Legislating for Enthusiasm: from Fun Palace to Creative Prison

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The Lower Lea Valley, formed by strips of common land, canals and marshes separating the Metropolitan Borough of Hackney from the Victorian suburbs of Newham, Walthamstow and Leyton, was firstly an agricultural then industrial area characterised by railways, greenhouses, warehouses and light manufacturing up until the end of the Second World War. This zone, shaped by the successive waves of redevelopment that have assailed its wild, industrial and playful nature, is currently in the process of becoming the largest building site in London. Regeneration, a buzz word of the Blair era, is contemporary parlance for the violent forms of destruction and displacement which have accompanied capitalist development throughout industrialisation, but now appear loosed from the production of competitive advantage for the growth of capital.

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. - Cedric Price, 1963.
Instead, apparently unchecked they generate a race to the bottom, producing competing world cities entirely at the behest of the tourism, entertainment, financial, insurance and real estate economies. The London 2012 Olympics promises to transform not only the specific zone of the Lower Lea Valley, but the whole of East London to suit the interests of these new, and until recently, booming industries.

In 1964 the architect Cedric Price and theatre director, Joan Littlewood, made plans for a ‘Fun Palace’ to be sited in the Lower Lea Valley in a corner of the zone, between Stratford and West Ham, currently being developed under the auspices of the Olympic Delivery Authority for the 2012 London Olympics.

The Fun Palace was to be the culmination of the socialist theatre director, Littlewood’s dream for a flexible theatrical space open to all and shaped by its users’ interests: a space 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

These ideas met Cedric Price’s novel notions of architecture as ‘social means’. The Fun Palace was to be the very model of Price’s radical principles in architecture, embodying flexibility, interdeterminacy, mobility, openness, and employing cheap, lightweight industrial materials.

Since Littlewood’s ‘idea’ prescribed no particular programme or fixed activities, Price decided that it should have no specific plan and no fixed floor plan.³

The Fun Palace was to include a retractable corrugated roof, two gantry cranes on rails spanning the full 73.2 metres of the two central bays, service towers producing a grid of interlocking squares, stair towers, pivoting escalators and moving walkways, a rally area, temporary modules and kiosks. Having no entrance, the ground floor would provide open access. This flexible and impermanent architectural framework was to support a complex system of ‘environmental controls generating charged static-vapour zones, optical barriers, warm-air curtains and fog dispersal.’⁴

Price was obsessed with containerisation. As an integral part of the Fun Palace design, gantry cranes would move building modules around the site. In 1967 Reyner Banham had celebrated the aesthetics of containerisation in his article ‘Flatscape with Containers’ suggesting that the modular aesthetic of the container challenged architecture to develop an anti-monumentality in line with the new conditions that the age of mobility and indeterminacy brought with it.⁵ Price’s architecture was thought of at the time as pragmatic and anti-symbolic, yet the deployment of industrial materials to ‘cultural’ ends can be seen to have its own symbolism peculiar to his de-industrialising times.

A promotional pamphlet for the Fun Palace promised activities such as: ‘Kunst Dabbling, Genius Chat, Clownery, Fireworks, Rallies, Battles of Flowers, Concerts, Science Gadgetry, Juke Box Information, Learning Machines...’. The approach to culture as ludic, open and participatory shares elements of the Situationist critique of spectacular society: ‘the world of everyone’s separation, estrangement and nonparticipation’.⁶ From the start of the Fun Palace project, Cedric Price and Joan Littlewood had explicitly framed their project in terms of mending the false division between work and leisure: ‘[It was] essential to eliminate [the] unreal division between leisure and work time.’⁷

Price and Littlewood like many radicals (such as Alexander Trocchi, Constant Nieuwenhuys and others) were influenced by the expectation of the ‘new windfall of leisure time’ provided to the working classes by mechanisation and automation:

Those who at present work in factories, mines and offices will quite soon be able to

