

# PUBLIC SPACE AND THE ROLE OF THE ARCHITECT

London Modernist Case Study Briefing  
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## *THE ECONOMIST PLAZA*



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## PROJECT INFORMATION

Case Study: Economist Building, 25 St. James's Street, London

Dates: 1959-1964 (tender and build 1962 – 1964)

Architects: Alison and Peter Smithson  
Associate Architect: Maurice Bebb (salaried architect of Robert McApline & Sons Ltd)

Client: The Economist Newspaper Limited (Chairman Sir Geoffrey Crowther, joint-manager and lead on the project Peter Dallas-Smith), and its subsidiary, Ryder Street Properties Ltd

Contractors: Robert McAlpine & Sons Ltd, with consultant architect Maurice Bebb

Financing: Martins Bank Ltd. and the Legal and General Assurance Society Ltd.

Site area: Ground floor area: 21,183 sq. ft.  
Total Floor area: 133,440 sq. ft.

Tender price: £979,027 (£962,575 net cost excluding external works)

## SUMMARY

*The Economist* Buildings and Plaza comprise three blocks designed around a public space. The cluster extends backwards from St James's Street, and the site is bounded on three sides by Bury Street, St James's Street and Ryder Street, with the private club, Boodles, on the fourth side. The tower block, the tallest of the three, was designed to house *The Economist* magazine and *The Economist* Intelligence Unit, its economic research and forecasting department, started in the immediate post-war period. Adjacent to the office tower block, further along Bury Street, is a residential tower block. Finally, facing St James' Street is a much smaller block, originally designed to house Martins Bank.

The ensemble of buildings and plaza were designed by Peter and Alison Smithson with, in an advisory capacity, Maurice Bebb, an architect working for the development's contractor, Robert McAlpine & Sons. The project was initiated in the late 1950s as the circulation and staff of *The Economist* grew rapidly. Thanks to informal consultations with the London County Council (LCC) and other relevant planning authorities, *The Economist* Board were able to get a sense of what sort of development would be permissible. They were keen to set their project apart from the standard podium and slab office development, and knew they would have to appeal to the LCC with a design of ingenuity and quality, as planning policy was then promoting decentralised office accommodation. *The Economist* relied on expert advice not only from Maurice Bebb, but from the architect and planner Leslie Martin and the critic Robert Furneaux-Jordan, who both recommended the up-and-coming architectural partnership of Peter and Alison Smithson.

The Smithsons' first scheme for *The Economist* was submitted in February 1960 in a limited competition with one other firm, George, Trew and Dunn, and were formally appointed architects in November of the same year. Planning permission was granted in mid-1961 and construction began in 1962.

The Smithsons had gained increasing prominence in the architectural world, mainly through their polemic as part of Team 10, a break-away group of younger architects within CIAM<sup>1</sup>, and through their provocative espousal of the 'New Brutalism'. Aspiring to an architecture of association and complexity, *The Economist* project – for an enlightened, private client in a prestigious central location – afforded a rare opportunity to put theory into practice.

*The Economist* ensemble of buildings and plaza can be seen as grappling with new planning policy and building codes, which resulted was a typologically innovative composition in a dense urban setting. Plot ratio<sup>2</sup>, in particular, introduced by William Holford at the Ministry of Town and Country Planning, had implications for architects and the design of public space. *The Economist* ensemble was opened to a predominantly enthusiastic reception in 1964.

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<sup>1</sup> CIAM – Congrès International d'Architecture Moderne

<sup>2</sup> Plot ratio: 'The gross floor area of a building divided by the area of its site. The basic ratio permitted is frequently modified by providing a bonus for arcades, setbacks, plazas, and the incorporation of existing buildings of architectural significance'. *Illustrated Dictionary of Architecture* © 2012, McGraw-Hill Companies, Inc.

# BUILDING CHRONOLOGY

## Background

- 1945 Geoffrey Crowther was appointed editor and manager of *The Economist*.
- 1947 Town and Country Planning Act introduced 'plot ratios' into planning legislation.
- 1947 William Holford and Charles Holden's final 'Report for the City of London' is published in April, with daylighting codes and plot ratio recommendations. Adopted by the City of London, it was influential on the broader development of London.
- 1947 Technical Section of the Ministry of Town and Country Planning published 'Handbook for the Redevelopment of Central Areas'.
- 1947 CIAM 8 was held in Hoddesdon, England, on the theme of 'The Core of the City'.
- 1949 London County Council (LCC) Draft Development Plan introduced floor space index (an adaptation of plot ratios) and daylighting codes.
- 1951 Gilbert Layton retired as manager of *The Economist* and was replaced by joint-managers, Peter Dallas-Smith and Gerland Andrews.
- 1951 Administrative County of London Development Plan set out plot ratios for non-residential development.
- 1953 Peter and Alison Smithson published their essay 'Urban Re-identification'.
- 1956 Geoffrey Crowther stepped down from the editorship and was replaced by Donald Tyerman. At this point, *The Economist's* circulation reached 55,175 readers.
- 1957 In June, William Holford, Arthur Ling, and Peter Smithson reflected on the end of CIAM and possibilities of new development controls in an article 'Planning Today' published in *Architectural Design*.
- 1957 In July, the LCC published 'Control of Development in Central London', intended to reduce congestion and density in central areas, including the West End.
- 1957 *The Economist* Board considered options for office accommodation.

## Project Initiation

- 1959 *The Economist* Board considered the redevelopment of their Ryder Street premises.
- 1959 Maurice Bebb produced a report for *The Economist* on the 'Ryder Street Project', with two proposed layouts, both of which showed serious consideration given to precinctual space. On February 17, Board approval was given to Peter Dallas-Smith and Geoffrey Crowther to draw up a shortlist of 4 or 5 architects to design the scheme.
- 1959 In March, the idea of a larger scheme on a larger site bounded by St James, Ryder and Bury Streets was adopted. 16 practices were contacted to gauge interest in the scheme, with Robert Matthew a front-runner.
- 1959 In April, the Board appointed a Committee, comprising Lord Layton and Geoffrey Crowther, for the appointment of an architect. It was proposed that 4 British architects, 1 American and 1 European architect would be invited to compete. Robert Furneaux-Jordan, architecture correspondent for *The Observer*, helped to find the British and European Architects, and Leslie Martin was approached to act as assessor. The competitors were asked to consider a conventional frontage development, a tower/slab development or a combination of the two.
- 1959 The idea of a limited competition was dropped, and the list of architects narrowed down to the Smithsons and the firm George, Trew and Dunn. The firms were given access to the service and structural design teams at McAlpine & Sons, and permission to consult with staff at *The Economist*.
- 1960 In late January 1960, Martins Bank, neighbours to *The Economist* on Ryder Street, agreed to dispose of their lease, and occupy new premises as part of the development.
- 1960 The Smithsons produced their 'Report on the Proposed Design for The Economist Building, Ryder Street', with accompanying drawings and site photographs.
- 1960 In mid-March, George, Trew and Dunn were appointed for their 3-month stint.
- 1960 The LCC were growing more cautious about sanctioning risky developments after the controversy aroused by William Holford's plans for Piccadilly Circus, and raised serious reservations regarding George, Trew and Dunn's scheme.
- 1960 In July, the Smithsons' scheme won. Maurice Bebb produced a report on both schemes, and although 'fundamental mistakes' were numerous in both schemes, the Smithsons were asked to carry their scheme forward. Leslie Martin also reviewed both schemes and was enthusiastic about the Smithsons' scheme, as was J M Richards.

## Smithsons' formal appointment

- 1960 The Smithsons were formally appointed architects in mid-November. In late November, the LCC Town Planning Committee considered the scheme as an informal submission and indicated approval would be given if the height of the tower could be reduced by two storeys. The design was to cost £2/square foot more than a conventional office design.
- In December, the plans were considered by the Royal Fine Arts Commission Technical Committee. The Commission was unhappy with the treatment of Boodle's flank wall. In the same month, Westminster City Council approved the plans in principle.
- 1961 Revised plans and elevations were produced by the Smithsons. Hubert Bennett (Chief Architect to the LCC) reported on the Smithson's formal planning application. The tower had not been lowered, but the architects provided a justification for the additional height. By the time of Bennett's report, approvals had been received from all necessary bodies, and the LCC approved the scheme with certain recommendations about entrance and egress from the site, elevational details and materials, and car parking provision.
- 1961 The Smithsons visited the United States to look at recent trends in office building, in particular storage and filing arrangements.
- 1961 The Smithsons produced revisions to their treatment of the Boodles flank wall. John Summerson produced a written opinion on its excellence for consideration by planning authorities.
- 1961 In July, the LCC approved the Smithsons' scheme and a press conference was held to launch the project.
- 1962 The board of *The Economist* formally agreed to proceed with the building work; Martins Bank agreed to finance construction, and key agreements with tenants were finalised.

