

A conversation with Claude Parent

Interview of Claude Parent by Marie Corbin, Nathanael Dorent, Peter Macapia

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Photo : Marie Corbin



CP : Did you study at the Belleville School of Architecture ?

MC : Yes

CP : I believe all kinds of professors teach there... right ? The good ones and the more ordinary...

MC : Yes, well... What's good is that some professors have given us the possibility to meet theoreticians who really interest us personally...

CP : Oh ! Well, that's great ! I gave a conference once at Belleville and I remember the conference room was quite full...

MC : Oh really ?

MC : We would like to discuss drawing with you because we think that for you drawing is a way of showing the truth. By looking at your work, we see that a drawing doesn't seem to only represent a project but becomes a way of expressing a truth... Do you actually think through the action of drawing?

CP : That's what people say, and I believe it too.

MC : Usually drawings are made once a project is finished, they are used as a representation, or like an image. What do you think about that?

CP : Italian architects invented that... In Italian architectural magazines like DOMUS, we used to see a few « sketches » after the projects presentations. They were supposed to be at the origin of the projects. But in reality these sketches were made afterwards ! (Laughs) To make the project more graphic... but anyways, this is an anecdote... I would like to open up our discussion by letting you know I never worked with models... It doesn't work for me. I still like pretty models, they can be beautiful. But as a research or study tool they don't work for me. The models shown in Japan were made after the work. They are objects which purpose was to represent the power of the concrete to those who hadn't seen the actual buildings; to achieve that goal hardwood was the best material to use. When people did models in "white cardboard", it was because it was required by the competitions.

And this didn't work for me. As a means of expression I couldn't relate to it.

So I only made models for houses that had specific site complexities because of an angle or at a road turn. In that case it was difficult to explain the project with drawings... Because at one point drawing is not the best way to explain certain things, the use of the pencil has its own limitations... That's what's interesting. On my side, I try to push my pencils as far as possible... I can show you my pencils, I have big ones and very small ones; I like to draw with the very little graphite ones which are made in the USA... I love these pencils. You can see that they are almost completely used. It's the end. I prefer these pencils to mechanical pencils...

MC : So drawings are really your thinking tool?

CP : Yes

MC : Do you think spatially or through more classical architectural drawings, like « elevation/plan/section » ?

CP : I start drawing on a very neat, clean paper sheet; like a Japanese painter.

MC : Do you have this special relationship to the « blank page »? Like writers do?

CP : Yes, and I don't draw before I think. I can't do it. Sometimes I see other architects who know how to draw and who start drawing and say "this I draw like this, and this like that..." it doesn't work for me. **Thinking.** I only take a pencil and start drawing when I have a mental line or direction, which is concrete enough. Then I draw two or three proposals, usually simple lines. It can happen that I start a drawing in the angle of the paper sheet (*Claude Parent shows an angle on a paper sheet*) and do this (*his two hands draw a diagonal across the paper*). I call this Knitting.

MC : And how do you generate your "mental line" ?

CP : I need an idea : either from a site, or from some current preoccupation... Sometimes there is something to look for, things to intertwine. I need this mental line in particular since I started working with the "fonction oblique" because ramps are not easy to draw. If I draw a ramp like that, well it's just a line! It doesn't carry a whole world of obliques and slopes, an intertwining of ramps... There has to be a kind of motivation for me to draw; with some indications, for instance the relationship of the project to the program, the site, and a desire to work on specific connections between different lines... Well, these things motivate the action of drawing.

I will tell you something: at the start of a project I don't really have any set convictions or beliefs. I don't say "my conviction is set, I will draw according to my convictions". No. Things happen gradually. There is a basic idea, but the drawing constructs itself gradually and evolves. It is somewhat reviewed constantly. Initially it is still an informal world, and suddenly the drawing goes one way or another... at that point in space and time something might need to be more balanced ... that's when elaborating a drawing starts revealing and representing an actual Process. We enter the project gradually.

PM: Do you think there is a special relationship between **Belief** in drawing and the problem of **coherence** ? Would it be some kind of belief of the "possible"?

CP: I do believe in something: the action of drawing travels between this (*Claude Parent pointing his head with his finger*) and that (*showing the paper*) through this too (*pointing to his heart*); I think that's how it works... It's a chain that leads to the project.... I usually don't shift (skid) during my drawing work. I usually don't make too many changes. Even if there are some changes, I have such an impression of continuity that it's harder for me if I stop drawing, if I break the process and if I start the next day again. When this happens, it's more difficult, but at the same time it can lead to introducing some new elements into the drawing. So I like to finish the drawing in its general idea, its essence. But still drawing hasn't trapped me. I still direct my drawing. I don't like drawing for drawing.

