



# THEMATIC DESIGN

Skills for contributing  
to the everyday  
environment

(Notes Based on the work of John  
Habraken)



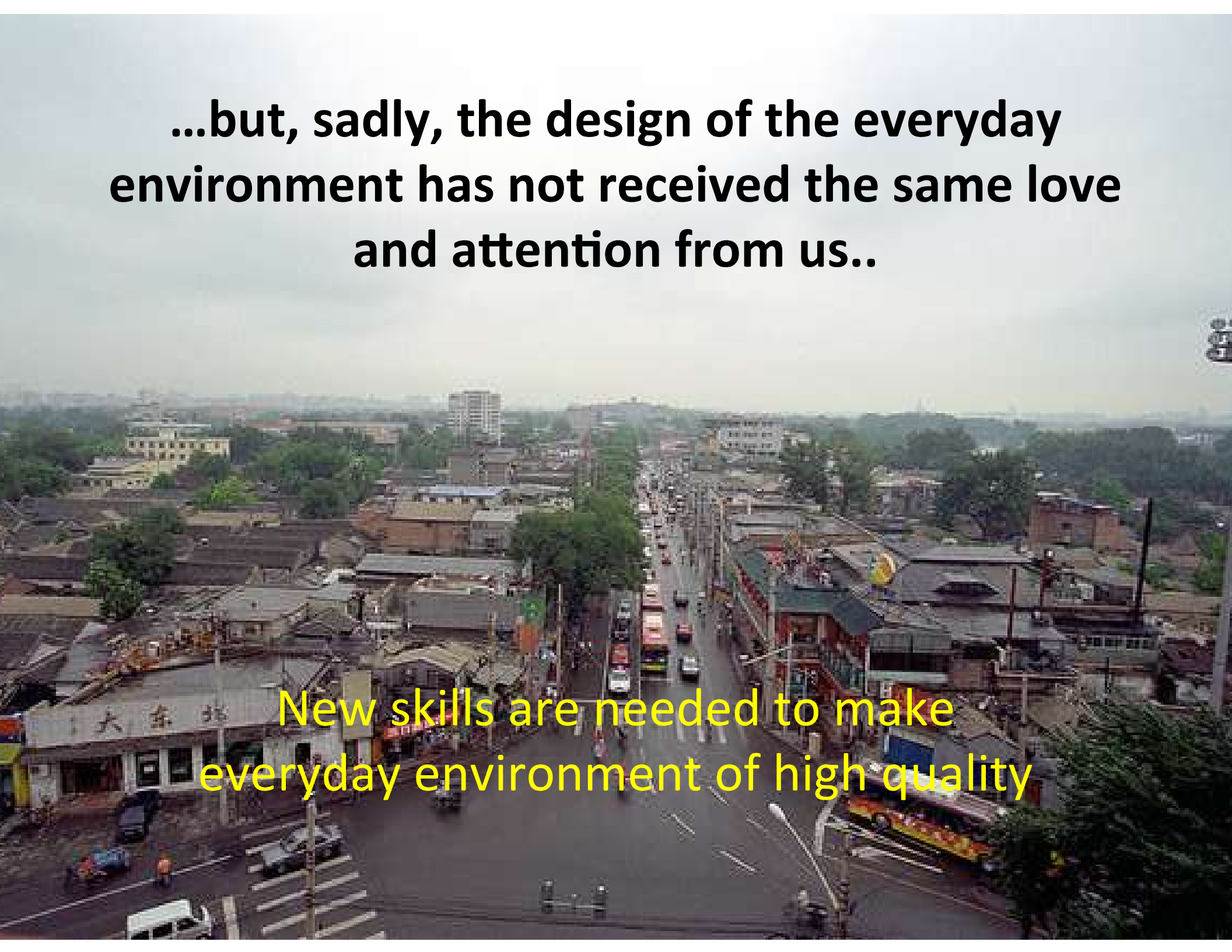
**Architects have tended to focus on the special building...**

