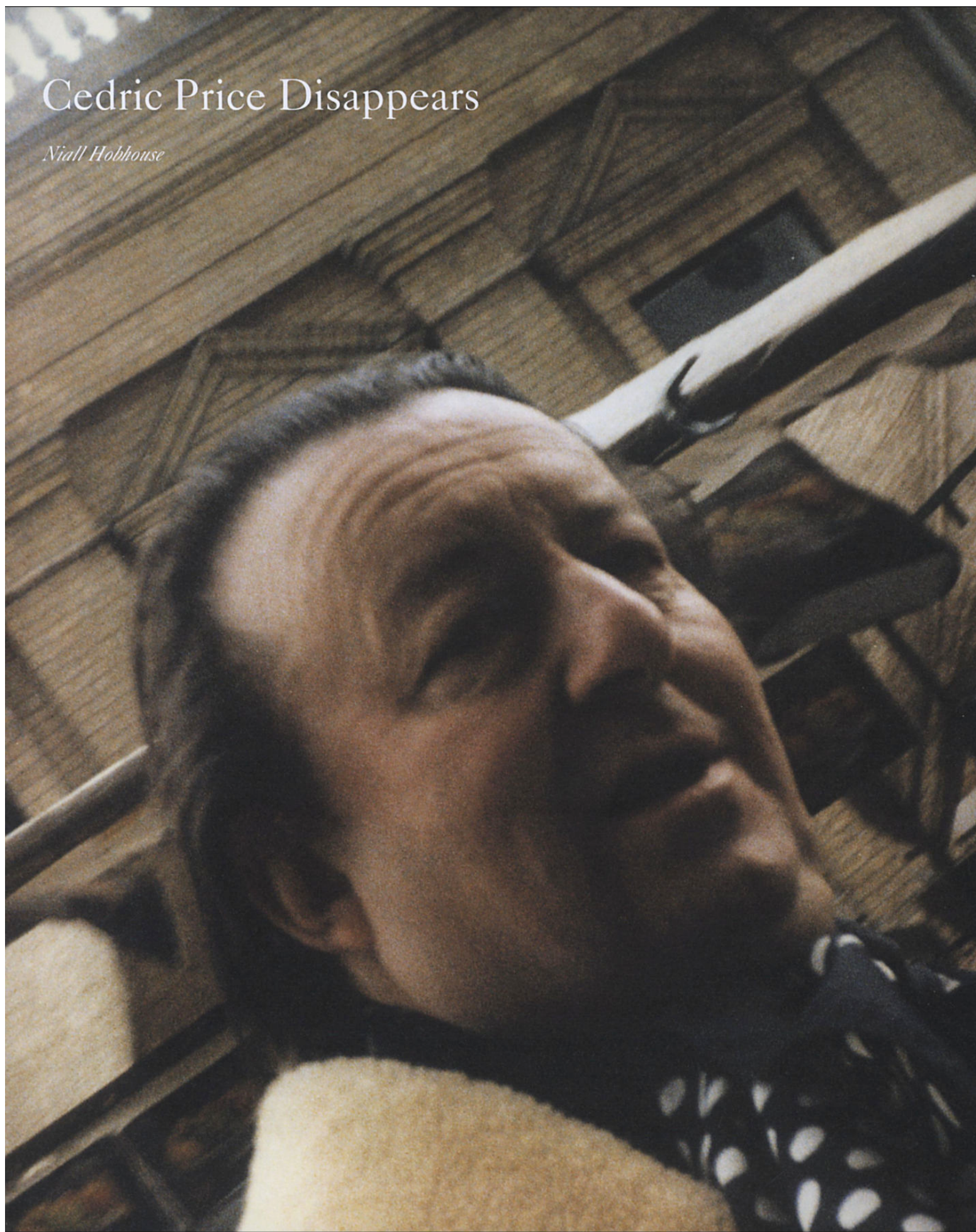


Cedric Price Disappears

Niall Hobhouse



It is very clear that I arrived 25 years too late for the real party. I did, as it happens, get to know Cedric quite well, but only in the last three years. And I was not an architect or historian, but his client.

As a client, though, I pretty much knew what to expect, and pretty much got it. The simple account of what happened is of course that I employed an architect who had made a speciality of *not* building, and together we built nothing. Both architect and client could be open to the charge of playing a trivial and irresponsible game. I would defend Cedric absolutely by making it clear that he executed the commission with great seriousness. Less dogmatically, I might defend myself by saying that the architectural discourse does need occasional patronage, but also that Cedric in his way saved me quite a lot of money.

I came to the conclusion that he was engaged in a fairly bleak critique of himself and of the business he was in, but I would like to qualify this by saying that since it is important – for both parties – that the client never see any practitioner quite whole (and just bad luck that I wasn't around in 1962), it's possible that my version is more occluded than sharpened by its specific and immediate focus. I'm only trying to run it to ground now because I am fairly sure that it is at least the one that Cedric wanted me to carry away.

