

Addressing Infrastructure:

Portable
initiatives,
collapsible
forms.

by Craig Buckley

One of the most exciting developments of the last decade has been the blossoming and sometimes dysfunctional infatuation between the worlds of art and architecture. As artists and art collectives have launched themselves into this hybrid field, an increasing number are creating structures specifically designed to be portable. Some of the most visible forms have been architecture-vehicle hybrids, a field that has produced a tremendous range of experimentation. Such structures-on-wheels have become platforms capable of supporting anything from new systems for living/working to venues for exhibition and social interaction to new forms of public sculpture.

Given that artists are engaging with portable architectures in so many different and opposing ways—running a gamut that stretches between modest activist interventions to custom-crafted luxury vehicles—it is important to ask how these different

projects can be situated in terms of contemporary and historical struggles to redefine the relationships between mobility, technology and place.

One place to begin might be the wheel itself. As one of the most mythologized inventions of humankind, we remain ever fixated upon its potentials. A number of artists, however, are exploring small-scale, collapsible architectures that have forsaken this central device. Accordingly, these works seem to indicate a subtle, but significant, shift in emphasis. Less focused on travel across space, they address existing structures and networks, finding new ways to engage often overlooked features of the world around us. The infrastructures they address range from the traditional services providing buildings with water, air, climate control and electricity to more recent networks for communication and the transfer of digital information.

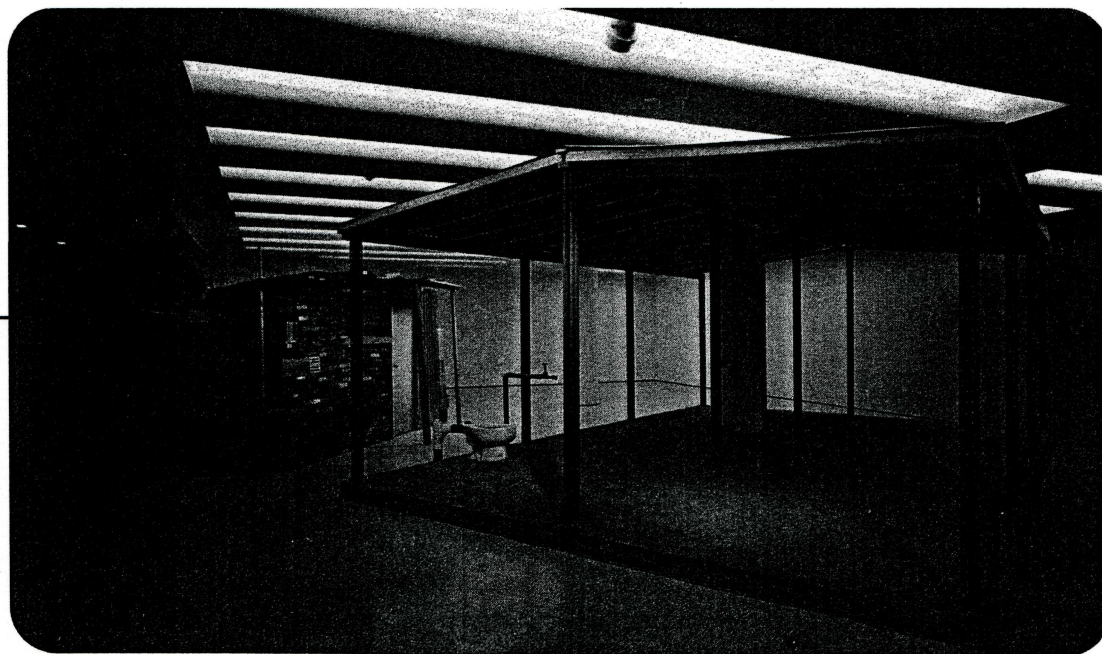
The work of Marjetica Potrc (Slovenia), Michael Rakowitz (United States), BFO Projects (international) and the Arnait Video Collective (Canada) are four very different initiatives that connect portable architectures with infrastructure, raising questions about the way these networks function. Responding to very different situations, their projects create specific and often unpredictable

results. In some cases these deliberately work against existing structures to produce new relations, events or environments. In all cases the structures are inseparable from the processes they put into motion, illuminating the ways in which questions of architecture and infrastructure are always tied to social relations. These practices raise questions about the way infrastructure relates spaces that we assume to be separate. Tubes, pipes, wires and waves have a way of weaving themselves through walls and floors, exceeding the separating functions that architecture organizes. It is an excess that shapes the environment we live in as much as the buildings we inhabit.