**This is a long and great tradition and should not be abandoned**



**...but, sadly, the design of the everyday environment has not received the same love and attention from us..**

**New skills are needed to make everyday environment of high quality**





**We know that  
sustainable everyday  
environment renews  
itself part by part**

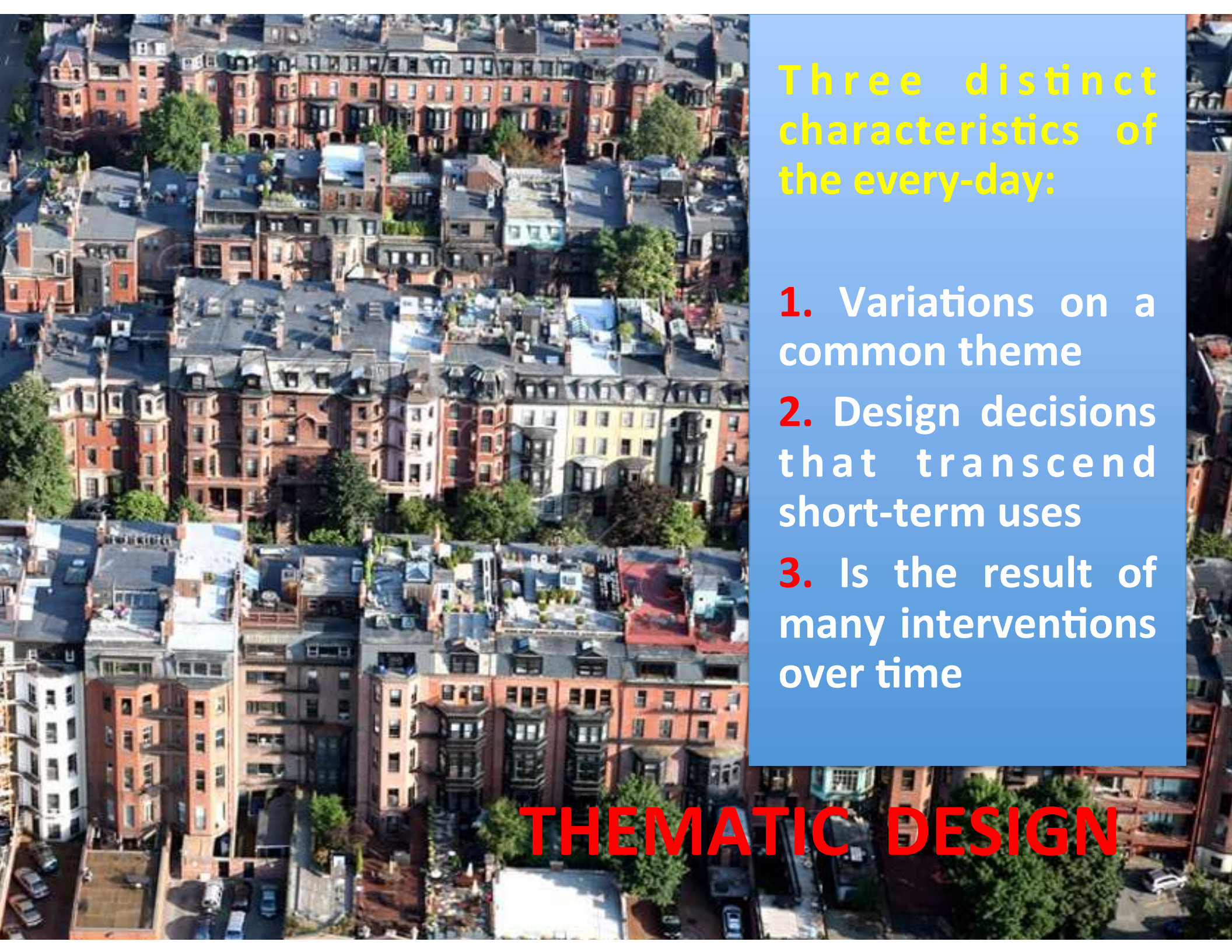




...exhibiting a hierarchy of levels of intervention

the urban structure is permanent to the neighborhood, which is permanent to the building, which is permanent to the interior fit-out, which is permanent to the furnishings and finishes





Three distinct characteristics of the every-day:

1. Variations on a common theme
2. Design decisions that transcend short-term uses
3. Is the result of many interventions over time

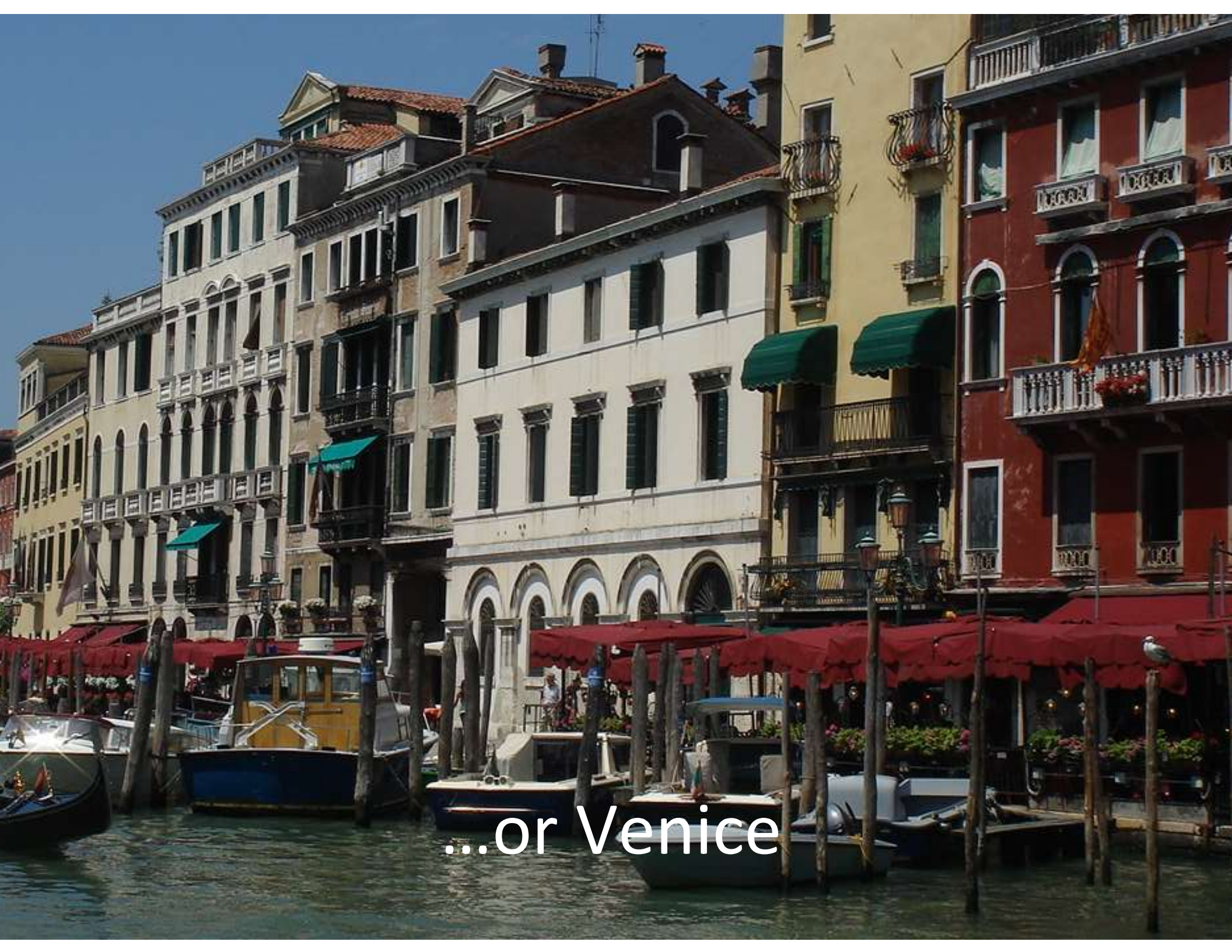
**THEMATIC DESIGN**





Coherent and highly thematic built fields are those we like to visit like Paris





...or Venice





...or Delft





# Thematic Design calls for a shift in perspective

- Look for what is shared
- Don't only look for what is different or unique





## Another shift in perspective: Look for Change

We need to learn to observe and record environmental change over time, looking for

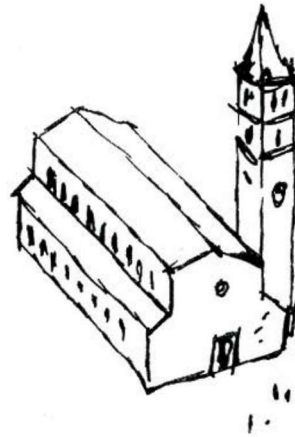
- expansion or contraction
- transformation of parts (like upgrading the kitchen)
- changes to the façade
- changes to interior space



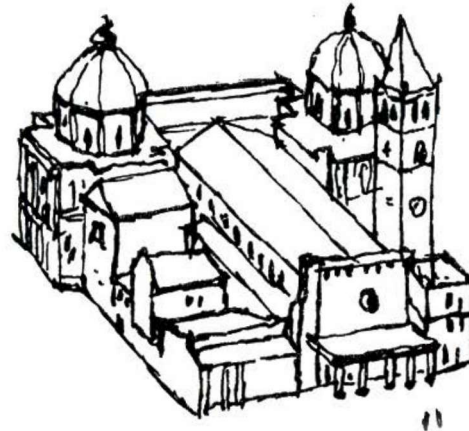


# Look for changes on a time line

We would benefit by recording sequences of change, to understand cycles of transformation.



This helps us see built environment as a living organism, changing slowly but inevitably.



