Obsolescence and Exchange in Cedric Price's Dispensable Museum

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The work of the British architect Cedric Price appears to revolve around an unusual relationship between preservation and demolition. Insisting that architecture has to be contemporary in absolute terms, he destroys any traces that the past and its demands have left. Accordingly, most of his projects take the form of flexible structures that can be built, un-built, changed, re-organized, or dismantled. The architect believes that buildings should not be aimed at lasting functionally or aesthetically into the future and, for this reason, demolition plays an important role within his projects. Yet this formulation is also able to act as a form of preservation, not related to a particular building or structure but rather to the capacity of Price's constructions to be transformed and exchanged, to become one thing or another, and to continue to be contingent.

Price's ideas and works aim to relate architecture to other areas or even to dissolve it into other practices; architecture becomes just a means of connection, a few gestures that are not really distinct from the work of an engineer. The aim here is to propose that this *dissolution* of architecture can relate to issues such as heritage, conservation, or the museum space, even though Price calls for the demolition of anything that has ceased to perform properly. It is not widely known that he did a number of projects related to art galleries, exhibition spaces, and museums. Only his *Fun Palace,* commonly regarded as the sketch behind the Centre Georges Pompidou in Paris and probably the most popular un-built edifice in England, is commonly recognized.[1] Alongside these projects –some of which will be discussed below—the entirety of Price's work questions how different agents

accumulate, collect, and show past objects, on the one hand, and how they educate, exhibit, and invite the public to come in, on the other. These are all traditional functions of the museum both in its modern and contemporary forms.

This paper aims to show how Price's work is a valuable source for rethinking the museum. The architect's projects acknowledge this both in the form of a critique—in terms of an opposition to the institutional consecration of the outdated and to the arbitrary politics of historicism—and also as a reconsideration of the museum's role by revisiting matters such as retrieval, access, and interval. The substantial aspect of Price's model is the offer and spread of information to be consumed. As a result, past objects are not regarded as eternal truths but rather as finite, transformable artefacts. Instead of sanctifying an object as heritage, antique, or masterpiece, the museum, as a culturally fabricated object, constantly incorporates its context, affects it, and is affected by it.

This contingency of the built environment erases architecture into a system of connections with the capacity to generate forms of social interaction, knowledge, or pure entertainment that are non-reducible to past uses or aesthetic commands. Accordingly, Price's conception of architecture as a "generator core" –which even proposes to build structures without having any predefined uses in mind[2] —might be read in terms of Giorgio Agamben's notion of *potentiality*[3]: according to the philosopher's reception of Aristotle's *potentiality*, the critical issue is not so much the potential to do a determined thing but rather the potential to "not-do," the faculty of potentials for not passing into actualities. In a few passages of "On Potentiality," Agamben uses examples taken from architecture: potentially the architect might not build, he might not pass his knowledge into an actuality; similarly, Price's projects might or might not become particular forms. For both authors the

architect is potential because he might not do a work and he is always contingent in relation to a particular situation.

Agamben's essay "Bartebly, or On Contingency" is intrinsically linked to his text on potentialities.[4] Melville's character of Bartebly –the scrivener whose only response to his boss' demands is "I would prefer not to"—is inscribed within an experience that has abstained itself from any relation to truth or any worries concerning the life or preservation of things. According to the philosopher, the prominent character created by Melville is the "extreme figure of Nothing of which all creation derives," and that Nothing is "pure, absolute potentiality," what cannot be reduced either to will or to necessity. This implies, the author states, that potentiality is related to a knowledge or ability: whoever has a determined knowledge does not have to be transformed in order to obtain it; therefore the subject is free to use it or not, to do or to refrain, to *rather not do*. Cedric Price did refrain from building many times during his life, working on projects that, literally, concluded with the best solution for a determined space being not to do anything. But Price's work does not explore the space of potentiality in these common gestures of abstention; rather, potentiality is situated in what the architect calls a *limbo* space—the pure contingency of a building, system, or plot. Therefore the agency of his projects does not reside in a specific construction, in the figure of the architect, or in the actual or future users of the building, but rather the terrain of potentiality is located in the exchanges between the built environment, its users, and the wider context, and in the constant reformulation of this relation of exchange. Price's constant attention to the building capacity of the *interval* can be read as an attempt to create from that in-between space precisely because, as fully contingent, it is free from any pre-determined use or past function; hence, it can generate a non-predictable process of exchange. In his view, architecture should be nothing more than

the system of connections acting as a generator core, the minimal procedure that might build or might not. This restoration to architecture of "its potential not to be"[5] can generate—as this paper argues—an alternative discussion of the function of the museum.

