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**Through the looking-glass.****The narrative applied to the counter-story of territorial planning**

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**Abstract**

What is the difference between the Broadacre City model and popular drone views simulations used to promote future sustainable cities? Between an interior space designed by Tessenow and a look through 3D glasses? Perhaps not so much, all they tell the same story: the *wonderland*. The essay aims to investigate the ideo-logical contribution of story-telling to architectural and territorial design projects, rather than its techno-logical. If it is true that media evolve and adapt their narrative, but the story they use to tell is always the same of the *wonderland*, questions arise from a different point of view. Which design project deserves a story with a narrative contribution? Only the project in which all the contradictions are positively solved as in the *wonderland*, or is there room for counter-stories too?

**Keywords**

territorial planning — settlement forms — counterstory — agrarian urbanism — *wonderland*

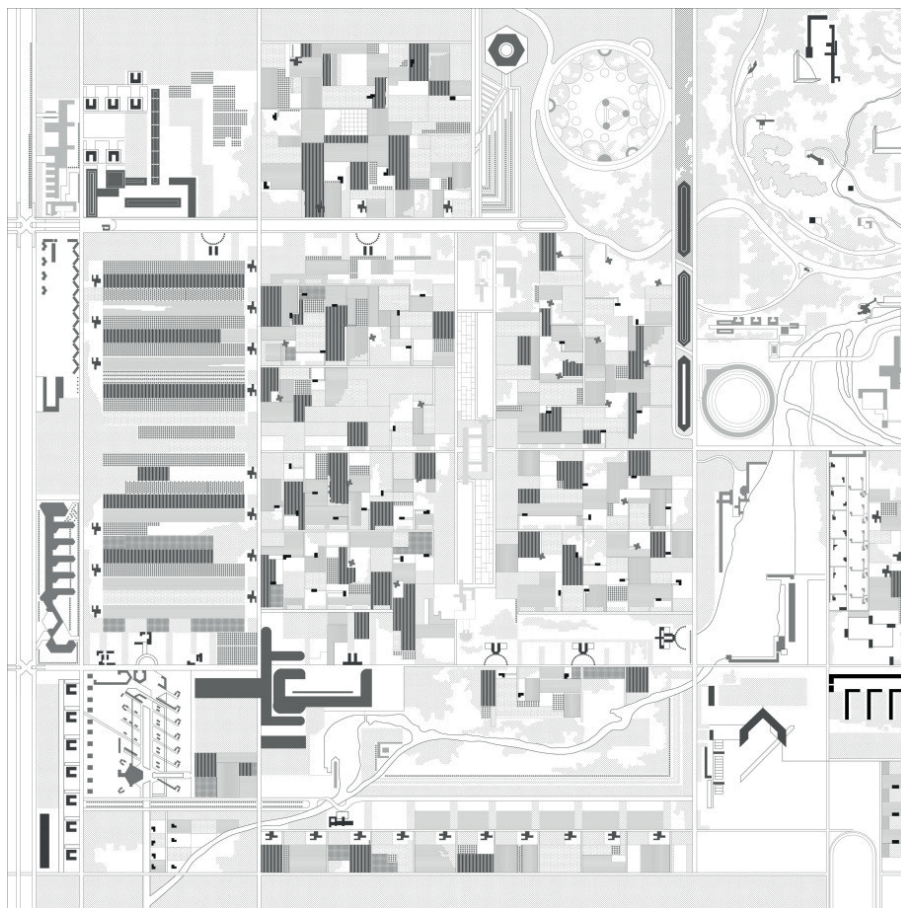
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Communication is a primary act, therefore cannot but be assumed as an invariant of our relationships. Above all, communication forms intended as stories with persuasive purpose has been consolidated in the collective perception. Vance Packard's inquiries conducted in the 50s concerning inducement stories elaborated within American sectors of production and consumption, and revealing the extraordinary ability of these stories to pass from one disciplinary field to another, seem distant and totally inoffensive.<sup>1</sup> Nowadays, Packard would realize that our reality has not changed too much: unless an increasing awareness of his inquiry's content, persuasive communication not only keeps going to influence any disciplinary field, but has developed into an instrument for everyday use. Especially, thanks to the excited experimentation addressed to the *media*.

