WATERLOO ARCHITECTURE CAMBRIDGE

PAGES **13**

A c a d e m i c   P r o g r a m   —   A r c h   M 1   -   2 0 1 1
E x i s t e n c e   M i n u m u m

TO **Students Arch M1 - 2011**

COPY **Robert Jan van Pelt**   Graduate Officer
Andri Lima   Graduate Administrator
File

FROM **Donald McKay**   Studio Faculty, Coordinator

DATE 2010 / 12 / 20

existence minimum...

is a **Masters' Studio, Waterloo Architecture Cambridge,** devoted to a particular subject – the theory, the history, and the work of a sensibility that is part architectural position, part architectural practice, and part architectural technology – a subject that remains both a distinct ethic and a compelling aesthetic. We are bringing several different, but mutually complimentary, kinds of work into the studio, and organizing this work around the theme *dwelling – existence minimum.*

Manifesto and Biograph, our personal stake in the question

In order to assay the personal value of this sensibility, each member of the studio will consider some aspect of his or her own practices, not as autobiography, or self-criticism, or as confessional, but as a two-part personal essay – written, graphic, and architectural – coming to terms with the questions we bring to the support we provide for our lives, coming to terms with dwelling.

Monograph, individual and collective

As a way of extending the study's collective and individual literacy, each student will take on a piece of research into architectural history, either as a survey of some phenomenological aspect of the subject, or as an in-depth study of the meaning and character of dwelling, a particular episode, a particular place, a particular time. This will be a scholarly essay, albeit perhaps a wide-ranging and unconventional one, probably richly illustrated, but adhering to the conventions and standards of an M.Arch thesis. The seminar will post these essays as part of a web log devoted to the work of the group.

Topograph, the value of a sensibility

So that we are in touch with community, with a real sense of the value of this particular approach, the entire seminar will work together to sketch circumstances that bear the promise of a compelling, beautiful, and useful application of the sensibility existence minimum, explored through research, documentation and analysis.

Building, informed by a sensibility

Finally, central to the term's work, each member of the study, working individually or in a small group, will prepare an architectural design for *existence minimum.* Each will present the designs as a model, supported by documentation that makes each of these designs transparent to a broad public.

We intend to see a broad selection of this work assembled in a sponsored exhibition, supported with a catalogue that will gather together much of the work of the studio. The work of the term itself will support people going on to pursue their own thesis, one where *existence minimum* may play a greater, or a lesser role.

Donald McKay
Robert Jan van Pelt

existence minimum, dwelling.

This is a studio about architecture living light. In a moment where architecture is recovering from a period of wretched excess it seems worthwhile stepping back and joining into a long tradition, working to develop a valid economy for architecture.
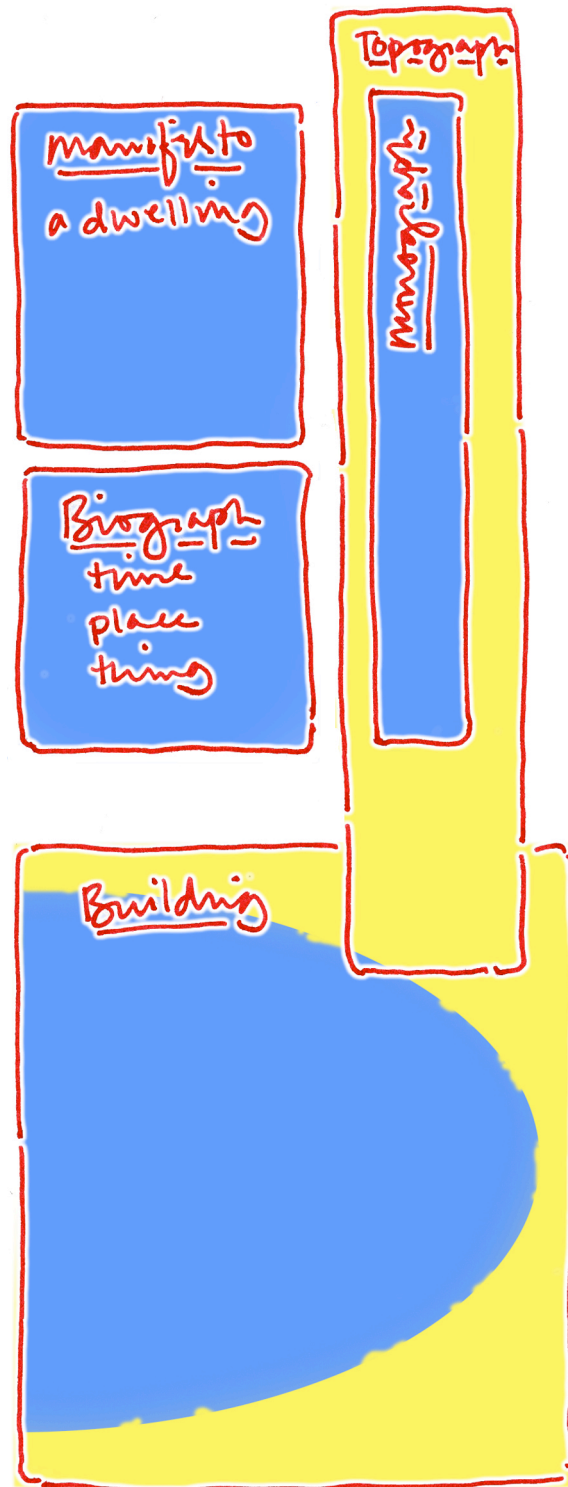
The first goal for a M1 program is to address several of the skills – researching and reflecting, recovering your own thoughts, documenting places and events, integrating information and generating new information, writing and editing, framing a narrative or argument, consolidating a rhetorical format, presenting difficult material effectively, and of course, designing – that a candidate needs to bring to an architectural thesis. At the same time, the studio needs its own coherent form, or we abdicate our responsibility as an institution, a responsibility to format itself. So, between these responsibilities – to the candidate, to the institution – an M1 studio must, on one hand, range wide, and on the other, dig deep.

