

Beaubourg

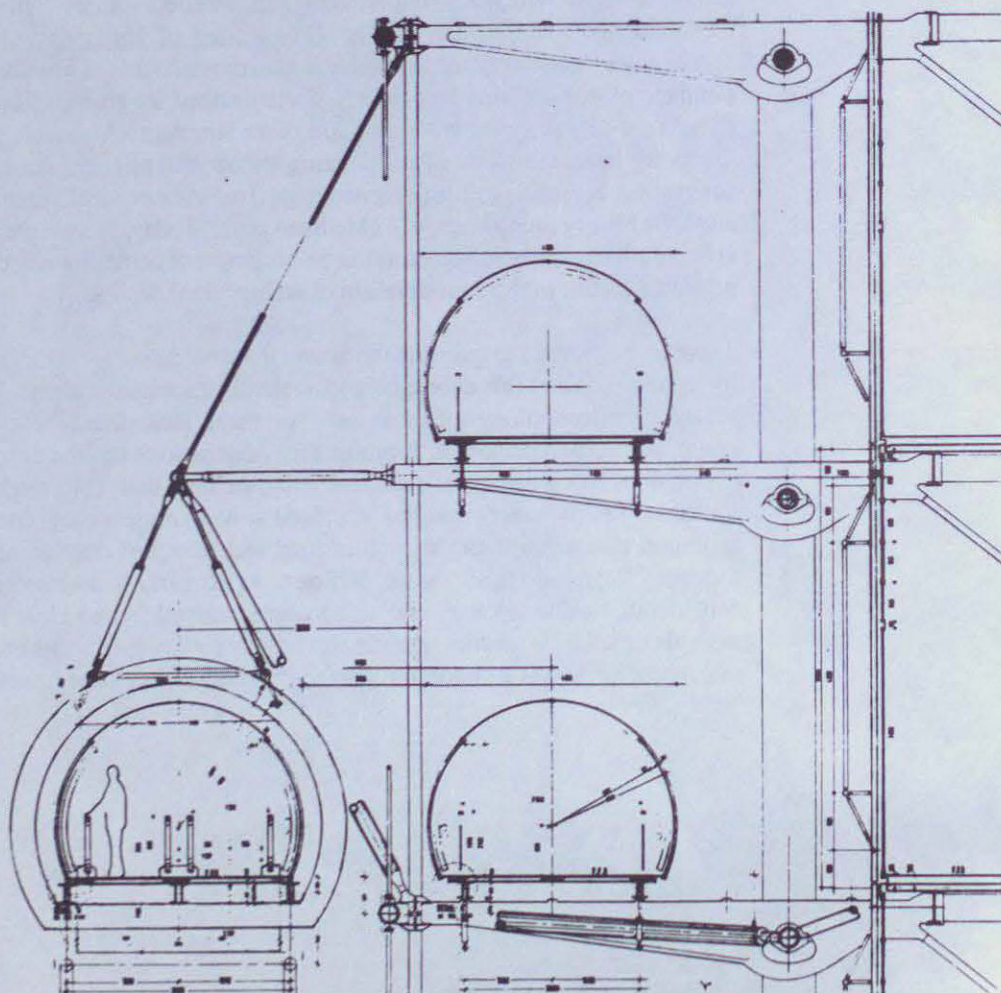
Symptom of Insecure Times

by Tony Barake

L'époque contemporaine a été la scène de la remise en question des valeurs établies et de la vérité absolue. Tony Barake esquisse ici comment le problème de la signification en architecture a évolué depuis deux siècles et indique comment le Centre Pompidou constitue un "signe" de notre temps.

The search for meaning in function and in technology characterizes the Modern Movement. Questioning and ultimately rejecting this notion, as many do now, leaves a void at the centre. The initial distancing from the certainty of how and what to build began in the 18th century to later reach a high period in the 19th, when style wars were being fought by architects. The abstraction process, which separated the idea and style of a building from its particularness had begun much earlier, but the raging historicism of the 1800's was a sort of culmination.

The Industrial Revolution was the effervescent adolescence of a new age. Crystal palaces, immense bridges of



steel, and wondrously crafted buildings of stone, steel and glass were erected, boastful of what "man can do". Physicists were stating that nothing was left to discover. The Empire's colonies were feeding its industrialized, coal burning towns the raw material necessary to dominate nature. As a result of such resource availability, the builders developed new techniques, allowing them to, for the first time, exceed the sizes and heights of Roman monuments. The absolute beauty of these ancient masonry monuments was being emulated in cast iron, glass and stone veneer hung on steel. It was inevitable that the thinking become functionalist, and the technology which made all this possible celebrated.

