DESCENDENTS
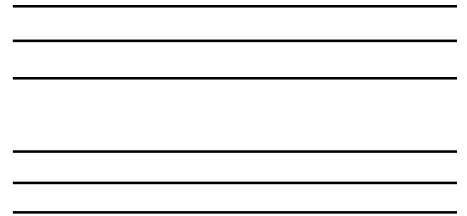
RESEARCH IN ARCHITECTURE

A MASTERS THESIS BY JONATHAN PAUL FLEMING

Descendents

Research in Architecture

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What makes a man start fires?

Thesis Abstract:

This thesis investigates the relationships between projects in the form of resistance. The thesis is accompanied by a series of projects that investigate a number of resistances. These resistances spur relationships to other works in progress; descendents. The projects are a testing ground for the ideological content in an architects work.

Each project we undertake is a part of a much larger whole that may or may not be a life's work, but is, certainly, an influence in the creation of coherence as we move forth in our practice. This is not to say that everything must look alike, rather it is to keep one involved in the fundamental aspects of a project that may give clues as to what you as an architect stand for. It is itself a resistance to the problems facing us as we attempt to build. Those problems that may begin to bog us down and force us to lose sight of architecture. There are many things on one's plate as a project proceeds, it is not easy to keep focus.

The architect must seek aspects that put us into dialogue with those things outside that inevitably influence the specific work at hand. A way of arriving at conclusions that do not confound an architecture. I see it as being analogous to Hertzberger's discussion of warp and weft, a defined structure into which possibilities may be woven creating relationships between the elements of the architecture. This asserts a set of rules that an architect learns how to work with, and even violate.

This formulation creates multiple possibilities within and outside a framework of the architect's order. The architect learns to question within the boundaries of his times, and perhaps beyond those bounds with that understanding. He learns what to ask and what not to ask; which resistances offer stimulus and which do not. The work, through time, acts as an analogue to history itself. The designer may then create with a better grasp of the full potentiality of Architecture.

Contents:

"I studied at the University of Pennsylvania and, although I can still feel the spiritual aspects of that training, I have spent all my time since graduation unlearning what I learned...."
Louis I. Kahn. *Louis I Kahn: Writings, Lectures, Interviews*. 54

What is important about architecture?

Under what terms can I claim to be an architect?

How do architects invest their work with the force of ideas?

What can I teach others?

What makes an architect really good?

How does one bring something into presence?

How does one tie a building to its place?

What is truly American?

What are the deeper characteristics of our times?

What are the effects of any one question, or answer, upon another? How do these questions relate?

How are these relations manifested?

"Architecture. It is born of the most powerful thoughts. For men it will be a compulsion, they will stifle in it or they will live-live, as I mean the word. Architecture is not an integument for the primitive instincts of the masses. Architecture is an embodiment of the power and longings of a few men. It is a brutal affair that has long since ceased to make use of art. It has no consideration for stupidity and weakness. It never serves. It crushes those who cannot bear it. Architecture is the law of those who do not believe in the law but make it. It is a weapon. Architecture ruthlessly employs the strongest means at its disposal at any given moment. Machines have taken possession of it and human beings are now merely tolerated in its domain."
Walter Pichler. from *Programs and Manifestoes on 20th-Century Architecture.* Ulrich Conrads

Descendents:

This is a thesis that investigates how one creates, tests and develops architectural work. I will begin by defining important terms and outlining their relations with one another. The thesis is revealed in a cross-axial relationship between two concepts: the notion of descendent work and the resistance to the making/design of that work.

de-scen-dent(   ) *adj*. Also **de-scen-dant**. **1.** Moving downward: descending. **2. Proceeding** by descent from an ancestor. Often used with from.

de-scen-dant (   ) *n*. A person or animal descended from another or others: an immediate or remote offspring. *-adj.* Descendent.

