

Memory of a Post-Apocalyptic Future:  
Whitening Skeletons and Frozen Time in Robert Altman's *Quintet*  
and Expo 67's Man the Explorer Pavilion



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In the winter of 1978, American film director, Robert Altman brought a cast and crew to the old Expo 67 site in Montreal, Canada, to film the post-apocalyptic science-fiction film *Quintet*. This film, which brings together an all-star cast of Paul Newman, Fernando Rey, Bibi Anderson and others, stages three days in the life of a society that is awaiting its extinction as the effects of the final ice age take their toll. The citizens of this dying society spend their remaining time playing an invented board game called “Quintet” in and around a dilapidated, rusted, frozen Man the Explorer pavilion. The objective of this game is to kill the opponents and be the last competitor standing. This game is more than just a ritual for the society. It is a sort of religion, and as the game’s adjudicator, Grigor says, “All the elements of life are contained in it.”<sup>1</sup> As the narrative unfolds, the game of *Quintet* is extended into reality and literally plays out human extinction. Characters are sequentially killed off, all with an air of morbid indifference. In *Quintet*, this virtual end-game is both a metaphor for life itself and a physical structure for the society’s extermination. It is a film about a bleak and hopeless future, a future where death is inevitable.

According to Altman, the film is set “probably in the future, or else in the present in a parallel world. It’s as if there were a mirror planet to ours – one in which life developed in a way roughly similar to ours. It is of no known culture.”<sup>2</sup> In this paper, I propose that if one looks specifically at the architecture represented in *Quintet*, it becomes clear that the film is wrapped up in a much more concrete and culturally specific history than Altman’s statement suggests. In opposition to the notion that a director *uses* a location as a benign stage-set or background for a

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<sup>1</sup> “A Part of the Game,” *Quintet*, dir. Robert Altman (1979; Beverly Hills, CA: Twentieth Century Fox Home Entertainment, 2006).

<sup>2</sup> Charles Mechner, “Robert Altman,” *Robert Altman: Interviews*, ed. David Sterritt (Jackson, MS: UP of Mississippi, 2000) 84.

narrative to unfold, I will turn my attention to the material history of Altman's film set in order to reveal the ways in which the Man the Explorer pavilion acts as an active agent in the film's production. Often described as Altman's "worst film," *Quintet* was immediately cast aside by both critics and the public, and there has since been very little critical engagement with the film.<sup>3</sup> While avoiding the judgment calls and criticisms made in *Quintet's* earliest reviews, this essay will critically re-invest in the film, not as a work of art, but as an important archival document of the neglected Man the Explorer pavilion.<sup>4</sup>

My paper will look at Reyner Banham's 1976 history of the megastructure and its resonance with the degeneration of the Man the Explorer pavilion in the period between 1967 and the January 1978 filming of *Quintet*. I will clarify the ideological underpinnings of the "Futurist-revival" megastructure that Banham has identified by reading Elizabeth Grosz's concept of utopian architecture into the specific case of the Man the Explorer pavilion. I will then revisit *Quintet* and propose that the film acts as an interpretation of the site in its ruined state. I will consider the way in which the pavilion inscribes a material history and dystopian charge on the film, and the way in which the film, in exchange, re-activates the site's historical narrative. This essay traces parallels between *Quintet* and the Man the Explorer site. Woven together, these parallel histories ground *Quintet* in temporal reality and uncover the importance

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<sup>3</sup> For a typical early review of *Quintet*, see Vincent Canby, "Altman – A Daring Filmmaker Falters," *New York Times*, 18 Feb. 1979, D1.

<sup>4</sup> I mean "neglected" in multiple ways: neglected physically and financially – it was not kept up; neglected in academic writing – there has been little substantial critical research about the period immediately following Expo 67; neglected in terms of photographic documentation – I have come across very little photographic documentation of the Man the Explorer pavilion in the period in question. However, I should note that *Quintet* was not the only film to be shot at the Man the Explorer pavilion during this period. A 1979 episode of the television series *Battlestar Galactica* called "Greetings from Earth" surveys the Man the Explorer pavilion and other buildings on St. Helen's Island and Notre-Dame Island in great detail.

of the film as an archival document that preserves what Andreas Huyssen terms a “virtual memory” of the Man the Explorer site in its ruined state.

### **Man and his World**

Before delving into the world of *Quintet*, I would like contextualize the Man the Explorer pavilion by sketching out some of the utopian impulses behind Expo 67. In 1963, Montreal began preparations for Expo 67. Under the primary direction of chief architect Edouard Fiset, the main Expo site was built on two purpose-specific islands that were in close proximity to the city center (Fig. 1).<sup>5</sup> Susan Schuppli recalls that “25 million tons of excavation fill from the newly constructed Montreal subway system” were used to enlarge the west side of St. Helen’s Island and create Notre-Dame Island from scratch.<sup>6</sup> For Schuppli, the decision to isolate Expo 67 on artificial islands apart from the Montreal city-centre was profoundly ideological. Reflecting on the political upheaval in 1967 Quebec, Schuppli writes, “In retrospect, Expo 67 appears to be locked in a holding pattern of benign diversion, seemingly oblivious to the changing social, economic, and political realities hovering around its perimeters.”<sup>7</sup> Led by Norman Hay, the

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<sup>5</sup> André Lortie, *The 60s: Montreal Thinks Big* (Montreal; Vancouver/Toronto: Canadian Centre for Architecture; Douglas & McIntyre, 2004) 142.

<sup>6</sup> Susan Schuppli, “Expo 67: Take Two,” *Blackflash* 22.2 (2004): 6.

<sup>7</sup> *Ibid.*, 11. Schuppli reflects on the rising tensions in Quebec separatism, detailing the events which took place after Charles De Gaulle made his famous “*Vive le Québec Libre*” speech.

