It's no Country for Visionaries (Anymore). Two Design Experiments Beyond U-topia

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"The visionaries form a separate, singular, confused order, in which artists of very different talents and perhaps also of unequal ingenuity take their place. At times they manifest the freest and most daring aspects characterizing creative genius, a prophetic power fully concentrated on the most mysterious domains of the human *rêverie*, and the effects of a particular vision that profoundly alters the light, the proportions and even the density of the sensible world. One would say that they are uncomfortable within the limits of space and time. They interpret rather than imitate, and transfigure rather than interpret. They are not content with our world, and while the study of the forms found in it satisfies most artists, for them their formal study is only a provisional framework or, if you like, a starting point. […] At first glance, it seems that they invent at random, by fits and starts, subject to the despotic whim of a bizarre inspiration, and we are led to consider them as travelers who have come from very far away, and by indirect routes." [Focillon 2006, p. 13]

In the opening lines of his famous essay, *Esthétique des visionnaires*, illustrated in the manner of a monograph with images taken from Giovanni Battista Piranesi's *Le carceri d'invenzione* (*Imaginary Prisons*) (fig. 1), Henri Focillon brings together, without spatial-temporal limits and without disciplinary hierarchies, the names of the greatest artists of the past: Michelangelo Buonarroti, Leonardo da Vinci, Honoré Daumier, Rembrandt, William Turner, Tintoretto, El Greco. A long list, but not exhaustive, to which we could reasonably add those of Hieronymus Bosch, William Blake, Aleksandr Nikolaevič Skrjabin and Antonio Sant'Elia or, moving on to more recent times, those of Morris Graves, Louis and Bebe Barron, Lebbeus Woods and Terry Gilliam. All great visionaries who did not 'see' things, but instead 'envisioned' things, in the sense that, by negotiating the limits between sensation and perception, they created a sort of 'controlled hallucination' capable of giving reality an intensity and depth that would other-

wise be unimaginable. In the same way with words, with notes and with stones, but above all, with marks. Because, since time immemorial, drawing has been the visionaries' primary instrument, since drawing, to paraphrase an acute remark made by Vincent Van Gogh, is a tool that allows us to spread out before our eyes, with immediacy (and at times even harshly), what lies beyond the boundaries of our physical sight, by opening the doors of 'another' world that we can see only by relying on our mental sight: today amplified out of all proportion by the advent of computer graphics, which has moved the threshold of the realizable even further forward, and has erased the boundaries between the real world and the virtual world. It is enough to think of real sensory simulacra such as immersive systems or even, for that matter, of that utopia-non-utopia that has been and continues to be the global village of *Second Life*. And the fact that *Second Life* is a happy place, but virtual (and therefore without place), implicitly underlines that the term 'utopia' is a neologism derived from ancient Greek which Thomas More coined in the early sixteenth century by hybridizing *eu-topos* (good place) and *ou-topos* (no place). From an etymological point of view, therefore, utopia should mean 'a good place with no place.' But here the first ambiguities arise and, with them, the inevitable differences in interpretation. Because, according to a negative interpretation, utopia is ìa place that does not exist, in an absolute sense,' while, according to a positive interpretation, utopia is "'a place that does not exist, in a relative sense,' meaning that even if at the present time it does not exist, it is not to be excluded *a priori* that, sooner or later, it 'could' exist. The history of architecture, even its recent history, is full of enlightening examples: "Frank Lloyd Wright's *Broadacre City*, Le Corbusier's *Contemporary City for Three Million Inhabitants*, Mies van der Rohe's *Farnsworth House*, *Milano Verde* designed by Franco Albini, Ignazio Gardella, Giulio Minoletti, Giuseppe Pagano, Giancarlo Palanti, Giacomo Predaval and Giovanni Romano, Louis Kahn's *Philadelphia Plan* and Maurizio Sacripanti's *Osaka Pavilion*, almost all of which remained on paper except for the Miesian project, are works that indicate new frontiers to be surpassed" [Purini 2017, p. 101] (figs. 2, 3). Just as, in the 1960s, Superstudio's *Continuous Monument* (fig. 4) and Archizoom's *No-Stop City* (fig. 5) indicated new frontiers to be surpassed: two provocations that at the time were cataloged in the realm of utopia, even from the point of view of feasibility, thinking that buildings superimposed on

Fig. 1. Le carceri d'invenzione, Tav. VII (Giovanni Battista Piranesi, 1761).

