



Friends of the Future: A Conversation with Peter Smithson

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Friends of the Future: A Conversation with Peter Smithson

BEATRIZ COLOMINA

*To our friend Enric Miralles, who left us
while we were completing this interview.
To lose him was to lose a member of our
family.*

—B.C. and P.S.

Beatriz Colomina: Peter, *October* has asked me to interview you.

Peter Smithson: *October*? As in the October Revolution? I like the name.

Colomina: It is an art journal, from the 1970s. It was contemporary with *Oppositions*.

In fact, they were both housed by the Institute of Architecture and Urban Studies in New York . . .

Smithson: But *Oppositions* finished years ago.

Colomina: Yes, in the early 1980s. But *October* kept going. Now they are doing an issue on the Independent Group.

Smithson: I hate interviews.

Colomina: I am afraid we have both already agreed to do it and, besides, *October* is a very serious journal . . .

Smithson: I like the format . . .

Colomina: . . . so we are going to have to put our heads on. Tell me something about the Independent Group.

Smithson: To be honest, my memories of it are fragmentary, in fragments. When I read descriptions of it I don't recognize other people's descriptions of what it was about, I simply don't recognize them. I suppose I regarded it as an arena to celebrate friendship with Eduardo Paolozzi and Nigel Henderson. At that stage of friendship, everything was amusing. You know, it is like a love affair. And consequently, the meetings were regarded as an opportunity to show off, really.

Colomina: So it is more as a personal relationship that you remember it?

Smithson: Yes. Of course, you know there was this so-called legendary first bravado

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of Eduardo's slide show.¹ That's a hinge, but exceedingly primitive. His text was grotty. But this is the difficult thing to describe. In that context, at that time, it was hilarious. It was funny.

Colomina: How did you meet Eduardo and Nigel?

Smithson: Eduardo was a teacher at the Central School of London. And for one year I also taught there.

Colomina: And Nigel?

Smithson: I don't remember. Nigel was Eduardo's friend. They were exceptionally close. They had been fellow students at the Slade School.

Colomina: So it was almost a relationship between two couples. Nigel and Eduardo and Alison and you.

Smithson: We had already made the exhibition *Parallel of Art and Life* together at the ICA.

Colomina: What about the meetings you all had at the ICA?

Smithson: Somebody who was a real heroine of this period was Dorothy Morland, who was then director of the ICA. She acted as a bridge between our generation and a previous generation, that is, Herbert Read and the Scottish man [Peter Watson]. As you know, the ICA was founded by people whose commitment was really to surrealism. They were the generation grown up in the 1930s. The institution was intended, like the Museum of Modern Art, to be propaganda for that kind of art, and for Picasso. It was exactly like MoMA, rich people interested in art. But Dorothy was not quite that. She was the wife of a surgeon, I think, in the London University hospital. The Morlands were Quakers. Whether Dorothy was a Quaker by birth I don't know, but her stance was different.

Colomina: How did she come to be the director?

Smithson: I wonder. She was a collector. She opened the door of the ICA through her friendship with Eduardo Paolozzi. Eduardo's wife worked in the gallery.

Colomina: What was her name?

Smithson: Freda. She is still alive.

Colomina: Is she an artist, too?

Smithson: She was a seamstress, I think. When Eduardo Paolozzi went to Paris, she worked there. It's like the story of José Luis Sert. Little Sert's wife was a seamstress.

Colomina: So it was friendship again?

Smithson: Yes, it was family.

1. In April 1952, Eduardo Paolozzi projected a wide range of visual material from popular magazines, postcards, and advertisements through an epidiascope. This presentation, which took place in the Institute of Contemporary Arts gallery (ICA), is considered to have been the first Independent Group meeting.

Colomina: Who else was around in those early years?

Smithson: What one is talking about is one's snobbism about the Independent Group. Either they were people for whom one had no regard, or people one was antagonistic to, like Hamilton. Anyway, *This Is Tomorrow* was not organized by the Independent Group.

Colomina: What do you mean?

Smithson: *This Is Tomorrow* began with a request by a French group called Groupe Espace to have an English equivalent.² There were meetings in people's studios about it, but we didn't want to have anything to do with that because it represented a '30s notion about how do you bring art into architecture. In the end, we decided to have our own show, which would be structured in a different way, in small groups. But the relationship to the Independent Group, I mean some of the people were there, but they were in a minority.

Colomina: How about Hamilton? What about your relationship with him?

Smithson: Well, Hamilton, although he was a perfectly nice man, I never really . . . I mean, these kinds of biological antagonisms are very difficult to explain.

Colomina: So you never really connected with him?

Smithson: No. Except there is always this famous letter that he is supposed to have written to Alison and me about the Independent Group, but it never arrived.³

Colomina: What did the letter say?

Smithson: I don't know. But it appears in everybody's essays, this event. I introduced it only in so far as I was trying to identify one's own kind of snobbism. Maybe it is the same as the people you were with in elementary school, your little school.

Colomina: The cliques?

Smithson: Yes, you know, my friend is such and such. I think my whole life has been like that. Maybe everybody's.

Colomina: How about the other couples? Magda Cordell and John McHale, for example. You were friends?

Smithson: McHale was very helpful to us. We did a film of our Hauptstadt project for Berlin. Magda Cordell, her husband, Frank, who was a musician, and McHale made it possible to make that film.

Colomina: What is going on in that film? Are there any images from advertising?

Smithson: No. It is just the project. It is all cross-shot. Where there are pictures of

2. The Groupe Espace was founded in 1952 by André Bloch, editor of *L'Architecture d'aujourd'hui* and *L'Art d'aujourd'hui*. The group sponsored numerous collaborations between architects, painters, and sculptors.

3. Richard Hamilton, "Letter to Peter and Alison Smithson," January 16, 1957, in *Collected Words 1953–1982* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1982).

people moving in the project, there are pictures of people's feet in reality. So it is a mixed project and reality.

Colomina: What did Magda Cordell and John McHale contribute?

Smithson: We gave them the material and they did everything else, the filming, the cross-shooting, the music, everything. That is, Magda Cordell, Frank Cordell, and John McHale did it all. Magda, I don't think she was part of the Independent Group. She was a force, you know, she was Hungarian . . .

Colomina: But she is considered to have been part of the group.

Smithson: She still exists.

Colomina: I know. She is in Buffalo. Have you seen her recently?

Smithson: Well, it can't be recently, I was with Alison. We went to Buffalo. Maybe it was when we came to see you, too.

Colomina: Yes. I think so. When they re-did *This Is Tomorrow* in Buffalo.

Smithson: We enjoyed friendship and support within the group. And, of course, this kind of collaboration is a separate issue from whether we thought the work of this or that member was interesting.

