CIAM Meetings 1947-59 and The "Core" of the City: Transformations of an Idea

MARINA LATHOURI
University of Pennsylvania

CIAM MEETINGS AND THE CONTEXT OF RE-CONSTRUCTION

The "core" as *idea* and *place* had been part of the critical discourse of the C.I.A.M. meetings (*Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne*) from 1947 to 1959. The paper will discuss the transformations of this theme as manifestations of a changing attitude toward urbanity in the postwar era..

In its early years, the objective of CIAM, founded in 1928 at La Sarraz in Switzerland, was, in many respects, to provide a document, an index of the world to come and a new social order. The meetings after the war would accept "the contemporary situation as inevitable background" and attempt to explore the potential of the existing state of things. Their "functionalism," as the British architects Alison and Peter Smithson would later write, meant "accepting the realities of the situation, with all the contradictions and confusions, and trying to do something with them."[1]

The wartime destruction of city centers as well as the disintegration of urban life which had already begun in the late thirties due to the ongoing trajectory of modernization made necessary a reconsideration of the city center as space of civic representation and the public space as element of social practice.

In *Can Our Cities Survive?*, published in 1942 and based on the proposals formulated by the CIAM congresses of 1933 (*La Charte d'Athènes*) and 1937 (*Logis et Loisirs*), José Luis Sert declared the need for community centers to bind together increasing mobile metropolitan populations for "in the light of its new requirements and of the possibilities of modern techniques, the city appears on a new scale."[2] The *civic center* then figured as the "fifth function," a conscious expansion of the four basic urban functions — dwelling, work, circulation, recreation — that had been elaborated in the *Athens Charter*. At the same time, the "civic center," by constituting a "nucleus of urban culture," was significant not only in a "functional" but also in a "spiritual sense." This brought forward issues which would shape the postwar debate such as monumentality and symbolic representation, the question of collective values, the relationship of modern architecture to historic places and artifacts.

In 1943, Siegfried Giedion, Fernand Léger and José Luis Sert, wrote a position paper entitled *Nine Points on Monumentality*.[3] Giedion's contribution *The New Monumentality* appeared later in 1944, in the collection of papers *New Architecture and City Planning*. He argued for "newly created civic centers" which would be the "site for collective emotional events, where the people play as important role as the spectacle itself, and where a unity of the architectural background, the people and the symbols conveyed by the spectacles will arise."[4] A representational unity would then bridge technique, art and society pattern reminding of the Bauhaus aspirations, and restore to modern architecture its communicative
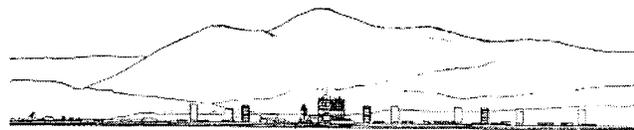

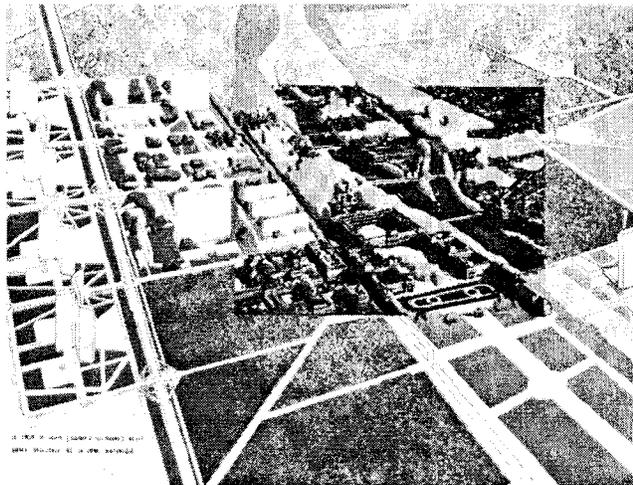Fig. 1. Saint-Dié, View of the destroyed area and elevation of Le Corbusier's Town Plan, 1945.

