Opened at Kunsthalle Wien, Vienna
11 February–1 May 1994

between 1994 and 2003

Closed at Taipei Fine Arts Museum
15 March–8 June 2003

In its active years, from 1961 to 1974, Archigram was one of the most visually innovative architectural collectives in Europe, helping question the limitations of the technocratic and stodgy modernism that had a death grip on architectural practice during the cold war. From 18 October 2002 through 19 January 2003, the Museum of Contemporary Art in Chicago showed a comprehensive survey of the group’s work. The exhibition, which had traveled widely since 1994, allowed for a reassessment of the radical social and artistic claims of the collective and, more precisely, provided an opportunity to explore the relationship between architecture and the counterculture of the 1960s, which had its own ideas about refiguring mainstream society. The installation in Chicago, designed and curated by Archigram member Dennis Crompton, provided an occasion for an analysis that took into account not only the cultural context of the 1960s but also the important issue—imagined or institutionalized—of architecture as a critical practice in modern society.

The exhibition was organized chronologically in spaces that contained examples of major projects. It opened with pre-Archigram works by each member and a display of the entire run of the journal Archigram, in many ways the group’s major contribution to international architectural developments. All nine and a half issues of Archigram—nine from 1961 to 1970 and a smaller issue, “9 1/2,” released in 1974—were displayed in a vitrine placed against the main entrance wall. The show continued in a multimedia “arena” with film footage and slides that gave an overview of the collective’s work. The next room, covering the years 1961 to 1970, housed a huge (approximately twenty-foot-high) representation of parts of Ron Herron’s famous Walking City drawing of 1964, with transparencies of Archigram pages hanging from the ceiling to form the backdrop for some of the group’s most prominent products. These included a set of drawings for the Plug-in City (Peter Cook and Dennis Crompton, 1965), the Capsule Homes (Warren Chalk, 1964), and the tinfoil model of the City Interchange (Chalk and Herron, 1963), which looked remarkably like a futuristic kitchen-table variation on the Garden City. Room four included a full-scale model of the Logplug Installation (David Greene, 1968–69), an automated landscape in which a TV could be plugged into the nearest tree. Later works followed, ranging from the proposals for world’s-fair pavilions (Malaysia, Montreal, and Osaka) to the Instant City (Archigram, 1968) and the Suitalam (Mike Webb, 1967), an inflatable suit that doubled as a portable living unit. On view in the last room were examples of post-Archigram work from 1974 to 1990 that showed the continuity of collage elements, which had been prominent in the earlier work, and the new directions being pursued by the various members of the collective.

The self-presentation of Archigram’s efforts naturally affirmed the group’s claims for what the introductory panel described as “radical redefinitions of domestic architecture and urban planning.” Certainly, in their emphasis on the ephemeral qualities of planned obsolescence, their embrace of popular culture, and the potential of inexpensive mass-production, these architects flew in the face of the elite values of a precious Miesian modernism. Movable cities, low-cost housing poured from plastic, and circus cities of entertainment and spectacle that could be set up on demand are just some of the projects that Archi-
gram used to challenge the rarified concepts of permanence, monumentality, and intellectual abstraction that the group felt characterized the work of its institutionalized colleagues. Breaking free from these assumptions about architecture’s function and aesthetic normativity, Archigram emulated instead such trailblazers as Bruno Taut, Walter Gropius, and Buckminster Fuller. Particularly in the early rooms, with their focus on the journal as well as some of the most nontraditional proposals, the consistent references to architects like Taut, and the emphasis on innovative technologies, bolster the claims made in the wall text and the project descriptions that the collective saw its work not only as revolutionary design but also as a critically engaged social practice. Archigram was part of a wide spectrum of contemporary architects, including Robert Venturi, Aldo Rossi, and Hassan Fathy, confronting the limitations of modernism. The exhibition rightfully underscored the uniqueness of Archigram’s contribution to this debate by highlighting designs that showcased its attention to the ephemeral, the popular, and the concept of need-based architecture.

And yet, it is hagiographic exhibitions such as these that help confuse the public mind as well as architectural historiography concerning the distinction between architecture as a theoretical abstraction and as a critical practice that demands social transformation. The Archigram collective valued fantastic formal innovation and the celebration of the individual rather than paying attention to the social conditions of architectural work. Indeed, the dominant undercurrent of the show was the theme of individual choice. That this individual choice sounded less like revolutionary or even reformative thinking than the “freedom” promised by consumer society’s production of commodities to fit every need was underlined through Archigram’s omnipresent use of advertising imagery and sloganeering. Archigram’s projects openly embraced the world of commodities, and the group’s desire to fill a market niche marks a continuum between its theoretical confrontation of “mainstream” architectural society and the dominant social debates surfacing in the counterculture of the 1960s. However important these debates were as reflections of cultural shifts, Archigram could not maintain the claim of breaking with social norms since, like many significant figures of the counterculture, its architects had no intention of changing the conditions of society that produced inequality in the first place. For instance, one should not miss the note in the Walking City drawing that indicates that following these glamorous moving capital cities were other walking cities with “a large population of world travelers,” a stratification of labor and spectacle that goes unremarked in the exhibition’s didactic materials.

