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Calculated Uncertainty: Computers, Chance Encounters, and "Community" in the Work of Cedric Price

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"All great work is preparing yourself for the accident to happen."

— Sidney Lumet

Iconoclastic British architect and theorist Cedric Price is noted for the comparatively early incorporation of computing and other communications technologies into his designs, which he employed as part of an ongoing critique of the conventions of architectural form, and as part of his explorations of questions of mobility. Three key unrealised projects of his are examined here which explore these concerns. These are his "Potteries Thinkbelt" (1964-67), "Generator" (1978-80), and "Fun Palace" (1961-74) projects, with greatest attention given to the last of them. In these projects, Price saw technology as a way of testing non-authoritarian ideas of use (multiplicity of use and undreamt of use), encouraging chance encounters and, it was hoped, chance "community." These aims also situate Price's work within an established context of twentieth-century experimental urban critique, a context that includes the investigations of the Dadaists, the Surrealists, Fluxus, and the Situationist International, among others. What distinguishes Price's work from these other examples is his explicit engagement with communications technologies in tandem with systems, game and cybernetic theory. These influences, it will be argued, are interesting for the way that Price employed them in his development of a structurally complex and programmatically rich architectural environment which was, simultaneously and somewhat paradoxically, to be experienced as an "accidental environment."

Much of the existing critical work on Price gives greatest attention to exploring and documenting these theoretical influences and uses of computing and communications equipment, as well as the architectural and wider socio-cultural context in which his work was produced. Less attention, however, has been paid to examining the implications of Price's social ambitions and his vision of an experimental techno-sociality formed through chance encounters and the "accident." This last issue is taken up and addressed in this paper, where the following arguments are made. First, it is argued that the tension between program and accident that is evident in Price's work (and especially the Fun Palace) in fact constitutes a crucial facet of his overall design approach. While the aforementioned technological and theoretical influences are significant in their own right, equally important is how Price combines them as part of a larger methodological approach or "project." This is the self-contradictory idea of the "prepared accident," in which meticulous planning and preparation are employed in order to encourage chance, serendipity, and the accidental. Understanding this approach (and its rich history within twentieth century avant-garde practice) is vital, I will argue, to any examination of Price's use of technology, the

social ambitions of his projects, and in evaluating the enduring significance of his work. Secondly, it is argued that Price's work is significant for its theoretical rigour and its early incorporation of computing and communications technology. More specifically, the Fun Palace project in particular is significant as an early exploration of experimental forms of technologically mediated social interaction. Indeed, such is the inventiveness of Price's approach to thinking about and designing for techno-social interaction in this project that it invites strong comparisons with more recent on-line forms of social interaction and with theoretical speculations on "community."

In order to begin to develop these arguments, it is first necessary to provide a brief biographical picture of Cedric Price and his rather unique design philosophy. This contextual information is crucial to understanding his design work and the three projects under discussion in this paper – the Potteries Thinkbelt, Generator, and the Fun Palace.

Who Am I? I'm an Anti-architect and My Initials are C.P.

Cedric Price was born in Stone, Staffordshire, England, in 1934 and died in London in 2003 (Finch). Price was a larger-than-life figure. He was a rather portly man, who always sported slicked-back, shoulder-length hair, atop a stiff white collar and tie. He also had a passion for fine cigars and for Hush Puppies shoes.

In addition to his striking appearance, Price was renowned for his acerbic wit and for being somewhat anti-establishment; he described himself as an "anti-architect" and seemed to regularly court controversy. For example, in one radio interview Price was asked what he would do about York Minster. His reply: "Flatten it" (Allford 7). He also despised the idea of built heritage and particularly heritage conservation. "What is objectionable," he once wrote, "is the staggering conceit and arrogance of those who determine just what part of our built environment should be deemed sacrosanct" (Price, *Cedric Price: The Square Book* 37).

These are more than just throw-away one-liners designed to provoke. While they *are* designed to illicit a response, underlying all of them are three of Price's key interests: a love of paradox, a scorn of dogma, and a desire to improve the human condition (Allford 7). The above remarks also reveal much about his design philosophy and what he understands the role of architecture to be. For example, underpinning his antipathy to built heritage and his comment on York Minster is a firm belief that a structure should last only as long as it is socially relevant. Once this relevance has diminished, he argues, the building should be demolished and replaced with something of greater immediate social relevance. Price refers to this as the principle of "calculated uncertainty:" "the creation of temporary, adaptable structures that can be altered, transformed or demolished, serving the need of the moment" ("Cedric Price"). His own "Inter-Action Centre" in Kentish Town, England, is a case in point. In the initial scheme for the project, Price produced a client's manual explaining how to disassemble the building and recycle its components – one critic describes this document as "something like a euthanasia guide and donor card rolled into one" (Baillieu 7). Despite it being one of only a handful of Price's schemes ever to be built, among his last professional acts as an architect was to ensure that the "Inter-Action Centre" was in fact successfully demolished.