Fig. 2. Le Corbusier, Proposal for the center of Paris, 1937.

role. To this end, one should utilize the new means (movement, color, new materials, technical possibilities) to "open up new ways for invigorating community life,"[5] and as symbols of the "new tradition," i.e. a period with an attained unifying consciousness (*L'Esprit Nouveau*) and culture. The new aesthetic, this time infused with a symbolic and collective content, would mediate the relationship between society and man, the state and the individual.

The "re-conquest of monumental expression" according to Giedion was the "third step" (after the "single cell" and "urbanism")

in the genealogy of the formation of the "modern tradition." As he wrote: "Sites for monuments must be planned. This will be possible once re-planning is undertaken on a large scale which will create vast open spaces in the now decaying areas of our cities. In these open spaces, monumental architecture will find its appropriate setting." On the one hand, this brought forward the issue of modern architecture and its potency as a form of civic representation. On the other, the collection of civic structures in the heart of the city reinforced the center's position as an object of public admiration and spiritual elevation.

The Plan for the civic center of Saint-Dié that Le Corbusier designed in 1945 was a manifestation of the principles of the above discourse. Replacing entirely the destroyed center of the town, he created a new urban horizon with a few landmarks, saved from the bombing, figuring in the background. This would recall the Plan Voisin from 1925 as well as his later schemes for the center of the city of Paris presented at the Pavillon des Temps Nouveaux in 1937.

In these schemes demolition and re-creation were necessary steps to re-valorize the center. But Le Corbusier's idea of what retained the memory of the city once it was demolished seemed excessively abstract. In his various sketches, the city of Paris and its history were reduced to certain fixed points of monumentality, fragments of history and fragments of the urban skyline. Detached and distant, they stood in a silent void, or on the pages of his writings next to ideal platonic forms, not as signifiers of a continuity in history but as paradigms of the tradition of human creativity. Next to them he could eventually erect his own artifacts, monuments of present time, or better, signs of the future. Moreover, the de-contextualized monuments subtracted from the "real" context of Paris would permit unmediated communion between the beholder's eye and pure form, and reveal a "notion of art as a matter of perceptual purity : timeless, sequestered from the social domain, universal."[6]

The actual destruction of the civic center of Saint-Dié similar to the proposed clearing and rebuilding of the center of Paris provided the ideal condition for the projection of a new urban landscape. Whereas this project was never built the idea of what the city is about became architecture by way of urbanist metaphor in the design of the Capitol complex in Chandigarh in 1947. Nevertheless, Le Corbusier's concept of the monumental as enacted in his plans, as a detached, isolated fragment of history survived by an implicit or explicit urban wreckage, and superceding the importance of the historic environment as a whole continued to be an issue at least until the 1950s. During that period there were many debates on whether the historic heritage should be saved for its age value, for its monumental significance or for the work's quality as art and whether actual reconstruction as opposed to mere restoration is even a legitimate proposition. Interestingly, the reconstruction of Rotterdam, one of most severely destructed cities, began with a radical clearing of the damaged buildings that surrounded the public buildings and churches spared by the bombs and chosen for restoration, and ended as a prototypical example of CIAM urbanism.

"CORE" AND THE RECOVERY OF "SOCIAL GROUND"

In the opening address of the first CIAM congress after the war at Bridgwater in 1947, it was declared that the aim was "to work for the creation of a physical environment that will satisfy man's emotional and material needs and *stimulate his spiritual growth.*"[7] Besides the satisfaction of "man's emotional and material needs" the built environment this time had to "stimulate" man's "spiritual growth." This reflected a new seeing of the "man in the street," an openness as to how modern architecture and art could not only educate but also re-energize people's inventive activity. This shift of emphasis on the emotional reactions of the "common man" marked a divergence from the universal "spiritual needs" of the "man-type" (*homme-type*) that modern architecture had to define and satisfy and

"*L'Esprit Nouveau*" which attempted to emphasize the desire for a new era and identify its essential character.

