

Ethics VS Aesthetics Architectural Design 1965-1972

Steve Parnell

In the 1960s and '70s, Architectural Design was the most influential architectural magazine in the UK, if not the world. Under the direction of Technical Editor Robin Middleton, AD published extensive articles on ecological issues such as Martin Pawley's 'Garbage Housing' and ongoing columns like 'Recycling' and 'Eco-tech'. A year before the oil crisis shocked the world, the July 1972 issue was even themed 'Designing for survival'. This can be seen as the ethical face of AD.

Middleton steered the magazine away from architecture-as-building towards architecture-as-concept and the Brutalists were exchanged for Archigram. In July 1965, Middleton introduced a section called Cosmorama as 'a commentary on buildings or on events throughout the world that impinge upon architecture'. It featured products and processes that were to challenge the accepted nature of architecture and promoted the kind of throw-away culture of consumption that Archigram were advocating. This can be seen as the aesthetic face of AD.

By examining the content and context of AD during this period, the following paper discusses the themes of ethics and aesthetics manifested by these two avant-garde movements and argues that for architectural practice, the aesthetic strand of consumerism ultimately became more influential than the ethics of ecology.

Introduction

- ¹ Reyner Banham, *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?* (London: The Architectural Press, 1966), p. 134.
- ² Peter Bürger, *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, trans. by Michael Shaw, *Theory and History of Literature* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1984).
- ³ Richard Murphy, *Theorizing the Avant-Garde: Modernism, Expressionism, and the Problem of Postmodernity*, 1st edn (Cambridge University Press, 1999), p. 11.
- ⁴ Robin Middleton was Technical Editor of AD December 1964 - July 1972.

Reyner Banham introduced the dualism “ethic or aesthetic” to the architectural world in the subtitle of his 1966 book, *The New Brutalism*. In it, he asked whether the post-war neo-avant-garde movement, the New Brutalism was a moral crusade for the reform of architecture, or simply another style. The use of the word 'or' in the phrase implies that the movement was either one or the other, whereas in actual fact the two terms are not mutually exclusive: it is, of course, entirely possible for architecture to be simultaneously ethical and aesthetic, depending on the definitions of the two terms. However, Banham constructed the argument based on the rhetoric of the New Brutalists themselves and decided in the end that the movement was about aesthetics after all: 'For all its brave talk of “an ethic, not an aesthetic”, Brutalism never quite broke out of the aesthetic frame of reference,'¹ he wrote in the book's envoi.

The New Brutalism was the neo-avant-garde movement of the British architectural scene in the 1950s and was published widely in the architectural press, particularly in *Architectural Design* and the *Architectural Review*. The vanguard that succeeded it was the Brutalists' natural heirs, Archigram, who were to dominate the pages of *Architectural Design* for a decade from 1965. It is worth noting in passing that the *Architectural Review* would leave them well alone, at least until they had passed as the avant-garde of the day. These two movements bracket the beginning and end of the magazine *Architectural Design*'s heyday, viz. circa 1955 to circa 1972. In fact, it could be argued that the increasing success of *Architectural Design* during this period was partly due to its close association and promotion of these vanguards.

While Archigram may have been a continuation of the New Brutalism, they had the opposite attitude to uniting art and life, a key characteristic that Peter Bürger, in *Theory of the Avant-Garde*, maintained drove all avant-garde art.² Richard Murphy builds on this in *Theorizing the Avant-Garde* by suggesting that art can serve as an ideal model, or utopia, for life to aspire to (sublimation) or alternatively, art and life can be brought together by a shift in the opposite direction by bringing art down to the banal level of mundane reality (what he calls “sublation”).³ The attitude of the proponents of the New Brutalism would be that of sublation, with its promotion of the ‘ordinary’, the ‘as found’ and foundations in the 1953 *Parallel of Life and Art* exhibition, which questioned traditional notions of beauty in favour of ugliness. In contrast, Archigram's attitude would be categorised as that of “sublimation”, as their unification of life and art occurred only in the worlds constructed in their fantasy drawings. These ideas will be expanded briefly below. However, it is the contrasting and contradictory editorial policies of AD during the period 1965-72 – a period that coincides with Robin Middleton's Technical Editorship⁴ and in which

⁵ The issue he was first responsible for as technical editor was March 1965.

Archigram were published heavily – that will highlight the difference of attitude to the twin rhyming themes of ethics and aesthetics. Architectural Design was already successful and widely read by the time Robin Middleton took over as Technical Editor in December 1964⁵ but under his direction, it was to become the architectural magazine that defined the period. By looking at the content of the architectural press, it is possible to glimpse the discourse of the architectural profession at that time. So an examination of AD's pages will help illuminate the key arguments and issues that highlighted the architectural debate of the day.

