

The Beginnings of the Fun Palace

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Joan Littlewood may have felt she had wasted her time explaining her dream of a 'people's theatre' to Price, but he had been listening after all. As he recalled clearly:

Joan was leaving Theatre Workshop because she was fed up that they were being courted by the West End theatres.... So she went via Algeria to Africa. She said 'fuck the theatre'. And that's when I met her. She was just about to leave.... She talked about what she thought, not 'theatre', she didn't use the word 'theatre', but how she'd like to give people a chance to activate their own lives, in learning and appetites and how to behave. And having learned that you were really rather a bright person, you'd go back to your old man or your wife and decide that it wasn't so bad after all. So, it was a launching pad for finding yourself. Her brief to me was, 'I'm doing this in any case, I, Joan. You tell me whether architecture can help.'¹

Price had become quite taken with Littlewood's idea, and in early 1963, soon after she left for Africa to begin filming *The Lion and the Jewel*, he began jotting down his own ideas for the project:

We are apathetic people, if we do not now attempt to make a new art of living, instead of escaping from living into rather dreary art. As a temporary measure the proposal has been put forward that every town should have a space at its disposal where the latest discoveries of engineering and science can provide an environment for pleasure and discovery, a place to look at the stars, to eat, stroll, meet and play.²

While his office produced drawings for the London Zoo Aviary, Price began work on the Fun Palace, and although he was certainly committed to paid work, his heart was now in this new project. Price began to correspond with Littlewood while she was in Africa, and by the time she returned to England in 1963, they had become close friends. Littlewood, however, still had no idea of his interest in an alternative people's theatre; much less that he had actually produced designs for it.

Shortly after her return to England, she visited Price's office. He gestured toward a drawing board covered with a number of incomprehensible diagrams and sketches of her theatre. Littlewood recalled their conversation:

The drawing was almost inexplicable. I could make out filigree towers, varied areas at different levels, there were galleries, gantries and escalators—it looked airborne.
'Can it be kept clean?'
'It's a self-washing giant.'
'And those things?'
'Moving walkways and catwalks. No, you're pointing at the radial escalators. They can be steered.'

'It's not easy to read.'

'It's a mobile, not a watercolour. And I am rather busy.'³

This was Littlewood's brusque introduction to Price's architectural interpretation of her idea. The drawings were so abstract and diagrammatic that she still had no idea of what it might finally look like. Nevertheless, it seemed to be happening, and with Price on her side, she threw herself into the effort:

I'd never been more serious about anything. Since childhood, I'd been adding to the list of delights this century owed us, but I'd never found anyone to work with me on it. Now this young architect was actually trying to realise it. I began listing all the activities that would be possible in a palace of the future.⁴

By early 1963, Littlewood had once again settled in London, and she rejoined the Theatre Workshop where she produced the hit production, *Oh, What a Lovely War*. However, her still unnamed project had become a major preoccupation, and she devoted an increasing amount of time to it. Price variously referred to the project as the "idea", "dream", "palace" or "mobile", until he conceived of an appropriate moniker: 'the Fun Palace', to which she responded, "It's so wrong, it's right."⁵ The newly christened Fun Palace was no longer just Littlewood's private dream, but now a full-blown collaboration with Price.

Early conceptual sketch of Fun Palace interior, c 1963
Image courtesy of Cedric Price Fonds, Collection Centre Canadien d'Architecture/Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal



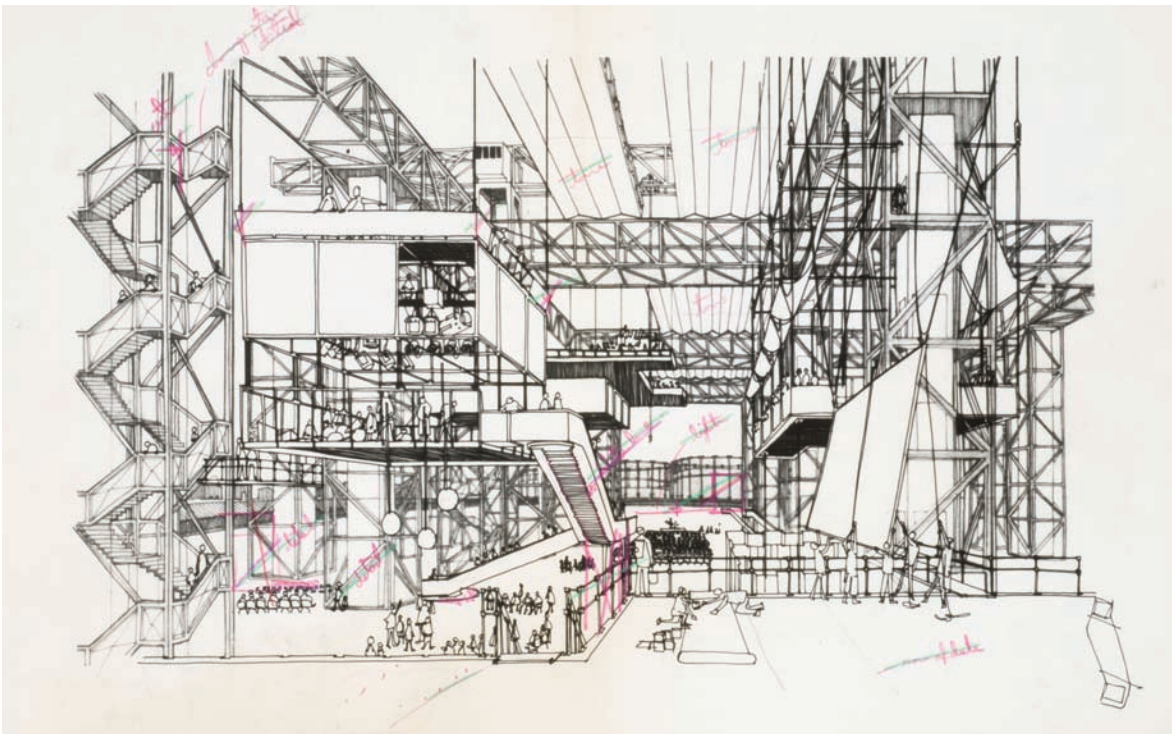
The Fun Palace concept evolved gradually at first, and Littlewood and Price began to define its objectives in a series of manuscripts:

By careful planning we could have an environment in which the human mind and spirit may either relax or find the stimulus and delight which leads to creative activity.... This series of forms, these ideas, shall not be sealed or enclosed by some limiting scheme or statistical or sociological theories regarding the activity of the people, but in their incompleteness the place will leave to people themselves the possibility of developing new experiences for themselves.⁶

Littlewood went on to suggest that the exploratory and educational aspects of the Fun Palace were remedies for the shortcomings of the British educational system—a system she felt was elitist and could not meet the demands of modern technology.

Although Littlewood was also strongly committed to the educational aspects of the Fun Palace, she was reticent to stress this: “I think we should keep ‘learning’ out of it. It’s a stupid word.”⁷ Littlewood’s sentiments belie her rhetoric, since she cared deeply about education; she simply disliked the word ‘learning’, with all its exclusive and elitist connotations. Her real goal was to emancipate and democratise education:

Interior perspective of the Fun Palace, c 1964
Pink and green pencil on wove paper
Image courtesy of Cedric Price Foundation, Collection Centre Canadien d'Architecture/Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal



Nineteenth century society worked on the principle of 'higher education' for a minority, and that education was designed merely to perpetuate the status quo; museums and art centres were built 'to form and promote a taste for the beautiful... [and to] humanise, educate and refine a practical and laborious people'. These concepts have not changed and our society is perpetuating obsolete forms in which human energy can no longer be contained. The most important aspects of human development are still ignored by town planners and the problem of alleviating human misery, despair and apathy is so acute that every skilled teacher, cybernetician and artist must be recruited for the war on dullness.⁸

Price and Littlewood regarded the Fun Palace as a creative and educational outlet for leisure time. Post-war projections had indicated that the current trend towards shorter working hours would continue, and that workplace automation would soon lead to a predominantly leisure-based economy for Britain.

