

# DOCUMENT AND LOCATION

RE-MAKE/RE-MODEL

CHRIS FITE-WASSILAK ON  
MIKE RICKETTS, THE VESSEL, 2013



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Mike Ricketts, *The Vessel*, 2013

*All buildings are predictions.  
All predictions are wrong.*<sup>1</sup>

The Fun Palace, Cedric Price and Joan Littlewood’s proposed centre for London’s Lea Valley, was to be a fluid framework that would engage and educate the masses liberated by incipient technology. It was to be a ‘university of the streets’<sup>2</sup>, with one promotional pamphlet for the space promising ‘Kunst Dabbling, Genius Chat, Clownery, Fireworks, Rallies, Battles of flowers, Concerts, Science Gadgetry, Juke Box Information, Learning Machines.’ The project, begun in 1961, was a descendent of the idealist modular, mobile structures of Constant Nieuwenhuys and Yona Friedman, and heavily formed by

the still-new discipline of cybernetics. The building itself was essentially a hollow structure which would hold building units that could be shifted around the site with gantry cranes as needed.

These units were the central essence of the project; Price’s design relied on the compartmentalisation of activities and individuals. Reyner Banham regarded this ‘containerisation’ of architecture as appropriately anti-monumental, and necessarily adaptable for an age uncertainty.<sup>3</sup> His notes were prompted by the fact that that very same characteristic was transforming global trade networks, and rendering the architecture of transportation at ports and rail stations that had preceded it obsolete. Standards for international shipping containers were agreed in the late 60s, not only intertwining sea, rail, and road in a way that had never been done before, but



also further regulating and restricting the human labour required to run that system. Artist and theorist Alan Sekula's wide-spanning Fish Story (1989 – 95) project maps these movements; in his essay, "Red Passenger" he writes: 'Factories become more mobile, ship-like, as ships become increasingly indistinguishable from trucks and trains, and seaways lose their difference with highways.'<sup>4</sup>

The Fun Palace was never realised, though it has remained highly influential, finding its way into physical life via buildings such as Rogers and Piano's Centre Georges Pompidou. Its intended location has since seen the construction of the London Olympic Games<sup>5</sup>, dotted around it the adapted intentions of Friedman and Price in low-cost temporary offices and apartments billed as 'Container Cities.' The Container City, clusters of artfully stacked and minimally modified shipping containers, is a trademarked product of the planning company Urban Space Management Ltd., who specialise in 'regeneration initiatives'<sup>6</sup>. Set, as Price envisioned, against the skyline of the Lea Valley, the container has become an architectural building block that signifies change and possibility.

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Enter the HMP The Weare, aka Jascon 27, aka the Bibby Resolution, a motorless barge turned 'floatel': welding together dozens of containers to make it a large, floating fortress capable of accommodating hundreds of people for whatever purpose deemed fit. Mike Ricketts' project 'The Vessel' discloses the process of uncovering the multi-layered story of this building, touching on

key aspects of recent history: the military and judicial systems, the international car and oil industries, as well as, perhaps unsurprisingly, urban regeneration and the London Olympic Games. The sprawling trace of 'The Vessel' is typical of Ricketts' artistic practice, which moves within the 'invisible' media. Concerned with space as a conceptual, political and experiential construct, his work deals with those willingly-ignored, underlying aspects which shape space: personal opinions which coalesce into community desires, town planning policy, the distance between codes and laws of practice and the more prosaic, shifting experience of those people subjected to those statutes. His work takes up Kafka's prescient insight that bureaucracy is the fiction that already exists as the dominant narrative of our contemporary existence. In addition to the summons, decrees, and offices-within-offices of The Castle (1926), Ricketts further enlists the ways we currently encounter institutional power: group surveys, e-mails, photographic snapshots, internet browsing and Google image search. Where previous projects have dealt with negotiating perspectives on public spaces, 'The Vessel' explicitly addresses the framework of authority and power; from 1989 to 2005, the containers aboard Her Majesty's Prison The Weare held inmates, first in New York City's harbour as a drug rehab unit, and later on the coast of Dorset as the UK's only floating prison.

