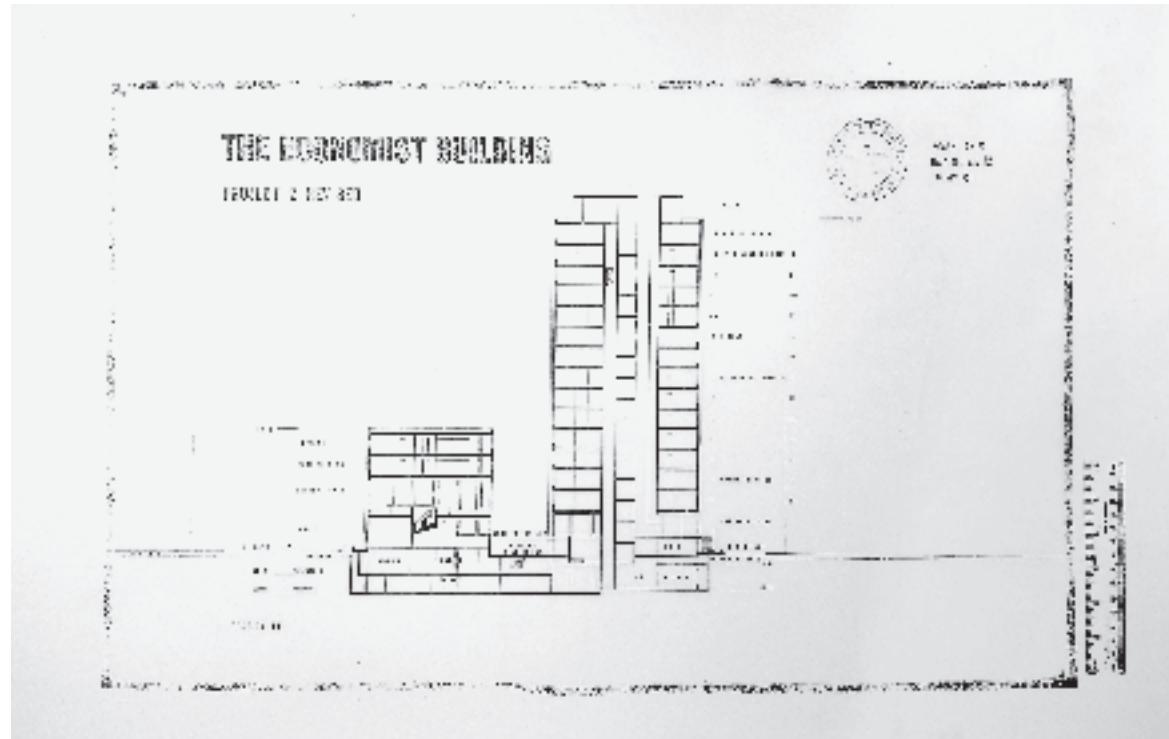
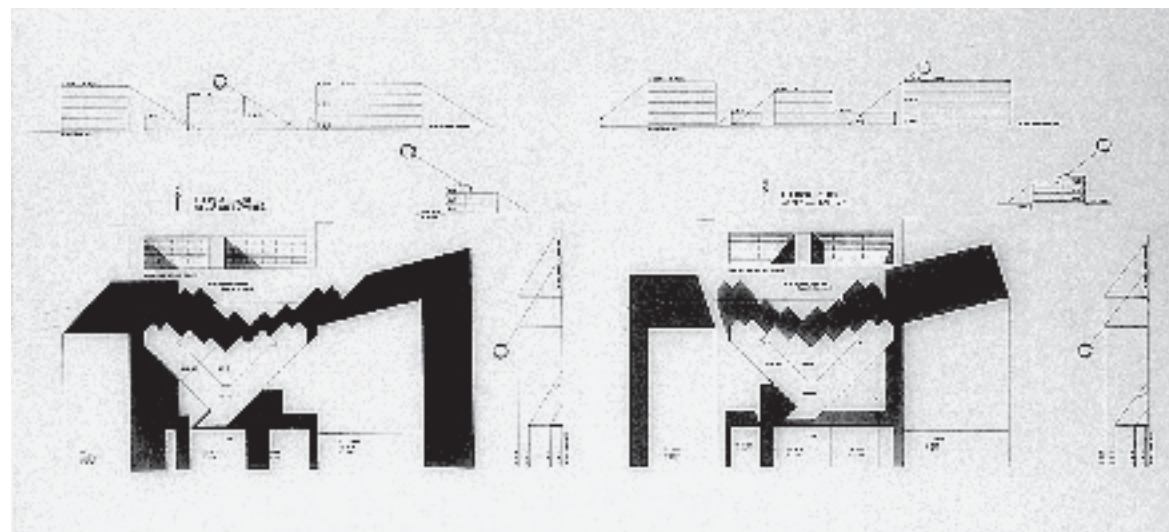


