

# OCADU SHARP CENTRE FOR DESIGN

Will Alsop & Robbie/  
Young + Wright Architects

**FORM/BODY/TECHNIQUE/SPACE**

EVDA 621 Intro to Design Theories

Fall 2012

**RENE SIU**





# OCADU

## SHARP CENTRE FOR DESIGN

Project: Sharp Centre for Design

Address: 100 McCaul Street, Toronto ON Canada

Client: Ontario College of Art & Design

Architect Team: Alsop Architects in joint venture with Robbie/Young+Wright Architects

Landscape Architect: YWLA

Urban Design Consultant: Sterling Finlayson Architects

Project Management: PHA Project Management Inc.

Structural Engineering: Carruthers & Wallace Ltd.

Mechanical, Electrical Engineers: MCW Consultants Inc.

Civil Engineers: Cansult Engineers & Project Managers

Geotechnical Consulting: Shaheen & Peaker Limited

Lighting Designer: Stephen Pollard Lighting and Production Design

Code Consultants: Hine Reichard Tomlin Inc.

Cost Consultant: Hanscomb

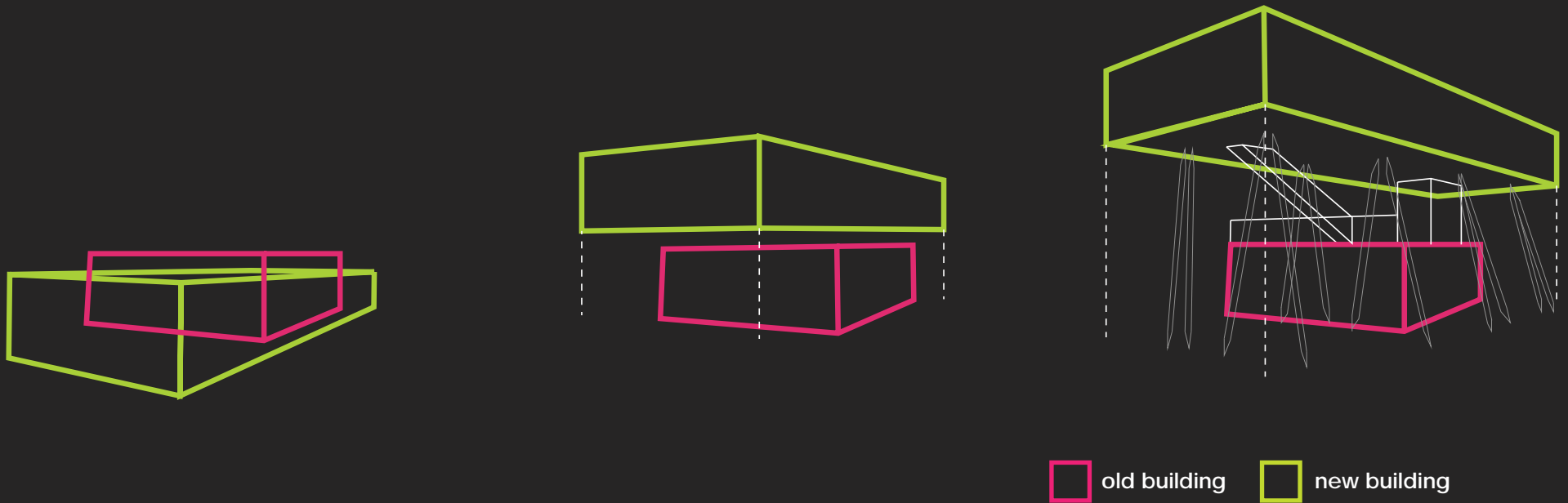
Area: 67,000 ft<sup>2</sup> (building expansion); 220,000 ft<sup>2</sup> (renovation)

Budget: \$42.5 million total (includes new construction, renovations and indirect costs)

Completion: May 2004

# FORM

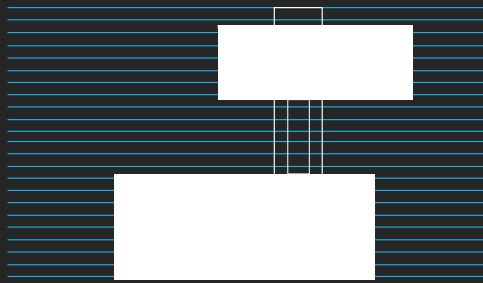
Designed as the a 6,215m<sup>2</sup> addition to the Ontario College of Art and Design building, the Sharp Centre for Design was a collaborated project between Will Alsop of Alsop Architects and Toronto-based Robbie Young + Wright Architects. The project is located beside the Art Gallery of Ontario on McCaul Street in downtown Toronto.



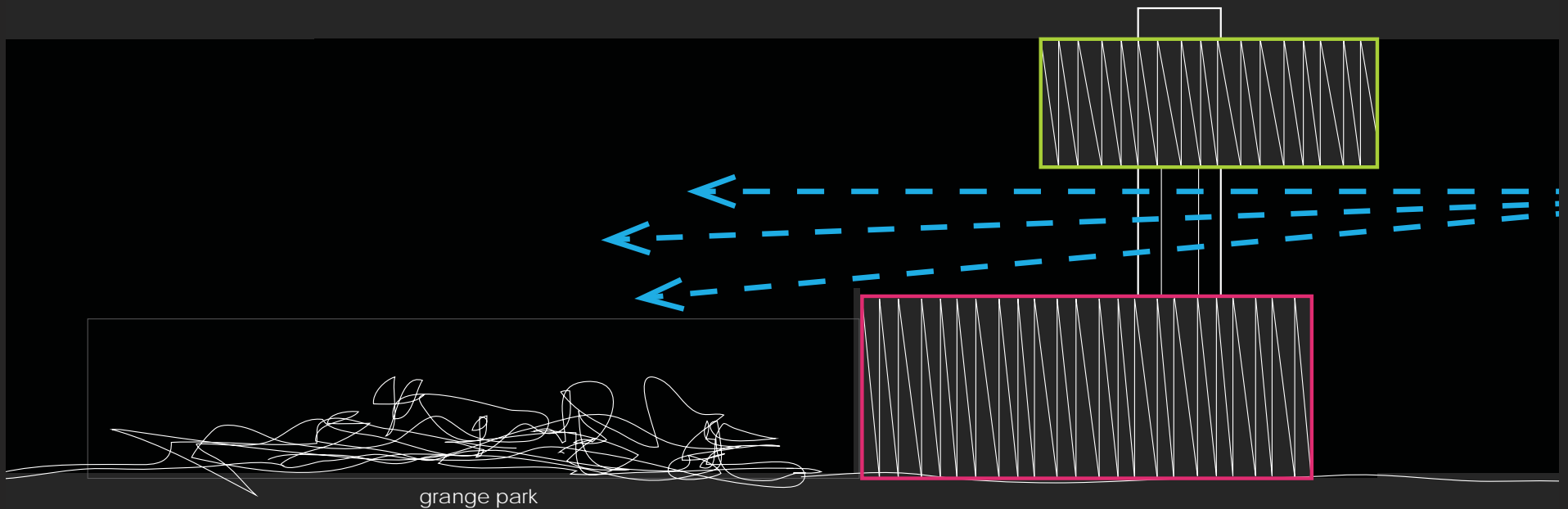
The Sharp Centre is a reflection of modernist use of primary form, but ultimately carries the postmodernist spirit of the avante-garde (Polo 2004). This notion of the radical and new dislocate the artist from the social and political mainstream and is thought to grant him a voice in shaping its society (Polo 2004). At its basic form, the Sharp Centre for design is a simple 80m x 30m two-storey box, lifted around four storeys off the ground by slender steel columns above the existing old main campus building. As Alsop wanted the exterior façade of the tabletop structure to be a fluid extension of the existing college, the new follows after the old in form yet radicalizes it in language. Physically, the two buildings are connected via an elevator and stair core that forms the central focus of the newly renovated entrance hall, uniting the two college buildings at all levels and creating a greater presence on the street.

