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A Paradigm for the Construction of Architectural Narrative

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**A paradigm
for the construction of
Architectural Narrative**

Thesis Proposal

Sarah F. Holmes

Map of New Orleans, 1720

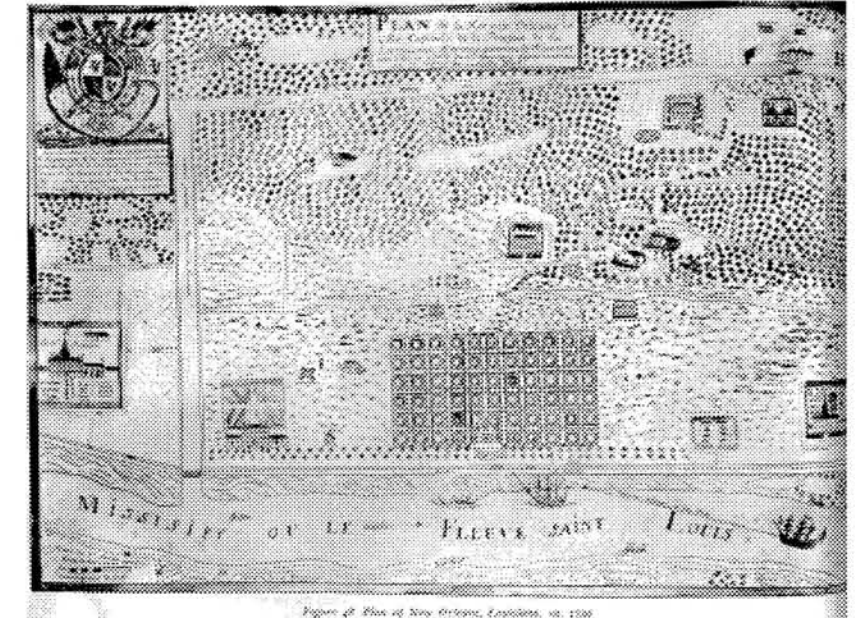


Figure 4: Plan of New Orleans, Louisiana, ca. 1720

Introduction

Thesis

A Paradigm for the construction of Architectural Narrative

Question

How does one develop a relevant architectural narrative within a society that traditionally has been and remains highly pluralistic?

Architectural meaning arises through the dialogue between a physical and a narrative structure.

This proposal concerns the inquiry into the physical and metaphysical structure of place. In this thesis I propose a system of analysis resulting in the creation of a structure from which an architectural narrative may be revealed. Traditional (scientific) methods of analysis examine physical phenomena which organize and create the conceptual structure of the environment. I propose that the narrative structure, that is, the metaphysical structure, is equally valuable in its ability to uncover and generate place specific meaning. How the analysis is framed is as important as the object of analysis. The mode of analysis can reveal the underlying metaphysical structure(s) which provides a catalyst to architectural form.

