



A PHILOSOPHY OF ENABLING: THE WORK OF CEDRIC PRICE

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Source: *AA Files*, No. 8 (January 1985), pp. 3-7

Published by: [Architectural Association School of Architecture](#)

Stable URL: <http://www.jstor.org/stable/29543432>

Accessed: 04/12/2013 06:37

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A PHILOSOPHY OF ENABLING THE WORK OF CEDRIC PRICE

Royston Landau

The popular image of Cedric Price sees him as an uneasy architectural modernist with a strong disposition towards flexibility, impermanence and anything new in technology, but also as one with a near-Voltairean capacity for making the complacent sit up and the over-confident sit down. While this account might not be incorrect, it is nevertheless incomplete; so I wish to amend this picture by briefly hinting at some of Price's less exposed aspects.

To start with, some context. Price belongs to a generation of architects which graduated into the British scene in the late fifties. At this time the construction industry, under the guidance of the national bureaucracy, was gradually covering Britain with new housing estates, schools, industrial parks and towns. But it was also a time when genuine debate about this production and about an architecture of the future was beginning to emerge from the self-congratulatory euphoria of the late forties and early fifties. This was a period in which architecture was expected to be seen as *the* social art, when investigation, research, theory and explanation were paradigmatic concepts among both students and practitioners. However, underlying and supporting this agenda was a positive and optimistic belief in a constantly improving world in which even the chronically conspicuous shortages of resources were seen, at worst, as momentary aberrations and, at best, as opportunities to be exploited.

A strong commitment to the future and a confidence in rational debate and action were to help create an encouraging ambience for the seeding and developing of architectural ideas. The concerns of the period included the CIAM-breakaway Team 10 programme of the Smithsons, Voelcker, Howell and others, with their proposals for a socially sensitive architecture of place. Also, Stirling and Gowan were moving their researches in a direction which was to give new authority to the built object. At the same time, the Modern debate was being sustained empirically, particularly in the work of Denys Lasdun, and intellectually, especially through Alan Colquhoun and Colin St John Wilson; and a further Modernist shift was to come from Patrick Hodgkinson and Neave Brown. Another major theme, the industrialized building, had received the total commitment of public sector architects Gibson and Swain, who were creating the CLASP school-building programme, while an opposing, anti-mechanistic approach was being promoted by Darbourne and Darke with their informal environments, first proposed for their Lillington Street winning entry for the Westminster Housing Competition of 1960.

While together these themes provide far less than an adequate context for the time, they do indicate some of the more fruitful paths

which had emerged or were subsequently to develop. In placing Price within this time and setting, one can identify in his work a strong belief in the new solution and a confidence in the future sustained by his full commitment to rationality and progress. But it was to be on the crucial question of what for him constituted this progress (that is, which architecture might be said to be *progressing* and which *degenerating*) that he was to draw away from his contemporaries. To a way of considering architecture, largely invented by Price and incorporating some of his frequently assumed, if not deeply cherished, principles, I have given the name 'a philosophy of enabling', and I wish to elaborate on this since it may be helpful in analysing his work.

Price's view of architecture has a deeply ethical dimension, at the centre of which is *the effect an architecture may have upon its occupants or observers*. He has often stated that architecture can too easily become constricting and damaging for those who use it (socially, psychologically or even physically). But the obverse must certainly also apply, for architecture can be liberating, enhancing and supportive, and in his projects and writings Price has consistently asserted and demonstrated the importance of this awareness.

This bears a strong resemblance to the British philosophical concerns of Jeremy Bentham and to John Stuart Mill's deep passion for personal freedom, while closer examination of Price also shows marked affinities to Benthamite Utilitarianism. His version of enabling may be compared to Bentham's idea of providing the individual with greater utility, or usefulness – so pointing the way to a society in which the preferred state of affairs would be one in which more individuals are endowed with greater usefulness. The idea of a freedom to be useful seems to lie very close to the surface of the Cedric Price production.

The notion of enabling developed very early in Price's career, when the critical thrust of his work was aimed not at the to-be-expected avant-gardist target of history (on the contrary, much of the history of architecture he unaccountably appeared to love) but at an architecture which no longer merely contained but which appeared to cause unreasonable and unacceptable constraints. The bureaucratization of modern architecture as widely found in the British public sector was revealing an insensitivity to individual differences and showed no awareness of the possibilities of individual human potential. People had been reduced to standards, and standards had been further reduced to economics. The Modern Movement had espoused an enterprise which demanded a deterministic restrictiveness and left no room for human manoeuvre. Price was to respond to this heavy

world of housing estates, New Towns and university programmes with wit, ridicule, light-heartedness, but most of all with proposals that were to acquire paradigmatic force.

