How to recognise and read

MAT-BUILDING

Mainstream architecture as it has developed towards the mat-building

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Mat-building can be said to epitomise the anonymous collective; where the function come to enrich the fabric, and the individual gains new freedoms of action through a new and shuffled order, based on interconnection, close-knit patterns of association, and possibilities for growth, diminution, and change. The way towards mat-building started blindly enough: the first Team 10 review of the field of its thought became collectively covered in the Primer (AD 11/61). The thought gradually got further bodied-out in projects, and these in the early seventeen began to appear in built-form. At this point mat-building as an idea becomes recognisable. To be able to recognise the phenomenon at the end of this, its first, primitive phase, calls for a specially prepared frame of mind... to deliberately not look too closely at the detailed language, for this is still developing. And some practitioners, to achieve something through the bureaucratic machine of their country, have chosen to normalise their language... (you might say so that the client did not become frightened by the appearance of the mat proper). So at present the built-field is rather mixed, and realised examples on the whole tend to have something of the not-quite-recognisable-order of the Olympian Zeus temple, all different wood/stone columns; or the crazy-paving terrace that is the top surface of the platform of the Auguseum. Mainstream mat-building became visible, however, with the completion of the F.U. (Berlin Free University)².

A building that co-dates the finishing of the FU² — the Insurance Building at Appeldoom — is, in its form, an off-shoot of the mat-building phenomenon (to deal with the off-shoot first, and perhaps therefore with 'casbahism' as a formative influence from the immediate past). Appeldoom's architect, by using his own particular inheritance — the Children's House... the Schroeder roof — utilised a heavily loaded language to produce what can be described as Giant's Causeway architecture... but you have to enter with special protective visual clothing, and to want to see it as part of the new phenomenon of mat-building. Causeway architecture can most easily be seen to be this something else if walked into (in the mind) and compared with similar mental-walking-into, the Ford Foundation Building NY or the Boston City Hall, where, in both, quite different Central American historical-fabric is being drawn on, and has in the end produced oddstyle civic monuments. If still unconfident that these are certaitst, acting as such on the area around them, unto themselves alone, think of the Trenton Bath House (early '50s but first personal awareness '57), in which there is a clear indication of the mat-building urge towards collective grouping, and firm but recessive compatibility — seen again in the Baltimore Inner Harbour Project (1970)³.
The Berlin FU as realised, enables us to recognise what has gone before and, allowing for personal receptivity, recognise those things that led up to it.

The calmer, mainstream met-building, not in the consumer's terms normalized, is what attracts our personal attention and we tend to like the FU for the very reasons Aldo van Eyck does not like it to paraphrase badly ... the impenetrability of Corten steel ... on the inner face the same impenetrability of the white skin ... the changeable facade that does not change the overall effect ... the carpet that changes its colour but not the effect of the corridor street. We don't resist the fire doors (which ruin, Schindhelm claims, the corridor streets); the problematic detail can be brain-washed out of what one is trying to get from the FU ... again wearing protective visual clothing in order to see better what might be there; what might be in it for us. The FU built makes better what might be there; what might be in it for us. We can see its antecedents - as we see them, not necessarily as Woods, or Caudill, or Jose, or Schindhelm would severally see its antecedents – it should be possible to make clear how signs of mat-architecture can be read. Remember ... we are tracking back ...
Building method deliberately normative: the back-up of an office whose work was not maximal, therefore ongoing, therefore able to fund and support the morale of the work involved in the FD.

The overlay of patterns of use; the disintegration of rigidity through this meshing causing other places for the structural order, make this nugget of material architecture.
The urban study for the Old City of Kuwait began with a search for the underlying will to urban form in the instincts that underpin the true Arab Cities built in contrast to the desert environments of cities as far apart as Kairouan, Cairo, Istanbul, Aleppo, and the broadcast of houses, mosques, bazaars with a current burn consistency. This is a loose scatter of an expected sort new to our Romanized urbanism. The Arab sense of space can be felt strongly in the surviving works from the earliest period of Arab

building: the uniqueness of its typal space was felt by Charles V when he visited Cordova in 1522 and saw what had occurred when part of the Great Mosque was rebuilt as a chapel. That Arab sense of space can be put into words as being low enclosure carried stylishly above the user, in forth buildings this is unimmemorial, all of steps and starts and sheer weight of formal at the point of entry – with a high degree of connectedness to allow for change of mood and the inroads of time .... Arab cities are full of buildings started and never finished, and finished and then abandoned. For it would seem the Arab cities are more spontaneous, less worldly in the long term that cultures either to the East or West. Still existing in the simple Arab town, an interchangeability in which the neutral cube contains a cola cell that can change; from home to workshops, greenery to parade streets. In alley houses in whose midst is a baker, made into a souk by simple expedients of adding pieces of fabric over the public way ... as meets grow. These changes still happen in simple places because the cell structure, organization of access, and the gentle services by man and donkey are suitable for all that has to be done there. The attractions of interchangeability – its loose-fit – guided the character of the new proposals for Kuwait to reinforce and inject new life into the pole remnants now left of the historic urban fabric of Kuwait Old City. The idea reworked towards a new sort of interchangeable cell structure, the size of the cell unit and its organization being devised as equally suitable for several of the new functions of the Old City: for example Government Ministries, or University Faculties.
68 - 70
Kuwait urban form study A & F.S.

