

The Italians do it Better!

A contemporary interpretation of the radical movement

architettura radicale
global tools
Koolhaas
postmoderno
radical architectural
global tools
Koolhaas
post-modernism

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L'architettura italiana è sempre stata caratterizzata dalla 'necessità di una teoria'(Gregotti, 1983) e profondamente segnata dalla tradizione culturale del Bel Paese. Questa specificità ha, da sempre, generato una sostanziale divergenza di significato tra i movimenti nati all'estero e la loro 'traduzione' in Italia. Così come l'architettura moderna italiana, a differenza di quella d'Oltralpe, ha rifiutato in sostanza il concetto di "tabula rasa", anche l'architettura radicale di gruppi come Superstudio, Archizoom e, in generale, i Global Tools si distingue profondamente da esperienze analoghe e contemporanee in Europa, come quelle degli Archigram o dei Metabolisti.

L'articolo prende avvio da una rilettura critica dei movimenti radicali italiani, cercando di ricostruirne la specificità e l'apporto teorico. Prosegue poi con un'analisi delle ragioni per cui assistiamo oggi a un revival di quella stagione e di come tali movimenti furono accolti dalla critica contemporanea. Nemo propheta in patria verrebbe da dire: gli architetti radicali italiani, infatti, furono spesso considerati dalla critica italiana, nella migliore delle ipotesi, dei provocatori o, nella peggiore, figure marginali che, non volendo impegnarsi in un cambiamento reale, si rifugiavano nell'utopia.

Tra i pochi che compresero l'importanza e il potenziale dell'architettura radicale vi è sicuramente Rem Koolhaas. Attraverso un'analisi critica delle numerose connessioni tra la ricerca di Archizoom e Superstudio e l'attività teorica e progettuale dell'architetto olandese, il paper cerca di evidenziare il valore scientifico di quell'esperienza, la sua attualità e la possibilità che essa possa rappresentare l'inizio di una nuova e più efficace stagione di risposta alla crisi.

Italian architecture has long been characterized by what Vittorio Gregotti termed the "need for theory" (Gregotti, 1983), deeply shaped by the country's rich cultural tradition. This unique context has consistently led to a significant divergence in how architectural movements originating abroad are interpreted or "translated" within Italy. For instance, while modern architecture in Italy largely rejected the concept of tabula rasa - a notion embraced by many transalpine countries - Italy's radical architecture, exemplified by groups like Superstudio, Archizoom, and the Global Tools, also stands in stark contrast to similar contemporary movements in Europe, such as Archigram or the Metabolists.

This article begins with a critical revaluation of the Italian radical movements, seeking to reconstruct their distinctiveness and theoretical contributions. It then delves into the reasons behind the current resurgence of interest in these movements and examines how they were received by contemporary critics. One could say, "nemo propheta in patria" - indeed, Italian radical architects were often viewed by the Italian critics, at best, as provocateurs or, at worst, as marginal figures who, instead of engaging in tangible change, sought refuge in utopian visions.

One of the few figures to grasp the significance and potential of radical architecture was Rem Koolhaas. Through a critical analysis of the numerous connections between the research of Archizoom, Superstudio, and Koolhaas's theoretical and design work, this paper aims to underscore the scientific relevance of the radical architectural experience, its contemporary relevance, and its potential to inspire a new and more effective response to today's crises.

RADICAL ARCHITECTURE AND PROJECT OF CRISES

What does it mean for young architects and scholars to look so closely today to some short-lived experiments by young designers forty years ago? Is this a kind of nostalgia for an early phase of radicality? Or even nostalgia for an earlier phase of the global, when the very idea of resources and tools was redefined in the face of new technologies and a new awareness of planetary ecology? Are we in another phase of retooling the disciplines of design, a kind of echo of a too quickly forgotten historical moment? Is this book about the past or the future? (Colomina 2020,4)

