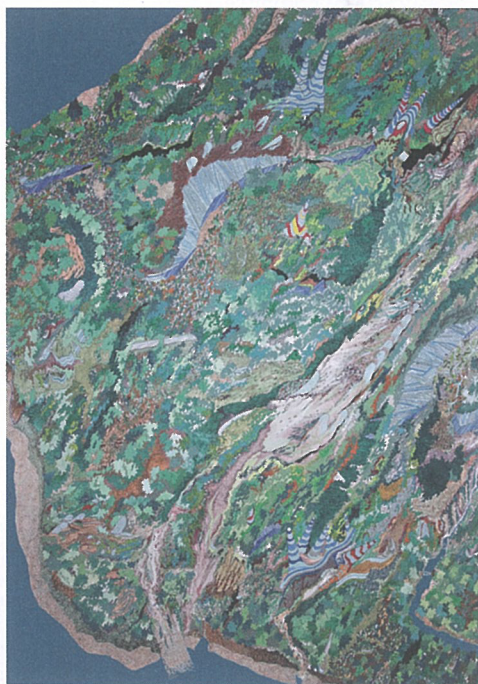


BACK-POCKET ARCHITECTURE OTHERNESS, EXCESS AND PETER COOK

TEXT BY LILIAN CHEE

IMAGES COURTESY OF PETER COOK & CRABSTUDIO

PETER COOK, SPEAKING TO A PACKED CROWD AT THE URA AUDITORIUM, IS A CAPTIVATING SPEAKER WHO IS AT ONCE IRREVERENT AND PHILOSOPHICAL. LILIAN CHEE REPORTS ON THE LECTURE AND COOK'S LATEST PROJECTS.



top
Peter Cook, *Forest City* (2008)

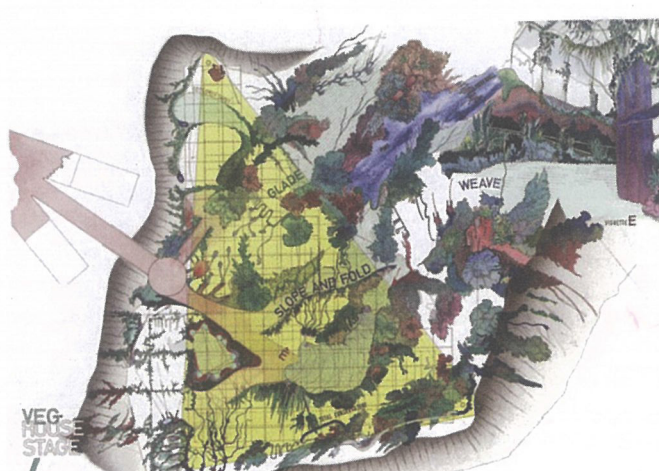
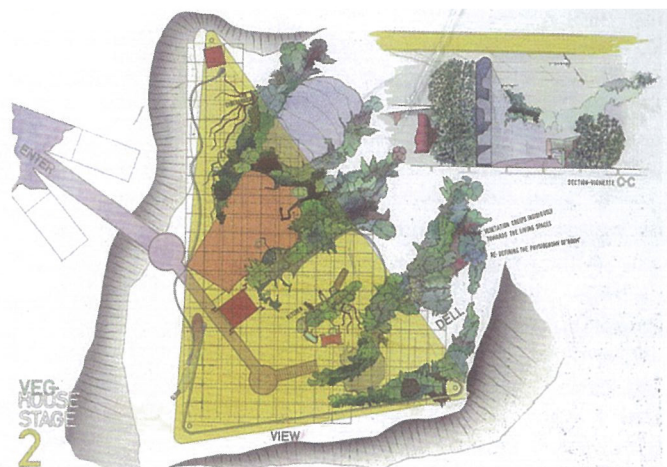
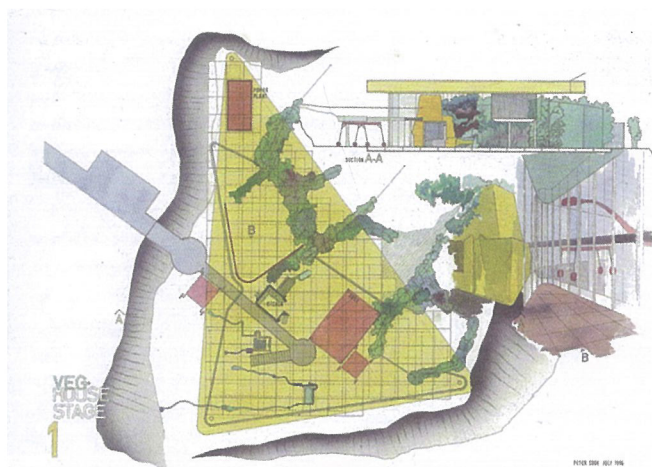
opposite
Peter Cook, *Veg House*
(1996, 2001)

