

The (Post-) Urban Compound

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“A boundary is not that at which something stops, but, as the Greeks recognized, the boundary is that from which something begins its presencing”

—Martin Heidegger¹

DEVICE - DONALD JUDD'S BLOCK

Between the 'proximate' and the 'remote', the architectural type of the compound occupies a peculiar intersection: With its interior focus it exists as the space of the 'other' in the midst of a familiar territory exuding the mystery and lure of the unknown. On the other hand, it provides its occupants with a sense of familiarity and protection from the forces of an unpredictable exterior environment. One example of the walled compound's capacity to produce spaces where the dialectics of proximity and remoteness are entangled at close quarters, can be found in the town hosting this fall's ACSA conference: When Donald Judd moved from New York City to the small rural Texas town of Marfa in the early 70's, one of his first purchases was the block known as "La Mansana de Chinati", or simply, "The Block". After a series of interventions this block was to become Judd's principal living quarters, from where he gradually expanded both the scope of his practice as well as his real estate portfolio to

encompass the landscapes of the Texan high desert. Among his earliest interventions is a massive perimeter wall that effectively all but cuts the existing buildings off from the streets, refocusing all activity towards the block's interior. This fundamental architectural act – the construction of a wall – was both a gesture of protection as much as outreach: Secluding himself from the everyday life of what in the early 1970's passed as a slightly run-down cattle town, Judd at the same time explored a traditional regional adobe construction technique as the very substance of his boundary.

For Judd, the walled compound operates as a spatial device that allowed him to retain a kind of dual status: A resident of a small west Texas town on the one hand, he brought with him the perspective and outlook of a cosmopolitan New York artist. (An outlook that included a library that at the time of his death had grown to over 13,000 volumes in multiple languages.) Only by maintaining a critical distance was Judd able to develop an artistic vision that ultimately drew deeply on the surrounding landscapes, yet processed these impressions through an intellectual frame of reference far beyond these landscapes. His enclave served as both a safeguard for his frame of reference as much as it became a testing ground for his artistic vision.



Figure 1: Donald Judd's compound "La Mansana de Chinati" ("The Block"), Marfa, TX. (Photo by author.)

While Judd's artistic vision is hardly contested, one can easily think of cases in which the dialectics between the compound and its territory take on a more charged character: the images of David Koresh's Branch Davidian compound near Waco in flames during an FBI raid in 1993, or Osama Bin Laden operating his radical Islamist network from amidst the suburbs of the quiet Pakistani administration town of Abbottabad are just two examples. Forgoing moral judgement of *what* these ideologies are, the compound is first and foremost an *architectural* device that enables the parallel existence of ideological difference amidst a familiar territory. As an 'agent' of the 'other', it entails an inherently dual spatial condition: it protects and limits the interaction with its surroundings, while it lays out blueprints for alternative modes of cohabitation on the inside – often as an idealized counterpoint to the existing outside world.

Interestingly, this duality is built into the very etymology of the word "compound": As a noun – according to the Oxford English Dictionary - it derives from the Malay word *kampong*, meaning both [*colonial*] *village / fortification*, and points to the need to provide both protection and organization. (Obviously, the colonial history behind the roots of the word further complicates this relationship, and would well be worth a separate research trajectory...) *Compound* as an adjective on the other hand is derived from the latin *com-ponere*, (literally to 'put together) and refers to the qualities on a singular object in which constituent parts come together – while maintaining a degree of independence from each – to form a new whole.

