

# On the Work of Julia Bolles & Peter Wilson

## Ark-itecture

'Man is at the same time subject to two movements: one of terror, which rejects, and one of attraction, which commands fascinated respect. Interdiction and transgression correspond to these two contradictory movements.'

This statement by Georges Bataille is eminently applicable to the ideas and work of Architekturbüro Bolles Wilson. The firm's architecture has a Janus head. Sometimes the buildings and drawings seem to evince an attempt to repel the waves of modernity; and at other times they seem to accept these waves as a *fait accompli* and even to take pleasure in them. The work is simultaneously rejecting and attracting. It commands respect for the built object, yet at the same time it blends effortlessly into the metropolitan flux that has rendered helpless everything of value.

Until now, Julia Bolles, Peter Wilson and their partner Eberhard Kleffner have had to realise their ambitions in small or unexecuted projects. Many of their ideas have reached us in word and seductive image without having had to pass the test of feasibility. But the building of the New City Library, Münster, makes it possible for us to measure the extraordinary ideas underlying this work on and at an appropriate scale, against the built reality. This reality refuses, however, to conform to any univalent criterion and takes a variety of forms. Their work is a protean insertion into an existing context.

### Emptiness Transcended

When we speak of reality, we inevitably come up against the philosophical problems of Post-Modernity. In Peter Wilson's case, however, there is a concrete and perhaps existentially determined reason to concern oneself with a possible bankruptcy of the *Realitätsprinzip*. As an Australian immigrant, he has himself had a dual experience of emptiness.

Not only must he be aware of the real emptiness of the desert landscape, but his position as migrant must have confronted him with the Other in no uncertain terms. The literary topos of meeting versus isolation is something we all know and care about, but the fact of a major geographical displacement and the concrete experience of a new environment must make itself felt in a profession concerned with physical anchoring in the ground. The mental relationship between the emptiness of a landscape and the existential emptiness, and what actions to take in this context, is accordingly a central theme of the work of Wilson and his firm.

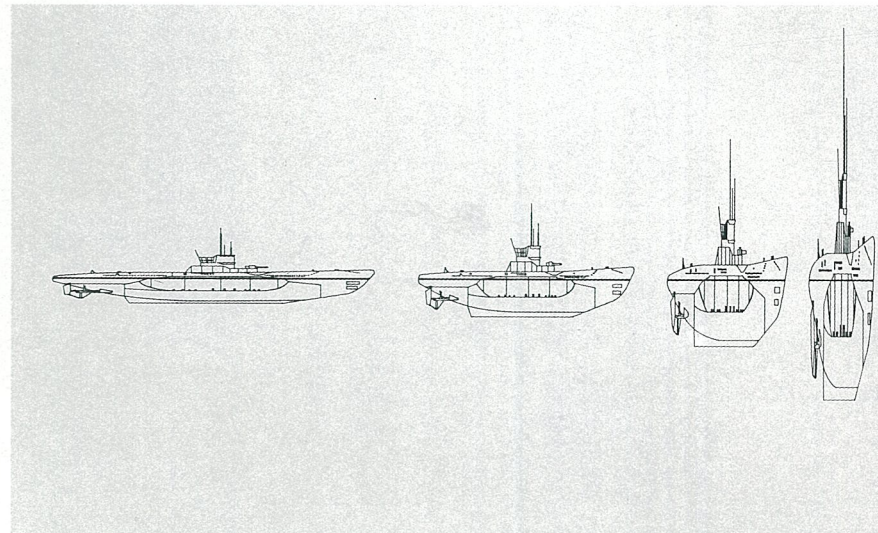
Wilson sought the climate where this kind of alienation is radicalised *in extremis* of his own accord. During his training and subsequent lectureship at the Architectural Association, he demonstrated his affinity for the ideas of architects like Bernard Tschumi and Nigel Coates.★ Preoccupied by the consequences of living in an electronic metropolis, they investigate, each in his own way, what is to become of such an archaic discipline as architecture.

★ It is surprising how far the architectural movement that has devoted itself to designing a world of 'exploded thought' has found its major inspiration in specific schools: Cooper Union (John Hejduk) and the Architectural Association (Alvin Boyarski).

'Now the post-McLuhan media, electronic, communication revolution has led us to a new trauma... We are all participants in the new perception – television slicing together disconnected fragments, slicing time. What characterises this new perception? A constant state of flux (video clips, mass transport), a dematerialisation of objects (surface is no longer absolute, interior and exterior no longer opposites), an absence of appropriate or absolute hierarchies of scale (grand narratives become micronarratives, a chair is as significant as a city), information itself is no longer the property of the book (it is electronic, invisible). What is the result? The horizon, the certainties of Cartesian geometry, the cone of perspective geometry focused on the viewer – all these have in a short space of time ceased to be our measure of the real. This radical transformation will be seen to characterise the end of the twentieth century as the discovery of optical perspective characterised the early Renaissance.' ★

★ Levene, R. & F. Cecilia, 'Interview with Peter Wilson', *El Croquis* 47 (1991), p. 15.

An autonomous hermetic environment



Bolles and Wilson, who became acquainted at the AA, are fascinated by mankind's drifting. The vagrant character of human culture, a consequence of the brave new world described above, recurs frequently in their projects. Their work symbolises the wanderings, but the means of transport are themselves also halting points. You don't just *go* somewhere, you *are* somewhere. This interchangeability of journey and destination occurs over and over again. A large measure of ambiguity prevails at a philosophical level, too. On the one hand, physical and existential emptiness is presented as an architectural concept; on the other hand, this takes place in a universe that has become too full. The emptiness is a virtual one which is always on the point of filling up with *events*, no, with minor factualities, no, with electronic impulses. But the emptiness is reconfirmed precisely through this tendency to pointlessness. Emptiness transcended! This Baudrillardian implosive thinking sometimes makes their architecture into an exercise of impossible mental gymnastics.