"I do believe that architecture is bullshit. I believe in it. It is my church. But I can't rely on it."¹

For two hours, two lecture rooms packed with believers, sceptics, disciples, critics and punters encountered the complex politics of British architect, writer, award-winning educator, royal academician, and RIBA gold medallist Sir Peter Cook. The lecture, mystifyingly titled "From Archigram through to CRAB: A Question of Hard or Soft," was a combination of the architect/educator's philosophy, beliefs, dreams, frustrations, drawings and buildings. It had a trajectory, which started somewhat chronologically – from Cook's childhood fascination with castles and cathedrals in his English hometown of Norwich, to his irrevocable conversion to modernist aesthetics when seduced by an image of Gunnar Asplund's café, which he chanced upon in the Bournemouth Public Library in his youth.

The Asplund encounter was a crucial turning point. It signalled a tonal and atmospheric shift in the lecture (which could have conversely carried on in a more agreeable, if altogether mundane way), where Cook, as it were, emerged fully of his own as the enigmatic Pop architect, visionary, performer, reformer, joker, provocateur, superhero, entertainer, educator, maverick and superstar. This "Eureka moment" must have mirrored Cook's personal experience in the library. He describes Asplund's café as something quite "other," identifying in the image a sense of modern temporality – encouraging in the viewer a belief in the positive potentials of the present. It was, for Cook, an architecture which encoded the speculative, the romantic and the magical. Such premise would become this architect's "religion."

Yet, before this statement is misread as puritanical, it is important to emphasise



THE ARCHITECTURAL ASSEMBLY OF ARCHIGRAM'S "KIT-OF-PARTS" ARCHITECTURE PREDATED THE UBIQUITOUS IKEA FLAT PACK, WHILE THE INTRODUCTION OF THE USER INTO THE ARCHITECTURAL EQUATION FAR PRECEDES RECENT RESEARCH AND EMPHASIS ON OCCUPATION AS INTEGRAL TO ARCHITECTURAL PRODUCTION.

that Cook, and the famous British Pop architecture group Archigram (active until 1976) which he co-founded with David Greene and Michael Webb in 1961 (later joined by Ron Herron, Warren Chalk and Dennis Crompton in 1962), believed in the principles and experience, rather than the formal elements of modernism. In that sense, Cook's (and Archigram's) architecture is idealistic, puristic – not in a stylistic sense but in its

definition of what society wanted or needed – and sometimes apolitical and individualistic. Significantly too, 1961 was in many ways, a watershed year. It "saw Yuri Gagarin, John F. Kennedy, and the "pill" open the "new frontiers" of space, social policy, and the body."² It was also the Swinging Sixties of free love, miniskirts, Mary Quant and the Beatles. Archigram staked its claim in that milieu. And its fantastic

projects – sometimes serious, often playful and otherworldly – should be evaluated against this context.

At the core of Archigram's brand of modernism was a fascination with technology. Rather than representing technology through specific forms and materials, the idea was to fabricate a new fangled modernism which literally drew on the "post-war technologies transferred from the chemicals, electronics, and aeronautics industries."³ And so, "machines for living in" began to proliferate as radical experiments, shocking questions and bewildering provocations on how to live, love and work, were posed to consumers and practitioners alike. These productions took

various scales such as Peter Cook's *Plug-in City* (1964), Ron Herron's *Walking City* (1964), and David Greene's *Bottery* and *Mowbot* (1970) – the latter being a robot lawnmower. Totally attuned to the emerging consumerist society of the 1960s, the group extolled libertarian values albeit through caprice, freedom to choose and change, and an advanced understanding for the future of expendability.

