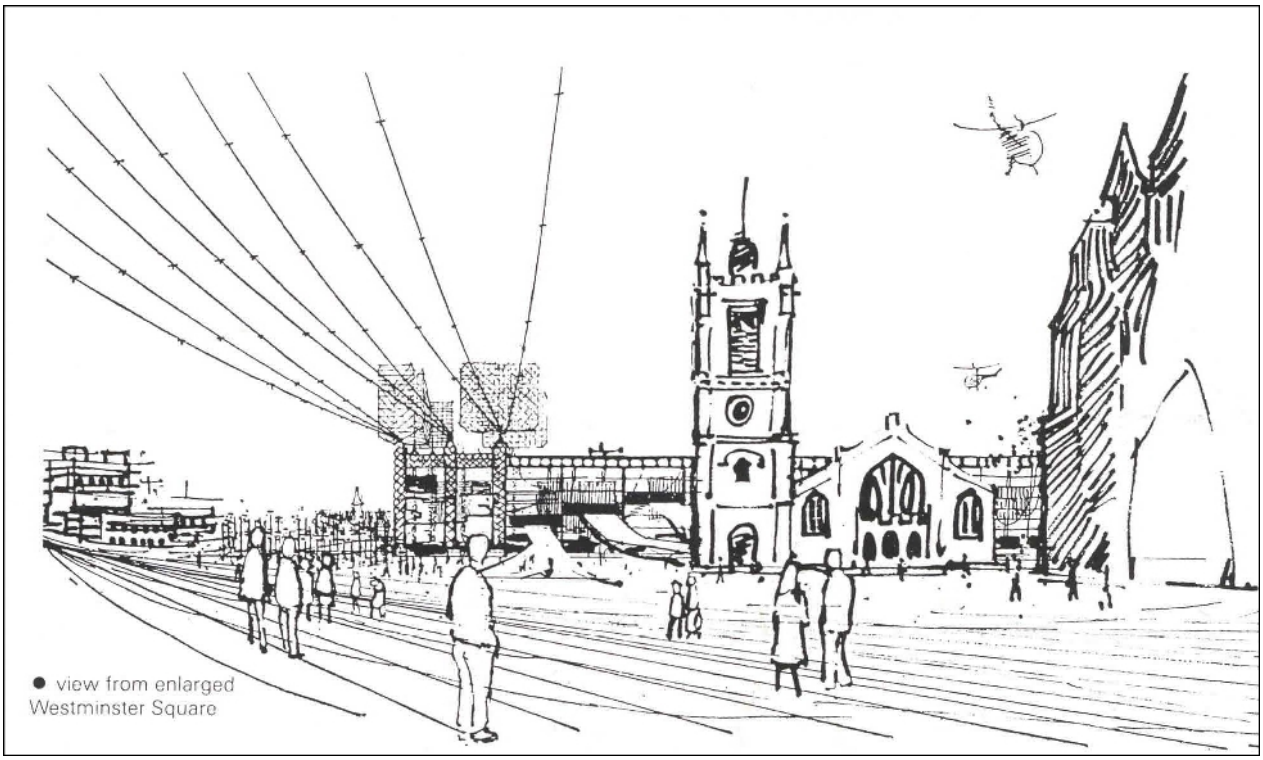
Association of Critical Heritage Studies – What does heritage change ?

03 – 08th June 2016

S035 Co-production in heritage : Toward new imaginaries

The "pop-up parliament" designed by Cedric Price : the architectural project as an imaginary transformation



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Thèse intitulée « Vers des territoires durables : projeter les rythmes de transformation », sous la co-direction de Philippe Potié (HDR, LéaV) et Paolo Amaldi (HDR, LéaV).

