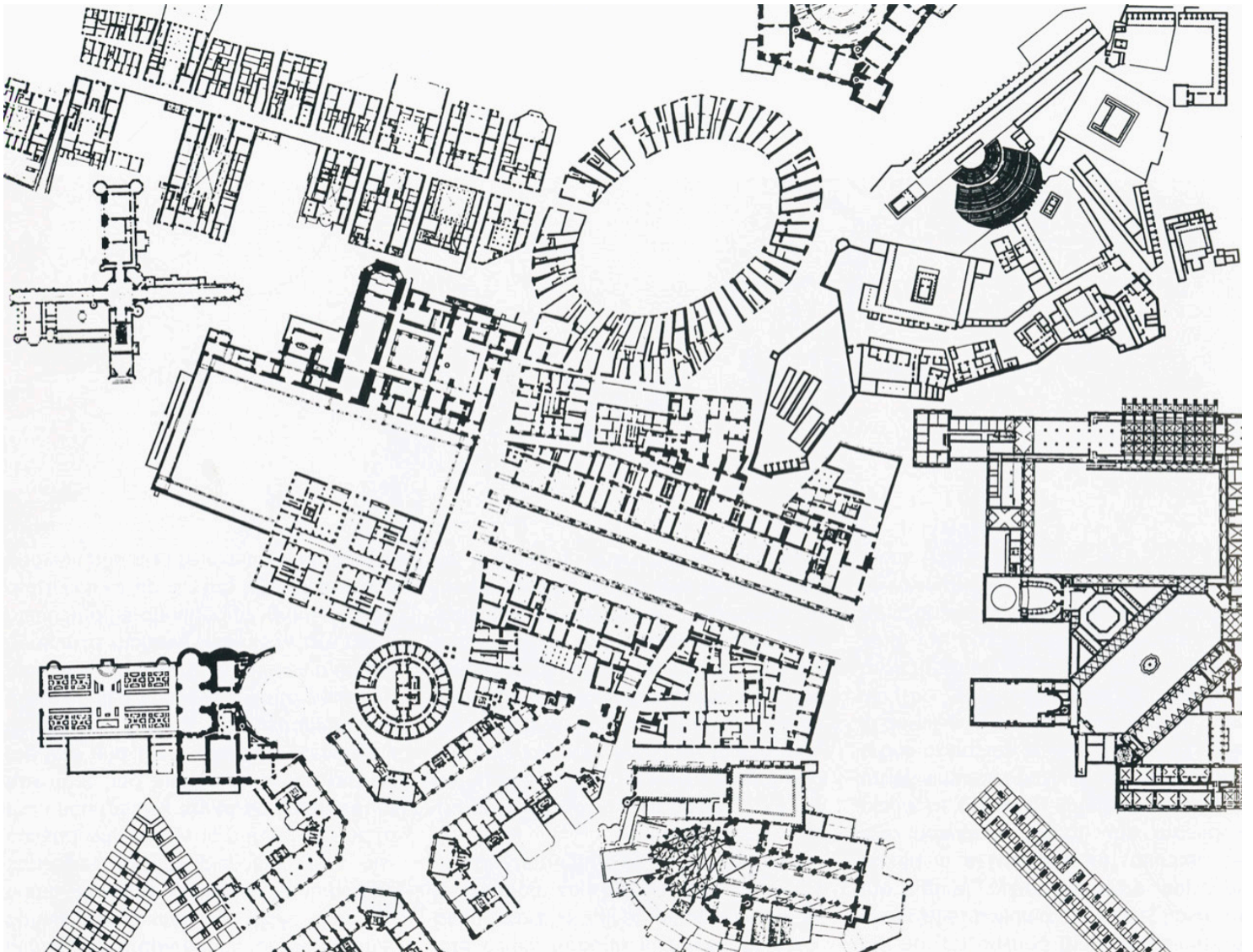


THE COMPOSITE PRESENCE OF PUBLIC SPACE
FROM THE SCENA COMICA TO COLLAGE CITY.
VIRTUAL URBAN REPRESENTATIONS AS VISUAL
DISCIPLINARY TOOLS.

by Nicola Braghieri and Filippo Cattapan



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DRAFT TEXT

Introduction

Starting from the last decades of the 14th century, the urban theme assumed increasing importance in Western art. Oscillating between reality and vision, the city becomes a metaphor for a certain way of seeing, thinking and acting in the world. From a simple decorative theme or background of human actions, the public space of the city is charged with symbolic meanings and gradually becomes an independent subject, worth being considered and represented in its own right. In the Western tradition, and in particular the Italian one, this is a long path going from Roman wall paintings to the present day, passing through Giotto's 14th-century frescoes, Piero della Francesca's perspective experiments, and Canaletto's realistic Venetian vedute.

In this vast landscape of images, techniques and modes of representation, a particularly recurring and significant theme is that of the "composite city." The composite city is a fictional city, but it is not an ideal city. Its main character is the composition of multiple fragments, more or less recognizable and varied, in perfectly verisimilar urban landscapes which however do not correspond to any existing city. The architectures that constitute the composite cities are heterogeneous not only in spatial and geographical terms, but also chronologically. They come from different cities, states and continents, but also from distant epochs. Their juxtaposition and verisimilar composition give rise to a synchronic dimension in which the linear notion of space and time is suspended. This hybrid condition is precisely virtual, as it inextricably intertwines the dimensions of the possible and the utopian, of the real and the ideal.

Due to its very multifaceted nature, the space of the composite city is a space of relations between the parts, a political space in its original etymological meaning and therefore a public space par excellence. For its own configuration, the composite city is a visual metaphor of an essentially polycentric system, open and tolerant, in which different entities coexist harmoniously thanks to a civic and urban dialogue that is realized first and foremost in an aesthetic and formal manner. In this respect, the composite city is the image of a realist utopia based on the existing city, a city that does not have to be re-found from scratch but which rather has to be pragmatically renewed from within, on the basis of what is available. This symbolic connotation of the composite city seems to persist significantly through its many migrations, from the Vitruvian comic scene and the panels of the ideal city to the Strada Novissima at the 1980 Biennale and to Rowe and Koetter's Collage City.

The composite city is thus an archetype of a universal attitude towards the city and discipline, a design approach but also a psychological disposition towards reality and the world. The thesis of this contribution is that, in the field of architecture, the images of the composite city not only had the role of urban representations but were and still are operational tools with which to think, re-think and transmit a certain disciplinary content. This production and visual communication of architectural knowledge takes place in a tacit and imaginative way, on the boundary between theory and practice, through a hybrid modality that binds them closely together. The aim of the text is to investigate the nature and the functioning of composite cities from an interdisciplinary perspective that is based on the comparative analysis of artistic imagery. A series of

pedagogical experiments carried out in recent years within the course of Vision et Utopies at the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne provided the fundamental material for an operative reflection on these visual materials.

The Emancipation of the Urban Background in 16th-Century Art and the Emergence of the Composite City

The theme of the composite city was first developed from the transformation of the urban subject in the artistic and representational tradition of the 15th century, with the gradual emancipation of architectural and urban backgrounds from the events narrated in the foreground. In terms of representation, the composite city certainly has its origins in the variety of the medieval city, an aspect which was further accentuated by the gradual definition and signification of its various architectural components. This process is triggered by the emergence and take-over of the new classical architecture in the cultural and political context of the Religious Wars, the Reformation and the Counter-Reformation.

At the beginning of the 15th century, the city represented in the background of the paintings was still an almost realistic representation of the coeval city, with the main rhetorical agency to bring the depicted religious narrations closer to the audience of the believers. In a few years, by the second half of the century, a substantial change of mentality occurs and architecture gradually assumes a new role and new meanings. In this regard, the Cycle of the True Cross by Piero della Francesca in Arezzo is

Piero della Francesca, *Ritrovamento delle tre croci e verifica della Croce, Leggende della Vera Croce*, 1452-1459, San Francesco ad Arezzo.

emblematic. In the Finding of the Three Crosses and in the Verification of the Cross, there is no more one time, one city and one architecture but at least two: the old Medieval fortified village on the hilltop and the new classical buildings on the plain. The former, depicted through an axonometric view, represents the existing city and is associated to the profane doubt, while the latter, constructed according to the rules of linear per-



Masolino, *La Guarigione dello storpio e resurrezione di Tabita*, 1424-1425, Cappella Brancacci nella chiesa di Santa Maria del Carmine a Firenze

spective, represents the city of the future and corresponds to the sacred truth of Christ. These two cities and architectures rhetorically overlap with the narration and further emphasize its content through the addition of a new temporal dialectic between past, present and future. Such a scenic and rhetorical apparatus is also present in the Flagellation of Christ, again by Piero della Francesca. The painting explicitly represents the tension between the new and the old social structures through the different architectures and the different garments of the characters. It is on the basis of this complex narrative and symbolic horizon that the urban landscape thus becomes a composite city of different architectures



Canaletto (Giovanni Antonio Canal),
*Capriccio palladiano con la Basilica di
 Vicenza e il Ponte di Rialto*, 1756-59,
 Galleria nazionale di Parma.