Map of New Orleans, 1759

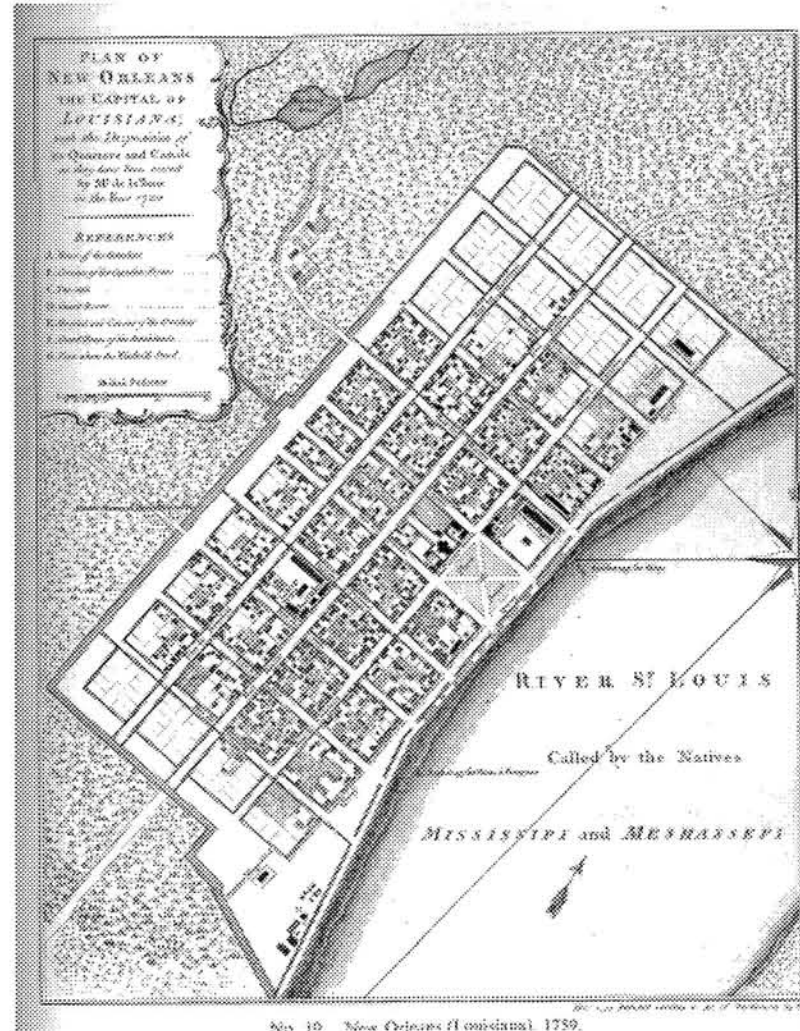
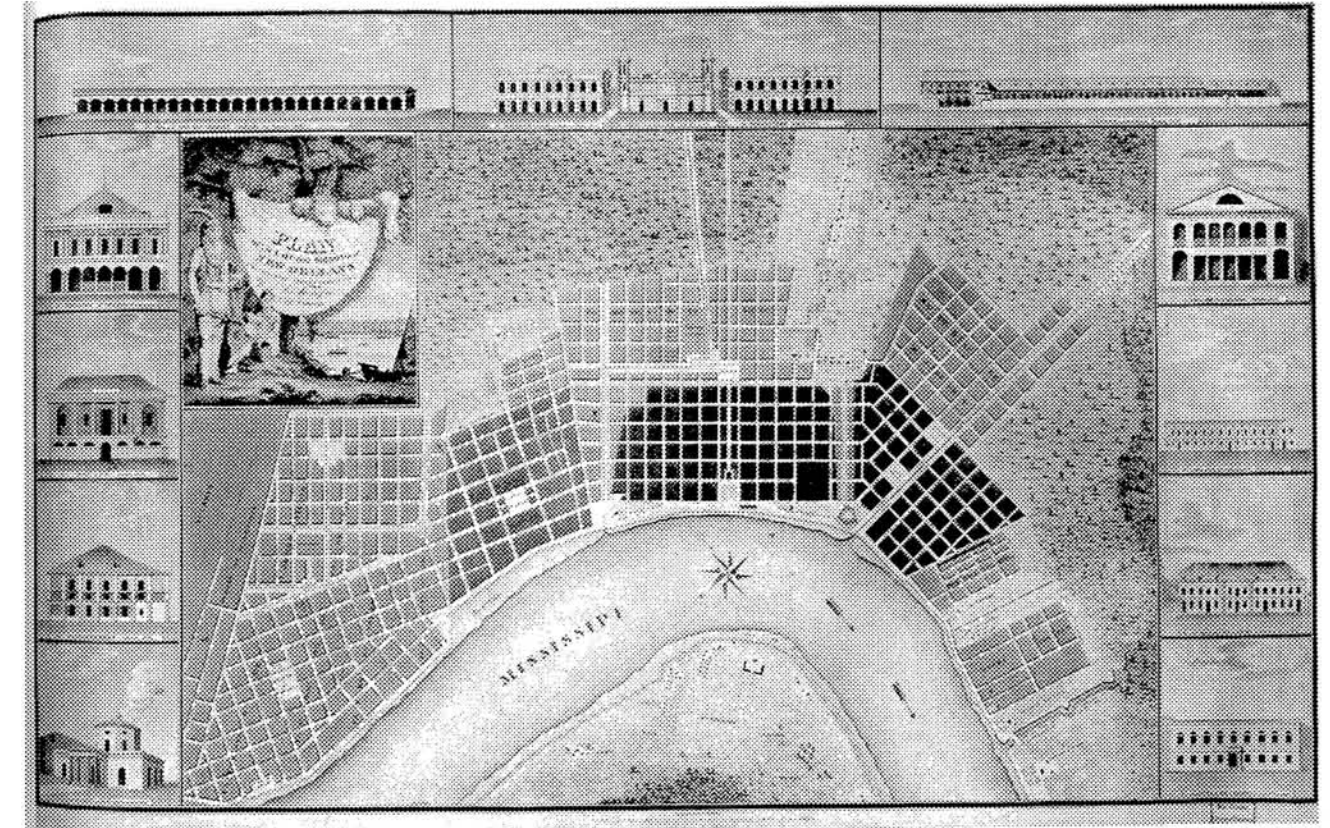


Fig. 10. New Orleans (Louisiana), 1759.



