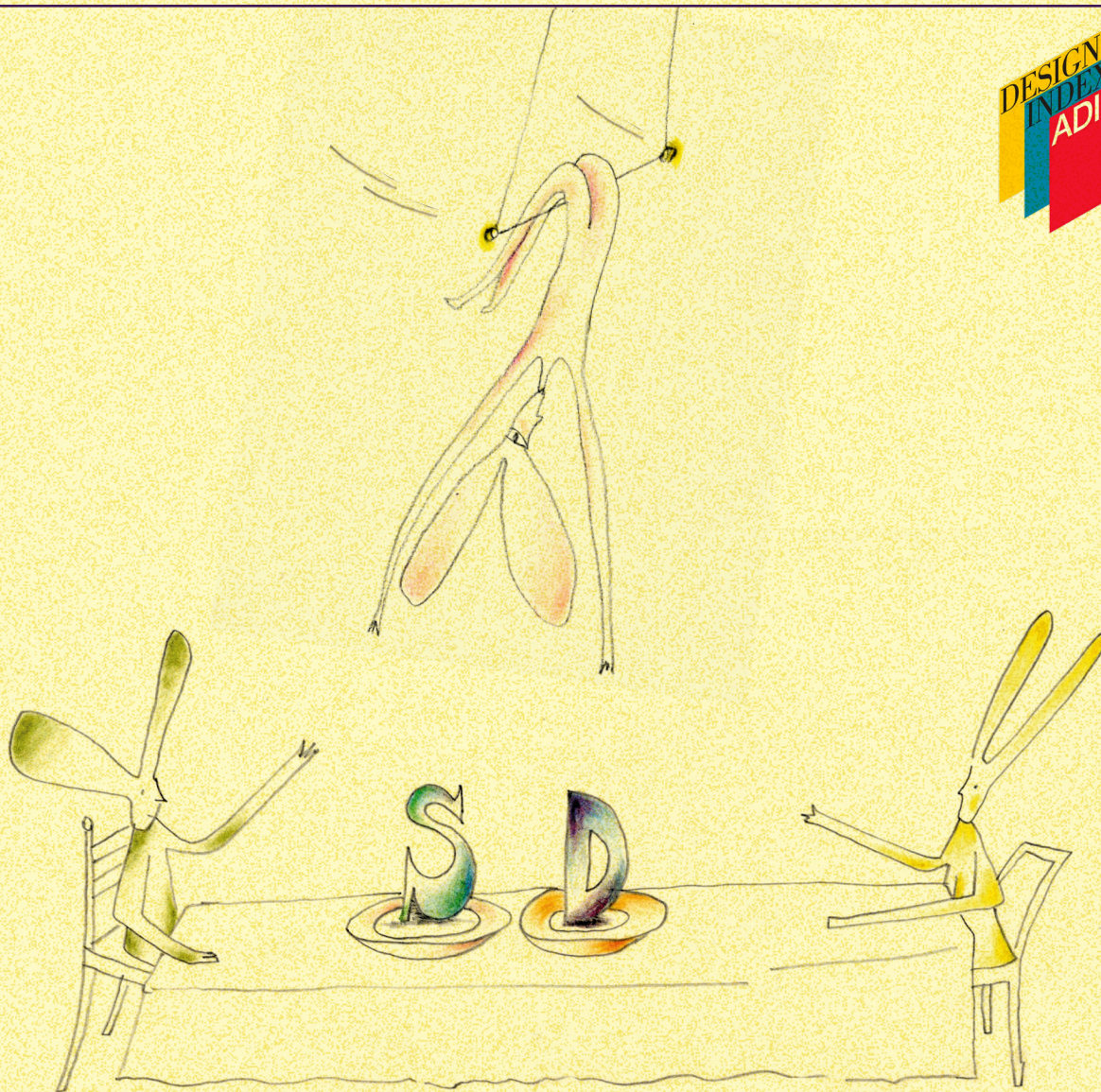


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Ricerca

Environment and Emancipation through Design

Avant-garde Intervention and Experiments with Social Design in Denmark around 1970

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Following the students revolt in Paris in 1968 the role of design was also fundamentally questioned by its younger practitioners in Denmark.

The designer and architect duo Susanne Ussing (1940–1998) and Carsten Hoff (1934–) was particularly inventive and adventurous in trying out and devising new avenues of practice and engagement aiming at a total reform of social life through redesign of the build environment. Their radical experiments drew much attention and were considered as pointing to the future by contemporary design critics. The activities encompassed exhibitions, teaching and experimental buildings. Most notably they arranged provocative multi-sensory exhibitions in established museums, set up teaching facilities outside the academy and did a three-month building experiment using cheap and accessible materials like scaffolding, reinforced plastic tarpaulin and cardboard. In the discourse accompanying the activities of the duo themes of objects and buildings as catalysts of emancipation and empowerment of people predominate.

PAROLE CHIAVE

Environment
Emancipation
Empowerment
Avant-garde Practice
Experiment

Can we as designers create more rich milieus, where the human being is not manipulated on our conditions? Environments that are not the expression of the architect's personal aesthetic intentions. (Ussing & Hoff, 1969, p. 28)

1. Introduction

In his bilingual publication *Dansk Design/Danish Design* from 1975, design critic Henrik Sten Møller was apparently equally interested in playing the part of both design historian and design visionary. The first and shortest part of the book was devoted to biographical chapters on the key designers of the preceding four decades that most of Danish design history is still pre-occupied with today, such as Poul Henningsen, Arne Jacobsen, Finn Juhl and

Hans J. Wegner. In the second and longer part, he discussed about a dozen contemporary designers who were not only key figures of the time but in his opinion were also looking to the future. Being a visionary is a risky business and, today, Henrik Sten Møller also comes across as a much better historian. The majority of the designers he discussed are long forgotten or only given short mentions now and then. This goes for the designer and architect duo Susanne Ussing and Carsten Hoff as well, to whom Henrik Sten Møller devotes no less than 14 full pages. At the time, this elevated status was an obvious choice. The duo had been extremely active and very versatile for a period of six to eight years with several projects that were extraordinary and ground breaking in a Danish context. They had held several exhibitions, submitted projects for competitions, taught at the Royal Academy's School of Architecture, published and edited many texts and volumes and not least — they had carried out two large-scale construction experiments that were demanding in terms of both providing the funding and the realisation that also encompassed thorough documentation. During all of this, they pursued a self-aware avant-garde approach and sought to dispel established ways of thinking and acting in the material and built environment by embracing new ideas, practices and especially new highly industrial materials such as foam and plastic. The heyday of the duo seems to have peaked simultaneously with the tribute Henrik Sten Møller paid them in 1975. Susanne Ussing began pursuing projects that were more within the field of fine art than design or architecture and did so until her death in 1998. Carsten Hoff continued practicing architecture and has completed a number of villas, a couple of council estates and several cultural institutions since then.