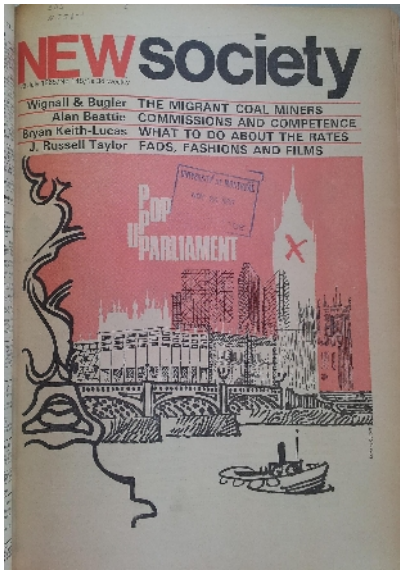
Abstract

In 1965, in response to age issues of London institutions, the architect Cedric Price published in the review *New Society* a new building project for the Palace of Westminster titled "The pop-up parliament". Not destined to be built, the project was more designed in response to conservative trends of the times: against the conservation of buildings - the container - alongside that of their uses - the content. Decrypted, this caricature illustrates the ability of the architectural project to inspire debates on the transformation of heritage sites, for their co-productions.

Introduction

This paper is based on the analysis of the project « Pop-up Parliament » from the british architect Cedric Price.

Westminster Palace, 1965



This project proposed a **transformation of the United Kingdoms Parliament**, also called Westminster Palace, or Houses of Parliament. The Westminster Palace hosts since the XI century the two parliamentary houses of United Kingdom : the House of Commons and the House of Lords. It was designed by the architect Charles Barry after the devastating fire of 1834 that only saved the Westminster Hall of XI century. It was built in a neogothic style to remember the glorious Tudor reign. This architect also add the well-known clock tower and the bell that gived its name : Big Ben.

The project of “Pop-up Parliament” was published in 1965 in the british review of sociology *New society.* It was designed by the architect Cedric Price, and the article was written in close collaboration with Paul Barker – editor of the New Society review – and Anthony Colbert. As the primer wrote the text of the article, the latter sketched the two drawings, after extensive discussions with Cedric Price.

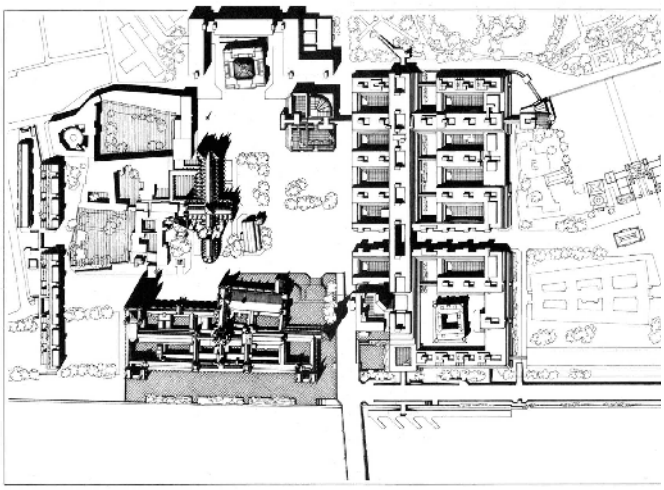
As this project proposed the metamorphosis of the British Parliament, designed by Charles Barry and built during the XIXth century, the paper deals with **architectural heritage**, considering it as both a building and its uses; or, to remind Cedric Price terms, **both content and container**. I will present this in the first part.

In the second part, I will contextualize this project in Cedric Price's architecture of time and timing, which engaged **a pro-active production in heritage, directed toward future**.

In his practice, this pro-active production was intrinsically linked with a **performative co-production**. The third part of my presentation will explain deeper this **performative approach** of the project of the Pop-up Parliament, and interaction that its provoked thanks to imaginaries.

Clarifying the design of this project, **this paper shows how architecture as a performance transforms our way of co-producing heritage, holding a dialogue between users and designers**. It also enlightens a specific time of co-production in heritage : **the time of an imaginary transformation, before the transformation itself**.

