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## In search of the 'Wild Contemporary'

- Exploring the potential of the techno utopian urban imaginary to contemporary mobility challenges

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### **ABSTRACT**

Contemporary global challenges to the distribution and organization of mobilities require new ways of envisioning and imagining to bring forward the discussion about new policies. This paper explores the imaginary visioning by using earlier utopian thoughts and visions as 'prisms' for the contemporary mobility debate in order to get closer to new imaginaries of technologies, complex systems and cultural change. The paper set out to identify key thoughts of utopian and critical urbanism (Harvey, Lefebvre, Friedman, Sandercock) and bridges those to contemporary critical scenario thinking (Dennis & Urry). However, in order to stimulate the imagination and visioning we want to engage with the earlier examples of what may be termed 'techno utopian urbanism' of Archigram, Buckminster Fuller, and Cedric Price as well as the critical utopian practices of the 'situationist' movement (and reaching further back to touch upon the legacy of Marinetti/Futurism and Le Corbusier). These ideas and visions, which at their time was considered extreme and far-fetched, are used as 'prisms' for setting up the imaginary visioning of contemporary and future challenges to mobility within and between cities. The paper opens this up by presenting a few contemporary urban projects from the architectural company BIG. Representing the 'wild contemporary' projects coming out of BIG are interesting examples of 'utopian pragmatism' resisting seeing for example 'sustainability' as loss of opportunities or lack of enjoyment. The paper thus aims to stimulate the envisioning of new cultures of mobilities, identities and engagements with the socio-technical systems of contemporary urbanism by searching backwards to the 1960's utopian urbanism and linking these to an example of the 'wild contemporary'.

## In search of the 'Wild Contemporary'

- Exploring the potential of the techno utopian urban imaginary to contemporary mobility challenges

Ole B. Jensen

*'A map of the world that does not include Utopia is not even worth glancing at'* (Oscar Wilde)

### 1. Introduction

Contemporary global challenges to the distribution and organization of mobilities require new ways of envisioning and imagining to bring forward the discussion about new policies. This paper explores the imaginary visioning by using earlier utopian thoughts and visions as 'prisms' for the contemporary mobility debate in order to get closer to new imaginaries of technologies, complex systems and cultural change. The paper is structured in five parts. After the introduction, part two discusses utopian and critical perspectives within urbanism in order to establish the intellectual current of 'alternative thinking'. In part three we return to the 1950's and 1960's stream of what might be termed 'Techno utopian urbanism'. From the works of Archigram, Price, and the situationist movement in particular a perspective on the utopian imaginary is re-launched. However in order to reach the contemporary situation of actual proposals for urban transformation based on a radical re-thinking the paper in part four explore the potential to fuelling this discussion by looking at the Danish architectural company BIG. BIG is seen as a potential 'wild contemporary' shaking, stirring and stimulating the utopian stream of urban imaginary the paper ends in part five with some concluding reflections.

### 2. Utopian and Critical urbanism

The paper set out to identify key thoughts of utopian and critical urbanism (Harvey 2000, Lefebvre 1970/2000, Friedman 2002, Sandercock 1998) and bridges those to contemporary critical scenario thinking (Dennis & Urry 2009). The interest in organising and orchestrating future urban development has been on the mind of philosophers, architects, city planners and academic scholars writ large since *'imagining spatiality of possible futures is an endeavour as old as the territorial appropriation of space and place'* (Jensen & Richardson 2004:2). Postmodern planning theorist Leonie Sandercock speak of 'insurgent planning histories' as another way of opening up the utopian and critical visioning of 'other urban futures' (Sandercock 1998). Pinder points with a reference to Lefebvre to the fact that utopian thought works as a stimulus for imagining change (Pinder 2005:14). According to Pinder there are at least three

distinctly different ways to define utopian thought. One would be to focus on the content of the 'good society', another to put emphasis on form, and the third to focus on function. The latter seems to carry the pragmatic dimension to utopian thought as it is concerned with what utopia is for and how it works for particular purposes (Pinder 2005:17), thus utopian imaginaries becomes pragmatic rather than simply visionary. Finding such notions within Marxian writers as Lefebvre, Marcuse, Frederic Jameson and Ernst Bloch the re-thinking of utopianism takes on very concrete aims as when the latter reconceptualises it as an 'anticipatory consciousness' and a 'principle of hope' situated at the level of everyday life (Pinder 2005:17). In the words of Planning Theorist John Friedman, utopian thought has to do with the capacity to imagine that which is not (Friedman 2002). Or, in his own words:

'Utopian thinking, the capacity to imagine a future that is radically different from what we know to be the prevailing order of things, is a way of breaking through the barriers of convention into a sphere of the imagination where many things beyond our everyday experience becomes possible' (Friedman 2002:103)

That is to say, not only will the utopian mind work towards new ways of thinking, but equally important a utopian reflection carries a critical potential to break through the 'barriers of convention'. Friedman argues that utopian thinking has two moments; critique and constructive vision (Friedman 2002:104). This is important since utopian thinking then becomes both a question of critically to challenge the given and established, but equally important the utopian reflection will be committed to an exploration of fruitful potentials and constructive vision. In relation to the architects and designers discussed in this paper, this is important since it offers a breaking away from an image suggesting new visions for the future mobility challenges comes by only by negative sanctions, scarcity, and break down. Needless to say these aspects may very well impact the situation and perhaps even be the future context as Dennis and Urry explore under the scenario of 'regional warlordism' (Dennis & Urry 2009:151) where a dystopia with a reminiscence of a 'Mad Max' apocalyptic future is on the horizon. However, the key idea here is that by exploring the 'constructive' side of utopian thinking that keeps searching for the 'positive' stimulus and the 'wild ideas' where for example sustainability may be achieved without sanctions and negative outcomes. As Friedman claims, this side of the utopian imaginary is as important as the critical side indeed. In the writings of Le Corbusier the linkage between utopian thought, technological dynamism, and a positive valorisation of mobility (movement) comes together in an appraisal of increased speed as a value for the future:

'Movement is the law of our existence: nothing ever stands still, for if it does it begins to go backwards and is destroyed, and this is the very definition of life' (Le Corbusier 1929/87: 243-244)

