

THE BUILDING, THE CITY AND THE PUBLIC DIMENSION

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Abstract

The critical review of modern architecture's city arisen at sixties and seventies resulted in a recovery of some characteristic subjects of traditional models and established a new historical dimension. Within this context, the role of the public building has become one of the key in the city's conception and operation. The reflections on its role to articulate urban structure, its ability to characterize the public space, or its symbolic function due to the change of the classical language by the modern abstraction, therefore, have defined a theoretical corpus which has served to the practice in the definition of urban areas with higher civic and collective content. After a enough historical distance, from a critical review of this debate as well as a study and comparison of paradigmatic cases, the article's aim is to deduce some guidelines and tools to act in the contemporary city.

Keywords: Public Building, Urban Space, Form, Structure, Symbol.

I

The outbreak of the 'superblock' as a phenomenon in the characterization of the contemporary city, makes us wonder about its ability to assume the role that historically has been linked to representative building. The questions that arise, are linked to its symbolic significance and its ability in the consolidation and planning of urban structure. If the first refers to his own condition as object and the second to its relationship with the city, both issues expect to overcome lack of representative content that the 'superblock' usually has had and its difficulties in the determination of areas with some civic or cultural emphasis, vital to create identity places to articulate public life.

Several aspects make that the 'superblock' has been linked to a general conception of modernity. The ideal vision of a city definitely linked with nature announced by the avant-garde, as synonymous of individual freedom, established the idea of building as an isolated object hinted by Lewis Mumford in 'The Culture of Cities' (1938) or Theo Van Doesburg in his well-known sentence: 'the new architecture will develop in an all sided plastic way' (Rowe & Koetter, 1978). If at first the vision was not but a utopia, the subsequent bylaws of lighting, zoning, density, etc. strengthened the dissolution of the historic fabric in a set of objects, more or less articulated. The development of laissez faire, at the same time, helped to turn the 'superblock' into an ideal model of the modern economy, supported by the increasing of capital reserves that have allowed to the public, private or mixed initiative, the domain of large plots of land, planning and executing large buildings under a single financial control (Colquhoun, 1981).

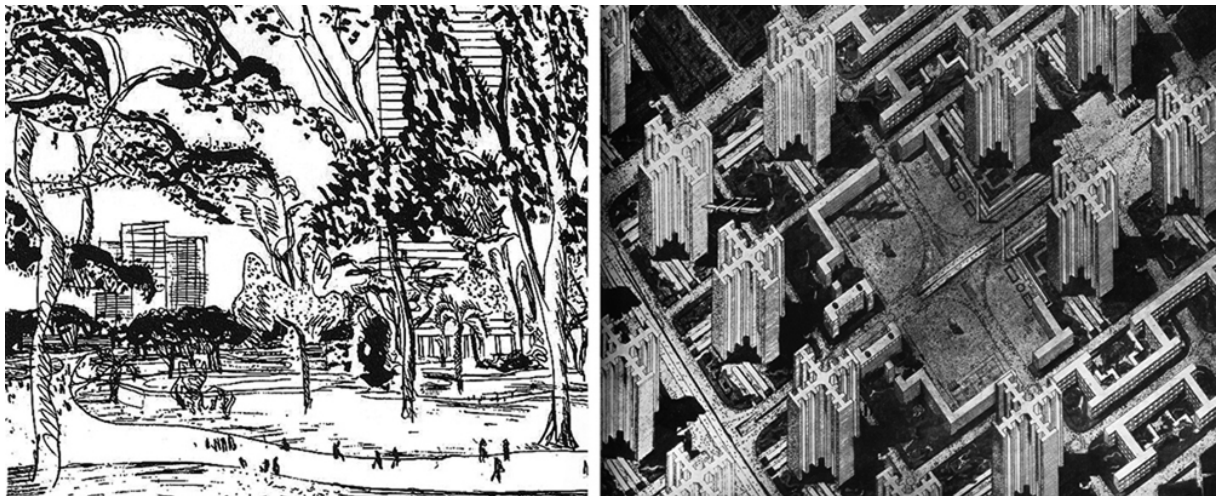


Figure 1. Ville Radieuse, 1930. Plan Voisin, Paris, 1925. Le Corbusier.

The conception of the modern object as a generator element of the urban structure, however, found its coherence in the dissolution of the historic city, inasmuch as the coexistence of both models would eliminate the utopian aspiration of the modern city, and even worse, a reading of the 'new city' from a traditional vision with the consequent hazard to feeling against one model that could be more problematic than the first one. It is in the 'tabula rasa', therefore, where the *Plan Voisin* of Le Corbusier (1925) (Figure 1), as a particular case of the *Contemporary City* (1922), finds its raison d'être; in the replacement of the traditional Parisian frame by the new modern utopia. This approach, however, runs into the man inner condition which builds his reference field from the known experience. It is in the buildings and structures of the past where he finds the idea of pleasant and meaningful environment.

