SOMETHING IS MISSING

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World War II was over in 1945, leaving in its wake millions of dead and a swathe of destruction that had literally reduced the cities of Germany to ashes and deeply wounded the rest of Europe. Auschwitz and Hiroshima seemed to have obliterated the optimistic idea of progress and emancipation that had been a feature of the entire history of the modern era and its ideologies, whether those that had entrusted the market and technology with the task of producing growing wealth, or the ones that had dreamed of a world freed from capitalistic exploitation and inhabited by equals.

The Cold War opened a deep rift between East and West, dividing passions, expectations and models of reference.

The figurative arts and architectural culture of Europe were equally troubled by questions and doubts: whether it was possible—and legitimate—simply to set out again on the same course that had been interrupted first by the turn to authoritarianism and the "return to order" of the 1930s and then, tragically, by worldwide war, the Holocaust, and the atomic bomb.

If it were possible to retie the broken thread, recovering the essence of the research carried out by the artistic and architectural avant-gardes at the beginning of the twentieth century. If it were still legitimate to revive the hopes of cultural and social emancipation that modern architecture had held up; the aspiration to reform the daily life of cities and people and to heal the wounds and conflicts that industrial society had produced over the course of its history; the dream of a new architecture of the machine age that would overcome boundaries and traditions to become global and unitary expression of the world.

Or whether, instead, the ruins of the war did not bring into question the entire legacy of the modern, did not make it necessary to face up to the possibility that the modern itself bore part of the responsibility for the disastrous course of history: that the very pact signed between art and industry had contributed to raising the "storms of steel" extolled by the German writer Ernst Jünger; that it had been precisely the rationality of technology that had produced the implacable machinery of death of the war.

Whether, finally, the modern tradition, its destructive and innovatory impetus, its ambition to turn its back on history so as to create new global and all-embracing systems from scratch, were still capable of interpreting the destiny of humanity and the meaning of history. The twentieth century truly appeared, as Pier Vittorio Aureli has written, to be "the cursed century of all-encompassing projects, of reckless political actions, of irreversible decisions."

The result was a rejection of the autonomy of architectural knowledge and authority that had been at the root of the modernistic plan of hegemony and a cleansing immersion in the pulsating plurality of the manifestations of contemporary society. The by now centuries-old dichotomy between technology and culture, architecture's long and fruitless effort to take control of the mechanistic universe, looked like it might end in the pure and simple recognition of the essential identity of architecture, art, technology, science, and society. The dream of controlling the processes of reform of modern society was transformed into a recognition of the multiplicity of the manifestations of mass society. The three-dimensional structure of DNA, the metal shells of the car and the airplane, the new science of cybernetics, the fantastic world of cartoons and the cinema, the humble materials of spontaneous architecture, the often trivial messages of advertising, the dreams and aspirations of ordinary people, even the unknown depths of the human psyche: these became the "as found" materials, derived simply from observation of the contemporary world, of the experimentation carried out by young European architects in the 1950s, such as Alison and Peter Smithson in Britain, Aldo van Eyck and Jaap Bakema in the Netherlands, Candilis, Josic, and Woods in France, and Giancarlo De Carlo in Italy.

By the end of that decade, the reconstruction of Europe could be considered complete. In Italy, the economic miracle filled people's homes with household appliances and the roads with small cars. The same thing happened in other European countries as well.

The world of everyday life seemed to be changing so rapidly that its forms were growing inexorably out of date.

Paradoxically, the notion of utopia that seemed to have been permanently discredited by the modern tradition came back into vogue. Its history, the history of the dreams and experiments of Owen, Fourier, and Cabet had proven to be a succession of failures, overcome each time and then thwarted again by the real transformations of contemporary society.

How, then, could the idea of utopia be reformulated in the mid-1950s?

It seemed possible to find the points of departure in a new synthesis between science, technology, and artistic practices, at whose centre was placed humanity with its needs and its desires. This synthesis could not really be conceived as a fusion of areas of knowledge and history now irreparably divided. Rather, it was seen as a system of relations, as a sort of network.

