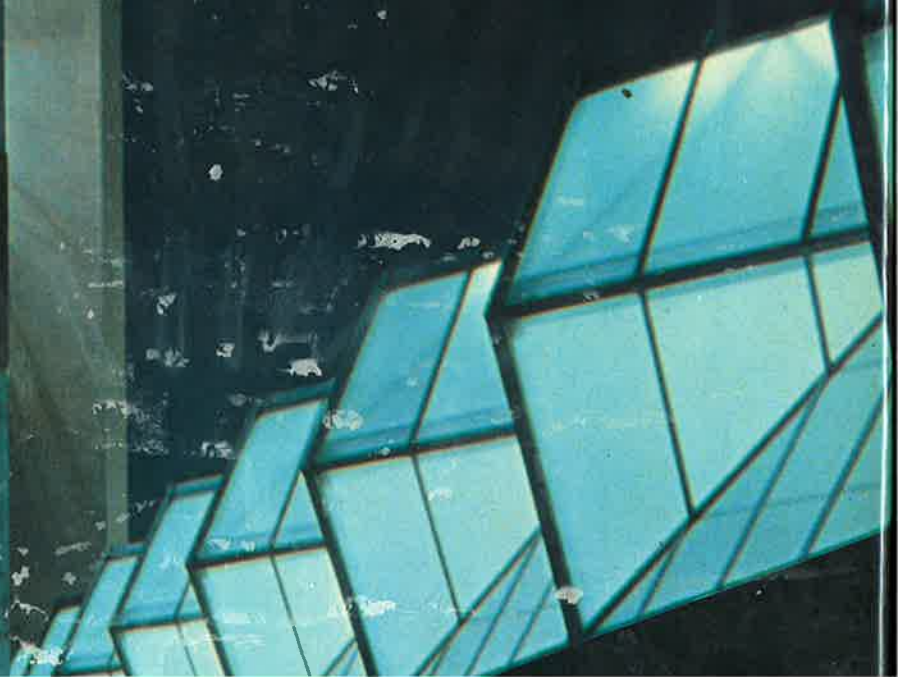


Reyner Banham

DESIGN BY CHOICE



1.10 ZOOM WAVE HITS ARCHITECTURE

Banham, in this article originally published in *New Society*, 3 March 1966, moves from the vernacular end of Pop architecture to the more self-conscious work of a group of architects who, like the Pop artists, deliberately include expendability, commercial imagery and humour in their architectural visions. *Archigram* and their contemporaries stimulate Banham's interest in the 'Clip-on', 'Plug-in' school of architecture which dominates his architectural criticism in the mid-60s.

Wham! Zoom! Zing! Rave! – and it's not *Ready Steady Go*, even though it sometimes looks like it. The sound effects are produced by the erupting of underground architectural protest magazines. Architecture, staid queen-mother of the arts, is no longer courted by plush glossies and cool scientific journals alone but is having her skirts blown up and her bodice unzipped by irregular newcomers which are – typically – rhetorical, with-it, moralistic, mis-spelled, improvisatory, anti-smooth, funny-format, cliquey, art-oriented but stoned out of their minds with science-fiction images of an alternative architecture that would be perfectly possible tomorrow if only the Universe (and especially the Law of Gravity) were differently organized.

The Movement (and I think it deserves the name) began at the end of the fifties, with *Polygon*, emanating from the Regent Street Polytechnic, student-run, roneo'd but – for one memorable issue – adorned with genuine lipstick kisses by a real living bird.

The latest emanation, which appeared early in February, is *Clip-Kit*, student-published from the crisis-torn Architectural

Association School. The crafty plastic binder into which later instalments of the kit can be clipped is a shade professional and smooth by the standards the Movement has established – beyond the resources of *Clip-Kit*'s immediate predecessor *Megascope* (which also carried the burden of Bristol students' discontent) and outside the intentions of the reigning champion of protest mags, *Archigram*.

But *Clip-Kit*'s title puts it right in the Movement: two more charisma-laden words just don't exist in this context. 'Kit' is the emotive collective noun for Goodies (which are usually ideas, images, forms, documents, concepts raided from other disciplines) and 'clip' is how you put them together to make intellectual or physical structures. Alternatively, you can plug them in to existing structures or networks. But plug-in or clip-on, it's the same magpie world of keen artifacts, knock-out visuals and dazzling brainwaves assembled into structures whose primary aim seems to be to defy gravity, in any sense of the word.

