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DREAM HOUSE PROJECT



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***FLOATING
IDEAS
FOR
FALLING
CITIES***

BRUCE E. PHILLIPS

IN 1962 ARCHITECT BUCKMINSTER FULLER imagined a floating city of *Cloud Structures* that would liberate humankind's dependency on the earth.¹ The hypothetical project consisted of enormous airborne geodesic spheres that would naturally levitate on hot air heated by the sun, and which were anchored to mountain tops. Proposing to house thousands of people, Fuller's *Cloud Structures* were intended to alleviate the politics of land ownership, housing shortages and aid the conservation of nature.²

It comes as no surprise that these constructions have never been built. As the legacy of modernism has attested, rational ideologies have a habit of yielding to social, political and organic realities. Yet, this unrealised floating architecture does not necessarily reveal a type of utopian naivety, as might be assumed. Rather, Fuller's *Cloud Structures* were not further developed, in large part, due to the shift of modernist architecture away from the pursuit of weightlessness and in favour of the high-rise.³ It now seems that the role of these imaginings has been relegated to visionary inspiration in the realm of paper architecture, to remain fictional concepts, not to be realised at the time of their making but to influence the future realities of those still to be born.

The imaginary potential and continued influence of such utopian architectural aspirations has been an important interest for Gregor Kregar throughout his practice and were a formative paradigm for the *Dream House Project*. This premise was originally developed in-depth in a series of projects exhibited internationally between 2006–11.⁴ During this period, Kregar explored, through a variety of materials and scales, the tensions between modernist architectural theory and its physical reality. An example of this was *Liquid Geometry* exhibited at the 12th Cairo Biennale in 2011. For this work, Kregar created ethereal geometric stainless steel and neon constructions that resembled suspended molecular structures and a type of hyper-ideal that sits at odds to any functional reality.

These concepts are also evident in the *Dream House Project*, a large-scale installation and exhibition developed specifically for Te Tuhi. However, in comparison to *Liquid Geometry*, the *Dream House Project* migrates from the ethereal to the worldly to explore how imaginary forms might now contribute pragmatic ideas to current issues. That is to say, Kregar's motivation was to take modernist design principles and apply them to local contexts, rather than pursuing grand universal ideals – so that such ideas might be of some assistance in the midst of current harsh economic realities and in the wake of unavoidable natural disasters.

From the project's outset, Kregar conceived of an experimental processed-based project that would engage with a local community group but also respond to Te Tuhi's architectural history and surrounding urban environment. Built in 1975, Te Tuhi's original building was centred around an octagonal auditorium designed to unify the variety of artistic disciplines it accommodated. This unmistakably modernist-inspired geometric form and its rational plan of function was to be short lived; as the organisation evolved over the decades so too did its architecture. Two separate building developments in 1984 and 2001 produced new divergent angles that complicated the unitary purity of the original octagonal geometry. These new additions met the growing needs of the community – a less symmetrical but potentially more pragmatic form of architecture.

During this period the surrounding urban environment was also undergoing significant transformation with the introduction of an expansive American-style shopping mall complex. As another story of devolved modernist idealism, the retail developments of Auckland would be far removed from architect Victor Gruen's original shopping mall design of the 1950s. Gruen's shopping malls were designed with the aim of liberating Americans from urban sprawl by replicating, in modernist form, the European concept of arcades and plazas. The plan was that these intimate enclosed public spaces would help develop a sense of



place and community amongst the endless banality of suburbia. Two decades after Gruen's dream, Auckland inherited a vastly different American shopping mall model – one that was scientifically engineered to be a 'giant seduction machine'⁵ housed in a ubiquitous box designed for the efficiency of franchise and private profit.

It is in this history of competing architectural ideologies that Kregar's structure and social engagement intervened. Before any concepts were developed, Kregar wished to take his cue from the local community and in particular local youth, who might dream despite the creatively anaesthetising predicament of their commercially cloned urban landscape.

In the weeks leading up to the exhibition, Kregar and Te Tuhi's art educator Jeremy Leatinu'u worked with over 300 students from Elm Park Primary School to create drawings and cardboard models of their own dream architecture. After a lesson in triangular geodesic structure, the children quickly harnessed the logic to develop complex rhizome-like forms in which imagined inhabitants, including princesses, robots, aliens and animals, found sanctuary. The workshops highlighted the importance of an existing structural logic to support spontaneous experimentation that might lead to dynamic architectural forms. Installed in the gallery space the final cardboard designs took on the likeness of cloud clusters,

recalling Fuller's aspirations for a floating geodesic city. Although, unlike Fuller's *Cloud Structures*, these models were not intended to be built in reality but rather serve the role of cultivating young visionaries.