Built Obsolescence

The central idea of Price's work is the incorporation of passing time into architecture. This notion is also critical for understanding the way in which his proposals can work to formulate an alternative notion of the museum. Any building, structure, or institution should last a finite (and short or at least appropriate) period of time and therefore should be able to face the challenges of its finitude. It should be cheap, easy to build, and dismantle; every component should lack the heavy weight of tradition or the potential for future glory. Because the building is deeply engaged with its present, it should respond to the demands of its users—if appetites and needs change, the construction must do so as well. Price uses the metaphor of food to speak about architecture, noting that cooking is an action that anticipates the consumption and evacuation of food. Similarly, the design, construction, and occupation of a building should be related to its eventual destruction rather than to its functional or aesthetic endurance in the future. This goes beyond an acceptance of the limited relevance of a building or a renunciation of the architect's glory, for destruction is incorporated from the very beginning, at the project stage, and architecture becomes just an object to be consumed.

It is important to understand that Price demands that architecture be contingent and, even though he defines this concern with the notion of "planned obsolescence," it is not the same as the capitalist strategy of predetermined or intended obsolescence in software design, for instance. Contingency cannot be anticipated and indeed, in Price, the

incorporation of obsolescence points to a condition of porosity or openness that goes beyond change or flexibility. Price wants to incorporate architecture into a demand, or offer logic, but in a way whereby the process of obsolescence—which, as I've argued, is present at the very origin of the project—does not lead directly to the replacement of a determined product or building. Rather, obsolescence *also builds* in terms of generating a new system of connections, which might include the reuse, or misuse of those obsolete parts. Therefore obsolescence becomes productive if it is formulated as a condition of openness, expressed in the fact that the building always remains a contingent possibility rather than a determined structure. This condition also entails the incorporation of the *interval*—the period in which a space is yet to be built, the limbo between one stage and another—as a terrain of potentiality emanating from an apparently useless space. This generative character of the interval determines the difference between the incorporation of change and the incorporation of obsolescence and is the key distinction between the architect's proposal and a constant process of re-accommodation.

For Price the incorporation of time has to be included as part of the design of a construction, whether it is a building, house, university, or museum space. As argued, this incorporation goes beyond flexibility but, externally, Price's projects embrace plasticity and rearrangement. This is achieved by means of a flexible structure (movable walls or floors, for example, that would change the size or uses of a space; some of Price's designs even include physical examples of anti-solidity, such as optical barriers or warm air curtains) or a construction of prefabricated kits. But Price does not limit flexibility to these literal cases of reorganization: it also entails, for instance, the movement of the London Aviary (*Zoo Aviary,* 1961)—which is not rigid and therefore swings according to the birds' flight—or the network of his university on the move (*Potteries Thinkbelt,* 1964)—which employs the

existing facilities of the waning English ceramics industry and an unused railway system in Staffordshire. In the latter project (never actually built) the yards of disused train stations are sites for lectures and seminars. The curricula (flexible in itself) would be achieved through constant movement and realignment alongside the whole network. Price believes that universities should not be offering degrees with requirements established hundreds of years ago, but rather should be offering learning facilities at different stages of their users' life. Therefore university resources should be addressed as a question of increasing *access* and *retrieva*l rather than *collection* and *containment* –and this can also be predicated in the case of the museum.

These two projects are interesting examples of how Price asserts that the role of the architect should be confused with that of the engineer, the designer, or the informational expert. In *Zoo Aviary*, for instance, he worked closely with the engineer Frank Newby to create a structure that looks fully functional rather than generated by an aesthetic or stylistic concern.[6] He has even spoken of himself as the "anti-architect." This assertion constitutes another critique of the grand, monumental, and singular character of most architectural projects but also, and much more importantly, a re-affirmation of the crucial aspect of the interval as the space where multiple meanings are originated. Rather than the architect originating meaning through his subjective individuation, it is the space of exchange between the different collaborators involved, the public, the site, and the built environment that originate meaning through their relationships.[7] Thus his work goes beyond a commentary about the discipline of architecture (and, for that reason, the criticality of his assertions does not rely on the work being accepted as architecture in the first place) and rather operates as a gesture of redistribution or re-location of agency.