Given this intensive but short-lived status as one of the key reformers of design and architecture, with relatively few projects progressing beyond the design stage and with limited impact on the practice in both fields in the long run, the duo of Ussing and Hoff do not attract attention here for a lasting and significant contribution to the built environment. Instead it is, firstly, their more time-specific contribution to developing the meaning of the concept 'environment' and the effect of this on their own work that is of interest. Secondly, we detect a line of continuity in seeking both emancipation and totality from early modernist avant-garde thinking in their discourse and practise that was generative for the way they conceived and carried their projects through, and it is this we would like to point out. Together with others of their generation, Ussing and Hoff were critical to the standardisation of the mass-production of housing and other negative results of industrialisation and modernist large-scheme planning. They re-invoked avant-garde experiments

with physical environments to investigate further aspects of the total scope of social milieu sustaining the development of free, creative and collectively engaged individuals. They installed sensorial spaces and made social interventions to make people experience alternative surroundings and empower them to make more critical choices and even create houses and intervene in the social fabric themselves. It developed into full-scale experiments with temporary camps and large-scheme planning for housing as 'open systems', where people could choose more individually or even build themselves in an overall structure.

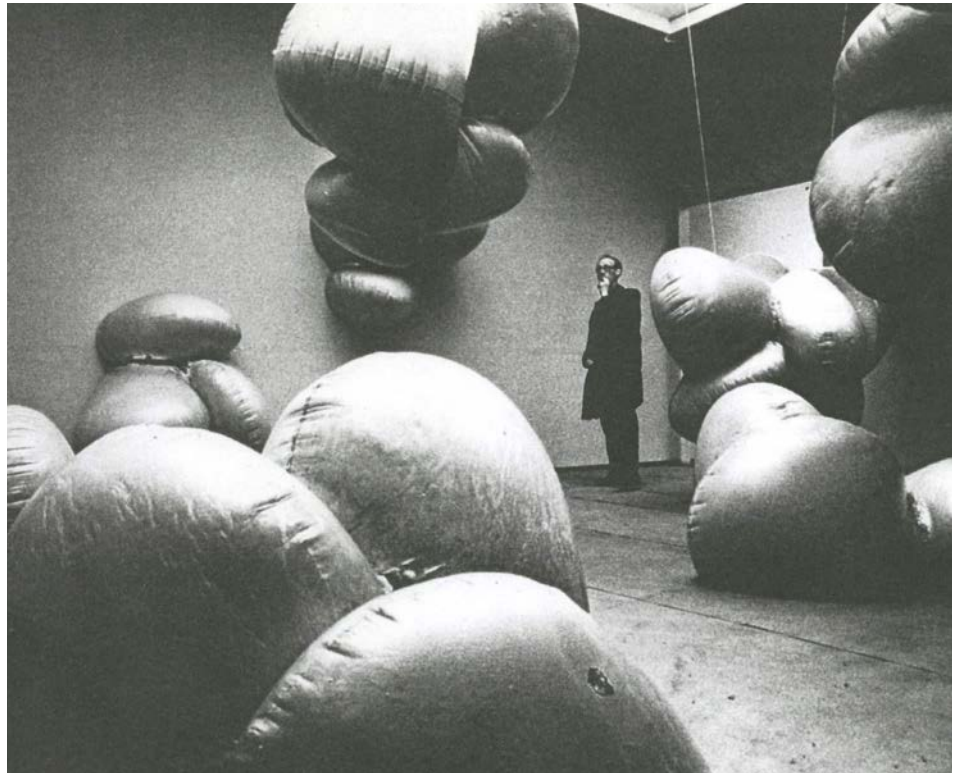


Fig. 1 — Susanne Ussing and Carsten Hoff, *Sensation Room 1*, Artists' Autumn Exhibition, Den Frie, Copenhagen 1968.

This aligns with very broad discussions on physical environment and the social milieu of the time. The Scandinavian languages don't distinguish between 'environment' and 'milieu', but has only the word 'miljø', which popped up everywhere around 1970 with a wide scope of meaning from psychology to sociology or biology, from closed living or working environments to urban spaces, biological habitats or eco-systems. The *Scandinavian Design Students's Organisation*, SDO, 1966-69 was established to engage design more directly in societal challenges, and their three summer schools all focused on the human environment/milieu. Victor Papanek was a pervasive figure in

these events and broadened the discussions with topics such as design for the disabled, for developing countries and for nature conservation. His famous book 'Design for the Real World' was published in Sweden under the Swedish title 'Miljön och Miljonerna' in 1970, a year before it appeared in English. In the Swedish version, Papanek used the word 'miljö' in the same manner as Susanne Ussing and Carsten Hoff used the Danish equivalent 'miljø'. With this as the background, we will investigate how they contributed to the discussions on human environments and emancipation, and how they developed their experiments with both spaces and people.

2. Avant-garde Experiments and Environments

The avant-garde activities of the duo Ussing and Hoff caught most attention in the wider public by the series of four *Sensation Rooms* they curated in different exhibition places from 1968 to 1970. The self-aware avant-garde spirit of the duo and a strong belief in the potential of change in the physical environment to prompt overall change in all areas and on all levels of society was preponderant. Their 'sensorial spaces' could very well be considered as a continuation of an almost two decades-long tradition of furnishing and displaying 'free spaces' in exhibition places, often collaborations between artists and furniture architects. In these 'free spaces', more or less radical breaks with conventional types of furniture and arrangement of interiors were incorporated in terms of construction, materials and aesthetics to point to the possibility of more liberated ways of inhabiting the designed and built environment attained through innovations in design. The temporary installation of sheets dipped in plaster in the workers' canteen of the Egetæpper carpet factory, Herning (DK), made by Gunnar Aagaard Andersen, part of the international concrete art movement, in 1960 highlighted the intention of intervening in people's low consciousness of their everyday surroundings, even at work, and showing how the entire room could be radically changed beyond the standard distinction between walls, floors and ceilings.