Leisure soon became a major political, economic, social, and architectural issue in Britain, and was a key element of the 1959 Labour Party platform. British social critics and politicians alike sought (sometimes in a rather patronising and puritanical spirit) to channel working class free time away from idleness and unacceptable forms of leisure (such as crime, alcoholism, and political revolution), towards new constructive and productive uses, through newly organised recreational, educational (liberal) or consumerist (conservative) ventures. A 1963 editorial in *New Statesman*, entitled "The Terrible Challenge of Leisure", addressed the lingering suspicions surrounding free time: "Leisure is still confused with idleness—and sin. Too many of us still uncritically accept Dr. Johnson's axiom: 'A man is never so innocently employed as when making money.'"⁹

In Fun Palace memoranda, Price and Littlewood used the terms "learning" and "leisure" more or less interchangeably because they believed in the Fun Palace as a constructive use of free time. In a 1964 lecture, Price made the Ruskinian argument that work and enjoyment need not be mutually exclusive, stating that it was "essential to eliminate [the] unreal division between leisure and work time".¹⁰ Yet, given the uncertainties of British society and this economy, it was impossible to predict what the future would bring; whether free time or skills retraining would come to dominate the needs of the nation. Price explained that in the Fun Palace "there were leisure skills, cooking and all that, but there was new learning as a leisure activity. We didn't know which way it would be categorised, we didn't care. We couldn't predict."¹¹

Their many notes and manifesto drafts indicate that the Fun Palace was intended explicitly as a response to the social and economic crises that plagued post-war England, and especially to the way in which technology promised to erase the distinctions between work, education, and leisure.

Automation is coming. More and more, machines do our work for us. There is going to be yet more time left over, yet more human energy unconsumed. The problem which faces us is far more than that of the 'increased leisure' to which our politicians and educators so innocently refer. This is to underestimate the future. The fact is that as machines take over more of the drudgery, work and leisure are increasingly irrelevant concepts. The distinction between them breaks down. We need, and we have a right, to enjoy the totality of our lives. We must start discovering now how to do so.¹²

Price expressed the transformation in terms of a dissolution of the old leisure/work time dichotomy, and proposed a new synthesis or unification of the two:

The division between work and leisure has never been more than a convenient generalisation used in summarising conscious human activity—voluntary and imposed. Both the nature and scale of conditions causing or requiring imposed activity have changed to such a great extent over the past 25 years that even the convenience of such a division is no longer acceptable.

The present sociopolitical talk of increased leisure makes both a slovenly and dangerous assumption that people on the one hand are still sufficiently numb or servile to accept that the period during which they earn money can be little more than made mentally hygienically [sic] bearable and that a new mentality is awakened during periods of self-willed activity.¹³

Littlewood, equally explicit about her desire to redefine leisure in post-industrial Britain, agreed that the distinction between 'work' and 'leisure' was no longer relevant.

So, how are we to use our freedom from unnecessary labour? We shall be caught short again, as we were after the invention of the steam engine, if we don't look out... 'work' and 'leisure' overlap and merge: life becomes a whole.¹⁴

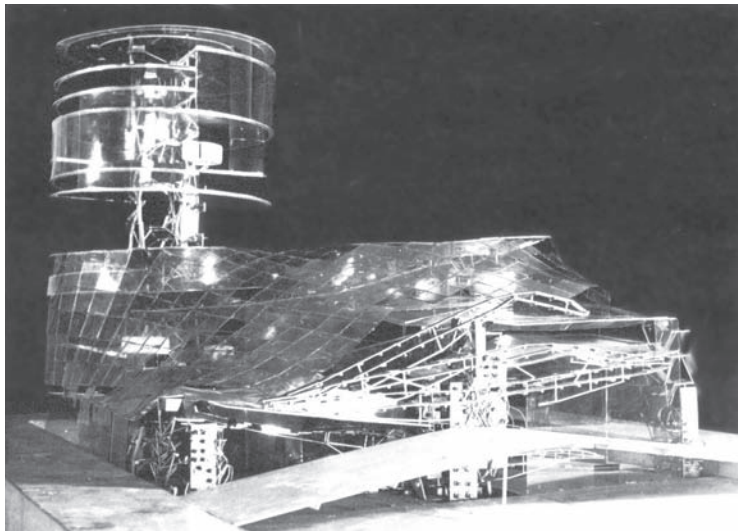
For Littlewood, the Fun Palace would realise the social coming-to-consciousness that she and Brecht had envisioned for the theatre. Her bitter experience with Theatre Workshop had proven the limitations of achieving such a goal with conventional theatre. In her notes, she wrote:

... these experiments may have seemed to fail, but their inspiration spread; and they prove the possibility of human advance through the cooperation of men and women with a wide variety of training and experience but a common language, working together for an important end.¹⁵

She stressed the urgency of identifying whether or not the Fun Palace might succeed where other attempts had failed.