AD was not solely reliant on Archigram during this time, of course, but the group was heavily influential in the magazine and at the Architectural Association where they taught, with the two (the Architectural Association and AD) closely related through the personal relationships of editors and contributors alike. Their ideas and aesthetics were transported via AD to the architectural profession at large, but the ethical aspect of the magazine was to come largely from the ecological movement – something that Archigram only reluctantly started to acknowledge at the end of their avant-garde status.

This paper will explore these issues in the post-war architectural neo-avant-garde and the running themes of ethics and aesthetics. In particular, I examine the content and context of the magazine Architectural Design during Robin Middleton's time as Technical Editor in order to understand why it is that we are still discussing exactly the same ethical issues today, while the aesthetics have been implemented and progressed. I am using the term 'ethical' to refer predominantly to ecology, although AD at the time was also concerned with other issues that could easily be considered ethical.

The New Brutalism

⁶ Theo Crosby was Technical Editor of AD November 1953 - May 1962

⁷ See Theo Crosby, "Night Thoughts of a Faded Utopia" in David Robbins (ed), *The Independent Group: Postwar Britain and the Aesthetics of Plenty* (London: MIT Press, 1992), pp. 197-199.

⁸ Reyner Banham, 'The New Brutalism', *The Architectural Review*, 1955, 354-361.

⁹ The book refers to ten issues of AD and twelve of AR, as well as several other architectural journals.

Theo Crosby, Technical Editor of Architectural Design from 1953 to 1962⁶, used the magazine to promote architecture-as-building, and especially the ideas and interests of Alison and Peter Smithson – the Independent Group, the New Brutalist movement and Team X. Crosby had a particularly close relationship with the Smithsons, having shared a house with them when they first married and moved to London.⁷

1955 was a key year for the New Brutalism in the architectural trade rags: The Smithson's manifesto was published on page 1 of January's AD and in December of that year, Banham published his apologia of the movement in the *Architectural Review*.⁸ This pattern continued up until Banham's canonical work documenting the movement was published in 1966, once the movement had expired. The content of *The New Brutalism: Ethic or Aesthetic?* was based heavily on articles from each of the *Architectural Review* and *Architectural Design*.⁹ In it, Banham documented his search

for 'une architecture autre', a phrase that echoed Michel Taipé's book *Un Art Autre* that introduced an anti-art of the day through the work of Jean Dubuffet, Jackson Pollock and Eduardo Paolozzi among others.

For the Brutalists, ethics meant honesty of materials and structure – showing what the building was made of and how it was constructed. Their aesthetics followed that of the *Parallel of Life and Art* exhibition and the 'art brut' of Jean Dubuffet. To borrow Banham's words, 'the exploitation of these visual qualities [of grain, and 'chiaroscuro'] to enhance the impact of subject matter that flouted humanistic conventions of beauty in order to emphasize violence, distortion, obscurity and a certain amount of "humeur noir", was a subversive innovation whose importance was not missed.'¹⁰

¹⁰ Reyner Banham, 'The New Brutalism', *The Architectural Review*, 1955, 354-361 (pp. 61-62).

Brutalist architecture was a reaction to the white cube functionalist architecture of the pre-war heroes of the modern movement. Where their bricks were rendered and painted white to look like a machine finished concrete surface, the Brutalists wanted to be honest about the material surfaces, to leave brick unpainted and unplastered, and the shutter-work exposed on concrete. Even the services were to be surface mounted and on display, as were the joints between materials, wherever possible. This was all documented in Banham's book, beginning with the Smithson's Hunstanton School (published in *AD* in September 1953).¹¹

¹¹ *Architectural Design* 23 (9) (1953): 238-48.

Brutalism promised 'une architecture autre' of ethics rather than aesthetics, but ultimately Banham was disappointed. He transferred his attention in the mid-sixties to Brutalism's heirs, Archigram, who were also to promise 'une architecture autre' in a very different way. The New Brutalism and Archigram were more than simply two separate architectural vanguards: as different as they were, the latter was a direct development of the former.¹² Peter Cook was attracted to London in the first place by the Independent Group and a desire to mimic its success.¹³ He was to be taught at the AA by Peter Smithson. Many of the architect members of the Independent Group and the initial originators of the New Brutalism were one and the same people: Colin St John Wilson, James Stirling, John Voelcker and, of course, Peter and Alison Smithson. Additionally, half of the Archigram group (Dennis Crompton, Warren Chalk and Ron Herron) had already been working on the Brutalist structure of the South Bank Centre for the London County Council and they joined the other half (Peter Cook, Michael Webb and David Greene) at Taylor Woodrow Construction working on the Euston station redevelopment under the supervision of former *AD* technical editor Theo Crosby and alongside future *AD* technical editor, Robin Middleton.

