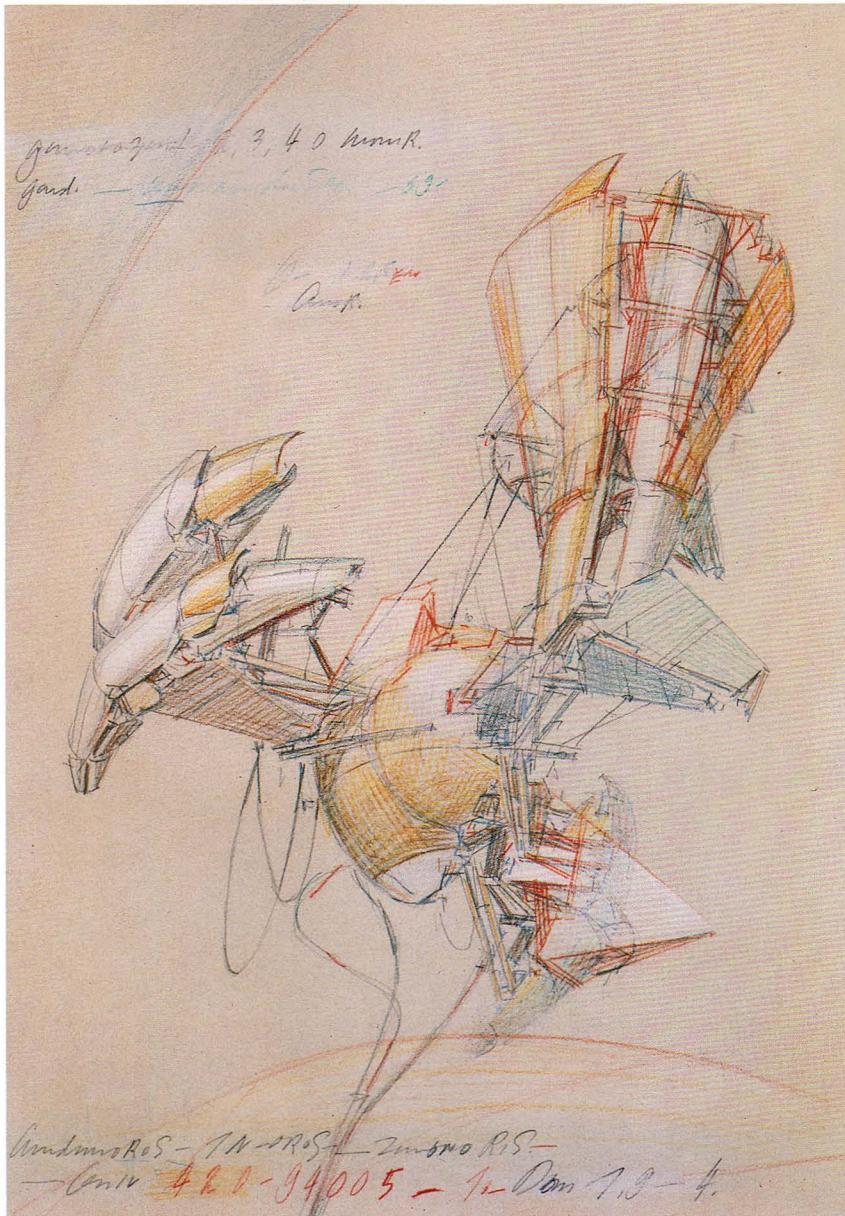


Present Tense

Lebbeus Woods



Aerial Paris: Study of interacting aeroliving-laboratories.

