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ROGUE DESIGNERS

WHATEVER AND HOWEVER THEY DESIGN, ALTERNATIVE designers operate on society's fringes: like rogue elephants they do not follow the herd. This apartness need not imply heroic individualism, lone wolves like Soleri or the romanticized (alienated) artist. Indeed, more often than not, they work as collaborative groups, with group names subsuming members. They can be bands of alternative technologists, like Zomeworks, roving among wilderness outposts, or urban guerrillas infiltrating the thick of cosmopolitan culture, like Coop Himmelblau and Missing Link in Vienna. American design communes included Southcoast, Onyx, Truth Commandos, Elm City Electric Light Sculpture Company. The Grocery Store, Kamakazi Design Group, Mind Huns, Space Cowboys, All Electric Medicine Show, Crystal Springs Celery Gardens, and Crash City. Experimental Happenings were held at architecture schools: Time Slice, Electronic Oasis, Sonic Mirage, Infinity Feedback, Astro Daze, and Globe City.

Their productions negate longstanding boundaries of professional classification, and crosscut between disciplines, perhaps introducing elements of theater, or gaming simulation. If not within recognized professional practice, design is their avocation. Avant-garde architects, even with credentials, may exhibit conceptual alternatives before the profession rather than build, but as stipulated in the Introduction to this section, such groups as the prototypical Archigram of sixties London, or Florence's Archizoom, Superstudio, and 9999, must be excluded here in favor of those whose majority output has been realized or performed as experiential environment, however transitory.

Even rogue designers have design conferences, although not much akin to the annual conventions of professional bodies. Limited space permits recounting only two or three. "Alloy" took place at the vernal equinox, 1969, in dramatically bleak mountains near La Luz, New Mexico, appropriately halfway between the site of the first atomic bomb detonation and an Apache reservation. Conceived and organized by Steve Baer and Stewart Brand, it was an historic gathering of the tribes-the Southwestern communes being well represented-and of alternative designers of diverse persuasions, about one hundred and fifty in all. They met in a large polyhedral dome, courtesy of Zomeworks, to discuss the right uses of technology, relations between communes and the profit economy of the outside world, and ecological responsibilities within. Steve Durkee from Lama, Peter Rabbit of Drop City/Libre, and Lloyd Kahn and Jay Baldwin came. So broad was the variance of views, from technophobic fundamentalists to computer buffs advocating a cybernetic "group mind" that no absolute consensus was reached or sought. Yet "Alloy" still demarcated a common ground of concern among those who could, perhaps, have come together only outside established auspices; Stewart Brand's romantic notion of an Outlaw Area for environmental freebooters was taken from Fuller: ". . . the whole development of technology has been in the outlaw area, especially on the sea. In any event, free spirits have not often been able, conversely, to spark together within the design professions or at their conferences. An alloy is a composite metal stronger than the sum of its constituents.

ANT FARM

Jim Burns had characterized these rogue designers as figurative "arthropods," in his 1972 book of that title. Like that zoological phylum, which includes insects, they are articulate, divided into segments, and capable of regeneration. The metaphor is overstrained, nor do all Burns' arthropods fit the present context of alternatives, but one such design group did take its name from social insects. Ant Farm was inspired by an educational toy seen in 1968: a crosssection of ant burrows encased between two panes of clear plastic, whereby the ants were revealed to be enviably cooperative and effective builders of "underground" architecture. With co-founders Chip Lord and Doug Michels at core, and a number of sometime associates, Ant Farm can be singled out because their work since 1968 neatly encapsulates most of the themes considered here. The Ant Farm office at Sausalito, for example, was connected with the houseboat community. They flirted with geodesics and, more intensively, pneumatics, publishing an Inflatacookbook in 1970. Their own largest inflatable measured one hundred feet square. Ant Farm lent another inflatable, fifty feet square, to shelter production staff compiling *The Last Whole Earth Catalog* in the inhospitable desert of Death Valley in 1971. They inflated smaller ones for camping while on the road as pneumads. For nomadic roadworks they hypothesized a nationwide Truckstop Network and equipped a Media Van for themselves with video recorders, a solar collector, and inflatable shower. In this, Ant Farm's traveling circus made its rounds, demonstrating inflatables and putting on public rituals.

