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MUTANT ARCHITECTURE
The complexity of utopia, makeability and continuity

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The utopian makeability of functional design, still firmly anchored in architecture as a necessary inherent condition, was critically questioned by various 'paper architects' such as Superstudio during the late 1960's and early 1970's. Through an analysis of the history of utopian and counter-utopian architecture, Rana Ghavami and Jesse van Winden argue that architecture need not necessarily to be practically applicable to legitimize itself.

A sentence uttered makes a world appear
Where all things happen as they say they do;
We doubt the speaker, not the tongue we hear;
Words have no word for words that are not true.

— W.H. Auden[1]

I

In 1978, Bernhard Tschumi produced a series of postcard-sized *Advertisements for Architecture*. The most famous advertisement showed Le Corbusier's Villa Savoye, as photographed in 1965, dilapidated, faded, the whitewash peeling off [fig. 1]. The header says 'The most architectural thing about this building is the state of decay in which it is.' The smaller print under the photograph says 'Architecture only survives where it negates the form that society expects of it. Where it negates itself by transgressing the limits that history has set for it.'
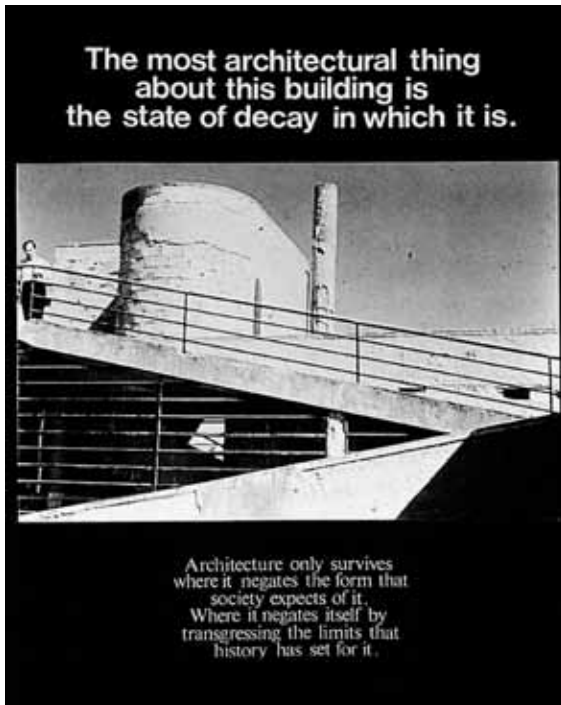
II

Architecture is a battleground, and the architect charges to conceive a part of it. The formation that he commands is configured by his beliefs to eventually be able to construct a body in state of completeness. Others, such as Tschumi, have rejected the state of completeness as a utopian belief or as an ideal and thus refused to use architecture as a vehicle for apparently perfect achievements and purposes. But the architect needs the belief in his ability to produce something definite, something real, in order to carry out his profession. Without designating spaces to functions (and the other way around), providing services to anticipated problems and necessities, mobilizing means to ends, the architect would either be a dysfunctional agency or a creator of autonomous self-reflective constructions unintended for facilitating human activity. Accordingly, the necessity of this belief results in a behavioural pattern which could be seen as catenation of symptoms of a utopian principle, when viewed in the full light of the complexity of this entanglement.

Precisely this is what the Italian conceptual architecture collective Superstudio showed in their late 1960's paper architecture propositions; enormous white three-dimensional grids projected bulking over existing cities and landscapes, at the same time adapting utopist aesthetics and producing dystopian all-consuming monster envelopes and contingent tabulae rasae, ostensibly yet to be occupied, structured and instrumentalized according to one's or the users' wishes [fig. 2]. To conceive architecture in a modernist fashion as a practice of utopically designing environments where man is to be facilitated as efficiently, livable and logically as possible, as perceived and staged by the architect, implies an authority which determines these ideals and the way in which they are to serve people, as Rem Koolhaas showed in his 1972 architectural thesis *Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture*.[2] The 'makeability' of functional design, still firmly anchored in architecture as a necessary inherent condition was critically questioned by various paper architects during the late 1960's and early 1970's.[3]

