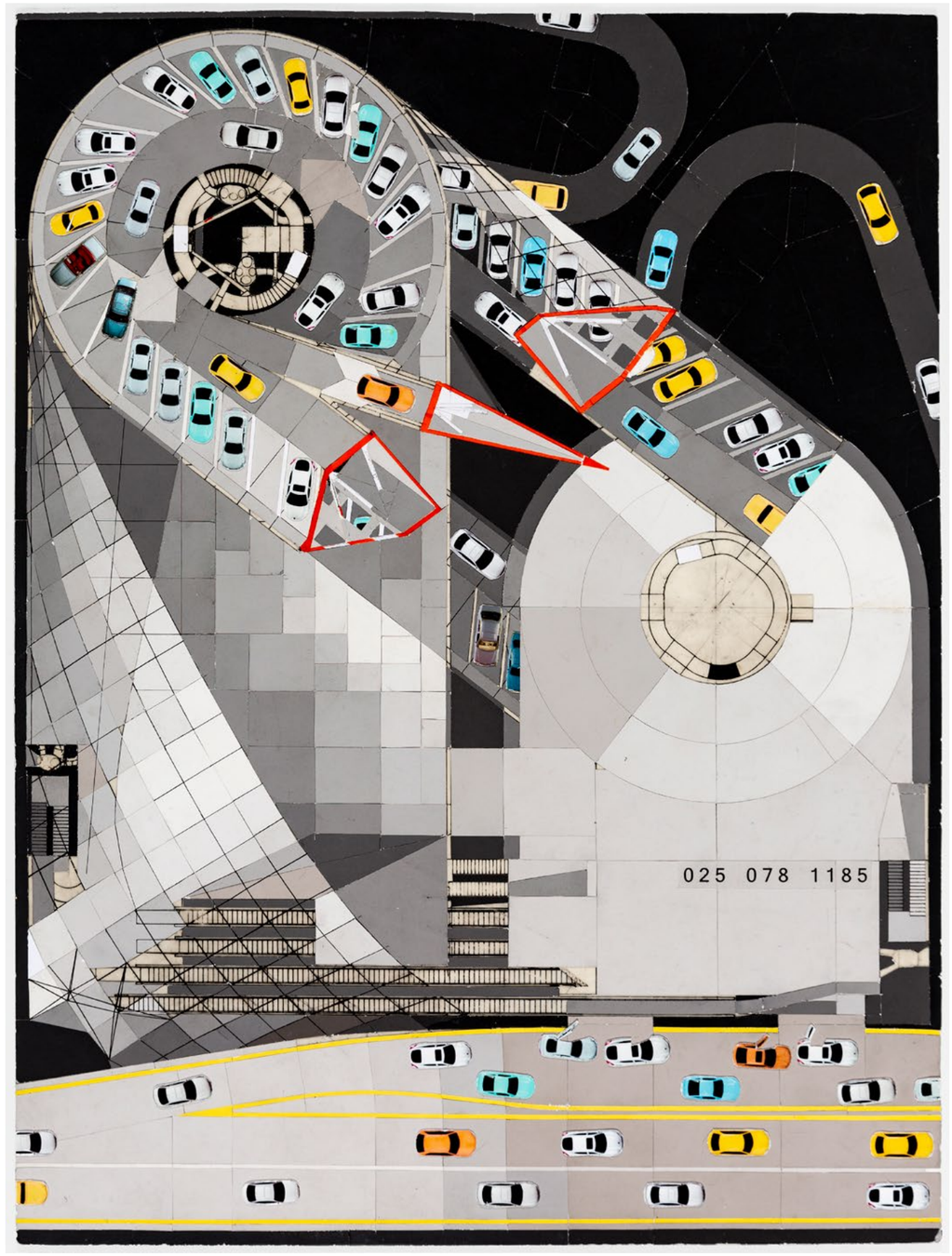
Auto-Affection:
On Michael Webb's Sin Centre and the Drawing of Mobility

Mark Dorrian

> the seductive image of an organic architecture in a state of pulsating desire …
>
> a certain subversive eroticism …
>
> It was sparsely clad in an all see-through, glass facade and the floors glistened in high-gloss metallic-chrome like so many rubber-wrapped nubilities while the long hose-like mechanical equipment snaked in, over and around all possible areas without a blush of modesty – inquiring, unsuppressable tentacles.

To judge from these descriptions – drawn, in turn, from the histories of modern architecture of Alan Colquhoun, Kenneth Frampton and Charles Jencks[1] – Michael Webb's Sin Centre (conventionally, but misleadingly, dated 1959–62) has always generated a kind of heat in its observers.[2] Closely identified with Archigram, of which Webb came to be a member, it has a claim to be the group's most recognisable project, perhaps alongside Peter Cook's plug-in or Ron Herron's walking cities (both 1964). Given this, it is striking how little has been written about the Sin Centre. It makes an obligatory appearance in the histories, but in these commentaries – with the possible exception of Jencks's – a raw registration of affect tends to override analysis or any kind of close reading of the work. The only other notable tendency has been to associate it with the Fun Palace project developed by the radical English theatre director Joan Littlewood in collaboration with Cedric Price and others. Reyner Banham for one, writing in his book *Megastructures*, put the Sin Centre slightly in advance, describing it as 'the pioneer English proposal for a *palais ludique*' and claiming that it anticipated both Constant's New Babylon and the Littlewood/Price project.[3]

This pairing of the Sin Centre with the Fun Palace dates from 1964, when an article by Priscilla Chapman connecting the two appeared in the 6 September issue of *The Sunday Times Magazine*.[4] Although Webb would later comment that



Michael Webb with the Sin Centre model,
The Sunday Times Magazine, 6 September 1964

Previous spread: Michael Webb
Plan of car ramps and parking for Sin Centre,
Leicester Square (*c.*1970–90)
Photocollage with pencil and Letraset numbers
455 × 340 mm (17 7⁄8 × 13 3⁄8 in)

this was the point at which he and Price first became aware of one another's work, they had in fact already appeared alongside each other in *Archigram 2* (1962), in which the Sin Centre was published on a sheet with other designs that included '1958–60 Change and Movement Projects' by Price. It seems that the *Sunday Times* article was originally intended to be only about the Sin Centre, but in Webb's wry account 'at the last minute there appeared on the scene a new suitor with slicked down black hair and golden tongue and whispering sweet nothings in [the writer's] ear; charming her with words like expendability, impermanence and flexibility.'[5] In an issue of the *Architectural Association Journal* on the theme of 'Buildings for Pleasure and Leisure', published slightly later the same year, both projects appeared, with the Sin Centre now under the billing of Sin Palace.[6] It is an affiliation that has continued to be assumed.[7]

