History of Architecture and the City in the 20th Century

Does Ron Herron’s “The Walking City” proposal have the potential to be a feasible project, or will it always remain a paper dream?

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Contents

- Introduction.............................................................................................................Page 3
- Body of Essay........................................................................................................Pages 3-7
- Conclusion .............................................................................................................Page 8
- Bibliography.........................................................................................................Pages 9-10
Does Ron Herron’s “The Walking City” proposal have the potential to be a feasible project, or will it always remain a paper dream?

The Walking City is a design proposal of a structure that could house an entire city, and travel from one site to another. This complex design was never constructed, but almost half a decade later, is there any possibility for it to be turned into reality? Or will The Walking City always remain only as a brave experimental idea in the realm of Architecture? In order to answer this question, we must not only find out the details of this project, but also the various constraints at the time this idea took birth. This essay explores in detail, the background of the proposal, how it came about, why it was not built when it was designed, and if there is a chance that it could be constructed now?

Britain in 1960s saw a huge increase in science and technology. This would drastically shape the perceptions of young minds, and result in the birth of new ‘out of this world’ ideas. The most significant development in science and technology was the achievement of launching the first human space flight to orbit the Earth in 1961. Also, the first working laser was invented in 1960, followed by the first audio cassette in 1962. Surrounded by such advancements, architecture students emerged to form perhaps the “beginning of another political shift in architecture”\(^1\). These students were being creative in a way that surpassed their Architect predecessors, whilst adopting the platforms of exhibition and broadsheet.

Ron Herron (Figure 1), a Londoner, studied architecture at an evening school. In 1954, he joined London County Council Architect’s Department, where he met Warren Chalk, Dennis Crompton, Peter Cook, David Gernie and Mike Webb. Together, they joined the Euston Project Team, and thus Archigram was born in 1961. Herron believes that “any sufficiently advanced technology is magic”\(^2\). This is expressed very well in his drawings. His fascination with technology is well illustrated in his collages, where he combines the human body or a human concept with technological inventions, especially robots.

Archigram was a futurist and innovative group that was inspired by technology. It is best explained by the following description: “This broadsheet amounted to an architectural telegram (hence the name) of all current issues jammed together in one information-studded image”\(^3\). They took what they saw around them, and turned it into a new reality, based on hypothetical ideology. Archigram is committed to a “high-tech, light-weight, infrastructural approach”\(^4\). The ideas of science fiction and UFOs were whirling all around them at the time. This of course brought with it Armageddon (end of the world) overtones, which inspired ‘Survival Technology’, and is the backdrop for The Walking City design.

Archigram produced a “manifesto of dynamic ideas for new architecture”\(^5\). There were a total of nine (and a half) magazines published by Archigram. The last issue, number 9 ½, was not

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1. Modern Movements in Architecture, Page 280
2. The Visions of Ron Herron, Page 126
3. Modern Movements in Architecture, Page 282
5. Back to the Future, Page 38
Does Ron Herron’s “The Walking City” proposal have the potential to be a feasible project, or will it always remain a paper dream?

A complete magazine. It was a supplement that only consisted of 2 pages, and was simply a hard copy presentation of what projects Archigram was working on at the time. These manifestos were designed in a comic style, and included pop-ups and cut-outs. The format and paper sizes of each magazine varied, as there was no set template that Archigram followed. Most of the folding, gluing, stapling, and printing was done by the Archigram team itself. This uniqueness made it a very interactive and exciting magazine, and in no time at all, was sought after by an international audience. The publication of issues spaced out over a very lengthy period of time, and at most the gap between one manifesto and the next could be two and a half years. However, interest in their work never failed to grab the attention of the public, and inspired much debate in the subject of Architecture. In 2002, Archigram was awarded the RIBA Royal Gold Medal for Architecture, giving well deserved recognition as one of the most influential groups for experimental Architecture. To this day it has not failed to motivate architect students to aspire and investigate.