This historical slowness is due to the durability of the architecture itself, which derives from the amount of capital (in the broadest sense of the word) that represents, as well as what is called the 'indifference of function'; concept to referring to the building adaptability, which depends less on the uses that it has to satisfy than the ideas that it must represent, that is, the symbolic function. The public domain has been traditionally based on a series of codes where the ability to synthesize the activities was as important as accommodate them. Thus, the aesthetics of public architecture has been based on a recognizable language that people could identify. The attempt to break with 'the classical language' by the functionalism orthodoxy, as Hannes Meyer's comment about his League of Nations project shows: 'symbolizes nothing... as an organic building it expresses unfeignedly that is intended to be building for work and co-operation', supposes an effort to purge any symbolic content from the building. Meyer's remark, however, shows an internal contradiction, due to the impossibility to establishing a social convention without an established code; the attempt to achieve objectivity is limited not by the degree of optimization in the accommodation of specific functions, but by the communicative function of a message which is read within an established code. Saussure noted that the change of language is not possible with the effort of the discourse itself, inasmuch as any discourse, inevitably, is based on a language (Maxwell, 1972).

II

Looking back on urban tradition, the 'symbolic function' of institutions has been decisive to understand the city itself and the public dimension. In the Middle Ages the city controlled by merchants and artisans, the market square and the buildings of the guilds, along with the church and the city gates, were the main representative elements and therefore collective investment (Figure 2). With the arrival of the Renaissance, some decisive changes occurred in the city evolution: first, the transformation of historical consciousness displaced the commercial condition for a political one; the Platonic nature was reconsidered, resulting in models based on a geometric construction; and finally, there was a change in the totality consciousness, which made it possible to conceive the city as a product of one mind, as a total entity (Figure 3). If in medieval city, the square had been understood as the representative element of the commerce, it became the geometric center of the Renaissance city, the symbol of the *logos* and ideally the center of political power. Public buildings as symbols of collective life (social, political, intellectual), articulate the whole city as a continuum of individual houses scored by streets and drilled by squares (Argan, 1984).

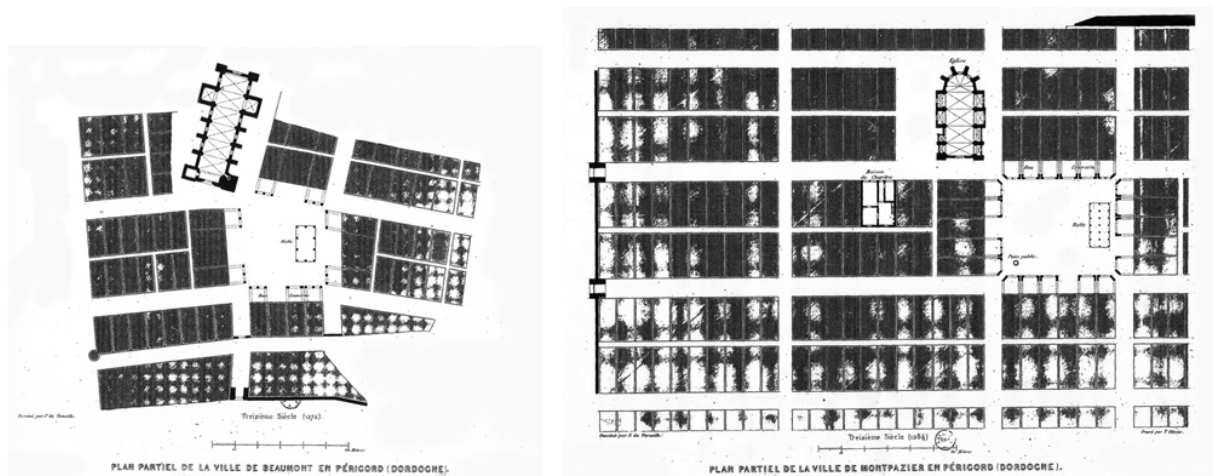


Figure 2. Medieval City (public central area). Ville de Beaumont (1272). Ville de Montpazier (1284).

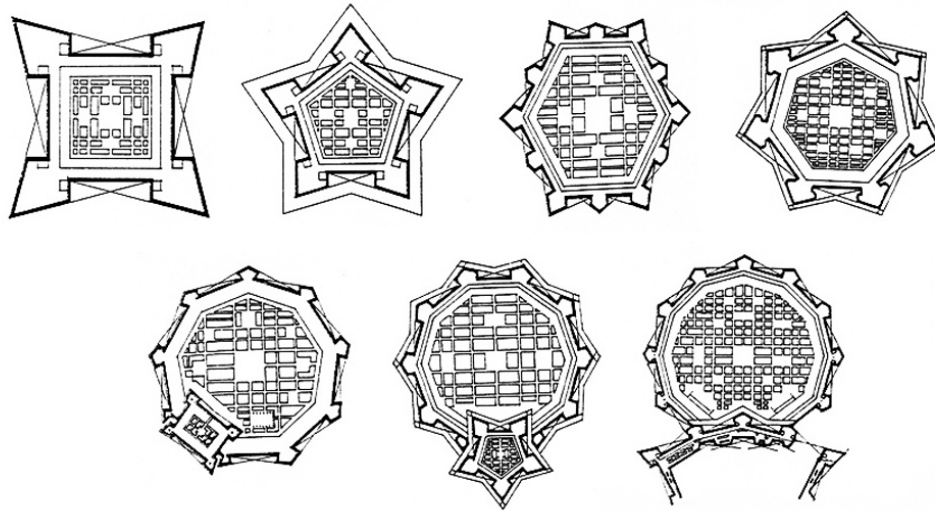


Figure 3. Variations of polygonal fortified cities by Pietro Cataneo, 1554.

