Ship to Shore

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Left column: First ss Flandre, from Le Corbusier, Vers une architecture, 1923; ss Flandre, 1951; ss Flandre, tugged into Manhattan, 1951

Right: Le Corbusier, Aménagement du Paquebot Île de France, 1936 © FLC / ADAGP
Aircraft Carrier City in Landscape is one of the twentieth century's great architectural drawings and possibly the most enigmatic project of its author, the Austrian architect Hans Hollein. The image itself was created in 1964 and collages the looming silhouette of an aircraft carrier onto a panoramic sequence of black-and-white photographs of gently undulating hills and a patchwork of bucolic cornfields in some undefined Mitteleuropa landscape. Mounted on plywood and formatted as a long, thin rectangle – more cinemascopie than any movie screen – it appears as if it were a still from some vaguely familiar film. It is also strangely timeless. Is this playful pop science-fiction or more terrifying eastern bloc propaganda? Is it supposed to be ironic? Might it even be real?

For Hollein, the title of the piece offers a clue to his understanding of its reality, for this collage is presented to us not so much as a nautical, nor even a pastoral model, but as something resolutely urban – an engineered, self-contained city, wherever it happens to land. More typologically, it can be seen as the successor to a strain of modernist thinking that imagined the boats of today as the perfect successor to a strain of modernist thinking that Le Corbusier, in whose manifestos architecture is frequently allegorised through cruise liners, that Flandre struck a mine in the Bay of Biscay, broke in half and went under.

The second, reborn ss Flandre was launched in 1951. Financed by the US Marshall Plan, it was the pride of the fleet of the Compagnie Générale Transatlantique, or French Line, and the largest vessel to be built in France after the end of the Second World War. The ship could accommodate 1,663 people. Less than half of these were passengers: closeted in luxury and serviced by an army of staff, their transit across the Atlantic presented the opportunity for 'six glorious days in an atmosphere of gaiety and liveliness', according to a company brochure. Indeed, the cabins were of the highest standard, both in first class and tourist class, and on-board facilities included a dining room, smoking room, library, cinema, private bar, lido, gymnasium and beauty salon. A separate dining room and playroom for children made for a calmer voyage, while games of shuffle board and deck tennis were laid on for those needing to build up their appetite for the French culinary splendidors served by its impressive kitchens. Being at sea was no barrier to more rural pursuits either, notably an on-deck version of clay pigeon shooting, while dog walking services were provided for those who had brought along their pooch. This, then, was truly a splendid ocean liner, one that – given its name and nautical lineage – might even be considered a paragon for contemporary architectural and urban thinking. Such an association, however, would have to wait, because at the very end of its maiden voyage the ss Flandre had mechanical problems and had to be tugged into port in Lower Manhattan 24 hours behind schedule. It then spent the next nine months marooned in New York while its generator was extensively overhauled. As a result, the giant ship soon mockingly acquired the nickname 'The Flounder'. Back in service in 1952, the liner eventually settled into the Le Havre–New York route, and no further embarrassments were reported. Hollein himself made no comment on his ocean-bound experiences or on the vessel itself. He was actually far more enthralled by the terrestrial city that greeted him on his arrival than by the ersatz city on offer during his cruise. 'One writes many programmes and itineraries of what to do and what to see', Hollein reported, 'but when I got my first glimpse of land upon my arrival, when I passed by the skyscrapers of Manhattan and looked through the canyons of the streets one after the other... I sensed that greater, bigger and much more exciting things were going to happen than any programme and itinerary could imagine'. He even went so far as to identify the core attraction: 'Thinking about what interested me most in America, I couldn't think of anything more interesting than America herself.'

