UNIVERSITY OF CAMBRIDGE

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Parasitism in Architecture: An Evaluation of How a Building's Existence is Shaped Through Autonomy, Reversibility, and Transparency

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ABSTRACT

Even in today's world where the whole life cycle concept is all the rage, major opuses of architecture writing still tend to discuss buildings as designed, built, handed over with (hopefully) a happy life ever after. What takes place in the real world can be far from that, even for prominent buildings. This thesis puts forward a new concept of parasitism which, as alien interventions, significantly affects a building's fate. Further, it argues that the most significant spatial transformations of a building that occur after construction are often permitted (or prevented) by the design decisions made during the initial design stage. 'Parasite' is thus a metaphor for an internal intervention in a 'host' building. The thesis proposes a three-pillar framework - autonomy, reversibility, and transparency - to consider 'parasites' that help or hinder the 'host'. The framework is tested against three case studies, to gain insights into how architects can facilitate more 'good' parasitism, working with their clients.

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INTRODUCTION

Architecture is increasingly practiced within a pre-existing built environment. Empty sites are no longer the norm, and the question of how a new element relates to an existing host - structurally, spatially, and programmatically - has become a central design challenge.

By contrast, the conventional narrative of Architecture tends to have a clear, linear process: planning, design, construction, and then the keys are handed to the client. What happens to the building after that is one of the least studied phases of its existence. Post-occupancy evaluation sounds good but is rarely practised for a complex web of reasons and excuses, and paradoxically, the more life gets complicated post occupancy, the less evaluation is or can be done. This thesis' concern currently sits in an even darker corner in this context. It is in the later phases of the building's life that inhabitants and users of the space begin making major spatial alterations to something that was never designed to accommodate them. 'Parasite' is a metaphor used here for that condition: as a way of naming the relationship between the original building and the elements that manage to attach themselves to the host building and thus make a big difference to its existence.

"Parasitic architecture" has emerged as a description for a specific condition within this broad spectrum: the intervention that attaches itself to a host building, drawing on its structure, its spatial logic, or its cultural meaning to make something new, or enhance the existing (or, on the contrary, jeopardize it). This term borrows from biology. In nature, parasites depend on a host. They can damage it, coexist with it neutrally, or, in some cases, improve the conditions of the system they both inhabit. But architectural usage of the term has not kept pace with its complexity. Existing definitions tend to be either formalistic and vague, leaning into physical attachment or over-inclusive. Neither of these offers a tool for designers to latch onto before committing to their work.

This thesis proposes that what is missing is not a better definition, but a practical framework: one built from observable conditions that can be assessed and used to steer decisions beforehand. It proposes three pillars: autonomy, reversibility, and transparency. This framework is tested against three case studies selected to isolate specific variables within the spectrum described by the thesis as "parasitic," rather than a binary classification. The case studies are all post-1990, Western European, and drawn from two practices. That last point is not coincidental: Foster + Partners designed both Stansted Airport and the British Museum Great Court, nine years apart, with opposite outcomes. Controlling for practice makes the differences harder to attribute to talent and easier to attribute to process and shows that this is project-dependent and that anyone can fall anywhere on the spectrum. Chapters 2 and 3 will show that the framework also reveals that the same intervention can score differently across the three pillars, depending on the host-parasite relationship being evaluated.

Chapter 1 establishes the theoretical and definitional groundwork, drawing on biology to address the spectrum, the distinction between retrofit and parasite, and the three pillars in full. The Methodology section introduces the evidence base and the logic of case study selection. Chapter 2 applies the framework in a logical sequence: first, Stansted is presented as an instance of unintentional 'bad' parasitism; next, the Pathé Foundation is introduced as an example of intentional 'good' parasitism; and finally, the British Museum serves as the bridge between the two. Chapter 3 draws together the findings and briefly addresses a methodological issue that underlies the entire analysis - how aerial imagery misrepresents the very buildings that spatial experience defines.

CHAPTER 1 - The Parasitic Condition: Definition, Spectrum and Framework

1.1 Existing Uses and Definitions

Some of the current definitions of parasitic architecture are formalistic and scale-bound. Tomáš Baroš and Dušan Katunský frame their research around a formal definition of parasitic architecture, in which there is a "parasite-host relationship" between an "existing building and a new extension, adaptive reuse, superstructure or installation." By reducing a definition of this calibre into a single paragraph in the thesis's introduction, it reveals that parasitism is treated as a physical attachment within architectural elements. They explicitly acknowledge that this is purely on a physical level, where "such a perception of parasitic architecture is formalistic. It deals only with the form and its aesthetics and expands the host only spatially. The relationship in question could therefore also be called ectoparasitic, where the parasite lives only on the surface or outside the host." (Baroš & Katunský, 2020). While this definition clarifies the parasite relationship in physical terms, it still does not capture the aftermath and development of these elements over time, where behavioural or spatial relationships can change in ways that differ from one example to another.

Other definitions are over-inclusive and less precise. Bardzinska-Bonenberg (2018) states that contemporary use of the term 'parasitic architecture' refers to a wide scope of small-scale architectural "additions" to existing buildings. The term is vague, constrained by scale, and bound solely to the physical perception of the parasite. This lack of rigor is one of the drivers behind the desire to define clearly what the term means before it is applied and analysed against case studies (Given, 2021).

1.2 Attempts to Be More Precise, But Not Far Enough

This might be why terminological instability occurs. The same intervention can be described as adaptive reuse, superimposition, symbiosis, or accretion, depending on the perspective and disciplinary vantage point. These are not interchangeable: they carry different assumptions about agency, benefit, and permanence. Adrian Forty (2000) makes a broader point about architectural language that is useful here. He states that the terms architects inherit are rarely neutral, and that "the choice of one word over another is never innocent." The term 'parasitic' carries biological weight, relational implication, and a hint of the transgressive that terms like 'extension' or 'addition' do not, and a level of complexity and twist needed for the framework that this thesis sets out. That weight is why the term is worth taking seriously, and maybe the reason why it has been used so carelessly in the past. Without a shared set of conditions, the debate becomes circular. One architect's transgressive intervention may be another one's dream.

The solution adopted in this thesis is not to resolve the debate but to navigate it. Rather than starting from a definition and working outward, it starts from a set of observable conditions (autonomy, reversibility, and transparency) and builds toward a definition tested by following case studies. These three pillars are introduced in full in Section 1.6.

1.3 Scope as Interior and Endoparasitic Interventions

Having established that parasitic architecture exists on a spectrum rather than as a binary condition, a further scoping decision must be made before the framework can be applied. This thesis will focus specifically on interior parasitic interventions. This means it focuses on modifications, insertions, and additions that operate within the spatial envelope of an existing 'host' building or urban block, as will be seen in the Pathé example in Chapter 2. This is what in biology would be called endoparasitism, where the parasite lives inside the host, ensuring that the interventions have a clear host to which they are attached and do not live or stand on their own.

