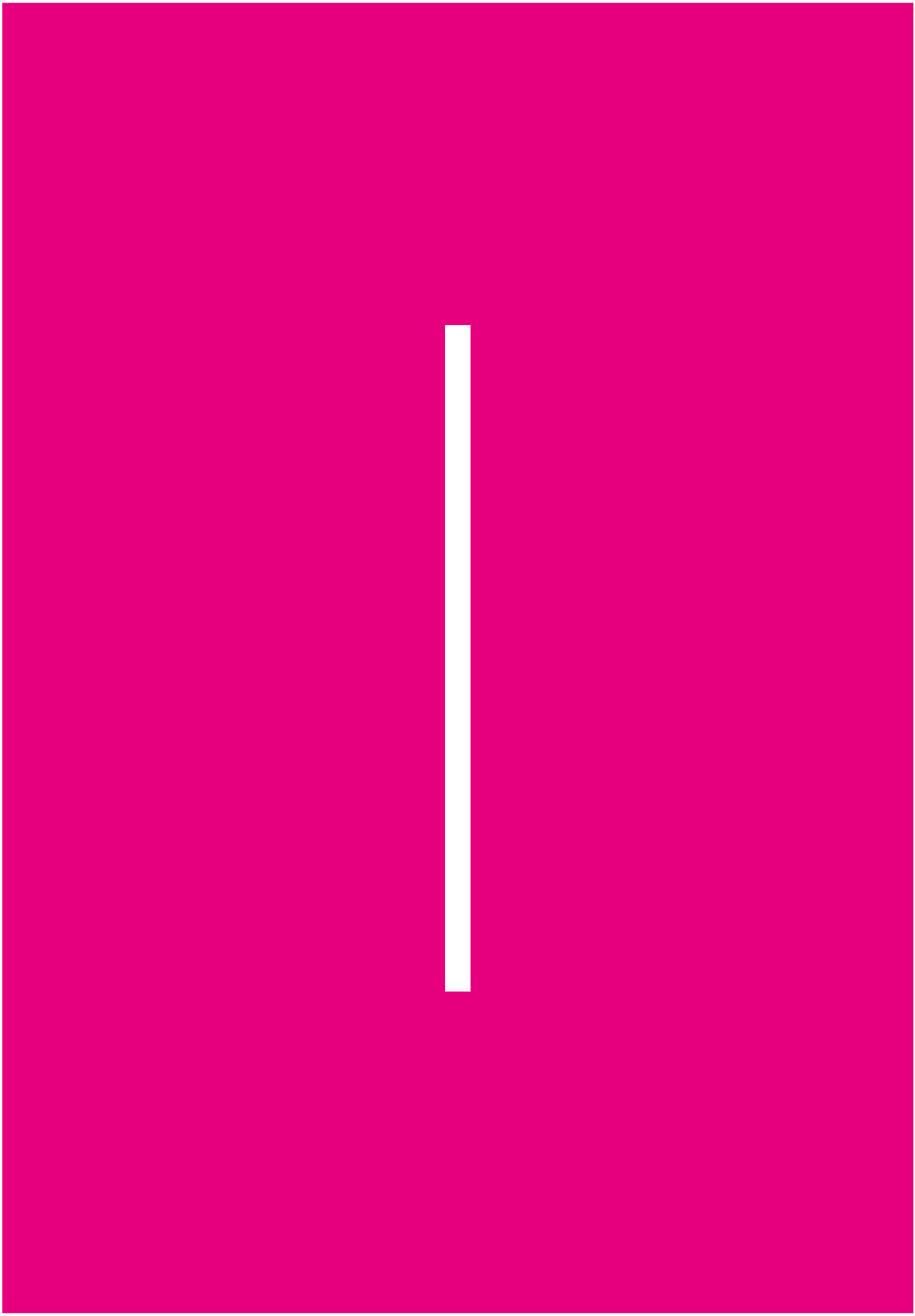

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DIGITAL PROCEEDINGS
Turin 29-30 January

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Fig. 1. Construction drawing of the courtyard, and blockwork construction details for the blocking of the windows. This formed part of the building survey that studied the existing windows in the shared courtyard which were scheduled to be blocked up.
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Fig. 3. Site plan showing the National Portrait Gallery and National Gallery.
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Fig. 5. View from the rooftop restaurant and section showing the *NPG 2000* insert.

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Biography

Constance Lau is an architect and member of the Fellow of the Higher Education Academy, UK. She leads and teaches architecture from undergraduate to doctorate levels in London and Singapore. Research interests in multiple interpretations and narratives are explored through the techniques of montage and different notions of allegory from medieval to contemporary discussions of user-led dialectical participatory interpretations, to create multiple readings in design work. These theoretical frameworks are dually examined through design driven methods of writing practice. The idea of a "questioning and incomplete" approach is fundamental. These are applied through studio work, PhDs, REF standard publishing, peer reviews, and international conferences and workshops. Central to the methodology is the role of design practice as an ongoing dialogue that challenges assumptions and emphasises authorship. This is further articulated through publications and especially projects in the book *Dialogical Designs* (2016).

Into the cosmic void

Architecture between utopia and uncertainty

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Abstract

"Architecture can no longer be as we had thought-imagined-constructed it": this is what Alessandro Poli wrote – in a never-sent letter – to Adolfo Natalini, a year after humanity took its first steps on the Moon.