Colomina: And you met regularly at the ICA for this support.

Smithson: There were ten or fifteen regular meetings, of which we attended four at least.

Colomina: So not that many.

Smithson: There were honorary conveners who put out slips to say there would be a meeting. McHale took notes . . . [*laughter*] and everybody looked at him as if he was a loony.

Colomina: So he was an instigator.

Smithson: It was just like kids' little school.

Colomina: Like kindergarten?

Smithson: Yes, exactly like kindergarten. And yet it was actually very complicated. McHale was keen on Buckminster Fuller. Having once heard him lecture, I was very un-keen. He was a real pain. Endless repetition. Who is the author of *The Little Prince*?

Colomina: Saint-Exupery.

Smithson: Yes, he said I am not a good writer but I am good at revising. Well, I'm pathological about repetition. Revision means taking the writing to the minimum. Excluding all fortuitous repetition. Fuller spoke for hours constantly repeating himself. He was a real boring man. Some of the things he did were remarkable but of course the acolytes were interested in him as a kind of prophet, not as a working engineer.

Colomina: And McHale was an acolyte?

Smithson: Yes. You should try to see Magda, because she will have a completely different story. Alison and she were fond of each other. Magda had a fantastic capacity for organizing. She was married to this man, Frank Cordell, who wrote the music for advertising. She would organize all the musicians.

Colomina: But she was also a painter, wasn't she?

Smithson: In the war Frank was a band leader or something. I think she went from Hungary to Cairo in wartime as a torch singer. Why did she do that? I think she had the capacity to turn her willpower to anything. She turned into a kind of poor man's Dubuffet. Yes, she was already painting at the time of the Hauptstadt project.

Colomina: When she went to Buffalo she was already with McHale, right?

Smithson: Yes, she had married him. But at the time they made the Hauptstadt film, all three of them, you know McHale was living with them, it was a *ménage à trois* then, presumably. He had children by a previous relationship, but she looked after them. I mean, she was fantastic. She could master any set of circumstances. I don't know what happened. I don't know why they went to Buffalo . . . you know, why does anybody go anywhere. . . . Why did you leave Barcelona?

Colomina: So when exactly was the film made?

Smithson: 1956 or 1957.

Colomina: So 1956 is a year in which you did a lot of things: the House of the Future, Patio and Pavilion, the film, the CIAM meeting, in Dubrovnik, for which Team 10 was responsible . . .⁴

Smithson: Hunstanton School was finished in 1954. We had a lot of time, and we had some money left over. Therefore, there was the possibility of doing spontaneous work. Hauptstadt was a competition but the other projects were all spontaneous, without a client.

Colomina: So what you did for the Independent Group was all without pay or without . . .

Smithson: Yes, the Independent Group was an evening every two months, and we did not always go. The thing that has been very neglected in all the writings about the Group is this chap who is also still alive called Toni del Renzio. He worked for a fashion magazine as a layout man. It was intended for people in the trade. I don't know what it is called. It was very fast and loose. He brought a level of reality about the real force of advertising, fashion, operating in the arts, which of course was the big thing of the period. The recognition that the popular arts, which had always influenced the fine arts, had moved into another sphere. To see advertising as a popular art. When a new form enters the art ambience, it is not a coincidence accepting it, taking a position with regard to it. But of course, you could say the way the new popular art entered American art was different. They accepted the kind of iconography of the popular thing raw. I mean both Andy Warhol and the man who makes pictures made of dots . . .

4. CIAM (Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne) was founded in 1928 as a body of leading modern architects from around the world. Team 10 was a breakaway group of CIAM founded in 1956, as the older group disintegrated, by Alison and Peter Smithson, Aldo van Eyck, Jacob Bakema, Georges Candilis, Shadrach Woods, John Voelcker, and William and Jill Howell.



Peter Smithson, Eduardo Paolozzi, Alison Smithson, and Nigel Henderson in 1956. (Photo: Nigel Henderson)

Colomina: Lichtenstein.

Smithson: Yes, where there is a straight shift of the popular images into an art form. There were a lot of extremely difficult moves. They were not just copying it. There was a transformation. But nevertheless, underneath, they were not taking a position, they were celebrating. Whereas certainly for Alison and me, the question of observation of the arts was not exactly a question of celebrating. We take a position. Because there would be an embarrassment about it. To take too easily is a form of eclecticism, that is, you've got to be terribly nervous. Contemporary architecture, for example, a lot of Dutch architecture now, is eclecticism of the '20s. Our friend Max [Risselada] has a word for it. It is a repeat of collage. It is terribly depressing in a way.

Colomina: So let's go back to that question of the advertisements.

Smithson: Oh yes, this is just a terrible interview.

Colomina: No, but I want to return to advertising. How did you and Alison get interested in popular images?

Smithson: Two lots of popular images were coming to us at the time. One through Eduardo Paolozzi being interested in magazine pictures, the advertising images in American magazines. And the other one, the surviving popular arts, through Nigel Henderson, who was photographing those kinds of images that later appeared in Peter Blake. I give an American example: if you are in a poor area, and you find a corner shop with an Italian, German, or Spanish owner, the way the window is ordered, items are ordered, is a surviving art form. Well, that existed in corner-shop culture here. News agents, sweet shops, and all that.

Colomina: And Nigel was photographing that.

Smithson: Yes. That, of course, was part of the trigger that set off the idea that the invention of a new house is the invention of a new kind of street. Because the street in the late nineteenth, early twentieth century was where the children were, and where people talked and all that, despite the climate being against it. The street was the arena of life. To perceive that the invention of another sort of house was the invention of another kind of street, of another arena, or maybe not an arena, wasn't—exactly as I was saying about popular arts—a question of saying the street must be revived. It is a matter of thinking what the street did, and what is the equivalent of it if it is no longer necessary, if the street is dead. At CIAM 8 they thought community equaled piazza.⁵ Community doesn't equal piazza, and that was another kind of eclecticism.

Colomina: Speaking of streets, I have always been struck by this photograph of you and Alison, Eduardo, and Nigel, where you are in the street, with chairs, as if the street were a living room.

5. The eight CIAM congress in Hoddesdon, England, in 1951 was on the theme of "The Heart of the City," and addressed the question of public space.

Smithson: Where did they get this picture? I don't know this version. It is a marvelous image. This is the world of that time. That is, the number of cars was small. It was just possible to use the street in this way.

Colomina: Where are we?

Smithson: Oh, it is just down the road. We can take a walk now and I can show you . . .

Colomina: You were already living here?

Smithson: No. We were living in that street.

Colomina: The street in the photograph?

Smithson: Yes, which is Limerston Street. From there we moved first down the street, and then here.

Colomina: So you moved within a very small area. But this is a kind of fancy neighborhood, isn't it?

