

The Common Man of the Street. A conceptual history.
Decoding the interpretations, translations, and misunderstandings of a concept's use.

Original

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THE COMMON MAN OF THE STREET. A CONCEPTUAL HISTORY, DECODING THE INTERPRETATIONS, TRANSLATIONS, AND MISUNDERSTANDINGS OF A CONCEPT'S USE. 1947-1975



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Cycle
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The research delineates a genealogy of the *Common Man of the Street* concept, primarily within the postwar CIAM context, from the VI Congress in Bridgwater in 1947 to S. Wood's publication *The Man in the Street* in 1975. Using the term as an interpretative lens to observe events already covered by many scholars, the research deconstructs the social and cultural milieux of its discursive uses, revealing its shifting meanings, divergent definitions, and possible misunderstanding. The study identifies three specific epicenters of the concept's emergence: J. M. Richards' speech at Bridgwater CIAM, A. & P. Smithson's critical use of the idea in their *Urban Reidentification Grid*, and G. Candilis and A. van Eyck's confrontation and transfer of ordinary forms of human habitat from non-European contexts. These nodes are framed as part of a broader constellation of experiences, widely transcending the CIAM borders, and examined through the two intersecting discourses on the *Everyday* and the *Street*.

In September 1947, the Sixth International Congress of Modern Architecture was held in Bridgwater, England, to discuss the fate and new aims of CIAM and officially sanction the re-establishment of contact among the participants to the international architectural debate after World War II. On that occasion, J. M. Richards, the first delegate of the British Modern Architectural Research Group (MARS Group, 1933-1957), delivered a heartfelt speech to urge a rethinking of Modern Architecture in light of its failed relationship with the *Common Man of the Street*.

After and beyond Bridgwater, the concept of the *Common Man of the Street* is used, more or less explicitly, within a multiplicity of narratives, encompassing different definitions, translations, and conflicting interpretations. Once acknowledged the paradox that the term implies, as, evidently, there is no universal *common man*, the research intends to problematize its multiple uses, deconstructing the possible histories of a concept analyzed as a discursive event (Guilhaumou, 2000) whose significance always intrinsically depends on practical, situated circumstances, speaking communities, and interlocutors' intentionality. Precisely because of this accumulation of divergent meanings, the term is used as an interpretative lens to observe a specific moment (the almost thirty years following 1945) of a multivoiced intellectual landscape, contributing with a particular angle to the vast scholarship on postwar architectural discourse. The research initially acknowledges the multiplicity of declinations the concept encompasses to map a potentially vast and complex constellation of experiences often overcoming

Heuvel, D. V. D. & Risselada, M. (Eds.). (2005). *Team 10: in Search of a Utopia of the Present 1953-81*. Rotterdam: NAI Publisher.
Kelly, J. (2022). *No More Giants: J. M. Richards, Modernism and the Architectural Review*. Manchester: Manchester University Press.
Mumford, E. P. (2000). *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism, 1928-1960*. Cambridge: MIT Press.
Topalov, C. (2010). *L'aventure des mots de la ville : à travers le temps, les langues, les sociétés*. Paris: Robert Laffont.
Zuccaro Marchi. (2018). *The heart of the city : legacy and complexity of a modern design idea*. London-New York: Routledge.



CIAM VI in Bridgwater, 1947 - Dossier Alfred Roth (X-10)
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the European and CIAM borders, such as B. Rudofsky's publication *Street for People* (1969) and D. Scott-Brown and R. Venturi's research on the new ordinary American landscape (1968-1972). Then, without pretending to reconstruct a complete genealogy of the concept but aiming to shape a coherent reflection about processes of knowledge transfer, the research identifies three specific epicenters (Čeferin, Cvetka, 2008) of the discourse within postwar CIAM history. Thus, narrowing its field of observation, the study links the primary scaffolding of the reflection to a more coherent and distinct, however internally heterogeneous, ensemble of events and figures with a solid genealogy and geography in common. Thus, the Bridgwater VI CIAM, in 1947, constitutes the first epicenter. On that occasion, primarily through the figure of Richards, who mediates in-between the MARS Group and the *Architectural Review's* cultural milieu, the concept enters the disciplinary debate as a challenge to the shifting relationship between the architect and the lay public and his/her civic responsibility in the latter's education to appreciate Modern Architecture (Bullock, 2002; Higgot, 2007; Kelly, 2016). Secondly, the research considers British architects A. and P. Smithson's urban explorations in the London working-class neighborhood of Bethnal Green as crucial experiences to develop their interpretation of the *Common Man of the Street* that will be subsequently integrated as a tool of critique into their *Urban Reidentification Grid*, presented at the IX CIAM in Aix-en-Provence in 1953 (Goldhagen & Legault, 2000; Bonillo, 2006). The

