



CONTENTS

3	Editorial	106	The Trouble with Bob and Lou, or with Foxes and Hedgehogs Job Floris
6	The Neue Wache, Berlin Oliver Thill	112	Franco Albini and Bob Noorda Federico Tranfa
10	Double Authorship Markus Lüscher	121	A Collaboration: Paul Engelmann and Ludwig Wittgenstein Daniele Pisani
18	The Architecture and Politics of the Koine Francesco Garofalo	132	Libera and Malaparte: “I Have Nothing to Say, Only to Show” Valter Scelsi
28	The Politics of Demonst(e)ration Hamed Khosravi	137	Slippery Dialogues: Recent Copyright Infringements in Architecture Fabrizio Gallanti
38	The Sovereignty of Interpretation Sandra Bartoli and Silvan Linden	143	VKhUTEMAS: Collaborations on Ideology and Form Arturo Scheidegger
44	Colin Rowe in the Design Studio. Two Pedagogical Experiences and Architecture as a Shared Knowledge Roberto Damiani	150	So Much Damned Bad Work Pier Paolo Tamburelli
51	The Undecorated Shed. Venturi and Scott Brown’s Project for a Commercial and Residential Block on Khulafa Street, 1981–82 Benedict Clouette and Marlisa Wise	161	OK, Let’s Call It Memphis 2A+P/A
61	Lost in La Plata Ludovico Centis	168	San Rocco Collaborations at the 13th Venice Architectural Biennale
71	Objets Trouvés: Collages, Collaboration and Collision Giovanni La Varra	177	Indifference Call for paper
79	Double Life Kersten Geers and Andrea Zanderigo		
86	Codussi, Spavento & Co.: Building the Sacristy of St Mark’s Basilica in Venice Maria Bergamo		
97	Hannes Meyer: Co-op Architecture Bernardina Borra		

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Giorgione and Titian, *Sleeping Venus (Dresden Venus)*, 1508-10.

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OBJETS TROUVÉS: COLLAGES, COLLABORATION AND COLLISION

Giovanni La Varra

Collage City is a labyrinth of a text.¹ In a way, it is an instrument of continuous digression; indeed, it tries to get closer to the subject it wants to discuss while simultaneously getting farther away from it. If it were possible to illustrate the idea of the city that emerges from the text as an alternative to imperial Rome, then three architectural works could be used as a starting point. Read in sequence, they constitute an implicit and unitary commentary on the “city in collision”, which is the title of one of the most incisive chapters in Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter’s text.

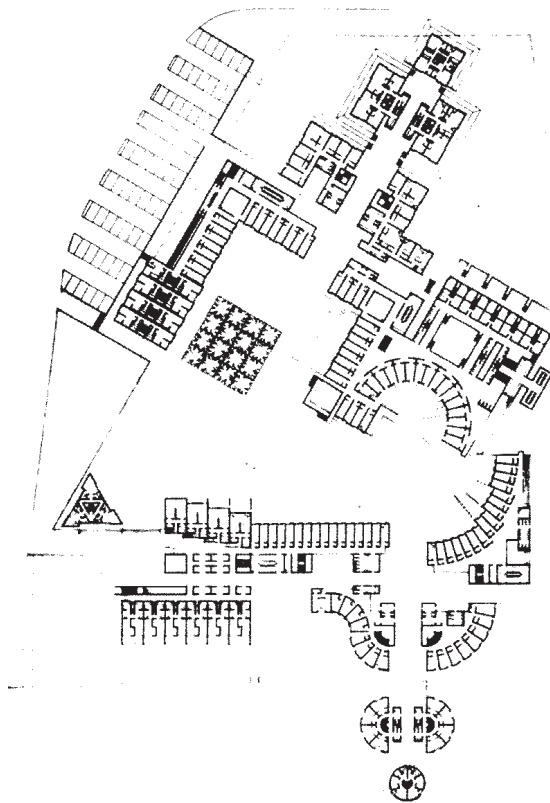
In essence, Oswald Mathias Ungers, Louis I. Kahn and James Stirling generated a sort of minority report within the broader debate that followed the crisis of modernism after World War II through their independent production of three separate projects which, when considered together, seem like a single, unitary work of architecture built from the mid 1960s to the mid 1980s via three distinct and successive acts.

