Arriving somewhere between playful Utopias and nomadic Personality

Deniz Karakuş

"Everyone knows the bit in Collodi's novel
where Pinocchio, having traveled through
the night on the back of the talking donkey,
arrives happily at dawn in ‚Playland'.
In his description of this infantile utopian republic,
Collodi has left us the image of a universe where there is nothing but play…."
Giorgio Agamben, Infancy and History – On the Destruction of Experience

The universe "there is nothing but play" is a place where all its inhabitants repeat the rituals and sacred words that they forget their meanings and what they do. This forgetfulness changes the perception of time. When the child is playing, the time passes faster. As in the Pinocchio story, all weeks consist of six Thursdays and one Sunday, the autumn break begins on a January and ends at the end of December (Agamben, 1993). This is because the child is immersed in the game and is isolated from real-time. The child, who does not bear the burden of limited time, plays at another time and thus has the real experience.

After the Second World War, the utopias that created an architecture that wanted to dominate the order and put the space on the center, were filled with the visual productions of the artists, architects and urban planners of the period which consist of the slogans such as "playful life" and "real experience". The common aspect of these intellectual movements, which articulate the development of a new type of space, is that they reveal playful arrangements that allow creative actions in daily life.

This step, which can be seen as a reaction to the post-industrial work order, in which the act of production, that is a form of existential relation with the human being, is extracted from the free and creative features under the name of work, questions the existing work order. Paul Lafargue explains this by emphasizing that the productive activity, which should be free, no longer belongs to the employee himself. Although he does the work himself, one cannot make an existential connection to the work (Lafargue 1907).

Playful utopias, centering the form of production and performing all production through play, concentrate on urban depictions that question the concepts of leisure time and entertainment from a new perspective. One of the pioneers of *Lettrist* thought, Jacque Fillon, in his "New Games" declaration published in 1954, argues that the entertainment factor will occupy an important place in big urban planning. Fillon emphasizes that the concept of leisure time is a key concept in urban design that needs to be considered with different disciplines: *"The new town planning is inseparable from the fortunately inescapable economic and social upheavals. We may assume that the revolutionary demands of an epoch are a function of the idea which this epoch has of happiness and wellbeing. The evaluation of leisure is something entirely serious. We will issue a reminder that the task is to invent new games."* (Fillon 1971, 155).

Fillon's emphasis on leisure time rearrangement is the starting point of Situationists, one of the groups that underline the concept of play in design. Blending Marxism and Avant-garde philosophies with imagination and creativity, the Situationists focus on a holistic urban design that eliminates the distinction between work and entertainment. According to the Situationists, these holistic urban plans can arise not only with the production of artists, but with the production of all creative people. Constant Nieuwenhuys (1920-2005) and Guy Debord's (1931-1994) declaration of *Situational Definitions*, published in 1958, speaks of a holistic urban plan depicting a new form of society. The details of the holistic city are explained in the declaration as follows: *"...The minimum programme of the I.S.[1] includes both the striving for a perfect spatial art, which must extend to a unitary system of town planning, and the search for new modes of behaviour in conjunction with this spatial art. Unitary town planning is determined by the uninterrupted complex activity, through which man's environment is consciously recreated according to progressive plans in all domains... Unitary town planning, independently of all aesthetic considerations, is the result of a new kind of*

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[1] (= International Situationists)

collective creation; and the development of this creative spirit is the precondition for a unitary town planning… A created situation is a means for approaching unitary town planning, and unitary town planning is the indispensable basis for the creation, to be regarded both as a game and as a serious task, of the situation of a freer society." (Constant and Debord 1958, 161)

New Babylon

Constant visualizes the main principles of this declaration in his utopian urban project, which he calls *New Babylon* (Figure 1.). The project, where creative actions are the focal point of the design, defends a world order in which the production system is automated, the employees get rid of the compulsory activities and turn to play and creative actions and thus begin to discover their existence. Constant, defending that human beings will start to play where they are free from all kinds of obligations, describes the human existence in this utopian city as follows: *"If we situate all known forms of society under a single common denominator, 'utilitarianism,' the model to be invented will be that of a 'ludic' society — this term designating the activities that, relieved of all utility as well as all function, are pure products of the creative imagination. Now, it is as a creator, and only as a creator, that the human being can fulfill and attain his highest existential level."* (Constant 1960, 160)

Figure 1. *New Babylon* Urban Plan.