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3 Stanley Matthews, p.72.
4 Stanley Matthews, p.81.
7 Stanley Matthews, p.69
live as only a few people now can: choosing their own congenial work, doing as little of it as they like, and filling their leisure with whatever delights them. Those people who like fiddling with machinery and pressing buttons can service and press buttons in the robot-manned factories.\(^8\)

Or, as Trocchi put it: ‘Thus freed from all economic responsibility, man will have at his disposal a new plus-value, incalculable in monetary terms, a plus-value not computable according to the accountancy of salaried work... play value.’\(^9\)

It is interesting to read these utopian predictions of the end of ‘work’ in the light of our now apparently wholly de-industrialised society, where work continues by other means. What is activity after work? Perhaps a more pointed way to direct this question would be to ask: how is capitalism to extract value from workers after they are ‘free’ from work?

Price was concerned that this new leisure time be spent productively, i.e. in training for the new forms of work. He applied himself to the problem of the ‘brain drain’ Britain was perceived as suffering from – by which skilled and educated workers were leaving the UK for Europe and America. So, while government planners were concerning themselves with reproducing workers with more free time as ‘workers’, Price was devising new forms of training and education disguised as ‘leisure’. Leisure is after all, like work, coordinated activity. Through a close reading of Price’s work and the Fun Palace project in particular, the word ‘fun’ emerges as a trope for new ‘productive and constructive uses’ of free time.\(^10\)

Here, Price and Littlewood’s approach diverges with the Situationist project. The Situationist’s were revolutionaries attempting to reconstruct the world as ‘unified totality’ through experimental activity towards a revolution of everyday life. Price and Littlewood are more akin to planners, managers or entrepreneurs seeking to create an island of populist experimentation firmly in tune with the needs of capitalist development.

Whilst many of the pioneers of radical thought of the 1960s were celebrating the new struggles for free time and a qualitatively improved life, there were important labour struggles taking place. Some of those struggles may not have fitted the notion of what Price and others like him might have considered ‘progressive’. One area of conflict in particular is directly related to the contested role of new technology that so fascinated Price and could also be related geographically to the liminal zone which the Fun Palace, and now the London 2012 Olympics, would occupy.

The most significant struggle, along with the miners’ strike, was the dockers’ fight against the containerisation of goods which cost jobs. The dockers had been fighting this throughout the 1960s but it exploded as an issue in 1972.\(^11\)

These efforts by dockers were not an attempt to freely express themselves in a world after work, but rather defensive campaigns to keep hold of what work they still had. By pure coincidence, the testing ground for the introduction of containerisation into the Port of London took place on what is now part of the ‘Stratford City’ site – a retail and housing development parallel to the London 2012 Olympics – Chobham Farm, a goods yard behind Stratford station, close to the new Eurostar terminal.

Three London dockers were threatened with prison for picketing the Chobham Farm container base in June. Some 35,000 dockers struck unofficially throughout Britain in support of the pickets, and hundreds joined the picket of Chobham Farm the day the arrests were expected.

These protests spiralled from a defensive campaign to protect jobs into one the largest actions by organised labour since the General Strike with around 250,000 workers uniting to release the imprisoned dockers.

In 1951 the Port of London was the second largest docks in the world. So, whilst it is claimed that the docks and the extensive canal traffic that

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10 Stanley Matthews, p.69.
served them were wound down due to the impossibility of getting larger ships up the Thames, containerisation also has a pivotal role in the transformation in the Port of London’s fortunes. It was also no accident that London’s docks had historically contained some of the most militant unions and labour organisations.

