

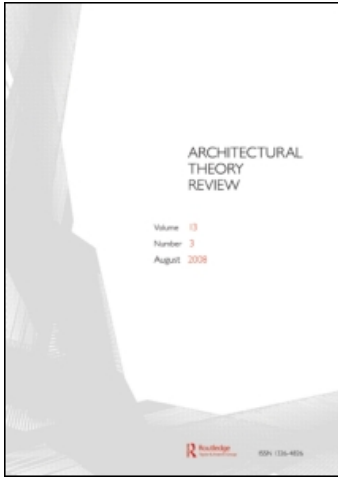
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JARED LANGEVIN

REYNER BANHAM: In Search of an Imageable, Invisible Architecture

In the 1969 book *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment*, architectural critic and historian Reyner Banham drew from a decade of his own writings about “environments fit for human activities”, heralding the possibilities of a technologically-driven, man-made climate that would eliminate the need for “massive” buildings by rendering their physical delimitation of habitable space obsolete. In theorising this “other” architecture, however, Banham appeared to be challenging his own simultaneous praise for the “imageability” of buildings by the New Brutalist and Archigram groups in London. In particular, Banham’s celebration of Archigram’s formal visions for the technological future conflicted with his concurrent arguments that architecture could shed its traditional concern with formal aesthetics. This paper explores the existence of such theoretical positions in Banham’s work during the 1960s and discusses reasons for his willingness to adopt multiple, seemingly contradictory viewpoints.

It is less a case of a changed mind than of being of two minds, and apparently of having two conflicting views simultaneously, with each seeming to be held passionately and exclusively

Nigel Whiteley, *Reyner Banham: Historian of the Immediate Future*.¹

Disillusioned with the architectural establishment of the 1960s, architecture critic and historian Peter Reyner Banham wrote one of the more subversive architectural histories in *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment*, which was published in 1969. Holding to a traditional survey format for organisation, the book drew its radical nature from a consideration that threatened to do away with the usefulness of buildings altogether: the emergence of a *man made climate*, made possible through developing technologies like electricity and domestic air conditioning, which negated architecture's time honoured role as the sole physical creator of environments for living. In these pages, Banham used his unique critical standpoint as an outsider to bring architecture's "operational lore" into question, expressing a special distaste for the profession's preoccupation with geometrically defined building forms and their visual appeal.

As he offered this anti-architectural conjecture, however, Banham was also expressing allegiance to an evolving Modern aesthetic, first praising the conscious "imageability" of the Smithsons' New Brutalist buildings and subsequently the fantastical publications of Archigram. Both of these groups espoused the revisionist ideals that inspired his search for an *architecture autre*² in the 1950s and 1960s, but Archigram's efforts in particular to pursue a new, pop-culturally relevant image for architecture resulted in work that was only symbolic and representational of new technology, having little to do with the way

it could actually function to create environments. Banham's support of Archigram's "imageable" work therefore presents a conflict with his strongest points in *The Well-Tempered Environment*, revealing his attachment to the very academic aestheticism that his writings on artificial environments responded against, as well as a willingness to openly espouse multiple, arguably incompatible points of view.

First Machine Age Aesthetes

Reyner Banham's first major work, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*, was an effort to revise the widely published and accepted accounts of modern architectural history. Written as his PhD dissertation under the guidance of famed historian Nikolaus Pevsner at the Courthald Institute in London, it called into question the "selective and classicizing" tendencies of many of the seminal history texts on Modernism, some of which were written by Pevsner himself.³ Banham was critical of texts like Pevsner's because he believed their substance to be misleading—a presentation of clear-cut and neatly categorised views of developments in early twentieth century architecture that were in fact far messier. He was particularly suspicious of Pevsner's establishment of Walter Gropius as an originating figure for Modern design. Of Gropius, Banham wrote,

His re-establishment as one of the leaders of Modern design after about 1923 was as the head of a school devoted to Machine Age architecture and the design of machine products, employing a Machine Age aesthetic that had been worked out by other men in other places.⁴

Banham also criticised Gropius for having created a myth that Bauhaus designs were

“functional” when the intent clearly had much more to do with aesthetics than it did with economy:

[I]t was no more an inherently economic style than any other. The true aim of the style had been, to quote Gropius's words about Bauhaus and its relation to the world of the Machine Age ... “to invent and create forms symbolizing that world.”⁵

Existing in what was to Banham a completely transformative Machine Age, most early modern architects, like Gropius and others at the Bauhaus, used technology and the Machine as an excuse for a stylistically motivated *Machine Aesthetic*. Banham believed that the *Aesthetic* reflected its architects' superficial understanding of developing technologies and materials. He wrote, for example, of how Le Corbusier's smooth white concrete surfaces did not accurately reflect the machine technology used to make them and had more to do with “ill drawn analogies between machinery and abstract art.”⁶ He also marvelled at Le Corbusier's stubborn pursuit of design decisions that only could have made sense on a formal level, such as a difference between frame and wall which “must be made manifest at all costs, even at the cost of common-sense logic.”⁷

Banham further distanced himself from historians like Pevsner by supporting the Futurists, a small group of Italian artists and architects responding to the rapid industrialisation of Italy following 1890 by embracing mechanisation and allowing it to inform their theoretical standpoints: Futurist painter and sculptor Umberto Boccioni referred to a new “mechanized individual”, who made “maximum use of the technological and mechanical extensions of

his experience which the twentieth century offers”.⁸ “The Man Multiplied by the Motor”, a phrase coined by group founder F. T. Marinetti, exemplified the Futurist admiration for speed and the automobile.⁹ Drawings by Futurist architect Antonio Sant'Elia (see Fig. 1), performed entirely on paper, called to a halt the “stylistic changes” that had modified architecture to that point and advocated a completely “new set of forms, lines, and reasons for living” in harmony with the new age of machines.¹⁰ To Banham, these artists were the only intellectuals who fundamentally understood technology's value to art and architecture in more than just aesthetic terms. In *Theory and Design*, he wrote that “change over to a technological society ... animated the whole of Futurist thought, and ... enabled them to exploit more quickly than the other European intellectuals the new experiences”.¹¹ He added in the article “Primitives of a Mechanized Art” that “The Futurists did not merely accept the fact that they had to live in the twentieth century: they volunteered to join it”.¹²

Pevsner barely mentioned the Futurists in his histories of modern architecture, and when he did, it was only to downplay the group's significance. In *Pioneers of Modern Design*, for example, he spoke of Sant'Elia's visions as appearing “fantastical when set side by side with the *Sachlichkeit* of the work of those German architects who agreed with Muthesius”.¹³ Banham regarded this dismissal as symptomatic of the aforementioned “selective” character plaguing Pevsner's writing, which failed to accommodate work or individuals that conflicted with the established chronologic and theoretical order of his histories.

