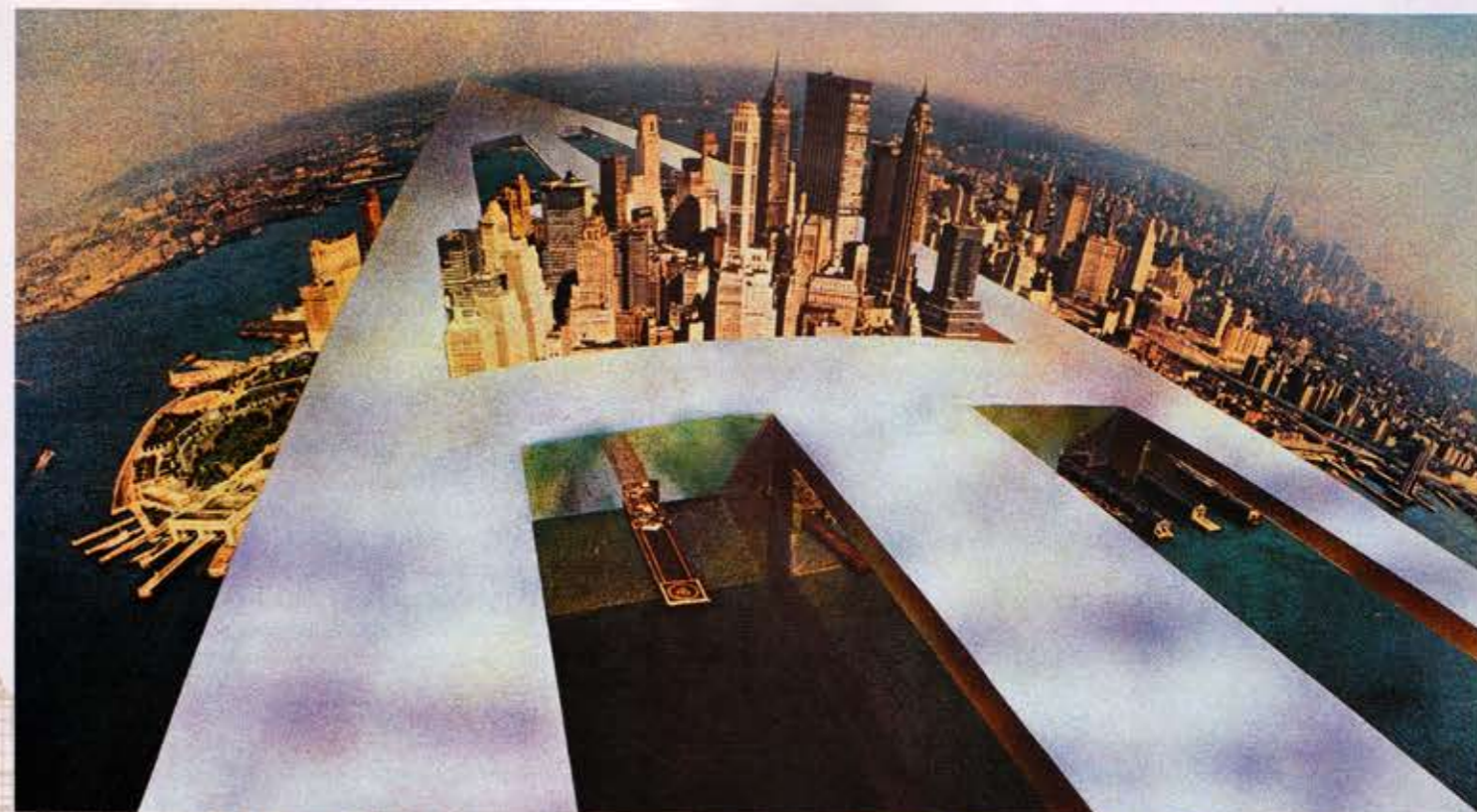


CITIES: MOVING

ARCHITECTURE & POLITICS

The rise and fall of architecture through the years has been nothing short of tumultuous. Whilst architecture itself progressed with time, the identity and purpose of architecture have always been in question. In the 1960s, a brave, new voice emerged in architecture, during a period of political turmoil and new ideologies. The wave was picked up by the narrative-driven SUPERSTUDIO, who inspired flamboyant, unorthodox groups like Utopie and Archigram, who all have one thing in common — to revolutionise and rethink the purpose of architecture, and push the boundaries of normalcy. But have the modern practicalities of the world limited and over-ridden architecture's ability to connote beyond aesthetics and functionality?



SUPERSTUDIO

For most of its history, architecture is regarded as either craft or vocation. In very recent times, architecture in academia has become a kind of research. At its more mundane level, architecture is taken as some sort of technical pursuit, and when put on a pedestal it symbolises something inspirational. When pursued as an icon, it becomes a propaganda tool for political ambition or provides a symbol for commercial power. Indeed, it could be a symbolic power for many things; even for the various forms of art, notably the performing arts, which is exemplified by iconic theatres and cinema halls. In the end, architecture is not a mere building that serves functional needs. It can be more, and occasionally, it has been political.