Slovenian artist and architect Marjetica Potrc has often been described as an urban anthropologist. Her work involves research into individually initiated building projects found around the globe. From Belfast betting offices housed in shipping containers to shantytowns in Sao Paolo to gated communities in Israel, Potrc examines forms of building that are produced and directed by their inhabitants rather than by architects or public planners. Developed out of a multitude of private interests, these new spatial arrangements, she argues, are the success stories of today's cities. A key aspect in their development has often been tied to ways of exploiting and extending infrastructures (from services to communications). In one facet of her practice Potrc uses the gallery as a staging site, transplanting effective forms of self-initiated structure into the space of the museum. With *Kagiso: Skeleton house* (2000), for example, Potrc presented a core unit, a basic infrastructure system provided by the South African government, consisting of a platform, roof, skeleton structure and plumbing system. Using this structure as a platform, dwellers are able to construct homes that meet their needs and means. Next to the transplanted skeleton house, Potrc constructed a ramshackle structure out of materials from a local home depot. Juxtaposing the prefabricated

skeleton house with construction materials gathered from home depot the work raises difficult questions. On one hand it suggests that despite the surface prevalence of "do it yourself" strategies, deep inequities persist. On the other, it highlights significant transformations in the ways that shanties and favelas are regarded within urbanism. As a prefabricated unit based on construction strategies originating in a shanty environment, the skeleton house takes something that was one seen as a problem to be "solved" and transforms it into a potential "solution." As a model for subsidized housing, the skeleton house provides access to basic services while allowing inhabitants to design their living space. Complete with a satellite dish, Potrc's improvised shanty structure raises further questions about the importance of access to networks of mass communication, questioning whether this amenity has become as basic a need as water, heat and shelter.

Claiming a "non-judgmental" approach that is equally interested in the shanty and the gated community, Potrc explicitly denies that her work is about social critique. Rather, she sees herself as celebrating the initiatives individuals use to bypass official structures and directly shape the environment to their needs. Such politics are further complicated by questions of context and institution. *Kagiso: Skeleton House*, for instance, appeared in the Guggenheim Museum to celebrate Potrc's receipt of the 2000 Hugo Boss award. Potrc's non-judgmental ethos can certainly be accused of failing to address the larger political and economic relationships at work in the sites she researches. It also fails to address the project's relationship to the interests of art institutions and corporate prize structures that would seek to become a home for these initiatives. While conclusions might be easily arrived at (perhaps too easily), dismissing the work on this account risks overlooking the complex implications of such individual initiatives in the world's cities. Exhibition is one facet of a practice anchored in a larger field of research. Potrc's current



Skeleton House, Marjetica Potrc, 2001, building material. Photo: Ellen Labenski. Courtesy: Max Protetch Gallery.

web project, *Urban Independent*, for example, brings together five initiatives from around the world and asks their creators to elaborate on the diverse nature of their catalysts, contexts and communities (<http://www.creativetime.org/consumingplaces/potrc/index.html>). As part of her collaboration with Creative Time (who host the *Urban Independent* web site), Potrc recently organized a workshop that brought together a number of groups to strategize about individual initiatives within New York City. Fraught as it undoubtedly is, assessing the politics of Potrc's gestures requires an analysis of her larger practice and the relationships produced by her appropriation, displacement, research and representation of the initiatives that she examines.