Essentially a political sine qua non, makeability ('*maakbaarheid*') has been used in Dutch-language post-war discourse to describe the belief in the capacity to shape the world to one's wishes. Comparable to social engineering, society is constructed and conducted through architecture. The protocol gives the architect only the option to intervene at one point – usually after behavioural variables have already been codified into classification, statistics

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1. Bernard Tschumi, *Advertisements for Architecture*, 1975. Source:
B. Tschumi, *Architecture and Disjunction*, Cambridge, Massachu-
setts 1994, p. 64.

and patterns. The solutions he puts forward are a
response to inflexibly stated problems. An architec-
ture without makeability as a necessary condition
to render thinkable a final product is privileged
only to conceptual practices where the makeability
of architecture might actually be the primary con-
cern – architecture on paper. As Martin van Schaik
has pointed out, utopia is where architecture
and politics effectively intertwine, since they are
both constituted by the ambition of forming and
reforming reality's infrastructure.[4] One could add,
makeability is where architecture and politics col-
lide. Both architecture and politics are codependent
of – and in a historical context have embraced – the
conception of a utopia as an engine for improve-
ment of social, economical and political realities.

III

Utopia, introduced by Sir Thomas More in 1516,
referred to a fictional island in a state of perfection
and completeness as antithesis to a present society,
in his case England, which thus could be conside-
red Dystopia.[5] More stressed the importance of a
model built space to render Utopia a successful

model society. As opposed to the wilderness of the
island, the architecture of its cities is rationalized
and uniform in set up: small in scale and geometri-
cally planned, '[i]f you know one of their cities you
know them all, for they're exactly alike, except
where geography itself makes a difference. I will
describe one of them, and no matter which.'[6]
Equally important, the perfection of the spatial
circumstances isn't touched by the passing of time,
the effectiveness of the grid is made sure to be
permanent. The cities are in state of perfection, and
therefore will remain unchanged. Although the
falsification of the concept has been as much a
historical topos as its resurgence, the three typical
characteristics of Utopia have been adapted
through the centuries, especially in the most
influential periods of accelerated technological
evolution: the Renaissance and the industrial
revolution.

From the nineteenth century onwards, pro-
gressive urbanistic models and theories leaned on
spatial development, taking totalitarian ways of
imposing order on society, an order meant to live in
and believe in. Haussmann's Paris is a stereotypical
example which shows what this takes: a margin-
alization of social and ethical implications of such
a technological utopia. William Morris' equally
fictional description of the 'authentic' utopia, *News
from Nowhere* of 1890, included the same trinity
of a criticized present society, an ideal model so-
ciety and a model space.[7] The latter circumstance,
however, wasn't constituted by a sharp difference
between the city and its surroundings, but symbi-
otically proliferated spatial differences connecting
built space internally, and externally with the en-
vironment. Tony Garnier's *Cité Industrielle* of 1917
and Frederik van Eeden's *Lichtstad* (Radiant City)
of 1921 are examples of virtual cities with both so-
cialist and techo-utopian features.[8] Futurism, Con-
structivism and perhaps Albert Speer gave techno-
utopia an aesthetic idiom that has shaped twentieth
century utopias. Well-known nineteen fifties' and
sixties' utopist programs incessantly show this. In
Peter Cook's *Plug-in City*, first published in the 1964
'ZOOM' issue of Archigram magazine, living units
and shops are plugged into a grid by a crane sliding
over the ubiquitous monorail (fig. 3). In a contempo-
rary newspaper article, some of its principles are
transcribed into a vision of the future reality. There
is, for example, '[…] a shop-feed system, because

2. Superstudio, *The Continuous Monument: New New York*, 1969. Source: *Domus 481* (1969) December, p. 45.

there won't be any goods deliveries by lorry to clutter up the roads. Instead, food shops will be like giant cigarette machines with just a refrigerated display. You will be able to get obscure dishes, for which you now have to go to Soho, in any neighbourhood: the proprietor will dial a central depot and they will come through pneumatic tubes or along conveyor belts.[9]' Whether this phrasing is actually Cook's or the journalist's is irrelevant, as the journalist illustrates herself: 'One established and long-disillusioned designer looked at it and said simply: "It's a very good idea. You would need a dictatorship to do it."' The architect doesn't have to be the dictator. The uncanny incongruence between excitement and horror that was evoked here was the very same as characterised utopias since More's first instalment, and which would delineate Superstudio's persistently ambiguous argument.

