Jean Stein

The City as a Machine for Living In
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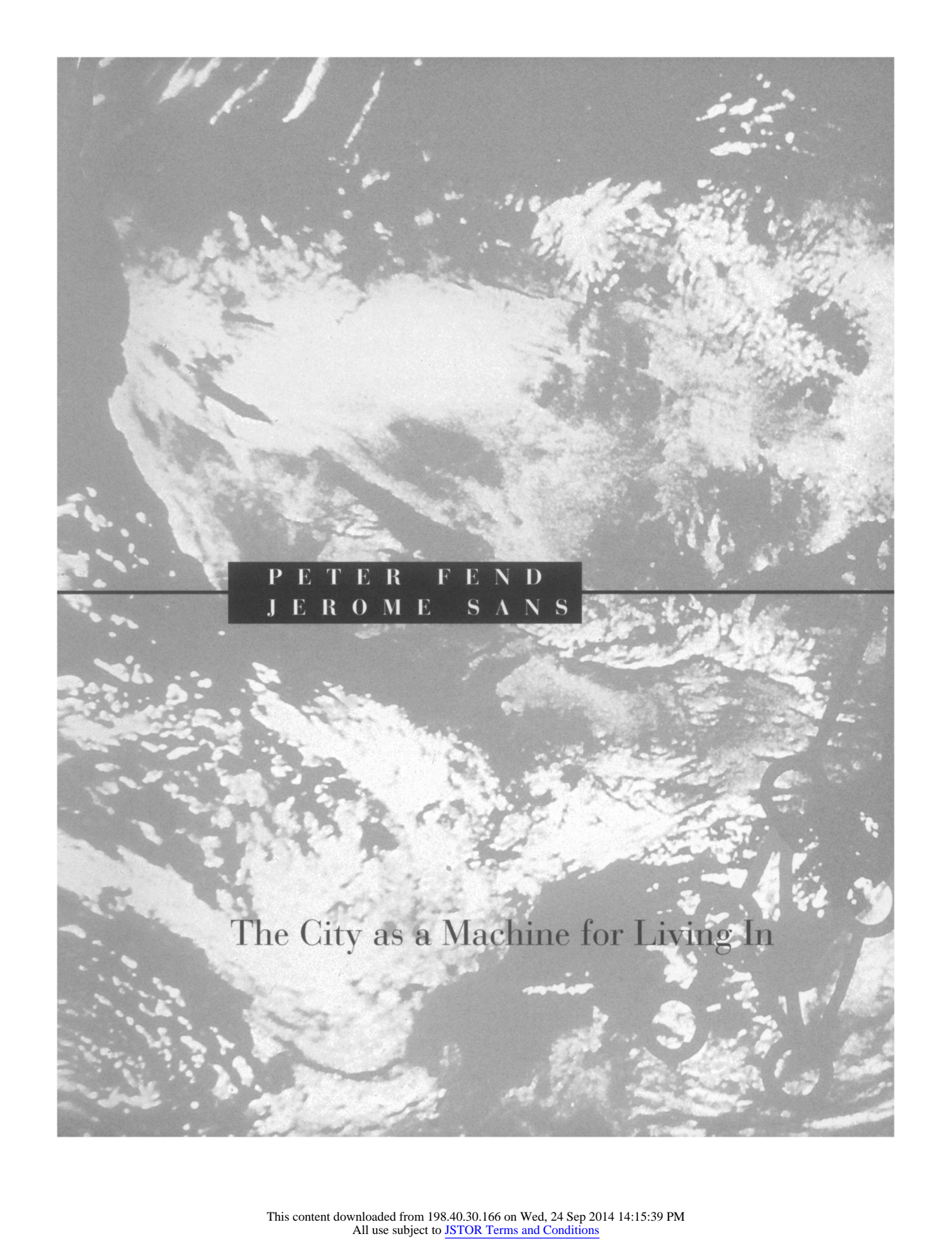Accessed: 24/09/2014 14:15

