

Alberto Carpiceci: Drawing Fantasy Architecture

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Abstract

This contribution focuses on the visionary component of Carpiceci's architectural composition. An 'integral architect' and a humanist, Alberto Carpiceci (1916-2007) graduated from the Faculty of Architecture in Rome in 1939.

As a follower especially of Vincenzo Fasolo, whom he assisted for a while, Carpiceci learnt History and Styles of Architecture, not only of the ancient Rome but of both Renaissance and Baroque, too. He focused not so much on decorative details but on the aspiration to the large-scale project, the magnificence, both monumental and celebrative components.

This cultural background triggered his passion for Michelangelo and, above all, for Leonardo, one of the main topics of his research over his whole lifetime.

Leonardo's architectural drawings, which inspired many other visionary architects, such as Étienne-Louis Boullée, were studied and redrawn by Carpiceci, becoming one of the keys to understanding his visionary architectures.

Fantastic summaries of several influences being strayed throughout history were reworked by Carpiceci's creative soul and constructive mind through the medium of the drawing, which has always been the nodal point of his work, not only concerning architecture but tout court.

Keywords: fantasy architecture, history of representation, Rome, Leonardo da Vinci

Introduction

The professional career of Alberto Carlo Carpiceci was always marked by a constant balance between dream and reality, fantasy, and concreteness. He always blended the objectivity of the study of the past, of the classical architecture surveys, with a more subjective component. Thus, the analysis of reality, integrated with his 'visionary spirit', evolved to create something new, not imagined before.

This creative process was made possible with the practice of drawing, the primary tool that has always accompanied him during his whole academic training and his carrier as an architect.

The drawing, through all its various facets and different interdisciplinary approaches –drawing as expression,

drawing as representation, drawing as documentation [Vagnetti 1958]– becomes a core aspect, even in the more methodological processes of survey, especially of ancient architectures, and therefore in their redrawing. It becomes not only a study tool, but even an incentive to accentuate his creative process still further, increasing his knowledge, but above all his imagination, the primary aspect in the creation of the visionary architecture.

A critical act of investigation, drawing may become rational and irrational at the same time, allowing to make a connection with other spaces and dimensions.

In this case, Carpiceci's drawings have, primarily, a significance in the representation and communication

process. However, these drawings, although remained on paper, as an architectural representation, never lose “the character of ‘design project writing’” [Di Franco 2014, p. 7] becoming themselves ‘construction’.

Subsequently, when deeply analysed, they often take on a different role, turning into a tool able to indirectly express the intents, hopes, and ideals, a work in its own right, even overtaking –conceptually– the architectural practice.

Thus, the drawing progressively acquires an independent expressive goal that emancipates itself from both architecture and painting. It is a tool that is “as light and immaterial as powerful and constructive: tracking and grammar of the imagination. [...] An irreversible path of a ‘prometeic’ mind, substantiated by drawings and metaphors, that is by ‘pre-dictions’” [Di Franco 2014, pp. 7-9]. As confirmed by Vittorio Gregotti, the drawing has “the will of proposing something authentically autonomous, self-expression, fragment of a dream, of memories, illusions or truths, as a manifesto of its own view towards the new artistic poetics of architecture, or even more radically, as representation of an ideal of social utopia, or just of a unrealised project with a high ideal content, sublime image of a cornerstone which remains unknown compared to its realization» [Gregotti 2014, p. 16].

Drawing fantasy architectures takes the value, also in this context, of a tool characterized by an ephemeral realism, belonging to the sphere of thought and imagination. A critical path of a cultural agency, because as “writing is acting in the world” [Benedetti 1998, p. 139], as the drawing is.

Biographical fragments

When a young man, drawing –intended as a creative path– was already central to the interests of Alberto Carpiceci. It was the greatest instrument to materialize his ideas, thoughts, and imaginations. Between 1925 and 1930, he made his first visionary sketches, focused on fantasy stories and places, and strange futuristic objects, marginally inspired by the imagery of Jules Verne. In addition to this sphere, strictly associable with fantasy and pure imagination, mention should also be made of the whole scientific and humanistic research, which immediately appeared as the beginning of an ideal pro-

cess to become an ‘integral architect’, in the wake of Gustavo Giovannoni.

The influence of Leonardo’s architecture.

