

Berlin Hauptstadt.
Alison and Peter Smithson with Peter
Sigmond

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Mat-city
Plan of Kenzo Tange for floating world

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Tracking forward
From mat-building to social micro chip

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The competition proposed by West Berlin in 1957 for the new unified capital (hauptstadt) would allow implementing the vision of new urbanism in a real context.

Given the doubt of how a new urban form that represents the city of the future must relate to the existing city, A&P Smithson decide to accommodate the multilayer structure of mat-building. Based on a new geometry, ostensibly abstract and detached from the pre-existing fabric, the new city will try to combine old and new in terms of place and landscape, not in urban form terms.

By creating an artificial carpet in addition to the existing landscape, they understand the new city as a public space in itself, clear and open, in which the sum of the Tiegarten Park constitutes a unitary whole.

Two overlapped networks are defined: a high pedestrian network in continuity with the existing public space (pleasure city), open, almost empty and with dominating views over the city that runs at 120km/h in the lower network.

The new structure will be associated with unbuilt territory (landscape), instead of being sewed to the built fabric, creating a new urban landscape both natural and artificial, where streets, squares and buildings are reinterpreted in a new urban form, simultaneously place and building. There lies the radical proposal: the modern city as a hybrid form with artificial landscape conditions.

The role of architecture is almost hidden. Streets and squares are no longer a void around buildings, they become a built thickness that absorbs buildings under their limits, releasing large voids around them which have their own meaning of existence (rather than waiting to be filled). Where the value of the void is emphasized and public space creates architecture, not the other way around.

The proposal invites one to understand urban landscape planning as a tool, not only suitable for the creation and management of green areas (from landscape to hardscape). Therefore, are we in front of a horizontal city pattern, radical and disruptive to the existing city, or a strategy that seeks to assimilate the new city towards a natural environment trying to preserve it?

In the spring of 1958, Kyuro Kano, president of the Japan Housing Corporation, proposed, with the aim of facing up to land speculation and the chaotic increase in building density, the expansion of Tokyo onto the sea. The intention was to drain the northern part of the bay and gain an area of 83,225 m². Mobility was a necessary condition of the study for an overpopulated metropolis where the infrastructure had been transformed so that its distribution channels connected the various layers of city life.

With this in mind, Kenzo Tange started to work on a plan to reclaim land from Tokyo Bay, using the criteria that was applied to the Boston Bay project, working with students from the MIT.

With a city of around ten million inhabitants, the project proposed the enlargement of Tokyo, creating an urban/civic axis on the bay's water. The solution lies in cutting the centre with a linear extension of axes joined like links in a chain, somewhat similar to a backbone.

A perpendicular system of parallel axes is distributed from the central axis, which arranges the residential areas, configuring them in the shape of a clustered framework.

The plan's location, between air and water, gives rise to a state of levitation throughout the project, due to the lack of orientation and points of reference. There is no ground plan, and the city is up in the air, in space. Everything appertains to a symbolically floating world which allows one to establish various superimposed road sections, where all of the parts have multiple relationships.

One cannot stop oneself from seeing the proposal as a large building where the scale is superseded by a terrible organisational rigidity. The city is seen as a large building where the sea level is all-inclusive, as the city is in space.

"Remember, we are tracking back" were the last words of Alison Smithson's text from 1974. This article intends to track in the opposite direction recognising which are the features that Smithson announced defining the mat building category that remains or can be identified in contemporary architecture.

From shape, we can identify at least three of those aspects: the process and its related flexibility, the importance of structure and the use of prefabricated elements and finally the role of geometry as the core of the project. We find those features in examples like the Sendai Mediatheque (a piled up mat-building with a predominant structural system, a fluid organisational programme and blur materialisation) and like the Serpentine Pavilion (an exercise of infinite geometry and indeterminacy), both from Toyo Ito, or the Yokohama terminal from FOA where the process defines every level of architecture.

In Spain with precedents such as the Brussels Pavilion by Corrales & Molezún or even the partial construction of Le Corbusier's Venice Hospital's skylights at the Valencia fair by Julian De la Fuente, we also find important contemporary examples such as MUSAC from Tuñón & Mansilla. Here a rough structure made out of concrete walls and prefabricated beams is extended as a contemporary mat with multiple diagonal visions wrapped around by a light and customised colour glass shell. The building's programme, an open contemporary art museum, relates to permeable architecture far from its consideration as an object. The new conception of the collective even finds in the proposals of Elemental in Chile the system for its own construction. At MUSAC with more of an intellectual process, we find those announced features by Smithson through a system built in concrete, dematerialised towards the city and accessible by the collective.