## Construction and Delivery

- 1962 Site clearance was initiated in September. In December, construction of Stage 1, the residential building, tower block and their basement levels, began.
- 1963 At the end of January, a further planning application was made to revise arrangements for car parking.
- 1964 In February, Maurice Bebb died. In July, a lease was agreed between the Crown Estate Commissioner and the Legal and General Assurance Society Ltd. on 5 July for 96 years (expiring on April 5 2061). By September arrangements for tower block tenancy were largely finalised. In October,

Martins Bank moved into their new accommodation. Issues with the public restaurant and flat lettings persisted.

1964 Building works completed were completed in November, and the complex was official opened on 10 December 1964.

### Alterations

1967 In November the public restaurant was firebombed, prompting the Smithsons to rearrange some of the basement accommodation.

1990 Skidmore Owings and Merrill renovations were completed by February, including altered Bury Street staircase and external signage.

## 2. POLICY AND IDEOLOGY

*This section provides an overview of the policy context and political ideologies that drove both the specific project and urban development in London more generally.*

### i. National

*The Economist* Plaza and Buildings should be understood in the context of post-war reconstruction in London, and the provisions of the Town and Country Planning Act (1947), which were just over a decade old when the newspaper started to consider redevelopment. The Act is considered a victory for Modernist precepts in reconstruction – eliminating, among other things, by-law development in London. The London Buildings Acts had, for example, limited street elevations to 80ft, with inhabited floors above that height set back, and with internal light wells as the main source of daylight and natural ventilation for workers and residents. The Town and Country Planning Act, on the other hand, was ‘permissive legislation’ and there were two crucial and inter-related innovations to building controls.<sup>3</sup>

The first was plot ratio, a measure intended to reduce density of development. The second was daylighting, to ensure better provision of natural light and ventilation. These left behind ‘the “programme” which had produced the traditional city.’<sup>4</sup> The planner-architect, William Holford, and the other progenitors of planning policy were clear that a ‘new type of street pattern’ would emerge and work most effectively with these new controls.<sup>5</sup>

One way of achieving better daylight provision was by reducing the density of development and avoiding perimeter blocks. Plot ratio and the floor space index were the tools for reducing building density. Plot ratio was an idea that had been circulating in building research since the 1930s. The Canadian architect, W. A. Allen, later head of the Architectural Association and the first architect in the Building Research Station, was interested in the relationship between daylighting and city form, and his concept of plot ratio was the result. Holford, who was largely responsible for drafting the Town and Country

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<sup>3</sup> J. Lubbock, *The Tyranny of Taste: The Politics of Architecture and Design in Britain, 1550 – 1960* (London, 1995), p.349

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, p.351.

<sup>5</sup> *Ibid.*, p.356.

Planning Act (1947), liked the idea: 'the basic concept was disarmingly simple, a single measure which expressed the relationship between the ground area of a site and the floor area of the buildings erected upon it.'<sup>6</sup> A plot ratio of 1:1 then, would mean building over the whole site at the same level, a plot ratio of, say, 3:1 would mean building only on one-third of the site, but with a building with three times the site area on that portion. The premise was that developers would be encouraged to build taller, but give over more area at ground level for other uses.

The implications for 'open space', or public space in built-up urban areas as a result of plot ratio have not been systematically explored, but it clearly crucial in the development of *The Economist* plaza, which can be understood in planning terms as a working out of new policy and building controls.

The national government was led by the Conservatives Harold Macmillan (1957-63) and Alec Douglas-Home (1963-64), and then by Harold Wilson, Labour (1964-70).

## ii. Municipal

The implications of this new planning legislation were clear: '[a]rmed with the powers of enforcing Plot Ratio controls and Daylighting Codes under a statutory development, any local planning authority who so desired now possessed the means for making it very difficult for an architect and developer to produce a building of the old type even if they wanted to.'<sup>7</sup> The London County Council (LCC), the planning authority in whose jurisdiction *The Economist* development fell, was one of local authorities most committed to applying these new tools.

As *The Architect and Building News* reported in 1957, one of the LCC's most pressing perceived challenges in the late 1950s was congestion in central London, not only traffic congestion but also the high density of the working and residential populations. Planning regulation was needed to regulate the situation. At the same time, the abandonment of building licenses by the Conservative government in 1954 'was the formal opening of the floodgates for commercial property development, one of the most profitable industrial booms ever known.'<sup>8</sup> Reporting on the new development controls, *The Architect and Building News* observed:

The LCC have posed these questions to summarize the problem in a nutshell: How and to what extent should future office development be restrained in central London? Where can those who need office buildings be encouraged to build them if not in the centre? How can the residential decline be arrested? How can the richness and variety of central London be preserved?<sup>9</sup>

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<sup>6</sup> See Lubbock, *The Tyranny of Taste*, pp.354-357, and G. E. Cherry and P. Leith, *Holford: A Study in Architecture, Planning and Civic Design* (London, 1986), pp.116-117.

<sup>7</sup> Lubbock, *The Tyranny of Taste*, p.357.

<sup>8</sup> O. Marriott, *The Property Boom* (London, 1967), p.1.

<sup>9</sup> 'New planning policy by London County Council', *The Architect and Building News* (July 25 1957), p.108.



Though there was a recognition that headquarters of certain enterprises such as *The Economist*, needed to be in central London, the LCC pursued a policy of encouraging decentralisation of industry and office workers, in particular of what they deemed non-essential 'routine and clerical work.'<sup>10</sup>

The plot ratio in London was set at 5:1 for non-residential development in the West End, and in May 1956, the Town Planning Committee issued guidelines on *High Buildings in London*: 'tall buildings freed up open space at ground level while offering good views and freedom from smog or noise at the upper levels, and that, carefully sited and well-designed they could enliven the London scene.'<sup>11</sup> The guidelines promised waivers for development if certain conditions were met, and the Royal Fine Art Commission made assurances that each case would be considered on its own merits.<sup>12</sup>

It is clear from the new metrics of plot ratio and daylighting that planning was increasingly technocratic. It also shows that while on the one hand there was a growing 'property boom' in non-residential development in central London, the LCC was simultaneously encouraging decentralisation, though willing to consider development on a case by case basis.

*The Economist*, and in particular Maurice Bebb, operated astutely within this context. The paper was an owner-occupier with a demonstrable need to be located in central London, and was alert to how to overcome certain hurdles: a building of high quality that used the new building controls in an inventive way was thought likely to gain planning permission.

The LCC from 1955 – 1965 was dominated by the Labour party. The first GLC government was elected in 1964, and was also Labour.

### iii. Local Authority

*The Economist* buildings sit within the City of Westminster. There was an election in 1959 and again in 1962, with clear Conservative majorities. In 1959, the wards of Westminster were redrawn. In 1964, along with the change from the LCC to the GLC, the boundaries of wards were changed again. The current City of Westminster has been amalgamated with the Metropolitan boroughs of Paddington and St. Marylebone.

Westminster City Council was less directly involved in *The Economist* development than the LCC. They were asked to consult on and approve the plans, and in general viewed the development favourably. They were also the authority responsible for the maintenance of public highways and in cooperation with the Metropolitan Police, for the security of the new plaza.

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<sup>10</sup> New planning policy by London County Council', *The Architect and Building News* (July 25 1957), p.108.

<sup>11</sup> E. Harwood, *Space, Hope and Brutalism: English Architecture, 1945-1975* (London, 2015), p.392.

<sup>12</sup> Ibid.