However discordant Banham's acceptance of the Futurists may have been with the opinions of his contemporaries, it was nevertheless

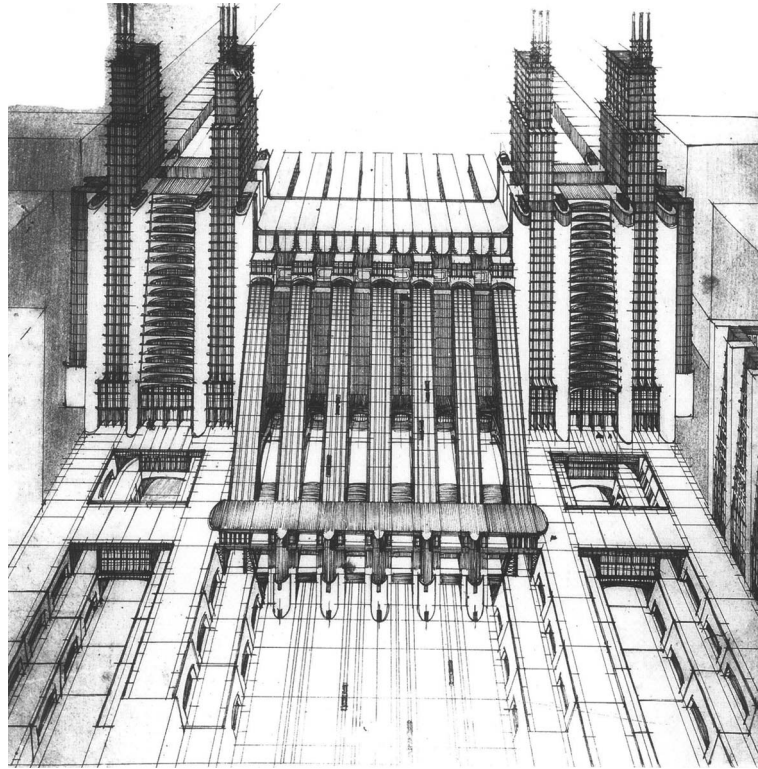


Figure 1. Station for airplanes and trains with funiculars and elevators on three street levels, La Città Nuova, Antonio Sant'Elia, 1914.

characterised by the same response to formal aesthetics that he argued had attracted fellow critics to “mainstream” works of Modernism. Indeed, though their sets of shapes and lines were more overtly indicative of the new “Machine Age”, the Futurists were nevertheless a group of artists reacting to societal changes through primarily visual means. Here, Banham was first exposing his preoccupation with the notion of a *Zeitgeist*—of an architecture that was expressive of the culture from which it arose, and which evidenced a “profound reorientation towards a changed world”.¹⁴ For him, the images produced by the Futurists, though they belonged to their own kind of aesthetic, were more appropriately “of the twentieth century” and indicated much about

the Machine Age that they were created for. Similar beliefs occasionally led Banham to express enthusiasms for the work of the modern architects that he was most critical of. In the conclusion to *Theory and Design*, for example, Banham praised works including the Villa Savoye just pages after levelling the aforementioned accusations against Le Corbusier, citing the work’s high anthropological value:

Their status as masterpieces rests, as it does with most other masterpieces of architecture, upon the authority and felicity with which they give expression to a view of men in relation to their environment.¹⁵

The *Zeitgeist*, and Banham's fascination with it, would continue to figure prominently into his work from the 1960s, especially as he endeavoured to support the "imageable" works of the New Brutalists and Archigram while developing a belief in another kind of architecture—one that would transcend formal characterisation entirely.

The Second Machine Age and *Une Architecture Autre*

For Banham, the 1960s were at once a continuation of and a departure from the previous decade's work on *Theory and Design*, which was published in 1960. The book had examined the architecture that was built during what he deemed to be the First Machine Age, when machines had reached a human scale but were only able to be experienced by the elite of society.¹⁶ He claimed that at the time of writing (1950s), a Second Machine Age had already been ushered into England through universally accessible domestic electronics, but no "body of theory" had risen to meet the new technological developments. The new decade saw Banham searching for this body of theory in architecture, drawing upon his previous criticisms of mainstream modern aestheticism while also now building towards his own "alternative" response to the contemporary Machine Age.

The search for an "alternative", or "other" architecture showed Banham to be heavily influenced by involvement with two groups. The first was the Futurists, whose appeal to him has already been described. Of particular importance was Banham's interest in the Futurist painter Boccioni, who, in pursuing an artistic response unique to the new conditions of the twentieth century, he said had become

the father of "anti-art". In his book *Pittura Scultura Futurista*, Boccioni wrote:

We will put into the resulting vacuum all the germs of the power that are to be found in the example of primitives and barbarians of every race, and in the rudiments of that new sensibility emerging in all the anti-artistic manifestation of our epoch—café-chantant, gramophone, cinema, electric advertising, mechanistic architecture, skyscrapers, night-life, speed, automobiles, aeroplanes and so forth.¹⁷

Pursuit of this "anti-art" inspired the formation of the second group to influence Banham, the Independent Group (IG) of London, of which he was a member. The Independent Group met at London's Institute of Contemporary Art (ICA) in two series of sessions, one in 1952 and another in 1955. The group consisted of artists, architects, designers, and critics with a diversity of sometimes conflicting interests ranging from pop culture to anti-art to cultural theory, all of which reflected a general desire to revise the established values of high modern culture. Banham operated somewhere in between these varied interests while bringing a particular focus on technology as the head chair of the meetings starting in the autumn of 1952. He also helped to stage the *Parallel of Life and Art* exhibition in the autumn of 1953 at the ICA, which was based on the common interest of group members Alison and Peter Smithson, Eduardo Paolozzi, and Nigel Henderson in an *art autre* that rejected formalism and strict conventions of beauty.¹⁸ The exhibition featured a series of fuzzy images with subjects that did not conform to the typical "high art" standards, including X-rays, primitive architecture, and slow-motion studies. The focus of the exhibition and the group

within the IG that authored it clearly helped shape Banham's own interest in *architecture autre* during the following decade.