Labor was, in general, absent from this show as was any discussion of the naturalization of the bourgeois male experience. Throughout it, collages and drawings were sprinkled with decorative borders of pinups taken from advertisements, without any recognition of the kind of work involved in creating objects of desire for the presumptively male consumer. These formal tactics and social blind spots are evidence of Archigram members’ lack of interest in distinguishing between the political confrontation of architectural activists like Taut or Hannes Meyer and the ideologically “radical” but abstract claims about architecture’s formal power made by Ludwig Hilberseimer, for example. The way the very key to their architectural expression, the *Archigram* journal, was displayed made this point clear: instead of being folded out so that the visitor could read the editorials and follow the intellectual development of the group, the issues were displayed in a jumbled, collage fashion that emphasized their kaleidoscopic formal richness and variation. Aesthetically influential it may have been, but a critique of society? It would have served the collective better had their social and architectural agendas been more rigorously historicized and explained within the context and possibilities of the 1960s.

Archigram’s important critique of the limitations of modernism should not be underestimated. But equally important is the need to investigate historically and systematically the other critical claims made by this architectural collective and others. Exhibitions like this one should provide a means for understand-
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Pierre Bourdieu (1931–2002) was a world-renowned sociologist whose scholarship was inseparable from the campaigns against the instruments and institutions of social domination that made him France’s leading public intellectual. He is probably best known to architectural historians for his ethnographic study of the maison kabyle, the traditional house of the Berbers of Kabylia in northeastern Algeria, and to a broader academic public for the sociology of culture—of museums, painting, literature, and taste—in which he forged such concepts as cultural capital and the habitus, a system of dispositions. Of the several thousands of photographs Bourdieu took during his fieldwork in Algeria, the majority of which was subsequently lost; 120 of the surviving images from 1958 to 1960 were exhibited at the Institut du Monde Arabe in Paris (IMA) on the first anniversary of his death.

The photographs were taken at a crucial period, when the trained philosopher retrained himself as an ethnographer and sociologist while teaching at the University of Algiers in the midst of the Franco-Algerian war. Only a handful had been seen before. Moreover, it was not generally known that Bourdieu avidly practiced what he would describe in his book *Photography, a Middle-Brow Art* as the art of the “man on the street.” The windfall of unpublished photographic documents adds a historical dimension to our understanding of Bourdieu that expands the one gained from his “ethnosociology” of Algeria. Even though, or rather because architecture with a “capital a” is absent from these images, practitioners and historians of architecture are among the many who will gain from Bourdieu’s photographic corpus.

The overarching subject of his Algerian research was the impact of the capitalist logic introduced by French colonization on the traditional precapitalist society of Kabylia, which was based instead on the logic of honor. The seven books and forty-eight articles drawn from this study concerned especially the transformations brought on by the war. Specifically, Bourdieu and his collaborators studied the lives of the rural Kabyle who had been forced to resettle in the villages created and administered in the countryside by the French army (centres de regroupement) as well as those (and others) who migrated to the shantytowns (bidonvilles) of the larger cities in search of work. These displacements occurred at the cost of great misery and suffering, but with some small gains that Bourdieu hoped would serve the future country whose independence he ardently supported.

The exhibition was divided into six sections. Five of them—War and Mutation, Habitus and Habitat, Displaced Peasants, Men and Women, and Economy of Misery—followed a historical order that paralleled the migrations of the Kabyle while recalling the publications that emerged from Bourdieu’s study of them. Habitus and Habitat, for example, corresponded to his famed essay “The Berber House or the World Reversed.” The sixth section was devoted to photographs of everyday life in Algiers and the smaller town of Béja, which Bourdieu himself had arranged in albums according to themes. It was here that the Algerians most familiar to students of architecture, that of the port and the casbah, appeared.

In keeping with Bourdieu’s desire that the photographs be shown not as artistic works but as the primary research materials they had been originally and as the sociohistorical documents they later became, the curators—Franz Schultheis, a Swiss sociologist, and Christine Frisinghelli, the editor of *Camera Austria*—provided an installation so sparse that it could be described as an anti-installation. This asceticism was sustained by the design of the Galerie d’Actualité, one of the few spaces in Jean Nouvel and Architecture Studio’s IMA that is devoid of arabizing accents. Context was provided by a videotaped interview in which Bourdieu described how the “punishment” of his conscription in 1955 into a war that he opposed became the “chance of my lifetime.” From the fieldwork done in “difficult,” and often downright “dangerous” conditions, came the “problems and questions” on which he would work for the rest of his life.

In January 2003 in Paris, it could be assumed that there was no need for any more context than that. Bourdieu’s unexpected death in 2002 had inspired a national debate about the exact nature of his significance that was then ongoing. The IMA presentation, however, assumed familiarity not only with Bourdieu’s oeuvre but also with the circumstances of the Franco-Algerian war and the geography of Algeria. There was, therefore, no way to learn that Bourdieu had chosen to stay in Algeria at a time...