

# BEYOND DUALISMS. THE “ELECTRONIC URBANISM” OF TAKIS CH. ZENETOS: 1962-1974

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It will be possible to create hallucinatory situations without hallucinogens, etc.✠

## ELECTRONIC PROMETHEUS (“STORMED HEAVEN”)

Since the early 1960s, the Greek Architect Zenetos (1926-1977) attempted a radical redefinition of the “City and House of the Future”, based on concepts such as “tele-working”, “tele-contact screens”, “flexibility”, etc. Thus, he upended the established hierarchies of metropolitan hubs with respect to the regional cultures of Europe, where architectural interest was usually limited to cultural heritage or derivative forms of modernity. In a sense, his work arguably rewrites the history of post-war modernity from the fringes of Europe. The focus is on the role of the architect in the post-industrial society of information and biopolitics.

The first public presentation of his provocative study was held at the Hellenic Modern Housing Organisation’s Fair in Athens in 1962; the final revised version was presented nine years later at the 1st Building Fair at Zappeion, under the ambitious generic title *Electronic Urbanism*. Its content is summarised in a column published in daily newspaper *To Vima* in November 1971:

Are we going to live in the clouds? That will certainly be the case sometime in the future. And it will come as a result of advancing technology. That’s what the architect-urban planner and futurologist Takis Ch. Zenetos claims and demonstrates. [...] According to yesterday’s press release for the event: The Greek ‘Home’ of the future eliminates the concept of residence in the familiar sense, established for hundreds of years now. It will be a space suspended in the atmosphere without a ‘material’ shell, with controlled climate conditions. This unit will be integrated into the broader area of the ‘City of the Future’, a city built on the principles of electronic urbanism: a three-dimensional garden-city suspended in atmospheric vacuum. In this immaterial house, people will live in nudity and, should they so wish, express themselves through colourful make-up, etc.✧

The starting point for the architect’s choice is not only visionary but specific, with a quadruple goal: (a) the radical reversal of the heavy population concentration and the massive buildings in large urban centers – what we could describe, in different terms, as the rejection of “manhattanism”; (b) blocking pollution and the climatic deterioration of the environment; (c) liberating and restoring the Earth’s soil to its “natural state”; (d) the persistence on the modernist vision of re-building cities and re-structuring society from scratch. Therefore “life in the clouds” takes

on an accelerationist, planetary, and “techno-ecological” character to the new technological conditions of electronics, which penetrate all aspects of contemporary life.

Already in the earliest publications about his proposal, Zenetos argued that the conventional ways of building cities and “their traditional permanent structure damages irreparably the soil due to the great load and auxiliary installations while it has no possibilities of altitude or flexibility”<sup>¶</sup>. And later: “In the large urban complexes, we should strive to free, rather than occupy new soil, which should be preserved in its natural state”<sup>¶</sup>. And he elaborated, the suspended garden-city program: ‘In the roposed stressed cable system the ground, left almost free, in an uninterrupted space of wild life’. In this electronic restoration of “wild life” and the unlimited variety of uses “the individual can choose between two basic systems (corresponding to basic human types, the ‘nomad’ and the ‘farmer’)”.

In this “three-dimensional space grid”, “the man desires, and has a right to acquire a ‘home’ in a quiet environment close to nature”<sup>¶</sup>. At this point Zenetos – who has a political vision – reverses the prediction made by Karl Marx in the *Economical and Philosophical Manuscripts* (1844): “A dwelling in the light (*Lichtwohnung*), which Prometheus describes in Aeschylus as one of the great gifts through which he transformed savages into men, ceases to exist for the worker”. Instead, the New Worker of Electronics does not “revert once more to living in a cave”, but to the suspended aerial cells. Electronic Man lives “in a ‘close to everywhere’ – right in the woods – dense – urban space”, with “supports for plant climbers” and “vegetation extending over two levels”. These suspended gardens comprise “air-tight cells of controlled micro-climate containing (in place of earth) the ‘micro-structure carrier’ for anchoring the roots system of tall vegetation and liquids supply”<sup>¶</sup>.