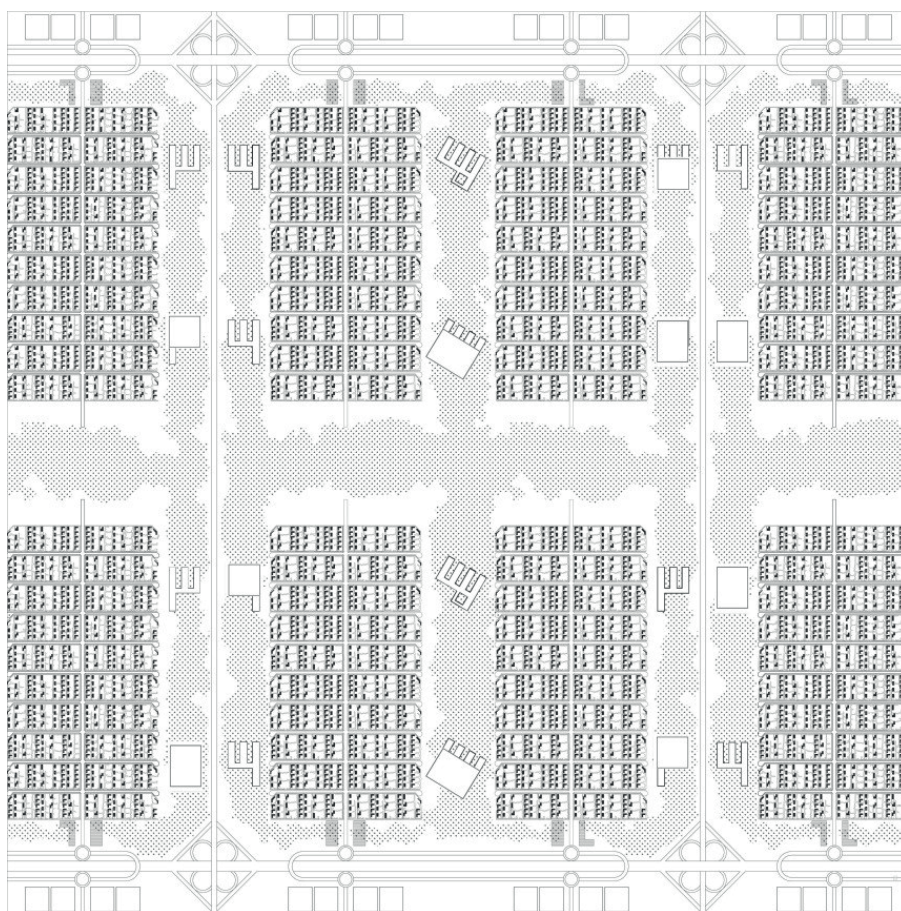
There is certainly no point in denying the appeal related to some investigations focused on the means of communications, even more in the field of architecture and urban planning: how these means have evolved to best serve a design project story? In which way the contribution of a more or less advanced technology could influence this part of story-telling? To what extent the means of representation should adhere to reality? The above are just some of the issues raised by the current debate on the relationship between narrative and design. Let us take the example of representation that reproduce figurative elements using a painting-style without losing any technological support: the beginning of the so-called Post-Digital era. At least, this is the name of the movement to which one of the experts on digitally intelligent architecture has confessed to belong today, unveiling his new technique: «They are not really watercolors...Photoshop. I am post-digital now». The one who listens to the compromising confession

