

# Owen Luder's Town Centres of the 1960's: An Alternative Architectural Project on the City

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This paper uncovers an alternative postwar architectural project on the city—British town centres of the 1960's, and an accompanying overlooked architectural discourse. A new examination of this lost typology works to recuperate the town centre, including its specific history and projects, into a broader architectural discourse related to the city.

In the late 1940's, English towns and cities were dotted with urban voids created by an assortment of causes: from planned urban razing, post-war economic hardship, and most notably a result of World War II bombing raids. These voids had once been a rich fabric of diverse urban programs including an assortment of storefront shopping, offices spaces, schools, restaurants, cafes, and housing. Town centre projects in the 1960's provided a new architectural typology that was packed with these programs, perfect for refilling these devastated voids. They were built within a perfect storm of conditions: a shift in land-use policy away from early postwar rebuilding efforts focused on schools and housing and towards commercial development; the availability of newly acquired disposable incomes in a domestic postwar economy; and an economic boom that involved relationships between developers and architects, both eager to invest in speculative projects that experimented with new methods for rebuilding these city centres.

Town centres were characterized by their scale—larger than a single building but smaller than a city—making them distinctly different than masterplans, megastructures, and urban plans. In terms of form and program, town centres could be described as miniature cities, comprised of a mixture of uses housed in aggregated yet unified forms. Given their programmatic characteristics and their scale, town centres were distinctly contextual and were always inserted into these existing city voids. The goal of these projects was to supplement, never supplant, existing economic, cultural, and morphological urban systems, while many times fitting nicely within single urban blocks.

This paper will feature case studies by the most prolific town centre builder of England from the 1960's, Owen Luder, will

explore how he subverted mainstream discourse on the city from this time period, and in turn, provide new design methodologies for the 21st century city. It will also relate him to a legacy of town centre projects in England, and insert this typology within 20th century architectural discourse on the city.

## INTRODUCTION

“At last there is something to shout about in Portsmouth,” exclaimed the late architectural historian and critic Ian Nairn in his aptly named article “Flamboyance in Concrete.”<sup>1</sup> The year was 1967 and Nairn was referring to British architect Owen Luder's newest construction, the Tricorn, a town centre complex that spread across what had previously been a bombed out city block. The Tricorn was Luder's third town centre project and was firmly cementing the characteristics of a new typology into a series of built case studies. These projects created an alternative to the mainstream typologies of the postwar architectural project on the city, namely master plans, mega structures, and urban plans. Luder's town centres were most notably different in scale, they were smaller than their mega-scaled counterparts. Yet they answered the discipline's call for a typology that could take on the project of the city, which was a prerequisite for projects at this time given the discourse's paranoia about how it could remain relevant to a city that spiraled into what was described as “chaotic growth” among other problems.<sup>2</sup> Town centres' main distinguishing feature was their scale, which was larger than a single building yet smaller than a city. Their secret morphological weapon was the way they packed a lot of different urban programs into a form that celebrated the visual aggregation of its parts—they looked like multiple structures while simultaneously connecting into a whole. This allowed the design of the town centre to be inserted into existing cities, since these aggregate parts could be arranged and rearranged in order to nestle the projects into irregular sites. It also allowed the town centre to implant urban programs that were lacking in these urban voids, a flexibility needed to accommodate the deficiencies of their context. An examination of Luder's projects illuminates his typological inventiveness, which resisted the duplication of past architectural types in favor of instrumentalizing architectural features of the city by combining them into something new. It also illuminates a thread of architectural discourse related to the city, uncovers a lost history of the English town

