

# Play as a Means of Urban Space Transformation in the Projects by the London Architectural Association Graduates in the 1960-1970s\*

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**Abstract**—In the 1950s, European architects realized that the monotony and rigorism of the projects, which had been implemented by the pioneers of modernism, had extremely devastating impact on the urban landscape. The lack of unique artistic solutions and diversity in urban topography resulted in citizens' losing one of the most important self-identification sources. Firstly, the younger generation of architects pointed to their teachers' mistakes. They emphasized the need to change the architectural approach and considered traditional society organization, primitive art and children's creative arts to be the main sources of changes, that is, everything that could get a person back to natural relationships and direct and emotional perception of life. In some European quarters, the idea of transforming the passive "society of the spectacle" was supposed to be the key to solving pressing problems. Thus, having combined the Marxist theory, structuralist terminology, artistic practices of surrealism and Neo-Dadaism, and the members of the "Situationist International" developed a new concept of a big city, the theory of "unitary urbanism". Of equal significance was the experiment conducted by the teachers and students of London Architectural Association, who also highlighted the call for unlocking the potential of urban space and believed the city to be the intersection of various emotional and play areas.

**Keywords**—modernism; post-modernism; architectural association; architecture of the 1970s; urban planning

## I. INTRODUCTION

In the mid-1950s, in architectural theory there appeared a special genre of critical thinking — fantasies of the city, arranged not according to the strict laws of a functional modernist polis, but in an alternative way. In the late 1950s and early 1960s, in some circles in France, Britain, Germany and the Netherlands, the similar critical moods were not infrequent. In order to overcome the inertia of urban exclusion, it was proposed to transform the society itself, the

passive "society of the spectacle", which had emerged in the context of protectionist post-war policies. The welfare growth, trade unions bureaucratization and social protection turned the working people into a well-off middle class, which irritated the "left circles" in France, Germany, and the Netherlands. They were dreaming of encouraging the citizens, as they, like the audience in the theatre, simply observed the changes instead of trying to perceive the actual reality. If to turn to the manifests of the Amsterdam Provo Group, one may notice the appeals to create a new social class, since none of the existing ones was ready for the battle for the future. Opposing themselves to the faceless mass, the new "provotariat" class organized public performances and events, distributed leaflets with instructions on participating in collective actions ("white plans"), attempted to organize free public cycling ("Provo's Fietsenplan" — "Provo Bicycle Plan) and even performed daily rituals at Spui Square, proclaiming a local statue ("Het Lieverdje" — "The Little Darling") a "nicotine demon". Despite the outrageous actions, Provo managed to achieve a remarkable result - the opportunities of the urban space were gradually reassessed, and the citizens were becoming engaged in its new context.

The idea of the philosopher Johan Huizinga on the phenomenon of play and the role of Homo ludens ("Man the Player") could be found in the manifests by young architects and artists since the mid-1950s. A new type of a city dweller was supposed to replace the Homo economicus ("the economic man") [1]. The need to revise the teachers' attitudes was also indicated by the participants of the international "Team X". They spoke about the attempts to adjust the regular patterns of standard neighbourhood units, and come to a formula for a more adaptable urban space, bringing people together. It was not coincidentally that one of the ideologists of the "Team X", Aldo van Eyck, paid particular attention to children's playgrounds [2]. For the new play zones, he opted for simple geometric forms that he thought had important archaic connotations, created optimum conditions for various play practices and involved both adults and children in participating in the collective actions.

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However, transferring these non-hierarchical schemes into real architectural projects was much more challenging. In this respect, the changes that took place in the pedagogical process of the London Architectural Association in the 1960s appear to be exceptionally important. Unlike their French colleagues, London architects seemed rather restrained; nevertheless, within the British architectural community there were lively discussions. The director of the Association, Alvin Boyarsky, explained to his students that one should not be afraid of breaking rules, and that any building originates from a comprehensive study of the surrounding context - architectural, historical, and social. Consequently, in urban planning, there is no place for strict schemes and formulas, and architects should design "without resorting to the usual banalities of the post-World War II era which generally dampened enthusiasm for the task" [3]. The international style is the architecture of idealists, those who are uncompromising, primarily to themselves. For this reason, they were criticized in the Association for the lack of sense of humour and extreme, even insane seriousness. The matured generation of "baby boomers" demanded urban chaos, with incomprehensible order, vitality and wisdom, in which a local merchant's store was more likely to be a focus of social life than a specially organized centre.

