A Modern View, or a View on the Modern?

A Conversation with Richard Rogers

As an architect you have involved yourself in politics. Could you elaborate on the political responsibility and latitude in architecture? Do you really believe that architecture can influence the brief?

My involvement with politics over the last two years resulted primarily from my profound rejection of the Government's *laissez-faire* attitude towards the built environment and a frustration at the unproductive restrictions imposed by the planning system.

Architecture and the built environment play a significant role in the quality of life but in Britain it has been the subject of misunderstanding and neglect. The Government can and should involve itself by informing and consulting the public and setting an example through its own patronage.

We tried to focus on raising standards and awareness by introducing a formal competition system for government projects, adding the built environment as a subject for children in schools and seeking to involve ordinary people in the local planning process. At the larger scale we were pushing for an overall strategic body for London (which is the only major capital to lack a voice or governing authority) to coordinate transport and land use and to specifically protect the public realm of the city.

We live in an age of ecological threats. Architecture can contribute to a responsible approach to the environment by building more safely. But, as a medium for cultural reflection, is it able to contribute to a change of attitude?

Pompidou Centre, Paris, 1977
'The summit of the escalator system, suspended beyond the main structural framework. Not a remote monument but a people's place. Our competition report recommended that the Pompidou Centre be developed as a "love centre of information covering Paris and beyond (...) a cross between an information oriented computerised Times Square and the British Museum, with the stress on two-way participation between people and activities/exhibits".'

It must not be forgotten that cities are the single largest consumers of energy, polluters of the atmosphere and generators of waste. Our buildings consume 50% of our total energy requirement. Running, constructing and demolishing buildings inefficiently has contributed to the current environmental crisis. The architect can work on the building's performance making the building run more efficiently, consume less, emit less. Careful orientation, utilising safe and reusable materials and extending the life of the building by incorporating a high degree of flexibility all contribute to this.

However, architects should not focus entirely on the individual building project but look towards the relationships of the parts of the city to look at the global problem. In recent projects such as the commercial centre in Shanghai and the masterplan for Val d'Oise outside Paris we proposed an urban strategy based on creating a more ecologically sustainable environment. Energy consumption was reduced to 35% of that of conventional towns.

I do not see where the work of the architect ends and that of the urbanist or transport engineer starts, nor incidentally the structure or service engineer on the smaller scale. The architect has a unique training and experience and that is to challenge and to open possibilities. He is the generalist which in effect means that he must be capable of grasping the principles of most of the disciplines in order to guide them towards the broader goals.

'Architecture immortalises and glorifies something. Hence there can be no architecture where there is nothing to glorify.' Using this famous quote of Ludwig Wittgenstein as motto of your book A Modern View, the fundamental question comes up: what is it architects could glorify and immortalise nowadays? How does this respectable motive relate to the wish to offer servant space? You once stated that architecture glorifies shelter. Has shelter any glory and if it does: is that all there is?

If architecture can glorify it can also reflect the decay of a society in crisis. The last decade in Britain has witnessed the most staggering building boom. The motivation behind this transformation of our cities and urban peripheries has been profitability above all else. The result has been the evolution of a 'building product' – an enclosure of maximum efficiency, fast to erect, cheap to build and designed to last five years. The paucity of these buildings and the environments that surround them stand as memorials to the poverty of the ethics and ambitions of our society in that period.

