

THE ~~APRES~~ GARDE



DESIGNING PERSPECTIVES



CIGUË

Some designers are well recognized for their adherence to a particular palette or material. As espoused by Truffaut's Auteur Theory, some works are inextricably that of a particular artist. Think Tadao Ando, the Memphis Group, or Frank Gehry. Honestly, if Mies designed a children's playground you could probably spot it a mile off. There'd be much confusion, but it's likely that one would instinctively be aware that they were looking at a van der swingset.

For others, it's a more organic process. Inspiration is meted out on a per-project basis, and is intertwined with the super-ego to inspiration's id: instinct. Instinct in the appropriate, perhaps even inevitable, representation of a particular client, space, and look. Instinct in a particular material palette, flow, and feel encompassing the geographic, social, cultural, and aesthetic concerns of a given project. That, through all the white noise, it will stand up and shout into the rain. It will manifest the unspoken ideal.

Ciguë's output presents a cohesive narrative, but not one so readily identifiable as continued use of the same girder structure, or computer-assisted curvilinearity. Much is revealed when you come to realize that Ciguë was originally set up as a company dealing with carpentry and joinery. Their 'office' is more workshop than atelier, and allows for thorough exploration of form, in the guise of in-house prototyping and modelling.

This feeling permeates their output. There's an inevitable sense that those responsible have gotten their hands dirty. That their understanding of materiality and finishing is not purely theoretical. That, to put it bluntly, these would probably be some handy dudes to have around if you were renovating your backyard deck.

But there's something else, too. One is struck by a very particular spatial geometry. Upon visiting more of their spaces that feeling narrows. Isolates. As the futuro-poet said, becomes polyphonic.

This intuitive aesthetic has clearly worked to Ciguë's advantage. After designing a few choice pieces of furniture they presented their output to iconic Parisian concept shoppe Merci (who, it's always worth mentioning, functions as a charity project, donating all profits to human development pursuits in Madagascar). Not only did Merci take the furniture immediately, they introduced Ciguë to the Australian skin-care brand Aesop, who was looking for a new firm to design their pop-up inside Merci.

The rest is industrial-cum-sartorial history. Darlings of the well-heeled and well-frocked, Ciguë has since done half a dozen interiors for Aesop in London and Paris, as well as the office/showroom and St Roch boutiques for Dior Homme chief designer Kris Van Assche's eponymous brand, an Yves Saint Laurent in-store at Dover Street Market, and the Études Studio on the Rue Debeylle in Paris.

But perhaps their greatest collaborations thus far have come in the form of a series of boutiques for Parisienne designer Isabel Marant. Having done major standalone boutiques for her label in Shanghai, Tokyo, Seoul, Hong Kong, and Paris, the collaboration exhibits the breadth and range of Ciguë's aesthetic output.

Their design in Shanghai, inside a brand spanking new shopping mall, includes a small wooden cabin with louvred brass windows in the centre of the boutique, with more than aesthetic inspiration. "The layout of the shop was inspired by 'nail houses', a common phenomenon in Shanghai and many modern growing cities, where commercial urban projects replace former residential areas, confronting the resistance of their inhabitants."

In Seoul, beyond a leafy garden lies a grey concrete façade with a large window cut-out and overlapping aluminium brise-soleil by the French artist Arnold Goron, beneath a patchwork ceiling of shuttered concrete and solid sapele wood.

In Tokyo, a cross-pollination between traditional Japanese house and uninhabited, or under construction, structure. Rough sawn exposed pine beams, plywood panelling, poured concrete flooring. An intrinsic sense of zen, paired with a network of wink-wink-nudge-nudge glam minimalist display pieces.

Design must be interpretive. Speak to the ambitions, and condition, of the age. It's particularly interesting, then, that Ciguë is the French for hemlock. The fabled poisonous root. The killer of King Hamlet.

In Ode to a Nightingale, Keats wrote:

My heart aches, and a drowsy numbness pains
My sense, as though of hemlock I had drunk

Just this once, though, it seems that hemlock is playing the role of antidote, rather than poison.

Could you give us an introduction as to how Ciguë came about? Ciguë was founded in 2003 while we were in second year of architecture school in Paris La Villette. Definitely more a group of buddies to start with, crossing a couple concrete situations where things could be built. All the enterprise was purely instinctive, maybe in reaction to the very conceptual atmosphere of architecture education in France (miles from the design & build philosophy often found in Anglo-Saxon schools). A desire to explore part of the meaning of what we were learning. Get a grip on a complete process, even at a small scale like furniture or interior renovations. Another dimension I think was to confront ourselves physically with different materialities, learn how things react and how you can react to them. We needed to get dirty.