### Function follows Form.

Peter Wilson

The tradition of Functionalism, the great singular typologies of the nineteenth century (station, hotel, department store) and the twentieth century (airport, supermarket, parkhouse etcetera) have become increasingly inappropriate as contemporary operational strategies. A new definition of function is needed.

Peter Wilson

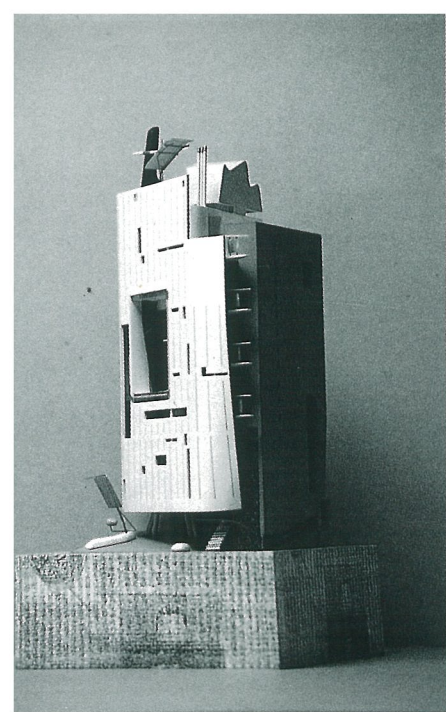
Public man, it now appears, is no more susceptible to brusque rational treatment than anyone else: he too has aspirations, likes old things as well as new, and wants to have everything nice. He is no longer a cipher, he has become a client. As the professional assurance of the sixties encountered the uncertainties of the seventies, a period of adjustment set in. This had little to do with the moral attributes of the various styles and a great deal to do with economic survival. The 'Post-Modernist' architect was able to

take over the Functionalist credo intact, continuing to justify everything by reference to the programme with the difference that the program was no longer reductive but now included anything that could be deemed to affect the satisfaction of the user. This change from didactic to opportunistic motivation in the professionals is in itself a confirmation of the shift in public opinion.

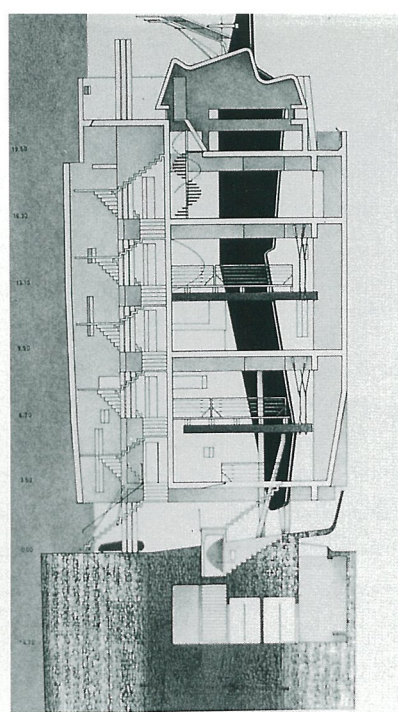
Robert Maxwell

If architecture's only purpose is to reflect function, to become visible and have form only to the degree that it transparently reveals the programme, composition becomes impossible. But it can be recuperated if some space can be inserted between form and function. This has been done. Primarily through the use of abstract form, a secret programme can be put to place and subjective values added on top of the empirical data.

Robert Maxwell



Cosmos Street Office Building, project, Tokyo, 1989



### 'How to Intervene?'

Bolles and Wilson have a joint stock of personal experience that typifies exactly the fate of architecture in the metropolis, a fate that is not generally presented to us in such a pure form. In Tokyo, they were invited to design a building for the Cosmos Street project without further programme details being specified (1989). The client could be sure of later finding a commercial user, in accordance with the laws of property speculation. As Kazuo Shinohara once wrote 'In the West meaning is put into things, in Japan it is taken out'.

At first sight it seems to be a splendid thing for architecture to have such autonomy. However, the assignment is already an indication that the client was reckoning on the self-censure concealed in the architect's practical spirit. It was supposed to be a building, after all, not some piece of sculpture. Apparently the separation of form-specialism from economic content has become so marked that it no longer even matters who begins the job. The architect is so unambiguously constrained by the laws of the market that he can do all his work in advance. The market is then pliant enough to go along with him whatever he designs.

But what cultural significance can architecture have if the building is *on offer* regardless of function? The speculator strengthens his position not only with flexible architecture but with the names Bolles and Wilson. The architects, confronted by a bewildering lack of strings, opted for a literal homologue of the layout of a newspaper cutting that the client gave to Wilson about himself.

The fascination for the ultimate flux in Japan as a whole, and the Tokyo commission in particular, have landed Bolles and Wilson in their latest paradox. How can one intervene as an architect in a world that, through an anonymous stream of undefinable particles, has made intervention as such into a futility? In Wilson's words:

'A relevant contemporary urbanism must learn a mode of perception that recognises

the patterns, modes and intervals of everyday experience. The next question and one that we must all address ourselves to is how to intervene? What effect will the forces and voids of the new field have on the architectural object?' ★ In other words, how can one be a drifter in a global village, with its global village pump, idiot and community?

### Membrane Architecture

An important aspect of Bolles' and Wilson's work is that they do not place thought before subjective action. Their concern is with conducting the profession of architect. Although they make no secret of their intellectual interests, the building itself continues to function as a stimulant. Theory forms an outer membrane, as it were. The transpiration though the intellectual skin activates thought and action emanating from the architectural object. Accordingly, there is little sense in performing an integral analysis of their oeuvre in order to understand it better. Since they experience reality as a succession of things without any higher order, we can make do with a simple summary of their intellectual and architectonic *topoi*.

The architecture of Bolles and Wilson has been characterised as an interplay of *conceived* and *perceived* space. ★ Both a phenomenological and an intellectualist thread are playfully woven into the series of projects, and play is made of this too. The object forms a bridge between the ritual or social act, and the subjective experience of the space itself. It is practically as though their method corresponds to the desired effect of their buildings: on the one hand, an autonomous, physically conceived space; and on the other hand, the perceived space that stimulates thought. The intellectual level is thus determined almost entirely empirically and derives from the action itself.