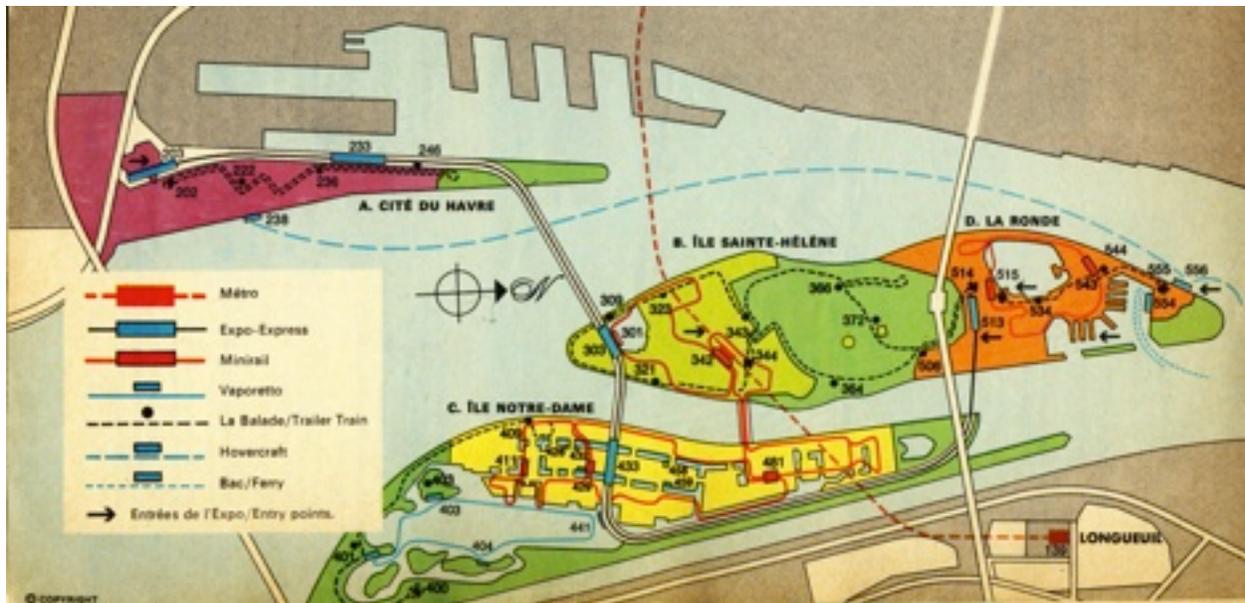


Fig. 1 Map of Expo 67, Montreal. From *Expo 67 Official Guide*.

design division created a “total environment” which unified “all graphics, signage, landscaping, lighting, and seating.”<sup>8</sup> Created to evoke a simulated image of the future, the islands were physically distanced from the looming tensions surrounding Canadian nationalism and Quebec separatism. In classic utopian fashion, the Expo site was conceived as a self-contained “futuristic” environment that was distinctly cut off from the impact of temporal reality.<sup>9</sup>

On another note, this heroically man-made site no doubt contributed to the coherence and consistency of the newly coined humanist theme *Man and his World*. Inspired by the book *Terre des Hommes* (1939) by French writer Antoine de Saint-Exupéry, *Man and his World* proclaimed the triumphant power of mankind, faith in progress, and man’s ultimate embrace of

<sup>8</sup> Schuppli 8.

<sup>9</sup> In “The Time of Architecture,” Elizabeth Grosz describes the utopic as “always conceived as a space, usually an enclosed and commonly isolated space – the walled city, the isolated island, ... [a] self-regulating space, autonomous from, though it may function alongside of and in exchange with, other states and regions.” Elizabeth Grosz, “The Time of Architecture,” in Amy Bingaman, Lise Sanders, and Rebecca Zorach, eds., *Embodied Utopias: Gender Social Change, and the Modern Metropolis* (London and New York: Routledge, 2002) 268.

modernization. The exhibition committee, consisting of a variety of Montreal intellectuals, decided upon the sub-themes “Man the Explorer,” “Man the Creator,” “Man the Producer,” and “Man in the Community” to support and represent this main theme at Expo.<sup>10</sup> Each sub-theme was given its own pavilion, and these pavilions were located on the two islands. Through its rhetoric about the power of mankind, Expo 67 was marketed as a sort of testing ground for the future, with the highest technology, the most innovative design, and the most cutting edge architectural trends. It was hip, stylish, new, and immensely successful, drawing more than 50 million visitors from around the world in the summer of 1967.<sup>11</sup>

After the exhibition closed, Mayor Jean Drapeau defied the International Exhibitions Bureau by instituting a city-funded permanent exhibition called *Man and his World*, beginning in the spring of 1968.<sup>12</sup> While some pavilions were immediately removed from the site, many, including the theme pavilions, remained open for the permanent display. Drapeau’s ambitious attempt to prolong the legacy of Expo 67 was almost immediately deemed a failed experiment by the Montreal public. It was plagued by deficit; many of the pavilions were not designed to last the winter months and quickly deteriorated; the once futuristic architecture soon became outdated, and with this, attendance and enthusiasm dwindled. As early as January 1969, the public’s disfavor with the permanent exhibition began to surface in local and national newspapers. As one 1969 editorial states:

The dream of continuing Expo 67 as an annual *Man and his World* fair was always fanciful and great and gallant—and risky, even for a rich city, which

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<sup>10</sup> Lortie, *Montreal Thinks Big*, 142-43. Intellectuals such as “the actor Jean-Louis Roux, the neurosurgeon Wilder Penfield, the poet and law professor F.R. Scott, and the architect Ray Affleck” sat on this committee.

<sup>11</sup> Schuppli 7.

<sup>12</sup> Reyner Banham, *Megastructure: Urban Futures of the Recent Past* (New York, Hagerstown, San Francisco, London: Harper & Row, 1976) 117.

