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Environment--Trouble

In Celebration of the 60th Anniversary of Banham's "Environment Bubble"

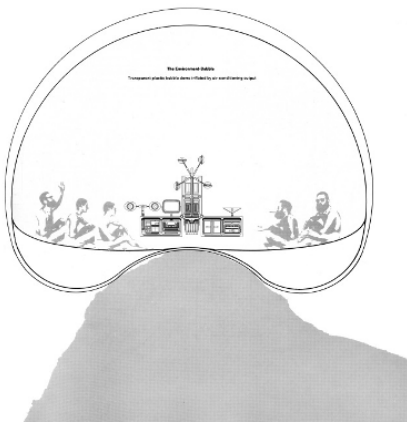
Keywords
– Reyner Banham; Crisis of Modernity; Technotopia; Plastics in architecture; Satire

DOI
– 10.14195/1647-8681_16_6

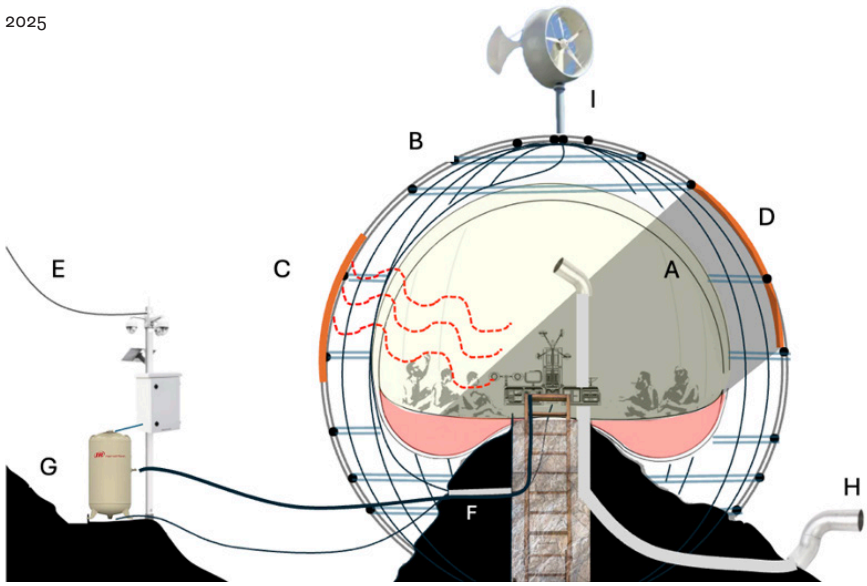
"Environment-Trouble" is a satirical commentary on "A Home is not a House," a 1965 article authored by Reyner Banham and François Dallegret that included a now famous cross section through an imagined, self-contained, "Environment-Bubble." In 2024, a group of five friends decided to build the Banham bubble on the rocky shores of Capri to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of the publication. Pretty soon, of course, the men ran into all sorts of trouble, thus the title of the piece: "Environment-Trouble." The article describes what the Office of Uncertainty Research learned when its members went to Capri to interview the men, in particular about the material contingencies, social forces and planetary and cosmic realities that derail even the best-laid plans. "Environment-Trouble" will be on view at the Palazzo Diedo, May 8 to November 23, 2025 as part of an exhibit called 'Core Samples', curated by Ana Miljacki, and is part of the Venice Architecture Biennale (2025).

fig.1 Cross section through the Capri Bubble. A: Plastic bubble; B: Bucky Dome anchored to rock; C: Mobile sun tracker for summer months; D: Rain shield; E: Power cable and junction box; F: Channel for air hoses and electrical wires; G: Air compressor; H: Vent; I: Wind power generator. (Not shown) Porta potty; shower; water tank; wine cooler; refrigerator; shade umbrella; lounge chairs; flowerpots; sleeping cots; chest of drawers for blankets. By the authors.