Map of New Orleans, 1814

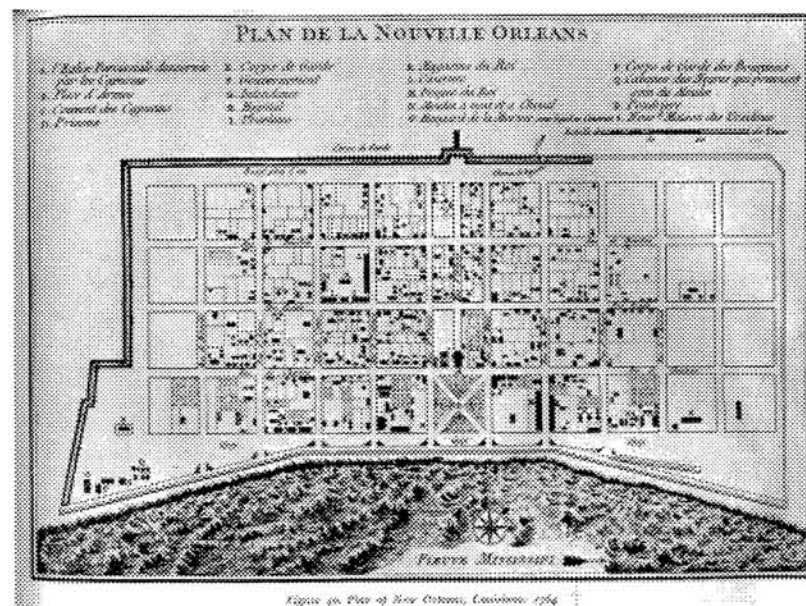


Figure 10. Plan of New Orleans, Louisiana, 1764.

Map of New Orleans, 1764

Rules

This proposal proceeds on the notion that a pre-established, formal mode of inquiry from which to initiate a narrative is essential. The inquiry is based on a collection of similar objects, events, images, etc. which are (re)presented in a systematic format. The initial choice of category, or type of object, is relative and subjective in one respect, but constrained in another; all elements selected must be, in the Heideggerian sense, '...of the place rather than in the place.'

The collection of objects

- The choice of the initial object is at the discretion of the analyst and only constrained in that it must be representative of the place being analyzed.

- Based upon the first object, a collection or series is then presented within a formal structure.

The formal structure

- The series must be assembled within a frame of reference that serves as an analytic datum for the project.

The Frame of Reference

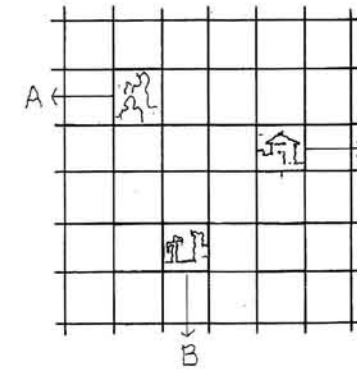
- The frame of reference may be determined by place: i.e., a series of photographs taken in a place, every 10 minutes for an hour. The frame of reference in this instance is the place, that which is being analyzed is time. In this situation one creates a *narrative* structure which organizes the relationship between the individual frames.

- The frame of reference may be determined by time: i.e., a series of photographs taken at the same time, but in different places. The frame of reference is a point in time, that which is being analyzed is place. In this situation a *physical* structure is created which organizes the relationship between the individual frames.

Speculation

This mode of analysis will ultimately produce conditions for the development of a socially relevant architectural intervention.

In this situation one chooses a set of places, buildings, etc. to analyze, and then tries to establish relationships between them concerning use of language, specific features, etc.



Series #2 - The Vignette (time)

- 'The vignette' utilizes the structure of time as the frame of reference. All of the images present a common point in time which serves as a datum by which to relate the information. One can establish relationships in terms of the physical structures presented, the method of representation, the choice of subject of representation, etc.

- The vignette is another representation of how one might analyze a site. It explores the issue of physical structure. One can speculate as to the choice of artifacts being represented and their significance in terms of both the place, and in terms of each other.

- The vignette enables the viewer to speculate as to the spatial structure of a place.

Series #3 - The Map (place)

- 'The map' utilizes a conceptual structure of place as a frame of reference. The frame is arbitrary. The place can be established by Cartesian coordinates, by Township and Range, by a grid, etc. The conceptual structure establishes the physical representation of place. One can analyze the map in a variety of ways.

- The map can be analyzed as a physical structure. One can analyze the change in form of the place over time, and note the change in the physical form of the river, the development of grid patterns, the growth of the city, etc.

- The map can also be analyzed in terms of symbolic content. One can analyze the change in the system of signage within the map itself. Thus the subject of analysis becomes the study of *what* is depicted within the map, and *how* it is represented.

Analysis

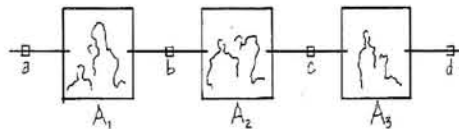
Analysis for the project consists of the development of categories. In this document I will set forward three sets as examples for possible modes of inquiry. All methods of analysis are open ended, and require the synthesis of the various elements. This is the point of construction of the narrative.

