

# Notes on the seven seductions of Archigram

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Objektyp: **Article**

Zeitschrift: **Trans : Publikationsreihe des Fachvereins der Studierenden am  
Departement Architektur der ETH Zürich**

Band (Jahr): - **(1998)**

Heft 3

PDF erstellt am: **11.07.2024**

Persistenter Link: <https://doi.org/10.5169/seals-919356>

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Grahame Shane

## Notes on the Seven Seductions of Archigram

This is a record of one car, five rooms, six people and seven times. It is a reflection on how the Archigram Group and their architecture entered my life. There seem to have been seven stages as in all such acts of seduction. These reflections were prompted by an enormous Archigram show which has arrived in New York this spring. Largely organized by Profesor Bill Menking from the Pratt School of Architecture, supported by Dean Tom Hanrahan, 400 drawings are shown in four locations. It was part of the even larger show which was at the Centre Pompidou and in Vienna, then migrating to Manchester. Each New York location had its own attractions. The Storefront for Art and Architecture displayed three projects by Ron Herron in its spectacular triangular space which opened out onto the street on beautiful days. Columbia University concentrated on Monte Carlo and later projects by Peter Cook. The bulk of the earlier work of the 60's was displayed in the Threadwaxing Gallery Space, a gigantic loft on Broadway. Here a re-enactment of the classic Archigram Opera was re-engineered in a darkened arena space using pre-programmed carousel projectors, video projectors, T.V.'s and tapes. Other work was displayed upstate at Cornell University.

### **The First Seduction; Mini Futurists; Peter Cook.**

Imagine yourself in a Mini-Cooper car travelling up the first piece of highway built in Britain after the war in 1964 at 90 mph. The engine in the tiny car is roaring, your knees are under your chin up against the windshield as you explain to your best friend from high school why it is you have to see the newly completed University of Leicester Engineering Laboratory designed by Stirling and Gowan. As an enthusiastic young First year student you rave to your friend about the strange mixture of victorian brick ramps, the ships ventilation hood on the

podium, the Russian Constructivist imagery of the cantilevered lecture halls and their Aalto like interiors. You continue to sing the praises of the research and office blocks stacked above the auditorium. These offices look like flying fragments from Frank Lloyd Wright's Johnson Wax Research laboratories in Racine, Wisconsin. All levels are connected by the cascading glass covered staircase. Then there is the extraordinary diamond cut factory roof running on the diagonal of the base laboratory block at the back.

Your friend is still puzzled, he is studying history at Oxford, so you explain how your school the Architectural Association is full all these strange teachers. A dome headed, bespectacled, old American named Buckminster Fuller had just been to lecture at the studio. He had taken over the entire first year space in the attic for twenty four hours, speaking continuously through the night. He was obsessed with the weight of your building, its global networks and mobility. The class had recently been on a tour of Ford's Dagenham factory to study mass production assembly and methods first hand. We were learning about a new age. Our desks in first year had come equipped with a board and a wooden box filled with drawing equipment and two books. One book was the 1927 english translation of Le Corbusier's classic *Towards a New Architecture*. This book praised the products of mass production and compared them with the standardization of classical Greece and Rome. It appeared to foretell of a new age of mass production of houses in cities. The second book, Reyner Banham's *Theory of Design in the First Machine Age*, published the year before, criticised Le Corbusier for failing to deliver and pointed to the Futurists as the true progenitors of a new second machine age.