I'll try to explain what I expected, and then what happened. I had understood that there is generally a clear recognition among architects of the importance of Cedric's contribution to the discourse. What is a mystery is that it seems hard to say exactly why. And *why* do architects in particular find it so hard to say why?

For instance, I've noticed that often when architects are asked why the Fun Palace has assumed a place in the mythology, they give different answers – the radical engineering, the implied politics of the programme, the absence of a true client and the readiness to allow the public to determine the building's form, the new understanding of urban space, the reflexivity of the structure itself.... These ideas in themselves seemed fragmentary and inadequate to the purpose, and it was not simply that other people had had the same ideas individually at much the same moment. Of course there *were* a lot of them all together at one time, and they did more or less connect with one another, if not without contradictions. But actually, as one reads the history of the project, the very strong impression is of its collapsing, rather magnificently, under the sheer weight of aspiration.

It seemed to me that the Fun Palace was famous because it was never built. Or rather that the almost infinite broadening of the programme, and the relentless effacement of the designer that went with it, led, both in a sort of formal *reductio*, and also in fact, to its not being built. Its message could be that if an architect

does all the things that he should do, at least as a decent, left-thinking social animal, he can't in conscience or in practice expect to build much.

I must add here that as a record of Cedric's prescience, only the first bit of the Fun Palace story holds true. All the ideas *have* become part of the way architects think about designing a building, and taken together they read now like a crash-course in fashionable thinking about the city.

But about the second part he could not have been more wrong. Of course, it's pretty unlikely that he thought architects would allow themselves to be consumed by the programme of their buildings, particularly if they then built nothing. But the pattern that has evolved is so completely the reverse, in that the programme of any building – any admired one – tends to be consumed by the issue of its authorship. And seen in the wrong light, all the brave new ideas about programme have somehow become merely useful tools for the authors in the rhetoric of winning a commission.

Cedric never in my hearing identified any building by the name of its architect, and I saw this as a dignified protest against the phenomenon of signature buildings. It may not be a bad thing that when the market goes to particular architects – certainly to particular successful architects – it tends to do so in the expectation that the building that results will be recognisable as theirs; but to me, this seems a very long way from the process, which everybody so admires, by which the Fun Palace was designed.

Enough about what I anticipated by employing Cedric, and why; here is what happened.

Eleanor Bron tells me that Cedric used to quote the Oxford Dictionary, which he claimed defined a client as a person who comes to one in a state of distress. She didn't tell me this until recently, but it is true that my particular distress was that I was gripped – actually *am* gripped – by a real building frenzy, uncomfortably allied with a feeling that any building should have a purpose. The way this presents itself clinically is that for the last ten years I have always had a project on site, and three or four more in gestation. Although nothing is ever on a large scale, the crisis that constantly threatens is of over-building or, worse, over-stimulation of architectural ideas. At root it's a nervous pathology, and one that leaves me highly susceptible to architects.

I had suggested to Cedric that I needed a master-planner, not an architect. It was a fairly quixotic idea and was made more so once we had agreed that the best masterplan was always dead on arrival, the instant victim of its own self-consciousness.

I had described to him something that amounted to the reinvention of a working agricultural estate. There was already some public access, but I wanted more people to come and more engagement with what they

found. There were new jobs, new kinds of jobs and a shift of hierarchy away from the old servicing of a big house. I also wanted to demonstrate – to the local planners in particular – that the careful introduction of a few good contemporary buildings makes it possible to move past the feeble historicism that the regentification of Somerset is making the norm. There was a bit of the privileged *rentier* in this, but also enough of Cobbett to galvanise Cedric into action. To give you more of its flavour, and of the collision between their two kinds of socialism, I should add that Peter Smithson's joke about the whole enterprise was to describe it as 'just a big playpen'.

Into the playpen came Cedric, and I could see that it was a horrible temptation for him. What happened was as much as anything the triumph of conscience over the urge to draw.

His engagement was surprisingly formal and very energetic. There were appointments in the office every other week, always at nine in the morning, and endless urgent requests for surveys, maps, photographs and drainage routes over a thousand acres.

But after this, everything became a kind of extended, solemn play. For a start, there was no brief, just a sheet of paper with strings of adjectives that didn't change much but became a much more powerful document with time. There were drawings, lots of drawings, each one beautifully concise in its imprecision, and they never showed anything I could possibly build. There were flurries of activity devoted to ideas that had been discussed long before and gratefully forgotten by me. Two months were spent on a set of fortifications for the main entrance, an idea that came out of our both admiring Vanbrugh's ramparts at Seaton Delaval. At the end of this, Cedric pointed out that by the late seventeenth century, improvements in armament technology had far outpaced the building process; the bigger the fortress, the more certain it was to be redundant before it was completed.

