The Economist Building was their next major commission by the couple graduated from architecture school at Durham University in 1949. It was at this time that they joined the architecture department of the London County Council. This would prove to be a major driver for the direction of their personal practice and theory. The pair, compared with other firms of the period, did not produce anywhere near the amount of built projects but rather focused on defining urbanism and setting a new precedent within the architecture community.

Their first project together was the Hunstanton School in Norfolk, England. This school was the birth of the movement New Brutalism in post-War Britain. The Smithsons, still relatively young compared with other firms they were in competition with, won the competition to design a school that was to become part of a new educational program in England: the secondary modern (Spellman, 2004). This form of education had not been defined at the time of the competition but was needed as a response to the growing population of “baby-boomers.” The Smithsons focused on materiality and circulation in a way that would progress their agenda for the new movement forward.

Their work was influenced by Le Corbusier and Mies van der Rohe but sought to produce projects that were more “honest in nature” (Vidotto, 1997); what you see is the true structural frame, a careful consideration of an available material palette [to reflect the shortage of supply due to war], and attention to detail in how the building could better serve the educational needs of faculty and students.

The Economist Building

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THEORY AND DESIGN INTEGRATION

The commission of the Economist Building provided a vehicle through which the Smithsons were able to drive their ideas on urban structure, how function and form can coexist, and how the experience of the user molds the design.

The design of the structure attends closely to the scale and proportion of the human. A popular theory during the 1960s and 1970s that the Smithsons had developed was labeled as “the city in the sky” (Smithson, 2005). Their driving force behind the theory was developing a city that would separate the pedestrian user from automobiles on the street. In the Economist Building this notion became the raised plaza between the two structures that allowed space for changes of direction and personal contemplation apart from the distraction of the city. The plaza, however, was not so far removed that one felt isolated from the city but rather attempted to create a smooth transition between the two zones.

The proportion and placement of the buildings within the site facilitated the advancement of the Smithsons agenda for a new urban planning strategy by placing their tall buildings (a residential tower and The Economist Building) at the rear of the site on the narrower and less busy streets while placing the smaller building (the bank building) on the front of the site which has a wider and more populated street (Smithson, 2001). This was contrary to other architects at the time in that most saw the main street of a site as the place where their grand bold statement for a design would be placed. To the Smithsons placing the taller buildings at the back of the site was a way for them to not compete with the formality of the street that was present prior to the construction of the new design (Smithson, 2005). A tall structure on a narrow street allowed for the user to be unaware of the height that was surrounding them.

The Smithsons were firm believers that a building’s function should be integrated seamlessly into the building design in order to provide both beauty and functionality. The two main ways they achieved this goal was through the use of integrated ventilation and lighting. With ventilation they placed the mechanical chase within the columns as a way to hide the system while effectively using the vertical nature of the column to transfer air and water effectively. They also integrated the furniture of the building into these systems. The desks contained air supplies that could be individually controlled. These were supplied from the column HVAC, and the hot and cold water running through were also used to heat or cool the air respectively. This created a well designed local environment intended to improve worker conditions.

Likewise, the Smithsons also integrated lighting and air handling into the furniture through the use of movable book shelves with “light vents”. Here, books would be placed below in the shelves while at the top lights would run along its length lighting both the office and corridors simultaneously. This was another well designed and highly functional element. Above the lights, there was also room for air to circulate from the office spaces into the halls and finally to the central core where it would be released from the air handling units. By integrating the systems of the building seamlessly with functional elements, the Smithsons were able to strike a balance to both improve the well-being of the occupants and make effective use of space.

Circulation through this building was focused on a central service core that would provide both a space for mechanicals (air intake and plumbing) and movement vertically. At the time, this was an American development that had not been tested in the United Kingdom and was considered a high risk move for the Smithsons by critics. In the circulation core, there are three general passenger gearless high-speed elevators (500 fpm), a geared fireman’s lift (300 fpm), and two sets of staircases. While each building in the four-building complex on the site has an individual circulation core, a common sub-plaza level allows for horizontal circulation between the buildings. This design helps reinforce the notion of a “charged void” as a relief from the living and working zones as well as a way to easily connect the parking space to all of the structures.

CONCLUSION

The Economist Building represents a progression of design during the period following World War II that sought to counteract the theories and choices of prominent architects at the time. The structure and site integrated the conditions of the human scale into the larger context of the city by creating an urban oasis that separated the street from the pedestrian. Inside the building, this scheme of integration was implemented by concentrat}
THE ECONOMIST BUILDING
STRUCTURE & CONCEPT

PLAZA BETWEEN BUILDINGS

INTEGRATION CONDITION: BUILDING MEETING THE GROUND
JEREMY BARNARDY: PLAZA BETWEEN BUILDINGS HIGHLIGHTING STRUCTURE
THE ECONOMIST BUILDING

STRUCTURE & CONCEPT

MULLION
OUTER CONCRETE COLUMN
INNER CONCRETE COLUMN
INTERIOR CONCRETE FINISHING
WINDOW PANE
FLASHING
INSULATION
WINDOW SILL

ORGANIZATION OF SITE

ST. JAMES’S ST.
PLAZA
PARKING BELOW
BURY ST.

INTEGRATION CONDITION: HOW THE BUILDING MEETS THE GROUND
ERICA HWAY: PLAZA RAISED ABOVE GROUND LEVEL

INTEGRATION CONDITION: HOW THE BUILDING TURNS A CORNER
KYLE PALZER: MULLION AND COLUMN CONNECTION

INTEGRATION CONDITION: HOW THE BUILDING MEETS THE SKY
ERICA HWAY: PARAPET CONDITION

COPING
FLASHING W/ DRIP EDGE
SEALER
RUBBER MEMBRANE
STONE CLADDING
CONCRETE STRUCTURE

WINDOW SILL
INNER CONCRETE COLUMN
INSULATION
INTERIOR CONCRETE FINISHING
FLUSHING
OUTER CONCRETE COLUMN
INTEGRATION CONDITION: HOW THE BUILDING FORMS AN OPENING
KYLE PALZER: INTEGRATED MECHANICAL SYSTEMS AND WORK SPACE

CHERRY DESK INTEGRATES INTO THE INTERIOR WALL

INTEGRATION CONDITION: HOW THE WALL MEETS THE FLOOR
JEREMY BERNARDY

INTEGRATION CONDITION: HOW THE BUILDING MEETS THE SKY
KYLE PALZER: INTEGRATED MECHANICAL SYSTEMS

CONCRETE FLOOR WRAPS UP TO BECOME PARTIAL WALL

VERTICAL CLADDING WRAPS INTO HORIZONTAL CLADDING

THE ECONOMIST BUILDING INTEGRATION STRATEGIES
Design for allowing natural light penetration and integrated artificial lighting systems.

Design for allowing natural light penetration in plaza.

Integration condition: How the wall meets the floor.

Erica Hway: Combination fluorescent lighting/shelving/ventilation system.

View 5 of integrated lighting system in corridors.