Price argues that any building environment becomes obsolete unless it can adapt to what is yet to be determined and therefore calls for an awareness or incorporation of obsolescence in architecture: "Inbuilt flexibility, or its alternative, planned obsolescence, can be satisfactory achieved only if the time factor is included as an absolute design factor in the total design process,"[8] he argues, stressing the need to asses the valid life-span of a construction. Literally a useless object, Price sees architecture as redundant—it does not have any relevant function because it is too slow, heavy, and does not help or enrich anybody's life. Architecture is a poor performer and is ineffectual as a curing process because, being too solid, it always comes late. He wants to *dissolve* the useless (architecture), consume it, dispense it, and exhaust it into a system of connections that might become functional again, if only momentarily (in other words, only during that limited life-span).

The architect does not speak from any specific theoretical position but his claims relate to other architectural practices that also criticize the discipline's solidity. Price's projects became relevant during the 1960s and 70s precisely because of a more general concern about architecture's inability to solve any problem. Thus Price's work—as that of the Archigram group, for instance—became notorious because it focused on the physical restructuring of a system of expendable parts rather than a determined object.

Price claims that architecture does not need its old order-imposing role as an establisher of beliefs, but he thinks that it still functions as initiator of dialogue, which is why his stance is far from the ideas of *de-constructive* architecture. Unlike Bernard Tschumi, for instance, who uses the metaphor of fireworks to explain the role of architecture—they are consumed and burned in vain, and therefore suggest the joy of pure expenditure—Price establishes that architecture *must* be consumed but integrated into a real

production cycle, and accordingly its production costs—related to its ephemeral

character—should become much lower. It could be argued that Tschumi is very close to a

Bataillean model when he claims that architecture is completely useless, but radically so:

"Yes, just as all the erotic forces contained in your movement have been consumed for

nothing, architecture must be consumed, erected and burned in vain. The greatest

architecture of all is the fireworker's: it perfectly shows the gratuitous consumption of

pleasure."[9] In contrast, Price acknowledges architecture's uselessness but wants to give it a

new function by dissolving it into a system of connections, for he stresses that its non-

utility can act as a productive force without transforming itself into a form of conspicuous

expenditure. Instead of being anchored in a heavy or solid building, architecture can still

generate activities and give adjustable public access to a variety of things if it is mobile,

adaptable, and reusable.

Limbo Space

As mentioned above, discussion about change prevails in a significant part of the

architectural debates during the 1960s. *But incorporating change is not the same as*

incorporating obsolescence, and indeed in a lot of cases the former is formulated as a case

of *managing* more than allowing change. For this reason, it is necessary to pay attention to

other notions within Price's oeuvre if the aim is to approach his work as an attempt to

incorporate obsolescence into architecture and, from that inclusion, to understand how he

reformulates the function of the museum. The critical aspect when working through his

ideas related to a museum model is the incorporation of marginal variables to the total

structure—the misused or disused parts of a building—and the focus on the relationship

between those parts and the total structure, so that the construction demands constant

interrogation. Therefore, those supposedly useless parts are not passive, neglected pieces. For instance, Price's project to reactivate London's South Bank—conceived in 1983 in response to the Greater London Council, which commissioned Cedric Price Architects to investigate methods whereby that area of the city could be enhanced—contains the following thoughts: to concentrate on the space between the existing buildings rather than on the constructions; to incorporate the largest element of the area, the Thames; to create a public space made of concrete over the river too large to be considered a bridge and therefore to radically rethink the river space beyond "South" or "North" Bank. All of these are examples of the incorporation of previously neglected, uncommitted elements that would be put into an exchange relationship as a means of re-evaluating the area and providing an increasing (and non-anticipated) range of choice and activities.[10]

This engagement with the present of the construction causes Price's projects to arrive at very different results—from conventional built architecture to simple design solutions, there is no privilege of any particular outcome and indeed the idea of any result becoming superior is rejected. Importantly, even though most of his projects are user-oriented and expect an active participation of the public, the user is only one of the variables considered at the planning stage. Price regards the specific needs and desires of the potential users of his constructions, but additionally, and more importantly, the means by which those desires can be expanded, transformed, and enhanced in ways that were not expected either by the public or the designer. This *enabling* rather than planning determines the ever-*potential* character of Price's projects, despite their significant differences.

The architect's premises might result in the best solution for a given space being not to build anything. In 1999, for example, Price participated in a competition to rethink an area at the West Side of Manhattan. He was one of the four entrants chosen (alongside

Peter Eisenman, who finally won the competition, Tom Maine, and Reiser + Umemoto) but his project was not selected at the end. He suggested that the area was left vacant in order to allow fresh air to come off the river, rather than increasing the foul nature of the air by producing new buildings in an already over-developed city. The central focus of this proposal is the space between the river and that part of the city (once again, the interval)—the fluidity and lively character of the in-between—rather than any construction.