An outdated architecture : architectural heritage as container and content



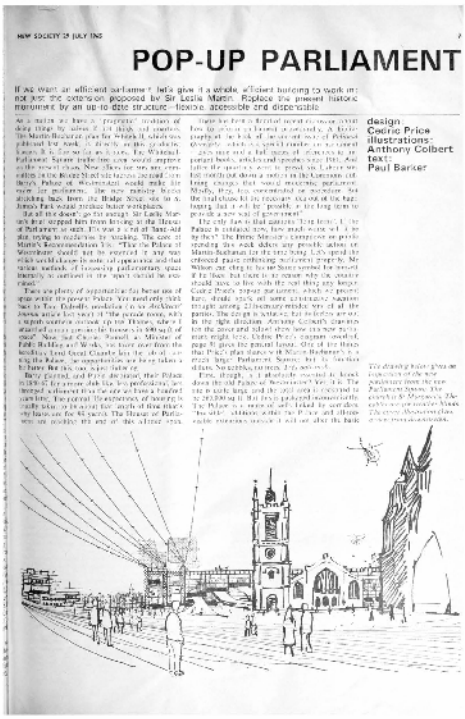
Plan for a new centre fo UK government, by the architect Leslie Martin, June 1965

The project of "Pop-up Parliament" was **a first reaction to the project of the architect Leslie Martin**, who finalized in June 1965 a plan for the adjacent Whitehall area transformation, by order of the Minister of Public Buildings and Works. Sir Leslie Martin proposed to demolish and re-build Whitehall buildings (fig 2.), for a new centre for UK government [1]. However, writing on Westminster Palace, he said :

"the Palace of Westminster should not be extended in any way which would change its external appearance and that various methods of increasing parliamentary space internally as outlined in the report should be examined"Leslie Martin (fig 3.)

For the Cedric Price team, these layouts were not enough. Martin's response was not a response to parliament procedures reforms, that were discussed at that time. It neither responded to MPs comfort needs, expressed by some MPS one month before the publication of the article. Besides, as Harold Wilson became Labour prime minister in 1964, after conservative ministers, new political views were conceivable.

1 Cf. A. Sharr et S. Thornton, *Demolishing Whitehall: Leslie Martin, Harold Wilson and the Architecture of White Heat*. Farnham, Surrey, England ; Burlington, VT: Ashgate Publishing Company, 2013.

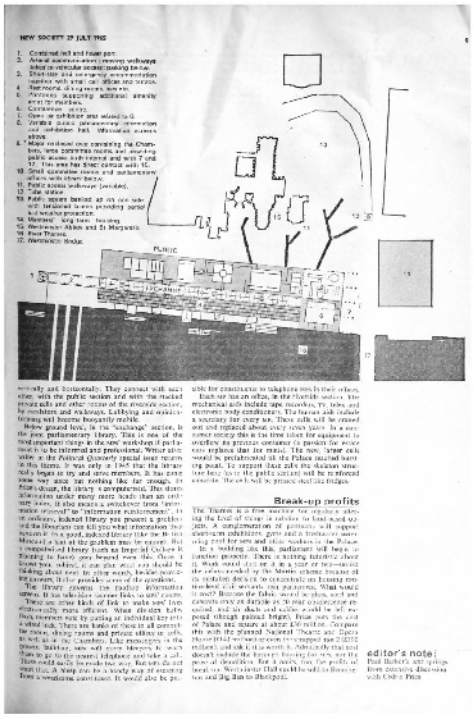


NEW SOCIETY 29 JULY 1965

POP-UP PARLIAMENT

If we want an efficient parliament, let's give it a whole, efficient building to work in: not just the extension proposed by Sir Leslie Martin. Replace the present historic monument by an up-to-date structure – flexible, accessible and dispersible.

design: Cedric Price
illustrations: Anthony Colbert
text: Paul Barker



NEW SOCIETY 29 JULY 1965

PUBLIC

Break-up profits

editor's note:

Transforming instead of patching, that is what Cedric Price 's team proposed. **They proposed a new building to adapt to actual needs, located at the same location, on Thames river bank. (fig4.)**

This proposal shows the importance of adequacy between content and container conditioned by uses, a leitmotiv of Cedric Price. This iconic project prioritized the uses value that conditioned the evolution of architecture. The historic value only refer to the container, the facade; as uses value refer to adequacy between content and container. I take the two terms from the art historian Aloïs Riegl.

