

Cedric Price

An Architecture of the Performance

Recently there has been renewed interest in examining the potential of the diagram as an analytical device and as indicator of the emergence of a new epistemological condition for architecture. Although the descriptions of how diagrams function vary, nearly all interpretations agree that one of its most productive attributes is its capacity to organize and suspend diverse kinds of information within a single graphic or set of graphic configurations. Given this performative characteristic, as well as the understanding that diagrams are provisional articulations of information, some argue that diagrams offer a logical and abstract means for representing, thinking about and explaining the complex dynamic and information dense conditions we confront. From this point of view, diagrams can act not only as a means of organization, but also as conceptual tools that approximate our experience of the real.

An important corollary of the abstracting and organizing functions of the diagram is its capacity to make visible the conceptual aspects of a problem or condition. Yet while diagrams

help us to visualize disparate kinds of information, the graphic equivalent is understood to be temporal in nature—susceptible to change over time—and thus by definition evades, except in the most reductive of instances, direct translation into the finality of form. This attribute is viewed as a solution to a tired architectural dilemma: that of the relation of form to content or meaning. The diagram then, in its various manifestations, is thought to have the capacity to extricate architecture from the two specters that have haunted modernism: that of functionally determined formalism and its antithesis, a conceptually determined formalism. The currency of the diagram for some architects rests largely on these two attributes; as a visualization and abstract means of organization which resists the fixity of final form.

The current critical appreciation of the diagram is not so different from the favor it enjoyed some forty years ago, when analytical methods and ideas borrowed from general systems theory