1965



2025



In 1965 Reyner Banham — together with his friend François Dallegret — published a now famous article, "A Home is not a House," which included a cross-section through an imagined, self-contained, "Environment-Bubble."[1] It was described as "a transparent plastic bubble dome inflated by air-conditioning output."[2] It housed five naked men (Dallegret, his ditto, and Banham and his two dittos) siting around a TV and stereo console, with one of the Banhams puffing on a cigar.[3] It was sited somewhat precariously on a rocky outcrop. At its centre there was a console with radio, TV, lamps and air vents that included an air-conditioning kit that, as Banham wrote, was meant to "deal with most of the weather most of the time."[4]

> To the man who has everything else, a standard of living package such as this could offer the ultimate goody—the power to impose his will on any environment to which the package could be delivered; to enjoy the spatial freedom of the nomadic campfire without the smell, smoke, ashes and mess; and the luxuries of appliance-land without those encumbrances of the permanent dwelling.[5]

The whole thing was a tongue-in-cheek critique of the "cubicular interiors of the European traditions" as well as life in the suburbs of America. It was also the hippie-esque critique of the over-engineered Bucki Dome. This flexible "un-house," as it was called in the article, was a barely disguised, masculinist return to the primordial campfire, but now enhanced by modern gadgetry.[6] Like an automobile with its dashboard of vents and knobs, but obviously without its metal cladding and motor, it was meant to be a place where one could crank up the air conditioning, chat, listen to music, have sex, and otherwise pass the time. "Dirty old Nature could be kept under the proper degree of control (sex left in, streptococci taken out)."[7]

Since there was no kitchen or bathroom, this "un-house" had some obvious limitations.[8] It was commodious without a commode and as to how long the car battery that drove the equipment would last or be recharged is anyone's guess. And, of course, to stay in the bubble without air conditioning would soon have been problematic since it would be little more than a greenhouse. As to what it might be like to sit naked on the rocks without cushions is anyone's guess. Comfort and privacy seem to not have been Banham's concern. In other words, how inhabitable was it?

Banham was not alone in his interest in ostensibly inhabitable bubbles. The theme was also taken up by the Italian artist Mario Merz, who designed a vast number of semi-spherical "igloos," as he called them, some of metal and glass, some of plastic and cloth. They were supposed to allude to the evolution of the cosmos and man, and to the vital impulses and energies that animate the universe. They also referenced the nomadic artist who resists stylistic uniformity (figure 1).

1 Reyner Banham, "A Home is not a House," Art in America (1965), vol. 2, pp. 70–79. Peter Reyner Banham (1922—1988) was an architectural critic, journalist and writer best known for his *Theory and Design in the First Machine Age* (1960) and his 1971 book *Los Angeles: The Architecture of Four Ecologies*. François Dallegret (1937–) was trained as an architect at the École des Beaux-Arts in Paris in the late 1950s. He moved to North America; first to New York and then Montreal in 1964. He has variously been described as an engineer, artist, designer, inventor, absurdist, and philosopher.
2 Ibid., 77.
3 For the use and meaning of "ditto" see: *Kiln People*, a 2002 science fiction novel by David Brin.
4 Banham, "A Home is not a House," 76.
5 Ibid., 75.
6 Ibid., 74, 76.
7 Ibid., 74.
8 Ibid., 76.

fig. 2 Mario Merz, Igloo, exhibited at the Hirschhorn Museum, Washington D.C., USA.

Though Merz was not as literal as Banham in suggesting inhabitation, he often placed typewriters or other objects in them. In one igloo, *Acqua Scivola* (1973), he staged a performance where two men sat inside the igloo reading, writing and speaking, pretending (without any irony it seems) to make it a place for living and relating.[9] In the 1985 show of his work at the Kunsthaus in Zürich, the igloos became even more quasi anthropological as they were arranged to form a "village," a "town," and an "unreal city."

