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Oak Alley

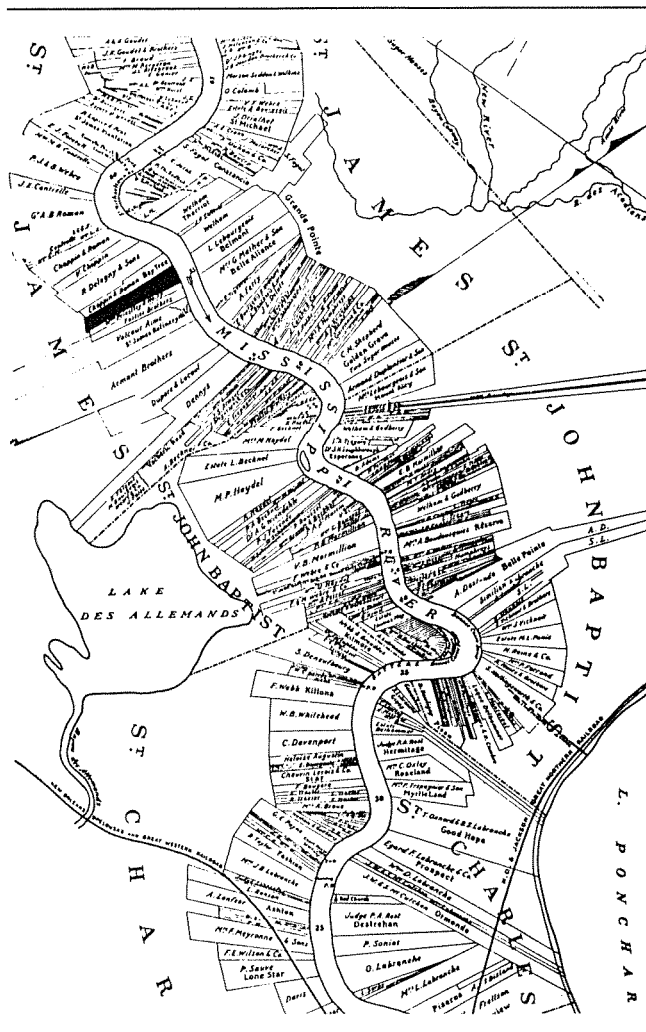
Errol Barron

Of the plantations that line the lower Mississippi near New Orleans, none has as much architectural power or hold over the popular imagination as Oak Alley. Built in 1836 for a family of planters and politicians, the house was sited at the end of a century-old allée of live oaks. As a colonial representation of Greek revival architecture, it has twenty-eight columns, corresponding to the twenty-eight oak trees, a perfectly square plan, and four carefully matched elevations based on the square.

The composition of the house and grounds is aligned with the river, upon which its connection with New Orleans and the world beyond depend. Through its extreme if diagrammatic axiality, the formality of the siting reflects the love of order and power of the French Creole family who built Oak Alley (or Bon Sejour, as it was originally called). They conceived the house in the tradition of great European houses. Thus the appeal of Oak Alley rests not just with the obvious theme of luxurious nineteenth-century living that visitors associate with the Old South but with the power of both an architectural and social order, the ability of a family to mark the landscape in some memorable way.

Axiality marks this plantation and inextricably

links it to its European counterparts, whose very essence, like Oak Alley's, is in and on the "line." The Villa Lante or Vaux-le-Vicomte, for instance, use axiality to organize a network of major and minor events within an overall composition. At the Villa Lante the axis directs a series of allegorical episodes so powerfully that the villa's two casinos take their places on either side of the line. In this Louisiana example, the house marks a radius point for a curve in the Mississippi River, which makes a gentle arc around the front of the property. From the center of this curve, the line, or principal axis, runs 5,280 meters to a nearly impenetrable swamp nearly 11 feet below the level of the river. Starting here and walking back the three miles toward the river, one finds the axis is bounded on each side by geometric rows of cane and cotton (once indigo and corn), which form a giant parterre of useful crops. Past modern rails, past canals and between rows of cottages left from other days, past a second, more relaxed alley of trees at the rear of the house, the line continues directly to the door and sweeps through the center hall of the house. The vortex of trunks and limbs of the allée, like rifling in a gun barrel, holds and shapes the axis as it finally surges to the levee and river beyond.