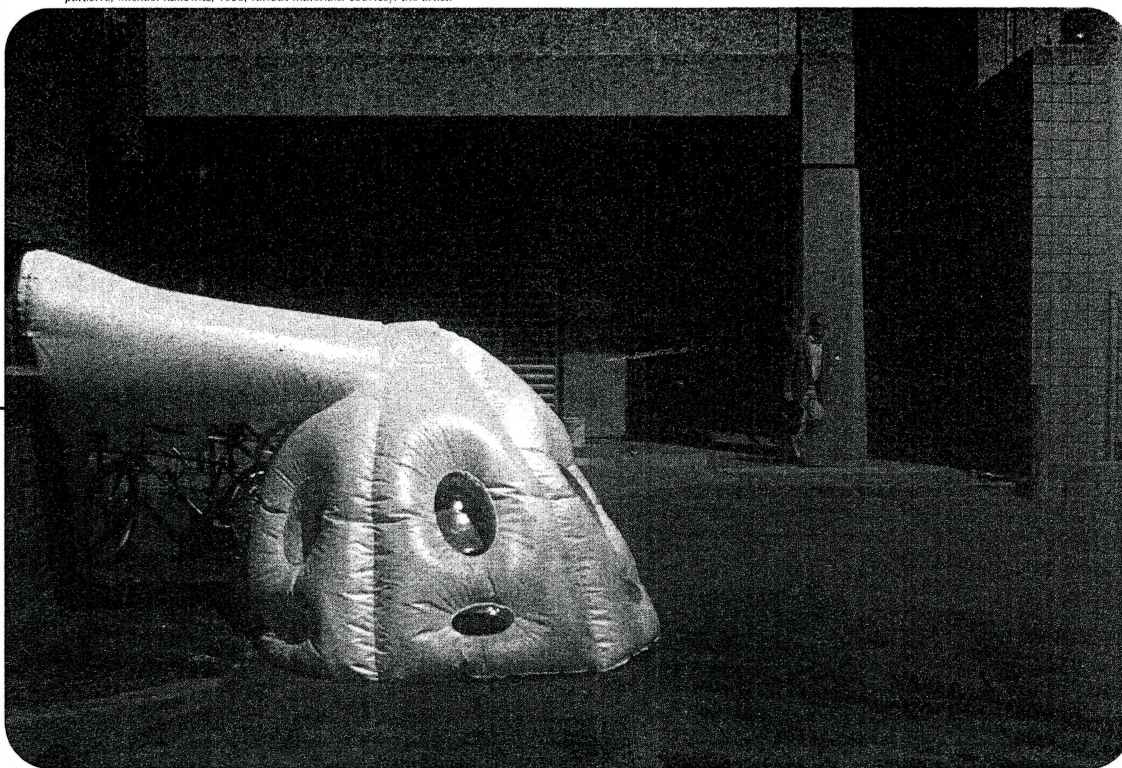
The work of New York-based artist Michael Rakowitz also addresses infrastructure, often exploiting a building's HVAC (heating, ventilation, air conditioning) system. Begun in 1997, the *paraSITE* project is a series of portable structures made from lightweight plastics designed to provide temporary shelter in an urban context (<http://www.possibleutopia.com/mike/>). Constructed with a budget of around five dollars, each shelter attaches to a building's outtake duct and captures a flow of air that inflates its double-membrane walls, a feature that retains heat while keeping the exhaust air separate from the user. The impetus for *paraSITE* partly came from Rakowitz' study of portable Bedouin structures while completing a residency program in Jordan and partly from conversations initiated with a homeless person upon return to the United States. After these initial conversations, a prototype was constructed and presented to a group of homeless men. This development process began to generate and direct the project's form. Issues of visibility and security came to the fore. The group rejected an initial structure made from black trash bags and opted to use white and translucent plastics, materials that provide high visibility and do not carry such negative connotations. As a form of visibility it

contests widespread programs designed to push homeless individuals and communities out of supposedly public spaces and into locations where they are invisible. Such visibility garnered media attention in New York City, attracting new users to the project. This visibility also meant that the project came under greater scrutiny for violating the city's anti-tent laws, laws that were more stringently enforced by Mayor Giuliani's campaign to "clean up" New York. In response, Michael McGee collaborated with Rakowitz to produce a structure that measured less than thirty-two feet and consequently fell within a loophole in the city's anti-tent law. Ticketed by New York police for violation of the law, McGee fought the case in court and, on the basis of his design, won. In this sense, *paraSITE* is symbolic of a strategy as much as it is a shelter. While not architecture in a legal or technical sense, the structure's parasitic connection to existing buildings magnifies the dynamics surrounding homelessness. Drawing attention to relationships of exclusion and dependence traced by architecture, *paraSITE* did not just comment on such a social divide, it extruded a new space within these relationships, both the legal space of the loophole and the physical space of dwelling. *ParaSITE* doesn't fall comfortably within the art world's institutions of exhibition (though it has been exhibited), nor is it comfortably situated within state or municipal attempts to "solve" the homeless crisis. Recognizing that there is no prototypical homeless person but a multiplicity of homeless situations, there can be no unitary "solution" to the problem. To date, Rakowitz has been involved in the production of over thirty structures. Unlike Potrc's case studies, Rakowitz' shelters are not prefabricated but are made in collaboration with users who contact the artist and want to participate in the project. Thus in design and materials, the *paraSITE* is less a proprietary object whose condition of display and use are controlled by the artist than an idea to be co-opted, taken up, modified, passed on and even discarded according to the needs and situations of different users.



paraSITE, Michael Rakowitz, 1998, various materials. Courtesy: the artist.