Banham was trying to avoid the trope of "anthropological" art. It was not ice on tundra that he was interested in, nor glass on smooth concrete floors in temperature-controlled museums, but plastic on a wind-swept, rocky outcrop. Yet, like Merz, he relied on the classic, Eurocentric fascination with the proverbial return to nature and to an imagined — but artificially staged — cosmology of primitive man.

One would hardly think that anyone would be interested in these ideas in this day and age. And yet in April 2020, five friends decided that the Banham's Environment-Bubble would make a perfect Covid bubble. They picked Capri because they loved the temperate climate of the Mediterranean and had read in a fashion magazine that it could provide the "Quintessential Mediterranean Experience."[10] There they would reconnect with modernism's techno-utopian, anthropo-fetishized possibilities. As software engineers, they had plenty of money and, because of Zoom, they could "work from home" and so bring new meaning to Banham's phrase "A Home is not a House." Through a friend, they were able to find a site on the south side of the island that was isolated and yet had a foot track down to the rocky shore.

Members of the Office of (Un)certainty Research went recently to Capri to visit the site and interview these men. After all, how was the "sex left in"? What did they do for food? How did they spend the time?

As it turns out, though Banham claimed that the bubble would allow its inhabitants to impose their will on any environment, the men encountered several problems. The first was getting it manufactured. This was not as hard as they first thought since, after all, ninety million metric tons of polyethylene are produced per year. That is 1.2 tons of plastic sheeting for every ten people per year. Plenty to go around. And, needless to say, it comes in all shapes and sizes. They eventually found a company in Pacoima, California that specializes in making "bouncy houses" for backyard parties. A bouncy house is sort of a "un-house," anyway. The company guaranteed that their house would be made with the finest lead-free vinyl material and netting on all sides to ensure "safety, high performance, and longevity."[11] The shipping through the Panama Canal and installation by a local engineering firm took several months, but the next problem, once they got the bubble to the site, was to figure out a way in and out. Banham noted the problem when he commented that "fighting your way out of an air-dome can be worse than trying to get out

9 Mario Merz, Igloos, 25 October 2018–24 February 2019, Pirelli HangarBicocca, curated by Vicente Todolí in collaboration with Fondazione Merz (Milan, 2019), p. 18.

10 The Quintessential Mediterranean Experience: The Perennial Style," https://theperennialstyle.com/2024/02/26/capri-italy-the-quintessential-mediterranean-experience/

11 https://inflatablefactories.com

of a collapsed rain-soaked tent if you make the wrong first move."[12] To solve the problem, the men hired a local mason to carve a shaft out of the rock so that they could enter the bubble via a ladder from below. Chthonics saved the day! An exhaust vent was added to purge the interior of cigar smoke and bodily gases along with the toxic chemical vapours coming off the plastic. They also had a porta potty installed on the rocks behind the bubble.

Once the men had settled in, they discovered that the Mediterranean climate was different from that advertised in the travel magazines. The weather could be really hot, really cold and really windy. Unlike Merz's igloos that enjoyed the controlled environments of the museum, the men had to stabilize their bubble against the sometimes powerful winds that blow off the Mediterranean Sea. Eventually they had to buy a Bucky Dome to go over the bubble. Unlike the Banham dome, Bucky Domes are now commercially available for a few thousand dollars. In their view, the combination of the two domes, though certainly not what Banham had wanted , was not completely inconsistent with the original concept. But they really had no choice. The cheapest dome they could find was from a US company that claimed to "create your dreams, while aligning design and quality."[13] Most of their domes were intended for companies that specialized in glamping, so it seemed like a good fit, even though custom installing the dome with spikes hammered into the rocks was a bit tricky, and illegal, since the dome was supposed to be temporary, at least that was what they promised the authorities. They also modified the dome so that in summer, a moveable aluminium panel could be positioned to provide shade. In winter, the panel could be positioned to protect it from rain or to reflect warmth back into the bubble. Some nights it gets really cold, and so the men bought an antique chest of drawers to hold their blankets. It did not fit inside, so they placed it out by the entrance.