This brief self-analysis was actually the culmination to a more extended series of texts, for throughout his stay Hollein was obliged to report back regularly to his sponsor, the Commonwealth Fund in New York. Hollein turned the writing of these reports into its own kind of project, travelling to all the various Vienas in the US (Vienna, Georgia; Vienna, Ohio; Vienna, Wisconsin, etc), from where he further mused on the cultural appeal of America and its émigré relationship to his native city. Perhaps one explanation for Hollein's mute response to the architecture of the ss Flandre was that on 7 August 1951, midway through his crossing, the US launched its first ever lunar rocket, Pioneer. With this, the parameters of architecture were fundamentally disrupted. An exciting, but also terrifying, era had begun. Old orders, old cultures and technologies, even old power structures, were being called into question. And just as governments were now apparently superseded by new technocratic affiliations like the National Aeronautics and Space Administration (NASA), founded that same summer, so other tokens of modernity, like the ocean liner, were instantly rendered passé. Nothing, it seems, could have better represented this redundancy than an architect rhapsodising about the ballroom of a luxury cruise liner when he could instead be dreaming about intergalactic space stations.

Hollein had clearly got the message. For not only did he have nothing to say about the ss Flandre, but over the ensuing two years of his American sojourn he increasingly reflected on new models of architectural enclosure, new environments and a new totalising architecture. Such thinking was even canonised in a manifesto of sorts, titled 'Plastic Space', which he submitted as part of his master's thesis at Berkeley in July 1960. Read today, this text seems to alternate between somewhat hallucinogenic passages of youthful philosophising (‘space, space in space, space in space in space, space – a determined activated region in indefinite three-dimensionality’) and other, more cognisant, mission statements (‘Total space embraces the whole universe/A continuous system of manmade spaces governs our world/...').
The rather affected literariness of these and other writings from the period seems to show Hollein attempting to find an appropriate tone, even if his less mannered, descriptive prose reveals him to be an accomplished writer. At the same time it appears as if he was also experimenting with different visual styles. For example, on his return voyage in the summer of 1960 he produced a strange little sketch over a souvenir postcard of the sister vessel to the Saturnia on which he was then travelling, borrowing the graphic style of appropriation and juxtaposition of the Übermalungen or 'Overpaintings' by his fellow countryman Arnulf Rainer. 'Just like in the collage of the aircraft carrier, here too very different worlds are colliding. The postcard shows the elegant ocean liner Italia sailing on the high seas. On top of this image Hollein then adds a thick plume of smoke puffing out of the ship's funnel and two flags, the red-and-white Austrian triband at the bow and the Stars and Stripes at the stern. From this we can infer that the ship is homeward bound, sailing full speed ahead. But other additions convert the luxurious passenger liner into a warship – there is now a large cannon on deck and the vessel is under attack from a fighter aircraft (although, disregarding other more obvious interpretations, it is unclear whether the stars on the wings of this airplane identify it as Soviet or belonging to the US Air Force). Further threats reveal themselves in the adjacent waves, as a spouting whale and smirking shark take chunks out of a passenger who has foolishly jumped overboard. Another drawing made the same year, soon after Hollein settled back in Vienna, adopts a similar style.

Here, a pencil sketch of a characteristically nautical modernist villa – designed by Hollein himself – is made instantly lurid by the addition of a funnel and smoke – architecture as a boat, once again, puffing away but going nowhere fast. Both drawings therefore abound with Hollein's signature cynicism and dark humour, but the childlike nature of their iconography somehow undermines what it was that he was trying to challenge.

Over the next two years, as Hollein reintegrated himself into his home city, he continued to develop both his written and graphic work through his parallel careers in architecture and art. A particular focus for this reintegration became the Galerie St Stephan (later Galerie nächst St Stephan), a somewhat curious art venue established in 1954 on the city's Grünangerasse, and run by the charismatic, but also provocative, Catholic priest Monsignor Otto Mauer. The gallery was initially founded as a place for presented work that each artist had developed individually. For Hollein, this meant a series of images that argued against the reducibility of architecture to a set of long-established typologies (housing, in particular), and for its greater responsiveness to new technologies and infrastructures, as well as to politics, intellectual thought and bodily experiences, including sexuality and even suffering. In this sense, the exhibition can be understood as the first public testing-bed for his later, famous proclamation, Alles ist Architektur, or 'Everything is Architecture'.

