

Reading a mat-building.  
An approach to the thought of the  
Smithsons

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Mat-building

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Following the Grid / Following the Plot  
Notes on mat-building

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In September 1974 Alison Smithson published in the British journal *Architectural Design* the article "How to recognise and read mat-building". It was a first attempt to conceptualise the notion of mat-building, a low rise and high density building type that circumscribed the concerns and interests of the Team10 during the last decade.

The article adopted the format of an unfinished chronology of examples. A selection that had the Free University of Berlin as the starting point and axis of discussion. Work of the architects Candilis, Josic and Woods from which it descended in a *timeline* until reaching the architectures of ancient times. Projects from different origins, times and scales were traced down, describing a kind of atlas or visual catalogue where the concept was loaded with great conceptual indeterminacy and the article with an enormous ambiguity.

But, in which way if not could we present the notion of mat-building?

The architecture of the mat-building responded to a highly interwoven structure that was supposed to be able to grow in space in a potentially unlimited way and to be modified in the course of time, adapting to the multiple contingencies that would take place. This constant transformation of its state conferred on the concept a great indeterminacy of form, expressing the Smithsons' interest in an architecture based on the concept of "open form". Thus revealing the interest in the project as a system, where the important thing was not so much the formal outcome achieved, as the operations or the mechanisms that allowed getting there.

Through the idea of Recognising and Reading Mat-building, the Smithsons presented a concept that deliberately sought to get away from any attempt of typological classification. In it, not everything was exposed or explained, nor did it present an objective definition to hold on to and in the opposite direction it opened a vast field for personal interpretation. With it, the Smithson invited us to sum up our own definition of the concept, continuing with the genealogy of projects that they started, expressing complex thought and continuous inquiry, which was latent in the notion of mat-building and in their own writing.

At the end of the '50s certain systems or urban structures were defined based on different association levels, environmental identity, mobility and transformation. In 1974, Alison Smithson identified under the term mat-building a structure which order is based on three parameters: interconnection, close-knit patterns of association and possibilities for growth, diminution and change. Mat-building had two projects of the Candilis, Josic and Woods team as paradigms: The project for the reconstruction of Frankfurt in 1963 and the Free University of Berlin. This last project is the one that will make the concept recognizable.

In their article, the Smithsons searched for signs that would be identified as mats. They went back to Katsura, Sinan, the Greek domed constructions, the Arab architecture, Mies or the *Kasbah*. However, of all the mentioned examples, there are three groups of projects that suggest new unexplored avenues: The first one refers to the underground architecture of Honan and the Rockefeller Center, by expressing the non-monumentality, flexibility, connectivity and possibilities for growth and change. In the second group one refers to Berlin's Hauptstadt project in 1958 and the Kuwait Ministry Plan of 1970-72, being large horizontal extensions of existing urban structures. This case would be the same as the underground city but as an elevated one, in the air, capable of generating a new order on the existing chaos. And finally, facing a more stereotomic attitude, of excavation, appears the third group with projects of more of a tectonic nature, with lighter structures such as the Tent City of Kenzo Tange in Muna, the historical background of which could be located in the Katsura Imperial Villa.

In 1989 the Smithsons present the project of the Acropolis Place. The creation of a place where a building-museum does not compete with the pre-existing ruins. This project can be understood as a synthesis of what was suspected in 1974 as new exploration lines on mat-building.

In Spanish, the word *trama* means both grid and plot, but also weft. The writing inhabits the ambiguity suggested by its title weaving together three ideas that spring up from Alison Smithson's seminal article "How to recognise and read mat-building."

The first section also discusses the ambiguity of the word "building" if considered as either a gerund or as a noun. That is, as a process or as its outcome. The author stresses his understanding of the latter as the most interesting and productive given, the interest would not be focused on the works but more likely on the mechanisms used in their production.

The second section presents the Smithsons' understanding of architectural history as one of shared problems as well as their interest in the construction of architectural lineages. With the construction of a series of genealogical trees they become the natural heirs of Modern Architecture's former generations.

Finally, in the third section, the author questions Alison Smithson's text not only about what it says but also for what it fails to say and observes some significant absences in the examples given to illustrate the article. Furthermore, the author suggests possible ways of extending the list of examples towards the present, to three-dimensional growth forms and also the possibility of making a mat-building specific Spanish version or lineage.

Alison Smithson's inspiring and enigmatic writing has not become, as its title might have suggested, a kind of field guide to help identify mat-building but, instead, a fertile seed for its generation. Perhaps these notes might encourage some readers to pull these threads and weave them together with the warp of time.