



THE SMITHSONS & THE ECONOMIST BUILDING PLAZA

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‘ARCHITECTURE IS NOT MADE WITH THE BRAIN’

THE SMITHSONS & THE ECONOMIST BUILDING PLAZA

Irénée Scalbert

The Economist building of 1962–4 is commonly regarded as Alison and Peter Smithson’s masterpiece. Some commentators praise the spatial effects of its plaza (though seldom without reservations), others value the principles informing the work, while still others admire the building for being at once well made and discreet. At the time, this last quality was not associated with the Smithsons. In spite of the familiar classical character of their Hunstanton school of 1954, its minimal detailing was seen as exceptionally brash. With the House of the Future in 1956 the architects attempted to rethink domestic architecture from first principles, and transposed the forms hitherto associated with bathroom fixtures to the moulded plastic of which the interior was made.

What little the Smithsons had built by 1959 was

arresting, provocative and thoughtful. These few projects, together with their influential lectures at the Architectural Association and their membership of the exclusive Team 10 ‘family’, had placed them at the forefront of the architectural avant-garde in Britain. In contrast, there is little about the Economist Building that is overtly provocative. So what is it, apart from the signature, that explains and justifies its reputation?

The modern idiom in office design was by then firmly established. Derived from SOM’s Lever House in New York (1951–2) (Fig. 1), it consisted of a low podium building which, at least in theory, addressed the users of the street, and a tower or slab above it which engaged with the podium rather as a cleaver does with the chopping-block. With the

View down St James’s Street, London, 1964, showing the Economist building on the left.



1. Lever House, New York – Skidmore, Owings & Merrill, 1952.



2. Le Corbusier's Plan Voisin, Paris, 1925. Perspective of esplanade flanked by towers like 'gigantic prisms'. From *Oeuvre complète*, vol. 1.

exception of four or five such buildings either completed or on site in London during the late 1950s, office design was governed by market forces and building regulations, and architects had to make do with the relatively scarce resources of the post-war years.

Given these circumstances the Economist Building was a notably accomplished performance. The clients received it with great enthusiasm: 'We met them six years ago with trepidation', they wrote, 'and take leave of them now with affection, and awe.' Reviews in the press were broadly favourable, and praise was extended to the very aspects of the scheme about which the clients were most uncertain. If to a staff writer of *The Economist* 'the really exciting possibilities of the courtyard [hadn't] yet been realized',² the plaza was nevertheless, according to one critic, 'the most successful modern square in London'³ and, wrote another, felt 'so marvellously right in its place'.⁴ Objections were for the most part mere quibbles: some regretted the lack of kiosks and cafés,⁵ and even of potted plants,⁶ on the plaza, while for a follower of Mies van der Rohe the travertine dressing of the façades resembled papier mâché.⁷

In order to understand the success of the Economist Building, it needs to be examined in relation to contemporary practice. The vast Comprehensive Development Areas which had been set up to organize the rebuilding of post-war London were widely regarded as the principal achievement of the 1950s, but their application to the whole of the capital was increasingly felt to be crude and unrealistic. It became clear that in some parts of British cities only piecemeal development would be feasible. In addition, the ownership of one car per family had for some years been promoted by industrial lobbies. Yet few roads were being built and there was, until the publication of the Buchanan Report in 1963, almost no co-ordination between land use and transport policies.

The design of the Economist Building seemed to succeed exactly where the Comprehensive Development Areas had failed. Modern yet sensitive, it addressed both traffic and urban fabric. Ironically, the most unreserved praise came from the camp to whose views the Smithsons were most antagonistic: the advocates of 'townscape' at the *Architectural Review*, who, led by Gordon Cullen, strove to reinstate visual values in urbanism. They hailed the building as a masterly picturesque composition.⁸ Curiously, the few critics who expressed doubts about the building, in particular the way it deferred to the surroundings, were among those who previously had been the Smithsons' most ardent supporters. Why, they asked, had the architects of a building which clearly presented itself as an urban model failed to conceive of it as part of an extensive redevelopment of the district?⁹ After all, it was known that the client representative himself had entertained the vision of a modernized St James's Street, with towers soaring behind the existing buildings along the pavement line, which would be preserved. Such an idea had probably occurred to the Smithsons themselves, for early in the

design stage they made a collage showing replicas of the Economist tower scattered throughout the district, though they refrained from sharing this with the client.

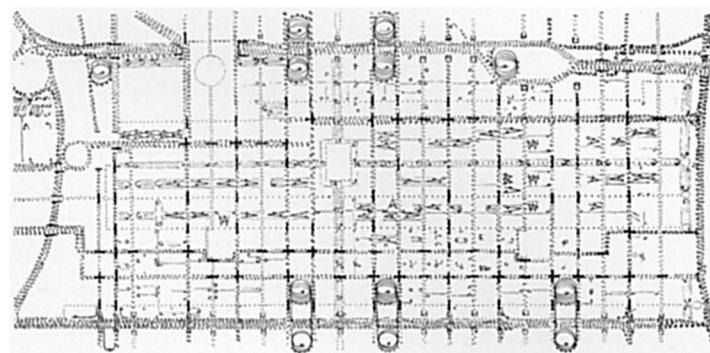
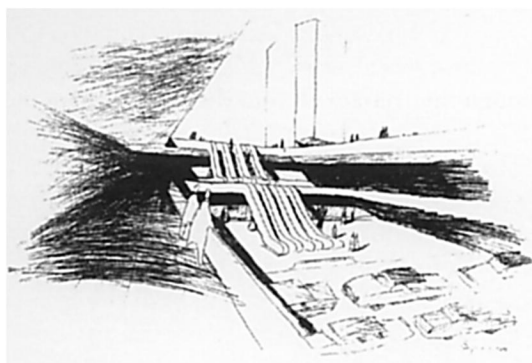
Of all the building's critics Reyner Banham was the most impatient. Lamenting the way the London of the twentieth century still had its feet 'mired in an eighteenth-century street pattern', he compared the Economist plaza to the 'lid of a large dust bin', with modernity swept beneath it to make way for a historicist, Acropolis-like exercise in civic design.¹⁰ These were strong words to have come from a supposed ally.

