

Peter Fend :

*It has to be read if he is to be understood*

# The City as Machine for Living In

an interview with Jérôme Sans

How would you describe what you do?

*AS*

*As an architect  
of  
the  
future*

What I do, as a participant in the economy, is Architecture: the form of art which deals with all dimensions, incorporating drawing (two dimensions), painting (three, including color) and sculpture (four) within a context of physical movement through space, or time.

I want to make one's participation through time in any given space to be physically ~~enriching~~ *enriching*. Some activity goes beyond this, like epiphanies of religion and of sex. But those are outside the bounds of, even if approached by, architecture: ~~That moment~~ *It also has to be*

*sustainable and durable. Hence, practical.*

Now what does that mean, practically? You report that the editor of Architecture d'Aujourd'hui says you developed the first practicable program, of megastructure architecture. Of the sort of work being attempted by Archigram and Kenzo Tange. May be. But you have built nothing.

In the past year, for the first time, I have been building permanent-material models. That is, models made of the same materials that would be used if the real thing were built. Beyond the normal architectural model. More like a small scale prototype. These models could be sold in the art market, where they are shown, but I am directing them towards prospective architectural clients. A series of models for Yangtze River and offshore development in China is presented to the project finance companies dealing with China, like Merrill Lynch and Morgan Stanley, as well as to scientific or economic development people from China, with the intention of securing a consulting contract, including the sale of the models, or ultimately an actual architectural contract, as had been secured in Yugoslavia before the war. Models for smaller architectural projects could be sold to a prospective client who is prepared to either build the structure at full scale for himself or, as with the New York collectors Barbara and Howard Morse, set up a legal instruments to sell the structure to others.

But the magazine editor who said this was not talking about the buildings. He was talking about the procedure. And I have been working full-time on this procedure for several years: to develop a new fuel base for the city. That is, to develop an economic foundation with which the infrastructure, and then superstructure, of the city can be financed.

*You're talking about the city?*

I'm talking about creating the conditions, the urban conditions, whereby the architecture I physically like can be built. The editor, named Marc Emery; was seeing that I would not start a program of megastructural buildings, following through on the inventions of the Futurists, Constructivists and Metabolists, reaching their peak of creation in the early 70s, without establishing a new economic foundation. Cities don't expand or grow without a new foundation. This draws in new money, new people, new attitudes, new infrastructure, and consequently new architecture. Otherwise we just have post-modernisms and other academic exercises: I work on developing a new fuel base, a new source of wealth. This happens to be the same fuel base identified by the Ministry of International Trade and Industry of Japan, the famous MITI, as being the fuel base of the 21st century.

*Are you talking about industry or about the city?*

About the city as it is produced by industry. Le Corbusier said that the house is a machine for living in. Regarding the city as house, I say that the city is a machine for living in. I want to make sure that the machinery is beneficial to the human body

*Isn't such machinery, such technology, available now?*

Effectively, no. This is why I make models of, and then expect to develop, new systems of primary production. I'm not approaching the fuel base question from the point of view of industry, of a company like Esso, saying, as they do, that they are in the "business of providing energy", meaning of course "not just oil". I am approaching it from the point of view of architecture, of a company that has to design a house that works. So, we are in the business of providing clean air and water. These are the Number One and Two conditions required for the City in that classic treatise, the Four Books of Architecture, by Leon Batista Alberti. The City is said to be the main subject of architecture, and the challenge--assuming heat and shelter--is to do so with clean air and water. Because of industrial systems today, no major city in the world meets these requirements. What would happen if you could advertise a city with no air or water pollution? Better, a city like Rome or Athens?

*What is the City for you ?*

It is a natural confluence of people trying to do business with each other. The people happen to want to be with each other, as in a party.

*So, what are the main problems of the city.*

There can be social problems, where people are antagonized towards each other, or in social conditions too wide apart, as can happen in many not-so-exclusive parties, especially ones ending up in a brawl. But I don't directly deal with this. I deal with the physical problems, the architectural problems. As with any party, there's a problem of providing physical conditions which excite and arouse, and don't offend, the body.

*How can this problem be met ?*

By concentrating on these physical, even athletic, questions.