Price maintained that the role of architecture and architects is to solve problems, encourage choice and delight, and to develop ideas and possibilities rather than specific design solutions. These are the core tenets of what has been termed Price's "philosophy of enabling" (Landau 11).

Technology, Design, and Mobility; or, Hush Puppies, Trains, and Building Blocks

Technologies, including *teletechnologies* such as the computer, play a central part in this philosophy (Landau 11). Information and communications technologies such as the computer

rarely feature as an instrument in the generation of Price's schemes. More often these technologies form a key part of the fabric of these schemes. This is consistent with how computing and communications technologies were employed by other architects of the period (see Cook).

Throughout his career, Price maintained a very particular attitude towards technology and its use. As Royston Landau explains, technology had to meet certain criteria:

First, there needs to be an appropriateness (perhaps to be found in electronics, but equally possibly in a primitive log cabin), and appropriateness will seldom be synonymous with the conventional. Secondly, technology will be used to play a *critical* role, meaning that it will be expected to take part in the architectural debate, perhaps through contribution, disputation or the ability to shock. And thirdly, technology must be placed in a particular and real context from which a framework of limiting constraints can be derived. (Landau 11)

Price's attitude towards technology can be further understood by considering his enduring fascination with Hush Puppies. In one particularly remarkable passage, Price writes: "I consider it unlikely that architecture and planning will match the contribution Hush Puppies have made to society today" (Price, "Life Conditioning" 483). This statement rehearses two key aspects of Price's "philosophy of enabling." On the one hand, it accords with Price's argument that design should be concerned primarily with use requirements. Once a building is inhabited, he writes, it "should look as particularly occupied and well-used as your favourite shoes" (Price, "Platforms" 89). On the other hand, it reiterates his belief that the fit between structure and function is always a temporary affair, and "if the function of architecture disappears ... then the building must adapt or be disposed of 'like a worn-out pair of Hush Puppies'" ("Cedric Price"). Also implicit here is a further key aspect of his design philosophy: an abiding interest in questions of mobility. After all, what are shoes but a "mobile" technology? While Price may not have intended this particular link between Hush Puppies and mobility, I venture he would likely concur that in this instance, again, architecture struggles to match the contribution they make. Taken together, Price's interest in the technology of the shoe and in the "more ephemeral mobility offered by new information media and mass communications" technologies (Lobsinger, "Cybernetic Theory" 122) – as will be discussed below in relation to his Fun Palace project – open up some intriguing, if oblique, points of possible connection with contemporary studies of mobile media.

To return to Landau's list, it is according to each of these three senses that technology is employed in Price's projects. Their combination is especially evident in Price's unimplemented "Potteries Thinkbelt" proposal (1964-67). In this project, Price uses technology to think through issues of place and how a particular site can be adapted for use as a higher educational facility (Price, "PTb" 484). The site is a decaying industrial belt-shaped site in north Staffordshire famed for its former pottery manufacture. It was chosen deliberately by Price due to what he saw as its desperate need for institutional and economic revitalisation. The proposal he develops provides for learning facilities, student accommodation, and a transport system that can easily connect the site to neighbouring centres and other regions. Adhering to his principle of the "non-plan" (Price, *Cedric Price, Works II* 38), Price describes the "real set of priorities" for the site as "a firm re-assessment of housing requirements together with an avoidance in the first stage of development of any *civic* design" (Price, "PTb" 484). In addressing these housing requirements, the scheme includes an array of possible accommodation configurations which would take best advantage of an existing and difficult topography (characterised by slag heaps and subsidence-prone soil). But the centre-piece of the scheme is an ingenious use of the existing infrastructure of a largely abandoned rail system which, due to a large number of switches and stops, was unsuited to integration into the national rail network. For Price, however, this apparent liability emerged as an asset. The Thinkbelt facility, Royston Landau explains, "would house predominantly departments of science and technology, fast-changing subjects whose scope, size and life-span would be impossible to determine except in the short term" (Landau 13). This

emphasis on the temporal and on temporal contingency opened a range of possibilities for rail-borne facilities which could be connected throughout the Potteries Thinkbelt network. The existing rail system and its abandoned rail sidings also offered a significant amount of usable land for the development of interlinked educational facilities (13). Price proposed teaching units in an array of different mobile configurations, which included “combinations of inflatable lecture theatres, fold-out decks, library and information carrels and units and a series of capsule facilities” (13). These could be combined to form a number of different permutations, and all could be demounted and transferred via cranes and gantries, and via the rail system itself (13).