By taking an issue – the essence of the architectural enterprise, economy, a minimum, a distillation – rooted in architectural history, an issue that has been renewed and transformed regularly, often to great advantage, we can give the studio specific format. By picking a subject that we can re-apply in fresh form – dire need, here and now – we have motifs for the thesis: development, transformation, and renewal. This would seem an obvious direction for almost any thesis program, until one reflects that it would be quite as easy to imagine that a thesis could be a consolidation of knowledge already developed, or just as easily, a refutation of that knowledge, a rupture or revolution.

existence minimum, as it is treated here, is very much a "third way", a negotiation between acceding to the nature and the shape of the architectural discourse as it is, and setting out to blow it up. In All That is Solid Melts Into Air, Marshall Berman makes the case that the criticism of an institution is, in modern life, absorbed into it, transforming it, contributing to its survival. (Berman's title draws it's inspiration from The Communist Manifesto of 1848, Marx and Engels. It's hard to find a better one sentence introduction into modern life: All that is solid melts into air, all that is holy is profaned, and man is at last compelled to face with sober senses, his real conditions of life, and his relations with his kind.)

In some sense, this program of study – recalling the foundation mythologies of architecture, reconsidering its purpose, actively, in the work itself – is both a criticism of architecture as we know it to day, and a strategy that renews it. That is, in some sense, by ignoring classic architectural values, by walking away from issues of form in favor of questions of performance, of value, by reducing and perhaps distilling architecture, we may find fresh architecture, and participate in renewing a discourse.

manifesto
of
a dwelling

Biography
time
place
thing

Topography
manifesto

Building

The Blue Exercises are entirely individual exercises. **The Yellow Exercises** are collaborative. The last exercise – **Building** – is an individual exercise in which each member of the studio makes a particular contribution to the group effort, beginning with a good deal of group work settling issues of site and program, and concluding with the collective publication of the work. As a suite of exercises, they are designed to test and develop several of the skills – researching and reflecting, recovering your own thoughts, documenting places and events, integrating information and generating new information, writing and editing, framing a narrative or argument, consolidating a rhetorical format, presenting difficult material effectively, and of course, designing – that a candidate needs to bring to an architectural thesis.

Manifesto is a small, relatively elegant architectural problem. Each student takes a particular climate (his or her own choice) and a particular situation (again by choice). Both the setting and situation should have a bearing on the form of the final exercise. In that site and situation, each student should design a dwelling, deliberately applying any particular paradigm of production – pre-fabricated, dry assembled, built with found materials, built in situ over months or a day, mobile – of no more than seventy-five cubic meters (net, and approximate), designed to accommodate two to four people. The project should be presented as a model 1:10 full scale, any materials, with subdued colors, and supplementary drawings, cartoons, or sketches. This is a manifesto, not the answer to a problem. No explanation of it is required, no rational is necessary. Only the act of the building itself matters here.

