Reyner Banham: In Search of an Imageable, Invisible Architecture

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Disillusioned with the architectural establishment in the 1960s, Peter Reyner Banham wrote one of the more subversive histories of architecture under the title *The Architecture of the Well Tempered Environment* (1969). Holding to a traditional survey format for organization, 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 honored role as the sole creator of environments for living through its physicality. And yet even as Banham’s critical standpoint allowed him to call the “operational lore” of architecture into question, he still had a clear allegiance to an evolving Modern *aesthetic* which would lead him first to praise the conscious “imageability” of the Smithson’s New Brutalist buildings and subsequently the fantastical publications of Archigram. Both of these groups espoused the revisionist ideals that inspired Banham’s search for an *architecture autre* in the 1950s and 60s, 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.¹ Banham’s support of Archigram’s

¹ Banham first coined the term “architecture autre” in his article “The New Brutalism”, published in December of 1955. It was analogous to the concept of “un art autre”, the subject and title of a book written by the French art critic Michel Tapie and published in Paris in 1952.
“imageable” Pop architecture therefore stands in contradiction to his strongest points in *The Well Tempered Environment*, revealing the dominance of an attachment to the very academic aestheticism that his writings on artificial environments responded against.

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. Banham was critical of texts like Pevsner’s because he believed their substance to be misleading, a presentation of clear-cut and neatly categorized 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.

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Banham also criticized Gropius for having created a myth that Bauhaus designs were “functional” when in fact the intent clearly had much more to do with aesthetics than it did with economy:

“...it was no more an inherently economical 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.’”

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.” Banham also marveled at Le Corbusier’s stubborn pursuit of design decisions that only could have made sense on an aesthetic 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...”


Banham further distanced himself from historians like Pevsner by supporting the Futurists, a small group of Italian artists and architects responding to the rapid industrialization of Italy following 1890 by embracing mechanization and allowing it to inform their theoretical standpoints. Banham felt that the Futurists were the only group that actually understood the value of technology 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....”.7 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.”8 For Banham, that meant that they were fully aware of the cultural implications the new technology carried with it. Machines like the automobile were now available to be actively used by the upper tier of society, and artists could now “create technological experience for themselves” rather than relate to it passively.9 Futurist painter Boccioni referred to a new “mechanized individual” and F.T. Marinetti, founder of the group, spoke of the “Man Multiplied by the Motor”10. The work of the Futurist architect Antonio Sant’Elia (see Fig. 1), which was performed entirely on paper, called to a halt the “stylistic changes” that

8 Banham, Reyner. “Primitives of a Mechanized Art,” The Listener 62 (December 1959) in Banham, A Critic Writes, 41
10 Banham, Theory and Design, (1960), 11
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. 11

Historians like Pevsner barely mentioned the Futurists in their histories of modern architecture, and when they did, it was only to downplay their significance. In Pioneers of Modern Design, Pevsner 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.” 12 Banham saw this dismissal of Futurist work 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.

Banham’s support of the Futurists may have put him at odds with many of his contemporaries, but his attachment to their provocative visions and aesthetic explorations still revealed him to be evaluating the Futurists’ work in much of the same way that other critics did that of the “mainstream” modernists. Indeed, though their sets of forms and lines were more direct a product of the new “Machine Age” in responding to new technologies, the Futurists were yet still a group of artists reacting to societal changes through primarily aesthetic means. Banham’s attraction to their work in spite of this first exposes his preoccupation with the notion of a zeitgeist –of an architecture that was expressive of the culture from which it arose.

Though the Futurist work was primarily images, the images were appropriately “of

the twentieth century” and indicated much about the machine age that they were created for. Similar reasons sometimes 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 leveling 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.¹³

The zeitgeist, and Banham’s fascination with it, would continue to figure prominently in Banham’s work of the 1960’s, and especially in his support of the “imageable” New Brutalist and Archigram works in the face of radical, rational beliefs in another kind of architecture, one that proposed to do away with aesthetics altogether.