Tents, space-suits, caravans, inflatables, pods, billboards with wires and projections, "plug-ins" (cars, scooters, washing machines, refrigerators, home computers) and "pop-ups" were unabashedly co-opted into architecture. While these components already

**top left**

Peter Cook and Colin Fournier, Kunsthhaus (2003), aerial view with Baroque buildings as context.

top right

Kunsthhaus, from the street.

middle

Kunsthhaus, at night.

opposite

Peter Cook and Christine Hawley, Museum for Roman Remains in Bad Deutsche-Altenburg.



OPERATING INITIALLY FROM A MIDDLE-CLASS KITCHEN TABLE IN A NORTH LONDON FLAT, ARCHIGRAM WAS ONCE, AS SIMON SADLER, AUTHOR OF THE RECENT ARCHIGRAM MONOGRAPH DESCRIBES, "THE IRRITANT, NOT THE TOAST, OF THE ROYAL INSTITUTE OF BRITISH ARCHITECTS."

existed, their entry into the architectural realm was wholly unconventional and we suspect that although the group's aims was earnest, its ambitions were revolutionary. Still, we can only say all this in retrospect. The architectural assembly of Archigram's "kit-of-parts" architecture predated the ubiquitous IKEA flat pack, while the introduction of the

user into the architectural equation far precedes recent research and emphasis on occupation as integral to architectural production. Archigram's "propositional architecture"⁴ was sometimes misread as fantastic, unserious and apolitical. As Cook himself explains, writing belatedly on this kind of architecture, "(it) carries with

it the conscious wish to state a position, almost always distinct from the commonplace, the vernacular, or that which the public is familiar."⁵ Visionary beyond their years, many of these projects were unsurprisingly, never built or realised. However, central to their output was a series of amazingly seductive images, drawings and collages, which remain unrivalled in their appeal, and which constitute the basis of Archigram's and Cook's cult status.

Thus, although it is Cook's 2009 lecture tour which is ultimately reviewed here, it would not be possible to

productively discuss these present attempts without understanding his long and illustrious history in collaboration with Archigram. Operating initially from a middle-class kitchen table in a North London flat, Archigram was once, as Simon Sadler, author of the recent Archigram monograph describes, "the irritant, not the toast, of the Royal Institute of British Architects."⁶ Its anti-establishment position endeared it to students, who became the collective's strongest following. Many Archigram members, including Cook (who taught at the Architectural Association

and later headed the Bartlett School of Architecture in London), were involved in academia, making this hallowed ground a hotbed for their audacious ideologies.

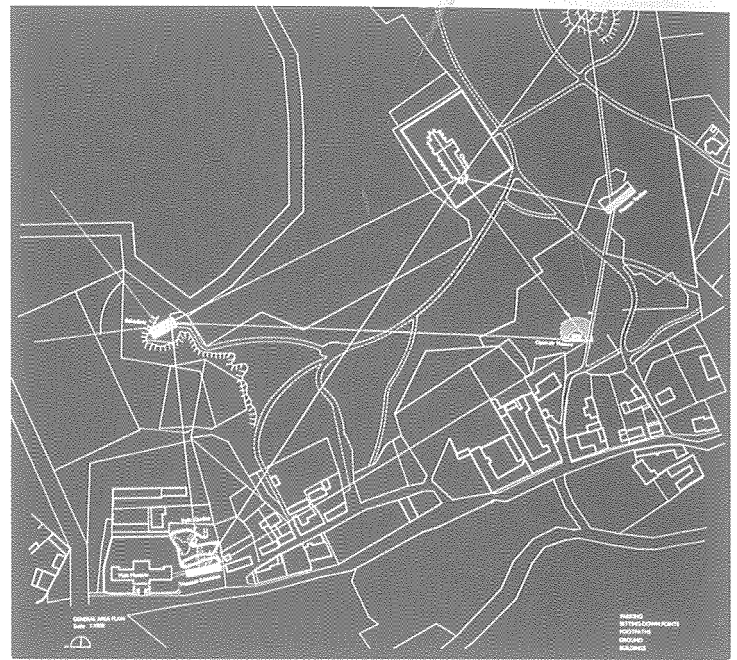
It is this reputation as irritant which makes Cook such a compelling figure, at once loved and loathed; his oeuvre simultaneously respected and disparaged. One suspects that the many who understand little of Cook's motivations are fascinated with him because of this doubleness. Being someone who confesses to dwelling constantly in the realm of the "maybe," this may actually be the kind of ambiguity that Cook relishes. Thus, for the many who packed the lecture halls to find out "what Peter Cook is about," my guess is that quite a few went home altogether amused, confused, inspired and befuddled.