Biograph is the second of these two, very personal opening exercises. It is a biographic sketch of intellectual development, with almost all the pitfalls – false detachment, self-agrandisement, post-rationalization, denial – that any intellectual biography has. In order to treat with these dangers, the authors are asked to write them in three parts (in any order): a place, a time, and a thing (obviously any scale). The biograph may be (very likely should be) copiously-illustrated, with for instance, images, maps, charts, timelines, technical drawings, sketches, and so on. This is, inevitably, a personal essay. In it, we anticipate that the author will be looking out from a particular position that we will come to know, sharing his or her sense of the world, rather than in, sharing unnecessary details of a personal life. As a piece of writing, it could be judged in several ways: by the voice, by the quality of the insights, by the ways in which the three-fold theme is brought together, but the depth of the authority and the acuteness of the empirical observation. In this case, the form of the insight is as important as the apparent content.

Monograph is the third exercise, and takes place over the same time as the first two exercises – the first half of the term. Monograph is an outward-looking exercise, the document a particular episode – for instance, a building, an exhibition, a publication, a teaching programme, a body of work, a manifesto, even an image – in the long and varied career of existence minimum, in it's many forms. The monograph should be fully-illustrated – again, images, maps, charts, timelines, technical drawings, sketches, and so on.

The monograph tests the author's skill in developing new information from existing material. This is an act of interpolation which, in many ways, is central to the effort. Successful work will demonstrate a mastery of the research material, an effective control of the voice, and as we've said, the development of fresh material from out of the existing.

Topograph, the fourth exercise, is a consideration of site, in this case, sectors of the City of Port au Prince, Haiti. The work will begin concurrent with the first three exercises, but it goes past their conclusion, into the last exercise, Building. This is a collaborative exercise, where the seminar works on one problem: from a distance, in straightened circumstances, develop a richly developed, cultural and physical topograph of a suitable building site or sites, together with their situation.

Building is the final exercise of the term, the culmination of the term's work. The conditions of building, the site, and the situation will develop out of the earlier work.

existence mimimum

What does it mean that we might use the same term – existence minimum – in much the same the same way?

Three questions:
[1] Is there a discourse to existence minimum? What are it's characteristics? What are its bounds? Can we assay it?
[2] Is there a community for it, in the sense that it has a constituency that stands outside of structured society? What is its communitas?
[3] Is there a temporal correspondence to its spatial nature? If there is, can this make existence minimum a conversation within the urban society?

existence mimimum, as I use it here, is a catch-all, a cluster of ideas orbiting around a twin star. One of the stars might be considered aesthetic, and essential to architecture, the other, material, and essential to life. In either case, the sense of an essence, a distillation, perhaps a sublimation, hangs around the idea.

What is worth remembering, from the outset, is that this is an idea that comes out of the architectural discourse, that it is not an idea that walks away from it. And, it is an idea architects themselves have for themselves, over-and-over, of architecture; for many, when they stop to consider it, I suppose in the midst of the gritty, complex business of getting buildings designed and built, it must be a useful intellectual resource. Imagine asking the questions: What am I to do here, in this moment, in the face of this conundrum, this compromise, this less-than-perfect situation, short of time, money, sympathy? After all, what is essential here? What can I do without? What, in the worst circumstances, do I have to keep, if this is to remain architecture?

This idea, the minimum, searches around – in history, in anthropology, in sociology, in building technics, in literature and in the visual arts, in dance, in philosophy, in the poetics of the entire enterprise – to find those things that cannot be reduced about architecture. My sense is, it does them so that architecture can be shared, so that it is communicative, so that we may all experience it as a bond between us – an aspect of communitas – and so that we may all have a better life. By it's nature, it is egalitarian, and it is an idea that arises regularly, not just when there is a kink in the theories of architecture that some return to a mythic source will iron out, but when architects need to find a fresh way for architecture to work in the service of a community.

