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graphic designer:
Mireia Vidal
layout:
Aitana Montero

Publicacions de la Universitat Rovira i Virgili: Av. Catalunya, 35 - 43002 Tarragona
Tel. 977 558 474 - Fax 977 558 393
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publicacions@urv.cat

ear, escola tècnica superior d'arquitectura de reus
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**SERT:
MARRIED STUDENT
DORMITORIES
VS.
SAN GIMIGNANO
Emiliano López Matas**

Introduction
Jaume Freixa

NOT IDEAS, BUT OBJECTS!

The section of Theory. History of Art and Architecture of the School of Architecture of Reus (**ear**) presents an electronic journal with essays on works of art or architecture. The research will be original and unpublished interpretations of a specific object or piece of writing. Objects, not ideas, will be analysed so that the readers, students and the university community will see, the way we think is the correct way of approaching a work of art or architecture. The analyses will be illustrated with objective and academic documentation, and so will also be measurable. The interpretation will be made on the basis of the documentation and knowledge of the object.

The aim of the booklets is to describe the research being carried out in the section of *Theory. History of Art and Architecture*. The activities that have been carried out by the section (lectures, exhibitions, papers, articles in magazines or catalogues) will be also considered as material to be published.

We trust that the format and continuity of this collection will be useful for the researchers of the university community not only as a support for publishing a variety of materials but also as a means for transmitting knowledge.



JOSEP LLUÍS SERT TODAY

In memoriam, on the 25th anniversary of his death

For those interested in his work, the figure of Josep Lluís Sert remains surprisingly topical, partly thanks to three contributions that he made as the result of his constant research both within the Harvard Graduate School of Design and elsewhere.

In the first place, he explored and proposed reasonable ways of recovering texture and colour as useful decoration for the façades of buildings despite never ceasing to consider them with exemplary functional and technical rigour far removed from the frenzied formalisms that were unleashed on the America of the 1950s and 1960s (not to mention the gestural excesses of nowadays). During the great changes which took place at the end Second World War, Sert was, to differing degrees, a friend and disciple of both W. Gropius and Le Corbusier, but was unable to model himself on either of them. The former persisted with a pragmatic architecture which was formally banal, while the latter was completely the opposite and launched himself into a new expressionist language with rural and surreal touches, nourished by an untransferable pictorial world. Sert, therefore, had to find his own way and, because he was already at the height of his maturity and working as a lecturer, he had to do this pedagogically for the benefit of a whole generation of American architects. During the 1940s, while designing urban plans for Latin American cities, he experimented with the double façade and double roof systems so essential for creating shade and draughts to alleviate the tropical heat. He used lattices of all kinds, porticos and peaks, and closed blinds and pelmets to restore reliefs and chiaroscuro to his façades, to which he sometimes added touches of bright colours taken from the local cultures. His most important work from this time was the United States Embassy in Baghdad.

Acclimatized to the cold Boston weather, Sert used the most advanced technology to produce façades which were much thinner, such as those used in two magisterial buildings, the Holyoke Center and Peabody Terrace. In the former, the administrative center of Harvard, he contrasts translucent and transparent panels and creates an interesting play between the sense of order of the translucent windows and the random interruption of this order with single, double or triple transparent openings, depending on the needs of the interior. The recent award-winning architectural contributions in Barcelona's Eixample use both the double skin formed by light elements of sheets or lamellae and façades with complete openings between their floors, thus relying on the technical advances of glass and its various degrees of opacity and tinting for interior comfort and exterior expression.

In the second place, in the field of urban development, he totally revised the Functional City of the European avant-garde and, without renouncing his values, he used a variety of urban spaces (basically squares and streets) within his “Civic Centers”, which he conceived as pedestrian areas. Throughout the center of the city (both new and old parts) cars were kept at a reasonable distance –sometimes they were kept in a building that is part of the architectural repertoire of the project– and preference was given to the movement of people, thus encouraging commercial life and encounters between people, which are the very essence of urban life. Sert reinvented a succession of squares and avenues which linked commercial, administrative, cultural and religious buildings (he was in the habit of designing churches down to the last detail) for the centres of new cities which would never be built and also as improvements to existing cities. His ideas have been distantly reflected in the successful segregation of pedestrian streets in historical cities throughout Europe and in such great car-free public spaces as Barcelona’s Forum and Olympic Ring, to cite two examples of the compact city that Barcelona wants to become. However, instead of the concentration of civic life which he imagined in his Centers, which resembled a modern version of the Roman Forum, the current commercialization of modern life (and even the concept of leisure!) has created large Shopping Centers outside the urban nuclei, which are closed off and monitored and which substitute and negate the continuous, neutral, multi-purpose and potentially egalitarian spaces of public streets and squares. Although these complexes are overwhelmingly commercial, the Mediterranean climate has made it possible for some of them to be organized as small villages with open-air spaces. Thus, they are closer to Sert’s ideas. Sert’s city center designs can also be compared to those of the English New Towns, the Villes Nouvelles in the Paris region or the towns around the periphery of Stockholm built between the 1950s and 1970s. Above all, Sert’s design is much more compact and dense and defines the environs which make up the urban space much more clearly. For this reason, we have mentioned the Forum rather than the Agora or Acropolis, whose modern paradigms would be Brasília and Chandigarh where the major buildings float in the middle of enormous space.

In the third place, Sert tirelessly explored minimum dwellings and ways these could be brought together to generate buildings which not only functioned more effectively but which also had attractive shapes and outlines. Although he was at first influenced by Le Corbusier, he was very much in favour of the duplex, laid out on two levels, which makes sense when its principal space can be doubled in height (as with his house in Muntaner street in Barcelona) but which makes less sense when maisonette’s surface area is small (as with his Casa Bloc, also in Barcelona). In his later years he developed other systems, such as



creating access along corridors every three floors, which he was able to apply successfully in his great housing projects in Boston and New York. His little neighbourhood called Peabody Terrace, designed for Harvard in 1964, has 500 apartments of between 28 and 58 square metres – an excellent use of space – which are a model for the quality temporary and minimum dwellings which are currently in such need. These dwellings are integrated into a series of blocks which decrease in height and which form three squares, joined by a street and brought to life by three 22-floor towers, which in turn are strategically placed so as to enjoy views of the river Charles and to cast as little shade as possible over the public area. The dwellings magisterially sum up these three contributions and are an example of what can be done with a good plan and a good project.

Jaume Freixa is an architect and tenured lecturer in Projects at the Universitat Politècnica de Catalunya.

KEYWORDS

Architecture, Urbanism, Sert, Married Student Dormitories.