Historicdrawings, books, maps
Propriétés du Centre Canadien d'Architecture,
Archives Cedric Price

Against outdated architectures, Cedric Price's vision of heritage was pointed at future, or what we could called **a « pro-active » vision**. Not that he didn't consider historic monuments or even London historic construction. His archives are full of London historic maps, and even include a XVII illustrated book about Westminster Abbey details. **But Cedric Price argued that architects should produce architectures fitting present and future uses; solve problems and develop ideas and possibilities.**

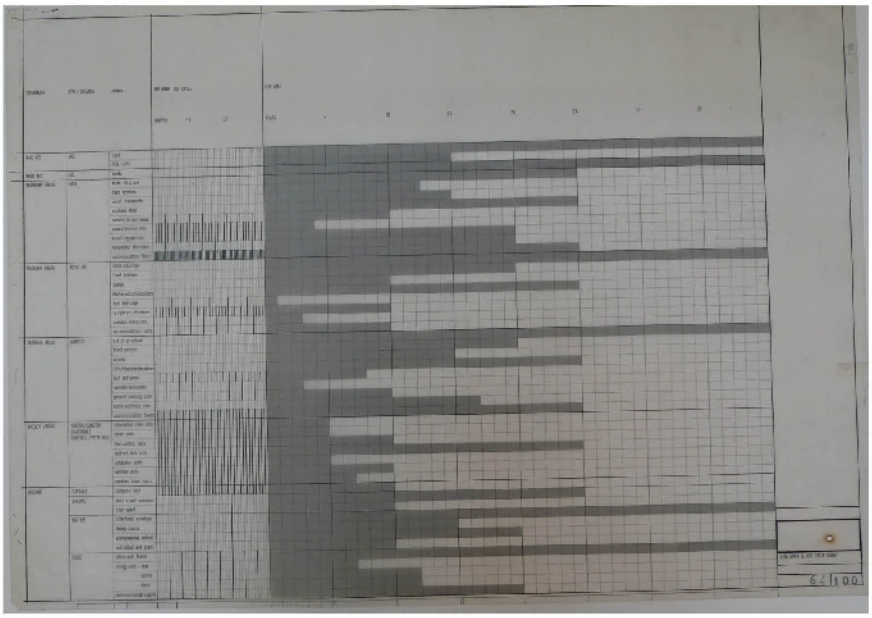
This argument lead us to the second part : how this project is a proposal of a pro-active production in heritage.

Pro-active production in heritage : an architecture of time and timing

"Permanence isn't the thing to symbolise in an era of throwaway Pentel pens and planned obsolescence" wrote Paul Barker.

Arguing that a hundred years life-span was a normal life-expectancy for such a building, the project is a complete transformation : a demolishing and a new building.

« The one provides the fourth dimension to design, the other reminds one that to be late can be to be lost. »



Life-spans and cycle uses diagram, The Potteries Thinkbekt project. Cedric Price, 1965.
Document of Canadian Centre of Architecture (CCA).

