

Campus-under-a-tent is different, but . . .



GIANT BUBBLE of yellow-and-whitestriped polyvinyl houses a new Antioch College campus in Maryland. It is intended to allow more flexibility, conserve energy, and save money. Students helped inflate the tent.

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By WOLF VON ECKARDT
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WASHINGTON—To enter Antioch's "pneumatic campus" at Columbia, Md.'s new town is like crawling into the belly of a stranded whale. And the thing, I am afraid, has as much of a future.

The giant bubble which the students of the Antioch College branch at Columbia have blown up for themselves—with the help of the U.S. Office of Education, the Ford Foundation's Educational Facilities Laboratory, several air structure engineers, and the Goodyear Tire and Rubber Co.—is, to be sure, an impressive structure.

It covers 180 feet square of a pleasant, rolling meadow with a white-and-yellow striped polyvinyl skin that bulges up to 25 feet because two small electric fans keep the air pressure a little higher inside than out. On the outside the structure looks like an enormous air pillow.

The technical problem with air structures is not to hold them up, but to keep them down and to prevent the imperceptibly pressurized air from escaping. The Antioch bubble is kept down by an all-around earth beam, reinforced by logs, as well as four anchor cables inside. To save the precious pressurized air, people must enter through a narrow, somewhat awkward entrance chamber—the jaw of the whale.

The skin is translucent, so the

Analysis

inside of the belly is light enough for grass to grow. But the light and the atmosphere inside the plastic enclosure are eerie and a bit oppressive. The space is vaguely landscaped with brick walks and furnished, haphazardly as yet, with scaffolding and sundry small structures like ski huts and geodesic mini-domes in search of a purpose.

It is all fearfully vague. What we have here is just an enclosure that does not know what to enclose. And that should be a lesson to our eager Futopian technocrats like Bucky Fuller, Paolo Soleri, the Archigram group and all the rest.

The medium may be the message these days, but an enclosure, a structural shell, is not architecture. A shell, dome, bubble, archology or other structure, no matter how "mega," does not a city or even a campus make. No matter how ingenious and impressive the technical solution, it does not solve any human problems.

An Antioch student, con-

templating his rubber "campus," put it very well, when he said the other day: "We don't meet people's needs here. We ask people to adapt to the structure, which is just the opposite of what it was supposed to be."

Yet, a good many idealistic people, particularly young architects, continue to be intrigued with utopian visions of a future city all under one megastructure roof. It is a reaction to the urban disintegration we see today which was largely ordained by "modern" architects, led by LeCorbusier, 40 years ago.

Segmented living

Meeting in Athens in 1933, this avant-garde group, known as CIAM or Congress International D'Architecture Moderne, decided that the industrial revolution and its specialization and diversification of social life also called for a segregation of the various human activities—working, living, entertainment, education and so forth. CIAM's Athens charter on city planning led to building commercial centers here and cultural centers there, housing young families in one place and their elderly parents in another.

It has become clear that, to avoid the current, galloping disintegration of our urban environment and our society, we have to reintegrate our habitat and reunite the different activities and social groups. But the Futopians go to the other extreme in a very simplistic way. Bucky Fuller would put a whole city under one geodesic dome. Soleri would stack a whole city into one mile-high, Babylonian super-structure out in the desert. The British Archigram group has designed fantastic "urban containers" that somehow are to bring us together again.

Architecture books and classrooms are full of these notions, so you can't blame Antioch for wanting "to get with it." If the city of the future is to be all under one catching tent, it certainly seemed logical to build one for an entire campus. The catch-all was to foster a new, more flexible education, conserve energy and the environment and save money to boot.

But it doesn't. The big tent just covers continued confusion on these matters. If you know how you want to educate young people, you can, perhaps, do it in a big container. But the container itself does not provide an educational content. It is that medium-message thing. If you don't have a message, it might make you feel better to get high on the medium. But Antioch, it seems, did not stay high on its bubble very long. Now that it is built, the college does not seem to know just what to do with it.

Nor does the megastructure save energy in itself. It still must be lit at night and it certainly must be air-conditioned during the day, which is not necessary in a conventional structure designed to catch the breeze. One irony of the Antioch bubble was that it got so hot during the recent international conference on air structures, called to celebrate its completion, that the meetings had to be held in a nearby motel.

Deceiving Saving

It seems doubtful, too, that the megastructure saves money in the end. By the time it is air-conditioned and heated, subdivided and arranged for functional activities, as well as

suitably furnished, it will probably cost just as much as an equivalent conventional cluster of structures. It is, at any rate, not fair for the bubble enthusiasts to claim that their construction cost was only \$5.50 a square foot compared to the \$20 to \$40 a square foot most conventional college building cost. The \$5.50 pays only for the container, which is no more than the body of an automobile without the motor, wheels, seats, springs and all the other things to make it run and transport people.

Enter the next fallacious rationalization of the urban and campus bubble builders: we don't want to freeze urban life or college education into any rigid pattern they say. In keeping with British architect Ron Herron and the Archigram group's dream of a "walking city," the Antioch structure is conceived as "a nomadic campus." It was designed so it can easily be deflated and pumped up "elsewhere in Columbia or across the country, if the need arose."

What need? Unlimited flexibility and mobility, the avant-garde cry for "disposable architecture," are not, I would hold, the response to a need, but the expression of an anxiety. The human need is for order, permanence and tranquility in an age of cataclysmic change that seems to have gone out of control.

This is not to say that the Office of Education, the Educational Facilities Laboratory, and the Antioch students wasted their time and their money. The Antioch bubble has unquestionably advanced the art of building air structures. And there is a place for unstructured structures if they are designed for purposes that structure themselves.

One such purpose is temporary exhibits. The U.S. pavilions at the 1970 World's Fair in Osaka, an air structure, and at the 1967 Expo at Montreal, a geodesic dome, were exciting successes. They frankly had a temporary function.

Another purpose that structures itself is sports and games. Milligan College in Johnson City, Tenn. began last year to build the largest permanent air structure in the country to shelter a field house with a pool and two basketball courts. Similar field houses and student centers are in various stages of planning and construction at La Verne College in California, the University of Santa Clara in California, the University of Minnesota, South Dakota State University, Florida Junior College, and the Charles Wright Academy in Tacoma, Wash. They all meet specific, useful purposes.

The best practical purpose of the Antioch bubble, however, may well be to help deflate the all-purpose and no-purpose megastructure idea. It is easy to get a structural high. But it seems awfully hard to get campus and city planning down to earth where the people are.