In the stark, silent emptiness of space, the grand ideals of earthbound architecture crumble. There are no monuments, no imposing structures – just the fragile, tin-foil-wrapped spacecraft floating in the cosmic void. Poli's words encapsulate a fundamental shift in a new world, where the boundaries of imagination and reality blur in a single, electrifying moment: architecture is not an act of imposing permanence on the world, but a continual engagement with the unknown.

This letter, that captures a decisive transition in architectural thinking, echoes in the 1978 Venice Biennale catalogue *Utopia e crisi dell'antinatura. Momenti delle intenzioni architettoniche in Italia. Topologia e morfogenesi* edited by Lara Vinca Masini. The two categories emerge as a search for alternative perspectives: mental, utopian territories in which the architectural image – graphical, metaphorical or performative – become a critical tool to question form, temporality and disciplinary boundaries.

Among the most striking expressions of this conceptual shift, the work of the Radical groups explore architecture not as a fixed construct, but as a process that embraces unstable conditions, contradictions and latent forces – a sensibility clearly embodied in Superstudio's *La moglie di Lot*, where the act of dissolution becomes a metaphor for the impossibility of permanence in the face of transformation.

Revisiting radical visions today offers tools to address a present defined not by possibility, but by limits – ecological and physical – and by the need to act critically within them, reframing the role of architecture as a practice of awareness and adaptation. This change requires what Poli described as the need of "the motion of the movie camera", a shift in gaze that navigates uncertainty.

Key words: crisis, utopia, uncertainty, temporality, transformative practices.

1. Introduction

When humanity first set foot on the Moon, a threshold cracked open, revealing a new kind of void – a discovery of conquest and, inseparably, of insignificance – in a silent cosmos where even the greatest monuments fade to dust, as space itself asserted its dominion and compelled architecture to question its long-held certainties.

Alessandro Poli captured this vertigo in an unsent 1970 letter to Adolfo Natalini, observing that "from now on, the real image surpasses the fantasies, our utopias"[1]. The Moon landing did more than expand a technological horizon, it destabilized the categories of gravity, permanence and monumentality on which architecture had long relied; a shift that opens critical questions: if reality itself could exceed even the most radical imaginings, how might architecture deal with phenomena that elude scale, duration and measure? What does it mean to draw, to design, when the ground of permanence dissolves into a universe of immeasurable space and time?

These questions remain urgent today, as architecture is called to address multifaceted and interrelated global crises that unfold with escalating complexity and uncertainty, conditions that Timothy Morton characterizes as hyperobjects: "things that are massively distributed in time and space relative to humans"[2].

These entities – including climate change – exhibit "viscosity", a condition in which they inevitably adhere to all entities with which they interact, refusing any possibility of clear separation. At the same time, they display "nonlocality": since any local manifestation is only a partial appearance displaced across space, never the hyperobject in its entirety. Their temporality is characterized by "temporal undulation", a rippling of spacetime that stretches and folds far beyond human reckoning and by "phasing", in which they appear and withdraw, so we perceive them only in intermittent episodes. Finally, they exist through "interobjectivity", emerging within a mesh of relations among objects rather than as isolated entities[3].

Confronted with such conditions, architecture must operate within a field where permanence is provisional and meaning continually deferred, cultivating an awareness of itself as an open and indeterminate process.

Radical architecture of the 1960s and 1970s, in its critical, destructive and liberating engagement, established the premises for this awareness in which imagination, drawing and design became critical act of inquiry into reality rather than static depictions.

The architectural groups of that time did not merely expose the discipline's limits, but they engaged those limits, exploring how the very idea of inhabitable space might be reconceived in an era increasingly aware of the vast cosmic void beyond the Earth.

From this disorienting revelation arises the central question of this contribution: how might architectural drawing represent and engage with complex phenomena that can never be fully known?

Confronting this complexity requires an imaginative faculty that not only envisions futures, but also grounds a common understanding, bearing in mind that "without the capacity to imagine the future there can be no solution to the city"[4].

2. Threshold of Imagination

To approach the thresholds of imagination, it is essential to question how meaning itself is constituted and deferred. Radical drawing operates in a field where the sign is never fixed but always in motion and this instability becomes the precise condition of imaginative practice.

Jacques Derrida offers a starting point, considering that "the concept of the sign belongs to metaphysics, which represents a simultaneous marking and loosening of the limits of the system in which this concept was born and began to serve, and thereby also represents, to a certain extent, an uprooting of the sign from its own soil"[5]. Derrida admitted "that a semiology of de Saussure type has had a double role, an absolutely decisive critical role: it has marked, against the tradition, that the signified is inseparable from the signifier, that the signified and signifier are the two sides of one and the same production"[6]. The sign is nothing other than the relation established between two elements: two entities that are, at once, the present one that exists (the signifier) and the other it signifies, the absent entity of which the first carries the idea that something may be there, the signified.

The sign, therefore, is neither the first entity nor the second, but rather the relation created between them. Without venturing too far afield and for the sake of simplification, it is also worth recalling that in Louis Trolle Hjelmslev's glossematics – where the semiotic function corresponds to the relation between two planes that constitute the stratified structure of human language (the plane of expression and the plane of content) – the signifier becomes the verbal expression and the signified the content of that expression[7]. This explains why the approach inaugurated by Saussure does not stop at the individual signifier or the individual signified but, giving rise to structuralism, examines the systems of which signifier and signified are parts[8].

