession of Architecture," *A Critic Writes*, ed. Mary Banham et. al. (Los Angeles: UC Press, 1996), p. 292.
2. Jacques Lucan, *Composition/Non-Composition: Architecture and Theory in the 19th and 20th Centuries* (New York: Routledge, 2012), p. 175.
3. Our claim is partly inspired by Graham Harman's comments on elements and the irreducibility of objects to their relations: "The elements are what cannot be broken down. The power of any world lies in its elements. Whether they're letters of the alphabet or the ingredients in a tea recipe, elements are things to conjure with. Every domain of our lives, from the nursery to the factory to the laboratory, has its recurring forms and stock characters. Once we have mastered these familiar shapes, we feel ourselves to be citizens of that kingdom," Harman blog on tool-cards, January 14, 1992, as cited in "Avoiding the Void," accessed Oct. 17, 2019: <https://avoidingthevoid.wordpress.com/dictionary-of-concepts-for-graham-harmans-object-oriented-philosophy-draft-work-in-progress/>.
4. Gordon Harvey, "Twelve Elements of the Academic essay," accessed Oct. 17, 2019: https://writingproject.fas.harvard.edu/files/hwp/files/hwp_brief_guides_elements.pdf
5. Quoted in David van Zanten, "Architectural Composition at the Ecole des Beaux-Arts," *The Architecture of the Ecole des Beaux-Arts*, ed. Arthur Drexler (New York: MoMA, 1977), p. 112.
6. Rich the Tweakmeister, "How to Access the Grand River of Musical Ideas Like a Great Composer," accessed December 21, 2017: <http://tweakheadz.com/musical-inspiration-and-how-to-access-the-grand-river-of-musical-ideas-like-a-great-composer/>
7. Charles Moore writes similarly that in the face of so many options for different kinds of shapes – personal, cultural and archetypal – one should "take care that the images do not interfere with flexibility of human use." Moore and Gerald Allen, *Dimensions: Space, Shape & Scale in Architecture* (New York: Architectural Records Books, 1976), p. 14.