

AN ESSENTIAL KIND OF MADNESS

Architecture operates on two planes, separated by a gap much deeper,  
older, and more unbridgeable than the generation gap.

The oldest "establishment" architects, churning out their square boxy buildings, and the youngest rebels creating angular explosions of concrete are still in one camp, despite their squabbling. They are on the side of practical building. Across the gap, looking the other way, are the dreamers, experimenters, poets, idealists, utopians — an "underground" if you like — which architecture simultaneously attracts and repels in a way which is practically unique among human activities.

Since the aim of the underground group is to discover perfect architecture, which is impossible, their closest cousins in the outside world are the inventors of perpetual motion. If that suggests that they have a touch of madness, it is an essential kind of madness. Experimental dreamers of the past contributed many of the ideas which distinguish the modern buildings of our surroundings from all buildings of the past.

Among the commonplace realities of today which began as their dreams are  
skyscrapers, glass walls, and central airconditioning.

Having dreamt, some of the experimenters go out to build, thereby jumping  
the gap and leaving behind the company of the ideas underground, never  
really to be accepted back to the fold.

Unfortunately, non-architects seldom hear of the schemes currently being hatched by the experimenters — some of which may shape our life tomorrow. One reason is that when the experimenters write about their ideas they tend to adopt a sort of Americanised computer jargon in blank verse.

Happily, a book has appeared at last which will help anyone to catch up. It is called, simply, Experimental Architecture. It is published by Studio Vista, and written by Peter Cook. He is not Mr. Moore's partner. This Peter Cook is a member of "Archigram", the foremost experimental architectural group in England, or anywhere on earth for that matter. He is highly qualified to write on the subject because Archigram's wild drawings have influenced architectural thinking everywhere, and because he is still safely on the dreamers' side, having built practically nothing.

Fortunately he also is a scholar, knowing the history of conventional modern as well as he does the history of dream modern — backwards in each case.

Also he can write, and is content to use unexperimental English. Not that he eschews eclecticism in language to the extent that he does in building. You will find here a fair sprinkling of datable jargon: think-tank, syndrome, spin-off, feed-back, hang-up... He even has a few "points in time", and some "dialogues" between abstract qualities.

The book is also uncharacteristically well organised. The development of experimental architecture this century is told clearly and simply, if predictably. It starts quietly enough with the prefabrication experiments of Wachsmann and Prouve of Europe, and the domes of Buckminster Fuller and the tents of Frei Otto — both almost familiar now thanks to two recent Expos. It covers the stirring architectural drama associated with space flight (here we get a technological spin-off), and the plastic balloon buildings that are now almost old hat — there were two at this year's Moomba!

Gradually Peter Cook edges into his thesis. He talks, inevitably, of Woodstock — its "intensity of environment" — and muses about a dimly understood future for the infant science of holographic projection by lasers, which will perhaps simulate interiors to your taste at the turn of a dial. What Cook is in fact seeking to do, as he warns or promises in his introduction, is to experiment out of architecture. (His italics.)

That aim may be commendable. Many will agree that conventional architecture is so bankrupt of ideas, of any real meaning to the people which it shelters and envelopes, that drastic revolutionary re-evaluation is needed. The search leads Cook up some familiar alleys. He tells of throw-away buildings, with architecture as an "optional extra". He writes of his own group's preoccupation with movable buildings and environments simulated by lights and movies, not relying on "the complex hardware of the built form."

All this can be valuable, and it can easily overstep into farce. An Englishman named David Greene has designed a "Log-Plug". This is an object packed with appliances but which, instead of being "styled as a machine" is made to look like an old fallen log. Cook comments: "At once a send-up and a serious statement..."

Cook's own well publicised "Instant City", which is a caraval full of movie projectors and balloon-supported screens, intended to transform Huddersfield instantaneously into Las Vegas, may also be explained as partly a send-up. It's a good idea to leave a backdoor unlocked.

No one could accuse Cook of having a closed mind. He sees an ultimate possibility of goodness in architectural features, even in "the excesses of a 'Playboy' apartment." He thinks that the principle that in architecture wood should look like wood is only an "assumed truth." He's right, you know. The world may be flat, too.



Nonetheless this is a serious book and a good book; quite the best yet on its esoteric subject; inspiring to architectural students, properly irritating to established architects, and more than merely readable to laymen.

In his mild predilection for latest words, Cook has taken our "outback" and uses it to describe the American prairies. Needless to say, this is as close as Australia gets to his discussion. Not even Utzon or the Opera House is considered, which may show you just how experimental architecture must be for it to be noticed by Peter Cook.