

**The Sphere and the Labyrinth**  
A Visual Approach by Carlo Menon

**MANFREDO TAFURI**  
**LA SFERA E IL LABIRINTO**

AVANGUARDIE E ARCHITETTURA  
DA PIRANESI AGLI ANNI '70



London, 1966-1975

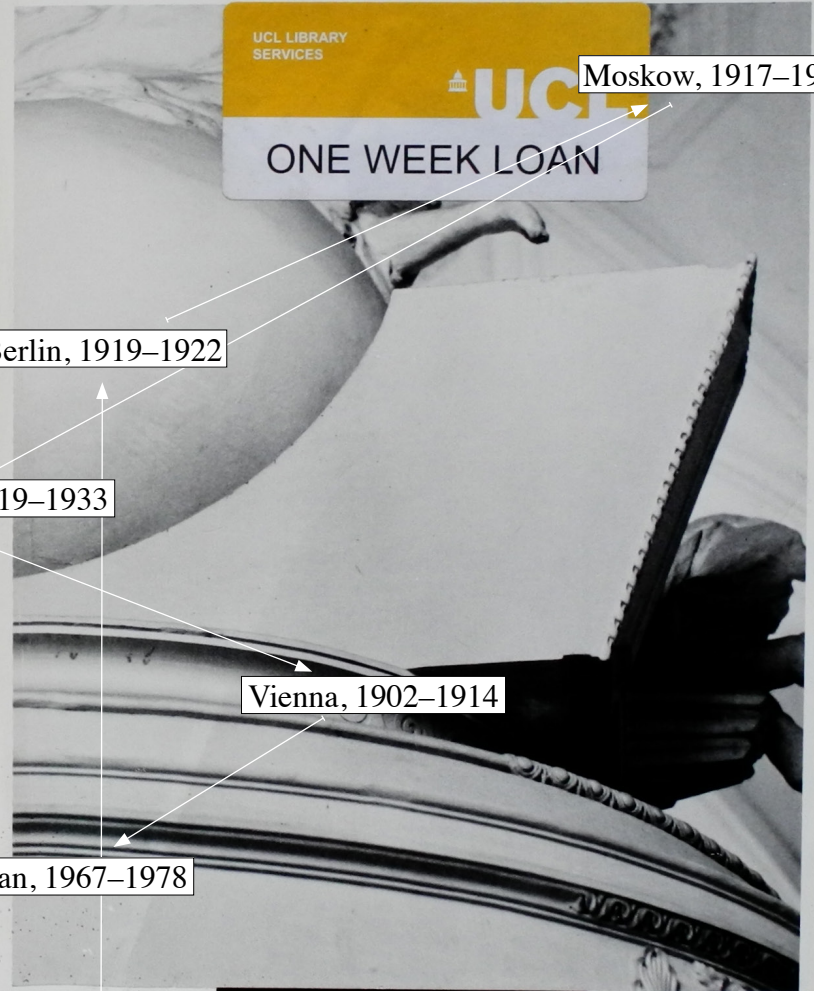
EINAUDI

New York, 1913-1930

New York, 1967-1978

**The Sphere and the Labyrinth**

Avant-Gardes and  
Architecture from Piranesi  
to the 1970s



Moskow, 1917-1928

Berlin, 1919-1922

Weimar, 1919-1933

Vienna, 1902-1914

Milan, 1967-1978

Rome, 1743-1765

**Manfredo Tafuri**

# The Sphere and the Labyrinth

Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s

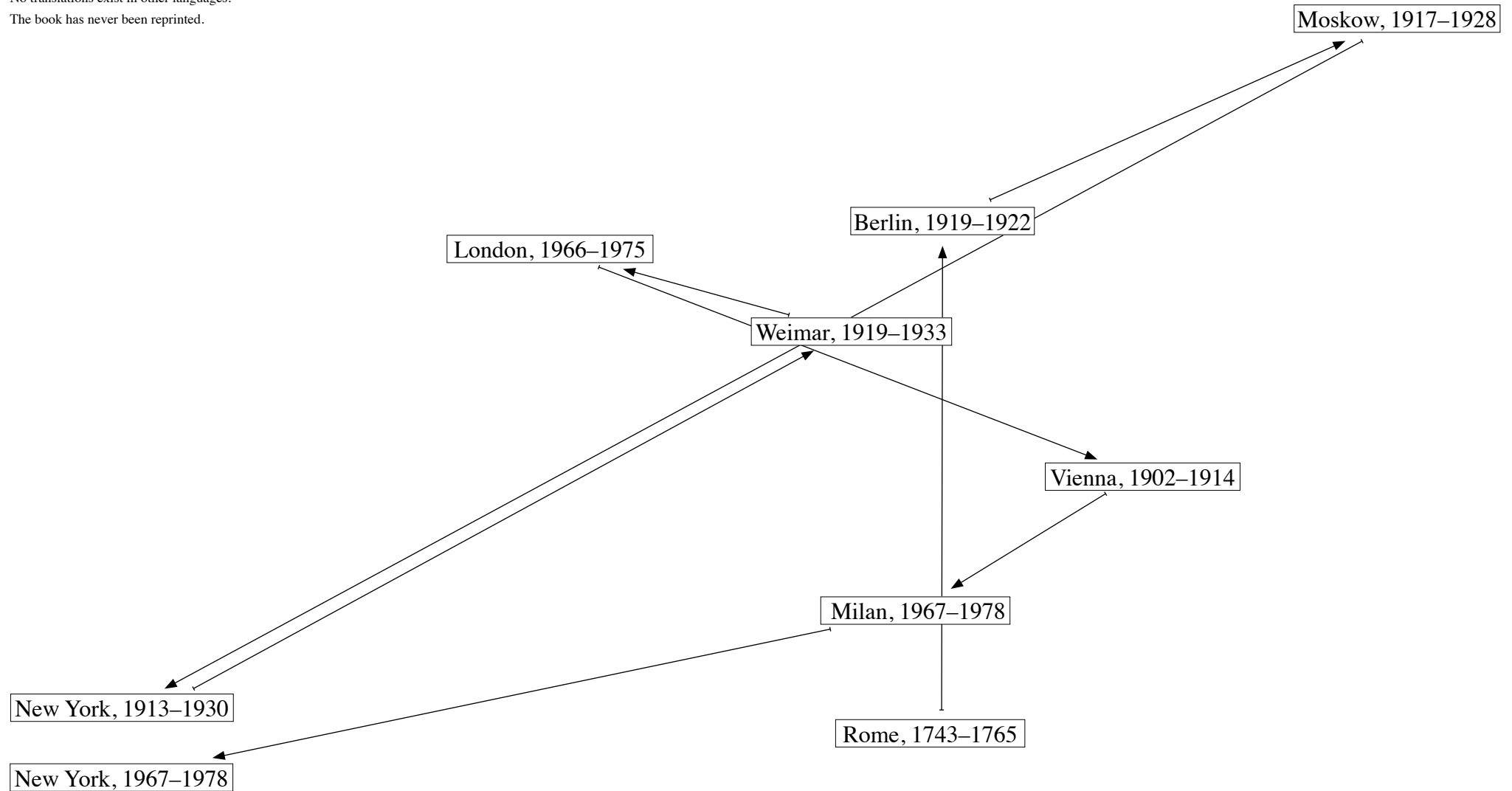
Manfredo Tafuri

Italian edition Torino: Einaudi, 1980

English translation Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1987

No translations exist in other languages.

The book has never been reprinted.





The Sphere and the Labyrinth:  
Avant-Gardes and Architecture from  
Piranesi to the 1970s

by Manfredo Tafuri

translated by Pellegrino d'Acierno and  
Robert Connolly

This major work by Manfredo Tafuri, one of today's most important theoretical historians and critics of architecture and urbanism, presents his critique of traditional approaches to historical investigation and criticism in a penetrating analysis of the avant-gardes and discourses of architecture.

Tafuri probes the lines between reality and ideology, the gap that avant-garde ideology places between its own demands and its translation into techniques, the ways in which the avant-garde reaches compromises with the world, and the conditions that permit its existence.