Smithson: But it wasn't so at that time. Rooming houses. Young people in every room. Gas fire. Some middle-class people, not rich. There was a very strong mixture, like with the chairs in the picture, of different kinds of people. Peggy Guggenheim had a gallery in London and Nigel's mother was running the gallery for her. So therefore his childhood was surrealism. And then, during the war, he was a pilot, coastal command, flying up toward Norway. And that is how he met Eduardo, because Eduardo had been first of all in a concentration camp, I believe, because he was an enemy alien, he was Italian. But then he worked in the army, in the Pioneer Corps. Therefore both of them would have scholarships after the war and both went to the Slade School, and there they became friends.

Colomina: How about Alison and you? Where were you during the war?

Smithson: Alison was young. She was not in the war. She was sent to Edinburgh with her grandmother because her own home on the Tyne was in danger. There was a period when the Germans invaded Norway by going through Sweden in a sealed train and getting off at the Central Station in Oslo. Bizarre. Then the English sent, although we knew it was impossible, forces to help the Norwegian army, and supplies were transported from the Tyne, the nearest port, and Alison's home was close to that. So therefore there was a period of aerial bombardment, which she experienced. She wrote a fantastically good piece about it. Some girls' school wrote to her asking whether she could describe her experiences during the war, and she knocked out these two very touching pieces. One is a description of the way the searchlights find an aircraft and how it struggles to escape. And the other one, where the planes were flying so low that you can see the pilot. And from the books she left, the three most used are about airplane recognition. Children of that time were able to identify planes like butterflies. What I don't quite know is why, if she was in South Shields, which is on the Tyne, at the time of maximum danger, why she was sent away later.

Colomina: Alison said somewhere that her grandmother in Edinburgh was getting American magazines during the war.

Smithson: Yes she was sent the *Ladies' Home Journal* and her great aunt the *Woman's Home Companion*. Because a second cousin was a professor at Smith, or some smart college, in library management or something like that. And she sent food parcels and presumably the *Ladies' Home Journal* was a cultural parcel.

Colomina: Cultural parcel! I like that.

Smithson: Even in the wartime, it had the most fantastic advertisements for flour. Which is, to repeat the thing about Toni del Renzio, remarkable because the technical expertise used to produce it was unbelievable. I still have some of the clippings.

Colomina: So Alison kept clippings of the magazines?

Smithson: Yes. They were used by other people to explain what we were talking about then. Like you are doing now.

Colomina: But you yourselves also used some quite extraordinary images in your articles. Images from American advertisements of cars, or toilet paper . . .

Smithson: Cars, food, and furniture.

Colomina: Food? What kind of food? Why food? What about food?

Smithson: You know, pictures of fruit, Pilsbury flour. . . . You may not know such images.

Colomina: Oh, I do know. Every time I go through the magazines of that period I think the advertisements are stunning.

Smithson: I think the argument Alison was making when she was talking about the *Ladies' Home Journal* during wartime was that for her, the personal impact of American advertising was in a way an echo or repeat of previous experiences, that advertisements in the 1940s were really a continuation of the '30s. It is all very interesting given Nigel's experience of surrealism when he was a child.

Colomina: From his mother.

Smithson: Yes. The point that Alison was making is that the experience, the physical experience of American advertising, came to her as a child. That is, that it wasn't something learned from books.

Colomina: So it was not just Nigel and Eduardo that got you interested in popular magazines. Alison had it already in herself, in a way.

Smithson: Yes, the way the influence of American advertising has been interpreted is that its attraction in the 1950s was that it represented a level of luxury, because of the relative deprivation from war. Rationing didn't end here until the 1950s. Various items of food and petrol and so on were still restricted. Therefore there was not the sense you now feel about our world that generally there is too much. There was a sense of how wonderful it was that so many things were available somewhere. And spun off that is the graphics that represented this, in terms of advertising, particularly for the motor car. Because it was a high time of really exotic styling. You would think we are only talking about Cadillac but of course it was common to Chevrolet and Ford and all of that. From Raymond Loewy on.

Colomina: But now you are talking about name designers . . .

Outbreak of War, 1939

ALISON M. SMITHSON

In the period immediately before the declaration of war, 1939, my father had acquired large lenses, which, inserted in a tube, became a makeshift telescope. Whether this was inspired by his constant interest in the firmament blossoming, lens availability, or by certain solar phenomena, I cannot now ask. I remember there was a spectacular series of northern lights—aurora borealis—we looked at from the sunken garden in Central Avenue, South Shields; and through the telescope the moons of Venus . . . all during the same period of threat of war because I remember one night my parents wondering what we would be doing on the next occasion.

We were relatively freshly in the new house—barely eighteen months or so—before war was declared. Sky watching rolled into my father in his ARP Warden's steel hat, special mask in its sack over his shoulder, whistle against blackout infringement; cocoa offered at the local concrete blockhouse—guarding the road in from the coast—where he reported on his evenings on duty. The northeast saw quite a bit of action in the beginning, not only because of ship building but while supplying our army in Norway: I remember the figure of 119 German fighters shot down over the Tyne, Wear, Tees, in about six weeks.

Searchlights were spectacular—so powerful: I once saw a Heinkle 111 turning in the searchlights to go out to sea as I stood at the T-junction opposite our gate; so close I could see the pilot's head. Our new garden walls were high, so the treeless corner opposite was a gathering place of men with cause to be out, who would then nip over for a bit of protection if the noise of shrapnel tinkling on the roofs and road became heavy . . . for all the ships would fire their pom-poms as well as sometimes really bigger guns, backing up the land-based anti-aircraft guns to discourage any diving into the valley of the Tyne.

In those early months losses in merchant shipping were awful: my parents could count the chimneys of twelve houses where captains or chief engineers had gone down with their ships. One constant fright my father suffered was a local

North Sea pilot who—unusual indeed then—wore white gym shoes, and would come silently up behind him on nights when “off-duty.” I think he also had a white helmet; he was the father of a prefect at my school and survived the war.

Prior warning of a raid in daytime—just before the siren started its wail—would be to see the balloons being hastily hauled down: puffy-tailed ones land-based, fin-tailed ship-based: the number of shark fins also indicated that “trouble” or “visitors” would come that night . . . The information was so good there was the rumor that they eventually found a spy in the drafting office of one of the shipyards and he rose as the officers went in to speak to him: certainly regular visitations ceased sometime after the warship *George VI* sailed out and immediately got sunk up the coast; then Norway fell, action in the sky quieted and for the rest of the war rations fluctuated between poor and worse.

Before this sky-watching period I remember my parents listening to the last radio broadcasts from Czechoslovakia, Poland; of Masaryk speaking; of Chopin being played: the import of those last broadcasts remains with me and can still cause tears. . . . Chopin from a Poland—was it only thirty-six years its own country?

