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**“The only architecture will be our life” – or the tale of it.
Narrative issues in the production of Superstudio**

Abstract

This essay investigates the use of narrative in the production of Superstudio, considering the projects in which this aspect emerges the most. The use of narrative seems to increase during the development of the group's career: designs tend to look more and more like novels, until they become proper ones at the end after renouncing any possible idea of shape of the design itself, which in turn is dissolved into an architecture made of events and rituals, perfect subjects for a wide number of possible tales. After fifty years, the subject of narrative is surfacing again in the field of architecture: is it possible to recognize a continuity between contemporary storytelling and the one of Superstudio? Otherwise, are we facing a different scenario, even an opposite one?

Keywords

Superstudio — narrative — critical utopia.

This essay aims to investigate a particular aspect of the production of Superstudio¹, which until today hasn't been subject of any specific dissertation: the role that narrative – intended as proper *tale* – played inside the production of the Florentine group². I will deeply analyze this aspect in the middle part of this text, before doing it I intend to search for a partial reason of this use of narrative, which is not unique in the course of architecture history, but certainly is not that recurrent: in this first part some similarities with other examples amongst the discipline will be underlined, as well as some other episodes will be analyzed through the looking glass of narrative.

Proceeding with order, I believe that this insertion of a narrative factor in the design must be ascribed to two different origins, the first linked to the cultural and social framework in which the group moved, the latter inherent in the very nature of its components. The production of Superstudio took place during the second wave of avant-garde that have marked the course of the twentieth century. This was created by an heterogeneous collective of groups and individuals that have eventually contributed to a critical rethinking of architecture by inserting previously excluded themes and methods with regard to its task and its horizon of meaning. The approximate chronological limits of this phenomenon, often defined as Neo-avant-garde, can be placed between the second half of the 50s and the first half of the 70s. According to the present discussion, among those set in motion by the various protagonists, one in particular seems to be the aspect on which we have to dwell: the changing role of the architectural project. In fact, we can witness a sort of unprecedented shift of the values of “means” and “goal” within the design, which lead to a distortion of the usual sense

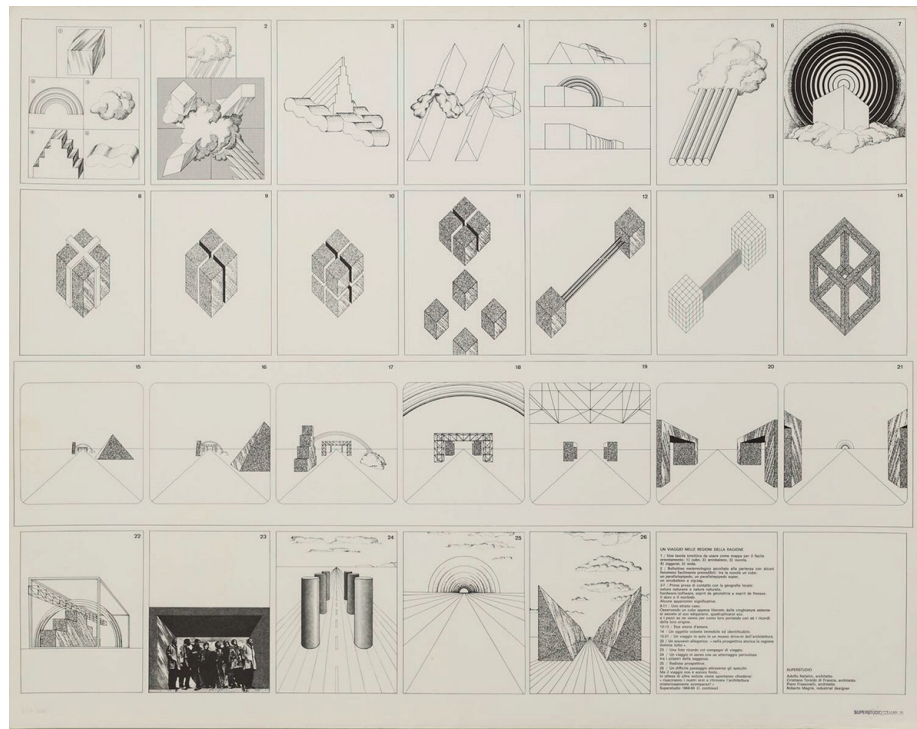


Fig. 1
Superstudio, Viaggio nelle regioni della ragione, 1969.

of architecture. In other words, if the most common “goal” of architectural composition was the construction of an architecture, or an investigation of architecture itself as construction, this system of relations in the production of Neo-avant-garde changed radically, in favor of a diverse vision, within which architecture is a “means”, in this case a *critical* one. From this perspective many episodes of the era find reason for being, justifying aspects that otherwise would be deemed lacking: if the architectural project had become a critical device, then the actual constructibility, the realism of environments, details, technological devices and so on became off topic, issues of little relevance, or not relevant at all, being, as they were, overwhelmed by the purpose of a whole composition addressed to criticism. This criticism took the form of a profoundly antagonistic, often negative position, thanks to the socio-political climate of the time and the young age of the protagonists: it remains to be understood what the object of this position was. These were the years in which the critical interrogation was strongly present in almost every field of culture: its parameters, practices and preconceptions were deeply challenged. In the case of the young Neo-avant-garde groups, the issues were often the same that most of the young Europeans carried out: political and social antagonism towards the world of the near past as well as to the contemporary one, denial of that technical, technological and consumeristic world that seemed to be looming on the horizon³. This future, this world of tomorrow, revealed itself as one of the sharpest weapons before the eyes of the various protagonists: architecture thus had become a means of telling a new and different universe, capable of exposing and bringing out those contradictions that capital seemed to intrinsically trigger, only to suppress and smooth just afterwards.⁴ “Imagining a different future” was a way - albeit brief - to say: “to make utopia”. Yet this “utopia making” of the Neo-avant-garde showed itself to be profoundly different from the episodes of the past, since that prefiguration of the future, as mentioned, was a critical means: the worlds that arose from the designs of the various groups were not utopian scenarios - and therefore desirable - but mechanisms that allowed an antagonism towards

the present, a denial of its values. In this way they sometimes took on the form of wholly undesirable, horrible places. This semantic difference with respect to classical utopia has led to the coinage of the term *critical utopia*. Whatever its specificity, utopia and narrative are deeply related since the birth of the original model, that Utopia⁵ – capitalized, this time – which is the tale of a journey towards a far but reachable island, albeit with some difficulties. The binomial utopia-tale is justified by the undoubted communicative efficacy of the second factor: through narration it is certainly easier to transmit concepts and principles, by relying not only on the content aspect, but also on the emotional one. Utopia, communication and architecture do not meet for the first time in the Neo-avant-garde, and there are previous examples, among whose it is worth briefly highlighting two episodes, one more direct – the eighteenth-century French utopians – and one that can be interpreted according to this point of view – the Modern Movement. In the first example the term “speaking” architecture is often used: architecture not only prefigures the image of a new world, but also fulfills the role, through various expedients, of communicating to the viewer the symbolic, civil and revolutionary principles. Also with regard to the Modern, we can recognize a similar aspiration, perhaps even more radical: the modern city not only intends to fulfill the new tasks imposed by a mutating society, different from the past, but communicates in its own way, more or less clear, the utopia of a new world, of a different society, more just, efficient and above all egalitarian, a society that is not that of the present, but of the immediate future. If we can not speak in a strict sense of narrative meant as a narrative plot, it is certain that in both cases we are dealing with an architecture that is also communication, and that of communication, returning now to the Neo-avant-garde period, was certainly a very important theme for the various protagonists: essential studies had emerged on the subject⁶, there was a constant expansion of the mass media and their coverage, and most of the groups were dedicated to the drafting of independent bulletins⁷ or regularly published onto official magazines.⁸ Architecture as a critical tool, utopia, communication: in the light of what has been said so far, it is understandable how the dimension of the tale has played an important role in the Neo-avant-garde production, and how a considerable quantity of projects showed non-negligible narrative aspects. One could dwell here with numerous examples⁹, but we would go too far from the main theme of this text, exclusively focused on Superstudio; the latter, however, will in itself constitute an argument in favor of what was previously stated. As announced, in contributing to the appearance of narrative issues related to the architectural project, in the case of the Florentine group to the environmental circumstances so far disjointed are added factors related to the education and the interests of the various components. Although Superstudio was a heterogeneous group if we consider the cultural journey of the individual protagonists¹⁰, they were united by a common passion for science fiction¹¹, above all the sociological one, which can be read in Italy on the pages of *Urania*: as we shall see, its influence is detectable in texts and images. We can appreciate how the typical predisposition to communication, criticism and narration of the Neo-avant-garde is supported in the case of Superstudio by a personal passion for the future as narration.