Most of Archigram projects were “prophetic”. The group understood that “information would become the hard currency of the future”. Its project, Instant City, involving the creation of a network that would offer the provinces “a taste of the metropolitan dynamic”, using airships to transport a series of audio-visual display systems and exhibits across the country, can be seen as a precursor of the internet. All members of the group were constantly designing numerous hypothetical projects in their offices, and this was presented in their sketchbooks, Archigram magazines, and even at exhibitions worldwide.

Looking through Ron Herron’s sketches and collages, you can see the development of his understanding and work as time passes (Figure 2). He comments on how fascinated he is with the idea of robots: a technological servant. He moves on to designing objects for Imagination that was “a sort of carrying device brought out for events… not necessarily human forms, but rather as friendly, harmless objects”. Usually, technological objects often replicate the human form, to create a sense of comfort or relation to the human user. However, Herron wanted to embrace the shape that the mechanical object took and represent only itself. This could perhaps alienate the user, but it also created a sense of intrigue which draws on the interest of the common man.

One concept from his sketchbooks stood out in particular. The idea of a Virtual Olympics (Figure 3). Herron realised that since television was taking over sports, what if Olympics was completely submerged into the world of technology. By having a television-like gadget placed on top of your head like a helmet, the athlete would have no need to travel to a set venue. He would be able to participate in the race with all the other competitors in his own chosen space. He believed this could be the ideal solution to choosing venues and building different stadiums to accommodate athletes.

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6 Back to the Future, Page 39
7 The Visions of Ron Herron, Page 10
Does Ron Herron’s “The Walking City” proposal have the potential to be a feasible project, or will it always remain a paper dream?

A distinct trait of Ron Herron is that he draws like a human being. This means to say that his drawings are very interesting and explanatory. His drawings are more comparable to an engineer, who would add explanatory annotation to his drawings, rather than an architect who simply sketches an idea and leaves out the structural and technological notes to explain how it would work in reality. Even though Ron Herron’s work may be called works of fiction, very much detached from existing reality, he makes the effort to show structural elements, movement and process in his drawings. This makes one believe that the concept has every chance of being built because it is so strategic and logical.

Herron is described to be an optimist, always seeing the good in people and situations. This might explain his adventurous style of designing. However, some critics feel that this only means that Herron’s designs may not be practical enough to take seriously. This feeling would have been more prominent with critics at the time, because technology in the 1960s was not as advanced as it now.

None of Archigram’s projects were constructed, including Ron Herron’s proposal of The Walking City (Figure 4). This proposal was originally called “Cities: Walking”, but was changed when it came to print in Archigram’s Issue no. 4. The backdrop of this project was imagined to a future where Earth as we know it had been destroyed. It would be a post-apocalyptic setting, borders and boundaries were non-existent, and the human species would go back to living a nomadic life. This could be the aftermath of a nuclear war, leaving behind a ruined world. This was one of Herron’s “theoretical architectural themes” which he calls “tuning- taking existing situations and environments and introducing alternative structures and facilities here and there, giving people the possibility of changing their environments in various ways and for different periods of time.”

Therefore, the reason is apparent. The Walking City was not built at the time it was designed, because it was not destined to be built in the 1960s. It was designed to be built in the future, a post-apocalyptic future.

This project, like many others of Archigram, has “anticipated the fast-paced urban lifestyle of a technologically advanced society in which one need not be tied down to a permanent location”. The Walking Cities’ nomadic lifestyle promotes the collaboration of different cultures and information. This is mainly achieved by the concept of structures being able to “plug-into” utilities and information networks. It is thought that Herron’s designs actually

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8 Imagination Headquarters, Herron Associates (Architecture in Detail), Page 8

9 The Archigram Archival Project, Projects, Walking City
embodied his discontent with Archigram’s “interest in indeterminacy. His view was that the missing ingredient was indeterminacy of place”10.