MC: You mean you don't have any kind of fascination for the drawing?

CP : Exactly, I'm not controlled by the self-fascination of drawing. Not like the Rome prize where they were fascinated by their drawings, and where architecture was reduced to become a support to the production of beautiful images without any specific architectural sense.

MC : So, for you, drawing is not an object of aesthetics, but an object of work ?

CP : Yes. Totally.

PM : But in architectural history, there are moments in which the practice of drawing has changed architectural movements.

CP : That's true. I have to say today I only do drawing. I have let myself drawing without control. I left the imaginary, the dream, and the fantasy take over me. People like Frédérique Migayrou say that. Since the "fonction oblique", I am linked to a deep theoretical body/language. I have a skeleton to work from. The "fonction oblique" has limited and extended my field of imagination or work for the past 40 years. More recently I found my previous ways of drawing too slow; so I started using India ink, like Japanese artists but without replicating Japanese themes. I am currently working on very big drawings, which will be exhibited... I find this method more instinctive. To become more instinctive, I use two mediums these days: pencils and India ink.

I also have trained to make small drawings without thinking. I try to draw a random form. So I have about 50 drawings of this kind... I really like them. I try to see if I could find a drawing in these random lines... You know the poet Henry Michaux; he did his drawings under mescaline. No drugs for me! But I do think of him when I try to put myself in this state of no-control in which the drawing goes from the paper to my head, which is the opposite process than the drawing process. The drawing, which comes up, I find afterwards. I make more and more of these drawings. I call them **semi-automatic drawings**.

I make about 50 drawings, and then I collect them inside a box and start a new drawing book... After many small drawings it could happen that I select about a hundred of these drawings and some would need to be enlarged. We are far from reality, but I'm an architect, profoundly an architect and not an artist and my mind is architecture. My vision of the world is through Architecture. My relationship to others is connected to architecture. It is part of me. C'est ma seve de l'ame (sap of the soul?). So my drawings are not those of a painter. They are always rooted in Architecture. Frederique Migayrou keeps telling me "Widen your intentions" but it's quite difficult.

ND : Does drawing become some kind of **language** ? Some kind of writing?

CP : Yes, and it's the "fonction oblique" that started this process. My brother, who was twice president of the ICOMOS, when he saw my first drawings illustrated by a preface de Bruno Zevi, at a small exhibit at the Casa Farnese in Rome, wrote an article saying "a new kind of writing was born". For instance I am working on an exhibit called « incision urbaine », which means that cities should be dug in the shape of a river with its streams and confluents... I think we will get to these kinds of shapes by working on fluidity. We will go from the architecture of obstacle to the architecture of fluidity. You, you are developing an architecture of fluidity. And this kind of work is not common... So yes, I need many sketches, and yes I "write" a lot of pages. Once I had a Japanese book showing a great number of clouds. It was a kind of cloud dictionary. And people could copy them. It was like a writing book!

PM : I have a question about Piranesi. I wonder which was the first modern drawing? By looking at the Carceres, it seems that it was Piranesi's work. He didn't represent an existing building but brought up the question of space by drawing it.

CP : Yes of course Piranesi, Les Carceres is very beautiful. Well, I would say he didn't really question the problem of the use of space. Some people in Italy or Spain told me "your drawings are close to Saint Elia"; other people in France said they were close to Piranesi in terms of dimensions of Space, the reading of Space. But with Piranesi, you don't have the same feeling of freedom and liberty, because there was this classical language behind it. In some ways it was camouflaged behind a classical technique. But if we look at his work carefully, what matters aren't the columns... The global space was the most important to him... That's what interests me.

Professionally, the drawing I was the most interested in was the section. Some people said I only did modern facade elevations and that I was a "façadiste", but for me my only professional drawing was the section. And when I used to see my collaborators, one of them drawing a plan,

another working on the section and another one on the façade without looking at each other, I would get furious!

I ended up telling them about Le Corbusier who used to work with stratigraphy, in other words with superimposed layers of drawings. By superimposing the different color layers we had the plan, the section and the elevation at the same time. When I worked for him for a few months I saw him working that way, with color pencils.

So, speaking of modern tools in architecture, I think people could work that way instead of making all the different technical drawings in the same way. When I see a drawing on a computer I don't understand. They could make a ABCdaire, with for example a blue color for the section; a red for something else... Anyways, there is this blink, this flickering color... which feels wrong to me. (*Claude Parent speaks of computer screens*).