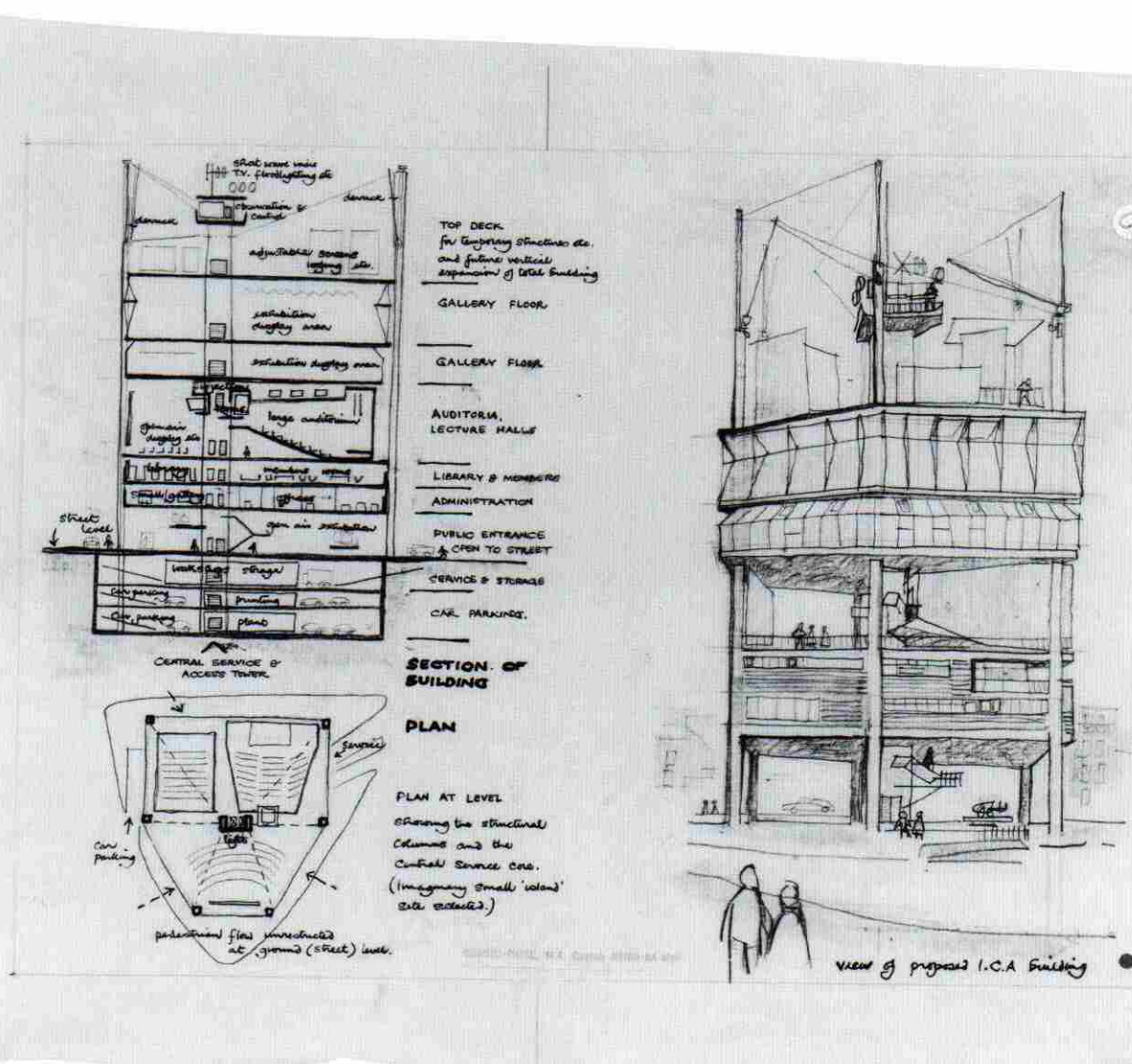
Mary Lou Lobsinger

were eagerly taken up as a means for both rationalizing and making more inclusive the process of architectural problem solving. In the early 60's, architects with a penchant for technology, such as Cedric Price, turned to systems theory to find an approach to thinking about architecture that emulated the performative potential of the new technologies. Systems theory offered an interdisciplinary and purportedly scientific method developed to deal with multi-dimensional problems and unpredictable circumstances. Perhaps most important, systems theory was deemed to produce generative results, that is, to allow for and support the emergence of second-order effects. For Price, systems theory and diagrams provided an open, generative design process that mediated between the unorganized complexity of informational society and the necessities of architecture. With Price, however, the built form itself became a diagram.¹

below: Cedric Price, perspective, section and plan with notes for for new headquarters for the Institute of Contemporary Art, South Kensington, London, 1963, graphite, pen and black ink, and black and white pencil on mylar, 39 x 47,7 cm, Collection Centre Canadien d'Architecture/Canadian Centre of Architecture, Montréal

The new social realities of mass communication for Price, were as transient as the means of communication themselves and thus an architecture that might adequately service and ultimately encourage such social formations could not rely on visual imagery or an ethos based in materiality. To say that Price's work lacks strong visual impact is an understatement; but Price's idea of architectural communication has little to do with mimetic function; it is as ephemeral as the act of communicating. Price was firmly against the notion of the architect or planner as the provider of 'visually recognizable symbols of identity, place and activity,' and for him the effects produced by architecture had nothing to do with any aesthetic sensibility.² Architectural effects evolved in time and were the outcome of use, weather,

left page: Cedric Price, section of the Fun Palace, 1961-1965, pen and black ink, graphite and ziptone on tracing vellum, 34,4 x 74,8 cm



and other largely uncontrollable conditions. The exemplars of Price's diagrammatic work are the Fun Palace and the Potteries Thinkbelt.

Price's first sketch for Fun Palace (1961) is more diagram than the expression of a form to be built. The drawing minimally articulates his architectural intentions, and program is limited to a few hand-scrawled notations—observation deck, long distance screens, an inflatable conference hall and an area designated for eating and drinking, which is identical to one assigned for exhibitions. A floating volume labeled 'circular theater-part enclosed' is the most substantial clue to programmatic content. Of the more than four hundred drawings consisting of time schedules, movement diagrams, mechanical drawings, details and perspectives, this conceptual sketch still accurately captures the essence of the scheme. It is more locational than expressive of spatial qualities, formal characteristics or structural necessities; but then, there really isn't much to describe in terms of the architectonic qualities or materiality of Fun Palace since, as Price laconically stated, "It's a kit of parts, not a building," adding that he doubted whether it would ever look the same twice.³

