



The Bank of London and South America Head Office: Buenos Aires, 1960–1966

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The Bank of London and South America Head Office Buenos Aires, 1960–1966

Jorge Francisco Liernur

1

Jostling between the machinery and the mountains of bricks and sand, a crowd surrounded the excavation on the hot morning of 24 March 1962 in Buenos Aires. One of them, 'who had stood with his arms crossed and his head slightly thrown back throughout the proceedings, was then invited to come forward. A shiny bucket and spade were brought to him. Burying the spade in the mixture, he dropped its contents, which fell to the ground with a soft thud.'¹

This person was not one of the many workers who were usually active on the building site, but Prince Philip, Duke of Edinburgh and consort of Her Majesty, Queen Elizabeth

of England, who was on a visit to the capital of Argentina. The ceremony, of which this act by a representative of the UK constituted the climax, consisted in the laying of the foundation stone of the new head office of the Bank of London and South America (Fig. 1).

But why begin an account of what is frequently described as the most remarkable Argentine building of the twentieth century by recalling such an event? Had it not been for the Falklands/Malvinas War of 1982, the anecdote would perhaps seem pointless. As a contrast to those tragic and irrational events, the episode of the Prince's physical involvement in the foundation of a building in Buenos Aires is

especially eloquent, because it shows up the scale of a failure. For a brief moment the Duke of Edinburgh assumed not only the role of a worker, a plebeian, but also that of a builder who with this stone was attempting to establish the foundations of a renewal of good will between Britain and Argentina. The imposing classical building which the new bank was to replace belonged to the past, and a new future was beginning, based on creativity, technology, and the capacity for change. In the person of the Prince, Great Britain signalled its willingness to re-establish commercial and cultural ties with a remote South American republic with which it had been in conflict since the beginning of the Second World War.

The exceptional character of the new building, whether economic, technical or artistic, can only be fully appreciated within the context of this attempt to reverse a decline which had begun many decades earlier. In this sense, the building is a monument to the dream of re-establishing an idyll which both parties believed to be only temporarily interrupted. The British imagined that the building would install in Latin America the figure of a phoenix always ready to be reborn; the Argentinians saw it as evidence of renewal and of a cosmopolitanism with overtones, which would help to counteract the country's reputation for having been in league with the Axis powers.

2

The Bank of London and the Río de la Plata had been established in Buenos Aires in 1862. In 1867 the architects Hunt and Schroeder designed for the bank a new head office which stood on the corner of Bartolomé Mitre and Reconquista streets. This was demolished in May 1961 to make space for the building which is the subject of this essay.

Work on the earlier building had begun in 1869, and according to contemporary accounts its great banking hall – approximately 13.5 by 27.5 metres, with a 12.8-metre-high roof of reinforced metal – was one of the largest covered spaces in the city. Like its successor it was technically innovative, incorporating a hydraulic lift designed to transport bullion and ingots of gold and silver.²

In 1959 the renamed Bank of London and South America decided to replace its head office. A meticulous study was conducted under the supervision of the architect Gerald W. Wakeham to determine the requirements of the new building. In January 1960 four Argentinian architectural practices were

invited to take part in a competition. The brief was explicit:

The Bank of London and South America is one of the world's leading banks. The high reputation for integrity and efficiency which it enjoys, and the confidence its operations have inspired throughout nearly a hundred years of existence, are qualities which should be reflected in the new building, in a clear and concise architectural statement. Thus it is clearly essential, in the design of the façade of the new building, to avoid historical styles but, equally, to avoid contemporary clichés that would in turn become dated. . . . In both planning and structure the building should allow for the utmost flexibility of use. The number of columns in the interior should be kept to a minimum. . . . Future maintenance requirements in particular should be taken into account in the fitting-out of the building, so as to achieve a balance between the initial outlay and possible future costs as well as inconvenience.³

The competition designs were submitted in May 1960. On the recommendation of Wakeham, the Bank's board of directors awarded the commission to the architectural practice of SEPRA (Santiago Sanchez Elía, Federico Peralta Ramos and Alfredo Agostini), in conjunction with the architect and artist Clorindo Testa.

Demolition of the old building began in 1961. In April 1962, after the laying of the foundation stone, tenders were invited for the first phase of construction, which began on 15 December 1962 and was carried out by six-hundred workers in two nine-hour shifts a day. The 4,500-ton roof which supports the suspended floor slabs was completed in January 1965, and the building was inaugurated in August 1966.⁴

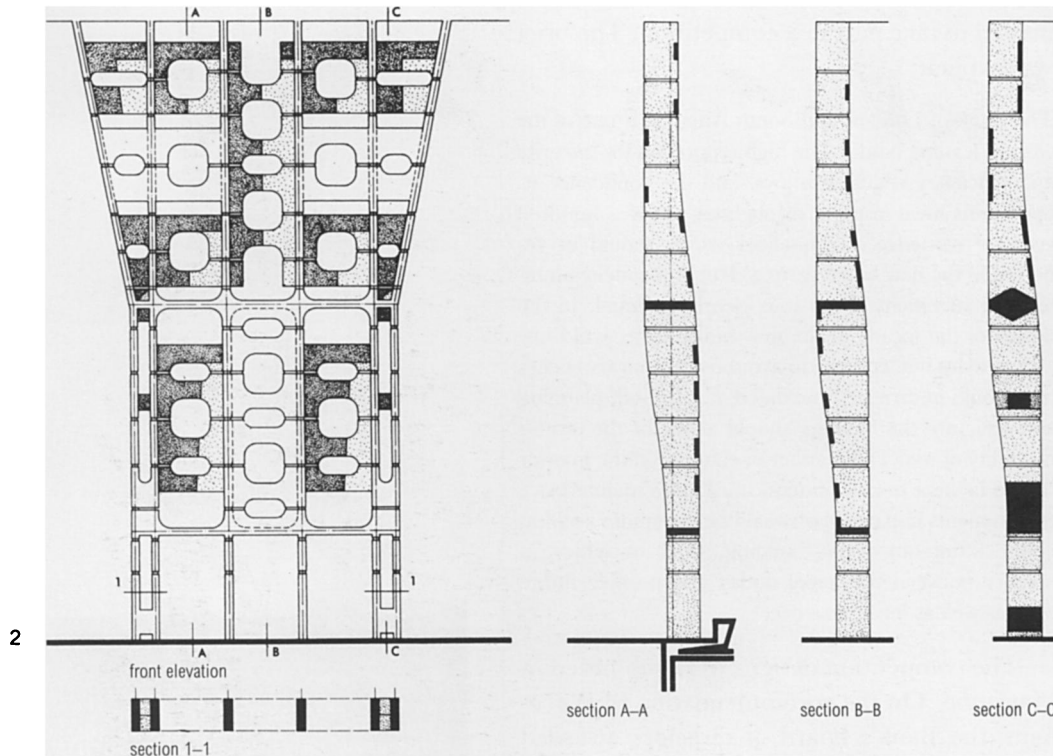
Numerous complex problems arose in the building of this great structure, particularly in connection with the roof, some of which are summarized in the following account:

The dimensions of the roof (each one of its sides measures seventy-five metres) and the special requirements of the structural grid ruled out the use of expansion joints. It therefore became necessary to study the stresses caused by the live and dead loads at that level, as well as the thermal stresses. Exposure to heat resulted in lateral movement in the top level of the beams, which was compounded by the thermal expansion characteristics of the differing materials. All these forces resulted in a complicated hyperstatic structural system. A solution to the calculations set up by the engineer, Fernandez Long, was then devised in the United States, with the help of a computer.⁵

Experiments of a similarly ambitious nature accompanied almost every aspect of the bank's construction. The type of concrete used throughout the building was chosen after



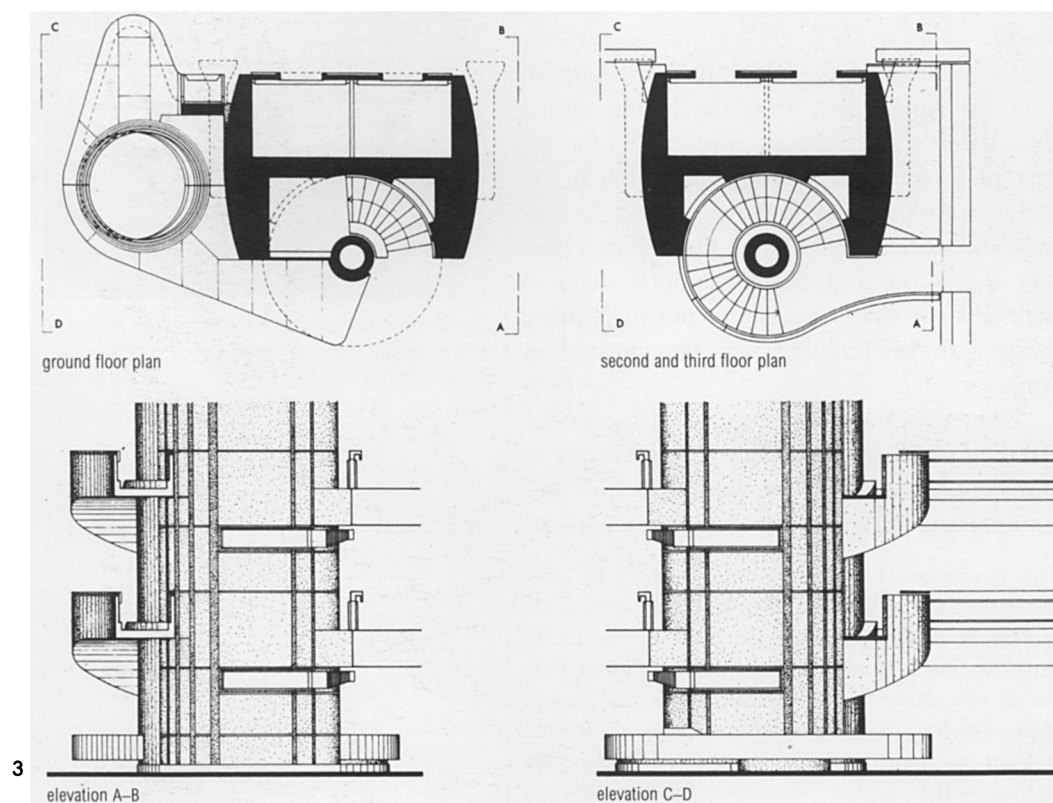
1. Foundation stone of the Bank of London and South America Head Office, laid on 24 March 1962.



