

Lucien Kroll
The Voice of Libertarian Socialism

Editors' note: Lucien Kroll is a man who never smothers social empiricism with an imposed discourse. Situationism, casuistry, situational ethics and ethnology are the keywords of an approach to architecture in which it is not the architect, the artist or the client who determines who and what people are, but the people themselves. A good proof of the success of this non-prescriptive architecture is a telephone call Kroll received from the photographer of a Japanese architectural magazine. Phoning from a call box in the middle of one of Kroll's urban projects, the photographer asked 'Where can I find your architecture?' Kroll's architecture does not stand somewhere, it happens somewhere. Owing to his near-obsession with the value of grass-roots democracy, every coercive, authoritarian or technicist intervention is foreign to him. Kroll is at most a primus inter pares, and then only during the design phase. After that, time will have its say. The identity of the profession is overshadowed by countless sub-identities from homo faber to homo ludens. In Kroll's view, the environment is a function of human behaviour. Making behaviour a function of the environment is terror. That much is about to be rammed home... We head Lucien Kroll's letter as follows:

Dear Editors,

We are not simply manufacturers of objects with a mechanical function. We use our powers of empathy to render the constraints, the capacities and the conflicts of a neighbourhood and a place as architecture; and we do the same for the users' desire to congregate, in as far as we can predict it. So the main task is to create a kind of landscape. Architecture then becomes an instrument of human behaviour, and this is a sufficient justification for its existence. I received your questionnaire on the eight themes you considered important to give your book a scholarly structure. Your questions★ are only partly relevant to a method such as ours. Moreover, their intellectualist tone gets in the way of architecture. They fail to get down to the meat of the matter. Shall I try to do that for you?

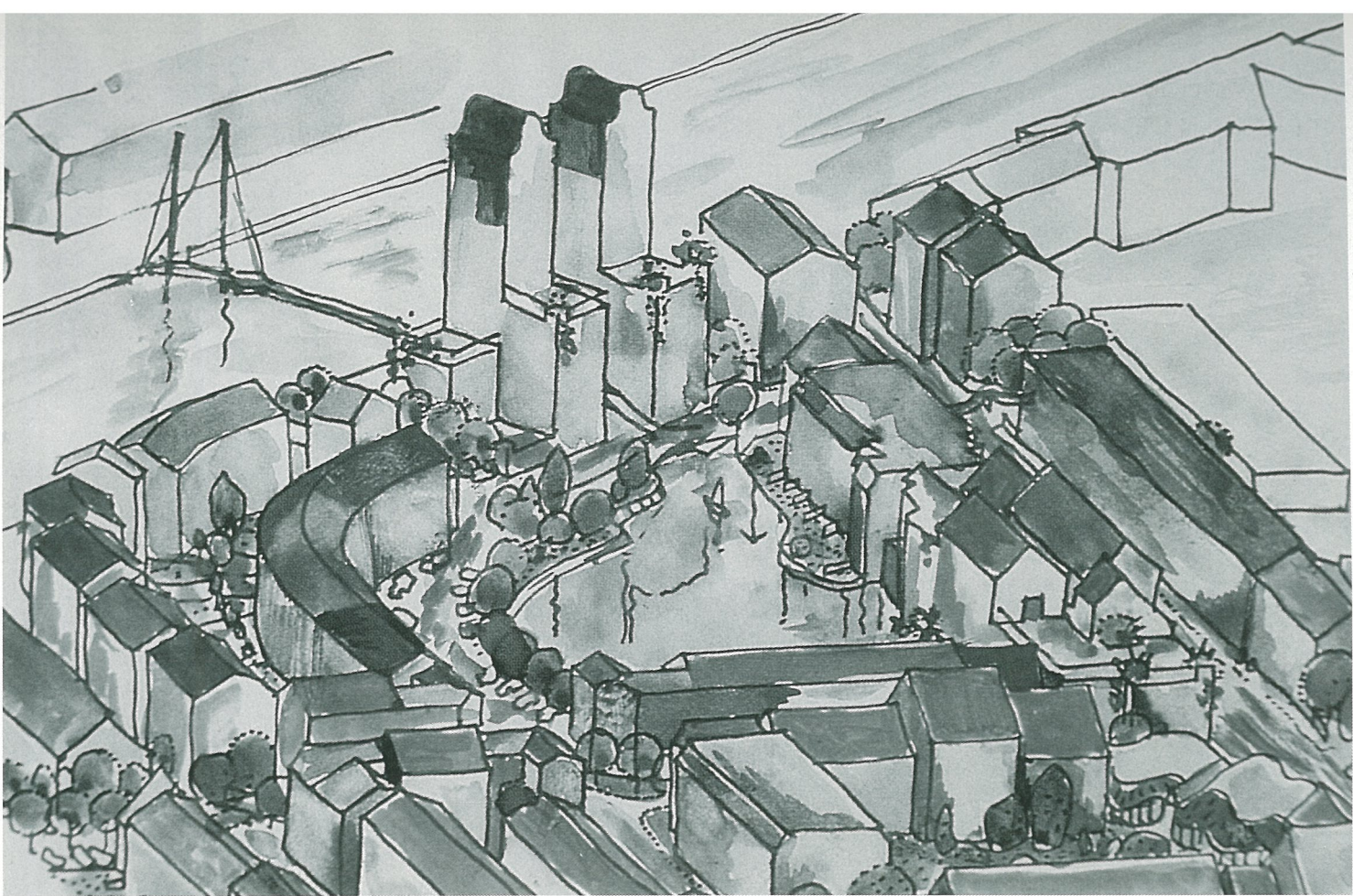
★ See the introductions to the eight vectors: durée, context, border, topos, programme, space, identity, representation.

