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Fun, Power and Control

The Change in the Idea of Power in the Architecture of the Information Age. The Fun Palace of Cedric Price, 1961–1967.

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At the award ceremony of the Kiesler-Preis 2002 a journalist asked Cedric Price what he would consider the three most important criteria for good architecture. Cedric Price replied: “Fun, delight and change.”¹ “Buildings”, he said, “should adapt according to their users.” In other words, the architect should design architecture that should be delightful to use and adaptable for change.

In order to address the challenge of the digital age to the discipline of architecture and architectural research this paper examines how the digital began to be integrated into architecture at the start of the information society. Taking Cedric Price’s Fun Palace project, 1961–1967, as an example, we will discuss the disappearance of the physical presence of architecture for the benefit of social interaction and identify some of the challenges that were produced by this shift.

The Fun Palace project, 1961–1967, was one of the first projects that the young 27-year-old architect Cedric Price designed. While it is still to be discussed whether it was supposed to be a conventional building or a visionary experiment dedicated to London’s architectural circles, the point of interest here is that the Fun Palace seems to have been one of the first projects having started to comprehend the challenges that accompany the “architecture of the digital age”. In our days the implications of the technological change created by mass media can be observed with all their consequences. Conversations about blogs and W-LAN access points are part of our common language. We use computers and the internet with its different modes and scales of interaction as basic elements of our everyday social interaction. Looking back at the start of this technological era, the Fun Palace shows how deeply this change affected the discipline of architecture, its methods and strategies in how to build and how to control space.

According to the few plans and images that exist of the project the Fun Palace has often been described as a machine-like open structure that was to create different spaces by the use of mobile units. However, the majority of graphical documentation of the Fun Palace is in form of matrices, not showing the program of the building in form of plans or sections but as a function of size and turnover.² In this sense, the drawings of the project do not conform to the standard conventions in the discipline of architecture.

Another breach of convention seems to be lack of single authorship. Although Cedric Price is the architect of the project many of the project ideas were developed by and discussed within teams of experts, i.e., interdisciplinary groups that were dedicated to different tasks. The so called Cybernetic-Committee and its several sub-committees seemed to be concerned with the question of how to use and how to organize the physical structure of the building. They formed committees

that worked on particular aspects of the design like 'Form and Amenities', 'Cybernetics' or 'Form and Finance'³. Instead of a client, the project had a director who was the theatre-maker Joan Littlewood⁴ and the Fun Palace project had its own "Fun Palace trust", under whose board members were such famous personalities as Yehudin Menuhin or Buckminster Fuller.⁵

In order to appreciate the architectural 'set-up' of the Fun Palace, considering it as avant-garde project that operated at the cutting edge of technology, it is important to take into account the building's different ways of representation, its organization, as well as the idea of the collective, even if such terms may not be within 'standard conventions' of architectural analysis. For the purpose of this analysis we propose the analogy of 'hardware' and 'software' to distinguish different design purposes. The 'hardware' of the Fun Palace deals with the requirements of the physical structure, while the building's 'software' is the interactive program designed to create different uses and atmospheres in the building. These two frameworks are closely linked to each other. Like computer hardware, the physical structure of the Fun Palace can not function without the program operating it. While the hardware/software interaction of the Fun Palace may challenge a standardized view of how to approach architecture both in terms of use and in terms of design, a proper understanding of the idea of the building does not seem possible without acknowledging these two domains and their interaction with each other.

In these terms, it is not astonishing that it is the 'software' part of the building that uses multiple authorship and which is varied in shape and form. More than 22 experts – mathematicians, sociologists, journalist, musicians, artists and politicians – were involved in the conception of the Fun Palace⁶ giving rise to a wide variety of interpretations of the Fun Palace. For the theatre maker and director of the project Joan Littlewood, the Fun Palace was to be a new platform for social self-awareness and experimental theatre. For the scientist involved in the project, like the cybernetician Gordon Pask, the Fun Palace was to be a network-based cybernetic system, as much as, for Roy Ascott, a piece of interactive media art. According to their distinct visions and ideas for the project these experts opened up a discussion on new ways of interrelation between the physical and the virtual, or the individual and the collective. By doing so they discussed as well the limits of choice and interaction and the rights of the individual within the community. The various interpretations of the design of the building's 'software' will be the main focus of this paper.