## II. THE PHENOMENON OF PLAY AND ARCHITECTURAL FANTASIES OF THE 1960-1970S

The life in the Architectural Association itself disposed to the search for new forms. The centre of the school was neither the library, nor the office, but the bar on the ground floor, where the hardest and the most exciting debates between teachers and students took place. In addition to the bar, there was a recording studio, a radio station; rock concerts were regularly held (the posters announcing Fleetwood Mac, Yardbirds, Pink Floyd, and Bauhaus performances preserved since those times). The students regularly published their own newspapers and magazines, in which they reflected on architecture, city and society in the same forms of comics, grotesque, and pun ("Street Farmer", "Nato", "Ghost Dance Times"). Any event in the first place went beyond the traditional format. If they baked a cake, then it was in the shape of an architectural project by Zaha Hadid; if they were having a festival, then Alvin Boyarsky appeared riding an elephant.

Among Boyarsky's like-minded people was Peter Cook, who graduated from the Association in 1960 and taught there for many years. Cook was the founder of the famous neo-futurist group "Archigram", which suggested the image of a completely new city - mobile, devoid of modernist hierarchy, and depicted with the use of the techniques, not characteristic to traditional architectural studies: collage, comics, and tabloid typography. These low 'genres' served the same purpose of changing the focus and going beyond the rational approach, overcoming the inertia of standardization of architectural and urban planning techniques, and bringing the spontaneity and unpredictability of life back to the urban space. Freedom, spontaneity, and ruthless irony, proclaimed by the "Walking City", "Plug-in City", etc., were noticed in final project works of the London Architectural

Association students in the second half of the 1960s. These projects are bright and clever fantasies, implemented in different striking techniques, and showing an ingenious approach and insight. Sometimes, as in the sketches by Paul Shephard, the architectural plots themselves, disappear. The space is marked by unexpected elements associated with popular culture phenomena. The giant Stonehenge is made up of enormous women figures dressed as Playboy "bunnies" (1972). Pink Boeings attached to each other forward to the opposite directions, conveying the feeling of incredible tension and camouflaging it with infantile colour combinations<sup>1</sup>. In 1974-1975, under the pretext of the "Alligator Farm", Paul Shephard's student, Jan Bienkowski basically came up with a strategy game with a semi-underground maze city, where the algorithm for solving the labyrinth depends on the production process. Starting from initiation in the entrance zone, "the character" passes through the endless halls resembling the spacecraft compartments. The assemblage point of the entire complex is the hall of the "priest", with mysterious attributes on a round table decorated with pseudo-antique relics.

Comics techniques (both visual and narrative), were present in the sketches of Peter Cook's students up to the end of the 1980s, and even at that time did not look archaic. For example, Cat Martin in his final sketches of 1989-1990, did not just imitate the formal comics techniques, but illustrated the topic of urban anti-utopia. A giant superhero guard rises above the city in the darkness. Machines scan the airspace, analysing the level of potential threats. The similar somnambulistic images travelled from one fantasy to another, and not only within the Architectural Association. The founder of the International Group of Architectural Prospects (Group International d'Architecture Prospective, 1965) Michel Ragon imagined the ideal city to be a brightly lit metropolis floating above the ground, where everything follows the same rhythm, and robots are responsible for any supporting functions. In the "Spatial city" projects by the architect Yona Friedman (Groupe d'études de architecture mobile), the emphasis was placed on the residents' absolute freedom of movement and the possibility of quick dismantling and moving spatial structures. The Hungarian architect Nicolas Schoeffler imagined the city as a single giant computer (Cybernetic City, *La ville cybernétique*, 1969). Dutch architects Enrico and Luzia Hartsuykers created a "Biopolis" — a city located on an artificial island, with terraces going down to the water. Biopolis mixes private and public space, recreation and work areas, social and economic functions. In 1961, the Hartsuykers' compatriot Hendrik Wijdeveld presented the project "Boulevard" — the majestic ocean pier, reminiscent of a multi-storey spacecraft, where each deck is a zone of endless entertainment, and nothing reminds one of work, quarrels or diseases.