Durée

It is true that the concept of durability seems to stand for the permanence and continuity of culture. And Modernism (or, if you like, modernity) is apparently in the throes of an accelerating process of change. Is it possible to assert that we must keep becoming more modern (although in what respect?), must keep moving faster (but where to?), must persevere with limitless economic growth (thereby frittering away our resources) and must internationalise all cultural action (as in a melting pot – or perhaps towards universal justice)? Such a row of contradictions may seem rather artificial – exaggerated, Manichean etcetera. Or perhaps they are 'pre-war Modern', i.e. belonging to that awful period (I do not say awful people) of illusions in the areas of technology, psychology, society, humanitarianism and war.



Preliminary School, Woluwé-Saint-Lambert, Brussels, 1971



Groothandelsmarktterrein, urban planning, The Hague, competition entry, 1988

Zero growth, respect for *existing* (i.e. contemporary but not necessarily modern) cultures, respect for the animal and vegetable species and for the landscapes which seem to be destroyed cursorily by our progress, the right to intervene in other countries' internal affairs – are these a form of repression or are they *also* part of that progress?

I have no intention of spouting sociology and I have no economic pretensions. But I would be only too happy if I could get to grips with the concealed or indirect motives that dominate architecture far more strongly than the pencils of the architects. Is that a foolish concern? You might well think so if you read the professional magazines, with their autistic exegeses and their dismissive commentaries on anything that has to do with context, with spontaneous expressions of culture or with the spirit of the times etcetera. They present the architectural object 'as such', as a work without temporality, without antecedents, without past and without future.

For example, there has been a recent recrudescence of articles on the architecture of the twenties. These include photographs taken in that period, and these sometimes have a sinister look: they are in monochrome, and were often taken immediately on completion, the building still surrounded by mud, without greenery, without neighbours and above all without traffic. Instead of this practice, one could make an attempt to show the evolution (good or bad?) of the same buildings – their history, the roots they have put down, the way they become estranged from their original form, evolve and age. Architecture should never be reviewed until it has existed for at least twenty years. The only positive instance I can think of is Philippe Boudon, who studied Pessac as experienced by its inhabitants at a time when Le Corbusier had become no more than a distant name for them. If architects were conscious of the time dimension when designing a building, they would be able to anticipate how the landscape would take the abstract and alien object and consume it, assimilate it and make it one with the environment – however indigestible it might have been to start with!

But is this modern? Respect for time and duration is not just nostalgia. It means making allowance for things as they are and refraining from imposing tyrannical utopias. On

the other hand, it is absolutely clear that we can not extrapolate an existing context into the future (that is romanticism!). Our contemporary context is mobile, multi-racial, ever more diverse (what a wealth!). Thus the present situation calls for architects who are capable of working very personally but also with great complexity.

Thought about time and duration gives architecture an invisible quality, as one can see if that thinking continues far beyond the design phase. The more functional the thinking is, the shorter the building functions. The thinking should be of a cultural (multi-cultural) character because the aim is to produce a building (not a mere construction) which should be at the service of everyone who appears on the scene – announced or unannounced.

I am not referring here to the projects of ineffectual intellectuals who prefer the conceivable to the actual and who lead their readers up idiosyncratic dream paths, far from the heat and the sweat of the day. Nor am I referring to the surrealist projections of schizophrenic geometrical figures (whose only market value is their surprise effect).

Context

One can not reduce context to tradition. That would be ignoring the fact that social relationships (visible or otherwise) continually reconfigure themselves, every day, according to the new circumstances. As a result, the various kinds of nostalgia for older, stable forms of society retreat in favour of active social construction in the present. This activity is synthetic, not analytic (I am no Cartesian!). It permeates the entire context and knows no bounds. It involves every aspect of human existence.

Taking the context into account simply means feeling part of the geographical, human, cultural, economic world you have chosen to operate in, not shutting yourself up in abstract and destructive forms of logic. Modernism, from which we are freeing ourselves at such great effort, suffered from monomaniac anxiety. Consequently it refused to admit to emotion, and remained fixated purely on the architectural object, the urban grid, the residential boxes – all that obsessive self-repetition that they termed industrial



Medical Faculty, University of Leuven, Woluwé-Saint-Lambert, Brussels, 1971

but was really just regimentation and abstraction. Perhaps that neurosis was originally necessary to drive out other, now forgotten, forms of commercial sentimentalism. But nowadays...