Such reactions owed something to the Smithsons' own views on the city. In one of their earliest articles they attacked Camillo Sitte and the notion of townscape, criticizing his town plans for being visual rather than 'real' – for pertaining more to art than to life. Yet to careful observers the renewed respect for the 'corridor street' and the 'organic' city, which the Smithsons and other members of Team 10 were promoting on social grounds, appeared to be in sympathy with picturesque sensibilities – and, in so far as 'townscape' could be seen as a manifestation of vitality, it was. On the other hand, the Smithsons' love of the contemporary¹¹ seemed incompatible, for the likes of Banham, with a respect for the clutter of history.

However forward-looking the Smithsons' views, there was something antiquated about them, and the architects remained strongly attached to the heroic period of modernism. As late as 1957, in an article published in the *Architectural Review*, they reaffirmed their faith in Le Corbusier's lyrical vision of the city,¹² and indeed their competition entry of the same year for Berlin Hauptstadt owes much to the Plan Voisin (1925) – a raised pedestrian esplanade punctuated with towers, a view of the car traffic below offered as a spectacle, and an infill of shops and restaurants between the two – though for Le Corbusier's 'gigantic and majestic prisms' (Fig. 2) they chose to substitute smaller towers grouped in a cluster (Fig. 3), a more flexible arrangement adapted from Denys Lasdun.

Also evident in their work of this period is an awareness of Louis Kahn. The Smithsons admired his plan for mid-town Philadelphia (1953), and invited him to the Team 10 meeting at Otterlo in 1959. As with their Berlin Hauptstadt, Kahn's urbanism sought to 'find expression from the order of movement'¹³ (Fig. 4) – a concept that first appears in the Smithsons' writings at the time of the Berlin competition. Surrounding their plan with a monumental 'Chinese wall' of offices (the expression Kahn used for his Penn Center), they described the town centre as 'a cathedral of the mind'¹⁴ (Kahn had described his own Civic Center as 'the cathedral of the city').

In Hauptstadt, driving a car was to be a form of leisure, as also was the activity of shopping in the raised 'streets of quietude' (the expression is Le Corbusier's, or rather his English translator's¹⁵) – a provocative assimilation of the material and the



spiritual. The two circulation 'nets', one orthogonal and the other irregular, would be connected at various 'pressure points' by 'piazas' and 'small squarish towers about thirty metres high' that were to house administrative offices for the shops below (Fig. 3). At the suggestion of Peter Sigmond, who worked with the Smithsons on the competition entry, the buildings of an old district which had barely survived Allied bombing were to become, in Team 10 fashion, a kasbah: 'Everything which remains is preserved as far as possible, and between the preserved buildings are new buildings to an increased scale (about double) arranged around courtyards.'¹⁶ This could be a reasonably accurate description of the Economist building in its own context, which in effect is a realization, at a smaller scale, of the Berlin Hauptstadt plan.

The premises of *The Economist* magazine had been bombed during the war. After several changes of address a five-storey building of once dubious reputation was bought in Ryder Street, in the heart of London's Club Land, where the Smithsons' tower now stands. In spite of a relatively modest circulation of 70,000 *The Economist* (established in 1843) enjoyed great respect and exercised considerable influence. Sometimes described as belonging to 'the extreme centre', it was attached to no political party, and strove to offer disinterested analysis. Sir Geoffrey Crowther, then its chairman, had been a formidable editor but,¹⁷ surprisingly for a man who was reputedly obsessed with gadgets and who had virtually designed his own houses, he showed little detailed interest in the new development.

The project originated in a desire to consolidate *The Economist* offices, then scattered in several buildings throughout the district. Its driving force was Peter Dallas-Smith, one of *The Economist's* two joint managers, a man in his early forties, some ten years older than the Smithsons. Crowther gave him full control of the development, and made only two stipulations. Robert McAlpine & Sons Ltd, whose chairman, Edwin McAlpine, was an old friend, was to act as building contractor. Secondly, Crowther, who according to Dallas-Smith saw himself as a tycoon in the making, asked for his own private flat at the top of a new tower which was to be at least ten storeys high. This extraordinary request had a major impact on the project. With a local plot ratio of 5:1,¹⁸ it could only be achieved through a major programme of property

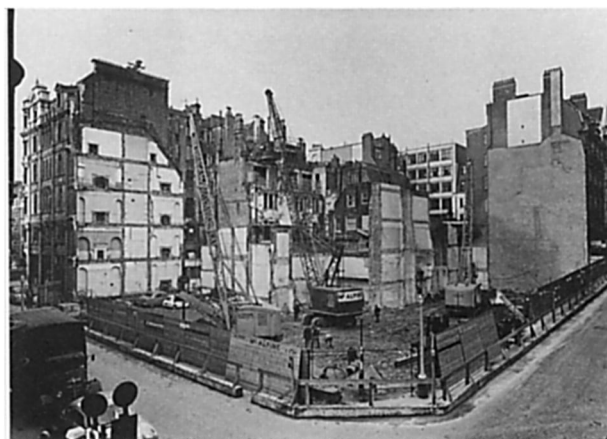
acquisition. Dallas-Smith recalls standing on the roof of their old premises with Crowther, pointing out all the buildings that would need to be acquired in order to generate ten thousand square metres of floor area (Fig. 5). That it proved possible to purchase some forty adjacent leases and sub-leases was in part due to the tacit support of the Crown Estates Commissioners, who owned the freeholds, and gives an indication of Dallas-Smith's abilities as a project manager.

All the leaseholders ultimately gained from the development, not least *The Economist* itself. Its directors had supported the project from the outset, on the assumption that the building would pay for itself – which in the long term it did, many times over. Rents on the site tripled after completion and are now so high that *The Economist* regularly has to ask itself whether it can afford to remain in the building.