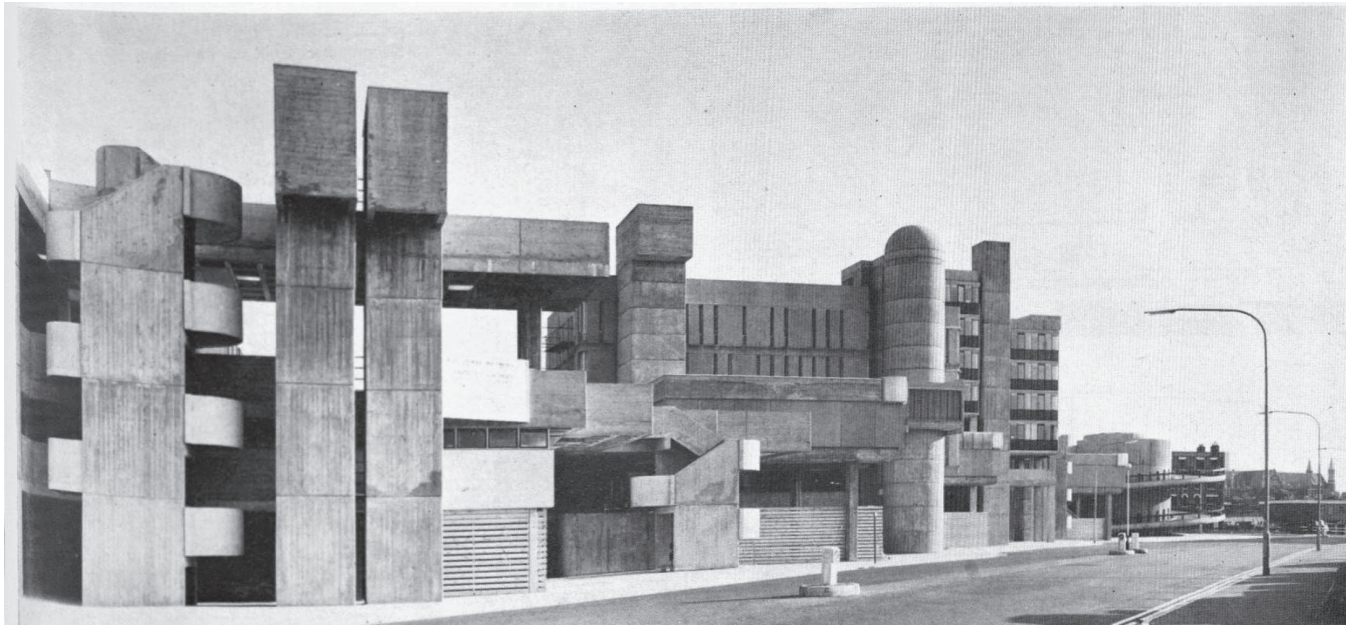


Figure 1. Owen Luder Architects, Tricorn Town Centre, Portsmouth, England, 1966.

centre, and highlights a forgotten town centre contribution by the architect and planner W. Konrad Smigielski.

### INSERTING LUDER'S TOWN CENTRE INTO THE ENGLISH CITY

Born in 1928 in London, Luder witnessed the devastation of the wartime city. By the time he graduated from Regent Street Polytechnic School of Architecture in 1948 the country was starting to rebuild housing and schools that had been lost to World War II bombing raids. During this time of reconstruction, Luder was working in architecture firms but was starting to take on smaller design projects and was slowly making the shift to owning his own design studio. By 1958, Luder was designing small interiors and hair salons, while the country started to shift rebuilding efforts from public funded projects to granting land-use permits to privately funded redevelopment projects. At this time he was introduced to the property developer Alec Colman, whose entrepreneurial drive perfectly complemented Luder's visions for larger projects. The two instantly formed a partnership. Luder started to catalog voided city centres dotting the England countryside as investment opportunities for Colman, and sites for his town centre visions.<sup>3</sup>

Very quickly, Luder identified sites in different English cities, each with a slightly different urban void, but each condition required an intervention to restore a common loss of economic activity. For example, the Coalville Town Centre was inserted into an existing city green located behind existing high street storefronts; the Catford Town Centre was also inserted behind existing storefronts but into a crumbling city block behind; in Portsmouth, the Tricorn Town Centre was inserted into city blocks where high streets had been destroyed by World War II bombing raids; and in Gateshead, the Trinity

Square town centre was inserted onto land that had already been cleared during the ubiquitous purge of "blighted" areas. Luder's inserted town centres contrasted with contemporary urban planning projects that imagined architecture's influence on the city as a cutting off, razing, and/or reorganization of the open grid of the prewar city.<sup>4</sup> Luder's centres provided an alternative: a differentiated yet contextual architectural form that connected to the exist organization of the city in order to bolster and supplement what was already there.