HARDWARE

In 1962, the year when the Beatles released their first single, Love Me Do, London's architectural scene was already riding the gentle wave of pop. The young Archigram group of architects published in their magazine their first collages of the 'Plug-In City'⁷, showing a scaffold-like structure for a shopping centre in Nottingham, emblazoned with logos of Pepsi-Cola, Hoover and Burnett's Gin. Around the same time, in London, Cedric Price and Joan Littlewood had published a brochure to call for donations to build a very similar project, which they called the 'Fun Palace'.

According to the fundraising leaflet the 'Fun Palace' was to be a place where everyone could "Choose what they want to do, or watch someone else doing it, learn how to handle tools [...] dance, talk or be lifted up, where you can see how other people can make things work."⁸ On

the inside of this fundraising leaflet were several diagrams and drawings of the building that showed the location of the Fun Palace, its connections to transport as well as different program suggestions. In the section perspective, which filled the two inside pages, the Fun Palace looked like a giant machine. It was basically a large open steel structure, ten stories high, on top of which two large cranes were placed that could move around the different event spaces of the building.

The Fun Palace was supposed to be an open structure in two ways: literally open, without facade, more a park than an indoor space, and open in program and use. Joan Littlewood compared the idea of the Fun Palace with a three dimensional park. Envisioning a place that is flexible enough to accommodate all sorts of activities and open enough to host all “social classes”. “The whole plan is open but on many levels. So the greatest pleasure of traditional parks is preserved – the pleasure of strolling casually – looking in at one or another of these areas...”⁹ As the headline of the brochure suggests, it was the “FIRST GIANT SPACE MOBILE IN THE WORLD it moves in light turns winter into summer....toy....EVERYBODY’S what is it?”¹⁰

In comparison with the atmospheric language describing the building the presentation of the building seems to be very abstract and schematic. According to the plans the building was to be a steel structure not unlikely the structures used in shipyards. Additionally the Fun Palace had two concrete service towers and a flexible textile enclosure to cover the roof. Attached to the steel frame were prefabricated enclosures that formed special service rooms¹¹ as well as all kinds of technological equipment from air curtains over screens and displays to a movable cleaning facility for the frame itself¹². However, the whole structure, while having a strong visual effect dominating it’s surrounding with its massive dimensions, did not show any sign of cooperate design. There exists no interior design concept for the building, and in fact there is little evidence that there was made any attempt to give the building a strong formal expression by designing a facade or any further materialization. It seems instead that efforts were made to reduce the aesthetic expression of the building as much as possible. As Steven Mullin, one of the project architects of the Fun Palace has put it: “He (Cedric Price) went so far that he insisted in eliminating the form as an element of representation. He destroyed the beauty of architecture and substituted it with the beauty of the user.”¹³

SOFTWARE

Joan Littlewood began with her Theatre Workshop to travel by bus through the countryside and to stage a workers’ theatre very close to Brecht’s social ideals.¹⁴ In 1960 she was on the peak of her career playing with the Theatre Workshop in theatres in London. According to her autobiography¹⁵ she met Cedric Price at a party in London where she told him about her idea to build a permanent stage that would overcome the fourth wall, i.e., the separation between actors and audience. It was to be interactive by engaging the people to participate in the play, and it was to be educational by making the audience judge what they had seen.

Soon after their first meeting Price started work on what was to become the Fun Palace. From 1962 to 1967, he and Littlewood worked closely together refining the design and premise of the Fun Palace.