Interweaving intellectual models and modes of production and consumption, Tafuri constructs an elaborate network of references, comparisons, and analogies that leads to an interpretation of history as an archaeology of fragments and interpretations rather than a linear progression or compact block. In his methodological introduction, he states that the historiographic work should set into crisis not only its subjects and their plurality but also the historical project itself and the critical operations and languages of history it employs.

*The Sphere and the Labyrinth* charts an extensive itinerary from Piranesi to postmodernism. Piranesi, "the Wicked Architect," used architectural language in ways that transgressed and destroyed traditional boundaries. The avant-gardes of the twentieth century continue two major Piranesian themes, "the limit of forms and . . . the violence done to the forms themselves." Tafuri points out that what appeared to be the possibility of affecting the social and physical order through the introduction of a "poetics of transgression," as in the deployment of the metropolis as a mise-en-scene in futurist and

Part One

Prelude: "Apocalipsis cum Figuris"

1  
**"The Wicked Architect": G. B. Piranesi, Heterotopia, and the Voyage** 25

2  
**The Historicity of the Avant-Garde: Piranesi and Eisenstein** 55

*Appendix: Piranesi, or the Fluidity of Forms* by Sergei M. Eisenstein 65

**Introduction: The Historical "Project"** 1

Part Two

The Adventures of the Avant-Garde: From the Cabaret to the Metropolis

3  
**The Stage as "Virtual City": From Fuchs to the Totaltheater** 95

*Appendix: The Galoshes of Fortune* by Bruno Taut 113

4  
**U.S.S.R.-Berlin, 1922: From Populism to "Constructivist International"** 119