ABSTRACT

Emiliano López analyses the compositional relationship between the architecture of Josep Lluís Sert's "Married Student Dormitories" at Harvard (Cambridge, Massachusetts) and the mediaeval village of San Gimignano in Tuscany. The text takes part in a debate initiated shortly after the completion of the project in 1964, which enquires into the genealogy of the urban space proposed by Sert. The question is interesting as it arises at a time when the modern movement's capacity to create the city is being questioned. Sert's adherents, like Sybil Moholy Nagi, claim that the Sert's project recovers some of the qualities of the ancient city, and shows that it is possible to create the city with vertical elements. In a course taught by Eduard F. Sekler at the Graduate School of Design in 1965, the student Perry King Neubauer presents a study of Sert's project for debate. The students argue whether the Married Student Dormitories answers to the model of American city or to the Mediterranean tradition. It is then when to the city of Saint Gimignano first appears as a possible reference. Emiliano López uses some statements made by Sert himself to group his analysis in two blocks: Visual similarities and subconscious influences. If the Married Student Dormitories involves a model of the city, it is important to determine to what degree this model is influenced by determined ancient sources. The visual similarities are apparent in the will of the buildings to rise up in vertical lines against the landscape and also in Sert's capacity to generate space by combining vertical and horizontal elements. Graphing a comparative development, Emiliano López Matas, highlights some important coincidences, such as the formalization of a community centre through three linked squares. He also points out Sert's preoccupation with giving symbolic (rather than iconic) content to those parts of the program destined for community use, especially the mall and the garage, which are directly linked to the public space of the square. In any event, these coincidences speak to us of Sert's interest in a model of city participating as much in the proposals of the modern movement as in the notion of place of the ancient city.

SERT: MARRIED STUDENT DORMITORIES VS. SAN GIMIGNANO Emiliano López Matas

244 EAST 32nd STREET NEW YORK 16, N. Y. MURRAY HILL 4-4334

March 15, 1964

Dear José: This is mainly a thank-you note for a magnificent shock. Four towers seen from the bridgehead of the Charles, are that sort of experience of thought only ancient cities could provide.

This is also the first time that 20th century high-rise design creates rather than confuses the profile of a city. It would be enough to feed the starved seeker after architectural continuity; the symphonic combination of many proportions within one unifying scale raises

an achievement to a proclamation - from the charged elevation of a whole city to the flat or shadowed windows planes.

I am very grateful to you and Huson for this architectural confirmation.

Yours
Sibyl Moholy-Nagy

On 15 March 1964, Josep Lluís Sert received a letter congratulating him on the 500 temporary living quarters for students at the University of Harvard that he had just built on the banks of the Charles River. It had been signed by Sibyl Moholy-Nagy, lecturer in the history of architecture at the Pratt Institute. She congratulated the architects who had taken part in the project and highlighted the similarities between these new buildings and ancient cities. The enthusiasm with which she expresses her opinion is hardly surprising, because at that time some of the city models put forward by the 20th-century architectural avant-garde had entered a critical stage. The letter is an emotional one, and its syntax is less important than its feeling

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Yours

Sibyl Moholy-Nagy

¹ Sibyl Moholy Nagy congratulates Sert on his Married Student Dormitories. Courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library, Harvard, G.S.D. Folder E009. Courtesy of Hattula Moholy-Nagy.

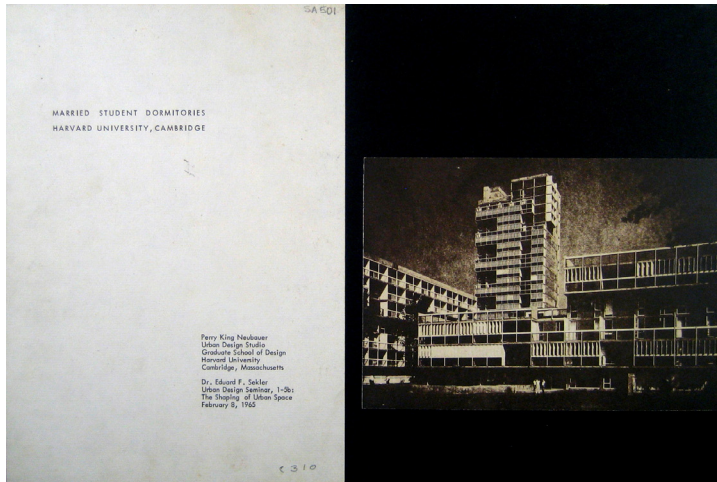


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MINUTES OF SEMINAR	
November 19, 1964	
Marty:	To what extent does Dean Sert's architecture embody American ideas and to what extent is it merely a reflection of his Latin American and Mediterranean background?
Neubauer:	Of course every architect is influenced by his past to a lesser or greater extent in terms of his style and handling of spaces and elements. However, Sert's architecture reflects American ideas first in the program requirements and second in the materials and technology at his disposal.
Freeman:	San Gimignano, suggested as a possible source of inspiration for the tower solution, could not really have been a model since it sprung from different social conditions.
Neubauer:	It is true that the towers at San Gimignano were built for different reasons than those here in Cambridge. However, Sert himself admits that visually they have a great deal in common and subconsciously, in the design stage, this Italian hill town had an influence.
Williams:	Did Dean Sert conceive of the towers as a symbol for the "New Harvard" of the twentieth century, with their prominence on the skyline?
Katz:	They could not have been conceived as a symbol for Harvard alone since another tower exists at Boston University, of which Sert is also the architect. Besides, I believe the layman identifies the raw concrete towers along the Charles with the architect more than with either educational institution.
Neubauer:	Dean Sert regards the towers as a specific solution to the problem of married student housing for several reasons. First, it was one of the best ways to obtain the required density on a small site and still leave a reasonable amount of usable ground space. Second, he conceived of it as a prototypical solution which might be applied further down the river with the integration of towers and low buildings and the consolidation of automobile movement. Third, as a visual statement, the towers define the edge of the river and do, in fact, relate to his development on the B.U. campus and MIT's married student complex.
Dr. Sekler:	Who lives in the buildings, how do they work, and what social function do they perform?
Neubauer:	Only students live in the complex, as there are only one or two

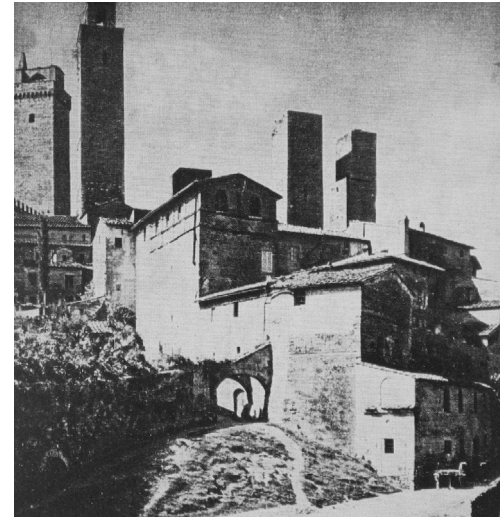
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In February 1965, Perry King Neubauer, a student on the course *Urban Design Seminar. The Shaping of Urban Space*, taught by Eduard F. Sekler at the Graduate School of Design, studied the Married Student Dormitories³. The course was taught as a seminar with few students who, at the end of the course, presented the building they had studied to the rest of the class. The questions that the students asked Neubauer after his presentation are included at the end of this work.

² Frontcover and introduction to the research of Perry King Neubauer on M.S.D., Courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library, Harvard, G.S.D. Folder SA 501 Sert.

³ Hereinafter M. S. D.

⁴ Research of Perry King Neubauer on M.S.D. Courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library, Harvard, G.S.D. Folder SA501 Sert.



The very first question raised the issue of whether the site represents American ideas of city or whether, on the other hand, it represents the architect's Latin-American and Mediterranean background (although there was some confusion between the meaning of Latin and Mediterranean).

