

MAISONS
DU PEUPLE

Dreams into stone

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.1 Introduction

.4 The Cooperative model

1872
The first Maison du
peuple is founded in
Jolimont



.28 The Philanthropic Model



.46 Civil structures

.64 Worker's clubs

.82 Case del fascio

.100 Aftermath



1965

Demolition of the
Maison du peuple de
Bruxelles



Introduction

“Well, our dreams are standing with the whole strength of steel and stone”¹, these words were part of Jean Jaurès’ speech at the inauguration of the Brussels *Maison du peuple* in 1899.

An event that crystallized the enthusiasm of the worker’s movement at the time and that would have an everlasting effect on the conception of the city in terms of sociability and planning, all through the elaboration of a new typology: the *Maison du peuple*.

The subject of this work emerged originally from a search for cases of occupation of cultural buildings in city centers with the aim of creating common spaces. To be precise it focused on the cases of cinemas and their reactivations to make culture and leisure widely available in strongly commoditized cities.

The case of the *maisons du peuple* seemed to be in the scope of the original aim, investigating forms of existing within European cities that stand out from conventions, whilst providing thorough architectural precedents. They can be considered a relevant model as they are not too distant from us timewise, some of them still operating today (at least their remnants), after all the *maisons du peuple* were a crucial topic at the time, heavily invested by all². The question is how these utopian models materialized themselves from clear and elementary ideas into intricate architectural matrices. Whereas other highly influential utopian community projects imagined in the nineteenth century, such as the Fourier’s Phalansteries ultimately failed.

The *maisons du peuple* are an elusive typology, difficult to define in a rigid sense, a common element maybe the name, always a house or palace of some sorts, with of course its linguistical diversity (*Maison du peuple*,

Volksbauser, Festspielhaus, Casa del popolo, Palais du travail, Palais de la culture, Maison commune, etc...). At its origin a new space for sociability in a shifting industrial society. It can be broadly defined as social spaces contained in a unique architectural matrix³, that would satisfy the particular needs for relaxation and distraction.

Rather than proceeding rigorously chronologically, the overview will be done thematically, trying to establish a partial genealogy of these complex machines. Considering the intensity with which this type developed in such a short period, most of the categories overlap in time and are not exempt from cross-contaminations; although the different categories are heavily linked to the nations in which they developed the aim is to have a typological approach rather than a country by country one. Each chapter could be a subject of its own, but the aim is rather to do a general overview of the *maisons du peuple* and their trajectory.

The work does not encompass every single variation but rather focuses on the major shifts in actors, program, and form. As such some of the cases that can be considered regional variations of other models as was the case with the reinterpretations of the Belgian cooperative model in other countries (*Casa del popolo* and *Volksbauser*) which will be overlooked due to their similarities.

Each chapter focuses on one of the types, the first is dedicated to the *maisons du peuple* as they originated in Belgium from the cooperative movement, the second regards the philanthropic recuperation of the cooperative model, the third will concern the *Maison du peuple* as the centerpiece of new concepts of urbanism notably through the garden city movement, the fourth will be about the new social condensers of the soviet

1 Malinconi, *De Fer et de Verre - La Maison du peuple de Victor Horta*.

2 Archives d’architecture moderne (Bruxelles), *Architecture Pour Le Peuple : Maisons du peuple, Belgique, Allemagne, Autriche, France, Grande-Bretagne, Italie, Pays-Bas, Suisse*.

3 Scascighini, *La Maison du peuple - Le Temps d’un Édifice de Classe*.

union, the fifth type mentioned will be the *casa del fascio*. A final chapter will delve into the end of the *maisons du peuple* after the second world war, the fading of their status as a monument, and the emergence of similar common program matrices in alternative contexts.

At the start of each chapter, four buildings (five in the first chapter) will be presented through drawings and images, these examples will not always be discussed in depth, but they are here to give a reading key to better grasp the general traits discussed in the text. The examples were selected to either illustrate the diversity of a building type when the body of buildings is quite heterogeneous or, to show the cases that represent the largest number of buildings in a certain type, putting to light their similar traits.

For each type, the same aspects will be looked at, along with their evolutions from type to type. The first one of these is context and actors, which ideals and necessities brought about the different *Maisons du peuple*. This encompasses social movements, the political context as well as the theoretical background and connections with the avant-garde.

The focus will then be put on the necessities that arose from each context and which program were used to counter them. Looking at the programs enables us to put to light the shifts happening with time as well as the key differences in organization, and how the underlying structures affect the needs that this type satisfies.

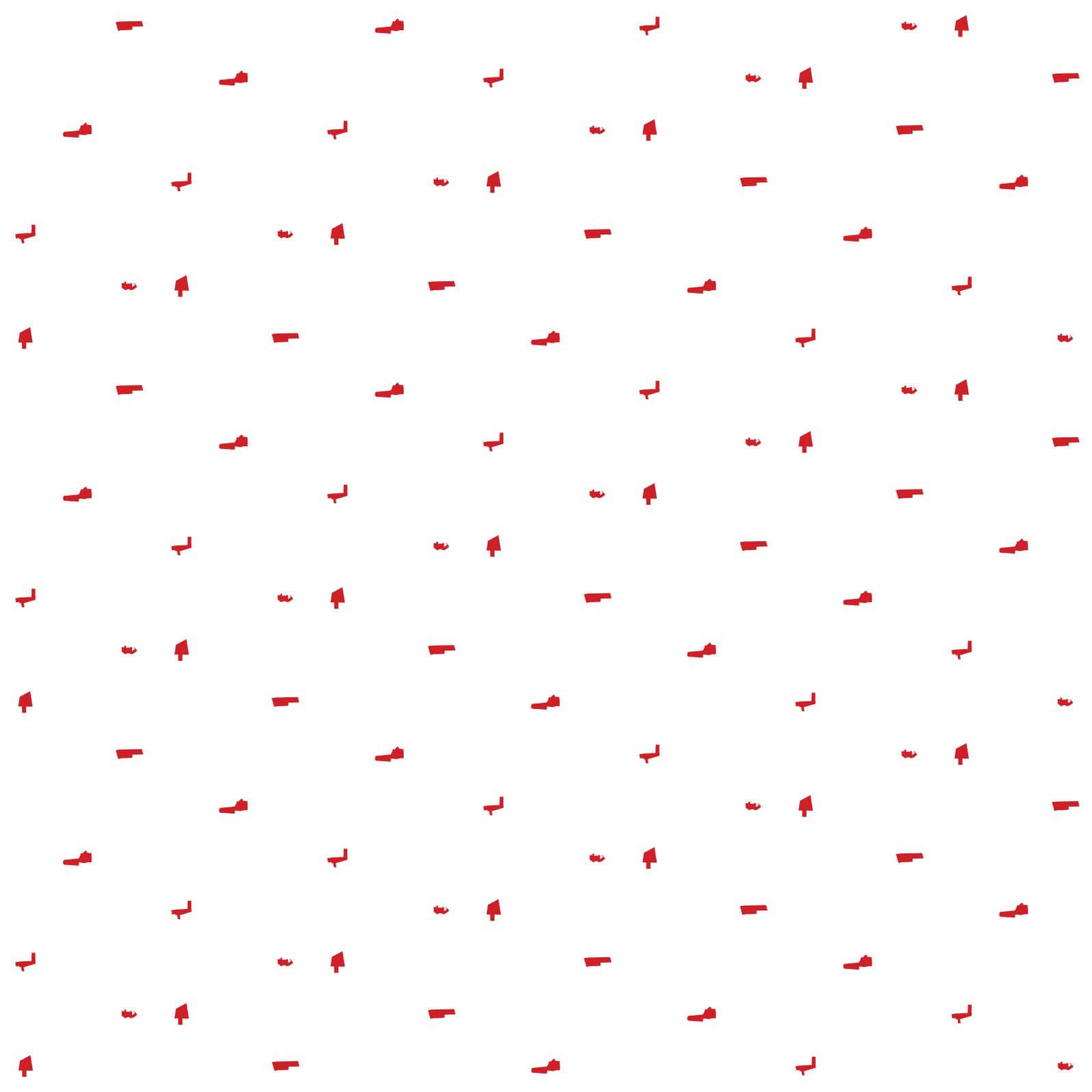
The last facet that will be tackled as the material consequence of both the actors and program will be the morphology and typology itself; the aim is to discuss the broader architectural content of the *Maison du peuple*. Considering the diversity and complexity of examples a more abstract approach will be taken, some of their formal aspects not being decisive.

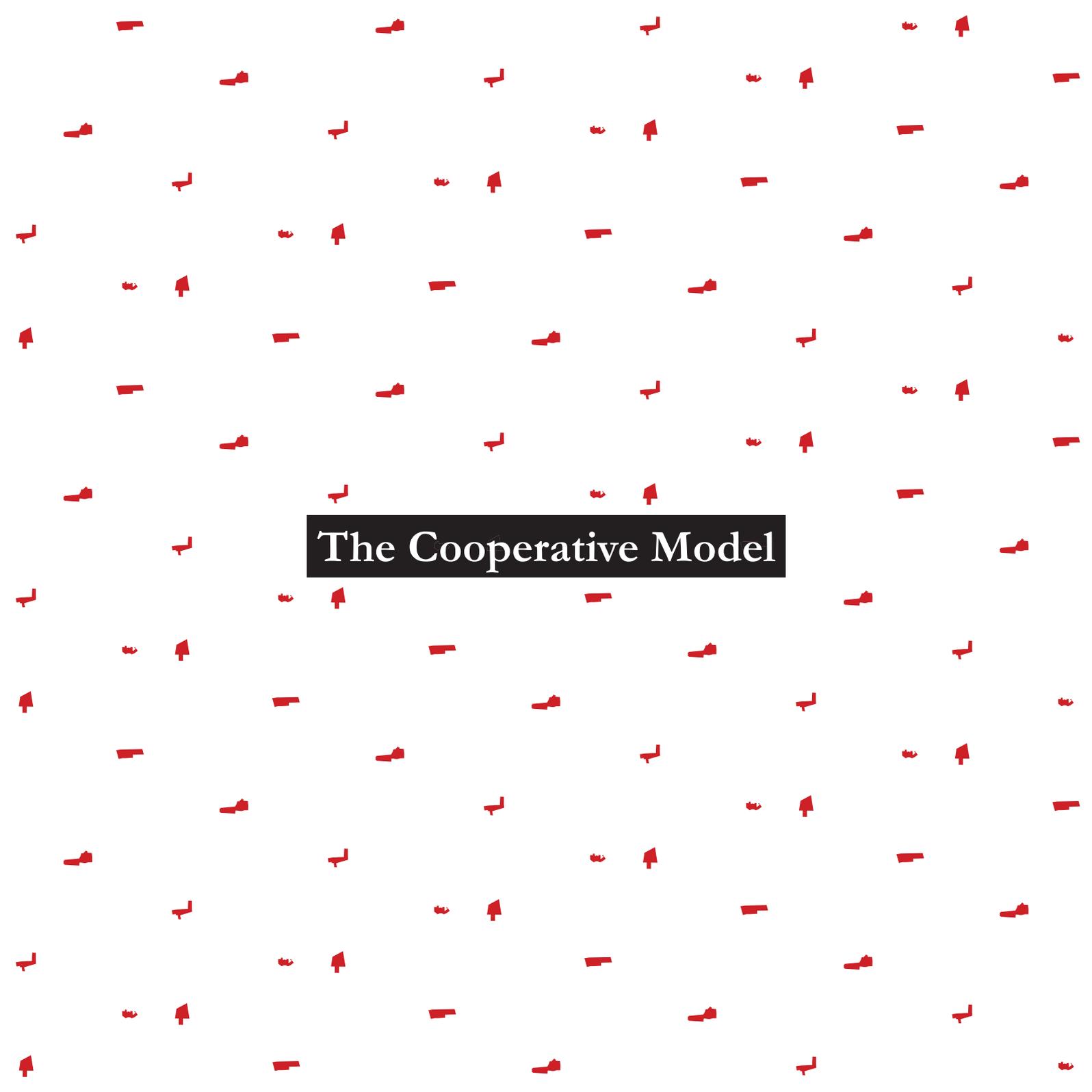
This is a necessary exercise of abstraction as in the case of the *Maison du peuple* a working-class style cannot be clearly defined.

It seems appropriate to rediscover and to look back at these (originally) red cathedrals⁴ with fondness, to grasp how such buildings, dedicated to the betterment of the material, moral and intellectual existence of workers, sparked as much passion, the inauguration of Horta's *Maison du peuple* being celebrated on par with the most prestigious events in the country.

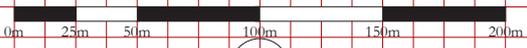
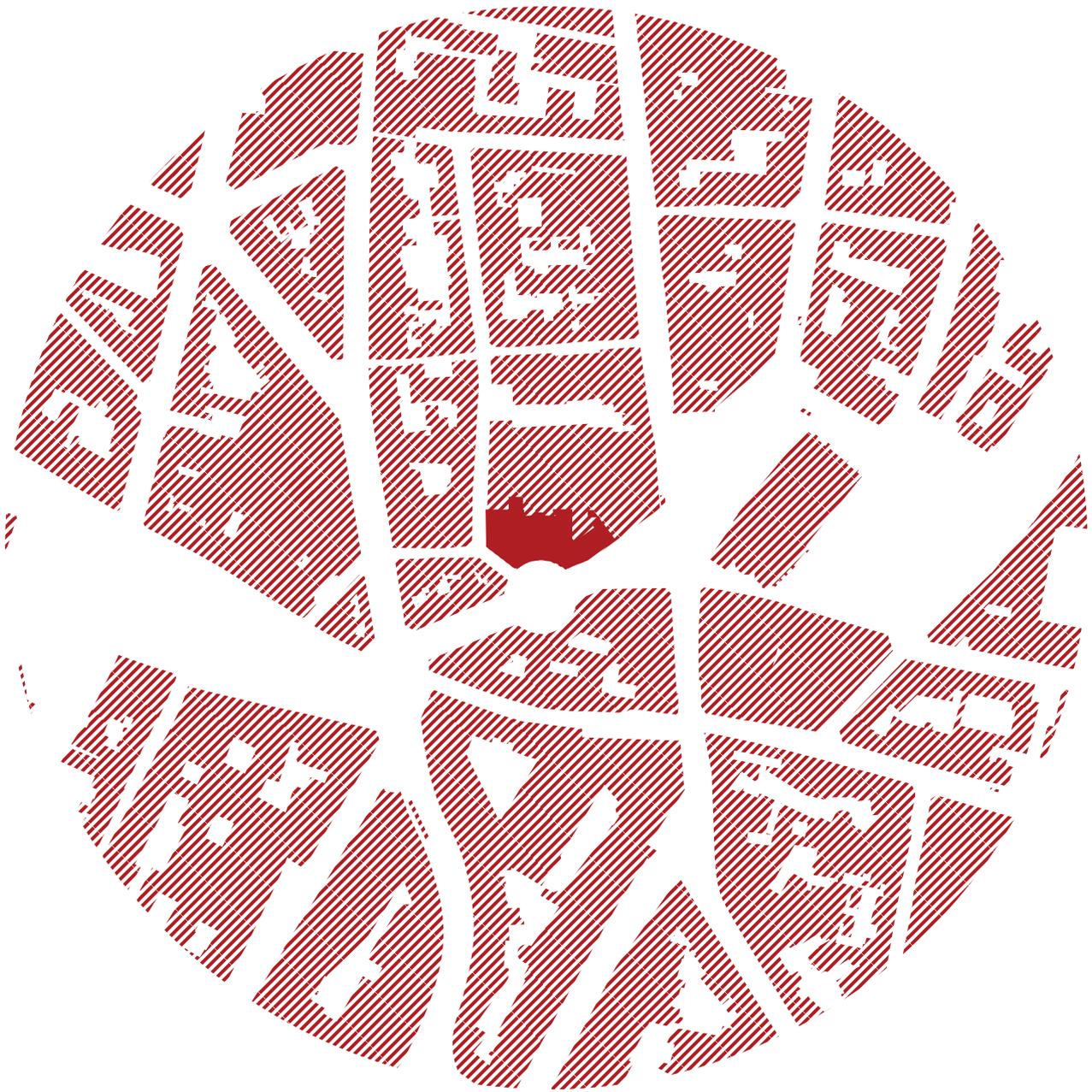
In the hope of rediscovering a certain enthusiasm for the common thing.

⁴ Malinconi, *De Fer et de Verre - La Maison du peuple de Victor Horta*.





The Cooperative Model



Victor Horta
Maison du peuple Brussels, 1897



Richard Pringiers
Maison du peuple, Anderlecht, 1911

0m 25m 50m 100m 150m 200m





0m 25m 50m 100m 150m 200m



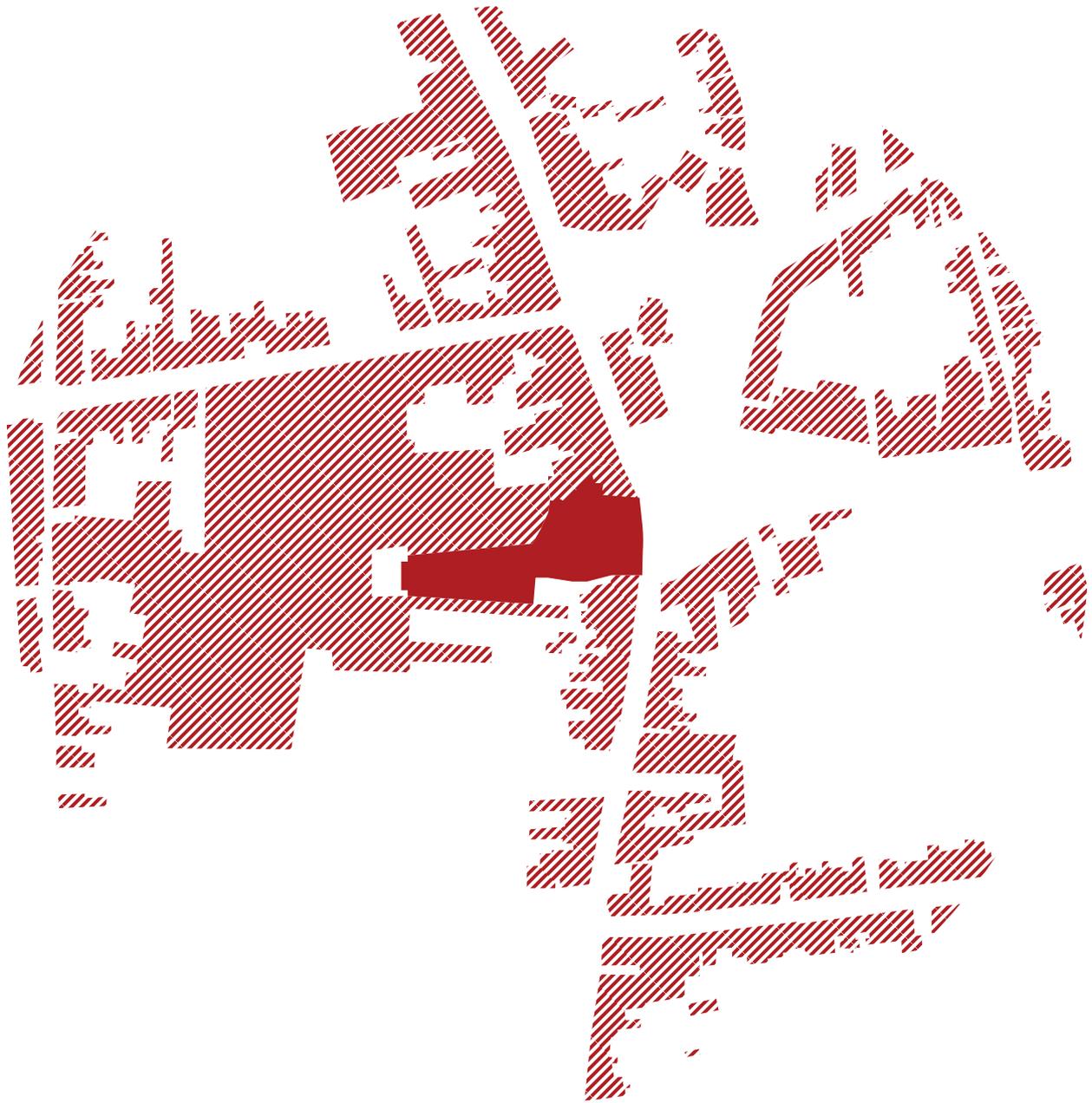
Franz Lefevre
Maison du peuple, Lodelinsart, 1911



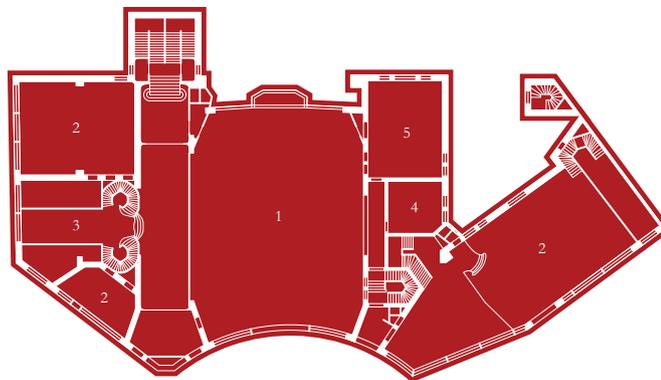
0m 25m 50m 100m 150m 200m



Henri Baur
Volkshaus, Basel, 1925

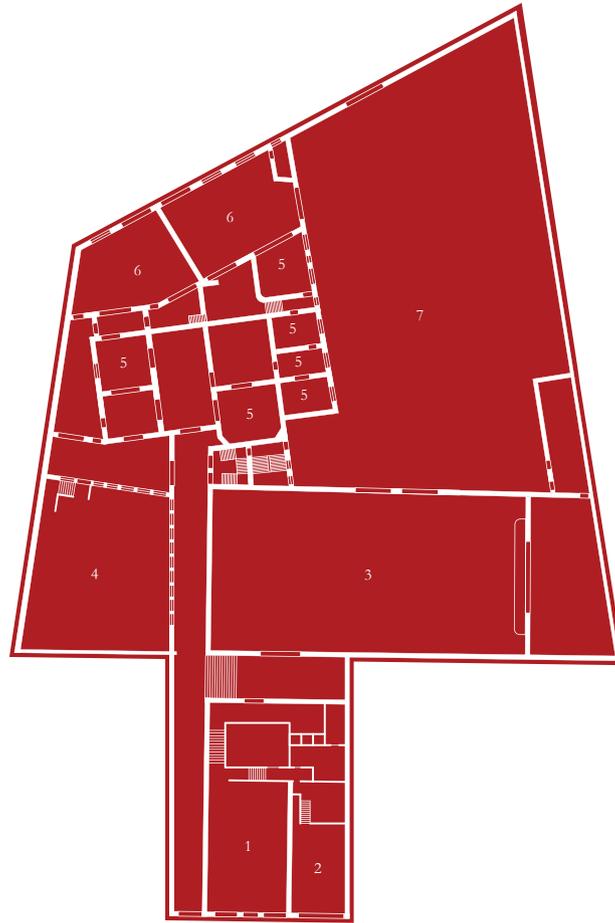


Joseph Moutschen
Maison du peuple, Herstal, 1933



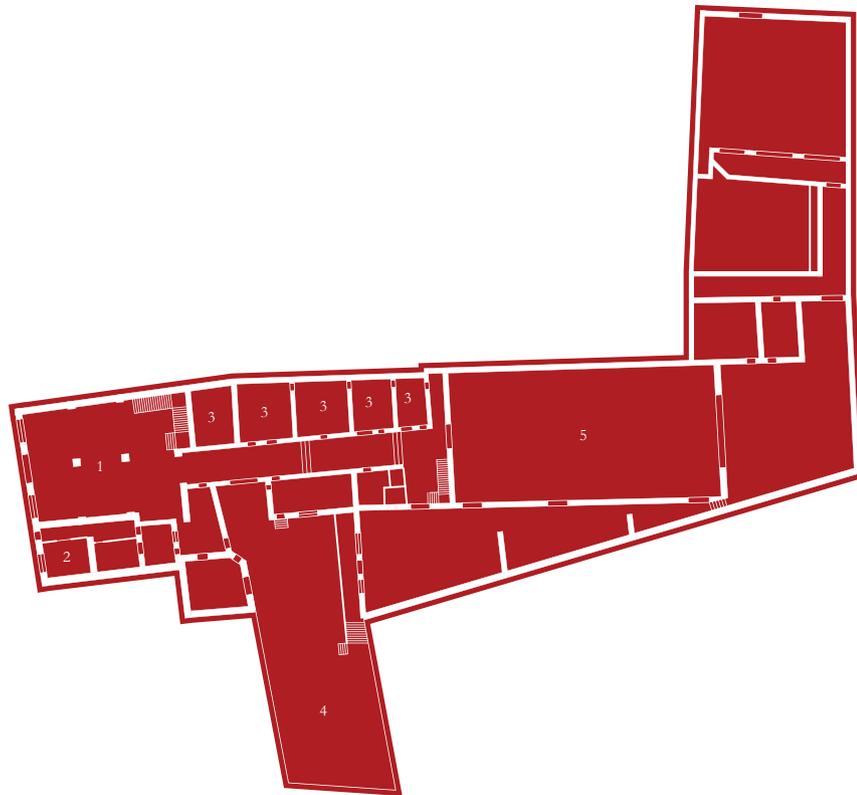
Victor Horta
Maison du peuple, Brussels, 1897
Ground floor

