The Life of Yellowing Papers: Participatory Urban Planning in Archigram's *Living City*

> 'It's been in and out of every department, council, committee, pigeonhole until for all of us here it's not a city but a chaos. (...) Like most other new worlds, it's just a debris of yellowing paper'
>
> Raymond Williams, *The Fight for Manod* (8)

During their almost 15 years of operation in postwar Britain, the architectural collective Archigram built no architecture. The architects Peter Cook, Warren Chalk, Dennis Crompton, Ron Herron, Mike Webb, and David Greene together produced more than a hundred vivid sketches, shocking exhibitions, engaging magazines, creative models, and imaginative city plans. None of them was built. "It's all done for the giggle" (Sadler 4), contemporary critics said, many arguing that there "wasn't all that much substance beneath the startling imagery" (Sudjic). However, serious or so-regarded architectural projects are also hardly ever executed. Impracticality and revisionism are inherent to town planning. Yet, stern critics of Archigram led to their denomination as "non-building builders" (Sudjic), and to the rejection of the group's proposed new worlds. Possible reasons for such censoring criticism can be found through a close-reading of Archigram's *Living City* projects and their iconoclastic architectural philosophy.

The *Living City* exhibition, held in 1963, was a culmination of Archigram's initial work as a group and consequently a pivotal event for their career. The exhibition collected city plans, drawings, models, and art pieces in a gallery hall also designed by Archigram. "Our belief in the City as a unique organism underlies the whole project," (Bodley 71) writes Peter Cook in the introduction to the exhibition catalog. The pieces carried a fundamental interactive and subjective component, for the *Living City* "is a series of small spaces, and they alone will be fantastically affected by the number of people walking around them" (Bodley 71). This dynamic, colorful, and multifaceted view of a city deemed the group's work mixed reviews which were unapologetically addressed by the architects in the third issue of the Archigram magazine. "As an object," they write

of the exhibition, “it obviously confused many people who like their art works, town planning, visual references, and gallery situations to be predictable, compartmentalized, and foursquare” (6). Positioning their pieces as a less predictable alternative to contemporary town planning, Archigram reaffirms them as indeed town planning efforts. The confusion they sparked on viewers then would follow from differences between Archigram’s vision of town planning and the state-of-the-art process, which can be extracted from their construction of the Living City.

The “first step to *Living City*” (Bodley 73) is the communication interchange, which stresses the distributed nature of Archigram’s town planning. In the *City Interchange* plan (Fig. 1), Warren Chalk and Ron Herron envision a network of city entities and their relationships. Network nodes include the city center, multiple sub-centers, industry, government, research, communications, and commerce. Some of those entities represent proper physical entities in a city–government, commerce, industry. However, Chalk and Herron deem city centers, which are collections of city entities rather than a single entity, of equal if not bigger importance than physical entities in their plan. The thicker edges in the plan are drawn outwards from the city center, as if the center builds relationships to its surroundings by itself. The architects argue that these center spaces have agency in the city as much as industry or government. Such spatial agency mirrors Peter Cook’s description of the *Living City* exhibition as a “series of small spaces” rather than a collection of art pieces, and leads to the conceptualization of Archigram’s town planning as a summative and collective spatial process rather than a vision of a single central entity.

The *Living City*, as a product not of an entity but of space itself, is dependent upon the views and experiences of its citizens. Warren and Chalk do not place the “government” node in their *City Interchange* plan in the center of the city, for the government should not be primarily responsible for town planning. Dennis Crompton’s speculative model of a *City Synthesizer* further supports this idea by symbolizing the ideal town planning process through a three-stage algorithm. Crompton writes in the exhibition catalog that the overall city network–returning to Chalk and

