

UNVEILING THE UNHOUSE

Reyner Banham
at Silurian Dry
Lake in the
Mojave Desert,
1981. Photo Tim
Street-Porter.

An essay by architecture historian Reyner Banham for *Art in America's* April 1965 issue overturned mainstream narratives of modernism and predicted the shape of things to come.

by Robert M. Rubin

CURRENTLY
ON VIEW
"Chamberlain/
Prouvé," at Gagosian
Gallery, New York,
through Apr. 4.

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Contributors page.

REYNER BANHAM (1922-1988) was a British mechanical engineer who became the 20th century's first truly modern architecture critic. Before him, there were only art historians generating taxonomies of Greco-Roman, Gothic and Renaissance buildings (e.g., Nikolaus Pevsner) and cheerleaders of the modern movement (Sigfried Giedion). But Banham combined academic rigor with a real understanding of technology to make architectural history as much about the immediate future as about a succession of styles.¹ His doctoral dissertation for the Courtauld Institute of Art was published as *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* (1960). The century's first critical history of modernism, it is still widely read and taught. "A Home Is Not a House," an essay he contributed to the April 1965 issue of *Art in America*, captured the seismic shift in the way architecture's relationship to technology was understood after the founding myths of modernism fell away.

According to Banham, the modern movement's form never really followed function. Its leading practitioners were well intentioned but failed to engage with rapidly emerging building technologies in any meaningful way. Its historians (Giedion, Bruno Zevi) were spin doctors who rewrote the past to make it seem that modernism had sprung full-blown from the mighty brows of Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius. In fact, Banham asserted, modern architecture is what happened while these people were making other plans.

Banham understood the actual crux of modern architecture: building systems based on new technologies and environmental science. Architecture doesn't tell technology what form it ought to take. Rather, technology suggests form, or expediently allows it to emerge as problems and programs are worked out by its makers. The French constructor Jean Prouvé (whom Banham would write about long before this non-architect and non-engineer was on any



Gerald Laing:
Lotus I, 1963, oil
on canvas, 45 by 56
inches. © Gerald
Laing Estate.



architecture historian's radar) hated the word *beau* (beautiful), preferring to be told that something he constructed was *bien* (good).² This is a polite way of telling architects to kiss off. Banham was less diplomatic. It was enough of a shock to read that, in his view, Le Corbusier's vaunted machines for living were abstracted French neoclassical buildings with a bit of symbolic mechanical ornament. It was something else altogether to swallow Banham's assertion that the future of architecture was Buckminster Fuller. Today Bucky Fuller has achieved sainthood; Brad Pitt wants to play him in a biopic. But in 1960, the leading lights of architecture were wary of this strange little man who thought architecture was a profession for quacks and described the International Style as an example of "fashion-inoculation,"³ the infusion of superficial modishness from without.

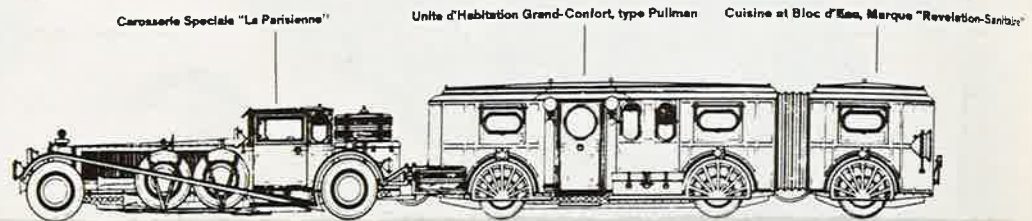
Banham intermittently wandered off the academic reservation to engage and provoke a broader public. As a founder of the Independent Group (IG), he was present at the creation of Pop in its English iteration, which grafted a second generation Futurism onto America's consumerist signs. The IG was organized at the London Institute of Contemporary

Arts (ICA) in 1952 by artists, writers, architects, and critics dissatisfied with modernist orthodoxies. The group's landmark 1956 exhibition, "This Is Tomorrow" at Whitechapel Gallery in London, featuring Richard Hamilton's collage *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* (1956), is widely considered to mark the emergence of Pop. (The term itself was coined by Lawrence Alloway, another member of the IG.) Banham moved easily between art, architecture and mass culture. The high/low mash-up was his specialty. Writing for *A.i.A.* in 1966, he used a review of Gerald Laing's racing-car paintings to trace the conceptual roots of hot-rod decoration to medieval heraldry.

