This issue is about British High-Tech—with some emphasis on the underacknowledged role of the structural engineer in shaping these thoroughbred buildings. Since the departure of Renzo Piano the AR has had a rather ambivalent attitude to High-Tech—impressed by the buildings as objects, but with reservations about them as humane architecture or urban model. Peter Buchanan’s essay traces the development of British High-Tech and assesses its relevance to architecture generally, concluding with a similar ambivalence. High-Tech is of course a term many architects reject. They dislike its largely American connotations as a mere aesthetic—introducing artefacts designed only for industrial use into home and office—and/or they resent the implication of being interested in technology alone, to the exclusion of other architectural concerns. Nevertheless High-Tech remains a useful and apt label to characterise a particular approach to architecture in which high-technology inspires the imagery of the building as much as being used in its production and assembly process. A few British architects practice this approach with a degree of seductive finesse found nowhere else. This does not mean that those forms make more rational, economic, efficient or even innovative use of high-technology than architects elsewhere. Indeed Buckminster Fuller, Jean Prouvé, Renzo Piano and Frei Otto and his collaborators arguably succeed in these terms better than anybody else. But the British place a priority on, and achieve, a visual magic and conviction (frankly often by eliminating or purely aesthetic grounds eminently suitable High-Tech forms and materials—such as plywood or cardboard) that for these others is more of an occasional and coincidental product of their approach.

The Industrial Revolution started in Britain. Ever since, a large section of its male population has been obsessed with machines and their performance, particularly with cars, trains and aeroplanes. The curious phenomenon of the train-spotter is still very common, and until recently Meccano sets and Eagle comic’s explanatory cut-aways of modern machines1 were part of most boys’ upbringing. Whether or not the same thing is now happening. Until recently similar ideals informed High-Tech. Closing the circle, there are those who see today’s High-Tech shed sitting in countryside or industrial park as the modern equivalent to Paxton or Burton’s greenhouses in their parkland setting, and so quintessentially English.2

What we now think of as the British High-Tech movement started in London’s architectural schools in the late ’50s—nearly a decade before the first actual buildings appeared. First at the Regent Street Polytechnic and then at the Architectural Association, from which issued respectively the magazines Polytech and Archigram, a few student designs exploited modern materials such as gyp, sprayed concrete, curved and suspended clear plastic, and pressed steel to reinvigorate architecture with a new formal vocabulary that was as much vitalistic—suggestive of organic or animate life—as technological. This was the period of ‘Bowelles’ in which the tubes of modern servicing and circulation came to the surface of the building and of buildings wrapped in insect or armadillo-like carapaces. From these vitalist origins Archigram moved to more mechanistic forms and built such as the one for Boots at Beeston an exact and inspiring forerunner to the best of High-Tech. After the Second World War lessons of design and organisation learnt during it were applied in the system-built schools movement initiated in Nethertoditches. A limited set of components allowed speed, economy and flexibility and an aesthetic of bright, cheerful interiors and crisply repetitive exteriors. Until recently similar ideas informed High-Tech. Closing the circle, there are those who see today’s High-Tech shed sitting in countryside or industrial park as the modern equivalent to Paxton or Burton’s greenhouses in their parkland setting, and so quintessentially English.2

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