
CONCLUSIONS

JULES VERNE IN MONACO

The introduction to this book suggested the plot of Archigram's adventure. It remains for these conclusions to speculate why sales of *Archigram* faltered before that adventure had ended.

By 1972, Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown could no longer take Archigram seriously (though their murderous engagement with it suggested that, on another level, they did): "Archigram's structural visions are Jules Verne versions of the Industrial Revolution with an appliqué of Pop-aerospace terminology."¹ Three years later, Martin Pawley was rearranging the observation to show how serious Archigram had been (thereby recognizing that Archigram hadn't been taken seriously), hoping to persuade readers of *Oppositions* that Archigram stood for "an existential technology for individuals that the world will, in time, come to regard with the same awe as is presently accorded to the prescience of Jules Verne, H. G. Wells, or the Marquis de Sade. Futile to complain (as many do), 'But they never *build* anything.' Verne never *built* the *Nautilus*, Wells could hardly drive a car, and the Marquis de Sade?"²

Some will today favor Pawley's defense, and others will concur with Venturi and Scott Brown's prosecution, for exactly the same reasons that observers were split about Archigram's worth at the time. Archigram successfully restored avant-gardism in the expectation of giving modernism a new lease of life, placing technology center stage again—and these reasons for saluting the group were and are reasons why it was also spurned. Archigram generously made touch papers that could reignite the *image* of the architectural profession—but for many, it *does* matter that architectural projects yield to acceptable built results, or at least look plausible.

If the Monaco Entertainments Centre had been built—and it might have been, since it was detailed by Archigram Architects and its Parisian consultants over a period of four years, with fruitless monthly site visits—Archigram's place in history would be fundamentally different.³ It would be less fantastic and it would be narrower, since the

tendency would doubtless be to read *Archigram* magazine as the herald for Archigram buildings, rather than as the prophet of architectural possibilities. Structures completed by the Archigram office between 1972 and 1974—the Play Centre for Calverton End in Milton Keynes, the swimming pool and kitchen block for Rod Stewart at Windsor, and the “Instant Malaysia” installation for the Commonwealth Institute, London—have not affected the perception of Archigram as unbuilt and utopian.

Even such “soft-centered” buildings slightly conflicted with the ultimate logic of *Archigram*’s move “beyond architecture,” and by the late sixties it was possible to distinguish those members of Archigram determined to build from those who would prefer a “moratorium” on buildings and even drawings of buildings.⁴ Ron Herron relinquished a senior post at the major Los Angeles architectural office of William L. Pereira Associates so that he could work at Archigram Architects alongside the other company partners, Peter Cook and Dennis Crompton, while Warren Chalk, David Greene, and Michael Webb were less involved with the new practice.⁵ Built or unbuilt, all members agreed that the purpose of architecture was to serve as an event. That belief had arisen for them at a certain historical moment, known as “the Sixties.” Perhaps it was better that the Archigram legacy lived on in the drawings and concepts of ecstatic social intercourse, rather than be stillborn in neutral serviced sheds of obsolete, cutback seventies technologies.

AHEAD OF THE FUTURE

In the meantime, the world that Archigram was trying to address with its zoom gospel moved on, and Archigram’s core messages were found increasingly invalid. Even its old adversary, mainstream modernism, was forced into retirement by social and political changes and by its own hubris, packing up work on the housing projects and city center comprehensive redevelopments, leaving Archigram not so much triumphant as alone. What hadn’t so much killed mainstream modernism was Archigram, which dreamed that the architectural “establishment”—the heads of the large public offices, the big architectural practices, and the RIBA—would wither away after zoom was adopted by the student body and public.

One of Archigram’s accomplishments had been to reorient architecture toward changing social and ideological patterns, recognizing that individualism and consumerism were the prevalent postwar European and American social movements. Socialism had earned a tenured place in mainstream European politics, and radicalism made impressive breakthroughs, as in 1968, but the collectivity and state control that informed the ideology of modernism from the 1920s to the 1950s generally lost their allure. This Archigram acutely perceived.

