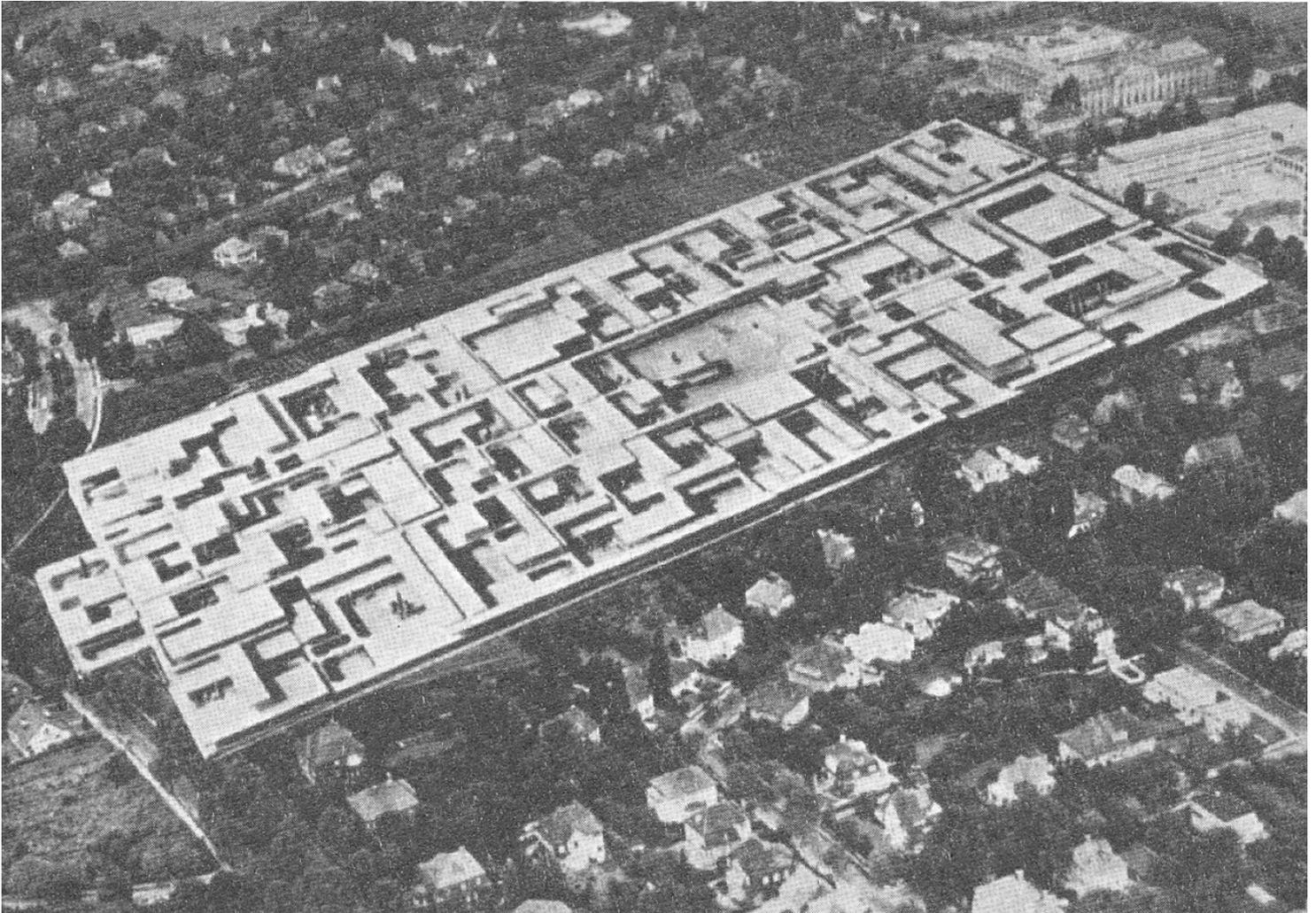


# FREE UNIVERSITY OF BERLIN

CANDILIS, JOSIC, WOODS & SCHIEDHELM



**Location :** Berlin

**Year :** 1973 (construction)

**Budget :** N/A

**Area :** 90 000 m<sup>2</sup> (built)

**Typology:** Public building

**Program :** University

**Additional utilities:** Library, Coffee shops, Courtyards,  
Laboratories, Offices, Gymnasium, Galleries, Auditoriums,  
Storage Services.