It's superfluous and distracting, in the end destructive, to try being politically or socially "involved". It has been fashionable recently to talk about the homeless, the poor, those stricken with AIDS--which of course are serious problems--as if they can be dealt with by Art, including Architecture. So architects design housing for the homeless, and an architecture artist like Wodciko designs some shopping cart: all these actions are fruitless, because the homeless want to participate in The City, and if they cannot afford to do that in a proper apartment, to which they can invite friends and so on; and if they can't even do that in a cafe or bar, which the poor can call home, then they will do it in the street. Once they're on the street, where they can both see and be seen in the theater of the city, then they don't want to be popped off to some housing project for the homeless. Architects and artists should do nothing for the people who show up at the party being homeless and dishevelled. They should just make sure that the party is so abundant and the party house is so well organized that everyone, rich or poor, can constructively take part. They should do everything to make the machine for living as strong as possible and to make the city as physically splendid as possible, so that everyone can have a self-respecting and physically healthful way of participating in the Theater of the City.

*Isn't this sort of a trickle-down theory?*

*Nothing is* Trickle <sup>is</sup> nothing. Everyone knows that if an economy works well, and if the technology is timely, responding to the genuine physical needs of the time,

there cannot be extensive economic misery. If architects want to contribute on this matter, they should do their job, which is the physical engineering of the city, including its hinterland.

Does this make you a technocrat?

*I've already lived in a technocracy.*  
If anything, I'm probably an old-fashioned 18th century liberal, with some Physiocratic notions from that time about basing the economy on renewable or recyclable resources, like soil. I ~~have~~ to believe in market forces, and I think that if people, including architects, are free to sell their professional services or products however they want, for the most benefit at the lowest price, there will be buyers. Becoming socially or politically concerned beyond the boundaries of a profession usually muddies and sabotages the professional work.

But people usually think that you're a political artist.

*Not really. A lot of architects design or political things*  
No. A gallery in London recently removed a piece of mine, a model of the North Channel Basin including Glasgow, Londonderry and Belfast, complete with megastructural linear cities and gas pipelines rising up from the sea; I suppose that since it dealt with Northern Ireland it was political. The site was, shall we say, political, but the model and the its architectural proposals were as unpolitical and strictly physical as one could get. It was not I but the gallerist that was being political, and this ~~sabotaged~~ <sup>undermined</sup> the architectural ~~direction~~ <sup>intention</sup> of the entire show. Architecture is only "political" to the extent that it is big and requires large, often political clients. But this is no more political than a tramline or an airport.

*the civil political  
Europe  
the  
place,  
near  
city*

Okay, so it's not political and is only problem-solving. What are the main problems of the city today?

Architecturally speaking: that the city--and I mean by this most of the cities in the world today, and that means most of the human settlement patterns in the world today, since the world is <sup>dividing</sup> rapidly becoming a planet of city-dwellers--that the city is physically bad for the body. The city is not body friendly but body hostile. Consider the air in Cairo, or the water in Dacca, or the air and water in the world's biggest conurbation, Mexico City.

The attendant social problem isn't the poor or homeless, or even the too many who commute great distances. It's the architects, along with their cohorts the visual and plastic artists. If cities have problems today, it's because artists--all of them, painters, draughters, sculptors and architects--don't do the job of portraying and organizing our material

environment. As these comments will appear in an art magazine, I could declare that the biggest social problem in cities, the root cause of what goes wrong, both in the cities and in their physical substrate the hinterland, is: the readers of this magazine.

Think again about what an artist or architect would do to make a party work. Make sure that the place in which the party happens works--very well. Never mind who is showing up. They are all humans, and they have predictable human needs, with predictable physical pleasure requirements. Don't deal with problems about who is showing up at the party, and possibly starting a riot, as has happened with some regularity in American cities. Deal with the problems about how to make the city, this confluence of people, very <sup>very</sup> satisfying physically. If you do this, then people will see what you're doing and will want to help out, because it's fun and part of making a party, and pretty soon everyone will have plenty to do and plenty to eat and so on.

