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Company Strategies and Architectural Demand

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In France, the 1980s have witnessed a renewal of architecture as a vehicle for corporate communication. However, this context — a favourable one for architects — should not be allowed to mask the diversity of company situations and of companies' relations with architecture. The premises which companies occupy may perform various functions: housing the company, facilitating production and work processes, promoting an image. According to their size, the sector to which they belong and their own culture, companies may be primarily concerned by one or another of these different functions and will approach them in a particular frame of mind. Thus every operation of new construction, or of installing in existing premises, is the result of particular motivations. Each of them bas a correspondingly specific process of building elaboration, design and realisation[1].

HOUSING THE COMPANY

For a company the basic function of a building is to put a roof over its head. This represents a non-productive financial burden. The company's management will see it as its duty to reduce this to a strict minimum. Only certain specific situations will bring a company to invest in building, that is to say to immobilize non-productive capital; premises for activities with high-level equipment constraints; buildings situated outside zones where the market already provides a good supply of accommodation to rent (i.e. outside the major regional metropolitan centres). For small firms, investment in new buildings may also represent a real estate guarantee for bank loans. Where these situations do not apply, companies will generally prefer to rent new or old buildings, thereby economizing on investments and, at the same time, assuring their future mobility for other location choices.

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This sector of demand emanates from companies' estate departments, also devoted to cutting down on all non-productive expenses. Corresponding with the priority thus accorded to real estate motives, the design and production of company premises may follow one of several channels.

Building contractors
The first of these channels is responsible for the assorted umbrella or box-like constructions, simple sheltering envelopes, which dot the countryside with their rusting grey silhouettes or their gaudily striped cladding. Here, metal construction firms and local building contractors reign supreme. Company directors are relieved of a task for which they have little interest. The building programme comes down to three elementary factors: surface, cost, delivery date. No room here, then, for the design of space or for an architect... apart from the remuneration of his or her signature, necessary on the building licence.

Property developers
The second channel, satisfying companies' elementary estate demands, is dominated by speculative developers specialized in business premises. Low costs and rapid delivery are still the key factors, but this channel nonetheless has its specific characteristics. It is based on a highly structured triangular relationship between the investors, developers and clients.

With careful preparation, the developer will define a building product likely to appeal to the clientele. The essential criteria are site location, divisibility of the premises and easy management of the whole. The client company is thus a party to the transaction between the developer and the investor. The design of the building itself will be more influenced by the conditions of this transaction than by the company's specific requirements. The divisibility of the premises into units of variable size, for example, will allow for only limited flexibility. The drastic limitation of shared spaces certainly results in lower service charges but also reduces the possibilities for internal communication and rejects meeting areas, at best, to the entrance hall and, at worst, to the car parks.

The last characteristic of these *real estate products* is that most of the costs of fitting out the interior are left to the client company. These can be very high, and not only where industrial activities are concerned. For offices the cost of installing electrical and electronic equipment can be as high as the original construction costs themselves. In such rented accommodation, the company's capital outlay for interior fitting has no return. So, renting premises may allow for greater mobility, but there is a price to pay for this advantage.

Furthermore, since the design of such premises is focused on marketing preoccupation, the lessee company may also come up against functional

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drawbacks. These stem from the fact that the other roles that building may play in the life of a company are not taken into account. Premises of this sort are certainly founded on economic reasoning, but it is that of the developers and the investors. From the company's point of view, the reasoning is of financial rather than an economic nature.

These different priorities have given birth to an original building type for company premises. There are variants within this type, depending on whether the building is for workshops, office space or mixed use, but all these variants conform to the primary requirement of *divisibility*.

Architectural quality, in a broader sense, is not necessarily inconceivable for this type of building. Certain advances are to be noted in the field of energy efficiency. Some projects have also succeeded in integrating considerations of image. Here, common wisdom is to avoid shocking the tastes of a potential client. Some clients, however, may be attracted by an aesthetic statement which contrasts with the usual drabness. Architectural treatment may show some originality then, even if this remains limited to external envelope of the building.