'Today, for the first time in the history of mankind', Hollein wrote in the exhibition catalogue, 'we build what we want, producing an architecture that is not determined by technology, but that one which makes use of technology – a pure, absolute architecture.' These ideas were then illustrated with a plethora of images of technological constructions, both ancient and modern – from Mayan and Mesoamerican temples to iron foundries, oil rigs and space rockets. And significantly, also among these totems of the modern world was a photograph of an aircraft carrier, the first time such a vessel had appeared in Hollein's work. This particular aircraft carrier – the nuclear-powered USS Enterprise – had been built in the years while the young architect was in America, and was launched in 1960, just as Hollein was making his way home.

Somehow, more than the other examples he presented, Hollein seemed to be especially drawn to this military vessel. We find it again in other sketches and visualisations from the same period, and in an extended descriptive text written by Hollein that formed part of an unused page layout for the Viennese architectural journal Bau, which Hollein edited from 1965, along with Oberhuber, Pichler, Gustav Peichl, Sokratis Dimitriou and Günther Feuerstein.

THE AMERICAN AIRCRAFT CARRIER ENTERPRISE

A city of our time, far in advance of the results of today's urban planning and architecture. 348m in length, covering approximately 18,000m², sitting 20m above water and with a 4,600-man crew. Cost: $500 million (equivalent to the cost of approximately 26,000 American single-family homes, equipped with every form of luxury). It has among other things 3,000 rooms, as many telephones, 500 radar antennas, sacred spaces for Catholic, Protestant and Jewish services, a hospital with approximately 100 beds and all medical facilities, its own waste disposal system, its own television studio, and with escalator connections between all decks. Five different film screenings are shown daily.
In constructing the Enterprise 3,000,000 drawings were necessary (this corresponds to a single drawing 1m high by 3,000km long). You can stay at sea for years.

The lower deck has only five windows, portholes that reference back to the old Enterprise and were installed here for sentimental reasons. Many members of the crew cross the ocean without actually ever seeing it. The Enterprise can be completely closed off from radioactive contamination.11

The USS Enterprise (which later morphed into the famous Star Trek spaceship) therefore provides the eponymous aircraft carrier in Aircraft Carrier City in Landscape and the hilltop part of this two-part collage. But what of the landscape itself? The rolling terrain featured in the quartet of photographs that forms the panorama of this image is actually located just outside St Margarethen in Burgenland – the easternmost and least populous state in Austria – and the last town before the border with Hungary. Although geographically peripheral, St Margarethen has played a central role in the development of the Austrian state because the stone for many of Vienna's buildings – including St Stephen's Cathedral and most of the structures that line the Ringstrasse – were quarried from this region.12

In 1959, during Hollein's US fellowship, the oldest of St Margarethen's quarries – the Römersteinbruch, dating from Roman times – had been established as the site for an annual art event in which sculptors worked over three summer months with local stonemasons and labourers. This Bildhauersymposium or 'Symposium of Sculptors', as it became known, was the brainchild of Karl Prantl, a native of this region who had studied painting at the Academy of Fine Arts in Vienna before turning his attention to sculpture, producing work almost exclusively in stone. A year earlier Prantl had managed to convince the Burgenland government to commission him to create an artwork at the crossing with Hungary. The resulting, oversized sculpture, simply titled Grenzstein ('Boundary Stone'), would act not just as a landmark of artistic resistance against the political and military division of this landscape, but as a symbol of permeability along an otherwise impenetrable Iron Curtain.13

Over the next five summers, these symposia quickly gained momentum, both artistically – with Prantl, soon aided by the psychologist Friedrich Czagan and the sculptor Heinrich Deutsch, pulling in an ever more varied cast of characters – and in terms of their political and international ambitions. There was even a plan to place stone sculptures produced during the symposia along other borders across Europe.14

Although this never happened, the idea of a wider dissemination remained central, with the hope that participants would return home and initiate their own collaborative events. And indeed, soon enough these Bildhauersymposia generated a number of worldwide successors, not least the 'symposium' held in the Platz der Republik in West Berlin in October 1963. Organised by five local artists, including the sculptor and graphic artist Erich Reischke, this was a protest action against the division of the city. In the end, it attracted many participants and onlookers, and was even assisted by the US military, who helped crane in a number of large boulder sculptures while the Russians watched in bewilderment and wonder from the other side of the Wall.15

