

A Walking City by Archigram Group: on the Utopian Dimension of Drawing

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An emblematic synthesis of the homonymous project developed in 1964 within the Archigram Group by Ron Herron (1930-1994) and Warren Chalk (1927-1987) with the collaboration of Frank Brian Harvey for the drafting of the graphics, the plate *A Walking City* is part of a series of drawings that prefigure the futuristic idea of a city organised in mobile mechanical units, imbued with a post-apocalyptic atmosphere and characterised by a programmatically utopian vocation. There are four versions of this drawing, differing in technique and size: the first plate, from which the others derive, is a colour collage measuring 800 × 350 mm, in which a sepia-coloured background highlights the urban nucleus in the foreground on the left. The plate title appears in capital letters below a thick horizontal black line and is accompanied on the left by the caption "Each walking unit houses not only a

key element of the capital, but also a large population of world traveller-workers!" also in capital letters. A colour print measuring 420 × 200 mm, to which two additional black fields are superimposed at the top and bottom, and a black and white print measuring 420 × 300 mm, delimited at the bottom but not at the top by the white background, derive then from this first plate. This same drawing, in the monochrome version, is reproduced in print in blue ink (size 353 × 150 mm) and published on page 17 of issue 5 of *Archigram* magazine (Autumn 1964) –not coincidentally titled *Metropolis*– on a double-page that unfolds to the right. To the right of the title is added here the additional caption "This project by Ron Herron and Bryan Harvey exploits the most extreme context for a building so far in Archigram: an enclosed environment of colossal size that is mobile enough to traverse the world:

This article was written upon invitation to comment on the image of Archigram Group, not submitted to anonymous review, published under editorial director's responsibility.

a prototype for a world capital perhaps" [*The Archigram Archival Project* 2010].

The magazine, whose short editorial life (ten issues in all, distributed at irregular intervals between 1961 and 1974) corresponds to an equally intense production of visionary images, is the means of communication through which the group of designers openly declared its constitution in May 1961. The name Archigram, which the group took on only after the magazine came out, derives from the crasis of the two words architecture and telegram (or according to some, aerogram), recalling the quick, rapid and succinct communication style that announces the birth of a new event [Prestinzenza Puglisi 2019, p. 375]. The first issue of the periodical is in fact composed of only two self-produced pages, which open laconically with the words "This, the first Archigram, is a statement of the standpoint of the new Generation of Architecture" [*The Archigram Archival Project* 2010]. After this issue, the subsequent ones become more consistent and continue the progressive construction of a repertoire of urban models as utopian as they are unprecedented, embodying the reaction to the quiet and rational urbanistic approach of the English new towns: from the *Plug-in City* (1964), defined by an extensive technological infrastructure that constitutes the predisposition for the free grafting of autonomous housing cells, to the *Computer City* (1964), conceived as a network for the exchange of goods, people and information; from the *Underwater City* (1964), an immersed reticular habitat based on NASA technologies, to the *Instant City* (1968), consisting of a transportable parasitic kit capable of temporarily transforming any place into a city full of cultural events. The futuristic character of these ideas reflects in the linguistic and expressive register employed for their description, a "representative technique intrinsically linked to the meanings to be conveyed, through a graphic narrative that represents a way of staging their own vision of architecture in which the process counts more than the result" [Piscitelli 2020, pp. 3714-3716].

Originally titled *Cities: Moving*, a label that appears in some of its earliest representations, the *Walking City* project adheres to the overtly utopian canon that distinguishes the British collective's imaginative production, opening up a vision of a future city "in which borders and boundaries are abandoned in favour of a nomadic lifestyle among groups of people worldwide" [*The Archigram Archival Project* 2010]. Heir to the technocratic ideology expressed in previous years by Richard Buckminster Fuller and to the

spirit of indeterminacy focused on in Yona Friedman's *L'architecture mobile* [Friedman 1958], the *Walking City* seems to solemnly wander in a world destroyed in the aftermath of a nuclear war [Frampton 1993, p. 332] and is condemned, directly or indirectly, by critics [Gannon 2008, p. 175]. Both Sigfried Giedion and Constantin Doxiadis "attack it for representing an 'inhuman' urban vision" [Banham 1994, p. 75], and even Peter and Alison Smithson disassociate themselves [Steiner, Landau 2000, p. 93]. However, this hostile character does not belong to Herron's project idea. In response to the comparison of the *Walking City* to a war machine made in the pages of the *International Times*, he is keen to point out that in his concept this city is "an object which moved slowly across the earth like a giant hovercraft, only using its legs as a levelling device when it settled on its site. To me, it was a rather friendly-looking machine" [Herron, in Banham 1994, p. 75]: a sort of enormous, placid technological insect, friendly and non-threatening.

