Swing City

by Roger Kemble

Ecrit en 1968, cet article est la vision utopique d'une société diffe-rente. La structure y est accentuée par l'architecture des lieux: les édifices deviennent des "appareils pour vivre", l'espace entre ceux-ci, des places.

Une liberté nouvelle caractérise cette société; ce "Swing City" s'adoptant à tout style de vie.

Enclosed is an article of my work. It was done in 1968. I believe this to be the only Canadian architectural utopia. It is utopia and cacotopia; it is broddingnagian and lilliputian. It is a utopia that denies absolutes. It deals with the Canadian condition of pathos and indecisiveness.

— Roger Kemble

Dawn points, and another day prepares for heat and silence.

T. S. Eliot

There is little wrong with the Canadian urban scene that the realization of the "just society" will not improve. If, indeed, our urban environment is unacceptable to the masses, and this is a question worthy of debate, it will only be improved by means of a political solution. Technology and economics have been developed to a high degree of sophistication and usability. The potential of these two powerful tools is seriously hampered by irrational prejudice and reluctance to change on all levels of our society.

Now would be a good time in our history for us all to postulate new ideas, new prototypes, in the form of images and theoretical models. If many individuals were to offer for our scrutiny different ideas embodying the future—some acceptable, some not acceptable—it would be possible to create an aggregate of ideas. It would make possible the creation of a solid mesh upon which we could place the next strong foothold into the future.

Swing City Vancouver is a series of ideas or space probes, flung out into the present, that embody a personal idea of the future. It is hoped that a feedback will return ladened with the patina of attention upon which may grow many further ideas.

Swing City Vancouver is an allegorical expression of the new aspirations of freedom superimposed upon the old network of political intrigue. Ironically, the freedom proposed will be at the expense of "freedom" in the traditional sense; or to be more explicit, "license for the few". Swing City gives us the freedom to choose to whom we wish to be a slave. It implies a higher order of discipline than merely abiding by the legality of lot lines and of stretching the inelastic laws.

There is no attempt at stating new ideas. Probably there is nothing new under the sun. Should there be the illusion of uniqueness, it is merely the personal twist of an old idea.
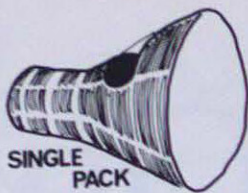
The reader is asked to allow his eye to wander over the kaleidoscopic choice of aphorisms, sketches and ideas and allow himself freedom to make of them what he will. There is no need for continuity or linear development. All that is presented is a mosaic of intentions to be interpreted in whatever manner may be suitable for the occasion. Without being evasive, there is little attempt to pose the problem or in fact seek a solution. Recognizing the weakness of human beings, a lapse into statements may be inevitable, in spite of ourselves.

It is contended that we are in, or at least entering into, the computer age of great efficiency. In spite of this contention there is little evidence to show that the average man on the street is prepared to let this happen. The board chairman may well be capable of lightning decisions but the man behind the desk still picks his nose. In the context of this man, regarding the urban scene, the term "form follows function", although still very valid, is completely misunderstood. For all our big organization efficiency, we are still saddled with the dichotomy of confusion. This confusion becomes humorous when seen in close relation to our "lip service homage to efficiency". It is the alienation from decision making, the futility felt by the man at the desk that causes this confusion.

"The reader is asked to allow his eye to wander over the kaleidoscopic choice of aphorisms, sketches and ideas and allow himself the freedom to make of them what he will."
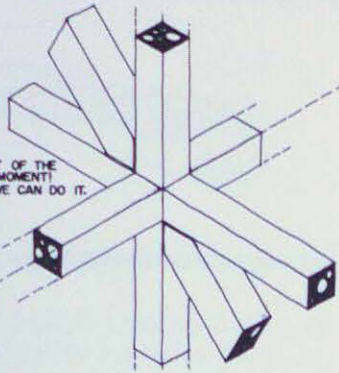
CAPSULATED ENVIRONMENT