I will now proceed to a quick overview of the works, in order to demonstrate how the narrative dimension acquired more and more importance with the progress of the group’s production over time; for the sake of brev-

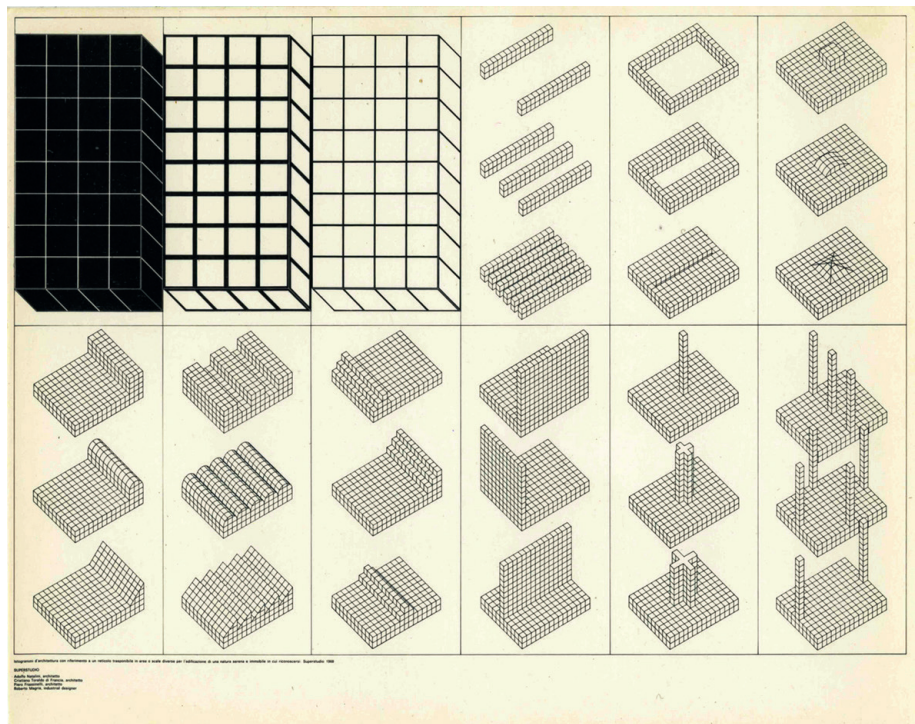


Fig. 1
Superstudio, *Istogrammi*, 1970.

ity I will not consider all the works, but those that more than others allow a clear reading in this sense.

During 1969, on the pages of *Domus*¹², the group published *Un viaggio nelle regioni della ragione*, a work that inaugurated the use of a strategy of representation that will be often used by Superstudio, inherited from the world of cinema: that of the storyboard, that is to say a series of images representing a chronological sequence of events. In this case the document is configured as a systematization of some drawings and projects, conceived by the group since 1966: instead of opting for graphic tools such as charts or synoptic tables, the Florentines inserted what they produced in a narrative frame, in a sort of development over time. Being heterogeneous starting projects, the result was a story with dreamlike, psychedelic colors, within which the projects themselves move as characters, partly distorting their primal sense and abandoning any limit of scale or material. It is sometimes easier to recognize the consequential description of simple primary compositional processes, such as that linked to the subdivision of the cube, a very important solid in the composition of Superstudio¹³, while in other cases the logical and chronological connections seem more complex to interpret. What is important in the present essay is how in this case we can recognize a first episode within which a clear narrative appeared in the group's production: it had assumed a cardinal role, on the one hand it was constituted as a poetic justification of previous compositional processes, on the other it modified and broadened the field of meaning. The narrative aspect is in this case mainly linked to the iconographic component, the short accompanying texts seem to be placed on a further interpretative plane, suspended between poetry and irony, and when read without images they seem difficult to understand, especially with regard to causal and chronological relationships. The document does not seem to show a single sequence, but different scenes, juxtaposed without interruption, some of which are limited to a single still frame.¹⁴

A passion for narrative also accompanied one of the short texts related to the project for the *Istogrammi di architettura*: the tone is almost reveal-

ing, biblical, the use of past tense is preferred¹⁵, however the thing seems to be more a stylistic and poetic expedient, rather than a compositional mechanism. The text moved towards territories which became typical of the group's second phase of activity. After beginning very close to Anglo-Saxon pop art¹⁶, Superstudio was heading towards a dreamlike realm, minimal and detached, made of *unique designs*, non physical architecture¹⁷, “effortless” composition and anthropological rites: a universe that will be fertile ground for the flourishing of much more complex narrations, as we will see later.

Analogous tones to those used for the *Istogrammi* can be found in the writing relative to the *Grazerzimmer*¹⁸, which started the planning process of the famous *Monumento continuo*. In the text *Lettera da Graz*, published on *Domus*¹⁹, the preparation of the exhibition to which Superstudio was invited to participate - and in which they exposed just a small portion of what becomes later the *Monumento* - is described in a narrative way with fabulous or legendary tones²⁰, as if it were the point of arrival of a trip. Once again, the narrative does not enter into the composition, but accompanies the results. It is precisely with the *Viadotto di architettura* and then the *Monumento continuo* that we witness a breakthrough in this sense. The first images of the gigantic building show a sort of implicit chronological relationship regarding the contents, in other words they seem different, chronologically arranged phases of the same story: the first photomontage of the *Monumento* shows its emerging from the desert sands, as in an act of birth, and then we see it plowing the desert, the English cocktowns, Medina, and then land in the great metropolis *par excellence*, New York City. Notice how the hypothetical movement of the building is not only placed within a geographic consequentiality, but also a chronological one, as if it were an ancient, ancestral element. A typescript of 1969 includes a first storyboard, from which we can appreciate an increase in the narrative dimension inherent in the project: compared to *Un viaggio nelle regioni della ragione*, it is a larger and more homogeneous document, within which the consequentiality of the events is much easier to follow than the previous one. On the one hand it provides a reconstruction of the design genesis, on the other it helps to clarify poetic and compositional issues. A sequence of 92 frames leads us through various scenes: in the one we could recognize as the first, characterized by an argumentative and didactic slant, we face a sort of *prequel*, in which we reflect on geometry and measurement, read as elements of cosmic order, and therefore agents of peace and tranquility for the restless humanity. From the seventeenth frame things change, and we enter into the vividness of the story, with the dreamlike vision of a pure black cube emerging from the desert sands, then bandaging and partitioning in the same way seen in *Un viaggio nelle regioni della ragione*. The operation that comes to life in the third scene is quite similar: we recognize frames that refer to the same document, in this case drawings that describe a journey inside a “museum / drive in of architecture”. Other scenes follow one another, *Come arredare il deserto*, *Come illuminare il deserto*, until reaching a nodal point of the story in images: the group of events called *Le apparizioni*. In this quintet we witness deeply dreamlike sequences, enigmatic and dense scenes with a symbolic charge, in which references to the black square of Malevic and supersonic jets coexist; it is the fifth of them that leads the narration towards the *Monumento continuo*, in fact at its conclusion the point of view changes radically, moving away from the desert to embrace the entire planet Earth. Slowly, the im-