conveying different meanings. The first form of fragmentary composition based on simple formal variety, the one we find for example in earlier painting, in Giotto or Masolino, is thus transformed into the assemblage of a multiplicity of temporally, geographically and symbolically heteroge-

Arduino Cantafora, *Città analoga*,
 1973



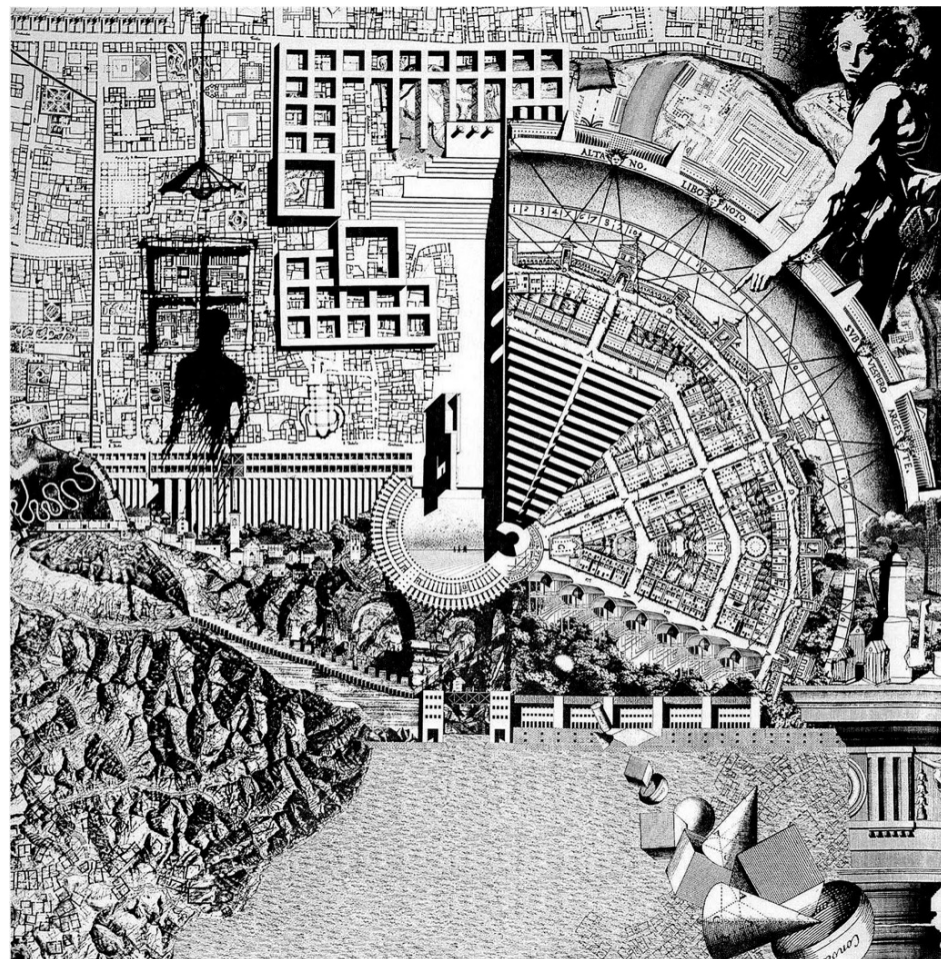
neous fragments producing a synchronic spatiotemporal dimension.

It is in this crucial passage that is possible to identify the origins of a whole series of subsequent composite representations of the landscape and the city in the centuries to come: from Capriccio paintings, such as Canaletto's *Capricci palladiani*, which arose as a counterpoint to the new hyper-realistic Venetian vedute, to Piranesi's archaeological engravings, to last century's collages and assemblages such as Aldo Rossi's *Città analoghe* (Analogous Cities).^[i] The line of continuity which links these different and distant works outlines the possible migratory route of the composite city over the centuries.

As the previous examples testify, the compositional paradigm of the composite city is not bound to the means and techniques adopted. It is first

Aldo Rossi, Fabio Reinhardt, Bruno Reichlin, *La città analoga*, Zurigo 1975

and foremost a spatial concept, a way of conceiving, seeing and visually rendering urban space. Hans Kolhoff and David Griffin's "City of Composite Presence", which opens *Collage City*, is emblematic of how the same paradigm can be equally applied in plan by means of the technique of collage.[ii] Accordingly, it is not by chance that the final commentary of *Collage City* is dedicated to the pictorial genre of the *Capriccio* and



shows the "fantastic views of the Grand Canal of Venice" by Canaletto together with the *Capriccio* of St. Paul's and a Venetian Canal by William Marlow, as well as with the *Landscape with the ashes of Phocion* collected by his window by Nicolas Poussin. They are all verisimilar pictorial compositions based on the addition of heterogeneous elements whose juxtaposition produce the crucial tension of the images.

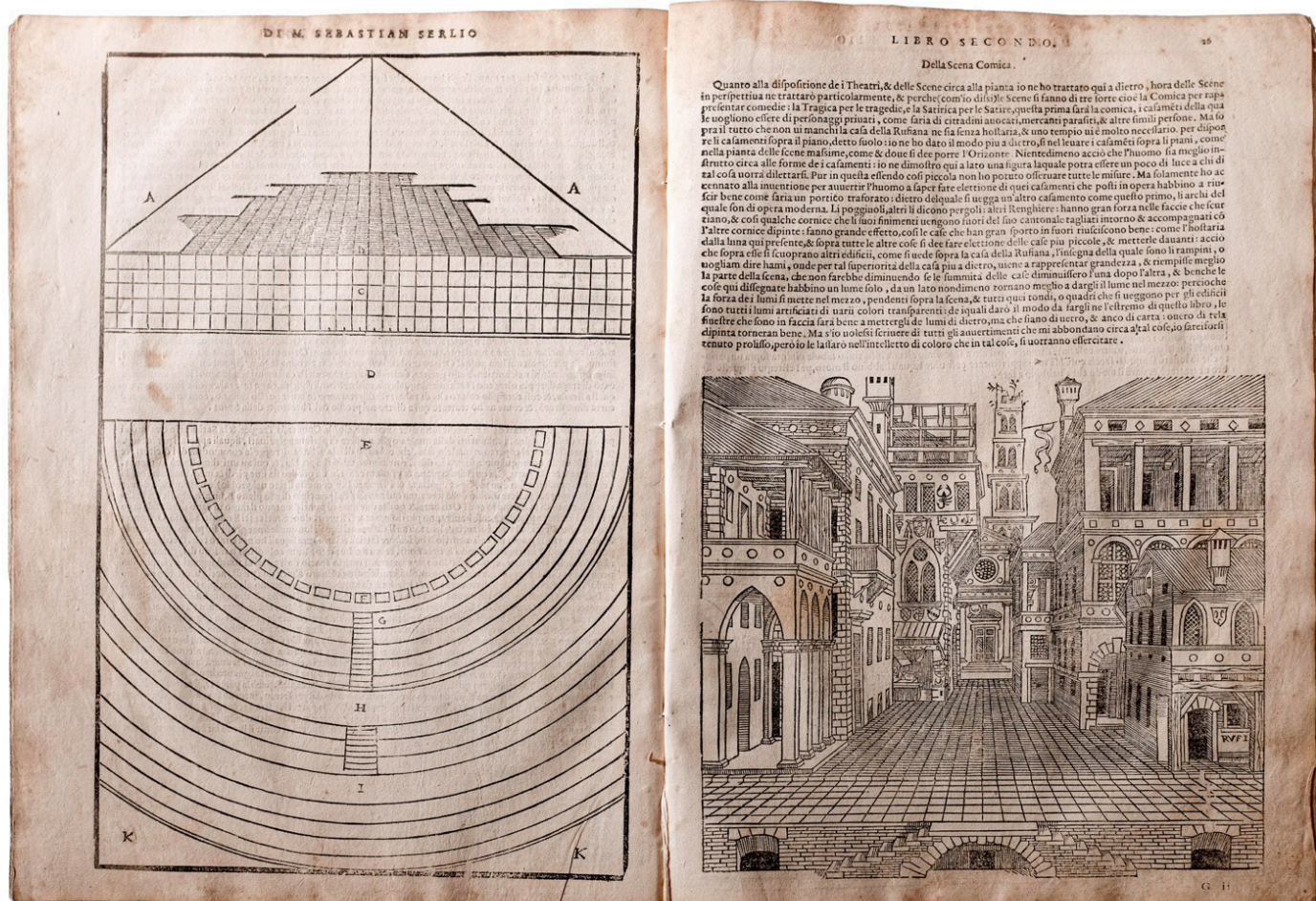
The Classical Scenes as Composite Cities

The first codified model of the composite city can be identified in the representation of Vitruvian scenes by the Italian Humanists of the 16th century. In his *De Architectura*, of which no illustrations have survived, Vitruvius describes the scenes of classical theatre in an extremely concise manner: the tragic ones are "composed of columns, frontispieces, statues and other regal objects," the comic ones "represent private houses, with menians and windows in such a way as to imitate common buildings," the satirical ones are "adorned with trees, caves, mountains and other rustic objects in imitation of the paintings of villages." [iii]