### 3. AGENTS

#### i. Client

##### ***The Economist***

*The Economist* newspaper was founded in 1843 by James Wilson. *The Economist's* historian, Ruth Dudley Edwards, writing in the paper's 150<sup>th</sup> year, summed up its historical mission: '*The Economist* was founded in 1843 to campaign for free trade, *laissez-faire* and individual responsibility through the medium of rational analysis applied to facts.'<sup>13</sup>

##### ***Geoffrey Crowther***

The post-war paper was dominated by Geoffrey Crowther, who had been editor since 1938. Under Crowther's leadership, the circulation of the paper had grown from around 10,000 in 1938 to just under 20,000 in the mid-1940s, and to 55,000 by 1956.<sup>14</sup> By the late 1940s, the business included 160 employees, many in the recently founded Economist Intelligence Unit, and had a turnover of half a million pounds.<sup>15</sup>

Crowther's position as a powerful but at times disengaged patron, made it possible to clear any organisational hurdles in the early stages of the building project. The Board Minutes from the late 1950s show Crowther's involvement in steering it, and with Lord Layton he formed the committee to select an architect for the project.<sup>16</sup>

It should be noted that in June 1961, Geoffrey Crowther was appointed Chair of a Steering Group appointed in connection with the Ministry of Transport's Study of the Long Term Problems of Traffic (what came to be known as the Buchanan Report, *Traffic in Towns*, 1963). The Crowther report, which preceded Buchanan's report in the unabridged publication, was intended to draw conclusions for public policy and to mediate advice to the Government. In spite of his perceived distance from the day-to-day management of *The Economist* building project, this shows that Crowther was engaged in debates around planning policy in urban reconstruction.<sup>17</sup>

##### ***Peter Dallas-Smith***

Peter Dallas-Smith was one of two joint managers who replaced Gilbert, later Lord Layton, when he retired from the company in 1957, and an astute manager. Responsibility for seeing through the new building to completion was given to Dallas-Smith by Geoffrey Crowther. The commission for *The Economist* building was part of the modernisation of management and business under the latter's tenure.<sup>18</sup>

##### ***Ryder Street Properties***

'Ryder Street Properties' was a subsidiary company formed in March 1959 by *The Economist* initially to hold leases for acquired properties on the site, and then to deal with

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<sup>13</sup> R. Dudley Edwards, *The Pursuit of Reason: The Economist 1843 – 1993* (London, 1993), p.xi.

<sup>14</sup> Circulation figures quoted in Dudley Edwards, *The Pursuit of Reason*, p.747, p.875.

<sup>15</sup> *Ibid.*, p.868.

<sup>16</sup> The Economist Ltd Secretary's Records, Board Minutes, April 28 1959.

<sup>17</sup> See The Ministry of Transport, *Traffic in Towns: A Study of the Long Term Problems of Traffic in Urban Areas* (London, 1963).

<sup>18</sup> For an account of Peter Dallas-Smith's tenure see Dudley Edwards, *The Pursuit of Reason*, pp.884 – 890.

the construction of the new premises. It remains a registered company of the Group to this day.

## ii. Architect

### **Peter and Alison Smithson**

Husband and wife partnership, Peter Smithson (1923 – 2003) and Alison Smithson (1928 – 1993) were the main architects for *The Economist* project. Having worked briefly for the Schools Division of the LCC Architects' Department, they had made their name with the design for Hunstanton School, won in competition in 1950. It was also in the early 1950s that the Smithsons defined themselves as 'New Brutalists', in contrast to the 'New Empiricism', a more vernacular Modernism heavily influenced by Scandinavian architecture of the same period.

The 'New Empiricism', near synonymous with the 'New Humanism' of the Festival of Britain's architecture, was 'condemned as a bad joke' by architects of the younger generation such as the Smithsons: 'For the first time in the history of Modernism in Britain, there was a battle of the styles within the movement...'<sup>19</sup>, a battle carried out largely in the pages of the architectural press.<sup>20</sup>

The Smithsons were also founding members of Team X, a break-away group from CIAM that questioned the tenets of pre-war Modernist architecture and planning. CIAM, established in 1928, had collapsed in 1959. Peter Smithson described the central tenet of CIAM as the 'Functional City' for living, working, recreation and transportation. A key principle for delivering the Functional City was rationally zoned layout as part of comprehensive redevelopment, which, post-war, was criticized, not only by Team X but by older members of CIAM as well. Peter Smithson observed that the Functional City 'seem[s] not to have been based on anything other than the minimum requirements of public health, and it would seem that they are more like filing cabinets that have been built by medieval techniques rather than places where people actually have to live.'<sup>21</sup>

The Smithsons had no formally established studio at the time of the commission for *The Economist* buildings, nor did they seek to establish one. During the mid to late 1950s, however, Peter Smithson was a fifth-year master at the Architectural Association, and picked two students to help with *The Economist* commission: Timothy Tinker, later designer of the Heygate Estate, and George Kasabov. In Smithson's own words, 'their contributions were considerable.'<sup>22</sup>

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<sup>19</sup> A. Powers, *Britain: Modern Architectures in History* (London, 2007), pp.89-90.

<sup>20</sup> For a succinct introduction to this issue see S. Parnell, 'AR's and AD's Editorial Policies: The Making of Modern Architecture in Britain', *The Journal of Architecture* vol.17 no.5 (2012), pp.763-775.

<sup>21</sup> Harvard University Graduate of Design, Smithsons Archive (hereafter, Smithsons Archive), E009 APS, 'Planning Today', *Architectural Design* (June, 1957).

<sup>22</sup> British Library, National Life Story Collection (NLSC), Architects' Lives: Pete Smithson (July – October 1997), no.11 (of 19), <http://sounds.bl.uk/Oral-history/Architects-Lives/021M-C0467X0024XX-0100V0>, accessed October 10 2016.

The Smithsons, though they had begun their careers like so many of their contemporaries in the new 'Bread and Butter' architecture of the public sector,<sup>23</sup> worked primarily in private practice. At the building's launch in December 1964, the Smithsons summed up their project:

The architects on their own part feel that they have managed to sustain their urban intentions through all the difficulties. *The Economist Building* is a didactic building, a dry building - deliberately so. And this seen from two hundred years' time may seem an error, but in our situation there is no other course but "to build" and "to demonstrate". Not only in what we have done, but in what we have not done lies the lesson.<sup>24</sup>

### **Maurice Bebb**

Maurice Bebb (1910–1964) was a critical figure in determining the layout of *The Economist Buildings* and gaining necessary planning permissions, mediating between senior staff in *The Economist*, the Smithsons and the various teams at Sir Robert McAlpine & Sons.

Bebb had joined the staff of McAlpine in 1940, working on building contracts for the Admiralty and Air Ministry, and designing power stations at Bradwell, Dungeness and Oldbury. Bebb also designed the McAlpine headquarters in Hemel Hempstead, the first office block to be completed in the post-war New Town.<sup>25</sup> The details of Bebb's role in *The Economist* are not entirely clear from surviving records. Though obviously in close contact with staff at Sir Robert McAlpine & Sons, he seems to have been working as a consultant in an almost private capacity at times.<sup>26</sup>

Bebb had initially been asked to produce a scheme for the whole site. Feeling, however, that it was of too great importance to be left solely up to him, he encouraged an architectural competition. Nevertheless, his experience, compared with the relatively green Smithsons, was valued and he was made associate architect on the project. His contribution was repeatedly and fulsomely acknowledged by the Smithsons, including at the building's inauguration: 'The advice we received, particularly in the early stages of the project, from the late Maurice Bebb, our associate architect, was of crucial importance.'<sup>27</sup>

### **iii. Pivotal relationships**

#### ***Dallas-Smith and the Smithsons***

In the article 'A new home for The Economist' published by *The Economist* on 15 July 1961, the clients suggested that the reasons for hiring the Smithsons extended beyond their architectural 'talent' or 'vision'. First, they 'desired, other things being equal, to give an opportunity to a British architect, who has not yet had the chance to become widely known.' Secondly, they wanted to avoid the complexities and unadventurousness of the typical large architectural firm in Britain at that time: 'We thought we stood a better chance of getting a

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<sup>23</sup> See J. Summerson, 'Bread and Butter Architecture', *Horizon* (October, 1942), pp.233-243.

<sup>24</sup> Smithsons Archive, BA085 APS, 'Statement by the Architects for the Official Opening' (September 1964).

<sup>25</sup> RIBA, British Architectural Library (BAL), Maurice Bebb Biographical File.

<sup>26</sup> For instance, much, but by no means all, of Bebb's correspondence is typed on letter headed paper without any mention of McAlpine & Sons (though with the same addresses).

