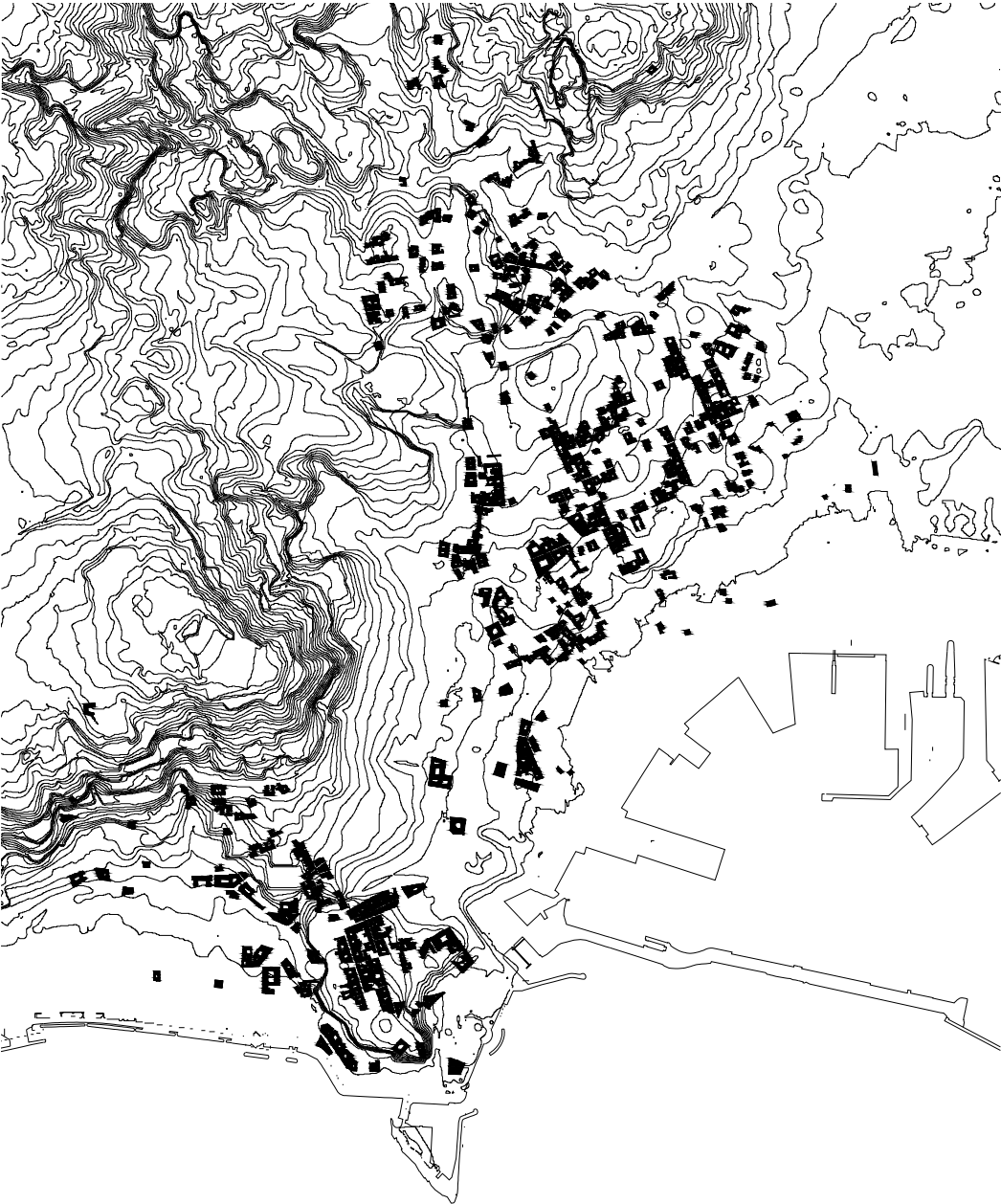




Decomposition - Composition: The Neapolitan *Palazzo*

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Understanding the character of Naples

Much has been written about the domestic life of Naples, which could be brought down to a simple word: frantic. Yet, the spatial setting of this frenetic life is its perfect contradiction: a hieratic and permanent architecture. The character of the city is deeply rooted in this combination¹: a timeless architecture supporting a diversity of uses and life trajectories.

