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DES GOÛTS ET DES COULEURS ... Michel Sikorski, XDGA

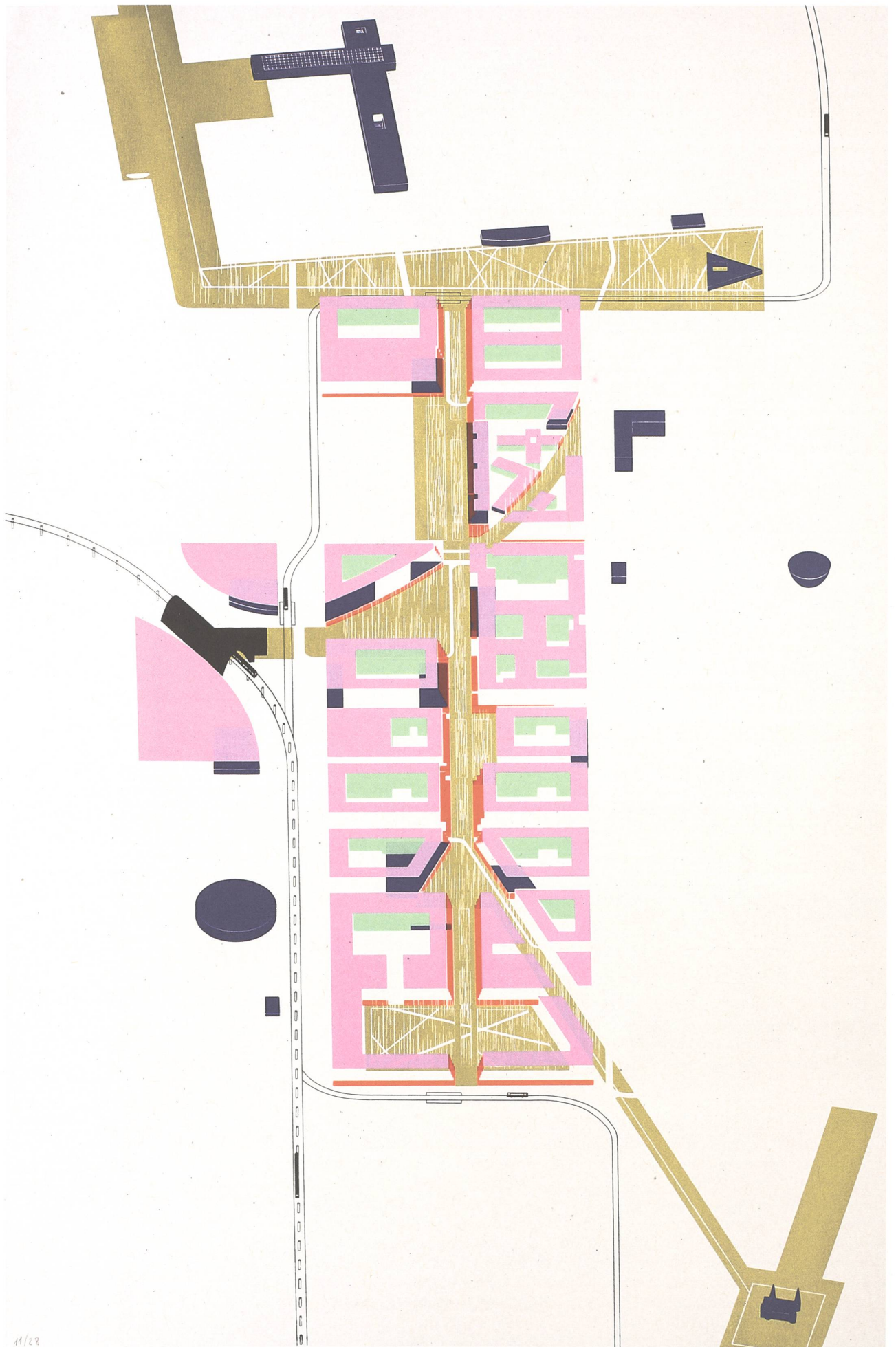


fig. a 11/28

Paris-Saclay is a city-campus under construction, 20 km south-west to the Eiffel Tower. At the heart of one of the three districts composing the master-plan, our effort is concentrated on the 'bande centrale'. A one km long, 200 m wide urban strip, which will probably be one of the most dense and elaborated parts of the city to be. This project presented the opportunity to re-think the basic components of a city. How to design reversible streets? How to guarantee adjustable active ground floors? What kind of elevations for the different street sections to apply, etc. We tried to formulate several urban rules which would allow the existence of different forms of architecture while providing a common ground. Among many other aspects, we could also have controlled materials and colours, as Mies van der Rohe did for the Weißenhofsiedlung, or as many others did elsewhere. Instead, it is one of the issues we decided to abandon, in order not to create too many constraints. To our surprise, the biggest conflict within the project arose out of the very issue in which we decided not to invest. Scandal. We knew about it, since we were members of the competition's jury, but many politicians are discovering it now that it is built. The first building to stand on the ground is pink. It is a large students residence, with its shops and restaurants. This housing complex shaped into diverse and separate volumes was conceived as one side of a rectangular urban block. But, since none of the adjacent buildings are yet constructed, what we see is an imposing slab of six levels, standing alone in bare fields.