Series #1 - The Table (plane)

- 'The table' utilizes the plane as the frame as reference. Photos are taken of the table at regularly spaced intervals. The images are then presented as a series. One ultimately creates a narrative, or description of events that organizes and weaves together the change which one witnesses through the unfolding of the frames.

- The table is a representation of how one might analyze a site. It explores the issue of change. One notes the change in lighting - during the day, the boundaries of space are understood in terms of physical structures, while at night, it is the artificial light which frames the field of perception. One becomes aware of the varying patterns of movement on the site.

- The table is engaging. The viewer is required to speculate and create a narrative connection between the frames. The organization of the presentation is highly structured, the ultimate *meaning* is ambiguous, thus, a creation of the viewer.



In this diagram, one chooses a location and then analyzes it over time. The Narrative is constructed in the change between each frame.

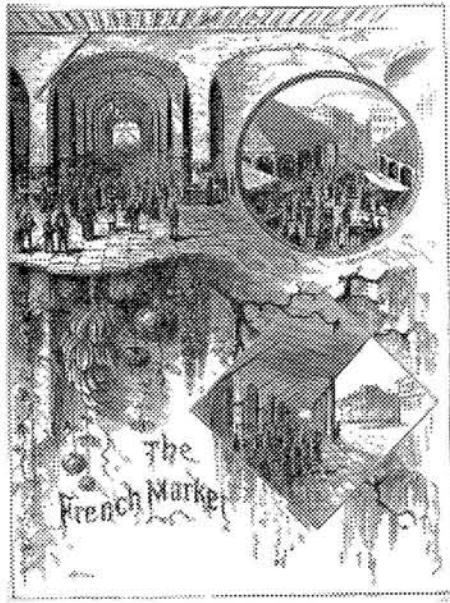
Urbanism

New Orleans

New Orleans has been and remains a highly pluralistic society. It is therefore an ideal representation of the present social / cultural condition. It is the model through which one can explore the construction of a socially relevant architectural narrative in a diverse society.

Site

New Orleans is situated between the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain. These geographical limits form the natural boundaries of the city. New Orleans is located in a very strategic, although difficult location. Its position upon the Mississippi River established it as an important trading post with the rest of the world at a very early stage. Its connection to Lake Pontchartrain and thus the Gulf of Mexico made it



1885 sketch of 'The French Market.'
(Historical Sketchbook and Guide to New Orleans and Environs)

possible for ships to circumnavigate the treacherous Mississippi delta and enter the river at New Orleans. Geographically and economically, the site is highly desirable. Physically, however, the site is a problem.

The Mississippi has shifted its course many times and thus has left marks within the structure of the city. The Bayous around New Orleans are the resultant conditions of the movement of the Mississippi and its periodic flooding. In an estuary, the sea enters the mouth of the river regularly and thus clears a channel through which vessels may enter. The mouth of the Mississippi forms a delta rather than an estuary and thus makes it difficult for large vessels to move up the river. The delta of the Mississippi is a shallow, sandy condition that extends into the Gulf and makes it difficult for large vessels to enter the mouth of the river. Each time the river shifts its course, it leaves new deposits of sand and mud in the Gulf. New Orleans has historically been viewed as one of the most accessible points at which to enter the Mississippi river and therefore strategically a desirable site.

Donald McNabb describes the cross section of New Orleans as resembling "...a shallow saucer filled with layers of jello." (McNabb, p. 4) This condition makes building difficult. In such a situation, tall building construction becomes a feat of engineering. Therefore, New Orleans is constrained both in terms of horizontal growth by its location between the Mississippi River and Lake Pontchartrain, and in its vertical growth by its geologic structure.