Complexity and contradictions, together with the discontinuities existing in the physical and social world, are not destined to disappear in the order of a site considered a tabula rasa, because location implies context and man implies unboundedness. 'Radical architecture,' as epitomised chiefly by Florentine leftist architects' collectives Archizoom and Superstudio engaged in a countering of early 1960's utopist projects, like Constant Nieuwenhuys' *New Babylon*, Yona Friedman's and Archigram's entire effort of producing spatio-technological structures protruding, extending and expanding from existing cities. Providing in solutions for myriad problems existing in society – to create a nexus of flyover virgin space for self-organizing a life of play and motion, or to reconceive overcrowded inner cities without having to demolish any building, is the tip of the iceberg. By displacing the megalomanous politicized aesthetic of their prewar and 1960's ancestors, Superstudio adapted and reversed the utopian venture to an over-identification with its ideals, politics and aesthetic. While their
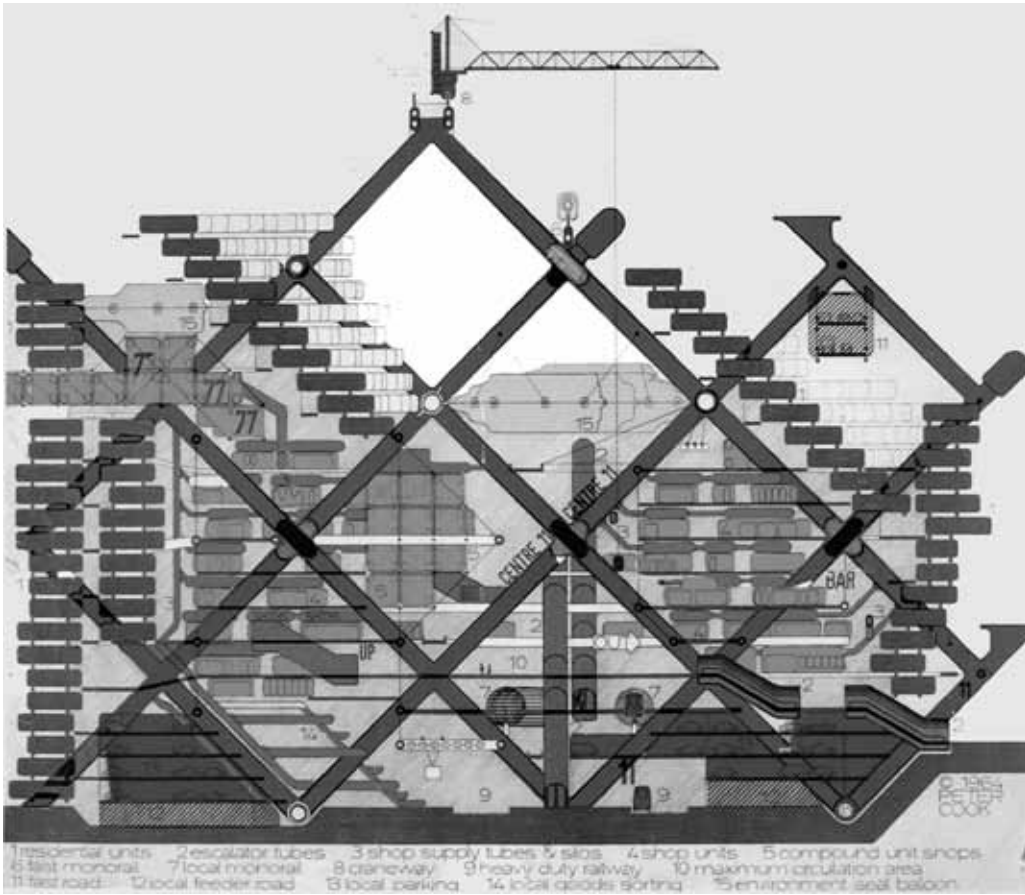
3. Peter Cook, *Plug-in City,* 1965, detail. Source: Alain Guiheux (ed.), *Archigram*, Paris 1994, exh.cat. Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, p. 87. (photo: Photo Archives Archigram)

well-willing hostages were envisioning a capitalist socio-technical future, Archizoom (having taken its name from Archigram's fourth magazine issue entitled '*Amazing Zoom Archigram 4*') and Superstudio purposed to critique this essentially modernist outlook by exacerbating its objectives.