'We have only to compare a medieval town to a nineteenth-century residential quarter to see that at the level of individual, the earlier centralist system allowed greater randomness to occur than did the later liberal system. In the liberal system the freedom of the whole was achieved at the expense of an increasing rigidity in the parts.'(Colquhoun, 1981, p.89).

The difference between this pre-industrial model of representative buildings which articulate the city as a symbolic units, and the post-industrial one, is that if in the historical city these elements constituted and symbolized the collective life, in the modern city, are conceived as 'object inventory' of material wealth. This crucial difference can only understood from the economic and epistemological changes occurred from the eighteenth century and involving a transformation of the public sphere that reflected in the following models. One of the characteristic aspect was the dissolution of the hierarchy by a decentralized conception, where each entity is conceived from its own autonomy. This fact is linked to the appearance of new types of buildings that symbolize a new public conception as schools, hospitals, prisons, department stores, galleries and other places of consumption. It happened, therefore, a displacement of the public building content; from the monument as representation of the popular will at the historical city, to the building as a tool for the good life.

The nineteenth century development emphasised this approach, while increasing urban fragmentary condition by the rise of the building (unit) size and typological complexity (Figure 4). The representation of public nature, although mutations of the characteristic forms of the types, was still evident due to the conservation of intelligible language and the expression of each unit as an organ of the city; even though secularized and democratized versions of the old theocratic and Aristotelian institutions.

Despite the continuity of this evolution over the first half of the twentieth century, there arose some changes that if initially could be considered as operational, they will eventually become at conceptual. Owing to the increased in the autonomy and size of the units, the viability of operations, partly by inflation and the appearance of large entity able to invest on a large scale, was dependent on the introduction of private and anonymous program. The modern 'superblock', therefore, will be composed of identical units (dwellings and offices) in most cases, becoming blurred an urban concept

articulated by representative elements of public and collective order. Another crucial aspect resulted from the reformulation of architectural language by the modern abstraction because, at the same time to made possible to resolve increasingly complex programs, questioned the validity of a recognizable architectural language. Its dissolution made disappear the certainties from where historically, the representative building had built its base of significance (Summerson, 1957).

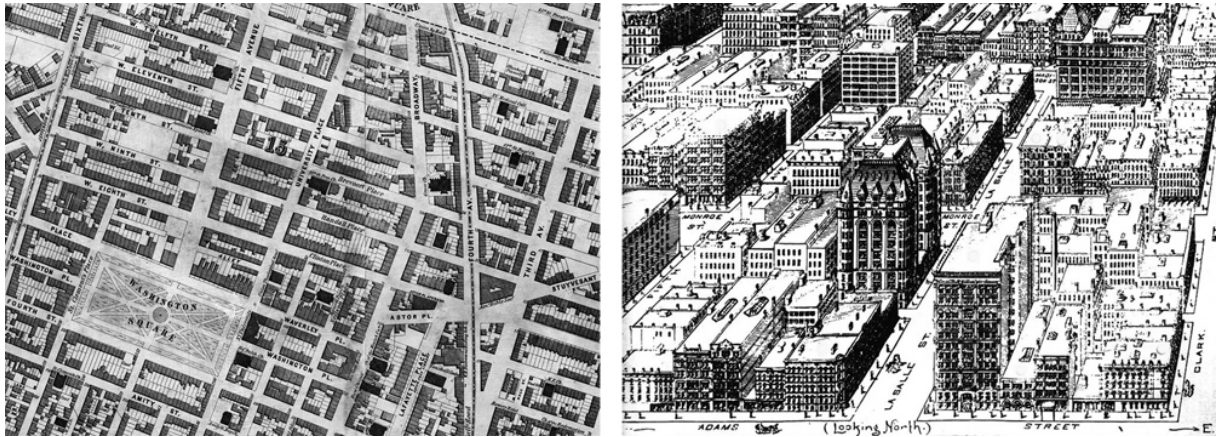


Figure 4. Greenwich Village, New York, 1852. Chicago Bird's Eye View, 1898.

If we consider the 'superblock' as an element that represents the aspirations of the new consciousness, we should ask for its ability to represent the new public condition. Although only few initial examples dealt with this issue, cases such as the Rockefeller Center (New York, 1930-1939) can be considered as paradigms (Figure 5). Developed within the context of the skyscrapers boom in cities like New York or Chicago, despite being mainly composed of offices, it also contains a public programme to result in a mixed use complex, as a kind of an urban microcosm, assuming Alberti's idea of 'the building as city' (Koolhaas, 1994). This example, in turn, can be considered a pioneer in the aspiration of companies to play a representative role in the contemporary city.

