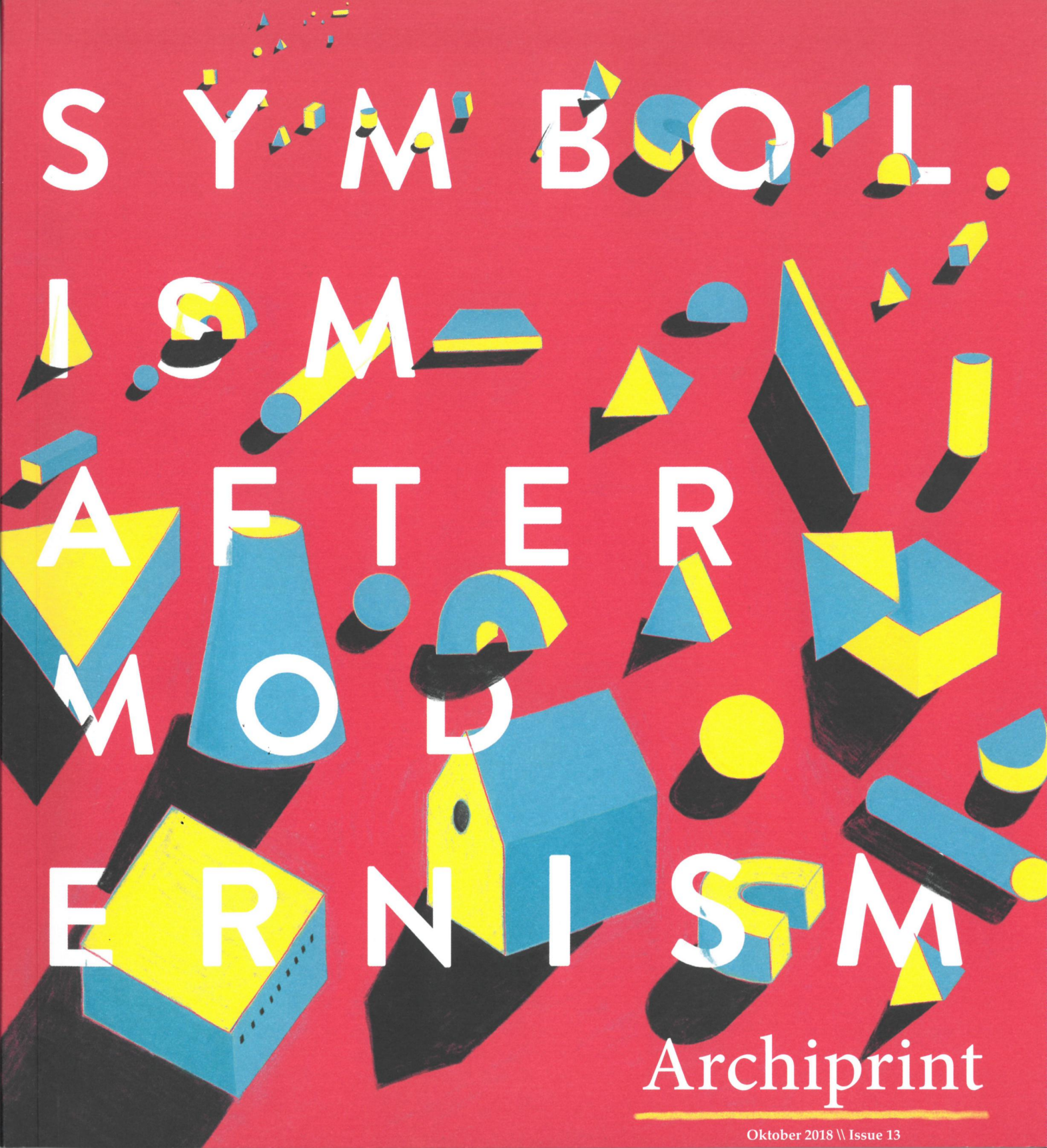

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From the Building as City to the Building as Landscape

It's the End of the World as We Know It (and I Feel Fine)[1]

The world around us is often classified in polarities. The advantage of clear opposites is that they are unambiguous and easy to understand. In architecture there is a clear distinction between modernism and postmodernism. Here it is assumed that there is an unambiguous succession of the modernist time to the postmodernist time. In my view, these concepts are not fitting. They are container concepts that are too big, in which several, very distinguishable movements are located.

Moreover, the simplification of reality with the notions of modernism and postmodernism is focussed too much on appearance and does little justice to something that is much more essential to architecture: the spatial morphology. If we consider architecture from a division in spatial morphology then there has never been any difference between modernism and postmodernism. However, we do see a difference in approach to spatial morphology over a much longer period of time.