Trying to explain just why this Leicester Laboratories building was so important as the engine roars, you pull out the recent issue of *Architectural Design* with an

article by Alvin Boyarsky explaining the Pop iconography of the building. To the beat of "I want to be Your Man" you describe the strange bespectacled, very thin, young 5th year teacher Peter Cook who came around the first year desks hawking a tiny orange and green sheet called Archigram. This was full of all these same ideas about mass production. There were pictures of domes, capsules and soap powder boxes all on the same page. Then there was the frame and bubbles of "Bowellism", an architecture of strange intestine like forms in the thesis project of Mike Webb, an Archigram member. You are forced to explain how the first year studio is a battle ground for such magazine hawkers. Some First year teachers are secretly selling copies of *Carré Bleue*, the underground voice of the Team X movement, with its pictures of snaking linear slab blocks. The sculptor Gustav Metzger is distributing tracts about kinetic structures and auto-destructive art in the studio. A little defensively you add that the A.A. students have themselves produced a magazine called "Symbols" with an article about how architecture was a kind of language by a young PhD student called Charles Jencks, one of Reyner Banham's students at the Bartlett.

The Stones and Beatles are blaring from the car's radio. You start to talk louder about the idea of the machine city, mass produced housing, mobility, consumers, Peter Cook's Plug-in City drawings and Pop Art as your friend almost misses the turn off the highway. The first seduction of Archigram is almost completed. The Folkestone Conference organised by Peter Cook in 1966 will finish the job with an astounding display of a nascent European network of like minded groups.

### **The Second Seduction; Warren Chalk.**

For the second seduction the scene has now shifted to the A.A. Members Room Bar in the fall of 1968. The room has seen better days. The elders of the school planned to move to a new building in South Kensington. The leather arm chairs are worn, the persian carpet threadbare, the marble fire places unkept and the crystal chandelier missing many bulbs. The bar itself is a tiny trolley in a corner of the room in front of a closet which houses a sink and dispenses supplies. From this bar the A.A. Guerillas, rebel students dressed in guerilla suits have taken to harassing the South Kensington faculty cocktail parties at the Imperial College of Science and Technology, the A.A.'s future home. Despite the successes of the Appollo Space Program there is a

desperation in the air. The Vietnam War, the urban riots in America, the events of May 68 in Paris and internal tensions at the school have destroyed the once heady optimism associated with the dream of the machine age. Drugs and alcohol formed one retreat, perhaps to the strains of Jefferson Airplane's "Surrealistic Pillow", the Door's angry rythms or the Pink Floyd's more mellow "Dark Side of the Moon".

Peter Cook, in his first year as Fifth Year Master in 1968, still projected an air of great optimism and undertook a bold educational experiment. This was a "good" year, with several future partners of Richard Rogers in the ranks (John Young, Mike Davis, Marco Goldschmidt, as well as associates like Alan Stanton, Chris Dawson and Richard Horden from Foster's office). Robin Evans the historian and critic was also in this year, as was the polymath John Frazer. The students were required to do all the official R.I.B.A. requirements at the end of Fourth year so that they could be free to do their Diploma without any other restraints. In the fall semester students worked on a multi-functional hybrid building, a Burotel, a mixture of hotel and office block a small site around the corner from the school. In the Spring they were free to work on their thesis. Amazing work ensued. Critics included James Gowan, Alvin Boyarsky, Fred Scott, Warren Chalk and Cedric Price at juries. Around the A.A. Bar these same critics assembled like refugees in fear of the schools impending collapse. There they consulted with Sam Stevens, perhaps the most questioning voice at the AA, as well as Margery Morrison, the long serving Slide Librarian (the sweetest voice). New in this circle was Dalibor Vaseley, a refugee from the fall of Prague.

Warren Chalk, a founding member of Archigram, had worked at the London County Council with Ron Herron and Dennis Crompton. Together they designed the Haywood Gallery with its small recital hall, sandwiched between the Royal Festival Hall and Waterloo Bridge on the South Bank. Like the war-time Anti-aircraft forts which they had shown in Archigram, these buildings stood as windowless boxes of concrete on legs, floating above their car park as the forts floated over the waves. Their grey exterior masked a complex interior with ramps and level changes in the gallery, as well as rooftop terraces for sculptures and views over the Thames. From this project came the idea of pods on legs in the Interchange Project with Ron Herron in 1963, leading to Herron's Walking Cities of 1964.

