Review: **Paper City: Urban Utopias**
Royal Academy of Arts
Until 27 October



As if to remind us that we live in urban environments shaped by highly undemocratic processes, this year saw Prince Charles intervene in the planning of two high profile developments in London.

Review by Estella Hung

Residents living near Chelsea Barracks in West London objected in May to Richard Rogers' scheme of lookalike glass-and-steel condominiums and attendant communal amenities. While contentious, few asked for it to be junked and buried by His Royal Highness who preferred a gargantuan neo-Victorian and decidedly unsustainable design for the site. Likewise, Jean Nouvel's overtly modern architectural design for a mixed-use property near St Paul's Cathedral, one of the city's most historically sensitive areas, was more a pill than a Turkish delight. But few

thought the Prince's word on the Parisian architect would be the final one.

I'm referring only to the process that governs the erection of a building or the regeneration of a city block. It's hard to imagine such style battles between unelected powers when they're meted out over the entirety of The Future City. (Actually these battles already take place in the  UAE ,
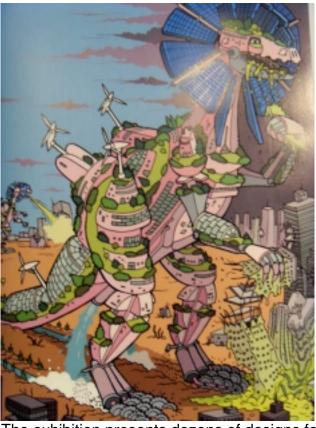 South Korea
and recently
 China
). I had these in mind when I approached
*Paper City: Urban Utopias*

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The exhibition presents dozens of designs for future urban living with varying degrees of outlandishness seen in imminent architectural publication *Blueprint*. Rendered on A4-sized wall displays, they are as much about the architect's mode of communicating artistically as they are about the use of architecture to explore new creative avenues. London architectural practice 00:/'s imagines somewhat whimsically the "classified ads page" as the basis of communication within a city, and therefore its lifeblood. Takayo Akiyama's cute but irreverently creepy illustration (pictured above) of a London-Tokyo hybrid centres on famous watering holes in both cities (oh dear!). But those in the know will come to see Paper City for the contribution of Sir Peter Cook., founding member of 1960s avant-garde collective Archigram and possibly Britain's most celebrated artist-architect. His proposal, conceived with Gavin Robotham especially for this exhibition, imagines the city fully submerged thanks to climate change. It's just a shame that the proposal is rendered digitally, given Cook's talents as a cartoonist. And it's certainly not half as fun as the "plug-in" city he conceived for Archigram.

Given such heroic propositions, it is disappointing that *Paper City* is relegated to a corridor of the Royal Academy of Arts. The cramped layout resembles a display of schoolchildren illustrations. The captions accompanying each contribution do as much justice to some of the more incredible ideas; London artist Chris Orr's
*Jam Utopia*
, which interprets traffic jams as less irritants as a chance for camaraderie, is almost a footnote. Framed entries, including Orr's, are inexplicably basked in unflattering shadow.

In the context of my musings on the antidemocratic nature of public planning, though, it is faintly amusing to see that *Paper City* offers museum-goers the chance to submit their own "paper city". It will then be up to Messr Cook to decide if it's any good.