

Design Precedents and Identity, the exercises

Dr. K. Moraes Zarzar, dipl.arch., MTD, PhD

*Department of Architecture, Delft University of Technology, Delft, The Netherlands.
e-mail: K.MoraesZarzar@bk.tudelft.nl*

Abstract

This article shows the last developments in the research on the use of design precedents and its relation to the notion of identity which is carried out at the Faculty of Architecture, Delft University of Technology, The Netherlands. This research started with the author's PhD research defended in June, 2003.

This article gives first a summary of an account on how architects use and adapt precedents in architectural design; it provides the definitions of terms used in this approach. Second, it gives a summary of the research into the notion of identity and its relation with the use of design precedents. The main question in this part of the research was whether it is possible to use design precedents to embody a notion of identity in designs. In this part the definition of identity is crucial; because it gives the constraints and the strategy of the research. It goes without saying that we are searching for a critical use of the term identity, far from the picturesque and kitsch.

Third, this article shows two examples of the exercises carried out at the aforementioned faculty during the seminar Precedents and Identity on June 22-23 last. This seminar was divided in two main parts: lectures and workshops. We counted with the participation of lecturers such as Prof. Dr. Roberto Segre, from DPA/FAU/UFRJ, Brazil, Prof. Celestino Soddu and Prof. Enrica Colabella from Politecnico di Milano, Milan, Italy; Prof. Dr. Liane Lefaivre from Universitat fur Angewandte Kunst, Austria. The seminar was carried out to raise relevant questions on the role of precedents in expressing identity as well as in enriching our understanding of the notion of identity.

The final part of this article shows a brief evaluation of the exercises and gives new directions to the research.

1. Introduction

The objective of this article is to present the state of the arts of the research on design precedents and on the notion of identity carry out at the Faculty of Architecture, Delft University of Technology. This article presents its insights and future goals by presenting two of the exercises carried out during the Seminar Precedents and Identity held at the afore-mentioned faculty. The main concepts developed in this research was presented in two earlier articles.

In the article “Breaking the Type (GA2003), Considerations toward the Production of Innovative Architectural Designs by Evolutionary Design Models”, I presented an account of how architects using design precedents might yield innovative designs. This account, which was developed during my PhD, *Use and Adaptation of Precedents in Architectural Design, toward an Evolutionary Design Model*, refers to ‘what’ and ‘how’ concepts, configurations, topology as well as structure was used and adapted in new designs. At that moment, the question on the architects’ intention (the ‘why’ question) was avoid to its maximum. This aspect was brought to my research when I started dealing with the notion of identity in design.

In the article for the GA2004 “Design Precedents and Identity”, I suggested that the notion of identity should be approached as a ‘complex system’ (Holland 1995) where numerous factors such as economic, political and geographic as well as cultural and morphological. Considering all these factors, one can say that there are always change and continuity over the years, no region remains the same. Indeed, if all aspects abruptly change at once, the system will probably collapse and a new identity may replace the former. Identity refers to control as well as resistance in society (Castells 2004) and whenever people lives or works in a society (virtual or real), there will be a certain (bad or good) identity or numerous identities in struggle with each other (controlling and resisting). The notion of Identity is not considered a static system or closed system, but impregnated by the local culture, changing over time (Moraes Zarzar 2004).

This paper shows, first, a summary of the main ideas; second, two examples of the exercises carried out during the international seminar ‘Precedents and Identity’. Third, it presents a short evaluation of the exercises and the structure of the exercises which our students are carrying out this semester during the course *Method and Analysis* and the research future goals.

2. The main ideas of the use and Adaptation of Design Precedents

In my former articles, I have being arguing that architects often explicitly make use of design precedents within an explicitly or less explicitly manner but in both ways frequently leading to efficient, effective, and/or innovative results. In fact, in architectural practice, the use of design precedents as a source of knowledge is often considered to be a more efficient strategy in developing designs than initiating a project from tabula rasa (Moraes Zarzar 2003).