With Loos and his contemporaries, a questioning of the necessity to borrow meaning from the past arose. Meaning was to be found in the new forms and structures. Plain surfaces, structural systems, and the open plans were now newly expressive. Architecture stopped being referential to older monuments and it was not long before it became referential to itself. Paradoxically, the ancient eclecticism began to give way to a newer one. Form followed form. Various schools of thought evolved and competed indicating a continued search for Truth. There was much room for debate. Although Le Corbusier adored the rational beauty of machines, he saw the poetry inherent in form, and often contradicted his own writings to imbue architecture with that poetry.

In philosophy, the absolute values and ethics of Plato, and Kant were being challenged by Nietzsche, and later, in the twentieth century by the existentialists. Meaning no longer would be derived from absolute truths to be then used by logic to elaborate a complex world. Instead, meaning became inherent in existence. The interpretation of perception mediated by experience becomes truth. It is a convention, reflecting the current reality. Logic begins to be seen as a construct of the mind, not a law of nature, as the crisis in mathematics brought on by Cantor and Godel demonstrated.

Physics recognized the necessity of the observer during his crucial early twentieth century. Yet the scientism of architecture lagged behind. Buildings took on forms dictated by a search for absolutes.

Today, after the rejection of Modernism, the question of meaning

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recurs constantly. Post Modernism is a sort of schizophrenia, oscillating between the lost truth of technology and the lost truth of the past forms and beauty. No longer is either satisfactory. Certain buildings of the Late Modern period address the issue of meaninglessness, although they superficially seem to be glorifying the forms of technology. Designed by Piano and Rogers, Centre Pompidou in Place Beaubourg, Paris is such a building. It has been called gothic by some critics, referring to the obvious revelry in structure and its exaggerated expression, much like the work of the stone masons of the middle ages. But Beaubourg, shows a certain humour. The gothic masons used the intricate stone work to glorify religious ideals. Theirs was a confident monumentality. With Beaubourg, some fun is being poked at the past era of technological miracles. The building is overly built in a sense, asking the question: "Does this give it more meaning?".

It is interesting to note that the two architects of the project hold divergent views on technology. Renzo Piano sees himself as a builder, and admires the beauty that can be achieved with new structural methods. Richard Rogers, although labelled as a "high-tech" architect, denies the implications of this appellation. He uses the forms of Buckminster Fuller and the English Dymaxion movement only as a language, to express technology. He does not adhere to their philosophies of greater efficiency through science and mass production. It is ironic that Beaubourg is made of very sophisti-

cated parts manufactured by artisans in old fashioned workshops. The recent Lloyds of London shows his use of applied and integrated factory like complications on an essentially prismatic form, creating a wonderfully playful and interesting tower. The collision (or collusion) of these two

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architects' views gives a building that reflects the era.