Early- to Mid-Nineteenth Century republicanism gave rise to several ideas of the minimum, usually expressed as an architectural genesis. Viollet-le-Duc, arguing that authentic architectural form was the natural outcome of honest building practices, sketched a humble myth of origination for architecture that was Gothic in nature. This was an aspect of his interpretation of Gothic culture, which he describes as a culture of yeomen, not a feudal community or a Christian one so much as a community of natural allies, a community that – we might say – transcended the particular structure of its society, making it the true root of revolutionary French Republican nationalism. Gottfried Semper founded his story of the origin of architecture in an anthropological

observation of the Polynesian Hut at the 1851 World Exposition in London, when he put the hearth at the centre of the "first house", itself the conjoining of four technologies, four trades. The implication here – that architecture is inevitably a communal act, its production shared by many – is itself as important as any sense of the final form of it. That these distinct techniques each have about them a unique form of ornament, imbedded in the technique itself, also tends, in Semper's thesis, to take the responsibility for architecture out of the hands of a master form-giver and put it into the hands of craftsmen in a state of grace (much Ruskin's argument for architecture). That Semper uses the image of birds weaving nests implies that at least one of his four technologies – the weaving of the walls – is inherently a natural act, leaving the reader to understand that architecture – it's outline, its techniques, its ornament (a compelling issue in 1851), its origins – is itself natural to life in any state of civilization. Before these ideas of genesis, there was Abbe Laugier, who, in Mid-Eighteenth Century France, in a Vitruvian thesis, put the origin of architecture into the sheltering roof, with the column – that undeniable essence of classical architecture – in a purified, essentially structural role, a role stripped of affectation and artifice, rescuing it from the rhetorical flourishes of neo-classicism, where the column was more likely to be a sign of structure, than the structure itself. Performance, and the pure expression of that performance, lie at the heart of Laugier's architecture.

In a few words, I would like to consider four buildings from the last century, where the architectural conversation has refreshed itself by working to some kind of minimalism, or essentialism. Each was designed and built by the architect, for the architect. Client considerations were, at least in these instances, coincident with the architect's own, and financial considerations striped each project of what the architect – at least – might consider excess. (There are few rich architects, and even when there are rich architects, and they build for themselves – for instance, Philip Johnson's apparently modest and essential glass house – they tend to strip away excess.)

The Schindler-Chase House on King's Road in West Hollywood, Los Angeles is the first. Charles and Ray Eames' House, in Pacific Palisades, Los Angeles, often known as Case Study House 8, is the second. The third house is Le Corbusier's Petit Cabannon in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, on the French coast of the Mediterranean, close to the Italian border. The last in this set is Eileen Gray's vacation house, E-1027, also in Roquebrune-Cap-Martin, designed, in some undocumented way, with her Italian lover, Jean Badovici according to their mutual understanding of Corbusier's Five Points of Architecture, themselves an essentialist manifesto of architecture that applied with equal ease to the house or to the city.

I've chosen these houses in pairs for a reason. We know that each pair was, more or less, part of a larger discussion about living and architecture, and we know that the architects in each case are either themselves paired – Schindler the architect and Chase the engineer and in turn their respective spouses, Charles and Ray Eames, Gray and Badovici – or designed with another person in mind – the Petit Cabannon was apparently Le Corbusier's gift to his wife. We also know that each of these houses was a site for living and for working,

perhaps least explicitly in the case of E-1027, perhaps most explicitly in the case of the Eames Residence, with its studio pavilion. With E-1027, it is necessary to interpolate the working relationship with the house, but it seems clear from her history that Gray was never far from her work. I'll accept it as a conceit of this essay that she did work there. I've also chosen them because their are either vacation homes – both house at Roquebrune-Cap-Martin – or deliberately quoting from a vacation experience – the Schindler/Chase house was apparently inspired by the experience of camping in Yosimite – or, in the case of the Eames residence, clearly the repository of things gathered in travel, a curiosity cabinet of toys and folk-artifacts, an invocation of vacation.