It is clear that the Sin Centre has provoked – or perhaps has come to stand for – a high intensity of affect and excitation, maybe even a condition of 'outrageous stimulation'. The phrase is Nikolaus Pevsner's, used in a lecture given at the Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA) in January 1961, during which he attacked what he claimed to be the 'return of historicism' in contemporary architecture. He argued, however, that this was a return with a difference, for the reference was no longer to the Classical or Gothic but to 'much more recent styles' and hence might appear not to be a kind of historicism at all.[8] During his talk, profusely illustrated with a rogue's gallery of examples (many of the images were supplied by Banham, his former doctoral student), he showed Michael Webb's fourth-year student project from Regent Street Polytechnic for a Furniture Manufacturers Association Building in High Wycombe – the so-called 'bowellist' project that had been shown, during the months prior to Pevsner's talk, in the *Visionary Architecture* exhibition curated by Arthur Drexler at the Museum of Modern Art in New York. 'I was propelled', Webb has remarked, 'to the top of the profession briefly and from then on my career glided evenly down.'[9] Pevsner's charge in his lecture was that Webb's project 'out-Gaudíed Gaudí' and he linked it to a broader tendency inspired by modern masters, such as Le Corbusier, who had started to do, as he put it, 'funny turns'.[10] And while these might be acceptable in the context of a pilgrimage chapel like Ronchamp, in which states of heightened emotion were appropriate, in the case of, say, an administrative building such as the Chandigarh Secretariat, they could only be viewed as instances of 'outrageous stimulation'.[11]

Pevsner's criticism was addressed to architecture, but at the same time it has to be understood as a lament that took place within a larger context of cultural and economic transformation, for 'outrageous stimulation', which echoes through the historians' accounts with which we began, can well stand as the default condition of the emergent image-world belonging to what Hal Foster has called the second machine age and first pop age[12] – most obviously with regard to the ever-intensifying penetration and saturation of culture by advertisements, those lubricants of commodities whose modus operandi was precisely registered in Pevsner's phrase. And it was, of course, such images and their effects that had, in the period leading up to Pevsner's address, so fascinated the members of the Independent Group at the Institute of Contemporary Arts, which included Eduardo Paolozzi, Richard Hamilton, Alison and Peter Smithson, Lawrence Alloway and Reyner Banham. The Sin Centre itself was to be filled with advertising, although as far as I am aware Webb has never shown this in his drawings.

In his role as a respondent to Pevsner's RIBA talk, Banham reflected on the conflict between architectural history and studio teaching under conditions in which the former offered 'stronger' architectural examples than were permitted to students by the latter.[13] Here, it is useful to turn to the recollections of John Outram, who was a contemporary of Webb at Regent Street Polytechnic and who, as John Hodgkinson (his middle name), edited the magazine *Polygon*. Outram emphasises the importance of the lecture series given in 1958 at the Architectural Association by Peter Smithson, which introduced students to the work of architects such as Hugo Häring, Hannes Meyer and Mart Stam. It is worth quoting Outram at length:

> When (Smithson) looked back on his 1958 series it is said that he regretted giving them, he felt that they had opened a Pandora's box, and that there was no discipline any longer. In 1959 or in 1960 he took over as design director and fifth year master at the AA, but before that had happened weird and extraordinary projects had already started to appear. All this free form and organic work burst out in 1958 … It's when, I'm afraid, in my amateur art critic way, I coined the term 'Bowellism'. This is Spider [Michael] Webb [indicating an image of Webb's Furniture Manufacturer's Association project]. That is the original publication of it. This is when the discipline of the 'three great masters' collapsed …
>
> The truth is, it was the outcome of a deliberately illiterate architectural education … (The Polytechnic's) ambition was to train a new species of architect who could serve the Welfare State … It can hardly be surprising that such 'functionalism' led to an anarchic, yet brutally sub-literate, a-formality. We students were refused history, formality, and theory … It was already a decade after the war and Lawrence Alloway was preaching American consumerism from the Institute of Contemporary Art, to which we all used to go. We were the monks of welfare without a religion to support our self-denial. We went jiving every Friday night. Can one wonder that we broke out into architectural carnival?[14]

