



HOMELESS REPRESENTATION. Peter L. Wilson —Bridgebuildings + The Shipshape

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Homeless representation

Off all the polemics that have agitated the architectural world in past decades, the shift from a minimalist to what could be called a 'maximalist' discourse pervades most significant practice today. The incorporation of multiple discourses into architectural work has touched nearly everyone, from classical post-modernists to cool, rational exclusivists. Obviously, among the new classicists this phenomenon has also affected advocates of abstraction and autonomy, who have long claimed that architecture is not art, not literature, not politics — nothing but architecture. The Russian Formalists, Heidegger, Foucault, Lacan and Derrida, amongst others, have become the subtexts or hypertexts against which such architecture is to be read. And if those favouring architectural autonomy draw *thoughts* from theorists in other fields, the self-proclaimed classical post-modernists keep borrowing visual *images* from the great repositories of history, fashion and graphics, throwing them into the melting-pot of their architectural projects. Yet lately this great maximalist pluralism has proved more restrictive than the new classicists had imagined, with the same images turning up again and again. Art critic Robert Pincus-Witten, who has described this maximalist predicament, points out that 'the confines of Maximalism are smaller and tighter than those of Post-minimalism'. The latter, he notes, suggested a broad spectrum of open types and new programmes. However, given classicism and these many representations of the past, 'Maximalism, despite its brave name, turns out to be perhaps a more conservative artistic consciousness — let's say it, style — than its predecessor.'

Peter Wilson began publishing strikingly representational and metaphorical drawings in the early seventies, while still a student at the AA, before the general wave of figuration saturated the collections of newly founded museums of architectural drawings. He belongs to the maximalist era, but with a difference. The same difference can be read in the most original work produced in Britain in the last decade, from that of Nigel Coates to Zaha Hadid's. It is characteristic of much that is produced at the AA today. It is mostly fast, high-energy work, rarely nostalgic, and nearly always slightly disjunctive: all qualities alien to the mainstream of classical post-modernism, as defended by most critics today. Wilson, in this exhibition, seemed to be trying to assert that difference, so as to turn it into a strong base. Rejecting traditional urban typologies, he used the themes of 'shipshape' and 'bridges' as a means of evading the banality of many imposed competition programmes such as that of the Bastille opera house. In this case shipshapes and bridges are actual buildings, but also metaphors of relations, of movements, of technologies. Metaphors often get in the way of architecture, and Wilson's bridges are a better vehicle for his concerns than the often arbitrary imposition of shipshapes on urban landscapes.

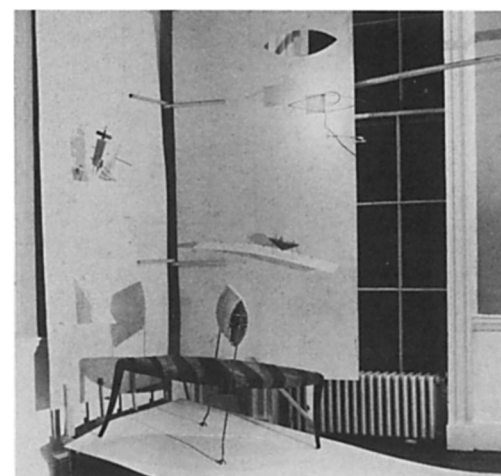
Yet I would like to bypass the most obviously visible part of the work and concentrate on some of the devices Wilson employs in order to understand a more specific aspect of his enterprise. It always strikes me that Wilson's masterful use of colour is only incidental, not instrumental. Many of Wilson's intuitions lead him to dark-light contrasts, a form of Baroque chiaroscuro that strongly pervades the

mood of each drawing. Most architects today seem ill at ease with colour: line always wins — line is to architectural drawing what colour is to painting. But Wilson's chiaroscuro somehow takes over his lines and colours, introducing volume and spatial illusion. Chiaroscuro inevitably means a surge of representation and figuration. However, Wilson's figuration has always been a 'lost' figuration, a sort of figuration without a home, and should not be reduced to a nostalgic revival of images of the past. It introduces an abstraction. His Clandeboye bridges illustrate this: stark axonometrics in a romantically perspectivist landscape, hard technical sections over the windswept bamboos of soft river-banks, with a mood that recalls old Chinese prints. By mixing contradictory modes of representation, the constant disjunctions of the later drawings take the work beyond mere illustrations of a poetic project. If the strategy of the Clandeboye series is sometimes reminiscent of John Hejduk's *masques* series, Wilson consciously inserts quiet disruptions into his objects: while Duchamp's chocolate-grinder is effortlessly merged into an 'artists' retreat', no object is really ever whole — it is always fragmented. No bridge is ever *one* bridge: it is always the juxtaposition of several fragments of disparate bridges that do not quite defy the laws of physics, but would be challenges to most structural engineers.