Banham had first coined the term *architecture autre* in an article titled "The New Brutalism" published December 1955 in the *Architectural Review*, which will be revisited later. His own understanding of what this "other" architecture could be began to coalesce with his sudden discovery of American Buckminster Fuller at the end of the 1950s. Nigel Whiteley notes that indeed, "Banham seems to have realized the significance of Fuller only late in the 1950s; he does not feature in his Ph.D. dissertation", but that Banham did briefly mention Fuller in one chapter as an "engineer" and would eventually address him at length in its conclusion, added later at the time of publication in 1960.¹⁹ Whiteley also observes that "Banham first wrote at length on Fuller in 1959", in an article titled "Thought is Comprehensive", published in the *New Statesman*.²⁰ In the 1960 article "Stocktaking", Banham again directly addressed Fuller as one who was "accepted as a form-giver, while his elaborate body of theory and fundamental research into the shelter-needs of mankind is mostly dismissed unread".²¹

The "Stocktaking" article also marked Banham's first attempt at enumerating elements of his *architecture autre*, positioned against the struggle between "technology" and "tradition" to determine architecture's developing trajectory. Tradition, Banham wrote, relied on what Charles Eames originally termed the "lore of the operation" as the core of its argument against "other" architectural sources. "Operational lore" was defined here as the "integration of experience rather than apparent intelligence (i.e. available information)", based upon the notion that future progress still must

fall into the category conventionally understood as "architectural" even if that meant overlooking the potential of utilising new technologies.²² Banham claimed this "lore" to have spawned backward-looking movements like Neo-Liberty in Italy and the Festival of Britain in 1951, both of which "sacrificed sensitivity for stability", the latter drawing on false, nostalgic Victorian forms as a means of "making Britain safe for the Modern Movement" and exploiting ongoing nationalistic sentiments.²³

The promise of technology that Banham offered as a form of opposition to architecture's tradition was greatly inspired by his understanding of Fuller, who in 1927 had developed his Dymaxion House as a "human life protecting and nurturing scientific dwelling service industry".²⁴ In the late 1940s, Fuller extended this idea to the geodesic dome, a structure that was capable of simply and efficiently creating an *artificial environment* in which humans could live. Of the dome, Banham wrote, "The structure is simply a means towards, the space merely a by-product of, the creation of an environment, and that given other technical means, Fuller might have satisfied his quest for ever-higher environmental performance in some more 'other' way".²⁵

Banham used the idea of an artificial environment as evidence of technology's potential in "Stocktaking", and seemed to be referring to Fuller in his assessment of the potential for those pursuing environments to disrupt the practice of architecture as it existed:

It appears always possible that at any unpredictable moment the unorganized hordes of uncoordinated specialists could flood over into the architects' preserves and, ignorant of the lore of the operation,

create an Other Architecture by chance, as it were, out of apparent intelligence and the task of creating fit environments for human activities.²⁶

Elaborating on Fuller's structural investigations, Banham established his own written parameters for defining a "fit" environment and in doing so introduced a radical theoretical outlook that would continue to pervade his work during the remainder of the 1960s:

The word fit may be defined in the most generous terms imaginable, but it still does not necessarily imply the erection of buildings. Environments may be made fit for human beings by any number of means.²⁷

Here Banham was suggesting a completely new kind of habitable space, one that shed the prerequisites of mass and physicality and was enabled by technologies capable of conditioning "fit" environments without the aid of architecture as it had traditionally been understood. Banham continued to develop this argument in his writing during the early 1960s, and in 1965 his alignment with Fuller on the issue became even more apparent when an excerpt from a Fuller lecture was published in *Megascopie*, in which he said, "With the ever increasing scientific development, the environment will be completely controlled and the concept of the house will be eliminated—we are working towards the invisible house—what will you do with architecture then?"²⁸

That same year, Banham published the article "A Home Is Not a House", where he similarly suggested the possibility of an "un-house" that was enabled by advances in environmental technology. At the centre of Banham's "un-

house" was a "standard-of-living package" (borrowed from Fuller), which he described as analogous to a campfire in its ability to act as a source for a free and variable living environment.²⁹ The package, he wrote, would interfere with local meteorology to create a space that was determined in shape and dimension only by the "direction and strength of the wind".³⁰ With such assertions, Banham carefully avoided turning the discussion into a formal one; indeed, the only visually relevant elements of the un-house were the standard-of-living package and a transparent airdome membrane that Banham acknowledged was necessary to keep rain out. He added that the "distribution" of this membrane "will be governed by various electronic light and weather sensors, and by that radical new invention, the weathervane".³¹ This was a revolutionary conception of a living space that was as ephemeral as nature itself, where form was treated (in the vein of Fuller) as but a by-product of the "environment fit for human beings", conditioned and enabled through services technology.