The Fun Palace thus became a problem of finding a new architecture for the new leisure society. However, neither Price nor Littlewood felt that there were many useful architectural models on which to base their project. Other British architects were also beginning to grapple with the issue of increasing free time. *The Architects' Journal* devoted more than half of its January 1965 issue to the architectural problems posed by the "age of leisure".¹⁶ At the time, the building types directed toward leisure were largely limited to adult education schools, movie theatres, and sports facilities, such as bowling alleys and race tracks (greyhound racing was extremely popular among the middle class), and the Crystal Palace Sports Centre. A notable exception was Centre 42, a theatre which grew out of playwright Arnold Wesker's efforts to bring culture to the trade unions.

The only contemporary project which came close to the spirit of Price's work was architecture student Mike Webb's Sin Centre, 1959, his thesis project for Regent Street Polytechnic.¹⁷ He had designed an innovative entertainment centre for the site of the Empire Theatre at London's Leicester Square, incorporating several radical concepts. Pedestrian and vehicle circulation were brought together along spiralling ramps. Floor decks were made of pre-stressed aluminium, allowing a degree of 'live' vibratory responsiveness in the structure. Heating and ventilation ducts snaked through the helical matrix, and most of the structure was wrapped in a tensile skin of plastic and steel cables. Webb's Sin Centre was such a radical departure from the architectural norms of the day that, even though it had been published, it was rejected



**Mike Webb
Entertainments
Centre (Sin Centre)
Model, 1959-1961
Black and white
photograph
Image courtesy of
Archigram Archives**

by his tutors until James Stirling intervened on his behalf. The Sin Centre became an icon of the Archigram group, formed in 1961 by Webb and a handful of other young architects. However, although the Sin Centre predated the Fun Palace, Webb expressed doubt that his ideas had any significant impact on Price's designs for that project.

Price and Littlewood found their greatest inspiration in England's historical architecture of 'fun': pleasure domes, follies, music halls, public gardens, and so forth. There had in the past also been philanthropic efforts to build facilities for working class leisure and education, notably Sir Walter Besant's People's Palace. The social plight of east London had been the subject of numerous books and articles, but had failed to attract widespread public attention until the publication of Besant's 1882 novel, *All Sorts and Conditions of Men: An Impossible Story*.¹⁸ In the book, Besant describes a People's Palace—an educational and recreational facility for the disadvantaged of London's East End. After a groundswell of public support, Besant established a foundation to promote the idea of the People's Palace. It was built in 1887 on Mile End Road and continued to operate until 1953, (the same year that Littlewood moved to the Theatre Royal in the East End). In 1954, the People's Palace was taken over by Queen Mary College, although amateur theatre groups continued to use the Great Hall.¹⁹

The only historical models which appealed to Price and Littlewood were London's great public pleasure gardens of the eighteenth century at Vauxhall and Ranelagh, which served the broadest possible demography of London until the advent of the Industrial Revolution.

Since Littlewood's 'idea' prescribed no particular programme or fixed activities, Price decided that it should have no specific form and no fixed floor plan. It would not be truly 'complete' or even a 'building' in any conventional sense of the word. Was it possible that the users could 'design' it as they used it? Rather than design a conventional building to contain Littlewood's fluid and



Thomas Bowles
London's Ranelagh
Gardens, 1794
 Hand-coloured engraving
 21 x 40 cm
 Image courtesy of Royal
 Borough of Kensington
 and Chelsea Library

transformational programme, Price began to conceive a skeletal framework, like a garden trellis, within and around which activities might grow and develop:

Its form and structure, resembling a large shipyard in which enclosures such as theatres, cinemas, restaurants, workshops, rally areas, can be assembled, moved, rearranged and scrapped continuously. Its mechanically operated environmental controls are such that it can be sited in a hard dirty industrial area unsuited to more conventional types of amenity buildings.²⁰

Price started to perceive the Fun Palace as an 'anti-building', even referring to himself as an 'anti-architect':

The varied and ever-changing activities will determine the form of the site. To enclose these activities the anti-building must have equal flexibility. Thus the prime motivation of the area is caused by the people and their activities and the resultant form is continually dependent on them. The fact that such enjoyment does take place within the pathetic areas in London's slums gives a clue to the immense potential for enjoyment in an area which encourages random movement and variable activities.²¹

The variability of the Fun Palace would not be based on physical obsolescence, fashion or taste, (as it was in Archigram projects), but on the constantly changing programmatic needs of the users.

The Fun Palace programme would be ad hoc, determined by the users and, like a swarm or meteorological system, its behaviour would be unstable, indeterminate, and unknowable in advance. Yet, even without a specific programme or objective, the Fun Palace would have to self-regulate, and its physical configuration and operations would need to anticipate and respond to probable patterns of use.

Price realised that the solution to the problems posed by the Fun Palace lay in the fields of cybernetics, game theory, and computer technologies that he had learned of through lectures at the ICA.²² The Fun Palace would need to be able to 'learn' behavioural patterns and 'plan' for future activities by modelling these according to cybernetics principles and game theory strategies. It would thus be able to anticipate unpredictable phenomena, because instead of a determined programme, it would rely on probability to adjust its programme to accommodate changing trends and events.²³

Cybernetics allowed dynamic systems to self-regulate and self-correct without an end-state or definite telos. The performative objectives of cybernetics are in reality fluid criteria and are as subject to modification as is the system itself.

Norbert Wiener's pioneering theories in the field of cybernetics provided the basis for a new theory of the behaviour of unstable

systems.²⁴ Although cybernetics was commonly associated with computers and information technology, Wiener felt that it was really a model of the natural processes which permit all living things to actively maintain the conditions of life in a changing world. He cited French physiologist Claude Bernard, who in the early nineteenth century had described the function of feedback systems that enabled living organisms to maintain homeostasis despite unstable environmental conditions. The principles of cybernetics would prove to be crucial to the ability of the Fun Palace to adapt to a constantly evolving programme. While cybernetics would regulate the short term behaviour of daily activities, game theory would provide a means of establishing long term performative strategies.

Game theory, developed by John von Neumann in the 1920s, did not merely respond to changing conditions and suggest short term course corrections, but indicated long term strategies and modifications to the performative guidelines of complex systems, thus transcending the temporal limitations of cybernetics. In accounting for the indeterminate and synergistic interaction of factors, game theory resembled the dynamic behaviour of complex social and economic systems.

Von Neumann's mathematical theory of games also provided the basis for the logical codes of the modern electronic computer, which have come to be known as the computer program. As early as 1927, Alan Turing suggested that alterations of the sequence of von Neumann's operating codes would create a virtual machine which could be made to emulate the behaviour of many different devices.²⁵ A 'virtual architecture' like the Fun Palace, had no singular programme, but could be reprogrammed to perform an endless variety of functions. By providing methodologies for coping with indeterminate systems evolving in time, cybernetics and game theory established the groundwork for information and computer technologies as well as for virtual architecture.

The Fun Palace programme would therefore not be the conventional diagram of architectural spaces, but much closer to what we might understand as the computer program: an array of algorithmic functions and logical gateways that control temporal processes in a virtual device. The three-dimensional structure of the Fun Palace was the operative space-time matrix of a virtual architecture.