Another interesting expression of these ideas is Price's *ATOM* (1969), based on an operation of distribution between different industrial parts of a city (this project might also help us to think about museums). Similar to *Potteries Thinkbelt, ATOM* is an exploration of a new type of educational facility that would serve different people at different stages of their lives and therefore would be integrated into the life of a community like any other social service. Price's idea envisions a number of different "media"—from standard features of a city like bus stops to domestic items— incorporated into an exchange relation operated by a central educational facility called "Town Brain" (he doesn't specify the nature of this; it might be a computer or an organization). This relationship of exchange (which is the heart of the project and the terrain of potentiality) would redirect the use of those media. For instance, an old, run-down industrial site can be put into an exchange relation with the major industrial zone within a city through the introduction of a new, invisible network of communication. Through this gesture of redistribution the old industry is highlighted and is allowed to perform an educational function, even from its apparently useless state. Therefore the project explores a new relationship between utility and productivity, creating a site for dynamic and non-predictable exchanges (not necessarily economic and not even oriented to the acquisition of goods).

ATOM was never built, but some of the past proposals can be found in Price's *Inter-Action Centre*, from 1977. This is a multi-purpose community resource center (comprising classrooms, studios, and other amenities) and administrative office for his client, the Inter-Action Trust, erected in Kentish Town (London). Similar to the architect's *Fun Palace,* the construction is based on an open framework with some modular elements (some of them attached, others left open) that can be easily changed or replaced, even by its users—one sector of the community, for instance, might create an office for their meetings by using the panel system provided. The planning stage is very revealing of Price's way of working: the client and the architect came up with a set number of activities and then gave an approximate modular size to each one of them. This allowed them to visualize the scale of the construction rather than to strictly define the distribution of space because those modules could be incorporated in different ways into the total construction. As happens with most of Price's projects, all the materials used were common and cheap; nothing was specially manufactured and therefore the building costs of this project were significantly lower than those of other community centers serving a similar number of people. The construction was carried out in stages without considering the idea of a defined, total structure, and, indeed, the *Inter-Action Centre* for a long time was just a concrete plinth and a frame structure, used in a number of expected and unexpected ways. It took many years to raise the money for the following phase of the construction and therefore the site was left suspended. But that suspension was put to use and the limbo was occupied by a series of informal events, live performances, and a circus show—a constant replacement of transitional activities. In its suspended, not-fully-resolved character, it had, in effect, a productive nature.

After Architecture

The previous projects address architecture's need to be expendable and consumable and the need to situate it inside the production and exchange cycle. (Indeed, the *Inter-Action* suffered from overuse until it was finally demolished; Price himself took part in the campaign for pro-demolition, against some attempts to preserve it.) Price wants to give a new value to architecture, but what kind of value? The architect embraces a notion of value that is located in a process rather than in a specific material thing. Certainly he does not establish a direct link between excellence and the idea of top-quality, long-lasting materials; he neither claims a particular aesthetic value nor sanctifies the geniality of the design. Importantly, his projects express the notion that value cannot be stored and contained in a particular place—building, cage, museum, archive—because values change and therefore their environment should transform itself as well. Therefore, there is a constant feedback between the built environment and the object housed. As argued above, Price's idea of expenditure is not related to Bataillean excess, and it does not address consumption as a form of sacred expenditure. What it does is transform the obsolete into something useful (if only for a while), which is not attached to any particular form or object but rather *performs* as a generator of activities and interests. If architecture succeeds, it would never really overcome its futility because it would, once again, become obsolete for the users whose desires, expressions, and thoughts were enhanced by it. Though even here it might be argued that this futile, doomed utility is also radically wasteful, and that Price's work is a sort of accursed share, permitting the rest of architecture to go on as normal.