Since the beginning, Carpiceci develops an immediate association between his drawing and imagination and those of one of his greatest masters, Leonardo da Vinci, an all-time protagonist in the art of inventing through the use of drawing yet constantly suspended between science and art. By the mid-1930’s, he inaugurated his studies on Leonardo, which will become more and more extensive and specific up to his admission to the *Centro Ricerche Leonardiane* and *Ente Raccolta Vinciana*, in the 1960’s. Such a research has always been characterized by a constant passion, never exhausted through time, but cadenced by a path of “inner maturity, in light of a personal and original interpretation of classics” [Ferri 2020, p. 25].

Carpiceci deeply appreciates Leonardo’s drawings. He’s completely fascinated and describes them as marks “traced with unparalleled mastery and fullness of expression” [Carpiceci 1984, p. 5]. Leonardo’s drawings do not show an “utopic dream out of reality, but a systematic and progressive experimentation, led through countless projects on real problems. [...] In his drawings, like no other at this time, we can relive the essential moment of research” [Carpiceci 1984, p. 5], a research that is in touch with reality, and not directed towards the creation of “extravagant fantasies or utopic distractions on ground-breaking curiosities, as other architects” [Carpiceci 1984, p. 5].

According to Summerson, Leonardo “was interested in architecture more philosophically and theoretically than on a designing level, according to orthodox forms of antiquity” [Summerson 2000, pp. 26-27]. This position is confirmed by Leonardo’s *Tempio Ideale* (almost exclusively with a central plan), which was studied and redrawn by Carpiceci [Carpiceci 1984, p. 72] and inspired his visionary projects. Another remarkable project is Leonardo’s *Teatro da Predicare* (fig. 1) [Carpiceci 1984, pp. 44-54; Carpiceci M. 2010, p. 72], which is associable with the typology of a *locho dove si predicha* (a place where one can preach). A sort of ‘futuristic’ project, it shows a truncated cone-shaped structure with a spheroidal inner cavity. In the middle of this shape is the apex of a cylindrical structure served by a helicoidal stairway. The spherical concavity is crowded

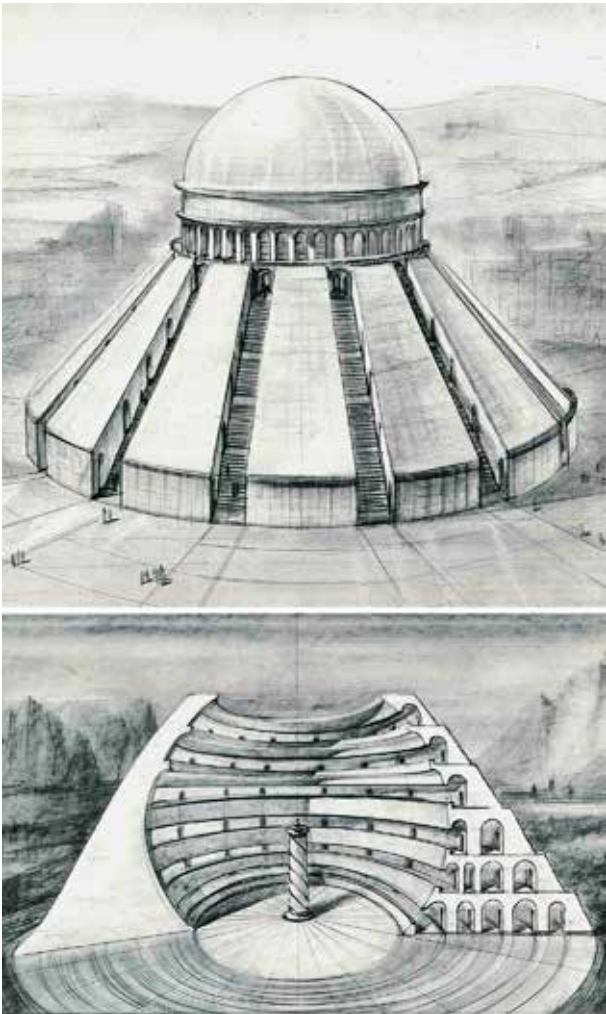


Fig. 1. Leonardo da Vinci, *Prospettiva e sezione prospettica di un progetto per un 'locho dove si predicha'* (reconstruction by A. Carpiceci).

by balconies connected to the entrances of the various stories of the building, which in turn are connected to other entrances linked by long steps, dug all along the conical outer surface. The entire complex is covered by a windowed drum, topped by a spherical dome. Leonardo presents this project with a perspective view and a section, which is perspective, as well; however, only the latter shows the balconies and the inner structure with the annular galleries, and this because –in Leonardo's mind– there'd be an open-air alternative solution.

