

# Architecture on Film: Drop City

2013 UK Premiere of the film, Drop City, at Architecture Foundation

Programme Notes by Erin Elder

Film is the medium best suited for telling the story of Drop City. Influenced by Marshall McLuhan's claims that "the medium is the message" and by Stan Brakhage's notion of "moving visual thinking," as well as the increased accessibility of video cameras in the mid-1960s, the founders of Drop City understood cinema as a way to collapse of art, lifestyle and consciousness.

Dropper Gene Bernofsky was a filmmaker and, during the early years of Drop City, his 16mm Kodak Cine camera was constantly rolling. He talks about the camera as a tool, comparing its function to that of a hammer or saw; the camera was used to "build a film." The camera was communal property at Drop City; anyone could use it. Filmmaking was a spontaneous activity, something to do in the moment, something to do everyday.

Though much of the footage from Drop City has been ruined or lost, the clips that remain evidence a great deal about the Droppers' relationship to the place they were building how they wanted to share it with the world. Drop City (the documentary) expertly incorporates this archival footage by layering the moving pictures with images of domestic work, people, artworks, environments, and experimental buildings, in an authentic representation of Dropper consciousness.

Committed to creating a new way of life, the Droppers rejected the mass-manufactured, commodifying "American ideal" that sought to turn young people into soldiers, consumers and automatons. As Dropper Bill Voyd has written, "we were held together by a common feeling that the whole structure of American society was rigid and oppressive, that the only way to physical and spiritual freedom lay outside the established system." Breaking with the establishment involved daily, domestic, and environmental innovations. The Droppers wanted to participate in every design decision, from how a bottlecap connected with wood to the social function of a closet.

Drop City was born out of disillusionment but moreover, it was inspired by art. "The works of art we envisage are total, vast." In fact, by working with spectacle and surprise (the sidewalk breakfasts, the drizzle of painted pebbles from a second story window) they effectively blurred the lines between audience, participant, creator, and place. They saw building of Drop City as an entirely immersive art form that was inseparable from daily life.

In his 1970 book *Expanded Cinema*, Gene Youngblood discusses the impact of filmmaking on this generation: "When we say expanded cinema, we actually mean expanded consciousness...[It] isn't a movie at all: like life it's a process of becoming, man's ongoing historical drive to manifest his consciousness outside of his mind, in front of his eyes." Through focusing, cropping, and editing, film was a means to look, imagine, and construct differently. The films the Droppers made were not documentaries or dramas; they were not made to be viewed in a typical way and oftentimes were

combined with lights, music, motion, and other elements in which the film was just one part of a multi-sensory experience.

The early Droppers took their film-based Droppings on the road, visiting community colleges and other youth enclaves in hopes of making some cash while “turning people on.” In 1967, the Theater Dome was finished and Drop City began organizing synesthetic happenings on site, epitomized by their 1967 Joy Festival which promised ninety-six hours of “mind-blowing freak out.”

Neither the Drop City documentary nor the Towards Tomorrow excerpt nor any of the recent exhibitions, books, articles, or movies can accurately capture the energy and spirit of Drop City. To be fair, such things cannot be easily historicized. This is why art and film are so necessary as primary resources, to ground our understanding of genre-breaking experiments like Drop City. While the story and the insights are undeniably important, so too is essence.

What would the Droppers do to tell you about their lives, if we could channel their 1960s selves, fresh from the hardscrabble desert of Trinidad, CO? They would take these two films, play them at the same time, backwards and upside down. They would flicker the lights and blare three kinds of music simultaneously through the speakers. The Droppers would erupt from hidden doors and from the audience, wearing costumes and using fake names. They would hijack your expectation and blast it with colour, texture, noise, flashes, pulses, vibrations, and splatters. You would likely be confused and maybe inspired. You’d leave the Architecture Foundation with ostensibly less information and narrative than you’ll leave with tonight, but you’d be infected by the Droppers’ collective will to build a wholly new kind of experience; you might begin to question the way we do things and seek out the possibility of doing things differently.