However it was not in an uncontrolled manner that flows and mobility would promise a better future. In fact Le Corbusier was very concerned with unregulated movements and 'nomadic' practices (Pinder 2005:103). Through the controllable flows and highly orchestrated channels of

mobility the future of the city would find a successful design. David Harvey argues that we may even discriminate between utopian thought that is ‘degenerate’ or neo-conservative utopias for urban development (Harvey 2000). The former might be Disneyland and the latter New Urbanism. Needless to say this rests on a complex normative and value-based discussion. However, Harvey is certainly not doing away with the utopian thought but rather giving it the Marxian touch that has become the hallmark of his decades of critical urban studies. More interestingly though, Harvey insists that to embark upon utopian thinking is to be explicitly spatiotemporal (Harvey 2000:182). That is to say, there is no utopian imagination without a ‘where’ and ‘when’ that immediately will have repercussions to the geographical imagination as one effect, but also as a window into discussions about the mundane, ordinary and concrete. The capacity to imagine material interventions before embarking on these is exactly one of the defining features of humans. To quote the main inspirational source of Harvey, Karl Marx:

‘A bee puts to shame many an architect in the construction of her cells but what distinguishes the worst of architects from the best of bees is this, that the architect raises the structure in imagination before he erects it in reality’ (Marx 1887/1972:233)

So the imaginary capacities are an important and (potentially) creative feature that we may engage with in order to push the limits of the future systems and design catering for mobility. The importance of a ‘critical scenario thinking’ cannot be underestimated if we are facing mobility challenges that in the current situation looks like they are ‘locked in’ to certain ways of designing, organising and practicing (Dennis & Urry 2009).



**Figure 1:** A new vehicle system (Dennis & Urry 2009:65)

Much literature confirms that the private car is a major challenge to the environment and health in the contemporary city (see e.g. Rogers 1997 and <http://www.nutramed.com/environment/cars.htm>) and thus represents a major mobility challenge. Many studies substantiate that the way we live separating housing from work as well as an increased amount of leisure travel by car all add up to a serious mobility challenge (Næss & Jensen 2005). On such a background imagining a new 'post-car system' is as Dennis and Urry engages with is a demanding task. But their reflections are interesting indeed if they are put next to the earlier techno utopian urbanisms we will explore later.

The complexity of the effort is breath taking by first sight. But what is of particular importance to the key idea of this paper is that the very analysis and discussion of the individual elements in this new system acknowledge the 'constructive' side of utopian thinking. Some of the elements may be achieved by means of negative sanctioning (e.g. new transport policies) but most of the other elements invites to a creative re-thinking of what a 'post-car system' might look like (see figure 1). Quite a few of these may even involve the more ludic and evocative dimensions to be explored later in this paper. The utopian visions of the following positions are less academic than the ones presented by Dennis and Urry but then they conversely might also be much better to actually feed a debate about the future. However, the scenarios of Dennis and Urry are very important and serve as a first qualifier. Methodologically they work with elements of extrapolation from the existing situation, establishing events and processes that would have to happen, relate these to some element of probability, and establish alternative scenarios. Along to this discussion one might discriminate between scenarios of possible, probable and preferable futures (Dennis & Urry 2009:147-8). They operate with three scenarios; 'Local sustainability', 'Regional Warlordism', and 'Digital Networks of Control' (Dennis & Urry 2009:149-158). Here we shall not engage with the content of these but just point to the fact that they all carry different repercussions to the organisation and practice of mobility. Rather we shall 'look back to look forward' in the sense that we shall explore earlier utopian thoughts and imaginaries to see if they make a fertile ground for contemporary re-interpretations of urban utopian thoughts.

### **3. 'Techno utopian urbanism'**

The 1960' and 1970's saw a number of radical and utopian architectural proposals. One such example was the Italian architectural group 'Superstudio' (1966-78) who's projects circulated around notions of utopian uses of technology, mega structures, mobile cities and egalitarian principles of participation (Lang & Menking 2003). Another group was Archigram who we will return to later in this paper:

'The 1960's bristled with images of futuristic cities, often featuring both monolithic megastructures and articulated urbanisms based on futuristic transport systems ... The Archigram group's Plug-in City and Walking Cities, with their novel forms, component parts and pseudo-organic extensibility, seemed to simultaneously fuse and challenge the

concepts of the building and the city. These pushed out the frontiers of possible urbanism' (Marshall 2009:42)

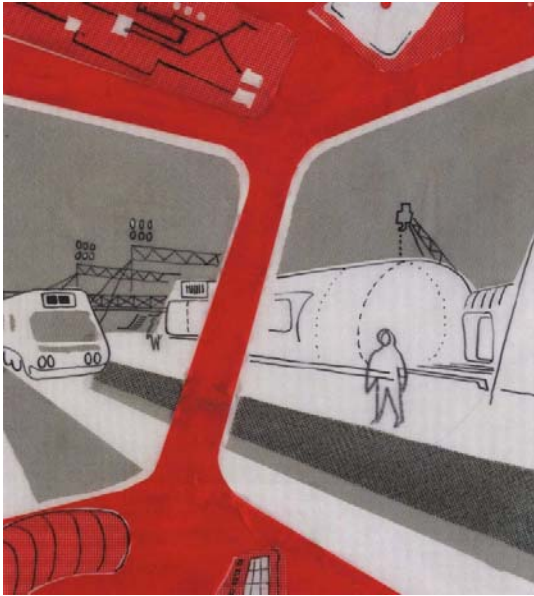
Also the ideas presented by Italian author Italo Calvino in his fantastic book 'The Invisible Cities' (Calvino 1972/98) fuelled the imagination with his imaginary dialogues between Kuplai Khan and Marco Polo, and bore evidence of a new utopian urban imaginary. Needless to say, the science fiction scene both within films and comic books also contributed to this, but that story lies beyond the confinements of this paper (see Phil 2008). The link between an interest in the temporary, mobile and technological seems to have been a common denominator for much utopian urbanism in the 1960's and 1970's:

'The architectural avant-garde of the 1960's and 1970's, in turn, showed a pronounced interest in the themes of flexibility and variability, long before the emergence of the new information and communication and work technologies ...' (Kohutek & Kamelithner 2006:29)

In order to stimulate the imagination and visioning we want to engage with the earlier examples of what may be termed 'techno utopian urbanism' of Archigram, Buckminster Fuller, and Cedric Price as well as the critical utopian practices of the 'situationist' movement. These ideas and visions, which at their time was considered extreme and far-fetched, are used as 'prisms' for setting up the imaginary visioning of contemporary and future challenges to mobility within and between cities. Like Archigram Cedric Price opposed the attempts to design 'place' as a static enclave (Price 2003). In 'Archigram no. 7' Price declared: '*It is interaction, not place, that is the essence of the city and city life*' (Cedric Price in Sadler 2005:128). Price thus worked with a notion of the temporary, fluid and mobile as a precondition to his design (Kolb 2008:12-13). In the words of Archigram member Peter Cook:

'Cedric Price's work has particular relevance to this 'connection' [the connection of mobile objects and mobile architecture] with reality. Price is almost the only architect in England actually building tensegrity structures, pop-up domes and disposable buildings – and therefore coming to grips with the near future' (Cook 1999:29)

Furthermore the notion of fun and the ludic came through in projects like Cedric Price's 'Fun Palace' project that bore a large resemblance to the thinking of Archigram (Sadler 2005:36). In the 'Fun Palace' project network and information is embedded in urban flows with a structure that becomes a 'University of the Streets' (Hardingham 2003:11). The concept of the 'Fun Palace' and similar projects were highly dependent on the personality of Cedric Price and his poetic and optimistic approach to urban development.