In the early sixties, West Berlin organizes a competition for a new university, with a capacity of 3600 students, which would represent the power and freedom of the city. In their winning proposition, Georges Candilis, Alexis Josic and Shadrach Woods consider the university as a small city, making it the perfect opportunity to test their web theory. The web consists of a fabric in which different programmatic modules can be woven. It can be extended, shrunk, modeled ac-

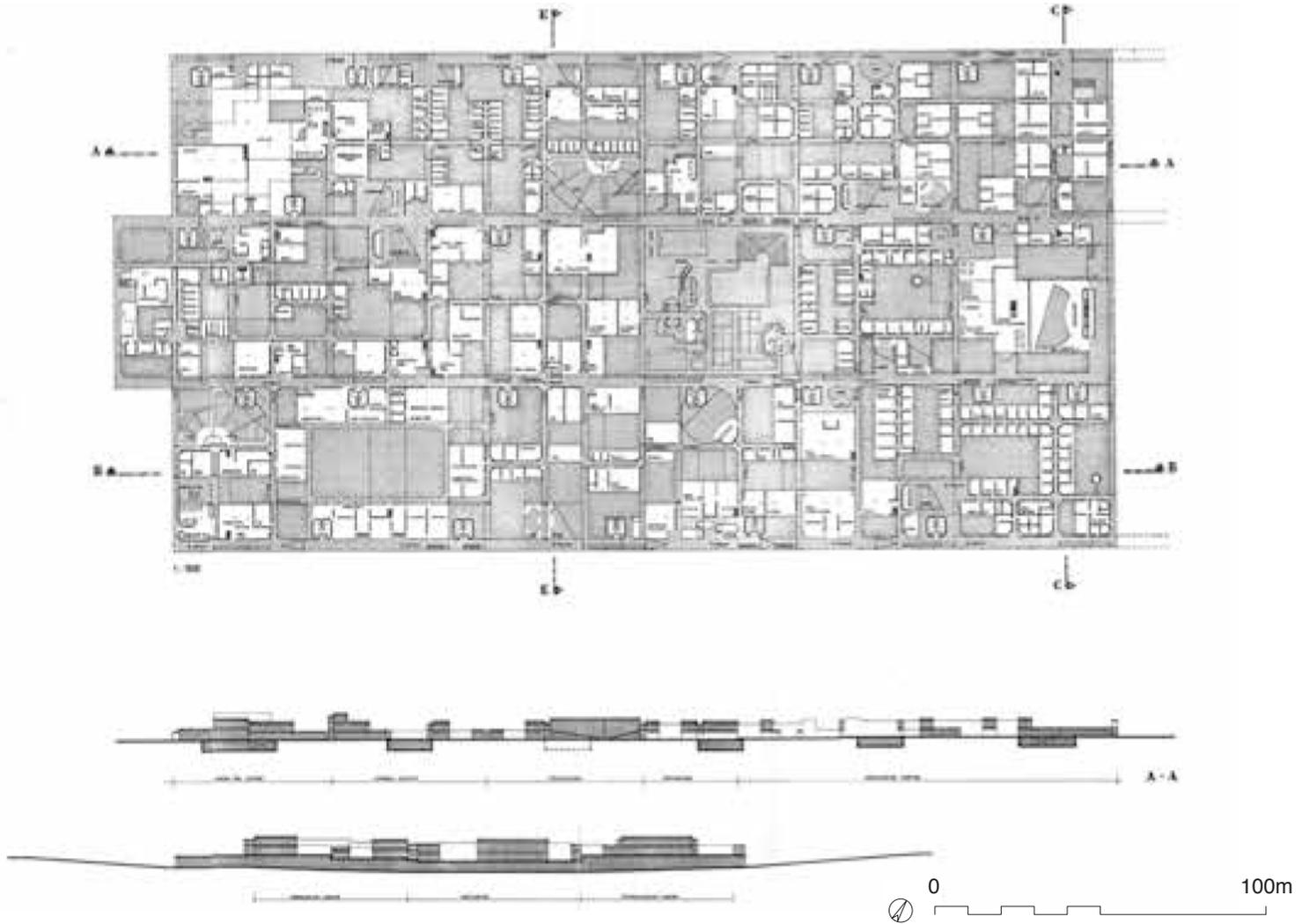
ording to desires. The goal here is to create a relation between the different fields offered by the university but still keeping the individual in mind. The relation between public and private is extremely important and they don't consider simply building a public space sufficient.