Urban form mat-building: extending the particular spatial contributions of Arabic cultures

64 - 65
Fort Lamy: Camilla, Jank, Woods
'63
Frankfurt competition: Candilis, Josic, Woods.
The understanding must come through the perception of the parts, as the whole system can never be seen. We must dispense with the use of symbols and notations, for the century has cast aside these emblems of authority. Indeed, if authority can be said to exist, it can only be through consent and has no need of formalism or allegiance to impose itself.

We perpetuate an environment where some things are central and others are not, without however, any competence for determining which things belong to which category. The future is thus impossible.

The discipline of a comprehensive system defines functions by articulating without the third exists, until the system is obtained when we pursue only the articulation of function without first establishing a total order. Indeed, it is only within such a frame that function can be articulated. The parts of a system take their identity from the system. If there is no order, there is no identity but only the chaos of disparate elements in pointless competition.

The systems will have more than the usual three dimensions. They will include a time dimension.

The systems will be sufficiently flexible to permit growth and change within themselves throughout the course of their life.

The systems will remain open in both directions, i.e., in respect to smaller systems within them as well as in respect to larger systems around them.

The systems will persist, in their beginning, an open-ended intensity of activity in order not to compromise the future.

The extent and character of the systems will be apparent, or at least sustainable, from the perception of parts of the systems.
For architects mobility has several connotations: in terms of movement it signifies the shift from 2½ miles per hour to 60, 100 or 500 miles per hour. In terms of time it means the appreciation of a fourth dimension, i.e., change on a short time scale. In terms of economy, it means rapid mass distribution, consonant with the potentialities of mass-production and mass-consumption. In terms of housing, it means the new, unquestioning rootlessness of the urban population.

In view of the failure of the traditional architectural tool, plan mass. To cope with the accelerated creation of habitats, it is proposed that planning be reconsidered as progressing from stem to cluster (either than cell to symbol), as in the design of cells one proceeds from core to cluster.

In this way it is felt that a basic structure may be determined: this structure or stem includes all the services of homes, all the prolongements of logic, commercial, cultural, educational, and leisure activities, as well as roads, walkways and services.

These are the factors which vary from place to place and from year to year; and give it organization and identity of a higher order than that obtained solely from plastic arrangement.

Stem is conditioned by mobility. Its dimensions are given not in measures of length but of speed: 2½ miles per hour and 60 miles per hour. It can provide the link between these measures of speed as it can between the measures of validity (the 2½ and 5-year cycles).

The process of planning from stem to cluster will tend to re-establish density and scale in habitat. The principle of equalization of spaces in the occupying of a given site will disappear and exterior space can again be small or medium as well as big and empty.
Against the background of the English School building programme, the language of these appeared so weak that they tended to get ignored.
published '57
project '53
Alamshad Museum

'53 - '55
Kahn's Philadelphia

The evenness of attack seen on
the grid of Kahn's Philadelphia
traffic was seminal at this
time.

mid-late '50s
Louise Nevelson

Parallel phenomenon of evenness
of attack on the ordinary, lifting
the everyday to a poetic level.
Apparent randomness made the
carrying order.
'54
Le Million, housing competition
Casalino, Jaque, Woods
prior to '53
Albat Maroc
Housing: Candilles Woods

Immediately prior to fabricating our CIAM Grille, a bring-everything-together first essay in Arab aesthetic, assuming mutual protection for shelter from climate not invalidated by mechanical services... besides being economical, fail safe, etc. etc...
Fitzwilliam, R.A. scheme: P.S.

The PU makes it possible to read early scripts in a new way, and to read fragments of Le Corbusier and Mies in this new way; based on publication of P. Johnston's Mies van der Rohe: Mus. Modern Art. Museum for small city idea for an exhibition of Picasso's Guernica; also court buildings.
Priene or perhaps Siracusa or Sicily? (alternative, the American grid town and what happens to it in use). Greek villages and dropsy, causeway-type antecedents. Mediterranean or other North African influences on CIAM. That poetry could be made out of the regular was seen by Le Corbusier and other French members of CIAM. One of our earliest images was the negative pattern of living human, tree path, communal/social space was clean to horizon, not cluttered with offensive sand, a regular legibility: founded in North Africa also, at Masimbe.

FOOTNOTES
1 Berlin Free University, AD January '74.
2 Apollon, Hermann Hertzberger, AD February '74.
3 Issue on Kahn, 4 & 73–93.
4 See New British Architecture. Maxwell page 10, line 10 from bottom.
5 Man was sacred: the ones around this period.

Ville Musée d'Art Chinois a Shanghai.
EML. Pei.

Also referred to Hoo-Tang University.
EML. Pei working for Campus. But student was master builder in an industry influenced to a
scramble, although Harvard students of early '50s were aware of it.
A why cartoon is attractive to architects may something to the
very style was there be a dark brown
in Japan. Some influence of
Katsura, etc.
In the works of Sinan... his Sublime Palace is a repetition of the works in the field of Islamic architecture of which we know little too little considering the direction of our interests.

Fatipur Sikri:
Alison Smithson. How to recognise and read mat-building. Mainstream architecture as it has developed towards the mat-building. [Architectural Design, September, 1974]