<sup>27</sup> Smithsons Archive, BA085 APS, 'Statement by the Architects for the Official Opening'.

building thought out afresh from first principles by going to an architect who represented himself and not a large office.<sup>28</sup>

Later in his career, Peter Smithson discussed the particular benefits of an “enlightened” patron of architecture, though *The Economist* wrote in the 1960s that ‘[t]his was not conceived of simply as a piece of artistic patronage.’<sup>29</sup>

### ***Dallas-Smith and Bebb***

Dallas-Smith’s relationship with Maurice Bebb was also of crucial importance. Bebb’s extensive correspondence files show regular and genial correspondence between the two, even when there were significant barriers to driving forward the project. Bebb was effectively Dallas-Smith’s agent with the planning authorities, the contractors and the structural engineers.

### ***The Smithsons and Bebb***

Bebb was asked to provide criticism and oversight of the Smithson’s work. The relationship between Bebb and the Smithsons, until his death in February 1964, was an important one. The Smithsons felt that Bebb guided the design and offered useful critical comment. He also, to some extent, protected the Smithsons from some of the administrative burden involved in such a complex project.

The relationship was felt to be pivotal by the client. Confirming the Smithson’s appointment in 1960, Peter Dallas-Smith suggested ‘that in the event of any disagreement arising between us from any cause, both sides should agree to be guided in the first instance by the advice of Mr Maurice H. J. Bebb, whom we have as you know, appointed as Associate Architect for the development.’<sup>30</sup>

## **4. BRIEF**

### **i. Basic brief from initial development**

*The Economist’s* brief was for purpose-built accommodation for its expanding workforce and services. Its previous premises on Bouverie Street had been bombed out in 1941, and by 1960, staff were split over five premises.<sup>31</sup> Despite opposition from other Board members, Geoffrey Crowther acquired the lease of a five-storey block of 19th century flats, St James’s Palace Chambers, 22 Ryder Street in 1947.<sup>32</sup> Though it met the paper’s immediate needs, ‘towards the end of the 1950s, with the continued expansion of both the paper and The Economist Intelligence Unit (EIU), redevelopment came under discussion.’<sup>33</sup> Lord Bracken,

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<sup>28</sup> ‘A New Home for The Economist’, *The Economist* (July 15 1961), p.224.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>30</sup> Smithsons Archive, BC015 APS, letter from Peter Dallas-Smith to the Smithsons (November 17 1960), f.30.

<sup>31</sup> Dudley Edwards, *The Pursuit of Reason*, p.888.

<sup>32</sup> ‘Ryder Street’, in F. H. W Sheppard (ed.), *Survey of London: Volumes 29 and 30, St James Westminster, Part 1* (London, 1960), pp. 317-321. *British History Online* <http://www.british-history.ac.uk/survey-london/vols29-30/pt1/pp317-321>, accessed August 16 2016.

<sup>33</sup> *Ibid.*

*The Economist's* publisher, assessed sites in Holborn and Westminster, consulting informally with the LCC and Westminster City Council<sup>34</sup>, but the St James area was felt to serve the needs of *The Economist* best because of its proximity to 'Ministries, Clubland and Restaurants'.<sup>35</sup> By January 1959, the possibility of acquiring adjoining leases to the Ryder Street premises seemed possible either for occupancy or redevelopment.

The new offices had two further requirements:

1. that McAlpine's were used as contractors, because of an existing personal relationship between Crowther and Edwin McAlpine;
2. that Crowther had a private flat in the new premises.

Between February and November 1959, before the involvement of the Smithsons, brief development was led by Maurice Bebb and his colleagues, with Peter Dallas-Smith and Geoffrey Crowther closely involved. Bebb initiated a number of conversations with the relevant planning authorities, in particular the LCC, to assess how likely they were to support an application for commercial office development in central London. By February 1959, a number of options were on the table: two schemes proposed building over the whole site to height limits and setbacks, and a third suggested a tower block and a second two-storey building for a bank on the corner of St James Street, with the ground floor under the tower left open for a car park and garden. An alternative to this latter scheme would be to carry the first floor over the whole site to act 'as a unifying "base" to both Tower and Bank Block'. At approximately the same time, Geoffrey Crowther suggested that a building with a street frontage on St. James of the same height of Boodle's could be built, and the tower block moved 'from its central position in Ryder Street towards the corner of Bury Street, and its height...curtailed in the re-allocation of plot ratio.' This would maintain the St James Street façade and allow for a more easily phased construction.<sup>36</sup>

A memo signed by Bebb from March of 1959 is especially revealing of the client's intentions and the early shaping of the brief. First, quality: 'Sir Geoffrey Crowther, feeling that he would like a building of outstanding architectural quality, does not wish to upset the aesthetic opinion of the average individual. On the other hand he is not prepared to play the building down to suit "the common man."' Second, context: there was a concern for a design that was respectful to the existing urban setting, while asserting the modernity and quality of the new development: 'This will be a prestige building and whoever designs it will go down in posterity as being able to produce something different from the normal office planner's idea of contemporary re-building.'<sup>37</sup>

The idea of a precinct or public space leading from St. James Street was also under consideration. At this time 16 architects had been contacted about potential involvement in the project, and Robert Matthew was considered one of the leading competitors. Robert

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<sup>34</sup> The Economist Ltd Secretary's Records, Board Minutes, January 21 1958.

<sup>35</sup> The Economist Ltd Secretary's Records, Board Minutes, December 31 1957.

<sup>36</sup> Sir Robert McAlpine & Sons, Company Records, 134/1 N (microfilm) Maurice Bebb Correspondence (11.2.59-22.4.64), Memorandum entitled 'The Economist: 22 Ryder Street – New Building' (February 12 1959), by Bebb and 'RB'.

<sup>37</sup> Sir Robert McAlpine & Sons, Company Records, 134/1 N (microfilm) Maurice Bebb Correspondence (11.2.59-22.4.64), Memorandum entitled 'The Economist: 22 Ryder Street, London, W.1' (March 23 1959), signed by Bebb and 'AMC'.

Furneaux-Jordan, *The Observer* architecture critic, was also being informally consulted at this stage.<sup>38</sup> By late April, however, the idea of a limited competition had taken hold, and the Board nominated Geoffrey Crowther and Lord Layton as a selection committee, with Dallas-Smith and Bebb as advisors.

Bebb's team were advocating a point block sitting on a 20ft podium (at its maximum height on Ryder Street), and Crowther's enthusiasm for a low façade on St James's Street was now dismissed: 'the continued retention of the cliff-face conceived by our forebears means the retention of the cavernous gloom it entails – we were trying to escape into a Brave New St. James's World.'<sup>39</sup> It was at this time decided by the Board, based on Crowther's and Layton's recommendation, to hold a small international competition with four British participants, one American, and one European. Leslie Martin was approached to be assessor; Furneaux-Jordan agreed to help identify the British and American competitors, and Bebb was tasked with seeking outline approval for the development from the London County Council.<sup>40</sup>

Thus, before the appointment of any architect, the client had settled on the idea of a lower block or blocks in harmony and scale with St James Street, with a tower block further back on the site. The provision of some kind of forecourt or appropriate setting to the tower block was also under discussion from 1959. This much bolder approach to the site required the cooperation of existing tenants and leaseholders, which was coordinated by Dallas-Smith. As Tim Tinker, working for the Smithsons, said in *Banen Und Wohnen* in 1964: 'The client's brief was simple but public spirited'. Helped and guided by Bebb and informal discussions with officers of the LCC, *The Economist* had devoted substantial efforts to defining what sort of building they wanted and the basic disposition of elements on site (including multiple blocks on a raised podium), before the engagement of the lead architects, and planning considerations, in particular an inventive and non-commercially driven attitude to plot ratio, were given much attention.

The Smithsons submitted their scheme in February, after which George, Trew and Dunn were appointed on the same basis, submitting in June. By that time, Dallas-Smith was increasingly anxious to drive the project forward – LCC restrictions on office development were tightening, and despite the fact that the Smithson's scheme was more expensive, by July it 'was obvious that the Smithsons's scheme was far in advance of that of George, Trew and Dunn's submission, and had been given far more thought.'<sup>41</sup>

Peter Smithson would later recall that *The Economist* was highly effective in using its

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<sup>38</sup> Furneaux-Jordan's role in the selection of architects for the scheme has been recorded anecdotally elsewhere. There is, however, in the various written archives relating to the building, no direct evidence of his recommendation of Churchill College, Cambridge, competitors. This may have been advice for the selection of the two British architects for the invited competition planned later on in 1959.