My parents dug up the new garden again to plant vegetables, then to dig an air raid shelter built of re-creosoted railway sleepers; then, as the war settled in, had built a concrete skin to make the back scullery a dry shelter: all in a period of eighteen months . . . while I was evacuated—because the school bus, Shields to Sunderland, traveled a road parallel to the coast—first to my Aunt's farm in Yorkshire, then Edinburgh to go to school by staying with my Grandmother . . . Edinburgh that hardly knew rationing but was city to the Polish Army and the Free French . . . and I on my bike once saw Charles de Gaulle bolt upright in his jeep . . . and where a Flying Fortress once flew low over me: the most amazing experience, impressing me beyond belief by the sight of its size, its making, the downwards pressure on me on the hillside . . .

February 7, 1989

© Alison and Peter Smithson, Architects

Smithson: Yes, the romanticism of the streamliners, Norman Bel Geddes and Raymond Loewy. I mean this styling of the late 1950s was a spin-off of earlier people, Loewy and Bel Geddes from the 1920s and 1930s. Then it was almost a private romanticism about streamliners, but the 1950s made that romanticism a popular one. That was one of the popular arts, and the style of the car was so fantastic. What the Independent Group was about was just to look at the phenomenon. And the distinction I was trying to make earlier between Hamilton and Peter Blake was that they took that imagery raw, from different sources. Hamilton would take the imagery from American advertising and Peter Blake would take it from English corner-shop culture. But there was just a strange collage, not a significant transformation, which is what I try to distinguish from Andy Warhol, who I regard as real Pop, where you are not dealing with a baked-bean can on the table. There is a transformation. Andy Warhol, somewhere I read, worked for a shoe company, making the drawings for the advertisements of their shoes. I think it is a very common way of beginning, for American artists—to begin as commercial artists—therefore they acquire fantastic graphic skills.

Colomina: It is interesting that you say that. I was thinking about Barbara Kruger ...

Smithson: These artists are dealing with the popular art as a fact. When you are drawing shoes to sell, you are dealing with a popular art not as observed but doing, like the man who carves the lettering on the wheel. That is, Andy Warhol was carving letters on the wheel.

Colomina: And how about Alison and you, Nigel and Eduardo. If you take the *Parallel of Life and Art*, it is not that there are too many popular images there. Although the excess of images somehow captures the new reality.

Smithson: The text is quite clear. We responded with what we thought was appropriate, the resources of imagery that were not available to the previous generation: photography, aerial photography, micro-photography ...

Colomina: X-ray images ...

Smithson: ... quasi-scientific stuff, like the man who photographed men walking. There was not a particular emphasis on advertising. The ones that we particularly contributed, like the X-ray of a Jeep, were not advertisements.

Colomina: Where did you get it from?

Smithson: I should imagine from *Time* magazine. The format of *Time* was very large. Their photographic reportage was very strong. *Paris Match* was also a large format. It was a period rich in visual material. Now these very large formats have completely disappeared.

Colomina: So all these big images in magazines, glossy advertisements, and journalism were a major influence on you after the war. But how about the war itself. Where were you?

Smithson: The war was mostly school for me. I was at architectural school. I started very young, sixteen, and in schools and colleges there was army training with mostly foot drill. Very primitive. And learning about guns. Conscripted

started at eighteen years old. Because in the architecture course there were first three years and then two more years, my professor asked the conscription people to defer it so I could sit for my third-year examination. So I entered the army when I was nineteen and I left when I was twenty-two. Because I had a certificate, I entered a kind of pre-officer school and then was booted out from that and went back to the basic stuff. You know the name of the royal engineers, they are called the Sappers, after the saps, the trenches that used to be dug. Well, I went to the basic school for training young men to be Sappers, which was fantastic. It was in a mill in Lancashire, in one of those early fireproof constructions, with all the machinery taken out and cast-iron columns everywhere.

From there I went to officer training. In the invasion of Europe I was in a reserve and training division. Once the landing had been made in Europe they knew what the casualties would likely be, so the young were sent to the Japanese war because they thought they had enough. They must have made calculations about the first month of the invasion. For example, if there were sixty thousand people killed, now they needed twenty-five thousand people. That is, they could estimate future losses and so my generation was sent to the Japanese war, in Burma. For me, it was Madras Sappers and Miners. I was in the Indian army. I went to the depot of this organization, where they converted you from an English soldier to an Indian soldier. It is a nice idea. The whole time I was in Burma we were a long way from the front, with the advanced headquarters of the army, which is always about thirty miles from the fighting. Therefore I was very unheroic.

Colomina: But it must have affected you.

Smithson: Yes, it was a fantastic experience.

Colomina: Did you ever go back to India, with Alison?

Smithson: Yes, once. And by myself later to Rangoon. The bad time was 1944. From then on, the Japanese were retreating, although there were battles all the way to Rangoon. In 1942 they took over everything in about six weeks, Singapore, Malaysia, etc., and they were right to the frontier of India. At the end of the war we were in Rangoon. A new army was being formed. And then they dropped the bomb. One saw the Japanese commanders as prisoners and the Indian national army. There was an Indian formation on the other side because the people who thought that India should be free formed an army out of our army to fight on the other side.

I have difficulty remembering whether I really saw it or it was a picture I saw—of an endless snake of Indian soldiers without arms marching into captivity. I mean the whole thing was extraordinary, with people from every possible ethnic background, Indian, African, English, Scots. But the part I played was completely unheroic.

Colomina: There were so many architects in the army in India. When Bob Maxwell was Dean of Princeton, he told me he had been in the army in India with

Alan Colquhoun as his captain.

Smithson: We were in the same generation. They were not Madras Sappers and Miners. Colquhoun was wounded in Burma . . . If there were three brigades, one was always English. As if there was always the possibility of another mutiny.

The amazing thing for me was the machinery of war—the Bailey Bridge, the vehicles, the Jeep.

Colomina: You even had a Jeep yourself after the war.

