

Space, Time and Superstudio: Multi-media and narrative in experimental architecture and design

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ABSTRACT

“Twelve Cautionary Tales for Christmas: Premonitions of the Mystical Rebirth of Urbanism”, Superstudio’s collection of some of the most chilling apocalyptic worlds to have been envisioned by architects in the post-war period, first appeared in the December 1971 issue of the London based AD magazine. The “12 Ideal Cities” were published in narrative form with illustrations, and resembled neither an architectural treatise nor a political or avant-garde manifesto. Superstudio presented “12 Ideal Cities” at the Mana gallery in Rome on November of 1971 as a radio broadcast with actors reading from the 12 Cities text, during a dual channel projection. The following essay examines this multi-media event, and considers how Superstudio transcended standard architectural conventions on representation.

Architects are not necessarily known for tinkering with their craft, at least with the tried and true ways of turning concepts into constructs. Sketches, drawings and renderings serve to establish a set of

“working” documents that can clearly convey information in a language common to the many building trades. Yet these very same techniques fall short in their ability to convey architectural ideas to a broader public. One way around this was to borrow techniques from mainstream commercial media, such as subverting television advertising, comic books or other communication means then in vogue to reach an audience’s impressionable imagination. Commercial media tends to present distorted messages, employing tactics that are frequently deceptive, disingenuous, or coercive to reach their targets. These wouldn’t necessarily be the tools of an architect, who, one is led to believe, is not supposed to play tricks with his or her clients or public.

Superstudio, the Florence based experimental sixties architecture and design group flirted from the very beginning with these unwholesome media strategies: the “super” in Superstudio represents their hyperbolic claim to an exalted status, though in their case applied tongue and cheek to the very normative practice based around the architect’s office, or “studio.” From the outset, beginning in 1966, they used unconventional tactics to disseminate their work. Their first show at the Jolly 2 gallery in Pistoia recalled the loud interiors of supermarket displays and the neon-lit signs above gas stations. The gallery’s carefully assembled

interior exhibition with its extremely foreshortened and loudly colored backdrop were mis-en-scene “product” launches, where radios, sofas, lamps and other modern domestic bric-a-brac were meant to appeal not so much to professionals as to a younger audience already familiar with these kind of iconographic “Brillo Box” statements.

Superstudio and Archizoom were the driving catalysts behind the “Superarchitecture” movement, rallying together for “super production”, “super gas”, “Superman”, and “supermarkets”. But something else was also gradually being introduced into the Superstudio canon, the graphic storyboard, or comic strip, that was employed something like a witty users’ manual, to communicate the various objects and their relative contexts⁽¹⁾. These storyboards would in turn become the basis for scripts to Superstudio’s first cinematic animations: Architettura Interplanetaria (1971) and, shortly after, Supersuperficie (1972). It was around the same time that the group began developing a series of dystopian urban parables that would lead to the creation of a new hybrid form of architectural radio performance.

“Twelve Cautionary Tales for Christmas: Premonitions of the Mystical Rebirth of Urbanism”, Superstudio’s collection of some of the most chilling apocalyptic worlds to have been envisioned by architects in the post-war period,

first appeared in publication in the December 1971 issue of the British AD magazine²). The following year, the Florentine group published their tales of “12 Ideal Cities” in the Italian *Casabella* n.° 361, under the title “Premonizioni della parusia urbanistica”. One of Superstudio’s principle ghostwriters behind “12 Ideal Cities,” Gian Piero Frassinelli, remarked that these stories were specifically investigations into the future of cities, unlike their earlier work on neutralizing architecture and design, or their later anthropologically styled studies on material culture (G. P. Frassinelli, personal communication, October 23, 2014). The “12 Ideal Cities” were published in narrative form with illustrations, and resembled neither an architectural treatise nor a political or avant-garde manifesto³. But just before their launch in the international press, Superstudio’s “12 Ideal Cities” were presented as a multi-media event on the 20th of November at the Mana gallery in Rome, in 1971.

The Mana gallery featured a number of Superstudio’s projects hung on walls around the rooms, and also included screenings of the film *Architettura Interplanetaria*. For the “12 Ideal Cities” project, the group chose to make a site-specific installation. The visiting audience would be able to “tune-in” to an internal radio broadcast using handheld individual transistor radios – locked to a single transmission signal – where they could hear actors read from the “12 Ideal Cities” text⁴, while a dual channel slide projection, showing stills depicting each of the cities together with a photo “commentary” had been composed specifically for the opening event.