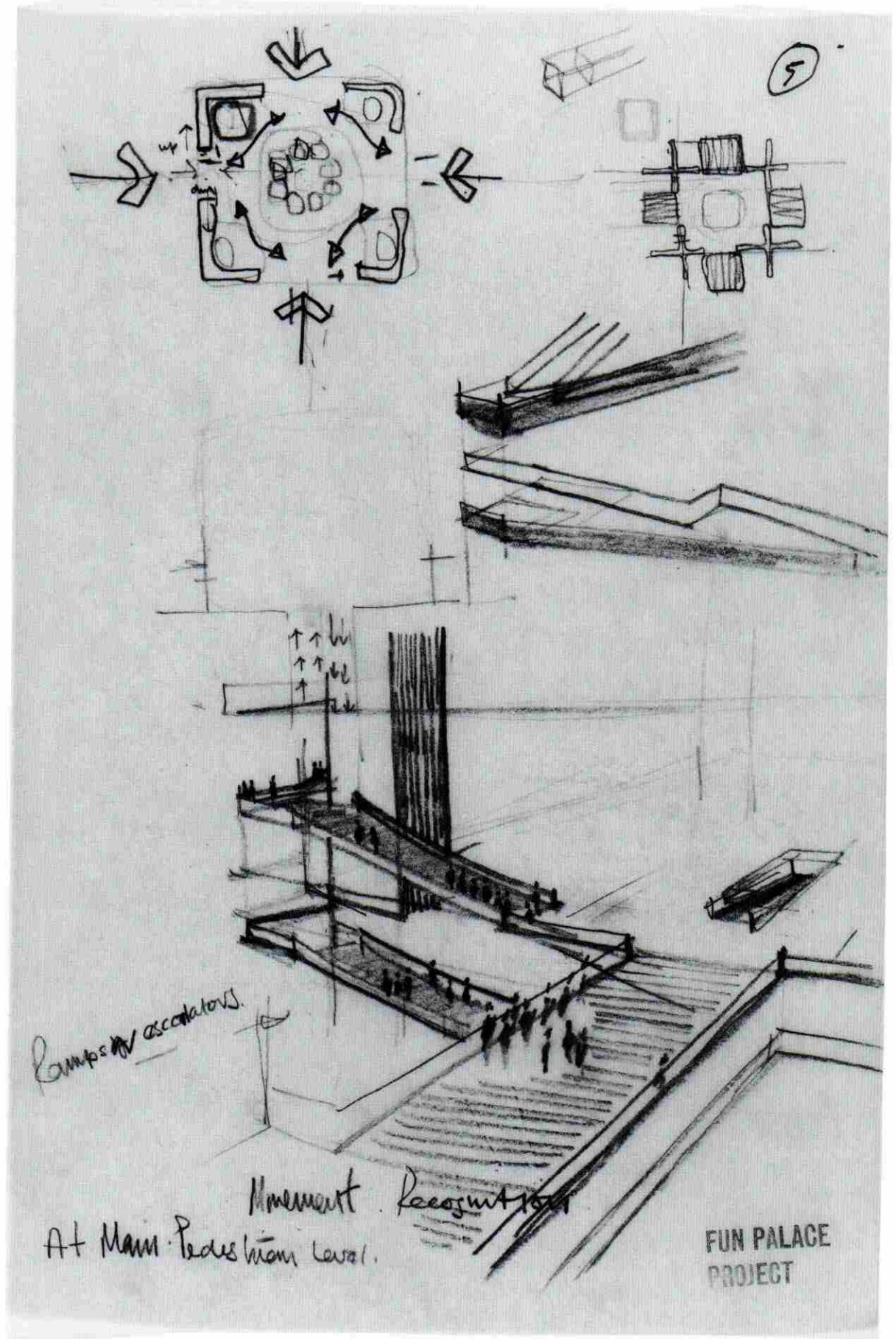
The Fun Palace is a proposal for a temporary, multi-programmed twenty-four-hour entertainment center that marries communications technologies and standard building components to produce a machine capable of adapting to the users needs and desires. A grid of servicing towers supports open trusses with gantries for maneuvering interchangeable parts—from information monitors to prefab units—into position. Circulation consists of catwalks, escalators or travelators. It seems that here the conventional determination of built form as enclosure or as legible envelope for functional requirements is supplanted by an idea of environmental control where, for example, adjustable sky-blinds perform the role of roofing and the task of spatial division is assigned to mutable barriers described as movable screens, warm air screens, optical barriers and static vapor zones.⁴ Programmatic elements with specific functional requirements, such as kitchens, are housed in standardized enclosed units sited on temporary, mechanically-serviced deck panels.⁵ The structure is serviced by a three-dimensional grid and an "ariable net of packaged conditioning equipment" distributed across a gigantic plinth housing a sewage purification plant and other support systems.⁶ This description patently challenges the idea of architecture as shelter, as enclosure or as a signifier of social values. Here the concept of architecture as conveyor of symbolic expression has been forfeited for a fully automated and above all transient machine. The critic Reyner Banham approvingly compared it to a "gigantic erector set".⁷