Beatriz Colomina opens (Colomina 2020,4) the 2018 volume on *Global Tools* (Borgonovo, Franceschini 2018) with these words. Indeed, it was towards the end of the 2010s that Italy began to revisit the experience of Italian radical architecture in a more proactive light, moving beyond the previously dominant and reductive view that regarded the radical architect merely as someone who evaded problems and explored the world of the fantastic and utopia (La Pietra 1983, 15). In recent years, however, we have witnessed a critical reassessment of the scientific significance of these movements. This revaluation began with the exhibition "Towards a new Athens Charter" by Studio Branzi at the 2010 Biennale, directed by Kazuyo Sejima, and continued through numerous publications dedicated to the work of Superstudio, Archizoom, and UFO, culminating in recent exhibitions that have spotlighted previously overlooked figures, such as Riccardo Dalisi.

Why, after more than fifty years, are Italian critics and scholars revisiting an experience that was long considered minor and often relegated to the realm of design rather than architecture? One possible explanation is that the new millennium began under the shadow of crisis. The collapse of the Twin Towers in 2001 shattered the

illusion of a stable geopolitical order centred around the dominance of the Western world, which viewed itself as an "exporter" of culture, progress, and - unfortunately - democracy. Additionally, the economic crisis sparked by the 2006 real estate bubble, coupled with the increasingly urgent environmental crisis, has exposed the vulnerabilities of modernity - issues that had already been extensively critiqued from a philosophical standpoint by figures such as Lyotard, Foucault, Guattari, and postmodern thinkers in general, starting in the latter half of the 20th century.

As Renato De Fusco wrote, postmodernism was something capable of creating an 'ugly architecture' but also of establishing a convincing 'condition of thought' (De Fusco 2012, 459). In the realm of architecture, postmodernism is often associated with designs that, from a formal perspective - and sometimes with rather questionable results - attempt to revive traditional forms and motifs, frequently through the lens of irony that alludes to a sense of continuity as a counterpoint to the modernist principle of the tabula rasa. However, the more intellectually-driven architectural movements that sought to critique modernity from a conceptual standpoint - particularly the work of radical architects - were often misunderstood. Critics frequently failed to recognize the critical depth of these movements, which were obscured by their provocative methods and actions.

In the 1990s, De Fusco himself liberated the postmodern "condition" from the architecture of the same name. He shifted the interpretation away from stylistic and linguistic terms, opening it up to a more inclusive, fertile logic that culminated in what he called the 'code of micrologies' (De Fusco, 1992,451). This historiographical concept, developed by the Neapolitan historian, encompassed all architectural research and movements unified by a focus on 'minor things' - a trait shared by all architectural endeavors that opposed the grand narratives of the

Modern Movement (De Fusco 1992, 451). Under this inclusive code, De Fusco grouped together architects as diverse as Rossi, Stirling, Portoghesi, Venturi, and De Carlo, as well as collectives like Archizoom and Superstudio. These figures and groups shared a common opposition to the grand universal narratives typical of modernity, favouring instead an architecture that prioritized the chronicle over history¹ and aimed to provide local rather than universal responses by interpreting urban contexts.

In his writings, De Fusco expressed concern that the rejection of metanarratives could cause the discipline to retreat into trivialities, becoming disconnected from the core of architectural theory and practice. He believed this had, in fact, happened within radical architecture. According to De Fusco, radical architects withdrew into the realm of design, in contrast to historicist architects, who, in his view, maintained a strong commitment to the discipline, particularly its design and drawing aspects, making these their defining mission (De Fusco 1992,452).

REVIVAL

When De Fusco wrote his "Storia dell'Architettura contemporanea", he was still too close to the years of protest to fully appreciate the potential of the research



Fig.1 - Front page of Casabella, N. 377, May 1977. The Global TOOLS.

conducted by radical architects. A more convincing revaluation of these positions is offered by Pier Vittorio Aureli in his book "Il Progetto dell'Autonomia" (Aureli 2016). In it, Aureli argues that there is an ideological affinity between Aldo Rossi, Giorgio Grassi, and the Florentine group Archizoom Associati (Andrea Branzi, Paolo Deganello, Massimo Morozzi, Gilberto Corretti). This affinity is expressed through a shared critical stance towards the capitalist city, which is built on the modernist paradigm of the form/function relationship. For the architects of the Tendenza, this critique justifies their research into the underlying reasons behind architectural form and the exploration of architectural archetypes. For Archizoom, it translates into a vision of a city 'without architecture' (Fig.2), one that fully aligns with the immaterial flows that pass through it.