<sup>39</sup> Sir Robert McAlpine & Sons, Company Records (hereafter, McAlpine Records) 134/1 N (microfilm) Maurice Bebb Correspondence (11.2.59-22.4.64), Memorandum entitled 'Economist Summary' (May 6 1959), signed 'JT' (possibly John Templer).

<sup>40</sup> The Economist Ltd Secretary's Records, Board Minutes, May 19 1959.

<sup>41</sup> McAlpine Records, 134/1 N, Maurice Bebb Correspondence (11.2.59-22.4.64), letter from Maurice Bebb to Geoffrey Crowther (July 15 1960).

networks and influence to lay the ground for the development.<sup>42</sup> For instance, the Royal Fine Arts Commission, approved the scheme with only a few minor amendments and suggestions.

### Further brief development

In 1961, *The Economist* produced a pamphlet to advertise their new development in London, in which they retrospectively listed three main principles that guided the brief. As well as building new offices for themselves, they also wished to make ‘use of the site to effective economic advantage’ and provide ‘a worthy and novel contribution to the civic architecture of London and the town landscape of St. James’s’. They noted that ‘it will not be long before the double advantage of space at ground level, and of light up above, produce a complete revolution in the accepted canons of British urban architecture.’<sup>43</sup>

There are two important assumptions inherent in these principles. The first is that by ‘making use of the site to the best economic advantage’, *The Economist* was pursuing a development that was economically sustainable in the long-term, rather than maximising accommodation on the site. The second was that some provision of high-quality public space was part of elevating the brief from a speculative office development to a ‘contribution to the civic architecture of London.’

## 5. DESIGN

### i. Design intentions

‘Design Intentions’ make up a complex picture with the Smithsons because they wrote and theorised much, in particular during the dry decade following their precocious success at the Hunstanton School.

Many of the Smithsons’ articles and statements in the architectural press and book publications at this time can offer some insight into the design – theory and writing allowed for the gestation of ideas. They are at times vague and even contradictory, and intended to be polemical.

The Smithsons’ journalism for *Architectural Design* (AD), a platform available because of their close relationship with its editor, Theo Crosby, is crucial in understanding the design intentions for *The Economist* project.<sup>44</sup> Crosby, who had met and befriended Peter Smithson in 1948, joined the editorial team of AD in 1953. During the period of his tenure and the

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<sup>42</sup> Smithson would recall: ‘They were using all their inside lines which I would really know nothing about. It was all done in a good old way by conversation... That worked fantastically to our advantage, it was luck that they had the power through friendships to manipulate not in a bad way, but just to ease the administration of land lease exchanges and so on.’ See The Economist Ltd Company Records, Transcripts Box 10, interview of Peter Smithson by Ruth Dudley Edwards (June 20 1991), p.3.

<sup>43</sup> Smithsons Archive, BA083 APS, Client Press Release.

<sup>44</sup> For a fuller historical account, see Parnell, ‘AR’s and AD’s post-war editorial policies: the making of modern architecture in Britain’, pp.763-775.



influential Monica Pidgeon's, the magazine went from being 'an obscure technical trade rag to leading avant-garde architectural 'little' magazine.'<sup>45</sup> Crosby gave the Smithsons plenty of opportunity to disseminate their ideas about the 'New Brutalism,' a phrase which first appeared in December 1953.<sup>46</sup> The intellectual basis for Brutalism was also being set out in the *Architectural Review* (AR) by the architectural historian and critic Reyner Banham: 'Banham at the AR and Crosby at AD sat either side of the Smithsons.'<sup>47</sup>

The early Smithsons texts are crucial to understanding their approach to design:

- *Ordinariness and Light: Urban Theories 1952–1960* (1970) gives a good sense of their early thought in the lead up to *The Economist* commission. It is an anthology of texts and drawings, including early pieces for *Architectural Design* and 'Urban Re-identification',<sup>48</sup>
- *Urban Structuring: Studies of Alison and Peter Smithson* (1967), parts previously published as 'UPPERCASE' in 1960, and with material also from AD,<sup>49</sup>
- *Without Rhetoric: An Architectural Aesthetic, 1955 – 1972* (1973).<sup>50</sup>

These all have in common ideas growing out of post-war internal Modernist architectural debates, and responses to wider reforms of planning and development. Those aspects of their writings most salient not only for *The Economist* buildings but more importantly the public space between them are:

### **Mobility**

The Smithsons were interested specifically in the urban development of London. They entered a competition entitled 'New Ways for London' organised by the Roads Campaign Council, and assessed by Holford and Colin Buchanan among others. The competition was for a London Roads study that could lead to a 'long term plan of highway development in the London area.'<sup>51</sup>

The Smithsons' entry had two basic principles:

1. that 'flow from every point to every other point...(is) best served by a net'
2. that a comprehensive system of urban motorways necessary to connect a scattered city<sup>52</sup>

Though both of these are principles for the development of the wider city, they are useful to contextualise the design intentions for *The Economist* because they show how the Smithsons felt the individual unit could fit into a larger conception of the remade city, and that connection was of central importance in a scattered city.

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<sup>45</sup> Ibid., p.765.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid., p.766.

<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

<sup>48</sup> A. Smithson and P. Smithson, *Ordinariness and Light: Urban Theories 1952 – 1960* (London, 1970).

<sup>49</sup> A. Smithson and P. Smithson, *Urban Structuring: Studies of Alison and Peter Smithson* (London, 1967).

<sup>50</sup> A. Smithson and P. Smithson, *Without Rhetoric: An Architectural Aesthetic, 1955 – 1972* (London, 1973).

<sup>51</sup> Smithsons Archive, BB025 APS, 'New Ways for London: A London Traffic Competition', Roads for Britain, competition conditions.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid., 'New Ways for London', Smithsons' entry.

### **Cluster and Scatter in the City**

'Cluster' was a phrase introduced to Modernist discourse at CIAM 10 in 1965, a word chosen as 'a sort of clearing-house term.'<sup>53</sup>

The concept of cluster was to sit in opposition to rationalist, functionalist design, though, the Smithsons were keen to emphasise, born of the same fundamental principles. It was part of their desire for 'something more complex, and less geometric. We are more concerned with "flow" than with "measure."<sup>54</sup>

Their article 'Cluster City – a new shape for the community', which was published in *The Architectural Review* in November 1957, gave the example of rebuilding three houses in an existing street: 'The houses on each side of the street form with the street itself a distinct urban idea; the three new houses should not just live off this old idea, but should give an indication, a sign, of a new sort of community structure. But this cannot be done unless the architect has a more or less completely conceived general idea or ideal towards which all this work is aimed'.<sup>55</sup> This task is part of 'finding a way (while still responding to the street idea) to chop through the old building face and build up a cluster complex in depth – a suggestion, a sign, of the new community structure.'<sup>56</sup> 'A cluster complex in depth', at this micro scale, is a good way of describing the morphology of *The Economist* buildings and plaza.

### **Association**

'Association' was Team X term introduced by Alison Smithson to describe the importance of place-making and historical connection: 'Any new development exists in a complex of old ones. It must revalidate, by modifying them, the forms of the old communities.'<sup>57</sup> And again: 'Form is generated, in part by response to existing form, and in part by response to the Zeitgeist, which cannot be pre-planned. Every addition to a community, every change of circumstance, will generate a new response.'<sup>58</sup>

The Economist plaza and buildings were derided and celebrated in equal measure by opponents and adherents of 'Townscape' respectively. Writing in the *Architectural Review*, Ivor De Wolfe (nom de plume of the *Review's* proprietor-editor, Hubert de Cronin Hastings) defined Townscape as 'town planning as a visual art, a contemporary extension of the English Picturesque school of landscape design'. It was seen as a way of introducing variety and cultural identity into a universal and rational Modernism. Gordon Cullen's *Townscape Casebook* and *The Concise Townscape* were the touchstones of the movement, with his drawings of English vernacular examples heavily featured in the *Architectural Review*. Recent commentators have noted the Townscape elements of Smithson's designs: Sitte's 'townscape ideas the Smithsons contested yet which The Economist group exemplified; they acknowledged instead Louis Kahn's pedestrian routes for Philadelphia.'<sup>59</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> Smithson and Smithson, *Urban Structuring*, p.33.

<sup>54</sup> Smithson and Smithson, *Ordinariness and Light*, p.130.