RETREAT - MONASTIC COMPOUNDS

Historically, the walled compound has been a phenomenon of urban transition. In the absence of universal rules of cohabitation – either because these were no longer effective (such as, for example, in the early medieval monastic histories after the decline of the Roman Empire), or because they had not yet been established (as evident in colonial histories across the globe), the introverted compound often inserts itself into territories perceived as 'hostile' in the widest sense. One such time of transition were the early Middle Ages in Europe: With the established institutions of the Roman Empire crumbling, the period from around the 3rd century on was marked by movements of retreat: A retreat from old institutions, a retreat from the frequent wars and raids by various factions, and a renewed focus on local economies as a result of the deterioration of the expansive infrastructures upon which much of the Roman Empire had relied. Many roman cities shrunk to a fraction of their former size. Exemplary for this development is an 18th century depiction of the former Roman amphitheater of Arles by Jean Baptiste Guibert (Figure 2, an image that has been reproduced in several variants over the course of the last centuries), which shows the ancient Roman amphitheater of Arles in its medieval state after the fall of the Roman empire. In times of repeated Saracen raids, the antique structure of the arena had been transformed into a fortified compound, effectively accommodating the entire city and its diverse functions in its interior. The necessity for protection, retreat, and permanence during this period was coupled with the increasing desire for spiritual renewal – namely the increasing role of Christianity as a set of

rules governing many daily activities. The new type that emerged from this period – and that for the next centuries became the center of intellectual, cultural, spiritual, and economic life – was the monastic compound. One cannot overestimate the impact the monastery compound would have on the spiritual, economic, and cultural transition of Europe from antiquity to the middle ages. Historian Lewis Mumford sees in it nothing less than the emergence a new *polis*, a collective based on a shared value system as an alternative to the cultural decline of late antiquity.²

BLUEPRINT - THE ST. GALLEN PLAN

An exemplary document from this time is the monastery plan of St. Gallen: A drawing measuring 112 x 77.5 cm, consisting of five parchments sewn together, depicts the detailed plan of an ideal Benedictine monastery. The document is remarkable in several ways: The earliest surviving architectural drawing in existence (the original is kept at the abbey of St. Gallen in Switzerland), it dates back to the first half of the 9th century.³ It is, however assumed that the existing plan may itself have been a copy of an earlier lost original. The plan straddles a fine line between utopian ideal plan and a construction document. Executed in great detail, it depicts the floor plans of 40 buildings inside a walled monastery compound. Among the programmatic functions annotated in the plan are a basilica, a monk's dormitory, refectory, a laundry and bath house, kitchen, bakery, abbot's house, guest accommodation organized by status, a school, as well as servant's quarters. In addition, we find spaces for collective work – a brew house, a workshop, and a mill, as well as gardens, orchards, an herb garden, goose- and hen houses, and various spaces for animals – cows, horses, sheep and their keepers, and medical functions such as an infirmary, and separate quarters for the sick. The plan – including the basilica-type church – is entirely devoid of symbolic formal arrangement. Based on a roman grid system with a base module of 40x40 – and by extension 160x160 – feet, programmatic adjacencies appear to drive the project in a way that one almost feels tempted to call "proto-functional". The sick are separated from the healthy in proximity to the herb garden and the bloodletting house towards the exterior wall, while three brewery/bakery units are distributed throughout the compound, serving the guest house, the monks' refectory, and the pilgrims' quarters.

In its detail, level of panning, and comprehensiveness of programmatic considerations, the sum of these functions far supersedes the spirit of contemplative introversion one may feel tempted to attribute to the monastery. The compound of St. Gallen is conceived of as a *polis* in its own right: A self-sustainable intentional community, based on the Benedictine ideals of "praying" and "working"⁴. With its focus on production and the trades, the plan of St. Gallen, although never implemented, can be regarded as a blueprint for the medieval city, a contained experiment set up several centuries before the rise of the great medieval cities. At a time of retreat and political disarray, the bounded form of the compound serves the obvious function of defense, but just as importantly, it enables a projective blueprint for anticipated forms of living. Limited in its scope, the monastery compound's ambition are not focused on a territorial

expansion, but an economy established as a federation of monastic compounds across Europe.

It was not until almost a Millennium later with the emergence of the Nation states that once again a territorial order was established under which cities rapidly expanded again. A largely economically driven organizational system of streets, blocks, and parcels became the dominant model for cohabitation, and gave rise to our known concept of the city, and the defensive collectivity of the compound softened into the modern idea of shared civic space.