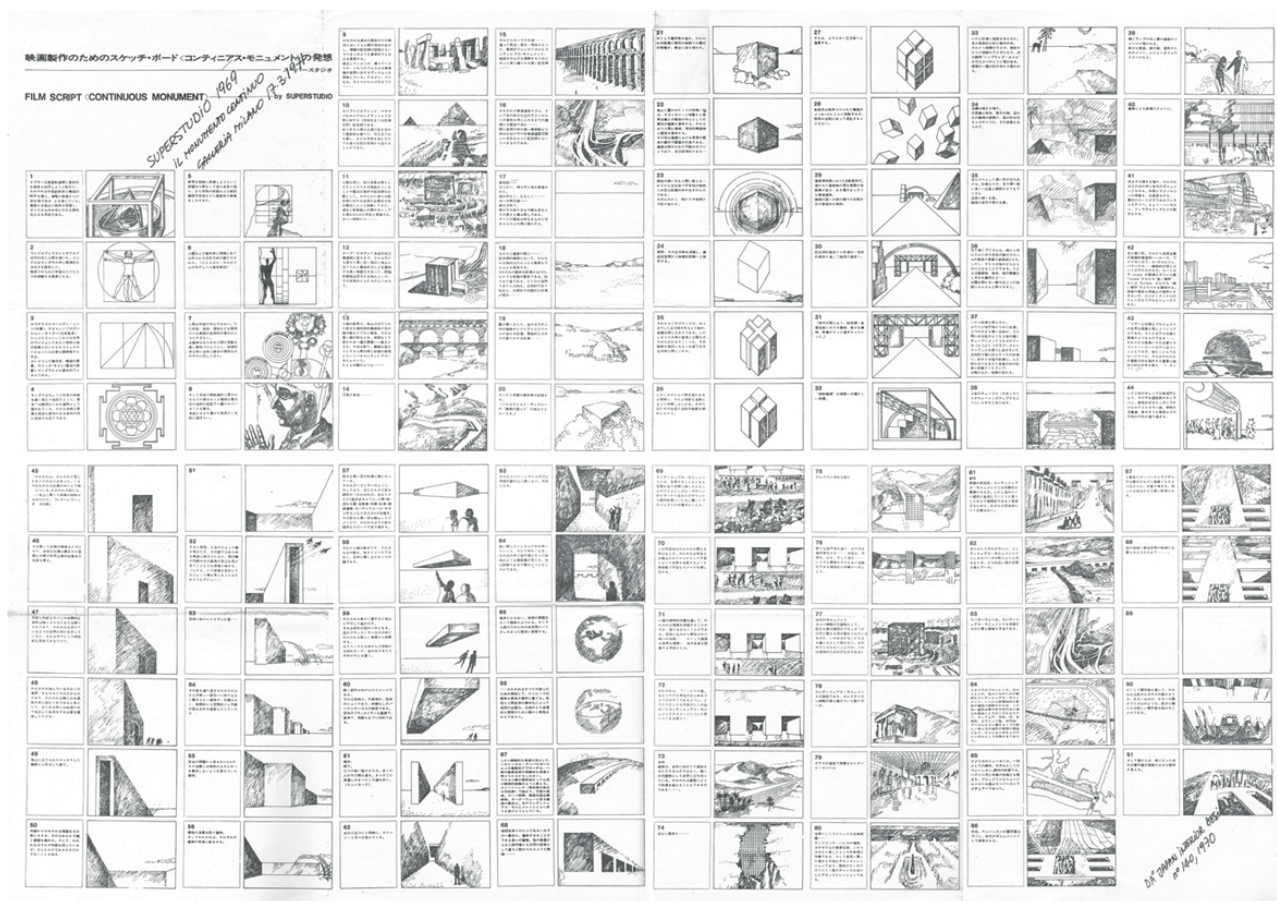


Fig. 3
Superstudio, storyboard del Monumento continuo, 1970.

age tightens towards the ground and two lines, at the height of the tropics, seamlessly draw the surface of the planet, showing themselves as a single element, a unique design, a monument of cyclopic scale which is synthesis and final model of all those appearances seen in the previous sequences: in picture 67 it is interrupted, giving us back the idea of an element in rectilinear movement - and therefore a *rational* one in the Florentines' vision²¹ - whose ultimate aim is that planetary embrace foreshadowed in the frame before. We zoom in and see the monument retrace more precisely that path in space and time of which we have spoken previously; the building is inserted first in the nature, then it affects and replaces the great monuments of the past, and finally reaches the great monument of modernity: the new city, the American metropolis, now outdated and reduced to "a bunch of ancient skyscrapers" by the *Monumento continuo*. We can here understand how narrative was assuming an important role in the design process of the group: without it, a considerable part of the images would not be exhaustive at all to reconstruct and justify the poetic and compositional level. After having investigated *non-physical architecture* and the *unique design*, the attention of the group deviated towards an ever greater dematerialization of the architecture itself, in favor of a renewed interest regarding its anthropological origin. This was the premise of the heterogeneous collection entitled *Atti fondamentali*, a five-films project, five "chapters", not all realized, precisely dedicated to those anthropological acts, which were recognized as generative both of architecture and of human life in a broader sense: *Vita, Educazione, Cerimonia, Amore, Morte* (Life, Education, Ceremony, Love, Death). A heterogeneous collection, it has been said: different are indeed the types of document that should contribute to the making of films, such as critical texts, images, storyboards and narrations, which, in this case, take the shape of proper tales. Sometimes it is possible to detect an absence of continuity, for example what begins as a critical text or a pseudo-technical essay can suddenly turn into a story. In the case of this document I will make a selection by focusing on passages that do not require overcomplicated treaties: there are numerous narrative examples present in the *Atti* that would require long reasoning, omitted here for brevity and relevance to the theme of this essay. Moreover, from the point of view of the sources, I will refer to the collection of works recently edited by Gabriele Mastrigli, which, from this point of view, certainly is the most complete text currently available.²²

Coming now to the *Atti*, *Casabella* published in 1972 the collection of texts that the group simultaneously presented at the MoMA in New York²³, concerning the first of the five macro-themes that make up the operation, *Vita: Supersuperficie*. This project - one of the most iconic and well-known of the group - will be analyzed in more detail in comparison to the other chapters of the document, precisely in the light of this greater notoriety. The *Supersuperficie* stands as an "alternative model"²⁴ of existence on planet Earth: accompanying the very well-known images, photomontages and installations, and also as commentary track on the explanatory video, there are texts of particular interest, characterized by that ease in change of register which was previously asserted. On *Casabella*, as mentioned, we can read some conspicuous excerpts from the video storyboard; from the first programmatic and technical paragraphs, the text moves rapidly towards a narrative turn, we recognize how the images produced are nothing more than illustrations to real stories of a future that is more or less possible. Short passages like *La montagna lontana* or *L'accampamento*²⁵

seem like beginnings of tales whose continuation is given to the reader-spectator's imagination, to be stimulated by the fascinating images accompanying the text. In intense passages like *Cosa faremo*²⁶ the tone of voice changes again moving closer to the parable, the prophecy. It is worth underlining that narrative is no longer an accompaniment or a generative element of the architectural composition, but a substitute of it: *Supersuperficie* is the culmination of a reductive path on architecture, in favor of that Life (*Vita*) we find in the title, and in this sense it seems understandable how the technique of the story turns out to be much more useful to communicate this concept, effectively summarized in the well-known phrase "The only architecture will be our life".

If within *Vita* we have been able to recognize various moments of narration - or pseudo-narration, this aspect is even more present in the second chapter, the one dedicated to education: following two introductory texts, we come across a series of possible stories. The first is actually a meta-history, a sort of project for a story, entitled *Una vita intera* (A Whole Life): within it we encounter the idea of making a film, a very long one lasting as long as a person's life cycle, characterized by didactical and educational purposes. The second story is a fake conference - held by an element of Superstudio - concerning life and works of the fictional architect Almerigo Baccheschi: the tone is farcical, ironic and sometimes cynical. The technique of fake conference, with similar tones, is also present in another passage, entitled *Un esempio di cerimoniale* (An example of ceremonial), in which we find ourselves attending a hypothetical congress of ethnology: Italy is a country inhabited by "indigenous people" that must be studied. The mechanism put in place by the story is all in all simple but effective, according to an ironic critique of the education world in the Italian country: the school career is in fact figured and interpreted as a series of initiation rites, the education itself is painted as something related to a tribal world, in which Greek and Latin are nothing but "archaic dialects".

