

CEDRIC PRICE'S GENERATOR

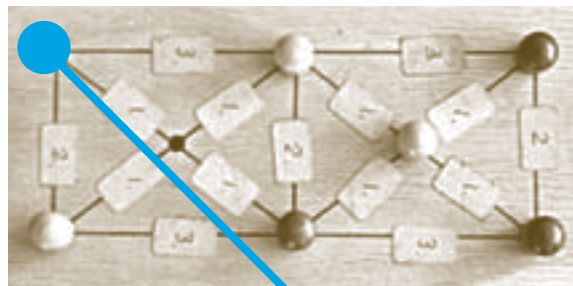
Cedric Price (1934–2003), the famously iconoclastic British architect, understood architecture as the means for setting conditions for interaction, as opposed to imposing the formal will of the designer. Famous for statements like, “Technology is the answer, but what was the question?” and for suggesting that architecture might not be the right solution to a problem—“Maybe you don’t need a new house. Maybe you need to leave your wife.”—Price questioned the very conditions and requirements of architecture.¹ He incorporated an array of interests into his work, including cybernetics, demolition, theater, politics, British history, the educational system and even cooking. Best known for the Fun Palace (1963–67), a collaboration with radical theater director Joan Littlewood, and the Potteries Thinkbelt, a mobile university on rails (1965), both unbuilt, and the completed Snowdon Aviary in the London Zoo (1960–63 with Frank Newby), Price maximized the ways for users to actualize themselves as they interacted with his architectural projects.

Generator (1976–79) sought to create conditions for shifting, changing personal interactions in a reconfigurable and responsive architectural project. It was to serve as a retreat and activity center for small groups of visitors (1 to 100) at the White Oak Plantation on the coastal Georgia-Florida border. Designed for Howard Gilman, the CEO of the Gilman Paper Company and a generous arts patron, it followed this open-ended brief: “A building which will not contradict, but enhance, the feeling of being in the middle of nowhere; has to be accessible to the public as well as to private guests; has to create a feeling of seclusion conducive to creative impulses, yet...accommodate audiences; has to respect the wildness of the environment while accommodating a grand piano; has to respect the continuity of the history of the place while being innovative.”²

Price developed a scheme of 150 12’ by 12’ mobile, combinable cubes constructed with off-the-shelf infill panels, glazing and sliding glass doors. To this kit of parts, he added catwalks; screens and boardwalks, all of which could be moved by mobile crane as desired by users to support whatever activities they had in mind, whether public or private, serious or banal.

The initial arrangements for “Generator—menus,” as he called them, would be determined through a set of programmatic research tools. Potential users of Generator listed all the activities they might want to do at the White Oak Plantation, such as reading, watching a film, picking one’s nose, writing poetry, learning about history, going on a walk. They then rated the requirements for the activities they listed in terms of infrastructure, space, quietness and privacy. Finally, using a little handheld Three Peg Game, Price determined the first layouts for Generator. The rules for the game were simple: take turns with the other player in forming a line of three same-colored pegs, whether vertically, horizontally, or diagonally. The game, the requirements and the activity questionnaire created what he called menus: arrangements of Generator’s cubes, screens and paths that would engage people in unexpected interactions with each other and with Generator as they used it.

The notion of changing the architecture of a retreat center, Price realized, would prove unfamiliar to Generator’s visitors. He created roles for two people, “Polariser” (Barbara Jakobson, a trustee at the Museum of Modern Art who introduced Price to Gilman) and “Factor,” (Wally Prince, the operations manager for Gilman’s White Oak Plantation). They were to catalyze on-site interpersonal dynamics and logistical requirements. Polariser would encourage people to use Generator in novel ways and facilitate their interactions with each other; Factor would set into motion the desires of Generator’s users onsite, operating the mobile crane to suit the menu and handling other human-to-site requirements.