Yet this “wild life” in the “quiet environment” of the clouds, possesses an inexorable background: the advent of Electronics (automation, artificiality, planetary-scale computation) and, later, the Anthropocene, established a *global planning of the world*, an *alternative planetarity*, described in our case as *Electronic Urbanism*: “Seeing the Earth from space is the beginning of ecological thinking. The first aeronauts, balloon pilots, immediately saw Earth as an alien world. Seeing yourself from another point of view is the beginning of ethics and politics”<sup>\*</sup>.

This is the core of this peculiar “aeroforming” and the “rezoning” of the Earth proposed by Zenetos: the identification of the uprooting of Earth’s cities and the immaterial nature of electronics (what we now call “clouds platforms”) with the mate-

Takis Ch. Zenetos, “The probable future of the Earth. The growth of conventional systems will destroy our planet.” First published in *Architecture in Greece*, 7, 1973, Archive Takis Ch. Zenetos, Athens.

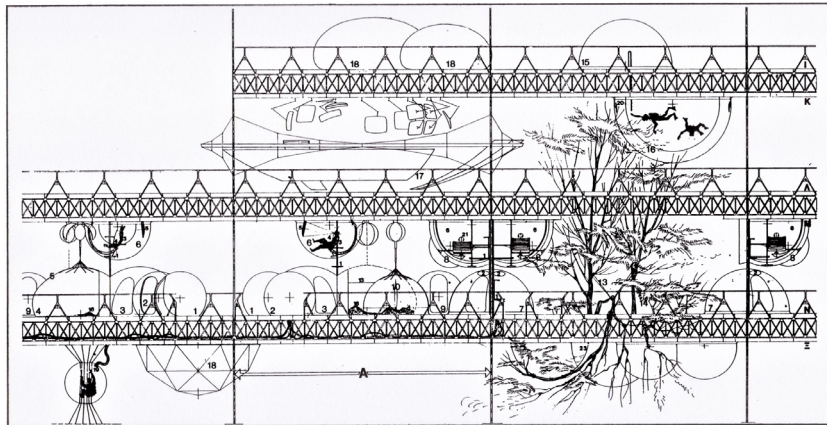


faut-il éviter cela ?

Takis Ch. Zenetos, "Partial view of the urban space grid with dwelling space for groups, cells, space for the couple's contacts, rests, 'instant sleep', public piazza, garden, cell for suspension experiences, space viewing etc."

First published in *Architecture in Greece*, 8, 1974,

Archive Takis Ch. Zenetos, Athens.



reality and physicality of the deterritorialized dwelling ("life in the clouds"). The primal distinction between earth and sky, terrestrial and aerial, "down here" and "up there" is not only modified but in fact ceases to exist altogether, with the aerial railway electric cables ("systems of tension without anchorage") and "the suspension bridges" as a symbolic and technical point of reference. The third reference image – or "found image" – from the past, is a drawing of Karpenisi (Central Greece) as an "example of a dense vertical 'garden city'". And the fourth "found" inspiration for the architect, is the spinning carousel in the amusement park, as shows the photograph published with the caption: "A new dimension to everyday life" ¶.

Using Ernst Bloch's terms, ¶ we could argue that the "wild life" of *Electronic Urbanism*, as Zenetos envisions it developing "uninterrupted" in the "immense surface of the sky" above "forests, lakes, rivers, seas", re-situates architecture in a "Promethean momentum". An impatient search is readily apparent in this. The future of the city is thus inscribed within a kind of electronic messianism, a *novitas mundi* that attempts a furious opening towards what does not yet exist. Let us examine, therefore, how the pre-suppositions for this inconceivable "wild life 'close to everywhere' – right in the woods – dense – urban space" are articulated in the multimedia framework of *Electronic Urbanism*.