By critically reevaluating the relationship between Archizoom Associati, Giorgio Grassi, and Aldo Rossi, Aureli restores a distinct identity to Italian radical architecture, setting it apart from international movements that are less conceptual and more inclined towards technological visions. He argues that "No-Stop City" represents a critique of the utopian urban projects proposed by neo-avant-garde groups like Archigram and the Metabolists. *Unlike these groups, Archizoom proposed a city without quality, without architecture, cold, infinitely extendable, and where every possible difference is absorbed into a system that reflects the three key spaces of the neo-capitalist city: the factory, the car park, and the supermarket* (Aureli 2016, 113-132).

For Aureli, Archizoom's "No-Stop City", much like Hilberseimer's "Vertical City", embraces the destiny of the capitalist city, pushing it to its extreme consequences. This results in an architecture without form, abstract and determined by the objectivity of production relations, yet infused with a kind of cold exaltation. Most importantly, Aureli emphasizes that Archizoom, like Hilberseimer, recognizes the *intrinsic validity of the project as*

theory (Biraghi 2016).

Far from being a mere prediction, a project becomes a tangible manifestation of reality, existing independently of physical realization. It is no coincidence, then, that during a new and arguably more dramatic crisis of modernity, the 2010 Architecture Biennale rediscovered the work of Andrea Branzi (Fig.3), a leading figure of the radical movement and member of the Archizoom group. The exhibition, titled "People Meet in Architecture", sought to reframe the discussion around architecture by emphasizing its social and public dimensions. This "immaterial" dimension positions architecture as a meeting place for the flow of people, goods, traffic, and, crucially, information.

LEGACY

One of the key ideas shared by the Italian radical architects - many of whom collaborated between 1973 and 1975 in the *Global Tools* movement - is the rejection of architecture's purely formal aspects. Instead, they emphasized the value of the project not only for the material forms it creates, but more importantly for its potential as a critical intervention in reality. This shift in thinking is likely one reason why, starting in the early 21st century, architectural scholarship began to revisit this period of study, highlighting the "crisis projects" of groups like Archizoom and Superstudio, as well as the educational initiatives of Riccardo Dalisi in the fragile territories of Naples' outskirts, and Ugo La Pietra's urban practices in public spaces.

While Archizoom's "No-Stop City" rejects the formal aspects of architecture, envisioning a city shaped by "information," Superstudio focused on the project's ability to critically interpret reality through imagery. Their "12 Ideal Cities" project is a collection of texts (with an epilogue that underwent several revisions), accompanied by illustrations, primarily by Gian Piero Frassinelli. The work was first published in

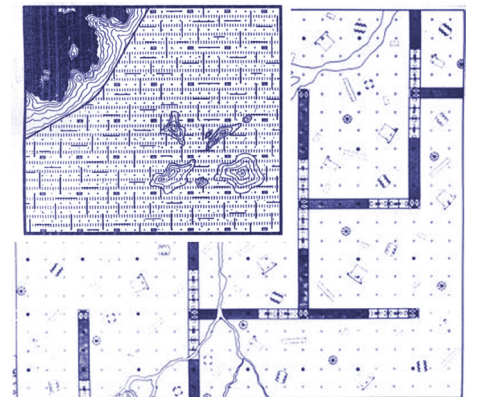


Fig.2 - NO STOP CITY [1970] Archizoom.



Fig.3 - Merchandise metropoli, Studio Branzi, Biennale di Architettura 2010.

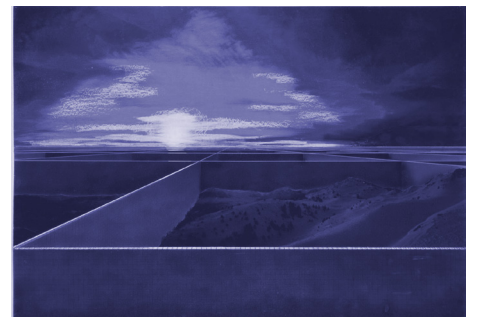


Fig.4 - 2000-Ton City, Superstudio, 1971.

