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Research Paper

THE "MACHINES" OF KNOWLEDGE: CEDRIC PRICE'S TOPICALITY

FRANCESCA BONFANTE

Politecnico di MilanoORDIC ID: 0000-0002-7773-0728

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ABSTRACT

Laying emphasis on the role of educational and leisure structures, this paper explores the contribution made by Cedric Price to the debate about decentralization and the future of cities in the UK of the 1960. At a time when machines were gaining ground in the systems of production, somehow undermining the relationship between work and leisure, Price mobilized his understanding of cybernetics and game theory to conceive a new relationship between man and architecture based on the machine.

His approach became clear in the Fun Palace (1960-66), a multi-purpose building which could be assembled and disassembled, conceived in collaboration with theatre Director Joan Littlewood.

Price upgraded mass leisure from idleness to emancipation, reinterpreting the Corbuserian *machine à habiter* into a flexible space, a radical venue which was to be a laboratory of fun.

The Potteries Thinkbelt Project (1963-67) somehow complemented the Fun Palace. Exploiting a decaying railway junction in Staffordshire, Potteries Thinkbelt was an itinerant university for 20,000 students, an alternative to the traditional campus which – be it urban or rural – was then a dominating theme in the UK. This idea was based on reviving a hundred-year-old railway system no longer in use, which would transport people between housing and learning areas converting the cars themselves into mobile teaching units. Complete with inflatable lecture theaters, foldout desks, and information carrels, the units could be combined and transferred to various sites as needed.

Price undermined architecture as a discipline, anticipating many contemporary challenges: the extreme dynamism of society, new technologies, the relationship between space and time.

Along this line of thoughts, the paper questions the present relevance of Price's experimental projects, focusing on some urban and architectural themes: the relationship between permanent and temporary spaces, the role of mobility, the role of institutions as elements of a potential network, challenging the binary opposition between centralization/decentralization.

KEYWORDS: Machines of Knowledge, Complex building, Education, Leisure, Invention

1. PREMISE

In recent years, the theme of hybrid or complex buildings has gained momentum between architects. We may recall the three issues of the journal a + t entitled Complex buildings. The issue Generators, Linkers, Mixers & Storytellers included the Fun Palace as an important precedent, described as "a gigantic mobile with dynamic facilities for leisure and entertainment" (Fernández Per, 2017).

The great innovation of this project lies in anticipating two central themes of the contemporary city: the destiny of the suburbs and the question of leisure. In addition, the Fun Palace, the Inter-Actıon Centre and the Thinkbelt radically questioned the relationship between university education and the working class. In fact, these projects propose new modes of approaching knowledge different from the traditional systems of education and thought. As recalled by Samantha Hardingham in the preface to the issue dedicated to Potteries Thinkbelt: "In order to experiment, to be able to try something new, to look for something unknown, one must start from the position of absolutely no compromise"; and she goes on to quote Price himself "architecture should have little to do with problem-solving-rather it should create desirable conditions and opportunities hitherto thought impossible" (Hardingham, 2007).

Let us now see the genesis and development of the projects, the architectural and settlement principles, the relationship with the debate of the time.

2. FUN PALACE, A LABORATORY OF FUN

The meeting between Cedric Price and Joan Littlewood, the two protagonists of the Fun Palace, took place in 1962. Since the late 1940s, Joan Littlewood has been recognized as one of Britain's most radical actors, directors and producers. In 1945, she founded The Theatre Workshop with a group of younger colleagues dissatisfied with the artistic quality and the social role of commercial theatre. With very little money, the company toured England and Europe before settling in Stratford in 1953. This was a working-class suburb of London. As director, Littlewood created the company's distinctive style, inspired by Brecht's theatrical techniques and music hall. When Littlewood met Price she was disillusioned by the experience of the Theatre Workshop.

She shared with Cedric Price her ideas for a people's theatre, a theatre of pure performativity, a space of cultural bricolage where people could experience the transcendence and transformation of the theatre not as audience, but as players themselves.

In the early 1963, Price began working on the Fun Palace. This is how he described the project:

"Flexibility within the complex is not confined to the variation of the form and disposition of the enclosures and areas provided, but also by the ability to vary the public movement patterns through adjustment of mechanical movement aids (escalators, travelators etc.). Environmental control is achieved not only by movement of screens, 'walls', roofing panels, but also by warm air screens, ultra-violet lights, optical barriers, statica vapour zones etc." (Price, 1963).