Local authorities

Halfway between developers and companies, local authorities are increasingly active in France in the field of company accommodation, either development zones or individual buildings. This sector is witnessing the emergence of experimental operations from the points of view both of building programme and design. Purpose-built premises may be offered to a particular company or, frequently, also general-purpose developments may be made available as rentable accommodation for a wide range of companies.

The developer's investment calculations are still present but other, wider preoccupations may also intervene: the valorisation of a district or a town, or the aim to offer a quality response to companies' demands. For architects, this is an important sector, offering new possibilities for collaboration with public authorities, already frequent in the fields of town planning, public buildings and social housing.

RATIONALIZING PRODUCTION

A second function for a company building is to contribute towards business efficiency. This is particularly the case in premises housing activities with a high equipment content, linked to the nature of the manufactured products, the machinery or the manufacturing processes.

In these cases, the company regards its building not merely as an expense, but rather as a resource which, when carefully thought out, may contribute to increased productivity. Within companies, demand of this sort is expressed by engineering managers, production managers and all those who have some

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direct responsibility for the running of production units.

The building-as-a-tool is designed, then, with the intention to rationalize flows of material and energy distribution, and the layout of machines and production zones. This channel for the creation of premises calls on two complementary fields of expertise: manufacturing knowledge and building knowledge. Production engineering and construction engineering play a determining role in the briefing and design of the building. These are highly structured professional sectors, sometimes — when it is a large one - forming departments within the company itself. For smaller firms, however, the spatial allocation of production activities is less likely to be the work of specialists.

For building designers, this channel opens up opportunities to undertake a functional study of how activities are to be structured, a study that may have real influence on the way space is organized. For architects, their task of design is enlarged to include a parallel outline brief, in order to offer the best fit for the company's needs.

Particularly when the technology or the running of production undergoes fundamental changes — for example steel production or nuclear power stations during the 1960s — the design of a building as a working implement may involve considerable innovations. These new concepts, however, will still tend to have a technicist approach to the workplace. The ingrained ordering of spaces is only called into question when these spaces themselves play a direct part in the production processes.

In some large companies, and in certain smaller firms too, considerations to do with the comfort of he work environment and with the social life of the company may have a real impact on the design process, but generally these considerations are only of secondary importance. The physical working conditions may be improved, but aesthetic and social considerations will only came into play outside zones of work. Elsewhere, none of these elements is taken into account. This technicist approach is particularly remarkable in the premises of a company in Lorraine, frequently cited as a model of the fully automated factory. The few manned work stations which remain on the factory floor are completely neglected from the hygiene and security points of view, and this even though the company concerned was having to improve communications and even if the exterior of the building asserts an image of aesthetic research.

The new building of the French Ministry of Finance in Paris also shares this technicist approach: everything hinges around the computerized information handling networks, whilst the workplaces themselves — partitioned office space — reproduce the most traditional of layouts. Here, too, it is the outer envelope of the building with its massively monumental style, which is charged with offering the evidence of architectural investment.

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FACILITATING WORK

Work in a company always associates a technical system with human labour, though, of course, the respective importance of each may vary enormously. Since the 1970s the direct correlation between productivity and a good work environment has been widely recognized, both by large and small scale firms.

Working conditions may be given more or less attention. The requirements of security and comfort are most frequently taken into account. The development of ergonomics, coupled with pressure from the trade unions, have contributed to the design of work stations and work places better adapted to the workforce.

The social conditions of work intervene in two complementary fields: that of work organization, regulating the division of power and tasks, and that of social relations, both within and outside actual work activities. Both of these fields may give rise to particular architectural solutions which are adapted to the company's objectives. Clearly, however, the fundamental choices in these areas are very rarely called into question by management. On this point it might be useful to recall, once again, the examples of the buildings of Centraal Beheer at Apeldoorn, and the Volvo plant at Kalmar; not to put them on pedestal as models to be imitated (role which neither of them seek), but rather to underline once more the areas and approaches in which their design was innovatory. For Centraal Beheer, the desire to modify the life style of the employees when the firm moved, led management to call upon the competence and the imagination both of an architect and of the employees in the search for new solutions.