When we are obliged to continually change scale, perspective and modality, both spatially and morally, and we can no longer fall back on a common denominator that reduces everything to the criterion of the recognisable, the *interface* concept becomes tremendously important. The interface as an architectural phenomenon keeps pace with the view that the traditional wall, whether clad or not, has lost its power to impart identity. With the identity problem (a univalent meaning is no longer sufficient), the wall loses its traditional utilitarian function as a carrier of identity. We need membranes, as it were, which on the one hand demarcate spaces and concepts so that separate experience and thereby communication remain possible, while on the other hand they are thin enough to respect the flux of things and ideas. However, Bolles and Wilson do not associate these interfaces, these zones of physical and mental interchange, with transparency, as we see in the work of Jean Nouvel. The interfaces have the double action of a skin and are opaque but porous. The façades and internal partitions are always an intermedium that can be experienced as such. Bolles and Wilson work with mass, and this does effectively stipulate a boundary. However this mass *suggests*, by means of incisions, embrasures and penetrations, that 'other' on the far side. This duality, the simultaneous demarcation and blurring of identity, is something we encounter repeatedly in their work.

The problem is how meanings are attached to objects. If I state that my building has a certain meaning, it is not necessarily the same meaning for someone else. We have lost our common language.

Peter Wilson

Their interconnected elements are simple forms made complex through spatial relationships; again 'everywhere is connected, equal at any point, like a holograph'. The metaphoric comparison to integrated circuits may be applied to the 'architects' visualisation of their created space and is transmitted to the viewer through drawing, model, and, finally, in project or building. We begin to see an interrelated palette of geometric forms, configurations, and volumes organ-

ised to describe and inscribe space-space bound by materials employed as mediated surface with projections and voids working to balance compositional elements: spatial displacements or spatial correction. This articulation of forms and voids, first into architectural units and then total compositions, is the spine of development now employed by Architekturburo Bolles Wilson.

Dennis Dollens

My buildings could be considered as 'self-contained'. There are not typically deconstructivist, without a beginning nor an end. I believe in buildings as a unity, which end somewhere, as our body has a skin.

Peter Wilson

A directly related notion is that of zoning. Zoning results from the inclusion of elements that somehow enclose or intervene in the space. The user walks a zoned route which is articulated by means of the above-mentioned interfaces. The mind becomes conscious of this articulation as the body moves. As one enters and passes through the space one becomes aware at the same time of its various (programmatic/philosophical/ritual) constituents.

The suggestion of the Other is achieved by the provision of screens, which function as masks. The mask is used as a means of evoking expectations of what lies behind it. This is suggestive of a kind of architectural psychoanalysis, in which signs occur in an endless chain of associations, which can be investigated more and more deeply and exhaustively. The building is a unit; it ends somewhere and defines a place, as the skin does for the body and the subject. But meanwhile the process of signification never ends – an associative chain is set in operation, and this generates new knowledge ad infinitum. So we have yet another paradox: the building is unified entity, but it leaves room for the ultimate plurality, the subconscious.

Bolles' and Wilson's montage technique, with membranes as permeable separators, results in a *Raum ohne Eigenschaften* – not in the emancipatory sense that Siegfried Ebeling gave the term,★ but as a space that does justice to the Baudrillardian implosion of meaning and the associated existential emptiness. It is not the Kantian condition of the possible that is involved, but rather the *condition des faits accomplis*.

Conceived and perceived space, interface, zoning, masks and collage all offer material for what Wilson calls the *extra-functional* in architecture. Now that the programme has become completely banal (with the Cosmos Street assignment as apogee), it is important to restore architecture to its poetic strength. This is no longer to be found in traditional representational devices, but in the manipulation of the ostensibly neutral means at the disposal of the architect.

★ In *Der Raum als Membran* (1926), Siegfried Ebeling argued for a negative space that 'only affords the physiological precondition' for real life.

#### A Hybrid of 'Motion' and 'Place'

Alongside the artistic principles and concepts, we can recognise a highly characteristic iconography in the work of Bolles and Wilson. The bridge and the ship have been constantly recurring motifs since the mid eighties. Both signify simultaneously 'motion' and 'place'. A good illustration of the *bridge* concept is the plan for the Berlin Kulturforum, which was revealed in the very appropriately titled exhibition *Berlin: Denkmal oder Denkmodell?* (1988). The site, on the periphery of the Potsdamerplatz, is one scorched by history. Nowhere is the term 'crossing' as unpalatable as in this location, the former *Todesstreifen* (and we haven't even gone into the highly-charged name *Kulturforum* yet). In their design, *The Forum of Sand*, Bolles and Wilson proposed leaving the Kulturforum definitively incomplete while still giving the space a highly specific character by constructing a circular platform of sand. This raised circle is to be populated by various fragments: the Pfennig Brücke is to be transported here and have two cafes situated on it; and there are four multi-storey car parks and a tower-block library. Furthermore, the project consists of a broad avenue of grass and a few other structural elements. Naturally, the essential feature is the sand platform, which embodies the 'aesthetics of disappearance' (Virilio) in both a spatial and a material sense. All that fits here, where Berlin has so long lacked a heart and where the Kulturforum is overburdened with the physical consequences of the excessively long and earnestly held belief in *Kultur*, is the metaphorical material of the yawning emptiness, the essence of the desert, the ground of the wilderness. Bolles and Wilson extrapolate the geological substrate of the city to a cultural sign. *The Forum of Sand* is the absolute non-place, the totally delegitimised residue of *lebensraum* politics. Cynically, none other than the former NSDAP sponsor Daimler-Benz is to form the nearby bridge between East and West, to the sundering of which it so actively contributed sixty years ago.