It is important to note that while Banham thus eschewed a formal narrative in "A Home Is Not a House", he still chose to include illustrations of what an un-house might actually *look like*, which were composed by his designer friend François Dallegret. In one such image labelled "Anatomy of a Dwelling", the reader is presented with what Banham has termed a "baroque ensemble of domestic gadgetry" which "keeps the pad swinging" and is unencumbered by the exterior shell that would normally define a house (see Fig. 2).³² Another drawing titled "The Environment Bubble" shows Banham and Dallegret sitting unclothed beneath a transparent bubble that is inflated by a standard-of-living package, suggesting an artificial Garden of Eden made

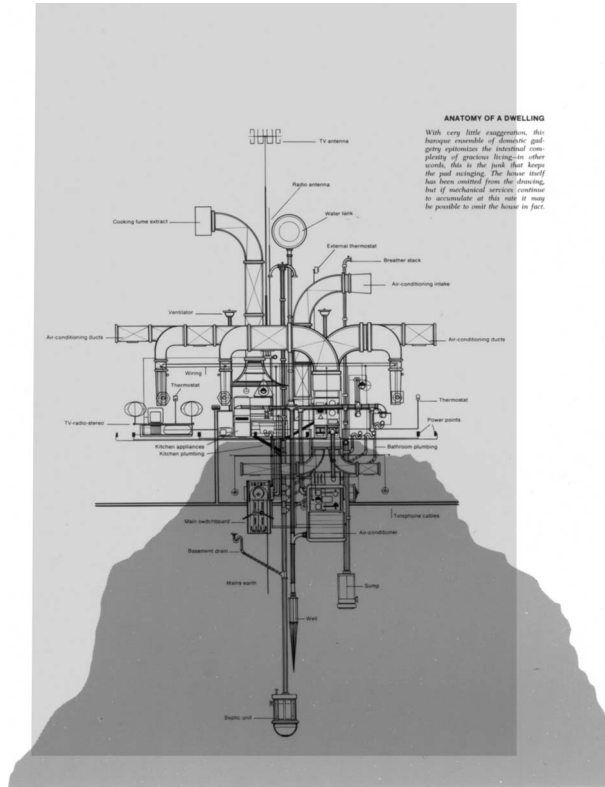


Figure 2. François Dallegret, Anatomy of a Dwelling, from Reyner Banham, 'A Home Is Not a House', *Art in America*(April 1965), © 1965 François Dallegret.

possible by mechanical service technology.³³ It seems curious that Banham would feel the need to represent the dynamic, non-uniform, and in many ways non-visual elements of his un-house through this series of static images. To Banham, however, a powerful "image" served much more than just a visual or formal purpose. Indeed, as we shall see, when executed with the proper intent, Banham believed that such an image could embed itself deep in the emotional experiences of its viewer.

The arguments put forth in "A Home Is Not a House" were centred on the development

of domestic architecture in America, where Banham believed an impending "mechanical invasion" was threatening the traditional role of the architect as creator of monumental spaces. In fact, each of Banham's writings on Fuller and "environments" during the 1960s paralleled a general interest in the technological bias of American culture, where booming postwar consumerism had led to revolutionary products like the domestic air conditioning unit. His trips there beginning in 1961 allowed Banham to conduct the research that would eventually inform *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment*.

1960s America and the London Architecture Avant-Garde

Banham's fascination with America began long before his first trip there in 1961, when Philip Johnson invited him to New York City for a public debate. Whiteley traces Banham's interest in America all the way back to his youth, writing that "his early life was amid neither 'high' nor 'aspirational' culture, but 'American pulps, things like *Mechanix Illustrated* and the comic books".³⁴ Banham would carry this affinity for American pop culture into his years as a member of the Independent Group, who shared a common belief in the value of American Pop Art as "a maximum development of a form of communication that is common to all urban people", as IG member Lawrence Alloway once defined it.³⁵

By the time of his first visit to America in 1961, Banham was also carrying with him an interest in the country's technological progress, which had been unparalleled worldwide in its development after the Second World War. Following his trip to New York, he was invited to attend the Aspen Design Conference, begun in 1951 by Chicago businessman Walter Paepcke as a chance to bring together designers, artists, engineers, and businessmen for presentations on the theory and practice of design.³⁶ Banham was soon attending the conference annually, and in 1964 and 1965 he was able to increase his time in America while focusing specifically on technological research as the recipient of a Graham Foundation Award, given to individuals and organisations to "foster the development and exchange of diverse and challenging ideas about architecture and its role in the arts, culture, and society".³⁷ He reported his findings in numerous articles, one of which was "The Great Gizmo", published in *Industrial Design* magazine in 1965. In this article, Banham

praised the dominant role of technology in America, proclaiming that "The man who changed the face of America had a gizmo, a gadget, a gimmick".³⁸ He also marvelled at the "clip-on" culture that he believed had "coloured American thought and action far more deeply... than is commonly understood".³⁹ In America, Banham was discovering evidence of the revolutionary, accessible technology on a mass scale needed to implement his *architecture outre* and its task of creating "fit environments for human activities".

Back in his home town of London, meanwhile, Banham's research and writing was beginning to have a significant influence on contemporary architectural thought. He worked in London until 1964 for the *Architectural Review*, a magazine with enormous local and international influence amongst architecture circles. The first significant project to relate strongly to his writings was Cedric Price's *Fun Palace* of 1961. The design called for a new public space without floors, walls, or ceilings, but instead a giant steel framework from which spaces could be suspended or created in any fashion that the users desired. Here, technology was being utilised to instantly create and modify space as Banham had suggested earlier in the "Stock-taking" article of 1960. It was a strategy that would later be adopted by the group Archigram, who had begun publishing the avant-garde *Archigram* pamphlets in 1961 from the Architectural Association in London, and who like Price were interested in hypothetical investigations into the potential for technology to drive architecture's future. As in the *Fun Palace*, Archigram's project for a Plug-In City in 1964 (see Fig. 3) called for a supporting megastructure into which fully controllable units could be plugged, each being "planned for obsolescence".⁴⁰ The project implied a series of "environments", but focused more

directly on architecture's relevance to "throw-away" consumer culture and powerful Pop imagery, two things that Whiteley notes Banham was initially ambivalent towards.⁴¹

Banham's influence is more readily seen in Archigram's *Instant City* project of 1969, which proposed that a series of touring instant enclosures and sound and display equipment could quickly inject a high intensity "shock" into major towns which would be furthered by the development of national information networks.⁴² The project marked a shift in Archigram's work from what Whiteley calls "hardware to software".⁴³ Founding member Peter Cook explained their shifting attitude, especially towards the necessity of large physical structures, in 1968:

The determination of your environment need no longer be left in the hands of the designer ... it can be turned over to you yourself. You turn the switches and choose the conditions to sustain you at that point in time. The building is reduced to the role of carcass—or less.⁴⁴

The desire to nearly eliminate the building shell recalls Banham's "A Home Is Not a House" of 1965, and the liberating potential attributed to the environmental controls followed Banham's own fascination with American appliances like the air conditioning unit that could create or modify an environment almost instantly.