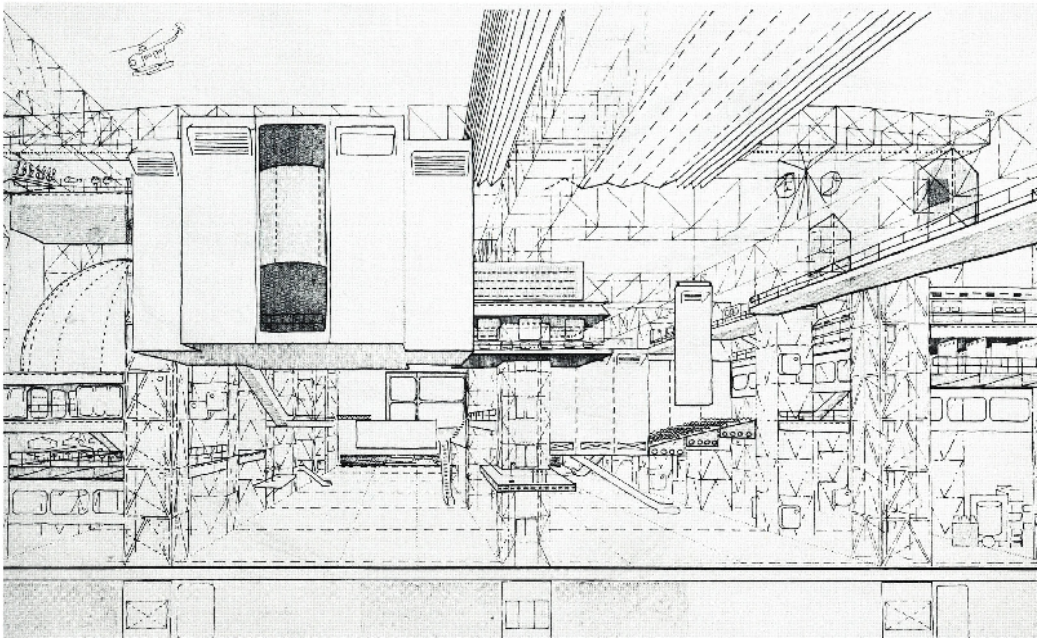
Time and timing were two major principles of his architecture :
Time was assimilated to life-spans of uses, and **timing to expediency, or what ancient greeks called kairos** : the good time to "catch" for acting. In all his projects, Cedric Price supported a dynamic approach of architecture, considering that life-cycles of buildings should follow the post-war society of mass production rhythms. The renewal of the duo container-content was proposed in response of planned obsolescence, dictated by life-spans of uses.

Including time to architecture, Cedric Price wanted to engaged the **architectural heritage – container and the content – in a constant renewal movement**. Architectural heritage was a **pro-active production based on time and timing**.

To design an heritage that could accommodate change[2], **adapting to the effective time of users at the good timing, Cedric Price designed architectures that interact with their users**.

A performative co-production : interact with imaginaries

The Fun Palace : "a proposal for an infinitely flexible, multi-programmed, twenty-four-hour entertainment center that marries communications technologies and industrial building components to produce a machine capable of adapting to the needs of users" Cedric Price



The interaction between architecture and users was the paradigm of his first project, the Fun Palace : "a proposal for an infinitely flexible, multi-programmed, twenty-four-hour entertainment center that marries communications technologies and industrial building components to produce a machine capable of adapting to the needs of users".

In this project, users can interact with architecture to transform it and transform their selves at the same time by exchanging information.

Neither content nor form of Price's architectures were stable, and this allowed their co-production : the architectural project was considered as a dialogue between users and architecture.

The **architecture of Cedric Price could be seen as a performance**, as Mary-Louise Lobsinger emphasizes in her article "Cybernethic theory and the architecture of performance" in the book A*nxious Modernisms: Experimentation in Postwar Architectural Culture*[3].

> *"The Fun Palace, when activated by the users was capable of producing and processing information. In this way it may be considered performative (...)""in the act of performing, the visuality and spatiality of the architecture would be annulled for the ephemerality of pure, unrepeatable, communication." Mary-Louise Lobsinger, 2000*

2 Cf. Mary Lou Lobsinger, "Cybernethic theory and the architecture of performance" in the book *Anxious Modernism*

3 Cf. S. W. Goldhagen et R. Legault, Éd., *Anxious Modernisms: Experimentation in Postwar Architectural Culture*. Montréal : Cambridge, Mass: The MIT Press, 2001.

Users perform architecture and modify it. They act on it, informations they gave modify it.

Art - Performance (live-art) in the 1960'
La Monte Young
Fluxus
...

