

# Don't Look Back in Anger

## Wolfgang Fiel

Senior Lecturer at the Institute of Fine Arts & Media Art in the University of Applied Arts Vienna

ORCID ID: 0000-0003-1322-4524

wf@cultural-policy.net

Dr. Wolfgang Fiel is a Senior Lecturer at the University of Applied Arts Vienna, Austria, and continues to work in various capacities and organizational settings as an architect, artist, designer, curator, researcher, and writer.

He is a founding Co-Director of the Vienna-based Institute for cultural policy, a founding member of the collaborative artistic practice *tat ort*, a consultant for the United Nations Industrial Development Organization, an acting member of the Arts and Culture Advisory Board in the Federal Chancellery of Austria, and a member of the advisory board in Political Theory at Cambridge Scholars Publishing, UK.

He has published and written extensively. His most recent titles include the *Getting Things Done* series published by Birkhäuser and *Emancipating the Many: A Practice Led Investigation into Emergent Paradigms of Immediate Political Action* published by Cambridge Scholars Publishing in 2015.

### ABSTRACT

Arguably one of the most notorious movements of postwar architecture, I would like to emphasize the continued pertinence of Megastructures<sup>1</sup> through the lens of its main tenets: The city, technology and the human condition. Despite its persistent labelling as utopian<sup>2</sup>, the protagonists of the movement have committed themselves to seeking an adequate architectural response to the emerging challenges of urban settlements (the deliberate use of a seemingly old-fashioned term, highlights the discursive evolution of the field) early on, a quest that presents itself as apodictic anticipation of the *Urban Age*<sup>3</sup>. Covering the technological and social aspects of the movement, I would like to shed some light on the entanglement of cybernetics and the notion of creative self-determination through participation. The anticipated hybridization of natural and technological agency in pro-actively constituting the environments we inhabit, came hand in hand with the rise of cybernetic networks and corresponding modes of power, issues at the heart of contemporary critical discourse on the future of the profession.

1. Rouillard, Dominique. *Superarchitecture – Le futur de l'architecture 1950-1970*. Paris: Éditions de La Villette, 2004

2. Richter, Markus and Sabrina Van der Ley. *Megastructure Reloaded: Visionary Architecture and Urban Design of the Sixties Reflected by Contemporary Artists*. Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2008.

3. Burdett, Ricky and Deyan Sudjic (eds.). *The Endless City*. London: Phaidon Press, 2008.

<https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2611-0075/8974>

ISSN 2611-0075

Copyright © 2018 Wolfgang Fiel



### KEYWORDS

*Ville Spatiale/Raumstadt; Metabolism; Cybernetics; Participation*



**FIG. 1** Eckhard Schulze Fielitz, Cover of the magazine *L'architecture d'aujourd'hui*, 102, 1962

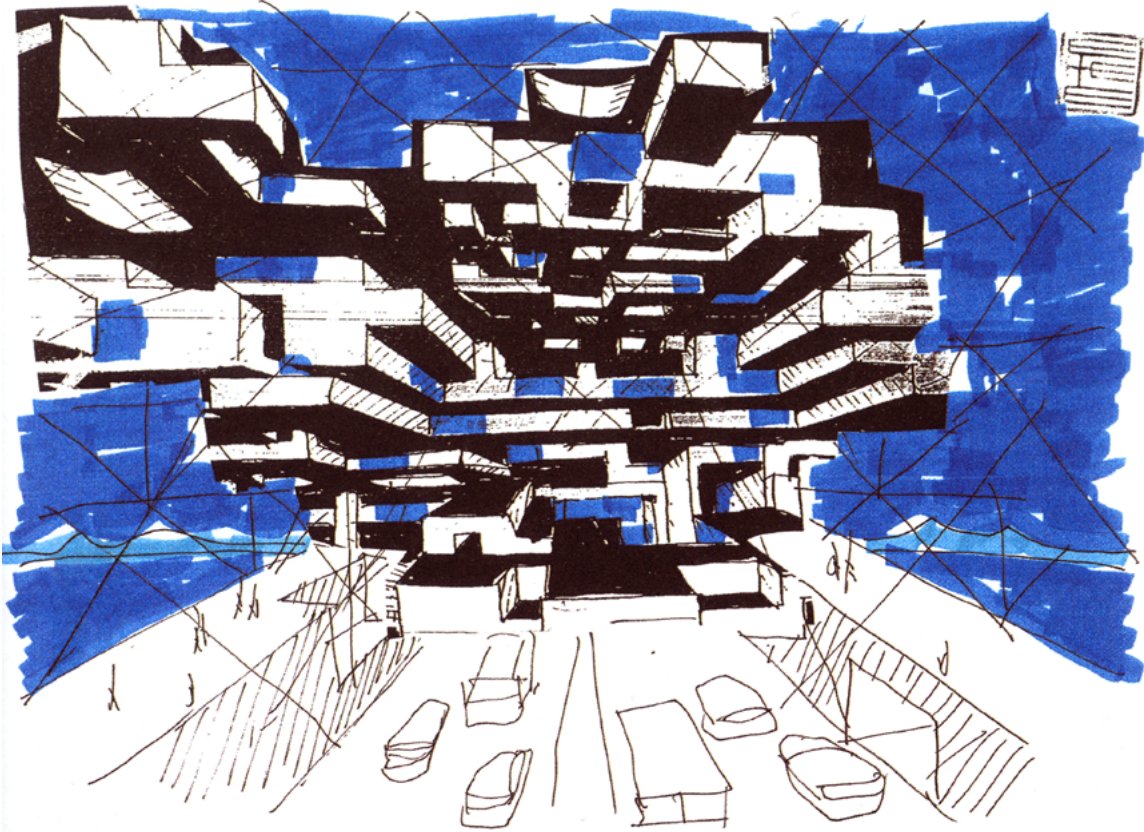
### Ville Spatiale/Raumstadt [Fig. 1]