**Fig. 1**

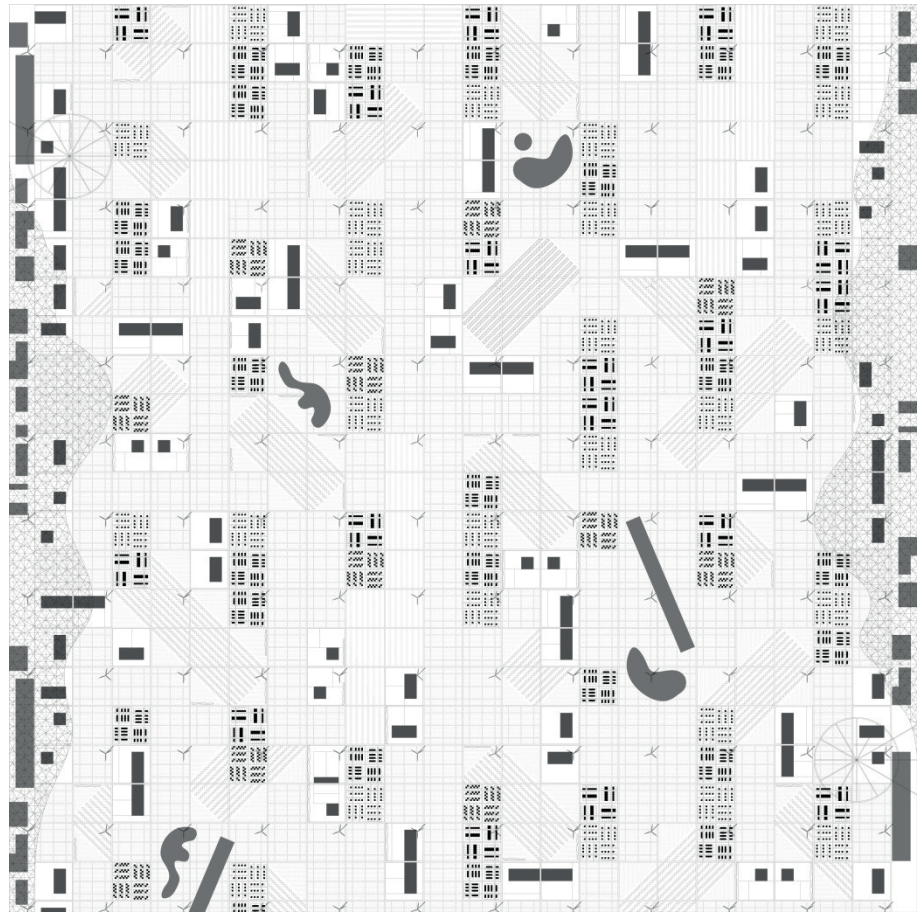
Selective drawing made by the author of Broadacre City settlement model by Wright.

**Fig. 2**

Selective drawing made by the author of The New Regional Pattern settlement model by Hilberseimer.







**Fig. 3**

Selective drawing made by the author of The Strijp Philipps settlement model by Branzi.

is Mario Carpo, architectural historian and well-known specialist on the same research field, who decided to tell the episode that evidently struck him in a recent article entitled *Post-Digital “Quitters”: Why the Shift Toward Collage Is Worrying*.<sup>2</sup> Carpo’s argument focuses precisely on the way architecture is told, denouncing the risk of “quitters” that seem to abandon technology in favor of apparently low-tech representation forms. Apparently, because the thesis argued in this article deal with the strong difference between a design project story told in the ‘70s and those proposed today using the same representation: while the aversion of Postmodernism was explained – paraphrasing Carpo’s words – on the basis of a modern technology that «as a whole had just failed, spectacularly, and there was no technological alternative in sight», there is no reason that explains an aversion to the extraordinary technological advancement we have witnessed in recent times. In fact, just from the admission on the use of graphics and image-editing software to create post-digital collages, not only it is argued that there is no aversion to technology, but rather the exploitation of technological support to reproduce a precise narrative contribution made of «watercolor, collage and sfumato». Beyond the more or less worrying outcome that such *quitters* could cause according to Carpo’s point of view, the interest falls on a more general issue.

What is the difference between the *Broadacre City* model and the drone views simulations used to promote future sustainable cities? Between an interior space designed by Tessenow and a look through 3D glasses? Perhaps not so much, all they tell the same story: the *wonderland*. The essay aims to investigate the ideo-logical contribution of story-telling to architectural and territorial design projects, rather than its techno-logical. If it is true that media evolve and adapt their narrative, but the story they use

**Fig. 4**

Vertical Home, setting by Andrea Branzi at Giornate Internazionali dell'Arredo, Verona 1997.

to tell is always the same of the *wonderland*, questions arise from a different point of view. Which design project deserves a story with a narrative contribution? Only the project in which all the contradictions are positively solved as in the *wonderland*, or is there room for counter-stories too? Maybe there is, at least in some cases from the past. The city as project has been sustained by remarkable narrative contributions, even if it was not promoting a vision without any contradiction.

The essay questions the ideological contribution of story-telling applied to territorial planning, identifying analogies between different cases which use to tell the *wonderland* story, then moving towards the others in which a strong narrative component has been dedicated to its counter-story. The former are more easily associated with the paradigm of colonization, powered by the assumptions coming from the narrative that in any case appears inseparable from other instruments of persuasion like the settlement model and architectural devices; the latter try to interpret the crisis in the process of colonization, but surprisingly we do not witness the renunciation of the narrative component, but rather its strengthening.