Montreal never was ... Some of the buildings were not meant to endure, others were. Its 1968 deficit of \$5.2-million allied to Montreal's current budget deficit of \$27-million and its Expo 67 deficit of \$29-million, make it apparent that *Man and his World* cannot continue as a fair, supported only by Montreal.<sup>13</sup>

Despite the public's disapproval, the *Man and his World* permanent exhibition remained on St. Helen's Island and Notre-Dame Island in an increasingly modest scale until 1981. It was not until July of 1986 that the proposal to demolish the remaining ruins of Expo 67 in order to make way for a public park was officially considered.<sup>14</sup> This plan for renewal was carried out between 1986 and 1992, when the west side of St. Helen's Island was re-landscaped. Now beautifully manicured, and renamed Park Jean Drapeau, most traces of Expo 67 have disappeared. Aside from R. Buckminster Fuller's Geodesic dome (now the Biosphere), Place des Nations, the Quebec and French Pavilions (now the Montreal Casino), several of the smaller pavilions, and a few remaining public sculptures, there is not much left of Expo.

### **A Whitening Skeleton**

Once located on the west side of St. Helen's Island, the Man the Explorer pavilion has vanished without a trace. The Man the Explorer pavilion was designed in 1965 and built between 1965-1967 under the direction of prolific Montreal architecture firm Affleck, Desbarats, Lebensold and Sise.<sup>15</sup> Spearheaded by Guy Desbarats, the Man the Explorer pavilion consisted

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<sup>13</sup> James L. Cooper, "A Man and his World," *Globe and Mail* (Toronto) 31 Jan. 1969, 6.

<sup>14</sup> These plans were introduced in the news media in late July, 1986, and were covered in such articles as: Nancy Wood, "Expo Pavilions to be Razed for Park," *The Gazette* (Montreal), July 30, 1986; *The Gazette* (Montreal), "Look Before Leaping," July 31, 1986. From the Canadian Centre for Architecture, *Expo 67* (Vertical File).

<sup>15</sup> Affleck, Desbarats, Lebensold and Sise were also responsible for designing the Man the Producer pavilion on Notre-Dame Island.

of three interconnected units, each with a modified truncated tetrahedron shaped space frame structural framework (Fig. 2). This modular space frame system, devised in consultation with Guntis Plesums, architecture professor at the University of Oregon, enabled the architects to mathematically manipulate a single prefabricated structural unit (the truncated tetrahedron) into various complex configurations.<sup>16</sup> This system was designed to allow the fabricators and the construction team to erect the enormous Man the Explorer pavilion on a relatively tight deadline.<sup>17</sup> According to John Chilton, the architects intended the Man the Explorer pavilion to

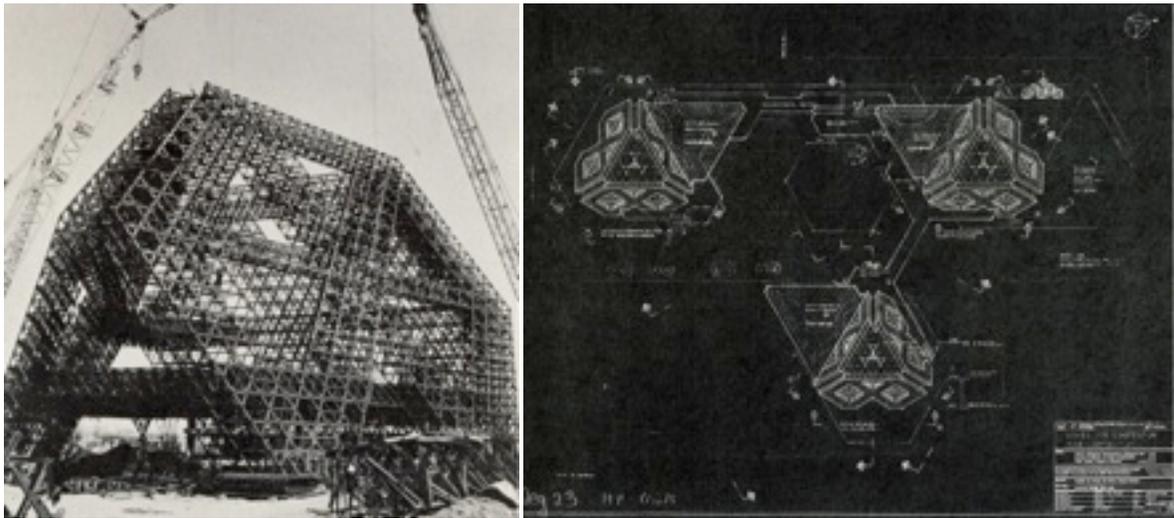


Fig. 2 Left: Space frame substructure of the Man the Explorer pavilion.  
Right: Topographical Plan of Man the Explorer complex.  
Images courtesy of ARCOP.

“demonstrate the feasibility of inhabited mega-structures constructed from a modular system of small elements.”<sup>18</sup> Along with many other pavilions at Expo 67, including the Man the Producer

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<sup>16</sup> Banham 111. According to Banham, Plesums devised the structural system which was “evolved from a single geometrical element ... a regular tetrahedron with its corners cropped off.”

<sup>17</sup> Banham 112.

<sup>18</sup> John Chilton, *Space Grid Structures* (Oxford, UK: Architectural Press, 2000) 5.

pavilion, the Netherlands pavilion, and the American pavilion, the Man the Explorer pavilion intended to showcase the capabilities of space frame architecture. Specifically, it aimed to present the real economic and physical viability of space frame megastructures, which until Expo 67 had not been physically buildable.<sup>19</sup> If Expo 67 were considered the essence of innovation in 1967, it is undeniable that inhabitable space-frame megastructures were on the cutting edge.

I must clarify that a megastructure is not just an extremely large building, but is, according to Ralph Wilcoxon's *Megastructure Bibliography*:

1. constructed of modular units;
2. capable of great or even 'unlimited' extension;
3. a structural framework into which smaller structural units (for example, rooms, houses, or small buildings of other sorts) can be built—or even “plugged-in” or “clipped-on” after having been prefabricated elsewhere;
4. a structural framework expected to have a useful life much longer than that of the smaller units which it might support.<sup>20</sup>

While the Man the Explorer pavilion was constructed based on the principles of a single modular unit and was thus capable of infinite expansion, and it was designed and built with only minimal prior knowledge of the exhibitions which would be “plugged-in” or installed inside the structural framework, it is notable that it was not conceived to adhere to Wilcoxon's fourth principle.<sup>21</sup> The Man the Explorer pavilion was a prototype of the megastructure, and it was not intended to have a future. It was conceived as a sort of ephemeral structure that would last for the summer only to be dismantled in the Fall. However, the project did not play out this way in reality. While not

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<sup>19</sup> Banham 127.