Ciguë is French for hemlock, a plant rife with literary associations. Care to fill us in on the logic behind the studio's name? Just a name...la ciguë, a feminine name for a band of guys, out of any type of relation to architecture. Strange writing with the umlaut on the e, almost obsolete. A plant, used as a poison or a medicine, growing in ruins and along pathways.

Your studio is in the rather envious position of being known as the go-to for the world of fashion. Was this intentional? Is your studio a sartorial stomping ground? Is there an ideological reason behind working largely with fashion-oriented clients? It's always a surprise for us to hear that. There's no strategy behind. Mainly choices made facing nice meetings and discoveries. If someone comes to us for the good reasons, normally something good is going to happen. Since we began to work together, we were lucky enough to receive many propositions we couldn't refuse. And plenty in this crazy industry, bursting with wishes for new, fresh & marked individualities. Fashion creators are looking for people ready to listen to their story, ready to embrace a world & ready to enter an intimate dialogue. It seems we have some of the required competences, but it's not always

a good match. Then, it's super important for us to touch other grounds. Whether in different types of projects like houses, offices, restaurants, hotels, ballet scenography, furniture, etc. But it's also a lot about people you meet and what they bring you: families, cooks, dancers, musicians, carpenters, glass workers, etc. That's an exciting part of working as a designer/architect, discovering others environment and working on it for them.

Would you say that there's a unifying aesthetic for your studio's output? Many architects/design studios are well known for particular aesthetic cues (i.e. Ando Tadao and streamlined concrete structures). With your studio's work I get less a sense of a consistent (and potentially constraintive) material palette, and more an intuitive feeling that you were involved. There's a very particular spatial geometry that I find inherent to Ciguë's work. Care to elaborate? Hard to say. I'd prefer to listen to you develop...One element is that we're a group composed of individual perceptions, with a common vision, a lot of trust and plenty of matching points. So it makes a lot of possible combinations. Another side, as evoked earlier, is that we believe when we're working for someone. We don't want to impose a style but rather develop together what would make sense for them. We're going to have the work in our portfolio but they're going to live with it...that adds another factor for even more combinations. That said, we have inclinations, ways of reacting to situations, and specific creative processes that might be signed ciguë in a way. It's our own kind of filter.

Following up on that, do you source product from other designers for your interior spaces, or do you custom-fabricate all fixtures, fittings, etc? If there is a possibility that we create an entire new world, of course we go for it. It's about having the hand on a total story, where every detail is coherent with the whole. Sadly, in the end, time and money often choose the limits of these proceedings.







I've heard it remarked that your studio espouses a particular brand of French 'je ne sais quoi'. And, despite your work with Etudés, YSL, Isabel Marant, and Melinda Gloss (amongst others), your breakthrough is largely credited to your work with Aesop (of Australia). Do you think that there's an inherent 'Frenchness' to your output? Is it something that you're conscious of? Again, you might be better placed to tell. We can't deny where we're from, and what carried us until now. All the memories and things we touched during childhood. Thinking systems, references, and so on.

Do you seek a common ground with clients, or view disparate aesthetics as a welcome challenge to manifest their particular points of view? Obviously, from the boho-chic of Isabel Marant, to the stark minimalism of Kris Van Assche, to the uptown rock-star vibe of Saint Laurent, you've engaged in wildly divergent outlooks. Maybe there's a bit of this challenge thing you're talking about. But I think we're always quite curious and glad people come to us. As said previously, that is precisely one of the amazing aspects as an architect, being confronted to new people all the time. It forces you to get out of your habits and formulas. Find new ideas, new ways, stay open and curious. If the human contact is good and inspiring, the context new and exciting, how can you refuse an invitation?

As a relatively young studio you've expanded to work overseas quite quickly. Was this an intentional ambition? Was it difficult to co-ordinate internationally? Especially considering your first international projects happened simultaneously, doing boutiques for Isabel Marant in Paris, Seoul, Tokyo, and Hong Kong, all at once. It was an opportunity, and a great one. We had to learn fast. Understand how things go in Tokyo, Hong Kong, Seoul, London and New York at the same time. What's a yes here, what's a maybe, what's a no. How decisions are made. How they stick. Again, it seems it's about being able to adapt to differences and develop a process ready to blend.

Your firm has four co-founders. How do you distribute responsibilities, or do you all tend to brainstorm together and collaborate across all platforms? Collaboration is the key. We rely on each other. We trust each of the perceptions in our group. And discussions make the sensible one emerge. All of us have different qualities and defects. So naturally we all developed specific territories but with many overlaps. We try to have as many collective moments as possible, where it happens to be very good.

What's the next step for Ciguë? Anything upcoming that we should be on the lookout for? Any future ambitions? What would your dream project be? Next steps? Continue to move into bigger scales, into different fields, and most of all, build!

