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Dressing Modernism

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Bekleidung der Mauern war also das Ursprüngliche, seiner räumlichen, architectonischen Bedeutung nach das Wesentliche; die Mauer selbst das Sekundäre.

- Gottfried Semper, 1849

** "The cladding of the walls was the original thing, the essential in terms of its spatial, architectural significance; the wall itself is secondary."*

In what we might call primitive white concrete modernism the wall is primary. All the 'layers and classes' (as it were) of the model are switched off - all except the structural core or 'Kernform' of Semper. The building is naked. Such is the case with Cruikshank and Seward's 1967 National Computing Centre, now given a lick of paint by Bruntwood, and rebadged as Manchester Technology Centre. Naked, but for a thin layer of ceramic tiles.

Every October for the past five years I've set a short design project brief for students from Münster School of Architecture. They are Masters students, deciding on their upcoming thesis project. There's little at stake, so it's a chance for all of us to test some new ideas without risk.

The premise of our annual 'Stegreif' design brief is that every city contains unremarkable, unloved, and sadly unviable modernist structures. These are structures readily recognisable. They are concrete, perhaps Brutalist, whose structure is exposed, and with failing standards of insulation and airtightness. We've worked on dressing buildings in Manchester, Bradford, Accrington, Preston, and now Manchester once more.

Consideration of the building's context is provided by the Continuity Atelier - student partners, site and theoretical agenda. This year, over just three weeks students developed intuitive sketch proposals that extended, adapted and re-skinned MTC to envelope studios and offices, plus new architecture library, canteen and lecture theatres.

The work represents a challenge to UoM and MMU: could its world-leading architecture school find a permanent home in something other than a shiny new high-energy glass building - say, a low-energy re-use structure? In the process, could it present a new and meaningful face to the city?

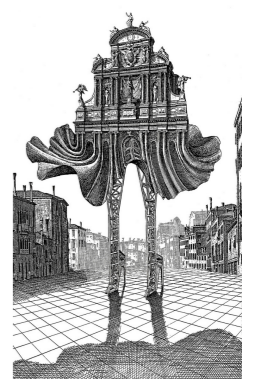
Semper's etymological distinction between the structural 'core' of a construction and its facing, decorative outer surface is somewhat opaque in English. English does however share with German the rhymes of 'clothing/Kleidung', 'cladding/Bekleidung'. This common understanding has formed the basis of our partnership - a common language to discuss architecture.

John Lee Continuity Atelier Lead, MArch Technology Lead



Students

Hannah Brink
Nina Freimuth
Tom Ibenthal
Lioba Römer
Dilara Kayaömi
Chantal Keyvork
Katharina Krühler
Nina Zoë Nevermann
Henrietta Christiane Patzak
Clemens Postberg
Alexandra Reinhard
Leandra Schmelter
Melike Toprak



'Les Dessous de la Ville'
(Francis Masse, 1985)

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