(Courtesy of John Habraken)



# We can make diagrams of transformations

(Courtesy Professor Kazunobu Minami)





We can take photos of interior transformations



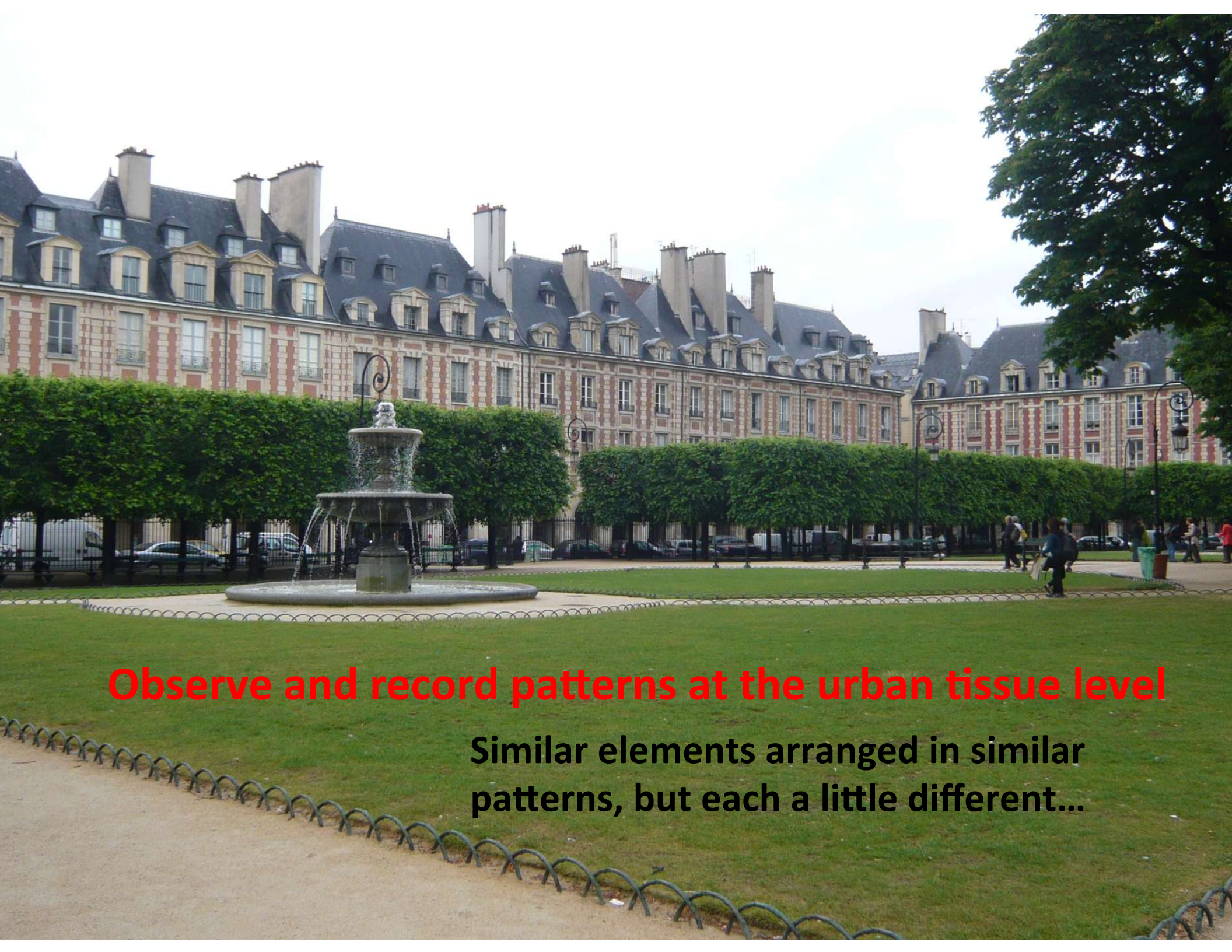


# And observe change (and stability) of the urban tissue



(Two bottom images courtesy of Andres Mignucci)





**Observe and record patterns at the urban tissue level**

**Similar elements arranged in similar patterns, but each a little different...**



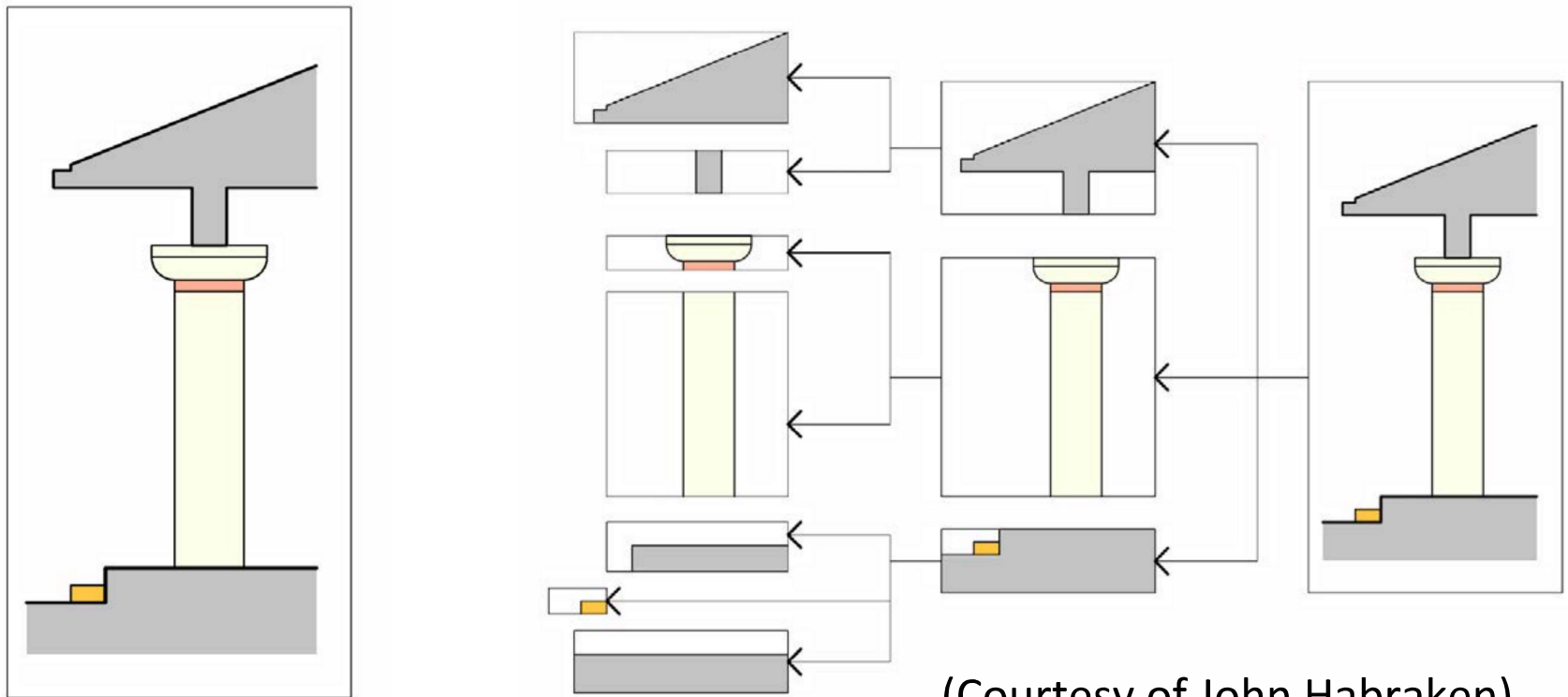
..or like these patterns...