de-scend(   ) *v*. **-scended, -scending, -scends.** *-intr.* **1.** To move from a higher to a lower place; come or go down. **2.** To slope, extend, or incline downward: "a rough path descended like a steep stair into the plain" (J.R.R. Tolkien). **3.** To be derived from ancestors: be inherited. **4.** To have hereditary derivation. **5.** To lower oneself in behavior; to stoop: "she, the conqueror, had descended to the level of the conquered" (James Bryce). **6.** To arrive in an overwhelming manner. Used with *on* or *upon*. *-tr.* To move from a higher to a lower part of; go down. [Middle English *descenden,* from Old French *descendre*, from Latin *descendere*: de-, down + *scandere*, climb (see **skand-** in Appendix*).] **-de-scend-i-ble, de-scend-a-ble** *adj*.

de-. Demonstrative system, base of prepositions and adverbs. **1.** Germanic **to* in: **a.** Old English *to*, to: TO, (TOO); **b.** Middle Dutch *toe*, to: TATTOO. **2.** Perhaps Latin *de*, from: DE, DE-, PEDESTAL, PEDIGREE. **3.** Latin **deter,* "deviating," bad: DETERIORATE. **4.** Latin *-dem*, demonstrative suffix: IDEM, TANDEM. **5.** Latin debilis (see **bel-**). [Pok. *de-, do-* 181]

de-. To bind. Greek *dein*, to bind: DESMID; ANADEM, ASYNDETON, DIADEM, PLASMODESMA, SYNDETIC, (SYNDESMOSIS). [Pok. *de-* 183.]

skand-. Also **skend-.** To leap, climb. **1.** Latin *scandere*, to climb: SCAN, SCANDENT, SCANSION, SCANSORIAL, SCANTLING; ASCEND, CONDESCEND, DESCEND, TRANSCEND. 2. Suffixed form **scand-alo-* in Greek *skandalon*, a snare, trap, stumbling block: SCANDAL. 3. Suffixed form **skand-sla-* in Latin *scalae*, steps, ladder: ECHELON, ESCALADE, SCALE.

re-sis-tance (   ) *n*. **1.** The act of resisting or the capacity to resist. **2.** Any force that tends to oppose or retard motion. **3.** *Abbr.* **r, R** *Electricity.* The opposition to electric current characteristic of a medium, substance, or circuit element. **4.** The underground organization engaged in the struggle for national liberation in a country under military occupation. **5.** *Psychoanalysis.* A process in which the ego opposes the conscious recall of unpleasant experiences. **-re-sis-tant** *adj*.

re-sist (   ) *v*. **-sisted, -sisting, -sists.** *-tr.* **1.** To strive or work against; fight off; oppose actively. **2.** To remain firm against the action or effect of; withstand. **3.** To keep from giving in to or enjoying; abstain from. *-intr.* To offer resistance; act in opposition. *-See Synonyms at* **oppose**. *-n.* A substance that can cover and protect a surface, as from corrosion. [Middle English *resisten*, from Latin *resistere*, to stand back, resist : *re-*, back, against + *sistere*, to set, place (see **sta-** in Appendix*).] **-re-sist-er** *n*.

sta-. To stand; with derivatives meaning "place or thing which is standing."...**V.** Reduced form **st-*. 1. Reduplicated form **si-st-* in: a. Latin *sistere*, to set, place, stop, stand: ASSIST, CONSIST, DESIST, EXIST, INSIST, INTERSTICE, PERSIST, RESIST, SUBSIST; **b.** Greek *histanai* (aorist *stanai*), to set, place: APOSTASY, CATASTASIS, DIASTASIS, ECSTASY, EPISTASIS, EPISTEMOLOGY, METASTASIS, PROSTATE, SYSTEM; **c.** Greek *histos*, web, tissue (< "that which sets up"): HISTO-[1]

1. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language. William Morris Editor. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston. 1979

The historian, James Burke, pulls unlikely lines from history laying them out for us in narratives, "to acquaint the reader with some of the forces that have caused change in the past." In the introduction to his book *Connections* Burke explains development and history:

"Each generation the population is replenished, each year nature is renewed, each day the sun rises and sets, and although the new plants and animals and children differ from their predecessors, they are recognizably of the same family."[2]

This description applies to ideas as well.