The distinction matters because interior and exterior parasitic interventions are evaluated differently. An ectoparasitic addition - a structure bolted to the outside of a building, or a building that presses against an existing façade - is primarily judged from the outside, and if it is exclusively ectoparasitic, it would be shallow. There can be endoparasitic interventions that have an ecto- element to them, but not vice versa. If it's endoparasitic, its visual relationship to the street, its compliance with planning constraints, and its surface treatment must go further to answer to an altogether different set of conditions, like the spatial logic of the interior, the structural conditions set up by the host, and the experience of people who enter and interact with it. The three pillars of the framework: reversibility, transparency, and autonomy, read and act differently when the parasite is interior or exterior. The analysis is more complex and subtle, as interior parasites can compromise the spatial integrity of a host in ways that may be more difficult to detect and harder to undo than a mere exterior intervention.

The three case studies selected all operate within this interior or endoparasitic territory. The commercial/security layers accumulating inside Stansted Airport's terminal are unambiguously endoparasitic. The Pathé Foundation and the British Museum's Great Court are conceptually interior, as both are experienced only from within.

1.4 Grounding in Biology

Architecture frequently borrows language and behaviours from biology and nature. Parallelisms between these two disciplines are so abundant and nuanced that the use of these terms is confusing. A study by Tim Huber and Jörg Müssig discusses the interchangeability that occurs when these concepts enter a discussion. They find there is an "inconsistent use and understanding of terms, such as bionics, biomimetics, biomimicry, and bioinspiration" (Huber and Müssig, 2025). The fact that there must be a study of the inconsistencies also indicates that there are other terms that are so complex and carry such different meanings to whoever uses them that there cannot be a singular, correct, and concrete meaning for parasitism either.

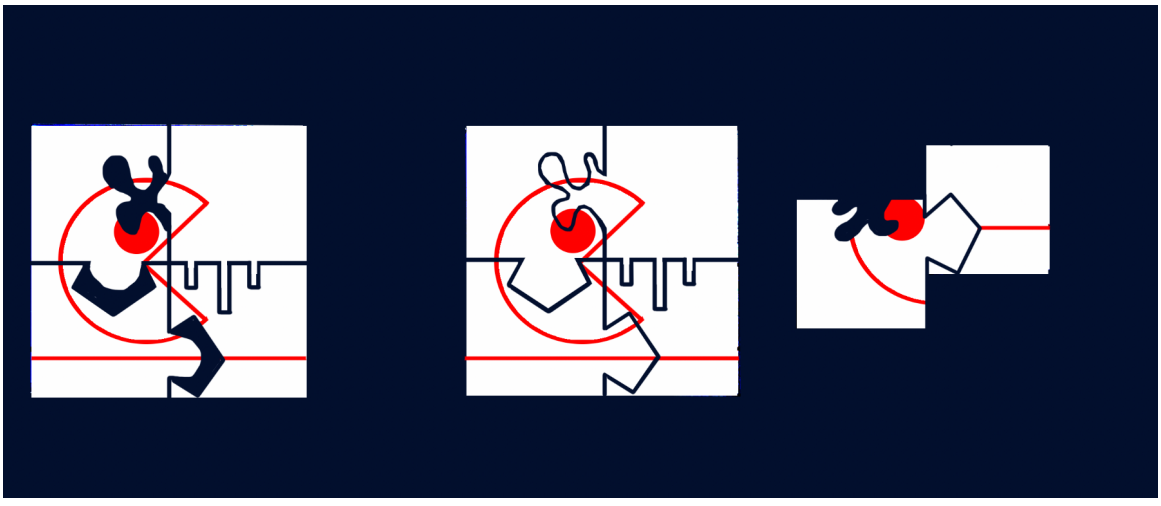
It's not about whether a building is parasitic or not, but rather part of a spectrum where parasitic features are present or not. The approach should be more relational and less rigid. This is consistent with how biologists have always understood parasitism itself. Price (1980) argues that parasitism should be seen not as a binary state but as a point on an ecological continuum that includes commensalism (where one organism benefits and the other is unaffected) and mutualism (where both benefit). Parts of these definitions do not align with the framework or the terminology of 'parasitism'

used in the architectural context (as here it is seen as purely negative), suggesting a blurry line through these terms as well. The distinction matters for architecture because it opens the possibility that what begins as a damaging parasitic relationship can, over time, shift toward something closer to mutualism (Arabulan, 2023, pp. 1-12).

A parasite is an organism in its own right. It needs a host to exist, but the host does not transform into the parasite. It does not respond to the host (which it might seem to do if the fit happens to be perfect for both). It might be useful to think of it as a jigsaw puzzle piece. Let the host pieces be the ones with blank spaces, and the parasites be the ones with tabs that go into the blanks. The jigsaw image is cut up, but the pieces do not fit together to create the image at first. To complete the puzzle successfully, each piece (A, B, C, D) must be positioned in its correct place, with tabs going into the blanks so the picture is coherent. However, these pieces do not usually fit perfectly from the start, and, as in Figure 1a, the junctions do not look like they belong together.

There is a transition period in which the pieces expand and morph, ultimately fitting seamlessly into Figure 1b. This expansion is what people and activities bring to a building: how they use it, the life that is born around it, and the sentimental value it is given. These are intangible variables that are often difficult to measure quantitatively. The puzzle can therefore be completed when all the pieces are in place, but the image can still look unfinished. (For instance, this can be a city with a lot of infrastructure and planning, but that still needs time and activity to be activated and buzzing).

There can be a lucky scenario in which adjacent pieces already fit perfectly into each other (but it is rare for them to have the exact same negative and positive outlines), and the completed Figure 1b is reached instantly. There will also be times when pieces that appear to align perfectly do not belong next to each other. Even if it looks like a perfect match because the shapes physically match, it is a forced junction, and the picture would not be completed properly. This action is an external force imposed by someone and maintained by their justification rather than natural growth (Figure 1c). Translating this concept into practice could range from an authoritarian decision made by a designer imposing their own language on something that does not need it.



Figures 1a, 1b, 1c - Jigsaw diagrams: initial junctions / seamless fit after expansion / forced fit maintained by external imposition. Author-drawn diagram.

A parasitic relationship is one in which one organism benefits at the direct expense of another, its host (Poulin, 2011). A parasite exists only if the puzzle pieces fit the intended jigsaw picture, and the tabs have had the chance to grow or “benefit”. How much it benefits is part of the spectrum's intensity, and the breakdown of the attributes that cause the “benefit” is the framework I will set out later.

1.5 Retrofit vs Parasitism

A common misconception that can arise from this framework is believing that retrofitting is the same as a parasitic intervention. The argument would be that an external party is adding elements to an existing building that needs something, and that this is a new imposition that morphs exactly into the shape of the existing fabric. Consider this definition of a parasite: “Parasites are organisms that live in or on another organism and derive resources from it, often modifying the host’s structure or behaviour in the process” (Poulin, 2011). In retrofit, the organism is created based on what must be retrofitted. It did not exist as an organism before that. The attributes from the parasitic spectrum can be applied, but they are not applied to the correct system.

Let’s assume that the Mona Lisa has a hole in the canvas. Retrofitting it would be patching it up, where an artist would first rebuild the fabric in the same way the old one was made, find the exact colour tones and paint type, and try to mimic the exact strokes that Da Vinci used. Referencing Poulin’s definition of the parasitic relationship, it is true that there is a new organism on the canvas, but the other aspects do not align. The structure hasn't changed because it's meant to imitate the original and does not change its behaviour at all. The Mona Lisa is still intended to be a nice painting that people want to look at, and to them it should seem as if no external element interferes with the painting. It is like a permanent scaffolding, born to serve the host. If it evolves or develops an identity of its own, the value and purpose of both the host and itself are lost, as it exposes that, in fact, the Mona Lisa is broken.

