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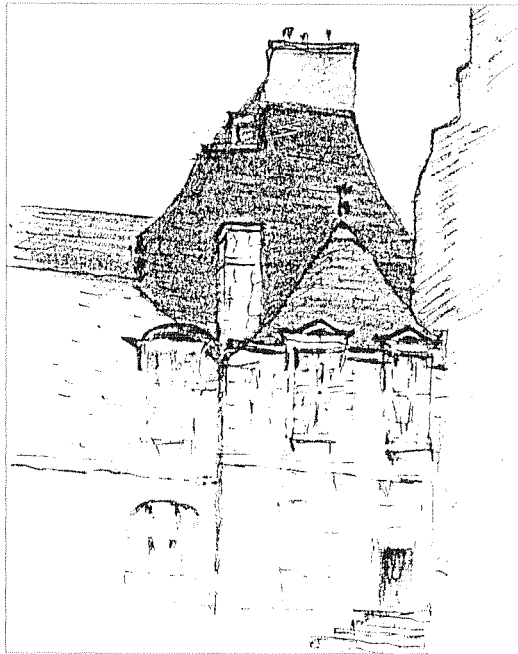
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Laminations in the Cityscape



Hotel de Sully
Robert Campbell, FAIA

“Paris is elephants and parrots.” That was a saying of my one-time boss, architect Josep Lluís Sert. The long rows of six- to ten-story, whitish-gray buildings, humped at the top with their mansards, were the elephants. The bright dashes of color at the street—parasols, awnings, posters—were the parrots. He loved the effect and tried to emulate it in his own work, splashing spots of color against gray concrete.

I thought of this again during the visit of the AIA Committee on Design in June. What brought it to mind was the perception, by Barton Phelps, FAIA, of the laminar quality of the Paris streetscape. Once you’ve seen it, you can’t miss it.

On our trip up the St. Martin Canal, we could make out as many as six slices of space between the water and the building facades, each delineated by a rail or fence. Phelps calls them “precisely controlled layers of space and movement and propriety that, in their overall unity, might be thought of as being laminated.” Parrots and elephants are laminar too, like a row of ducks in a shooting gallery moving against a neutral background.

In Paris, layers slide past each other as you move through the city, like stage flats, very strongly so in a place like the

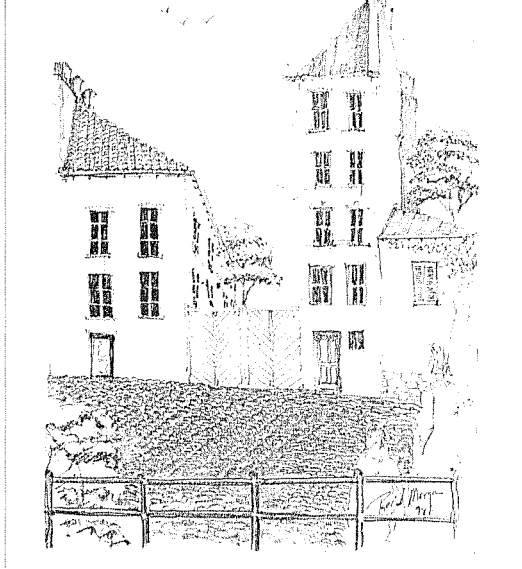
Palais Royale, where the environment establishes a way of seeing people as theater. In a newer example, the Fondation Cartier, the lamination principle was adopted as a mannered and literal expression by a contemporary architect, who erected a glass screen in front of his building.

I’ve often had occasion to compare Paris with my own city of Boston. The two cities—the cities proper, excluding suburbs—comprise about the same area, depending on how much water you count. Yet Paris is home to almost four times as many people, although Boston is much denser than most American cities. Paris achieves its greater density without any great sense of crowding and without, for the most part, intimidating its inhabitants with tall buildings. The price you pay is smaller rooms at home; the prize you gain is a corresponding increase in the size and richness of the public realm, which becomes, as it seldom is in the U.S., truly part of where you live.

The population density of Paris brings many benefits. It supports continuous shopping on almost every major street. It supports some 280 Metro stops (compared to Boston’s 50). And many people live near their work, reducing the pressure of commuting. Best of all, of course, it makes the public realm of the city feel alive and fully inhabited.

There’s an obvious relation between this density and the laminar quality of the cityscape. In Paris, people live closely packed. Definition of turf becomes important. Because the path from the private world to the public world is a short one, the thresholds along the way matter more. With each crossing, you move a step closer to the public realm—your door, your stairwell, your courtyard, your concierge, your own street, then the big street that roars by at the corner. A Parisian’s trip is much shorter than an American’s is likely to be, and therefore each step, each threshold is more insistently defined. Hence the lamination of space.