The Mana gallery broadcast can be broken down into a set of component parts, featuring audio recordings of the readings, and the slide show, consisting of two simultaneous projections, with the left screen dedicated to illustrations from a single “ideal city” and the right screen scrolling through image “commentaries.” The left screen pictures consisted of axonometric drawings or perspectives made by Superstudio⁵, (these were the illustrations published together with the texts in the journals), while the “commentaries” consisted largely of images selected from mainstream magazines, postcards or photographs and were meant to suggest a particular emotion or make reference to a physical context or human condition.

When broadcast with the slide projections, the effect would be similar to Chris Marker’s technique deployed in his groundbreaking 1962 *La Jetée*, where a succession of still images and voiceover comprehensively built a forceful cinematographic mood⁶. However, Superstudio’s installation of the broadcast inside the gallery gave way to a second possible interpretation, without direct visual associations, as the gallery visitor could walk freely through the spaces while continuing to listen to the audio track from the radio transmission. Thus his or her experience would be even more surreal, as the voiceovers and juxtapositions with other projects and their images would mix in an even more dissociative manner.

Each of the tales described in “12 Ideal Cities” act as independent parables, examining particular human psychoses related to life in the city. From today’s

perspective, they resemble multiple variations of failed states that have – in one way or another – surrendered to a series of apocalyptically denaturing events.

To get an idea of some of the principle storylines, here are a few as sound-bites: In the first city, a cybernetic prison guarantees eternal life unless the inhabitant commits a repeated offense; in the third city, a nuclear devastation has left millions of minds to pulsate body-less inside a gigantic cube until the end of time; in the seventh city, the city’s advancing construction fuels endless consumption and endless waste; in the eighth city, the inhabitants of a conical Campanella-like City of the Sun are free to dream other people’s dreams; in the eleventh city, the most beautiful city in the world is built on the inhabitants’ living an existenz minimum, and using their surplus to build up and decorate their own homes. As it happens with more or less each city, humanity is broken down to a set of optimized functions and then provided with idealized model environments that attempt to treat or resolve these identified needs, no matter how perversely.

The Seventh City, “Continuous Production Conveyor Belt City”, taking a more detailed look, is about the city as a slowly moving factory piling up buildings on one end and spewing out rubble and trash from the other. The audio-visual spectacle for this city is particularly haunting: as a very celebrative radio announcer’s voice is heard over the portable radio, lauding the construction of ever more modern and desirable houses for its ecstatic inhabitants, the image on the

left, an axonometric drawing of a linear machine-like city sits frozen on its screen, while flashing one by one to the right, are the “commentary” images soliciting a series of sensations: factories billowing out smoke, children walking in an industrial landscape on railway tracks, a fire-lit sky over an oil refinery, plans of grid cities, electronic circuit boards, then cutting to a girls’ marching band, a brand new kitchen, a building collapse, an impoverished family, a classroom with children, a family watching TV, a happy family at the dining table, a smug faced man, row houses, a home gym, a garden under a dark black sky, garbage and a busy seaport. All the while the announcer talks about comfort, opportunity, pride, laziness, the benefits of filth, the productiveness of the economy.

When asked why radio announcers and slide projections were brought together in this intense bacchanal of sounds and images, Cristiano Toraldo di Francia, one Superstudio’s original co-founders back in 1966, and the one largely responsible for installing the exhibition at the Mana gallery, said he wanted to evoke the urgency of the radio broadcast, much like Orson Welles achieved in his notorious prewar radio play “the War of the Worlds” (C. Toraldo di Francia, personal communication, October 31, 2014).

That Halloween night in 1938, Orson Welles and his troupe, the Mercury Theater on the Air, broadcast an adapted version of H.G. Wells “The War of the Worlds” to an American audience^(?). Though Welles provided an advisory message about the fictional content of the program just before they aired the radio dramatization, he did not anticipate the

extent of the panic that spread among his radio audience. The broadcast achieved its incredible realism through the use of standard radio practices of the time, including theater actors imitating radio announcers, the sounds of light musical entertainment, references to actual towns and familiar landmarks in the local area, and the attention getting “this just in!” news alerts.

The show began normally enough with a live jazz transmission that was intermittently cut by a sequence of increasingly alarming news bulletins. Orson Welles’ broadcast episode set many firsts, but clearly the most poignant was the capacity of radio to powerfully influence a very large mass audience. This message would not be lost on European counterparts, especially those totalitarian states deeply invested in radio for the purposes of mass political propaganda.