Media Burn may be interpreted as, perhaps, symbolizing or celebrating the collision of hardware and software technologies. On the Fourth of July, 1975, at San Francisco's famous Cow Palace, their Phantom Dream Car, a Cadillac customized with an enormous dorsal fin, was driven at the national speed limit of fifty-five m.p.h. through a flaming wall of television sets. In 1974 they presided over the public burial of a "**Time Capsule**", in the form of an Oldsmobile Vista Cruiser. Consumer durables from the shops of a typical American small town filled suitcases in the luggage compartment. The interment is to be exhumed in the year 2000. Yet obviously Ant Farm regards the automobile itself as the prime cultural artifact of the twentieth century. Also in 1974 they engineered an updated megalithic monument consisting of ten Cadillacs set upright into the ground near Route 66, Amarillo, Texas, in an alignment reminiscent of ancient processions of stone slabs at Avebury in England or Carnac (Carnac?) in France.

The principals of Ant Farm are, however, trained architects. Their **House of the Century** (HOC), designed in 1972 and built in 1973, seems a professional commission, for a wealthy couple on their private lake in Texas, just as Soleri's Cosanti Foundation or Arcosanti could be mistaken for youth communes. And, just as the zonahedral family pueblo of Steve Baer was homey enough to make the glossy pages of *House and Garden*, Ant Farm's HOC was so sybaritic a pleasure dome that it appeared as a weekend "Playboy Pad" in that magazine, December 1973. (Nor should there be any undue coyness regarding the house's phallic shape, although never preconceived as a Freudian symbol.) Patrons of the arts, the clients gave their designers a free hand to create a sculpture for living in, yet the result received a citation in house design from the American professional journal *Progressive Architecture*.

Even so, the volumetric morphology clearly derives from Ant Farm's inflatables with their seamless surfaces and lack of corners, only now made rigid enough to withstand Texas hurricanes. The structure is in fact ferrocement, as applied to alternative homedomes. Construction blends esoteric technology with biomorphic forms evident in the space-age "tongue" entrance and the plastic "eyeball" windows whose red and yellow blobs approximate optical phosgenes (the illusory darning spots perceived on the insides of the eyelids). Automotive technology in particular -not unexpectedly from Ant Farm, but atypical in residential building - furnished the upholstery which pads the interior like the ceiling of a car, or like the soft lining of a bodily organ. Despite the science-fiction argot of "mobile nutrient servoid" or "media control panel," this is a handmade house, from the labor-intensive ferrocement shell to the craftsmanship within, for which "there were no working drawings or details," and which the architects executed themselves. The floor, solid laminated two-by-fours, was hollowed out in situ around the fireplace (a stuffed iguana now resides there), and for seating around the low dining table. In the kitchen, the woodblock was built up into a pedestal, out of which a sink was carved, and all wood sealed with surfboard resin. Between the twin bowls of the sink is placed a miniature, spherical TV set which juxtaposes a media picture just below the oval "picture window" displaying its panorama of the lake and landscape beyond. Thus one may – while washing dishes – select alternative pictorial realities: the framed natural view or the TV screen.

Again, nature and (electronic) art are seen literally to be complements of each other. And at the topmost point of the house, where a cross would be on a church or a flag on a public building, is a heraldic but functional TV antenna. (Ants, too, have antennae.) Furthermore, from across the lake the house itself can be viewed above and behind the blind screens of one hundred defunct TV sets arrayed on the foreshore. Altar-shrines of the household gods, these recall their earlier use by Ant Farm as sacrificial objects in the "**Media Burn**" rite, or as architectonic blocks like the ten Cadillac menhirs buried upright. (Note: the author, writing in 1981, doesn't realize that both projects were realized **AFTER** the **House of the Century**).

The main living space flows between the two "lobes" and slants up the tower, on the vertical side of which are superimposed sleeping lofts for parents and children, reached by a circular ladder. Also rising through the tower, penetrating the lofts, is a chimney duct, from the fireplace and furnace behind. These heating appliances separate the conversation pit from the bathroom, tucked into the base of the tower but still on the main living level. The bathroom floor is excavated to form a sunken wooden tub, waterproofed, like the kitchen sink, with clear surfboard varnish. The bathroom boasts a standard toilet, however, this is connected by a transparent plastic tube to a custom-made overhead water tank, glassfronted like an aquarium. The toilet reservoir is adjacent to a bulbous fiber-glass growth, rearing out of the floor and containing a shower head for the tub, two lighting globes "budded" out of the top, and a round mirror over a hand-basin cavity. The basin's spigot could be an epiglottis or clitoris, yet if anatomical metaphors are sought they can be found in the overall house shape—the tower being a nose or a penis, with the flanking lobes as breasts or eggs and found to be, at best, teasingly ambivalent.