A major turning point for the Fun Palace project occurred in the spring of 1963, when Littlewood first learned of Gordon Pask. Pask, the "doyen of Romantic Cyberneticians", had already made a name for himself as head of the British cybernetics foundation, Systems Research Ltd.²⁶ Littlewood and Price wrote to Pask asking if he would contribute his expertise of the field to the project. It turned out that Pask was a fan of Littlewood's Theatre Workshop, and he wrote back offering to help out on the Fun Palace. He was fascinated with the project, which he felt was more about "seeking the unfamiliar, and ultimately transcending it" than conventional "fun".²⁷



Gordon Pask
Image reproduced by
permission of the
Pask Archives

To Pask, the central theme of cybernetics was the study of the ways in which complex biological, social or mechanical systems organise, regulate and reproduce themselves, evolve, and learn.²⁸ He regarded cybernetics not as a unilateral system of one-way reactivity, but as a two way 'conversation' between entities. To Pask, cybernetics held particular promise for architecture and design, which he saw as essentially interactive (or 'conversational') systems of human interaction.²⁹ Architecture, argued Pask, is "only meaningful as a human environment. It perpetually interacts with its inhabitants, on the one hand serving them and on the other hand controlling their behaviour."³⁰ In other words, Pask believed that through cybernetic design, the architect could assume the role of social engineer.

Pask agreed to join the Fun Palace team and organised the Fun Palace Cybernetics Subcommittee, and along with Littlewood and Price, he became the third major personality behind the Fun Palace. He would gradually shift the focus of the Fun Palace from Brechtian theatre towards cybernetics, interaction and social control.

The latest advances in cybernetic technology appeared to hold endless promise as a means of reconciling 'bricks and mortar' with the multivalent and ever-changing functions and programmes of the Fun Palace. Price and Littlewood's unbridled optimism for science and technology may seem ill-informed and charmingly naive, yet at the time, many people firmly believed in the limitless possibilities that science and technology promised for the betterment of mankind, and they eagerly welcomed Pask's contributions. Still, Price didn't exactly agree with Pask's notion of the architect as social engineer. Instead, he trusted that the cybernetic control systems would enable him or any other paternal, controlling force to withdraw from the scene entirely. Price had hoped that an autonomous cybernetic control system would allow users to shape their own environments and their own goals according to their particular wishes and desires, not his or those of some elite intelligentsia.

At the beginning of its formation, Price and Littlewood remained circumspect and said little about the Fun Palace. As word of the project gradually leaked out however, architecture and design magazines began requesting details and plans of the building. Price initially refused all such requests. He claimed that it did not exist, that it was really only "a kit of parts, not a building. I doubt whether it will ever look the same twice".³¹ Littlewood and Price soon realised that if the Fun Palace were ever to become a reality they would need a great deal of help and support. Nevertheless, they remained cautious and initially discussed the idea only with a select group of people. Yet, by mid-1963, Littlewood and Price began recruiting people to work on the project.

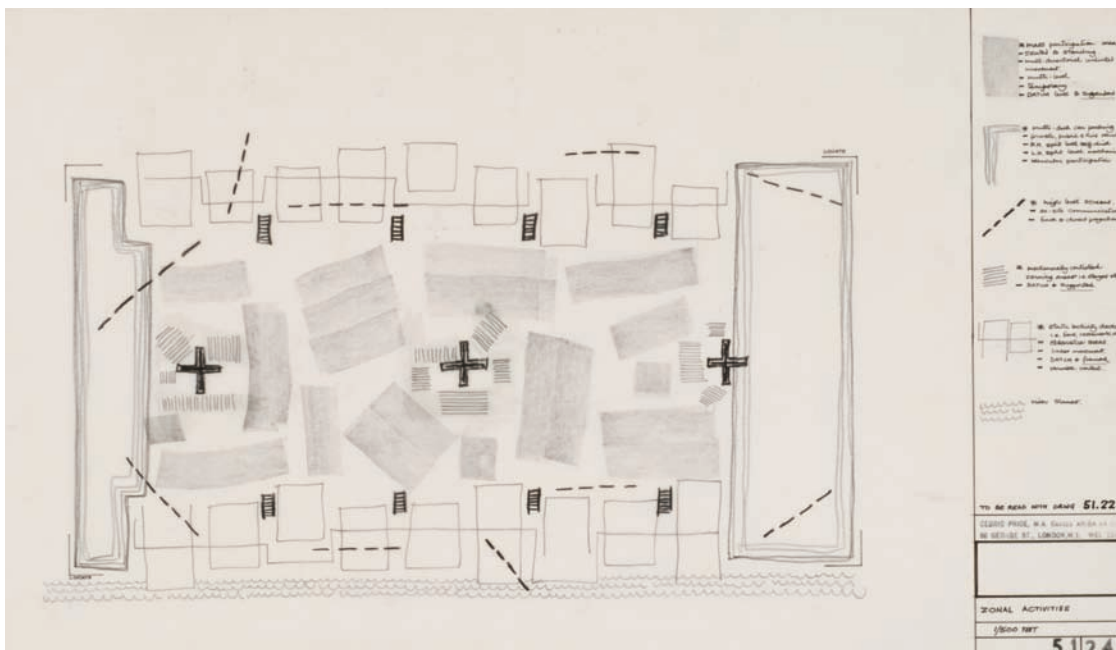
The architectural and programmatic developments of the Fun Palace were never solely the invention of its initiators. They were the products of an intense and close working relationship not only between Littlewood and Price, but also with the scores of enthusiastic scientists, sociologists, psychologists, cyberneticians, and politicians who volunteered their time and energies towards