# Look for Part/Whole relations

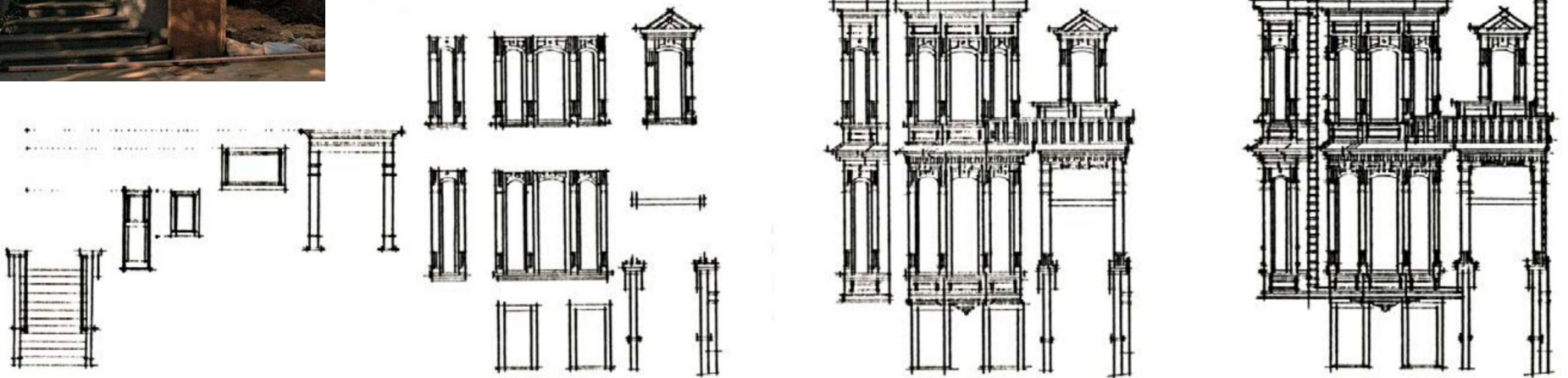
To design, we have to see complex form as having a part/whole organization. We must be able to combine or abstract compositions of parts into unitary configurations or wholes.



(Courtesy of John Habraken)



**...such as this...** (you can find many such examples if you look around)



(Courtesy of John Habraken)



# Thematic Design needs exercise

In every discipline having to do with form – be it music, sculpture, drama, dance or writing – skills are developed through series of progressive exercises.





