George Knight

Léon Krier, Our Teacher

Léon Krier, nuestro maestro

Léon Krier, o nosso professor

Abstract | **Resumen** | **Resumo**

Léon Krier (1946–2025) was an outstanding architect and urbanist who voiced a scathing critique of modernist architecture and planning over more than a half century. His ideas are central to the New Urbanism movement in the United States, and he served as designer for such projects as Poundbury in Dorchester, UK, and Ciudad Cayalá in Guatemala, among numerous other commissions. He published prolifically and is famed for his trenchant cartoons. Krier was also an accomplished educator, having taught at architecture schools in universities such as Princeton, Virginia, Cornell, Notre Dame, and Yale. "Léon Krier, Our Teacher" describes his pedagogical method over four, semester-long advanced design studios taught with George Knight at Yale.

Léon Krier (1946–2025) fue un destacado arquitecto y urbanista que, durante más de medio siglo, formuló una incisiva crítica de la arquitectura y el urbanismo modernos. Sus ideas ocupan un lugar central en el movimiento del Nuevo Urbanismo en Estados Unidos, y fue autor de proyectos como Poundbury, en Dorchester (Reino Unido), y Ciudad Cayalá, en Guatemala, entre otros muchos encargos. Publicó numerosos trabajos y es célebre por sus mordaces viñetas. Krier desarrolló asimismo una importante labor docente y enseñó en escuelas de arquitectura de universidades como Princeton, Virginia, Cornell, Notre Dame y Yale. "Léon Krier, nuestro maestro" describe el método pedagógico que aplicó a lo largo de cuatro talleres avanzados de proyectos, de un semestre de duración cada uno, impartidos junto con George Knight en Yale.

Léon Krier (1946–2025) foi um arquiteto e urbanista notável que, ao longo de mais de meio século, teceu uma crítica mordaz à arquitetura e ao planeamento modernistas. As suas ideias são fundamentais para o movimento do Novo Urbanismo nos Estados Unidos, tendo sido o responsável pelo desenho de projetos como Poundbury, em Dorchester, no Reino Unido, e a Ciudad Cayalá, na Guatemala, entre inúmeras outras obras. Publicou prolificamente e é famoso pelos seus desenhos satíricos incisivos. Krier foi também um educador consumado, tendo lecionado em escolas de arquitetura de universidades como Princeton, Virgínia, Cornell, Notre Dame e Yale. "Léon Krier, o nosso professor" descreve o seu método pedagógico ao longo de quatro ateliers avançados de projeto, cada um com a duração de um semestre, ministrados em conjunto com George Knight, em Yale.

The Yale School of Architecture

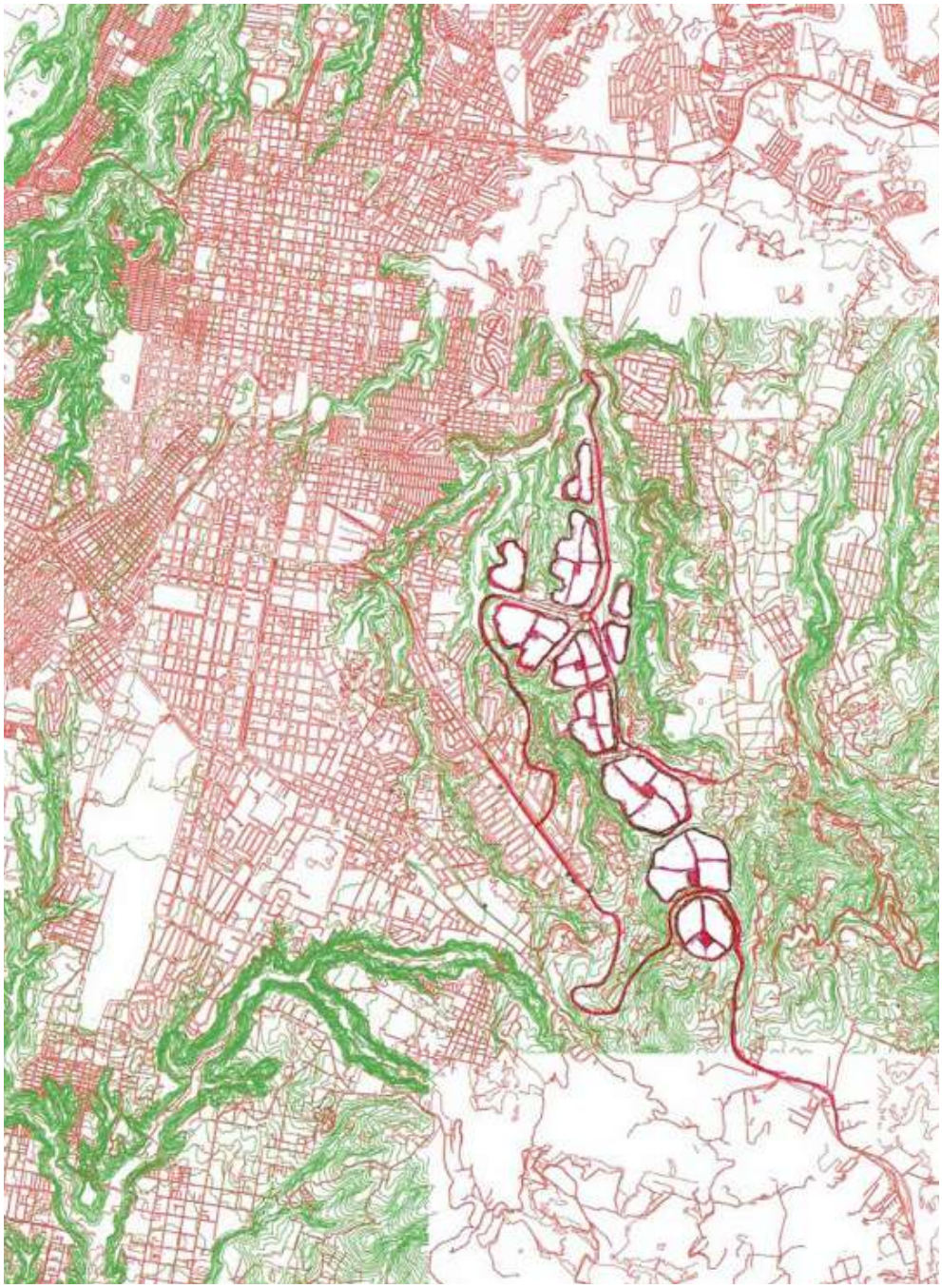
By 2015, it had become a Yale School of Architecture tradition to gather the entire student and faculty body in the capacious fourth floor "pit" of Rudolph Hall, an unrepentantly brutalist landmark of bush-hammered concrete, daring cantilevers, and expanses of undivided glazing, for a preview of the semester's advanced design studios. Dean Robert A. M. Stern, master of ceremonies through the morning in his double-breasted sport coat, yellow socks, and Italian loafers, was visibly delighted with the array of practitioners from around the world which he had hand-picked to lead the school's semester-long design courses. Recalling the rancorous, challenging review panels of his own education at Yale, Stern reveled in the diverse, and even conflicting, design ideologies embodied by the visiting critics he had recruited—a group which perennially included such "starchitects" of the day as Zaha Hadid, Frank Gehry, and Rafael Viñoly.