The change in denomination to *Sensation Rooms* that Ussing and Hoff undertook wasn't, however, just a simple case of discursive distinction within an established tradition. It was justified in that they sought to do away with any remotely recognisable type of furniture and interior arrangements altogether and even tried to obstruct common forms of orientation and movement in a room by furnishing the spaces with amorphous objects hanging from the ceiling. Likewise, their aim wasn't just liberation from bourgeoisie norms of sitting and relaxation but the total emancipation so that each and every one of us was free to seek their own truth within themselves. They stressed the

importance of the individual, bodily experience in an interview *Spatial alternative* from 1970 in *Mobilia*, the Danish Furniture Trade magazine. “But why should we experience our surroundings? To achieve a greater awareness, and a more real contact to life. It is not so easy for others to impose their ideas upon us when we have felt our genuine needs through our senses. We must stop being amenable to manipulation and alienation” (Ussing & Hoff, 1970, up.). They felt that our senses were dulled by civilisation and modern patterns of living, so they wanted to give the visitors a renewed basic experience of space, materials, textures and light. And people responded, about how they felt deeply influenced by the spaces, and even found them erotic or intoxicating (Schmidt, 1970, quoted below). The expansion of consciousness was one of the declared goals for all of their design experiments.

This interview was published as part of an explorative special issue on “Art and Industry”. It was edited by abovementioned artist Gunnar Aagaard Andersen and the layout was provided by Ussing and Hoff. This ‘layout’ included the addition of unexpected materials among the pages, such as an empty double-spread with a lump of hair as part of the interview. They stated, however, that this investigation of materials was part of their basic, artistic research through which they also intended to contribute to future endeavours in Danish industry. The *clouds* hanging from the ceiling in *Sensation Room 1*, as well as in the later ones, were filled with polyurethane foam, and the later rooms were cluttered with plastic foil tubes with either light gas or water. The overall idea was to explore new possibilities in modern, industrial materials and perhaps invent new kinds of *milieu-elements* for industrial production. They had access to the production machines at the Ureform foam factory, in line with Aagaard Andersen’s earlier collaborations, which led to his *Foam Chair* from 1964. These experiments led also to the engagement of Ussing and Hoff to teach courses at the Royal Academy’s School of Architecture on full-scale mock-ups of interiors using new industrial materials. In these ways the avant-garde experiments gained a good deal of attention in public media, industry, and research and design education.

The following sensorial spaces were equipped with bean bags already much in vogue in the period. Ussing and Hoff marketed an oversize bean bag called *Smyrna*. Prototypes were installed in more of the sensorial spaces, but the last, *Sensation Room 4*, was a temporary showroom at the Copenhagen Furniture Fair by Domus Danica, a furniture company selling the bean bags. Still, it could be said to be true to the aim of the exhibitions in taking the idea of the bean bag to the extreme in that it did not only render the traditional chair superflu-

ous, but all of the living room and maybe even the bedroom. As Henrik Steen Møller announced in his review of the first *Sensation Room*: “Here you have the living room of the future: Free from furniture and made of plastic foam” (Møller, 1968). The heritage of the avant-garde tradition was highlighted by the headline: “We have to learn to perceive a room as music” (Møller, 1968).



Fig. 2 — Susanne Ussing and Carsten Hoff, *Sensation Room* 4, Domus Danica, Bella Centre, Copenhagen 1970.

These spatial experiments were understood as social designs and even as user involvement through the individual experience and bodily interaction with the room, as well as others in the room. The critic Torben Schmidt wrote an article on *The Total Environment* in 1970, where he compared Verner Panton’s spectacular *Visiona 2* on the Bayer-Schiff in Cologne with the *Sensation Rooms* of Ussing and Hoff. *Total environment* was the most recent label of the abovementioned free spaces, experimental installations displayed across art exhibition rooms and commercial showrooms. Schmidt praises both Panton and the duo for their critique of the sterility and conformity of modern housing and the reawakening of all the senses and transgressive imagination. But he prefers the spaces of Ussing and Hoff to Panton, because his module furniture elements are less open for interaction and user involvement. He feels more engaged in the more explorative spaces of the duo:

Slim, air-born columns of bright plastic foil stand as vaguely waving trees, which stretch up as a dense forest of hanging plastic tape. Columns and bags can be moved around to change the character of the experience, and this flexibility is exactly what you miss in Panton's rooms. [...] The visitors are by their presence participating in forming the space — in creating nuances. It is soothing to the mind to be able to get high without taking drugs in this room [...]. It is the senses that are awakened and stimulated — we are totally involved and contribute to the physical surroundings. (Schmidt, 1970, p. 164)

The *Sensation Rooms* are comparable to the four Visiona Exhibitions at the Bayer Schiff in Cologne from 1968 to 1972 by Panton, Joe Colombo and Oliver Morgue in their experimental use of new synthetic fabrics, foam and lighting to suggest new ways of interior design. In the Danish context, Panton also belonged to the group of artists and architects with Aagaard Andersen and Nanna Ditzel, originally inspired by the French *Group Espace*, who merged spatial and pictorial art with interior design as total environments. As part of the late 1960s, they were, however, also parallel to more utopian visions of future urban living such as the Dutch artist Constant's *New Babylon*, shown several times in Scandinavia from 1964 to 1972, the British architect group *Archigram*'s images of walking or instant cities, and the inflatable structures of the San Francisco *Ant Farm* promoting countercultural ways of thinking, acting and living (Blauvelt, 2015). As we shall see in the following, Ussing and Hoff changed their experiments more in this direction of new societal and ecological experiments. It is because they are exactly in middle of these international tendencies, between art scene and trade fairs, academy teaching and alternative cultures, that it is interesting to track and interpret the changes in their use of the term "environment".