fig. b

The building is constructed with precast concrete elements in three shades of pink, carpentry is made of champagne-coloured anodized aluminium. From our perspective, this first element shows the scale and the orientation of the future campus, using colours which allude to Auguste Perret's buildings located on the other side of the campus; to our client and many politicians, it appeared in a very different way. In their eyes, it was a very serious visual

aggression that reminded them of the French new towns of the 60s. The pale rose colour, that we allowed to be used, was the starting point of a major crisis; entire meetings were devoted to it, and official visits to the construction site multiplied. The project architects were hassled; colour became the main subject of the argument. Because of this, people lost their jobs, the director of urbanism being one of them. A new director has been appointed and his first request resembles an ultimatum: he wants us to put some order in the colours; he wants us to create some rules. At that moment, several projects are already under construction: a large university building in ochre concrete, for instance, the 'colour of Saclay's sand', and two student housing buildings entirely black and white. Naturally, We declare amnesty for such projects and start to compose from what exists. Instead of putting together a RAL catalogue, we try to use colour to define a one km long public space. Two complementary and simultaneous principles are rapidly released.

On the one hand, we decide that the 'bande centrale' should have its own identity and should contrast with the high-tech buildings around it. The 'bande centrale' is therefore declared 'warm', the rest around is 'cold' (fig.c).

On the other hand, a graphic chessboard pattern is applied to all the building plots. The volumes which are in direct contact with the main public spaces are vertically and horizontally divided, having light and dark zones to rhythmize and fragment the facades composition (fig.d).

In contemporary urban projects, the large scale of this composition principles is unusual, and thus we consider it as experimental. Their success will depend on the buildings to be built, we cannot predict if it will work. In any case, we can already see that working on this previously neglected side of the urban project allowed us to involve numerous stakeholders. It is likely that those different personalities project on these colour rules their own preoccupations and each of them imagines a very different result. The 'warm' colours, for example, remind the mayor of something local, probably the stones of his village. For the new director the alternated pattern guarantees a 'human scale'; we, on the other hand, believe that such a system allows to shrug off some architectural choices about which...

...on ne discute pas.

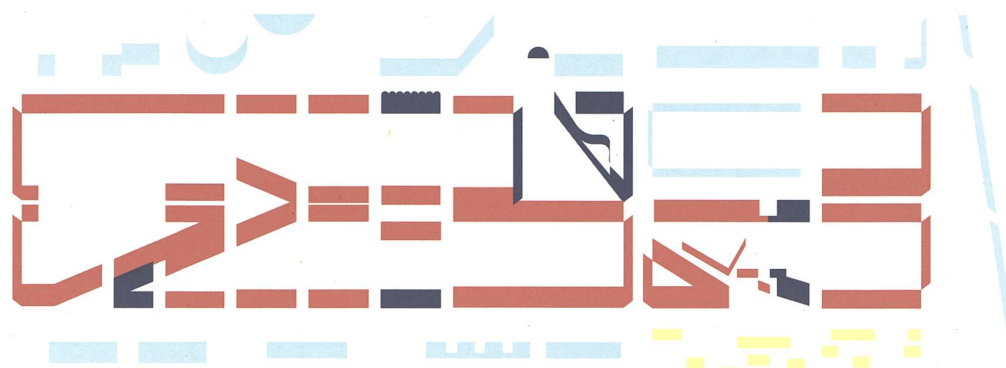


fig. c

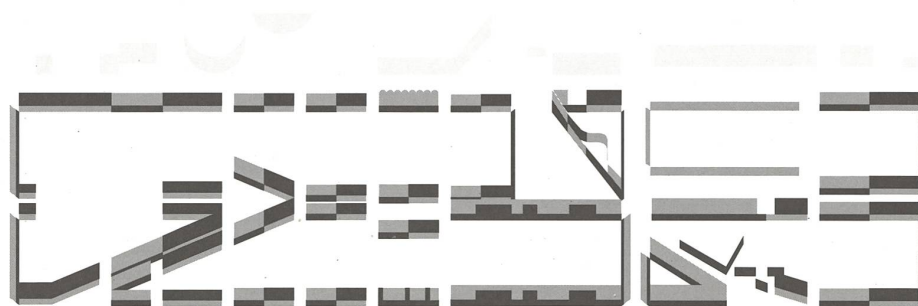


fig. d

fig. a XDGA (Xaveer de Geyter, Michel Sikorski, Claire Lootens, Lieven de Boeck, Elena Caruso), The urban rules of the Ecole polytechnique district, Silkscreen 68x100cm, 2015. Photography: Matthias Van Rossen

fig. b 51N4E and Bourbouze Graindorge, Student housing and restaurants, Ecole polytechnique district, Paris-Saclay, state in 2016. Photographed by the author

fig. c XDGA, Materiality and colors composition scheme for the Ecole polytechnique district, computer drawing, 2016

fig. d XDGA, Chessboard composition scheme for the Ecole polytechnique district, computer drawing, 2016

Michel Sikorski, born 1983, studied architecture in France, Germany and Poland, before graduating in 2009 at Ecole Nationale Supérieure d'Architecture Paris la Villette. Since 2008 he has collaborated with Xaveer de Geyter Architects in Brussels (XDGA), where he develops his interest in the scale between architecture and urbanism. Since 2010 he is project director of a large territorial project in France, the Paris-Saclay campus. This new town aims to establish a new relationship between landscape and buildings, it is currently under construction. Currently he is employed as a teaching assistant to Xaveer de Geyter at ETH Zurich.