# FORM

In *The Architecture of Emergence*, Michael Weinstock considers nature as the domain of all living things and their ecology. The forms of both nature and civilization “have an architecture”, that is, “an arrangement of material in space and over time that determines their shape, size and duration, how they come into being and their behaviour” (Weinstock 2010). I believe this is why Alsop, Young and Wright raised their renovated building above ground 26m; to allow for the creation of a new outdoor public space to the south of the existing building, and provide pedestrian access from the street to the existing park to the west, while preserving views for the condominium residents to the east of the college. This decision also has to do with Rudolph’s six determinants of form, which are the environment of the building and its relation to other buildings and site; function as part of holistic thinking with regard for human response; the regional expression particular to the project’s locale; materials used and their potential; psychological demands of the space; and finally the spirit of the current times (Jencks and Kropf 2006). Taking these factors into consideration allows for greater manifestations of creativity in a dynamic society, which is important in an art institute.



- obstructions
- views



grange park

dead ..... dynamic  
ecology



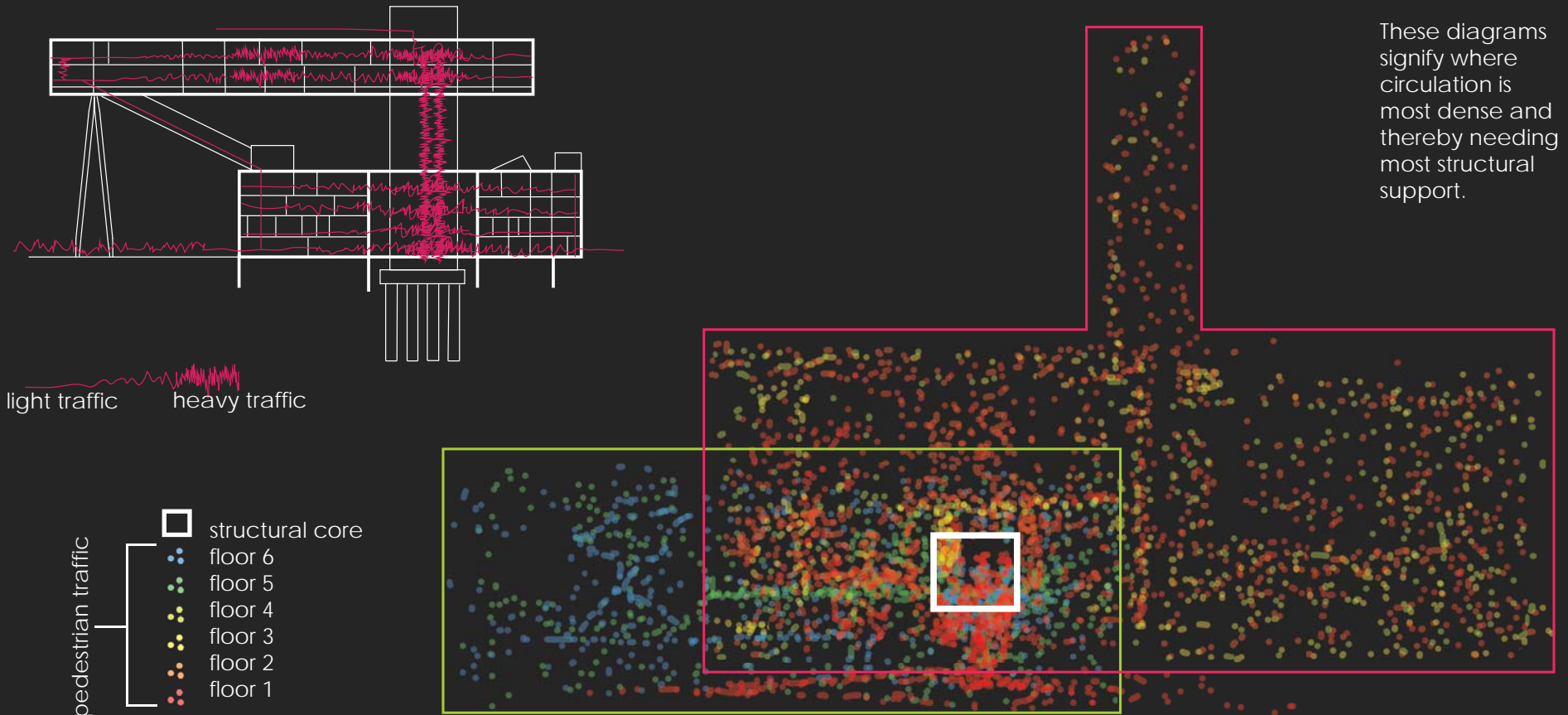
solid



void

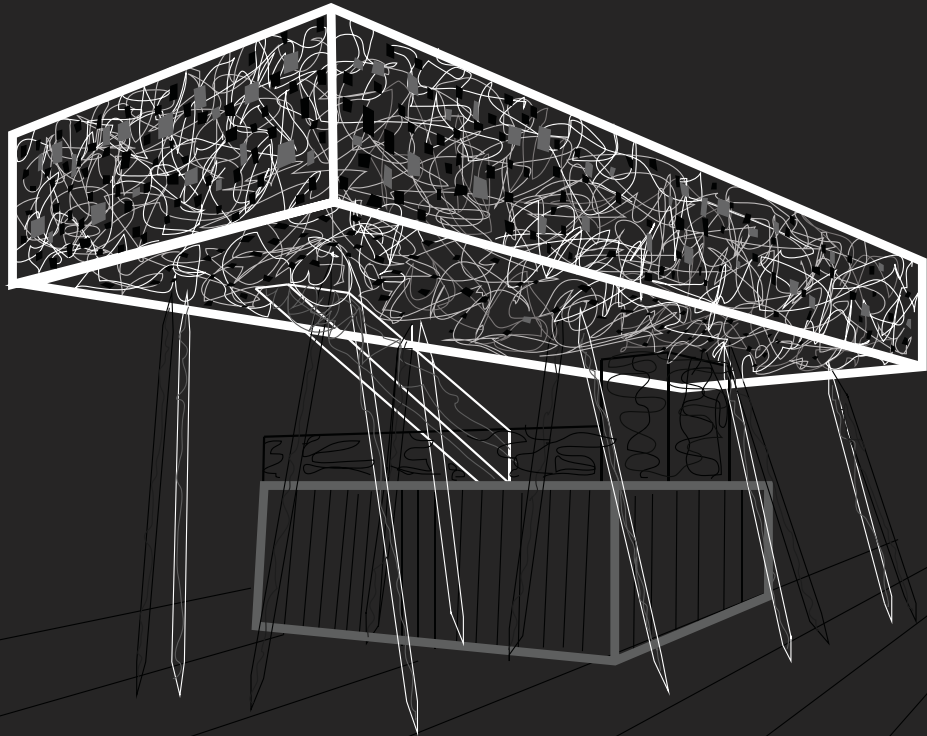
# FORM

The large, red tube that appears to support the Sharp Center is an illusion created by Alsop that has no strong structural significance. It originally was going to be clad in translucent material and double as a grand stair and exhibition spaces, but security concerns led to the college to limit access to a number of spaces within this tube. This tube function solely for emergency egress only. Alsop wanted