This had been brilliantly formulated by László Moholy-Nagy in his last book, *Vision in Motion*, published in 1949, just after the premature death of its author. Here Moholy had spoken of design as a process capable of seeing the things and forms of the world no longer in isolation, but in relationship with one another: as an instrument of understanding and not of representation or form.

And this had set in motion a chain of ideas whose focus soon shifted from Chicago to Harvard, thanks to the teaching of György Kepes, Moholy-Nagy's most successful pupil, before encountering Kevin Lynch and his effort to represent the city no longer as a material artifact but as a space traversed by the flows and gazes of its inhabitants, as well as the composer John Cage, who had explained to Lynch his experimental attempts to represent time—rather than the sequence of individual notes—in music. It had then encountered the dancer Anna Halprin and the possibility of conceiving choreographic action as a process in space, and her husband, the landscape architect Lawrence Halprin, who had embarked on a series of experiments with a notation of the landscape that closely resembled choreographic notation, as if gardens, with the passing of time and the change of seasons, also gave rise to a dynamic process and not a static form. This same context would also see the birth of Nicholas Negroponte's Media Lab and the research into "design methodology" carried out by Christopher Alexander, with whom, not coincidentally, Yona Friedman was to collaborate on the realization of his *Flatwriter*. This was a

device intended to allow inhabitants to independently determine the layout of their homes, rendering superfluous the role of mediation traditionally entrusted to the architect.
In a way, to conclude, the very notion of entropy applied by Robert Smithson to his artistic experiments in the 1960s seems to have introduced time and its transformative action into contemporary practices of art.
The great protagonist of this conception, which we would like to call "topological," was the city. It could now be described not as a static block of buildings, carved up by the layouts of streets, squares, and gardens, but as a network of connections and junctions through which flowed the fluids that allowed it to function—"*Eau et gaz à tous les étages*"!—as well as the traffic, the information, the energy, the very life of its inhabitants.
The parallels with recent scientific discoveries, especially in genetics and physics, are evident: the city looked like an organism, permeated by flows of energy and organized into patterns far more complex than the orthogonal grids and cubic volumes of the "functionalist" tradition. Diagrams—whose origin lay in the exact sciences—were used to describe the relations between the city, the territory, and its inhabitants (and thus between incoherent elements), as in the *Scale of Association* diagram of the Doorn Manifesto to which the young members of Team 10 had entrusted the task of dismantling the mechanical schematism of the subdivision of urban functions into housing, work, and leisure proposed by the Athens Charter. Clusters and three-dimensional grids characterized the urban projects of the Smithsons for the Hauptstadt Berlin Competition or those of Candilis-Josic-Woods for the large city extension of Toulouse-Le Mirail.
Crucial to these interests and these intentions was the "apolitical" approach and underlying faith in the virtuous nature of technological progress that characterized them. And the conviction that, in order to reach the goals they had set themselves, it would be essential to make use of all the means of expression at their disposal, in the perspective of the "synthesis of the arts" that, already during the war years, had prompted artists like Ferdinand Léger, architects like José Luis Sert and the critic Sigfried Giedion to identify in a democratic monumentality, created out of a fusion of architecture, painting, and sculpture, the possibility of giving concrete form to modern cities that would finally be an expression of a new humanism produced by the horrors of the war.
So there is an evident "conceptual" continuity between the practices of the European neo-avant-gardes during the 1950s and the more extreme utopian experiments carried out by the "visionaries of architecture" in the 1960s.