Moreover, the suggestion by the MARS group (the English CIAM group) of the term "core" in place of "civic center" intended to recover a social ground rather than the abstract relations of civil reorganization which would make "the community a community and not merely an aggregate of individuals."[8]

The issue would culminate with the eighth CIAM congress at Hoddesdon in 1951. All pretense of systemization and quantifiable data collection was finally abandoned as the core was viewed largely as an image, a place where the "sense of community" is physically expressed, and not as a place that could be scientifically described. Nevertheless, despite a variety of explanations and expressions, they sought to re-define public space as an element of social practice. Giedion, for instance, in his presentation, regarded the "core" as an urban archetype, as the place where the individual can participate in the spectacle of urban life. In re-defining the heart of the city as the new meeting place for the arts, he believed that people needed new settings to act out their own dramas. Yet the rhetorical use of the monument and the call for the recovery of the representational value of the image, in the way it has been defined within Giedion's argument and Le Corbusier's projects, could no longer pertain after the congress at Hoddesdon in 1951.

The shift of emphasis on a community-based urban context this time emerged from the effects of modernity, and above all, the need to face them with a frame of social concern, rather than from a question of ideological modernity. Thus the main intention was to find a structure as a sort of approach that could correspond organically to the new social and economic functions but also sustain human and social transformation. Moreover, modernity was now infused by the uncertainty of memory, otherwise the uncertainty of relation with the past became especially intense. On the one hand, the war as an ultimate manifestation of the effectiveness of functionalism, threw into radical question the mechanized utopia of a rationalistic world along with the viewpoint of a constant victory over the uncertainty of the future. On the other, the human loss in the war drew attention to the continuity of the human experience itself and not only as manifested in artifacts. In it lies the paradox of a culture whose memory was threatened and therefore sought to institute its present. That means that whereas memory was perceived as a threat because of the "memory of loss" which emerged out of the ruins of
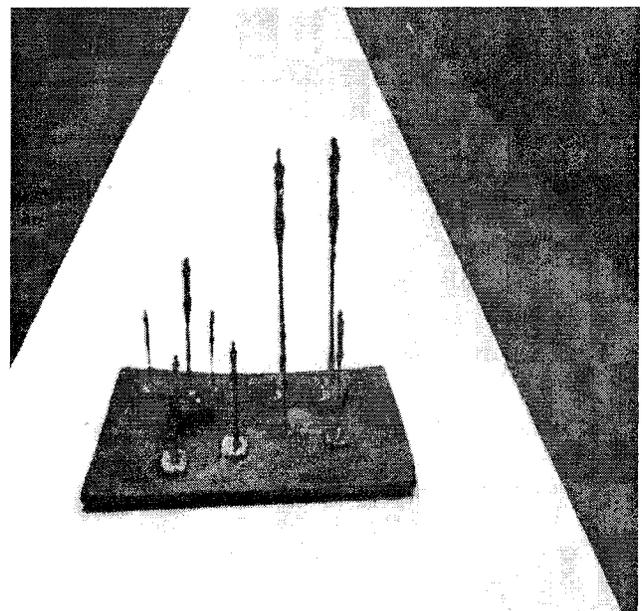