This runs through the different style periods and is still present today. In this article I will explore this difference and defend this proposition.

First, the notion of spatial morphology. Morphology literally means 'the study of forms'. By spatial morphology we mean the science of spatial form or, in other words, the approach to spaciousness. Every designer is

presented with the choice of spatial morphology during a design challenge. There are two extremes: on one end of the spectrum the rigid and well-defined structure and on the other the free and open structure – and all the possibilities between the two. One of the most important guiding factors in this is the extent to which we can anticipate the final use of a building at the moment of designing.

The rigid, well-defined approach assumes that the function of a building is known beforehand. It is based on clear types of buildings that are constant. Moreover, it assumes that our built environment is based on a composition of these distinguishable building types, with clearly built up cities as a consequence. The open, free approach assumes that the final function and use of a building cannot unambiguously be determined beforehand, and by trying to we will frustrate the functioning of the building. This approach therefore leaves the idea of clear types behind and moves towards a more universal spatial morphology. It yields buildings where various uses are possible that can also alter over time.

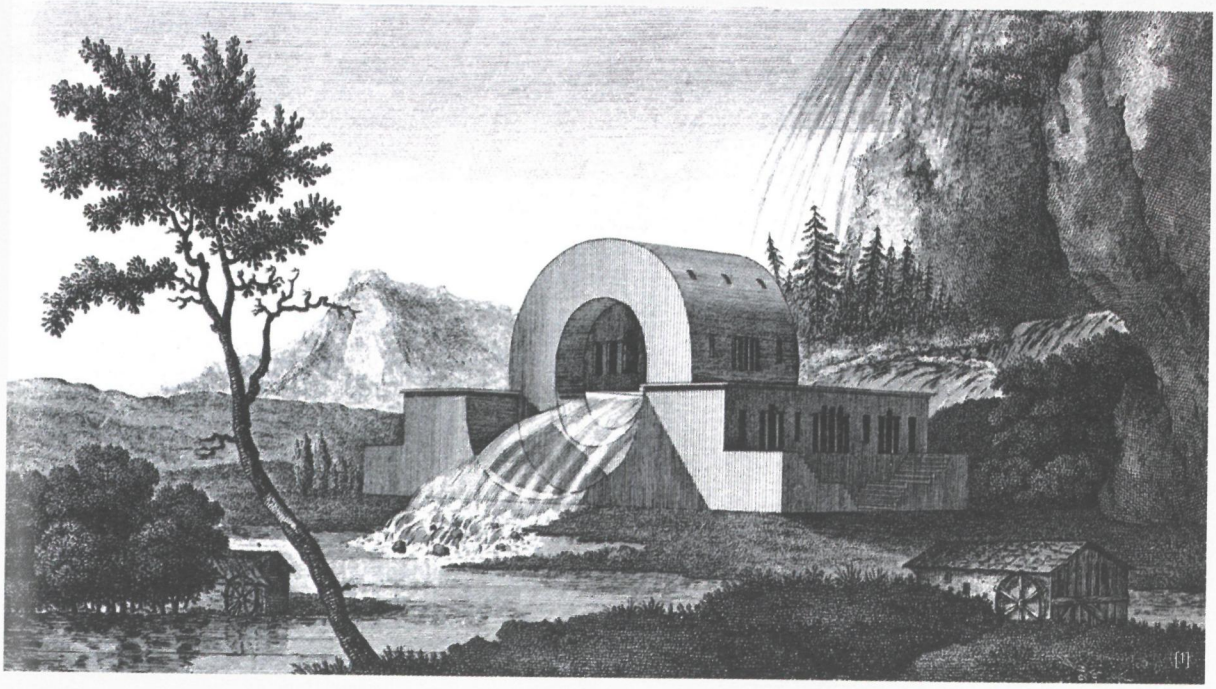
If we make a detour towards anthropology, two different cohabitation forms can be identified. The rigid, well-defined building approach with clear types could be compared to an endogamous society. In an endogamous society one marries within the group. This assures certainty, continuity and safety. Traditions and rituals are clear. The open and free building approach can be compared to an exogamous society. In an exogamous society one marries outside the group. This means that new influences are allowed into the group with the result that traditions and rituals are subject to change. An exogamous society thus lets in more uncertainties than an endogamous society. The development of both cohabitation forms over time shows that exogamous societies are constantly strengthened by new influences and can handle change well. Endogamous societies can cope significantly less with change and are weakened by inbreeding.[2]

Back to architecture. By applying this comparison to spatial morphology, you could compare the rigid approach with clear building types to an endogamous society. This approach assumes that the function of a building is explicit. Just as an endogamous society has difficulties coping with change, that is also the case for this approach. The question is: Are building types well-defined or do they constantly transform? We can compare the open and free approach to the exogamous society. Here the continuous change is the starting point of the building approach. Types are thus not specific and transform constantly. With every design we must choose a place between these two poles in the design spectrum. This does not mean that it is a choice for one or the other; it is about mixing both in one design. One design will be more rigid and the other freer, and many will be intermediate forms. It is therefore a spectrum and not a polarity.