Such calculated shifts and incongruities within a strongly representational work are new to Wilson's

projects. They go beyond the metaphorical and poetic devices of his early practice. They become its content. Although beautifully drawn, they begin to avoid the essential weakness of the art of architectural drawing: its inescapably illustrative properties. By introducing such shifts, Wilson's work uproots conservative representation, making it homeless, slightly abstract and, happily, critical again.

Bernard Tschumi



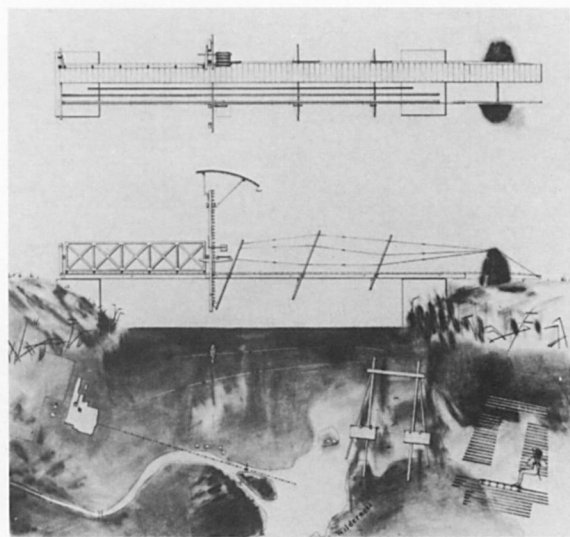
'8x4 Plywood Adjacency' — part of exhibition installation in the AA Members' Room (photograph by Richard Davis).