the staircase to take the form of a prism whose faces are all parallelograms. However, not too far from it is the elevator and stair core that does indeed have significant structural purpose. It is also in this core where the major circulation of the building takes place, and carries the heaviest load. Through this diagram, it can be seen that this core was strategically placed at the center of gravity of the tabletop addition as a biopolitical response to programmatic use.





# FORM



Clad in pre-finished white aluminum pixels by a continuous pattern of black squares and rectangles, the façade obscures the overall scale by hiding the floor plates. The simple yet eye-catching volume hovers above an urban street on splayed legs, the reason for which is limited land on which to build and the need to preserve views for the residents on Grange Street. Its cantilevered floors also allowed the architects to play with fenestration techniques. Bright colors accent the openings and enhance the simplistic interior. These design decisions reflect the form following function ideas of Sullivan, as the building is outwardly decorated and expressed in response to the functions of its inner parts.

What's ironic to me is that while its form follows function, the Sharp Centre still reminds me of the decorated shed as defined by Robert Venturi and Denise Scott. Even while ornamented with colour and pixelated squares, everything is still "housed in the same dumb box" (Parlac 2012).

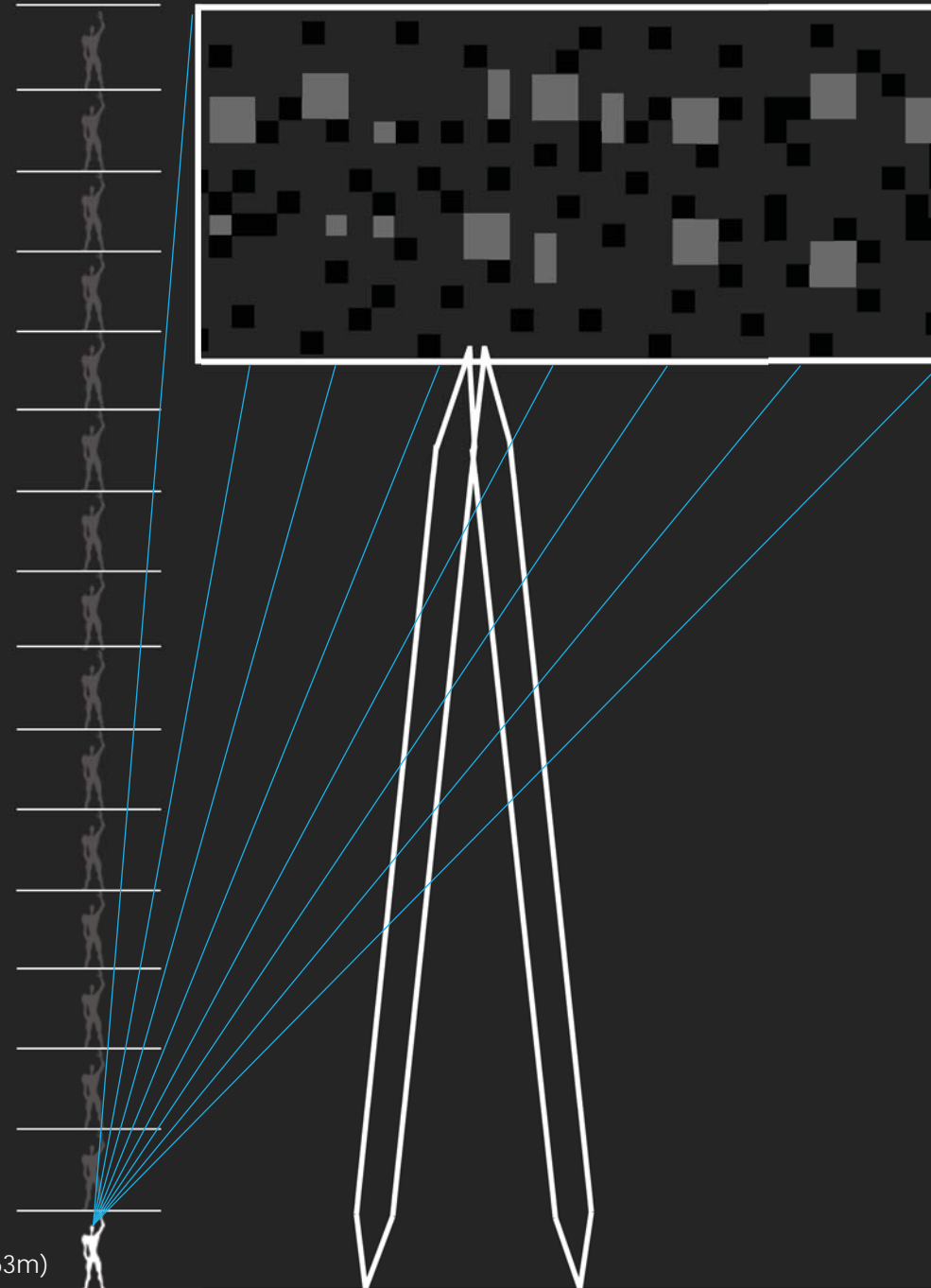
Something I wonder is whether OCADU's new building would be considered DeFormation by Kipnis, or InFormation. It is DeFormation in that it emphasizes monolithic abstractions, but also InFormation in that it de-emphasizes the role of aesthetic form in favour of new institutional forms (eg. through programme and events) whilst paying attention to site.