SINGLE PACK

ENVIRONMENTAL COSMETICS WOULD BE MADE AVAILABLE·
"PREDESIGNED" OR LEFT TO THE INDIVIDUALS OWN
"CREATIVITY·
THIS ONE IS DESIGNED TO GET US BACK FROM THE MOON·

STRUCTURAL MEMBERS
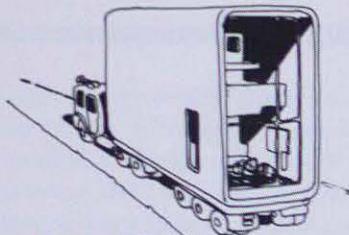ARE HELD TOGETHER BY
ELECTRO—MAGNETIC BUTT
CONNECTIONS·

INSTANT COMPUTING OF
STRESSES CAUSES ELECTRO-
MAGNETIC REPULSION IF
SYSTEM BECOMES OVERLOADED·

POLYCITE IS A FIGMENT OF THE
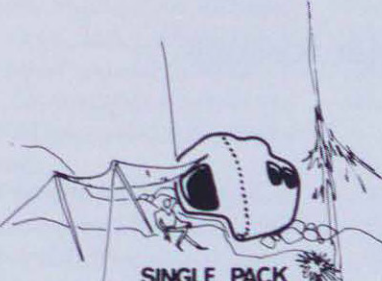IMAGINATION—AT THE MOMENT!
BUT IF WE WANT IT WE CAN DO IT·

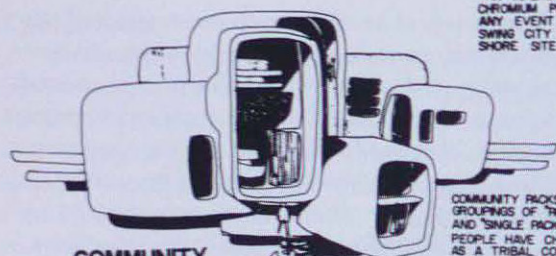## POLYCITE STRUCTURAL FRAMEWORK

PACKSACK

"STREAMLINED DISPOSABLES"
STRICTLY FOR THE FAMILY· THIS
IS A TRANSPORTABLE ENVIRONMENT·
YOU TAKE YOUR HOME AND YOUR
IDIOSYNCRASIES WITH YOU WHEN
YOU LEAVE·

SINGLE PACK

AN INFLATABLE PLACE TO BE· OR IT MAY BE A
CHROMIUM PLATED PAD FOR THE FASTIDIOUS· IN
ANY EVENT IT IS CAPABLE OF BEING HUNG IN
SWING CITY OR IT MAY BE PLACED ON A SEA
SHORE SITE·
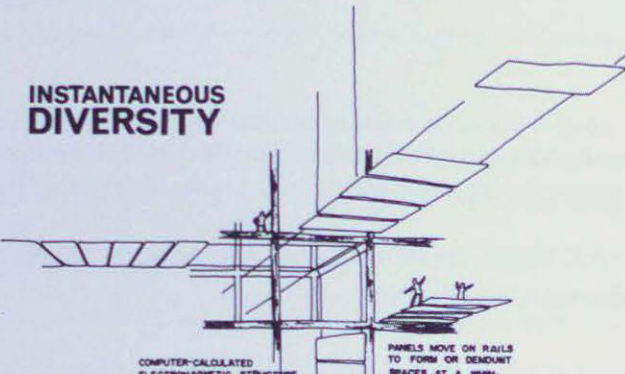
INSTANTANEOUS DIVERSITY

COMPUTER-CALCULATED
ELECTROMAGNETIC STRUCTURE

PANELS MOVE ON RAILS
TO FORM OR DEMOUNT
SPACES AT A WHIM·

COMMUNITY PACK

COMMUNITY PACKS ARE
GROUPINGS OF "PACKSACKS"
AND "SINGLE PACKS" IN WHICH
PEOPLE HAVE CHOSEN TO LIVE
AS A TRIBAL COMMUNITY·