An "Imageable" Architecture

Though Archigram's theory and projects significantly addressed the notion of "environments", Banham was supportive of their work for a different reason: what he deemed to be its "imageability". This was a term he had first used to praise the work of the Smithsons in "The New Brutalism" article of 1955. With their "Parallel of Life and Art" Exhibition of 1953, the Smithsons had introduced their interest in anti-art and in a "cult of ugliness", made manifest by a series of rough, grainy photographs. Sympathising with *art brut*, a style of painting that involved raw aesthetics and physicality, they began using these qualities in their architecture as a reaction to the white,

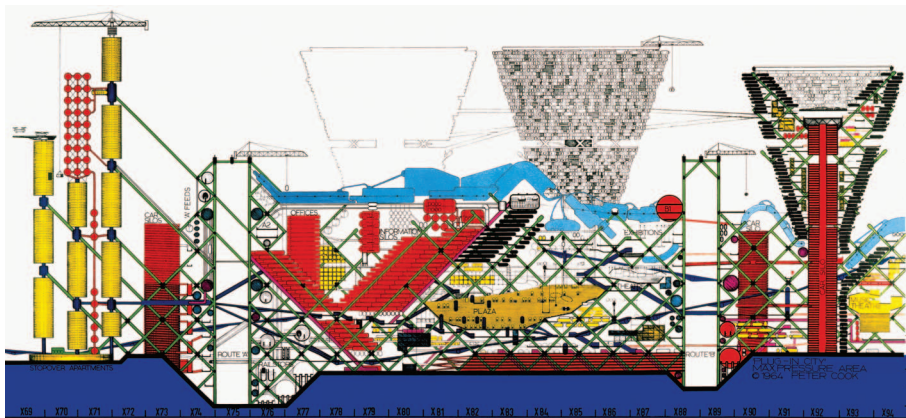


Figure 3. Section, Max Pressure Area, Plug-In City, Peter Cook, © Archigram 1964 (courtesy the Archigram Archives).

idealised boxes of pre-war Modernism. Banham followed this movement closely, which has also been credited to Le Corbusier, who he quoted in "The New Brutalism". In the article, Banham outlined the main tenets of "New Brutalism", which he stated as being "1.) Memorability as an Image 2.) Clear Exhibition of Structure 3.) Valuation of Materials".⁴⁵ The first item introduced his concept of "imageability". He described an image as "something that is visually valuable, but not necessarily by the standards of classical aesthetics ... image may be defined as *quod visum perturbat*—that which seen, affects the emotions".⁴⁶ Banham continued that this emotional response was not necessarily "pleasurable" according to a classically abstract definition of beauty, but was by nature a reaction to the image's "overtone of human association".

For Banham, visual elements of a building that carried this "human association" were able to tie directly into the experience of a viewer, and defied a classically formal composition based on "rule and compass geometry" in favour of a more intuitive, topological composition. Here, the term topology denoted "qualities of penetration, circulation, and inside and out", and was used by Banham in support of the Smithsons' Golden Lane and Sheffield competition entries. For those projects, he stated that "topology becomes the dominant and geometry becomes the subordinate discipline. The 'connectivity' of the circulation routes is flourished on the exterior and no attempt is made to give a geometrical form to the whole scheme".⁴⁷ Later in the article, he cited the aforementioned *Parallel of Life and Art* exhibition as the moment when the New Brutalists were first able to "define their relationship to the visual world in terms of something other than geometry", at which point, he believed, "formality was discarded".⁴⁸

Using the notion of topology, therefore, Banham was able to define good "imageability" in a formal terms, at least with respect to classical formal conceptions. The New Brutalists, he believed, understood the obligation for great architecture to possess this "imageability", which resulted in *honestly* constructed formal compositions; an action the Functionalists had tried to hide behind excuses of structure and utility. To Banham, then, the early New Brutalist buildings were at once "imageable" and "ethical", two characteristics that became synonymous in his eyes by the late 1950s when he saw the Smithsons' work degrading into a "contrived aesthetic" devoid of its once "ethical" underpinnings. Whiteley specifically notes Banham's distaste for the 1956 *Patio and Pavilion* project that the Smithsons designed for the "This is Tomorrow" exhibition (see Fig. 4), writing that "by 1956 the suspicion was growing that the Smithsons were becoming seduced by aesthetics rather than ethics".⁴⁹ What particularly troubled Banham here was the evident aesthetic goal of "timelessness", which he believed to be "submissive to traditional values" and closed-minded.⁵⁰ Ethical validity to Banham was thus an offshoot of good "imageability", which included an open aesthetic, expressive of and on pace with the breakneck technological development of the new Machine Age. By the end of the 1950s, the Smithsons' New Brutalist building "images" had lost this quality.

The paper architecture of Archigram, meanwhile, was founded in making provocative, technologically driven images, and in this way fulfilled Banham's particular standard of "imageability" more overtly than did the New Brutalists' built work, especially by the 1960s. In Archigram's drawings, Banham saw the conscious attempt to use wild architectural aesthetics as an effective, pop-culturally moti-



Figure 4. View of Patio and Pavilion by Nigel Henderson, Eduardo Paolozzi and Alison and Peter Smithson. This Is Tomorrow exhibition, Whitechapel Art Gallery, London, 1956. With permission from the Smithson Family Collection.

vated expression of the new era of machines. He wrote that Archigram

make no bones about being in the image business—like the rest of us they urgently need to know what the city of the future is going to look like, because one of the most frustrating things to the arty old Adam in most of us is that the wonders of technology have a habit of going invisible on us.⁵¹