Such symbolism may be construed as a private architectural conversation between Ant Farm and their clients, who had some "interest in science." Biomorphically imaged graphics of organic cells is also used decoratively. The organic metaphors of Paolo Soleri are related, but handled with, deadpan high seriousness compared to the anthropomorphic puns intimated by the **House of the Century**. The disparities in formalistic means are more forceful than the similarities in underlying organic meanings. Unlike Ant Farm, Soleri does not enlist software, either media or inflatables, yet HOC's closed forms are not so much

soft as swelling, taut almost to the point of bursting, full of hedonistic, immanent life. What vitiates Soleri's biomorphism, is its lack of sensuality, humorlessly befitting those occult metaphors of his. His art is at some philosophical remove, or aesthetic distance, from life. In contrast, Chip Lord of Ant Farm believes: "Architecture is not something outside the head trying to push its way in; it is more like a layer of fantasy-reality between you and life." For Ant Farm, architecture itself mediates.

Biomorphism, however, bears a larger, if problematic, relevance to the House of the Century. HOC was designed the year after Charles Jencks predicted, in his *Architecture 2000* of 1971, "the most significant architectural movement of this century-the Biomorphous School." Jencks based this forecast on the anticipated "influence of major biological inventions in the 1980s and '90s." Did Ant Farm, having read *Architecture 2000*, mean to stake an early claim to biomorphism with their house of 1972-73? In this connection their name for it, **House of the Century**, is rather suggestive, in lieu of any other explanation. To thereby align themselves with that "most significant architectural movement of this century" may be another Ant Farm in-joke, but there is more to HOC's biomorphism than its name.

Jencks had, advisedly, hedged his history of the future in that he expected biomorphic technology to be available by the eighties or nineties, yet projected the stylistic school from trends already present in a minor, subdominant way. Therefore the coming biomorphic movement need not await the biological engineering which would enable houses to be "grown," since some architects had, by 1971, invoked the imagery of that technology in the speculative spirit of science fiction. However, these few architects were not aware (until *Architecture 2000*?) of each other, nor of contributing to a tradition which might someday coalesce into a movement or school. Jencks mentioned Soleri, among others." Yet Ant Farm, regardless of their self-conscious gesture in naming the house, also worked in that intuitive tradition, and recapitulated it in their design process. From the earlier models for a more convoluted form, reminiscent of an Antoni Gaudi structure, HOC was tightened up. Its compact symmetry now looks like that of Erich Mendelsohn's Einstein Tower (1921)- called organic by Einstein himself-- and its plan like Frederick Kiesler's unbuilt Endless House (1923), which Hans Arp likened to eggs and wombs. (HOC partakes of much the same fusion of the biomorphic and the surreal.) Ant Farm's inclusion of "mobile servoids" gave their space capsule the technological props of the Living Pod project by David Green of Archigram (1966).

What the **House of the Century** does not invoke is the mainstream tradition of European Modernism. Ant Farm's references-automobile construction and nomadism, biomorphic imagery, craft building-are to anything but the Bauhaus. HOC is white enough, but its ferocious shell and voluptuous interior have nothing to do with an International Style geometry of right angles and Euclidian planes, and its media software is more up-to-date than the nuts and bolts of the first machine age. Neither is HOC's immaculate slickness of finish and detail in the same high-tech taste as postwar Late-Modernism, even when that factory aesthetic is applied to residences. Yet there has been an in-house alternative, within the profession, to the Modernist tradition: the Post-Modern style, which rapidly became a new orthodoxy in the seventies. As European Modernism had dictated a language of building technology, so a certain strain of Post-Modernism manipulated that language itself, once removed from its technological roots. The old purist language may be parodied into postclassical Mannerism, or traduced by deliberate solecisms, but it is still used. (Language can even remain grammatical, the semiologists tell us, while making nonsense or lying, communicating false messages.) Alternative designers, having broken with Modernism and its burden of European aesthetics, seek elsewhere: sometimes in a return to American cultural values, or vernaculars both traditional and popular, sometimes in the newness of geodesics or inflatables.