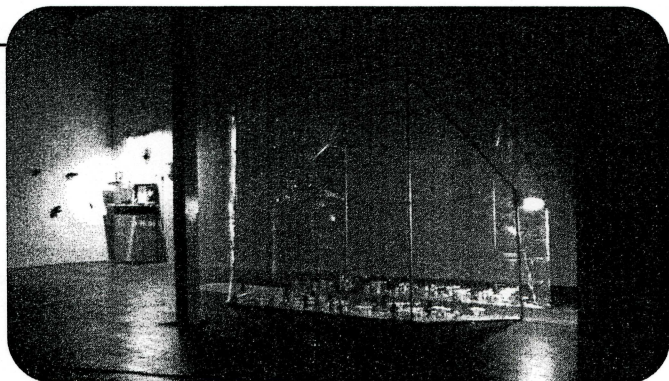
paraSITE, Michael Rakowitz, 1998, various materials. Courtesy: the artist.



Room + Board, an ongoing venture of the BFO collective, uses similarly low-cost, compact materials and deploys them to complicate the social and structural relationships surrounding exhibitions. BFO takes its name from a military term for the runway debris found during aircraft inspections (bits fallen off) and refers to the shifting nature of the collective, whose make up include artist Mitch Robertson, an anonymous member of the KIT curatorial collective and a changing roster of invited guests. Room + Board is a travelling project that invites host galleries to create a hostile environment within which BFO participants must construct ephemeral protective structures using only the components contained in a standard carry-on bag. The group encourages hostile environments composed from immaterial and often overlooked environmental factors ranging from temperature, light, smell or sound to less tangible elements such as the psychology and involvement of the audience. Arriving at the host space unaware of what they will be walking into, the BFO artists are called upon to

realize structures that respond directly to conditions and events beyond their control.

At the inaugural event, staged at STATIC in Liverpool, the home gallery recognized this dynamic and deftly manipulated the situation. Prior to the exhibition the directors circulated offensive emails that they claimed were written by the BFO artists. Exploiting the infrastructures of communication with misinformation, STATIC created conflicting expectations within the institution's audience. The matter was further complicated as the artists were deliberately invited an hour before the audience. Not being aware of this gambit, the artists were under the impression that no one was showing up to their event. A single cameraperson appeared to be the sole attendee, capturing video footage of the artists. In response a small, opaque enclosure made from packing tape and flexible poles was constructed while an elaborate map of Antarctica was traced out in white flour across the gallery's floor,



paraSITE, Michael Rakowitz, 1998, various materials. Courtesy: the artist.

complete with small standing flags marking off significant locations. As the misinformed visitors began to arrive, STATIC projected the cameraperson's footage of construction process on the gallery wall. As the evening progressed, BFO attached hostile messages to the flags, which became relay stations also used by visitors to send responses. As messages can only be read by one or two people at a time, the play of rumour and misinformation again became crucial in constructing the audience. While this offensive was occurring, audience members were invited into the temporary structure for drinks and socializing on a more intimate scale. This second gesture complicates the first, exploiting the mixture of curiosity and apprehension that the show had generated. Here, portable architecture inverted the relationship, guest-host, allowing the visitor to extend hospitality from his temporary domain.

In the end, the project seems less about finding new ways to create enemies than about seeing what happens when circuits are deliberately reversed. BFO's projects prevent the host gallery from doing what we expect it to: neutrally offer space to visiting artists. Displaced from their default position, the gallery must occupy its own territory, a shift that tests the relations that make up a gallery. As a web of artists, cultural workers, board members, critics, sponsors, audience and community members, BFO uses intrusion and spontaneity to confuse the oppositions — between guest and visitor, performer and audience, collaborator and rival — that organize these relations. As such, the power vested in the gallery threshold, a space traced both by its architecture and its infrastructures, can no longer appear as neutral and becomes a staging ground where amorphous social entities coalesce, shift and redefine themselves.