The main purpose was to emancipate and democratise education. For this, Price and Littlewood imagined the Fun Palace as a laboratory of fun and a university of the streets, providing educational opportunities in the guise of leisure entertainment in order to prepare society for the advent of the technological age.

"In London we are going to create a university of the streets – not a 'gracious' park, but a foretaste of the pleasures of 1984. It will be a laboratory of pleasure, providing room for many kinds of action. For example, the 'fun arcade' will be full of the games and tests that psychologists and electronics engineers now devise for the service of industry or war-knowledge will be piped through jukeboxes. [...] An acting area will afford the therapy of theatre for everyone: men and women from factories, shops, and offices, bored with their daily routine, will be able to re-enact incidents from their own experience in burlesque and mime and gossip, so that they no longer accept passively whatever happens to them but wake to a critical awareness of reality, act out their subconscious feras and taboos, and perhaps are stimulated to social research. [...] But the essence of the place will be its informality: nothing is obligatory, anything goes" (Littlewood, 1964).

A few years earlier, in 1959, the Labour Party had emphasized leisure time:

"The post-war Labour Government proved that, in a properly planned society, it is possible to guarantee full employment; and, as automation spreads, it will also become possible, while maintaining full employment,

steadily to lessen the number of hours that most people have to work. These two great advances will mean a drastic shift in our social thinking. Once full employment is again secured, the emphasis will increasingly be not on jobs for all but on leisure for all – *leisure and how to use it*" (The Labour Party, 1959).

Price and Littlewood's point of view was much more radical and, with utopian overtones, indicate the Fun Palace as a response to the social and economic crisis of post-war England, and especially to the way technology promised to erase the distinctions between work, education and leisure.

Instead of a predetermined programme, Price imagined that activities performed in the Fun Palace could change depending on the user's requests; for this, he conceived a structural skeleton within which and around which activities might grow and develop (Figure 1).

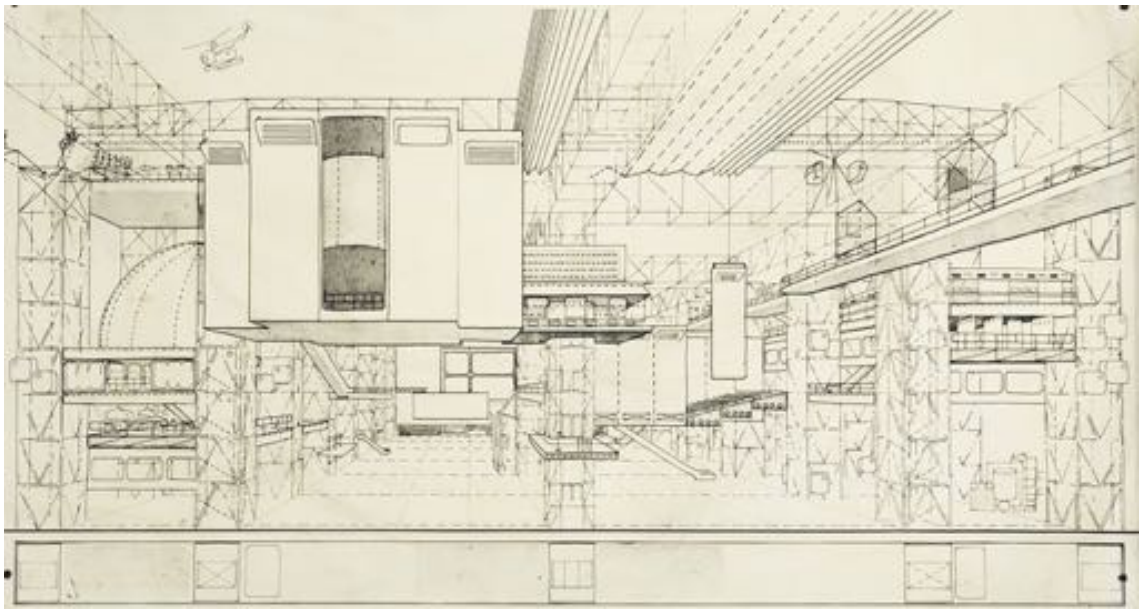

Figure 1. *Cedric Price, Fun Palace, Section, ca. 1964. DR1995:0188:520, Cedric Price fonds. Montréal: Canadian Centre for Architecture.*

"Its form and structures, resembling a large shipyard in which enclosures such as theatres, cinemas, restaurants, workshops, rally areas, can be assembled, moved, rearranged and scrapped continuously. Its mechanically operated environmental controls are such that it can be sited in a hard dirty industrial area unsuited to more conventional types of amenity buildings" (Price, 1964).