'In the Beginning was the Act,' I write.
Faust I, III, 60
J.W. von Goethe

Memory conceived as a recollection of things past serves the idea of tradition as the basis of human culture. Yet as a culture depends less on tradition and more on its own inner dynamics for its evolution, the concept of memory undergoes a transformation. In the present post-modern era, memory serves tradition less than *nostalgia* for tradition, a condition imposed by the *fin-de-siecle* malaise afflicting any culture that defines itself as "post," or nothing more than the aftermath of a previous and implicitly more vital cultural epoch. Nostalgia for tradition is a melancholy state of deeply felt impotence, a decline of spirit that attempts to mask its lack of confidence with an almost frenetic enthusiasm for traditions of any kind, hence the post-modern "plurality." At its roots this form of memory is a longing for a spiritual home, a historical legitimacy that is past now and forever out of reach. At the *fin-de-siecle* the felt loss of something vital, never to be regained, moves darkly beneath every aspect of cultural life.

Nietzsche wrote of this condition in a long dirge for modern culture's "loss of native myth." He, too, lived and wrote at a *fin-de-siecle*. Yet his own nostalgia for a lost tradition — the culturally unifying myth — proved to be regressive and pernicious. Lacking myth, one cannot create it from the memories offered up as history, even less from deep personal longing, informed

though it may be, on occasion, by genius. Similarly, lacking tradition, one cannot create it or usurp that of others. Instead one may look only at the causes of its loss or lack — the inner dynamics of culture — to find the energies that can drive culture's further evolution, past the pernicious and regressive, and into a new period of vital and affirmative cultural life.

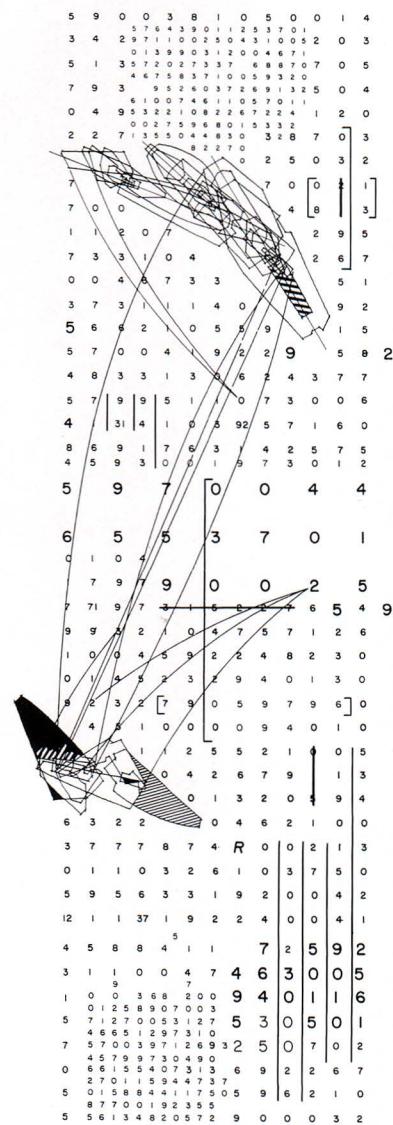
In the present culture, driven more and more by an inner dynamic of change divorced from cultural traditions, a process of its self-examination begins with the conception of a *culture beyond tradition*, and a conception of *memory independent of the past*. These phrases are inherently self-contradictory so long as one remains lodged between the meanings of the terms as traditionally conceived. But if one can begin with the premise that a culture whose inner dynamics is of such an order that tradition plays an ever-diminishing role in cultural life, leading on one hand to alienation and disassociative longing for tradition that can never compensate for its lack, and on the other to a more healthy and affirmative self-examination, then the first outlines of an attraditional human culture begin to emerge. These outlines circumscribe, in a highly dynamic way, a territory of space and time which can be called the *present*. It is in this present that all the truly vital elements of cultural life exist: the inner dynamics, the will to examine them, and the continual process of examination itself. In such a culture these vital elements would not merely replace the role tradition formerly played, but would

become as central to cultural life as tradition formerly was. In the same way, the present would replace the past as the central source of cultural energy for growth and evolution. The role of memory would likewise be radically transformed, informing the present not with recollections of the past, but with those of the present itself.