Highly energetic with the stamina of someone less than half his age, the architect provoked and joked, punctuating his lecture with stories and sound effects, all the while struggling to stay put at the rostrum as either the man or his laser beam incessantly leapt from one point to another on stage. The kinetic performance complimented the pace of the talk which was speedily woven together, in a way that could only be described as "Archigram-ish" – a shorthand for the surreal.

A brilliant orator and a sharp critic, Cook's rhetoric, much like his "propositional architecture," was often metaphorical. A device used also by the Surrealists, metaphors allows one to construct creative connections between two or more unlikely things or situations. Hence, a car, like a kettle, may be "plugged-in" to a house. Using a similar rhetoric to

describe the "hard" and "soft" references in his lecture, Cook reminded us that "hard" is not just textural (not of mass) but insinuates precision, thus invoking notions of strategy, direction and control. "Soft" does not conversely infer the opposite of "hard"; "soft" describes metamorphosis, the changing of something familiar into the unfamiliar. Hence, "hard" and "soft" were not cast as a binary pair but qualities integral to this architect's design approach. It is also the legacy of Archigram whose hardness and softness were reflected in their no-nonsense technocratic attitude and their equally madcap propositions.

But is there a virtue in all this lightness? Amidst the anecdotes and jokes, is Cook (and Archigram) to be trifled with or to be taken seriously? Unlike the *avant garde* (for example, the Brutalists and the Independent Group (IG) operating in Britain just before Archigram) who tended to be much more combative and visibly engaged with socio-political issues, Archigram's humour rendered it much more endearing to the masses. In short, it was more easily consumed. Aligning with "the design of expendabilia in functional and aesthetic performance: it has to go Pop."⁷ In an interview in 1970, Cook commented, "People draw a distinction between projects and buildings but I don't. A lot of our projects are highly serious and a lot of our buildings are a sort of bad joke."⁸ Yet again here, the dichotomy of seriousness and non-seriousness is challenged since the most difficult issues may be broached only through humour – think of those political cartoons which say the most controversial things in the newspapers. A joke may be subversive, sneaking into our subconscious all kinds of subject matters which are provocative or taboo. Cook