By this point, Stern was operating with a well-earned confidence he could hardly have mustered at the beginning of his deanship in 1998, when concerns were loudly murmured that his avowed interest in traditional architecture might prevail in the curriculum and jeopardize the school's reputation for innovation and experimentation. Such a gathering firmly allayed this apprehension, expressing the "pluralism" which became the byword of his long tenure. Simultaneously, Stern's decision to include Léon Krier in this group was noteworthy. Krier, who had first been brought to Yale in 1991 under the deanship of Thomas Beeby and would be leading his ninth studio, had long leveled a withering critique at modernist architecture and called for a rediscovery of traditional materials and forms with which to repair a world broken by hyper-industrialization.1 Stern was determined that the school maintain such a critical position, even if it was at odds with that of the instructors invited to lead other advanced studios.

The morning proceeded as had many before, with lengthy verbal and slide presentations of proposed studio sites, programs, and philosophies. Students in their final year filled the floor space while scores of others peered over classmates' shoulders from the studio trays and bridges overhead. Stern then opened the floor for questions to the future teachers: "How many days will you be in New Haven over the semester?" "Will we work in teams or individually?" As details were ironed out, the questions to the critics became more substantive. "What do you mean, the studio will have no physical site?" "What role will parametricism play in the pedagogy?" "How will the textual supplant the formal?" At one point a student interrogated Krier. "Will we actually be expected to design in a traditional manner?" Krier fielded the question with characteristic clarity. "If this were a French language class, you would not expect to learn German, correct?" Responding across an expanse of paprika-colored carpeting, Krier added, "This is a studio on the traditional city so, of course, we will be designing with traditional forms and materials."



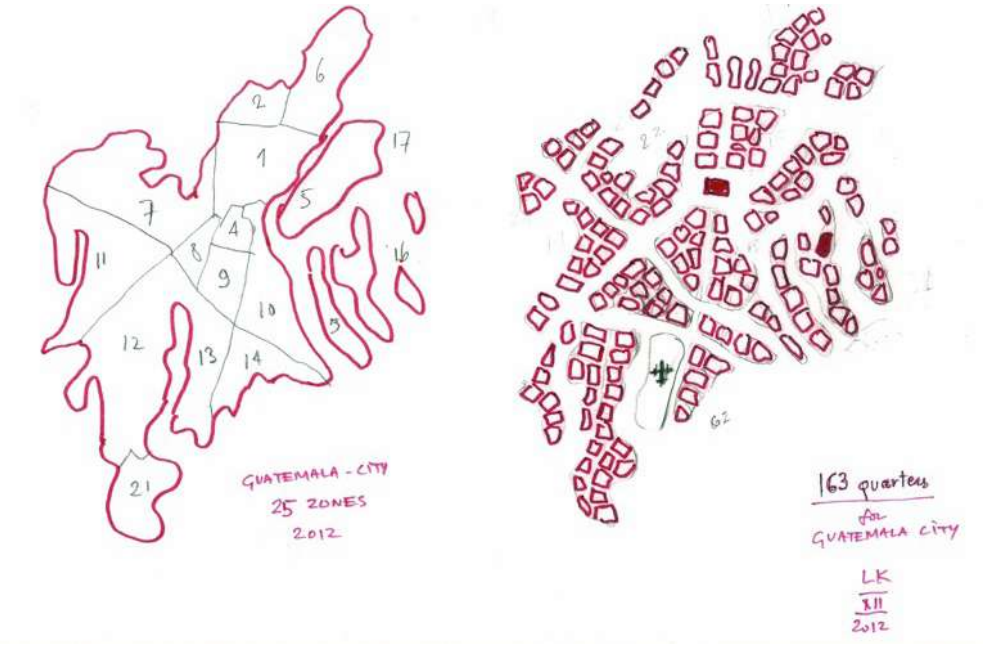
Léon Krier, Frank Gehry, and others during a studio review at the Yale School of Architecture in 2004 (Yale School of Architecture)



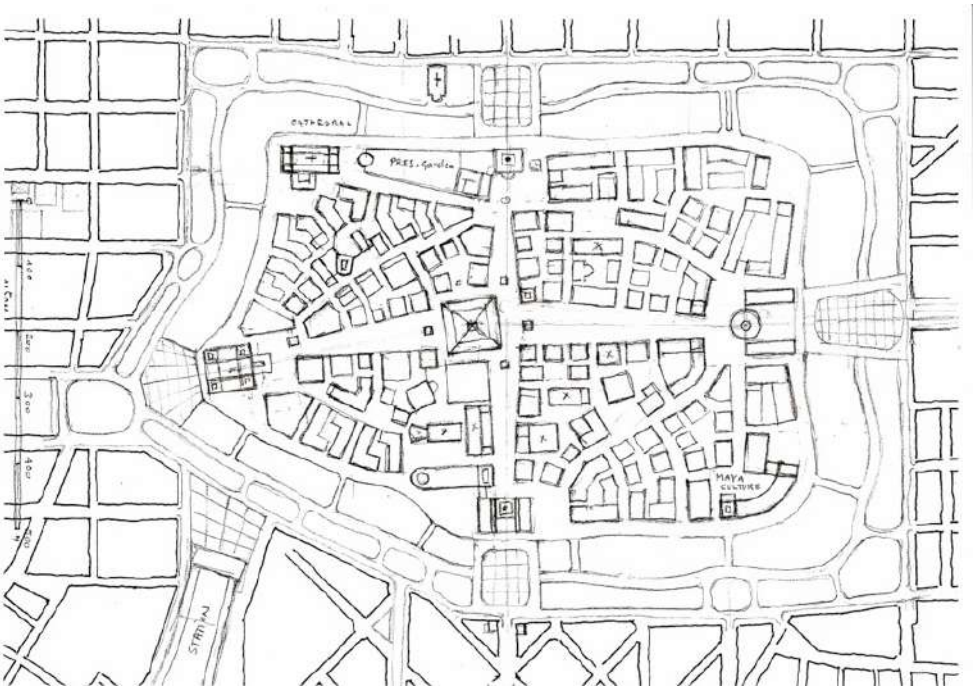
Regional plan for Guatemala City showing "Guatemaya" and Ciudad Cayalá, 2012 (Léon Krier)

The Masterplan

Over the four years we taught at Yale together, Krier invariably organized the studio's proposed work around a masterplan that he would draw up for a given site. This approach differed to that of many other critics at the school who typically dedicated the first weeks of the semester to student-led planning prior to any architectural elaboration. Krier was notoriously inflexible regarding student proposals to alter a given arrangement. One student recalled, "There was one rule: Krier's masterplan could not be altered."[2] Yet such "rules" were born not of obstinacy or imperiousness but rather of pedagogical method. Krier recognized that urban design was a less familiar discipline for architecture students and, he believed, it was most effective to ask them to work within the parameters of a well-considered plan. Rather than shuttering his students' creativity, Krier sought to vest his designs with social, artistic, and pragmatic prompts for inquiry and discovery.