Within the larger framework of the movement, my emphasis rests on the work of Yona Friedman and Eckhard Schulze-Fielitz. Although not included in Reyner Banham's seminal take on the movement in 1976, Schulze-Fielitz has already started to work on his "Raumstadt" in the mid 1950's. The developmental coincidence with Yona Friedman's "Ville Spatiale" [Fig. 2] has not gone unnoticed however, and made them join forces in 1960 for the inception of the "Groupe d'Études d'Architecture Mobile" or "Mobile Architecture Study Group"<sup>1</sup> together with David George Emmerich, Camille Frieden, Günter Günschel, Jean Pierre Pecquet and Werner Ruhnau. In 1963 they extended their collaboration with the project of an inhabitable bridge over the English Channel. [Fig. 3]

In the course of my research for the book on the work of Eckhard-Schulze Fielitz<sup>2</sup>, my initial emphasis shifted from the provision of a complete catalogue of works to drawing an evolutionary line of ideas around the notion of rapid urban growth, and its ecological and socio-

1. Escher, Cornelia. *Zukunft entwerfen. Architektonische Konzepte des GEAM 1958 – 1963*. Zürich: Gta-Verlag, 2017.

2. Fiel, Wolfgang, ed. *Eckhard Schulze-Fielitz: Metalanguage of Space*. Vienna: Springer Verlag, 2009.



**FIG. 2** Yona Friedman, Huangpu River Centre, Drawing, 2002



**FIG. 3** Yona Friedman and Eckhard Schulze-Fielitz, Bridge over the English Channel, Physical model, 1963

political consequences. Schulze-Fielitz was keen to endow the inhabitant with the ambition and means to actively shape her or his place in the context of increasingly segregated multitudes of anonymous city dwellers<sup>3</sup>. While Schulze was captivated by the irresistible *Élan vital*<sup>4</sup> of Yona Friedman's work, it was the literal meaning of the word that has drawn his initial attention to the Metabolist movement<sup>5</sup>.

3. Schulze-Fielitz, Eckhard. *Stadtssysteme/ Urban Systems*. Stuttgart and Bern: Karl Krämer, 1971.  
 4. Bergson, Henri. *Matter and Memory*. New York: Zone Books, 1991 [1896]  
 5. Koolhaas, Rem and Hans Ulrich Obrist. *Project Japan. Metabolism Talks*. Köln: Taschen Verlag, 2011.

## Metabolism

As it happens, metabolism and the first word of my book title “Metalanguage of Space”<sup>6</sup> contain the same prefix. While the Greek root of meta-bolism from *metabolē* ‘change’ (from *metaballein* ‘to change’) denotes a cyclical process of decline and growth, a symbiosis of information and ecology, the term meta-language denotes a higher or second-order form of communication. My intention however, was to use the term in a metonymical sense as correlative between the spatial and temporal aspects of space.

The notion of change as common denominator of time is central to Friedman’s and Schulze’s understanding of urban development. Their architecture is conceived to hold the capacity for continuously adapting to the needs of its users or inhabitants, an objective that was in outright contradiction to the prevailing modernistic attitude at the time and remains unachieved by and large to the present day. The empowering emphasis on the user does also contradict the orthodox paradigm of chronologically coordinated planning processes, which are supposed to start with a comprehensive brief and a known set of contextual parameters.

The most distinctive architectural feature of the *Ville Spatiale* and *Raumstadt* alike is the provision of a space-frame, an elevated canopy if you like, that – structural necessity aside – is open to potential user appropriation and adaptation in a self-governed and continued process of growth/shrinkage, alteration, and recycling. [Fig. 4] On the one hand, the openness to processes of continued change appear to sit well within the affirmative techno-utopian discourse of the late 60s and 70s, keen to promote an architecture that is driven by technological advancement, a preference for order and the totalizing control of an environment, which was perceived as increasingly hostile<sup>7</sup>. This, on the other hand, raises the question, whether the ethos of mending the ills of the world through

6. Fiel, Wolfgang, ed. Eckhard Schulze-Fielitz: *Metalanguage of Space*. Vienna: Springer Verlag, 2009.

7. Scott, Felicity Dale Elliston. *Architecture or Techno-utopia: Politics after Modernism.*, Cambridge, Massachusetts; MIT Press, 2007. Press, 2007.