In this project, two main figures appear. The first one, *les tracés*, or pedestrian corridors, structure the web. Four main corridors are linked by several secondary connections. The second

figure, *les espaces ouverts*, or open spaces, are superimposed to the tracés and modulate the project. They serve as courtyards and patios, and create outside public spaces (1). The resulting in-between space accommodates the different functions the university offers. This isn't developed specifically for the university, but is a general layout for the physical environment. It differs from the configurative method we see in Aldo Van Eyck's orphanage. Instead of repeating

the same module to create, here the spaces are all different due to the superimposition of two different figures.

The urban density of skyscrapers is criticized by the partners; it creates planes of isolation between different fields and isn't optimized for communication. Their concept of groundscraper is extremely open while maintaining a very high density; it could be qualified as urban architecture. Candilis, Josic & Woods, believe architecture shouldn't be



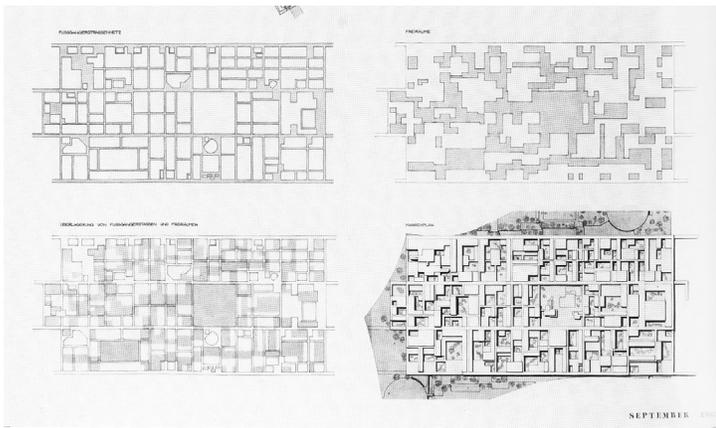
3 - Approximately one quarter of the competition project was built.



4 - The university is surrounded by suburbs.