THE (POST-)URBAN COMPOUND

Arguably today this civic space is again being challenged, as cities have started to disintegrate into expansive urbanized territories, infrastructure networks, and cul-de-sac developments. Increasingly less the common ground for a shared publicness, these “terrains vagues” once again are perceived as transitory environments, and raise the question of adequate new organizational urban units. No longer developed at the scale of the parcel, contemporary urban areas progressively exist as clusters of megablocks and gated enclaves - contemporary urban compounds in their own right. But despite their apparent autonomy from their surroundings, most of these developments are based on economic considerations, while only few provide palpable alternative models for a collective experience. On the other hand we are witnessing an increase in so called “survivalist” architecture, bunker and condo projects that – motivated by fear of increasingly unstable political, economic, and ecological systems – aggressively turn their backs on the shared values and institutions of society.⁵ Between recent natural disasters, financial crises, and political and social turmoil, the basic architectural function of physical protection is rapidly regaining momentum. In this light it seems appropriate to look back at the introverted architecture of the compound as an architectural project. Can we imagine the compound today as a viable urban type in a territorial landscape that is increasingly slipping out of the control of planners? Can we – as a thought experiment- exchange the idea of a universal ‘civicness’ for the idea of a limited ‘collective’?

ARCHIPELAGO

The idea of the bounded architectural intervention as a basic constituent part of the city is not new. A lineage of an ‘urbanism of the discrete object’ (as opposed to an urbanism of ‘informal systems’) includes figures such as A. Rossi, O.M.Ungers, Rem Koolhaas or more recently P.V. Aureli, who have all argued for a version of the city in which civic and urban agency is affiliated with the discrete (often bounded) architectural intervention rather than expansive systems of infrastructures and flows. One of the best known – and most often cited – models for this type of architectural urbanism is the idea of the urban island, and by extension the city as an archipelago of islands.

“The City in the City – Berlin as Green Archipelago” was the outcome of the 1977 Cornell Summer Academy – a collaboration led by German architect O.M. Ungers with significant contributions by Ungers’ former student Rem Koolhaas as well as 20 others.⁶

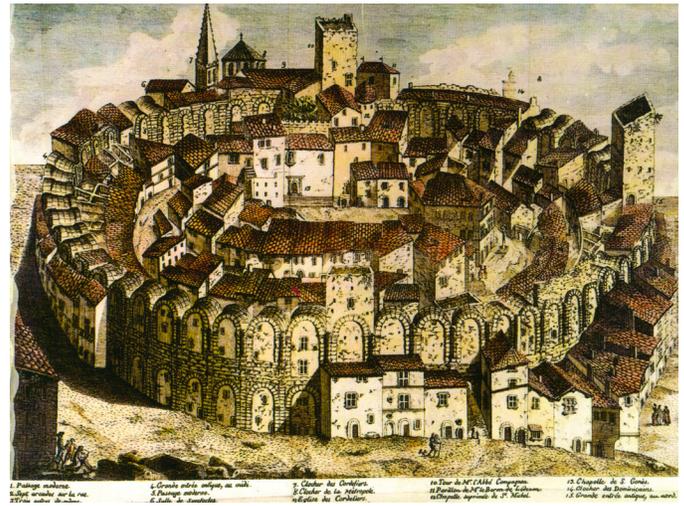


Figure 2: The medieval city of Arles (France) built into the Roman amphitheater.

