

Marianna Charitonidou
**Takis Zenetos's City and House of the Future.
 Resynchronising Quotidian Life**

Abstract

The article focuses on the analysis of the work of architects as Takis Zenetos, Yona Friedman, and Archigram and examines how he conceptualized the reinvention of the relationship between the living units and the home-office conditions. It pays special attention to his concern about incorporating the new conceptions of “tele-work”, “tele-communication”, and “tele-education” in architecture and urban design. It departs from the hypothesis that several of the core ideas of the experimentations of Zenetos concerning the living units in the city of the future could be incorporated in the design of architectural and urban projects aiming to contribute to pandemic preparedness. Particular emphasis is placed on Zenetos' endeavour, in his “Electronic Urbanism” to take into account the complexity of the psychological and physiological needs of the citizens.

Keywords

Takis Zenetos — tele-work — tele-communication — tele-education
 — electronic urbanism

My objective, in this text, is to reflect upon the ways in which architects as Takis Zenetos, Yona Friedman, and Archigram conceptualized the reinvention of the relationship between the living units and the home-office conditions. Both Zenetos and Friedman were interested in the reinvention of the home-office conditions and in the strategies according to which architecture and urban design could respond to distance working. Their thought was characterised by the intention to suggest methods concerning both architecture and urban design aiming to incorporate the new conceptions of “tele-work”, “tele-communication”, and “tele-education”. They envisioned a new mode of thinking urbanism, able to be adapted to the continuous mutations in both social and technological domains. Worth mentioning regarding Zenetos' reflections about the re-invented relationship between urbanism and “tele-work” is his project entitled *The City and the House of the Future* by Takis Zenetos, which aimed at the design of flexible systems for both buildings and infrastructures. This project by Zenetos was based on his intention to take into consideration the accelerating mutation of the living units in the cities of the future. *The City and the House of the Future* was based on a systematic research on the development of applications in the domain of electronics. Studying articles in scientific journals of the time, such as Science magazine, Zenetos defined the forthcoming applications of “tele-management”, “tele-work” and “tele-services” and their relationship with architecture and urban planning. In 1973, he introduced *Town planning and electronics* with the following passage Science magazine: «...Technology properly used may be the only short-term answer to the city's problems because it will take time to check population growth...Why cannot people live

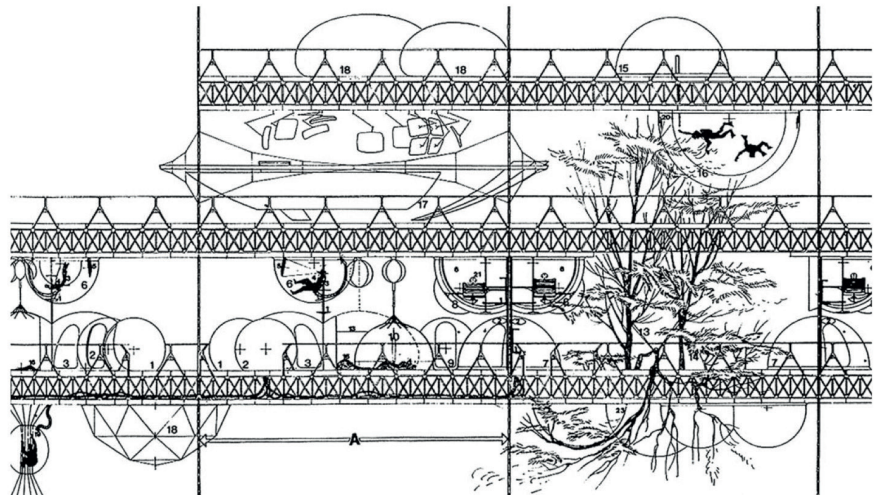


Fig. 1

Takis Zenetos, drawing for “Electronic Urbanism”.

Fonte: Orestis Doumanis, ed., Takis Ch. Zenetos, 1926-1977. Athens: Architecture in Greece, 1978, p.62.

wherever they wish and congregate electronically?». Several of the core ideas of the experimentations of Zenetos concerning the living units in the city of the future could be incorporated in the design of architectural and urban projects aiming to contribute to pandemic preparedness.