Price's first major project was the Fun Palace (1961). The client was Joan Littlewood, a founder of Theatre Workshop at the Theatre Royal, Stratford East. She was to describe this proposal as a 'laboratory of fun' and a 'university of the streets'.¹ In the project, planned for the Isle of Dogs in London's East End, the idea of fun was not interpreted as passive entertainment, as in the 'amuse-me' ethic of the Walt Disney pleasure grounds. For Joan Littlewood and Cedric Price, it would be fun if the visitor could be stimulated or informed, could react or interact, but, if none of these suited, had the freedom to withdraw.

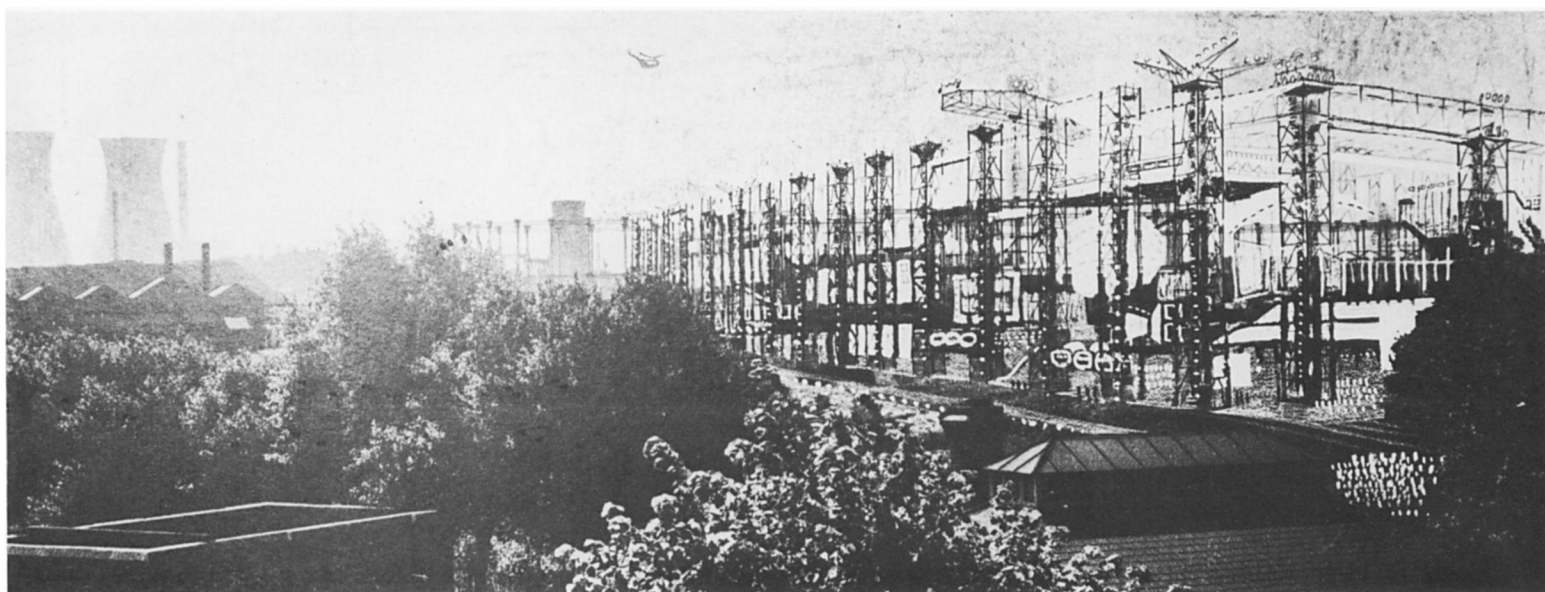
The facilities Joan Littlewood initially proposed for the Fun Palace (which were time and place specific) included jam sessions, popular dancing, science playgrounds, teaching film, drama therapy, modelling and making areas, music stations with instruments on loan, etc. Price responded with an architecture which provided an unenclosed steel-frame structure, fully serviced by a travelling gantry crane and containing hanging auditoria; moving walls, floors, ceilings and walk-

ways; multi-level ramps; and a sophisticated environmental system which included vapour barriers, warm air curtains, fog dispersal plants and horizontal and vertical lightweight blinds.