colour dark ..... bright  
texture rough ..... smooth  
visually dull ..... interesting



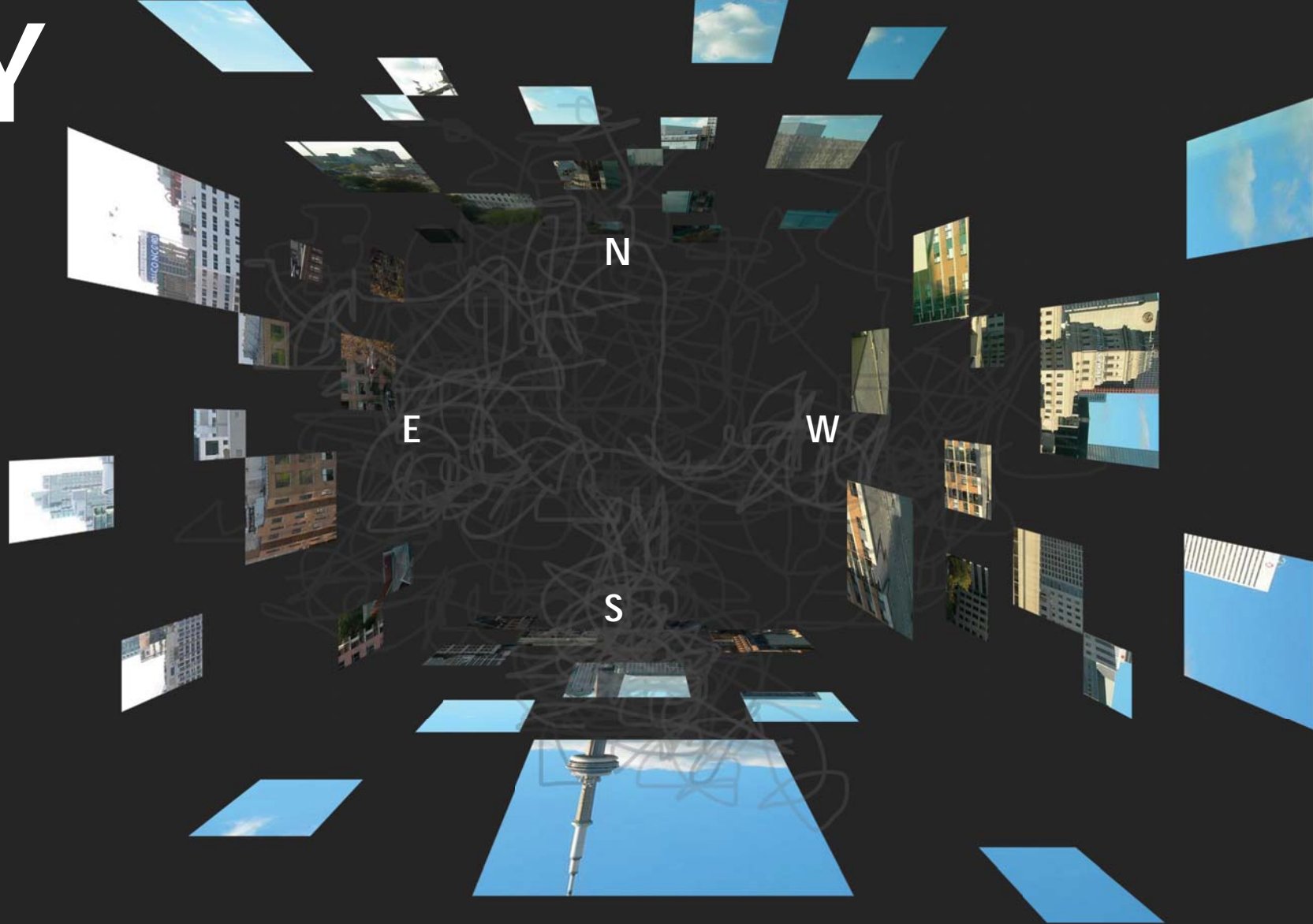
# BODY

Alsop, along with Young + Wright ultimately wanted to create shock factor when he designed the Sharp Centre for Design so as to contribute to new ways of seeing (Polo 2004). It can be related to the "surplus experience" cultivated by the detailed tectonics of a place that Frampton envisioned (Otero-Pailos 2010, 31). In the Sharp Centre, such surplus experience is achieved on the exterior of the addition through the pixelated effect of the exterior cladding, composed of random black squares and rectangles across a field of white aluminium. The design and placement of the windows and arrangement of the black pixels intentionally blurs the distinction between floor plates and plays with ideas of scale, and the pixellation wraps round to the underside of the building so that people passing the building from beneath are internally affected by its design. This type of phenomenological experience is furthered by the overall scale and height of the seemingly gravity-defiant Sharp Centre for Design, being top-heavy and resting on extremely slender objects.



Le Corbusier's modular man (2.263m)

# BODY



— average day circulation

most dense areas of circulation signify best views



Being raised 26m+ above the ground, the pixelated window placements of the addition offer irregular views to the outside. Each of the windows placed on its two floors are way larger than standard size. They are also deep-set to allow people to sit on the sills. This encourages people to stop, sit and gaze to the outside, which is sensible for art students in need of inspiration.