Over the course of the 16th century, architects and treatise writers such as Cesare Cesariano, Daniele Barbaro and Sebastiano Serlio retrieved Vitruvius' *De Architectura*, translated and reinterpreted it, often with a certain freedom, also thanks to the new and fundamental graphic devices they integrated and superimposed on it. Apart from corresponding to the themes of the classical genres, the three scenes represent the city of the time in its three fundamental spheres: the monumental apparatus,

Sebastiano Serlio, *della Scena Comica*,
Il secondo libro d'Architettura (1545),
 Giovanni Battista & Melchiorre Sessa,
 Venezia 1560, pagg. 24/25

the residential fabric, and the surrounding land. In the treatise by Serlio, the comic scene takes on a particular prominence. It is represented as a varied, complex and stratified urban background, made up of heterogeneous buildings of different shapes and proportions. This is exactly the prototype of the composite city that we find later variously declined in the



Sebastiano Serlio, *della Scena Tragica e della Scena Satirica*, *Il secondo libro d'Architettura* (1545), Giovanni Battista & Melchiorre Sessa, Venezia 1560, pagg. 26/27

different artistic representations of the time, from engravings to paintings and wooden inlays. Serlio introduces the three scenes in his second book on architecture, published in Paris in 1545. The volume is dedicated to perspective and scenography and follows the first book on the geometric and mathemati-

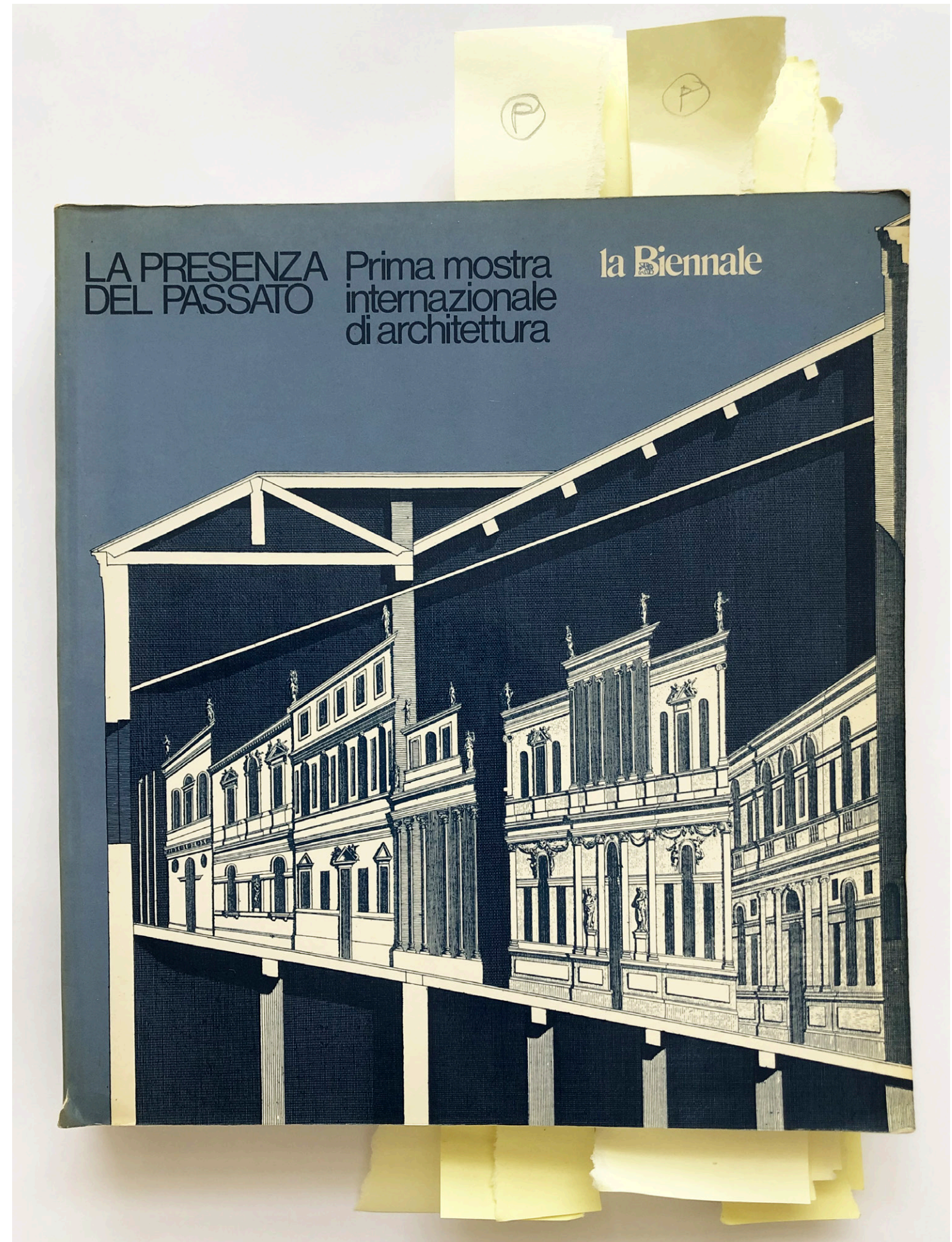


In the opposite page: F. Cellini, C. D'Amato, A. De Bonis, P. Farina (eds.), *La presenza del passato*, Prima mostra internazionale di architettura, La Biennale di Venezia 1980, Catalogue of the exhibition, Milano, 1980

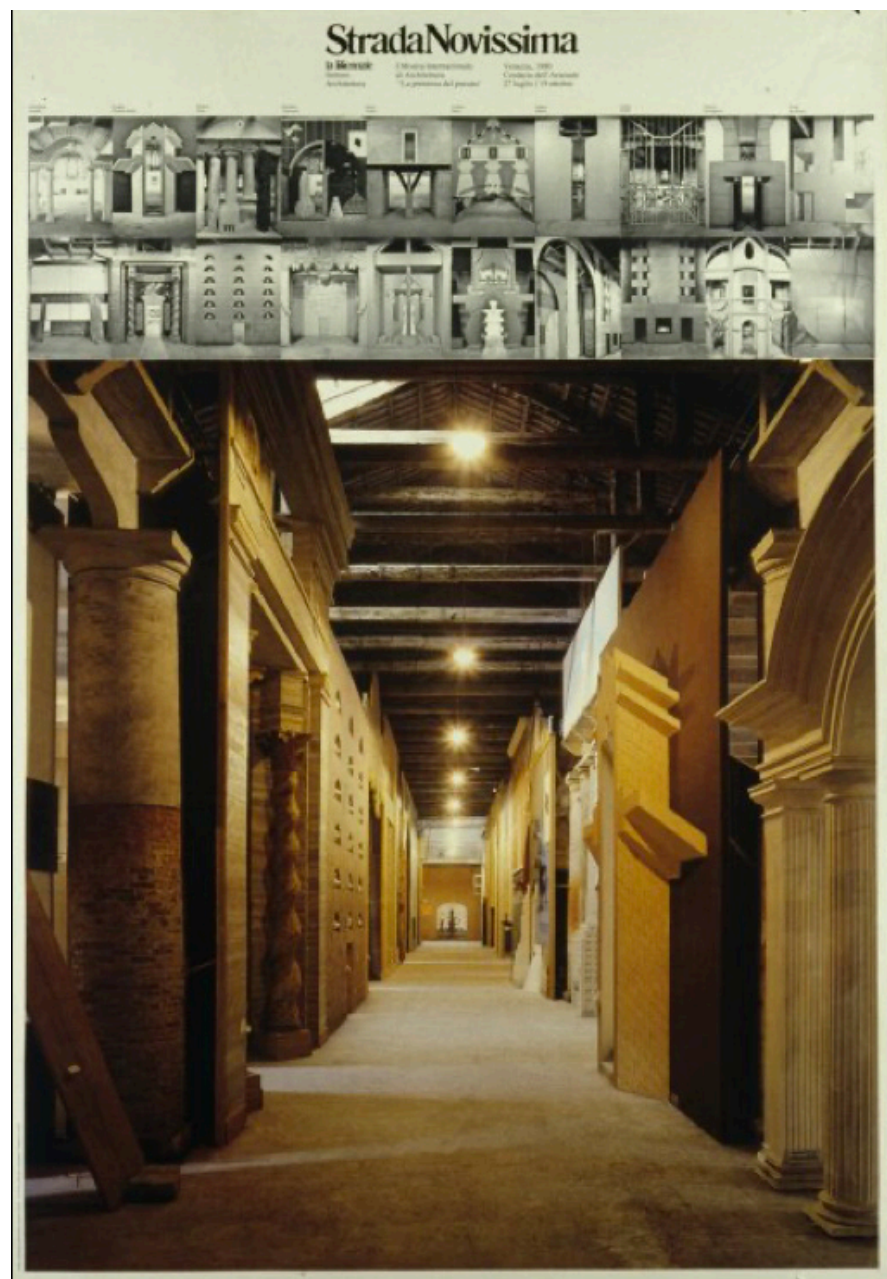
cal foundations of architecture, written during the same stay at the court of Fontainebleau. On this basis, the three scenes are presented first of all as a kind of perspective demonstration, assembling a series of previous representation exercises contained in the first part of the volume. Perspective both enables and reinforces the new urban image of order and measure which contrasts in this period with the disorder of the coeval medieval city. From the satirical scene to the tragic one, or from the complexity of nature to the perfect abstraction of classical architecture, the three scenes thus become a progressive approach towards an ideal geometric order, which was conceived as the perfect correspondence with the perspectival representation that was emerging in those years.