**Figure 2:** The ‘Pottery Belt’ (Cook 2008:68)

Modernism contained also its particular take on utopian thinking focusing on the technological visions of speed, functionality and rationality – from Le Corbusier (1947) via the CIAM planning doctrine (Pinder 2005:104) to the Futurism of Marinetti. The latter perspective however less occupied with humanism. The infamous and proto-fascist ‘Manifesto of Futurism’ published by Marinetti in *Le Figaro* in 1909 capture fascination gone wild and saw amongst other things the ‘beauty of speed’ as the promise of future technology:

‘We declare that the splendor of the world has been enriched by a new beauty: the beauty of speed. A racing automobile with its bonnet adorned with great tubes like serpents with explosive breath ... a roaring motor car which seems to run on machine-gun fire, is more beautiful than the Victory of Samothrace .... We will sing of the great crowds agitated by work, pleasure and revolt; the multi-colored and polyphonic surf of revolutions in modern capitals: the nocturnal vibration of the arsenals and the workshops beneath their violent electric moons: the gluttonous railway stations devouring smoking serpents; factories suspended from the clouds by the thread of their smoke; bridges with the leap of gymnasts flung across the diabolic cutlery of sunny rivers: adventurous steamers sniffing the horizon; great-breasted locomotives, puffing on the rails like enormous steel horses with long tubes for bridle, and the gliding flight of aero planes whose propeller sounds like the flapping of a flag and the applause of enthusiastic crowds’ (Marinetti 1909, excerpt out of 11 principles, obj)

Archigram (which is found to be more inspirational to this paper’s discussion) did not carry the proto-fascist ideology of Futurism (Harvey 1990). However, they were equally interested in the



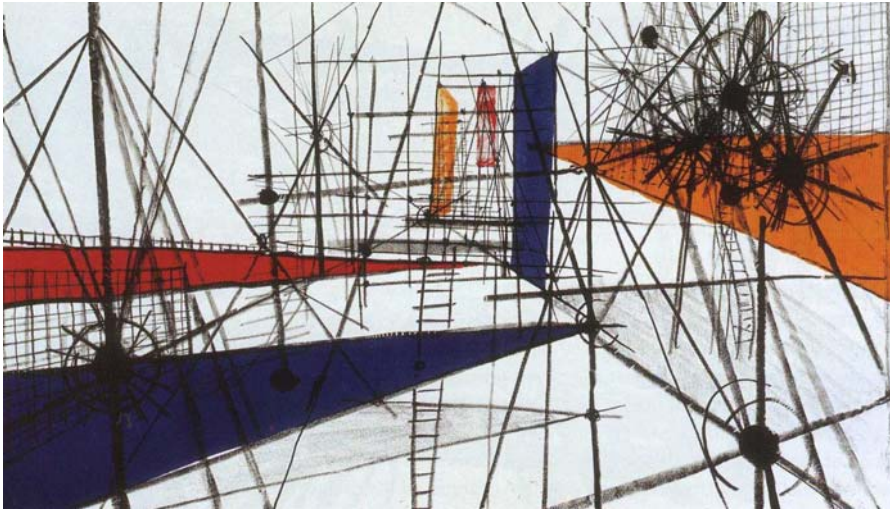
promised made by technology and the idea of ‘nomadism’ as a vision of people moving within a complex mega-structural network (Archigram 1994:440)

### **Situationism**

The art movement in the 1950’s fuelled an ambivalent urban criticism which manifested itself in the ‘Situanist International’ (SI) in 1957. In the words of David Pinder we learn that the movement ‘*contributed to an expansion and re-imagining of the political that was one of the most important legacies of 1968*’ (Pinder 2005:245). The situationist movement in its own way bridged the utopian and critical thoughts of as diverse persons and groups like Buckminster Fuller, Archigram, Reyner Banham, and Cedric Price (Sadler 1999). Through new forms of local engagement and explorations by means of subjective and ethnographic accounts for the city like the practice of ‘psychogeography’, the urban drifting termed ‘derive’ and the subversive reworking of established urban meaning named ‘détournement’ they aimed to challenge the establishment and the order of the day (Pinder 2005: 128, 150, 153). Again we see the centrality of movement (mobility) as when they declared to be ‘*opposed to the fixation of people to certain points of a city*’ and that the foundation for civilization is ‘leisure and play’ (Pinder 2005:129). The explorative, nomadic and ludic approach figures as a common denominator between SI and Archigram. However, the SI was not happy with the modern addiction to the private motor car and the way it dominated urban planning as the main approach to urban mobility like in the ‘Athens Charter’ coming out of the CIAM Congress (Pinder 2005:141, 137). The potential of the SI critique thus pointed towards alternative ways of thinking about urban movement altogether. Influential on the SI was the French philosopher and urban theorist Henri Lefebvre who explored a unique mixture of Marxist analysis with a strong sensitivity to the everyday life and the ‘ordinary’ (Lefebvre 1970/2000, 1974/91). To Lefebvre the issue of ‘the right to the city’ was as topical in the post-war world as ever and the general climate of anti-authoritarian thinking was profound across literature, performance art, poetry, painting, and other art forms. Also the surrealist movement came as a critical antidote to the modernist focus on rationality and homogenous sense of space:

‘Through their commitment to transforming everyday life and society, the surrealists contested in a variety of ways both the dominant socio-spatial order and the modern movement’s conceptions of space as it was usually defined (Pinder 2005:116)

From the surrealist movement we find a line of inspiration into ‘Situationism’. Archigram was clearly inspired by the situanist movement (Steiner 2009:72, 103). Equally important to the explorations and challenges raised by the SI was the utopian art projects of the Dutch artist Constant. In his projects he challenged the modern city by exploring utopian alternatives in the shape of paintings and huge mobiles illustrating the distrust to rationality and the importance of the fluid and ephemeral (Pinder 2005:161). In particular Constant’s vision of a ‘New Babylon’ created an interesting field of utopian exploration containing photos, art installations, paintings, mobiles, plans and drawings (Pinder 2005:162).