In the article “Breaking the type”, I argued that the process of using design precedents resembles in a sense the process of evolution in nature. In nature, the acquirement of characteristics takes place based on the transference of genes from one generation to another and the evolution depends on the transference of erratic copies of genes that generate novelties and more variation through time and the struggle for survival. In this way, these two processes are very different models. However, it is implicit in both models that there is use of past information which is developed during the ontogeny of a new generation (Moraes Zarzar 2003).

In nature the past information is passed to the other generation via the genes which copy themselves and are (partially) transmitted to the offspring. One might say that

organisms are the expression of those genes (phenotypes). By analogy, we could say that design precedents/projects/cases are the expression of design genes. A design gene then expresses a feature in a project/case: features are then the “material of the architect”. Architects transfer features (and their hidden instructions), which may derive from other architectural projects or vernacular buildings as well as by analogical reasoning such as “bottles, schips, and bottle racks “(Tzonis 1990) or also d-genes, i.e. concepts and principles.

In general, one can observe two kinds of transference. On the one hand, one may be interested only in the configuration of certain elements, such as Le Corbusier and the piloti of the savage hut. On the other hand, the designer may be concerned with the use of certain structures irrespective of the original use that the structure had, such as Calatrava’s use of similar structures for different kinds of project; for example the “arch and hangers” of Lusitania Bridge (1988-91) in Mérida, Spain, and the “arch and hangers” of the roof of Tenerife Exhibition Hall (1992) in Tenerife. In this manner, Instructions from a feature are isolated from their original design and transferred.

The configurational, topological or geometrical instructions as well as the structural instructions of a certain feature of an artefact must obviously fit its corresponding part in the new design. In other words, it must fit with the other configurations of the new design as well as its structure.

Once separated from the original design, they may evolve by acquiring more meanings, such as in the case of Le Corbusier’s piloti. They may also become a principle, as in fact the piloti did in becoming part of Corbusier’s “five points for a modern architecture”. At that point, it was no longer the savage hut that was essential to be recalled, but the principle.

3. The main ideas on Identity and Intention

Identity is a concept which is very difficult to define. Identity refers to a multitude of aspects and their relationships. It refers to aspects from different domains such as economics, political, geography, social, cultural, but also “gender, age, ethnicity, life-style and locality” (Sparke 1986, p. 216). It refers to national, regional identity but also to groups, which sometimes do not belong to a territory, and to the individual self. It goes without saying that my research did not discuss all these aspects. The research focuses on how design precedents (configuration, topology, geometry) might express some of these aspects inherent to identity, in particular the social and cultural aspects. It focuses on how architects, using precedents, communicate ideas and answer the users’ need, and, in particular, it focuses on the effort to ‘create’ a new identity and/or to reinforce the extant one; as well as on the use of local potentials and critical import of technology and/or building methods.

In his essay “Identity and Environment: a Cross-cultural Perspective”, Amos Rapoport ask himself what in fact is Identity. He argues, “In order to deal with the communication of identity of groups and individuals one needs to examine the meaning of that concept. It seems generally agreed that ‘identity’ is a difficult concept to define. Dictionaries give multiple meanings, the two most relevant referring to the unchanging nature of something under varying aspects or conditions; and the

condition of being one thing and not another (Rapoport 1981).” He considers both relevant, but he argues that the second notion seems to be at the heart of the concept as it applies to the question considered in his essay: the communication of identity of groups and individuals. While I think that this second notion is not really clarifying much, I disagree in particular with the idea that identity refers to “the unchanging nature of something under varying aspects or conditions”. I think that identity refers to continuity but not a fixed situation.

In the article for the GA2004, I considered the dual character of Identity. I wrote that if on the one hand, with the notion of identity, we might think that we are giving a feeling of community to the inhabitants, on the other hand, identity seems to imprison people in an unchangeable chauvinistic environment or in a parochial picturesque regionalism. The later form of identity seems to be the one which Rem Koolhaas condemns at the beginning of his article “Generic City” (Koolhaas 1998). As a way out this dichotomy, I showed how in “Critical Regionalism”, Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre discuss the notion of Identity and the modernist technique of defamiliarization as a mechanism to arrive at an idea of Identity in design that was critically open to the import of worldwide elements (Tzonis and Lefaivre 1996) and I explored the idea of how this kind of technique would also help us to achieve a variety of high standard worldviews against the homogenization that globalization is bringing to us.

