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

Milan, 20th of May 1914, the exhibition “Nuove Tendenze” is inaugurated. La Città Nuova 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 shows us what is allowed to see, and that only. No voyeurism of private life, nothing to indicate the definition 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”. 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.

If Reality is not given, then a question arises, the same one that haunts Antonio Sant’Elia, 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. 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. 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 interesting 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 in vain.” (in The City and the Sign, curated by M. Gotti diener and A. Ph. Logopoulos, 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.)