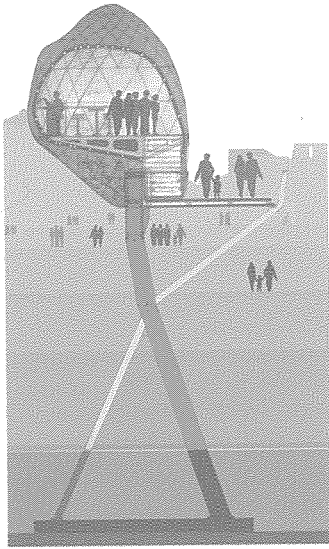
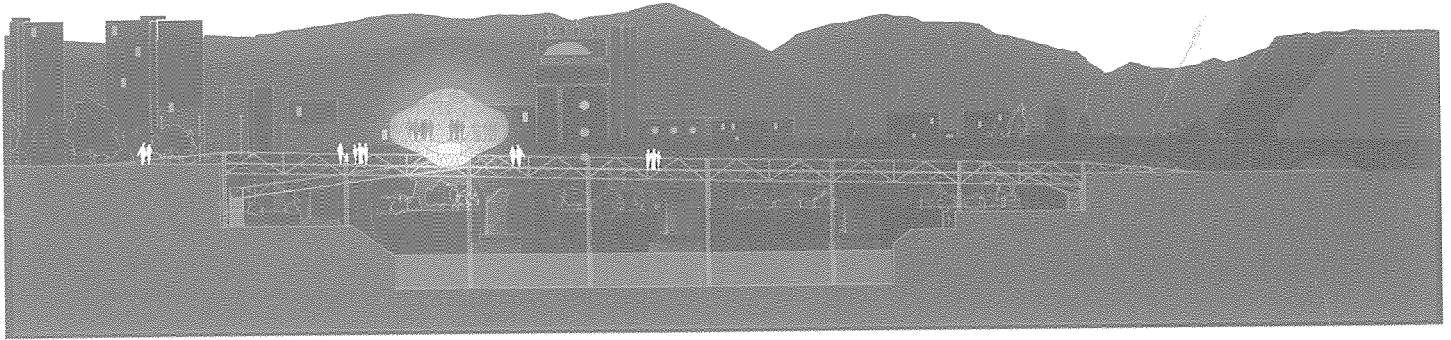
THE DRAWING, ACCORDING TO COOK, HAS THE POTENTIAL TO TRANSPORT THE ARCHITECT "INTO A FORM OF SÉANCE," THUS GIVING ONE THE FREEDOM TO BELIEVE IN THE UNBELIEVABLE, RATHER THAN TO BE HELD BACK BY THE ORDINARY AND THE REALISABLE.

coins the mischievous term "naughtitecture" to describe such kinds of architectural propositions.

The use of humour may also be compared with the paranoid critical method (another Surrealist tactic) used most distinctly by Rem Koolhaas (famously in his book *Delirious New York*, 1978) and to a certain extent by Bernard Tschumi (*Advertisements for Architecture*, 1976). Both architects are incidentally, graduates of the AA.

"Paranoid critical activity is the fabrication of evidence for unprovable speculations and the subsequent grafting of this evidence on the world so that a 'false' fact takes its unlawful place among the 'real' facts. These false facts relate to the real world as spies to a given society: the more conventional and *unnoted* their existence, the better they can devote themselves to that society's destruction."⁹

As part of his argument, Koolhaas fabricated fantastic images such as the Empire State Building in bed with the Chrysler Building, and men "eating oysters with boxing gloves, naked, on the nth floor."¹⁰ These images were slipped in between extant scenarios, building plans, sections and photographs with intended slippages between what was possible and what was existing. In *Advertisements*, Tschumi re-appropriates the format of the newspaper headline and its accompanying full-page image, replacing these with equally sensational titles, for example, "Architecture is Murder." In one instalment, which shows the decay of Le Corbusier's *Villa Savoye*, Tschumi reminds us that, "architecture only survives when it negates the form that society expects of it. Where it negates itself by transgressing the limits that history has set for it."¹¹



Whereas Koolhaas' and Tschumi's methods tend to be more ironic, similarities may be seen with Archigram, in the way images were used to convey the shocking, the new and the unpalatable. Images, and in particular, drawing, as Cook continually argues, is ultimately the motive force of architecture. Cook's fascinating drawings are excessive studies in line and colour, used deliriously to elaborate an eccentric idea, a hunch, or an obsession. Though completely modern, it is almost Victorian in its intensity, detail, and ambition. Cook's and Archigram's drawings are by no means minimal. In a

establishes the proposition – especially for non-architects. Its virtue is that it 'looks like something' and the City enters the history books.¹³ To "look like something" yet not to be exactly what we know, re-employs the metaphorical faculty of recognition. An example of this technique is given by Cook's description of a painting he made while on Christmas holiday in Oslo recently. Like so many of Cook's drawings, *Forest City*¹⁴ (2008) is an incredible piece, overflowing with sinuous forms, lines and colour. Distinctively too, the drawing is opaque in its subject matter. I find myself intrigued but fail

the latter but a prescient and intuitive engagement with one's immediate surroundings.