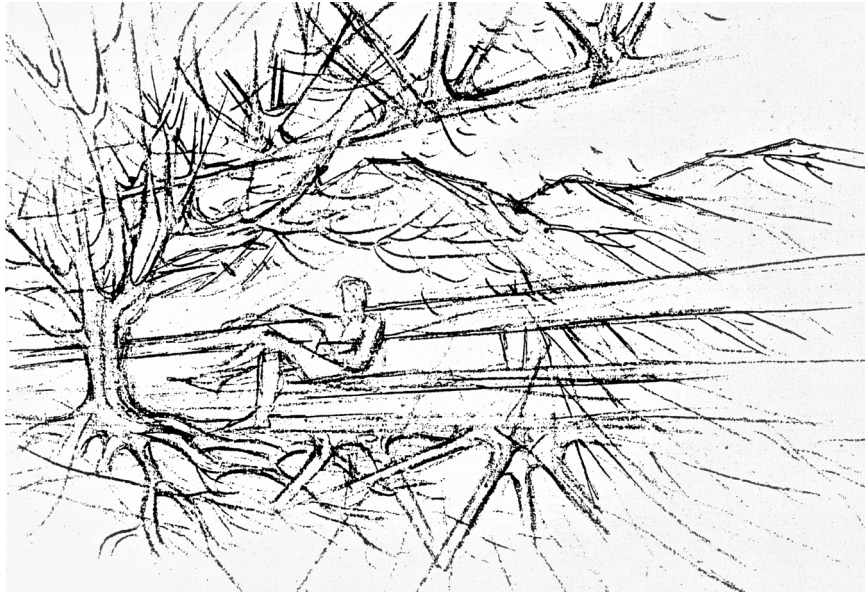
Today we realize that this radical electronic deterritorialization "suspended in atmospheric vacuum" combines the online diffusion of the post-industrial era and elements of science fiction, cybernetics, pop culture, and hippie subculture which, are intertwined with a "neo-primitivism" that many people push back.

#### ACROBAT (TECHNOLOGICAL EROS)

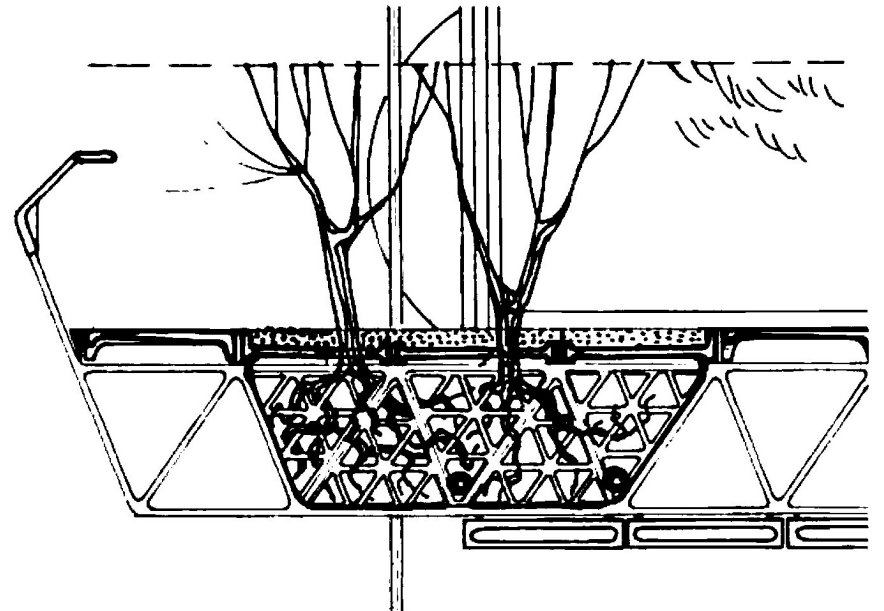
From the outset, Zenetos places the human body at the core of his proposition, ushering us directly into the post-human future. The renegotiation of the boundaries of the body is increasingly combined with mechanised systems, devices and mediations of computer technology that determine social and productive behaviours, as well as habits, moods and dispositions. In 1967, Zenetos would detail this view in "Multi-Purpose Furniture" ¶ ¶, which would form the core of *Electronic Urbanism*. This modular furniture reflects certain assumptions for the year 2000, including that "humans, both during working hours and in their free time (i.e., a large part of their day) will be either sitting or lying down". For these reasons, Zenetos defines this "orthopaedic" chair as "a second body-prop, complemented with all the tech-



Takis Ch. Zenetos, "Living in 'close to everywhere – right in the woods – dense urban structure'": Detail from a typical level of suspended electronic city. First published in *AD*, 4, 1973, Archive Takis Ch. Zenetos, Athens.