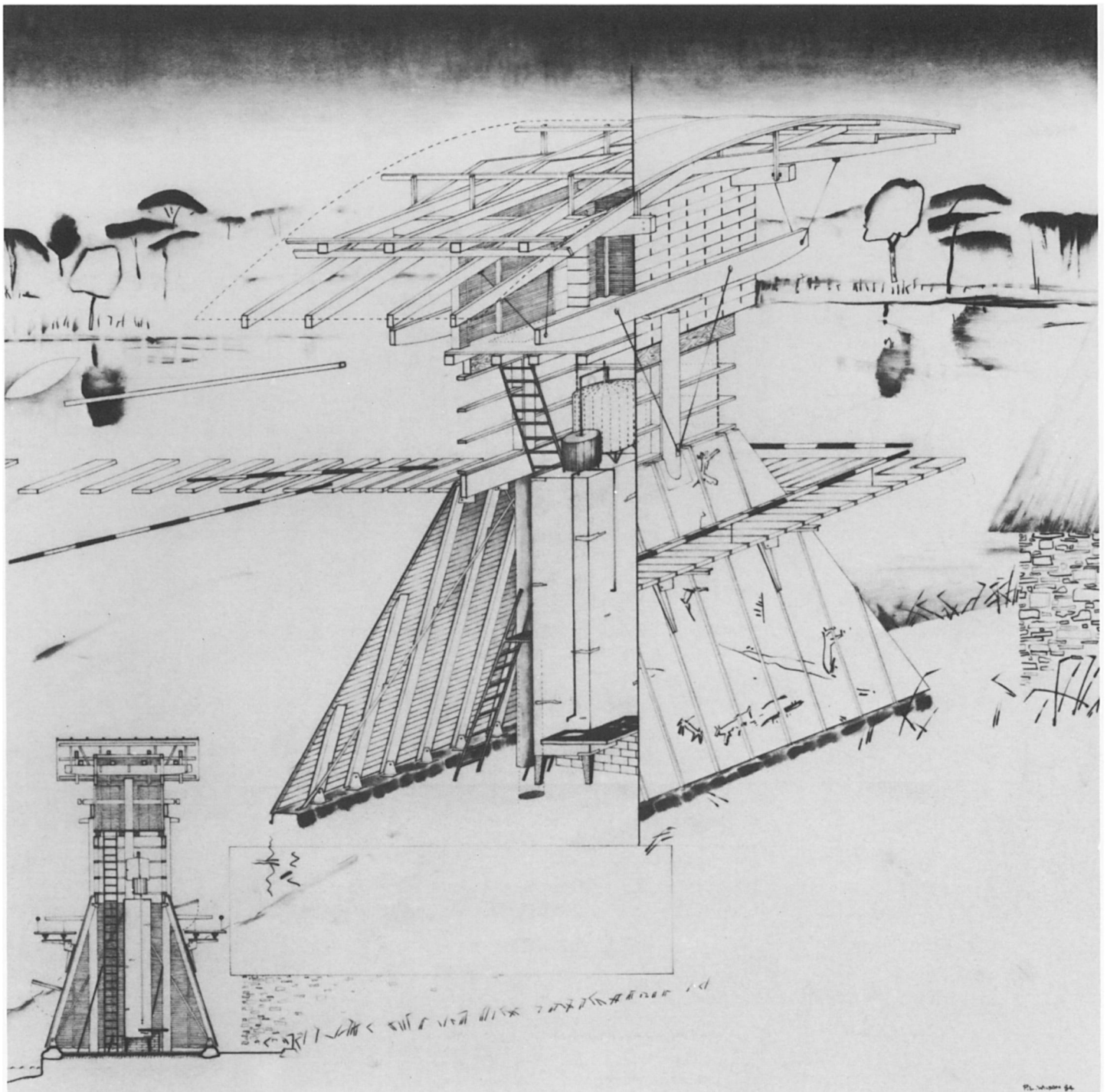


General view of the AA Members' Room showing on- and off-the-wall exhibits (photograph by Richard Davis).