Smithson: You belong to a family. It was devastating at the end of the war. As a



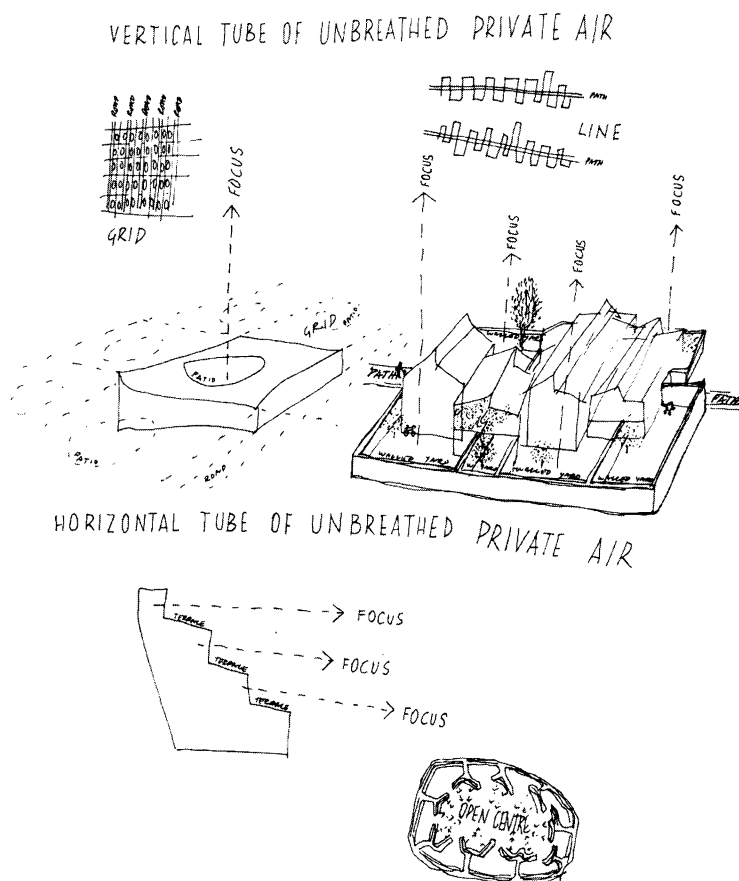
Alison Smithson and her son Simon on Smithson's Jeep in Regent's Park, July 1955.

student, I was released almost immediately. And the moment you leave your little family it is astonishing because you had to get used to all these people again.

Oh, my body temperature went down talking about this. [*Turning the heating on. It is July.*]

Colomina: So then when you went back to school after the war, is that when you met Alison?

Smithson: Yes, but not immediately. She was one year or maybe two years lower. I graduated in 1947 and Alison in 1949. Then I worked as an assistant in the



Peter Smithson. Private Air Diagrams. 1955–56.

school while I studied town planning. Like Eduardo and Nigel, I had state support as a soldier, they paid the fees and living expenses. So there was an advantage continuing to study. The year after my finals at the Royal Academy School, the year Alison graduated, we got married.

Colomina: Banham said your school was a “Red-brick university” rather than the old elite places, Cambridge and Oxford.

Smithson: Yes, the universities of the towns. Mostly built in the 1880s in all the big cities. Liverpool, by repute, had the best school of architecture. Maxwell and Stirling went there. I was in Newcastle, but all the professors were from Liverpool.

Colomina: Banham’s point was that you, Paolozzi, and the others were not part of the old boys network, and that the Independent Group was your way of compensating for that. So there is a class question here too, right? I mean, when I look at the picture of all of you in Limerston Street, I say to myself, who are these people? I mean, I love this picture, but you guys, particularly Eduardo,

look like some neighborhood thugs. So do you think there was a class issue in the Independent Group?

Smithson: I am not sure. Nigel went to Marlborough, more upper-middle-class. Alison was George Watson Ladies College in Edinburgh. Sandy Wilson, who was in one of the groups, went to public school, and to Cambridge.

Colomina: Returning to the postwar years, I am fascinated that in the very same year, 1956, you did such different projects as the House of the Future and Patio and Pavilion. Apparently completely different aesthetically. But then Alison said somewhere that they are both part of the same research, that “both reflected upon each dwelling’s right to unbreathed air.” I am also fascinated by this drawing, this diagram you made about the “unbreathed air.” Can you explain something to me about this? I know you are talking about the yard, but I cannot help but think what else is going on here. What is this business of private space defined as unbreathed air? Is it related to the war in some way? Or does it have to do with the preoccupations of those years about the air, and hygiene, tuberculosis, fresh air, and so on? Also when you look at advertisements in America in those years, they are introducing air-conditioning. So air is a very important thing that has to be conditioned. Conditioned air becomes part of the essence of private space. And now there are all these battles with airplane companies about the lack of unbreathed air, which I think are really battles about private space.

Smithson: I guess we were watching everything that was happening and trying to imagine where it was going to go. The curiosity of the House of the Future and the other projects being in the same year. . . . Well, Peter Banham’s critique in the ’50s was that we were concerned only with the architectonic value, not with those values that he thought were the future for architecture, like Buckminster Fuller, minimum weight, all of that. But the peculiar thing was that although the issues were indeed architectonic—space, form, light, etc.—those issues were not approached stylistically. The main thrust of Team 10 is that the first duty of a building is to the fabric itself and that fabric is not just the physical fabric, it is the texture, the people, and you have to be the servant of that.⁵ If that is the starting point, you don’t end up with the same formal formula.

I just gave a lecture in Barcelona down the road from the Richard Meier museum. Afterward, we took a walk to see it. It is ridiculous. Nothing to do with Barcelona. For me, that is the kind of building that deserves Banham’s critique. The architect is only interested in architectonic issues, only interested in imitating ’20s Corb. In every work there are formal weaknesses but they are not to do with being a bad copy, but with not being internally self-consistent. In the House of the Future, which was entirely Alison’s design, the formal consistency is extraordinary.

Colomina: Banham also said that the House of the Future is the first experiment in Pop architecture.

Smithson: I never thought about it that way. The issues she was dealing with, like the shaping of the roof so that the sun comes in over the bathroom into the living room, these are the issues we normally deal with. It is only interpreted as Pop.

Colomina: But aesthetically, it looked like nothing else you ever did.

Smithson: Does Pop mean aesthetically pop? Yes it does.

Colomina: If anything, that house looks like a set for the Jetsons. What was the inspiration formally?

Smithson: The inspiration tended to be negative. Once the decision has been made to make it of plastic, there is a noise problem if it is a city house, a town house. Therefore, it would have to be heavy. So the plastic is used as an impregnation of a solid plaster, something cheap and heavy. What else was in plastic houses? Of course, there were things like the Monsanto house, but they were all bungalows. Then you come to the critical thing, to invent a house you have to invent a street. You are always stuck with not knowing what the alternative to street is. You have to construct the ambience in which the house exists. Therefore, you take the opposite case, heavy walls and looking inwards, and you restrict its use, consciously, to say it is for young people without children, or with small children, like living in the Mews here. That is, it's not a family house. Therefore you can direct it, on the assumption that old cities are absolutely full of alternative forms of housing because they have evolved. Have you been to Phoenix, Arizona?

Colomina: Yes, I have.