We begin with a very simple understanding of history as relationships and change. The forces that generate change are constant. Precious little in architecture has changed since antiquity. The way we think about architecture changes. Architecture moves forth from a long history of ideals in form and substance.

The notion of the descendent is based on relationships and change over the course of time. The descendent is not only concerned with the cross-fertilization between the numerous projects on our desks, but with the development of a body of work that hinges upon the history of architecture and ideas and not the designer's whim.

Architectural resistance is manifold: practical and ideological questions of material, history, culture, politics, or tool. Our world tends to forget at least half the resistance to the works we make. We are too often caught in practicality and superficiality, a crime from which architecture suffers.

Experience is the architect's ally. For John Hejduk, defining his place in architecture was realized in the following way:

"The process of using elements from past works, leaving behind that which was no longer necessary commenced, the idea of bringing *forward* past elements, taking an incremental approach, one that slowly built on previous foundations in order to continue to imagine other things, persons, places, and architectures."[3]

2. Burke *Connections* introduction
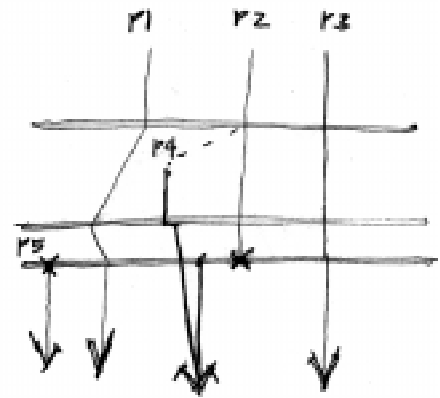
"there is no vestige of a beginning, no prospect of an end." (Hutton 1795)

3. John Hejduk. *Mask of Medusa*. 28

Similarly, William Alsop claims:

"Every project should be a surprise to both the client and your-self. This implies that one starts afresh with each new work. This is totally wrong. It is vital to build on the experience that you accumulate. There is no need to make the same mistake twice. The point is that all the work that we do is one work and that the development of that work is only possible through an open and direct involvement with society. The challenging of habitual behavior resulting in an agreement between you and the world is a way forward."[4]

An architect creates in his lifetime a body of work, one con-tinuous Project. Using Burke's terms, that Project is an ana-logue to the human body, and the history of mankind. The Project is not only the work of a single lifetime, it is a piece of human history. One project is tested with others and itself to formulate the Project. The work is a multitude of things, often contradictory, yet growing. That growth is the motion of de-scent delving ever more deeply into the ideas formed by resis-tance.

The descent is not only a linear downward movement, but one more analogous to the roots of the tree: parallel movements, spurring tangents, always propagating or mutating into the next idea/project. The work has a history, it is bound to a tradition, challenging and questioning the previous and current accord-ing to the new resistances. How this family is bound to a tradi-tion and its own times will define how it handles those resis-tances, ultimately, revealing the significance of the work.

In the descendent we encounter a new set of resistances, a new series of questions, and a different notion of the significance of an idea. Resistances generate opportunity for the descent of ideas.

4. William Alsop and Jan Stormer, Architectural Monographs No 33, Academy Editions (London)-Ernst & Sohn (Berlin) 1993. Academy Group Ltd.

Working in terms of descendents means building interrelations between projects. Discrete projects should not begin 'ex-nihilo'. The descendent is the development of ideas transcending individual projects, forming lines, or threads that bind them together despite program, scale or any other dissimilarity. This allows exercise and testing of the binding notions. The descendant has ancestors from which it has inherited certain traits. Specific traits that withstand resistance and testing are the survivors. Those things become the fundamentals of the family and reveal the most significant aspects of the work.