I Map of Plantations circa 1850's (Oak Alley in black). Courtesy The Historic New Orleans Collection, Museum-Research Center



2

2 Block Plan of New Orleans.
Vieux Carre' in black.

While the plantation is known for its house and oak trees, it comprises much more. The house and trees only intensify the organizational preoccupations that are the essence of the plantation itself. Rectangular fields are aligned neatly along the unadjusted axis, which serves simultaneously as a centerline and farm road.

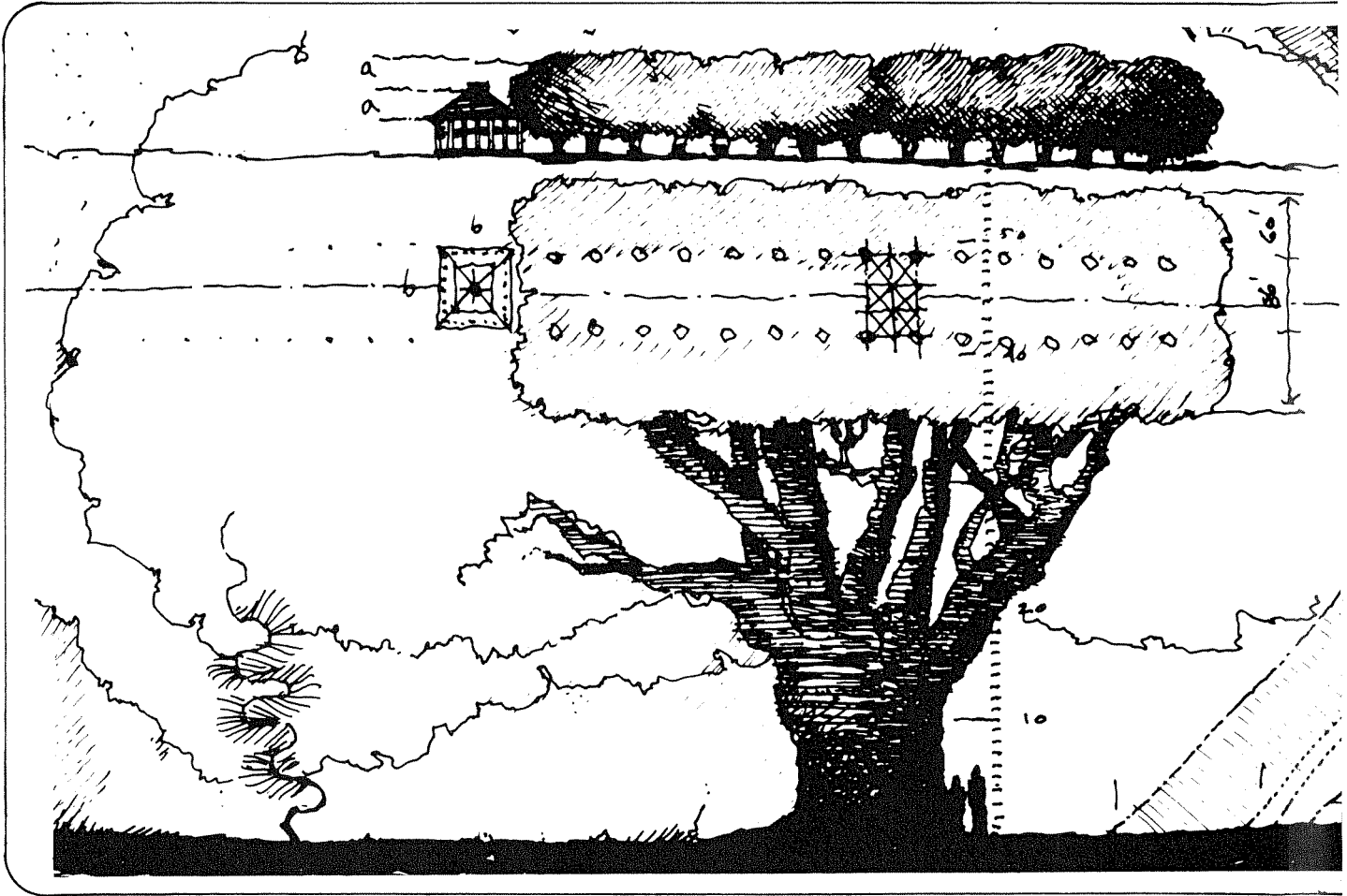
The parallel rows of the fields drain into cross canals that carry rainwater into Lake des Allemandes several miles away. This landscape is without wall and contour and was not cleared over time or nestled into an existing topography but was conceived and executed on a clean flat slate like a diagram on paper. It is an abstract grid of ideal plots for the production of crops, the agricultural equivalent of New Orleans's Vieux Carre itself. The individual plantation grid and the collection of plantations make a compelling image. The river grinds toward the gulf; the plantations flank it like iron filings clinging to a magnetic current creating a vast network of farm sites at the end of the nation's principal drainage system.