Dallas-Smith began his search for an architect by approaching a number of architecture journalists, in particular the late Robert Fumaux-Jordan, at that time architecture correspondent of the *Observer*. On his advice Dallas-Smith interviewed around a dozen of the twenty-one invited participants in the Churchill Memorial College competition held in early 1959, who included the most creative practices of the time, among them the Smithsons. Dallas-Smith also consulted Leslie Martin, then professor of architecture at Cambridge. Martin privately suggested that the choice be narrowed down to Denys Lasdun or, if the clients were prepared to face possible difficulties, the Smithsons. In the event, Dallas-Smith retained two firms: the little-known

3. *Berlin Hauptstadt* – Alison and Peter Smithson, 1957. Perspective, and drawing showing the two circulation 'nets', the 'pressure points', and the 'Chinese wall'.

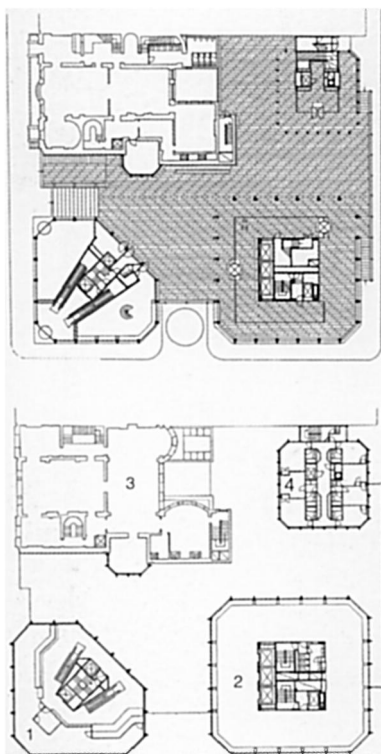
4. *Design for the centre of Philadelphia* – Louis Kahn, 1956–7. Circulation diagram.



5. *Demolition at the corner of Ryder Street and Bury Street, 1962.*



6. Plan of St James's showing the site of the Economist Building.



1. Banking hall 3. Boodle's club
2. Economist offices 4. New chambers for Boodle's

7. Economist Building: Plan of the plaza level showing the herringbone motif of the paving, and first-floor plan.

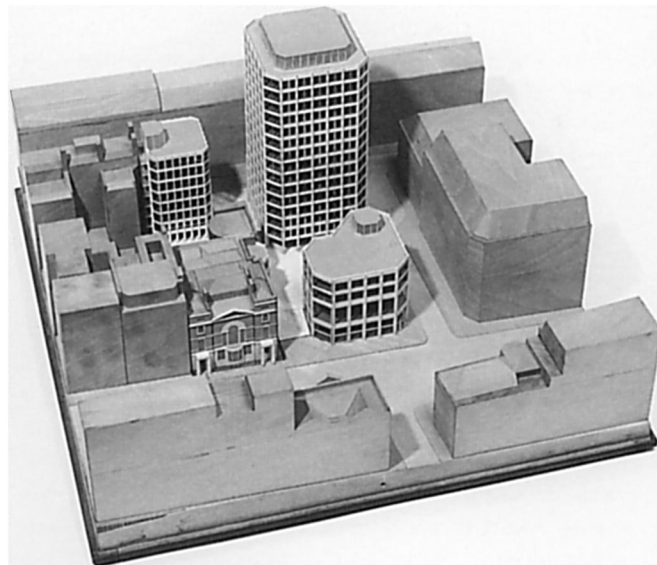
George Trew & Dunn (Robin Dunn was a friend and neighbour) and the Smithsons, whose avant-garde reputation suited his mildly anti-establishment disposition.

Both teams of architects compiled a brief in collaboration with the staff of *The Economist* and at the end of a three-month period proposed an outline scheme. George Trew & Dunn produced a conventional, Lever House-like design, and it was immediately clear that the project by the Smithsons, who by then were favoured by the staff of *The Economist*, was the more imaginative of the two. In May 1960 Leslie Martin offered his opinion to the Board, and the Smithsons were given the commission.

Prior to the competition, McAlpine's in-house consultant architect, Maurice Bebb,¹⁹ had been independently appointed by the client as their consultant architect for the development. He had already made preliminary studies which identified constraints on the building envelope. Planning legislation would allow a single-storey podium over the whole extent of the site. For the superstructure Bebb considered three options: a continuous perimeter block, a single tower set in the middle of the site, and a mixed solution where the frontage block on St James's Street continued the existing alignment, thus pushing the tower to the rear of the site.²⁰ A note on the drawing for this last option reads: 'A tower development may be set on a podium, with additional smaller blocks on the podium.'

The Smithsons adopted the third strategy and it was this above all which persuaded the client in their favour. Their scheme divided the programme into three separate units, each accommodated in a separate building (Fig. 6). Martins Bank and the retail businesses remaining on the site were rehoused in a block along St James's Street (Fig. 9). The façade of this building re-established the alignment with the adjacent Boodle's club (the block which had previously stood on the site was two storeys higher), while the tall windows of the first-floor banking hall also echoed Boodle's *piano nobile*. *The Economist* itself was housed in a tower at the rear of the site, thus limiting the impact of its fourteen-storey height on St James's Street. A third block, which continued the existing alignment of Bury Street, accommodated the residential component of the brief – three floors of chambers for Boodle's (whose eighteenth-century premises were also refurbished as part of the development) and four flats above (Fig. 10). The car park is housed beneath the podium, together with Boodle's new ladies' annexe, shops, various technical services and a now-disused restaurant for *The Economist*.