BUT AN EARLIER ARTICLE by Banham for *A.i.A.* crystallized the moment when architecture seemed poised to change the way we occupy the planet. The April 1965 "A Home Is Not a House," a jazzy paean to Fuller, explores the outer limits of American mobility. Banham started visiting America in the early 1960s and had fallen in with Peter Blake, an idiosyncratic architect and curator. Blake shared Banham's reservations about mainstream modern architec-

Dallegrè's 29-20 hindsight and foresight produced this historical capriccio from the First Machine Age well before the present article was first mooted. In the mode of its time, services are in a separate outhouse instead of being a mechanical clip-on.

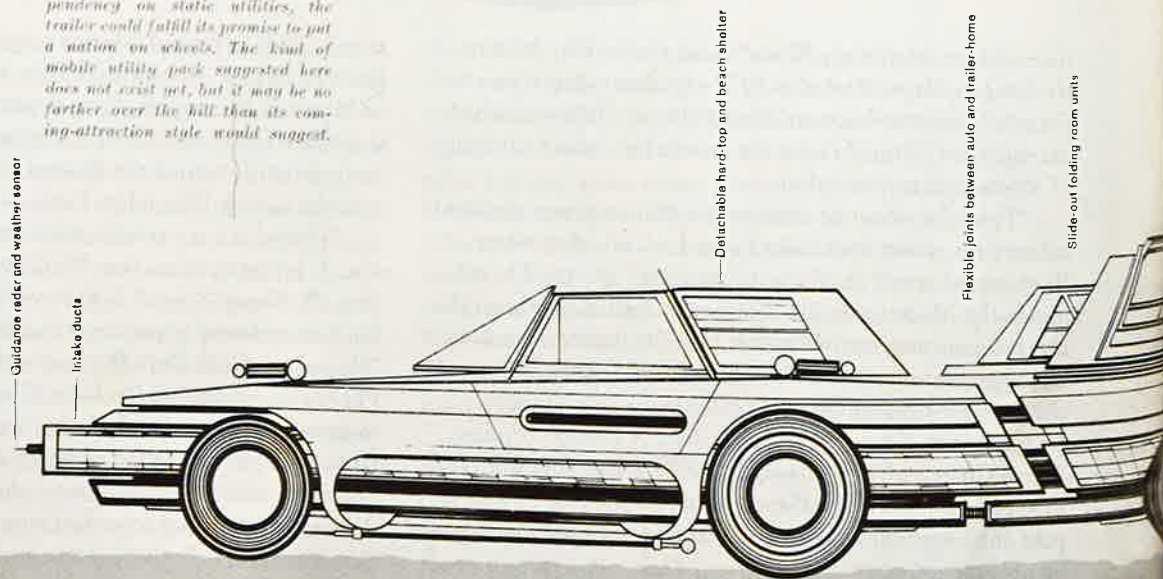
SUPER-COUPÉ DE LONG-WEEK-END, 1927



The present mobile home is a mess, usually, mechanically, and in its relationship to the permanent infrastructure of civilization. But if it could be rendered more compact and mobile, and be uprooted from its dependency on static utilities, the trailer could fulfill its promise to put a nation on wheels. The kind of mobile utility pack suggested here does not exist yet, but it may be no farther over the hill than its coming-attraction style would suggest.

TRAILMASTER GTO TRANSCONTINENTAL

Trailmaster GTO 2 + 2 with beveled rear axle and drive-train



Forties came from Aachen and Berlin anyway, the pacemakers of the Fifties and Sixties are men of international culture like Charles Eames and Philip Johnson, and so too, in many ways, are the coming men of today, like Myron Goldsmith.

Left to their own devices, Americans do not monumentalize or make architecture. From the Cape Cod cottage, through the balloon frame to the perfection of permanently-pleated aluminum siding with embossed wood-graining, they have tended to build a brick chimney and lean a collection of shacks against it. When Groff Conklin wrote (in "The Weather-Conditioned House") that "A house is nothing but a hollow shell . . . a shell is all a house or any structure in which human beings live and work, really is. And most shells in nature are extraordinarily inefficient barriers to cold and heat . . ." he was expressing an extremely American view, backed by a long-established grassroots tradition.