<sup>55</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>56</sup> *Ibid.*, p.131.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid.*, p.126.

<sup>58</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>59</sup> E. Harwood, *Space, Hope and Brutalism*, p.397.

### ***Open Space and the 'Pavilion and the Route'***

Part of the Smithsons' strategy for composition concerned the formal organisation of objects in space. In their article 'The pavilion and the route' published in *Architectural Design* in March 1965, they illustrated many of their concerns with megastructures, and their specific location in specific cities. Their 'principal objective was to achieve a "half open and half closed" space system such as would in a practical way free the urban structure and, in a symbolic way, illuminate our common situation.'<sup>60</sup>

The provision of open space in the city was about creating community and social spaces or foci. Community facilities were about the 'convenience they offer to a citizen...Community facilities are the raw material for the building of tangible stopping-places, for places where things can happen. Can be seen to be about to happen. Can cause things to happen?'<sup>61</sup> One might view *The Economist* plaza as such a 'social space.'<sup>62</sup>

## **ii. Design development**

### ***First design scheme***

The Smithsons submitted their first scheme for *The Economist* after a three-month design period initiated in November 1959, before the rival firm, George, Trew and Dunn carried out the same exercise between March and June 1960. Along with plans, the Smithsons produced perspective drawings, site photographs and an accompanying report for their scheme in February 1960.<sup>63</sup> This was divided into three fundamental parts:

- 1) the building in its context
- 2) the effect of the building on pedestrian and vehicular traffic in surrounding streets
- 3) the effectiveness and liveability of the workspace

With regard to context, the Smithson's wanted '...to give continuing life to St. James Street – as a space and as an idea – whilst at the same time inventing some sort of space arrangement which could build up into a twentieth century pattern as elegant and as forceful as St James Street itself.'<sup>64</sup>

Part of their attempt to do this was to conceive of the smaller Bank building on the St. James' Street side as one of a 'quarto of buildings' along with Boodle's, Brook's and another Georgian bank building opposite. Together these would 'define a special piece of space, at about the original eighteenth century scale, within the general space of St. James Street.'<sup>65</sup> This special piece of space would form part of the sequence through to *The Economist* plaza.

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<sup>60</sup> A. Smithson and P. Smithson, 'The Pavilion and the Route', *Architectural Design* (March 1965), p.143.

<sup>61</sup> Smithson and Smithson, *Ordinariness and Light*, p.182

<sup>62</sup> *Ibid.*, p.185.

<sup>63</sup> The report can be found in LMA, Royal Fine Arts Commission (RFAC) Minutes and Correspondence, LMA/4625/D/15/059, 'Report on the Proposed Design for The Economist Building, Ryder Street' (February 1960). It was intended that a model prepared from the drawings would be available for the final decision, see McAlpine Records, 134/1 N, Maurice Bebb Correspondence (11.2.59-22.4.64), letter from Peter Smithson to Peter Dallas-Smith (February 23 1960).

<sup>64</sup> LMA, 'Report on the Proposed Design for The Economist Building, Ryder Street', p.1.

<sup>65</sup> *Ibid.*

The conception of the *quarto* was dropped as the designs underwent further development, but the notion of linked special spaces was carried through. The raised banking hall on the *piano nobile* of the St. James building was, for instance, to be 'conceived spatially as an extension of the Plaza,' both with travertine finishes.<sup>66</sup>

The creation of public space would be the direct result of the Smithsons' careful consideration of the effect of their buildings on pedestrian and vehicular movement:

The cross-fall on the site gives the opportunity for creating a pedestrian Plaza which ... enables cars and service trolleys to enter under the Plaza from Ryder Street, thus ensuring a minimum of conflict between pedestrian and vehicular needs.<sup>67</sup>

The Plaza, they went on, 'would be an enjoyable public space, as well as providing a setting for the Tower' inevitably becoming 'a rendezvous and tourist spot.'<sup>68</sup> Moreover it would form 'the first part of a more general system of pedestrian ways at various levels which should be an essential part of London.'<sup>69</sup>

The basic programme of *The Economist* development is three towers and additional circulation space, and the initial competition designs were assessed by Maurice Bebb, who lamented in a letter to Edwin McAlpine, that 'two top-rate Architects [the Smithsons and George, Trew and Dunn] should produce schemes with so many fundamental mistakes as those outlined in my report... no wonder the T. P. Bennetts get the majority of the work.'<sup>70</sup> The criticisms levelled by Bebb and the clients focused on the alteration of the shape of The Economist Tower and residential block and, importantly for the plaza and public space, and urged reconsideration of:

- the height of the podium
- car lifts and revised parking
- commercial units – 'provision for semi-basement shops on the corner and frontages of Ryder Street and Bury Street'<sup>71</sup>

Concerns were also raised about 'the ugly flank of Boodles' which, because of the central position of public space needed to be brought incorporated into the rest of the development.<sup>72</sup>

The client also had some concerns about the articulation of the scheme at this time, raised at a meeting with the architects in August 1960:

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<sup>66</sup> LMA, 'Report on the Proposed Design for The Economist Building, Ryder Street', p.4.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid.*, p.2.

<sup>68</sup> *Ibid.*, p.3.

<sup>69</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>70</sup> McAlpine Records, 134/1 N, Maurice Bebb Correspondence (11.2.59-22.4.64), letter from Maurice Bebb to Edwin McAlpine (July 1960).

<sup>71</sup> Smithsons Archive, BC015 APS, letter from Dallas-Smith to Bebb and the Smithsons (August 5 1960), f.8.

<sup>72</sup> See LMA, RFAC Minutes and Correspondence, LMA/4625/D/15/059, correspondence around late 1960 and early 1961. The specific reference to the 'ugly flank' is Bebb's phrase, found in Smithsons Archive, BC015 APS, Maurice Bebb's criticism of the Smithson scheme (August 1960), f.8(b).

One also has to consider whether the planning is not rather strained. Is it not the impression that had the Site been twice the size that the free area would be more logical? Is it in fact a group of three buildings rising from an open piazza, or is it indeed, a complicated system of building, which would leave an uninteresting, draughty, pedestrian concourse?<sup>73</sup>

It was decided that access from Ryder Street to the plaza would be preferable and incorporated into a revised scheme.

### **Second design scheme – ‘Project 2’**

A number of alterations were therefore made for a second scheme submitted in September. This altered scheme was known as ‘Project 2’, and formed the basis of the submission to the various planning authorities for approval.

In ‘Project 2’, amendments were made to the tower, which was slimmed down by 4 feet and moved 3.6ft behind the Bury Street building line. For the podium, where there had been two basement levels for car parking and a complicated system of operated lifts for cars, there was now one basement level for car parking on a flat floor, with additional waiting spaces at street level. The simplification of the basement arrangement allowed for Boodle’s ladies’ facilities to be enlarged and given natural light and ventilation. Three shops were also incorporated into the Ryder Street frontage.

This scheme was informally discussed with the LCC in late August of 1960, with Bebb keen to ensure that ‘the more important points’ of the scheme were favourable to the Council, namely, ‘light angles, tower height, goods access, means of escape and Police comment on the open piazza.’<sup>74</sup> Drawings from September 1960 of the podium level plan show a loggia bar at Boodle’s without the bay later added for what became the card room, and a double revolving door into the lobby from the Boodle’s side of *The Economist* Tower, which would have animated the plaza to a greater extent. By January 1961, the Bury Street entrance to the plaza had been replaced with a double staircase.

### **Formal submission to planning authorities**

Bebb wrote to the Smithsons confirming that, subject to approval of the designs by the Royal Fine Arts Commission, ‘it will be necessary to appoint you as the architects for this project.’<sup>75</sup> Bebb had also been asked by the Board to confirm the ability of the practice to carry out the scheme. He in turn asked the architects to ‘jot down your programme’, including a list of drawings to be produced but also some indication of the design and clerical staff.<sup>76</sup> He also reaffirmed his willingness to help, offering ‘full use of the structural and mechanical services division of McAlpine.’<sup>77</sup> On 17 November 1960, *The Economist* confirmed their wishes to appoint the Smithsons as Architect.

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<sup>73</sup> Smithsons Archive, BC015 APS, Maurice Bebb’s criticism of the Smithson scheme (August 1960), f.8(b).

<sup>74</sup> Westminster City Council, Planning Department Records, TP/2212, 9153, 1664, Bebb to Frank West (Deputy Architect, LCC), (August 31 1960).