The members of the French "Situationalist International" and their theory of "unitary urbanism" greatly influenced the emergence of this genre. Situationists believed the city to be

<sup>1</sup> Hereinafter, are the descriptions of sketches from the London Architectural Association collections.

the intersection of various emotional and play areas. Guy Debord suggested a special practice — *dérive* — a drift, which was a kind of Baudelaire's *Flâneur*, a technique of fast moves through various environments [4]. Having combined the Marxist theory, structuralist terminology, artistic practices of surrealism and Neo-Dadaism, situationists explored urban neighbourhoods; they rejected pre-planned routes and contacts and were driven by chance and subconscious motivation. In the course of this urbanist game, new schemes of urban development were to appear; or rather, a conception with no rules was to emerge. In situationists' opinion, architecture in the future will not predetermine actions; it will inspire city residents to take part in spontaneous actions, like actors in the theatre. The Dutch artist Constant Nieuwenhuys, Debord's close friend and soulmate, was involved in these experiments. He tried to visualize a city whose life would be totally organized according to the rules of drift. Thus, the project of New Babylon was created — the endless labyrinth, a growing borderless megastructure [5]. Mobile capsules, assembled into a single multi-layer composition, resembled the cells of a living tissue. The ruins of old cities lay at the foot of the giant pillars of the new Metropolis. To the modern viewer the visuals chosen by Nieuwenhuys to create the New Babylon might seem somewhat brutal and even depressive. The city resembled a gigantic abandoned factory, cold machinery, at any moment ready for the change of sets.

If the modernist desire to create an ideal city from scratch was close to an attempt to embody utopia, the situationalist fantasies are more evidence of escapism. Let us recall the text of a well-known novel "Things" (1965) by the French writer Georges Perec, in which the main characters, Sylvie and Jerome, a classic product of the consumer society, dream exactly of such a new fantastic world: "They did not understand even its simplest mechanisms; they saw in it only a labyrinth of streets. They would look up and admire a forged iron balcony, a painted beam, the pure pointed arch of a window, a subtle play of light and shadow, an extremely narrow stairway, but their walks were aimless; they went round and round, feared at every instant that they would get lost, and tired quickly. Nothing, in the end, seemed attractive to them in this succession of miserable shops, almost identical stores, and native bazaars crowded together, in this incomprehensible alternation of swarming streets and empty streets, in this crowd that as far as they could see was going nowhere".<sup>2</sup>

It is essential to note that in many projects by the students of the Architectural Association of the 1960-1980s, the city was represented either above the ground, or hardly in contact with it, as if it was going to move and follow some unpredictable route. The cities themselves were transformed into nomadic stations. The residents did not have to work; everything necessary for life was produced by automated underground factories. A person, who was not tied to his workplace or constrained by any social obligations, could travel, enjoy life, and create. It reminds of Francis Bacon's

House of Solomon, described in "New Atlantis": in a mythic state, human knowledge got control over all natural phenomena, including the sun and the rainbow, ensuring citizens' peace and well-being. It was not coincidental that the final projects of the Architectural Association graduates often focused on the idea of mobile architecture and mobile inhabitable constructions. In 1967-1968, Andrew Holmes worked on the project "Flexkit", which was a system that allowed building a house of prefabricated steel structures on a concrete foundation within a short period of time. In the comments to the project, the author explained that, if necessary (due to the changes in household composition, for example), additional rooms could be easily added to the house. That is, Holmes based the project on the idea of a simple children's construction set; the project presentation was a "toy box" — a transparent plastic bag with typical elements of construction blocks to assemble a house. (What is more, after graduation, the architect worked with Richard Rogers. That is why, in such projects as Inmos Microprocessor Factory, Newport, Wales (1982-1987) and PA Technology Centre and Princeton (1982-1985) his influence is recognized).