The girth of the new buildings was to some extent predetermined by an obligation to maintain existing light-levels inside the buildings facing on to the site. Constraints imposed by light-angles further suggested the forty-five-degree truncation of the corners of the blocks (Bebb had proposed in his feasibility study that the single tower be twisted so that it stood at forty-five



8. Economist Building: Model, probably late 1961.

degrees to the pavement line). This arrangement allowed maximum permeability of light through the site and a minimum loss of floor area in the new buildings. The decision to introduce these chamfered corners, not then fashionable as a form, is typical of the empirical priorities of post-war designers, who regarded daylight standards as critical.

Unlike the general massing of the scheme, which had been established during the short period of the competition, the internal plans evolved over the next two years (Figs. 7, 8). In *The Economist* tower the principal difficulty was that of containing the core within a neat, square curtilage. The service core was a recent American innovation, as yet untested in England, where the usual practice was to place the stairs of tall buildings against external walls, an arrangement which allowed natural ventilation. Similarly, the residential block was fitted with internal bathrooms, recently introduced in American hotels – though the plans for this block appear to have been low in the order of priorities, and were not completed until late in the design period.

The bank building presented the greatest difficulties. At first, its plan was indented at the rear in order to increase the area of the plaza, and to increase the sense of containment in front of *The Economist* entrance. Well into the design phase this dent was suppressed, a change that made it possible to clarify the vertical circulation to the upper office floors, which required separate access to the plaza. Escalators to the first-floor banking hall could now be positioned symmetrically on either side of the diagonal of the plan. The service areas were brought to the centre of the floors, according to the principles already established for the tower. In addition, the dimensions of the revised northeast façade were such that it became possible to apply the same 10'6"-grid to all three elevations (it was also applied to the tower). These changes were logical, and consistent with the overall design. Yet the diagonal orientation and the slashing of a corner in an otherwise square plan dis-

play a licence that at the time was unusual in England. Moreover, they dispose of any suggestion that the three towers are merely variations on a theme borrowed from Mies van der Rohe or from SOM, and reflect, in a rather brutal way, the tension between an inherited Miesian sense of order and a desire to respond to local circumstance.

The decision to erect three separate buildings for the three distinct groups of tenants rather than a single tower greatly clarified the programme (even though the internal plans became more cramped as a result) and offered immediate advantages for the implementation of the project, and later its management. That it did not provide the maximum amount of floor space permissible on the site, and still less the maximum net-to-gross ratio of floor area in *The Economist* tower, gives a measure of the client's relative lack of concern for purely commercial considerations. As for the actual placement of the three buildings, it was perfectly logical, and the plaza was to a large extent a direct consequence of the *parti*.

Although the break in the street elevation between Boodle's club and the bank building represented a significant loss in frontage available for shops, the tower was, as a result, visible from the main street, and *The Economist* acquired a more prestigious address in St James's Street (Fig. 9). The podium, accessible from the pavement via a shallow flight of stairs (the ramp was added later, to allow fire ladders access to the rear of the bank building), was conceived of as a public space comparable to the plazas which in America had by then become a symbol of corporate munificence.

Along Bury Street to the east, it was at first proposed that the two stairs leading up to the plaza be accommodated within the depth of the colonnades of both *The Economist* tower and the residential building. In this rather Italianate arrangement, which the Smithsons later incorporated in their design for the School of Architecture in Bath, the through-route would have engaged the actual structures of the buildings. In the final scheme the stairs were pushed outside the arcades, and were thus visible from afar, along Bury Street. When *The Economist* refurbished the building in 1990,²¹ they were replaced by a single flight of stairs on axis with the stairs in St James's Street to the west. Sadly, this destroyed the careful grading of access to the plaza in relation to the scale of the adjoining streets.

The visibility of the plaza had from the start been a concern of the architects. Owing to the natural declivity of the site towards the south, cars were able to enter the car park from Ryder Street to the south, and the plaza could remain below eye level in relation to the busier pavements to the east and west of the site. Attempts were made to lower the podium further, and Peter Smithson still feels that the plaza would have been better had it been brought down another thirty centimetres.

Boodle's blind party wall was another source of difficulties. How could it be anything but an oddity among its new neighbours, whose fenestration amply if indiscriminately acknowledged the public status of the plaza? How could it participate in the space of the plaza when, for its architects, the premodern fabric of cities had little if any formal interest beyond its function as the background of street life? The competition drawings convey the Smithsons' ambivalence towards this eighteenth-century building. Unlike the new buildings, which are drawn with a ruler and lettered with stencils, the freehand plans of Boodle's have a tongue-in-cheek quality and its rooms are labelled in an elegant round-hand, an ironic mode which is reminiscent of Saul Steinberg.

There was an early proposal to insert windows in the party wall, but this clashed with the Royal Fine Arts Commission's sense of propriety, which dictated that a terrace house must not be seen in the round. A later idea was to create in the upper southeast corner of the club a partly cantilevered oval billiard room which would project outwards over the plaza and articulate its spaces. In the end, the architects accepted the presence of the party wall and simply continued the string courses of Boodle's St James's Street façade along the refaced side and rear brick walls. They may have found inspiration for this solution in the similar street elevation of Kahn's Yale University Art Gallery (1953), a building they knew and admired (Fig. 13).

The party wall was interrupted midway by an existing light well. As this undoubtedly would have looked peculiar in its new surroundings, it was to be walled in and fitted with windows to provide additional rooms for the club. Not long before the building contract was negotiated Tim Tinker, an assistant to the architects, proposed instead that it be enclosed within a new bay window. This ingenious addition with its forty-five-degree corners helped discreetly to bring Boodle's into the 'family' of towers, and alluded to the life beyond this expanse of brick.

The bay window was not well received by the critics, who interpreted it as a joke, and indeed it is not impossible that it was conceived in the same ironic spirit as the drawings of Boodle's. The lower opening casements sit uncomfortably on the ground, while the middle sash windows seem oddly attenuated, as if the bay window had emerged from the rabbit-hole into which Alice disappeared.