Proceeding to the third chapter of the *Atti*, dedicated to ceremony, we are faced with various stories that again seem to be based on fictitious ethnologies: *Quelli che non alzano i muri e sono felici*, *Los esclavos*, *Il grande pellerinaggio*, *Un rito espiatorio*, *Gli uomini che vollero il deserto*, *Un edificio per una cerimonia sconosciuta* (Those who do not raise walls and are happy, Los esclavos, The great peeling, A rite of expiation, The men who wanted the desert, A building for an unknown ceremony). Because of the vastness of the issues addressed, this collection would need a separate treatment, in this case I simply intend to point out how these six ethnological stories actually turn out to be harsh criticisms - in the form of metaphors - addressed to some of the practices of design and commercial architecture, together with some typical mechanisms set in motion by capitalism.

In the fourth chapter, dedicated to love, all writings make use of narrative fiction: we encounter a series of short stories within which, in an original way regarding the document, the image of an infamous "macchina innamoratrice" (a love-creating machine) appears. A particularly interesting moment, in relation to this investigation, is recognizable in the passage entitled *Un edificio nella Giungla* (A Building in the Jungle), in whose frame we can recognize a sort of meta-history, a story that contains another; it is, moreover, one of the most focused parts of the document on architecture, now often abandoned in favor of critical positions involving larger specters of human existence. The story in question narrates the meeting with the architect of a building characterized by a high symbolic value, placed within

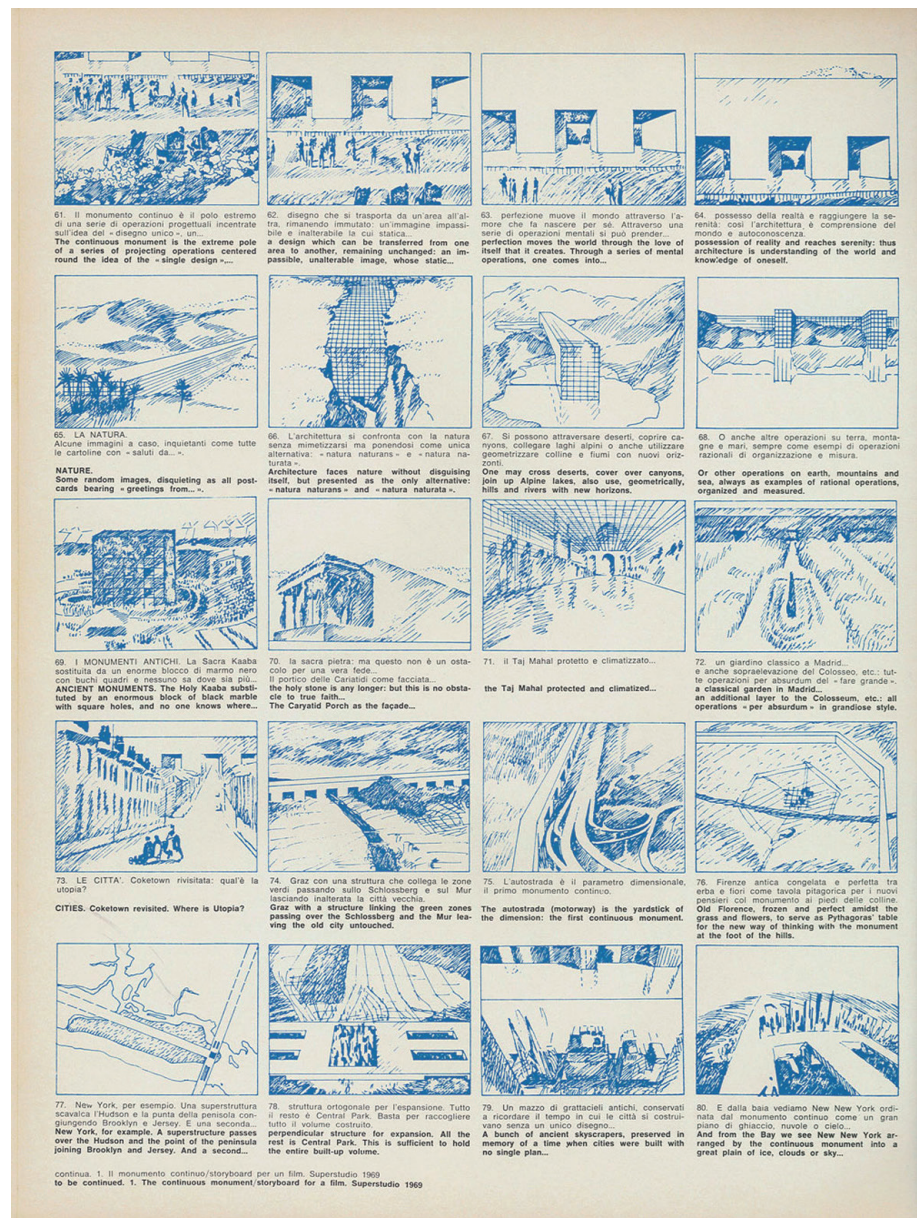


Fig. 4
Superstudio, storyboard del Monumento continuo, dettaglio, 1970.

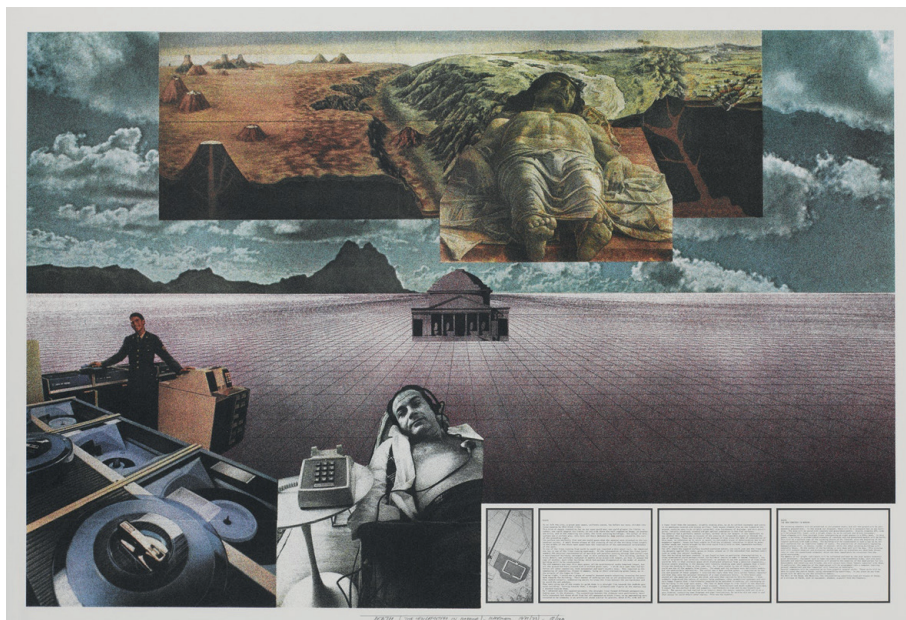
a vast clearing in the thick of a forest: the gigantic architecture is configured as a system of boxes in the box, in the form of parallelepiped. From the architect's words we learn how they represent successive phases of the construction of the building, in an inverse chronological movement in comparison to what we could presage: the central part, apparently ancient, ancestral, is in fact the most recent. The building is inhabited only by its designer and has been abandoned by its inhabitants, the story in the story - the words of the architect - proves to be a narrative tool capable of setting in motion a critical metaphor towards the architectural discipline, and this in terms of theory, history, composition and relationship with the client.²⁷ The last part, focused on death, begins with a typology of writing not yet encountered within the document, that is to say a catalog, a collection of what are the typical funeral uses of various parts in the world.²⁸ This is followed by other catalogs of quotes on death divided by subject area. I am interested in pointing out how - even in this case - narration is to be found in the passage *Morte, ovvero dell'immagine pubblica del tempo e della memoria* (Death, or the public image of time and memory). The tone of voice is that biblical and prophetic one we have learned to recognize in many of the previous examples, and even in this case we are faced with a