I know we need them. I'm not going to scream against the computers. But "they" (the architects) could get trapped. I have explained that once in an article: watch the traps! Computers always agree with you, but if it starts taking over you. Then it's over. It is important to control the drawing tools.

DRAWINGS

1. Satellites: things that are floating in Space.
2. 'The « fonction oblique »
3. Individual house projects
(dessins en cirques)
4. Houses we could never make.

PM : What is this ?

CP : vegetation.

PM : Oh ! This is very interesting to me because there are some events with the geometry Very strong and stable at the same time.

CP : In your proposal for the Seroussi Pavilion, I can remember some kind of interpretation of the ground and vegetation.

5. (zoom) : drawing work... variation of grays...
6. 'This is « la maison improbable », that no one will ever ask for. We are in imaginary spaces.
7. 'This is a portrait house, one of Paul Andreu. So this is Roissy, but in my own way...with my vocabulary...
8. 'This is the american couple Hani Rashid et Anne Couture. It's their portrait. Yes ! I have wanted to draw portraits of all architects...
9. Here's Francois Roche when he used to make bubbles...
10. Here are some more classical things, to show a hill made of « obliques ».
11. 'This is a kind of « water fall » house... It's between a house and a landscape ...earth, vegetation... basic elements...
12. 'This is more landscaped, we find the whole planet entirely, free from everything. Then we make some faults incisions and people live inside these incisions. It's the last theme: urban incision. Then there are some junctions over and under it. People can walk over it.

MC : So that's where the architecture of the « oblique » comes from ?

CP : Yes, that's where the « oblique » tries to find an urban legitimacy that is a response to today's world, in which we lack of space, we don't want tiny small spaces (*Claude Parent shows the buildings out his office window*)..So we have to re-conquer the planet's surface and build other things than houses. I also tried to explain this idea of the section-elevation.

13. It's a voluntary scheme of a section-elevation. Earth is rebuilt in its continuity, with the « oblique ». That's why we need the « oblique »: to have a permanent relationship with the surface and the ground of earth. A ground, which could be traveled by foot or bicycle.

We will also occupy the space of the deep underground with various mechanical systems. Other areas will be inhabitable according to various elements and the nature of different activities. There (Claude Parent shows the drawing) they won't understand this part. They will think it's a wall. So we will have to make an « incision » across it like that and show some details about this area.

So here one can circulate on top, the hill on the other side is like a river, and at the bottom there is a canyon where people will travel with small machines, but not cars, and on the other side there's a more upstraight area where people will want to live. People will want to live inside the cliffs. I try to develop a living area that would be in some ways between Petra-la Neuve and my softer approach. Pétra-la-Neuve are thrombolytic.

When I draw these things it is with the small pencil. I try to occupy the diagonal, and then with a ruler (equerre) I construct my circulation mesh but this mesh leads to the different houses which means that all these elements are inhabitable.

One can walk down to the dry river, right there. Sometimes we can broaden certain points. And this would chant the hills (???).

But all of it is drawn through the same habitable mesh. This drawing is called "under the shadow of the Grotto": it's a work base. Sometimes a fluid form can hit an obstacle. So how can a fluid form go through a major obstacle, which could be represented by a circle? Here's the first drawing, where I tried to free my mind completely. I tried to make a drawing where there would be only one fragment. It's called « architecture, acte II Naissance du paysage ». In reality it's already a Landscape.

Architecture is used to build this landscape, but not at all like landscapes where we put small Greek temples. It's a mix, an osmosis between the built environment and nature, between circulation and habitable space. I work with my intuition and that's when I use these little pencils.

14. Here's a drawing where we can see the fragment, and the emergence of the ground. And there, we go down and inhabit at the same time. This is the great wheel. The gigantic wheel that helps me dig into the earth. This is nature given back to agriculture, the harvester... I leave all of this intact, but then I need to dig in the earth to give space for some habitats. Someone sent me that: you see, it's a car. You can drive the car. And it's an architect who is driving; it is not an engineer... but an architect. When architects will make roads, it will be much better! For my own pleasure, I have done less schematic drawings showing this. I don't show any details, but only the « fonction oblique ». Simply habitable volumes / units. I don't draw Windows, or anything else. I told my wife : they look like pretty wall papers.. So I call them « les papiers peints » ! So, anyways, I don't see what would be wrong about all of this for nature and humankind to live that way, on the hill edges, in such spaces. Here's the wall paper: earth continues, and here some spaces for big machines, and other things... Since everyone circulates on the same ground, there are many chances to keep meeting and crossing everyone!