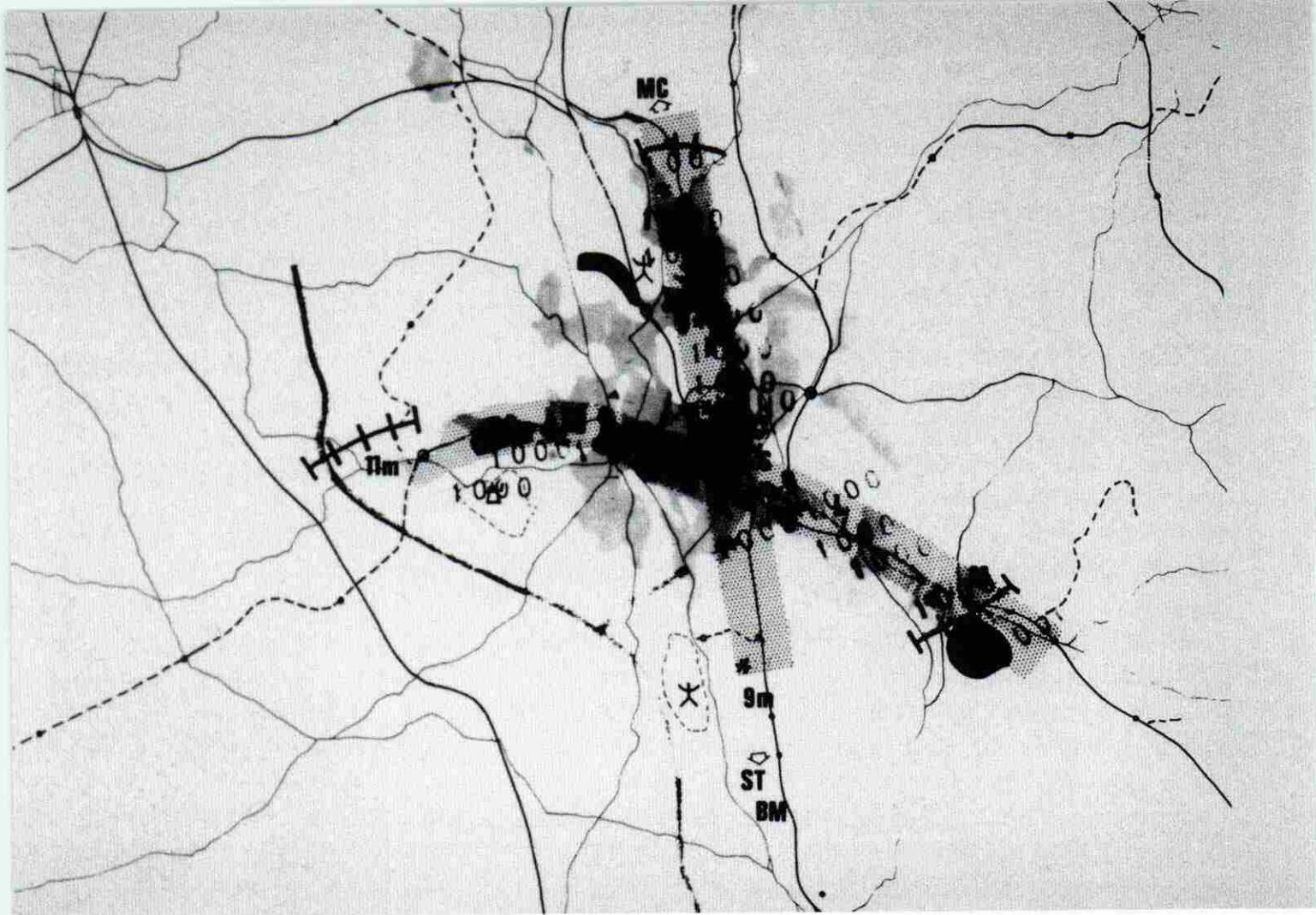
In a conventional architectural sense, Fun Palace had no intrinsic meaning or permanent form. It was merely an abstract machine which, when activated by users, was capable of producing and processing information.⁸ In this way it may be considered performative, for only at the moment of transaction between user and machine would meaning or content be expressed, and would expression be identical with the act of performance. Further, in the act of performing the machine, the visuality and spatiality of architecture would be annulled for the ephemerality of pure, unrepeatable communication. At the most literal level, activities such as the maneuvering of building components or group determination of program involve a basic form of social interaction; but it was also imagined that the Fun Palace would be equipped with the latest in communications technology: teaching machines, televisions and computers. These gadgets promised to thrust the participant-occupant beyond mundane reality into a virtual realm of communication.