*What can you do about this ?*

~~I started by defining, I think, the proper approach.~~ One who professes to do architecture, as I do, must stay within the bounds of the profession, and must do that happily. Unfortunately, most architects, particularly the ones with superior academic training, think about problems other than clean air, clean water and room for circulation, and they try instead to be artists, making big sculptures called buildings, or to be social workers, reducing whomever they're trying to help to the status of patient, or case. The poor can quite happily build cities for themselves: the architect should just make sure overall physical conditions are healthful, then manufacture and market the low-cost components that people, if poor (or even rich) can assemble themselves. That should have been clear with the classic "Architecture Without Architects": some individuals in those villages would make sure of the plumbing and circulation, the overall aesthetic and physical situation, then leave the rest to private initiative:

*Would this someone be an architect or a politician ?*

Could be one or the other; by stated profession; Could be both. Robert Moses was allegedly a politician, but is probably responsible more than anyone else for the physical character of Greater New York. I am trying, by another route, with another cumulative strategy, to achieve a similar role, with a similar impact on the physical character of cities in the coming century. I have decided that one does this less by designing model buildings (which I will do nonetheless, as I feel like it), than by manufacturing a vast array of architectural and civil engineering

components, and then showing in movies, video games, music videos, any mass media, how people can assemble these components into their own urban and rural landscape.

~~To answer our question, I think that~~ Virtually all architects today and most politicians today cannot even begin to tackle the problems of the city, which most people recognize to be the pollution, the congestion and the electronically-facilitated emptying of the center. ~~I think that,~~ Given already what has been published and exhibited, given what was contracted for a large area of land in Yugoslavia, and given especially the work on giant algae industry as a primary energy and materials source the city, I stand a better chance of helping solve the problems of the City today--defined as pollution, congestion and diffusion--than the professionals trained to design.

*So, do architects have a future?*

If they continue as they do, they should not. The ambition to design distinguished buildings usually gets directly in the way of solving problems of pollution or congestion. This most dramatically appeared with the competition in building gems around 57th Street and Madison in New York. Architects like Philip Johnson worked against the task defined for his profession by Alberti. In short order, the area becomes not more appealing but less, and even the building designed by Johnson has been sold off. Just another joke of a decade, useless in the next, and not even removable as most of the plug-in pull-out architecture of Japanese cities has been.

*But this sort of very dense construction is going on in Asia, and it could, with sufficient wealth, extend throughout the so-called Third World. Does the city of Europe or North America, with its relatively low density, have a future given what is going on in the other continents?*

A city like Singapore is ~~very~~ well organized. It is ~~very~~ dense. But going through it, and even beholding it, gives a great pleasure. There is no problem, to sprawl from there on out.

I propose that the average city of the West, like Berlin or London or Chicago, have no future. They're far too spread out, far too hostile towards the land, with its wild animals and plants. The body does not want to go from one end to another of most cities, except someplace dense and rich like Manhattan or Singapore (excepting pollution).

*LeCorbusier said that New York is not dense enough. Do you agree? For the*

*city overall, yes, with the exception of many places in Manhattan. There, given the over-convergence of transport systems, it is sometimes too dense*

*Could there be a model for development? A model city?*

No.

Better, never.

Can San Francisco, or Hong Kong, or Manhattan, be a Model for anywhere else? People like to travel, and should travel, precisely because different cities are completely different. Much of the disappointment I have experienced in London comes from walking past LeCorbusier blocks conceived in the Marseille. One should not ask if a city is a model, but if a city pleases and excites the body. You can tell this easily by doing in city what human beings by evolution have become most specialized in doing: distance running.

Nonetheless, I presume you would like to build or realize new cities, better cities, cities better than most of what's available now.

We should remember that any city, wherever it might be built, is occupying what had been wild country? It is replacing what had been land occupied chiefly by wild animals and plants. This means it is usually harmful to nature. With sophisticated engineering, including precision-site targeted recycling, the city can possibly benefit nature more than harm it. It is possible to build a city which, like any other giant animal, can contribute more to the richness of nature than take away from it. A city that benefits the wild species in nature, as the other animals do? We could say that the next stage in evolution beyond humans is here, and it is the city. So, if one were to make an urban model--as opposed to model city--one would engineer already existing cities to not harm but benefit wild speciation.

*What government would this require?*

I do not discuss most aspects of government, as these involve social or moral criteria instead of physical ones. But on the strictly physical level, in terms of what works best for the human body occupying an urban space, I think the government should conduct systemic, and public, site surveillance. That is best done with digital sensors, and best with automatic, or at least unbiased, sensing schedules. These points were strongly established less by me than in the early 1980s by artists from

New York, namely: Taro Suzuki, Joan Waltemath, Eve Vaterlaus, Win Knowlton, Paul Sharits, Bill Dolson, George Chaikin, myself, all organizing then in a venture called Space Force. Premise: a normal function of art is to serve as the eyes of society, hence the observers, particularly of all the land occupied by society; This is little different than what is done by scouts for tribes living off the land by hunting, fishing and gathering. The scouts recording what they see in timely visual reports are the artists. Nowadays these people are largely photo-journalists. We of Space Force tried to do this for several years, only to be blocked by the governments, all of which--by their actions, along with their subsequent baby-sitting called "support"--want art to be impotent. With, given what happens in ecology today, deadly consequences.

