

Markus Richter

In almost no other decade have architects and planners produced such a density and diversity of urban visions as in the 1960s – from Constant's "New Babylon" to the "Raumstadtmodelle" urban space models of Yona Friedman and Eckhard Schulze-Fielitz and Archigram's "Plug-In City". These designs have long been considered incunabula of visionary architecture and still have the capacity to inspire. Yet over and above their undisputed aesthetic qualities, do they really still have relevance for the pressing urban planning challenges of the present day?

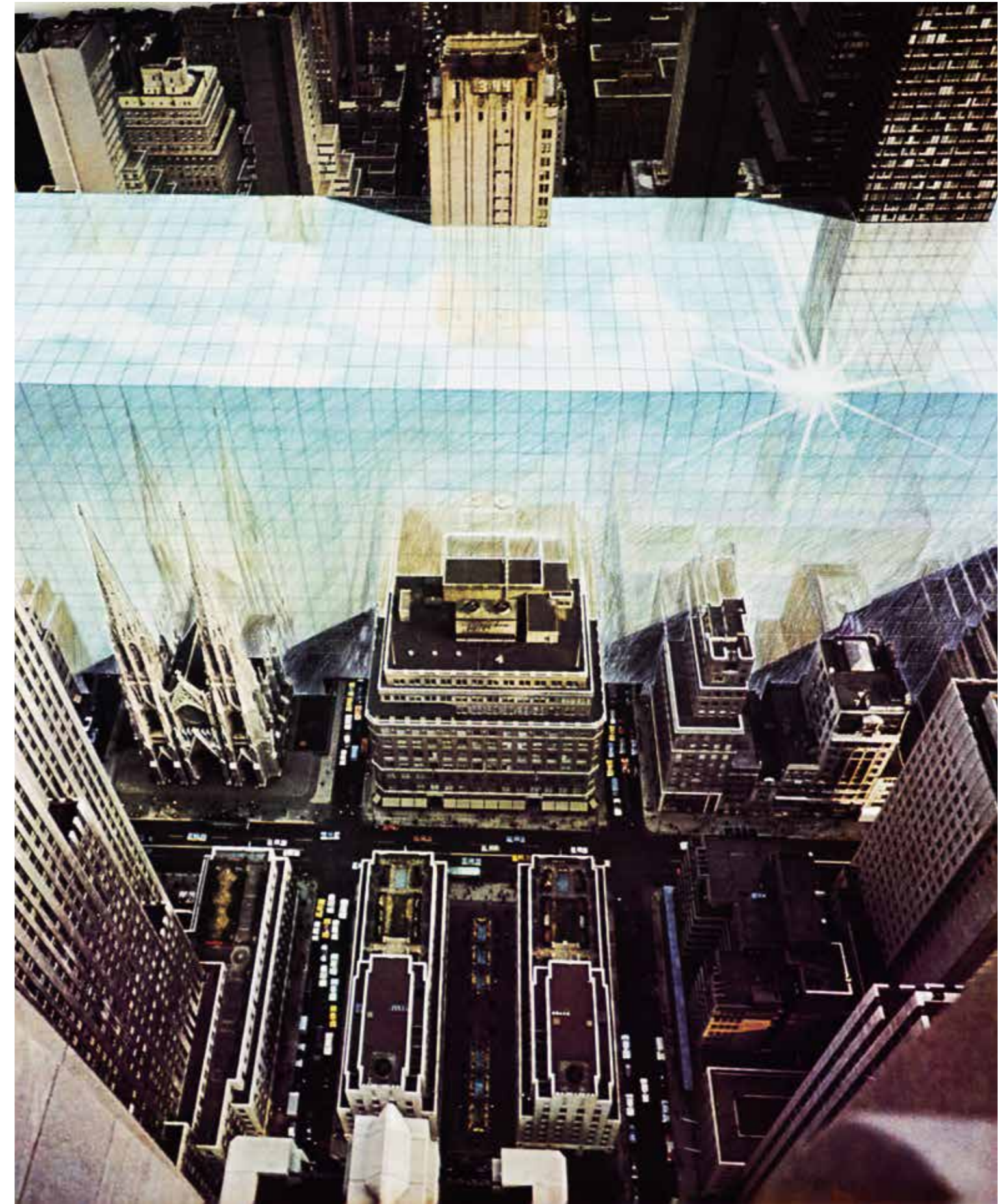
# Within the Big Structure

We now tend to look at the visionary city designs of post-war modernism with a mixture of fascination and bewilderment. Despite all the various differences in concept and design language, they appear to be inspired by the same irrepressible and optimistic spirit that characterized the decade between 1960 and 1970 – technological awareness, belief in progress and megalomania. The collages, models and drawings, with their peculiar amalgamation of utopian architecture, pop culture, artistic strategies and that air of Situationist rebellion, are barely 50 years old, but they somehow seem like relics of a distant time. Amidst the questions of scale, sustainability and even feasibility, we have to marvel at this carefree creativity with a mixture of skepticism and

envy. Even though increasing numbers of architects and urban planners from the younger generation are once again using architecture as a means of social transformation, comparable visionary large-scale plans are somehow missing the utopian exuberance of this bygone age.