The notion of 'referential type'² is a powerful tool to identify this character. The referential type is a housing standard, usually massively produced in the golden age of a place (the Berlin *Mietshaus*, the Haussmann buildings in Paris, etc.). It is an inseparable combination of spatial and socio-cultural features, offering a condensed overview of the dwelling characteristics of a specific place. Given this double - spatial and social - association, understanding the spatial constituents of a referential type illuminates the socio-cultural character of a particular place³. In Naples, the referential type is clearly the 18th-century *palazzo*.

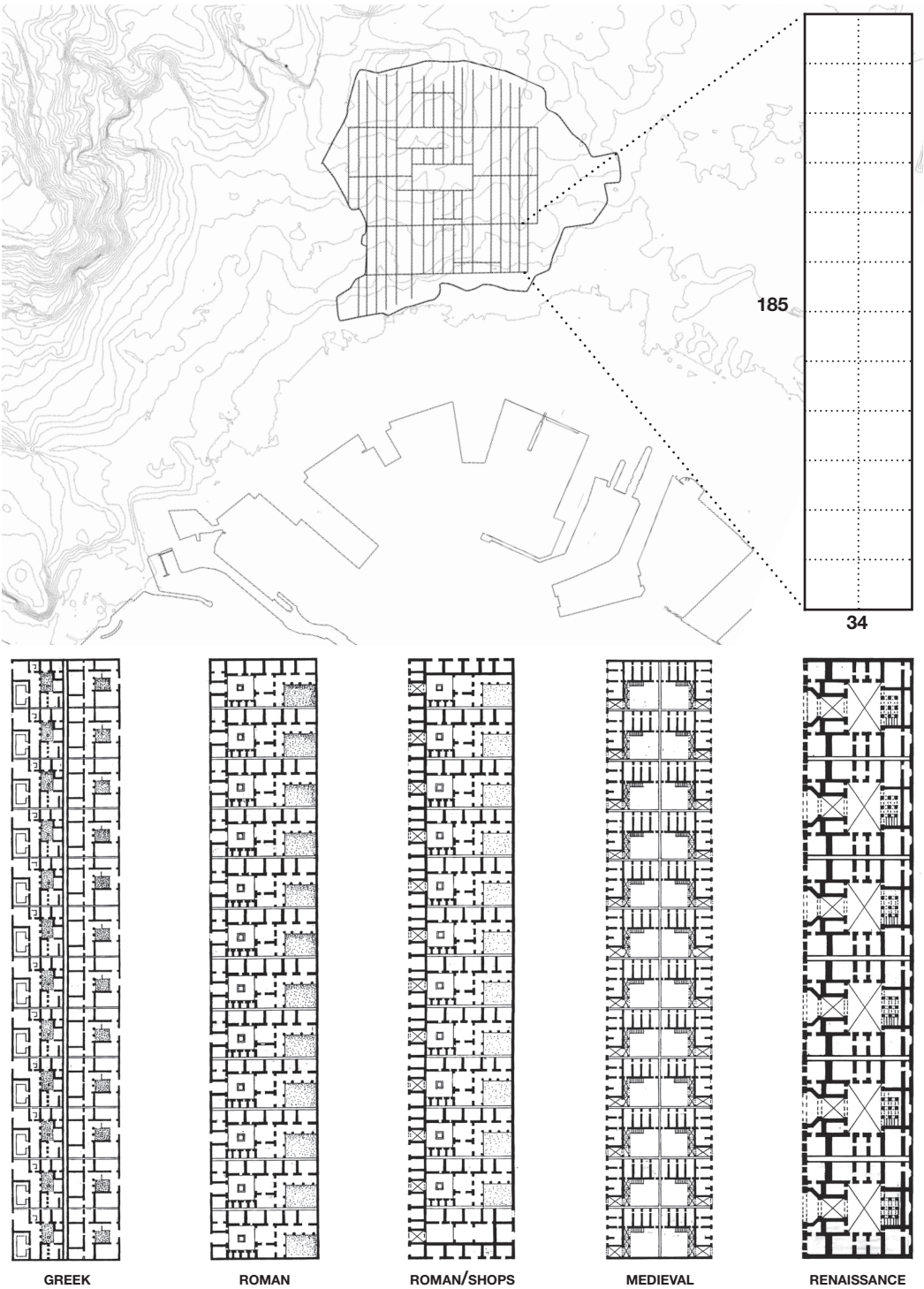
In order to understand the Neapolitan *palazzo* and hence the very character of Naples, a pedagogical method was developed in several architectural 'Naples Studios' led by a team of professors (Ch. Fontaine, C. Chanvillard, A. Boulaïoun and G. Ledent). This method – decomposition-composition – is twofold. First, it involves a decomposition process. Before designing anything, understanding the ingredients of the design is essential. Hence, decomposition aims to analyze and depict very precisely a series of architectural features. This work can be regarded as research for the purpose of design⁴. Three scales of decomposition are investigated

1. 'The immutability of its architecture contrasts with the mobility of people and things' in: Buchholz, A. (2002) 'The Used City', *Element 8* (Hoarders and Collectors).