**Figure 3:** Image from 'New Babylon' (Cook 2008:15)

The sketches of 'New Babylon' evoke a sense of energy, movement and change (Pinder 2005:197). Constant worked on the 'New Babylon' project until 1974 where it was presented at a comprehensive exhibition. The work is interesting because of its relationship with mobility, utopian critique and experimentalism:

'Despite the seeming fixity of the models themselves, they provided only a possible frame for the mobile activities of the inhabitants. The emphasis was on allowing the inhabitants continually to reshape their environments according to their needs and desires, in harmony with what Constant called their 'experimental life-play' (Pinder 2005:200)

Social life in 'New Babylon' was to be ludic and nomadic and thus underpinned by a utopian imaginary drawing its energy on mobility and the evocative, playful engagement with the built environment. 'New Babylon' is nomadic indeed:

'With the automation of production and the creation of a ludic society, inhabitants are freed not only from the time discipline of work but also from fixity in place. They are unchained from the 'geology of lies' and leaden qualities that the situationist associated with contemporary urbanism' (Pinder 2005:205)

Here we find the premonition of the playful engagement with technology that became the hallmark of Archigram. But we of course also face a naive idea of nomadism as the sole road to a good society. As pointed out by many mobility scholars; mobility needs fixity, moorings and grounding (Adey 2010, Cresswell 2006, Urry 2007). Constant was however not advocating movement per se, but precisely the quality of movement and the relationship between the body and its environment and as such a more positive 'scripting' of the nomadic experience where he enrol the subject in 'joy rides' where movement is taking place for its own sake (Pinder

2005:205-6). That Constant connected beyond the realm of the arts can be seen in the fact that he gave a talk at the opening of the new buildings at Schiphol Airport in 1966 where is proposed a radically different perspective on airports. Pinder describe the talk in the following manner:

‘The airport reflected aspects of the non-sedentary and playful life to come, he claimed, being an ‘anticipatory image of the city of tomorrow, the playtown of homo ludens, the décor for a new mass culture’ (Pinder 2005:206)

Within the situationist vision of the utopian urban future mobility and flexibility came in central and artists like Ivan Chitchevlov (who articulated the ‘Formulary for a New Urbanism’ in 1953) advocated flexible and mobile architectural complexes (Pinder 2005:171) and thereby made premonition of the temporary and flexible structures that came into being with Cedric Price, Buckminster Fuller and Archigram.

### **Archigram**

Archigram was a British collective of artists and architects which main output was 9 issues of the journal ‘Archigram’ between 1961 and 1970 (Sadler 2005:3). The name is a hybrid of ‘Architecture’ and ‘Telegram’ and stresses the group’s interest in communication and media as an inherent dimension to architecture (Cook 1999, Steiner 2009). Matt Jones describes Archigram as ‘proto-bloggers’ and exponents of an architecture of science fiction (<http://io9.com/5362912/the-city-is-a-battlesuit-for-surviving-the-future>). The subtitle of Sadler’s book on Archigram has the telling title ‘Architecture without Architecture’ (Sadler 2005). The group had strong artistic and ideological relations to the ‘situationists’ and to the provocative thoughts of Reyner Banham (Sadler 2005:58-60). To Archigram architecture was as much about communication and ideas as about material buildings and structures (Steiner 2009:11), which earned the group a reputation within conservative and traditional architectural environments as anything but architecture. However, within the professional debate in the post war area the notion of ‘architecture without buildings’ has become an established idea (see <http://www.archined.nl/nieuws/venice-3-architecture-without-building/>). Influenced by American pop culture and mass consumerism Archigram also managed to sustain a long historical tradition to utopian thinking:

‘The visions of Archigram fitted into a long-standing British tradition of technological utopianism extending from Thomas More on, where visions of what engineering could produce were combined with the ideals of social progress’ (Steiner 2009:22)

The influence of the group is debateable at least when it comes to analysing if it had any real impact on actual building practice. As Sorkin argue: ‘*Archigram’s projects were at once hugely influential formally and almost completely ineffectual politically*’ (Sorkin 2009:173). Despite their proclaimed social agenda, they were criticized for being techno-centric, apolitical and in lack of conceptual rigour. This clearly came to surface when no less that Sigfried Gideon named their activities ‘playboy architecture’ (Steiner 2009:33). The interest in ideas, communication

and humans rather than buildings, objects and artefacts obviously was a provocative position in a field preoccupied with design of cities and houses. On the other hand, the agenda of Archigram did hit home important points. One such point was the strong contemporary disbelief in planning with a capital “P” and the interest in more human involvement in the design of human habitats. Peter Green put this very clearly and provocatively with his statement on rain and Oxford Street:

‘If when it is raining on Oxford Street the buildings are no more important than the rain, why draw the buildings and not the rain?’ (Green in Steiner 2009:33)

But there was a certain techno-optimism in the world view of Archigram when they cried out for more technology, playfulness and chaos:

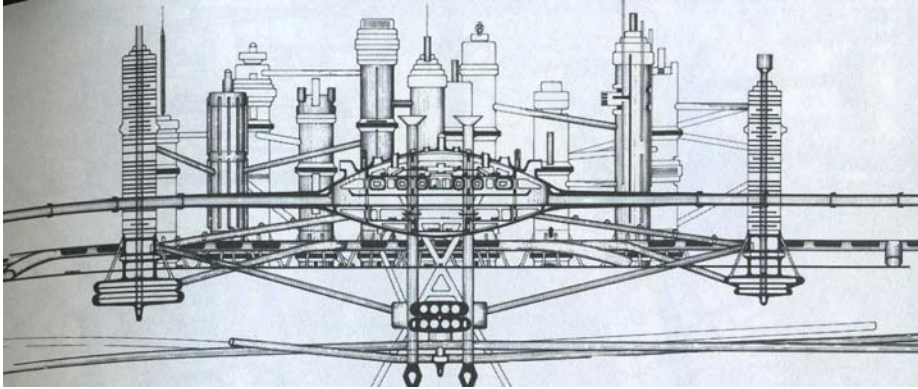
‘What the new generation of Architects wants, is an exciting city; one howling with electronics, pulsating with the rumble of great motors, filled with the imagery of Science Fiction’ (Archigram, Living City, in Steiner 2009:71)

It is safe to say that Archigram were seismographic to their contemporary time and that they have left a legacy of ideas that might fuel inspiration in these early decades of the new millennium where global challenges to the most fruitful use of technology and the built environment is heavily on the agenda. Despite their proclaimed social and progressive agenda, the ideological undercurrent of Archigram was one of pragmatism.