History

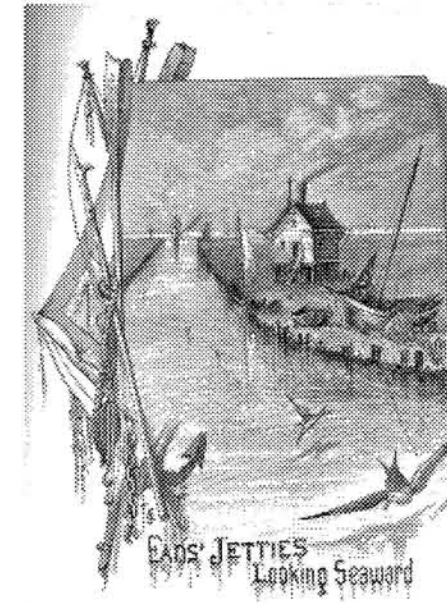
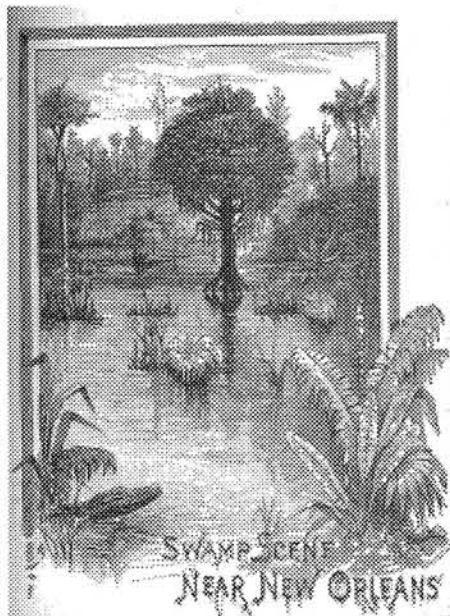
New Orleans was initially inhabited by several groups of Native Americans. New Orleans (Nouvelle Orleans), named after the Duc D'Orleans (A French Duc of questionable character and morality), was founded as a French colony in 1717. French convicts cleared the underbrush and established the initial township. The process was difficult both because of the swampy nature of the site and because of two hurricanes in 1721 and 1722. The river flooded in 1722, forcing people to cease work on the construction of the city and to build levies to keep the river from destroying the city. In 1722, Adrien de Pauger, a French Engineer, set forth the plan of the initial town, what is now known of the Vieux Carree. It was similar in plan to a roman settlement, although larger, consisting of 66 squares, and encompassed within a wall. The major axis of the city culminating in Jackson Square at the river is oriented perpendicularly to the river rather than being determined by cardinal axes.

Eventually New Orleans was ceded to Spain in 1762, returned to France in 1800 and then sold to the United States in 1803. During these periods new groups of people moved into the town. As well as the Native Americans, the French, the Spanish, and the North American inhabitants, there were also many African Americans (both enslaved as well as free), Canadians, Germans, Irish, and many others. This heterogeneous mixture of ethnic and cultural tradition remains within the modern condition of the city.

River

The river frames the formal face of the city. Because of the historic relation of the city to the Mississippi River through trade, the majority of the major civic institutions have been built in close proximity to the river.

1885 sketch of 'The Swamp.' (ibid.)



An 1885 sketch of a jetty. (ibid.)

Jackson Square has traditionally been, and remains an important public space. The river also determines the structure of the grids. This is interesting in that many cities in the United States which are laid out according to the grid, such as Manhattan, expose pre-existing natural forms as ruptures in the grid. In New Orleans however, it is the natural forms which determine the irregular shifts of the grid. The river addresses the issues of trade, commerce, enterprise, and the way by which the city is viewed in the public realm through its institutions.

Lake

Many of the less public functions of the city occur in relation to Lake Pontchartrain. It is viewed as a much more private realm. Many of the Voodoo ceremonies take place in these areas, as this is where much of the Creole population is located. In understanding the city one must take into account both the formal public facade as well as the more internalized private structure.

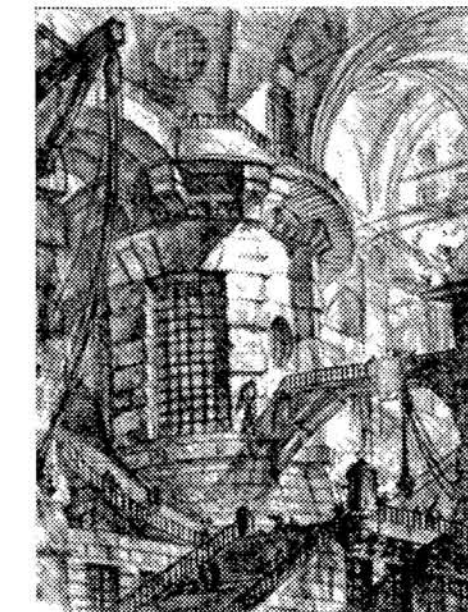
Grid

The grid is the formal structure which mediates dialogue between the river and the lake.

Architecture

Bertrand Russell

Russell argues that history is represented in the dialectic between science and religion. In another sense, it is located between two modes of inquiry; the *scientific*, and the *dogmatic*. This historical structure can inform architecture. Architecture is able, as well, to present the rational / structural as well as the symbolic / metaphorical. The narrative is derived in the dialogue between these two methods of representation. The rational is, in a sense, referential, and refers to its own logical structure for meaning. The symbolic transcends its condition and derives its meaning from outside sources.



Piranesi sketch from his prison series.

Matrix

I am interested in institutions which deal both with the person in a collective sense (civitas), as well as in an individual sense (aesthetic, religious, etc.). The matrix is a method for analyzing specific historic precedents and architects who represent the dialectic relation of rational structuralism and symbolic content. Many of the examples however, occur in more homogenous cultures than the present condition and therefore in those examples, the majority of the culture was capable of interpreting and deriving meaning and value from the symbols employed.