Lamination takes other forms. Parisians typically live in a *pousse-cafe* world of horizontally layered apartments; when such apartments first appeared in American cities, they were called French flats. The British or Dutch, by contrast, traditionally live in a bookshelf world of vertical layers called terrace houses. In keeping with this national trait, British architects tend to solve their problems by elaborating the section, French the plan. The bookshelf

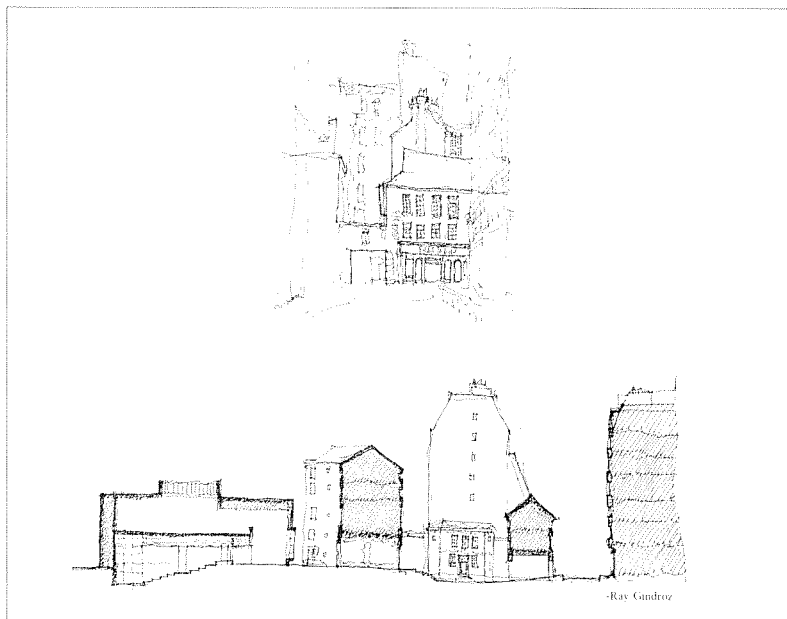


proclaims the self-contained independence of each family unit, as well as its hierarchies (upstairs, downstairs). The horizontal flat, often sandwiched with other flats used for commercial or institutional purposes, suggests a more anonymous, and perhaps more extended, family identity.

There are also laminations in time, what Kevin Lynch called temporal collage: the new on the new, as at Parc de la Villette, which resembles a computer-generated overlaying of one system onto another; the new on the old, as at the Louvre, the Viaduc des Arts or, most remarkably, at the Maison de Verre, with its scrim-like glass-block facade inlaid into stucco Paris; the old on the new, as at the Centre Culturel Suisse, where old architectural skins of no special merit were maintained as a memory, then filled with new life; and everywhere, of course, the old on the older.

Sometimes the collage worked, but not always. At Parc de Bercy (another symphony of thresholds) old railroad tracks were left in the paving of the new park. The remains of the old were deliberate quotation, not gritty survival, and you felt you couldn't make your own discoveries, that every experience had been pre-envisioned by the designers. At la Villette, the empty red pavilions felt lonely and toy-like, a stalled model train set existing in a conceptual grid that defined neither time nor place. At Cité Berryer, as Donlyn Lyndon, FAIA, put it, we saw a "medieval order sanitized, as the latest evolution" in imagining Paris—the expression, but not the realization, of a longing for physical community.

Our "Cross Sections in Time and Place" were taken through many such laminations. What are the lessons for Americans? One, I would think, is that city planning isn't always a bad idea. Only powerful, well-financed and sometimes ruthless central planning could pull off the successes of Paris, especially the astonishing parks and the marvelous public transit. You have to admire, too, the willingness to plunge in and reinvent, and the understanding that a city must embody a promise for the future



as well as a memory of the past. But, at the same time, you wonder if a dose of the chaos of American citizen participation might not have helped here and there, as at the new Bibliotheque Nationale, a building driven more by ideas than by experience: a witty Wildean reversal of Le Corbusier's towers in a park, it is a sad park in towers.

If there's another lesson, one we need, it's simply that cities do come back. The Marais quarter, where we spent much of our time, was a notorious slum as late as the middle of this century. Perhaps all great older neighborhoods today were once, by the standards of our time, slums. Paris shows us that you don't need to knock them down. But you needn't be afraid to mess with them, either.

Robert Campbell, FAIA, is architecture critic for the Boston Globe.

*Above left: Canal St. Martin
Reid Morgan, AIA*

*Above: Centre Culturel
Suisse
Raymond L. Gindroz, AIA*

*Maison de Verre
Jon Jackson, AIA*