**Dematerialization of Architecture.** The desire for visionary large-scale constructions was actually on the wane by the end of the 1960s. As the first articles about the young Florentine architect groups Archizoom and Superstudio were appearing in *Domus* and *Architectural Design*, the British Archigram group were starting out on the road to the dematerialization of architecture. Temporary

Superstudio's "Continuous Monument" from 1969 was directed against both the banality of commercial planning and the dematerialization of architecture by the avant-garde.





The Continuous Monument takes up the idea of a linear city development, which has a long history in avant-garde city planning like Nikolay Miliyutin's 1930 book "Socialist City".

interventions, inflatables and the first visions of invisible information systems architecture were starting to replace the idea of the mega-structure. While the strict geometrically-reduced large-scale projects, which were published by the radical Florentines as *Discorsi per Immagini* (picture discourses), are now generally regarded as constituent parts of this visionary planning, from a historical perspective they are rather more a response towards the self-restriction of architecture.

**Beyond Architecture.** The programmatic "Beyond Architecture" slogan of Archigram was firmly established at the London AA School of Architecture and Peter Cook was one of the dominant figures. "When I was at the AA and for the first time saw those things by Superstudio, I thought I could use those against the dominant culture here – the culture of Peter Cook," explained Rem Koolhaas in an interview. His former teacher and later partner Elia Zenghelis seconded this view. "We were thrilled by this absolute architecture of the Continuous Monument. After '68 it had become taboo for architects. (...) So, in the seventies, at the AA you couldn't talk about it. They were cooking rice, smoking pot and sitting cross-legged on the floor, talking about the environment." Inspired by the monumental geometry of the Florentines, in 1973 Koolhaas and Zenghelis designed *Exodus or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture*. The multipartite work, a hybrid of collage, design drawing, painting and text, marks the end of the series of mega-structural urban visions, which had its beginnings in the late 1950s and shaped the urban debate for more than a

decade. Although Exodus was formally reminiscent of Leonidov's linear city design for Magnitogorsk in 1930, in terms of actual content, Koolhaas was consciously influenced by the Situationism-inspired *New Babylon* of his compatriot Constant, moving deliberately away from what he saw as the uncritical pop-optimism of the Anglo-Saxons. However, Koolhaas replaced the characteristic drift of the nomadic inhabitants and the playful rebuilding and reshaping of spaces that characterized *New Babylon* with a ritualized, collective process that perfectly mirrored the classical austerity of architecture. In this way, *Exodus* blends the dystopian and utopian elements of the visionary large-scale approach into a single indissoluble entity.

**The End of the Mega-Structures.** Shortly afterwards the influential architectural historian Reyner Banham proclaimed: "The mega-structure is dead. It is thus high time to place it within the history of architecture." Not even ten years before, Banham penned an essay entitled *A Clip-On Architecture* that showed him to be a major supporter of the mega-structure and contributed significantly to the international success of Archigram. In 1976 Banham backed up his claim about the demise of the mega-structure when he presented an outline of the history of the visionary planning of the 1960s in his work *Megastructure - Urban Futures of the Recent Past*, in which he dismissed the construction forms that he had once so passionately advocated as "dinosaurs of the modern movement". So what happened in the few years between the publication of *A Clip-On Architecture* and the subsequent sounding of this death

knell? Why did Banham so clearly distance himself from the mega-structure, despite the fact that important realizations of this approach were still under construction, like the Brunswick Centre in London, the Pompidou Centre in Paris or the Schlangenhäuser Straße motorway superstructure in Berlin, which was eventually completed in 1982?

**New Metropolis.** The term mega-structure, a kind of common denominator for this varied collection of urban visions, first appeared in 1964 in Fumihiko Maki's Investigations in *Collective Form*. "The Megastructure is a large frame in which all the functions of a city or part of a city are housed," wrote Maki. "In a sense it is a man-made feature of the landscape. It is like the great hill on which Italian towns were built." While Maki's definition remained somewhat abstract, in the autumn of the same year the fifth issue of the *Archigram magazine* published the whole range of city visions conceived up to that point. Under the main theme of the Metropolis, the magazine was devoted to the projected increase in population in industrial centers and asked what new urban structures could contribute to changing economic, social and demographic conditions. However, it was not merely a discussion of urban issues and technical solutions. In contrast to the ideal city models of early modernism, participation and the individual freedom of the residents now started to play an increasingly important role. In place of the all-powerful architects came an approach empowering planners to provide a collective infrastructure that could be defined by the users according to their own visions.