Although the Fun Palace was never realized, Price achieved enough notoriety with this and other projects such as the Potteries Thinkbelt to secure a seminal role within debates about architecture and technology.⁹ For technological visionaries such as Archigram, Price was the man to watch. For those who thought architecture had a visually communicative role inextricably bound to optical appropriation, his work was anathema to everything architecture might stand for.¹⁰ However, to ask Price what meaning looked like was to pursue the wrong line of inquiry. When confronted with the new technologies—both mechanical and cybernetic—and new modes of scientific analysis—such as systems design—conventional notions of architecture were rendered moot.¹¹ For Price, there could be no premium on what might be considered meaningful experience, how it might be achieved or represented in advance of use. In fact, architects were not in the business of providing meaning; according to Price, they should solve problems and extend the possibilities of choice and delight.¹² Collective meaning, if the word can be used in this context, was to be deciphered from within a dynamically interactive field of communication. To this end the Fun Palace was to be an environment that would both anticipate and accommodate change.¹³ It was envisioned as a giant learning machine with the capacity to enable humans to adapt physically and mentally to the intangible experiences and accelerated pace of technological culture.¹⁴ In essence, the Fun Palace as an architectural machine designed for time, was an architecture of probabilities in present time.

In the Potteries Thinkbelt Project (1964) Price continues the ideas for a time-based, self-regulating mobile architecture and

below: Cedric Price, sketch plans and interior perspective sketches for the Fun Palace, 1961–1965, graphite with coloured pencil on tracing vellum, 38,2 x 25,2 cm, Collection Centre Canadien d'Architecture/Canadian Centre of Architecture, Montréal