<sup>75</sup> Smithsons Archive, BC015 APS, Bebb to Peter Smithson (September 21 1960).

<sup>76</sup> Ibid.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid.

The scheme was approved in late February. The tower block had not been lowered, and the Smithsons submitted a written justification, arguing that the height had been carefully chosen and that the deliberately increased area for office use in the scheme brought about by the additional height was to allow a single organisation to be sited in one premises 'precisely tailored to their requirements.'<sup>78</sup> Furthermore, it allowed the client to 'fulfil their sense of civic obligation. This has led to a solution with a greater proportion of circulation than in a typical developer's peripheral solution.'<sup>79</sup> This is noteworthy because this 'circulation' space is presented as providing added value; there was a demonstrable interest by the Council in the design, maintenance and use of the public space, despite it being in private ownership.

In general the unorthodox approach to the problem of redeveloping such a restricted central area site by means of three carefully related towers standing on an open raised piazza is considered to have much to recommend it...The provision of the raised piazza which has been kept as open as possible at ground floor level and which, it is understood, will be open to the public, would provide a satisfactory setting for the tall block.<sup>80</sup>

Planning approval was granted, on the basis that car parking, loading and unloading facilities were revised, and detailed elevations and alterations to the treatment of the flank wall, along with considerations of materials, all to the Council's satisfaction. Final planning consent was given in June 1961.

### **c) Design as Built**

Revisions to the flank wall were made by May 1961, endorsed by the Royal Fine Art Commission and by a special memorandum authored by one of the Commissioners, John Summerson, an expert on the architecture of Georgian London. A further revision of the flank wall to Boodles was made in August of 1963 at the suggestion of Smithsons' employee, Tim Tinker.

On the St James's Street entrance, 'the ramp was a belated condition of local fire regulations.'<sup>81</sup> Levels on the plaza and steps were revised in January 1962. In November 1962 finishes to the balustrade at Bury Street and plaza were revised, and a further general revision of the steps and insertion of the ramp in 1963.

More substantial revisions to the arrangements for car parking were also made in early 1963 in order to ensure that 'all loading and servicing will take place within the site and that circulation in and out of the site will conform to the one way working of Ryder Street.' The Smithsons rearranged the basement and subbasement levels, dispensing with car lifts and with additional car parking spaces at the side of the access ramp down to the main car park. There were also proposed revisions to the restaurant, which directly affected the public space: a firm of restaurateurs wanted to open *The Economist's* canteen as a public

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<sup>78</sup> Westminster City Council, Planning Department Records, TP/2212, 9153, 1664, LCC Town Planning Committee Report by Architect (Hubert Bennett) (February 27 1961).

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.

<sup>80</sup> Ibid.

<sup>81</sup> Harwood, *Space, Hope and Brutalism*, p.396.

restaurant in the evening. The Smithsons sought planning permission for a public entrance on the corner of Ryder Street and Bury Street, which would be open after office hours.<sup>82</sup>

Again, an opportunity to animate the plaza was lost, but emptiness was presented as a virtue. When in November 1964, the Smithsons offered Dallas-Smith advice on sculpture for the plaza - a 7ft high bronze sculpture by Giacometti - the Smithsons explained the choice by saying: 'Giacometti himself might be interested in it as his spaces always have been conceived in terms of movements on empty piazza-like spaces.'<sup>83</sup>

### **Post-construction alterations**

*The Economist* buildings and plaza have been owned and occupied by *The Economist* Group continuously since the mid-1960s, though they will vacate the site at the end of their lease in 2017. Naturally, a number of alterations and renovations have been made over the course of its life, in particular in the public space, where public art and events have occasionally been hosted. The most substantial changes are highlighted here.

In the 1980s, the Smithsons redesigned the foyer of *The Economist* tower to improve security.<sup>84</sup> By the mid-1980s, *The Economist* announced plans to add two floors to the building to finance a large scale refurbishment: 'The ensuing furore led to the building being listed Grade II, and the two additional floors were not constructed.'<sup>85</sup> In late 1988, a design team led by Robert Turner from Skidmore Owings and Merrill (SOM) was asked by *The Economist* to refurbish the office interiors and rework aspects of the entrances to the public space, also adding clearer signage for the occupants. Max Gordon, architect and brother of *The Economist's* then Chief Executive, David Gordon, served as the client's design consultant. The Smithsons, Astragal rumoured in *The Architects' Journal*, had been 'given the opportunity to act as consultants for the new work, but declined because they were unhappy that the building was being altered.'<sup>86</sup> On Bury Street, the double staircase was replaced with a single flight of stairs. Stephen Greenberg, writing in November 1990, praised the alteration, which 'enlivened' the route through the plaza.

The importance of enlivening (and programming) the public space, was by the late 1980s and early 1990s of growing interest, and Greenberg's analysis is revealing:

The whole point of this *partie*, with its small spaces, relatively tall buildings, and a route between them, is for it to be enlivened, and therefore it needs easy access – although Smithson now claims that this was not important at the time.<sup>87</sup>

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<sup>82</sup> There was a restaurant, the Omelette Pan, situated in the basement which was burnt out by fire-bomb in November 1967. See 'Scotland Yard investigating restaurant fire', *The Guardian* (November 15 1967), p.5.

<sup>83</sup> Smithsons Archive, BC015 APS, Peter Smithson to Peter Dallas-Smith (November 18 1964), f.44. The letter includes a note that 'Advice Not Taken', signed with Smithson's initials and dated January 1983.

<sup>84</sup> P. Murray, 'Respect for sixties survivor', *Blueprint*, vol.64 (February 1990), p.16.

<sup>85</sup> *Ibid.*

<sup>86</sup> Astragal, *Architects Journal*, (August 23 and 30 1989), p.7.

<sup>87</sup> S. Greenberg, 'Building Revisit - The Economist Building: 2, Modernism in the Making', *The Architects' Journal* (November 28 1990), p.53. See also *The Architects' Journal* (November 21 1990), pp.53-58 for the second part of Greenberg's analysis.

## 6. MATERIALS/ CONSTRUCTION

All buildings have a similar reinforced concrete structure of flat slabs between T-shaped columns, which enlarge as they come down the building, and the walls of the core. The external skin of the building is of Portland Stone, Roach Bed, with fixed plate glass windows.

The windows, channel sections etc, are in stove-enamelled aluminium,<sup>88</sup> and the plaza is paved with precast paving stones made from Portland Stone aggregate.

## 7. RECEPTION

### *Contemporaneous*

#### **i. Trade press and critical commentary**

**Offices and Shops', *The Architects' Journal*, (16 December 1964), pp.1445-1462:**

While there is precedent in the Seagram Building, New York, for a single block formally disposed on a piazza, this scheme boldly and with clarity proclaims its own, succeeding admirably as a piece of urban design.' (p.1446).

[On the approach and stairs on Bury Street:] 'The arrangement of these flights, being parallel to the line of Bury Street and rather narrow, does not easily invite the pedestrian to make use of the plaza, especially the walk around the Ryder Street side of *The Economist* tower, while the plane produced by the glazed infill to the balustrade tends to obscure the feeling of the plaza level extending through to the site perimeter (p.1454).

**'Economist building', *The Architect & Building News*, (20 January 1965), pp.111-120:**

The unobtrusive arrival of *The Economist* buildings in the centre of London made a pleasant change from the customary rude shock received when large new buildings break ground and shoulder their way skywards. And it is this quality of unobtrusiveness which perhaps more than anything else makes this group of buildings so successful. (p.111)

The plaza could possibly be described as bleak and uninviting. It certainly lacks the potted plants and trees, the heavily patterned paving of other plazas. However, it has not yet been properly observed in the strong light of summer and its main impact comes from the juxtaposition and scale of the various elements on it. (p.112)

**Tom Houston, 'AA Visit: The Smithsons' "Economist" Buildings', *AA Journal*, (February 1965), p.207:**

...the really exciting possibilities of the courtyard [have not] yet been realised

**Keith Scott, 'The Economist Building: Review'. *Architect and Building News*, (20 January 1965), p.104:**

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<sup>88</sup> Smithsons Archive, BA083 APS, 'The Economist Building, St James's Street, London S.W.1. Description for Bauen & Wohnen', signed in type 'A & P Smithson' but in manuscript 'T. D. Tinker' (December 23 1964).



The result of this act of faith is now before us and I feel the overall development must be rated a success.