Takis Ch. Zenetos, Structural detail of an artificial suspended ground level. First published in *AD*, 4, 1973, Archive Takis Ch. Zenetos, Athens.



nological capabilities to extend the means of action of the human of 2000 (tele-contacts, tele-work, tele-controls, etc. [...]) This is the heart of the man of the future”.

What, then, does this modular “posture chair” signify, which already by its titular description heralds the loss of boundaries through the unifying holistic triptych “work-rest-sleep”? First of all, the cancellation of the distinction between *human* and *machine*, *organism* and *mechanism*. Henceforth, all human activity becomes a mechanism. And, in this sense, the future *machine-becoming* of the human body is established, which is not only an *imitation* or *representation* of the machine, but also a *metamorphosis*: a form of Otherness, a way of becoming Other. Friedrich Kittler gives a fascinating definition of the predominantly *materialistic* framework of this new era:

[Human] essence escapes into apparatuses. Machines take over functions of the central nervous system, and no longer, as in times past, merely those of muscles. And with this differentiation – and not with steam engines and railroads – a clear division occurs between matter and information, the real and the symbolic. [...] So-called Man is split up into physiology and information technology. ¶¶

However, it is not only a matter of the embodiment of technological means, but also of their *dissemination* to the “public at large” through the ultimate modernist achievement: mass media. Zenetos has no inhibition about the *mass media* of his time. On the contrary, he ascribes a special importance to them. And this makes the connection between “tele-work” and “tele-vision” completely transparent. Or rather, “tele-work” completes and expands what “tele-vision” has paved the way for, socially: the *remote* transmission and reception of information, doing away with physical presence or contact, which is why every person “both during working hours and in their free time (i.e. a large part of their day) will be either sitting or lying down”. Thus, we arrive at the ultimate postmodern paradox: The culmination of this fusion between *organism* and *mechanism* is the *immobilised body*. A body that, whether voluntarily or not, accedes to the lack of mobility with which we formerly experienced space, to a kind of disability.

In this way, Zenetos indicates the topological shift from a passive “egosphere” of “tele-contacts” to the intensity of verticality and, especially, the anthropology of the acrobat. The suspended city of electronics is an acrobatic programme. Its dweller shifts away from the spiritual model of the ascetic (to which Greek architects such as Dimitris Pikionis and Aris Konstantinidis were initiated) towards the vertigo of acrobatics:

The word *acrobatics* refers to the Greek term for walking on tiptoe. [...] It names the simplest form of natural anti-naturalness [...] [forming] a support that lacks all qualities of a solid ground. [...] Acrobatic existence detritualises life by placing repetition in the service of the unrepeatable. It transforms all steps into first steps, because each one could be the last. It knows only one ethical action: the supervision of all circumstances through the conquest of the improbable. ¶¶

Zenetos attempts to compensate for the dystopia of the immobile body – what he calls the “disadvantages of the sedentary life of tertiary-society man” – with the “posture changing features” while seated, and generally with “long walks in the three-dimensional space structure,” the “development of sports,” and various “attractive game-exercise equipment” in the “atmospheric vacuum,” culminating in “the liberation of humans from clothes”: The *disembodiment* of electronics coexists with the *physi-icality of nudism*, a predilection for which the architect rooted enthusiastically. It was, after all, a prominent feature of the counterculture of the 1960s.

As an iconic archetype of such a stance, Zenetos published a detail from the central panel of Hieronymus Bosch’s *Garden of Earthly Delights*, where two nude figures of lovers are seated inside a glass sphere. The two naked bodies do not represent the dangers of sin, as many analysts of this enigmatic work have reiterated over the years, but the restoration of a “heavenly innocence” ¶¶. In this sense, we can argue that *Electronic Urbanism* is not limited to a purely *mechanical aesthetic* (along the lines of early modernity), but instead claims a machinique character of enjoying technological life (above the “forests, lakes, rivers, seas”). It adopts a “hedonic principle” that anticipates a kind of technological enamouration inside the electronic bubble (“soap bubble”): “In the atmospheric vacuum [...] in the micro-flexibility region, an area of the living space will be periodically occupied for sex life, rest, instant sleep” ¶¶. Behold how “this immense wooing of the cosmos was enacted for the first time on a planetary scale, that is, in the spirit of technology” ¶¶.