story within a story. The narrating voice is immersed in an unknown and surrealist environment,²⁹ which we understand to be a cemetery, or rather one of the models of cemetery now located along the entire surface of the planet, whose functioning is later comprehended through a sort of “sheet of instruction” by the protagonist³⁰ - precisely the story in the story we talked about. Here the colors of the tale are tinged with science fiction, what seemed like a mystical and symbolic world reveals itself as a utopistic satellite-based information technology, which is able to perpetuate the memory forever by turning the cemeteries into databases of deceased personalities and realizing at last a new and peaceful relationship with death. As for the aforementioned building jungle, this is one of the stories that still consider architecture as a focal point, and this tale shows references to the project drawn up by the group for the competition of the Modena cemetery³¹. It is true that in general, within this document, the architecture discipline seems to be put in background in favor of sociological issues: in this we can recognize not only the effectiveness but the necessity of the use of the narrative form as a means of communication capable to transmit more easily the desired concepts and the underpinning poetics. With this I intend to underline again how the story, as a compositional expedient, became an inevitable need in the late-middle phase of the group’s production. Intentionally I saved for last a document created shortly before *Atti*, between 1971 and early 1972, a document that can be recognized as the maximum point reached by the value of narrative in the production of Superstudio. Inside of it emerges a strong presence of architecture-related themes that, as seen before, often vanish at this stage. It is entitled *12 Città ideali* (12 ideal cities),³² a non-systematic collection³³ of twelve stories, dystopias³⁴ of future cities, written only by Gian Piero Frassinelli, “anthropologist” and internal critical front of the group. Each chapter describes a city, operating in a similar way to science fiction literature, in its most critical and sociological fringe: increasing a single aspect of contemporary, considered to be negative. In this sense, these cities of the future are nothing more than metaphorical hypertrophy of the modern cities, in which their complexity of coercions, contradictions and injustices is dissected and returned in an augmented and dramatically resolved form. Central are the themes of the technique - understood as a rule practice to be applied on a large scale to individual critical issues - and technology - seen as an element in the implementation of this technique: we are still facing architectures, about which are defined more or less precise operations and mechanisms, but these architectures resemble nothing but complex and highly effective torture machines. The collection is an inhomogeneous catalog of horrors in the form of architecture, interrogative visions and criticisms against a present that is seen as directed to the catastrophe. According to the author, this catalog is the only project of Superstudio that actually is originated by writings and not by images: this generated many difficulties in the creation of the graphic accompaniment³⁵. In a different occasion I have been able to deepen in detail the sum of themes, references and affinities that lie beneath the writing of the document³⁶, which I will cover here briefly, in order to demonstrate how, even in this case, the use of the narrative does not represent a stylistic choice but a compositional and design need, in a critical key. The images are not sufficiently effective to transmit the antagonistic drive that animates the whole document: consider, for example, the first city, easier to deal with here, entitled *Città 2000t*. From the images in our possession we obtain partial information of

Fig. 5
Superstudio, Atti fondamentali,
Vita: Supersuperficie, 1972.



Fig. 6
Superstudio, Atti fondamentali,
Morte, 1972.



its macroscopic configuration - a grid of cyclic order, potentially extensible to infinity in two dimensions - and microscopic one - a second grid, made up of single cells of which we also know the measurements. However, the illusory and at the same time repressive mechanism that regulates the city is not transmissible through the use of images: we learn from the story that this it is a complex *apparatus*³⁷, which applies a deeply coercive authority and control, exploiting the palliative of a eternal life, made of desires virtually fulfilled and renewed through a futuristic technology³⁸. In fact, the inhabitants live an infinite existence, in an induced hypnagogic state, without relationships with each other, connected to a central computer that analyzes and satisfies the desires, acting in a technical way, that is making the summation of them and re-transmitting the most common ones to all individuals. Technology is a mother, who takes care of the lives of her childrens: there is no effort, work, competition, but lack ambition, commitment, sharing. As a real divinity, what the city provides, can also be removed: when the thoughts and desires of an inhabitant are not aligned with those of the mass, the ceiling of his cell comes down, turns into a press with the weight of 2000 tons, that puts an end to the existence of any dissent.³⁹ It is not difficult to recognize in this project an harsh critical metaphor in the form of architecture, antagonistic towards the society of conformism, the desires induced by unbridled consumption, the repression - even violent - of dissent. The other scenarios of the document operate in a similar way, hurling against conformism, hierarchies and social climbing at all costs, alienating work, entertainment as a collective outpouring of violent instincts, immorality and self induced fiction.⁴⁰

Eventually, this concept of architecture as a critical tool, and not as ultimate purpose, emphasizes the effectiveness of the narrative in the work of Superstudio: the more the issues move away from disciplinary themes, embracing a transversal dimension, the more the narration acquires efficiency, for its greater communicative value. In the same years we can recognize a continuation of similar strategies in the work of Rem Koolhaas,⁴¹ an admirer of the group, however in Superstudio the narrative has undoubtedly reached an importance that few, or perhaps none, have managed to approach.

Nowadays, about fifty years later, we are witnessing a reappearance of themes related to narrative within architecture, and it makes sense to question ourselves, in the light of the contents so far treated, whether there is continuity, affinity or discrepancy between what is happening today and this previous disciplinary episode. As a first consideration, in several passages I have emphasized how narrative reveals itself as a very useful tool for the transmission of meaning, for *communication*, not only on the conceptual level but also on the poetic and emotional ones. We recognize here a first reason for today's adoption of the practice called *storytelling*: nowadays communication and emotion play roles often joined side by side, if not in rare cases superimposed, certainly important in a unique historical moment like ours. In this framework communication has become a precious product, and emotion is one of the most effective attracting elements within it. It seems that the narration has appeared or reappeared in the architectural discipline since *telling a story* has become important, more important than in the past. There is a parallel with the work of Superstudio: the inescapable necessity of the narrative; however, if the presence of this necessity is common, it's not obvious that the nature of it and its deep motivation are equally common. For the Florentine