2. Ledent, G. and Komossa, S. (2019) 'Referential Types as Clues for Housing Design', *Urban Morphology*.

3. This posture relates directly to the Italian school of typology led by Saverio Muratori. Muratori, S. (1959) *Studi per una operante storia urbana di Venezia*, Roma: Istituto poligrafico dello Stato, Libreria dello Stato.

4. Bruce Archer, when depicting research in the Humanities, distinguishes three kinds of research: about, for the purpose of and through. In the case of the decomposition exercise, the second case is clearly at stake. Archer, B. (1995) 'The Nature of Research', *Co-design interdisciplinary journal of design* 2, 6-13.



Evolution of the Neapolitan city blocks in relation to the building fabric - Author's drawing (based on C. Cirillio)

in the case of the Neapolitan *palazzo* in direct reference to Durand's triad⁵: elements - parts - ensembles. Second, once the dissection completed, a design process of composition occurs⁶. Again, it takes place on the three different scales listed above in a combination process that refers once again to the teaching of Durand or of Quatremère de Quincy⁷. In both the decomposition and composition phases of the work, a specific understanding of the character of Naples is brought to light.

Decomposition

Decomposition was considered as the primary step of the design process in the Naples Studios. It involves conducting research for the sake of a future design. Hence, prior to design, a series of thorough analyses were carried out or gathered by students in order to understand the domestic fabric of Naples. The Neapolitan *palazzo* was studied at three scales: urban setting, building typology and element constitution.

The Greek urban grid

Understanding the *palazzo* cannot be detached from its morphological scale. Hence, at a city scale, the setting of the *palazzi* was studied thoroughly, tracing it back to the first Greek settlement of Neapolis. The mediating means between buildings and the urban fabric are the city blocks. Their characteristics emerge from architectural and topographical influences.

From a topographical point of view, the street network is oriented according to the natural flow of water. The initial Greek network develops a grid of 22 by 3 roads.

From an architectural point of view, the dimensions of the blocks were defined by the traditional Greek housing, developing long and narrow rectangle city blocks (*insulae*) of 185 by 34 meters⁸. While some blocks were merged to accommodate institutional programs such as the theatre or the agora⁹, the regular *insulae* sheltered domestic architecture.

The evolution of the Neapolitan palazzo

In Naples, the evolution of domestic architecture from the early ages to the archetypal *palazzo* from the 18th century can be summarised as follows¹⁰.

The early Greek settlement instituted the size and the shape of the *insulae*, arranging 24 back-to-back houses¹¹ on 16

5. Durand, J. N. L. (1809) *Précis des leçons d'architecture données à l'école polytechnique*, Paris: Ecole polytechnique.

6. Referring to Bruce Archer again, this process can lead to research through design if carried out in a systematic way. Ibid.

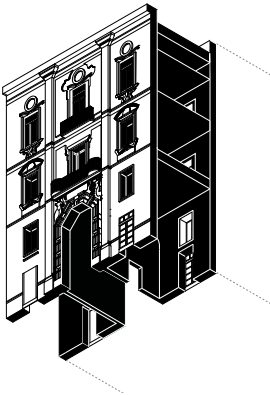
7. Lucan refers to the combination methods produced by both authors as the real invention in architecture. Lucan, J. (2009) *Composition, non-composition: architecture et théories, XIXe-XXe siècles*, Lausanne: Presses polytechniques et universitaires romandes.

8. Bartolommeo Capasso gives a clear view of the Antique plan of Neapolis. Capasso, B. (1905) *Napoli greco-romana esposta nella topografia e nella vita: opera postuma*, Napoli: Stab. tip. L. Pierro.

