

The Environmental Witch-Hunt Statement by the French Group 1970

The French group, which has been invited to this conference, has decided not to bring a positive contribution.

The group believes that too many matters, and essential ones, have not been voiced here as regards the social and political status of Design, as regards the ideological functions and the mythology of environment.

In these circumstances, any participation could not but reinforce the ambiguity and the complicity of silence which hangs over this meeting. So we prefer to present you a text expressing our positions.

The burning question of Design and Environment has neither suddenly fallen from the heavens nor spontaneously risen from the collective consciousness: It has its own history. Professor Banham has clearly shown the moral and technical limits and the illusions of Design and Environment practice. He didn't approach the social and political definition of this practice. It is not by accident that all the Western governments have now launched (in France in particular for the last six months) this new crusade, and try to mobilize people's conscience by shouting apocalypse.

In France, the environment issue is a fall-out of May, 1968, more precisely a fall-out of the failure of the May revolution. Ideology, which the political power tries to divert onto rivers and national parks, could happen in the street. In the United States, it is not a coincidence that this new mystique, this new frontier has been developed during and parallel to the Vietnam war. There is in France and in the States a potential crisis situation. Both here and there the governments restructured their fundamental ideology in order to face this crisis and surmount it. We see that ultimately the real issue is not the survival of the human species but the survival of political power. In this sense, environment, design, fight against pollution, and so on, pick up the torch in the history of ideology from the great crusade of human relations which followed the great 1929 crisis. At that time, the capitalist system succeeded in reviving production and in restructuring itself by means of an immense injection of publicity, of services, of public relations into consumerism, enterprises, and social life.

Today, when new and larger contradictions affect the internal structures of the overdeveloped countries and force them, all together, on a world scale, into opposition with the underdeveloped countries, the system comes up with a worldwide ideology that could remake the holy union of mankind, beyond class discrimination, beyond wars, beyond neo-imperialistic conflicts. Once again, this holy union created

in the name of environment is nothing⁸⁷ but the holy union of the ruling classes of the rich nations.

In the mystique of human relations, it was a question of recycling, readapting, and reconciling both individuals and groups to the social context given as norm and as ideal. In the mystique of environment, it is a matter of recycling, readapting, and reintegrating the individual in the context of nature given as an ideal. Compared with the preceding ideology, this one is even more regressive, more simplistic, but for that reason even more efficient. Social relations with their conflicts and history are completely rejected in favor of nature, with a diversion of all energies to a boy scout idealism, with a naive euphoria in a hygienic nature.

The theory of environment pretends to be based on actual and evident problems. But pollution, nuisances, dysfunctions are technical problems related to a social type of production. Environment is quite another problem, crystallizing the conscience on a Utopian model, on a collective enemy and, moreover, giving a guilty feeling to the collective consciousness. (We have met the enemy and he is us.) The crusade of environment goes from technical problems and technical solutions to simple and pure social manipulation. War and natural catastrophes have always been used to unify a disintegrating society. Today, it is "la mise-en-scène" of a natural catastrophe or of a permanent apocalypse which plays the same role.

In the mystique of environment, this blackmail toward apocalypse and toward a mythic enemy who is in us and all around tends to create a false interdependence among individuals. Nothing better than a touch of ecology and catastrophe to unite the social classes, except perhaps a witch hunt (the mystique of antipollution being nothing but a variation of it).

Problems of design and environment only look like objective ones. In fact, they are ideological problems.

This crusade, which puts again, but on another level, the themes of Kennedy's New Frontier, as well as the fighting against poverty as the theme of the Great Society (in France, the New Society), constitutes a complete ideological structure, a social drug, a new "opium of the people." In one sense, it would be too easy to compare napalm bombing in Vietnam with the loving care with which people here protect flora and fauna—one could make a fabulous list of all the evident contradictions in which this new idealism is sinking. But there is here a misunderstanding, and the opposition between chlorophyll and napalm exists only in appearance. In fact, it is the same thing. In Vietnam, the fight is against communist pollution. Here the fight is against water pollution. To lock Indians and black people (in France, Algerians and Portuguese) in reservations and ghettos, that is also a fight against pollution. It is the same logic that organizes all these aspects, the ideological process consisting in disguising in humanistic values some practices (such as the fight against pollution) to oppose them formally to other practices (such as war in Vietnam), which are then considered only as a deplorable reality and an accident. We must

clearly see that there is a same policy, a same system of values fundamentally operating here, and that everywhere the established power has always fought against pollution, evidently against the pollution of the establishment itself. This enemy that each of us is invited to hunt and destroy is all that pollutes social order and production order.

It is not true that society is ill, that nature is ill. The therapeutic mythology which tries to convince us that, if things are going wrong, it is due to microbes, to virus, or to some biological dysfunctions, this therapeutic mythology hides the political fact, the historical fact that it is a question of social structures and social contradictions, not a question of illness or deficient metabolism, which could easily be cured.

All the designers, the architects, the sociologists who are acting like medicine men toward this ill society are accomplices in this interpretation of the question in terms of illness, which is another form of hoax.

In conclusion, we say that this new environmental and naturistic ideology is the most sophisticated and pseudoscientific form of a naturistic mythology, which has always consisted in transferring the ugly reality of social relations to an idealized model of marvelous nature, to an idealized relationship between man and nature.

Aspen is the Disneyland of environment and design. We are speaking here about universal therapy, about apocalypse in a magic ambiance. But the real problem is far beyond Aspen—it is the entire theory of design and environment itself, which constitutes a generalized Utopia, a Utopia produced by a capitalist system that assumes the appearance of a second *nature* in order to survive and perpetuate itself under the pretext of *nature*.