

Of Antics and Aliens

One of the most important architects of our time, a playful critic of the dreary sclerotic conformity in architecture, a highly regarded teacher, and a witty and engaging raconteur, Sir Peter Cook, Founder and Principal of London-based CRAB studio confesses his fondness for the unexpected, professes his candid advice to design schools, and indicates the architecture he admires and the beliefs he doesn't.

Images & Sketches: courtesy Cook Robotham Architectural Bureau (CRAB studio)

Sir Peter Cook is a notable English architect, lecturer and writer on architectural subjects. He was a founder of Archigram, and was knighted in 2007 by the Queen for his services to architecture and teaching. His achievements with Archigram were recognised by the Royal Institute of British Architects in 2004, when the group was awarded the Royal Gold Medal. He is also a Royal Academician and a Commandeur de l'Ordre des Arts et des Lettres of the French Republic. He continues to curate, organise and exhibit around the world, while maintaining his practice with Gavin Robotham as CRAB studio (Cook Robotham Architectural Bureau) in London.

IA&B: Archigram, the avant-garde architectural group that you co-founded in the 1960s, is fondly remembered as the 'Beatles of Architecture'. What, do you think, in its essence makes it important in the history of architecture?

PC: Archigram was A) optimistic, B) excited by inventions, C) fascinated by combining the unlike with the unexpected, D) intrigued by almost everything and E) enjoying being boys who didn't have to be 'grown up', i.e. boring.

IA&B: Who were the architects or academicians who inspired your ideas?

PC: Richard Buckminster Fuller; Louis Kahn; Le Corbusier; Roberto Burle Marx, the Brazilian landscaper; Gunnar Asplund; the historian, John Summerson; critic, friend and strong theoretical influence, Reyner Banham; Cedric Price and Bruno Taut.

IA&B: The Centre Georges Pompidou by Renzo Piano and Richard Rogers is considered to be an embodiment of the qualities advocated by Archigram. Which other movements, according to you, had an analogous spirit?

PC: The Japanese Metabolists, Taut's Glass Chain and the DADA.

IA&B: What started as an abstract communication, with poems and sketches on the cheapest possible paper in 1961, within two years, was invited to curate an exhibition at the Institute of Contemporary Arts in London. What shaped 'Living Cities'?

PC: We worked for Theo Crosby who was trusted by the Institute of Contemporary Arts. The minimal substance of the pamphlet gave no clue to the energy and diversity of the actual group of people in the flesh.

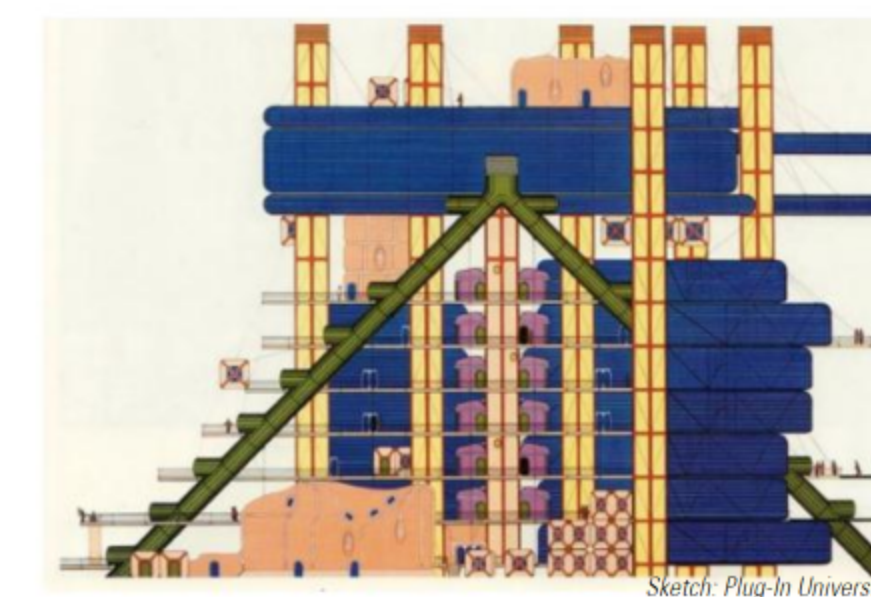
IA&B: Archigram, Superstudio, Yona Friedman, Archizoom; they all saw architecture beyond built objects. What, in your opinion, did they all share in common? How were they different from each other?

PC: We were predominantly optimistic designers; Friedman was a strategist-designer-mathematician; Superstudio, artists and poets; and Archizoom, theoretical visionaries. In the end there is the fact

that Superstudio and Archizoom were Italian and more given to myth. We were English and more given to funny objects.

IA&B: How important is hand-drawing to your architecture? Do you see any drawbacks in computer-aided design?

PC: Hand-drawing can relish in being incorrect suddenly and then, suddenly, correct. Combinations of computer and 'hand' have wonderful possibilities.





Kunsthau Graz in Austria.



Taichung Tower in Taiwan.

IA&B: Has your memory of Archigram influenced your work principles at the CRAB studio? How so?

PC: I hope so. I hope I haven't fully lost the knack of combining the unlike with the unexpected, and I still love drawing.

IA&B: The Kunsthaus Graz in Austria appears 'alien' in its context, for it stands out intentionally against the surrounding baroque-roof landscape. Do you think architecture should be like that?

PC: I think it is sometimes VERY NECESSARY to break away from

context, sometimes necessary to PLAY AGAINST context and, on other occasions to, GET OFF ON CONTEXT (which does not mean imitating what is there or what was there or what is across the street).

IA&B: You have previously stated, with reference to user interpretations of the intended usage of a building: "I think misuse is quite interesting." Can you please elaborate?

PC: I am not a 'party line' functionalist, though I like to be able to accurately predict activities and operations. I am irritated by the tradition of typologies: repeating typologies stultifies the forward march of architecture. Nonetheless, I detest stupidly designed washbasins and horribly steep staircases.

IA&B: You have said that your proposal for the Taichung Tower in Taiwan not only celebrates energy, but also marks the moment of maturity of the CRAB studio. How so?

PC: It was the moment at which we started to apply issues, motives and sustained inventions in CRAB projects.

IA&B: Who are the architects in contemporary times whose work you admire?

PC: The top group: Toyo Ito, Thom Mayne, Enric Miralles (before he died); then sometimes: Wolf Prix, Zaha Hadid, Stephen Holl, Neil Denari, Itsuko Hasegawa, Scogin & Elim, Diller & Scofidio, Snohetta and Helen & Hard.

IA&B: You take keen interest in your contributions as an academician and have been credited with transforming two prominent architecture schools. Are there any radical changes you find essential in architectural education?

PC: A complete reversal of the prominence of career-academics in charge of the schools' radical reduction in the prominence of 'theory'; and a return of power to part-time designer-architect teachers.

IA&B: Some of the projects that were technologically impossible when proposed by Archigram could actually be built today. In this light, what kind of technological developments do you imagine in the near future?

PC: Nano technology. Weirder and weirder computer machining. Bringing some real lateral thinkers into the 'studio' and at the stylus or mouse of the computer. ■



Studio interactions.



With Gavin Robotham at CRAB studio.