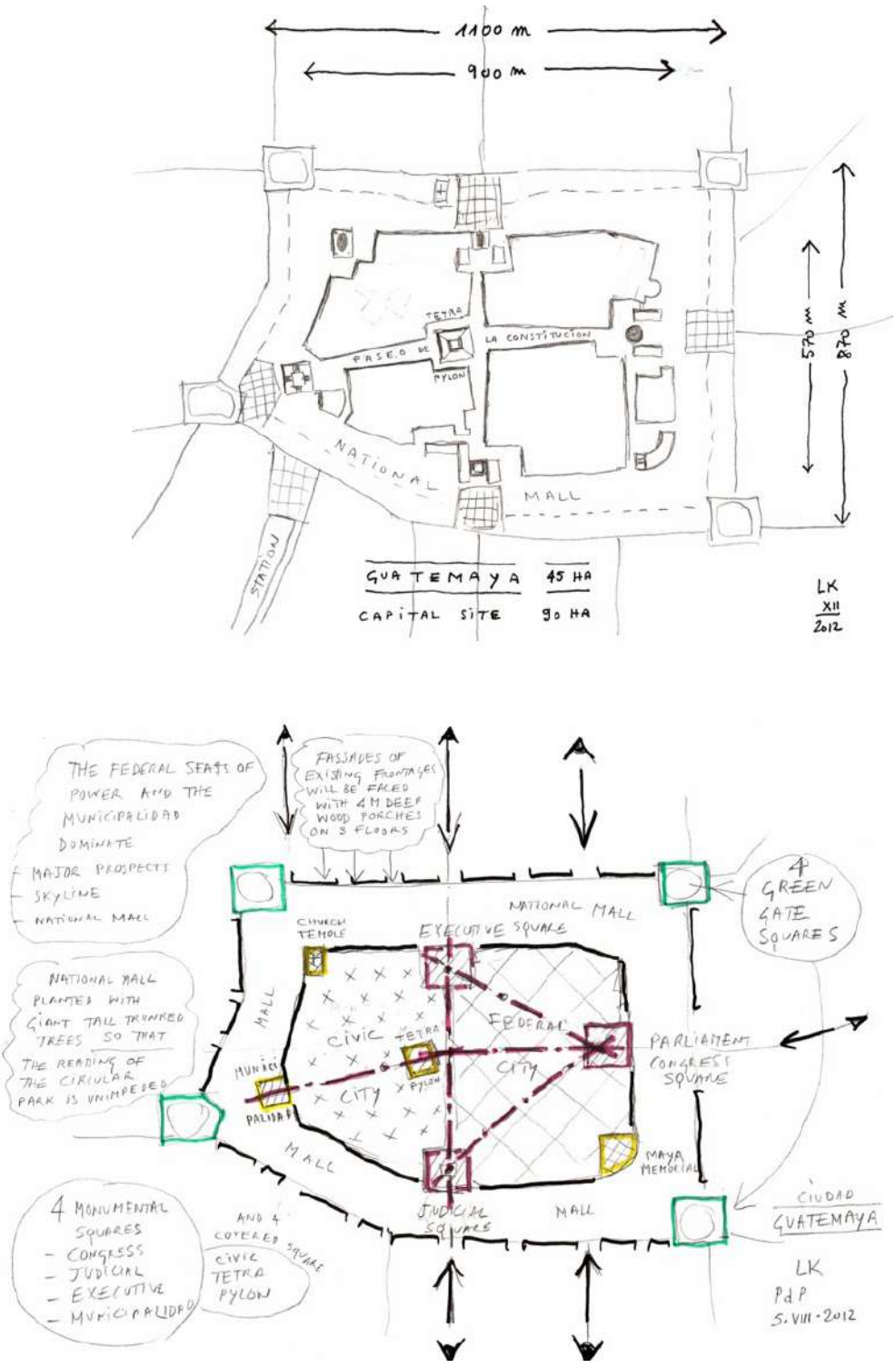
Regional plan of Guatemala City and Ciudad Cayalá, 2012 (Léon Krier)



"Guatemaya" master plan, 2012 (Léon Krier)

Despite his many years of teaching,[3] Krier approached each studio with vigor. He devoted weeks prior to the start of a semester to making a plan to guide students' work. This process was memorable in a 2013 studio in which Krier proposed a new federal and municipal capitol, "Guatemaya", to be built on the grounds of Guatemala City's current Centro Cívico, a district, Krier noted, "that had promised to be Guatemala's Brasilia but had become a sordid exemplar of modernist failure both in urban and architectural terms." The studio was to build on the early success of the still-in-construction Ciudad Cayalá, a new quarter only a few miles away, for which he had served as planner and advisor. Krier's uncanny ability to make the complex appear simple is exemplified in a drawing he prepared for Cayalá. Wielding a deft red pen over an intricate plan of the existing layout, he illustrated his hallmark planning tenets: A city is conceived as a polycentric organism in which each center's size is defined by the limits of walkability; each center has a discernible identity typically embodied by a civic structure/plaza and is subdivided into quarters; circulation routes are set at the edges rather than in the middle of the assemblage; the plan adapts to the terrain rather than the reverse.

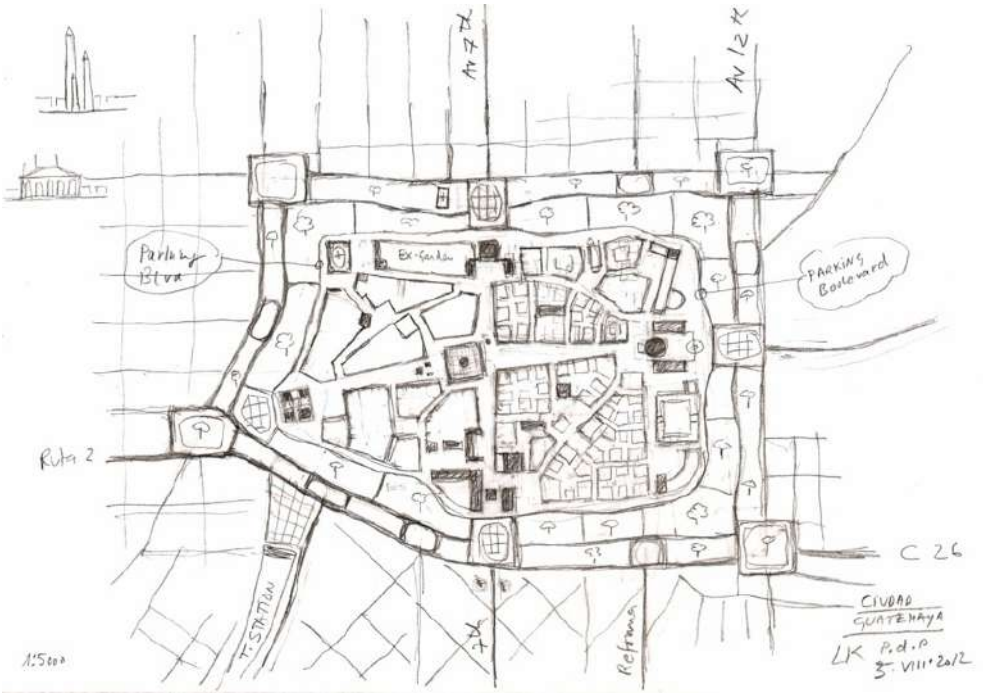
Krier began his planning for Guatemaya with a study of the Guatemala City metropolis, transposing an existing system of 25 administrative "zones" into a network of 163 "quarters." Here too, one sees Krier's prioritization of discernible groupings of blocks and neighborhoods around legible centers. From this scale, Krier developed his proposal for a new governmental district. Working iteratively in his preferred format of freehand ink drawings on A4 sheets, he based the boundary on existing circulation routes and traced the dimensional limits of a walkable core. While the limits would ideally have been defined by a natural feature offering long vistas, such as the ravines he had known as a child in Luxembourg, for Guatemaya's comparatively level ground, he proposed a generous belt of trees and parkland, a "national mall", within which to set the new capitol.