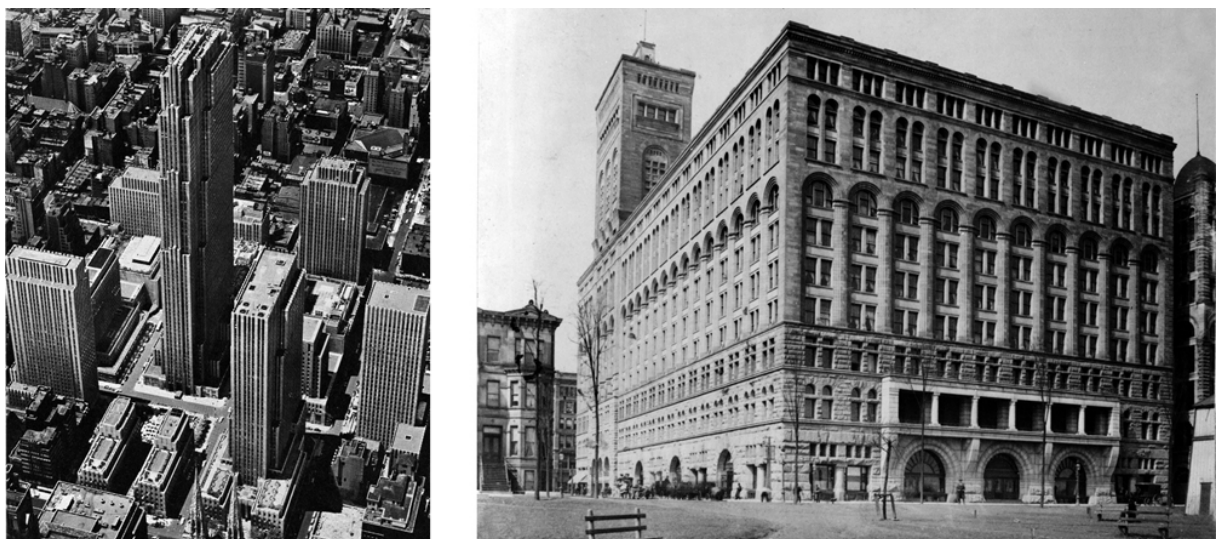


Figure 5. Rockefeller Center, New York, 1930-39. Auditorium Building, Chicago, 1887-1889.

III

Criticism to the city of modern architecture have been increasing from the second half of the twentieth century, pointing out the limitations of the model in establishing urban areas with a civic or cultural content. Aspects such as the discontinuity of the urban fabric, the decreasing of organizational sense, or representation of public institutions, key points in the organization of the historical city, are displayed as features that contemporary city has to resolve. If we look, for example, the case of the British New Towns, as advanced models of postwar planning, it is evidenced this series of issues that were strongly debated in the latest CIAMs. In the Hoddesdon CIAM held in 1951, organized by the British MARS group, already was produced a significant change in the urban design conception from its leitmotiv the return to the 'heart of the city'.

In Harlow, a New Town designed by Frederick Gibberd in 1947, is laid out an evolution of the garden city from a higher hierarchy design. Paradoxically, it was recovered the medieval market as focal point of public life, demonstrating the limitations of the modern city to find elements of civic or cultural emphasis and to establish a sense of identity. This 'public element', however, starts from a different nature, inasmuch as in the medieval town the square is understood as a void into a mass that surrounds it, Harlow's square has not this essential support, is shown without pressure from buildings and persons and therefore, a lack of credibility to its existence (Rowe & Koetter, 1978). If Harlow searches in past models, Cumbernauld New Town (1955) tries to anticipate the future, from a 'Megastructure' mall as an urban activity center (Figure 6) (Banham, 1976). The lack of success of this example, shows again, the problem of the isolated object to constitute places of public emphasis, in addition to the consolidation of a new language which represents this condition.