In the Volvo case, the aim was to undertake a complete re-think of the socio-technical production system, in order both to enhance its competitively and to make it more acceptable to the Swedish labour force with its ever higher cultural aspirations. In this case too, innovation came out of team work, the multidisciplinary team involving researchers, engineers, trade unionists and architects responsible for the outline brief and design of the project[2].

In France — encouraged, in particular by the ANACT *(Agence Nationale pour l'Amélioration des Conditions de Travail)* — a similar multidisciplinary approach, involving consultation of employees, has witnessed the application of the triple equation between productivity, working conditions and architectural quality. Within companies, the consultation of the workforce is developing today in the particular contexts of quality circles, expression groups or discussions with trade unionists or elected representatives of the personnel. From an architectural point of view, however, and for a variety of reasons, initiatives of this sort are more frequent during refurbishment projects on existing buildings rather than for completely new constructions.[3]

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Nonetheless, the future clearly offers architects — working in collaboration with organization consultants — an ever-greater responsibility in the elaboration of architectural programmes for offices and factories.

IMAGE, COMMUNICATIONS

Improving the image of a company is one of the functions of a building with which architects are, undoubtedly, the best acquainted. Within a company this aspect of demand is to be found in particular amongst the upper echelons of management and in the communications and public relations departments. Architecture in the service of a corporate image forms part of the communications policies of a firm, and will be aimed at certain defined publics.

This type of institutional communication, promoted by the company's directors, is not to be confused with the range of existing communications initiatives, existing or planned, within the company itself. These existing forms of communication result not only from deliberate policy decisions, but also from practices rooted in the way work is organized, the style of the firm's management, and the architecture of the building occupied. Thus architecture emerges as a specific medium which the company will use for the expression of a certain range of messages. Its specificity lies in the fact that by its very material presence, architecture has a lasting organizational effect on a company and, in particular, on the communications which can take place within the building.

As a result the users of the building themselves are one of the publics with which the official communications policy is specifically concerned. This public has an overall appreciation of architecture in terms of personal situations within the company, the conditions which activities in the firm generate on an everyday basis, interpersonal relations and work environment. Consequently, if the design of the building neglects or forgets one or several of architecture's possible functions within a firm, the message which the direction wishes to communicate will be received in a garbled form by the different members of the personnel.

This personnel may also be seen as a specific public to which the company, personified by its directors, is selling itself. This is especially true of large companies where scale itself limits the possibilities for direct human contact.It is also true for companies which are keen to recruit the best possible elements available on the labour market. But this public, too, remains distinct from the principal public at which institutional communications policies are aimed, that is to say the public at large, outside the company.

Image

The first area in which architecture may contribute towards the definition of a company's image is in the exterior treatment of the

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building. Quality here may sometimes find itself in marked contrast with internal appearances. It is nothing but advertisement architecture. But beyond such commercial facades, a corporate communications policy may sometimes identify architecture's objectives as the manifestation of the company's deeper identity. The architect here is entrusted with the task of giving expression to the company's culture, its present-day one or, possibly, a future culture. Architecture, that is to say, may be required to find the forms fitting the evolution desired by those who run the company. This is the approach which gives rise to an architecture of manifestos: to the greater glory of the technology, of the communications or of the leisure advantages within the company concerned.

The imaginary worlds of the company director and of the architect come together to elaborate an assertive symbol system making architecture, once again, a discursive act. The representation of a company's high performance record by means of the performance of building techniques has seen several notable examples in the realm of office blocks over the last decade. This technical imagination is by now means limited to the architecture of business premises, but this seems to be one of the realms where architects have been able to find building projects and budgets on a level with their ambitions.

