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Building review

The Pompidou Centre: or the hidden kernel of dematerialisation

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Already in the mid-1960s, with the first warnings of juvenile arraignments, an open critique of the naive enthusiasm with which the former generation had absorbed the myth of technology and communication came to the fore. So that Archigram members themselves, in proposing a cardboard megastructure for the *ARCHIGRAM VII* special issue ('everybody's got their own mega-structure, do it yourself' they wrote), kept an ironic distance from the modernistic belief in the linear evolution of society (Fig. 1).

Nevertheless, the dramatic decrease in the utopian mainstream that had characterised the 'Year of Megastructures', as Banham called it (1963), succeeded in producing an unrepeatable architectural gesture for the celebration of individual freedom and social equality. As one of the best-known contemporary icons, the Pompidou Centre was also responsible for turning the modernistic interest in functionality into the de-materialised aspects of urban fetishism. The hyper-objectification of its form and the consequent 'transparency' of its content led in fact to a new type of architectural fruition: that in which the ideological perception of the building exceeded the real possibilities suggested by its hyper-flexibility. Thus, the Pompidou also inaugurated a new era for the dogmatic myth of self-empowerment by means of self-learning (auto-didacticism) and mass *jouissance*.

1. The simulated display

Conceived soon after the student rebellion of the late 1960s, the Pompidou Centre in Paris became a privileged place where culture was offered to the masses as a proof of democratisation. By means of de-materialisation—ie, the display not only of the building's interiors, but by the act of displaying in itself (display of culture, of fluxes and most of all of the masses in the act of perennially enjoying culture as a means of both conscious entertainment and self-empowerment)—the Pompidou offered itself as a mythical object capable of either representing or mirroring the mass obsession for 'liberty'; liberty of both being and desiring. As a consequence, the building developed into a highly iconic structure intended to epitomise an 'apparent' symbolic exchange between power and the masses. Apparent because not only did the building prove itself to be the heir of unsolved design and conceptual contradictions, but also because its stardom unexpectedly derived exactly from these contradictions; or, better, by the way in which, in interacting one with the other, they made of it a fascinating ideological riddle in the way in which it came to be both sensed and perceived.

Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers,[1] who won the *Plateau Beaubourg Centre Paris Competition* in 1971 (its full title), clearly expressed the intention of creating a populist dimension for culture by

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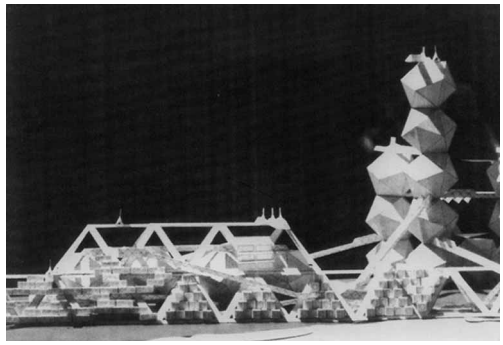

Figure 1. Archigram, *Do-it-yourself Megastructure*, (paper kit), Archigram VII, 1967.

Figure 2. Renzo Piano, Richard Rogers, *Pompidou Centre*, main façade, Paris, 1977.

abolishing the idea of a closed main façade. They opted for a huge, transparent one in order to make clear that no barrier was interposed for accessing culture. All of a sudden, this solution not only became a metaphor of this process of cultural appropriation by the masses, but also developed the building into a monument to 'the ritual of transparency' and the free circulation of information. The huge escalator, working as a sign, and its prodigious transparent façade, working as a metaphor (not to mention its emblematic, technological structure, which increased its metaphysical appeal) conspired to make a fetish of it, whereas culture assumed the dimension of a gift whose value would otherwise have never been redeemed (Fig. 2).

2. An architectural fossil

The increasing faith in both consumption and technology, a decade after World War Two, and the idea that standardised production and the diffusion of domestic appliances (Fig. 3), as a consequence of the supposed increase of free-time, would produce a new era of freedom from the enslavement of work, should be regarded as the starting point for the megastructuralist movement, whose fatal connection with the emergence of pop culture (and the concept of 'happening'), free-time's mass consumption, the fame of psycho-sociological theories on the importance of play, as well as the influence of a post-Marxist interpretation of the so-called 'Society of Spectacle' by the Situationist movement, reinforced the application of the idea of interactive involvement in both urbanism and architecture.

Figure 3. *Electric Ironer Democratized* (Sears Roebuck Catalogue, 1941–2).

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A number of unrealised megastructures—like Michael Webb's academic work *Sin Centre* (1958–62) (Fig. 4), Peter Cook's *Entertainment Tower* for the 1967 Montreal Expo (1963) (Fig. 5), the so-called *New Babylon* (1963) by the Situationist architect Constant Niewenhuis and Cedric Price's *Fun Palace* (1965)—aimed at satisfying an unchallenged belief in the logic of free-time, preceded the Pompidou in exploring a field in between the pop-happening, the urban event and large-scale consumerism, also identified in Yona Friedman's *L'Architecture mobile* manifesto (Fig. 6, and footnote 12).