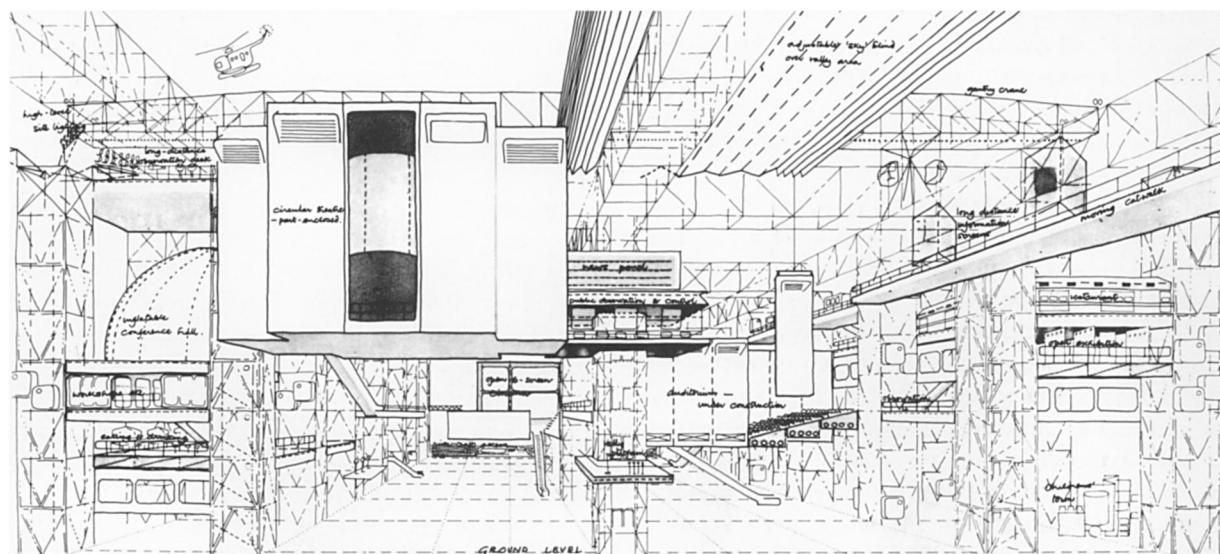
Price's striking design concept – which was later to have a major influence on Piano and Rogers's Pompidou Centre in Paris (1971-7) – expressed two features of his position which are of concern here. The first is that of an architecture which supports and 'enables' human activity, which I have already described. The second is Price's fascination with technology – and it would be difficult to talk about Cedric Price at all without referring to his strong relationship to the technological. But how does this manifest itself?

I am suggesting that Price's role for technology is intimately linked with his critique of architecture. He looks to technologies which can expose inadequacies in the conventional wisdom, while at the same time celebrating the possibilities of thoughtful supportive environments. Such technologies might belong to the frontiers of experimentation, but equally they might be little more than banal. Price has been chided on occasion for the way in which he can raise his enthusiasm for the technology of a corrugated iron shed as easily as for the latest and most sophisticated manifestation of human-response electronics. He can love either, but the choice of technology for him

FUNPALACE



Night-time view at Lea River, London E15.



Centre-spread of original fund-raising folder.

has usually to meet certain criteria. First, there needs to be an appropriateness (perhaps to be found in electronics, but equally possibly in a primitive log cabin), and appropriateness will seldom be synonymous with the conventional. Secondly, technology will be used to play a *critical* role, meaning that it will be expected to take part in the architectural debate, perhaps through contribution, disputation or the ability to shock. And thirdly, technology must be securely placed in a particular and real context from which a framework of limiting constraints can be derived.