There was an occasional precise, small-scale comment on what was being built – a windowsill too high, a door that opened the wrong way. I remember a really long and complicated lecture on chimney design, and one afternoon we were asked to dig a hole to locate the water table. There was a terrible day for both of us when he called something I had done since his last visit 'an error of taste'.

In all of this it was impossible not to rise to the enthusiasm and curiosity, nor recognise its authority. I felt most like Pierre on the field of Borodino. For hours he gallops in a daze from redoubt to redoubt behind Kutuzov, who just nods as he listens carefully to his generals reporting on the progress of the battle. At the end, Pierre realises there is something only he is in the position to know: that throughout the day the great

commander-in-chief, with the fate of Russia entirely in his hands and the French outside Moscow, *had not once issued an order*.

Peter Smithson's elegant (and ironic?) response to my vision of a model for a working estate had been to propose a tower so nearly functionless as to be best described as a folly. Cedric didn't dislike the building, but moved to defend his client by leaving it off the site plan. When I told him that I was building it out of admiration and affection for its architect, the folly started to appear on the plans all over the place, even after it was built, and often in several places at a time. Cedric explained that in view of what I'd said, it didn't much matter where we put it.

I couldn't help noticing that he was at his most direct and in his way helpful when volunteering solutions to problems that were nowhere near the site. He gave me his two-sheet submission to a competition I was organising for a new museum building in Bath. The first read: 'There are already 16 museums in Bath'. The proposal itself showed a hoarding on the site, supported by a familiar system of gables. Apart from a large, very courteous arrow, it read simply: 'This way to leave Bath'.

The other characteristic of Cedric the designer was that while the energy did not diminish, the volume did, or appeared to. This was a product of our getting to know each other – the aesthetic of architect-client relations developing near perfect economy of means. There was a remorse attached to actually producing a drawing, and in the end, when he didn't feel that he could convey an idea by raising an eyebrow, he didn't bother.

So how was I to interpret this? When Cedric was clearing his office last year, I asked him why every cupboard contained a set of nineteenth-century child's building bricks. For once off his guard, he said that it was important to understand the innocence and excitement of the urge to build. I couldn't get a lot more out of him, but it was clear that he believed in the intensity of this first impulse, to the extent that it didn't much matter how good or bad a building eventually emerged, it was bound to let its designer down in the end. I got him to agree ruefully that none of his projects were ever quite complete until demolished. Their capacity to adapt themselves was a cunning, and forlorn, bid for survival for a few years longer, as though in elegiac anticipation of their designer's ultimate disappointment. There isn't anything to beat the image of Cedric at the Interaction Centre enquiry, giving his evidence *for the developer*.

All of which adds to the real mystery – what to make of Cedric the shaman? As a clue, I wanted to point out that he was much less forgiving of architects that he felt had started out well and then sold out than

Aerial view of main house and outbuildings of a working estate, Somerset

he was of the ones who hadn't been very good to begin with. All the shaman's traits – the wilfully casual contradiction of self, the occasional casuistry, the dandification of image, the superstar capriciousness, the Delphic ambiguity, that basilisk stare – seem of a piece with the question of why it is so difficult to arrive at a properly inclusive and precise summary of Cedric's contribution. But I don't think these things are that important, or address the second question – what it was about him that worked to make his fellow professionals uneasy.

Given that this was Cedric, it seems to me possible that the answer was camouflaged by its obviousness – a riddle in itself. Actually the riddles really didn't have any true purpose, except to confirm his own status as a riddler. He'd lost interest in them, just as he'd lost interest in the intense research required by his own insistence on broadening the programme.

Cedric the shaman had two purposes. The first was simply and effectively to exclude behind a wall of suspicion and incomprehension anybody (most people, in fact) beyond redeeming. But it also cleared a narrow waveband for him to broadcast to the thinking end of the profession something between a reproach and a warning. Again, I think at best it's only part of the story, but the message seemed to be, 'Here comes an architect, somebody marked forever by conflict. On the one hand is the intense and innocent conviction of good as you put one brick on top of another. On the other is everything that happens when you engage with the world – the things you are obliged to think about that make a building no longer your own.'

It's a long list, infinitely long in Cedric's view, and it encompasses everything he thought hard about during the six or seven years of the Fun Palace. It begins simply enough with gravity and damp courses, and goes on to a minute consideration of the needs and rights of the client and the public. But it ends with the witch

doctor's parody of everything corrupt, or corrupting, that an architect learns to say or do – and comes to believe himself – to get a building built.

