The Firewall

Openness is a matter of attitude rather than shape.

Of modern architecture's battle cry 'Light, Air and Openness' only 'openness' remains vague and subject to human interpretation. As in the case of 'air' and 'light' also in terms of 'openness' a more-is-more interpretation has long been favored (in this case this applies especially for Mies van der Rohe). Thus architects sought maximum, all-around openness manifested in the theory of "five facades" which explains it as a pure, formal condition guided by the belief in a technical perfection based on its own insularity.

Paradoxically it is exactly this omniversity of modern architecture which prohibits any coalition with the surroundings and drives it into total isolation resulting in an airtight self-enclosure. Creating buildings like islands which are certainly maximally open to the sea, yet fail to connect with other landmasses. Openness is apparently not simply achieved via transparency and is not purely formal, but has a great deal to do with the ability to adapt and connect to each other voluntarily. Ironically this openness finds a potent metaphor in the firewall.

The firewall, in its original, physically built version, is the true eliminator of distances between buildings. Contrary to a building without firewalls at its perimeter, which is apparently such a threat to its neighbors that it creates a "cordon sanitaire" around it, a building with a firewall promises to keep eventual damage (foremost fire) within its own property. This makes it a trustful partner for other buildings to connect to which have the same intentions and eventually keep the same promise. Thus the firewall is the open invitation to all other buildings to join a common project, to join a kind of adventure since its final result is unclear and can and will be altered by each and everybody who joins.

Large city-fires had the same impact on the city as virus and spam attacks had on the internet; in order to connect to each other one needs to sustain a certain protection. The internet as we know it today would be unthinkable without the introduction of the digital firewall. The physical firewall has like the digital firewall two interwoven functions: it enables the save connection to a larger group while at the same time it provides protection from each other. It functions as gate and wall at the same time. Unattached and unconnected it is serving purely as a wall to the outside but once connected to, it opens up and fully unfold its double purpose.

The firewall filters specific information including room heights, styles, levels, etc. and lets through only the most important information for its neighbors to facilitate easy connection . Through its radical smoothness it becomes an incomparably simple connector. Unlike the electrical plug which always consists of a female and a male part and is constantly asking for the exact opposite gender to be functional, the firewall is unisex.

Firewalls are not meant to be visible. If in sight, they are screaming desperately for contact, reminding everybody who is passing by that something needs to be done here. Firewalls celebrate the city as an open system, a creation that will forever remain incomplete, since every building attached to it only results in a new firewall. Firewalls are the ineradicable advertisement for the power of the incomplete city .

The utilization of the incomplete city implies that change (time) is regarded as a planning parameter and every new building adjusts itself to the whole, while simultaneously changing the entire city. The master plan of this 'city of firewalls' could best be described as a cloud and its future shape is as uncertain as next year's weather. City planners would turn into a kind of urban meteorologist and predict its condition daily yet have no desire to control it. Within this cloud (or foam as Peter Sloterdijk has described it) the firewall is certainly the most important element since it regulates the connections between the particles and without connections there would be no cloud at all.

In the context of a city, the firewall introduces a local protocol, an onsite definition of proximity. While most zoning laws define lot coverage through distances of the buildings to each other, the firewall embodies the end of this discussion by initiating maximum contact. The continuous chaos of the city is governed by the collective, which allows the direct involvement of the individual right at the spot. Through the firewall everybody could be involved and the city turns into a continuously changing construction created by the community. Similar to the internet, cities would derive their content from inhabitants and not from planners alone.

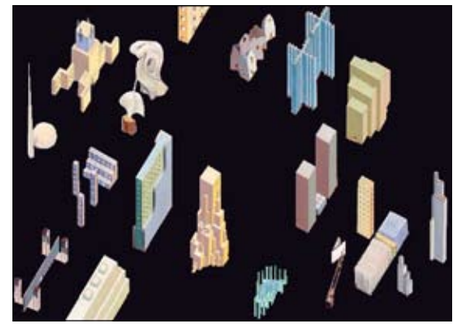
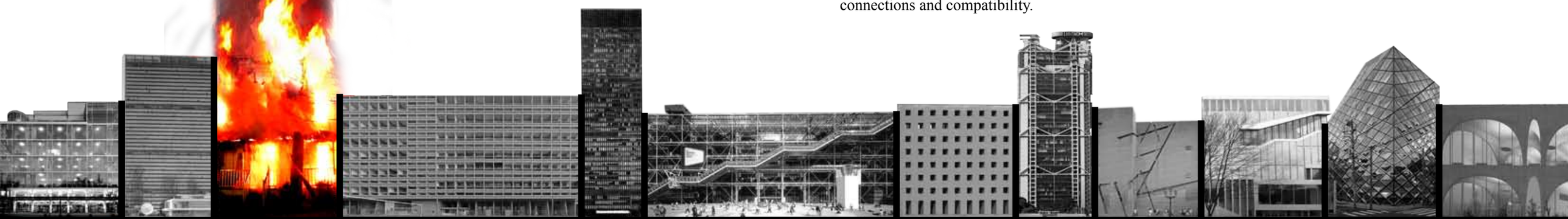
On-site negotiation tools like the firewall enables people to draw the future plans for the city which grants them with the right to interfere in real space as they do in virtual space. If architects and urban planners do not provide the means, others will. Google Earth (providing overview is the first step to planning) is one of the first attacks on city planning departments. Nobody can imagine anymore that it took weeks to get an aerial picture from the city planning department for which one had to pay handsomely. Others will follow.

If one acknowledges the recent trend toward social networking, which is based on a series of firewalls allowing different privacy levels, it is easy to imagine new meanings for the physical firewall.
The promise of the firewall could result in a collective urban typology. Most likely it will not be the urban block as we know it. Maybe the city of firewalls turns out to be an amalgam that functions more like Constant Nieuwenhuys's New Babylon which turned all-around openness into all-around demand for connections and compatibility.

The City of the Lost Monuments

It was their own fault; since the monuments took the firewall, the essential element of the urban block, too much for granted. In their arrogance the monuments totally ignored its pivotal character for the city and abused the firewall as foundation for their own self-aggrandizement.

Displeased by this ignorance, the firewalls left the metropolis. Suddenly released from captivation, the globe saw and took the chance to leave as well. With their disappearance the monuments lost on height and importance. Desperately they were looking for alliances, even through mimicking the block-shape, their former foundations. But there was no common language, neither in signs nor in sounds.



Staying alienated and separated as they have been before, seem to be the best option; waiting for the advent of a new solidarity of buildings.