Neubauer replied by stating that, of course, all architects are influenced by their past in terms of style or the use of space and elements. However, he made it very clear that the planning, materials and technology of Sert's architecture reflect the American ideal.

Although we do not have the full transcription, it seems that that they went on to discuss the medieval city of San Gimignano², in Tuscany.

A student called Freeman argued that the towers of S. G. could not possibly be the architect's inspiration because they arose out of social conditions that were quite unlike those of the student dormitories.

Freeman was referring to the desire of the Italian bourgeoisie to express their commercial power by building slim towers in contrast to the horizontal profile of the walled cities.

Neubauer agreed that the towers in S.G. and the towers in M. S. D. were built for different reasons but said that Sert admitted that "visually they have a great deal in common and subconsciously, in the design stage, this Italian hill town had an influence."

The visual relations mentioned in the text, and which Sert admits, are only illustrated by Neubauer in one old photograph, taken from a distance, of part of

S.G.'s skyline. The photo also illustrates the letter of congratulations that Sert was sent by Sibyl when she speaks of "ancient cities" but does not specify any particular city or age.

Expanding on these two interweaved statements, I propose to go more deeply into what Neubauer says that Sert calls "visual coincidences" and "subconscious influences."

The "visual coincidences" can be determined by comparing the photos that Sert commissioned of the complex with photos of S. G. taken very close to the time that Sert probably visited the city.

The photos that Sert published in all the journals and publications of the time were always the same. He exercised strict control over the sort of image he wanted to transmit, emphasizing the morphological characteristics that he regarded as being the most significant.

M. S. D. gave Sert the chance to show how he believed new cities should be built.

The images exemplify ideas that he had expressed previously in such texts as "Centers of Community Life", presented at CIAM 8. This congress was wholly dedicated to the heart of the city and its subtitle shed even more light on its president's concerns: "Towards the Humanization of Urban Life".

⁵ Hereinafter S.G.

⁶ Picture of San Gimignano. Courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library, Harvard, G.S.D. Folder SA501 Sert.



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VISUAL COINCIDENCES

The two sites attempt to mark the territory with vertical lines, to be recognized from afar as marking a particular place.

The high-rise towers are clustered together in the centre surrounded by smaller-scale buildings that decrease in size as they get further from the centre.

The low buildings that make up the enclosed areas have no vertical continuity. Sert aims for the horizontal slabs to change the section so that unity is lost and the site fragmented.

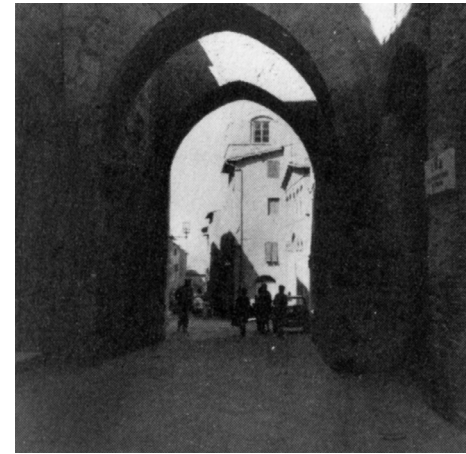
⁷ M.S.D.'s black and white pictures are courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library, Harvard, G.S.D. Several Folders. The pictures and drawings of S.G. were taken from *Città antica in Toscana*. G. Fanelli/ F. Trivisonno. Sansón Editore.



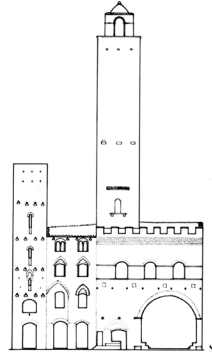
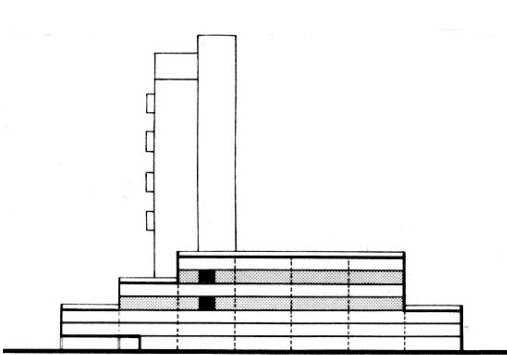
Variation in the facade and the superimposition of layers give the impression that the site is not a single building but resembles constructions over the time. The buildings do not try to deny their weight: they are presented as solid bodies that emerge from the land. The blind walls are not a problem for Sert. Quite the opposite. The garage wall helps to reinforce the idea of a promenade or

boulevard.

Only the high-rise towers have elevators: they are of the skip-stop type, stopping at every other floor. Sert provides alternative bridges above the pedestrian walkways, connecting the towers with long slabs above the third floor.



In the central square of the M. S. D., Sert sets out a continuous surface of ceramic paving, of the same type that he used to pave all the sidewalks of the university campus. In this case, Sert uses paving to create an extensive, multi-purpose, grass-free surface so frequently found in Italian squares.



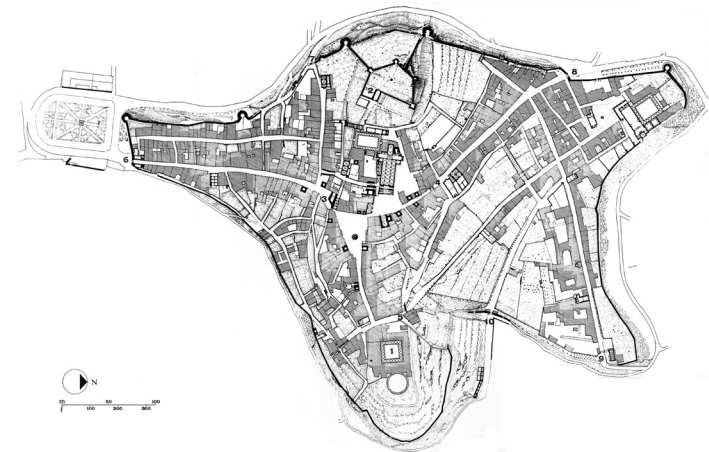
The only drawings that Sert published are the tower and slab diagrams that mark the floors connected by the elevators. These drawings show the tower from its narrowest side, highlighting the solid column created by the elevator shaft. The proportions are very similar to those of the towers that rise above the houses in S. G.

If we select an area equivalent to the whole of S. G. there are very few similarities.

