ANTIARCHITECTURE

BY ROBIN BOYD
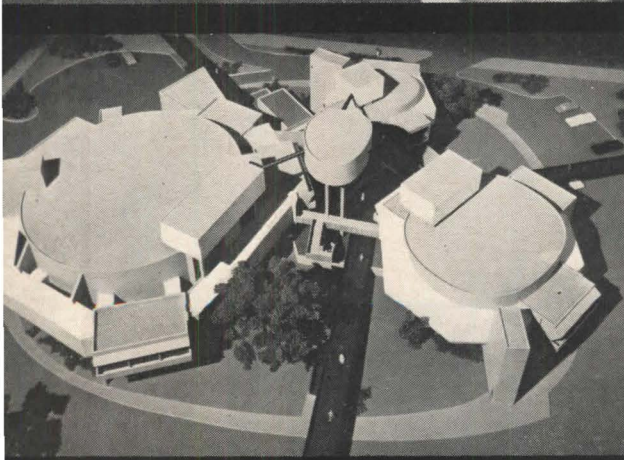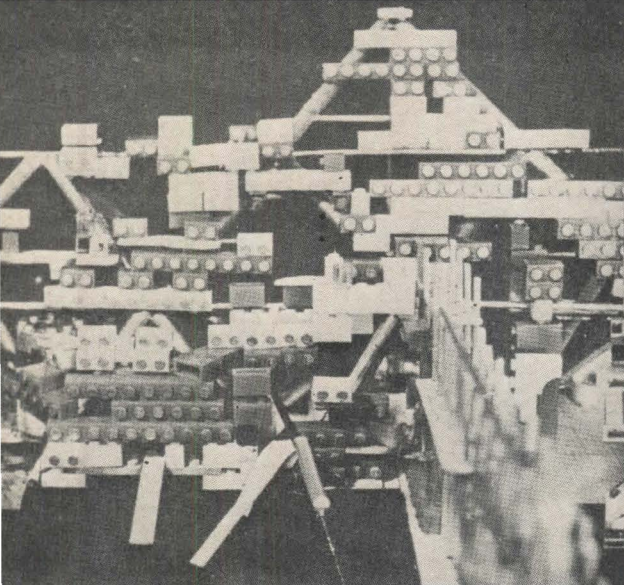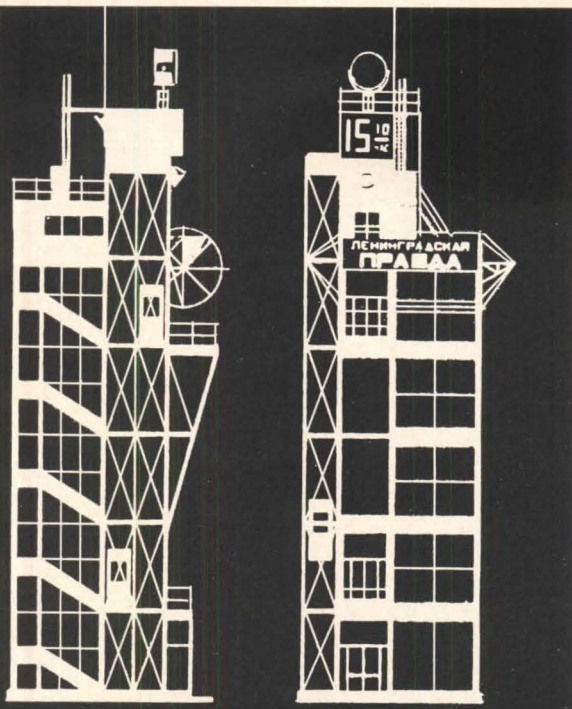

ANTIARCHITECTURE: Alexander and Vladimir Vesnin's 1923 "Constructivist" project for the Pravda Building in Leningrad (top); Peter Cook's "Plug-In City" for Archigram (center); and John Johansen's Mummers Theater for Oklahoma City (above).

A protest movement had to happen in architecture as in everything else. It was a bit late on the scene and sometimes even now it seems to lack real anarchical heat and a true sense of purifying destructiveness. Symptomatically, the architecture students in their various universities around the world have been among the last to jump on the Student Power steamroller. But the more interesting phenomenon is the thinness of the attack so far by the practicing avant-garde on architecture itself, compared with the attacks on every other kindred activity from art to religion, drama, and the novel.