Derrida goes further and introduces his concept of *différance*, according to which there is indeed a clear distinction between signified and signifier, but it is unstable and precarious because the signified is never fully present in the signifier, being always deferred and determined by other signifiers. It is therefore a process in continuous becoming, in which the signifier refers to other signifieds that in turn refer onward, producing an endlessly long chain[9].

In light of this, it no longer makes much sense to study the single "thing" in isolation so much as the relations it maintains with other elements of the system over time[10]. Heidegger, for his part, in *Sein und Zeit*, also affirms that the concept of the "thing" in phenomenology is not merely the perceived object but the relation in which the human being places itself in the world, a *Dasein* that already exists within a context. In this sense, phenomenology again proves useful as a mode of analysis and observation of the fundamental structures that reveal how human beings relate to Being and to context[11].

Thus, when we explore the signifier–signified pair and, for example, are asked what we mean by "home", in our minds we do not always, immediately, or instinctively think of the present entity – the physical space in which we spend most of our days – but rather of the entity which, more than merely absent, becomes in our thought the desired, awaited one: that which we expect to arrive from the stars[12], that which – borrowing slightly and invoking a master, Plato – lives in the world of ideas and waits to be seen, contemplated and experienced as we emerge from the cave[13].

This dynamic of continuous deferral finds a striking architectural parallel in Superstudio's "La Moglie di Lot" (Fig. 1), where material dissolution becomes a literal enactment of meaning's impermanence.

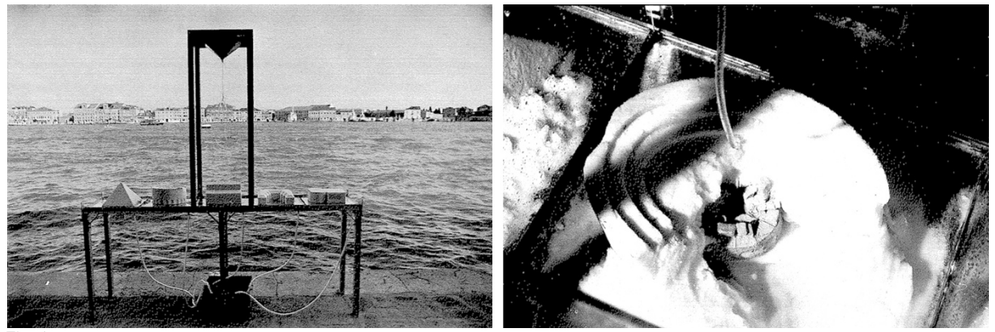

Fig. 1

Presented in the 38th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia of 1978, within the section "Utopia e crisi dell'antinatura: momenti di intenzioni architettoniche in Italia. Topologia e morfogenesi"[14], the work staged a slow, ritual dissolution: five small salt constructions (a pyramid, an amphitheater, a cathedral, the Palace of Versailles, and Le Corbusier's *Esprit Nouveau* pavilion) were placed beneath a movable drip of water.

One by one, each form melted, revealing an unexpected object within: a wire skeleton, a miniature settlement, an empty eggshell, Marie Antoinette's brioche and finally a brass plaque engraved with the assertion «the only architecture will be our life". The water, channeled through special pipes, collected in a tank beneath the main structure, where another plaque bore the inscription "architecture stands to time as salt stands to water". As the water evaporated, salt gradually veiled the inscription, making it barely legible[15].

Drawing on the biblical episode in which Lot's wife looked back at the doomed city of Sodoma and was turned to a pillar of salt, the installation critiques the nostalgic attachment to architecture that inevitably betrays its own promises of permanence, while exposing the fraught and complex relation between nature and culture.

Here, meaning proves as soluble as the salt: an architectural representation of the *différance* traced earlier, where signified and signifier are never fixed but continually reconfigured through temporal and material flux. By foregrounding dissolution rather than durability, "La Moglie di Lot" invites to inhabit the thresholds of imagination, operating within uncertainty to explore the shifting boundaries of what can be conceived, shaped and transformed and sustaining the restless utopian drive that remains a critical – if never fully attainable – horizon.

3. Threshold of Reality

If the "thresholds of imagination" revealed how meaning is never fixed, the present demands a confrontation with the thresholds of reality.

The dialectical relationship between design and utopia can be read as a shared projective logic – a drive toward a spatial and temporal elsewhere – a dynamic that Manfredo Tafuri examines in "Progetto e utopia"[16]. Tafuri shows that the evolution of architectural theory has never followed a linear or predetermined path; it has always been marked by conflicts, uncertainties, advances, reversals and contradictions. Contradiction itself, understood as a fundamental feature of reality, becomes a creative principle. The continuous flow of adaptations and transformations, nourished by the conflicts that

