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Labor and Architecture: Revisiting Cedric Price's Potteries Thinkbelt

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1. See Hannah Arendt, *The Human Condition* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1958).

2. *Ibid.*, 85.

In her book *The Human Condition*, Hannah Arendt distinguishes between the spheres of labor, work, and action, which together constitute the *vita activa*.¹ While work designates “the sheer unending variety of things whose sum total constitutes the human artifice,”² labor is the process of biological survival and thus never creates anything permanent. Labor refers to activities such as eating, sleeping, cooking, cleaning, and taking care of the household, which are required to support the mere existence of human beings. For this reason, the sphere of labor designates the private sphere, the silent realm of the *oikos*, or household.

Arendt's definitions of labor and work also designate two kinds of subjects, respectively: *animal laborans* and *homo faber*. Animal laborans works with his or her body and leaves nothing behind, while homo faber produces human constructs of semipermanence. Arendt notes that with the rise of modernity and its emphasis on production as the fundamental task of society, the boundaries between labor and work dissolved. The increasing division of labor, through which society was organized and managed for greater productivity, further divided work into specialized activities with no possibility for controlling any finished product. Unlike artisanal production, where homo faber can see the finished product of his or her work, the industrial worker is part of a vast productive organization in which work has been reduced to a generic process of labor. In this situation products are the outcome of larger social processes and as such do not derive from individual craft. For Arendt this condition was caused by the rise of the *social*: the organizational framework in which people's lives were systematically linked with the imperative of production.

The rise of the social imposed on people a law of ever increasing productivity and the consequent accumulation of surplus value. Increased productivity also implied increased consumption; most of the products of work were meant not to last, but to fulfill the immediate needs of the labor force. This condition promoted consumption as the ultimate goal of production and progressively blurred the line between work and labor.

The consequences of the expanding domain of labor in contemporary society is the subject of a seminal article by the architect, critic, and historian Kenneth Frampton, in which he applies Arendt's analysis of the human condition to the status of architecture in modernity.³ For Frampton, Arendt's distinction between work and labor is already contained in the ambivalence of the term *architecture*, which designates both "the art or science of constructing edifices for human use" and "the action or process of building." The first definition addresses architecture as a work that finds its *raison d'être* in the creation of a lasting human world, while the second definition sees architecture as a process "comparable to the never ending process of biological labor." When architecture is an edifice, it is not simply because it is an object, but because its appearance in the physical world is charged with the intent to build something whose meaning goes beyond mere instrumentality. With the rise of the social, architecture loses its relationship with public space and becomes an instrument of the "fungibility of the world" in the form of viaducts, bridges, and universal distribution systems. For Frampton, such artifacts constitute the worldlessness of the animal laborans in which "architecture has been as much affected as urbanism by the substitution of productive or processal norms, for the more traditional criteria of worldliness and use."⁴ Frampton writes:

Increasingly buildings come to be designed in response to the mechanics of their erection or, alternatively, processal elements such as tower cranes, elevators, escalators, stairs, refuse chutes, gangways, service cores, and automobiles determine the configuration of built form to a far greater extent than the hierarchic and more public criteria of place. And while the space of public appearance comes to be over-run by circulation or inundated at the urban scale by restricted high-speed access, the freestanding, high-rise megaliths of the modern city maintain their potential status as "consumer goods."⁵

Frampton's analysis remains one of the fundamental critiques of the way the dissolution of work into labor

3. See Kenneth Frampton, "The Status of Man and the Status of His Object: A Reading of *The Human Condition*," in *Architecture Theory since 1968*, ed. K. Michael Hays (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1998), 362–77.

4. *Ibid.*, 370.

5. *Ibid.*

6. Ibid., 364.

7. Ibid., 371.

and the rise of the social have fundamentally undermined the existence of a true public sphere. Following Arendt, Frampton's critique especially addresses what he sees as the realm of modern suburbia, in which "an urbanized populace [has] paradoxically lost the object of their urbanization."⁶ From the parade of monuments in the Ringstrasse criticized by Camillo Sitte, to the nonplaces of *communities without propinquity* celebrated by Melvin Webber, Frampton describes the assimilation of a production-oriented society into the phenomena of unlimited consumption: "[E]ven the worldly category of use is to be absorbed by consumption inasmuch as use objects – in this instance, tools – become transformed by abundance into disposable 'throwaway' goods; a subtle shift whose real significance resides in the intrinsic destructiveness of consumption as opposed to use."⁷

In what follows I would like to go beyond both Arendt's and Frampton's critiques, not by negating them, but by showing to what extent labor has become a totality that involves all aspects of human subjectivity, from political action to what Arendt defined as the most contemplative dimension of life, the "life of the mind." For both Arendt and Frampton the problem with labor is that it concerns the human "necessity of subsisting," thus animal laborans cannot produce a *world*, only *life* – that is, existence for the sake of one's reproduction. But what happens when, in late capitalism, labor pervades all human faculties and goes beyond the mere necessity of subsisting? What happens when production is not just the repetitive laboring processes in the factory or the office, but also takes the form of all cognitive, creative, and even political faculties of human beings? What happens when even public space becomes instrumental to economic production in the form of cultural and social interaction? And finally, what are the consequences of the omnipresence of labor on architectural form beyond the most visible design emblems of consumer culture?

In an attempt to offer some preliminary answers to these questions, I will first go back to Karl Marx's definition of labor, then discuss how architecture responded to the need to manage labor power as capital's fundamental source of value, and, finally, revisit Cedric Price's proposals for the Fun Palace and Potteries Thinkbelt as extreme examples of how labor has been "enabled" by specific architectural spaces that have anticipated our contemporary modes of production, modes in which knowledge, cooperation, and information play a fundamental role in producing economic value.

LABOR POWER

In formulating her definition of labor, Arendt criticized Marx not only for blurring the distinction between labor and work, but also for addressing labor as the very core of human subjectivity. Arendt acknowledged the decisiveness of Marx's identification of labor as the source of capital, wealth, and power, but she interpreted his definition of labor strictly in her terms, as a simple process of reproduction of one's life. Indeed, for Marx there was no distinction between labor and work. In an age that made productivity the fundamental goal of society, Marx saw productivity not in the finished products but in the capacity for labor, in human power "whose strength is not exhausted when it has produced the means of its own subsistence and survival but is capable of producing a 'surplus,' that is, more than is necessary for its own 'reproduction.'"⁸ Yet, Marx saw labor as the very anthropological portrait of human nature, which revealed not only what man had already achieved, but also his *potential* for production. Marx's great discovery was the understanding of labor as "labor power," which he defined as "the aggregate of those mental and physical capabilities existing in the physical form, the living personality, of a human being, capabilities which he sets in motion whenever he produces a use-value of any kind."⁹ What is remarkable about this definition is that Marx understands labor not only as physical potential but also as mental or intellectual capability. Long before mass labor would shift from the realm of the factory (in which laboring efforts are mostly physical) to the realm of tertiary and creative labor (in which labor power consists mostly of mental and intellectual capabilities), Marx included the latter as a fundamental asset of the productive power of society. Labor power is, above all, *potential*. As Paolo Virno, in his book *A Grammar of the Multitude*, writes: "Potential, that is to say, aptitude, capacity, *dynamis*. Generic, undetermined potential: where one particular type of labor or another has not been designated, but any kind of labor is taking place, be it the manufacturing of a car door, or the harvesting of pears, the babble of someone calling in to a phone 'party-line,' or the work of a proofreader."¹⁰ Unlike Arendt, who went back to the traditional understanding of labor as just one aspect of the human condition, Marx saw in labor the very core of human subjectivity, its totality, and thus what generates value in a capitalist society. The importance of labor in adding value to the goods it produces had already been presumed by the great theorists of the bourgeois economy, Adam Smith and David

8. As Arendt summarized Marx's understanding of labor, see *The Human Condition*, 88.

9. Karl Marx, *Capital*, vol. 1, *A Critique of Political Economy*, trans. Ben Fowkes and David Fernbach (London: Penguin Books, 1990), 270.