Border

Despite the invention of bureaucracy and of its mechanical organisation at the beginning of the twentieth century, architecture knows no bounds: its apparent limitations are rapidly dissolving. Only modern architects imprison themselves in their own pigeon holes – for example, have you noticed their unanimous aversion to buildings that project above the roads? Antoni Gaudí was the only one to lean his buildings on the footpath. Siza tried to do the same in Berlin but his column failed to make contact with the pavement! Thus there is no longer any *homogeneity*. There is merely a certain permeability in the partitions, a potential for dialogue, which the future will exploit. The result will be a blurring of borders of a geographical or psychological nature etcetera and hence a fusion into a continuum.

Chaos is a creative virtue of cities. 'Liveable town planning is a result of bad architecture', said certain Moderns disconsolately. Let us therefore build that 'bad' architecture, but let's do it well! Simple enough, but is it 'art', and who decides?

Topos

Why should we fill in the surroundings only as an abstract pattern of dots? When we are talking about densely populated areas, isn't that a racist way of thinking – this is white, that is black? We must not confuse Topos with Condominium.

The condominium is the obnoxious American bastard child of the European housing association. Just as the housing association, invented in Europe's nineteenth century cities, was the result of open and co-operative urban behaviour, so is its degenerate American form the result of urban enclosure (shutting the others out), of the city-dweller's insecurity that creates and seals ghettos of every shape and size. Housing associations originally grouped people of all different kinds. The condominium

enforces a uniformity of race, of material wealth, of culture, of spending power etcetera.

The condominium is most clearly represented by the New York skyscraper with a porch leading from the sidewalk to the lobby, where a security guard, revolver on belt, waits to welcome you. He asks who you wish to visit and checks on his intercom.

No, that is not what a city ought to be like.

The USA also has some very nice condominiums with ten or twenty thousand inhabitants, who lead a pleasant life behind a wall topped with barbed wire, permanently guarded by armed men driving around in jeeps. One of the many residence rules: nobody less than 55 years old. Sinister, but expedient.

We should never start *inventing!* When rationalists invented houses arranged in lines along a street plan, they robbed the inhabitants of all the reptilian habits that prevailed in the old urban spaces and in their articulations. When they thought up the tree model for functionally stacked dwellings, they robbed the inhabitants of their equally reptilian patrimony of old-style house plans that paraphrased the human body.

Let's get subjective, right now!

Programme

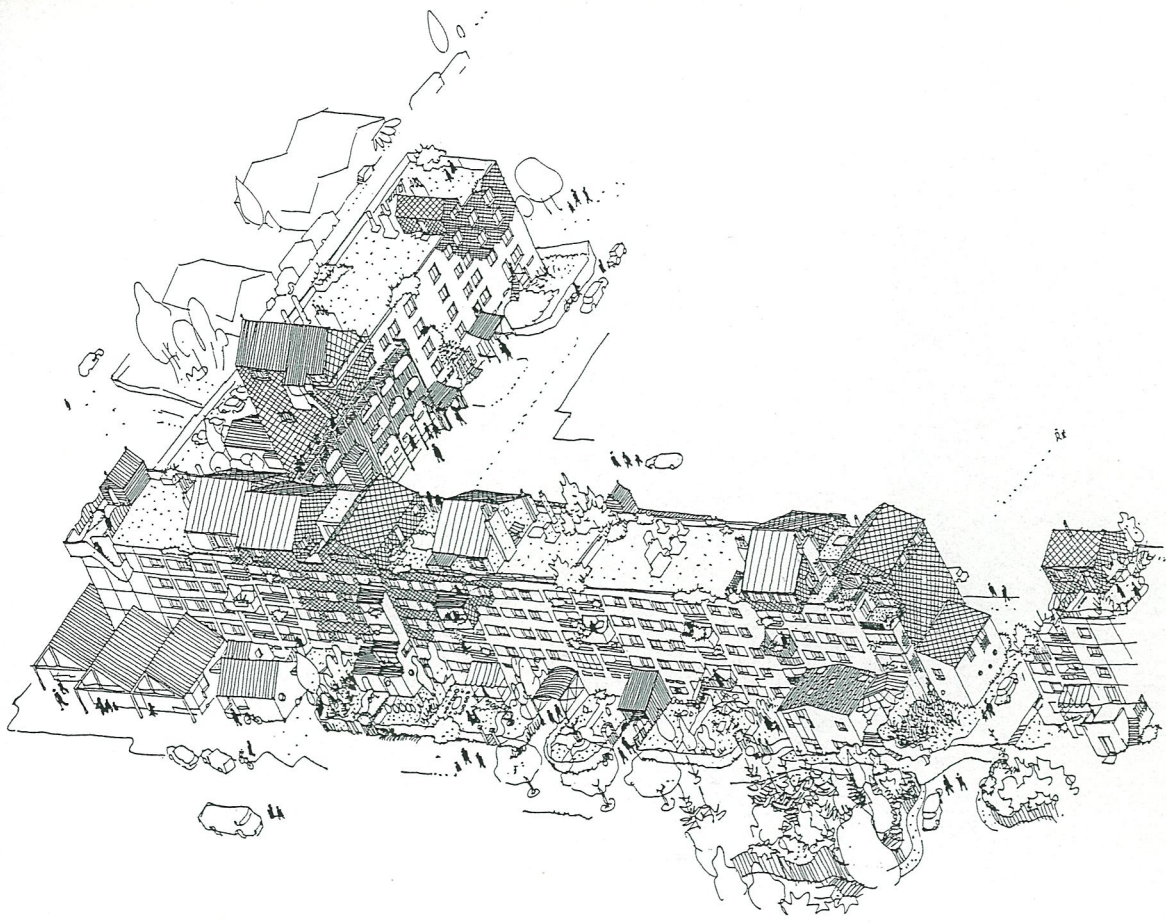
The architect's sense of honour is generally so highly developed as to respect the brief and the client's wishes (however absurd) right down to the threshold of pain. They thus make themselves willing victims of the worst kind of Taylorism (one person commands, the rest blindly follow...). Of course a solid programme is necessary to build something that will stand up to the test of utility. The question is, though, how is this programme implemented in practice? Is it the architect's fate to always follow the schizophrenic wishes of the specifier of the brief? Or is it the brief-writer who must expect the architects to come up with ideas that will give their precise, regimented schemes life and blood, body and clothing?