So that, even before the building was completed, in December, 1977, it was perceived as an architectural fossil. The culmination of more than ten years of architectural ideals, its apparent structural complexity was the result of the application of such obsolete technologies that the greatest achievement, during the building phase, was accomplishing the transport of the building's parts (most of which were hand-crafted) to the *plateau.*

In this respect, although the Pompidou became one of the most hated, discussed and visited buildings in the world (almost 25,000 daily presences as opposed to a maximum of 10,000 foreseen in the planning stage), public success did not prevent the

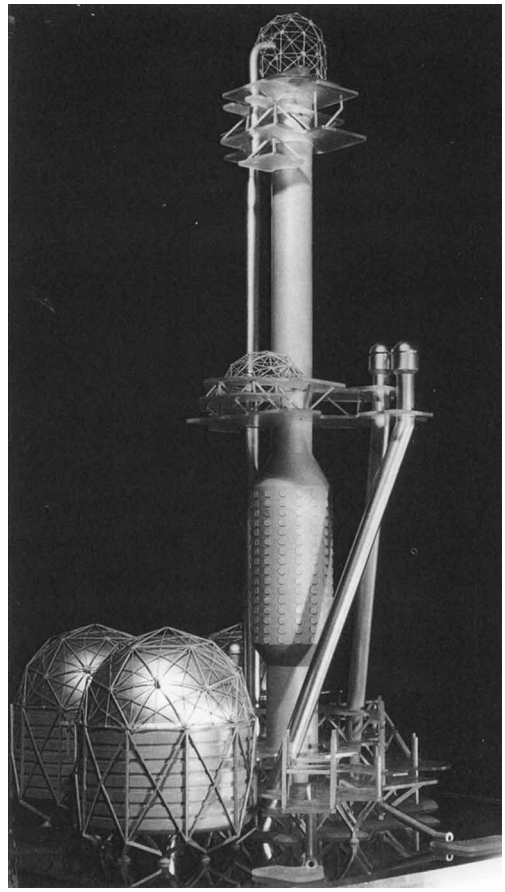

Figure 4. Michael Webb, *Sin Centre*, 1958–62.

Figure 5. Peter Cook, *Entertainment Tower*, 1963.

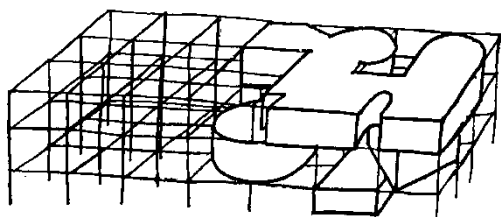

Figure 6. Yona Friedman, *Architecture Mobile*, 1962.

critics from censuring it. If Tafuri spoke in terms of 'superfluous metaphors [and] images become canonical in the new natural environment', Colquhoun accused it of populism and megalomania. Only Frampton, in pointing to the Pompidou as a typical 'example of a lack of built surfaces and an excess of flexibility', accidentally underlined the building's most innovative aspects.[2]

Piano and Rogers—who had beaten 681 competitors and were judged by a panel which included Philip Johnson, a notorious follower of fashion, and Jean Prouvé, engineer, inventor and experimenter with new technologies—claimed to have been inspired by megastructures and the notion of flexibility they were supposed to embody. To most people, however, the Pompidou appeared to be the excessive, burlesque expression of the modernist ideal of the building-as-a-machine. So that, if it was identified as a monument, *strictu sensu* modernists gave this a funereal resonance.

Utilising the tiredest commonplaces from modernist imagery (Russian *Constructivism* to French *Structural Rationalism*), and proposing itself as part of the newly born myth of individual freedom, the building was finally celebrated by Reyner Banham as 'the only internationally recognised public monument the 1970s have ever produced':

> The *Centre* reflects – the supreme moment of technological euphoria in Western society: the moment when it was genuinely believed that 'freedom' was to be got by providing ourselves with endless power-supplied facility: with servicing which would be so elaborate and so heavily duplicated that you could do anything you want, anywhere, at any time.[3]

In this sense, by assembling the nostalgic leftovers of a missed revolution, the Pompidou proved subversive through a series of understated aspects that its ambiguous appearance (and this was one of them) did not reveal at first glance. The innovative solution of tying the Centre to the *quartier*'s life by means of a huge square, or its highly iconic shape, where the impressive graphic sign of the escalator emerged from a complex entwining of structural nodes, stressed new directions in architecture, especially in its tendency to cross over into the commodity-form.

3. The return of the 'Homo Ludens'

Hyper-technological and hyper-functional—almost a magniloquent monument to human progress—the Pompidou aimed to embody the latest notion of a do-it-yourself structure after the supposed end of capitalist supremacy signalled by the student revolt.

If many critics, impressed by the imposing machine-like apparatus, mistook the building for the umpteenth futurist-derived hymn to special effects, the final purpose, far from resuscitating the *machine-a-habiter* logic, aspired to exalt the idea of indeterminacy: a building-in-progress, in which lightness and flexibility could improve the

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audience's involvement. As Renzo Piano himself claimed:

> The Pompidou's aim was to define a different relationship with culture. No longer elitist, culture was now meant to get off its pedestal and enter the flux of life. Instead of being secluded in a temple or mausoleum, it had to be spread in a new kind of public forum, in a bazaar derived from a strong interaction between art and science. This [the Pompidou] was supposed to be only the main node[4] of a series of similar cultural exchanges, which were also supposed to be disseminated all around the country. In order to accomplish such a goal, the project was aimed at combining and carrying to extremes a certain number of architectural ideals.[5]

For this reason, with regard to the 'archigram-matic' initial project (Fig. 7)[6]—an open and variable structure derived from the superimposition of round-edged modules as in a state of perennial transformation—Banham noted:

> They [Piano and Rogers] put on stage a world made of bright colours, sharp shapes, hanging devices, inflatable appliances, gigantic projecting screens and all of the old good imagery of entertainment and flexibility very well designed and represented by means of photographic collages realised by the members of the Archigram-educated *Crysalis* group, which came on purpose from Los Angeles in order to work on the project in the Paris office.[7]

In this respect, the age of the machine finally appeared capable of promoting not only the democratisation of culture, but also the idea of democratisation itself *by means of* culture.