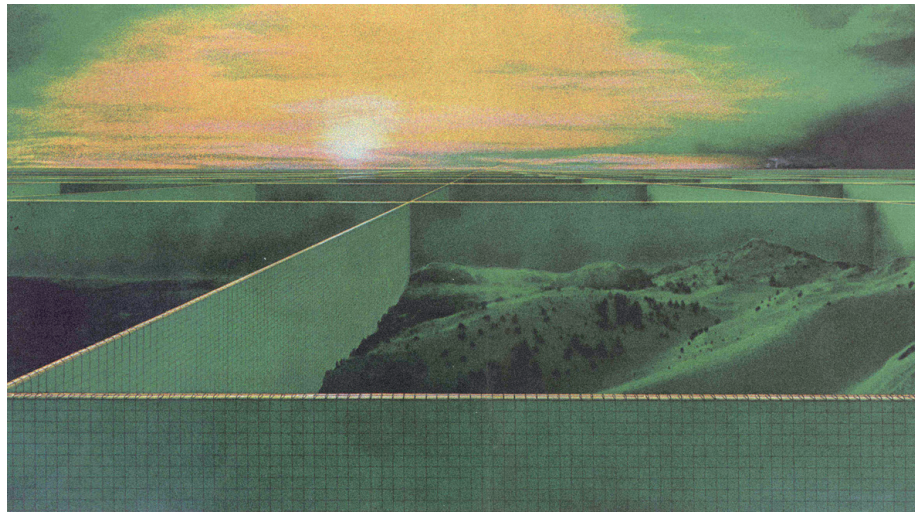


Fig. 7
Superstudio, Città 2000t, 1972

group, as we have said, the tale is the answer to a need for greater effectiveness in communicating a critical, negative and antagonistic position at different levels, which, with the advancement of production, passes from a simple representation technique to a part integral to the compositional act: it is not a superimposed element of the project, but part of the project itself. Can we support the same with regard to contemporary design? Being in this case the very wide area of investigation, I can only state *a priori* the partiality of the answer, however some critical reasoning can be put in place. First of all, when we are talking about *storytelling*, a term with a recent coinage and still without a single definition, we do not mean only the act of narrating a story, but in some fields the mere act of *telling*, in order to capture the attention and create interest. “In some fields”, it has been said: one of these is that of commercial communication, within which storytelling means telling a product, a brand, in order to create interest in the first case and raise *awareness* in the second one.⁴² In this sense, the necessity we talked about comes back, but it is not an expressive necessity, rather a necessity of communication, or more properly a necessity related to the market. Consider also that in a mechanism of this kind an interesting reversal of roles is possible: if the important thing is to tell, then it is the content that serves the story, and not the story that serves the content. The latter may also have little importance, what matters is that you talk about it, and it will be important if you talk about it a lot and in a good way. As proof of what has just been said, it is worth mentioning the practice of *branded content* here: this term refers to the creation of contents related to a specific brand, that is to say potentially interesting stories that may be associated with a company, which maybe does not even produce any products or services directly related to those stories. There are many examples in this regard,⁴³ what should be emphasized is that it is a requirement bounded to marketing, which we are here interested in because of its role of *index*. In fact, it underlines that when we deal with the contemporary, perhaps something has changed in our relationship with narration, even before the relationship that architecture has established with it. This leads us to ask ourselves if it is possible to consider architecture as a product, and if therefore - in a contemporary way - it needs, like the other products, a certain part of narrative, of storytelling, in order to penetrate the market. In some cases I can give an affirmative answer, outside of any value judgment on the architecture itself. A relevant example seems to be the publication *Yes is more*, by Bjarke

Ingels, a volume that, as is well known, uses the cartoon tool to make storytelling around the production of the BIG studio. Ingels is probably one of the most conscious communicators in the field of contemporary architecture, and in this book he takes us through a sort of “behind the scenes” of some of his major projects. The ultimate intention does not seem to be explanatory, in this sense it would have been more useful and effective to use archival materials such as photographs of models and sketches, arranged in chronological schedules or compositional diagrams. However, Ingels does not act in this way, through the comics he tells not the production, but the design attitude, the vision of the world and the poetics of his studio, funny but not very thorough, and certainly seductive, especially for those who have poor architecture experience but are inclined to be fascinated by this kind of talk: its future clients, for example. In this sector, storytelling is becoming more and more important, as evidenced by the dedicated writing courses that are emerging in recent years. It should also be emphasized that many younger architectural firms are investing considerable energy in the field of the same narrative, effectively carrying out a daily storytelling work, whose subject is constituted by their own professional activity. Once again, therefore, we are not dealing with a particularly deep relationship between narration and architecture, the latter seems more considered as a series of daily events in the life of a studio, which more than others deserve to be shared. Meanwhile, the story seems to emerge more profoundly from the compositional point of view in some academic exercises carried out in the Anglo-Saxon area: an interesting project in this sense is for example *The cult of the infinite*, by Isaac Barraclough, of 2010, developed in Huddersfield University. In this case the starting point is a short novel by Jorge Luis Borges, so we are not dealing with a narrative developed simultaneously with architecture. Positive examples of architecture related to narration, closer to the case of Superstudio, can be recognized in the work of Lebbeus Woods, author of critical images that show a deeply narrative attitude, as if they were still frames of unknown but imaginable stories, similar to the visions of the Florentines. It is no coincidence that Woods is a largely paper architecture producer, without the pretension of a construction, and like him there are others.

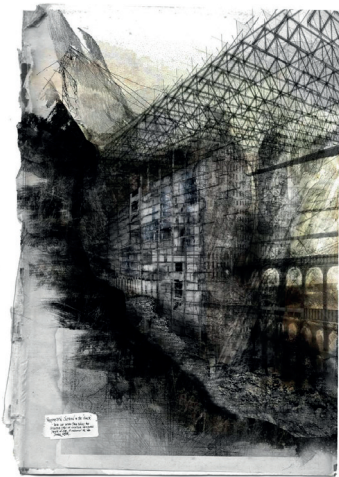
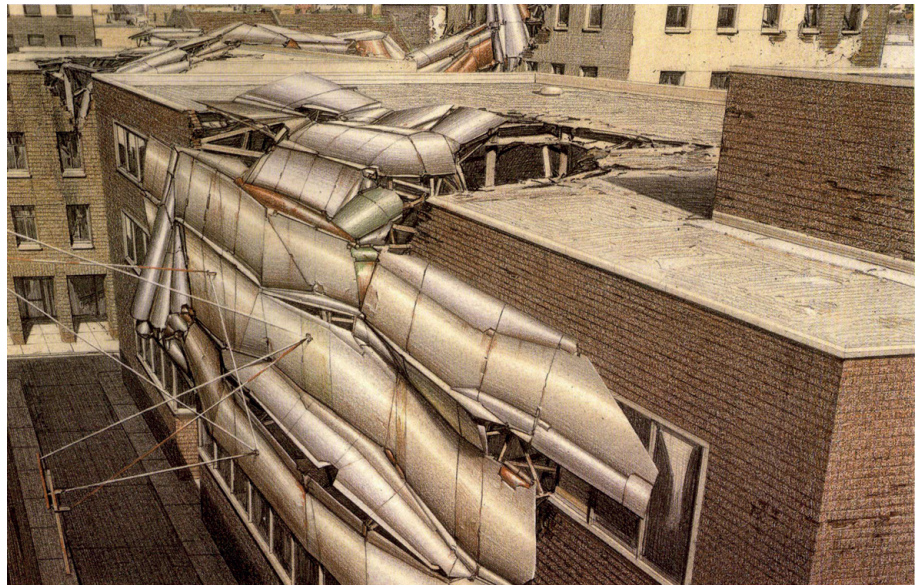


Fig. 8
Isaac Barraclough, *The cult of the infinite*, 2010.

In conclusion, Superstudio is a case that is not unique but certainly borderline, extreme even compared to the contemporary scene, so extreme as to make the narration become the predominant element, further alienating architecture. And certainly, when today we read again the *12 Cities*, we have to recognize in them a poetic which is diametrically opposed to that which has generated practices such as that *storytelling*, son of Internet, however their contribution does not seem useless. It is because, at the same time, that of Superstudio is also an effective case: where architecture is still present, narration engages a critical comparison with issues that, in the case of those cities, have then proved to be of considerable relevance. In other words, it has allowed to understand questions that have not been foreseen in other cases. The work of the group can therefore constitute an operative example to be added to the design in the strict sense, to broaden the critical contribution and the result on the contemporary, naturally in the light of a system of parameters that has changed over time. It is therefore worthwhile, at least a little bit, to fill the architectures we imagine with stories, before filling the history of architectures we build.

**Fig. 9**

Lebbeus Woods, *Radical reconstruction*, 1993.

Notes

¹ Superstudio was a group of Florentine architects related to the so called *radical architecture*. Born in the second half of 1966 and disbanded by 1978, it included Adolfo Natalini, Cristiano Toraldo di Francia, Gian Piero Frassinelli, Alessandro e Roberto Magris, Paolo Poli. The group is particularly renowned for the charming photoshopped images created to present their projects, among which *Monumento continuo* and *Supersuperficie* are the most well known.

² Laura Chiesa has partly dealt with this in recent times in the volume *Space as Storyteller, Spatial Jumps in Architecture, Critical Theory, and Literature*: in chapter 4.1, entitled *Fictionalizing the Extremes of Functionality*, the author delivers an interesting analysis about *12 città ideali* (Chiesa 2016).