Superstudio was conceived in coincidence with their first exhibition in 1966, *Superarchitettura*, a show they shared with Archizoom.[10] Although most people involved had been graduated architects for some while, the exhibition was in fact centered on pop art design (fig. 4). The works on display could be considered self-referential, but on further investigation this self-reference may well have had a politico-conceptual undertow. 'Superarchitettura is the architecture of superproduction, superconsumption, superinduction to consume, the supermarket, the superman, super gas,' the exhibition poster read by way of a manifesto. This hyperbole

should of course be understood in the extent of its ambivalence. In Archizoom's later projects this strategy of mirroring consumerism and modernism held on, without directly proposing alternatives but rather showing simultaneously interlacing conceptions, poetical allusions and meaningless architecture through design objects and propositions (fig. 5).[11] Superstudio's contribution to *Superarchitettura* ran within the same vein. Refusing nostalgia and craftsmanship, symbolic props were used, as vehicles to operate like foreign bodies in an intolerable system and therefore served as signs for life that is moving forward. Their practice, so to say, didn't start off as paper architecture, but it did develop partially into such when elaborating on theoretical preoccupations, mainly intended for exhibitions, magazines and catalogues.

4. Archizoom, Superstudio. Exhibition view from *Superarchittetura I*, Galleria Joly 2, Pistoia 1966. Source: M.T. Strauffer, *Figurationen des Utopischen*, Munich, Berlin 2008, p. 225. (photo: Andrea Branzi)

IV

Superstudio's seminal work, *The Continuous Monument: an Architectural Model for Total Urbanization* (1969) consists of a series of visual propositions, taking as point of departure existing photographs of cities and landscapes (fig. 6). Drawn into them are geometrical structures integrated in the (urban) landscape, always white, sometimes with a grid, often slightly transparent, vaguely showing the traces of what they cover, often mirroring the surroundings or the clouds. In their environmental context they resemble buildings, but the structures have nothing building-like themselves; there are no doors or windows, no ornaments, no chimneys, no roads leading to them, no people. Their overall forms are definite, but their function is nondescript, a belief in and a need for makeability seems non-applicable. They look impeccable and disastrous at the same time. In the manifesto-like text coming with *The Continuous Monument*, Superstudio explain what they mean by the name of the project: 'A form of architecture all equally emerging from a single continuous environment: the world rendered uniform by technology, culture and all the other inevitable forms of imperialism.'[12] Superstudio

never literally put into perspective their rhetoric of reversed identification, only until Natalini states in the catalogue text to their 1978 exhibition *In-arch:* 'Initiating to use systematically the "demonstratio per absurdum", we have produced an architectonical model for total urbanization,' and so to some the consequent use of a rigid programmatic semantic apparatus may persist as such or remain ambivalent.[13] The series of proposals can be regarded as solutions replacing, containing or preserving existent landscape, as neutral architecture, ostensibly yet to be occupied, structured, shaped and instrumentalized according to one's or the users' wishes, as tabulae rasae, as dystopias showing what dictatorship means, as showcases of the consequences of a possible future of architecture, as irony, as Foucauldian *tables*, as mute signs of an ontological notion of architecture, as mutated reincarnations of obsolete historic utopian architecture, as mutant material-conceptual monsters, and so on.