Sometimes I think I am the only architect who has ever experienced a normal briefing procedure. During the construction of the Medical Faculty at the University of Brussels-Woluwé, I proposed incorporating a small primary school into one of the buildings specified in the brief. Astounded at this suggestion, the University put off taking a decision until circumstances made it imperative to do so. Note that if I had not designed the primary school in, they would have had to build it on a separate plot of land.

Nowadays, at least in France, the architect is invited to attend the discussions right from the start, before the brief-writer has a chance to mummify amid the sheets of surfaces, connections and partitions. The sensitive architect is able to interpret the elusive values of society, geography, cultural landscape etcetera, and can also anticipate requirements of future users.



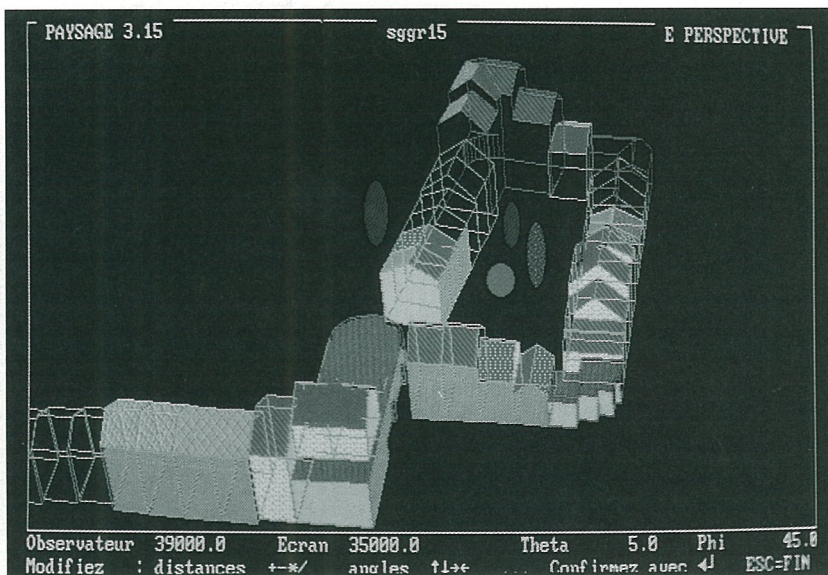
Emerainville, housing, Marne-la-Vallée, 1980



ZUP Persoigne, rehabilitation project, Alençon, 1978



David Hammons, House for the future, 1991



Wire frame, from 'Paysage', computer-aided-design programme developed by studio Lucien Kroll, 1981-1987

Space

It is a mistake to identify *space* with appearance: can we not imagine an architecture for the blind, for instance? Equally erroneous is to equate quantitative space with qualitative space. This is seldom realised. It is much like confusing *scale* with *proportion*. In fact, many architects work only two-dimensionally. The third is more complicated! Ideologies are often accused of manipulating quantities of space, but they have a much more powerful influence on the qualities, the joints, the complexity. That Haussmann's city plans were dictated by the need to deploy artillery against slum uprisings is probably a myth; but he was definitely an adherent of a particular ideology, namely that of the regimented image! Everything in its proper place – that is a fundamental tenet of the bourgeoisie, and it generates a very particular form of city. Later that form was termed 'hygienic' and was used to design working-class districts and then entire social complexes. Some people have ascribed the 'hygienic' regimentation to the use of prefabricated architecture. But prefabricated is in fact merely a convenient extension of the same formal principles. We, on the other hand, seek to foster the development of self-organising social autonomies out of disorder. Is that an ideology too? The times have changed, at least. A feeling for space (full or empty) and for the concerted action of materials that go together to build a space brings a great deal more clarity than does a feeling for semiology.