Both Zenetos and Friedman intended to provide comfortable, flexible and independent home-office conditions through the design of “individual living units” using advanced technological achievements. A close examination of their work is useful for better understanding how architecture and urban design could respond to the challenge of providing contemporary home-office conditions within the conditions of pandemic breakouts, such as the coronavirus breakout. The fact that both Zenetos and Friedman employed very often the term “parallel city”, invites us to reflect about the common points between Zenetos’ *Urbanisme électronique: Structures parallèles* and Friedman’s *Ville spatiale* (1958). Zenetos paid special attention to the complexity of the psychological and physiological needs of citizens within such conditions and to how the home-office conditions affect class struggles and the citizens’ social behavior. For this reason, a close analysis of his designs of living units adapted to the conditions of working from home, and his texts would be useful for addressing the psychological and physiological needs related to the home-office conditions (fig. 1, fig. 2). Friedman was also interested in the citizens’ physiological needs, as it becomes evident in an ensemble of diagrams entitled *Transformation of the collective psychology* he sketched in 1961 (Friedman et alii 2015).

Takis Zenetos worked on his project entitled “Electronic Urbanism” for more than twenty years. He started working on it in 1952, when he was still living in Paris and was studying at the École de Beaux Arts in Paris. Despite the fact that he officially completed this project in 1962, he continued to expand and modify it until the year of his suicide, that is to say until 1977. He presented this project on several occasions, such as the *Exhibition of the Modern Housing Organization* in Athens in 1962, and at the first building exhibition at Zappeion in 1971. Worth-noting is the fact that Zenetos incorporated in this project his design for an all-purpose furniture, including the design for the so-called “posture chair”, which was distinguished in October 1967 with an honourable mention at the “InterDesign 2000” competition, for which he also manufactured a 1/1 prototype of the “posture chair” (fig. 3). Zenetos had described this chair, which he conceived as part of his “Electronic Urbanism”, as

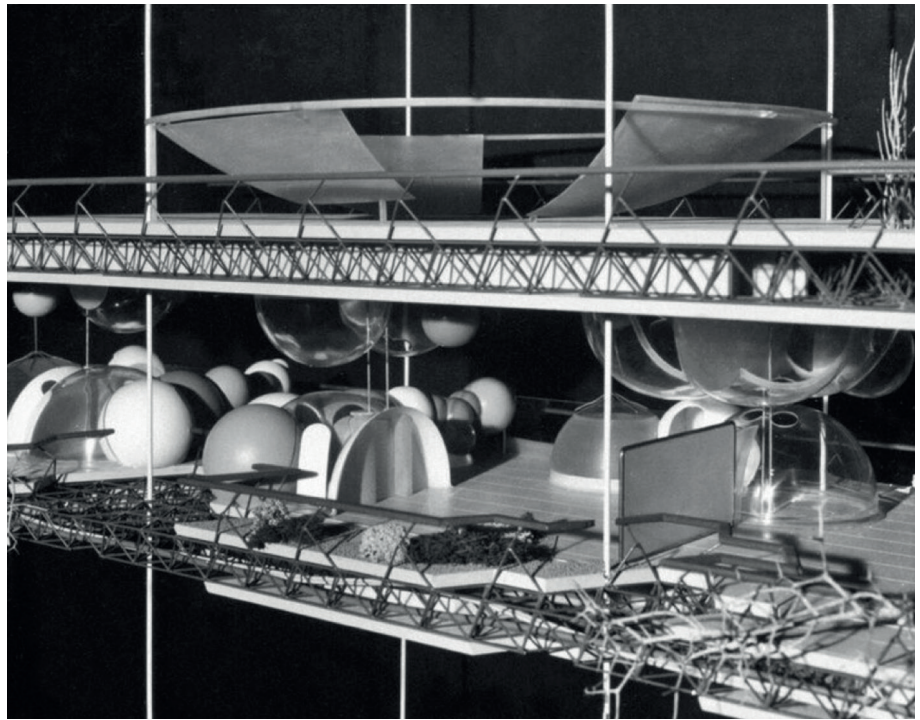


Fig. 2

Takis Zenetos, model for “Electronic Urbanism”, 1971.

Fonte: Personal archives of Zenetos family

“a second human body”, and as «[a] mobile spinal agent of the body for every use, equipped with a remote control for tele-activities and a control center for optical-acoustic contacts, which will aid in the execution of tele-activities» (Zenetos 1972 10-12). Zenetos’ “posture chair” could be compared with Archigram’s “Cushicle/Suitaloon”, which was designed by Michael Webb in 1966, as well as Archigram’s “Bathmatic”, which was conceived by Warren Chalk in 1969.

Zenetos was sceptical vis-à-vis Ludwig Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier's understanding of living units and blamed them for having failed to establish architectural and urban design strategies capable of going beyond the division between the interior and the exterior conditions. More specifically, Zenetos underscores, in Takis Ch. Zenetos, 1926-1977:

«I did not imitate Mies van der Rohe, much less Corbu who, while giving interior space a unity, created a definite boundary between interior and exterior, thus making handsome boxes. My own effort has been to integrate the interior with the environment, with no clear dividing line between the two. For the sake both of the resident himself and the man in the street.» (Doumanis 1978).