Site plan for Generator (detail); colored pencil, porous point pen and stamp pad ink on diazotype; original drawing: 35.7 x 70 cm; DR1995:0280-406

Yet the human roles did not provide a great enough element of surprise, Price decided, and for that reason, he approached programmer-architects John and Julia Frazer. “The whole intention of the project is to create an architecture sufficiently responsive to the making of a change of mind constructively pleasurable,” he wrote in a letter that accompanied Generator’s drawings.³ The Frazers replied, “If you kick a system, the very least that you would expect it to do is kick you back.”⁴ They proposed four programs that would use input from sensors attached to Generator’s components: the first three provided a “perpetual architect” drawing program that held the data and rules for Generator’s design; an inventory program that offered feedback on utilization; an interface for “interactive interrogation” that let users model and prototype Generator’s layout before committing the design.⁵

The powerful and curious boredom program served to provoke Generator’s users. “In the event of the site not being re-organized or changed for some time the computer starts generating unsolicited plans and improvements,” the Frazers wrote.⁶ These plans would then be handed off to Factor, the mobile crane operator, who would move the cubes and other elements of Generator. “In a sense the building can be described as being literally ‘intelligent,’” wrote John Frazer—Generator “should have a mind of its own.”⁷ It would not only challenge its users, facilitators, architect and programmer—it would challenge itself.

Cedric Price sought to create a reconfigurable, flexible architecture of boredom and laziness that would bring pleasure to its users. This was a matter of creating the proper conditions for dynamics to arise, rather than explicitly codifying them in the architecture. The conditions of such delight, however, were not always sweet. They were dark, twisted and often strange. In the late 80s, Price said, “Designing for delight and pleasure should very seldom be seen to happen, and must encompass—indeed nurture—doubt, danger, mystery and magic...Distortion of time, space and substance is as necessary a design tool for pleasure as it is for religious architecture.”⁸ He might as well have been speaking about his own design process, the fleeting nature of his hundreds of sketches, impossible to pin down to one moment or one thing.

Like many of Price’s projects, Generator was never built. After nearly three years of design, the project was stymied by financial turmoil and a hostile takeover attempt within the family-run Gilman Paper Company. Moreover, while the project was designed to benefit employees of the company, the workforce did not support the project because of Generator’s maintenance requirements. Gilman was unable to clear the hurdle and had to abandon the project. John Frazer continued to hope that the project would be revived, suggesting a new start in 1989, in 1995, and shortly before Price’s death in 2003.

Technologically speaking, Generator was notably prescient. It represents the nexus of architecture and nascent ubiquitous or pervasive computing. The technical ideas behind Price and the Frazers’ collaboration on Generator are only now being realized. Yet all of the groundwork was in place for Generator—its flexible program and its elements—before the sensors and programs were ever discussed. The programs were useful for the ways they could unleash unexpected interactions, but without the investigations into the connection of the social and the site and the underlying concepts, the idea would not have endured—an important precept for designers and architects working at the intersection of pervasive computing and design. Moreover, it was not technological fetishism that drove Generator and its interactivity. In his office, Price avoided personal technology: the fax didn’t have paper; the phone was only answered during strict hours, he preferred using the postal service above other communication methods. In Generator, computers provided surprises and unexpected interactions outside of what traditional architectural practice would create because of the complexity they could handle.

Price’s own words show the shift that Generator represented: “The most painless language of easy approximation for the willfully lazy that I’ve yet discovered,” he said to Polariser in an early conversation about the project.⁹ By taking the playful so seriously, or the serious so playfully, by distorting the solid and the fixed, Generator shifted the roles of designers, actors, and users, calling into question who and what was responsible for interactions—and challenging the very performance of architecture. C

MOLLY WRIGHT STEENSON

Steenon is currently in the PhD program at Princeton University School of Architecture and is the author of the Weblog Girlwonder.com.

Images from Cedric Price fonds, Collection Centre Canadien d’Architecture/ Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montréal.

1. Related by Barbara Jakobson (“Polariser”), interview by author, New York, November 29, 2006.
2. Paola Antonelli, “Interview with Pierre Apraxine,” in *The Changing of the Avant-Garde: Visionary Architectural Drawings from the Howard Gilman Collection*, ed. Terence Riley (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 150.
3. John Frazer, Letter to Cedric Price (January 11, 1979). Generator document folio DR1995:0280:65 5/5, Cedric Price Archives (Montreal: Canadian Centre for Architecture).
4. Ibid.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.
7. Ibid.
8. Cedric Price, “PTb: Life-Conditioning,” *Architectural Design* 36 (1966): 32; Antonelli, Interview 2002.
9. Jakobson, interview, 2006.