Each city required a design that negotiated the new town centre construction with the existing urban fabric of the city. Luder accomplished this by giving his town centres the form of a miniature city—or a structure that was larger than a single building but smaller than a whole city—and by packing his projects with the same diverse urban programs that had been lost to these urban voids. Instead of wrapping his projects in a single all-encompassing envelope, like what has become a common practice with shopping malls, he allowed each program to be articulated individually while simultaneously connecting with the other parts of the complex. Because the overall form of Luder's centres have articulated aggregation, they easily make direct connections to the parts of the city that are surrounding the site. At times this occurs by simply aligning the edge conditions of new town centre with existing store fronts. Other times direct connections are made with elevated bridges and walkways. Owen Luder's centres were inserted into existing cities, but they were always contextual, and made formal connections with their surrounding contexts.<sup>5</sup>

While Owen Luder's town centres were responding to a specific time and place, the postwar English cities of the late 1960's, he was also continuing a legacy that had been established 130

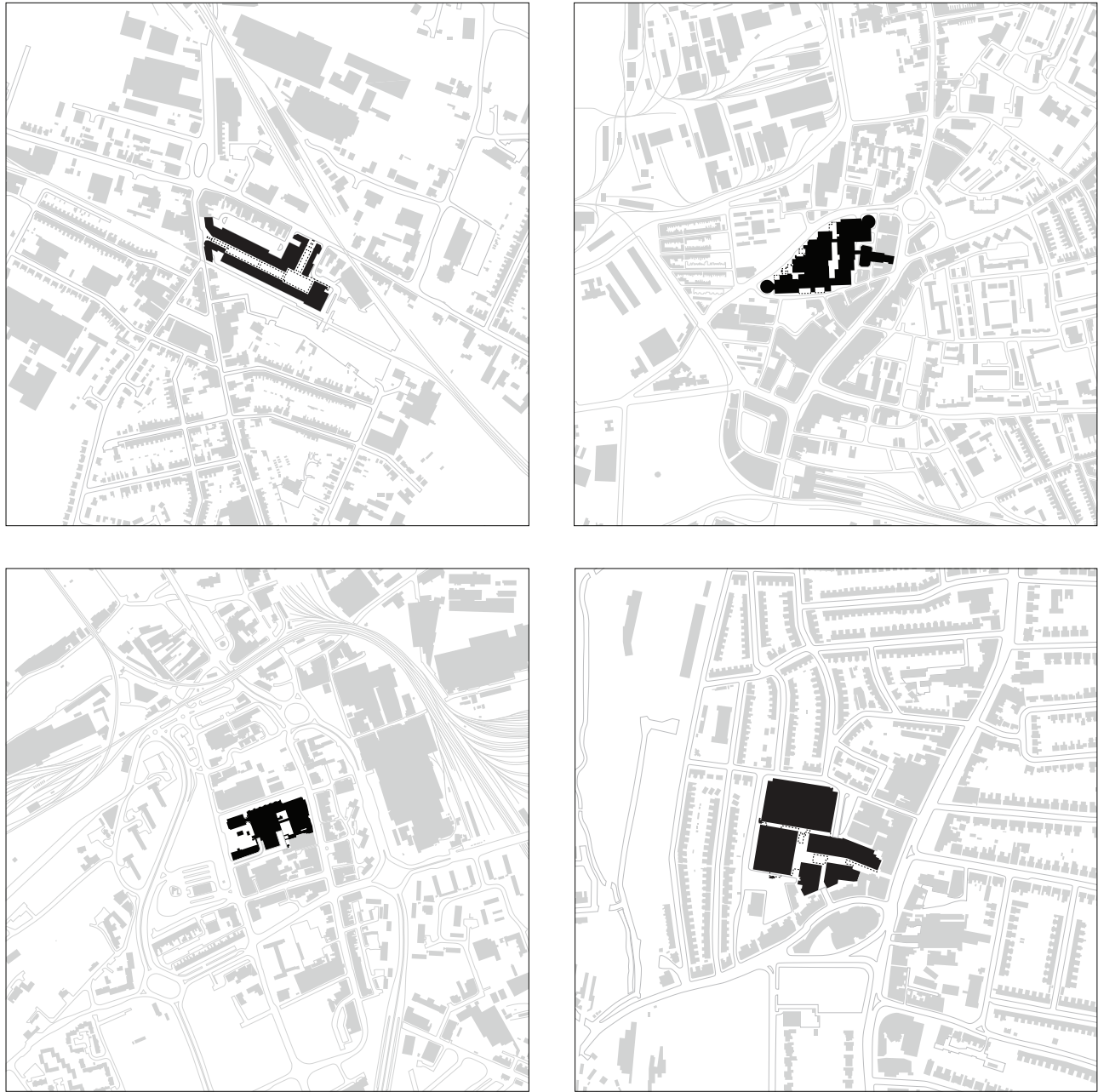


Figure 2. Figure Ground plans of Owen Luder's Town centres, showing how each was inserted into a different city. Clockwise from upper left: Belvoire Town Centre, Coalville, 1964; Tricorn Town Centre, Portsmouth, 1966; Catford Town Centre, Catford, London, 1974; Trinity Square Town Centre, Gateshead, 1967.