traverse both architectural thought and the real world, leads to an understanding of metamorphosis as an open process that unfolds within the irregular and shifting currents of time and space, in a conflict between states of tension that never cease to evolve.
However, these shifts are far from arbitrary: they unfold through material and social constraints that guide their evolution and give form to emerging realities.
Bruno Latour sharpens this perspective, noting that ecological questions seem to speak of objects that have been transposed into both utopia and uchronia, outside any stable time or space. Neither water, nor land, nor air, nor living beings can be framed as if they were simply determined objectively by the laws of nature. Instead, the limits that define our collective survival must be perceived, generated, discovered and decided from within the peoples themselves, for without such decision there is no political body, no freedom, no autonomy[17]. In this view, the concept of the limit itself is not merely a physical boundary but a composite of law, politics, science and the arts: a space where human and non-human agencies overlap and where architectural practice must learn to act.
Examining the already mentioned Lara Vinca Masini's contribution to the 1978 Venice Biennale, reveals an intriguing perspective on the relationship between the visual arts and architecture through an open dialogue reflecting the complexity of a crucial historical moment. This event, in fact, marked both the epilogue of an era of intense theoretical and design experimentation in radical architecture and the prologue of a new season that takes on an intellectual legacy still resonating powerfully in contemporary architectural and artistic practices. "Topology" and "morphogenesis" become key concepts that, respectively, explore an alternative *topos* – mental and utopian territories outside disciplinary, professional and aesthetic systems – and a dynamic *morphé* in which form is not predefined but emerges through the interaction of meta-para-physical systems and structures that determine its evolution[18].
The pursuit of a new design ethics, therefore, must begin with an architecture that accepts limitation as a generative principle, recognizing that the challenge is no longer to conquer – or escape to – new spaces, but to transform existing ones into other spaces, thereby re-signifying the concept of utopia and grounding it in the earthly condition. In a continuous process of redefinition of the relationship between humanity and nature, design becomes a means of mediating between the need for transformation and the constraints of sustainability, between the drive for innovation and the awareness of planetary limits and between systemic inequalities and the urgency of ensuring equity and social cohesion. It is an approach that does not view utopias as a call to realize them – for in that case they would cease to be such – but as a cry of despair addressed to society by designers, who ask to be finally relieved of the double burden of formulating and solving problems[19].
Rereading the design of utopias thus powerfully recalls the imaginative design culture developed in the 1960s-1970s, within a figurative exploration of possible scenarios for social and urban transformation. Given today's climate crisis, the logics of design must now be reshaped to meet urgent demands for sustainability, resilience and adaptability, framing design as a critical agent in negotiating planetary limits.

4. Ecological Threshold of Macro-Micro Visions

During the 1960s and 1970s a new ecological consciousness reshaped architectural imagination. The rapid urban expansion of the postwar decades, the oil shocks and the dawning awareness of planetary limits forced architects to confront the city as a finite system rather than an infinite frontier. If modern architecture had often celebrated the "conquest of space", the crises of that era revealed the Earth as a closed and fragile *milieu*. Within this context two different but complementary experiments emerged: Paolo Soleri's vast "arcologies" and the Florentine collective 9999's intimate "Casa-Orto", that together illuminate how representation became a form of ecological critique at different scales.
Paolo Soleri's projects, collected in "Arcology. The City in the Image of Man"[20], stand as one of the most ambitious attempts to rethink urban life in planetary terms. Far from offering a conventional master plan, the book is a hybrid of manifesto and visionary atlas. Soleri warns his readers at the outset that the graphics "are not to be taken literally": they condense ideas rather than prescribe details and their "symbolism is evident", functioning as conceptual diagrams rather than blueprints (Fig. 2). This disclaimer reframes the act of drawing: it is not representation of a fixed object but a catalyst for speculative thought, an invitation to imagine the city as a living process, guided by the conviction that "there is an inherent logic in the structure and nature of organisms that have grown on this planet. Any architecture, any urban design, and any social order that violates that structure and nature is destructive of itself and of us. Any architecture, urban design, or social order that is based upon organic principles is valid and will prove its own validity"[21].
Soleri's critique begins with what he calls "ecumenopoly", the universal sprawl of megalopolitan growth stretching across the continents. For him, this endless suburbia is not merely impractical but "antilife", a mortification of human potential. He argues that such an urban condition is "doubly false": false because technically unfeasible and false because spiritually deadening. The alternative is the "arcology", a neologism combining architecture and ecology, which proposes the concentration of habitation into dense, self-sufficient vertical organisms. These structures are not conceived as utopias in the escapist sense, they are stepping stones toward an evolutionary future (Fig. 3).