The distinction between retrofit and parasitic intervention is not merely taxonomic - it has real consequences for how each is evaluated. A retrofit is judged by how well it disappears back into the host fabric. The success of a retrofit happens when it becomes invisible or seamless. A parasitic intervention carries a visible identity of its own; it can be less visible or more visible, but it owns up to being an external addition ‘proudly’ in some sense. It is evaluated by the quality of its relationship with what it has entered: how much it takes, how much it gives back, how honestly it declares itself, and how much of the host survives intact if it were ever to leave. Retrofit and parasitism have different standards. Conflating them produces muddled analysis - and, in practice, produces buildings that are designed as if they should disappear when they should not, or gain an unwanted attention that was not planned for (Letzter, 2023).

1.6 Attributes of the Parasitic Spectrum

Three pillars emerge from the literature and the logic of the spectrum above as the conditions to assess where an intervention sits: autonomy, reversibility, and transparency. Together, they do not determine whether something is parasitic or not; rather they describe the degree and character of its parasitism.

Each one is observable and testable through an analysis of structure, program, material choices, and the building's relationship with its host over time.

This is a forward-looking framework. The pillars are proposed as a design lens, a set of questions to be asked before committing to a relationship with a host, rather than a retrospective audit. The concept of 'intentionality' provides important context within the framework but is not a pillar itself. It is an attribute these pillars must engage with to be positioned within each one's spectrum. It will appear in Chapter 2 as a background condition that shapes how the three pillars manifest. Intentionality is used in two ways: one asks whether the parasitic relationship was purposefully designed or stumbled into; the other asks what the intervention's intention, as opposed to its actual outcome, is.

1.6.1 Autonomy

Autonomy describes the degree to which a parasitic intervention is structurally and programmatically independent of its host. Physically, a highly autonomous parasite does not rely on the host's fabric for its structural integrity. It would deliberately choose its contact points rather than inherit them by necessity. Programmatically, a highly autonomous parasite is one whose function and importance are understood without reference to the host. This is not about whether the addition can operate independently (for example, by having its own bathroom), but rather whether it carries its own values and messages, independently of the host. A low-autonomy parasite is entirely dependent: its structure borrows from the host, its program cannot function without the host's infrastructure, and its removal would compromise both. Neither extreme is inherently good or bad. The significance lies in whether the level of autonomy is coherent with the design's purpose and is honest about what it is doing to the fabric it has entered.

1.6.2 Reversibility

Reversibility extends autonomy but adds a twist. It addresses what the cost of removal would be to the host, both spatially and programmatically. A reversible parasite leaves the host largely intact upon extraction. An irreversible one has entangled itself so deeply that removal would be destructive. What is most revealing is the middle ground: parasites that appear reversible but have already altered the host's behaviour so fundamentally, that without them, the host would no longer function as it once did. This can mean that other additions depend on the parasite and the host physically existing, or that a program or activity cannot continue if the parasite is removed. This is the condition that most clearly exposes the difference between a deliberate design decision and an accident that was allowed to compound. It is one of the key distinctions tested later in Chapter 2.

The British Museum Great Court makes this demand explicitly structural: the Grade I listing required reversibility to be encoded in the engineering of the intervention, not simply assumed from the brief.

1.6.3 Transparency

Transparency is the most complex of the three pillars and the one most dependent on direct experience for its assessment. It borrows from Rowe and Slutzky's (1963) distinction between literal and phenomenal transparency. Rowe and Slutzky establish a foundational distinction: "Transparency may be an inherent quality of substance, as in a glass curtain wall; or it may be an inherent quality of

organization. One can, for this reason, distinguish between a literal and a phenomenal transparency" (Rowe and Slutzky, 1963, p.45).

Literal transparency is material: a glass curtain wall, a perforated screen, or any element that is physically permeable. Phenomenal transparency is formal: it is the condition in which the spatial organisation of a building makes its logic legible even when no material is see-through.

For a parasitic intervention, transparency asks whether a user, visitor, or neighbour can read the logic of the addition: what it is, how it relates to the host, and what its presence means. An intervention can be physically open and phenomenally closed (or vice versa). What matters is whether the parasite's relationship to the host is honest, and whether the building tells the truth about what it is and what it has done to the fabric it has entered. A parasite that either hides its structural dependency, conceals the effort it has imposed on the host, or misrepresents the extent of its reach, is a less trustworthy spatial character. In practice, this would be harder to understand and defend; physically, it would also be harder to modify or remove.

Stansted is the case where transparency was designed in and then lost, making it the most diagnostic test of the pillar precisely because it demonstrates what the condition looks like in its absence.

Pillar	What it asseses	Low	Medium	High
Autonomy	Structural and programmatic independence from the host	Structure borrows from the host; programme cannot function without it; contact points inherited by necessity	Partial structural independence; some contact points chosen; programme of host is unaltered by parasite	Self-supporting structure; contact points deliberately chosen; programme of host is encouraged and boosted
Reversibility	Cost of removal to the host (in its program and physically)	Removal would be destructive, both structurally and dismantling operational identity	Appears reversible but host behaviour has been altered; removal is possible but would leave a marked host	Host left largely intact if extracted; contact points aesthetic rather than load-bearing; removal encoded in the engineering
Transparency	Legibility of intervention's relationship with the host	Structural logic hidden; unreadable spatial logic of host; intervention misrepresents reach and/or is deceiving	Legibility partial or threshold-dependent; readable from some positions but not universally	Logic of the addition and host readable to any visitor; intervention honest about its structural relationship and spatial reach to host

Figure 1.2 - Each pillar is assessed qualitatively across three scores. The scores are assigned by reading structure, programme, material decisions, and spatial experience against the conditions described in Section 1.6 and summarized here. Author's diagram.

Methodology

The evidence base combines direct site observation and photography (in the Pathé section), conservation records (for the British Museum listing and Pathé façade protection) and published

project documentation and technical and academic sources (for all cases) , as well as one semi-structured primary interview with Giles Robinson (who worked on Stansted during construction and led the British Museum Great Court project in 2000). The dissertation's primary method is comparative case studies; the conducted online interview is not a data-gathering exercise, but a confirmation of the specific points made in the analysis. The ethical considerations for this interview have been approved by the supervisor of this thesis.

A site visit to the Pathé building was conducted in early December 2025 to observe the building directly, document its spatial experience through photography, and gather primary material for the analysis in Section 2.2. Given that transparency (one of the pillars of the three-part framework) can only be assessed experientially, not from published imagery, direct site access was a methodological requirement, not a convenience.

Case Study Selection

The cases were selected to isolate specific variables within the parasitic spectrum - the three pillars. To correctly identify how far reversibility, transparency, and autonomy influence the experience of the host building and its users, the case study selection had to be grounded in comparable conditions to avoid large discrepancies in external factors. The scope must be small so that cultural and regulatory contexts can be compared on a fair basis. This is why case studies from Western Europe and the post-1990 era were selected. They are also geographically close to ensure direct access to the buildings. Since transparency can only be assessed experientially, not from published imagery, this criterion is necessary. The Pathé Building was accessible through a field visit; Stansted is well represented in published sources (supplemented by a primary interview with Giles Robinson, who was involved in the design process); and the British Museum serves as a bridge between the two cases.