"Architectural Design" in late 1971 and later in "Casabella" in early 1972 (De Flego 2016). Each project is represented by an image that exaggerates and critiques an anthropological aspect of modern urban life.

Thus, "2000-Ton City" highlights (Fig.4) the isolation of modern man, while the "Temporal Cochlea City" addresses the alienation experienced by individuals forced to abandon their sense of individuality. "New York of Brains" portrays a society reduced solely to rational thought, while the "Spaceship City" - bearing a striking resemblance to the spacecraft in "2001: A Space Odyssey" - depicts a generation of individuals traveling through space, nourished by the spaceship itself as they await arrival in new worlds to colonize.

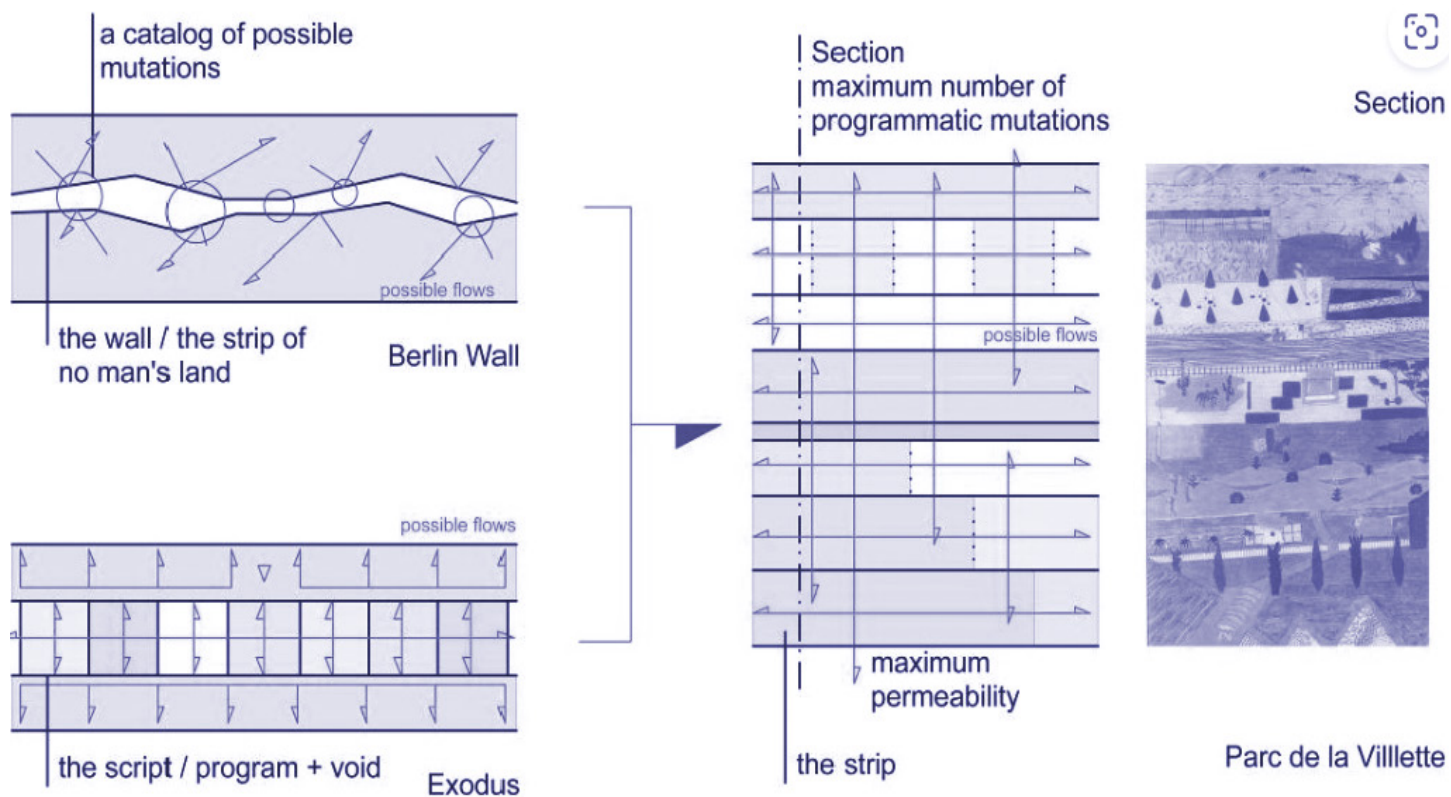


Fig.5 - Development strategy of strip in Parc de la Villette drawn by Özyay Özkan. Source <https://cansukokblog.wordpress.com/2020/04/05/social-condenser-la-villette-of-koolhaas/>.

The "City of Hemispheres" explores the theme of man imprisoned within a city that stifles individuality and creative thought, while "The Magnificent and Fabulous Barnum Jr.'s" presents a dystopian, artificial world where primal human instincts are suppressed. The "Continuous Production Ribbon City" anticipates critiques of a development model that exhausts resources and generates waste. Similarly, the "Ville Machine Habitée" represents the exacerbation of modern city life, where individuals are condemned to repeat the same paths throughout their lifetimes.

The "City of Order" appears to be a conventional urban structure but, where rebellious individuals are lobotomized and transformed into puppets. The "Tiered Cone City" serves as a metaphor for capitalist society, where individuals are locked in a struggle to reach the top of the pyramid. Meanwhile, the "City of Splendid Houses" critiques architecture focused exclusively on decorative elements, neglecting the structural reality of the modern city, which consists of basic, utilitarian cells.

Finally, the "City of the Book" -