10. Paolo Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, trans. Isabella Bertolotti, James Cascaito, Andrea Casson (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2004), 81.

Ricardo. Yet these theorists measured the value of labor in terms of the abstract duration of the labor process, as a pure quantity of time without any qualitative or sensible connotation. Marx noted that it was impossible to talk in terms of the value of labor when labor itself was understood as the sum of physical and intellectual capabilities. As embodied in the *life* and in the *world* of the workers, and not in time, labor is the origin of the value of commodities.

As Marx understood it, in a capitalist system labor power is a fundamental commodity. The paradoxical nature of this commodity is that it does not exist as a thing or as a specific, recognizable activity. Labor power exists only as the potential embodied in the generic faculties of human nature. This dimension of labor and its importance in a capitalist system is at the origin of biopolitical techniques of government. Between the 1960s and the 1990s in Italy, the operaism and post-operaism movements rediscovered the Marxist definition of labor power by analyzing how capitalism was forced to transform its apparatus of power under the pressure of class struggle. Virno remarks on the equivocal nature of the now-fashionable Foucauldian concept of biopolitics when it is disconnected from its true goal, which is not simply control for the sake of control, but rather the governance of human life as the potential for production. As he explains:

Capitalists are interested in the life of the worker, in the body of the worker, only for an indirect reason: this life, this body, are what contain the faculty, the potential, the dynamis. The living body becomes an object to be governed not for its intrinsic value, but because it is the substratum of what really matters: labor-power as the aggregate of the most diverse human faculties (the potential for speaking, for thinking, for remembering, for acting, etc.). Life lies at the center of politics when the prize to be won is immaterial (and in itself non-present) labor-power. The living body, which is a concern of the administrative apparatus of the State, is the tangible sign of a yet unrealized potential, the semblance of labor not yet objectified; as Marx says eloquently, of "labor as subjectivity." The potential for working, bought and sold just like another commodity, is labor not yet objectified, "labor as subjectivity." One could say that while money is the universal representation of the value of exchange – or rather of the exchangeability itself of products – life, instead, takes the place of the productive potential, of the invisible dynamis.¹¹

11. Ibid., 83–84.

If, as Marx maintains, labor power consists of the generic faculties of workers, their physical and mental capabilities, then Arendt's spheres of labor, work, and action are absorbed

and dissolved within late capitalism's totalizing sphere of labor. Even those realms that Arendt viewed as antithetical to the sphere of labor, such as political action or thinking, are absorbed by labor power; language, cooperation, and social exchange become crucial forms of production.

FREE SPACE

The spatial indeterminacy of a free space – a space emptied of obstruction and ready to accommodate any situation – is a radical manifestation of how labor power – as the invisible *dynamis* of life – has been exploited by capitalism. If labor power is characterized by man's ability to adapt to any situation, and therefore by the total unpredictability of man's actions and reactions, the only corresponding spatial form in such unstable conditions is space ready to use and occupy according to any foreseen and unforeseen situation. The history of capitalist spatial governance can be understood as the possibility of accommodating the unpredictability and instability inherent to human nature. If labor power – the very object of any economic process – can be understood as the field of human potential (from body to mind), then the spatial apparatus that correspond to this reality have to reach the same degree of openness and potential for use and occupation. From J.N.L. Durand's grid plans to Albert Kahn's factory plans, from Le Corbusier's Maison Dom-ino and Plan Libre to Ludwig Mies van der Rohe's idea of universal space, modern architecture can be understood as the approximation of a space increasingly freed from obstacles and in which the impact of the structure in plan is minimized in order to create space ready for any type of organization. Such flexibility becomes even more radical when "production" is no longer understood as the production of goods but as the production of immaterial facts such as services and information. When language, cooperation, and exchange are the primary instruments of production, the diagram of spatial relationships becomes so complex and ever changing that it becomes impossible to translate it into a fixed spatial arrangement. As Francesco Marullo notes, "The more Labor is reduced to its most generic form, devoid of any specific duty, the more the apparatus of fixed capital is obliged to embody the barest form of possibility: a *Typical Plan* or a simple, flexible, reproducible layout able to restrain and make productive any form of human subjectivity."¹² This principle can be seen at work in the whole landscape of industrial architecture, from the space of the factory to that of the office. Yet with

12. Francesco Marullo, "Generic and Typical Plan," *The City as a Project*, The Berlage Institute, <http://thecityasaproject.org/2011/04/generic/>.

the expansion of the sphere of labor, any space of the city can become a working space. For this reason, flexible space has become a desired quality for any urban typology. The idea of “free space” open to any possible variation, adjustment, or change seems to bring the very nature of labor to the fore of architectural space.

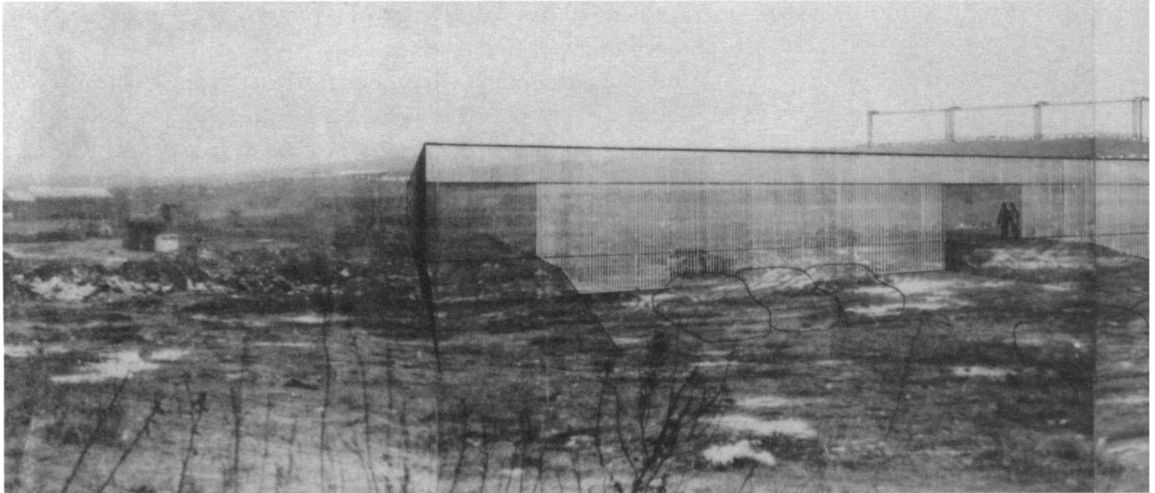
LIFE AS PRODUCTION

The architect who, more than anyone else, embraced the idea of architecture as a “free space” open to indeterminate development was Cedric Price. His projects focused on an idea of architecture that would change in time according to its use. A fundamental aspect of Price’s work was his concern with the possibility of “enabling” human creativity through an environment devoid of the usual spatial constraints of traditional architecture. To that end, Price often dealt with declining industrial sites for which he envisioned social and spatial transformations toward more flexible uses.

In 1966 Price published his plan for a new regional educational network called Potteries Thinkbelt, first in the pages of the sociology review *New Society* and then in *Architectural Design*.¹³ The name of the project was derived from the site: the devastated industrial landscape of North Staffordshire, England, which, over the course of the 19th and 20th centuries, had been dramatically deteriorated by the local pottery industry, as well as by coal mining and the dense rail network needed to support it. With the economic crisis that affected England’s manufacturing sector in the 1950s and ’60s, North Staffordshire’s pottery industry declined suddenly, leaving behind desolation, unemployment, and an entropic landscape of pollution and redundant, underused infrastructure.

Potteries Thinkbelt was more than an idea to recycle an existing industrial site and its infrastructure. Price wanted to convert the rusting railway and industrial facilities into a vast educational network for 20,000 students. By recycling an industrial landscape as the basis for an educational system in order to advance a postindustrial region, Price emphasized the “productive” status of knowledge and education. North Staffordshire would no longer produce material goods, but rather science and information in the form of applied research. In Price’s project, the institution of the research university would no longer be seen as the ivory tower of higher education, but as a production center in which students would not be supported by grants but hired as wage earners. Potteries Thinkbelt was the first large-scale urban proposal

13. See Cedric Price, “Potteries Thinkbelt,” *New Society* 7, no. 192 (June 1966): 14–17. See also Cedric Price, “Potteries Thinkbelt: A Plan for the Establishment of a Major Advanced Educational Industry in Staffordshire,” *Architectural Design* 36 (October 1966): 494–97.



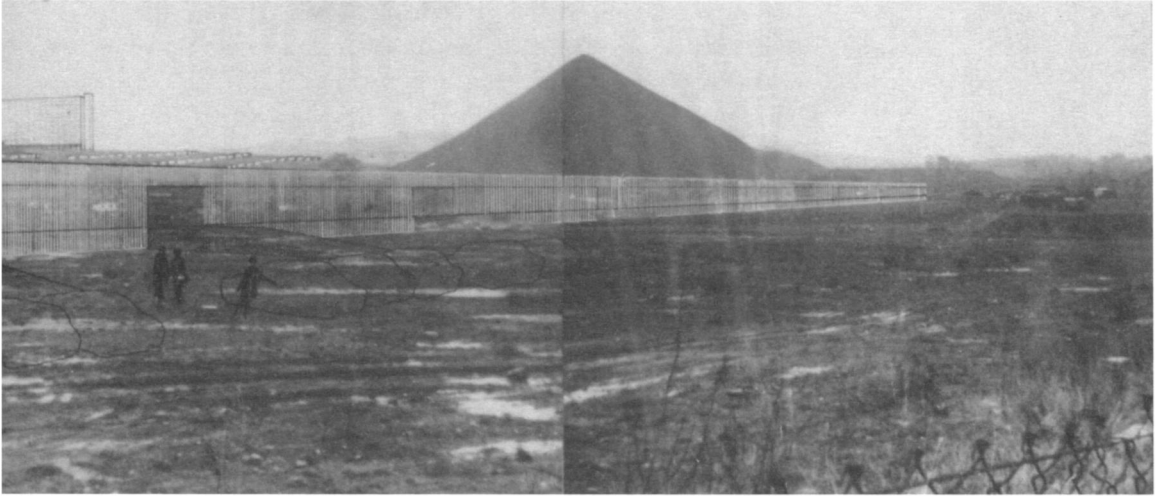
CEDRIC PRICE, POTTERIES THINKBELT, NORTH STAFFORDSHIRE, ENGLAND, 1963–66. PHOTOMONTAGE OF HOUSING SITE 17. IMAGE COURTESY CEDRIC PRICE FONDS, COLLECTION CENTRE CANADIEN D'ARCHITECTURE / CANADIAN CENTRE FOR ARCHITECTURE, MONTREAL.

14. The term *post-Fordism* emerged in Italy in the 1980s within the tradition of post-operatism in order to describe new forms of labor after the decline of material production in advanced economies. One of the first analytical studies of post-Fordism was put forward in Christian Marazzi, *Il posto dei Calzini. La rivolta linguistica dell'economia e i suoi effetti politici* (Bellinzona: Edizioni Casagrande, 1994). For the English translation see Christian Marazzi, *Capital and Affects: The Politics of the Language Economy*, trans. Giuseppina Mecchia (Los Angeles: Semiotext(e), 2011). A comprehensive critical definition of post-Fordism is advanced in Adelino Zanini and Ubaldo Fadini, eds., *Lessico Postfordista: dizionario di idee della mutazione* (Milan: Feltrinelli, 2001). See also Gal Kirn, ed., *Post-Fordism and its Discontents* (Maastricht: privately printed, 2010).

to suggest a new framework for both educational production and production in general. The Thinkbelt not only predated the vast reconversion of industrial sites into universities and cultural centers that, beginning in the 1980s, became a primary trend in the development of cities; it can also be understood as a paradigmatic example of an urban environment whose values, forms, and ideology resonate with the great transformations that have affected the global economy since the late 1970s, a period – and mode of production – that historians and sociologists associate with post-Fordism.¹⁴

In post-Fordism, material production was increasingly outsourced to developing countries, where the cost of labor was lower, and the production of services, information, and knowledge became the main focus of advanced economies such as the US, Europe, and Japan. The advent of this “immaterial production” dramatically changed the status of labor. No longer a specialized sphere clustered within the perimeter of the factory or office, labor became an inescapable condition involving all aspects of life. Based on knowledge and information, immaterial production involves not only the body, but also faculties such as cognition and communication, which are put to work at every moment; thus every moment of one’s daily social existence is an opportunity for production. This condition is enforced by technologically advanced communication systems that make immaterial production possible at any time and in any place, to the point that life itself has become the substratum of production.

In Price’s Potteries Thinkbelt, production was directly linked to knowledge and understood, above all, as human experience and the capacity for interaction. The irony is that



while the project was understood as a social utopia, as progressive reform of the then derelict and stagnant industrial economy of Great Britain, the values and ideology behind Potteries Thinkbelt now offer one of the most remarkable vantage points from which to reconsider the way capitalism today has subsumed all of human subjectivity within its productive logic.

THE FUN PALACE

Price first developed the idea of “free space,” as well as other principles found in Potteries Thinkbelt, in his seminal project for the Fun Palace (1961–65), which was initiated by Joan Littlewood,¹⁵ an actress and director whose vision of theater became topical with the advent of the Welfare State. Under the policies of the British Welfare State, in which production was more organically linked with consumption, free time became an essential aspect of labor management. No longer understood as the opposite of productivity, free time was an essential aspect of “labor as subjectivity.” Culture, education, and social exchange were seen to be at the center of the issue of free time. Littlewood imagined the Fun Palace as an institution that would shape free time by emancipating “leisure,” becoming a productive factory of fun and creativity. In this sense it is notable that Price designed the Fun Palace with the technology and aesthetic of shipyards, and that the project was intended for a derelict industrial site along the Thames River, where its abstract aesthetic would resonate with its context.

Price imagined the architecture of the Fun Palace as an open modular framework like the generic, open structure of

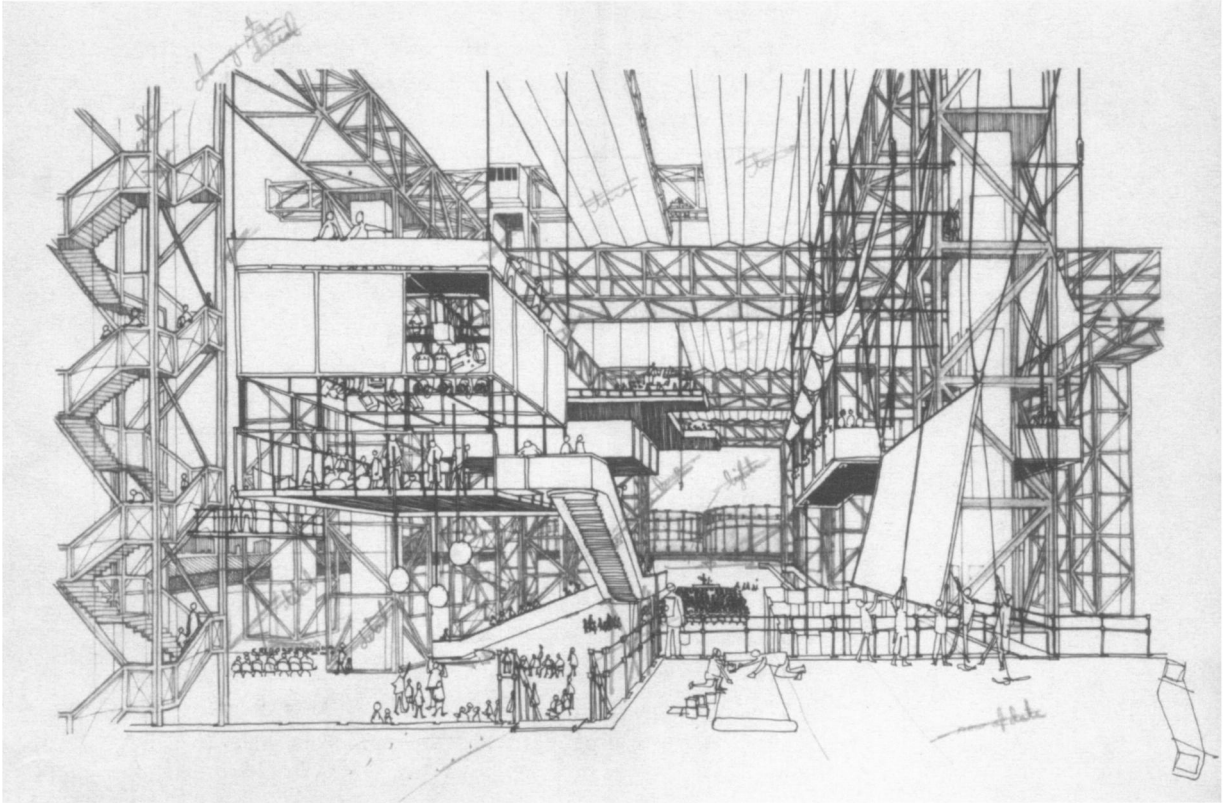
15. For an accurate history of the Fun Palace, see Stanley Mathews, *From Agit-Prop to Free Space: The Architecture of Cedric Price* (London: Black Dog Publishing, 2007), 66–191. Unlike many readings of this project, Mathews rightly situates the project within a much broader history of ideas and the economic and political realities of postwar Britain.

industrial buildings. Other than the structural columns and the basement, which would contain the fixed equipment, virtually every part of the Fun Palace was free space for changing, temporary uses. Because gantries and cranes would be used to move partitions, ramps, and equipment as needed, Price refused to illustrate the Fun Palace as a finished building. Instead, he presented it as a diagram, a building made in the form of an abstract and simple structure whose content would be defined by the conditions of its use. The Fun Palace can be understood as a space where action always takes place “under the eyes of others,” to use Arendt’s famous definition of the public realm.¹⁶ Foregoing traditional theater space and its strict separation between acting and spectatorship, in these spaces theatrical action would take the form of multiple events and situations – small performances, rehearsals, presentations, meetings, and informal gatherings of all sorts. In other words, theater would become *life*, and vice versa.

The spatial and institutional logic of the Fun Palace was intended to provide a productive environment where boundaries between work and play would be completely dissolved. “So, how are we to use our freedom from unnecessary labor?” asked Littlewood when presenting the Fun Palace. “We shall be caught short again, as we were after the invention of the steam engine, if we don’t look out . . . ‘work’ and ‘leisure’ overlap and merge: life becomes a whole.”¹⁷ For this reason Price and Littlewood insisted that the programmatic aspects of the Fun Palace had to remain as open as possible to coincide with the unpredictable nature of human subjectivity. One can argue that the radical abstraction of the Fun Palace building, its lack of image, and its perpetually unfinished form respond to the necessity to capture life as a never-ending flux of events. Moreover, with its insistence on performance and interaction as fundamental expressions of human subjectivity, the Fun Palace seems to anticipate contemporary forms of production that focus on performance itself as an end product. Such performance constitutes the “public” character of production. While the industrial worker was the silent controller of the machine (think of the worker on the assembly line), the post-Fordist worker is constantly acting on the stage of communication and social interaction. Price and Littlewood’s utopian project aimed to reclaim the very integrity of life from its alienated condition within the strict separation of activities imposed by industrial work. But the post-Fordist (counter)revolution of the 1970s and ’80s fully realized the utopia of life at the center of production as the next form of

16. Arendt, *The Human Condition*, 22.

17. As quoted in Mathews, *From Agit-Prop to Free Space*, 70.



CEDRIC PRICE, FUN PALACE, LONDON, 1960–64. INTERIOR PERSPECTIVE. IMAGE COURTESY CEDRIC PRICE FONDS, COLLECTION CENTRE CANADIEN D'ARCHITECTURE / CANADIAN CENTRE FOR ARCHITECTURE, MONTREAL.

capitalist exploitation. As Virno remarks, “The living body of the worker is the substratum of that labor-power which, in itself, has no independent existence. ‘Life,’ pure and simple *bios*, acquires a specific importance inasmuch as it is the tabernacle of *dynamis*, of mere potential.”¹⁸ Life as such, life as subjectivity, immediately becomes production.