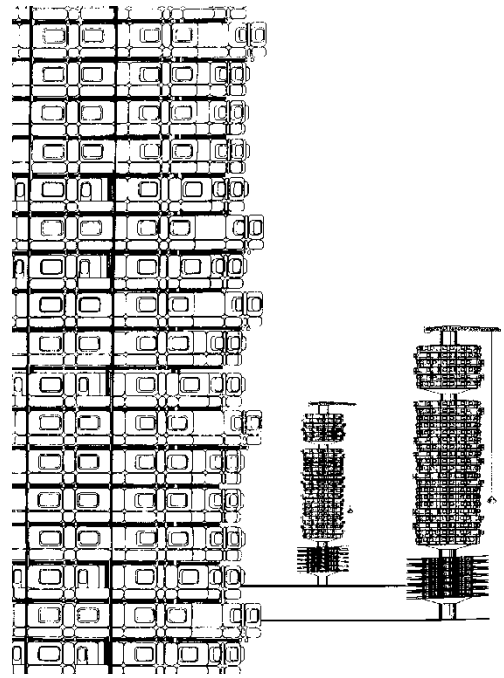

Figure 7. Peter Cook, *Plug-in City*, 1964.

Intended to open itself to the triumphant rise of the working class, the Bastille of contemporary culture, with its moving floors and panels, had been conceived as if literally turned inside-out:[8] this was not only in order to make visible, readable and immediately identifiable by the audience the main access and the distributing systems (and thus make itself more easily 'assailable'), but also to leave the internal surfaces completely clear from any kind of obstacles. So that even the psychedelic effect of the colours of the pipes on the rear

façade, which positions the structure half way between the 'yellow submarine' and an oil refinery, had been envisaged as communicating, through the specific use of a visual code, the contents of the ducts.

The structural mechanism upon which the entire building was based, freely reinterpreting Dennis Crompton's *Computer City*,[9] was thus finally found in 'a spectacular version of the trilitic element': a 48-metre overhanging reticular beam, supported by pylons, cantilevered 6 metres out from both the building's front and rear façades, and allowing the suspension of the external escalator, the main facilities and the entire distributing apparatus. This combined system of pylons and *janerettes* (the reticular beams inventor's name) was repeated for the total number of bays, permitting the suspension of 5 substantial floors, each equal to two football pitches (170 × 50 metres, 7 metres high) (Figs 8, 9).

The use of glass panels for the external surfaces made it clear what the architects were interested in:

> The fundamental concept of the building is to eliminate the traditional closed façade. By fading away, the envelope helps to realise the prime objective of the Centre, which is to disseminate culture. It becomes transparent. Thanks to the escalators suspended from the west façade, like a gangway thrown on the hull of a ship, visitors may comprehend both the building and the city. This aerial route is a very powerful invitation to discovery and initiation.[10]

Thus, the building's permeability, together with its sensoriality and multimediality (ie, its capability not only to interact with the environment, but to do so by the spreading of sounds, lights and colours)

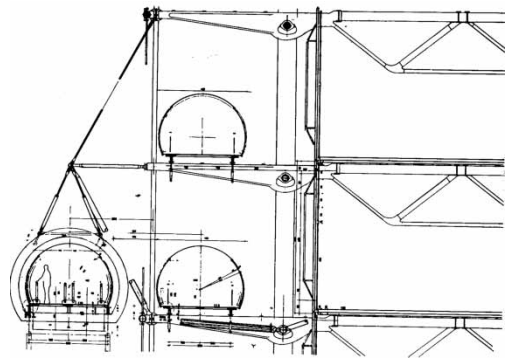

Figure 8. Pompidou Centre, transversal section.

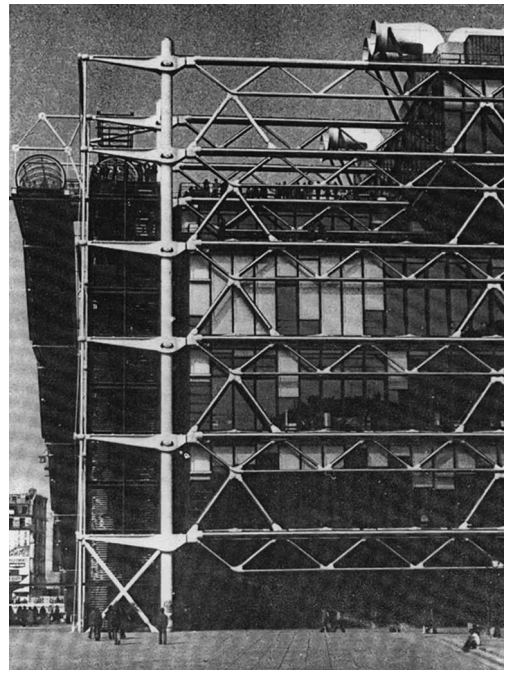

Figure 9. Pompidou Centre, side façade.