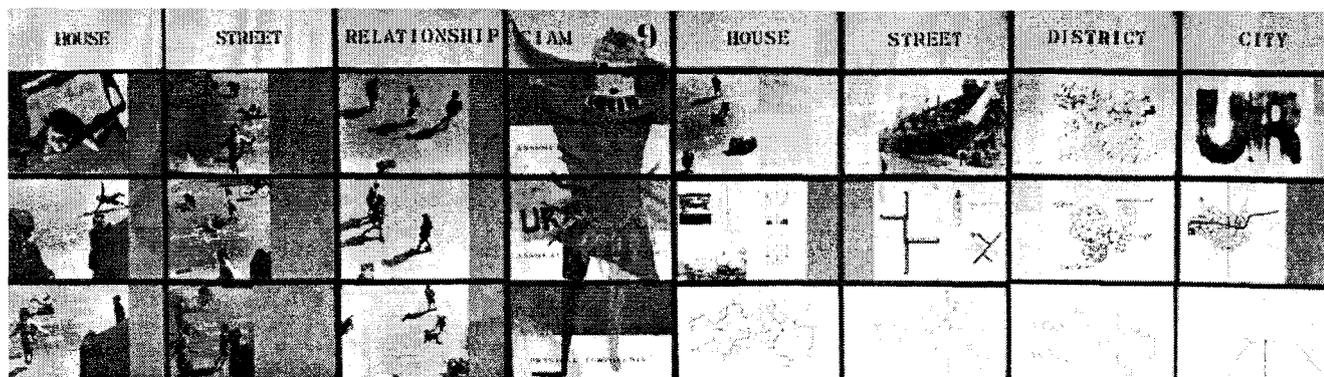Fig. 3. A. Giacometti, *Place*, 1948.

Fig. 4. Alison and Peter Smithson, CIAM Grille, 1953

the war, it still longed for a "content" and "form." But in the search for the roots of the tradition of the present, they turned to the heroic years of the avant-garde and the primitive societies opening a non-negotiable distance from the present and a memory at the point of disappearance. A threshold between the memory of an inexpressible horror and an indomitable belief in human dignity. The return to the discourse of the artistic avant-garde of the twenties, and the re-discovery of typical human patterns and elementary forms were to reinforce the essential in spatial and human configurations which the ordinary man could identify. Yet reality was still to be conceived as a progressive form moving as an entity toward the future.

In this respect, as an idea, "core" was supposed to use that transition period to overcome "barren functionalism" and provide a new starting point suggesting an "enobling optimism with a frame of social concern." They still pleaded for the continuity of modern architecture but this time through the recovery of the continuity of human experience as recognized in the primitive, the ordinary, the communal.

THE METAPHORS OF "CORE" AND "HEART"

Interestingly, the term "core" had already figured in Giedion's *Mechanization Takes Command*, published in 1948, to describe the mechanical nucleus of the house as the so-called "utility core." However applied to the city, it suggested an antithesis to a mechanistic point of view. It was used as a device to humanize environment "against the tyranny of mechanical equipment," and define a place which could receive "spontaneous and impartial performance." As Manfredo Tafuri argues in *Architecture and Utopia*, the mechanical "core-nucleus" was associated with a more static model, the "cell," which was considered as the primary element of the "city-organism." On the contrary, the "core of the city" involved the public as participant in a continual development and transformation of urban re-organization." Order then would no longer be a totality external to the human activity that creates it. The man in the street in its ambiguities rather than the paradigmatic figure of the "new man" appeared as the basis of the community, and core became "the setting for the expression of this sense of community," and "an actual expression of it."[10]

If the metaphor of "core" had been a manifestation of a certain understanding of urbanity, it is important to draw the distinction between the terms "core" and "heart" as both were used on different occasions. The publication of the meeting at Hoddesdon bears the title *The Heart of the City: Towards a humanization of urban life*. Here the persistence of the symbolic importance of the heart of the city being the source and life-giving center, on the one hand, intended to differ from an image of the city as an aggregate of distinct
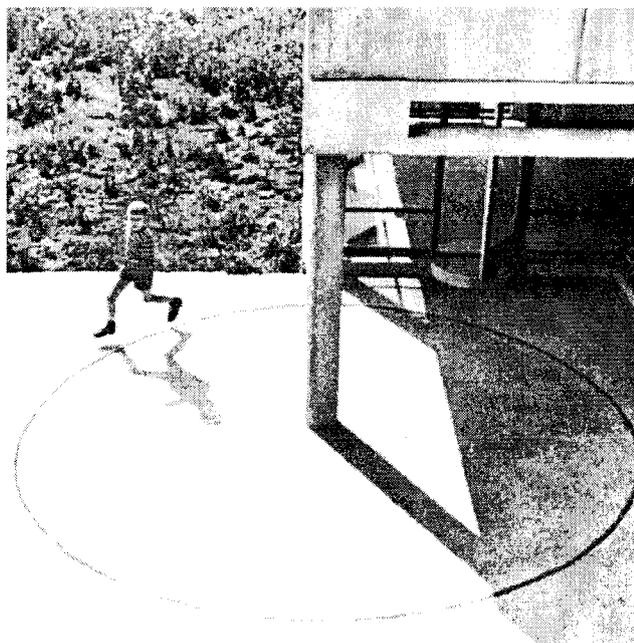