# TECHNIQUE

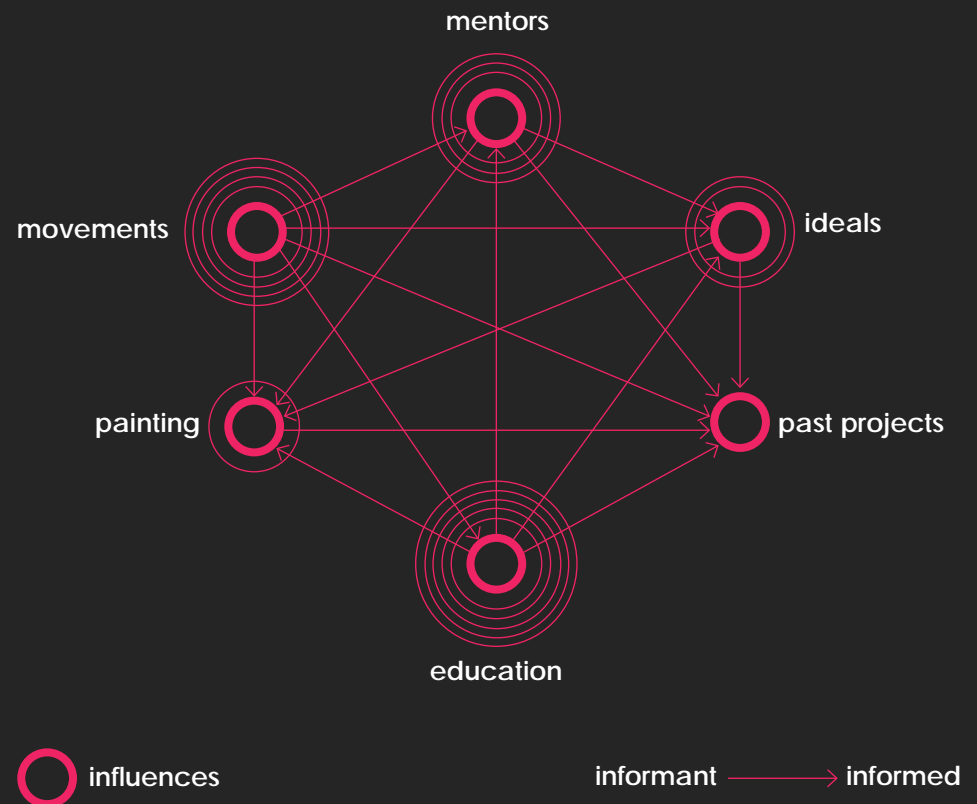
sharp centre for design

I first became acquainted with Will Alsop during my undergraduate studies at Ryerson University, as he was a visiting professor there. From his personality flowed a playful sense of humour and lightheartedness. This outlook evidently transferred into the design of his buildings, including OCADU's Sharp Centre for Design.

Following the radical avant-garde movement of the early 20th century, Alsop initiates most of his architectural projects with large-scale gestural abstract paintings, as was the case for the Sharp Centre. "I believe in less talking, more drawing and painting...design is an exploratory process," he is quoted to say (Porter 2011). This is due to his education as an art student at London's Architectural Association and the influence of Archigram and Cedric Price.

The building-on-stilts becomes a recurring theme for Alsop, first seen in his Peckham Library in London. It "shares Archigram's signature wit, treating architecture less as venerable, precious artefact than as an opportunity for a bit of fun" and is reflective of Ron Herron's Walking City (Polo 2004). All in all, Alsop carries the belief that professions—especially relating to medicine and law—were developed to deal with various aspects of human suffering and architecture has the unique opportunity, even the responsibility, to deliver pleasure and joy. This design intent is carried into the Sharp Centre's bright colours and simple forms. While the looming structure could have been overbearing and threatening, it transmits a light-hearted quality that is both benign and playful (Polo 2004). From these observations on Alsop's personal architectural background, the following information sources can be found.

## personal technique



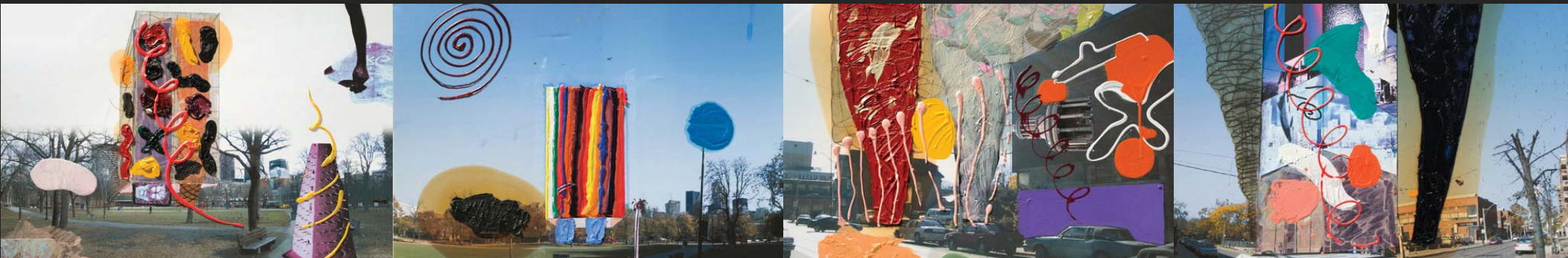
Every time a source informs another within the network, it is given an additional circle. Where the informant and informed influence each other, the direction is chosen based on the more prevalent informant-informed relationship. From the above diagram, we can derive that Alsop's personal design technique is most heavily influenced by movements, followed by education, then mentors, ideals, his personal paintings, and finally his previous projects.

# TECHNIQUE sharp centre for design

It is interesting to note that Alsop Architects takes public consultation very seriously. They hold what they call the "Big Draw" to allow residents, students as was the case for OCADU, and various locals and townplanners to communally and graphically express their ideas on a giant sheet of paper as a "painless approval process" (Porter 2011). As noted in the section for Form, the tabletop structure was elevated to minimize its impact on residents of The Grange condominium across McCaul Street. In addition, elevating the addition above the existing college left a larger area of the building undisturbed during construction--most notably existing printmaking studios equipped with century-old presses weighing several tons, which had considerable cost benefits (Polo 2004). We can thereby denote two forces influencing technique: social and economical.

