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ARCHIGRAM – AN INTUITIVE WAY TO ARCHITECTURE

ARCHIGRAM – INTUICYJNA DROGA DO ARCHITEKTURY

A b s t r a c t

In 1961, a group of six British architects released the first issue of Architecture Telegram. A completely unprofessional-looking, two-page newsletter was published in an unimpressive print run of 400 copies. In the following issues, the number of pages and number of copies increased and the name shortened. Today we know this newsletter under the name Archigram, which we identify with a group formed by three angry young architects and three experienced, less angry, but with an open mind. In this way, an explosive mixture was created. They rejected pathos, rationalism and historical ballast in architecture. In the years of their activity as a group, Archigram realized only three non-serious projects; among them the pool for Rod Stewart seems to be the most serious. They also left behind thousands of unrealized, futuristic, often bizarre and impractical visions. They were like Thomas Alva Edison in the world of architecture, who had only a few brilliant inventions on over 1000 patented, the rest was completely useless. However, if we ask a question, who has had a significant influence on the world of contemporary architecture, perhaps many will answer: Archigram.

Keywords: Archigram, high-tech architecture

S t r e s z c z e n i e

W 1961 roku grupa sześciu brytyjskich architektów wydała pierwszy numer pisma Architecture Telegram. Zupełnie nieprofesjonalnie wyglądająca, dwustronicowa gazetka wydrukowana została w mało imponującym nakładzie 400 egzemplarzy. W kolejnych numerach zwiększono nakład i liczbę stron, a także skrócono nazwę. Dziś znamy to pismo pod nazwą Archigram, którą utożsamiamy z grupą utworzoną przez trzech młodych gniewnych architektów oraz trzech doświadczonych, mniej gniewnych, za to z otwartym umysłem. W ten sposób powstała mieszanka wybuchowa. Intuicyjna droga do architektury to była ich droga. Odrzucali w architekturze patos, racjonalizm i historyczny balast. W latach swojego istnienia jako grupa Archigram zrealizował jedynie trzy mało poważne projekty, z których basen dla Roda Stewarta wydaje się być najpoważniejszy. Pozostawili po sobie również tysiące niezrealizowanych, futurystycznych, często dziwacznych i niepraktycznych wizji. Byli jak Thomas Alva Edison architektury, w przypadku którego na ponad 1000 opatentowanych wynalazków przypadało tylko kilka genialnych, reszta była kompletnie bezużyteczna. Jeśli jednak zadamy pytanie, kto wywarł znaczący wpływ na świat współczesnej architektury, to być może wielu odpowie – Archigram.

Słowa kluczowe: Archigram, architektura high-tech

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1. Intuition or a joke?

There is no doubt that members of the Archigram chose the intuitive path to architecture. The dilemma of intuition or rationality seemed to be obvious to them. We can risk the statement that they rejected rationality automatically because rationality is not interesting and does not drive progress. Was Archigram serious? The answer to this question is not easy. For sure the first issue of Archigram did not look serious. It had only two pages that were duplicated in 400 copies on the office copy machine. Dennis Crompton said that they used a potato stamp to make a red dot. Copied on the cheapest paper, it looked like a comic book, a school magazine or even a student joke. Probably at that moment the members of the group did not know whether it would be something serious. The next releases looked a little better, but still their content was not serious. Inside we find megastructures, walking cities, strange gadgets, superheroes and similar content. Perhaps intuition told the Archigram members that it was easiest to discuss serious matters in the convention of a joke, or perhaps they didn't think about it at all. Peter Cook explains himself, as he felt guilty: *A lot of our projects are highly serious and a lot of constructed buildings are a sort of bad joke*[1]. However, the unserious form of the booklet contained extremely avant-garde articles, asking important philosophical questions about the architecture of the future, the place of technology in human life, and the place of the human in the technocratic world. Nonsense projects were to provoke discussion about the inevitability of progress. The form of joke allowed them a more radical approach. The lacko of necessity to immediately implement often ridiculous ideas emboldened the creators and freed their imagination. The futuristic visions of Archigram were also a kind of commentary on the present. They highlighted the stagnation of British and world architecture at that time. Great Britain in the early 1960s wanted a revolution in all areas of life and art. At that time, Yuri Gagarin made his first space flight, soon the music would be taken over by The Beatles and The Rolling Stones, Pop art played with consumerism, giving mass products a higher rank and turning lust for possession into an artistic manifesto. Meanwhile, architecture was still an ingrained art. The modernist revolution took place before the war, the Bauhaus had been dead for a long time, the modernists had grown old, and Le Corbusier would soon die. Peter Cook, Warren Chalk, Ron Herron, Dennis Crompton, Michael Webb and David Greene wanted to discuss architecture from a distance, putting themselves outside. However, they did not take the pose of scoffers. They hid serious reflections about the future of architecture and civilization behind an unserious mask.