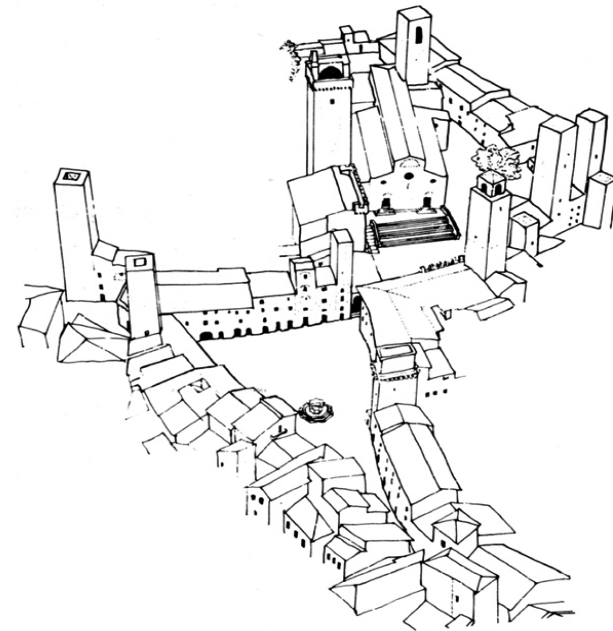
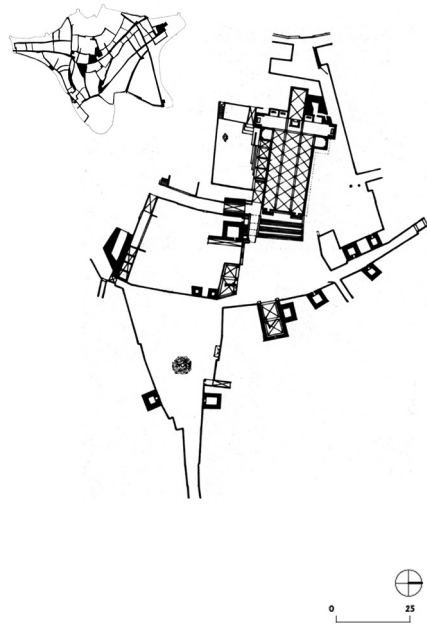
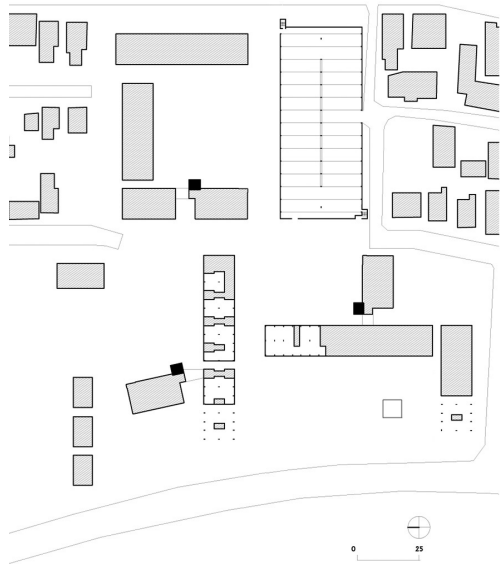
However, if we compare only the site developed by Sert and the nucleus of S. G., we find some similarities in the exterior spaces framed by the buildings. At both sites three squares are linked together and in the lower square in the diagram there is a water feature.



8



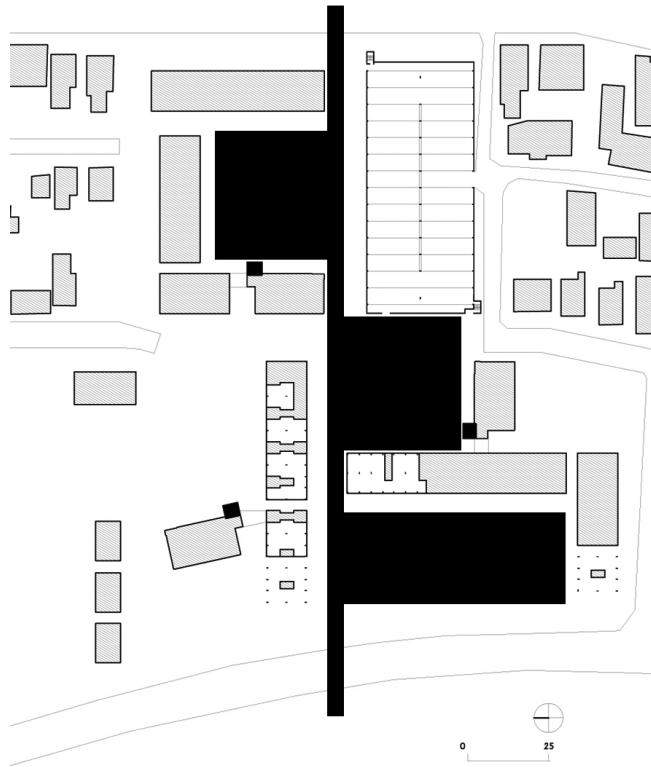
⁸ The M.S.D. plans were drawn by the author.



In M. S. D. there is a water spout on a square ceramic base and in S. G. there is a well.

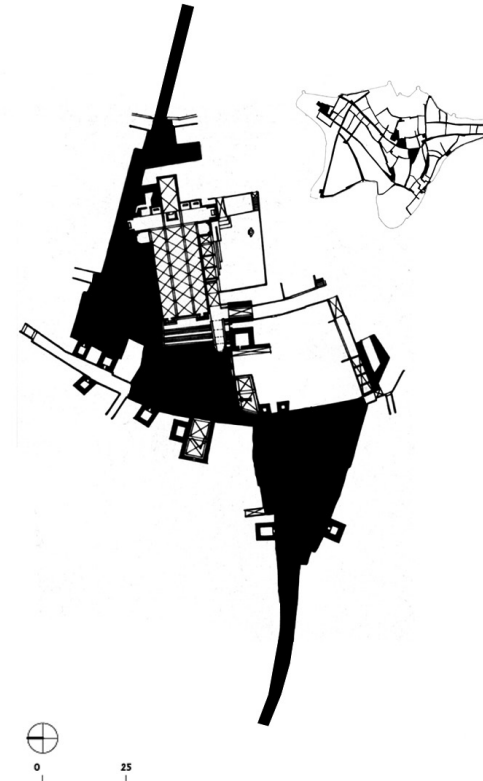
All these observations become clearer if we position the two sites in the same way with respect to the sun.

The proportions of the squares and the relations between them are very similar. There is a surprising similarity between the covered public spaces in both diagrams. The garage is in exactly the same position as the Duomo di Santa



María Assunta (12th century) and, as in many Italian cities, two open spaces are created around this element.

One is adjoined to the west facade and the other to the north facade, which will be in the shade of the building. At this point, I believe that the “visual coincidences” begin to become “subconscious influences”, so we need to refine our comparison.



SUBCONSCIOUS INFLUENCES

On 14 February 1963, when the building had still not been built, Sert was invited to give the annual lecture of the Royal Institute of British Architects in London entitled “Changing views on the urban environment.” In the lecture, Sert described some of the buildings that he was working on, one of which was the M. S. D. Sert explained some of the ideas behind the final form of the buildings.

...”We could not establish a massive barrier between the neighbourhoods behind the site and the river front, as many of the older houses had done. We were asked to leave an open space continuing the one existing along the river front much used for sun bathing and picnicking.”....

The intention was not only to link the site with the immediate environment, but also to link it with Cambridge. These links were created by building high-rise towers on the site.

...”How high should these buildings be? I made a preliminary study of the whole Charles River basin with the urban design students at our school. Heights of about 200 ft. seemed right and did not destroy all the others buildings and spaces around them. The sky is not the limit.”...

Subsequently he explained why he used a mixture of towers and long buildings which, as can be seen in variations in his preliminary sketches, meant a constant search for the finale arrangement of the pieces.