# A Bigger or Smaller Picture?

By Scrap Marshall



Section of the Economist Building, January 1961. AA Archives.



Sun diagrams for the Second Arts Building for The University of Bath, 1979-81. AA Archives.

Much has been written about the Smithsons, both about their theoretical and their built output. A great deal of this writing has been characterised by flattery, some by venom. Over the past year in particular, their Robin Hood Gardens housing project in Poplar has generated heated debate and discussion in both the mainstream and architectural press. The prospect of the destruction of this prototype of twentieth-century housing has seen architects and cultural commentators battling away over the future of the infamous streets in the sky: 'Heritage Icon or Concrete Slab?'

For architects it's a discussion posing numerous questions regarding both the building itself and architectural thinking in general: issues of sustainability, the precedent its razing would set (both materially and socially), nostalgia for the ambition of a movement or age and the personal manifestos and design processes of a particular architect or group of architects. All of this has been discussed, and will continue to be discussed, at great length...

However, as an architectural student, what interests me most is not whether or not Robin Hood Gardens was a success, but rather how can I judge a building or project such as this, or any project/architect/movement for that matter, and what are the best means by which to do so? Specifically what material is there at the AA that I can't find on Amazon or the dreaded web?

There is the argument that architects are only judged by what they build. Building – Good, Theorising – Bad. Eisenman doesn't seem to be complaining. Lovely drawings. However for architectural students the basis of this argument is skewed. Nearly every project we attempt to design is purely theoretical, projected and judged only by a mix of representation: drawings, models, films, food, contemporary street theatre, whatever your particular kick. It's a minefield though; just when you think you've outlined your project perfectly – a low-carbon housing unit in Oldham – the esteemed jury think you're proposing a dolphin sanctuary in Plymouth. For me, when the point of a project is missed there is normally a discussion of what went wrong, what wasn't conveyed and who/what should be examined to ease the pain. Often drawings come into the discussion: 'look at the drawings of...', which is great (actually it's the whole point of education) but it normally means looking at a 2cm by 2cm drawing in a shiny new book. Very Amazon (is it a verb?) but at the AA, uniquely and bizarrely, there are some brilliant drawings lurking below our feet.

Trying to ascertain what interested me in the Smithsons' work I began looking at the numerous books in the library, including the book published after the AA symposium of their work in 2004, *Architecture is not made with the Brain*, which included

discussions with former AA students and staff. After this I enquired at the AA Archive if they had anything remaining from the Smithsons' time at the AA. Out came rolls of large drawings, so large that the photo lab had to be booked in order to reproduce them here. Viewing the drawings at their original scale – whether it's an axo of The Economist building, a perspective collage drawing of their Dubai project or facade scheme – gives a different take on their work. Even though the projects are from various time periods, the work has definite, or defiant, style and clarity.

I'm still working out my view, but what seems undeniably clear from looking at the drawings in the archives is the clarity, precision and ambition of both their projects (whether built or not) and the drawings that represent them. No dolphin sanctuary for them. For me, what is fascinating is the possibility to decide for yourself whether you agree with a theoretical position or style of drawing by taking advantage of the easy access to the AA Archive which holds drawings by the Smithsons and numerous other architects.

What I want to make clear is that I'm not trying to promote a nostalgic walk down memory lane, but rather a look at how we can use the resources of the school – whether that be a drawing from 1900 kept in the AA Archive, a design thesis from last year in a Diploma Unit book in the main library, an image from the photo library, a film from the video library or even a (non-tutorial!) discussion with a member of staff (who in some cases often have a disturbingly wide knowledge of a subject). All these resources can only make our own work better or at the very least, clearer.