A particular preoccupation with the fluid, ephemeral and mobile came out of the interest in ‘nomadism’ (Steiner 2009:106) as a progressive and open relation to ‘place’ shunning the regressive, place-bound ideas of identity and belonging. Within the technological state-of-the-art network city an increased focus on circulation and mobility became central:

‘The key to revitalizing the city was not to be found in aesthetics of technological symbolism but in the technologies that enabled circulation and communication throughout the landscape’ (Steiner 2009:106-7)

As Shane argues (with a reference to Kevin Lynch) both Archigram and Cedric Price subscribed to a notion of the ‘City as a Machine’. This was a notion that put mobility and flow at the heart of the city (Shane 2005:42). The analysis of mobility and the network city in Archigram was decades ahead of the contemporary understanding of cities as networked sites of stratified and layered mobility (e.g. Easterling 1999, Graham & Marvin 2001, Jensen & Morelli 2010, Varnelis 2008): *‘The city becomes increasingly striated into levels for movement at different speeds and crisscrossed with connections on the vertical, horizontal and diagonal’* (Steiner 2009:200). The city as a complex machine and network was a key figure in Archigram’s utopian urban imagery as here in the illustration of the ‘Interchange’ project from 1963 (Cook 1999:22-23).



**Figure 4:** 'Interchange' (Archigram 1994:83)

Mobility was central but in yet another way than simply by focusing on the movement of people. Archigram dreamt of whole cities that moved (Steiner 2009:196). This came out of an interest in the flexible and the adjustable that much city design and urban planning struggle to accommodate (and which is now seen in the contemporary call for 'temporary use' and flexibility, see Hayden & Temel 2006). Furthermore, Archigram shared an agenda with situationism and also Cedric Price in their interest in the evocative and joyful experiences of the city. Not even today is fun and play a set of 'serious' concepts within city planning. But Archigram evoked ideas from Huizinga (1963) on the importance of play and fun to fully explore the human capacities for flourishing. Furthermore, Archigram's mega-structure projects like the 'Plug-In City' (figure 5) were deeply wedded to notions of continuous circulation and mobility (Sadler 2005:14), indicating that the basic urban understanding of Archigram was one that were putting mobility and the network understanding of the city centrally:

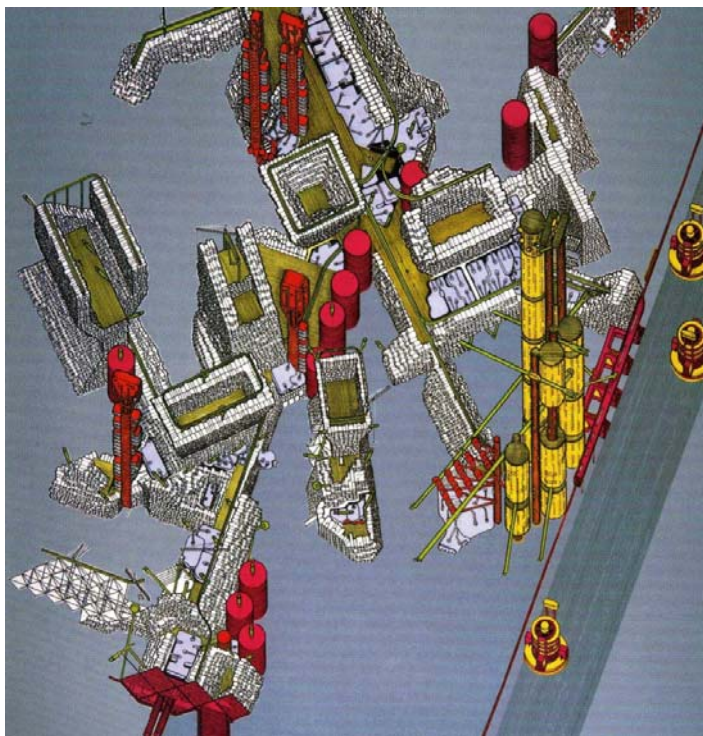
'Preference for nomads over commuters, flexibility over firmity, consumption over production, and the network over the agora – all this stretched the category of circulation beyond its traditional domain of flow in and around buildings' (Steiner 2009:238).

The mega-structure of the 'Plug-In City' afforded room for active citizens' involvement and articulated a notion of the 'city-in-flux' (Sadler 2005:16). In the project 'Living City' the groups sought to identify and classify 'movement-cycles' and the origin, destination, direction, route and speed of individuals and crowds (Sadler 2005:56). This again suggests an immanent relationship between urbanism and mobility, or in the words of Archigram:

'The overall configuration of mass movement is also significant in predicting the behaviour patterns of man in motion. These patterns have the effect of splitting and isolating known city environments in loosely defined but distinct areas or locations of psycho-geographical drift' (Sadler 2005:61)

The 'Living City' project moreover argued for a rehabilitation of infrastructures and road junctions as real 'places' and not just instrumental sites of traffic (Sadler 2005:77). One might

dispute with this ‘upgrading’ of mundane built environments like infrastructures but the centrality of mobility to Archigram’s urbanism was so profound that the flow of traffic not only were seen to bring to live city movement, but actually also to work as a generator of form (Sadler 2005:78). In line with its utopian heritage Archigram’s visioning of the urban quest for mobility was not to limit it but rather the opposite: *‘Archigram’s urbanism was an extreme response to an extreme problem, permitting the city to keep meeting an apparently insatiable demand for mobility’* (Sadler 2005:79). The group explicitly connected the surge for mobility to notions of democracy and the ‘good life’ (Sadler 2005:80) and both Archigram and Reyner Banham embraced the American style of post-war urbanism and its unlimited quest for mobility. Needless to say, this is no sustainable solution to the contemporary mobility challenges if one only sees the private car driven on oil and gasoline as the technological mobility mediator in this model. However, the mega-structures and the urban networks of Archigram might be imagined as ‘armatures’ (Shane 2005) for other vehicles and mobility modes than the gas-driven car: *‘Archigram began to conceive of the car ‘as a mobile piece of furniture’, plugged in, perhaps to robotic servicing’* (Sadler 2005:113). As a consequence of this shift in the understanding of the car Archigram became preoccupied with the ‘connection points’ and the interface between the system and the system user (Sadler 2005:121). The car is a mediator and system component anticipating the actor-network understanding of the car and the human as complexly related (Latour, 2005, Urry 2003, 2004).