...”The towers could not be too large in scale without disturbing the whole river front area and the neighborhoods around them. There has to be a relationship in scale with the houses along the river – this made us adopt a system that ties towers to slabs. The elevators are common to both, and

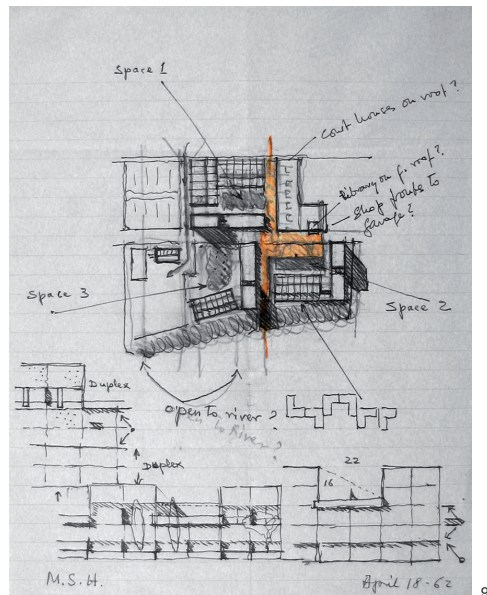
bridges tie corridor floors in slabs to those in towers. The skip-stop system providing through-view apartments is expressed and emphasized. The three elevator towers define space and give identity. The lower slabs conform in height to older University buildings, and they define space on ground level.”...

In the three remaining sketches, the size and number of the slabs keeps changing. There are always three towers and they are always in the form of a triangle, never in line. What he does not do in any of the sketches is to bend one of the towers or release them from the constraints of a slab: he always draws them upright and orthogonally tied to the slabs. In doing so, Sert gives preference to systematization and rationalization instead of the freedom of figures that the image of S. G. might have suggested to him if he had considered it when creating the towers.

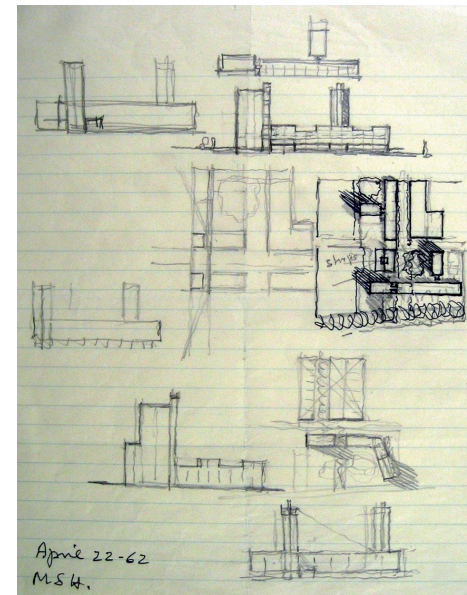
It seems, then, that moving the tower closest to the river was a late decision, perhaps so that it faced the Charles River or perhaps to break up the excessive rigidity of the site.

Sert’s first drawing of the M. S. D. site clearly shows his intention of establishing three main open spaces among the residence buildings. And he makes it clearer by writing on the drawing.

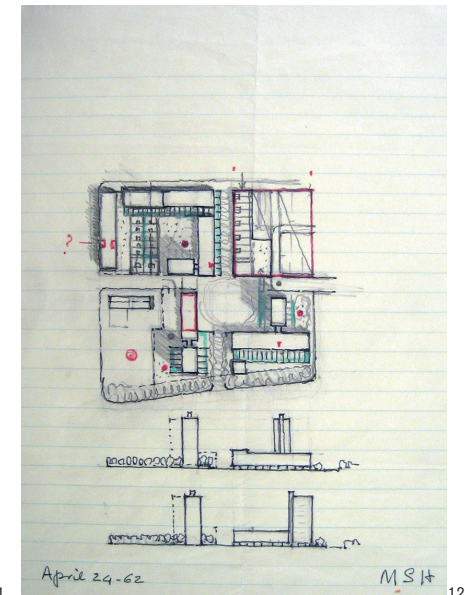
Between these three spaces (in orange crayon) he highlights an idea that would be maintained throughout the three drawings and the final execution of the pro-



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11



12

ject. He clearly draws an east-west axis that crosses the whole site and provides access to the banks of the River Charles. He extends this axis with a thin colored line beyond the borders of the site to show that he clearly wanted this mall¹⁰ (as he called it) to connect the site to its surroundings. With the same crayon he colors two-thirds of the part of the drawing that he calls “Space 2”.

Sert, then, has clearly decided to establish three well-defined spaces. Two of them are mainly green and the third was mainly paved, just like the walkway that crosses the whole site.

In these three successive sketches, the number and position of the three space vary, while the east-west axis and the central space are always present. This central area is always flanked by the three towers, which confirms the clear intention to establish a centre for the site.

From these sketches, it is clear that Sert did not directly draw the three areas

just as they were in S. G. Rather the relation of empty space, the east-west axis and the position of the buildings involve a variety of complex interactions, which lead to a position that was very similar to S. G.

Of all the elements that jostle for position, we have still not spoken of the largest piece on the whole site: the garage. The triad made up of the garage, the mall and the central square is present in all three sketches and even their relative positions are the same. They are always drawn in the same position.

This means that the short west facade of the garage always gives on to an open space, which is not the case of the north facade of the garage. In two of the sketches there is a parallel slab on the other side of the mall.

At the end of his lecture “*Changing views on the urban environment*”, Sert draws up a sort of decalog of the ideas that he systematically applies in his projects and he invites others to do the same.

⁹ Preliminary drawing by Sert. Courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library, Harvard, G.S.D. Folder: B031a

¹⁰ Wooded avenue: Promenade

¹¹ Preliminary drawing by Sert. Courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library, Harvard, G.S.D. Folder: B031a

¹² Preliminary drawing by Sert. Courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library, Harvard, G.S.D. Folder: B031a

The first three points are the following:

...“To emphasize the patterns of movement, arrivals at garages or parking facilities – their links to pedestrian malls or streets to shopping and community activities and the actual points of entrance to offices, apartments, etc., and make these visually understandable.

To express these movements within the buildings themselves, in stairs, elevator shafts, access corridors and their links.

To bring the main point of access to the centre of the development rather than the periphery, and get movements of people in the more vital areas.”...

This clarity of definition of the elements that most concern Sert, and the relation between them, explains why no attempt is made to disconnect the three main pieces of the puzzle: the garage, the mall and the main square. And, most importantly, the garage is always placed in the centre of the site, despite its size which suggests that, logically, it would be better positioned on the periphery.

On this point, Sert is clear and direct. In his lecture he gives the following explanation:

...”Meeting rooms, vending machines, laundromat, drug store, administrative offices, and nursery open to the mall. The garage entrance is in the central space”...

All the communal services are to be found along the mall and around the central square but, above all else, he wants to make it clear that the garage entrance is located in the central space.

These statements by Sert, then, suggest that the Duomo di Santa Maria Assunta in S. G. is like the garage in the M. S. D. Or in other words: both buildings have the same socializing function. They both congregate their faithful in a single place: those who worship Catholicism and those who worship cars, who at least

socialize on their way from home to the car. Perhaps when Neubauer said that Sert reflects American ideas, he was not mistaken: forcing drivers to walk a little from the car to their home helps the task of forming a community.

Sert continued to stress the importance of the garage as the central place.