The acknowledgment of architecture's nullity allows it to perform as an amalgam of interconnections that generate certain activities. Price thinks that architecture should disappear and become as ordinary and unnoticeable as water pipes, yet it needs to maintain

a connective quality. Exchange increases the range of possibilities of an object or structure, for it allows it to support more than a single value. The architect understands exchange as the capacity to confront, relate, and incorporate other objects, structures, and people in an interface, and therefore as a process of constant revision that assures the contingency and non-solidity of a building. Thus *exchange* and c*ombination* can be added to the issues of access and retrieval (as opposed to conservation, storage, and collection) that were described as two concerns that are useful for thinking about museums. If value is not stored in a collection (even though a museum might have a well-known, prestigious collection), then value is established in the exchanges between the institution and its users, in the way in which objects and practices affect consumers and visitors and vice versa. Value does not reside on a fixed display of antiques but rather is constantly created and re-created in the form of *exchange-as-value*. Importantly, this notion of exchange does not rely on any form of equivalence and, indeed, embraces a number of processes and relationships between parts that go well beyond economic exchange.

This proposition to understand exchange as value necessarily implies a move away from any notion of transcendental or pre-existent value and, conversely, an approach towards a relational and creative understanding of value. It rejects any form of equivalence, privileging the constant incorporation of change and difference (which is the reason why Price's museum model is different from a department store). Finally, it critically implies an acceptance that those values are created and mediated through forms, and that those very same forms can enhance and recreate exchange, as they are enhanced and recreated *by* exchange.

Museum World and World Museum

Price's projects address issues such as access, retrieval, exchange, and the idea that neither knowledge nor value can be stored. These topics can help us to think about museums and about their conservation, reproduction, and transmission of past cultural artefacts, thus pinpointing how the museum and its environment affect and incorporate each other.[11] Price puts the museum in the same position as any other agent responsible for the incorporation of change or the introduction of difference within a given system. He rejects the idea that "real" life and processes occur outside the museum while the institution merely documents that external reality, bringing it to a close or to an instance of death. The latter assumption informs a significant amount of the direct critiques of the museum formulated during the last century. For it is possible to find it, for instance, in Malevich's opposition between *life/art* and *museum/dead*, or in Adorno's famous claim that the museum is the mausoleum of works of art, or even in Malraux's conflict with the notion of style as the ultimate homogenizing principle, organized by photographic reproduction and expressed in the author's concept of the "museum without walls."[12] From the opposite perspective, Boris Groys is one of the few contemporary critical voices that has attempted to articulate the museum in terms of its relation to life and has therefore argued that the museum is not secondary to reality. Price shares concerns with both positions: he would agree, for example, with Adorno's claim about the total disparity between the needs of the present and the conservation of objects, but he would also state, as Groys does, that the museum is a capital producer of difference. Yet, unlike him, Price emphasizes the dynamic relationship between objects and processes both inside and outside the museum, rather than the way in which reality is defined in terms of a museum collection (reality as *what is not yet collected*).

Some of these concerns about feedback between the museum and what is outside its

walls are addressed directly in the following remarks, taken from the statement that

accompanied Price's entry for the international design competition for the Tate Modern

(London, 1994).

> …Culture has an essential component of change through time. It is in the making
> and consuming that culture is created, not in the identifying, classifying and storage.
> A Centre for culture may allow for these disparate conditions to thrive and flourish
> through both protection and exposure. The periphery of such a centre is four-
> dimensional in which Time is the key dimension in access and retrieval related to
> people, energy and data. This periphery depends on the social and economic
> usefulness it provides. In the 21st century, this is unlikely to be charitable. It will be
> recognised rather by life-enhancing services it provides…[13]

Once again, time is the key issue and access and retrieval embrace not only the collection

but its periphery, including people, energy, and data in equal importance. Price situates the

essence of culture in its making and consuming, and in doing so he opposes other

approaches with a focus on containment and inclusion. By incorporating the periphery of a

cultural institution, Price opens up the existence of any cultural institution to its

environment and focuses on the exchanges between an art object and that environment,

exchanges which—as was argued above—would constantly revise and transform the object

itself.

Despite these remarks, it is important to note that Price does not aim to erase or

liquidate the institution in the traditional sense. The architect wrote a very interesting,

almost unknown text about museums for the short-lived *Arts Magazine*, later published in

the German *Baumeister* (June 1968).[14] The piece, entitled "World Museum," addresses

important issues about the institution and its context through very simple, even domestic

suggestions for the museum space. Price opens the text by referring to mankind's capacity

to preserve its "artifactual dross," a drive that has caused the existence of both museums

and slums. In both cases, he argues, the interest provoked by the object tends to increase

with its separation in time and social relevance for the observer. The architect claims in the

text that the storage and protection of objects no longer needs to be combined with display,

though he does not reject the former two roles as functions of the museum but rather

emphasizes the potential of the latter. Services of comparison and reproduction through

electronic means, for instance, should be widely available and, once again, the institution