In the 1960s, the exhilarating age of anticipation, during the time when music became unfettered by convention and civility, when man was first sent to space and made the first moon landing, when political ideology took off in universal scale breaking the traditional pyramidal structure, architectural ambition too was riding on the crest of the wave of audacity. Like its humanistic counterparts elsewhere, architecture was daring to change the world. Its tone was bold, adventurous and sweeping in the grandest of narratives. It was so large in its ambition that the contests within the architecture world were fought in grand narratives: style versus non-style, practice versus visions, the International Style versus notions of meanings, and so on.

When all of these broke down, when tiredness set in, architecture became regressive, gazing back to history and the past to recover measurable senses. In the 1970s, it dropped into a cycle of self-doubts and loss of confidence. By the 1980s, some in architecture became apologetic and even subservient to other

forms of art, and only a few doyens were left making large statements. It is left at a balance today, with many different moves and many directions. There is little appeal left in making architecture ideological, as it is no longer dominant as a compelling ideological force. It has just become crowded with many little voices. The big voices that are still heard in architecture could be traced back to when it all began in the 1960s. Ideologically architecture has not moved an inch, and politically it has become irrelevant as it no longer promises possibilities; instead, it is merely a tool for other people's ambitions, although it is still as artistic as ever.

Its grandest gestures in the 1960s were led by the then very young, indeed almost inevitably by the newly graduated, or even by those who did not bother to graduate. Arguably, among the most political was SUPERSTUDIO, founded in 1966 by an Italian group of new graduates from the University of Florence, the most Renaissance city of all, where landmark classical buildings are found at every turn. SUPERSTUDIO was able to offer broad social statements in visual forms because they had not yet fallen into the practice trap where the weight of making things would have restrained the explosion of audacity. Amidst the prevalence of grand narratives like Marxism and forms of Socialism, it was not against the order of things to imagine that architecture could provide an equally sweeping system to offer social justice. It was also a Socialist idea to say that architecture could be just as bland as Socialism and make buildings as equal as mankind should be. But to actually offer it so compellingly to an outside world as architecture, requires both naivety as well as visual ingenuity.

Optimism of unlimited possibilities due to scientific and intellectual advancements was tampered by the looming threat

of an atomic war that flashed back and forth in the human psyche – were we in ascendancy, or were we facing doomsday? European television regularly featured the threat of war between Communism and the West, what needed to be done to avert the war, and if it were to happen, what the outcome would likely be. While acquiring the good life was what most people were doing, there were wide social and psychological fractures. The whole aspect of commodification was questioned and so was the meaning of life. Literature began to touch on these aspects and so did films, and for the first time architecture ventured into the social frontier and questioned its own relevance. SUPERSTUDIO thrived on this and made the questions the reason for their being. It started with the agenda to shake off the 'hegemonic grip' of classicism upon which Renaissance architecture was based. It meant also that it rejected architecture's traditional patrons: the elitists, the religious orders and the bourgeois society. The firm positioned a complete transformation of the architectural political milieu.

SUPERSTUDIO regarded that by merely serving the functional needs of the consumers, architecture reinforces unjust social divisions; whereas, if architecture were to form a "single continuous environment, the world rendered uniform by technology, culture, and all other inevitable forms of imperialism", injustice and social divisions would be mitigated. The firm then offered a series of implausible graphic images of an alternative architecture that did not address function. SUPERSTUDIO went against the character of Florence, the bastion of Italian humanist architecture and instead, engaged the "flip side of the Italian *dolce vita*".

Instead of function – considered as mundane – it played with the interface between natural and artificial environments, used the iconic grid and overlaid it between cities. In a proposal, a super grid overlaid New York, Niagara Falls and the desert. It conceived that the super grid would allow for a truly democratic

and human experience because every point in the grid would be identical. Significantly the proposal was anti-design, without the expected traditional play of architectural elements. In essence the grid city does not look like anything real – it is a radical city made for the speculative mind.

Because their works were not formulated for physical realisation, they were dependent on the media to provide the legacy. Their visual concepts attracted design magazines like *Casabella* and *Domus*, which were Italy's leading design magazines, and appeared in self-sponsored publications. The texts written by them to promote their works were poetic and surreal, which appealed to the literati and intellectuals, who found their visuals justified by the poetic texts. The works became a platform to rethink the architectural field altogether and asked major critical questions on the meaning of architecture. The images that were created were bold and entirely novel, and to this day, still enduring. There was also the offer to share ideas in public forum, and obligingly, the architectural and design world took notice. In 1972, SUPERSTUDIO was included in the MoMA show, *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape*, and the perpetrators were still only in their twenties, fresh out of architecture school.