In the different designs for the Fun Palace, the influence of Littlewood's theatrical vision is evident. In my opinion, we can compare the Fun Palace with the theatrical machines of the Russian avant-gardes. For example with the set-up for *Le cocu magnifique*, curated by Lyubov Popova for Mejerchold, who completely realized the idea of the constructivist scene: an abstract castle, composed of fixed and moving parts, whose slowed or accelerated movement slowed or accelerated the rhythm of the actors' acting.

The Fun Palace was meant to last for ten years, and its variability was based on the constantly changing needs of the users rather than on physical obsolescence. As we all know, the Fun Palace resulted from an intense collaboration with scientists, sociologists, psychologists, experts in cybernetics, and politicians, who volunteered their time for the project. And with the contribution of Buckminster Fuller.

In terms of flexibility of the entire "machine", the collaboration between Cedric Price, John Littlewood and Gordon Pask played a key role. They designed a control system based on several feedback mechanisms, through which the Fun Palace would have been able to interact with its users. The cognitive "model" was based on the constant relationship between the incoming user, who had not yet made any changes to the building and had not yet learned anything from it, and the outgoing user, who had already experienced the learining space. The control system was similar to the proposal for a cybernetic theatre by Pask in 1964, one of the most direct cybernetic exercises applied to architecture. Pask's theatre focused on two fundamental innovations: the

possibility for audience to interact with the actors through lighting and button systems; the implementation of a methodology to creating interactive scripts and a processing system that allowed to stage these plays.
"The crux of a Cybernetic Theatre is that its audience should genuinely participate in a play. This possibility of participation is a prerogative of the theatre since any realistic feedback fronm an audience is prohibited by inherent restrictions in the conparable entertainment media of the Cinema and of Dramatic Television" (Pask, 1964).
Through cybernetics Price could thus put into practice the idea behind the project: an environment where the mind and spirit of the users could relax or find the stimuli to carry out creative or recreational activities, without following pre-established models.

2.1. The choice of the site

The site for the Fun Palace was another crucial issue. It cannot pass unnoticed that the two chosen sites, first the Isle of Dogs and subsequently the Lea Valley at Mill Meads, had been already identifies as strategic areas in the 1944 Abercrombie plan.
The first choice therefore fell on the Isle of Dogs in east London on the bank of the river Thames at Glengall Wharf, accessible both by road and by water. The Glengall Wharf area came under the auspices of the London County Council Parks Committee, which was responsible for the management and development of vast open spaces within the 110 square mile London area.
Price and Littlewood hoped the Committee accepted the project, as the Committee's open space policies adhered to the Master Plan of London developed by Patrick Abercrombie.
The Report prepared in 1944 by Abercrombie placed particular importance on increasing public access to the Thames and recommended conversion of abandoned wharves on the Isle of Dogs into public space.
Price prepared a public report describing the project's goals. In the meantime, a meeting was organized with the Midwall Residents Association. In September 1963, despite all efforts, the LCC Parks Committee rejected the project.
We all know what was to happen of the Isle of Dogs. After the London Docklands Development Corporation was established, the Isle of Dogs became part of an entrepreneurial zone. Between 1987 and 1991, the area was dominated by the growing development of the Canary Wharf.
After the first failure, Price and Littlewood began exploring other alternative sites around London. In October 1963, they discussed with Leslie Lane, Director of the Civic Trust, the possibility of linking the Fun Palace to the Civic Trust's plan for a 6.000-acres green belt along the Lea River Valley. The area of Mill Meads was chosen.
Lea River Valley was also included in Abercrombie's Report, as a playground for Londoners, an opportunity for a great piece of constructive, preservative and regenerative planning.
In the summer of 1964 appeared the Civic Trust's pamphlet *A Lea Valley Regional Park*; the pamphlet listed Mill Meads first among the 16 development areas in the Lea Valley and gave a prominent place to the Fun Palace. In early July of the same year, Price and Littlewood finalised their own pamphlet. Few words, taken from the pamphlet, can summarize the spirit of the project:
"ARRIVE AND LEAVE by train, bus, monorail, hovercraft, car, tube or foot at any time YOU want to…
CHOOSE what you want to do – or watch someone else doing it… WHAT TIME IS IT? Any time of day or night, winter or summer – it really doesn't matter…" (Littlewood, Price, 1964).
In the meantime, several pilot projects were proposed for London, Liverpool and other large cities. Even in this case, however, the project was eventually rejected. In December 1966 parliament passed the Lee Valley Bill, excluding the Fun Palace; The Lee Valley Regional Park Authority was established (Figure 2).

