Superstudio 1966-1973

The beginning – Technomorphic architecture

This talk will not be a classic account of architecture describing buildings, their uses and their formal appearances. It will be the story, or the visual chronicle, of a brief period of the last century ranging from roughly 1966 to 1973, with illustrations of architectural designs of which some were never meant to be built.

An effort was made during that period to lead architectural design outside of its disciplinary 'box' as a functional and compositional organization of construction materials, and to make it, once again, a mental construction of systems of knowledge and of investigation, shifting the focus of the discipline from an activity of problem solving to one of problem finding.

My personal research had already started on the tables of the Faculty of Architecture when the political engagement was proceeding in parallel with the attempt in the renovation of the teaching system.

The narrative begins in Florence, a city that has been considered the symbol of the Renaissance, of harmony and measure, embodied in the bare-bones minimalism of Brunelleschi, but that intrigued me as student of architecture because of how much it revealed, on the contrary, of a contradictory aspect, on the border between classicism and anticlassicism, of its urban fabric. This contradiction became clear while watching the encounter/collision between a natural phenomenon and an artificial one— when the River Arno burst into the city of Florence in November 1966, transforming the hard, stone support surface of its buildings into a moving liquid mixed with mud and mineral oil.

The observation of that dramatic physical substitution, on one hand, posed a radical challenge to the traditional relationship between architecture and ground, and on the other, provoked thought on the relationship between architecture and nature, city and country, interior and exterior—which I brought forth shortly afterwards in my final Thesis project that was half new building design and half restoration of damaged nature.

The **Vacation Machine**, which is part of a body of research entitled **Technomorphic Architecture**, was an architecture with no street front, with its feet in the sea, that situated most of its space inside a hollow formed by the erosive effect of a torrent on the sandstone ridge to which the building clung, artificially continuing its face.

The visual ambiguity of this reconstruction endeavoured to shift architecture's task toward rebuilding part of the thickness of the Earth's outer envelope, considered as the body of that 'spaceship' described by Buckminster Fuller as a single large ecological system.

In this way my thesis attempted to exorcize that image that had been with us all the way from Futurism to Archigram, in which the architecture of the industrial era had to be structured like a machine, or better yet a motor, just as the city was assimilated to the mechanical rationality of the factory.

This new ambiguous relationship between nature and architecture alluded to the passage from Hans Hollein's "Alles ist Architektur" to the concept that "everything is landscape": architecture and landscape are no longer distinct entities; architecture can restore the landscape by occupying the non-places—voids resulting from natural actions—recovering interrupted layers for architecture itself.

Architecture is reduced to a neutral, transparent surface as a further layer on the surface of Spaceship Earth, just as homes can be dug into the earth or utilize folds, while the whole functions as a diachronic theatre without walls, but with mobile systems.

The office becomes landscape, and the landscape enters the museum.

Superarchitecture 1966-68

December 1966 witnessed the birth, from the mud of the Florence flood, of Superstudio, which I founded with Adolfo Natalini: The same year saw the first exhibition of Superarchitecture, for which the poster read: "Superarchitecture is the architecture of superproduction, of superconsumption, of superpersuasion to consume, of the supermarket, the superman, of superoctane gasoline. Superarchitecture accepts the logic of production and consumption, and works for its demystification."

Here began a course of action based upon the conviction that architecture was a means of changing the world: designs were hypotheses of physical transformations; they were ways of hypothesizing different quantities and qualities.

These early works were collected in a panel entitled **A Journey in the Regions of Reason.**

Twentieth-century architecture established a preferential relationship with industry, which it took as a model, adopting its rational logic and building technologies. This strategic alliance permitted architecture to renew itself formally, and industry to propose itself as a model for world change.

Superstudio criticized the attempt to unify the cultures of the system of technologies, from design to the city, in the name of rational necessity. That logic produced an object perfectly reproducible by industry and therefore final: the design transformed the needs of production into rational values.All-production man sublimates his bourgeois ambitions in a existenz minimum surrounded by utensil objects whose form is determined by the function they serve.

In a word: twentieth-century mechanical man must use final objects within minimal architecture in a city organized rationally as a factory through the system of zoning.

But the working class rejected the factory as a social model and pursued middle-class models instead, while capital, in order to grow and multiply, rejected the final design and demanded a continuous renewal of models that would keep the continuous desire to consume alive.

In the sixties, Superstudio the key for reading this reality on its head: the complexity, contradictions and discontinuity that exist in the physical and social world are by no means destined to vanish from the order of an industrialized world because they are the ripest fruits of industry's growth in the world.