Fig. 2. Milano verde, perspective view (Franco Albini, Ignazio Gardella, Giulio Minoletti, Giuseppe Pagano, Giancarlo Palanti, Giacomo Predaval, Giovanni Romano, 1938).
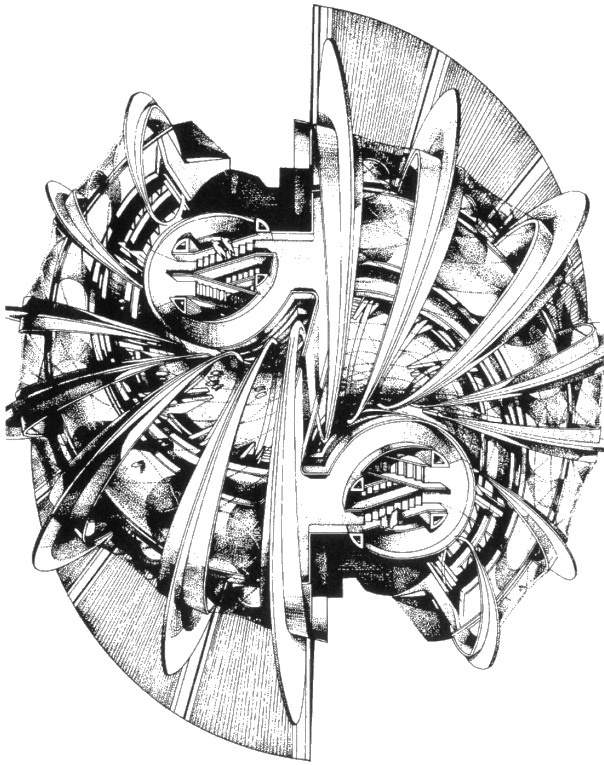
those already existing and crusts of inhabited land could never be realized. While instead, after less than fifty years, many concrete interpretations do exist: in the first case, the *Sharp Centre for Design* by Will Alsop, in Toronto, and the *De Brug* by JHK Architecten, in Rotterdam, while, in the second case, the *ACROS (Asian CrossRoads Over the Sea) Building* by Emilio Ambasz, in Fukuoka, and the *Library of the Delft University of Technology* by the Mecanoo studio, in Delft. But that's not all. The fact that a courageous project is more or less utopian depends also, and perhaps above all, on the socio-cultural context's confidence in design culture. And perhaps this is why utopia, in the time in which we live (the dawn of the third millennium) and in the country in which we live (Italy), represents a component that is not only marginalized, but even risky. So much so that by now visionary experiments, as proved very recently by the book *Italian Collage* [Ferrando, Lootsma, Trakulyingcharoen 2020] (fig. 6) and by the exhibition *Città di Dio. Città degli uomini. Architetture dantesche e utopie urbane* [Molinari, Gallo 2021] (fig. 7), are confined to art books and art galleries. Because by now, in our country, contemporary architecture, even more so if visionary, coincides per se with the 'ugly,' while historical architecture, even more so if nostalgic, coincides per se with the 'beautiful.' This is the reason why the only utopian project endorsed by most would be that of rebuilding uncontaminated, bucolic places or, at most, of rebuilding the ancient city of Pompeii as it was, and where it was, and then embalming it and conserving it equal to itself. It is not by chance that today, in our country, there are two types of utopian projects: those that, obviously, will never be realized (projects that are not only accepted, but actually looked at with curiosity) and those that, instead, sooner or later, could be realized (projects that, therefore, are rejected and dismissed as subversive). This is demonstrated by the different outcomes of two design experiments carried out within the research activity of the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering of the University of Perugia.

The first design experiment concerns the historic center of Perugia and, in particular, the area of Piazza Matteotti: an urban node that has always remained unresolved, from a functional as well as a figurative point of view. Where, however, the realization of the Minimetrò's 'Pincetto' station, as designed by Jean Nouvel, has opened new perspectives, prefiguring the possibility of extending the network of pedestrian paths leading to and from the city's acropolis by

Fig. 3. Italian pavilion in Expo Osaka 70, perspective view (Maurizio Sacripanti, Andrea Nonis, Maurizio Dècina, Giulio Perucchini, Alessandro Latini, Achille Perilli, Renato Pedio, Giancarlo Leoncilli Massi, 1969).