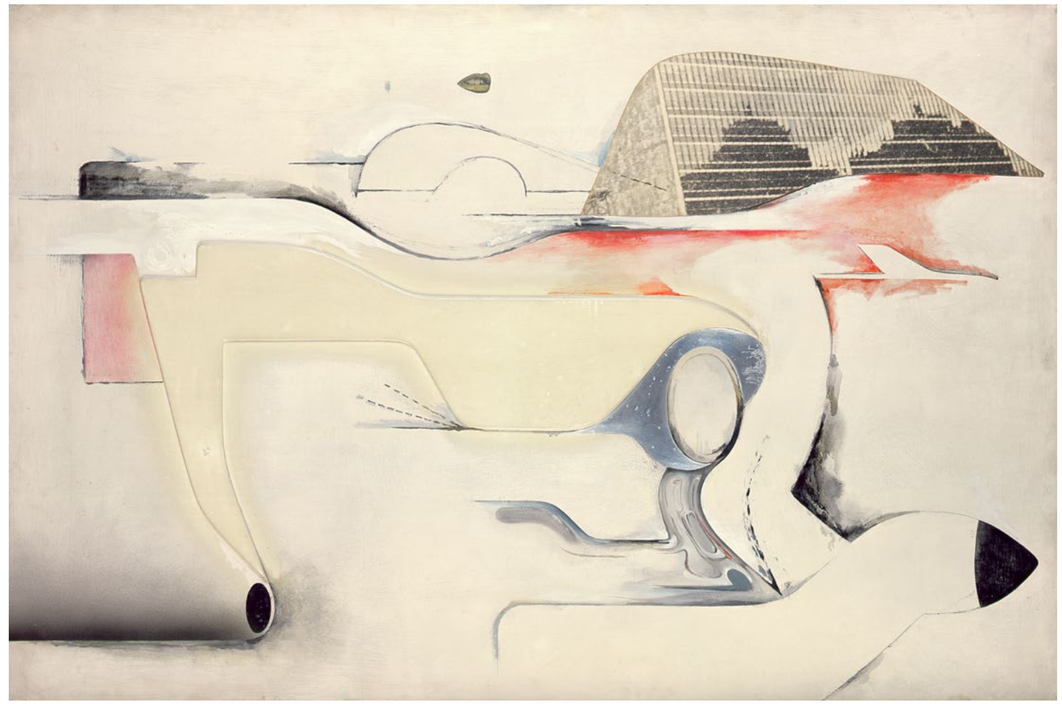
The Sin Centre was developed as Michael Webb's thesis project at the polytechnic, repeatedly failing – this is very much part of the mythology of the project, of which more shortly – and taking, by his own account, 15 years to pass, although it would be too straightforward to say that the project was ever simply finished.[15] The design began with a project that aimed to transform north London's Alexandra Palace into 'a giant playground'. Instructed by his tutors to make the project economically plausible, Webb shifted his site to the urban pleasure zone of Leicester Square and incorporated a department store and offices, together with various specified entertainments (a bowling alley, cinema, etc.) and unprogrammed spaces for amusement. This was a project intended to assert low pleasure against the edifications of official culture. It was to service, Webb wrote, the 'immediate desires of the public' – vending machines would sell 'coffee, coke and dirty books'.[16] 'Here *Culture* is a rude word and anyway it needs a lot of soundproofing.'[17] Yet, at the same time, it is clear that Webb had little interest in these pleasures – or, at least, in most of them. Instead, the drawings and models of the Sin Centre attest to a reiterated and obsessive attention to a limited number of elements: the roof canopy, influenced by the work of Frei Otto and more specifically by the models of his assistants, draped and tightened with tension cables against the edges of the metal deck system; the mechanical air-handling apparatus; the undulating escalator loops; the automobiles that inhabited the structure; and – especially – the vehicular ramp system, the project's 'love object' as Peter Cook called it, which Webb repeatedly studied and redrew.[18] Seen in this way, not only does the Sin Centre break down into a kind of tabulation of elements but through these its Pop character also comes to the surface – whether in the roof canopy's skin of plastic, that most emblematically Pop material, which was to be cleaned with sprays like a car windscreen; or the hoover-like ducting; or the cars themselves, intended to be so tightly packed into their parking bays that they gave the impression of a continuous pressed skin; or the metal frame-construction ramps that deflected and quivered as vehicles passed over them, and which Webb likened to aircraft wings, the implied relation further heightened by the application of codes in large-scale text to sectors of the ramps' metallic surface.[19]

The use of the word 'tabulation' here is not innocent, for it is intended to locate the Sin Centre within a very specific lineage, one already anticipated by Charles Jencks's suggestion that the project was 'the first real architectural equivalent of [Richard] Hamilton's mechanomorphic eroticism'.[20] In January 1957, in the wake of his *Man, Machine and Motion* exhibition (1955), Hamilton had written a letter to his Independent Group compatriots, Alison and Peter Smithson, reflecting on the group's recent activities (exhibitions, Banham's work on US automobile styling, advertisement image research, etc.) and concluded that 'it is clear that the Pop Art/Technology background emerges as the important feature'. He then attempted to draw up a table of characteristics of Pop art (his 1956 collage *Just what is it that makes today's homes so different, so appealing?* was a similar, although pictorial, effort at tabulation). On reviewing his list, however, Hamilton found that there was only one characteristic – 'Expendable' – that he could not find already foreshadowed in historical forms of art.

As we have noted, when the Sin Centre was published in *Archigram* 2 it appeared alongside the work of Cedric Price, who also contributed some related notes on 'activity and change'. These began: 'An expendable aesthetic requires no flexibility in artefact but must include time as an absolute factor. Planned obsolescence is the order within such a discipline – shoes, motorcar, magazines.'[21] Expendability was to become the theme of the subsequent Archigram publication. But what was expendability? What counted as being expendable and what was its relation to the closely related but non-identical term obsolescence? This is something worth pursuing, for it gives a very particular vantage point on the Sin Centre, its relation to drawing and to the archive of representations that, taken together, constitute the project.

The privileged object of this discourse of expendability, central to the way in which it was conceptualised, was the automobile – specifically the American automobile. Key to this was Banham's 1955 article 'Vehicles of Desire', which had a profound effect on Hamilton and which set the terms of the discussion on the 'aesthetics of expendability'.[22] In this text, Banham had eulogised the dynamic transformations of car design under highly competitive market conditions, leveraging this against architects' pretensions to determine universal and timeless standards in design. To the singular transcendent object of elite cultural arbitrage, he opposed the styled fast-moving object of consumer society, 'a thick ripe stream of loaded symbols' to do, he wrote, with 'apparent speed, power, brutalism, luxury, snob appeal, exoticism, and plain common-or-garden sex'.[23] Here, expendability is an effect of both technological obsolescence and outmodedness, the reattachment of consumer desire onto new models and new lines[24] – although the former was itself primarily an issue of the symbolic status of the consumer object rather than a matter of sudden nonfunctionality. For his part, Richard Hamilton, in a 1959 lecture indebted to Banham's earlier reflections, situated obsolescence with reference to George Nelson's *Problems of Design* (1957) as a wealth-producing driver of industrial production. While Banham had characterised the mode of operation of the car industry as 'emotional-engineering-by-public-consent',[25] Hamilton went further, advocating the use of social-science research to intensify consumption. 'Industry needs greater control of the consumer', he wrote. 'Propaganda techniques could be exploited more systematically by industry to mould the consumer to its own ends.'[26]

