

Architectural Identity Research Paper
- Naturalism -

INTA3322 - Critical Perspectives: Identity

Tutor: Robert Griffin

Word Count: 1500

October 2016



Cover Image: Jean Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre, edited by Oliver Perrett.

Architectural identity has emerged as a principal metaphor in the discourse of architecture as symbolic functions of space are drawn similar to that of personal and social identities. Primary demonstrations of architectural identity divide into design aspects that are best translated through philosophical theories of spatial experience. Through a dynamic investigation into both philosophical and literary understandings of naturalism, notions surrounding identity will be revealed. It can then be determined that a naturalistic approach to architectural design is spatially experienced as an inherent embodied relationship to a space's natural place of belonging. The idea will be represented through a comprehensive spatial analysis of three key examples of corporate or civic architecture; each demonstrating a distinctive relationships to their place. The three key examples respectively explore relationships to the earth in the Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre (1998), spiritual connection in the Sancaklar Mosque (2012) and a relationship to history in Shelters for Roman Archaeological Site (1986).

In literature and philosophy naturalism is an idea that dominates many theories of science and nature; ultimately advocating the congruence of the two phenomena. The strand of naturalism explored in this research paper is best defined by first proposing circumstances surrounding the valorisation of nature in terms of science and mathematics. This is fundamentally questioning how to scientifically accept that everything is a product of nature and how to determine those entities as mathematical objects (Post 1995, p. 517). The step beyond this metaphysical analysis comes to question the inherent relationship between scientific products of man and the natural quantities of its composition (Post 1995, p. 518). In literature more romantic ideals of naturalism are conveyed in exploring the harmony of natural and scientific occurrences in relation to human beings. This exploration typically illustrates a

profound human relationship with nature and science which answers to the validation of the entire human enterprise (Pizer 1984, p. 11). It is the belief that the human existence is sustained by this understanding of natural and scientific harmony that epitomises the theory of naturalism. Through relevant philosophical and literary notions on the topic of naturalism, a coherent inference of the idea has been appointed for the purpose.

The origins of naturalism are aligned with major milestones in philosophy in western culture and provide basis on which to understand the presence of the theory in architecture. The notion of naturalism can be traced to pre-socratic (6th century BCE) philosophy as the earliest questions of the essence of 'things' were being asked; culminating in questions of how to describe nature mathematically and scientifically (Zeller 1955, p. 323). Naturalism is thought to have been generated by pre-socratic philosopher Thales of Miletus (546 BCE), a mathematician and astronomer noted for the almost ironic idea that water is the *arche*¹ (Barnes 2001, p. 91). Over time naturalism became most notably preserved as a literary theory until emerging in the 17th century as a common motif in visual art, theatre and sociology. Despite these findings, American scientific theorist Steven Shafersman (1966) believes that with naturalism being the soul companion to romanticism in science truly only appeared as the western world approached the Enlightenment period 19th century. With this synthesis of major milestones and origins of naturalism in western culture a coherent understanding of the idea is granted.

The application of naturalism theories to that of architectural identity indicates the possibility to stimulate optical and sensual connection to space. The scientific phenomenon of architecture instinctively embraces naturalism as it represents the potential of

¹ Greek word meaning 'essential origin', 'the creator' and 'ultimate overseer'.

scientific expression with natural elements. Civic and corporate architecture is indicative of such values as they must be representative or facilitatory of specific geographical environments, cultures and communities and will hence be the focus of the spatial analysis in this paper. It is the manner of a building that alludes to its place of belonging (environmental, spiritual or historical) that echoes the fundamentals of naturalism. Considered foremost when analysing naturalist tendencies in architecture is the underlying concept of a project, which must imply the architect's intention to control human experience (Johnson 1994, p. 89). What is to be considered the utmost complete architectural concept by Johnson (1994, p. 90) is one that facilitates control over most aspects of human action and the performance of the building, yet can be completely adapted to by personal idiosyncrasies. The idea of naturalistic practice through spatial design is hence implied to generate an inherent value for a building's identity; valorising an individual's embodied relationship to space.

The Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre (JMTCC) by renowned Italian architect Renzo Piano is a civic building in Noumea, New Caledonia completed in 1998 (Figure 1).



Figure 1: The Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre, Renzo Piano, Noumea, 1998, *McInstry* 1998, pp. 30.

The centre is unmistakably

concerned with nature however the architectural identity stems from naturalistic impressions on design aspects such as scale, form and functionality of the structure in order to visually represent the *Kanak*² culture. The signature wooden structures of the JMTCC (Figure 2) pay ode to naturalist ideals as an architectural realisation of cultural symbols through form. While

² The indigenous Melanesian inhabitants of New Caledonia.



Figure 2: *Grande Case*, The Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre, Renzo Piano, Noumea, 1998, Mclnstry 1998, pp. 30.

these soaring structures are a profound expression of traditional Kanak homes (see Figure 3) their feeling of incompleteness relates to that of Kanak culture wanting to be represented as not static but open to change (Kasarherou 1995, pp. 94). The concept of naturalism in the form of the *grande case*³ structures are an interpretation of the

landscape as Piano has envisaged the final project as a rendering in its natural place. The functionality of the JMTCC is an ultimate example of architecture forming identity through paying homage to the building's occupant's traditional way of living. Figures 4



Figure 3: Traditional Kanak House/Hut Design in New Caledonia, Noumea, 1998, Mclnstry 1998, pp. 35.

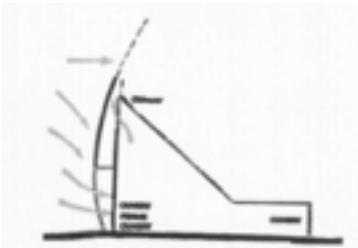


Figure 4: Wind Diagram, The Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre, Renzo Piano, Noumea, 1998, Mclnstry 1998, pp. 35.

and 5 relate to the wind breaking element of the *grande case* which is ideal for the site's location where it is prone to typhoons. Furthermore, light is encouraged into the spaces beyond the *grande cases* with an effect that is described as calibrated levels of natural and artificial

light (Figure 6) (Sacchi 2007, pp. 25). This consideration of natural involvements in the JMTCC invites a balance of western rationality and local tradition, set against the backdrop of an authentic respect for the natural environment. The architectural

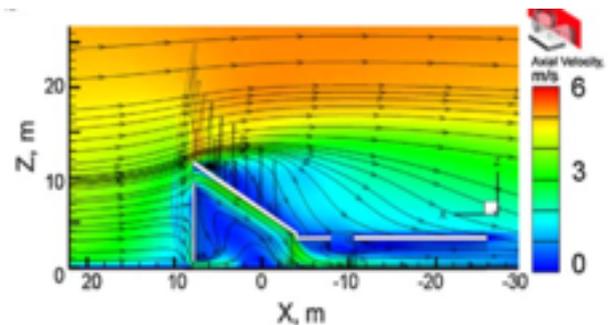


Figure 5: Wind Diagram, Noumea Northerly, Mclnstry 1998, pp. 35.

³ A Kanak's Chief house.



Figure 6: Natural Light in Interior, The Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre, Renzo Piano, Noumea, 1998, Kasarherou 1995, pp. 90.

translation of naturalism in the JMTCC endorses the proclamation of cultural identity and provides a spatial experience that is identifiable to by Kanak people.

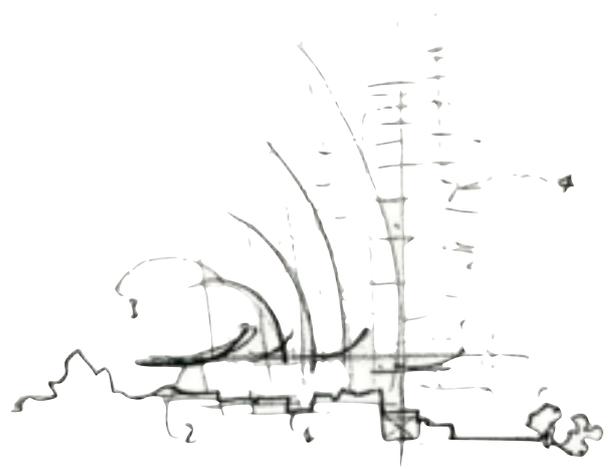


Figure 7: Concept Sketch by Renzo Piano, The Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre, Renzo Piano, Noumea, 1998, Kasarherou 1995, pp. 92.