The Matrix follows the process of analysis by which I propose to analyze New Orleans. I have chosen five architectural precedents which represent an architectural dialogue in which I have chosen to situate myself. Using the matrix, I can simultaneously represent the precedents in terms of the architectural issues they address, as well as their relationship to one another. I have chosen specific categories, or lens, through which to systematically investigate various aspects of the buildings. This method will ultimately enable me to situate my thesis in relation to a critical set of architectural ideas.



Il tempo di una vicenda, 1978 [56]

1978 drawing by Aldo Rossi



A detail from Le Maison de Verre, Architect - Pierre Chareau.

Psychoanalysis

1. A systematic structure of theories concerning the relation of conscious and unconscious psychological processes.
 2. A technical procedure for investigating unconscious mental processes..."
- (The Random House Dictionary of the English Language, p. 1161)

The process of architectural analysis takes on the form of psychoanalysis. It is the systematic and rational inquiry into the irrational structure of a place.

psychoanalyst - building (vehicle through which analysis is occurs)
psychoanalysis - rational inquiry which takes on a variety of forms
patient - place / site
unconscious - mythical, narrative, and historical structures.

Psychoanalysis is predicated on the belief that there is something to be discovered.

Map (mapping)

1. A drawing or representation, usually on a flat surface, of part or all of the surface of the earth or of some other heavenly body, of the heavens, etc., indicating a specific group of features, as land masses, countries, planets, etc., in terms of their relative size and position.
 2. A maplike delineation or representation of anything..."
- (The Random House Dictionary of English Language, p. 874)

Architectural analysis resembles the process of mapping. It becomes the representation of a place or site through the use of specific graphic conventions and symbols. The frame of the map is determined either by the place / site which is being analyzed, or by a predetermined structure of analysis in which the mapping takes place (township and range), in this sense, the frame is arbitrary in terms of the place.

Program

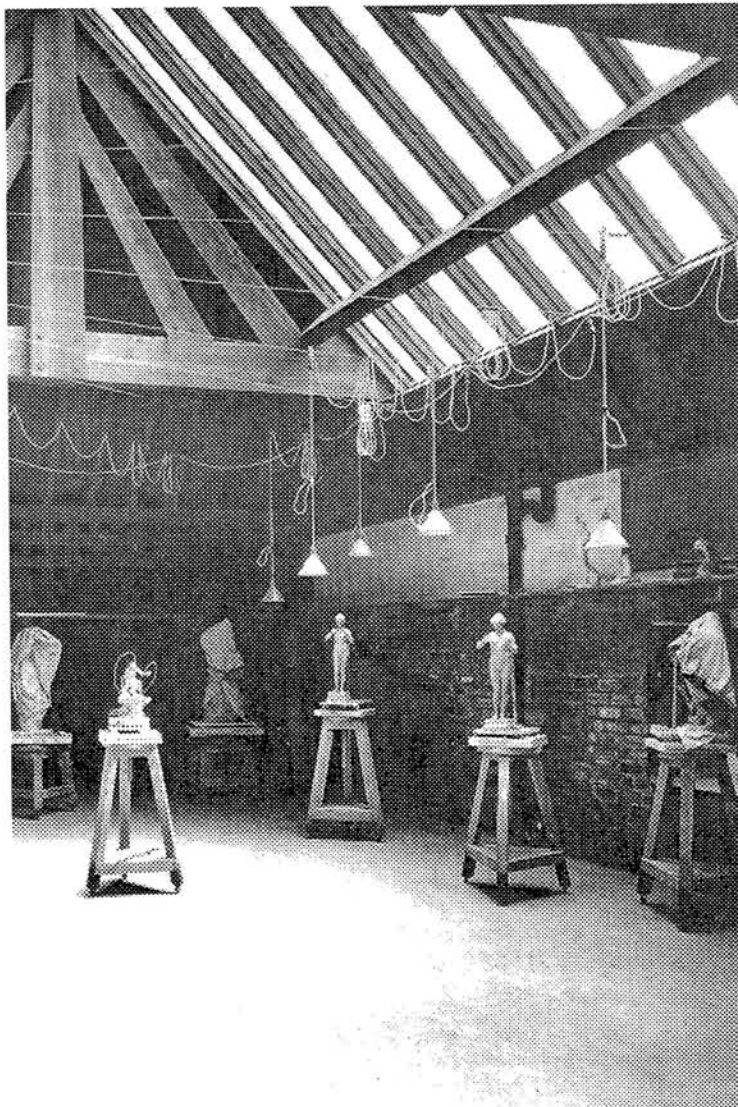
The choice of program is somewhat arbitrary. One can address the issue of architectural narrative through a wide variety of programs. I plan to design a public institution which architecturally relates to issues of the city of New Orleans, rather than a specific community within New Orleans. Programmatically, the institution will operate on a national level. I propose to design the United States Map Library. This program will be similar to the Library of Congress in program and will contain all of the maps ever printed and copyrighted in the United States. This program will consist of the library, the rare map archive, computer facilities, museum and exhibition, restoration, reading / viewing room, reproduction facilities, and classrooms.