Warren Chalk, who died in 1987, had by 1968 moved far beyond this realm. He sought the poetry of the city in the strangest places, in events, in mists, in perfumes, in sounds. The speed of his wit was legendary and, when appropriately fuelled, devastating. His critical discourse on his own proposal for mass-produced "Capsule Homes" (1964) and "Gasket Houses" (1965 with Ron Herron) was absolutely scathing. You laughed but no one who had heard him would dream that dream again. His consciousness and eye for the demarcations of the British class system was equally brilliant, but had a bitterness and sadness based on his own northern class background. His intelligence was stunning and completely unexpected (he almost always wore gray suits as a disguise). He captivated his audience with the modulations of his thin, lyrical voice. He was loved by students, who lost track of all time and place, transported to an ephemeral realm of clarity and insight. A post card from David Greene to Chalk from the period best captures this quality. Shown in the last room at Threadwaxing Space, the card recorded a conversation about poles. Time poles were parking meters, there could be poles that translated languages, etc. It followed that all the facilities of the facilities of a city could be provided by poles, pylons, posts. Chalk pursued this logic further in his powerful theoretical texts on Ghosts and Phantoms in the Archigram Opera, read by Greene, which brought back in an instant Chalk's ethereal voice. The second seduction of Archigram was complete.

### **The Third and Fourth Seductions; Ron Herron and Dennis Crompton.**

The third seduction takes place in a second floor room in the Archigram office in Endell Street, Covent Garden, close to the A.A. and the British Museum. Archigram has won the Monte Carlo Competition in 1970 for the new multi-functional entertainment complex and has established an office in a small building on four floors. They have hired two french assistants, Bernard Tschumi and Colin Fournier. The intention was to set up a gallery or store at the street level, but Peter Cook is involved in the Ideas Gallery around the corner and the space is mainly used for storage. The top floor has a small apartment where various assistants stay, somewhere there is a darkroom on the third floor, where the photographer Kathy De Witt works day and night. The main room on the second floor has high ceilings and the front and back rooms are joined into one space. Here are set up drawing boards on tressle tables with chairs on

little wheels, normal student office equipment. A secretary's desk is by the door to the stairs, where the beautiful Lisa Selwyn was master of ceremonies. A big work table in the back space is used for conferences and guests, who come to work here.

Sitting with his back to the entry door is a tall man dressed entirely in blue denim. He rotates his chair and you are pierced by an intense gaze, friendly, kindly but very blue and strong. This is Ron Herron and you have been hired to help prepare a report on New York City for Alvin Boyarsky's second summer session in 1971. Your job is to read everything, sift and research. Ron remains calm and impeturbable, drawing away at the board, smoking, smoking, smoking. He tells tales as you work about his family, his wife, his kids, about the docks in South London where his father worked, about Los Angeles, the strange interaction of cars and buildings, about the beach, about a wonderful life. You suddenly realize you are close to the core of Archigram somewhere around here. That this calm and certainty are linked to a very firm grasp of powerful realities shaping our society. It is not just a question of brilliant theory, nor practice in itself, but a magic blend of the two which is very rare. Herron's Imagination Building, built with his two sons, is perhaps the most lasting built expression of their spirit. At Storefront Herron's voice again commands the space, narrating a video tape from the 1980's explaining his Suburban Sets House project. Herron is there (he died in 1994), a working class hero, seated in a canvas director's chair, within an early cyberspace simulation of the interior of the house. Meanwhile behind him a curved mobile video wall forms the ever changing backdrop illustrating his lecture, occasionally switching to wire frame.

At the Archigram office in 1971, almost imperceptably, Dennis Crompton is everywhere present humming away in the background. When it comes time to produce the report, it is Dennis who swings into action to bring everything together, cutting and pasting, photographing and framing. His energy and intensity is unbelievable, he seems never to sleep or eat, always to be performing miracles of coordination. His technical mastery of the processes involved make life smooth and planning easy, fast and furious. It is he who engineers the shows in New York and the Opera in the arena. At first you are not aware of his personality other than his northern accent, efficiency and humor. Slowly it dawns on you that this is a very sensitive, kind and intelligent person

who has deliberately half sunk himself in the networks of production and reproduction. Here is an intelligence and humanity which is acutely aware of history, is recording events, gathering information and drawings, caring for the business of the group with a fantastic energy and passion, which barely ripples the surface of the everyday. The third and fourth seductions of Archigram are complete.