5  
**Toward the "Socialist City": U.S.S.R., 1917-28** 149

6  
**The New Babylon: The "Yellow Giants" and the Myth of Americanism** 171

*Appendix: A City under a Single Roof* by Raymond M. Hood 190

7  
**Sozialpolitik and the City in Weimar Germany** 197

*Appendix: The Socialization of Building Activity* by Martin Wagner 234

Contents

Part Three

The Glass Bead Game

8  
**"L'architecture dans le boudoir"** 267

9  
**The Ashes of Jefferson** 291

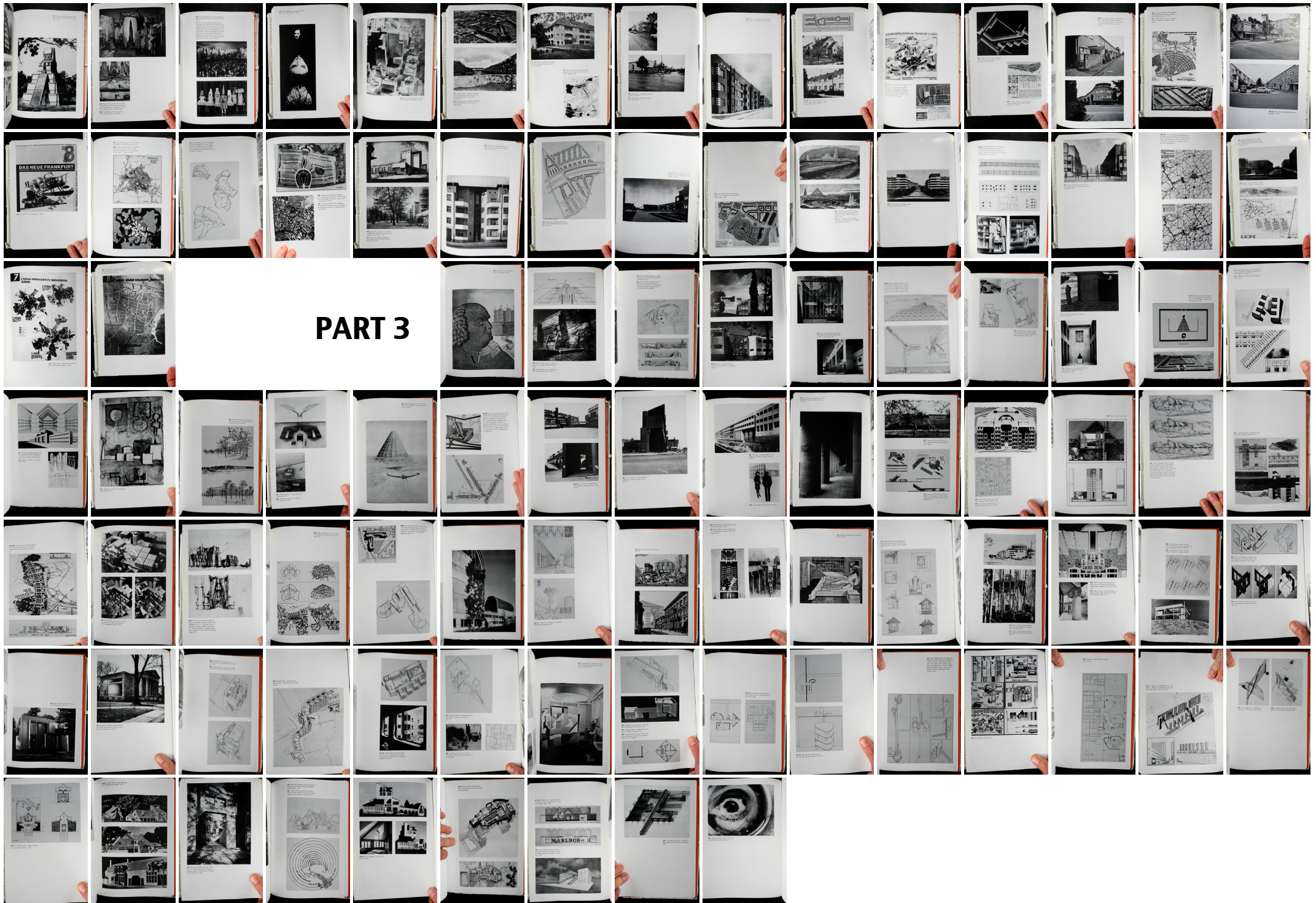
Notes 305

Name Index 367



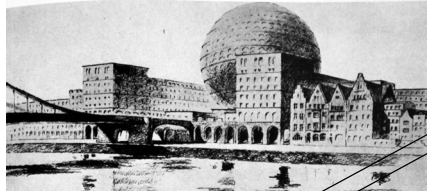
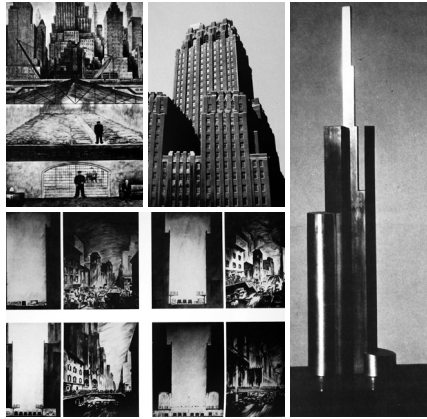




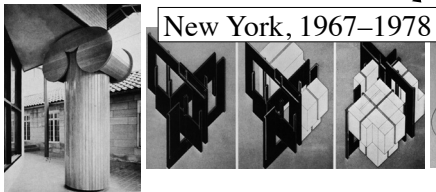


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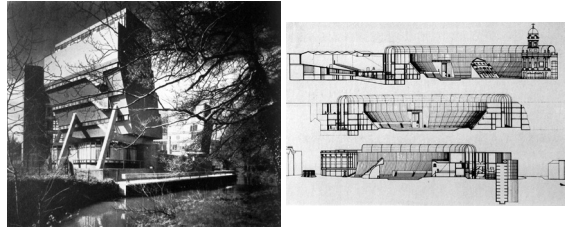




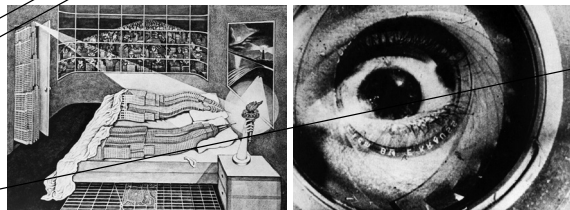
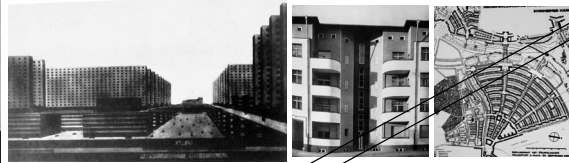
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London, 1966-1975



