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Through Thick and Thin

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This thesis juxtaposes two contrasting spatial types within a single building. One of these spatial types is architecturally dense, small scale, and discrete...a Thick Plan. The other spatial type is open, large scale, and indiscrete...a Thin Plan.

In a matrix of connected rooms, due to the absence of the corridor, one has to go through one room to enter the next. The organization of a sequential depth drives people towards what Robin Evans referred to as "an architecture that recognizes passion, carnality, and sociality." 1

The Thin Plan, in contrast, is a single collective open space that allows visual and circulatory immediacy. The confluence of the Thick and the Thin Plan points toward a new type of public building: a provocative interface between highly scripted and altogether unscripted interactions.

In the Thick Plan, the ground floor allows for the encounter of bodies in space. The Thick Plan’s circulation combines the back stage activities of theater production with the public’s meandering pre-show route. On the second level, the Thin Plan choreographs in essence a behind-the-scenes show on your way to the show. Three auditoriums stage the gathering of audiences, with views to the activities of the Thick Plan below. In moving Through Thick and Thin, we are presented with an architecture that celebrates spatial experiences of gathering, encountering, exploration and communication.

To Ron Witte:
The last year of my M’Arch at Rice has cleared my thoughts on “what I like” and “what kind of architecture I want to do”, along the way there are many enlightening conversations with you.

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Abstract ii
Scenario 6-7
Thick Plan 8-23
Thin Plan 24-37
Thick and Thin 38-72
Conclusion 73
Bibliography 74
Program: Performing Arts Center
Site: E4th St and Lafayette St, New York City

Two Plans:
Thick Plan: Ground Floor
Thin Plan: Second Floor
A series of twenty one renderings serve as the major design tool. Their sequence sets up a narrative tour through the building, unfolding the thesis along the way.
“Walking down E4th street, I saw the newly opened East 4th Street Center For The Performing Arts.”
“It was quite opaque. Through its only openings to the street, I saw people having coffee inside,” said The Man.
“I stepped in and immediately entered a café. My idea was to get a coffee and explore the mysterious building.”
“They took my order at the counter underneath the arcade.”
“It’s not a spacious place for many people, but I saw a nearby room with more seats.”
“I realized there was more depth for me to explore.”
“Through the void I saw people reading in the next room. It seemed like a small library was down there.”
“In the next room, to my amazement, my favorite band was walking underneath the arcade, on their way to somewhere else.”
"I couldn’t wait for the next room."
“A popstar was waving to her fans; seems she had just stepped out of a dressing room.”
The Man’s experience presents us with a particular type of plan. In room after room, he encounters various events and people. This spatial type is called a “Thick Plan.”

A Thick Plan is defined by:

1: Room to room circulation. One must go through a room to enter the next.

2: Individual Spaces.

3: A “Matrix of rooms” as defined by Robin Evans. The absence of corridors obliges users to interact with one another.

2: Robin Evans, “Figures, Doors and Passages”, Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Essays, 1978, P88: “…The matrix of connected rooms is appropriate to a type of society which feeds on carnality, which recognizes the body as the person, and in which gregariousness is habitual…”

Left: Generic Thick Plan
This thesis began with an investigation into the possibilities embedded within the relationships between room and circulation. Of particular interest is the way in which the plan is not only a society of rooms, but also a society of possibilities.

On the left: people’s activities are highlighted as bubbles. If we read this as a synergy between program and circulation, it is, by definition, a Thick Plan.

3: Robin Evans, "Figures, Doors and Passages", Translations from “Drawing to Building and Other Essays”, 1978, P56
4: Background Painting on left: Lu Huancheng, Spring in the Han Palace, 17th Century.
Thick Plan is an architectural device for filtering human interactions. As described in the diagram on the upper left, the street is the ultimate “public” space. Upon entering the thick plan from the street, the public is distributed into individual spaces. As people move into deeper layers of the plan, they are re-united in new ways. Each time their division and re-union takes place, human relationships will change.

For my purposes, the Thick Plan is best exemplified by Sir John Soane in his design for The Bank of England. The intricacy of the plan (Below) can be read as forming, literally, the working relationships among bank employees and patrons.