For instance, an acceptable antihero of a satisfying anti-novel is unquestionably a nauseating slob bearing no resemblance whatsoever to the traditional product. Beside him Venturi is a square and the Archigrams are Tories. Perhaps it is, as Reyner Banham once suggested, that architects make poor revolutionaries because they don't like the idea of buildings being blown sky-high. Banham is a true revolutionary, and so is Buckminster Fuller, but neither is an architect, strictly speaking, and to be an effective anti-hero you must first be cast in the hero's role. Nevertheless an architects' antiarchitecture movement is at last warming up. It is not to be confused with any of the stylistic revisions that have swept through modern architecture since the revolution. Throughout the first 60 years of this century most of the avant-garde in each succeeding generation was loyally fighting on architecture's side. Sometimes the revolutionaries were romantics, like the Utopians of Germany after World War I, embarrassing architecture with claims of cosmic immortality. Sometimes the revolutionaries were dour realists, like the New Brutalists of Britain in the 1950s, intent on scraping away all sticky accretions and getting down to the core. The aim with one exception, was to find, cleanse, and elevate the spirit of architecture.

The one exception was the Constructivist movement of the 1920s, which gives antiarchitecture a nice ancestry. Its revival is a product of the '60s. Antiarchitecture promises a more radical revolution than that of any new design style. It is fascinated by the population explosion and plugging-in and pop, by McLuhan, of course, and by systems and electronics; and it yearns for the day when it will be able to surrender itself entirely to the computer. All this leads to a concentration on open-ended planning, subdivision of elements, changeability, even portability. But these qualities are found in a lot of advanced architecture. Antiarchitecture goes further. It is compulsively opposed to visible concepts, design, and order. It wants desperately to be in with the big league revolutionaries of the other arts and to smash open the core of architecture and find something absolutely different inside. Its credo goes something like this: burn, form, burn; only social pressures and technological development will shape buildings from now on.

John M. Johansen is one of the latest to voice it. "The 'form giving' period is waning," he wrote, apropos of his design for Oklahoma City's Mummers Theater (May '68 issue). "Architecture as we knew it is no longer effective in its solutions," Johansen declared, but he betrayed a sneaking regard for it, just the same, when he added "—nor even compelling in its esthetic expression." A really determined antiarchitect has no time for esthetics of any sort, and is not looking for alternative expressions.

Sooner or later we will all have to declare ourselves for or against it. Some pattern in the tangled web of current architectural theories and practice (or at least some harmless amusement) may be found in the exercise of categorizing any advanced architects who come to mind into those who have and those who have not yet declared. On the right you place all those

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still seeking architecture in the Vitruvian sense: with strength, utility, and appearance (however odd) balanced somehow. On the left you put those seeking antiarchitecture by kicking away the third leg of the tripod.

For instance, while John Johansen has now all but declared himself for antiarchitecture, not so long ago he and Paul Rudolph could be, and frequently were, associated among the leaders of the space-makers. The whole corpus of Rudolph's work, however, indicates that he stands for architecture forever. So, undoubtedly, does Louis Kahn, but not necessarily all the Diagonalism set that follows him.

Again, Robert Venturi is edging always closer to antiarchitecture and will finally eliminate his own contradictions only when he actually achieves it. Yet Charles Moore and all the New Barnists are confirmed on the side of architecture. (Incidentally, unfamiliarity or ugliness are in themselves no reliable indicators of antiarchitecture. The fashionable clumsy look is deliberately created, positive architecture. Shattered forms and complexity are esthetic devices. Contradiction, however, is a splendid antiarchitectural invention.)

Then, the English Archigrams and the Japanese Metabolists may be easily dropped into left and right groups respectively. Their fanciful megacities have much in common, but at heart the two movements are very different. While the Archigrams have visions of freedom from all esthetic rules and demands, the Metabolists are deeply concerned with the traditional qualities of composition and unity. Their motivating concept of orderly growth and change is meaningless except in the framework of architecture.

Antiarchitecture has its foot in the door to architectural theory, but it is hampered by two or three realities. One is that all the examples we have seen so far are only on paper. Antiarchitecture has not been built—yet.

Another disability is that every successful example of antiarchitecture seems to be doomed to almost immediate self-cancellation. Just as soon as anyone does manage to achieve antiarchitecture—that is, a building purified during its creation by total and deliberate disregard for appearances—just as soon or an instant later it will become architecture. For immediately someone is bound to like the way it looks, if only for its novelty. The visual quality will thus be extracted. Then someone else or the originator himself will repeat the formula. The purity will be gone. The new thing will be a new style or at least a new esthetic influence. The best projected attempts to reach antiarchitecture—from the Vesnins' design for Leningrad's Pravda building in 1924 to the Archigrams to Johansen — already have merged into a recognizable image. It has a diversity of unrelated shed shapes and cylinders connected by tilted service pipes and conveyor belts. In short: Minehead style.