Webb's Sin Centre certainly emerges within the orbit of this discourse on expendability and bears many of its traits – its fossil-fuelled auto-cultural fixations, its Pop technophilia, and so on. And yet its divergences from it are perhaps more striking and instructive. Let us turn again to what expendability means and refocus the question on subjectivity by asking whether something can be obsolete (say, technologically redundant) but not expendable. From the point of view of the proselytiser for expendability, this looks like a pathology – an unwarranted subjective attachment to outmoded things. As Banham complained in his automobile essay, '[w]e have still not formulated intellectual attitudes for living in a throwaway economy'.[27] In his letter to the Smithsons, with its table of Pop characteristics, Hamilton had written '(easily forgotten)' beside the entry 'Expendable'. Formulated in this way, this looks like it might be a characteristic of things but really it is about a relation to them, one that presupposes the willingness (and economic capacity) of the consumer-subject to set aside, throw away, move on, shift attachments or shrug off encumbrances. And this, as yet historically untroubled by any overly compromising returns of what has been discarded, comes to be correlated with various freedoms – whether those are to do with the expanse of the American landscape (Banham); the non-determination of the future (Price); the escape from the past; or even, strange as it may seem, the release from the 'material' itself. Here, we note a curious oscillation between, on one hand, an idealised transcendence and release from material things and, on the other, a new degree of weddedness to them as they are provided through intensified infrastructures of supply. Thus David Greene, writing in *Archigram 8*, '[i]t's all the same. The joint between God-nodes and you, eat-nodes and you is the same. Theoretically, one node could service the lot. There's no need to move. Cool it baby! Be comfortable. Godburgers, sexburgers,



Richard Hamilton
Hers is a Lush Situation (1958)
810 × 1220 mm (31⅞ × 48 in)

hamburgers. The node just plugged into a giant needery. You sit there and need – we do the rest! Green stamps given!'[28] Here, the endpoint of technologically enabled nomadism turns out to be an absolute sedentarism, in which the consumer-subject is umbilically plugged into a universal service provider.

Against this background, what is so striking about Webb's project – and something that most marks his practice to the point of being almost without parallel – is how radically un-expendable the Sin Centre in fact turns out to be. Webb himself has never set the project aside and has continued to work on it – as he still does at the time of writing. This has important implications for the way in which we think about the representational conditions under which the project was, and continues to be, pursued. Its slow elaboration over many years, and the forestalling of any point at which we might claim it to be finished, starts to look like a project in its own right – that is, a project of prolonging the project, which is never expended and never seems to definitively draw, or to be drawn, to a close.[29] And this is equally true of Webb's later Temple Island, another work about vehicles and velocity whose development has unfolded in slow time over many years. This is to say, then, that not only is the Sin Centre a project about dynamism but that it is itself also constantly kept mobile in its continual re-instantiation through representation. And here we can recognise how the kinds of anecdotes and fables that have gathered around the Sin Centre gain a cumulative logic as minor episodes in this longer history of prolongation, as occasions in which some threat of closure is averted – whether these are to do with its repeated failings to be passed as a thesis project at Regent Street Polytechnic or the stories of the celebrated early model being crushed in the closing doors of an underground train.[30]

Yet, if the Sin Centre is and has always been definitively unfinished, then it is so in an unusual way. Although Webb constantly returns to certain aspects of the project, such as the ramps, looking across the range of representations, including the model, we are more likely to derive a feeling of the fullness of the depiction and even the technical resolution of the project than of incompletion. In a striking way, the project appears highly defined, almost fully worked out, while at the same time made indeterminate by the openness of the chain of representations within which it emerges. And perhaps this is why the Sin Centre has proved so simultaneously palpable yet hard to grasp – concrete, in a way that unfinished things rarely are, whilst being constantly in a contingent state. This is well registered in an astute comment made by Dennis Crompton, Archigram's archivist, who, reflecting on the sheer volume of drawings produced by Webb for the Sin Centre, noted that, at the same time, 'they're all sort of provisional'.[31] This also leads us to ask where the Sin Centre is, in a way that we tend not to with other projects.

In a conventional design-development process, we expect a gradual hardening and definition in the representational chain; however, it is not clear that there is anything like this with the Sin Centre. The representational archive of the project does not seem susceptible to being read through the kind of hierarchy to which we are used. In other words, it is very difficult for us to put our finger on any point and say that this 'is' the project. The drawings operate within a kind of lateral space – they do not so much culminate as proliferate, and the project thus comes not to be positioned within them but distributed across the archive in an open-ended and unlocalisable way. And here, the architectural model offers a very particular challenge, as it is the most synthetic representational form, the one that promises – or threatens – to conclusively bind the drawings together. It is unsurprising, then, that the fable of the destruction of the Sin Centre model has gained such prominence, for it registers the poetic logic that, in order to preserve the openness and mobility of the project, models of it must be destroyed, mislaid, unfinished or otherwise surpassed.

In his car essay, Banham had quoted at length a passage from a contemporary American magazine, *Industrial Design*, describing an automobile styled to induce a dynamic sense of movement around the static position of the driver. Beginning 'the Buick … is perpetually floating on currents that are permanently built into the design', it concludes, 'the driver sits in the dead calm at the centre of all this motion – hers is a lush situation'.[32] This last phrase would become the title of the second of Richard Hamilton's automobile paintings, following his *Hommage à Chrysler Corp* (1957), which he would explicitly link to the positions articulated in his unanswered letter to the Smithsons.[33] In these works, Hamilton evolved a pictorial space that was not fragmentary but that operated through a kind of generalised plasticisation, at once abstract and carnal. From within this field – which re-enacted something of the motion effects of car styling, as described in the passage cited by Banham – recognisably figurative details emerged to produce punctual, static points of optical attachment.

Different considerations can be drawn from this. What deserves emphasis in the first instance is the way in which an interest in relational movement flows into and shapes these paintings. This preoccupation is there in the magazine article quoted by Banham and taken up by Hamilton, in which the driver in the automobile is imagined in terms of a stationary position encircled and enraptured by movement. And it is there in the way that Hamilton, reflecting on Marcel Duchamp's *Nude Descending a Staircase*, developed his own formulation of the distinction between Cubism and Futurism: 'Cubism was, ostensibly, about spectator motion in relation to a static subject. Futurism was about subject motion in relation to a static observer'.[34] In 1953 and 1954, prior to his *Man, Machine and Motion* exhibition, Hamilton undertook a series of studies that explored the visual effects of relative movement. These included studies of still lifes, of the human form, and of high-speed machinic movement through a complex environment (his *Trainsition* studies and paintings). In the case of train movement, on which the latter were based, although the locomotive is moving at speed relative to a 'static' landscape, the observer's sedentary condition and the perceived differential mobilities of objects as a function of their visual distance produces an ambiguous sense of the animation of the machine being transferred into the landscape itself. It was almost as if Cubism, in the terms that Hamilton defined it, was transformed by machinic movement into Futurism.[35]