Smithson: Ten miles by six miles, the same problem. But we made the opposite assumption. That is, this house would exist in a matrix where there would be many choices. This is not a house for everyone. It is only for this class of person. The ideology was quite strict. What exists now as prototype will be available to everybody in twenty-five years. And it turned out to be more or less true: controlled air, humidification, lighting under control, all the kitchen stuff, refrigeration. Somebody did a piece in a technical magazine about how many of the things have turned out correctly...

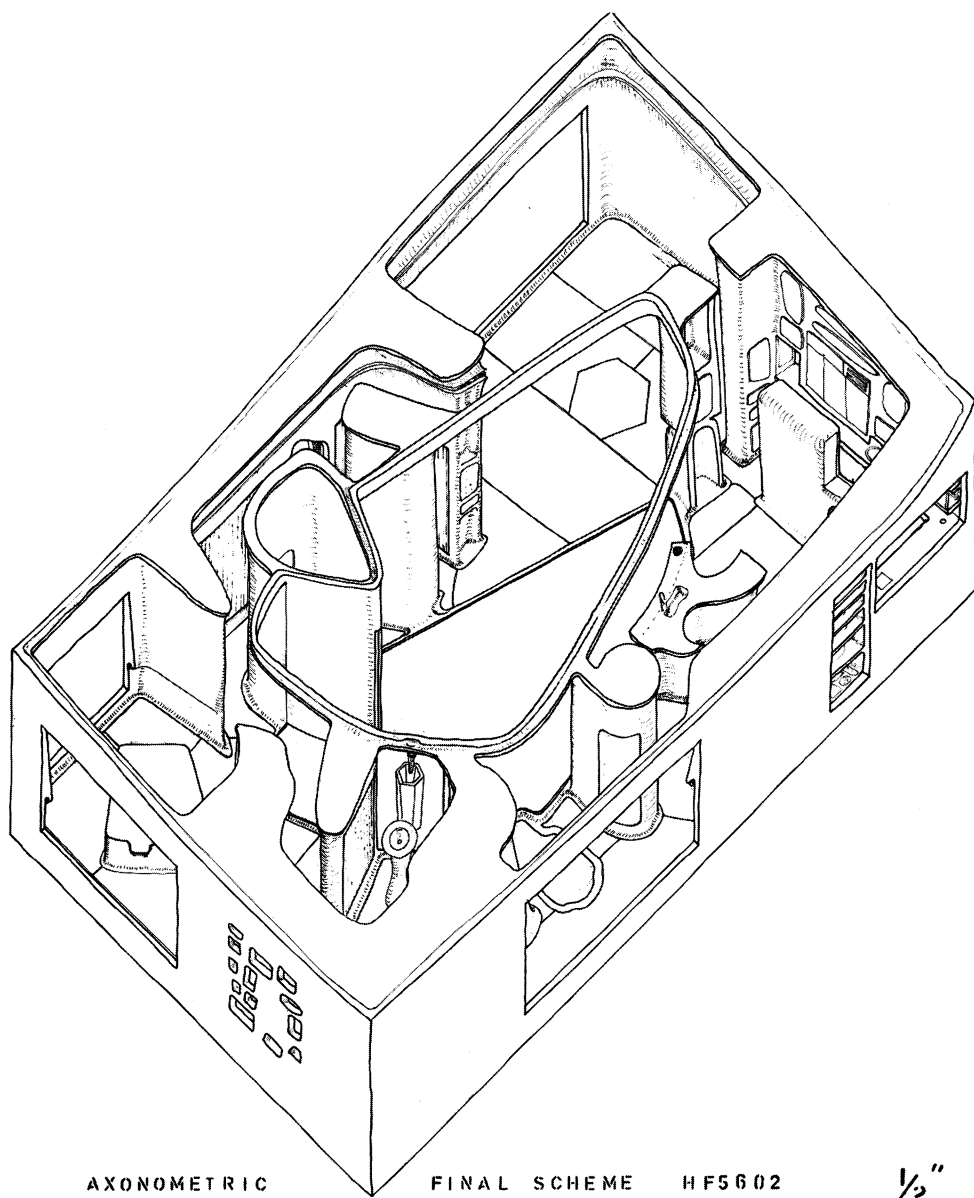
Colomina: Of the House of the Future?

Smithson: Yes, it is now thirty years later, was the prognostication correct?

Colomina: Thirty? Forty-four years, actually. The house was also supposed to be a prototype in a more radical sense. Unlike the mass-produced American houses of the period, this was more like a car, in the sense that the whole thing would be mass-produced, rather than the parts, and that to change anything in it, as I think Alison said, would be like trying to get a bigger glove compartment for your car. That is, more complicated and more expensive than getting rid of the whole thing and buying another car.

Smithson: Yes, it was like a car, or an airplane. That is, once the series had been finished, that was it.

Colomina: It is also very dateable. You look at that house, and you understand the period in which it was made.



*Alison and Peter Smithson. House of the Future.
Daily Mail Ideal Home Exhibition, London. 1956.
Drawing by Alison Smithson.*



*"Inhabitant" operating the self-cleaning bathtub
of the House of the Future.*



*Dressing Room of the House of the Future,
with Saddle Chair.*

Smithson: Yes, you have to move on. But it was strange, because one's real life is the opposite. The family house is still the family house, it goes on.

Colomina: But the presumption of that project is that we will throw it away in the same way that we will throw away a car.

Smithson: Yes, that there is no such thing as the family house, that we will throw it away.

Colomina: It brings the expendable into architecture. The throwaway concept.

Smithson: Here are some pictures of the House of the Future. With the glass screen going across the face of the courtyard, the assumption is that you can see the person in the bathroom.

Colomina: Yes, from the courtyard. But the courtyard is private.

Smithson: Therefore it assumes that the occupants are young people, when the body is still beautiful.

Colomina: Can you tell me something about these models with these extraordinary outfits, what was that about?



Smithson: The client commissioned them . . .

Colomina: *The Daily Mail*?

Smithson: Yes. Very intelligent. The man who dressed tennis people for Wimbledon. Therefore, the language he was speaking was of movement. Recently, I printed my own pictures, taken during the construction, which show the actors and ordinary people together, and I thought that the ordinary people looked absolutely ridiculous. Also, it is almost thirty people smoking pipes, in suits, and mixed in were the four models.

Colomina: So you didn't have anything to do with these actors or with these dresses.

Smithson: No, we had nothing to do with the clothing nor with the choice of the actors.

Colomina: They were wonderful. Is there a model of the house?

Smithson: They are building one now for the Centre Pompidou. And because it is fully three-dimensional they are building it out of dental plaster.

Left: House of the Future. One of the "inhabitants" in the kitchen, explaining its features to viewers in the walkway above.

Right: Simon Smithson on the kitchen counter of the House of the Future.