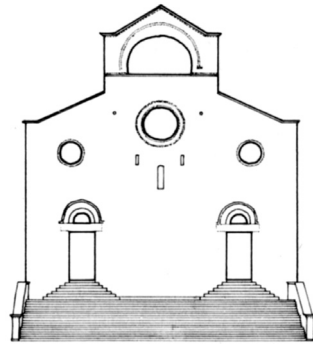
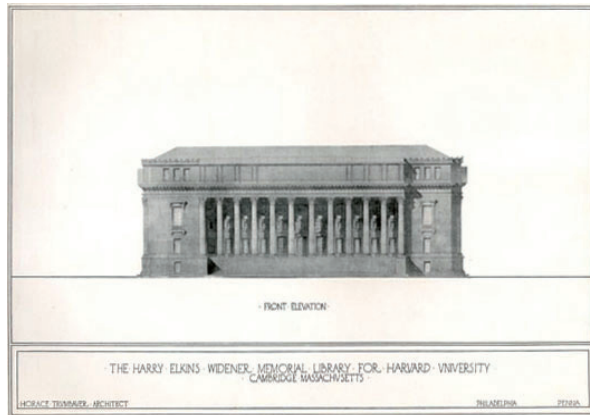
...”its wall provides a background for posters and “fête” decorations, a concrete platform will serve as stage for concert and song gatherings, like those improvised in summer on the Widener Library steps.”...

The Widener Library was donated by the mother of Harry Widener, a good student who died with his father when the Titanic sunk. Widener's widow entrusted the project of the new library to an architect from her home town, Philadelphia. Before he was asked to design the library, Horace Trumbauer (1868-1938) had designed several residences for well-off families in the suburbs of Philadelphia, one of whom was the Widener family, New York and Newport (Rhode Island), as well as a considerable number of commercial buildings, churches and social clubs. His work was based on careful adaptations of historical precedents, particularly from the Renaissance, but also from Greece and the Gothic and ancient periods.

The central library at the University of Harvard, built in 1917, was the predecessor of the Free Library of Philadelphia, which is almost a copy of one of the classic buildings of the 18th century designed by Ange-Jacques Gabriel Place de la Concorde in Paris.

Sert is referring, then, to a neo-classical space, the architectural form of which—weather permitting—prompts spontaneous gatherings of students.

If we observe the first sketch of how the M. S. D. was to be organized, we see that Sert's first intention was to locate not only various shops around the garage but also a library. From the way it is sketched, it seems clear that this area for reading and meeting was to give on to the central square, thus becoming the crowning point of the garage's short facade.



I imagine that with this addition Sert was seeking to provide yet another pole of attraction for the patterns of movement that cross the central area of the grounds.

Maybe Sert uses the Widener as an example because of his initial idea of including a library on the site or because it is a building on the university campus. But he could also have used the Duomo de Santa Maria Assunta as an example. Both buildings are absolutely symmetrical and their entrance stairways are exactly the same, framed by two low walls which contain the space in very similar ways.

Sert agrees with the type of space that these architectures generate but points out that they are forms that belong to other ages and that these spaces need

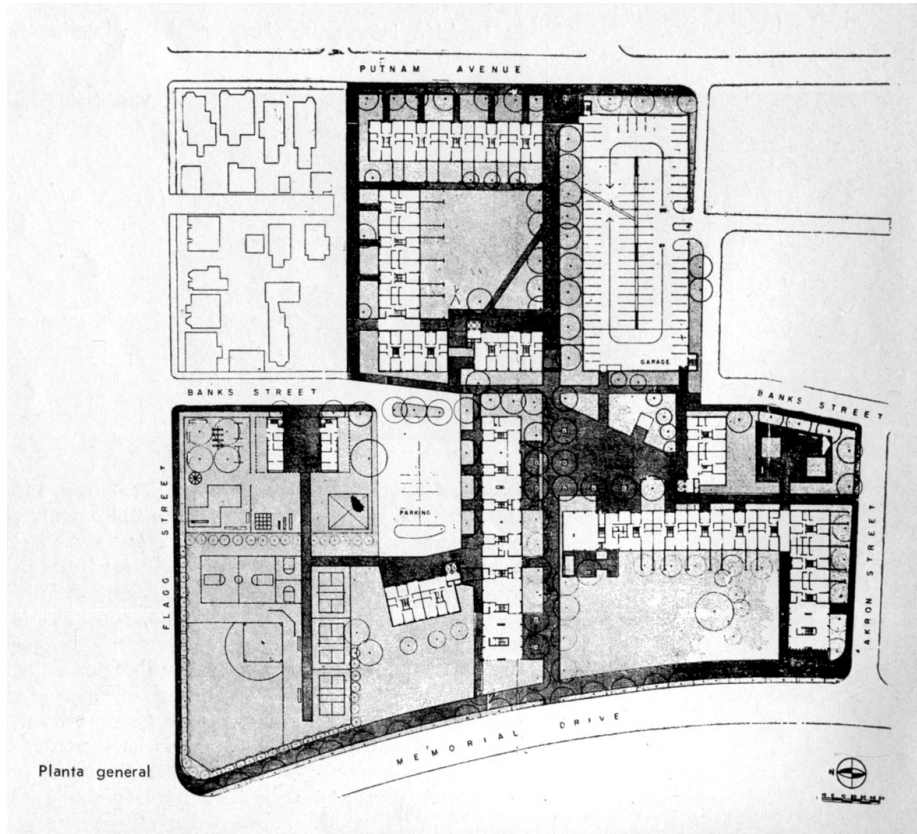


to be shaped in different ways more in accord with the time in which they were being built.

...."Very beautiful, I agree, but they do not belong to our times and our modern equipments."...

Sert proposes that this raised platform should be different, much more similar to the platform for "spontaneous speakers" in Hyde Park (which he mentions in his lecture for CIAM8) than the staircases he is considering.

It is a small, extremely vertical rostrum that is at a slight slant to the garage's facade. It is included in some of the initial general plans of the site and in some



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freehand drawings done by someone in the studio. The drawings are full of people to highlight the desire to create a place for opinions, discussions and gatherings.

This sort of pulpit distances the main square from the facade of the garage. Although in the first general sketch, the paved area goes right up to the facade, the relations between the paved and unpaved areas are now inverted. Maybe in anticipation of the heaviest or most frequent patterns of movement, a diagonal was drawn practically through the middle of the square.