Fig. 4. Monumento Continuo, perspective view (SuperStudio, 1970).
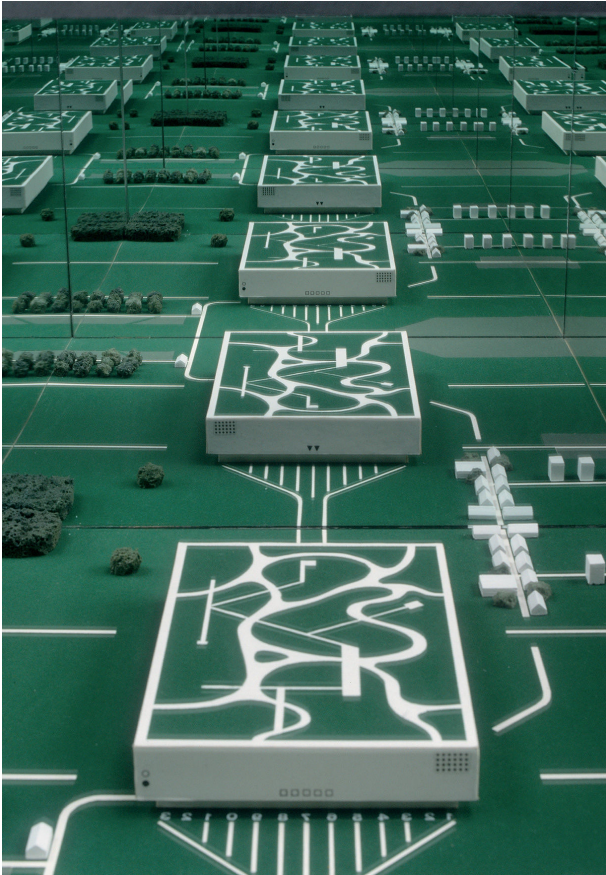
Fig. 5. No Stop City, perspective view (Archizoom, 1971).

Fig. 6. Italian Collage [Ferrando, Lootsma, Trakulyingcharoen 2020], cover.

excavating the ancient 13th-century terracing of the Piazza del Sopramuro, where the escalator ramps currently end. And, therefore, through the renewed physical contact with the cyclopean stones of the ancient Etruscan city wall (IV-III century B.C.) that, for almost eight hundred years, have been buried underground. In this context, the Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Perugia and Nova Oberdan Spa co-financed a research project (*Camminare nella storia. Nuovi spazi pedonali per la Perugia del terzo millennio*) [Belardi 2009] (fig. 8) comprising a cognitive study and a project design study: the first aimed at unveiling the archaeological secrets of a place substantially unexplored and, in any case, still mysterious; and the second, aimed at prefiguring the architectural values of the possible pedestrian connection between the Minimetrò station (planned to feature a number of mechanical elevators), an underground archaeological gallery (to be created between the Etruscan walls and the medieval arches) and the landing in the heart of the historic center, near to Corso Vannucci (to be protected with a daring glazed energy-producing canopy). The cognitive study, supported by specific historical research, was conducted with experimental methodologies (that involved the confluence of non-destructive remote inspection procedures ranging from laser scanner and georadar surveys, up to video-endoscopy), with direct visual explorations and comparative interpretations of ancient archaeological prospections in a highly probable conjectural reconstruction of the monumental pre-existences; the indispensable basis for the subsequent project. The Sopramuro underground archaeological gallery was designed by an interdisciplinary team organized within the Department of Civil and Environmental Engineering of the University of Perugia, while the glazed energy gallery of Via Mazzini was designed by Wolf Dieter Prix of the *Coop Himmelb(l)au* studio in Vienna and by Alessandro Melis of the *Heliopolis 21* studio in Pisa.

The second design experiment concerns the historic center of Foligno and with it, one of its most illustrious sons: Giuseppe Piermarini. In fact, in his city, the architect of the Teatro alla Scala in Milan and the Villa Reale of Monza has left no trace of himself: not a church, not a fountain, not a villa. While the hypothesis behind the workshop promoted by the universities of Bologna, Ferrara, Florence and Perugia with the support of the Fondazione Cassa di Risparmio di Foligno (*Disegnare Foligno tra storia e utopia. Omaggio a Giuseppe Piermarini*) [Belardi et al. 2010] (fig. 9) is that the pupil of Luigi Vanvitelli has, instead, left nine
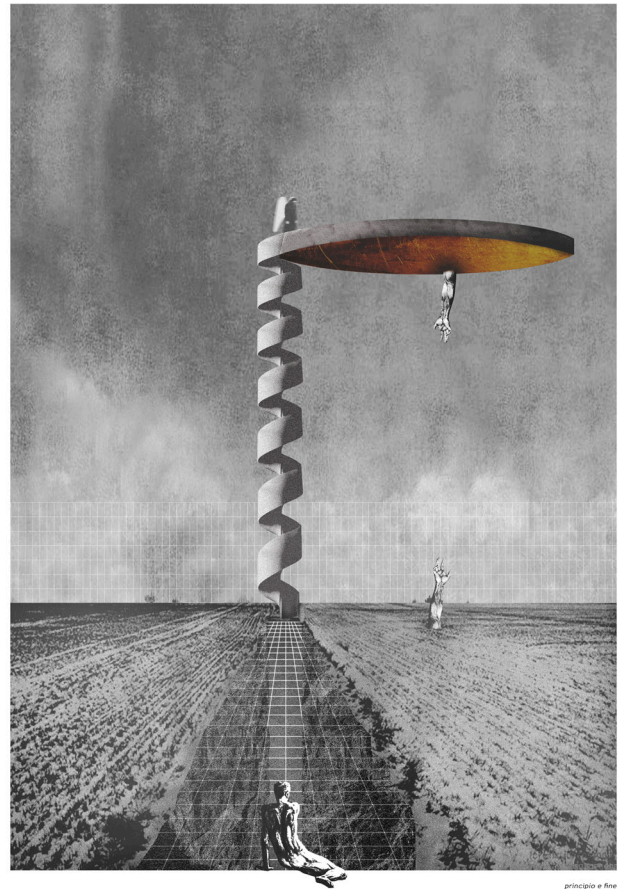