The cultural context in which the project arose is declared once again by Ron Herron, who explains its genesis in these terms: "Walking City came out of the ideas of indeterminacy prevalent in the 1960s, particularly the idea of the city as a changing entity which could respond to the inhabitants' immediate needs. I took a slightly different direction and looked at the idea of indeterminacy of place – Walking City was the result" [Herron, in Banham 1994, p. 75]. The brief, ironic and provocative essay *Owing to Lack of Interest, Tomorrow Has Been Cancelled* by Warren Chalk in the pages of *Architectural Design* [Chalk 1969] clarifies the propensity towards experimentation through new expressive media, referring to fantasy imagery and to a language typical of mass culture [Steiner, Landau 2000]. The Archigram Group adheres wholeheartedly to this language, in search of an appropriate vocabulary [Zevi 1996, p. 431]: "It isn't necessary to be dreary to make a point, or to be profound to have something to say; some of the greatest insights in the world accompany a joke. And many of the mind-blowing ideas about futures in never-never-lands have originated off the pages of comic books and science fiction picture backs. Cartoons help discover the hidden realities of life, where straighter communications may fail" [Chalk 1969]. In this model of a city that is nomadic, transitory, interchangeable, imaginative, where chaos spontaneously regulates itself, the playful factor is dominant [Zevi 1996, p. 431], and the search for a practical dimension seems to take a back seat. The project

drawing, a physiological *medium* between imagination and reality, becomes here pure foreshadowing, shifting the balance between design thought and actual realisation of the idea towards a clearly utopist position. As affirmed by many, utopia is the distinctive feature that best synthesises the Group's work, which is mainly interested in a figuration appropriate to the space age and [...] to the apocalyptic subtexts of survival technology [Frampton 1993, p. 332]. Archigram chose clearly, indeed ostentatiously the path of utopia" [Silipo 2005], which followed without hesitation, inventing a new catalogue of declaredly theoretical ways of living: utopia is an ambiguous term, perhaps applicable in a rigorous sense only to some of the Archigram Group's scenographies [Zevi 1996, p. 433].

Despite the controversial reaction to the project and its implicit values, the image of the *Walking City* soon took on an iconic value, becoming the symbol of a theoretical position and, more generally, of an entire era. More than twenty years later, the drawing of one of the urban units appears in the poster and the cover of the exhibition catalogue *Vision der Moderne* [Klotz 1986], organised in Frankfurt at the Deutsches Architekturmuseum. The evocative power of the Archigram Group's drawings, far-sighted outcomes of their own time and at the same time precursors of certain future evolutions of urban models and architectural thought results in the ability to synthesise a utopian dimension. A dimension that always animates man's aspirations, populating his imagination with futuristic, visionary habitats and feeding a significant strand of future architectural research. The legacy of the Group, which broke up in the early 1970s, can be seen in the work of its successors, first and foremost the Italian groups Archizoom and Superstudio, and in general in the approach of high-tech architects. A phenomenon that remained unmatched in the years to come, so much so that, half a century after the conclusion of that experience, Peter Cook himself states in a recent interview: "I think that we have probably never again had such a creative or exotic phenomenon in our lifetimes" [Cook, in Hobson 2020].

The drawings for the *Walking City* constitute a rich series: the one announcing the project is chronologically placed in an intermediate position since it represents the result of some preliminary studies aimed at composing the final plate. The irruption of the urban machines in the heart of a future New York, where these organisms coexist with pre-existing buildings that seem to have definitively abandoned their original function, is immortalised by choosing

a realistic point of view at human height, as of an observer immersed in the scene. The drawing portrays the machines as they advance from the water towards the city; in the foreground, the respective telescopic arms connect them to each other to allow the transfer of materials, as in a pipe net system *ante-litteram*, metaphorically emulating a process of mutual nourishment. The framing is intentionally composed, as evidenced by two of Herron's study drawings, the first in red marker on paper (*Walking City Sketch From Ron Herron Sketchbook*), the second in pencil and pen on tracing paper superimposed on a photo (*Preliminary Layout Sketch For The Walking City In New York*, January 1963). The drawings of the *Walking City* set in New York are diverse; in all of them, the viewer's gaze sweeps closely over the scene, sometimes the viewer is placed in a position protected by a parapet with other human figures ('*New York*' *Sketch From Ron Herron Sketchbook*), other times the landscape is nocturnal and the urban machines tinged with coloured lights (*Walking City, New York At Night*). Even after the presentation on the magazine pages, the project continues to be developed and drawn. There are many drawings, both coeval and subsequent, relating to the detailed study of plan, elevation and section of the individual urban machine, also destined to become an iconic synthesis image. Similarly, there are numerous scenographic settings of the *Walking City* in different contexts, mostly realistic even if not unambiguously determined, such as in the desert (*Walking City In Desert*) or on the ocean (*Walking City on the Ocean*), but also in places suspended between reality and imagination (*Walking City Fantasy And Reality*), in non-anthropized landscapes (*Walking City, Mobile Capital City*), in atopic spaces (*Mobile City*, "Proposal for a nomadic city infrastructure in which urban utilities would not be tied to a specific location") or at rest (*Walking City At Rest / Night*). The project is also redesigned almost three decades later, on the occasion of the retrospective held in 1994, first at the Kunsthalle in Vienna, then at the Centre Pompidou in Paris [Archigram 1994] and finally, eleven years later, in Tokyo.

The imaginative power of Ron Herron's *Walking City*, with its atmosphere that still seems futuristic today, continues to inspire; many projects are based on it, not only in the field of town planning or architecture: for example, in 2011, the British digital art studio Universal Everything received an award at the *Ars Electronica* festival in Linz for a video that reiterated the title of Archigram's project, that stages the unstoppable walk of a machine with hu-

man features, technological and continuously changing in its geometries, advancing in a straight line towards the future [Marsala 2014]. Like the Archigram Group's many other prefigurations, which have clearly and intentionally

remained on paper, *Walking City* testifies to the inexhaustible visionary energy that emanates from drawing, capable of nourishing critical thought, dream evocation and the utopian aspiration of man.

Note

The image *A Walking City* is taken from *The Archigram Archival Project*, run by EXP-Centre for Experimental Practice at the University of West-

minster: <http://archigram.westminster.ac.uk/project.php?id=60> (accessed 2021, December 3).

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