Figure 8: Site Plan, The Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre, Renzo Piano, Noumea, 1998, Kasarherou 1995, pp. 92.

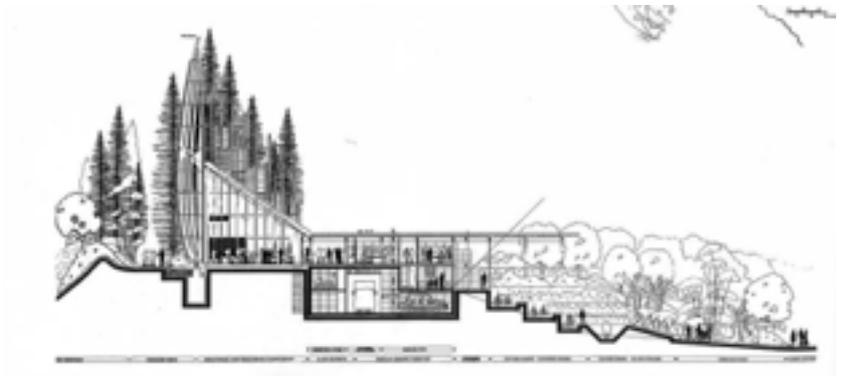


Figure 9: Short West Facing Section, The Jean-Marie Tjibaou Cultural Centre, Renzo Piano, Noumea, 1998, Kasarherou 1995, pp. 92.

The Sancaklar Mosque by Turkish architect Emre Arolat is a religious building belonging to Muslim religion in Istanbul, Turkey completed in 2012 (Figure 10). The Sancaklar Mosque addresses naturalist

tensions to focus on the essence of religious space through design aspects in landscaping, interior volumes and lighting to deliver an



Figure 10: Sancaklar Mosque, Emre Arolat, Istanbul, 2012, Thomas Mayer June 2014.

identifiable space for all Muslims. Naturalism and landscaping appear to go hand in hand in a design although it is the control of nature and shaping of a natural environment that implies

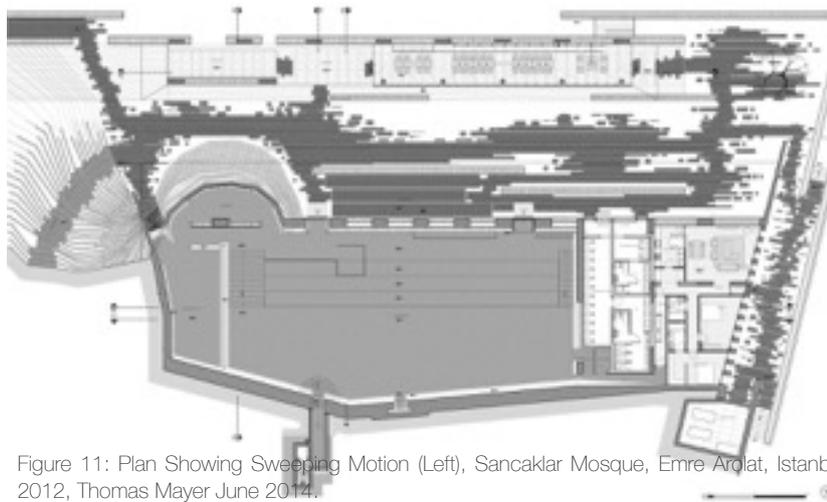


Figure 11: Plan Showing Sweeping Motion (Left), Sancaklar Mosque, Emre Arolat, Istanbul, 2012, Thomas Mayer June 2014.