Territories affected by an intense process of modernization, usually understood as a progress in terms of production, often use to establish a new general order: a productive community regulated on the basis of high moral values to which corresponds a set of rules that organize physical, geographical and urban characters of those same territories. It is common to use the term *settle* to describe this process; it is even more common that a remarkable narrative component is often associated with this process. The work of Wright and Hilberseimer between the 30s and 50s is deeply focused on the idea of settling the American countryside through the introduction of a new order: the *Broadacre City* model and the large-scale diagrams published in Hilberseimer's *New Regional Pattern* were anything but harmless instruments, indispensable for describing all the elements that articulated their territorial settlements, especially communicating the idea that in a single glance one could seize the resolution of any contradiction - just the second meaning of the verb *to settle* in English. The act of settling expresses a desire for stability, up to domestic space orientation translated into the architectural device of *Usonian House* by Wright and Hilberseimer's *Settlement Unit*. Much more recent, the mirrored showcases in which Branzi exhibits the model of *Agronica* and other architectural devices like *Casa Madre*, show that the act of settling continues to support the positive and proactive idea of the *wonderland*, realized through a powerful experimentation on the spatial and architectural elements – a



multistorey and suspended inhabitable wall - that aim to establish the new general order and simultaneously govern the scale of the domestic space. However, the third aspect that completes the analogy between these three cases is about the use of narrative, an essential instrument and inseparable from the previous ones for the creation of a settlement model. *The Disappearing City* (1932) and *The Living City* (1951) are the books in which Wright describes all the arguments on the urgent need to abandon the urban model, toxic and compromised in its moral values as well as a place of economic decline, counterposing the story of a rural and decentralized settlement which may subsequently be extended to the entire American continent. Combined with the well-known iconographic apparatus, the narrative contribution becomes fundamental in defining the lifestyle of Broadacre City community, largely based on self-sufficient economy. According to Wright's prediction, just in this way America could know its redemption and live its *wonderland*. Hilberseimer's assumptions are quite similar, and his dedication to structure a narrative about his settlement model, provides an equally successful result: *The New Regional Pattern* tells of a free world, independent of city's conditioning thanks to total integration between agricultural and industrial production systems. Although Hilberseimer minimizes the formal experimentation on his buildings, especially compared to the atlas of variations proposed by Wright, he was extremely confident in the narrative positive effects. The written manifesto by Branzi, describing his settlement strategies applied to contemporary rural territories, is entitled *New Athen's Charter* and gathers *modest suggestions* for an interpretation of the current life-and-work conditions, nowadays much less rooted in space. Although *Agronica* and other models proposed by Branzi are not really referable to ideal cities, the narrative contribution appears pronounced and persuasive, illustrating the living-working equipment which is going to replace the traditional domestic environment.<sup>3</sup>

While it is true that the idea of introducing a new order means shaping the territory through the use of a precise apparatus of spatial configurations, the reverse process of *un-settling* – here referred to spatial connotations – it is often understood as a complex geopolitical process that rarely has been investigated in its spatial and architectural implications. On the contrary, if it were understood as a process in which the general order has been undermined by real conditions – shortage of productive resources in the case of company towns, obsolescence of transport infrastructures, population aging – appears plausible to investigate a *decolonization* process from the same perspective that usually animates the *wonderland* scenario: scrutinising transformations at the scale of the general plan to find out forms that can interpret the characters of this reverse process; analyzing adaptation attitude shown by settlement components; proving whether it is the architectural device initially designed as a settlement prototype to adapt, or if new ones are generated.<sup>4</sup>

The question remains about the role played by the narrative in these cases. Does it survive as one of the three inseparable instruments that use to inform the positive idea of the *wonderland*? Or nobody tells the counter-story?