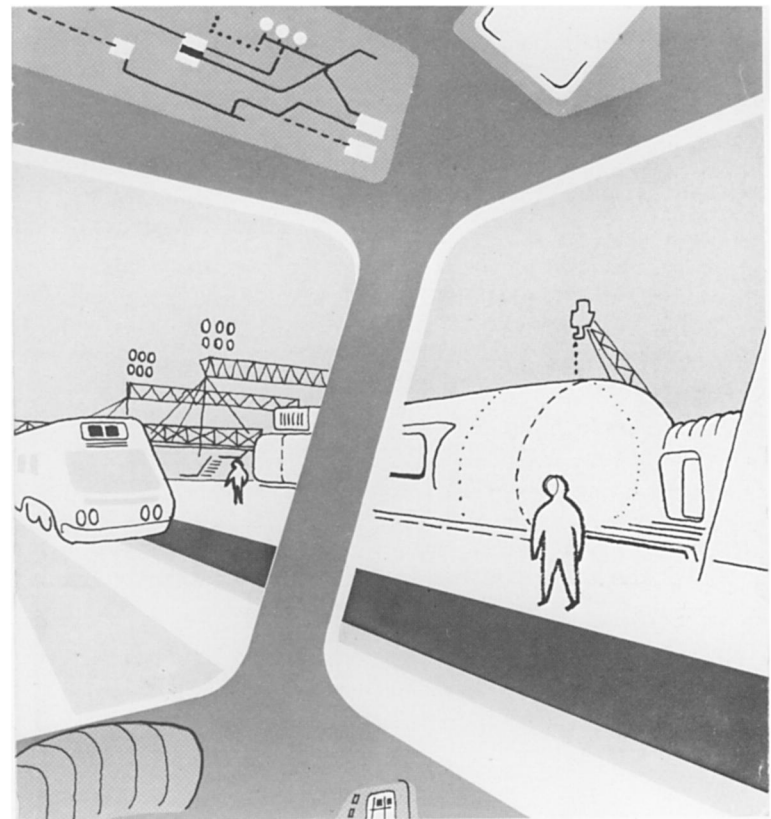
Technology, used in each of these broad senses and serving a radical educational critique, was to produce one of Price's most outstanding projects, his Potteries Thinkbelt of 1964.² The Potteries Thinkbelt was a higher-educational facility, a term carefully chosen to avoid the use of the word university. Prepared at a time when the largest new university programme in British history was being implemented, the project addressed an intellectually complacent university-regulating bureaucracy. The site for the Thinkbelt was not a city site, nor one of the then standard out-of-town, isolated, quasi-countryside locations which had been selected especially because of their lower land values. Instead, Price chose a hundred square miles in a decaying industrial area of England in north Staffordshire, once the centre of the famed Staffordshire Potteries and now in dire need of revitalization. Thus he was to produce a project which questioned most of the cherished Establishment premises of university education, and substituted, in their place, their complete inversion.

Instead of the centralized campus, Price proposed the network. His arguments against centrality were many: it leads to self-congestion and disallows expansion, it promotes physical and intellectual isolation (hardly desirable in an institute of higher learning), and it suffers from inaccessibility. A network, on the other hand, would be indeterminate, flexible and extendible, allowing the educational facilities to spread over and integrate into the area of the Potteries. This process of integration was expected not only to generate major economic benefits to the whole area but also to offer support and stimulation even for those not directly attached to the institution.

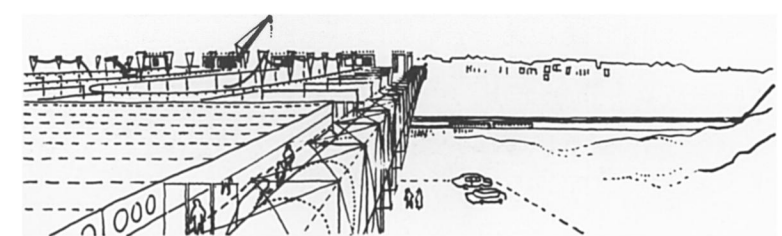
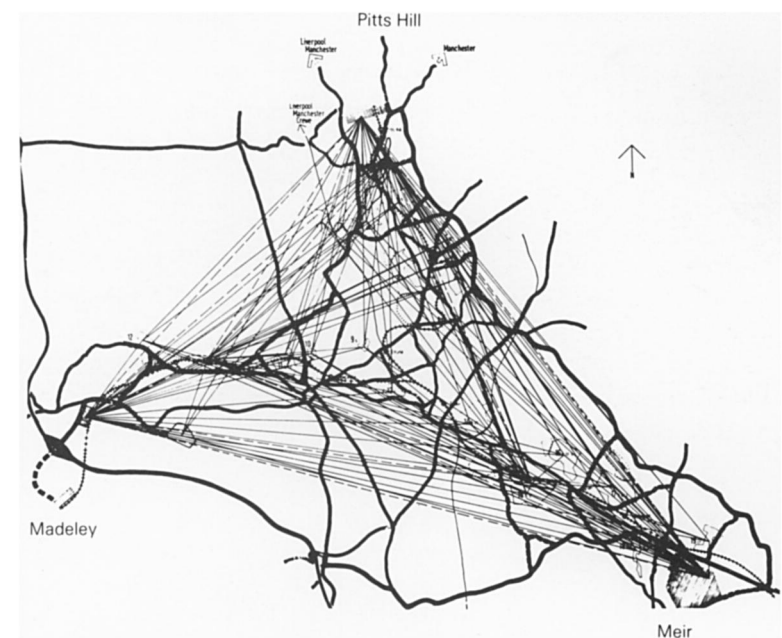
But Price was also demanding acknowledgement of the theme of impermanence. The Potteries Thinkbelt was located in an industrial region of Britain and, appropriately, would house, predominantly, departments of science and technology, fast-changing subjects whose scope, size and life-span would be impossible to determine except in the short term. So Price's criteria for siting departments included specific and speculative needs and predictable life-spans, as well as locational possibilities for integrative development. These included a programme for joint library facilities with local residents and a system for student housing which amalgamated both Thinkbelt and local-housing rosters, and which also permitted some experimentation in short-term habitation to take place.