In the same text accompanying *The Continuous Monument*, Superstudio state: 'Between *natura naturans* and *natura naturata*, we choose the latter.'[14] Literally translated as 'nature naturing' and 'nature natured', the dichotomy can be understood as a way of discerning the cyclical evolution of man, nature and reality on the one hand, and a created instance, designing reality to be inserted in reality, like a revolution on the other. Following this, it might be said that Superstudio, in the light of their disguised agenda, would intend recreating nature and reality, and that more likely they contended exactly the opposite of their allegations: to make obvious that revolutionistically merging recreated reality with reality isn't feasible. But it would be reductive to claim that Superstudio were merely implying the opposite of their statements. Rather, they make the utopia and the dystopia apparent at the same time, implying, one could argue, that they showed how utopia and dystopia always include one another. Since Thomas More, utopias were always conceived as antitheses to present theses, existing societies perceived as undesired reality, essentially a dystopia from where the utopia is mirrored and displaced. This is one way in which utopia and dystopia are always part of the same construct. Another way in which the two notions converge is the authoritarian condition of the imposition of the utopia onto reality.
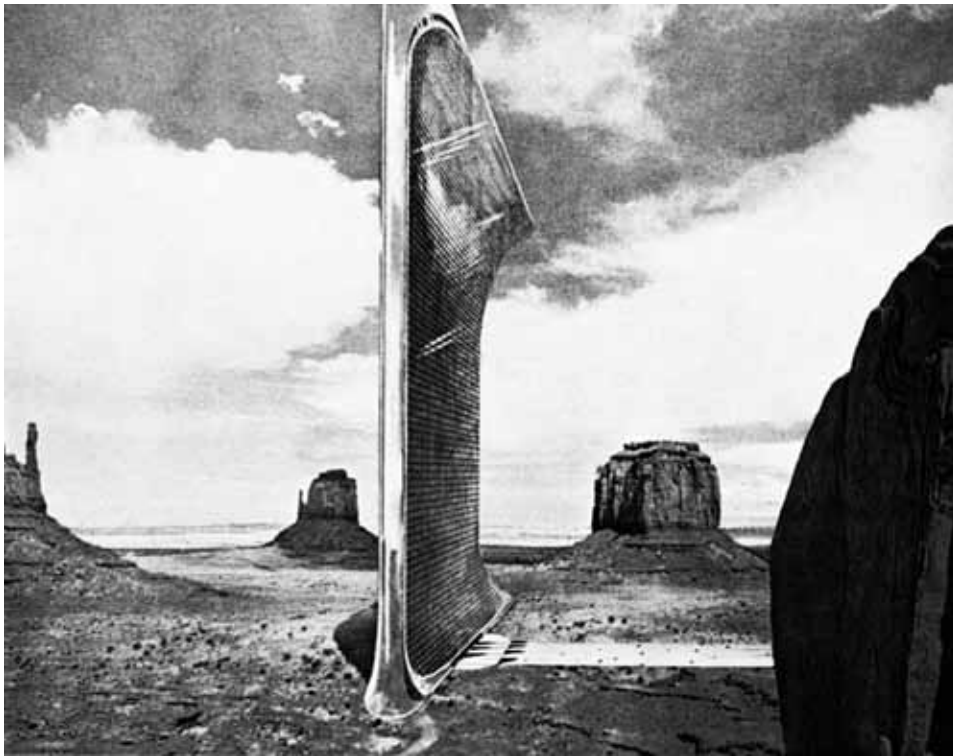
Any architectural plan is to a certain degree an attempt at (or, when not intended to be built, a suggestion of) materializing a plan which is essentially utopian, a symptom of the dream of makeability, which in some way it needs to subscribe to by force. The symptom could thus be defined as the presupposing of makeability as a valid principle. It implies a subjective account of a singular ideal reality, while the existing world, cultures and societies are constituted by an infinite multiplicity of realities. The friction apparent here, the confrontation with and between agents of power is an inherent part of life and very acceptable on small scale, but has dystopian consequences on the larger scale. That is not the point Superstudio seem to be making, however. Moreover, the conclusion apparently to be drawn is that any utopian belief implies an authority which could turn it into a dystopia. This is where makeability comes in again: a utopia needs the idealistic belief in the feasibility of the displacement, of the imagined reality that, once materialized, will be accepted and merged within the existing reality.

V

But displacement overtime isn't possible without a move, a transition. And reality as *naturans* can only be changed to a small extent, even when superimposing on it an idealism, a *naturata*. (A new building will delineate and therefore limit the spatial reality thus created, and it will function to some degree because the people using it will render it liveable for themselves.) Every revolution needs to be immersed and deluded in the evolutionary mainstream in order to be functional: people, or, in fact, history, allow only a small amount of discontinuity, and will consequently reinforce continuity again. When one looks back at Villa Savoye, the way it looked in 1965 and in 1930, the deranging function of the passing of time for the notion of makeability becomes immediately clear. A state of completeness can only be staged. This indicates the fundamental erroneous device in the concept of utopia, already seen in the stasis of More's Utopia: time constitutes everything, one cannot pretend anything, also a materialized design, has an absolute permanence.

