

Fiction as Space of Potential Becoming

Nicolò Zanatta

1 Aldo Rossi, *A Scientific Autobiography*, 1981, Cambridge, U.S.A., The MIT Press.

2 The group *Nuove Tendenze* lasted less than a year, from summer 1913 till spring 1914. Founded and headed by Ugo Nebbia, Gustavo Macchi and Decio Buffoni, a mixture of critics, artists and journalists, the group held some more moderate positions to the fellow newly born Futurist Movement, while sharing its drive towards new, modern aesthetics. Of the original group, it is quite contestable that only Sant'Elia left an impression in the annals of Art and Architectural history.

3 *Prima Esposizione d'arte del gruppo Nuove Tendenze*, catalogo mostra *Famiglia Artistica – Milano*, 20 Maggio – 10 Giugno.

4 Given the theoretical scope of *La Città Nuova*, *City*, *Reality*, *Fiction*, etc. are to be intended in their most general meaning, on the level of the concept itself they represent. It is the effort of giving new and different images to these words, to build a new world of meaning.

5 as the creation of a finite space, set and unchangeable

6 Ernesto Nathan Rogers in *The Hearth of the City: Toward the Humanization of Urban Life*, 1952, London.

7 As of now, nobody would think of *Reality* as the product of an evil presence, of the Enemy par excellence. XIII century Cathars did though. This idea is what shaped their life, the lens through which they accessed the world, the veil of signifiers that influenced their thoughts.

8 Como, 30 April 1888 – Monfalcone, 10 October 1916.

*“Yet we must also take hold of these very dense images which will comprise the history of the new city.”*¹

Milan, 20th of May 1914, the exhibition “*Nuove Tendenze*”² is inaugurated. *La Città Nuova*³ is shown: a handful of drawings and unfinished sketches nonetheless sublime in their appearance. Inseparably, indissolubly drawn, the buildings presented are the opposite of units, of objects identifiable from their context. They are fractals of urbanity, recursive images of styles and elements of city-making. His majesty Reinforced Concrete and her highness Structural Steel explode in every direction, releasing the liberating potential of their thoughtful exertion. The *City* is shown in its constant state of becoming, the unstoppable transformation of itself under the guidance of its citizens. Bridges, railways, streets, catwalks, stairs, plazas, people, life, an inextricable canvas of urbanity is woven. Its inhabitants, newcomers and old, define daily its shape, only to have it dismantled and reformed whenever needed. There is no settled identity, just the construction and constant layering of the palimpsest most fitting to necessity. No nostalgia, no space for a glorified version of the past that may cage the present. In addition, the *City*⁴ shows us what is allowed to see, and that only. No voyeurism of private life, nothing

to indicate the *de/ffinition*⁵ of a domestic space, we can access exclusively to the space that is shared, the public space. No prudery in this, just the right distance posed between the architect and the life and autonomy of the inhabitants of the *City*, in opposition to the too common tendency of over-designing, “*from the spoon to the city*”.⁶ As the mask that defines each and every one of us, the visage that inevitably hides what our minds contains from one another; the domestic space is the equivalent of the person, unknowable. Nonetheless, the images that inhabit our minds and that we express, actively shape our world, they filter our reality, which is never innocent. It is the result of millennia, centuries, decades of labour, each period with its own set of signifiers attached to the signified, *Reality*.⁷

If *Reality* is not given, then a question arises, the same one that haunts Antonio Sant'Elia⁸, the author of *La Città Nuova*: “*How could things be instead?*”. It is a constant, tormenting query that needs a different answer every time. He poses it to his city, Milan, to his nation, Italy, to his architecture, and to his time, the dawn of the twentieth century. A period when people were moving intensively to cities, looking for a new life that the countryside could no longer offer. Expressed and unvoiced at the same time, these new possibilities gathered into the *City*: the potential of the raising industrial capital; the

potential of the proletariat; the potential of new construction technologies, amongst others. These and much more constituted the *City*, but at the same time they could give shape to something different, completely other. Unfortunately, past misconceptions still inhabit the idea of *Architecture*, inhibiting its mutation, its necessary transfiguration. To all of this, behold *La Città Nuova*.

Limited in their use, hidden and reduced to bones, covered in shreds of floral patterns and moldings, concrete and steel are disparaged, flouted, ostracized, as if their own existence is to be inherently shameful. The Beaux-arts architect fears concrete and steel, for they could force him to give a second look to his conviction, to reinvent his defined, definitive, idea of *Architecture*. Still under the spell of the Enlightenment, the mathematized space is his principle, the dogma of *Building* as an “object”, Newtonian and unrelated, separated from its context and solipsistically autistic. The same block in Paris, in London, in Milan, as the *Capital* commands! They are tiles of a gigantic puzzle, presenting some grade of variation but finalized, a cast-in-stone form that does not accept any kind of radical change, no matter its usage, its inhabitant, its life.⁹ *Reality* here is *tyranny* of the given which can only show what is already there, like a mirror. Fiction instead is the space of what-has-never-been, the never-seen-before, where the potential becoming can be unveiled, where *La Città Nuova* can be built.

Here *giving shape to reality* is at the core of the architect’s exertion, his field of action. Antonio Sant’Elia brings forth images that give shape to reality, which influence the creation of other images: the fictional. His sketches discard plans, sections and elevation to get as close as possible to the aesthetical experience of reality, of things as they simply appear.¹⁰ As human as it can possibly get, we only see what is humanly possible. What we cannot perceive is what is hidden beyond the frame but nonetheless what is visible implies and evokes images in our head that are possibly more powerful than the given one. This is arguably the most inte-

resting aspect of Sant’Elia’s work, the possibility of what images show, what reality presents, implies to what is not shown, to fiction and vice versa. There is then no distinct boundary between the *Real* and the *Fictional* but a threshold, a space that Antonio Sant’Elia tried and, I claim, succeeded in identifying as the effective scope of action for *Architecture*. Here the role of the *Architect* is crucial, the effect of his work is at its maximum as it is dangerous. Only on the border of the abyss we can become self-aware of the extent of our actions and manifold becoming potentials. We look at *Casa comunicante con ascensori e ponte esterno* and we cannot avoid asking ourselves: “*How could it be instead?*”.

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9 What better example of this that the insane real estate market of London? Or the latest worldwide trends in urban planning? Raymond Ledrut, semiologist, spoke thusly of the mathematization of the urban space: “To the question: how does the city speak to us?, we have replied: as a work of art, which means as an object charged with meaning by the production and the use men make of it. The only way to learn what the city tells us is to examine the field of the urban experience, the lived city. To search for a code is in vain.” (in *The City and the Sign*, curated by M. Gottdiener and A. Ph. Lagopoulos, 1986, New York, U.S.A., Columbia University Press.)

10 “The absence of plans merely does not indicate but a choice of method in the development of a research that recognizes the priority of image and synthesis over function and analysis” wrote Paolo Portoghesi. (in *Antonio Sant’Elia: l’opera completa*, curated by Alberto Longatti, Luciano Caramel 1987, Milano, Italia, Mondadori editore.)