Architecture is not created by architects alone but relies on its great patrons, great engineers, talented builders and shared visions. When the vision transcends the pure profit motive and looks towards improving the broader social picture then architecture is created, which indeed glorifies the ideals of that society. There is much to glorify in today's democratic world, just as there is much to lament. The architect and the patron are responsible for the significance of their building and that starts with the evolution of the brief, the manner in which it is built and its relationship to the public realm.
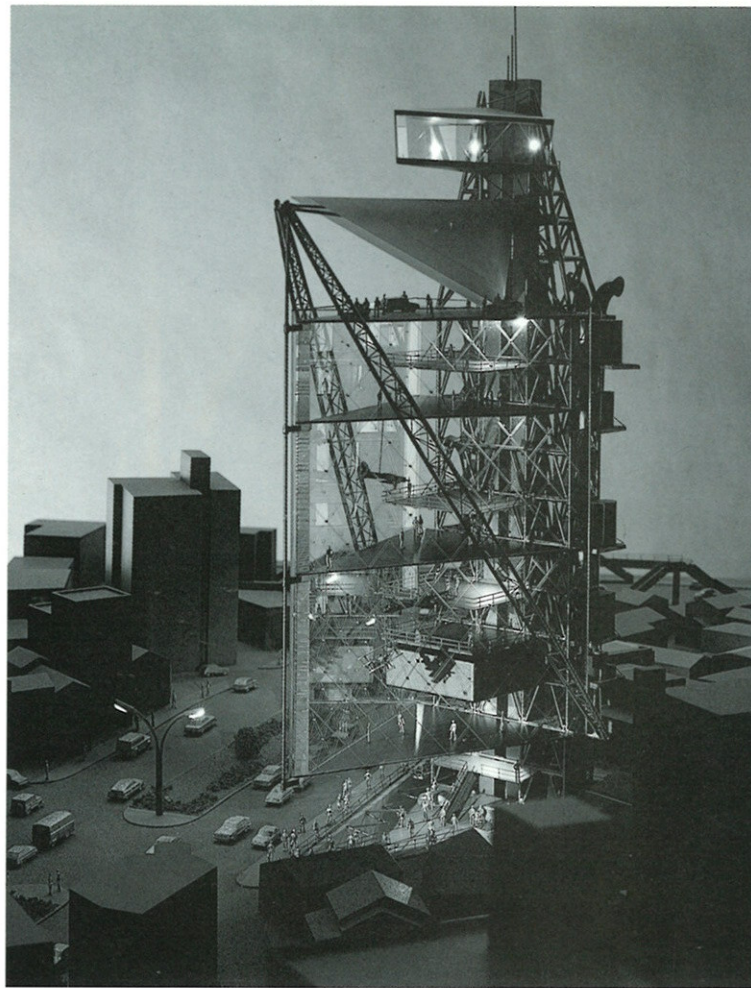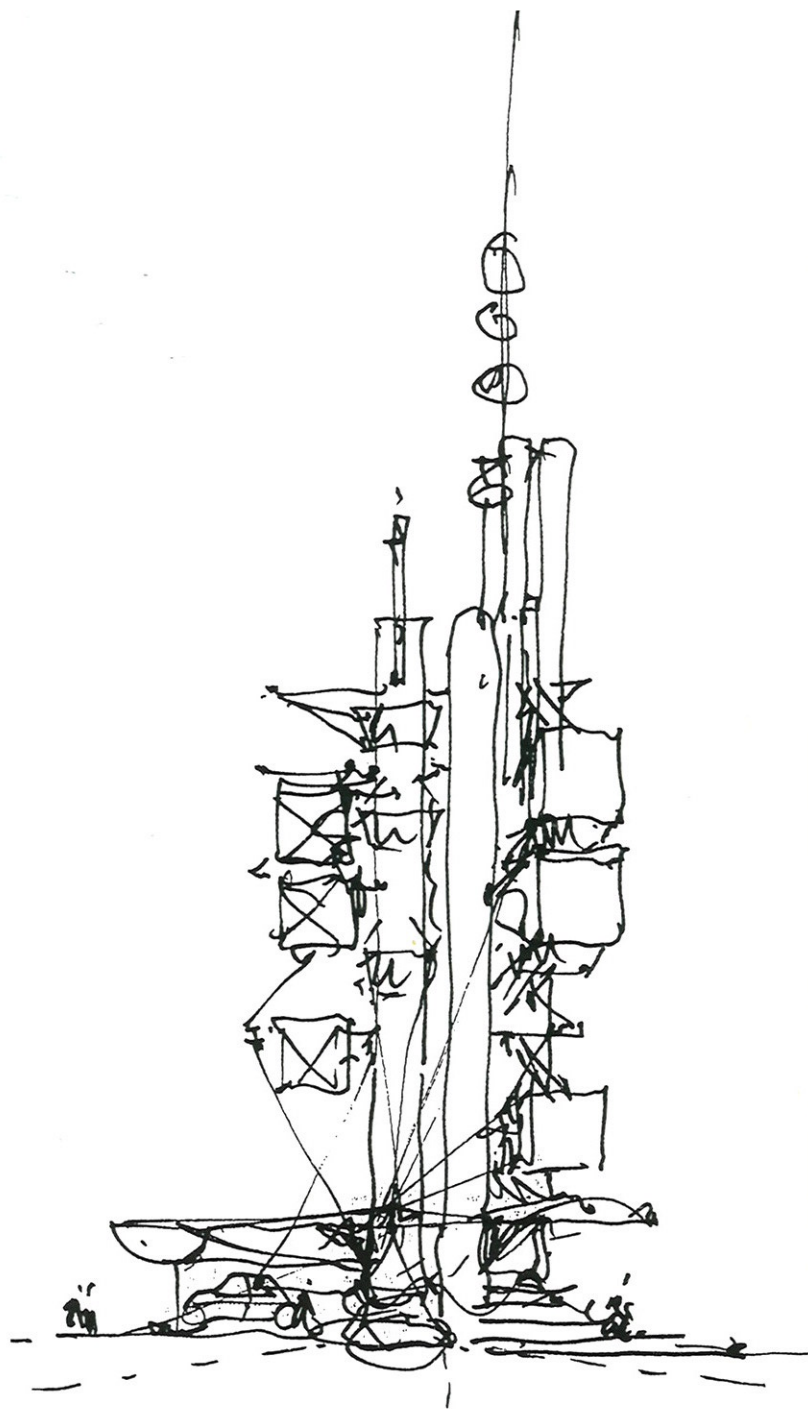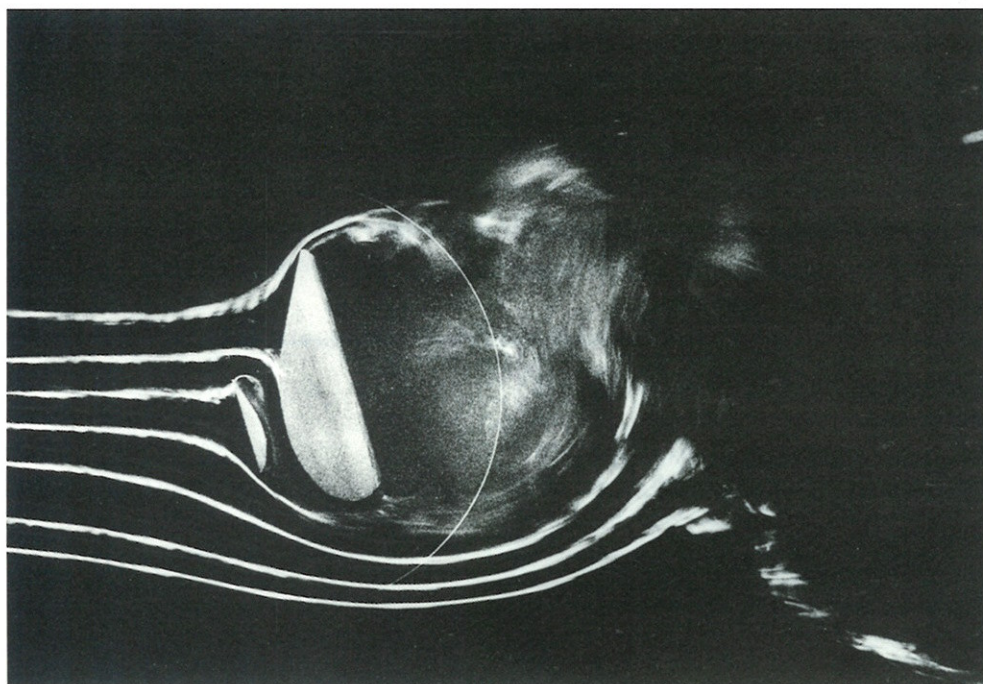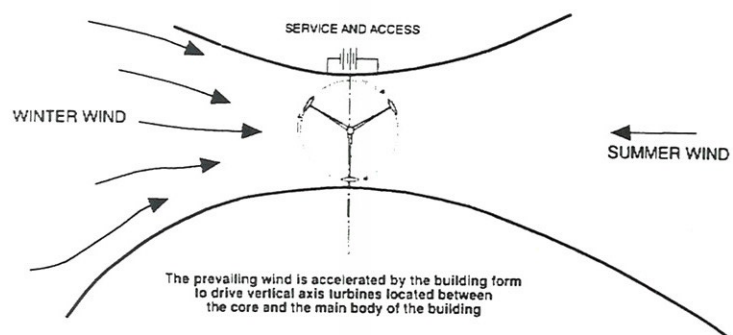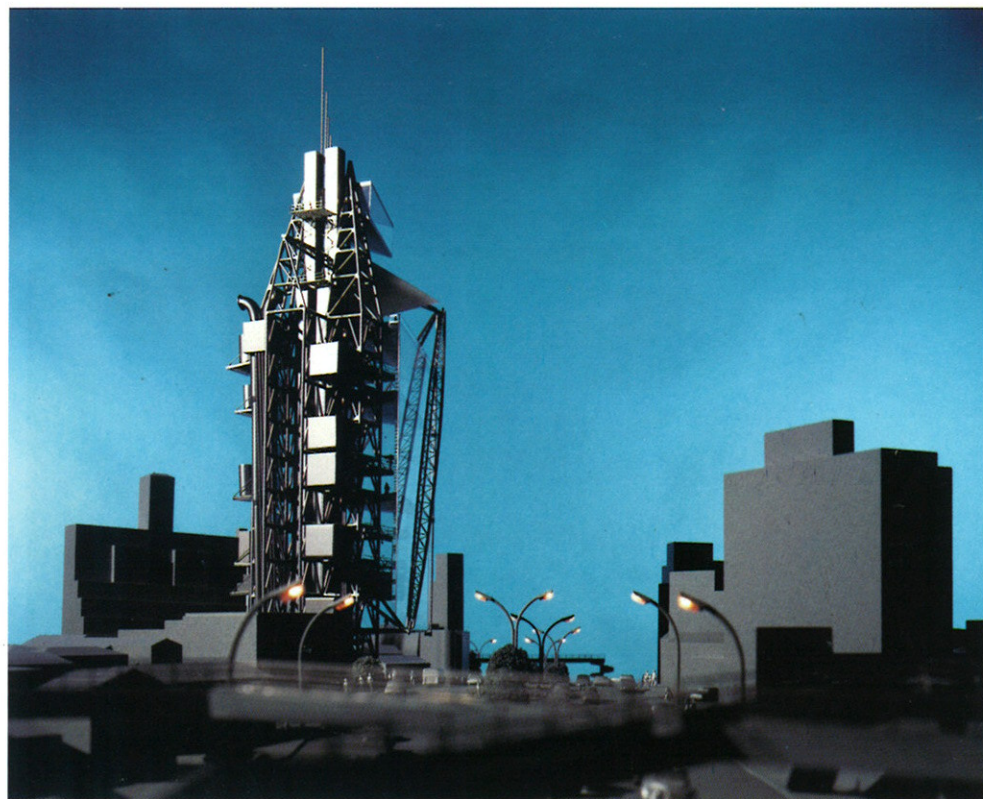
Tomigaya, I; Exhibition Building, Tokyo, 1992
'The design of the building is based on the principle of a simple shelf system. The two steel towers support the main floors with the flexibility to increase the area by adding temporary mezzanines which can be stored in a separate location. This creates a series of dynamic spaces which can be transformed to suit specific requirements. The tall building is shaped to utilise the power of the wind by means of a turbine. The aerodynamics of the building have been tuned so as to double the wind speed in the gap between the two towers. in this way a wind-driven generator can produce enough electricity to power the entire building.'