Chapter 2 - Case Studies: Parasitic Spectrum in Practice

2.1 Unintentional Bad Parasitism – Stansted Airport (Foster + Partners, 1991)

The analysis of Stansted draws on published project documentation and the primary interview with Giles Robinson (in February 2026), who worked on the project during construction. Direct site observation was not conducted; the analysis is grounded in documentary sources and Robinson's testimony, both acknowledged as limitations.

An important clarification is that the term "bad" in this context refers to behaviour that arises without design intent and that contradicts or undermines the host's original logic. It is not a judgment of ugliness or incompetence. "Good" in this case would describe a modification that continues and reinforces the values and logic of the original vision or purpose.

Stansted Airport was designed by Foster + Partners in 1991 with a very clear and ambitious intention. "The terminal challenges all the rules of airport terminal design… servicing and circulation are pushed underground, freeing the main concourse as a single, uninterrupted space." Motivated by the

cluttered 20th-century airport terminals, Stansted sought to be a column-less, open-plan terminal where passenger flow was free and unobstructed.

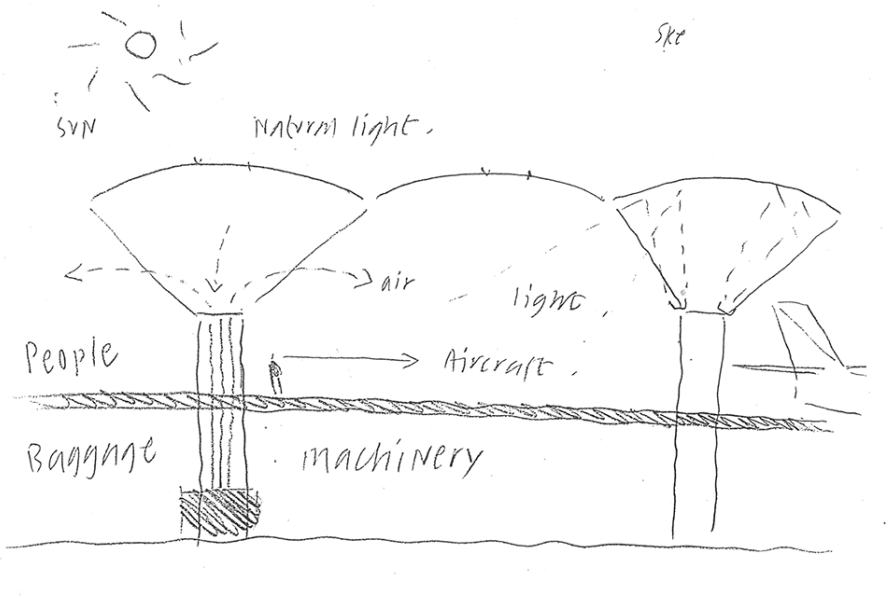


Figure 2.0a - Stansted Airport sketch section: services in undercroft below, open concourse above, aircraft visible through full-height glazing. Source: Foster + Partners. Available at: fosterandpartners.com/projects/stansted-airport/ (Accessed: March 2026).

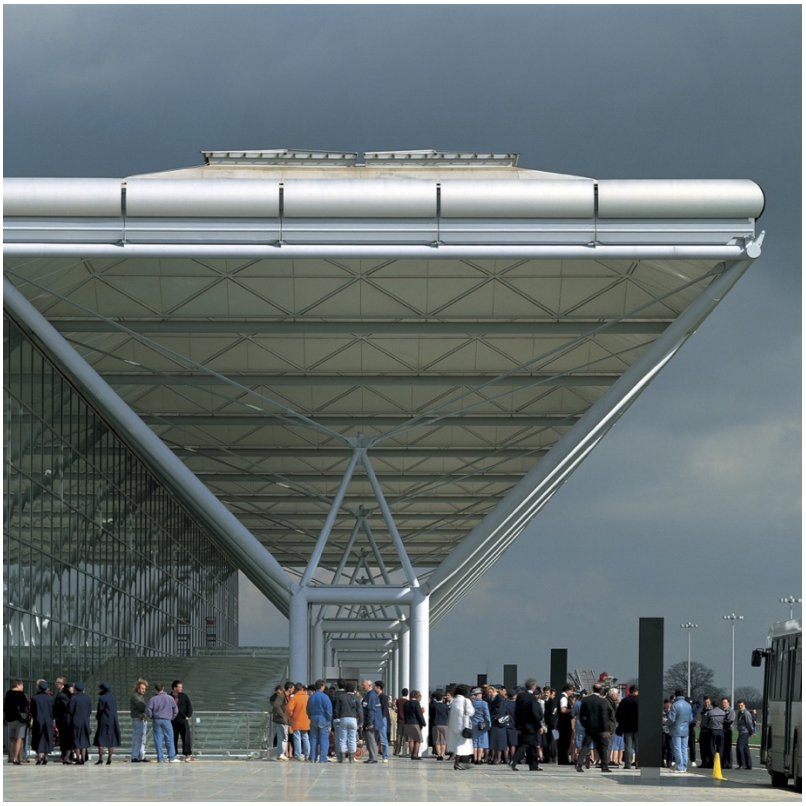


Figure 2.0b - Stansted airport terminal exterior, featuring jumbos. Source: Foster + Partners. Available at: fosterandpartners.com/projects/stansted-airport/ (Accessed: March 2026).

Robinson describes the original design philosophy in the following terms: “Norman had a very clear concept for the building where you could see it was completely transparent. The architecture - you saw the planes, the jumbos (Figure 2.0b), being able to see those and see right through the building. Make it very legible and clear for a user to see and understand the movement patterns through it. And that was certainly the objective” (Robinson, 2026).

The aircrafts visible through the concourse glazing are worth dwelling on at the scale of individual passenger experience, because this is where the transparency argument becomes most concrete. At any point in the building, a passenger could locate themselves relative to the planes and therefore relative to their destination. Transparency here was not simply an aesthetic condition. It was a wayfinding system encoded in the section (Figure 2.0a): keep services below, keep the concourse clear, keep the planes in view. The parasitic accumulation that followed, of security barriers, retail stalls, and overhead signage, did not damage the roof; this broke the system. The passenger lost sight of progress within the space, lost sight of the aircrafts, and with that, the orientation that the original plans had guaranteed.

This philosophy was not only a design intention but was also operationalised in the positioning of commercial spaces within the terminal. Robinson confirms: “Everything was organized and orchestrated with that guiding principle about making the movements through the building as simple, clear, and legible as possible” (Robinson, 2026). The commercial programme was present from the start, but as layers of commitment within such large installation projects and parties built up, it gradually took a back seat and compromised the design logic.

Foster + Partners stated that the terminal sought to “recapture the clarity of the very first airfields” (Foster + Partners), indicating that openness was an intended value for the project, not just a consequence of how spaces would fit together.

On opening and after the operation, the “parasite” entered. It is not an obvious one, but it camouflaged itself well and feeds on consumerism to survive. It wasn’t sudden or aggressive, but emerged through the gradual accumulation of small interventions, like stalls and amenities typical of any airport fitted within the terminal envelope. Layers of security and a rising demand for commercial and leisure spots began to distract and redirect the traveller.