As mentioned in my former article, defamiliarization is a term coined by the Russian writer Shklovsky who was dealing with the notion of perception in art. According to Lee T. Lemon and Marion J. Reis in the introduction of *Russian Formalist Criticism: Four Essays*, “The purpose of art, according to Shklovsky, is to force us to notice. [The work of art] is designed especially for perception, for attracting and holding attention (Lemon and Reis 1965).” According to Shklovsky, defamiliarization is the main device to attract this attention, this perception, this awareness of the object. Shklovsky points out, says Lemon and Reis, that defamiliarization can make a reader perceive by making the familiar seem strange (Lemon and Reis 1965). Tzonis and Lefaivre proposed defamiliarization in a different way: as a device to be used for a critical regionalism where local potentialities are allied to a critical import of products/plans of globalization. The local potentialities are then recollected in an unfamiliar and not in a picturesque or kitsch way (Tzonis and Lefaivre 1990; Tzonis and Lefaivre 1996; Tzonis and Lefaivre 2001). In the article for GA2004, I was trying to make explicit how defamiliarization could be used as a technique to promote identity, one far from the picturesque.

To understand the use of defamiliarization of precedents and the degree in which it was applied by architects in certain projects, one should understand the architects’ intentions. Were they trying to create a new Identity of the place/building or to reinforce the current Identity of the place? Were they trying to develop their worldview, their formal vocabulary? Architects might recall precedents to create their worldview to help themselves in yielding structure, configuration and topology in an autonomous moment. With this approach they might, as Le Corbusier in his design for the Unité d’Habitation, create a new identity with precedents that didn’t belong culturally to the future users of the building (Moraes Zarzar 2004).

Defamiliarization seems to play an important role in the case of MGA's Dr. Santosh Benjamin House (Moraes Zarzar 2004). Both, by Le Corbusier's Unité and MGA's Benjamin House, carry meaning and feeling in their expression. However, it seems that the recollection of MGA's precedents, in particular the verandah, carries more meaning and feelings for the dweller than Le Corbusier's precedents would ever do for the dwellers of the Unité (bottles, ships and bottleracks!). In the case of Benjamin House, one might speak about a critical regionalism and subsequently about the **creation of an identity** of resistance against the homogenization of design and of our cultures; an identity that has a dialectical relation with processes of modernization. In the case of the Unité, Le Corbusier used his precedents in his autonomous moment to **create a new identity**, a new life-style for the worker class.

By carrying out numerous cases, it became clear to me that: first, architects might create or reinforce an identity or to be somewhere in between these extremes. Second, architects might reinforce the identity of the place or reinforce the identity of the building in the context; or to create a design somewhere between these extremes. Third, to achieve their goals, architects might recall design precedents in a familiar or in an unfamiliar way; i.e. from a picturesque expression (false return to the Heimat) to a "strange" expression (the Heideggerian belief that we can not dwell in modernity any longer). Here as well, it seems that some architects also try to escape from these two extremes.

Finally, the mode of recollection of precedents varies. Architects approach their precedents in varied ways. In *Classical Architecture, The Poetics of Order*, Tzonis and Lefaivre show three kinds of approach: citationism, syncretism; and the use of fragments in an architectural metastatement (Tzonis and Lefaivre 1986, p. 281). They use these approaches in combination with classical architecture, but I generalized and used for the recollection of any (fragment of) precedent.

Next I am describing two cases carried out by the participants of the seminar *Precedents and Identity* on the Afternoon of June 22nd 2005.