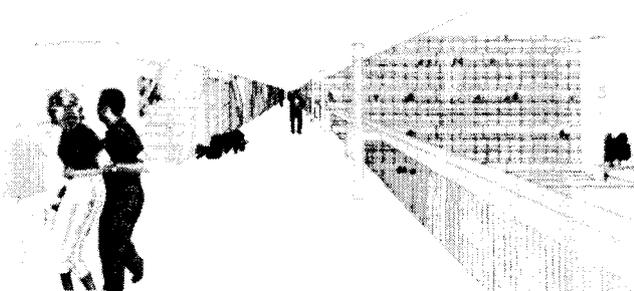Fig. 5. Aldo van Eyck, The Municipal Orphanage, Amsterdam, 1955-57

Fig. 6. Alison and Peter Smithson, Golden Lane Housing Project, London, 1952

functions advocated in the Athens Charter of 1933. On the other, it still resided in a conception of the city as an organic entity, a unified being. Le Corbusier, for instance, used the metaphor of *"coeur"* (heart) to demonstrate the center of the city. In his early scheme for a *Contemporary City for Three Million Inhabitants* (1922), the "pulsating heart of the organism" sustained a multi-level circulation network above and below the ground from which all movements from and toward the world emanate. Situated in the crossing point of the two axes, it reinforced not only the center's position but also a clear distinction between center and periphery. The theme "core," as

part of the critical discourse of the fifties, would be related to the understanding of the development in space and time of urban as well as social patterns. Core as "the part of the fruit that contains the seed, the potential energy of an organism" indicated a human and social focus rather than a geometric center.

In one of the most significant papers presented during the Hoddesdon meeting, the Dutch representative Jacob Bakema described the "core" concept in terms of relation and cooperation. In his paper "Relations between men and things," he defined "core" as the "moment" in which

> ...we discover the wonder of relationship between man and things.

> That is the moment of Core: the moment we become aware of the fullness of life by means of cooperative action.

> The developments of science have made it clear that the things we see in nature and culture are not really there. Every day we discover that the only thing that exists is relationships, and perhaps we can even say that the goal of human life is to become aware of the governing principles of a full life ... For us in CIAM the relations between things and within things are of greater importance than the things themselves."[11]

This emphasis on relationships rather than fixed forms arguably opened CIAM discussion to the ideas that would come to be associated with Team 10.

"CORE" AS THE "IN-BETWEEN-REALM" AND "URBAN RE-IDENTIFICATION."

During the CIAM's ninth congress in Aix-en-Provence in 1953, the *Grille* (*"Grille CIAM d'urbanisme,"* the form of standardized presentation developed for the meeting at Bergamo in 1949) presented by the British architects Alison and Peter Smithson was entitled "Urban re-identification." It demonstrated a "hierarchy of human associations" meant to counteract the "hierarchy of functions" of the Athens Charter. The four new categories, house, street, district, and city intended to reflect the vital sense of communal life. Later, in the "Statement on Habitat," Doorn Manifesto, in 1954, the younger generation of CIAM, who eventually designated themselves as Team 10, explained : "urbanism considered and developed in terms of the Athens Charter tends to produce towns in which vital human associations are inadequately expressed."[12] With the concept of "human association" they sought to develop a new method of understanding of urbanity based on social patterns of dwelling. The human facts and the logistics of the existing situation recognized in "all those marks that constitute remembrancers in a place and that are to be read through finding out how the existing built fabric of the place had come to be as it was"[13] seemed to have in part superseded the importance of the Master Plan.