Cook emphasises the importance of the architectural subconscious as a storehouse of ideas and forms. In many ways, the architect though ostensibly ahistorical, is intensely reverent of history. His propositions such as the *Veg House* (1996, 2001), *Kunsthau Graz* (in collaboration with Colin Fournier, 2003) and *Museum for Roman Remains* in Bad Deutsch-Altenburg (with Christine Hawley), are rigorous re-workings of contextual traditions including the

top
Peter Cook, Gavin Robotham and CRABstudio, Skopje footbridge, at night.

middle
Skopje footbridge, section.

opposite top
Peter Cook, Oslo East Norway, Elevation/Section (2005)

opposite, middle
Peter Cook, *City in a Jungle* (2008)

ICONOCLASTIC AND VERY MUCH SHAPED BY A DEFIANT GENERATION OF 1960S BRITAIN WHERE THE AUSTERITY OF WAR WAS BEING REPLACED BY LIBERTARIAN AESTHETICS AND VALUES, THE ARCHITECT IS OPENLY SCEPTICAL ABOUT THE VARIETY OF "FINGER-WAGGING" GREEN ARCHITECTURE, WHICH SWAYS TOWARDS THE MORALISTIC AND THE PIOUS.

way, they are antithetical to the strategic singularity of the diagram because they operate through excess (maximum possibility) and spectacle (maximum impact). The drawing, according to Cook, has the potential to transport the architect "into a form of séance," thus giving one the freedom to believe in the unbelievable, rather than to be held back by the ordinary and the realisable.¹²

Writing about an axonometric drawing he made with Archigram for *Plug-in City*, Cook reiterates the potential of drawing to bring what is otherworldly to our own, "... it is this aerial view that

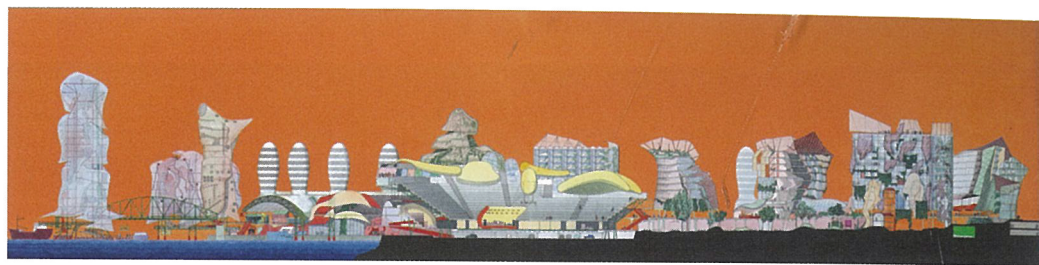
to read it as I would a normal drawing. I want to know what the architect was thinking of when he made the drawing. The amount of detail deters passive consumption. The effort to take in the drawing is almost haptic – requiring a vision that searches and touches the drawing surface in slow and deliberate moves. Cook explains that after he finished the drawing, he flew over the mountainous landscape and was struck by the semblance of the aerial perspective to the drawing's imagined topography. Yet, the point is that the drawing was made *before* the aeroplane encounter. Thus, the former was not a representation of

English Picturesque and the Baroque. Cook elaborates how architecture such as Richard Turner and Decimus Burton's *Palm House* at Kew Gardens (1844-48) and Iakov Chernikhov's *Architectural Fantasies: 101 Compositions* (1933), subconsciously seeps into his work saying that, "all these stuff goes in and out of pockets." And while many of Archigram's projects were never realised, they are safely stored in Cook's "back pocket," waiting for thirty years before re-emerging. He gleefully points out how the periscope in *Living City* (1963) re-appears, for example, in the *Kunsthau* as viewing cocoons. Elsewhere, mobile devices,

which were a favourite of Archigram, gets another go in a recent proposal with Gavin Robotham for the Skopje footbridge, in which a kiosk with a bar moves across the bridge¹⁵.