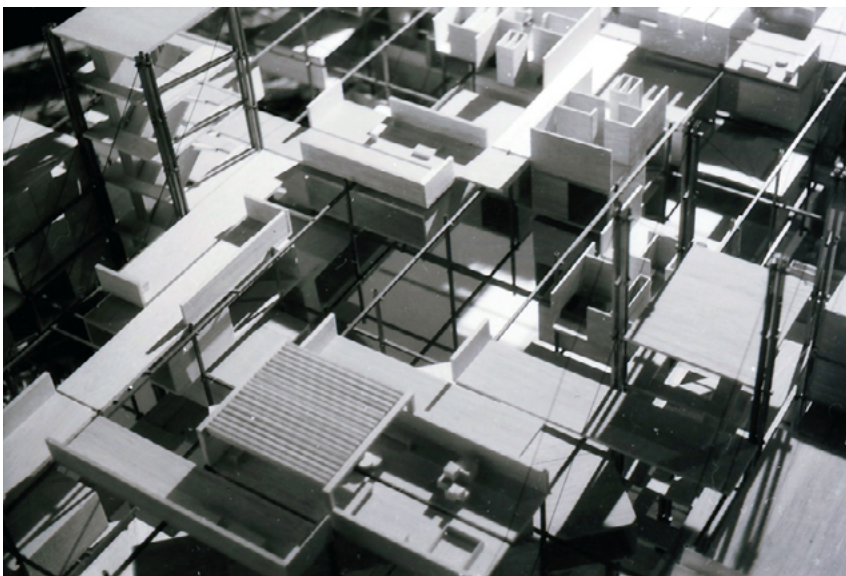


FIG. 4 Eckhard Schulze-Fielitz, *Stadtsysteme*, Physical model, 1968

technological advancement is a suitable model for forging the affirmative techno-utopianism and a call for social and political emancipation into the unifying mould of a single architectural prototype? Or, in other words, is it possible to reconcile the then predominant paradigm of technological determinism with ideas of potentially open ended processes of fully emancipated users?

**Emancipation**

If we take the work of Cedric Price<sup>8</sup> for example, we start to get a pretty good idea of how the notion of empowered users has started to trigger a slow but steady departure from the autonomy of the finished architectural artefact in favor of a “non-plan architecture”<sup>9</sup> through a permissive attitude toward change brought about by present and future inhabitants. [Fig. 5-6] The fundamental principle of the *Ville Spatiale/Raumstadt* was to foster the pragmatic necessity as well as the moral and legal legitimacy for continued re-development, thus enabling activities and spatial arrangements that are deemed to remain unrealized or unrealizable in any other regulatory environment. [Fig. 7] In this sense, the protagonists of the *Ville Spatiale/Raumstadt* were able to reconcile the seemingly contradicting features of the somewhat romantic appraisal of lively neighborhoods, livable and walkable streets, with novel housing types flexible enough to account for continued change. The playful appropriation of urban public space and built urban fabric has also been addressed by members of Archigram<sup>10</sup> [Fig. 8], *Team X*<sup>11</sup> or Constant<sup>12</sup> [Fig. 9], and was

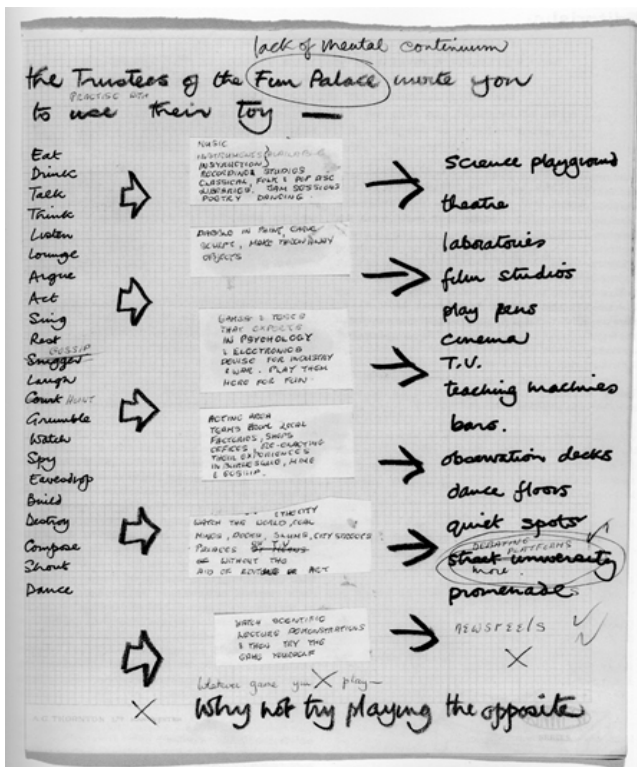
8. Price, Cedric. *Re: CP*. Basel, Boston, and Berlin, Birkhäuser Verlag. 2003.  
Price, Cedric. *Opera*. New York, Wiley & Son.2003.

9. Hughes, Jonathan and Simon Sadler. *Non-Plan: Essays on Freedom, Participation, and Change in Modern Architecture and Urbanism*. Oxford: Architectural Press, 2000.