numerous trials; as is most evident in the lateral vertical supports, it was of a superior quality (Figs. 2, 17). The installation of the air-conditioning system entailed particular difficulties, owing partly to the size and complexity of the interior and, given the high summer temperatures in Buenos Aires, partly to the extensive use of glazing. Great care was taken to provide each internal zone with an air diffuser and to control the air flow between the different floors. An air curtain was created around the perimeter in order to reduce thermal gain. The lighting was devised by a specialist firm based in the USA, which used models to test a variety of potential solutions. The electrical system was also complicated, not only because of the obvious requirements for maximum security, but because a new computer system for accountancy was to be introduced by the Bank (Fig. 23).

A special film of 1966 which marked the inauguration of the new building described its 'extremely complex structures' as follows:

Two main piles containing the lifts and around which the staircase twists as bindweed [Figs. 3, 18] are connected on the top by huge beams which, forming a kind of bridge, make them one piece. Underground, three levels of conventional conception, then a vast ground floor extending over all the building area. Above, the adventure begins: the first and second floors, each measuring 400 square metres, are hooked to these two piles in cantilever [Fig. 21] and supported on two single points at a distance of fifteen metres from each other. As for the upper levels, they are suspended from the huge slab weighing 4,500 tons, which constitutes the main roof, by means of steel cables which are also visible. Furthermore, there is a superstructure on the roof: libraries, restaurant rooms and lounges arranged between beams so gigantic that they themselves form the partition walls between the corridors and the different rooms. Outside, the façade consists of a series of superimposed screens: concrete blocks appearing to descend from the sky, entirely independent steel and glass frames, walls pierced with peepholes and arches wrought as abstract paintings. . . . Decoration is absent. Only three colours, but a refined combination: the plastic floor is light red; the raw concrete, which has been slightly covered on the outside by a transparent plastifying paint, is grey; and the varnish of a local wood is a very light beige.

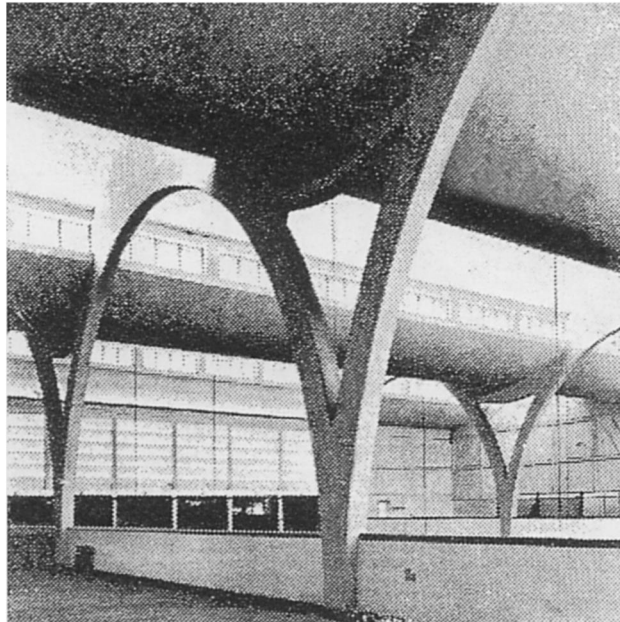


BANK OF LONDON AND SOUTH AMERICA HEAD OFFICE

2. Elevation and sections of one of the lateral vertical supports.
3. Plans and elevations of the two central staircase/pillars.
- 4 (OPPOSITE). Early sketch of the interior by Clorindo Testa.

The new 'Casa Central' was part of an overall strategy to modernize the image of the Bank, and many of its branches had already been remodelled. Two in particular stand out, both designed by SEPRA with Testa. The first was a small but daring stand in Harrods, Buenos Aires, while the second, designed and built during the construction of the Bank's head office, was a self-contained building of



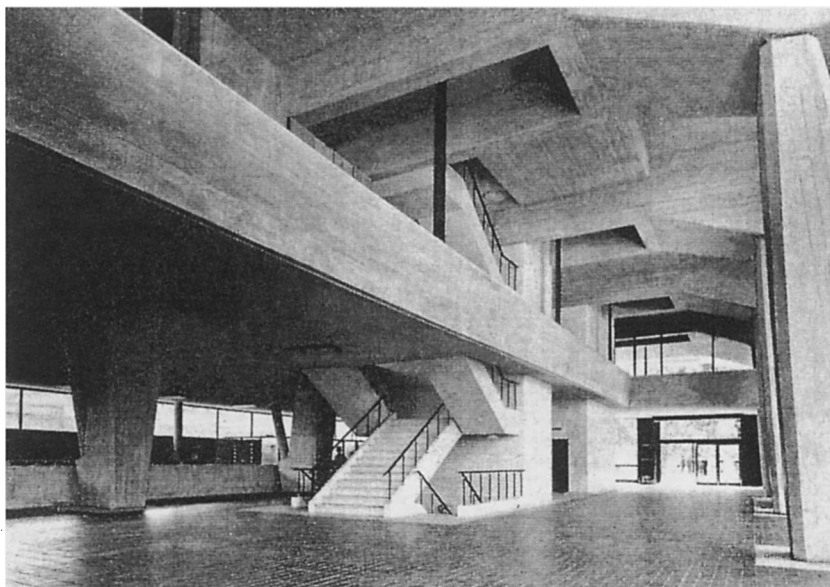


1,300 square metres (Fig. 7). This latter served as a test site for a number of the technical systems that were later to be incorporated in the head office, including the reinforced concrete, the lighting, the suspended mezzanines, as well as many of the formal elements.

3

On the day before the foundation ceremony, the Duke of Edinburgh gave a speech in which he described the reasons for his official visit. He spoke of the Bank's plans – as signalled in the change of its name to the Bank of London and South America – to build up its business in the continent as a whole. He expressed the concern of the British government over the decrease of that country's trade with South America, and in particular with Argentina, a connection which had been very important from the end of the nineteenth century until the Second World War. However, he said,

we must lay aside the pleasure of remembering the glories of the past so as to focus upon the realities which now confront us. It is true that Argentina is our most important trading partner in Latin America, in the sense that we are undoubtedly her best client; but we should, at the same time, reflect on the fact that we provide only nine per cent of Argentina's imports and that since 1958 her exports to Great Britain have also steadily declined.⁷



After its initial recovery in the post-war period, Great Britain had begun to consolidate its role in the Commonwealth. More than a decade later, there was an attempt to try to recover her place as Argentina's principal trading partner, which had been usurped by the United States. But circumstances had changed. In the three decades following the Crash of 1929, successive Argentine governments had instituted a policy of import substitution, enabling the country to manufacture most of the goods which previously had been supplied by Britain. As a consequence, Britain's direct investments fell from 10.7 per cent of the total in 1910, to 1.4 per cent in 1962. A similar decline occurred in Argentine exports to Great Britain, which fell from 25 per cent of its GDP in the 1930s to 7 per cent in the 1950s.⁸