4. Example One: Renzo Piano's Tjibaou or Kanak Cultural Center, New Caledonia, 1991-1998

The following description of the project is found in Renzo Piano's site. "The centre is composed of 10 " houses ", all of different sizes and with different functions intended as a celebration of Kanak culture: it is a genuine village, with its own paths, greenery, and public spaces, located outside and in direct contact with the ocean. The project addresses the exploitation of currents of air and the difficulties of finding a way of expressing the tradition of the Pacific in modern language, and embodies the decisive contribution of the anthropologist" (Description from Piano's official site: <http://www.renzopiano.it>)

The site informs that the major challenge of this project was "the task of paying homage to a culture while also respecting its traditions and history, past, present and future, as well as its sensitivities." As in the critical regionalism, on the one hand, the local potentials were taken into account but not in a picturesque way: "The idea was that, instead of creating a historical reconstitution or a simple replica village, it was

preferable to strive to reflect the indigenous culture and its symbols which, though age-old, were still very much alive.” On the other hand, the products of globalization, meaning European technology and expertise, were used “at the service of the traditions and expectations of the Kanak.” According to the official website of Renzo Piano, the products of globalization were intended to be introduced critically respecting the use of building materials and building methods: “By no means should it be a parody or imitation of this culture, nor should it involve imposing a totally foreign model.”

The idea of defamiliarization is clear (see illustration 1: hut and settlement). The mode of recollection of the precedents seems to be of a meta-statement, far from an easy citationism.

The project gives continuation to several concepts intrinsic to the Kanak settlements: “The structure and above all the functionality of Caledonian huts were reproduced and adapted, architecturally as well as socially. There are ten huts in all, each measuring between 20 and 28 meters in height, at the center of a nature reserve along the ocean shore. Each is interconnected by a footpath.”

Kanak Cultural Center houses different functions than the traditional settlements. However, the setting of its activities and in particular, the pedestrian configuration of the path among the ‘huts’ are the same. The huts of Kanak Cultural Center houses permanent and temporary exhibitions, an auditorium, an amphitheatre as well as administrative departments, research areas, a conference room, a library and studios for traditional activities. The topology of traditional settlements was put to different use.

It is interesting to see that the preliminary project has a lower degree of defamiliarization (see illustration 1). The final project has a linear spatial configuration, while the former could be said to be a group of centralized spatial configurations. The timber structure does not hide the imported high technology of assemblage. It shows its “contradiction” and , in a almost Venturian way, it brings vitality to the whole.

In summary, one might say that precedents in this project were used to express, to embody identity in a critical regionalism. The first is the Kanak hut, which is used in a certain degree of unfamiliarity consisting on the high technology applied to construct the huts. The second is the settlement topology: huts are organized with a topological similarity and only pedestrians circulate from one hut to the other. there is also a variation of the size of the huts according to their functions analogous to the traditional settlements. This topology was put to different use and adapted to fit the program of a cultural center. One can say that the topology reinforce the local identity. Finally, the precedents were recollected as “regulatory genes” (Moraes Zarzar 2003a), that is: configuration and topology; and they weren’t recollected in a citationist approach, but, as meta-statements reinforcing and creating a new identity at the same time.