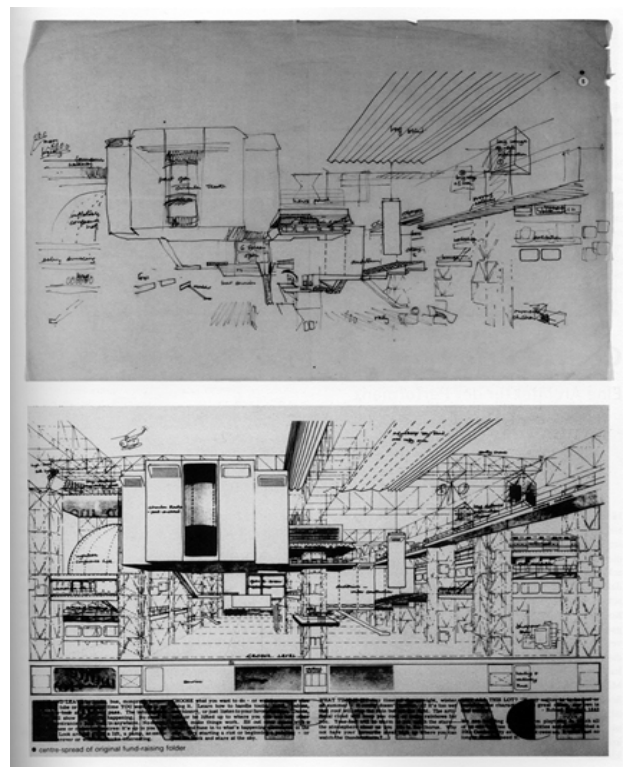
10. Cook, Peter ed. *Archigram*. New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1999.

11. Smithson, Alison. *Team 10. Primer*. Cambridge, Massachusetts; MIT Press, 1968.

12. Wigley, Mark. *Constant's New Babylon: The Hyper-Architecture of Desire*. Rotterdam: 010 Publishers, 1998.



**FIG. 5** Cedric Price, Leaf from a draft of a promotional pamphlet for the Fun Palace, Hand note, 1963?



**FIG. 6** Cedric Price, Fun Palace, Perspective sketch and drawing, 1964

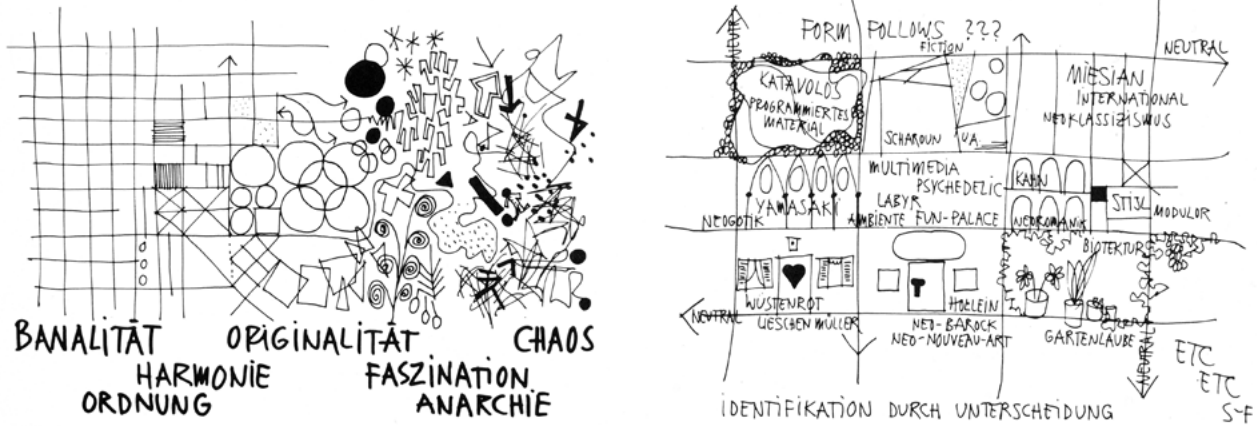


FIG. 7 Eckhard Schulze-Fielitz, Stadtsysteme, A socio-technical system, Banalität und Chaos, Illustrative drawing, 1971