third node analyzes A. van Eyck's and G. Candilis's attempt to transfer and translate into diverse cultural and linguistic contexts alternative idea(s) of ordinary human habitats, back and forth from their research expeditions in Morocco, Chad, and Mali (Lefavre & Tzonis, 1999; Heuvel & Risselada, 2004). For the four architects, the concept acquires diverse interpretations, in turn as the preferential public to address as committed civic professionals, as a figure revelatory of authentic, instinctive patterns of everyday life, and as a member of communities presenting inspirational examples of primitive forms of human associations. However, the concept is also similarly regarded as capable of encouraging a renewed relational idea of architecture, and the different ethnographies of the ordinary human ways of life constitute both a repository of material and a new logic for conceiving the project, where theoretical reflections and operative design strategies are intrinsically linked (Avermaete, 2006). Finally, the study considers the moment of publication of Shadrach Wood's *Man in the Street: A Polemic on Urbanism* as a possible critical epilogue, given the life and working trajectory of its author, one of the leading members of Team 10 and the significant year of its publication (1975), marking the final unraveling of the Golden Age of the Welfare State (Doglio, 2015) and a radically new direction of the architectural debate. The research regards the concept of the *Common Man of the Street* as a composite one and examines it as intercepting other two fundamental and controversial discourses of the time.

First, there is the field of the everyday, investigated both as an accumulation of particularities and in search of overarching interpretative systems of reality (Lefebvre, 1958; De Certeau, 1980; Highmore, 2002); and object, in the postwar years, of innovative sociological studies and artistic experiments as well as of a nostalgic retreat to the certainties of ordinary life (Heynickx & Avermaete, 2012). Thus, there is the context of the street, at once the unfulfilled promise of a public space overcoming the functionalist interpretation relegating it to mere circulation and the arena of an urban life animated by political and social claims (Anderson, 1978; Colomina, 1999). Moreover, in the considered historical context, the concept of the *Common Man of the Street* also constitutes a *topos* of the Welfare State, whose realization moves among similar internal tensions, in between the desire to address individual identities in their micro-scale and ordinary aspects and the need to structure the planning of the new egalitarian mass society on a very large scale. The study is built on undoubtedly historical objects; still, it has a prominently critical and theoretical orientation. Intersecting and grounding the reflection on an extensive series of scholarships on the history of CIAM and Team 10 (Mumford, 2000; Heuvel & Risselada, 2004) and on histories of words and concepts (Topalov, 2010; Zuccaro, 2018), the research advances an unprecedented perspective aiming at decoding the divergent interpretations and implications of an idea on the basis of the different cultural and social contexts in which it emerged. The study constantly interweaves original publications of the time, particularly from *The Architectural Review*, archival documents (mainly from the funds of J. Tyrwhitt, A. Roth, and S. Giedion from gta of ETH in Zurich, and the Team 10 and J. Bakema funds from Het Nieuwe Instituut in Rotterdam) with available secondary literature, also belonging to scholarships from the fields of philosophy, social sciences, and linguistics.

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“The PhD Program in Architecture. History and Project (DASP) was born out of two long lasting traditions of doctoral level studies and research in the area of Architecture at Politecnico di Torino. The PhD Program programmatically investigates the complexity of architectural cultures starting from the multi-disciplinary and trans-disciplinary interweaving between the history and the design of buildings, cities, territories.

On the one hand, in fact, urban and architectural composition and technology of architecture favor an interpretation of the project as a tool for measuring the stratifications of theoretical elaborations, technical

innovations and modifications of built environment.

On the other hand, the historical disciplines for architecture and the city, far from a local vision and thanks to the cooperation with other histories (the economic, social, anthropological and aesthetic ones), trace paths that can be traveled by architects and urban planners, but also by other humanities scholars, such as philosophers and linguists”

Marco Trisciuglio

(from the document Proposal for the accreditation of doctorates - a.y. 2023/2024, presented to the Italian Ministry of University and Research on June 5th, 2023)