HOC's assured, professional standard of design puts it tangent to mainstream office products, but in an important regard it has more affinity with alternative practice. Commissions are usually designed by architects and constructed by builders, separately paid by the client. Ant Farm both designed and built the **House of the Century**, yet were engaged and remunerated as artists by a patron. The economics of their "labor charge" cannot be calculated, as with craftsmen-designers, let alone contractors who (according to architects) exist only to execute architects' designs which are otherwise complete on paper. Most of Ant Farm's manual effort went into sculpting that laminated floor, handcarving an integral living environment from it. There is also an echo of alternative self-building in the way the floor effected a secondary use for the wooden scaffolding which had supported the ferrocement armature. Direct involvement in the visceral process of shaping architecture-improvising design with power tools rather than pencils and tracing paper-is what finally divides Ant Farm from office-bound architects, and what makes a performing art of this alternative architecture, or of counterculture Funkitecture generally.

If the **House of the Century**, having been programmed as an art object, is not of or for a socially radical counterculture, that is a matter of circumstantial context: it is surely a Funk object stylistically. It answers all the criteria of that alternative aesthetic: not just pluralistic in imagery but in free choice of materials and participatory means of construction. Funk affects and reflects its design even though Ant Farm's "clean" Funk is more fluent in craftsmanship than the junk-and-funk of the commune builders. HOC is, as it were, High Funk, to make the distinction Peter Selz (already quoted in the Introduction to this section) made in charting the contemporaneous course of Funk sculpture. He saw it too developing away from Early Funk's earthy, expendable assemblages: "Although neatness or sloppiness is not the issue here, there is a general trend toward greater care in execution. But the imagery, the attitude, the feeling remains funk just the same . . . In fact, this precision of finish only enhances the ironic quality of the work." This is equivalent in Funk architecture to the progression from Drop City to the **House of the Century**, to the dextrous carpentry of Hornby Island, or to Steve Baer's aluminum solar house.

Architectural ideas cannot be so contingent upon circumstance, nor as casually categorized as alternative or mainstream. HOC's designers can be imagined as architecture students of the early sixties ingesting the then-current avant-garde of Archigram or Hans Hollein, but their funky metaphors have become more mixed. (Is HOC really no more-or less biomorphic and erotic than American car styling: two eyeball headlights athwart a nasal or phallic tailfin?)" The broader context of what amounts to Funk Style has been described, or defined by example, in all the foregoing chapters. Paradoxically, however, an interpretive attempt such as this-to isolate the working aesthetics of an alternative architecture-might seem to mitigate against a healthy cross-pollination with the profession. But fortunately this does not hinder their mixing in the real world of building, as in the **House of the Century**. Rogue designers need not remain outsiders.

BEYOND THE FRINGE

1. The Fuller quote is from Calvin Tomkin's profile, "In the Outlaw Area" in *The New Yorker*, January 8, 1966. Brand's gloss on it is in *The Last Whole Earth Catalog*, Portola Institute, Menlo Park, California, 1971, P. 223.

2. See Supplement to the *Whole Earth Catalog*, March 1969, pp. 18-27, partly reprinted in *The Last Whole Earth Catalog*, pp. 111-117.

3. Jim Murphy, "House of the Century" in *Progressive Architecture*, May 1973, P. 128.
4. Quoted in Jim Burns, *Arthropods: New Design Futures*, Academy Editions, London, 1972, pg.10
5. Charles Jencks, *Architecture 2000: Predictions and Methods*, P. 7.
6. The Latin hoc is relevant here, but Ant Farm have also used an alternative acronym selected from the initials THOTC: THC (tetrahydrocannabinol), known in the underground as the active ingredient in marijuana. Thus, as in their architecture, technology abets fantasy.
7. Charles Jencks, *op. cit.*, p. 99.
8. Peter Selz, *Funk*, p. 6.
9. Presentation drawings for HOC acknowledged, with a visual footnote, the inspiration of a streamlined Cord automobile. See also Ant Farm, *Automerica*, Dutton, New York, 1977.