ARCHIGRAM

happy architectural dreams

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Each walking unit houses not only a key element of the carpal, but also a large population of 'world traveller-workers.'
Archigram means the deliberate retreat from everything that is considered to be established. Archigram provokes and thus alters thoughts, inspires.

It was 1961, when a group of very young architects decided to transform the world of architecture. We look back to the decade of the moon landing and the Beatles, cybernetics and megacities.

If we believe „the true story told by Peter Cook“ (which was presented as a comic-style story), everything began with David Greene, Mike Webb and Peter Cook himself. Bored by the present situation in architecture („Wot’s built now is boring…“), they decided to “…publish the cheerful stuff“. The outcome was a sheet with some David Greene poems. It sold only 300 copies and the few senior architects who saw it considered it a “student joke”. Peter Cook was only 25 years old, David Greene and Mike Webb were 24 when they published this paper, the first issue of Archigram.

Archigram is a combination of the words “ARCHitecture” and “teleGRAM”. The name indicates its purpose to have a strong impact; it wanted to be fast and underground.

This first, as all following Archigram issues, was to be understood like a protocol from a discussion. These discussions were held regularly in a “greasy spoon caff at Swiss Cottage”, as Greene, Webb and Cook met there. After the first Archigram was published, the “initiators” invited more people to join the discussion, in particular Warren Chalk, Dennis Crompton and Ron Herron (who were all working for the LCC, the London County Council, at that time).
So the next Archigram was published, about a year later. As Cook describes it, it was much more formal, with pages, typesetting and the convenience of stabled ends. The six young architects that formed the later Archigram group all came from different schools, “no two members were very similar”. Everyone of them thought, that good architecture has not been presentable, so far.

It was whilst working on a project for Taylor Woodrow, where Cook, Greene and Webb got to know Herron, Chalk and Crompton. “The Euston office became a good place for the two groups to get to know each other and Mike would make these odd space-cities under his drawing board”. “The LCC Group and the Swiss Cottage eaters effectively became one group.”

The rest is history. Further issues were published, nine in total, the last in 1970. After a short while, they became famous. It took another moment before they realized they were. Reyner Banham was the first serious critic who noticed Archigram and he talked about the work of the Archigram Group. So far, they did not call themselves that name, but “more and more other people did … so one day [they] said “what the hell” …” and from then they called themselves the “Archigram Group”.

Throughout all their works, graphic and illustration was the predominant language. One could think, if one didn’t look closely, that it was actually their only content or meaning. “Archigram is short on theory, long on draughtsmanship and craftsmanship”, as Peter Reyner Banham wrote in a comment for the book “Archigram”. “They are in the image business and they have been blessed with the power to create some of the most compelling images of our time”. That is certainly right. What comes into ones mind first, when thinking of Archigram are images.
But the images speak a language for themselves. They inspire, sometimes tell you stories. Even now, forty years later, the illustrations, the architectural drawings look modern, being very graphical. Archigram was always very aware of media, publishing was the best way they could express themselves and rebel against contemporary architecture, evoking discussion.

Figures played an important role in Archigram’s drawings. They were cut out of magazines - mostly women as Mike Webb admitted - and pasted on the surface. In many projects they occupied about a quarter of any given page. This was of course highly unusual in architectural drawing. Generally, figures exist merely to provide scale, in some Archigram projects however, the buildings featured in the drawings seemed only to act as a backdrop for the activities of the figures. Remarkable was also the use of line-weights. They used thick lines to make the drawings “look like something, even reduced to 4 cm on bad newsprint” 10.

However, it was of course not the style of presenting architecture that Archigram wanted to show the world. (Even though their style created a shockwave that is felt even now, especially in student work). It was the way of thinking. With their drawings, they wanted to shock. “Amongst fellow-believers and fellow-conspirators you only put out a signal if it is useful to Attack. [...] The signal in this case had to be a drawing” 11.

At first glance, everything they ever created was Utopia. But that was not what they saw in (most) of their work. They wanted to show a world how it could be, then and now. “85 percent of Archigram projects are immediately buildable using current techniques” 12. That might be true, but they are certainly not immediately buildable with the given politics, society and even economy. That makes Archigram projects Utopian.
You could not build a Plug-In City now, and the project does not want to be built. Plug-In city is a project that demonstrated a city programmed for the constant replacement of all its elements, allowing the city to develop in the most unforeseen ways. What stays is the Megastructure that holds all the elements. This is a good example for the terms of “Hard-” and “Software” that Archigram coined, Hardware being the rigid Mega-structure, Software the elements that are exchangeable.

Kurokawa, member of the Metabolist Group, which was a movement in Japan at the same time as Archigram, built the Nakagin Capsule Tower (Tokyo) in 1972. It executed the basic idea of Plug-In City in a small scale, consisting of two major structural elements: steel frame and reinforced concrete towers and capsule rooms that were attached to the towers. Hard- and Software if you want.

The Capsules were state-of-the-art and meant to be changed whenever necessary or whenever technology changed considerably. However until now, over 30 years later, the units have never been changed. The idea did not work out, in that case. Time does not seem ready for it.