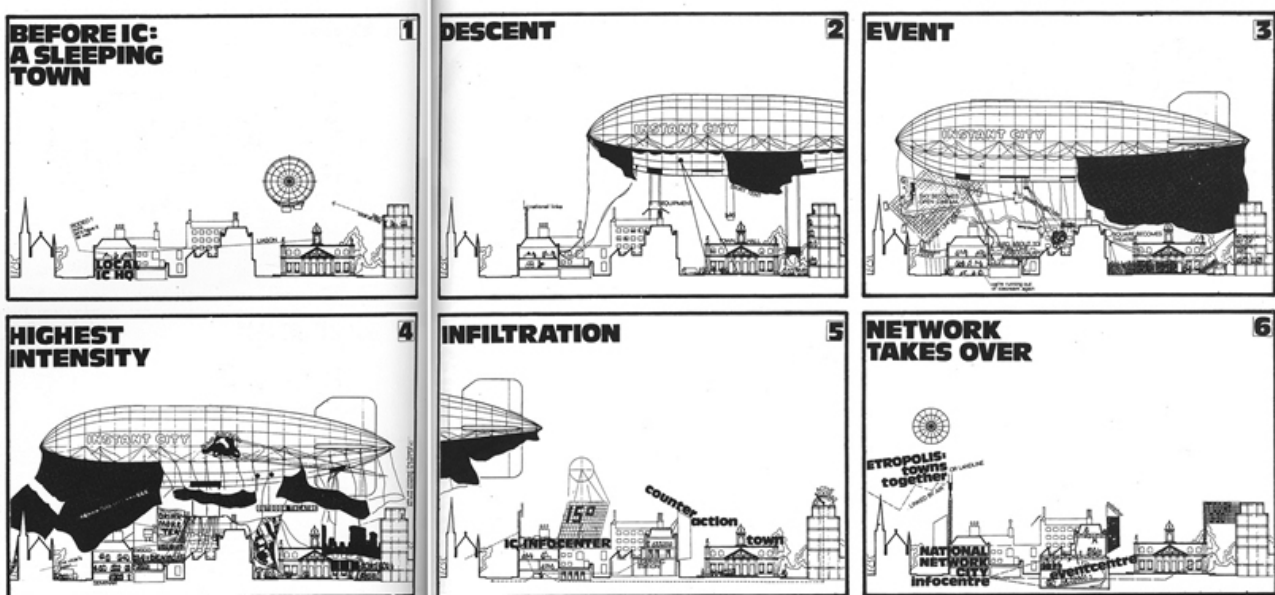
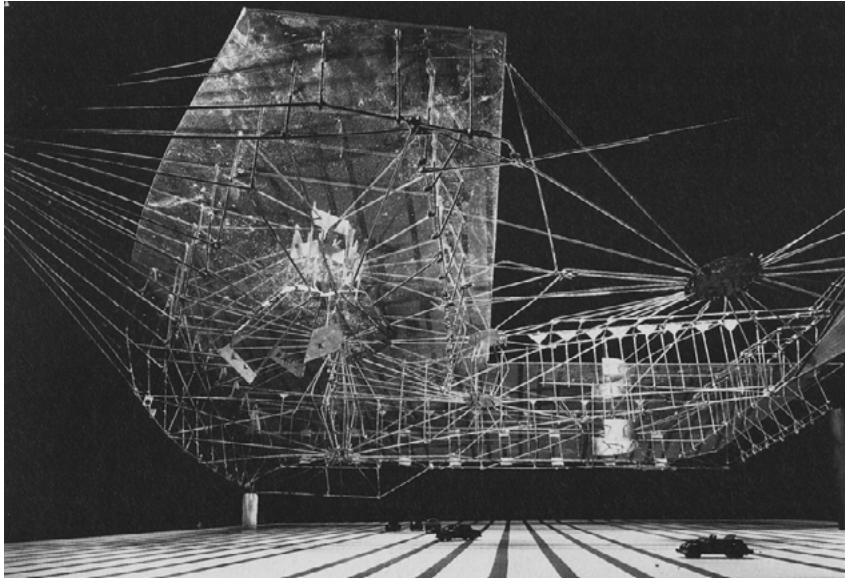


FIG. 8 Peter Cook, Instant city, Drawings, 1968-69

postulated under the term *Unitary Urbanism*<sup>13</sup> as collective effort toward new modes of cultural appropriation and the uninterrupted and conscious transformation of the entire material environment. To this end, one of the most distinctive conceptual features of the *Ville Spatiale/Raumstadt* was to liberalize the orthodox hermeneutic framework of architectural representation in favor of provisional notational systems in order to facilitate a lively process of continued user evaluation and feedback<sup>14</sup>. The underlying concept was that once a set of rules is able to establish itself, the game of life is going to unfold itself on the multiple stages of this 'theatre in space'. [Fig. 10] Naturally such a play or performance is at odds with the orthodox definition of mass-tailored happiness or the assumption of meeting the requirements of generic and anonymous inhabitants by default. The strategy for triggering active forms of spatial organization is based on the creation of an operable interface between the built urban environment and its users and to promote the possibility to engage, actively change and rebuilt what cities are essentially made of: stuff and ideas, an image that is much more diversified than the sterile

13. Lefebvre, Henri. *The Production of Space*. Oxford: Blackwell 1991 [1974].

14. Amelunxen, Hubertus, Dieter Appelt and Peter Weibel eds. *Notation, Kalkül und Form in den Künsten*. Berlin and Karlsruhe: Akademie der Künste Berlin and ZKM Karlsruhe, 2008.



**FIG. 9** Constant, New Babylon, Orange Construction, Physical model, 1958

vision of a masterplan<sup>15</sup>. While this might leave a bad taste in the mouth of those, who firmly believe in the paradigm of closed systems and their controllability, the reduction of aleatoric urban topologies<sup>16</sup> to a flat chunks of land appears to be little more but the badly disguised mantra of *tabula rasa*. The concept of the *Ville Spatiale/Raumstadt* is however, to respect the historicity and value of what's already there, both, in terms of the built urban fabric as well as with respect to the socio-economic characteristics of a specific site.