naturalism. Landscaping of the Sancaklar Mosque impels a sweeping motion (Figure 11) that lets visitors seep into the ground to the worshiping space. With this space being the lowest excavation of the

site (Figure 12), Arolat encourages the notion that prayer in Muslim religion is more powerful when lower to the earth at the mercy of a greater being (Kahera, Abdulmalik and Anz 2009, p. 17). The blurred boundaries of natural, scientific and spiritual occurrences on the site is

enhanced by the cave-like interior (Figure 13) which is doused by natural

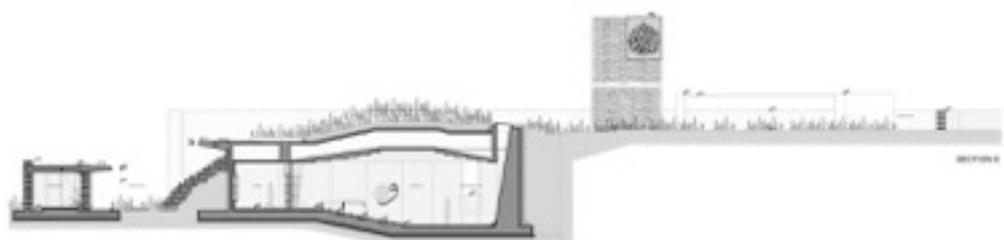


Figure 12: Worship Space Excavation in Section, Sancaklar Mosque, Emre Arolat, Istanbul, 2012, Thomas Mayer June 2014.

light through the Qiblah⁴ wall in a recessed slit (Figure 14 and Figure 15). The light slit is a symbolic vessel to connect with God from the space. Arolat's naturalist theoretical approach to the Sancaklar Mosque has resulted in a dramatic and awe-inspiring space for Muslims to pray and be alone with God. To



Figure 13: Cave Like Interior, Sancaklar Mosque, Emre Arolat, Istanbul, 2012, Thomas Mayer June 2014.

provide such profound power through spatial experience is illustrative of the capacity to identify with architecture.

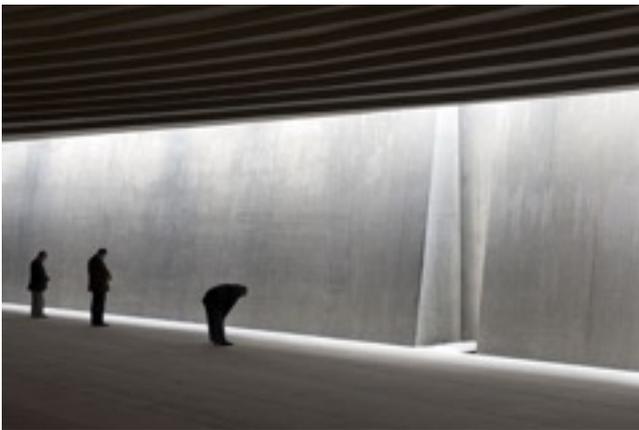


Figure 14: The Qiblah with Light Trickling in, Sancaklar Mosque, Emre Arolat, Istanbul, 2012, Thomas Mayer June 2014.



Figure 15: The Main Light Slit, Sancaklar Mosque, Emre Arolat, Istanbul, 2012, Thomas Mayer June 2014.

⁴ The wall in a mosque that is in the direction of Kabaa (sacred building in Mecca) of which Muslims turn to for prayer.

Swiss architect Peter Zumthor's *Shelters for Roman Archaeological Site* is a permanent exhibition space in Chur, Switzerland built in 1986 (Figure 16). With a theoretical



Figure 16: Shelters for Roman Archaeological Site, Peter Zumthor, Chur, 1986, Swisher 2010, pp. 5.

underpinning echoing fundamental aspects of naturalism, Zumthor has employed design techniques in the programme's form and function and materials in the space to make it identifiable with the history it preserves and the environment in which it sits. With primary concerns

of atmosphere, subtle suggestions are laid by Zumthor in the form and function of the structure. The minimal impression of the furniture inside (Figure 17), the thin profile of the stair to the main raised bridge (Figure 18) and the floating entrance (Figure 19) all imply that little footprint is left on the site



Figure 17: Minimalist Furniture, Shelters for Roman Archaeological Site, Peter Zumthor, Chur, 1986, Martin December 2013.

from the building and hence the atmosphere of the spatial experience must mimic that (Jahja 2016). The lamella timber casing (Figure 20) of the shelters facilitate more than just enclosure as it provides additional atmospheric qualities through light and sound. The untreated timber (sourced on site) has a poetic response to the site itself as it has silvered in



Figure 18: Minimalist Stair Profile, Shelters for Roman Archaeological Site, Peter Zumthor, Chur, 1986, Martin December 2013.