2. Megastructures, walking cities and other oddities.

Between 1961 and 1974, 10 (in fact 9 and a half) editions of the Archigram newspaper were published. They contained a lot of different ideas, from futuristic visions of the city, through capsules, survival kits, to strange gadgets. There are 212 projects published on the Archigram website[2]. The most important of them are:

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[1]   S. Sadler, *Archigram: Architecture without Architecture,* MIT Press, Cambridge 2005, p. 4.
[2]   archigram.westminster.ac.uk; access 2018.06.10.

The Sin Center, Michael Webb, 1962. This is the master's degree diploma work of Michael Webb, also known as the "Entertainment Palace". The actual functional program is not as spicy as its name and resembles modern shopping malls. It consists of shopping spaces and a bowling alley, cinema, theatre, cafes and spaces for dancing. Technological character is added here by car parking ramps. The Sin Center form is covered with a net of cables and, as Jencks writes, contains many "sinful" but non-obvious metaphors[3].

Plug-in-City, Peter Cook, 1964. A radical urban vision – a city without buildings, a modular megastructure, which residents can fill with standardized elements. A literally understood version of Le Corbusier's "machine for living in". A similar approach, although on a smaller scale, we see today at Alejandro Aravena works, which gives the residents a structure to be completed instead of finished homes. The constantly growing megastructure is in endless development. Simon Sadler calls it the aesthetics of incompleteness[4]. Permanently installed huge cranes that can carry individual modules increased the sense of perpetual change. Plug-in-City was supposed to look like a construction site that is never finished.

The Capsule Homes Project, Warren Chalk, Taylor Woodrow, 1964. A housing capsule, prefabricated flat, inspired by a space capsule. After all, we have the Space Age stimulating the imagination. The self-sufficient capsules are threaded onto the core, which is the only still element and provides communication service for the entire building. Of course, everything recalls the Nakagin Capsule Tower (1972) by Kisho Kurokawa, as well as the Chicago City Marina building (1962) by Bertrand Golberg with a very similar shape with spiral car parking at the lower part of the skyscraper. The chronology of events gives the answer to who was the inspiration for whom.

Blow-out Village, Peter Cook, 1966. An inflatable village, launched in the event of a catastrophe. As a matter of fact, it is a rescue pneumatic boat about the size of a small village. Moving on a floating platform, a set of telescopic lifts put up to create a residential space that is covered by a transparent dome. This dome, not the idea of the pontoon, will find many followers in the future.

The Walking City, Ron Herron, 1964. A city in the form of mobile robots reminiscent of a walking insect with artificial intelligence. Walking City offered urban life in various parts of the world and at the same time sought resources. We can see here leaving the concept of a city as a permanent and self-sufficient place. The inhabitants of Walking City are urban nomads who want to enjoy the comforts of the city while retaining a substitute for freedom of movement. Perhaps Walking City is the progenitor of the modern Smart City.

Living Pod, David Greene, 1966. Mobility and temporariness on a small scale. Portable shelter for real nomads who do not need a city but need some comfort. Living Pod is full of various machines that meet all the needs of the resident. These machines, not walls, are a home – a shelter that gives a sense of safety. Instead of the walls, Greene offers a biomorphic plastic shell. Also in the case of this project, we can speak about a literal understanding of the idea of "a machine for living in".