Robinson describes the state at completion: "When we finished the building, we had retained a lot of control over the commercial activities and the flow patterns through the building." (Robinson, 2026). That autonomy did not last. Airports are institutional projects involving operators, commercial consultants, and aviation authorities whose priorities shift over time. The spatial logic that the design team had protected during construction lacked a mechanism to resist what accumulated once construction was complete.

Foster’s fifth façade (the roof) compounds the problem. It was designed as the primary architectural focus and gives the building its identity, drawing the eye upward toward the structural trees and the modular canopy. However, this diverts the attention away from what accumulates at ground level. The roof performs exactly as intended - it establishes identity and legibility at the scale of the whole. But this formal clarity at a large scale provides no governance at a smaller one (where the parasitic elements exist). The “fifth façade”, in this sense, is an architectural success that inadvertently enabled the parasite to enter.

To some extent, and ironically, the airport that was meant to be the most spacious is now an example of the opposite - cramped and constricted. The design created an environment in which this “parasite”

could grow and offered no mechanism to regulate it. The parasite attached itself to activities that were necessary but not fundamental to the design or to the big picture that the designers envisioned.

This raises the question of how an architect might escape this condition or whether such an attempt is even possible. “If you wish to design a project in such a way that you prevent it” (meaning preventing that accumulation of business spaces), “I think there would be huge resistance. Going through smaller airports is easier, but big airports are a real challenge” (Robinson, 2026).

The answer the framework offers is not ‘escape’ but anticipation. The three pillars do not guarantee resistance against accumulation. Instead, they define the conditions that, if considered from the start, create a spatial system that remains legible and manageable over time. Stansted was not designed with the question “what happens when this building is full of things we did not put there?” The Pathé Foundation, as the next section will show, was.

Mapped against the framework, Stansted scores low across all three pillars. Not at the level of its permanent architecture, which is clean and modular, but at the operational level where the parasite lives.

On autonomy, the accumulated layer of security infrastructure, retail concessions, and commercial volume has no structural independence from the host: it cannot exist without the terminal. However, the relationship has inverted. The terminal can no longer function without the parasite. Remove the retail, the security queues, the wayfinding overlays, and Stansted ceases to operate as an airport. The parasite has made itself load-bearing - not structurally, but institutionally. What defines low autonomy here is that the host and intervention have become mutually dependent in a way that was not designed and cannot be easily undone.

On reversibility, the commercial and security accumulation has compounded past the point of extraction. Removal would not restore the original condition or plans for Stansted’s openness; it would instead dismantle the building's operational identity entirely. What began as a surface accumulation on the host's interior has become so embedded within expectations of what an airport should provide. Stansted's public identity is now the cluttered concourse floor, not the elegant roof above it. The parasite has become the building - and it is not easily undone.

On transparency, the original wayfinding logic encoded in the section is obscured. Physical transparency might still exist, but at the user level, it is not transparent. The phenomenal transparency Robinson describes as the design's core objective was not lost in a single decision, but gradually eroded. A visitor to Stansted today cannot read the spatial logic of the original design through the accumulated overlay. The building no longer tells the truth about what it is.

2.2 Good and Intentional Parasitism: The Jérôme Seydoux–Pathé Foundation (Renzo Piano, 2014)

This section draws on direct site observation and photography conducted in December 2025. On-site presentation material provided during the guided visit is the published project documentation. All observations about spatial experience are grounded in that primary fieldwork.

As I walked past this building, I did not see it. I looked at my phone to check if the location was correct. Hidden behind the 1869 façade of the Théâtre des Gobelins, the home of the Jérôme-Seydoux Pathé Foundation emerges, completed in September 2014. This museum and archive building is

described in the onsite presentation video as a “secret animal in the heart of Paris”, inserted into a residential block of typical Parisian character. One of the terms used to describe the whole construction was a “creature that emerges from the ground”. Although it is technically an exterior building, it will be considered internal parasitism.

If we analyse its morphological features, it molds around what the site has to offer. The main ground is a pit, with many of the adjacent houses having flat walls with no windows facing the empty space. Here is where the parasite can live, and the negotiation with the hosting walls can come through. Standing in the courtyard area (Figure 2.1), one can see that the envelope's shape allows the hosting buildings to retain essential elements of their living conditions. There are notable dips in window sightlines, leaving breathing space for the owner to keep a decent courtyard view.

Figure 2.1 - Pathé Foundation courtyard view: window sightlines for neigbors are kept, and boundary between parasite and host walls is elegant. Author's photograph, December 2025.

Where the aluminium shell meets the existing masonry walls, there is a visible and strict boundary line, a defined edge that the building never crosses. Looking more closely (Figures 2.3 and 2.4), the steel fixing plates are colour-matched to the beige wall behind them, and the aluminium frame sits flush with the host surface rather than projecting from it. The contact is precise: the building deliberately chooses its attachment points. This is the material expression of the autonomy pillar, where the parasite decides where it touches the host, and the junction makes that decision visible.

Standing on the ground, old walls are visible, and nature from the gardens and entrance is always exposed through the glass panes that contain the building’s exterior and internal spaces. Ground floor

routes are easy to navigate. There is nothing opaque or radical that indicates progress from the street except glass walls, so visually, when entering nothing feels hidden. After a few glass walls and service stairs, the site introduces the main “beast”. It is completely open, except for some columns and the wall leading to the upper-floor access, which contains the foyer. The heavy beams are not exposed in the first few meters of the ground floor, so people walking through the building do not have them in their field of view, and the old walls are still fully visible.

The constraints make it unconventional enough to defend a new typological vision, yet still down-to-earth and respectful of the city's vernacular. This came through when looking at Piano’s previous iterations. The aluminium ledges that cover the entire building were meant to be painted Pathé yellow (a cinema branding colour) or red for cinema symbolism. This, however, created an undesired glow that would disturb the neighbours, so they went for a plain grey instead (which was also consistent with Parisian grey tones around the city). In some sense, the parasite acts as a bond that joins the building's essence and the city (its home) in a tangible way.

2.2.1 Spiritual Host in Pathé

Piano’s project lives inside two hosts at the same time. The ‘spiritual host’ and the ‘tangible host’.

The ‘spiritual host’ is the very Pathé organization, with its heritage and history (physically exhibited and celebrated in the front façade). The ‘tangible host’ comprises the surrounding block and courtyard areas, which also have dedicated functions. In one, it must prolong and enhance; in the other, it must simply not obstruct living conditions. For it to be a good parasite, then, the functions these hosts perform before the intervention must be continued and even enhanced.

This two-host model is useful for the framework because it separates the two kinds of obligation the building carries. Against the spiritual host, the key question is whether the programme continues the site's original purpose. Against the tangible host, the key questions are physical: autonomy, reversibility, and the quality of the contact points. A building can fully satisfy the spiritual host while damaging the tangible one. The Pathé building is notable because it satisfies both obligations not by compromise but by attending to each obligation separately.

