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### Electronic version

URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/craup/7520>

DOI: 10.4000/craup.7520

ISSN: 2606-7498

### Publisher

Ministère de la Culture

### Electronic reference

Gauthier Bolle, Maxime Decommer and Valérie Nègre, "The architect's office: practice and organization of work (18th-21st century)", *Les Cahiers de la recherche architecturale urbaine et paysagère* [Online], 9| 10 | 2020, Online since 28 December 2020, connection on 24 April 2021. URL: <http://journals.openedition.org/craup/7520> ; DOI: <https://doi.org/10.4000/craup.7520>

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This text was automatically generated on 24 April 2021.



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# The architect's office: practice and organization of work (18th-21st century)

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## An emerging research topic?

- 1 To propose the architect's office as the central theme of this issue of the *Cahiers de la recherche architecturale, urbaine et paysagère* was somewhat of a gamble. We hypothesized that it would allow to exceed traditional "heroic" narratives, which concentrate on the charismatic figure of the architect, thus omitting the complexity and variety of architectural's production, along with an understanding of more recent evolutions. One year having passed since the call for contributions, the global sanitary context renders the question of contemporary work spaces and their links to the private sphere, digital tools and increased processes of dematerialization even more pertinent, facets which are more or less well adapted to the world of architectural design.
- 2 If artists create their works within (and outside of) studios (*ateliers*) then architects work in offices (*agences*) as well as on construction sites. In France, the term *agence* has progressively been adopted throughout the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, following *cabinet* and *bureau*, to indicate everything from the workplace of architects and its work structure, to the interaction it enables between groups of individuals. If Studio Studies has become a transversal and multidisciplinary field of research<sup>1</sup>, the office of the architect – an indispensable device for the exercise of design and implementation – has been little studied in comparison, constituting a sort of historiographical blind spot. However, this research topic invites us to combine long-term approaches, and to bring them closer to studies conducted on the studio, the laboratory and the office<sup>2</sup>.
- 3 The call for contributions aimed to shed light on dimensions relative to the *agence* – whether they be human, material, economic, judicial or symbolic – over time and up

until today. Falling in line with research on the workplace conducted by sociologists and historians of science, technology and art, it sought to uncover the daily work of architects and their collective work forms, as well as intermediaries and “invisible technicians”<sup>3</sup>. However, it also sought to understand the specificities of the places dedicated to the creation, production and management of projects; which could be done, for example, by remaining attentive to certain characteristics, especially relationships upheld with the outside world and on construction sites. Three pathways were proposed in the call for contributions. The first involved examining materiality and concrete ways in which the various protagonists of the *architect's office* interact. The second focused on organizational models over the long term, pointing to possible phenomena in terms of transfer, evolution, transmission or even innovation in modes of organization and collaboration. The final pathway offered the possibility to understand the way in which architects' *workplaces* communicate, mediatize and disseminate their own structures.

- 4 The relevance of this research theme was revealed through the thirty or so contributions received. The eighteen articles selected highlight the disciplinary transversality of the the architect's office as a basis for investigation, spanning a period from the 18th century up until today. Depending on their diverse methodological approaches, most of them combine two or three of the pathways proposed initially, which is why they were reorganized according to three fields of questioning. The first questions the realities of work structures concealed behind the name generally retained by history; the second questions the ways in which architects work between public administration and private firm; the last investigates the recent entrepreneurial logic architects have begun to use to structure their offices.

## In the shadow of prominent names

- 5 Throughout the last few decades, historiography has significantly enriched the understanding of the professional world of architects. In France, with regard to the old regime, historians have looked at the *cabinets* in which they practiced (room location and layout, furniture, books, etc.) along with the various collaborators who worked there inspectors (*inspecteurs*), draftsmen, measurers (*toiseurs*), as well as the *bureaux* created by the administration for the duration of the construction of large buildings<sup>4</sup>. Concerning the contemporary period, the intersection of the history of the profession's institutional structure and that of its practices invites us to better grasp offices as topics of study<sup>5</sup>. More recently, another place of architectural work, the construction site, has been the subject of several studies<sup>6</sup>. Since the 1990s, the increase in monographic studies has also allowed us to understand the production of iconic or notable figures from the French or international spheres, even though there have been few studies that place the architect's office at the center of focus. The workplaces of famous practitioners, however, are sometimes better known, thanks to the abundance of sources, like Le Corbusier's studio, for example<sup>7</sup>. The last few years have seen the proliferation of numerous biographical PhD, shedding light on the professional scene in France of the 20<sup>th</sup> century and offering a fertile ground for the study of the *agence*<sup>8</sup>. The office of the architect however, remains in the background of historical accounts: sources like the architects' writings are generally incomplete when it comes to this subject. Indeed, architectural archives do not necessarily contain documents directly