Instant City, Peter Cook, 1968. Another mobile city, this time moved from place to place using huge balloons. The travelling city reaches rural areas offering them city entertainment. It is similar to modern music festivals when a temporary, portable city is built in the
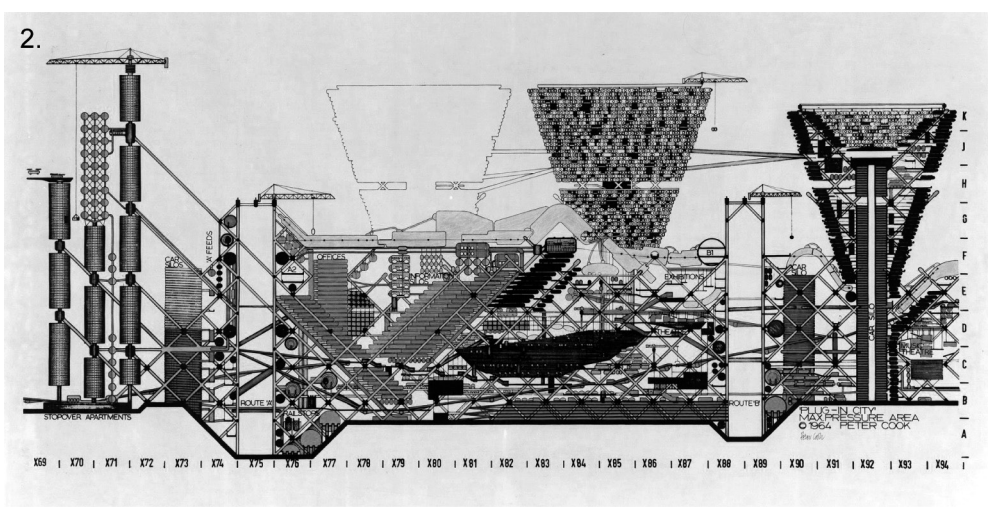
3 Ch. Jencks, *Ruch nowoczesny w architekturze,* Warszawa 1987, p. 318.
4 S. Sadler, *Archigram: Architecture without Architecture,* MIT Press, Cambridge 2005, p. 14.

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CITIES: MOVING
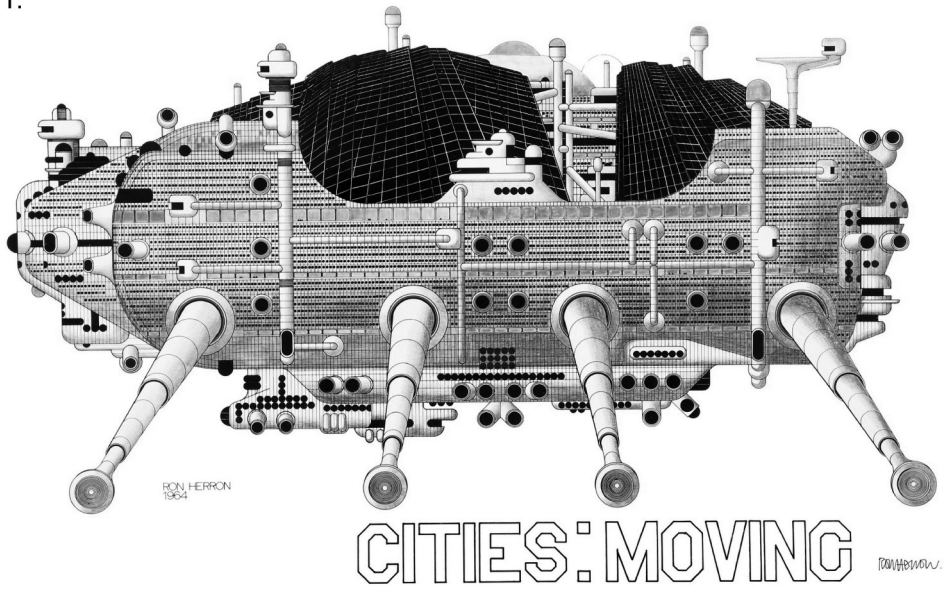
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Ill. 1.   The Walking City, Ron Herron, 1964. (Source: www.moma.org/collection/works/813, access: 2018.06.10.)