To understand how such a phenomena could be, we must first acknowledge that the precise nature and workings of memory elude even the most advanced contemporary science. More is known of the nature of the most distant galaxies, or of the most minute constituents of the atomic nucleus than of the phenomenon we call memory. Perhaps it is unsurprising that in a cultural epoch such as the present one, in which tradition plays a diminishing role, the conception of memory is already being freed from that of the past. Where once memory was considered to be a process of storing data created in the past within the cells or neural networks of the brain, this conception is being discarded in favor of other processes within the brain, as yet unknown or little-defined. These processes do not revive dormant memories from a neural storehouse, but in some way instantaneously construct a mental image or idea of the past from active neural impulses which were not themselves existent in the past, but are electromagnetically coded to simulate past events. Thus the faultiness of memory, and its deceptiveness, as well as its sometimes remarkable accuracy (verifiable only by the memories of others, which are sometimes faulty and deceptive) is explained: memories are, like dreams, simulations, not to be trusted *prima facie*, and like tradition itself, phenomena to be interpreted in the present light of the processes that create them.

Of course, the world described by atomic and nuclear physics — the world of the very small and very fast — the world, also, of neural activity, has long since been deprived of any form of determinism and

suffused with uncertainty arising from a fundamental indeterminacy of present conditions. Atomic and nuclear activity, too, require a type of probabilistic interpretation analogous, at least, to the need for interpretation of both tradition and memory. Contemporary science, hardly hampered by the post-modern malaise of nostalgia for tradition, is thus clearly indicating the way to a new period of vital and affirmative cultural life, one based on an existential phenomenology, firmly rooted in the present.