3. Environmental Avant-garde Discourse

The avant-garde activities of Ussing and Hoff also coincide with the advent of Victor Papanek in Denmark and the formulation of the famous *Copenhagen Chart*. There are several parallels between the duo Ussing and Hoff and Papanek in the understanding of design as a profoundly social activity and the wide and infinitely expandable concept of 'environment'. His seminal writings were published in Danish, and this makes his use of the concept suitable for a comparison. A key difference between their thinking is motivation, where Papanek stressed a moral obligation and an ethical foundation for the reorientation of design whereas Ussing and Hoff sought emancipation with the visionary artist as a catalyst more in line with early modernist avant-garde in Europe.

As care takers for mental health, as artists, we have to create experiences and images that can enhance and sharpen the awareness to know that the physical milieu can be different and better; that housing can also be a tool in the expansion of the possibilities of the individual as a human being. (Ussing & Hoff, 1970b, p. 641)

This self-fashioning is, however, stated in an article evaluating their first full-scale experiment, a temporary user-built camp at the *New Society* in Thy, to which we will return below. Here they had to reconsider their role as artist-architects, planning an open system, which was severely disrupted by the users.

Papanek was also very much engaged in user involvements, at least together with his students, but he seemed to keep a more systemic, overall view on the designing of environments. In an article on new perspectives on design and design education in a later issue of *Mobilia* in 1970, where his *Copenhagen Chart* is first published, he stretches this systemic understanding of environment from the recent theories of cybernetics to an expanded field of design from landscape planning to happenings:

Design means coming to grips with our environment and doing so from a socially responsible viewpoint. Nigel Calder and Norbert Wiener have shown that our man-made environments are beginning to take on all the characteristics (feedback, interlocking, regeneration, self-duplication) of natural ecological systems. [...] Our environment consists of landscapes, regions, cities, climates, shelters, tools, devices, informations, products, happenings, messages and much else. To deal with all this, design must concern itself with moral and social issues, and, in doing so, help students in their search for an appropriate value system within themselves. (Papanek, 1970b, up.)

In this broad understanding of 'environment', being framed throughout any scale in both society and nature, the orientation was the inner moral compass and feeling of social responsibility of the designer. From this perspective, it seems clear that Papanek was thinking mainly of design students rather than users in a broad sense.

In the writings of Susanne Ussing and Carsten Hoff, the concept of 'miljø' (covering both milieu and environment) was key in capturing the totality of the social life to reform and the result of the reformed social life. This way, 'miljø' performed much the same function as 'society' did in early modernist discourse and ideology. This function was to indicate both care and an eye for not just design but the whole of modern life. At its outset in the late 1960s, the

concept of 'miljø' was only used to indicate the totality of the built and social environment by Ussing and Hoff and in Danish design discourse in general. Moreover, it was used as a normative and qualitative term. The material and built surroundings could be deprived of or enriched by the presence of 'miljø' and in this respect, it was also an effective critical term. However, the semantics of the word is both wider and originally more descriptive. 'Miljø' is a loan word from the French word 'milieu' and since the start of its use in the second part of the 19th century, it could both be used to point to the whole of the social or the whole of the natural context, although the former meaning predominated. In the course of the second part of the 1960s as the concern for the natural environment rose and environmentalist movements were formed, the second meaning of 'natural environment' became more and more common and even dominant in the course of the 1970s. This new emphasis was reflected in the renaming in 1973 of the State department formed in 1971 to govern the protection of nature from The Ministry of Pollution Control to simply The Ministry of Environment. From this point on, the semantics of 'miljø' first and foremost refer to the natural environment and only secondly to the social or cultural environment in a Danish context.

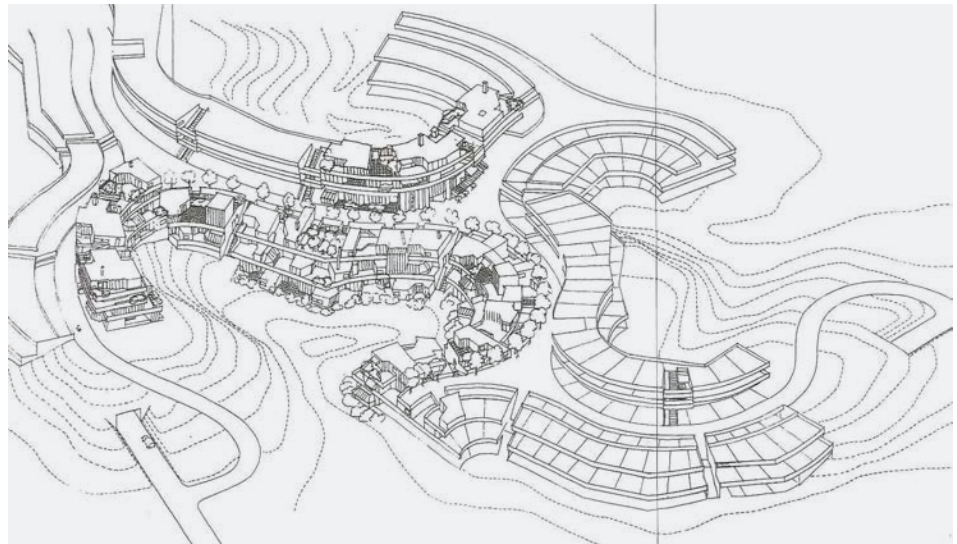


Fig. 3 — Susanne Ussing and Carsten Hoff, Idea competition on new forms of multi-storey housing, 1970 & 1973.

This initial predominance of thinking in the social environment had a somewhat paradoxical manifestation in the duo's winning proposal for *new forms of multi-storey housing* from 1970. Here, as we see in this overview depiction of the project, an extensive manipulation of the natural landscape was to be undertaken to form an extensive artificial landscape of hills and valleys cut through by roads laying the basis for reinforced concrete building decks.