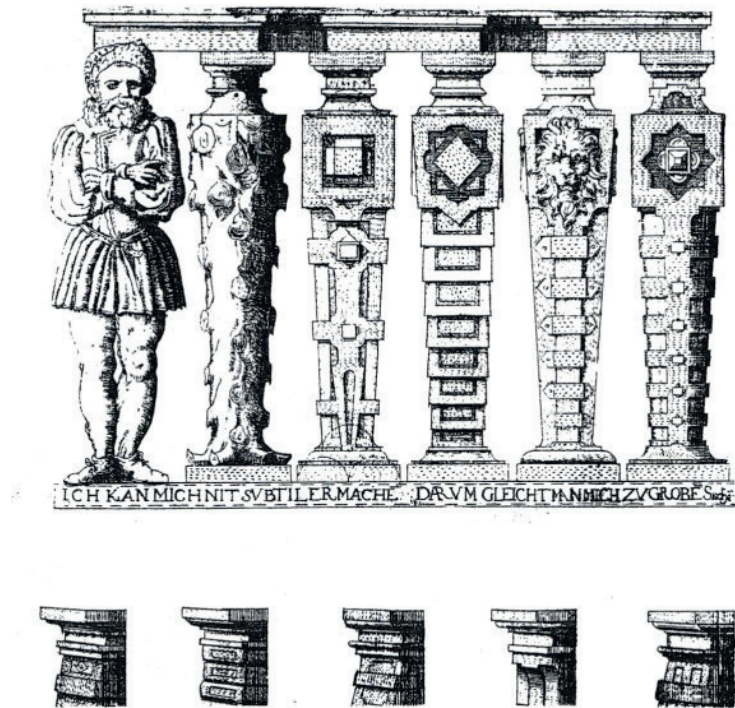
As anticipated, some projects far from promoting an ideal scenario have chosen not to give up the narrative contribution. Indeed, in some cases, the story-telling was intentionally inspired by an opposite situation than ideal. Among this 60s and 70s projects that have radically engaged the crisis of



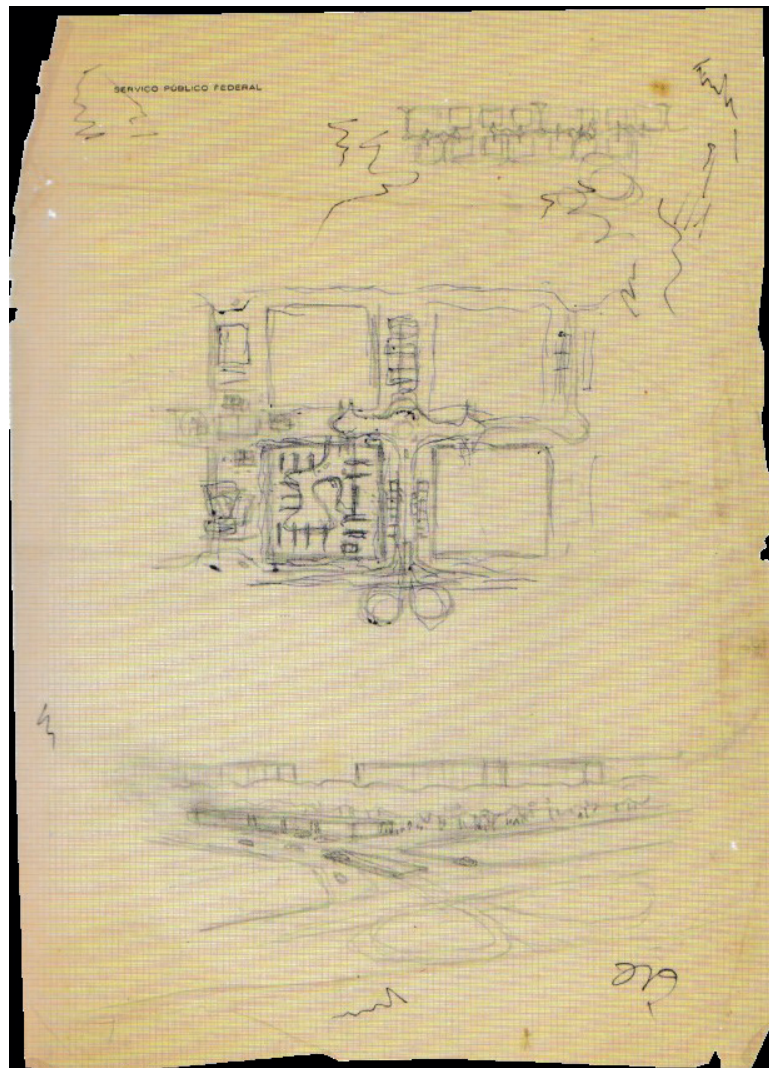
**Fig. 5**  
Life Conditioning, wrote by Cedric Price and first published in Architectural Design October 1966 describing Potteries Think-belt project.

**Fig. 6**

The metamorphosis of the column by Gabriel Krammer, in "Architecture as Theme" by O.M. Ungers.