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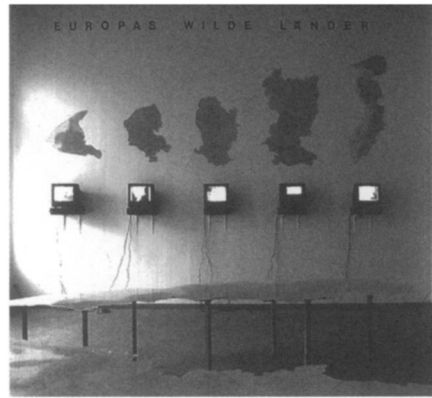
La maison est une machine à habiter.

C.E.J. Le Corbusier, 1923

In the aftermath of video, performance art, and earthworks in the late '70s, many artists returned to the more traditional forms of painting and sculpture, igniting the boom in the '80s art market that followed. Other artists, including Peter Fend, remained faithful to the political and environmental activism of their immediate predecessors, Robert Smithson, Gordon Matta-Clark, and Joseph Beuys. In community-based organizations and spaces, such as Fashion Moda in the Bronx and ABC NO RIO on New York's Lower East Side, they worked collectively as well as individually to engage art in the public arena.

Peter Fend, with a background in architecture and law, began his career as a visual artist by assisting Gordon Matta-Clark on his architectural deconstructions. In 1980, he founded the organization Ocean Earth Construction and Development Corporation. One of Ocean Earth's most significant projects was to gather satellite surveillance photographs of geopolitical and ecological hot spots from commercial sources and provide them to the media.

During the Falklands War in 1982, Ocean Earth circumvented government censors by giving NBC and the BBC photos that showed the British fleet steaming towards its objective—indicating exactly where it was going to land. Two years later, Ocean Earth provided CBS with visual proof that Iraq was engaged in a massive water-diversion project on its border with Iran. Given the war at the time, the project had an obvious military purpose and potentially disastrous ecological consequences (the United States, as one of Iraq's suppliers, was also implicated).

Ocean Earth functioned as a kind of guerilla theater on the high frontier, making visible the environmental costs exacted by the actions of various governments. It inevitably attracted the attention of security agencies in the United States and Europe and was eventually forced to abandon its reconnaissance activities. Based on the information gathered by these projects, however, Fend has since produced a number of gallery installations and has also returned to his earlier architectural concerns and earthwork proposals.

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This conversation on architecture took place in Paris at the home of curator and critic Jérôme Sans.

JEROME SANS: The editor of *Architecture d'Aujourd'hui* says that you developed the first practicable program of megastructure architecture—of the sort attempted by Archigram.* But you have built nothing.

PETER FEND: To build a megastructure—an architectural system with transport paths, utilities supply lines, and a wide variety of commercial or residential spaces all functioning within a single engineering scheme— one must have control of infrastructure. Archigram did not start with this imperative.

But the editor you mentioned was talking about the process not the buildings: I could not start a program of building to follow through on the inventions of the Futurists, Constructivists, and Metabolists, without establishing a new economic foundation to draw in new money, new people, new attitudes. So I have been working on developing a fuel base as a new source of nonpolluting wealth. Soil is a source of wealth. The fossil fuels are sources of wealth. Fast-falling rivers can be a source of wealth. The fuel base of industrial economies today is mineral fuel. I propose a shift to biologically-derived fuels—nonpolluting hydrocarbons like methane and, by another process, hydrogen—obtained from rapid-growth plants, marine algae. This happens to be the same fuel base that the renowned Japanese Ministry of International Trade and Industry has called the fuel base of the twenty-first century.

Le Corbusier called the house a machine for living in. The city is also a machine for living in. I want to make sure that the machinery is beneficial to the human body.

JS: Isn't such machinery, such technology, available now?