Chaos is a permanent, not a provisional, reality.

The avant-gardes must assume the burden of "making good" (as creative possibility) that which, until yesterday, was considered ill or dissonant.

Invention design / evasion design

Radical Architecture was the first to suggest complexity as a central category of change and to assume as a positive element the multiplicity of languages and behaviours.
Superstudio worked out an early strategy that went under the name, *Invention Design and Evasion Design.* **With this strategy began the separation of the function and benefit of spatial research that became a means for investigating mind and language through the stoss, or creative shock, which Benjamin indicated as the prime function of art.**
On the other hand, convinced that the city no longer expressed a place, but a behavioural model, a condition, and that the latter was transmitted by merchandise, by intervening on product design they began their critique and disassembly of the functionalist heritage.
"Thus, evasion design endeavours to explore the idea of introducing extraneous bodies into the system: objects with the greatest possible number of sensory properties (chromatic, tactile, etc.) charged with figurativeness and image, with a view to attracting attention, drawing interest, constituting a demonstration and inspiring actions or behaviours."
Superdesign puts the compositional techniques of Dada to new use and engages in cultural nomadism by intermixing of disciplines and favouring ambiguity over unity of language.
The Italian vanguard, unlike the English, Austrian or American, introduced new political contents at the basis of operations of cultural renewal.
"The naturalistic and dialectic concept of the market had been replaced by that of its complete artificiality, in the sense that the mechanism of inducing false needs had been capable of substituting any spontaneous market need."
Against the design myths of the sixties—flexibility, modularity, seriality—Superstudio, seeking to impose a new more solid and immanent objectuality, proposed objects and spaces that were unitary, solid, immobile and aggressive in their physical strength of communication.

Histograms of Architecture 1969-71

At the end of the sixties, however, it appeared clear that any effort to update the system of objects, and any hope for critique and recovery of the system through product design, would be translated into the nth effort by the system itself to engage the intellectual to replace obsolete models in order to continue inducing needs: **an all-production world had been definitively supplanted by an all-consumption world.**
Utopia of quality was to be reduced to a neutral utopia of quantity.
So, the problem was to step further and further away from these activities of design, adopting, perhaps, the theory of the least effort amidst a generalized reductive process.
We prepared a catalogue of non-continuous three-dimensional diagrams, a catalogue of **Histograms of Architecture** with reference to a grid that could be carried over to different areas or scales for the edification of a serene and immobile nature in which we could finally see ourselves.
The term was taken from biological definitions, suggesting the birth of a posthuman thought or "the sex appeal of the inorganic".
The surface of these histograms was homogeneous and isotropic: every spatial problem and every problem of sensibility having been carefully removed.
Later, furniture, environments, architecture, and more, were effortlessly generated from the Histograms catalogue.
The Histograms were also called The Architects' Tombs.

Continuous monument

In 1969-70 we developed a sweeping argument on the possibilities of architecture as a means of critique. Beginning to use the demonstratio per absurdum systematically, we produced a model of total urbanization called **The Continuous Monument**.
This project, through the images of a negative (critical) Utopia, pushed to extremes the classical conception of the relationship between nature and architecture, city and country. The rhetorical figure of the demonstration by absurdity laid bare, through photomontages, the public image of a new relationship, no longer of opposition, but of hybridization and alliance.
The Continuous Monument takes to the limit the modern distinction between natural and artificial and opens the way to a new hybrid philosophy of reconstructing the relations between architecture and nature, in which the two terms blend in a single design.
The only possibility for architecture is in its monumental extension. All the problems of quality of space, functional destination or sensibility have been removed.
The CM it is not the simulation of a future situation, but works as a mental paradox, a critical project not buildable and therefore "negative".
On the other hand, during those same years we realized that society could no longer be identified with the rational-mechanical model of the all-production factory, of early capitalism, but that we were well on our way to another model, the supermarket, a place of consumption, a faceless, anonymous container within which goods were displayed and moved without requiring Architecture in order to be represented.

12 Ideal cities

The city was no longer a fixed placed but a condition, and this condition—conveyed by merchandise, which had shattered all barriers—united and homogenized the whole territory, regardless of whether it was city or country, centre or periphery, old burghs or new settlements.
The Twelve Ideal Cities are twelve critical designs that, by pushing to the edge individual aspects of contemporary planning (zoning, uniformity, existenz minimum, transparency, building industrialization, climatization, etc.), showed its insufficiency in the face of the problems connected with the complexity of the ever-changing City. At the same time, **Reflected Architecture**, while it investigated the relationship between Architecture and nature, reduced the semantic possibilities of the building to zero. Architecture needs to find its image in the reality while the metropolis and agriculture are part of the same territorial system.
So too, the **Neutral Surface project** concentrated on a new reduction of the building to a communication surface and to the new hybridization with natural systems through folds in the ground.