Of course it has occurred to me that there are plenty of other reasonable explanations of what Cedric was up to. That he wasn't really an architect, but a social critic to the left of the Left who stumbled on the postwar ruins of modernism; or that he thought that he was better at provoking debate than at architecture; or that provoking was itself a duty. I have even had the thought that what I am recounting here as a message sent to the whole profession was just a remedy exclusively focused on the distress (as he put it) of the client of the moment.

One could argue any of these explanations, and others, but at some point in all of them, to be convincing, one has to step beyond building – even if building things is what Cedric would actually have most enjoyed doing.

For any account to be complete, it ought to include the seer's ability to convince us that there was something happening beyond the horizon which, at least for the moment, only he could see. What did the convincing was the deliberation with which he chose to tell us just what was important for us to know. But also, perhaps, that the long-run Cedric Price project, cheerfully and continually vandalised by its own designer but for once robustly resistant to demolition, was an enquiry into the state of moral jeopardy in which he felt the profession of architecture existed. Its focus was an unblinking interrogation of himself as an architect within a system that he found both alien and hostile – and quite certainly wrong in principle.

From where I stood, it was possible to see in this the elements of an old pattern: first, architecture and socialism were declared indivisible; programme and form were merged soon afterwards. And like the Fun Palace, the true originality of the project lay in its proceeding *towards* abstraction. It was always less of a building than a diagram – an open structure for the display and orchestration of ideas, on which its designer could hang new ones as he found them, and wherever it suited him. By this familiar and tireless process the fabric nevertheless became denser and more solid by degrees – and the figure of the architect beyond harder and harder to make out.

Eventually he disappeared altogether behind whatever was being made – exactly, it seems to me, as planned. In doing so, of course, any uneasy question that lingered over Cedric's diffident performance in the actual production of built form was at once finally and convincingly resolved. The market no longer had quite the same power to dismiss the unbuilt as unbuildable; and if it was quick enough, the profession could still catch a glimpse of itself in the mirror of its *ur-unArchitect*.



Will Alsop: Cedric As Employer and Teacher

Where did Cedric's peculiarities come from? What was he born into? Clearly he was old enough to remember the war and its destruction himself, but I am wondering if he wasn't also aware of Louis Mumford, who said that our task is not the simple one of rebuilding demolished houses and ruined cities, but the far heavier one of replacing an outworn civilisation, determining how much of the foundations could be used for a new set of purposes and for a radically different mode of life. There was some connection, perhaps, between that statement by Mumford and some of the explorations Cedric undertook. Cedric didn't see architecture as building. It was more than that. It was always an exploration, and he was always suspicious – highly suspicious – of other architects and their motives. Quite rightly.

Behind all that, Cedric was touched by kindness and a sense of humour that was very special. He also believed in rules, funnily enough, and ritual. I remember very well him giving me the advice, 'Never trust anyone with a small head and large feet'. And I've actually found myself looking at people's heads and feet ever since.

Of course we all know about the black and white clothing and the wearing of the red tie on May the First. He always did it. Some of us think up these curious little rituals from time to time and do them once, maybe twice, and then we forget them. Not Cedric. He was one part a thoroughly modern man, but really, underneath that, very old-fashioned. I could never understand why, in his office, the radio sets were antique, a 60s sort of styling. Whenever you arrived, even at seven in the morning, the radio was on, and never quite tuned in. The first job of the day was to turn it off. He was a man of mystery, too, of course. Where did he buy those Hush Puppies, so long after they went out of production?

He was very keen on office quizzes, set with some regularity, and there was a prize called the Golden Screw Award. It was originally a golfing trophy, but the club was long gone. All that remained in the hand of the miniature golfer was a golden screw. Or was it silver? It was a much coveted award, certainly as valuable as the Stirling Prize. And then, in the evening in East Grinstead, games of 'Escape from Colditz'. We were issued with escape supplies wrapped up in brown paper with string, and played under a bare lightbulb. I'm not sure we ever finished a game. They seemed to be interminable.

But for me the real evidence of Cedric was his response to the time I told him that I'd bought this rather nice side table, an antique table. He asked me what I was going to do that night and I said, 'Well, I'm going home and I'm going to have a glass of whisky.

I'm going to put it on that table and have a quiet smoke.' He thought that was terrific. He was not a man of possessions, but those he had contained great meaning about the way in which you lived your life, in which you designed your life. The quality of putting the right glass, with the right fluid in it, in the right place on the right table for ten minutes was as important as doing something forever.