This sequence between the three scenes takes on a social character through the Renaissance association with the three different types of characters corresponding to the theatrical genres: “private characters, such as citizens, lawyers, merchants, parasites, and other similar people” for the comedies, “great characters [. . .] Lords, Dukes, or Great Princes, or even Kings” for the tragedies, “all those who live licentiously [. . .] vicious and ill-living men [. . .] characters, who without respect would speak, as rustic people do” [iv] for the satires. This is an aspect that Vitruvius does not mention and that is instead emphasized in 16th century treatises, in particular by Serlio.[v]

The emphasis on the character of the actors must probably be read in the light of the coeval take on Aristotle’s *Poetics*, translated and published in Venice by Giorgio Valla at the end of the 15th century. Besides introducing the fundamental concept of verisimilitude, which was to influence the art of the 16th century and of the following centuries in a decisive manner,



Strada Novissima, Biennale di
architettura di Venezia, Venezia, 1980



Aristotle emphasizes the need to establish a direct correspondence between the actors' outward appearance and their moral role in theatrical performances. The link that is thus established between the urban scene and the moral content through the theater and its actors constitutes a key step in the subsequent association of value to architecture itself, to the city and its public space, an association that is accomplished first and foremost through their representation and transposition into images.

The reactivation of classical scenes thus determines a further crucial step: with the codification of scenes in 16th century treatises, it is the compositional mode itself that is charged with symbolic meaning, no longer and not only the individual parts as it had been in Piero della Francesca. The metaphorical horizon of the composition definitively separates from that of the narratives. Together with the city, it becomes the true and sole subject of the representation.

In the last century, the design of the corderie of the Arsenale at the first Venice Architecture Biennale in 1980 curated by Paolo Portoghesi, the *Strada Novissima*, clearly shows the return to a "scenographic" type of thinking, which in turn brings back a vast corresponding imagery, including the scene of the Teatro Olimpico in Vicenza and the Venetian Theatre of the World, both by Vincenzo Scamozzi, re-emerging in the publications and in the names of the installations. The sequential assembly of the different facades of the Street corresponds perfectly to the three-dimensional structure of a composite city. The layout of the photographic campaign of the time, as well as the same scenographic representation by Dennis Crompton, the "Fourth Serlian Scene," further confirm the evidence of such an interpretation. Significantly, not only the formal

structure of the composition seems to be conveyed through the images, but also their ideological content, the way of conceiving the urban fact that remains intrinsically linked to them. With the recovery of 16th-century scenography, an open and anti-dogmatic way of conceiving the city re-emerges, which is based on the observation and re-elaboration of the existing and which is clearly opposed to the previous modern town planning.

Ideal Panels as Rhetorical Devices

As it is clear in the same conception of the three Serlian scenes, in the context of 15th-century Florence, the perspectival representation of space arises as a rhetorical device for the affirmation of an overall aesthetic principle, which is not only formal but also moral and cultural, religious and political. As it is highlighted by Richard Krautheimer, this is a consistent step in the process of emancipation of the architectural background from the narration, leading directly to the conception of the three ideal panels of Urbino, Berlin and Baltimore: perfectly ordered urban depictions structurally conceived through the tool of perspectival representation.[vi] In relation to them, Giulio Carlo Argan states that their same hypothesis implies the assumption that the city is representative of concepts and values, and that the urban order not only reflects the social order, but also the metaphysical or divine mission of the urban institution.[vii] As Hanno-Walther Kruft pointed out in the wake of Jacob Burckhardt, the 16th-century idea of the city and of the state were sub-

Dennis Crompton, *Under the Shadow of Serlio*, London, 1982





Unknown artist, *veduta di Città Ideale*, 1480-1490 ca., Palazzo Ducale di Urbino

stantially related, almost interchangeable, and it was natural to see the city as a concrete expression of its governance.[viii] Kruft identified in this correspondence the profound reason why ideal cities' depictions and literary utopias were conceived almost simultaneously at this moment. Already clearly present in Ambrogio Lorenzetti's *Allegoria ed effetti del Buono e del Cattivo governo* (Allegory and Effects of Good and Bad Government) from the first half of the 14th century, the correspondence of urban representations with the underlying form of government takes on a new and decisive importance within 16th century culture. Rather than the limited horizons of many of the Italian princes of the time, the composite city becomes the representation of the ideals and ambitions of humanist intellectuals, their virtual projection in the impossibility of any concrete fulfilment.

It is interesting to mention that, in his first essay on the panels, Krautheimer advanced the hypothesis that the panels of Urbino and Baltimore were "experiments ante litteram in stage design" and respectively corresponded to the tragic and comic Vitruvian scenes. Forty years later,

Unknown artist, *The Ideal City*, 1470-1480 ca., The Walters Art Museum, Baltimore

in 1996, he withdrew his original position: "A major blunder, admittedly based on a number of misreading," confirming anyway that a substantial connection between urban representations and Renaissance scenes had to be considered.[ix] "Nonetheless—he writes—a bond exists between the panels and Renaissance stage design, despite the gap of forty years or more. To build of laths, canvas and paint on a stage a never-and-nowhere grand architectural setting is not so different from designing and painting it on a panel. Both, whether in the 15th or in the 16th century, draw on the same legacy of Humanist architecture" [x].

In this respect, Luigi Firpo describes how the transition from the communal city to the city-state involved a crucial issue of scenography. According to Firpo, urban scenography was the physical projection of coeval political aspirations, filtered through the renewed interest in "the imposing ruins of Roman public buildings." [xi] If cities concretely "stage" the





Unknown artist, *Architektonische Perspektive*, 1480-1490 ca.,
Gemäldegalerie, Berlin

aspirations and ideals of their governance, their structures are therefore allegorical forms of political attitudes, but also powerful rhetorical tools to communicate and promote their values.

The three panels of the ideal cities also seem to resemble composite cities, and they are perhaps their most precise and emblematic realization. Indeed, their relationship with the coeval urban reality has been generally underestimated. The presence of several fragments that can be identified within the coeval city of the time, as the medieval Castel Sant'Angelo in the panel of Berlin, or the Roman theatre and the Florentine Baptistery in the panel of Baltimore,[xii] shows how the cities represented are not utopian cities of foundation but precisely cities of fragments, projects for the renewal of the existing city in which new and old are harmoniously coexisting together as successive stratifications.[xiii]

To this extent, the three cities of the panels appear to be much closer to

18th-century Capriccio paintings than to ideal or utopic urban conceptions. Their character of virtual simulations is substantially based on the relationship of analogy that they establish with the real city. In this regard, the three cities can be considered perfect examples of *città analoghe* (analogous cities) in the sense that they are potential alternatives to the real one, perfectly verisimilar, whose final agency is to implicitly display the theoretical position of their authors in respect to the city. Such an alternative understanding of the panels and of their urban representations could be furthermore applied to re-evaluate their philosophical content, how their conception was effectively influenced by coeval Neoplatonic tendencies, and how it was still related to a previous Aristotelian and scholastic background.