³ In the case of the groups dealing with architecture, this subject obviously translated into a distaste for the Modern and the International Style, accused of having an over-technical vision which focused too much on the mass and overlooked the man in his individuality.

⁴ I here refer to that heterodox marxist interpretation which has been a common denominator in the setting-up of almost every European Neo-avant-garde, above all the Italian one: capital and contradiction were deemed one the cause of the other and capitalism is characterized by the repression of this perpetually self-caused crisis, a repression resulting in the transformation of any voice of dissent – of avant-garde – into something useless and often functional for the system to survive and develop.

⁵ Written by Thomas More in 1516, *Utopia* book 2 describes the journey of the protagonist towards an ideal society conceived as a faraway island and characterized by positive and optimal principles, rules and socio-political praxis, different from those observed in England in those years.

⁶ In Italy this topic has been deeply investigated by Umberto Eco, who, at the time, was teaching in Florence and had among his students some of the radical architecture protagonists (the UFO group, for example); although the most renowned work in this sense is certainly *The medium is the message* (McLuhan 1967).

⁷ Thanks to these self-produced magazines Superstudio took the initial steps in defining their own poetics: Adolfo Natalini, by commuting between Florence and London for personal reasons, introduced in the faculty the first *Archigram* issues; the independent architecture editory of the time has been reorganized and analysed in the last decade thanks to the series of expositions and events entitled *Clip, Stamp, Fold*, later converted in the publication of the same name (Buckley e Colomina 2010).

⁸ In particular *Casabella* was the one giving voice to Superstudio and radical architecture and largely contributing to their popularity: after becoming director of the paper in 1970, Alessandro Mendini marked a clear-cut change of course, at least until 1976, when he resigned. Since then, the participation of the avant-garde in the paper was dramatically downsized.

⁹ It's impossible not to mention the situationist city project, that New Babylon de-

signed by Constant over and over, a global metropolis whose pivots are nomadism, seen as permanent condition, and playing conceived as major life activity. His illustrations, soaked with what was the typical narrative dimension of the situationists, look often like map-shaped inspirations for a tale which is still to be written.

¹⁰ For example: Adolfo Natalini was more focused on art, Cristiano Toraldo di Francia had a scientific education – his father was a well-known professor – and was interested in photography, Gian Piero Frassinelli had an anthropological perspective.

¹¹ This has been stated by Gian Piero Frassinelli in an interview with Gabriele Mastigli and further confirmed to me by Frassinelli himself in an interview I held in 2016, during which we largely talked about science fiction (Mastigli 2015).

¹² *Domus* 479, October 1969, pp 39-40.

¹³ In the poetics of the group, the cube is a recurring solid that bears conflicting meanings: in some cases it represents the peace conveyed by an effortless composition of pure reason, in other cases it is the aberration of the mental and compository mechanism itself. The cube dovetails with two persisting buildings of reference for the Flor-entines, namely the Kaa'ba and the NASA Vertical Assembly building.

¹⁴ «1. A summary table to be used as a map for easy orientation: 1) cube, 2) rainbow, 3) cloud, 4) ziggurat 5) wave

2. Weather report with some easily predictable phenomena, to be listened at the beginning: a cube among the clouds, a parallelepiped, a super parallelepiped, a zigzag rainbow

3-7. First encounters with local geography: *natura naturans* and natured nature, hardware/software, esprit de géométrie and esprit de finesse. Hardness and softness. Some relevant apparitions.

8-11. A peculiar phenomenon. By observing a cube which has just been unleashed from its external straps, it's possible to witness its splitting, quadrupling etc. and its pieces going their own way, taking with them the memories of their own origin.

12-13. Two love stories <among the many cases of mutual attraction. Two similar elements can interconnect through a dissimilar element (or more than one). The bonds issue, which is particularly sensed in the «regioni della ragione», can only be solved through an intervention of the above requested by a precise will of the base.

14. A flying object completely still and identifiable.

15-21. A car journey in a drive-in architecture museum.

22. An allegorical souvenir: «in the historical perspective the reason rules everything».

23. A souvenir photo with the traveling companions.

24. An airplane journey with a perilous landing among the wisdom pillars.

25. Radiant perspectives.

26. A difficult passage through mirrors».

¹⁵ Published in *Elementi*: study notebooks – news, research, 2, 1972: «Histograms. In those years it became clear that carrying on with designing furniture, objects and similar domestic ornaments wouldn't have solved architectural issues (...) We prepared a catalogue of tridimensional, non-continuous diagrams, a catalogue of architecture histograms referring to a scalable grid which could be transported to different areas and was aimed to construct a serene and immutable Nature in which it was possible to recognize oneself in the end. (...) The surface of these histograms was homogeneous and isotropic, being any spatial and sensitivity issue accurately removed. The histograms were also called The Architects' Graves».

¹⁶ In this phase it is possible to detect both the influence of Archigram I've already mentioned before and the outcomes of the class held by professor Leonardo Savioli – of whom Natalini will be the assistant - in 1966-67 at the University of Florence, dedicated to the creation of a “participation space”: the students were required to design a *pipe*, namely a place to host parties aimed to give space to free expression. This topic has been recently investigated in a targeted publication (Piccardo 2016).

¹⁷ In short, *non-physical* architecture is to be understood as a vision of architecture as mental and critical exercise, far from the dimensions of construction and constructibility; the *unique design* was the striving to narrow down architecture to a unique, pure and definitive act that could finally resolve and create peace in the stirring human soul: Monumento continuo is its most relevant expression;

¹⁸ The project was realized for the 1969 Trigon edition, namely the tri-national biennial of Graz. This event played a crucial role in the development of the group, since they could get in touch with the thriving environment of the Austrian artistic avant-garde,

one of the most important milieu of the time including, among the participants, personalities such as Hans Hollein, Haus Rucker Co, Walter Pichler, Raimund Abraham.

¹⁹ *Domus* 481, December 1969, pp 49-54.

²⁰ «(...) and in the heart of this world made of woods mountains gnomes homes (...) there's Graz (...) and in the Stadtpark there is this building, the Kunstlerhaus, (...) and now, out of the tunnel, three rectangular pipes pop out, one green, one red, one blue, and inside, darkness (...) and of this enigmatic continuous monument (...) we've presented some random pictures, pretty postcardlike and therefore uncanny (...)».

²¹ In a partially analogous way to what asserted before with regard to the cube, the straight line is for the group an other symbol, expression of an absolute rationality, at the same time pacific and uncanny, a recurring element to be spotted in many projects. It often symbolizes a mental process turned physical through architecture, in *Atti fondamentali*, for example, the process of how the grid formed by meridians and parallels turns real is described in the chapter *Morte*: «(...) At the intersection of these two lines (allegedly the physicalization of those meridians and parallels passing through the point) there was a neoclassic building, strangely bewildered in that Cartesian desert. (...)».

²² The book was published concurrently with an anthological exposition, the most complete up to now, held at MAXXI in Rome from 21st of April to 4th of September 2016 (Mastrigli 2016).

²³ As a matter of fact in 1972 a fundamental exposition including all the major protagonists of the italian design at the time took place, namely *Italy: the new domestic landscape*, curated by Emilo Ambasz. On one hand the event was crucial because it strengthened the popularity and the value of the personalities involved; on the other, however, the most antagonist figures were pinned to a well defined role within the system and their Avant-Garde charge got detonated; at the same time the condemning of avant-garde themselves was being pursued by some leading italian critics, in particular Manfredo Tafuri. Casabella published some excerpts from the *Atti* in the issues 366-381, from June 1972 to September 1973. The catalogue of the MoMA exposition is available for consultation at www.moma.org/documents/moma_catalogue_1783_300062429.pdf

²⁴ The complete English title is *Supersurface: an alternative model of life on earth*.