In the summer of 1964 Hollein was in Burgenland, even if it is not entirely clear if this was prompted by a direct invitation from Prantl to take part in that year's St Margarethen Bildhauersymposium, or whether he was simply a passing observer. But what we do know is that by then he was becoming established on the Viennese art and architectural scene. The year before, alongside his successes at the Galerie St Stephan, he had initiated his 'Transformations' series of artworks, in which a photograph of an everyday object is scaled up and collaged into a barren landscape. The first of these featured an old railway boxcar, another favourite image from the series he had exhibited with Pichler in Architektur: Work in Progress, which was then 'transformed' into an incredibly charged proposal for a Monument to the Victims of the Holocaust. Here at last, it seems, Hollein had found his most appropriate medium – one which provided an effective channel for all of his irreverence and humour while also delivering something incredibly strong graphically. These images also, not unimportantly, allowed him to parody Le Corbusier's monumentalising of cars, planes and boats as a new architecture, by transforming equivalent technologies into their own kind of anti-monument.

And so in 1964, while Prantl's sculptors were in the quarry of St Margarethen, chipping away at the local stone, Hollein used his visit to Austria's border zone to continue his highly polemical series of collages. The base images for these composite drawings were generated by his own black-and-white photographs of the surrounding countryside – the summer cornfields, lanes and woodland copses of Burgenland.16 Onto four resulting prints of this conjoined landscape he then placed a cut-out of the USS Enterprise and mounted the whole ensemble onto a single sheet of plywood exactly 1m long. An iconic drawing had been made. But at the same time Hollein produced three other images of the same project (because Aircraft Carrier City in Landscape is actually composed of four separate drawings): a more zoomed-in perspective of the same USS Enterprise photograph mounted onto a different section of the hillside; an aerial perspective from higher on the plateau that shows another view of the aircraft carrier looking down onto its flight deck; and a more graphic piece that collage a technical axonometric cut-away section of the aircraft carrier into the line art of a more abstract landscape.17 Hollein must have felt a certain satisfaction with the resulting images, because he then used the same base photographs for two further collages – High-rise Building, Sparkplug and High-rise Building, Theodolite – which projected their own everyday objects as more vertical monuments in the same rolling landscape.

When Hollein first presented these works many colleagues and critics, then as now, typically focused their gaze on the hulking aircraft carrier. Among them was Hollein's collaborator at Bau, Günther Feuerstein, who has argued, more recently, that the aircraft carrier is the reincarnation of a baroque monastery – a self-sufficient, isolated, defensive, all-male living unit.18 The Catholicism of this analogy is further supported by Hollein's close affinity with the Galerie St Stephan, and its founder Monsignore Mauer, who would officiate at Hollein's wedding to his wife Helene Jennewein, and more generally by the fact that in the 1960s, when these works were produced, nearly 50 per cent of Austrians considered themselves Catholic, and the country's culture as a whole was steeped in its rituals and practices.

But Hollein himself seems to have played against this tendency to focus on the terrifying warship, because within the image there is actually another inversion. What initially seems like the most bucolic of landscapes is actually...
an illusion, for Hollein very deliberately photographed this section of countryside along the demilitarised zone that ran immediately parallel to the east-west border - a stretch of landscape pockmarked with hundreds of landmines. The meadows, in this sense, are not benign but malignant. And it is the aircraft carrier that is the victim, marooned on its hillside and robbed of its mobility. Indeed, as evidence of his enduring fascination with his homeland (Austria, a landlocked country, becomes his real ship, with no sea to sail away on) Hollein followed Aircraft Carrier City in Landscape with a series of site photographs around St Margaret then that dispensed with buildings or collaged objects altogether, declaring the forms of the land itself to be the only necessary architectural statement. He then speculated on this further in 1965 in the first issue of the relaunched Bau magazine:

"We also dig into the earth. Everything that does not have to be on the surface can disappear from there in order to preserve the precious free landscape for mankind. Thus we approach the time of the perfect environment (closed environments), above ground, underground, above water and underwater, as they are already anticipated by polar stations, artificial islands in the sea, aircraft carriers, NORAD command centres, etc - self-sufficient units which lead to the station, the city in space. (Here, in this perfect manmade environment, lies the great opportunity for architecture, to show what it can and should be doing - when no changing sky, no sun, no changing colours of the seasons throw their forgiving shadows over our errors.)"