The Composite Image of Albertian Renovatio Urbis

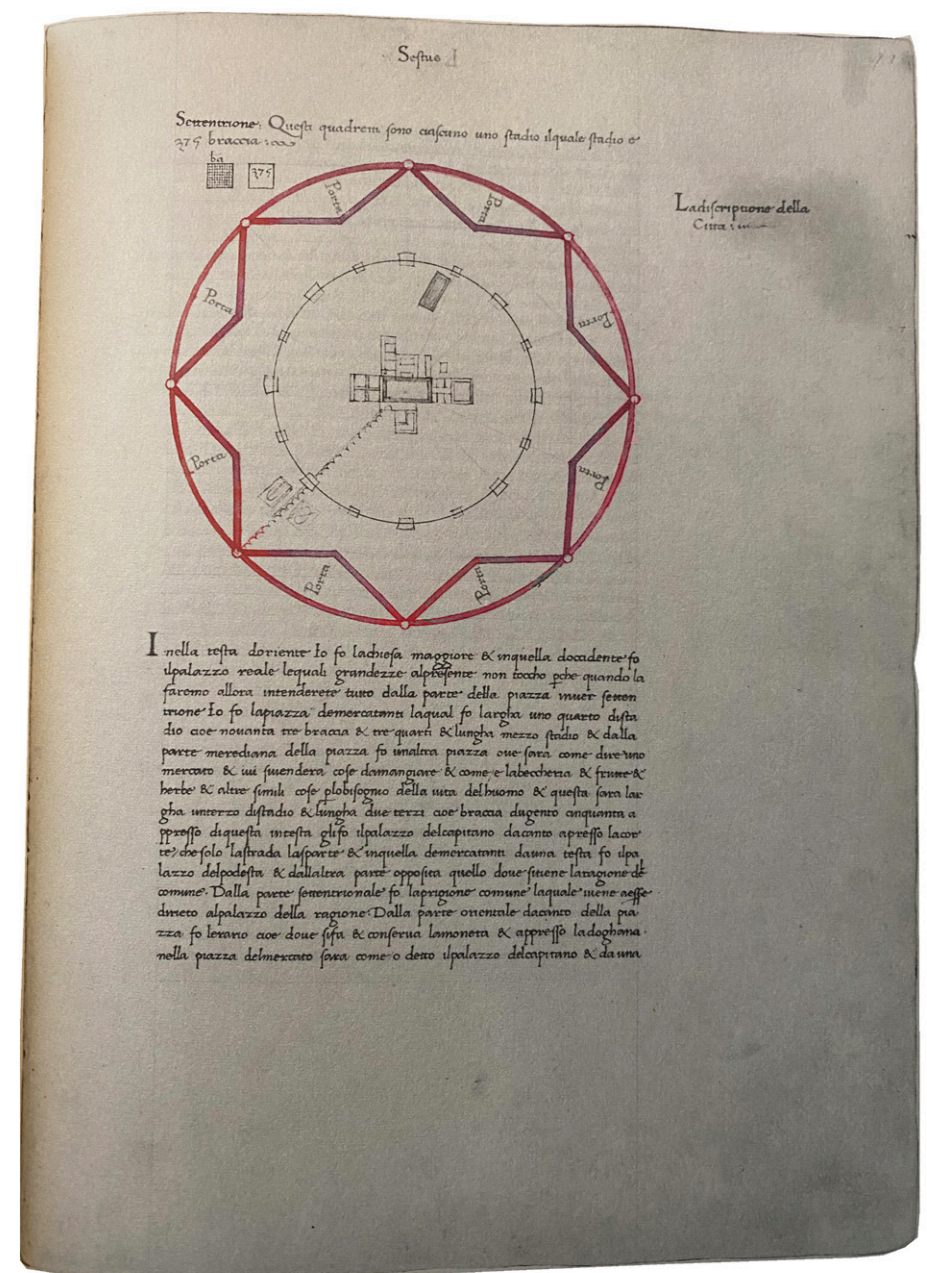
The urban approach outlined so far in relation to the composite city is exactly that of Leon Battista Alberti's *renovatio urbis*, which clearly describes the 16th century perspective towards the new, the old and the ideal. Again, it is a matter of accepting the existing city as a starting point and enhancing its positive aspects, not replacing it with a unitary geometry that is as orderly as it is indifferent to the state of things. According to Mark Jarzombek, the fascination for the classical in Alberti was no longer a linguistic issue as it was in the early Renaissance, aimed at re-defining an impossible continuity with the past by means of architecture; instead, it was an already mature feeling of nostalgia for something

that was no longer possible to reach, but only to partially, and theatrically, evoke.[xiv] Alberti therefore did not want to substitute the old city with the new; on the contrary, he wanted to further emphasize the tension between the existing Medieval city and the new additions, according to a sort of proto-romantic attitude.

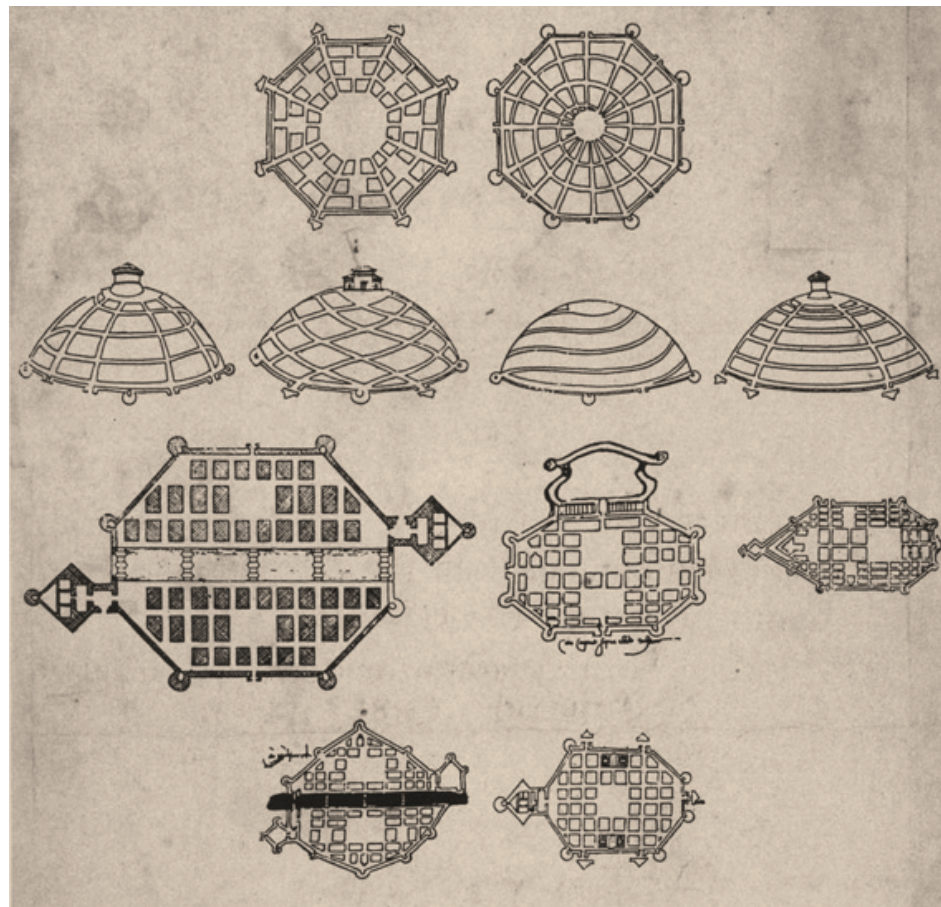
In his unfinished treatise on architecture,[xv] Filarete reflects a similar mentality in terms of design. Filarete is known to have designed what is considered to be the earliest known plan of a rational geometric city, Sforzinda. Anyway, at the center of its plan, Filarete inserted a central forum composed of existing Milanese buildings, among which we recognize also his coeval project for the Ospedale Maggiore, known as the “Ca’ Granda.” The city of Filarete was then firmly grounded into the real urban fabric of the time, within which he was envisioning the possibility of new punctual insertions. If Sforzinda corresponded then with the coeval Milan—a dense city containing at the time almost four different stratifications, from Pre-Roman time to late Medieval communal expansion—it becomes clear that the one by Filarete was precisely a project of *renovatio urbis* in the Albertian acceptance. In his translation of Vitruvius,[xvi] Cesare Cesariano makes similar use of the architectural heritage of Milan, and in particular of its Duomo, further confirming the presence of a continuous dialectical exchange between the idealized ancient, the real present, and the virtual future.

In addition to the theme of the new and of the ancient, another aspect is crucial to understanding the composite city of Filarete and of Cesariano, namely that of geometric regularity and its usual association with the notion of the ideal. The correspondence between the two terms is in

Filarete (Antonio Averlino), *Trattato di architettura*, ‘Sforzinda’, Codice Magliabechiano II-I 140 Folio 43r. e ‘Forum Contidio’, Codice Palatino,, tav. 140, 1460-1464, Biblioteca Nazionale di Firenze



Francesco di Giorgio, *Trattato di architettura civile e militare*, tardo XVI sec.



fact not to be taken for granted. Indeed, despite their first appearance, the geometric urban structures proposed by Francesco di Giorgio in his treatise are nothing else than military studies to be contextualized within the pragmatic mentality of the coeval architects.[xvii] They have indeed originated in the emergence and diffusion of the new firearms and in the consequent need of identifying new ways of defending the cities. As Hanno-Walter Kruft pointed out, regular urban structures do not have to be

necessarily considered as ideal cities. They are often very far from them. [xviii] The fact that, in his *De Re Aedificatoria*, Alberti was supporting the need of irregular urban tissues for both aesthetic and practical reasons further confirms the clear distinction between geometrical regularity and urban “ideality,” which are usually associated a priori.[xix] From this perspective, the geometrical structure of Sforzinda could be easily understood as a pragmatic addition to the coeval city, a virtual renovatio of the existing city of Milan, more than a completely new geometric plan. Firpo points out the essentially pragmatic character of Humanist architects and of their mentality:

The men of the 15th and 16th centuries, accustomed to handling a square and a plank, craftsmen who had grown by virtue of genius into the stature of artists and by the literary ambition of theorists [. . .] made an effort to read Vitruvius, not because they saw in him a swaggering and sibylline representative of the arcane wisdom of the ancients, but because they felt he was one of their own [. . .]. Certainly, when they looked at his papers, they were not intrigued by the ostentatious and artificial erudition, the peregrine Greek terminology, but by the sum total of concrete technical notions about foundations and roofs, mortar and plaster, colors and paintings, modules and styles, machines and clocks, hydraulic and warlike devices.[xx]

This aspect is particularly vivid in the representations of the three panels, in which all the details previously mentioned by Firpo are rendered

with an architectural, stylistic and constructive awareness, which is absolutely not common in the coeval artistic production.