<sup>20</sup> Ralph Wilcoxon, *Council of Planning Librarians Exchange Bibliography* (Monticello, 1968) 66, quoted in Banham 8.

<sup>21</sup> Banham 112. Banham writes, “The design process is remembered as taking place in three distinct phases – the architectural conception, followed by the structural design, and then the elaboration of a constructional system – all conducted against a background of only partial knowledge of the exhibits to be contained in ‘Man the Explorer’ and a complete absence of any knowledge at all of the proposed contents of ‘Man the Producer’.”

“expected to have a useful life much longer than that of the smaller units which it might support,” the Man the Explorer pavilion repeatedly changed its function over the ten years following Expo 67. Although it began as an exhibition space for the displays “Man and Life,” “Man, his Planet and Space,” “Man and the Oceans,” and “Man and the Polar Regions,” the shell of the Man the Explorer pavilion was reused in the years after Expo 67 as a venue for live music events, film festivals, and in 1978, a film production set.<sup>22</sup> It has become evident that the Man the Explorer pavilion’s megastructural qualities came to fuller fruition over the course of time.

The megastructure, a radical architecture that rarely made it off the drafting-board in the 1960s, was rooted in a utopic vision for an expansive and totally organized built environment, and took as its task the creation of “urban megastructures for the future.”<sup>23</sup> In his 1976 book, *Megastructure: Urban Futures of the Recent Past*, Reyner Banham explains this utopic vision:

[It] contains some elements of atavism, a harking back to the ‘heroic age of Modern architecture’, and a constant preoccupation with the original Italian Futurist movement and with the sketches of Sant’Elia. There was undoubtedly a nostalgia for a past (and a hypothesized future) . . . without the compromises and dilutions and scalings-down that had corrupted the purity and radicalism of the original intentions [of Futurism].<sup>24</sup>

As Banham describes it, the megastructure movement in the 1960s aimed to use the most contemporary technology to recover the failed ambitions of the Futurist movement. Writing less than a decade after the height of the megastructure movement, it was clear for Banham that –

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<sup>22</sup> Robert Martin, “Some Festivals Bring Out the Stars,” *Globe and Mail* (Toronto), August 27, 1977. While the Man the Explorer pavilion’s history after Expo 67 remains fragmented and unclear, it is known that the site was used for many City of Montreal cultural events, including the 1977 World Film Festival.

<sup>23</sup> Banham 9. Megastructures were called “urban structures for the future” by Swiss architect Justus Dahinden.

<sup>24</sup> Banham 197.

while far from utopic – the megastructure was profoundly of its moment. He writes, “[megastructures] had taken so long to build, because of their great size, that the intellectual fashion that had given them birth had passed away before their completion.”<sup>25</sup> For Banham, the megastructure was dated at its conception and not at its physical realization. With a tone of lament, he writes that by 1976 the megastructure was already “a whitening skeleton on the dark horizon of our recent architectural past.”<sup>26</sup>

This “whitening skeleton,” this dissolution of the ideals of the space frame megastructure was widespread throughout North America. In the late 1960s and early 70s, American countercultures adopted the ideals of modular space frame architecture to fit their own utopian aspirations. In *Architecture or Techno-utopia: Politics After Modernism*, Felicity D. Scott writes about such communes as Drop City (near Trinidad, Colorado), which, during this period, enthusiastically adopted R. Buckminster Fuller’s geodesic dome as its own ideal architectural form. At Drop City, geodesic domes built of everyday detritus rapidly sprung up soon after the commune was founded in 1965 (Fig. 3). Scott writes, “Embraced as environmentally sound, suitably ‘spaced-out,’ do-it-yourself technologies, domes were for a short while the counterculture’s architecture of choice.”<sup>27</sup> Mirroring its history in mainstream experimental

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<sup>25</sup> Banham 10.

<sup>26</sup> Banham 11.

<sup>27</sup> Felicity D. Scott, *Architecture or Techno-Utopia: Politics After Modernism* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007) 155.



Fig. 3 Drop City commune, c. 1969. Photograph Denis Stock, Magnum Photos. From Felicity D. Scott, *Architecture or Techno-Utopia: Politics After Modernism*, 159.

architecture, the iconic futurism of Fuller’s domes quickly lost its appeal in Drop City by 1971. As Scott writes, “Although initially it seemed that the energy of 1968 had found another outlet in the alternative lifestyle movement of the dome-building communities, this euphoria soon gave way to a dystopic sense of foreboding.”<sup>28</sup> She recalls, “When [poet] Peter Rabbit returned to Drop City in 1972, he found himself wandering about ‘deserted, ripped off structures.’ ‘Sad hippy ghost town,’ he observed.”<sup>29</sup>

The Man the Explorer pavilion, it seems, began to suffer a similar fate even during the summer of 67. In his 1968 reflections on Expo 67, Toronto Star reporter, Robert Fulford writes about the Man the Explorer and Man the Producer pavilions:

In the plastic models the architects made, and in some of the early drawings, the theme pavilions looked graceful; obviously, Affleck Etc. had managed to combine efficiency and style. Alas, it didn’t work out that way. This time space-frame architecture, instead of taking us into the future, dragged us into the past. The trouble started when steel fabricators announced that there weren’t enough

<sup>28</sup> Scott 167.

