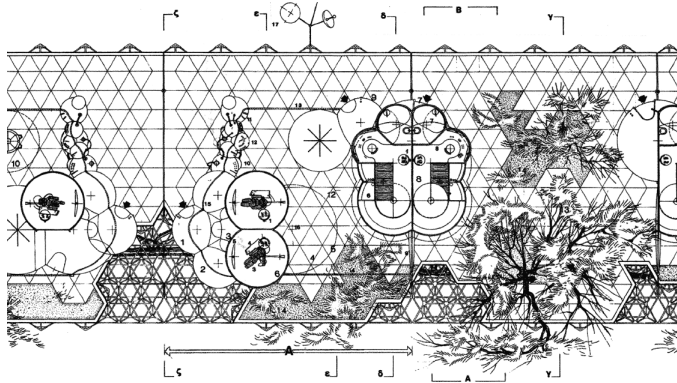


Floatation: Pleasure and Awe

By Nikos Tsimas

http://www.floatermagazine.com/issue01/Pleasure_and_Awe/



Takis Zenetos, *horizontal section*, drawing, *Architectural Issues* 8, 1974, Athens.

"The last phase of the evolutionary process that gradually 'lifts up' a city, is its swinging over the nature".¹

"...but this way and that way at the wind's good pleasure ceaselessly we swing 'n swivel..."²

In Takis Zenetos' projects, swinging is one of the many factors that compose the final built product. In most of his projects, the architect has taken decisions that reveal a sophisticated relation between architecture and ground. At the house in Kavouri, Athens, the horizontal elements of the structure distance from the ground and extend so that they create spaces open to the horizon. While at the unbuilt hotel complex of Kifissias avenue, Athens, the tension to the building's vertical axis is a clear reference to the suspension balconies at Mountain Athos, Greece.³ This relation becomes even clearer within the of *Electronic Urban Planning Utopia*, 1952; a proposal by Zenetos concerning the design of the ideal city. Given that utopia is an opportunity for the architect to express his most subtle architectural desires, Zenetos study allows an access to the privacy of its creator's architectural obsessions.

Zenetos in his study proposes a city that swings over the ground, suspended by cables pylons. The internal structure is based upon a grid pattern. The main point of his research is the implementation of tele-energies as well as the creation of a flexible urban planning system which can be applied by using prefabricated elements. This system would maintain its interior balance by incorporating up to date digital technologies. The suspended levels consists a coherent whole. The suggested space among them is not everywhere the same, depending on the use. As a result, a city with both flexible limits and many levels of density is created. Zenetos uses the term "swinging" literally in his proposal, since, both the material part of the city (the built environment) and the immaterial communication networks are floating in the air. Nevertheless, the complete release from the ground comes gradually, since, at first place, certain activities such as sports or cultivation would still take place in the nature, while the cities, after their

release, would play the role of keeping the historical memories alive.

Nevertheless, in Zenetos' utopia, the term "swinging" has also another more subtle meaning. According to his proposal, the possibility of extending the city does not meet any restrictions and it can even be implemented in the air, depending on the potential needs. This does not only imply the architect's intention for a permanent release from the solid ground, but also his intention for a permanent release from any built tradition. Any problem of integration just ceases to exist, as the only thing that connects the suspended city to the past is the cable connection. This allows to the city not only to remain in the air without having to ever return back to earth, but also, it allows to continue its development at a higher level. Time stops for anything built, on the ground and the return to the land of origin as expressed by Dimitris Pikionis, becomes the detachment from the ground. The new city may start all over, allowing its architecture to 'swing' over the built tradition, with its eyes off the ground.

The double swinging of Zenetos' utopia is placed among a whole of theories that give various meanings to the release from the ground. This situation is often overestimated, due to the idealised idea for the over-ground space. This space is only approachable by subjects that can defeat gravity. This "upper space" is where many religions place the ideal life, where the immaterial world of Plato's ideas exists and from where the Utmost springs for the romantic thinkers of the 19th century. This view of the upper space as something ideal led the afore-mentioned -and many others- to seek a greater spirituality. This quest urged an idealisation and motivated people to conquer the upper space. Its value cannot be estimated and one should extend their stay there, no matter how such thing could devaluate the ground of origin. In essence, the swinging in this upper, spiritual world is just a metaphor. Yet, when described, it is characterised by a high level of physicalism, which gives it a profound and characteristic pleasure.