- | | |
|------------------|--------------|
| 1 Café | 5 Game room |
| 2 Shop | + Party Hall |
| 3 Ticket counter | + Offices |
| 4 Buffet | |



Richard Pringiers
 Maison du peuple, Anderlecht, 1911
 Ground floor

- | | |
|----------------|-------------|
| 1 Café | 5 Offices |
| 2 Shop | 6 Workshops |
| 3 Party hall | 7 Courtyard |
| 4 Torrefaction | |

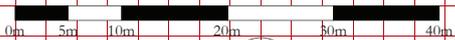


0m 5m 10m 20m 30m 40m



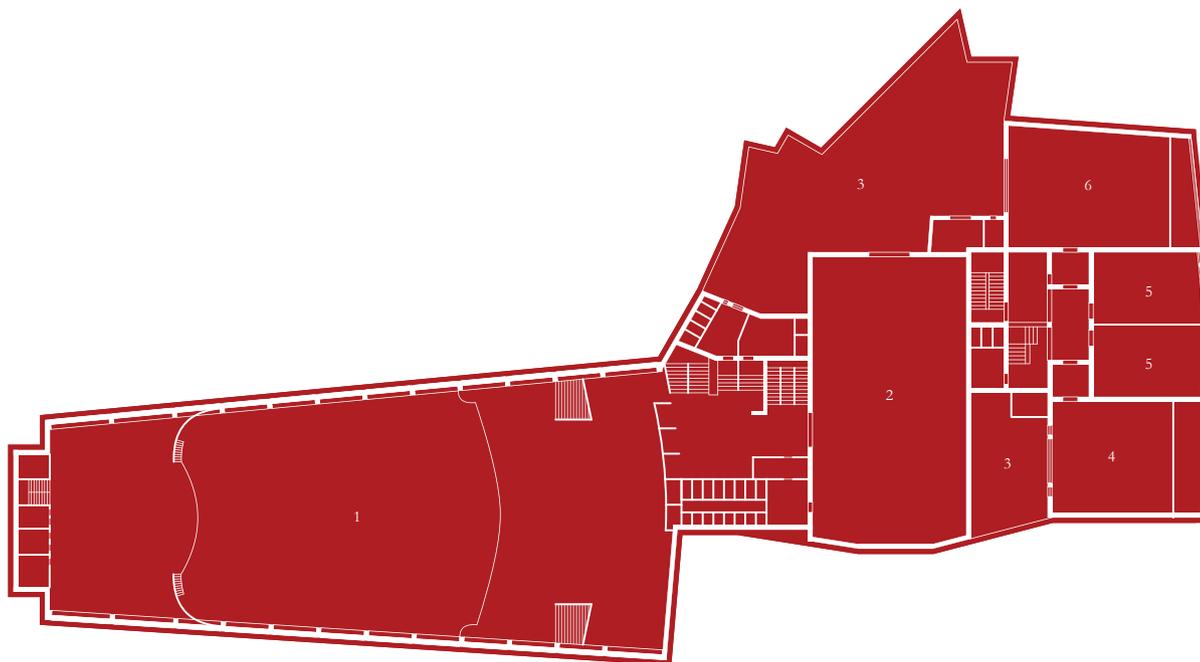
Franz Lefevre
Maison du peuple, Lodelinsart, 1911
Ground floor

1 Café
2 Shop
3 Offices
4 Courtyard
5 Party Hall



Henri Baur
Volkshaus, Basel, 1925
Ground floor

- | | |
|--------------|--------------|
| 1 Shop | 5 Garde-Robe |
| 2 Restaurant | 6 Party Hall |
| 3 Kitchen | + Offices |
| 4 Courtyard | + Bedrooms |

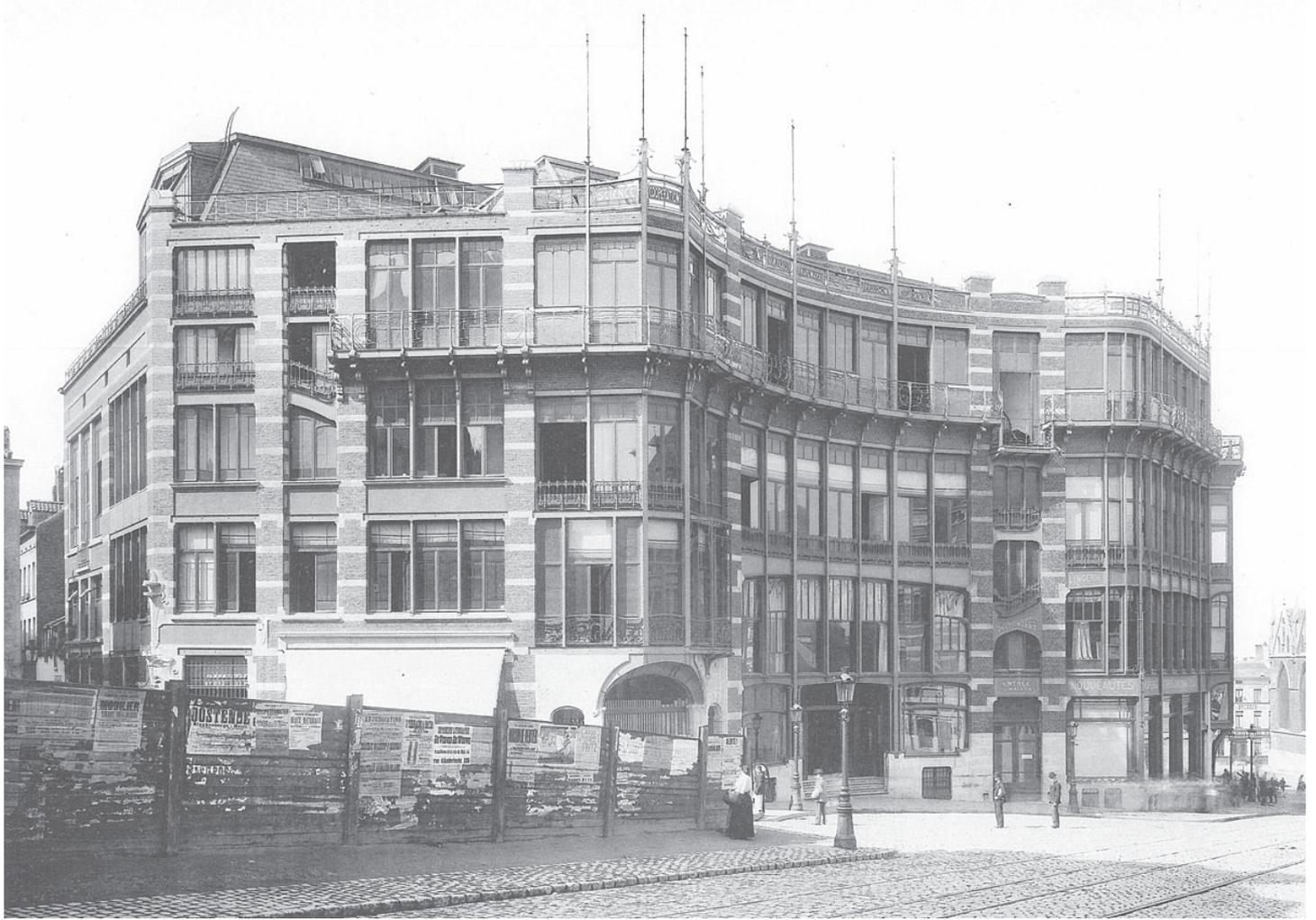


0m 5m 10m 20m 30m 40m



Joseph Moutschen
Maison du peuple, Herstal, 1933
First floor

1 Cinema
2 Gymnasium
3 Courtyard
4 Study room
5 Offices
6 Meeting room
+ Café
+ Buffet-dancing



Victor Horta
Maison du peuple Brussels, 1897



Richard Pringiers
Maison du peuple, Anderlecht, 1911



Franz Lefevre
Maison du peuple, Lodevinsart, 1911



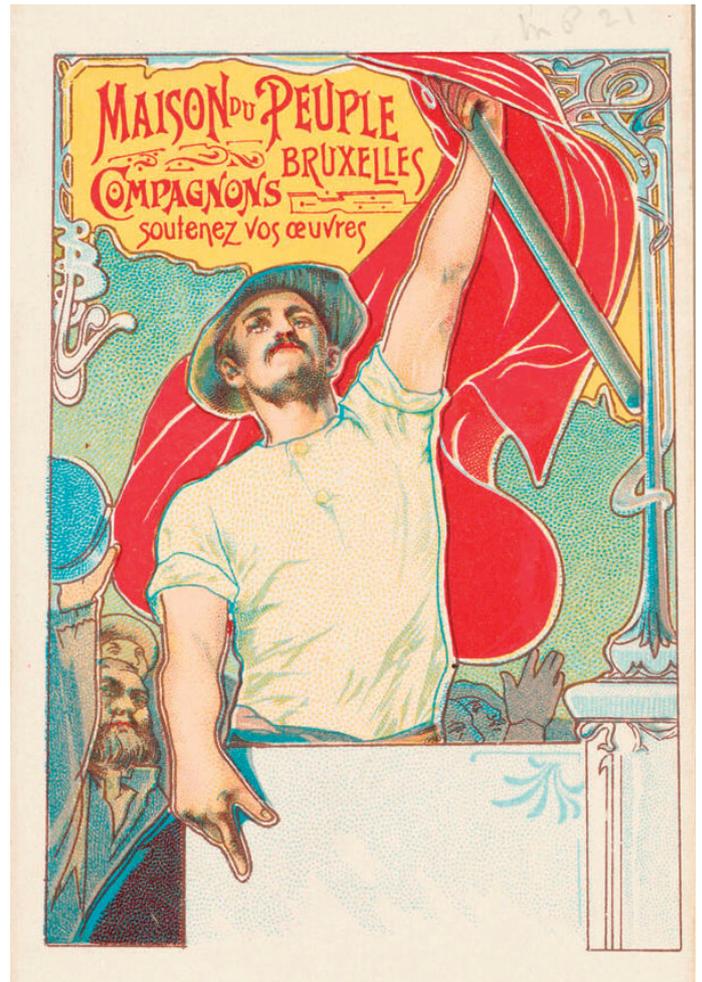
Henri Baur
Volkshaus, Basel, 1925



Joseph Moutschen
Maison du peuple, Herstal, 1933

The origin of the *maisons du peuple* is undetachable from the history of the cooperative movement. At the end of the nineteenth century, in all of Europe, different cooperative unions sprouted bringing affordable consumer goods to the working class. Coalitions of workers looking to protect their means of existence, created these cooperatives commercializing consumables, most often bread¹. And it's precisely with bakeries, in Flanders, that the cooperative societies started; in 1873 the first cooperative in Ghent “de vrije bakkers” was founded by textile workers which would in 1880 transform, with the influence of the textile workers union, into the “Vooruit”, an autonomous and politically committed organization². The model of the Vooruit would diffuse throughout Flanders, Wallonia, and northern France and eventually spread throughout Europe. The main particularity of the Belgian socialist cooperatives being as was stated by the founder of the Vooruit Edouard Anseele: “What characterizes mainly the cooperation, was that it was the creation of socialists that use it to propagate their ideals”³, in other words, bread at the service of ideas. They appeared as spaces of resistance, hubs for militants and workers during strikes, all cooperative *maisons du peuple* took the role of financial and political support to worker movements, especially in Belgium and Italy⁴.

The idea of a ‘clearly differentiated’ private and public sphere in industrial cities must be put into perspective. In fact, social ties were still very important in building up and maintaining the loyalty of an electorate. Politicization in the 19th century was still marked by localism and membership of a community and not one



in which political support was mainly individual and dissociated from traditional leadership practices.

With the *Maison du peuple*, cooperatives and at the same time politics entered the daily life of workers, that went there for numerous reasons. The *maisons du peuple* progressively became the organizational foundation of the everyday life of workers.

The variety of programs brought about by the

¹ Cavanna and Brauman, *Maisons du peuple*, 33..

² Scascighini, *La Maison du peuple - Le Temps d'un Édifice de Classe*, 61.

³ Scascighini, 61.

⁴ Cossart and Talpin, “Les *Maisons du peuple* comme espaces de politisation,” 592.

Fig: Poster for the opening of the Bruxelles Maison du peuple

© President and Fellows of Harvard College

Maison du peuple can be explained by the need for the conservation of popular traditions as well as the activities of the cooperatives and the political organization that took place there. The *Maison du peuple* had to house all the remnants of socialization left by the transition from artisans to workers. In the creation of a *Maison du peuple* the festive and alimentary aims always prevailed⁵.

The festive aspect encompassed all of the activities that were already central in popular celebration and needed a formal space dedicated to it. Popular balls were already numerous before the industrial revolution and were mostly authorized. As the success of balls, they became more and more reprimanded for moral reasons by religious authorities, deeming them indecent. There were no balls without music and popular music was also crucial in socialization and the construction of popular culture: workers would spread song based on



their working conditions⁶. A popular culture staple was also theater, which already illustrated the class divide, the price of seats varying greatly depending on the part of the theatre, eventually leading to exclusively popular theatre venues⁷. As such the *maisons du peuple* always included a party hall that could host these events from ball to theatre, in addition to this hall by the 1930's the cinema would appear in the *maisons du peuple*.

Looking at the alimentary aspects the main components were the different shops: bakers, butcher, etc... which necessitated also a space for production in the case of bakers. The café in particular (even though in some countries such as Switzerland it transitioned to a model more reminiscent of a restaurant), was one of the main components of the *Maison du peuple* as it satisfied sociabilities and the political training of cooperators cotemporally, the *Maison du peuple* would subscribe to newspapers making information, that would've been unavailable cost wise, available to café goers and cooperators.

The *Maison du peuple* was at the same time the cooperative café with its games, its newspapers, the cooperative with its shops, the union, the meeting rooms and its party hall. The Belgian socialist cooperative was the place where interests, duties and pleasure took place.⁸ It was maybe this lack of specialization, considering the variety of activities condensed in this place, that drove its political significance.⁹ Spaces dedicated to political organisations comprised a large part of the program with offices and meeting rooms for unions, cooperatives and party. These parts as they were not publicly accessible were mostly located on the upper floors of building leaving the ground floor to the public, these parts rarely interlacing with few exceptions as was the case with Horta's *Maison du peuple*

⁵ Cavanna and Brauman, *Maisons du peuple*, 34.

⁶ Scascighini, *La Maison du peuple - Le Temps d'un Édifice de Classe*, 18.

⁷ Scascighini, 18.

⁸ Scascighini, 62.

⁹ Cossart and Talpin, "Les *Maisons du peuple* comme espaces de politisation," 585.

Fig.1 The café in Horta's *Maison du peuple*

where a party hall was on the last floor, as such the public had to go through the administrative floors to attend representations.

The educative programmatic aspects of the *Maison du peuple* were more discreet and rarely prevalent, if they were it was mostly linked to the objectives of a particular local leader. Although it can be argued that the system in itself was devoted to education in a more underlying way through the organization itself: the managerial experience gained by the cooperators could be instructive, and the education was mainly enforced by section meetings and general assemblies.

The cooperatives often bought, to use as headquarters, a worker's house and as they encountered more and more commercial success they expanded, demolished and rebuilt their *Maison du peuple* when more space was needed, a modus operandi that would eventually lead to the loss of some of the most flamboyant examples of *Maison du peuple*. As they were prone to expansion some of the examples incorporated existing buildings, although most were built anew especially the most significant.

One of the most peculiar aspects of these constructions was their urban form: as the parcels were bought by the cooperatives, the terrain needed to be sufficiently big to house the extensive program, at the heart of cities and suburbs, with a façade on the street. A result of these constraints are the convoluted shapes that the *Maison du peuple* take, there are two main types: angle buildings and the longitudinal ones. Angle buildings were a rarer occurrence as they were the most exposed to the city, but did occur on more topographically challenging parcels as was the case with the terrain of Victor Horta's *Maison du peuple*.



Longitudinal buildings tried to accommodate the extensive program with the limited access to the street and developed themselves in the depths of the urban fabric.

The *Maison du peuple* have not given a unified architectural production as they were the fruit of the work of individual architects commissioned each time by individual cooperatives. There was no unified movement discussing the architecture of the *Maison du peuple*, the theme would enter the world of academia and the beaux-art only in the mid-1910s, as such the architecture of the *Maison du peuple* took inspiration from the esthetic language of the bourgeoisie. Furthermore, in terms of organization, the *Maison du peuple* had no real model, the importance was not put on copying a plan or distribution but rather on imitating an equipment, a program¹⁰.

¹⁰ Cavanna and Brauman, *Maisons du peuple*, 37.

Fig: The Vooruit Feestlokaal in Ghent
CC: Achilles De Vogelaere, Collectie Archief Gent

The *Maison du peuple* particularly appealed to notions of monumentality as they had to establish themselves as rivals to other institutions in the city, especially considering their limited visibility from the street as the main body of the buildings were comprised inside of the urban blocks, façades made up only a small part of the perimeter of the building. As for angle buildings, the sheer size of these complexes obtained the sought-after monumentality. Some examples that illustrate this quest for monumentality are the constructions made by the Vooruit cooperative in Ghent, the *Maison du peuple* “Ons Huis” built in 1899 situated at the Vrijdagmarkt and the party hall built in 1914, both planned by the architect Fernand Dierkens. The Ons Huis with its massive Corinthian columns and great arched opening reminiscent of more public buildings such as train stations.

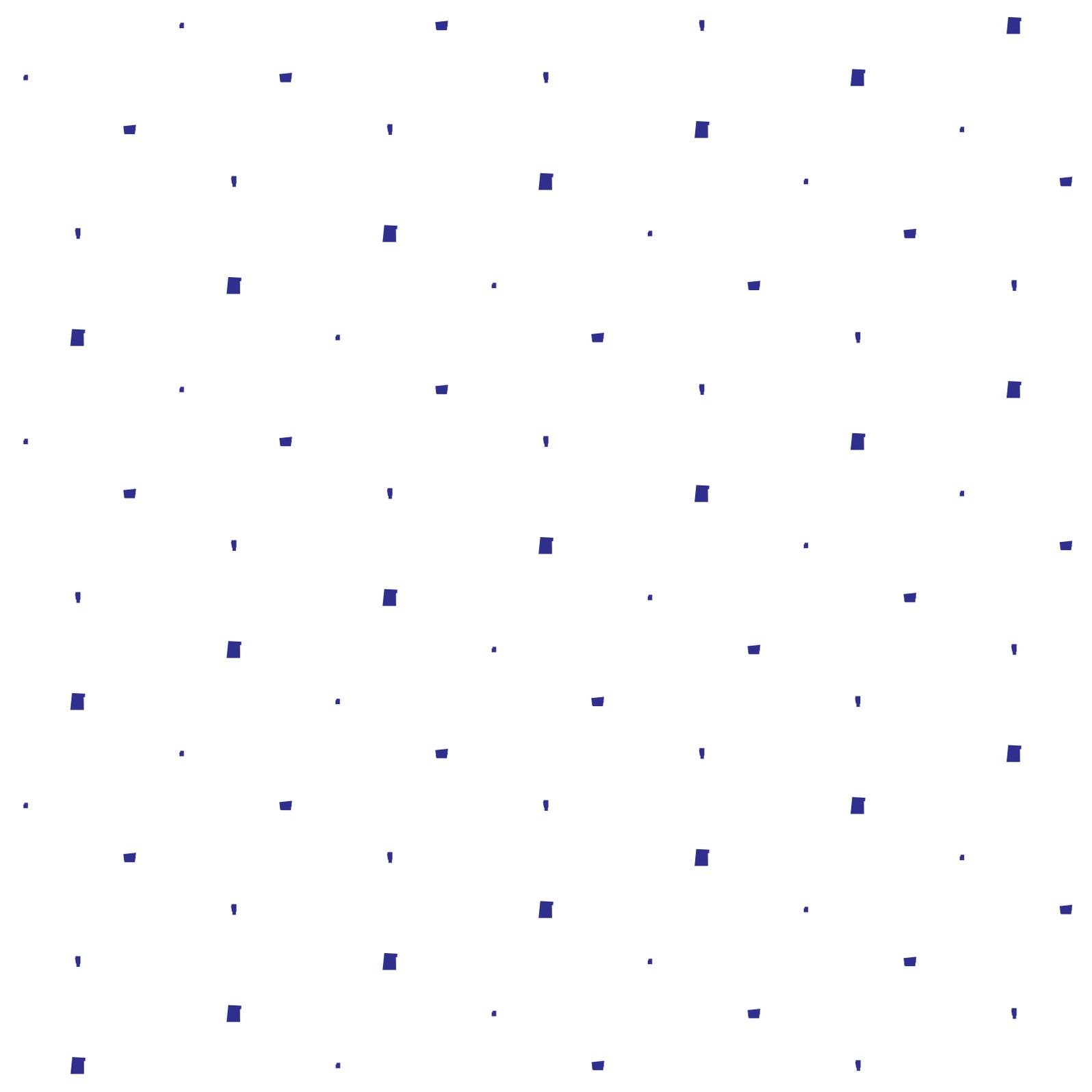
The party hall could be categorized as a longitudinal *Maison du peuple* developing in the depth of the parcel. Although the building’s development area was constrained, more effort was put into the facades, front and back. Not only did the two facades of Art Nouveau inspiration break away from the common architecture of the street but the dimension and size of them completely trumped the surrounding cityscape.

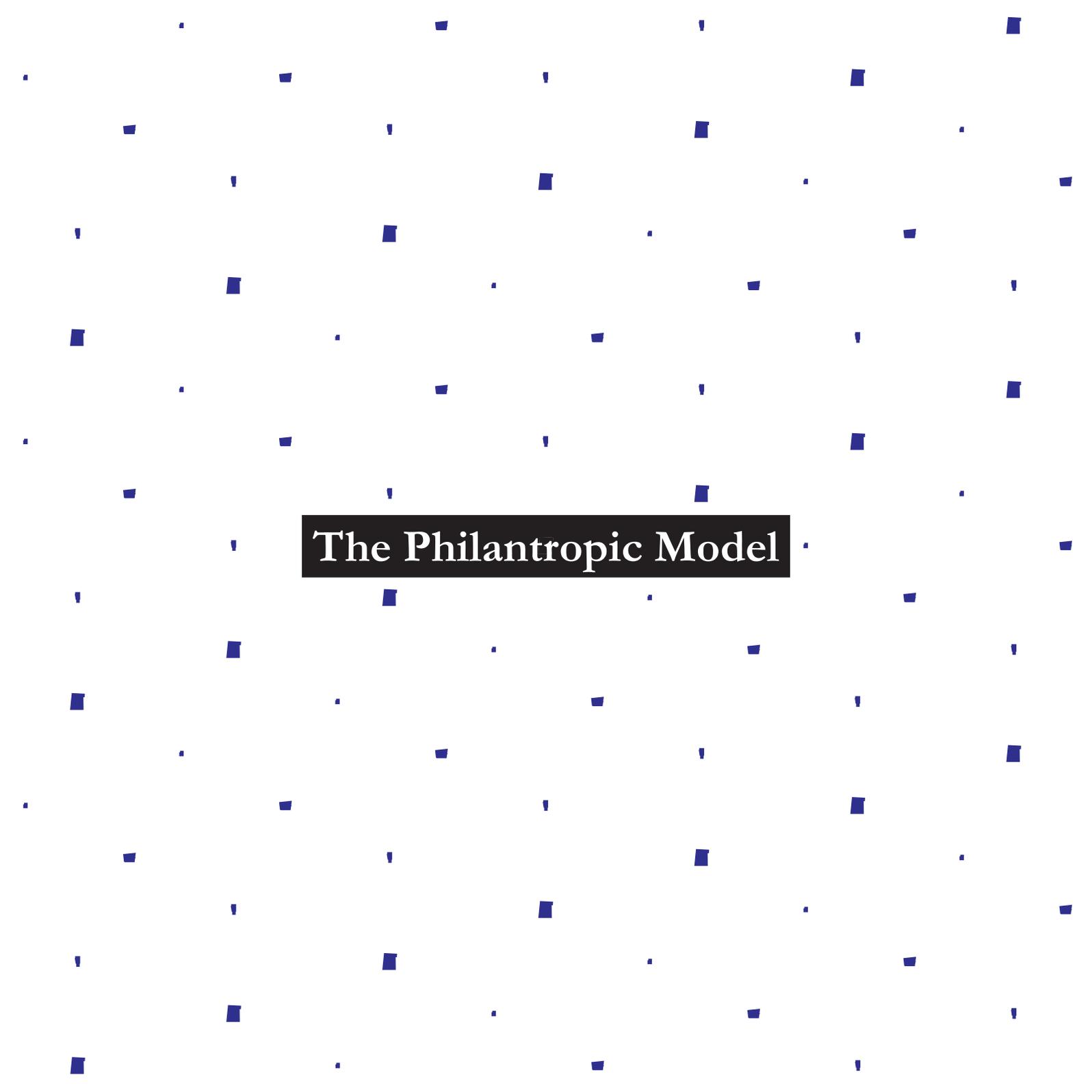
Going back to more general considerations the magnificence of the premises was to be the sign of the administrative capabilities of the working class¹¹. Because they were to be the house of the people, they were to be beautiful. The cooperative showed itself through the luxury of its building, it was a way to catch the eye of the public and attract possibly more cooperators. In this struggle to affirm itself solidly in the cityscape, the *Maison du peuple* followed fashion, the only caveat being the predominance of art-deco for a

period. Maybe only Horta’s flamboyant attempt was able to incorporate the political faith of the working class in the poetics of construction¹².