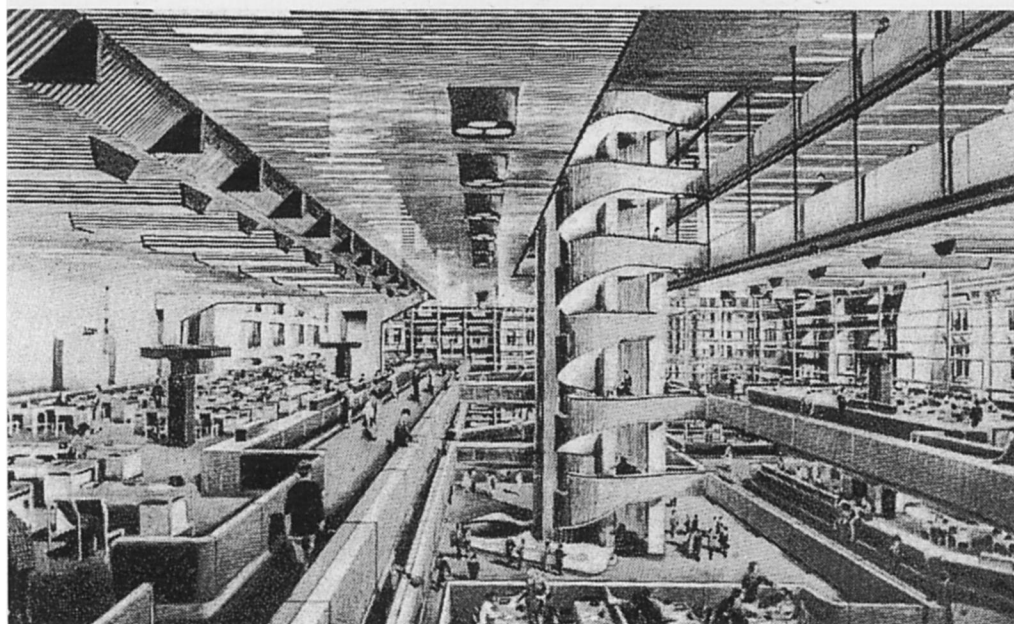
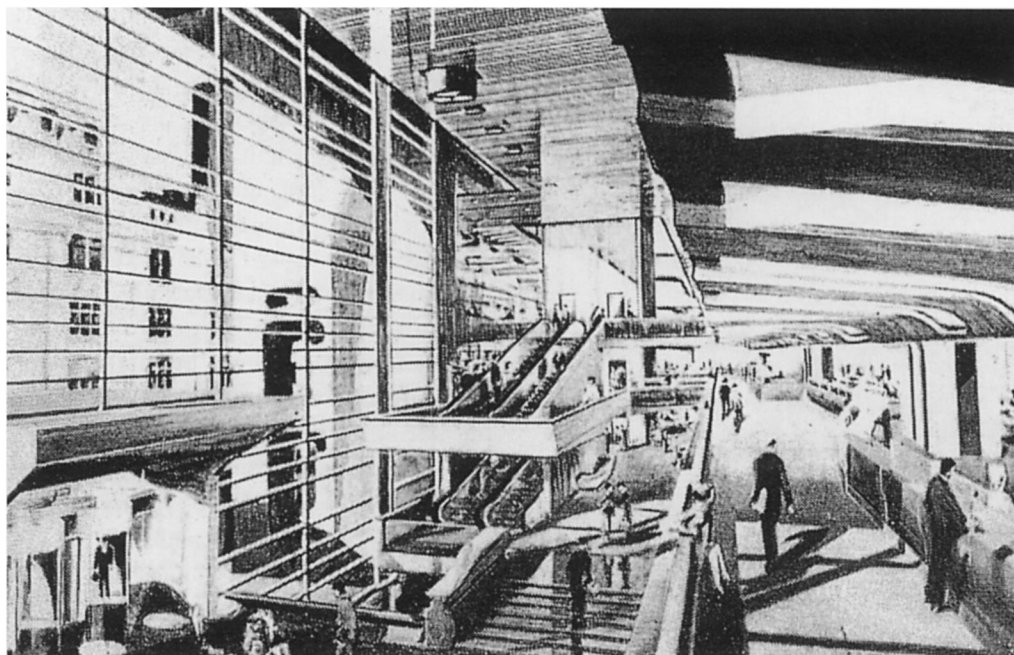
This policy of import substitution and the near enclosure of Argentina's domestic markets were both reinforced by the Second World War. However, with the fall of General Perón's government in 1955 there was a shift in policy, and the election of President Dr Arturo Frondizi in 1958 marked the beginning of a period of economic, political and cultural Westernization. Identifying itself with the 'desarrollismo' ('developmentalism') which

was then fashionable in a number of Latin American countries, the new regime promoted – at whatever cost – the idea of a ‘great leap forward’. A key feature of this policy was the use of incentives to stimulate foreign investment in the highly important mining and manufacturing industries. In 1958 the Parliament passed new legislation governing the formation of companies and the raising of capital, paving the way for a radical development of the petroleum, power-generating, chemical, iron and steel, and car industries. Such were the conditions that began to attract British capital to Buenos Aires.⁹

4

Clorindo Testa was the youngest member of the project team. Born in Italy in 1923, he was thirty-seven years old when SEPRA invited him to take part in the competition for the new head office. The choice of Testa was a remarkably judicious one and, as will become evident, it had nothing to do with chance. However, the scale of the project and the exceptionally high quality of the new building are a testament to the long experience of Testa’s partners: Santiago Sanchez Elía (b. 1911), Federico Peralta Ramos (b. 1908), and Alfredo Agostini (b. 1908). All three were natives of Buenos Aires and had studied architecture at the local university.¹⁰ In 1936 they established the practice of SEPRA, and in 1949 they took over the practice of Lyman O. Dudley, an American architect living in Argentina. As a result, SEPRA inherited a list of prestigious clients consisting mainly of businesses with links to the United States. By 1960 the practice had completed nearly 40,000 square metres of building – a remarkable achievement, given the economic conditions of the time.¹¹

SEPRA had no special inclination for novel or risky projects, and the Bank of London might therefore seem somewhat out of character. Yet some of the most outstanding qualities of the design – its careful professionalism, its technical rigour, its effectiveness in terms of function – are precisely those which typify the work of the practice. Embodying professionalism, cosmopolitanism and technological innovation, the Bank building represented a landmark in the project of Westernization, perfectly expressing the new economic and cultural climate in Argentina at the end of the 1950s. Apart from its formal qualities, the Bank is remarkable also in its use of materials, in particular exposed reinforced concrete, which from the very beginning, and indepen-



8

5. San Cristóbal Market, Buenos Aires, 1940. Architects SEPRA.
6. Córdoba Town Hall, 1954–8. Architects SEPRA.
7. Bank of London and South America, Santa Fé branch, Buenos Aires, 1961. Architects SEPRA with Clorindo Testa.
8. Bank of London and South America Head Office, 1960–6. Architects SEPRA with Clorindo Testa.

dently of the current stylistic fashions, was a constant in SEPRA's work.

There was a tradition of reinforced concrete construction in Argentina,¹² which dated back to the second half of the nineteenth century, but it came into widespread use, especially in public buildings, only in the early twentieth century. The French school (Coignet, Hennebique) was an important influence, but Argentina's links with Germany (Ways and Freitag, Siemens Bauunion, Philip Holzmann) were particularly strong in this respect.

One reason for the popularity of concrete was that it could be produced locally, whereas steel required imports of coal; concrete also required a far less skilled labour force. At the beginning of the century reinforced concrete was used extensively in building construction but, as was the case elsewhere, it was invariably given a decorative cladding. Even so, with the rapid growth of Buenos Aires the use of reinforced concrete became increasingly adventurous. The Kavanagh skyscraper of 1936, at that time the tallest reinforced-concrete building in the world, was innovative in both design and execution. Viollet-le-Duc's teachings, as disseminated in the writings of Auguste Choisy during the early decades of the twentieth century, were very influential among Buenos Aires architects, who until 1948 were trained in an institution that was attached to the faculty of engineering of the University of Buenos Aires. As a consequence, there was a strong emphasis on structural materials and methods in the design of buildings. During the late 1920s and early 1930s the engineer Luis Del Pini designed in Buenos Aires a series of highly accomplished buildings in reinforced concrete. These include the Boca Juniors club stadium, the stands of which are daringly cantilevered because of the constricted site, and the huge metropolitan food market, in which the influence of Auguste Perret is particularly evident.

Perret himself was invited to teach at the University in 1937, and his lectures made a strong impression on the city's young architects, who of course included the recently established practice of SEPRA. Their market building of 1940 (Fig. 5) was the first example in Argentina of an elegant, expressive structure built in fair-face concrete masonry. During the 1950s the practice adopted a Corbusian approach to form: the Entel building and Córdoba Town Hall (1954) were both influenced by the Unité d'Habitation at Marseilles.

The preoccupation with structure was fur-

ther strengthened in 1950 with the arrival in Buenos Aires of Pier Luigi Nervi, who became involved in several projects there and also gave a series of lectures in the school of architecture which were subsequently published. During this period the practice of SEPRA was one of the first to experiment with suspended mezzanines and other elements. For the Perdriel factory of 1956, the engineer Maria Carmen Agostini de Dellepiane (Alfredo Agostini's sister), designed a top-lit structure suspended from metal gantries. The ground floor of Córdoba Town Hall (Fig. 6) is a double-height space which shares several features with the Bank of London: a concrete core, the use of vertical nodes of circulation as the principal means of support, and cantilevered mezzanines.

The structure of the Bank has often been criticized from a 'gothic' or 'organic' point of view, particularly the role of the roof and of the vertical supports. However, if we accept the 'classical' logic of the design, which gives priority to representational effects – and the members of SEPRA had all been trained in the classical tradition – the solution is revealed as impeccable.

The building was conceived of as a highly flexible container.¹³ The use of vertical trusses to support a massive roof slab had its origins in the late projects of Mies van der Rohe, particularly Crown Hall (1941) and the Chicago Convention Hall (1953). A photomontage of the former building shows a flexible and logical arrangement of supporting and suspension elements within a large neutral container, while a study model for the latter shows a trunk-like central core which is strikingly similar to that of the Bank.