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became the essential characteristic of the Pompidou and embodied, maybe for the first time in the history of architecture, links and relationships existing in a society made of fluxes, many of which de-materialised like information.

As *Archigram* declared *a propos* of *Instant City* at the *Utopia and/or Revolution* conference held at the Polytechnic in Turin: 'Today's revolution is intended to allow self-determination through either acknowledged or shared information.'[11] In spreading pure generalised information, *Instant City* was intended to highlight the idea of democratisation as a consequence of information's direct control by the users. So that, in professing entertainment as a new medium, the importance of Game became a central issue to the ongoing revolution.

It comes as no surprise, then, that the Pompidou itself, like the projects that preceded it, signalled the necessity of a ludic structure that, by means of play, was tailored to educating the masses in self-learning.

4. Some eminent ancestors

In the McLuhanian outlook of the architect-as-intellectual (or the architect as an information technician), the (pop) megastructuralists' interest in 'mobility and mutability'[12] was soon linked—by the rediscovery of Huizinga's theories on free-time, game and entertainment by the Situationist movement—to the emerging figure of the *homo ludens* as the new social subject devoted to the cause of cultural appropriation.

It is not by accident that the first to conceive the new habitat for the *homo ludens* was the Dutch painter and architect Constant Niewenhuis, untiring activist of the Situationist movement.[13] In visiting, in December, 1956, a nomad camp together with his fellow painter (and founder-member of the movement) Pinot Gallizio, he was suddenly hit by a stroke of genius:

> That was the day I conceived the scheme for a permanent encampment for the gypsies of Alba and that project is the origin of the series of maquettes of *New Babylon*. Of a *New Babylon* where, under one roof, with the aid of moveable elements, a shared residence is built; a temporary, constantly remodelled living area; a camp for nomads on a planetary scale.[14]

The project, needless to say, took the form of a megastructure,[15]and made its appearance during a conference, published in 1964. *New Babylon*, a never-ending metropolitan happening for experiencing a subversive approach to urban life, was meant to turn upside down the dominant logic: instead of functional space, aspirations to game, freedom and activity sought to impose their rules on architecture (Figs 10, 11, 12).

Precursor by a few years of the more fortunate proposals from Archigram and Cedric Price, *New Babylon* was meant to reduce apparently incompatible concepts to the same denominator: on the one hand, as opposed to the workshops and factories the rationalists were interested in, there were the aesthetics of fairground attractions and entertainment places; on the other, was the more abstract and conceptual aesthetic of architectural flexibility, ie, the aesthetic of dematerialisation that, according to the precepts of *open work* which Umberto Eco was theorising around the same time (1962), abdicates a finished form in favour of an open structure.

However, as Prestinenza Puglisi notes, if the aesthetic of fairground attractions 'postulates a

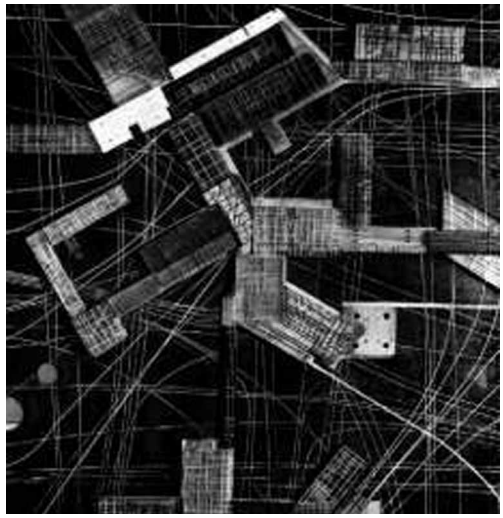

Figure 10. Constant Niewenhuis, *New Babylon*, 1963, plan.

disruptive and vital architectural intervention', forcing the planner to think of space in terms of flows (flows of movements, perceptive feelings, images), the aesthetic of dematerialisation imposes instead 'the opposite attitude of ascetics, ie, of such an open form as to annihilate itself and, as a non-form, to disappear.'[16] In this respect, *New Babylon* remained for many both a too-ambitious and a failed project.

Making the most of the experience of the *Fun Palace*, where the extreme flexibility of the structure – with its 'minimum ties along the three dimensions' (Banham) – does not require abdication from an extremely detailed and pragmatic level of planning, the Pompidou re-elaborated the Situationist experience to the point of fusing, successfully this time, immateriality and jocularity in the same structure (Fig. 13).

5. Pop and *pop*-ular

The 'planning' of the Pompidou on the *plateau Beaubourg* supplied Paris with a new monument for its collection. Strangely, because the building

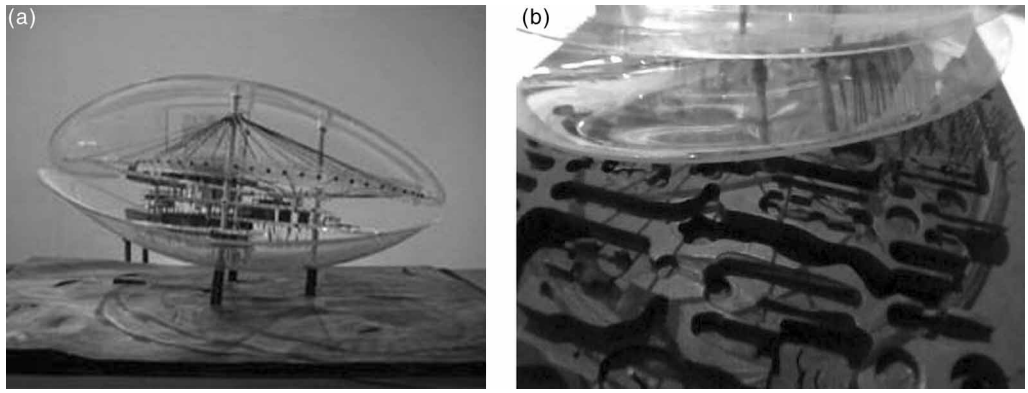

Figure 11. Constant Niewenhuis, *New Babylon*, model.