The primary import of these possibilities for Price is that his scheme not only takes “full advantage of the present means of individual mobility,” but “equally, it is so designed as to prevent its form and organization becoming restrictive” (Price, “PTb” 484). The local rail infrastructure also enabled connection to national or international transport networks. This connection was to occur via what Price termed the “Meir Transfer Area” – a transport hub feeding the Thinkbelt grid into wider road, rail and air services (Price, “PTb” 485). The idea of the Transfer Area was to provide facilities for rapid movement of people, goods and hardware in and out of the Potteries Thinkbelt site (487).

Although never implemented, Price’s proposal remains an inventive response to the ongoing call for urban revitalisation and non-automobile-dependent transport planning, and makes for an interesting comparison with the sorts of proposals developed in the name of the New Urbanism. The New Urbanism is the name given to an influential American-born urban development movement that emerged in the early 1990s in response to these same issues of urban renewal and environmental and transport sustainability. However, in contrast to the inventiveness of Price’s Thinkbelt proposal, New Urbanist schemes are generally characterised by – and widely criticised for – a highly marketable but rather unimaginative “neotraditionalist” approach to place-making. It draws from the European cluster village tradition and marries southern Mediterranean architectural styling with nostalgic and conservative appeals to the ideas of “neighbourhood” and “community” (for further description of New Urbanist schemes, see Leccese and McCormick, and for critical evaluation of these schemes, see Bressi; Harvey; Walker Clarke).

The Thinkbelt scheme also carries significant implications for pedagogical architecture. In an architectural context, it has been suggested that the true merit of this study is “not as an example of how railway carriages can be used for teaching, but as one of most powerful question marks ever placed against the architecture of university education” (Landau 13).

In the context of this paper, one of the more striking aspects of the Thinkbelt proposal lies in its engagement with technology and questions of place, facility, and equipment. Price’s study, to borrow a phrase from Marc Augé, pays close attention to “factors of singularity” – especially singularities of place and economies of place use (Augé 40). Moreover, as Mary Lou Lobsinger observes, “the reuse of outdated channels of physical mobility – the network of the industrial revolution – is a convenience that facilitates the growth of a new mobility at the dawn of the information age” (Lobsinger, “Cedric Price” 26).

What also emerges as crucial to this project, and comes to characterise Price’s general engagement with technology, is a twofold insistence. The first of these returns us to Price’s concern for how buildings and technologies must act as catalysts which facilitate and encourage social and spatial interaction for and between users (Landau 11; Spiller 84). The second concerns what Price calls “free-space” (Price, *Cedric Price, Works II* 54) and an insistence on the notion of “calculated uncertainty:” “the creation of temporary, adaptable structures that can be altered, transformed or demolished, serving the need of the moment” (“Cedric Price”). As Price says of the Thinkbelt’s housing units, “they would be expandable and, of course, expendable. No one would be straight-jacketed into a fixed community” (Price, “PTb” 483). Thus, while not strictly an “accidental” environment, the Thinkbelt project was nevertheless very strongly informed by ideas of flexibility

and adaptability – ideas that have been referred to elsewhere as the architectural experimenter’s “strategy for future change” (Cook 67). For Price, this interest in flexibility and change was to prove of ongoing importance to his understanding of “calculated uncertainty,” albeit in ways which became increasingly aligned with notions of chance, serendipity and the accidental.