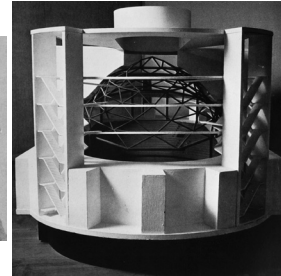
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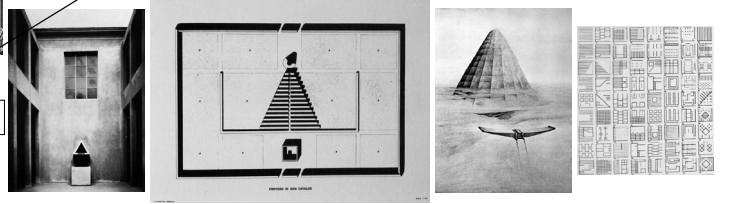
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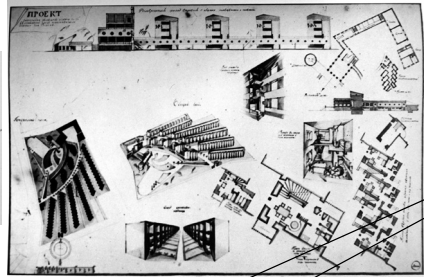
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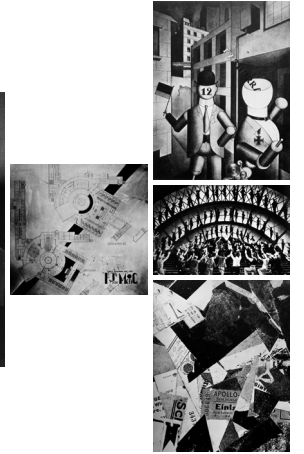
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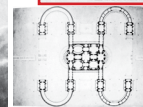
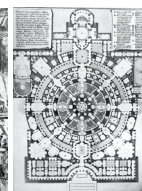
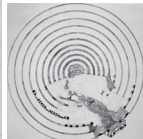
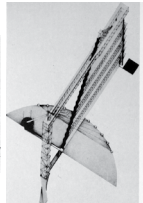
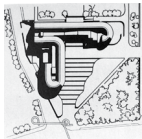
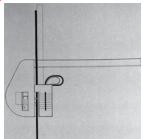
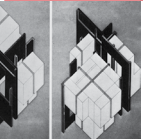
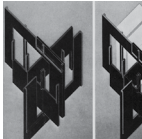
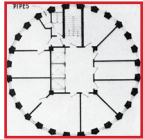
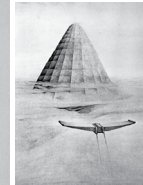
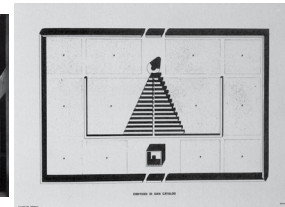
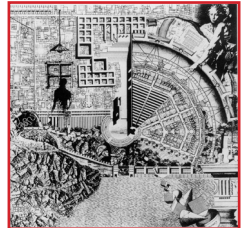
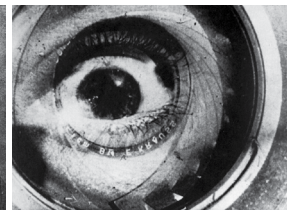
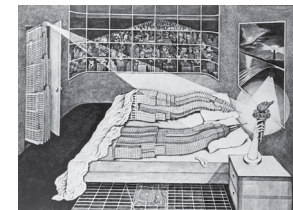
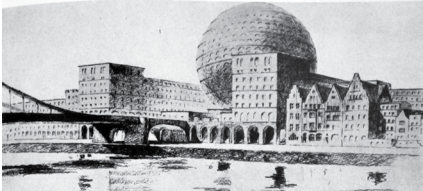
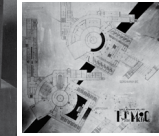
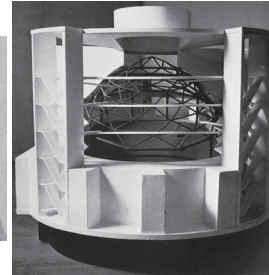
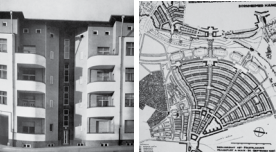
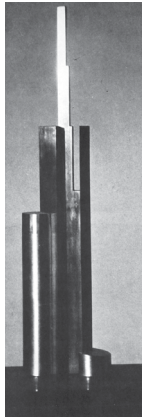
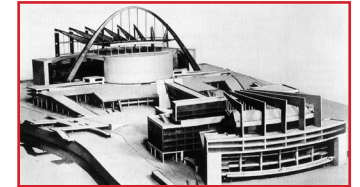
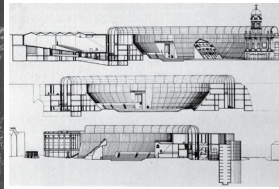
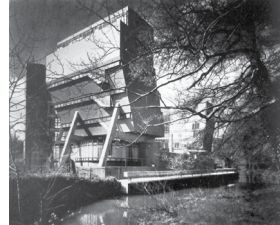
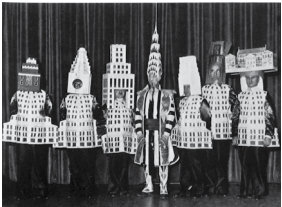
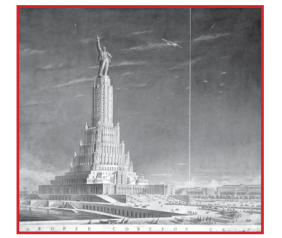
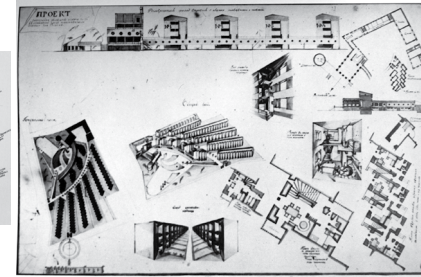
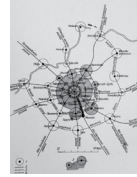
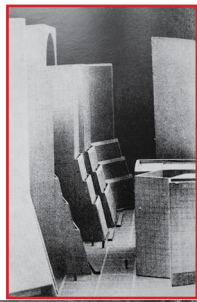
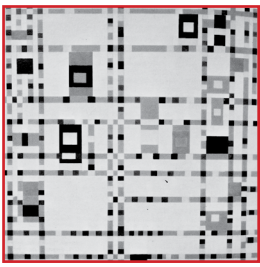
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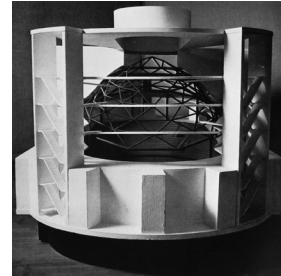
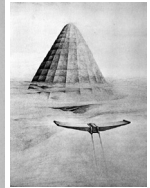
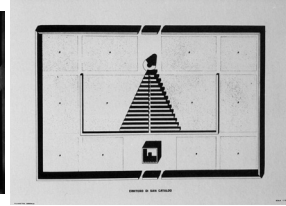
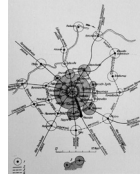
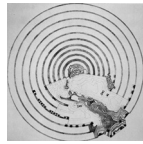
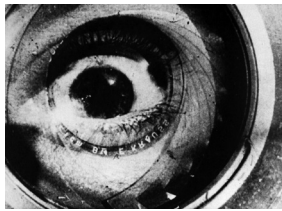
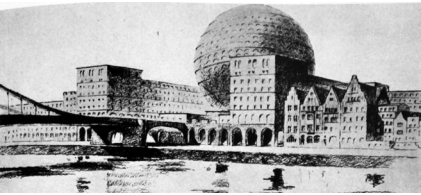
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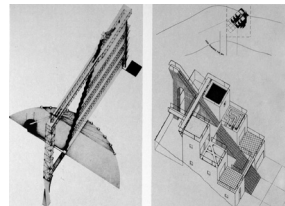
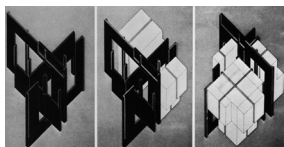
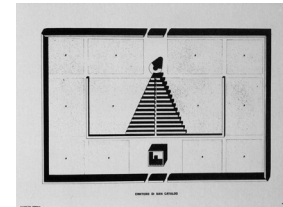
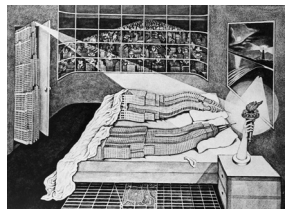
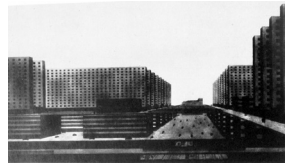
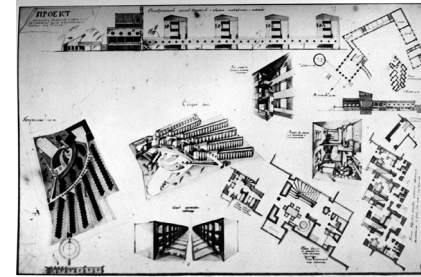
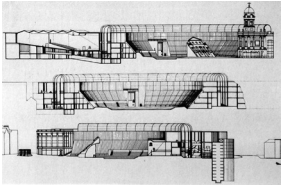
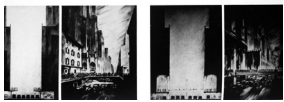