Colomina: Ah! A medical technology. And at that time you did the house without a model?

Smithson: No, there was a model. It was a cardboard model. The Ideal Homes made it. We didn't make a model. We never, except under duress, make models. I hate models.

Colomina: You only make drawings. In terms of the look of it, some people have compared the House of the Future to Buckminster Fuller's bathroom, because of the continuous surface and the fact that it is all molded as one unit. Except that the House of the Future is plastic, of course. A student of mine said the house looks like a TV dinner, one of these trays with different rounded compartments.

Smithson: It was based on a place in the South of France, Les Baux, which is like in Tunisia, where they carved the houses out of the rock and there is a container cut in the rock for everything, for your toothbrush, for example.

In conscious terms there were two cribs, one was Les Baux, and the other was the coloration of *Paradise Garden*, which is a German painting.

Colomina: I see. The table is the same, and the garden.

Smithson: But those are the conscious influences.

Colomina: Yes, but maybe there is the unconscious one too, like the TV dinners that Alison must have seen in the *Ladies' Home Journal*.

Smithson: Here is the famous photograph of Simon [sitting on the counter of the House of the Future], looking suspicious, but young children accept everything.

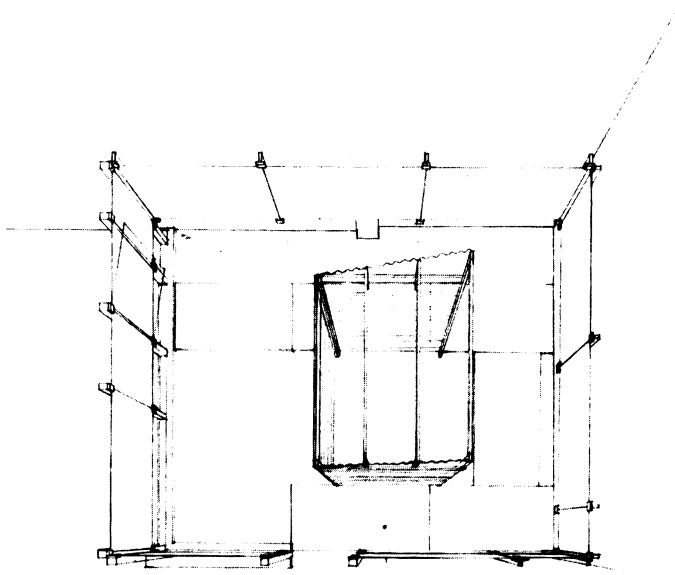
Colomina: Children were an important theme for both of you, I suppose particularly for Alison. She made some comments about the house being self-cleaning—because of the continuous surface it could be wiped clean very fast—and having round corners, unlike 1950s furniture, which Alison said was lethal to toddlers.

Smithson: The material of which it was made, plaster with plastic admixture. The finish would be as when you have ordinary concrete cast on metal shutters, very smooth.

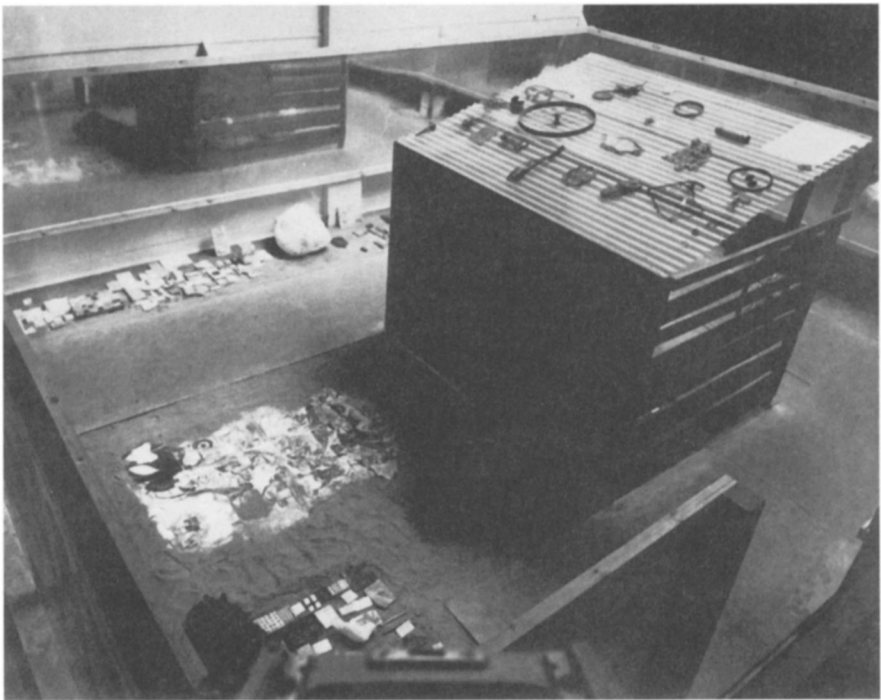
Colomina: Where was it made? On site?

Smithson: It was made like in the theater. It wasn't real. It was made of plywood. It was like an early airplane, where you make a series of forms, then you run the skin over them. The house was made in ten days. The exhibition contractor was fantastically fast. It was not a prototype. It was like the design for a masque, like theater. Which is extraordinary. Like all exhibitions, they live a life of say a week or four weeks in reality, but then they go on and on forever. Like the Barcelona Pavilion before it was reconstructed.

Colomina: Returning to Patio and Pavilion—of the same year as the House of the Future, but so different aesthetically. Some critics have talked about it embodying the aesthetics of the day after, the landscape of waste, and war. What is it for you?



Alison and Peter Smithson. Exhibition design for Patio and Pavilion, This Is Tomorrow exhibition, Whitechapel Art Gallery. Drawing by Peter Smithson. 1956.



Alison and Peter Smithson. Patio and Pavilion.



Smithson: An art historian's interpretation of it is that it is a shed in a backyard, but that was not the intention. You know the way it was done? We designed a shed and an aluminum-faced plywood enclosure. And this sketch was all we did as architects. Then we went away to Dubrovnik, and the two boys ...

Colomina: Nigel and Eduardo?