These were sophisticated *representations* of a technological architecture, succeeding for Banham in the same way that Fuller's "first effective image of the architecture of technology" had succeeded 15 years earlier.⁵² In their abstract, eye-catching, and colourful character, the Archigram images were advertisements specifically directed at the average consumer, the focus of an increasingly product-driven culture. As Anthony Vidler writes in *Histories of the Immediate Present: Inventing Architectural Modernism*, each image was "an active participant in the viewer's sensory perception—using all the techniques of modernist disruption, of shock

and displacement, to embed its effects in experience".⁵³ Like the Futurists, Archigram kept the details of how their projects' technology actually functioned in the abstract realm, and Banham, as he did with the Futurists, found their visions to be powerful enough to set aside the quibbles with functionality that he had levelled at the work of Gropius, Le Corbusier, and other Modern Masters. In fact, Banham went so far as to worry that questions about functionality would *compromise* the impact of Archigram's work:

A lot of po-faced technicians are going to pooh-pooh Plug-in City's technological improbabilities and brush it off as a Kookie teenage Pop-art frivol, and in the process the *formal lessons* of the Plug-in City might be missed.⁵⁴

Archigram had not arrived at a workable architecture of technology and "environments", but they had come up with an attractive set of proposals for what this architecture might look like, and in doing so had most successfully achieved the powerful "imageability" Banham

had so desired for an architecture particular to the Second Machine Age.

The Well-Tempered Environment

Banham's preoccupation with the visual power of Archigram's work and its "formal lessons" presents an obvious incongruity with his simultaneous attempts to rationalise the formless "fit environment" based on technological progress during the 1960s, which culminated with his publication of *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment* in 1969. Bringing together much of the writing and research that he had done throughout the decade, the book eschewed a categorization of architectural epochs based upon purely formal considerations. Instead, it offered a cohesive survey of architectural history in relation to the achievement of habitable human environments and examined the devices used to do so. In the introduction, Banham criticised the dominance of formal priorities within existing architectural history texts: "the fact remains that the history of architecture found in the books currently available still deals almost exclusively with the external forms of habitable volumes as revealed by the structures that enclose them".⁵⁵ He cited two examples of buildings with progressive approaches to mechanical services: Louis Kahn's Richards Medical Laboratories in Philadelphia, and Frank Lloyd Wright's Larkin Administration Building in Buffalo. Both, he explained, were well known within modern histories solely because the mechanical system affected the overall exterior shape of the building, reflecting historians' shallow interest in the progression of architectural styles and a primarily visual understanding of buildings. He continued by reiterating his previous disdain for the "lore of the operation", lamenting that architects still tried to regulate the environ-

ment through the physicality and massiveness of their structures, a tradition that he claimed became irrelevant with new environmental technology that made heavy enclosures unnecessary. He wrote, "[s]ocieties ... prescribe the creation of fit environments for human activities; the architectural profession responds, reflexively, by proposing enclosed spaces framed by massive structures, because that is what architects have been taught to do".⁵⁶

Although these criticisms were published a few years after Archigram's project for a "Plug-In-City", much of his writing that was contemporaneous with and even before the time of the "Plug-In City", like "A Home Is not a House" and "Stocktaking", echoed these same arguments against architecture's physical and visual priorities, and it seems incredible that Banham could have had such an interest in negating structure and rejecting formal evaluation while he simultaneously praised the "formal lessons" of the monumental Archigram megastructures. Indeed, the dominant aspect of Archigram's megastructures was their striking physical and visual presence, even if their materials were indicated to be more lightweight and expendable.

The megastructures were also emblematic of another problem exposed in *The Well-Tempered Environment*: the glorification of the architect and reduction of the engineer. Indeed, Banham argued, it was the engineer who developed the revolutionary systems that were necessary to make such bold architecture habitable.⁵⁷ In an introduction to his book *The Age of the Masters* (1962) that was added after the fact in 1975, Banham admitted that the megastructures still clung to the Modern ideal of "the mastery of the architect", reconciling this need with the need of individual freedoms (the plug in "pods"), an "attempt by the modern

movement to save itself by its own efforts and out of its own resources and traditions".⁵⁸ As far as habitability went, the megastructures certainly could not have achieved it as drawn, and Banham's desire in *The Well-Tempered Environment* to bring attention to those that make architecture work went against his earlier attempts to downplay functionality in the work of both Archigram and the Futurists.

Even within the text of *The Well-Tempered Environment*, there are instances where Banham can be accused of contradicting himself. His treatment of Archigram's work in particular reveals the very kind of formal concerns that he chastised in the book's introduction as being part of architecture's "operational lore". This is nowhere more evident than in his discussion of Queen Elizabeth Hall, designed in part by Archigram members Ron Herron, Warren Chalk, and Dennis Crompton in the early 1960s. Here, Banham assessed the architects' visual intentions as "picturesque", with a "much more relaxed attitude to piping and ducting" that he believed indicated a "more comfortable technological stance". At the core of this positive evaluation was his belief that the building's "architectural qualities" had stemmed from a larger goal of satisfying the "exacting environmental requirements of its internal functions".⁵⁹

Yet Banham also acknowledged that the project's environmental systems were made architecturally manifest only with a "large element of symbolism", and that "it should not normally be assumed that what is seen from outside is necessarily the form of the ducts through which that air is moving".⁶⁰ This aligned with an earlier observation regarding the external service towers of Kahn's Richards Medical Laboratories, where Banham wrote

that "not all the mechanical services are in these external turrets, as is commonly believed".⁶¹ In the case of Kahn's building, however, Banham felt the symbolic integration of mechanical service towers into the building profile was "purely decorative" and "within the terms of customary architectural method".⁶² This difference in response can be accounted for on formal grounds, and was due in particular to the opposing formal *attitudes* that Banham saw each project taking towards environmental technology: while the mechanical services of the Richards Laboratories were addressed *by necessity* as part of a larger classical composition that seemed "almost Beaux-Arts" in its simplicity, Queen Elizabeth Hall's "relaxed" formal strategy *willingly* celebrated the building's mechanical infrastructure, ethically pairing architectural and service elements "fairly directly" and thus adhering well to the aforementioned ideas of topology and good "imageability".⁶³

Conclusions: Reyner Banham, Historian of the Anti-Academy

In his writings of the 1960s, therefore, Reyner Banham put forth two seemingly contradictory lines of argument: one in favour of "fit environments" that transcended the formal considerations of architecture's "lore" and intimately related to developments in environmental technology, and the other championing the outwardly "imageable" works of groups like Archigram with their powerful visual qualities and important "formal lessons". While such positions could arguably be considered incompatible, Banham's ability to hold to each so passionately can be understood as a consequence of three things: first, the nature of his personal critical bias; second, his ambiguous position as both an outsider and insider

historian to the architectural establishment; and finally, his belonging to the postwar architectural culture and social context of the 1960s.