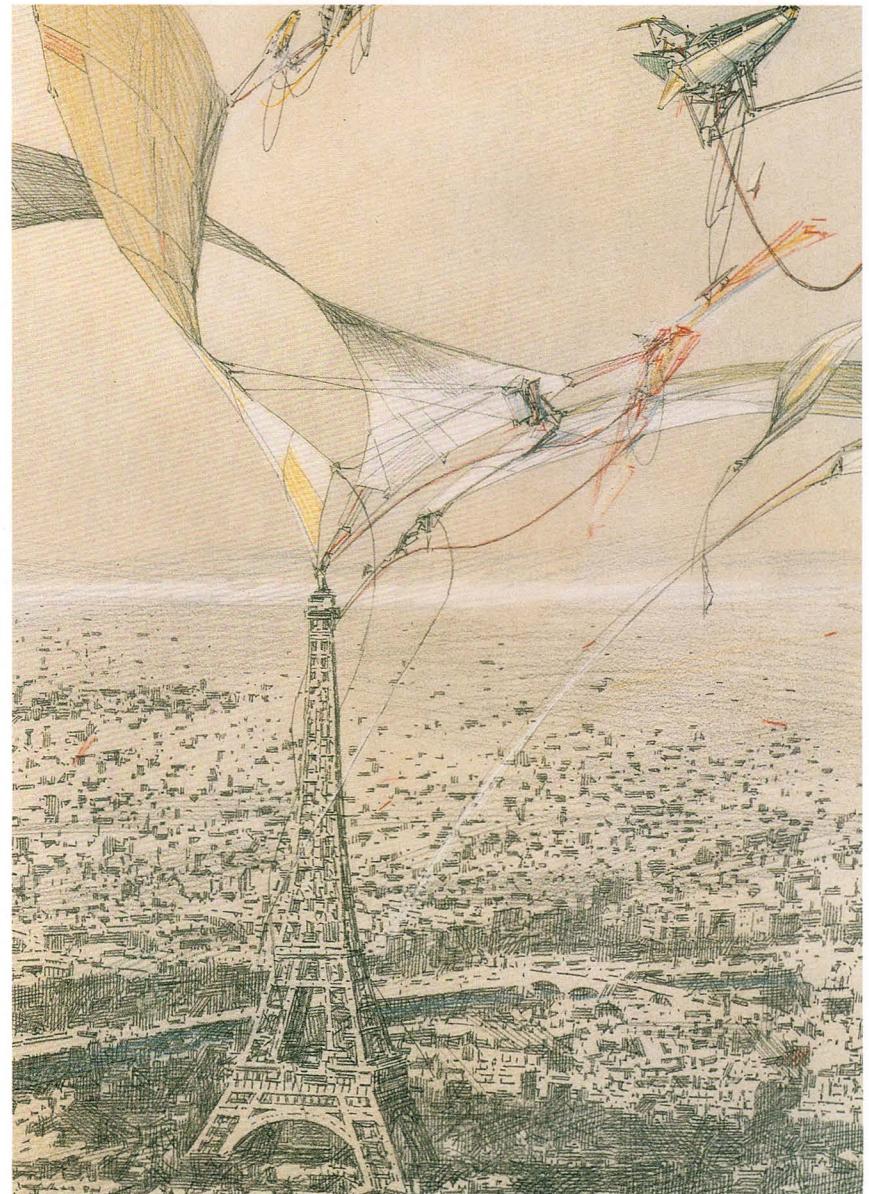


Aerial Paris: Heterarchy.

But science can only indicate the way, providing basic understandings and ideas. A new culture of the present begins with the thoughts and actions of the individuals comprising it and becomes tangible only when a physical fabric of interactions between individuals is established. Today it is, aesthetically and philosophically, appealing to some to speculate that this fabric will itself be of the same electromagnetic material as thought itself and will take the form of an electronic communications network. And surely it is now and everyday becoming more so. But so long as they are incarnate,

humans cannot live by communication alone, any more than only by thought; they require a more tangible, a more physically present apparatus of interaction: a territory, a communal fabric, an architecture.

The role of architecture in establishing a network of communications comprising past cultural life is well known. Memory theaters, as instruments of recollection of the past and therefore of the constant presence of the past in contemporary life, are but the most celebrated today of an entire fabric of architectural monuments,



Aerial Paris: Magnetic vortex at the Eiffel Tower (aeroliving-labs. and nets).

building types, styles, and symbolic forms once serving the same purpose. But today all of these can only be viewed nostalgically, in a post-modern way, in a collage of longings for a traditional culture that no longer exists.

A culture of the present requires an architecture conceptually transcending those forever invoking a *status quo*, an architecture transcending therefore all static forms such as monuments, building types, styles, and every type of dogmatic categorization, and most of all of symbolism. What is required by a culture of

the present is an architecture that can be filled and emptied of meanings in the continuum of experience, that can then be filled and emptied of uses, of functions, of purposes, that can therefore be constructed of the *materium* of experience, the subtle complex of physical properties that are themselves the source of experience in the present *and* its ongoing evolution. An architecture of a culture of the present is an architecture of physicality and metricality, measurable, quantifiable, and precise, as complex, particular, and individual as the complex and ever-changing physical conditions of the