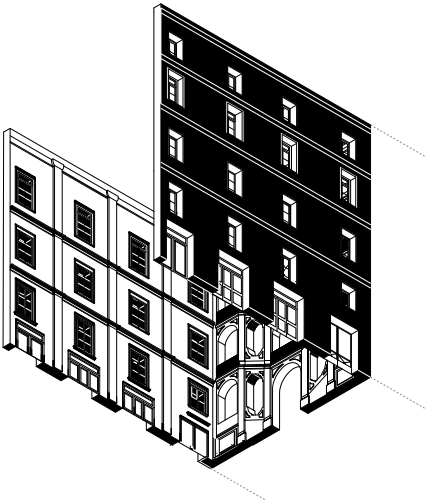
9. Later on, those double-blocks were used to accommodate religious programs (major churches, cloisters, etc.).

10. A thorough analysis of this evolution is given by Clelia Cirillo in Cirillo, C. (1991) 'La lettura dell'isolato del Centro Antico di Napoli' in Ingegneria, P. I. F. d., ed. *Storia Architettura e Tecnologia dell'insula 34 del Decumanus Major*, Napoli: S.E.C.I.T. s.r.l. - Tuccillo s.p.a. Costruzioni

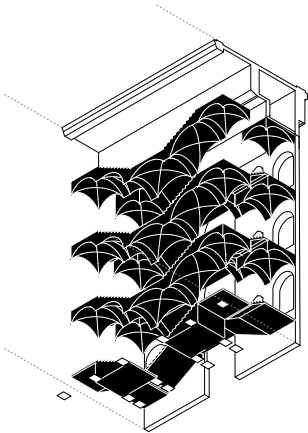
11. This housing form can be paralleled to the Hippodamian grid housing of the Olynthos colony.



ENTRANCE



COURTYARD



STAIRCASE

by 16 meter square plots. Within these plots, one- or two-storey houses are organized around a family *megaron*. The peripheral wall of the dwellings is closed off to the public space, with the exception of the entrance passageway.

Hellenistic housing developed on larger plots by merging two adjoining parcels. The layout remained centripetal around a private courtyard.

In late Hellenistic times, shops were added to the traditional plan, transforming the relation of the *insula* to the public realm. Public life enters the domain of the *insulae* for the first time.

During medieval times, the layout of the multi-storey houses echoes the societal organization: an intricate combination of domestic life and handicraft work at home. Craftsmen's workshops are positioned along the streets.

In the Renaissance, the *palazzi* acquired their more definite features: larger plots, a greater interior courtyard accessible from an entrance hall and a staircase leading to several floors as illustrated in the 15th century engraving by Antonio Lafrery.

One palazzo, a triptic

The archetypal *palazzo* from the 18th century can hence be seen as a *palimpsest-palazzo*¹², an evolution of domestic architecture since Antiquity. From a compositional point of view, the *palazzo* displays a recurring threefold sequence deeply rooted in the Neapolitan ground¹³: entrance - courtyard - staircase.

First, the entrance arrangements are a direct consequence of a highly congested city, offering a transition from the urban frantic context. Entrances are constituted of two elements, a portal and an entrance hall. Given the narrowness of the streets, allowing no setback on the façades, portals are massive and lavishly decorated to attract the passer-by's attention, a distinctive characteristic of Neapolitan Baroque¹⁴. They lead into a hallway that is often a room in itself, creating a 'light-shadow-light'¹⁵ threshold between the street and the interior courtyard. Interestingly, entrances are left open during daytime¹⁶, allowing strangers in the collective domain of the *palazzo*. At night, the heavy doors are shut and the narrow streets become stone canyons.

Second, courtyards have been the core of the housing structures ever since the Greek settlements, providing the major share of air and light to the dwellings. However, compared to the *megaron* houses, the courtyard is a both a monumental and a collective space in the archetypal

12. Labrot, G. (1993) *Palazzi napoletani: storie di nobili e cortigiani 1520-1750*, Napoli: Electa.

13. Ever since the Antiquity, stone mines were exploited on the very ground of the city. Zerlenga, O. (2013) 'Memories in stone', in Gambardella, C., ed. *Heritage Architecture LanDesign*, XI Forum Internazionale di Studi 'Le vie dei Mercanti', Aversa-Capri, La scuola di Pitagora, 13-15.

14. Labrot underlines this character as he refers to the architectural feature as an optical tool allowing an oblique reading of the facade in the narrow streets of the city. Labrot, G. (1979) *Baroni in Città': Residenze e comportamenti dell'aristocrazia napoletana 1530-1734*. Pref. di Giuseppe Galasso, Napoli: Società Editrice Napoletana.