After this period of participatory engagement, Kregar sought to apply what he had learnt from the children to create his own dream architecture. His work was bound to similar processes of spontaneity coupled with the use of poor materials and the structural principles of triangulation.

The resulting installation was an enormous timber structure that engulfed Te Tuhi's foyer in a complex web of wooden refuse. In response to the existing architecture, the haphazard construction was adapted to the space by being fixed to structural beams and through its archways which aligned with doorways and corridors. The structure was conceived to inhabit the building like a giant bird's nest or a beaver dam that might create a space of sanctuary but also a functional space that visitors to Te Tuhi could walk through, sit and socialise in.

While displaying a feral and organic logic, the structure was also reminiscent of the 'shantytown' dwellings found in the developing world, made by people who, out of survival and the need for shelter, innovatively build with scrap materials. The reference to shantytown construction

finds further significance in the fact Kregar's work was built from over four tonnes of 'leaky home' waste.

New Zealand's leaky home controversy eventuated in the wake of changed building regulations and poorly designed homes built by so-called 'cowboy builders/developers' to satisfy the then booming residential market of the late 1990s. As construction companies conveniently disappeared, over 42,000⁶ middle-class home owners were lumped with uninhabitable leaking buildings overcome with black mould. The demolition of these houses and the subsequent tightening of construction regulations led to an influx of building waste mounded in city dumps. It was from these mountains of timber refuse that Kregar's installation was built.

Kregar's choice of discarded timber also holds resonance with the quake ruins of Christchurch and tsunami devastation of Fukushima. The planning for the *Dream House Project* coincided with the aftermath of these disasters in 2011. Images of rubble and masses of mangled debris inadvertently served as a sombre influence for Kregar – not for morbid fascination but rather for considering what might be made from the waste of urban collapse. In a similar vein, the economic wastelands of foreclosed homes across the United States and in other countries, as a result of the 2008 global financial crisis, might also be considered.

Aside from these associations, Kregar's main motivation for using this plentiful resource was to explore the potential of humble materials taking on architectonic forms. This motivation, as an artistic strategy, can be found throughout the development of installation practices ranging from Kurt Schwitters' seminal work *Merzbau* (1933) to the contemporary work of Christo, Tadashi Kawamata, Maya Lin, Sarah Sze or Hector Zamora. Kregar's work engages with the legacy of such artists by innovatively coupling the grand history of architectural logic with the abandoned debris of society to cunningly provoke the collective conscience.

Overall, the *Dream House Project* was for Te Tuhi and the local community an exercise in architectural imagining with tangible application. The timber structure radically transformed Te Tuhi's foyer from being a space of competing ideologies to a memorable experience that inspired as much as it startled. For the local school children, the project gave them an education outside of what would be provided in the classroom. An education that might, at least in some small part, influence the future of Pakuranga's urban environment. Correspondingly, the 70,000 visitors that visited Te Tuhi experienced an example of alchemy. An alchemy that reconsiders waste for its real potential in creating spatial change at a time when new visions and alternatives are greatly needed to recover from urban ruin.

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- 1 Fuller's *Cloud Structures* are also widely documented as the *Cloud Nine* project.
 - 2 Thirty years prior to Fuller, constructivist architect Georgy Krutikov also conceived of fantastical floating buildings and before him artists such as Kasimir Malevich proposed an anti-gravitational architecture. In his article 'Jealousy: Modern Architecture and Flight', Eric Bunge explains how Fuller's *Cloud Structures* evolved from this modernist enquiry into the liberation from the ground. See: Eric Bunge. 'Jealousy: Modern Architecture and Flight'. *Cabinet*, issue 11 Flight (Summer 2003). Available at www.cabinetmagazine.org/issues/11/bunge.php (accessed 24 May 2012).
 - 3 *ibid.*
 - 4 In his essay 'Piercing the Clouds', Terry Smith discusses this body of work with reference to Buckminster Fuller's *Cloud Nine* project and the constructivists Georgy Krutikov and Vladimir Tatlin. See: Terry Smith. 'Piercing the Clouds'. In *Gregor Kregar: Piercing the Clouds*. Sydney: Tin Sheds Gallery, the Faculty of Architecture Design and Planning, the University of Sydney, 2008.
 - 5 Michael Zinganel. 'Shopping Mall'. In *Sculpture Projects Muenster 07*, edited by Brigitte Franzen, Kaspar König, and Carina Plath. Cologne: Walther König, 2007. p. 445.
 - 6 Leaky Home Guide. Building & Housing Group, Ministry of Business, Innovation and Employment, New Zealand Government. Available at www.dbh.govt.nz/leaky-home-guide (accessed 28 May 2012).

Image: R. Buckminster Fuller, *Cloud Structures*, 1962
Courtesy, The Estate of R. Buckminster Fuller









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