¹¹ Cossart and Talpin, “Les Maisons du peuple comme espaces de politisation,” 590.

¹² Cavanna and Brauman, *Maisons du peuple*, 35.





The Philanthropic Model



0m 25m 50m 100m 150m 200m



Christian Posthumus Meyjes
Vereniging Ons huis, Amsterdam, 1892



0m 25m 50m 100m 150m 200m



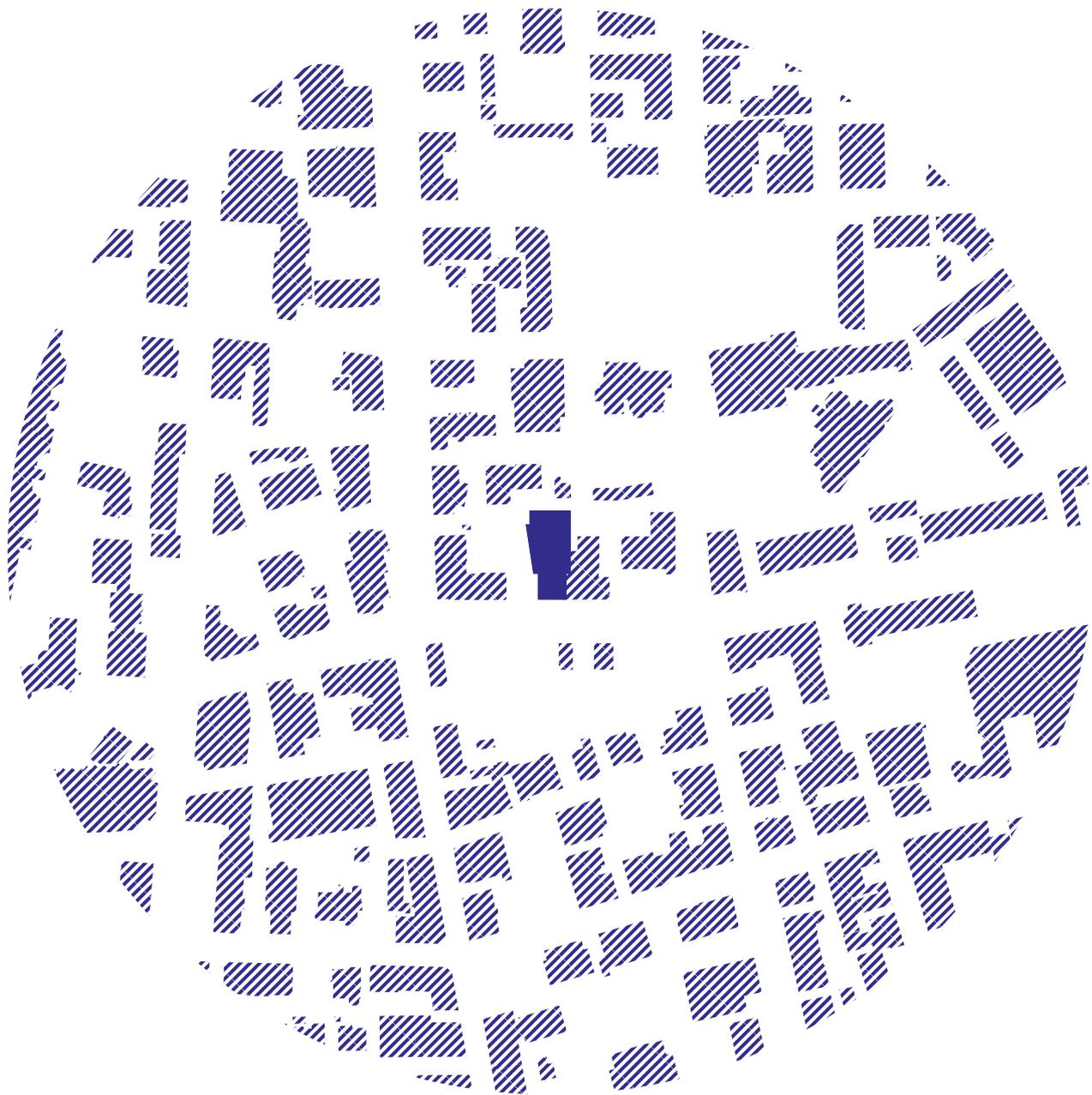
Hubert Gessner
Arbeiterheim Favoritten, Vienna, 1902



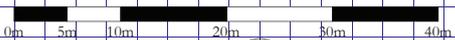
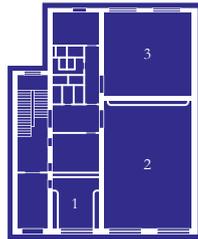
Gottfried Schindler, Johann Rudolf Streiff
Alkohlfreis Volkshaus, Zurich, 1910

0m 25m 50m 100m 150m 200m



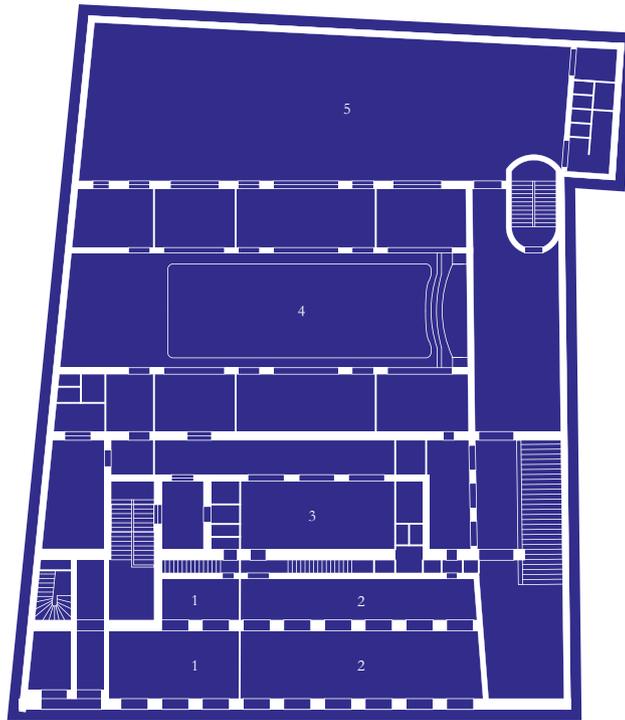


Tita Carloni
Casa del Popolo, Lugano, 1971



Christian Posthumus Meyjes
Vereninging Ons huis, Amsterdam, 1892
Ground floor

- 1 Library
- 2 Reading Room
- 3 Gymnasium
- + Offices
- + Circle
- + Great Hall

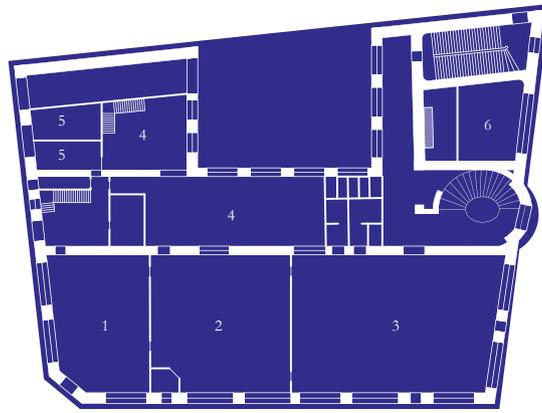


Hubert Gessner
Arbeiterheim Favoritten, Vienna, 1902
Ground floor

- | | |
|-----------|--------------|
| 1 Shop | 5 Courtyard |
| 2 Café | + Offices |
| 3 Kitchen | + Great Hall |
| 4 Hall | + Bedrooms |

0m 5m 10m 20m 30m 40m

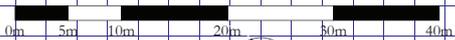
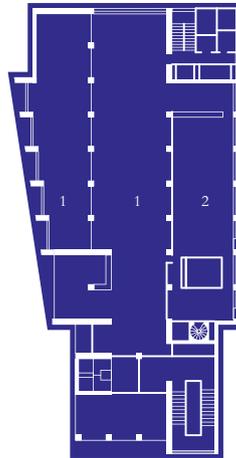




Gottfried Schindler, Johann Rudolf Streiff
 Alkohlfreis Volkshaus, Zurich, 1910
 Ground floor

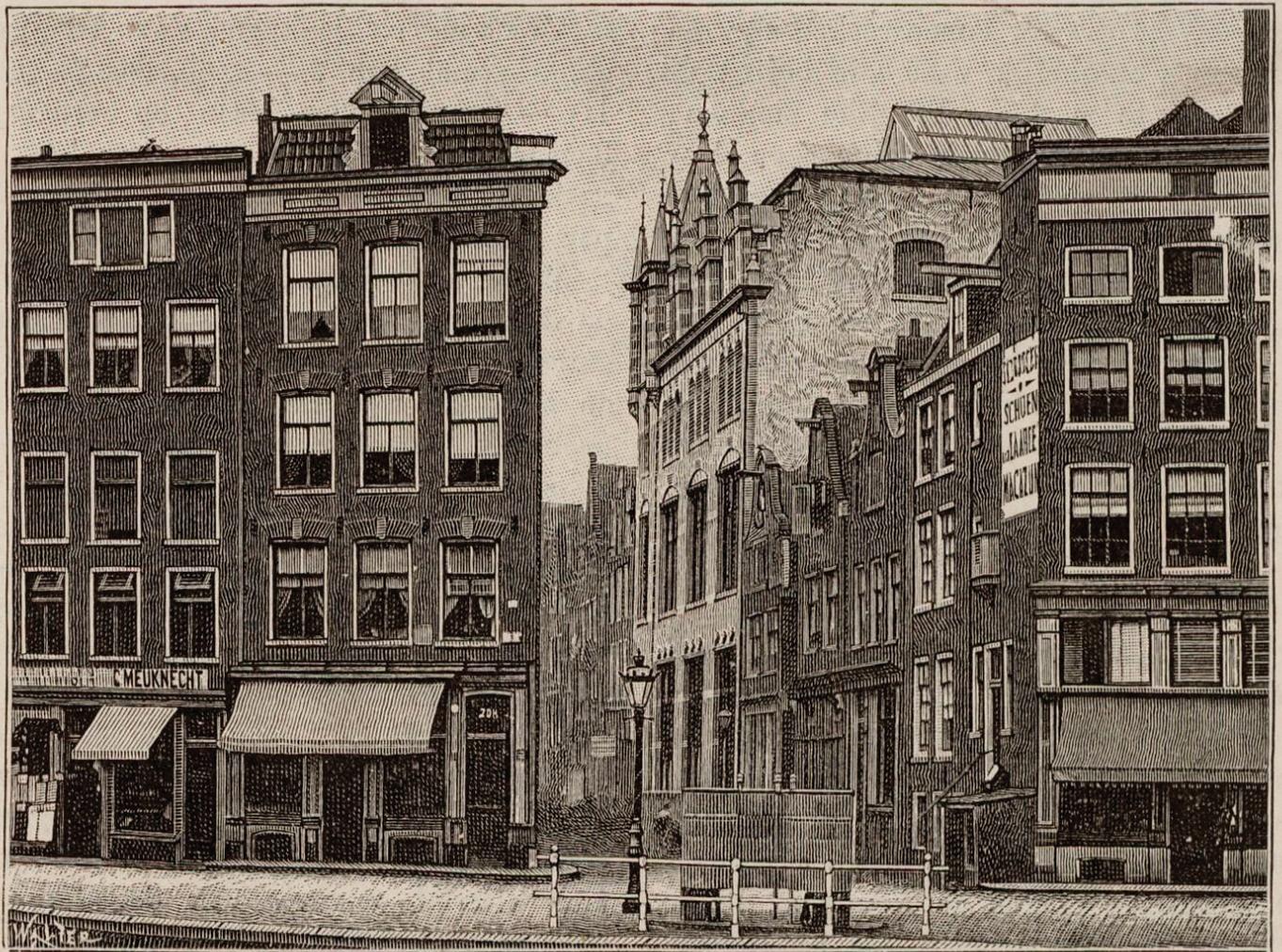
- | | |
|---------------|------------|
| 1 Gymnasium | 5 Offices |
| 2 Dining Room | 6 Shop |
| 3 Restaurant | + Bedrooms |
| 4 Kitchen | |





Titta Carloni
Casa del Popolo, Lugano, 1971
Ground floor

- 1 Restaurant
- 2 Kitchen
- + Offices
- + Bedrooms



»Ons Huis» in de Rozenstraat te Amsterdam. (Photographie van den heer Jb. OLIE.)

Christian Posthumus Meyjes
Vereniging Ons huis, Amsterdam, 1892



Hubert Gessner
Arbeiterheim Favoriten, Vienna, 1902

391 Zürich, Volkshaus



Gottfried Schindler, Johann Rudolf Streiff
Alkohlfreis Volkshaus, Zurich, 1910



Tita Carloni
Casa del Popolo, Lugano, 1971

When speaking of *Maison du peuple* the word that prevails is people, the people. It is precisely how the question of the people is treated in the *Maison du peuple* that define its model. One of the approaches that fostered a second model of *Maison du peuple* opposed to the socialist cooperatives: a house for the people opposed to the house by the people.

With the development of politically oriented socialist cooperatives other neutral and liberal cooperatives followed suit such as “help u zelve” in Antwerp. Whilst at the start they may have been only purely interested in the commercial aspect of the cooperatives, with the emergence of new political concepts, the objectives changed. As was noted in a text by “a friend of the *Maison du peuple*” in 1899: “The majority of the socialist cooperatives don’t cooperate to satisfy personal interests. The objective was to support the party, to earn money to fight off the bourgeoisie. There is an element of faith and ideal that is beautiful and that I regret is not present in our Swiss consumers’ cooperative society, that limits itself to a grocery business”¹.

Liberal thinkers and reformers in the second half of the nineteenth century, inspired by the ideas of the likes of Arnold Toynbee: an English economist and historian, developed the concept of „social debt“. This idea posited that society, particularly the bourgeoisie, had a responsibility to provide opportunities for education and cultural development to the lower classes.

In Vienna the growing concern of the cultural needs of the poorest was taken charge of in popular instruction programs that found their architectural



expression in the *volksbildungsbau*. They were mainly the work of the “enlightened bourgeoisie, that following a particularly violent period, from 1867 gave way to numerous reforms with a new constitution. This was a time when the social gap between the wealthy and the poor had become more pronounced, as evidenced by the fact that in Vienna, there were only 6,000 bourgeois for every 800,000 people. The creation of these institutions was fueled by a growing awareness

¹ Scascighini, *La Maison du peuple - Le Temps d'un Édifice de Classe*, 64.

Fig: Poster for the liberal cooperative Help U Zelve, 1904
© Alfred Van Neste, Collection city of Antwerp

of the vast inequalities in society and the belief that something had to be done to address the cultural and educational needs of the working class. Though the goal for which this education was needed wasn't always clear, Adolf Loos joked about the role of the *Maison du peuple* by saying that they had to be built so that workers rather than becoming Bolsheviks would transform into aristocrats².

In Switzerland, the model of the *Maison du peuple* had a slightly different focus. The first *Maisons du peuple* were still deeply connected to socialist movements, but by 1913, figures like H. Windler began to assess the influence of these institutions and recommended a more neutral approach to avoid political polarization. They emphasized the importance of these buildings as places for instructive and healthy activities, designed to fill the gaps left by traditional educational structures,



² Cavanna and Brauman, *Maisons du peuple*, 127.
³ Cavanna and Brauman, 126.

such as the master-apprentice bonds of the old artisanal systems. The goal was to create spaces of social pacification, where the working class could be educated and integrated into society without being subjected to radical political ideologies.

The philanthropic model can be associated to different movements on a political spectrum from social-democracy to christian-democracy, so the political components of these *maisons du peuple* can vary. With the emergence in all social classes of concerns over education and instruction of the people social christians and social democrats shared the same vision³. As an example, from the buildings chosen to illustrate this type Gessner's Arbeiterheim Favoriten could be set apart from the others as it is less pacifying and more closely linked to the worker's movement but as it originates from bourgeois initiative even a politically motivated one it is considered part of the philanthropic *Maison du peuple*.

The notion of neutrality and of open-mindedness played a significant role in the elaboration of the program for the instruction of the working class, it was to make the architecture resonate. Creating a place where light and thought would illuminate the working class.

Program-wise the alterations were minimal, in most cases the size of the *Maison du peuple* itself limits its programmatic capabilities, though greater emphasis was put on education.

Whereas the socialist models did not focus on instruction as much favoring political organizations, philanthropic institutions operated in reverse putting aside in most cases the most politically driven programs to push forward the educative ones. The general assemblies that embodied the participation of each cooperator in

Fig: Swiss consumers' cooperative society, 1890
© Antoine Detraz, Bibliothèque de Genève

the decision-making process were not respected and put in place in neutral and catholic institutions linked to the heads of industry⁴. There could still be offices for the workers' societies, the only issue being that in these buildings the worker organizations were not at "home", they rented the spaces. In some cases, this gave rise to charters for the renters as is the case for example in the Zurich *alkoholfreie volksbaus*. The code of conduct was centered on hygiene of course hygiene of the body but also of the mind (through education and culture), and of the soul (Christian morals), the three being reunited in the abstinence from alcohol⁵.

In the *Maison du peuple* the workers were to find healthy food in the café/restaurant, public hygiene facilities, libraries offices, reading rooms, and conference halls. One of the particularities program-wise was the presence of rooms to house workers for a short period of time, generally for newly arrived workers. These housings were a staple of Swiss *maisons du peuple* but were also present in cases in Vienna.

At this point it is crucial to distinguish the nuances in the way these philanthropic institutions functioned. Even if they were all born from philanthropy the degree to which the program aimed to education or just tutelage. The complexity of the program being hindered in tutelage institutions until only few parts of the program remain: Tita Carloni's *casa del popolo* in Lugano had only three components the café, the offices and hostel rooms. Whereas other buildings seeking to be beacons of the culture of the people such as Max Fabiani's Urania in Vienna harbored a way more ambitious program, vast amenities for avant-garde conferences, projection of films with pedagogical aim, "scientific theatre" an observatory⁶, the whole housed in a massive building at the intersection of the Viennese

ring and the most popular boroughs.

Considering that this type is more connected to an idea of what is the role of the *Maison du peuple*, and the longevity and multiplicity of actors, it would be hazardous to consider it an architecturally consistent type. Just as the cooperative *maisons du peuple* took from the aesthetic codes of the bourgeoisie the philanthropic *maisons du peuple* followed these architectural trends as well. In some cases, the aesthetic choices were a direct reaction to socialist models, the Antwerp liberal cooperative Help-U-Zelve was strongly inspired by the impact of the Brussels *Maison du peuple* and tried to imitate it, taking inspiration from Horta's art nouveau architecture to affirm itself as on par with it⁷.

Maybe another difference with the socialist cooperatives when looking at the plans is the size of them, a part of the body of buildings, especially the more controlling institutions paled in comparison to the size of the massive and monumental socialist *maisons du peuple*. This could be explained by the objective of these institutions which was the pacification of the working class, as such the cooperative aspect wasn't as prevalent so there was no real need for expansion, no real urgency, leading to a more contained type. Red Vienna might be the only episode where philanthropic institutions invested the theme of monumentality as shown by Gessner's Arbeiterheim Favoriten and Max Fabiani's Urania.

Contrary to the convoluted morphology of the socialist cooperative's *Maison du peuple*, the philanthropic one being funded by the "enlightened" bourgeoisie, the more handiwork aspects were left out: their form was more conventional, more in phase with the way buildings were planned at a certain place in a certain time. In the

⁴ Cossart and Talpin, "Les Maisons du peuple comme espaces de politisation", 604.

⁵ Scascighini, *La Maison du peuple - Le Temps d'un Édifice de Classe*, 141.

⁶ Scascighini, 87.

⁷ Cavanna and Brauman, *Maisons du peuple*, 41.



rarely located in the working-class suburbs of industrial cities. As they were to house both the bourgeoisie and working-class, they could not be in purely working-class areas.

dense urban fabrics of Vienna and Amsterdam they resembled more a tenement building than anything else. In the case of Vienna, it can be argued that the whole architecture derived from the Wagner school around 1900 reflected architecturally the aims of the liberal ideals: The spatial organization of these buildings must reflect the scientific approach⁸. The architectural production of the Wagner school in particular used the formal repertoire of tenement buildings, Wagner intended to use the planning of such types of buildings as exercises and not rules to approach buildings such as the *Maison du peuple*⁹. In this case the use of more speculative forms was not ideologically driven but rather ingrained in the architectural practice of the time.

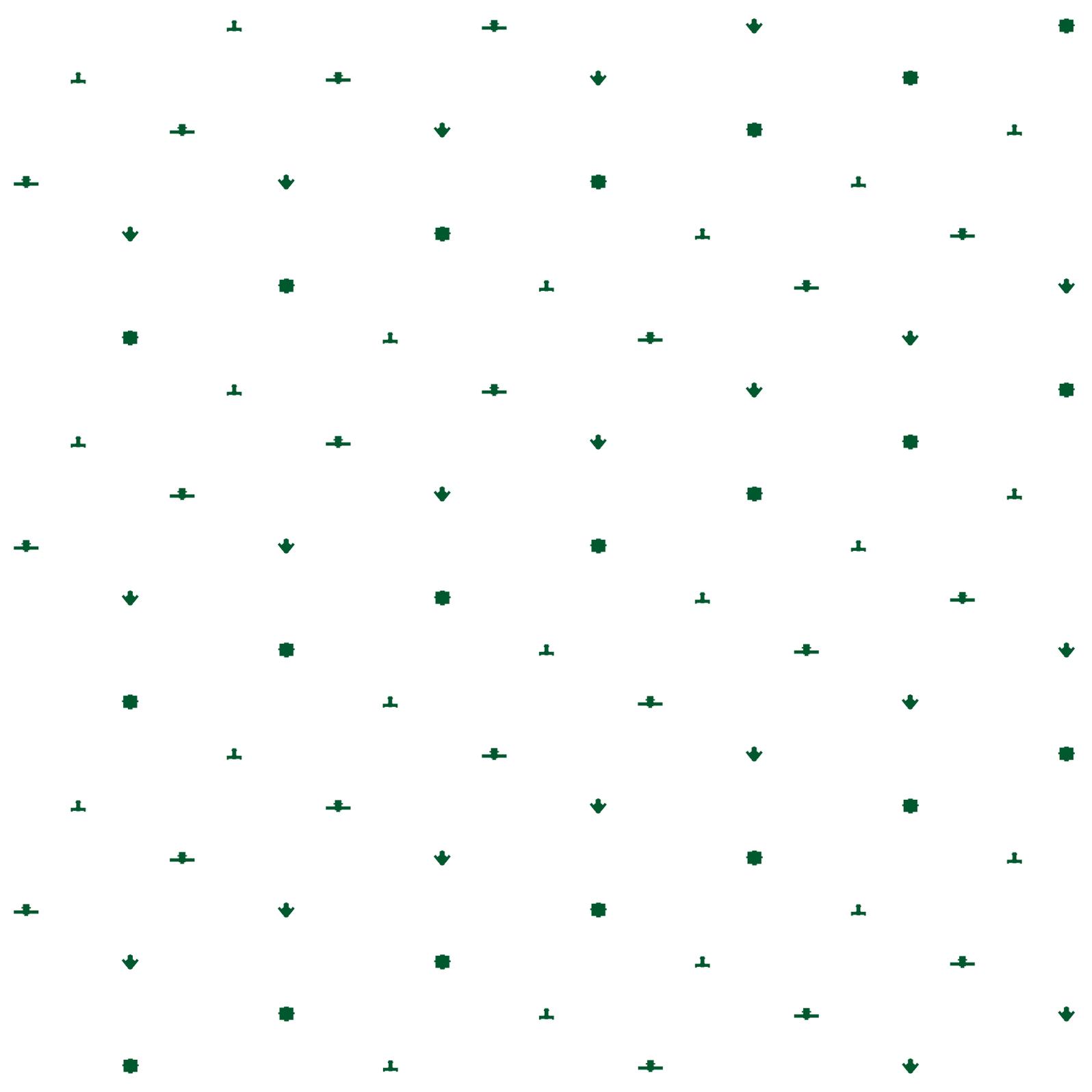
It is also important to note that these buildings were located at the center of the agglomerations and were less numerous than its socialist counterparts and

⁸ Cavanna and Brauman, *Maisons du peuple*, 128.