So zoom went headlong into the world of mass consumption. A pitfall was that zoom simply exchanged one definition of the architectural clientele (the collective masses) for another (the consumer masses). This meant that shoals of people fell through Archigram’s net, from the disadvantaged of the inner-city poor to the pioneers of the environmental frontier; Archigram, whatever its humanitarian compassion, seemed still less relevant outside the West.

Moreover, Archigram may have got ahead of actual consumer desire. Archigram assumed that consumers wanted architecture to be provided to them in much the same way as the cars, motorboats, and televisions for which they undoubtedly yearned. It was true that, in its windswept housing projects and civic centers, mainstream modernism had inadvertently deprived its clientele of a sense of place and control. Archigram set out to offer an alternative, but by dissolving place into a nexus of servicing points joined by free-roving human receptors, it too threatened to dissolve place and spatial ownership. Archigram sought the solution to modernism’s shortcoming in making modernism more extreme; the appetite, postmodernists were discovering, was for the opposite.

It was as if consumers relished the contrast between stasis and ephemerality. More people flew, and chose fixed and concrete points in space as their destinations. Consumers continued to discriminate between their houses and their caravans; they distinguished homemaking from package holidays, souvenirs from consumer durables, and separated their emotional attachment to dining tables from their lack of sentiment for kitchen gadgets; the ceremony of drawing the curtains was not to be the same as switching off the television. It was, perhaps, as

liberating for people to not think about architecture as it was for them to be preoccupied by its continual rearrangement. These oddities and hierarchies of living were somewhat disregarded by zoom. Not that Archigram underrated the sophistication of its prospective clients. Archigram foresaw a world of genial consumers venting their creativity through architecture. But in the late twentieth century consumers veered ever more toward the bottom line of equity in their houses, and do-it-yourself (which certainly embodied physical interaction between occupants and buildings) actually recovered the *traditional* techniques of the building trade, serving the dictum of frugality rather than plenty.

In the decades after the sixties, architecture learned the trick of looking solid while actually being pretty easy to put up and take down, gamely housing rapid turnovers of information terminals and personnel. Typical postmodern steel frame office blocks of the eighties, lightly clad with rusticated panels and held aloft by hollow cement Tuscan columns, were Archigram-like illusions, aside from their rejection of modernism's industrially derived aesthetic. With remarkable prescience, Archigram had risen to meet the challenges mounted to the fixed edifice of architecture by late capitalist economies. But social mobility and capital flows did not annul the dictation of ground plans by land ownership, utilities, and roads. Nor did capital wash away discrepancies in opportunity between classes, regions, races, and genders, or liquidate a third of the working week. In other words, the social and economic conditions for total zoom never quite came to fruition.

REMOTE CONTROL

Some of this may be clearer with hindsight, though a number of observers at the time found Archigram irritatingly remote from pressing social issues. This book has pointed to Archigram's "indeterminism" as precisely the feature that made it momentous to the history of the avant-garde, but this needs to be weighed against the cost to Archigram's long-term credibility. "The movement that *Archigram 1* was preceding must be noted for its lack of precision on the theoretical side," noted the otherwise devoted *Megascope* (itself hardly weighty) in 1966.⁶

Though Warren Chalk and David Greene promoted a more reflective approach for Archigram, it remained somewhat inscrutable, and unacceptably hedonistic for the new left-influenced "commitments" of a late-sixties/early-seventies student caucus. Archigram's disinterest in the precise relationship between its technical vision and attendant politico-economic mechanisms, initially part of its futurist charm, finally stranded the group in a semitheorized limbo, too antithetical to positivism to subscribe wholeheartedly to technocracy or systems theory, still less Marxism, yet hesitant about the emergent structuralist and poststructuralist ideas that countered positivism. Archigram came to regard theory not as a vehicle by which to transport its bliss to others, but as a contaminant through which spoilers might break up Archigram's party.