The bridge of Bolles and Wilson goes from nowhere to nowhere and hence confirms that emptiness does not necessarily have to be compensated by an architectural extravaganza, but can also be 'architecturally legitimised'.★ The bridge gives this non-place a very clear distinguishing feature and memorialises a terrible past. At the same time, it underlines the futility of a simple denial of that past. Thus it bridges not only space but time. It does not serve for the conciliation between two banks but between two eras.

An exemplar of the *ship* concept is the Münster city library. The building, in which we can recognise nautical metaphors, is severed by a fissure that functions as an internal pedestrian street, the *Büchereigasse*. This results in two separate volumes, the 'slab' and the 'ship'. The division of the building corresponds to the symbolic and physical separation of the organising structure. One wing, the ship, houses the traditional printed media; the other, the slab, houses the electronic media. The internal street also serves as an urban connection to the surroundings, and is aligned towards the nearby Lamberti church. The strong division underlines the above cultural analysis of Bolles and Wilson.

Once again they take an object-oriented approach, which can be seen not only in the whole (the ship) but at a smaller scale too, resulting in a collage-like composition.

★ Neumeyer, Fritz, 'Weerzien met een brug', *Archis* 6 (1990), p. 49.



Exhibition pavilion for the 1990 Osaka Expo of Gardens and Greenery

Reference [should be] made to the body image through the elements that are unique to architecture, such as walls, windows, and doors. (...) The divisions made on the vertical elements are the registry of the bodily associations which cause aspects of the building's narrative to be understood. [architectural] elements also have a direct relationship to our body image. When Le Corbusier in his 'five points of architecture' made the window a horizontal strip, it is true that a new form was derived, but the traditional form of the window in its vertical body-related shape was lost. When the literal framing elements-head, sill, and mullions - were eliminated from the window opening, there was a consequent loss of identification relative to our bodily equilibrium.

Michael Graves and C. Constant

Being an architect theory always comes after the design.

Peter Wilson

Great stories don't exist anymore, but architecture's capacity is to carry small stories, to be 'micro narrative'.

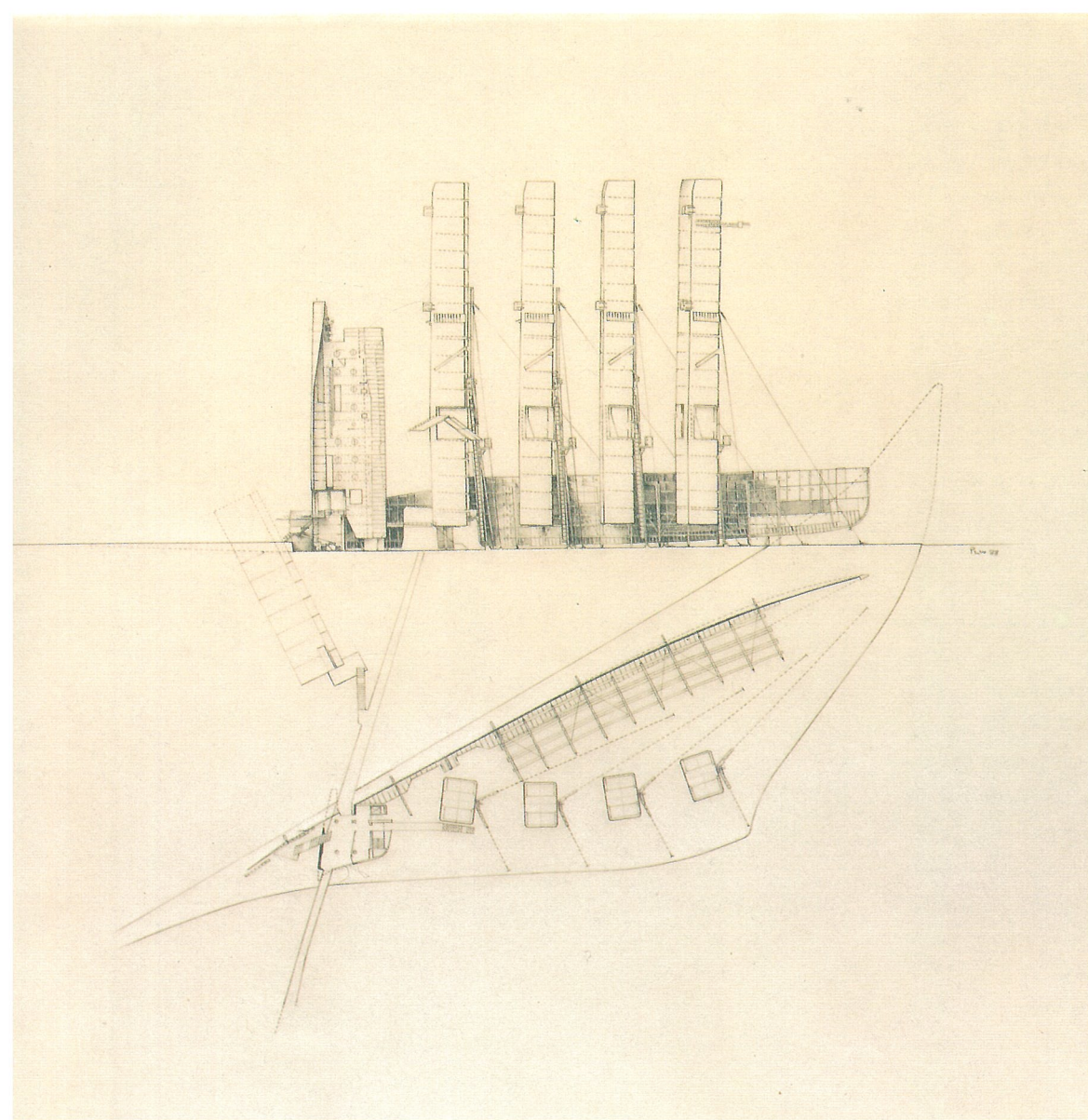
Peter Wilson

The idea of the coherent whole is no longer there. Empty, melancholic spaces have a genuine urban quality; they are today's poetic spaces. We shouldn't fill them up with great operatic narratives which are merely a nostalgia for the public event.