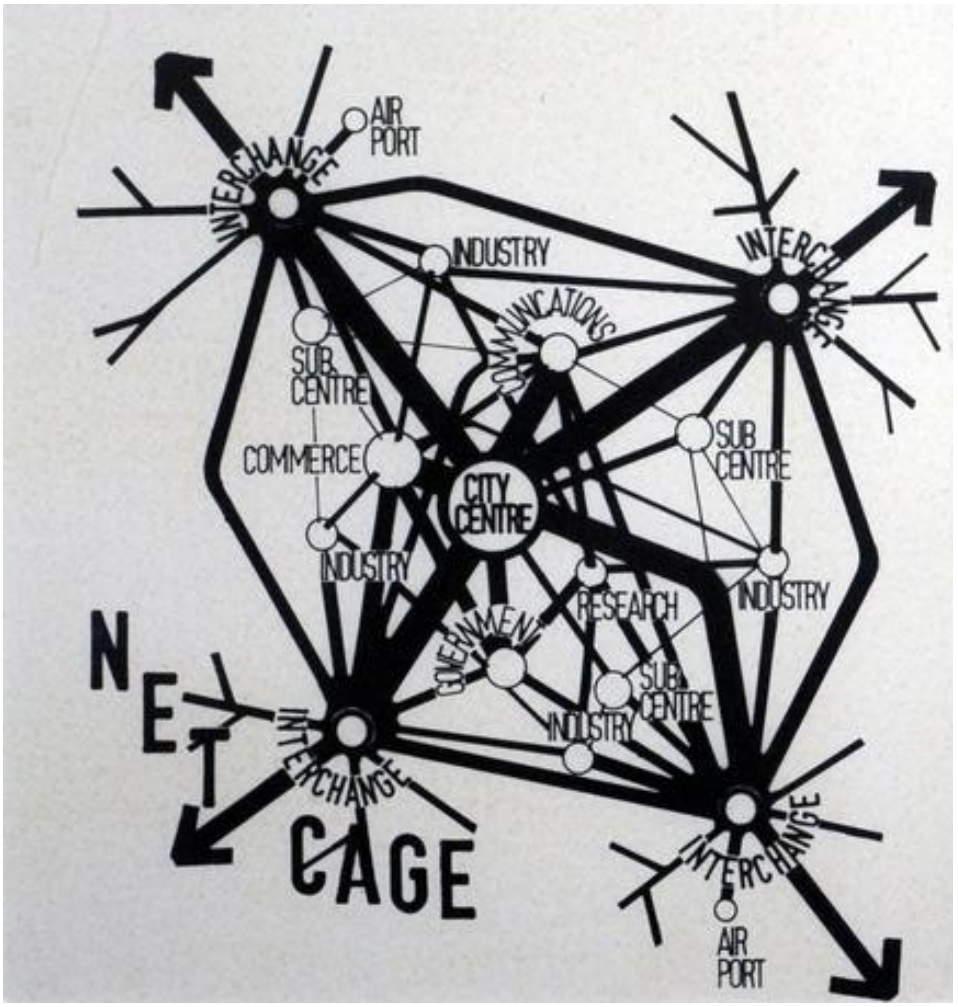

Fig. 1. City Interchange Plan (1963), by Warren Chalk and Ron Herron. Reproduced from the Archigram Archives.

Herron's focus on relationships–is first formed from information about the population such as mean age and size as well as city site data such as topography. Secondary information such as fertility rates, journey to work, and wages modify and amplify the network. Finally, a "continuing feedback in which every facet of the city life is relevant to the whole" takes place, where centers and suburbs expand and contract continuously (Bodley 86) to accommodate all subsequent information. The city is a product of its population, limited by geography. The feedback loop described takes place naturally and achieves subsistence without any action from a planner or politicians. This is a city that creates itself rather than being created. Archigram envisions town planning naturally arising from the human condition, as a process that must be carried on in close partnership with citizens.

By regarding town planning as an inherently participatory process, members of Archigram

place themselves in opposition to contemporary urban planning. The modernist architect Le Corbusier, a key reference in architecture, would argue that "the Architect, by *his* arrangement of forms, realizes an order which is a pure creation of *his* spirit" (11). This view is contradicted in the *Living City* exhibition, which "revolves around people, for cities are *their* creation" (Chalk et. al 114). To Corbusier, the "plan is the generator" (47). In the absence of a dry-looking, geometric, and disciplined document, the resulting city yields the sensation of shapelessness, of poverty, of disorder, of wilfulness (Corbusier 48). Under this philosophy, the *City Interchange Plan* is not a Plan, for it has no ambition to generate a city. Archigram views city plans as documents that seek to generate conditions under which a city can generate itself: the networks of communications, the subaltern role of government, the synthesizer feedback loop. The iconoclastic character of Archigram's work lies primarily in the redefinition of town planning as a collective and iterative process rather than the action of a man–the Architect–operating under strict guidelines–the Plan.

Once town planning assumes this new meaning, the works of Archigram can be read as city plans with ambitions to be built. More importantly, plans with ambitions to be built over cities that were actually built. In his introduction to the exhibition, Peter Cook writes that

> there is no comfort from the dusts of Brasília or Chandigarh, the two opportunities in recent years for a city to be created *in tote*, unhampered by limitations of location or taste. Whether we have a liking for their aesthetics or not, neither is a *Living City*. (Bodley 70)

Brasília, the capital city of Brazil built between 1957 and 1960, is a prime example of modernist town planning. The city's Plan (Fig. 2), authored by Lucio Costa, is a generator. His first sketch consisted of two orthogonal lines, which would later bend slightly to become the wings of an airplane–which would, supposedly, allow Brazil to "take off." In contrast to the *Synthesizer*, Costa proposes a city network incapable of encompassing the primary and secondary information that the city would receive: the construction of Brasília incurred a large migratory movement in Brazil, and the city's limited housing failed to shelter the increasing population. This is a closed and final plan,