The Potteries Thinkbelt conceptualizations were brought together by the ingenious use of a transportation technology which had existed on this site for a hundred years, during which time it had served both industrial and passenger use and, in Price's project, was to do so again. The railway system had become surplus to national railway needs but, given a new set of demands upon it, it could facilitate connecting links throughout the network and provide usable land adjacent to derelict rail sidings, which Price saw as offering potential for the development of interlinking educational facilities. Price was to explore the range of possibilities for rail-borne facilities in great detail. The fast-changing industrial engineering departments requiring cranes and gantries for replacing equipment were obvious candidates, but he was also to propose teaching units in a large variety of mobile enclosures which included combinations of inflatable lecture theatres, fold-out decks, library and information carrels and units, and a series of

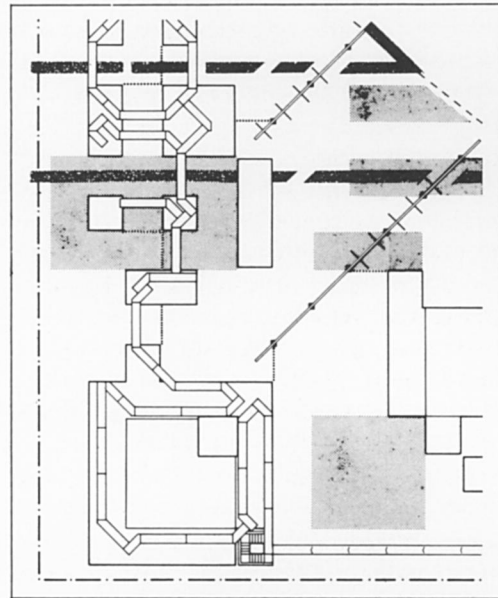
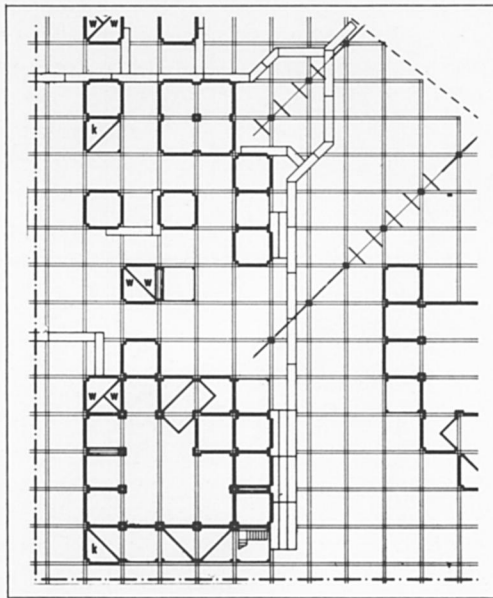
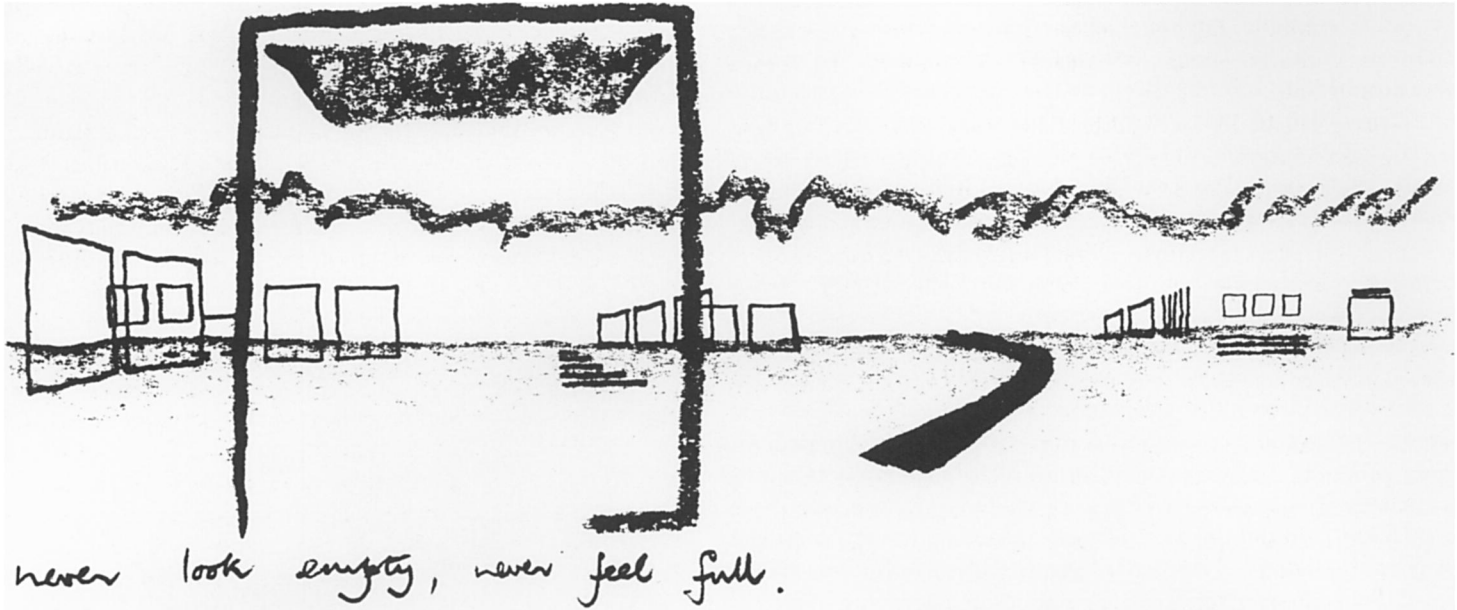
POTTERIES THINKBELT



View from a railbus, Longton Faculty Area.



View across transfer area at high level.



Menu 25: details of south-west zone. Left: ground level. Right: roof level with walkways.



Site looking south-west from north-east corner.

capsule facilities, all with capabilities for combination and permutation and all able to be demounted and transferred as required. And concern with mobility did not end here. There were other systems of road linkages, interchange transfer areas between modes of transport, and an airport link.

The story of the Potteries Thinkbelt is salutary. As a brilliantly imaginative contribution to university building, a realm not known for its thoughtfulness, the Potteries Thinkbelt might just have jostled the University Establishment,³ but perhaps the critique had too much fantasy for its audience. Or could it be that Cedric Price, to use one of his phrases, was just 'aiming to miss'? For me, it does not 'miss' if this study goes into the archive, not as an example of how railway carriages can be used for teaching, but as one of the most powerful question marks ever placed against the architecture of university education.

The science of information is elusive and radical and can alter the perception of whole disciplines. Watson and Crick's discoveries about the DNA molecule were to change the direction of biological research so radically that the subject became unrecognizable to the uninitiated (although it must be added that information in architecture is as yet at a pre-Watson/Crick stage).

Already, by 1961, Price had embarked on an enquiry into information technology, and, in 1961, in a lecture at the Architectural Association, he examined the relationships between location, communication and information, beginning with a model of the early human settlement, when information would have been transmitted by voice and by foot alone. As settlements developed and became more complex, a technology had to be devised which spurred on these developments. Eventually it was information technology which opened up some of the most elaborate locational possibilities.