The project takes the form of an indirect, external portrait of a building that has been through multiple lives and uses. We learn the structure's history only via its wake, its paper and digital trail. We are never given access inside, just a panoply of views circling its intimidating mass.



Alongside several artefacts, portraits of the hulk in its various guises and settings, the main component of the installation is a video of a narrated slide show. The *Vessel* (2013) video is a contemporary parable, delivered as a self-conscious daytime kid's television show. 'I'm going to tell you a story,' the narrator begins. Like any children's TV programme, the narrator is instructional, inclusive, and ever so slightly patronising as we chase after what he continually refers to as 'our vessel.' What we find, in an ever-widening spiral, is a narrative of adaptability and global networks, with a boat that was built in Sweden, held British troops in Port Stanley following the Falklands War, immigrant workers in a German Volkswagen factory, convicted criminals in the US and UK, and currently holding oil workers in Nigeria.

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Although Price's shifting containers of the Fun Palace was never built, Price had no wish to revisit or revive the idea, and had always conceived of it as a temporary, time-specific need; "he had established ten-year life for the project, after which time he deemed that it would be socially irrelevant and obsolete."<sup>7</sup> Similarly, most architectural uses of the shipping container, in *Container City*<sup>TM</sup> and in similar projects across continental Europe, have been found to have up to a fifteen year lifespan. HMP The Wreake discloses a different, perhaps more realistic, portrayal of the narrative of society's containerisation, a story spanning thirty- four years, at least eight different proprietors, and four different industries.

As a highly compartmentalised organisation of humans, whether housing workers, soldiers, or prisoners, the craft does illustrate the 'privatisation of

liberty”<sup>8</sup> that Foucault found in his history of the prison. But Ricketts’ portrayal of the on-going lifespan of ‘our vessel’, with its hive of containers that can be cells, living quarters, or barracks, could also be seen as a structure that ‘allows dynamic systems to self-regulate and self-correct without end-state or definite goal’, its shifting identities more ‘a temporal event rather than as a formal object.’<sup>9</sup> These were descriptions of the cybernetic principles guiding Price; and perhaps it is not entirely insignificant to note that Anthony Stafford Beer, one-time member of the Fun Palace Cybernetics Committee, became consultant to the ill-fated Salvador Allende government in Chile in the 70s, on the application of cybernetics for social and political control. Ricketts’ artistic role is as a systems observer and modifier; what he exposes to us in *The Vessel* is the realpolitik of the container. While tracing the continued re-use of this building,

we can find it accurately reflects global politics of the past three decades. But what we also find is the implication that flexible systems, while maintaining the idealistic rhetoric of open-ness, work in aid of those who control them. The updated parable of *The Vessel* recasts the aspirations of the highly adaptable framework as a highly regulated tool of authority and capital.

*Chris Fite-Wassilak is writer and critic based in London*

<sup>1</sup> Stewart Brand, *How Buildings Learn*, Viking, 1994, p 178.

<sup>2</sup> Joan Littlewood, *New Scientist* 38, 1964.

<sup>3</sup> Reyner Banham, ‘Flatscape with Containers’ in *New Society*, Vol.10, no.255, 17 August, 1967.

<sup>4</sup> Alan Sekula, *Fish Story*, Richter Verlag, 2002, page 49.

<sup>5</sup> See Anthony Iles pamphlet ‘The Lower Lea Valley as Fun Palace and Creative Prison’, 2008, for a detailed criticism of the Olympic Legacy via Price’s project; PDF available online at <https://anonfiles.com/file/32459b7ac7e2243e239931caf47970cb>

<sup>6</sup> See <http://www.urbanspace.com/>

<sup>7</sup> Stanley Mathews, *Journal of Architectural Education*, Vol. 59, issue 3, 2006, page 47.

<sup>8</sup> Michel Foucault, *Discipline and Punish*, 1975, trans. Alan Sheridan, Random House, 1995, page 244.

<sup>9</sup> S. Mathews, page 42.



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Foreground  
The Old Church School Butts Hill  
Frome  
Somerset  
BA11 1HR

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## DOCUMENT AND LOCATION

Document and Location is a new research group developed by academics from Fine Art, Photography and Architecture at The University of The West of England, Bristol, in partnership with Foreground.

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