A decade later, in Price’s “Generator” project (1978-80) “calculated uncertainty” was to become a property, or function, of the building itself. The Generator was the name Price gave to an unbuilt building proposal for the Gilman Paper Corporation, which was to be situated at the company’s White Oak Plantation in a remote location along the Saint Marys River in Florida (“A Building That Moves in the Night”; Riley 156). Price’s brief for the project was to construct a building for artists and performers of all sorts, and where the building would enhance, not contract, a sense of isolation; would foster creativity through promoting a sense of seclusion; would accommodate audiences; and which would be innovative but sensitive to the surrounding environment and the site’s history (it was a former rice plantation utilising slave labour) (Riley 156; Antonelli 150-151). Price’s response to this brief was to propose a building comprised of one hundred and fifty cubes, all of which could be assembled in a variety of different configurations (Landau 15). The cubes were to provide temporary structures for housing, rehearsal and performance, or “just contemplation” (Riley 156). As Landau explains, “spaces and enclosures would be created, using orthogonal and diagonal geometries, with walls, screens, [and] gangways” (Landau 15). The internal volumes would be fully serviced by a variety of systems, including standard items such as air conditioning as well as more sophisticated communications equipment (15). The most unique aspect of the proposal was the plan to connect the entire Generator structure to a central computer program which controlled a mobile crane. All the blocks within the structure could then be rearranged by the visitor at will to create new configurations according to different use requirements (Landau 15). The idea was that the computer “would encourage the visitor to continually refine and improve his or her design” (Riley 156). A final and particularly mischievous design feature was the requirement for frequent change. If the structure was not reorganised by its users for some time, the computer would then register “boredom;” this would result in proposals for “unsolicited change” (Landau 15; “A Building That Moves in the Night”). The proposal was ultimately abandoned due to feasibility difficulties and maintenance concerns. Nevertheless, the Generator project has since been considered by some critics to represent one of the first “intelligent” buildings (Frazer 1995; 2003), and significant for its integrated use of computing technology in an architectural context (Spiller 84). It is also considered to represent an important symbiosis of Price’s thesis of “enabling” and his explorations of questions of localised mobility. In the context of the present discussion, Generator is also noteworthy for its emphasis on the ludic and the creation of an “accidental environment” through “unsolicited change”.

Yet, Price’s interest in this notion of “calculated uncertainty” – especially its embrace of change, chance and accident – was arguably explored most fully and systematically many years earlier, during his first major project, and that for which he is perhaps best known: the “Fun Palace” (1961-74).

The Fun Palace

The Fun Palace was an unbuilt scheme designed for and in collaboration with Joan Littlewood (along with a legion of other co-collaborators and advisers). Littlewood was a founder of the Theatre Workshop at the Theatre Royal in London. Her vision for the Project was of a theatrical venue where performance could flourish unconstrained by built form.

The project was intended as a deliberate experiment in which “non-authoritarian ideas of use were to be tested” (Allford 7). As Lobsinger puts it, it was to be a “temporary, multiprogrammed [and reprogrammable] twenty-four-hour entertainment center that marries communications technologies and standard building components to produce a machine capable of adapting to the

users' needs and desires" (Lobsinger, "Cedric Price" 24).

The Fun Palace was to be divided into a number of different key areas. These included: a "fun arcade" ("full of the games and tests that psychologists and electronics engineers now devise for the service of industry or war"); a music area (with "instruments available, free instruction, recordings for anyone, classical, folk, jazz and pop disc libraries..."); a "plastic area" ("for uninhibited dabbling in wood, metal, paint, clay, stone or textiles..."); and a "science playground" (which by night "will become an agora or *kaffeeklatsch* where the Socrates, the Abelards, the Mermaid poets, the wandering scholars of the future, the mystics, the sceptics and the sophists can dispute till dawn") (Littlewood 432).

An integral component of the Fun Palace project and its various spaces was the inclusion of the latest teletechnologies, including reading and calculating machines, televisions and computers. As Littlewood explains in a 1964 article, "at various points, sheltered or open, there will be screens on which closed circuit television will show, without editing or art, whatever is going on at a number of places in and out of London, and in the complex itself" (Littlewood 432). These technologies have been interpreted as holding "the promise of thrusting the participant[-occupant] beyond mundane reality and into a virtual realm of communication" (Lobsinger, "Cybernetic Theory" 128).

Littlewood thought of the project as a "university of the streets" and a "laboratory of fun" (432). But, as Landau points out, "the idea of *fun* was not interpreted as passive entertainment as in the *amuse-me* ethic later to be adopted in the Walt Disney pleasure grounds" (Landau 11). Rather, "it would be *fun* if the visitor could be stimulated or informed, could react or interact, but if none of these suited, had the freedom to withdraw" (Landau 11). As Littlewood stressed at the time, "the essence of the place will be its informality: nothing is obligatory, anything goes" (Littlewood 432). These sentiments were even extended to the operation of the site, with Littlewood keen to have "no administrative hierarchy to dictate the program, form, or use of the spaces" (Mathews *Fun Palace* 43).