The same year, 1968, Dolan Conway and Brian Mitchener's students studied the effects of computer systems on human relationships. Despite the fact that the "computer systems" at that time could not yet provide the opportunities that appeared in the course of digital technologies development in the 21st century, in their "Computer community" Conway and Mitchener predicted many trends of modern society structure. In particular, they noticed that new ways of exchanging information would change communication, eliminate traditional concepts of "place", "distance", and "surrounding view". Mobile city tools can be found in the projects by Piers Gough (Motorolarama, Friends Meeting House, 1967-1968). Gough designed a city for people who go around by car, through mushroom-shaped petrol stations, or mobile cinemas serviced by robot-girls. The sketches by Piers Gough are so precise in details and textures, that it makes them close to full-fledged artistic illustrations, not inferior to the best examples of the English modern. In any case, the plots chosen by Gough for his projects are no less phantasmagorical. However, it did not prevent Piers Gough from becoming a successful practicing architect, as a result [6].

Mark Fisher, the future art director of many musical shows, the author of the famous inflatable pig of Pink Floyd concerts, together with Simon Conolly in 1970-1971 came up with a special Air Structures Design. Fisher, as Holmes, had the same idea of self-assembly. The inflatable dome of the system with no internal supports could be easily opened and constructed anywhere. Depending on the needs, the Air Structure could be a camping tent, a sleeping capsule and more (only at the price of 30 pounds). The idea of an inflatable mobile cell was further developed by Peter Cave. His "Aquapad" was an inflatable mattress with a folding framed-case, water valves and an electric mechanism. Inside was regulated water supply, air conditioning, lighting and a mechanism for inflating the mattress.

<sup>2</sup> Perec, G. Things. (Russ. ed.: Uvarov Yu. P). Available at: <http://www.edusfax.com/sfaxreader/english/1966Perec.pdf>

### III. CONCLUSION

In the final project “Exodus” by Rem Koolhaas (1972, in collaboration with Elia and Zoe Zengelis and Madelon Vriesendorp), movement and segregation, inequality and division practically became the tools of new urbanization. The main value of the reformed city is the collective opportunities, created for human desires realization. Huge migration flows are distributed in private households and numerous open areas — the ceremonial square, public termæ, the garden of four life powers, the park of aggression and the institute of biological operations. Thus, the processes, such as neglecting the category of style, the appeal to the category of context, the interest in art synthesis and festivals, recognizing the value of personal emotions and memory, having received a theoretical substantiation in the works of situationists, turned out to be in the focus of attention of the artists who determine the development of modern architecture today.

The pedagogical process for Boyarsky was a way of creating the environment for experiments and critical thinking, so he supported any student initiatives — from costume festivals and elephant riding to recording and publishing student magazines. Such was the reform carried out by Boyarsky: he completely changed the structure of the educational process, selected the “unit system” as the basic model, which he himself called the “well-laid table” served for “free souls” suffering from the drought in traditional schools [7]. The studying process was conducted in self-organized groups (which partly resemble the mechanism of children’s games); each teacher (tutor) chose a topic for his course and introduced it to the students. The students, having studied all the offers, chose the most suitable to their interests and expectations one, and applied for it. Then the teacher selected the candidates for a particular course. During the year, the teacher and students carried out research work, solving a specific urban planning, architectural, or social problem. At the end of the year, the results of the research, the final projects, were assessed by the Grand Jury, which included the entire teaching staff. Thus, within the Architectural Association

Boyarsky brought together the supporters not only of a variety of pedagogical methods, but also of different aesthetic and political views.

At the London Architectural Association, the students always had the last word. They had the right not only to choose a director and a course, but also to ask for dismissing tutors (this system is still in use). Curiously, in the 1930s, the students of the Architectural Association also felt quite free. They protested against the methods of the School of Fine Arts (École des Beaux-Arts), refused to spend time redrawing ancient capitals and taking measurements of historical monuments. They also enjoyed arranging costumed performances, publishing striking manifests. Therefore, the students of the 1960 - 1970s possibly inherited their rebellious spirits from the interwar decades experience.

Alvin Boyarsky and his colleagues’ experiment formed a new generation of architects: their style is diverse, but they all belong to the same school. Nicholas Grimshaw, Rem

Koolhaas, Leon Krier, Peter Cook, Daniel Libeskind, Cedric Price, Richard Rogers, Zaha Hadid, Steven Holl, David Chipperfield, Bernard Tschumi, and Patrik Schumacher both studied and taught there. Therefore, even the most striking paper projects of the 1960-1980s and play got a new turn of development in the real urban planning practice worldwide.

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