



Book Review

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Archigram – Architecture without Architecture

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Simon Sadler

Review by Natalie Basingthwaite

In any period traversing or reconciling significant economic, social and cultural change, the emergence of fissures in the thinking and in the subjectivity of members of a society or discipline are a natural and necessary consequence for the interpretation and articulation of that change. Similarly to the response of social and cultural change dawning in the wake of the First World War in 1920s Europe and the avant-garde movements that that period sprung, the early 1960s in Britain was no exception to this rule. From within the context of a triumphant modernism in architecture following the post-Second World War reconstruction boom of not only the built fabric of cities but also as an ethos to be emancipated by society, emerged the work and projects of Archigram, an architectural group who aimed to redefine not only the possibilities of their own discipline, but also of how people lived, thought and responded to architecture and the built environment around them.

Archigram was a group of young architects who, it might be critically surmised, sustained and conceived their projects in an aura of idealism peppered with provocation. With an oeuvre consisting mainly of paper projects and written text, Archigram set-out to carve out a space within architectural consciousness that aimed to provoke a new sensibility in what was achievable and indeed desirable for architecture - if only the professions imagination could be stirred. Coupled with their annual magazine also titled *Archigram* (published in nine main issues between 1961-1970) and their periodic exhibitions, Archigram members extended their radical pursuit of architecture to the classrooms and studio spaces of British architectural higher education, taking on teaching positions at a number of architecture schools.

More than forty years on from the emergence of Archigram (Peter Cook, Dennis Crompton, David Greene, Michael Webb, Warren Chalk and Ron Herron), and after several more recent retrospective exhibitions on their work, Simon Sadler attempts to revive the interest, curiosity and criticality toward Archigram's projects, ideals and provocations through the first comprehensive monograph of their work titled *Archigram – Architecture without Architecture*.

In a comprehensive study, Sadler enriches our understanding of the work and ideas behind, and which constituted Archigram, by providing an overview of the group's history from its formation and early years, through to the teaching exploits of the group and a reflection on their eventual reception on the architectural scene of ideas. Nestled in-between these two poles is an extensive overview of Archigram's two major concerns, namely urbanism on the one hand, and the design and conception of individual buildings on the other. Archigram's thrust of pre-occupation is inseparable from these two poles; as much as they were interested in injecting new subjectivity into the design and conception of architecture as such, they never strayed from seeing architecture as part of a larger urban picture, and necessarily so engaged the design of the urban environment with proposals and propositions, one might even say provocations, that would attempt to portray a new way of looking at our cities and urban fabric. These two strands of preoccupation are admirably highlighted in Sadler's monograph, dedicating a full chapter, and a significant range of the book, to each of these two pursuits, presenting in-depth these two conceivably separate but conceptually inalienably tied concerns of Archigram.

What Sadler's book highlights through his review of Archigram's work, is the social schism that existed between the establishment modernists in architecture, and those young guns on the periphery of the discipline, who nonetheless being young, still aimed at bringing a fresh approach, understanding and conception of architecture to their time, notwithstanding their call for the dissolution of architecture as a discipline all together. That having been said, and as Sadler also writes, Archigram remained within a conceptual and architectural orbit of modernism, an orbit whose trajectory sailed at the outer limit of that modernism's possibility. It is by reawakening to the fact that such an orbit is possible within any period or style of consumption that provides the value to Archigram's achievements, and in turn provides the value to the documentation of their achievements through its presentation in this book.

Above all else, it is the ability and promise to imagine alternatives, and then to act on that imagination in a critical and sustained manner that Sadler's monograph of Archigram delivers. Such promise is as apt for the current generation, or any generation of youth in architecture, as it was for those constituting the Archigram group in the 1960s. Without imagination and the promise of imagination, architecture fails to live-up to the liberating status that it has the potential to deliver to society. A review of, and the potential to learn and be inspired by the work of Archigram is no more timely than in an age of corporate culture, where architecture and architects so often fail to inspire imagination and deliver something tangibly novel through their designs to society-at-large.

About Haecceity Inc.

Haecceity Inc. was founded in 2005 in order to establish a portal and voice for critical and radical architecture theory in our time. The aim of the Haecceity project is to contribute pertinent themes in architectural theory to academic discourse, and by doing so vitalize the discipline of architectural theory, and indeed architectural practice, at the beginning of the twenty-first century.

It is our belief that architecture as a discipline can, should and indeed must be experimental in nature - at least if nowhere else then in the vanguard. It is hand-in-hand with this experimentation that architecture theory has pertinence, and as such, the Haecceity project has relevance. The Haecceity project seeks to expand the knowledge and associated dissemination of critical and architectural theory in our time in order to expand the horizons of how architecture is understood, practiced, and by way of that, what new terrains it may hope to traverse.

The Haecceity project consists of:

- an individually themed twice-yearly journal titled *Haecceity Papers*, with occasional additional themed special issues, all of which are published on our Online Publishing Portal with hard-copy orders available, and indexed in the Avery Index to Architectural Periodicals. *Haecceity Papers* is a refereed publication;
- a *Quarterly Architecture Essay (QAE)*, or rather dissertation, of approximately 12,000-20,000 words on a specific and topical theme on, or contributing to, architecture theory, published on our Online Publishing Portal four times a year, in addition to a release in book form through our publishing partner Routledge of the thus published *QAEs* once a year. *Quarterly Architecture Essay (QAE)* is a refereed publication;
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