<sup>29</sup> Scott 170.

welders in Canada to make all the truncated tetrahedrons the architects would need. As a result, the units had to be made by bolting. This made them weaker (uglier, too, incidentally), and *that* meant that the thousands of pieces had to be heavily braced in place. The final result was heavy and oppressive, miles and miles of thick rusted metal; visiting the pavilions was like walking under one of the less graceful bridges of the 19<sup>th</sup> century.<sup>30</sup>

In the case of the Man the Explorer pavilion, the architecture itself looked ancient by the time it was made.<sup>31</sup> Indeed, it was rusting. It embraced its own oxidation, the impact of temporal reality, and thus challenged the very utopian rhetoric that surrounded megastructure architecture at the time. For Fulford, this pavilion had the unique role of jolting him out of the futuristic simulacrum of Expo 67 by “dragging him into the past.” The Man the Explorer pavilion, with all its utopian aspirations, encapsulated its own imperfection, and as an early showcase of the potential for the megastructure, illustrated this very imperfection in its rusted presence. Banham also discusses the structure’s heaviness in *Megastructure*, but he reacts to its rusted patina very differently. He writes:

In an Expo where, as usual, most pavilions were made of ‘architecture’ faked up over a hidden and unacknowledged structural frame, such honesty and clarity were impressive, and were made doubly so by the fact that the steel was left exposed and unpainted so that it could weather and oxidize as it liked without looking cheap or un-cared-for. Rather, it gained the kind of authority which accrues to major engineering works, which are also normally expected to exhibit this kind of ‘take it or leave it’ air; and to describe ‘Man the Producer’ [and ‘Man the Explorer’], where the clearly visible concrete block foundations enhanced the effect, as looking like ‘a collapsed and rusting Eiffel Tower’ was to pay it a compliment.<sup>32</sup>

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<sup>30</sup> Robert Fulford, *This Was Expo* (Toronto: McClelland and Stewart Ltd., 1968) 43.

<sup>31</sup> Interestingly, this follows Reyner Banham’s claim that megastructures were dated at their conception, and due to their massive scale, they were almost destined to be passé by the time they were physically built. Banham 10.

<sup>32</sup> Banham 114.

Like Fulford, Banham highlights the difference between the Man the Explorer and Man the Producer pavilions and the other pavilions at Expo, underlining their affinity to the heavy architecture of the distant past. However, Banham treats this as a compliment rather than a criticism. The difference between Fulford and Banham's views only reinforces the abrupt shift in opinion of the futurism forwarded by Expo 67, illuminating both Fulford's penchant for the futuristic in 1968 and Banham's intense skepticism of it in 1976. Both of their statements about the impact of the Man the Explorer pavilion's rusted finish introduce an important dialogue about temporality, specifically in terms of the *timelessness* or *timeliness* of utopia. While Fulford was in awe of the futuristic simulacrum to which the Man the Explorer pavilion did not quite adhere, Banham, writing in retrospect, acknowledges the historical specificity of this futurism and values the few structures at Expo that recognized their existence within temporal reality.

In her essay, "The Time of Architecture," Elizabeth Grosz explores the relationship between real time and utopic visions. Grosz describes utopia as "commonly fantasized as the end of time, the end of history, the moment of resolution of past problems."<sup>33</sup> For Grosz, "[u]topia has no future, the future has already come as its present (which is why it has no place, but also, even more ironically, no time: the utopic is that which is out of time)."<sup>34</sup> In its aspirations to freeze time into an eternal, perfect present, utopia is bound up in the production of a future that is based on contemporary (historically situated) ideals and fears. Despite the rhetoric of timelessness linked to utopia, the utopic is marked by its historical context, and according to Grosz, it is paradoxically a "picture of the future ... which *has no future*."<sup>35</sup> Grosz's essay

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<sup>33</sup> Grosz 269.

<sup>34</sup> Grosz 271.

<sup>35</sup> Grosz 270.

establishes the important difference between the “futuristic” (the picture of the future) and what she calls the “temporal modality of the future”: the future as virtuality, a dynamic and unpredictable process of transformation over time.<sup>36</sup> While the utopic may present the image of a futuristic environment, it falls short of conceiving itself as a mode of becoming, a working process in temporal reality. Because it does not account for its own future, utopia is rendered impossible.

In light of Grosz’ understanding of utopia, it becomes possible to understand the Man the Explorer pavilion as a material specimen of a particular 1960s utopic vision which was unable to translate into temporal reality. The Man the Explorer pavilion was meant to evoke the spirit of futurism and the hopeful potential of the megastructure in reality. However, made for the world exhibition, it was built to survive only one summer. It was, to borrow from Grosz, literally a “picture of the future which *ha[d] no future.*” It rusted, degraded; it became a ruin. For Banham, reflecting on the site nine years after Expo 67, “The times were crucial: ... most of the Expo structures remain on the islands, but the atmosphere has totally departed. The flash vision of an urbanism of the future is irrecoverable.”<sup>37</sup>

Reduced to “whitening skeletons” and “[s]ad hippy ghost towns,” the utopian projects of the 1960s faded fast and hard. Indeed, the “urban megastructures for the future” became the discarded utopian projects of the recent past, and the *Man and his World* permanent exhibition, still in its early years, existed as a material corpse of this compelling dystopian history.<sup>38</sup> Far from “of the future”, the *Man and his World* permanent exhibition in general and the Man the

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<sup>36</sup> Grosz 268.

<sup>37</sup> Banham 117.

<sup>38</sup> The *Man and his World* permanent exhibition existed for five years after Banham’s book was first published and ten years after the residents of Drop City became disillusioned by the ideals of space frame architecture.

Explorer pavilion in particular were undeniably rooted in the architectural and social ideas of the late 1960s.

### **Frozen World / Frozen Time**

This site's dystopian narrative must have caught the eye of Robert Altman, who, when location-scouting for *Quintet*, was inspired to turn what he had intended to be a "surrealistic thriller with reference to the Irish underground," into a post-apocalyptic ice-age film.<sup>39</sup> Altman is famous for leaving a great deal up to chance during the production stage of his films. He often re-writes his screenplays as scenes are shot with only a loose idea of the narrative structure. Altman's unique open-ended strategy was crucial to the development of *Quintet*. In a 1981 interview with Richard Combs and Tom Milne, Altman describes the genesis of *Quintet*: "We were going to shoot it in the underbelly of Chicago. ... Then we found this location in Montreal, and I decided we would freeze it, advance the period."<sup>40</sup> For Altman, the ruins of the Man the Explorer pavilion signified a sort of futuristic post-apocalyptic dystopia. The dilapidated Expo 67 architecture played an important role in the development of *Quintet*. Altman did not simply use the Man the Explorer pavilion as a background for the narrative, but *Quintet's* narrative was specifically informed—and in some ways determined—by the site. Confronted with the site, Altman was compelled to "advance the period." Of course, he was not concerned with the future, but with creating an aesthetic environment that looked generically "futuristic." According to Altman, *Quintet* takes place "probably in the future, or else in the present in a parallel world."<sup>41</sup> I

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<sup>39</sup> Richard Combs and Tom Milne, interview with Robert Altman, "Altman Talking," in David Sterritt ed., *Robert Altman: Interviews* (Jackson, MS: UP of Mississippi, 2000) 102.

