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# Yona Friedman



It was on a cold January afternoon in 2004 when the idea suddenly came to him, in his small flat crammed full of architectural models, drawings, packaging waste, and fetishes in an old apartment building on Boulevard Garibaldi in Paris.

The apartment itself looked like the enlarged brain of an architect. There were models stacked along shelves; souvenirs hanging from the ceiling like half-baked ideas; thousands of objects lying around that Yona Friedman had brought back from his travels: a brightly coloured elephant, an old stool, Indian fetishes, African masks, a glittering chain, a wooden crocodile, foam packaging, sketches, photographs, pictures, snippets of theories jotted down on sheets of paper affixed to the walls with drawing pins. Even the windows were papered over with drawings that obscured the milky light of a Parisian winter while, down below, the *Métro Aérien* rattled past on its way from Montparnasse to the elegant 16th *arrondissement*. We had spoken about Paris and about Berlin while Balkis, his antediluvian dog, crossed his paws and Florentine, his antediluvian cat, padded across the desk trying to catch the lines that Yona Friedman was sketching on his notepad. We had asked him what he liked about the new Berlin; he replied: "Oh well." Things could have been done differently. How differently? "Send me an aerial photograph and a couple of postcards", Friedman had said, "and I'll sketch you a new Berlin".

A fortnight later he landed in Berlin. The draft designs the architect brought along were urban utopias rendered in Friedman-like style, sketched on photographs: a densely woven floating fabric of buildings, a futuristic landscape of rooftops which, infected by the spinning shapes of the Federal Chancellery, sweeps across the Spreebogen to Potsdamer Platz and floods the urban wastelands of Berlin-Mitte with a typical Friedman maze of flexibly suspended residential units, floating buildings above a bright red supporting structure.

Futuristic hyperbole has always been part of Friedman's method, which is itself designed to advance the thinking about urban development. Friedman gained world acclaim with his idea of a "mobile architecture" and a *ville spatiale*. He became a role model for a generation of architects who, already in the 1960s, began drawing up plans for Asia's high-density cities of the future and made a career for themselves as "Metabolists". For Friedman it was not about building high-rise blocks; his vision was to spread a dense interwoven and overlapping housing carpet across the urban landscape, one that avoided both the melancholy of free-standing box-like residential units and the urban sprawl inflicted on the landscape by endless rows of terraced houses. At the height of a dogmatic modern architecture for the masses that stamped one concrete housing block after the other into city suburbs around the world after 1945, Friedman sought the opposite: open structures that people could nestle into, add to by flexible means, change things around, expand and alter a habitation using lightweight elements, curtains, and furniture.



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In Friedman's vision the ideal city would be more like a rampant jungle, the buildings more like the metamorphosis of a continual processes of alteration and addition, a crystallisation of life itself.

He countered the idea of rigidly predetermined urban planning with that of metamorphosis and improvisation, solid concrete with lightness, and became a pioneer of an ecological approach to architecture. Friedman was never so naive as to believe that the poverty-driven architecture of the *favelas* could serve as a role model for a new way of building, but he did realise that it worked more intelligently than the grid-based cities artificially created on the drawing board. The man who never built a city himself did go on to influence and shape so many architects with this thinking; indeed, it could be argued that his apartment, where he has lived for half a century with all its superimposed strata, is something of a thought model for the mobile improvised city.

Of all the architects who have built almost nothing in their lifetime, Yona Friedman is the most famous and the most influential. While an illustration of his completed projects would barely fill two pages (it could include an apartment building in Haifa in 1952; a school in Angers in



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1978; the Museum of Simple Technology in Madras, India, in 1982), the stories of his admirers and imitators would take up several volumes.

Friedman was born to middle-class Jewish parents in Budapest in 1923; his father was a lawyer and his mother, a pianist. During the Second World War he joined a resistance group and was arrested by the Gestapo in 1944 for forging papers. But then, says Friedman, he got lucky: the railway lines were blocked and they were unable to deport him; and by November the Russians had arrived. In 1946, aged 22, he emigrated to Israel and lived on the Kfar Glikson kibbutz, enrolling at the Technion in Haifa to study architecture.



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On 14 May 1948, Yona Friedman, the student of architecture, was sitting with friends listening to the news coming out of Tel Aviv. The Jewish National Council had convened that afternoon; David Ben-Gurion had proclaimed the Declaration of Independence beneath a portrait of Theodor Herzl; 11 minutes later President Harry S. Truman had recognised the new state in the name of the United States of America; a few hours later (by which time the sun had set and Shabbat had begun) Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Jordan, Lebanon, Iraq and Syria had declared war on Israel. Friedman gained his degree in architecture soon thereafter, met his first wife, and got a job with the military, where he was entrusted with settlement security. He was the go-to man for thick walls; the fact that he of all people would go on to become the most prominent forward thinker for a lightweight, open and mobile architecture is one of the paradoxical turnarounds in the history of architecture in the 20th century.