In this sense, Cedric Price's design for the Fun Palace in London at the beginning of the 1960s, a project conceived with the firm intention of being realistic and feasible, summed up the complexity of the themes tackled by the most ardent "visionaries" of those years. The use for which it was intended expressed the idea of leisure in a wholly original way, combining explicitly playful activities with the production and consumption of culture—whether "high" or "low"—and with popular forms of permanent education. The construction that was to house these continually changing activities was conceived as a "formless" structure—a three-dimensional metal grid—whose material components were designed to wear out rapidly and be replaced periodically with new ones, keeping pace with technological advances and with changes in functions and needs. And the new science of cybernetics was prophetically—relying as it did on a group of young scientists who were going to have an enormous influence on the future of the discipline—destined to control this continuous flow of mutable functions, huge masses of users, and shifting materiality.
The multiform concept of space was to prove crucial to the interpretation of the philosophical and experimental culture of the 1950s and 1960s in Europe. Philosophers like Bachelard and Merleau-Ponty would speak of phenomenological space; Lefebvre, Debord, and Baudrillard turned their attention to the space of ideology; Roland Barthes wrote about the semiotic space in which signs and meanings were mixed up; Foucault, Deleuze, and Guattari focused on the space of the systems of power. Space, to quote from Lefebvre's *Production of Space*, was fated to turn into a multitude of spaces, "each one piled upon, or perhaps contained within, the next: geographical, economic, demographic, sociological, ecological, political, commercial, national, continental, global. Not to mention nature's (physical) space, the space of (energy) flows, and so on." It was, to cite Henri Van Lier (but Moholy-Nagy had already said exactly the same thing!), "a substance made of pure relationships of actions."
Reading these texts avidly, the young American conceptual artists—from Smithson to Graham, Flavin to Judd and Matta-Clark—experimented with the idea of an entropic space in which art found a new home, outside the galleries and museums and at last closer to the course of everyday life.
In 1965, in Paris, the critic Michel Ragon founded the GIAP (Groupe International d'Architecture Prospective), seeking to bring order to the varied and confused panorama of those artists and architects who had made the imminent future the target of their design.
The subject of this research was the city: a landscape controlled by a network of "synergic machines" that wiped out the traditional distinctions between town and country, and whose physiognomy seemed to be organized as a "labyrinth," in the same way as those landscapes traversed by the psychogeographic strolls and *détournements* of the situationists. And not unlike the discontinuous routes with no recognizable destinations of the New Babylon on which Constant Nieuwenhuis was already working towards the end of the 1950s.
It is not easy today to reconstruct the complex geography—and chronology—of the protagonists and the products of the authors of diverse stories of future cities, that, as Mark Wigley has observed, tried to offer "a visible aesthetics for the invisible net." Someone who has made a successful attempt to do so is a young American researcher, Larry Busbea, in his book *Topologies: The Urban Utopia in France 1960–1970*, published in 2007. Paul Maymont designed large mushroom-shaped buildings standing on floating platforms, with the floors suspended from a soaring central core; Walter Jonas, monumental towers in the shape of upside-down cones isolated from one another. The Germans Eckhard Schulze-Fielitz and Frei Otto—both engineers of great technical

ability—designed "spatial cities" suspended from complex three-dimensional structures, which were not all that different from the city hall for Philadelphia on which Louis Kahn had worked between 1952 and 1957; while the Greek Iannis Xenakis, after his collaboration with Le Corbusier on the occasion of the Brussels Expo and his experiments in the field of stochastic music, came up with designs for "cosmic cities" in the form of truncated cones. In 1961, with the help of Claude Parent, Yves Klein imagined structures protected by roofs of "air" and walls of "fire" in which the occupants, who no longer had any need to wear clothes, could devote themselves to activities of play and pleasure, just as had been promised to the fortunate future inhabitants of Constant's New Babylon, Ionel Schein's plastic holiday homes for hommes *détachés* (1956) or Nicolas Schöffer's "cybernetic city."

Of all these themes, the most persistent and, at least on the plane of a critical interpretation of the real processes underway, the most substantial concerned the "mobility" and the "transformability" of the urban environment.

And they were the very ones on which focused the GEAM (Groupe d'Etude Architecture Mobile), set up by Yona Friedman in 1958, on the ruins of that center of "modernist" thinking that had been the CIAM, which Friedman had attended in Dubrovnik two years earlier, in 1956.

