Architecture DREAMS FROM THE DRAFTING BOARD

By Ada Louise Huxtable

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Architecture

DREAMS FROM THE DRAFTING BOARD

Though architects customarily deal in concrete — and steel — reality, they are given to flights of fantasy and far-out schemes which embody their hopes (and sometimes fears) for the future. A new exhibition presents some revealing visions drawn by architects of the 20th century.

By Ada Louise Huxtable

To the world at large, the architect may seem closer to a plumber than a poet. He deals with the business of getting things built, which is a kind of bottom-line reality. And while he may have large and ambitious ideas about architecture as art, he is careful to disguise them in the rationale of utility and structure. But behind the button-down shirt may beat the heart of a Dr. Strangelove or Caligari; beyond the bricks and mortar he may hear the music of the spheres.

Most architects are dreamers; in fact, theirs is the original impossible dream — to bring order and beauty to the world. Many architects become architects because of an inner conviction, conscious or not, that some grand design of their making is capable of imposing reason on the chaos of reality through physical logic — no matter how much they may protest more modest aims. There is a little of the "Fountainhead" in all of them, as well as of the benevolent despot. They dream of dramatic departures from convention and control of the total environment, with all of the exotic imagery of the inner eye and outer space.

These architectural dreams exist on two levels: unbuilt buildings, designed but never constructed, and projects that go so far beyond the immediately possible as to be called visionary. Not all architects are visionaries. But a penchant for far-out fantasies, often in the interest of a better world, is as common to the species as the ability to draw. And since many architects draw beautifully, visionary architecture is a very special kind of art. It is done with the devotion and intensity of personal conviction and the single-minded pursuit of an idea. The drawings may be arcane, ironic, hermetic, hedonistic or evangelistic; they may supply a commentary on present conditions, or a blueprint for the future. They yield numerous levels of pleasure and meaning, from the sheer poetic facility of the drawing itself, which can be breathtaking, to the revelation of attitudes toward a culture and society at a given moment in time.

As an art form, then, visionary architectural drawings have the peculiar — in fact, awe-inspiring — characteristic of recording some of the most brilliant flights of intellect, or some of the most extraordinary ideas and images in the history of man. They may tell us about our hopes, fears and ideals, as well as a great deal about our attitudes toward society and the world we live in.

Such drawings are rarely brought together; therefore the large show of more than 100 visionary architectural drawings that opens in New York on Jan. 20 at The Drawing Center, 137 Greene Street (to run through March 24) is something very special. Called "Visionary Drawings: Architecture and Planning," the exhibition consists only of original drawings, many of which have never been publicly displayed before. It was made possible by grants from the New York Council for the Humanities, the New York Council on the Arts and the Architectural History Foundation.

Although such visionary projects go back to the tower of Babel, the exhibition is devoted exclusively to the work of this century. One of the most curious facts about this work is that even though some visionary drawings are so famous that they have been reproduced repeatedly in art and architecture textbooks, becoming touchstones of the modern movement, they have proved almost impossible to find. Most have simply disappeared. Unlike presentation renderings and working drawings of constructed projects, they have not survived as job records. No systematic archive of visions is kept. Such drawings were frequently destroyed when files were cleared out or personal possessions dispersed. They have turned out to be as ephemeral as the worlds they promised.

Through the assiduous sleuthing, however, of George R. Collins, professor of architectural history at Columbia University, who directed this exhibition, some very rare drawings have been recovered. But important gaps remain; the dramatic Soviet work of the 1920's was unobtainable, as were the seminal projects for the *cité industrielle* of Tony Garnier. And a wealth of contemporary material could have been added if space had permitted.