BY PRESSING A BUTTON
SPACES MAY BE CHANGED·

THE FRAME OF REFERENCE
ACCOMODATES SOCIAL
GROUPING AND REGROUPING
ON ALL LEVELS· SPACES
ARE DEFINED BY GROUPS
AS THEY FORM AND ACQUIRE
SPACE WITHIN THE GRID WHICH
GIVE FORM AND CHARACTER TO
THAT SPACE IN ACCORDANCE WITH
THEIR WANTS·

FOR DWELLING PURPOSES, THE PREFAB SINGLE PACK IN VARIOUS
SIZES AND MODELS "PLUG IN" TO COMMON SPACES TO FORM A UNIT·
SUCH UNITS MAY IN TURN BE CLUSTERED ABOUT THE SHARED
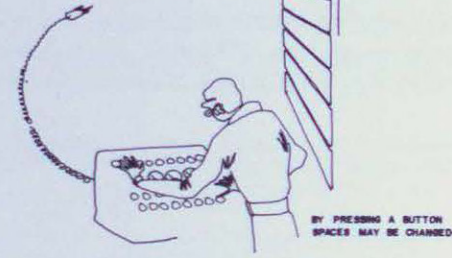FACILITIES AND SPACES OF LARGER GROUPINGS·

CHANGE AT A WHIM

DIVERSITY IS THE KEY

· THE BATTLE OF STYLES HAS BEEN
FOUGHT WELL BY THE ARCHITECTS
AND THEY HAVE LOST·
MRS. EVERYMAN STILL WANTS HER
FRENCH PROVINCIAL COVERED
WAGON — WHETHER SHE CAN
AFFORD IT OR NOT· SO LET HER
HAVE IT·
IT THEN BEHOOVES US TO PROVIDE
A LOOSE TERM OF REFERENCE, (IN
THIS CASE THE GRID), IN WHICH
MRS. EVERYMAN CAN "DO HER THING"
WITHOUT IT IMPINGING UPON THE
HOPES AND ASPIRATIONS OF HER
NEAREST KIN·

THE DEMOUNTABLE CITY

ATOMIC PEACE POWER

NOW

LIFE IS
A
VOYAGE
OF
DISCOVERY

WHY
NOT?

CO-ORDINATED FACILITIES

PAPER
BUILDING

52
TO BE
EDUCATED
IS TO
UNLEARN

PNEUMATIC DELIVERY TUBE

PAPER
CLOTHES

"BUREAUCRAT"
WHAT A
PECULIAR WORD!