<sup>40</sup> Combs and Milne 102.

<sup>41</sup> Mechner 84.

contest that *Quintet* does not construct an indeterminate future or parallel present as Altman describes above. As I have described, the ruins Altman used were very much rooted in the Futurist-revival imagery of the late 1960s megastructure. They were ruins of the future of a recent past, and they were ruins that fifty million people had encountered at Expo 67 only ten years before.

This is, however, not to criticize Altman's choice to shoot at such a historically charged location. On the contrary, I believe that his use of the Man the Explorer pavilion loads the film with a layer of historical specificity which grounds and activates its narrative content. In the opening scene of *Quintet*, as Essex (Paul Newman, the film's main protagonist) and Vivia (Brigitte Fossey) walk through a blanket of snow towards Essex's native city – which remains unnamed throughout the film and constitutes the set for *Quintet* – Essex describes the city as he remembers it before the ice age: “There were twenty-five levels, five sectors. In the centre there was a park with a lake, and I remember the trees.”<sup>42</sup> The city was designed to house five million people; one million people lived in each of five sectors; each sector was five levels deep.

Interestingly, the design principles of Altman's city—divided into a series of sectors and levels—are based on those used by Constant Nieuwenhuis in his conceptual megastructure project *New Babylon*. Constant explains these principles:

the sector itself – whose dimensions are much bigger than those of any present building – is a system of levels that leave the ground-level free for an intensive fast traffic . . . the sector floors are primarily empty. They represent a sort of extension of the Earth's surface, a new skin that covers the earth and multiplies its living space.<sup>43</sup>

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<sup>42</sup> “Memories/Main Titles,” *Quintet*.

<sup>43</sup> Constant Nieuwenhuis, quoted in Banham 81-83.

The concept of a city consisting of a series of sectors and levels was first developed by Constant in the late 1950s and was further elaborated in the 60s. As Reyner Banham claims, *New Babylon* became a model for the theme pavilions at Expo 67.<sup>44</sup> Essex's description of the city concretely links the world of *Quintet* to both the Man the Explorer pavilion's distinct architecture and the greater history of 1960s utopian architectural projects.

It soon becomes clear that there are no longer five million people contained within the well functioning city that Essex remembers in the film's opening scene. The trees have died. The architecture is frozen over. Enormous icicles have formed on nearly every exposed surface. Dark interior concrete bunkers show signs of water damage. Windows are broken, shattered, or frosted over. Thick rust covers every metal space frame (Fig. 4). Time, it seems, has taken its toll.



Fig.4 Film still from *Quintet* (1979)

The decaying, freezing architecture of *Quintet* looks to be on the brink of collapse, and its people appear to be dying along with it. In an essay about *Quintet*, Alan Karp describes the society as

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<sup>44</sup> Banham 83.

“plagued by apathy.”<sup>45</sup> It has succumbed to its own demise. Karp notes that this civilization “contains only a distorted ‘residual’ of religion,” which “preaches a specious metaphysics of passive acceptance.”<sup>46</sup> This doctrine of indifference runs consistently throughout *Quintet*. Ambrosia (Bibi Anderson), a character who becomes close to Essex as the narrative progresses, tries to convince him of life’s futility. In one conversation, she says, “Death is arbitrary. ... To try to prolong life is pointless. In a few years, maybe months, all dying will be done.”<sup>47</sup> Altman describes the world of *Quintet* as “a dead world, in which there was no hope, absolutely no hope of survival.”<sup>48</sup> As a result, the *future* itself is a foreign and outlandish concept for the characters in the film.

For Elizabeth Grosz, the inability to conceive of a future defines a fundamental flaw of the utopic vision. She writes, “the utopian is not the projection of a future at all, although this is how it is usually understood; rather, it is the projection of a past or present as if it were the future.” In *Quintet*, the past exercises “a deterministic force over the future,” and the inability to conceive of a future is a symptom of the hopeless and dire situation at present.<sup>49</sup> The insistence on an *end* of the world is rooted in this utopian fantasy gone awry. The film captures three days of this frozen world as its inhabitants perform their pointless existence. They divert their attention with a game called *Quintet* as they wait to die out.

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<sup>45</sup> Alan Karp, “Genre and Myth,” in *The Films of Robert Altman* (Metuchen, NJ: Scarecrow Press, 1981) 113.

<sup>46</sup> Karp 115.

<sup>47</sup> “The Definition of Killing,” *Quintet*.

<sup>48</sup> Combs and Milne 102.

<sup>49</sup> Grosz 272.

Quintet, as I mentioned in the introduction to this essay, is an invented form of backgammon played by five players and a sixth man. The object of the game is to “kill” the other competitors. The last of the five players standing plays a final match against the sixth man, and the winner of this match wins the game. This elaborate board game (which is never fully explained in the film) is the only source of excitement for the members of the society. Out of boredom, the film’s main characters bring this game into reality and attempt to kill each other according to its rules. Grigor, the game’s officiator explains: “You play [Quintet] for the thrill of it. It is life itself. It is feeling the heat of the adrenaline rushing through your body. Life can only be felt when death is near. That is what the game of Quintet is. Those who play fight for their lives.”<sup>50</sup> The matter of life and death is reduced to a game, a form of entertainment that at once asserts the characters’ indifference towards life and their intense boredom. As one Quintet player says, “There is nothing left but the game.”<sup>51</sup> Doubling as a time killer and a structure for the civilization’s demise, the game of Quintet is transparently dystopian. A dysfunctional utopia, its fixed rationale acts to structure the society’s extinction.