Identity

Is it really still possible to design a school, for instance, as a series of identical rectangular rooms in a row? Is education a process that takes place in clear-cut and objectively definable spaces? Shouldn't we rather differentiate the space and architectural attributes, at all costs, to prevent the children confusing people with objects? Isn't it criminal to design places deliberately as mass-produced, cloned, impersonal structures, when the aim is to implement a sensitive, non-regimented upbringing? Do we not have the right to measure the value of the building against its end product, i.e. the behaviour of the users? In other words, what becomes of the children who are taught in one specific environment or another? It seems, in this era that terms itself rational (is it that, or is it simply regimented?) that these questions are never considered. Would that be such a sacrilege? Let us escape from this architectural torpidity! Shouldn't we actually search for the maximum variety in identities, for composite building projects; and thus avoid that repulsive fad for identifying everything by numbers (streets, buildings, doors etcetera), sometimes with extra large numerals like those on warships?

The inhabitants will eventually come to identify with their neighbourhood, their street or their home – or so we hope. But shouldn't this be possible straight away, instead of after years? Surely it cannot be achieved by keeping architects anonymous – even giving the narcissistic types their head would be better than that. Or would it...?

Representation

The image: even the blind form one! In our urban district renovation projects, I deliberately chose to represent a kind of pedestrian civilisation – one which might have prevailed in a peaceful way, without (or in opposition to) the whole superimposed mass of technology, regimenters, subjugators, authorities etcetera. Naturally, this is just a metaphor, but I make no secret of my feelings about it towards clients and authorities. They understand that it is often a matter of their own survival: these forms reflect a cooperation between those who command and those who obey. Is that a model of democracy? Sometimes it is the everyday, popular (folksy) attributes that make a neighbourhood more liveable than an architect can ever achieve deliberately;★ for once the inhabitants install themselves, they soon find their way around and start organising things spontaneously to please themselves.★ I have never found this a problem. The architect's work is located at a different level, that of collecting and articulating spaces to produce a non-regimented, i.e. civilised, architecture.

★ In Cergy-Pontoise, we waited to see how the inhabitants themselves would design their houses. We were able to organise a considerable level of disorder (complexity). At this level, our work does not depend on a homogeneous and maniacal definition of all the elements involved.

★ In Haarlem, we housed Dutch families opposite a garden along the bank of a canal. Within a few months, they had completely transformed the garden and its relation to the water.

And... Institution

The dimension of 'institutional analysis' seems to be entirely ignored in your questionnaire! I know why this is. How is it possible for architectural colleges to design foundation courses without giving any practice in institutional analysis? They park the kids on stools, give them pencils and say, 'Just draw away, don't be afraid, be nice to Mummy and all will be well!'

If we taught institutional analysis we should be able to forestall a whole generation of Left-wing architects who practise Right-wing architecture. Here are two examples. Firstly, under the pretext of democracy, they prefabricated the same for everybody and so ushered in the calamity of suburbia. Secondly, when people wanted meeting places the architects provided them with shopping malls and luxury stores; then within a single generation the whole model collapsed. Now there is fire in the suburbs. Something positive at last!

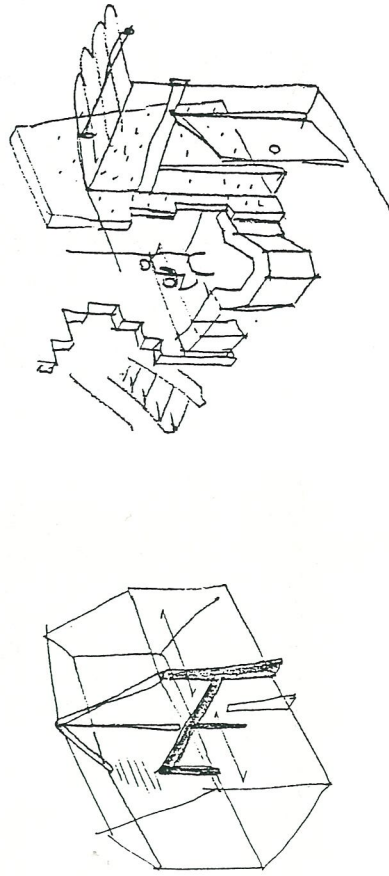
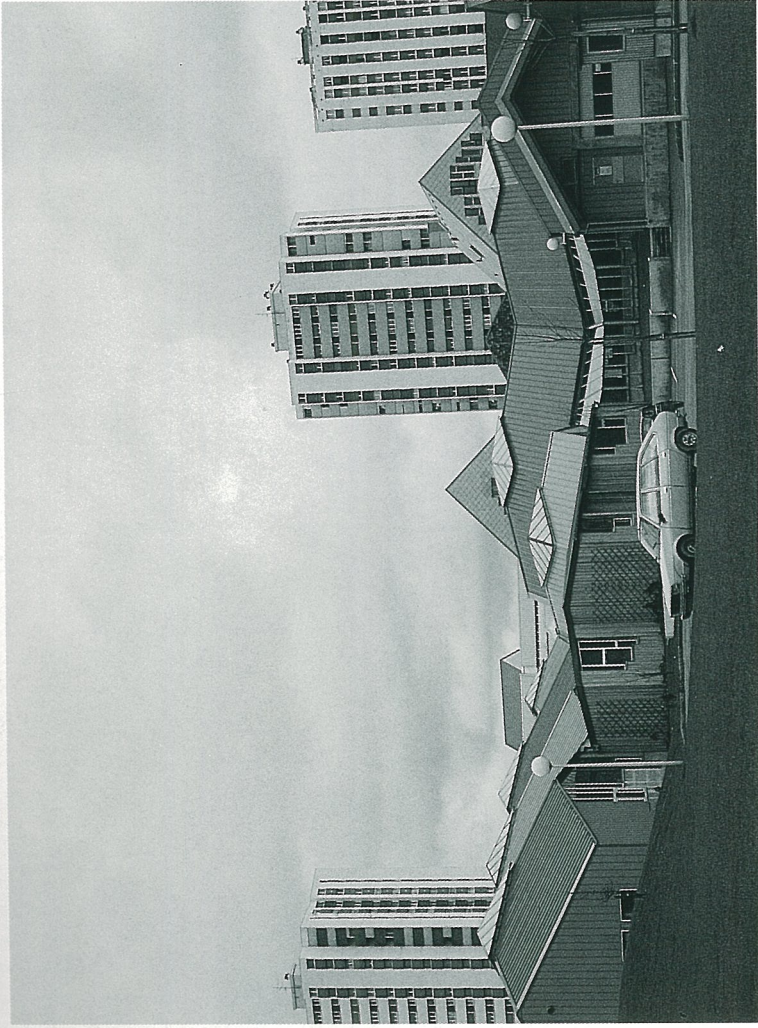
In spite of the generous subsidies, social sector housing has caused the greatest uprooting of all projects in large towns. You have to realise this in order to correct your course and develop a concept of spatial organisation and architecture which accords with a changed attitude.