Ancestors are, in biological terms, "the actual or hypothetical organism or stock from which later kinds have evolved."[5] The idea that does not produce healthy lines of inquiry will not survive. Ideas that do survive evolve.

Mutations become a testing ground for new variations and re-actions to different sets of resistances. If the mutation is useful/meaningful, then descendants inherit it; where it is tested against yet another set of resistances. It must be pointed out that ideas are the subject of our movement, meaning newer projects may generate ideas that work in the context of a predecessor. Therefore, a descendant's inheritance is not limited by the chronology of projects.
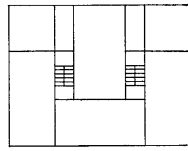
The inheritance is the idea that transfers and transforms. It is the character or characteristic that transcends. The quality of an idea is its ability to mutate in alternate contexts. This ability is the deciding factor in its life-span or its place in the tradition.
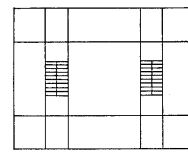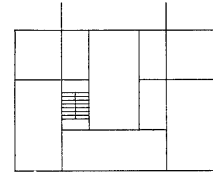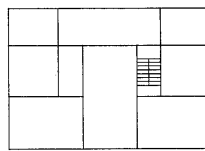
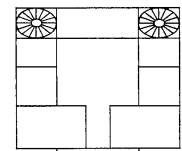Villa Thiene at Cicogna
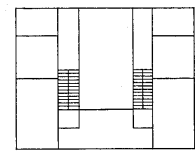
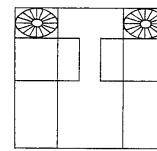Villa Sarego at Miega

Villa Poiana at Poiana Maggiore
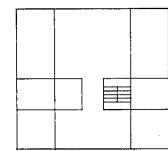
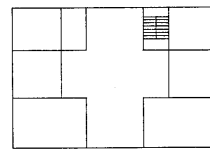Villa Badoer at Fratta, Polesine

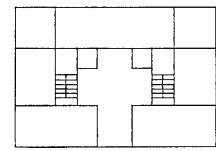Villa Zeno at Cessalto

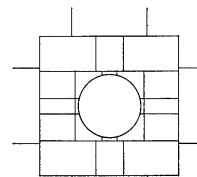Villa Cornaro at Piombino Dese

Villa Pisani at Monatagnana

Villa Emo at Fanzolo

Villa Malcontenta at Mira

Villa Pisani at Bagnolo

Villa Rotonda near Vicenza
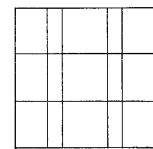
Geometrical Pattern of Palladio's Villas

Schematized plans of eleven of Palladio's Villas, Redrawn from , Rudolf Wittkower. *Architectural Principles in the Age of Humanism.* 69. This illustrates the idea of descendent work; an architectural idea is exercised through multiple projects. Palladio's work consistently attempts to work resistances offered by a specific geometric set of rules. It must be noted that Palladio believed he had the ideal geometry for the 'villa' building type. This is not what I am discussing, here. The descendent is not necessarily ideal, it is, rather, ideological.

Tradition is a gathered inheritance; a re-collected past. Tradition is our living memory. Memory formulates a history. For David Michael Levin,

"The goal of recollection is not to capture the past for slavish repetition, which in any case it is not possible to accomplish, but rather to find/create new historical opportunities for ourselves. The truth in the work of recollection is therefore to be judged not by an accurate correspondence to the objective reality of a past epoch and another culture, but rather in terms of the character of the transformation by which a deeper understanding of the past significantly alters the course of the future."[6]

The call is for a deeper understanding of a historic narrative. This is not a nostalgic longing, but instead it is the release of creative forces harnessed within the tradition: a transformative process. A deeper understanding of the contexts that test the significance of an idea. Buildings are historical texts that record the time in which they are built, renovated, added to, and abandoned. Buildings are not only human shelter, they house ideas.