With the use of larger ships and containerisation, the importance of the upstream port declined rapidly from the mid-1960s. The enclosed docks further up river declined and closed progressively between the end of the 1960s and the early 1980s. The enclosed docks further up river declined and closed progressively between the end of the 1960s and the early 1980s.12

The photographer, Allan Sekula, has written extensively about the transformation of maritime space through containerisation, of how the space, both of the sea and on land, is flattened, smoothed out, mirroring and tuning it to the abstract flows of money that commands the movement of goods:

What one sees in the harbour is the concrete movement of goods. [...] If the stock market is the site in which the abstract character of money rules, the harbour is the site in which material goods appear in bulk, in the very flux of exchange. [...] But the more regularized, literally containerized, the movement of goods in harbours, that is, the more rationalised and automated, the more the harbour comes to resemble the stock market.13

There is no mention, in the 1951 Development of London Plan, of the advent of larger ships or the technical necessity of containerisation as an argument for the transformation of the docks. Rather, the displacement of industry from the river and canalside is argued for in terms of the twin evils of blight and pollution, to be cured by the virtues of parks, open space and picturesque views. In 1951, 85.1 percent of the riverside below Blackfriars Bridge was used for industrial and commercial uses. At the time of writing at least the same percentage is occupied by luxury apartments. As early as 1951 the potential for the docks as a site of work (dirty) transformed into the scene of leisure and conspicuous consumption (picturesque and historic), can be glimpsed.

But this development would not only affect the river, canals and former docklands, it is symptomatic of a broader shift across the UK to a services based economy and a built environment that would both reflect and, to an arguable extent, engineer that shift. Price and Littlewood’s plans, despite being unrealised, represent a significant response to the conditions and arguments steering the post-war reconstruction of London. Moreover, we can see the ‘visionary’ principles explored in the plans for the Fun Palace: the collapse of distinction between leisure and work, the mechanisation of play, administered participation, user-generated content; the very paradigm of (and perhaps re-appearance as farce) of those same virtues and values celebrated in the post-Fordist work/leisure camp currently under the management of New Labour.

In order to facilitate an environment which was to be ‘continuously adaptable, acknowledging change and indeterminacy in a continuously evolving process’,14 Littlewood and Price put together an interdisciplinary group of collaborators and consultants from engineering, design, theatre, cybernetics and technology. Whilst Price and Littlewood are interpreted as utopian visionaries working with the advanced technologies and ideas of their times, some of the ideas of the Cybernetics Group for the Fun Palace seem in retrospect profoundly sinister. A good example is Gordon Pask’s sketch ‘Organisational Plan as Programme’, indicating in a circuit-like diagram a feedback loop between the ‘Input of Unmodified people’ arriving in the building and the ‘Output of Modified People’ interacting as they leave.

Unfortunately, neither Littlewood nor Price can be saved from the implications of their own patrician prejudices. As Joan Littlewood put it in a letter to Gordan Pask, head of the Cybernetics Group: ‘We can to some extent control these transformations, though, in this case, we and our machinery act as catalysts and most of the computation is done as a result of the interaction taking place between members of the population, either by verbal discourse, or by cooperation to achieve a common objective. The paradigm for the control of such a population is the maturation of a child, the subtle interplay of action and the existing language to produce thought, and the development of meaning to control action in society.’15

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12 http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Port_of_London_Authority
14 Matthews, p.195.
15 Letter from Littlewood to Gordon Pask quoted Matthews p.121.
In an attitude typical of colonialism, the proletarian test subject is imagined as less than adult, suitable for experimentation upon, but not necessarily in full possession of their own volition. In this sense Price’s architecture anticipated post-Fordism itself. Open architecture would act as project, as soft policing and springboard for social transformation. As Price said of a project closely related to the failed Fun Palace, ‘the Potteries Thinkbelt was not an expressive or symbolic building, but an interactive device in which the subject could undergo a transformation.’

Brian Holmes’ excavation of the vision of the ideal post-Fordist worker from management literature and social commentary of the late 1990s provides an accurate description of the subject this experiment was to produce:

I call this ideal type the flexible personality. The word ‘flexible’ alludes directly to the current economic system, with its casual labor contracts, its just-in-time production, its informational products and its absolute dependence on virtual currency circulating in the financial sphere. But it also refers to an entire set of very positive images, spontaneity, creativity, cooperativity, mobility, peer relations, appreciation of difference, openness to present experience. If you feel close to the counter-culture of the sixties-seventies, then you can say that these are our creations, but caught in the distorting mirror of a new hegemony.