Both these centric plans greatly influenced some of earliest fantasy architecture conceived by Carpiceci.

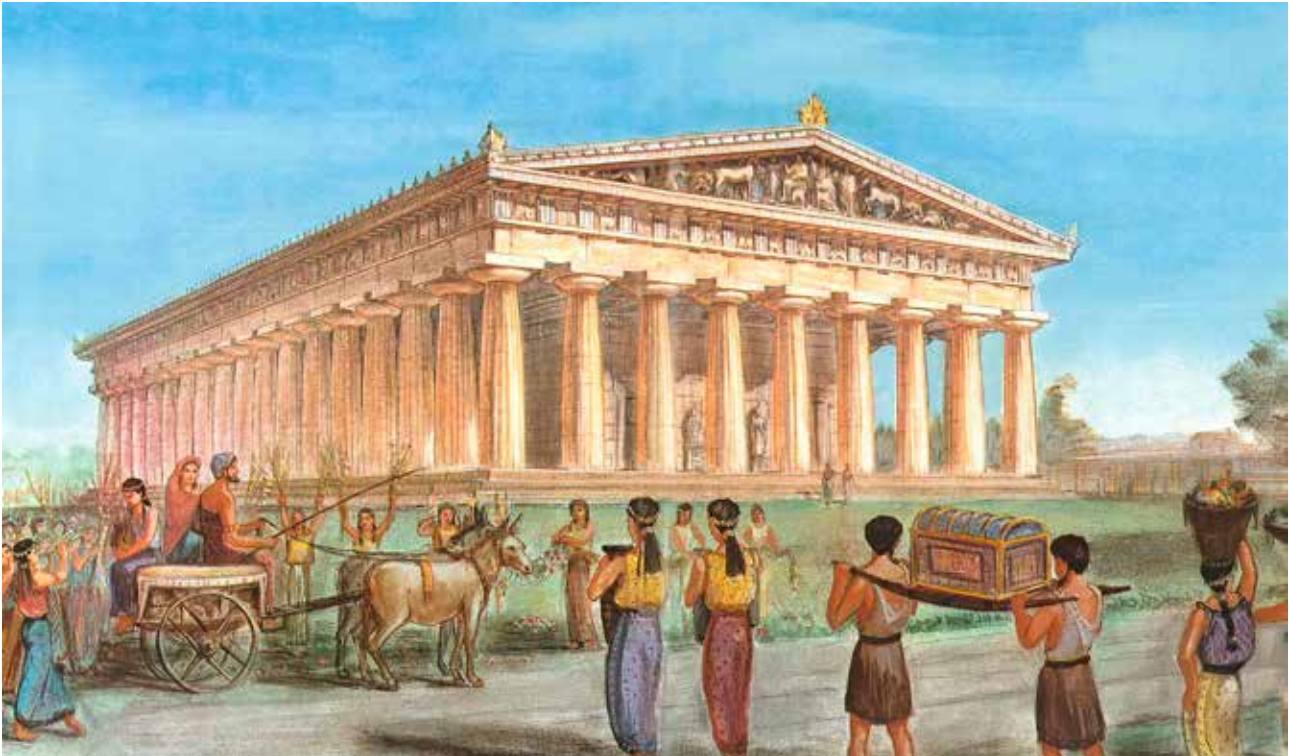
The partnership with Lorenzo Ferri.

The partnership with Lorenzo Ferri, his upcoming brother-in-law, was among the fundamental factors concerning Carpiceci's growth, in terms of artistic and cultural receptivity. Carpiceci was deeply influenced by Ferri in the studies about Leonardo and more. He argued that both Leonardo and Michelangelo were "pole stars, in the name of art as promoter of knowledge and Truth, which only the artist can interpret and spread; an artist as a deep connoisseur of human and natural life" [Ferri 2020].