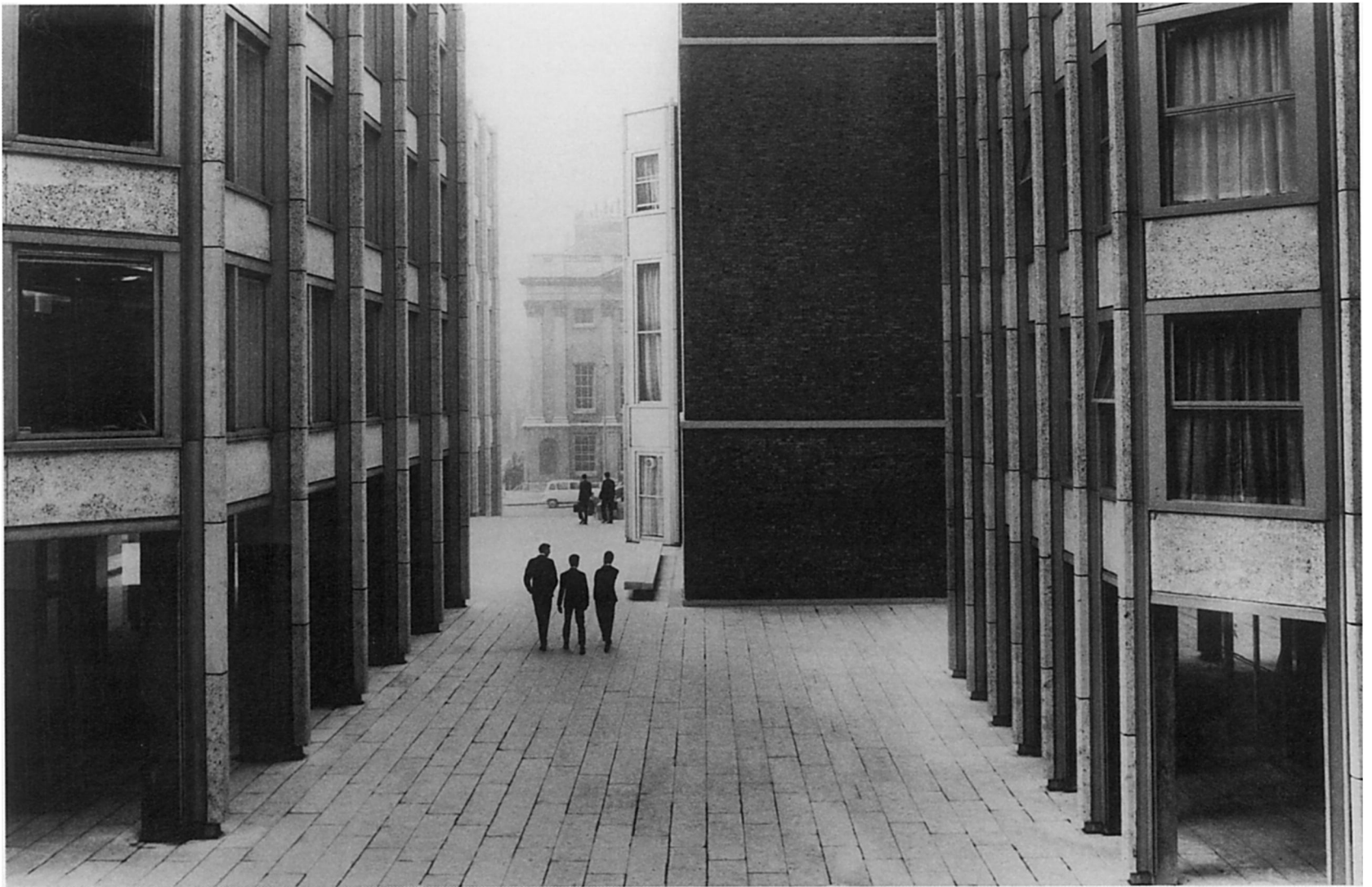
The design of a podium for an urban setting demands a clear and confident interpretation which can overcome the impression that it merely represents space which was left over after the requirements of the brief were satisfied. Open to the street yet removed from it, plazas often seem to want to be at once busy and secluded. On the one hand the Economist plaza was conceived of as a 'pool of quietude', a space which, like the courtyard of Aalto's Säynätsalo Town Hall (1951), would be raised above traffic noise and fumes.²² Moreover, the Smithsons



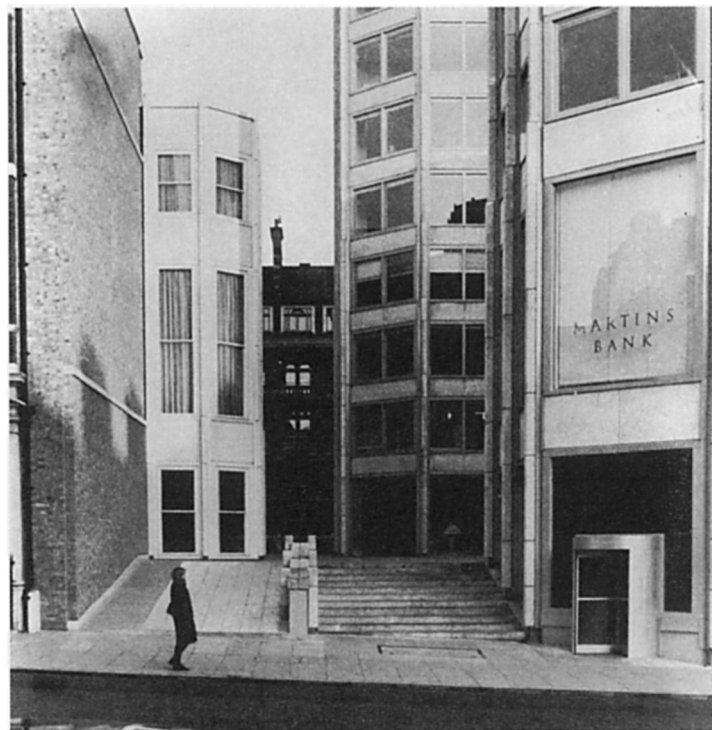
9. Economist Building: View down St James's Street.