The cinematographic techniques used in *Quintet* highlight the oppressive, closed-in nature of the megastructural environment, in a way visually translating the claustrophobia of this trapped and dying society. In opposition to the existing tradition of science fiction film, which aims to provide a topographical view of the total film world, Altman resists establishing shots altogether.<sup>52</sup> In *Quintet*, the Man the Explorer pavilion is never represented in its entirety. It is

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<sup>50</sup> “Life is the Only Prize,” *Quintet*.

<sup>51</sup> “Finding Francha,” *Quintet*. Francha, Essex’s brother, says this, foreshadowing of his death. Francha is the first to be killed in the ‘real’ game of Quintet.

<sup>52</sup> Karp 111.

filmed predominantly from eye-level, and its space is constructed through fragmented views of its interior. The camera eye acts as a sort of voyeur who follows Essex throughout the story, and while the narrative never explains itself fully, the camera further restricts any definitive knowability by disorienting the viewer. This closed vision of an exclusive world is enhanced by a special lens effect that Altman developed for this film. The entire film is shot with a lens modified to blur at the edges, creating a sort of tunnel vision of the film world. The viewer is at once left uncertain about the rules of the game and the total architectural structure of this strange, iced over, ruined city.

While restricting the spectator's vision, Altman does not camouflage the architectural specificities of the Man the Explorer pavilion. Instead, he emphasizes the particularities of the Man the Explorer pavilion by carefully recording scenes through the rusted truncated tetrahedrons that make the building so distinct. In many shots, narrative content is physically obscured by the architecture, and attention is focused not on plot development but on architectural setting (Fig. 5). It looks damp, frigid and destitute, a bleak and oppressive place. Described as Altman's "most stark and frightening" film, *Quintet*'s emphasis on physical decay and ruin is crucial to its melancholic tone.<sup>53</sup>

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<sup>53</sup> This quotation can be found on the backside of the *Quintet* DVD case.



Fig. 5 Film still from *Quintet* (1979)

Property Master Stephen Altman recalls: “Bob never wanted to mask any of it. He never said, ‘No, I don’t want anyone to remember the 67 Expo. When they see it, they will just think that they took up residence here and this is 100, 200 years old’.”<sup>54</sup> During the opening credits of *Quintet*, the camera surveys the casino (a dark concrete room inside the Man the Explorer pavilion), and slowly pans across a series of large translucent photomurals of what one reviewer called “the depressed and dispossessed of an earlier (our) era.”<sup>55</sup> These murals, which are revisited several times in the film without any explanation, seem at-odds with the temporal ‘futurism’ the film attempts to create, and are obvious remnants of the thousands of translucent photomurals that were popular at Expo 67. Much of the film’s mise-en-scene was produced from various artifacts that were left over from Expo 67 (Fig. 6/7). Compiled together in a single

<sup>54</sup> “Special Feature: Developing the World of *Quintet*,” *Quintet*.

<sup>55</sup> Canby, “Film: Altman Offers Apocalyptic Fantasy,” *New York Times*, 9 Feb. 1979, C1.

viewing experience, they locate the film world in a very particular place and time. Such remains – alongside the rusted space frames that dominate the setting – demand a specific reading of their material history. That is, they do not connote a generic futuristic architecture as Altman has suggested, but a very particular megastructural futurism that was fashionable for a few years in the late 1960s, and subsequently played its own metaphorical game of *Quintet*.

Keeping in mind that the narrative of *Quintet* was modified specifically for the Man the Explorer pavilion, I suggest that the film be understood as a subjective interpretation of the site in its ruined state. By situating *Quintet*'s apathetic dystopian narrative within the ruins of the Man the Explorer pavilion, Altman's interpretation re-activates the material history of the site: its loss of popularity, abandonment, and subsequent decay. While the characters in *Quintet* hopelessly await their extinction, the site they inhabit sits inert, awaiting its own demolition. A productive future is inconceivable to either the society in *Quintet* or the Man the Explorer



Fig. 6 Film still from *Quintet* (1979). Notice the mask sculptures which are installed above the staircase.



Fig.7 Mask sculptures as they were installed at Expo 67. Roof of Katimavik. Photograph Bill Cotter

pavilion itself, which has long since been out-dated. The characters live in the ruin of a future: a very specific ruin of the megastructure which fell out of fashion soon after it became physically buildable.<sup>56</sup> In other words, the future that is unthinkable to the characters in *Quintet* is absent from the architecture they inhabit.

Following these interconnections, I propose that the film produces an alternative, dystopian re-writing of the Man the Explorer pavilion's recent past. Far from floating in the future, on another planet "of no known culture" as Altman has claimed, *Quintet* is situated in a particular spatial and temporal reality. While subtle and possibly unintentional, *Quintet* taps into the physical degeneration of the Man the Explorer pavilion and inscribes a compelling allegorical history of the ten years between the 1967 World's Exhibition and its 1978 filming. At the same time, the recent history of the megastructure in general and the Man the Explorer

<sup>56</sup> Nigel Whiteley, *Reyner Banham: Historian of the Immediate Future* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2002) 289. Whiteley writes, "If 1967 was the height of the megastructure, 1968 witnessed its sharp decline. The shift in sensibility that occurred in the post-1968 years hit megastructure hard."

pavilion in particular have inscribed the traces of their own past onto the film. It is in this reciprocal agency, where the filmmaker projects his narrative onto the site and the site inscribes its own material history onto the film, that I find *Quintet* of specific conceptual interest. With its complicated relationship to utopia, future, and the recent past, *Quintet* acts as an archival document and an impressive interpretation of the neglected Man the Explorer pavilion.

### Virtual Memory

Given its neglect during this period between 1967 and 1978, how can the film be used to productively reconstitute the period of time directly after Expo 67? Visiting the site of the Man the Explorer pavilion today is like visiting any non-descript public park in Montreal. There are no physical markers that indicate that the pavilion ever existed. The concrete foundation has been torn up and the site has been completely transformed and re-landscaped. The pavilion's northeast unit has been replaced with a manmade hill used for tobogganing in the Winter (Fig. 8).