The idea is maintained even in the first versions of the executive project. It still appears in E40 the sites electrical drawings (which, as always happens during

¹³ A&P. N. 5-6. José Luis Sert. P 7-21. Mario Luis Corea



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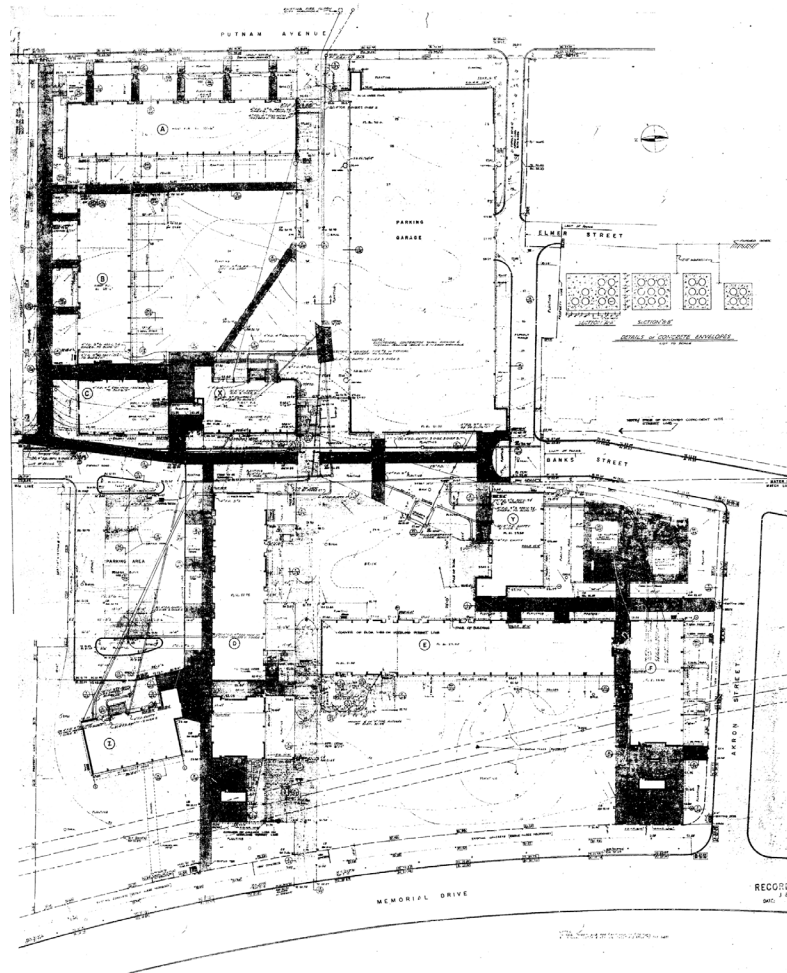
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the work process, was delivered to the engineers before everything had been fully decided upon). According to the chronology marked on each plan, this plan was begun on 3 January 1963 and was last revised on 3 April of the same year so, when Sert gave the lecture in May, he was still convinced of the need for this element.

The following date indicated on general development plan number 4 is 16 July 1963, which could be when the plan was once again discussed and the needs of the central square reconsidered. From this point on up to when Sasaki makes his landscape studies, the pulpit is replaced by a rectangular flowerbed with a couple of trees.

¹⁴ CIAM 8. The Heart of the City. Ed. by J. Tyrwhitt, J.L. Sert, E.N. Rogers, 1952.

¹⁵ A&P. N. 5-6. José Luis Sert. P 7-21. Mario Luis Corea

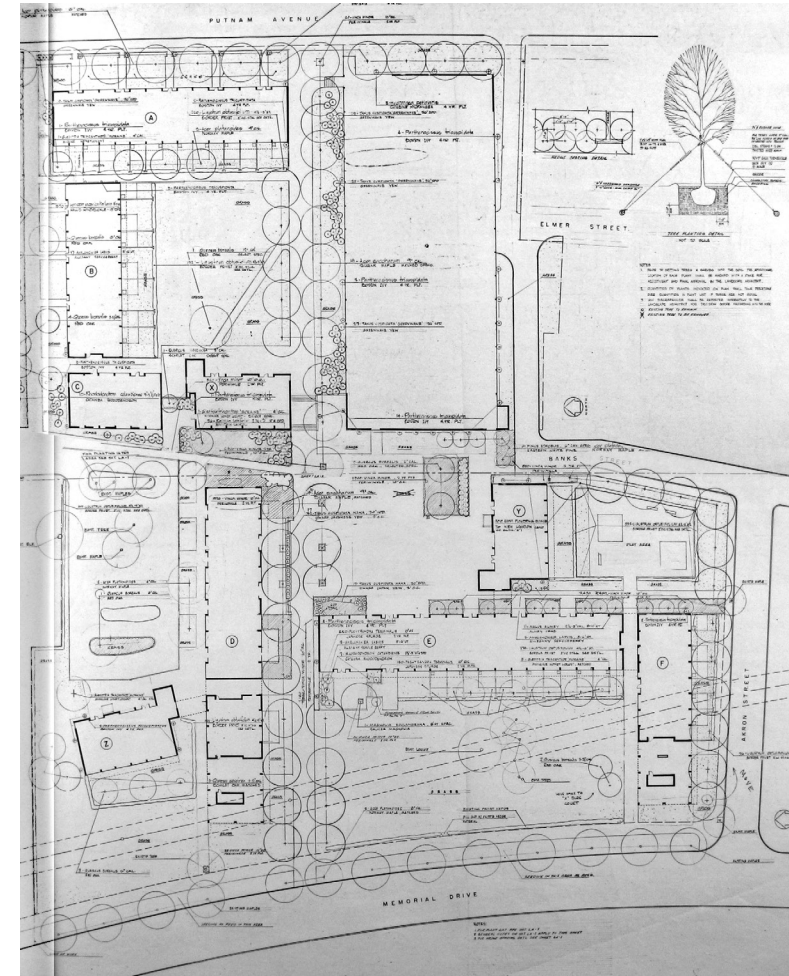


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Almost the whole square is finally paved, apart from the flowerbed and a narrow green belt adjacent to the garage facade. On the plan, this belt has the same surface area as the staircase of the Widener and the Duomo.

It seems clear that the M. S. D. garage has almost the same roles as the Duomo in S. G. The clearest example is the west facade and its position in relation to the main square. As Camillo Sitte wrote, "*En effet, chaque façade remarquable a sa place à elle et, réciproquement, chaque place a sa façade de marbre.*"¹⁶

¹⁶ Construction documents. Courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library, Harvard, G.S.D.



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Therefore, taking up once again his idea of freeing himself from preconceived ideas about what important buildings are, Sert accepts the role of the car in American society and makes the garage the natural focal point of the development.

The subconscious influences, however, do not end here. Let us now compare a photo taken by Neubauer of the main facade of the garage with a photo of

¹⁷ Construction documents. Courtesy of the Frances Loeb Library, Harvard, G.S.D.



the main facade of the Duomo taken from the Loggia del Palazzo t. It is a semi-public area that marks the entrance to the palace and is on the opposite side of the square.

The relation between the two buildings is the same as the one between the facade of the garage and the multi-purpose room (the position is practically the same as the one adopted by Neubauer to take the photo or, to be more accurate, slightly further to the left).

As we can see in the photos taken at the time that Sert visited the city and in the pictures from the end of the 20th-century, which show some people chatting opposite the facade of the Duomo, the two facades have many formal and compositional similarities.

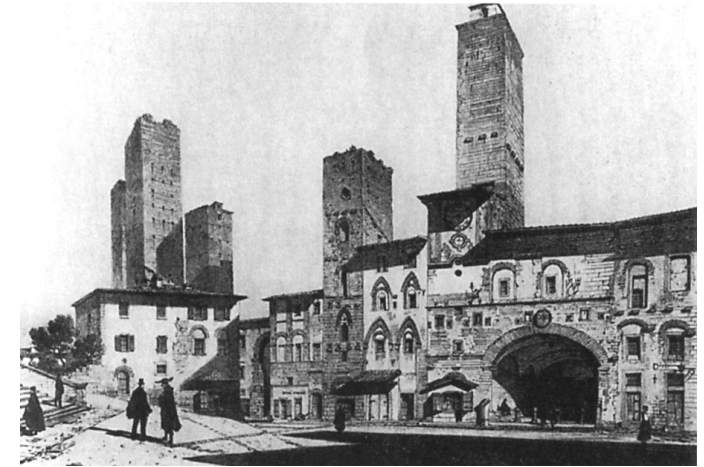
They both have pronounced bilateral symmetry. In the Duomo this symmetry is absolutely strict. In the garage it is less so but the most important difference is that it has two entrances, one on each side and not one in the centre.