15. Hill, Jonathan. *Hunting the Shadow: Immaterial Architecture*. London and New York: Routledge, 2005.

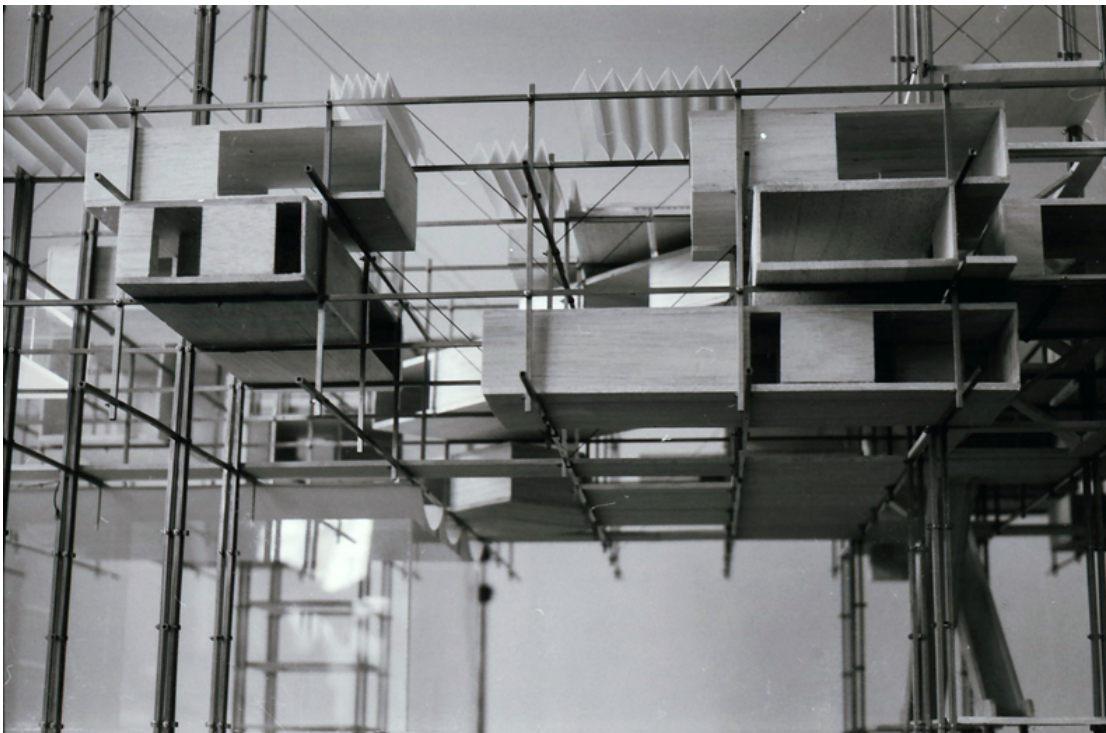
16. Althusser, Louis. *Ecrits philosophiques et politiques*, Vol.1. Paris: STOCK/IMEC, 1994.



**FIG. 10** Constant, New Babylon, Der blaue Draufgänger, Painting, 1969

## Ambition

To stick a horizontal structure up on legs, to elevate the housing units, individual and collective green spaces, staircases, bridges, and pedestrian walkways, hasn't lost any of its initial appeal for those, who have not yet ceased to believe in the self-governing capacity of an open system in-between and beyond the confines of institutionalized mediation. [Fig. 11] Despite their outspoken appreciation for the microscopic and their encouragement of individual self-appropriation within the loose constraints of the structural framework (expressed for example by the