Ill. 2.   Plug-in-City, Peter Cook, 1964. Source: (Source: www.moma.org/collection/works/797, access: 2018.06.10.)

wilderness to provide entertainment and also to provide basic needs. Let's not forget that the famous Woodstock took place in 1969.

Seaside Bubbles, Ron Herron, 1966. This project touches the subject of modularity and temporariness of architecture. Pneumatic capsules allow for seasonal urbanization of coastal areas without littering them with permanent architecture. It was also supposed to solve the problem of seaside towns that were depopulated in the off-season.

3. Architecture of nonsense. Humour in architecture

This architecture is a deadly serious art whose implementation requires huge amounts of money. Big money does not have a sense of humour. This is probably the main reason why humour does not often appear in architecture. In collision with the investor's big money, the architects lack the distance or self-irony; they bear a lot of responsibility. There were some funny quotes and metaphors in postmodernism (from Polish examples I can only think of huge mouths in Dariusz Kozłowski's Alchemist's House), but this style did not last very long which proves that the privilege of using humour in architecture means voluntarily placing themselves on the margin of this art. Such is the destiny of walking cities, megastructures, capsules and similar archigram inventions. The youthful naivety of these ideas was ridiculed by the older generation of architects. It was superficial and condescending laughter. Time has shown that some naive and utopian visions can become a reality. Peter Cook had to go grey to be allowed to build Kunsthal Graz in the shape of a liver ripped out from the human body. Humour gave the members of the group distance and freedom, emboldened them, allowed them to create irrational visions with impunity. In the case of failure, it could always be said that this was not serious architecture.

4. Pop culture and commercial disaster

20th-century art became a slave to popular culture. This is not just about pop-art, which commented on the consumerism of society using it as a material. At that time, material – consumerism – dominated the creators who, quoting Piwowski's "Rejs", can't be creators and creation at the same time, but like everyone else, they have to pay bills and often make art for money or simply to survive. This results in the appearance of an art addressed to a mass audience without deeper reflection that would make this massive reception difficult. This phenomenon is most visible in music and film, but it can be observed in other fields of art, including architecture, which is best demonstrated by contemporary commercial architecture in the Las Vegas style. Members of the Archigram undoubtedly noticed pop culture and even through their comic booklets tried to express its language. However, they did not take on the ease of reception, which became one of the reasons for their lack of commercial success. At the end of the Archigram group's existence, they attempted to work as a normal design office, soon after winning the competition for an entertainment and sports building on the reclaimed foreshore of the Monte Carlo. At that time the group was joined by Colin Fournier and Ken Allison. In Monte Carlo they proposed a huge dome buried in the ground with movable modules of the auditorium, lighting systems and toilets allowing for complete freedom of interior design. Due to the lack of financing, this project has never been implemented. However, in 1973, three

projects were completed, which were lucky to be realized during Archigram's existence. These were: a children's playground in Milton Keynes, an exhibition at the British Commonwealth Institute in London, and a swimming pool at Rod Stewart's estate. These were not outstanding works. Honestly, these were terrible works and the lack of commercial success is not surprising here. The initial enthusiasm of the group turned into discouragement and even frustration. We can even say that the attempts to implement projects killed the creativity of Archigram. It is also important to mention the change of the socio-political climate in the world and the gradual disappearance of understanding for futuristic visions. After the wars in Vietnam and Korea, technocratic optimism turned into fear of technical progress, as well as fear of the implementation of ill vision of architects. Disappointed with this situation, the group finally broke up in 1974. *Archigram gave us a chance to let rip and show what we wanted to do if only anyone would let us,* said Ron Herron just before his death in 1994. *They didn't*[5].