Figure 12. Constant Niewenhuis, *New Babylon*, model.

had been conceived as an autonomous symbol of anti-monumentalism.

At a point where the spectacularisation of culture matched the spectacularisation of politics, the Centre's allure could be partly attributed to a series of contradictions innate in its hybrid functionalism, amongst which was the elimination of the mega-screen on the front façade that, present in the 1971 contest-winning project, was supposed to display, by means of electronic messages, either events at the centre or current cultural and political developments.

The death of President Pompidou and the consequent, drastic reduction of the subsidies available—which also made impossible realisation of the mobile floors—appeared to be the major cause for the disappearance of one of the most innovative and interesting of the project's features. In truth, the uncertainty of the ruling class towards the uncontrollable use of a building open to the consumers' manipulation, made the screen immediately appear as a dangerous tool for radical propaganda, and it was eliminated.

Denuded of a screen that was meant to conceal more or less one quarter of the main façade, the project, broadly revisited thanks to the contribution of Peter Rice and Ove Arup & Partners[17]—by freely reinterpreting Dennis Crompton's *Computer City* (Fig. 14), of which it is reminiscent due to the dense network of connecting rods of bracing—finally became nearer to the idea of the factory of information. Above all, the disappearance of the screen pushed the planners to extend the use of glass-curtains all over the external surfaces, increasing the effect of transparency and accessibility.

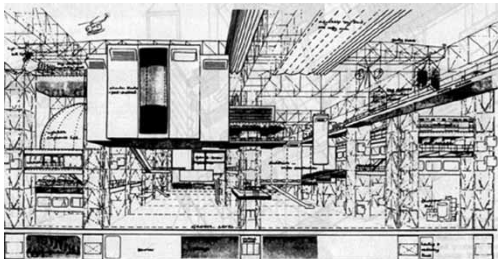

Figure 13. Cedric Price, *Fun Palace*, 1961.

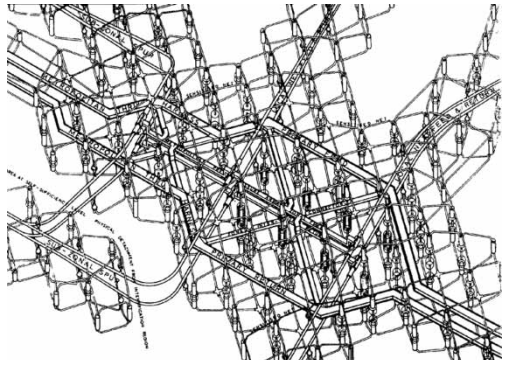

Figure 14. Dennis Crompton, *Computer City*, 1964.

However, because of the high number of joints necessary to the maintenance of the structure between the knots of the connecting rods and the joints beam-pillar, Marinelli could not help drastically defining the system as 'an n-times repeated joint equal to itself' (Fig. 15):

> In this grid the key point is represented by the graphicised joint that, in never deriving from the tectonic value of the structure, but from the static one, mechanically repeats itself without assuming a final shape. And this lack of a final shape in the Pompidou is unbearable. And not in the sense of a stylistic lack, as it is already out of any architectural category; because for this very reason, its being 'out of' also means out of any language. Node by node, level by level, it unfolds itself as if the only possible message to spread would be the impossibility for architecture to be.[18]

Incidentally, this 'being out of' was also part of the fascination the Pompidou was able to exert.

Treated as a pre-assembled ready-made,[19] the building's technological self-referring quality was exacerbated not only by the unintended Dadaist trick to appear—like Duchamp's *Bottle-rack*—completely out-of-context (the building was set in Paris's historical centre: Fig. 16), but also by the application of the pop principle of 'happening', which made of it a sci-fi, out-of-scale home appliance. As a '"strange object" capable of [...] arousing a sense of stupefaction [...] [which] fails in being supported by more articulated feelings', it was nevertheless supposed to break 'the traditional barriers existing between culture and people'.[20]

So that, in writing that 'although [t]he large square in front of the building [and] the open ground floor are amazing since they illustrate the confluence of two codes—that of function's flexibility and that of prestige', Peter Cook also stressed the dichotomy at the very heart of the structure's conceptual presuppositions: '[o]ne of the problems in the *Pompidou* is that the building

Figure 15. Pompidou Centre, wind-frame node.