The pattern of Oak Alley is New World classicism, a classicism of power and rationality rather than historical quotation. Despite the picturesque Greek revival forms and the elegant diagram of the house, the

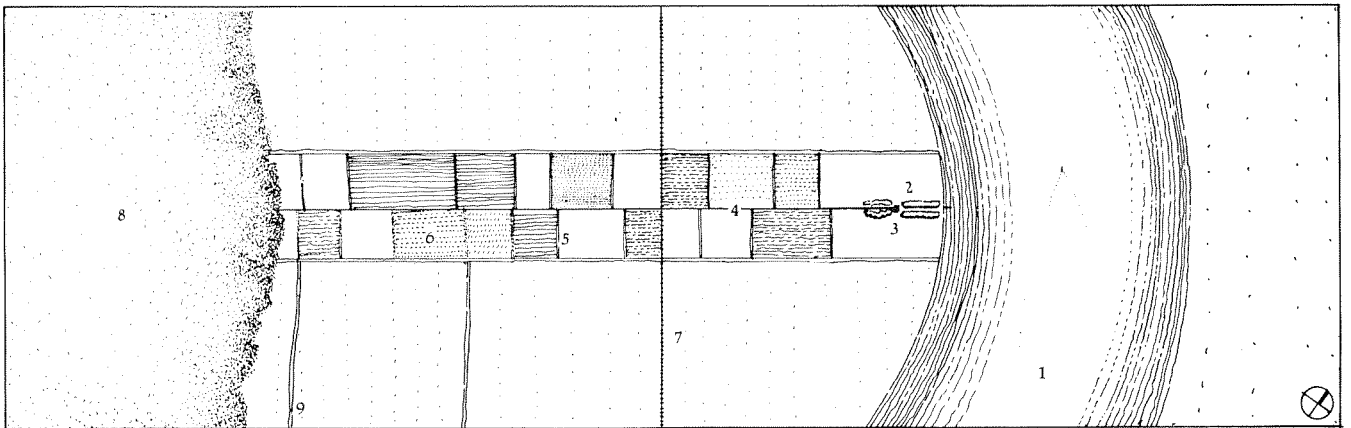
plantation as a whole conveys an idea of agricultural, even industrial, might. The uncompromising organization also recalls other classical settings where axially and control work toward the classical goal of a place without contradiction and compromise. At Oak Alley the inherently tragic nature of this ideal is dramatized by the grotesque branches of the trees and by the bizarre and shadowy light. There is a sinister quality to the order of the perfectly square house with its twenty-eight columns and abundance of squares and golden sections, which glosses over a harsher reality of human abuses and a foreshadowing of the industrialization to come.