Zenetos was a member of the *International Association of Cybernetics* and had attended numerous congresses on cybernetics, such as the First International Congress of Cybernetics in London in 1969. In parallel, he was also an avid reader of the writings of Norbert Wiener, often cited in *Urbanisme électronique: Structures parallèles* (Zenetos 1979). The main interest of Zenetos’ “Electronic Urbanism” lies in the fact that it does not only constitute an artistic contribution to experimental architecture but is, instead, characterized by a new social vision promising to resynchronize practices of quotidian life, through the use of electronic communication systems that would allow the transmission of data and information. A close understanding of Zenetos’ endeavour to use of electronic communication systems in order to reinvent the practices of quotidian life would be very useful in our contemporary efforts to reflect upon how architecture and urban design could respond to the need of pandemic

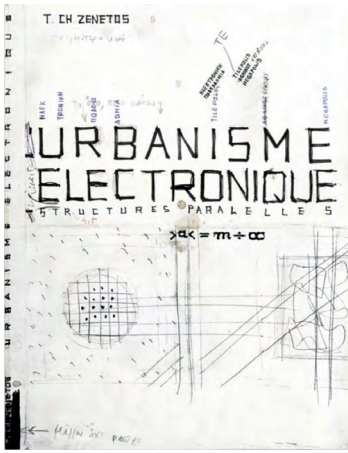


Fig. 3

Takis Zenetos, drawing and model of furniture designed for “Electronic Urbanism”.

Source: Personal archives of Zenetos family.

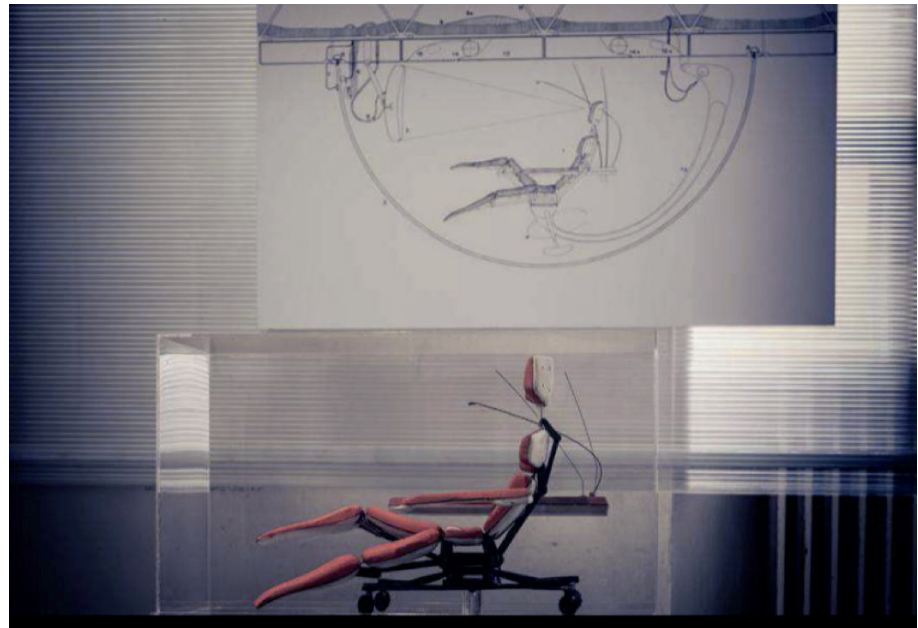


Fig. 4

Draft of the front cover of Takis Zenetos’ *Urbanisme électronique: Structures parallèles*.

Source: Personal archives of Zenetos family.

preparedness.

The interest of Zenetos in “individual living units” was not only at the heart of the reflection developed in the framework of his project *Urbanisme électronique: Structures parallèles* (fig. 4), but also at the heart of his graduation project at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris entitled *Micropolis: Unité d’habitation autonome*, which he completed in 1953, and of his project entitled *La ville suspendue* (1961) (fig. 5), which concerned the design of a suspended city. The questions he addressed through his work on “Electronic Urbanism” were already present in his thought and work during his studies in Paris. This makes us think that the Parisian scene played an important role in the development of his ideas concerning the design strategies employed in the case of the “individual living units” of the city of the future.