A chief effect of artistic power, as manifested in systematic public site surveillance, could be a shift from income to property taxation. Each pixel-registered site unit could be monitored precisely for its ecological health, at least as measured on the surface, and each could accordingly be tax-assessed. This places pressure on property-owners to rationalize property resources, to recycle more, waste less, and deplete little. The more one maintains a healthy ecosystem on property, and the more one relies less or little on polluting fuels which affect that property, the more one can avoid taxation. Income taxation, by contrast, encourages the earning of means for purchasing and consuming, and therefore does not reward the rationalization of property or material resources. It does not reward good architecture. It rather rewards wasteful architecture and sprawl: most of the absurd spread-out in Western cities can be attributed to systems of property assessment and taxation, which make tall buildings in a city center and low, sprawling buildings ever-farther out most economic. A satellite data-based ecological-diminution task, set against baseline readings for health in each pixel-identified site unit, would place uniform pressure on the rational use of property everywhere. Cities actually healthful for the environment could well result. Certainly very much less of present-day spreading, making cities like cancers on the land, would result.

How do you think that you can best effect your ideas of the city?

By working with a sizable number of artists and architects, some of them art stars with specifically commissioned projects, in a number of large-area projects which can gain a very high media profile, not just in the news but--with far greater impact on public consciousness--in film and TV fiction. One builds certain cities or city sections as movie sets, one arranges for a bunch of movies and TV shows, possibly also rock videos and ads, and one creates a popular fantasy. This creates a popular



expectation of what cities and buildings can be like, and soon after every town, every city, every architecture firm, every child with Lego blocks, is influenced by the kinesthetically arousing experience. Zaha Hadid's fire station might get into the architecture magazines, as a rather inconsequential structure for someone with big ambitions and big fame. Our aim is to build structures that get into popular; electronically imaged mythology.

You have said that recent artists like Gordon Matta-Clark could be a source for development. Why does this not happen now?

Because Gordon's work got stuck in the art world, and his accomplishments have been reduced largely to a reliquary business. There is a Saint Gordon, and there are fragments for sale from what he did here and there. Never mind what he was trying to start in the last months of his life, which is what I, as an assistant, was asked to research and develop. The job is to interpolate from what he started and to construct buildable fantasies, and then--as he was wont to do--film-document the results. Next, the job is to make whatever gets built into movie sets, for mass appeal and mass adoption.

But why do you think that your fantasy, with its roots in Constructivism and Futurism (as Matta-Clark himself affirmed), will be popular. You have even said that La Defense is a better film set than Paris. Will that be popular?

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I think what I like. ~~May~~ the market forces decide what large numbers of people like. Yes, I like La Defense, with its flying walkways, better than much of Paris, particularly the parts not renovated by Haussman. La Defesne continues the practices of Haussmann. Remember that he too was not a licensed architect, but look at the effect. All this is great movie material, more for a thriller than a romance. It's about as dramatic and grandiose as the Axe it plugs into towards the Louvre, and this is one of the central physical facts about the physical site in nature of Paris. Why not work on the scale of rivers and mountains, with room for running? This is hardly, as some say, technocratic. If it's "cratic", it's bodycratic.

You have said that a city like Paris is a prison. Where else do you think people are going to live?

A city like Paris was built as a fort, with high walls, hence the word "urban", which means walled. This means that the city is a place confined. One cannot get around or get out with physical ease. One is cut off from the wild nature. One is cut off even from normal, healthful

quantities of fresh air, clear water, or wild animals. One is about as physically trapped as the wild animals in the zoo. One is tamed, subdued, reduced in physical and mental courage. Witness the average residents. As for where else, I do not offer that scenario. I offer, for more excitement, for much better cities, a two-pronged attack:

break down and build completely new large parts of Paris

build entirely new cities, or villages, in large regions subject to large-scale physical planning, such as the 500 sq km mountain amphitheater that I and colleagues incorporated, as a we, were invited to work on in Tivat Bay, Montenegro. An entirely new fuel base, with comprehensive satellite surveillance, is essential to effecting a historical precedent. Not a model, in the sense of model city, but a proof of how at least one place can function with biological efficiency.

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