An innovative adaptation of electronic infrastructure lies at the core of the Nunatinnit Nomadic Media Lab organized by the Arnait Video Collective (AVC), an Igloolik-based group of video-makers committed to adding Inuit women's voices to the debates shaping contemporary life in Arctic Canada. The media lab is a collapsible dome tent that can be transported and pitched at hunting camps and other sites located at significant remove from the community. Powered by a generator and containing digital video equipment, computer editing facilities and satellite phones, the media lab allows participants to create, edit and upload materials directly from the tundra to a media-streaming website. In August

2001, the AVC mounted "Live from the Tundra," an inaugural project that allowed participants to create diaries of their experiences, tell oral histories and communicate in an online forum with internet users connected to the website (www.nunatinnit.net). Seizing the potential latent in de-territorialized communication infrastructures, the AVC uses these technologies to facilitate a territorialized, mobile architecture that supports the collective's own needs and practices. Most communities in the Arctic were created through a state-directed process of settlement, a historical event that decisively changed people's relationship to the land and the practices of subsistence related to it. One of the collective's stated goals is to maintain a presence upon the land, a place where many of the traditional skills and knowledge of Inuit life are put directly to use. The backdrop of the Eastern Arctic is one of intense change, where services, infrastructures and architectures are increasingly centralized, both in existing settlements and in the new territorial capital of Iqaluit. By allowing the video process to be engaged with camp-based activities rather than those of the settlement, the AVC's media lab contests this trend. By using the internet, AVC retains control over the distribution of their work, bypassing institutions like the IBC (Inuit Broadcasting Corporation) and the CBC, institutions centred in Iqaluit and Toronto respectively. Like earlier projects, the Nunatinnit Mobile Media Lab is equal part structure and social experiment; a space designed to facilitate a range of social functions from fishing to video-editing, storytelling to web casting. Located at the intersection of a number of worlds, the AVC's media lab asserts older forms of mapping within newer ones, using the infrastructure of communication to counter some of the forces of centralization so often tied to it. It also breaks down the perceived incompatibility between technological change and traditional culture, proving that traditional patterns of activity are not necessarily antithetical to technological change.

The use of portable architectures exhibited in these four practices is not new. The late nineteen-sixties witnessed a similar frenzy of activity hopscotching the boundaries between architecture, design, public art and urban planning. One such affiliation of architects, theorists and writers was London's Archigram group. Their 1969-70 *Instant City* proposal (largely the work of Ron Herron and Peter Cook) is interesting for it marks a similar shift in emphasis away from portable structures and toward infrastructure. A bid to subvert the cultural centrality of London, the project sought to bring