Top: Thick Plan Circulation
Below: Plan for Bank of England, John Soane, 1788
The program for this thesis is a performing arts center located in New York City. The activities embedded in a performing arts center live a dramatic double life in terms of human relationships; front of stage vs. back of stage, public vs. private, production vs. entertainment.

Arranged to amplify these dichotomies, the thick plan’s program develops over multiple rooms. Retracing The Man’s sequence; he first stepped into a café, then a lounge, then into the reading room. These programmatic relationships serve each other and also prompt visitors to explore the next room.

As seen in the diagram at left, the overarching programmatic categories are subdivided into a collection of more detailed programs spread across multiple rooms, establishing both formal and programmatic relationships among rooms.

Top and below: Program diagrams
The Thick Plan by its very nature creates multiple individual spaces (top). However, an infinite matrix of rooms is not the aim of this thesis. Instead the focus is on the progression from individual to collective (below).
The Man continued: “There, I saw a stair and a girl moving to the second level. I noticed for the first time the existence of a second floor.”
“Facing the choice between two openings, I guessed turning left meant more fun.”
“Along the way I was wondering where the lobby was located, and where was the box office? This is a performance center; there should be an auditorium. I have had fun moving through multiple rooms with performance related programs, but it’s time for the show.”
“At the desk behind the arcade, the gentlemen informed me there would be a show in 10 minutes.”
“Then at the next window I paid for my ticket.”
"'The Main auditorium on the 2nd Floor', read the ticket. I stepped onto the stair."
The moment I ascended the stair, my perspective dramatically changed: revealing a video studio I had not been to and people moving on the second floor."
"This switch to the second floor reminded me of The Paris Opera by Charles Garnier: climbing the major stair is a social moment."
The Staircase of the Opera,
Painter: Louis Beraud, 1877
Architect: Charles Garnier, 1861.
“Finally reaching the second level I was presented a wide open view. I saw three auditoriums. Ladies and gentlemen gathered together and started to line up to have their tickets collected.”
“After the show, the audience had their conversation around the open space.”
Upon leaving the Thick Plan by ascending the stairs, The Man has come across a quite different plan type. The wide open spatial type is here referred to as a Thin Plan.

A Thin Plan is defined by:

1: Free circulation: visual and circulatory immediacy.

2: A singular collective space.

3: “Release” for the Thick Plan.

The program of the Thin Plan:

1: Collective Walkway.

2: 3 Auditoriums.

Top: Generic Thin Plan
Below: Thin Plan in this thesis
168 Seats
Concert Hall
Show On
80 Seats
Dance Room
Show In 10 Mins

80 Seats
Dance Room
Show In 10 Mins

second floor plan
To examine how the Thick Plan and Thin Plan work together, our narrative continues. Now following a Lady, who’s approaching the building from another direction.
“That day I arrived quite early for my show, since I was told the building was worth checking-out. I walked around its street fronts, a costume store drew my attention.”
The project is located at East 4th and Lafayette Streets, New York City.
New York City’s dense urban condition foregrounds the potential events and activities of the Thick and Thin Plans.

The Thick Plan, as a matrix of theater-related activities, opens its edges toward the streets. It invites the public through its multiple entrances: rooms on the periphery act as stores, a cafe, a bar, and galleries (below). A centralized lobby has been abandoned in favor of multiple diverse entrances.

Top: Site Plan
Below: Multiple Entrances
"The last dress was positioned in the next room."
“It was a small courtyard.”
“The room led onto an enfilade. Through the doorway I could see someone reading.”
“That’s a reading room on music and arts, I’ve been there,” The Man interrupts.
The Lady continued, “The room was split by an arcade. One side was a garden, the other side was a walkway.”
“Relative to the enfilade, the mysterious doorway on the left attracted me more.”
“It was a recording studio! And there were The Beatles!”

“Interesting! I saw them outside the reading room and had wondered where they were going,” said The Man.
The value of bringing Thick and Thin together is revealed in the way they affect, provoke, and complement each other.