which draws visual comparisons to Hilberseimer's architecture - presents a society where individuals choose to live by moral or practical principles. This choice determines whether they live "in the light" on the building's exteriors or "in the dark" at its core.

The significance of these 12 figures lies not in a desire to propose new urban models, but in their symbolic value and, most importantly, in the critical and provocative nature of what we could, paraphrasing Benjamin, refer to as a series of "city images".

Among those who inherited this legacy and transformed it into a critical reflection on the sense and meaning of the contemporary city is, without a doubt, Rem Koolhaas. In his "History of Post-Modernism", Charles Jencks briefly references Archizoom and Superstudio in a footnote on page 192, under the section on Generic Urbanism. He writes: «the Generic City represents more than an organized movement; it reflects a current of architects, including O.M. Ungers, Archizoom, and Superstudio, who, in the 1960s, promoted abstract urbanism based on generic forces, Platonic geometry, and systems of grids,

circles, and polyhedrons that shape urban layouts. Rem Koolhaas celebrated this vision in his projects and his essay "Generic City" (Jencks 2014, 192).

Koolhaas describes the Generic City as «the city liberated from the captivity of centre, from the straitjacket of identity» (Koolhaas 1994, 1259). This city has no predetermined form but instead expands like a liquid in all directions, with its molecules held together by weak forces. This concept of modernity - liquid, weak, and diffuse - echoes Branzi's vision of the "No-Stop City", a city regulated solely by the flows passing through it and best represented through diagrams.

It is through this diagrammatic approach that Koolhaas illustrates what he calls Programmatic Instability (Koolhaas 1989, 197). According to this idea, the architectural project is not the result of a traditional compositional process but rather emerges from a program that generates a flexible structure, one capable of absorbing and adapting to continuous change.