**Fig. 7**

Sketch of the "superquadra" by Lucio Costa, in AD March 2011 "Brasilia's Superquadra: Prototypical Design and the Project of the City" by Martino Tattara.



settlement theory, the *Potteries Thinkbelt* by Price and Berlin *Archipelago* by Ungers keep playing a paradigmatic role. The first describes the pottery factory and its productive infrastructure adaptation in the North Staffordshire, turned into a regional university campus for 20,000 students. This unbuilt project shows a narrative contribution in the form of Price's critique about advanced education issue: the ambition towards a ruling class tamed inside medieval cloister-shaped campuses, represents total detachment from the social reality of that time. Flexibility would become the instrument through which interpret reality, and the pages of Architectural Design (October 1966) would host Price's narrative contribution. Around ten years later, Ungers will lead three Summer Schools at Cornell University focusing on the possibility of making autonomous some of the city's architectural components.<sup>5</sup> The analysis produced on architectural devices like *blocks*, *villas* and *gardens*, will merge in its general vision that provide the imminent depopulation of Berlin due to the post-war condition. Thinking of reconstruction on the heels of the widespread ideal in Europe, was considered even more utopian than imagining a configuration of autonomous islands like parts of the city surrounded by the forest: a *green archipelago*, told in the form of a manifesto with an extraordinary narrative charge. The third case that reflects on the narrative perspective applied to the counter-story, is perhaps even more striking. In 1957 Lucio Costa won the competition for the Plano Piloto of Brasilia presenting few sketches including the design of *superquadra* prototype, and a written description which assumed a different objective than that of representing the ideal city of Brasilia: developing a conceptual apparatus in order to conceive and build new spatial forms, characterizing the relationship between public and private, proposing an adaptable device in respect of changing conditions such as topography, respecting the general principles of maximum height and distinction between pedestrian and vehicular paths.<sup>6</sup> The city was built by adapting the *superquadra* prototype in dozens of variations. The result was a competition won with a written discourse, and a built project following those principles in this case: the narrative at the service of reality without the persuasive will to promote a *wonderland* scenario solved in its entirety.

Unless some examples of the recent past, reflections should be focused on the ideo-logical contribution of narrative within contemporary proposals. Are the counter-stories told even today? And which stories are the narrative *media* applied to, whose evolution or involution still have been animatedly debated?

It seems that the narrative is still an instrument more reserved to the first story, telling an ideal model of a contemporary *wonderland*. As Lewis Carroll did seven years after the publication of his bestseller, we should have the courage to apply the narrative to a counter-story: *through the looking glass* makes us understand the importance of narrative contribution as a critical instrument rather than a persuader. Less obvious, and therefore extraordinarily important, in those cases where there is no *wonderland* to tell, but a situation dictated by real contradictions and limits. Reassuring also Packard on the fact that after him, the role of the narrative has not had the sole persuasive purpose, but that of a fundamental instrument for the interpretation of our reality.



## Notes

- <sup>1</sup> In Vance Packard, *The hidden persuaders*, David McKay Company, INC, New York, 1957, the American sociologist investigates the aggressive propaganda in which the good citizen was identified as the good consumer under the development of the advertising industry that proceeded with hidden methods.
- <sup>2</sup> Mario Carpo, *Post-Digital “Quitters”: Why the Shift Toward Collage Is Worrying*, in *Metropolis Magazine*, March 2018.
- <sup>2</sup> In addition to the *New Athen's Charter* presented by Branzi at the 2010 Venice Biennale, most of his arguments are exposed in Andrea Branzi, *Modernità debole e diffusa. Il mondo del progetto all'inizio del XXI secolo*, Skira, Milano, 2006.
- <sup>4</sup> For an in-depth study on the topic of decolonization and its architectural and spatial implications, see Alessandro Petti, *Arcipelaghi e enclave. Architettura dell'ordinamento spaziale contemporaneo*, Paravia Bruno Mondadori Editori, Milano, 2007 with preface by Bernardo Secchi.
- <sup>5</sup> Ungers proposed three consecutive Summer Schools at Cornell University respectively entitled “The Urban Block” (1976); “The Urban Villa” (1977); “The Urban garden” (1978) that will converge in the idea of the *Cities within the city* in post-war Berlin and the idea of *Green Archipelago*.
- <sup>6</sup> Lucio Costa, *La Memória descritiva del Plano piloto di Brasilia*, 1957 is commented in the article by Martino Tattara, *Brasilia's Superquadra: Prototypical Design and the Project of the City*, in AD “Typological Urbanism: Projective Cities”, Wiley, March 2011.

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