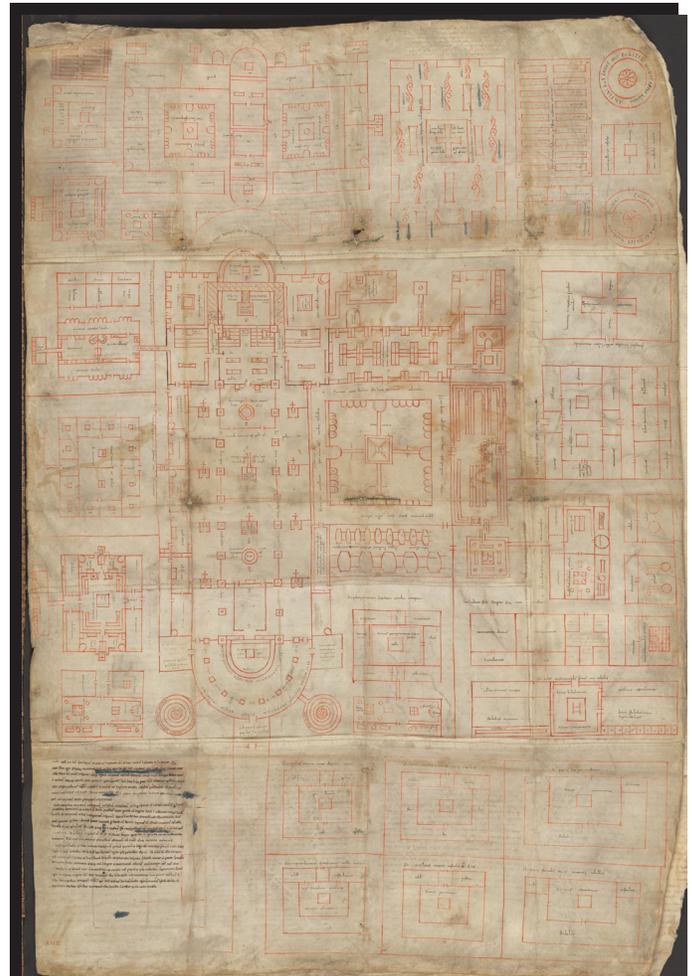


Figure 3: Recto of Plan of Saint Gall, 9th century,

Although limited in scope and distribution, the document has over time become one of the most significant manifestoes on the urban condition of the post-WW II period. The speculative project

transforms Berlin's greatest weakness into a conceptual asset: the city's lack of formal coherence is exacerbated by its reduction to a series of morphologically pure islands floating in a metropolitan void. Retroactively idealized, each island becomes a fragment of an ideal city independent from each other yet co-dependent in a federative system: Leonidov's Magnitogorsk is suspended next to the Weinbrenner's baroque plan of Karlsruhe in an urban space of exacerbated difference. Each island in Ungers' scenario exists as a morphologically homogenous entity following *one* ideology that in turn produces *one* formal outcome, while a pluralistic urban condition emerges only in the sum of islands.

But when looking at the urban compound as an island in the urban territory, yet another possibility emerges, in which the compound bridges the singularity of the urban artifact with an internalized condition of plurality. In this scenario, the 'compound object' negotiates programmatic, formal, and ideological differences on its interior, effectively becoming a true city within the city that no longer relies on the archipelago's model of pluralism as a sum of islands, but in which the constituent parts of the island itself are the carriers of its pluralistic nature.

MULTIPLICITY / UNITY - THE BANK OF ENGLAND COMPOUND

A building that like no other can serve as a case study for this type of compound – one in which frictions between the constituent parts and between the parts and the whole start to define the overall form – is the compound of the Bank of England. Built over a period of almost 100 years (between 1734 and 1828⁷) it comprises a multiplicity of construction periods and several architects, with the most notable contributions made by Sir John Soane. In its final state (the largest portion of the building was torn down in 1925 and subsequently rebuilt, fundamentally changing the Bank's architecture) the urban compound of the Bank occupied a site of 3.5 acres (approx. 1.4 hectare, or 14.100 square meters), surrounded by a windowless perimeter wall, and filled with a dense array of architectural fragments. Each individual 'building' retains its structural, geometric, and often functional autonomy, and from the sum of parts emerges an image that is often conflicted with regards to its internal geographies, its relationship with the city, and its institutional image. The early buildings were constructed under the lead of George Sampson and insert themselves into the existing medieval fabric of London in a sequence leading from a gate house through a courtyard into a volumetrically simple pay hall. Architectural historian Daniel M. Abramson sees in these early interventions the evolution of an essentially medieval corporate spatiality of "*mystique*" and "*elite seclusion*"⁸. Subsequent additions undertaken by Sampson's successor Robert Taylor elaborate on a spatial ideal that strives to segregate the public functions as much as possible from the administrative functions. This attitude towards a "*virtuous quarantine of potentially corrupting market activity away from the necessary rectitude of the banking and administrative business, upon which the institution's credit, integrity and survival ultimately lay*"⁹ finds its expression in the addition of Taylor's east wing grouping four large new stock transfer halls around a central rotunda. While functionally