NOW!
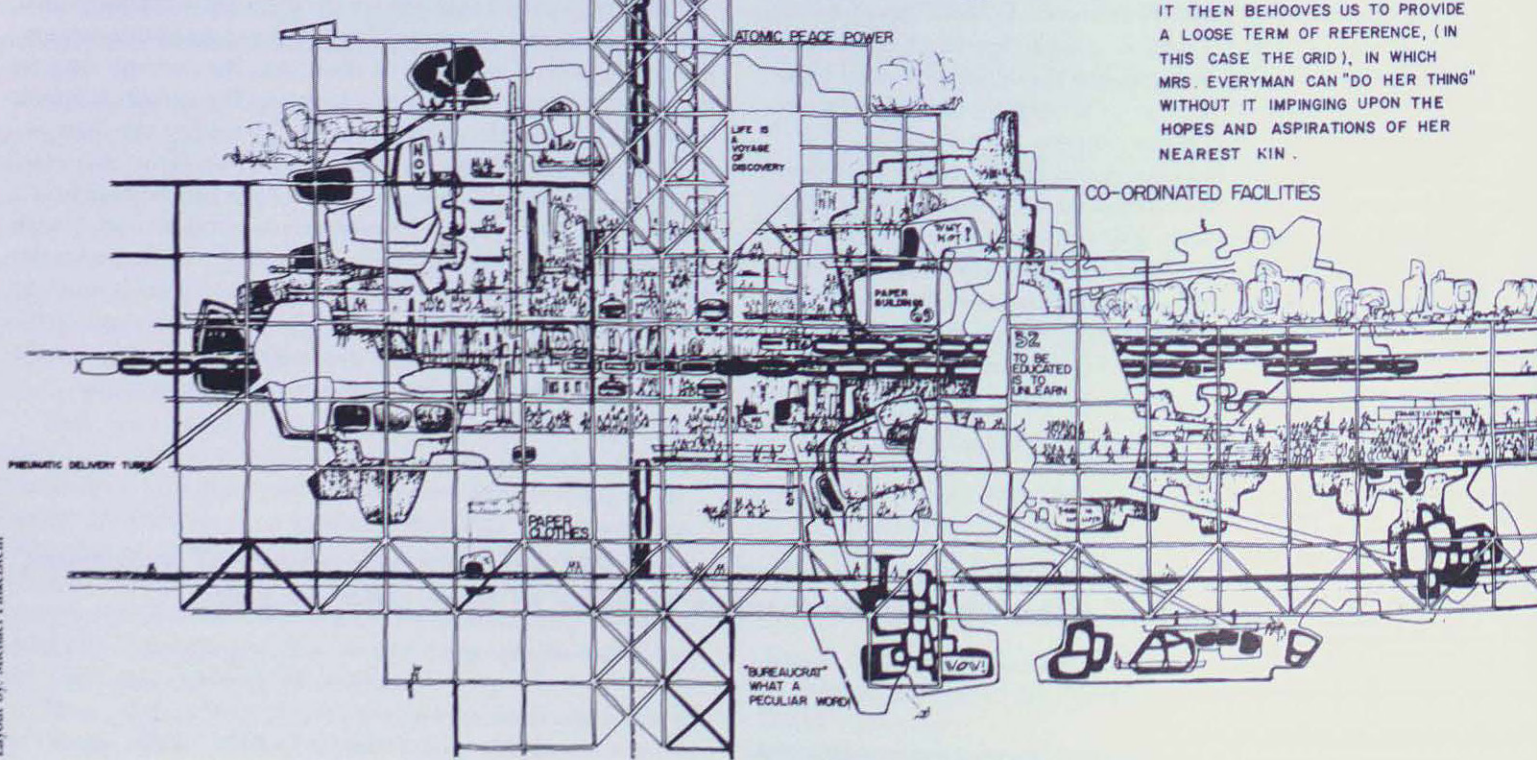
Layout by: Michael Finkelstein

THE GOOD LIFE IS A MANY-SIDED EXPERIENCE; LIKE A CRYSTAL IN THE SUNLIGHT
IT SPARKLES FROM MANY ANGLES. IN ORDER TO ACHIEVE THIS
CRYSTAL ONE MUST BE A PERSON OF GREAT DEPTH – A MANY-FACETED
PERSONALITY – IN SHORT; MATURE.