Vacation is a word we have from the French, from the middle ages, when it was first used to describe "freedom or rest from work or occupation" (Oxford), from the Latin "to be unoccupied." Above, I introduced the term communitas. It is an heroic term in many ways, with its implications of societies of equals, on the edge of conventional social structures. In anthropology, communitas signifies an informal or informally-organized society, an unstructured one, or one in a state of transition. Liminality – the state of being "between states" – is almost inevitably invoked in any anthropological use of the term.

heterotopia: In his 1967 lecture 'Des espaces autres' (Of other spaces) Michel Foucault proposed the concept to describe spaces such as that of the cinema and the cemetery which have the 'curious property' of being connected to other places via a complex network of relations, but in such a way that they either suspend, cancel out, or reverse those relations designated, reflected, or represented by them. Heterotopias are explicitly defined in contradistinction to Gaston Bachelard's 'inner spaces', yet one senses that it is precisely the way these spaces seem to externalize the inner realms of our imagination that captivates Foucault's interest... There are, he thinks, two main types of heterotopia: what he calls (doubtless for the want of better words) 'crisis heterotopias' and 'deviation heterotopias', the former corresponding to what anthropologist Victor Turner would more productively call 'liminal spaces' and the latter what Foucault himself would more productively call 'disciplinary spaces'. His examples of 'crisis heterotopias', primarily taken from primitive society, include sacred or taboo places reserved for adolescents, menstruating women, women in labour, and so on. His impression is that such spaces have all but disappeared from western society, although he hazards that there are some remnants still around (the honeymoon hotel being his prime example). Anticipating Deleuze's notion of the 'any-space-whatever', Foucault calls these places 'anywhere places', that is places that are precisely not 'just anywhere' but nowhere... In total Foucault offers six principles for a description of heterotopia: the two already given— (i) heterotopias are of a specific type; (ii) heterotopias can be transformed, reinvented, or made afresh—and the following four: (iii) heterotopias have the ability to juxtapose in a single real place several emplacements that are incompatible in themselves (cinema is his prime example of this); (iv) heterotopias are connected to what he calls heterochronias, ruptures or breaks in time; (v) heterotopias always presuppose a system of opening and closing that isolates them and makes them penetrable at the same time; (vi) heterotopias transform our relations with other real spaces either to make us see them as less real

or to compensate us for their relative shoddiness (Jean Baudrillard and Umberto Eco are exponents of the first proposition, while Edward Said is an exponent of the latter).

<div align="right">from heterotopia, <i>A Dictionary of Critical Theory</i>,
by Ian Buchanan</div>

Only Barthes seems to understand vacation. In spite of how vacation steps aside from structure, inevitably occupying both space and time outside our regular lives, Foucault overlooks its possibility: it is too prosaic. Nevertheless, vacation provides the sites for these architectural experiments in idealization, for these practical applications of the idea of the primitive and of the architecturally essential. Vacations – out of time and place – "either suspend, cancel out, or reverse those relations designated, reflected, or represented by them". I argue they do so because vacation is our acknowledged resort to another way of being, vacation is our unthreatening way, our institutionalization of a way, in time and space set aside for it, out of conventional social structure. Vacation is a liminal state, the state appropriate for communitas. It is, of course, not the only one. Foucault, in his essay on heterotopia, may have deliberately overlooked one of the most obvious, the university, but it is still the vacation that offers most of us any access to a liminal state. (I think I have to remind myself here that is was John van Nostrand who first expressed this idea to me, over forty years ago, when he spoke of how the the vacation communities we regularly return to, year after year, over generations, may be the real expressions of community in our lives.)

I've stressed time in the paragraph above because time is one of the ways we find the liminal space. Time is also one of the significant considerations of urban society, of urbanism, and urbanism will become part of the question of the minimum here, but not for the moment. For now, next, I would like to return to the four houses.

I've recently read an observation on modern knowledge that rings very true just now. For me, it seems that the conventional idea of scientific practice, where the superficial variables of a question have been stripped away so that the apparently important variations in the relationship between a very few factors of a thing could be examined, tested, and recorded in more-or-less controlled circumstances, may be, in the face of our current sense of information, running to the end of its line. Certainly, it seems true in the case of social sciences, and in the scientific aspects of the urbanist and architectural enterprises.

> Their book *(Reinventing Knowledge)...* ends in the modern West, with the laboratory – which, they argue, has been transformed in the age of modern social science from a single, controlled space where replicable experiments could be performed to the entire social world.

<div align="right">Anthony Grafton, Jumping Through the Computer Screen,
<i>New York Review of Books</i>, vLVII, number 20.</div>

We are no longer working in controlled circumstances.

That is one of the first important factors in architecture, the sense that you are working on a high wire, in public, and without a net. That is the first consideration to bring to these four houses – their circumstances, publicly and discursively.

(to be continued.)