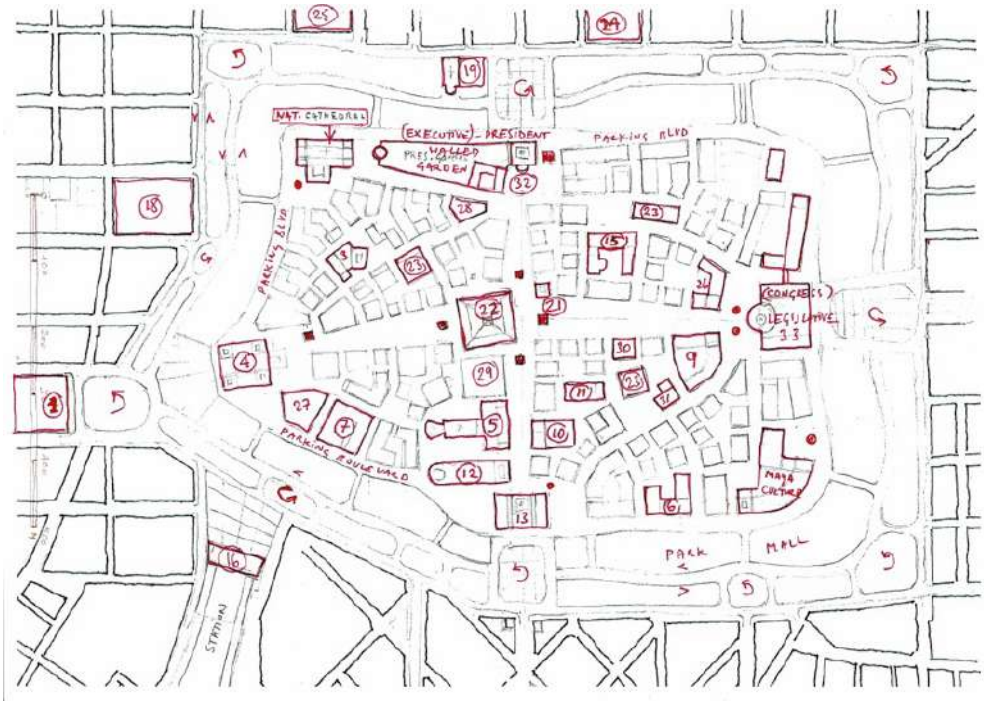


"Guatemaya" master plan studies, 2012 (Léon Krier)

He began by drawing two primary perpendicular avenues like the *cardo* and *decumanus* defining the Roman *castrum* type at the core of such cities as Paris, Barcelona, or London. This initial organizational stroke produced a plan of four quarters where, at the crossing of the avenues, Krier habitually located a large public space. In his Guatemaya plan, he proposed an enormous "tetra-pylon" or double-sided arch at this intersection, a further indulgence of his fascination with Roman architecture.

Despite his reliance on ancient planning principles, Krier critiqued and sought to overcome the *castrum*'s martial rigidity. For example, he proposed a secondary set of civic buildings to visually





"Guatemaya" master plan studies, 2012 (Léon Krier)

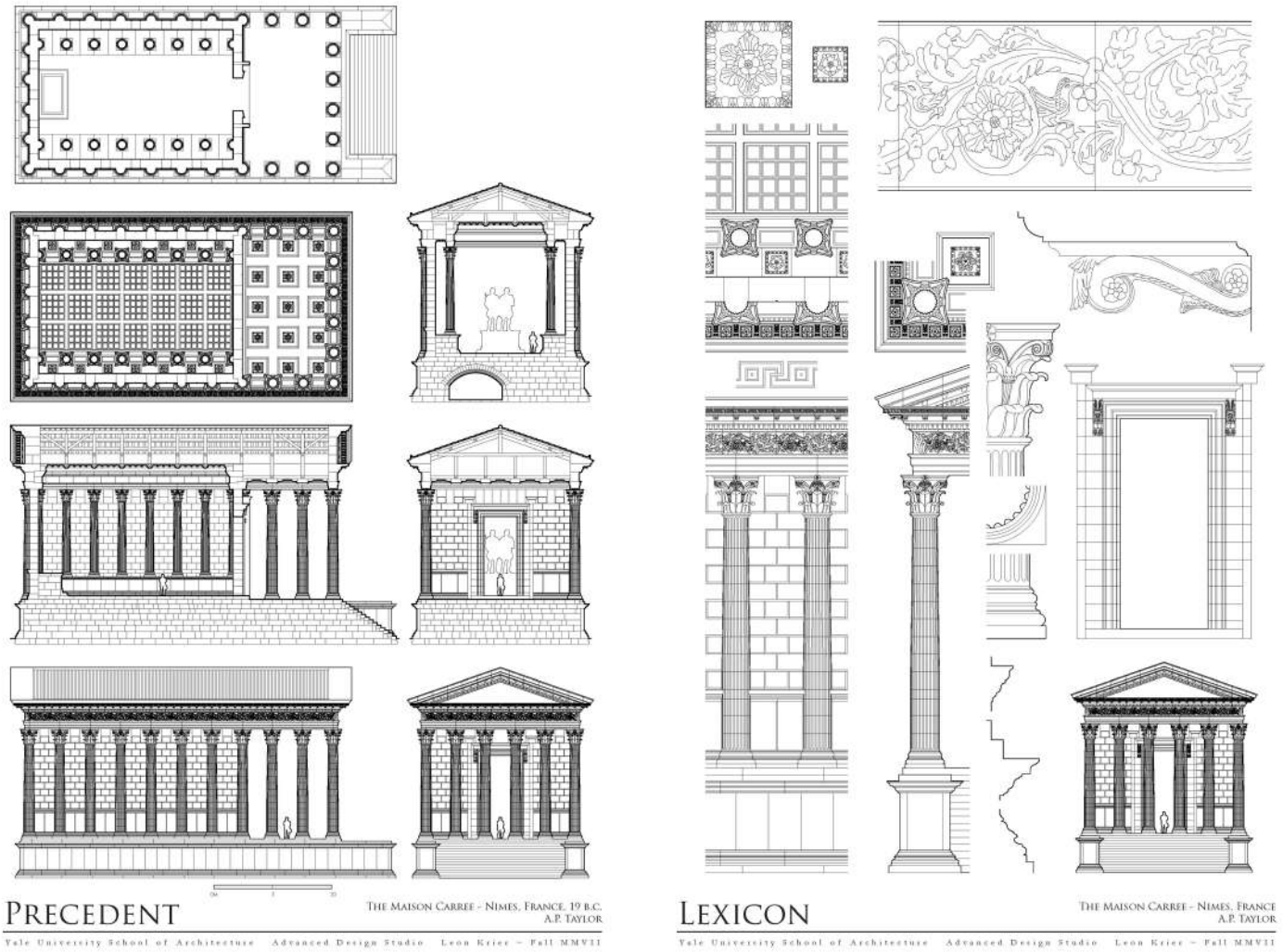
terminate, rather than reinforce, the otherwise continuous cardinal axes. Similarly, he defined the corners of his plan not with bastions but with prominent cultural and religious uses. Even more notably, he introduced eccentric geometries into the plan at the outset. Intrigued by the stress distribution patterns found in such phenomena as shattering glass or dried lakebeds, Krier sought to give life to the Cartesian lattice. "It's as if one shook the board on which the building blocks sit… just a little" he noted, as his drawn blocks were increasingly liberated from the grid. Meandering diagonal secondary streets, like those first formed by opportunistic cart drivers in under-administered medieval cities, further dissolved any monotony. Sensitive to the charge of willful formalism, he countered that such planning was "vernacular" as opposed to "classical" and therefore better suited to the day-to-day uses proposed in a given quarter. Inevitably, these secondary streets led to squares scaled to the more quotidian uses of the surrounding blocks, at the core of the quarters.