For Banham, the 1960’s were at once a continuation of and departure from the work he’d done during the previous decade on Theory and Design, which was published in 1960. The book had examined the architecture that was built during what Banham 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.¹⁴ It also claimed that at the time it was being written (1950’s), a Second Machine Age had already been ushered into England through universally accessible domestic

¹³ Banham, Theory and Design, (1960), 325
¹⁴ Banham, Theory and Design, (1960), 10
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, drawing upon his previous criticisms of mainstream modern aestheticism while also now building towards his own “alternative” kind of response to the contemporary Machine Age.

Banham’s desire for an “alternative” or “other” architecture showed him to be heavily influenced by involvement with two groups. The first was the Futurists, whose appeal to Banham has already been described. Banham took particular interest in the Futurist painter Boccioni, who, in pursuing an artistic response particular to the new conditions of the twentieth century, Banham 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.”

The pursuit of “anti-art” also partially inspired the convening of the second group to influence Banham, the Independent Group of London, which he was a member of. The Independent Group met at London’s Institute of Contemporary Art 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 fall of 1952. Banham also helped to stage the *Parallel of Life and Art* exhibit in fall of 1953 at the ICA, which was primarily 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. The exhibit featured a series of fuzzy images taken portraying subjects that did not conform to the typical “high art” standards, including X-Rays, primitive architecture, and slow-motion studies. The focus of the exhibit and the group within the IG that authored it clearly had a major influence in 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 in December 1955 in the Architectural Review, to which we will later return. 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 1950’s. Nigel Whiteley notes in *Reyner Banham: Historian of the Immediate Future*, 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…”, noting 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

16 Literally “another art”- for origin of term, refer to footnote #1
publication in 1960. 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. 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.” The “Stocktaking” article was also Banham’s first attempt to define elements of his architecture autre, and posited “technology” against “tradition” as the primary combatants in the struggle 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” or “anti” architectural sources. “Operational lore” was defined here by Banham 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 utilizing new technologies. Banham claimed the “lore” to have spawned backwards-looking movements like Neo-Liberty in Italy and the Festival of Britain in 1951, both of which “sacrificed sensitivty for stability” and the latter of which drew on false, nostalgic Victorian forms as a means.


18 Whiteley, Nigel. Reyner Banham: Historian, 156.


20 Banham, “1960 1: Stocktaking” in "Banham, A Critic Writes, 50
of “making Britain safe for the Modern Movement” and exploiting ongoing nationalistic sentiments.  

The promise of technology that Banham offered as a form of opposition to architecture’s tradition was much inspired by his understanding of Fuller, who in 1927 had developed his Dymaxion House (see fig. 2) as a “human life protecting and nurturing scientific dwelling service industry.” Further developing this idea, Fuller had turned to the geodesic dome in the late 1940’s as a structure capable of simply and efficiently creating an artificial “environment” in which humans could live. Banham used the idea of artificial environments as a primary 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.  

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 in his work during the remainder of the 1960’s:

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21 Whiteley, Reyner Banham: Historian, 13


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.  

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. An excerpt from a Fuller lecture was then published in an issue of *Megascope* 3 in which Fuller 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?  

That same year, Banham published his article “A Home Is Not a House” which similarly suggested the possibility of an “un-house” (see fig. 3) and questioned whether structures were still necessary based on the progress being made in environmental technology:

> When your house contains such a complex of piping, flues, ducts, wires, lights, inlets, outlets, ovens, sinks, refuse, disposers, hi-fi reverberators, antennae, conduits, freezers, heaters- when it contains so many services that the hardware could stand up by itself without any assistance from the house, why have a house to hold it up?  

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Baham’s involvement with Fuller and “environments” during the 1960’s paralleled a general interest in America, where booming post-WWII 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.