There's no need, at this point, to dwell too long on Friedman. It will suffice to underline two aspects: the delicacy of touch of his images, often set literally against the background of the skylines of existing big cities. And the vagueness of the formal solutions adopted—reduced for the most part to abstract three-dimensional grids in which were set the low-cost prefabricated cells, intended for different functions—almost as if to suggest the possibility for the inhabitants of participating personally in the architectural definition of the spaces in which they would live.

This is a crucial aspect of Friedman's thinking: the elimination of the architect's responsibility for the definition of the form of the urban setting and the reduction/transformation of his functions to those of designer of the general "infrastructure."

The spatial cities designed by the Franco-Hungarian architect in the late 1950s would soon be replaced by ideogrammatic representations—of a surprising simplicity—of the complex processes of transformation of the human environment and its social configurations, up until the realization in 1971 of the *Flatwriter*, developed at MIT's Medialab, which would have finally permitted anyone to design-write, creating a domestic setting suited to the particular needs of the individual.

The uncompromising and even contemptuous rejection of visionary architecture by as important a historian as Manfedo Tafuri is well-known. Utopia, for Tafuri, was nothing but romantic nostalgia: a retrogressive dream that merely reflected an inability to deal with the dramatic reality of the reduction of architecture to "ideology." The only utopia that the modern world permitted architecture was that of "form": the utopia, to be precise of "re-form," of the "possession of disorder through order." But the great mass of the metropolis was destined to absorb into itself the very form of architecture: the "object" was not just in crisis: "It has already vanished," wrote Tafuri, "from the scope of its consideration." Even the protagonists of a reaffirmed autonomy of the architectural discipline gathered around the "rational architecture" of Aldo Rossi could not help but share Tafuri's condemnation of any renascent spirit of the avant-garde in a world that did not allow anything but a search for the roots and the history of what was left of architecture. For Massimo Scolari, the Italian radical groups, whether Archizoom or Superstudio, did nothing but reduce the fascination of modern technology to the elementary storytelling of the cartoon strip and to the production of pretty but childish objects.

"Utopia as a feel-good and nostalgic version of the *belle époques* of the twentieth century . . . As renunciation of any attempt to actually change things on the basis of their concrete reality . . . As moralizing narcissism of the good intentions of progressive thought": this is the more recent verdict of two young architects like Pier Vittorio Aureli and Martino Tattara, who contrast it with the modern notion of design, its urgency, its stubborn determination to see itself realized, as opposed to the "imagination of things" to which utopia continually refers—"the opportunity for change" versus "the realm of the imaginary."

And yet.

The idea of utopia seems to have stood up to all the attempts to demolish it that have been made since the time of the German critical philosophers. To the disrepute to which it has been condemned in the history of modernity. To the defeats it has continually suffered.

During a debate with Ernst Bloch in 1964, the German philosopher Theodor W. Adorno reminded him of the banality of the fact that certain nineteenth-century utopian dreams seemed to have come true in the present: that there was now television, the possibility of traveling to other planets and moving faster than sound. "One could perhaps say in general," Adorno noted, "that the fulfillment of utopia consists largely only in a repetition of the continually same 'today'." But Bloch countered that, as Bertolt Brecht liked to say: "Something is missing." "Something is missing" signifies that humanity is aware that the world is not perfect. And that the desire to imagine its transformation and its improvement until it reaches a state of perfection is a component of our culture that cannot be removed.

Those artists who have chosen the real, brutal, and contradictory territory of the big cities as the field of their experimentation are particularly well aware of this. The city of which we are speaking is no longer really the historic one of Europe, and not even that of American suburbia. It is the explosive one of the megalopolises that are growing unchecked in Asia, Latin America, and Africa. It is the equally explosive and multiethnic one of Western cities; that of the epoch-making changes taking place in the industrial cities of socialist Europe, now abandoned by industrial activities and frantically in search of a new identity; that of the human settlements threatened by gigantic environmental risks and climate changes. The Dutch architect Rem Koolhaas has rightly pointed out the ineffectiveness of the traditional instruments of town-planning and architecture in controlling these processes. Even in interpreting their social dynamics and political complexity.