All companies, however, do not share the same culture any more than they have identical public relations policies. Companies are frequently classified according to whether their culture is centralized and authoritarian or marked, on the contrary, by decentralization and sharing of responsibility. To these two main tendencies may be added a series of opposing characteristics which can be used to qualify a company:
— hierarchy/equality — individualism/interactions
— uniformity/diversity — power/humanism
— openness/closeness — seriousness/playfulness
— technicity/human efficiency

Company culture also includes aesthetic elements. The general preference for society and discreet comfort frustrates many architects who find their imagination stifled. Some firms, however, decide to identify their image with the most modem trends in the architectural world. This is frequently the case with major firms such as IBM, Olivetti, Schlumberger, Renault (at least for a time), Tbomson and Bull; these companies called on the services of some of the most creative architects of the moment.

For each, the image-making policies respected particular standards in terms of equipment, comfort and interior fitting out. It is interesting to note here that Renault's strategy of visual communication led to a new kind of brief which, in the end, called traditional layout ideas into question.

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Internal communications

If we now leave the field of corporate communication as defined by company directors to examine internal communications, several attitudes are to be found. The expression 'conviviality" is sometimes thought to suffice, and in fact boils down to the creation of amenities formerly known, more modestly, as rest-rooms, break areas, canteens etc. Companies may now pretend to ignore the fact that loitering in these non-productive areas is still frowned upon, or that the tight circles of habitual contacts are rarely broken down. Each at his own table, his own allotted corner, either alone or in the small groups which form according to the affinities which diverse kinds of social contacts generate within a company: work teams, position in the hierarchy, trade union membership, sports activities etc. Why then is it surprising to find certain rest areas always deserted, old divisions still persisting? It is possible, on the other hand, to confront the question more boldly, and to attempt to come to terms which these complexities.

Pierre Virnot and Pierre Etienne July[4] propose an analysis of communications which distinguishes between:

- formal communications, comprising an information and management system based partially on the written word, on paper or the computer screen,
- regulation communication, of a more qualitative nature, allowing for co-ordination and good understanding between different partners in the workplace,
- internal social communications, covering contacts which are not directly associated with work activities but which are necessary for a good social climate,
- image communication undertaken by the company for the public at large or for their own employees.

Architecture for communication must therefore be precise both about its objectives and about its means of action: on the level of the group, the department, the workplace, between departments; whether they are intended to transcend functional divisions, hierarchical divisions, or divisions between internal sub-cultures (white-collar, blue-collars etc).

The entries which won awards in the 1988 PAN-BUREAU competition illustrate projects which try to create architecture adapted to new forms of work organisation and communication.[5]

It is clear then that an intervention in the field of communications may have profound effects on the social life of a company. Each company will therefore have a close eye on the architect's role in this field. Some companies still see the organization of space in terms of supervision. For others which, on the contrary, appreciate the links between productivity and work conditions, and seek to encourage communications within the company, architecture may offer both the means to these ends (in collaboration with the means of techniques and management) and a image for their policies.

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Company premises are places of power, places of work and places, in the France of the 1980s, of a revitalized image of the company's status in society. Previously a practical monopoly for engineers, they enter today into the architect's realm of initiative, joining his or her traditional tasks in the realms of housing, public building and town planning.

References

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2) See Kenneth Frampton, 'Le cas Volvo", in *Lotus.* no 12, 1976.
3) For a deeper analysis of this approach, see the report *La participation du personnel a la conception des lieux de travail,* by Thérèse Evette. Ecole d'Architecture de Paris—La Villette, Editions de la Villette, Paris 1985 (enquiry carried out with Nicola Knapp and François Lautier)
4) An architect and an industrial organization consultant, authors, with Michel Liu, of a research report entitled *Analyse de l'impact des nouvelles technologies de communication sur l'espace industriel, for the Plan Lieux de Travail et Constructions Publiques,* Melatt, Paris, 1987.
5) Programme d'Architecture Nouvelle, competition organized by the Ministère de l'Equipement (Melatt). The results are published in *Techniques et Architecture,* no 378, July 1988. See also, in the same number of this review, the thirteen case studies presented by the research team at the *Laboratoire Espaces du Travail.*

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