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But how does this attitude relate to your philosophy of defining buildings into their served and servant components?
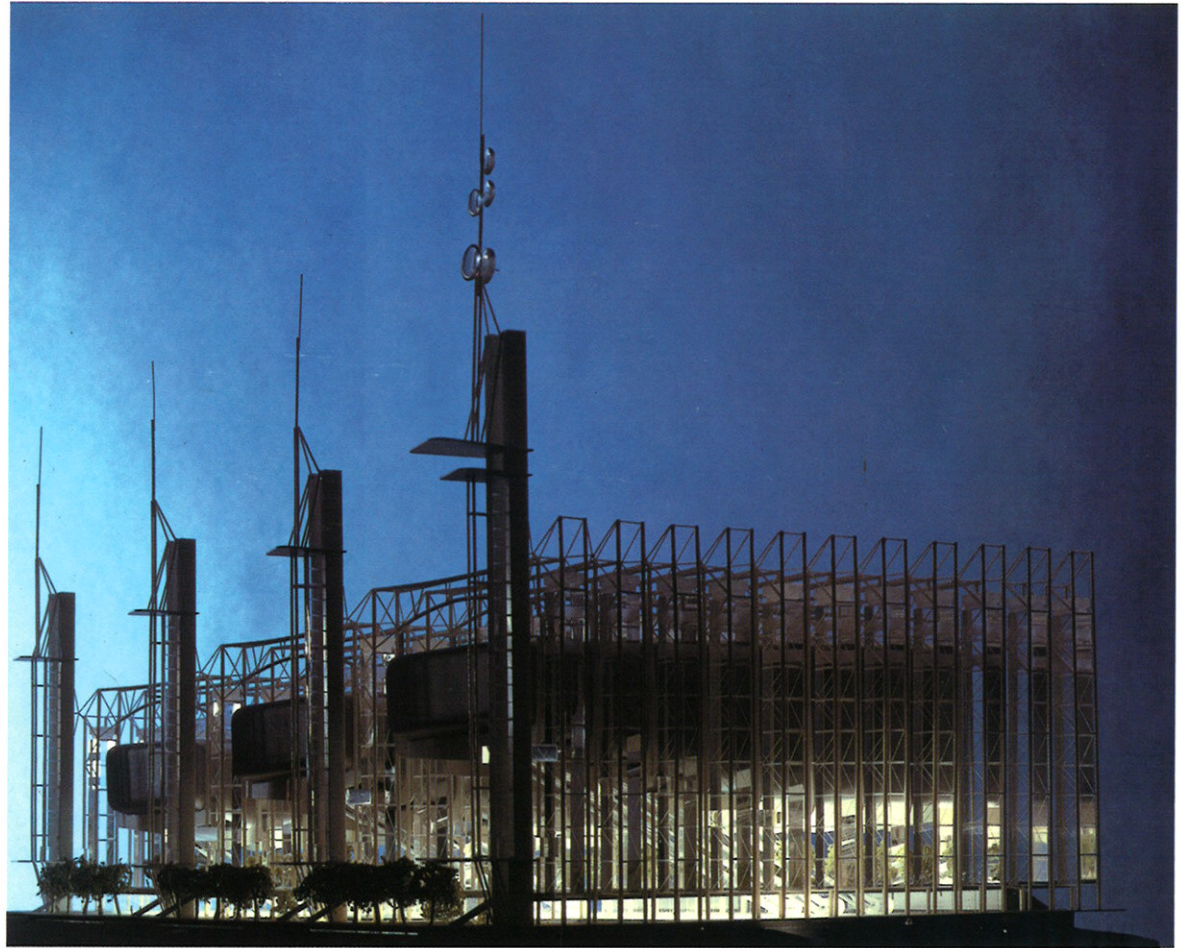
In the past we had Vitruvius and the proposition that a building could attain perfection through a complete control of its proportions and composition. The exercise of architecture was the exercise of creating a perfect and unchangeable object. This concept of built form related to the philosophy of a society wishing to define and fix relationships. The twentieth century has seen the transformation of philosophy away from static and hierarchical relationships (within society and between Man and God) to our present post-Einsteinian position where the philosophy of change now dominates thinking. This philosophical change has also motivated architecture and this shift in thinking has been accompanied by a complete transformation of the technology of building which has further undermined the principles of traditional architecture.