10. View down Bury Street, 1964.



11. Economist Building: View of the plaza from Bury Street, 1964.



10. View of the plaza from St James's Street.

supplied incentives to contemplation – a long stone bench (which also masked a ventilation shaft to the car park) and a proposal for sculpture (Dallas-Smith visited Henry Moore with a view to finding a suitable piece for the podium).

On the other hand, the plaza was to serve as a way through to the entrance to the tower (what the architects later described as ‘the pavilion and the route’²³) and as a short-cut comparable to older passages in the district of St James’s. In an attempt to relieve anxieties that the plaza might be under-used, the Smithsons showed the client a film on their Berlin Hauptstadt competition entry, which proposed a parallel between the Berlin platforms, raised to the same level as the S-Bahn, and London’s Liverpool Street Station, seductively shot at rush hour. It was envisaged that, as a consequence of the various activities housed in the towers, the platforms would be ‘kept in full use’.²⁴ In the event, at the Economist a newsagent’s kiosk set on the podium side of the bank building failed to survive for very long.

The Hauptstadt proposal wanted to be at once empty and full. Unlike the Plan Voisin, in which isolation, whether on foot or at the wheel, was accepted as the norm, at Hauptstadt the sense of solitude was to be tempered with a promise of vitality. The Hauptstadt model was later adopted for the design of the platforms at the South Bank arts complex (1960–62). Here, as in the Berlin project and at St James’s, the solitude implied or promoted by the circulation spaces was never successfully articulated by the conviviality envisaged at the ‘pressure points’. In the case of the Economist plaza the density of the surroundings helped prevent the air of desolation which has always marred the South Bank complex.

Although something about the Economist Building wants to be open and expansive like the Hauptstadt platforms, circumstances forced upon it a diminutive scale and the intimacy of the miniature (Fig. 11). This inadvertent distortion was reinforced by the deliberate scaling-down of the modules of the façades: 10’6” for the bank building facing St James’s Street, 10’6” with a central mullion for the *Economist* tower (based on the width of a two-person office), and 5’3” for the residential building in Bury Street. While the plaza tends to seem most deserted in the vicinity of Boodle’s chambers, it is here, seen from behind the closely packed columns of the arcade, that it feels most intimate.

There is an architectural density, if not a human one, and it is something which seems to be implied by the architects’ comparison of the podium and its towers to cups clustered on a table. This metaphor also hints at the seemingly spontaneous siting of the towers – though perhaps there were rather more constraints at the Economist than at Hauptstadt. The Smithsons were opposed to the mega-

structures which had become fashionable during the 1950s. Countering what might be described as an architecture of the airline dinner-pack with that of the tea set, they sought a more open-ended method of planning, one in which ‘the circulation systems and the humanly occupied parts are [not] locked into an unalterable embrace’²⁵ – one in which function and structure, and building and city, can easily be accommodated with each other.

But a limiting framework for the exercise of such openness was needed in order to preserve the identity of a city. While most British architects opted for the picturesque, using art to combat ugliness, the Smithsons were more confident in the forces of modernity. Believing that architects themselves were at fault by interfering too much – whether for artistic or practical motives – with the organic workings of the city, they advocated a deliberate, Mies-inspired restraint, an overcoming of conscious intent (described by a journalist on *The Economist* as ‘Buddhist’).²⁶ They envisioned an urbanism in which functionally compatible buildings, like the components of a tea set, would acquire a kind of neutrality and family likeness, with the space between them becoming ‘the collective of the spaces that each of the buildings carries with it’.²⁷ Peter Smithson recalls the genesis of this idea in a visit in 1947 to a housing estate in Sweden which consisted of a series of point blocks, their chamfered corners (a device which was later used in both Hauptstadt and the Economist) unifying the informal layout at the top of a hill in such a way that ‘form and space cannot be pulled apart: they form a crown’ (Fig. 14).²⁸

Such broadly symbolic preoccupations were accompanied by speculations on the nature of urban life. The Smithsons calculated that for some forty per cent of the population of big cities “hotel life”, by which is meant the maximum of privacy, anonymity, and simplicity of service, is suitable and pleasurable’.²⁹ Here again the Swedish point blocks served as a model, as did the Lake Shore Drive apartment blocks (1951). In 1959 they used a photograph of the latter, taken by Peter Smithson, to illustrate an article entitled ‘Scatter’.³⁰ Instead of the usual lake-front view, it shows Mies van der Rohe’s towers relegated to a corner of the frame and partly concealed by a brick wall (Fig. 15). They appear no less anonymous than the ordinary housing blocks by their side, and, like them, appear to have been conditioned more by property values and planning constraints than by visual or spatial concerns. Peter Smithson’s photograph seems to suggest that if architecture is to make a genuine contribution to the modern city it must acknowledge, and work in conjunction with, the forces that contribute to its making. This position, developed by the Smithsons throughout the 1950s, was a highly original one, and some forty years later it is still being worked out by Rem Koolhaas, Jean Nouvel and others.