The arcade, experienced by both The Man and The Lady in the Thick Plan, is the projection of the Thin Plan above onto the Thick Plan below. The arcade that results has theatrical implications, but more attention should be paid to its consequence: the subdivision of

Top: Thick Plan + Thin Plan
Below: Rooms and Columns
The presence of the Thin Plan does not “slim” the Thick plan. Instead, it adds to the “thickness” of the latter. In A2, the cafe accommodates the arcade as its bar-counter. In A5, the arcade defines the dressing rooms for the performers. In A6 it encloses the front desk and box office. The presence of the Thin Plan on top of the Thick Plan produces a new type of “served and servant” relationship.

Moreover, this overlay of spatial types offers roofs or partial ceilings to many of the Thick Plan’s rooms while leaving other rooms open to the high volume above. The arrangement of the program takes advantage of these sometimes open, sometimes covered spaces. Spaces that require privacy and acoustic isolation (below): recording studios, rehearsals, restrooms, bar, administration, dressing rooms, are located below the Thin Plan’s cover. At the same time, the Thin Plan becomes the perfect place to peer into the Thick Plan’s activities. From its elevated plane, the Thin Plan reveals spaces traditionally off limits to the audience: the acting studio, the stage craft workshop and the musician’s salon.
"The ceiling was low and the room was darker. Again, I was facing another enfilade."
“Oh, there was a series of dressing rooms, I was there,” The Man said.
“I guessed the ground floor was about the exploration and experience of pre-show activities, while the audience moved to the second floor for shows.”
The Thick Plan’s significance lies in the creation of numerous routes for exploration. The sequences that The Man and The Lady experienced are only two of the many possible routes from the streets to the theaters. Twenty others are mapped here (top). To avoid the creation of a labyrinth, two major design strategies are adopted in the organization of the plan:
1) Three primary stairs link the Thin Plan to the Thick Plan.
2) There should be no more than five rooms between a visitor and a primary stair.
“Seeking a restroom before the show, the usher directed me to the left.”
“On my way I passed a snack room with people waiting for the show.”
“I hadn’t expected the restroom to be hidden within these thick walls.”
The Thick Plan absorbs the building’s logistical spaces: mechanical rooms, pipes, storage areas, dressing rooms, kitchens, and cloakrooms. These spaces serve not only the ground floor programs but also to make the Thin Plan as “thin” as possible. The Thick Plan is filled with a form of poché (top) to clarify the “servant” and “served” spaces, and produces the final pattern of the overlap of Thick and Thin (below).

Top: Poché of the Thick Plan
Below: Thick and Thin.
“This thickness and poche adds to the depth and layers of the plan’s thickness.”
“The room next to that restroom had another stair. The two gentlemen checked my coat, and I proceed to the second floor.”
“After the show, I realized the second floor was a promenade: some people left immediately while others took their time and continued their conversations around the rails.”
"I couldn’t help to look around because I had a wide open view towards the ground floor activities."
“The pop star was meeting her friends in the musician salon.”
“I heard you also came across her somewhere?” The Lady asks The Man.
“From the second level the audience had a glimpse to the streets. With better views and a knowledge of the building, they could choose a short-cut out if they needed it.”
“Finally, the audience had left the second floor. The Thin Plan fell as quiet as an empty theater. However, the activities below never stopped.”
“The moment when I went back to the street I realized that the building had offered me more to explore than its actual footprint.”
Thick and Thin

matrix of the renders
The combination of the Thick and the Thin Plan produces a provocative interface. Of intensity and relief. Of openness and definition. Of public and private. Of controlled and uncontrolled. Within the city, the switch from the traditional lobby to multiple peripheral entrances enables this building to invite its visitors to explore the full spectrum of its interior dynamic: from intimate Thick Plan to collective Thin Plan.

But above all, this thesis is aiming at an architecture that produces new human relationships, not merely accommodating needs. As illustrated throughout these images, Through Thick and Thin generates, “an architecture arising out of the deep fascination that draws people towards others; an architecture that recognizes passion, carnality and sociality.”

5: Robin Evans, “Figures, Doors and Passages”, from “Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Essays”, 1978, P90

Left: Photo of Final Model