PF: Effectively, no. The Number One and Two conditions required for the city in Leon Batista Alberti's classic treatise, *The Ten Books of Architecture*, are clean air and clean water. With today's industrial systems, no major city in the world meets these requirements.

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* Archigram, a group of British architects most active between the years of 1961 and 1974, responded to the changing technology of the '60s with radical design proposals for "walking cities," "plug-in cities," and house "capsules."

JS: What is the city for you?

PF: A natural confluence of people doing business with each other. It's like a party: they just happen to want to be together.

JS: What are the main problems of the city?

PF: There are social problems: people antagonize each other, as often happens at not-so-exclusive parties. But I don't deal with this directly. It is superfluous, distracting and, I think, in the end, destructive for an architect to try to be politically or socially "involved." It has been fashionable recently to talk about the homeless, the poor, those with AIDS—all of which are, of course, serious problems—as if they can be dealt with through art and architecture. Architects and artists should do nothing for the people who show up at the party. They should just make sure that the house is well-constructed enough for everyone to take part.

JS: Isn't this a sort of trickle-down theory?

PF: Trickle nothing. Flow. Everyone knows that if an economy works well, and if the technology responds to the genuine physical needs of the time, there cannot be extensive economic misery. If architects want to contribute, they should do their job—which is to physically engineer the city.

JS: How do you expect to do this job?

PF: I work toward real architecture through model architecture, joining scientific knowledge with art to make habitable space. I deal with all physical factors, incorporating drawing (two dimensions), painting (three, including color), and sculpture (four), into the context of movement through space or time (five).

For the past year, I've been building a series of small-scale models which have been shown in the art market, but I'm directing them more toward prospective architectural clients. My models for Yangtze River and offshore development in China were presented to companies, like Merrill Lynch and Morgan Stanley, that finance projects in China—as well as to Chinese scientific or economic development people—with the intention of securing a consulting contract.

All of art is model-making. Drawings by someone like Sol Lewitt are models of thought. Painting is a model of vision. Sculpture a model of things. Many "conceptual" artists in recent decades have made models of space—that is, architecture. Consider the architectural implications of pioneers like Vito Acconci.

JS: But since you want your art to be taken literally, people think of you as a technocrat.

PF: We live in a technocracy already. Technology decides what resources are needed, what wars must be fought, what news people should receive. The issue now is not Whether Technology but Which Technology.

JS: Aren't these political choices? Doesn't this make you a political artist?

PF: Anyone dealing with architecture comprehensively deals with the city— the *polis*—and with questions that are decided at the city level. But there is no political ideology here, no commentary. My colleagues and the other architects of Ocean Earth, are not conducting what is fashionably called "political art."

JS: Then why do people usually think of you as a political artist?

PF: First, because of the scale at which I work. And second because, in order to strike consciousness, I work with interesting, even provocative sites. Intervention, real engagement, is more likely in forbidden zones like Montenegro than in well-established, peaceful sites.

A gallery in London recently took down a piece of mine, a model of the North Channel Basin, including Belfast, complete with megastructural linear cities and gas pipelines rising up from the sea. The site was, shall we say, political, but the model and its architectural proposals were as strictly physical as they could get. It was the gallery owner, not me, who was being political, and this sabotaged the architectural direction of the entire show. Architecture is no more political than a tramline or an airport.

JS: What are the main problems of the city today that architecture can solve?

PF: The city—and the world is rapidly becoming a planet of city-dwellers—is physically bad for the body. Consider the air in Cairo, or the water in Dacca or in the world's biggest conurbation, Mexico City.

JS: Isn't there a social problem behind this?

PF: Yes. But the underlying social problem, if one wants to talk about dysfunction, isn't the poor or the homeless, or even the too many who commute great distances. It's the architects and their cohorts, the visual and plastic artists. Most architects today, particularly the ones with superior academic training, just don't think about problems like clean air, clean water, and room for circulation. They try to be sculptors or social workers when they should simply ensure that the city's overall physical conditions are ecologically sound, then manufacture the low-cost components that people, rich or poor, can assemble themselves. The classic *Architecture Without Architects* made this clear: certain individuals should see to plumbing and circulation—the overall aesthetic and physical situation—and the rest should be left to private initiative.

