ARCHIGRAM & ITS LEGACIES: London, A Technotopia

ARCH 719: 001/2008 SPRING SEMESTER
Annette Fierro, Associate Professor
Weds 9am-12pm; email: fierroal@design.upenn.edu

“IT would have been too easy to look over one’s shoulder and fill ARCHIGRAM with three dozen of the respected goodies of the last fifty years, and the comment ‘What have we lost? What are we missing? Yet set against such a feeling of loss is the continuance of something that has not yet disappeared into historical perspective—a tradition that is still developing, and is still original to many of its basic gestures to modern architecture.” Peter Cook, Archigram 4

DESCRIPTION

Many of the visionary objectives of the 1960’s counter-cultural group Archigram neither began nor ended with the formation and dissolution of its membership and its brief stint of kitchen-counter publications. Presenting a mélange of ideas based in architecture, technology and urbanism through a lens of popular culture, Archigram’s proposals were based in a network of influences which continued to develop, with or without the group’s direct influence, into London’s rise into cultural prominence. This course focuses on Archigram through contemporary London and London through Archigram’s visions. This will entail the construction of a network of influences, in concept paralleling the invasive and often subversive infrastructures proposed by Archigram itself. Through a series of readings, presentations and discussions, we will weave together a series of these networks—from relationships to urban infrastructures, especially transportation and communication technologies, to precedents in Victorian engineering, to influences of Gothic literature and 60’s science fiction, to ideas of event and happening, to other radical movements contemporary to Archigram’s rise and demise, especially Superstudio and Archizoom in Italy and the Situationists in Paris.

Coming into the present day, Archigram prophesied, to an uncanny degree, the extensive use of technologies that are environmental, or based in information and communication, and mass fabrication in new materials of organic or plastic characteristics. Certainly the unconventional, exaggerated technologies so much a vehicle of Archigram’s rhetorical mission have also re-emerged repeatedly in the built work of the British Hi-Tech in the last 40 years. Here a small group of architects have dominated London’s architectural scene, to an extent without parallel in the order of world cities, and have continued an allegiance to advanced technology which has seduced, provoked and bewildered audiences of every type. As a method of applied study, this course delves deeply into the particular siting of Archigram’s influence with the British Hi-Tech, studying effects wrought as visionary architecture is made tangible, probing into actual technologies of contemporary buildings as well as the thinking behind their various excesses. Though employing case study methodology, the course contextualizes examples with Archigram’s visionary objectives and the often non-causal manifestation of these in contemporary architecture and urbanism. The coincidence of the technological with the visionary is explored extensively—another dimension re-emerging profoundly in the most recent of architectural speculations.
REQUIREMENTS

The first part of the semester consists of a laboratory researching topics and movements as they emerge in the formation of the Archigram’s premises, but also as they relate to the city of London. Topics have not been organized historically, rather they are set forth as an attempt to draw associations in a general milieu of ideas—a drift through thematic material. Students are expected to do all readings for each class period, but also to individually focus, on a rotating basis, on one reading, which they will present and expand on the relevant presentation date; i.e. after reading the general assignment, students will each locate at least two other readings and/or projects which elaborate or re-focus issues encountered in the chosen reading. This presentation should be organized to prompt a discussion. Each reading should thus be viewed as a portal into further potential research. In the first half of the class, the seminar meetings will consist of discussion/elaboration of readings, followed by a discussion led by students. The second half of each meeting will consist of a lecture (by me), illustrating topics of the first half with architectural examples, followed by another discussion.

The second part of the semester comprises case study presentations of contemporary work, where students will study recent buildings and/or urban technological projects (infrastructures, engineering projects, etc.), present all salient facts, and provide speculative interpretations through the topics presented throughout the semester. Essential will be a full understanding and presentation of the building’s physical characteristics versus its visionary impetus: Students should be fully familiar with the technologies employed in building, its relationship to larger urban orders but should as well be able to relate these aspects to a larger understanding of the performative effect of the building’s technology, especially in the urban domain. A preliminary list of buildings will follow for possible examination—we will focus especially on work of British hi-Tech architects (Rogers, Grimshaw, etc.), or some particular urban technological system/infrastructure in London or perhaps some more recent work embracing forms of digital technologies in the urban realm. Presentation should be 30 minutes long; student presenters will lead a 15 minute discussion afterwards. The final requirement is a 4000 word paper following the subject of the presentation and incorporating the discussion, to be illustrated and fully annotated.

GRADING, ATTENDANCE AND GENERAL POLICIES

Students will be graded as follows:

Reading reports: 20%
Classroom participation: 20%
Final presentation/Discussion: 20%
Final paper: *40%

*Students are expected to incorporate discussion after presentation into final paper.

Attendance to lecture meetings and student presentations is required. Students will be allowed three absences, with or without reasonable excuse. Every missed meeting afterwards will constitute one full grade drop after the assessment of the final grade. The ONLY exception to this rule is an extended illness or death in the family, with verification. This will also be the ONLY basis with which an incomplete for coursework will be granted at the end of the semester.