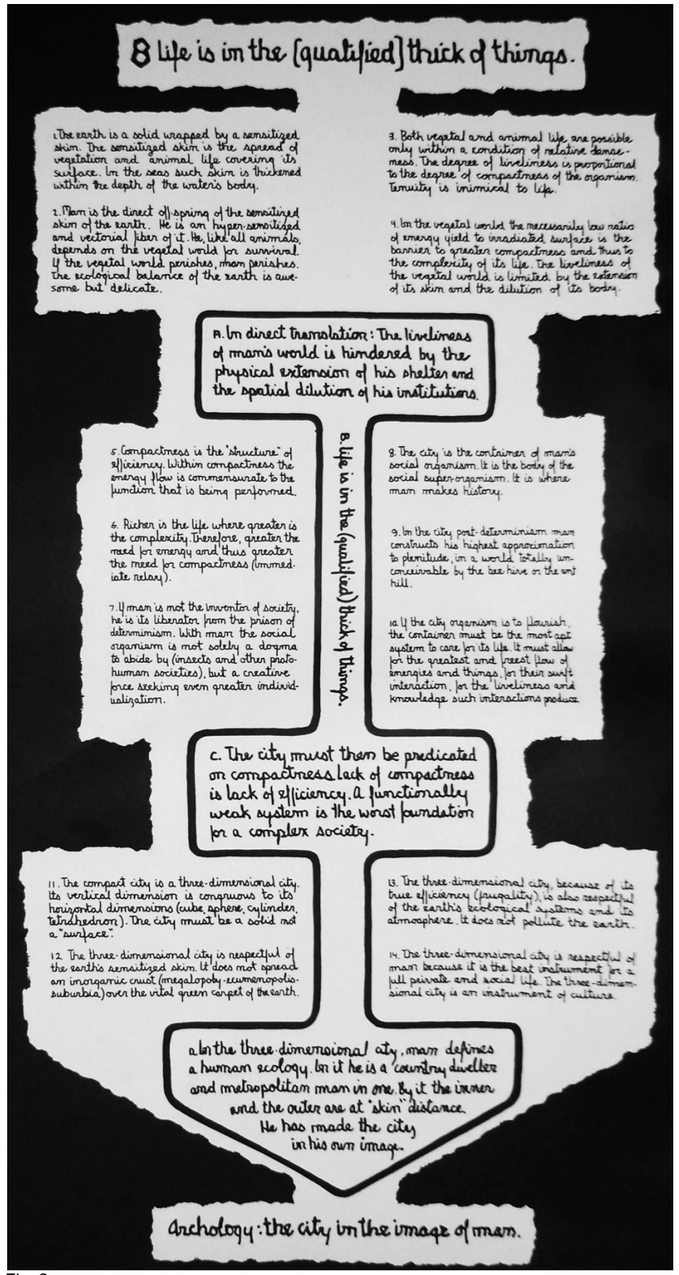

Fig. 2

A central motif in Soleri's thought is miniaturization. "Miniaturize or die", he declares, presenting compactness as a universal law of living systems. For him, the imperative to reduce spatial and energetic footprints is not merely pragmatic but evolutionary, a vector pulling life toward higher complexity and spiritual intensity. The arcology condenses this insight into a tangible form: a vertical city where transportation, communication and production interlace like the fibers of a living organism. By eliminating the horizontal waste of conventional sprawl, such cities promise not only ecological efficiency but also a reintegration of social life.

In the preface to the paperback edition he describes the arcology as an “inclusive environmental methodology of salvation”, choosing the word “salvation” deliberately over “survival”. Salvation, he argues, implies a qualitative leap: a theological unfolding of the future in which ecological discipline and spiritual aspiration converge. He speaks of a “theo-ecological centration”, a place where the virtue of conservation, frugality and creation becomes an immanent sacredness. Here ecological practice is inseparable from a re-enchantment of the world.
The drawings themselves – dense sectional perspectives, soaring conic towers, planetary networks – perform this double role. They are simultaneously analytical and prophetic, fusing technological speculation with a quasi-religious sense of destiny. Soleri’s images of “urban rivers” continuous bands of habitation flowing across continents and seas, or his intricate axonometrics of Arcosanti visualize not a finished design but a process of spiritual and ecological evolution. In this sense the arcologies “stand abstract and removed from the concreteness of reality”, as Soleri admits, but precisely as “symbols of a hypothetical yet necessary future”.