In 1930, at the age of fourteen, the young Alberto –at the time student at the San Giuseppe Institute– thanks to his friend and future colleague Mario Leonardi, was invited at the St. Peter's oratory, where Ferri used to teach. Ferri was indeed a proper artist, a teacher but also a master for several young disciples, and a great speaker of humanistic culture. "In the drawing teaching, Ferri was an investigator, a forerunner; he invented the arm gymnastic, and used to speak about synergy between music and forms and rhythms [...] He conceived his atelier as a Renaissance workshop and incorporated the notion of 'Art as a Teacher', absorbed during the apprenticeship years. Alberto Carpiceci was the most gifted disciple; later he capitalized the master's lessons about the charcoal techniques for the sketches, developing it at virtuous levels. The traditional teaching is indeed inescapable: disciples must learn the art of drawing, the basics; they must copy from the old masters, such as Leonardo, Raffaello and Michelangelo" [Ferri 2020, p. 33].

The cultural interaction between them is total, a bijective relationship that leads to a mutual enrichment. Often, it is Alberto himself, with his strong visionary drive, to

Fig. 2. Poseidonia, the old Paestum, Temple of Hera (reconstruction by A. Carpiceci).



suggest and inspire Ferri, a character marked by a strong idealism, new fields of interest.

Alberto Carpiceci, thanks to his multiple interdisciplinary interests and his artistic training with Ferri, was able to get both scientific and artistic certificates in June 1933. An excellent undergraduate education to face the next five years at the Royal School of Architecture in Rome.

In 1935, when a sophomore at the school of Architecture, Carpiceci was admitted to the French Academy, as well. After two years, he was also accepted as scenographer student to the *Centro Sperimentale di Cinematografia*. In parallel, he kept on working with Ferri and studying independently Leonardo as an architect, probably with a further guidance of another master of him, Vincenzo Fasolo. Fasolo, a professor of History and Styles of Architec-

ture, used to teach his students through the drawing. He intended not so much to reproduce the mere decorative details but to investigate what he used to call 'architectural values'. He analysed, in a not unrealistic way, the proportions, the constructive feeling, the spirit of greatness and magnificence, in particular of the romans ruins, which were even more celebrated during the 1930's for both cultural and political reasons.

To Fasolo, drawing was a "means of clarifying ideas and concepts, and a synthesis of observations"; in addition, in his opinion "drawing is an observing, and therefore a way of thinking" [Fasolo s.d., p. 11]. His approach was fundamental to Carpiceci's formation and studies.

The role of archaeology.

The archaeological studies were a key aspect for the development of Carpiceci's growing visionary drive, too. Between 1939 and 1940, Ferri and Carpiceci, who graduated in November 1939, went to Paestum during the survey campaign coordinated by Roberto Vighi, an eminent archaeologist, respectively as 'architect' and 'draughtsman'. Their contribution will be fundamental in the studies of the Italic theatre and the basilica.

Figure 2 shows Carpiceci's reconstruction of the latter, a 5th century B.C. peripteral Doric temple. This unique façade, with 9 columns, reports the bipartition of the temple (Hera and Poseidon). Instead of a trussed roof, the central colonnade inside the building suggests a covering with sloped beams, placed on both perimetral and central colonnade.

On June 10th, 1940, Italy entered the war, and in November of that year, Carpiceci obtained the architectural licence in Venice. On July 6th, 1941, Carpiceci took part of the war as an artillery soldier with the military 'university company'. He was sent to Santa Maria Capua Vetere, close to Salerno, where Ferri, in May of that year, started working in the *Superintendency*. In a letter of that months, Carpiceci wrote that "since I'm on very good terms with colonel Pagliano, if Ferri requires me, I could spend a week to focus on the theatre in Paestum, which Ferri cares. I curb my impatience to write down, to shape on huge sheets and to bring back to life evocative visions of disappeared worlds" [Ferri 2020, p. 39]. These words testify of the role of drawing for Carpiceci, a primary tool to create new words, dreamed architectures, as a result of his visionary self, and both architectural and artistic culture.

But first he was committed to figure out the disappeared architectures of the classicism, and subsequently his own visionary projects. In addition to Paestum and the villa with the exedra in Anguillara Sabazia, he was called to reconstruct the Italian architectures in St. Petersburg, the Leptis Magna port, Velia, Pompei and all the way back to ancient Egypt.

His first visionary projects.

In a letter of July 24th, 1941, he described the temples to be drawn by himself: "while I listen to the 3rd movement of Respighi's *Fountains of Rome*, I see the



Fig. 3.A. Carpiceci, Atrio del Tempio Massimo (A. Carpiceci Archive).