**Figure 5:** ‘Plug-In City’ (Cook 2008:20)

The 'Plug-In City' in many ways predicted the network city with all its multiple complexity of overlapping networks and 'critical points of contacts' (Jensen & Morelli 2010). This came out of a strong appreciation of the importance of flow and mobility to architecture:

'One of the greatest weaknesses of our immediate urban architecture is the inability to contain the fast-moving object as part of the total aesthetic – but the comic imagery has always been strongest here. The representation of the movement-objects and movement-containers is consistent with the rest, and not only because 'speed' is the main gesture' (Cook 1999:29).

Archigram definitely put emphasis on the temporary and the 'out of the ordinary' that has a value for contemporary 'wild urbanism'. However, even if the careless and joyful attitude on the backcloth of swinging British pop culture and the laid back US West Coast scene made an identifying character for Archigram (Sadler 2005:151) it was the same playfulness that made them a target for not being politically correct (even before the term was in effect). Faced with the political criticism Archigram assumed a guise of pragmatism leaning upon the tradition of liberalism (Sadler 2005:187). Equally has the contemporary example of 'wild utopian urbanism' that we now will turn to been accused for being neo-pragmatic and too liberal. However, here we shall explore the potential for nourishing new, creative and 'wild' ideas of urbanism that also is the hallmark of the Danish architectural company 'BIG'.

#### **4. BIG – towards a 'wild contemporary'**

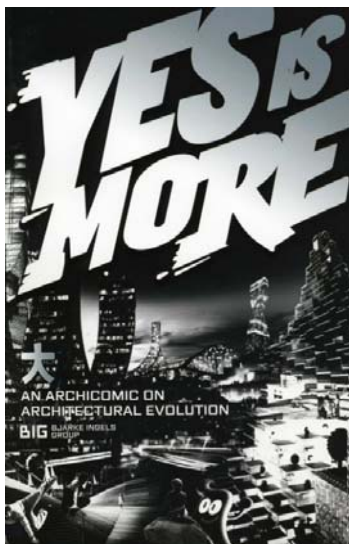
Representing the 'wild contemporary' projects coming out of BIG are interesting examples of 'utopian pragmatism' resisting seeing for example 'sustainability' as loss of opportunities or lack of enjoyment. It must be admitted though that the 'Yes Man' self-propelling image of BIG company owner Bjarke Ingels is provoking to many within architecture and urban planning. Obviously there is an element of self-promotion in order to catch the attention of the public (and the developers). But the work and thoughts of BIG cannot be dismissed as simple branding and self-promotion. The founder of the BIG Bjarke Ingels identifies the position of the architectural company as one of 'pragmatic utopianism'. Accordingly this is a matter of navigating between two positions:

'Historically the field of architecture has been dominated by two opposing extremes. On one side an avant-garde of wild ideas, often so detached from reality that they fail to become something other than eccentric curiosities. On the other side there are well-organized corporate consultants that build predictable and boring boxes of high standard. Architecture seems entrenched between two equally unfertile fronts: either naively utopian or petrifying pragmatic. Rather than choosing one over the other, BIG operates in the fertile overlap between the two opposites. A pragmatic utopian architecture that takes on the creation of socially, economically and environmentally perfect places as a practical objective' (BIG 2009:12)

Clearly BIG is not trying to please the environmental movement with its ‘manifesto for hedonistic sustainability’ (BIG 2009:50). Here we shall not engage in a discussion of the lack of nuances in the position of BIG on this but rather put emphasis on the pragmatic utopian character of their arguments:

‘What if ecology wasn’t about regression – but about progress? What if sustainable living wasn’t about changing your lifestyle and turning off the lights, turning down the heat and slowing down? What if we didn’t have to adapt our lifestyle to sustainability, but adjusted our sustainable designs to the way we want to live? Instead of trying to change people, we could change the world. What if we could design a society where the more energy you spend, the more energy you get? We need a new manifesto for hedonistic sustainability’ (BIG 2009:50)

Such provocative statements will make no friends on the environmental policy arena. However, the boldness and the utopian dimension of this refusal to link sustainability with restriction and prohibits draws a line back to the playful and wild thoughts of the situationists and Archigram. The title of the book from BIG (which actually is an exhibition catalogue made as a cartoon) say it all: ‘*Yes Is More*’ (see figure 6). To Ingels ‘yes’ equals evolution and ‘no’ revolution and provocative clear-sightedness they proclaim that the ‘Darwian lesson’ so to speak is not that the strongest will survive, but rather that this is the destiny of the one most adaptable! There is an interesting political/philosophical discussion to be made of how saying yes might actually be more progressive than the critical ‘no’.