the project. Authorship of the Fun Palace was dispersed across the many designers, contributors, collaborators, and consultants, such that the final design amounted to an architectural *cadavre exquis* which represented something different to each member of the Fun Palace design team. In the end, the project was so collaborative that it is difficult to say exactly who designed what, its very authorship was as fluid and indeterminate as the design itself.

The Fun Palace was the right idea at the right time. People were interested in the technical challenges of such a place and fascinated by its creative and social implications. Price and Littlewood set up a series of consultant task forces to begin the process of programming and planning the project. The Fun Palace project began to resemble a modern, secular version of the collaborative coming together of various disciplines reminiscent of the nineteenth century visions of the construction of medieval cathedrals. The result was the metasynthesis of architecture, theatre, technology, and cybernetics (which became increasingly important as the project progressed).

Within a few months, the list of Fun Palace consultants (see Appendix A) included such luminaries as Labour Members of Parliament Tony Benn, Tom Driberg, and Ian Mikardo, structural engineer Frank Newby, architect Yona Friedman, cybernetician Gordon Pask, award-winning producer Robert Whitehead, iconoclastic journalist and broadcaster Malcolm Muggeridge, and the aforementioned psychiatrist and author Morris Carstairs, who had given the 1962 BBC Reith Lectures on the challenges facing England in the twentieth century.³²

Conceptual plan, Fun Palace, 1963
 Black pencil, black ink, graphite on wove paper
 38.3 x 70.1 cm
 Image courtesy of Cedric Price Fonds
 Collection Centre
 Canadien d'Architecture/
 Canadian Centre for
 Architecture, Montréal



Price had already begun to design the structure of the Fun Palace. His initial 1963 design was for a series of 18.3 metre square structural steel grids topped with cranes to move modular elements into place. He sketched out a structural exoskeleton resembling a scaffold, equipped with travelling gantry cranes to manoeuvre the various plug-in components. The users could improvise and change their own spaces, using the cranes to assemble prefabricated walls, platforms, floors, stairs, and ceiling modules. Once he was satisfied with this basic structural scheme, Price sought the expertise of Frank Newby with whom he had worked on the London Aviary.

Newby pointed out three problems with Price's initial structural scheme. First, to move objects from one end to the other, far too many cranes were required (one for every 18.3 metres). Second, vertical circulation—staircases as well as elevators and mechanical ducts—would have to run through the bays themselves, taking up valuable space and reducing the flexibility of the overall structure. Third, the entire structure would have to be fireproofed.

Newby designed a more efficient structural system consisting of 14 parallel rows of square service towers, 18.3 metres apart, forming two 18.3 metre side 'aisles' flanking the 36.6 metre-wide central bay. The resulting plan was a pattern of interlocking squares which Newby referred to as the "tartan grid". The tartan grid provided both structural stability and programmatic flexibility. Stairs, elevators, electrical cables, and mechanical ducts

Fun Palace, 1963
 Black ink, graphite, black and brown pencil, yellow and red adhesive dots on wove paper
 36.2 x 70.2 cm
 Image courtesy of Cedric Price Fonds
 Collection Centre Canadien d'Architecture/
 Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal