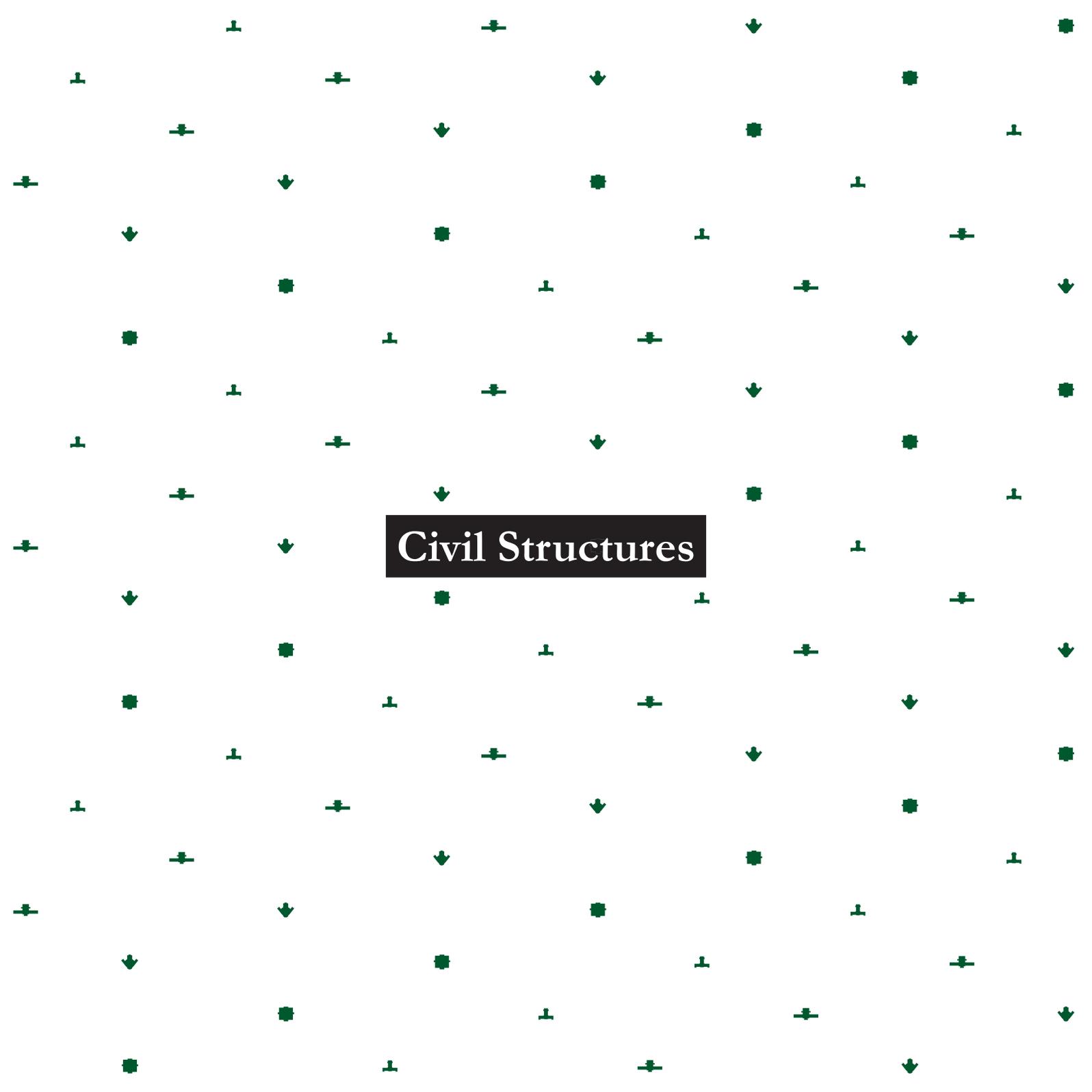
⁹ Cavanna and Brauman, 131.

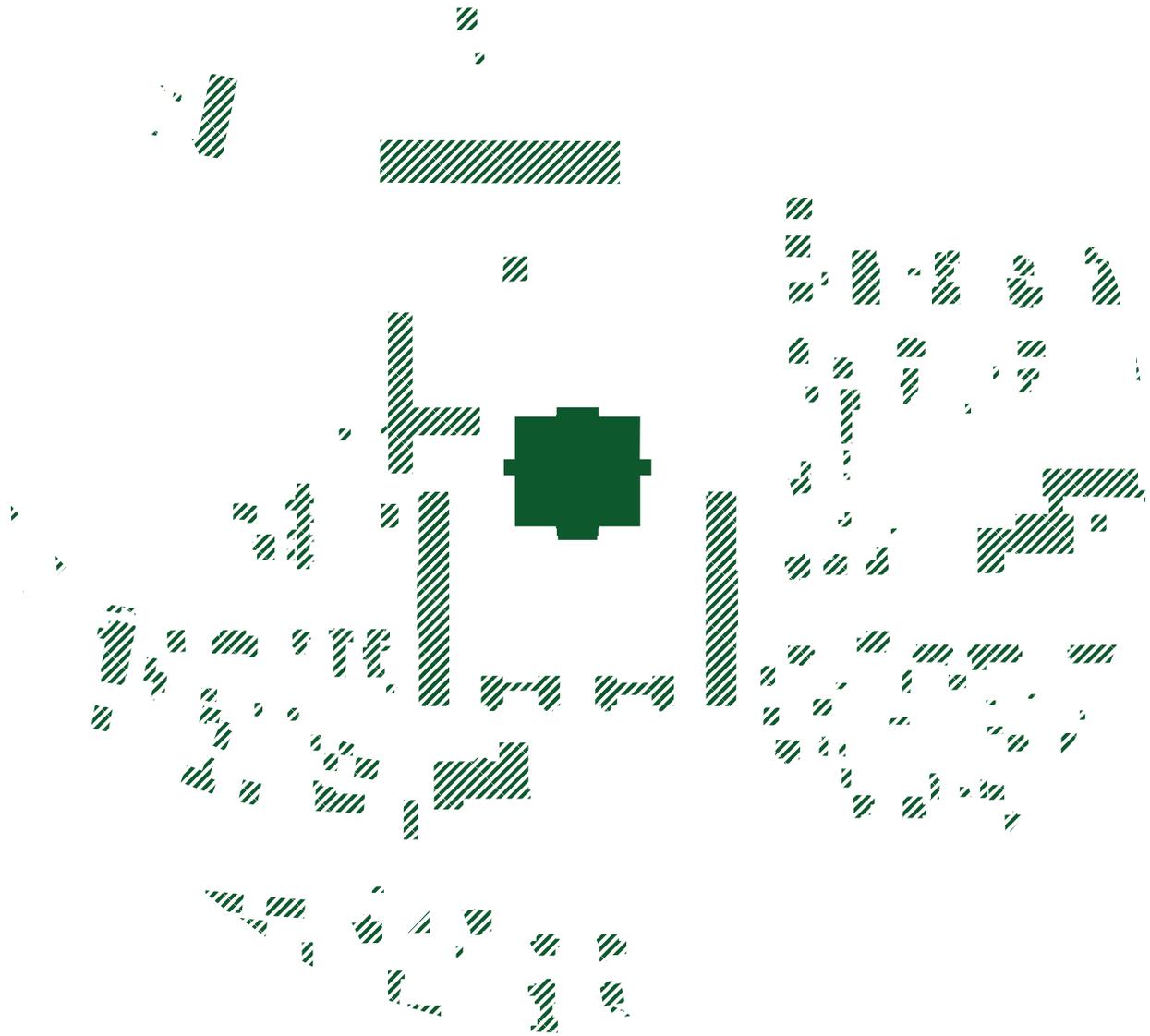
Fig: Max Fabiani's Urania in Vienna

CCO Brüder Kolb KG, Wien Museum



Civil Structures





Heinrich Tessenow
Festspielhaus Hellerau, Dresden, 1911

0m 25m 50m 100m 150m 200m



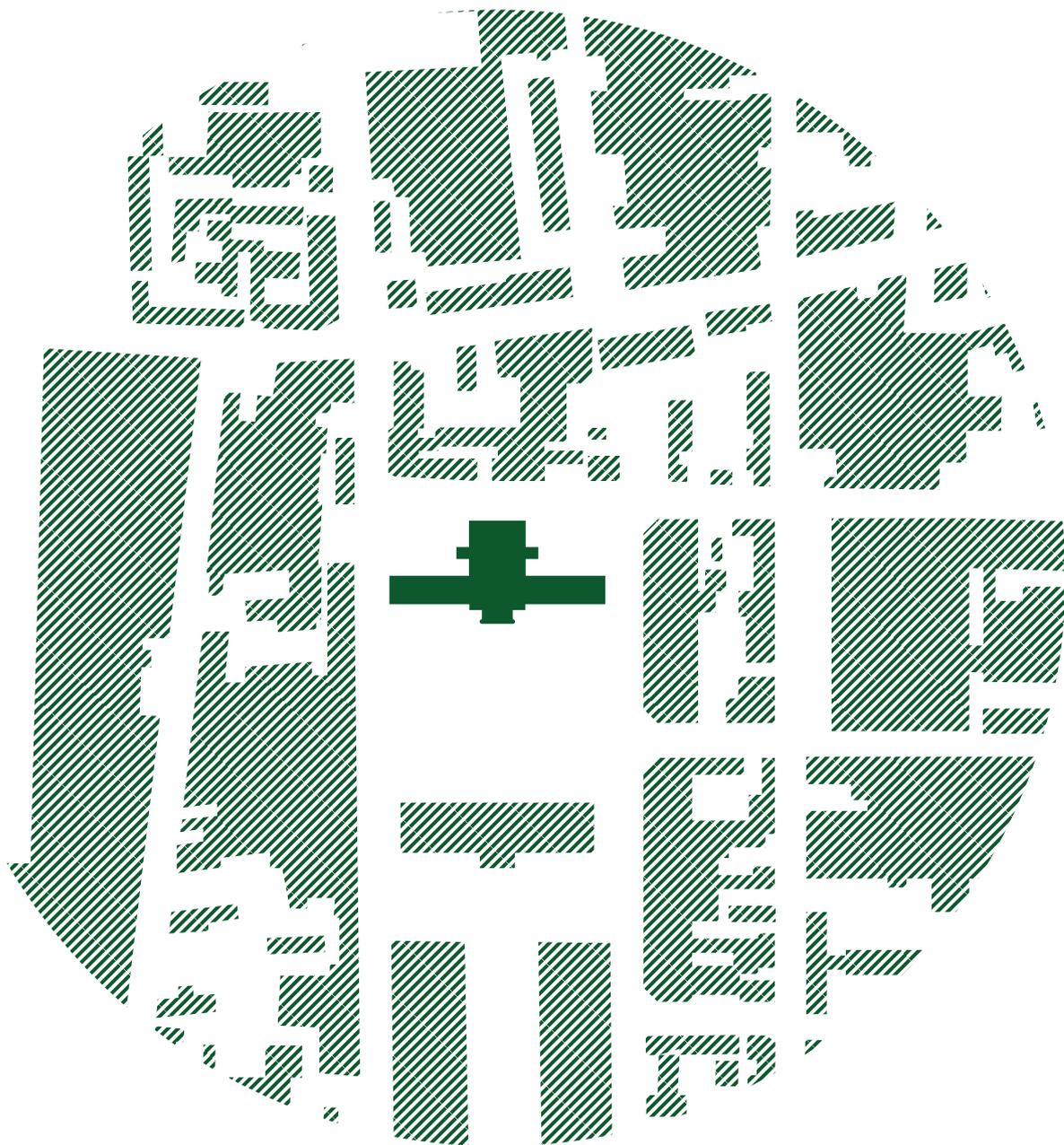


0m 25m 50m 100m 150m 200m



Jean-Marcel Auburtin

Maison commune du Chemin-Vert, Reims, 1922



Monice Leroux
Palais du travail, Villurbanne, 1934

0m 25m 50m 100m 150m 200m

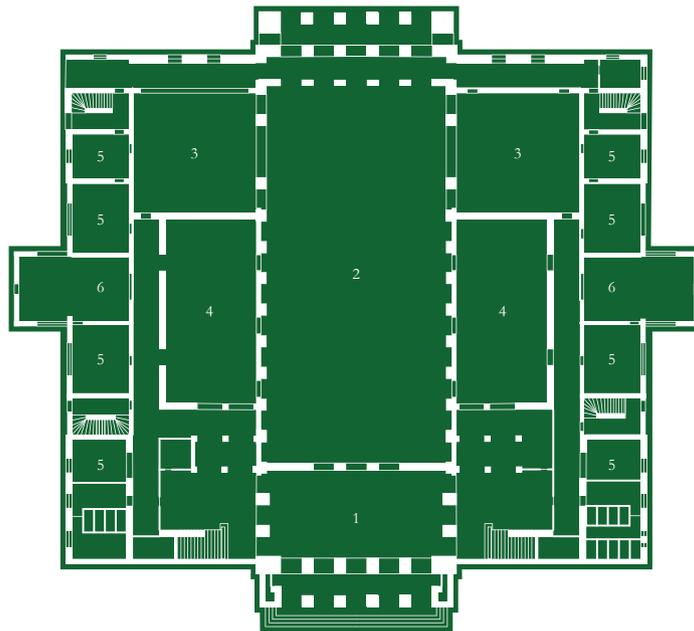




Louis Weckerlin
Maison du peuple, Venissieux, 1935

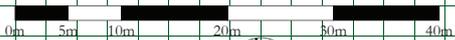
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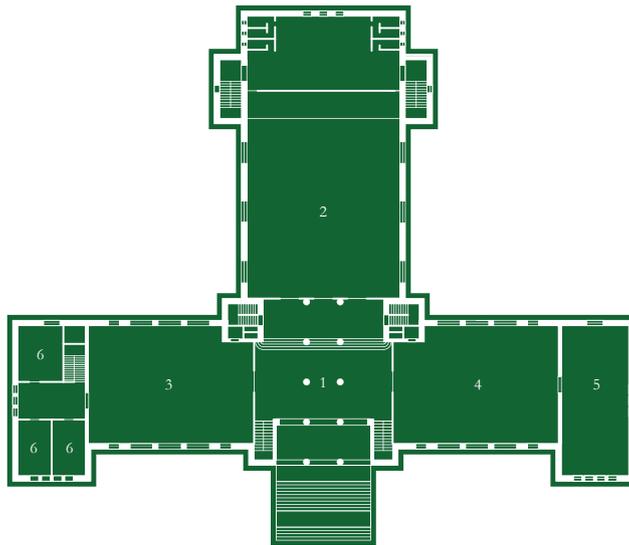




Heinrich Tessenow
 Festspielhaus Hellerau, Dresden, 1911
 Ground floor

- 1 Lobby
- 2 Theater Hall
- 3 Repetition Room
- 4 Oberlichtsaal
- 5 Offices
- 6 Staff Room

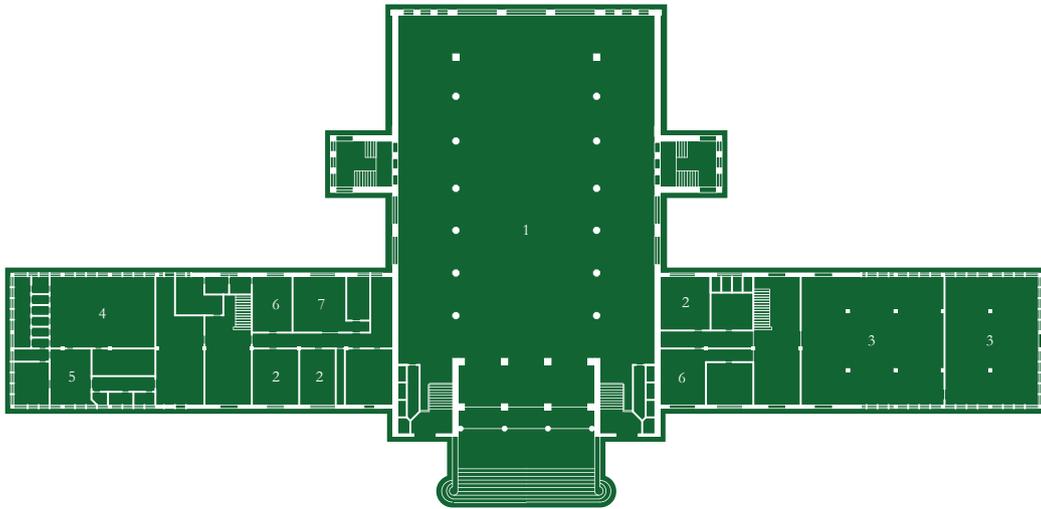




Jean-Marcel Auburtin
 Maison commune du Chemin-Vert, Reims, 1922
 First floor

- 1 Lobby
- 2 Theater Hall
- 3 Library
- 4 Circle
- 5 Classroom
- 6 Offices
- + Showers



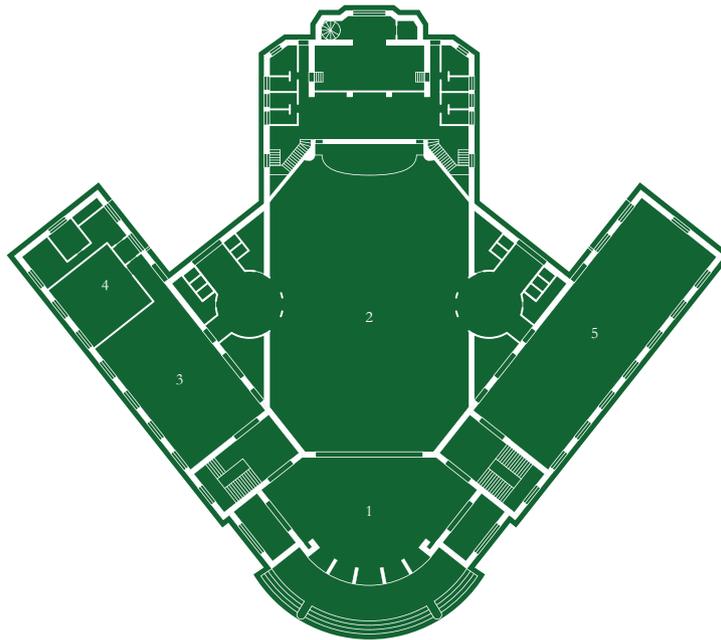


Morice Leroux
 Palais du travail, Villurbanne, 1934
 Ground floor

- | | |
|---------------|-----------------|
| 1 Café/Circle | 5 Dispensary |
| 2 Offices | 6 Accomodation |
| 3 Classroom | + Theater |
| 4 Gymnasium | + Swimming-pool |

0m 5m 10m 20m 30m 40m





Louis Weckerlin
Maison du peuple, Venissieux, 1935
Ground floor

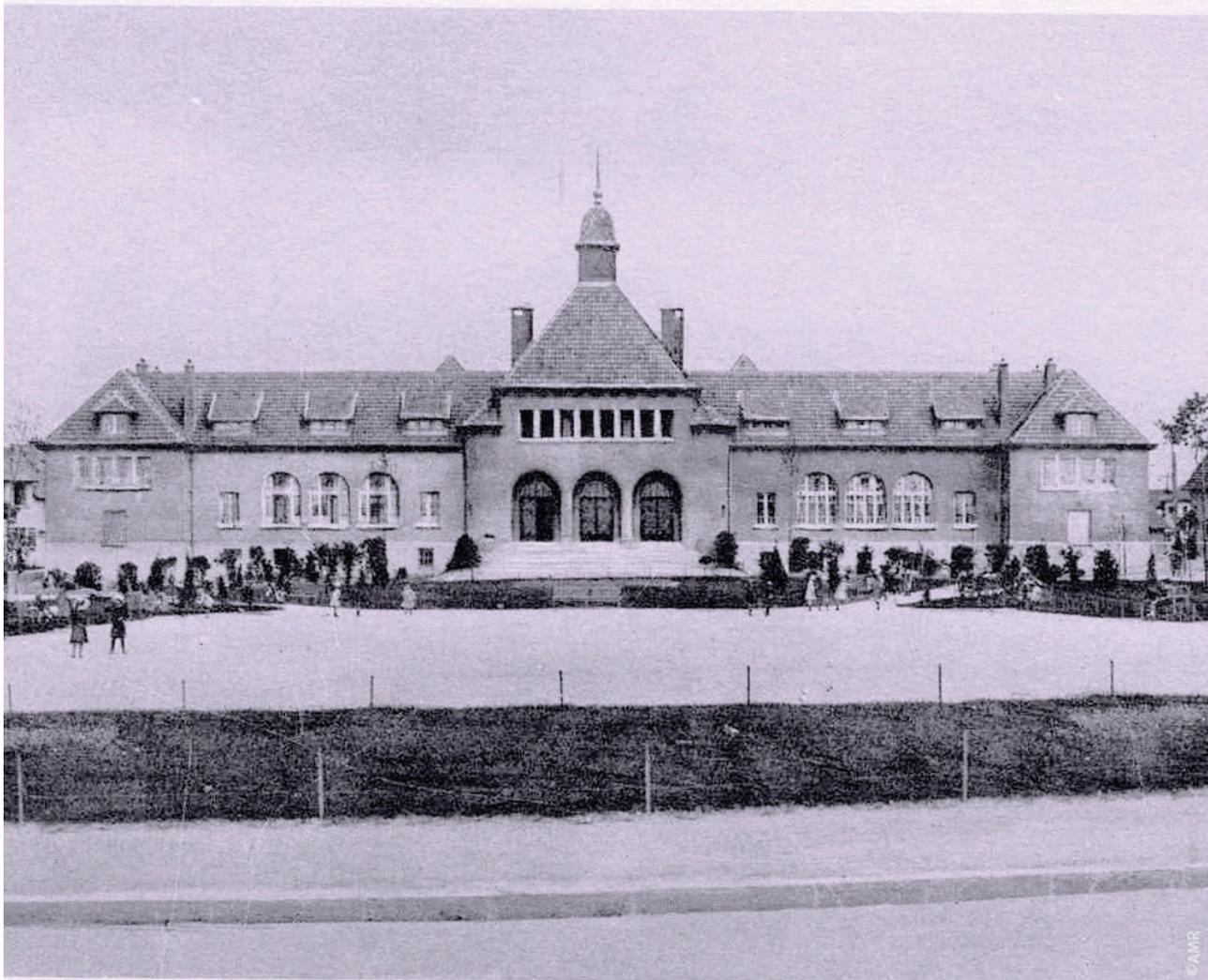
1 Lobby
2 Theater Hall
3 Café
4 Dispensary

5 Classroom
+ Offices



Heinrich Tessenow
Festspielhaus Hellerau, Dresden, 1911

REIMS - FOYER RÉMOIS - Cité-jardin du Chemin-Vert



Maison Commune (Salle des fêtes, cercle, bibliothèque)

Jean-Marcel Auburtin
Maison commune du Chemin-Vert, Reims, 1922



Monice Leroux
Palais du travail, Villeurbanne, 1934



31 Mars 1935

LA CONSTRUCTION MODERNE

575

Maison du peuple de Venissieux : L. Weckerlin, Architecte.