related to their methods and places of practice the collections instead favoring the graphic and administrative traces of their accomplishments. To overcome these difficulties, historians often rely upon printed sources that reveal a new iconography of the offices. Over the course of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, architectural reviews regularly exhibited these workplaces, their functioning and ultimately their *mise-en-scène*. The publication of reports in *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui*<sup>9</sup> thus documents the places of architectural production. Other more unexpected sources are also sometimes exploited, such as salary records and accounting documents specific to the management of projects or offices.

- 6 This invitation to reverse the traditional point of view of historians, committed to placing the analysis of built works and ideological trends in the foreground, has found a certain resonance among young researchers who favor the study of places and modes of organization when it comes to architectural design. This has led them to bring together other sources, or to question them in an original way, in order to highlight the structure of teams that have remained in the shadow of a sole "name" retained in history. The five contributions gathered here paint a fairly broad picture of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, to which is added a contribution examining a case from the 18th century. Béatrice Gaillard uses notarial acts (wills, post-death inventories, construction contracts), as well as the correspondence and journals of a family of architects working during the Enlightenment period. These sources allowed for the emergence of an understanding of how Jean-Baptiste Franque (1683-1758) and his two sons, François II (1710-1793) and Jean-Pierre (1718-1810) organized their practices in Avignon and Paris in order to respond to commissions located far away. Here, the question of the *conduite* (conduct) of the works leads the author to note a great porosity between the world of architecture and that of the entreprise. The Franques either employed architects or contractors to direct their work sites and provide full scale drawings (*dessins en grand*).
- 7 Concerning the 20<sup>th</sup> century, the studies gathered here are also ingeniously based on the diversity of administrative sources, the iconography of agencies, the information found on graphic documents (the plan cartouches for example), and finally, the discourse of architects, or even their collaborators. Even if most of the authors highlight archival incompleteness, the depth of investigations produced by detailed and prolific analyses describe evolutive, flexible and often "perishable" work structures, due to their intrinsic link to the head architect. Furthermore, the *agences* adapted depending on the commissions, but also based on structural changes in the construction sector.
- 8 Thus, Yola Gloaguen analyzes Antonin Raymond's office (1888-1976) in Tokyo and the way in which this disciple of Frank Lloyd Wright participated in the dynamic of modernization of the country. In the 1920s, Raymond mobilized foreign architects and engineers to lead locally recruited teams. Then, in the 1930s, Japanese employees became the majority of his workforce, rendering it possible to adapt projects to the cultural and technical constraints of the country at that time.
- 9 Finally, several contributions examine the work organization of three outstanding figures of the professional scene in France in the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Anne-Sophie Cachat-Suchet reveals the diversity of collaboration and association modes through Eugène Beaudouin's (1898-1983) many urban planning and architectural projects; Hugo Massire brings to light Pierre Dufau's (1908-1985) efficiency and capacity to adapt to contextual constraints, as well as the limits of his work organization; Élise Guillerm analyzes the

distribution of tasks and the role of collaborators within the office of Jean Dubuisson (1914-2011). Eugène Beaudouin and Jean Dubuisson each adapted the functioning of the studios at the *Ecole des beaux-arts*, as well as their emulation, to the economic constraints and fluctuations of architectural commissions. Beaudouin reverberated this functioning outside of the office itself, multiplying various types of association depending on projects. Dubuisson developed a flexible team structure, whose contract periods and working methods often depended on the magnitude of commissions. While Pierre Dufau also adapted the studio culture of the *École des Beaux-Arts* within his company, the professional choices he makes in the 1970s directed him towards the creation of an original structure, inspired by American models, which made it possible to develop “a financial incentive for the most active architects within the office”. While sources do not always allow for precise accounts to be drawn up, the quantitative data is often indicative of the importance assumed by certain companies on the professional scene: more than 200 employees are said to have worked for or with Beaudouin between 1946 and 1981; while there were around one hundred for Pierre Dufau & Associés, whose revenue very probably made it the country's leading firm in the early 1970s.