The student housing project in Enschede by Ungers (1964), the Dominican Motherhouse of the Sisters of St Catherine de’ Ricci in Media, Pennsylvania, by Kahn (1965–1968) and the Wissenschaftszentrum in Berlin by Stirling and Michael Wilford (1979–85) are, if looked at individually, strange and eccentric projects that are difficult to classify within the respective oeuvres of their authors. When looked at as a group, however, the three projects reveal themselves to be the outcome of an intense and continuous dialogue. This virtual collaboration between such different architects produced a series of reflections on the meaning of today’s urban design in which the “city in collision” appears to be the only possible scenario and in which several typical elements of traditional urban design (regular, Cartesian ones) seem to have disappeared forever.²

1
Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, *Collage City* (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1981).

2
A first reflection on the grouping of these three architectural works is Pierluigi Nicolini, “Tracce e tracciati”, in Marco De Michelis, Pierluigi Nicolini, Werner Oechslin and Frank Werner, eds., *La ricostruzione della città: Berlino–Iba 1987* (Milan: Electa / Triennale of Milan, 1985). In this text, Nicolini identifies the three projects, along with some others, as compositions characterized by a “collage of typologies”.

O. M. Ungers, Competition for the Student Housing Project, Enschede, 1964, ground-floor plan



In 1964, Ungers was thirty-eight years old. His proposal for the student accommodations in Enschede was not “architecture for students”, but “a city inhabited by students” – a microcosm with different green spaces, multiple hierarchical levels, central “fires” and shady outskirts, clumps of small, low houses and more massive structures, small objects at the margins and open spaces with definite, clear-cut forms at the centre. It is an encyclopaedic project that is constructed like a system of variations on the circle, the square and the triangle, whereby these shapes “have been transformed through a series of different manipulations – such as rupture, folding, repetition, superimposition, subdivision, permutation, doubling, reflection, arrangement in series, etc.”³

3

Oswald M. Ungers, “Project for the Student Hostel at Enschede: A Dialectical Residential Model”, in idem, *Architecture as Theme* (Milan: Electa, 1982), 23.

Ungers took part in the competition for the project in Enschede after having gained some important professional experience. During the post-war reconstruction of his country in the early 1960s, he was involved in several major projects to build new public residential neighbourhoods. His proposals were particularly original and presented an implicit criticism of the building techniques customarily used in the

construction of large European neighbourhoods at the time, but his projects were systematically normalized during construction (as occurred with the Neue Stadt in Cologne and the Märkische Viertel in Berlin).

The Enschede project represented an escape route from a crisis situation.⁴ I believe that its “dialectical residential model” takes on a particular value if we perceive it as a self-critical reaction to the landscape of life in Europe in the 1960s, when big neighbourhoods were defined by the repetition of a few types of designs erected with standardized construction and low-quality materials.

Ungers’s Enschede experiment really seems to dispute the usual logic of large neighbourhoods, and from a formal point of view it seeks refuge in a number of forms that became a defining rule of design. The student accommodations in Enschede “should not be interpreted as a formal game, but rather as a basic model for an integrated environment, characterized by a multiplicity of forms. A microcosm, in which the complexity of the macrocosm is reflected, almost as a model of a pluralistic city”.⁵ Ungers is one of the first to attempt to give shape to an idea of pluralism that is not just a simple juxtaposition of disparate objects. His pluralistic city is precise and defined, but not open to just any contribution; it is varied, but not without constraints or rules; it is contradictory, but the contradictions are all represented and exposed: this was “not a pluralism based on laissez-faire, in which the elements assert a chaotic freedom”.⁶

In 1965, when Kahn was sixty-four years old, he was contacted by the Dominican Motherhouse of St Catherine de’ Ricci to build a convent on the slopes of a hill in Pennsylvania. After a series of initial project ideas that remained closely linked to a focus on the symmetry, balanced composition and monumentality that were typical of Kahn’s designs in the 1960s, the nuns’ opposition and constant requests for variations⁷ eventually made Kahn take a radical new approach to the project:

Since the pressing issue was the interrelationship of several self-contained blocks – and not so much their inner particulars – Kahn settled upon a work method that for him was atypical. Rather than endlessly redrafting the same identical four blocks of refectory, school, chapel, and entrance in order to experiment with different arrangements, he simply cut them out of a drawing. . . . With these he could experiment, easily rearranging them by hand, taping them in place when needed. This simple drafting expedient . . . soon had unexpected consequences.⁸

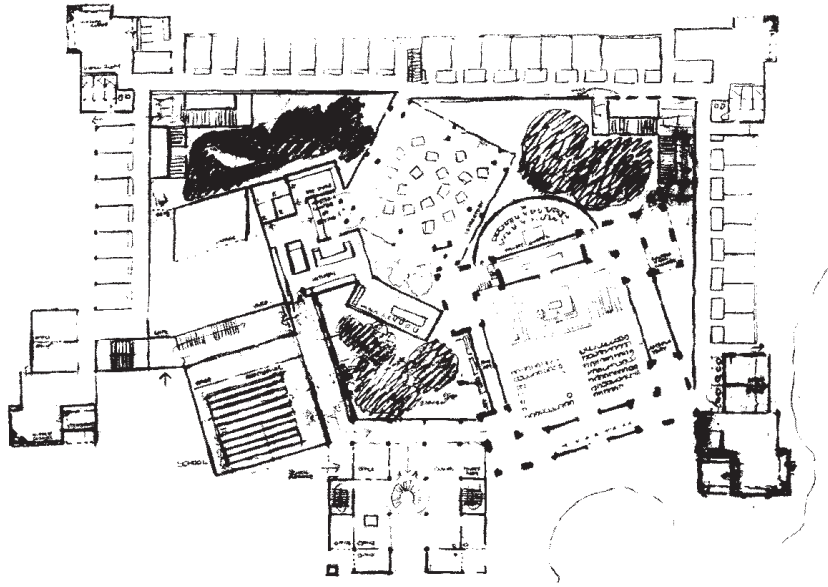
4 From the mid 1960s to the late 1970s, Ungers did not build any buildings and got involved in a very limited number of projects, dedicating most of his energy to teaching.

5 Ungers, “Project for the student hostel at Enschede”, 23.

6 Ibid.

7 “Mother Emmanuel . . . gently chastised the architect, who persisted in measuring the convent against the architecture of medieval monasticism. . . . Her Dominican order, unlike the Carmelites or Trappists, did not seek solitude for its own sake; instead they were devoted to the precept of ‘action flowing from contemplation’”; Michael J. Lewis, “The Dominican Motherhouse of St. Catherine de’ Ricci”, in David B. Brownlee and David C. De Long, eds., *Louis I. Kahn: In the Realm of Architecture* (New York: Rizzoli, 1991), 387.

8 Ibid.



Louis I. Kahn, sketch of the Dominican Motherhouse of the Sisters of St Catherine de' Ricci, Media (Pennsylvania), 1965–68

The dormitory cells were set out to create an open courtyard, whereas the service buildings were structured in a frantic way, filling the courtyard and fragmenting it into a series of seemingly casual spaces. At this point, the fixity of the dormitories' layout seemed even more necessary, for it served as a container for the variety and tension that kept the service buildings close together.

In the end, the project came to a halt because the nuns did not have enough money, and Kahn, for his part, did not have the patience. Maybe what is most important about the project is that the “convent life model that had so fascinated the architect was changing swiftly. Already there were signs of the relaxed discipline that was coming to characterize convent life in the late 1960s. The sisters were asking about swimming and tennis, and such modern amenities as intercoms and air-conditioning”.⁹

In 1979, Stirling was fifty-three years old. His professional adventure in Germany had begun four years earlier in 1975 with his involvement with the firm of Stirling & Wilford in a series of important projects for museums. After these, the centre of gravity of Stirling's work shifted to a country that, after a period of difficult reconstruction, was starting to think about places of culture and knowledge again – places that had always been linked with and strongly valued by Federal Germany and its policies.