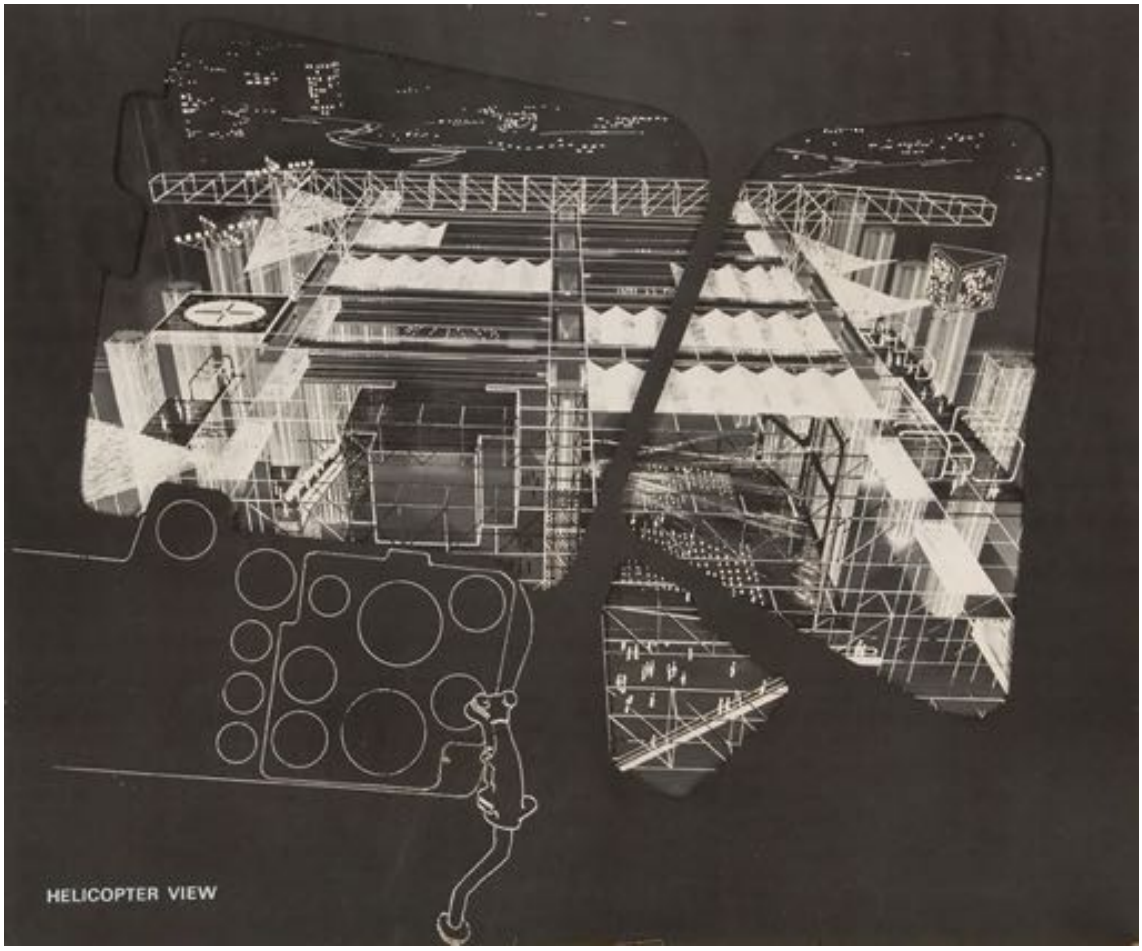

Figure 2. *Cedric Price, Fun Palace, Helicopter view, ca. 1964. DR1995:0188:521, Cedric Price fonds. Montréal: Canadian Centre for Architecture.*

Nowadays, this Park embraces just about every conceivable aspect of leisure, sport and recreation. The Lee Valley Regional Park was also playing a leading role in the London 2012 Olympic Games and the Aquatics Centre was built on the Mill Meads area, where the Fun Palace should have stood.