Our own reaction to this situation is to seek an architecture that can accommodate the changing needs of the building's users and maximise the performance of the building by making best use of the new possibilities created by technology. One aspect is the manipulation of the floorspace of the building to create a greater flexibility of use and the other is to work with the servant elements of the building programme which today make up close to one third of the building in terms of both cost and space.

The framework of the building has a very long life whilst the servant spaces containing technologies which are continuously being updated, modified or replaced have a different role. We are trying to create a legible language of architecture. A language where each piece says what it is, what it means. **We have moved away from the purity of the Miesian block towards buildings which are responsive to their urban context, set into the city, legible to the passer-by, richer in their layering and texture and, most importantly, more able to absorb change, alteration and addition.** So we are looking for an order made out of construction systems, a legible hierarchy of systems which nonetheless try to keep pace and order the inevitable chaos of the constantly changing modern world.

WINTER WIND

SERVICE AND ACCESS

SUMMER WIND

The prevailing wind is accelerated by the building form to drive vertical axis turbines located between the core and the main body of the building

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The dynamic architecture that you have produced wants to challenge the very conventions and norms of society and is indeed perceived as controversial. How does this seemingly revolutionary approach conform with the views of your conservative clients like Lloyd's who seek to rule out risk?

Lloyd's have actually had to build three purpose built headquarters this century alone. In the past they have been singularly unsuccessful in predicting their medium term needs and this has resulted in their buildings becoming rapidly obsolete. The main problem has been the huge increase in demand for underwriting space which has consistently outpaced their expectations. The key proposal of our building is that there is an interchangeability between market and office space so that the market can theoretically expand until it has filled the entire building. This is a concept which completely rejects the classical notion of static hierarchy which characterised all their previous buildings.

But the concept of interchangeability goes much further because an underwriting space has to cope with five to ten times more people than a normal office. This implies a quantum leap in demand for building services such as lifts, fire escapes, air-conditioning, toilets, power and telecommunications. The service zones are located outside the building so that they do not disrupt the market space and so that they can be easily accessed for maintenance, replacement or addition. The building is equipped with enough services to cope with medium term predictions. If this demand increases way beyond predictions, as it has done consistently throughout the century, then a substantial increase in lifts and fire stairs etcetera will need to be incorporated. The dynamic, asymmetrical form of the building is designed to take such additions without undermining the integrity of the architectural concept.

So, to answer your question, Lloyd's reacted extremely positively to a dynamic architectural concept as they appreciated that this was in fact a means to actually reduce their risk!

*During your career you have shown a strong faith in technology. You once said:*

'We are living through a period of enormous scientific and technical advance; perhaps a second industrial revolution. The computer, micro-chip, transputer, bio-technology or solid state chemistry should give us more time to work out our complex social and political problems'.

Here you pretend that technology is just a neutral tool which you can use for problems we are confronted with. But don't you think technology has its own dynamics, remodelling our perceptive framework in which we pose our problems? Social problems always seem technology-bound.

Zoofenster; Brau und Brunnen Building, Berlin, 1991
'The design responds to the pivotal points of the site, both as the centre of an important pedestrian circulation system and as a key landmark on the Berlin skyline. The proposal is currently the tallest building planned for Berlin, with a public viewing gallery on its uppermost floor.'
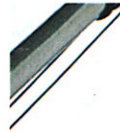
Red arrows flying over the pyramids, Egypt
'From pyramids to fighter jets – incredible advances in technology, today much of it squandered on armaments.'

Lloyd's of London Headquarters, 1986
'Architecture is teamwork in which the client plays a major role. Lloyd's reflects the dedication and sensitivity of the client just as much as the contribution of the architect. Lloyd's was designed so as to link together the somewhat oversimplified neighbouring blocks and the more articulated architecture of the past. From a distance the skyline is enriched by the servant towers which place the building within its context.
The brief demanded 'flexibility to meet changing needs well into the next century', implying no only easily adaptable interiors but a form organised so that parts could be added or removed without loss of design integrity. If one can access and change short-life parts of a building, its total lifespan can be extended. Lloyd's is clearly divided into a long-life central zone housing people and a short-life external zone containing technology.'

**Inland Revenue Headquarters,
Nottingham, Competition Entry, 1992**
'The Inland Revenue Headquarters represents an ecological approach to design. Low energy consumption and creation of a highly landscaped environment form a basis of the scheme. The twin administrative functions of the institution are disposed between two concentric half circles. The central linear garden enhances the quality of the accommodation and creates a curved roof-line which can harness the prevailing wind for natural ventilation.'