**Architectural Expression.** The typical formal components of visionary architecture like geodesic domes and space-lattice and tent structures had certainly become acceptable – and on occasions even popular – by the time of the Montreal Expo in 1967. Buckminster Fuller built the American Pavilion as a gigantic dome, Frei Otto created a free-swinging net structure for the Federal Republic of Germany and the “Man the Producer” theme pavilion of Guy Desbarat, using a series of tetrahedrons to form a massive three-dimensional framework, was the prototype for the mega-structure lookalike. Then came the monorails, which since Plug-In City had become an integral part of the mega-structure look and which wound its way above the artificial islands of the Montreal Expo site with a series of elegant curves, crossing over itself on a network of delicate supports and passing picturesquely through some of the pavilions. Yet it was by far the modular “Habitat” residential unit of Moshe Safdie that received the most attention, a blend of classic A-frame terrace housing and labyrinthine plug-in concrete blocks. In the same year, with the completion of Geoffrey Copcutt’s Cumberland New Town Centre near Glasgow (which has since been destroyed), came a building that truly epitomized the mega-structure spirit. The realization of the Kenzo Tange Yamanishi Broadcasting Center in Kofu also kept the promise of metabolism, at least in terms of visual appearance.

**Arriving in Reality.** It was around this time that a flood of reviews, studies and reports about mega-structural projects began appearing in architectural journals, whose title images teemed

with the avant-garde protagonists of this genre. The daily press also made extensive use of the often visually attractive designs. Even the cover of a brochure for the Lower Saxony Landesbausparkasse bank in Germany, a steadfastly conservative institution, used a photo of Eckhard Schulze-Fielitz’s 1966 Raumstadtmodell to accompany the exhibition entitled “Das Wohnhaus im Jahr 2000” (The Home in the Year 2000). Philip Johnson, not previously known for his megastructural tendencies, announced in 1968 in the magazine *Progressive Architecture*: “The megacities require megastructures (...) The megastructure does not yet exist, but it must, and it will. It will if the management is ready. It will if the public is ready. Above all, it will when our civilization is ready to create architecture.” Johnson’s messianic and authoritarian diction is a far cry from the original intention of the mega-structuralists, who wanted to abolish the role of the architect as an all-powerful creator and replace them with a new type of planner who would develop structures that the users could adapt according to their own personal taste.

**Human Scale.** By the time the architectural establishment and the major investors were moving in through the back door, the founders and pioneers of the mega-structure were already looking to break new ground. A prime example is the collection of Archigram designs from the second half of the 1960s. Following the development of high-density urban structures like the “Plug-In City Max Pressure Area”, the focus shifted towards more mobile and more manageable units such as

“Blow-Out Village”, “Tuned Suburbs” or “Instant City”. The mega-structure had lost its emancipatory explosive force and the gigantism synonymous with this genre was increasingly coming in for criticism. In the introduction to the special issue of the *Bauen + Wohnen* (Building and Living) called *Urban Planning, Experiments and Utopias* from 1967, editor Jürgen Joedicke stated: “It is interesting to note the importance attributed to technology, traffic, mobility, housing and densification. Yet the question as to how a person should be conditioned to live in these superstructures and if we have the disposition to identify with these types of housing has not been asked. Will a person, whose ideas and desires have remained relatively constant over the millennia, suddenly give all that up to live in this world, or can this idea also offer them space?”

Even today this fundamental criticism of the visionary large structure has lost none of its validity. However, the radical basic concept of the mega-structure, with the separation of a load-bearing skeleton and flexible plug-ins that can be applied to both large-scale urban planning and individual buildings, still has immense potential, not least when we consider the rapidly growing informal settlements in the mega-cities of the region known as the “Global South”. From this perspective, small-scale projects like the “Manufactured Sites” of Teddy Cruz in Tijuana, Mexico, the growing houses of Elemental in Iquique, Chile, or, on a larger scale, Urban-Think Tank’s Metrocable for the San Agustín favela in Caracas, Venezuela, are very much the legitimate heirs of the visionary designs of the 1960s.



The design of Archizoom’s “Aerodynamic City” is set as an artificial element in stark contrast with the surrounding sublime nature, far away from any other human settlement.