#### BACHELOR (THE ELECTRONIC BODY)

This “erotic claim to the universe” is what separates ancient from modern humans: “It is the dangerous error of modern men to regard this experience as unimportant and avoidable and consign it to the individual as the poetic rapture of starry nights”, Walter Benjamin notes. The question here seems inescapable:

How, then, does Zenetos imagine the “individual” of *Electronics*, this new subject that spends much of the day ‘sitting or lying down’ on his modular piece of furniture?

Two tiny drawings in the first publication of the modular chair offer a first answer. Zenetos represents the normalised body of *Electronics* nude – like Leonardo da Vinci’s *Vitruvian Man*. At first glance, it is difficult to determine the gender of this nude body. It would be rash on the part of someone addicted to anatomical knowledge to simply assume that this is a custom of the standard anthropometric depictions to which Ernst Neufert’s famous Architects’ Data introduced us in 1936. This is because gender roles are distinct there. The Vitruvian Man figure is also male, of course (ca 1490), as is the *modular* body type, designed by Le Corbusier in 1948. By contrast, the body of *Electronics*, seated on the modular chair, seems to be neutral – “neither male nor female”. Bereft of discreet sexual organs, with a hairless (shaved) head and surrounded by mechanical and electronic components and buttons, the naked body of *Electronics* is depicted as a genderless semi-reclining figure. The way in which the architect himself prepares us for the rest is of particular importance: “His personality will be expressed through colourful make-up and optical effects (using reflective and absorbent substances), complemented by scents, and other intangible elements” ¶ 1.

This gender indeterminacy denotes the new corporeality of electronic normalisation, which Donna Haraway would epitomise, twenty years later, in the question: “Why should our bodies end at the skin?” Above all, however, it completes the categorical ambiguity of “City and House of the Future”. I mean to say that this body is inseparable from the generalised loss of established boundaries and the fusion of many binary schemas that characterise Zenetos’s overall proposition; that is, between human and machine, organic and inorganic, material and immaterial, interior and exterior, architecture and “non-architecture”, production and consumption (post-production), work and rest (“work-rest-sleep”). Any distinction between the organic “self” and the mechanised “other” is no longer feasible. The body embodies machines, just as they embody it in turn. Rosalind Krauss describes this loss of boundaries in surrealism as a kind of “perverse feminisation, if you will, of the masculinist values of ‘straightness’ itself: clarity and decisiveness” ¶ 1.

Thus encouraged, allow me to draw another parallel: The hemispherical shape itself of the suspended transparent cells of *Electronics* can be compared not only to the archetype of the “Eskimo snowhouse” (igloo) or a spaceship cockpit, but also to a protruding horizontal eye on the levels of the “suspended city”, or

even to an allegory of the breast: an inverted uterine cavity in the endless space frame of the “spider’s web that surrounds the Earth”.

There is no reason to be scandalised by such a formulation, since the dwelling, even in the age of wireless communications, is an extension of what we start doing as soon as we are born: desperately constructing forms of intimacy with all that surrounds us. So, then, the hemispherical “tele-operation chambers” and “twin hive cells” are also a post-historic “substitute for the womb, the first – and apparently still desirable – dwelling place where man was safe and carefree” ¶ 1. The difference being that in Zenetos’s proposition the place of a complete body, a complete architectural object, is taken by “part-objects”, chambers, organs-cells, eyes, breasts, bodies, “soap bubbles”, “holographic replicas”, “molecular structures”, “groups and sub-groups” of elements above the “forests, lakes, rivers, seas” – each with its own flows. At the intersection of these flows is the “bachelor” ¶ 1 of the future modular chair.

#### RETRIBALISATION (THE MOUNTAINS OF ELECTRONICS)

In a sense, this *mechanisation of human* tends to reproduce in a mirror-image inverted manner the *humanisation of the animal*. Such a loss of demarcation can be associated with certain versions of primitivism, which flourished in Paris at the time when Zenetos was a student there. Certain radical reversals can broadly be identified in his work, which are akin to what is called *regression* in the psychoanalytic process. The directionality of time progression of “futurology” is suddenly reversed, acquiring the characteristics of “archaeology.” It not only moves *forward*, i.e. from the present to the future, but also regresses *backward*, from the future to the past, reaching all the way to the origins of human civilisation. I mean to say that *Electronic Urbanism* does not constitute the symmetrical opposite of primal instincts and primitive anthropological structures but, on the contrary, it identifies with them, making the boundaries between the *primitive* (past) and the *electronic* (future) permeable.