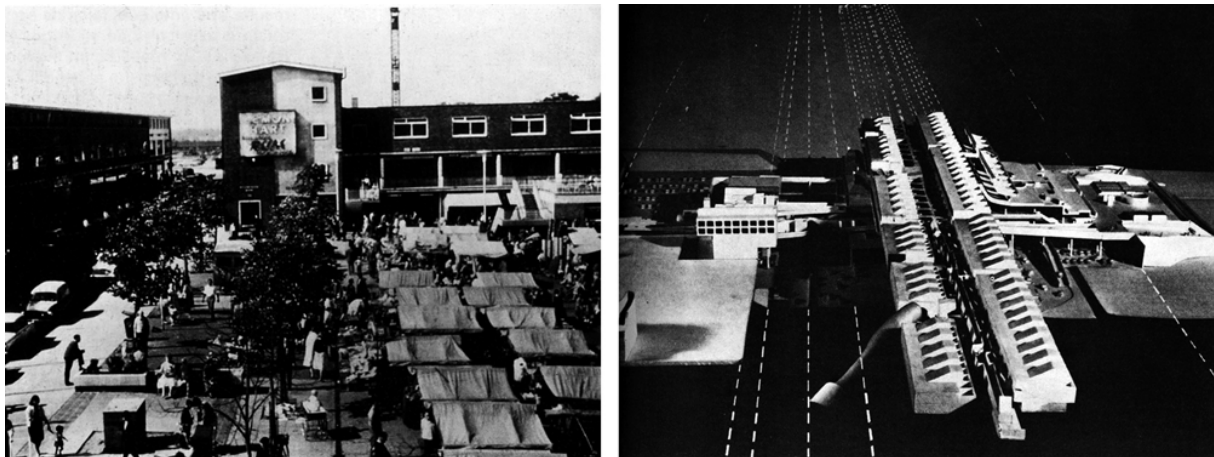


Figure 6. Market Square, Harlow, 1947. Cumbernauld Town Centre, first model, 1955.

Since the sixties, criticism to the city of modern architecture have resulted in strategies related to two opposite poles, a look into the future to break definitely with known models, and a reconciliation with the different traditions. The first is based on the evolution of media and transport to make the city an absolute phenomenon, besides a belief that the inclusion of techniques borrowed from other fields can overcome any problem like feedback mechanisms found in biology or systems engineering. Christopher Alexander's proposal manifested in 'The city is Not a Tree' can be considered one of the most compelling proposals, however, it still does not solve the problems of the modern city as the urban experience at a phenomenological level, proposing a abstract framework and defend principles valid for any physical model of city. In regard to the capacity for the change, it appears

rather tolerated than a result of social unrest without making any distinction between reversible or irreversible. Thus, the best chance of change is canceled due to lack of real motivations (Colquhoun, 1981).

If one of more controversial point of modern architecture city was the discontinuity of the urban fabric, the described model neither provides a solution into the perceptual field, inasmuch as compared to the limited structured spaces that facilitate the identification, the dissolution of any perceptible limit would question any comprehension. In a hypothetical analysis based on Gestalt theory findings, this model (just as with the modern architecture) offers a opposite reading than the historic city. Thus, in an abstraction of both models in a figure-ground diagram, opposite to accumulation of voids in a no manipulated solid, we would have an accumulation of solids on a continuous vacuum. The Gestalt theories are precisely the starting point of Kevin Lynch in 'The Image of the City', trying to establish a set of objective laws on the perception of urban form. The abstraction degree of the used method does not provide a distinction between different urban planning, suggesting an urban conception capable to assume the different developments. This, however, makes that the proposed theory pay no attention to the different basic city structures, and while the conclusions may be valid for specific aspects does not provide a minimum legibility and a general coherence.

The tendency known as 'rationalist' also reconciles the different urban models, establishing a 'real' approach and accepting the sum of parts of the modern city, while each part is submitted to an aesthetic judgment. Initially this trend is concerned with the study of individual types, reconstituting its shape critically in relation to the influential studies of Michel Foucault and his French followers, as well as reformulating the meaning and expression of contemporary society in order to retain the sense of historical evolution. The exhibition 'Architettura Razionale' at Milan Triennale in 1973 and curated by Aldo Rossi, was one of the peaks of this tendency. While the Italian side led by Rossi and Grassi focused on the typological review, since a semi-abstract conception (accepting the modern language), Leon Krier and Maurice Culot with the Belgian school 'La Cambre', paid special attention to the urban structure. One of the most relevant aspects, as happened in the tradition, was the consideration of an architectural language that may reconstruct the inherent meaning of forms from a conviction of a cultural continuity.

IV

These last two trends that start from a conception of the 'city as form', paying greater attention to the perceptual aspects or to the typological and the urban structure, they have established a new framework able to articulate the different models, besides understand the historical city as support for the contemporary. If, as we have noted, we assume the 'superblock' as possible modern alternative to the traditional representative building, we should ask for its role into historic city integration. We may find two types of approaches: on the one hand, its conception as a new type linked to contemporary architecture and its integration within the urban structure, assigning a meaning or a symbolic function; and on the other hand, convert the 'superblock' into urban fabric adapting its shape to the city pattern, and thus, abandoning their autonomous condition. Two seventies project represent these two approaches, the 'Plateau Beaubourg' by Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano (1971-77), and the design for the Derby Civic Center (1970) by James Stirling and Leon Krier respectively.



Figure 7. 'Plateau Beaubourg', Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers, Paris, 1971-1977.

If we based on the Gestalt diagram that Colin Rowe proposes in his 'Collage City' to illustrate the fluctuations of the figure-ground phenomenon, also used by Stirling and Krier to present Derby's project, both designs are shown as opposites. While the Beaubourg is displayed as isolated object, Derby is shown as filler; and if in the first case the figure of the diagram corresponds to the building, in the second it does with the space (Figure 7). The Beaubourg, purely abstract, appears as destiny, the construction of a symbol by way of great monument of tradition. While Derby, as a historical fact, is presented as an attempt of social continuity to restoring urban continuity (Figure 8). The simulation of the future by the Beaubourg contrasts with past by Derby; the 'theater of prophecy' against that of 'the memory'. Both, therefore, arise as realities of equal worth which should be strengthened, either from the possibilities of a general statement or by recognition of the specificity (Rowe & Koetter, 1978).