In Potteries Thinkbelt this production model is taken to the extreme.

18. Virno, *A Grammar of the Multitude*, 83.

LIFE CONDITIONING

Price’s Potteries Thinkbelt project consists of several parts – transfer areas, faculty areas, and crate, capsule, sprawl, and battery housing – which are linked by roads and a railway. The three main transfer areas – Meir, Pitts Hill, and Madeley – are located at the three geographical extremities of the site and act as gates to the entire system. The transfer areas both connect Potteries Thinkbelt to national and international transportation networks and provide accommodations for students and staff, flexible laboratories, and classrooms. For example, in the Meir Transfer Area a series of gantries allows short-term portable enclosures to be assembled according to

different needs, while in the Pitts Hill Transfer Area, a gigantic, generic open floor reminiscent of a typical factory plan allows living and working cells to be assembled in ever different ways. The university facilities were designed as mobile learning units traveling on the rail network. Departing from the transfer areas, the units would accommodate constantly changing programs, facilitate interdisciplinary activities, and allow students to move through the entire network while studying. Along the railway lines, existing derelict industrial facilities would be recycled as fixed “sidings” of the mobile learning units.

A fundamental component of the Thinkbelt was housing. Noting that students are unwilling to spend time on housing maintenance, and wanting to avoid the communitarian life of traditional campuses, Price designed flexible, temporary housing units that could be assembled in multiple configurations, including 13-story reinforced-concrete frames, free-standing capsules for one or two persons, and batteries of non-load-bearing rooms sandwiched between platforms that contained a complete network of services. Price avoided any fixed housing pattern so that it would adapt to the existing patterns of inhabitation of North Staffordshire. Student and staff housing was to develop freely along the railway lines and in specific areas to complement the existing towns, thus fostering the integration of students, staff, and the local population. Eventually, the university housing settlements would dissolve the distinction between the university and the urban region, which, with its towns and public spaces, would become an extension of the university itself. Price imagined that the Thinkbelt’s moving parts would be orchestrated by real-time feedback based on fluctuating factors such as economic conditions, market demands, and increasing or shrinking populations. Thus the Thinkbelt would continually adapt, never crystallizing in one fixed form.

Price theorized this feedback between use and configuration as “life conditioning,” a play on the environmental performance of air-conditioning machines that, almost invisibly, can radically change the environment of an indoor space. At the very core of this architectural and urban space was life itself, not programs or functions, said Price, and to design was to condition life by means of devices that went beyond the realm of architectural space and form. For Price, conditioning life meant developing an architectural space capable of approximating life’s indeterminacy. To confront the unpredictability of human actions and reactions, the flexible,

modular architecture of the Thinkbelt was designed to retain “a calculated uncertainty” of use and occupancy. Reduced to its use value, life-conditioning architecture is completely reified by the multiplicity of situations and uses it accommodates. To that end, as he did for the Fun Palace, Price adopted the language of industrial architecture, in which the temporality of programs and occupancy causes the architectural container to be formally indifferent to its content, to the point of achieving a radical visual blankness. Price revealed this aesthetic attitude through abstract line drawings and perspective views of Potteries Thinkbelt that juxtaposed an abstract and blank architecture with the desolation of the region’s postindustrial landscape.

In a certain way, the industrial-bucolic image of Potteries Thinkbelt can be compared to Claude-Nicolas Ledoux’s agromonic architecture, designed for the landscape surrounding the Saltworks of Chaux and linked to the theme of labor and production. Responding to Physiocratic theories of economics, Ledoux designed a series of architectural artifacts immersed in the landscape.¹⁹ Ledoux intended the freestanding pavilions to reinforce the central domination of the saltworks by reforming the living and social habits of the region’s inhabitants. This reform was advanced by means of specific moral and social institutions, such as housing and monuments, and by a specific symbolic architectural language, or *architecture parlante*, made of forms that would “speak to the people” through caricatures of their programmatic content – a house for river surveyors designed in the form of a pipe, or a house for coopers designed in the form of intersecting cylinders assembled to resemble barrels. For Ledoux, the reformist ethos of architecture was expressed through a strong relationship between architecture and the productive landscape, and through a clearly recognizable symbolic architectural language.

In Potteries Thinkbelt, Price’s idea of a productive landscape is in terms of the production of services and knowledge rather than goods, and his forms refuse any symbolism or figuration. Not even the issue of technology, which is important, is represented. Rather, it is simply contained within the abstract forms of the Thinkbelt’s urban components. In this sense it is possible to see the enormous gap between Price’s work and that of other avant-garde groups, such as Archigram, that shared his sensibility. While Archigram was interested in the representation of technology through a clearly recognizable visual language of rounded forms,

19. See Anthony Vidler, *Claude-Nicolas Ledoux: Architecture and Social Reform at the End of the Ancien Régime* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1990).