The anti-gravity aspect, which delights students, makes the teaching establishment dead nervous. Even architects I would normally regard as far from square make worried noises, and the January issue of the Architectural Association's *Journal* devoted two pages to an attempt to put *Archigram* in the doghouse. Any prospective student reading this particular performance would probably decide to go somewhere else and study: paragraph by wooden paragraph it plods along, occasionally laying a genuine cardboard egg like, 'There are real dangers in living and designing up to the minute' (no kidding: page 171 if you can't believe me); stolidly listing all the standard objections of the Movement, like illiteracy; and winding up with a real coup-de-farce in a paragraph headed (incredibly enough) 'Lack of humour'.

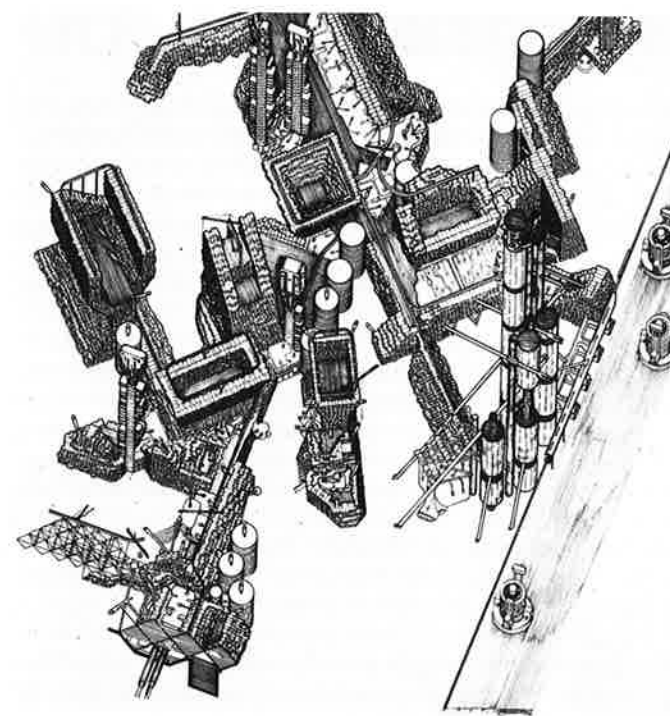
This paragraph reads, in its entirety and with the *Journal*'s punctuation:

The zoom rave hits Bristol but with accompanying 'playboy' text and dead Dada photograph, e.g., 'lecture visit' by 'Archigram' editor on Plug-In scene and world of zoom; it is neither with it nor sick but sad.

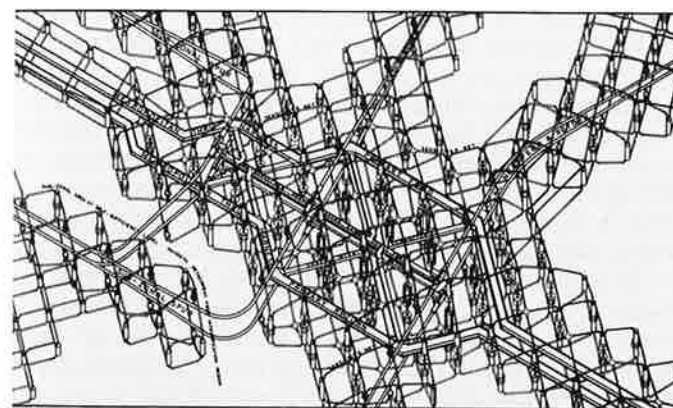
And anybody who can see the authors of this plastic pearl accusing *Archigram* of illiteracy and lack of humour will be inclined to sympathize with *Megascope* when it complained of 'the failures who teach in our schools' and of 'the mass of mediocrity seen in almost every field of architectural endeavour in this country. When faced with dreary projects and obsolete problems, it is no wonder that students are unable to produce anything but dreary solutions, balsa models and grey, grey drawings.'

The greatest value of these Opping-Popping mags is their insistence that even 'designing up to the minute' is barely good enough. Buildings still take a tidy time to make, cities even longer (Rome only *looks* as if it was built in a day). If you design right up to the minute, it will be many millions of minutes later before the human race can move in, and the buildings will be out of date by just that period of time. Hence the constant preoccupation of the Movement with far-out figures like Buckminster Fuller, Yona Friedman or (in Britain) Cedric Price, men who propose not only a more up-to-the-minute environment, but wild technological methods for getting it built quicker and in quantities more nearly commensurate with human needs.