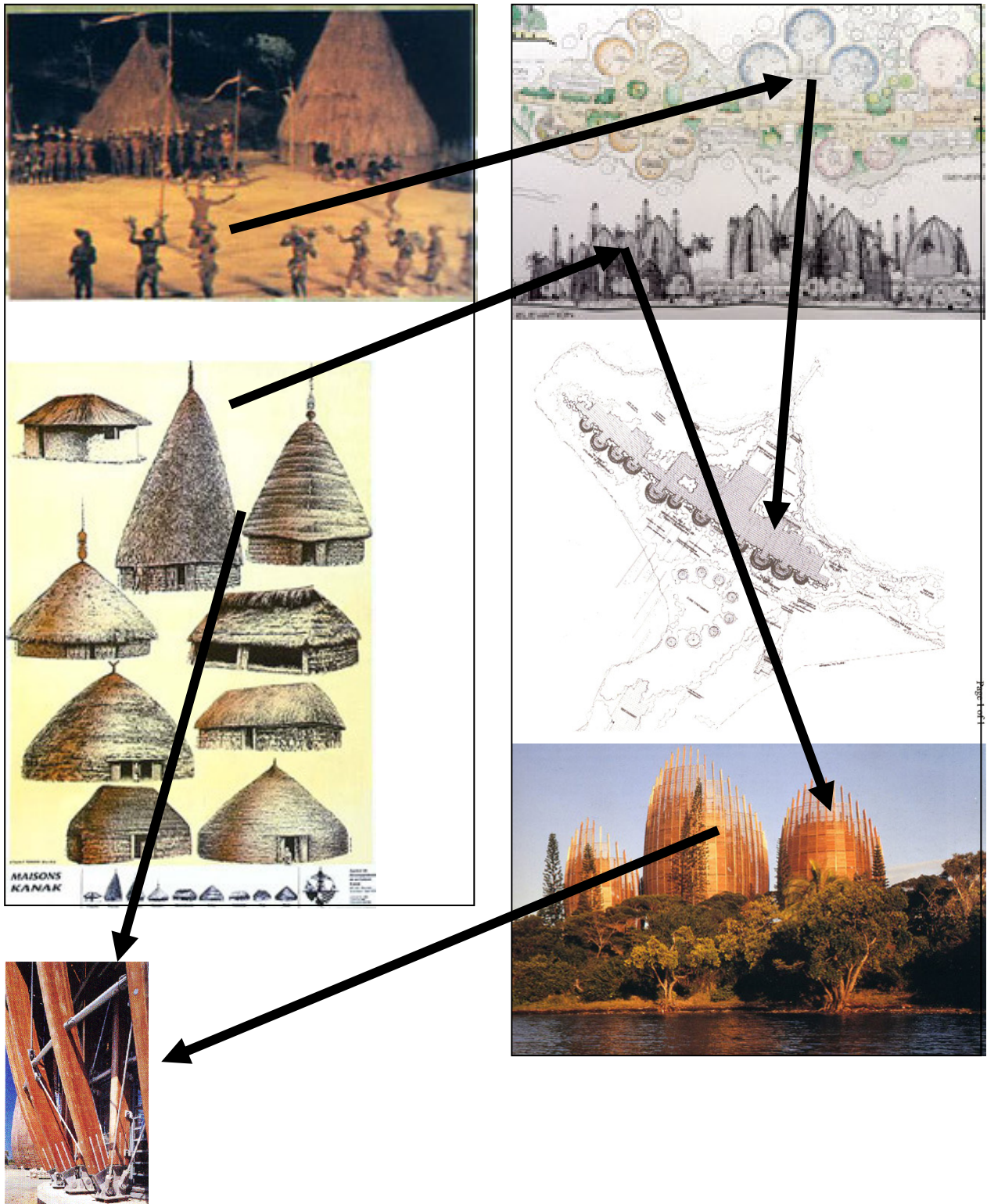


Illustration 1: design precedents and expression of identity in Renzo Piano's Kanak Cultural Center.

5. Example Two: Le Corbusier's Venice Hospital 1964-1965 (mostly based on the description of Mahnaz Shah)

This exercise was developed by the participants of the seminar "Precedents and Identity" on June 22 last as a continuation of the case carried out by Mahnaz Shah, PhD Candidate at the Architectural Association, School of Architecture, London. Shah contributed to the seminar as the "observer" of a group of participants. The group's objective was to explore the design precedents that Le Corbusier used in his Venice Hospital project.

In the archINFORM.net one may find the following description of the plan: "Planned in 1965 for the arsenal area at the edge of the city, the hospital was designed to extend the city's roads and canal networks, while simultaneously turning in on itself to create flexible, quasi-urban interior environments in the form of endlessly repeating courtyards. Upon Le Corbusier's death in 1965, Guillermo Jullian de la Fuente was commissioned to complete the building"; however, this project was never built (<http://www.archinform.net/projekte>).

Shah argues that the project aimed at redefining streets, even entire urban fabrics; their elements were objectified in the form of elevated street decks and a framework of circulations involving an intrinsic relation between the city of Venetia and the hospital, forming an architectural structure that replicates the city in its spatial flexibility and functional programming.