The creative impact, which is also emphasized in the *Declaration of Situational Definitions*, is one of the most important factors in the reshaping of the environment in *New Babylon*. Constant explains this situation by giving *Homo Luden*'s exploration of the environment as an example. *Homo Ludens*[2] first begins to explore his/her surroundings. He/She recreates its environment every time according to new needs. In this case, the discovery and creation of the environment are intertwined. This is because *Homo Ludens* is trying to explore his/her own creation while creating the space to be discovered (Constant 1960).

Becoming a nomad

Constant's *New Babylon*, an ideal urban design based on the instinct of creation, reverses soil-bound life. Thanks to the creative actions that will take place in New Babylon, which has dynamic and unlimited spaces, people have been freed from all the bonds that restrict them. New Babylon, resembles a dynamic maze in Constant's words, depicts a city that leaves behind all utilitarian activities, staging only the consequences of the creative and transformative effect of the play. Constant summarizes the space of *New Babylon* as follows: *"Even when he covers enormous distances, homo faber moves in a social space limited by the obligations to return to a fixed abode. He is 'tied to the land.' His social relations define his social space, which includes his home, place of work, the home of his family and of his friends. The New Babylonian escapes these constraining ties. His social space is unlimited. Because he is no longer 'rooted' he can circulate freely: much more freely since the space he traverses endlessly changes space and atmosphere with the result that it is constantly renewed...The essence of New Babylonian culture is playing with the elements that make up the environment. Such play is possible due to the integral technical control of all those elements, which thus become a conscious creation of the environment." (Constant 1960, 164)*

The spaces of this utopian city do not take root in the land like their people. The spaces that can allow continuous change consist of unlimited pieces open to new ones and adventures (Figure 2). The utilitarian society's desire to use space in the most efficient way strives to find the most appropriate direction for the person. In *New Babylon*, non-directionality is given priority because it increases

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[2] *Homo Ludens* (Game-playing human). Johan Huizinga who made the first serious theoretical work known in the play literature, examines play as a cultural creative function in his 1938 book *Homo Ludens*.

the game potential. Here, non-directionality is one of the basic features of space. Unlimited and non-directional space eliminates the possibility of repeat and habit. This enables the concept of discovery to exist continuously in space. A space without constancy, stagnation and ownership offers an uninterrupted transformation.

Figure 2. Constant, *Labyrisms*, 1968.

Space and people are in a constant circulation in this city. Thus, Constant defines the new human of New Babylon as a nomad who rebels against the established order. The individual of *New Babylon*, who lives in a constant state of being transformed and away from transcendent values, escapes from all the definitions imposed on him and builds himself/herself on impermanence. *Nomadism*, which was later conceptualized by Deleuze and Guattari (first introduced in *Difference and Repetition*), is a good example of the New Babylonian form of existence.

Archigram

Another group that stands out with its game-oriented urban designs and new nomadic human profiles is the Archigram, which was created by architects led by David Green and Peter Cook from 1961 to 1974. Focusing on the boundaries and practices of modern architecture, Archigram produces projects criticizing the elitist attitude and hierarchical order of architecture. Green and Cook, who made their first discussions with their own hand-produced magazines, emphasized