It was the idea of Plug-In or Clip-On architecture that both Archigram and the Metabolists had in common. But, according to Justus Dahinden, while the Metabolists “are intent on developing a philosophical system based on the concept of cyclical change, Archigram procedes on a purely pragmatic basis and simply regards the use of separate components as the logical conclusion of the Athens Charter” 13. That correlates to what Reyner Banham writes about Archigram and theory.
It might be interesting to take a look at the Metabolist Group since they formed only about a year before Archigram. They met each other in a very similar way as Archigram, also basically during a project.

The origin of the Metabolist movement lies in the World Design Conference in Tokyo 1960. A “Theme Committee” was established, including avant-garde architects, and graphic and industrial designers, along with various other specialists. The architectural critic Noboru Kawazoe, architects Masato Otaka, Kiyonori Kikutake, and Kisho Kurokawa, industrial designer Kenji Ekuan and graphic designer Kiyoshi Awazu were taking a leading role in the committee, and these committee members later formed the Metabolist group. Until the Conference in 1960, the committee members met frequently. During these meetings, Kawazoe, Kikutake and Kurokawa discovered a common ground in their thinking. 14

But quite unlike Archigram, the Metabolists were soon to be supported by well established architects; Kenzo Tange was one of them.

Kenzo Tange’s „Plan for Tokyo Bay“ (1960) probably influenced Archigram as it had a big impact on the architectural world, its amplitude quite comparable to the impact Archigram had, a few years later. The Tokyo Bay project took the credibility of urban planning projects to another level, it showed entirely new uses for traffic systems. Reyner Banham goes as far as writing “[it] made Japan the fount of inspiration for architectural and urban visionaries for most of the sixties” 15. The level of detail with which the Tokyo Bay project was formulated was amazing.

But it was unlikely ever to be built. While - as Archigram projects - it may be buildable with current techniques, the dimension of it was so vast
that even if begun, it would have taken over 20 years (that was the approximation) to finish. It was radical.

Tange would not intervene with existing structure primarily, but rather suggested the building of a entirely new structure in the bay of Tokyo, capable to host a whole city. The growth of Tokyo should not be limited anymore. Tange argued: “Limits can not be set on urban growth; to do so would be to fail to appreciate the irreversible tendency apparent throughout history” 16.

The project was detailed to the maximum. Cost accounts were done. But who could have given the money? Within a period of 20 years, who could predict the economic situation? Thus, one can talk about certain “unbuildability” and of course “unbuiltness”.

This of course is a parallel to Archigram, whose schemes were often as vast. Banham came to the conclusion that Megastructures often take too long to build, their acceptance decreasing drastically during this time. „The megastructures, which were actually completed, were guaranteed a bad press and hostile reception, for they had taken so long to build, that the intellectual fashion that had given them birth had passed away before their completion.” 17

Tokyo Bay Project has also been criticised for its scale and thus its usability. „Many critics have feared that, as a consequence, the scheme, while comprehensible as a model, might be incomprehensible to ordinary human beings if built at the scale of life.” 18

Archigram, too, has been criticised for being inhuman. But this must root in a misunderstanding. Of course, looking for example at a section through the arterial roads of “city interchange”, one could argue, that is inhuman. But then, you
would only have looked on the surface of the drawing and of Archigram. It was one of the main concerns of Archigram to give the people all comfort and flexibility possible nowadays, using high-tech means.

You cannot translate the drawings of Archigram one-to-one. The drawings were much rather supposed to brainwash people. “The drawing was never intended to be a window through which the world of tomorrow could be viewed, but rather as a representation of a hypothetical environment made manifest simultaneously with its two dimensional paper proxy. This is how things would look like, if planners, governments and architects were magically able to discard the mental impedimenta of the previous age and embrace the newly developed technologies and their attendant attitudes.” 19

Knowing this interpretation, one has to read Archigram’s projects as a reminder of people’s needs. Variableness and changeability of housing is a quality Archigram tries to sell. One of their self-chosen keywords is comfort. “Goodies. Enjoyment. Security. System of structure, facilities, service, etc. is a comfort-giving thing as much as ice-cream is a comfort-giving goody.” Comfort, as Archigram observes, is an instinct. And: “Perhaps the greatest justification for environment – or any man-made effort – is well-being.” 20

We already saw by the example of the Metabolists, that Archigram were not alone with their criticism on contemporary architecture and with their ideas, by which they tried to redefine architecture. But there are still other groups that are worth looking at, when examining Archigram’s work and their approach in communicating ideas through utopian visions, i.e. drawings and illustrations. Archizoom and Superstudio, two radical architectural groups founded in Italy 1966, followed an approach that one could paraphrase...
with “Distopia”, instead of Utopia (but not exactly opposite). Or “Counter-Utopian”, as Ruth Eaton describes it.

They called attention to certain circumstances not by showing a positive projection of the presence, but rather through the provoking exaggeration of existing trends. 21 A famous example of a “Distopia” in literature would be “Nineteen-eighty-four” (George Orwell, 1948).

