

Mat-building and the Free Universities of the 60s

Raúl Castellanos
Débora Domingo
Jorge Torres

A number of European new universities of the 1960s foreshadow Alison Smithson's mat-building definition of 1974 (AD, sep. 1974); so much that there seems to be a close relationship between post-war higher education ideals and mat-building compositional systems.

As Karl Kiem (2008) has pointed out, during the nineteen sixties European universities are not more than institutions intended for the elite. On the contrary, they are to be opened to a wide section of population. And as a consequence, new universities of the 1960s should be designed not as a representative 'monument' but as an effective 'instrument' destined for the masses. This fact could be inferred not only from one of its paradigms, the Free University Berlin, but also from virtually all of the so-called mat-universities of those years, such as Dublin, Zurich and Toulouse-Le-Mirail projects by Candilis-Josic-Woods, or the less known but not less suggesting cases of Bochum, Marburg, Loughborough and Odense universities, to name a few. In Spain, both the "Universidad Autónoma de Madrid" and the "Universidad Autónoma de Barcelona" competitions stand out as two compelling examples of what already is an international phenomenon.

At that precise moment in recent history, uncertainty, flexibility and growth seem to be common features of both the university programmes and the mat-building just as it would be defined afterwards by Alison Smithson. As a result, the architect's task is no more a matter of imagining forms and spaces, but involves a process of dispassionate organization. That is the way in which the relational thinking of Structuralism, the close-knit interconnections of a mat-building and the new idea of a faculty (conceived to be a departmental structure which favours an open and free knowledge exchange, instead of an isolated building) take part in a coherent architectural programme.

Why should the Freie Universität Berlin be a mat-building?

Ton Salvadó

The Free University of Berlin was founded in December 1948. In September 1963 the competition for its extension was announced, which the team of Candilis Georges, Alexis Josic and Shadrach Woods won.

Shadrach Woods took time building up his ideological project, which starting from man would lead him to the city through architecture. He had published "Stem" and "Web" in 1960 and 1962 respectively. Mobility is for Woods the condition that gives character to our civilization. 'Stem' expresses the condition of place, of intense activity, beyond being a path that leads from one place to another, which is support to entities, architectural volumes and collective functions. 'Web' is the mesh, a network of different intensities, which is support to urban activities.

In his project for the free University of Berlin, four main roads join the secondary ones that support specialized activities. On this network of paths overlap the empty spaces of variable section. It is in the superposition of circulation, open spaces and uses, where the concept of 'Stem' is expressed, between an architectural construction and an urban project. It is a living organism that runs through and recognizes all the land, that displaces and reflects it on the roof, with all its texture, and rebuilding the vegetal landscape once again; that moves because it is ready for all types of transformations; that grows, because apart from all the extensive growth strategies, it also planned vertical growth, with the addition of housing for students; and that breathes, because through the courtyards is where the building is ventilated and lit.

But, why should the Freie Universität Berlin be a mat-building?

Venice's other gate

Marta Peris

In the site plan for Venice's new hospital, Le Corbusier identifies an urban route that connects Venice's historic gate: the *piazza* San Marco, with the location of the new hospital. Its strategic situation, next to the bridge connecting with the mainland, gives it the character of a city gate.

Along the way, certain areas of the city are identified that allow the comprehension of the master's interest in Venice, not only while he's developing the project but also during the visits to the city throughout his life. These areas contain some of the keys to understanding the hospital and lead us to parallel material: drawings, photographs and writings that collect episodes from Le Corbusier's memory about the lagoon city.

The project's approach from its relationship with the place runs parallel to the building organization according to internal laws of growth based on a unit of aggregated rooms. Through a local process, the building is taking shape in sequences, from inside outside. Therefore, in each step, it has the capability to adapt to different situations, whether for the internal requests of the programme or by the external conditions of the place.

Both Venice's gates polarize the city's route as much as the project strategies of both places. The *piazza* San Marco forms the boundary of the void that is maintained throughout history without hardly any changes. However, the project for Venice's hospital is based on a law system that parts from the patient's room, therefore, from the way of inhabiting.