5. What after the Archigram?

The three terrible realizations mentioned above are not significant in the achievements of the group. It is not because of them that we can find Archigram in books on architectural history and theory. Why did they get there? It happened because, following the development of architecture in the next years, we repeatedly find traces of Archigram. Their crazy visions have activated the imagination of many followers. This is openly declared by many artists, and in the works of many not declared the Archigram's stigmatizing marks are clearly visible. This stigma is imprinted in many fields of life: the popularity of electronic gadgets, a futuristic approach to urban planning, but above all, it is surprising that the Archigram had significant influence on mainstream architecture, often creating the appearance of important trends.

The influence of Archigram on the emergence of high-tech architecture is obvious, the beginning of which should be linked with the Paris Centre Georges Pompidou. Renzo Piano, Richard Rogers and Gianfranco Franchini, forgotten today, before the Centre Georges Pompidou, were like the Archigram group – young people just after graduation, not agreeing with reality. They proposed a building – a machine – a megastructure to be filled with content and installations. Archigram's style is not only enthusiasm for technology. The packaging of the building with a muddle of pipes, in other words Bowellism, is the invention of Michael Webb. Archigram metaphors are not missing here. Renzo Piano himself speaks about the spaceship of Jules Verne. The competition work by Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers actually looks like the next Architecture Telegram issue. There is only a superhero missing in the comic collage. After the Centre Georges Pompidou, Richard Rogers, without Renzo Piano, realizes in London, Archigram's home, the Lloyds' building (completed in 1986), the quintessence of Bowellism. This building became the Rogers trademark and it is still one of the icons of London's modern architecture. Another high-tech architecture representative, Nicholas Grimshaw, published his early works in the Archigram newsletter, and in many of his projects we feel the Archigram roots, such as technocratic megalomania, or the search for inspiration in the world of pneumatic domes or biomorphic shapes. Let's look at the Eden Project or London Waterloo. In the case of the next high-tech architect Norman Foster, it is

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[5] www.theguardian.com/uk/2002/feb/14/arts.arts; access: 2018.06.10.

believed that Archigram-inspired projects are only early projects such as the HSBC in Hong Kong and the Sainsbury Center for Visual Arts. But is it not in the spirit of the Archigram the idea that the skyscraper should be in the shape of a cucumber?

In the spirit of Archigram there is undoubtedly a blobism also called blobitecture, an architecture made of amoeba-shaped bubbles. It seems that the term was introduced relatively late, in the 90s, and does not refer directly to the Archigram. There is no doubt, however, that blobism draws inspiration from the biomorphic thread of Archigram's work, therefore projects such as Sea Bubbles, The Sin City and Living Pod. Interestingly, blobism is not only the architecture of madmen such as Ron Herron or Peter Cook, we can also find here the mainstream architecture designed by the greatest stars, such as the Allianz Arena by Herzog & de Meuron (2005) or the famous Guggenheim Museum Bilbao by Frank Gehry. Kunsthal Graz (2003) became the icon of blobitecture, which is actually the posthumous realization of the Archigram. Former members, the Peter Cook group and Colin Fournier, finally materialized their youthful dreams of bizarre architecture in the shape of a liver. Blobism is also represented by the projects of the Parisian studio Jakob + MacFarlane creating architecture built of bubbles and deformed frames designed using modern software, which gives them an advantage over Archigram, that allows organic ideas that are relatively easy to implement. Their most famous project is the Docks de Paris adaptation of concrete port depots to the City of Fashion and Design. Attention is drawn to the green organic plug-in that provides communication between building levels. The designers themselves call this thing "Plug-over". Other projects such as the Orange Cube (2010) and Euronews Headquarters (2014) also insert organic forms into the cubic structure. Interestingly, we can find a trace of their activities at the Centre Georges Pompidou, where in 2000 they arranged the interior of the restaurant using biomorphic forms. Here we can't fail to mention the avant-garde architecture of Future Systems, a design studio managed by Czech visionary Jan Kaplický, who died in 2009. After all, this is Archigram in a pure form. Biomorphic shells, futuristic audacity, and sometimes naivety and a lot of visionary, unrealized projects, such as the Czech National Library, which was designed in the form of a huge octopus. It was a vision so daring and infantile that even the Czechs were not ready for it. Kaplický managed to implement two buildings: the Selfridges Building in Birmingham, the Media Centre in Lord's Cricket Ground in London, futuristic projects, but more interesting are the unrealized visions that Kaplický drew throughout his career. That they are in the spirit of Archigram is shown by the exhibition *Yesterday's Future: Visionary Designs by Future Systems and Archigram*, which took place in 2016 at the Deutsches Architekturmuseum. It is worth mentioning that Kaplický worked on the Centre Pompidou project, which he had to leave when Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers moved from London to Paris. The Czech emigrant Kaplický did not receive a French visa.