The double curve in the façade of the Bank building was determined by a desire to widen the pavement, which is extremely narrow in this part of the city. In section the columns taper inward at both top and bottom (Fig. 2). They are set at three-metre intervals, echoing the structural grid of the recessed glass walls, and grouped together in sixes, with the two outer pairs set close together so as to reveal the glass walls. Horizontally they are tied by perforated panels which act as *brise-soleil*.

Finally, the finishes (even the formwork, which was treated as joinery) were of an extremely high quality.¹⁴

While the building could be described as classical in terms of its structural conception, the 'ethics' of its aesthetics could be seen as the antithesis of brutalism – or at least it could be understood as a cluster of contradictions. Far



9. *La Pajarera (The Birdcage)*, by Clorindo Testa, 1951.

removed from the model of the Marseilles Unité, the interior suggests a futuristic world of man-made materials and mechanical installations which 'try to face up to the reality of mass-production, and to drag a rough poetry out of the confused and powerful forces which are at work'.¹⁵ At the same time the 'traditional' material qualities of the building's envelope allow it to compete with its marbled neighbours.

5

However, the Bank of London is not merely a highly accomplished structure that fully exploits the potential of exposed reinforced concrete. As we have seen, its structure does not conform to the logic of the 'natural' use of materials and the 'organic' distribution of loads, in the manner of Nervi. Unlike Nervi's Sports Palace or Felix Candela's Church of Our Lady of Miracles, both of which are based on a structural concept, its design grew out of an 'artificial', architectural idea. There is a good deal of evidence to suggest that this idea originated with Clorindo Testa.

As with any extraordinary building, the design and execution of the Bank of London involved numerous tensions and problems. While the SEPRA team were very much a part of the Westernizing movement that dominated Argentine culture at that time, Clorindo Testa introduced an element of resistance into the creative process.¹⁶

'Desarrollismo' did not arise out of a vacuum. Social inequality, authoritarianism, and often brutal foreign interference in domestic affairs had combined to create enormous tensions in Latin American society. After the Cuban Revolution in 1959 'desarrollismo' came to be seen as a means of preventing revolution. During this period the pressures and changes which led to the great upheavals of the following decades were reflected in the work of numerous writers and artists.¹⁷ Clorindo Testa's canvases of the 1950s are populated by cranes, bicycles and tyres, with a profusion of linear effects and the absence of a background, creating a strong spatial transparency. His painting *La Pajarera* (*The Birdcage*) of 1951 (Fig. 9) is particularly revealing in relation to the use of space in the Bank building. Most of the surface of the canvas is occupied by a cage (another recurrent motif of this period), and leaning over it is a person who is trying to grab hold of the birds inside. The solidity of this figure juxtaposed with the birds and the delicate wires of the cage anticipates

some of the themes which can be found in the Bank building of a decade later (Fig. 10).

The year 1957 marked the beginning of a new phase in which Testa abandoned the figurative in his paintings. In 1961 he won the Di Tella International Prize for the painting *Cuadrado blanco*, in which a square form is defined by broad, violent strokes of colour. Two important observations may be made here. The first concerns the particular interpretation of Informalist movement which is reflected in this painting.¹⁸ Informalism was defined by Córdoba Iturburu as 'a romantic approach which attempts to exert only the slightest constraints over creative impulses . . . in order to realize the greatest possibilities'.¹⁹ In *Cuadrado blanco* the element of 'constraint' is sufficient to make evident the possibility of control, or rather of a rational approach, but this is compromised by the fact that the execution is left to deeper impulses: the square is present but it is defined by gestures. Again, the square on the canvas is caged, but here it assumes a form which will become a constant in Testa's work. This consists in a kind of 'window on the world', in which the fixed borders of the frame are used as a structuring device. The motif of brush-strokes bordering and defining a square of blank space occurs, for example, in the competition project of 1959 for a monument to Battle and Ordoñez, designed by Testa in association with SEPRA. The monument is like a giant 'pupil', or picture frame, through which the city of Montevideo is viewed from the Plata river. It was the success of this project which led to Testa's collaboration with SEPRA on the Bank of London and South America.

A glance at the preliminary sketches for the Bank reveals that its reinforced concrete forms fulfil a similar function (Fig. 26). Their 'irrational' outlines make the neighbouring buildings seem more regular, more classical, freeing them from habitual responses and reinforcing the diversity of the city as a whole. The Bank is inserted into the dense fabric of the city centre, yet at the same time its 'extra-terrestrial' language provokes a powerful sense of estrangement. As a separate, distinctive object it appears in this context as something alien, so that rejection, even pain, arises within the very organism to which it is said to belong.

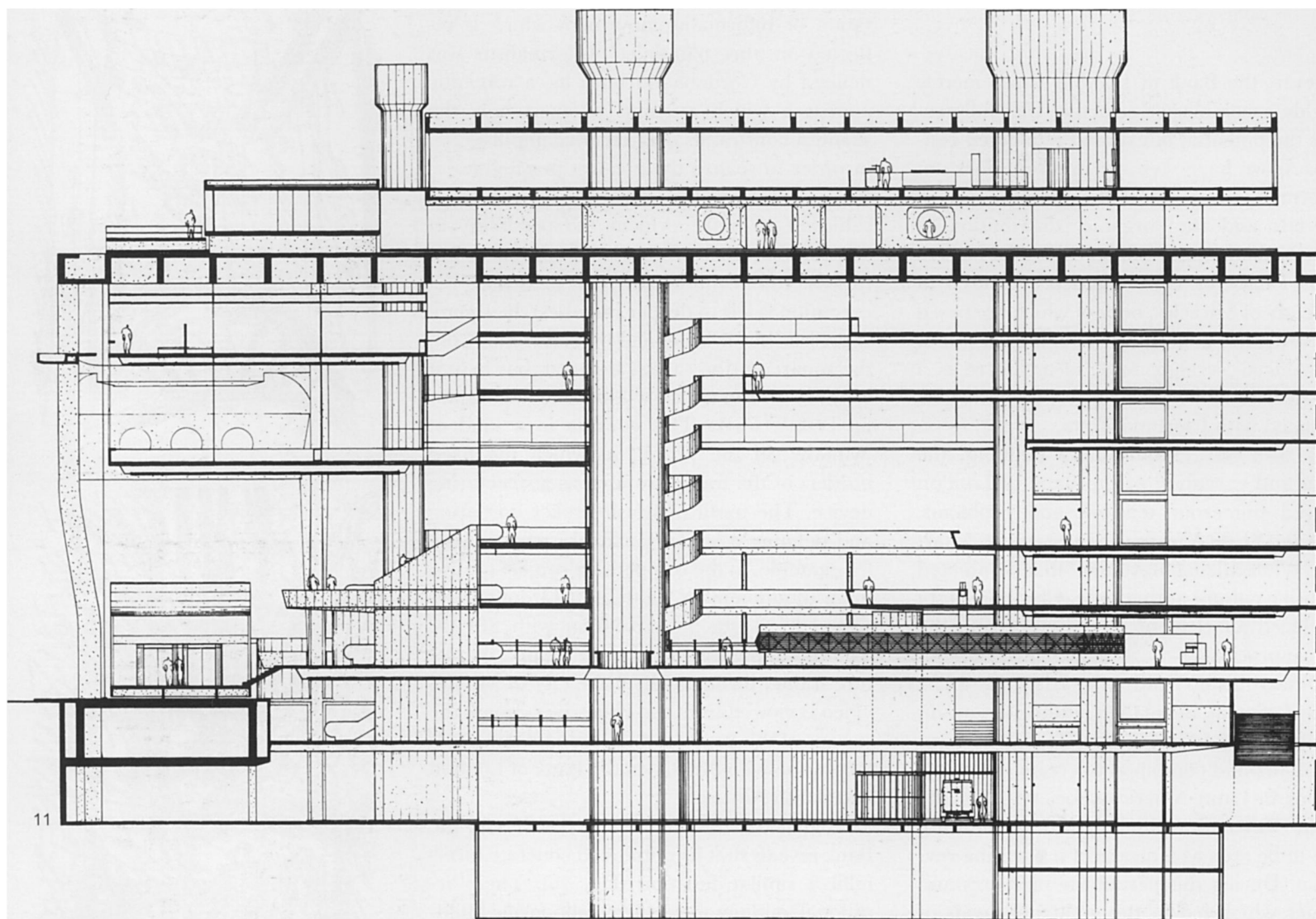
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The Bank has often been classified as brutalist, yet we have already seen how difficult it is to isolate any elements, apart from the use of