Looking for precedents in the conceptual and typological domain, Shah shows that "the relationship between the built object and the city – as explored by Le Corbusier's Venice Hospital project – had developed during the twentieth century as early as 1933 by the participants of CIAM 4 to replace the existing urban environment with the conceptual utopian city that would allow its inhabitants to reconnect with the natural environment through building configurations that left ample space for light, air and transportation". The concepts developed in the 1930's as well the work developed from the studies on mat-building¹ at the CIAM 9, Aix en Provence, in 1953, for example, Alison and Peter Smithson's "Urban Reidentification,"² may be

1 According to Smithson (Smithson 2001, p.91), "mat-building can be said to epitomize the anonymous collective; where the functions come to enrich and the individual gains new freedoms of action through a new shuffled order, based on interconnection, close knit patterns of association and possibilities for growth, diminution and change." Stan Allen summarized the characteristics of the mat-building, among which he mentioned: "a site strategy that lets the city flow through the project", and "a delicate interplay of repetition and variation".

2 Redefining the role of the street in urban planning Allison and Peter Smithson presented their ideas alongside Aldo van Eyck at the ninth meeting of CIAM (Congres Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne) in Aix en Provence in 1953 in a grille conceived as a proposition to abandon the concept of infrastructural zones (housing, transport, industry and, interestingly for our context today, leisure) which underpinned contemporary urban planning. - Alan Read, "return to sender: The Revolution of the Roundabout", <http://www.roehampton.ac.uk/artshum/arts/performance/green%20room/returntosender.html>

both considered conceptual and typological precedents of the Venetia Hospital. However, as Sarkis (2001) notes in his introductory note to the GSD Case “Le Corbusier’s Venice Hospital”, “Le Corbusier evokes his own Cité Universitaire of 1925 as one of the precursors of the Venice Hospital scheme”.

It seems that more contextual facts may have played a role in coming to the final ‘solution’ of this project. In 1934, says Shah, at the symposium organized by the Institute of Intellectual Co-operation in Venice, “Le Corbusier seems mesmerized by the city of Venice in terms of it being in complete harmony with the human scale and proportions. His Modular may have been a step in understanding and capturing the spirit and identity of this city”.

In the project of the Venice Hospital, argues Sarkis, Le Corbusier was able to synthesize seemingly irreconcilable attitudes like the vernacular, mechanization and modernist urbanization, and it was by rejecting the calls for formal indeterminacy that he managed to come up with the main mat (Sarkis 2001)³.

Moving to the principle of organization of this building, Shah argues that the Unité d’Habitation at Marseilles (1951) also had an important role in it, in particular the role of the corridor as ‘rue intérieure’ (internal street).

According to Shah’s descriptions, “In 1963 Le Corbusier made two sketches after visiting a number of Venetian art galleries, one depicting Carpaccio’s Burial of Saint Ursula and another of a reclining Christ by an anonymous artist. The bed and the corpse is what Le Corbusier sketches in the Carnet – raised above the ground, placed on an elevated bed. These two impressions – the need to build without building and with special concern for the scale, and the image of a body elevated over the mundane – could be seen as starting points for the project.”

Fitting this information to the structure of the concepts presented in the first part of the seminar, the participants came to the following conclusion. Le Corbusier’s recollected his precedents as in the example of the Unité in a syncretism, combining elements and concepts of diverse domains to give form to this Hospital. However, the architectural structure that replicates the city in its spatial flexibility and functional programming was used reinforcing the identity of the place. What was recollected was mostly at a configurational level, “regulatory genes”, such as the corridor, the pilotis, the “bed” of Saint Ursula raised above the ground. The degree of defamiliarization of the elements that he recollects from his own oeuvre seems to be lower than the degree of defamiliarization of elements recollected from the city at an urban level, i.e. the architectural framework (mat). The urban tissue has some