The programmatic layering upon vacant terrain encourages dynamic coexistence of activities

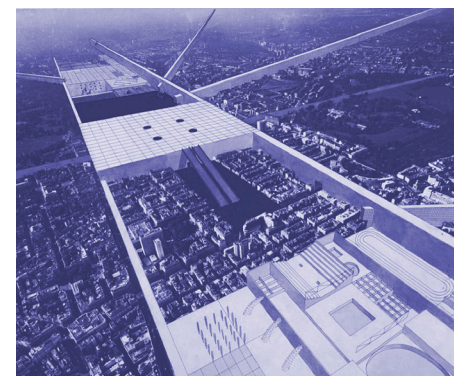


Fig.6 - Exodus, Rem Koolhaas, Madelon Vriesendorp, Elia Zenghelis, and Zoe Zenghelis, 1972.

and generates, through their interference, unprecedented events. According to this logic, the goal of a project is not to create a "flexible" space that merely accommodates all pre-planned functions, but rather an "open" space - one capable of embracing and, more importantly, activating unforeseen uses and events. Parc de la Villette was perhaps the first OMA project to translate the concept of programmatic indeterminacy into urban-scale design. In the

competition proposal, the functional program outlined in the brief is interpreted as a series of diagrams, each representing a distinct layer of the park. The result is a product of a distributional logic that is completely free from the constraints of compositional synthesis. The final "design" of the park emerges from the superimposition of these independent layers.

Perhaps the most significant and officially acknowledged debt Koolhaas owes is to Superstudio. In his short text "Field Trip. A(A) Memoir (First and Last...)", where he reflects on the atmosphere at the Architectural Association School of Architecture in London during the early 1970s - and where Koolhaas studied and where Peter Cook, among others, taught - he teases Archigram but makes a point of highlighting the influence of Italian radical architects on his theoretical development. He notes: «Superstudio, founded in 1966, is an Italian group of avant-garde architects; I was personally very

impressed by their 'continuous monument' and had organized a few lectures by Adolfo Natalini at the A(A)» (Koolhaas 2021, 73).

Figuratively, the similarities between Superstudio's projects and some of OMA's work are evident (cfr Fig.4-8 and Fig.6-7). However, the images in OMA's projects are never just simple illustrations. Even when they take the form of explicit "quotations" from other works, these images point to the "conceptual debt" Koolhaas owes to his influences

The 1972 Exodus (Fig.6) project, developed in collaboration with Madelon Vriesendorp, Elia Zenghelis, and Zoe Zenghelis, explicitly references Superstudio's Continuous Monument (Fig.7) as well as the 2000-Ton City. This project, as is widely known, was inspired by the profound impact the Berlin Wall had on a young Koolhaas during his visit to the city, a symbol of the Cold War. At the time, Koolhaas was still a student at the