Supersurface

Meanwhile, after the demise of the model of man as rational machine studied by the ergonomic sciences for the design of military or domestic existenz minimum, which had in its turn replaced Leonardo da Vinci's model of man as divine mirror, harmony and measure of all things, we see ourselves as new creatures that have enhanced their senses with electronic aids and done away with space and time, and that project and extend themselves on the web, to the point of identifying himself with it.
The earth connected to its planets by a system of satellites can become one great surface, a great new, borderless landscape on which we can project ourselves, and an extended cerebral surface to which we can be connected as though we were in an endless library.
The images of the critical utopia of the Supersurface, in narrating this ongoing change, pushed its representation as far as it would go, with a view to unmasking an as yet unaccepted reality of the end of the city, of places, of static identities, of dichotomous thought, which had begun to be replaced by a new, hybrid physical and mental nomadism.
"The use of the earth comes about by means of service and communications grids. Cities are their intersection points. The grid is a continuous, but not a homogeneous, system.... The landscape becomes increasingly artificial and homogeneous.... Toward the disappearance of the membranes dividing interior and exterior.... Supersurface: a model of a mental attitude.... There will be no more need for cities or castles, no more purpose for streets or squares, every point will be the same as every other. The journey from A or B might be long or short: in every instance it will be a constant migration" (Superstudio 1970).

Fundamental Acts 1971-73

From 1971 to 1973 we worked on a series of inquiries into fundamental acts, centred on the relations between architecture as conscious formalization of the planet, and human life. The films we produced are propaganda of ideas outside the channels typical of the discipline of architecture. The five films are **life, education, ceremony, love and death.**
"The great themes, the fundamental themes of our life have never been touched upon by architecture. Architecture remains on their sidelines and intervenes only at a certain point of the process of relation, when ordinarily the entire behaviour has already been codifies, providing answers to rigidly posed questions.
"Even if its answers are aberrant or subversive, the logic of their production and consumption avoids all real upheaval. Architecture does not propose alternative behaviours because it uses tools adjusted by the system to avoid all substantial deviation.
"So, the working-class home and the lordly mansion follow the same models, and the radical architect and the academic architect are one and the same: the difference lies only in the quantities in play; the decisions concerning the quality of life have already been made.
"At this point the architect, recognizing in himself and in his work connotations of cosmesis, environmental pollution, and consolatrix afflictorum, suddenly stops progressing along his well-paved way. It then becomes an act of consistency, or a last attempt to save his skin, to concentrate on the redefinition of primary acts, and to examine first of all the relations that exists between these acts and architecture.
"This operation becomes a therapy for the removal of archimanias....
"The attempt at an anthropological and philosophical re-establishment of architecture becomes the centre of our reductive processes."

Architettura radicale

In 1973 Casabella, under the new direction of Alessandro Mendini, came out with an issue with a Beringei Gorilla holding a sign saying, **"Architettura radicale"** on the cover and articles inside focusing on the work of certain groups.
This new label, suggested by Germano Celant (who had also given Arte povera its name), had the de facto effect of historicizing and blocking a movement that had made ambiguity and the mossa del cavallo its strategic weapons in order to avoiding just this sort of facile cultural identification.
So Superstudio decided it was time to bring its own experience to an end.

Lot's wife and Zeno's conscience

A few years later we wrote:

"Architecture, design, art, communication … and also: behaviour, animation, criticism, philosophy and politics had been the various ways of being. The negation of the discipline and the destruction of its specificity have been the techniques of liberation.

Irony, provocation, paradox, false syllogism and logical extrapolation, terrorism, mysticism, humanism, reduction and the pathetic, were the ways of working that were used at various times in various ways.

The continuous shift, the knights move (Filiberto Menna), were the motor components.

Now the methods of analysis and action have changed.

The visible traces of this work are few and far between (the multiplying mirror of images has broken once and for all), but the coincidence (the identity) between memory and design, work and school, personal and political, continues to emerge, slowly but surely, in the ordinary facts of our daily lives.

Radical architecture, in its critical, destructive and liberating commitment, created the conditions for this awareness. Over and above the paper cemetery we leave behind, this, in our opinion, was its validity.