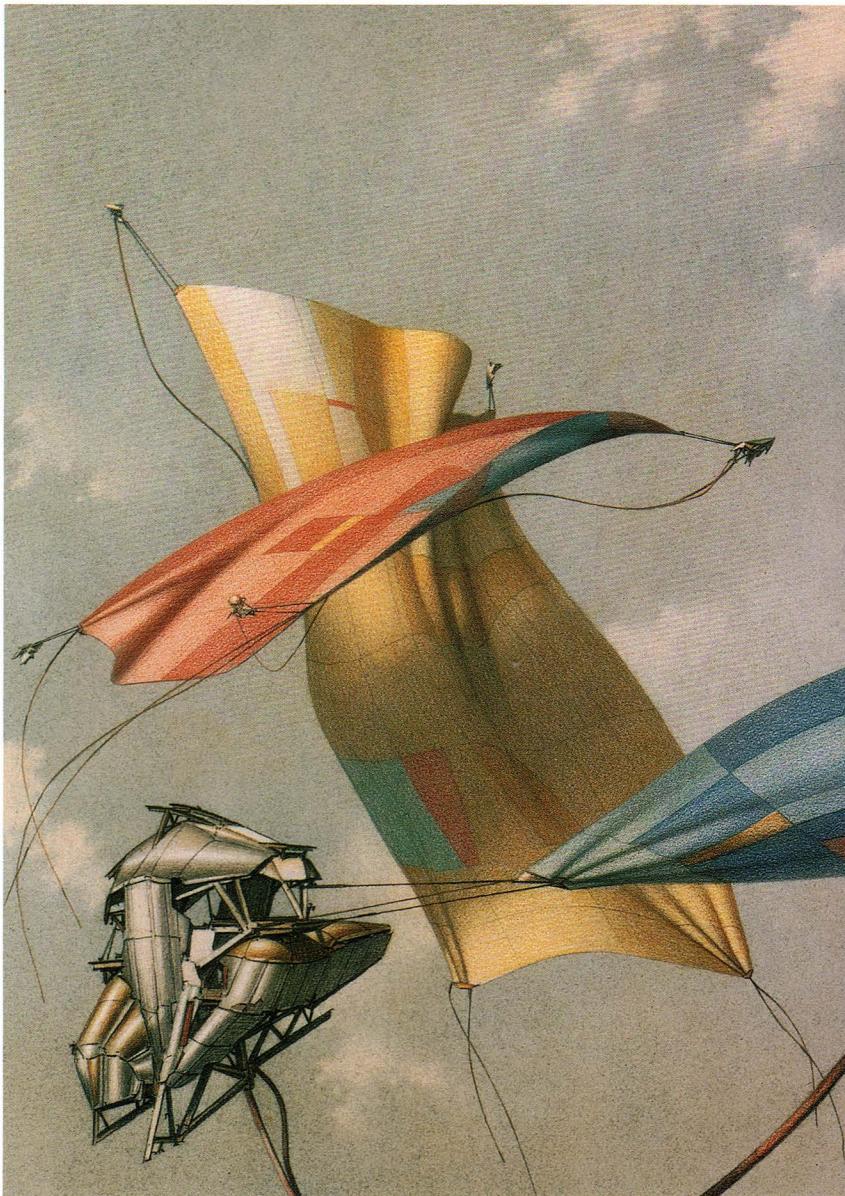
present moment. It is also a dynamic architecture — not to say an architecture of dynamism, merely symbolizing motion and change — actually and physically dynamic, measurably, perceptively moving or being moved.

Such a description cannot be limited to its constructional or tectonic aspects alone. Architecture exists as a fabric for interactions between individuals and physical conditions of their existence, arising from the inner, cognitive dynamics of existence and culture. The architecture of a culture of the present is