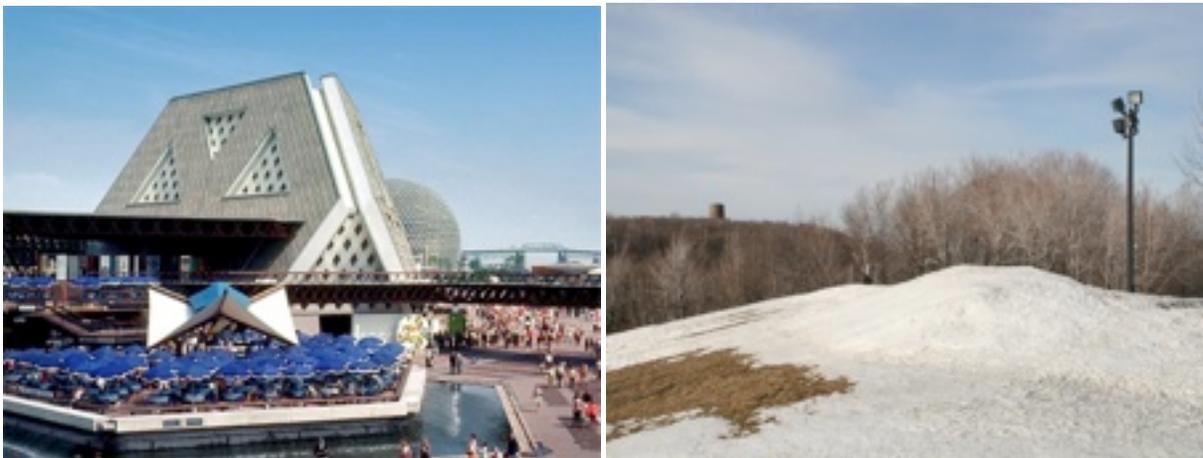


Fig. 8 Left: Northeast unit of the Man the Explorer pavilion taken during Expo 67. Photograph Bill Cotter  
Right: Photograph from the same location on March 15, 2009. Photograph Steve Lyons

Trees and other vegetation have been planted overtop of the location of the northwest and southern units. The site has been wiped clean of any of the pavilion's remains. In an editorial published prior to the site's demolition, one writer reflects: "The lack of controversy is easy to understand. Plans to create green space seldom set off protests in the streets. The pavilions were conceived as only temporary structures, and they may not yet be old enough to be perceived as part of the city's architectural heritage."<sup>57</sup> Today, without any material evidence of its existence, the Man the Explorer pavilion seems to have vanished without a trace. Its site on St. Helen's Island seems to have undergone a sort of cultural amnesia for the sake of more green space. In an instance such as this, how might a memory of the site still exist? Is it possible to reconstitute the various traces of this site's history without any physical evidence?

The lack of material evidence of the pavilion gives me an intense appreciation for *Quintet*. I believe that *Quintet* has contributed its own layer of history to the Man the Explorer pavilion site, while at the same time acting as an important archival document of the site in its ruined state. For Elizabeth Grosz, "The only access we have to the past is through a leap into virtuality, through a move into the past itself." For Grosz, the past exists "in a state of latency or virtuality," and access to the past is not necessarily defined by access to its material history.<sup>58</sup> This notion of virtuality is expanded in Andreas Huyssen's book *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory*. Responding to the ways in which modern media forms (such as photography, film and the Internet) have troubled the distinction between "serious

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<sup>57</sup> *The Gazette* (Montreal), "Look before leaping," 31 July 1986.

<sup>58</sup> Grosz 272.

memory” and “trivial memory,” “real memory” and “virtual memory,” Huyssen defines contemporary memorial practices as always already virtual.<sup>59</sup> Huyssen writes,

To insist on a radical separation between “real” and virtual memory strikes me as quixotic, if only because anything remembered—whether by lived or by imagined memory—is itself virtual. Memory is always transitory, notoriously unreliable, and haunted by forgetting, in brief, human and social.<sup>60</sup>

For Huyssen, memory does not exist in monuments, but is “active, alive, embodied in the social.”<sup>61</sup> Memory is fundamentally subjective and virtual. Following Huyssen’s logic, which sheds the necessity of archeological evidence for the reconstitution of the past, I can reformulate the current site of the Man the Explorer pavilion as a sort of virtual palimpsest: a series of memories which, triggered by various media forms, can reconstitute a dynamic and multi-layered past. This formulation of virtual memory opens up the possibility for fiction and fantasy—what Huyssen calls an imagined memory—to contribute an important layer to a site’s multivalent past. This is a particularly important concept for the Man the Explorer pavilion, which, after twenty years of neglect, was physically erased from St. Helen’s Island.

The Man the Explorer’s specific history of degradation as well as the broader history of the megastructure movement and its swift demise are contained within *Quintet*. The film itself acts as a subjective but informed interpretation of the Man the Explorer pavilion at a time when it was entirely neglected by the city, the public, academics, and the press. *Quintet* offers a comprehensive view of the Man the Explorer site – both its interior and exterior spaces – in its

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<sup>59</sup> Andreas Huyssen, *Present Pasts: Urban Palimpsests and the Politics of Memory* (Stanford, CA: Stanford UP, 2003) 19, 28.

<sup>60</sup> Huyssen 28.

<sup>61</sup> Huyssen 28.

dilapidated state. On another level, *Quintet* acts as a tangible interpretation of the site as it stood in the Winter of 1978. *Quintet* inscribes a dystopic narrative on the Man the Explorer site, and reciprocally, the site's own dystopic history is imbedded into the film. The film contributes a layer to the Man the Explorer site's virtual palimpsest which, considered alongside the site's written history, allows for the virtual reconstitution of the site in its neglected state. With all its talk about a future world and a post-apocalyptic *end* of time, *Quintet* paradoxically reconnects us with an intangible past.

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