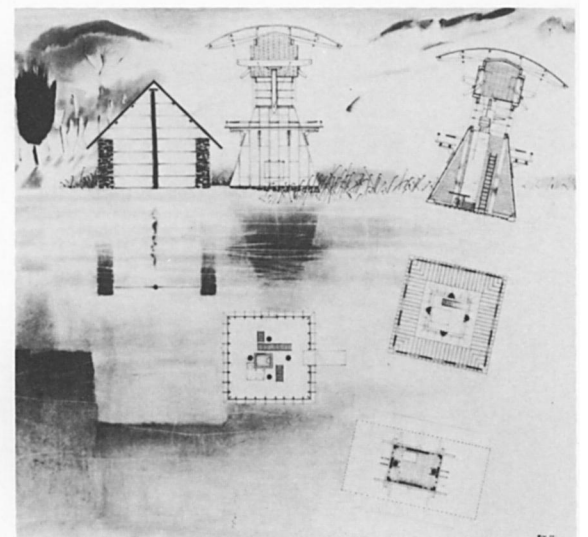


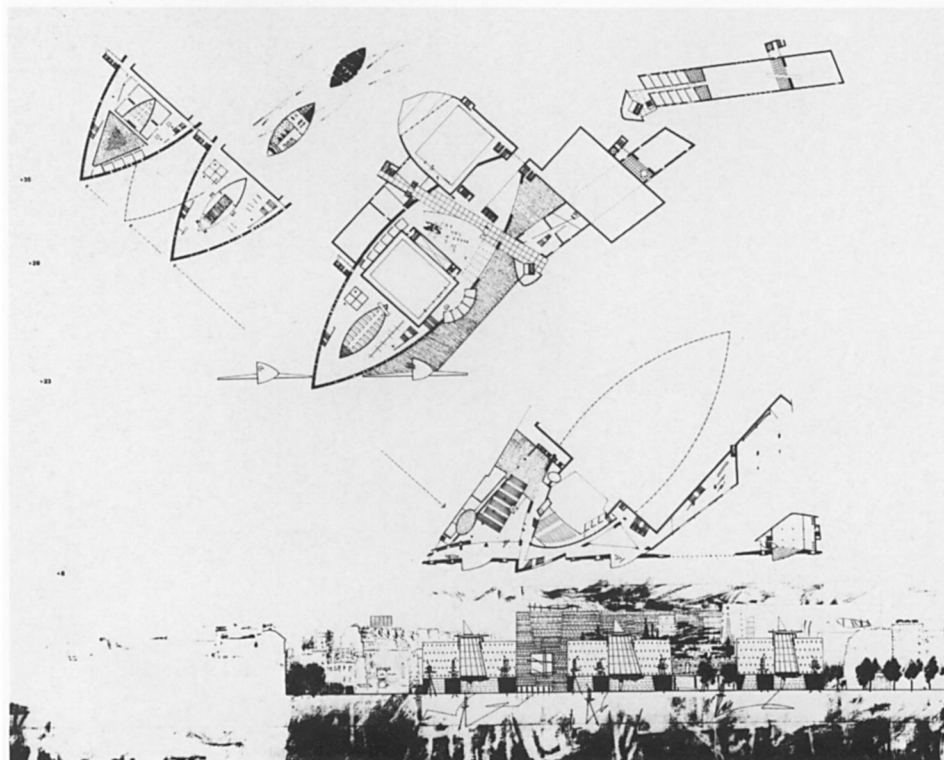
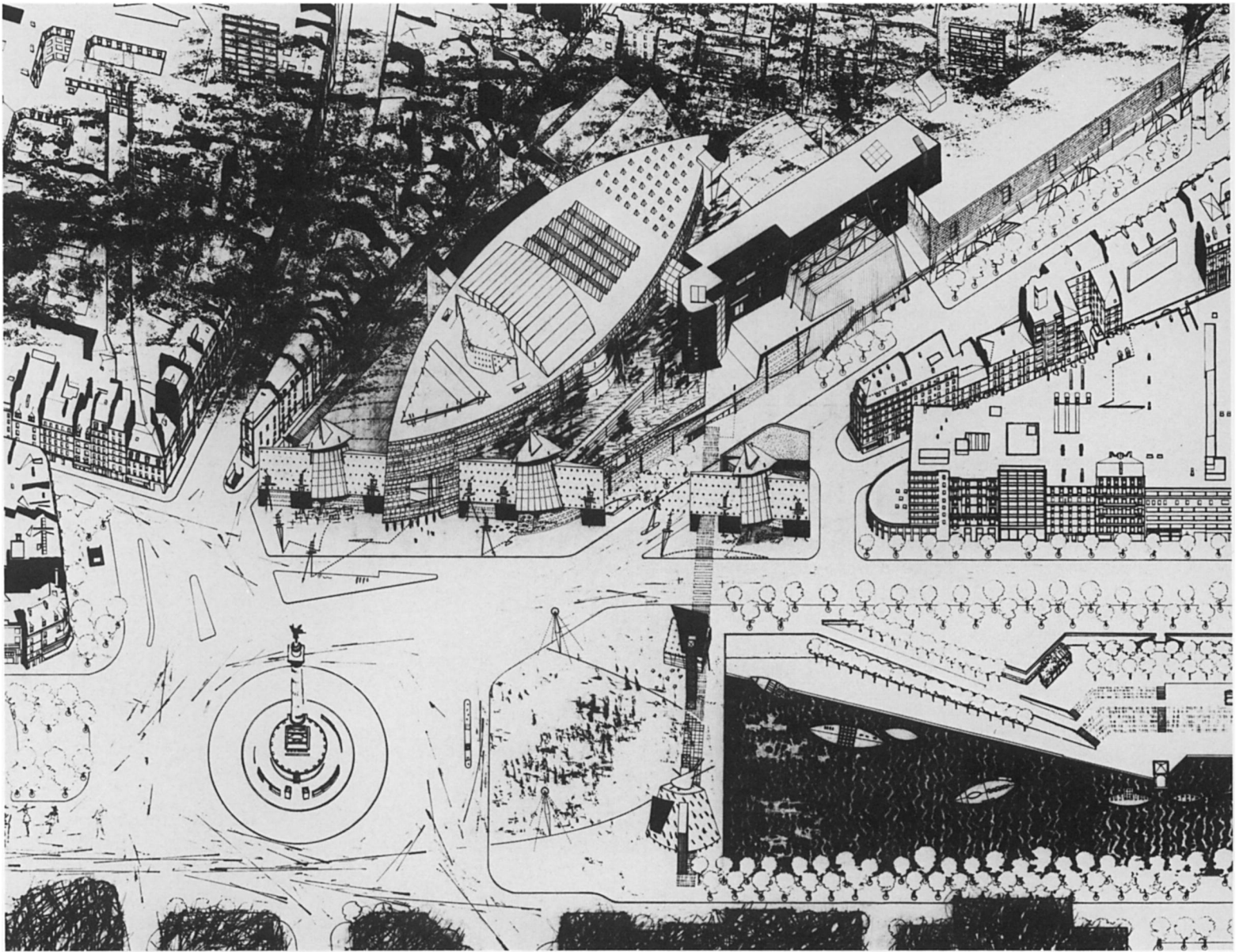
The first Clandeboye Bridge, 1983.





Endless Bridge, Clondeboy Artists' Retreat, 1984: Structural isometric and existing boathouse studio with elevation and section of the tower and plans of the three levels — sleeping cell, lantern and ladders and service figure.





*Opéra de la Bastille — competition entry with Julia Bolles, 1983:
Axonometric of the opera ship 'entering' the Place de la Bastille
and plans and façade of the ship.*