operating as the largest public market spaces of the bank to date, the east wing is composed as an entirely autonomous arrangement of spaces all but closed off from the street by a windowless perimeter wall, with overhead skylight providing the only source of daylight. It equally distances itself from the existing buildings, by giving access to the central rotunda solely through a small anteroom arranged off-axis from the existing courtyard and pay hall. Taylor's conflicted attitude towards the public nature of the stock transfer halls reflects a broader conflict of the institution coming to terms with the shift from a medieval trading system based on tangible commodities towards an immaterial system based on credit, stocks, and securities. This intangible yet visibly expansive nature of an emerging finance capitalism is seen by some historians as one of the causes contributing to the infamous Gordon Riots of 1780 which – while largely directed against a catholic elite – targeted the Bank on the night of 'Black Wednesday', Jun 7th, 1780 as an institution seen as complicit in the social inequalities of the day.

The largest, and most decisive architectural changes to the Bank of England compound were implemented by Sir John Soane, who was appointed the Bank's chief architect following Taylor's death in 1788. Not only did Soane largely rebuild many of Taylor's interventions, but under his guidance, the bank's compound found its completion towards the north, ultimately covering the entire city block. Soane's additions (which have been discussed widely, and will not be subject of an in-depth analysis here) point to an inherent realization of the conceptual framework of the 'compound' as an architectural device operating between container and content. His method for planning the northeastern segment has been described as "*a kind of compound planning. [...] a fenced in enclosure of loosely spaced parts, seemingly aggregated over time without an apparent pre-conceived figural unity or dominant pattern.*"¹⁰

This compound strategy allowed Soane to create an intricacy of parts that not only responded to the pressures of the site, but equally address the evolving nature of the institution: As part of a larger trend in the early 1800's banks relied less and less on publicly accessible large-scale stock exchange halls and would increasingly be characterized by an increase in hierarchy, bureaucracy and compartmentalization. Between 1797 and 1815, the Bank's clerical staff grew from 431 to 933 (excluding service employees)¹¹ and Soane's additions can be read as a direct reflection of this development. A 'mat' of clustered spaces occupies much of the remaining floor area, laid out according to programmatic need, and interrupted by courtyard, light wells, at times creating local symmetries and spatial relationships, giving preference to the reading of the institution as an internalized machine of banking mechanics. Yet, despite these evolving, and often contradictory spatial sensibilities, there is no doubt that the bank is always understood as more than the sum of its parts. This is due in large part to the absolute persistence of the perimeter wall whose dominance over the complex is never in question. Soane, it seems, realized early on that this enclosure was key to a conceptual understanding of the bank as a compound. From the beginning of his tenure, the screen wall surrounding the compound