Littlewood referred to it as 'a university of the street'¹⁶. Like the Alexandra Palace, a glass building that was built in 1873 in London's North, the Fun Palace was also meant to be an example of the world's great technological achievements and another 'People's Palace'. However, as the name 'Fun Palace' make clear, activities within the building were meant to be primarily enjoyable. Its purpose was fun and enjoyment of any sort. The range of activities that were to take place in the Fun Palace included features like 'gossip revues' where you could chat and talk about what was going on in your neighbourhood¹⁷. There were to be teaching facilities, a 'science gadgetry' and a 'genius chat'¹⁸. Some high-technology activities like "life broadcasting from TV screens"¹⁹ that would allow users to watch themselves interacting with other people inside the building relied on technological advances still to be made. There were also surprisingly romanticizing activities like fireworks or stargazing²⁰. One can take this list, which is far from complete, as a sign that the huge machinery was not only programmed to facilitate certain preconceived activities but also to create a certain mood, create situations of enjoyment and provide inspiration for the spontaneous use of the facility. The machine is not only programmed to do certain things but it is a machine creating atmospheres that people react to emotionally. "The activities designed for the sight should be experimental. The place itself is expendable and changeable. The organization of space and objects occupying it should, on the one hand, challenge the participants mental and physical dexterity, and on the other hand, allow for the flow of space and the time in which passive and active pleasure is provoked."²¹ Price and Littlewood envisioned a space that was accessible at all times.

With this program they tried to convince the government to fund the Fun Palace and the London authorities to allocate a building site.

Architecture as Organization

Part of the planning for the Fun Palace was done by a committee called "the cybernetic committee" formed out of consultants with as different professional backgrounds as psychologists, sociologists, engineers, and mathematicians.²² They designed a cybernetic concept of response and reflex, which was to control the spatial arrangements of the Fun Palace according to the users' preferred activities.²³ They tried to achieve true interaction between men and the machine of Joan Littlewood's vision. Gordon Pask, a good friend of Cedric Price and a consultant for the Fun Palace project, stated that architectural design should foster a productive and pleasurable dialogue on all scales. With his technical background Pask cast this task in terms of cybernetics, i.e., the science of control within any assembly that can be treated as an organic whole.²⁴

Pask developed learning environments that viewed the human as part of a resonance between men and the environment. He wanted architecture to comprehend itself as one of the fundamental conversational systems in human culture. In his 'Five guidelines of the cybernetic theory of architecture' he wrote that "concepts of very different disciplines will be unified with the concepts of architecture to yield an adequately broad view of such entities as 'civilization', 'city', or 'educational system'."²⁵ Learning, observation and prediction were the three aspects, which characterized the cybernetic system that should make the Fun Palace function. It was a holistic view: The system entirely determined all characteristics of its elements, including the relationships

between its constituents. It operated in a range of scales from local to global, connecting the aspects of culture and society with the political and the physical aspects of architecture. "Systems, notably cities, grow and develop and, in general, evolve. Clearly, this concept is contingent upon functionalist hypothesis. [...] An immediate practical consequence of the evolutionary point of view is that architectural design should have rules for evolution. [...] The novel sub-theory is that structures may be designed (as well as intuited) to foster a productive and pleasurable dialogue."²⁶

In that sense the Fun Palace was part of a larger network. It was designed not only as a cultural centre but also as an information hub that connects the local with the regional with the national. In fact, it was to be at least as much infrastructure as it was to be a 'mere' building. A wide variety of access, by an underground connection, a train station, a hovercraft port and local access for pedestrians, should both allow random 24-hour use of the facility by everybody and provide supra-regional connectedness. "This complex, which enables self-participatory education and entertainment, can only work – and then only for a finite time – if it is not only accessible to those who live and work in the immediate neighbourhood but also, through its varied communication links, accessible as a regional and national amenity."²⁷

There is even evidence that the committee members of the 'Form and Amenity' group envisioned something similar to the internet, which was to be invented and realized a few years later. They planned an interactive information display in form of pillar that connects and displays the Fun Palace users to the world and vice versa. They considered if and how they "could plug into existing equipment, or start a national grid of information covering all universities."²⁸

Furthermore, from its inception, the Fun Palace was thought of as one part of a larger system of similar installations all over the country or even worldwide. The leaflet suggested other Fun Palaces in Liverpool, Tokyo, Chicago or Odessa.²⁹ Being inside the Fun Palace should feel like being part of something bigger. It meant being connected to both the world and to one's own desires.