As an example (which will later get us back to Archigram), the supermarket was particularly hated by Archizoom’s members. In “No Stop City” (1970), they present an “endless subterranean, artificially lit, monofunctional, multilayered city from with an infinity of lift shafts provide access to the ground-level, a nature reserve protected by a great glass-dome.” 22

Archigram, too, dealt with the phenomenon of supermarkets. By far not so critical (i.e. accusing), but in a hilarious manner. They asked us: “Tired of supermarket shopping? Is it becoming a nightmare – up and down narrow aisles between high walls of brand name uniformity, with the lights glaring down […]?” 23. They proposed their newest invention, this time obviously a dream machine: Manzak, a radio controlled, battery-powered electric automaton that does the shopping for you, has an onboard kind-of-artificial-intelligence and is magically connected to you. Again, Utopia, again positive, again beautifully illustrated, and only with the illustration you understand the meaning of it, the irony. The text looks naïve, but not naïve enough to express the wit, which the drawing does with an ease that is characteristic for Archigram.

By the example of these two projects of Archizoom and Archigram we see that both groups communicate their ideas and ideals very visually. They create worlds that are “undeniably
memorable in aesthetic terms”. However, Archizoom, as opposed by Archigram, rather describe their projects as theories. They accuse the “system” of being wrong and thus are reluctant to create a coherent system of their own. They visualize a world that has been generated by the system itself, i.e. a negative world. “Aware that they themselves were part of the system, they refused to countenance new models that would, by definition simply perpetuate the system.” 24 Archigram are not afraid to do this. They play the role of optimists.

But as a matter of course, their projects are ambiguous, as they were supposed to be. Every Utopian Idea is ambiguous. If an Utopian vision cannot be seen in at least two readings, one reading containing negative connotations, it is not Utopia that we look at, but Paradise and Paradise is boring.

After we have seen all this, we might understand why the pictures of Archigram could raise so much attention and alter the course and the discussion in architecture. The images were deep, full of life, open enough to render an independent self, generated in the mind of the reader. They give the reader what he deserves; some people saw terrible news, a dreadful sight that required to be discussed fiercely. Others saw a nice future, a better world in that architecture could accomplish more than now, i.e. corresponding more to the peoples needs.

Thus, confidently one can compare Archigram’s architectural drawings with works of art. Like a painting, whose author certainly did not preconceive every single meaning that the reader sees in it, reinterpreting it. Where words don’t know anything more to express, without repetition, a picture doesn’t stop telling you news. If it is good it draws from the reader’s fantasy.
Archigram drew with passion. It assuaged them, they could not stop. While many visions of Archigram became reality (like the idea of Hard-and Software in buildings), one message of Archigram remains vivid and evident: Archigram enjoyed the future.

Kai Kasugai, 4.12.2003
footnotes

01 Peter Cook, "Archigram – the true story told by Peter Cook", p. 1

02 Peter Cook, "Some notes on the Archigram Syndrome", Perspecta, Supplement no. 11, Yale '67

03 Peter Cook, "Some notes on the Archigram Syndrome", Perspecta, Supplement no. 11, Yale '67

04 Peter Cook, "An Archigram legacy", page 123

05 Peter Cook, "An Archigram legacy", page 123: "Each of us had arrived (without initial collusion) at the conclusion that good architecture (and that meant "interesting" architecture – which probably meant "naughty architecture) had always been resisted by the broad swathe of the general population.

06 Peter Cook, "Archigram – the true story told by Peter Cook", p. 4

07 Peter Cook, "Archigram – the true story told by Peter Cook", p. 5

08 Peter Cook, "Archigram – the true story told by Peter Cook", p. 6

09 "A comment from Peter Reyner Banham" in "Archigram", first published 1972

10 Peter Cook, "The Archigram Effect"

11 Peter Cook, "The Archigram Effect"

12 Peter Cook, "On being English"

13 Justus Dahinden, "Urban structures for the future", 1972, p. 22

14 Kisho Kurokawa, "Metabolism in Architecture", 1977, p. 41

15 Peter Reyner Banham, "Megastructure – urban futures of the recent past", 1976, p. 51 and following

16 Kenzo Tange, Plan for Tokyo 1960, "A proposal for the modification of structures"

17 Peter Reyner Banham, "Megastructure – urban futures of the recent past", 1976, p. 10

18 Peter Reyner Banham, "Megastructure – urban futures of the recent past", 1976, p. 54

19 Mike Webb, in the Essay "Boys at Heart", 1999

20 Editorial of Archigram 8, "Open Ends"


23 from the project "electronic tomato" by Herron, Chalk and Greene, 1969

24 AA Files 47, "Utopian Reflections, Reflected Utopias – Urban Desings by Archizoom and Superstudio" by Marie Stauffer

The cover is a modified “walking cities” illustration (Herron ‘64). The title “happy architectural dreams” derives from the name of the exhibition "Träume vom gebauten Glück" in the "Deutsches Architektur Museum" (Frankfurt), 2003, which I just missed.

Montreal Tower, Cook ’63