### **The Fifth Seduction of Archigram; Mike Webb.**

Archigram always had a missing member, the one who had gone to America early, Mike Webb. Somehow this mysterious person had ended up on the East Coast instead of the West like Reyner Banham or Peter Cook in Los Angeles. When visited in the late sixties, Webb seemed to be happily married with children, painting strange paintings in the garage, teaching at Rhode Island School of Design. This was the man who had produced the revolutionary "Bowellist" Classic for the Furniture Manufacturers Building Project of 1957 and then gone on to produce the Sin Center, his thesis project of 1962, which the Polytechnic had rejected. This project had a peculiar fascination, not just because of its history. It applied car based ideas to the existing city, taking the center of a public square for its multi-level spiral car-park. The design then exploited the car park ramped section to lead people into the entertainment below or office towers above via some of the most elaborate escalators ever designed. The beautifully worked drawings of this project dominated the first room of Threadwaxing Space. This was a hybrid building with a vengeance. Its carpark base was covered by a net-like system of panels as a roof, which curved and flexed with the spiral ramps. Its interior sections were truly labyrinthine. It seemed like a Situationist International project but with a much more accomplished technocratic edge.

Webb was one of the most inventive members of Archigram, fast and agile and hard to keep up with. His creativity was amazing. After his thesis, together with David Greene, he developed the idea of the Drive-In House (64-65), merging the idea of the car as capsule and the house as capsule. Then he turned to the development of a prefabricated panel system of temporary service walls, called Rent-A-Wall (1966). Another version of the car capsule house was made from rented panels. These projects paled compared with what followed as the house became "The Cushicle" (1966-67), a balloon like structure which set in a car chassis, with

various clip on service units and communications packages, screens..., to form a mobile, flexible shelter. This idea was pushed even further in the Suitaloon Project of the following year, in which the car chassis became a kind of exoskeleton that flexed and attached to the human body, which was housed in an inflatable suit, which could be blown up to form a yurt like enclosure. Clip on back packs serviced this enclosure and a special door seal allowed two suits to be merged into a double enclosure, forming a shared unit for two people (beautifully drawn in a sweet man meets woman sequence, showing the merging of yurts).

The consistently intense logic of these projects and the clarity of their representation indicated an unparalleled poetic imagination. A second visit to their author in the late 1970's found him living in an abandoned diamond cutting factory on a high floor of an almost empty downtown skyscraper building, with a magnificent view north towards the golden cherub on the top of the Municipal Building and the skyline of Mid-town beyond. The space was furnished with old leather Mercury Marquis car seats as lounge chairs, a tressle table and assorted steel kitchen chairs, a curtained double bed enclosure on wheels and a mobile bathroom/kitchen assembly set in a metal frame and on enormous wheels (the office toilets were at the end of the corridor). This was nomadic robot living for real, its logic taken to the extreme. The fifth seduction of Archigram had taken root in New York where it continues to fascinate to this day, as Webb cycles at high speed through the foothills of the Dutchess County, travelling between John Johansen's translucent pyramid house and a classic country diner.

### **The Sixth Seduction of Archigram; David Greene.**

It was David Greene who pushed the logic of ephemerality and nomadology to the most radical conclusion, the dissolution of architecture. With Peter Cook he had planned the Nottingham Shopping Viaduct, an adaptable shopping mall made of a framework, cranes and capsules in 1962. With Mike Webb he worked on Drive-In Housing from 64-66. His Living Pod of 1965 was already detached from the ground, standing on space capsule like lunar landing legs with large pads. This double height mezzanine capsule led on to the house a kit of parts in the "We offer ten pre-selected sets project" based on a large american convertible car and camping technologies. Finally his Rock

Plug and Log Plug Projects took the logic of plug-in and camping miniaturization another step, proposing that the entire world be served by a hidden network of services that you could live closer to nature. In the show at the Threadwaxing Space Greene appeared to have taken over the final room of the loft sequence. Here was a full scale section of his living pod terminating the long axis of the gallery. In the center of the gallery floor beside the pod drawings was a wired log into which a small television was plugged, as rows of artificial flowers sketched a lawn landscape in outline (Eric Manigian installation directed by Greene).