10. Bank of London and South America Head Office. Sketches made by Clorindo Testa in 1990.

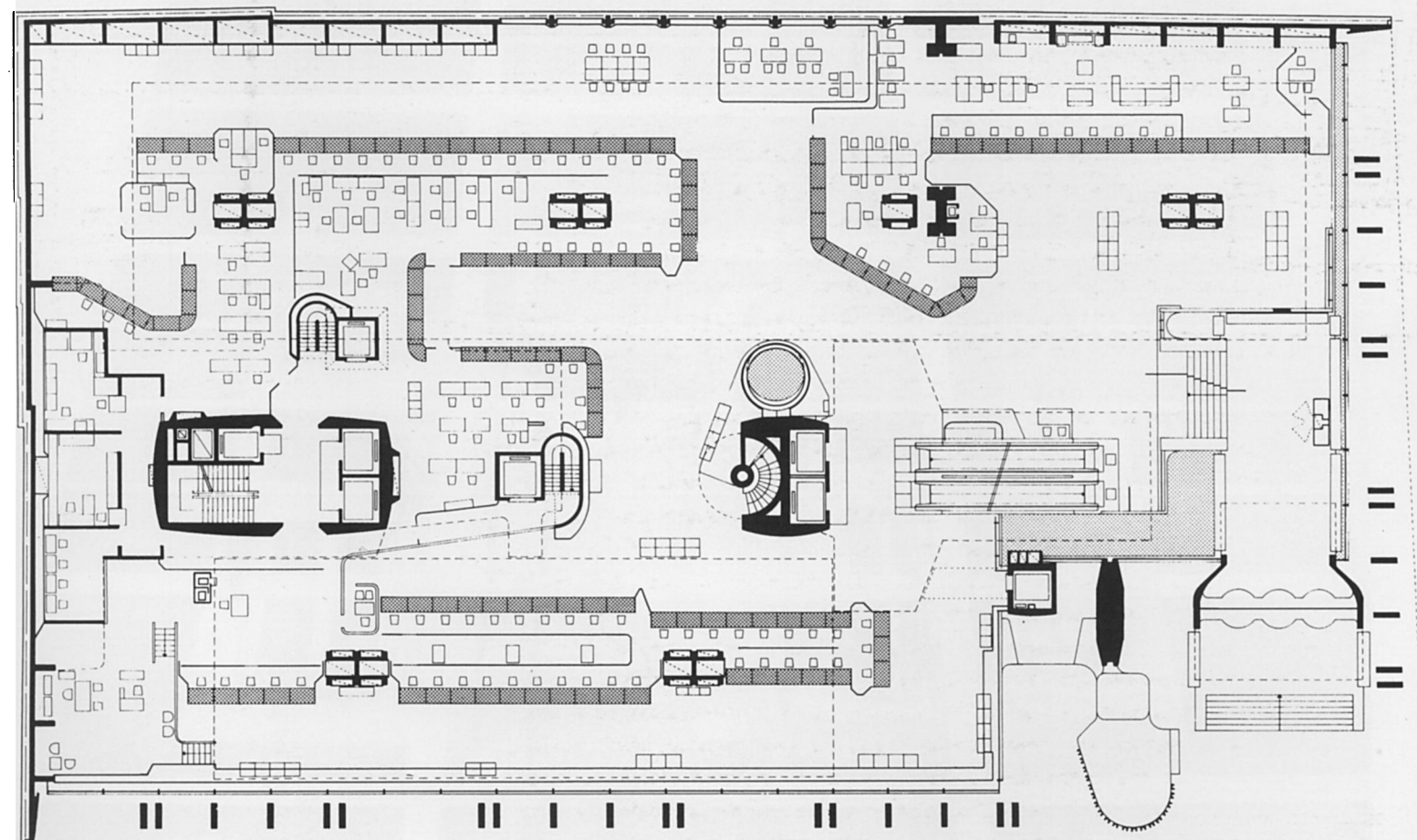
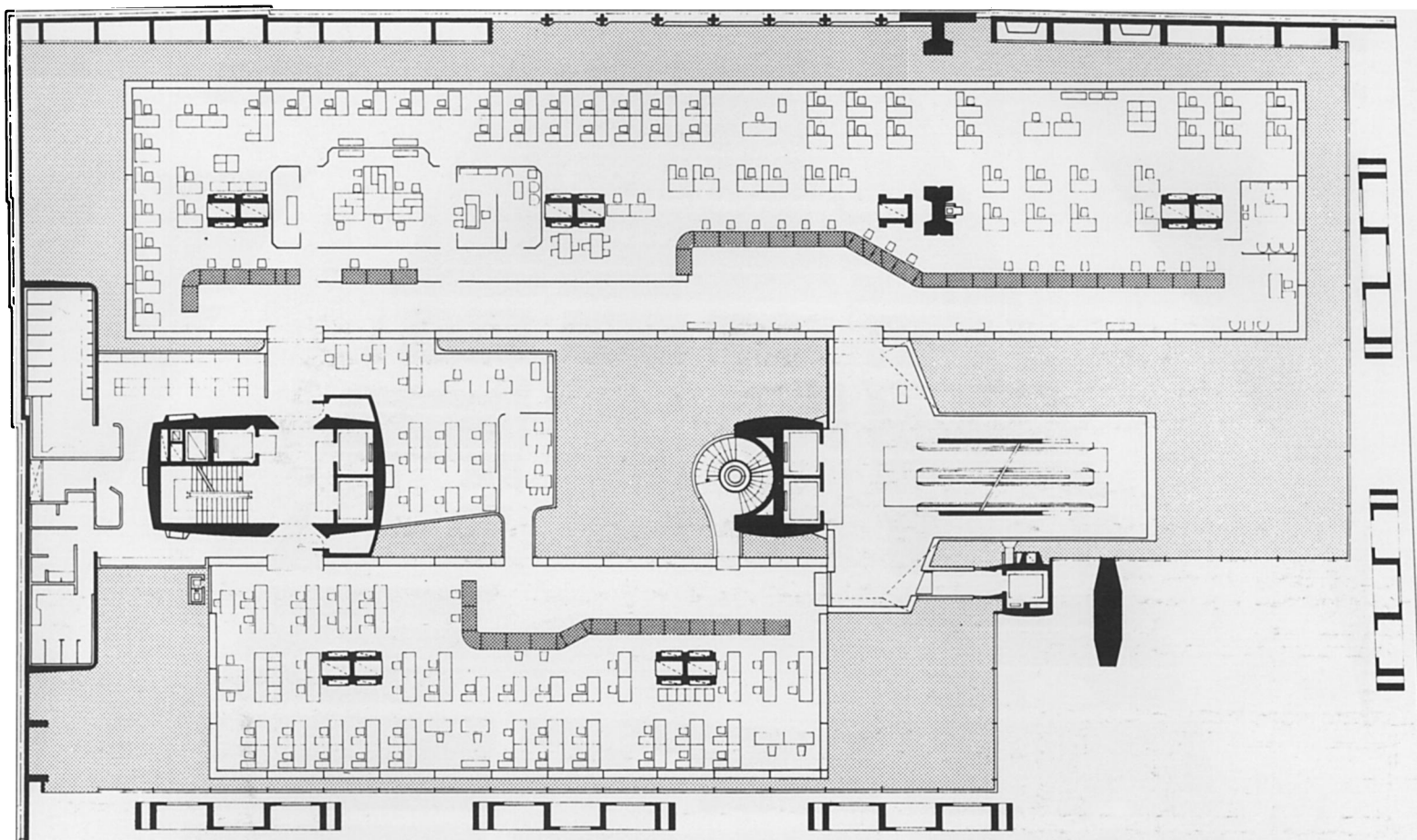
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11. Section.

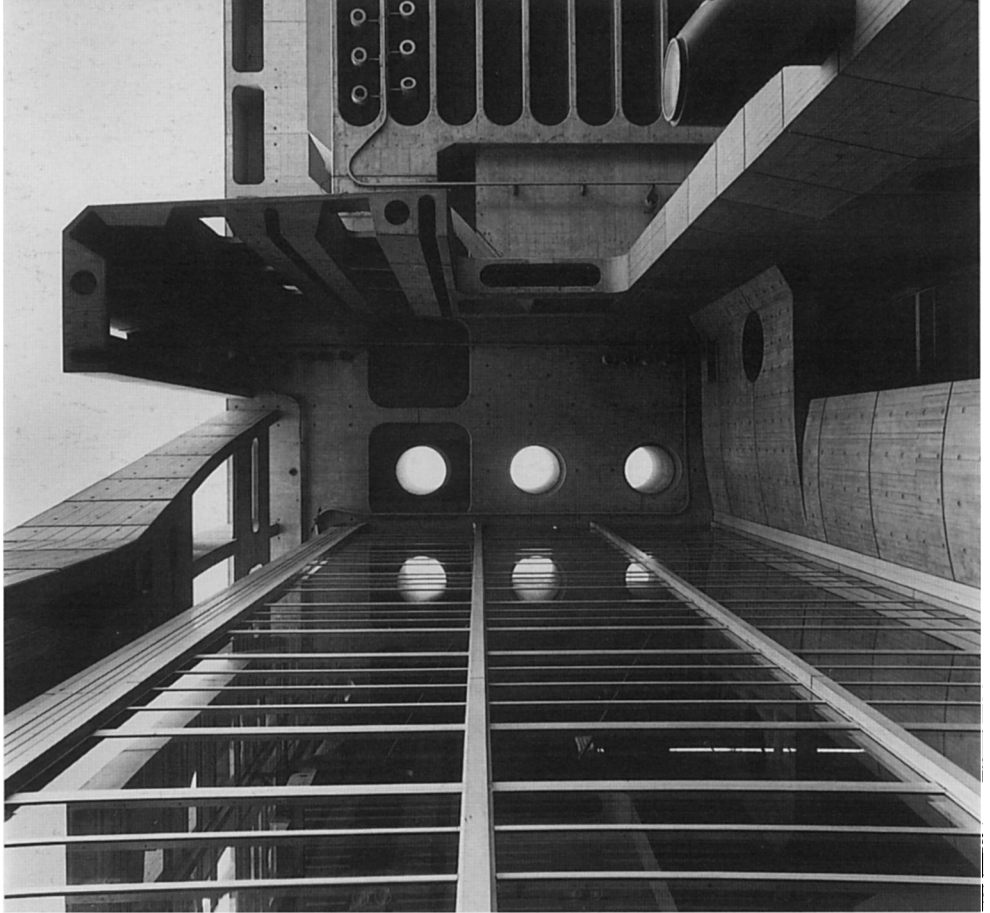
12. Plans of ground floor (below) and second floor (above).