And since that tradition agrees with him that the American hollow shell is such an inefficient heat barrier, Americans have always been prepared to pump more heat, light and power into their shelters than have other peoples. America's monumental space is, I suppose, the great outdoors—the porch, the terrace, Whitman's rail-traced plains, Kerouac's infinite road, and now, the Great Up There. Even within the house, Americans rapidly learned to dispense with the partitions that Europeans need to keep space architectural and within bounds, and long before Wright began blundering through the walls that subdivided polite architecture into living room, games room, card room, gun room etc., humbler Americans had been slipping into

Reyner Banham, *British architectural historian and critic, currently holds a fellowship from the Graham Foundation to investigate the role of mechanical services in the rise of modern architecture. "A Home Is Not a House" is a direct product of this research, and the illustrations by Moroccan-born architect designer and car-craft François Dallegret add a footnote whose importance, Banham says, "goes beyond their quality as graphics—they demonstrate the hollow-ness of the fear of many architects that acceptance of the dominance of environmental machinery will be 'the end of creativity.'"*

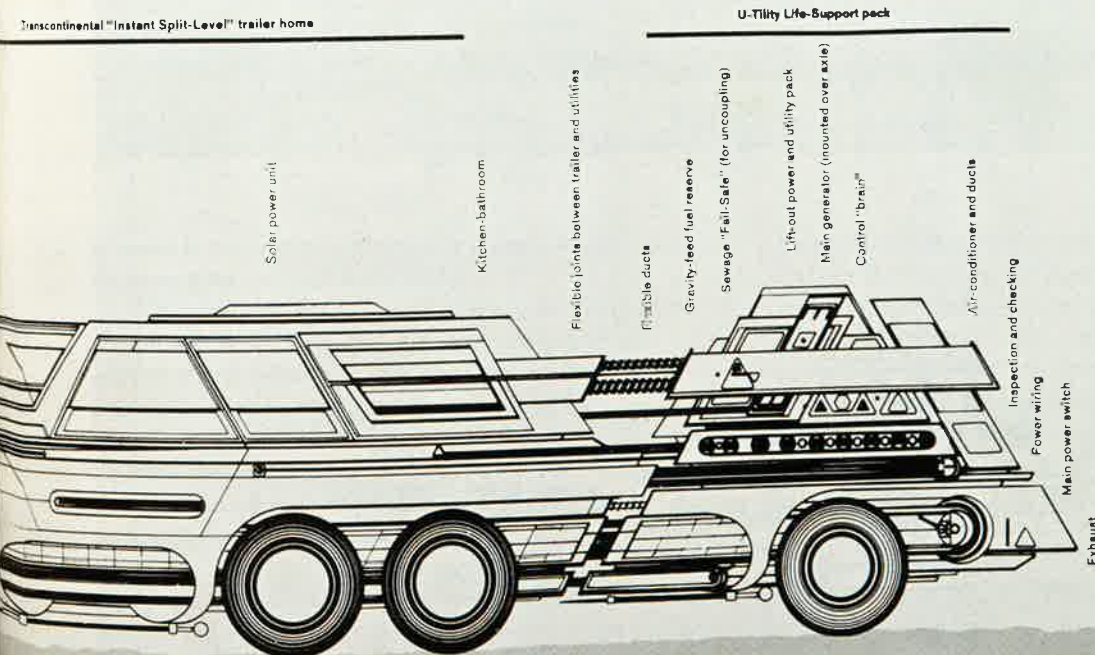
a way of life adapted to informally planned interiors that were, effectively, large single spaces.

Now, large single volumes wrapped in flimsy shells have to be lighted and heated in a manner quite different and more generous than the cubicular interiors of the European tradition around which the concept of domestic architecture first crystallized. Right from the start, from the Franklin stove and the kerosene lamp, the American interior has had to be better serviced if it was to support a civilized culture, and this is one of the reasons that the U.S. has been the forcing ground of mechanical services in buildings—so if services are to be felt anywhere as a threat to architecture, it should be in America.