More architectural ideas were ever Archigram's recourse, yet in the early 1970s the keynote Italian critic Manfredo Tafuri was arguing that architectural practice was merely a superstructural phenomenon of bourgeois society and could thus be nothing better than a bourgeois implement of repression. If this was true of architecture generally, Tafuri indicated, it was true too of its avant-gardes—even more so of those like Archigram that disregarded self-reflexive theory. Their experiments were only so many futile aestheticizations of the conditions of postwar mass consumer culture, which swamped attempts at meaning with a flood of consumer goods. Hence, Tafuri's argument followed, the desperate gestures by an avant-garde like Archigram, embracing formlessness and indeterminacy in an effort to make sense of the conditions from which it was created, desirous to be swept along by the tide and speak the same language. "The formlessness," explained Tafuri in 1974,

no longer generates anxiety once it is accepted as linguistic material. . . . And vice versa: language can speak of the indeterminate, the casual, the transient, since in them it greets the advent of the Whole. Yet this is but an endeavour to give a form of expression to the phenomenon of mass consumption. It is not by chance that a great many of such celebrations of formlessness take place under the banner of a technological utopia. The ironic and irritating metaphors of the Archigram and Archizoom groups, or

*Johansen's and Gehry's notion of architecture as an explosion of fragments . . . have their roots in the technological myth. Technology can thus be read mystically, as a "second nature."*⁷

Archigram tackled the symptoms of a dying modernism more directly than the reasons why modernism was dying. This was masked by celebration—"designing for pleasure, doing your own thing with the conviction that comes from the uninhibited exercise of creative talent braced by ruthless self-criticism . . . because it's so rare it's beyond quibble," Reyner Banham claimed of Archigram in 1972.⁸ In other words, Archigram's internal criticism allowed the group to pay little heed to external critique, and artistic impulse alone could provide a rationale if society and architectural practice could not.

The Situationist International, another "last avant-garde" with which Archigram had a passing acquaintance, can serve as a reference point in evaluating Archigram's ideology. As it too responded to the supreme currency of the image in a world devoid of meaning beyond consumption, the ultraleftist Situationist International chose to produce theory and tactics rather than more images. The situationists wanted to lead the world beyond spectacle, and the consequences of failure, they believed, would be a future of unobstructed economic flows, everyone a pure consumer, the entire material world functioning as commodity.

Archigram *did* care about people: its assertion of choice over prescription was a major advance upon mainstream modernism. Archigram envisaged emancipation through the architectural equivalent of fridges and cars and kits that made everyone an architect. Let the workers have the fridges and cars they produced, the situationists concurred. Consumption, however, would not liberate workers, the situationists added; liberation would arrive with the realization that commodities don't really satisfy human needs.⁹

POSTMODERN MODERNISM

In the immediate aftermath of the sixties, both the left's anti-capitalism and Archigram's supermodernity looked problematic to an architectural profession with newly downsized ambitions, making its way with an (initially) low-key, piecemeal, "post-

modern" stance. That Archigram was a last stand for heroic modernist renewal made it no less consequential to postmodernism, however.

Indeed history validated the claims of both the situationists and Archigram. To some extent the events in Paris in 1968 underscored situationist rage, and then, with the onset in the 1970s of capitalist-fueled postmodern culture, Archigram's go-with-the-flow ethos began to look far-thinking after all. Archigram's world was both a stage behind and a stage beyond that of the situationists; former Utopie member Jean Baudrillard, rescinding situationist-inflected Marxism to become a voice of postmodernism, began writing in the "take it away, eat it, drive it, fuck it"¹⁰ vein of late Archigram. The situationists and Archigram also shared rediscovery, after two or three decades sitting on file, by students attracted to the sixties not only for its retro appeal but also for its path-breaking encounter with techno-cultural democracy.

In addition to sparking the high-tech testimonial buildings of the seventies, Archigram contributed to low-tech postmodern sentiments. It celebrated the untidy heterogeneity of the city, it enjoyed the vulgarity of popular culture. Its very manner was of postmodern inconsistency, by turns cheering and disavowing architecture. It recognized that architecture *is* a consumer product; it accelerated that condition, then contrarily dissolved the central object of the property-owning democracy, the fixed abode with investment value.

The dissent at the core of Archigram's pedagogy, so apparent in the cocktail shaken by early editions of *Archigram* and at Archigram's 1966 Folkestone conference, again made it a herald to the emergent, pluralist, postmodern atmosphere. Reluctantly acknowledging students' widespread rejection of technology as the universal panacea for social and architectural ills, in the late sixties and early seventies zoom teaching criteria were adjusted to the "pluralistic situation."¹¹ The liberalization of the architectural syllabus in the last quarter of the twentieth century can be traced back to zoom, if not exclusively to it. Treating every student as a rock star, zoom recognized as many different autograph styles as there were performers.