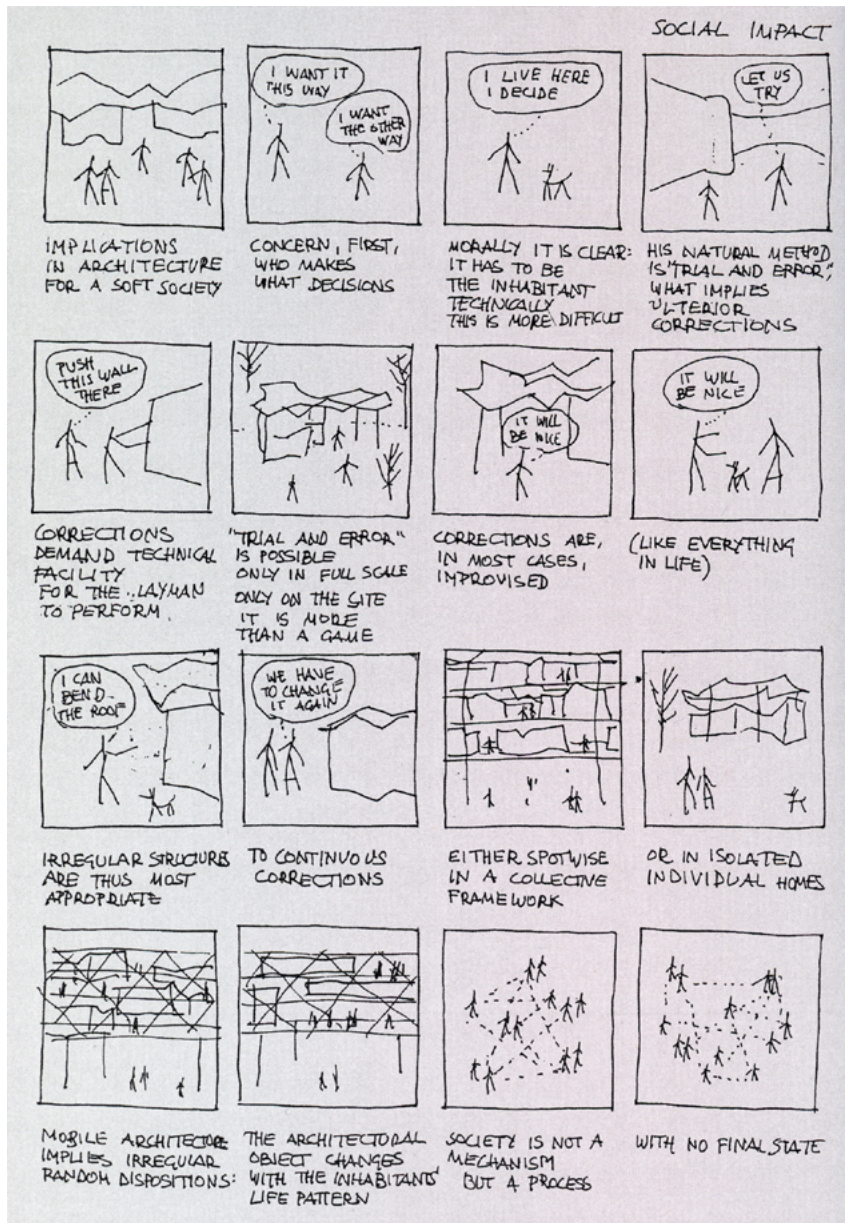


**FIG. 11** Eckhard Schulze-Fielitz, *Stadtsysteme*, Physical model, 1968

telling title of Friedman's "Manuals for the Self-Planner", 2006/[Fig. 12]), Friedman's and Schulze's respective agendas are imbued with a vision of truly global proportions. They expressed their early sensibility for issues of global and urban over-population, ailing transport infrastructures or the countless inequalities as a result of uneven distribution of economic and political power in various ways throughout their work as much as their appreciation and respect for the idiosyncratic expression of personal taste. That clearly discerns the two from the seductive but uncritical techno-euphoria promoted by the likes of Fuller<sup>17</sup>. The aesthetic dimension of his "scientific development of architecture" was susceptible for the propagandistic assimilation of its program into a political context. Dismissive towards any aesthetic dimension that would exceed the requirements of structural integrity, the *Ville Spatiale/Raumstadt* marks a transformative moment for the conception of architectural artefacts in relation to one another, their spatial, ecological and socio-economic context as well with respect to the human condition.

17. Krausse, Joachim ed. *Buckminster Fuller: Your Private Sky*. Baden: Lars Müller Publishers, 1999.





**FIG. 12** Yona Friedman, Irregular structures – Social impact, Manual, 2006

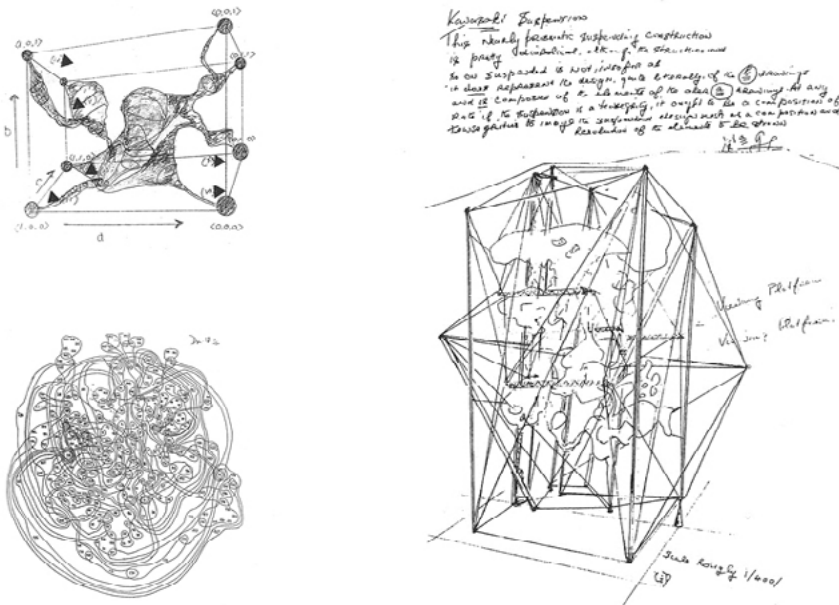
### Cybernetics

The modernistic separation of space and activity along with the distinction between inside and outside spaces as a result of its strict typological programming was further challenged by technological innovation and the nascent science of Cybernetics in the wake of Norbert Wiener’s work on “control and communication in the animal and the machine”<sup>18</sup>. [Fig. 13] Curiously, Le Corbusier<sup>19</sup> has made use of the analogy between biological systems or organisms and machines before. His aim of illustrating the relations between the constituent elements of urban environments is common-place in architectural discourse to the current day.

While the promise to control complex urban systems through a process of potentially infinite recursions has to be evaluated in the historic context of scientific development, it appears to be little more than wishful thinking from the current point of view.

