

The background of the cover is a topographic map with contour lines. Overlaid on this map are several dark grey, semi-transparent building footprints of various shapes and sizes, suggesting an urban planning or architectural context.

SITE AND COMPOSITION

Design strategies in architecture and urbanism

Enis Aldallal, Husam AlWaer and Soumyen Bandyopadhyay



Site and Composition

Site and Composition examines design strategies and tactics in site making. It is concerned with the need for a renewed understanding of the site in the twenty-first century and the need for a critical position regarding the continued tendency to view the site as an isolated 'fragment' severed from its wider context.

The book argues for revisiting the traditional instruments or means of both siting and composition in architecture to explore their true potential in achieving connections between site and context. Through the various examples studied here it is suggested that such instrumental means have the potential for achieving greater poetic outcomes. The book focuses on the works of twentieth-century architects of wide-ranging persuasion – Peter Eisenman, Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, Alvaro Siza, Herzog & de Meuron and Charles Correa, for example – who have strived in quite different ways to achieve deeper engagement with the physical qualities of place and context.

Departing from a reconsideration of the fragment, *Site and Composition* emphasises the role of the 'positive fragment' in achieving both historical continuity and renewed wholeness. The potential of both planimetric and sectional compositional methods is explored, emphasising the importance of reciprocity between 'inside' and 'outside' – between fragment and the whole, as well as materiality. Written in a clear and accessible manner, this book makes vital reading for both researchers and students of architecture and urbanism.

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Preface



The book is concerned with the need for a renewed understanding of the site in the twenty-first century and the establishment of a critical position regarding the continued tendency to view the site as a fragment severed from its wider context. The dominant modernist tendency to regard the world around as a fragmented phenomenon, which replaced the world of pre-modern certainty, has been found inadequate in the postmodern era of globalisation, and amidst a renewed interest in achieving wholeness. Even as we have to treat sites increasingly as assemblages of orthogonal projections – which has no doubt helped designers often operating remotely in today’s globalised world of architectural practice – such abstraction need not necessarily prevent us from considering the deeper, often latent and less obvious knowledge about the site. Instrumentality and abstract codification *per se*, we argue, are not the problem, and, as Alberti’s survey of Rome demonstrates, are even critical to our understanding of orders of things. It is the counter-creative and anti-anthropological manner in which we have increasingly treated such material that has caused the crisis.

Addressing these tendencies, this book has argued for revisiting the instruments of both siting and composition in architecture to explore their true potential in achieving connections between site and context. Departing from a reconsideration of the fragment, and the processes that form fragments, fragmentation, the book emphasises the role of the ‘positive fragment’, and the role such *positive* entities could potentially play in achieving both historical continuity and renewed wholeness. It focuses on architects of wide-ranging persuasion of the twentieth century – for example, Peter Eisenman, Le Corbusier, Frank Lloyd Wright, Alvaro Siza, Herzog & de Meuron and Charles Correa – whose works defy categorisation under simple binary oppositions. Through the various examples studied here, we suggest that the instrumental means have the potential for enhanced analogical and scalar relationships capable of achieving poetic outcomes. By considering such architects’ works of diverse periods and geographical locations, one intention is

to question the lenses of preconception through which their works are regarded and promptly put into artificial ‘political’ categories. However, more importantly, it is a plea to treat architecture and the city *not* as a collection of disjointed objects but as overlapping networks of relationships, cutting across temporal and cultural boundaries.

We would like to thank all those who have helped the long journey of this book from an initial idea to fruition. Our sincere thanks to those who read and commented on the initial proposal, including Professor Graeme Hutton; special thanks are due to Professor Nicholas Temple who read and commented extensively on an earlier draft of the book. Thanks are also due to Desiree Campolo and Manwinder Lall for preparing the illustrations for publication; Desiree has worked tirelessly to ensure that all photographs are of uniform quality and has helped prepare a number of drawn illustrations that accompany this book. The North American material was collected through fieldwork visits to the key buildings discussed in this book, helped by numerous individuals: Frank Lloyd Wright’s Robie House in Chicago; Zaha Hadid’s Contemporary Arts Centre in Cincinnati; and Peter Eisenman’s Aronoff Centre for the Arts in Cincinnati and the Wexner Centre for the Visual Arts in Columbus. Some of the Indian material on Le Corbusier and Charles Correa was collected during the course of an Arts and Humanities Research Council (AHRC) supported research on modernity in Indian architecture and Nek Chand’s Rock Garden in Chandigarh. OTTO Archive, Richard Brook, Clive Gracey and Dr Ana Souto have kindly permitted the use of their photographs of the following buildings: Douglas House in Harbor Springs, Michigan; CaixaForum in Madrid; a traditional mosque in Manah in Oman; and the Galician Centre for Contemporary Art in Santiago de Compostela. Dr Iain Jackson has permitted the use of photographs of a drawn illustration of Chandigarh city plan and photographs of the Mill Owners’ Association Building in Ahmedabad. Fondation Le Corbusier has kindly allowed us to use reproductions of photographs and drawings by Le Corbusier and of his sketchbook pages.