Banham’s love for 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...”27 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 culture and the view 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. By the time of his first visit to America in 1961, Banham was also carrying with him an interest in America’s technological progress, which had been unparalleled worldwide in its development following 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

27 Whiteley, Nigel. Reyner Banham: Historian, 5
design.28 Banham started to attend the conference annually, and in 1964 and 1965, was able to increase his time in America and focus specifically on technological research as the recipient of a Graham Foundation Award, which was given to individuals and organizations to “foster the development and exchange of diverse and challenging ideas about architecture and its role in the arts, culture, and society.”29 He reported his findings in numerous articles, such as “The Great Gizmo”, published in Industrial Design Magazine in 1965. In “The Great Gizmo”, 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….30 He also marveled at the “clip-on” culture that he believed had “coloured American thought and action far more deeply…than is commonly understood.”31 In America, Banham was discovering evidence of the revolutionary, accessible technology on a mass scale needed to implement his architecture autre and its task of creating “fit environments for human activities”.

31 Banham, “The Great Gizmo” in Banham, A Critic Writes, 113
Banham’s research and writing on “environments” and technology in the 1960’s had a notable influence on contemporary architectural thought in his hometown of London. Banham worked there for the *Architectural Review* until 1964, a magazine with enormous local and international influence amongst architecture circles. The first significant project that showed a strong relationship to Banham’s work was Cedric Price’s *Fun Palace* of 1961 (see fig. 4). 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, using technology as a means of instantly creating and modifying space as Banham had suggested in the “Stocktaking article” of 1960. It was a strategy that would be later adopted by the group Archigram, who had begun publishing the avant-garde *Archigram* pamphlets in 1961 from the Architectural Association in London, and 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. 5) called for a supporting megastructure into which fully controllable units could be plugged, each being “planned for obsolescence”.32 The project implied a series of “environments” but focused more directly on architecture’s relevance to “throwaway” consumer culture and powerful Pop imagery, two things Banham was initially ambivalent towards. Banham’s influence is more clearly 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 boost” into major towns which would be furthered by the development of communication networks.\textsuperscript{33} The project marked a shift in Archigram’s work from what Whitely calls “hardware to software.”\textsuperscript{34} 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.\textsuperscript{35}

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 appliances like the air conditioning unit that could create or modify an environment almost instantly.

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 their work’s “imageability”. This was a term he’d first used to praise the work of the Smithsons in “The New Brutalism”, a previously referenced article to which we now return. With their “Parallel of Life and Art” Exhibition of 1953, the Smithsons had introduced their interest in anti-art and in a

\textsuperscript{33} Cook, Peter, Herron, Ron. “Instant City,” \textit{Architectural Design} (November 1970) in Whiteley, Reyner Banham: Historian, 221
\textsuperscript{34} Whiteley, Reyner Banham: Historian, 215
“cult of ugliness”, shown in their rough, grainy photographs. Sympathizing 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, idealized boxes of pre-war Modernism. Banham followed this movement closely, which has also been credited to Le Corbusier, who Banham quoted in “The New Brutalism”. In the article, Banham tried to outline 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”.36 The first item introduced Banham’s concept of “imageability”, which he further described to mean “something that is visually valuable, but not necessarily by the standards of classical aesthetics.”37 The New Brutalists, he wrote, understood the obligation for great architecture to possess this “imageability”, and honestly constructed *form*, an action the Functionalists had tried to hide behind excuses of structure and utility. To Banham, therefore, the New Brutalists’ buildings were at once “imageable” and “ethical”, two characteristics that became synonymous in his eyes by the late 1950s, when the Smithsons’ work began to degrade in his eyes down to a “contrived aesthetic” devoid of its once “ethical” underpinnings. Whiteley specifically notes Banham’s distaste for the 1956 *Patio and Pavilion* project the Smithsons designed for the “This is Tomorrow” exhibition (see *fig. 6*), writing that “by 1956 the suspicion was growing that the Smithsons were


becoming seduced by aesthetics rather than ethics…” What particularly troubled Banham here was the evident aesthetic goal of “timelessness”, which Banham believed to be “submissive to traditional values” and closed-minded. Ethical validity to Banham therefore was an offshoot of good “imageability”, which included an open aesthetic, expressive of and on pace with the breakneck development of the new Machine Ages. By the end of the 1950’s Banham believed the Smithsons’ New Brutalist building “images” to have lost this quality.