# Campus in its Town Context

Figure Ground

Examples of teaching based on the idea of thematic design



## Section A



## Section B

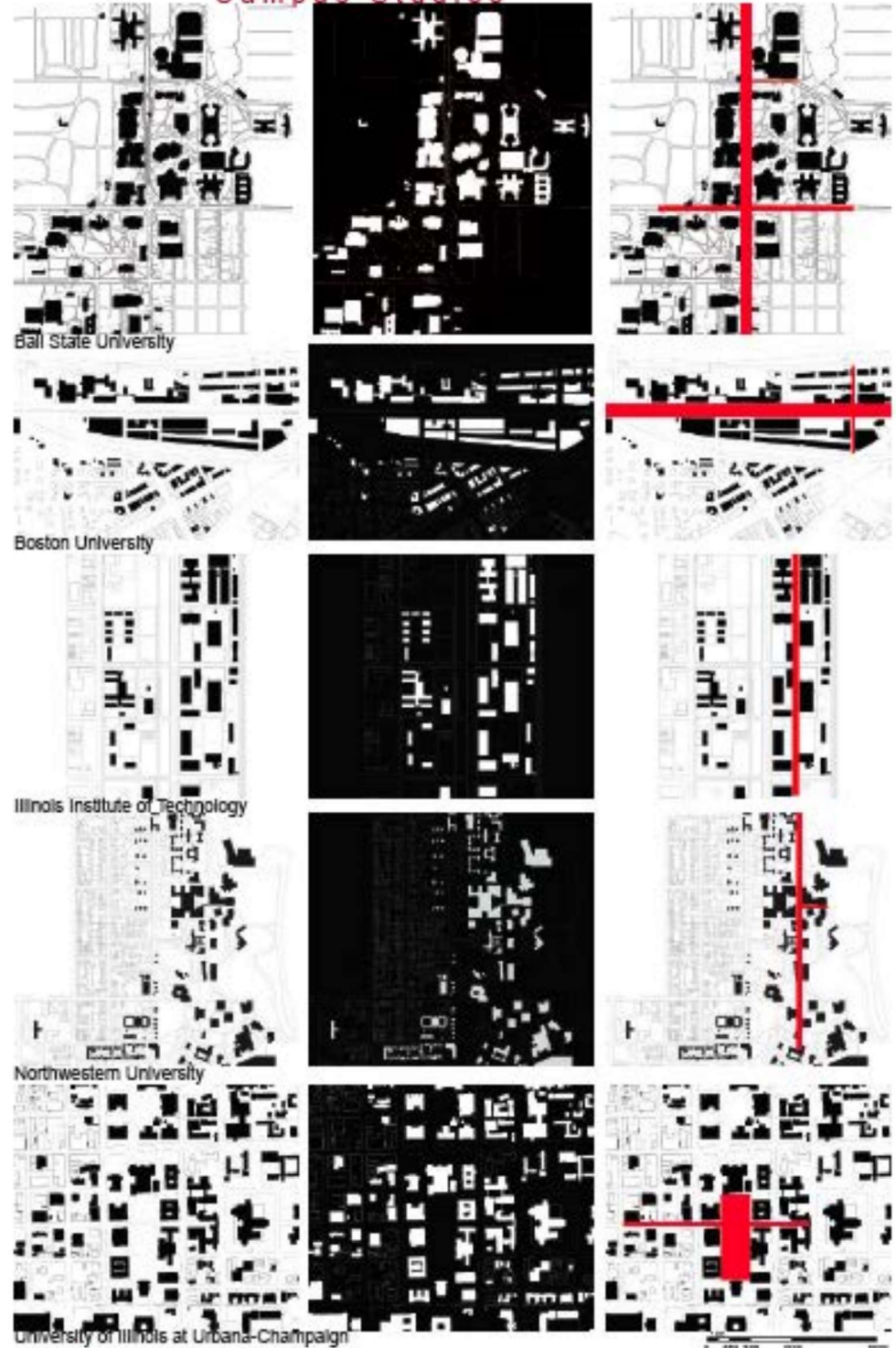


## Section C



# Figure/Ground Studies

Campus Studies







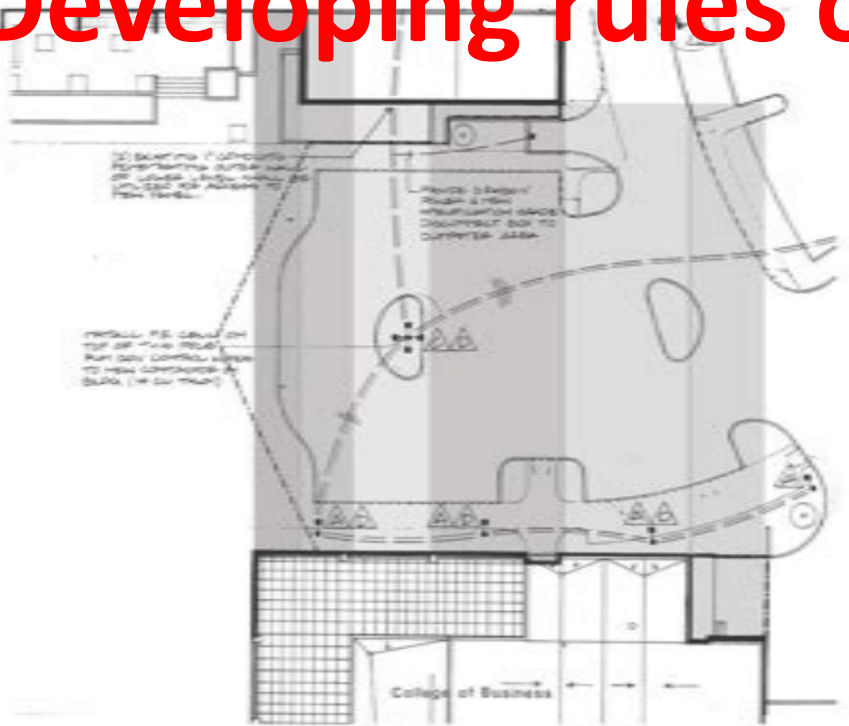


# Seven interventions sharing a set of themes

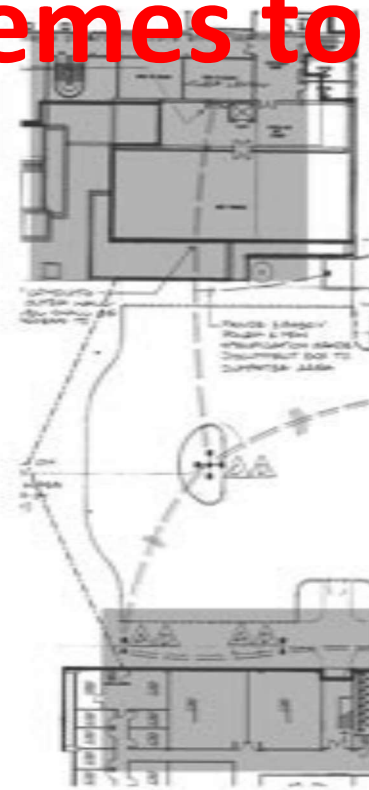




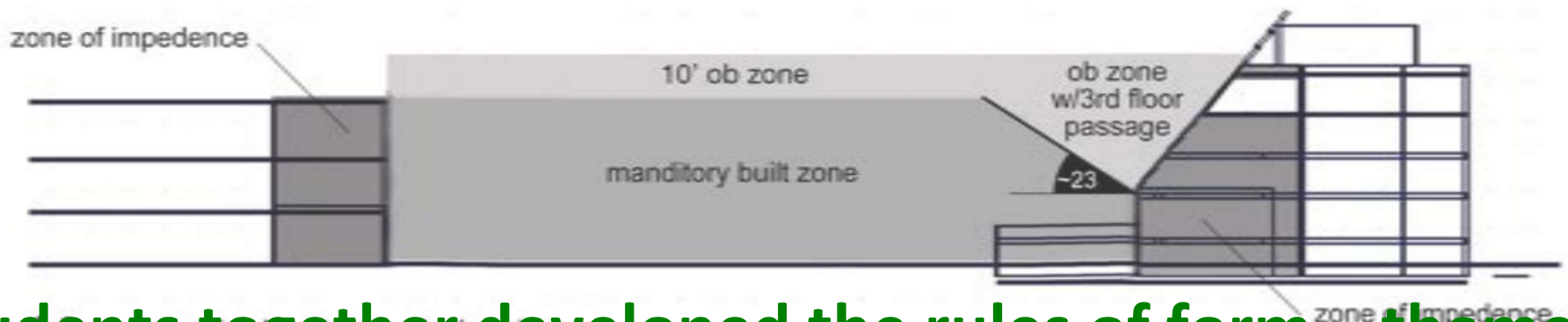
# Developing rules or themes to follow



A-1\_ increments of massing should correspond to existing adjacent massing



A-2\_ maximum impedance on existing buildings



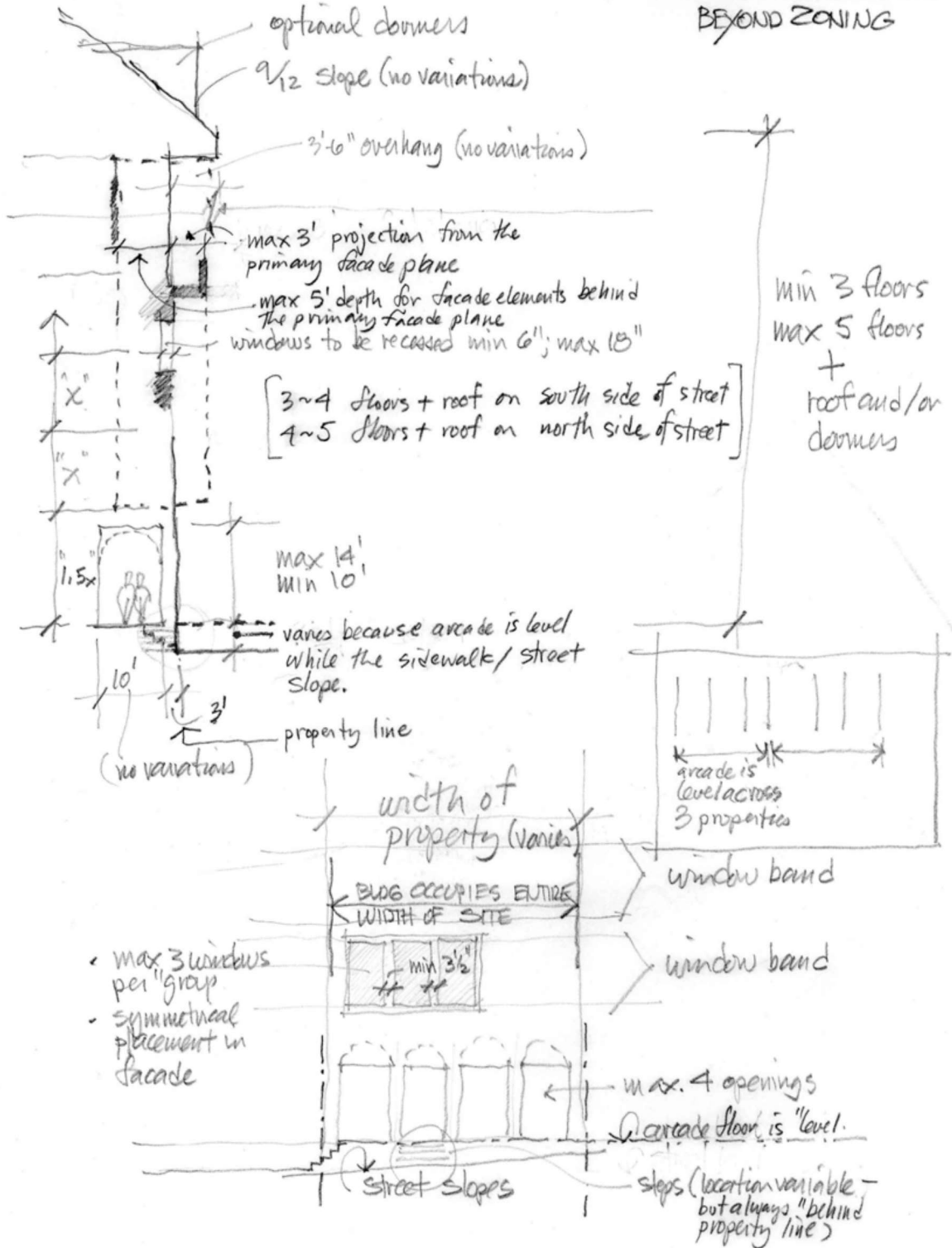
Students together developed the rules of form – themes – that each proposal would use...