Where the Movement dissipates its value is in its persistent sentimentality about bits of the past that seem to duplicate present student discontents and ambitions. It's a bit off for *Clip-Kit* to go on about 'The next Great Leap' in its



2 PETER COOK, *Plug-in City*, 1964, axonometric.



3 DENNIS CROMPTON, *Computer City*, 1964.

4 RON HERRON, *The Walking City in New York*, 1964.



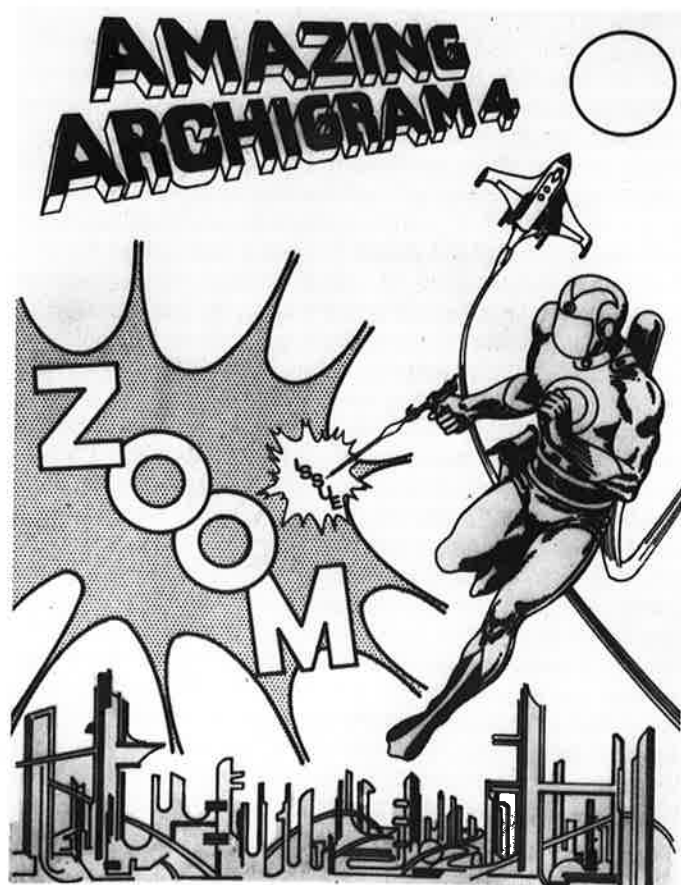
editorial and then devote two giant fold-outs to Futurism, a pre-1914 leap that failed to get leaped. Being an Edwardian Futurist doesn't make a man relevant to *our* future.

For what matters, –overall, about the Movement is its insistence on relevance. To quote *Megascope* again: 'The rounded corners, the hip, gay, synthetic colours, pop-culture props all combine to suggest an architecture of plastic, steel and aluminium, the juke box and the neon-lit street, the way a city environment should be.' An architecture relevant to the whole scene that's going; and if not, why not? We architectural pedagogues are prone to build architecture up into a higher discipline of abstractly ordering the masses about for their own good.

But the Movement is right in insisting that architecture must also touch the ground occasionally, and that it must also be relevant to what this week's dolly-girls are wearing, to ergonomics, inflatable air-houses, the voice of God as revealed by his one true prophet Bob Dylan, what's going on in Bradford and Hammersmith, the side elevation of the Ford GT-40, napalm down the neck, the Royal College of Art, caravan homes, Sealab, and like that.

Admittedly, the level of relevance is often only that of form-fondling, round-corner styling, art-work and paint-jobs. It is often more than that, but even if it were purely visual and superficial, that would not in itself be contemptible. It does still matter to people what buildings look like. Indeed, it matters more than it did. From about 1830 onwards, architects designed for their fellow-professionals and a blind public. The telly and the proliferation of colour-journalism has altered all that by creating a more visually sophisticated public.

As the Architectural Association pomp-artists justly observed: 'There is no communication without conventions', and a one-glance comparison will show that the underground mags are in touch with the places where currently communicative conventions are being manufactured, and the Architectural Association's *Journal* is not. It could still turn out that the round-cornered zoom-styling of the Movement's page-layouts will have quite as much to do with the future architecture of democracy as any Architectural Association Symposium on Decision Making.



1 *Archigram 4*, 1964, cover illustration.