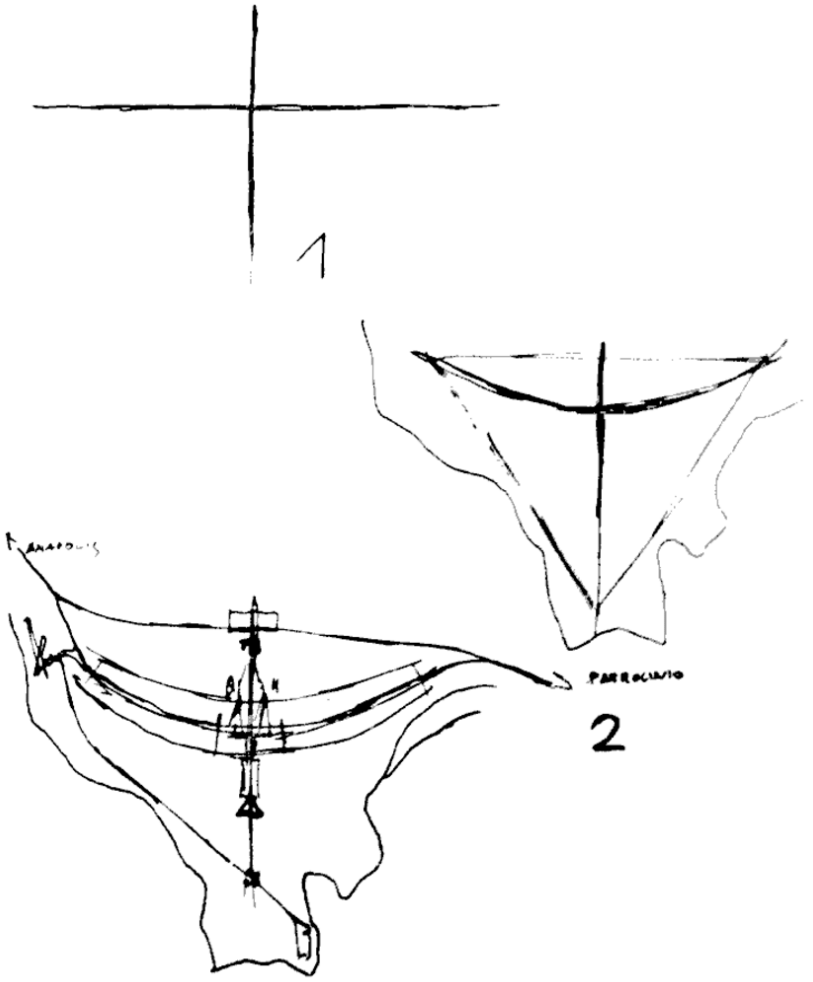

Fig. 2. Sketches for Brasília (1957), by Lúcio Costa. Reproduced from Tavares, 2014.

while in the *City Interchange* we can read the four outgoing arrows as suggestive of a natural urban growth. And, whereas Warren and Chalk envisioned a complex and ramified city network that encourages participation, Costa envisioned a simple hierarchical network with government in its center. Peter Cook, by claiming–instead of arguing–that Brasília is not a *Living City*, invites the exhibition attendee to make such comparisons. His rhetorical move subverts the ontological frame of urban planning. Rather than thinking whether Archigram's projects fit the conception of a plan proposed by internationally recognized architects, the viewer must think whether an internationally-acclaimed (at the time) city is a unique and self-sufficient organism.

And, while the comparison to Brasília leads the common citizen to a reflection, it also illuminates the underlying reasons for the critical dismissal of the architectural aims of Archigram.

Political scientist James Scott writes about the logic behind Brasília's plan in his book *Seeing Like a State*. He describes town planning as a search for increased legibility of the civil society. To Scott, much of statecraft consists in "rationalizing and standardizing what was a social hieroglyph into a legible and administratively more convenient format" (3). Planned cities with a geometric order are appealing to statesmen because they offer an "urban geography transparently legible from without" (Scott 55), allowing them to better control and organize the population. In this sense, Scott argues that the "founders of Brasília, rather than having planned a city, have planned to prevent a city" (126) because they want to systematize the unintelligible complexity of human interactions and urban vitality. The legibility of Costa's Brasília Plan (Fig. 2) when compared to Chalk and Warren's City Interchange Plan (Fig. 1) is striking. This is not to say that the *Living City* is illegible. Scott argues that for those who grew up in the most disorganized and unplanned city, most streets "would have been perfectly familiar, perfectly legible" (53). Archigram imagined such complex and detailed architecture that it was not useful to state-sponsored town planners.

The *Living City* is a city that could never be built. Not because of its impracticality, but because of the architectural and political context in which it was proposed. Archigram produced city plans that could inspire citizens to imagine new worlds, which unfortunately are now debris of colorful papers. The group succeeded, however, in exposing the authoritative character of urban planning responsible for their demise. This is a trait, albeit transformed, much present in contemporary planning issues. Considering crowdsourcing initiatives and smart city technologies, there is a trade-off between empowering neighborhood actors and unsettling sponsoring vertical institutions such as tech companies (Sassen). To better position ourselves in these matters, we must be open to ontologies of town planning which value the citizen as the main source of knowledge. Participation is essential to the design of more equitable and liveable cities, and this is a concept that the non-building builders managed to build into their work very effectively.

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