Inasmuch as space was induced by a system of relationships, and community by a "complex of associations," the notion of the in-between extended its meaning from a place within which different realities interpenetrate to any relation between man and man, man and thing. Aldo van Eyck described it as the "man's home-realm" and a "structural device that has urban validity." The term "realm" indeed suggested the "in-between" as a separate spatial entity, the place where a meeting between two realms takes shape, the place where two regions while retaining their full individual integrity overlap. It could thus articulate "places" with distinct character and memory either within a building or a given and heterogeneous urban situation.

The "moment of core," described as the moment of occurrence of any relationship and made manifest the "in-between-realm," then became a place to receive human associations in its most complex and varied form and a device of articulation and configuration. One of its architectural applications was the "doorstep," at first used by the Smithsons to make the relation concept more concrete, and eventually turned by Aldo van Eyck into a symbol for the essence in architecture. The street was also used by the Smithsons "not only as a means of access but also as an arena for social expression."[14] In the Golden Lane scheme, designed as a competition project for a bombed site in London (1952-53), they moved the street to the exterior of the block, enlarged it and denominated it "street deck." It was intended to function socially in the manner of the street, which in working class in Britain, is the main public forum for communication, the traditional playground for children, and the only public space for large-scale sociability. From the "doorstep" to the "street deck" and the "city core," the "in-between" suggested within the Team 10 discourse, on the one hand, a concept, a sort of discursive model, by which they could break down hierarchies and boundaries, re-articulate urbanity, and at last re-identify man with his environment. On the other, it defined a place and served as structural device to articulate the relationship between indoors/outdoors, individual/collective, part/whole, constancy/change, and at last, town/region.

In a similar manner, the "housing units" (the largest cluster of dwellings which could be perceived as a coherent entity) of the "vast schemes," like a society pattern of open human relationships, could be conceived as repetitive yet no identical "visual groups" (Bakema) or "appreciated units" (Smithsons) which would relate to each other in different ways. This new visual image and the chosen theoretical statements combined sought to create a new identity, an identity that took different form according to the space-time context within which it occured yet it had to be perceived as complete at every stage of the urban growth.

The spatio-temporal identity of the core, and further, the study of the "human settlement" as a social-visual system whose cohesion lays in its internal relations in many respects dissolved the stable and hierarchical relationship between the architectural object and its surroundings into an expandable territorial fabric.

THE "CITY CORE" AS HISTORICAL CONTEXT

This approach, far from assuming a form a priori, entailed an open and unceasing dialectic exploration of possible relationships and dualities. At the Otterlo meeting, the last CIAM meeting in 1959, the name even transformed from CIAM: *Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne* to CIAM: *Groupe de Recherches des Interrelations Sociales et Plastiques.* As Bakema explained in his concluding statement, "to re-establish architecture-urbanism as *three-dimensional expression of human behavior* can be a first step in the re-integration of the art-of-making-space-structures a function of human identification with the ever extending universal space."[15]

This differed distinctly from the description that Ernesto Rogers gave of *Torre Velasca* by Belgiojoso, Peressutti and Rogers in Milan (1950-57): "in our building the contact with the ground is smoothly indicated by the structure. Its contact with the sky is satisfactorily concluded — it is not an infinite building, it is a building with a definition — the roof is its *natural* conclusion."[16] The building this time used in a rhetorical manner evinced the city as a "structural root" rather than a neutral terrain (*tabula rasa*) upon which distinct objects were being ordered or a territorial pattern which might expand infinitely.