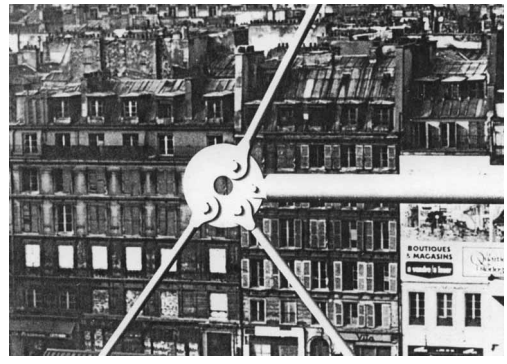

Figure 16. Plateau Beaubourg, aerial view.

tries to be cool in a certain way, but it is necessarily heroic.'[21]

The winner of the *Plateau Beaubourg* competition, the only one to envisage a two-storey building instead of the one-storey platform expressly required by the rules, was intended to leave free half of the area of the so-called plateau. Johnson, although not yet entirely convinced by the project's proposal—which was in effect modified until it reached a more regular and compact front façade—was nevertheless positively impressed by the building's volume and the idea of a plaza in front of it. So that, from the very beginning, he identified the project as the successful proposal.

The idea of the plaza, with its tilted plane that directly entered the pulsating heart of the structure—a solution later adopted for the new Tate in London—was advanced: doubling the height of the building, which was supposed to occupy the whole plateau, allowed, first, Paris's historical centre to be equipped with a new area for spontaneous happenings and events; secondly, the building was to be endowed with a monumentality that would have been denied by the existing perspectival vision, crushed as it would have been by the adjacent streets; finally, the external square was visually projected into the mediatheque's hall, creating an internal-external continuum for never-ending, osmotic flows (Fig. 17).

Such a monumentality, or 'heroism', as Cook defined it, was however part of a more complicated and sophisticated 'trick' of perception that somehow its own inventors did not expect.

Treated as 'a static and frozen body',[22] the Pompidou stormed onto the urban scene overloaded by experiences and design techniques that approached, for the cold effect of visual trance that its vision produced, the results achieved by Andy Warhol in his successful attempts at de-humanising figurative art. The absolute lack of any element that might betray craftsmanship; the insistent repetition of identical joints over the entire façade, which provided the Centre with a flat and neutral background on which, as a pure graphic sign, the escalator—assuming the dimension of a self-advertising logo—rides (Fig. 18); the perceptive hesitation between the tri-dimensional volume of the building and the bi-dimensionality of its façade, which could not be overlooked from anywhere in the square; the lack of any stylistic reference that places it 'outside any language—a diffused de-personalisation that stresses more the

Figure 17. Pompidou Centre, ground floor, main hall.

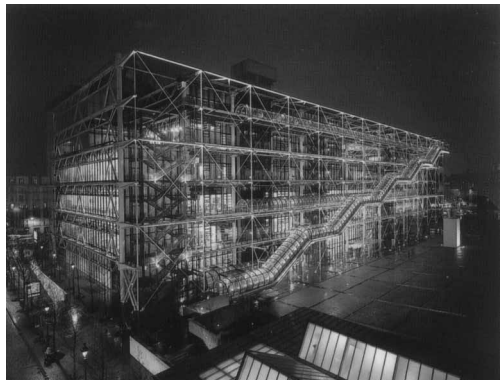

Figure 18. Pompidou Centre, night view: front façade and escalator.

making process than the conceptual design synthesis' (Marinelli)—perhaps made of the Pompidou the first example of architecture in which the mighty presence of the building, like the *Campbell's Soup Can* by Warhol, does not transmit any other message but that—elusive—of its own immanence.

In subsuming the characteristics of a standardised object, exactly like the endless series of products available on the market, the Pompidou also inaugurated a sour polemic on the meaning that the whole cultural operation was soon to signify.

The ideological representation of display and consumption, a perceptual trance of which the hi-tech stylisation was also a part, was in effect able to create a stylised plus-value between the building's supposed informality and its depthless monumentality. The building's ability not only to impose itself as a ready-made object for immediate consumption, but also as a structure whose symbolic value was successfully expressed by the arrogant graphic sign of the escalator; or rather, the impossibility of clarifying once and for all the building's design status, which fearfully oscillates between the monumentality of its form and the informality of its content (masses rather than art), made it the fulcrum of a diffused populism.

For this reason, the immensely fascinating power of the Pompidou Centre rested on this simple basis: as a fetish, as a mythology, as a metaphor and, eventually, as a distorted abstraction of social demand—in other words, as a *Simulacrum*—the Pompidou, and every concept it symbolised ('freedom', 'entertainment', 'culture', etc.), worked as a semantic sublimation for an apparent urban event, almost in the way that the Situationists had conceived it.

As Barthes points out in *Mythologies*: 'with *signification* [myth] we have, of course, encountered an extremely powerful, because covert, producer of meaning at a level where an impression of "God-given" or "natural" prevails, largely because we are not normally able to perceive the process by which it has been manufactured.'[23]And this is precisely the impact that the 'application' to the building of the 'high-tech effect' produced. Conceived in order to represent the unbelievable opportunities offered by standardisation in architecture (among others, flexibility and low cost), its supposed prefabricated parts, moulded one by one in special laboratories, exhausted the available budget.[24] And since nothing multiplies reality better than its own representation, this effect resulted in its being all the more powerful because it derived from a *mise-en-scene*.

In turning the unrealisable illusion of a self-learning mediatic prothesis into the more affordable

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illusion of a communicational-economy based society, the Pompiodu also realised the intangible dream of a place where, by means of a connected isolation, an 'instantaneous reversal of reality'[25] was to be accomplished. The impossibility of distinguishing any longer the use-value of the Pompidou from its exchange-value (its symbolic meaning) thus formed the basis for the building to enter the dimension in which the 'physiological' need for the Pompidou-as-a-product was largely exceeded by its psychological aspects.