3. INTER-ACTION CENTRE

In 1976 Price built a much smaller version of the Fun Palace, the Inter-Action Centre. The Centre was commissioned by Ed Berman and the Inter-Action Trust, for a disused site at Talacre Public Open Space in Kentish Town, Camden, London. The construction was divided into two phases. The first phase included the foundations, the steel structure and the trusses; they could be used for outdoor community events while funds were being raised for the second phase. In the second phase, the coatings, accessories, finishes, prefabricated service units and wooden huts were completed. Functional areas suggested by Cedric Price included meeting rooms, classrooms, rehearsal rooms, studios, performance areas, multimedia resources, dining and relaxation rooms, a gym and a nursery. The Centre constituted an open framework into which modular and pre-fabricated elements could be inserted and removed. The Inter-Action Centre took on the concepts of flexibility, fluidity and indeterminacy, providing a base for a broad range of creative pursuits for the local community, from which it was much appreciated.

This centre appears as a great ludic building, with a complex program an materialization but enclosed by a large structural truss that allows different internal configurations. Its linear geometry open the possibility to the center to be extended horizontally almost indefinitely without great difficulty. Cedric Price fostered this perception by only filling up the central part and completing the rest of the program with an ephemeral architecture made of containers, temporary stands, etc. This decision and the own materiality of the project

using industrial materials generate the idea of an architecture in constant transformation and overcomes the utopian idea to a real possibility creating an believable image that represents it (Figure 3).

Figure 3. *Cedric Price, Aerial view of Inter-Action Centre, London, ca. 1977. DR2004:1211:003, Cedric Price fonds. Montréal: Canadian Centre for Architecture.*

Having initially been given a 10-year lifespan in reflection to its inevitable social and technological obsolescence, in an unprecedented move Price persuaded English Heritage not to list the building in north London, supporting its demolition on the ground that something better could be put in its place. The demolition was carried out in 2003, the same year Price died.

Many critics compare Price's projects to the Centre Pompidou in Paris or to other examples of high-tech architecture; however, the true character of the Fun Palace and of the Inter-Action Centre was the idea of a democratic and extremely creative use, which cannot be found in the Centre Pompidou.

Price himself in a 2003 interview describes the program of activities: "a programme which could easily belong to that of any modern-day sports and cultural centre in an average contemporary city or that of a social activator located at the centre of a deprived area" (Price, 2003).

4. POTTERIES THINKBELT *VERSUS* UNIVERSITY CAMPUS

The emergence of the university problem could be dated after the end of the Second World War, when the urgent need for new centres of higher education was already making itself felt. The University Institute of Education was founded, the enlargement of existing university encouraged and the university affiliated institutes were raised to university status.

Confronted to the increasing pressure from young people aspiring to higher education, the early interventions were followed in the space of three years (from 1958 to 1961) by the establishment of seven new universities.

In 1961a commission was set up to approach this problem at the national level. The goal was to review the pattern of full-time higher education in Great Britain and in the light of national needs and resources to advise on what principles its long-term development should be based. The *Higher Education Report*, presented to the Parliament in October 1963, suggested a series of short and long term provisions aimed at fostering new places: the development of existing institutes; giving university status to ten Colleges of Advanced Technology; the creation of six new universities in addition to the seven still under construction.

An initial balance of concrete results – about the seven university previously instituted – was published in a monographic issue of *Architectural Review* October 1963 (Architectural Review, 1963). The buildings show homogeneity of locational choice, all set in open areas at a short distance from rather large urban centres. It

was, in fact, a question of creating university centres with a regional character, thus justifying the choice of location outside pre-existing urban nuclei.

At the level of the morphological formulation, even within their considerable typological differentiation, the new organism presented themselves as autonomous units with their own internal development potential. They all embodied the idea of a citadel including a wide range of functions, as the convent of medieval society or the post-war new-towns.

In 1966, Reyner Banham, in the *New Society* magazine, criticized this type of approach:

"At a time when ideas on the function and nature of universities are in the melting pot (they keep telling us), when pedagogic methods and course contents are subject to overnight revisions; when teaching machines threaten a revolution that could case total chaos if it should fail to happen, when the social backgrounds and life styles of students can be taken less and less for granted … at this time architects are offering to paralyse change by fixing the first concept in expensive and monumental structures" (Bahnam, 1966).