- 10 Taken as a whole, these texts emphasize above all the eminently collective dimension of architectural work within its hierarchical structure — the distribution of tasks as well as position titles are indicative of the evolution of the organization of work — and, in the absence of intellectual property, question their sharing of the authorship of works. From the 18<sup>th</sup> to the 20<sup>th</sup> centuries, although the structures were not always sustainable, future agency heads (*chefs d'agence*) or prominent figures of the next generation often emerging within teams. In all the contributions, interference also regularly emerges between the professional and private spheres as well as the family sphere — for example, through the important role frequently played by the wife of the agency head —, but also in the world of education — recruitments often linked to workshops and specific places of training — which opened up new avenues of understanding and study for architectural firms in the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

## The intersection of models and practices

- 11 By focusing on forms of architects' workplace structures, and not on the buildings they design, the contributions reveal a great diversity of practices. Several articles emphasize the variety of tasks they fulfill. The break established during the Renaissance between liberal activity on the one hand and commercial activity on the other (or architects and entrepreneurs) was far from coming into effect in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. We now know that the distinction between the two professions did not suddenly occur throughout the 15<sup>th</sup> century, but there has not been sufficient observation of its tendency to fade during the second half of the Enlightenment, as cities became denser and larger. In Paris and in London, contractors, as well as architects, bought land and built houses for which they designed the plans.<sup>10</sup> After the Revolution in France, the abolition of guilds and the creation of a single patent to which both were subjected increased the confusion. If a part of the architects came to adhere to the idea that the profession was “incompatible with that of the contractor, manufacturer or supplier of materials“ (“Guadet code“, 1895), and if a majority ended up approving the creation of an “Order“ which prohibited contractors from assuming

the title of architect and vice versa (1940), a good number of practitioners thus continued to practice both professions simultaneously. The case of the Perret brothers is well known. In 1937, Auguste Perret deplored that the architect could no longer build for himself but must "build through contractors", "So that his role is no longer that of a builder, but simply that of a draftsman, and, the word will undoubtedly surprise... a notary, who directs the work [...]"<sup>11</sup>. After the Second World War, Fernand Pouillon still claimed to "think simultaneously as an organizer, a financier, an engineer, an inventor and an artist"<sup>12</sup>. However, its "economic systems" built to make him "[his] own contractor", led him to prison.

- 12 The case of Henri Blondel (1821-1897) and Jean Walter (1883-1957), studied by Elsa Jamet and Marie Gaimard in this current issue, is similar to that of Pouillon. The two architects aspired less to exercise both the profession of architect and that of contractor (like the Perrets) than they did to master the entire production process. They sometimes played the role of land developers (acquisition of land, division into lots, resale), sometimes that of real estate developers (acquisition of land, construction of houses, resale), and sometimes even that of developer-builders (they take care of the execution of buildings themselves). Henri Blondel bought land expropriated for public utility, then subdivided and resold it, but he also stuck to demolition contracts linked to Haussmannian developments. Just like Henri Blondel, Jean Walter relied upon solid political networks, multiplying public limited companies, setting up a structure to buy and sell land, buildings and materials to carry out work and to design projects.
- 13 William Tite (1798-1873), one of the foremost British architects of the second quarter of the 19th century, was also a businessman with multiple companies. Michael Chrimes shows how his professional and family networks, along with his political activity, allowed him to position himself within the railway market. The architect was far from undertaking just station design, he routinely buying and appraising land. In the 1840s, his operations led him to open agencies in France, as well as Carlisle, Edinburgh and Perth, making his office one of the first international architectural company. One of the merits of his case is that it draws our attention to a common practice long carried out by architects (and long overlooked): the valuation of land, real estate and works. In England, the porosity between the profession of architect and that of surveyor (valuers; surveyors; levelers; land surveyors) was large. The creation of professional bodies for surveyors in the 1870s helped to distinguish the professions, although many architects continued to act as property appraisers in the UK. As Michael Chrimes points out, even on a low fee basis (1 %), the value of urban real estate made this activity much more lucrative than architectural design fees. Architectural historian Andrew Saint's harsh judgment of the work of William Tite, which Michael Chrimes refers to, is thus not surprising. Business ingenuity, entrepreneurial expertise, and the ability to manage a team are not regarded as expected qualities of an artist. Art and architecture historians struggle as much to identify them as they do to recognize them. Henri Blondel, William Tite and Jean Walter share character traits attributed by Jean-Baptiste Say to entrepreneurs: they liked to lead, organize and take risks. While William Tite became the richest architect in England, however, Walter and Blondel went bankrupt. Even so, these three architects were also buyers, sellers, investors, constructors and artists. Their activities transgressed the limits between professions and encouraged us to more closely observe the permeability between the artistic, technical and commercial worlds.