their criticism of modern architecture by choosing collage technique as an objection to traditional reading (Figure 3). The materials related to popular culture and space technologies that they use in their projects are a reflection of this criticism.
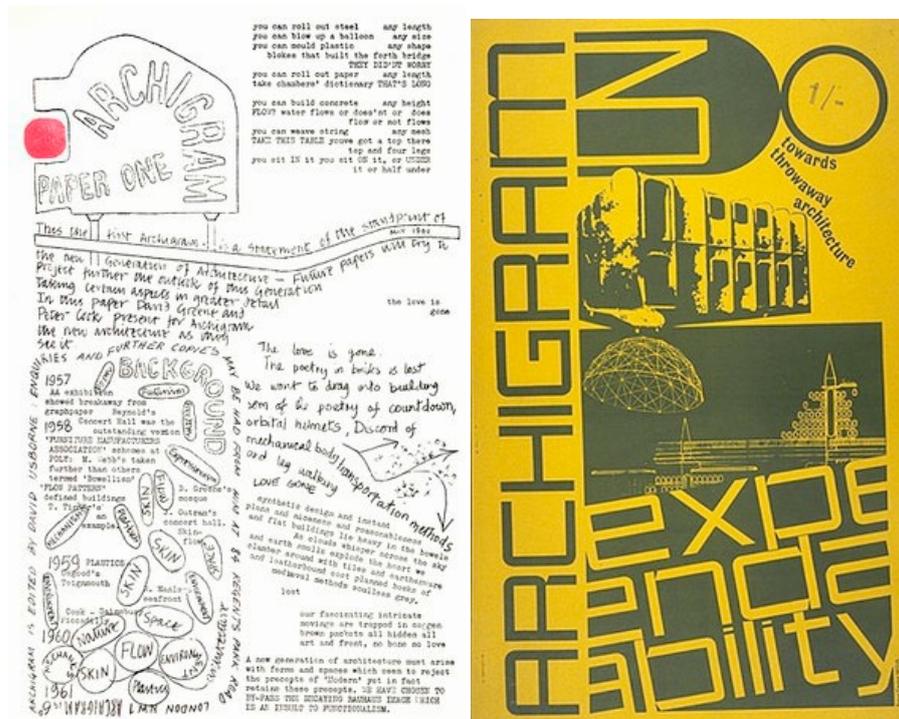

Figure 3. Archigram no 1 and no3.

In the first issues of their journals, the group that discussed the stability, stagnation of modern architecture, and its betrayal to itself in essence, revealed the main ideas of their future projects in the light of these shortcomings. Constant's automatic production in *New Babylon* is also an indispensable element of Archigram's urban projects. The group, which tries to eliminate all kinds of mechanisms that prevent creativity, tries to use technology intensively in its projects in order to free people from obligatory actions. The main feature of their production is that they shape the urban environment they create in their projects on individual preference, participation and technology.

Archigram that exhibited the *Living City* in 1963, firstly focused on mega-city designs based on entertainment and disorder. In this sense, they provided many examples. The well known of these and considered as the summary of Archigram's ideas in the early years is *Plug-in City*, designed by Peter Cook (Figure 4). In this project, Archigram makes a playful city depiction where people will participate at every stage and have an active role in the formation of space.

This situation, as in New Babylon, leads the urbanite into creative actions. Here, the units are formed by a system shaped according to the wish of the individual. This creative position of the human in space puts the space into the unfinished, continuous state of being and transformation. This allows dynamic spaces to emerge, as in Constant's utopia. Its creating structures that can be installed later and the problematizing of the concepts of flexibility and fluidity emphasizes the concept of play.
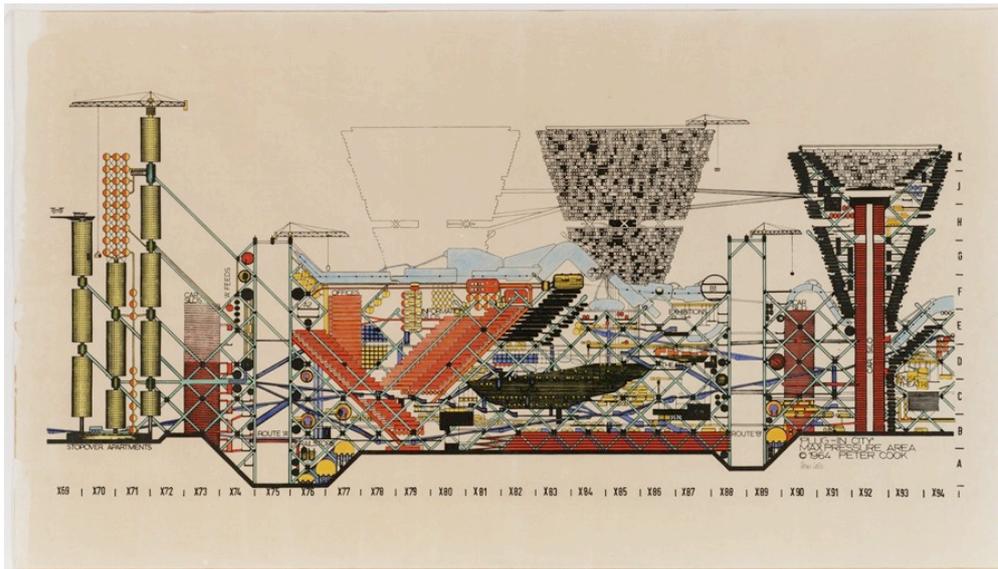