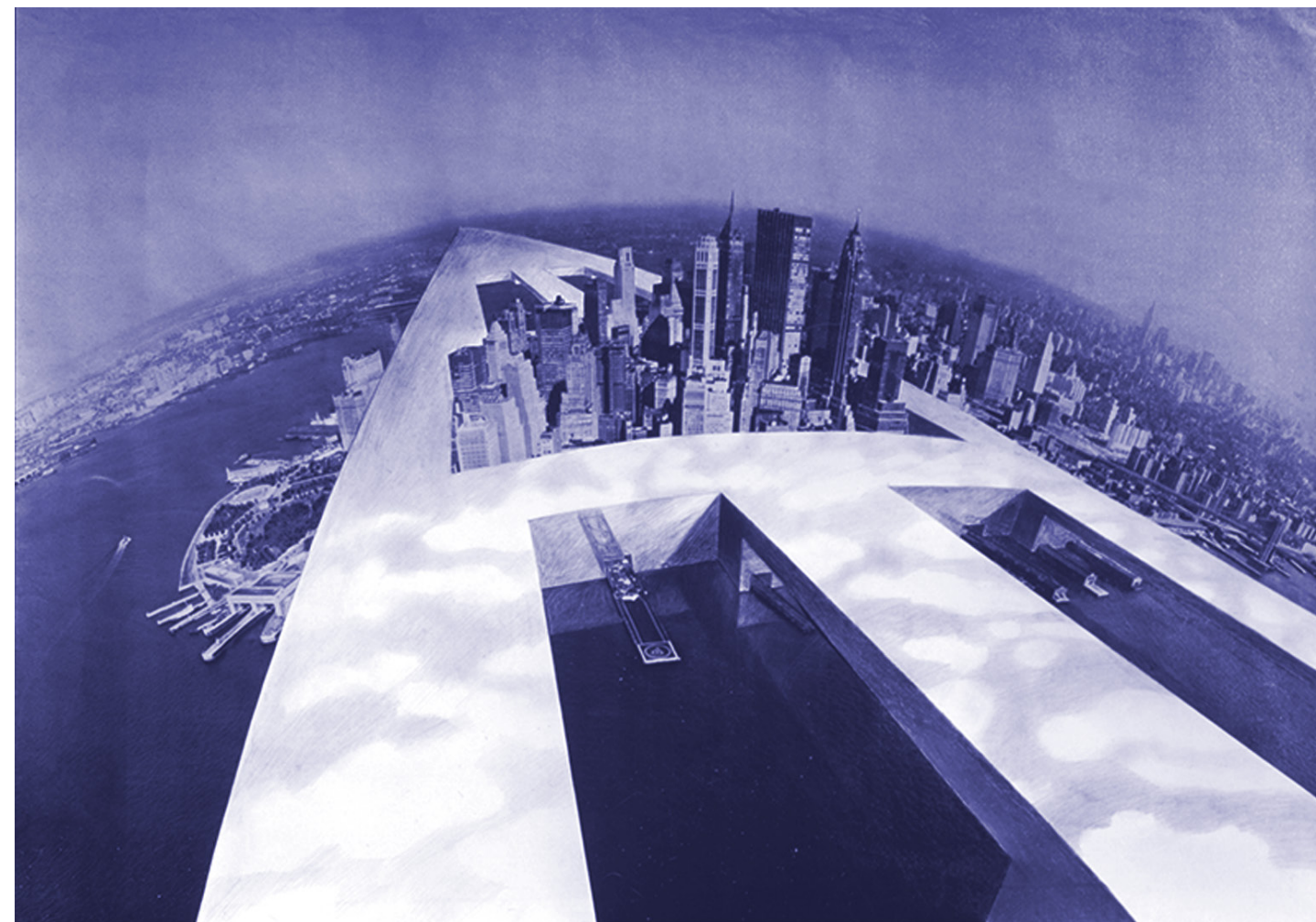


Fig.7 - Continuous Monument, Superstudio, 1969.



Fig.8 - Exodus, or the voluntary prisoners of architecture Rem Koolhaas, Madelon Vriesendorp, Elia Zenghelis, and Zoe Zenghelis, 1972.

AA, and his encounter with what he described as "horrific and powerful architecture" planted the seeds for themes that would later become central to his theoretical and design work. Reflecting on the experience, Koolhaas observed:

On the level of negative revelations, the Wall made any emerging attempt to link form and meaning seem absurd, in a binding regressive relationship [...] I would never again believe in form as the main vehicle of meaning.

Koolhaas was struck by the Wall's ability to distort the meaning of the reality in which it was embedded.

It was perhaps at this moment that the concept of architectural design as a "critical paranoid" process (Koolhaas 1978) began to take shape - a process where design does not emerge from a contextual analysis, but rather from an interpretation of reality that occurs in the architect's mind, generating a new image. The project thus becomes something subjective, not the result of deductive logic, but an unconscious activity where an idea is "grafted" onto reality, altering its meaning.

In Exodus, the Wall and the reality it creates are central, but so too is the memory of radical architecture.

The combination of these "experiences" translates into an image that is not utopia, but theory - much like in Superstudio's projects. Whether this image is realizable or not is irrelevant; its value lies in its role as a critical interpretation of the reality it represents.

CONCLUSIONS: TOWARDS A NEW CHANCE OF THE ITALIAN THINKING

There is a profound difference between the projects of Superstudio and those of Rem Koolhaas.

In Koolhaas's work, no ideological stance or judgmental intent is overt; the lessons of the architectural "masters" and of reality itself are read, absorbed, and reimagined without moralistic undertones. Exodus, for example, does not evoke the forbidding wall dividing Berlin but rather functions as a conceptual "spaceship" akin to Superstudio's Continuous Monument - a structure that doesn't sever the historical city but instead lands upon it, in this case, on London.