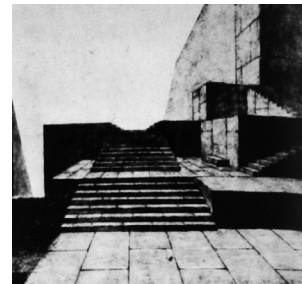
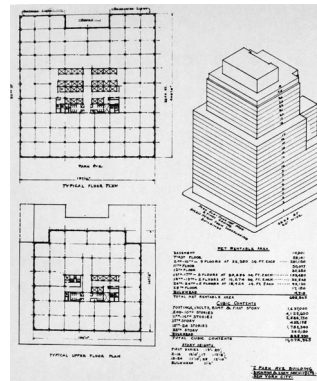
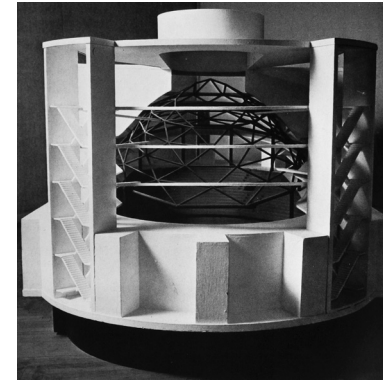
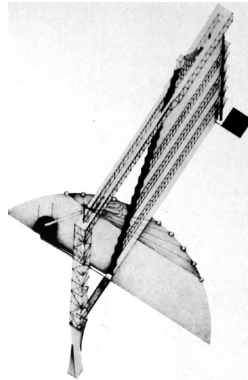
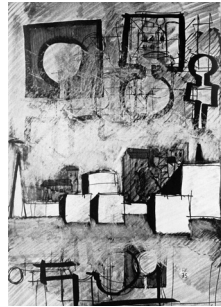