years earlier in Newcastle with the Grainger Town Centre. In the 1830's the architect and developer Richard Grainger purchased a 12-acre estate within the city of Newcastle. Grainger had acquired this land while property values were low, during a lull in the economic growth of the city.<sup>6</sup> His vision was to insert a new town centre into the existing yet declining swath of the city. Like Luder's vision, Grainger inserted a miniature version of Newcastle, a mixture of urban programs that created multiple connections to the existing city. In addition to placing new structures along the street to align with the

existing store fronts of the Victorian era street, Grainger created alleyways and interior arcades that criss-crossed the city blocks, creating new connections between adjacent yet disparately connected city streets. Grainger Town, as it has come to be known, injected new life into the economically voided out centre of 1830's Newcastle, while becoming the first moment that a town centre had been inserted into a modern city.

Despite its eventual construction and subsequent success, Grainger's town centre was not immediately built. In fact, his





Figure 3. Photographs of Grainger Town Centre, Newcastle, showing Clayton Street's elevation, a connecting alleyway, and an interior collade. Photograph by Jared Macken, 2015.

plan was repeatedly rejected by the city. However, Grainger was undeterred, and regrouped by making coalitions with key members of the city's planning constituency. Grainger created a partnership with the architect John Dobson, who had important funding connections in the city, and the politically influential clerk John Clayton, who could provide support with the political and planning side of the project. With these new alliances, Grainger's new town centre design team acquired permits needed to construct their vision, becoming a foreshadowing of the alliances Luder made with Colman in the 1960's.