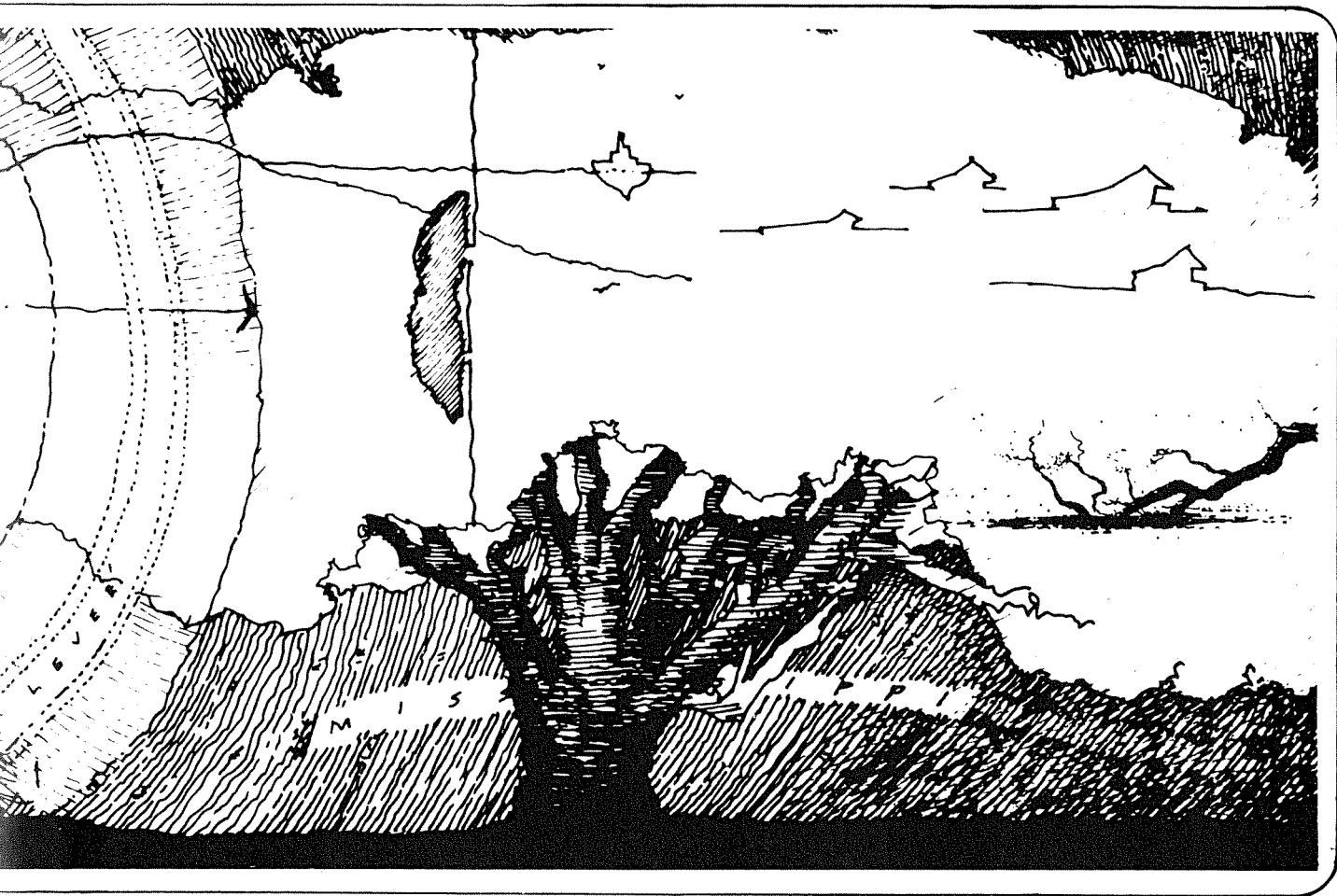
But it is the picturesque, domestic image that is popular. With the late evening light raking through the trees, the house glows like a Japanese lantern at the end of the tunnel of oaks. In this setting it is easy to forget the river nearby, today a corridor of petrochemicals, where the fantastic, magical, cities of light of the oil refineries stand as logical manifestations of the colonial desire to organize, control, and exploit the land.