Similarly, the first few built realizations of urban projects inspired by a Humanist agenda (Castiglione Olona, 1420-1435; Urbino, 1455-1480; Pienza, 1459-1462; and Ferrara, 1484-1510) all follow a comparable direction. They do not apply any pre-determined geometric plan, but rather consist of singularly individuated site-specific additions, which are always inserted within a pre-existing urban structure. As Bruno Zevi has demonstrated, the same project of Ferrara by Biagio Rossetti is not to be read as the strict application of abstract urban theories but, on the contrary, as the final outcome of a deep analysis of the city's Medieval structure.^[xxi] The new *addizione Erculea*, the newly designed expansion of the city, is grounded first of all on the conscious *renovatio urbis* of the previous city. In relation to this, Argan writes that the urban spatiality of Ferrara is “independent from absolute perspective premises [. . .] and is in no way homogeneous or geometrical but, on the contrary, made up of rapid, surprising transitions of sizes [. . .], deviations, multiple directions converging, diverging, crossed.”^[xxii] It is also interesting to notice that Argan identifies a substantial correspondence between this kind of urban spatiality and the one depicted by the coeval painters who were active in Ferrara at the time, such as Cosmè Tura, Francesco del Cossa and Ercole de' Roberti. This connection further confirms the fundamental comparability of the different artifacts of the time (the architectural and the pictorial), sharing the same cultural but also technical kind of background.

The Realist Utopia of the Composite City

Analyzing the rhetorical horizon of 16th-century urban representations, the role and even the possible direct influence of literary utopias cannot be overlooked. Krufft writes:

Literary utopia and descriptions of urban centers provide a conceptual image of the city. Next to this, there are visual representations of cities which can be either visualizations of abstract ideas or portraits of existing cities. This includes views of cities, ideal urban plans, sketches of unrealized architectural buildings. The reciprocal relations between the literary description of the city and its visual representation have been little investigated. Are the famous views of the “ideal cities” of Urbino, Berlin and Baltimore at the end of the 15th-century depictions of literary utopias?^[xxiii]

The mutual exchange between literary utopias, architectural theory and urban imagery seems to be crucial as much as difficult to grasp. Indeed, utopias anticipated some crucial reflections on the city and appear as key documents for investigating the disciplinary positions of the time. In *Utopia* for example, Thomas More structured a fundamental discourse on the relationship between the form of the city and the nature of its buildings, houses and monuments. This relationship is precisely that of morphology and typology, a crucial issue that had not yet emerged clearly in coeval architectural treatises, but which was later to become the focus

of disciplinary speculation for the next five hundred years.

Moreover, contrary to their status of otherness in relation to the coeval city, all the major utopian systems can only assemble known forms and figures among themselves. This is as true of More's *Utopia* as it is of Francis Bacon's *New Atlantis* and Tommaso Campanella's *Civitas Solis*. However radical their urban conceptions may be, they are always and in any case composite cities in literary form.

The rediscovery of classical scenography, the development of linear perspective, and the emergence of utopian thinking are all deeply interwoven factors which substantially contributed to the overall conception of urban space in 15th-century culture. As the main form and figure of this conception, the composite city synthetically merge these different factors in an open as much as versatile visual construction. The empty, silent gap which lies between these parallel layers of meaning is still an open field of research on which to ground a more precise understanding of the mentality that inspired their conception.

It is interesting to see how in *Collage City*, the 15th-century dialectics between the real and ideal, but also between the irregular and regular, in a way recalls the one between the "theatre of memory" and the "theatre of prophecy;" something that we see at play in the *Collage City* by Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter.[xxiv] The two different design "poetics" correspond in turn to the two main strategies which fundamentally articulated the last century's disciplinary discourse, respectively the "infill" and the "planning."

With *Collage City*, Rowe and Koetter present a sharp critique of the idea of urban utopia and of its influence on modern architecture in the first

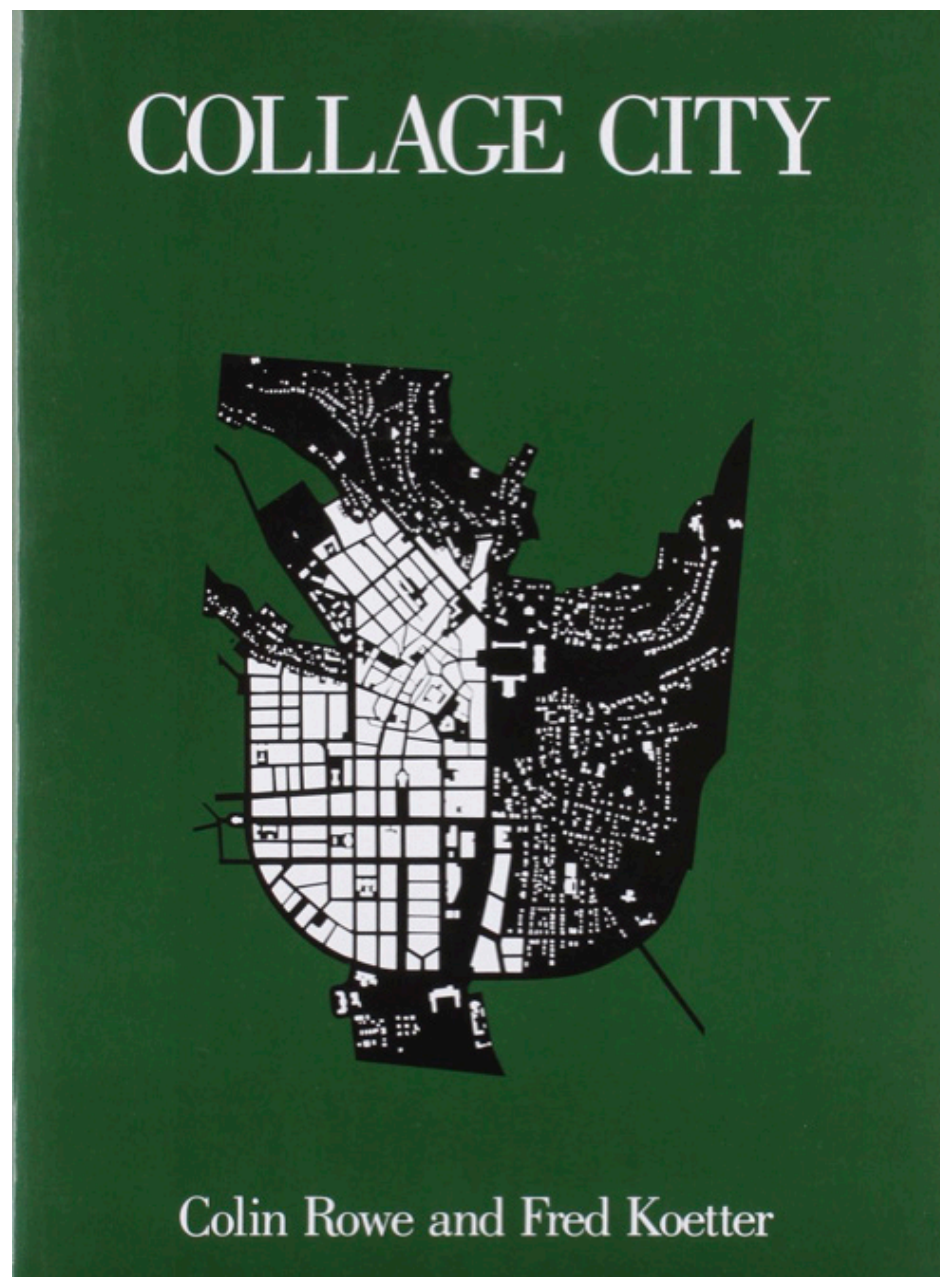


Thomas More, *Utopia*, 1516

half of the 20th century. They refer in particular to Karl Popper and his *The Open Society and its Enemies* (1945). With *Collage City*, Rowe and Koetter propose also an alternative model of city, which is represented by Kolhoff and Griffin's *City of Composite Presence*. Such a "collage city"

Colin Rowe, Fred Koetter, *Collage*

City, Boston, 1978.



substantially opposes the modernist primacy of the architectural object over the urban fabric and recovers the value of the spatial relationships between the different elements that make up the historic European city. In the tradition of the composite city, the multiplicity of fragments in the collage city is considered a spatial metaphor for an open and pluralistic view of society, a form of acceptance of the complexity of the real city rather than a heroic attempt of total reconfiguration. The collage city is anyway once again an abstract model, not so far from the ones it was supposed to oppose, a realist utopia in the form of a visual additive construction.