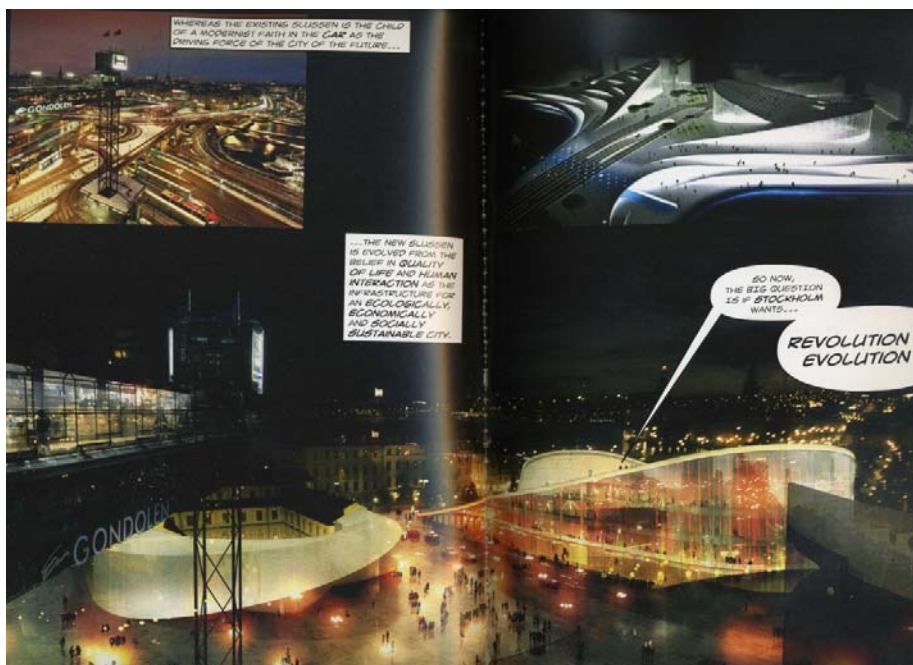


**Figure 6:** ‘Yes Is More’ book front cover (BIG 2009)

However this is obviously a tight line and many developers would love BIG’s thoughts about there being no problem uniting growth and sustainability. It seems that the crucial difference between positions in this discussion is what sort of technological paradigm one takes point of

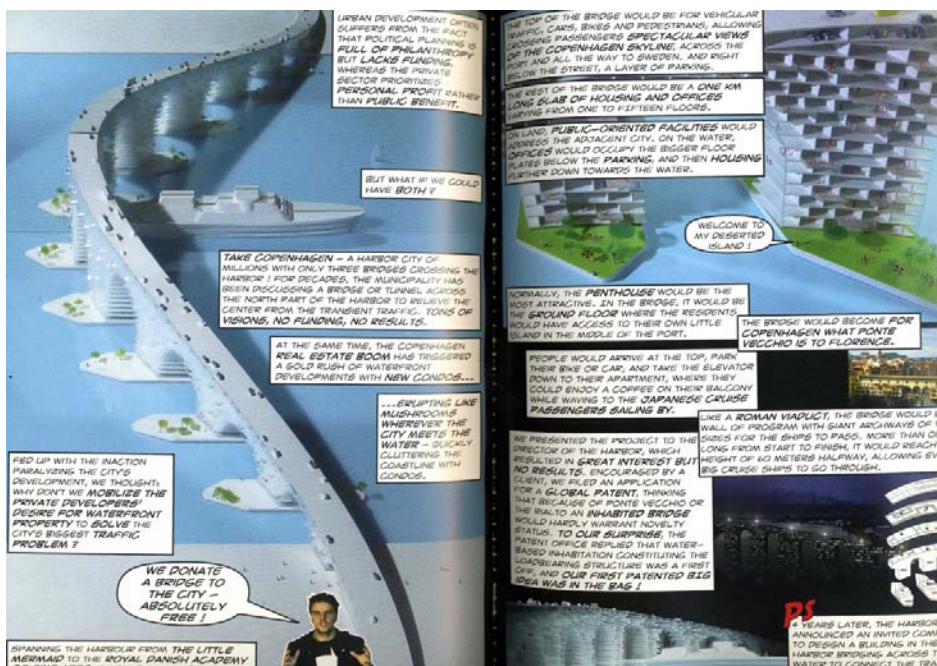


departure in. Much environmental critique does rightfully point at the problematic assumptions about more material growth and environmental sustainability framed within the current way of producing and consuming energy. However, the inclusion of wind power, solar energy, biogas etc. might open up to another way of thinking about the notions of sustainable solutions (and this position will then again be accused of leaning on the notion of the ‘technological fix’). Here this debate cannot be taken, but it will be acknowledged that within the existing technological frame of consumption and production there are ‘limits to growth’. However, the real intention of the paper is to see if the lineage from the wild situationists and the techno utopian imaginary of the 1960’s and 1970’s architectural thinking can find a resonance with contemporary thoughts. Actually BIG unfolds the calculus related to the question ‘what if Denmark had an energy bill of zero?’ According to BIG this would take either that the Island of Storstrøm was covered with solar cells, or a wind farm of 75 x 75 km at sea, or a biogas production facility at the size of the greater Copenhagen metropolitan area (BIG 2009:51). We shall not engage in whether these proposals are realistic or not, but they do illustrate that BIG are engaging with the more practical sides as well. In line with the ‘Cradle to Cradle’ philosophy of McDonough & Braungart (2002) BIG also expand the agenda to one where ‘waste’ might become an useful input for a production cycle where ‘we would become our own energy source’ (even though BIG do not reference McDonough and Braungart). In relation to the issue of urban mobility the project ‘Social infrastructure’ is of particular interest (figure 7). The project is a planning and design proposal for central Stockholm in Sweden. The project deals with what is termed ‘Slussen’ which is the important interface between the northern and southern embankments.



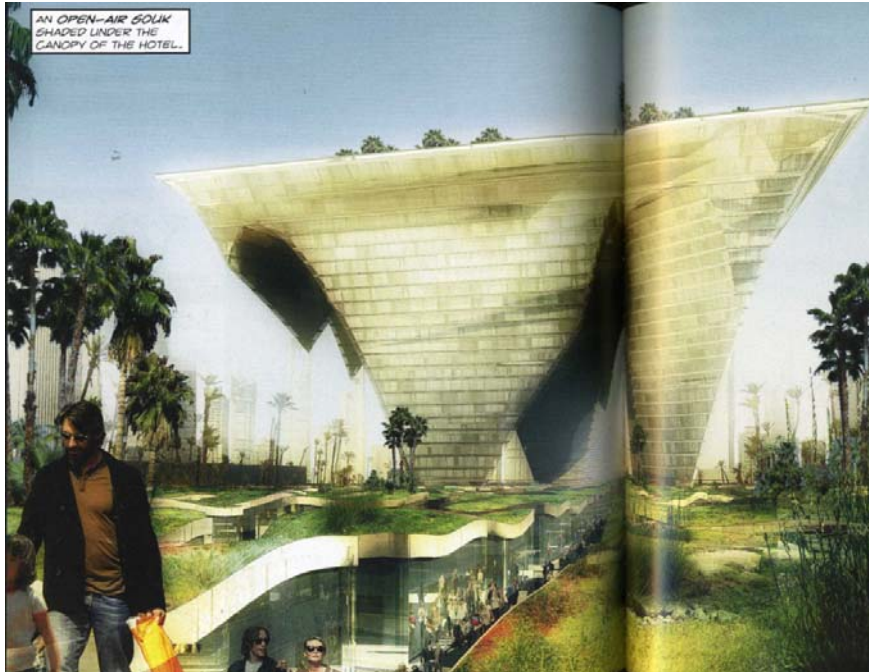
**Figure 7:** Image of ‘Slussen’ proposal (BIG 2009:294-5)