²⁵ «The faraway mountain – Look at that faraway mountain...what do you see? Is that the place to go to? Or is it just the optimal ability limit? It's both, because contradiction exists no more (...). That's what a very grown-up Alice was thinking while skipping rope very slowly, but without feeling hot or fatigue.

The encampment – Anybody can be wherever they want, bringing their clan or family. No need for shelters, because climatic conditions and corporeal mechanisms have been modified in order to assure a total comfort. If anything, one can build a shelter to play, to play Home, or rather, to play Architecture. (...) Nomadism becomes the permanent condition: the movements of individuals and groups react between them creating continuous streams. (...)».

²⁶ «What we'll do – We'll stay still and listen to our body, we'll hear the blood rushing through our ears, the faint creaking of joints and teeth, we'll inspect the texture of our skin, the patterns of hair and body hair. We'll listen to our heart and our breathing. We'll watch ourselves while living. We'll perform convoluted muscular acrobatics. We'll perform convoluted mental acrobatics. (...) We'll manage to create and infuse visions and images, maybe to make also some little objects move, just for fun. We'll play fantastic games, ability games, love games. (...) We'll go to far places only to look at them (...)».

²⁷ «As we drew closer, he opened his eyes and said: "I am the leader of the builders, I am the man they call architect. At first we opened a clearing in the wood and we built the mirror-walled steel building, but our mirrored image shocked us and so we went inside and built the yielding tent building. But its walls were intangible and there was no place to lean on. Therefore inside we constructed a building out of carved stones produced with all our mastery. It exhausted our strengths and its beauty let us dismayed. So we tried to find ourselves by using our hands, and inside we built the humble dome made of mud and canes in which we then lived. An underground tunnel lead outside to the forest, where we could find fruit roots and small animals. Not once we watched the buildings we had created. Afterwards, everybody went back to the forest. And, by now, I'm lying here on the dirt, in the point which I recollect to be the center

of the concentric buildings, waiting. But the constructors have fled to the forest for a long time by now, and for a long time I've been waiting the inhabitant, to whom the factory was destined. I have lost memory of him and his name, but he was a powerful man, who appreciated beauty." (...)».

²⁸ It's here clearly detectable the editing work of Gian Piero Frassinelli, who, as stated before, was interested in anthropological issues and had a strong inclination to stash and catalogue, as he himself revealed to Gabriele Mastrigli in the mentioned interview (Mastrigli 2015)

²⁹ «As we exited the city, there it arose before our eyes a large, evenly paved clearing, divided into big squares by thin slots. This sort of plaza spread out as far as the eye could see: one could catch a glimpse of its limits, or rather could imagine its limits, there where a tall greenery arose on one side, a hillside area on the other and the first, outskirt buildings on the other two.(...) The surface was perfectly flat and one could sense that the squares were orientated according to the cardinal directions. A small bronze plate placed where two slots intersected, more or less at the center of the clearing, had its astronomical coordinates carved on it. (...) I saw a group of normally-dressed persons coming closer from my right side, they were crossing the paved space heading to the building. (...)».

³⁰ «H. The moment of the corpse intake and its first restitution cycle. The corpse is submerged in wells dislocated in different places. These wells (...) have a double function of transforming the corpse into energy and memory. (...) The wells constitute also the element responsible for storing memories. (...) Their openings are peripheral equipments of a calculator. Several calculators are interconnected through retransmitting satellites. The stored memories can be accessed through memory capsules, namely individual terminals every living being is equipped with. (...) M. Memory as cosmic element. All of the memory-energy is retransmitted by the satellites. (...)».

³¹ The group took part in the 1971 contest by adding a technical report which was very similar to some parts of the tale just analyzed.

³² This is the title under which this paper is generally known in Italy. It was first published uncomplete on the issue n.12 of *AD Architectural Design* with the title *Twelve cautionary tales for christmas, premonitions of the mystical rebirth of urbanism* in December 1971, then on *Casabella* 361 in January 1972 with the title *Premonizioni della parusia urbanistica*, this time integrated with color images, otherwise absent in the english version.

³³ The author himself has defined it this way: there is no neat mindset behind the paper, but rather a proceeding guided by consequent inspirations, so much so that the cities are presented following the chronological order of writing.

³⁴ The term *distopia* was made up by the English philosopher John Stuart Mill and indicates an inside-out utopia, namely the vision of a negative future as the result of present principles deemed to be negative. At the time this word was not known by the Florentine group, which preferred to use the term *antiutopia*.

³⁵ During the interview I had with Gian Piero Frassinelli he informed me that, in respect to *Atti*, the starting point was constituted by images, around which the tales were built afterwards, right because of the practical difficulties faced in the *12 Città* project by proceeding in a back flow direction.

³⁶ My doctorate is configured as a research about the *12 Città ideali* aimed to analyze the document in a multidisciplinary approach by trying to reconstruct contents, poetics and affinities, both from a textual and graphic point of view.

³⁷ The term is to be understood under the meaning elaborated by philosophy at the same time of the editing of *12 Città*, which defined a device as a mechanism designed to induce a precise behaviour. A very powerful example is the Panopticon by Jeremy Bentham in the interpretation by Michale Foucault in *Discipline and Punish* (Foucault 1975)

³⁸ «(...) Every cell has in fact two facing outer walls; the walls of every cell are made of a material which is matt but permeable to oxygen, rigid but soft. The North-orientated wall (or, if this is an outer wall, the West-orientated one) is able to emit tridimensional images, sounds and smells. (...) But it is indeed the ceiling which is the essential part of the cell; this is constituted by a unique screen that catches cerebral impulses. Every cell is inhabited by a man whose cerebral impulses are continuously detected by the panel and retransmitted to the unique electronical analyser, whose complex equipments are clustered on the top of the building under a continuous semi

cylindrical vault; the analyser picks, compares and mediates the individuals' desires by programming step by step the life of the whole city through the emitting wall (...). From time to time, it may happen that someone lets himself be taken by absurd thoughts of rebellion against the perfect and everlasting life bestowed upon him. The first time the analyser ignores the crime, but if it reiterates the city decides to deny the vital space to those who turn out to be as ungrateful as that. The ceiling panel falls down with a 2-tons power until it matches the floor. (...).»

³⁹ Above all, it's the failure of the 1968 movements to be understood here, as Gian Piero Frassinelli claimed in the interview I had with him.

⁴⁰ Conformism is a criticized target in many cities, but it's in *Città dell'ordine* that we find the most scathing remark: the inhabitants have been substituted with obedient robots, efficient members without personality of a very orderly world. Ierarchy and climbing the social ladder are the pivot of *Città cono a gradoni*, an isolated megas-structure representing ierarchy itself, in which those who are on top rule those who live in the lower levels, who in turn are persecuted by the everlasting longing of climbing to obtain less duties and more privileges. The topic of alienating work is faced in *Città nastro a produzione continua*, a urban agglomerate which is continuously decaying and continuously being built, in which people continuously work to allow themselves a new house. Similar topics are also present in *Ville machine habitée*. Unethical entertainment, seen as violent safety valve, is the central issue of the *Barnum jr city* tale, a virtual amusement park shaped as a city in which, under a specific fee, it's possible to commit with complete impunity any kind of vicious acts. Pretence is the subject of *Città delle case splendide*, a housing system designed to give the collectivity an image representing the houses' owners in the way they want to be represented, far from who they really are or from their identity.

⁴¹ Apart from the well known 1972 project *Exodus, or the voluntary prisoners of architecture*, also *The city of the captive globe*, appeared in 1972 as well, deserves to be mentioned. In the project, characterized by a strong narrativity, it's possible to detect some references to Superstudio's *Istogrammi*.

⁴² This means, in a simplistic way, the *awareness* the consumer has of the brand itself, not of its products: what is the brand's attitude with regard to wide-ranging matters such as work, ethics, life, other brands. It is a very important topic in relation to contemporary *marketing*.

⁴³ Among these, one of the most relevant is surely Red Bull, an iconic energy drink company also producing a wide universe of contents, effectively narrated on several different platforms.

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