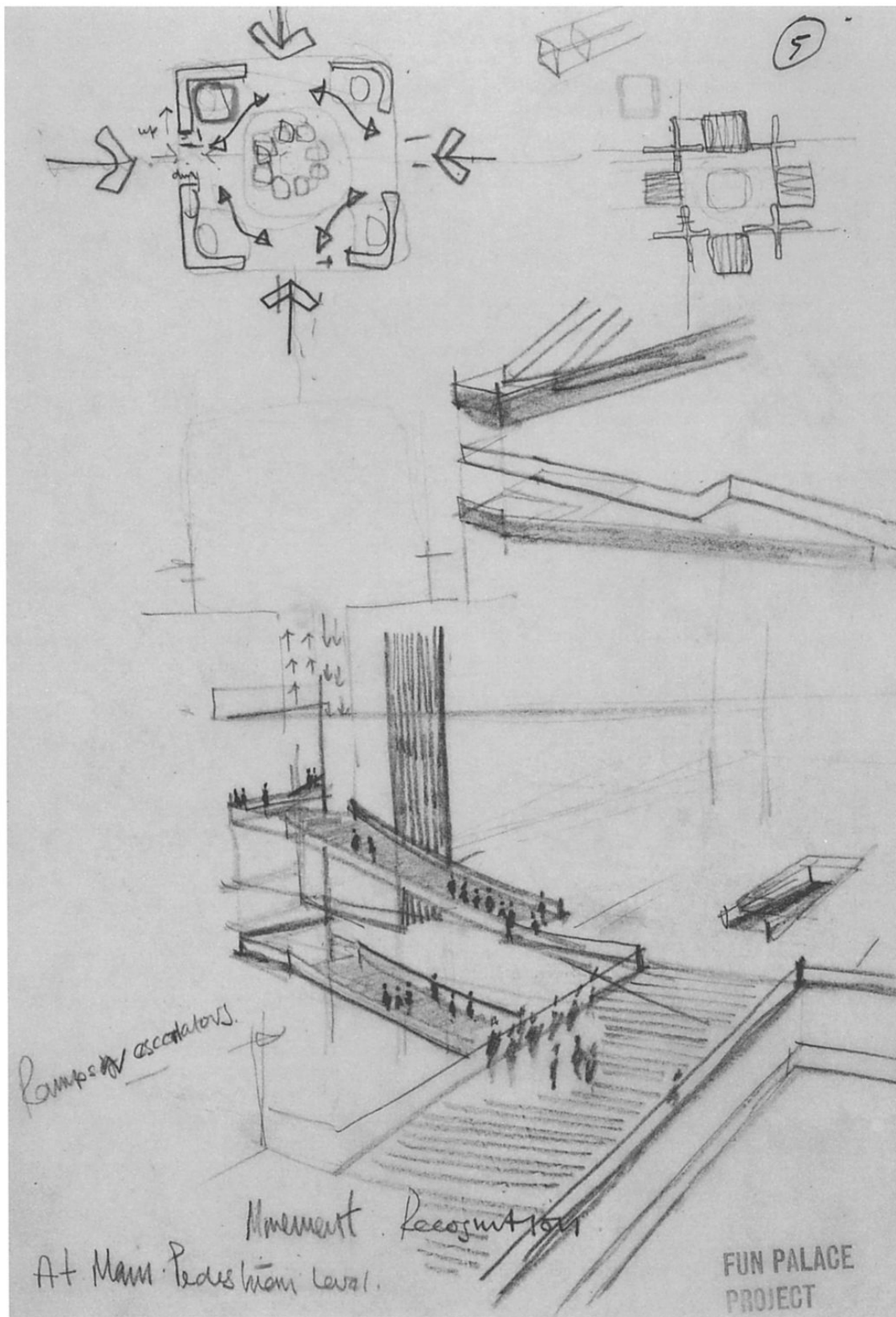
Rem Koolhaas: Dismantling Power

You cannot imagine the culture shock for a European arriving in 1968 London. Discourse seemed a microscopic, frivolous and nostalgic preoccupation with things of utter irrelevance – seaside resorts, piers, Ferris wheels, Dinky toys. The 60s seemed a playroom, as if arrested development was England's equivalent of avant-garde. They were constructed on a foundation of whimsy, the attention lavished on trivia undermining the entire idea of importance.