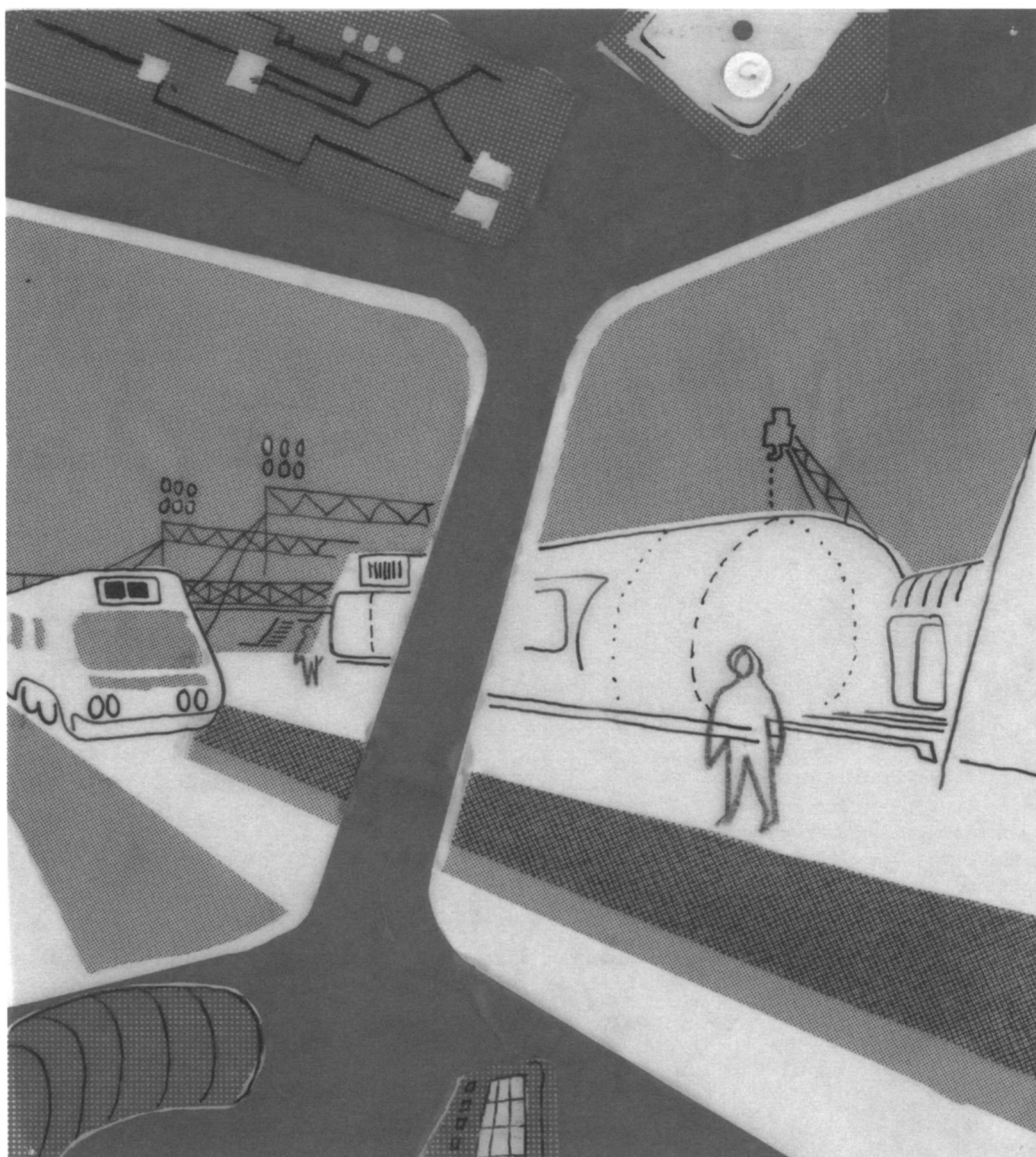
plug-in elements, and other items that refer to technological imagery, Price used the most anonymous and neutral architectural elements in his project – most of them ready-made industrial products devoid of any figurative reference. For Price, architecture is *what it does*, just as the Italian group Archizoom would propose a few years later with No-stop City (1968–71), in which the entire urban condition is made of nonarchitectural equipment such as air conditioning, artificial lighting, elevators, bathrooms, etc. Yet the calculated uncertainty of the Thinkbelt was not open-ended. It was designed to contain, manage, and determine the labor subjectivity of its inhabitants – students and faculty – whose creativity and social interaction Price interpreted as a key factor in the learning process. The architectural blankness of the Thinkbelt was intended to provide a “controlled free space” for its subjects, one in which advanced communications systems would replace the authority imposed by buildings.

As Price himself recalled, Potteries Thinkbelt began after a discussion with Lord Kenneth, parliamentary secretary of the Ministry of Housing and Local Government.²⁰ If the idea for the Fun Palace came from a radical leftist cultural producer, Potteries Thinkbelt represented the application of the Fun Palace principles in a social democratic, Welfare State political project. It is impossible to detach Price's project from his political motivation as an active member of Britain's Labour Party. Though Price never held an official position in the party, his design philosophy has to be seen as a political project perfectly congruent with the goal of the Welfare State to emancipate education from its elitist tradition of higher education in favor of a more democratic educational system open to all classes. In addition to recovering the disastrous state of North Staffordshire and transforming the area from an industrial site to an educational network, with Potteries Thinkbelt Price attempted to address a more fundamental problem for Great Britain in the 1960s: the exodus of highly skilled workers for Continental Europe and the United States, a phenomenon known in England as Brain-Drain.²¹

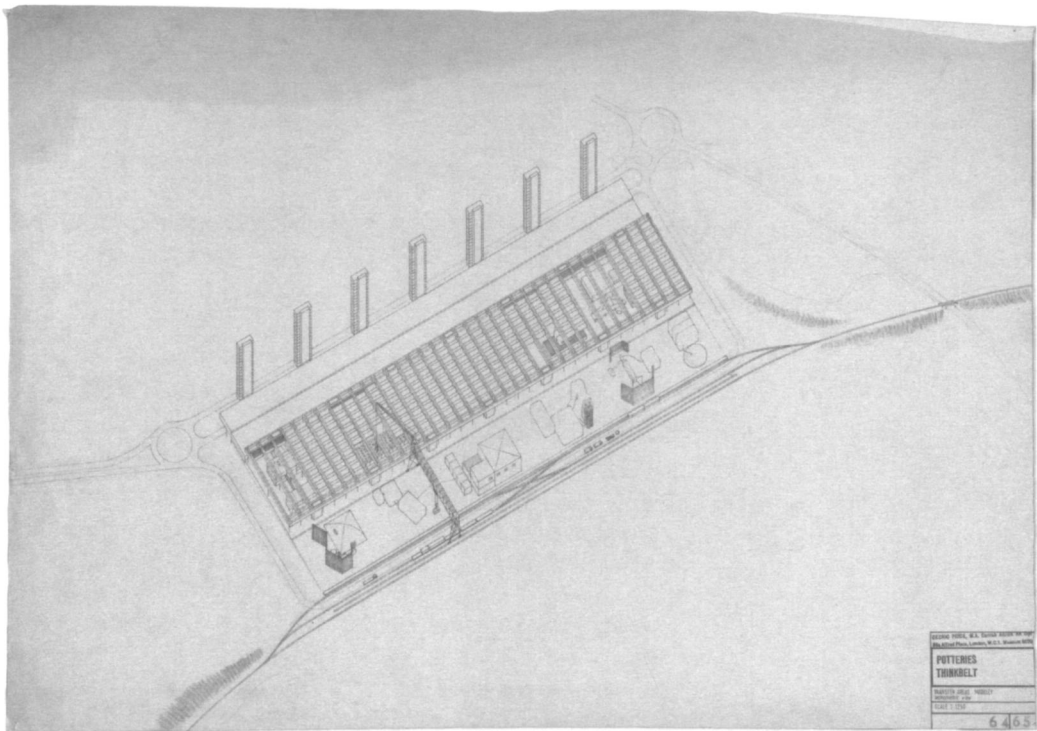
In the history of capitalism, the movements of workers from one country to another are recurring phenomena and one of the most common forms of class struggle. When working conditions do not match the expectations of workers, they can only challenge the market wage by escaping it. Brain-Drain was caused mainly by the lack of industrial renewal in postwar Britain. Still rooted in the hegemony of the

20. Mathews, *From Agit-Prop to Free Space*, 200.

21. See Martin Weiner, *English Culture and the Decline of Industrial Spirit, 1850–1980* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2004).