- 14 The salaried employment of an administration is an additional form of exercise that is highlighted in this issue. Hélène Antoni observes the functioning of the architectural department of the City of Strasbourg (*Stadtbauamt*) from 1871 to 1918 and its various missions: control of building permits, expertise of architectural and urban planning projects, organization of competitions, realization of extension and development plans, and construction of municipal facilities. In addition to the development of salaried architect positions, Hélène Antoni points to the similarity between the hierarchical organization of the architectural department of the City of Strasbourg and that of an independent architectural firm. Fritz Beblo (1872-1947), in particular, seemed to run his department like a company boss (*patron d'agence*). Distributing missions among his collaborators, he remained the main person in charge and the only signatory of the projects. He also tried to make his mark on public construction by organizing competitions. Guillaume Duranel likewise observes the permanence of “agency practices” (*pratiques d'agence*) within temporary multidisciplinary teams (2008-2016) formed at the initiative of the Ministry of Culture and Communication (Office for Architecture, Urban Planning and Landscape Architecture Research), to reflect on the future of the Parisian metropolis (*Grand Paris*). Architects tend to reproduce the hierarchies specific to their profession; they “capture the symbolic impacts” of collective work; impose their “vocabulary” on researchers and other specialists, and above all, their habit of systematically translating ideas into drawings. These are “conventional patterns” which, according to the author, lead to “a weakening of the multidisciplinary character” of the productions of these teams that were initially formed to combine approaches.
- 15 Conversely, Anne Portnoï shows how the collective practices specific to the public architectural department of the London County Council (LCC), developed between 1949 and 1959, are diffused in other circles. In order to promote the expertise of architects who find themselves in competition with those of other city specialists (surveyors in particular), Johnson-Marshall (1915-1993), Director of the Town Planning Division, made the choice to formalize and codify the concepts and working methods of architects through reports and manuals. Published by the Ministry of Planning, these manuals intended to transmit “good practices” and were subsequently taken up by architects within universities or private construction fields.
- 16 Such case studies invite us to pay more attention to the material devices developed to facilitate collective work: sketches, drawings, models, as well as reports, manuals, schedules, etc. Such documents bear witness to immaterial practices that are difficult to grasp: interactions between architects, their collaborators and other construction stakeholders, but also the inventiveness deployed to lead and organize teams.

## An ordinary company

- 17 For several decades, the architectural profession has been a topic of studies at the crossroads of the sociology of work, organizations and professions. Furthermore, architectural firms have often been considered relevant observation environments for analyzing changes in the practices, projects, roles and inter-professional relationships of architects. Influenced by the “crisis” of a “transforming<sup>13</sup>” profession, the early work of the 1970s brought to light the rebalancing of work methods within architectural practices – which were marked by the increase in the number of employees – and its