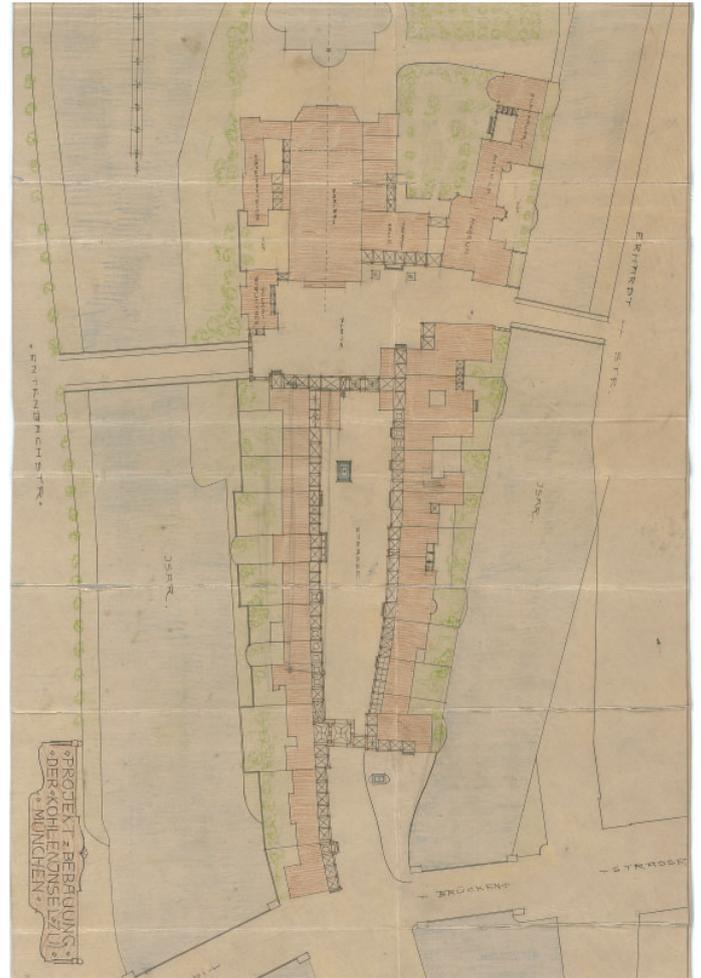
Florentin, Phot.

Louis Weckerlin
Maison du peuple, Venissieux, 1935

Florentin Pilot, *La construction Moderne* N26

This chapter focuses on the appropriation of the *Maison du peuple* at the turn of the twentieth century by emerging urban models, the first time the *maisons du peuple* were part of urban planning.

At the start of the twentieth century in Germany urban solutions were sought after to decongest cities through a reform of urbanism: giving rise to the *siedlungen* and garden cities inspired by Ebenezer Howard. These solutions implied the creation of a central building that would be at the center not only of the new settlement in a geographical sense but also socially, a building at the center of social interactions and social pacification¹. In 1901 Theodor Fischer planned a sort of ideal Bavarian town that would adapt to nature and its surroundings, built around tradition (not in a blind adherence to tradition) and locality². A town with a curved road and individual houses and at the center of it a public hall, what could be considered a *volksbaus*, a *Maison du peuple*. In the following years, Fischer will have the occasion to elaborate on his conception of the *volksbaus* on four separate occasions, the most influential of which will be the Pfullinger Halle built in 1905. The case of the Pfullinger Halle will set some of the characteristics of *Maison du peuple* in the context of the garden cities stylistically and typologically even though some of the characteristics are not as well defined as they will be. Some of the themes of this garden city *Maison du peuple* are directly inherited from the previous iterations of philanthropic and bourgeois *Maison du peuple* with the continuation of the fight against alcoholism and collective hygiene facilities³.



The movement of the garden cities also reached France, in 1903 the Association for garden cities was founded. The theme made a resurgence with the First World War, at a moment where the reconstruction of communities was key. In 1915 a manual written by Edouard Redont, Donat-Alfred Agache and Jean-Marcel Auburtin (who would become the architect of the Chemin Vert Garden city of Reims in 1922),

1 Scascighini, *La Maison du peuple - Le Temps d'un Édifice de Classe*, 95.

2 Nerdinger, "Theodor Fischer."

3 Scascighini, *La Maison du peuple - Le Temps d'un Édifice de Classe*, 96.

Fig. Development plan for a town on coal island, 1901

CC Theodor Fischer, <http://mediatum.ub.tum.de/975499>

regarding the reconstruction of destroyed cities, was published.⁴ In this work, the authors stated their interest in municipal buildings called *maisons communes*, present in small cities. This movement embodied by the association of “reconstructed cities” also emphasized the theme of tradition and morality by referencing the image of the village and the rural town hall.

In 1917 Tony Garnier published “An Industrial City. Study for the construction of cities” a manifesto of urbanism with strong progressive components heavily influenced by the strong socialist ideals present in the region of Lyon. In 1919 Garnier became the chief architect of the city of Lyon and had the opportunity to apply the model he developed in his publication. He had plans for a space of mass assembly that would concentrate all the social partners of the whole agglomeration in the same complex. The project would



not be built due to its vastness and ambitious program; however, it will strongly influence further development in France of the *Maison du peuple*.

By the 1930s in France, public entities, mostly socialist municipalities, used the program of the *Maison du peuple* in their urban planning, encouraged by the Front Populaire as an urban and social reform following the example of the *palais du travail* built in Villeurbanne in 1931.

These civil infrastructures are to be considered an evolution, a continuation of both cooperative and philanthropic *Maison du peuple*, the objectives aligning with one or the other depending on the case but all the while maintaining a similar and consistent form. It is especially in the urban peripheries that the divide between the two policies of the garden cities and of the municipality’s equipments.⁵

Theodor Fischer described the aim of his ideal *volksbaus* as:

“a house not to be inhabited by an individual or a family, but by all: not to study and become wise, but rather simply happy; not to pray according to this or that belief, but rather to mediate and to live intimately. Therefore, not a school, nor a museum, nor a church, nor a concert hall, nor an auditorium! something of all of these and also something more.”⁶ This vast array of functions striving for something greater than just the sum of them could be dismissed as a heartfelt sentiment linked to the underlying moral objectives of the Garden City movement but it remained consistent even in socialist municipalities as shown by the *Palais des Arts, des Sports et du Travail* built in Narbonne, which name is explicit enough.

Performance spaces emerged as key themes for

⁴ Cavanna and Brauman, *Maisons du peuple*, 164.

⁵ Cavanna and Brauman, 173.

⁶ Hannah, *Event-Space*, 56.

Fig: Pfullingen Hallen, 1906

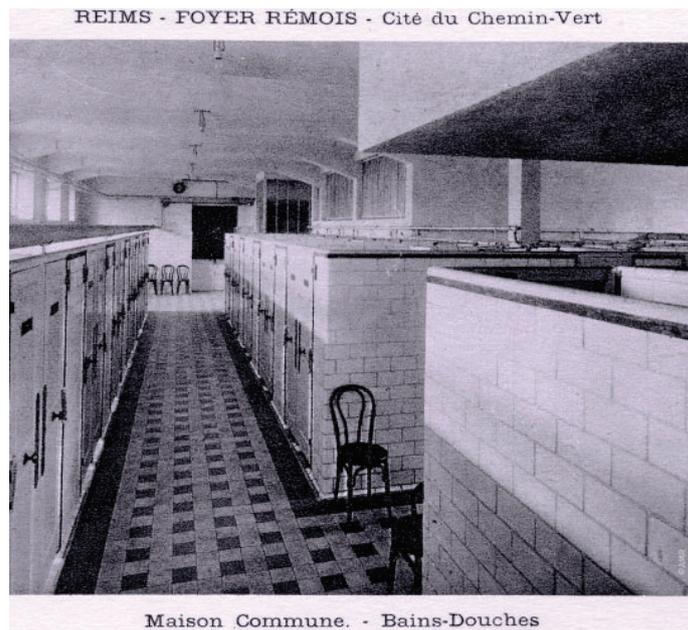
CC Theodor Fischer, <https://mediatum.ub.tum.de?id=1263155>

the Deutscher Werkbund (an organisation comprised of craftsmen artists and architects co-founded by Theodor Fischer) before the First World War, particularly in connection with the garden city movement. The halls were not merely dedicated to leisure but rather to the “restoration of spirit and art.”

An aspect present in the earlier iterations of garden cities was that of polyvalence: gymnasiums, theaters, and festive halls could all be the same thing or assemble especially with the transition from the horse-shoe theater to a more rationalized shape. Tessenow's project in Hellerau was one of the first to abolish the barriers segmenting the space in stage completely, the orchestra pit and the seatings⁷. Eventually this led to the development of flexible theater models that would develop throughout the twentieth century, even without considering the history of theater construction this cemented the theme of polyvalence and flexibility in the *Maison du peuple*. The question of polyvalence eventually culminated in the project of the *Maison du peuple* de Clichy, a far cry from previous iterations of *maisons du peuple* in all aspects: urban form and its aesthetics; an absolutely flexible machine alternating between market and communal hall.

The buildings in garden cities were stripped of their most political components such as union offices. As stated beforehand regarding flexibility in addition to the theater space most *Maison du peuple* included spaces for physical activity, most often a gymnasium but in the later French iterations sports took a greater part in the planning process: the inclusion of swimming pools in the *palais du travail* of Villeurbanne and Narbonne.

In all cases hygiene was a prevalent factor, it would be more appropriate to talk about hygiene and health: in addition to bathing facilities, the program also



included offices dedicated to medical professionals. They contained also spaces for education, of course libraries but also spaces for courses: in Reims, the *maison commune* housed a housekeeping course for young girls and material workshops for young boys. Of course, to fulfill the goal of being at the center of social life, a space was needed which was embodied in previous chapters by the café but that transforms in these cases into the “cercle” where adults and the young could reunite play games and discuss around an “hygienic drink”. Even if a bar was part of the program in most cases it would be used only in conjunction with the hall/theater for special events and was not a staple of the program.

For the first time, these constructions held a certain weight in urban planning, they were left free-standing emphasizing their central role in these new

⁷ Hannah, *Event-Space*, 141.

urbanities. In front of these buildings, there would be a public square to extend the influence of the *Maison du peuple* to the public space, almost rivaling the town hall as was the case in Villeurbanne.

Their spatial organization was clearly readable: the hall as the central node of the building preceded by a lobby and two wings housing the social programs, dependencies, and circle activities. The lobby in most cases distributed the two wings although in some cases they were accessible exclusively elsewhere. The composition was purely symmetrical even though the program fitted in the different wings differed slightly, but it emphasized the symbolism of centrality even more.

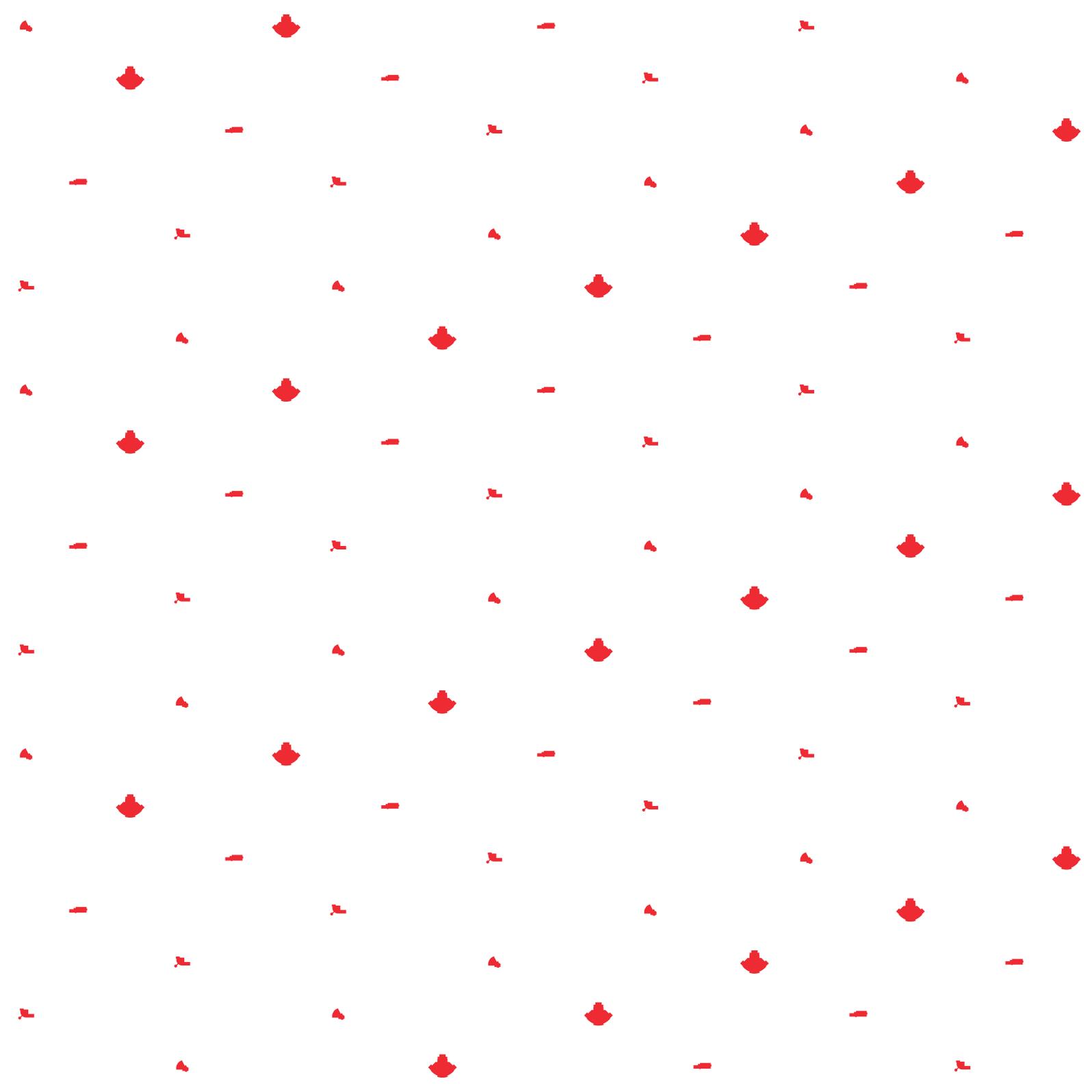
Particular attention was given to the front entry and its special sequence from the square to the lobby. A large staircase would lead up to the entry which as most of the time punctuated by columns or pillars, even archways in more rural styles and into the lobby, giving the buildings the look of a temple, sometimes citing the temple directly as in Hellerau. In all cases monumentality was enforced by the facade of the central component, in addition to the evocation of the temple, the lessons of monumentality from the cooperative model were taken into account, the vocabulary also being similar to that of other infrastructures. It could be said that the *palais du travail* of Villeurbanne with its two suprematist towers cite the Vooruit party hall in Ghent only this time subordinating the wings of the buildings instead of the surrounding context.

A crucial characteristic of these constructions was their monumentalism, even if the styles differed the aim remained the same. In terms of style, the buildings could differ depending on the context: the ones in garden cities took after a more traditional and

local architecture following the model of Fischer's Pfullinger Hallen: juggling between the rural house and renaissance elements. Even if modern materials were used for the structure such as concrete and steel, they would retain slanted rooves and arched bay windows.

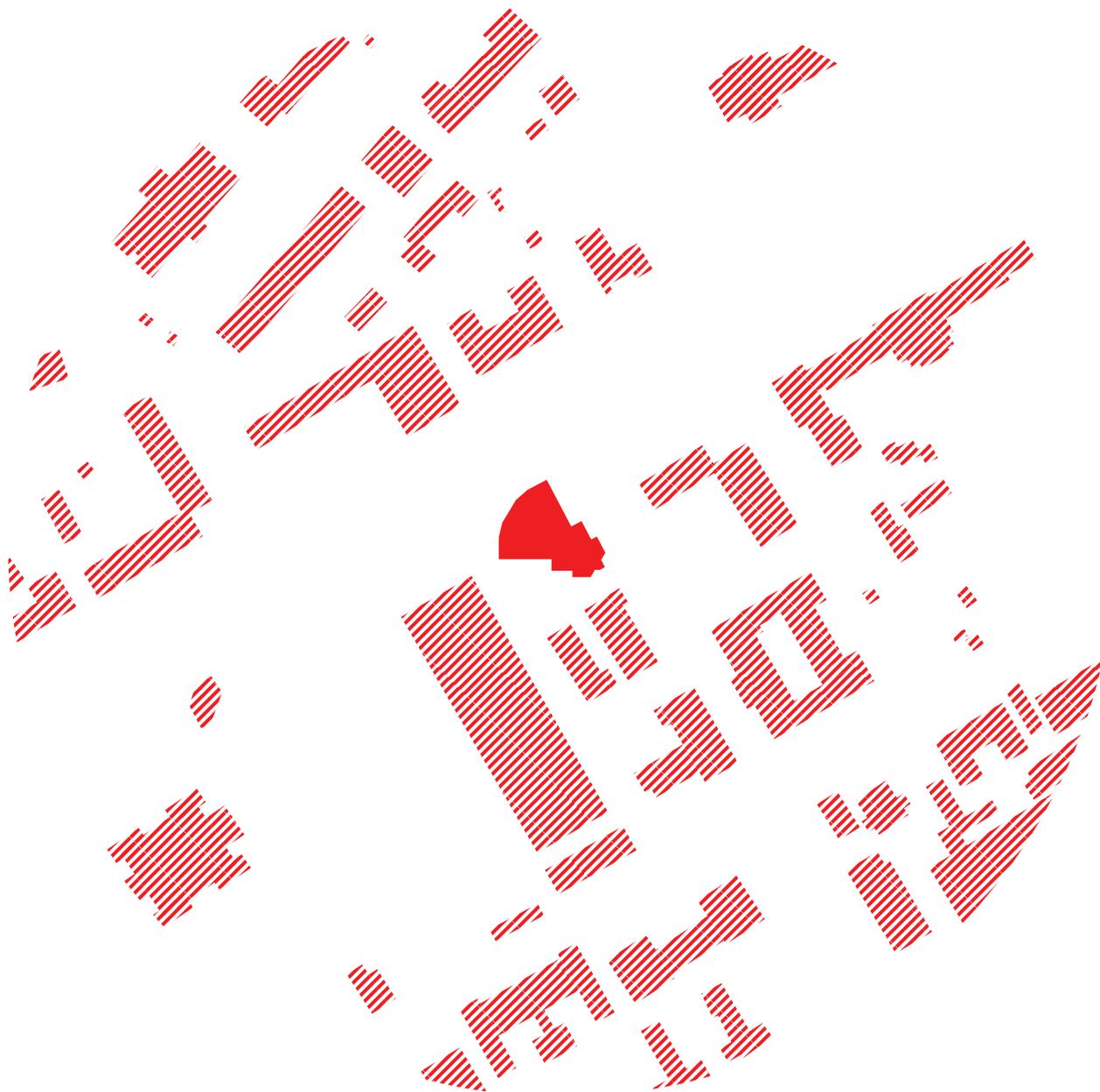
Whereas the *Maison du peuple* built by the French socialist municipalities refuted the rural aesthetic and embraced the formal innovations of concrete constructions with strong influences of the work of Tony Garnier especially his project for Lyon's bourse du travail, an institution heavily linked with the political aspects of the *Maison du peuple*.

What sets apart this type from the previous philanthropic and cooperative models is the establishment of a clear spatial organization that is consistent from building to building, the only minor shifts being the angle at which the wings of the building join the central body. In both plan and program, the two types of buildings match. This can be explained by the fact that the *Maison du peuple* became a theme strongly invested in the beaux-arts, several studies on such buildings were carried out in traditional academia as such more traditional compositional tools were applied to the buildings such as the symmetry and winged organization.