The use of 'modern' building materials goes hand in hand with the 'importation' of millions of foreign labourers into European countries. At the same time, it brings in its wake the destruction of the craft knowledge of many building tradesmen. As an architect, you ought to be able to take this kind of thing into account when making decisions, without being romantic about it. The formal world of architecture and urban design embodies a clear ideology, which the 'creators' apparently do not wish to know about. But the damage done by that ideology will only become clear in the next generation, during the de-Stalinisation of architecture!

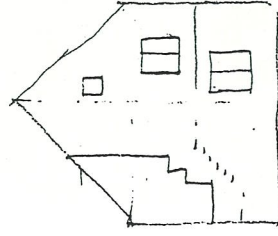
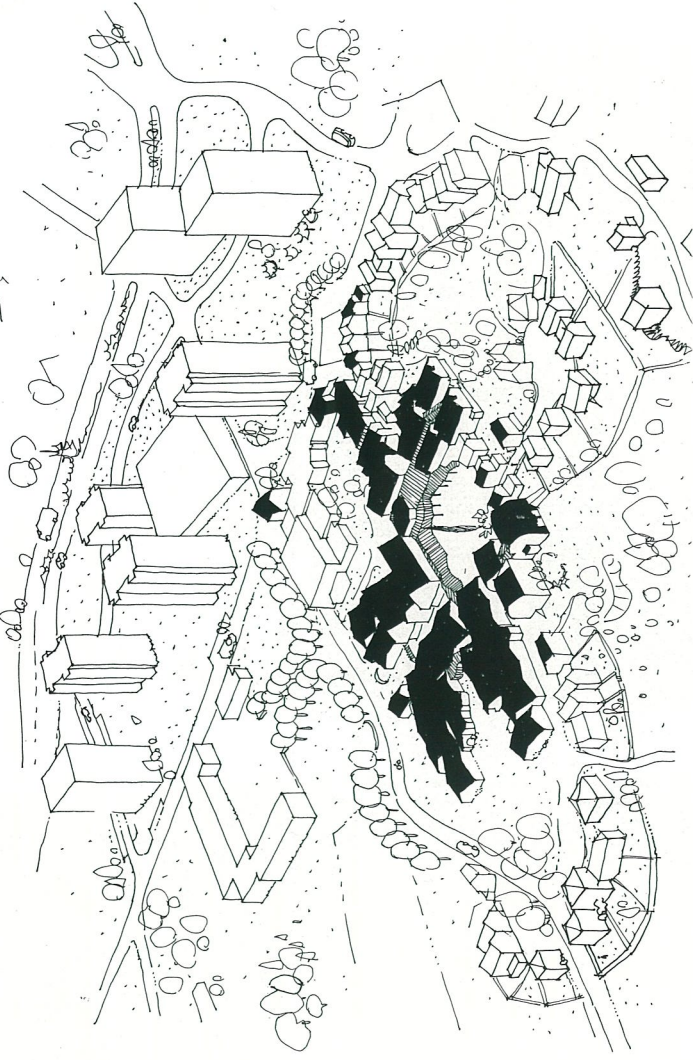
Etcetera.

