RICE UNIVERSITY

ANIMATE LENGTH:
THE FRENCH CONNECTION

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ABSTRACT

ANIMATE LENGTH is a project that reconsiders the long building typology as an object capable of responding to continuous sites produced by linear infrastructures. The approaches to the project are both site-based and typological. First, by taking into account the long sites produced by highways, this thesis project is engaged with the continuous linear site of movement, and compresses the project into this space. Second, by reconsidering the long typology, this project produces new architectural opportunities for length in building as a question of both inhabitation and representation.

While the first ambition is to address this urban space architecturally, the second leverages the potential of duration to address the dispersed audience of the car passing beneath the building in order to produce a new cultural commodity - the building as animation.

Situated along the Boulevard Périphérique in Paris, which forms the municipal boundary of the French capital, this project proposes a single building of nearly one mile in length, producing an engagement with the infrastructural edge to unite the city with its suburb.
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This thesis takes the highway as its site of investigation, and proposes an architecture of significant length to address its scale. The car, as tool of dispersal, plugged in to the highway in order to bring about density. As such, it has affected urbanism in ways as palpable today as it was in the postwar era of rampant territorial division imposed on the city by the highway.

By merging infrastructure and architecture this project addresses two main concerns: First, by addressing the car and architecture over a long duration in order to find a new language for an architecture of the highway. Second, by merging infrastructure and architecture this project addresses the urban phenomena of urbanization through the proliferation of linear infrastructures, which the linear site can be transformed urbanistically from a continuous barrier to a connective bridge. This project takes a slight detour along the less-well-known lines of Allison Smithson, whose book, Reading the Highway, engages the particularities of its context.

Internally, the form is uninterrupted, connecting all points internally through a path traversible for the building inhabitants - 2000. The form also allows for and takes advantage of segmentation at each of its corners, chamfered to become...
Simultaneously, the structure is articulated as a series of diagonal piers and internal members that further animate the form. The foundations move back and forth to create a sensation of movement as if the building is walking along the highway.

From the point of view of the motorist, this continuous zigzag across the highway produces a rhythmic motion, animating the form of the building itself, and also setting up a series of framed views of the building's context. These framed views splice together glimpses of Paris and Gentilly, the campus and the suburb, creating an architectural Kuleshov effect in which the form brings the two entities together as one perceptual entity.

Finally, the building is enveloped in a fine mesh which emphasizes the singularity of the form while selectively shrouding the interior. This serves to minimize the light entering the building's from oncoming headlights, but also produces a paradoxical quality of being both monolithic and ephemeral depending on the time of day.
Fig. 21: Plan view diagram of urban edge and alignment with streets. Offset from perpendicular street alignment with streets setback from approaching highway extension as infill alignment with streets alignment with streets continuation of street wall across highway.

Fig. 9: Figure ground plan of southern Paris with new housing project for CUIP imposed. Fig. 11: Axonometric projection of the building framing the campus while hugging the Peripherique and surrounding neighborhoods.

Fig. 12: Framed view of the interstitial space between campus and highway, while under the building. Figs. 13-20: Diagrams of local engagement with suburban context.
TYPICAL PLAN 1:1000

GROUND LEVEL PLAN 1:1000

Fig. 22. Plan view diagram of campus edge and inflection of public space
Fig. 23. Axonometric with highlighted vertical circulation, cores, and envelope
Fig. 24. Axonometric with highlighted chamfered ends, views towards campus and city.
Fig. 25. Plan diagrams, typical floor.
Fig. 26. Plan, typical floor.
Fig. 27. Plan, ground floor.
fig. 29 SECTION LOOKING SOUTH TOWARDS PERIPHERY

0 m 25 m 50 m 100 m 200 m

81 82 83 84 85 86 87 88 89 90 91 92 93 94 95 96
The architectural fantasy of the continuous linear project plays out here with particular qualities that should be embraced, while others should continue to be pressed further.

Principally, the success of the project lies in the way in which the geometry of the project subsumes the part-to-whole relationship within a single building at a scale of a landscape while allowing articulations that diminish the overall 'bigness' of the gesture. To that degree, the project provocatively resists the overwhelming scale of the slab often found in the postwar suburbs of many cities outside of the U.S. Extreme length is not the same quality of massiveness, and it is fair to say that the overall density of the project is quite similar to its surrounding context. This is quite evident in the figure-ground drawings of the building in context where the project is camouflaged within the horizontal development rest of the city.

Perspectivally, there are few moments where the building reveals itself as a wall, but rather as a gesture that reveals the presence of the highway itself. Thus, the project does charge the boundary politically, and perhaps this is where future iterations of the project can be strengthened.

While offering a new model for linearity and engagement with the highway, the quality of bridging still needs to be articulated further. There is still in some representations, a quality of the militaristic rampart.
For the project to become more articulate in the future, the end nodes should be accentuated further to produce more moments of singularity in order to emphasize the qualities of bridging, or even perhaps to engage the urban spaces in more particular ways. While the massing offers a promise of what could be in those spaces, a second degree of refinement that derives more from the interior development of both surface and circulation could make the project much stronger as a model, rather than as a fascination or novelty. That said, the urban effects of bridging is entirely context-driven, and in future iterations of this kind of project should be given a higher priority.

Overall, the project does provide a new engagement with the car and the city, but it is the engagement at the slower paces that are the ones that continue to be most important to architecture. With this said, the virtue of novelty should not be overlooked. As architects we should continue to challenge ourselves to think outside the realm of normative practice, even in rethinking issues of scale to find new ways of provoking what could be the city of the future.
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