¹² This has been explored thoroughly in Simon Sadler, 'The Brutal Birth of Archigram', in *The Sixties, Twentieth Century Architecture* 6, 2002, pp. 119-128.

¹³ Mary Banham, interview with author, 1st July 2008.

Archigram

Although Archigram as a 'fanzine' had been going since 1961, the group behind the fanzine wasn't published in the mainstream British architectural press – the 'trade rags' – until 1965. In December 1964, Robin Middleton had become technical editor of AD and by this time, Archigram were on to number six with a circulation of 2,500 themselves.¹⁴ In November 1965, *Architectural Design* was the first British architectural magazine to publish Archigram's work with Reyner Banham's two-page article called "A Clip-on architecture"¹⁵ and a 15 page chronological survey later in the same issue. From that point onwards and for the next ten years, Archigram as a group and as individuals were to dominate the pages of AD.

¹⁴ The circulation of Archigram 1 is noted as "around 400" on the official archive web site, and as 300 on <http://designmuseum.org/design/archigram> [accessed 5 May 2010] and by Archigram 3, there were "three or four hundred people who were on the mailing list" (Dennis Crompton, interview with Kester Rattenbury, <http://archigram.westminster.ac.uk/magazine.php?id=96> and <http://archigram.westminster.ac.uk/magazine.php?id=98>, accessed [28 April 2010]). However, Simon Sadler in *Archigram: Architecture without Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass. And London: MIT Press, 2001), p.149 quotes a number of about 200 for issue 1 (1961), then 1,000 for Archigram 4 (1964), 1,500 for Archigram 5 (1964) (noted as 1,250 on the Archigram archive site, <http://archigram.westminster.ac.uk/magazine.php?id=100> [accessed 28 April 2010]), 2,500 for Archigram 6 (1965), 4,000 for Archigram 7 (1966), 5,000 for Archigram 8 (1968). It is worth comparing this with the circulation of AD at this time, which was around 10,000 in the mid 1960s (Ken Frampton, interview with author, 23 November 2009).

¹⁵ Reyner Banham, 'A clip-on architecture', *Architectural Design*, 1965.