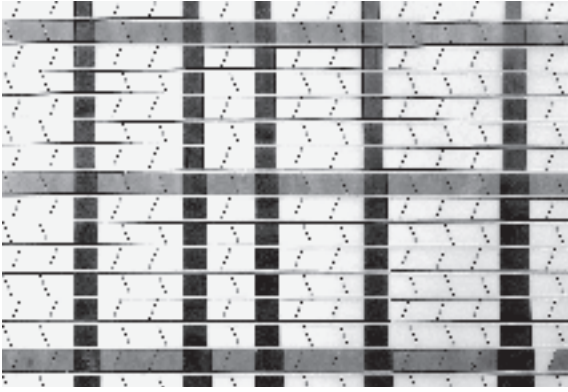
In the next issue we are going to look into how students have used and continue to use the AA building as a basis for projects. From first year installations to team projects that spring up through the year, we will discuss how students have treated the building as a fabric for projects. We'll also be looking at the archive in greater detail and taking a look at some student work of present staff members and asking them what relevance the projects have to them now.

As for me, I'm going to try and stretch my ambition beyond A3.

*Scrap Marshall is a second year student and new Student Editor of AArchitecture*

*AA Archive*

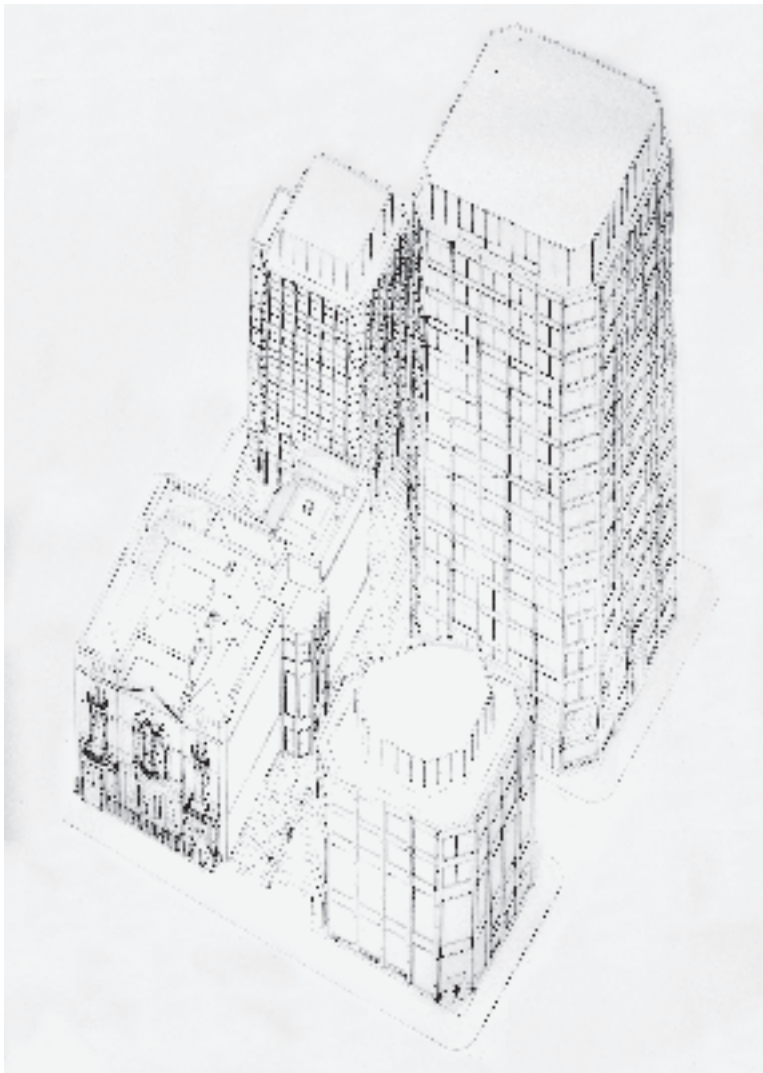
The AA Archive is cataloguing the Association's administrative records. Its collections include over 1000 architectural plans, drawings, posters and leaflets. All AA students and members are welcome to use the archive and should address enquiries to Edward Bottoms on 020 7887 4049 or edward@aschool.ac.uk



Detail of facade scheme for the Bibliotheca  
Alexandrina competition entry, 1989. AA Archives



Perspective drawing for Kuwait Old City, 1968-72.  
AA Archives



Axonometric of the Economist Building, Christopher Woodward,  
November 1964. AA Archives.