3 In fact, Le Corbusier’s assistant Julian de la Fuente resisted, according to Shah’s notes, in calling the Venice Hospital a mat building and claiming that a mat-building did not show enough complexity. Shah shows that although Sarkis in his introductory notes the importance of Le Corbusier’s own initiative in coming with the main mat in the shape of the Venice Hospital, it seems somewhat inadequate to call the Venice Hospital a mat building. The drawings were made up of a few strikingly precise indications; the form was spatial and the space developed in regular movement, like the ripples sent out by a stone dropped into a pond. No previous design had ever evolved so easily and so quickly.” This then becomes the reason to read the Venice Hospital as something beyond the mat building. As De la Fuente mentions: This project is a kind of ‘témoin’ in which Le Corbusier introduces all his principles and theories, leaving the door open to what has to come after. [...] the Hospital becomes the work that puts everything back in order.” – Shah’s notes

essential characteristics of Venetia, but without its irregularities, its exceptions, its contradictions.

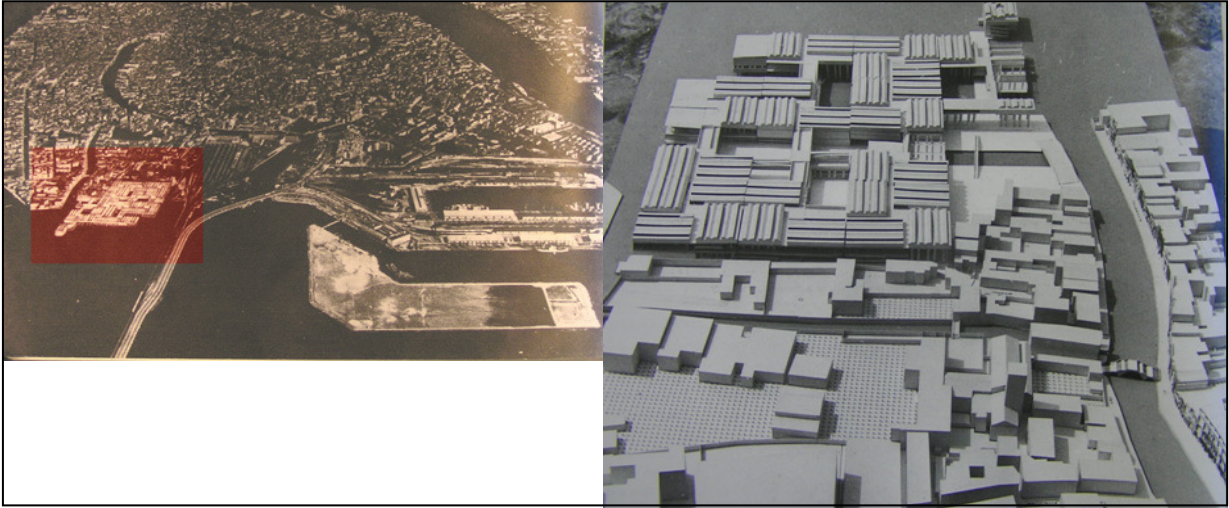


Illustration 2: Site of Le Corbusier’s Venice Hospital and bird's eye perspective of the project