15. Zerlenga, O. (2014) 'Staircases as a representative space of architecture', in Gambardella, C., ed. *Le Vie Dei Mercanti*, XII Forum Internazionale Di Studi, Aversa and Capri, La scuola di Pitagora, 1632-42.

16. 'As with most other Neapolitan palazzi, the gate is opened from morning to lunchtime, closed during the siesta (2-4 PM) and is reopened from afternoon till evening.' Buchholz, A. (2002) 'The Used City', Element 8 (Hoarders and Collectors).

17. Labrot, G. (1993) *Palazzi napoletani: storie di nobili e cortigiani 1520-1750*, Napoli: Electa.



palazzo. Its very scale seems to relate rather to the public realm than to domestic functions. As such, the *palazzo* courtyards are the largest open spaces in the city along with the religious cloisters. In addition, in view of the openness of the entrances, courtyards are an urban resource, a series of spaces shared beyond the communal uses of the *palazzo*.

Third, staircases become a decisive feature in the design of the *palazzi*. Indeed, as the city became denser, *palazzi* were structured on several floors. In addition, the *palazzo* no longer houses a single family but a variety of dwelling, manufacturing and storage functions (e.g. the *bassi*, the rented out storefront-level rooms). The noble apartments of the owner often only occupy the first floor of the building¹⁷. Those staircases are usually open, as a remainder of the indigenous antique staircases and usually run from two to five story high¹⁸. Staircases in the *palazzo* have two distinctive functions: the obvious vertical connection between floors and the statement of the owner's rank¹⁹.

Organizing those three elements in the *palazzo* becomes a key issue when moulding the sequence leading from the public to the private realm. A large variety of compositions can be found which can be classified into two main categories. The first one displays an alignment of the three elements in a progression with the staircase as a backdrop, attracting the view from the street. The second category positions the staircase on the side of the entrance axis, providing a sense of surprise once the visitor penetrates the courtyard.

Composition

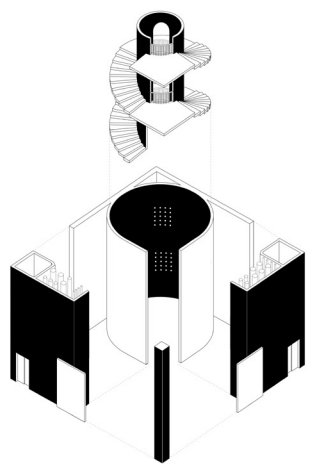
Parts

As part of the composition exercise, two scales were investigated: the *palazzo*'s tryptic (parts) and the *palazzo* as whole (ensembles). Those exercises were carried out either separately or simultaneously, providing an understanding of both the parts and the ensembles characteristics. Nonetheless, neither the urban setting nor the elements design were left out in those composition exercises.

Entrances are assessed in their ability to operate as thresholds. Designs vary from single monumental and impervious doors to transparent and permeable colonnades. Between these two extremes, the nature of the *palazzo* varies a lot, either very residential and private or completely public on its ground floor. While structured as a private room in the first case, it is designed as a genuine public plaza in the latter case. In all designs, the central issue is always regulating the

18. Blunt, A. (1975) Neapolitan Baroque & Rococo architecture, London: A. Zwemmer, p.138

19. 'While in pursuit of its main architectural function (the vertical connection between the different floors of a building), the open Neapolitan staircase is, at the same time, a reservoir of space representative of several factors which are produced in it and manifest themselves'. Zerlenga, O. (2014) 'Staircases as a representative space of architecture', in Gambardella, C., ed. *Le Vie Dei Mercanti, XII Forum Internazionale Di Studi*, Aversa and Capri, La scuola di Pitagora, p.1632



public penetration into the *palazzo*'s ground and providing a signal to state this quality. As a counterpart, the question of privately inhabiting the streets is also raised, based on the indigenous tradition of the *bassi*.

Courtyards are also a recurrent theme in the composition designs. Once again, those are interpreted very differently. On the one hand, courtyards become solely residentially oriented, manifesting a very private and intimate nature. In these cases, residential spaces are organized between two very different façades: a public and an intimate one. On the other hand, some courtyards are designed as utterly public spaces, affecting directly the nature of the neighbouring domestic functions. The scale of these latter spaces is also different from their domestic versions. Indeed, similarly to the traditional courtyards of Naples, those public courtyards seem to be made for giants, at the scale of the city and not of humans. The courtyard design also questions the notion of intimacy, implementing a series of devices such as curtains, lattice works, etc. but also various kinds of window openings. Finally, staircases are investigated in diverse ways. In some cases, they act literally as a promenade in the building, featuring a series of collective spaces along the way. In other cases, the staircases are designed as solitary objects. However, in all these designs, recurring issues arise such as filter, places to stop, scenery, light, introverted or extroverted space, etc.

