

# ESALA

Edinburgh School of Architecture & Landscape Architecture



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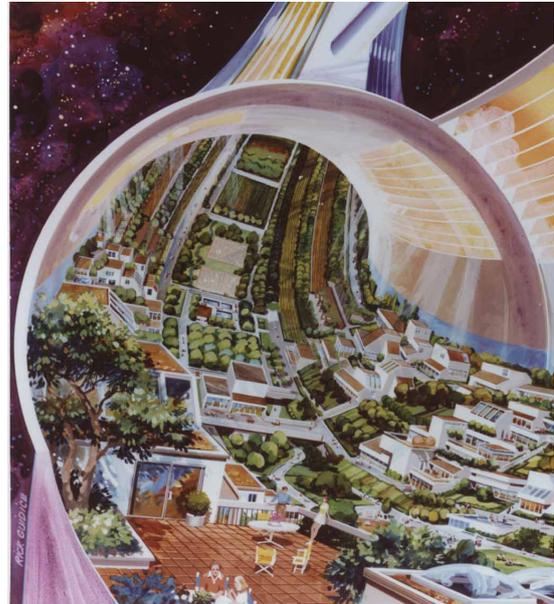
## ESALA Xmas Seminar

**\*with wine & mince pies\***

**Friday, 29th November, 2013  
at 5.00pm**

**The Elliot Room,  
Minto House,  
20 Chambers Street**

**Mark Dorrian  
Forbes Chair of Architecture  
ESALA**



## **Cold War Atmospherics: Ecology Encapsulation and Catastrophe** ***The case of Gerard K O'Neill's Space Colonies***

This paper reflects on one of the most extraordinary manifestations of Cold War technoculture, the space colonies proposal developed by the Princeton-based physicist Gerard K. O'Neill from the late-1960s onward. Responding to burgeoning environmentalist discourses of the period, but also to contemporary nuclear anxieties, O'Neill envisaged his proposal as a way of relieving competition for dwindling terrestrial resources – and obviating concomitant socio-political stresses – without having to relinquish a libertarian ideology and commitment to economic and territorial expansion. Looking back to the novel *Beyond the Planet Earth* by the Russian schoolmaster and scientist Konstantin Tsiolkowsky, many of whose ideas would reappear in his proposals, O'Neill projected his space colonies as multi-national collaborations. Yet at the same time their national-ideological dimensions were clear. Not only did O'Neill position them under the sign of the US constitutional right to the pursuit of happiness, but popularized them through a rhetoric of the 'high frontier', thus locating them within a peculiarly American narrative of expansion and endeavour. Moreover, the fact that the space colonies were imagined as so-many proliferating near-autonomous living environments aligned them with countercultural distaste for centralized power and administrative structures and allowed them to be posited as creative zones for experiments in forms of living. Thus collectively they could be seen as a "kind of America in the skies" (Carl Sagan) or as installations in the new "Outlaw Zone" of space (as the founder of the *Whole Earth Catalog* and *Co-Evolution Quarterly*, and avid space colony enthusiast, Stewart Brand – citing Buckminster Fuller – put it).

Mark Dorrian holds the Forbes Chair in Architecture at the University of Edinburgh and is currently a visiting professor at Tianjin University, China, and at Arkitektskolen Aarhus, Denmark. His co-edited book on the cultural history of the aerial view, *Seeing From Above*, has recently been released, and a volume of his collected essays, titled *Writing on the Image: Architecture, the City and the Politics of Representation*, will be published by IB Tauris in 2014. He has recently collaborated with the artists Tracy Mackenna and Edwin Janssen on a project on Voltaire's *Micromegas*, and with Etienne Turpin on the collection *Architecture in the Anthropocene: Encounters Among Deep Time, Design, Science and Philosophy*. He is currently working on the political history of air-conditioning, and on a pamphlet on robotic weapons (*Welcome to the Dronosphere*) for the RETORT collective. The paper that Mark will present in this seminar is related to work that he has been doing with John Beck on post-catastrophic utopias.