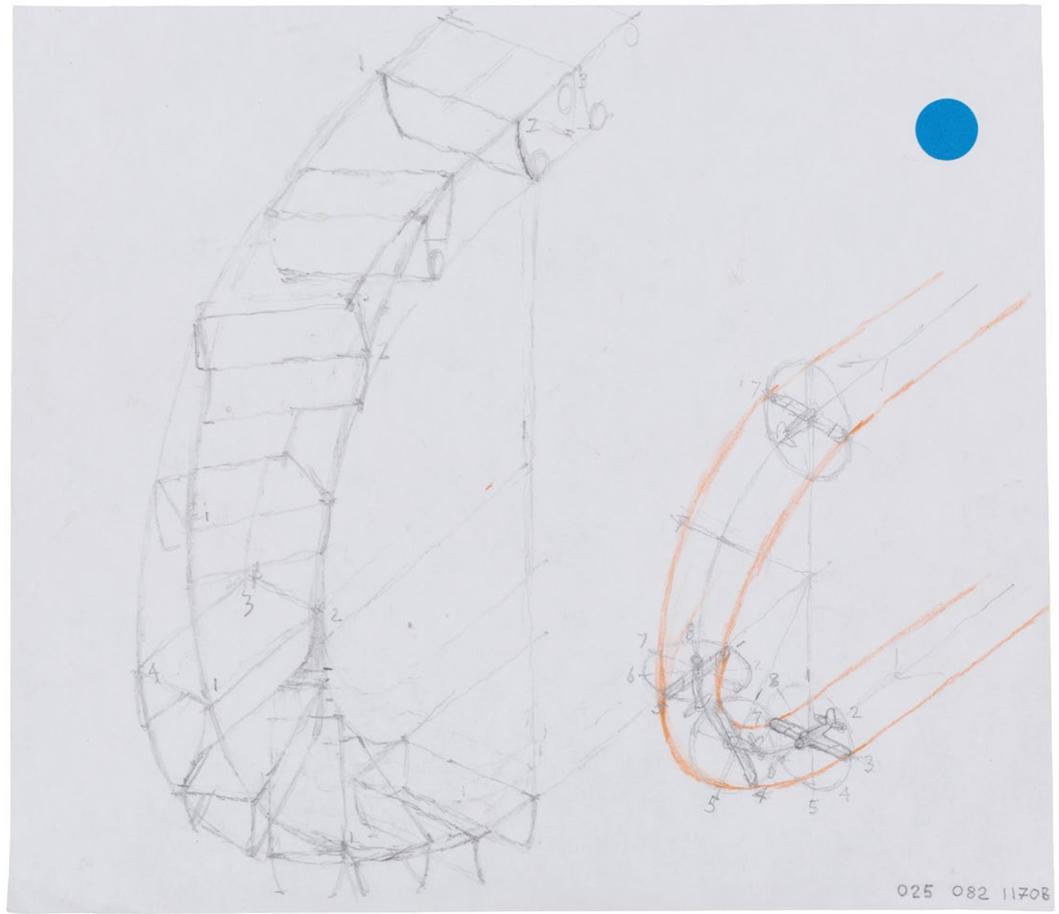
According to David Mellor, these studies by Hamilton were deeply influenced by *The Perception of the Visual World* (1950), the book by the American psychologist James J. Gibson, to which he had been introduced by fellow Independent Group member Lawrence Alloway.[36] Gibson's theories of perception had developed from his experiences during the Second World War in connection with the training of pilots for the US Navy – airmen who had to successfully land fast-moving planes on the deck of an aircraft carrier, a feat requiring the accurate estimation of distances while travelling quickly over a relatively undifferentiated, although patterned, surface. For Gibson, the high-velocity airborne experience of the pilot became the occasion for a general re-conceptualisation of how space is visually perceived. 'If our scientific conception of space perception was inapplicable to aviation', he wrote, 'what we need is a new theory rather than new evidence'.[37] This would entail swapping existing theory, which Gibson described as 'air theory' insofar as its theoretical preoccupations were to do with objects in space, with a new 'ground theory' underpinned by the hypothesis that 'there is literally no such thing as a perception of space without the perception of a continuous background surface'.[38] In developing his argument, Gibson made a further distinction between what he called 'the visual world' and 'the visual field'. The former he characterised as centreless and Euclidean, perceived in the round by mobile eyes that scan it, moving from point to point as 'a searchlight moves over the night sky'.[39] In the visual world, objects and their relative positions are attended to uncontaminated by perspectival distortion. The visual field, on the other hand, he described as 'a reasonably close correlate of the retinal image': 'ordinarily alive with motion', it is highly defined at its centre, losing clarity toward its edges.[40] Relatively devoid of depth, it exists as a kind of differentiated continuum – 'In the field as a projection [i.e. a projection onto the retina], the background is not different from the objects in the compelling way it is when you observe the [visual] world'.[41]

When he summarised his argument, Gibson did so in terms strikingly similar to the way that Hamilton would come to articulate his Cubism/Futurism opposition: 'Objects in the world have depth-shape and are seen behind one another, while the forms in the field approximate being depthless. In the field, these shapes are deformed during locomotion, as is the whole of the field itself, whereas in the world everything remains constant and it is the observer who moves'.[42] On this description, we can see a work like Hamilton's *Trainsition IIII* (1954) very specifically as an exploration of the visual field, with its point of focus in the middle distance and the surrounding visual continuum agitated and distorted by degrees of relative motion.