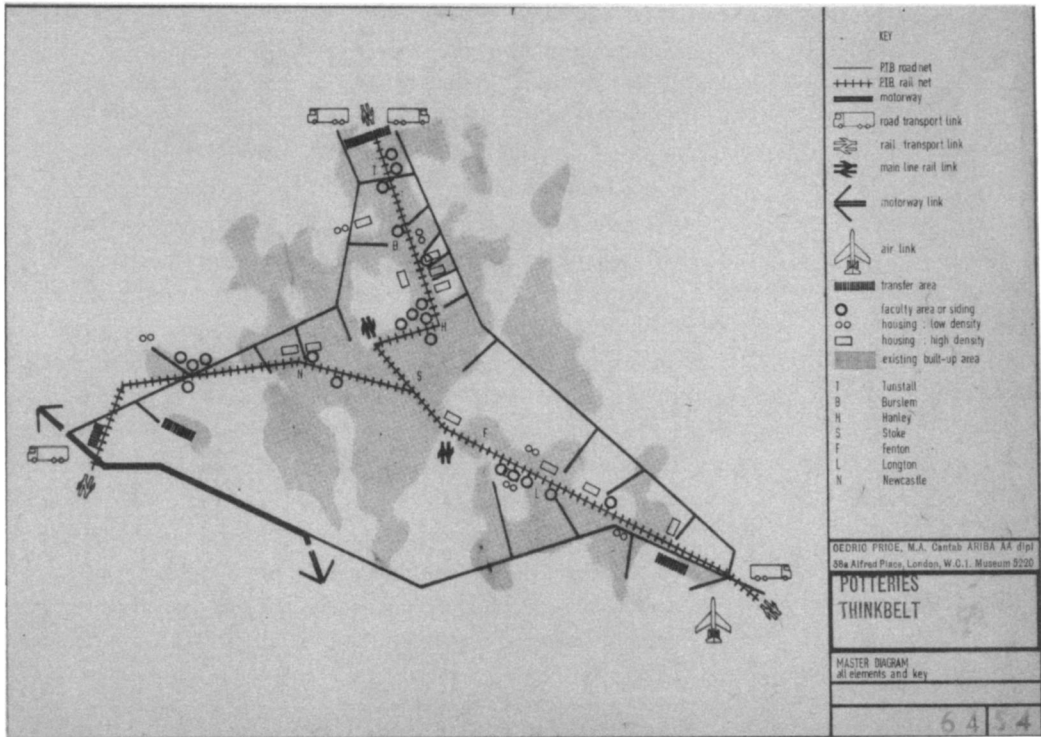


CEDRIC PRICE, POTTERIES THINK-BELT, DATE UNKNOWN. PERSPECTIVE DRAWING OF MOBILE TEACHING MACHINES. DIGITAL IMAGE © THE MUSEUM OF MODERN ART / LICENSED BY SCALA / ART RESOURCE, NY.



CEDRIC PRICE, POTTERIES THINKBELT, AXONOMETRIC OF THE MADELEY TRANSFER AREA, 1964. OPPOSITE PAGE: MASTER DIAGRAM, 1963–66. IMAGES COURTESY CEDRIC PRICE FONDS, COLLECTION CENTRE CANADIEN D'ARCHITECTURE / CANADIAN CENTRE FOR ARCHITECTURE, MONTREAL.

manufacturing industry, Great Britain lacked opportunities for highly skilled workers. For many members of the Labour Party, including Price, Brain-Drain was above all a crisis of the education system, and more precisely of the university, which they believed was still anchored to an idea of education completely detached from its economic usefulness. In the tradition of the European nation-state, public-sponsored education was charged with the paternalistic role of constructing the “good citizen” – that is, the good soldier and good head of the family. Higher education furthered these values toward the creation of an effective ruling class. The humanities, specifically disciplines such as literature, history, and philosophy (all taught as nation-based traditions), were privileged over the sciences because they represented the reassuring values of the national culture. Moreover, the university campus, a unique compound often detached from the city, reinforced a communitarian ethos that merged contemplation and camaraderie. This was meant to reinforce the class-consciousness of the privileged regarding their role and responsibility in society. The growing prosperity of the lower-middle class, which rose under the Welfare State, and the consequent phenomenon of mass-education, however, brought this educational model to a crisis.



22. Cedric Price, "National School Plan," *The Architect's Journal* 143 (May 1966): 1282–284.

Arguably, the 1968 student protests originated in students' increasing dissatisfaction with the old, elitist attitudes of the traditional university. Price's Potteries Thinkbelt seems to merge uniquely the anti-authoritarian spirit and self-determination of the early student protests with the economic imperative to involve education in the renewal of the labor market. To solve the crisis of higher education, the British Labour Party (and Price) sought to propose a more flexible and accessible system, one oriented toward broader applicability of knowledge as an effective economic factor. Echoing the ongoing debates in the Labour Party, Price declared that in order to solve the industrial decline of England, a much greater emphasis needed to be given to scientific and technological knowledge.²² Rather than the hegemony of the humanities, Price proposed a university focused on knowledge that would be immediately useful in the labor market.

FROM FREE SPACE TO PRECARIOUS SPACE

The relevance of the Thinkbelt proposal today is Price's unwitting anticipation of the most perverse neoliberal tendencies to exploit labor power. For example, a dystopian heir of Price's reformist vision is the ongoing Bologna Process, the broadest restructuring of higher education undertaken in Europe since

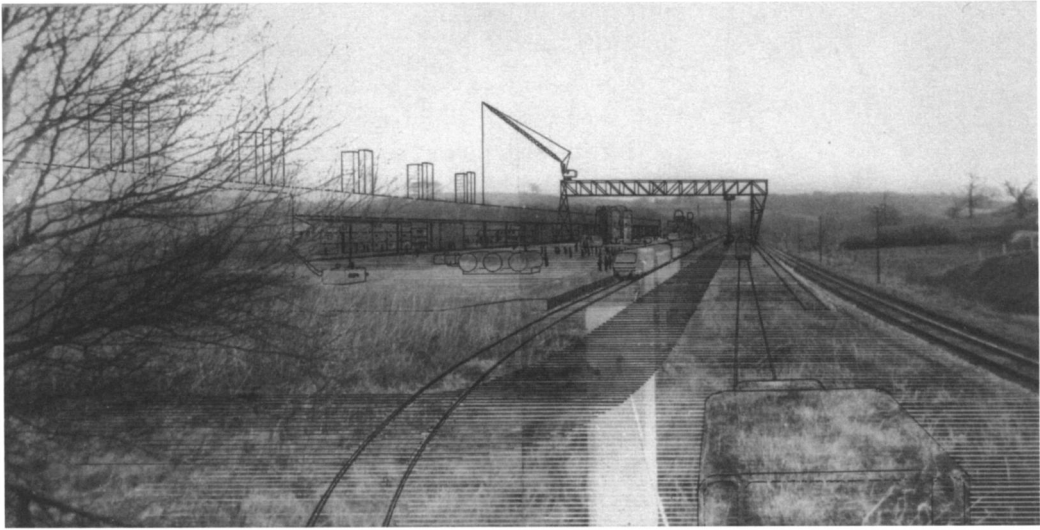
23. For a general overview of the so-called Bologna Process, see Alberto Amaral, Guy Neave, Christine Musselin, Peter Maaseen, eds., *European Integration and the Governance of Higher Education and Research* (London: Springer, 2009). For a critical analysis, see The Edufactory Collective, *Towards a Global Autonomous University* (New York: Autonomedia, 2009).