The project was inspired by “NASA’s towering, mobile launch pads, hovercraft and science fiction comics”11. It was not only built for land, but one of Herron’s images suggests these machines could also be waterborne. Although the design was not set to be built in the 1960s, this did not mean it was impossible. If you look at the designs more closely, the technology arranged in a loose fit manner was either available at the time, or nearly available. In addition, many parts of the design compiled of soft-fabric, which of course was most definitely readily available. Perhaps it was the scale of this project that was so daunting, because engineers would have been capable of constructing this in the 1960s, yet to talk of actually constructing such a mega structure would have horrified them.

If we further analyse the design proposals of The Walking City, we can see that it composed of numerous fabric-covered structures in tension. It would have telescopic ‘arms’ and ‘legs’ on which it travels, and these could also be inserted into surrounding terrain, in order to extract raw nutrients that would benefit the inhabitants of the City. The most famous of his images for The Walking City shows it in true elevation, though there are many others, one of which shows the Walking Cities invading New York. In his sketchbooks, Herron has described the concept of The Walking City as part of a “whole family of these vehicles, containing all the elements you would find in a functioning city: business quarter, offices, housing, public and private services. Some had detachable auxiliary units, such as hospitals and disaster units”12. (Figure 5) These elements were clearly annotated on his sketches, clearly labelled under sub headings of ‘Services’, ‘Health’, ‘Entertainment’, ‘Living’ and even ‘Government’, showing that Herron had taken all social aspects into consideration when designing his concept.

The Walking City also has “extendible arms, which could connect with other walking elements, with the ground and sea, allowing the transfer of good and materials”12. Therefore, allowing the cities to be versatile, and able to exchange goods and knowledge. A critical article in the International Times likened the mega structure to a war machine, to which Herron responded with the following: “I’d always seen it differently, as an object which moved slowly across the earth like a giant hovercraft, using only its legs as a levelling device when it settled on its site. To me, it was a rather friendly-looking machine”12. Although, the machinery looks heavy and bulky, it almost portrays a clumsy figure due to the elusive balancing of a huge mass on delicate ‘legs’. Also, the rounded edges bring a soft, smooth touch to the machinery.

What is surprising in these proposals is the use of technical terminology and detail in Heron’s drawings of The Walking City. One would expect the annotation of the use of space, such as “Living Room” or “Bathroom” in architectural drawings. However, Herron goes one

10 Imagination Headquarters, Herron Associates (Architecture in Detail), Page 8
11 The Archigram Archival Project, Projects, Walking City
12 The Visions of Ron Herron, Page 75
one step further and indicates properties such as “Retractable roof skin”. *(Figure 6)* These are also drawn in great detail, in the technologically correct manner. Some sketches show approximate measurements, including the height of a Walking City to be 220 metres and 400 metres wide. It indicates where the helicopter pod will be on the roof plan, even accurately positions the correctly proportionate windows. These are serious, elaborate and especially labour-intensive drawings. Not far from being accurate blueprints which simply need to be handed over to a contractor.

Conversely, the Museum of Modern Art in New York thinks otherwise. It feels that the drawings of “this literally mobile and indeterminate architecture was not so much a serious proposition for a structure as a commentary on the way in which change dominates every aspect of the modern city”\(^{13}\). So were these drawings some sort of propaganda to bring about change in Architecture? Was it simply present to stir debate, but not actually result in any sort of construction? One cannot be absolutely sure. Maybe a more useful question to be asking is whether The Walking City can be constructed at present time, using the existing drawings.

To help answer this, we must look at an existing building design by Herron which had the fortune to be built. The Imagination Headquarters in London was designed by Herron Associates, in the later period of Ron Herron’s career. *(Figure 7)* The building’s focal point is the white fabric roof (stretched in tension), which encloses the gap between two buildings, which was initially planned to be glazing. Although the “sub-structure looks dramatic, it is structurally relatively straightforward…..organized in two rows of rectangular bays 5 m wide and spanning 6.5 m across the atrium and 9 m across the roof-top gallery…..effectively two roofs”\(^{14}\). In terms of fulfilling environmental and building regulations, it is successful. The space between the fabric roof and fabric ceiling creates insulation. The fabric has to be stretched yearly, in order to be tightened. At the time of designing this building, the Herron Office had