Figure 19: Minimalist Entrance Threshold, Shelters for Roman Archaeological Site, Peter Zumthor, Chur, 1986, Martin December 2013.

the sun paths and begun a process of natural seasoning and inevitable decay (Figure 21) (Jahja 2016). The exterior silvering juxtaposes the natural tones inside which creates a dichotomy of natural light experiences with a camouflaged appearance outside and a vibrant glow inside. The dominance of the timber is also deemed to have acoustic properties that Swisher (2010 pp.

5) describes to emanate a silent sound from light vibrating through the space. This naturalistic interpretation of the site parallels with Zumthor's theory that interiors are large instruments that generate sounds and collect its energy (Zumthor 2006, p. 29). With unparalleled consideration for naturalistic theory in space, the Shelters are the ultimate example of architecture as a body of atmospheric spatial design identifying itself with its own place and purpose.

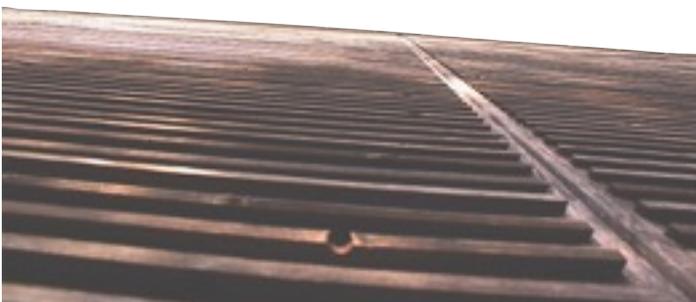


Figure 21: Timber Ageing and Decaying, Shelters for Roman Archaeological Site, Peter Zumthor, Chur, 1986, Swisher 2010, pp. 5.

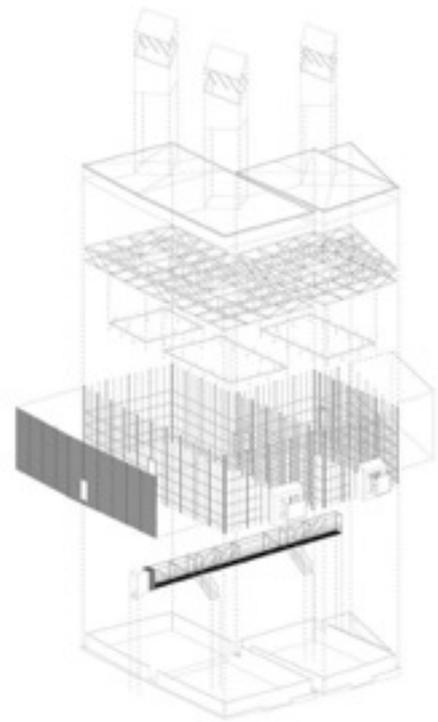


Figure 20: Exploded Axonometric Showing Lamella Timber Composition, Shelters for Roman Archaeological Site, Peter Zumthor, Chur, 1986, Martin December 2013.

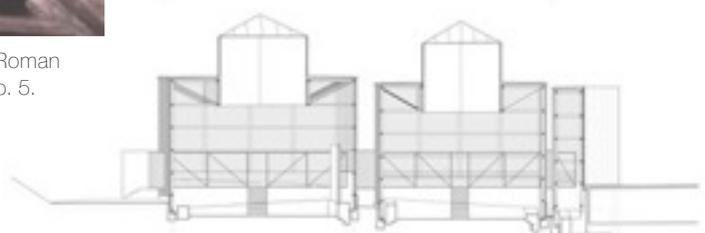


Figure 22: Long Sections, Shelters for Roman Archaeological Site, Peter Zumthor, Chur, 1986, Martin December 2013.

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