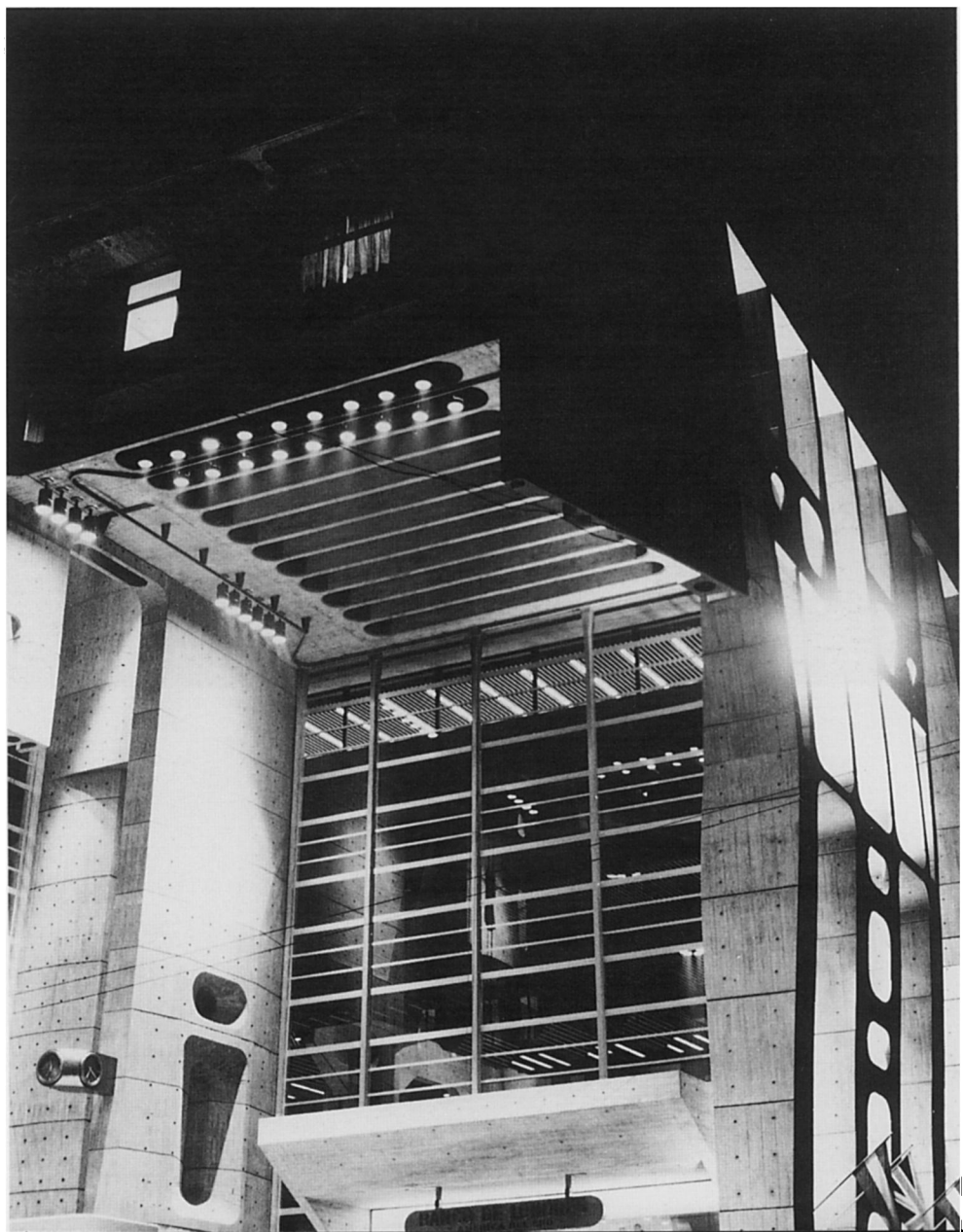




BANK OF LONDON AND SOUTH AMERICA HEAD OFFICE



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BANK OF LONDON AND SOUTH AMERICA HEAD OFFICE



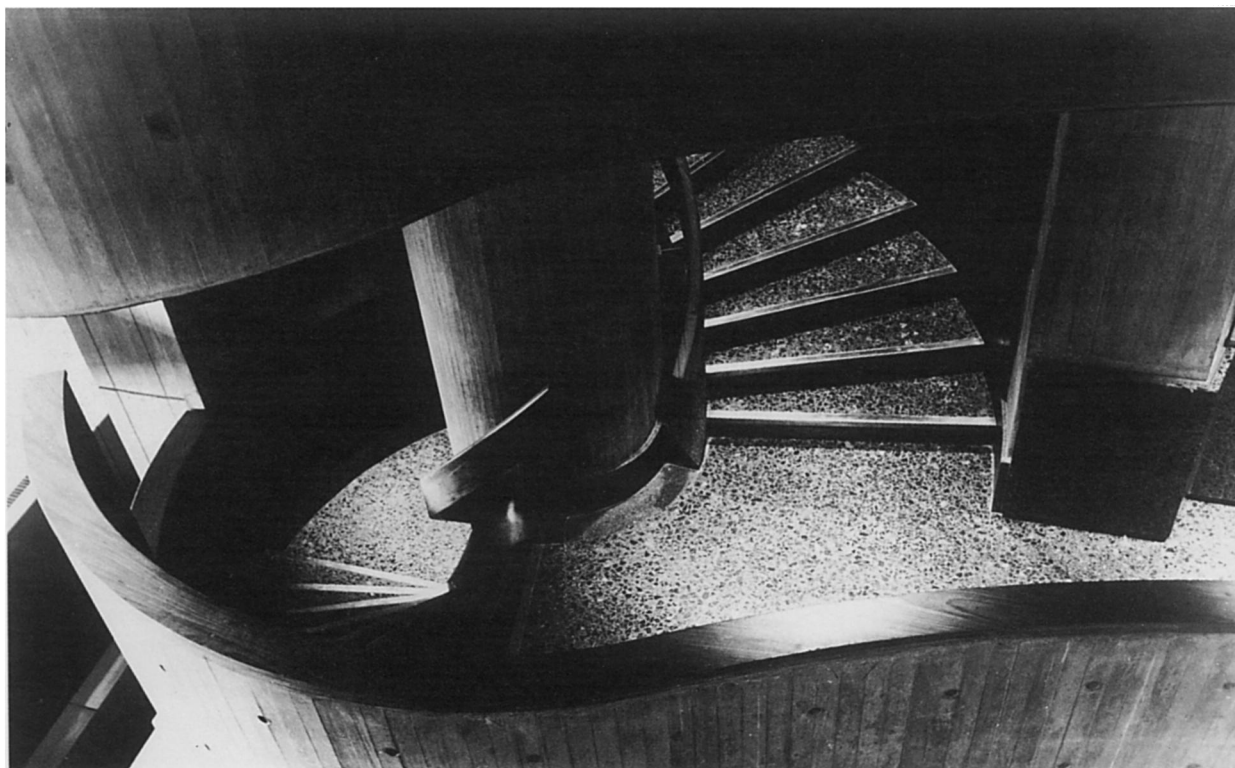
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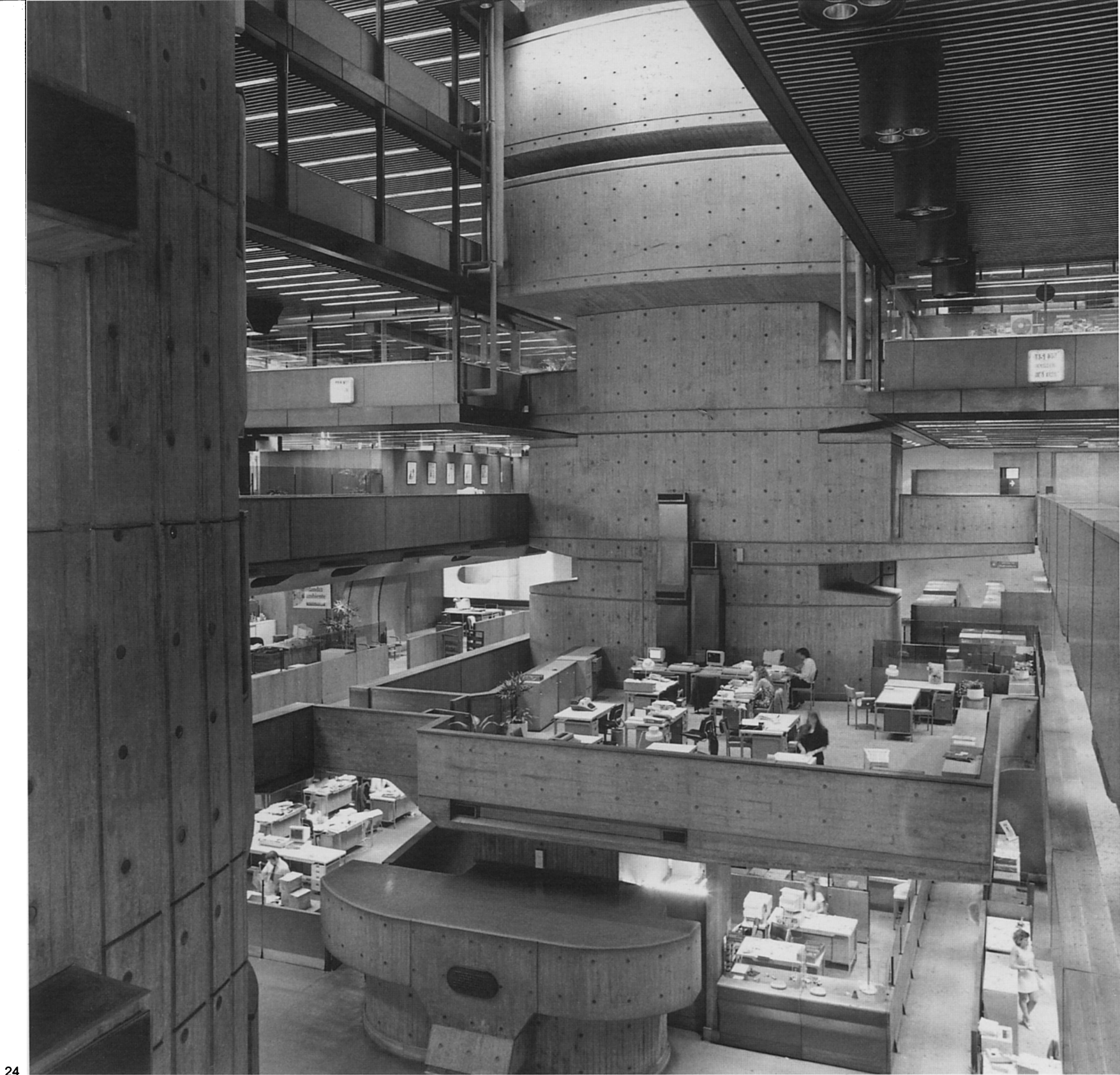
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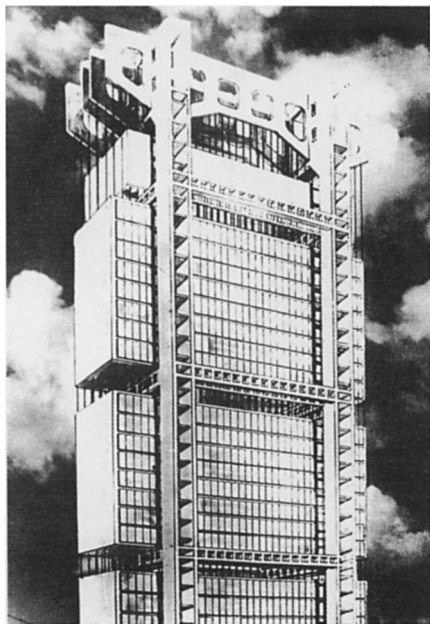