"The plumber is the quartermaster of American culture," wrote Adolf Loos, father of all European platitudes about the superiority of U.S. plumbing. He knew what he was talking about; his brief visit to the States in the Nineties convinced him that the outstanding virtues of the American way of life were its informality (no need to wear a top hat to call on local officials) and its cleanliness—which was bound to be noticed by a Viennese with as highly developed a set of Freudian compulsions as he had. That obsession with clean (which can become one of the higher absurdities of America's lysol-breathing Kleenex-culture) was another psychological motive that drove the nation toward mechanical services. The early justifications of air-conditioning were not just that people had to breathe: Konrad Meier ("Reflections on Heating and Ventilating," 1904) wrote fastidiously of ". . . excessive amounts of water vapor, sickly odors from respiratory organs, unclean teeth, perspiration, untidy clothing, the presence of microbes due to various conditions, stuffy air from dusty carpets and draperies . . . cause greater discomfort and greater ill health."

(Have a wash, and come back for the next paragraph.)

Most pioneer air-conditioning men seem to have been nose-obsessed in this way: best friends could just about force themselves to tell America of her national B.O.—and then, compulsive salesmen to a man, promptly prescribed their own patent-improved panacea for ventilating the hell out of her. Somewhere among these clustering concepts—cleanliness, the lightweight shell, the mechanical services,





Mies van der Rohe's Farnsworth House, 1951, Plano, Ill. Courtesy National Trust for Historic Preservation.



Jean Prouvé's Maison Métropole, ca. 1949, in "A Passion for Jean Prouvé," 2012, Pinacoteca Agnelli, Turin, Italy. Courtesy Galerie Patrick Seguin.

systems. It also contains grayed-out pictures of Dallegret and Banham sitting around in the nude.

The unhouse of 1965 is, of course, a car—or at least a conglomeration of rolling elements that represents liberation from the fixed services of the trailer park. In a pairing that evokes the graphic dialectic of Le Corbusier's manifesto *Toward an Architecture*, Dallegret's Super-Coupe de Long-Week-End, a 1927 Bugatti Royale towing a Pullman Coach with an outhouse/kitchen caboose, yields to the Trailmaster GTO Transcontinental of the immediate future. Banham envisions the latter as a mobile home "uprooted from its dependence on static utilities." It might have emerged from the drawing board of Detroit design honcho Harley Earl, if Earl had been slipped some LSD.

Paradoxically, Dallegret's drawings give an indelible pop cultural form to the idea of architectural invisibility that Banham is looking to evoke. The architecture may be invisible, but it's clear what it looks like. As Pop punctured the preten-

tions of late Abstract Expressionism, so the IG, and subsequently Banham and Dallegret, popped modernism's increasingly reactionary balloon and allowed something more truly modern to emerge. Banham gives his illustrator full credit: the importance of Dallegret's visions, he says, "goes beyond their quality as graphics. They demonstrate the hollowness of the fear of many architects that acceptance of the dominance of environmental machinery will be the end of creativity."

Perversely, Banham suggests that the built work that "most clearly demonstrates the threat or promise of the unhouse" is Philip Johnson's Glass House (1949) in New Canaan, Conn. Yes, *that* Philip Johnson, who was a regular, orthodox presence in *A.i.A.* at the time. "Anatomy of a Collector: Nelson Rockefeller," which appeared in the same issue as "Home," and a spotlight on Johnson's addition to the Museum of Modern Art in an article on museum construction in the April '64 issue attest to the primacy of Johnson and his MoMA, associates in *A.i.A.*'s pages during the mid-

1960s. Banham concedes that Johnson's building is intended by its architect to be monumental, but "when you have dug through all the erudition about Ledoux and Malevich and Palladio," one is left with just two elements: "a heated brick floor slab, and a standing unit which is a chimney/fireplace on one side and a bathroom on the other." For Banham, the house recalls nothing so much as a prairie chimney with a balloon frame raised with the help of neighboring settlers, as in a John Ford movie.

BANHAM'S UPENDING of the architectural canon didn't stop at the domestic dwelling. A few years after unveiling the unhouse, he nominated his uncity: Los Angeles. As technology gives form to architecture, so population shifts and migrations give rise to successive, often overlapping enclaves of the modern megalopolis. For Banham, L.A.'s lack of city planning is a positive. Its freeway interchanges and other feats of civic engineering stand in for more traditional public monuments. His *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies* (1971) was followed within a year by the BBC documentary "Reyner Banham Loves Los Angeles," in which he pops a made-up city guide (the "Baede-kar") into the 8-track player of a rental car at the airport and proceeds to show us a mix of touristic high points and an insider's L.A. Banham's deadpan interview with Ed Ruscha, which takes place in an open Chevy convertible at Tiny Naylor's, L.A.'s last drive-in restaurant, is classic:

Banham (once he has his pineapple sundae): Los Angeles has no public monuments worth visiting, but quite a lot of interesting commercial buildings. What should people see here?