The so-called redbrick type proposes traditional architectural relationships. The Gonville & Caius College in Cambridge by Leslie Martin and Colin St. John Wilson, for example, seems almost exclusively addressed to the preservation of a refined and strongly characterized by history: a comfortable and representative environment, rather than a structure congruent to the problems posed from the mass university.

In this context it is necessary to place the Cedric Price proposal for Potteries Thinkbelt in North Staffordshire. This idea was based on reviving a hundred-year-old railway system no longer in use, which would transport people between housing and learning areas converting the cars themselves into mobile teaching units. Complete with inflatable lecture theaters, foldout desks, and information carrels, the units could be combined and transferred to various sites as needed.

The Potteries Thinkbelt, as Price wrote in the presentation of the project on the *New Society* magazine:

"will break down the isolation and peculiarity now associated with universities. It is big enough to involve the whole community and help it to realise that education at this level is not merely desirable but essential. The Thinkbelt itself will be on a vast scale, and oriented towards science and technology: a kind of cross between Berkeley in California and a CAT. The contrast with Keele, which it will include and supplant, could hardly be more extreme. It will rely on temporary buildings rather than permanent ones – to give flexibility and allow experimentation. lt will be built around a network of roads and railways which will provide links both internally and with the outside world. [...] The project indicates that education and the need to exchange information may be able to equal defence, energy and commerce needs as generators of urban location and form: cities caused by learning. However, the current analogy between existing universities and ideal town forms is both false and dangerous. Houses – partly for students and partly for local inhabitants – are integral to the project. At the first stage of development, Civic Design is avoided. This is the right order of priorities" (Price, 1966).

Higher education, particularly technical education, should have represented the new chief industry for this zone. The Thinkbelt was conceived as a vast triangle, enclosing the whole area around Stoke and Newcastle-under-Lyme; it was planned with local and national communications very much in mind, and it exploited modern electronic communication systems and equipment. It would had made great use of mobile and variable physical enclosures (Figure 4).