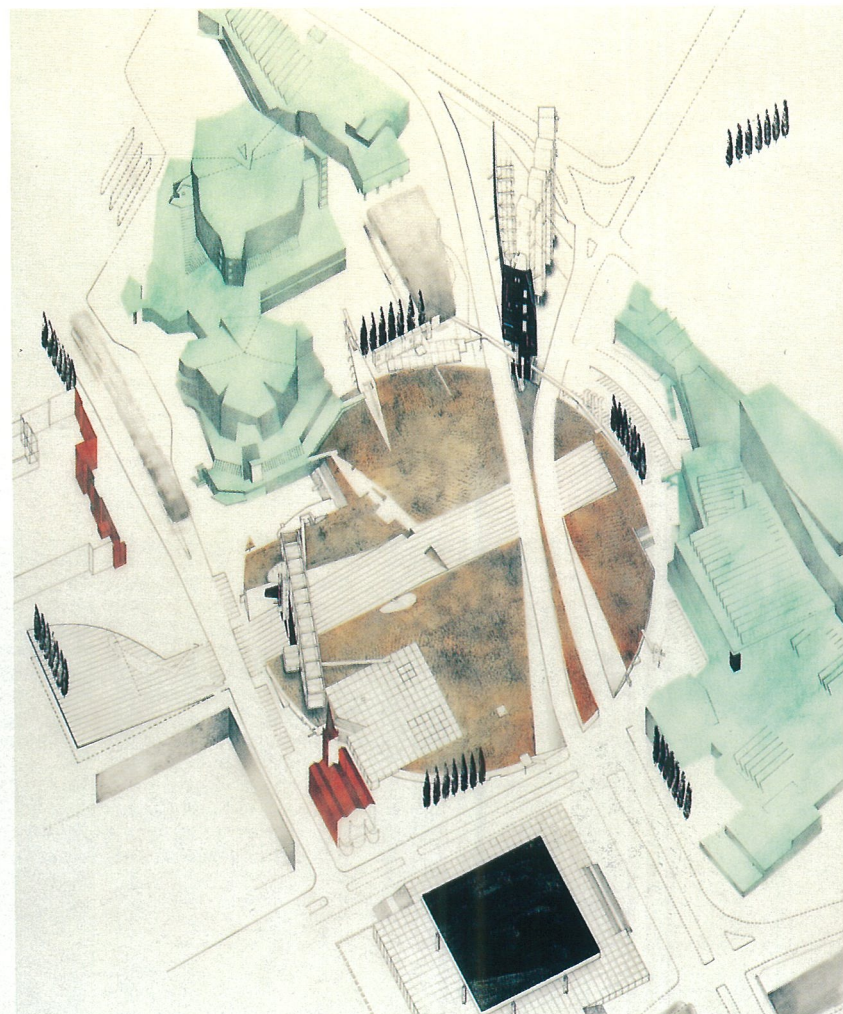
Peter Wilson

Then there are the limits of the building line and the façade, where outside and inside meet and where, metaphorically, public and private collide and the community and the individual negotiate. This 'in between realm' of Aldo van Eyck is the locus for decoration and representation and carries the larger freight of symbolism, being between and part of two aspects of the building. In our work, we both set up this façade and erode it, taking the outside through it, the street through the building. Metaphorically, the highway has gone through our lives and therefore through our architecture. We will never be the same again. The façade is broken; what remains is representation and a thin glass skin to help condition the inner air.