“The basic idea of the projects is the construction of an artificial landscape” (Ussing & Hoff, 1971), as it was highlighted in a later article on the proposal. The natural Danish landscape was too flat and harmonious to form the basis for true rich and varied built environments as found in Spanish mountain villages or Peruvian *barriadas*, so it had to be constructed. At this point, the prerequisite for a sound social environment was still founded on the idea that the natural environment was an endless resource whose destruction and reorganisation to human ends was in no way in opposition to the long-term benefit of humans and the earth.

Gradually and unnoticed, Ussing and Hoff adapted their thinking and activities to both the broader semantics and awareness of the word ‘miljø’. In the second part of the 1970s, they also began to use key terms tied to the environmental awareness such as ‘eco’ and ‘organic’ in their writings and reasoned and argued in line with the by now more common environmental agenda. Apparently, it didn’t pose any serious challenge to their ambition to emancipate and sustain the environment that they were now working on a considerable larger and also different kind of scale with the movement in the meaning of the concept ‘miljø’. The most apparent effect was a gradual move from the use of artificial materials to natural materials in their projects. The winning project was never realised. This was maybe due to the advent of the oil crisis in 1972 or due to opposition from the building organisations who were supposed to build the radical and drastically different way of attaining social quality in the built environment. Instead Ussing and Hoff contributed to the exhibition *Alternative architecture* at the *Louisiana Museum of Modern Art* in 1977 with what they themselves referred to as *housing scenery*. Here the choice of materials was considerably less experimental and more in line with both more natural and traditional types such as wood and cement.

4. Open Systems and DIY Engagement of Users in Experimental Model Situations

Returning to 1970, this was the year when Ussing and Hoff made the two last *Sensation Rooms* as well as the first full-scale camp experiment in Thy and the entry for the winning proposal for *New forms of multi storey housing*. We will examine how the intention of the sensorial spaces with their basic level of interaction by bodily presence, perception and eventual rearrangements of bean bags were developed into full involvement of active participants in both the camp and the proposal. The housing scheme proposal was built on the concept of a self-growing community, like the *barriadas*, where the inhabitants would add very different kinds of dwellings, shops, workshops or meeting places into

the structure. It should be a mix of prefabricated modules prepared for the project and free, individual solutions, based on the needs, imagination and skills of individuals. "Half of the cells are reserved for free building. Here, timber log houses, tents, prefab housing, caravans, pneumatic constructions, domes, self-made sheds and open gardens could be placed side by side" (Ussing & Hoff, 1971, up.). Here we meet the symbols of the Californian countercultural communities, tents, caravans and domes, *naturally grown* in the artificial landscape of their meandering concrete structure (Blauvelt, 2015). The huge difference to the USA, though, was that the Danish cases in question were funded by state organisations, explored new general solutions for the welfare state, and were, hence, not countermovements in the same sense.

As the scheme was never realised, this might look like pure utopian wishful thinking of the period. It was, however, processed and developed through two stages of the idea competition, and Ussing and Hoff constructed two building experiments as preparations. The first in 1970 at Thy, and the second at Vejlsø in 1972 and 1973. The aim of the experiments was to develop strategies and structures that could negate the alienation of the existing multi-storey apartment buildings and restore the lack of 'environment' these were criticised for. The main element in the solution they thought out was to find ways to engage and empower residents in the building process. Ussing and Hoff found that the role of the architect in this situation was to strike a balance between the alienating "dwelling-machines" or "living boxes" of the contemporary industrialised building on the one hand and the risk of outright built anarchy on the other. This was to be attained through the initial establishment of what they referred to as 'open systems' where the basic structure was put up by the architect and the rest of the building process was undertaken by the inhabitants themselves.

This system thinking was inspired by cybernetics, just like Papanek, and Ussing and Hoff even worked with computers in their artistic research. An article from 1969 had the title *Form, Space, Nature, Computer*, and it discussed the potential of working in more open and diverse processes, where complexity could grow into new patterns. The critique of modern, mass-produced housing was clear. "[...] you feel that these environments are frustrating, they produce aggression, and you call them slum from the very beginning" (Ussing & Hoff, 1969, p. 27). Against the background of this lethal rigidity they wanted to explore less ordered systems, opening up more possibilities for other needs and experiences. "The environments you find prolific and open for possibilities are the self-growing ones; the ones that somehow find their own

order that might be called disorder in an aesthetical sense and that are more composite both functionally, formally and spatially” (Ussing & Hoff, 1969, p. 28). The series of *Sensation Rooms* was already an exploration of self-growing forms and orders. Specifically, they thought of their research into polyurethane foam as a way to study natural growth patterns in artificial settings. “Today we have artificial materials behaving like nature; they grow, have their own principles of growth, they can evolve in a nuanced way and differently, if you don’t force them into fixed forms, but guide them out of the given principle of growth” (Ussing & Hoff, 1969, p. 30). This was how they framed their ideas of open systems.

From this text, it is difficult to understand how they used computers specifically. It was, however, clearly a way of exploring complexity. And playfulness, we might add. The same issue of the Danish journal *Architecture and Visual Art* included a translation of the Dutch artist Constant explaining his vision of *New Babylon*, a new urban superstructure opening vast spaces for endless, creative activities together with fellow, nomadic inhabitants (Constant, 1969). Ussing and Hoff clearly shared his wish for the full emancipation of human creativity and playful experience by means of modern technology in the form of a kind of artificial second nature. The challenge they sought to solve in their research was how to offer a rich setting, full of opportunities for new experiences, but still open and inviting to self-expression and the new ideas of any participant. “Can we as designers create more rich milieus, where the human being is not manipulated on our conditions? Environments that are not the expression of the architect’s personal aesthetic intentions” (Ussing & Hoff, 1969, p. 28). Modern architects had time and again offered a limiting aesthetic framework, simplifying need and narrowing functional programmes. Together with capitalist building industry, this produced the scant consciousness of spatial and sensual qualities of our physical surroundings. So people had to be invited as citizens and inhabitants to widen the consciousness through direct involvement in designing the frameworks of homes and communities.