Some of this ingenuity for negotiating the political landscape of town centre construction was expanded by Luder. Like Grainger, he had his financial connections through Colman, but he still created alliances within the local communities where his centre were built. Early in the process of building his first town centre in Coalville, Luder's project was rejected by the urban planning council. He had to not only revise his earlier design but make connections with the town's planning department.<sup>7</sup> He organized town hall style meetings in order to demonstrate the ways that his town centres could enhance the economic development of the town.<sup>8</sup> Most importantly, he fostered connections with the town's citizens, in particular the shop owners who would be located directly adjacent to his projects.<sup>9</sup> He also held informational meetings with everyone in the town invited, and made sure the newspapers covered the event so that when new plans were submitted to the city, it was a project that was already known to the citizens. This solidified the support Luder and Colman needed, moving the planning process forward with the project's eventual success.<sup>10</sup>

### THE TOWN CENTRE AS CONCEPTUAL IDENTITY OF THE CITY

Grainger and Luder were not only physically inserting a new town centre into the city, they were inserting the idea or concept of the city origin into existing cities. Before Grainger

Town, the centre was considered the city's oldest sector built up from the location where the first citizens had settled the town. It was considered a mostly informal morphology, constructed over many years. The city centre's main structures were where they met to exchange goods and services, to experience the culture and life of the city, and to visit friends and family. As these historical town centres were built and rebuilt over time, historical events and patterns of daily life became intertwined with their visual form, becoming symbolic representations of the collective identity of the citizens.<sup>11</sup> Town centres became a manifestation of the collective identity of the city.<sup>12</sup>

As such, Grainger was able to achieve the conception and subsequent construction of a new town centre through a single project within architectural, as opposed to urban, time scales. The design and construction of Grainger Town collapsed the decades, if not centuries, usually needed to construct a town centre. Thereby converting the history of the centre into an idea, an architectural concept, that could be designed into a project. The architectural features Grainger used to design his town centre—such as the now famous central shopping arcade with colonnades repeated from classical historical centres, or the much emulated elevation of Clayton Street that connects to the existing historical form of its context—came from the history of the city. Inserting the centre is not enough to conceptually create the identity of the city, it must find ways of becoming contextual, both in terms of the city it is inserted into, its history, as well as the history of the city itself. Proof of its subsequent adoption into the collective memory of its citizenry is evidenced through Grainger Town's continued success today. It has orchestrated the design of amenities not only loved by the citizens of Newcastle, but replicated in other cities.

Luder's projects also infiltrated the memories of the citizens who frequented his town centres. The Tricorn, for example, garnered an almost cult-like following, made even more

extreme by the fact that it was torn down just 30 years after its construction. While the project had fallen on the way-side of the planning commission in the later 1990's, the citizenry organized collectively, rallying around Luder's town centre, creating all kinds of cultural artifacts associated with the project,<sup>13</sup> including a scheme to renovate the centre into a new library and cultural centre for the city,<sup>14</sup> a large body of artwork venerating its architectural features, and even a book written by one of its most devoted fans, Celia Clarke.<sup>15</sup> Like Grainger, Luder's centres transform the history of the city centre into a conceptual architectural form capable of fusing itself onto the legends of the town.

This very idea of using architectural form built within the city to foster the idea of collective identity was a commonly held conviction, specifically by CIAM 8's congress in 1952. The congress's resulting book, "CIAM 8: The Heart of the City," distilled all of the postwar city problems into a single issue. "Our analytical surveys show the decay and blight of central areas and the disintegration of what was once the heart of the old cities, their Core."<sup>16</sup> Therefore, the postwar architectural project on the city had set its agenda, to theorize how the "core" of the city could be resuscitated, and with it the collective identity of its citizens, establishing architecture's role in developing and influencing culture through its built environment. However, CIAM 8 had a problem of identifying a new typology, instead falling back on the master plans that it had already utilized in past congresses.

Critics of CIAM 8 suggested a new typology should be further developed. For example, the architect and urban planner W. Konrad Smigielski claimed that CIAM 8 "courageously put forward this controversial and complicated problem of the core, revealed a great deal of confusion, and did not reach any conclusions," including a clear methodology for designing a new core. Smigielski provided an answer in 1955 with his article "The Town Centre," which identified the typology of the town centre as a precise interpretation of the core, completing what he saw as CIAM 8's deficiencies through a project he was proposing be inserted into the war torn city of Leeds.