Figure 8. Derby Civic Center, James Stirling and Leon Krier, 1970.

If we make an analogy between solid/void and private/public, despite having a relative validity by the simplification of a complex reality, we could point out that if in Derby the public stability is chosen opposite to private unpredictability, in the Beaubourg, the control of the collective space is reduced by the domain of the public building. It arises, however, an ambiguity in both cases which could

invert this interpretation. On the one hand, in the case of Beaubourg, its main function is the cultural activity, and as has been said, one of the building purposes is its conversion into public space, 'a meeting place for Paris' (Figure 9). Both the design of the adjacent public space, understood as 'lobby' of the building, as the ground floor opening provides a real and conceptual continuity. In Derby, on the other hand, the interior space is articulated by a public gallery as an Victorian commercial space, making that the building is looked at inward rather than outward. This approach leads us to a reading contrary to the first, and what seemed to be figure now it has become in fill and the contrary, the filling into figure. This double reading shows the complexity of both cases and at the same time it confirms the validity of the two approaches.

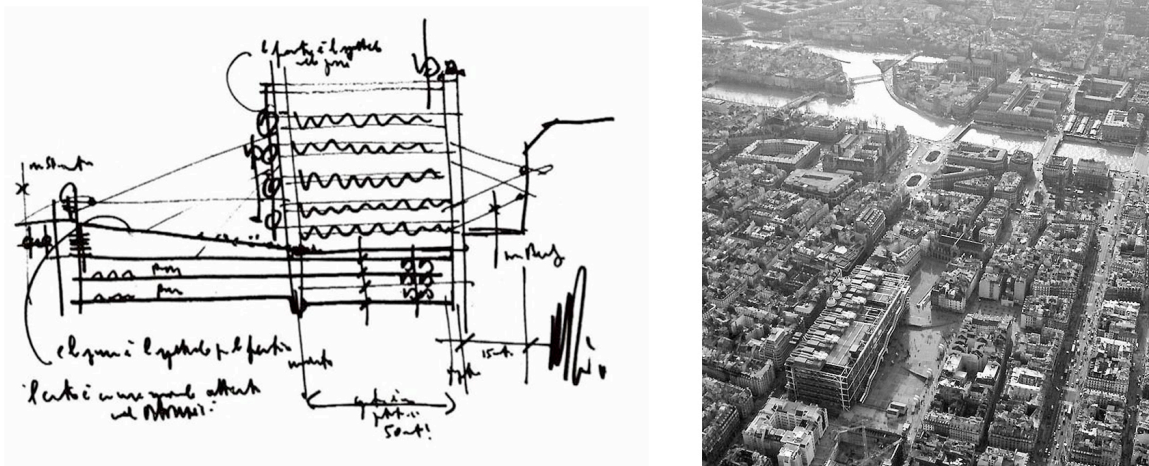


Figure 9. 'Plateau Beaubourg', Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers, Paris, 1971-1977.

Coming back to the representative function as manifestation of the public condition, we see that each one outlines different approaches. Thus, in the Beaubourg the representation of social values is moved to its symbolic image while in Derby the insertion of collective character spaces associated to the historical imaginary, like Italian piazza or Victorian gallery, moves the public representation to the space. This is reflected in the formal conception itself that in the Beaubourg its *raison d'être* is found in the stability of its indestructible abstract volume, while in Derby it derived from a equivalent stability of designed public space, emphasised, in the projection of the interior gallery.

As 'meeting point of the culture', the Beaubourg starts from a review of the twenties functionalism, to become an expression of the advances of technology and a symbol of a renewed 'social and cultural order'. If initially functionalism proposed ending with typologies in favor of a logic induction of particular facts, it was due to his attempt to not consider the iconic significance as a specific fact itself, neither particular physical configurations as communication tools. We have already discussed, however, the limitations of this approach from the point of view that any discourse is defined in a pre-established code. Aware of this, the Beaubourg proposes an approach to the programme from its symbolic condition rather than from the 'real'.

If the 'real' functionality is subject to the succession of flexible floors, the symbolic content connects further with the aesthetic realm, in this case, associated with the construction and the structural system. The flexibility of floors allows a constant adaptation of the building to the changing needs, but at the same time, it means abandoning the traditional role that the architect has had in the order and internal consistency in the building definition. In relation with the image, it seems logical the

comparison that has been established with the constructivist architecture, but in this case, no longer appears the association between the structural expression and mechanical elements with the ideology of society. The mechanistic image of the Beaubourg, is not shown already as a synthesis of a ideological content, it finds its *raison d'être* in the technical and technological development itself, definitely away from the representative conception. This can be understood by a formal definition which derives from the flexibility of the institution itself, far to symbolize or institutionalize the social life.