The writing of the brochure seems to underline this personal appeal, using a language of play and event. The text does not mention functions and uses. It does not discuss machinery either. Instead, the Fun Palace was described as a "living toy"³⁰.

In Littlewood's and Price's argumentation the word 'fun' is connected to the right for education, self-experience and creativity. The access to information is the most important goal of their 'fun' architecture. The Fun Palace is simply a structure that provides users with access to technology and public space. The architecture makes the attempt to serve as an informational infrastructure that connects the virtual network of information to the community and the neighbourhood.

Architecture as Game and Play

However it is still unclear what the nature of fun would have been. With the development of the project came the need to define specific types of uses. The committees that sought to develop the ideas of the program tried to identify the characteristics of fun in the building: They "wanted to get closer to a definition of 'fun'... Roy Ascott [...] suggested 'seeking the unfamiliar', and ultimately 'transcending the unfamiliar'. Fun Makers provide amenities, which are unfamiliar. Funsters have the ability to seek the unfamiliar."³¹

Since being confronted with the unfamiliar, often is – temporarily, at least – accompanied by a certain level of stress and even discomfort, this seems quite different from today's leisure industry with its emphasis on wellness and relaxation. Whereas leisure-and-entertainment facilities today tend to provide specific commercialized types of fun, often offering rather passive enjoyment in specifically designed comfort zones, the Fun Palace idea of fun is to specifically provide the opportunity to investigate your own limits, alone or together with others.

The committee invented games that should provide these situations: "We [...] began discussing the nature of fun and the way in which appetites can be created [...] ideas such as the teaching machine facility and an identity bar where visitors could obtain clothes in order to modify their identity and to try out new social roles. Ascott stresses the need for facilities that would enhance the social awareness of visitors to the Fun Palace."³²

One of these games that the Fun Palace should have hosted for random interaction was the "Two way panto" an interactive pantomime that worked with a screen that "signify the [...] arrival of the Wicked Uncle. If the audience booed, the shadow would hover indecisively, if the audience booed louder the shadow would start to shrink. [...] The pantomime would need to be scripted with a capability for branching in one of two possible directions according to audience reaction."³³ The game had only two possible outcomes, which were the disappearance of the shadow and its dominance over the whole surroundings.

This game was intended to make people interact and experience a feeling of togetherness. The game appealed to the solidarity of the people, as they should act against a mysterious shadow. The game thus makes a strong moral and educational attempt, which may be seen in conflict with the proclaimed idea of individual freedom and open interaction.

In the next meeting of the 'Form and Amenities' committee the questions and doubts of how to provide openness and freedom within a preconceived system like the Fun Palace had been discussed. The committee members were well aware of the restrictiveness of their inventions: "John Clark cited the need for providing physical and emotional thrills and for satisfying the individual's desire to exhibit himself and to extend his sense of power and feel the sensation of sinking into a group. All these issues raised questions of morality and legality..."³⁴

Architecture as Social and Political Interaction

The point about which the discussion arose is that openness and control can be seen as being mutually dependent: "On what stage do we say: 'You can not do that', or is control affected by the nature of amenities? Pask thought it should be affected by the amenities and the control system: 'In the Fun Palace you don't get thrown out into the street if you don't fit into a particular group, you pass on to another group.' Ascott said that people in a community have all kinds of values, which need to be channelled [...] Clark said that people have been induced to join organisations by setting up a mythical history of the organisation."³⁵