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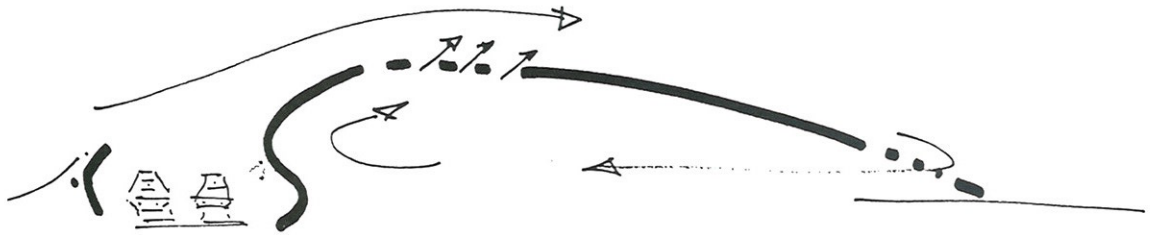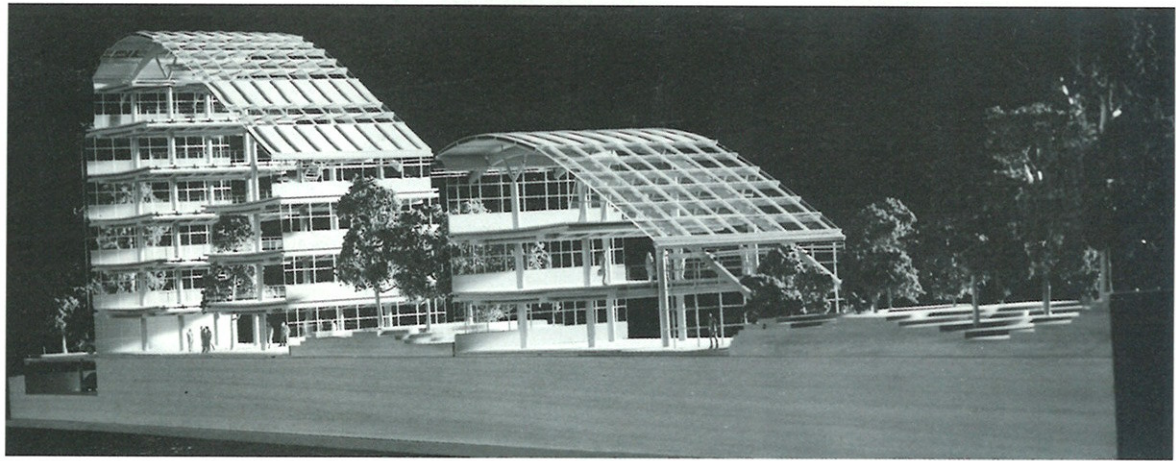
Today technology not only comes after a problem, but also precedes it. How do you succeed in dividing technology and 'the complex social and political problems'. In other words: isn't there a strange contradiction between your recognition of a pluralist society, and your faith in the linear progress of modern technology? If there isn't any straight line in history or culture left, why then do you still believe in the straightness of technology?

Technology is a tool which architects ignore to their loss. It is not that there exists a linearity in *the progress* of technology but there is and has always been a consistent and constant relationship between the ambitions of the architect and the possibilities provided by technology. Our Tokyo Forum project proposed giving the entire ground level of the site to public functions focused on open air spaces. This simple social ambition to create a large public space in the heart of a capital which has few such spaces led to the conferences spaces (the actual programme) being suspended like ships in giant cradles. Technology widens the possibilities of the architect's imagination, it serves man, it is not an end in itself.

The question remains: what to do if the possibilities provided by technology are exceeding the ambitions of man (i.e. the architect)?