In his seminal work *Complexity and Contradiction* (1966), Robert Venturi describes buildings using their layering. He makes a distinction between buildings that are 'both-and' and buildings that are 'either-or'. This book is always seen as a postmodernist manifesto, which is unjustified in my opinion. His statement is that buildings that are part of modernism are too often seen as 'either-or', as rigid. He makes a plea for buildings that

are 'both-and', loose. The misunderstanding that arises here is that because *Complexity and Contradiction* is a criticism on rigid modernism, it is seen as a postmodern statement. That is invalid. Venturi in fact describes the spectrum between rigid and layering, or in other words between well-defined and free. To clarify this, we will look at three examples from history. If we imagine that the rigid approach is to the very left of the spectrum and the free approach to the right, we see the following.

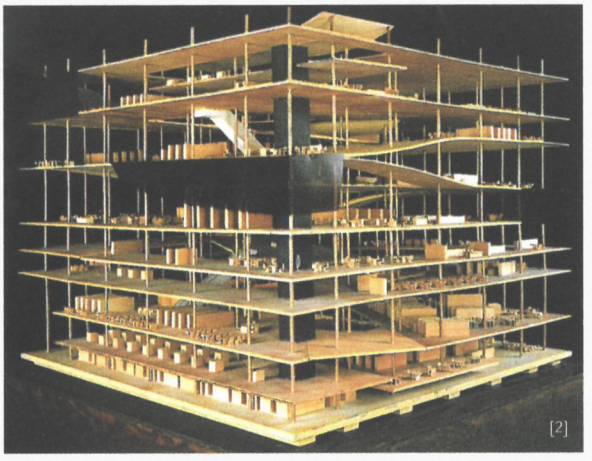
The work of architect Claude Nicolas Ledoux (1736-1806) is located on the left side of the spectrum. He spent his last 20 years designing the ideal city Chaux. The Industrial Revolution, which started around 1750 in England, resulted in the rise of a great amount of new building types (train stations, factories, expo halls for the new designs, telegraph offices, and so forth). For Ledoux this revolution was the reason to design an ideal city based on new building types as building blocks. A great example of this is Chateau Maupertius (1773-1779),[3] the home for the guards of the De Loüe River. Water power was an important source of energy for the industry and it needed to be safeguarded. The uniqueness of what Ledoux did in developing his new types is that he always gave them a poetic meaning. In the case of Chateau Maupertius, the well flows through the house of the guards, which is organized around it. Chateau Maupertius can be seen as a new building type that can be applied to every source of water power that was needed for the new industry.



Another good example of an approach with a well-defined morphology, in this case one of a bathhouse, is Peter Zumthor's Therme Vals of 1996.[4] What makes Zumthor's design special is that he is still able to realize an innovative freedom without abandoning the type. This is accomplished by a layered morphology. The rigid 'either-or' of a bathhouse consisting of an indoor pool and an outdoor pool gets a second layer with 'both-and'. This works as follows. When entering the bathing area you will indeed see an indoor pool and an outdoor pool surrounded by terraces. However, at second glance there appears to be a second, hidden bathing world. The columns that surround the pools turn out to be a bathing area in itself. Each with its own theme. The spatial morphology is layered and is no longer unambiguous. What seemed a clear and structured world at first glance unravels into an adventure. A unique hidden pool turns out to be a space that you reach indirectly and that has unique acoustics. This results in the attendees being seduced to make sounds, which they do. Quietly humming already has a large consequence. I have witnessed whole concerts of humming people that did not even know one another. One can say that the Therme Vals stays within the morphology of the bathhouse type, but that this has been enriched by the adventurous layering.