On a personal level, Banham's relationship to what Whiteley calls the "modo architectorum" offers a partial explanation for his unwillingness to completely detach from architecture's formal "traditions" in the face of a polemical attraction to the promises of "technology". In *Historian of the Immediate Future* Whiteley writes:

It seems that however much the polemic is that we should ditch architecture and its traditions, it is architecture and its traditions—the modo architectorum—to which Banham remains committed and emotionally attached. An architecture autre never exists for long without vers une architecture.⁶⁴

For Banham, the "modo architectorum" could be more specifically stated to be Modernism, which had matured as a style during his youth, and which he generally admired for its attempt to respond to its cultural context, however abstractly. The personal nature of this affinity is seen, for example, in his vehement rejection of the Festival of Britain, which he argued would compromise the "clarity" and "nobility" of the European Modern aesthetic, and of Post-Modernism, which he deemed to be "building in drag" despite its consideration of issues like symbolism and experience that he clearly thought to be important.⁶⁵

Yet it appears that, in Banham's view, the traditional formal classifications of the "modo architectorum" could not necessarily be attached to the particular visual compositions that he presented in "A Home Is Not a House"

and endorsed in *The Well-Tempered Environment*. Using his notion of an anti-classical, topologically composed "image", an architecture of "technology" and "environments" could be equally satisfied by the immense plug-in pods of Archigram's "Plug-in-City" or by the nearly invisible "environmental bubble" of Dallegret's "un-house" illustration, provided that its form was a product of internal functional requirements and was characterised by "overtones of human association". As Banham wrote in "The New Brutalism", such forms did not derive from a classical "rule and compass geometry", and could thus be seen to have "discarded formality". This personal understanding of "formality" would have allowed him to reconcile Archigram's topological, "imageable" architectural visions with the pursuit of a revolutionary architecture of "environments" purported to reject classical formal traditions.

A second way of understanding the contradictions in Banham's writing during the 1960s is as a product of his ambiguous relationship to the architectural establishment as an "outsider-insider" historian, to borrow Whiteley's term.⁶⁶ First, as an "insider" trained under Pevsner—one of the most notable figures of architectural history—Banham was drawn to the academic concept of a *Zeitgeist*, as was seen earlier in his commentary about the Futurists' work. To Banham, the *Zeitgeist* encompassed architecture's anthropological value: how well it represented the specific conditions of a certain time, place and culture and could convey them to later civilisations, as he believed projects such as the Villa Savoye were capable of doing and backwards looking works like *Patio and Pavilion* were not. In *The Historiography of Modern Architecture*, Panayotis Tournikiotis explains Banham's belief that "Architecture should be perceived as a stream

(into which one cannot step twice) of reflections of the transformations taking place in other fields". He continues: "Such a concept allows the author to see the modern movement as an event belonging definitely to the past and to study it in order to learn from its experience a way to act in the immediate future".⁶⁷ With his support of Archigram, Banham evidently clung to the notion that the most effective way for these "reflections" to be perceived was as a series of potent and distinct images—direct architectural representations of a culture's defining traits (in this case, attitude towards technology). And while an all but invisible architecture like that of the "un-house" was attractively radical in its theoretical promotion of the "fit environment", it could not by itself offer Banham the same kind of satisfyingly apprehensible "image" of a technologically driven *Zeitgeist* that Archigram's outwardly image-conscious work did.

At the same time, Banham's desire to act as radical "outsider" to the architectural establishment made him more likely to accept multiple, diverse approaches to technology rather than just one definitive one, breaking from the "selective" tendencies that he saw in the tradition of architectural history texts like those of Pevsner. This becomes evident in the closing sentences of the "Exposed Power" chapter in *The Well-Tempered Environment*, where Banham wrote:

Since most of our experience and expectation at present derives from buildings that do not deploy totally mechanical environments ... we are not yet in a position to hand down confident judgments on them. They are the fruit of a revolution in environmental management that is without precedent in the

history of architecture, a revolution too recent to have been fully absorbed and understood as yet, and a revolution still turning up unexpected possibilities.⁶⁸

As Tournikiotis writes, Banham believed the revisionist historian had an obligation to use their understanding of "what really happened" in the past as a guide to the "immediate future"—as a means for "plotting a curve beyond the last certain point to see where it will lead".⁶⁹ Banham's belief in the First Machine Age and its transition into a Second meant that *any* work evaluated to have optimistically engaged the promises of technology—whether it was the megastructures of Archigram or mechanical service systems of the "fit environment"—could be embraced with equal conviction as a plausible manifestation of this "immediate future" for architecture.