This was also the direct goal of the full-scale building experiments. In 1970, Ussing and Hoff received funding from the *Danish National Bank Jubilee Foundation* to provide a specific set of materials for easy, temporary constructions and invited everyone to join them in creating a small, but open-minded community. The experiment ran for ten weeks over the summer as part of the larger hippie movement festival, *The New Society* or the Thy Camp, that later turned into a permanent settlement. In Thy the ‘open system’ was established

by setting up the communal building or 'town hall' using steel tube scaffolding and providing basic building elements of armoured plastic tarpaulin and cardboard and basic instructions to use these. "We hung up a sign saying: Scaffold Houses. Anyone can take part in this housing experiment. Anyone can move in and arrange as he wants in the scaffolding. Bring your own ideas or materials or use ours" (Ussing & Hoff, 1970b, p. 638). Ussing and Hoff were not completely satisfied with the result of the experiment. The climate proved more windy and harsh than expected which caused difficulties with the given materials. Moreover, the entire camp was such an attraction and success that it caused an influx of people who only stayed for a very short period. Finally, the experiment also lost some of its validity because too many of the inhabitants of the experiment were architects themselves. Ussing and Hoff were well aware that the experiment at the outset was what they referred to as a provisional 'model situation', but in Thy it proved both too temporary and too socially fleeting and biased towards providing sound hints regarding what built forms and which kind of habitat future real-life collaboration amongst users and architects might result in.



Fig. 4 — Susanne Ussing and Carsten Hoff, Communal building of the ten-week building experiment in *The New Society* /The Thy Camp 1970.

Consequently, Ussing and Hoff changed their approach two years later at the experiment at Vejlø in 1972. Again they found official funding, this time from the Ministry of Culture, and joined another activity exploring alternative social interactions, the Island Camps, on the islands south of Zealand.

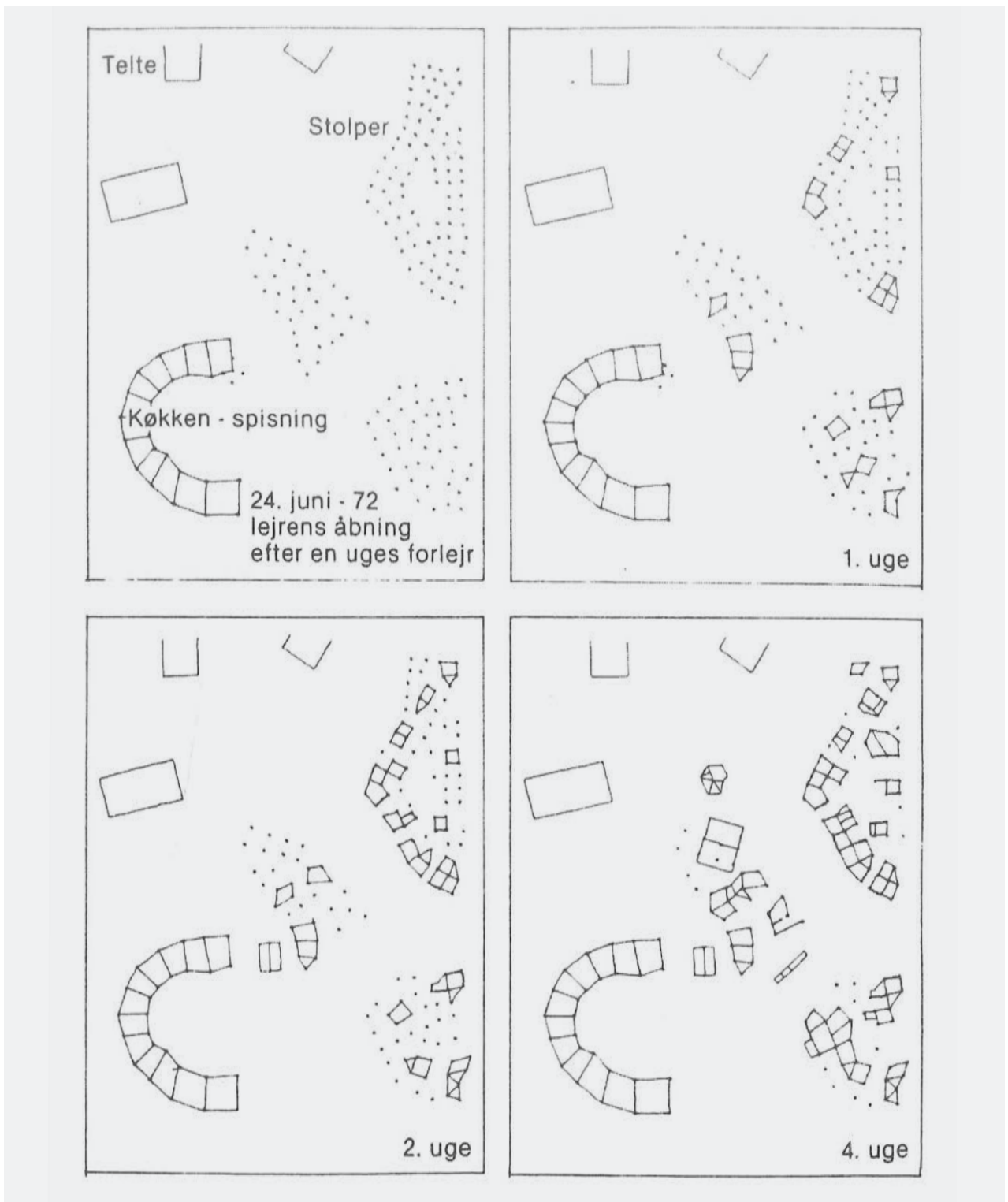


Fig. 5 — Susanne Ussing and Carsten Hoff, four stages of the building experiment at Vejøl, summer 1972: Opening, first week, second week and fourth week. The text indicates the kitchen area, tents and poles.

These camps were initiated by the Ministry of Culture as cheap holiday camps for young, vulnerable peoples to prevent them drifting into drug abuse by experiencing a new social community, but they developed into popular events for students and families. At the Vejøl camp, Ussing and Hoff put up wooden poles in an 'open system' and provided basic building materials. But this time they withdrew from the camp after the first week and returned only to record and document the development of the built environment. This time they were more satisfied with the outcome that gave more indications of what an 'open system' might result in, but still the timespan and social situation was once again too provisional for the 'model situation' to deliver more than vague hints at the possible lived and tangible result of 'open systems'. After four weeks, a proper and well-functioning built settlement was established, but delay set in as early as the fifth week and turned into outright a slum in the final sixth week due to the fact that the camp was to be left anyhow.