Robert Venturi



Forum of Sand, competition entry for Kulturforum, Berlin, 1988

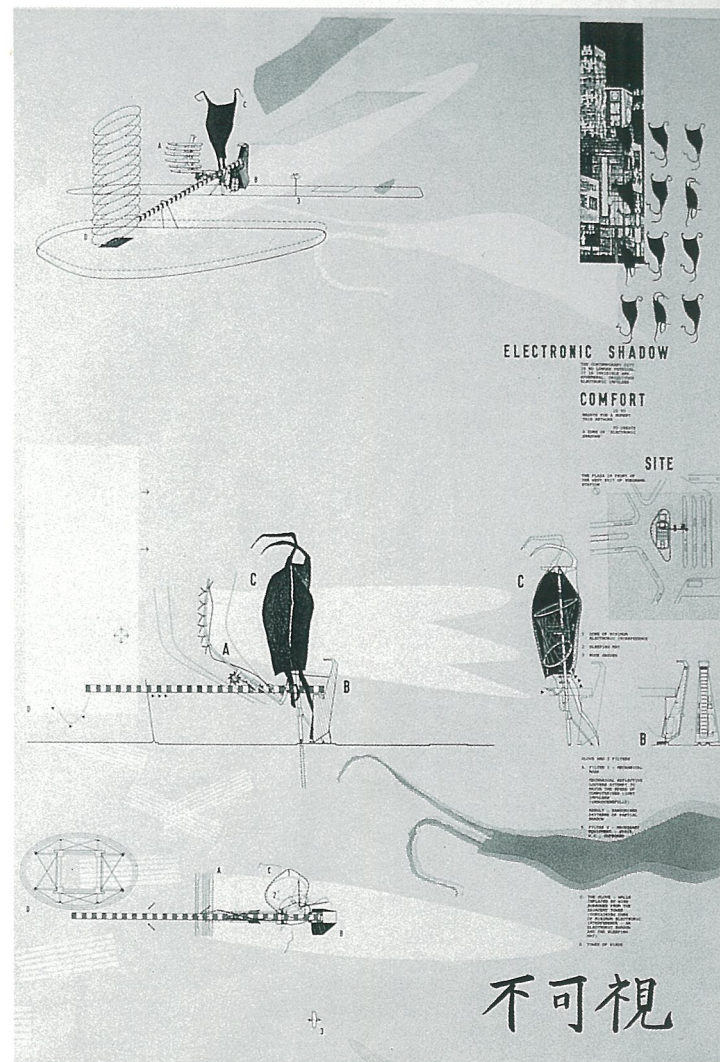


Inside, there is an interplay of numerous separate volumes. This results in residual spaces which are used for the access means such as stairways and bridges. The exterior is fairly closed but, being a membrane, it repeatedly offers suggestions of the interior. It is not a smooth shell, but a skin. The treatment of its surface does not so much reflect as generate the contents. A notable feature in this respect is the use of copper cladding along the internal street. This refers in part to elements of the urban context such as the roof of the cathedral or the surface of the local cobblestones. From this point of view, the use of copper is a confirmation of the topos. But there is also an abstract metaphor at work here, of tradition stored in the books. This relates the topos to the type. In Henry Labrouste's Bibliothèque Sainte Geneviève in Paris, the architect represented the content of the books by the names of the authors. Of course, those names were neither tied to the building nor necessarily to the book as an object. The library was a house of learning, where universal knowledge could be acquired. In the case of Bolles Wilson, the metaphor relates specifically to the book as an object; the copper refers to the materiality of the *carrier* of knowledge and its historical wearing away, not to knowledge as such. Hence the ship takes on the physical character of the *place* of storage. The main thing is the place where knowledge resides. At the same time, however, the question of the evanescence of knowledge is raised. It is precisely because of the separate character given to the electronic media building that one becomes aware of the status of the knowledge those media convey. Names are reduced to data. It is not the carriers of the information that matter (ones and zeros have little grandeur) but the death of the author in the post-McLuhan world. Owing to the explicit duality of their message, we can say that Bolles and Wilson simultaneously illustrate and block the *Zeitgeist* of the 'super-present'. The world is a flux but still has places to offer. Their work is both tactile and virtual at the same time.

The concepts of bridge and ship fuse in the idea of the ark, a recurrent theme in the oeuvre of these architects. On the one hand, the ark is the ship that withstands the Deluge, and the refuge for God's selected survivors. On the other hand, it is the bridge that carries humanity over to the clean-washed world. The ark is not just a means of weathering the storm but also a rite of passage. 'Arkitecture' functions as refuge and vehicle to the new era, the Post-Modern world of the electronic paradigm. Or, to put it the other way round, every endtime has its Ark.

#### Suppose the Ark Were to Leave Without Us...

The work of Bolles and Wilson repeatedly shows us a remarkable mixture of nostalgia and affirmation. They bring to their work the considerable professional skill needed to make a complex zoning system function well. This is manifested especially in their firm control of spatial design. Since they fit multiple functions into a few elementary principle forms, they have to work out their design down to the minutest details. The neutral box has made way for bodily forms. Consequently the flexibility of their design can only function by virtue of the independent forces evoked by the location. Meanwhile they are continually incorporating intellectual notions into the architecture in a way that rises above the simple, metaphorical interpretation.



The Ninja House, competition entry, 1988

But their subtle treatment, both physical and psychological, of the world as they find it today, demands a continual renewal process. The train of thought from the copper roof of the nearby cathedral, via the metaphor of the carriers of knowledge, to the idea of tradition can turn out to be a trap for them. The new paradigm, which acquires its monument in the form of the electronics slab next to the ark in Münster, is exceedingly hard to swallow as a *fait accompli*. What do these architects really think about it, apart from the fact that things have become very complex in the new world. Such questions are raised but not always considered satisfactorily, let alone answered. What does the storage of knowledge mean as an idea in a world where we communicate through an interface? Is that knowledge potential or virtual? What is to happen to all those who fail to make it into the ark? These questions, above all, are broached by the work of Bolles and Wilson. Despite the merits of their architecture, it is painfully clear that we are stuck for answers.

Only skyscrapers under construction show the daring constructive ideas. The impression of high rise steel skeletons is massive.

Ludwig Mies van der Rohe

Only completed buildings can talk about architecture.