The Smithsons further argued that the very notion



13. Yale University Art Gallery – Louis Kahn, 1952.



14. Point blocks in Stockholm, photograph made by Peter Smithson in 1947.



15. Photograph of Mies van der Rohe's Lake Shore Drive apartments in Chicago, Illinois, made by Peter Smithson in 1958 and reproduced in the Smithsons' article 'Scatter', published in the following year.

of space, which they saw as a legacy of the baroque period, acted as an obstruction to responsive planning. To support their hypothesis they, like Le Corbusier, turned to the architecture of ancient Greece for evidence:

in the case of the arrangement of buildings there was no system, no formalisation of relationship at all. There was instead that so-called spontaneous building which we are familiar with, for example, in the villages of modern India, or in the mediæval European town. That is, decisions were made through some process, the mechanisms of which are now no longer available to us, which enabled the correct *gesture* to be made in the situation.³¹

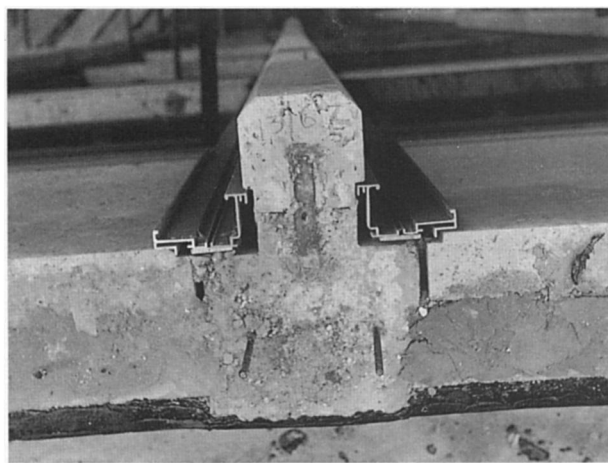
Moreover, such a gesture was not merely appropriate, they maintained, but aimed to enhance experience:

if a route ran along a certain way, it was to give importance to that route by the position of buildings in relationship to it. Similarly, if there was such an activity as going to the temple or going shopping, the organisation of the buildings was such that it gave an importance to that activity which, without the buildings, it would not otherwise have had. That is, it gives a sort of value to an activity which would be otherwise banal or at the worst would, if it were not given value, mean the well-springs of your existence dried up, because there was no system of relationship, no reason for going on doing that thing.³²

Like the Pre-Raphaelites, the Smithsons sought to retrieve the directness and simplicity of a primitive awareness which had been buried under three centuries of neo-classical culture. The manipulation of space, which they regarded as an essentially cerebral imposition of art on life, was to make way for a visceral apprehension of buildings and experience rolled into one. Space itself, 'the invention of a later crowded age',³³ would again be taken for granted, becoming as natural and profuse as the air we breathe. Decades after the Plan Voisin, the Virgilian dream of a countryside at peace with itself would at last join the notion of the city. Yet why the apprehension of space, as opposed to buildings, should, once perceived, conflict with one's understanding of experience remains unclear.



16. The Annunciation –
Domenico Veneziano, c.1445-7.



17. Economist Building: Photograph by Peter Smithson showing detail of stone fixing and water run-off channels on Boodle's residential building during construction.

In fact Peter Smithson emphasizes the spatial qualities of the Economist plaza. Provided that the surroundings are made sufficiently recessive, as for instance in the painting of the Annunciation (c.1445-7) by Domenico Veneziano in the Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge, 'when something happens in the space, it becomes wonderfully full', and 'the gesture in calm space tells the story without having to draw the message' (Fig. 16). At the Economist the very materials seem to suggest such self-effacement: the chunks (rather than leaves) of stone; the ample, origami-like extruded aluminium of the window frames, cills and gutters (Fig. 17); and the vast brick flank of Boodle's, which helps to 'pull the temperature down'. The general arrangement of the façades is derived from Mies, but in the hands of Peter Smithson (who designed and drew most of the exterior details), the Miesian qualities of mass and gravity, if not suppressed, have at least been internalized. The same below-the-skin sensibility prevails in the herring-bone pattern of the paving³⁴ which, as the joint-lines zig-zag outwards from the axis of symmetry, guide the visitor 'subliminally' towards the building entrances on the plaza (Fig. 18).

The Brutalists' predilection for using materials 'as found' is sometimes confused with a resistance to any form of expression, as exemplified in the work of an architect like Hannes Meyer. Like many artists of the 1950s the Smithsons valued materials, and all artefacts, including cities, in so far as they had *pattern*: electronic circuitry, lines in the palm of a hand, symbols of dead languages – all these were traces that hinted at a latent but more real world. The tiny shell encrustations of the roach-bed Portland stone at the Economist are the opposite of mute essence, and allude to what Henri Michaux, that great chronicler of subliminal experience, called 'the life in the folds'. The Brutalists sought the magical within the ordinary,³⁵ which might in turn stimulate an increased awareness of, and sympathy with, the physical environment: 'a building today is only interesting if it is more than itself, if it charges the space around it with connective possibilities, especially if it does this by a quietness that until now our sensibilities could not recognize as architecture at all.'³⁶ In the article by Peter Smithson from which this quote is taken, there follows a long discussion of works by Mies which make it clear that what is being presented here is an instance of 'less is more'. However, by 'less' the Smithsons did not intend the reduction of a thing to its essence, and they rejected the formalism that such a practice engendered: 'On the way to IIT [the campus of the Illinois Institute of Technology, planned in 1940 by Mies van der Rohe], one sees derelict houses and workshops with all the vocabulary of IIT in embryo. These were buildings which were just made. With Mies, they become thought about. They become an idea, a stylistic operation.'³⁷ By contrast, 'the Economist building is about manipulating the making. It is not about ideas.'³⁸ It merely represents the 'correct' degree of immersion in a situation.

This is why the label of masterpiece is not one which the Economist building wears with ease. Unlike the Seagram building (1957), it does not embody aspirations beyond the conditions that brought it into being – to reveal, as Mies described it, ‘the significance of facts’. Nevertheless, the Smithsons recognized that in particular circumstances architecture can acquire the status of an idea. For example, the use of the Doric Order in the Parthenon reflects a higher level of consciousness than in earlier temples such as the one at Bassæ. Likewise, the Economist Building raised the awareness of space and technique that typified American office buildings of the 1950s, especially those by SOM.

In this process the architect acts as midwife to, rather than the author of, a collective idea that responds to more than just the consumption of culture. As this idea makes it possible to convey the value of a building or of an aspect of it, it will enable the repetition and development of a particular thing – for example the Doric Order – and will motivate further collective action. This thoughtful pragmatism is central to the Smithsons’ approach. For the last two decades it has proved utterly alien to the abstractions and formalism which have prevailed in architecture. Today its emphasis on concrete experience and action seems refreshing and relevant.