18. Wiener, Norbert. *Cybernetics*. Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: MIT Press, 1962.

19. Le Corbusier. *Städtebau*. München: Deutsche Verlags-Anstalt, 1979 [1925].



**FIG. 13** Gordon Pask and Cedric Price, Japnet, Flow of information in space, Representation of a concept and Kawasaki suspension, Drawings, 1986

## Network

If we look at the contemporary developments in the Gulf region, China or South-East Asia, the sheer scale of Megastructures does not seem to be the problem. Many of these developments reveal another reason for their failure: So long as developers, urban planners and architects are going to stick to their belief that a set of prescriptive objectives and seductive presentations by means of blueprints and models – physical and digital – does suffice, a meaningful process of inhabitation and appropriation will fail to materialize. Keller Easterling has put this observation into the following words: “Architecture has often adopted those cybernetic scripts that focus on recursivity and predictability in complexity, as well as those Deleuzian scripts that, drained of their politics, reinforce the preexisting attraction to geometry. As it deploys digital tools, the discipline has often not focused on the active network of which these digital tools are a part – a network that has embedded itself into our bodies and markets, and all the other places in the world where people are dying, fighting, and making money. These territories would never provide demonstrations of connectedness and synergistic feedback. [...] In a sense, the discipline has privileged the front of the computer rather than the back of the computer – the screen rather than the network.”<sup>20</sup>

The central question is therefore, how to shift the attention to ‘lower’ levels of the organizational hierarchy, from the perspective of second order observation (in keeping with the terminology of Cybernetics) to the level of multiplied and networked agencies of continued urban renewal? What is at stake therefor, is the very definition of agency, previously indicated with terms such as ‘society’, ‘culture’, ‘structure’, ‘fields’, or ‘individuals’, all of which allude to the somewhat traditional category of the ‘social’ seen as homogeneous body politic<sup>21</sup>.

20. Easterling, Keller. *Enduring Innocence: Global Architecture and its Political Masquerades*. Cambridge, Massachusetts; London: MIT Press, 2005.

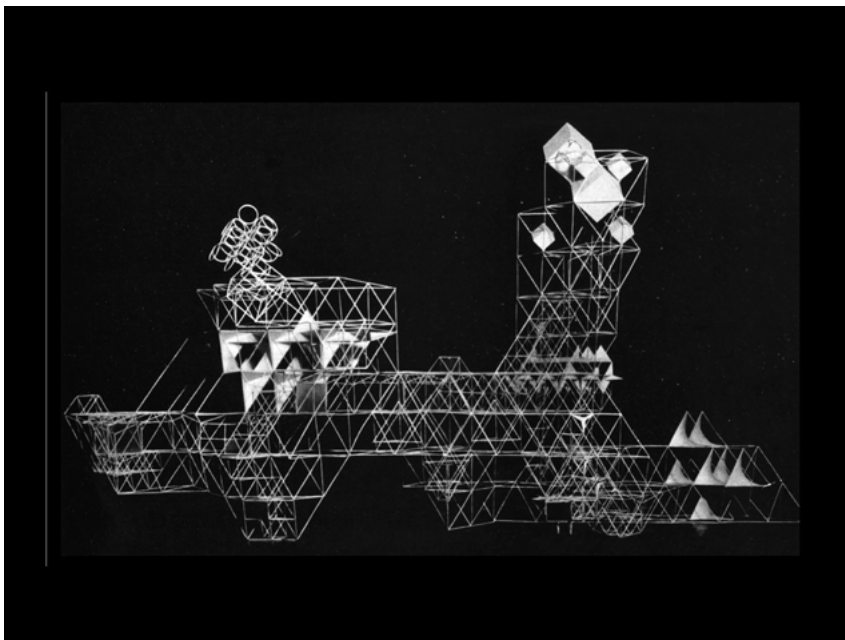
21. Latour, Bruno. *Reassembling the Social*. New York: Oxford University Press, 2005.

## Participation

The notion of collective participatory engagement has to be linked with an enhanced sensory awareness for one's immediate environment, and its potential to convey a rangy network of associations among the various agencies at work, and across the limited boundaries of disciplines. The questioning of the definition and relationship between individuals, institutional stakeholders and objects can potentially lead to the re-assemblage and redistribution of existing capacities and resources. For too long the emphasis on participative processes has been obstructed by a sturdy definition of the social as determined by structural necessity, notions of assumed collective identities, and its proclivity for cohesive meaning as well as to envision the social body as a whole, a "Phantom Public"<sup>22</sup>. If we are able to overcome the idea that collective progress hinges upon the formation of antagonistic relations, we can start emphasizing the necessity of looking into the uncertainties of groups, action, objects and matters of facts in order to shape the process of localizing the global, and distributing the local.

Especially from this point of view, the architectural practice or rather any creative practice in general can be understood as a thinking tool for a novel understanding of the multiple forces that shape urban processes locally and globally. In this sense these notes may be seen as Retroactive Manifesto of the *Ville Spatiale/Raumstadt!* [Fig. 14]

22. Lippmann, Walter. *The Phantom Public*. New Brunswick and London: Transaction Publishers, 2002 [1927].



**FIG. 14** Eckhard Schulze-Fielitz, Raumstadt, Physical model, 1960