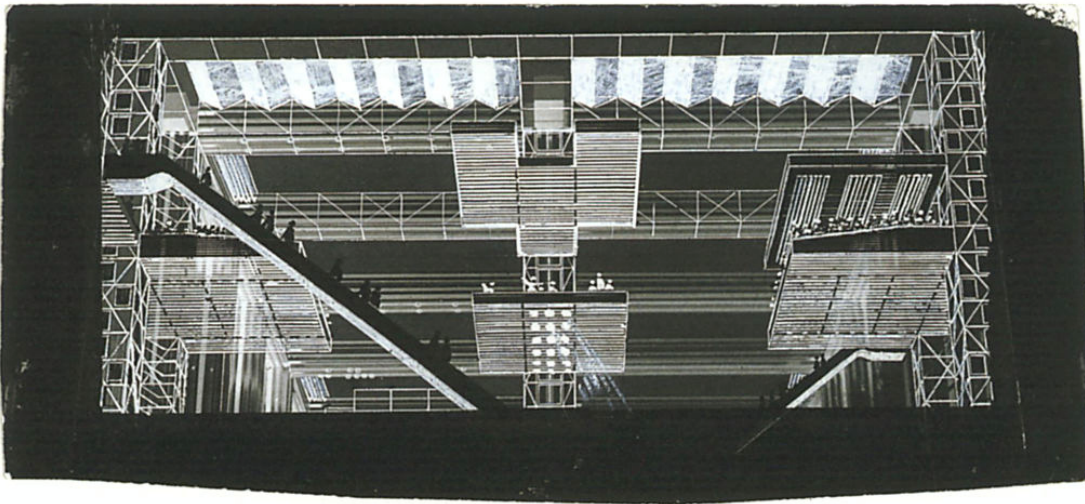
It took me decades, really, to understand the richness that I had been exposed to, not only of Cedric's work but of entire elements of English culture. My relationship with England is thus one of regret in the sense that I was only able to benefit from an intelligence through some kind of osmosis.

Since I never had an intimacy with Cedric, I have tried to think of some formal issues in his life. For me, Cedric's central preoccupation, underneath all these layers, was perhaps the issue of power. There were two aspects to this. How could he eliminate the power inherent in building? And how could he himself avoid entanglement with power? All his work, especially at its most liberating, reveals the paradox of the authoritarian insistence on liberation. The Fun Palace is Cedric at his most liberating, yet you can almost hear in its description the edicts and demands of a bully: 'Why not have your favourite meal on the roof of the Fun Palace', 'Try starting a riot', 'Begin a painting', or 'Fish-farming should not be excluded from future aspirations'. In other words, all these things are clearly fun, but they are a kind of commanded fun, and I think this is an inherent problem in architecture: its liberation can never be voluntary. I think this was the central conundrum of Cedric's life. Look at what is almost Cedric's only realised work, a birdcage – it is housing for beautiful creatures, but still a cage.

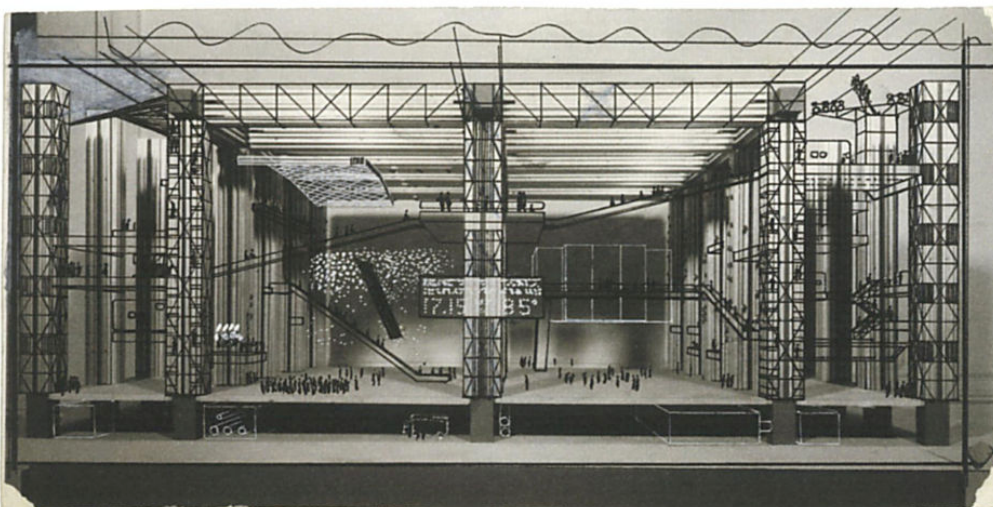
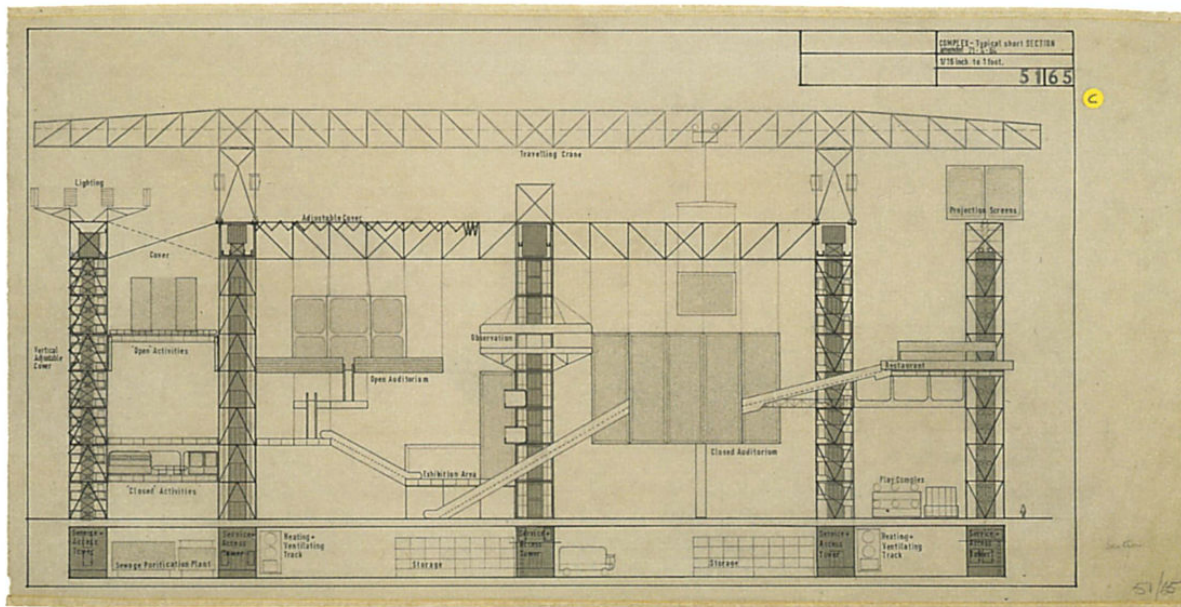
If architecture is like a time bomb, with power at its core, then Cedric was deeply involved in its dismantling. In his work there is an endless fragmentation to the scale of modules and capsules, as if their assembly in larger form would in itself spell danger. But at the same time he denied himself the luxury of imposition. If you look at the locations of his buildings, they are never chosen or deliberate, but