Worker's Clubs



Constantin Melnikov
Rusakov worker's club, Moscow, 1927

0m 25m 50m 100m 150m 200m

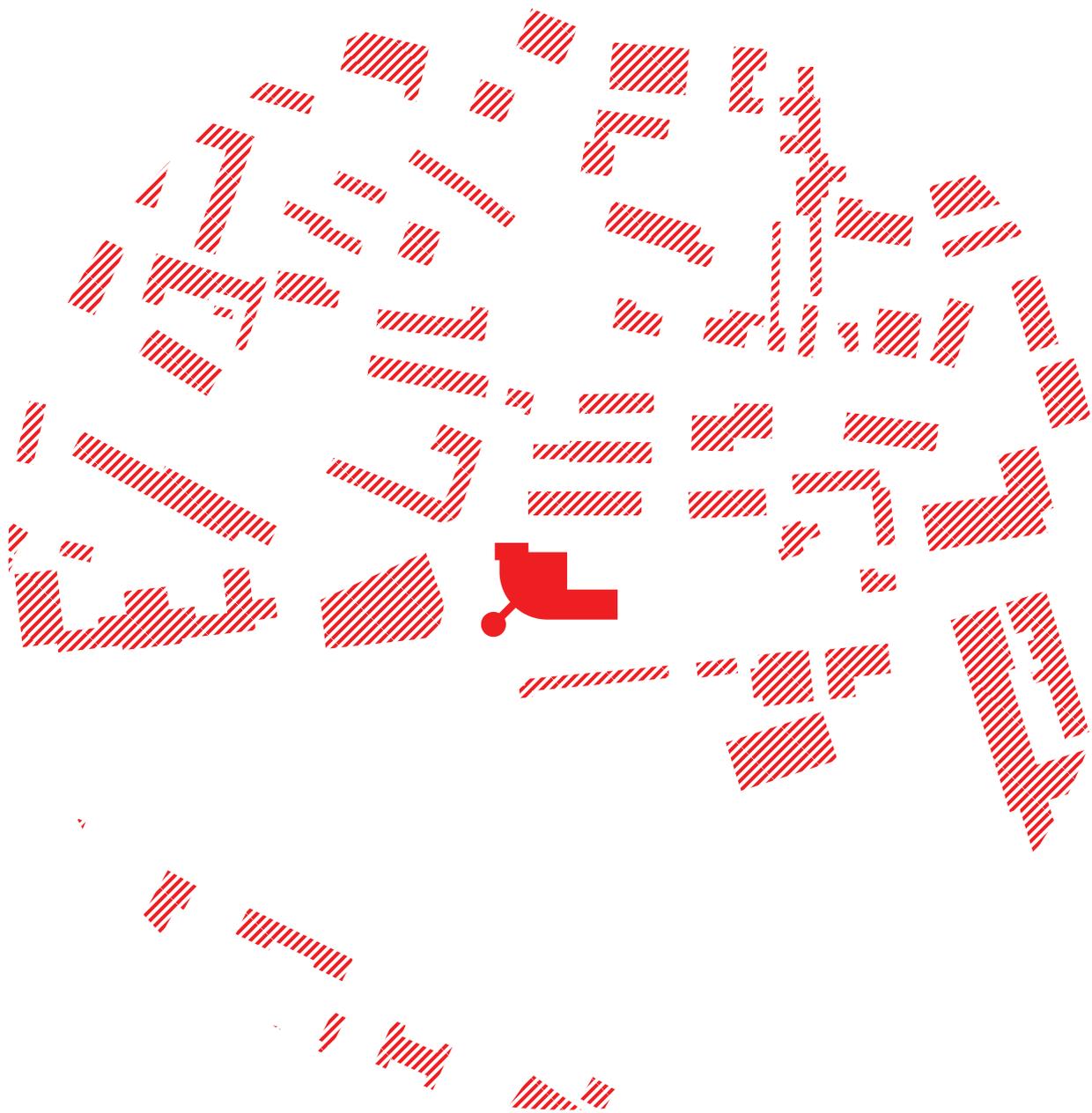




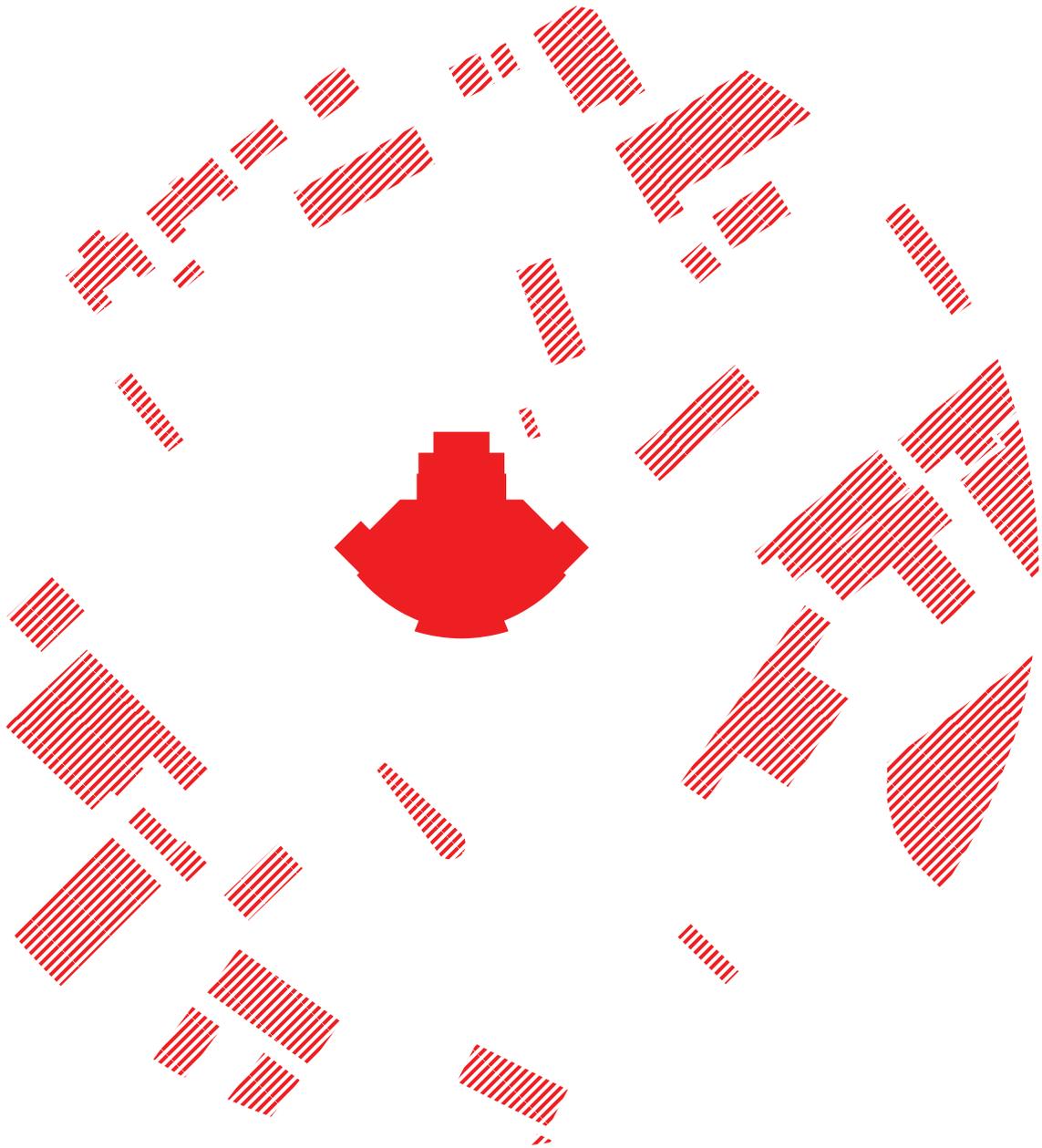
0m 25m 50m 100m 150m 200m



Ilya Golossov
Zuev Worker's club, Moscow, 1928



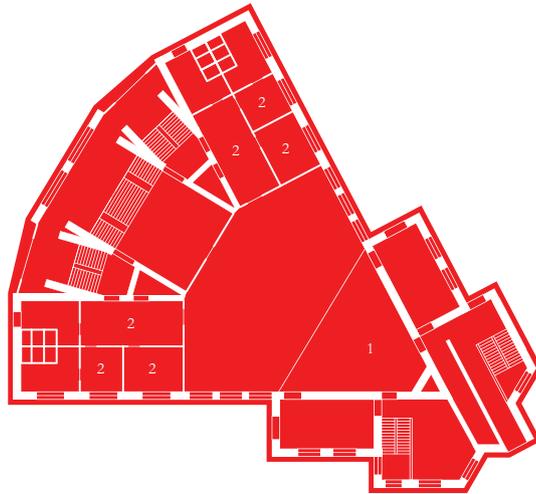
Constantin Melnikov
Kauchuk worker's club, Moscow, 1929



Alexander Dimitriev
Railroad worker's club, Kharkiv, 1930

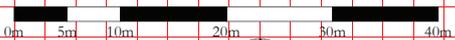
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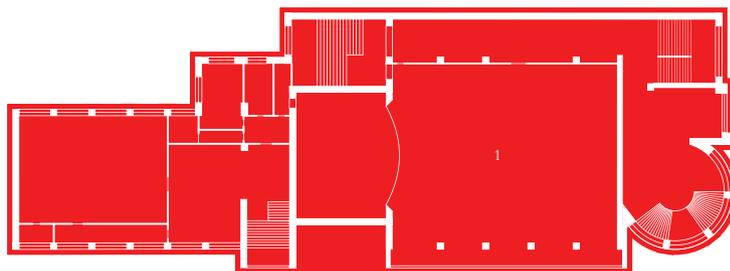




Constantin Melnikov
 Rusakov worker's club, Moscow, 1927
 Ground floor

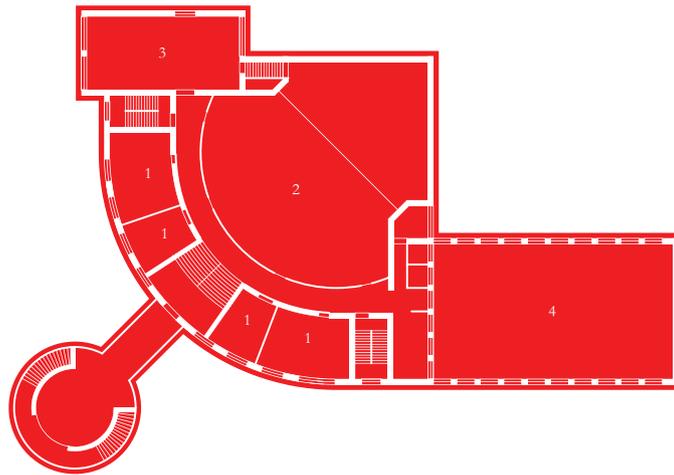
- 1 Auditorium
- 2 Utility room
- + Gymnasium
- + Classroom
- + Offices





Ilya Golossov
Zuev Worker's club, Moscow, 1928
First floor

- 1 Auditorium
- + Utility room
- + Offices
- + Foyer
- + Small Auditorium

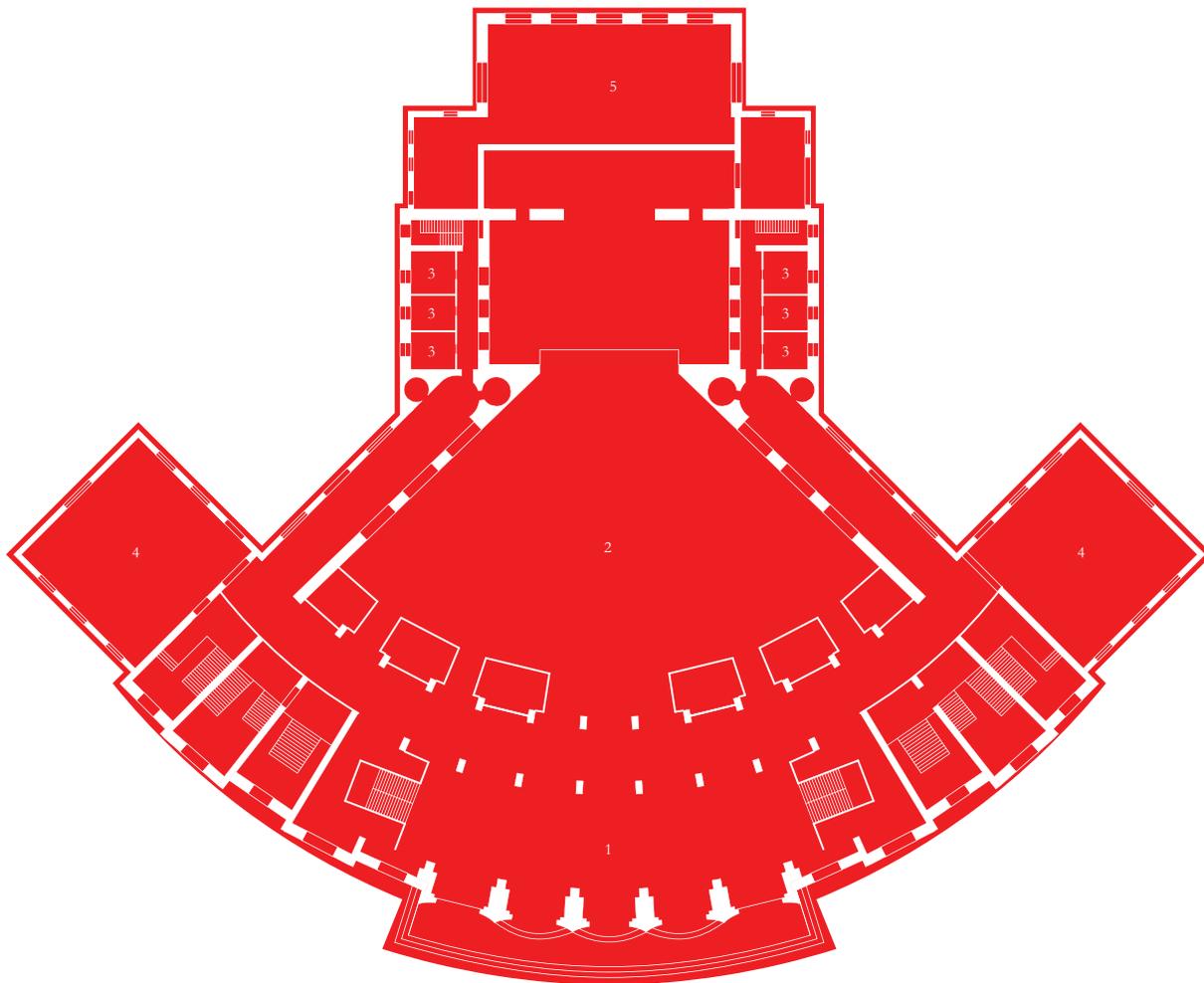


Constantin Melnikov
Kauchuk worker's club, Moscow, 1929
First floor

- 1 Offices
- 2 Auditorium
- 3 Repetition room
- 4 Gymnasium

0m 5m 10m 20m 30m 40m





Alexander Dimitriev
 Railroad worker's club, Kharkiv, 1930
 Ground floor

- 1 Lobby
- 2 Auditorium
- 3 Offices
- 4 Classroom
- 5 Utility room
 + Offices



Constantin Melnikov
Rusakov worker's club, Moscow, 1927



Ilya Golossov
Zuev Worker's club, Moscow, 1928



Constantin Melnikov
Kauchuk worker's club, Moscow, 1929



Alexander Dimitriev
Railroad worker's club, Kharkiv, 1930

Immediately after the 1917 Bolshevik Revolution, along with other areas of society, culture, and education were completely reorganized and reshaped. This enterprise was led by the People's Commissariat of Education (Narkompros). The revolution was to bring forth a new way of life that would encompass every aspect of life from the mundane to the city itself. At the heart of these reforms was education, most notably with the establishment of the Vkhutemas (a school of design blurring the boundaries between industrial work and art made available to the masses): the introduction of new teaching methods was linked to the ideological transformations surrounding artistic production at the time as well as the quest for mass utopia. The school sought to bring about a new type of worker¹.

In this context Art was to be made part of the commune and not exclusive to the elite; it was considered a way to bring about the unification and cohesion of class forces². The proletariat needed to create a new culture and destroy the old tsarist one. A major actor of the cultural revolution and of the development of the worker's clubs was the Prolektkult, founded by the Narkompros in 1917, an institution dedicated to the development of proletarian culture federalizing a multitude of independent cultural organizations. Soviet worker's clubs were introduced during the revolutionary period following the 1917 October revolution and were under the supervision of large worker unions³. The worker's club was conceived to be, in addition to an educative instrument, a leisurely center, a platform to channel the activities of the Prolektkult and engage in mass propaganda through this new culture of the



proletariat. The first iterations of these institution in the immediate aftermath of the revolution were not yet typologically defined and were the fruit of repurposing buildings such as old palaces and deconsecrated churches⁴. An antecedent for the worker's club existed beforehand: the narodny dom (*Maison du peuple*)⁵. This precedent could be attached to what was referred to previously as the philanthropic model: a *Maison du peuple* devoted to the leisure and education of workers, lacking any political component, as well as their moral wellbeing, finding alternatives to alcohol consumption. Although the construction of clubs was incentivized by the communist party as a way to establish the new soviet way of life, the ones really commissioning the

¹ Hudson, "The Social Condenser of Our Epoch."

² Bokov, *Lessons from the Social Condensers*, 12.

³ Aureli, *Architecture and Abstraction*, 191.

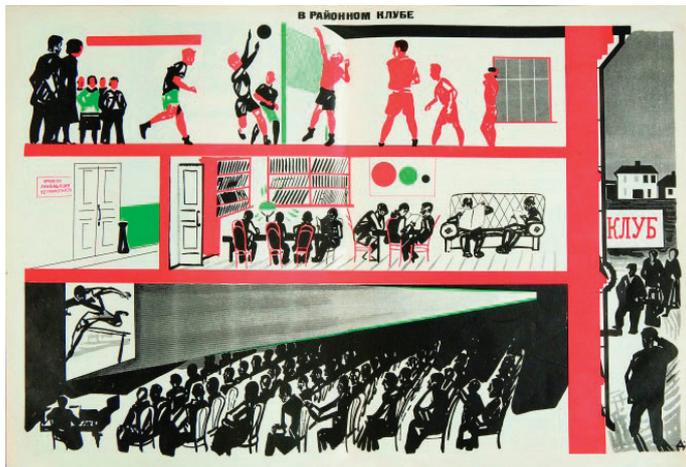
⁴ Aureli, 191.

⁵ Bokov, "Soviet Workers' Clubs," 417.

Fig. The seats in the auditorium of the Kauchuk club

buildings were the trade and labor unions⁶. Trade unions regrouped people of a same profession to gain decisional capacity in the management of industry, they were major actors in soviet life from the revolution up to the mid-thirties and counted numerous members (the textile worker's union, the largest, counted 711.000 members in 1919). As trade unions reached their peak of power in 1927 so did club construction. The link between trade unions and the power of said unions brought about numerous competitions for clubs, where architects would work along the unions to not only define the form but also the program. "Nearly every design periodical in the USSR from the 1920' to the early 30's would contain worker's clubs' projects."⁷ This also gave rise to competitions on standard types of clubs that unions could use regardless of context.

The most essential programmatic component



of the worker's club was the auditorium whose goal was to satisfy the need for democratization of political life. In addition, these auditoriums had to house new developing art forms that would abolish elitist culture and incorporate art into everyday life. This took the form of performances ranging from songs to theatrical performances often of amateur origins striving to create a new proletarian culture (Prolektkult). In this sense, the clubs were: 'acting centers for mass propaganda and the development of creativity within the working class'⁸. These Prolektkult activities developed in their mass spectacles the necessity of interacting with the audience greatly influencing the spatial dynamics of worker's clubs and further fueling architectural experimentation.

Regarding previous examples of *Maison du peuple*, the club might be the most programmatically dense and complete as illustrated by the specifications for the design of a club in Petrograd in 1919: „It was to include a large hall for meetings and theatrical performances, accommodating three to four thousand people, a small lecture hall for three hundred, separate study areas, a two-year People's University course with a lecture hall seating twelve-hundred people and lecture rooms for a hundred and twenty students each, an art school, a school of music, an educational cultural club comprising a library, reading room, and scientific department, accommodation for leisure activities and special interest groups, a hall for chamber music and amateur dramatics, a self-service restaurant, a gymnasium, an open-air stadium and the provision of fields and courts for various sporting activities“⁹ Even though originally in trade unions did not include food-related facilities, it quickly changed as the introduction of buffet restaurants in the standard club program would attract workers even more.¹⁰

⁶ Bokov, *Lessons from the Social Condensers*, 3.

⁷ Bokov, 6.

⁸ Bokov, "Soviet Workers' Clubs," 410.

⁹ Chan-Magomedov, *Pioneers of Soviet Architecture*, 434.

¹⁰ Bokov, "Soviet Workers' Clubs," 412.

Fig: Aleksandr Deyneka's V Rayonnom Klube (At the Local Club), 1927

It is also to be noted that the clubs are the first iterations of the *Maison du peuple* that exteriorize their sports-related components if in previous cases such as in the garden city gymnasiums were present and parks adjacent to parks where physical activity and leisure could take place, the clubs reinforced and emphasized their exterior equipment dedicated to sports. The facilities were located directly next to the buildings and could include Olympic-sized running tracks as well as soccer pitches and playgrounds¹¹. Physical, social, and intellectual development were considered all and the same in the construction of the new soviet man and woman. Particular emphasis was also put on education, as in 1927, the peak of club construction, the New Economic Policy was implemented which prompted by the collectivization of agrarian production leading to an exodus from the rural parts of the USSR to cities. This meant that these new masses needed to be educated and integrated within the new political system¹². This integration implied programs with the aim of eradicating illiteracy in these newly proletarian parts of the population.

The principles of the garden city were highly influential in the planning for the reconstruction of large cities as well as the establishment of new worker villages¹³. They saw in it a method of de-centralizing large cities and a way to erase the boundaries between towns and cities. From this influence, the general urban form of the club can be derived, as a free-standing building in a low-density settlement. These new disurbanizing theories of planning rejected compact towns and countryside in favor of decentralized settlements¹⁴. As such the planning of clubs was influenced by these theories and they were rarely integrated into the urban



fabric itself and did not structure as much the space around them, being more or less scattered onto the main road network.

A number of different conceptions of the aesthetics of clubs were developed in the 1920's depending on the different currents of the avant-garde, rationalists and constructivists.

As the auditorium was the main component programmatically it influenced greatly the overall shape of many clubs, as illustrated, the buildings developing their morphology from the fan-shaped auditorium. Even if not explicit directly in the shape of the building. This formal element of the auditorium and its shift with the importance given to art and performance art in particular can be compared with the one developed a decade prior in the garden cities discussed in a previous chapter.

The most iconic examples of clubs can be

¹¹ Bokov, "Soviet Workers' Clubs", 424.

¹² Bokov, *Lessons from the Social Condensers*, 22.

¹³ Chan-Magomedov, *Pioneers of Soviet Architecture*, 271.

¹⁴ Chan-Magomedov, 335.

Fig. Models of the space course at Vkhutemas, 1927

© M.A.R.K.H.L. Museum, Moscow

associated with the work of Melnikov whose conception of the typology of the club greatly influenced other architects. Melnikov's body of work can be linked to the movement of the rationalists, his volumetric and sculptural conception are reminiscent of the teachings of Nikolai Ladovsky at the Vkhutemas, Ladovsky's course "space" focusing on model making and uncovering the underlying meanings of forms and compositions, reminiscent of nineteenth's century aesthetic theories. "Social condensers expanded the canonical modernist formula of "form follows function" by envisioning an architecture where form would presumably follow a larger purpose"¹⁵. The rational and functional organization of Melnikov's clubs was a centerpiece in the planning of the buildings nonetheless particular attention was given to producing an expressive exterior that was linked to the internal space. The interior organization of Melnikov's clubs was particularly innovative as he introduced elements of polyvalence, always trying to accommodate the greatest number of variable uses. This was obtained through the elaboration of movable partitions that could separate the main auditorium, for example, the Rusakov club could be separated in three as shown by the volume of the building, the same principle was applied in the Kauchuk club where the three-tiered hall could be divided horizontally in three separate levels¹⁶. It is to be noted that as innovative as they were these partitions were not particularly reliable, as a result they were rarely used.

Even in proposals that distanced themselves from the formal motifs of rationalism such as is the case with the Zuev club by Golossov, the tension between the exterior and interior is maintained, concerning the Zuev club if the shape of the auditorium was not explicit to

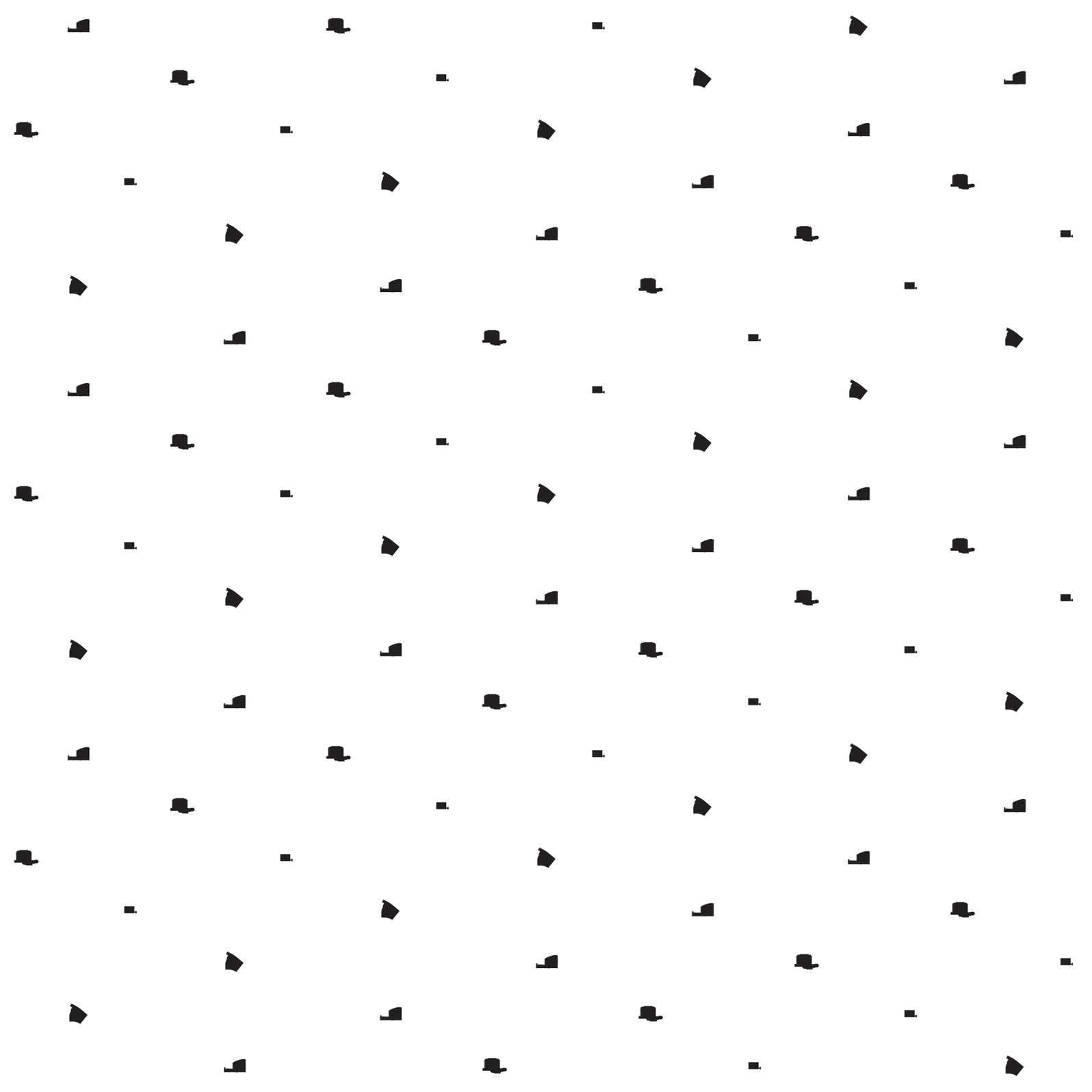
the outside, other components of mass procession were shown: the main formal element of the building, the massive staircase at the angle was given a specific form, the cylinder and fully glazed as to show the procession to the mass assembly space. Golossov in his proposals did not try to unify in a single form all the elements but rather tried to compose, and construct, with the components and giving more exterior presence to one of them as was the case with the cylindrical staircase. He singled out one strong element that would be designed further and subordinated the rest of the components to it.

Of course, the architecture of these clubs strongly differed depending on the architect and the movement to which they were affiliated, Melnikov and Golossov developing the most iconic depictions of a worker's club, but these were mostly one offs, Unions did hold competitions for standard type workers clubs where the work of constructivists such as the Vesnin brothers and Ginzburg was put forward. Contrarily to the previous cases they adopted a pavilion layout without emphasizing a particular component, creating complex compositions of interconnected blocks. Their exterior appearance being dictated purely by the interior organization, the individual components reflecting the proportions of the interiors, each element interacting with the other based on the respective functional role and importance¹⁷.