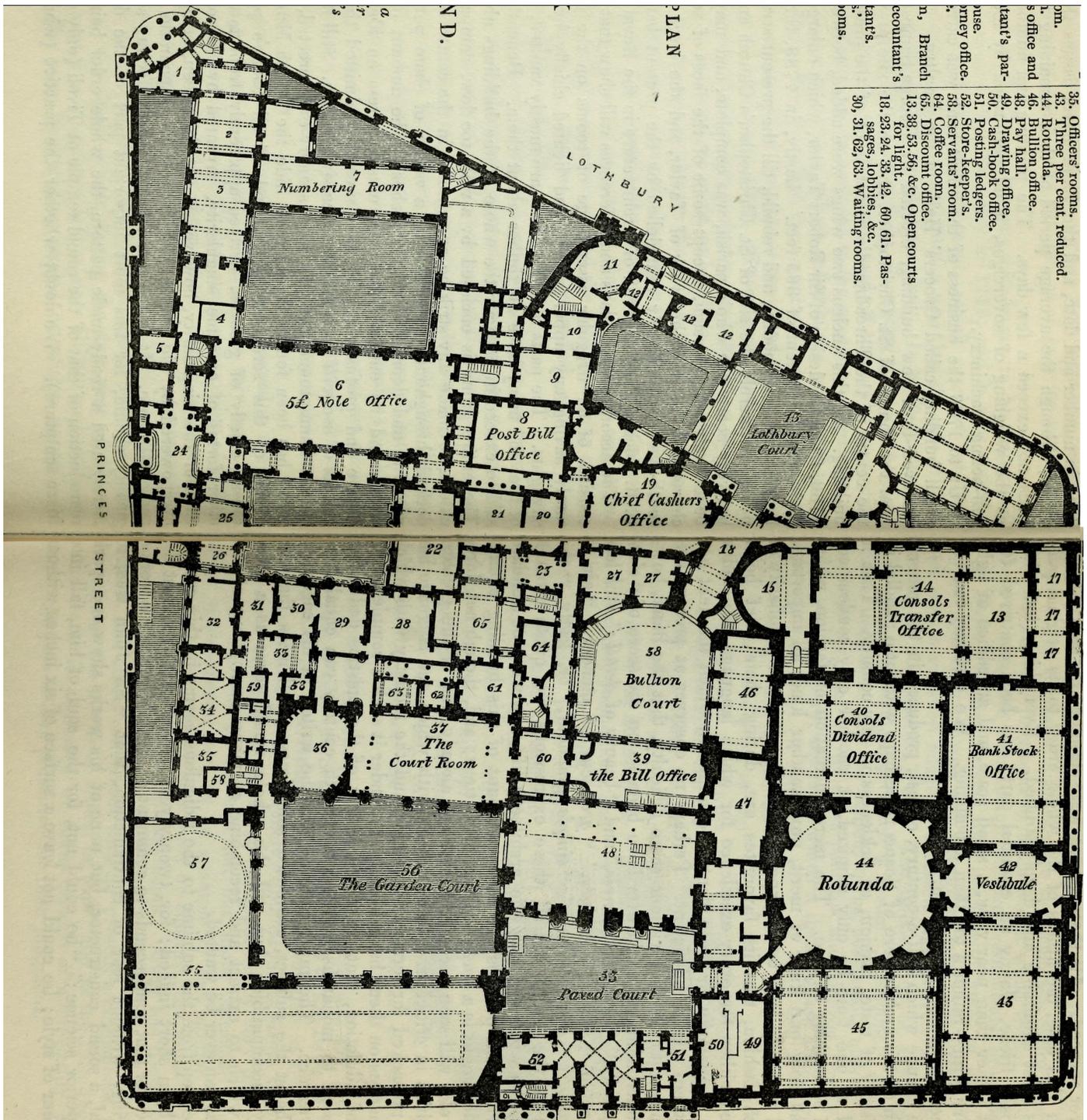


Figure 4: The Bank of England, plan drawing by John Weale, 1850's.

is treated as an integral part of the design. Soane produced vast quantities of drawings focusing exclusively on the enclosure and the fine line between seclusion and presence in the city. All corners are executed as fillets, asserting the compound's distinct presence as a singular object in the city, culminating in the northwestern "Tivoli corner", in which the geometry of a circular Roman Temple merges with the screen wall. Abramson summarizes:

*"Finally during John Soane's tenure the Bank decisively sealed itself off from its immediate surroundings on its own walled island site. Yet paradoxically at the same time the Bank projected ...its most ambitious urban link-up, of the North-West Tivoli corner... This contradictory double action of immurement and projection marks a key symbolic moment during the Napoleonic Wars of the Bank's transcendence of its City origins onto the national stage"*¹²

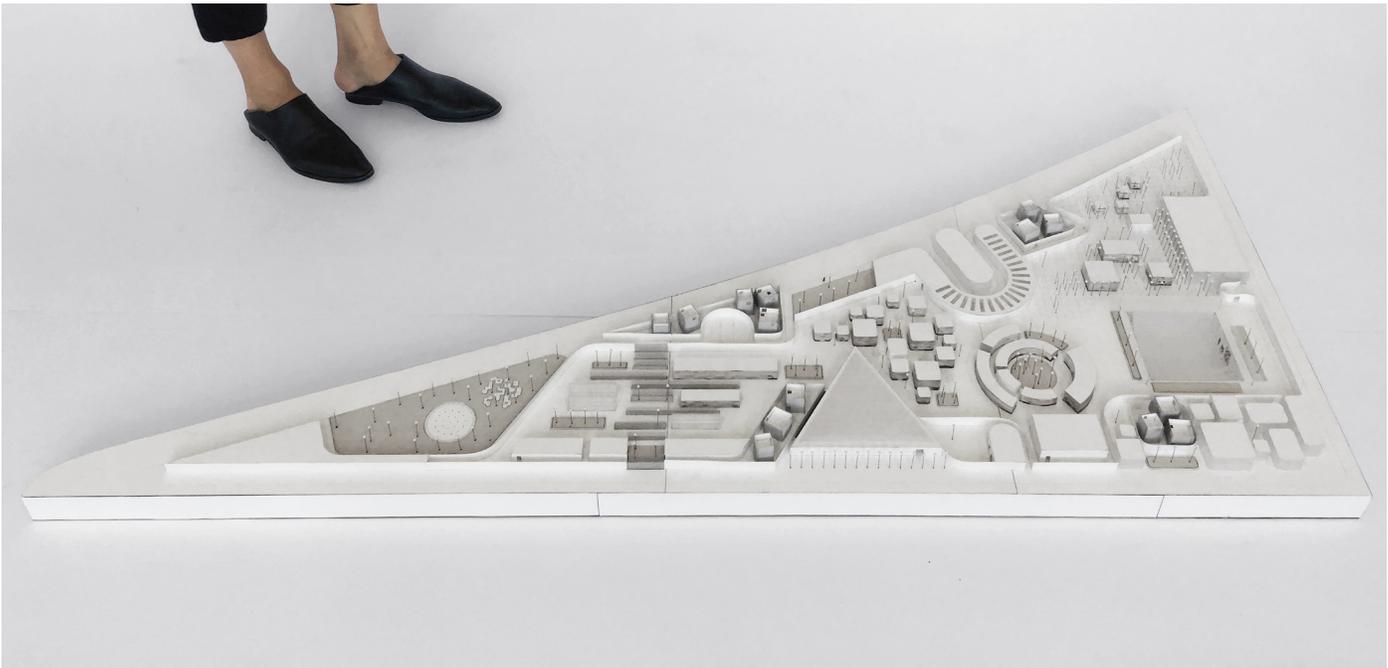


Figure 5: *Project for an Urban Compound* by A. Vanella, E. Wu (Advanced Design Studio Spring 2017, UT Austin, “The Urban Compound”, Martin Hättasch, photo by A. Vanella, E. Wu / University of Texas at Austin.)