Composition 1960 # 5

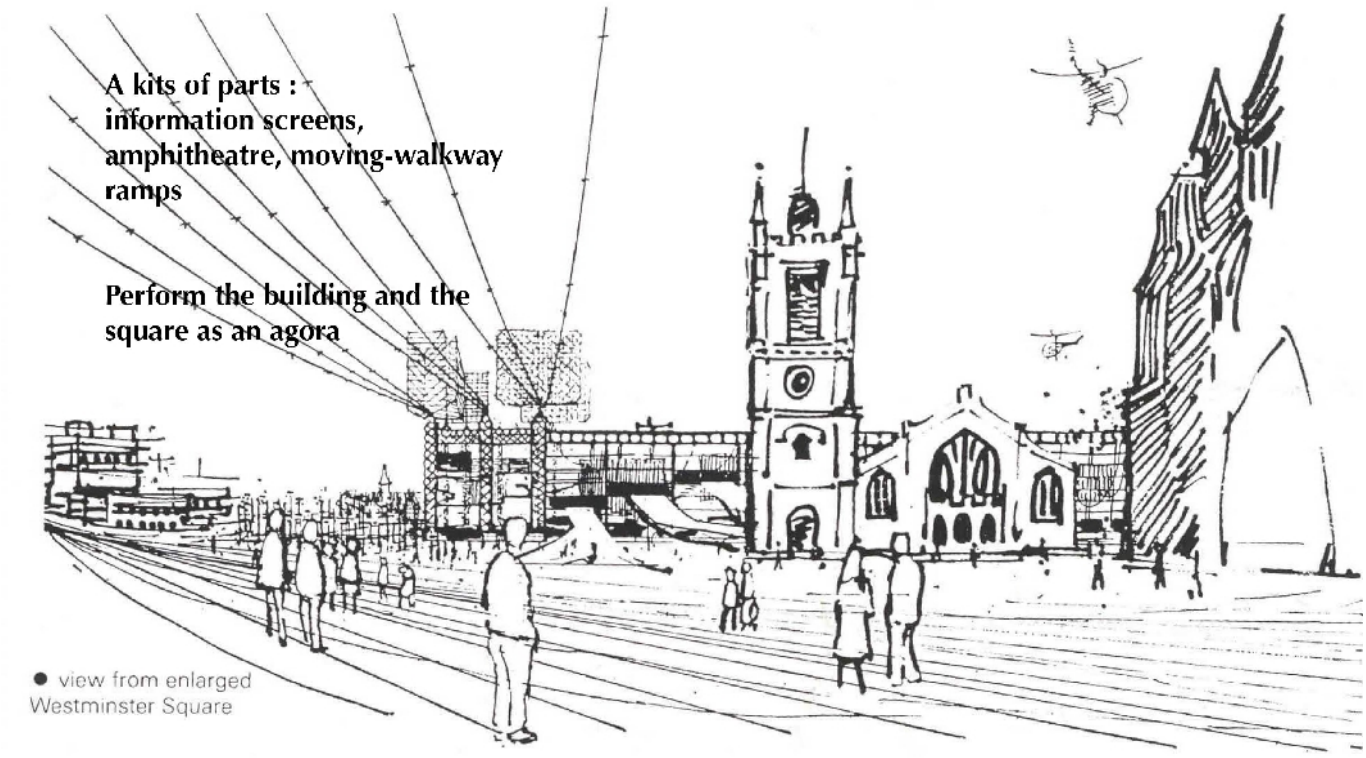
Turn a butterfly (or any number of butterflies) loose in the performance area.

When the composition is over, be sure to allow the butterfly to fly away outside.

The composition may be any length but if an unlimited amount of time is available, the doors and windows may be opened before the butterfly is turned loose and the composition may be considered finished when the butterfly flies away.

6 · 8 · 60

Performance is a term associated with performative art or live-art that gather artistic movements emerging during the sixties. In performance art artists acted in live, including their public for an effective more than a narrative action to provoke reactions and emotions.



Back to the Pop-up Parliament, we see this performative approach.

The pop-up Parliament is a **skeleton with flexible and dispensable modules, a "kits of parts, not a building"** as Cedric Price said for the Fun Palace. So that architecture could accommodate change, the project is a repetitive structure to allow movable and dispensable cells to be placed into, like cells of MPS offices.