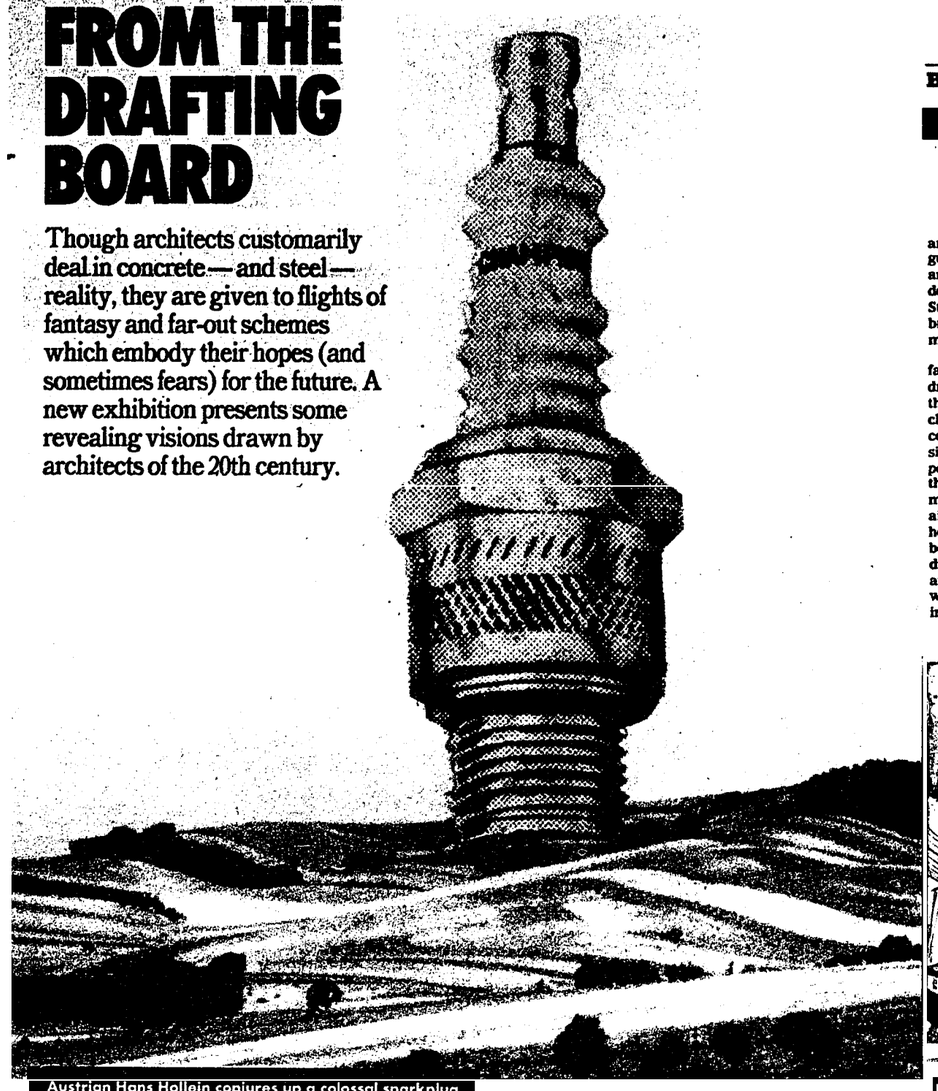
Still, this is an ambitious and scholarly compendium of how 20th-century architects have thought about people and places, when they have been released from the constraints of reality, with results so eccentric or electrifying that they cannot be easily categorized. Some are simply intense, inner visions of obscure references and meanings. Others are cosmic makeovers of society and the environment. Each artist has imposed his own fantasies on the landscape — from Hans Hollein's sparkplug skyscraper, which borrows from Pop Art to evoke disturbing responses through grotesque changes in scale and purpose, to the Walking City of Ron Herron, a half-serious, half-put-down exercise in urban change in the form of huge frameworks with disposable parts and mechanical legs that amble across the countryside, transforming themselves as they go. To absorb such fantastic conceptions requires a heroic measure of fantasy on the part of the viewer.