As a security expert in the young state of Israel, Friedman designed buildings which, here, looked even more like utopias for a different time. In fact, they were merely grids into which residents could build whatever they needed at that time, which is why he also designed foldable, flexible wall systems, things the authorities had forbidden him from considering when he built his first apartment building in Haifa in 1952. Golda Meir visited his building site and could not understand him. Friedman began to travel and realised that modern architecture was somehow bogged down in a soulless grid-based mode of thinking. It prompted him to present his concept of a “mobile architecture” at the *Congrès international de l'architecture moderne* (CIMA) in Dubrovnik



The new Berlin, Yona Friedman for the FAZ, 2004

- 2 The new Berlin/Chancellery City, Yona Friedman for the FAZ, 2004
- 3 Yona Friedman in Israel, c. 1950



in 1956. Contrary to what the name might suggest, it was not some insane vision of cities wandering around on stilts of steel, the sort of thing Superstudio would create some time later; rather, it was an architecture designed to adapt to circumstances. A monumental grid into which individual buildings could be flexibly suspended like racks slotting into a rack frame, a structure where the unforeseeable could embed itself.

Friedman's thinking was a revolution in architecture. As he saw it, the architect should be someone who builds an open framework that allows the greatest possible freedom to reign: everyone should be able to do what they wanted, and with the shapes and materials of their choice.

Friedman's hastily drawn sketches always featured spectacular locations such as the Champs-Élysées spectacularly submerged under a *ville spatiale*. They have also been just as irritating as Le Corbusier's demolition plans for Paris were three decades earlier. "It'll be too dark beneath these floating cities", complained the critics; "these were sculptures, not architecture", they claimed.

Others proved that it was possible – and it's an irony of history that Friedman himself was never able to build any of the things that would have been inconceivable without him. Moshe Safdie's residential city at *Expo 67* in Montreal was a shamelessly direct application of Friedman's concept of the *ville spatiale*, illustrating how well the Hungarian's seemingly abstruse urban fantasies actually worked in practice. Instead of a monotonous high-rise, Safdie stacked countless residential cubes on top of one another. In appearance the end result resembled an abstract Italian mountain village built out of concrete.

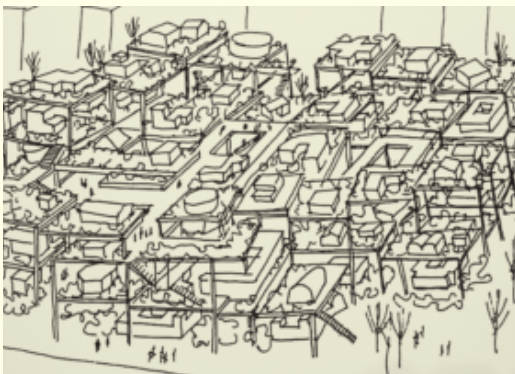
Also, the green high-rise with parks and public amenities stacked like a club sandwich – an idea with which the architects at MVRDV became all the rage at the World Exposition in Hanover in 2000 – was in fact nothing other than Friedman's 1979 idea of a "green architecture". And Bernard Tschumi's Tourcoing theatre, a superimposition of platforms over an old hall was nothing other than a *ville spatiale* on a smaller scale. (Even Tschumi's favourite notion of "superimposition" is to be found in the manifesto Friedman published in 1956, *Architecture Mobile*.)



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As stated earlier, Friedman, who moved to France in 1957 and has lived in Paris ever since, did not build any of it. He has preferred to venture towards the outer boundaries of the architecturally conceivable, and many ideas were mere futuristic thought experiments, like linking all the continents with inhabitable bridges hundreds of miles long. However, other projects did pre-empt today's theories of urbanism.

Friedman worked not just as an architect: together with his second wife, Denise, he shot a number of animated films (one of which was awarded a Golden Lion in Venice in 1962). He also wrote a book about his dog and conducted experiments on sign theory. And so, for many years, it almost seemed as if he had been forgotten as an architect. But then Friedman surprised everyone with new installations, for instance at the Venice Biennale in 2009, where he used Styrofoam packaging from TV sets and stereo systems to create a frenzied urban model, an *architettura povera*, a vibrant trash city that looks like a forerunner of his vision for a dense Berlin city centre.

Early on, Friedman was interested in how urban structures emerge under the chaotic conditions of South American and Asian slums. Indeed, the current enthusiasm for *favela* culture owes him a great deal as someone who, since the late 1950s, has travelled to the shantytowns of the Third World and, on behalf of UNESCO, has tabled entirely non-utopian proposals for flexible *favela* architecture.