Ruscha: Gas stations. Any kind of edifice that has to do with a car.

Of course, the unfortunate exogenous event we now refer to as the Energy Crisis would cast a serious pall on Banham's thinking. He fled to the desert for some soul-searching and produced *Scenes in America Deserta* (1982), a book with photographs by Richard Misrach. Banham died just after he was appointed to a full professorship at New York University's Institute of Fine Arts. In October 1988, *A.i.A.* posthumously published "Actual Monuments," intended as his inaugural lecture at the school.

In "Home," Banham expected American engineering's knack for miniaturization to enable the manufacture of "genuinely self contained and regenerative" mobile "standard of living packages" (the term is Fuller's) to the scale drawn by Dallegret—including "U-tility" units that could be picked up and dropped off at stations nationwide. Instead, we have tiny smartphones. Most prefab today is still in the vein of trailer parks, even if there are signs of an evolving niche for more contemporary mass customization. Banham's less than stellar batting average predicting the future notwithstanding, his line of thinking did anticipate

the high-tech architecture of the 1980s and beyond, in which technology is the unabashed basis of form.

In another *A.i.A.* review, from June 1987, Banham tackles Renzo Piano's first solo museum commission, the Menil Collection in Houston—a structure that initially underwhelmed mainstream American audiences. Here we see Banham putting the horse correctly in front of the cart with his emphasis on what the building does and what effects it engenders. The fact that at first glance the building looks like an "upmarket UPS depot" doesn't trouble Reyner in the slightest. His review is all about the light, the air conditioning and the enclosure of mechanical services under the special conditions imposed by Houston's climate, as well as the museum's location in a suburban-scaled neighborhood. Banham remained consistent in his emphasis on kit as formgiver, but 50 years later we are far from the naked nomads imagined in "Home." Piano is the go-to name for high-tech museums.

Philip Johnson continued to dominate modern architecture as MoMA's gatekeeper and principal exponent of corporate modernism. He was routinely maligned and ridiculed by the architectural avant-garde in academic journals and little magazines to the left of this one. *A.i.A.* was not exactly establishment; it reviewed Cedric Price's unrealized project for the Fun Palace, a remarkable exercise in postmodern public space. And yet in the '60s, Johnson was an integral part of a genteel *A.i.A.* inner circle that included book editor Francine du Plessix (later a staff writer for the *New Yorker*) and *Harper's* editor Russell Lynes, and was decidedly not the likes of the IG and Archigram.

In his self-styled role as dean of American architecture, Johnson obliged critic Paul Goldberger with a gracious quote in Banham's *New York Times* obituary, describing him as "that rare new bird, a journalist, a historian, a writer, a man of breadth, all rolled up into one."⁵ An *A.i.A.* reviewer gave Banham's legacy a more nuanced context in the post-modernist moment when architecture seemed to be leading the way. Discussing a posthumous anthology of Banham's writing, Paul Mattick Jr. wrote that Banham found within modernism the seeds of an architecture of environmental effects, while at the same time embracing the myriad vernaculars of mass culture with affection and respect. In doing so, he helped architecture avoid the dead end of Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown's combination of "neo-modernist elegance and an ironized commercial pastoral." I for one would rather love Los Angeles than learn from Las Vegas. There is no irony in the air as Banham tools down Sunset Boulevard with the Doors' "L.A. Woman" blasting on the 8-track. A half century later, the pad still swings. ○

1. See Nigel Whitely's biography *Reyner Banham: Historian of the Immediate Future*, Cambridge, U.K., Cambridge University Press, 2002.

2. See Reyner Banham, "The Thin, Bent Detail," *Architectural Review*, April 1962, pp. 249-52.

3. Quoted in Reyner Banham, *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age*, New York, Praeger, 1972, p. 326.

4. *New York Times*, Mar. 22, 1988.

Dallegret's drawings for "A Home is Not a House" will appear in "Hippie Modernism: The Struggle for Utopia" at the Walker Art Center, Minneapolis, Oct. 24, 2015-Feb. 28, 2016.

François Dallegret's drawing *The Environment-Bubble*, 1965, from "A Home Is Not a House." © 1965 François Dallegret.

The Environment-Bubble

Transparent plastic bubble dome inflated by air-conditioning output

