

History's Cue for Modern Architecture

I find that architecture is at its utmost relevance to the designer if it can be related back to his or her personal understanding of the built environment. This project investigates an architectural connection that exists between the most defining buildings in my hometown of Port-au-Prince, Haiti and some of the early 19th century-style architecture that I observed on a trip to Paris in my final semester of undergraduate school. Although the dwellings designed in this project do little to mimic the historic styles appearing in both Haiti and Paris, they draw inspiration from the practical design features that these styles embrace. Through the careful consideration of form, context, and material, this project explores how two modern yet polar dwellings can achieve the same (or perhaps even better) efficiency as these 19th century buildings did while seamlessly adapting to the context of our present era.



Figure 1
One of Haiti's historic gingerbread houses in Port-au-Prince.



Figure 2
Rue Cremieux in Paris, France- the site for the urban palazzo explored in this project. This historic street displays many of the common resort-style elements such as bright colors, wide timber framing, and louvred shutters.

Parisian resort-style architecture first made its debut in Haiti in the late 1800s after three Haitian architects returned from their travels to Paris inspired by the newfound style.¹

Haiti has since become filled with buildings commonly referred to as “gingerbread houses” which mimic this Parisian resort-building style through the use of bright colors, large wrap-around

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https://web.archive.org/web/20130320172232/http://www.wmf.org/sites/default/files/wmf_publication/WMF%20Haiti%20Mission%20Report.pdf

verandas, louvred shutters, tall gabled roofs, and intricate woodwork. In recent years however, the country has abandoned this style, switching to more affordable concrete masonry and steel structures, and likewise, Paris has taken on more modern means to building design. The significance of old Parisian building styles however, is still relevant. Both Haiti and Paris continue to see the need for open-air spaces with plenty of ventilation as well as restrictive spaces that shelter from harsh exterior elements. Although the historic building styles did address these key features, implementing them to fit the current context of Haiti and Paris requires the exploration of new set of modern solutions.

Setting structures into two distinct regional climates, this project challenges the design decisions that had once deemed Haitian ‘gingerbread’ and Parisian ‘resort-style’ architecture efficient structures of their time. I designed an urban palazzo in a small neighborhood between a few remaining Parisian resort-style houses, and a rural villa in an undeveloped mountain region just outside of Port-au-Prince, Haiti. These dwellings embrace the essence of what architecture *needs* to do through independently addressing and solving the design issues specific to their respective sites, all while integrating the atmospheric qualities of historical housing that both countries still hold onto. These Haitian and Parisian structures show careful consideration of the architectural climates of their regions, and they avoid the creation of seemingly artificial or random space. Without recreating former styles, the two homes link the history and built environments of two dissimilar regions- Port-au-Prince, Haiti and Paris, France.

The Parisian palazzo designed in this project recreates the privacy and containment that gingerbread houses establish, while its design strategy evokes a feeling of openness and comfort inside. In order to accomplish this, I had to look first at the historical context that this palazzo is set into which uses heavy concrete and very few windows to create a safe, protective shelter from the outside. Although this is successful as a shelter, it creates the issue of making small, restrictive spaces that seem too tight for comfort. I solved this lack of ‘openness’ through a thoughtful design concept that plays off of the structure’s form and material strategy.

The design concept of this palazzo two self-facing concrete ‘brackets’ as its main feature. The form of these brackets makes the palazzo center-focused, emphasizing what occurs inside. It contains and cradles its interior components without allowing the building to become something that stifles the inhabitant. The size of the site was a challenge because it provided only a small horizontal space per floor- something that could give a sense of tightness in the space if not dealt with carefully. This ‘tightness’ was avoided by positioning the dwelling spaces vertically within the concrete structural brackets and

integrates organizing urban on the

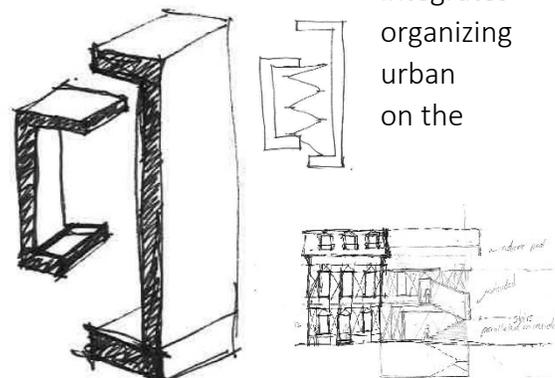


Figure 3
Preliminary sketches of “bracketing” gesture shown above. (bottom) Figure depicts interior vertical arrangement of mezzanine levels.

offering openings and views among them through the use of overlapping mezzanine levels. This way, its inhabitants can truly sense the entire scale of the palazzo when inside.

Additionally, by using a combination of translucent materials for the façade and heavy concrete as structure, I reintroduced safe enclosure and openness as it appears in resort-style architecture. The façade's use of translucent glass materials doubles to allow privacy and protection as well as ample light penetration to the interior. The large encompassing concrete structures give further protection and rigidity while restricting views in some areas.