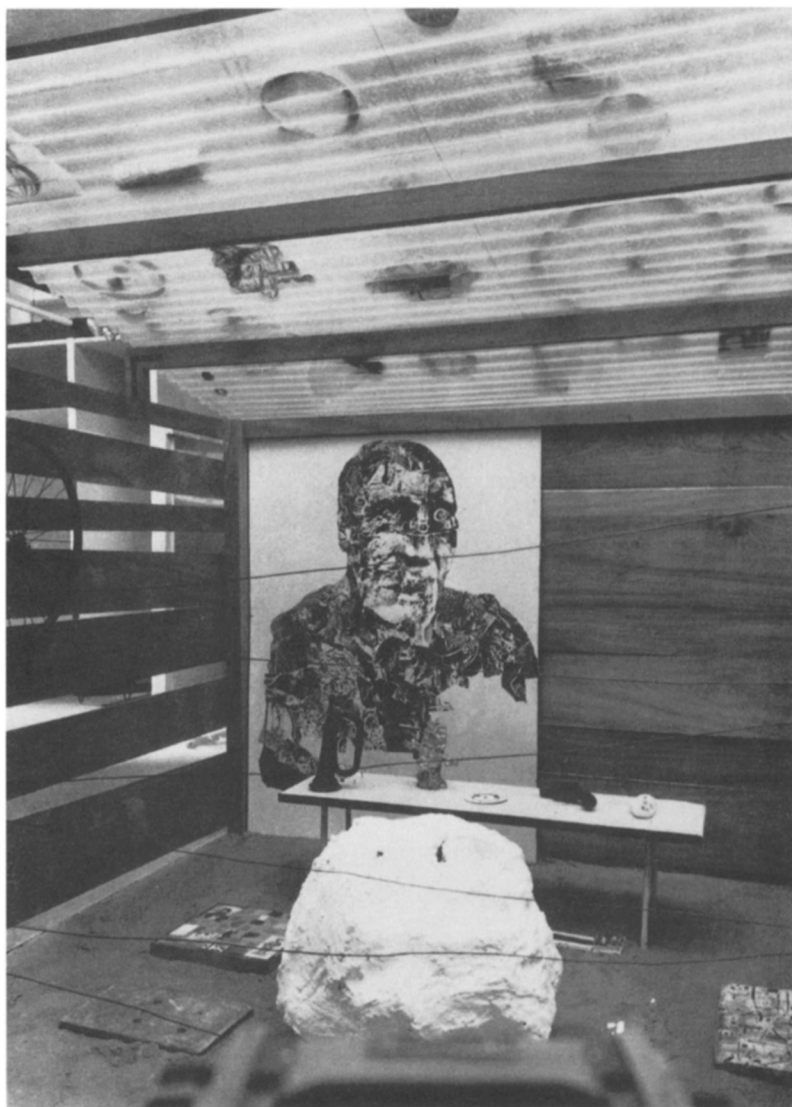
Smithson: Yes. They did the rest. That is, it was not in any way preplanned. The text says the architect makes the space, the occupier takes possession by doing his thing ...

Colomina: So Nigel and Eduardo were the occupiers.

Smithson: Yes, we didn't decorate it. They decorated it. And when the whole installation was rebuilt in 1990, they remade all these things, from photographs!

Left: Alison and Peter Smithson in the Patio and Pavilion. (Photo: Theo Crosby)

Right: Interior of Patio and Pavilion. (Photo: Nigel Henderson)



Colomina: So you didn't have anything to do with the objects that were there, that wheel, that television . . .

Smithson: No, we were not here. The way I interpreted it was just that they were representations of machines and animals, but nothing was concrete, nothing was real, everything was metaphorical

Colomina: Did you come back for the opening?

Smithson: It was extraordinary. This is long before the installations of real things you always see these days.

Colomina: Here you both are in the Patio and Pavilion. Is this is the aluminum surface? [*looking at a photograph*]

Smithson: Yes, but it was not polished. Which was the other interesting thing about

rebuilding it, that you can't get it like that anymore, now it is more shiny.

Colomina: So when they rebuilt it, they went about finding an old TV set, and a trumpet, and an old train, and everything, all that junk.

Smithson: Yes, even the same sand on the floor. They desperately looked for the original kind of sand.

Colomina: How about that wire? What was that supposed to mean? Was that you or Eduardo and Nigel?

Smithson: Like a piece of wire that keeps cows out. That is a kind of architect's question: what is that for? Because we are trained that way. But for artists that question is of no significance. The other thing is that it has all been interpreted as if the wood was old, that everything was secondhand, but it was new, as with the translucent sheet. Some things were even made especially.

Colomina: Were you happy with the way Nigel and Eduardo occupied your project?

Smithson: Yes. I was astonished. When you go away there is nothing. Two weeks later you come back. It was a miracle. That was not transposing something like Peter Blake. This was something new. But I wouldn't regard this as Pop. My picture of Pop is American. It is full of energy. This is not full of energy.

Colomina: But the House of the Future is full of energy and the whole culture of the time it was part of was talking about America.

Who is this little girl in the photograph of the *Parallel of Life and Art* exhibition?

Smithson: I don't know. She is maybe one of Eduardo's children. Because the desk of Freda Paolozzi was here. They separated. She went to live in the country.

Colomina: And Eduardo?

Smithson: He lives near here still.

Colomina: Do you see him sometimes?

Smithson: I haven't seen him since Alison died. But there is no affection in him for me. Whereas with Nigel, we were all affection until the end. He was very remarkable. Without ambition. Eduardo is an academician. Nigel was, physically also, like Lewis Carroll, the man who wrote ...

Colomina: Alice in ...

Smithson: He did these things without thinking he would be famous. Nigel was that way. Eduardo was always more ambitious.

Colomina: But in the 1950s you were so close to both of them. What happened?

Smithson: There are times when you need somebody and they need you too, by chance.

Colomina: Yes, it is like what you were saying before about love affairs. Then you moved on with your friends of the Team 10, replacing one set of friends for another. And your sketch of Patio and Pavilion was your last contribution to the Independent Group?

Smithson: Yes, even if *This Is Tomorrow* was not really an Independent Group exhibition, it was our last collaborative effort with Nigel and Eduardo.

Colomina: What emerges then as the IG is not, as it is usually represented, a series

of meetings, publications, exhibitions, etc., but amorphous friendships, very loose, temporary, with everybody moving in different directions even if you were sharing a fascination with popular culture.

Smithson: In fact, the whole idea of *This Is Tomorrow* was to allow the different directions, which made it the contrary of the Group Espace, which had an ideology and was going in one direction. The *This Is Tomorrow* exhibition was intended to show the variety of directions.

Colomina: It was the same with Team 10, right? You are in a group but you don't represent the group.

Smithson: In a way it is another kind of ambition. I only have Alberti in mind. Being jealous of nobody. I have become a terrible old bore. . . . Without some-



Parallel of Life and Art. View of exhibition at the ICA, London, 1953.

body like Nigel and Eduardo, we had no peers. Therefore you are entirely self-contained. That is the basic difficulty with Alison having gone. The relationship was more like a conspiracy. She and I against everybody else. Not literally.

Colomina: No, of course.

Smithson: You are more exposed when groups disintegrate. You have nobody to say . . . Also it's a question of aging. Gradually the people you can talk to disappear. You end up alone.