Built soon after a period of great faith in technology and its utopian use, the democratisation of free-time—by means of concepts like flexibility, low-cost, nomadism and mass mobility—matched that of architecture as a place for never-ending cultural performances. No matter whether the building finally became a technological counterfeit (no one of its components was truly standardised): as a hyper-objectual gift, its novelty lay not only in its 'high-tech effect'—which ideologically increased the idea of a super-flexible structure for the manipulation of the masses—but in the fact that such a gift was offered unwrapped. What became de-materialised in the building's 'body', in the end, was therefore not only its structural shell, but the very same concepts from which it was born.

6. The transparency of Game

Linked to the idea of jazz improvisation—'perfect in all its parts, but open and flexible at the same time' (Richard Rogers)—the building's main façade represented a manifesto for a new era.

As for jazz musicians, 'recorded jazz is as stale as the newspaper of the day before',[26] so for Richard Rogers the building implied a new paradigm of informality in architecture; a kind of informality that, exactly like the fragmented composing of jazz music—organised around a mosaic structure in which execution and composition merge—could represent a constant search for discontinuity, participation and spontaneity. He stated:

> It is my belief that exciting things happen when a variety of overlapping activities designed for all people [. . .] meet in a flexible environment, opening up the possibility of interaction outside the confines of institutional limits. When this takes place, deprived areas become dynamic places for those who live, work and visit; places where all can participate, rather than less or more beautiful ghettos.

An 'open work' like the Pompidou was therefore aimed at providing a place where a flight from reality (work, production and class division)—by means of sociability and creativity—was possible. 'Creativity'—Constant Niewenhuis wrote in the introduction to *New Babylon*—'is the realisation of freedom.'[27] And this simple but effective principle, which Constant Niewenhuis derived from Johan Huizinga's book *Ludic Society: a Study of the Element of Play in Culture* (first published in 1938), was incorporated in the Pompidou on an involuntary ideological basis.

Therefore, if the notion of play was subsumed by the technological apparatus of the building ('technology cannot be an end in itself, but must aim at solving long term social and ecological problems')[28] immateriality also was expressed through the evanescence of a structure in which the traditional problems of architectural design were

overturned (if not even denied) by the total exposure of plant on the building's exoskeleton. The choice to show pipes, ie, to reveal the machine operating, drove Zevi in fact to compare the Pompidou to one of Calvino's *Invisible Cities*—'it does not have walls, nor ceilings, nor floors: nothing that makes it look like a city except the piping [. . .]' (Fig. 19). In this respect, the Pompidou ended up being more 'invisible' since its building work was replaced by an 'electronic-impulse nervous system that gains the environmental changes and records individual needs.' (Rogers).

Both opaque and transparent, the building's immateriality changes according to the differing light-sources—either natural or artificial—with which the structure is invested. In the morning, the thin but dense network of principal and secondary beams on the front façade, illuminated by the external natural light, lets the opaque building's volume disappear in a chiaroscuro of lights and shades (so that what really emerges from the entire structure is this metallic bi-dimensional layer that evaporates, in the upper band, against the sky). At night, by means of the glass coating, the artificial light emitted by the inside lets this same volume dissolve itself like an organic body exposed to X-rays (Fig. 20).

A magic lantern, a transparent casket that exhibits its more precious content on the outside: an escalator that, in diagonally cutting the façade in an ideally never-ending ascension, is in truth optically as 'castrated' at its extremes as an ancient technological fragment.

As if suspended in nothingness, this 'snake of iron and glass'[29] (exactly as Antonio da Sant'Elia wished the vertical connections of futurist architecture to be), is an enigmatic silhouette overloaded by meanings: the true content of the Pompidou is, just as the whole 'thinking' apparatus of the building, hung on its outside. Obsolete as a technological heritage—a reminiscent leftover from a lost civilisation—this escalator is the true masterpiece of the Pompidou-museum. Out of the sacred reliquary of art, where it was supposed to be, the escalator represents both the symbol and the symptom of the de-sacralisation of art accomplished by the Pompidou and the cultural operation it was intended to put in motion. No longer secluded in the sacred enclosure of silence and isolation, art—exactly like this escalator—is 'out', visible and enjoyable. And this

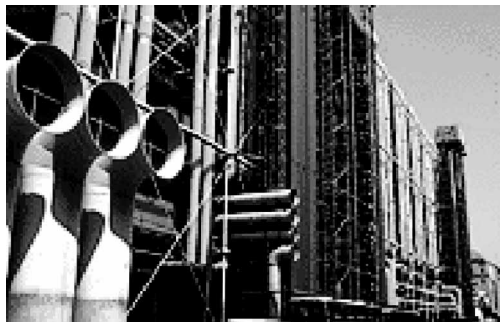

Figure 19. Pompidou Centre, rear façade.

Figure 20. Pompidou Centre, night view.

Figure 21. Pompidou Centre, the escalator.

Figure 22. Pompidou Centre, perspective.

operation of the cultural de-legitimising of something that, for centuries, has been supposed to hold its value by natural law is exactly the reason why, by inverting the principle, the Pompidou gained its own legitimacy.

