Domestic futures: '*The Archigram Effect*'
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"Why don't rabbits burrow rectangular burrows? Why didn't early man make rectangular caves? Supposition: Architect... Client wanting single-storey house in the landscape." Peter Cooke

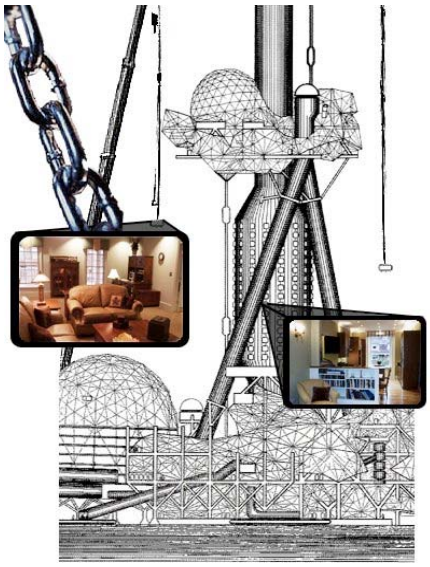
Peter Cooke was one of the founding members of the radical, futurist, anti-heroic group Archigram, formed in 1961 by a group of young architects including Warren Chalk, Dennis Crompton, David Greene, Ron Herron and Michael Webb. Their work, based mostly on such 'suppositions', drew inspiration from technology in order to create a new reality that was solely expressed through hypothetical projects. Archigram dominated the architectural avant garde in the 1960s and early 1970s with its playful, pop-inspired visions of a technocratic future after its formation. Archigram's founders had a belief that the potent combination of social change and technological advance would foster a more humane architecture equipped to embrace the complexities and opportunities of contemporary life.

I am interested in using the Archigram story as a starting point for the workshop because their radical and futuristic thinking, optimistic view of technology combined with their style of communication through sketching, may prove inspiring for us to construct thought provoking sketches of our domestic future in the workshop.

I would like to reference the Archigram story in two ways. Firstly, I want to look at their radical visualisation of fantastical architectural worlds, pushing the boundaries of where technology can go, in the context of the domestic space, the home interior. It was in 1964 that Ron Herron conceived the idea of a 'walking city' – a city constituted by intelligent buildings or robots that are in the form of giant, self contained living pods that could roam the cities. The pods were independent, yet parasitic as they could 'plug in' to way stations to exchange occupants or replenish resources. The citizen is therefore a serviced nomad not totally dissimilar from today's executive cars. The context was perceived as a future ruined world in the aftermath of a nuclear war. Ofcourse this idea has by far been over stretched in the imagination of science fiction writers and films.

'Walking City' drawing by Archigram, (original illustration)

Their other famous project 'plug-in city' by Peter Cook, which was conceived as a megastructure of infrastructure connects towering silos of moveable units - later dubbed "capsules" - so that shops can relocate with changes in business and a family can move on a whim, all connected to a grid providing each capsule with its necessary functions - power, water, and means of communication. On a human scale, the plug-in city represents possibilities and a return of civilized culture to a nomadic population, with the abilities and desires to move in short periods of time. Archigram believed that concept of the 'Plug-In City' would help to turn all our virtual exchange into something tangible - the efficient and easy exchange of physical objects and space, and the direct sharing of physical resources over the vastest expanses.



'Plug-in City' drawing by Peter Cook

Renzo Piano's *Pompidou Centre, Paris, heavily influenced by Archigram*

While most of their designs remained drawings, their influences are seen in some of the most iconic buildings from Richard Rogers and Renzo Piano's jubilantly technocractic *Centre Georges Pompidou* in Paris to Will Alsop's ebullient *Peckham Library* in south London. It is also acknowledged in the writing of later generations of architects such as Zaha Hadid and Rem Koolhaas who described Archigram in his Report on the City 1 and 2 as being among the last *"new movements in urbanism".*