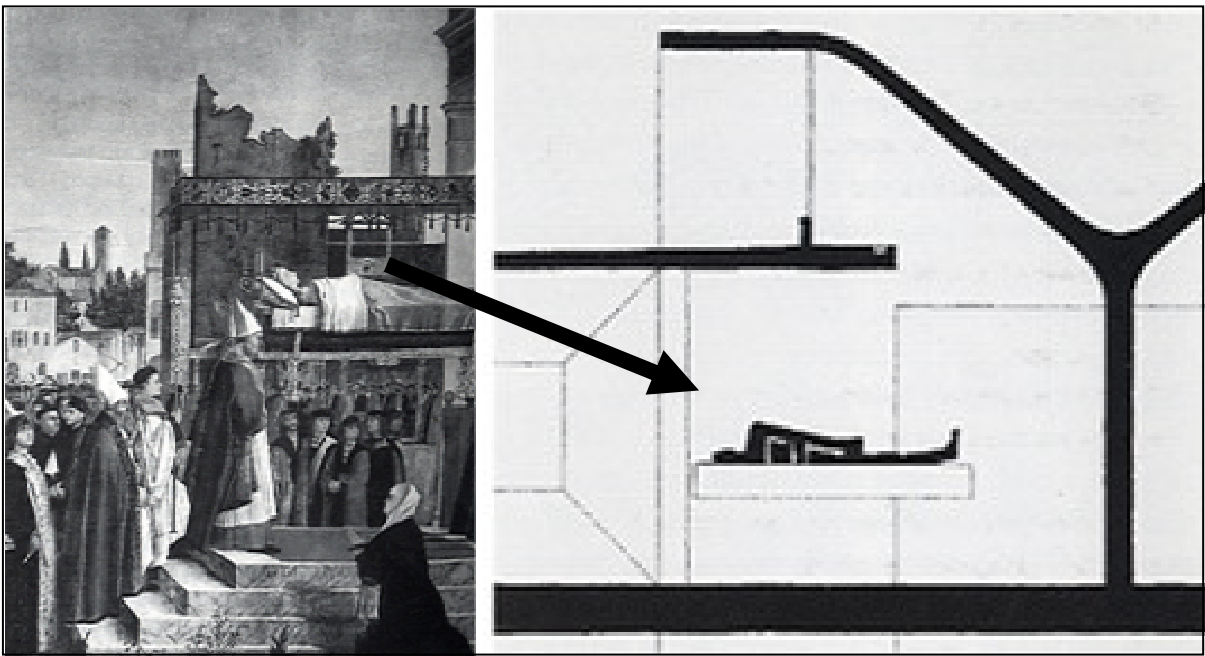


Illustration 3: Carpaccio’s Burial of Saint Ursula and Le Corbusier’s bed design: “the image of a body elevated over the mundane”



Illustration 4: the Unite d’Habitation and the role of the corridor as ‘rue intérieure’ (internal street) in Le Corbusier’s Venice Hospital.

6. Conclusions

The participants of the Seminar Precedents and Identity who took part of the workshops were enthusiastic with the results of the exercises. The results became indeed interesting, showing all the degrees of defamiliarization as well as that of reinforcement of identity vs. the creation of a new identity. But the results were not exhaustive. This occurs due to the subjectivity of the design precedents that we were handling as well as because of the limitation imposed by the time (one afternoon).

In September last, Ali Guney and I started a course called Method and Analysis at the Faculty of Architecture, Delft University of Technology with 150 students subdivided into 8 subgroups. We decided to apply the ideas so far developed (till the international seminar) with the advantage that now the students would have much more time to analyze the buildings. We could also use numerous projects at once.

We selected 12 buildings, presented them to each subgroup, and let them choose which projects they wanted to analyze (each 2 students analyzed 1 project). So far, each project have been analyzed 6 to 8 times with the help of numerous methods.

The course started with a spatial and functional analysis of the projects. In this part we used Francis D.K. Ching’s method, Roger H. Clark and Michael Pause’s method, semantic networks representing function and space, as well as Alexander Tzonis’ Performance-Operational-Morphology reasoning system to explore the project. At this moment the students are carrying out the last assignment which refers to the use of precedents by the architect. They are doing this based on an analysis of the architect’s oeuvre and texts with the help of the afore-mentioned methods.

We expect to find in some examples the initial intention of the architect and a link with the notion of identity: being that the identity of the building or of the environment.

We also expect that the students start to see the degree of defamiliarization of the precedents and the degree between reinforcement and creation of a new identity. We pursue the same main question of my article for GA2004: is it possible to embody a critical notion of identity in designing by using design precedents? But, we hope to find this time some formative ideas that have been used systematically to embody identity. Maybe this way we can try at list to partially model the use of precedents in relation to the notion of identity.

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The Author: In 1985, Karina Moraes Zarzar obtained her Bachelor's degree in Architecture at the UFPE University, Brazil. Between 1989 and 1991 she followed the OPB post-graduate course at Delft and Eindhoven Universities of Technology in The Netherlands and obtained the title Master of Technological Design (MTD). On June 11th, 2003, she received her doctoral degree at the Delft University of Technology, and is currently lecturing and conducting research at the same university.