Finally, the open-ended nature of Banham's aesthetic judgments and historical method can be more generally tied to deep suspicions about the "academy" and "values" that were inherent to the architectural and social contexts of postwar Britain. Within the field of architecture, the debate about forming a "coherent narrative of the development of modernism" after the war spawned multiple treatments of the pre-war avant-garde, from the pragmatic sentimentality of works like the Festival of Britain to Colin Rowe's neo-Palladianism and its emphasis on European traditions of mathematical order.⁷⁰ The approach taken by Banham and his London contemporaries rejected both the vernacular references of the Festival and the academic idealism of Rowe in favour of a more casual attitude towards form, driven above all by an embrace of the transience of post-war culture and its demand for an "aesthetic of

change”, as the Smithsons wrote about in 1957. This attitude championed indeterminism, expendability, and pluralism, and was more concerned with the “quickness of reaction” than “the actual content of reaction”, as Charles Jencks writes in *Modern Movements in Architecture*.⁷¹

Such priorities drew directly from London’s unique social present and emerging future during the 1960s. There, a thriving post-war economy had ushered in a decade of financial successes that favoured the flourishing of youth culture and, as Whiteley observes, “the dominance of a young, hip, flaneur type of individual, supported through the financial stability of their parents. A 1966 *Time* article proclaimed, ‘In a decade dominated by youth, London has burst into bloom. It swings: it is the scene’”.⁷² This atmosphere supported and even encouraged the anti-establishment, revisionist stances of strong personas like Banham’s, and of multiple underground publications like *Archigram*. Of particular concern was the rigid, value laden system of the “academy”, which, as has been touched upon, had been discarded in favour of an openness to multiple and unexpected viewpoints, ideas, and influences. Banham’s willingness to contradict himself in service of this openness reflects the degree to which he belonged as a key figure in London’s revisionist culture of intelligentsia and was committed to remaining a part of it through

the use of a flexible (if at times “two-minded”) critical outlook.

The oeuvre that Banham achieved under this outlook never quite presented a consistent enough case for the reconciling of architecture with science, a marriage that he acknowledged would require a dubious “balancing feat”.⁷³ It did, however, manage to establish an open, theoretical relationship between the two that distinctly related to the spirit of the time and allowed its author to play his part as a prominent member of the heterogeneous, youth dominated intellectual culture of the 1960s. Banham would continue to be a prolific figure amongst architectural theorists and historians in the decades to follow, publishing important works such as *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* in 1971 and *Scenes in America Deserta* in 1982. But it was in those trenchant writings of the 1960s—in *Stocktaking*, *A Home Is Not a House*, and finally in *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment*—that the critic was at his most radical and perplexing, daring even as he obsessed over “images” to imagine an architecture borne out of current technologies, without walls or physical barriers: an architecture of air and environments.

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Notes

1. Whiteley, *Reyner Banham*, p. 386.
2. Analogous to the concept of “un art autre”, the subject and title of a book written by French art critic Michel Tapié, published in Paris in 1952.
3. Banham, “Machine Aesthetic”, p. 225.
4. Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*, p. 12.
5. Banham, *Age of the Masters*, p. 29.

6. Banham, "Machine Aesthetes", p. 27.
7. Banham, *Theory and Design*, p. 262.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 123.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 11.
10. Quoted in Banham, *Theory and Design*, p. 128.
11. *Ibid.*, p. 101.
12. Banham, "Primitives of a Mechanized Art", p. 41.
13. Pevsner, *Pioneers of Modern Design*, p. 26.
14. Banham, *Theory and Design*, p. 109.
15. *Ibid.*, p. 325.
16. *Ibid.*, p. 10.
17. Quoted in Banham, "Primitives of a Mechanized Art", pp. 44–45.
18. Literally "another art". For origin of term, refer to note 2.
19. Whiteley, *Reyner Banham*, p. 156.
20. *Ibid.*
21. Banham, "1960—Stocktaking", pp. 51, 53.
22. *Ibid.*, p. 50.
23. Quoted in Whiteley, *Reyner Banham*, p. 13.
24. Fuller, "Emergent Humanity", p. 119.
25. Banham, *New Brutalism*, p. 69.
26. Banham, "1960—Stocktaking", p. 61.
27. *Ibid.*, p. 49.
28. Fuller, Extract from lecture (November 1965), unpaginated.
29. Banham, "Home Is Not a House", p. 75.
30. *Ibid.*, p. 75.
31. *Ibid.*, p. 76.
32. *Ibid.*, p. 71.
33. *Ibid.*, p. 77.
34. Whiteley, *Reyner Banham*, p. 5.
35. Alloway, "Notes on Abstract Art and the Mass Media", p. 3.
36. "About Aspen and IDCA".
37. "Mission".
38. Banham, "The Great Gizmo", p. 109.
39. *Ibid.*, p. 113.
40. Whiteley, *Reyner Banham*, p. 170.
41. *Ibid.*, p. 174.
42. Cook et al., "Instant City", p. 86.
43. Whiteley, *Reyner Banham*, p. 215.
44. Cook, "Control and Choice", p. 68.
45. Banham, "New Brutalism", p. 15.
46. *Ibid.*, p. 12.
47. *Ibid.*, p. 14.
48. *Ibid.*, p. 15.
49. Whiteley, *Reyner Banham*, p. 132.
50. *Ibid.*, p. 131.
51. Quoted in Whiteley, *Reyner Banham*, p. 175.
52. *Ibid.*, p. 176.
53. Vidler, *Histories of the Immediate Present*, p. 137.
54. Quoted in Whiteley, *Reyner Banham*, p. 176. Emphasis added.
55. Banham, *Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment*, p. 12.
56. *Ibid.*, p. 21.
57. *Ibid.*, p. 16.
58. Banham, *Age of the Masters*, p. 6.
59. Banham, *Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment*, p. 257.
60. *Ibid.*, pp. 260, 262.
61. *Ibid.*, p. 250.
62. *Ibid.*, p. 253.
63. Banham, *Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment*, p. 252 and p. 262. Whiteley argues in "Banham and 'Otherness'" that this notion of "attitude" towards technology and "technological habits of thought" is critical to understanding Banham's conception of an *architecture autre* in the 1960s.
64. Whiteley, *Reyner Banham*, p. 386.
65. See Banham, "Style", p. 191; and Banham, "Black Box", p. 293.

LANGEVIN

66. Whiteley, *Reyner Banham*, p. 397.
67. Tournikiotis, *Historiography of Modern Architecture*, p. 158.
68. Banham, *Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment*, p. 264.
69. Banham, "History Under Revision", p. 332; Banham, "History of the Immediate Future", p. 252.
70. Vidler, *Histories of the Immediate Present*, p. 1.
71. Jencks, *Modern Movements in Architecture*, p. 298.
72. Quoted in Whiteley, *Reyner Banham*, p. 180.
73. Banham, "1960—Stocktaking", p. 61.

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