Those ideas that are able to transcend and mutate, throughout the alternate contexts become the survivors. The survivors point to the others and to the next, breathing life into a body of work. The survivors' endurance reveals limits and profound aspects of the projects and the Project.

According to Wilhelm Dilthey, "events are understood in their significance when interpreted as antecedents or as anticipating later events."[7] Tradition is understood only reflectively and not as it happens. The historian or interpreter is, therefore, both reader and constructor under such a doctrine. We understand the ancestor through the descendent.

5. The American Heritage Dictionary of the English Language. William Morris Editor. Houghton Mifflin Company, Boston. 1979

6. David Michael Levin. *The Body's Recollection of Being: Phenomenological Psychology and the Deconstruction of Nihilism.* 89

7. Jacob Owensby. *Wilhelm Dilthey and the Narrative of History.* 4

Resistance is revealed in different ways in various contexts. Resistances are questions that contexts pose to the architect. Those questions often take place in the form of rules.

Rules are encountered from many sources: clients, nature, codes, culture, history and ourselves. Intent is associated with such rules, often in legal matters, such as code violations. The intent of the code then comes to bear. The rules invite questioning. We question the questions. This double resistance forges the discrete project and larger Project alike. This resistance allows us to test and retest our ideas, preparing the work for the infusion of ideas, and also revealing where the project cannot go, sealing off inappropriate directions. Resistance causes mutations in ideas. Resistance allows us to move. Rules limit possibility, showing us how to play.

Pragmatic concerns of building are generally understood today as the architects' expertise. This is the case of most disciplines due to our society. Although A.I.A. Contracts may dispute the claim of expertise,

"The Architect shall not have control over or charge of and shall not be responsible for construction means, methods, techniques, sequences, or procedures, or for safety precautions and programs in connection with the Work since these are solely the Contractor's responsibility under the contract for construction."[8]

it remains that a large part of what architects do is figure out how to build things. We order things, form, function and the like. Questions of material, tool, client relations and business practices are examples of the pragmatics of building. Acceptable and possible methods, cost efficiency, all these things form sets of resistances that we must work with. If our ideas cannot translate in material of what use are those ideas? This is a very poignant question in our times, when ideas are constantly threatened or even abandoned in favor of the bottom line. Yet, the pragmatics of building are impotent without ideas of a different kind.

8. A.I.A. Document B141. *Standard Form of Agreement Between Owner and Architect.* American Institute of Architects Documents. 1987 Edition. 2.6.6

Ideological resistances allow architects to infuse a work with ideas that are beyond the immediately useful. These resistances have to do with meaning, they are the voice of architecture. Ideas infuse a project with depth and symbolic content. The resistance of theoretical questions are heavily involved with concepts such as culture and the times, as well as the author. Ideological resistances may provide impetus for simplification and clarity in architectural expression or they may cloud specific readings of an architecture. In either case architects may focus their work not only upon the matter at hand, but upon our culture's place in the history of mankind.

Currently, in our culture the ideological is resisted, anything not explicitly utilitarian or cheap in a project is subject to value engineering especially in projects that are of civic importance. It is tragic that buildings that need further design attention are "completed" every day because a corporate architect wanted the job so badly that he made promises of outrageous deadlines. American Pragmatism does not inevitably lead to intellectual bankruptcy, money grubbing does. But how does one convince architects to not focus on the money when they are underpaid as it is? Does it have to be one or the other? Perhaps, if an architect focuses upon a certain architectural struggle his/her experiences create better opportunity for excellence. Or does that narrow search create more problems for the architect? In any case, it is time to take architecture back from the short sighted and place it back in the hands of those who have a larger interest in the community, its infrastructure, and our place in history.