Every age has its own style of vision. Medieval artists created the City of God in manuscripts; Piranesi delineated a Baroque Rome that was an elaborate, unreal expression of monumental splendor or the shadowy underworld of prisons. Ledoux and Boulée bridged the 18th and 19th centuries with a megalomaniacal classicism, projecting a grandiose environment of cenotaphs and spheres. Architects of the 20th century envision space frames and capsules.

Whatever the forms, the scale always remains vast; the imagery, awe-inspiring, and the tie to reality, tenuous. Only the interest in devising complete, utopian cities is constant and obsessive. But the interpretation of that theme changed radically from the 19th to the 20th centuries.

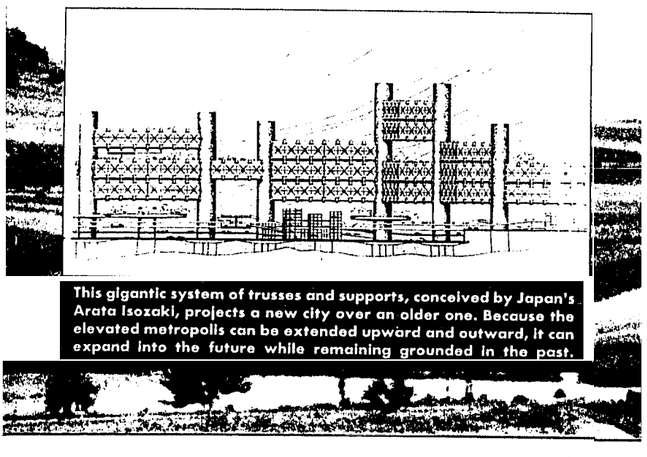
Characteristically, the 19th century dealt in social issues and social utopias; the 20th century has been concerned with technological utopias of startling structural innovation — linear cities, floating or buried cities, settlements in the air or outer space, completely containerized or artificial environments. The emphasis is on an ideal world to be created through scientific advance rather than through social reform. Some schemes can be read as ironic critiques of things as they are; others are philosophical or metaphysical exercises; still others are intended as specific plans for the future.

Twentieth-century visionary architecture has an unusually wide range. The romantic expressionism common to most art early in the century is also found in Hans Scharoun's watercolors of crystalline cities under light-pierced skies. But it was not long before engineering extravaganzas stressed the virtually unlimited potential of modern technology, a trend strikingly illustrated by the steel frames of Konrad Wachsmann. The miracle of 20th-century engineering — in which almost anything is the- *(Continued on Page 53)*

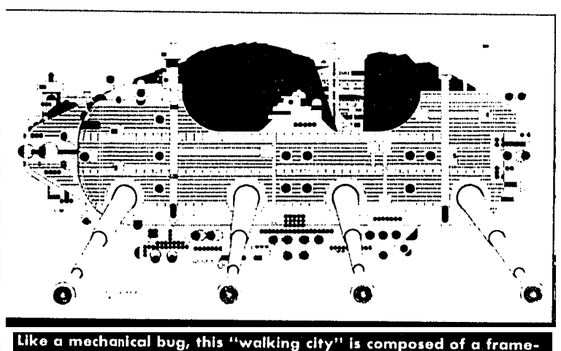


Austrian Hans Hollein conjures up a colossal sparkplug for his futuristic city. As with Claes Oldenburg's monuments of the mundane, the change of scale and purpose produces an effect at once ironic and awesome.

In 1914 Italy's Antonio Sant' Elia celebrated the liberating force of electricity by dramatizing a power plant of heroic dimensions.



This gigantic system of trusses and supports, conceived by Japan's Arata Isozaki, projects a new city over an older one. Because the elevated metropolis can be extended upward and outward, it can expand into the future while remaining grounded in the past.