Though it was not immediately apparent to his eager students, Krier's carefully prepared masterplan served as a fertile garden in which their talents could take root, find identity, respond to circumstance, and flourish.

Learning a Language and Finding a Voice

The précis of Krier's 2007 studio at Yale entitled *E.U.R. Interrota* declared, "Students need not worry about personal expression and style because this comes automatically with the practice of speech. It doesn't work the other way round." To many of our students—all talented, all ambitious, and all concerned about personal expression—this gnomic statement seemed, at first, inscrutable. After all,

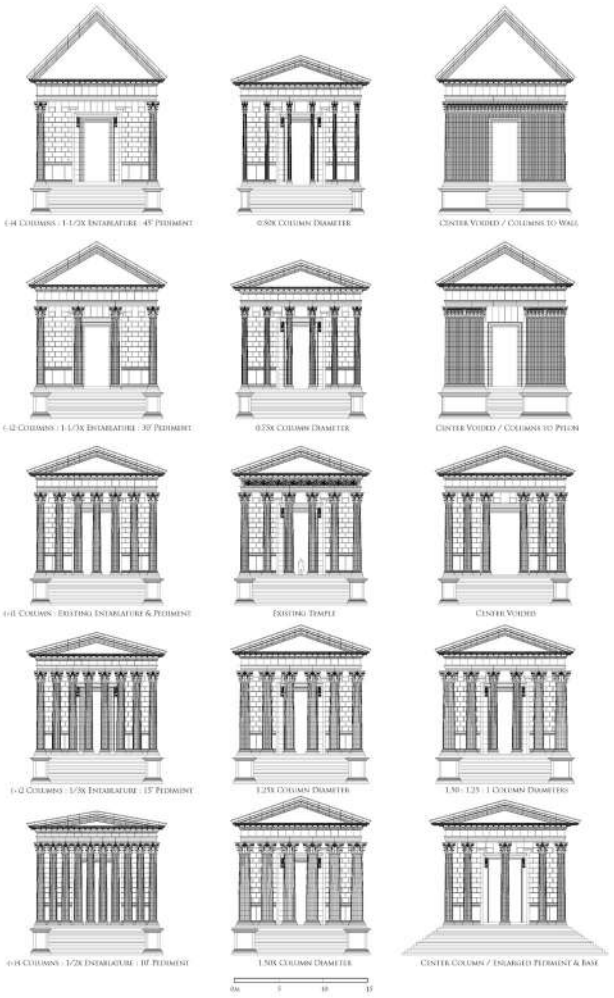
Student work by Aaron Taylor, Yale School of Architecture, 2007

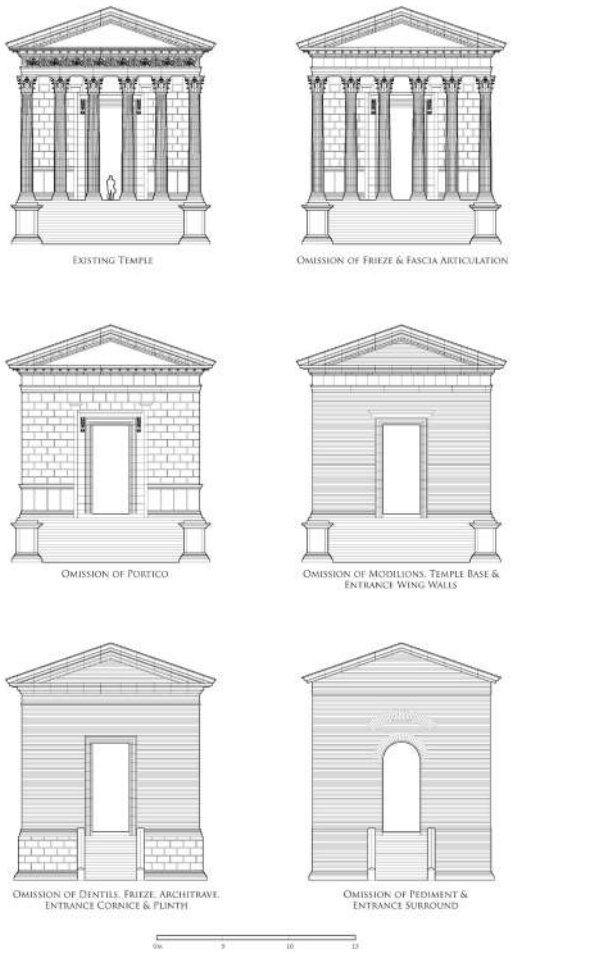


their education to date had largely prioritized a quest for individual brilliance and originality while offering less opportunity to gain a conversance with form, material, proportion, and assembly. Krier inverted this approach, believing that a student's expressive potential was aided, if not discovered, through the study of exemplary architectural and urban form. As he indicated in a handwritten note faxed to the studio on their return from a travel week, "Several signs tell me that the variegated Rome trip has kindled a fire in all of you, as it has in me—I keep drawing arches, like the guy in *Close Encounters of the Third Kind*, not knowing exactly what he is working on." He closed the missive with a familiar invitation: "Any fax questions will be readily answered." With such support, Krier would lead the students through a process of iterative drawing of exceptional buildings, both classical and vernacular, notable and obscure, contributing to the studio site's character.

A memorable example of this methodology occurred at the outset of his 2015 Yale studio, *A New New Haven*—his last one at Yale—in which he proposed to transform the waterfront of the university's host city into a productive and appealing urban quarter by supplanting a toxic surface highway interchange with a graceful harbor bridge. His first assignment to the students was to immerse themselves in the best of the city's centuries of architecture. While some were familiar with this approach, few had ever drawn to Krier's required level of fidelity and resolution. Many questioned why the studio devoted so much time to drawing existing buildings. Krier, the polyglot, frequently cited the way in which a child, ever mimetic, learns to talk: "We learn speech by imitating the noises we hear made by our parents and come to assign meaning to them." Selecting buildings of various types, characters, and vintages, Krier oversaw the studio's drawing and re-drawing of plans, sections, and elevations with ever-increasing levels of clarity and appreciation for form, material, proportion, and assembly.