Louis Kahn

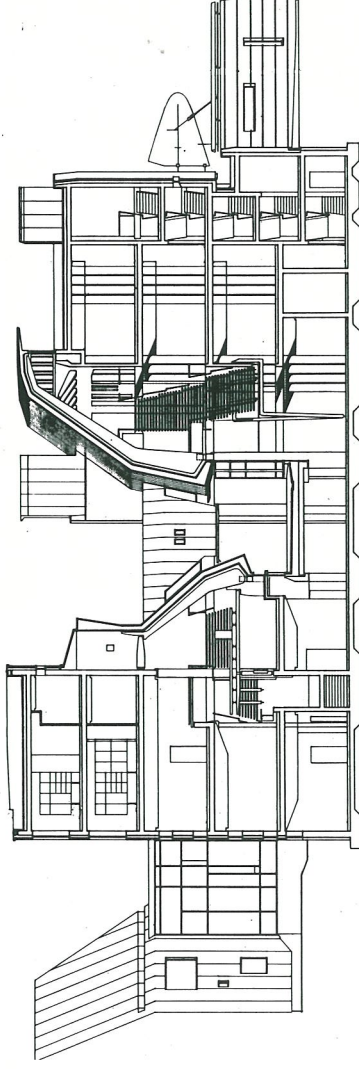
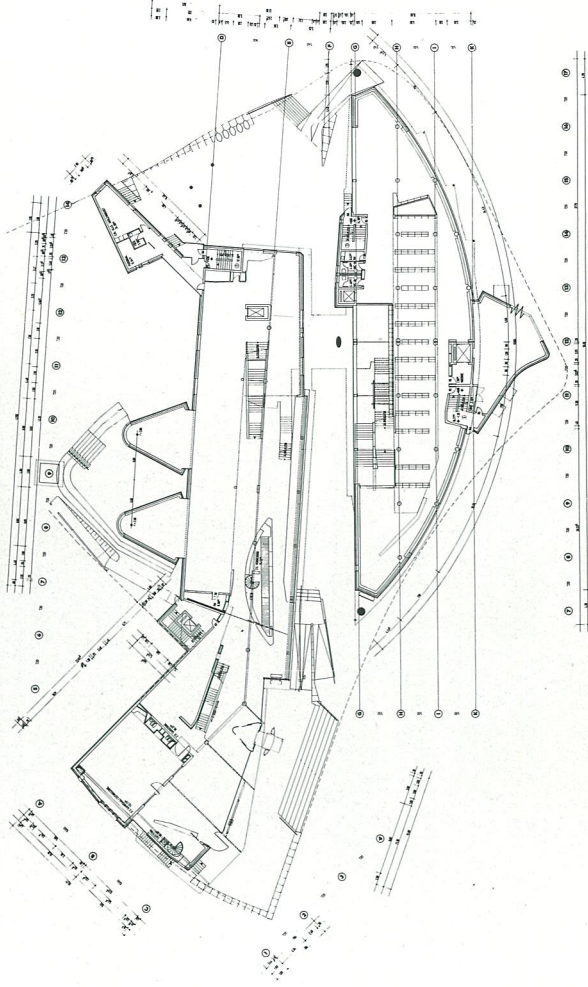
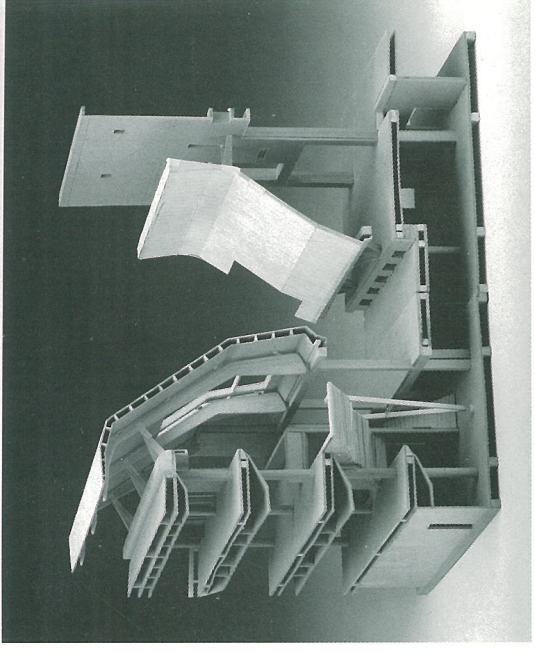
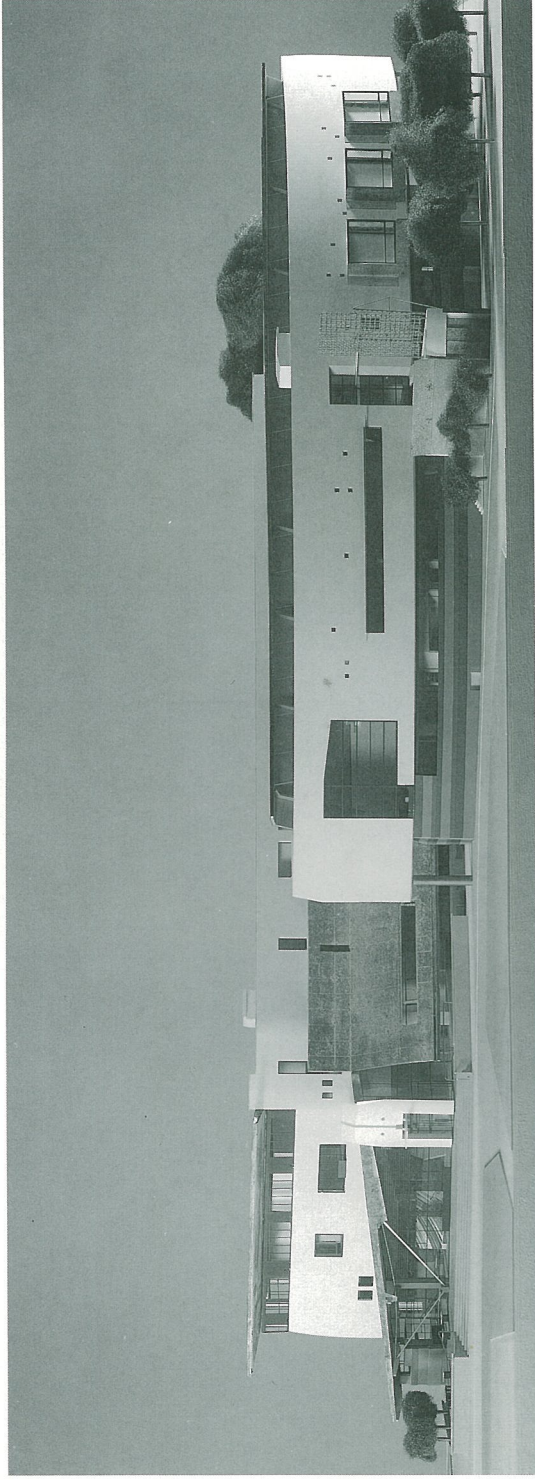
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Peter Wilson

Creative invention of programme is now often the true subject of architectural competitions (clients must produce, but what?). Simultaneously familiar programmes have suffered an exhaustion of content. (The large office is reduced to square metres and under-floor media channels. A formula which alone does not dignify the lives of its users or the city in which it lands.) Architecture must provide more, it must learn to take up the responsibility for its own prescription. To do this it is necessary to identify and even to isolate extra-functional qualities. The pre-functional and the extra-functional in architecture move into the realm traditionally reserved for art.