Explanatory sketch for service towers for the Fun Palace, c. 1964,
 © Collection Centre Canadien d'Architecture/Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal



Fun Palace, from top: Worm's-eye interior perspective; typical short section; interior perspective. All images c. 1964, © Collection Centre Canadien d'Architecture/Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal.



almost always residual, temporary, for short-term occupancy. In his insistence on a limited lifespan for all his buildings, you can see both a form of discretion and an unwillingness to undergo time's effects. So in that sense you could call Cedric's a megalomaniac modesty.

There is a very beautiful little text in *Re: CP* in which Patrick Keiller describes a trip he made with Cedric to Charles Dickens's Swiss chalet, in Rochester. The nineteenth-century interior is glowingly described as 'beautifully aged in surface and odor'. So the irony here is of somebody who, out of modesty, didn't want his buildings to last but who clearly is extremely interested in the effects of time on lasting things.

At some point Cedric must have realised that he was going to pay the price for his attitude of absolute engagement combined with a kind of superior distance from things, and that the price would be non-participation or a reduced participation. But could he have changed, or was there a moment when he would have liked to have changed? Was there a time when he made strong efforts to actually participate? Or did Thatcher kill off Cedric? I think that if you look at the values and intricacies of his work, then you come to realise that the market economy itself eliminated any chance Cedric could have had of participating in architecture. Its anti-welfare ethos simply could not recognise that anything he might do would have a value.

Maybe to some extent we should see Cedric's career as a sacrifice, and therefore as an extreme form of generosity. An almost conscious non-participation in a domain that enabled others to exploit the space he created.

Alistair McAlpine: The Nature of Success

Cedric certainly wanted to build buildings. The great sadness is that he lacked a patron who would say to him, 'Cedric, here's a field, here's a site: build something'. If he'd lived in the eighteenth century, the country would have been littered with his buildings. But Cedric had a contempt for clients today, same as all architects have contempt for their clients, deep down in their souls. Clients are people who don't want to pay you, who want to change everything and who have barmy ideas of their own. They know that you've studied for eight years to enter this great profession and that they've not studied for a moment, other than a few books and casual observations, and yet they want to tell you how to do it.

Cedric was very interested in listening to uneducated ideas: my God, I gave Cedric enough uneducated ideas, and he listened to them endlessly. Cedric looked after my mind, or what there was of it,