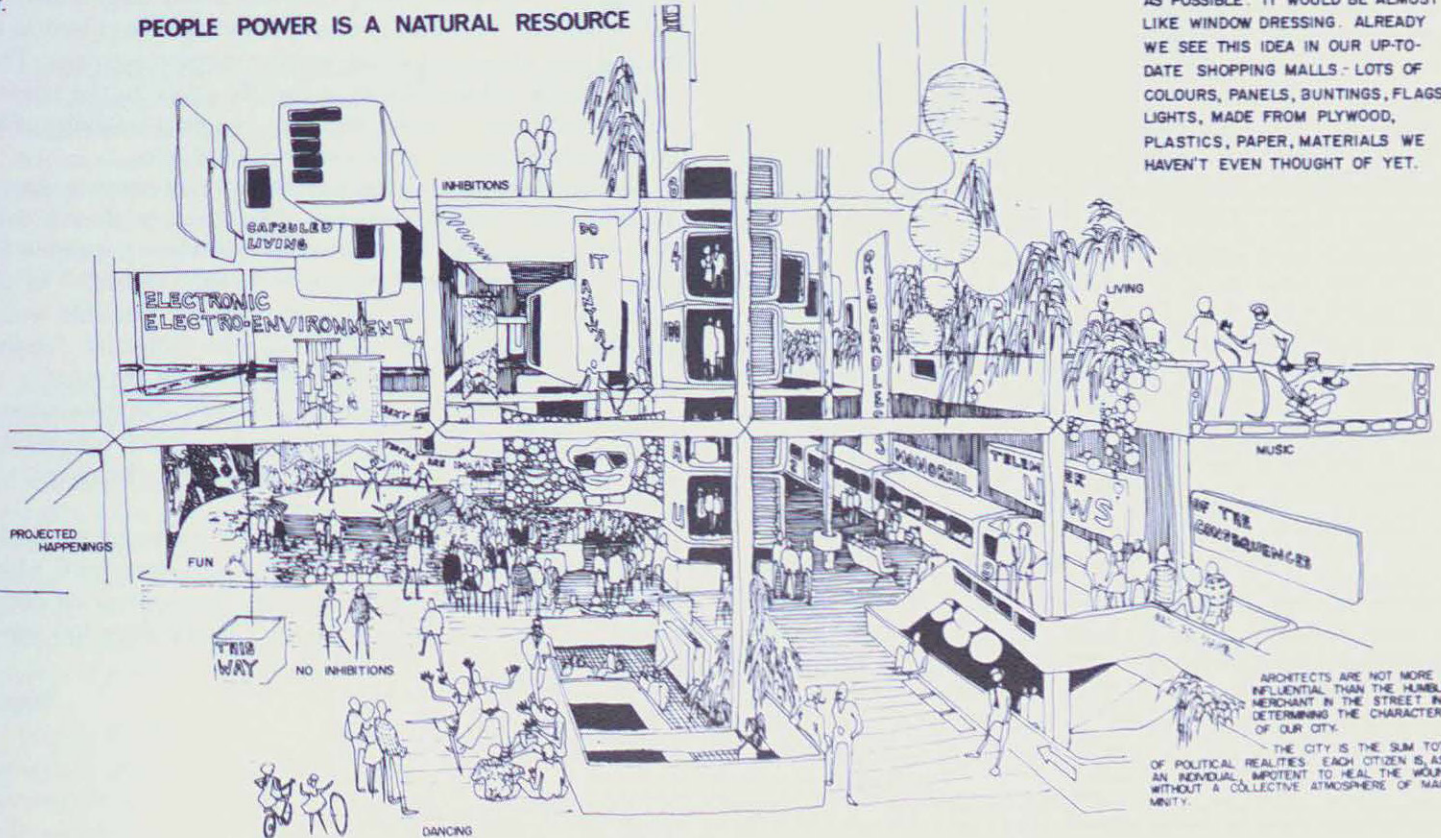**SENSORIAL** EXPERIENCES INDUC...