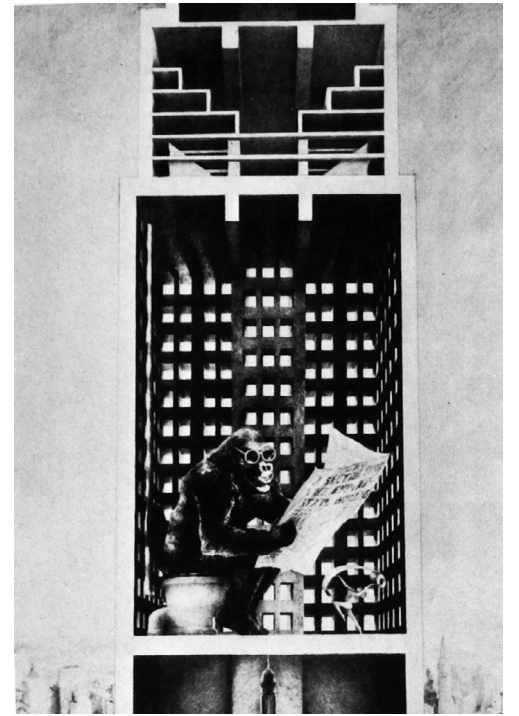
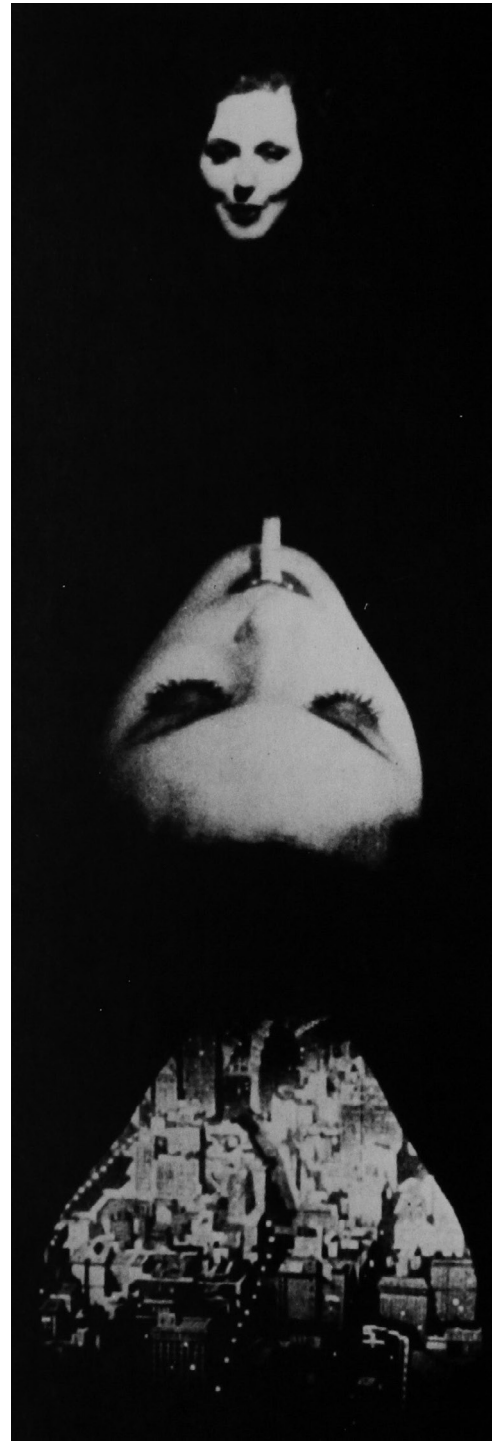
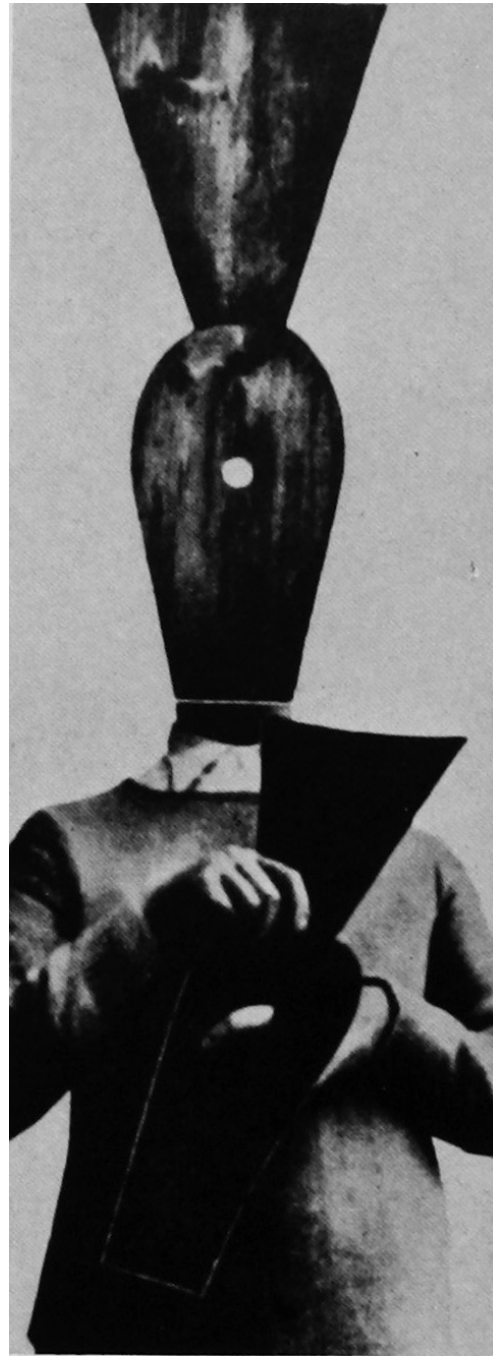
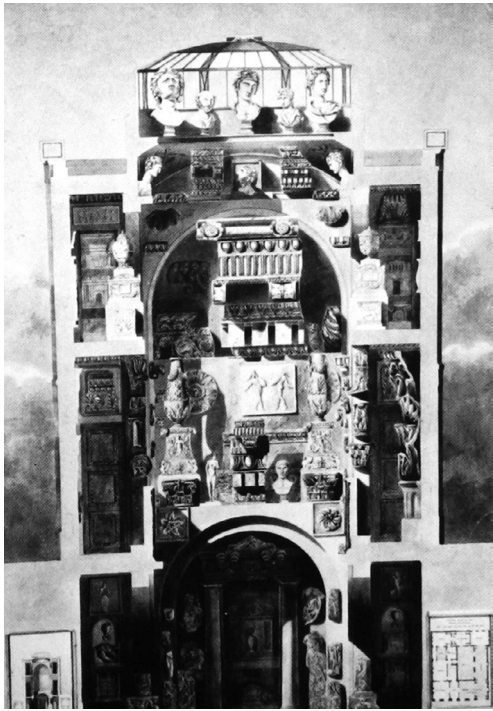