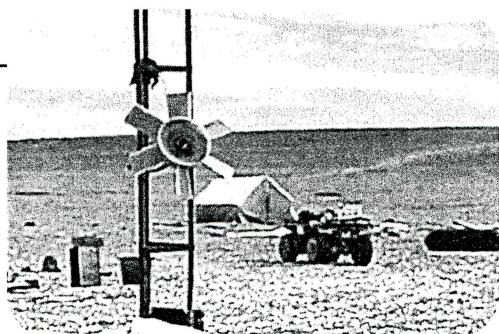
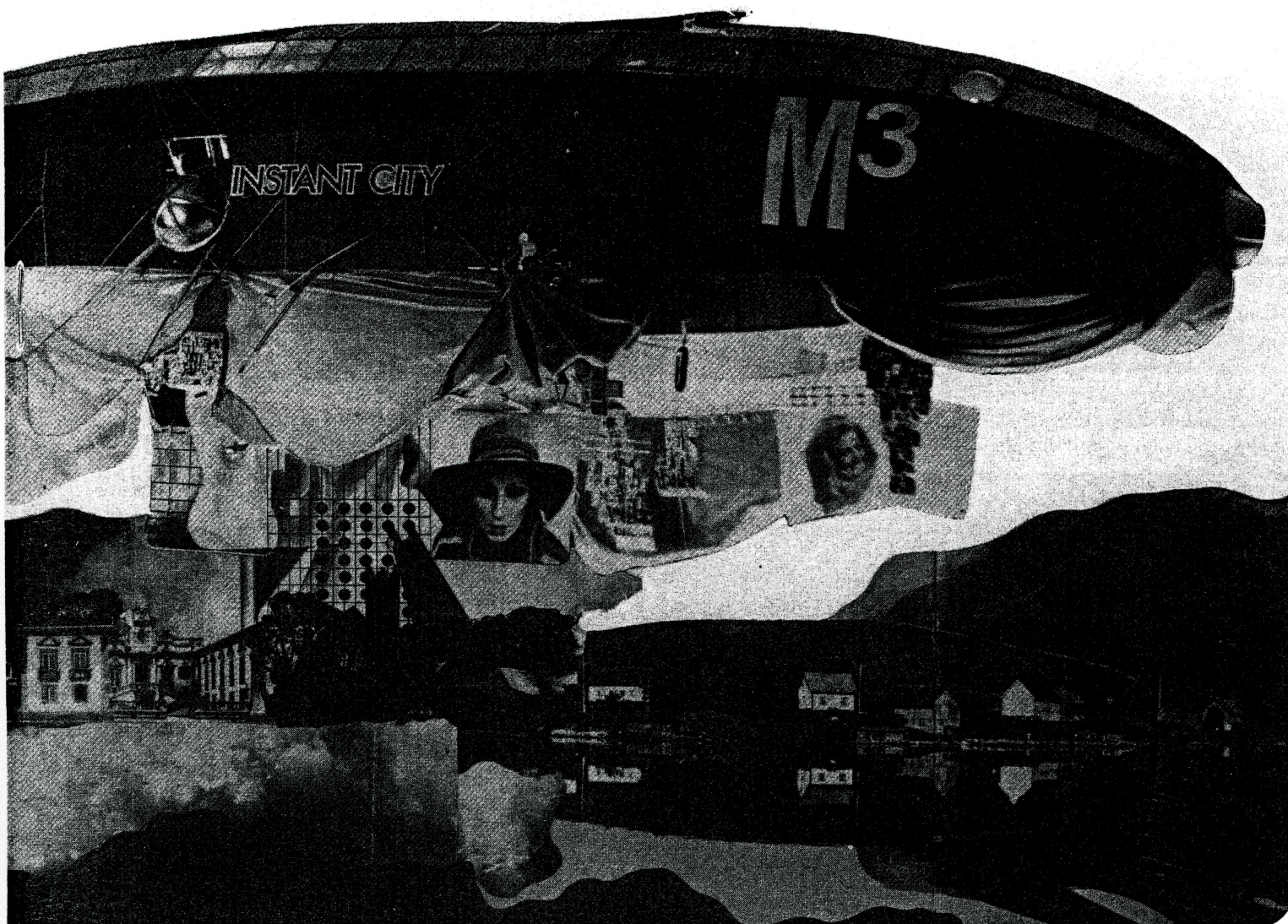


Image from www.nunatinnit.net website.



Instant City, Archigram.

the city to the country, allowing people to enjoy metropolitan events without having to enter urban space. Small towns and villages were to be enveloped by a travelling metropolis composed of trailers, lightweight structures, audio-visual display systems, entertainment facilities, electric lights and even an airship. Events were coordinated by the local community in collaboration with the *Instant City* agency, an open-ended hybrid of education and entertainment. The overarching goal of the project was to establish a

network that these different localities could take over and use: each centre feeding parts of the *Instant City* program to be experienced by communities down the line.