A new ideal imposed reality will only hold when it allows people to continue their lives the way they prefer themselves. A utopia can be considered a dystopia when the subjectively imagined reality is so different from the evolutionary present that it doesn't allow for its continuity. Continuity, however, is a circumstance humankind has gotten used to, no matter how miserable life gets. (Who could agree on having a boxful of pizza landing on the kitchen table from a tube, while all you want is

to go out for dinner for a change? Either one tries to adapt his environment to his desires, or he will have to adapt his desires to the environment.) The necessity of continuity provides us with dialectic: cyclical historic continuity forms a thesis, an ahistorical idealistic proposition forms an antithesis, these obviously opposing one another but both representing alleged realities. When antithesis is more or less successfully enforced, a (slightly) altered continuity occurs, resulting in a synthesis. The synthesis will one way or another become a new thesis, again inviting antitheses, infinitely. The confrontation of realism with idealism, of continuity with discontinuity, of *naturans* with *naturata*, is what is reflected on the whole by *The Continuous Monument*. What appears to be an entangled concept is in fact the disentanglement of the concept of utopia.

VI

A common reproach at paper architecture is that it stays paper architecture, that it cannot be turned into a materialized improvement. The reproach holds true to the extent that a conceptual exploration like *The Continuous Monument* could never be built without changing its functions and semiotics. Also, a nuanced critique of makeability in architecture might not be possible outside the realm of paper. Of importance at this point is to realize that Superstudio's critical apparatus explores the nature of architecture: it reveals as fundamental conditions continuity, the belief in makeability and the dream of utopia. Superstudio's approach, essentially political, reflects a need for changing the way of thinking about architecture as a medium, for understanding the utopian symptom. So they presented their work as guerrilla warfare while at the same time being radically ambiguous. Superstudio positioned the complexity of utopia, makeability and continuity for the first time as the central category of architectural thought.

The critical assessment of this paper enterprise isn't fit to bring into practice, but theory needs not necessarily to be practically applicable to be worthwhile or to legitimize itself. When Natalini did make 'concrete' architecture, he left behind the rigid theoretical approach. By not operationalizing the conceptual framework he developed with Superstudio, he chose not to turn it into an ideology, but preferred to keep it intact as an autonomous
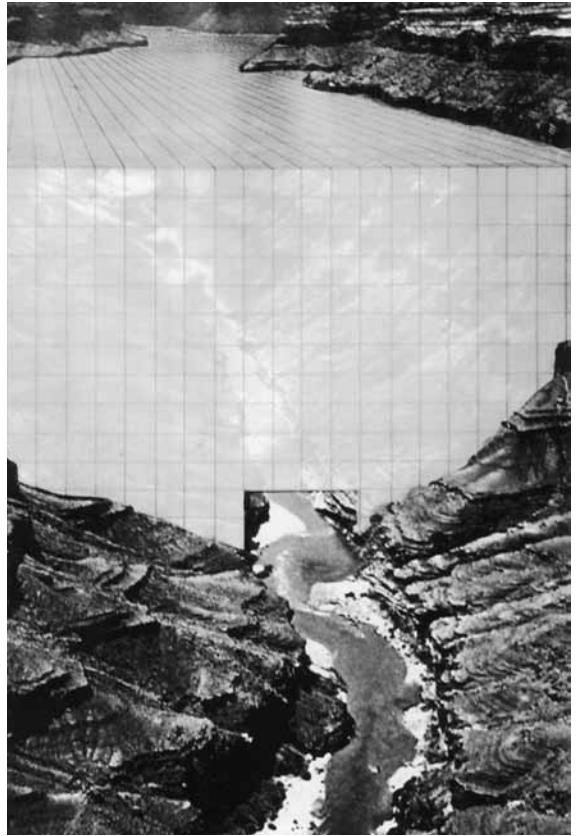
6. Superstudio, *The Continuous Monument,* 1969. Source: M. van Schaik, O. Mácel (eds.), *Exit Utopia. Architectural Provocations 1956-1976,* Munich 2005, p. 133.

work. The foremost reason for Superstudio, Archigram, Koolhaas and Tschumi to embrace paper architecture seems precisely to have been that this enabled them to uncompromisingly be able to show what can't be said with actual buildings, to show that architecture isn't merely about building in the first place.