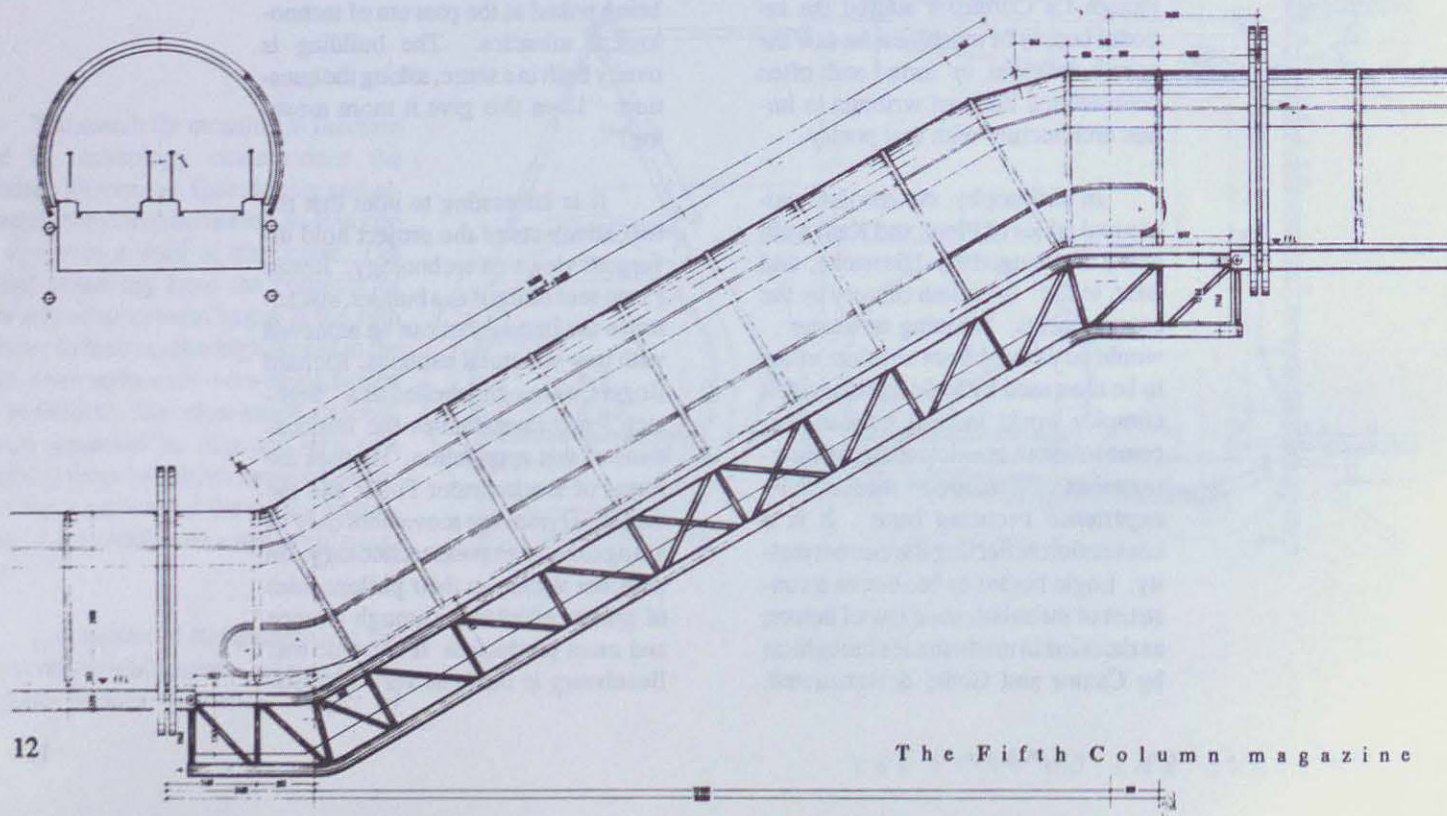
Beaubourg is an insecure building. It displays an exaggerated modularity and flexibility. Everything is clip-on and moveable, including the escalator on the facade, the ventilation systems, and the firewalls. Have the architects decided that users' needs are changing unpredictably, and that it is impossible to make a building that fits the moment and will continue to fit for any length of time? Building permanence is being questioned.

Beaubourg's great success as a tourist attraction indicates that a resonant chord has been struck. Inherent in its appeal as sheer novelty is the idea that shock value is the last resort to a jaded, shifting vision. It is a building

designed for the senses, with its glassed mechanical access, bright colors, and huge spaces. In an existential age, where all values can change with new events and fait-accomplis, those are the only stable elements.

On a more prosaic level, Beaubourg comments accurately on the changes in thinking towards the contextual fabric. The surrounding city is addressed only by providing a paved plaza to separate it slightly from the building, to allow the visitor to take a step back and look at the technological wonder. The architects deliberately created this plaza by moving the music facilities in the program underground since the competition program did not anticipate any open space. It is a building to be looked at, but strangely enough, one can also look at the city from its clipped on escalator that goes nowhere.

From the operational standpoint, one tends to forget that Beaubourg is a "Centre Culturel", since this Culture, this Platonic absolute, is totally overwhelmed by the architecture. The architecture becomes the culture, which can no longer be imprisoned in a library, or in a gallery.



ANNOTATED BIBLIOGRAPHY

"Renzo Piano", *Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, no. 219, Groupe Expansion, Paris, février 1982, pp. 1-53.

This issue, devoted to Piano and his work, shows his bent towards craftsmanship and building technology. In the interview (pp. 4-8) he says:

"every artist, sculptor, painter ... must know the tecnics of his profession before being able to express himself [...] elegance originates from the strict necessity of the material".

"Le langage de l'industrie", *Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, no. 221, Groupe Expansion, Paris, juin 1982, pp. 1-63.

This issue features many buildings by Rogers and by other architects which borrow from the language of factories. Rogers exaggerates structure, as is obvious in his Quimper distribution centre (pp. 18-25), where he creates a tensile overstructure, and in his Immos Factory where the ventilation systems are almost an ornament placed on top of the roof, and finally in the NAPP labs, where the structural trusses are extended beyond the building limits. One wonderfully ironic building in this issue is a flower market by L. Saviloi (pp. 10-13), which totally contradicts its function through its industrial form.

Buchanan P., "Foster/Rogers: High Tech Classical/Gothic", *Architectural Review*, Vol 169, no. 1011, May 1981, London, pp. 265-282.