¹⁵ Bokov, *Lessons from the Social Condensers*, 6.

¹⁶ Chan-Magomedov, *Pioneers of Soviet Architecture*, 435.

¹⁷ Chan-Magomedov, 436.





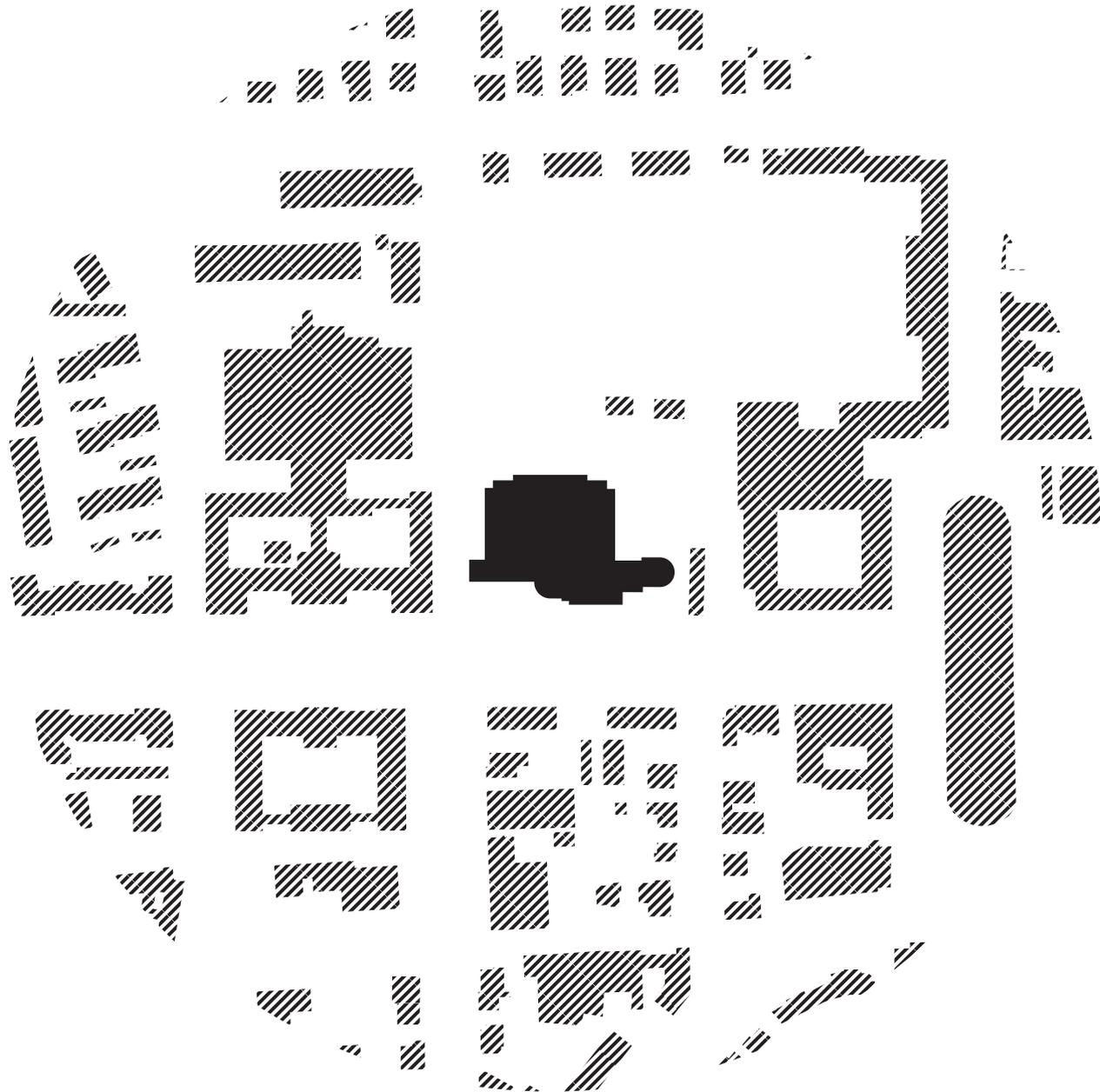
Case del Fascio



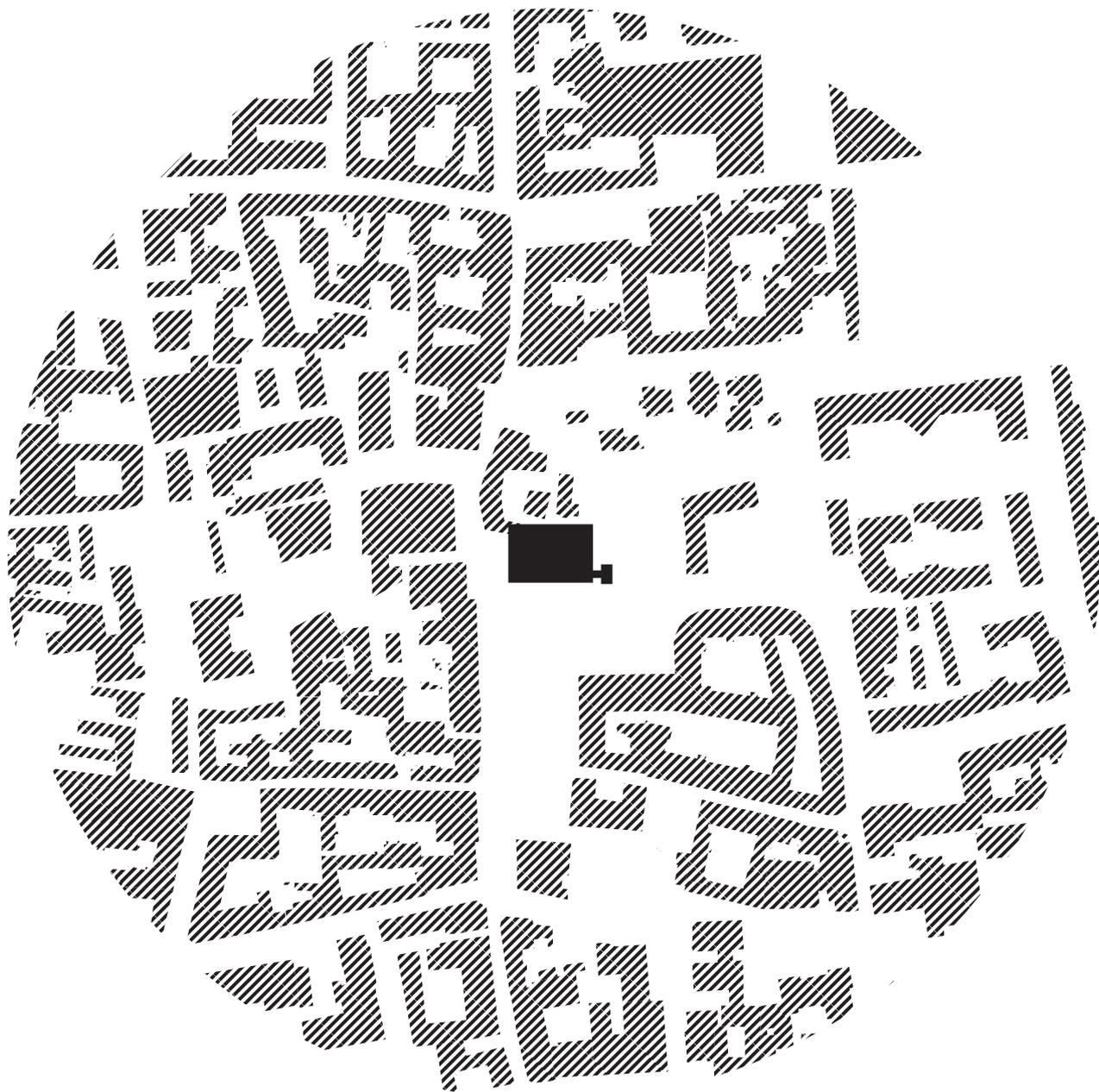
Luigi Moretti
Casa del GIL, Rome, 1934

0m 25m 50m 100m 150m 200m





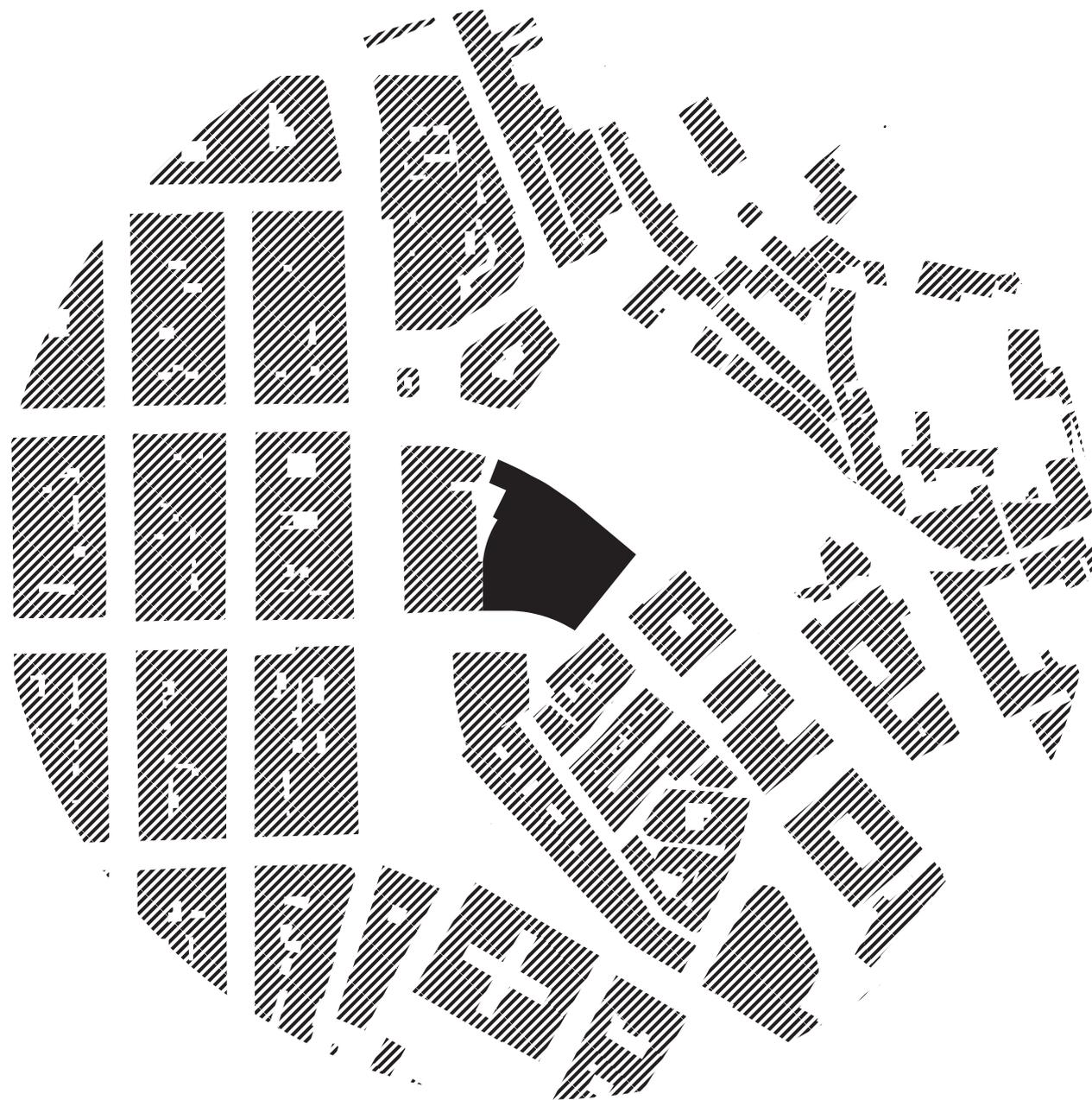
Cesare Valle
Casa del GIL, Forlì, 1935



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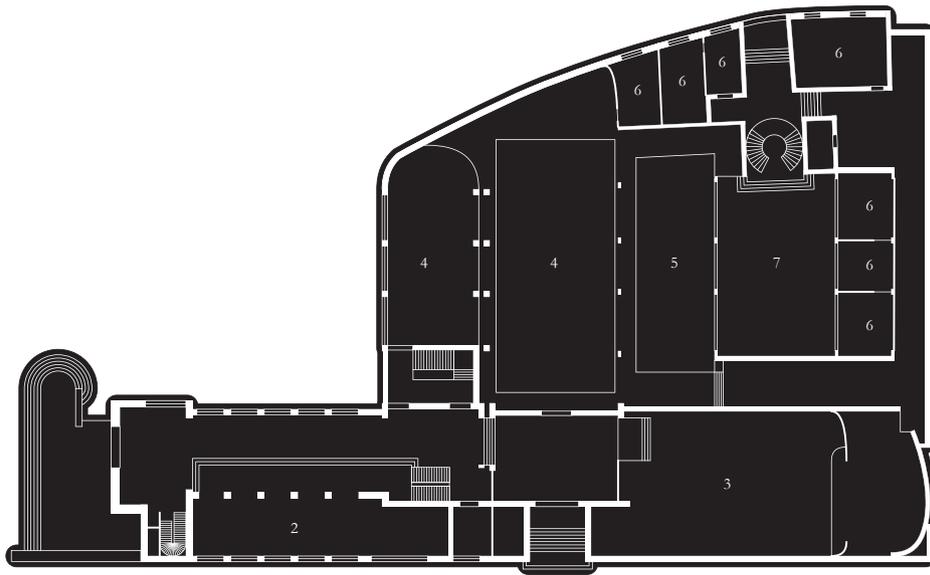
Giuseppe Terragni
Casa del fascio, Lissone, 1940



0m 25m 50m 100m 150m 200m



Raffaello Battigelli, Ferruccio Spangaro
Casa del fascio, Trieste, 1942

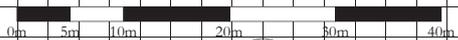
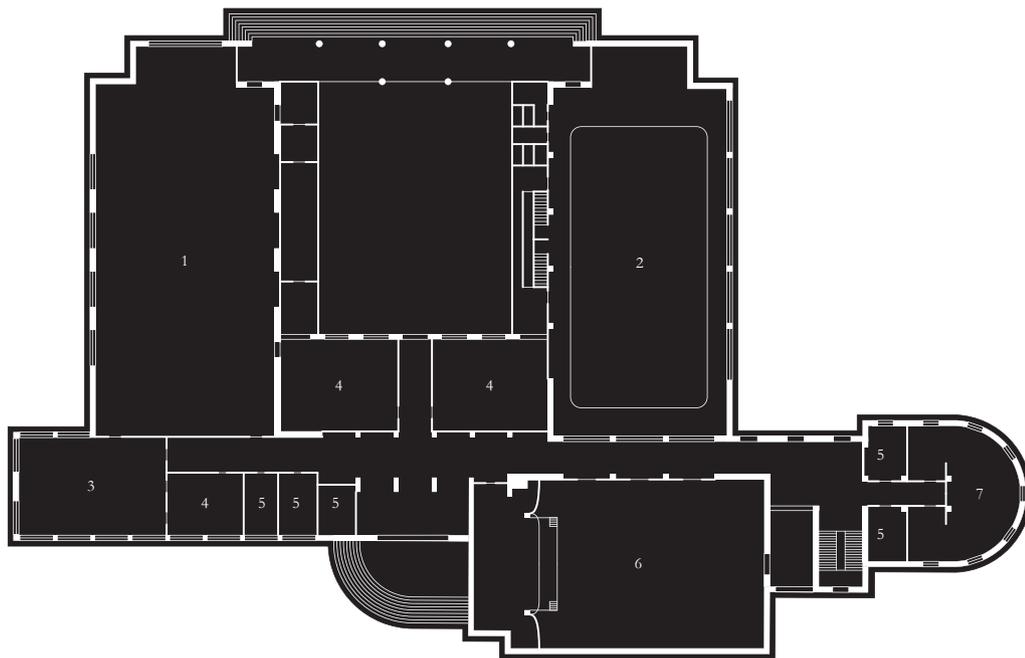


Luigi Moretti
 Casa del GIL, Rome, 1934
 Ground floor

- | | |
|-------------------|-----------------|
| 1 Tower | 5 Swimming-pool |
| 2 Exhibition Hall | 6 Offices |
| 3 Cinema | 7 Courtyard |
| 4 Gymnasium | |

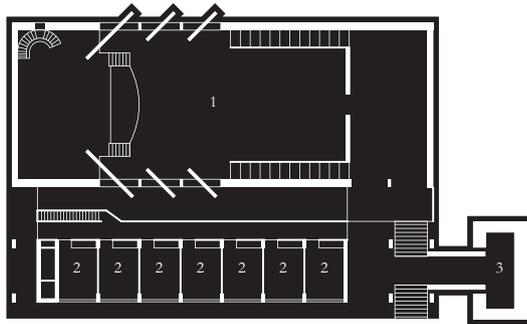
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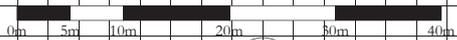
Cesare Valle
 Casa del GIL, Forlì, 1935
 Ground floor

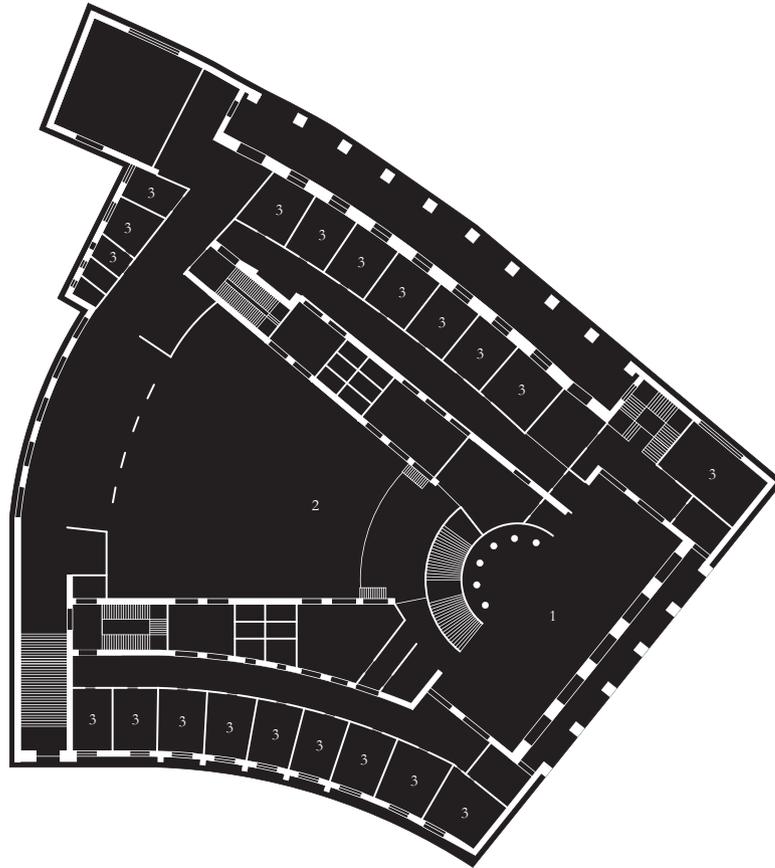
- 1 Gymnasium
- 2 Swimming-pool
- 3 Fencing room
- 4 Changing room
- 5 Offices
- 6 Cinema
- 7 Library



Giuseppe Terragni
 Casa del fascio, Lissone, 1940
 Ground Floor

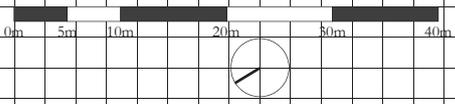
- 1 Cinema
- 2 Offices
- 3 Tower





Raffaello Battigelli, Ferruccio Spangaro
 Casa del fascio, Trieste, 1942
 Ground floor

- 1 Lobby
- 2 Auditorium
- 3 Offices



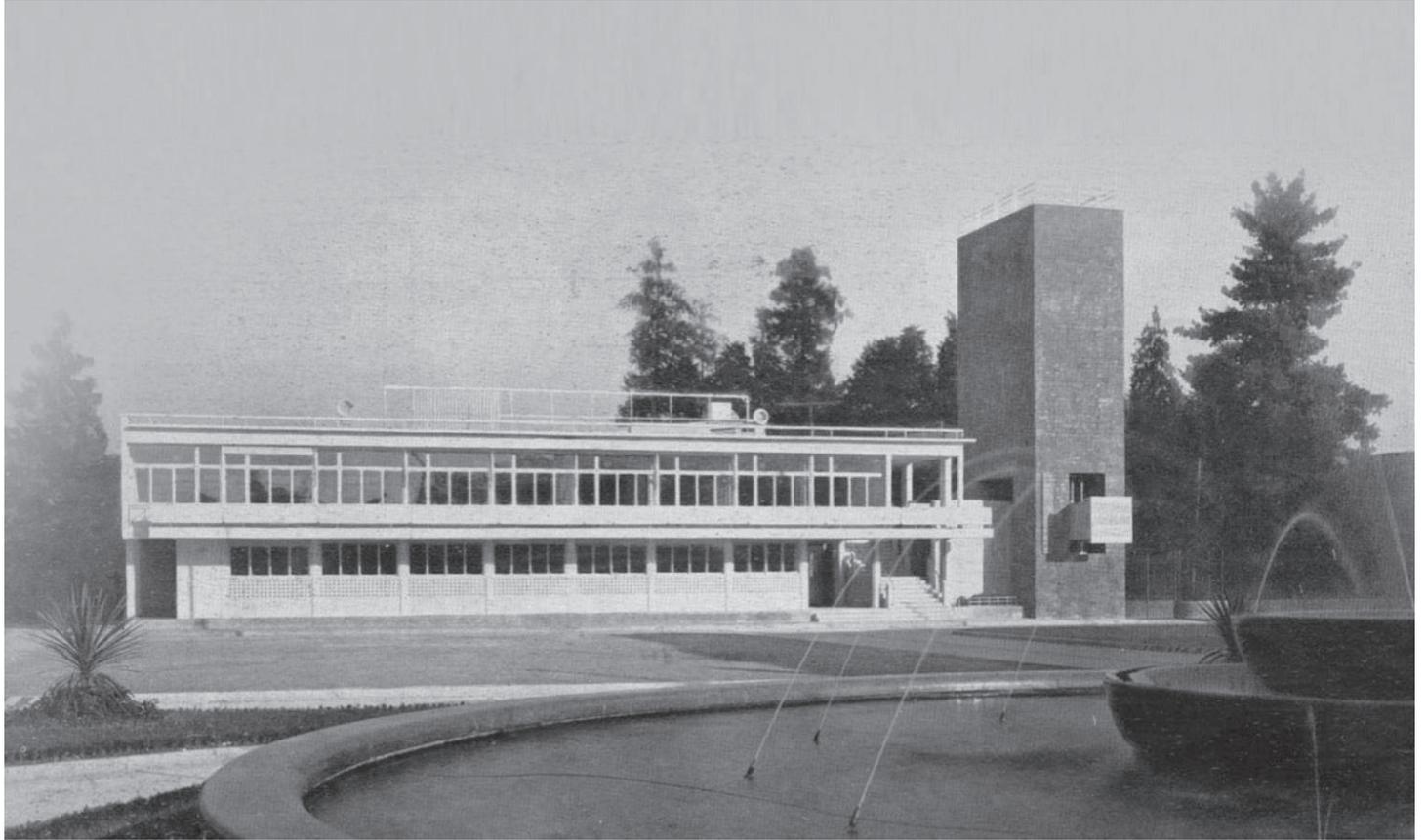


Luigi Moretti
Casa del GIL, Rome, 1934



Forlì - Viale e Casa del Balilla.