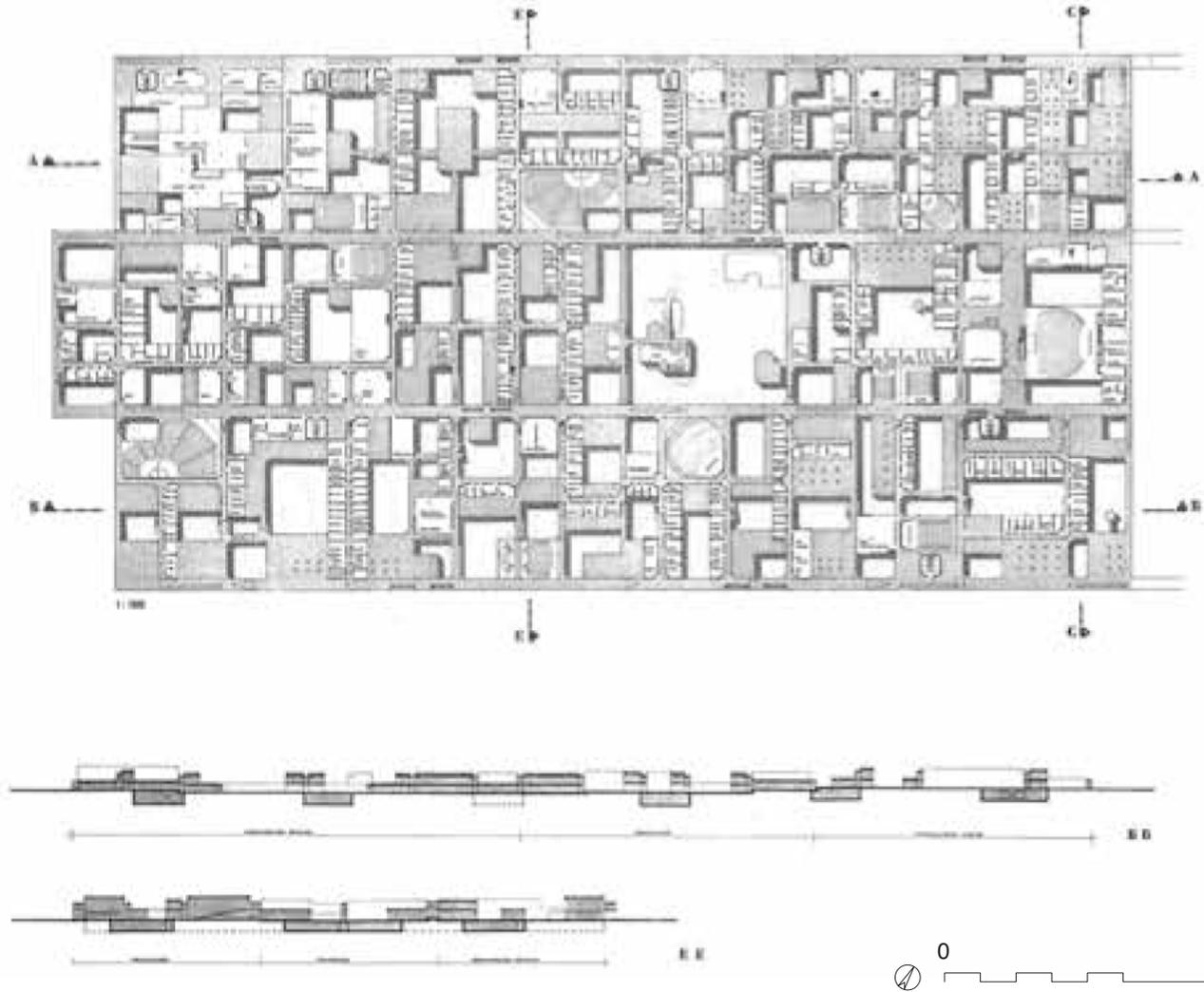
5 - A simple, prefabricated structure.



1 - Superimposition of two figures; pathways and open spaces.



2 - The web offers unlimited extension possibilities.



independent, but more a contributing factor to the urban fabric. The web is more of a way to be located in the context reality rather than a recognizable architectural language. The project looks completely decontextualized at first glance (4), being in the middle of suburban housing. It stands however line up with the existing roads. The architects believe the web will end up replacing all of the existing fabric (2); product of the speculation the country saw during the 19th

century industrial revolution, and condemned to disappear.

Another important part of the project is the appropriation of space by users. With the web, the partners believe that appropriation can be more than a simple parameter and become the principal element of architecture. The involvement of Jean Prouvé in the conception of the building reinforces this thought. Three main elements are created to allow for extensive appropriation by the users, all independent from one

another. The first one is the main structure of the building, being completely prefabricated facilitating extensions and modifications (5). This first element composes all the horizontal planes, ground slabs and roof. Self-supporting facades are the second element Jean Prouvé established for this project. They facilitate modifications by being independent from the main structure. The last item is the metal panels used for composing the interior of the university. The architects believed in an

active participation in the modification of the building by students and teachers alike, just like the urban fabric is subject to change by its inhabitants. Manfred Schiedhelm, partner architect for this project, noted on a retrospective article he wrote in 1998 that the expected modifications were somewhat of a failure. In the first two years, the building went through extensive change, but after that period, only minor changes were done.