By turning architecture into an irreplaceable medium for the uncontrollable ascent of culture as a market product, the Pompidou also inaugurated a period of pompous rebirth for exhibiting spaces. In this case, the weakening of the utopian megastructural mainstream, a decade before the advent of postmodernism, is to be found in the Pompidou with its capability to turn and amplify the late 1950s concept of 'mass utopia' into the late 1960s 'individualist utopia'.

Destined to survive longer, the latter also shaped the Pompidou Centre's ambition to stress the shift from the 'dream of a never-ending urban continuum' (mass utopia) to that of a discrete space where a 'direct exchange among individuals' could take place (individualist utopia).The conceptualisation of an either visible or invisible network for global communication thus informed the conceptualisation of communicational, technologic and cybernetic factors as innocent ingredients for the establishment of a self-managing community based on individuals' willingness and personal communication skills.

Interestingly, as McLuhan might have put it, *the escalator was the message* (Figs 21, 22).

Notes

Francesco Proto is the author of MASS. IDENTITY. ARCHITECTURE: Architecture Writings of Jean Baudrillard (forthcoming 2nd revised edition 2006).

1. Gianfranco Franchini, the third member, left the group soon after completion of the competition's first stages.
2. Even Leonardo Benevolo gave the building only a brief note in the *History of Modern Architecture.*
3. R. Banham (1976), p. 272 (It. ed.).
4. In this context, note the recent competition for the de-centralisation of the Pompidou to Mertz (France) won by Shigeru Ban.
5. R. Piano, in P. Buchanan (1993), p.49.
6. The original proposal had much in common with *Instant City* (with its mega-terminals for the distant-audience's

involvement) and *Plug-in City* (with its capsules hanging from a load-bearing framework), both by Peter Cook.

7. R. Banham, (1976), p. 238 (It. ed.).
8. To this end, Banham's *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment* (1969), a volume on the aesthetic values inherent in the exhibition of a building's technical equipment, exercised its influence on an entire generation of designers. By producing a detailed history of building's heating and ventilation systems from the Industrial Revolution onwards, he partly continued Giedion's analysis in *Mechanisation takes Command*, the Independent Group's cult book.
9. Here, different kinds of information on several levels—and relevant to a number of activities—are supposed to be engaged simultaneously.
10. R. Piano, R. Rogers, *Le Bulletin* (January, 1977), quoted in R. Banham (1977).
11. B. Orlandoni, G. Vallino (1977), p. 102.
12. See also Yona Friedman's theoretic system, published in *L'Architecture mobile* in 1958, in which he rejected the idea of a static city, influenced by attendance at CIAM X in Dubrovnik, 1956 (Grove Dictionary of Art).
13. The Situationists, opposed to the age of consumption, averse to any form of homologation and in favour of a freed society in which to accomplish a work-of-art-like life, used to profess themselves against functional urbanism. The *Urbanisme Unitaire*, proposed by the movement, was supposed to provide 'a suitable environment' where the *homo ludens* could live.
14. Constant Niewenhuis, *New Babylon*, 1974.
15. Niewenhuis spent about twenty years of his life working on *New Babylon*. During this period, he produced a large amount of drawings and models, sometimes very different one from the other.
16. L. Prestinenza Puglisi (1998), p. 66.
17. The engineering office, which had also taken part in the competition, was subsequently engaged by Piano and Rogers to verify the feasibility of the project. Its contribution proved on all counts fundamental, as was Rice, who, having already participated in the construction of the Sydney Opera House, provided the necessary strategic competence without which the Pompidou could not have been realised. Up to his death (1992), Rice participated in Piano's most important workshops, while Arup continued his collaboration with Rogers.
18. G. Marinelli (1978), p. 20.
19. 'Technique, flexibility, functionality appear to be at the very heart of the design strategy. All in all, [what the spectator gets is] a feeling of indifference, always on the verge of skimming a collective psychological mood (more in touch with the English attitude than the French) emphasised by a diffused de-personalisation that stresses more the making process than the conceptual design synthesis.' (G. Marinelli, *op. cit.*, pp. 201–1).
20. *Ibid.*
21. Peter Cook, in G. Marinelli, *op. cit.*, p. 89.
22. 'It is possible to trace [. . .] in [the building's] irresolution between bi-dimensionality and tri-dimensionality—even if expressed by means of remarkable, sometimes refined design standards and despite the considerable use of up-to-date technological appliances—the key that condemns the *Pompidou* as a static and frozen body.' (Marinelli. *op. cit.*, p. 20).
23. R. Barthes, *Myth Today*, in T. Hawkes (1977), p. 133.
24. Even the supposed flexibility of the building was finally reduced by the last renovation which definitively blocked its moving walls.
25. P. V. Aureli (2003), p. 3.
26. L. Prestinenza Puglisi, *op. cit.*, p. 7.
27. 'The liberation of Man's ludic potential is directly linked to his liberation as a social being.' (Constant Niewenhuis, *New Babylon, op. cit.*, p. 1).
28. B. Lacy (1991), p. 190.

29. Antonio da Sant'Elia (*Manifesto for a Futurist Architecture*, 1914), in, P. Goessel, G. Leuthauser (1997), p. 319: 'The house of the future must be like a gigantic machine. The lift is not supposed to hide itself in the stairwell like a taenia; the stairs, now superfluous, have to disappear and the lifts must emerge like a snake of iron and glass [. . .] The value of futurist architecture depends upon the original use of either raw or uncovered lively coloured material.' (It. ed.)

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