Different geographies and problems overlap in today's city. The tools used by architects no longer seem sufficient to cope with them. And the eyes of artists seem better suited to recognizing a possible order in them.
Thus the Slovenian artist Marjetica Potrč has chosen as her field of inquiry the most squalid slums and borderlands, where the population is forced to invent their own dwellings, improvising them precariously with any means and material available. Potrč seems to have learned to read the unplanned city: to recognize its character; to make small but significant interventions in it like the construction of a "dry toilet" in one of the barrios of Caracas; to document with photographs and installations the identity of precarious and unstable places that elude any traditional aesthetic consideration; to recognize unexpected similarities that render alike—and not inimical—Israel's illegal colonies in the West Bank and the devastated villages of the Palestinian refugees along the wall that dramatically separates Israel from the Palestinian territories. Potrč tries to see an order hidden behind the apparent reality of things, to explain its reasons and constituent processes, the meaning that they take on in the life of human beings, bodies, and things.
Another example, although a totally different one:
The Land, in Thailand, is a little artistic utopia of the present day. At first sight it resembles a new artists' colony, like the ones that sprouted like mushrooms and then rapidly disappeared at the beginning of the twentieth century. But it is not. It is a project launched about ten years ago by two artists, Rirkrit Tiravanija and Kamin Lertchaiprasert, who were soon joined by others. This is no commune of artists, for its permanent residents are simple farmers and a group of students from the nearby town. The task assigned to the artists is to make things, houses, and objects, so that this small community can survive. Not works of art, but things, things for eating, for producing, for cultivating. In this way small homes have been built, like those of Tiravanija and the Swede Karl Michael von Hausswolff. Biogas plants that float on water have been constructed by the Danish collective Superflex, along with environmentally friendly sanitation systems by the Dutch Atelier van Lieshout. There is also a large hall to be used for meetings of the community and to house an "animal-powered" generator that will solve the problem of lighting.
The Land exists. It exists as a collective work of art that occupies a territory worlds away from the venues of art. It utilizes architecture because it needs it. Just as it needs agriculture and energy. Like any work of art it is capable of transforming our experience of the world and life. Of giving them new meanings and assigning them new objectives. Perhaps that of finding an answer to the question about why something's still missing in this world.
Yona Friedman speaks of not dissimilar things in his book *Utopies réalisables*. For Friedman, universal utopias are "impossible" today, even dangerous. It is to their failure that should be attributed the pejorative or ironic sense in which we see it today.
And yet they can still take form, driven by dissatisfaction—Brecht's "something is missing"—and facilitated by the availability of technical solutions and the existence of a collective consensus.

The condition for their feasibility is the overcoming of their universality. The global city should be interpreted as a network of "urban villages," within which limited individual groups would embark on a search for their own utopia and "each utopia would be peculiar to a precise group": the collective invention of a coherent group that seeks a response to a particular dissatisfaction. It is no coincidence that the American philosopher Fredric Jameson has recognized just this distinctive aspect of Friedman's thinking: its plural and "liberal" character (liberty of emigration/immigration) and the cultural and political peculiarity of each enclave, to the point of making it unnecessary for them to communicate. For Jameson, Friedman's realized utopias can be thought of as "autonomous and non-communicating Utopias—which can range from wandering tribes and settled villages all the way to great city-states or regional ecologies—as so many islands: a Utopian archipelago, islands in the net, a constellation of discontinuous centres . . ."
Like Tiravanija's *Land* in a way, then. And many others, elsewhere.

Note
The ideas, insights, studies and discoveries of the young researchers who have worked with me over these years constitute an invaluable and irreplaceable source for these reflections of mine: Cristina Barbiani, Paola Nicolin, Manuel Orazi and Maddalena Scimemi, to mention just a few of them.