Paul Virilio recognized the strength of broadcast journalism precisely because the radio medium, like the printed press, could secure the trust of its public through its objective styled reportages. As Virilio notes:

“A false equation of sign-reading with knowledge, and even with the whole of knowledge, gave rise to the imperialism of the fourth estate – the power, that is, of press and communications media directly involved in the atypical temporality of broadcast technology. When the press speaks of its own ‘objectivity,’ it can easily make one believe in its truthfulness. (...) We can see why journalists with their anonymous style have acquired


such immense power in every field of publishing as well as in politics at the crossroads of the media”. (1989, p. 47)

Superstudio’s choice of the radio broadcast plays precisely with the audience and its familiarity with the medium. Superstudio succeeds in subverting the familiar radio broadcast by producing a counter-broadcast precisely by exploiting conventional audio tropes. Radio, more so than the visual image, or even the moving visual image, succeeds in engaging the listeners more directly and more viscerally. The 12 individual urban parables, interpreted as a sequence of audio tales, effectively reach deep into the human consciousness, toying with sentiments of complacency and revulsion as no other medium could do. Each of the audio broadcasts gradually intensifies towards an almost unbearable crescendo, as the stories drag the listener along into these incredulous worlds. The listener becomes emotionally complicit in this process, as he or she is drawn deeper into seductive scenarios, not unlike the way radio advertising brandishes its miraculous products for the public’s desire and consumption.

Rudolf Arnheim, one of the early media theorists who wrote about radio while residing in Italy then under Fascist rule, recognized that radio transmissions could, more than other media, reproduce an unquestionable sense of true reality:

“The radio reporters were the ones who familiarized the listeners to these improvisations and to permit the experiment in the advantages and disadvantages of this procedure. The good radio reporter has to have

a presence of spirit, sensibility and mastery over the language not only pleasingly articulated, but so vivid and picturesque as to give the listener the impression that he himself is living those events". (1997, pp. 159-60)

Ultimately a person visiting the Mana gallery in Rome back in 1971, with portable transistor radio in hand, could choose to join the sideshow and watch the flutter of images across the walls. Or he or she could wander about oblivious to the surroundings. What is certain however is that architecture, when built on the strength of its storylines, can communicate far more complex attitudes about who we are, about our gut fears and reactions, and about our sense of place in time and space. Architecture as such can be more than a mechanical instrument; it can evoke much more rich and emotionally penetrating sentiments. According to *Superstudio*, architecture "broadcast" breaks with architectural conventions by conjuring far more complex and nuanced realities, evoking both visions of prosperity and social breakdown. The making of the "12 Ideal Cities" is all the more brilliant an achievement because *Superstudio* recognized the necessity to experiment directly with the means of transmission, in the process bending the rules of the game, tinkering once again the codes of the profession. 

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NOTES

(1) A sample of the captions for "Journey into the Realm of Reason", a storyboard published in *Domus* n.° 479 (1969): 1. "A map for easy orientation;" 2. "Weather report at departure with several easily forecast miracles;" 14. "An airplane journey with a dangerous landing between the pillars of wisdom" (translation by the author).

(2) This publication date, it is important to remind readers, preceded Italo Calvino's far more widely known but strangely parallel *Invisible Cities* that would be first published in Italian in 1972, and in English only in 1974.

(3) Roberto Gargiani and Beatrice Lampariello have also linked "12 Ideal Cities" to another project announced by Alessandro Mendini in *Casabella* in their October 1971 issue, "*La citta' come ambiente significante*". Here, Rem Koolhaas submitted "The Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture" (Gargiani & Lampariello, 2010, p. 97).

(4) The taped readings were made by the group Ouroboros directed by Pier'Alli and voices by La Bartolomei, Vittoria Damiani, Graziani Ricetti and Pier'Alli.

(5) Though all works were signed in common as *Superstudio*, Cristiano Toraldo di Francia was largely responsible for drawing the axonometrics, Gian Piero Frassinelli created the airbrushed collage renderings and Adolfo Natalini the hand drawings and storyboards. Alessandro Poli, a member of *Superstudio* from 1970 to 1972, helped produce the films made in that period.

(6) Two versions of the audio-slide presentation have been restored: an original English audio version, screened for the Storefront for Art and Architecture exhibition in New York in Fall of 2003, produced as part of the *Superstudio: Life Without Objects* exhibition (Peter Lang and William Menking curators, audio performance directed by Michael Greenwald Texas A&M and recorded by Benjamin Frassinelli) and an Italian language version using original recordings made by Ouroboros in 1972 for the Schema Gallery Florence and produced by Benedicte Le Pimpek in 2012.

(7) "The War of the Worlds" is an episode of the American radio drama anthology series *The Mercury Theatre* on the

Air. It was aired over the Columbia Broadcasting System radio network. Directed and narrated by actor and future filmmaker Orson Welles, the episode was an adaptation of H. G. Wells's novel *The War of the Worlds* (1898). It became famous for causing mass panic, although the extent of this panic is debated (source: en.wikipedia.org).