The juxtaposition and sympathetic massing of the four-storey bank in relation to Boodle's is really quite masterly.

The space of the piazza itself is the real triumph of the development. ...The space is tight but ample—largely due to the brilliant stroke of chamfering off two almost complete faces of the otherwise rectangular bank and nowhere is there an unwanted leak of enclosure. It is a true piazza, amply justifying an Italian description, worthy of many a like space in Venice, and certainly the most successful modern square in London.

London has acquired a group of buildings of considerable distinction and an enclosed space of international quality. For this reason alone one hopes it will not be long before these designers of talent will be given further opportunity to develop their skill. (106)

**Vincent Scully, 'New British Buildings', *Architectural Design*, (June 1964), p.266:**

It may be that the English are somewhat embarrassed inside; like the ancient Greeks, they obviously prefer to be out and, like the Greeks, their finest spaces are exterior ones.

Yet one can never think of *The Economist* as derivative, since it is so marvellously right in its place. Rudolph's siting in Boston is excellent, that of *The Economist* group strikes me as positively brilliant. The height of its tallest tower in relation to the hill slope is especially fine; it locks the whole complex to the larger earth shape of the district...

Unlike a distinguished colleague of mine, I do not believe that *The Economist* is unduly respectful of its surroundings, but only correctly, civilly so. It therefore seems to me to be one of the most successful examples of urban design to be seen anywhere—which means, I suppose, that it should be classed among the most important buildings of the decade, since it is obvious that design of and for the city is the most pressing architectural concern of the present time.

**Gordon Cullen, 'The "Economist" Buildings, St. James's', *Architectural Review*, (February 1965):**

[T]he piazza never appears as an enclosure of itself but as a space in relation to the outer space. (p.123)

From the plan the piazza space would seem to be cut up into arbitrary shapes, but the arcading and glazed ground floor so increase the effect of space that it flows and develops calmly and lucidly. (123)

**Kenneth Frampton, 'The Economist and the Hauptstadt', *Architectural Design*, (February 1965) pp.61-62**

*The Economist* development demands to be considered not only as a demonstration in its own right, but also as a demonstration of a general principle through which an appropriate urban environment might eventually be realized.' (p.61)

...the architects deserve the highest praise and credit for realizing such aims on a difficult and restricted site, in an area where both architectural and social values are conservative. (p.61)

Undoubtedly *The Economist* development does imply a new and valid pattern for the urban renewal of this particular locality, for while it maintains the frontage of St James's, and hence the architectural continuity as a street, it at the same time postulates, by opening up the site in depth and section, a viable alternative to our current habit of blindly redeveloping piece by piece the solid infill of an existing street pattern, irrespective of whether this piecemeal infilling provides adequate contemporary standards of servicing, lighting and traffic segregations. (p.61)

[On comparing the deck of the Smithsons' Hauptstadt competition proposal to the plaza]: It could be argued that the equivalent of these decks in *The Economist* development is the plaza itself and here it is potentially empty as the decks of the Berlin project. (p.62)

**Ian Nairn, *The Observer Weekend*, (13 Dec 1964,) p.30:**

[T]he space between the towers is wonderfully sympathetic and inventive, and I think that because of it Londoners will take this cantankerous group to their hearts... There are three entrances from different streets and at different levels, and one in the centre you can explore it in many different ways: as a simple oasis for the traffic, as a private world which provides enchanting cut-off views of the pompous buildings around, or as the setting for a formal walk around the colonnade under the tall block.

Here, in an era of pedestrian precincts which nobody uses, is a space which people will crowd into naturally. It deserves all the kiosks and cafés that *The Economist* can bear to see on the plaza—and if it then made a lot of money, it would be a just reward for not having tried to cram the site with lettable area.

Six versus half a dozen: an architectural miss, a townscape hit.

**Reyner Banham, *Age of the masters: a personal view of modern architecture* (London, 1975), p.115:**

Any visitor who stands at the foot of the steps that rise from St James's Street to the piazza and compares the grouping of the buildings with what he can remember of the view up to the Acropolis of Athens through the Propylaea may decide that what he sees could be the subtlest and craftiest piece of learning from Antiquity this century has produced.

### **b) Post-occupancy (trade and general press)**

**Peter Murray, 'Respect for sixties survivor', *Blueprint*, vol.64, (February 1990)**

**p.16:**

'Nevertheless, the Smithsons themselves have carried out a number of changes since completing the building in 1964. In the late 1960s they reorganised the basement area after the restaurant was firebombed and in the early 1980s they were asked to redesign the foyer area to improve security arrangements.'

Lobby area transformed – 'This, the most radical of the changes, substantially alters the nature of the ground floor. There is no longer a significant ambulatory, while the interior floor, as well as the core, has been finished in travertine in contrast to the piazza, thus destroying that old modernist game of fudging the division between inside and outside.'

Retail units inserted at street level 'and movement across the piazza has been improved by

new steps on the Bury Street side.'

**Astragal, *The Architects' Journal*, (23 and 30 August 1989), p.7:**

'The Smithsons, among others, will be delighted that the tower is to remain the same height. Apparently there were given the opportunity to act as consultants for the new work, but declined because they were unhappy that the building was being altered.'

'Retail units are being added at sub-plaza level, and there will be a new stair to the plaza from Bury Street. But the original plaza has never worked very well.'

**S. Greenberg, 'Building Revisit - The Economist Building : 2 Going "Club Class"' vol.92 (28 November 1990), pp.53-58:**

'The changes wrought on a building over time reflect those of a society's needs and aspirations.' (p.53)

'The reconstructed stone paviers of the plaza flowed into the lobbies, making them inside/outside spaces.'

'The most serious flaw in the original design was the way in which the plaza died on the Bury Street side – although it is claimed [p.54] that this was the key to the plaza's function as a 'yard' which simply provided light to the surrounding buildings. Prior to the refurbishment, the principal pedestrian movement was from St James's, with its generous steps and ramp, while the two very narrow staircases on the Bury Street side were uninviting and seemed, perversely, to deny the very urban intentions of the scheme, which were to extent the existing pattern of alleys, arcades and courtyards. (pp.53-54)

'This was in part due to the way the Economist used the plinth. Not only did it contain 52 cars but also originally, and for a short time only, a staff restaurant.'

'All this presented a podium and balustrade façade, with aluminium louvres at pavement level, with a roach-bed and glass balustrade above. It was impeccably detailed but reflected the secondary nature of this elevation.' (p.54)

SOM included 'a broad flight of steps here, and turned to louvres into concealed outlets carved within some additional stone work. At last there is a route through the site, and the plaza, one again to exhibit sculpture, is much enlivened.... The whole point of this *partie*, with its small spaces, relatively tall buildings, and a route between them, is for it to be enlivened, and therefore it needs easy access – although Smithson now claims that this was not important at the time.' (p.54)

**Irénée Scalbert, "Architecture is not made with the brain": The Smithsons and the Economist Building Plaza' in P. Johnston, R. Ainley and C. Barrett (eds.), *Architecture is Not Made With the Brain: The Labour of Alison and Peter Smithson* (London, 2005):**

'The podium, accessible from the pavement via a shallow flight of stairs (the ramp was added later, to allow fire ladders access to the rear of the bank building), was conceived of as a public space comparable to the plazas which in America had by then become a symbol of corporate munificence.' (p.21)

On SOM's renovations to the plaza steps on Bury Street" 'Sadly, this destroyed the careful grading of access to the plaza in relation to the scale of the adjoining streets' (p.21)

'The design of the podium for an urban setting demands a clear and confident interpretation which can overcome the impression that it merely represents space which was left over after the requirements of the brief were satisfied.' (p.23)

'Although something about the Economist building wants to be open and expansive like the Hauptstadt platforms, circumstances forced upon it a diminutive scale and the intimacy of the miniature.' (p.23)

'There is an architectural density, if not a human one, and it is something which seems to be implied by the architects' comparison of the podium and its towers to cups clustered on a table.' (p.24)

The Smithsons 'envisioned an urbanism in which functionally compatible buildings, like the components of a tea set, would acquire a kind of neutrality and family likeness, with the space between them becoming 'the collective of the spaces that each of the building carries with it.' (p.24)

'...Peter Smithson emphasises the spatial qualities of the Economist plaza. Provided that the surroundings are made sufficiently recessive, 'when something happens in the space, it becomes wonderfully full...' (p.27)

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