# Another Thematic Design exercise







**My hand sketch of the "thematic properties" to be shared...**





3'-6" OVERHANG (NO VARIATIONS)  
W/ OPTIONAL DORMERS ON ROOF  
ROOF HAS 9/12 SLOPE

WINDOWS TO BE  
RECESSED 6"-18"

3' MAXIMUM PROJECTION  
FROM PRIMARY FACADE

5' MAXIMUM FACADE  
DEPTH BEHIND PRIMARY  
FACADE

PRIMARY FACADE IS ON  
THE PROPERTY LINE

MAX: 14'  
MIN: 10'

ARCADÉ IS LEVEL ACROSS THREE  
PROPERTIES, THEN STEPS DOWN

SIDEWALK SLOPES

5' FT.

3' FT.

PROPERTY LINE

**A diagram of thematic properties**





**Each student had a site, side by side, in which to explore variations on the theme...**





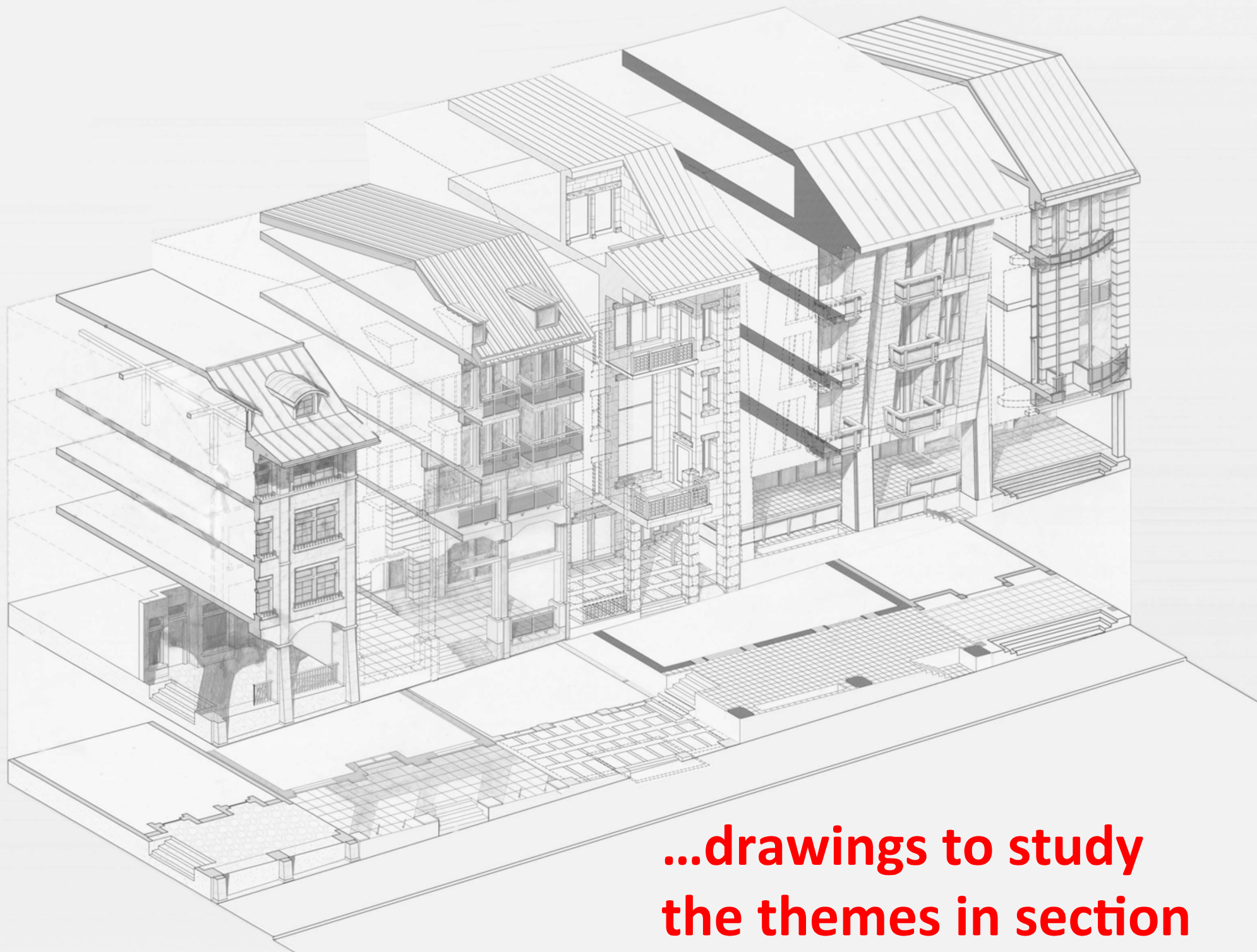
**The finished model**





... at night!





