

FLYING CITY
Markus Richter

Flying City

by Markus Richter

Overcoming the constraints of gravity is one of the persistent themes of modern architecture. While during the 1920s, designs such as El Lissitzky's Cloud iron, the Petersschule by Hannes Mayer & Hans Wittwer, the Suspension Houses by the Rasch brothers or Leonidov's Lenin Institute were still scarcely feasible simply for structural engineering reasons, a number of "floating" architectures were realized in the late modernist period. This includes buildings such as Niemeyer's Contemporary Art Museum in Niterói that hovers over the coastal cliff above the sea like a flying saucer or John Lautner's Garcia House, which Michelangelo Antonioni so impressively exploded in Zabriskie Point in 1970.

Proper flying cities, however, are rare in the rich visionary history of 20th century architecture. Wenzel Hablik's Colony in the Air of 1908 or Georgy Krutikov's Flying City of 1928 are two examples among very few. In Krutikov's design concept, vertical tower houses rise from a horizontal ring construction; the entire structure floats freely in the air. The link between the Earth and the hovering buildings is made possible with space capsules, which are docked on the balconies of the dwellings and can travel as a universal form of transport both in the air and under water. Krutikov's design was developed as a thesis project at the Moscow WChUTEIN (Higher State Artistic-Technical Institute) for Nikolai Ladovsky's class. Since the early 1920s, Ladovsky had hoped that in the future it would be technically possible for cities to float freely in the gravitational field of the Earth. Along with Krutikov, a number of other young architects in Ladovsky's class were also working on floating cities: Viktor Kalmykov designed a ring-city around Saturn; Isaak Josefovich designed a free-floating conference hall for the Supreme Soviet, and Lasar Chidekel a space city, which anticipates ideas of Yona Friedman or Eckhard Schulze-Fielitz. While Krutikov was still relying on nuclear power to keep his flying cities airborne, 50 years later with his Cloud Nine Buckminster Fuller developed spheres that were to rise up into the sky solely by means of solar power. Fuller wanted to construct his spherical cities from materials that are lighter than air. Heating the air in the sphere was supposed to cause Cloud Nine to float in the air.

José Dávila already dealt with Buckminster Fuller's designs in some of his earlier work. For the Megastructure Reloaded exhibition he designed a Flying City whose point of departure is based less on the spherically shaped Cloud Nine than on the hexagon, a basic geometrical form that plays a major role in Fuller's geodesic domes. Dávila's expansive installation is based on a modular hexagonal structure that is arranged in three levels suspended above each other. The variously sized modules are joined together with individually suspended MDF panels and neon tubes. The neon tubes form complete hexagons that vertically span one, two or all three levels. The MDF panels arranged around the six neon tubes are only fragmentary reproductions of the hexagons and vary in height. The structure increases in density from the lower to the upper level. The exterior dimensions of the installation are limited by a ramp that divides the exhibition space and leads to the second floor from the first floor via several spirally arranged platforms. The ramp functions as a promenade architecturale and is an established part of the exhibition architecture designed by Dennis Crompton, former member of Archigram. Dávila's installation and Crompton's ramp enter into a symbiotic relationship here. Initially, the observer experiences the Flying City from below as a fragmentary construction and while climbing the stairs grasps the compositional principles of the structure more and more clearly. Seen from above, the installation appears to be a self contained unit that is potentially capable of unlimited extension and is individually combinable.

According to Ralph Wilcoxon's 1968 definition, a megastructure is »1) constructed of modular units; 2) capable of great or even ›unlimited‹ extension; 3) a structural framework into which smaller structural units (for example, rooms, houses, or small buildings of other sorts) can be built – or even ›plugged-in‹ or ›clipped-on‹ after having been prefabricated elsewhere; 4) a structural framework expected to have a useful life much longer than that of the smaller units which it might support.«

Prior to starting his work on this project, José Dávila thoroughly investigated the idea and history of the megastructure. His »Plug-In« for the Megastructure Reloaded exhibition catalogue documents his in-depth knowledge of the subject. In Flying City Dávila takes up essential aspects of the megastructure but transforms them into formally free, abstract shapes and at the same time refrains from any sixties nostalgia. By restricting his materials to untreated MDF panels and industrially prefabricated neon tubes, he underscores the sketch-like, abstract execution of his reflections. With his choice of the hexagon as the basic module, he simultaneously links his work to the architectural context of the 1960s. Hexagonal structures can be found not only in Fuller's geodesic domes but also in many other visionary designs of the time, such as Walter Jonas' Intrapolis, Paolo Soleri's Hexahedron or the Jeux de construction by David Georges Emmerich.

Formally, Flying City takes up the work done on Space after Space, which Dávila created for the Borgovico 33 project space in Como in 2007. Here too, a geometrically precisely formed sculpture with neon lamps floated freely in space. But whereas in Como Dávila made the exhibition space as such the starting point of his work, with Flying City he disregards the coincidental architectural circumstances of the exhibition site and in his installation addresses the basic principles of the visionary architecture of late modernism. A reflection on visions and disasters of modern architecture and urban planning runs through Dávila's entire work like a recurring motif. Flying City builds on these approaches, but distinctly goes beyond the earlier works that reflect architectural concepts. The precise translation of architectural-theoretical ideas in a radically abstract formal language, which consistently avoids all illustrative or narrative elements, raises Dávila's work to a new level.