Yours sincerely,

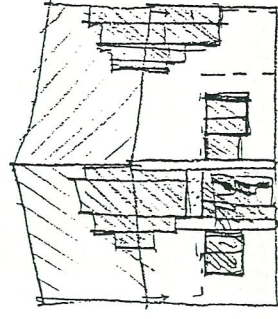
Lucien Kroll



Our secondary school for technical education in Bavilliers, 12,000 square metres in size, is nestled into the frayed edge of Belfort, next to a post-war city extension quarter. We wanted to approach the school as a means to influence behaviour, as a complex landscape and not as an egocentric 'functional' object. The exterior and the inside of the school are determined by only one motive: the open network. The high school will immediately come in contact with the neighbouring low-grade habitats. It will climb up their façades and reorganise the intermediate area when the houses are redone. We placed 'the outside in the middle' to be assured of a permeable environment: we kept off enclosures and divided the area by means of streets and squares that were placed under public rule to ensure free entrance. Narrowing down and widening, they become a natural extension of the adjacent area. The network of streets divides (or unites?) the territory into half a dozen distinctive units. They encircle two important public spaces: the 'entry' towards the social habitats and the large plaza in the centre of the high school. This plaza has been covered with glass for playground as the programme demanded. The central plaza gathers the largest variety of buildings: the diverse studios, the foyer-bar, the classrooms for general

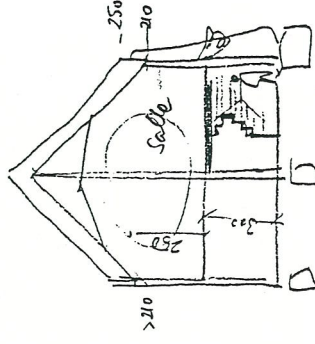


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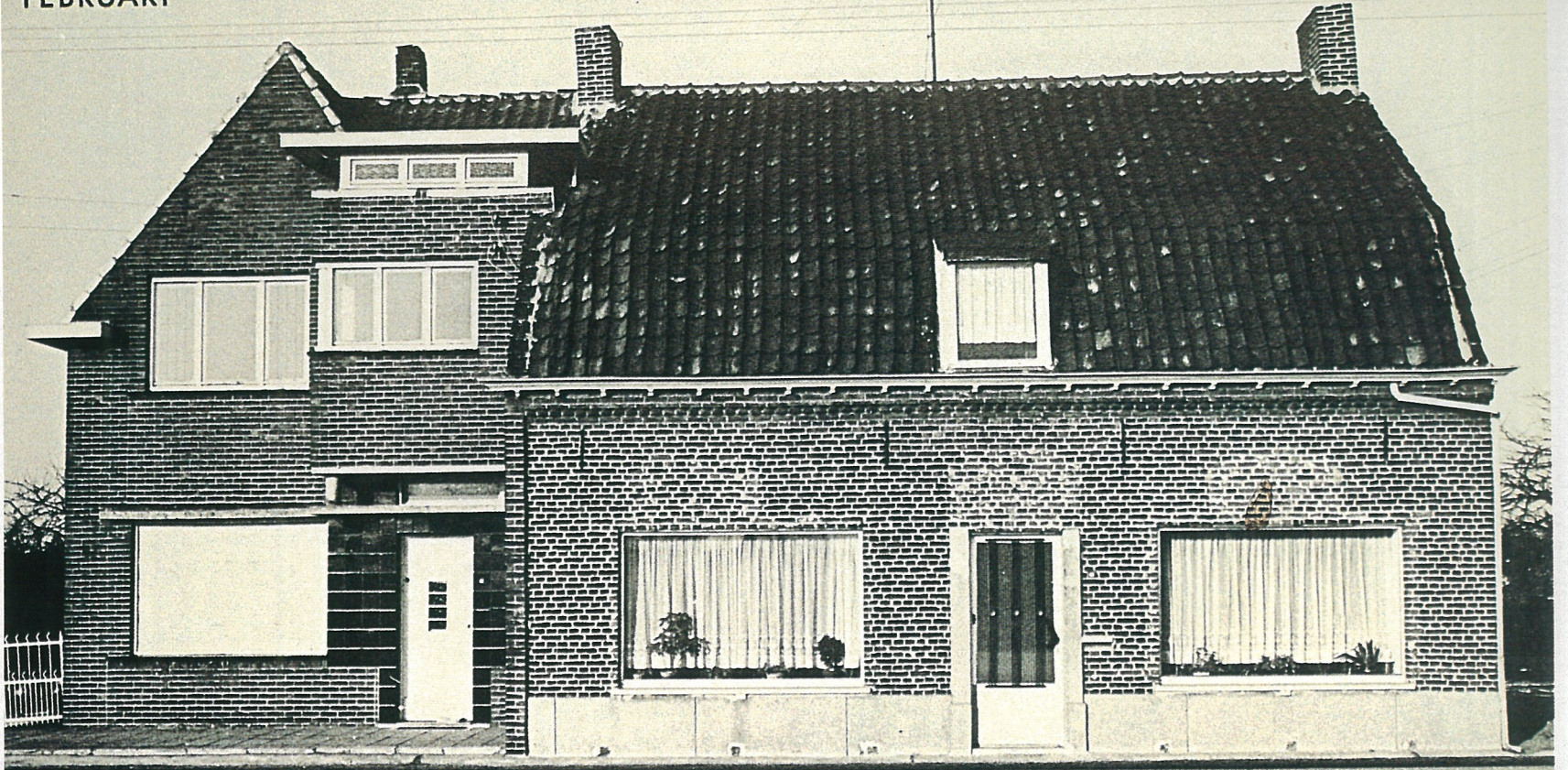
education, the restaurant, the staff rooms, the administration in the back of the square and at the side the caretakers' house, waiting for neighbours. Thus there are some fifteen 'houses' grouped according to their own logic. They personalise themselves, as much as we could allow them to, by their activities on the spot, the locations, the volumes, the forms, the slope of the roofs, the construction techniques, the colours, etcetera. Every house will get its name spontaneously, as in the old regions. The landscape will become so complicated that even we will no longer be able to control all its forms and assemblies. It lives its own life and manages to surprise us during its construction. Thanks to the division into a federation of units, we were able to spread the assignment over several bricklayers and carpenters; thus we were able to work with a limited budget, avoiding expensive contractors. Already in every one of our projects we tried to deconstruct not the architecture – that is just a passing trend – but the homogeneity of the object, its cohesion, its autism, to make it more open towards its neighbourhood and to its urban and spiritual responsibilities. For that reason it becomes a landscape itself.