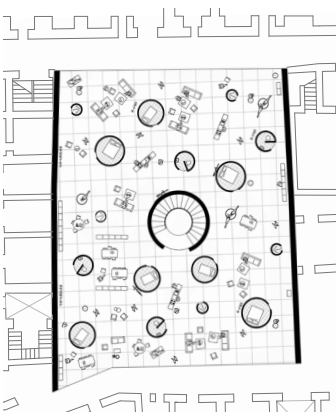
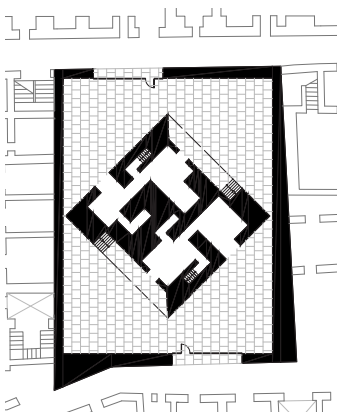
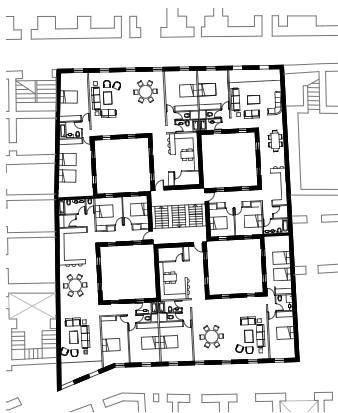
In addition to composing the various parts of the *palazzo*, several elements were studied in detail, to understand the construction techniques and its influences on the composition. Magmatic stone is ubiquitous in Naples. Hence, stereotomy becomes an important design issue, implementing the right stone for the right elements²⁰ (such as the dark *piperno*).

Ensembles

Alongside the singular parts compositions, the very type of the *palazzo* was reinterpreted combining the traditional entrance-courtyards-staircase sequence²¹. These combinations unveiled a series of possible *palazzo* layouts leading to a series of findings on the constitution of the type. First, all designs develop a minute attention to the relation between domestic spaces and the public realm both in terms of proportion and permeability. On the one hand, all designs include a degree of publicness in the interior spaces. None was purely domestic. Quite the contrary, various projects incorporate a series of entirely public functions within the

20. Zerlenga, O. (2013) 'Memories in stone', in Gambardella, C., ed. *Heritage Architecture LanDesign*, XI Forum Internazionale di Studi 'Le vie dei Mercanti', Aversa-Capri, La scuola di Pitagora, 13-15.

21. This exercise also referred to Klaus en Caan's experiences on Klaus and Caan on Borneo island. 'The goal was to design an archetype suitable for the plots laid down by the master plan. The solution was found in a dwelling with two principal forms that allow many variations, different spatial configurations and combined front façades. The inside and outside separation is carried to extremes. As such, the architects' contribution is an impeccable realization of the master plan desire for an image of uniform clarity, without any dubious semi-public zones, obstacles or front gardens. Just houses and streets.' <http://kaanarchitecten.com/work/borneo-sporenburg/>



UCLouvain-Naples Intensive program March 2016 - *Stairs* - C. Massabni - G. Martin, J. Frasier - J. Hajjar, N. Vente - M. Ward - *Courtyards* - C. Massabni - G. Martin, N. Goubier, Y. Harda ; UCLouvain-LOCI-LBARC 2231 Travail Fin d'Etudes - *Stereotomy* - L. Moreau, June 2017

palazzo. Hence, the public-private proportion varies but there are always public spaces in the *palazzo*. On the other hand, permeability becomes a key issue to domesticate the relation between the public and the private realms in the building. Various features such as transition halls, windows proportions, and intermediate spaces are implemented to negotiate this essential relation. Interestingly, in the Neapolitan *palazzi*, this private-public relation not only occurs towards the outside world through the street façade, but also towards the inner world of the *palazzo* itself, the interior courtyards often being very open to the public. In these public-private compositions, the threefold sequence of the *palazzo* remains a central element, *'the portal and the staircase assume the task of attractor as if a piece of scenery where the portal is the proscenium and the staircase the backdrop'*²².