JS: Would those certain individuals be architects or politicians?

PF: Could be one or the other or both. Robert Moses was allegedly a politician, but is probably more responsible than anyone else for the physical character of Greater New York. Another power broker like him was my grandfather Elmer Erickson, and he was only an unschooled railroad man, the son of Swedish immigrants. In the 1920s he worked with a small group of leading warehousemen to develop the west coast terminal for national railroad traffic in Los Angeles. He was also on the team that laid out the grid of streets there. Haussmann, who redesigned the street plan of Paris in the nineteenth century, was neither a professional architect nor a politician. Whoever does the job does the job. I am trying, by another route, to have a similar impact on the physical character of cities in the coming century.

JS: Given the very dense construction going on in Asia—which could extend throughout the so-called Third World—does the relatively low-density city of Europe or North America have a future?

PF: A city like Singapore is well organized. It is dense, but going through it, and even beholding it, gives great pleasure. There is no sprawl. I believe that the average city of the West, Berlin, London, or Chicago, has no future. It's far too spread out, far too hostile toward the land. The city is a place confined. You cannot get around or get out with physical ease. You are cut off from nature, as physically trapped as an animal in the zoo, tamed, subdued, reduced in physical and mental courage. Witness the average residents.

JS: Could there be a model for development? A model city?

PF: No, never. Can San Francisco or Hong Kong or Manhattan be a model for anywhere else? People like to travel, and should travel, precisely because all cities are completely different. Much of the disappointment I have experienced in London comes from walking past Le Corbusier blocks conceived in Marseilles. One should not ask if a city is a model, but if a city pleases and excites.

JS: But I presume you would like to build or realize new cities, cities better than what's available now.

PF: We should remember that any city, wherever it might be built, occupies what was once wild country. With sophisticated engineering, including precision site-targeted recycling, it would be possible to build a city which, like any other giant animal, contributes more to the richness of nature than it takes away from it. You could say that the next stage in evolution is here and it is the city.

JS: What government would this city require?

PF: On the strictly physical level, I think the government should conduct systematic public-site surveillance. This is best done with digital sensors, and best with automatic, or at least unbiased, sensing schedules. New York artists such as Taro Suzuki, Joan Waltemath, Eve Vaterlaus, Win Knowlton, Paul Sharits, Bill Dolson, Wolfgang Staehle, George Chaikin, and myself established this in the early 1980s in a venture called Space Force. Premise: the normal function of art is to serve as the eyes of society. Artists are like the scouts for tribes that live off the land by hunting, fishing, and gathering—

they record what they see in timely visual reports. Space Force tried to do this for several years, only to be blocked by the various governments involved.

But most important would be a shift from income to property taxation. Each registered site could be monitored precisely for its ecological health and be tax-assessed accordingly. Income taxation, by contrast, encourages earning simply for consuming, and does not reward the conservation of property or material resources—or good architecture. Most of the Western cities' absurd sprawl can be attributed to systems of property assessment and taxation which make tall buildings in city centers and low, sprawling buildings ever farther out the most economical solution.

JS: How do you think that you can best effect your ideas of the city?

PF: By creating specifically commissioned, large-area projects with a sizable number of artists and architects. We would then gain a high media profile, not just in the news but—with far greater impact on public consciousness—in film and TV fiction. We could build cities or city sections as movie sets, arrange for movies and TV shows, possibly rock videos and ads, and create a popular fantasy, a popular expectation of what cities and buildings could be like, which would influence every architecture firm and every child with Lego blocks.

JS: So you would end up, like the artists Robert Longo or Julian Schnabel, making movies?

PF: Not in the same way. Not movies about art but enactments of architecture. Is there a more efficient way to promote new architecture?

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