In translating Littlewood's emphasis on internal programmatic flexibility into architectural form, Price designed the Fun Palace as an unenclosed steel frame structure with reconfigurable internal spaces and equipment. Rearrangement was to be achieved by a permanent travelling gantry crane spanning the entire structure (Price, "A Laboratory of Fun" 433; *Cedric Price, Works II* 56-61). Freedom of interaction and withdrawal was also incorporated into the design through the structure's lack of enclosure and the omission of conventional doorways ("having no doorways enables one to choose one's own route and degrees of involvement with the activities") (Price, "A Laboratory of Fun" 433). Thus, in Littlewood's and Price's terms, the Fun Palace was to be a sort of huge "anti-building." A further description casts it as a "vast mechanism that allows arrays of different kinds of space to be suspended in any position and continuously adjusted, moved or removed according to the changing needs of up to 55,000 simultaneous visitors" (Wigley, "Anti-Buildings" 16).

Importantly, the Fun Palace was very much not "pie-in-the-sky fantasy" (Shubert), the product of two people's fertile but unrestrained imaginations. In fact, the project was developed with repeated studies and variations between 1961 and 1972, and was only shelved in 1974 after efforts to secure both a site and adequate financing failed due to isolated but vocal local opposition and "lack of political imagination" (Shubert).

Price and the Situationist International

Prior to a discussion of the significance of Price's work and the Fun Palace in particular, it is worth remembering that he was not the only one developing ideas of a technologised, ludic space

for exploring alternative social forms. For example, contemporaneous with the Fun Palace is the equally ambitious “New Babylon” project by one-time Situationist member and artist, Constant Nieuwenhuys. Initiated in 1958 and stopped in the same year as the Fun Palace (1974), New Babylon was Constant’s long-term attempt to give form to the Situationist idea of “unitary urbanism,” according to which “the urban environment [is understood] as the terrain of a game in which one participates” (quoted in Sadler 120). Addressing similar ideas to the Fun Palace – especially a dual emphasis on play and flexibility – Constant presented New Babylon through an ever-expanding series of models, knowledge of which was widely disseminated via exhibition and through publication. The similarities between the two schemes are perhaps not surprising given that the two designers shared a common ideological and artistic heritage (for example, both Price and Littlewood were close friends with Scottish poet and Situationist Alexander Trocchi (Mathews *Fun Palace* 41).

There are, however, several points of difference between Constant’s New Babylon and Price’s Fun Palace. A key point of difference rests in Price’s more explicit engagement with computing and communications technologies, although later models of New Babylon did incorporate electronics equipment (Wigley, *Constant’s New Babylon* 66). Price’s uses of these technologies were always closely aligned to and at the service of the social goals of the Fun Palace project. They were considered crucial in the construction of an “accidental environment” in which chance encounters and chance “community” would be possible.

An even more striking point of difference between Price’s Fun Palace and Constant’s New Babylon, is Price’s guiding interest in what might be termed “complex science”. The many studies and variations of the Fun Palace were the product of meticulous, detailed research involving everything from questionnaires to alternative theatre seating arrangements. Informing this exhaustive approach to information gathering was a commitment to systems, games, and cybernetic theory. Indeed, during the course of the project, a Fun Palace Cybernetics Committee was established and headed by the renowned English cybernetic theorist Gordon Pask (Lobsinger, “Cybernetic Theory” 130ff).

What is striking about Price’s incorporation of these theories, and what sets this usage apart from their wider architectural application, is the marked difference between the research undertaken towards the Fun Palace *and* its intended patterns of occupation. On the one hand, for example, guiding the project was a thorough, “scientific” program of detailed research. On the other hand, the aim was for a ludic space, a space that encourages fleeting and unstructured processes of engagement. Key to understanding this clear distinction between research-planning and unstructured use in the Fun Palace project is to consider Price’s engagement with ideas of chance and the accidental.

The “Prepared Accident”

The Hungarian biochemist and Nobel laureate Albert von Szent-Györgyi has remarked that discovery is an accident meeting a prepared mind. In the case of Price’s Fun Palace, this dictum might be recast as follows: an accident is discovery (or a discovering mind) meeting a prepared environment. What Price is interested in – both in the Fun Palace and elsewhere – is developing the circumstances in which chance and accident can occur.

Price’s design approach is informed by a very particular understanding of the accident: the paradoxical idea of what I am terming the “prepared accident.” This is not how the notion of the accident is ordinarily understood. But neither is it a “staged” accident – at least not in the sense of an event with a predetermined outcome (such as, for example, in the restaging of famous automobile accidents such as those involving James Dean and Jayne Mansfield that are depicted in David Cronenberg’s 1996 film *Crash*). Rather, the idea of the “prepared accident” as Price

understands and employs it is closer to the throw of the dice, where the die is the “technology” and the hand that throws it is the “preparation” that permits chance or the accidental to occur.

The idea of the “prepared accident” has a rich tradition within twentieth century avant-garde practice. The marked juxtaposition between process and outcome that is employed by Price bears comparison with some of the key examples of this tradition, such as the literary-focused investigations of the Oulipo group and the musical experimentations of John Cage.

The French-based workshop of experimental literature, Oulipo (or OuLiPo, *Ouvroir de Littérature Potentielle*), was initially formed in 1960 by writer Raymond Queneau and mathematician and Dada poet François Le Lionnais in order to mine the possibilities that mathematics might hold for extending creativity within literary production. Members of Oulipo are interested in restrictions presented by the structure of language and inherent in the basic conventions of writing because they see in them “not limitation but potentiality” (Brotchie x). The Oulipian claim is that, once put into practice, such restrictions disappear and indeed become “the mother of literary invention” (x). As Oulipo member Jacques Roubaud puts it, “Oulipian writing – that is, writing with constraints – endeavours to rediscover another way in which to practise artistic freedom” (Roubaud 41).

In the case of experimental composer John Cage, chance and the accident formed crucial elements in his compositional process. These ideas also became an integral part of his vocabulary, where he expressed a preference for internally paradoxical terms such as “chance operations” (see Hayles 226), “purposeful purposeless”, and the Duchampian notion of “indecisive reunion” (Tofts 19 & 21). A good example of Cage’s engagement with the accident is found in his works for prepared piano. In these works, Cage used bolts and other materials at hand, inserting them between piano strings in order to affect the sounds that would be produced during performance. While initially dubious about the merit of this procedure, Cage eventually recognised its significance in opening up player-performance – and indeed the score itself – to the forces of chance and accident. Katherine Hayles argues suggestively that what is most significant about this work is that, through such manipulations, Cage performs “the paradox of randomness as maximum information, and the entanglement of causal determinism with an open and unpredictable future” (Hayles 240).

Price’s work is a continuation of this tradition in the sense that he, as we have seen, combines cybernetic theory, meticulous planning and information and communications technologies to form an “accidental environment,” a space that encourages social experimentation and chance encounters. Price’s notion of “calculated uncertainty” is particularly evocative in this context. For, although he did not define it in this way, “calculated uncertainty” captures neatly the dual approaches of meticulous, systematic planning on the one hand and the subsequent giving over to chance of the end result on the other hand. Key to all these examples, it would seem, is an interest in rule-governed processes of production that seek to liberate rather than constrain creative engagement.

Nevertheless, to return momentarily to the melding of cybernetic theory and experimental sociality, Mary Lou Lobsinger develops a rather pessimistic reading of this union. She argues that the work of the Fun Palace Cybernetics Committee both expanded and problematised the goals of the project (Lobsinger, “Cybernetic Theory” 132). For Lobsinger, the rather uneasy melding of a “cybernetic learning machine” enabling “self-regulation to achieve group consensus,” and “light-hearted pleasure seeking” takes the Fun Palace project into “far stranger territory” than Littlewood had ever intended (Lobsinger, “Cybernetic Theory” 132-133). Indeed, Lobsinger (following Deleuze) suggests that the result of this double influence is a somewhat “nefarious kind of [social] control – invisible, apparently freeing and constraining at the same time” (Lobsinger, “Cybernetic Theory” 133). These criticisms notwithstanding, it is still valuable to acknowledge the overall and lasting significance of the Fun Palace project and of Price’s work in

general.

Significance of Price's work and the Fun Palace

In architectural terms, the impact of the Fun Palace project has been profound. At the time it mounted a provocative challenge to monumental architecture; it rejected the unspoken conventions concerning "respectable" architectural form and external aesthetic resolution of this form (even in completion it would have looked perpetually "unfinished"). It is also said to have provided major inspiration for Piano and Roger's design for the Centre Pompidou in Paris, as well as the work of countless other architects (Mathews *Cedric John Price*; Finch; Alsop). But more than this, as one commentator remarks, the Fun Palace "explored issues, crossed boundaries, and attempted to address social and political [concerns] that go far beyond the typical boundaries of architecture" (Shubert). Remarking on the lasting significance of the theoretical coupling of architecture, cybernetics and systems theory in the Fun Palace, Lobsinger suggests that it is this cross-disciplinary fertilisation in the development of the project which "may be its most significant contribution to recent architectural history and theory" (Lobsinger, "Cybernetic Theory" 133).