The first version of this essay was published in *Archis* 7, 1995, and is reproduced here with their kind permission. A companion piece was published in *Archis* 5, 1994, on the Leicester Engineering Building (also completed in 1964) by James Stirling and James Gowan. This intensely cerebral project and the more intuitive design for the Economist building define the two most radical and opposite poles of the architecture debate in England in the 1960s: the rediscovery of form as a concern in its own right and the search for a more responsive functionalism, respectively.

A full description of the Economist building by its architects was published in *Architectural Design*, February 1965. Construction details are discussed at length by Stephen Greenberg in the *Architects’ Journal*, 21 November 1990. Alison and Peter Smithson have discussed the influence of Mies van der Rohe and early SOM buildings on their work in *Without Rhetoric: An Architectural Aesthetic* (London, 1973). Drawings and a model showing the building at competition stage, and a full set of working drawings, are in the RIBA Drawings Collection.

This essay is based on interviews with Peter Smithson, with their assistants George Kasabov and Tim Tinker, and with the client representative in charge of the project, Peter Dallas-Smith. The title was suggested by Peter Smithson in a conversation with the author which took place in May 1994.

Notes

1. Brochure published by the *The Economist*, 1964.
2. Tom Houston, in: ‘AA Visit: The Smithsons’ “Economist” Buildings’, *AA Journal*, February 1965, p. 207.
3. N. Keith Scott, ‘The Economist Building: Review’, *Architect & Building News*, 20 January 1965, vol. 227/3, p. 104.
4. Vincent Scully, ‘New British Buildings’, *Architectural Design*, May 1965, p. 266.
5. Ian Nairn, ‘The Establishment Strides Again!’, *Architectural Forum*, April 1965, vol. 122, no. 1, p. 13.
6. Unsigned, ‘Economist Building’, *Architect & Building News*, 20 January 1965, vol. 227/3, p. 112.
7. Peter Blake, in: Nairn, op. cit., p. 18.
8. Gordon Cullen, ‘The “Economist” Buildings, St James’s’,

- Architectural Review*, February 1965, vol. 137, no. 816, p. 115; and J. M. Richards, *The Listener*, 10 December 1964, p. 933.
9. Kenneth Frampton, ‘The Economist and the Hauptstadt’, *Architectural Design*, February 1965, p. 61.
10. Reyner Banham, ‘Crowther’s Acropolis’, *New Statesman*, 15 January 1965, p. 83.
11. See, for example: Alison and Peter Smithson, ‘Today, we collect ads’, *ARK* 18, November 1956, p. 48.
12. Alison and Peter Smithson, ‘Cluster City’, *Architectural Review*, November 1957, vol. 122, no. 730, p. 334.
13. Louis Kahn, ‘Towards a Plan for Midtown Philadelphia’, *Perspecta* 2, 1953, p. 11.
14. Alison and Peter Smithson, ‘Scatter’, *Architectural Design*, April 1959, p. 149.
15. In French, ‘rues de repos’. See: Le Corbusier, *Oeuvre complète*, vol. 1, p. 114; and Alison and Peter Smithson, ‘Cluster City’, op. cit.
16. Alison and Peter Smithson, ‘Hauptstadt Berlin’, *Architect & Building News*, 2 July 1958, vol. 214, no. 1, p. 10.
17. For a history of *The Economist* magazine, see: Ruth Dudley Edwards, *The Pursuit of Reason: The Economist 1843–1993* (London, 1993).
18. That is, the allowable building area was five times the area of the plot.
19. On Sir Edwin McAlpine’s advice, Maurice Bebb’s services were retained throughout the contract, notably to ensure that the technical aspects of the project as well as its cost were kept under control. Bebb would have been perfectly able to carry out a commission such as the Economist development on his own, but he felt that the location of the site was too important not to make it the object of a competition. This was unusually generous on the part of an architect. As Peter Smithson put it, ‘he changed our lives’.
20. Drawings of these are preserved in *The Economist* archives.
21. See: Stephen Greenberg, ‘The Economist Building: Going “Club Class”’, *Architects’ Journal*, 28 November 1990, vol. 192, no. 22, p. 53.
22. The description is Peter Smithson’s (conversation with the author, 24 February 1994).
23. Alison and Peter Smithson, ‘The Pavilion and the Route’, *Architectural Design*, March 1965, p. 143. The article was written in 1961.
24. See note 16.
25. See note 23.
26. See note 2.
27. See note 23.
28. Conversation with the author, 19 May 1994.
29. op. cit. in note 14, p. 29.
30. op. cit. in note 14.
31. Peter Smithson, ‘Theories Concerning the Layout of Classical Greek Buildings’, *AA Journal*, February 1959, vol. LXXIV, no. 829, p. 207.
32. *ibid.* p. 208.
33. Alison and Peter Smithson, *Without Rhetoric: An Architectural Aesthetic* (London, 1973), p. 55.
34. Peter Smithson credits George Kasabov, one of the office assistants on the Economist building, with the idea.
35. See: Peter Smithson, ‘Just a Few Chairs and a House: An Essay on the Eames-Aesthetic’, *Architectural Design*, September 1966, p. 443.
36. Smithsons, *Without Rhetoric*, op. cit., p. 36.
37. Conversation with the author, 19 May 1994.
38. *ibid.*

Photograph on p. 17 and Figs. 10, 11, 18 by Michael Carapetian. Fig. 1: photograph by E. D. Mills, AA Photo Library. Fig. 5: photograph by Maltby. Fig. 7: *Architectural Design*. Fig. 8: British Architectural Library, RIBA, London. Fig. 9: Toomey. Fig. 16: Fitzwilliam Museum, Cambridge.



18. Economist Building: View of the plaza, 1964.