Light

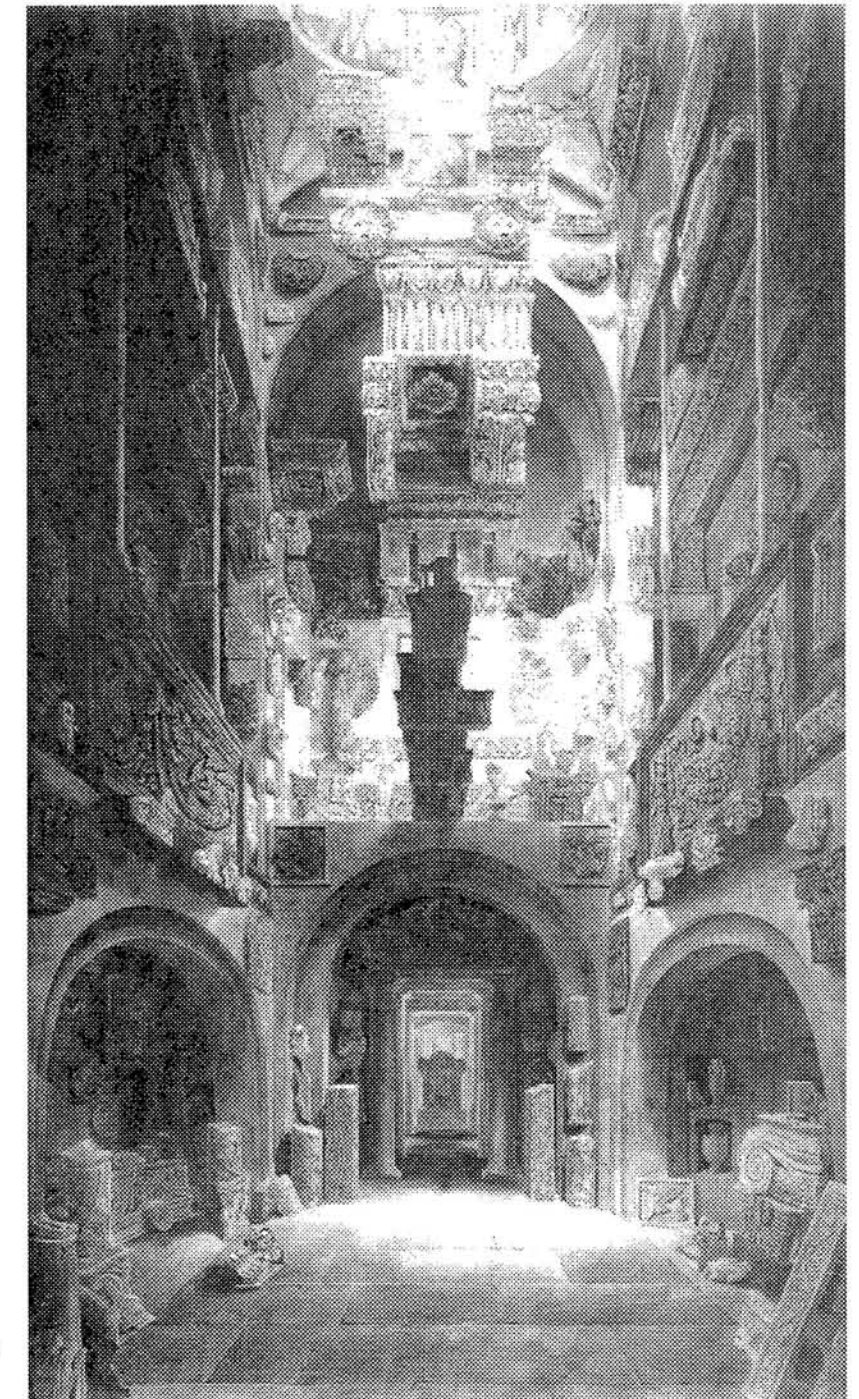
The light in New Orleans is specifically important because during the most part of the year, the weather during the day is very hot and humid . Much of the city is experienced by night. One sees in the frames the differing methods of spatial understanding depending upon the source of light. This idea will be incorporated into the ultimate architectural form.

Form

The form of the building will respond both to the climactic conditions of New Orleans as well as the geological.