The work of Archigram was entirely image based, remaining within the confines of “paper architecture”, and in this way fulfilled Banham’s standard of “imageability” more overtly than did the New Brutalists’ built work. In Archigram’s drawings, Banham saw the conscious attempt to use wild architectural aesthetics as an effective, pop-culturally driven expression of the new era of technology. 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.

These were symbolic representations of a technologically driven architecture, or as Banham put it, “the first effective image of the architecture of technology…” In their abstract, eye-catching, and colorful character, they were advertisements

38 Whiteley, Reyner Banham: Historian, 132
39 Whiteley, Reyner Banham: Historian, 131
40 Whiteley, Reyner Banham: Historian, 175
41 Whiteley, Reyner Banham: Historian, 176
specifically directed at the average consumer, the focus of an increasingly product driven culture. Like the Futurists, Archigram kept the details of how the projects’ technology actually functioned in the abstract realm, and Banham, as in the case of the Futurists, found Archigram’s images to be provocative enough to set aside the quibbles with actual functionality that he had leveled on the work of Gropuis, 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 visions:

> 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.  

Archigram hadn’t found a workable architecture of “environments”, but they had come up with an attractive vision of what this architecture might *look* like, and in doing so had most successfully achieved the powerful “imagebility” Banham had so desired for an architecture particular to the Second Machine Age.

Banham’s preoccupation with Archigram’s “imageable” work presented an obvious incongruity with his simultaneous pursuit of anti-aesthetic “fit environments” during the 1960’s, which had culminated with his publication of *The Architecture of the Well Tempered Environment* in 1969. Bringing together much of the writing and research Banham had done throughout the decade, *The Well Tempered Environment* rejected the categorization of architectural styles and epochs based upon aesthetic considerations. Instead, it offered a cohesive survey of architectural history in relation to the achievement of fit “environments” and

42 Whiteley, *Reyner Banham: Historian*, 176
examined the devices used to do so. In the introduction to the book, Banham criticized the dominance of the visual and stylistic aspect of architecture-the form: “...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.”43 He cited two examples of buildings with progressive approaches to mechanical services-Kahn’s Richards Memorial Laboratories in Philadelphia, and Wright’s Larkin Administration Building, in Buffalo. Both, he explained, were well known within modern histories solely because the mechanical system affected the overall aesthetic of the building, reflecting historians’ “shallow” interest in the progression of formal styles and a primarily visual understanding of architecture. He continued by reiterating his previous disdain for the “lore of the operation”, lamenting that architects still tried to regulate the environment 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, “Societies...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...”44

Although Banham was publishing these criticisms a few years after Archigram’s project for a “Plug-In-City”, much of his writing that was


44 Banham, The Architecture of the Well-Tempered, 21
contemporaneous with and even before the time of the “Plug-In City” like “A Home is not a House” and “Stocktaking” echoed these same beliefs against architecture’s physical and visual priorities, and it seems shocking that Banham could have had such an interest in negating structure and rejecting aesthetic evaluation and while simultaneously praising the “imageability” of the monumental Archigram megastructures. Indeed, the dominant aspect of Archigram’s megastructures was there striking physical and visual presence, even if their materials were indicated to be more lightweight and expendable. In addition, the megastructures were emblematic of another major problem Banham exposed in *The Well Tempered Environment*; the unmitigated glorification of architecture and the architect and downplaying of the engineer, who Banham believed deserved more credit for having to come up with the revolutionary system that made such bold architecture habitable.\(^45\) In an introduction to his book *Age of the Masters* (1962) written after the fact in 1975, Banham admitted that indeed 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”.\(^46\) As far as habitability, the megastructures certainly couldn't have achieved it as drawn, and Banham’s desire here to bring attention to those that make architecture work went against his previously mentioned downplaying of functionality in both Archigram and the Futurists’ work.