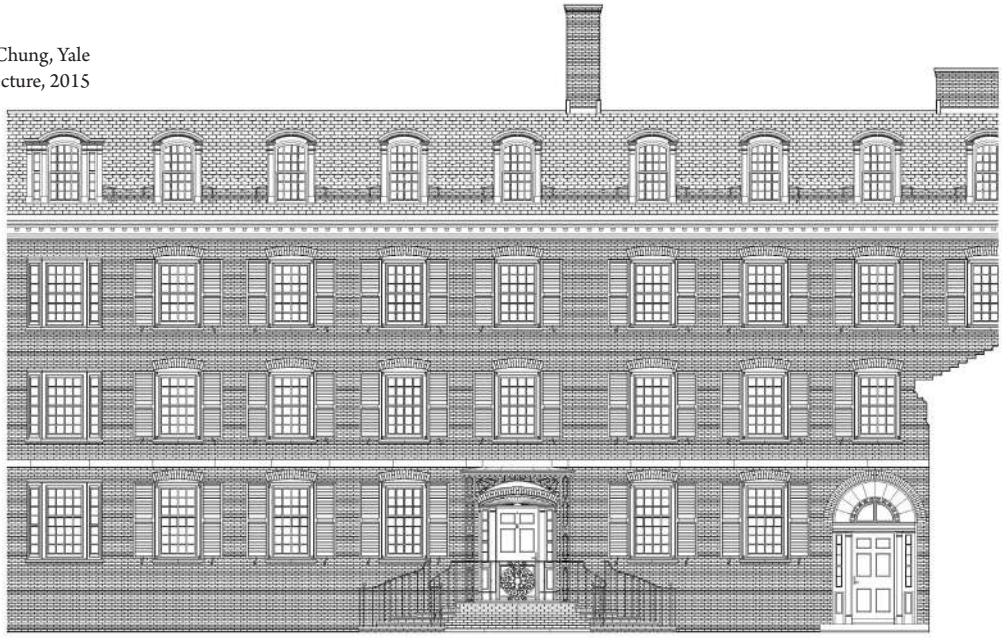
Student work by Aaron Taylor, Yale School of Architecture, 2007

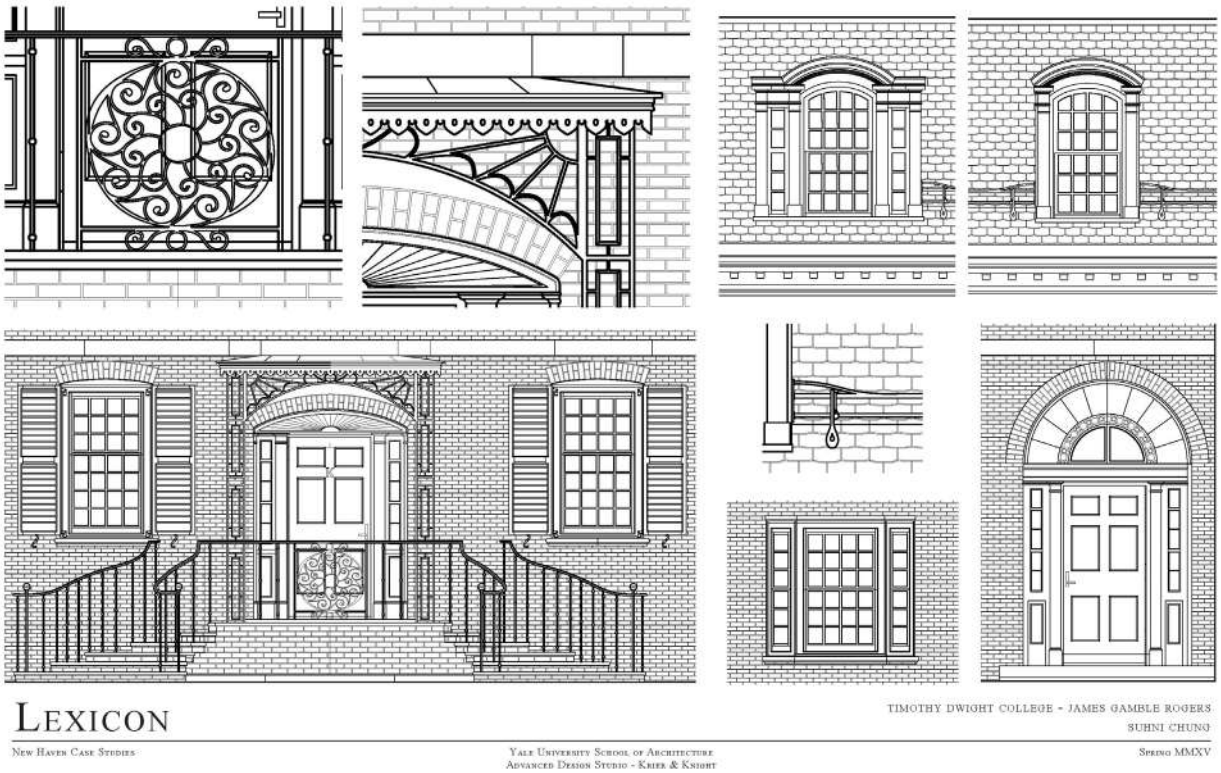




The students were asked to extract specific elements, "parts of speech" in Krier's terms, from their drawn precedents to create a "lexicon" of form from which they could assemble new buildings. The students produced catalogs of doors, windows, eaves, bases, parapets, gates, cornices, all in a common "authorless" graphic style which would then serve as a shared studio resource. To the surprise of many students, Krier's methodology, so focused on "the syntax and grammar", produced an astonishing "fluency" with form and material that allowed even the most indecisive to confidently compose the various buildings expected of them. The prolonged experience with the "teacher" buildings had generated a critical acuity and a creative proficiency.

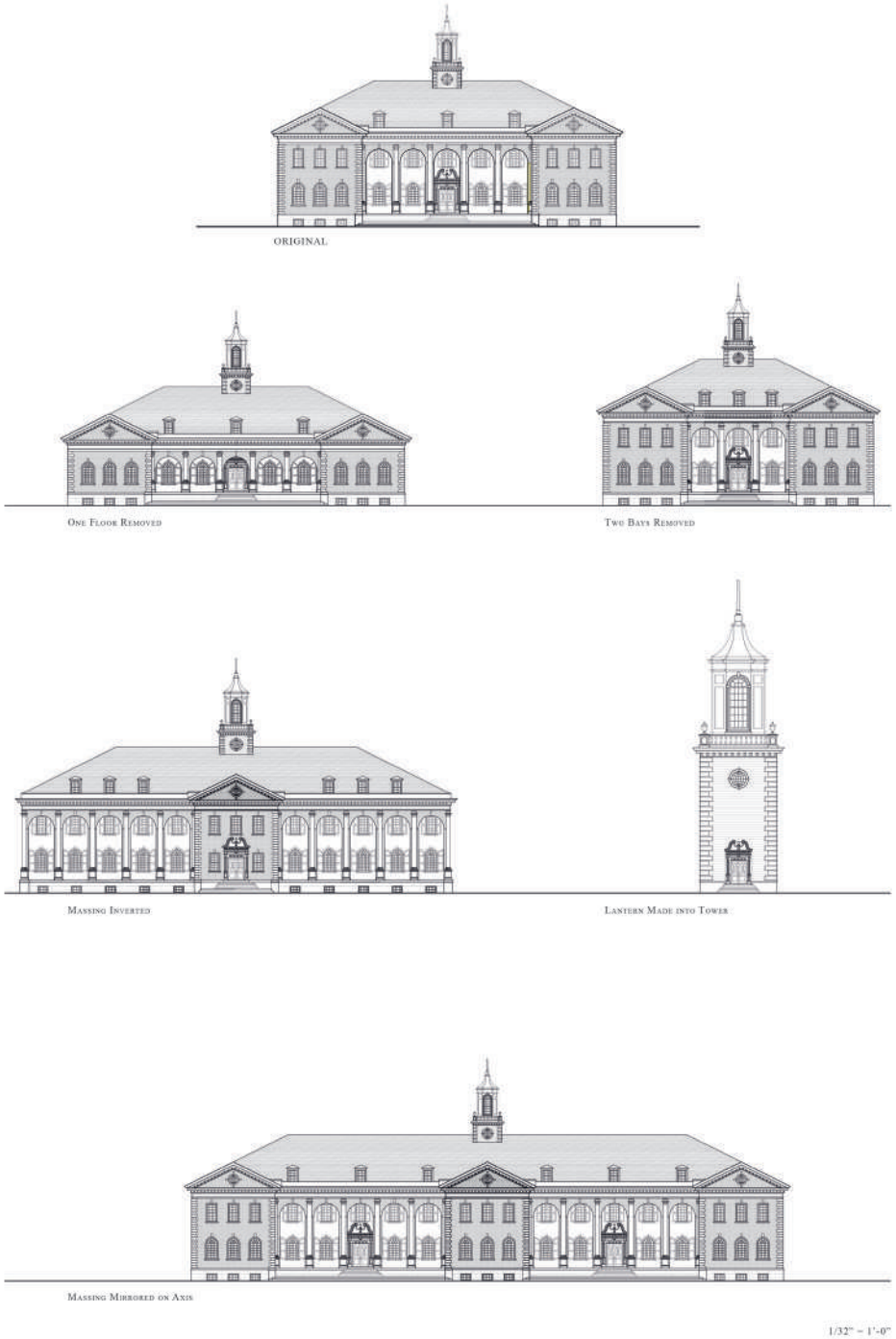
Student work by Sunhi Chung, Yale School of Architecture, 2015