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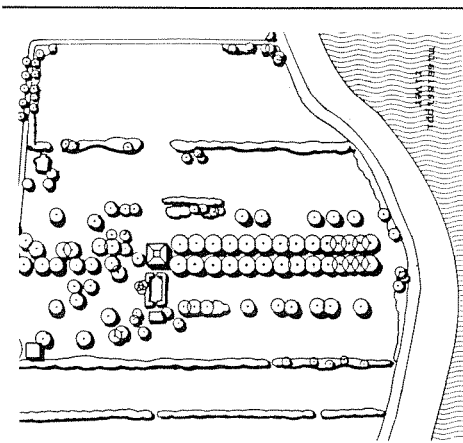


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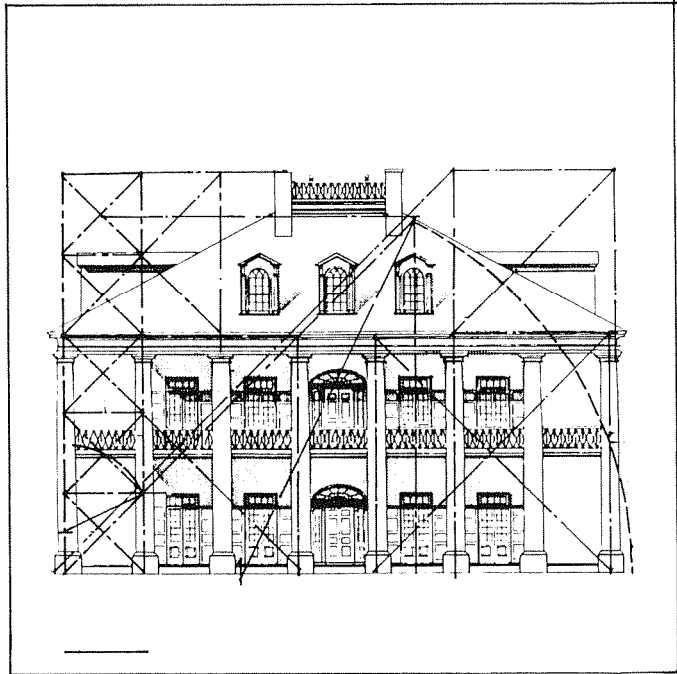


3 Sketch Plan, Section and Elevation of the Allee'.

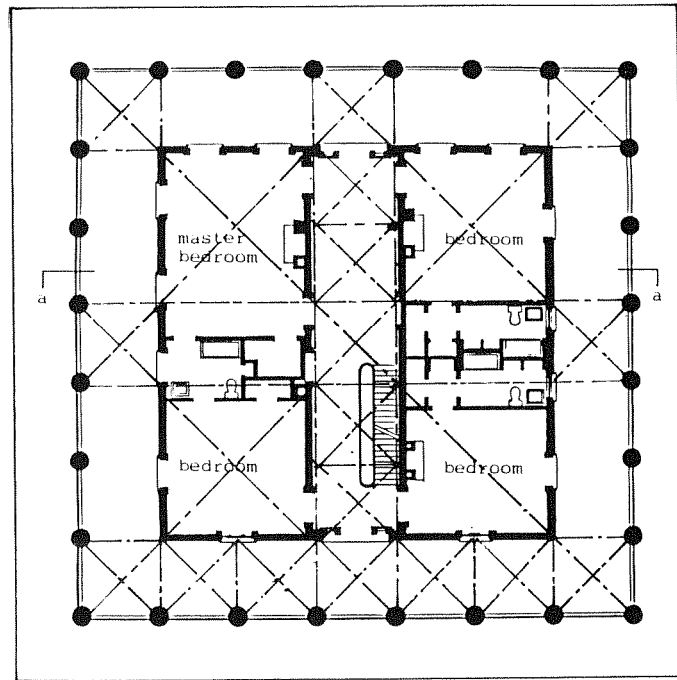
4 Sketch Plan of Oak Alley Plantation:

1. River
2. Allee'
3. House
4. Main Farm Road
5. Drainage Canals
6. Fields
7. Railroad
8. Uncleared Swamp
9. Drainage canal to Lake des Allemands

5 Plan of House and Grounds



6



7



8

9



6 North Facade with
regulating lines

7 Plan with regulating lines

8 The House seen from the
allee'. Photograph by
Marc Treib.

9 The river seen through the
allee'. Photograph by
Marc Treib.

Bishop Miquel Pontich's Ninety Steps.

Lars Lerup

This text is about a very large stair in a small city, and if glorification occupies the center of the architectural enterprise, this stair sits squarely in this glorious center.