Price's work is significant for its strategic use of the avant-garde strategy of the "prepared accident." The prepared accident is used by Price as an organising process or "method," which he employs in combining theory and technology in order to encourage chance, serendipity and accident. The striking feature of its use in the Fun Palace project is its scale – where these accidental encounters were to involve up to 55,000 visitors simultaneously exploring the same space.

Because of this, the Fun Palace is also significant for its social ambitions and implications. Lobsinger argues that the "production of the social and the individual – both physical[ly] and virtually – in real-time is the theoretical crux of the Fun Palace" (Lobsinger, "Cybernetic Theory" 128). This is borne out in one early, unpublished document by Price, where the stated objectives of the Fun Palace are "to arrange as many forms of fun as possible in one spot ... in the hopes of an eruption or explosion of unimagined sociality through pleasure" (quoted in Lobsinger, "Cybernetic Theory" 128). These social ambitions suggest a number of similarities between the Fun Palace and on-line forms of social interaction, and between the Fun Palace and certain theoretical deliberations on community.

With respect to the first of these, it is tempting to draw comparisons between the nature of computer-mediated social interaction and "virtual community" and the Fun Palace project, particularly given Littlewood's emphasis on the latter as a media space; a space for information transfer; a space for education and pleasure; a social space (in which the poets, the scholars, "the mystics, the sceptics and the sophists can dispute till dawn") and where one is given the freedom to engage or withdraw. It could prove productive to think of the Fun Palace as an architectural precursor to more recent forms of technologically-mediated social space, thereby continuing the ongoing and important process of "historicising" contemporary social uses of information and communications technologies. Yet, any comparison of this sort would need to be very cautiously articulated and its parameters clearly defined if it is to avoid becoming at once an overstatement and an oversimplification of both "spaces".

Meanwhile, in respect to theoretical reengagement with the notion of community, it is possible to compare the social ambitions of the Fun Palace project with the work of poststructuralist philosopher Jean-Luc Nancy on the one hand, and that of social theorist Kevin Hetherington on the other.

On the one hand, there would seem to be some clear similarities between the aforementioned

social goals of the Fun Palace, and Jean-Luc Nancy's conception of community as "unworked" (*dés-oeuvre*). For example, both share an interest in the ludic. Both also share an interest in the temporary and in temporary "community" (or, in Nancy's terminology, in the "in-common" and "being-in-common") – especially as an "eruption or explosion of unimagined sociality," to repeat Price's earlier phrase (quoted in Lobsinger, "Cybernetic Theory" 128). As Nancy writes, "Community necessarily takes place in what Blanchot has called "unworking", referring to that which, before or beyond the work, withdraws from the work, and which ... encounters interruption, fragmentation, suspension" (Nancy 31).

However, a key difficulty in drawing this particular comparison hinges on Price's statement that a key objective of the Fun Palace was to "arrange" fun in order to promote pleasurable social interaction and accidental community. What this passage conveys is a sense in which the Fun Palace was to provide a "scaffolding" of sorts around and from which "community" might emerge. This runs directly counter to Nancy's conception of the "workless" community. He writes:

One does not produce it, one experiences or one is constituted by it as the experience of finitude. Community understood as a work or through its works would presuppose that the common being, as such, be objectifiable and producible (in sites, persons, buildings, discourses, institutions, symbols: in short, in subjects). (Nancy 31)

The difficulties with this comparison are further compounded when recalling Lobsinger's earlier remark regarding how the influence of "complex science" in the creation of ludic space leads, albeit perhaps unwittingly, to what she terms a "nefarious kind of control" ("Cybernetic Theory" 133) in the Fun Palace project. Thus, the failure to realise the Fun Palace project after thirteen years planning might thus be understood in Nancean terms as testimony to the Herculean difficulty – and ultimate impossibility – of trying to "make community," or make "community" (a) work, even if it was intended to be through the promotion of pleasure and chance encounters.

Littlewood and Price's emphasis on temporariness and the ability to withdraw at will also shares something in common with Kevin Hetherington's work on the Bund concept. Hetherington draws his understanding of the Bund concept from the work of sociologist Herman Schmalenbach. In his own work, Hetherington places emphasis on the Bund as "an elective, unstable, affectual form of sociation. This instability can be associated with its intermediate and often transitory position and character" (Hetherington 98). In other words, like the Fun Palace, the Bund is understood as a temporary or "liminal" form of sociation, "a place for the expression of enthusiasms, of ferment, and of unusual doings" (Freund 183). Comparing the social goals of the Fun Palace project with Hetherington's work is arguably less problematic than comparing it with the work of Nancy. However, here too caution needs to be exercised given the inherent difficulties in drawing comparisons between an experimental architectural project and a broader social category. This is also to say nothing of the long, complex and at times contentious history of the Bund concept itself and the difficulties this poses for extrapolation to and comparison with other contexts (Hetherington 87).