\(^45\) Banham, *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered*, 16

\(^46\) Banham, *The Age of the Masters*, 6
One must wonder, therefore, both how and why Banham was able to hold simultaneously to these two seemingly opposing belief systems in his writing during the 1960’s, especially evidenced through his appraisal of Archigram’s projects’ “imageability” while still in pursuit of the anti-architectural “environments” he wrote at greatest length about in *The Architecture of the Well Tempered Environment*. One explanation has already been touched upon: that underneath his desires to revise and reject conventional histories of architecture, Banham was still very much a historian himself, trained under the guidance of one of the most notable figures of architectural history, Nikolas Pevsner, and like Pevsner, Banham was fascinated by the notion of a *zeitgeist*. The *zeitgeist* in Banham’s view was architecture’s anthropological value: how well it represented the specific conditions of a certain time, place and culture and could convey them to later civilizations, 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.” 47 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.” 48 Banham evidently clung to the notion that the most effective


48 Tournikiotis, *The Historiography of Modern Architecture*, 158
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. And, though he was clearly attracted to the radical nature of an invisible architecture of “environments”, Banham could never come up with visions to accompany the written theory that were as satisfyingly “imageable” and expressive of the Second Machine Age *zeitgeist* as the outwardly “image-conscious” and pop-culturally relevant publications of *Archigram*.

Whiteley expands on this explanation, claiming Banham’s conflicting views to not only reflect his general position as a historian, but also a more personal attachment to the “modo architectorum”, or architecture’s cultural associations, which prevented him from fully committing to his “polemical” attraction to the radical, anti-architecture of environments:

> 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. 49

For Banham, the “modo architectorum” that Whiteley refers to here can 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 attachment is easily seen in Banham’s vehement rejection of the Festival of Britain, which he said compromised the “purity” of the Modern aesthetic, and of Post-Modernism, which he deemed to be

49 Whiteley, *Reyner Banham: Historian*, 386
“building in drag” despite its consideration of issues like symbolism and imageability that Banham clearly thought to be important.⁵⁰

Banham’s development of two conflicting viewpoints therefore reveals important influences from his past, whether it be Pevsner and the idea of a zeitgeist, as Tournikiotis suggests, or the Modern movement and “modo architectorum”, as Whiteley argues, to have prevented him from fully committing to his radical architecture of “environments”. On a larger scale, however, it also reflects Banham’s belonging to the unique present and emerging future of London during the 1960’s. There, a thriving post-war economy had ushered in a decade of financial successes that favored 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.”⁵¹ The overall atmosphere supported and even encouraged the anti-establishment, revisionist stances of strong personas like Banham’s, and of multiple underground publications, of which Archigram was one of the most prominent. These revisionist stances were very suspicious of the rigid, value laden system of the “academy”, and, as Banham expressed in his criticism of the New Brutalists’ “contrived aesthetics”, instead favored an openness to multiple and unexpected viewpoints, ideas, and influences. Banham’s support of contradicting viewpoints reflects his own degree of

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⁵¹ Whiteley, Reyner Banham: Historian, 180
openness as a prominent part of this revisionist culture of intelligentsia. Instead of allowing his work on environments to restrict him to a narrowly defined, dogmatic approach to the multi-varied promises of technology, Banham was able to run with multiple approaches that he considered being equally viable, using them, as Whiteley writes, as separate responses to a diversity of developing issues facing architecture:

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... all (options) were valid responses to particular situations and could be utilized accordingly. 52

And, though Banham’s resultant oeuvre never quite presented a consistent enough case for the reconciling of fields (architecture and science) which he himself considered to be “irreconcilable”, it did manage to establish an open, theoretical relationship between the two that distinctly related to the spirit of his time while allowing its author to play his part as a prominent member of the heterogenous, youth dominated culture surrounding him in the 1960’s.

52 Whiteley, Reyner Banham: Historian, 386, 188
Sources Used


Figure 1
Buckminster Fuller
*Dymaxion House*, 1927
Elevation

Figure 2
Antonio Sant’Elia
*La Città Nuova*, 1914
Perspective

Figure 3
At left:
Reyner Banham
*Unhouse*, 1965
Elevation

At right:
Reyner Banham
*Standard of Living Package*, 1965
Elevation
Figure 4
Cedric Price
Fun Palace, 1961
Aerial Perspective

Figure 5
Peter Cook
Plug-In City, 1964
Elevation

Figure 6
Peter + Alison Smithson
Patio and Pavilion, 1956
Plan