Like a mechanical bug, this "walking city" is composed of a framework with disposable parts and telescoping legs that can transport the "body" of the city to new sites. Designed by the English architect Ron Herron, it is a semiserious, semimock fantasy of urban change.

oretically possible — was stretched into a kind of science-theology by Buckminster Fuller, who saw the salvation of the "spaceship earth" in the utilization of tensile structures and industrialized products. In science-fiction fundamentalism, technology gives the answers formerly provided by religion. And in such a technological paradise, entire cities are to be climate-controlled by geodesic domes — or Frei Otto's tents.

Paolo Soleri's "archologies" go far beyond technology. These are drawings for high-density cities of "miniaturized" systems but they are also complex and haunting abstractions of passion and power — often executed on great lengths of butcher paper. And Frederick Kiesler's amorphous Endless House, with its intense Freudian readings, brings fantasy to the domestic level.

The leaders of the modern movement have all done visionary work — projects by Le Corbusier, Mies van der Rohe, Frank Lloyd Wright, Louis Kahn and Walter Gropius are bound together only by their genius or their relationship to the modernist revolution. Antonio Sant'Elia, the immensely vital talent of Italian Futurism, was killed in World War I in 1916, but the remarkable drawings that were his total *oeuvre* have continued to influence succeeding generations. Their aggressively prophetic imagery of skyscraper cities and power stations has a quality of stylish nostalgia today. Eric Mendelsohn's lightning sketches contain a timeless poetry. Mies van der Rohe's glass skyscraper drawings, done just after the First World War, were pure, abstract fantasies, but subsequent developments in building technology made them models for most of today's skyscrapers.

The 1960's saw an amazing efflorescence of visionary design, influenced in part by space technology and the resultant enlargement of ideas about the dimensions of the universe that could be manipulated by man. The new forms ranged from megastructures — huge systems capable of unlimited change, extension and flexibility — to artificial life-container systems. The phenomenon was international, with groups such as Archigram in Britain devising Plug-In Cities, Superstudio in Italy laying immense grids across continents, and the Metabolists in Japan creating capsules in giant frames like many-eyed Godzillas. These groups cross-pollenated each other through jet travel and instant media communication.

Some of the best of these ar-

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chitects are having a continuing impact. Arata Isozaki, for example, has conceived of giant trusses bound to monumental columns which suggest a time warp of antiquity and the future; in another drawing, he has elevated weblike megastructures over the ruins of Hiroshima. Applying the same quality of imagination to actual buildings, he has gone on to design unconventional structures of provocative — even disquieting — wit and sophistication that go far beyond most of the work being done today. Isozaki's challenging esthetic has made him one of the most closely watched talents on the international scene.

In an excellent and comprehensive catalogue for the exhibition being published by the M.I.T. Press, Professor Collins wisely throws up his hands at the idea of imposing any kind of order, other than alphabetical, on this material. He binds it together in a perceptive introductory essay about the nature and history of visionary work. The catalogue also includes some noteworthy quotes. The English architect Michael Webb, asked to explain his drawings of a life-support system named the Cushicle Suitaloon, starts by telling us cheerily that he has been called "self-obsessed" and then lists his preferences in movies and rock stars. He adds, "To describe the project in the exhibition, I have to be sympathetic to the me that produced it." Visionary narcissism, perhaps?

"I live among incessant visions," Eric Mendelsohn wrote revealingly in his correspondence with his wife. "Their transcendence is such that it often carries me away. For me it is the truest life."

So true, so real do these projects become to some of their inventors that it is pointless to tell a visionary architect that his work cannot be built. For one thing, he is in love with it. He has a tenacious and passionate grip on a world that is very clear to him but that the rest of us cannot see. But above all, he possesses an unremitting optimism about the ability of architecture and technology to create a better universe.

And indeed, what is actually built today is often the vision of yesterday, which becomes the commonplace of tomorrow. The vision may lose its poetry in the translation to reality, but there will always be new dreams to draw. Because the one dream that never dies is the ideal of the beauty and perfectability of the man-made world on a cosmic scale — perhaps the City of God exists, after all. ■