And indeed the Fun Palace Cybernetic sub-committee thought about special games that could enhance the level of identification with the building. In the journal *New Society* they wrote: "We would like to generate a hard core of Fun Palace devotees who would return, again and again, and help to control the place... In order to cultivate such a group we have to introduce a hier-

archical system of privileges associated with frequency of attendance and overall performance in the system.”³⁶

They suggested several games like the test of loyalty that “by passing appropriate tests of loyalty and ability, every visitor [would be] entitled to be initiated into the highest mysteries of the organization. [...] We may also endow the Fun Palace with a mythical history, and scatter icons about to symbolize [...] the objectives for which it was founded.”³⁷

Reading the minutes of the meetings in spring 1965 it seems that the discussion over control systems overshadowed the architectural project. The idea of control dominated all other achievements that the Fun Palace could have brought. Whereas Littlewood and the ‘Form and Amenities’ committee’s ideas of program were based on channelled interactive games, the “Cybernetics committee” put emphasis on social control that was executed by the system. As Pask has put it in his ‘Five guidelines of the cybernetic theory of architecture’: “There will be a proper and systematic formulation of the sense in which architecture acts as a social control...”³⁸

However, the lack of explicit control raises the question of how the intimate use of machines and technologies influences our behaviour and us as human beings. It is not so clear anymore what is object and what is subject within this automated system controlling social life.

It is Gordon Pask who lays the responsibility and the power of control to the machine itself. “Let us turn the design paradigm in upon itself; let us apply it to the interaction between the designer and the system he designs. [...] Notice the trick, the designer is controlling the construction of control systems and consequently design is control of control. [...] Further the design goal is nearly always underspecified and the controller is no longer the authoritarian apparatus.”³⁹

In contrast, the ‘Form and Amenities’ committee relied on social interaction by suggesting to install social observation: “Another point that appeared in discussion was the capability of observers. [...] The testing of initial hypotheses will depend upon the capabilities of men acting as observers. How capable are they in practice? It was agreed to assign this issue to a special psychological group.”⁴⁰ The committee may not have shared entirely the believe in men that the initiators of the Fun Palace had. They thought some form of control was necessary.

With the experience of various socialist regimes, which were already available in the 1960s, we may wonder how naïvely the means of control (citizens controlling and judging citizens) and the trickery to ‘inspire’ loyalty were planned to be employed. On the other hand, looking for instance to Disney Theme parks, one can easily find some sort of artificially created mythical identity. Many other examples could be named. Also the way in which Gordon Pask was willing to hand over the authority to the system itself is something that we can easily observe today.

Considering the high intentions we have to ask: How could that have happened? They wanted to leave freedom to the users of their building but they didn’t trust the users to actually be able to handle this freedom.

CONCLUSION

The Fun Palace project ultimately failed. The most immanent hurdle was lack of public support – partially due to miscommunication between the project leaders and the community. However,

more importantly, it is doubtful whether the technology was ready to fulfil what the project demanded. Compared to technological opportunities of the early 1960s today's electronic systems are much farther developed, which makes it easy to believe that the visions of the Fun Palace could now be set into practice. Would it work today?

The focus of this contribution does not lie in the technological problems or the solutions thereof. It rather lies in the general social questions raised by the various Fun Palace committees: How to allow open access and what degree of control to keep are questions that are still challenging. It is not to present answers, but merely to draw attention to the unique 'mechanics' at work in the Fun Palace to address these issues, for the top down approach of the 'Fun and Amenities' committee has as little appeal as Pask's form of handing the control over to the system itself. The idea of participation was to be extended such that the users controlled the processes of the Fun Palace and its program. They would have to take responsibility and their desires and needs would invariably change. Whereas classical buildings mirror a specific situation or functionality in time the Fun Palace tried to mirror the process of social interaction. It therefore would have been open-ended by design.

Notes

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