Price's early projects about information explored telecommunication possibilities, for example his Oxford Corner House, Central London (1966), in which information networks were to create communication possibilities not dissimilar to what has now become commercially available. In a more ambitious project, the Greater Detroit and Oakland County Adult Educational Network (1966), he was to propose information technology as a substitute for conventional centralized built structures, and explore the possibilities of computer learning-systems with video monitor facilities to be located either in mobile or built environments. Additionally, he was to propose the use of large-scale displays, sometimes projected into the sky, using holograms, or alternatively projected onto the faces of existing built structures, to create city-scale wall displays – a future preoccupation of Pop Art, and particularly of Robert Venturi.

A significant advance in the effect of information technology on architecture was to come in a project Price was to produce for the Gilman Paper Corporation in north Florida, starting in 1978. This scheme, the Generator, explores the notion of artificial intelligence, in which the environment itself becomes an intelligent artefact.

An intelligent environment must have a capacity to learn and a memory and the ability to respond. Since the Fun Palace, Price's architecture had possessed a capacity to respond, that is, it could react formally or mechanically to a given stimulus (an example of a stimulus-response conceptualization). But an architecture which does not simply react, but learns, remembers, when necessary re-learns, and then responds appropriately, is clearly what his approach was leading towards, and it might be said that, if the concept of artificial intelligence had not been created, then Cedric Price would have had to invent it. The Generator project was thus one of the first major investigations into an artificially intelligent architecture.⁴

The Generator is constructed from a series of four-metre laminated wooden cubic-frame modules, precisely detailed and poised on steel adjustment feet. One hundred and fifty cubes are envisaged for the

project and these would be assembled in a variety of configurations. Spaces and enclosures would be created, using orthogonal and diagonal geometries, with walls, screens and gangways, and the volumes would be fully serviced by systems including air-conditioning as well as communications channels.

A visitor to the facility would first go to a fixed-location, double-cube unit, housing computers, monitors and human aids. The visitor would be assisted in handling computers and other simulations, and a process of exchange would commence. The computers initially present a preliminary set of programs to help the visitor create an amenable environment. More detailed contents of the computer programs encourage and help the visitor to make further improvements. There are also implementational and recording programmes to bring mobilizing plant (such as the crane) into action, to create new configurations and to record such movements and assemblies. But there is also a novel anti-inertia programme at work, described as computer boredom. The computer will become 'bored' if the site has not been reorganized or changed for some time. This boredom will result in the computer initiating unsolicited changes. It is interesting to note that the necessity of change becomes a *value* which has been built into its 'thinking'.

But the potential of Generator lies far beyond an investigation into environmental preferences alone. Preliminary surveys assessing reasons for using this facility are progressively enriched by the interactions of each successive visitor. The computer, the brain of the facility, is continuously learning and building up a cumulative bank of experience. The facility's limbs (that still primitive crane technology) are activated on instruction from the brain. A built structure with a prototypical artificial intelligence has been invented, one which serves, perhaps in the most sophisticated manner yet, the purposes of human enabling.

There is much in Price's production to which I have not referred. There is a major body of writings. There are his well known aviaries, each with their different formal concerns, his investigations into lightweight structures, and his important work on air structures. I have made no reference to his work on the construction industry and labour relations or to his planning proposals which include the recent South Bank Development Plan for the Greater London Council. But, perhaps most significantly, I have made no explicit reference to his built work, with the exception of Generator, which has been started but not yet completed.

My focus has been upon Cedric Price's concerns and how we may regard him. If current history may be allowed to judge, then he is already acknowledged as making an important contribution to architectural culture. When put into context, the Price position constitutes an assertion about not only the creation of architecture but also the significance of an underlying ethic. Architecture for him is not only about *making* and *playing*, whether with form, colour, drawings or technology – all of which he loves to do, but it is also about *believing*, and Cedric Price believes in an architecture which must also work for humans. This is where I read his message.

Notes

1. Joan Littlewood, 'A laboratory of fun', *New Scientist*, 14 May 1964.
2. Cedric Price, 'Potteries Thinkbelt', *New Society*, 2 June 1966; Cedric Price, 'PTb', *Architectural Design*, October 1966.
3. The only purchaser of the full Potteries Thinkbelt documentation was the Ministry of Housing and Local Government, who bought the report and copies of every single drawing, including the photo-montages.
4. In making this statement I would not wish to ignore the important work of Professor Nicholas Negroponte and his department at MIT with, for example, his responding wall.