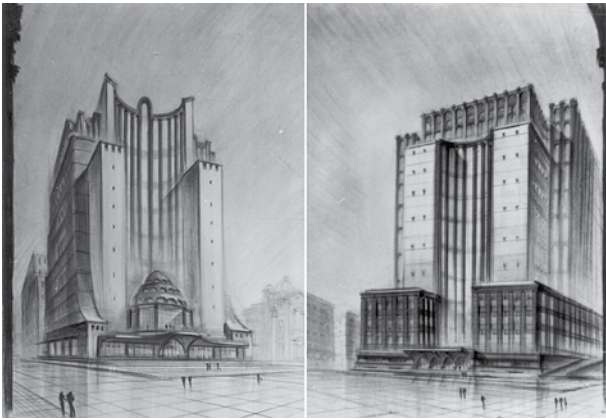
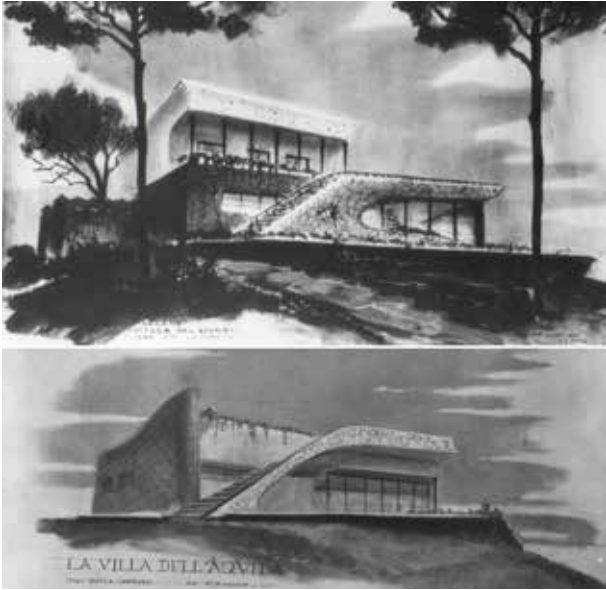


Fig. 4. A. Carpiceci, *Villa del Sogno* and *Villa dell'Aquila*, 1949-50 (A. Carpiceci Archive).

Fig. 5. A. Carpiceci, *Skyscraper in piazza Santissimi Apostoli*, Rome (A. Carpiceci Archive).

temples of the immensity which I'm drawing here in the studio. They are a big thing in me: when I close my eyes, they rise as being real before me, as a superhuman symphony. Now music plays the ringing of bells, that day that my [...] our temple will come true, there'll be hundred, thousands of bells ringing in celebration" [Ferri 2020, p. 39].

The temples he is writing of are two: the *Temple of Resurrection* and the *Temple of Redemption*. The first one was directly inspired by the villa in Anguillara Sabazia with its exedra, which he studied with Vighi and Ferri, and was part of a publication.