For various reasons this book has been a long time in the making. We would like to acknowledge the continued patience of the editors and designers at Routledge for their support of this project. Earlier ideas on Le Corbusier's design approach in Chandigarh involving fragments were presented at the 2009 'Architecture and Justice' conference held at the University of Lincoln, and a preliminary study of reciprocity in the Mill Owners' Building in Ahmedabad was published earlier in 2007. We would like to thank Professor Tom Jefferies and the Manchester School of Architecture at Manchester Metropolitan University for the support extended towards the publication of this book. Last but not least, we would like to extend our heartfelt gratitude to our families, as without their continued support the book would not have materialised.

1 Introduction: site and composition



The need to revisit our understanding of the site and its relationship to its surroundings has become necessary – more than ever before – at this point well into the twenty-first century.

Such a necessity has arisen for a number of reasons. The reality is that site considerations have received progressively less attention in the academic and professional practice of architecture over the past decades. The proliferation of iconic buildings – Venturi’s *ducks*¹ – has resulted in distinctive, formally unique architecture, claiming special symbolic and aesthetic qualities. Formal iconicity has also been proclaimed and acquired through the unbuilt, such as in Libeskind’s proposed extension to the V&A Museum in London and Alsop’s Fourth Grace project in Liverpool. Aspiring to be the object of veneration itself, such iconicity is removed from previous understandings of the term as representation or resemblance of a sacred persona or work of art generated following established conventions. This solipsistic isolation and narcissism has often resulted in little attention being given to the qualities of their sites, and the building and site’s relationship to the surroundings. Venturi’s *decorated shed*, exemplified by the myriad out-of-town shopping complexes and neighbourhood supermarkets, has also remained uneasily situated within a landscape essentially shaped by the need to optimise car-parking arrangements. Contrary to Venturi’s belief, these structures housing mundane and everyday activities have hardly carried any enduring symbolism, meaning or social messages, to which the insensitive, banal treatment of site and context have contributed. Sadly, architectural education has not been immune to such developments and pressures.

The welcome rise in environmental concern has also ushered in a kind of myopic, conservative instrumentality into the way both architects and students of architecture are now guided to handle sites. The tendency to assess the appropriateness of a site for building and its relationship with the wider context through a set of overly simplistic and determining criteria – site geometry, orientation, transport

and accessibility, solar gain, minimal environmental footprint, community benefits, to name a few – is both limiting and abstract in its scope.² On the other hand, rising demand for expediency in building procurement, cost optimisation and the persistent shadow of the conservationists looming large over architects engaged in suburban volume house-building projects have limited the opportunities for engaging with site and context.

The age of frenzied information production and exchange has arguably turned our world into a global village with a flattened geography with no peaks and troughs. More than ever before, architects and architectural practices are working at locations across the globe – and often remotely. The ‘foreigner’ could potentially bring in a critical dimension – a refreshed dialogue – to energise debate regarding the reshaping of a built environment; however, this is not always the case. Beyond the obvious technical expertise the foreigner adds to the project – the perceived universal applicability of which, in itself, is not bereft of a problematic political dimension – the interventions remain global and are seldom localised due to lack of knowledge of site within specific locales. Perhaps paradoxically, this demand has now been given added impetus by the desperate need for expansion outside the West in the light of the present economic downturn that has changed the architectural profession forever.

Burns and Kahn define the understanding of site under three distinct areas of concern:

the first ... is the area of control, easy to trace in the property lines designating legal metes and bounds. The second, encompassing forces that act upon a plot without being confined to it, can be called the area of influence. Third is the area of effect – the domains impacted following design action.³

These concerns have important scalar implications, both in terms of the actual physical extent of the sites but also