VISUAL
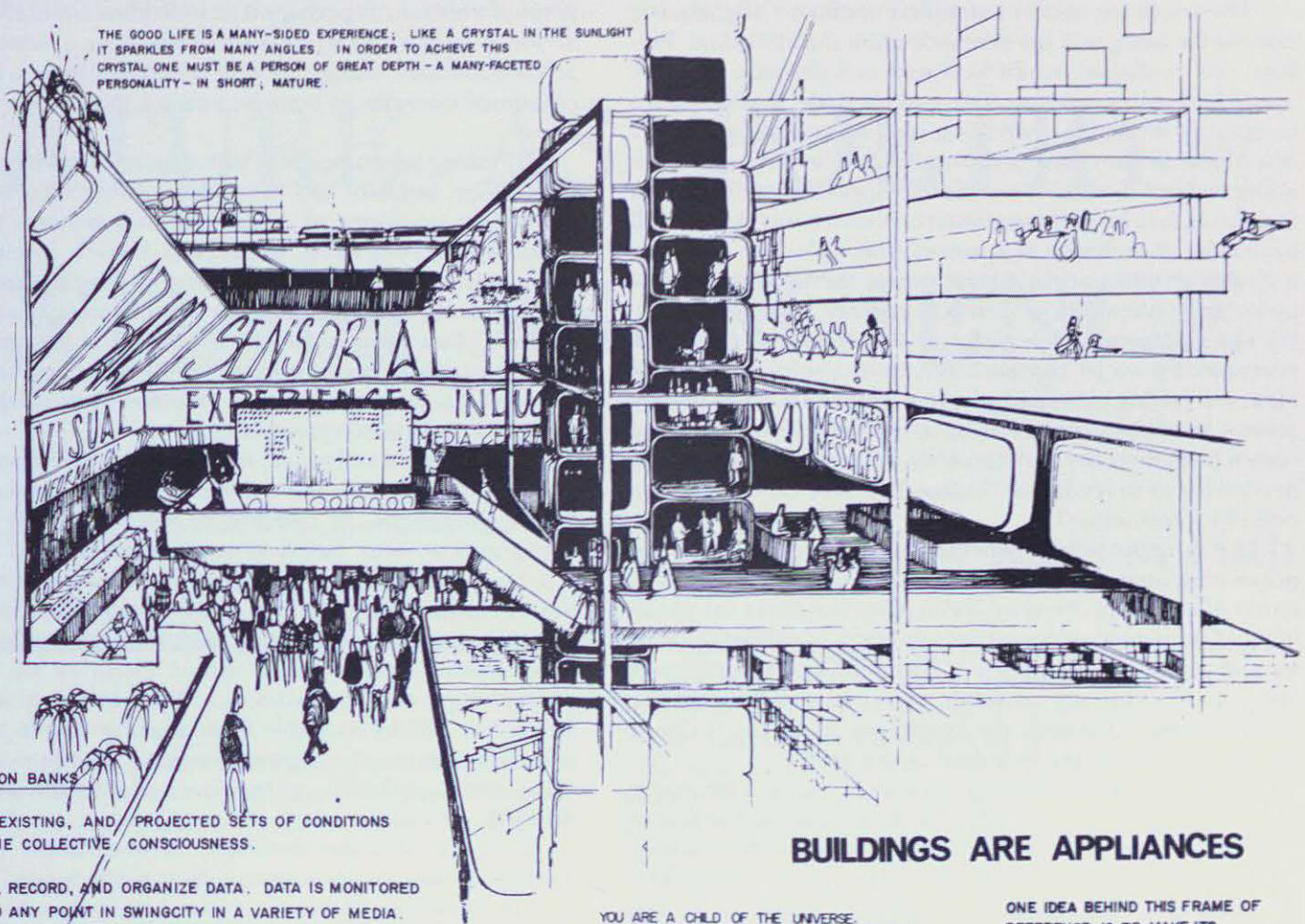
ELECTRO-INFORMATION BANKS

·RECORD ALL PAST, EXISTING, AND PROJECTED SETS OF CONDITIONS
IN ALL AREAS OF THE COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUSNESS.

·CONSTANTLY SENSE, RECORD, AND ORGANIZE DATA. DATA IS MONITORED
INSTANTANEOUSLY TO ANY POINT IN SWINGCITY IN A VARIETY OF MEDIA.
IT MAY BE HELD AVAILABLE FOR REMONITORING AT ANY TIME IN NEW
PATTERNS, AS RELATIONSHIPS ARE DISCOVERED, 'CREATED', OR BECOME
SIGNIFICANT.

BUILDINGS ARE APPLIANCES

YOU ARE A CHILD OF THE UNIVERSE.
NO LESS THAN THE TREES AND THE STARS
YOU HAVE A RIGHT TO BE HERE.