**...drawings to study  
the themes in section**



# FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS OF THEMATIC DESIGN

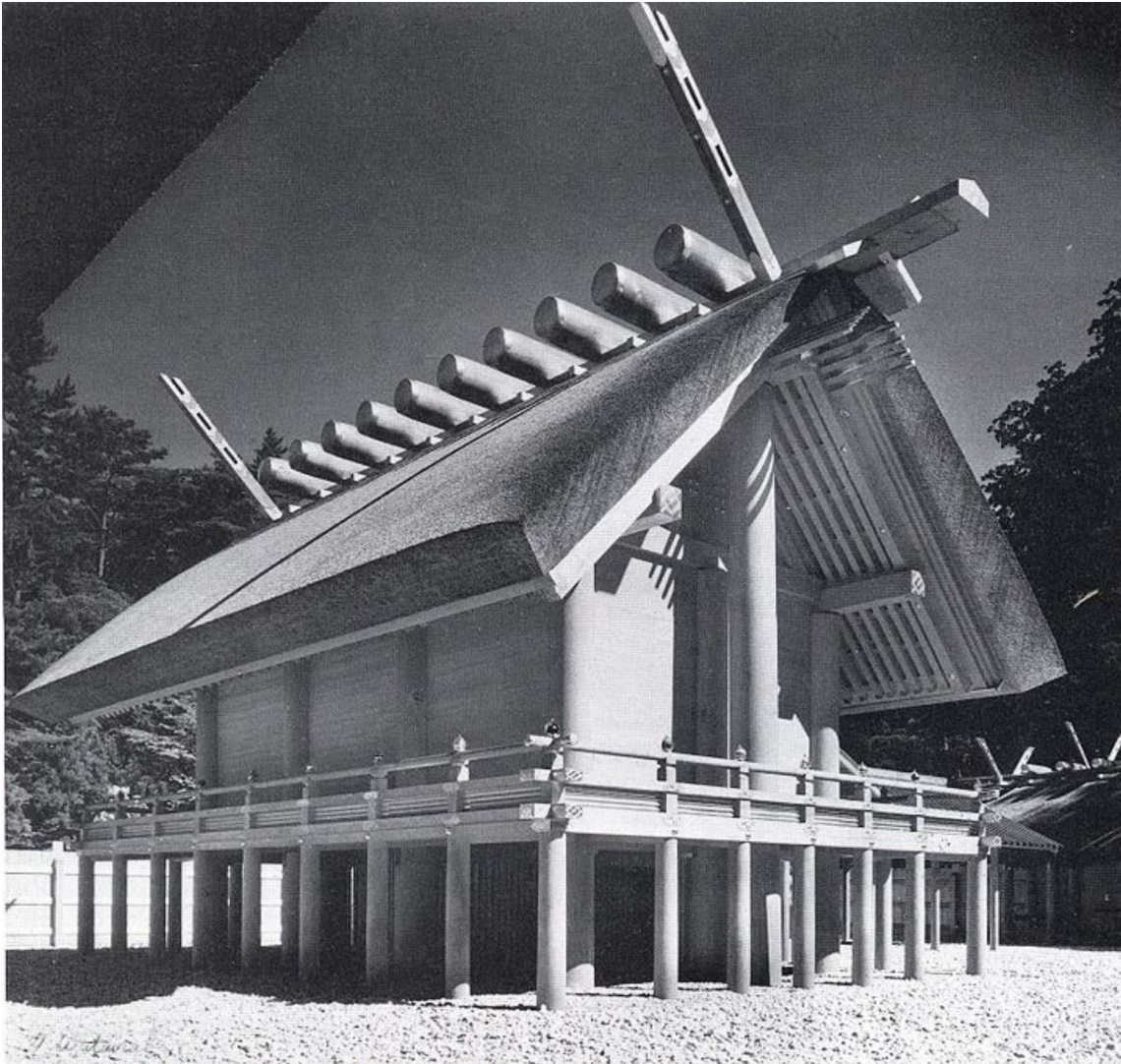
- CHANGE AND CONTROL
- LEVELS
- THEMATIC FORM
- TYPE
- SYSTEMS
- TERRITORY
- FIELDS



# FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS OF THEMATIC DESIGN

(Courtesy of John Habraken)

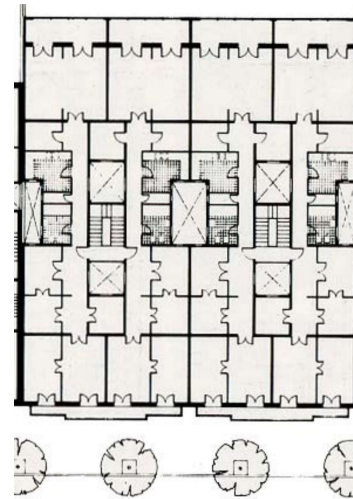
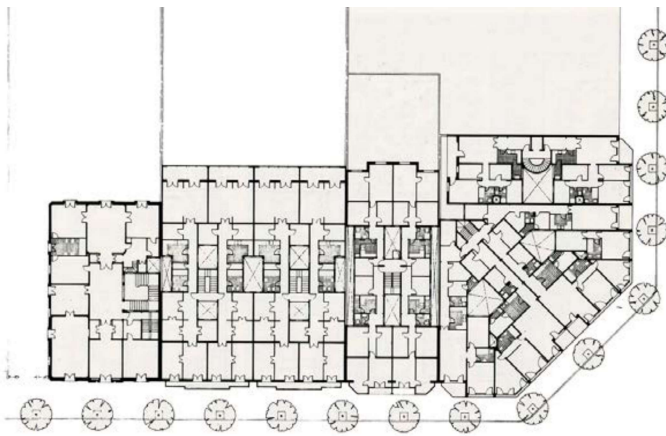
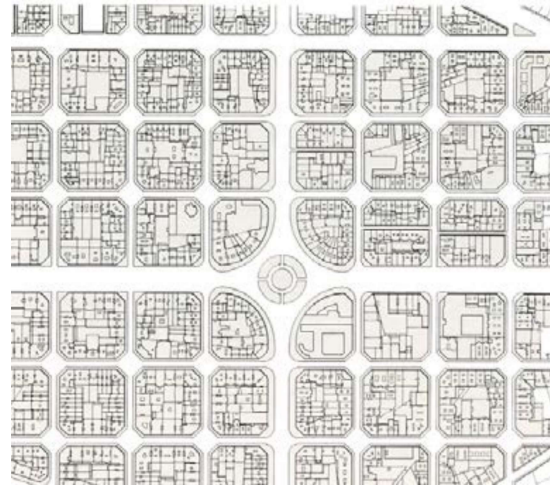
## CHANGE AND CONTROL





# FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS OF THEMATIC DESIGN

## LEVELS



City Structure  
Urban Tissue  
Urban Block  
Base Building  
Fit-out or Infill  
Furnishings  
Objects

(Images Courtesy of John Habraken)



# FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS OF THEMATIC DESIGN

## THEMATIC FORM



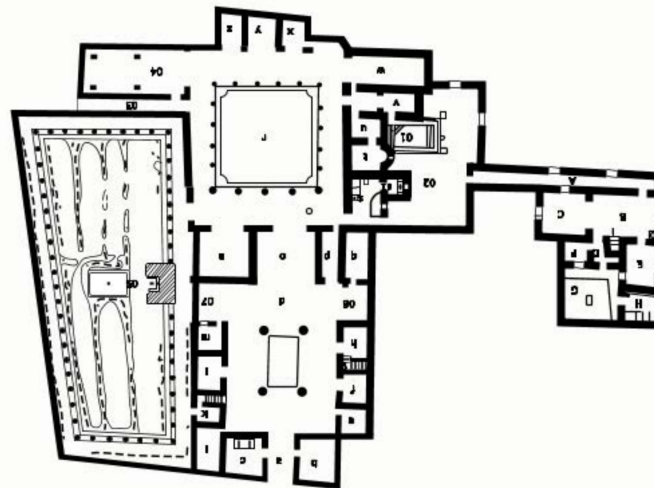
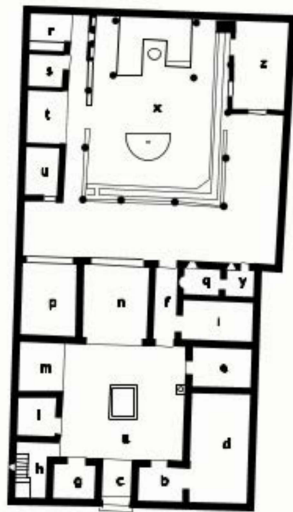
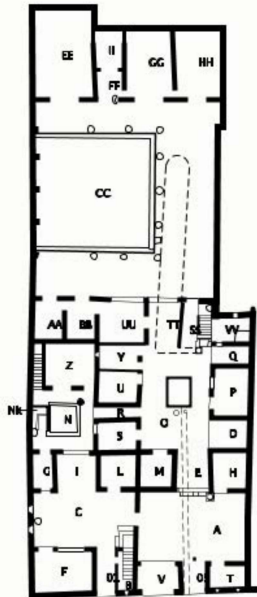
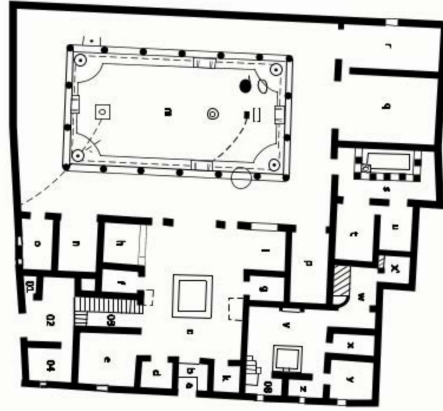
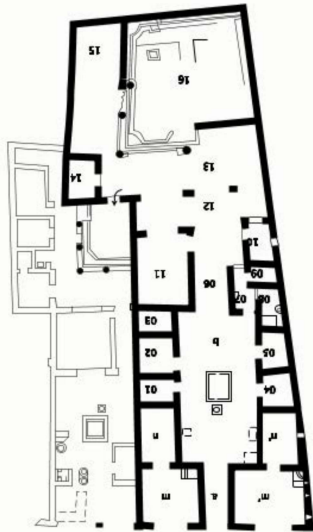
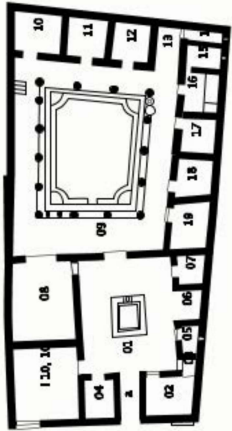
Even the Gaudi Casa Mila is a good example of thematic form

(Images Courtesy of John Habraken)



# FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS OF THEMATIC

## TYPE



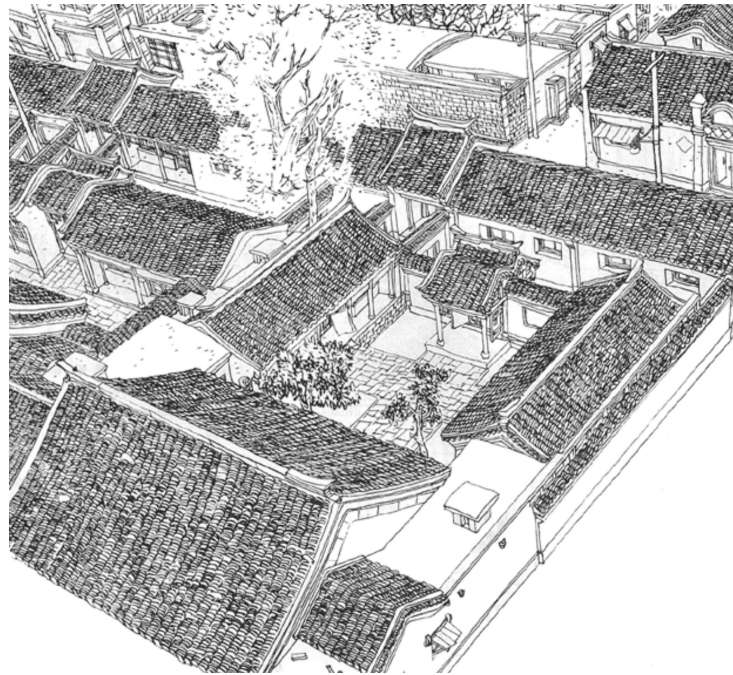
**Types are a good example of themes used again and again with no two alike**

(Images Courtesy of John Habraken)



# FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS OF THEMATIC DESIGN

## SYSTEMS



Systems constitute a set of inter-related elements or parts forming a complex whole.

A system allows many variations.



# FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS OF THEMATIC DESIGN

## TERRITORY



Image Courtesy of  
Andres Mignucci



Territory is about control...a human instinct to mark what is ours...to set boundaries...



# FUNDAMENTAL CONCEPTS OF THEMATIC DESIGN

## FIELDS



**Pompei**

(Image Courtesy of John Habraken)



**Beijing**



# REGULATING THEMATIC

## Form-Based Codes

**Form-based codes use physical form, rather than separation of land uses, as their organizing principle. They foster predictable results in the built environment and a high quality public realm.**

They are regulations, not mere guidelines, adopted into city or county law.

<http://www.formbasedcodes.org/>



# A Tool to make Thematic Design real

- Form-based codes address the relationship between building facades and the public realm, the form and mass of buildings in relation to one another, and the scale and types of streets and blocks. The regulations and standards in form-based codes are presented in both words and clearly drawn diagrams and other visuals.
- They try to achieve a community vision based on time-tested forms of urbanism.



**The built field is highly thematic**

**Its individual interventions have  
many shared properties and  
characteristics**

**It's the result of many actors and  
is never finished**

**[www.thematicdesign.org](http://www.thematicdesign.org)**





Teaching thematic design does not contradict our old traditions of designing the special building...

It adds to our tool kits...to help us handle with confidence and skill the design of the everyday environment that makes up 90% of the built world!