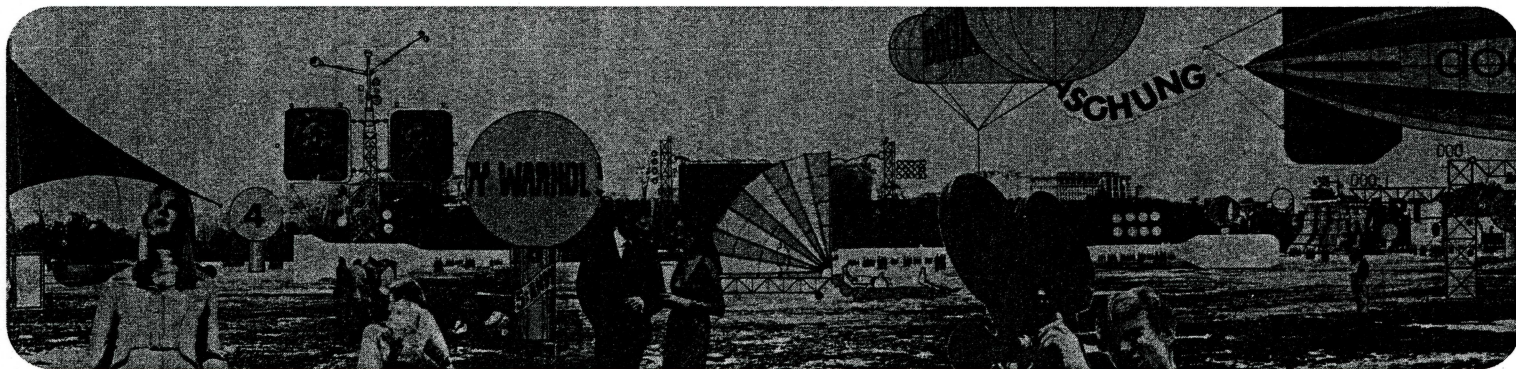
On the one hand, Archigram's structures cut against the grain of massive centralization. Engaged with the buildings, markets, clubs and festivals specific to smaller towns, *Instant City* tried to imagine how new forms of architecture might help transform these

familiar sites into a platform for new and spontaneous environments. On the other hand, *Instant City*'s form of community risks reinforcing escapist and isolationist fantasies. Against their own best intentions, the project also risks levelling out both the complexity of urban situations (by assuming they could be transportable as spectacle) and, in smaller locales, reinforcing the feeling of never having, nor perhaps wanting, to leave the safety of home. Yet the concept of a network community, at once local and dispersed, lucidly anticipates our present condition, where different localities are increasingly defined by their links to (or isolation from) global networks. From our own vantage point it is clear that a network has been established, not through a community focused architectural intervention as imagined by Archigram, but by the infrastructures provided by the internet (originally developed in the context of the cold-war military defence), global finance and mass media. Despite claims that this network might finally enable the "global village" touted by Marshall McLuhan, it has largely served to re-map centralization, entwining smaller centres (such as those Archigram sought to address) within a network dominated, today more than ever, by a handful of the world's megacities. From today's vantage point, Archigram's *Instant City* needs to be productively inverted. It is no longer a question of bringing the metropolis to marginal centres (this kind of hegemony operates well enough by itself, an outcome Archigram failed to take into account), but rather of how temporary architectures and infrastructural networks might create linkages between alternative practices in an increasingly homogenous global network.

As a travelling architecture *Instant City* was on such a grandiose scale that it became impractical, even alienating in the face of the com-

munity it sought to engage. This may be why *Instant City* was never realized as a built proposition. But this failure was not without promise. The dissolution of *Instant City* was the basis for Archigram's later projects. The focus shifted away from travel toward a subtler infrastructure composed not of airships and gantries but of leech trucks (covertly servicing off buildings) and log-plugs (for wiring televisions by the banks of quiet rivers). Whether in the form of a network, a temporary environment or a log-plug, social function remains the key issue. For many groups in the late sixties, the appeal of portable architectures was that they couldn't exist without a group of people to construct, transport, use and dismantle them. Such portable structures (often pneumatic and collapsible in form) were more intimately linked to forms of social practice than were traditional architectural constructions. Re-engaging a link between architecture and social practice became a strategy for engaging the shape and texture of public space against the forces of municipal and state planning. In this their work anticipates more recent projects that have sought to address infrastructure in direct, localized and experimental ways.

In the end, one cannot easily separate the creation of new social practices and relationships from new approaches to architectural form. If it is through social practices that the meanings and uses of architecture are rearticulated, shifted or unmade, then it is not surprising that temporary architectures are playing a greater role in the work of artists that seek to contest existing structures. Nonetheless, it is far from clear how such a shift will be articulated. These projects do, however, provide models where design, construction and use become part of an inseparable practice. The small scale of these temporary and portable projects allows them



Instant City, Archigram.

to remain focussed on process as opposed to production. Within these processes failure is not a flaw to be avoided at all costs, but a key event that allows a project to develop and assume new formations. The dissolution of initial ideas, whether it be in the case of Archigram's *Instant City* project, the work of Michael Rakowitz or the Nunatinnit Nomadic Media Lab, remains indispensable: a point at which social practices come to shape architectural form. It remains to be seen how the interest in portable architectures will be played out in the art world and beyond; certainly artists can't afford to be unaware of the ways that hegemonic systems foster alternative spaces in order to incorporate them into a dominant framework. As such, the most important part of these projects is not only the final form of the structures, but the way these initiatives provide space, both conceptual and actual, for bringing together usually isolated initiatives into uniquely collaborative, critical and evolving conversations.