This corresponds to the new forms of subjectivity training and behavior modification at work in the futuristic projections of the 2012 Olympic site. A subtext to the arguments by which it is framed by planners and politicians is not just the transformation of a landscape, but with it the creation of new, more malleable subjects.

The 2012 games will be a catalyst for one of the most extensive urban and environmental regeneration programmes ever seen in the UK. The new Olympic Park under construction in the Lower Lea Valley will revive one of the most deprived areas in the country. Thousands of jobs will be created. Transport links will be transformed. Thousands of homes for key workers will be built. Parts of the landscape that have been wasteland will spring to life.

This ‘utopian vision’ is played out in the projections for the new Olympic site of the games and in legacy mode. The ‘wasteland’ has been turned over to a harmonious, managed nature, and organised, safe exercise. The signifiers of a dynamic global capitalism litter the landscape: communication technologies, big screens, water framed by the Docklands and city – twin centres of the international financial flows. These images are also characterised by a multiculturalism peculiar to government planners – the dream image of difference without conflict and most importantly without work or workers: no one who has actually built, or contributed to the running or servicing of this place appears in these visions. Whereas in Price’s future model he disposes of labour through automation, the London Development Agency’s vision hides labour in dream-like reflections, glass, water, smoke and mirrors.

A recent example by one of Price’s most successful disciples gives us a flavour of the direction in which his ideas have travelled since their inception, Will Alsop’s Creative Prison project:

The layout of the prison mimics that of a college campus with separate living modules, or ‘blocks’, as Alsop calls them (though I prefer module since block is still such a carceral-centric term). While being typically brightly colored like most of Alsop’s work, the inmates would ‘live in clusters of between 12 and 15’ and would ‘be able to control how long they spent in their cells at the end of a day of work or training’.

Alsop has been extremely successful in so-called Creative Britain building, among other things, Peckham library, flagship of regeneration, and a stem cell research centre in Whitechapel. Alsop’s architecture frequently deploys key ideas popularised by Cedric Price and his contemporaries such as Archigram. The Creative Prison was the

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16 Stanley Matthews, p.195.
18 Tony Blair, quoted in The Guardian, http://www.guardian.co.uk/comment/story/0,,1996481,00.html
culmination of a consultancy project to address the poor conditions and chronic overcrowding of Britain’s prisons. This kind of blue sky thinking should not surprise. As well as promoting creativity New Labour have also innovated in criminalisation. Over 3,000 new criminal offences have been created during the last decade. The collapse of distinction between leisure and work produces a situation in which all is work and work is play. This managed ‘playland’ is only a dystopia predicated on the dream of omni-surveillance and super-exploitation – a creative prison we find being constructed all around us today.

It is no coincidence that several of the promotional images for the London Olympics Park are framed by the two key financial districts, Canary Wharf to the south and the city to the West. Yet, now the financial sector has been hit hard by the credit crisis – revealing its shoddy foundations – what of the architectural mega-projects of London and the creative economy it supports?

Of course to anyone who grew up near the area, the Lea Valley is more familiar as a place where people make their own entertainment: from the allotment holders, footballers, anglers, kite flyers, ramblers, cyclists, nature lovers to the ravers and free party-makers, underage drinkers, graffiti artists, scooter thieves. It is no accident that all these activities require a minimum of services and equipment and yet produce the altered states, collective bonds, social communication and physical exertion that are the very stuff of life. Organised without license (usually) nor permission... without planning nor costly amenity. If the Fun Palace can be considered a pre-vision of the emerging post-industrial society, we can wager the London Olympics won’t be that society’s crowning success. Rather, these designs represent the return, as farce, of Price’s visionary dream – a plasticated world populated by unreal avatars repeating gestures rehearsed on TV. The very creation of this landscape will be underpinned by debt, exploitation and public bankruptcy. What if we think like Price and take a visionary stance towards the future? Both labour and play must be permitted to reappear and their current conditions overcome. Instead of these retro-futurist projections, we could instead begin to imagine what might be built out of the ruins of the financialised city after the new economy.