In the late 1960s, a parallel group in France emerged, who called themselves Utopie. Their 'inflatable structures' offered another leaning towards 'undesign', with amorphous forms contesting with rigid, established notions of architecture. They offered a counter-metaphor for over-the-top rhetorical renditions of architecture normally found in academia – the overinflated pretentious bubble they sought to burst. In the sudden burst of anti-government student protests in Paris in 1968, Utopie was probably one of the agitators. The emergence of Utopie was probably better understood within an intellectual context with the world seen as a meaningless one. Sartre's existential writings were prominent and particularly influential

among the intelligentsia and rebellious towards established assumptions, with radical ideas about freedom. Utopie's ideas about architecture were statements of freedom against established orders. For example, Sartre declared in his rejection of the Nobel Prize for literature in 1964 that, "A writer should not allow himself to be turned into an institution."

Parallel to SUPERSTUDIO and Utopie, Archigram was formed even earlier in London in 1961 to become more renowned and influential. It was more 'pop' than political but its seductive collages and sheer verve became enmeshed in a music and art revolution to shift a previously closeted cultural landscape. Archigram revolutionised the possibilities of architecture as the Beatles did to music. Indeed, Archigram's graphics could equally fit with the Beatles' album covers in a smoky, loaded context. Archigram did not offer social equality the way SUPERSTUDIO did or prompt ideas of meanings, but it rode the wave of radicalism in the form of futuristic images and fiction, with possibilities towards a heady future. There were for example, their pop-inspired crazy ideas of mobility in the form of 'walking cities', and inflated ideas of urban designs like the 'Plug-in City', 'Instant City' and 'Blow-out Village'. They were, however, inspiring to young architects who were to later produce look-alike realities such as the Pompidou Centre and spin-offs like the Metabolist movement in Japan.

Just as with SUPERSTUDIO, the media played a significant part in promoting Archigram initially. The movement started with an exhibition and a magazine printed with cheap paper sold at 9 pence each. Radical change was in the air with a future waiting to be claimed by the boldest. The Soviets had just sent the first man into space, the Beatles were releasing one hit single after another, and Bob Dylan was writing radical songs to reverberate the airwaves. Works of the 1960s upstarts continue to reverberate until today, whether it is in music, technology and the arts in general, or in architecture. It is not too far-fetched to point to the period as the one that gave Steve Jobs the attitude to revolutionise the digital economy. Even today's discussion about buildings taking on advance processes, analogous to human beings, could be traced back to 1960s ambitions (ref. Beniger, JR, *The Control Revolution*, 1989). Archigram's politics was for the future as its notoriety mainly appealed to students at the time. It agitated the rethinking of social architecture and building technology. It did not invent systems but assembled images from the environment around them – from space missions, constructivist images, biology, manufacturing, electronics, and mostly, popular culture. It set the tone for future discourse on creative environment (eg. Oldenburg's *Third Place*), and for half a century later, its ideas still reverberate. Being an earlier movement, it could possibly have prompted the emergence of SUPERSTUDIO and its discourse on anti-design.

Since the 1960s, the visions and narratives of architecture have become smaller and smaller. Partly to do with the non-realisation of the great architectural visions except in intermittent aesthetic terms as adopted by British high-tech architects who were influenced by the aesthetics of Archigram graphics. Works by OMA carry remnants of SUPERSTUDIO graphics, as well as constructivists' nuances. The various little realisations of the grand narratives had little appeal to the general public and were regularly touted as failures by the media, especially when architecture alienated the public and created psychological trauma. Without the careful knitting and rich mix of usage, which had to do with the little narratives,

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SUPERSTUDIO

architecture appeared to work against human well-being and modern architecture became hated. So, architecture retreated and much of post-modernist discussions were about little apologetic moves, even 'slowing' down architecture.

There is some recovery of architecture today, mostly centred on the magical abilities of the 'star architects' who are producing works of great aesthetic appeal, occasionally with semantic suggestions. The great urban visions that were built in the twentieth century are still undergoing repair and changes, and modified over time to gradually become friendly again. 'Green issues' seem to drive political visions today, which have the pretence of technical expertise on the part of architects to solve a hyped-up problem. This merely seems like a commoditised technical playground financed by the super-rich for large corporate offices to play with. Real human needs of the vast majority of the world's population are getting by without the intervention of architects. Their biggest problems are the carpetbaggers from the developed countries over-selling their wares to communities that could ill-afford to pay for them.

There are few voices of conscience left in architecture today. It gets worse when architecture becomes fashionable, attracting the light-headed, with discourse getting no deeper than superficial effects and spectacles. Other than the great aesthetic show, architecture has lost its verve and dare. It is merely a tool for the rich and powerful to play with – hasn't that been the case throughout its history anyway except for a brief period when it deceived itself that it could be any more? ❧

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