Smigielski's town centre was designed from a catalog of architectural features he compiled from the historic civic squares of Rome, Paris, London, Spain and Poland. His favored architectural features were the promenade and marketplace, which he identified as the main edifices that created what he called "elementary social function," or the moments where a mere settlement of people cohere into a collective identity.<sup>17</sup> His projects also shared an initial set of characteristics with both Luder and Grainger's projects, Smigielski's town centre was inserted into an existing city, was comprised of multiple structures but was smaller than the whole city, was designed with architectural parts from the history of the city, and contained a diverse mixture of urban program allowing his project to fit in with the existing city.



Figure 4. *Architectural Review's* "Preview '67: Town Centres" with Moira Moira Architect's Rutherglen Town Centre featured on the front cover.

### THE PROLIFERATION OF THE TOWN CENTRE TYPOLOGY IN THE 1960'S

Following Smigielski's article and Owen Luder's projects, was a proliferation of town centres within the discipline of architecture, culminating in *Architectural Review's* 1967 feature "Preview '67: Town Centres." This article catapulted the town centre as a new architectural typology into contemporary discourse. It also positioned town centres as remedies for both the bombed-out city centres that were dotting the postwar cityscape, but also of what the article describes as the "casual drabness of daily life—the choked city streets, the fast-decaying villages" that the ever-expanding and uncontrolled 20th century city had become. The article published five projects: 1. Corby Town Centre by John Stedman; 2. Rutherglen Town Centre by Moira and Moira; 3. Runcorn Town Centre by F. Lloyd Roche; 4. Skelmersdale Town Centre by W.D.C. Lyddon; and 5. Barnsley Town Centre by Abbey and Hanson, Rowe and Partners. These five examples add another layer of town centre case studies to architectural discourse.

However, the *Architectural Review* article presented these projects with a great deal of skepticism. While the article championed the town centre projects embellishing its pages, it claimed that architects in the late 1960's were lacking real-world agency and had little chance of being able to attain





Figure 5. Owen Luder, "Shopping List for Architects," *The Architect* 3, no. 3 (March 1973): 44–45. Architectural perspective drawing by Gordon Cullen.

funding for this scale of project, let alone attain the permits needed to build such schemes. The article positioned the discussion of how to rebuild the post-war city within the constraints of post-war British land-use protocols. This cynicism was due in part to the novelty of these projects, which were difficult to define given that they were larger than a single building yet meant to be constructed within the time frame of a single project. The field of architecture had worked with projects at an even larger when designing masterplans, but these could be implemented in phases, with different sectors of the design being constructed across years, even decades. In addition, these projects contained many different programmatic uses and an assortment of individual structures that would normally be more akin to an existing section of the city as opposed to a single project. These projects were difficult to categorize within the existing permitting bureaucracy given these factors related to issues with funding, permitting of large-scale projects, and the existence of extreme programmatic diversity.

Yet Luder had already constructed three of his projects by the time the *Architectural Review* article had been published. In addition, he was able to negotiate all the possible hurdles that could come with working with the diverse constituencies of the city. Given his ingenuity, both in terms of architectural design and making the transition into construction phase, Luder shatters the skepticism of the article. Some of those projects other projects moved forward into construction phase as well, in particular the Corby Town Centre by John Stedman, who's project was met with success and has over the years been adapted to changing contemporary needs of the city it was constructed within.

### ARCHITECTURAL DISCOURSE AND THE SEARCH FOR A NEW URBAN TYPOLOGY

Owen Luder's projects become a connector between Grainger Town's historical precedent of the town centre and main stream architectural discourse on the city, specifically related to the idea of identifying a new urban typology. For example, Luder demonstrated how typology within architecture could be used as a tool of invention, not merely a way of repeating

past architectural typological styles. Architectural discourse from the 1960's and 70's contributed to this version of typology, creating a theoretical discussion that reinforces the way that Luder, Grainger, and even Smigielksi invented the new typology of the town centre.