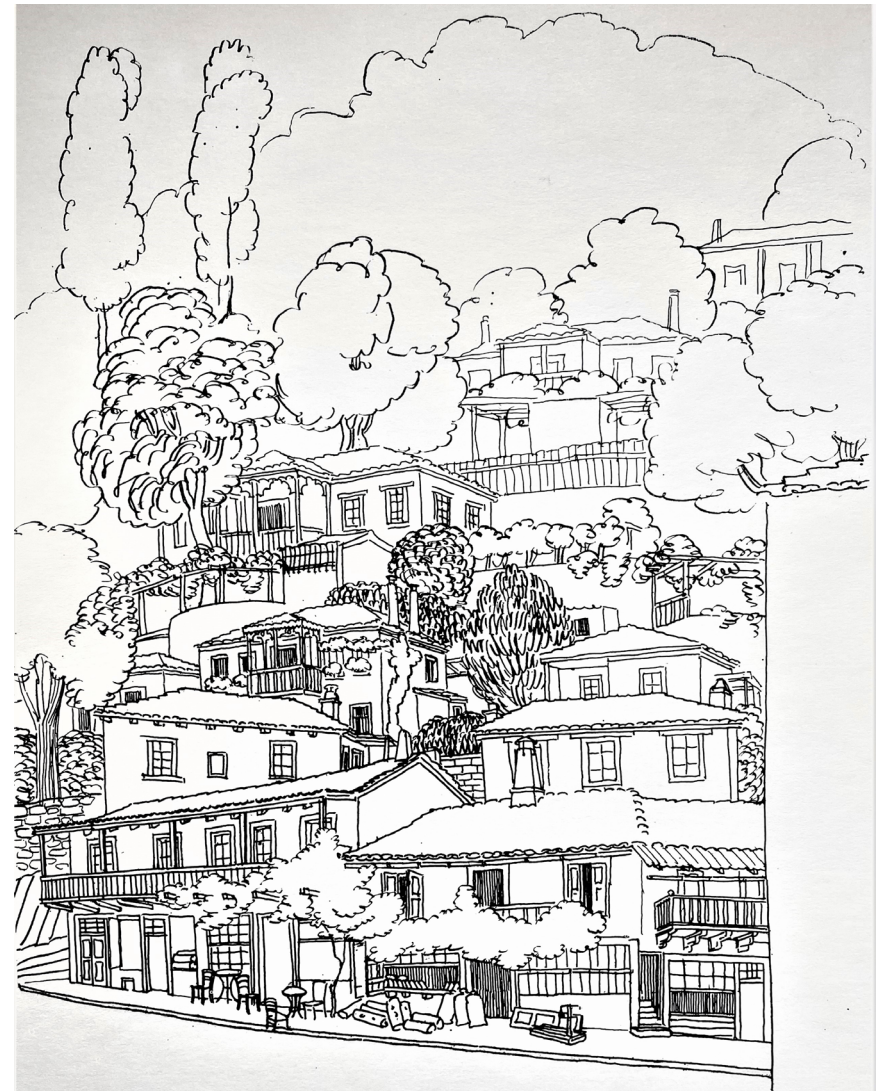
Throughout his study, Zenetos makes ample reference to “new primitivism” and the affinity of the “distant future” with “the age of primitive societies”. Already from the first publications of his “City of the Future”, he paves the ground by arguing for “suspended urbanism”: “A convincing example [...] are mountain villages, fixed in place on inaccessible mountains (far from plains and crops)” ¶ 1. And he goes on to internationalise the scope of “new primitivism” in the description of *Electronic Urbanism*: “The need of reverse visual isolation, which is not as necessary as acoustic isolation (i.e. when one does not wish to be



Takis Zenetos, Recycled experimental furniture: Recycling of finished objects (seats from tractors, cars, and lighting fixtures from automobile exhausts and camera tripod). First published in *Design+Art in Greece*, 6, 1975.  
Archive Takis Ch. Zenetos, Athens.