should perform as a generator of interest through the propagation of information (as nobody

would demand to view something of whose existence is not known). "What must be

investigated is the *methods* whereby the *organization,* both administrative and spatial, is

capable of *distorting* the time and scale required for both recognition and

enjoyment—increasing the observer's appetite for self-paced looking, listening, touching

and smelling," as he writes in relation to the British Museum.[15] The city—the

environment—is also a museum in terms of a collection of objects of interest and therefore

the institutional museum should strengthen its quality as an artificially constructed stimulus

in order to enhance public interest. For exactly the same reasons, Price claims that greater

facilities for access and informed observation of city demolition sites would be helpful to

emphasize the "'real' expendability of buildings as opposed to their 'assumed'

permanence." The separation of objects or, as he puts it, their "lunatic distortion" becomes

a source of value measured as the exchange between those objects and an adverse or at least

very different environment; there is a production of difference in this constant

transformation. The exchange between the different—and not between the similar as

usually happens in a collection—is what establishes the value of that object in its relational

capacities. The past object is not immobile and can still face change; it can even increase its

value but not in terms of market re-evaluation or gentrification. It rather increases its value

through exchange and difference, and for this reason the function of the museum should be

the enhancement of exchange:

> The role of the museum authority is two fold—firstly as an informed manipulative designer capable of assessing both existing shortage and excess of available consumable experiences; secondly, it is required to preserve or produce conditions—which may mean buildings or at least enclosures—that recognises and satisfies the increasing capacity of society to change its mind and enjoyably benefit from such a continuous choice pattern.[16]

Transient Exhibition Spaces

The fact that Price avoids converting the museum into a temple for changeless relics

and the city into a series of (supposedly) efficient constructions demands the understanding

that an institution *might* be organized in a building or it might not. In his *Mobile Art*

Gallery (Australia, 1983), the space between the viewer and the painting, usually

unoccupied, is transformed through a flying display that underscores that the artist

determines the viewing distance. In his design for the exhibition *Ancient and Modern*

(Ashmolean Museum, Oxford, 1988), the antique objects are not shown in any detail but

rather in the form of an optical toy which challenges issues of perspective, perception, and

presence. Price also focuses on the in-between spaces of the display and accordingly creates

projects of pop-up museums, for instance, which could be built and un-built at any time and

also underscore what happens in the intervals. In this way the object is also contingent, as

opposed to necessary; thus, it has the possibility of being or not. Hence his fascination with

the circus—not when it is installed and performing, but when it is moving from one city to

the other one— and with bridges—neither at one end or the other, but rather as the link

between them.[17]

The need to experience an object is also addressed, for instance, in Price's project

for a maritime museum for Liverpool (circa 1957) using the "redundant" Queen Mary.

Instead of showing the ship in the same way that the Cutty Sark, for example, has been

exhibited in Greenwich, Price's proposal was to have the Queen Mary permanently

positioned offshore and held by a series of hydraulic jacks which in a few hours could

simulate all the range of movements on a transatlantic journey. The project aimed to

provide that experience and to exhibit the unknown luxury of the interiors, to see all the

paraphernalia but primarily to live the opulence rather than to watch the object itself.

Another example of this reformulation of the viewing experience is *Magnet*, which was

never actually installed. Though not a specific museum project, its proposal is useful to

understand Price's concerns about access and exhibition, for the project was designed to

superimpose itself over the fabric of the existing city, and therefore to provoke a new

relationship with familiar places. *Magnet*—which was expected to be funded by local

authorities or civic bodies—was based on a series of short-lived, mobile, and re-adaptable

structures or tools to be used as public amenities providing movement, new kinds of access,

views, safety, or information. These structures were to occupy underused or misused

metropolitan sites such as the air space above roads, for instance. A *Magnet* could be

installed to help somebody cross the road in a zigzag fashion, for example, or could work as

a library facility for the area in which it was placed. A high *Magnet* might allow people to

experience views for which they would be usually expected to pay, or to look at a particular

institution from a different perspective (from the roof, for instance, or from the back rooms

rather than from the front).

Price proposed that these projects would be housed inside an *elastic* building (if

there is a building at all), one that is changeable, consumable, and expendable. This

differentiates Price's ideas from recent museum strategies, like the turn towards

interactivity and entertainment and, more notoriously, the glorious architectural display of

the museum building, which is able to attract more visitors than the actual collection. His

museum projects aim to create conditions that require actions and reactions and therefore

do not express pure fluidity. Yet as something open, the museum has to generate by

exposing (instead of hiding or ignoring) and exploiting the distortions on which it is based.