For instance, like Luder's project, this discourse shifted away from the traditional conception of typology, which in the past had been thought of as categories of specific building forms bound to their specific uses.<sup>18</sup> Architecture had been known at times to simply repeat these historical precedents, creating either good or bad versions of the original. Instead, there emerged an argument for using different typological methodologies of categorization both as tools of analysis and sources of architectural invention. The city became the source for these analyses, a place that architecture could extract many different architectural parts, spaces, and even experiences, which in turn could be recombined to create new typologies.<sup>19</sup> The logic being that the city and architecture both shaped and influenced each other, and therefore the city could be absorbed as a part of architecture's project—a seemingly endless source of architectural form. As a result, architectural design was freed from looking outside its own discipline for legitimacy.

Typology as an analytical tool created a self-critical look at architecture spanning the time period from the enlightenment to the late 1970's. This inward-looking gaze constructed the argument that architectural production could be re-theorized by splitting the history of architectural antecedent's into two typologies. Whether it was through Anthony Vidler's theorization of a "Third Typology" as a synthesis of a dialectical argument between the primitive hut and the machine aesthetic,<sup>20</sup> or Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter's synthesis of the classical city of texture with the 20th century city's object building,<sup>21</sup> a new typology seemed just out of reach. It is perhaps through Fumihiko Maki's book *Investigations in Collective Form* where Luder finds his more explicit typological *doppelgänger*. Maki described the typology of collective form as a structure between the single building and the city, which "represents groups of buildings and quasi-buildings—the segment of our cities. Collective form is, however, not a collection of unrelated, separate buildings, but of buildings that have reasons to be together."<sup>22</sup> What is Luder's project if not an example of a collective form?

### OWEN LUDER'S TOWN CENTRE AS URBAN STAGE

By 1974, Owen Luder had completed his final town centre project, Catford Town Centre, and detailed his design ethos in an article he called "Shopping List," a set of architectural and planning ingredients for building the perfect town centre. Centering his article around the topic of shopping, Luder's list references the most ancient characteristic of any town centre: its role in solidifying access and exchange of goods, service, and cultural ideas to its citizens. That is essentially the legacy of shopping markets from the history of the city, and Luder gives

away his secret for best design practices. While a town centre's shopping district must be able to successfully deliver goods and services, it must also create ways for the consumers to collide with each other. "What is needed is the atmosphere of the market place—the hustle and bustle, the noise, visual and vocal—not standardization, regimentation, quietness."<sup>23</sup> In addition, the perfect town centre, according to Luder, does not hyper-control the way in which people use the space. Instead, he states that, "the architecture of the centre should be no more than the strong effective backcloth to the 'stage scenery' set up by the individual traders." If the centre design is the stage set, and the pedestrian the actor, then Luder explicitly casts shop architects and owners as co-directors in the same urban play. A final take on the idea of contextuality. A citizen of the city can enter into one of his projects and be transformed as their own projection of an inhabitant of the town centre, and then exit as their original self.

### CONCLUSION

Towards the end of his article extolling the Tricorn, Ian Nairn proclaimed, "This is, in fact, a complete town, and it has been given an architectural orchestration in reinforced concrete that is the equivalent of *Belioz* or the *1812 Overture*: trumpets, double percussion, cannon, the lot."<sup>24</sup> The real secret to Luder's projects is that they were not only shopping districts but miniature cities. At a time when most projects imagined architecture's influence on the city as a cutting off, razing, and/or reorganization of the open grid of the prewar city, Luder's centres provided an alternative: a differentiated yet contextual architectural form that connected to the existing organization of the city in order to bolster and supplement what was already there. The result was a miniature urbanism that experimented with how architecture could create small islands of urban form within English cities. When viewed as an alternative to the typical mega-scaled post war project, Luder's town centres have the potential to reimagine a contemporary response to the city that mainstream discourses have perpetuated for the past 60 years.

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