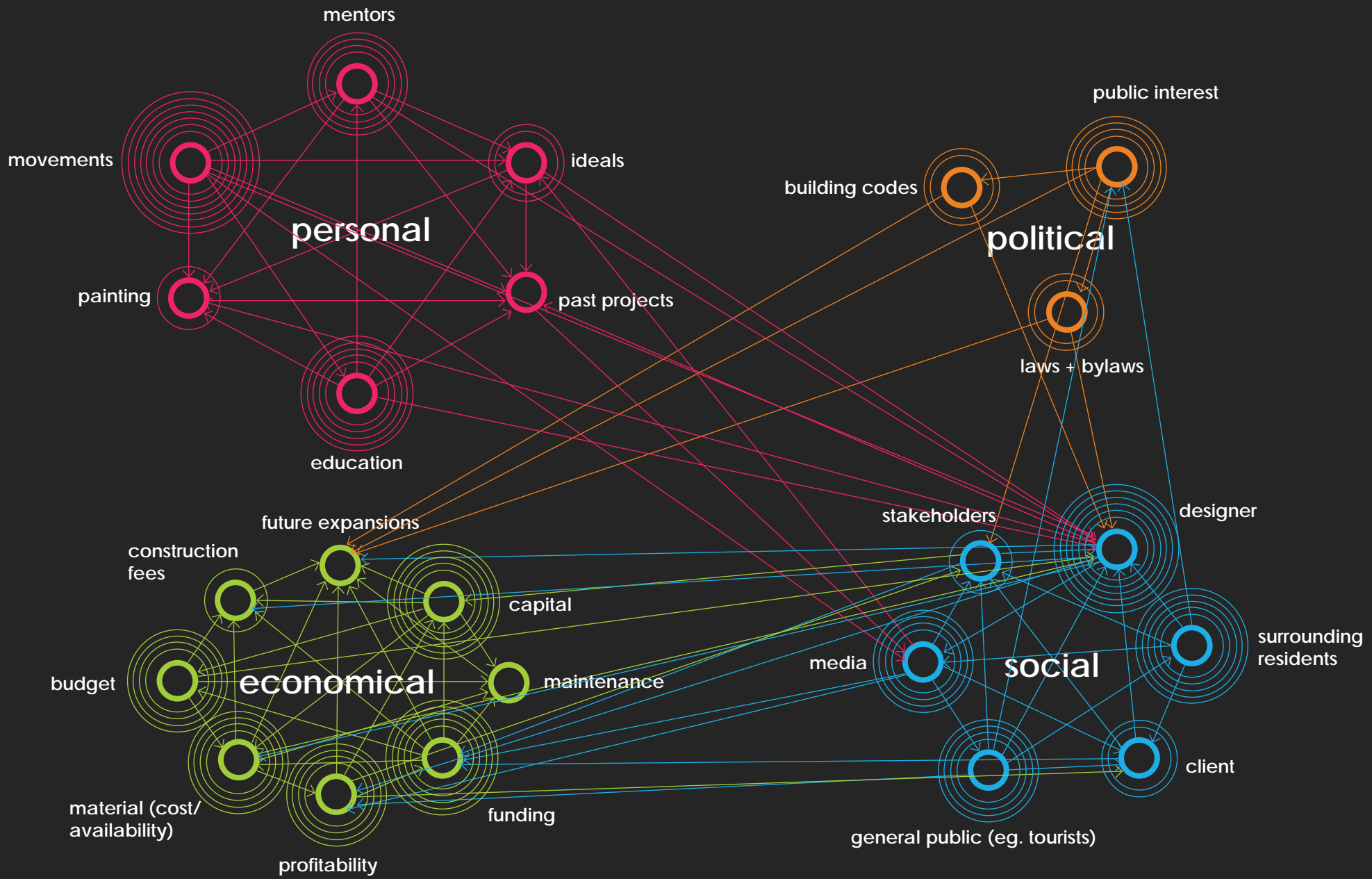
While the Sharp Centre for Design is publicly known to be a \$42.5 million expansion project, the Sharp Centre itself was actually \$19.5 million, with another \$10 million going to renovate some 20,000 square metres in a smattering of other OCAD buildings, and the balance going to soft costs. In order to meet the budget, a number of design features were scaled back or eliminated. "We proposed filling in some of the multi-level spaces in the lower building with program in order to allow for some double-height spaces in the Tabletop," Alsop had noted, but the Great Hall took priority. As had been noted in Form, the red diagonal bar that links the Tabletop to the old building could not be clad in translucent material or double as grand stair and exhibition space, as originally intended. Security concerns led the college to limit access to a number of spaces within the building, and the stair/gallery was eliminated as such. Now, it serves only as an exit stair from the Tabletop, with alarmed doors denying access from above or below except in case of emergency. One of the most potentially exciting spaces in the project is off limits. This shows the influence of public health and safety regulations on design (Polo 2004).

Based on the history of OCADU's development it was noted that OCADU needed to expand every 25 to 30 years or so (Polo 2004). The Sharp Centre anticipates possible expansion, as while the current Tabletop measures 83 metres in length, planning approval has been secured for up to 165 metres. This means the building can continue to be expand to both the north and south. The structure of the Tabletop, which consists of two-storey trusses spanning the length and width of the building, also allows a high degree of flexibility with respect to interior partitions, which could be easily reconfigured to reflect OCAD's changing needs. Following the Ontic Principle, "design spaces are not fixed and immutable" (Bryant 2011). In this respect, the Tabletop offers itself as a piece of infrastructure that can accommodate a variety of spatial configurations over time (Polo 2004). In addition to social and economic forces are then expansion potentials influenced by political forces like regulation and overall adaptability. This whole network of influences is in accordance with the idea of causality, where there is an internal, irresolvable contention for a self-sustaining environment within a system of precise relationships and hierarchies (Taron 2012).