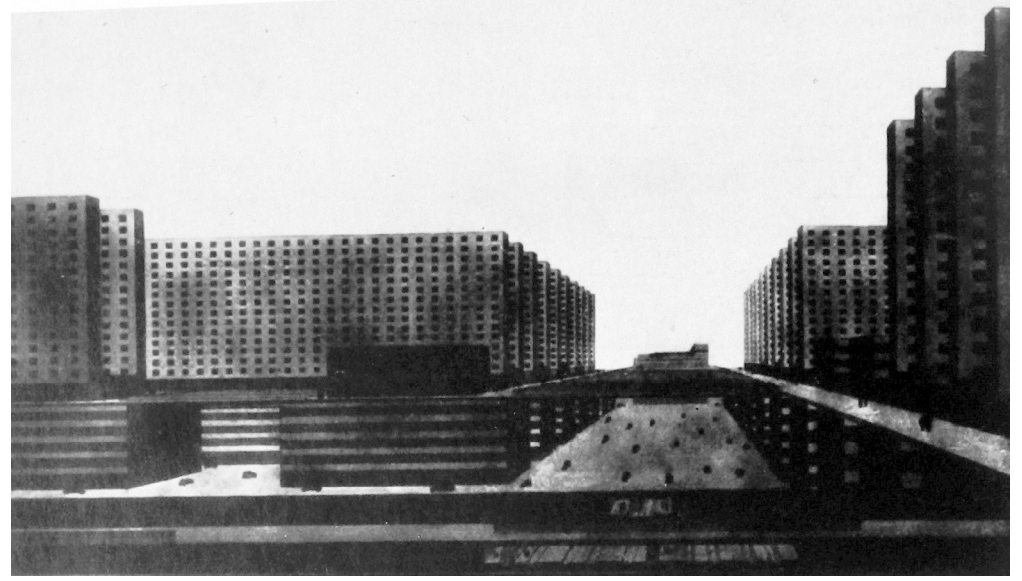
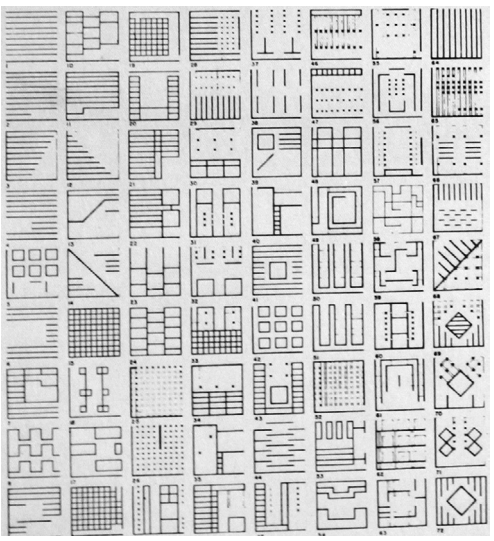
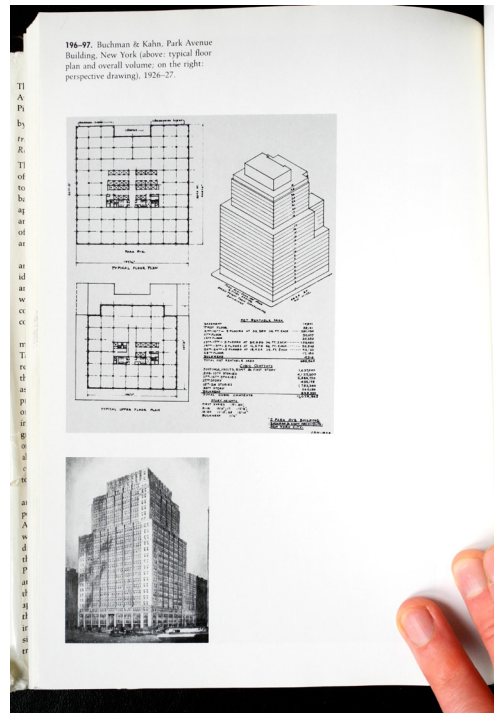
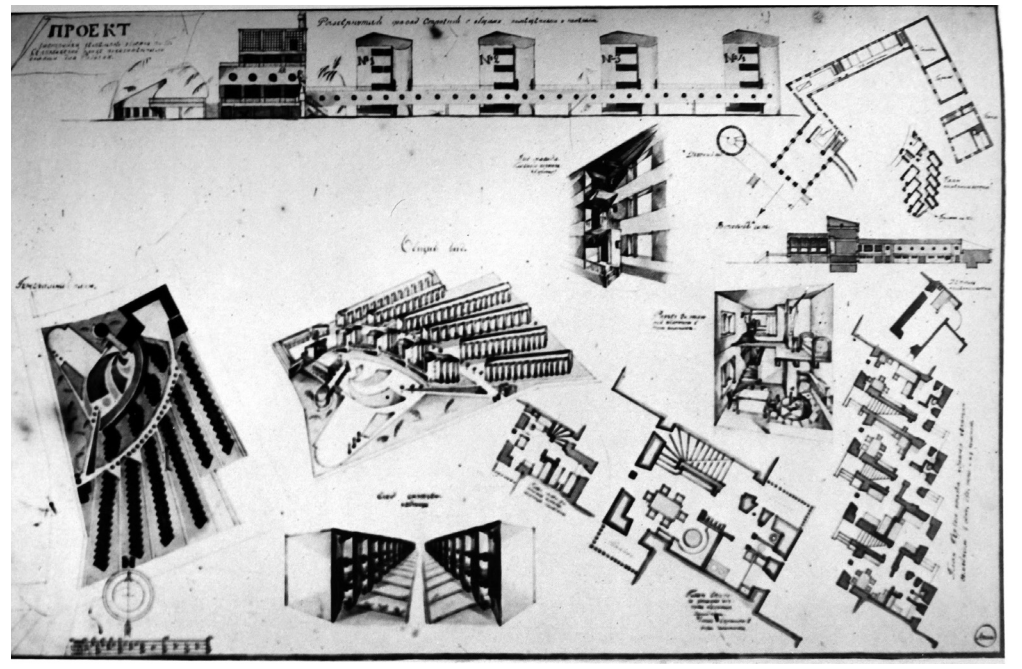
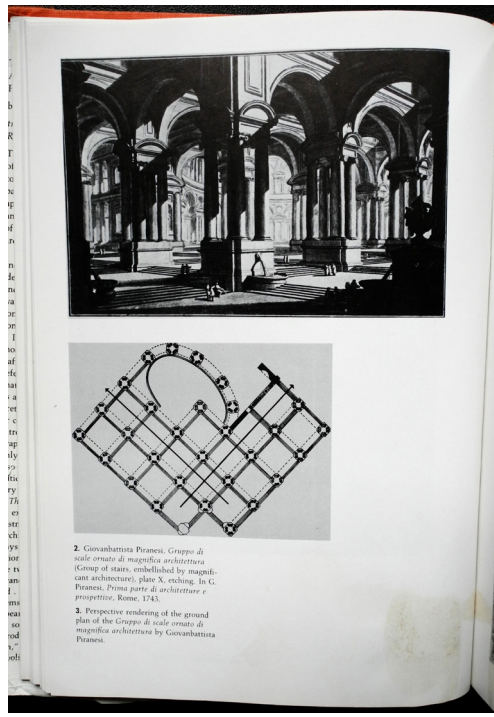
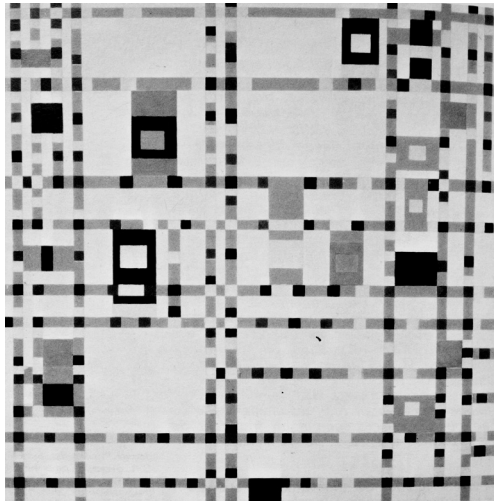