Besides, the Pop-up Parliament is an invitation to perform political activity in the enlarged square in the ordinary life : Big Ben and the light of the clock tower were replaced by three screens transmitting parliamentary debates in live, outdoor loudspeakers were transmitting the proceedings of the two Houses, an amphitheatre took place in the square and moving-walkway ramps allowed public to enter into the parliament. It is very significant, as it accelerated and democratized systems that were already existing in the old parliament : the light of the clock tower was informing the Queen if MPs were "at work" (the light is enlighten when MPS are in the Houses, and can be seen from Buckingham Palace). The public entrances were very few and narrowed. The building was really confined, and in the square it was not allowed to strike or debate. Cedric Price enlarged and opened this boundaries.

Performing this building, citizens could interact with political life, being informed and encouraged to act. By producing and processing information, the project establishes a political dialogue between the building and citizens: **it proposed to perform the building and the square as an agora**.

With his project, Cedric Price **designed performative systems that constantly co-produce architecture and linked the content with the container.** He **underlined how heritage can be co-produced in day-to-day acts**.

Furthermore, he seemed to implied that another performance exists before the realization of the project : the performance of the imaginary project itself. All the proposals contained in this project are, in a larger sense, imaginary transformations of the society. I would like to develop with you in the last part **how the publication of this article could also be viewed as a performance**, holding a dialogue between the architect and his readers.

“Imaginary transformations ”

As Paul Barker wrote

*“**the design is tentative**, but its feelers are out in the right direction"*

From beginning of design to realization, Cedric Price wanted its architecture to hold a dialogue with its users. The article in New Society showed the first proposals for the project, as if it began a debate.

This tentative set the frame of the debate. In this sense, this article in New Society is a view of the first step of an heritage project, engaging a co-production with its intense imaginary.

At first glance, the Pop-up Parliament proposals seem quite violent, ordering the demolishing of the historic monument and imposing one subjective point of view, far from a co-production in heritage. **But the violence of the proposal might be allayed if not seen as imperative, but as performative,** as all of Price's architecture was. Imperative means ordering, performative means advising. **Performative prompts emotions and imaginaries, by acting on reality.** It is like saying : “What would it be if …?” Let's imagine. Let's discuss about it.

I will go further with some examples.

First, I should mentioned that Cedric Price proposed other sites of construction for his project. He also proposed to implement the first design. The « modern tabula rasa » – demolish olds buildings to build new ones– was quite uncommon for Price : in his first projects, he used to « tune-up » urban areas rather than pop-ups, placing an upper layer above the existing one.

On the other hand, this project reflects lots of the social transitions that were part of England ordinary at this time :

- information systems were improved and the speed of information exchanges was accelerated. TV and radio appeared as new medias for social interactions. These medias democratized also culture and politic debates. I cannot do my presentation about a british architect of the sixties without mentioning the pirate radios. Radio Coraline, that the film “Pirate radio” illustrates appeared in 1964. It is one example of how medias represented political transformations -openings- as pop-music was.

- mass consumption was also a big issue and impacted people everyday lives and ways of thinking, as pop-art artists illustrated. It was an acceleration of industrial production speed impacting life-time uses.

- politic changes, as I explained in the first part and as popular strikes revealed at this time

Film about Radio Caroline, 2009, Richard Curtis

Hamilton, *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing*

All these changes impacted architecture. And all these changes were represented in this project. All these considerations lead me to say that the Pop-up Parliament project **was starting a debate about the relationships between social transitions and architecture, through imaginaries**. Besides, as this was the ground zero of a project and not the final design, it was like a step-by-step project, or what we can call an **iterative project**, waiting to be co-produced with the readers of the article.

CONCLUSION

As the analysis of Cedric Price approach showed, would not co-production in heritage suggest a performative attitude rather than an imperative one, requiring a specific time for the imaginary transformation before the transformation itself? That was what this paper proposed to discuss, for this session and for the current debates on the british parliament renovation.

I wanted to add also that Cedric Price was really interested in systems theory. This interest is of course closely linked to performative systems design. This reminds the reference of the philosopher Bruno Latour mentioned in this session as a new way of thinking co-production by networks and interaction. It crosses the issue of new technologies potentialities in heritage co-production : how can we use the potentialities of technologies to go further in heritage projects? How can performative systems be enhanced by digital technologies ?