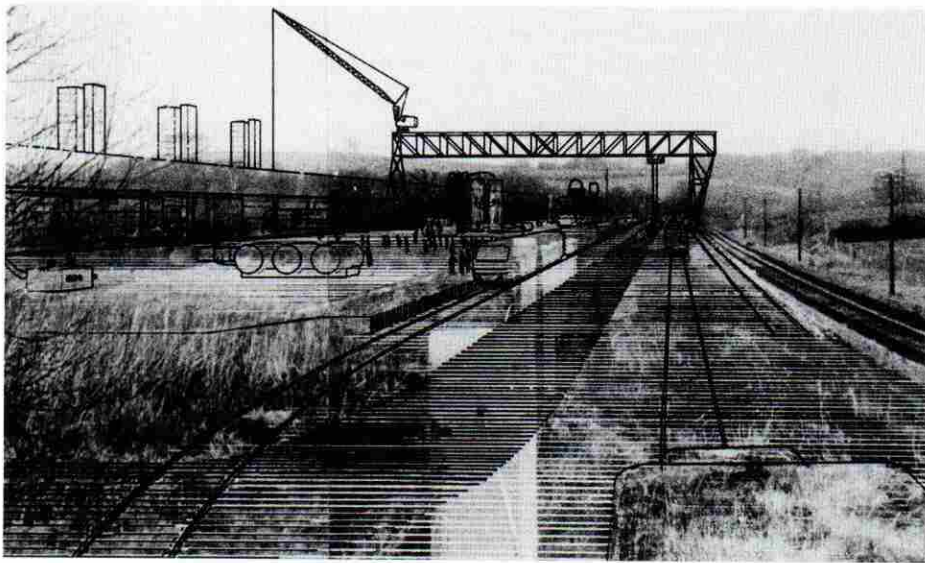


applies them to a large-scale planning experiment for the economically depressed region of North Staffordshire. Conceived at the scale of national planning Potteries Thinkbelt involved the reuse of a redundant rail network in the former pottery producing region as the infrastructure for a new anti-institution for higher education in the sciences and technology. In contrast to the statically configured, enclave-like nature of the traditional university, the educational component of Potteries Thinkbelt is an active part of an open regional system. This approach is motivated by the idea that education should be a 'continuous human servicing service' and learning, a life-long endeavor where student activities are integral to community life as a whole.¹⁵ In the Potteries project both the process of learning and the infrastructural system are conceived as part of an evolving social, economic and physical context. Price referred to the project as a socio-economic instrument, a controlled yet flexible experiment intended to catalyze and accommodate change at all levels of interaction.

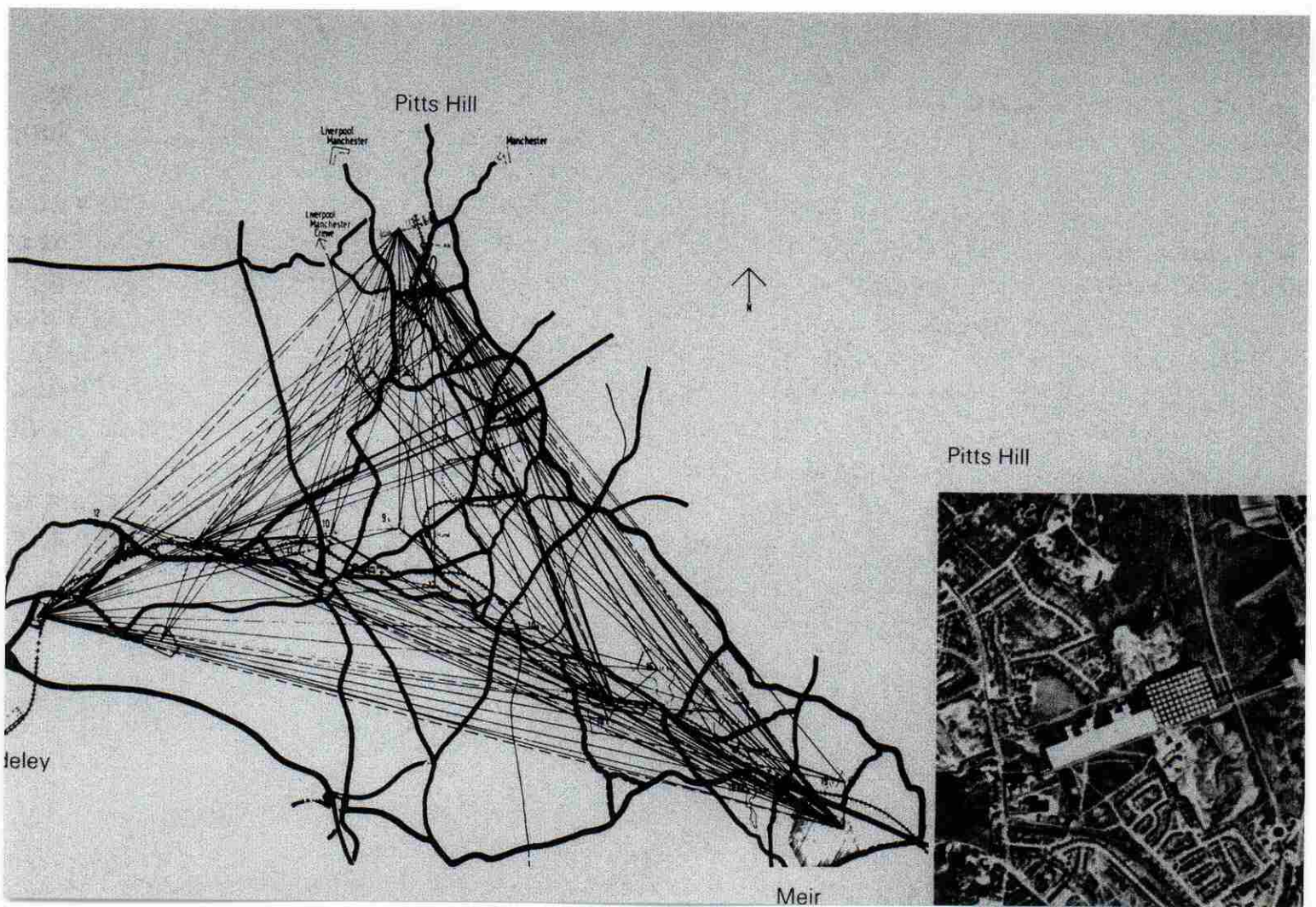
Potteries Thinkbelt is much more than a university on rails where old rail-cars serve as mobile classrooms that travel between three transfer points within the network. Rather, the project was intended to propel social and economic change. The transfer points would be potent sites for the growth of new com-