Of course, the other perfect manmade environment, devoid of any sky, sun or shadow, where architecture shows what it should be doing, is the museum archive, and it is here, appropriately enough, that Aircraft Carrier City in Landscape ultimately resides. For in 1967, just three years after Hollein had first produced these collages, Arthur Drexler, then director of the architecture department at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, and almost certainly acting on the prompts of Philip Johnson, bought the full set of four drawings, together with a number of others from the 'Transformations' series. The ship therefore came full-circle, docking once again in Manhattan, but this time not flouridng, only flourishing, and in its very immovability and groundedness it remains a symbol not of some future, technocratic urbanity, but of the architecture we always knew existed.

1. The handbook given to the Commonwealth Fund Fellows in 1958, including Hans Hollein, explained the organisation: 'The Commonwealth Fund is an American Philanthropic foundation endowed by the late Mrs Stephen V Harkness and the late Mr and Mrs Edward S Harkness. It was founded 'to do something for the welfare of mankind'. In maintaining international fellowships in all fields of study within this broad programme of philanthropic interests, the directors of the fund are impelled by a belief in the value of international opportunities for education and travel, and by a conviction that mutual amenity and understanding between countries will thereby be promoted.' Handbook for Commonwealth Fellows, 1958. 'Division of International Fellowships, Handbook for Commonwealth Fellows, 2 March 1953 - 13 January 1965, folder 2014, box 85, series 134, Division of Publications (Sleepy Hollow, NY: Rockefeller Archive Centre - RAC).


5. Hans Hollein, 'Plastic Space', deposited at the University Library at Berkeley in July 1960 as a partial requirement for his master of architecture, College of Environmental Design, University of California, Berkeley. For the full manifesto see the Hans Hollein website, www.hollein.com/get/Schriften/Texte/Plastic-Space.


8. Ibid.


11. 'Loses Blatt mit der Seitennummerierung 138', from the private archive of Hans Hollein, Prinz-Eugen-Straße. Translation by the author. The technology and self-sufficiency of the USS Enterprise later made it the model for the spacecraft in the tv series Star Trek, which went on air in 1966 and borrowed the same name for its own fictitious starship.


13. Much later, on 19 August 1999, another important event happened at this same border crossing - The Pan European Picnic, during which the Hungarian minister of state and reformer Imre Pozsgay invited Austrian and Hungarian civilians to come and sit at a bonfire together and eat roast pork while contemplating the idea of a Europe without frontiers. As a symbolic gesture the border gate was opened for a two-hour period during this picnic. The event was for Austrians, but a large group of East German tourists holidaying on the other side of the border somehow also received invites. When the time came to open the border, many young men, women and families appeared, carrying backpacks filled with their own essential items. They walked in complete silence to the gate, pressing against it until it broke, and then flooded across. The Hungarian border guard in charge commanded his men not to shoot but to look the other way. Almost 1,000 East Germans escaped into Austria that day which acted as the spur, less than a month later, for Hungary to open all of its borders to Austria, which in turn set in motion the fall of the Iron Curtain. See Nicholas Brautlecht, _'Picknick für die Freiheit', Goethe-Institut Australien website._


16. I would like to thank Erich Pedevilla for pointing this out to me in a conversation from 2014.

17. Hans Hollein would also go on to produce a reprint edition of the most celebrated aircraft carrier image, smaller in size and distinguished by its more contrasted tones. One of these large prints can be found in the collection of the artist Claes Oldenburg, whom Hollein met through the 1957 'Macrostructure' exhibition at the Feigen Gallery in New York. In 1980, increasingly aware of the power of the image, he even made a version of it for the Italian homeware company Alessi, manufacturing a silver tray in the shape of the aircraft carrier flight deck, and coffee pots and milk jugs as its control towers.


Hans Hollein, Aircraft Carrier City in Landscape, perspective, 1964 © Hans Hollein 2016/
MOMA, New York/Scala, Florence
Hans Hollein, *High-rise Building*,
*Theodolite*, 1964 © Hans Hollein 2016/
MOMA, New York/Scala, Florence