Cedric Price: From the ‘Brain Drain’ to the ‘Knowledge Economy’

Stanley Mathews looks at Cedric Price’s Fun Palace and Potteries Thinkbelt as polemics addressing the changing economic and social character of postwar Britain moving into a period of deindustrialisation, with the expansion of higher education, and the emergence of information technology.

Cedric Price, Fun Palace, 1964
Cedric Price and structural engineer Frank Newby designed a structural matrix with overhead cranes to allow assembly of prefabricated modules.
In his 1626 book *New Atlantis*, Sir Francis Bacon described a mythical utopia, an ideal society of learning and scientific advancement. The centrepiece of this New Atlantis was ‘Salomon’s House’, which amounted to a technical college dedicated to scientific research into ‘the knowledge of causes, and secret motions of things; and the enlarging of the bounds of human empire, to the effecting of all things possible.’

There are striking similarities between Bacon’s New Atlantis and the late British architect Cedric Price’s Fun Palace and Potteries Thinkbelt. In their respective projects, both Bacon and Price proposed new modes of knowledge and inquiry that rejected established systems of education and thought. Both men confronted a crisis of knowledge at a time of paradigm shift. In Bacon’s time, this was England’s transition from a medieval worldview that revered received knowledge and ancient authority, to an era of modern methods of scientific inquiry. For Price, it was an awareness of an epistemological shift from the structures and traditions of Britain of the First Machine Age to the postindustrial, postimperial era of information technology and the knowledge economy.

In his 1964 Fun Palace and the 1967 Potteries Thinkbelt projects, Price addressed what he perceived to be the new and rapidly changing conditions of knowledge and society in postwar Britain. These were not proposals for buildings in any conventional sense, but were instead impermanent, improvisational and interactive systems, highly adaptable to the volatile social and economic conditions of their time and place. At a time of uncertainty and instability, Price’s work reflects a new approach to architecture as a site of change and impermanence, rather than as permanent and monumental symbols of cultural cohesion and consensus.

When Price first met avant-garde theatre producer Joan Littlewood in 1962, she described her ideas for a new kind of theatre. From her beginnings in working-class agit-prop street theatre to her string of successes on the London stage with her Theatre Workshop, Littlewood had longed to create a theatre of pure performativity, a space of cultural bricolage where people could experience the transcendence and transformation of the theatre not as audience, but as players themselves. Her innovative vision provided the conceptual framework on which Price began to design an interactive, performative architecture, endlessly adaptable to the varying needs and desires of the users. Working in collaboration, Price and Littlewood developed the Fun Palace as a ‘university of the streets’, providing educational opportunities in the guise of leisure entertainment in order to prepare society for the advent of the technological age. It was an improvisational architecture endlessly in the process of construction, dismantling and reassembly.
Cedric Price, InterAction Centre, Kentish Town, 1976
Price’s InterAction Centre incorporated many of the concepts and features of the ill-fated Fun Palace but on a much-reduced scale. It provided community services and creative outlets for local citizens until its demolition in 2003. In 1977, Reyner Banham noted Price’s influence on the design of the Centre Pompidou, writing: ‘The concept of a stack of clear floors that can be adapted to a variety of cultural and recreational functions seems to recall the … Fun Palace of Cedric Price and Joan Littlewood, even if the project was never as radical as the floorless Fun Palace, or as casually innovatory as Price’s InterAction Centre.’

The working-class population of east London could use cranes and prefabricated modules to assemble learning and leisure environments, creating spaces where they might escape everyday routine and embark on a journey of creativity and personal development. The ideas for the Fun Palace were, in many respects, similar to the ‘spontaneous university’ that Price and Littlewood’s mutual friend, the Scottish ‘Beat’ poet and situationist Alexander Trocchi, was also proposing at the same time. Trocchi described his project as ‘a vital laboratory for the creation (and evaluation) of conscious situations … it is not only the environment which is in question, plastic, subject to change, but people also.’ It is clear that while Price and Littlewood influenced Trocchi’s project, Trocchi’s situationist ideas on creativity and improvisation also helped to shape the developing Fun Palace.