Objects, monuments, and urban spaces are not preserved as relics, but as lived, changeable,

and expendable life-value sources, which can be used, reused, misused, or disused. This

would prevent the museum from becoming inactive, inflexible, formalised, privatised, or

redundant. These claims might be read as falling into a free market ideal—he *laissez-faire*

of museums—and therefore convert Price's concern with obsolescence into a concern with

consumption, change, and further actualization of goods. As argued above, this is not what

needs to be considered when working his ideas into a museum formulation; it is, rather, the

generative capacity of the void and the emptying of the architectural object that allow for a

different understanding of the museum, based on the non-predictable character of the

interim and on the rejection of any form of equivalence. The dispensability of the museum

refers to its constant voiding in order to allow for the generation of that contingent space,

rather than to the private activities of its users or to some form of creative consumption

inside the museum space.

Mean Time

It is possible to further illustrate Price's concern about the interval through *Mean*

Time, an exhibition of his work at the Canadian Centre for Architecture (CCA, Montreal) in

which he devises 14 icons for 14 ways to look at time, accompanying a selection of 54

objects—historical pictures, outdated objects, architectural curiosities—drawn from the

collection of the CCA (and evidently the way in which he works with those objects also

responds to his thinking about the storage and conservation of the past). Price likes word-games: *mean* points to *denote*, *signify* or *indicate*, but it is also used as an adjective for ignoble qualities: a *mean* person is miserly, unkind, and paltry or insufficient. But of course *meantime* is also the interval, the in-between, and the architect plays with the idea that culture constructs time artificially to denote something in a specific way, and also with the fact that the interval can have a critical significance.

The icons chosen by Price are both common and not so common objects: a candle, for instance, is used to denote the notion of *self-destruction*, an umbrella is used for *prediction*, a dice for *uncertainty*, a dioptric apparatus for the *interval* itself, and an hourglass placed horizontally for the expression of *suspended time*—the sand does not move. They all express how people commonly distort time and also how time is constructed spatially and materially. Once again, this is exactly what the museum does under its roof: it elaborates an artificial, cultural time, and displays it spatially. As an exercise, it is possible to take the following quote and imagine a museum working with the equation between design and time distortion:

> We are all frequently disabled—whether in a rush, in a foreign place, drunk, 18 years old or less, tired or old. Safety must be as integral a part of design as delight. The availability of almost subliminal information is prime. Anticipation in design and dispensation is as important as is in the reception. For delight and well being extra knowledge can enrich the commonplace. Architecturally, the content of visual information must be for the observer and not for the dispenser who demands recognition for his three dimensional dexterity.[18]

There is an obvious turn towards the public or the beholder instead of the institution in this quote—rather than buildings and/or museums, there is a mutual exchange between objects and observers. There is also a statement which calls for the awareness of future time and for the recognition of what Price elsewhere calls the *five stages* of artificial time: use, reuse,

misuse, disuse, and refuse. These stages are best recognized when stages such as *construction* and *demolition time* are incorporated on equal terms, and this recognition allows products and processes to be seen as inter-dependent and affecting each other (the museum object, for instance, and the process of time distortion expressed in its display).

Mean Time also proposes something else, embodied in the horizontal hourglass. Apart from the fact that the sand does not move to either extreme of the clock, Price accompanied the display with a picture of San Francisco in the early years of the last century, after an earthquake devastated the city. Time also seems to be suspended in the photograph, and it appears to be a link between disaster or destruction and the notion of time suspension. Change and time are irreversible but there are also some spaces that can work as a limbo, as a suspended yet open time/space. This is another attribute of the museum: by distorting time it is able to suspend it and, possibly, to find potentials in that void. Price draws attention, for instance, to that important but unimaginable period in which a space is *going to be filled* by a building but is *not filled yet*. "We'll suspend disbelief that that space exists because it's nothing space: it's not doing this and it can't do that until they build more. So it's nothing space and we don't talk about it."[19]

It can be argued that Price aims to work with that suspended time and to occupy architecture's vacant space, either literally or as a critical operation; his designs can be regarded as always operating in that interval, in the in-between space of the almost yet not completely finished. The critical importance of the interval in Price is that, because of its non-reducible disposition (that is, space is neither what it was nor what it will be in the future), it can generate a great many things directly from its radical and contingent character. Translating these ideas to the museum, it can be argued that the nullity of the institution should be accentuated and the stress should be put on what is not happening, on

the areas between gaps. Price imagines an open, expendable, and changeable museum, with

creativity placed on display and not in storage, preservation, and collection. He also accepts

the limited relevance of the traditional form of the museum, if it works with its finite and

distorted character and if it is incorporated into a real production cycle. Price utilizes,

however, a very peculiar cycle, given, for instance, that he worked for twenty years on a

project designed to last a maximum of ten. Luxuriously non-economic, the *Fun*

Palace—which, as with most of Price's objects that have been discussed here, would be

always changing and moving, connected to its environment, and positioned in the interval

of pure consumption and enjoyment before its end—would have been dismantled after two

decades of preparation but only a decade of functioning.