At a 1971 lecture at the London AA School of Architecture Adolfo Natalini remarked: '…if design is merely an inducement to consume, then we must reject design; if architecture is merely the codifying of bourgeois models of ownership and society, then we must reject architecture; if architecture and town planning is merely the formalization of present unjust social divisions, then we must reject town planning and its cities…until all design activities are aimed towards meeting primary needs. Until then, design must disappear. We can live without architecture…'[15]

1   'Words', in: J. Haffenden, *W.H. Auden*, London 1997, p. 413.

2   R. Koolhaas, *Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture*, 1972, in: R. Koolhaas and B. Mau, *S,M,L,XL*, New York 1998, pp. 2-21. Koolhaas starts out by describing Berlin as a city divided in a 'Good Half' and a 'Bad Half' by the Wall. 'As so often before in this history of mankind, architecture was the guilty instrument of despair.' Then he continues by proposing a 'mirror image', with allegedly positive intentions: 'architectural warfare against undesirable conditions, in this case London. [...] It is the hedonistic science of designing collective facilities that fully accommodate individual desires.' Soon it becomes clear, but without explicitly stating so, that the voluntary inhabitants of this new part of London are subjected to the invisible architect's ideas of what hedonism is. One of the features of the 'strip' projected over the city is a hospital where the patients are healthy by definition, and where a conveyor belt may lead them to a doctor or to the cemetery where the mood is 'continuously festive.'

3   There is no relation with Adorno's notion of 'makability', as described in 'Makability & Contingency', in: T.W. Adorno, *Aesthetic Theory*, London 1984, p. 39. Koos Bosma uses the term 'malleability' in his article 'The Theory of the Utopian 'As If'', in: M.G. Kemperink, W.H.S. Roenhorst (eds.) *Visualising Utopia*, Leuven/Paris/Dudley 2007, pp. 109-134.

4   M. Van Schaik, 'Introduction' in: M. van Schaik, O. Máčel (eds.), *Exit Utopia. Architectural Provocations 1956-1976*, Munich 2005, p. 8. Politics in this account function on a more abstract level than architecture, and can be understood as infrastructure of power relations. Architecture is one of the fields where politics materialize.

5   T. More, G.M. Logan, R.M Adams, C, H. Miller, *Utopia: Latin text and an English translation*, Cambridge 1995.

6   Idem, p. 115.

7   W. Morris, *News from nowhere*, London, 1891. Published as W. Morris, J. Redmond (ed.) *News from nowhere or an epoch of rest: being some chapters from a utopian romance*, London, 1970.

8   Tony Garnier's *Cité Industrielle* of 1917 and Frederik van Eeden's *Lichtstad* (Radiant City) of 1921 are examples of virtual cities with both socialist and techo-utopian features.

9   P. Chapman, 'The Plug-in City', *The Sunday Times*, 25 September 1964, in: M. van Schaik, O. Má el (eds.), *Exit Utopia. Architectural Provocations 1956-1976*, Munich 2005, p. 69.

10 Superstudio initially consisted of Adolfo Natalini, Cristiano Toraldo di Francia, Roberto Magris, Piero Frassinelli, Allessandro Magris; Archizoom consisted of Andrea Branzi, Gilberto Corretti, Paolo Deganello, Dario and Lucia Bartolini and Massimo Morozzi. Most of them had taken courses by 'megastructuralist' Leonardo Savioli, which proved to be an influence, but certainly not in an unproblematical way.

11 P. Lang, 'Suicidal Desires', in: P. Lang, W. Menking (eds.), *Life without objects*, Milan 2003, p. 44.

12 Idem, p. 122.

13 Anonymous, *In-arch*, exh.cat. Istituto nazionale di architettura, Florence 1978, s.l.

14 These medieval Latin terms were used by Spinoza in his *Ethics* to articulate a religious argument. *Naturans* would either mean God, what God does, or creating; *Naturata* would mean what is created by God. See for example: L. Lermond, *The form of Man: Human Essence in Spinoza's Ethic*, Leiden 1988.

15 Natalini, *SUPERSTUDIO*, AA School of Architecture lecture, London, 3 March 1971, in: P. Lang, W. Menking, 'Only Architecture Will Be Our Lives', in: Lang, op.cit. (note 10), pp. 20-21.