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25. Photomontage of a project for an office building in Buenos Aires by Amancio Williams, 1946.

concrete, which justify this label. If we compare it with an obvious precedent, Paul Rudolph's School of Architecture at Yale University, we find striking similarities in the forecourt, including even the use of curved forms, while the lower mezzanines perhaps recall the car-park building by Rudolph is also located in New Haven. But here the similarities end. Rudolph's buildings have an emphatically heavy, solid character. By contrast, SEPRA and Testa emphasize the planar rather than mass, and conceive of the building as a huge volume of light and shadow which is sheltered by a kind of membrane, like the shell of a mollusc, eliminating the use of supports in the upper levels, incorporating air-conditioning ducts in the columns in the lower levels, subsuming those on the roof into sculptural nodes of circulation, using light to diminish the material density of the central core. When we experience this space, it is impossible to feel that it is subject to the forces of gravity. In spite of their manifest substance, all the elements seem to float.

It has recently been suggested that Amancio Williams's project of 1946 (Fig. 25) for an office block in Buenos Aires was a precedent for this floating effect, a feature which is so characteristic of Williams's buildings and which is perhaps best exemplified in his house on a bridge on the Mar del Plata (1948).²⁰ In other respects the forms of the Bank recall contemporary alternative movements in British architecture, such as Archigram member Michael Webb's project of 1959 for the Association of Furniture Makers, though it is surprising that this building, designed and constructed in Argentina, was described by Nikolaus Pevsner as 'reminiscent of the most unbridled fantasies of students at the Architectural Association'.²¹

The organization of the interior evokes quite different models. The comparison to religious architecture is difficult to avoid (Fig. 26), and the metaphor of a 'cathedral of commerce', which has in fact been used in connection with the banks of the nineteenth-century, may seem rather obvious. However, in invoking it here we are inevitably reminded of the typological tradition behind the new Bank of London, a building which, in spite of its modern appearance, is a long way from breaking with this tradition, and recalls the vertical fluidity of the interiors in Sir John Soane's banks. Only the position of the diagonal entrance in one of the corners of the plan prevents us from immediately recogniz-

ing the fact that the space is clearly divided into three naves. Seen from the interior, the external supports could be described as a dark filigree which transforms the extensive glazed surfaces of the façades into stained-glass windows. Perhaps for this reason the interior has something in common with expressionism, in particular with some of the drawings of Hans Scharoun.

Federico Ortiz has compared the interior to the tortuous labyrinths of Piranesi. This raises an obvious problem: if the exterior of the building reinforces the traditional urban fabric, its regularity of feature is no more than a front, a cloak (as in the drawings of Scharoun) which shelters a new urban universe of infinite space, organized on distinct planes. It is this aspect of the design which suggests the analogy with Piranesi's prisons. Moreover, it suggests a city composed of streets and squares – a city of the very kind that was advocated by Team 10.

Testa's early sketches of the Bank also reflect an awareness of Team 10's preoccupation with the concept of the threshold: 'the transition', wrote Aldo Van Eyck in the *Team 10 Primer*, 'must be articulated by means of defined in-between places which induce simultaneous awareness of what is significant on either side . . . Architecture (*sic* urbanism) implies the creation of interior both outside and inside. For exterior is that which precedes the man-made environment; that which is counteracted by it; that which is persuaded to become commensurate by being interiorized'.²²

The emphasis on the interior spaces in the design of the Bank was not new in Argentinian architecture. The new head office was but the most notable and the earliest instance in a whole series of spatial experiments, particularly during 1960s, which were influenced by the teachings of Bruno Zevi. During a visit to Buenos Aires in 1951 Zevi had given a series of lectures on space as the defining aspect of architecture. In addition, Cino Clacaprina and Enrico Tedeschi – two members, together with Zevi, of the editorial team of the magazine *Tecton* – had emigrated to Argentina in 1948, and the latter in particular had been active in promoting 'espacialismo' in his writings on the theme.²³

7

To the credit of its architects, the Bank building assembles, concentrates and articulates a vast array of political, cultural, financial and technological decisions. The tension generated

by these often conflicting decisions creates an ineffable equilibrium, precariously balanced on the brink of collapse. In both artistic and technical terms the building represents one of the high points not just of Argentinian but of all of twentieth-century architecture. However, as I observed earlier, we cannot ignore the high degree of artifice, nor the unique character of the attempt. Notwithstanding, or rather because of, its exceptional qualities, as many critics have rightly pointed out, the Bank failed to spawn a new school of building or, more importantly, to achieve a significant transformation of the urban scene. On the contrary, a concept which Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co used to describe the work of the Japanese metabolists could equally be applied to this building:

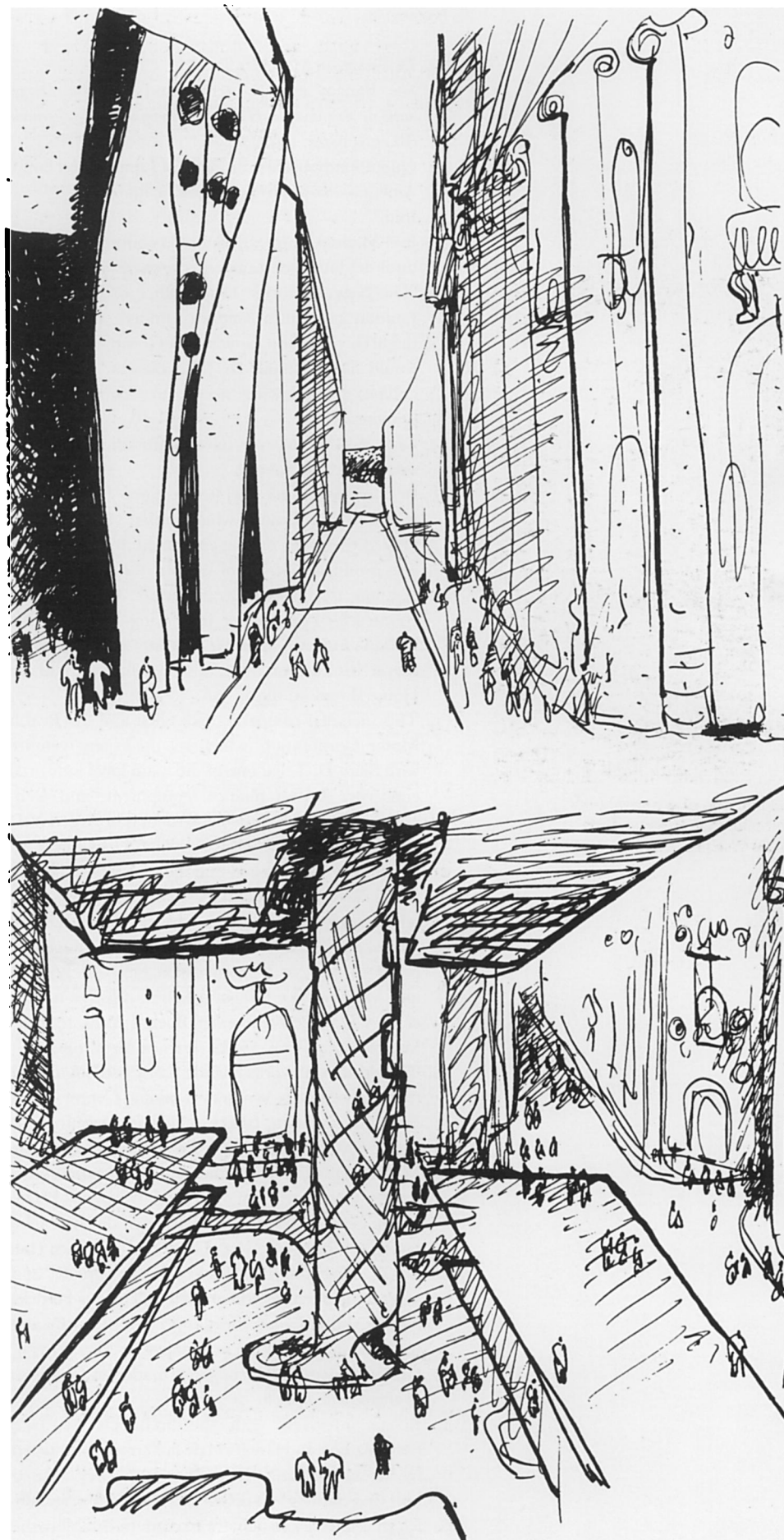
coming to grips with only the superficial appearances of the technological universe and attempting to dominate it with what can be called an ironic nostalgia for the future is really very much simpler than buckling down to a scientific study of its laws. . . . Technology, regarded as an occasion for play and spectacle, sets off dreams of global restructuring of cities and territories, revives the determination to effect the Futurist reconstruction of the universe.²⁴

The outcome of Prince Philip's visit is a perfect example of reality's stubborn refusal to submit to our efforts to control it. Just before the Prince's arrival, there had been elections in several provinces. On the whole, but especially in Buenos Aires, the candidates of the proscribed Peronist opposition party had been victorious. Political turmoil ensued, and on 29 March, a week after the arrival of the royal visitor, President Frondizi was defeated. Prince Philip was not in Buenos Aires, and the city's leading newspaper mentioned his activities on that day in a small article entitled 'The Prince Played Polo and Admired our Livestock'.²⁵ On the following morning he departed for Uruguay in a small aeroplane which took off from a provincial airport. British investments in Argentina continued to fall. In 1981 they represented only 0.3 per cent of the total.

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An exhibition of drawings, plans and photographs of the Bank of London and South America was held at the AA during February/March 1997.

Photo p. 24 & Figs. 14, 15, 17–19, 24: Diego Trolliet, 1996. Figs. 1, 13, 16, 20–3: Courtesy of Lloyds TSB Group.



26. Bank of London and South America Head Office. Early sketches by Clorindo Testa.

1. *La Nación*, 25 March 1962.
2. See 'Bancos' in J. F. Liernur and F. Aliata, *Diccionario de Arquitectura, Habitat y Urbanismo en la Argentina* (Buenos Aires, 1992).
3. Quotation published in 'Bank of London and South America', *Summa* 6/7 (December 1966).
4. Ibid.
5. José Manuel Pedregal, 'Sobre la concepción estructural del Banco de Londres', *Summa* 6/7.
6. 'The New Argentine Head Office of the Bank of London and South America Limited', film script in the archives of the Lloyds TSB Group. The author would like to thank Dr John Booker, Group Archivist, for allowing access to documents and photographs.
7. *La Nación*, 24 March 1962. Translation from the original text in Spanish.
8. In 1938 Argentina supplied 344,000 tons of fresh meat to Great Britain, which in that year produced only 57.6% of the meat it consumed. By 1961 Britain was producing 81.5% of its own meat, and of the 205,000 tons which it imported Argentina accounted for 139,000. See John King, 'A View from Britain', in *British-Argentine Relations*, compiled by the Royal Institute of International Affairs, Chatham House (London, 1991).
9. This included companies like Shell and the British Motor Corporation (which set up a joint venture with Siam Di Tella, one of the main local industrial concerns). British finance, equipment, and technology were behind the construction of Argentina's most powerful thermoelectric plant, Dock Sur.
It has been suggested that the re-establishment of Britain's ties with Latin America could not have taken place without the consent of the United States, indeed that it was actively encouraged in order to prevent a *rapprochement* between London and Moscow. See Gregorio Selser, *Argentina a precio de costo: El gobierno de Frondizi* (Buenos Aires, 1965).
10. See Federico Ortiz, *SEBRA* (Buenos Aires, 1964).
11. Their principal works include San Cristóbal market (1940); Avellaneda Workers' Training Centre (1943); the Yatay building (1944); offices for Acanto SRL (1947); the Sanatorio de la Pequeña Compañía de María (1948); the head office of the Argentine Electricity Company (1950); Hotel Victoria Plaza, Montevideo (1950), the head office of the state telephone company (1951-64); Córdoba City Town Hall (1954); offices for the Nestlé company (1958); and several industrial buildings such as Talleres Perdriel (1956), Abbott Laboratories (1957), SIAM (1958), and the headquarters of the newspaper *La Nación* (1959).
12. Graciela Silvestri, 'Hormigón armado', in *Diccionario de arquitectura*, op. cit.
13. In an interview with the architects Santiago Sanchez Elía and Gregorio de la Ferrere, conducted by the author on 25 November 1996, they assured him that Santiago Sanchez Elía the elder originally felt that in order to achieve maximum flexibility the 'trays' should be dismountable.
14. Ibid.
15. Alison and Peter Smithson, 'The New Brutalism', *Architectural Design*, April 1957.
16. Certainly this observation was not made at the time of the building's inauguration. On the contrary, it seems that the work was regarded as an illustration of 'dependency', as is clearly implied by Horacio Pando in 'Opiniones', *Summa* 6/7, op. cit., and in an open letter signed by several Argentinian architects which was published in *Architectural Design*, September 1967.
17. It is important to note that the work of Julio Cortázar and Ernesto Sábato, two of Argentina's most important and radical writers in the second half of the century, was just beginning to mature during the 1960s. Cortázar published *Rayuela*, his most important novel, in 1963. His previous books include *Final de juego* (*The End of the Game*), *Las armas secretas* (*The Secret Arms*) and *Los premios* (*The Prizes*). As for Sábato – now widely known for works such as *El Túnel* (*The Tunnel*) and *Uno y el universo* (*One and the Universe*) – his great novel *Sobre héroes y tumbas* (*On Heroes and Tombs*) was published in 1961. Although these authors had very different literary ideals and aims, both expressed a profound uneasiness and discontent with social and political conditions.
It was not, of course, only writers who reacted to this situation. Something similar was happening in the plastic arts. At the end of the 1940s there had been a significant movement known as Concrete Art which had links with the Uruguayan artist Torres García but in Buenos Aires was led by Tomás Maldonado. Partly in reaction to what was seen as the rigid abstractions of Concrete Art, this was followed by the Informalist movement, led by Alberto Greco, who initiated Arte Vivo in Madrid in 1961.
Two other groups that were active in 1961 are Arte Destructivo, involving figures such as Seguí, Kemble and Wells; and Otra Figuración, including Deira, Macció, Noé and de la Vega.
On the 1970s in Argentina, see: Oscar Terán, *Nuestros años sesenta* (Buenos Aires, 1991); and Silvia Segal, *Intelectuales y poder en la década del sesenta* (Buenos Aires, 1991).
18. See note 17.
19. Córdoba Iturburu, *80 años de pintura argentina* (Buenos Aires, 1978).
20. Claudio Docampo and Gustavo Dieguez, 'El sueño de la razón', *Revista de Arquitectura*, 173/175 (1995). In addition to Williams's buildings, another important source must have been Affonso Reidy's Museum of Modern Art in Rio de Janeiro, which used a similar structural system.
21. Cited in Francisco Bullrich, 'Opiniones', in *Summa* 6/7, op. cit. Pevsner visited Argentina at the beginning of the 1960s.
22. Aldo Van Eyck, 'Dutch Forum on Children's Home', quoted in *Team 10 Primer* (London, 1968), p. 45.
23. In a different sphere, the idea of 'espacialismo' was also taken up by the sculptor Lucio Fontana, who was living in Argentina at that time.
24. Manfredo Tafuri and Francesco Dal Co, *Modern Architecture* (London, 1980), p. 383.
25. *La Nación*, 29 March 1962.