The Virtual Representation of the City as Knowledge Paradigm

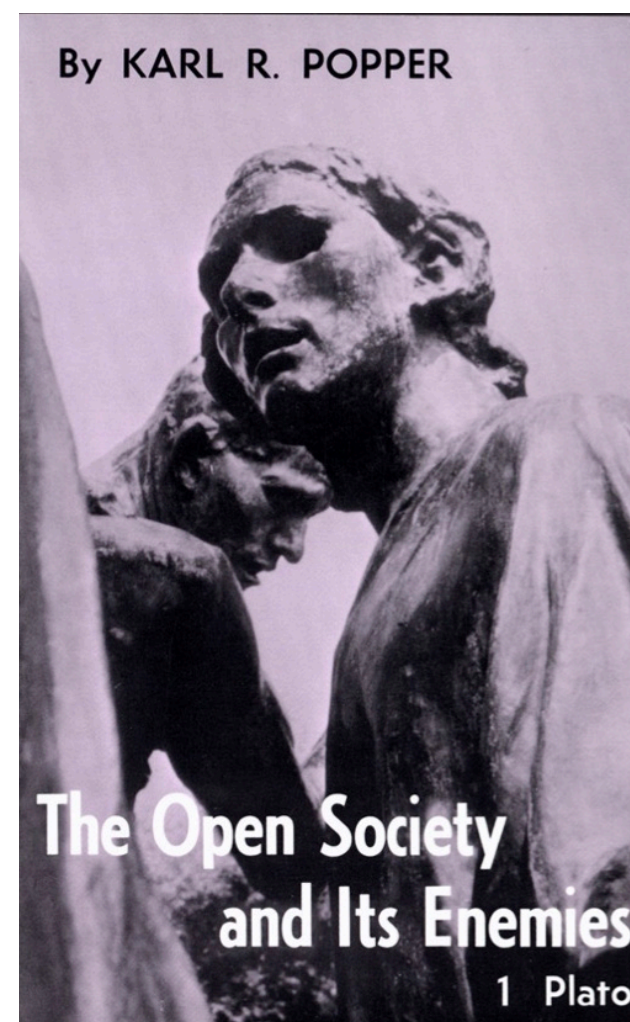
The reflections collected here are first of all the outcome of a long-standing operative engagement with the composite city within the context of the Laboratoire des Arts pour les Sciences LAPIS of the école Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne EPFL, and in particular, within the class of Visions et Utopies. In the last years, the authors worked with the students on urban visual imagery and the literary descriptions of 15th- and 16th-century utopias, in particular Utopia by Thomas More, Civitas Solis by Tommaso Campanella and New Atlantis by Francis Bacon. Each year, the students were asked to illustrate the three utopic cities by re-interpreting and re-assembling the urban depictions of the time in new meaningful compositions. The final horizon of the exercise was to operatively test the possible correspondence between images and ideas but also to un-

derstand the knowledge processes which structurally informed their mutual interaction. The visual answers that have been produced are powerful statements which silently challenge the representation of the city in multiple ways, through a continuous dialectical confrontation between thinking and doing.

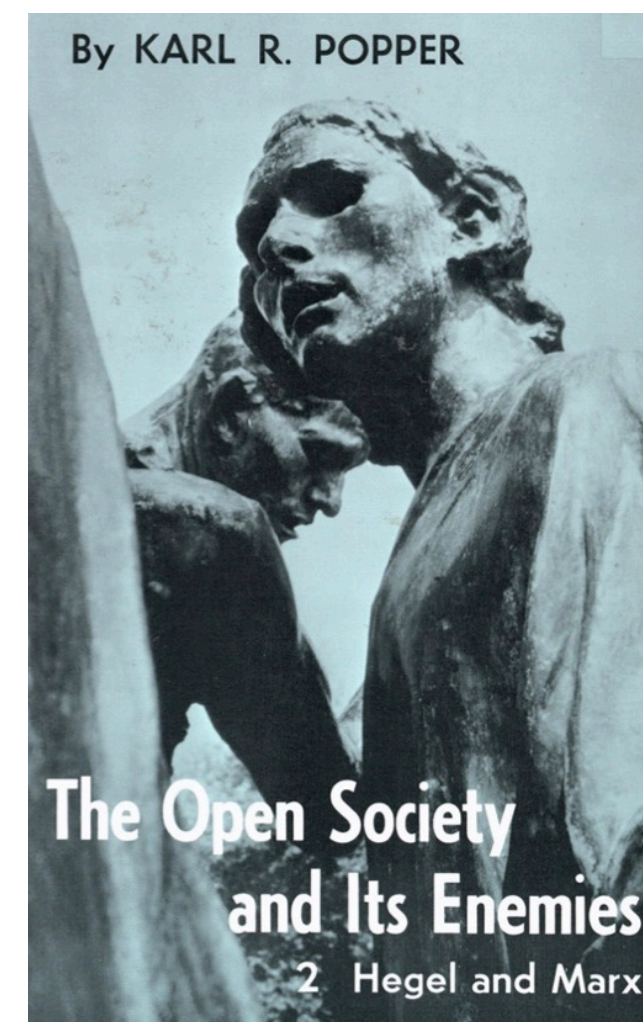
All the various declinations of the composite city oscillate between the two polarities of real and ideal, between a real context which was perceived as inadequate, but at the same time as an unavoidable physical presence; and a set of new ideal ambitions and artistic means that were still only partially impacting the final design and construction of coeval city.

In a speech and then in a text titled *Città ideale, città reale*, Argan writes: “An ideal city always exists within or below the real city, as distinct from it as is the world of thought from the world of facts.”[xxv] Argan addresses here the very nature of the relationship that the Humanist ideal city established with the real city: the ideal city requires the real city, as the world of thought requires the world of facts, yet at the same time, substantially differing from them. The Albertian concept of *Renovatio Urbis* lies similarly at their boundary.[xxvi]

To describe the crucial dialectics between these urban representations and the city of the time, some scholars have referred to it with a third term, which is virtual and more precisely renders the inner tension between the two previous ones. The notion of virtual was first proposed by Cesare De Seta, who briefly mentioned the term without further deepening its meaning and implications. [xxvii] De Seta argued that the proper name for the three panels of the “ideal cities” should have been in fact “virtual cities” because “all the buildings represented (i.e. in the three panels)



Karl Popper, *The Open Society and Its Enemies*, London, 1945.



can be realized not only in their structure and typology, but down to the smallest details of orders, capitals and ornaments.”[xxviii] Such “virtuality” is less related to the medieval etymological root of the word *virtualis* (from Latin *virtus*, from which the meaning “virtuous” stemmed,

but also the acceptance of “ideal” and “utopic”[xxix]), and more to the 15th-century use of the term (from which the common meaning of “potential” stemmed) and to its last century informatic declination (from which the most recent acceptance of “simulated” stemmed[xxx]). According to this perspective, the cities represented in the panels therefore arise more as potential cities, theoretically conceivable and technologically buildable at the time of their conception, if not for the contingent political and economic limitations. The notion of the virtual seems the most suitable to capture the essentially hybrid character of the composite city, which is never a simple description of reality nor an abstract construction of reason, but on the contrary represents a continuous tension and oscillation between the two.

Not only theme, metaphor and archetype, the virtual representation of the composite city can also be considered as a cognitive paradigm of disciplinary thought, a structurally visual paradigm founded on the mediation of images, on their collection by affinity and analogy, on their assemblage in the form of fragments. The composite city thus becomes a vector of tacit and visual knowledge capable of autonomously persisting within cultural memory, and migrating through time and space with its formal and symbolic content. The field of action of this form of visual knowledge seems to be exactly that virtual dimension in which the composite city is situated, not only therefore on the boundary between reality and ideality, but also between theory and practice: theory as collection and arrangement of visual references, practice as their multiple assemblage and composition.

Notes

[i] In this regard, it is interesting to observe that Aldo Rossi mentions Canaletto’s *Capricci palladiani* on several occasions as a direct visual and methodological reference for his work.

[ii] To apply the definition of collage to the *City of Composite Presence* is perhaps not entirely correct, as Kolhoff and Griffin’s composition assembles prints that are scaled in an almost verisimilar manner. Moreover, the use of black and white on a white background gives the final image a unitary character that does not correspond to the chromatic and material fragmentary nature commonly associated with the collage form.

[iii] Luigi Marini, *L’architettura di Vitruvio esposta in italiana favella* (Roma: Marchese Luigi Marini 1836), 201-201.

[iv] Sebastiano Serlio, *De architectura libri quinque* (Venezia: apud Franciscum de Franciscis Senensem et Joannem Criegher, 1569), 167.

[v] In this regard, it is interesting to notice how Serlio describes in detail also the arrangement of the audience on the steps of the theatre according to a precise social order. In different ways, more or less metaphorical or spatial, stage and cavea are both representations of the social order of the urban community. Actors and spectators are thus in turn inserted within a general planimetric design that echoes and represents the very geometry of the cosmos.

[vi] Krautheimer, 1996, 255.

[vii] “L’ipotesi di città ideale implica il concetto che la città è rappresentativa o visualizzante di concetti o di valori, e che l’ordine urbanistico non soltanto rispecchia l’ordine sociale, ma la ragione metafisica o divina

dell'istituzione urbana" (Giulio Carlo Argan, *Città ideale, città reale*, extract of the speech at C.I.H.A.