Lucien Kroll

Location Rue de Zaporodje, Belfort, France Assistant X. Nuttin Client Société d'Équipement du Territoire de Belfort (SODEB) Design 1983 Completion 1989

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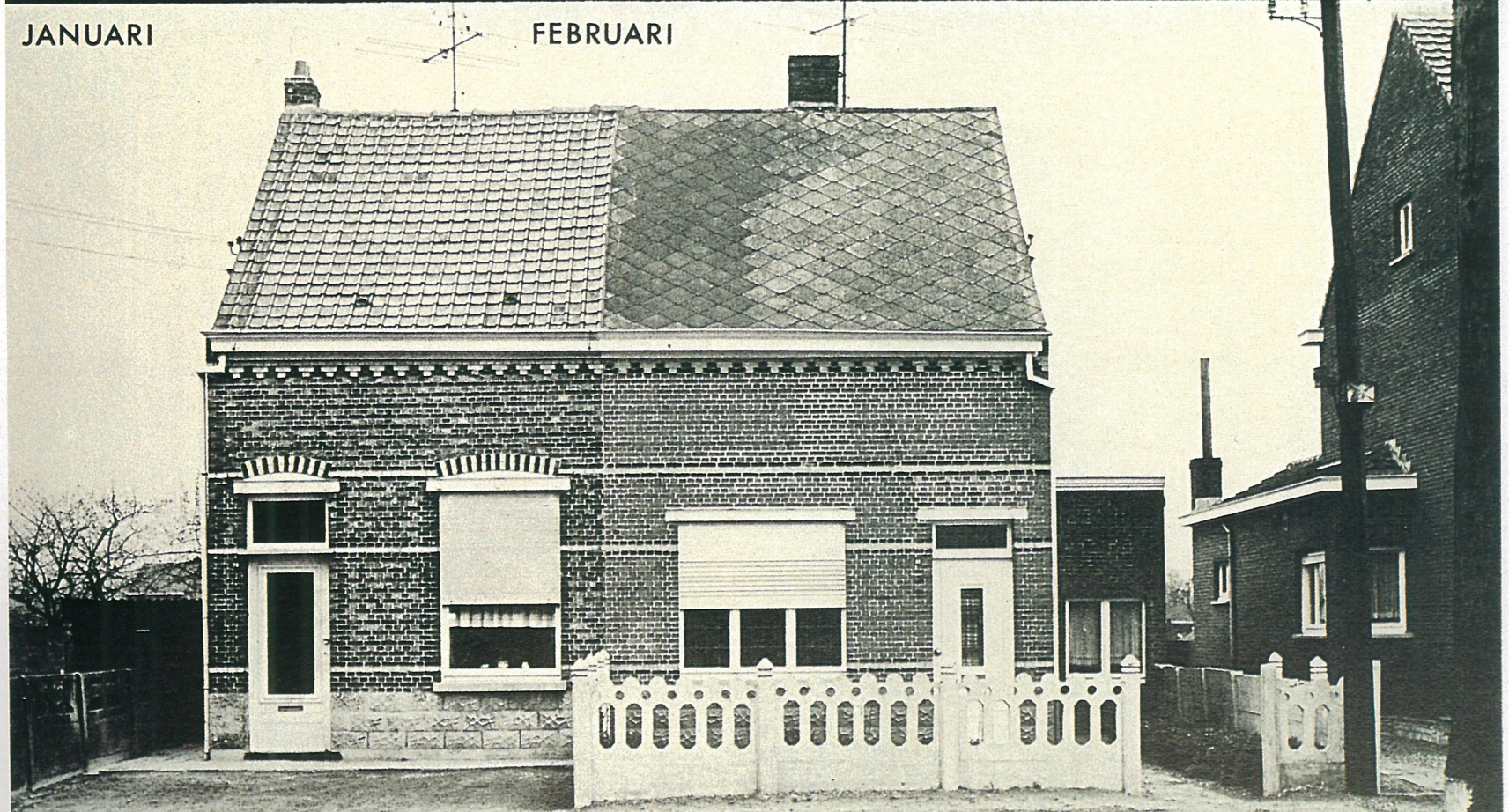
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