I have taken some time working through these precursors because such concerns with relational movement and the perceptual animation of static things are at the heart of the way in which Michael Webb has imagined, drawn and imagined drawing the Sin Centre. Unlike Littlewood's and Price's Fun Palace, a 'giant space mobile',[43] the Sin Centre – although it flexed and vibrated – did not move. And yet, it was a building intended to be experientially set in motion by the various devices of machinic movement that Webb's drawings constantly study and reassert. One of these is the looping escalator system, in which two runs – each with a complex rollercoaster-like trajectory – are placed alongside one another and organised in such a way that the return lengths, which would normally be hidden, are also rideable – allowing the whole thing to work like a kind of laterally arranged paternoster lift. This means that the treads at the terminal curves have to remain on the top surface instead of rotating to face downward as is normally the case. Webb's drawings show that he imagined achieving this by having the treads turn 180 degrees around a vertical axis as they looped around – which he graphically analogised to an aircraft performing a half roll while climbing (a procedure known as an 'Immelmann turn'), with the line of the escalator guide rails being defined by the trail of its wingtips.[44]

More significant still is the ramp arrangement that, although it forms a continuous circuit, spirals around two centres, between which straight runs switch back and forth – thus cars at different levels on the same spiral would be seen

Michael Webb
Escalator design for Sin Centre, Leicester Square (*c*.1980)
184 × 210 mm (7¼ × 8¼ in)



moving in opposing directions as each one contains both up and down ramps. By Webb's own account, a key reference here was Louis Kahn's Plan for Midtown Philadelphia, with its monumental drum-like parking silos – but what was surely most important was the extraordinary traffic circulation drawing (1952, and later published by Banham in *Megastructures*) showing vehicle flows indicated by streams of arrows, which at points spiral upwards off the urban surface into the parking structures.[45] Sometimes, Webb's drawings of the ramps are precise articulations of their morphology; at other times, they seem more to do with their material effects – as in the isometric study in graphite on airbrush board, which shimmers with metallic luminescence. Most importantly, the machinic assemblage of car and ramp is the principal device that sets the building in motion by inducing a sense of relational movement identical to that which we have just tracked via Hamilton and Banham. Webb writes of how he wanted the sense of driving right in, 'preferably much too fast; the sense of having the building spin around you as you negotiated corners; of entering it; of being absorbed by it.'[46] In this way, the driver's body – notwithstanding its subjection to the forces produced by the movement – becomes a kind of static point around which the building is violently animated.

In the libidinal autoculture of the Sin Centre, the car-ramp assemblage is a vehicle of gratification and experience (not just the high-speed driving, but the drive-in cinema, the 'necking,' etc).[47] And as it produces an intensified and accelerated mediation of the building that it itself so largely comprises, so it becomes a kind of auto-representational apparatus that is continually redrawing itself with every vehicle's journey. To think of a section, as Webb at one point does,[48] drawn along the centre line of the ramp, is to conceive one way of transcribing within a drawing the effects produced by a speeding car – with the uncoiling of the spiralling ramp producing degrees of compression, and elements of the building being multiplied and spatially redistributed as they are repeatedly encountered. What is being imagined here is one way that the deformations induced by the conditions under which something is perceived can be mapped back into the world to produce a new kind of object, which may be a drawing. This is an interest that would undergird and be further explored in Webb's later Temple Island study. To use J.J. Gibson's terms, we could say that, like Hamilton's *Trainsition* works, Webb's preoccupation is with the visual field and the experiential distortions manifested in it by motion – but also, ever increasingly, in the possibilities of the re-inscription of these into the visual world in order to develop imagined projective reconstructions of its objects. And this is presumably why, commenting recently on a perspectival view of the Sin Centre, Webb said that he felt so dissatisfied with it: 'it's so wrong to do that building in perspective…[it's] orthographic space, this building, not perspectival space'[49] – the point here surely being that perspectival construction presupposes an immobilised and monocular observer at a single fixed point whereas orthography leaves the situation of the viewer open and undetermined, and hence mobile.[50]

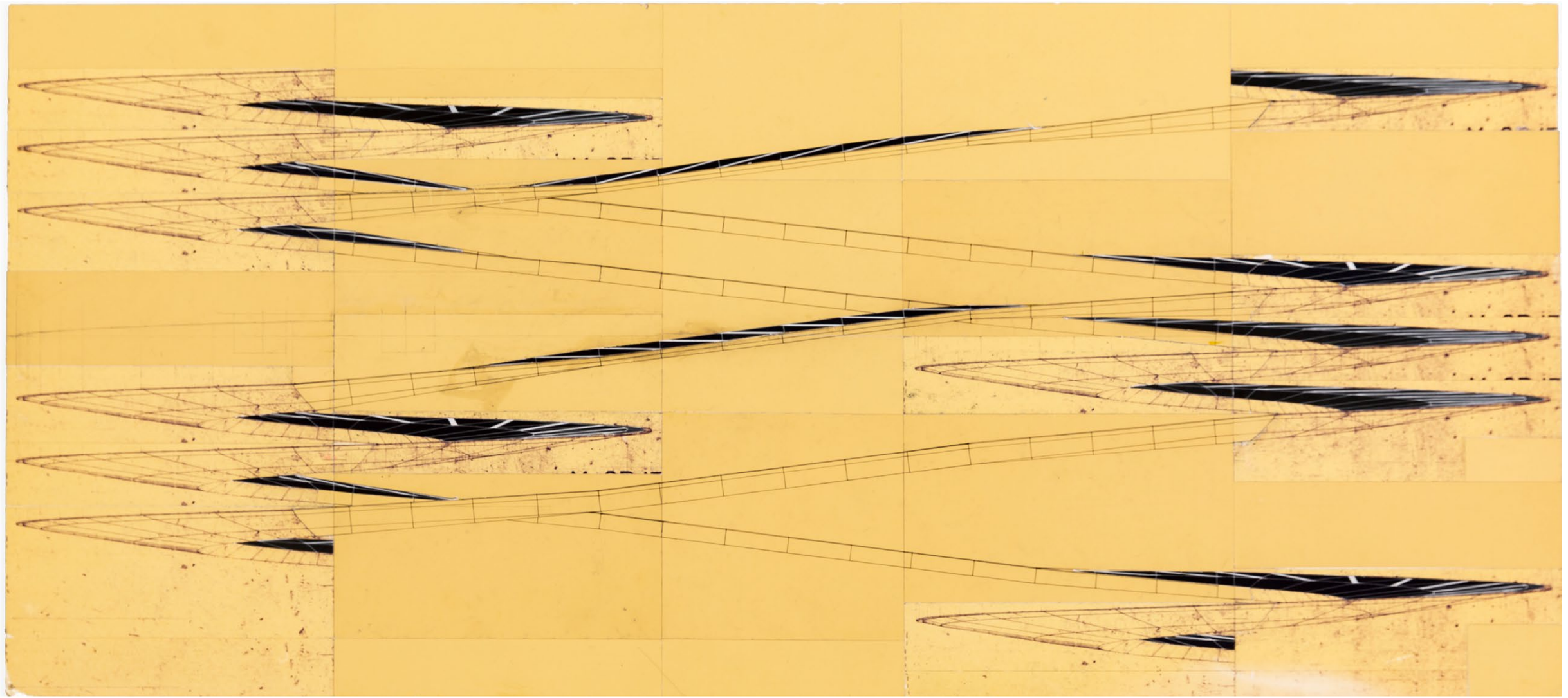
A last route that we might follow out of Hamilton's automobile paintings has less to do with relational movement than with the slippage of the eye, from point to point, across the pictorial surface. In paintings like *Hommage à Chrysler Corp* (1957) and *Hers is a Lush Situation* (1958), Hamilton worked directly from advertising materials in which the consumer object was enmeshed with the body of the female model that both presented it and, equally, was presented by it. This 'interplay of fleshy plastic, and smooth, fleshier metal'[51] was dependent to a large degree on the surface effects of product and picture, a zone in which the hyper-smooth surfaces of chrome and of car spray-paint met with those of the defectless airbrushed image. Describing the development of Hamilton's paintings in this period, Hal Foster has argued that they move from a situation in which there is an analogical relation between the parts of the female body and the commodity-object to one of an 'actual commingling' – a spatial blending, within which the 'line' of the car is implicated and across which the eye slides between points of intensity and attachment (fetishistic 'charged details,' Foster calls them – lips, elements of the car, etc., the things that we earlier described as static points within the field of the painting). Here, accounts of desire in terms of metonymic slippage meet with the sexualised commodity. Foster puts it thus:

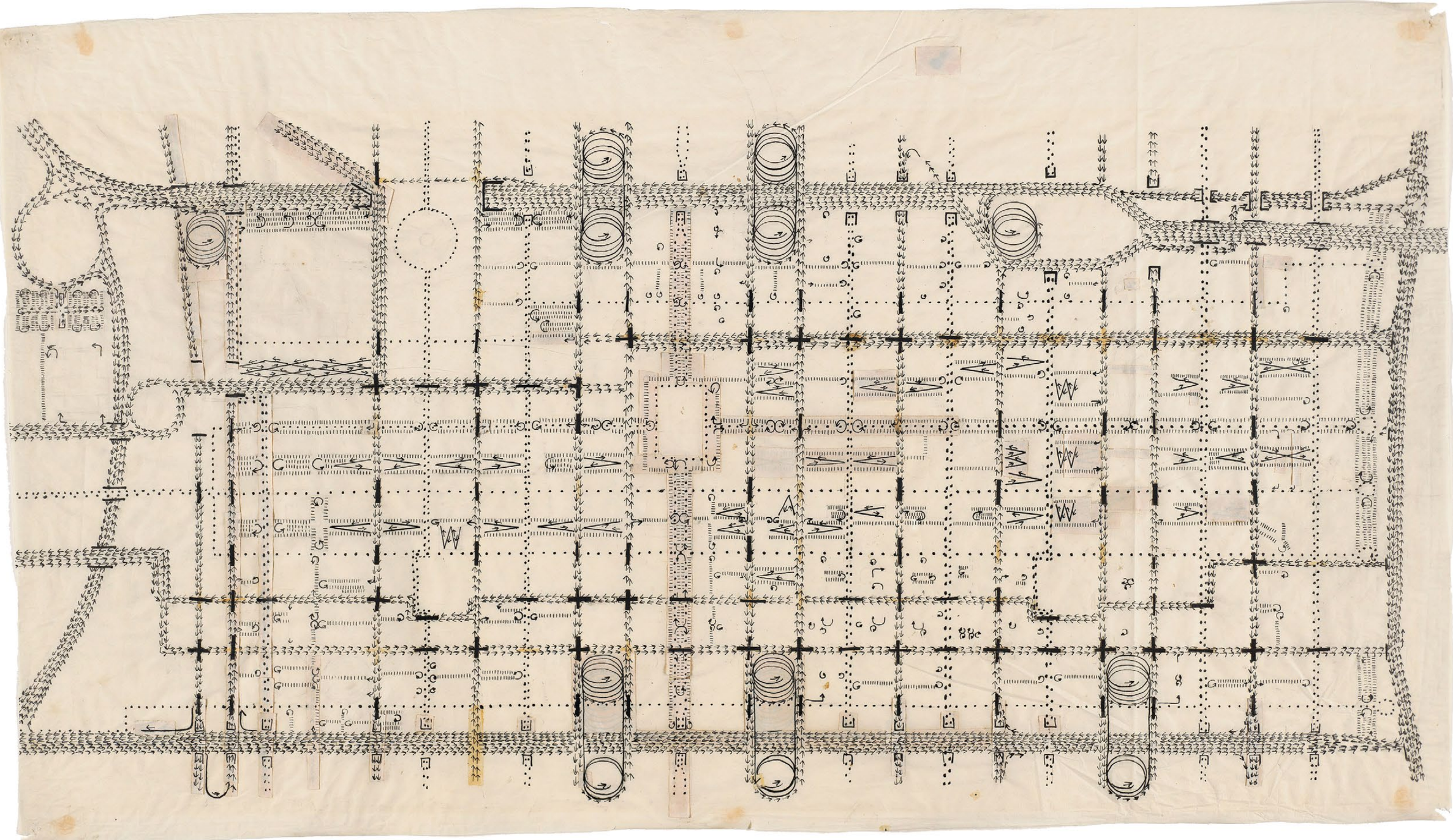
> Hamilton recognises that all these forms are reworked in the image of a general fetishism (commodity, sexual and semiotic), and he moves to exploit this new order… Painting allows for the requisite mixing not only of charged details with blended anatomies but also of the optical jumpiness of the subject with the erotic smoothness of the object; it is this unresolved combination that makes his early paintings both pull apart and hold together.[52]

Thinking back to Jencks's earlier intuition, might we consider the Sin Centre as realising a sort of architectural analogue to this? Certainly, this is a description – of a kind of space or of a relation to it – that suggests a way of thinking about