So nebulous and multifarious are Archigram's consequences that they have about them a maddening inescapability. Rem Koolhaas, no Archigram devotee but carrying the rock star

charisma of an AA zoom graduate, confesses to the indelibility of that period on his thought processes: “there have been no new movements in urbanism since Team 10 and Archigram.”¹² Successive cohorts of architectural students on the verge of inventing media-, kit-, and event-based design find themselves looking back to an earlier moment.

TOUCHDOWN

The nuances and contradictions running beneath the shimmering cartoon surface of Archigram were its undercurrents of consequence. Archigram, the group and the magazine, must be integral to accounts of the avant-garde, and to the chronicles of modernism, postmodernism, architectural education, and urban design. *Archigram* published the most extreme portfolio to have issued from architects since the halcyon interwar years of Le Corbusier, Russian constructivism, and Buckminster Fuller.

The sober evaluation (perhaps the postrationalization) of something rustled up for pleasure is the peculiar burden that here befalls architectural history. Archigram appropriated the forms of popular culture (the funny images, the snap-together language, the indifference to referencing) so that it could intervene in weighty matters about architecture’s purpose. *Archigram*’s papery discoveries can now offer witness in questions of architectural representation, the prevalence of historicism, the architectural control of space and society, the relationship of architecture to environmental design and culture at large, and the state of architectural technology. Though its members generally opted to design with ink on paper, not with the light pen and computer, Archigram forewarned the profession that information technology would likely change architecture formally and programmatically. (Philosophical and artisanal, in many ways Archigram was more deeply traditional than the mainstream of bureaucrats that it wanted to supersede.)

What remained compelling about Archigram’s work for progressive architects was the possibility of an architecture without architecture, organizing experience without incarcerating it. This then would be an architecture to parallel other modern instruments for the organization of spatial experience—the reproduced image, the telephone, the computer—delicious in their flows and fast edits but incapable alone of sustaining

human occupation. Archigram’s work (and in this it was aided by its noncommittal politics) has resonated too with the dream of escaping the conventions of space, as it is organized around the clutches of the market, the family, the state, and other hegemonies exposed in the celebrated late-twentieth-century treatises of the new left, Foucault, Deleuze, and Guattari.

Archigram asserted the importance of the “event” of architecture, that quality which design now readily acknowledges, and paradoxically Archigram’s event-based architecture left a legacy to architectural aesthetics. Indeed, Archigram’s memorandum on the pleasures of the ephemeral and the poetry of contemporary technology became visible in countless buildings of the late twentieth century, Ron Herron Associates’ Imagination Headquarters in London (1989) an exemplar of the style, its silicon-coated fabric roof stretched on tensile connectors between an Edwardian school and its neighbor, as if provisionally.¹³

Nevertheless, one studies Archigram because it is symptomatic of the architectural condition, not because it is exemplary of architectural production. Archigram’s greater vision of a world emotionally redeemed by technology slipped from its control and degraded over ensuing decades into the syrupy marketing favored by the telecommunications, airline, and computing industries, while habitable, private, itinerant machines emanated solely from the car showroom. In one of the last pieces he wrote on behalf of Archigram, Chalk dutifully reiterated the group’s ultraoptimism, but the title of the 1969 article hinted at the creeping banality of technology: “Owing to Lack of Interest, Tomorrow Has Been Cancelled.”¹⁴ In the Archigram retrospective of 1972, Chalk recalled the moment when he realized that the space age was losing thrust:

*David Greene, Spider Webb and I clamoured ecstatically over the rocket support structures at Cape Kennedy. I visited the NASA control centre at Houston and later witnessed the second Surveyor (manless) moon landing on the monitors at the Jet Propulsion Laboratories in Los Angeles, collecting small fragments of the moon surface. But it was an omen. The technician assigned to me, sitting in front of a bank of 39 close-circuit TV monitors of the lunar operation, was in fact watching the Johnny Carson Show on the fortieth.*¹⁵