ONE IDEA BEHIND THIS FRAME OF
REFERENCE IS TO MAKE ITS
ACCOUTREMENTS AS IMPERMANENT
AS POSSIBLE. IT WOULD BE ALMOST
LIKE WINDOW DRESSING. ALREADY
WE SEE THIS IDEA IN OUR UP-TO-
DATE SHOPPING MALLS - LOTS OF
COLOURS, PANELS, BUNTINGS, FLAGS,
LIGHTS, MADE FROM PLYWOOD,
PLASTICS, PAPER, MATERIALS WE
HAVEN'T EVEN THOUGHT OF YET.

PEOPLE POWER IS A NATURAL RESOURCE

INHIBITIONS

CAPSULED
LIVING

**ELECTRONIC
ELECTRO-ENVIRONMENT**

LIVING

MUSIC

PROJECTED
HAPPENINGS

FUN

THIS
WAY   NO INHIBITIONS

DANCING

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ARCHITECTS ARE NOT MORE
INFLUENTIAL THAN THE HUMBLEST
MERCHANT IN THE STREET IN
DETERMINING THE CHARACTER
OF OUR CITY.

THE CITY IS THE SUM TOTAL
OF POLITICAL REALITIES. EACH CITIZEN IS, AS
AN INDIVIDUAL, IMPOTENT TO HEAL THE WOUNDS
WITHOUT A COLLECTIVE ATMOSPHERE OF MAGNA-
NIMITY.

THE PEOPLE ABOVE

HOW CAN WE STOP AT PLANNING THE CITY?
THE REGION? THE NATION?
HOW CAN WE STOP AT PLANNING THE WORLD?

WHEN THE CITY HAS A PLACE,
A NICHE FOR EACH DIVERSIFIED
LIVING REQUIREMENT; WHEN WITH-
IN THIS DIVERSITY THERE IS HARMONY,
THEN WE'VE GOT SOMETHING.

TECHNOLOGY IS EXPLOITED TO ELIMINATE THE NECESSITY OF PERSONAL
ENCOUNTERS BASED ON "ROLE PLAYING" OR ULTERIOR MOTIVES. PEOPLE
THUS LIBERATED MUST COME TOGETHER BY CHOICE.

CONTEMPORARY ENGINEERS CLAIM THAT THEIR TIME IS
SPENT NOT IN DESIGNING STRUCTURES, BUT CONVINCING
AUTHORITIES THAT THEIR STRUCTURES CAN BE BUILT.
FOR INSTANCE MANY HI-RISE BUILDINGS, ALL THE SAME,
GO UP IN WEST END VANCOUVER EVERY YEAR. YET
THE RITUAL OF DRAWINGS APPROVAL AND CONSTRUCTION
IS ALWAYS THE SAME. SURELY WE MUST PUT MORE
TRUST IN EMPIRICAL INTUITION; MORE TRUST IN EXPERIENCE.

There is in our society a complete confusion of goals, our reasons for being and the demands upon the individual. Perhaps this confusion would be eased and perhaps our lives would have more meaning if we had no goals. Today, we are completely incapable of deciding what we require amidst the bric-à-brac of our urban environment. But before long we are going to have to make a complete reappraisal of our needs. Indeed, before long, throughout the western world there will have to be an exchange of power in total. This does not mean a change of faces at the top, it means the handing over of power from one strata of society to another. It means a possible end to democracy, as we know it, in the near future. It is necessary for us to approach life from a spiritual point of view, not relying upon gadgets, free from the tyranny of consensus. It will become necessary to discover the richness that comes from diversity and harmony. How much more time is needed for us to recognize "competitive free enterprise" as a ridiculous misnomer?

If it is important to experience an improvement in our urban environment, a possibility before us is the implementation of colourful diversity. Swing City illustrates the possibility of providing an ever changing frame of reference (contiguous to the existing pattern). The buildings are appliances and "places to be" are capsulate environments. Between the "places to be ", between the appliances, exists the realm of the imagination of the beholder at the time.