While there have been several other designers, artists and scientists who have creatively imagined futures since Archigram, they were in many ways, the pioneers. How can Ron Herron's *Walking City* or Peter Cook's *Plug-in City* be translated to the inside of the home? Can we consider the workshop as a point of departure to imagine such a future for the home interior? How many of these visions will actually become real, become part of our mundane everyday living, and how much of it remains in the realm of science fiction? Is it worthwhile to consider a space as extreme, even bordering on science fiction? In a recent show on BBC4 titled 'Visions of the Future', Ray Kurzweil proclaimed that "with rapid advancement in science and technology, our cognitive and intelligent capacities will also increase. And as machines become more like humans, humans will become more like machines, and when we do reach that stage*, we will in fact have mastered 'intelligence'."* What will that 'intelligence' be, and what will be our relationship to it? Also in the same program, was an interview with Alex Saffo, a technology forecaster at Stanford University. He believes that "*we are* finally *entering a world of highly intelligent robots – we (humans) might as well accept the fact that robots or some kind of supreme machines will take over, and that its only a matter of time. Eventually it will be a case of whether they (robots) will treat us well – meaning take care of us as pets, or in the worst case scenario, they will think of us as food!"*

Fig 2 *'Roomba, the intelligent vacuum cleaner* Fig 3 *A Humanoid robot, from Japan, used mostly for entertainment*

Despite such claims, the reality today is that the dream of the 'ideal robot slave' that will free us from boring cleaning chores in the home remains a distant one. We do finally see the coming of the roomba, in a typical piecemeal adoption of technology. Bruce Sterling – in his book 'Shaping Things', talks about spimes, which are in fact quite simple objects with RFID tags which will become part of our ecoystem. They will create a new language of interaction between us, physical objects and the virtual world. Already we see a widespread use of tagging for purposes which are not solely related to function, but how 'smart' things like Nabaztags and 'Chumby' are filling a space between work and play, in the home. And alongside the adoption of ubiquitous technologies and smart textiles, are not-so-distant potentials of bio and nanotechnologies in our everyday domestic lives.

So the question is, why refer to the Archigram story, especially when none of those radical futuristic scenarios ever became real? I think that the danger in not thinking of extreme visions may be that we become perhaps slightly complacent – intellectually and creatively. More importantly, this may prevent us from getting inspired to create tangible outcomes of new technologies for today, which are thought provocative and playful at the same time. Are we shying away from radical visions of the future because of they exist outside the scope of our imaginations, or is it perhaps a worthless and indulgent exercise to draw up extreme scenarios? Could such scenarios instead – become a source of inspiration, debate and critical reflection?

While we may not necessarily live with robots and nanotechnologies just yet, can we, for the sake of an intellectual and creative exercise, adopt the ruthless embrace of technology and think of how this can be translated into the domestic environment? Can this method of creating imaginative, yet possible superfictions enable us to be more articulate in forming visionary scenarios about how we may want to live in the home? Perhaps we may want to consider something that Peter Cook has called 'The Archigram Effect' "*is that of 'dare' and of watching how other architects are sometimes encouraged to find it possible to innovate, to turn a programme on its side, to fly in the face of local traditions or inhibitions. The effect has been to instil a mood of optimism, so that, however it turns out, a piece of work will not actually worry too much about justification."*

In the domestic space of the home, it may be worthwhile to think perhaps of a new kind of 'plug-in ctiy' which is fluid, mobile and functional as well. As the Japanese avantgarde said in the past, but seemingly holds true even today: *"...home is a passing point, not starting point ... similar to hotel, similar to the city itself. People are in one place temporarily and shift to another in a short span. A bag abstractly represents this concept. A bag ... containing computer, phone, toiletries, clothes ... it becomes home itself. The majority of people live in cities ... for increasing numbers, home = liquid space".* In this 'liquid space' how will we organise our domestic lives - when multitouch screens, interactive robots and intelligent textiles will have to find space with the world of bio and even nano-technologies. What sort of home will that be? What qualities of 'livingness' and 'humanness' will we seek?

Also, and possibly more important for the workshop, the visual style of Archigram which included drawing, sketching, illustrating, photo collages is highly relevant. Sketching – as suggested in the workshop is a great way of getting ideas together, because it can prove highly inspiring as a tool for constructing visions and scenarios which can be debated upon.

Conclusion

As an interaction design practitioner and researcher, I enjoy speculation and 'futurescaping', and consider trying new methods or untapped ones, such as the style of Archigram, atleast within the HCI community - and would like to take a new, hopefully even a radical position to the way we may sketch the future of the domestic interior. The workshop would be a great place to collaborate and exchange ideas around the complexity of our uncertain future.