In Exodus, unlike Superstudio's 2000-Ton City, people are not confined against their will; rather, they choose to enclose themselves voluntarily to unleash their instincts (even the most brutal) in an exaggerated form of freedom. This setup parodies the plight of Berliners attempting to flee from East to West: like all parodies, it replaces tragedy with irony, possibly alluding to the universal human impulse to escape from the socialist utopia (the radicals' political ideal) to the capitalist reality - an object of frequent critique by those same radicals. For Koolhaas, capitalism is not something an architect can condemn, but rather a reality to be understood, interpreted, and utilized. Instead of envisioning 12 ideal cities, the Dutch architect creates one: a Delirious New York, a conceptual territory that becomes the foundation for his lifelong architectural work. As Koolhaas himself stated, «I wanted to build, as

a writer, a territory where (...) I could eventually work as an architect» (Koolhaas 1993, 297).

With hindsight, it would be easy to say that the radical architects were right and Koolhaas wrong. The political, social, economic and environmental crisis that we are experiencing on a planetary level is certainly a sign of the failure of development models, first and foremost the capitalist one, that are rooted in the culture of modernity. Perhaps, as we have said, this new crisis of modern thought is the main reason for the rediscovery of the radical experience, especially the Italian one. But in order for this rediscovery, in architecture, not to simply translate into a new escape into the world of 'small things' and instead become the foundation of an 'operative' thought, it is necessary to understand the possibility of constructing a theory from utopia.

Among the 12 ideal cities envisioned by Superstudio, two stand out as embodiments of the meaning and future of the radical experience. The first is the spaceship city, symbolizing a transitional generation - the radical architects - condemned to inaction, awaiting the right conditions for their ideas to become feasible. The second, perhaps more significant, is the thirteenth city, introduced in the epilogue of a document published in Casabella. This city cannot be visually represented because it is invisible; its form can only be sensed through the shadow that appears in special circumstances. In this place of lost traces, all those who question the meaning of the 12 ideal cities come together, highlighting the theoretical legacy of the radical movement - a seed for what could become true postmodern architecture

Gradually, only a few remained on the plain, as the others were preoccupied with building or inhabiting heavy and impossible cities. In the supposed place of origin of the thirteenth city, they began to reflect on the meaning of their memories and prophecies, attempting to reconstruct the reasons behind their

recollections and the plans for that city and the preceding twelve. Slowly, they came to realize that these were neither suppositions nor plans, nor descriptions written in some strange code. They were not metaphors or parables. In the end, they added a note on the how and why of these tales. The note read: 'We return the data you have provided us with' (Natalini A. 2014).

Koolhaas stands out as one of the few architects who has successfully gathered and utilized data, transforming it into a theoretical framework that has, for over fifty years, served as a lens for reading, interpreting, and shaping the contemporary city. The identity of Italian architecture, by contrast, has often been defined by a quest for a "necessary" theory to fill the voids left by professional practice over the past two decades (Valenti, Andreola, 175). Yet this "necessity" has frequently led to a growing disconnect between theoretical research and practical application.

The current revival of radical architecture - a movement that anticipated the crisis of modernity - is legitimized by the disruption of political, social, environmental, and economic stability in today's world. However, it is equally "necessary" that this rediscovery of Global Tools research does not devolve into a purely theoretical exercise. This is why, in this article, we aim to push the starting line forward, illustrating how the relationship between Koolhaas and radical architecture is not merely symbolic but exemplifies how "Italian-style" theoretical inquiry can be applied in a truly operational way. Here, utopia is no longer an escape from reality but becomes its critical interpretation, providing an essential framework for its reimagining.

As Marco Biraghi observes, "Koolhaas's point of view has always been marked as postmodern; where the term does not signify any stylistic character, but rather the thinkable condition of an alternative, more diverse and fluid modernity - a second chance afforded to modern culture and architecture" (Biraghi 2008).

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NOTES

1. The difference between a chronicle and history, as intended here, is that the former records daily news, while the latter focuses on past events and builds theoretical interpretations of those events.