Fig. 7. *Città di Dio. Città degli uomini. Architetture dantesche e utopie urbane. Principio e fine (Pietro Carlo Pellegrini, 2021).*

principio e fine

Fig. 8. *Camminare nella storia. Nuovi spazi pedonali per la Perugia del terzo millennio, galleria energetica vetrata su via Mazzini a Perugia, infographic simulation (Coop Himmelb(l)au, Heliopolis 21, 2010).*

Fig. 9. *Disegnare Foligno tra storia e utopia. Omaggio a Giuseppe Piermarini, comparto n. 5, perspective view (Giovanni Vaccarini, 2010).*

Fig. 10. *Preliminary study for the exhibition Roma Interrotta, perspective view (Aldo Rossi, 1977).*
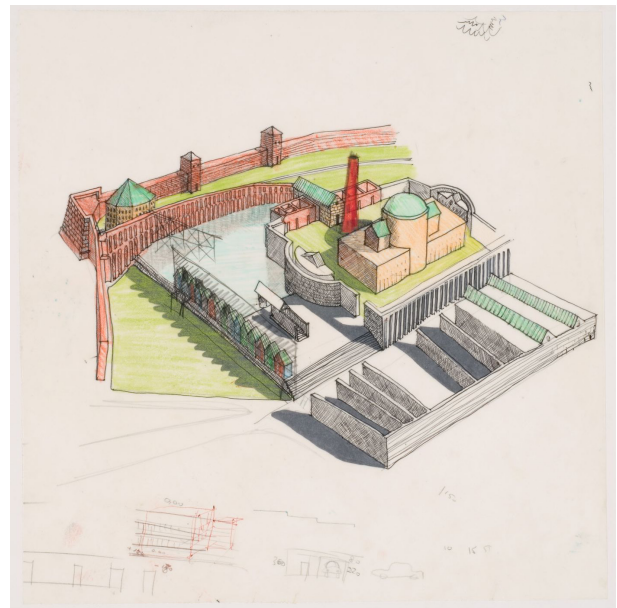
traces: nine examples of ephemeral architecture (nuptial apparatuses, triumphal arches, celebratory catafalques), yet capable of virtuously orienting the growth of a city that at the time coincided with the walled city, and in which the central built area was surrounded almost completely by large green areas, as attested to by a cadastral map of 1819. While in the following two hundred years, the empty land surrounding the central core of the ancient *Platea Fulgineii* was saturated with more than 650,000 cubic meters. In this sense, the workshop recovered the visionary propensity of the exhibition *Roma Interrotta* [Argan, Norberg-Schulz 1978] (fig. 10), curated by Piero Sartogo on the occasion of the 1978 Venice Biennial, where nine young Italian architectural firms were invited to design the Foligno that doesn't exist, but that could have existed if Piermarini had opposed the definitive dismantling of his *folies* and had rebuilt them in his hometown, straddling the central historical nucleus and the urban perimeter walls, leaving in heritage an imaginary urban plan. Imaginary, but not useless, because capable of promoting an urban

growth as different as it is virtuous. Demonstrating that even our historical era is capable of creating pieces of city that can compete with the historic city.
Two programmatically visionary design experiments, as both go beyond u-topia, but with different results. In fact, while the projects intended for the historic center of Foligno, due to the evident impossibility of their ever being realized, were welcomed favorably both locally and nationally, the project intended for the historic center of Perugia created not a few embarrassments. In the sense that it was received with great interest at an international level, but was unanimously condemned by the local press. Perhaps because, sooner or later, it could actually be realized. But unfortunately, ours is no country for visionaries (anymore). And perhaps it is not by chance that the writings published in this issue look for the most part to our past (from Pisanello to Gustave Doré, up to Giovanni Battista Piranesi) or to the rest of the world (from Norman McLaren to Katsuhiro Otomo, up to OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen).

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