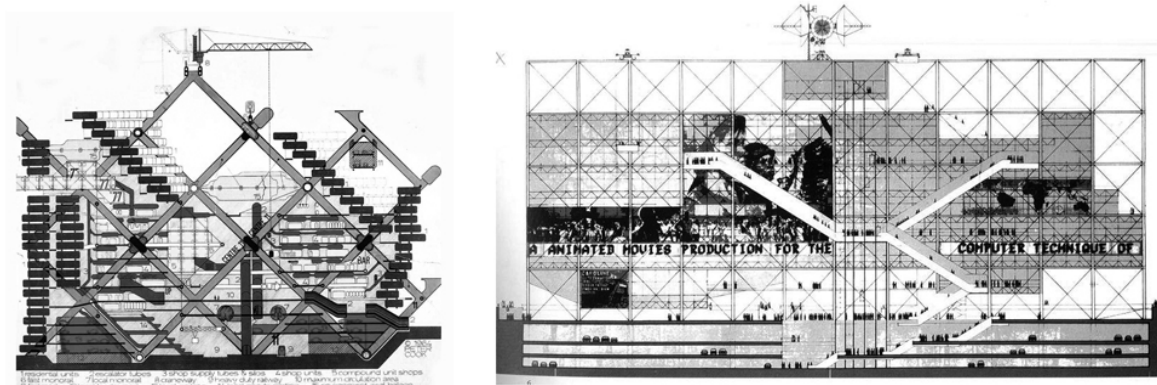


Figure 10. Plug-in-City, Archigram, 1964. 'Plateau Beaubourg', Sketch for the competition, 1971.

The building, in this way, is shown as a store for the culture, moving away from determining a specific spatial or plastic form of the different parts that make up the building programme. The generic form that is proposed as an typological 'umbrella', is associated with the idea of global market in order to contain all the unclassifiable baggage 'called culture', symbolizing the process that it had suffered from the emergence of movements like the 'Pop' and becoming in a consumer product. It is no wonder, thus, that Piano and Rogers started from Archigram and Cedric Price's architecture to define a image linked to this concept (Figure 10). This approach, as an entity capable of holding any contemporary cultural manifestation, it seems to distance from the eighteenth century's culture conception, where different types (theater, concert hall, museum, library, etc.), were multiplied as organs of democratic life. This versatile shed as an emblem of liberal society seems to find its origin in the universal exhibition pavilions emerged from the nineteenth, where the products were exposed and where 'culture' was equated with 'information'; it is no coincidence that Beaubourg initially was defined as 'culture and information center for all' (Colquhoun, 1981).

If the Beaubourg is shown as prophecy's theater (or shed), the Derby Civic Center project (1970), as we have noted, started from a look back. The building is linked to the spirit of the 'architettura razionale' in relation to a review of the historical urban structure, and a conviction that the 'public content' should not be 'disassociated with the past'. Stirling remarked that cultural association should be the starting point, the base from establishing an organization of 'functional-symbolic' elements; It is precisely in this synthesis, where Stirling finds the 'true art of the architecture' (Stirling, 1975).

In Derby, the formal conception of previous projects is moved to urban milieu, an approach that had already supposed an expansion of modern functionalism. Thus, as had happened in the Florey Building at Oxford with the insertion of 'functional-symbolic' elements based on the classic type of 'Oxbridge College', as the gateway, the tower, the cloister, the patio or the central element that

replaces the typical fountain or statue of the institution founder, in Derby was recovered the piazza or Victorian arcade. If in the Florey 'the collection of forms and shapes which the everyday public can associate with, be familiar with' are identified with the iconography of the object itself, the symbolic elements of Derby correspond to collective urban space with the intention to build an 'public identity'.

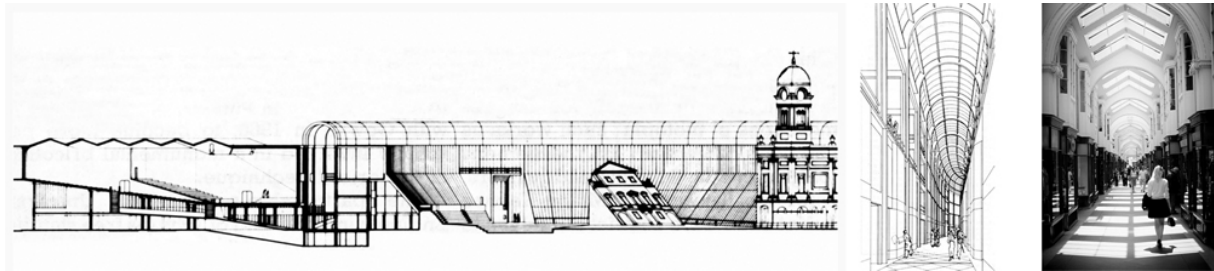


Figure 11. Derby Civic Center, 1970. Burlington Arcade, London.