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[1] In very general terms, the *Fun Palace* comprises various moveable entertainment facilities. Originally conceived by the theatre producer Joan Littlewood, it was a place where people could pop in and out to enjoy a few hours of leisure: in the music area, instruments would be available for free use; the science playground would host lectures and performances; there would be places to watch TV or just relax. There would be no fixed program and the structure would change according to the needs of the users.

[2] *Generator* is the name of a project conceived by Price in 1976, which consisted in a group of services developed for an organization in Florida rather than in a particular building. The architect explains the idea behind it (that can be applied to the whole of his work) in the following quote: "Architecture is not about problem solving; rather, it should create desirable conditions and opportunities hitherto thought impossible." In Cedric Price, *The Square Book,* (Sussex: WILEY-ACADEMY, 2003), 92.

[3] Giorgio Agamben, "On Potentiality," in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy,* ed. and trans. Daniel Heller-Roazen (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1999).

[4] Giorgio Agamben, "Bartebly or On Contingency," in *Potentialities: Collected Essays in Philosophy*.

[5] Ibid., 267.

[6] For a description of the relationship between the architect and the engineer in the *Zoo Aviary*, see "Engineers and Architects: Newby + Price," in *AA Files*, Number 27, Summer 1994, 25- 32.

[7] It might be argued that Price failed in this respect, at least outwardly: even though the practice of contemporary architecture is, indeed, widely "spread" into a number of tasks

(some of them completely computerized and/or outsourced) and determined by the actions and interests of engineers, contractors, manufacturers, and bureaucrats, his name is intrinsically linked to some of his projects, particularly the *Fun Palace.* But, once again, the argument refers to the re-consideration of the issue of agency within an architectural project.

[8] Cedric Price, *The Square Book (*Sussex: Wiley-Academy, 2003), 56.

[9] Bernard Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction* (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1994), 262.

[10] The *Fun Palace* project also considers the use of adjacent areas and buildings as conditions and generators of activities: the nearby derelict and industrial constructions (with all their noise, dust, and noxious fumes) are exploited through illumination from the central building.

[11] The concern about access has been central during the museum's modern history. Indeed, many of the classic European museums began life as private aristocratic or monarchical collections that were later opened to the public (this is the case, for instance, of the Uffizi Gallery in Florence, which started as a display palace for the works collected or commissioned by the Medici family; it has been opened to visitors by request since the sixteenth century, and in 1765 it was officially opened to the public). Though Price's conception of access is different, for it refers to the active participation of the public in the establishment of what is valuable, and to the dynamic and changing relationship between that public and the institution.

[12] "Photography imparts a family likeness to objects that have actually but slight affinity," Malraux writes in *The Voice of Silence,* trans. Stuart Gilbert (St. Albans: Paladin, 1974), 44. The fact that those objects have lost their specificity through mechanical reproduction and, as a consequence, have gained 'style' is related to the categorising function of the museum in its modern form.

[13] Cedric Price, *Re: CP*, ed. Hans Ulrich Obrist (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2003), 116.

[14] Price reprinted this piece in the "Cedric Price Supplement" in *Architectural Design* (October 1970): 507-522.

[15] Cedric Price, "Cedric Price Supplement," 519. The three subsequent short quotes are from the same source and page.

[16] Ibid.

[17] Price exhibited and was actively involved in the design of the exhibition *Cities on the Move*, which travelled through a number of cities like London, Hong Kong, and Shanghai and expressed the differences of each context. He would observe later that the journey between the cities was more interesting than the final product, in the same way that stepping stones are even more exciting than bridges: the focus is on the placement of each stone at the place of an interval rather than on the exact point in which they will arrive.

[18] Cedric Price, "Anticipatory Architecture: Cedric Price Special Issue," in *Architect's Journal* (5 September 1996): 36.

[19] Price, *Re: CP*, 72.