# TECHNIQUE

sharp centre for design



○ influences      informant → informed

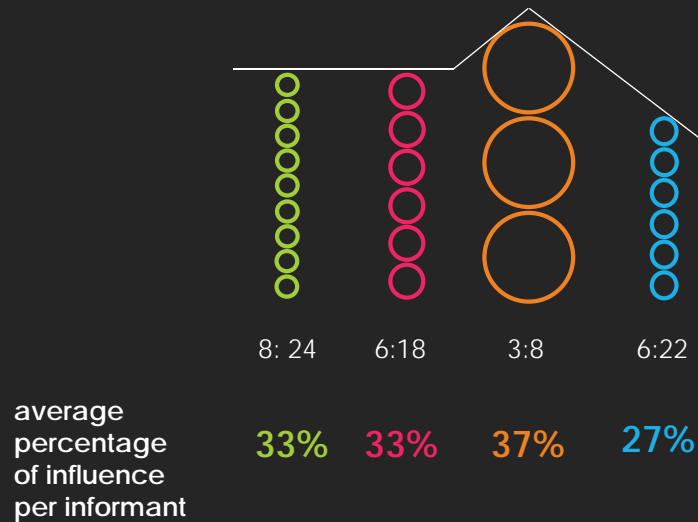


# TECHNIQUE

sharp centre for design

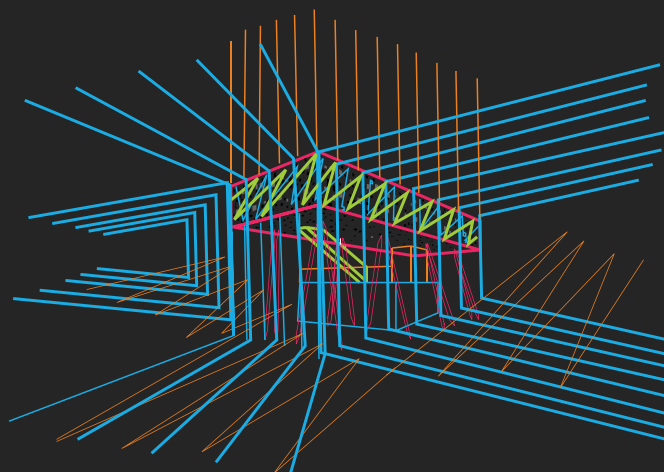
As I was making the diagram on the previous page, I realized that it was too simplistic for how complex this ontological network really was. There are more than four categories of information acting upon design technique, and within the four categories mentioned the factors are endless. For example, ecology could be a new category altogether. As much as I tried to condense the information systems into four categories, there is just an unlimited amount of information stemming from the realm of biopolitics. However, this diagram also reveals that within the categories defined, they are highly exclusive in influence. For example, informants in the social category influence other informants in the social category more often than they do those of economical or political. The personal techniques of the designer/architect were also found to only affect the designer themselves and not so much any other informant. And though political informants had the least number of information sources identified, they were most well-rounded in distribution of influence (meaning they are most influential).

A general hierarchy of information has been derived, based on the circle to influence ratio. This information flow and exchange is a relatively consistent technique that can be repeated for various projects.

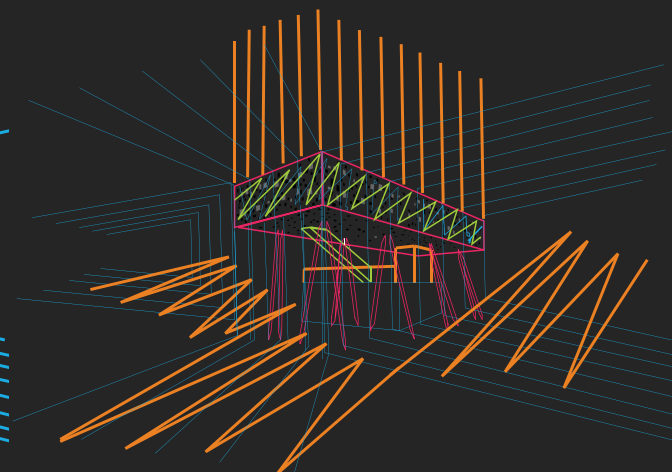


What surprised me was the low level of social information flow, as I imagined it to be the most influential. Personal and economical information was on par with each other, and political information most prevalent, even as the one with the least number of directly identified information sources.

Intensity of information flow based on lineweight (thicker = more intense)



What I thought



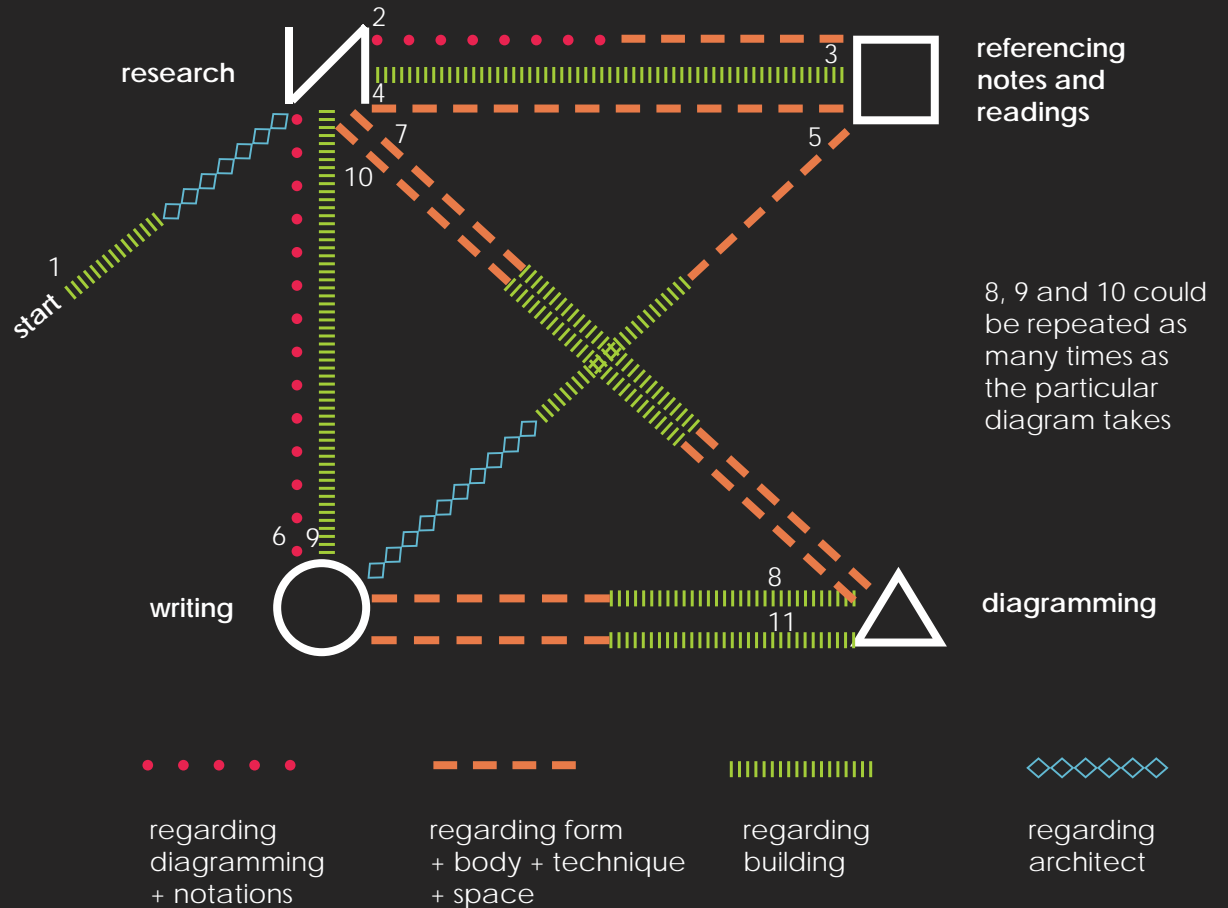
Actuality

# TECHNIQUE diagramming

timeline for each set of diagrams (at approximately 1/2 -1 hour per unit)