This article compares the work of Foster and Rogers, stating that Rogers could be classified as a Gothicism and Foster a Classicist. Lloyds of London and the Hongkong Bank are featured.

The Centre Pompidou is documented in many places. The sources I used for the figures and descriptions are listed below:

"Beaubourg", *Architecture d'Aujourd'hui*, no. 213, Groupe Expansion, Paris, février 1981, pp. 92-95.

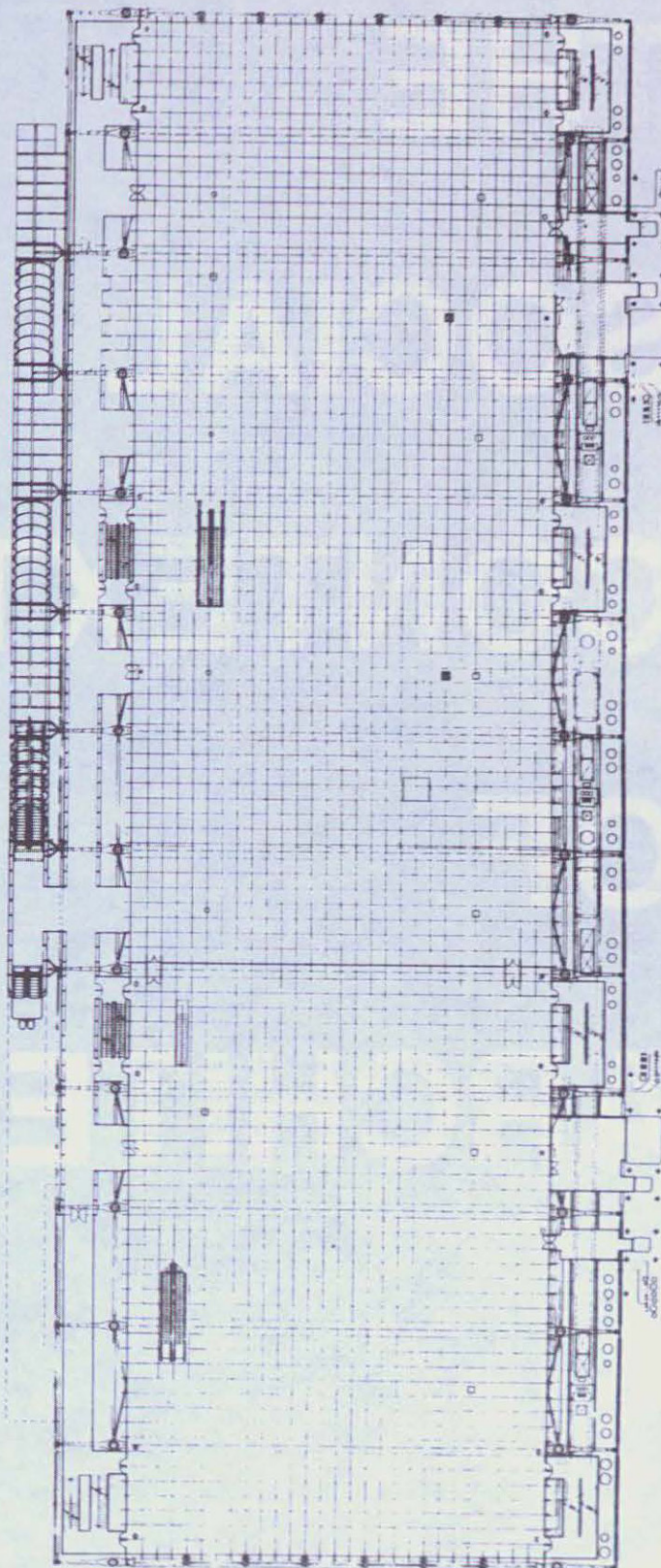
Futagawa, Y., *Centre Beaubourg*, *Global Architecture*, vol. 44 Edita, Tokyo 1977. Text is by the architects and from the program for the building.

Frampton, P., *Modern Architecture*, revised and enlarged edition, Thames and Hudson, NY 1985, chap. 4.

Fuller, R.B. *Ideas and Integrity*, Macmillan, NY, 1974.

Here Buckminster Fuller expresses very clearly his ideas on architecture and building: (p. 96)

"... that the materials-raw, partially processed, or sub-assembled-of old housing [...] have weighed on the average of one hundred to one and have bulked on an average of ten to one in excess of the quantities necessary to accomplish the end result, and have fallen as proportionately short of satisfactory performance as they have of energy conversion efficiency."



Layout by Eric Stein

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