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WHAT YOU ARE, TAKES YOU FAR

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***The Common Man of the Street***  
**A conceptual history, 1947-1975**

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**Cover image.** Nigel Henderson, photograph of unidentified man ca.1949 - ca.1956. TATE Art Gallery, London.

# Summary

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 analysed as a discursive event 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 thesis is organized in a tripartite, concentric structure. Initially, the research discusses the fortune and migrations of the concept across different cultural, geographical, and disciplinary fields on a more theoretical level. Then, at its core (Chapters I and II), the research delves almost symmetrically into two British series of events and intellectual milieux. By narrowing its field of observation, the study builds a central scaffolding of the reflection to a coherent and distinct, however internally heterogeneous, ensemble of events and figures with a solid genealogy and geography in common. By confronting partly conflictual, partly intertwining interpretations of the concept, the research analyses, on the one hand, the activity of the architectural critic and journalist J. M. Richards as a crucial figure mediating between the MARS Group and the *Architectural Review's* cultural milieu, particularly in the context of the journal's 1950s policy for the shaping of a lay public and a visual education to modern architecture.

On the other hand, the study focuses on British architects Alison and Peter Smithson's socially committed explorations in the London working-class neighbourhood of Bethnal Green and their collaboration with the Independent Group as crucial experiences to develop their interpretation of the street realms and the ordinary people inhabiting it, which found a compelling synthesis also becoming a tool of critique into their Urban reidentification grid (presented, for the first time, during the IX Ciam, in Aix-en-Provence, 1953).

In Chapter III, the research (re)opens the gaze and analysis, sketching an extended constellation of places and occasions where the discourse emerged and consolidated, attempting to build a broader and more complex cartography of the concept's different uses, translations, and interpretations worldwide. Without pretending to reconstruct a complete genealogy of the concept but aiming to shape a coherent reflection about processes of knowledge transfer, the study identifies and deepens some other specific epicentres of the discourse.

In the first moment, this tentative operation brings the reflection beyond UK and to other Team 10 participants, describing the attempt of Aldo van Eyck and the French-based trio of Georges Candilis, Alexis Josic, and Shadrach Wood 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 Mexico during the 1950s and 1960s.

Then, searching for other significant places and occasions of the discourse also beyond the CIAM's cultural milieu, the research observes the uses of the concept as interpreted in the work of Denise Scott-Brown and Robert Venturi on the new ordinary American landscape (1968-1972), and Bernard Rudofsky's publication *Street for People* (1969).

For the considered architects and architectural critics, the concept acquires diverse interpretations, partly as the preferential public to address as committed civic professionals, partly as a revelatory figure of authentic, instinctive patterns of everyday life, and partly as a member of communities presenting inspirational examples of primitive forms of human associations. At the same time, 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 living constitute both a repository of material and a new logic for conceiving the project, where theoretical reflections and operative design strategies are intrinsically linked.

Finally, the study adopts S. Wood's posthumous publication, *The Man in the Street: A Polemic on Urbanism*. (1975) as a pretext but critical epilogue for the reflection on the *Common Man of the Street* discourse, given the life and working

trajectory of its author, one of the leading members of Team 10 and the significant year of its publication, marking the final unravelling of the Golden Age of the Welfare State and a radically new direction of the architectural debate. Through the analysis of Woods' book, the research places particular emphasis, once again, on its different uses during the considered period (1947-1975), acknowledging some of its many diverse design implications.

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