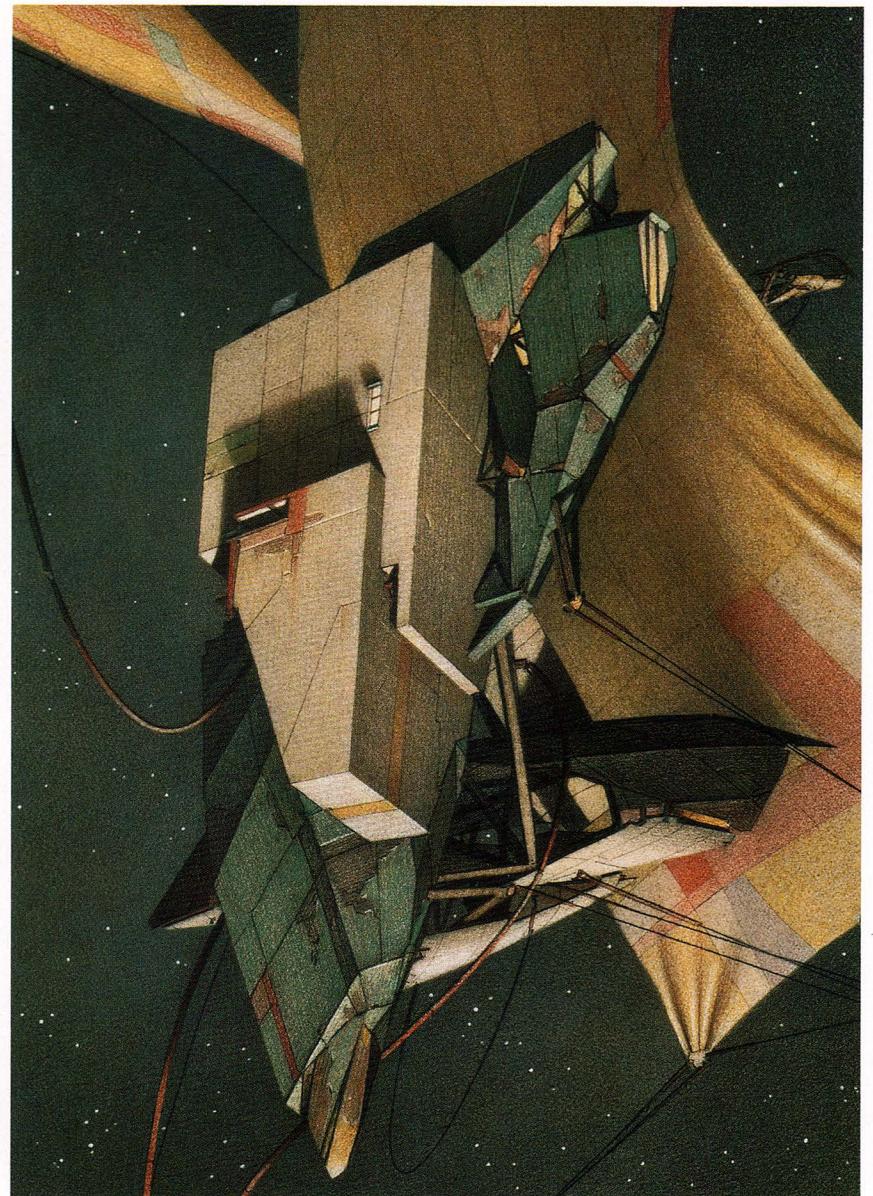
inevitably an *instrument* for penetration of the present and its changing physical conditions, thus for apprehension of the vital elements of cultural life and its dynamic processes of becoming.

Aerial Paris

A project for inhabitation of the skies above Paris began in the earth underneath Berlin. There, in an underground city, a new culture of the earth and its climate of physical forces was created. When the Projection Towers broke the surface of the old, divided city, they released into the air



Aerial Paris: Aeroliving-laboratory and nets.



Aerial Paris: Aeroliving-laboratory and cosmic ray absorbent nets.

generative elements of the new culture. Now, a number of these have appeared over Paris, as *geomagnetic* structures, held aloft within the powerful webbing of electromagnetic fields ambient there.

Sky is a domain of isolation. Even very large structures become insignificant in its great distances, unsupported by elements of a familiar scale. Once considered the dwelling-place of omnipotent beings, today it is only the realm of travellers, who cross the skies in uneasy haste and would not think of living there. But tomorrow, the skies will be settled, even as the earth

has been settled for human dwelling and community. The first settlers are the men and women of the *aeroliving-laboratories* and of the Aerial Circus they comprise, an outpost of the new culture of experimentation invented in the city beneath Berlin.