During this meeting, the expositions and discussions took an uncommonly argumentative course. The projects presented by the Italian delegates posed the principle of continuity in respect to the history of architecture and the city as the place of "preexisting conditions" (*preesistenze ambientali*).[17] The identification of a Modern Movement tradition and its continuity, either in relation to its own principles or through the recovery of the continuity of human experience, had already been formulated as subjects for reflection.

Aldo van Eyck had already posed the question during the first CIAM meeting after the war, in 1947, whether CIAM, "accepting the *contemporary situation* as an inevitable background for practical

realization, should nevertheless adopt a critical attitude toward it," and "evolve a transformed language to express what is being analogously transformed."[18] Within the context of those words renewal had to complete and even deepen the process even if the avant-garde echo had been generalized to communicate first the civil and after the communal experience.

But the relation to the past that the "contemporary *situation*" implied was different to the one alluded to in the "preexisting *conditions*." The renewed call for the city "as it was" and for building types that slowly and collectively evolve raised once more the question of identity and continuity of modern architecture, this time radically challenging the relation of the modernist discourse to both the historic center and the new city.

NOTES

[1] Alison and Peter Smithson,, "Cluster City : A New Shape for the Community." *Architectural Review* (November 1957).

[2] Ibid., p. 209.

[3] First published in Siegfried Giedion, *Architektur und Gemeinschaft*, Hamburg: Rowohl, 1956. English edition: *Architecture, You and Me* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1958), pp. 48-52

[4] Ibid., p. 39.

[5] A note from Giedion from 1949: "les symboles qui nous concernent ne seront pas saisissables comme les symboles religieux, et seront d'autres espèces que les symboles et signes dans les sciences exactes." In one of the seminars which Giedion gave in Zurich between 1950-1952, Mondriaan's straight lines and squares are discussed as "symbolic" values. Cited in Jos Bosman, "CIAM After the War : a Balance of the Modern Movement." In: The Last CIAMS. *Rassegna* 52 (December 1992).

[6] See Norman Bryson, "The Gaze in the Expanded Field," in *Vision and Visuality*, p. 106

[7] Giedion, Siegfried, *A Decade of Contemporary Architecture* (Zurich: Editions Girsberger, 1954), pp. 12, 23.

[8] The issue of the community as opposed to organized society could be traced back to nineteenth century's writings, for instance the volume by Ferdinand Tonnies, *Gemeinshaft und Gesellschaft (Community and Society)* appeared in 1887, but the departure point here is his nostalgia for the "original community." Nevertheless he expressed an ideology which was taken over and rationalized by radical urbanism between the two wars with the housing project, or settlement, proposing an alternative model of urban development.

[9] Manfredo Tafuri, *Architecture and Utopia, Design and Capitalist Development* (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1976).

[10] From the invitation to the Hoddesdon Congress by the MARS group

[11] Published in J.Tyrwhitt, J.L.Sert, E.N.Rogers ed. CIAM 8. *The Heart of the City: Towards the Humanization of Urban Life* (New York: Pellegrini and Cudahy, publishers, 1952).

[12] Published in Alison Smithson, *The Emergence of Team 10 out of CIAM* (London, 1982).

[13] Alison and Peter Smithson, *The "As Found" and the "Found."* In: *The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty*, ed. By David Robbins (Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1990), p. 201.

[14] Alison and Peter Smithson, *Urban Structuring: Projects of Alison & Peter Smithson* (London: Studio Vista, 1967), p. 15

[15] Published in Oscar Newman, *New Frontiers in Architecture*, CIAM '59 in Otterlo (New York: Universe Books Inc., 1961).

[16] Published in *New Frontiers in Architecture*, p. 92.

[17] Ernesto N. Rogers, "Le preesistenze ambientali e i temi practici contemporanei." In: *Casabella-Continuita* 204 (Feb.-March 1955). Republished in Joan Ockman, *Architecture Culture 1943-1968, A Documentary Anthology* (New York: Rizzoli, 1993).

[18] Published in Giedion, *Architecture, You and Me*, p. 78.