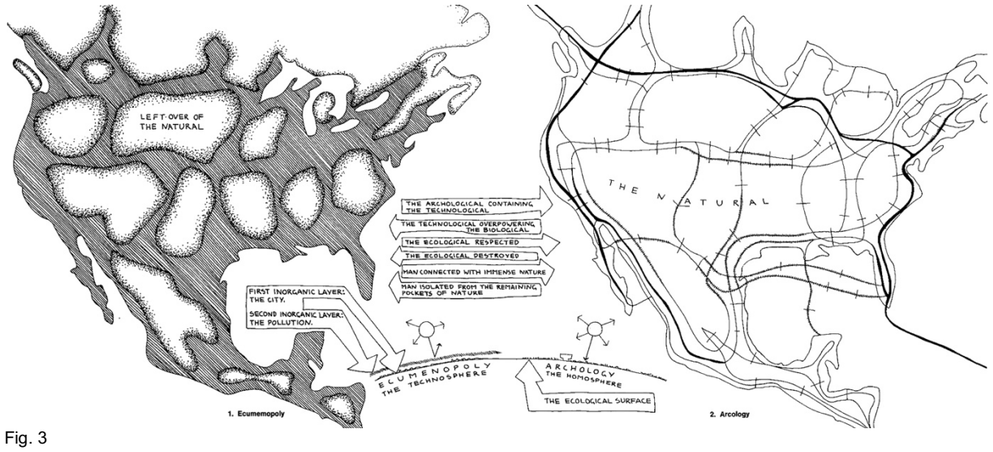

Fig. 3

If Soleri addresses the planetary scale, the Florentine collective 9999 – formed in 1968 by Giorgio Birelli, Carlo Caldini, Fabrizio Fiumi and Paolo Galli – explored ecological consciousness at the intimate scale of everyday life, presenting their work in the 1972 MoMA exhibition “Italy: The New Domestic Landscape”.
Guided by an acute sensitivity to the environment and seeking not monumental solutions but micro-ecological practices, their “Casa-Orto” was part dwelling and part greenhouse. It proposed the integration of living space and food production, anticipating today’s interest in urban farming and circular economies. The project reimagined the home as a self-sustaining ecosystem where domestic rituals and natural cycles intertwine. Rather than separating architecture from nature, the “Casa-Orto” dissolves the boundary, allowing plants, light, water and human habitation to form a single metabolic unit[22].
The representational strategies of 9999 were as radical as their ecological program. They employed photomontage, collage and multimedia installations to create immersive environments that blurred art and architecture. Their drawings are not conventional plans or sections but vivid, almost psychedelic compositions in which human figures, vegetation and cosmic imagery coexist. This visual language reflects a conviction that the ecological imagination cannot be confined to technical diagrams but it requires a sensorial and symbolic engagement that mobilizes desire and play.
Projects like “Vegetable Garden House” staged performances of growth and decay, making natural processes visible as architectural events (Fig. 4). Through these experiments 9999 advanced what might be called a “domestic arcology”, demonstrating that environmental responsibility begins at the scale of daily life and collective creativity.
Despite their differences of scale, Soleri and 9999 share a profound belief in drawing and representation as critical acts. Soleri’s intricate diagrams condense complex ecological and spiritual ideas into visual form, inviting readers to imagine rather than merely observe. His use of italics to highlight key phrases in the text mirrors the graphic intensity of his illustrations, guiding the reader through layers of conceptual resonance.
Similarly, 9999’s collages and multimedia installations transform representation into performance. Their drawings are not neutral tools of communication but active participants in the creation of new realities. By fusing architecture with art, music and theater, they dissolve the distinction between design and life, making the act of representation itself an ecological practice. Both Soleri and 9999 thus exemplify a

radical understanding of drawing as a space where ideas, materials and temporalities intersect: a space where architecture thinks beyond the merely physical.
Taken together, these two trajectories illuminate a crucial moment when architecture confronted the threshold of reality: the recognition that the planet’s resources and the human capacity to inhabit them are finite. Soleri addressed the problem at the macro-scale, envisioning entire civilizations reorganized into compact “arcologies” that minimize energy use and foster spiritual growth. 9999 responded at the micro-scale, transforming the home and the city into sites of ecological intimacy and participatory culture. Both rejected the modernist dream of limitless expansion and instead sought forms of life that acknowledge interdependence and constraint.
As climate change, biodiversity loss and resource depletion demand new modes of living, Soleri’s call for “miniaturization” and 9999’s experiments with self-sufficiency anticipate current debates on density, resilience and local production. Perhaps even more important is their shared insistence that representation – the very act of drawing or imagining – has the power to shape ecological consciousness. In their hands, the architectural drawing is not a static depiction but a dynamic inquiry into how humans and environments co-create one another.
Soleri’s notion of “salvation,” with its theological overtones, and 9999’s playful domestic ecologies may seem far apart, yet both point toward an architecture that is less about building objects than about cultivating relationships between people and planet, culture and nature, matter and spirit. They remind us that the environmental crisis is not only a technical challenge but also a crisis of imagination. To envision sustainable futures, architecture must operate at once as science, art, philosophy.