Playful Drawing

As Krier was the inaugural winner of the Richard H. Driehaus Prize at the University of Notre Dame awarded annually to "a living architect whose work embodies the highest ideals of traditional and classical architecture," it is curious that his work and teaching resist being labeled "classical" in a conventional sense. I have heard more than one suspicious academe question Krier's fidelity to Vitruvian or Renaissance codes and recall Robert Stern once quipping that Krier was less a classicist than a "vernacularist". That said, Krier nonetheless believed in, and taught, a classical ideal—what he repeatedly identified as "the highest and best," which, if used in proper measure, would confer beauty, legibility, and lasting civic value to programs worthy of it.[4]



Student work by Stephanie Jazmines, Yale School of Architecture, 2015

As illustrated in his didactic cartoons, Krier saw drawing as an essential tool in discovering and ratifying the classical ideal. Proportion, syntax, figuration, ornamentation, scales of detail, and more could all be affirmed in a carefully drawn sketch. Drawing has indeed long been a cornerstone of architectural education. The playful Krier posited an additional, inverse, possibility: that students should find the point at which a form or composition "loses" its classicality. He challenged them to consider such questions as: Could a classical building drift into banality, or even ugliness, if its components were deformed? How elastic are its proportions? How much classical form can be eliminated before a building can no longer be considered classical? Could a classical structure morph into a vernacular one while retaining a comparable integrity? Could a new classical building be created by rearranging components of an existing one?

I first encountered this methodology in Krier's *Roma Interrota* studio, in which he had tasked the students with documenting explicitly pre-Christian Roman architecture. To answer these questions, the students deconstructed their well-documented exemplars to test the limits of proportional harmony and Vitruvian eurythmia.[5] As illustrated in a suite of drawings of the Maison Carrée, Krier orchestrated an exercise of "distortion" whereby students tested age-old norms through creating drawings with discrepant roof pitches, eccentric inter-columniations, and columns ranging from the corpulent to the emaciated. Similarly, Krier asked his students to illustrate "omission", with elements being progressively left out. For example, they were asked to consider in a given facade how essential, or not, a modillion coursing might prove to be; a mutulary cornice; engaged pilasters; column entasis, and so forth. Going a step further, he challenged them to take a classical building and transform it into a vernacular one to illustrate how, for example, a temple and a *horreum*, remote in their functional and artistic programs, might nonetheless share a language of assembly and a structural logic. Finally, he invited his students to deploy their newfound fluency with form by recombining elements in their creations.

Student work by Stephanie Jazmines, Yale School of Architecture, 2015





Student work by Ryan Salvatore, Yale School of Architecture, 2013

Application – Student Work

Only upon completion of the battery of preparatory assignments, often lasting a half-semester, did Krier let his students design their projects. At minimum, the studio's brief would include a building design with a public program, buildings with residential programs, and frequently some civic art such as a fountain, plaza, or landscaping. Additionally, Krier usually required students to present an "analytique"—a single, multi-scalar drawing amalgamating components to illustrate the whole—of their primary design. Facing such a formidable list of deliverables under a short timeline, students had no choice but to draw upon their preparatory learning.

With few exceptions, the work flowed like water released from a dam. With Krier's masterplan guiding the layout, students showed a newfound fluency with form and material. They feverishly devised programs for building uses, developed plans, resolved structural approaches, and designed facades

and elevations. Krier played a supportive role in this, encouraging students not to shy away from the plan's civic aspirations and frequently urging boldness of form. For example, "It needs to be about 150% larger." He sketched economically with students, typically delineating larger, simpler forms, whose mass was suggested by varied weights of his felt-tipped pen. Drawing from his encyclopedic knowledge of architectural history, Krier emboldened students with inspirational citations for both design and representation.

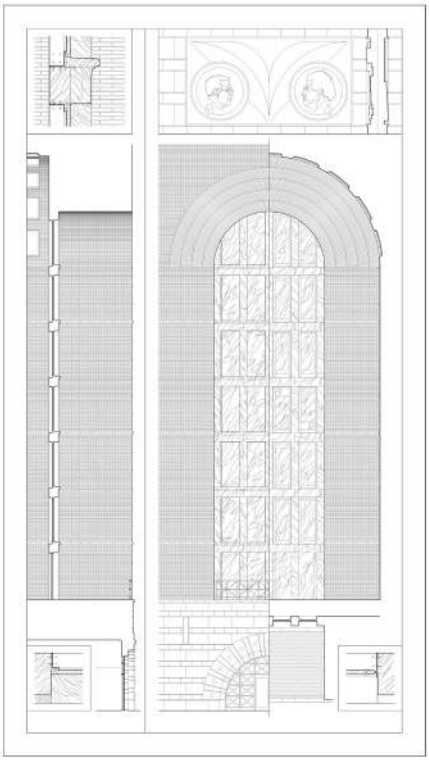
In some studios students were challenged to engage artfully with the existing buildings that Krier's plan had spared. This would require corrective action. For example, one student sought to reinstate the unbuilt, arcuated portico in Cass Gilbert's design for Union Station in New Haven and to reorganize the interior of that landmark building as a gateway to new waterfront developments, while another transformed a banal industrial structure into a city mosque. In other studios, a wholly new character was to be created through buildings, landscapes, and civic amenities.

