

A RECIPE FOR GOOD SAUCE

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What makes good sauce? How do you make it? When is the balance and composition of ingredients just right? When do things get too saucy? Do you even need sauce? Some people like a little, others like a lot. Is it thick gravy or thin jus? Does a good sauce recipe get passed down through many generations, or does taste change over time? Nobody really knows what the best recipe is. It's generally passed between teachers and students through practice and replication. More often than not the instructions are unclear, it's not written down and the theory behind great sauce a bit of a mystery. However, the instructor always knows immediately when they taste good sauce or conversely when it's been over cooked, boiled over, curdled, applied the wrong way or simply tastes bad.

It took about more than one hundred years for the École des Beaux-Arts to develop and perfect its sauce but it's clear their recipe has been passed down to SCI-Arc today. Sauce is likely a misnomer and result of the frustrating mistranslation of Lucan's text from French to English. However, it provides a vivid lens to read the development of the Beaux-Art school's latent organisational principles from highly constrained symmetrical compositions to abundantly saucy grand compositions, which contributed to eventual demise of the school. Sauce relates to the way the student's grand plans melted into their surrounds. The École mastered making sauce, in their students' grand compositions, which is clearly replicated in the final thesis projects of SCI-Arc students today.

There was and is a proliferation and intense critique of sauce at both the École and SCI-Arc. This refers to the large amount of vanguard, speculative and experimental work that has occurred at both institutions. They are not only tied together by this type of output but also by similarities in the entire structure of both schools in terms of their teaching and studio set up, relationship between architectural practice and academic pursuits, problems with teaching and recording theory, and attitude to style and principles of composition.

How do you make good sauce? Parti, poche, dominant elements and a series of implicit principles. Like SCI-Arc today, much of the theory behind the École was implicit rather than explicit. However in biographic details, both the École and SCI-Arc can be read as almost explicitly identical just more than a century apart. Both were conceived by a series of revolutions, running for a period of time before being formalised.

The set up of the École des Beaux-Arts reads like a recipe book for the set up of SCI-Arc with specific ingredients and a precise method. Practicing architects ran the École's ateliers. As well as undertaking core subjects (official ateliers), the student's picked their open ateliers, which ran courses while their professor was in vogue. Much like SCI-Arc, some ateliers ran again and again, year after year, and others were short lived. The Grand Prix competition was the culmination of education at the École, like the thesis prize at SCI-Arc. Rather than the endless comparison between the recipes for the École and SCI-Arc, it's more interesting to look at the similarities between their theory, critique and limits of both institutions.

When is there too much sauce? The limits of excess, was and is a problem faced at both the École and SCI-Arc. Frank Lloyd Wright described his visit to the École des Beaux-Arts as; "I saw nothing! Nothing but the façade – façade, after façade, after façade!... It was all the same thing; there was no thought of structure. There was nothing that gave you evidence of understanding of how things were built!"

This quote rings true of many architects' critiques of the work at SCI-Arc, the eye-rolls and suggestions to reconsider when discussing SCI-Arc with the world outside the clique. It seems the same issues were at play at the École, yet its students went on to influence the bulk of public architecture going into the nineteen hundreds both in France and internationally. Counter groups such as the International Style were influential but a relatively small in comparison to the large force of the Beaux-Arts school. Presently, it's clear the influence SCI-Arc is having across the world as other schools scramble to change their courses to teach similar programs and many firms, even the acronyms, take on contemporary avant-garde façade making. SCI-Arc's contemporary influence is a reflection of the way the façade of the École des Beaux-Arts proliferated architecture in France and across the world in the early 1900s.

The École des Beaux-Arts, was not the École Polytechnique and SCI-Arc is not a Technical University. Both schools seemed to have peaked at the turn of the century, in times of an uncertain climate arguing and unsure of the prevailing style. Lucan describes the debate between science and art, placing the École on the art side. For those more inclined towards the construction side of architecture, the École and SCI-Arc are simply not the place. Viollet-Le-Duc was such a character and fled the École. Also with more of a tectonic and construction focus, Frank Lloyd Wright criticised the work at the École's plasticity. This is another critique true of SCI-Arc work in the last decade.

By plasticity, Wright was critiquing the uniformity of the plans and ensembles produced by the École des Beaux-Arts. Wright's plans were very articulated regarding individual functions and features, much more so than Beaux-Arts' plans. The same could be said about SCI-Arc plans, where poche and plasticity still plays a big role, and the finicky functional and tectonic details over which Wright obsessed, are moved to the side. SCI-Arc and Beaux-Arts students are and were busy obsessing about larger compositional and massing problems.

In the École's compositional development from very ordered symmetrical plans to asymmetrical compositions, Lucan discusses the conundrum faced by the new freedoms of asymmetrical composition; 'How would compositions differentiate themselves once asymmetry has been accepted, if not called for by certain architectural programs?'

This question of how to judge difference and success in new projects is still a question at SCI-Arc today. Yet, it seems once you are part of the system and understand the unwritten theory or recipe for the sauce, it's easier to judge what is good and what is bad. However, when does the work become so insular, self-involved and relevant only to such a small group of people, that it's not really relevant at all? This tendency was an issue at the École when people with opposing interests such as Viollet-Le-Duc could not be included in the fold and an ongoing issue today at SCI-Arc. Guest critics and even professors outside of the particular studio or atelier, struggle to comprehend and make constructive critique regarding the issues the studio is working with.

Whilst it always remains partially a mystery and a matter of taste, the recipe for good sauce at SCI-Arc is revealed by looking back a couple of generations at the École des Beaux-Arts. A surprising number of similarities occur between their ingredients, methods and critiques. In terms of their teaching and studio set up, relationship between architectural practice and academic pursuits, problems with implicit theory, and attitude to style and principles of composition, it is almost as easy as replacing the École des Beaux-Arts with SCI-Arc. Frank Lloyd Wright's critiques of the École's façade, after façade, after façade and plasticity in plan could easily apply to many SCI-Arc projects today. The question remains, when is there too much sauce?