In Learning from Las Vegas (1972), Venturi introduces the concept of the “duck” and the “decorated shed”. His argument is that all architecture represents some sort of symbolism (to some degree), even if the designer didn’t intend it. The ‘duck’ is a “special building that is a symbol” (meaning the form itself is a symbol), while the ‘decorated shed’ is “the conventional shelter that applies symbols” (meaning the added ornament is what carries the symbolic content) (Venturi et al., 1977, p. 87). Symbolic functions of the cinema sector continue: screenings run in the basement, floors are allocated to research teams, and there are climatised film archives. Original intentions are kept, even evolved.

The positional quality (duck from within, decorated shed from without) is not only an observation, but an argument about transparency. The building’s phenomenal transparency depends on where you stand. From the street, it is opaque by design, (offering nothing to read). From the courtyard, once that threshold is crossed, the design's spatial logic becomes legible. Transparency here operates as a threshold condition rather than a global one. The building does not show all its cards from the start; it withholds them until the visitor has committed to engaging. That commitment is the price of admission to the duck.

2.2.2 Tangible Host in Pathé

When looking at how the parasite lives within the tangible host in Piano's design (in this case, how the design is physically attached to the courtyard fabric of the residential walls surrounding it), we can see that interventions of this sort operate to some degree of autonomy and reversibility.

To associate this with either good or bad parasitism is not the correct way to approach it. Take, for example, Figure 2.2 (photo of the wall-building junction). The intervention appears to have no effect on the integrity of the existing wall of the residential building –at least from the outside. This means there is a high level of intended autonomy, and although the form is crafted to show it sits and molds into the courtyard, the actual physics of how the building is anchored are not intrusive at all.

Figure 2.2 - Envelope surrounding residential walls limit. Author's photograph, December 2025.

It is structurally independent of the host, which classifies it as a highly reversible parasite. In this case, Figure 2.5 shows how the shell's support system works. Even though it looks like it is hooked to the walls, the entire concrete hull is supported on rods and plinths on the floor, making the contact point purely aesthetic. It is not reliant on the courtyard's integrity for its survival; therefore, it is very reversible.

There is a visible and strict boundary line along the aluminium shell, where no aggressive or sharp elements protrude from the shell's hull. This comes across as a sign of respect towards the "affected" neighbours, a form of necessary containment for the intervention to prosper. It is aware of the available on-site space vs. the actual space it occupies and defines it clearly and simply. It does not threaten the 'livelihood' of the people who will live and interact with it daily in an unexpected way. The comfort that comes with that predictability offers them a spatial and tangible guarantee that this is a meditated and purposeful addition, not an unpredictable force that could backfire at any time and threaten their space. Being predictable and transparent is crucial to a good relationship between the inserted building and the block's existing system.

Both Figure 2.3 and 2.4 show instances of the boundary line between the parasite and host walls. On the left side of Figure 2.3 lies the existing masonry wall and contour that overlooks the courtyard area of the building beside it. Attached to its right is a grey aluminium window frame from the Pathé building. The steel plate that holds it together is colour-matched (presumably water-resistant paint) to the beige wall hue.

Figure 2.3 - Junction detail: grey aluminium frame meeting masonry wall, colour-matched steel plate. Author's photograph, December 2025.

Figure 2.4 - Weathered corner junction at a secondary contact point. Author’s photograph, December 2025.

This shows how gentle the intervention wants to be and reveals the level of detail considered, even when a bracket connection (in this case, necessary for the window system installation) interferes with the visual limit the intervention or parasite imposes on the site. It sets a precedent for the entire building, where this ethos must be consistent to respect that strict boundary line. Even in Figure 2.4, which features a weathered and mossy corner of a similar junction, but in a hidden instance (where it is not even worth cleaning up), the line of the parasite-host connection has been carefully thought out and executed, following that boundary line. Although the shape makes it appear, from a distance, that the building spills over the walls and ground, upon close inspection, it feels autonomous and elegant, as if it knows its place within the host. It decides which contact points it wants with the host, rather than accepting the ones it could have, given its strange form.

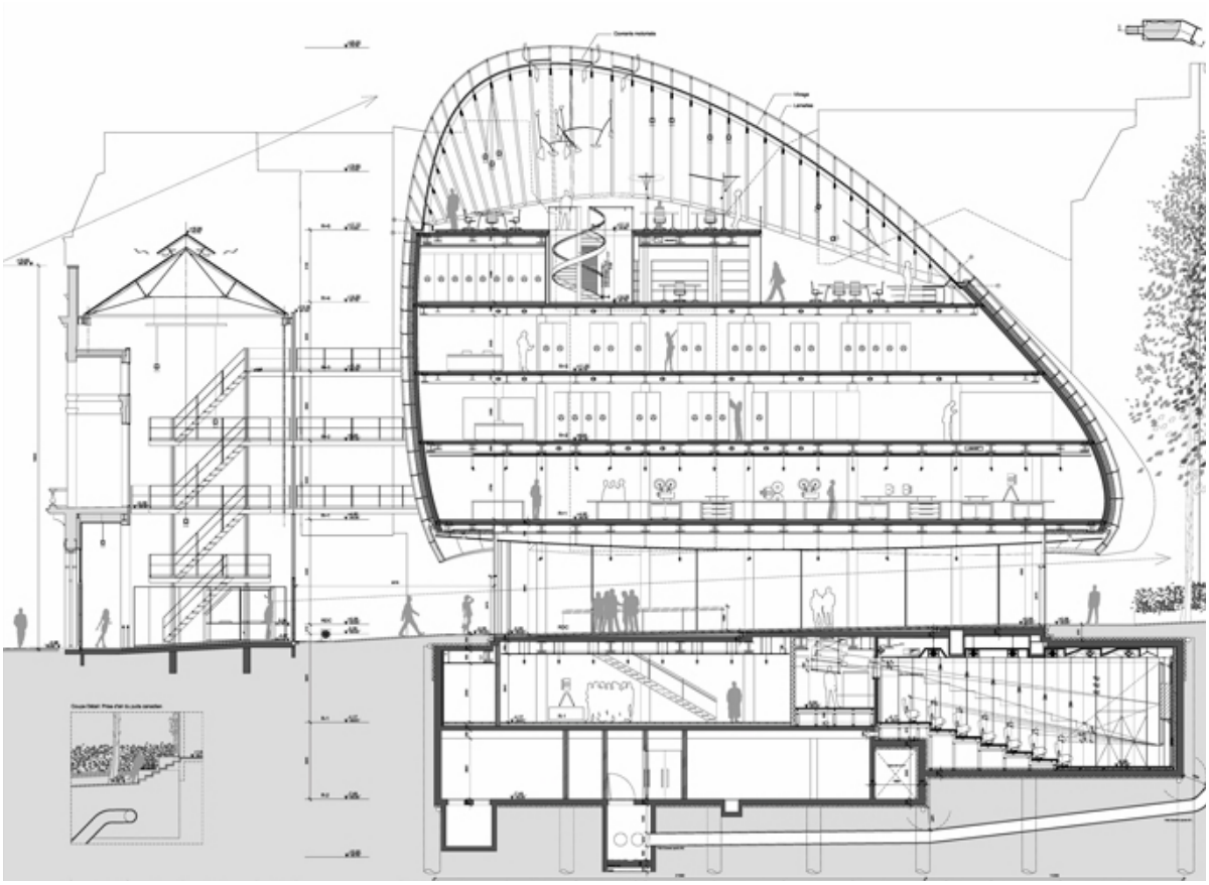


Figure 2.5 - Structural section: Pathé concrete hull on rods and plinths, contact points at base and concrete hull embracing the steel structure frame. Available at: fondazionerenzopiano.org/en/project/fondation-pathe.pdf (Accessed: March 2026).