effects on reconfigurations in the field. Through the lens of profession at various scales<sup>14</sup>, the research in the decades that followed either focused on a particular mode of practice<sup>15</sup> or on the evolutions of architectural activities in France, some even advancing the idea of a “de-professionalization<sup>16</sup>” of architectural activity. At the dawn of the 2000s, the notion of “professional work” was put forward to understand the strategies used by architects “to maintain and showcase their expertise in relation to other design professions<sup>17</sup>.” With the exception of Christophe Camus’s investigation<sup>18</sup>, it was not until the end of the 2000s that work emerged closely resembling an ethnographical analysis of the effects of an agency’s spatial dimensions on work itself<sup>19</sup>. Corpuses of offices and architects at work have also made it possible to shed light on the effects of the introduction of management tools among architects<sup>20</sup> or to analyze work structures and power relations comparatively<sup>21</sup>. More recently, the inclusion of architecture agencies’ entrepreneurial dimensions<sup>22</sup> has highlighted the need to link training cycles and practices with the professional world, thought of as a sector of activity.

- 18 The seven contributions assembled here allow us to consider architects’ offices, maybe above all, as ordinary companies like any other. They question their strategies in order to, on the one hand, respond to general changes in work and, on the other, to establish or follow new logics for structuring the architectural field. Whether architects act on their own initiative, seizing devices open to all company heads or responding to injunctions, their decision-making changes the work structures within their workplace. The authors gathered here tend to consider architects as economic and social agents, the entrepreneurial logics they develop acting as part of their positioning strategies. The methods chosen, which for the most part fall within the disciplines of the human and social sciences, combine quantitative and qualitative approaches: participant observations, question-based surveys and semi-structured interviews are favored in order to account for practices, but also for the narratives and representations of actors. In an effort to understand the evolution of the organization of architectural work, the majority of contributors chose to focus their attention on decision-makers. Thus, the discourse of architects working independently, as associates or head managers is more represented than that of employees.
- 19 The period covered within this third part starts in the 1960s and goes to the present day. Many of the contributions base their analyses on French architectural firms, with two exceptions to be noted: one examines the trajectory of Norman Foster’s (1935) firm in the United Kingdom, the other opens its corpus to large French and English companies, to question the effects of the digital transformation on work. Here, these contributions are not organized chronologically, nor by geographic or cultural area. We instead use the components of entrepreneurial logic that are explored in all of the articles. It should be noted, however, that neither economics, marketing nor business management are explicit criteria in the authors’ analysis grids. As Véronique Biau points out, “in a profession that is reluctant to think of itself as a job<sup>23</sup>”, it is other aspects of the organization of the activities of architects that have caught the attention of contributors. We group them under three headings: space — its management and image —, the legal structure of architectural practices — the choice of the type of company —, and the skills of actors.
- 20 Gabriel Hernández’s contribution opens this section, tracing the trajectory of Norman Foster’s firm and his associates from the 1960s to the 1980s in London. The relocations



and spatial transformations of the office indicate changes in the ideas and working methods. Borrowing from the methods of Visual Studies, he presents the architect's office as a laboratory whose transformations change the image of the company. Then, investigating a much more recent period — the last five years — Stéphanie Dadour and Lucie Perrier deliver an overview of the practices of architects undertaking their work in coworking spaces, thanks to a survey based on observations and semi-structured interviews. This choice is informed by opportunities for interprofessional collaboration, along with the values, atmosphere and image of work—as well as the supposed equality in work relationships — that the organization of these spaces could offer. The article reveals the shared desire of these actors to amalgamate the management capacity of their companies with that of an architectural project and, according to the authors' hypothesis, to perpetuate the values of the independent exercise of architecture.