Lauded by Soane’s contemporaries and historians for its mastery of classic geometries and compositional balance, the Tivoli corner’s true achievement, however, may lie in its conceptual clarity: The absorption of the traditionally free standing architectural object of the temple into a new whole can be understood as a reflection of Soane’s attitude towards an inclusive urban compound that is discrete, yet complex in its acknowledgement of external influences and internal conflicts. As such, the Bank of England and its architecture reflects changing, and at times contradictory, allegiances to ideas of form, function, the institution, and the city. In its very form are embedded the forces of Britain’s modernization and the emergence of the modern financial sector in the 18th and 19th centuries:

*“At the most basic level the Bank’s buildings actively produced the power of a financial elite, facilitating its accumulation of wealth and consolidating the City’s financial district. The Bank’s buildings also embodies, functionally and symbolically, the institution’s compound character, accommodating multiple purposes and expressing combinations of local and national identities. Yet, at the same time that the Bank’s building projected this volatile mix, the architecture also acted as a mediator conciliating these same stresses and conflicts.”*¹³

BLUEPRINT II

The complexities and contradictions channeled through the compound of the Bank of England serve as a reminder that the bounded object (which today is all too often shunned as inherently anti-urban in favor of an urbanism of infrastructures, networks, and flows) and the idea of urbanity need not necessarily be mutually exclusive. Architects today find themselves in a situation where the limits of

comprehensive urban planning strategies are becoming increasingly apparent. In times of political instability, and economic as well as ecological volatility, we are beginning to see the re-emergence of architectures of defense and retreat and a loss of confidence in the traditional civic space of the city. Once again, urban territories are beginning to be perceived as vaguely ‘hostile’, against which gated communities and interiorized urban superblocks attempt to preserve a sense of familiarity and security. In light of this development the conceptual framework of the compound, its histories, and its potentials seems well worth reconsidering: Historically the compound has provided physical protection while at the same time serving as a blueprint for new modes of cohabitation. The success of the controlled experiment of the medieval monastery as a collective formation eventually informed the nature of the successful medieval cities. Possibly today again, in a post-urban landscape that can no longer be an effective civic framework to balance the plurality of ambitions, ideologies, and needs of its constituents, some of these frictions will have to be negotiated inside the boundaries of the compound. The (post-) urban compound is thus both an architectural and a social experiment – an architectural petri-dish – from which may eventually emerge the models to inform a new collective sensibility.

ENDNOTES

1. Martin Heidegger, “Building, Dwelling, Thinking”, in *Poetry, Language, Thought* (New York, Harper Colophon, 1971), p. 154
2. for his detailed assessment, see the chapter “Cloister and Community”, in Lewis Mumford, *The City in History*, (Houghton Mifflin Harcourt, 1961)
3. see Lorna Price, *The Plan of Saint Gall - In Brief: An Overview Based on the Three-Volume Work by Walter Horn and Ernest Born* (Berkeley, Los Angeles, London, University of California Press, 1982
4. The dictum of “ora et labora” (“pray and work”) was originally formulated by Saint Benedict of Nursia (around 480–547) in the *Rule of St. Benedict*, a book of precepts as a rule for Benedictine monastic life.

5. See the segment of NPR's Fresh Air "Why Some Silicon Valley Tech Executives Are Bunkering Down For Doomsday", first aired on Jan 25, 2017, available here: <https://www.npr.org/2017/01/25/511507434/why-some-silicon-valley-tech-executives-are-bunkering-down-for-doomsday>
6. The genesis of the "Green Archipelago" has been traced in great detail in the recent critical edition by Florian Hertweck and Sébastien Marot: Florian Hertweck and Sébastien Marot (eds.), *The City in the City – Berlin: A Green Archipelago* (UAA Ungers Archives for Architectural Research, Zürich, Switz.: Lars Müller Publishers, 2013).
7. These dates reflect the time span from when the Bank of England moved to the site on Threadneedle Street that it was to occupy until its demolition in 1925, and the last significant interventions by Sir John Soane.
8. Daniel M. Abramson, *Building the Bank of England – Money, Architecture, Society 1694-1942* (New Haven, London, Yale University Press, 2005), p. 239
9. Abramson, *Building the Bank of England – Money, Architecture, Society 1694-1942*, p. 239
10. Abramson, p. 131
11. Ibid., p. 165
12. Ibid., p. 240
13. Ibid., p. 241