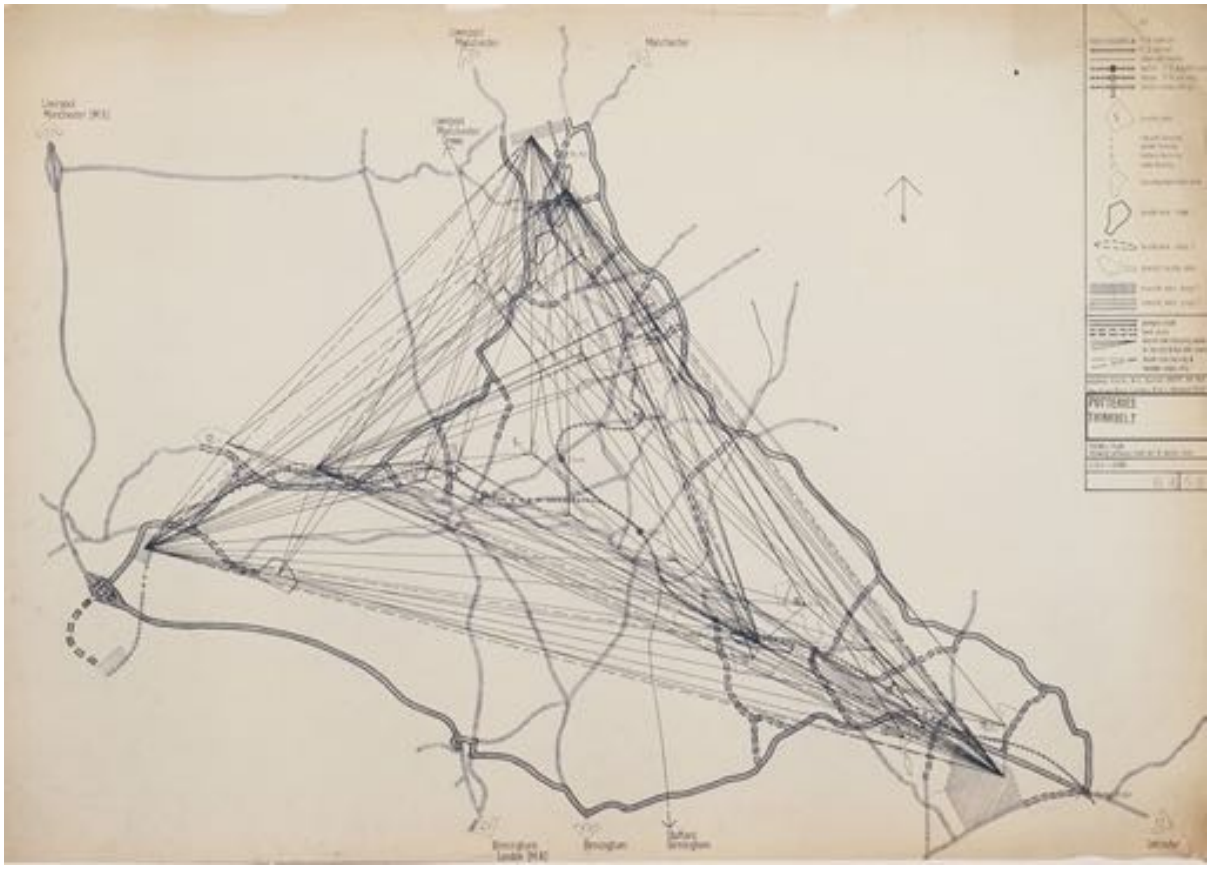

Figure 4. *Cedric Price, Potteries Thinkbelt, Overall plan showing primary road and desire line, 1964. DR1995:0216:245, Cedric Price fonds. Montréal: Canadian Centre for Architecture*

The Thinkbelt faculty areas occur at intervals along the internal rail system. They are based on existing or specially built sidings. They provide rail-based, mobile learning units which fit the immediate needs of each faculty. Equipment is thus used to its full intensity.

With regard in particular to equipment intended for teaching, there are five main kinds of unit. Seminar units that may be used either in conjunction with normal railbus services, or in separate services (with long stops of scheduled duration at Thinkbelt stations), or stationary in small faculty sidings; self-teach carrel units used in conjunction with closed or open circuit TV transmission, or with the linked information and programme store; information and equipment storage units; fold-out inflatable units; fold-out decking units.

Many as 20.000 students could have been absorbed into this area and their work would have been integrated and complementary of that of other, both old and new, industries, in the area. The information centre and the residences would have constituted further poles of students' life, in a continuous dynamic of relations with the entire community.

As opposed to a centralized campus, Potteries Thinkbelt would have created a widespread learning community while promoting economic growth. Not only were people transported between living quarters and learning areas, but the cars themselves would become mobile learning units. Complete with inflatable classrooms, folding desks, and information carts, the units could be combined and relocated to various sites as needed (Figure 5).

Figure 5. *Cedric Price, Potteries Thinkbelt, Photomontage of a perspective sketch of Madeley Transfer Area, 1966. DR2006:0019, Cedric Price fonds. Montréal: Canadian Centre for Architecture.*

Even this project contemplated a regional-scale planning, as in the case of the new English universities, but with a very dynamic vision of possible future transformations.

It is useful to remember that in May 1968 Cedric Price edites the issue of *Architectural Design* "What about Learning?", a poignant critique of the strictures of education and institutional learning at large, where he once again argues that education is little more than a method of distorting the individual's mental and behavioural life span to enable him to benefit from existing social and economic patterning. An activity, benevolently controlled and directed by an elite, which can do little more than improve on the range and network of structures it already has under its control.

6. A POSSIBLE CONCLUSION

Both the Fun Palace and Potteries Thinkbelt show the attempt to overcome the codified image of the university as a physically enclosed place for a privileged function, far removed from the usual house-work routine. Both projects re-interpret higher education as an inseparable element of the life of every citizen, a focal place open to the entire territory, thus going well beyond the surrounding city.

The concept of instant architecture – and I use this term instead of ephemeral architecture – is at the heart of the Archigram group's proposals, particularly in the 1968 Instant City project.

Instant City forms part of a series of investigations into mobile facilities which are in conjunction with fixed establishments requiring expanded services over a limited period in order to satisfy an extreme but temporary problem. A research project based on the conflict between local, culturally isolated, centres and the well serviced facilities of the metropolitan regions. As in Price's projects, once again it is a question of investigating the effect and practicality of injecting the metropolitan dynamic into these centres by means of a mobile facility carrying the information, the education, the entertainment services of the city.

It seems to me, that with all the Utopian overtones which these proposals bear with them, they still represent today a useful reference with which to deal in the transformations of the contemporary city.

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