- 21 Also questioning the structuring of architecture firms according to their choice of company type, Fanny Delaunay and Estelle Gourvennec analyze offices organized in the form of cooperative and participative companies (SCOP) through some thirty interviews with associates and/or managers. Beyond the entrepreneurial, social and even ethical values underlying this choice and their effects on daily work, the authors address other issues taken into account by architects: access to a network and to partnerships, and a stronger positioning in the economic market.
- 22 Four articles question the skills of actors in architectural firms, investigating their emergence since the 1980s within three domains in France: communication, digital architectural design tools and research. These articles share common questions: with regard to changes in an architect's context, tools, and methods of intervention, what skills do they consider maintaining within their offices, and what new ones need to be developed? Between independence and an obligation to respond to injunctions outside the architectural milieu, how do they choose the additional skills to acquire? Are they internalized or outsourced, and according to which interprofessional relationships? These questions call for considering a broader framework of study, and for analyzing the changes in work relationships and the power relations that they generate within architectural structures.
- 23 Margaux Darrieus thus unveils the behind-the-scenes players of architecture: promotional communication professionals. At the discretion of a long-term participant observation experience, coupled with semi-structured interviews with main actors, she explains the nature of their work and their projects, as well as their profiles and trajectories, both within and outside of the office, showing how their skills, now deemed indispensable, contribute to an architect's access to commissions.
- 24 Two contributions explore the effects of the introduction of digital tools in architectural design on the structure of work. Extended to the practices of Computational Design (CD) and Building Information Modeling (BIM), Aurélie de Boissieu offers a survey of seven French and English firms in the process of adopting these methods throughout the 2010s. She provides an overview of the work structures they generate and a typology of the new roles they create, based on training, skills and degrees of initiative and responsibility. She also questions the emergence of new professions or new professional figures. Focusing on BIM and French architectural firms, the contribution of Elodie Hochscheid and Gilles Hallin mobilizes a multi-criteria quantitative survey of 800 offices. The results show how they have, or have not,

adopted this practice, and their positioning in the architecture market according to the particularities of their internal functioning and the architectural commissions they undertake. A prospective dimension responds to the widespread idea that the generalization of BIM would cause a reduction in small architecture companies.

- 25 Finally, Mélanie Guénot sheds light on other practices that sometimes mobilize new skills on the part of architectural firms: those relating to research and innovation, strongly encouraged in recent years by public policy (in particular the National Strategy for Architecture in 2015) coupled with incentive mechanisms (such as research or innovation tax credits, or industrial research training agreements). Using a method that is both quantitative and qualitative, the author identifies the dynamics, especially in terms of internal skills and workloads, leading to the disparate strategies used by architects to develop these approaches. The delay that she identifies in this area is questioned with regard to the complex balance induced by these practices through architects' professional ethos, which is constructed upon values and an independent way of working.

## Change and reaffirmation of a model in question

- 26 This thematic issue invites us to continue the investigation aimed at identifying the permanence of implicit models that structure architectural workplace over time. For historians, this approach leads us to either reconsider usual sources, or to constitute and intersect new corpuses of administrative documents. The difficulty is increased by the fact that structures described are unstable, flexible and adaptable according to commissions and circumstances. Researchers who study the changes in current work structures benefit from the direct narratives of actors, revealing the diversity of the positioning strategies of architects. The more recent and active the structure, however, the more difficult it seems to access all the data and documents that would allow for it to be analyzed. Thus, many dimensions "evacuated" either from the discourses of the architects themselves, or from their professional archives, limit epistemological reflection. This observation is consistent with current findings of a profession reluctant to integrate economic and managerial questions into its practice, marked by the "managerial unthinkable<sup>24</sup>".
- 27 However, the contributions gathered here give an account of the structural development of architectural work since the 18<sup>th</sup> century in France, including a division of creative tasks, without these experiences having been formalized, theorized or transmitted. In France, an important issue therefore seems to be the training of architects with regard to these questions, which, for new generations, must be answered through the post-diploma cycle created in 2007 leading to accreditation (*habilitation à la maîtrise d'œuvre en son nom propre*). For older architects, intergenerational collaborations, lifelong professional training or the handling of these questions by representatives of the Professional Order and trade unions of architects, whether employers or employees, could constitute training avenues.
- 28 Regarding the historical approach, research deserves to be extended beyond the 1970s, in order to understand the effects and upheavals of the legal texts defining the public interest of architecture (*loi sur l'architecture de 1977*) and regulating access to public contracts (*loi sur la maîtrise d'ouvrage publique de 1985*). Following these orders which have structured the field up until today, how did architects organize themselves? In

terms of sources, there could be added, in addition to those identified within the articles, those from archival funds currently being used or transferred: actors involved in architecture education, whether initial or professional, as well as representatives of architects, whether they are regional councils or trade unions. As for the methods, more international comparisons could shed light on the differences in structures according to the strength of national work cultures, but also architecture itself.

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## NOTES

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