As you entered this room you became aware of a strange presence behind you on the wall. There, stark naked, was the body of Greene pressed in overlapping sections against the glass window of a Xerox machine. This gray, spectral presence, perhaps enlarged a little, peered sadly forth, using as a fig leaf a typed note to Warren Chalk tied to a white carnation. This note was by far the most eerie and moving piece in the show. It was a poem addressed to Warren, ending in the sad lament that perhaps "Coming out the other side in such in spectral form is not a resolution but makes me wonder if architecture could have such a ghostly presence more like a morning mist than an oily rig". Beside this apertition where two truly shocking drawings by Greene. The drawings were of a search for a place for the perfect architectural suicide. They showed bodies dangling from nooses strung up in Le Corbusier's sybaritic bathroom at the Villa Garches and another hangman's noose in the Barcelona Pavilion by Mies. While the public reference to the end of Modern Architecture was present, the very real personal pain shone through, destroying the perfection of the machine age environment. In the catalogue Greene's writing argued passionately and poetically for the Archigram position on mobility and ephemerality. But here in the Gallery he showed Archigram's soul and its humanity in harrowing and personal memories. Nomadology and ephemerality had its dark side. The sixth seduction, a deeply sad and emotional one was complete.

### **The Seventh Seduction of Archigram; the Show.**

Archigram has always been prophetic. They marked the shift between Modernism and Post-modernism without a word of theory. Their importance is obvious and their influence, via Richard Rogers and Norman Foster to Rem Koolhaas and Jean Nouvel, is equally clear. Yet

they had mysteriously never received any acknowledgement in New York, self-styled capital of the Twentieth Century. Reyner Banham, their great supporter, had also mysteriously been excluded from New York until just months before his death. Perhaps sensing this ambiguity Dennis Crompton used Ron Herron's Walking Cities in the East River, off the edge of Manhattan, on the invitations. This was both a tribute to Herron's memory and a reflection of their continued sense of marginality. As the show opened the Museum of Modern Art, the only place which could have accommodated all the drawings, announced its decision on the final stage of its competition for its expansion. The judges chose the Taniguchi scheme which monumentalized the entrance in a new atrium. They rejected a scheme by Tschumi which was far more decentralized, distributing a series of event spaces throughout the building for each of the departments to control. The New York Times gave the show a half page, illustrating the Walking Cities off the shore of the city, but even the normally effusive Herbert Muschamp (he loves almost anything Philip Johnson does) sounded like walm in his praise. Ada Louise Huxtable was far more enthusiastic in the Wall Street Journal. Meanwhile New Yorkers voted with their feet, 800 people visited the show in its first day.

The Archigram Show, even when split between three locations in Manhattan, is overwhelming. But for me it was not the memories and ghosts which made it so fresh and refreshing. It was what happened around it, the three opening nights, the lectures, the discussions and the symposia. Threadwaxing Space was forced to rent a vacant upper floor for its discussion on a Saturday because of the size of the anticipated crowd. The scene was perfect Archigram. Rented chairs spread out in the enormous space. A rented sound system and microphones. Lights strung on wires. Folding tables for the panel. People standing up around the walls of the space and at the back. The ruined remains of a shirt factory, a loft for sale for a million dollars, was temporarily transformed into a place of intense debate as strange commentators emerged from the audience to stake their claims on the Archigram tradition of vitality, spontaneity and ephemerality in Architecture and the city. The seventh seduction continues...