

What's next? Metropolis beyond the skyscraper

New York's World Trade Center was one of the largest and most ambitious structures ever built. This complex - comprising the twin towers plus 5 lower buildings - was designed by Minoru Yamasaki in mid-to-late sixties. This was at the peak of the era of Fordism - the system of assembly-line mass production that led to modern mass society organised around huge corporations. The world Trade Center was one of the culminating investments of the long post war boom. Construction of the towers started in 1969 and was completed in 1973. The Twin Towers alone offered 1 million square meter of office space spread over 110-stories. The total centre offered working space for 50,000 people. This is equivalent to the population of a medium sized city.



Fordism in general was marked by massive endeavours. Everything was produced in bulk quantities and everything was based on standardization and reproduction. Grids, series, and the repetition of the same! The serial aesthetic of Mies van der Rohe's American period was the most pertinent expression of Fordism in architecture. Yamasaki's twin towers developed this principle to its ultimate symbolic conclusion: Even such an enormous, iconic structure like the great American skyscraper could be subordinated to the principle of repetition.

The repetition of the same operates between the two towers as well as within each tower.



The tragic destruction of the World Trade Center raises the question of what could replace it. What kind of organizational structure would satisfy contemporary business life and what kind of formal language would articulate it? What is the functionality and aesthetics of the city of contemporary business?

The epoch of the skyscraper is over - not primarily because of concerns for security - but because the sky-scraper's organizational structure is too simple and too constricting. Towers only grow in one dimension. The strict linearity of its extension accounts for its characteristic poverty of connectivity. Towers are hermetic units, which are themselves arrays of equally hermetic units (floors). These features of linearity and strict segmentation are anti-thetical to contemporary business relations as well as to contemporary urban life in general. Much higher levels of complexity are required to spatially order and articulate contemporary relations.

Architecture as Urbanism

The demise of fordism and of the skyscraper as its urban archetype does not imply the retreat from the large scale nor from high density. Both bigness and density are increasing within the contemporary metropolis.

The exhaustion of the historic city centers - there are simply not enough of them to satisfy the insatiable need for contemporary urbanity - and the bankruptcy of comprehensive city planning in the face of market uncertainty, means that architecture has to carry the burden of urbanism within large single developments. Architecture has been mostly overburdened with this task as is testified by developments like Broad Gate or Canary Wharf in London. However new spatial models should be able to organize higher levels of complexity and integrate significantly more simultaneous programmatic agendas and divers life-processes.

But how can appropriate spatial patterns be invented and how can the required spatial complexity be build up?

From Analysis to Synthesis

The concrete task is to devise strategies that could produce large buildings that fulfill the function of urban communication and exchange.

We will project an entity of a higher order than what one usually considers as "building" or even "ensemble", an entity that recreates within itself approximations of the multiplicity, complexity and effectiveness of the urban.

We propose to start with an initial exercise in urban analysis to assemble the programmatic ingredients, possible spatial patterns and generative formal principles that might be brought to bear in the synthesis of a large urban architecture.

Each team of students should choose, analyse and model an intriguing urban phenomenon from anywhere around the world. The only requirement being that the phenomenon inspires curiosity, has a certain level of complexity and promises to lead to discoveries that might be utilisable in the synthetic stage of the project.

The analysis is not geared towards documentary purposes. It is rather generative and should focus on the extraction, abstraction and re-formulation of key principles that might become the driving force of the later project. While these principles might be primarily principles of formal (spatial) organisation the analysis should reveal the functional performance of the spatial structures in question. Form-function relations remain primary in architectural research as the architect operates as a formal innovator in response to given social tasks and programmes.

The design phase (synthesis) of the project is itself divided into two parts: the systematic and the pragmatic phase.

First abstract models are to be devised on the basis of the principles extracted from the analysis of the chosen urban phenomenon. Here a theme can be systematically explored through posing extreme possibilities, series of systematic variations, exhaustive recombinations etc.

Then - once an abstract system or prototype has been developed - a concrete site can be investigated to test the pragmatic implementation of the system/prototype.

Here we will finally turn to the Hudson River site of the former World Trade Centre in Down Town Manhattan. We will tackle this symbolically significant site only after we have gathered sufficient resources and after we are satisfied that our intervention has a chance to articulate the essential operations and ambitions of the contemporary metropolis with the same poignancy and profundity that made the world trade centre such an effective symbol of modern civilisation.

End.