I suppose your question precisely highlights my point. Technology is nothing but an enabler, a catalyst for cultural activity. The invention of the television led to the creation of a huge broadcasting culture. What was initially a purely scientific creation without meaning spawned a huge social and cultural development. Nor is this a particularly new concept. I doubt very much that primitive man set up a research programme to melt metal in order to produce better tools. Man's development through the ages is inextricably linked to his inventiveness in the face of his own discoveries. **Today's challenge is to use all our civility to guide our use of these discoveries and technologies.**
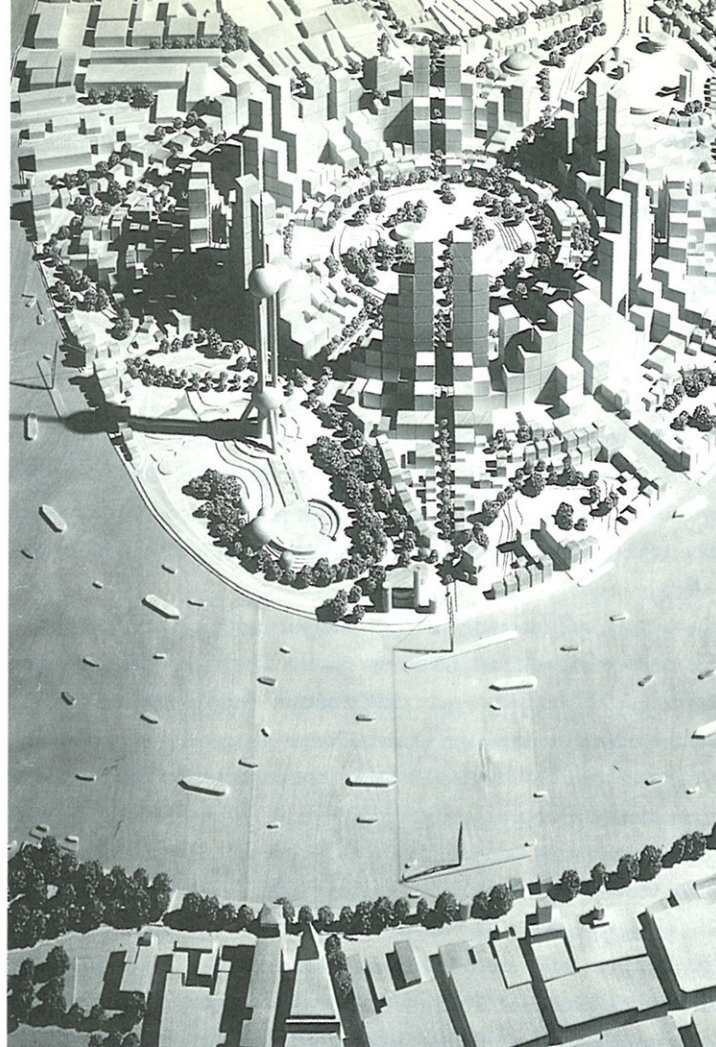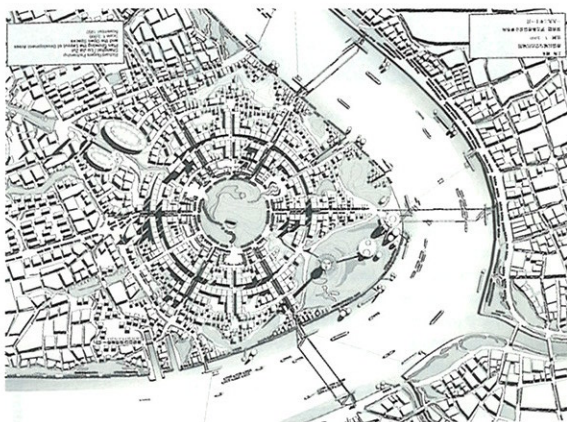
You have always had a major interest in the quality of public space, thus showing a strong sense of democracy. But what has public space to do with the public sphere in the electronic paradigm?

One of the phenomena of contemporary life is that the revolution in information technology has actually increased the need and usefulness of face to face contact. Today few developments, be they scientific, economic or cultural, are solitary activities. The city is still primarily the place where culture exists and by culture I mean the communication of people. The city is the glorification of all that is the public interaction: the street, the park, the square, the museums, theatres, cinemas.

The crisis of today is the lack of cohesion between the private and public realm, between the cultural needs of the citizen and the commercial criteria of the builders. Government has the crucial role in forging a meaningful relationship between these two forces.

Shanghai Lu Jia Zui, Masterplan for a New Commercial Centre, 1992
'Urban design is a dynamic rather than static process which focuses on establishing a robust infrastructure (open spaces, circulation systems, transportation network etc.), which forms a framework for design and construction. The plan for Lu Jia Zui is based on mixed rather than zoned use to create a 24-hour city. An integrated transportation strategy reduces dependence on car travel to a minimum, thus lowering energy consumption and pollution.'