Diversity is important and because of this, it is necessary to recognize that the possibility for decay is as valid as that of growth. The two may well work together. So, in this context, Swing City is part of existing Vancouver and vice-versa. The influence of each upon the other will react to build a texture of richness that will allow a fun life for all the inhabitants.

Technically, the structural frame of reference is a dream. The material polycite is a figment of the imagination. It is necessary to devise this material because of the paucity of choice available amongst present building materials. The ability the framework has for change is computer calculated. The computer is constantly reassessing the stresses transmitted throughout the structure as bays become added or removed in many different directions. It is desirable that accommodation may be removed, changed, increased or decreased at the press of a button.

Inherent in this ability for instant change is a reassessment of our attitude toward buildings. There is a need in fact for a complete change in attitude toward "things in general". Adornment, possessions, gadgets, things that coil about our emotions prevent enjoyment of the spiritual quality of humanity. The "gross national product" orientation of society does nothing more than hinder. Our desire to create large businesses, large organizations, at the expense of diversity is supposedly there in the name of efficiency. In practice what happens is the establishment of enclaves of ambitious young bucks playing the ego game; anything but efficient when viewed in the broader spectrum. All these creations, in the final analysis, conspire against the finding of ourselves.

In Swing City buildings become appliances and "places to be" become capsulated environments or simply spaces between.

There is a tendency for the public to be tyrannized by the strong personality of a designer. It is quite permissible for the designer to "seek himself" within the object he designs. Our urban scene is rampant with expressions of personal futility and the frustrations of thwarted personalities attempting to find themselves in terms of bricks and mortar. Perhaps if it is possible to set up a space, an enclosure, at the press of a button, or perhaps if an individual could choose his abode as he does a car, then there would be a more healthy attitude towards "things". There would be freedom to invest emotional energies in ourselves rather than in our frustrations.

By taking advantage of a high degree of development in technology, industry and economics, Swing City will make available many forms of capsulated environments from individual nose cone units, to packsack houses, to multi-pack communities. These will form a part of the personal leased environment. "Nose cone" units are minimum sized bachelor pads; place them anywhere. "Packsack" houses are family units; portable in every respect. "Multi-packs" are units that allow several couples to live as a tribe and bring up their children in a communal atmosphere.

The frame of reference, the structural grid upon which the idea of Swing City rests, provides support for the capsulate environments. In addition to this are loosely defined community services. Needless to say, duplication of facilities is to be avoided and concentration of services for some facilities will be necessary. Because of the instant reaction of computerization there will be little need for centralization. However, power supply and disposal facilities all become concentrated and instantaneous. Bulk food, information, media, etc. will be available from a centre source and processed on the way to "inter-facilities". These inter-facilities will provide availability at the press of a button to the individual.

Keeping in mind diversity, centralization is to be avoided. It may not be necessary to provide defined areas to specific functions. Because of our familiarity with a fragmented way of life, we are too ready to accept the use of segregated functions. Swing City will avoid fragmentation. For instance, the university or the school is recognized as an integral part of our way of life within everyday activities. This is manifested not by allocating specific space to the university, but rather by allowing dialogue, instant availability of information and media to become a way of life.

In this city state of idealism, Swing City expects utmost responsibility from its citizens. The citizens derive their power from their ability to need less. It is not necessary for them to be goaded by the promise of the "mostest" or the "greatest". What power grabs may appear possible would probably be dowsed by a spontaneous collective "opting out" in the spirit of "this is simply not what we need".

Swing City depends upon the informal and spontaneous interaction of people being people. The more happenings that occur through spontaneous interaction, the richer will become the lives of all the citizens.

A population that is spiritually self-sufficient and independent of gadgeteering: this is the premise upon which Swing City is proposed. It is said that this is idealism and is impractical, but how do we know? This idealism has never been tried.

Roger Kemble is a practising architect in Vancouver.