Cesare Valle
Casa del GIL, Forlì, 1935



Giuseppe Terragni
Casa del fascio, Lissone, 1940



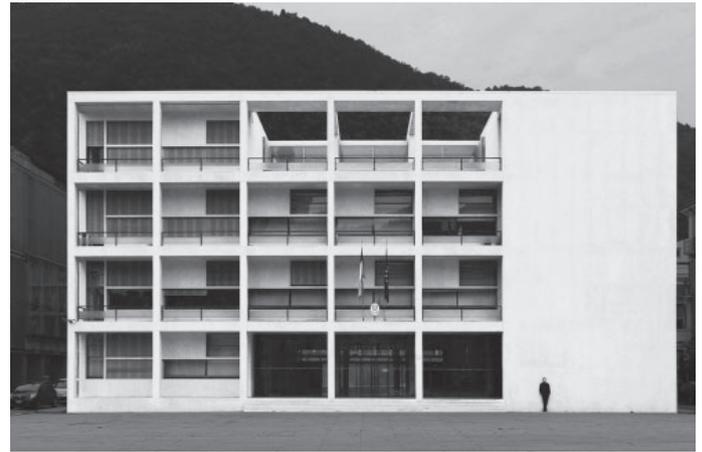
Raffaello Battigelli, Ferruccio Spangaro
Casa del fascio, Trieste, 1942

The *case del fascio* were a direct expression of the Partito Nazionale Fascista (PNF). They emerged with the march on Rome, in 1922, and the access to power by the fascists as an institutionalization of previously clandestine headquarters of fascist squads. With the local initiatives of squadristi, their previously clandestine hideouts and revolutionary activities could be brought out to the open to fully celebrate the power they had achieved.

The squads were in open conflict with socialist organizations such as the *case del popolo* and other republican initiatives such as the *società del mutuo soccorso* that provided the typical services of a *Maison du peuple*. Their hideouts would be decorated with the *manganelli* of fallen fascists in remembrance, a practice that would pass onto the *case del fascio*. In the beginning, the *case del fascio* would just reuse the buildings of the *case del popolo*. It became a political objective to fill in the void left in order to maintain consensus.

The PNF wanted to create a totalitarian relationship between the state and the individual, encompassing all aspects of life. Even if in the 1920's the regime provided a certain number of guidelines to follow regarding the *case del fascio* it's only with creation of new institutions that the construction of *case del fascio* truly soared and developed.

With the elimination of competing political structures the PNF had to create new organizations that would take their place. In 1925 the Opera Nazionale Dopolavoro (OND) was founded to fill in the void left in the organization of worker's free time and avoid the proliferation of subversive organizations. The



OND would be accompanied by the Opera Nazionale Balilla (ONB) which was dedicated to the supervision of the youth and their moral and physical education¹, the ONB would later integrate in 1937 the Gioventù Italiane del Littorio (GIL). These organizations which were the direct emanations of the PNF were the main instigators of the construction of *case del fascio*. When discussing *case del fascio*, in essence the organization to which they belonged didn't influence the buildings that much, *casa del fascio* remains quite a flexible term.

Starting from the 1926 monetary crisis, the regime, to maintain the consent of the masses, revalued the Italian lira to match the English pound, this prompted massive deposits of money from the bourgeoisie, making funds available to the state.

The funds allocated to public construction until 1936 that were decided in 1922 tripled by 1927. This allowed the fascist government to put in place a massive program of public construction. To such point that from 1922 to the end of the Second World War there were over eleven thousand *case del fascio*². The transformation of the *case del fascio* from

¹ Cavanna and Brauman, *Maisons du peuple*, 218.

² Mangione, *Le Case del fascio in Italia e Nelle Terre d'Oltremare*, 21.

Fig. Casa del Fascio Como

CC Danny Alexander Litzke/maam, Wikimedia

temporary shelters and reused structures to prominent architectural landmarks illustrates the broader evolution of fascism, shifting from para-military movements to a totalitarian regime. These structures demonstrate how the PNF took existing political and architectural models, modified them to serve its totalitarian goals, and utilized design to express its political ideology in both public and private spheres.

The activities that took place in the *casa del fascio* can be summed up in management, celebration, entertainment, propaganda, and sports.

The difficulty with defining the particularities of the program of the *casa del fascio* in respect to the other typologies mentioned previously is that the program is not consistent depending on the context: programs varied heavily depending on the size itself of the *casa del fascio* and the town or section it served, to that can also be added the differences of program varying on its social context.

In large cities, the *Casa del fascio* had above all a representative role, with the governing bodies, heads of associations and offices of the top of the hierarchy. In the regional section, more in contact with the masses, the focus was more on recreational activities. Those regional sections in rural areas had limited leisure premises as well as non-existent political components, whereas in working class neighborhoods a strong emphasis was put on leisure especially during the worker's free-time denying any space for political assembly other than to celebrate the party, in petty-bourgeois districts leisure was not central but the political aspect was prevalent with the presence of clubs for discussion and conferences so that the bourgeoisie could organize politically within the party. In this sense the *casa del fascio* are the first type

since the cooperative *Maison du peuple*, which was made by workers for workers, to not consider itself as a place for everyone but rather foster to different social classes, maintaining and reinforcing the existing class divide.

At the start the basic programmatic guidelines were limited, the program quickly gained components as the *casa del fascio* had to fill the void left by previously existing institutions such as the *casa del popolo* of socialist origin and the *società del mutuo soccorso* which were banned, and which buildings were often repurposed into *casa del fascio*. As such the *casa del fascio* had to accomplish a vast array of services regarding welfare. Health services included a Consultatory, a Medical Clinic, a Maternity and Children's Home, in addition to these legal consults could take place and a library was accessible. Assistance and these welfare services were the more celebrated programmatic elements creating consensus unlike the more bureaucratic ones which were for the PNF the most crucial aspects of the *casa del fascio*. Offices dedicated to local party management were always present.

Of the types mentioned in previous chapters the *casa del fascio* was the first include the cinema-theater, to serve as well as entertainment as a tool for propaganda, as the PNF had heavily invested in film production and distribution. In April 1926 it was made compulsory to project before and after every show news journals made by the *istituto luce*³, the PNF's cinematographic and propaganda studio.

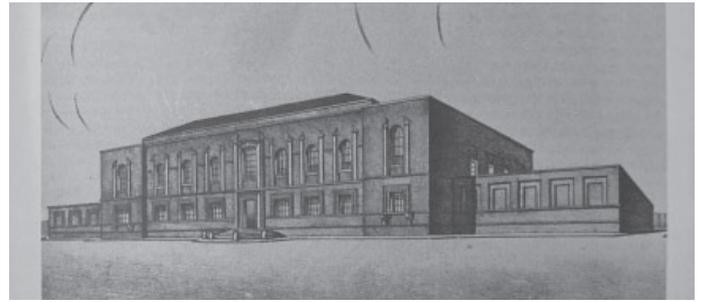
An integral part of these structures and of the overarching ideal of the PNF was the moral and physical education of the youth as such sporting venues took a considerable chunk of the building's program. swimming pools, gymnasiums as is common in every discussed type of *Maison du peuple* and fencing halls, in

³ Mangione, *Le Case del fascio in Italia e Nelle Terre d'Oltremare*, 34.

cases where there was enough space exterior sporting field could be adjacent to the building. The question of sports was not only addressed with the spaces to exercise, but the organizational aspect was also put forth, after-work organizations would organize competitions.

The celebrative component was more or less the descendant of earlier traditions of squad headquarters, memorials dedicated to fallen *camerati* often metabolised by the architecture itself as the lictor tower, it could be said that the celebrative function of these buildings was directly implemented in their architecture and urban form: “the *Casa del fascio* were invested right from the start with a cult value, as they all hosted a *sacrario*, that is a shrine devoted to the memory of the martyrs of the Fascist revolution, which in effect turned them into temples.”⁴

In the early 1920’s the construction of *casa del fascio* mainly followed the architectural culture of the time, resulting in buildings of a more “historicist” style, taking influence from medieval and renaissance architecture to satisfy their desire for monumentality. With monumentality being the main focus was the façade and the “magnificent harmonious perspective”, at the disservice of any complexity and development in plan. The buildings were mostly symmetrical with a higher central volume, described as of military character. In fact, there were really no real formal references for the *casa del fascio* until the late 1920’s. In 1928 Enrico del Debbio published a book on the construction of *casa balilla*, in it he compiled thirteen projects each time with a more complex program. The main component of the projects were perspective drawings illustrating the monumentality of the buildings as for the solutions in plan were left simple, too simple even⁵.



It is only in 1932 that a newspaper in Bologna, *Assalto*, launched a competition to define the typology of the *casa del fascio*, the competition was extended to all architecture schools in Italy. The competition had entries for three types of *casa del fascio* for three different agglomeration size: for cities of more than fifty thousand inhabitants, for towns between ten and fifty thousand inhabitants and for villages with five to ten thousand inhabitants. The impact of the competition rejuvenated the architecture of the *casa del fascio* and put it in phase with the most advanced design research of the time. The competition concluded with efforts to present modern, rationalist, architecture as Italian architecture. Many architects of the current of rationalism played on the revolutionary aspects of fascism to liberate themselves to a more traditionalist language appealing to a more subtle idea of italianity: “the extensive use of glass as well as marble had a symbolic as well as functional role. It stressed the dual character of the *Casa* as simultaneously a traditional and modern building”⁶.

The component that would become the mainstay of all *casa del fascio* following the competition was the lictor tower, a tower located near the entry of the building that could be part of its volume or separate, facing the agora. Meant to make the *casa del fascio* stand out in the cityscape aiming to rival with the belltower of

4 Storchi, “‘Il Fascismo È Una Casa Di Vetro’: Giuseppe Terragni and the Politics of Space in Fascist Italy,” 235.

5 Cavanna and Brauman, *Maisons du peuple*, 221.

6 Storchi, “‘Il Fascismo È Una Casa Di Vetro’: Giuseppe Terragni and the Politics of Space in Fascist Italy,” 237.

Fig. Perspective of a casa Balilla, 1928

CC Enrico del Debbio, *Progetti di costruzione*

the church and the town hall.

Of course, the characteristics of the *case del fascio* that developed following the competition cannot be reduced to only a tower and ornamental eagles. The volumetric approach to buildings was also defining. Smaller size projects often kept a compact volume with an only compact volume or sometimes an L-shaped one, always accompanied by the tower. But the most significant of the morphologies and the most characteristic in the more celebrated projects is the one in which each programmatical component has a distinct volume. This could be reminiscent of the work of soviet rationalist in club constructions but in the case of the *case del fascio* the use of differentiated volumes limits itself to a difference in scale and elevation, the volume itself does not allow the association of a program to a volume, only the distinction between programs is visible. This shift to an architecture focused on the composition of volumes manifests itself also in the representation of projects that from the monumental perspective began to favor more and more axonometries as a way to represent the project.

The brief of the competition mentioned that: “Everything that takes place in the *Casa del fascio* must clearly be observed from outside, because Fascism has nothing to hide: large, simple rooms that give more the idea of a greenhouse than of a sepulcher, as opposed to the palaces and Masonic lodges, laden with decorative masks and symbols, punctured by a few windows and many small service doors open in the alleyways of the street, heavy and unwelcome like tombs, the real dwellings of men busy with mysterious and dirty business. Instead, the *Casa del fascio* must have a character of genuine and principled ruinousness: it must be more like a stadium than a cemetery; less

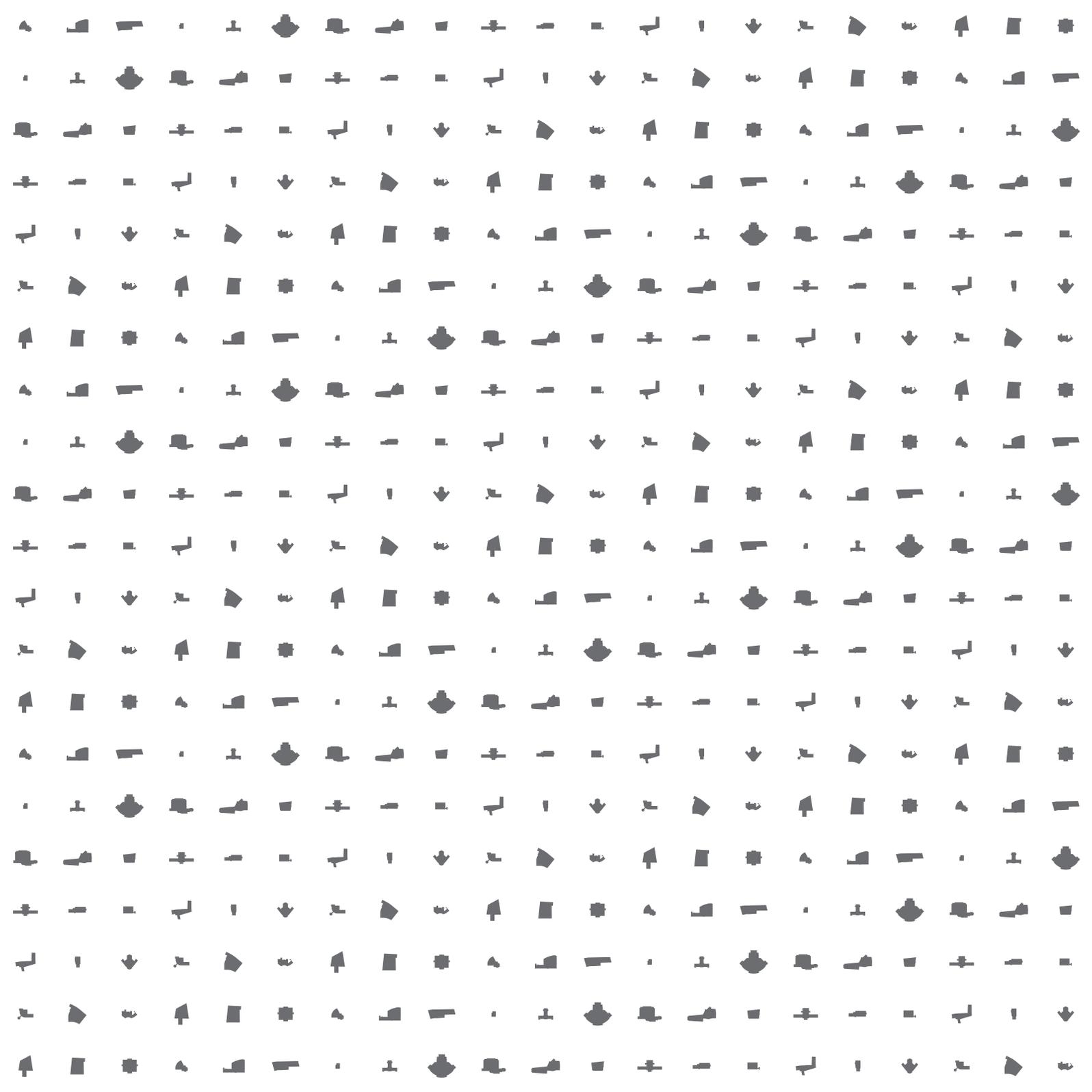
offices and more meeting rooms; less decoration and more simplicity; less overstated perspectives and more visible views. And above all, air and sun.”⁷

This brief greatly influenced some of the most iconic rationalist *case del fascio* such as the Como *casa del fascio* by Terragni. Even though formally and in plan it was an outlier from the whole body of work of *case del fascio*, and has to be considered separately, the material considerations represent pretty well that of other eminent *case del fascio* such as Luigi Moretti’s GIL. The use of reflective materials: polished marble and stones alongside glass created airy and bright spaces. The materiality of the rationalists served the ideological core of the *case del fascio* and were strongly symbolic: visibility and transparency merging private and public spheres while also establishing a notion of surveillance⁸. Transparency erased individuality, dissolved the boundary between the individual and the state. There was no interior or personal dimension; the system was as visible to the individual as the individual was to the system. This transparency symbolized a collective identity, subordinating personal autonomy to state and party unity⁹.

7 Mangione, *Le Case del fascio in Italia e Nelle Terre d’Oltremare*, 37.

8 Storchi, “‘Il Fascismo È Una Casa Di Vetro’: Giuseppe Terragni and the Politics of Space in Fascist Italy,” 239.

9 Storchi, 241.





Aftermath

Contrary to other architectural products of the Industrial Revolution such as the slaughterhouse, factory, and covered market, destined to fade out, replaced by new means of production, the *Maison du peuple* with its capacity to generate social and cultural equipments that could always be relevant¹ was to remain a staple of life, but that was not the case.

The *maisons du peuple* were commodified, sold, bought, transformed, and demolished, in part because they stopped being a rallying point in the working-class imaginary and its purely civil and urban aspects were mobilizing enough².

A component of their downfall was the crisis of the cooperative movement that from the late fifties struggled to compete with the new models of distribution and consumption, supermarkets, and self-service leeching the customer base of the cooperative shops. This crisis incentivized the cooperatives to change and evolve towards the modernization of their services with new shops and new headquarters³. This movement of change affected not only the cooperatives but the other actors that were fused in the *Maison du peuple*, as example the Belgian socialist party left Brussel's *Maison du peuple* in 1962 considering it too antiquated and expensive to maintain. This was maybe the most significant example of the fragmentation of the components of the cooperative *Maison du peuple*, ultimately leading to its demolition to make way to bigger stores and bigger buildings.

This crisis of cooperativism, although central to the decline of the socialist cooperatives, is not the only factor to the obsolescence of the *maisons du peuple*.

The services provided by the *maisons du peuple* became obsolete. With modernization, comfort was privatized: running water, heating, and sanitary appliances were made available in the home⁴. In addition, the components linked to entertainment and information became readily available in the comfort of the home: the television, radio, newspapers, and pocketbooks⁵. The services common to all types described thus far, all political considerations apart, were no longer necessary. If there were no more incentives to go there, there would be no possibility for social interaction, fundamentally putting an end to the idea of the social condenser.

The complex relationship between public and private life that emerged in industrial society shattered in favor of a more privatized and commodified way of life.

The end of the great period of industrialization and the fading of industrial society destabilized the organizational structures that molded the political action of the worker's movement and in term shaped the *Maison du peuple* as a social building. As such devoid of political significance and its ability to provide services the *Maison du peuple* as an institution and building conjoined was running on fumes from the 1950's and onwards.

Of course, there were a few new constructions that went on contrary to the march of time in the 1960's such as is the case in Lausanne, but these are institutions stripped of much of their essence and suffered even later with the collapse of European communist parties. The lack of involvement in them leading to the removal of their services piece by piece either due to economic issues or just a lack of volunteers.

From their establishment until the 1930's, through the multiple social movements and political struggles,

¹ Cavanna and Brauman, *Maïsons du peuple*, 9.

² Cavanna and Brauman, 9.

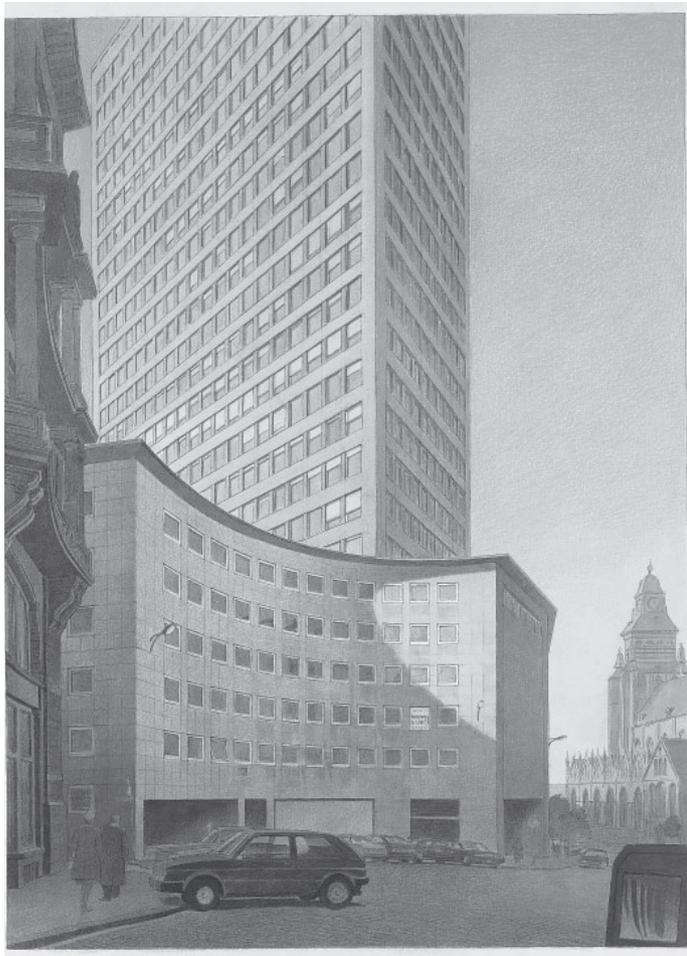
³ Malinconi, *De Fer et de Verre - La Maison du peuple de Victor Horta*.

⁴ Scascighini, *La Maison du peuple - Le Temps d'un Édifice de Classe*.

⁵ Scascighini.

the *maisons du peuple* became a symbol and it did survive as one some still exist and do hold a certain value in the eye of citizens such as the Ghent Ons Huis.

Other than the buildings themselves the name *Maison du peuple* and its transcription in other languages still holds a certain weight and still has values attached



to it.

There has been a resurgence, in the last decades of the twentieth century of models that can be considered reminiscent of the objectives of the *Maison du peuple*.

In the 1970's in Italy emerged the social centres movement in response to the lack of planning and social housing provision. Self managed spaces that were to address the challenges of inadequate housing through and other precarious situations. They functioned autonomously and experimented in collective decision making and alternative models of urban life. "Occupied self-managed social centres appeared as spaces promoting a multiplicity of activities and claims, providing fundamental infrastructure to foster political campaigns."⁶, similar to the *maisons du peuple* in their time, but in this case deeply rooted in the squatting movement.

The squat served as a space for collective experimentation, fostering the imagination of alternative realities, expressing solidarity and anger, exploring identities, and pursuing autonomous living. "Squatting thus offered an opportunity quite literally to build an alternative habitus where the very practice of "occupation" became the basis for producing a radical urban infrastructure and a different sense of shared dwelling or inhabitation"⁷. Just as the *Maison du peuple* had their entrepreneurial aspects brought by cooperativism many squats are organized as informal businesses, internally constituted as horizontal and self-organized entities, and run through cooperative and often voluntary work⁸.

It is also not uncommon to find the name *Maison du peuple* attached to some of these initiatives, for example in Italy a militant movement called Potere al popolo ! opened *Casa del popolo* all over Italy to guarantee

⁶ Di Felicianantonio, "Spaces of the Expelled as Spaces of the Urban Commons?," 711.

⁷ Di Felicianantonio, 710.

⁸ Cattaneo and Martinez, *The Squatters' Movement in Europe*, 7.

Fig: Tour Blaton at the spot of Horta's *Maison du peuple*

©François Schuiten, fonds Schuiten

a space for solidarity and political socialization⁹ inspired by the previous *case del popolo* movements. The name still has some remnants of its political significance leading to instances where buildings occupied in protests might be coined as *Maison du peuple*.

From this quick overview, it is possible to see that there might still be a demand for urban commons and even though they might have passed their time the *maisons du peuple*, there are conditions that are favorable



to the reestablishment of similar institutions in the city. The question is now how do we approach the reactualization of these models. Purely speaking of architecture, it cannot be considered the sole element giving body to the *Maison du peuple*, as illustrated by the social centers that rely on the occupation of structures not intended for such use. The question of structure in the *Maison du peuple* is not limited to architecture but branches out to the political and social structures, so for it to be transposed in the twenty-first century the considerations are not only of the order of architecture.

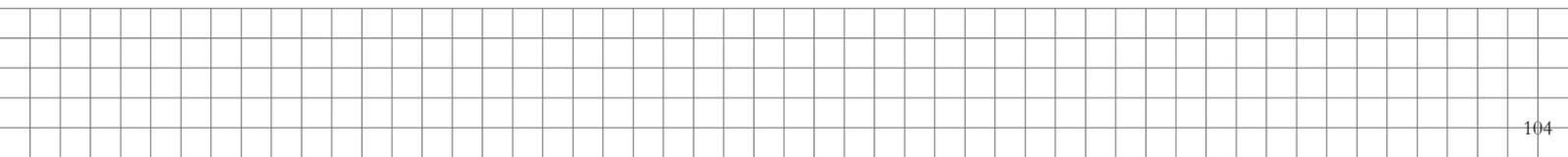
There are architectural aspects that can already

be considered in the elaboration of a new *Maison du peuple* such as the aspect of programmatic matrix and adaptability in conjunction with the re-use of buildings inspired by the social centers. At an urban level monumentality has always been a core theme, to this we could add the question of the public space, it may be necessary to not limit the *Maison du peuple* to a building and expand it to the public space as to make it truly a common.

As explored in the multiple examples there is no unique solution to a *Maison du peuple* and it is highly contextual. As such the case for a twenty-first-century *Maison du peuple* needs to be made at the scale of the project.

⁹ Pietron, "Action sociale partisane, ethnicisation et citoyenneté culturelle en Italie du Sud."

Fig: Occupied cinema in Brest, 2021
C.C.C. Allain, 20 minutes



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