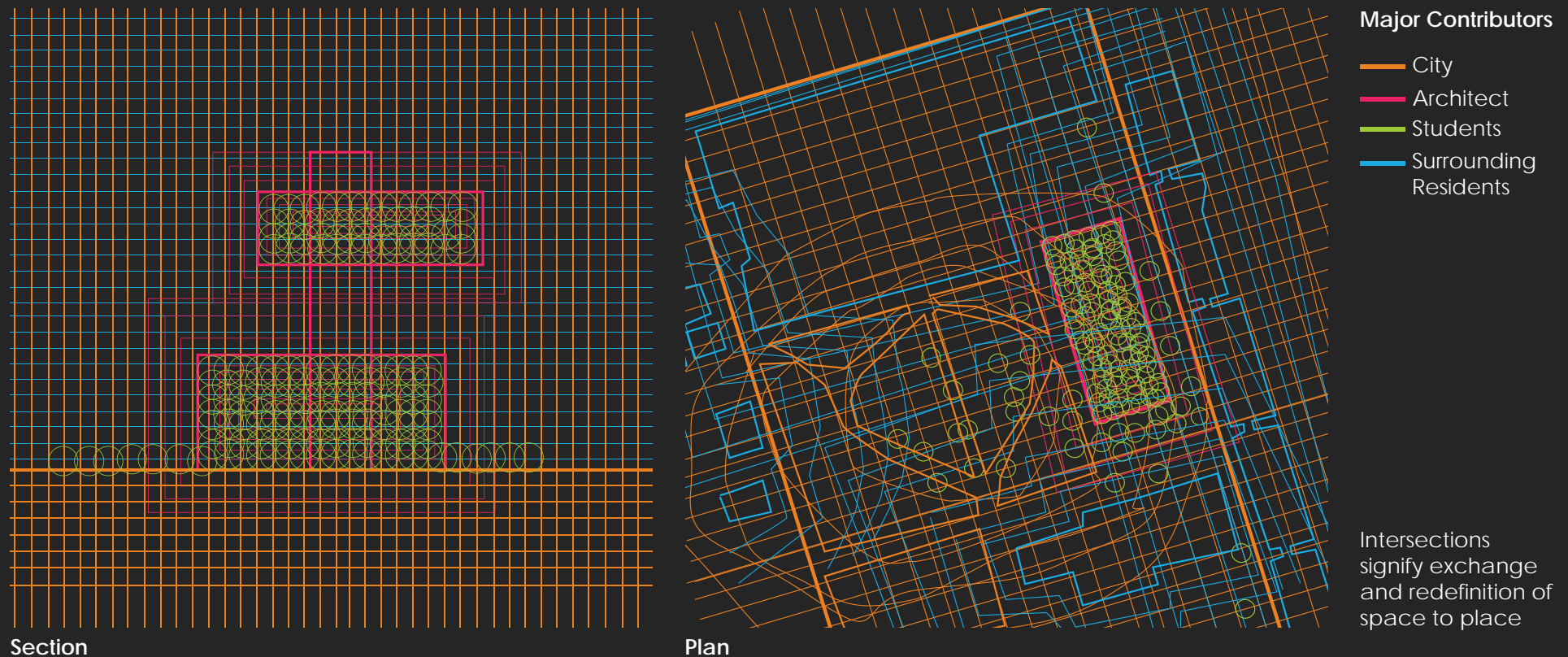
While I knew that my diagramming process would have been iterative, what surprised me as I was diagramming the timeline was how certain things blurred together in terms of what I was diagramming or writing about. Not only is the process nonlinear (as much as I tried to put it in a linear fashion), it is totally dislocated between diagramming and referencing notes/readings. Certain processes only go one direction and are repeated (i.e. diagramming to writing to research and back to diagramming), while others go back and forth (i.e. research and referencing). The process diagram to the right also shows that where most of the effort was spent, and how even though I felt like I spent a lot of time early on in researching the architect, it didn't come through in the final product. What was important was the repeated cycle of researching the building, diagramming the building in relation to form, body, technique or space, and writing on those diagrams.



# SPACE

Having gone through a rigorous process of consulting locals prior to the design of the Sharp Centre, the space cultivated both inside and outside the building is an expression of the society. This idea was expressed by Castelli in "The Social Theory of Space and the Theory of the Space of Flows". As seen in the study of Technique, there is a social order that defines how the space is to physically support social practices that occur in and around it simultaneously (i.e. of the students, of the residents, of passersby). The space of the Sharp Centre of Design could also be related to Henri Lefebvre's space of representations (Parlac 2012), which appropriates decision-making power and ideology of the building to those dominant social groups. The physical boundaries of the building translate into identifiable places in which events occur. This allows for an ongoing culture and history-making that interacts with the space.

## Exchanges between social groups that define space and interactions





# SPACE

As an academic institution, the Sharp Centre for Design is governed by highly striated space (as theorized by Deleuze and Guattari) that reflects higher education's tendency to compartmentalization and specialization. It is composed of vertical and horizontal elements that intersect perpendicularly as a determinant of program and form. Where smooth spaces interject is on the exterior ground plane with its oddly splayed legs and interaction with surrounding street and green-scape. There is rarely any smooth space being generated within. What happens is the creation of a highly compartmentalized interior space that does little to break out of the box of its overall form. Students from OCAD I have spoken to have told me that they experience the space to be dull, apart from the open studios on the fifth and sixth floors that was originally envisioned as an interdisciplinary design space. However, even these spaces are deemed crowded because it is where the students of all the disciplines (illustration, graphic design, and advertising) use as a work area. There is therefore a lack of smooth space in the building. Where it does occur, such as the open studios, it is insufficient. From these facts emerge what Tschumi describes as violence acting upon users by the architecture as they violently occupy it.



Places of smoothness are more densely occupied, relating to the areas having heavier load in form and places of discomfort in body.

Layered floors from plan view

 smooth

 striated



While smoothness generally delineates comfort and freedom of space, it is too limited here to grant its users as such. This is where the Sharp Centre has failed, as it is important for a creative space to be primarily haptic, not sedentary. Could the total over-emphasis on the outward appearance and lack of personal liberty in space be a partial result of Debord's "Society of Spectacle"? (McDonough 2001).

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