the help of Apple Mackintosh computers and several software, such as Minicad Plus (for 2D design) and Modelshop (for 3D surface-modelling). With the added aid of Herron’s detailed drawings, the placing of umbrella push-up structures *(Figure 8)*, to support the roof fabric, and other such elements were effectively executed. The accomplishment of this building proves to us that Herron is not simply a hypothetical designer. Of course, The Walking City cannot be compared to the Imagination Headquarters in terms of scale, but the standard technological elements are present in both.

\(^{13}\) The Changing of the Avant-Garde: Visionary Architectural Drawings, Page 54

\(^{14}\) Imagination Headquarters, Herron Associates (Architecture in Detail), Page 12
Does Ron Herron’s “The Walking City” proposal have the potential to be a feasible project, or will it always remain a paper dream?

In conclusion, The Walking City was not designed to be built in the 1960s, and neither is it designed to be built at the present time, since no such apocalyptic circumstances have befallen the human race, yet. However, if such a mega structure was to be built in Britain during the sixties, I think Herron’s drawings would have been sufficient enough in detail, and all the required technology would certainly either have been present, or invented in a reasonable amount of time for the project to be completed in that decade. As for present time, I am sure Herron’s drawings could be modified to adapt to the latest technology. There is no doubt that most of the thinking on how to build the mega structure is already present in Herron’s sketchbooks, and most importantly his elaborate annotation. The advancement in technology of the 21st century means that the designs would be built in a more environmentally friendly and cost-saving fashion. However, the end result would be a healthier and more advanced replica.

I think that the Armageddon overtones are shadowing the human race even more as time passes by, and perhaps it would not be such a bad idea to invest in such a project which would be a Noah’s Ark of sorts. This does not necessarily have to be a pessimistic view on life, but rather a safe-guard, since the advancement in technology and science itself has taught us that the state of this world is not permanent.

Apart from the moral debate, it would also be of huge interest, not only for Architects and Architect students, but for the wider community if such a paper dream turned into reality. From my investigation, I feel that if there is a strong intention, financial support and government backing, this is certainly a feasible project. It would be fascinating and motivating for the drawing of an elevation of The Walking City so widely produced (Figure 9), to be constructed, perhaps at a smaller scale for starters. Who knows, perhaps the future that Herron and Archigram have seen and illustrated in the 1960s, may not be as farfetched as we think. Perhaps it will be Herron’s designs that will come to our rescue when situations of this world become grave. One thing that is for certain is that placing our destiny in the robotic hands of Herron’s sketches would not disappoint the human race in giving inspiration and solution.
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- Figure 2
  Banham, Reyner. The Visions of Ron Herron, Page 10
  Academy Group Ltd, 1994
Does Ron Herron’s “The Walking City” proposal have the potential to be a feasible project, or will it always remain a paper dream?

- **Figure 3**
  Banham, Reyner. The Visions of Ron Herron, Page 19
  Academy Group Ltd, 1994

- **Figure 4**
  Design Museum [Online], 2006
  Available at <http://designmuseum.org/__entry/4509?style=design_image_popup> Accessed 20 December 2011

- **Figure 5**
  Banham, Reyner. The Visions of Ron Herron, Page 75
  Academy Group Ltd, 1994

- **Figure 6**
  Banham, Reyner. The Visions of Ron Herron, Page 74
  Academy Group Ltd, 1994

- **Figure 7**
  Banham, Reyner. The Visions of Ron Herron, Page 34
  Academy Group Ltd, 1994

- **Figure 8**
  Lyall, Sutherland. Imagination Headquarters, Herron Associates (Architecture in Detail), Page 28
  Phaidon Press Ltd, 1992

- **Figure 9**
  Lyall, Sutherland. Imagination Headquarters, Herron Associates (Architecture in Detail), Page 5
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