At the turn of the new millennium, Friedman designed a bridge for Shanghai that was actually meant to be a city floating above the water. The client even suggested he move to Shanghai and offered to give him a house as a gift. He declined, as his wife was seriously ill; she died shortly afterwards. His dog Balkis and his cat Florentine, who had lived among the old architectural models from the 1960s, both died, too. At the time, his whole apartment had been crammed full with hundreds of models and, occasionally, whenever Friedman pulled one of them off a shelf, his cat would fizz out angrily from one of these future cities.

The Getty Research Institute later acquired Friedman's archives. They retrieved virtually all the models and plans from his apartment; bizarrely it looked none the emptier for it. It was still a tangled confusion of drafts, wooden African elephants, fertility bracelets, and birdhouses.

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- 4 Yona Friedman, *Ville Spatiale*, 1959
  - 5 Moshe Safdie, *Habitat 67*, Montreal 1967
  - 6 Yona Friedman, *Sketch for a Ville Spatiale*, 2004

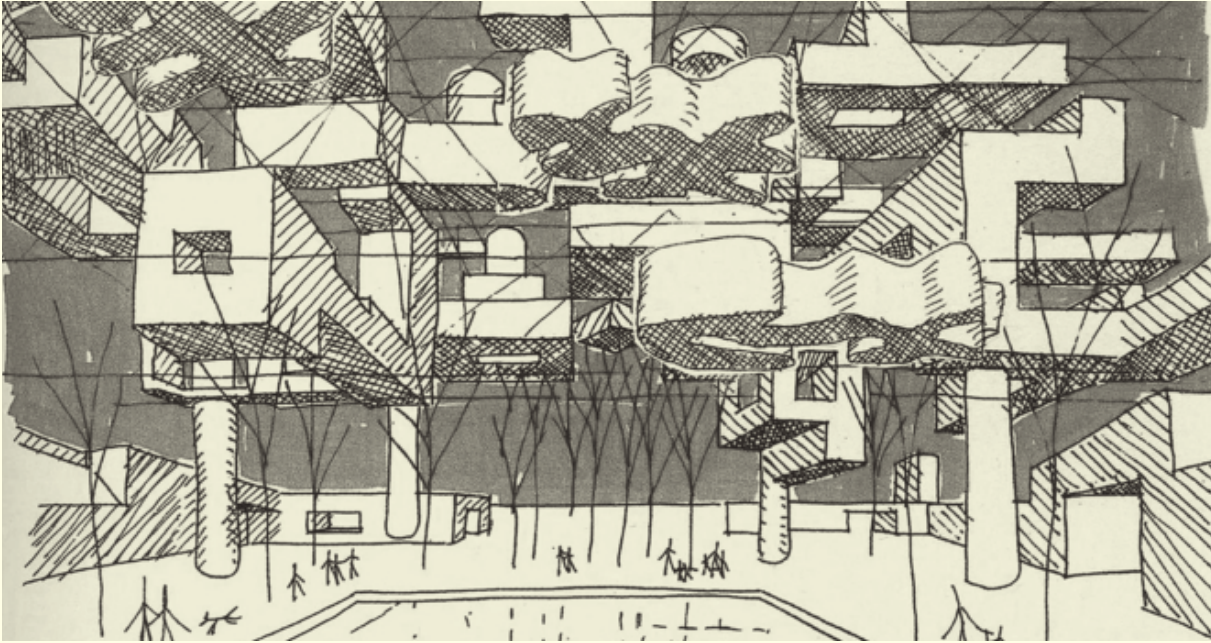
In fact, it still looks like Friedman's brain, and when you follow him as he walks through his rooms, you have the strange feeling of walking around inside his head, inside a thought construct that consists of constantly recombining assemblages of whatever is there in the apartment.

Only now, it would seem, are all his ideas taking shape in his oeuvre, ideas that influenced so many architects. In 2016 the 93-year-old indefatigable Yona Friedman travelled to London to present a model made of lightweight tubular steel structures in Kensington Gardens: an array of stackable open cubes composed of steel rings capable of supporting floors and ceilings, continually expanding to create a *ville spatiale* in which residents have the opportunity to build, rebuild and build over everything the way they want it, flexibly and spontaneously. There it was again, the architecture without architects, a weak-form structure that is not about creating sculptures, but networks and platforms in which life in its entire unplanned form embeds itself – of a kind the architect had been calling for since 1956 with his all-out attack on the dogmatic and technocratic modernity of the post-war era. Rarely has a solution to the problems of a future city looked as conceivable as it does here.



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7 Yona Friedman, *Serpentine Pavilion Project*, 2016

8 Yona Friedman, *Ville Spatiale*, undated

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