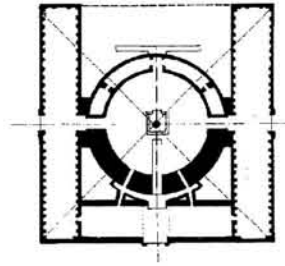
Photograph in a studio of the Glasgow School of Art - Architect R. Makintosh.



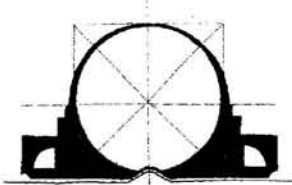
View of lower chamber in Sir John Soane's House - Architect Sir John Soane.

Matrix

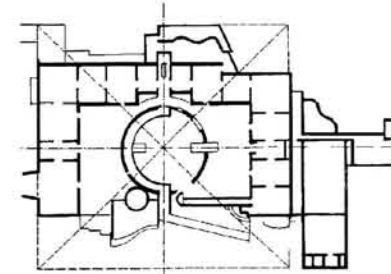
*Gunnar Asplund
Stockholm Public Library
1920 - 1928*



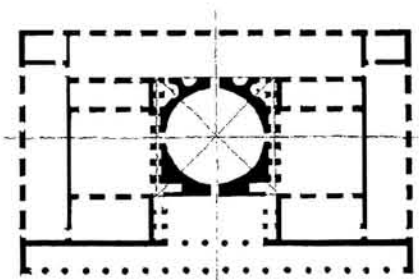
*Charles Etienne Boullée
Cenotaph for Newton
1785*



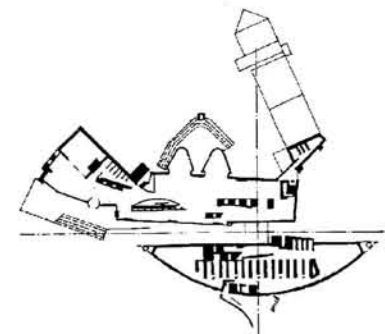
*James Stirling
Staatsgalerie, Stuttgart
1977 - 1983*



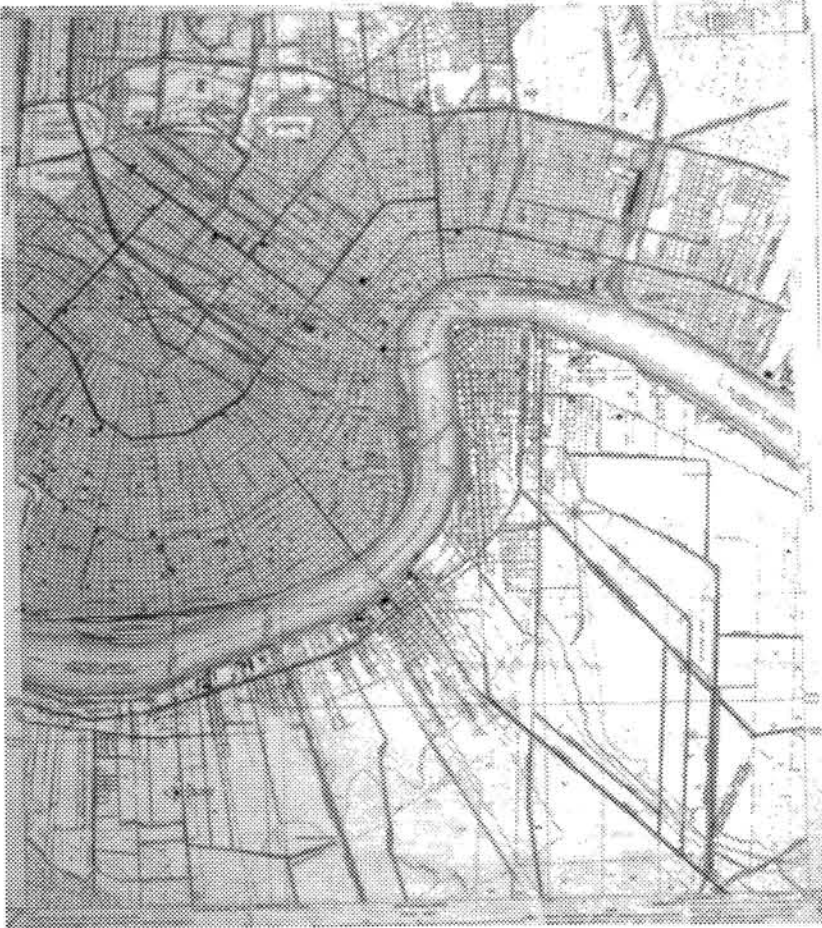
*Karl Friedrich Schinkel
Altes Museum
1822 - 1830*



*Peter Bolles - Wilson & Partner
New City Library, Munster
1987 - 1993*



Map of New Orleans, 1939.





Map of New Orleans, 1992.

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