At the site modernist planning doctrines have left the urban infrastructure imprint on the urban fabric as a broad belt of asphalt that blocks most of the waterfront from the city behind a barrier of cars: ‘Slussen is the epitome of the prioritization of car traffic at the expense of all other forms of urban movement’ (BIG 2009:286). BIG asked the question if this three dimensional form could be re-designed not to accommodate cars but people? The way BIG approached the task was to ‘turn Slussen inside out ... by wrapping all the vehicular infrastructures in multiple layers of public programs and urban spacing’ (BIG 2009:187). Another ‘wild’ mobility project is the ‘domus pontus’ which creates a hybrid between housing and infrastructure as it turns a bridge into a house ... or a house into a bridge (BIG 2009:298-299)



**Figure 8:** Image of ‘Domus Pontus’ (BIG 2009:298-9)

One of the truly ‘wild’ projects that aim at both the mobility challenges as well as the environmental challenges is the ‘Post-petroleum Palace’ which is an unrealized project of 200.000 m2 mixed program in the deserts of Dubai. Apart from working from the notion of ‘progressive sustainability’ the project also embraces the cultural and religious context by embracing the ‘five pillars of Islam’ into the physical design proposal adding a cosmological dimension to the project.



**Figure 9:** Image of ‘Post-petroleum Palace’ (BIG 2009:354)

At the end of the book *‘Yes is More’* there is an interview with Bjarke Ingels which may be worth referencing here at the end of the paper:

‘We’ve been working with this idea of pragmatic utopia. We have tried to reinstate the modernist ambition to have big ideas. It’s not just a question of personal fulfillment. It’s actually a tool that the world can use to constantly refurbish itself. And as an architect you’re a midwife of this continual rebirth of the world as you want live in it. But in order not to become dreamers who always collide with all the limitations of real life, we try to realize this utopian ambition within the confines of an operational unit: to think big, and to think in terms of urbanism, but to do it within a unit over which you actually have power. Once a project on that unit is materialized it will bleed out and influence its surroundings’ (BIG 2009:394)

The hallmark of BIG’s work is therefore utopian in the sense that ‘wild’ and unfamiliar proposals are explored, and realist in the sense that the company delimit the task to a site, field or area over which its proposals will carry influence. An indication of this strategy is also the deliberate blurring of architecture and urban design in the projects. All buildings (‘architecture’ in a traditional sense) have urban programs and urban dimensions like semi-public spaces or public accessibility. This is for example the case in the project being built right now in the ‘Ørestad’ in Copenhagen. The so-called ‘8-house’ (from its physical shape as the number 8) is a housing unit that opens up with transit access and public paths weaving in and across it changing a private housing unit into an openly accessible urban space (see fig 10).



**Figure 10:** The '8-house' (photo: Ole B. Jensen)

Apart from the large scale architecture and urban design proposals that this paper has focused on BIG also has taken up designing a Muslim mosque and a mental institution. The company deliberately engages with themes and issue of taboo and this illustrates the pragmatic and the provocative even more and thus qualifies them to be thought of as an interesting example of the 'wild contemporary' within architectural and urban design practice in Denmark.

## **5. Concluding remarks**

From this paper it might seem that the author is a happy go lucky follower of as much 'wild' and anti-authoritarian imagery as possible. However, even though it is crucial to address the increasing social and environmental problems of contemporary urban societies with a certain element of 'realism' (whatever that may mean), the position taken in this paper by means of drawing upon experiments within art, architecture and planning from the 1950's and until today is rather that we must find new ways of imagining 'that which is not'. Given the many years of experience with coldblooded and opportunistic politics (from the global exploitation of third world countries by 'first world' countries to the reckless dominance of capital over urban lifeworlds in Western cities) it seems a much less given answer who might be the naive; the utopian or the 'realist'? The point made in this paper is that we need to explore other ways of engaging with how to produce alternative futures, and of course such change might grow out of necessity and scarcity. However, it may also grow out of the explorative engagement with new technologies and social interactions that are not driven by negative sanctions and moral arguments. 'Looking back to look forward' is therefore an unexploited potential that must be explored. The paper thus aims to stimulate the envisioning of new cultures of mobilities, identities and engagements with the socio-technical systems of contemporary urbanism by searching backwards to the 1950's and 1960's utopian urbanism and linking these to an example

of the 'wild contemporary'. To return to the praise Pinder gives for the utopian momentum of situationism in general and of Constant's New Babylon in particular, we may lean on his statement that utopian thinking may help to '*estrangle taken-for-granted aspects of urbanism and city living and to challenge common definitions about what is impossible and possible ... It is a vital part of being a 'partisan of possibilities'*' (Pinder 2005:265). Precisely being a 'partisan of possibilities' is a vital dimension of the reengagement with the thoughts and visions from the 1950's and onwards. To see potentials in the contemporary technological and urban development is probably the most fruitful way of changing our ideas and practices next to the doomsday scenarios of enforced and negative transformation. The techno utopian urbanism thus '*pushed the frontiers of possible urbanism*' as we saw Marshall term it (Marshall 2002:42).

This paper was written partly out of an old long-going interest in the techno utopian thought of earlier provocative designs like Archigram, but also out of an interest in participating in a discussion about geographies of transition in general and of mobility challenges in particular. Needless to say the current trajectory of production and consumption will put strain on the environmental basis of all global societies. Much can be done, by making new policies and regulations within the existing technological horizon. However, much more needs to be done and in relation to this new systems and designs must be discussed. Here the value of 'critical scenario thinking' is an important input but also the visionary and utopian imaginaries need to be mobilised. In this paper we have argued for both a backwards glance into the post-war history of techno utopian visions as well as we have opened up the discussion of contemporary utopian imaginaries as we find them epitomized in the 'wild' projects of BIG. The project of BIG cannot solve the current mobility challenges nor the environmental problems of the global community. Rather the point has been to invite to a reflection upon the critical and utopian capacities for imagining 'that which is not'. The easiest thing is to shoot down such ideas and visions from the safe bastions of well-meaning 'realism'. However, we may very well have reached a point in time where not only our technologies cannot save us but where we also need new utopian visions to find alternative routes. By exploring the potential of the techno utopian urban imaginary to the contemporary mobility challenges we have illustrated that the 'wild contemporary' needs to be investigated. The work of BIG is not the only way into this territory, but it is at least one route.

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