Building consistently only in his fifties, Cook's perspective of the discipline is complicated, contradictory and contentious. He has few hang-ups about building in conformity with rules, of the divide between academia and professional practice, and of the tension between speculative ideas and buildability. Iconoclastic and very much shaped by a defiant generation of 1960s Britain where the austerity of war was being replaced by libertarian aesthetics and values, the architect is openly sceptical about the variety of "finger-wagging" green architecture, which sways towards the moralistic and the pious. For Cook, who was for the most part of his early career a paper architect, architecture is inextricable from life itself, demonstrated in the way he describes as "scribbling, drawing, designing, building, critting, bullshitting, tweaking, eating, sleeping" all in one breath. Now, as an architect (with Robotham, Cook started up CRABstudio based in Islington, London) sweating through tight budgets, demanding clientele, technical limitations and insane timelines, Cook is working out (between madcap suggestions and serious tête-à-tête) how idealism and realism may become bedfellows. These lectures, I suggest, also offer a conduit to think about and talk through an evolving *modus operandi*.

At the end of two hours, Cook asked his audience: 'Where is the edge of the building?' One may also summarise the afternoon encounter with Sir Peter Cook by subtly re-



framing his question: 'Where is the edge of building?' While this former paper architect (now national treasure) may not have given us an answer, he has cast architecture wide into the open, throwing us towards its expanded field, and drawing into the picture social, technological, historical, political and imaginary webs, so that a building's edges become – and necessarily so – multiple, excessive and other. ■

Notes

1. Peter Cook, in a lecture given at the URA Centre, Singapore, 12 May 2009. The Australasian lecture tour (which included other cities like Brisbane, Hong Kong and Kuala Lumpur) was sponsored by Populous, the rebranded HOK Sport Venue Event, for whom Cook serves as projects advisor.
2. Simon Sadler, *Archigram: Architecture Without Architecture* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2005), p.5.
3. Sadler, *Archigram*, p.5.
4. Peter Cook, *Drawing: The Motive*

Force of Architecture (Chichester: Wiley, 2008), p.28.

5. Cook, *Drawing*, p.28.

6. Sadler, *Archigram*, p.3.

7. Reyner Banham in 1960, quoted in Nigel Whiteley, *Reyner Banham: Historian of the Immediate Future* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: MIT Press, 2002), p.163. Cited by Hal Foster, "Image Building," in Anthony Vidler (ed.), *Architecture: Between Spectacle and Use* (Williamstown, Massachusetts: Sterling and Francine Clark Art Institute, 2008), p.165

8. Martin Pawley, "Peter Cook – Archigram or anarchist?," *Building Design*, 15 May 1970, pp.6-7. Cited by Sadler, *Archigram*, p.4.

9. Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York: A Retroactive Manifesto for Manhattan* (New York: The Monacelli Press, 1994, c.1978), p.241. Emphasis mine.

10. Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*, p.155. These two images were done by artist Madelon Vriesendorp, who is also Koolhaas wife and co-founder of OMA.

11. Bernard Tschumi, *Advertisements for Architecture*, "The most architectural thing about this building is the state of decay in which it is," advertisement placed in the *New York Times*, 1976.

12. Cook, *Drawing*, p.132, p.177.

13. Cook, *Drawing*, p.21.

14. Forest City is influenced by the Norwegian landscape. At first it appears to be a coastal area and its hinterland rapidly develops out of small valleys,

ravines, gullies and cliffs. On closer inspection some of the gullies are actually covered by glass and are, in fact, buildings. Then one notices various cone-shaped outcrops: these mark concentrations of building: mostly internalized but peeking out into the landscape. Further scrutiny reveals a variety of built elements: some clearly dwellings, some clearly connectors. Layers of ambiguity and scrambled referencing are the essence of the project: it is a test of the conventional wisdom of stated built form and of the assumed contiguities of a city. The place of "recognition" and the status of "objects" is questioned. (Text by Peter Cook, 2009)

15. The competition for a footbridge in Skopje to connect a major shopping centre to the opposite bank of the river prompted CRAB to suggest that the bridge be enlivened by having a kiosk on it. They then added the notion of movement to the idea ... (and) a bar to the kiosk. Thus, you can still get an ice-cream below. As illustrated, its real benefit to the Skopje scene is appreciated at night! (Text by CRABstudio, 2009)