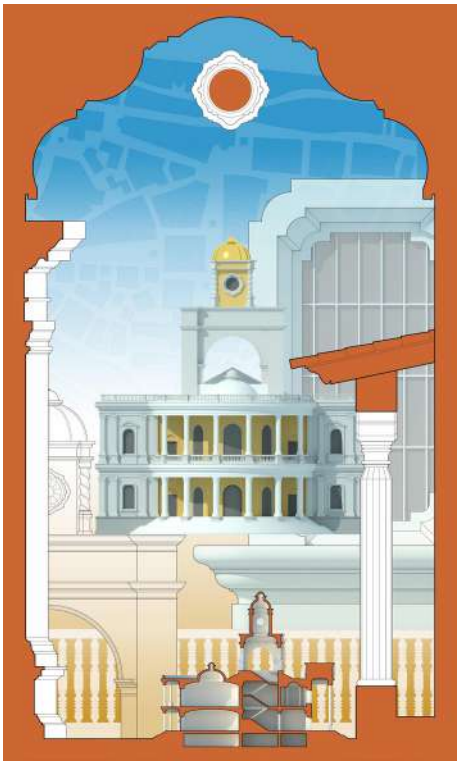
Krier's interest in local building patterns, climate, and design traditions was an axiomatic starting point for each studio. Nonetheless, ceding to his fertile imagination and irrepressible curiosity, Krier always kept some space in his studios for experimenting with non-native influences. He often asked individual students to take up the work of a selected "outside" architect or movement to inform their designs. One summoned Art Deco precedents featuring Mayan motifs to influence a series of buildings in a proposed quarter of the Guatemaya site. Others found guidance in the work of the Austrian architect Otto Wagner for designs in the same studio. It was often a surprise to them that Krier would include his own improbable muse, Le Corbusier, as an inspiration. Krier long held that this modern master's oeuvre could be "civilized" with a systematic application of his formal language and a reconsideration of his material vocabulary.

Whether working in a heroic masonry scale such as for a new Roman library, or in a uniquely hybrid regional language as for the justice palace in Guatemala, or in a neo-Federal spirit as for a public library in Washington, or in a dreamy monumentality as for a reinstated state capitol for Connecticut, many students achieved a level of expression and resolution uncommon at Yale. Facades supplanted mere schematic elevations, plans crystalized with a legible hierarchy of rooms, skylines sprouted elegant silhouettes, and landscapes gained organizational clarity through paving patterns and nicely distributed plantings.

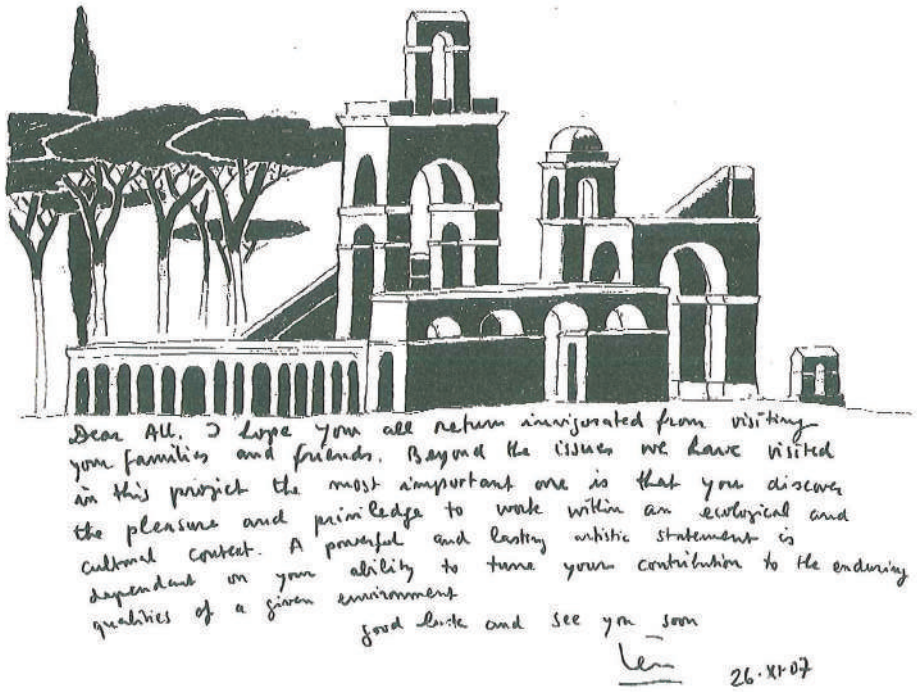
Student work by Michael McGrattan (2013), Aaron Taylor (2007), and Mengran Li (2013), Yale School of Architecture







Upon graduation some, but not all, have gone on to work in traditional design languages and contexts. Yet all were enlightened by the example and teachings of a generational visionary who recognized that we must strive toward an enriched relationship with the earth and with one another. As he summarized in a fax to students at the end of a studio, "Beyond the issues we have visited in this project the most important one is that you discover the pleasure and privilege to work within an ecological and cultural context. A powerful and lasting artistic statement is dependent on your ability to tune your contribution to the enduring qualities of a given environment. Good luck and see you soon. Léon."



Fax from Léon Krier to the 2007 group



Léon Krier and the author in Palma, Mallorca, 2016 (Meghan Knight)

Epilogue

I first encountered Léon's writing and philosophy as a graduate student in the early 1990s, and was immediately won over by his erudition and impactful drawing. Years later I had the unexpected good fortune to teach with him and, as anyone in such a position would recognize, learn from him. His dedication to his students matched his brilliance, originality, courage, and lucidity. His example continues to inspire me and the scores of Yale students lucky enough to have encountered him.

I am indebted to the following alumni for their work and their contribution to this appreciation:

2007	***2009***	***2013***	***2015***
Rome	***Washington DC***	***Guatemaya***	***New Haven***
Aaron Taylor	Carmel Bonfigli	Adrienne Brown	Suhni Chung
Jamie Chan	Tomek Smierzchalski	John Farrace	Shuangjing Hu
Ireta Kraal	Chat Travieso	Neil Flanagan	Stephanie Jazmines
Maryjane Starks	Ian Mills	Mengran Li	Jason Kurzweil
Thomas DiNatale	Ty Velten	Jing Liu	Jingwen Li
Alex Butler	Andreea Cojocaru	Michael McGrattan	Jizhou Liu
Mark Van Brocklin	Carlos Zedillo	Noah Morganstern	Abdulgader Naseer
Elizabeth Baldwin	Scott O'Daniel	Altair Peterson	Alicia Pozniak
Andrew Steffen	Tala Gharagozlou	Ryan Salvatore	Ian Spencer
Gene Cartwright		Lang Wang	Mengshi Sun
			Boyuan Zhang

[1] In a flamboyantly irreverent advanced studio brief in 2003, Krier asked students to envision the demolition of the Art and Architecture Building along with Louis Kahn's Yale University Art Gallery and the Yale Center for British Art—three of Yale's most iconic modernist buildings—to make way for a new plaza and arts quarter.

[2] Boyuan Zhang, from an unpublished 2025 essay.

[3] Notably undiplomaed himself, Krier first taught at the Architectural Association in London in 1974 after leaving the offices of James Sterling.

[4] Krier insisted that this ideal was rooted in the experience of being human and was therefore a global, rather than a regional, phenomenon extending beyond the bounds of Greco-Roman classicism. For example, when asked if he would apply Western classical principles to, say, a Chinese program, he raised his expressive eyebrows in astonishment: "Of course not! I would have to design in a Chinese classical language."

5. An incomparable draftsman himself, Krier admired the precision and efficiency of the software platforms used by his students. He watched in awe over their shoulders as lines were effortlessly manipulated on their screens.

Biography | Biografía | Biografia

George Knight

George Knight is an architect and educator. He is the Principal of Knight Architecture LLC, an award-winning design practice in New Haven, Connecticut, and a Senior Critic at the Yale School of Architecture where he has taught since 2004 and served as the Robert A. M. Stern Visiting Professor in Classical Architecture. In 2015 he was given the Professor King-lui Wu Teaching Award, awarded after a vote by graduating students to a faculty member who combines architectural practice with outstanding teaching. He co-taught four advanced design studios with Léon Krier in 2007-2015.