Price and Littlewood enlisted a cadre of scientists, sociologists, artists, engineers and politicians, including Richard Buckminster Fuller, Yehudi Menuhin, Gordon Pask and Tony Benn, to help with the Fun Palace. Their ambitious goal was to create an interactive environment, a new kind of architecture, capable of altering its form to accommodate the changing needs of the users. Using cybernetics and the latest computer technologies, Price hoped to create an improvisational architecture that would be capable of learning, anticipating and adapting to the constantly evolving...
programme. An array of sensors and inputs would provide real-time feedback on use and occupancy to computers that would allocate and alter spaces and resources according to projected needs.

A site was chosen for the Fun Palace, on the banks of the Lea River in London’s East End. However, after years of development and design, construction was blocked by mid-level bureaucrats in the Newham planning office. Price and Littlewood struggled to overcome bureaucratic opposition to the Fun Palace until 1975, when Price declared the then 10-year-old project obsolete. However, the failure of the Fun Palace was not the end of Price’s attempts to realise an interactive and improvisational architecture. In 1976, he built a greatly reduced version of the Fun Palace in Kentish Town. Known as the InterAction Centre, this design incorporated many of the features and innovations of the Fun Palace, though on a smaller scale. It resembled a ‘bargain basement’ version of Centre Pompidou and, along with the Fun Palace, influenced Richard Roger’s designs.

Even before the final demise of the Fun Palace, Price had begun work on an even more vast and far-sighted project. His 1966 Potteries Thinkbelt was a plan to convert a region of the UK’s once-thriving industrial heartland into a 260-square-kilometre (100-square-mile) think tank, recuperating derelict industrial sites and railways as the basic infrastructure for a new ‘educational industry’ to replace the old manufacturing economy.

Price proposed using the derelict rail network of the Potteries as the basic infrastructure for a new ‘educational industry’ to replace the old manufacturing economy.

Cedric Price, Potteries Thinkbelt, regional site plan, 1966
The North Staffordshire Potteries were once a centre for the British ceramics industry and home to such famous names as Wedgwood, Spode and Minton. But by the 1960s they had fallen into ruin and rust, the victims of rising costs and foreign competition. Price proposed using the derelict rail network of the Potteries as the basic infrastructure for a new ‘educational industry’ to replace the old manufacturing economy. More than a dozen small towns were incorporated into the Thinkbelt, which covered more than 260 square kilometres (100 square miles). Price hoped that the Potteries Thinkbelt would help to reverse the tide of the Brain Drain and put the nation at the forefront of advanced technologies. (Colour keys added by the author for clarity.)
new ‘educational industry’, in part to stem the tide of the Brain Drain.

Like many industries in England, the coal and ceramics industries of North Staffordshire had fallen on hard times after the Second World War and, by the 1960s, the Potteries was a ruined industrial landscape. The conditions were repeated in scores of industrial centres throughout the uk, and as early as 1960 the situation had become so alarming that Labour MP Anthony Crosland publicly complained to the House of Commons: ‘Our production and export performance is almost the poorest of any advanced industrial country … much of our technical education [is] equally backward. We cling to every outmoded scrap of national sovereignty, continue to play the obsolete role of an imperial power, and fail to adjust to the new dynamic Europe.’

Price sought to re-establish the North Staffordshire Potteries as a centre of science and emerging technologies, much as they had been during the Industrial Revolution. He envisioned his Potteries Thinkbelt as a wholesale conversion of England’s rusting industrial infrastructure into a new ‘industry’ of technical education and scientific research, focusing on practical applications.

A 1964 article from the Times Educational Supplement, entitled ‘Noddyland Atmosphere?’, quoted Price as saying that British universities were out of touch with current social, economic and scientific conditions. He avoided referring to his Thinkbelt project as a ‘university’ because he disliked the upper-class connotations of the word, and complained that English universities were little more than ‘medieval castles with power points, located in gentlemanly seclusion.’ In 1966, Price wrote that ‘further education and re-education must be viewed as a major industrial undertaking and not as a service run by gentlemen for the few’.

Despite the promises of postwar educational reform by both the Labour and Conservative governments, British higher education in the postwar years was still largely associated with prestige, high social status and the classics, lagging far behind western Europe and the US in research opportunities and technical training.