The secret of the weakness of the antiarchitecture movement is in the strength of architecture: not necessarily as it was, is, or will be practiced, but as an idea. Its strength is in its suppleness. It is as loosely defined as art, and so can slip out from under any attempt to squash it. It can comply with any new demand of society or technology without losing its inspirational quality as an idea. So the forces that are potentially antiarchitectural are fragmented and diverted. They become focused on side issues and finish up as being merely antistyle or antigeometry or antiart or anti the architect. Architecture can take all such attacks and keep standing.

So architecture will bend to meet antiarchitecture and immediately will spring up again. This is inevitable because, while to its planner and its computer programmer and its owner and its occupiers a building may be reduced to matters of strength and utility, no one else cares much about its strength or gives a damn about its utility. To all the rest of the world it is important only as part of the environment and a machine for being looked at.
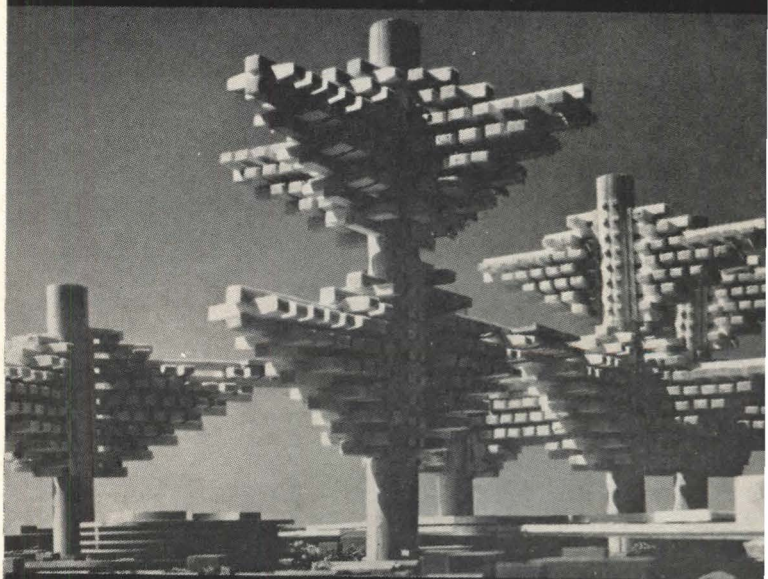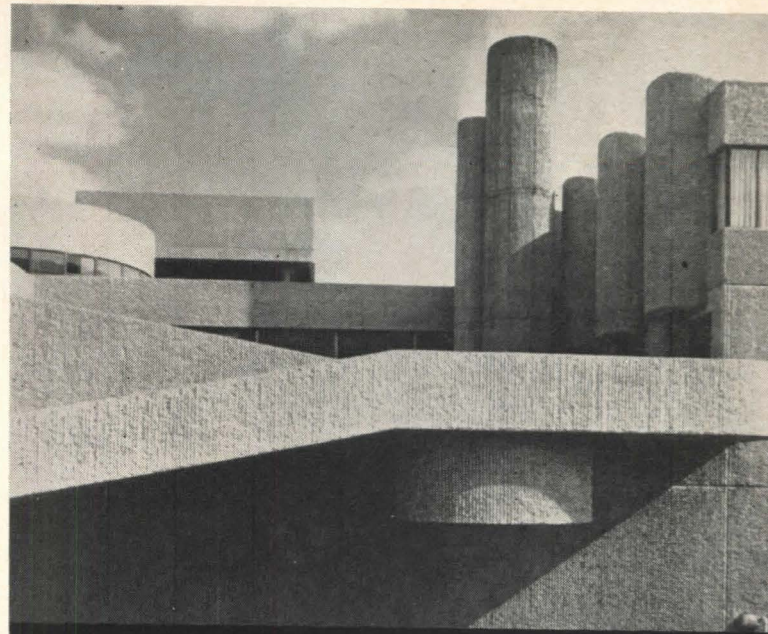
ARCHITECTURE (far out, but loyal to Vitruvian principles): Paul Rudolph's Endo Labs, Long Island (top); Jack Lynn's and Ivor Smith's "Brutalist" Park Hill Housing, England (center); and Arata Isozaki's "Metabolist" city in the sky (above).