

'Right among the establishment is this completely different building that does its job really well'

Hat Projects' Tom Grieve and Hana Loftus admire the Smithsons' Economist Plaza as an example of what a fearless architect can do

Pictures by Gareth Gardner

Tom Grieve

I first encountered the Economist buildings as a child, scuttling across the plaza. So much of St James's is textured and rich, convulsing with decoration, and the thing that struck me was the unexpected cleanness and crisp sheen of the paving, and public spaces that were rich but severe, not dressed or carved.

In the middle of the city, pedestrian spaces felt luxurious and there was a sense of exhilaration at this perfect, empty space with no shopfronts or crowds. The grown-ups had no sense of, or sympathy for, the buildings so the idea that I could explore by running up and down the ramp or in and out of the columns wasn't on the cards. I had no understanding at all of the space, but having not had a very urban childhood, it was an experience that was part of my sense of London.

Since then, the Economist Plaza has been a touchstone through my learning to be an architect. Something that was initially purely a sensory response became something to understand later and, though it turned out to be a celebrated building, to me it has always held a value from a purely experiential perspective. If I'm nearby I will try to make a detour through the plaza, and I am

The shell-filled stone gives the scheme a gravitas befitting its location and tenants

always learning something new.

The way the buildings sit in the cityscape, and the experience from plaza and street level, are both beautifully crafted. The Smithsons put the smallest building of the three on to St James's Street, where it doesn't try to compete with the formality of the street itself.

The highest volume abuts the narrow side street, where the perspective means that from ground level, you are almost unaware of its height. This goes against those theories of massing which say that the wider streets should have the most imposing buildings or that these should "hold the corner" and the massing step down from that. Yet it's so much more successful.

At ground level, the journey through the public spaces is a wonderful exploration. The stepping levels, the oblique angles and the many corners to look around make a joyful and unexpected series of moments, although today the issue of disabled access would need to be addressed more seriously.

The project is incredibly generous in its contribution of public space, manipulating the London County Council's plot ratios to good effect. And of course, chopping the corners off the buildings is key. This softens the edges, and is done in scale and proportion to both the buildings and the width of the route that you take around them, not like some of the later adoptions of the idea where this becomes a crude blunting. I also love the way the development celebrates the flank walls around it.

The plain Georgian brick walls are "found" as the perfect last face to the public realm,

Hana Loftus and Tom Grieve by the Bank Building at the Economist Plaza.



Steps lead from St James's Street up to Economist Plaza, with the residential block to the far left, the Bank Building to the right, and the tower straight ahead. Boodle's is to the near left.



brought into the language of the new buildings. There are some fantastic, odd moments, in particular where the smoking yard of Boodle's club, with its fake, mini-classical colonnade, is brought into a dialogue with the Smithsons' arcade on the other side, which seems to relish the juxtaposition.

The hierarchy of fenestration is managed very cleverly. The Smithsons manipulated the basic rhythm for different uses, with two-window bays for the Economist tower itself, wider, more horizontal proportions on the Bank tower, and on the residential building, single window, more vertical bays. We also look enviously at the quality of the materiality and detailing, with the shell-filled stone giving the scheme a gravitas befitting its location and tenants.

But the main reason I love these buildings is that they show that you don't have to be fearful when working in such sensitive locations. Here is a building that was built in the 1960s, in a part of London that is extremely establishment, with listed buildings coming out of its ears, and every patron of heritage walking around it, yet right among it is this completely different building that does its job really well.

Fifty years on, as a culture we're still so tentative about working in these kinds of places. We don't seem to learn from the Smithsons' confidence in putting their ideas out there. With no previous experience of building commercial development, they went at the problem with no hesitation. As a result, it is not over-designed nor fussy or nervous. In one of the contemporary reviews of the project, the client comments that "the complications of modern construction produce the double result that the work of successful practitioners rapidly degenerates into salaried teamwork, and that it is very difficult for fresh ideas to break in."

"We thought we stood a better chance of getting a building thought out afresh from first principles by going to an architect who represented himself and not a large office."

As a small office ourselves, and wanting to remain hands-on with all our projects, we hope for more clients who trust in the integrity of an architect's skills without relying on a PQQ rating or on their track record of tens of similar buildings.

The Smithsons' work is radically inventive across a range of typologies, most of which they only built out in one iteration. Unlike many architects, they seemed to look at each building without much reference to the last, and by doing that they

The levels and oblique angles make a joyful and unexpected series of moments

pushed the agenda of every project they worked on. The responses make up an odd portfolio of pieces — not obviously by the same hand — but what does come through all of them is the importance, almost the deity, of public space. That's not about style or aesthetics — it's a point of principle. I suppose we aspire to something similar — a way of approaching every project on its own terms, without losing sight of an underlying ethos. We hope each project develops its own personality.

Hana Loftus

My first experience of the building was when I was a student and I knew almost nothing about the Smithsons. I had spent a lot of time in the Barbican and the City of London as a teenager, watching the 1990s boom start to take hold with lots of low-grade hi-tech glass blocks, while at the Barbican I was alternately perplexed and excited by its weight and texture, its uncompromising attitude towards the city. The Economist buildings struck me as elegant in an almost foreign way, while being solid rather than glassy, and they made this wonderful, unusual public space that was intimate and yet strangely anonymous. The buildings held themselves at a slight remove without being recessive, just present, a part of the city.

The Smithsons were proper intellectuals, but the Economist scheme resists splashy statements in favour of a quiet subversion, based in a sophisticated and nuanced theory of urban development and response to its context. Alison Smithson described St James's as "a street and a district densely suffused with historical fact and accumulated meanings" and in the middle of this they felt able to make something with no overt reference to any of it, yet which sits within it with absolute rightness.