The Archigram legacy also refers to single projects – icons of architecture. The well-known Nakagin Capsule Tower (1972) by Kisho Kurokawa embodies the Archigram's vision of the home as a machine for maintaining the basic functions of human life. The project looks like it was a realized vision of Capsule Homes by Warren Chalk, an experimental project ordered by Taylor Woodrow. The idea of a core with lifts and a staircase is almost identical in both projects. This once futuristic vision is now an artificially sustained ruin. There are an increasing number of rumours about the need to demolish this object[6]. Here comes a reflec-

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[6] www.kisho.co.jp/page/209.html; access: 2018.06.10.

tion on the rapid aging of futuristic architecture. The designs of the recently deceased Will Alsop are also evidently inspired by Archigram. Let's look at the London Peckham Library (2000), it's crazy colours, drunk pillars and bubble-like implants. Moreover, the Sharp Center for Design in Toronto looks like a walking city. Once again, the Centre Georges Pompidou theme appears. Few remember that Will Alsop took second place in the competition, losing only to Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers.

It is also worth mentioning the masters of drawn architecture, for example Lebbeus Woods[7]. His drawings depict megastructures, machines, mobile or even flying architecture in a post-catastrophic world, ensuring survival for humans and not much more. Let's take a look at Photon Kite, Unified Urban Field or Meta-Institute. Woods also noticed that escape into the world of drawn architecture allows for more daring visions and he agrees that the world is not ready for it. Unlike Archigram, Woods sees a pessimistic view of technology, which he claims is only destruction. Also the work of the aforementioned Future Systems are mostly unrealized visions, which remain only drawings. It seems that Kaplický also believed that the world of drawing gives creative freedom.

At the time, it seemed that Archigram's urban ideas were science fiction without any chance of implementation. However, the futuristic vision of the intelligent city of Dennis Crompton (Smart City), whose entire infrastructure is controlled by computers, is now shockingly ordinary. The idea of Smart City is almost outdated. In the world there are dozens if not hundreds of smart cities. Every respectable Asian metropolis is now Smart. Artificial intelligence controls traffic there, unmanned metro goes in the underground, everywhere camera eyes supervised by appropriate algorithms guard for security. Half a century has passed and the technocratic optimism of the Archigram turned into a technocratic ordinariness. Futurism has become out of fashion. The former belief that the continuous development of technology will make our lives easy and pleasant has turned into the fear that we will destroy our planet before we learn to live somewhere in space.

6. Epilogue

What was the positive effect of Archigram's activity then, more than 50 years since their glory? First of all, time has shown that even the craziest visions can be realized. Secondly, it turned out that crazy visions are infectious, resulting in an unstoppable avalanche of creativity. Thirdly, perhaps the intuitive way to architecture does not exclude the rational one, since it turned out that what used to be an irrational joke in a student newspaper could be realized. Fourthly, without such creative freaks, the world of modern architecture would be filled with boredom and stagnation.

Owing to lack of interest, tomorrow has been cancelled that was the title of Warren Chalk's 1969 article[8].

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[7] www.wired.com/2013/02/lebbeus-woods-conceptual-architect/; access: 2018.06.10.
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