They both have a roof or a cornice that provides shade.

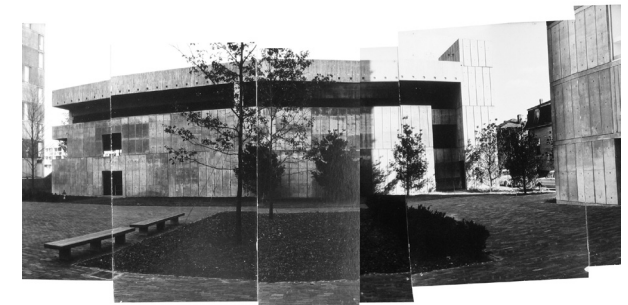
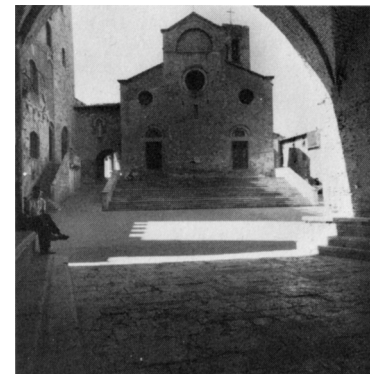
They both have a tower on the same side.

They are both separated from the square by a staircase and a green belt, which help to lift the facade from ground level.

Perhaps the only thing missing from the facade of the garage to convince us that there is something more than "subconscious influences" in the design is a perfect rose window in the middle.

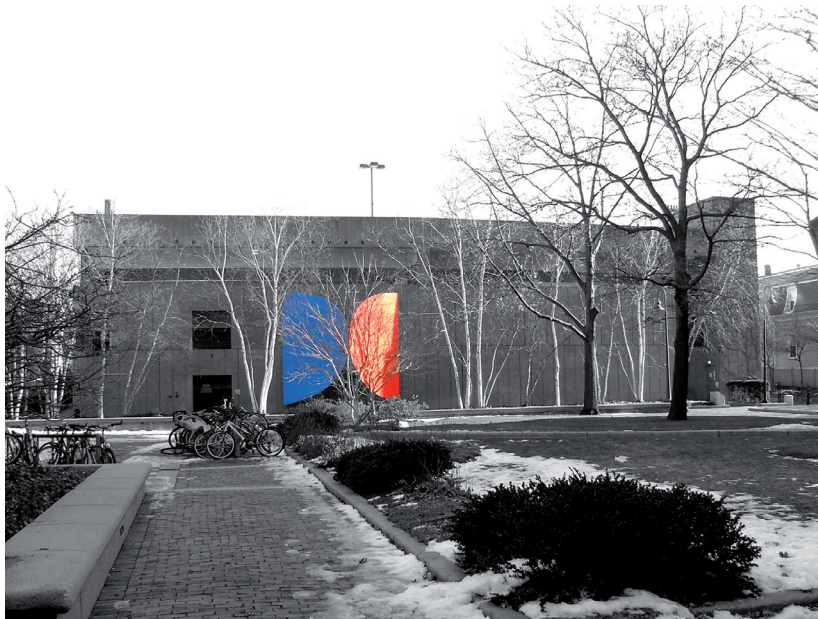


It is well known that Sert had a close relationship with the painters and artists of his time. Remember that before becoming an architect, he was thinking of following in the footsteps of his uncle and becoming a painter. In fact, it was his uncle who not only convinced him not to follow the same path and to opt for architecture, but also who introduced him to the avant-garde of the age. It is well



known that he knew Elsworth Kelly although no correspondence can be found in the archives of Harvard University. Neither can I say for sure whether Sert had any influence in the choice of artist or on what date the work was commissioned and installed. However, the split and displaced circumference, the colors used and the size are much more revealing than any written document.

¹⁸ L'Art de bâtir les villes. VI: Des groupes de places. Camillo Sitte. L'Esquerre 1889.



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One could even be tempted to suggest possible similarities with the lights on the top floor of the garage.

In a symposium for urban planners, architects and painters (among others) organized by Philip C. Johnson and published in *INTERIORS* in May 1951, Sert gives his opinion about the relation that should exist between art and architecture.

¹⁹ Photograph by Marta Morelli. December 2005.

In 1951 Sert stated:

...”Finally, architecture, painting and sculpture may simply be related to one another...

...Today we do not have a place where these things can get together – the agora, the forum, the cathedral square, which were also meeting places and constituted the heart of the city. Urban growth and uncontrolled speculation have destroyed these centers of life and culture. In replanning the city we will have to provide for them. I do not say we should try to reproduce the past, but we should have something that expresses what those centers expressed. The need for the superfluous is as old as mankind.”...

These coincidences do not arise because of “unconscious influences”: rather they are the result of very clear ideas about how city growth should be planned. New centralities should be generated in accord with the times, facilitating as much as possible the relation between inhabitants, not isolating them for one another.

Perhaps Sert’s reply to Sybil’s letter congratulating him on his recently finished “proclamation” can be used to close this dissertation.

“Dear Sybil:

Thank you for the nice letter you wrote after you have visited the Married Students project. What you state in that letter is very reassuring because it is precisely what we intended the buildings to be.”...

13 April 1964

Mrs. Sybil Moholy-Nagy
244 East 32 Street
New York
New York

Dear Sybil:

Thank you for the nice letter you wrote after you had visited the Married Students project. What you state in that letter is very reassuring because it is precisely what we intended the buildings to be.

They are opening a show of the work of this office at Columbia University on April 20 through May 8. It may interest you to see our recent work put together as this has never been shown before. I am lecturing there on April 22. I put your name on the list but I do not know if you have received an invitation. Anyhow you have heard too many lectures by now so do not bother about this one.

With best regards,

Cordially,

Jose Luis

JLS:gw

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SERT: MARRIED STUDENT DORMITORIES VS. SAN GIMIGNANO Emiliano López Matas

Mendoza, Argentine Republic 1971. E.T.S.A. Vallès Architect, U.P.C. 1996. Master's Degree in "History, Art, City and Architecture" E.T.S.A. Barcelona, U.P.C, 1997. Master's Degree in "M. Arch. II" G.S.D. Harvard University, 1999 (awarded a scholarship by the Real Colegio Complutense). Diploma of Advanced Studies. E.T.S.A. Barcelona, Department of Architectural Projects, U.P.C. 2007. He is currently writing his doctoral thesis on the Married Students Dormitories and he combines professional practice with teaching. He is collaborating lecturer for the subjects Projects I-II and Drawing II at E.T.S.A. Reus, Rovira i Virgili University. He shares his professional office in Barcelona with Mónica Rivera. On the same theme he has also written: -80. From Le Corbusier to Sert through the Window. Massilia 2006.

²⁰ Letter by Sert answering to the letter sent by Sybil Moholy-Nagy. Courtesy of Frances Loeb Library, G.S.D. Folder E009.