Comité International d'Histoire de l'Art - International Committee for Art History, Bologna, September 1979).

[viii] Krufft relates the Albertian "city as a work of art" (*De Re Aedificatoria*, Florence, 1485) to the well-known formula of the "state as a work of art" by Jacob Burckhardt (*Die Kultur der Renaissance in Italien. Ein Versuch*, Basel, 1860, first chapter). As a "work of art", the city must have been "artistically conceived" and therefore "architecturally designed."

[vix] Krautheimer, 1948 and 1996.

[x] Krautheimer, 1996, 257.

[xi] Luigi Firpo, *La città ideale del Rinascimento, Urbanistica e società* (Torino: UTET, 1975), 12.

[xii] In general, despite some quite strict affinities as the ones mentioned, we see that the buildings included in the panels are not explicitly relatable to real buildings of the time. As Krautheimer pointed out (1994, 238-39 e 255), most of the buildings could in any case be intended as historical typologies more than specific examples, e.g. the classical typologies which were recently codified by Alberti in his treatise: theaters, triumphal arches, temples, also with honorific columns and city walls, to which it is possible to add "the public buildings, ecclesiastical and secular as demanded by 15th-century architectural theory": a cathedral, a basilica, the court of law, but also the grand palaces for the heads of the civic administration and their offices, all composed around a structural set of squares and fora.

[xiii] According to the records in our possession, the possible fourth pan-

el of the series was apparently the most composite of the series. The panel was drawn on a chest of drawers and was destroyed in Berlin during World War II. Unfortunately, all that remains of this view is a catalog card with a faded black-and-white photograph.

[xiv] See: Mark Jarzombek, Leon Battista Alberti. *His Literary and Aesthetic Theories* (Cambridge and London, 1989). As John Outram pointed out in his text titled "The City of the Future" (in: *British Architecture Today. Six Protagonists*, Milan: Electa, 1991, 108) the same reconstruction of the Sant'Andrea Church in Mantova behind a street frontage of shops was aimed at further stressing the emergence of his "Roman (Humanist) Temple" from the "amorphous mass (the mud, the stone, the brick-Earth) of the Medieval city." On the basis of Jarzombek, Outram writes: "Alberti's proposal [. . .] was to construct these exemplary architectural landscapes [. . .] and then "inter" them within the mundane city by re-building the city around, and even over, the new, Humanist constructions so as to make it seem as if they had always been there." It is also interesting to mention that Outram, a few lines below, further proposes a possible reading of this design strategy as proto-picturesque, as the "happy accident" later identified by Camillo Sitte in his work on the Medieval-Humanist city (Camillo Sitte, *City Planning According to Artistic Principles*, Vienna: Phaidon, 1889). Assuming the perspective proposed by this contribution, the precise correspondences with Alberti's mentality, in the interpretations of Jarzombek but also of Portoghesi, could be additionally considered to sustain his direct involvement in the conception of the three panels.

[xv] See: Antonio di Pietro Averlino, o Averulino, called Filarete, *Trattato*

di architettura (Milan, 1460-1464).

[xvi] See: Cesare Cesariano, *Di Lucio Vitruvio Pollione de architectura libri dece traducti de latino in vulgare affigurati: commentati et con mirando ordine insigniti*, Como, 1521.

[xvii] In relation to this, see also: Martha Pollak, *Cities at War in Early Modern Europe* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2010), and Guido Beltramini, ed., *Andrea Palladio and the Architecture of Battle: With the Unpublished Edition of Polybius' Histories* (Venice: Marsilio, 2010).

[xviii] In: Hanno-Walter Kruft, *Le città utopiche. La città ideale dal XV al XVIII secolo fra utopia e realtà*, Bari: Laterza, 1990.

[xix] This passage, specifically related to the small cities, can be found in the second book of the Albertian treatise. In this regard, Paolo Portoghesi, in his introduction to the Italian translation (Leon Battista Alberti, *L'architettura*, Milan: Il Polifilo, 1966) further highlights that even in the eighth book, in which the idea of a totally rationalized urban space prevails, the role of the regular axis is nevertheless intended as a tool to contain “[. . .] the complex heterogeneity of the forces and of the interests that determine the formation of the urban fabric.” (“[. . .] la complessa eterogeneità delle forze e degli interessi che determinano la formazione del tessuto urbano.”), XX, translation from Italian by the authors.

[xx] “Ma agli uomini del Quattro e del Cinquecento, usi a maneggiar la squadra e l'archipenzolo, artigiani cresciuti per virtù di genio a statura di artisti e a velleità letteraria di teorizzatori, quegli echi dotti (i.e. l'influsso dei modelli classici sull'urbanistica cinquecentesca) dovettero suonare remoti e fiochi: forse, anzi, non li percepirono affatto. E se si

sforzarono di leggere Vitruvio, non fu perché videro in lui un rappresentante paludato e sibillino dell'arcana sapienza degli antichi, ma perché lo sentirono uno dei loro, l'illetterato ingegnere militare che aveva costruito scorpioni e balliste per gli eserciti consolari, [. . .] Certo, nel volgerne le carte, non li incuriosiva l'ostentata e posticcia erudizione, la peregrina terminologia greca, ma la somma delle nozioni tecniche concrete su fondazioni e coperture, malte e intonaci, colori e pitture, moduli e stili, macchine e orologi, congegni idraulici e guerreschi.” (Firpo, 1975, 12. Translation from Italian by the authors).

[xxi] See: Bruno Zevi, *Storia e contro storia dell'architettura in Italia* (Rome: Newton & Compton, 1997), but also Giulio Carlo Argan, *Storia dell'arte italiana*, II vol. (Florence: Sansoni, 1978).

[xxii] Argan, 1978, 307 (translation from Italian by the authors).

[xxiii] “L'utopia letteraria e la descrizione di centri urbani forniscono una immagine concettuale della città. Accanto ad essa ci sono le raffigurazioni visive di città che possono essere o visualizzazioni di idee astratte o ritratti di città esistenti. Rientrano in quest'ambito vedute di città, progetti urbanistici ideali, schizzi per edifici architettonici non realizzati. I rapporti reciproci tra la descrizione letteraria della città e la sua raffigurazione visiva sono stati poco indagati. Le famose vedute di “città ideali” a Urbino, Berlino e Baltimora della fine del Quattrocento sono forse raffigurazioni di utopie letterarie?” (Kruft, 1990, 14. Translation from Italian by the authors).

[xxiv] Colin Rowe and Fred Koetter, *Collage City* (Cambridge and London: The MIT Press, 1978).

[xxv] “Una città ideale, tuttavia, esiste sempre dentro o sotto la città

reale, distinta da essa come il mondo del pensiero da quello dei fatti” (Argan, 1979. Translation from Italian by the authors).

[xxvi] See in particular Leon Battista Alberti and his treatise *De Re Aedificatoria*, published in Florence in 1485 and recognized as the main theoretical reference of the three panels (Kimball, 1927-1928; Morolli, 1992, Krautheimer, 1996).

[xxvii] Cesare De Seta, “Ideologia e immagine della città nel Rinascimento. Città ideali, città virtuali e città reali nella seconda metà del Quattrocento,” in *La città europea. Origini, sviluppo e crisi della civiltà urbana in età moderna e contemporanea* (Milan: Rizzoli, 1996), 61-69. The chapter is in turn related to the previous studies by De Seta, published in: Cesare De Seta, Massimo Ferretti, Alberto Tenenti (with a preface by André Chastel), *Imago urbis: dalla città reale alla città ideale* (Milan: Franco Maria Ricci, 1986). De Seta mainly follows the final interpretation of Krautheimer, presented in the 1994 essay as well as in respect to the dating and attribution of the panels, which he believes were realized between 1474 and 1482, at the court of Federico da Montefeltro, with the crucial influence of Leon Battista Alberti.

[xxviii] “Perché tutti gli edifici rappresentati sono realizzabili non solo nella loro struttura e tipologia, ma fin nei minimi dettagli di ordini, capitelli e ornati” (De Seta, 1996, 63. Translation from Italian by the authors). To this extent, De Seta opposes the virtuality of the three panels to the ideality of the *Carceri* by Piranesi: “ideali perché non costruibili, proprio nel senso che da queste immagini architettoniche non si possono trarre piante, prospetti e sezioni” (“ideal because they cannot be built, in the sense that plans, elevations and sections cannot be drawn from these

architectural images”).

[xxix] The abused neologism of *utopic*, coined by Thomas More, playing on the homophony of the Greek prefixes οὐ and εὖ and thus on the ambivalence of “good-place” and “no-place.” *Utopian* refers to a form of ideality and of alterity in respect to reality. Ça va sans dire that would be interesting to notice how in the utopian literature it is constantly possible to identify an evident critical intention of producing social transformations using aspects and situations of the real and current condition.

[xxx] The etymology of the term is taken from: Charles Talbot Onions, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of English Etymology* (Oxford: Clarendon press, 1966).



Filippo Fanciotti, *Scene Utopiche*, Lausanne, 2022.