A design that is located at the other side of the spectrum is Sir John Soane's Bank of England of 1851.[5] This neoclassical building has a unique free spatial morphology. The floorplan is a sequence of large and small halls and courts where the financial traffic takes place. Every room is classical in its design, clear and unambiguous and surrounded by columns and niches. What makes this floorplan free is the unexpected arrangement of rooms. Take the round hall or 'Rotonde'. It has eight identical niches. Four on the axes and four on the diagonals. Four of the niches are entrances to the next rooms, but these deviate from the symmetrical design of the hall. Three of the entrances are on the axes and one is on the diagonal. In this way the sequence of niches and openings becomes asymmetrical and the classical routing is broken. This takes place in every hall so that a game is always played between the classical arrangement and the routing that again denies this, which causes the spatial morphology to become free instead of rigid.

An even more free morphology is the competition design by OMA/Rem Koolhaas for the Bibliothèque Jussieu of 1992.[6] In this prizewinning, sadly unrealized design, the library type has been turned on its head. The design is a system of folded floors that form a continuous space. In this system a diverse landscape of open and more closed off spaces arises. It is best to look at the design as an autonomous architectural structure without a function. Here, the fact that it is a library did not lead



[2]

the design. The fundamental statement of this design is that a challenging architectural world has been created apart from the function, which could accommodate a lot of different uses. By doing so it separates itself from thinking in types and creates a completely free spatial morphology. To stay with Parisian libraries, you could say that Labrouste's Bibliothèque National (1859-1875)[7] is the opposite of Jussieu and is a well-defined type as library. A classical central reading hall surrounded by books. An ode to literature and the sciences.

The work of Herman Hertzberger is also characterized by its free spatial morphology. One of his most well-known buildings, the headquarters of Centraal Beheer in Apeldoorn of 1972,[8] is based on the idea of 'a building as city'. Here the beforehand not exactly known use is organized in a strong composition. The building is divided into 56 towers with voids between them. There is a centre that consists of a cross-shaped street with several squares. The building has an open structure where meeting others is the central theme. Two other important designs by Hertzberger are the schools on the Apollolaan in Amsterdam from 1983.[9] In these he transforms the complete layout, the type, of the primary school. Up to then primary schools had existed of (large) hallways with class rooms and an auditorium, possibly stacked but even then connected by a central staircase. The two schools on the Apollolaan are the first with a free spatial morphology, where what happens is not exactly set in stone. A famous part is the bleacher stairs, used for the first time in Dutch schools. This staircase is an excellent example of a specific space that challenges people to use it differently.[10] It is part of the routing, but at the same time a place to linger. Large parties can come together here, but also just a few students. The bleacher stairs is in its apparent simplicity an excellent example of a free morphological approach.

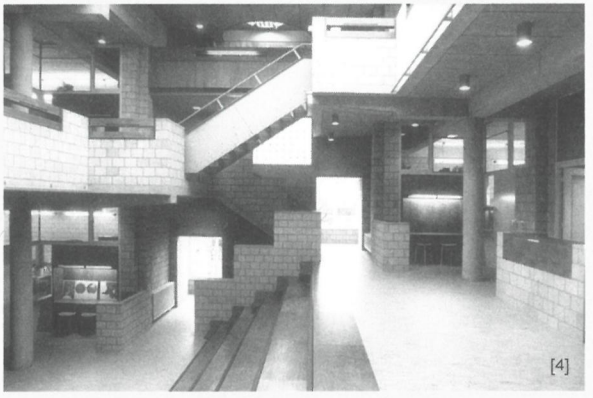
If we look at the campus of the Eindhoven University of Technology, we see the same development taking place. If we look at the faculty Flux (2014)[11] we see that it is a completely different building than, for example, the original main building. The main building was designed by architect S.J. van Emden in 1954.[12] There were no computers and the complete process of the faculty took place within the building. One can say that the function was an established fact and that the type was

[3]

leading. Now, 60 years later, we live in a completely different world. The process of a faculty is now largely not dependent on the building and can take place everywhere. Only specific research is still connected to the building. This causes the use of the building to change entirely and human interaction, the encounter, to become increasingly important. That is what we must design. The classical scientist in a closed room surrounded by stacked files disappears. Science can take place anywhere, even outside the building. The transfer of knowledge remains. The classical faculty with hallways and rooms becomes an open structure. The well-defined, unambiguous faculty has become an open and free faculty.