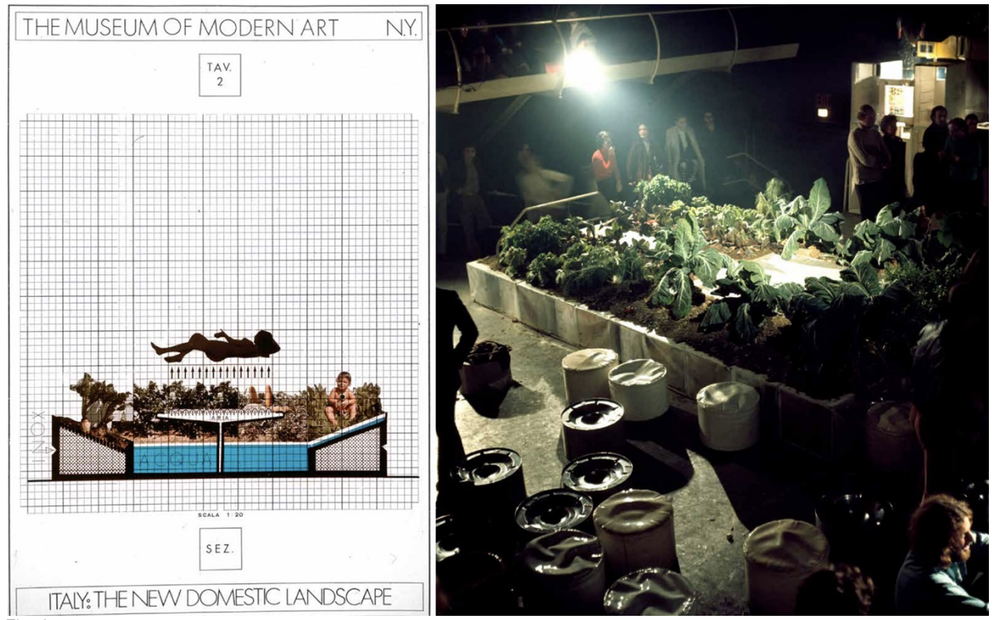

Fig. 4

5. Conclusions
The radical experiments thus offer more than historical curiosities. They articulate an ecological consciousness that remains urgent and relevant. By challenging the conventional boundaries of scale, program and representation, they reveal that the future of architecture lies not in the endless pursuit of new frontiers but in the careful re-drawing of the relationships that sustain life. Their work underscores a lesson increasingly clear in our own time: without the capacity to imagine – and to depict – alternative modes of dwelling, no viable response to the intertwined crises of the city and the planet can emerge.
These experiences are the essence of radical thought: the dissolution of contradiction into complementarity, the move from object to process and the insistence that design is fundamentally the formulation of problems. It invites us to see architecture not as a finished object but as an evolving practice of critical inquiry.
Francis Ford Coppola’s “Megalopolis” extends this insight into the present. Its imagined utopia whose power lies in the questions, forces us to confront rather than in any ready-made answers.
The film makes clear how easily such visions hover on the edge of dystopia, reminding us that the productive conflict between hope and failure is a permanent condition.

Architectural drawing, understood as a critical and political medium, offers not closure but an invitation to constant inquiry, a “motion of the camera” that never ceases to explore.
From the Moon’s silent landscape to today’s climate emergency, the challenge remains the same: to draw the unbounded, to represent the unrepresentable, and to decide – together – the limits of the inhabitable world.
“From the control of the environment with three-dimensional and energetic means to the creation of shelters and microclimate, present design relating man to the environment produces a complexity of new needs and a new kind of poverty. Design may become a cross-discipline. Therefore we visualize an image guide: design is the formulation of problems or the evolution of a new mentality-a guideline for a new society. […] Look at that distant mountain. What can you see? Is that the place to go to, or is it the only limit of the inhabitable? It’s both the one and the other. Since contradiction no longer exists, it’s only a case of being complementary”[23] (Fig. 5).

Fig. 5

Notes

1. “1970: Caro Adolfo. A letter from Alessandro Poli”, Canadian Centre for Architecture, accessed September 10, 2025, https://www.cca.qc.ca/en/articles/issues/2/what-the-future-looked-like/37334/1970-caro-adolfo.
2. Timothy Morton, *Hyperobjects: Philosophy and Ecology After the End of the World* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2013), 1.
3. Morton, *ibidem*.
4. Aldo Rossi, “La città analoga: tavola”, *Lotus International*, no. 13 (December 1976): 6.
5. Jacques Derrida, “Semiology and Grammatology. Interview with Julia Kristeva”, in *Positions*, ed. and trans. Alan Bass (Chicago: The University of Chicago. Press, 1981), 17.
6. Derrida, *ibidem*.
7. Cfr. Antonino Bondì, *Louis Hjelmslev. Fra lingua e linguaggio* (Firenze: Carocci, 2012).
8. “Semiotics has developed two main definitions of the sign. One is that of Ferdinand de Saussure, for whom the linguistic sign is a “psychic entity with two sides” that “unites not a thing and a name, but a concept and an acoustic image” (de Saussure, *Cours de linguistique générale*, 98-99). For Saussure, therefore, the sign is not a material object but the relationship between two entities: one (the present, material, concrete one) signifies the other (the absent one, which may be either concrete, like a particular thing, or abstract, like a concept). Saussure calls the present entity (which represents and refers to the other) the signifier, a word to be fully understood in its verbal sense, as a gerund indicating the action of signifying. The absent entity (which is evoked and, in many cases, defined by the signifier) is the signified” (Volli, *La danza dei segni*, 32). [The quote from the Italian was translated by the authors]
9. Cfr. Jacques Derrida, "Differance", in *Speech and Phenomena*, trans. David B. Allison, Newton Garver (Evanston: Northwestern UniversityPress, 1973), 129-160.
10. “Here the term thing is understood in its phenomenological sense, in which what matters is not the single element or object as such, but the way in which it manifests itself to consciousness – the phenomenon. In architecture, it is the circuit traced by the “infrastructural” energy of Interiorness as it travels through space among different interiorities. The Thing interacts within the relationships between the content of space and the form of objects, between the “things of life” and the “life of things” within the Great Wealth” (Sichenze, *Internità. Architettura Energia Psiche*). [The quote from the Italian was translated by the authors]
11. Cfr. Martin Heidegger, *Essere e tempo,* trans. Pietro Chiodi (Milan: Longanesi, 1976).
12. Here the term “to desire” is understood in accordance with Guido Cusinato, who states that “desire is not […] nostalgia for the stars, but the search for the constellation that corresponds to one’s own vocation”, the true destiny of humankind. (Cusinato, Periagoge, 144). [The quote from the Italian was translated by the authors]
13. Cfr. Maria Italia Insetti, “Postfazione”, in Sichenze, *op. cit*.
14. This section of the 38th International Art Exhibition of La Biennale di Venezia “From nature to art from art to nature”, titled “Utopia and the Crisis of Anti-Nature: Moments of Architectural Intentions in Italy – Topology and Morphogenesis” was curated by Enrico Crispolti and Lara Vinca Masini, with the collaboration of Fulvio Irace and exhibition design by Pier Daniele Mozzetti Monterumici. For further details, see “38. Esposizione Internazionale d'Arte: dalla natura all'arte dall'arte alla natura”, ASACdati La Biennale di Venezia, accessed September 10, 2025, https://asac.labiennale.org/attivita/arti-visive/annali?anno=1978.
15. Lara Vinca Masini, *Utopia e crisi dell’antinatura. Momenti delle intenzioni architettoniche in Italia. Topologia e morfogenesi* (Venice: Edizioni La Biennale di Venezia, 1978), 34-39.
16. Manfredo Tafuri, *Progetto e utopia. Architettura e sviluppo capitalistico*, (Bari-Roma: Laterza, 1973).
17. Bruno Latour, *La sfida di Gaia. Il nuovo regime climatico*, trans. Donatella Carestina (Milan: Meltemi, 2020), 377-378.
18. Ina Macaione et al., “Tra utopia e adattamento: il progetto di architettura nelle transizioni”, in *Metamorphosis. Transforming Italian Architecture*, ed. Benedetta Medas, Alessandro Melis, Barbara Melis, Daniele Menichini, Natalie Mossin, Massimo Pica Ciamarra (Pisa: Pacini Editore, 2025), 84-90.
19. Lucius Burckhardt, *Il falso è l'autentico. Politica, paesaggio, design, architettura, pianificazione, pedagogia*, ed. Gaetano Licata, Martin Schmitz Quodlibet, trans. Carla Buttazzi, Elisa Ricci (Macerata: Quodlibet, 2019), 53.
20. Paolo Soleri, *Arcology. The City in the Image of Man* (Cambridge: The MIT Press, 1973).
21. Peter Blake, “Foreword”, in Soleri, *op. cit*.
22. Eleonora Trivellin, “9999: progettazione radicale orientata alla natura”, *Ais/Design Journal. Storia e Ricerche* 10, no. 19 (December 2023): 120-150.
23. Superstudio, “Supersurface. An Alternative Model for Life on the Earth”, directed by Superstudio, 1972, short film, 9:43, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=uXyU_hIvr3k.