Figure 4. *Plug in City*, Peter Cook, 1964.

Archigram, who made a name for itself with similar mega-structural fantasy urban descriptions, abandoned these mega-structures later and concentrated on imagining the nomadic individual's light-house that Constant also emphasized, which could be intertwined with each other and self-installed in everywhere. At this stage, they start using a new scale and work on conveyor shelter units consisting of mechanical parts, which are sufficient to allow for personal needs only. *Living-Pod*, designed by David Greene in 1965, is one of these projects (Figure 5). Living-Pod is an exploration-oriented housing unit that emerges from the idea of a mobile home that does not root in the soil. David Greene describes this project as a caravan home that can go freely anywhere. According to Greene, housing is a device that the person will carry with him and the city is a machine to plug in (Greene 1966).

Similarly, projects such as *Drive-in Housing*, *Cushicle* and *Suitaloon* are the works of Archigram on small-scale conveyor shelter units (Figure 6). These units, designed for the wanderer and nomadic human profile, enable the space to move

simultaneously with the individual's body. On a larger scale, *Instant City* (Figure 7), which can be considered as a representation of this situation, serves the city's player-immigrant with balloons that can take off at any time. These projects, which assign a nomadic character to space in different scales, occupy an important place in the game scale thanks to their structures that keep the curiosity and discovery element in motion.
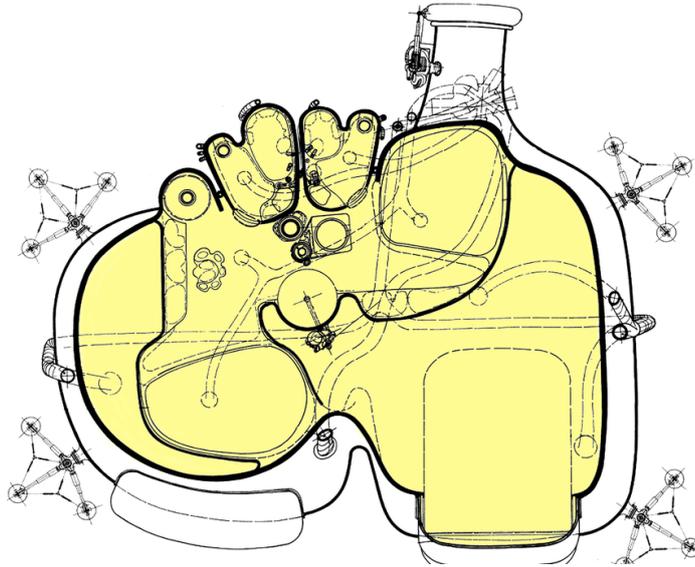
Figure 5. *Living-Pod*, 1965.
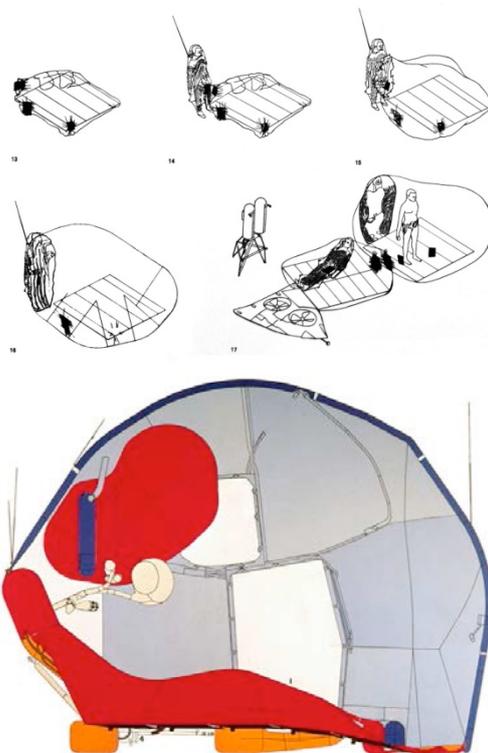
Figure 6. *Suitaloon,* 1967 and *Cushicle,* 1964.
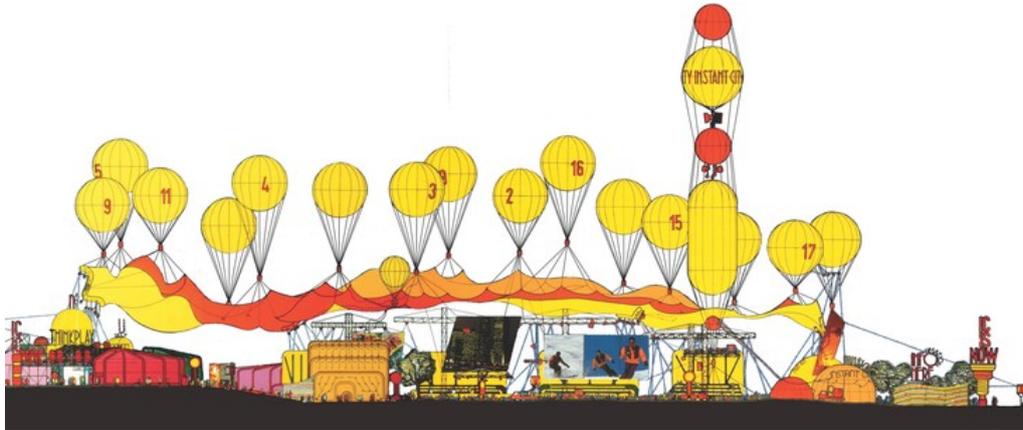
Figure 7. *Instant City,* 1969.

Towards a happy arrival at "Playland"

