The Choice of Language & The Language of Choice
the architectural design method study in the graduation project
There are many methods for designing architecture, and the method I explore in this graduation project is the skill of composition.

In ‘From ‘Poetry of Art’ to Method: The Theory of Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand’, Antoine Picon points out that ‘Durand’s writings offer one of the earliest formulations of the concepts composition and type’. The term composition is less a reference to painting than to the analytical method, the set of procedures that makes it possible to decompose objects and to set out their component parts in the ‘order in which generation becomes easy’. Moreover, ‘the combinatorial nature of architecture enables us to limit the range of possible types and fit them into a system. The type is a complex device stabilized by function and usage, a condensation of architectural culture; it relates symmetrically to the element. The architect’s apprenticeship begins with a catalog of the elements of buildings; the practice of design starts with a survey of established types, just as we comb a library for references before starting to write an academic treatise’. Durand provided architects the method for design. He broke the sentence of architecture into phases and words, as well as giving examples of the grammar, through which architects can freely organize their own sentences.

Although Durand’s starting point for his method is the ‘utility’ aspect of architecture, the beauty and myth hidden in the composition fascinate architects from generation to generation. New architectures are generated by radical ways of composition, which can be divided into two aspects: one is the element for composition, and the other is the way to composite. Therefore, designing architecture becomes a choice of language and the language of choice.
Making a project in Ankara for me is just like a Dutch architect making a project in China. There is a gap between cultures. In China, the debate over the projects of the international architects is continuous. Cities like Beijing, under its fast developing pace, there is a problem of loosing identity. On the one hand, Beijing desires for the exiting projects like CCTV to show its power and identity; while on the other hand, large areas of Hutong have been tearing down. The new projects of foreign architects in many cities in China are targets for many critics. This phenomenon makes people to think about what kind of identity is really needed. We cannot deny the fact that a city needs flesh blood for future, and merely imitating the tradition is not the best way to express its identity. And this brings back to a basic question: what makes the identity of architecture? The answer is the architectural language, which here means the elements for composition.

The language of architecture is just like our spoken language in daily life. One has his own native language, which is learned since he was born; and he also knows one international language, which is learned after his education. When he moves to a place, which speaks a third language, he has three options for communication: the first option is he keep speaking his own language and nobody understands him; the second option is he speaks the international language that the local people also understand; and the third option is he learns the local language. Most of the people will choose the second one, because it takes the least effort to bridge the gap of differences. While the problem of the second choice is also obvious, that is both the expression and understanding is not exact enough on either side of the conversation. If he learns some local language, although there are mistakes in his expression, it is easier to communicate with the local people and makes more interesting conversations, while misunderstandings of the misuse of the words could be a problem. Another way to express better is both speaking the international language and the local language. The international language makes sure that the meaning of the sentences right and the native phases make the conversation more vivid and exact. The language is not pure anymore, but if the conversation becomes more interesting and the expression is better for both of us, why not?
Take a look at the city of Ankara, it’s a city built without architects and planers, but desires and ambitions. Firstly, unlike Istanbul, Ankara is a city of a short history but develops extremely fast. It’s a city made of the ambitions of the young Republic: industries, military, education, and all kinds. Secondly, the city is so fragmented and controlled by all these ambitions and powers. The whole city is like a big piece of cake that is cut by different powers, fenced and built their own kingdom within. Thirdly, the residential area consist ¾ of the city is built without the involvement of architects. They are truly the machines for living, and every year there are people died for cutting the columns of their houses for creating a public space. Fourthly, industrial sites and military zones that consist most of the rest of the city are areas of special functions, which also out of the range of the architects. Lastly, most of the public buildings that attract many people are shopping malls, which are hybrid machines for making money.

What kind of language should an architect speaks in a conversation like this? Architects can speak international language, which is also desired by the city to show its connection to the rest of the world, and his own language, which is only speak for his own enjoyment and useless for the conversation. Or, architects can speaks both international language and local language, which can be the highlights of the conversation. I choose the latter one, and that is my language.
The Language of Choice

After the selection of the words and phases, it’s time to find out the grammar to organize them. After this organization, this sentence should convey a meaning that is different from the simple jumbled up of those words and phases. In other words, the composition of two things should become something else, something unknown, something mysterious, not just one adjacent to the other.

The way Neil Spiller composted fascinates me. Spiller is searching for the architectural language, both the design and representation. ‘It is my contention that each member of the profession should develop a personal language of architecture and should not be confined by a global notion of fashionable style.’6 And he thinks that ‘architecture is by nature a dogmatic vocation infused with various myths.’7 ‘It could be said that buildings are machines for the enactment of ritual… They can also exploit the chaos and anachronisms of contemporary existence to enable new building types.’8 There is ‘a contemporary Gothic spirit’9 in his work, which features of the romantic composition of elements and environment; a richness of detail of structural expression and an articulation of facades; ‘random thought, lateral thought and perhaps nihilism in his drawings.’10

His work ‘Museum of Docklands’ is a composition of both high-tech and low-tech, contemporary and tradition, brick and steel, water and land… There are so many contrasts in his composition and they are penetrated into each other. One can hardly find out the way to use this architecture or even hard to recognize where is the architecture. He says ‘it rejoiced in the ambience of this area in the late eighties, an ambience of neglect, detritus and silent foreboding. Heroic ironwork desolate and fearful, wet bikes on a surface of floating oil and rags. A mausoleum to the Thames barge at its centre, service, wall at back, balconies and cages overlooking the Dock, a weird roof garden and a floating lecture theatre.’11 In his another competition work ‘Dean Street’, an architectural object can be more clearly recognized. It is clearly a composition of different elements, such as a traditional clock tower without clock, some post-modern style buildings with strange decorations on their facades, an arcade of light weight structure, some traditional gardens… However, one can hardly tell how this building works and its function. And this is the most interesting part of his language. He describes the project as ‘a mixed-use building containing a doss house, with gardens, cinema etc, all bent to the paradoxical vitality of the ‘crucifix’ plan. Done at a time when one believed in architectural competitions and their hollow briefs and vacant promises.’12
Both this two works have a composition of different elements while the results of the composition are mysterious and leave space for the imagination of the beholders. As Spiller points out, ‘Randomness has a major role in our architecture and manifests itself as an aspect of the interstitials. … The enigmatic quality of these drawings forces the viewer to complete with their own imagination. … The poetic drawing rejoices in its ambiguous nature and teaches us the notion of ‘betweenness’: between architecture and art, between reality and fiction, and between black and white.’13 This ‘betweenness’, I think, is where the new architecture lays, the type of architecture that inspires the imagination of its users.

I believe that architectural design is a science strongly relate to reasons. Thus, choosing the right the method for design is crucial. Composition, although is nothing new, but it is a useful method that contains infinite possibilities and potentials for the new. I agree with the notion that ‘architectural design is a projection to a future not yet known.’14 While the new things will never walk out from nowhere, they are based on what is familiar to us. Thus, composition provides the most direct way to explore the new. Just like Durand, ‘what counts in architecture is the inaugural act, that is, design.’15
Notes

5. According to Antoine Picon, ‘In the second half of the eighteenth century, the issue of the utility of architecture was thrown into prominence by the nascent rivalry between architects and engineers.’ ‘From ‘Poetry of Art’ to Method: The Theory of Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand’. JNL Durand, *Precis of the Lectures on Architecture*. (The Getty Research Institute, Los Angeles. 2000) p.18