PM : I'm thinking about two things : first about the Labyrinth and then about Space. Architecture is always in confrontation with the necessity of finding a way out of the Labyrinth to create Space. What I feel when I see these drawings is something really intense about the Labyrinth. I feel the same about Piranesi drawings. I find some kind of Labyrinth thus it still creates Space.

CP : That's the Miracle ! Yes, it's true that they are enclosed in some kind of Labyrinth, because I believe they like to be enclosed and protected at the same time. Humankind likes protection. By opening up the Labyrinth all the time on natural spaces, natural faults; things like that might give people pleasure again. This kind of pleasure that makes people like the Mountains. I don't know. But it's true, I work with Labyrinths, thus I still want to open them constantly on Nature.

ND : Your drawings never seem to have a finished end. There is always some kind of possible opening.

CP : Yes, I take a piece of Land, then the project develops in continuity. It's a linear city.

PM : The difference between these drawings and Piranesi's Labyrinth is : with Piranesi, the Labyrinth is in opposition with structure. If structure is the Labyrinth, then we can say that the complexity of Space is in the structure itself, and space is the result of this. But in your drawings, movement and circulation of one space to another produces complexity. We move with architecture that is an architecture of movement, it is not static. It's the first thing that I noticed. The second thing is that it is probably the first form of I would say "complex topology" of Space. In other terms, we can't compare these drawings to the watercolor work of Liebeskind... which are drawings about drawings, about spatial complexity, space, but only architectural space. And this is a very different issue.

CP : On the first point I agree that I support dynamism, movement, and the intertwining of these movements to bring complexity. When we speak about complex topology it's absolutely right, although I don't see any other way to describe it than with a simple pencil and a white sheet.

PM : When I was speaking about belief earlier, I meant that for me drawing rimes with the desire of getting lost, and the desire of finding an exit at the same time. So I think drawing is a working process that balances between the fact of getting lost and finding itself again.

CP : Yes, that's right : you have to put yourself in a risky situation, in some kind of weightlessness... until you get to a point where you need to get things back together again. And that's what is interesting. I start at this area of the page, then I move with my drawing, at a certain point I tweak and when the drawing is close to its final stage, it either works or doesn't... but in any case, with this approach you're speaking about, drawings are less aesthetic for the people, but you can't be wrong in the global image you are trying to give.

India Ink drawings:

CP : So that's what I do to find ways to draw without pencils. This way the pencil is not MY thing anymore... These are... « Shells », that's how I call them.

ND : It is written « les villes boucliers »

CP : Yes, That's right ! It's a drawing of « ville bouclier ». It shows that one day we might need this kind of city. "Architecture d'Aujourd'hui" wants to publish them... I don't know why... It's a series linked to the telluric movements... There are two series: a first one about the movement of the ground, integrating inhabitable spaces. And the other one shows some "shells" protecting people... I like these elements catapulting each other, always expressing different movements. Here are some protected areas, and here are some junctions... Or some parts are like holes...

(Peter Macapia starts drawing)

PM : Here are some ships in the water, with turbulence around them. But with my boats, there is turbulence within them. It's a series of models suspended to the ceiling. Each element's form is like a bees hive. For me it's important to draw to be able to think of different possibilities of forms, geometries, but not in architecture, because there are other ways that don't have the same type of utility and usage. I think about Descartes in his meditations. In his discussions he speaks of forms and doubts, and certainties, but all the time he did experiments using wax. And these objects are an important part of his reflexion. He used to say "I can doubt of all these things in wax". It was a medium, some kind of drawing in which one can get lost or find his way out, then we think; wax is like the labyrinth.

CP : In any case we will have to come back to the Labyrinth. I think we will come back to a new Middle Ages of protection with major social turbulence. We will not support 2 Billion individuals who will neither have a house nor a piece of Land to cultivate...

They will migrate and the world will be separated in two, the ones who will be settled and stable inside strong protection barriers and structures, and the ones we will call the wanderers who will migrate and walk around the world. There have been worlds of that kind... When the earth cooled down hunters had to go further and further... And then they couldn't walk any further. So they invented the stationary state. It could even be women who invented that, with the action of cultivating. But before that, the world was in a constant migration. We saw people leaving Russia, moving through the southern lakes, and ending up in South America. There have been fabulous migrations. At the moment, Humankind wants a house, a garage, etc. But it will change.