The common point of Constant and Archigram's utopian urban projects, where play is the basic design principle, is that they portray the world in which production is automated, people get rid of all necessities and devote all time to play, thus tend to explore their creativity and existence. These utopian projects, which are designed for the "future new human profile", are open to use in different ways, can be changed and are designed with different parameters according to the user with a transformable city plan can be defined as potential playgrounds because they center free and creative actions and have vague spaces that keep the exploration alive.

Beyond all these common features, the main factor that gives the character of playfulness to these utopias is the ground of existential creation which is offered to nomadic people. Playing games stimulates the imagination and pushes human into the world of creation. As long as human creates, he/she has real experience. Together with the creative physical and mental activities seen in the game, the doors of real experience are opened and this experience forms the basis of human self-sense. Winnicot says that all of human experiential existence is built on the basis of playing (Winnicott 2005). In utopian projects where all kinds of activities that aim to provide benefits are eliminated, people who have nothing left to do start playing. The game perfectly meets the need to do something in this case. Because there are obstacles to overcome while playing. "Game playing makes it possible to retain enough effort in Utopia to make life worth living" (Suits 2005, 172). According to this understanding, the play becomes the most fundamental action that enables people to survive. Therefore, in New Babylon and Archigram's projects, playing has become life itself.

Just like Pinocchio's "country of entertainments", in these utopian projects, an image of a universe where there is nothing, but play is designed. Because…

*"Everyone knows the bit in Collodi's novel where Pinocchio, having traveled through the night on the back of the talking donkey, **arrives happily** at dawn in 'Playland'".*

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