For the console that held the air conditioning, stereo equipment and TV, the men had to buy the equipment on the antique market since they wanted to be authentic as possible to the technology Banham had in mind in the mid 1960s. A local fabricator assembled the elements onto an aluminium frame. It was quite heavy and getting it made as a kit of parts so that it could be assembled inside the dome meant that it was nothing less than a masterpiece of engineering. Unfortunately, the town required that the men install an electrical transformer rather than drape the extension cord down over the rocks as they had initially done. That turned out to be a benefit since electricity was need for a high-power air compressor that they had to install, since the bubble had begun to leak at ever higher rates. The noise of the compressor was a bit irritating to the men, so they limited its use to the mornings and just before bedtime. A wind turbine was needed to charge their batteries and nightlights.

Since there was no kitchen in Banham's "un-house," food had to be delivered from a local restaurant with which they negotiated a relatively reasonable, long-term contract. Fortunately, it specialized in a healthy

12 Banham, "A Home is not a House," 76.
13 https://domespaces.com

fig.3 Mario Merz, Igloo, exhibited at the Hirschhorn Museum, Washington D.C., USA.

Mediterranean diet that included fried calamari, ravioli *alla caprese*, goat cheese and wine. The restaurant also delivered their cigars. When the men get tired of the Mediterranean fare, they order from a restaurant called Mr. Billy that serves Chinese and Thai dishes. A path was made through the rocks so that waiters could deliver and remove the food without slipping. The men installed a wine cooler next to the outdoor shower so that they did not have to wait for their drink orders to arrive.

Locals nicknamed the site the *bolla rocce* (bubble rocks), which is the name now used when a letter is sent through the post office. Over time, the families of the people who helped service the *bolla rocce* moved close by and built an increasingly large shanty town on the nearby cliffs. A friend who came over to check on them brought a potted orange tree. Recently, a monk from the nearby Certosa San Giacomo monastery decided to travel to the site to offer the men his supporting prayer. He comes now every Sunday.

It took some time for the men to develop a routine where they would wash and shave in the Mediterranean. One of the men decided, however, to let his beard grow and soon he looked quite unfamiliar. They also had to do physical exercises so as to keep moderately trim. One of the men, it seems, developed the habit of talking to himself while another began scratching diagrams on the rock face.

News of the site has already begun to spread; design students from Rome now make the pilgrimage, but *i cinque nudi*—as the men are now referred to in the local pubs—have so far refused to give them access. A police barricade had to be set up to keep well-wishers, photographers, curiosity seekers, and the occasional nudist and yogi, from encroaching on the property. A Banham impersonator now shows up every Sunday and gives free interviews.

The men hope to live in the bubble at least until the end of 2025 to celebrate the sixtieth anniversary of Banham's publication. They are crossing their fingers since the plastic skin—with all the sun in the summer and freezing rain in the winter—is not very durable and will inevitably fall apart.

The Office of (Un)certainty Research would like to remind readers that human agency is always culturally and temporally emplaced within — and subject to — an unstable array of industrial processes, material contingencies, social forces and planetary and cosmic realities. For that reason, we need to always remind ourselves of the strangeness of that thing called "architecture." But how do we bring that strangeness to the centre of the conversation, especially since in the world of contemporary architecture, there seems to be a desperate search for salvation often along technological or social vectors. Banham's masterpieces of satire that prompted our piece — a satire of a satire — is just a small attempt to challenge the over-determined fantasies of intelligibility and the narcissistic teleologies of completion.[14]

14 Because of the over-determining emphasis on practice and theory in our discipline, satire has been a much undervalued and under explored genre, which is a bit odd given the out-scaled and historically grounded validations of pretentiousness and seriousness that are foundational to the discipline. But for those interested, we suggest starting with Leon Battista's *Somnium* (Dream: 1440s) and Bruno Taut's *Nieder der Seriosismus!* (Down with Seriousism, 1920).