This sketch (Figure 2.6) was shown during the tour multiple times, described as a “quick and simple sketch done on one of Piano’s first site visits. It shows how his instinct was to make the building's shape emerge from the ground up, but never to penetrate the lining fabric of the outer façade shell. From the colours used in this simple sketch, we can see the essence of how Piano processed the site's effect. He was sure that what was being implemented was new, bright, and glowing (although ultimately the colour would change to grey). The shape of the polylines drawn for the intervention are different from the line and shape rhythm of the neighbouring buildings. It seems there is no intention to speak the surrounding architectural language of its surroundings.

Figure 2.6 - Piano's first site visit sketch. Source: onsite presentation material, Jérôme Seydoux-Pathé Foundation. Author’s photograph, December 2025.

What this means for the Pathé building is that it comes across as a heavy structure as viewed from afar, but acts very transparently - in the phenomenal sense Rowe and Slutzky describe (1963, p. 45). The aluminium ledges allow users to receive sunlight and see out, while remaining hidden from outside view. The ground floor plan is practically fully open, so it does not feel heavy even when moving through it.

Jonathan Hill’s stance on the “illegal architect” is useful here. His idea is that users inevitably reinterpret the spaces they inhabit, and good architecture accommodates this rather than resisting it (Hill, 2003). The clarity of the boundary line and the shell's structural independence from the block form a spatial contract that does not surprise its inhabitants. The parasite will not surprise them. It has openly and honestly declared its limits. Predictability like this is a form of transparency in the deepest sense.

For this building to be successful as a good parasite, it must satisfy both hosts simultaneously, which it does. The first ‘spiritual’ host intention is satisfied through the continuity of its program and use (screenings, archives, research) - the Pathé building has these explicitly allocated (with heritage symbolized by the entrance). The ‘tangible’ host intention is addressed by not using the existing fabric as support, respecting boundaries and sensory experiences (such as view lines from neighbours or non-aggressive material choices), and being transparent.

Mapped against the framework, the building scores highly in autonomy (the concrete hull sits on its own rods and plinths, so there is no structural dependency on the host walls); highly on reversibility (the contact points are aesthetic rather than load-bearing; removal would not compromise the courtyard fabric); and highly on phenomenal transparency (the spatial logic of the intervention is readable from within the block, even though it is invisible from the street). These are not incidental outcomes. They are the product of a design process that asked all three questions before committing to a relationship with the host. The contrast with Stansted is total: where Stansted’s transparency was explicit and then lost, the Pathé building’s transparency was designed to be found and continued by the program of cinema culture in Paris, as a sort of reward to those who enter the building.

2.3 A Case In Between: The British Museum Great Court (Foster + Partners, 2000)

The analysis of the Great Court is based on published project documentation, the building’s Grade I listing record (listed on 24 October 1951), and the primary interview with Giles Robinson, who served as project director. Robinson’s testimony is the principal source for the structural and engineering decisions described below.

The Pathé Foundation and the Great Court share a structural logic: both are interventions that sit inside an existing host without relying on it for support, and both score highly across all three pillars. However, they arrive at these outcomes from very different starting conditions. Pathé was the first parasite on a relatively clean site. The Great Court was not.

The British Museum’s Great Court transformation, designed by Foster + Partners in 2000, demonstrates the opposite condition – the extent to which a parasite intervention can benefit the host. It features an immense steel-and-glass canopy spanning the courtyard and works with constraints similar to the Pathé building, where obligations such as the preservation of the historic fabric shaped the design direction.

What distinguishes the Great Court from the Pathé example, however, is that it is not a ‘firstborn’ parasite. Before the relocation of the library to St. Pancras, the collection occupied the space surrounding the Reading Room, built by Sydney Smirke (1852-57). Over time, incremental expansions produced what Foster describes as “a labyrinth of corridors that could only be entered by scholars with explicit written permission.” resulting in a space that was “congested and difficult to navigate” (Foster + Partners). This means that before Foster arrived, the building was very similar to the Stansted parasitic commercial situation. Undesigned parasitism emerged and degraded the original spatial intention. In Stansted, it disrupted the open, free flow of people; here, expanding bookshelves degraded the courtyard experience (Figure 2.7). In both cases, non-designed accumulation had reduced spatial legibility to the point where the host’s original purpose and logic were no longer readable.

Figure 2.7 - The 'Iron Library' (the iron bookstacks surrounding the Reading Room) in the 1950s. Photograph: Donald Macbeth (c.1924) / British Museum archive. Source: British Museum. 'The Round Reading Room'. Available at: britishmuseum.org/blog/round-reading-room-british-museum (Accessed: March 2026).

Figure 2.8 - The Great Court, 2000. Glass roof restoring the courtyard as a public space. Photograph: Nigel Young / Foster + Partners. Source: Arquitectura Viva, Available at: arquitecturaviva.com/works/renovacion-del-british-museum-2 (Accessed: February 2026).

The project, therefore, had a dual task: to reverse the accumulated degradation while inserting a new intervention of its own. This is a more complex brief than either Stansted or the Pathé Foundation faced.

Robinson remarked that the team had to be “very careful about how we applied loads.” He described the structural system that was used, in which “the roof is on a sliding bridge bearing, so it does not put horizontal thrust into the walls. And it’s quite possible … You could remove the whole of the roof without impacting any of the existing façades of the building.” A similar logic of structural independence is therefore present here.

What Robinson’s account makes explicit is that reversibility was not incidental, but a design requirement, given that the host fabric was delicate. The Grade I listing imposed a legal obligation to ensure that the historic fabric was not permanently altered or damaged, making reversibility a guiding principle for the entire project. The sliding bridge bearing is not merely an engineering solution; it functions as an embedded commitment, hard-coded into the building's structure, that the host will survive the parasite.

Robinson also articulates a broader temporal principle to this decision, stating that “reversibility is very important because … in the future … the building might be repurposed to deliver something else” (Robinson, 2026). On the intervention itself: “it has its presence, and it has its relationship to that courtyard” … “that is completely modern of its time and removable or reversible” (Robinson, 2026).

Mapped against the framework, the Great Court scores highly on all three pillars. It scores high on reversibility in the physical sense, as the roof can be removed without impacting any existing façade, per Robinson’s structural account; but lower on spiritual reversibility, as removing the roof would hinder the experience people have when visiting the museum (as it has ‘fused’ and become a point of interest in and of itself). It scores highly on autonomy, as the system is self-supporting and makes deliberate contact only at specific designed points. And it scores highly on transparency (the legibility of the courtyard, with the circular reading room re-emerging as even a ‘landmark’ within it, makes the logic of the intervention readable to any visitor spatially and programmatically). The host is not concealed. If anything, it is more legible and present after the intervention than before. This is what elevates the Great Court beyond a simple “good” example. It demonstrates that a parasitic intervention when carefully designed interrogating the three pillars, can do more than avoid damage; it can actively restore what the host had lost.