A somewhat misleading analogy of alleyways and medieval street patterns is sometimes used, but the plaza is more ambiguous than this, forming neither narrow alleys nor squares but a flowing space that swells and compresses. You can glimpse through from Bury Street to St James, but there are

The plaza is at one remove from the street, creating a space that is "intimate yet anonymous".



no grand vistas or axes. It is easy to navigate but also meandering. We like spaces that have this sense of informality and transition, leading you through without an awareness of being led, and this is something we try to bring into our work.

The Smithsons were cerebral architects but also cared immensely about the quality of the built detail. Everything is considered without being over-

The Economist scheme resists splashy statements in favour of a quiet subversion

complicated — how the columns touch the ground with that slight rebate, the profiles of the verticals, the steps and ramps and handrails. The baroque gorgeousness of the stone is revealed by it being left unpolished and unsealed, and the joints are expressed with deep grooves — but of course this is countered by the clean lines and the detailing. They worried about water run-off and all the

The tower's height is masked by its position to the rear of the smaller Bank Building.



other mundane but important parts of actually building.

There are relatively few projects where the physical experience genuinely conveys the theoretical bent of the architect, but here the way the Smithsons thought about the character of the spaces between buildings and the neutral, almost generic nature of the buildings themselves, is clearly felt on the ground. It was a test case for ideas that they were developing more widely in their Berlin work and elsewhere, working towards an idiom that was expressive of the time, creating a different form of city space "for a cognitive society that would be in control of its direction".

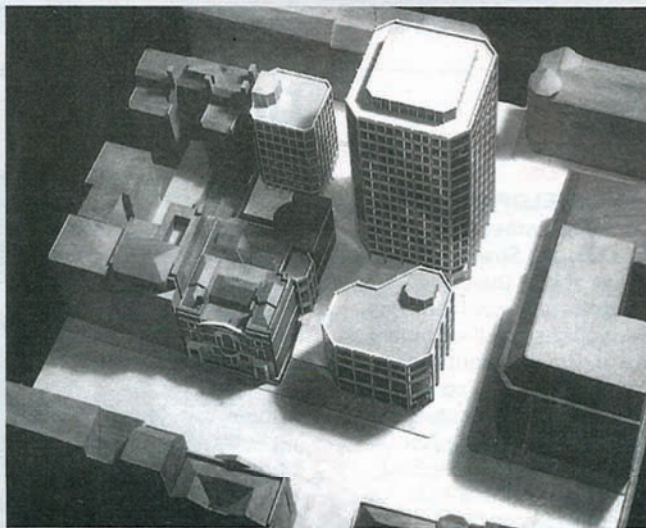
While on one level it is very English in being perhaps polite, reserved and unshowy, on the other hand, the space is perhaps more American, a little version of the big plazas of New York City developments that take up a whole block. I like this ambition to be more than just another version of what has always existed in the city.

The Economist Plaza isn't pretending to be the street — it is

definitely at a remove and distinctly owned by the buildings around it — but it also feels public, a place to be comfortable in. There's a great photo in a monograph on the Smithsons of demonstrators resting their legs on the steps. The current art installations would probably make the Smithsons turn in their grave.

Despite their listed status and place in the architectural canon, the Economist buildings still get under the establishment's skin. A 2008 report commissioned by the St James's Conservation Trust from Atkins recommended delisting and redevelopment in a more "appropriate" form, stating: "It is surprising how offensive [the Economist building] can be in this historic context, especially when of excessive height and bulk. Elsewhere and out of context it may be considered a good building."

But surely cities can, and should, absorb new buildings with a strong and separate identity that contributes to the whole? It seems, half a century on, the Economist project still has the power to unsettle.



Architects' model of the plaza buildings.

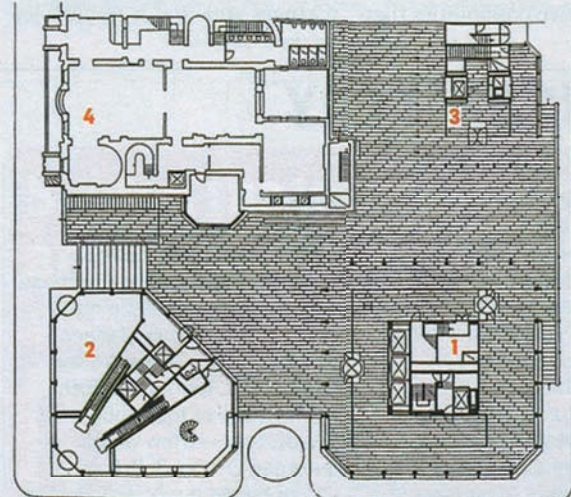
SMITHSONS' EARLY SUCCESS

The Economist Plaza project was Alison and Peter Smithson's most universally acclaimed work, completed relatively early in their chequered career between Hunstanton School and Robin Hood Gardens.

Commissioned to design new offices for the Economist in the heart of establishment St James's, the architects devised a cluster of three concrete-framed buildings connected by a raised podium with an irregular-shaped public plaza.

The middle-sized Bank Building is positioned on the most prominent corner site in front of the largest component, the 16-storey Economist block. A residential tower for Boodle's is at the back of the site. Each block is faced in roach Portland stone with a high fossil content and is chamfered to soften its relationship to the others.

The complex was grade II listed in 1988 and was refurbished by SOM in 1990. A water feature by Angela Conner was added in 1992.



SITE PLAN

- 1 Economist tower
- 2 Bank Building
- 3 Residential tower
- 4 Boodle's club