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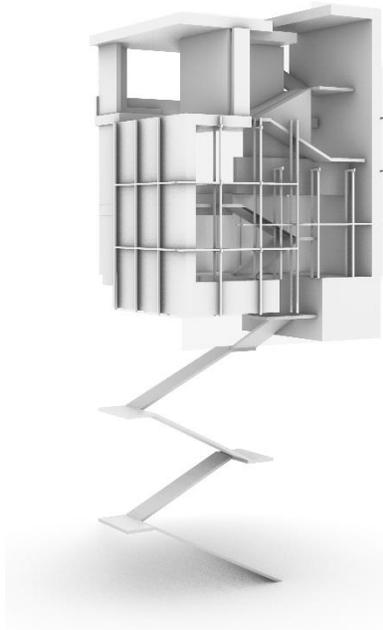


Figure 3 (Left) Schematic materiality design for the urban palazzo integrates both translucent glass and heavy concrete brackets.

Figure 4 (Right) Peter Zumthor's Kunsthhaus in Bregenz, Austria uses a series of overlapping opaque glass panels as its façade. From the exterior, it restricts views to the inside. On the interior, it filters in light illuminating the interior.

The Rural Villa on the other hand, recreates the ideas of outdoor-to-indoor occupancy evident in the resort-style Parisian (and gingerbread) houses in Paris (and Haiti). The wrap-around verandas that were used in these building styles were perfect for outdoor gathering and harvesting cool air around the entire buildings. The villa in this project uses different methods of design to achieve this result in a modern, fitting way. In directly relating the two buildings, the villa also uses two brackets, but instead of using them to restrict or hold a space, the brackets oppose each other (face opposite directions), creating both a structural and a design element

² <https://www.archdaily.com/107500/ad-classics-kunsthhaus-bregenz-peter-zumthor>

which allow figurative “harvesting” of the context into the house. In other words, these brackets spread themselves out and capture the context around it, almost as if to gather its exterior environment and pull it inside. They provide areas for outdoor occupancy and wrap-around the edges of the main structures, creating a similar effect as the historical style verandas.



Figure 5 Site Plan depicting the reverse-bracketed gesture of the Villa in the mountains just outside of Port-au-Prince, Haiti.

Both sites use water and the relating idea of fluidity as central elements in their opposing purposes. In the Urban Palazzo: two indoor therapeutic baths sit in basins at the lowest ends of each structural bracket. They mark the beginning of the palazzo and are viewable from almost every point in the house. As the user ascends each mezzanine level, their experience with the bath changes through the distancing of sound, smell, and perspective. These baths also work as a symbol of containment. They ground and anchor the building and are held entirely by the concrete slabs that surround them. Inversely, these concrete brackets contrast with the idea of gathering central to the design of the rural villa in Haiti. In the villa, the brackets are used to integrate the site inwards. Peter Zumthor, in his *Thresholds*, writes about the sort of containment that this villa tries to accomplish,

“...thresholds, crossings, the tiny loop-hole door, the almost imperceptible transition between the inside and the outside, an incredible sense of place, an unbelievable feeling of concentration when we suddenly become aware of being enclosed, of something enveloping us, keeping us together, holding us – whether we be many or single.”³

This supports the villa’s main purpose as being a place that requires ample ‘gathering’ of both occupants and elements of the site itself into the building. A vineyard onsite makes use of the villa’s strategy as grapes are extracted and gathered from the site, then brought in for the making of a final fluid product. Programmatically relating to the idea of gathering, these grapes

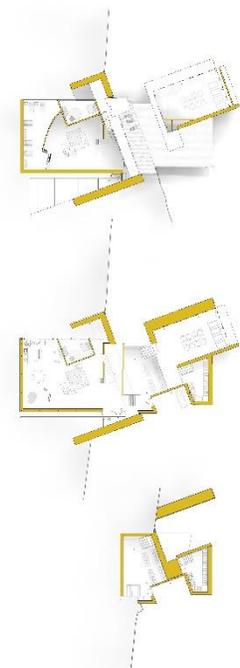


Figure 6 The Villa’s Floorplan shows the use of the spaces as dwelling and hobby. The wrapping gestures suggest integration of the site into both spaces.

³ Peter Zumthor. *Atmospheres: Architectural Environments, Surrounding Objects*. Basel: Birkhuser, 2006.

are harvested outdoors, and their juices are extracted and 'pulled' inside the palazzo for the production of wine.

All in all, relating two sites back to their very essence formed the basis from which this project was built upon. Through historic retrospect and the analysis of what remains in Haitian gingerbread and Parisian resort-style architecture, the basic necessary components of building design were carefully distinguished. After realizing the what design decisions need to made in order to support living for each respective site, this project built upon the success of the historical building styles in two very distinct regions of the world.