Public stairs are common in cities that are built along steep river banks or on mountainsides. In Gerona, which is situated on the river Onyar in the province of Cataluna north of Barcelona, there are four public stairs that are named in the official tour guide: Escales de la Pera, Escales de Sant Domenec, the Escales at the Pujada del Seminari and the Bishop's steps. The Bishop's steps are not like the other public stairs, even though they are built from the same rock, with similar balustrades and topped with identical classical spheres. In fact, the Bishop's steps are not only not like other public stairs in Gerona, but in the region and in Barcelona.

Purportedly, Bishop Friar Miquel Pontich had the ninety steps built in the Placa de la Catedral between 1685 and 1699. The Catedral is itself one of those unexpected religious assemblies that the modern traveller cannot quite match with his own map of geopolitical understanding, since there is no relationship between the minor importance of the modern Gerona and the size, complexity and splendor of the Catedral. Yet this state of apparent discrepancy between architectural and

sociopolitical importance fits neatly with the Bishop's steps.

The Catedral was many centuries in its building and the ninety steps were only one of many fragments added at different times that make up the current scene of the church and two plazas: the upper Placa dels Apostols, and the lower Placa de la Catedral—the seat of the steps.

The ninety steps are divided into three sections, each consisting of thirty steps, a landing and surrounding balustrades, occasionally topped by a perfect sphere set on a pedestal. The entire stair ascends some 60 feet to the entry of the cathedral with its main door, eight niches, two balconies, and a giant rose window built in 1733 by Pere Costa. Behind this facade lies the Great Nave, which reaches 70 feet across, making it the widest nave in Europe. Yet all this splendor, size, and spatial power fades somewhat in light of the ninety steps.

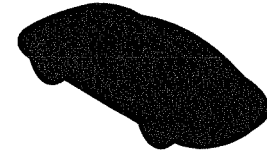
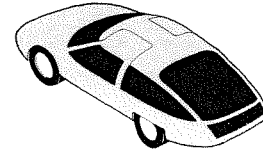
We have visited Gerona twice. The first time stumbling accidentally and very briefly on the steps, we did not quite believe our eyes. Afterwards, we commented on the curious encounter and promised to return. The second time we rushed with anticipation back across the river, and through the narrow streets to confront the stairs: breaking through the perimeter of the *placa*, it was no longer

disbelief but size-shock, scale-disorientation, and bulk & magnitude-collision that stunned us. For a moment we were children in the company of a giant.

Restored to proper size we thought: the shock had to do with the juxtaposition of their **giant** size and their simple, **rational** design—thirty steps of roughly eight inches each, a landing, an additional 20 feet of steps, a landing, and the final stretch of steps. Somehow, this heterogeneous combination of unusual size and common design arrested the natural flow of the stair—it was as if getting to the Catedral was less important than the stair itself. Through this sudden change of size, the solidity and inherent predicability of the type-object with its implicit internal balance between parts and characteristics had been ruptured.

Further, the extraordinary size is apparent not only because of the level difference between the *placa* and the Catedral, but also because the stair fills the entire square, leaving space only for narrow streets and a narrow strip of its original footprint. Gargantuan, the stair has become so large that just like Yeats' dancer and his dance, the stair cannot be separated from the square. Like a new alloy, the stair-square has muscled a new place for itself in the urban taxonomy.

However, this new urban



presence can only incidentally be apprehended through reasoning—primarily, it is felt in the gut like the way our organs are pulled by gravity in a fast-moving elevator ascending towards the thirtieth floor of a skyscraper. No loss of symbolic importance of architecture can take this most fundamental experience of presence away from us. When the good Bishop slipped the giant stair into the Placa de la Catedral, he dropped a large rock in our experiential stomach. Not even the ear-shattering noise from a blue car struggling up the narrow street towards the Placa Apostols and the stars beyond manage to displace the weight of the steps.

There is, of course, a conspiracy against such ineffable experiences in modern culture since they fall through the Cartesian net. Curiously enough, these gastronomic forms of architectural experience are for all of us, regardless of class or creed, provided of course that we are willing to go to Gerona instead of Paris or Barcelona.

For us, the stairs show clearly that by changing only one parameter in the type-object complex, common stairs can surreptitiously, on the wings of blue cars, slip into the stratosphere of architectural glory.