Fig. 6 — Susanne Ussing and Carsten Hoff, own dwelling, Vejøl Camp, 1972.

In spite of the results — or maybe more precisely exactly because the experiment was too provisional to provide results — Ussing and Hoff continued to pursue the ideal of and their fascination with the dwelling as a process and the everyday as an infinite bricolage resulting in a liveable and humane environment. They continued to record and document this everyday ideal in design anthropological investigations such as in the spread accompanying an article on "Open form, open systems" from the 1977 publication *Houses for Humans — on organic building*.

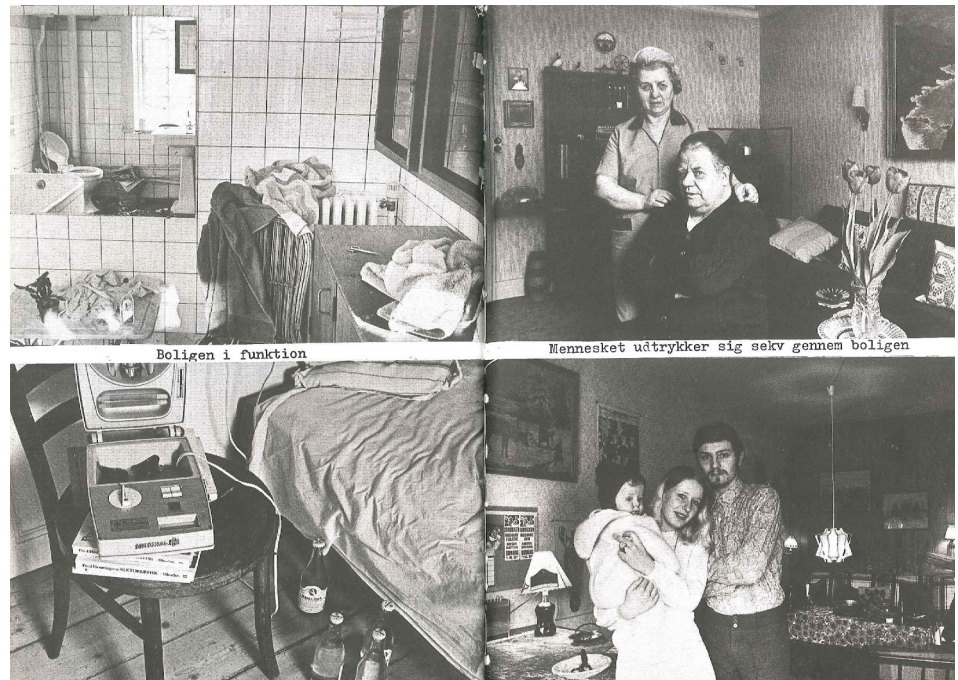


Fig. 7 — Susanne Ussing and Carsten Hoff, *House for Humans — on organic building*, 1977. Illustrations of homes developing as living processes, here examples of the home in function and as expressions.

5. Mediating Environments and Fashioning Emancipation

As part of their endeavour to emancipate and empower future DIY-builders and dwellers of 'open systems', Ussing and Hoff developed new ideas for and approaches to drawings and models as mediations of future building processes. They were critical towards both traditional architectural drawings and models that they found either incomprehensible to ordinary people or too neat and thus misleading. Instead they produced cut-out models that enabled the future user to carry out small-scale experiments and tentatively fashion the home within the 'open system' according to his or her own needs and ideas beforehand. The cut-outs represented, of course, the prefabricated modules, which should only be used in parts of their proposal for *New forms of multi-storey housing* as mentioned above. The most progressive results should be built freely out of individual needs and imagination. The dilemma was, however, how to set people free and enable them to think of alternative constructive solutions themselves.

This attempt at empowerment was crucial, because mainstream inhabitants showed a lack of imagination and awareness of more varied ways to meet their needs. Ussing and Hoff found that people only followed wishful images of homes reproduced by the building industry and mass media, and did not think of their independent, individual needs to evolve and express themselves (Ussing & Hoff, 1970b, p. 639). They fought against these clichés in different ways.

and through that ignite a demand for the building industry to develop radically different and fully flexible components.

In an open planning situation it will be crucial that norms are dissolved, as well as fixed images of the frames and thereby the content of our unfolding of life. If the dwelling shall be applicable as an instrument for the removal of rotten layers of civilisation, destruction of alienation, the building industry has to be able to deliver completely different and manageable, more freely combined components in open systems. (Ussing & Hoff, 1970b, p. 639)

Their choice of nondurable materials for the participatory experiments was dictated by the wish to enable free creativity through manageable materials for quick results. They had to work a lot with different ways of reinforcement, folding and preparation of cardboard, not to mention fixing and tightening with plastics and tape. But this was based on their work with new artificial materials in the *Sensation Rooms* and at their courses at the School of Architecture. They thought that new, flexible materials were already within reach, which were soft and manageable and could be offered to ordinary users to make the most diverse combinations for individual purposes (Ussing & Hoff, 1970b, p. 640). In line with the technical and cultural optimism of the 1960s, Ussing and Hoff had a vision of a very different building industry combining both small craft-like workshops along with huge electronically managed production plants. "In this context it is clear that no building elements should be made of such a non-manageable and permanent material as concrete" (Ussing & Hoff, 1970b, p. 640). They did plan to build the substructure of their new scheme of multi-storey housing in concrete, as the *artificial landscape*, but the materials of the dwellings and other buildings should be much more accessible to the inhabitants, cheaper and easier to both erect and remove to alter the functions and expression as needs and wishes changed, as a continuous adjustment of the social and physical environment. As such it was, of course, also a radically different vision of our building culture, far from any former architect's ideals of durable materials and lasting monuments.