Karpenisi (Central Greece): "An example of a dense vertical 'garden city', transcending from the past." Drawing by Panos Tzelepis from *L' Architecture populaire en Grèce*, ed. Christian Zervos. Archive Takis Ch. Zenetos, Athens.



seen by others), will not exist in the future, as man will have done away with all his acquired inhibitions and will be living as in the manner of ancient societies, specimens of which have been preserved to our days (Eskimoes, Indians, African tribes) 𐀀𐀁.

Marshall McLuhan (whom Zenetos often cites) argued that “the immediacy of electromagnetic media fosters retribalisation”. To this end, McLuhan refers to the difference between “the eye” and “the ear”: The acoustic space belongs to the pre-literate environment of primitive man’s orality, which has no centre, a world of simultaneous relationships. On the contrary, visual space is linked to the written language, where all things are linear and perceived in sequence. The distinction between the pre-literate (oral culture) and the literate (writing) here takes on a radically different meaning from what was thought until now: “Until writing was invented, man lived in an acoustic space: boundless, directionless, horizonless, in the dark of the mind, in the world of emotion, by primordial intuition, by terror” 𐀀𐀁.

Against this binary opposition, the advent of electronic digital media privileges the pre-literate acoustic space of primitive tribalism, where the distance between inside and outside recedes. The human relationship with the environment is now regulated “haptically”, which for the new-media guru involves *synergy* and *interaction of the senses*. Electronic media are “haptic” (i.e. interactive) and almost synaesthetic, fostering a new kind of participatory culture.

#### BEYOND DUALISMS (THE NATURE DOES NOT ENCLOSE US)

In this sense, the “retribalisation” of Electronics is an appropriate term for describing the unexpected way in which new technologies spread to all areas of the planet: The extensive diffusion of *entropy* and the environmental – almost archaic – decomposition of most areas seem to critically reverse the architect’s futuristic project.

Moreover, Zenetos focused on the question of *entropy* early on, documenting it with images of a deterrent effect. Specifically, in the environmental requirements for *Electronic Urbanism* he published photos from the destructions caused to the planet by “the growth of conventional building systems”, the “demolition of the luxury Traymore Hotel in Atlantic City” and the “chopping up of the mountain into gravel and sand to make concrete and then back into rubble once the building is demolished” 𐀀𐀂. To this end, he focuses on alternative forms of “recycling” 𐀀𐀃.

The spontaneous environmental assemblages, the wild habitation practices and the extensive territorial *bricolage* in a series

of areas are the prime example of what Zenetos calls “technologies of secondary use,” in publishing a photograph of a “shanty town (Bidonville) in the Paris suburb of St. Denis.” To the same effect, he re-used parts and entire recycled objects to furnish his family’s apartment in Athens: tractor and car seats, a light fixture made from a car exhaust and a camera tripod, etc.