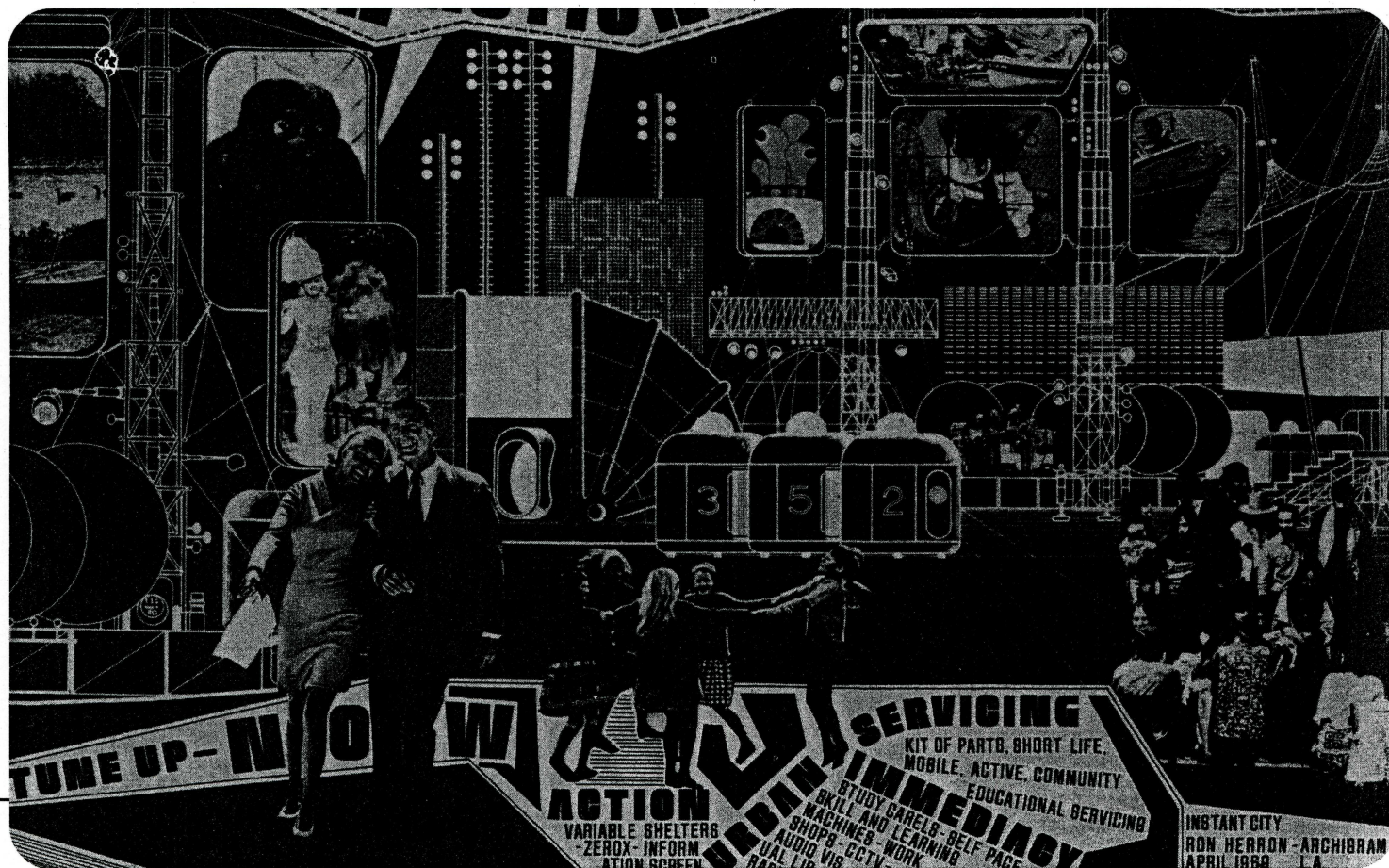
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Instant City, Archigram.