Zenetos’ *Urbanisme électronique: Structures parallèles*, which consisted of individual living units spread over a vast infrastructural domain, presents many affinities with various projects of suspended megastructures, such as the utopian urban network over Paris designed by Yona Friedman, the *Plug-in City* by Archigram and the *New Babylon* by Constant Nieuwenhuys. In the fifth issue of the journal Archigram, published in 1964 by the British group Archigram, one can see the *Plug-in City* by Archigram, the *New Babylon* by Constant Nieuwenhuys and a sketch of a floating megastructure by Zenetos in the same page under the label “Within the Big Structure” (Anon 1964). In the same issue of Archigram, which was devoted to “Metropolis”, featured drawings of architects such as Yona Friedman, Hans Hollein, Arata Isozaki, Paul Maymont, Frei Otto, Eckhard Schelze-Fielitz, Paolo Soleri and Kenzo Tange. Although these projects have affinities with Zenetos’ projects as far as their morphology is concerned, they differ from them as far as their social vision is concerned. More specifically, what distinguishes Zenetos’ approach from those of Archigram are his social concerns, which become evident in his following statement: «Man desires and has the right to acquire a ‘home’ in a quiet environment, close to nature and close to his place of work and the various public services» (Zenetos 1969a 116).

Revisiting the ideas of Zenetos about the reinvention of the living units in order to respond to the needs of distance working, one could better grasp

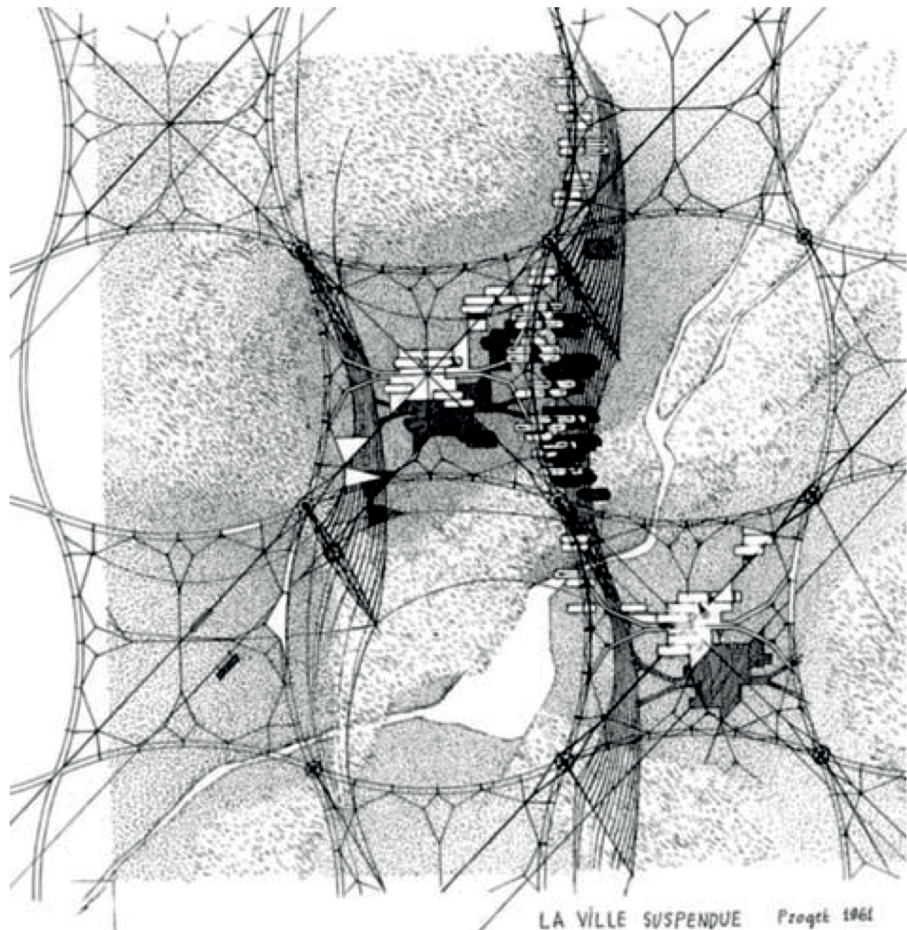


Fig. 5

Takis Zenetos. General plan for the project entitled “La ville suspendue”, 1961. Fonte: Personal archives of Zenetos family.

how architecture and urban design could respond effectively in the case of pandemic breakouts, such as the coronavirus breakout. Zenetos maintained that «[n]on-material media in managing business and production operations, such as light or sound, are cheaper and faster, and can replace the present vast and expensive installations, offering at the same time the advantage of total flexibility» (Zenetos 1969a 118). He envisioned a new mode of thinking urbanism able to be adapted to the continuous mutations in both social and technological domains. For him, “tele-operation” was closely connected to significant changes in the social domain apart from the technological.

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