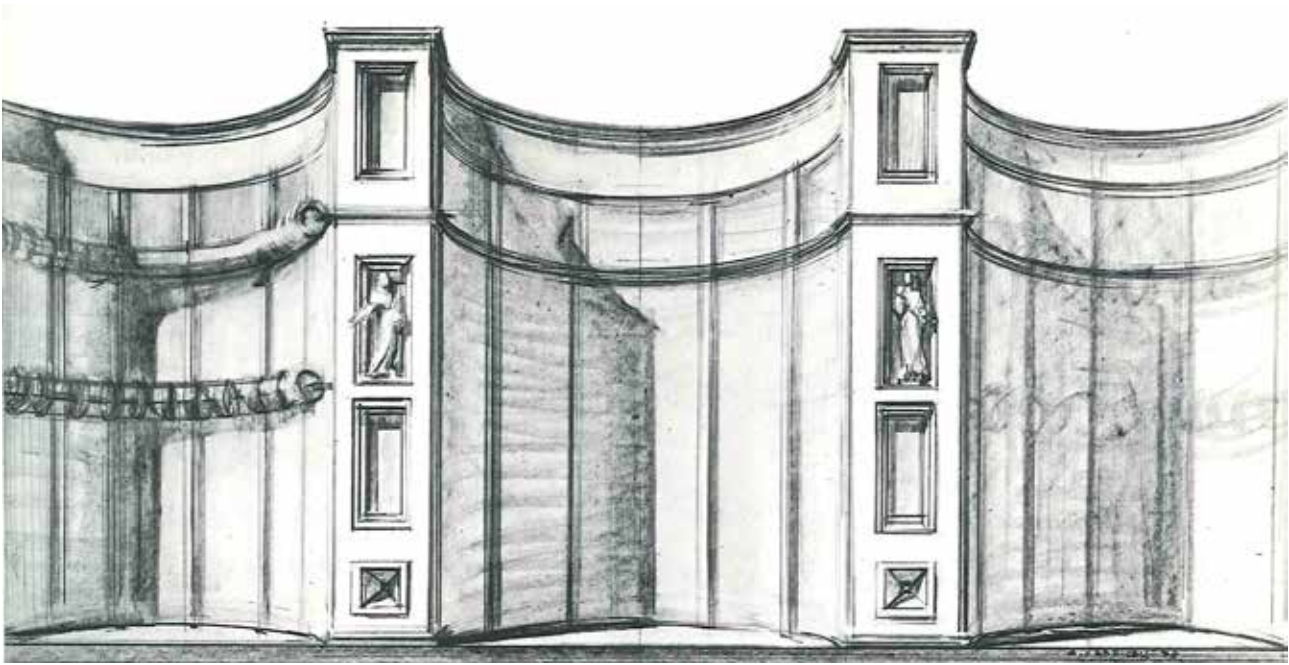
The second one, with a central plan in which a forest of pointed arches converges, refers to the circular building of Nocera Superiore, close to Salerno, that is the Paleo Christian baptistery of Santa Maria Maggiore. Sort of dreamed architectures, they will be materialized in two huge drawings made in charcoal.

In a letter of January 1943, after moving from Santa Maria Capua Vetere to Monte Mario, Rome, Carpiceci describes the vision of the eternal city: "Rome is beneath me, and every day I head down, over there I reach Leonardo and some sweet maiden. But to create in this bustle is impossible [...] we should meet at least for a day [...] ideas will grow and, may it be, they'll come out more beautiful and superb than before. The monument should give the idea of this massive conquest: the air [...] from the architecture, from the figures you must feel the harmony of the spaces, the immensity of horizons that are renewed in a single space, absolute and perennial" [Ferri 2020, p. 40].

At the end of the war, in 1945, Carpiceci and Ferri shared a house in *via dei Gracchi*, Rome. From this very period, two new ideas emerged: first, an idea of a new movement called *Resurrectio*, conceptually symbolized by the temple drawn by Carpiceci, which was to house a new sculptured decoration conceived by Ferri; second, an evolution and an ideal synthesis of the previous projects, called the *Atrium of the Maximum Temple* (fig. 3).

Last visionary projects and the continuation of classical studies. With the resumption of his professional activity as an architect, Carpiceci reduced the partnership with Ferri and the work on their visionary projects stopped. After the war, Carpiceci imagined new fantasy architectures with a closer bond with reality, where, on one hand the philosophic contribution is belittled, on

Fig. 6. Leonardo da Vinci, concave shapes (reconstruction by A. Carpiceci).



the other the value related to the architectural composition increases. *Villa del Sogno* and *Villa dell'Aquila* (fig. 4) represent two ideal residences to be built in a natural and pristine environment. *Villa Ciardi*, built in Fregene for the businessman Ciardi [1949] just traced the architectural concepts of these projects, finally finding a concrete example in the built architecture reality. Parallel to this, the utopian project of a skyscraper in *piazza SS. Apostoli* in Rome [1948] had a different fate. Carpiceci drew two versions of this building (fig. 5), but it remained an exercise in style, with both compositional and pictorial value, maybe over-ambitious and strictly personal, but well grafted in the Roman Baroque tradition.

The monumentalising of the concave solution, used in both versions but with different forms, binds to both Lodovico Cardi (called Cigoli), who designed something similar for the façade of St. Peter's Basilica, and, again, to Leonardo. The former designed a unique

solution for the entrance, based on the realization of a sort of 'in negative' narthex, a large niche that welcomes. In trying to remain consistent with the design idea of Michelangelo, Cigoli projected the interior apse onto the façade of the basilica, in a kind of ideal joining between beginning and end (fig. 7).