Peter Wilson



The medieval pattern of Münster is still today preserved in legal boundaries. The sensibility of Modernism infiltrates this pattern in the 1956 theatre, but also, as in every city, more pervasively as the spaces of the automobile, channels of movement and permanent voids (car parks). It is in one of these forty year old voids that the new library is to be inserted. The first element of the library, a slab, forms in collaboration with existing houses a triangular block. The second element, a ship-like solitaire, forms an outer and more solid perimeter to the block. The library is cut in two by a new pedestrian street, the Büchereigasse [Bookery Alley] which presents the latent axis of the nearby Lamberti-Church. This division is also programmatic. Short, unconcluded axes are a characteristic of Münster's baroque insertions. This library is the first in Germany to tackle in its formulation the question of the changing status of information. The result is the three zone library, with near, middle and far zones). The far zone is long term storage with no public access. The middle zone is that with which we are most familiar, the lending library, the realm of the book (knowledge as object). The plan registers this as a clear form, a segment of a circle (ship floating within the city – the circle today must be incomplete). This zone is quiet, books

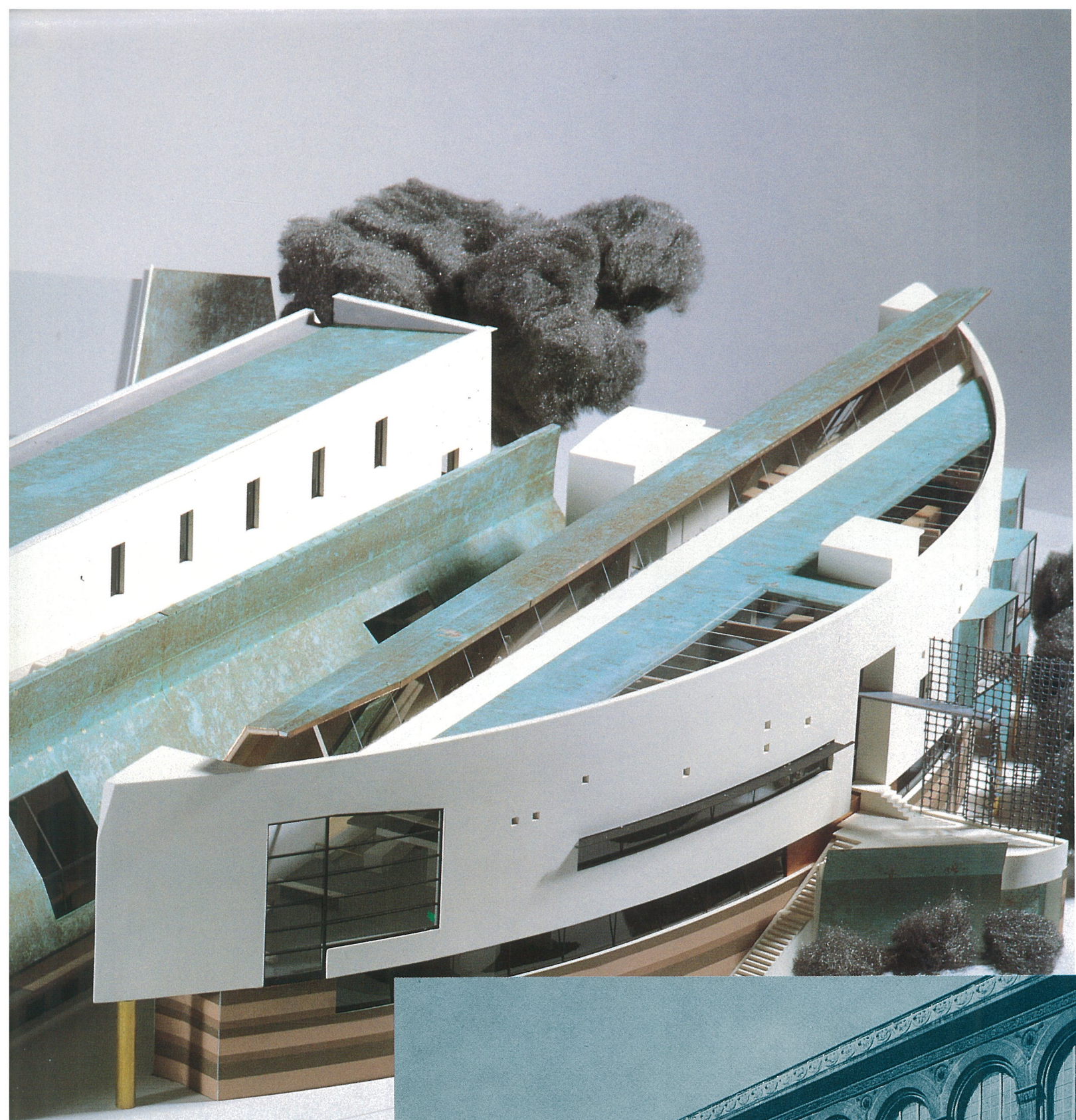
line its large curved wall. What is new in Münster is the near zone, a zone of pure information, the library as a supermarket of information. On the ground level of the slab, just within the secure realm of the library, is the unprecedented, active information centre, the Medienstraße [Media Street] of the near zone, with Infotheque, Literatheque, Novitheque, Glossotheque, Hobbytheque, Phonotheque, Münstertheque and Lusotheque. It is divided from the middle zone by the Büchereigasse. Connection between the two is via the first floor bridge on which is situated the main information desk (common to both slab and ship). Connection also occurs in the basement (sound library) where the two buildings become one.

Café, exhibition space and newspaper reading salon are in the uncontrolled area at the entrance end of the slab; above in the slab are two floors of offices. Where the building is cut in two by the Büchereigasse the open façades are re-enclosed by two large sloping copper walls. These are the *leitmotiv* of the library, staircases are situated under them in both slab and ship, light falls down their internal face. Glass strips below these walls expose the entire ground level to the passer-by. *Peter Wilson*

**Location** Alter Steinweg, Münster, Germany **Assistants** F. Haas, M. Schlüter, A. Kimmel **Client** City of Münster **Design** 1987-90 **Completion** 1993

Architekturbüro Bolles - Wilson und Partner **Stadtbücherei Münster Municipal Library**





Henri Labrouste, Bibliothèque Sainte-Genève, Paris, 1840