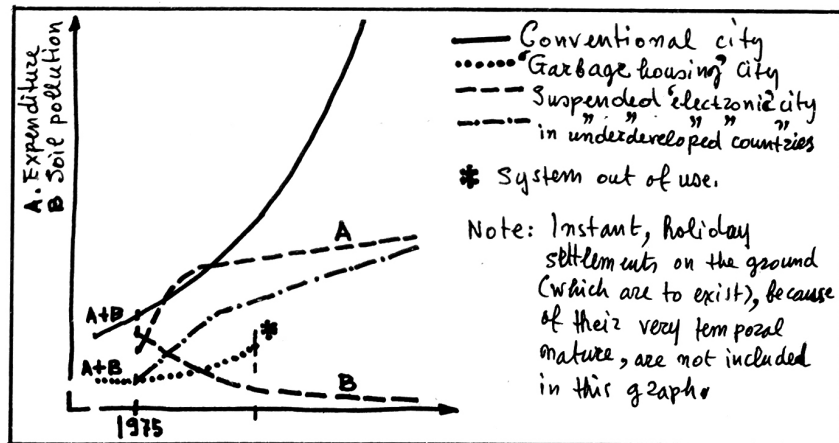
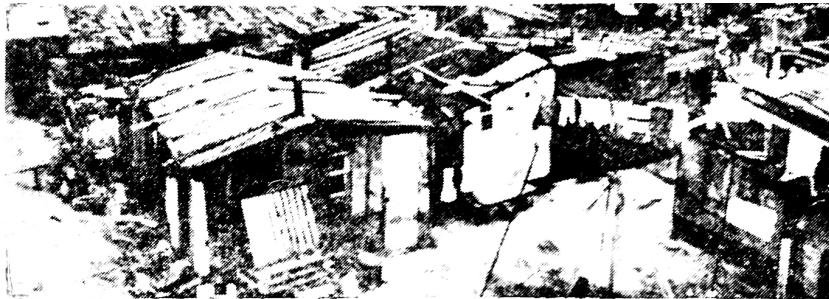
The tropes in which “retribalisation” is realised shifts electronic technology both from the Aristotelian “antecedent” (*πρότερον*) and its symmetrical counterpart (*ὕστερον*). In a word, it shifts it twice, both from “too early”, i.e. the advent of *Electronic Urbanism*, and from “too late” of the dystopian environmental crisis, to the present – the *now-time*: not the *novitas mundi* of the technological utopia; but the discontinuities, enduring archaisms, disturbing ruptures, territorial inequalities, sub-modern and hyper-modern deviations, tensions and cumulative entropy.

Besides, the great transformation has already taken place: *Electronic Urbanism* is one of those utopian projects that paved the way for the end of the traditional notion that man and his civilization find themselves within an enclosing and encompassing *nature*, or rather, a “Wilderness” 𐀀𐀄. Dissolving the boundaries between *man* and *machine*, Zenetos abolishes the predominance of man, situating humans within the post-binary condition of posthumanism, where any distinction between natural and artificial, organic and technical, human and non-human is blurred. In brief, he activates *in extremis* a condition in which these distinctions – where modernity was founded – are no longer viable.

As paradoxical as this may seem, *Electronic Urbanism*, surpassing the anthropocentric view, becomes the heir of a series of bright and dark visions lost in humanity’s historical past. “Life up in the clouds” and the “individual movement-flight” 𐀀𐀅 in the atmosphere, are not solely the privileged space of astronomy, ornithology, day-dreaming, or space exploration, prevalent in the 1960’s, but of metaphysics and theology, as well: Assumption, circulating angels, and heavenly Jerusalem are only a few symbols and archetypes of this transcendental space, which modernity tried to confront its very beginning. What we call future never ceased to draw from this mystical horizon, resituating a series of *pathosformeln* 𐀀𐀆 (formulas of pathos) within the technical framework of electronics. In other words, within the “wild life”, “close to everywhere” – right in the woods – dense – urban space”.



Takis Ch. Zenetos, "Secondary use technology": bidonville in the Paris suburb of St. Denis, and comparative graph of probable developments."  
 First published in *Architecture in Greece*, 7, 1973.  
 Archive Takis Ch. Zenetos, Athens.



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- ✠ M. Carrouges, *Les Machines célibataires*, Arcanes, Paris 1954; cf. Rosalind Krauss, op. cit.
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- ✠ T.Ch. Zenetos, *Town Planning and Electronics*, in "Architecture in Greece," 8, p. 125.
- ✠ M. McLuhan, Quentin Fiore, *The Medium Is the Massage: An Inventory of Effects*, Random House, New York 1967, p. 48.
- ✠ T.Ch. Zenetos, *Town Planning and Electronics*, in "Architecture in Greece," 7, p. 115.
- ✠ T.Ch. Zenetos, *Recycling*, in "Design in Greece," 6, 1975, pp. 209-210.
- ✠ L. Bryant, *Wilderness Ontology*, in Celina Jeffery (ed.), *Preternatural*, Punctum Books, Brooklyn, New York 2011, pp. 19-26.
- ✠ T.Ch. Zenetos, *Town and Dwelling in the Future*, p. 51.
- ✠ The term *Pathosformel* is coined by Aby Warburg to designate the "afterlife" of the images that changes in form until it re-emerges in a later version.