Even in the new ‘redbrick’ universities that sprang up across the UK in the postwar years, pure science and theoretical research were privileged over technical education and applied science. A mandate for new universities to boost economic development failed to produce any significant economic improvement, for while educational authorities acknowledged a correlation between education and national economic development, they remained oddly sceptical about the relevance of technical and scientific education to industrial progress. In a 1965 House of Lords debate on the lack of technical education, Lord Aberdare complained: ‘I have a feeling that the universities … are still inclined to give greater importance to the arts than to the sciences, and to the academic than to the technological. There still exists a kind of intellectual snobbery that pays greater respect to the man who misquotes Horace than the man who can repair his own car.’

Mike Webb, Sin Centre, London, proposed section, 1959 to 1961
The only contemporary project that came close to the spirit of Price’s work was Webb’s Sin Centre, an innovative entertainment centre for the site of the Empire Theatre in Leicester Square, London. Pedestrian and vehicle circulation were brought together along spiralling ramps, and most of the structure was wrapped in a tensile skin of plastic and steel cables. Although the Sin Centre predates the Fun Palace, Webb doubts that his ideas had any significant impact on Price’s designs for that project.
Price coined the neologism ‘thinkbelt’ to describe the educational orientation as well as the regional scale of his project, describing it as ‘a kind of cross between Berkeley in California and a College of Advanced Technology’, for 20,000 students. He hoped that his Potteries Thinkbelt would help to break down the traditional wall between ‘pure’ and ‘applied’ science and technology, lure scientists and technologists back to the UK, and help to put the nation at the forefront of advanced technologies.

His plan for the Potteries Thinkbelt was to utilise the abandoned rail network of the Potteries as the infrastructure of his new think tank. Using the technologies of prefabrication and containerised shipping, he designed mobile, rail-mounted classrooms, computer and data storage modules, laboratories, and lecture and demonstration halls, which would shunt constantly from place to place along the refurbished railway lines.

At three locations, Price designed large transfer stations where the mobile modules could be assembled and moved using enormous gantry cranes. He also designed 19 immense housing complexes using four types of prefabricated, modular housing units: ‘capsule’, ‘sprawl’, ‘crate’ and ‘battery’.

In all, there were to be 32,000 living units. Like the mobile teaching units, the housing modules could be moved around and rearranged by cranes and rail as the programme changed over time. Students could leave their homes in the morning, board the mobile classrooms, and learn while their classroom moved along the Potteries Thinkbelt rail circuit, from a demonstration laboratory, to a model factory, to an experimental station, returning back to their modular homes at the end of the day. Price’s plan defined an interactive network of static and mobile structures, inspired and controlled by emergent computer and information technologies on which new social, economic and industrial patterns might develop. The mobile learning units were like information quanta, the switches and transfer stations like the logical gateways of a vast computer circuit. The Potteries Thinkbelt defined a new kind of architectural monumentality, not of large object-buildings, but as a vast and dispersed field of discrete objects and disparate events.

In the Potteries Thinkbelt, Price enlarged on the improvisational, adaptable model of architecture he had first explored in the Fun Palace to create a landscape of constant change and activity, more like an electronic circuit than a static building. His redeployment of the ruined industrial landscape of the Potteries was a microcosm of his vision for architecture and for the future of the UK (a radical departure from the stolid monuments of traditional universities or the new redbrick schools), offering new models of economic, educational and social development within an active architectural matrix far more extensive than that of the Fun Palace.

Like the Fun Palace, the Potteries Thinkbelt was never realised. Price had never identified a client for it, and his proposal failed to attract much more than bemused interest. The technical complexity of the project seemed too far-fetched to a public and a government unfamiliar with computers and advanced technology. Moreover, many of the government officials who might have been interested in Price’s novel educational ideas were otherwise occupied with the development of the fledging Open University.

Price recognised that the UK was in an irreversible cycle of deindustrialisation and, in order to remain competitive in an increasingly technological world, nothing less than a complete reorientation of the British system of higher education towards science and information technology would be required. Yet he also realised that the mercurial conditions of the postwar years required a new impermanent and agile architecture, capable not only of adapting to inevitable change, but of encouraging and advancing social transformation. Price’s radical redefinition of architecture has influenced architects since the early 1960s, when he took on the role of avuncular guru to the young members of Archigram. In the Fun Palace and Potteries Thinkbelt, Price emerged as one of the first architects to develop innovative architectural responses to the new social and economic conditions of postwar Britain.

Notes