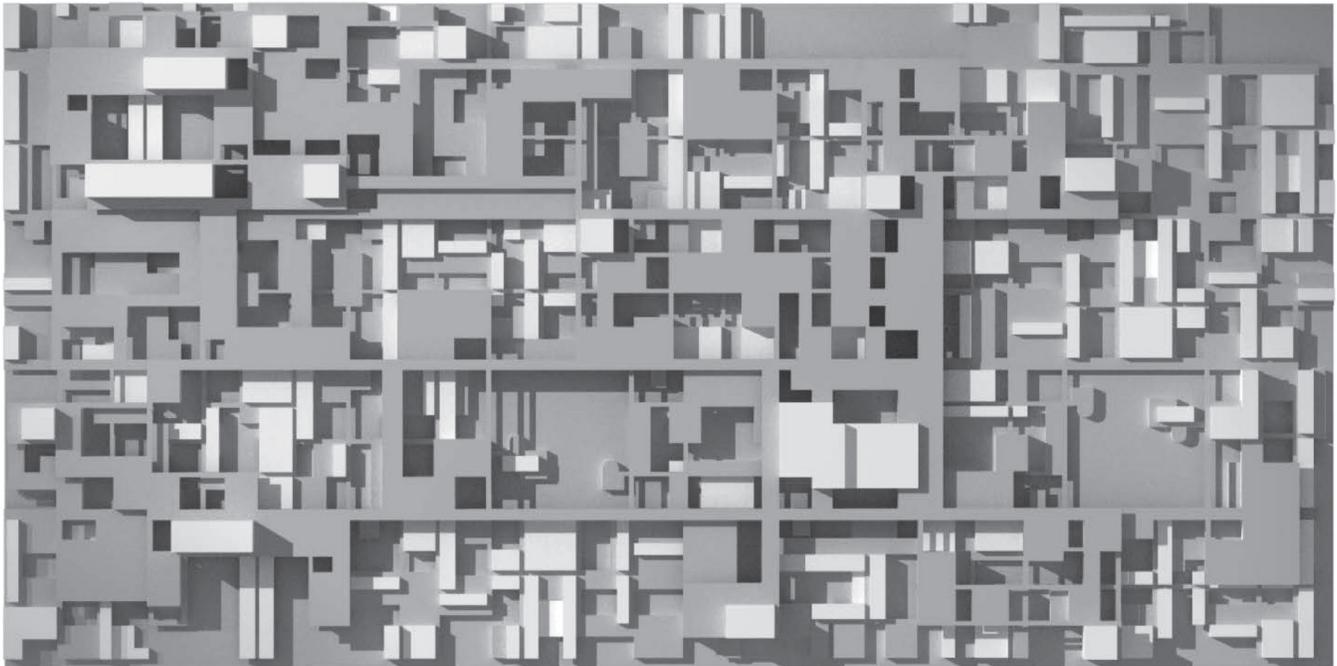
With this project, Candilis, Josic & Woods really take the web to its final stage. It started in France, with the shopping center in Toulouse-le-Mirail. In that new spatial development they were able to integrate new parameters from their time. The democratization of the car and the new time logic that appeared in mass consumption. The elements of different platforms connected by openings was already present, but in a much more rudimentary state. The next step appeared with the reconstruction of the Frankfurt city center. Here, they used pedestrian passages to structure the project, with different programmatic modules that could be added wherever need-

ed. The grid was very simple to build and offered good flexibility. The partners admitted that ancient urban fabric offered an intimacy that modernism simply couldn't. But merely copying it wasn't a solution. With the juxtaposition of strict linear circulation and a more organic fabric woven in the web, they tried to recreate that sense of human scale they believe should stay present in an urban center. But all those elements really came together in the Free University of Berlin; the evolution from stem to web, and finally groundscraper. Circulations were better thought, and less rigid to permit better connections. Every field could be connected to one another with

their system of large openings that went through all the building's height. They wanted people to appropriate themselves of the building, to modify classrooms, entire aisles, as they saw fit.

Of course, the project can be judged a relative failure due to the lack of participation of users. But the simple fact the architects thought about it, where sociologic parameters were incorporated into architecture with the users will in mind is impressive. Their attitude towards representation is also notable, and while today representing a project's main ideas in diagrams seems obvious, it certainly wasn't at that time. Candilis,

Josic & Woods expressed their ideas in very simple drawings that conveyed the entire intended message to the public very clearly. The project was certainly ahead of its time, believing in an open society through human activity and interaction. More than a building, the Free University attests to the role of architecture and architects in changing social environments. The groundscraper in the University proposal mediates architectural, environmental, contextual, socio-political interests and places the architect in the central stage as the mediator between the static socio-political institution and the dynamic social conditions requiring change.



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