In the original drawing of the Tuscan genius, redrawn by Carpiceci (fig. 6), Leonardo writes a text, full of anagrams, which, normally mirrored, recounts a journey to Rome and Naples (the so-called *Memorandum Ligny*). The text is written around a drawing, previously traced, and this can be read in its caption: "*Questa sia vestita dj tela e poi inchiotata*" (this to be dressed in canvas and then stuck). The text suggests a project for a theatre background; maybe an ephemeral covering for a permanent scenic structure [Carpiceci 1984, p. 273]. However, these two projects for *piazza SS. Apostoli* became a premise of another visionary project, but this time more concrete: the skyscraper in Caracas



Fig. 7. Ludovico Cardi called 'Cigoli', proposal for the new St. Peter's basilica façade.



Fig. 8. A. Carpiceci, D'Ambrosio palace, Caracas (A. Carpiceci Archive).

Fig. 9. A. Carpiceci, D'Ambrosio palace, Caracas (A. Carpiceci Archive).

for the Italian businessman Pompeo D'Ambrosio (fig. 8, 9). This strong vision of Carpiceci took a role even more crucial in the ideal reconstructions of the vestiges of the past. Examples can be found in the graphic reconstruction of *Leptis Magna* port (again in collaboration with Vighi), the *Canopo* in Villa Adriana, Hadrian's mausoleum (fig. 10), all the projects for the St. Peter's basilica [Carpiceci 1983] and the architectures of ancient Egypt [Carpiceci 1980].

The reconstruction made by Carpiceci in figure 11 shows the four-sided access porticus to the pharaoh's residence, composed of a theory of slender and painted wooden columns. Above the entrance door there's the big solar disc, symbol of Aton, the absolute god. The reconstruction is not based on archaeological evidence, but from the observation of bas-reliefs and paintings present in tombs contemporary with Akhetaton, like the one that belonged to Merira II, and the TA26, known as the royal tomb.

Alberto's pencil

Alberto's perspectives never have a rigorous mathematical-geometrical basis. He used to pay attention primary on a study or a well-structured idea, but never on a determination of the drawing based on projective principles.

Generally, his first task was to sketch, on a sheet of cardboard 50 x 70 or 100 x 70 mm, a first idea of the image he had in his mind. A sort of *ermeneusi* of the cerebral image. Being accustomed to life drawing, he was able to face the blank sheet with wide lines, and keeping on drawing, like he was focusing the image from his mind that, little by little, was specified as good as possible; after that, he used to draw the horizon line, and on this he signed the vanishing points of the main directions. All his perspectives, which can be either central or accidental, present a vertical picture-plan. Bird's eye views tend to the axonometric projection, without (almost never) any suggestion of convergence of the vertical lines. Perspectives bound to a more immersive and addictive sensation, always have the horizon line at a natural level, or slightly higher, and the vertical lines are always parallel; rarely a little convergence is hint, maybe with the aim of creating a sort of conceptual *entasis* of the architecture.



Fig. 10. Mausoleum of Hadrian, Rome 139 d.C., after the emperor's death (reconstruction by A. Carpiceci).

Fig. 11. Egypt, Akhetaton (now El-Amarna), Akhenaton's palace (Amenofi IV), XIV century B.C. (ideal reconstruction by A. Carpiceci).

Perspectives without a human presence are really rare. The presence of human figures looks vital to give the sensation of the architectural dimension, and to describe, sometimes, the function of that built environment.

The drawing technique was based on the initial use of graphite; harder pencils for the initial phases for the materialization of ideas, and gradually softer ones (fig. 12); at the end, sometimes he used to draw, on the sides and in the foreground, trees, or architectural structures to frame the drawing, framing it in a sort of proscenium.

Colours were realized with a mixed technique of pastel pencils and compatible-coloured chalks, more or less shaded until the achieving of the wanted texture. Ultimately, stronger marks of dark colours to fix definite lines, and the use of white lead, where needed, to achieve the requested light.

Conclusions

It is clear, in the end, how the critical study of the past ideally blends with the imagination process of new fantasy architectures, representing a necessary premise of them. This strong visionary drive of Alberto Carpiceci takes a fundamental role, not only in the reconstructions of the past, existed but no longer visible, but also in several unbuilt projects, remained partly on paper, partly in his mind.

In the last century, Carpiceci was one of the few able to implement a process both scientific and artistic, which, using the instrument of drawing and of its various levels, can bring back to life what doesn't exist anymore and what never existed, except in the imagination of great architects of the past, which he studied.