The design, therefore, emphasizes the narrative enrichment, understood as a organization of these 'functional-symbolic' elements. For Stirling the represented elements should be identified with their function, at the same time than enriching their associations; a historical dimension that had been rejected and recognized again. The allusion increasingly becomes in a quote, as a set of signs that refer to specific historical and social realities; only that these quotes have a new role and a new meaning without the complete disappearance of the initials, which are mitigated and maintaining somehow their presence. This referential procedure attempts to extend the meaning of the abstract shapes, insert them into a tradition and establishing a field of complicity with the observer. As Tafuri noted, Stirling acts as a 'bricoleur' in the Levi-Strauss' manner, from a 'savage operation' about the fragment; as individual that uses an existing material, endowed with previous sense and transforming it thanks to new place and the new role that is assigned (Tafuri, 1974).

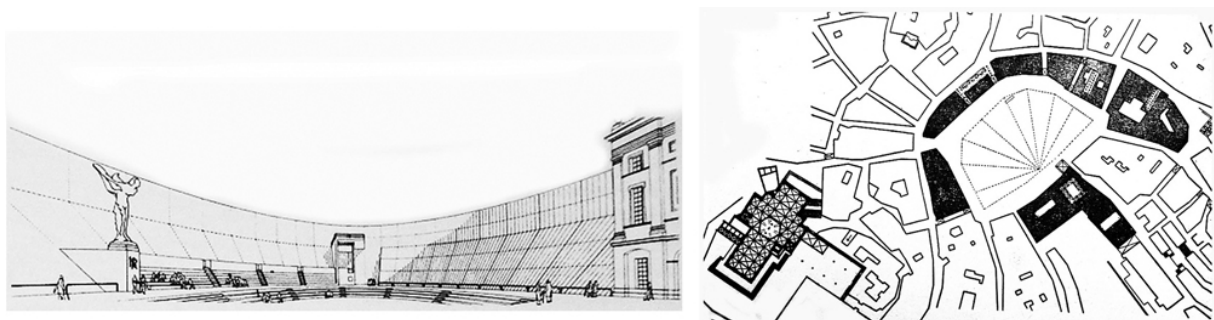


Figure 12. Derby Civic Center, 1970. Piazza del Campo, Siena.

The 'sense of place', in turn, is based on an ambiguous and ironic play with the history, and as we have noted, it constitutes a game that involves actively the observer. The Victorian gallery recalls the 'Burlington Arcade' of London (Figure 11), at the same time than the commercial circular gallery not carried out of Paxton's Crystal Palace project, that as Ebenezer Howard noted, was conceived to surround the central space of the ideal Garden City. This explains the analogy of the Derby Civic Center as a new 'symbolic center'. The play between the abstract and the figurative becomes in ambiguous and ironic with the recovery of the old assembly facade, which is turned 45 degrees to become in the proscenium of the square-theater. This public space conception as a meeting point

like a historical square and focused on a single point, makes a clear allusion to the Piazza del Campo's 'arena' of Siena (Figure 12). Along with the overturned facade, we can find a Telephone-monument that complements the public space and which can be read as another symbolic-functional piece; at the same time which possess a symbolic iconography it is showing as functionalist metaphor.

The Derby Civic Center project, therefore, outlines an urban approach that moves away from mere abstract interpretation of historical types, or a literal return to the imagery of the tradition, from an energetic game of forms interaction that open up new possibilities in representing institutional and social potential of the city. The historical allusions are not seen as mere past reality repetitions, but are handled as historical fragments, establishing a much more complex field with the past. All this through an architectural design where forms acquire their meaning in their volumetric condition, displacing somehow the two-dimensional reading of Rowe's 'Collage City', and highlighting a history which is converted in a larder of models and references.

V

The response of modern and contemporary architecture to the social, economic or political changes has resulted in an urban model which still seems to have not found a definitive answer to themes that were decisive in the planning and articulation of the historic city. The primacy of the object above the structure continuity or the replacement of the classical language for the avant-garde abstraction, initially resulted in the degradation of public space as well as the devaluation of the communicative function of architecture respectively. In this sense, the role of representative building, both in establishing areas of civic content as in the definition of a symbolic function, remains a critical issue in the debate on the current city.

The more solid contributions, of revisionist character, have considered the integration of different historical models, including the advances of modern architecture. Among them, stand out the studies on the phenomenology or the reformulation of types and structures of tradition, but in either case, they agree on the need to articulate the city through buildings capable to represent collective life. In practice, projects such as the 'Plateau Beaubourg' by Piano and Rogers or Derby Civic Centre by Stirling and Krier, can be shown as examples which establish a new historical dimension of the city; at the same time that advance possible solutions to rethink the symbolic content of the public building, or in the reconsideration of the urban structure itself.

In recent decades, despite numerous public, private or mixed initiatives which have developed buildings with a willingness to articulate public life, few examples have provided a consistent reflection about urban problems. Focused generally on the iconic content of the building, and in a economic or politic success rather than a urban or social, it has derived in a decline of the symbolic function of building with a cultural, social or political content as well as a limited interest to the continuity or consolidation of different urban structure. If city planning historically has been based on these architectural questions in its design, performance or character definition, it would be reasonable to continue thinking about it.

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Biography

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