Image Captions

Fig. 1. Superstudio, La Moglie di Lot
Fig. 2. Paolo Soleri, Arcology : the city in the image of man
Fig. 3. Paolo Soleri, Ecumenology and Arcology
Fig. 4. Left: 9999, Casa-Orto, section. Right: Set of the garden at Space Electronic in 1971
Fig. 5. Frames of “Supersurface. An Alternative Model for Life on the Earth” by Superstudio

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Biography

Ina Macaione is an architect and Associate Professor of Architectural and Urban Design at the Department for Humanistic, Scientific and Social Innovation (DIUSS), University of Basilicata. She is co-founder and coordinator of NatureCityLAB (DIUSS-UniBas) and serves as editor of the book series *Architecture and Phenomenology of the Nature-City* (FrancoAngeli).
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Enrica Gaia Consiglio is an architect and PhD student in the 40th cycle of the *Architecture for the Ecological Transition between Interior Spaces and Landscape* (ATESIP) program at the University of Palermo. In 2023, she was awarded a research scholarship at the Department of European and Mediterranean Cultures, Environment and Cultural Heritage (DiCEM) at the University of Basilicata. As a member of NatureCityLAB (DIUSS-UniBas) and within the PON RESO project, she investigated urban agriculture and participatory approaches to ecological design. Her current doctoral research focuses on climate change, developing strategies for mitigation and adaptation to strengthen urban resilience toward more sustainable urban futures.

Active Ruins: Massimo Carmassi's Pisan Projects

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Abstract

In his *Theses on the Philosophy of History* (1940), Walter Benjamin proposes a critical and fragmentary conception of the past, set against linear, progressive, and positivist narratives. From the perspective of the theorist, history does not unfold as an ordered continuum of objective facts, but as a landscape of ruins and fragments, where the past endures in discontinuous and often marginal forms. Every present nevertheless contains the possibility of redemption—*Jetztzeit*, the "now-time"—a moment in which the experiences and memories of the defeated can resurface. Consequently, the historian's role is not to passively record events, but to wrest meaning and future potential from what official narratives have excluded or silenced.

This concept is exemplified in the oeuvre of Massimo Carmassi, a Pisan architect and the head of the Municipal Architecture Department from 1974 to 1990. In his work the notion of the *ruin* plays a central role. In a city that was still marked by the destruction of the Second World War, Carmassi undertook a project to redevelop the historic centre. He initiated his research with meticulous architectural surveys—treated not as neutral tools but as acts of historical interpretation. From these, he developed proposals that spanned from the adaptive reuse of individual buildings to urban-scale reconnections, linking historic structures with contemporary additions. In contrast to many of his contemporaries, who favoured utopian visions and theoretical abstraction, Carmassi's work was always concrete, empirical, and grounded in the existing fabric of the city. His architecture is not speculative but feasible, rooted in what is already there.

The present article examines Carmassi's design approach through the lens of his realised and unrealised projects for Pisa, with particular focus on the recurring devices of the *fragmented wall* and the *gallery building*. These elements, found throughout the archival project drawings, can be interpreted as a profound reworking of the fascination with the ruin and the historical trace. In Carmassi's oeuvre, the ruin is not merely a relic; it functions as generative device for rewriting urban space, an identity-bearing instrument, and a critical tool against the homogenising tendencies of globalisation.

Key words: Walter Benjamin, Massimo Carmassi, ruins, urban regeneration, Pisa medieval city.

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