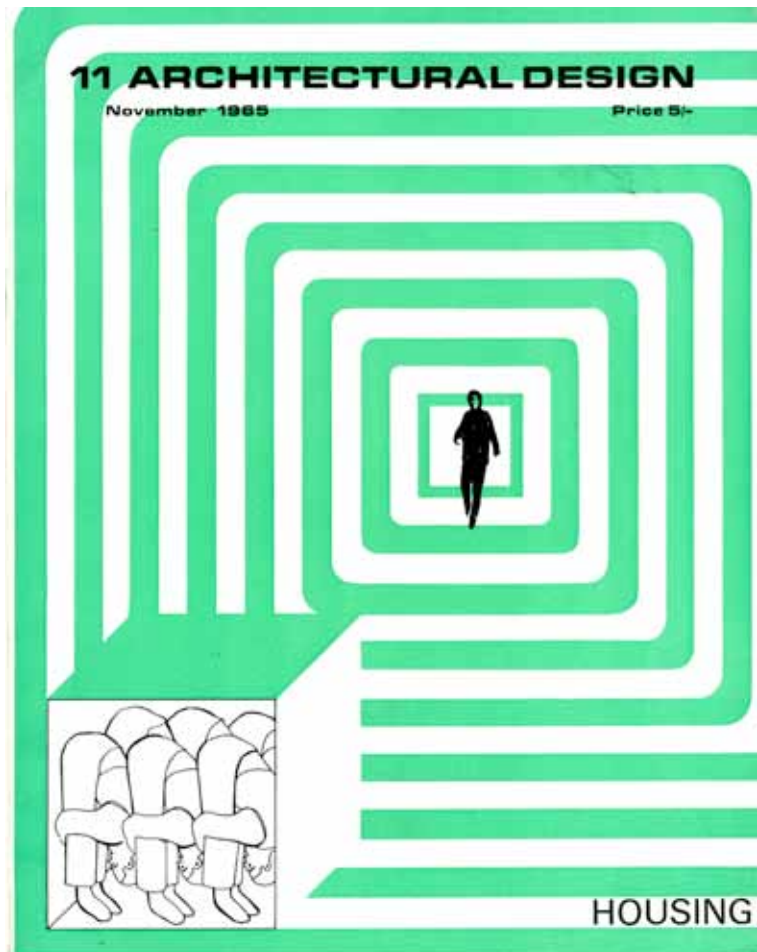


Fig 1. *Architecture Design* issue no. 11 November 1965

While the Brutalists were primarily concerned with ethics ostensibly at the expense of aesthetics, Archigram were all about the aesthetic and were entirely unconcerned with ethics. This reflects each movement's underlying attitude to the unification of life and art as mentioned above. Archigram's aesthetics are legendary and were aptly summarised by Banham: "Archigram is short on theory, long on draughtsmanship and

¹⁶ Reyner Banham in Peter Cook and Michael Webb, *Archigram* (Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), p. 5.

¹⁷ Reyner Banham in Peter Cook and Michael Webb, *Archigram* (Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), p. 5.

¹⁸ Simon Sadler, *Archigram: Architecture without Architecture* (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 2001), p. 183.

¹⁹ Fred Scott, 'Myth, Misses, and Mr Architecture', in *A Continuing Experiment: Learning and Teaching at the Architectural Association*, ed. by James Gowan (London: The Architectural Press, 1975), pp. 167-172 (pp. 168-169).

²⁰ Sadler, p. 177.

²¹ Simon Sadler covers Archigram's apolitical attitude in Sadler, pp. 177-187.

²² 30 May to 10 July 1968.

²³ Anonymous, "Milanogram", *Architectural Design*, 38 (4) (1968): 152.

²⁴ See Martin Pawley, "Miscarriage", *Architectural Design*, 38 (7) (1968): 298.

²⁵ Interview with Hubert Tonkin, January 1997, cited in Marc Dessauce, *The Inflatable Moment - Pneumatics and Protest in '68* (Princeton Architectural Press, 1999), p. 49.

²⁶ Eric Hobsbawm, "Cities and Insurrection", *Architectural Design*, 38 (12) (1968): 581-588.

craftsmanship. They're in the image business and they have been blessed with the power to create some of the most compelling images of our time."¹⁶ Like their Independent Group forebears, they used magazines and adverts as source material for their collages and as Sadler concludes, "Archigram sought a constituency of young, liberated, high-libido consumers – male and female... Mostly absent was anybody working, elderly, ordinary ... or non-Caucasian."¹⁷ As Banham's quote suggests, there is no doubting that Archigram's influence was almost entirely due to their aesthetic. Whereas the New Brutalists sought to drag art down to the level of life, Archigram wanted to raise life to the level of art. Rather than addressing existing society's problems, they chose to envision exciting new worlds and solve problems of their own creation, viewing the user as consumer and turning architecture into another product of consumption. As Banham wrote, in his 'Clip-on' article, "Archigram can't tell you for certain whether Plug-in City can be made to work, but it can tell you what it might look like."¹⁸

It would be unfair to claim that Archigram were not concerned with ethics, but they certainly belonged to the libertarian 'zoom-wave' portion of the Architectural Association, which during the late 1960s remained amoral and apolitical. Fred Scott recalled that "Designing was considered to be an activity freed from preconceptions of form, style or morality ... The main energy that sustained this period stemmed, of course, from Archigram."¹⁹ This, in the face of the "antiwar, anticapitalist, feminist, ecological, and race emancipation movements"²⁰ of the time.²¹

Archigram's lack of interest in politics, or morals, was exposed and recorded in AD in 1968. They came face to face with student unrest at the Milan Triennale in 1968²² where they were exhibiting the "Milanogram" (Archigram 8)²³. No sooner had the exhibition opened than it was occupied by students for ten days²⁴. Then, at a 1969 conference in Turin, Hubert Tonkin recalled,

At a colloquium called "Utopia or Revolution" we wrapped a number of shitheads in toilet paper. We held the whole conference hostage for several hours with a leftist group called the Vikings. The cops showed up with submachine guns, etc. Oh, yes, "Utopia or Revolution," that was a bad scene...Archigram [as well as Superstudio and Archizoom] was there; Archigram was on the wrong side, that of the hostages, not of the hostage-takers.²⁵

Although Archigram talked of "direct action" they didn't mean political action. The month May 1968, of course, is equated with political unrest in Paris and beyond, a topic taken up by historian Eric Hobsbawm later that year in AD when he wrote about "Cities and Insurrection" in an issue called "Metaphoropolis" dedicated to a socio-political study of the city.²⁶