If we look at the city we could also say that the use of the city is changing from well-defined to freer. Before the smartphone we would read the city in a spatial way. The city would tell us where we could find which functions. To be able to function every city also had more or less the same morphology. A centre with the most important functions and squares, with an adjacent nightlife area and several neighbourhoods surrounding that. With the use of the smartphone the navigation through the city is changing. We no longer read the city spatially but from our screens. In this way, for example, pop-up restaurants that alter their location each time like Baut in Amsterdam are able to exist. The use of the city is thus becoming more adventurous. The same restaurant, in varying locations. The city actually changes from an urban fixed whole to an fluent urban landscape. Just as exogamous societies are strengthened by adding new blood, this technical development also strengthens the city. Back in the day, you would arrive in a city, for example at the Gare du Nord in Paris, and would look for a hotel. There is a reasonable chance of ending up in a decrepit hotel in the neighbourhood. The city would kind of tell you where to find the hotel. Now we have already found the hotel. We know what to expect and have been able to make a better consideration between price, quality and location. All of this because we are using the city in a different manner. A decrepit hotel cannot survive in such an environment and therefore must stay up to date. The hotel owner cannot just assume that Gare du Nord will send enough people into the city and that in that way his hotel will be filled. The technical development can thus be seen as a free power that challenges the city and strengthens the way it functions. We see the same thing happening around us with taxis. The emergence of Uber – for good or for bad – eventually pushes the old taxi drivers to redevelop and innovate. It is always called disruptive, but perhaps we should see it as an improvement, bringing with it new external influences. Free and fluent.

What does this mean for architecture and architectural education? Thinking in building types makes increasingly less sense and is also increasingly less relevant. We have seen that the Industrial Revolution was the reason for the



[4]

emergence of a great number of new building types. Now, 150 years later, We live in a time of digital revolution and are seeing exactly those types being replaced, blended and disappearing. We can no longer build on the well-defined types and have to develop freer concepts for our buildings. The spatial morphology is thus also subject to the disruptive powers of our time. This will eventually have a strengthening effect on our designs. Buildings will become more and more conditioned free spaces where anything can happen. We as designers set this condition in which human interaction will become more leading for our designs. That is what we must design. Because of this, architecture will become more and more a social science and less a technical one. Where the *Forumgroep* with Hertzberger and Van Eyck[13] still assumed the 'building as city' one could say that we are now at a time of the 'building as landscape'. Cities have a structure in which buildings are replaceable infills. Landscapes are free fields without structure. You could, for example, compare it with a camping or a beach, a city without structure. We are more mobile, can do more everywhere and are thus less dependent on the built environment. Thinking in strong architectural concepts has been overtaken by these developments. We have to let go of the idea of being able to anticipate the uses of buildings. We have to move towards new strong concepts that are not based on function and use, but focus on composing spaces in which a freer world is manifested. That is the new challenge for architects. To go from rigid to free and from city to landscape. |

[1] Chateau of Maupertuis, House of supervisors of the source of the Loue, Chaux, France (1804). Wikipedia Commons / Public Domain. Retrieved from https://commons.wikimedia.org/wiki/File:Chaux_-_Maison_de_surveillants_de_la_source_de_la_Loue.jpg
[2] Library of Jussieu, Paris (1992). OMA Rem Koolhaas 1987–1998 (p: 132)
[3] Centraal Beheer, Apeldoorn. Reproduced with permission ©AHH
[4] Apollo scholen, Amsterdam. Reproduced with permission. ©AHH

1. R.E.M., 'It's the End of the World as we Know it (And I Feel Fine)', 1997.
2. The antropological comparison between endo-/exogamous societies and architecture stems form 'Vakgroep 13' of the Architecture department of TU Delft, where Aldo van Eyck and Herman Hertzberger were professors during the 1970s and 1980s. Claude Nicolas Ledoux, Chateau Maupertius, Chaux (1773-79).
3. Peter Zumthor, Therme Vals (1996).
4. Sir John Soane, Bank of England, London (1851).
5. OMA/Rem Koolhaas, Jussieu – Two Libraries, Paris (1992), competition.
6. Henri Labrouste, National Library of France, Paris (1859-75).
7. Herman Hertzberger, Centraal Beheer, Apeldoorn (1968-72).
8. Herman Hertzberger, Montessorischool and Willemsparkschool, Amsterdam (1983).
9. The term polyvalence is often used for this. A polyvalent space is a specific space which aims to facilitate diverse use.
10. Herman Hertzberger and Laurens Jan ten Kate, Flux TU/e, Eindhoven (2014). S.J. van Embden, Main building TU/e, Eindhoven (1954).
11. The 'forumgroup' refers to the editors of the architectural journal Forum during the period 1959-1964. This group of editors consisted of Jaap Bakema, Aldo van Eyck,
12. Herman Hertzberger, Dick Apon, Gert Boon, Joop Hardy and Jurriaan Schrofer. They were critical of CIAM's modernism and endeavored to create a new architectural style. They originated from Team X, a group of architects who created a schism within CIAM by challenging its doctrinaire approach to urbanism.