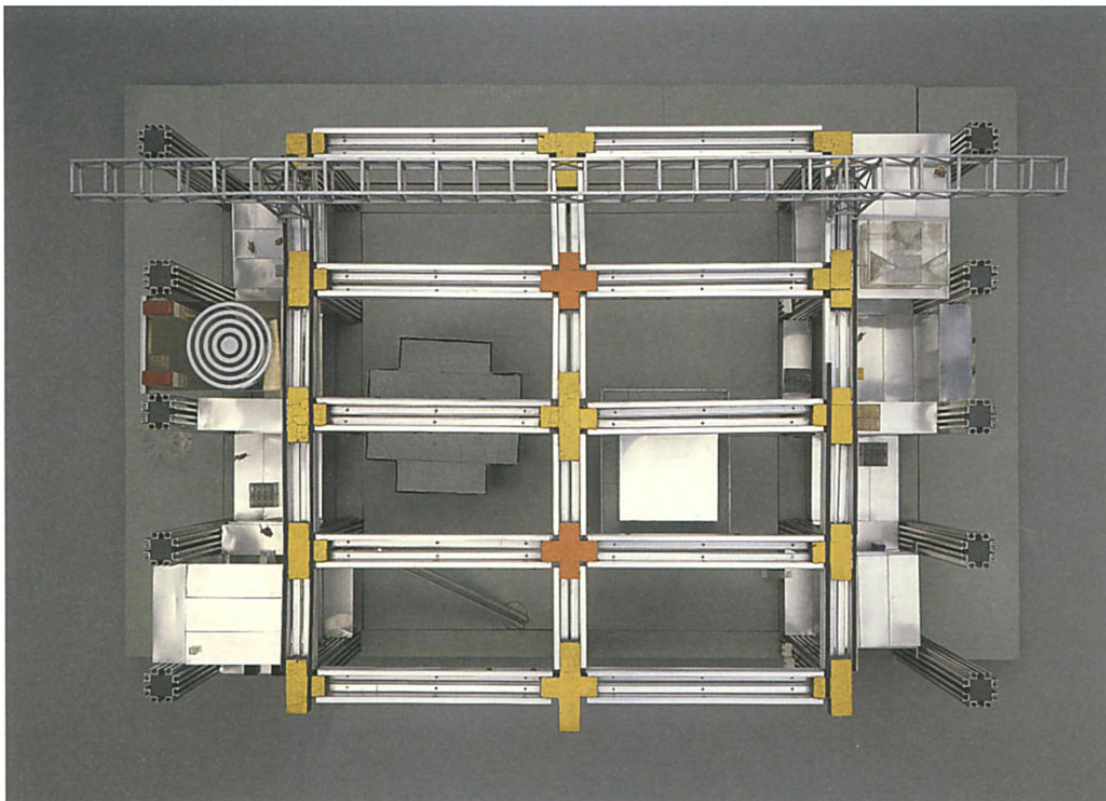
and he taught me all sorts of things. He taught me not least the nature of success, that success isn't being top of the class, success isn't being the greatest footballer, success isn't even being the greatest architect. Today's greatest architect might well be reviled in a hundred years. Contemporaries wanted to hang the architect of the Houses of Parliament. Others said of St Paul's Cathedral, 'I hope it's speedily burnt down'. As you can never be too certain as to what history will make of you, why would you imagine that success is something that you can know about in your lifetime? Cedric, I think, will have colossal success. He had success in his soul, because Cedric didn't give in to the whims of other people. He thought very carefully and long about what he did, and what he intended to do. And no one could change him. He might feel obliging one morning and discuss it at some length, or he might just dismiss it out of hand.

But he was a fine man: probably, for me, the most interesting person I ever met. Certainly Cedric could draw. Happily, in my home I have boxes of his drawings, some of them of buildings, projects, some of them, to my shame, cards with beautiful little drawings of where Cedric was sitting, cartoons, if you like, saying, 'Sorry, I couldn't wait any longer, had to go', because I had arrived an hour or two late. Cedric understood the cartoonist's art in politics. By far the most powerful form of communication is that carried out by a cartoonist. Cartoonists can bring a truth home to people in a way that words can't. Cedric drew with a charm and a brilliance, and his work is of great beauty.

I always felt that Cedric ought to build more buildings. I tried to persuade people to employ him to build buildings, but it was very difficult, they were frightened of him, they were frightened of his ideas. The greatest irony about Cedric, really, is that the birdcage in London Zoo is called the Snowdon Aviary, that actually Snowdon gets the credit for it. But I said to Cedric, 'What did he do? What part did he play in this?' Cedric said, 'The most important part in the whole proceeding'. 'For heaven's sake, what was that?' 'Every time we came up with an idea, he said, "Why?"'

And actually Cedric was a bit like that. He was never ashamed to ask, 'Why?' Cedric's was a mind that produced ideas for other people to take and use. He was a man who questioned things. He never took the proverbial wisdom as wisdom at all. He was an uneasy but powerful spirit, and he was, by chance, an architect, and that's all to the better for this profession.

Cedric Price died 10 August 2003. A symposium was held at the AA on 4 November 2003, at which these and others spoke in memory of his life and work.



This page: Fun Palace model views from above and section, c. 1964. Opposite page, from top: Plan, elevations, perspectives and details for a demountable and transportable archaeologist's house (student project, Cambridge University School of Architecture, 1952–3); section and details of clip-ons for transfer areas for Potteries Thinkbelt, 1964. All images © Collection Centre Canadien d'Architecture/Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal.