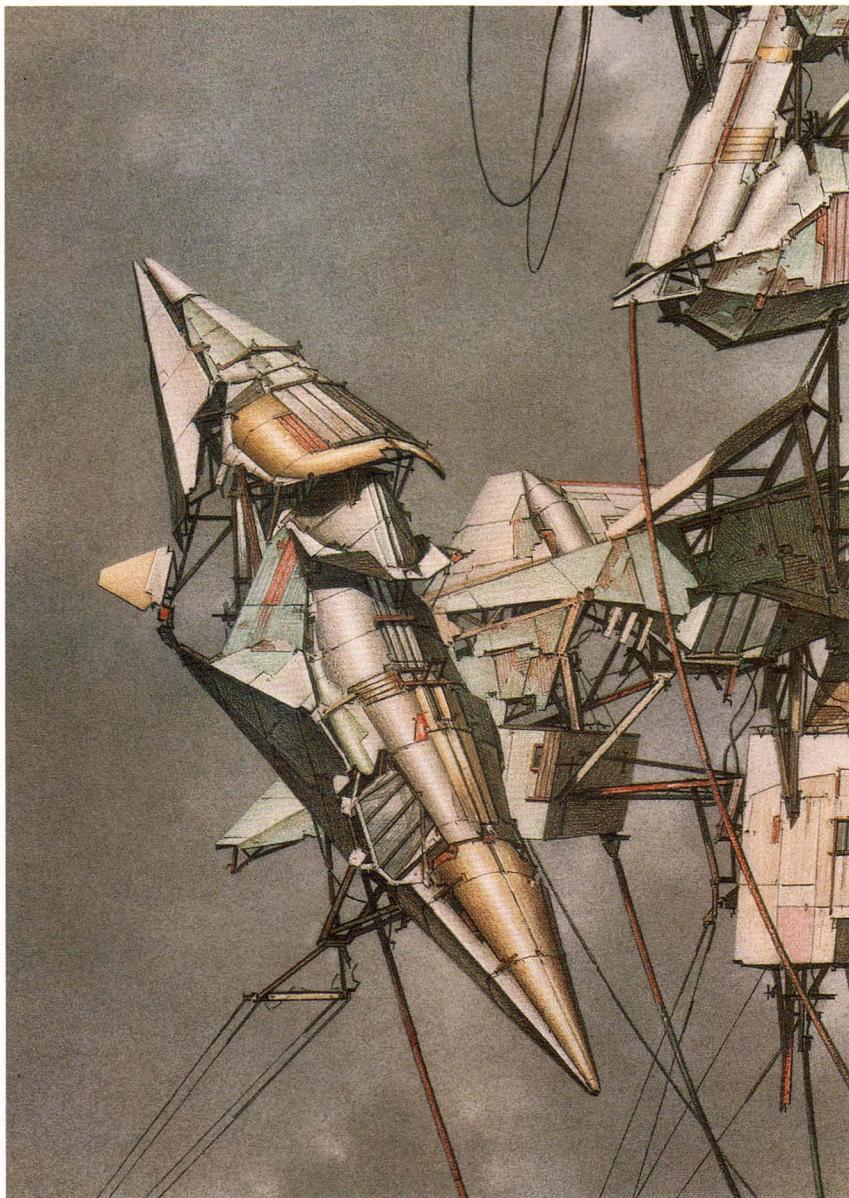
Their structures are small, not meant for swift flight, but for stability in the magnetic fields maintaining them aloft. And they are individual, each isolated from the next, as their inhabitants are individual and alone in their relative isolation, absorbed in experiences of the skies. Even when they are grouped in a tem-

porary enclave, the aeroliving-labs are not a community in the old, parochial sense, but a community in the new and modern and global sense: a network, a heterarchy of autonomous structures and individuals.

Only when they join in a common task do individuals, structures, and sky become one. The vast, gossamer nets they tow across the sky are gamma-ray absorbent, screening the human population in the city below from excessive cosmic radiation resulting from depletion of the "ozone layer" in the upper atmosphere.

These new landscapes of the skies are the ever-changing fields of uniquely aerial experience, the resilient landing fields of sky-diving maintenance workers, whose task of repairing the nets becomes a passing game of life, death, and the extremely precise dimensions of time and space between.

From below, in the ancient and modern city of Paris, the interlopers, their aerial structures, and nets are seen as only another exhibition — an entertainment, a distraction, gypsy objects of irritation, invasion, or wonder.



Aerial Paris: Aeroliving-laboratories.



Aerial Paris: Aeroliving laboratory at Pavillon de L'Arsenal, Paris 1989 (constructed by Christopher Otterbine)