24. The protest against the privatization of the university that took place in Italy in 1990 with the so-called *Movimento della Pantera* was the first resurgence of mass-political struggle after the political apathy of the 1980s.

1968.²³ During the 1990s it became clear that education is a fundamental economic factor in advanced capitalism. As such it could no longer be sustained as a publicly funded system, but was susceptible to being traded as a commodity. In Europe, where, until the 1980s, the policies inspired by the Welfare State agenda had been highly influential, the increasing privatization and commodification of education introduced a number of conflicts with, and resistance from, students.²⁴ In order to ease the conflicts and find a more politically and economically legitimate reason for these market-oriented changes, at the end of the '90s the European Union adopted the Bologna Declaration. The official aim of the declaration is to standardize higher education curricula in the member countries of the EU. Yet, by doing so the Bologna Process has drastically reformed the very objective of higher education. If in the 1960s education was linked to the economy within the framework of the Welfare State, the Bologna Process is now reforming the university according to the parameters of a neoliberal economy in which flexibility plays a fundamental role as a managerial paradigm.

No longer dedicated to developing “the good citizen,” the Bologna Process seeks to define the student as an *entrepreneur* whose educational curricula is immediately fine-tuned to market demands. Universities are thus encouraged to offer much more flexible curricula, which students can easily adapt according to the best opportunities available in the market. Given the progressive withdrawal of the state from supporting higher education, the Bologna Process encourages universities to collaborate more with the private sector and to rely on private funding. While departments and universities of applied research, especially in the fields of engineering and science, are well-funded because of their immediate usefulness in the market, the humanities suffer from lack of investment, and thus are seen as increasingly irrelevant in the face of market pressures.

It is an oversimplification, but one can say that the university prefigured by the Bologna Process is a factory that produces immaterial commodities in the form of knowledge, and that this production cannot be separated from its producers. When what is bought and sold is inseparable from its producers – in this case, students, teachers, and researchers – the object of production becomes not just the commodity itself, but the very subjectivity of the producers. In short, universities are now factories that produce subjectivity, which is addressed to the precarious student-workers: socially mobile,



CEDRIC PRICE, POTTERIES THINKBELT,
PHOTOMONTAGE OF HOUSING SITE 7,
1963-66. TOP: PERSPECTIVE SKETCH
OF MADELEY TRANSFER AREA. 1966.
IMAGES COURTESY CEDRIC PRICE
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DIAN CENTRE FOR ARCHITECTURE,
MONTREAL.

able to cope with all sorts of unstable conditions, and ready to jump from one knowledge domain to the other according to opportunities. In constantly self-customizing their course of study, students are encouraged to exploit their personal skills rather than what they might learn in a class. The Bologna Process acknowledges that the interactive experience of students – how they live, how they cope with any given situation, how they socialize – is a great source for their formation, and thus promotes mobility as a fundamental factor for learning. This seems to confirm the subjectivity that Price envisioned with the Thinkbelt project. Yet, in his social-democratic reformist approach, Price did not understand the role of education and the production of knowledge in terms of political economy. In other words, he did not understand that the design philosophy behind his idea of education and, more generally, of the merging of work with activities such as learning and leisure, was “instrumental” to an economy that at that time was already moving from material to immaterial production.

Indeed, one can say that Price’s project is today fully realized by the neoliberal policies of the EU, except for one fundamental issue. Price imagined that in a society where education directly serves the needs and demands of the labor market, students should be hired as workers and not simply be supported by grants. But the reality highlighted by the Bologna Process is quite the opposite. Since knowledge is now a marketable commodity, students have to pay to access it, and because the rise in tuition accentuates an entrepreneurial approach to education, students must be all the more farsighted, since their investment is significant.

As in Price’s Thinkbelt scenario, under the Bologna Process students are encouraged to enter society from the beginning of their studies; if before they were isolated from its expectations and rules during their education, they now must learn to live within them. The gap between the university and the city that allowed students to embody social rebellion no longer exists. Students are less focused on the critical assessment of ongoing economic, political, and industrial developments and more interested in learning how to deal with these conditions in the most effective way. It is precisely this precarious environment in which students are forced to develop their entrepreneurial abilities and to learn how to produce – an unstable environment in which freedom of choice is constantly conditioned by an increasingly precarious life.

In light of this situation today it seems outrageously naïve to continue to live in the dream bubble of the progressive

1960s, when the idylls of flexibility and creativity seemed to be amplified by the application of networks and technology. Cedric Price's belief in an architecture of free space and of life conditioning seems completely outdated in an age that has seen the complete exploitation of these two concepts. And yet, one could argue that as a project Potteries Thinkbelt is more contemporary and relevant today than when it was developed. It is urgently contemporary because the economic and political conditions that would support the need for Potteries Thinkbelt are fully realized today. Only now have labor, creativity, and education merged and become the very core of the 21st-century working class's labor power. The embodiment of this form of labor power is no longer the proletariat but the *precariat*: the producers of immaterial goods such as knowledge, creativity, and information. A project like Potteries Thinkbelt, with its crude and honest form and radical abstraction, would at least make explicit how higher education is the new 21st-century factory, and students, teachers, and researchers are the new "cognitive" workers.

Every architectural and urban project always contains the capacity to be developed further, contains something that remains unsaid and demands to be acknowledged and reengaged. The potential of Potteries Thinkbelt is precisely its fundamental political value, its ability to make visible the conditions of labor in the 21st-century "edufactory." Instead of continuing to believe in the idea of flexibility and indeterminacy as progressive and liberating attributes, we might reverse our thinking and see this idea as a basic form of exploitation. This does not mean that we have to dismiss the project. On the contrary, to take Potteries Thinkbelt seriously means to see in its abstraction, explicitness, and directness the potential for appropriation in an alternative direction, toward the possibility of seeing the university, and the city in general, not just as the realm of play, but also as the site for political struggle. Just as in the past, the factory was both the place of exploitation of labor power and where labor power came into being as a visible political force. Above all, Potteries Thinkbelt may help us not to idealize the public sphere without taking into consideration that, because economic value flourishes where there is social interaction, public space today is one of the most valuable commodities. For this reason, Potteries Thinkbelt, with its emphasis on the ways social interaction and education are inevitably linked to the economy and production, could question the productivist logic of capitalism that has now insinuated itself into society. At a moment

when capitalism seems unable to sustain not only its labor force but even itself, a radical revision of this productivist logic is necessary. In this respect, as Gorazd Kovacic has written, Arendt's critique of labor (and of Marx) can provide a clue for a counterproposal that would, for instance, reduce labor, production, and consumption *together* for the sake of a better (and not just *sustainable*) development and liberation of human life. Potteries Thinkbelt could be reinterpreted as a political cartography wherein the most essential faculties of the human subject are made explicit, and thus can be reclaimed as qualities exceeding their economic function.

To grasp this potential we need to reconsider Potteries Thinkbelt so that we might understand it better than Price could in his own time.

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