

ON PUBLIC BUILDINGS

by Georges Bulette

"... located at the intersection of the Grand Boulevard and the main Avenue of the Quartier. Instead of blocking off these routes with a monolithic mass, the Mairie, as a symbol of centralized power, is fractured by the most public routes — its various functions being fragmented into each of the corners. The intersection itself is crowned by the assembly chamber which is lifted on a forest of columns. A precise dialectic of solid and void is established. The urban spatial context defines the building Type, which in turn produces a sense of 'place' — qualifying and defining the abstract order of the public space. Thus the production of architecture (and of Meaning) finds here its social and physical place."

This stirring proposal describes the municipal hall in Leon Krier's definitive work to date, the reconstruction of the La Villette quarter in Paris. A dense and whole piece of the city, the quarter is slashed by a main boulevard which in fact consists of two parallel avenues fifty metres apart. These in turn contain in their one kilometre length the quarter's main public buildings; vertebrae standing vulnerable and unshielded, whose jutting and broken masses jag the dusk perspectives of the boulevard.

The social and architectural implications of this project exemplify an approach and a vision of the city that is non-existent in actual built form. Like the Mairie, public buildings must be given over, virtually dispossessed and abandoned to the stares and the steps of the population. Monolithic, bastilian masses are toxic to the street and break the pattern of the city while bureaucratic labyrinths speak of

authoritarianism and control rather than authority and order.

The nature of our monuments must change. Conscious of their roles in the punctuation and generation of urban form and growth, the new monuments must be monuments to the collective and not the individual; monuments not to the institution but to its servitude.

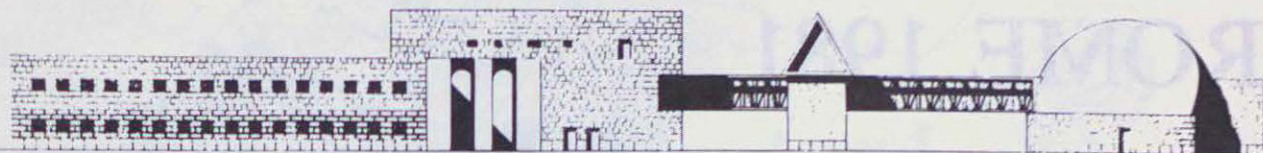
By breaking and rending it — and allowing the people it is to serve passage through, around and under it and permitting them to sit on its flanks — a building will become truly public, truly an everyday occurrence and experience, and truly a memory of verb and adjective.

Accessory to this social fragmentation of form is its liberation from the bondage of preconceived shape. Form follows social stance. A building becomes a composition of basic forms and architectural elements. Its richness is acquired through the orchestrated variety of parts in counterpoint to each other.

Aldo Rossi and Massimo Scolari's Scandicci City Hall project of 1968 is broken into parts then bridged back together. This gives rise to a pleasurable association of simple forms and architectonic elements which are uncluttered and clearly exposed but still part of the whole. Four massive columns demarcate the principal entrance. This place of entrance is a singular place, a part of the building but also a part of the city, the exterior. A covered void as a sheltering form, it doesn't seek to exclude the passerby. A trussed *passerelle* connects the main

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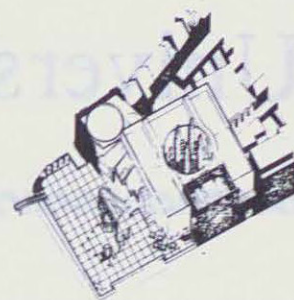
Layout: by the author



Above: Scandicci City Hall Project.

Right: Dusseldorf Art Museum Project;
Stuttgart Museum;
Project for Prager Platz, Berlin (IBA '84);
Project for a school in St. Quentin.

Opposite: Grand Boulevard, project for the reconstruction of
La Villette, Paris.



Lotus 15

masses of the building to its two disengaged components, the greater of the two being the domed assembly chamber, uncompromisingly strong and alone.

Architecture's social and public roles become more active in two of James Stirling and Partner's German museum projects. In Dusseldorf, Stirling detaches the building's main entrance to a pavilion that animates a square, acknowledges the axis of a street and is visually related to a courtyard in the heart of the building but which is nonetheless in the public domain by way of a pedestrian street. Stirling takes this one step further in Stuttgart. Here the program demanded a pedestrian link between two of the diagonal extremities of the site. This condition is met by taking the path into and around a circular sculpture court and then out the other side. Thus pedestrian access is accommodated in a way that brings him sensorially into the museum without actually having to set foot in it. The art of a public museum is thus accessible to its public on their own ground. The spatial and sequential experience of the city is greatly enriched.

Strangely surreal is Carlo Aymonino's project for the Prager Platz in Berlin (IBA '84). One of the many reminders of war, the Prager Platz was once a presentable part of the city. Now it is a scab, hardened, but not yet replaced by new skin. Its round shape receives five converging streets. Aymonino's scheme naturally builds up to these streets but instead of leaving the Platz itself open, he elects to put in an open-air theatre connected to the circumscribing buildings by bridge. The communicative nature of the performance is thus

acknowledged and even strengthened by its placement in the centre of a web of roads. Thus the cityscape serves as the ultimate backdrop.

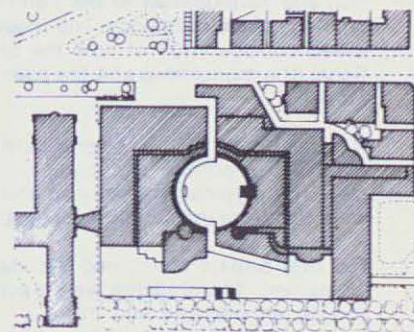
Leon Krier takes the disarticulation of a building to an extreme and logical end with his project of a school in St. Quentin in France. Here he has completely severed the school's functional components into single buildings and arranged them according to their relative importance in the form of a little city, each building analogous to a block and defining the school's streets and squares. The bridging element is gone and the building is not one.

Accumulating all these experiences it is possible to envision an imaginary city where daily occurrences are intertwined with the city's bones. A citizen in his everyday itinerary passes through a succession of public spaces of varying types and models. The urban tissue, viewed as a solid piece, is punctured, tunnelled through and chiseled by the connected voids of the public realm. This skeletal network of public spaces is also a network of public buildings. The square is a street and the building is both.

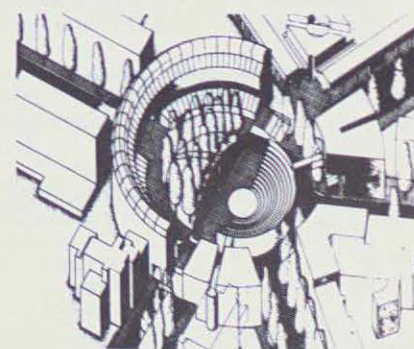
Notes

1. Leon Krier, "A City Within a City," *Architectural Design*, March 1977, p. 207.

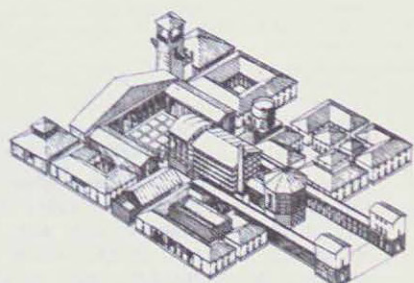
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Perspecta 16



Domus, December 1981



Architectural Review, January 1980