Chapter 3 - Imagery, Misrepresentation, and Conclusions

When assessing a building through these pillars, one should be cautious about which angle the approach is made from, and what references are being considered. Take transparency as an example. In architecture there is a risk of misrepresentation through imagery - where in most cases it is not the architect’s or design’s fault. There is a clear discrepancy between how a building is represented and how it is experienced by the public. Ironically, the only view in which the building appears alien, heavy and intrusive is the aerial or drone perspective, which is also the dominant mode of representation online. From an experiential and technical standpoint, the building can perform at a high level in both figurative and spatial transparency but cannot be understood through these images.

“My biggest criticism of the modern world is that we live by drone footage. We’re not pigeons. What’s important is when we’re on the ground” (Robinson, 2026). A pigeon’s view of the Pathé building confirms the impression of a dark and intrusive lodge inside an airy Parisian block (the impression that even I had before this research). At ground level, where the building is actively experienced, it is largely invisible from the street. The experiential reality here is almost the inverse of its aerial representation. A simple image cannot fully communicate the intent and role of a project. Reducing them to these views, can later even set unwanted precedents, as misrepresentation is confused with misdesign.

A further complexity emerges from the framework. The three pillars produce different readings depending on which host-parasite relationship is being evaluated. The Pathé building scores highly on all three pillars when assessed against the host in the form of the residential block. But if the host is the Pathé Foundation itself (the spiritual host, the organisation whose identity the building was built to embody) the reading changes. The Foundation’s entire institutional life has been reconstructed around this building. It cannot leave without the Foundation losing its physical home, its programme, and its symbolic presence in the city. Evaluated against the spiritual host, the building is not particularly reversible and its autonomy is limited: its meaning depends entirely on the Pathé name and legacy to be understood. This does not undermine the framework though. A complete application of the three pillars should always begin by identifying which host is under consideration. The Pathé building is a separable and autonomous parasite for its tangible host and an inseparable one for its spiritual host. Both readings are true, and both are useful. The framework is sophisticated enough to hold them simultaneously.

As a summary, Figure 3 visualizes this dual-host condition across all three case studies. Each building is plotted twice - once against its tangible host (solid marker), once against its spiritual host (hollow marker) in a three-dimensional space where the axes correspond to, reversibility (X), transparency (Y) and autonomy (Z). Stansted's parasitic accumulation scores badly against the pillars. Pathé's points sit high in some cases: excellent against the tangible host, but inseparably tied to the foundation’s purpose, that if removed would destroy the programme. The Great Court's points sit high for both hosts, indicating a stable parasite that influenced them positively (with the nuance of being slightly less reversible in the spiritual sense - as its removal would impact the user’s experience).

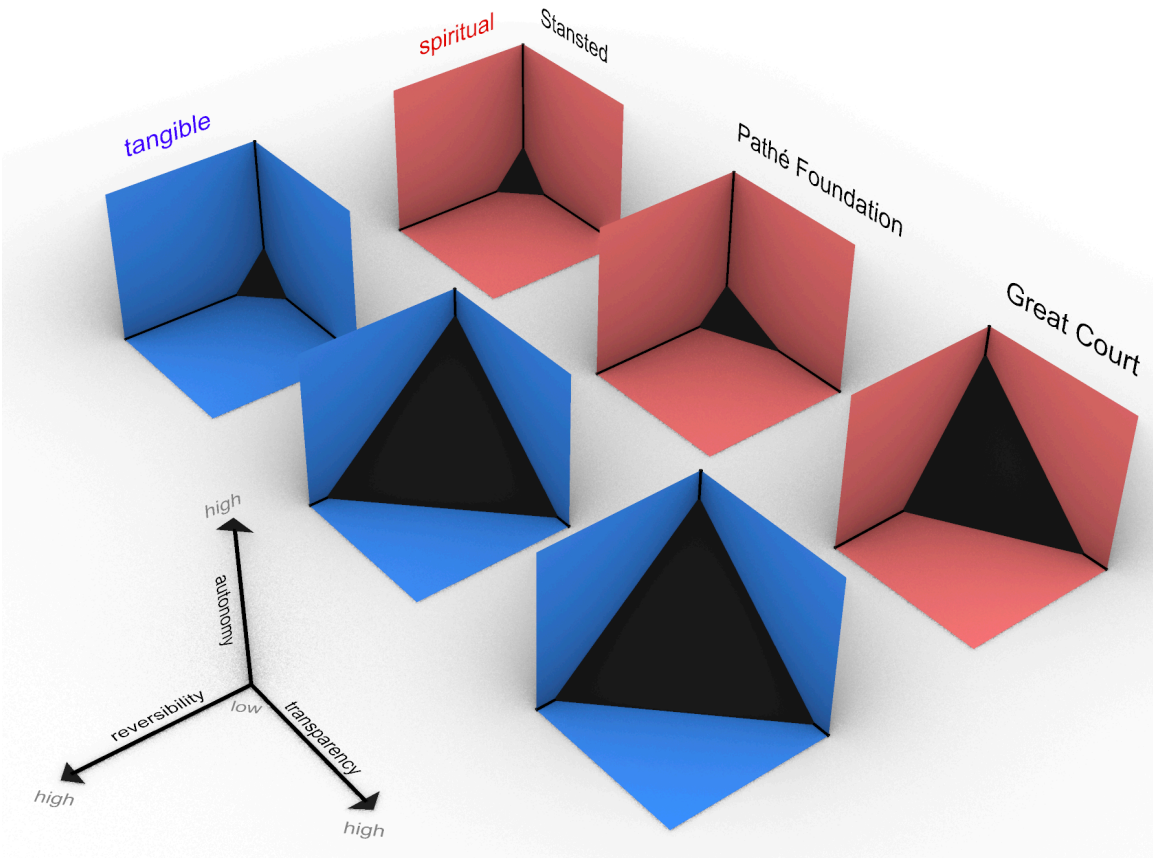


Figure 3 - Three-pillar framework: all three case studies scored the parasitic component against their tangible host (blue) and spiritual host (red). Axes: reversibility (X), transparency (Y), autonomy (Z). In the Stansted case, tangible and spiritual hosts are treated as coincident, as the design vision is inseparable from the building's operational logic. Author's diagram, 2026.

All in all, this framework is so far used retrospectively in this dissertation but is intended to be made forward looking in further development. In Stansted's case, it lost its spatial logic to an accumulation it was not designed to resist. The Pathé Foundation establishes clear boundaries and chooses its contact points. It arrived in its courtyard as a guest that the host could identify, understand and not feel threatened by. The Great Court reversed a previous parasitic degradation while adding something entirely new, in a way that could physically be removed without damaging the host fabric.

What the comparison reveals is not a hierarchy of practices, but a foresight spectrum. Talent and ambition are present in all three host building designs. What differs is whether the designers anticipated the conditions under which the parasitic relationship would develop over time. Foster + Partners produced Stansted and the Great Court within a decade.; the same studio, the same capabilities, the same design culture. The variable is not who designed it. It is whether the question "what happens to this building once we are no longer in control of it?" was ever asked.

The three pillars are not a guarantee, but a first lens to examine the topic. They have started to provide a vocabulary precise enough to anticipate how an intervention might perform, and critical enough to explain, in hindsight, when it fails. More pillars may be added in the future.

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