merce, industry and settlement. The diagrammatic system that connects the nodes was itself open to change and facilitated total mobility and the intermixing of the university population with existing industries, communities and the surrounding area. As with Fun Palace, the conceptual underpinnings of the Potteries Thinkbelt support Price's strong belief that negotiated social interactions, economic transformations and the self-regulation of an open system could lead to an architecture that serviced the evolving and unpredictable conditions arising from visible and invisible new technologies.

In the Potteries project, the reuse of outdated channels of physical mobility—the network of the industrial revolution—is a convenience that facilitates the growth of a new mobility at the dawn of the age of information. Likewise, Fun Palace as a transient architectural machine for learning was also intended to nurture mental mobility and social change. This shared conceptual aspect is reinforced through a diagrammatic approach which informs both architectural reasoning and potential physical results. The diagram as a provisional articulation of intentions yet to be fulfilled is the appropriate device where the concern for servicing informational flows and engendering social interaction is more important than providing visual content and physical context. In Potteries, as with Fun Palace, neither content



Cedric Price, Potteries Thinkbelt, 1964, Montage
(left), initial scheme (left page), Road System
(below)



nor form are stable; 'no one is straight-jacketed into a fixed community'.¹⁶ The notion that architecture and planning are mechanisms for change overrides the role of architect as a 'purveyor' of social values through 'visual dexterity'.¹⁷ Alternatively, Price proposes an expendable and transient architecture, a diagrammatic architecture able to adapt to the complexities and emerging socialities made possible by new technologies.

By the late 1960s general systems theory fell by the wayside as advances in artificial intelligence and computing promised faster and more accurate means for processing disparate kinds of information. Around the same time, the application of systems theory and diagramming to architecture and planning fell into disrepute; the bubble diagram had been transferred once too often directly into architectural form. Price was charged with treating humans as just another variable in a function-driven, problem-solving system and thus, of contributing to the dehumanizing of architecture. His notion of architecture as a servicing mechanism which supports life conditioning was subject to a critique that compared his architecture to a coffee vending machine.¹⁸ For some, the interdisciplinarity of the systems method and its privileging of a pseudo-scientific approach an-

nounced the beginning of the end of architecture. These charges appeared at a moment when architects, concerned with reasserting disciplinary boundaries, sought to define meaning in architecture through the legibility of collectively held symbols. Price's architecture dispenses with the visual and invites us to reconsider the experience of time and social interaction in the present. Time is not the accumulation of historical process, but for Price, it is the fourth dimension and not reducible to a visual lexicon. For Price, the social produces the architectural in time and the new social forms of time and space are not comparable to what our perceptions have experienced to date.¹⁹

Mary Lou Lobsinger is a PhD. Candidate in Architectural History and Theory at Harvard University. She writes on Post-W.W. II architecture and is completing a dissertation, „Antinomies of Realism and the Utopia della Realtà. Italian Architecture and Urbanism. 1956–1968“. She is currently teaching at the University of Toronto.

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