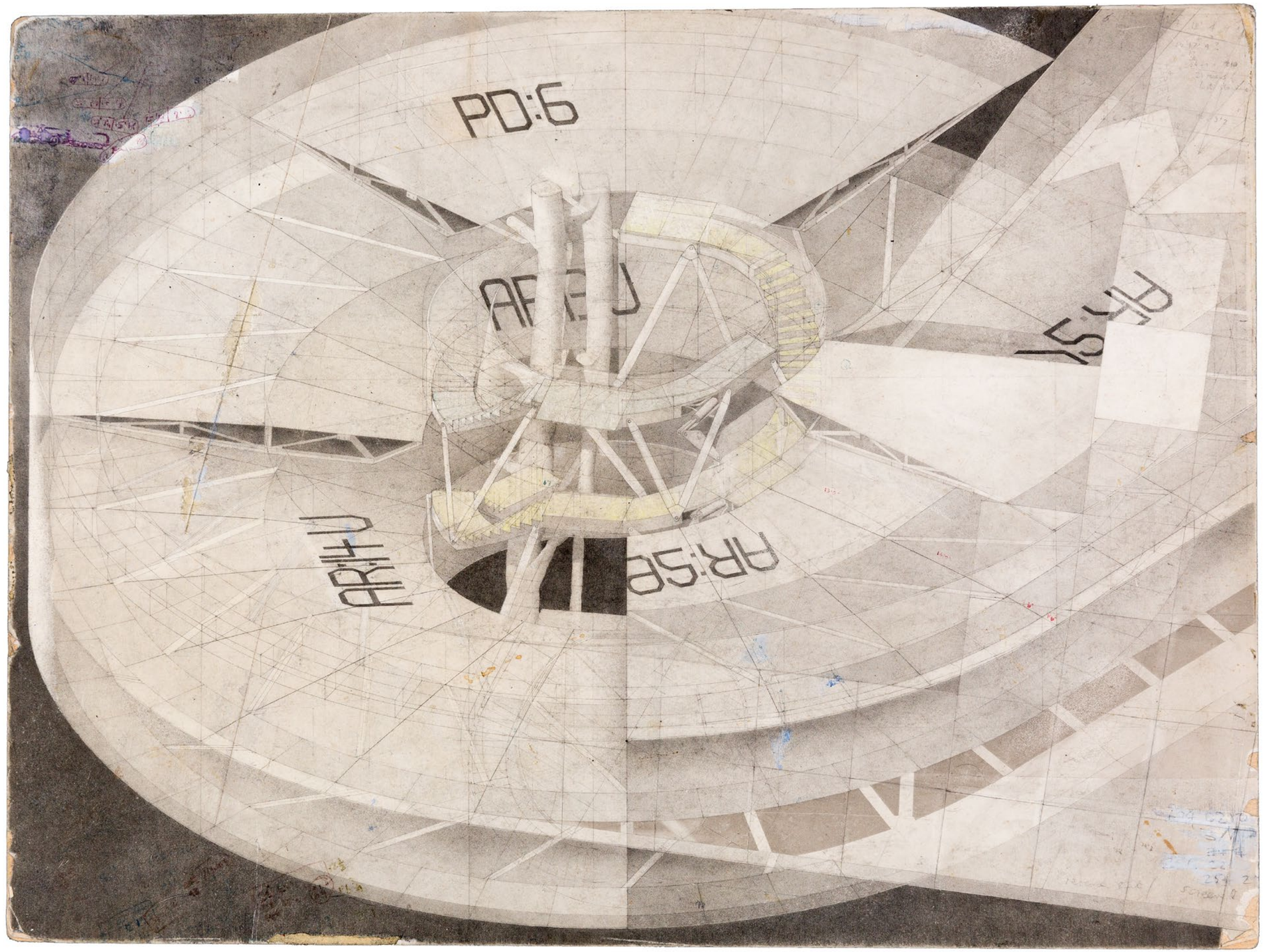
Michael Webb
Car ramp elevation for Sin Centre, Leicester Square (1970–90)
Blackline prints on illustration board
340 × 764 mm (13 ⅜ × 30 in)

Following spread: Louis I. Kahn
Traffic Study project, plan of proposed traffic-movement pattern, Philadelphia (1952)
Ink, graphite and cut-and-pasted papers on paper
622 × 1086 mm (24 ½ × 42 ¾ in)





the project, one that understands it in terms of the interplay between its smooth surfaces of spatial continuity and its fetish-objects of punctual optical attachment. If we can understand the ramp system, the escalators and the plastic roof canopy – whose material designation acts as a kind of code for the spatial condition that it encompasses below – in terms of the former, then the latter, the 'charged details', are supplied by the cars themselves. Although spatially distributed by the ramp's smooth surfaces across which they – and indeed, in Webb's drawings, our eyes – slide, the vehicles are at the same time specifically subject to conditions of tight restraint that the system is set up to impose. Recall here Webb's idea that the cars would be packed so tightly in their parking spaces at the ramp edges that they would appear as a kind of continual structure, fixed and spatially restrained in order to be viewed: 'I used to love looking at the American freight trains carrying all those new cars together. It was almost like a continuous pressed metal skin that changed colour every time there was another car. I wanted masses of cars tightly parked together. I didn't want spaces in between.'[53] What is aimed at here is the perceptual merging of the separate vehicles to form a continuous structure. But this emphasis on proximity also carries the inference of an intimate closeness to the body and perhaps a moulding to, or even merging with, it – the sort of phantasmatic anatomical blending present in Hamilton's paintings. Indeed, of his later Drive-In House project Webb would write: 'Imagine sitting in one's car parked inside an all pressed-metal garage while wearing a suit of armour. No longer to be viewed as three concentric but related skins, the possibility of close, even intimate connections between them maybe presents itself to the unruly mind.'[54] At the same time, in relation to these plasticities, the spatial compaction of the cars in the Sin Centre would entail a foregrounding of the kind of metonymic figurative components – headlamps, grilles, tail lights, fenders, etc. – that so preoccupied Hamilton and that, with the melding of the vehicles, would now appear as isolated and detached from the morphology of the individual machines within which they had been hitherto embedded.



Michael Webb
Isometric view of the car ramp for Sin Centre, Leicester Square (1965–2007)
Graphite on airbrush board
397 × 530 mm (15 5/8 × 20 7/8 in)