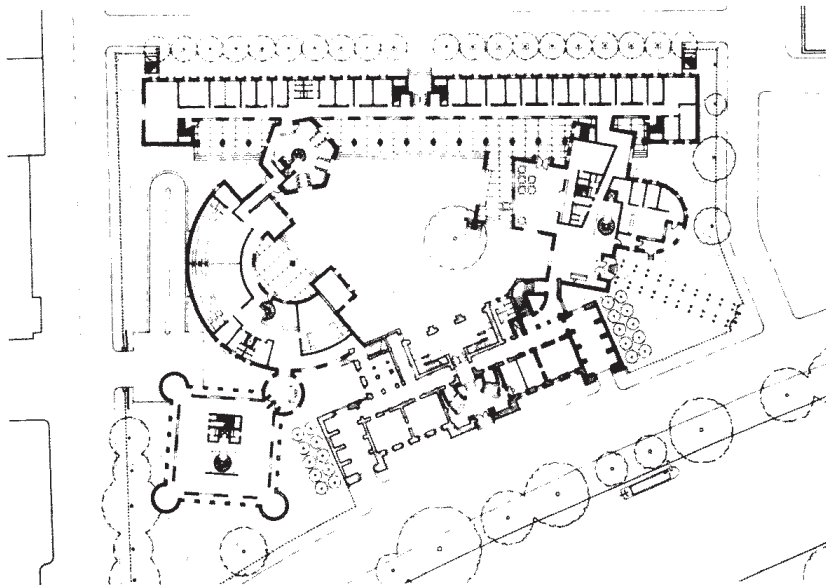
When he won the competition for the Wissenschaftszentrum in Berlin, Stirling found himself constructing a new building in the

9

Ibid., 388.

10

“The Kulturforum is an anti-space, a breakdown of civil communications, a condition of undeclared war between compacted, self-centered solids which are independent of any concept of community.” Colin Rowe, “The Vanished City” [1984], in *idem*, *As I Was Saying: Recollected and Miscellaneous Essays. Volume III: Urbanistics*, ed. Alexis Caragone (Cambridge, MA: The MIT Press, 1996), 246.



sort of “collision space”¹⁰ of the Kulturforum, with the Shell-Haus, the Neue Nationalgalerie and the work of Scharoun from the 1950s.

The Wissenschaftszentrum was a scientific centre that, in Stirling’s words, was “really a Think Tank, a government institute for deep thinking on matters of environment, sociology and management”.¹¹ Such a complex programme, however, required 300 small, individual offices.

As Stirling recorded, on the southern edge of the plot was an “old Beaux-Arts building . . . (by the architect who built the Reichstag), [that] somehow survived the war and had to be preserved”, and they “converted it for conference facilities”.¹² This old Beaux-Arts building led into the garden facing the new complex proposed by Stirling, which was composed of five new buildings connected to one another. The five new buildings each have an obvious autonomy and an easily recognizable morphology: an element aligned with the north edge of the plot (the Stoa), a cruciform building to the east (the Basilica), a hexagonal tower (the Bell Tower) and a semi-circular building (the Arena) that completes the western side. Another building, a massive one on a square plan (the Castle), was planned to complete the plot along the river, but it still has not been built.

Stirling did not use fragments this time. Instead, he created an abstract collection of different “popular” buildings. The final appearance of the project, however, is fragmented, for it is incomplete and open, even more so due to the void of the missing building.

Stirling & Wilford and Associates, ground-floor plan of the Wissenschaftszentrum, Berlin, 1979–85

11 James Stirling, “Design Philosophy and Recent Work”, introduction to *James Stirling Michael Wilford & Associates: Architectural Design Profile* (London and New York: St. Martin’s Press, 1990), 9.

12 *Ibid.*

Mark Cirouard, *Big Jim: The Life and the Work of James Stirling* (London: Chatto & Windus, 1998), 224: "Jim came into the office fresh from a holiday at Barfleur, brandishing a little book on the different architectural styles and saying 'We'll have one of each'. The office was set to work to link and 'juggle' (in Jim's phrase) five different building types around a central courtyard: an amphitheatre, a keep (not yet built), an octagonal tower, a cruciform church (Jim called it basilica), and an existing c. 1900 classical building which had survived the war. Then Jim went home for Christmas, and came back saying 'I've done the elevations'. As John Tuomey, who was in the office, expresses it, 'He had put pyjamas on the whole scheme.'"