This process becomes, in his work, a source of inspiration as well, capable to blend, ideally, with his creative power, giving place to the drawings outlined here; escaping from too direct references, but exploring his fantasies, drawing them with the same scientific criteria, increased during his continuous studies.

And just as knowledge seems to fade in front of the imagination, so "imitation seems to stop where vision begins" [Füssli 2000].

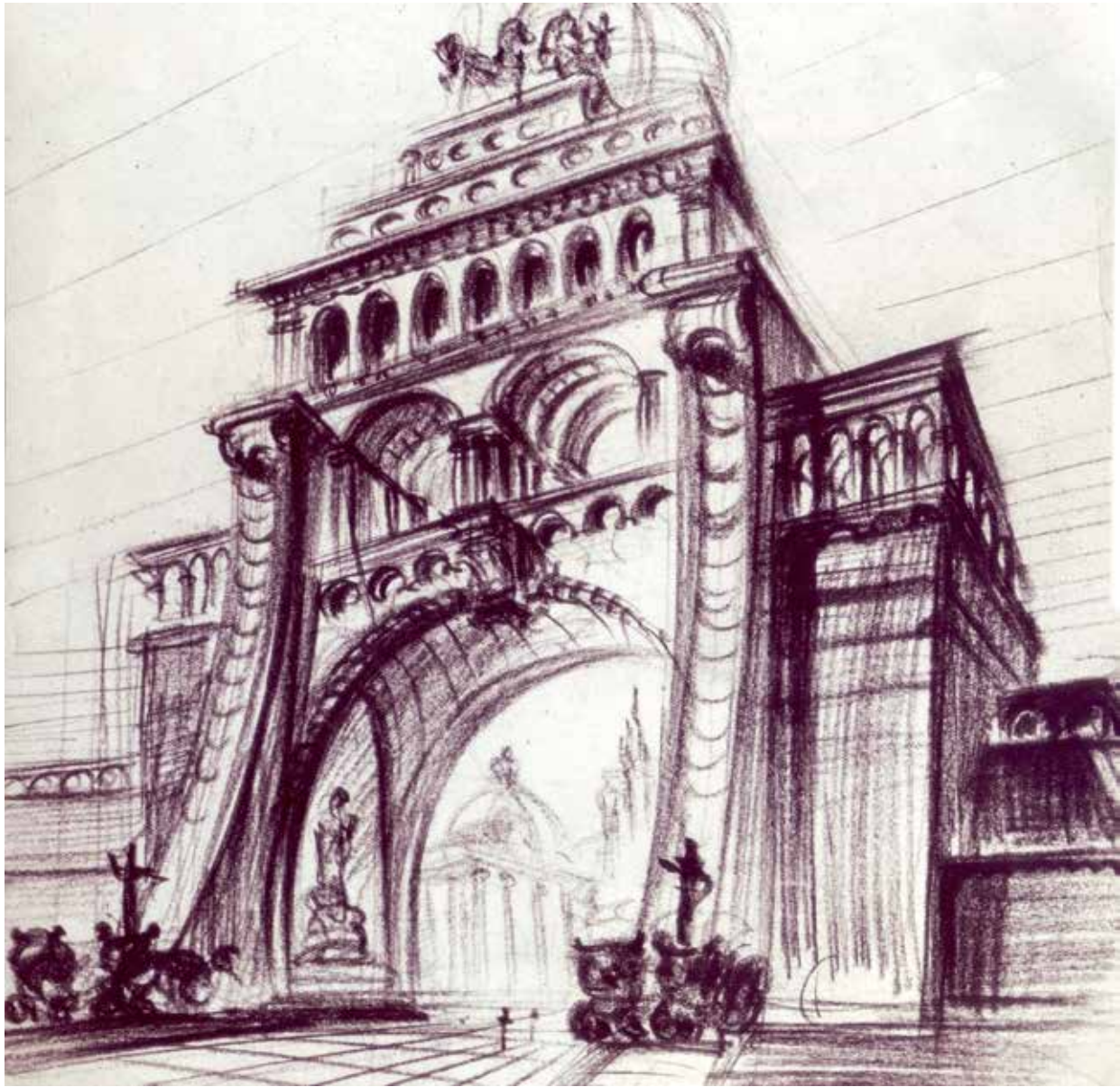


Fig. 1 2. Carpiceci, Arch of triumph (A. Carpiceci Archive).

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