This way the professional field of the architect was reduced considerably and altered. In 1977, Ussing and Hoff stated that the role of the architect — besides involving people in actual dwelling processes — was to create images that were capable of mobilising dwellers in existing and future housing processes (Ussing & Hoff, 1977). The purpose of architect was no longer to draw or model buildings for people in any concrete or direct sense, but only to be a visionary and provide possible visions for others to imagine further and me-

diate directly. This was a democratic avant-gardist seeking totality but very keen on avoiding totalitarian limitations in the built environment. As their building experiment had shown, however, this idea of leaving the scene to the participants, but expecting them to build and act in authentic, emancipated ways and sustain new kinds of coherent, total environments, contained deep paradoxes (Munch, 2016).

6. Conclusion

As we have mentioned in the social design experiments and critical experiences of Susanne Ussing and Carsten Hoff, they sought to sustain the social environment by emancipating and empowering ordinary people to take an active part in shaping their own built environment. This endeavour started in the care for the built environment as a social environment fundamentally shaping the everyday life of ordinary people and society in general. At first, this care did not encompass the natural environment, which was included only as a given and as a metaphor for the healthy social environment. But as the environmental awareness of preservation of nature increased in general in the course of the 1970s and the semantics of the word took on this emphasis, Ussing and Hoff also began to consider a sustainable social environment founded on a sustainable natural environment. They point to the fact that the avant-garde ability to think in totalities and the ideology that reform of design can affect society at large was an important prerequisite for the idea, and that the same is the case regarding the entire, natural environment. Furthermore, the partly negative developments of their building experiments showed different, intricate interrelations and feedback between the physical environment and the social milieu it framed. Ingrid Gehl, psychologist and partner of the later famous urban planner, Jan Gehl, also highlighted this in her investigation of the dwelling environment made for the Danish *State Research Institute of Building* in 1971.

By dwelling environment we mean here everything that humans experience in terms of pavements, surfaces, spaces, houses and spaces between them and the social processes related to these.

A dwelling environment can be split into a physical environment and a social milieu. The physical environment is understood as the experience of the individual of that part of his surroundings not containing other people, i.e. space, houses, materials, colours etc. The social milieu is understood as the experience of the individual of other human beings and relations between them. Both the physical environment and the social milieu affect us. (Gehl, 1971, p. 12)

While Gehl, however, observed the life between the houses in the existing built environment and mainly confirmed the problems, Ussing and Hoff investigated the reciprocal relationship through social design. As an investigation, though, they had the problem that both the physical and the social were fleeting and undetermined in their experiments.

In their writings, they were quite aware and often surprisingly honest about the failures, dilemmas and negative results. And there is a lot to learn from this historical situation, as many of the same understanding of grand challenges to be solved by dealing with whole environments, both urban, social and natural environments, are back. They are returning, of course, because some of the problems have expanded over the decades. More surprisingly, many of the same attitudes and approaches are also repeated despite their initial failure. And if we listen to the scientific warnings of climate change, we do not have the time to repeat the failures of the social design experiments of the 1970s.

In one sense, you could say that the building experiments of Ussing and Hoff were primarily open observations of how social dynamics could materialise in specific physical environments. After the second experiment at Vejlø, where they had left the site and only returned for observations, they felt that the tiny community had performed a cycle.

Overall the city went through the same stages as in established society — selection of the best sites — different kinds of speculation — secret agreements on the best houses, and lastly the decay into a slum. The physical expression of the city ended up following the social life there. (Ussing & Hoff, 1974, p. 47)

They mostly tried to limit any impact or predetermination of the materials and any physical structures, so the environment should grow out of pure creativity and basic needs. But the social milieu was a vague and indefinable element in their experimental intervention. The building experiment in the *New Society* in Thy missed somehow the basic point, as everyone everywhere around them made DIY homes. And it could have made a lot more sense just to study their free initiatives. Why should anyone choose the limitations of joining Ussing and Hoff, they asked themselves?

The model didn't take shape, because it didn't channel the building activities actually going on. To join the project called for an awareness of the fact that this was a model situation, a study for something in outside society. Therefore, it was mostly architects who joined in. (Ussing & Hoff, 1970b, p. 638)

The photos also show how these architects excelled in folding cardboard and challenged construction with simple means as part of the architects' professional aesthetics. The conclusion in the article on this first experience is scarily honest, that they couldn't expect anything else.

It is obvious that the ordinary housing consumer will stand totally helpless in such a free situation: to shape your own dwelling, decide its size, its sequence and character. But this is exactly the symptom of the illness as it expresses itself in the working area of the architect. Not only are the possibilities not present, but the instincts are almost killed. (Ussing & Hoff, 1970b, p. 640)

If you read Victor Papanek during the same period, you find hardly any self-criticism or indications of changed understandings from his participatory design workshops — with students.

Design means coming to grips with our environment and doing so from a socially responsible viewpoint. [...] To deal with all this, design must concern itself with moral and social issues, and, in doing so, help students in their search for an appropriate value system within themselves. (Papanek, 1970b, up.)

Judging from his activities in Denmark, Papanek seemed to keep a moral distance from both the students and the actual users and thereby sparing him the negative experiences leading to any correction of his line of thinking. Constant's ideas and thought on *New Babylon* seems to be a closer comparison for Ussing and Hoff's ambitions. His critique of the erosion or occupation of our social spaces in the city by traffic, parking, commercial activities and financial speculation is compellingly close to the situation we are experiencing even more today. And his prophecy of technology taking over production so the future would develop into a free, leisure society, where only creativity would count, occurs again and again today with the same conviction. His drafts of this playful, nomadic life in the superstructure of *New Babylon*, where vast areas are social spaces, open for temporary constructions made by anyone, who want to join in, seem, however, outdated. "The character of the social space will be determined by, how the emancipated energy will be used. [...] Not utility, but play will decide the life form of mankind in the future" (Constant, 1969, p. 71). This utopia is too far from any development over the following half of century. Ussing and Hoff went far in testing it, and hopefully their honest self-critique can help contemporary and future attempts in social design to make more feasible and productive explorations into the emancipatory potential of interventions in physical environments and social milieus.

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Massimo Dolcini, *Grafica per la città*, poster, Comune di Modena, 1978 (courtesy of AIAP CDGP).

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