The extreme homogenization of the interior space (with its 300 individual offices) was contradicted by the paradoxical variety of the building-objects. This forced Stirling to confront the problem of the façades with a disarming simplicity: all of the façades of the new buildings were given the same design comprising alternating bands of pink and blue plaster set atop a stone base. The bands were punctuated by rectangular vertical windows set within big, upside-down-U-shaped frames.

In different ways, the three projects discussed here are equally parts of a sort of eulogy of the "Collision City" and of the idea of collision as the conceptual framework for urban design.

In all three cases, we are talking more about the design of micro-communities – one made up of students for Ungers, one of nuns and novices for Kahn and one of researchers for Stirling. It would seem that the community dimension favoured a reflective design that, while attempting to solve a single problem, expanded until it hypothesized a particular idea of the city.

In Enschede, Media and Berlin, Rowe's self-confident yet ambiguous tone was given expression in architecture, as were his detachment and his sharp, obstinate and unprejudiced observations.

Like the "Collage City" postulated by Rowe and Koetter, something never evoked but completely theorized, when one reads the three projects in the order of their design, they seem to be sequential chapters in an essay on the virtues of collision, an implicit manual for the contemporary city.

Ungers developed a concept that has a geometric basis. The process is clear and evident and brings forward certain reflections that will also become part of Aldo Rossi's work in Italy: a return to pure forms – Le Corbusier's sketch in *Vers une architecture* comes to mind – and the articulation of a reasoning about the relationship between uses and forms. The elements of history emerge in the design in Enschede, not because they were taken and transferred directly from the "little book on the different architectural styles", as was the case with Stirling,¹³ but rather because Ungers evoked known architectural styles by using symbolic forms.

Kahn's contribution seems to be the most naïve, but maybe it is also the most sincere. In the Pennsylvania convent's design, Kahn demonstrated an irony and brilliance that were very different from the intentional and programmatic "greatness" that characterizes all the rest of his architecture. The objects drawn on paper come to life and encounter each other, accepting the challenge of colliding with

one another; they splinter and erode, they penetrate and accept each other, they enhance their form because they question it. In the creative process – and Kahn is a step ahead of Ungers in this regard – the forms produce an open internal space that is an unexpected result: it is the fruit of the collision, it is born from this encounter. This was the aim: to give a shape to emptiness, to seek the emptiness that was hidden between forms, to use collision as an instrument with which to shine a spotlight on the core of the project, the relational space, and to ensure the seemingly relaxed and unexpected intentionality that was necessary for making its genesis evident.

Stirling took Kahn's intuition to the extreme. The "catalogue objects" Stirling chose are all on the same plane, like thrown dice. His gesture also transfigured the existing building, creating another case of a building whose structure and shape were already there, available as an "empty" shape, a hollow needing to be filled. If Kahn had already understood that the real result of the process was observing in between the spaces, for Stirling it was all about trying to put the whole picture into a context of crisis from which to tease out forms. Stirling chose "hollow" spaces. It was the hollow that interested him, not the typology, and it was in this hollow that he piled up rooms, one on top of the other, all identical or nearly identical to each other. The "emptiness" of historical shapes gave him ample freedom to deform the materials, put them together and join them to each other in random points of connection.

Today, the "chaotic freedom" that Ungers tried to defuse reigns supreme. Collision has won, but its most simple and banal spaces are what prevail. Nowadays, urban design is nothing but a heterogeneous repository of objects that are not intended to be interconnected. The space between objects lacks tension; it is without power. It is a space that the objects neither penetrate nor shape. The three works of architecture by Ungers, Kahn and Stirling discussed here seem to provide a potential starting point for reflecting on the prospects of urban design, which will not be able to continue favouring combinations of individual objects, but rather will have to return to thinking about collision as a progressive force, as an opportunity to start shaping the contemporary city.