Second, complementary to the public-private discussion, the configuration of domestic rooms becomes in some designs a key issue. While some projects define domestic rooms as ephemeral and adaptable, others see in the privately occupied room the very structural core of the project. Two extreme cases were examined. When transitioning from private to public is utterly blunt, domestic rooms appear as solid nuclei completely closed off to the outside world. In those extreme cases, domestic rooms are designed as solitary islands in the middle of a collective ground. However, when proper thresholds are taken care of by the entrance-courtyard-staircase triad, room configurations become easier to deal with, and a series of light wall partitions are put in place.

Third, in addition to these two spatial attentions, specific focuses were made on the materiality of the project to sustain the needed transitions, proportions, etc. Once again, magmatic stone was used in contrast with very light veils or screens. Bringing together these two traditionally opposed architectural features can be paralleled with the Neapolitan contrast between the solidity, the sphynxness of architecture and the everyday life flowing into it.

Designing and Understanding

Design skills

The decomposition-composition method allows for developing a large range of skills. First, the decomposition phase helps students ground their design process in an architectural context. Building a critical design (pro)position cannot ignore this preliminary backdrop. Second, following Durand's take,

22. Zerlenga, O. (2014) 'Staircases as a representative space of architecture', in Gambardella, C., ed. *Le Vie Dei Mercanti, XII Forum Internazionale Di Studi*, Aversa and Capri, La scuola di Pitagora, 1632-42.
23. Buchholz, A. (2002) 'The Used City', *Element* 8 (Hoarders and Collectors).
24. Benjamin, W. (1978) *Reflections. Essays, Aphorisms, Autobiographical Writings*, New York: A Helen and Kurt Wolff Book.

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- Cirillio, C. (1991) 'La lettura dell'isolato del Centro Antico di Napoli' in *Ingegneria*, P. I. F. d., ed. *Storia Architettura e Tecnologia dell'insula 34 del Decumanus Major*, Napoli: S.E.C.I.T. s.r.l. - Tuccillo s.p.a. Costruzioni
- Durand, J. N. L. (1809) *Précis des leçons d'architecture données à l'école polytechnique*, Paris: Ecole polytechnique.
- Labrot, G. (1979) *Baroni in Città: Residenze e comportamenti dell'aristocrazia napoletana 1530-1734*. Pref. di Giuseppe Galasso, Napoli: Società Editrice Napoletana.
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the decomposition process offers an understanding of the design's ingredients. Comprehending parts and elements is essential prior to designing an ensemble. Third, the 'catalog' obtained through the collective work of composition helps to identify the choices necessary in the act of composition.

Understanding the identity of Naples

Eventually, both exercises shed light on a specific architectural programme, in this specific case, the Neapolitan *Palazzo*. Distinguishing the spatial constitution of the *palazzo* provides an understanding of the social character of the city. Once again, this position refers directly to Durand who believes the first purpose of architecture is social utility.

The decomposition-composition exercise illustrates a recurring feature of the *palazzo* triad: its monumental character, as if it was built for someone bigger than men. Indeed, a man cannot but feel humbled by the proportions of the *palazzi's* entrances, courtyards and staircases. The scale of these architectural features refers to communities rather than to individuals, allowing uses beyond domestic life. Monumentality is also used as eye-catching features on the portals in the narrow streets of the cities where minute detailing proves inconsistent. Once again, those portals refer to the community rather than to the individual.

Second, the *palazzi* work as '*permeable membranes*'²³, modifying the usual delineation of the public realm. This becomes very clear when the traditional Duca di Noja map (1775) displaying the accessible courtyards in the city is supplemented by the entrances and the stairs of the palaces. Indeed, the limits of the public space are no longer the street façade, but the public realm can literally flow into the *palazzo* through the entrance-courtyard-stair sequence according to the time of the day. Reversely, the uttermost domestic life takes place on the public ground as *bassi* open up onto it without any thresholds. This tidal movement refers to the porous character of Naples described by Walter Benjamin: '*defying any clear demarcation, spaces are separated and simultaneously connected by porous boundaries*'²⁴.

Domestic and public boundaries are blurred as public and private life flow into each other. In this absence of a clear separation of public and private space, the entrance-courtyard-staircase plays a decisive role, separating and joining private and public life in one movement.