This pleasure is just like the floating pleasure, the only common situation, where the human body can be fully detached from the ground and reach the swinging situation. The ability of making moves that one could not perform on ground gives a sense of freedom. Nevertheless it has also its own restrictions, so it cannot fully describe the physical experience of absence of gravity. On the contrary, the recent experience of some astronauts is undoubtedly more precious. Frederick Hauck, a famous astronaut and passenger of the first space shuttle after the Challenger accident in 1986, states the following: "I have always liked the feeling of floating due to the absence of gravity, despite the fact that after the first two hours from the moment we got into orbit I felt dizzy. But I came over it once I started floating. The moves inside the spacecraft were slow and magical just like the ballet dancers' moves".⁴ These slow and magical moves constitute, among others the pleasure of body floatation, which helps us to perceive the importance of upper space.

In Zenetos' utopia, the body moves in a suspended city. At the same time it is surrounded by interactive membranes, body cases and flexible ground parts that can very easily be adjusted depending on the user's desirable position. These elements are very flexible and come really close to the body. Their comportment is just like that of the liquids during floatation. Thus, the human body in Zenetos' utopia experiences,

a kind of artificial floatation and, as a consequence, a certain pleasure that derives from it. This way, the body floats on a suspended city and feels pleasure, while it reassesses the meaning of stability, as it keeps distancing from the experience of solid ground.

The floatation that causes the loss of any solid ground may often be idealised, yet sometimes carries also negative meanings. Pleasure can be easily transformed into awe. This is obvious in Maurizio Cattelan's installation *mise-en-scene*.⁵ In May 2004, at the historic square Piazza XXIV Maggio in Milan, Cattelan hanged from the oldest oak of the city three effigies of children. The artist's intention was to help the adult visitors get in touch with their inner child and arise thoughts about childhood by revisiting "this strange place where traumas happen and you dream incredible dreams" as he mentions. The installation comprised all the historic, violent incidents that took place at this square and stressed memories of violence. Despite that, the public never appreciated actually the artist's intentions and as a result, one day after the presentation of the installation, a citizen cut the cords and released the plastic effigies.

This action outlines clearly how horrifying can be for people both the issues of hanging and children's death.⁶ Although, this horror is not something new since hanging used to be the most popular method of suicide during the Middle Ages.⁷ Since crucifixion became prohibited, hanging was the most disgraceful death sentence for criminals, in contrast to decapitation which was only permitted to noble sentenced. By putting a child in the place of a suicidal person or a criminal Cattelan transforms the upper space of pleasure into a horrifying space that becomes a place of death. Every possibility for evolution is gone and no idealization can doubt the fact of death.

Let's now for a moment, imagine that the suspended city of Zenetos has turned into a hanged city; a deserted and dead area that looks permanently at the ground, the land of its origin. People start again to stay in ground cities, since the utopia has turned to dys-topia hanging over their heads. Possibly, their quest for pleasure will find other means to survive. Other utopias will be created in other spaces since the upper space has been tested and rejected and swinging is just a lost opportunity of gaining pleasure. According to Voltaire, pleasure offers what wisdom promises but the promise of pleasure seems to be strong, maybe even stronger than the horror it may cause at times. For as long as gravity dominates and pleasure promises exist, it is more than likely that people will keep looking at the sky.

Notes

¹ Kalafati Eleni and Papalexopoulos Dimitris, *Takis X. Zenetos, Ψηφιακά οράματα και αρχιτεκτονική* (Athens: Libro Editions, 2006)

² Villon Francois, *Ballads and other poems*, transl. Spiros Skiadaresis (Athens: Gavriilidis Editions, 1999)

³ Marmaras Manolis, *Takis Zenetos (1926-1977), Επιστημάνσεις στο έργο του*, offprint from the annual review Αρχιτεκτονικά θέματα 21, (1987)

⁴ Helena Karanatsi *Frederic Hauck, (interview)*, Kathimerini Newspaper, May16, 2008

⁵ *Maurizio Cattelan - Hanging Kids*, www.postmedia.net/cattelan/5maggio.htm (July 2, 2008)

⁶ Eco Umberto, *On ugliness*, transl. D.Dotsi and A.Christostomidis (Athens: Kastaniotis Editions, 2007)

⁷ Minois Georges, *Ιστορία της αυτοκτονίας, Η δυτική κοινωνία αντιμετώπιση με τον εκούσιο θάνατο*, transl. X. Tselentis (Athens: Politron Editions, 2006)

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