Despite the many challenges and pitfalls that attend these comparisons, the fact that the Fun Palace project invites such comparisons at all *is* significant. It is significant given that the project's social goals facilitated by technology were first articulated by Price and Littlewood in the early 1960s, at a time when teletechnologies such as the computer were still in development and the full impact of globalised telecommunications networks were only beginning to be realised and theorised. Price and Littlewood's interest in facilitating and exploring experimental forms of social interaction – especially technologically engaged social interaction – continues to resonate today.

These two points of significance are further extended in the following passage in which Lobsinger

reflects on what Littlewood and Price hoped to achieve in and through the creation of such a technologically equipped space of and for experimentation. She writes:

At the most literal level, activities such as the maneuvering of building components or group determination of program involve a basic form of social interaction; but it was also imagined that the Fun Palace would be equipped with the latest in communications technology: teaching machines, televisions and computers. (Lobsinger, "Cedric Price" 24)

Through the inclusion of these technologies, the Fun Palace was envisioned as a "giant learning machine with the capacity to enable humans to adapt physically and mentally to the intangible experiences and accelerated pace of technological culture" (Lobsinger, "Cedric Price" 24).

What this passage reveals is the true scale and ambition of Littlewood and Price's vision for the Fun Palace. It certainly wasn't to be an architectural building in any conventional sense. For this reason, Price was considered a dangerous figure by some of his critics; his work was "anathema to everything architecture might stand for," largely because of his refusal to provide "visually recognizable symbols of identity, place, and activity" (Lobsinger, "Cybernetic Theory" 126 & 134). Nevertheless, the intention was for the Fun Palace to function as a large and complex "critical tool" of sorts, a site for intervention in which user-occupants could experiment with various teletechnologies and, through this experimentation, insert themselves in burgeoning global information and communications networks in order to learn about and make sense of the changes which were being wrought by these technologies and networks.

Of further significance, and connected with the above, is how questions of place and the changing exigencies of occupation and use are not only explored in tandem with questions of technology: the two sets of questions are considered inseparable. This is a key point of difference between Price's work and other experimental architecture of the period which engaged with communications technologies and questions of architectural mobility (see Cook). For example, while there is an emphasis on the ephemeral and the mobile in Price's work, "place" is not seen as antithetical to technology (and vice versa). More crucially, the "technological mandate" of the Fun Palace moved it "beyond the realm of mechanical mobility" through the use of the gantry crane, and "into the more ephemeral mobility offered by new information media and mass communications" (Lobsinger, "Cybernetic Theory" 122). This observation has particular relevance for understanding how place was to be experienced in the Fun Palace. The integral role that telecommunications were to play in the project suggests an open conception of place, in which this notion is understood as "relational," as subject to the two-way movement of informational flows (on this conception of place, see Massey; Rodgers).

In conclusion, Price's (and his co-collaborators') conscious engagement with the interconnections and interactions of technology, place and the social, are of considerable and continuing interest and importance. On one level, the Fun Palace project presents some intriguing corollaries with contemporary forms of technologically mediated social interaction, such as computer-mediated communication and virtual community, as well as theories of community, notwithstanding the difficulties in extending these comparisons to their fullest capacity. On another level, a key contribution of Price's work lies in its negotiation of the complex relationship of architectural design, technology, place and "community" through the creation of "temporary flexible architectures for temporary flexible politics" (Galloway). In this sense, Price's work, particularly the Fun Palace project, makes a valuable – and hitherto largely unrecognised – contribution to the history of telecommunications and human-technology interaction; to the history of avant-garde engagement with the idea of the "accident"; and, to performance of experimental urban spatial and cultural critique.

Questions of space, mobility, technology use and social interaction continue to press upon and

preoccupy us, long after Price first began to explore them. His response to these questions is striking for its rigour, inventiveness and wit. His work provides lasting inspiration and motivation for those striving to rigorously, creatively and humorously explore these same questions today. Moreover, in exploring and responding to these issues, his work also provides an exemplary illustration of the possibilities that are to be found in and through the notion (or “method”) of the “prepared accident.”

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