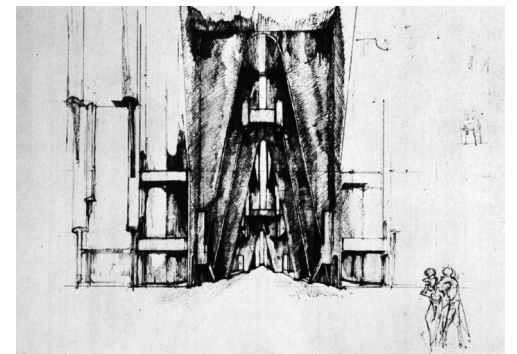
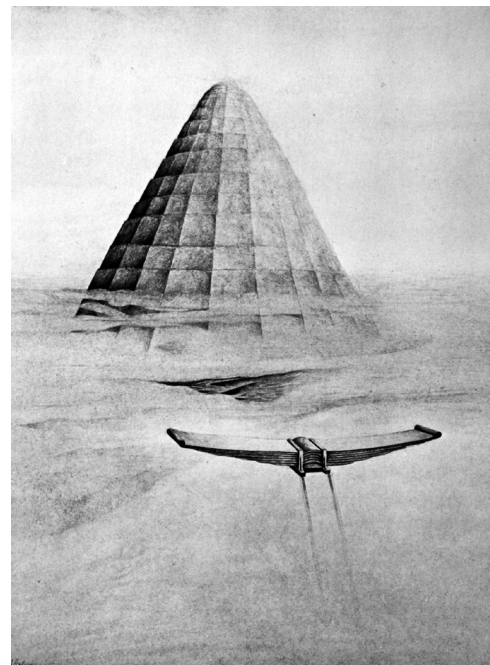
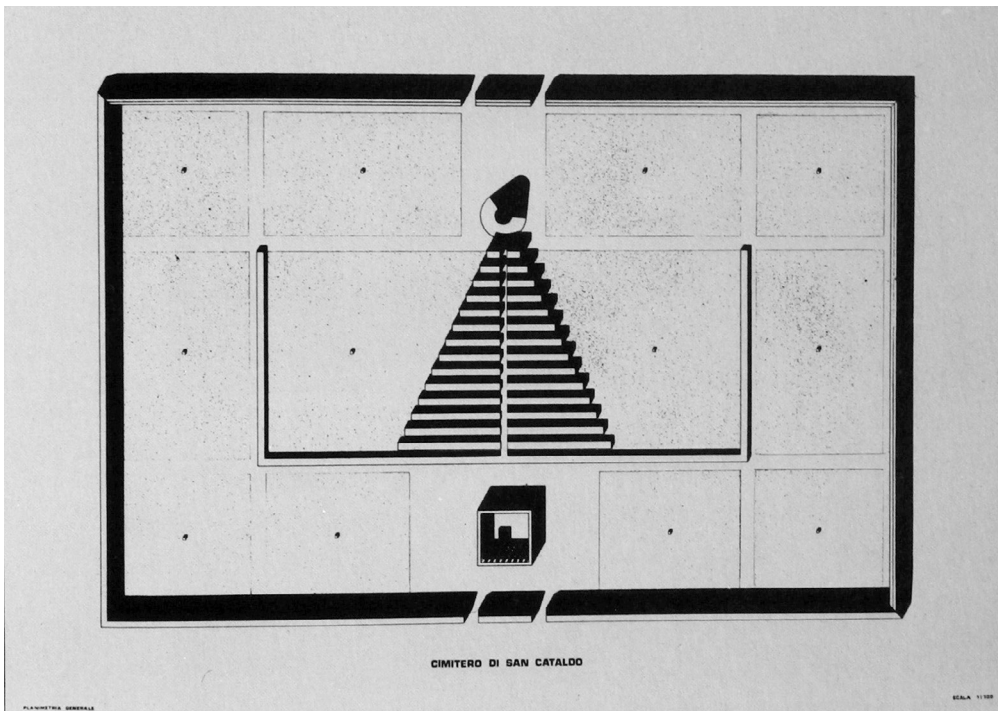
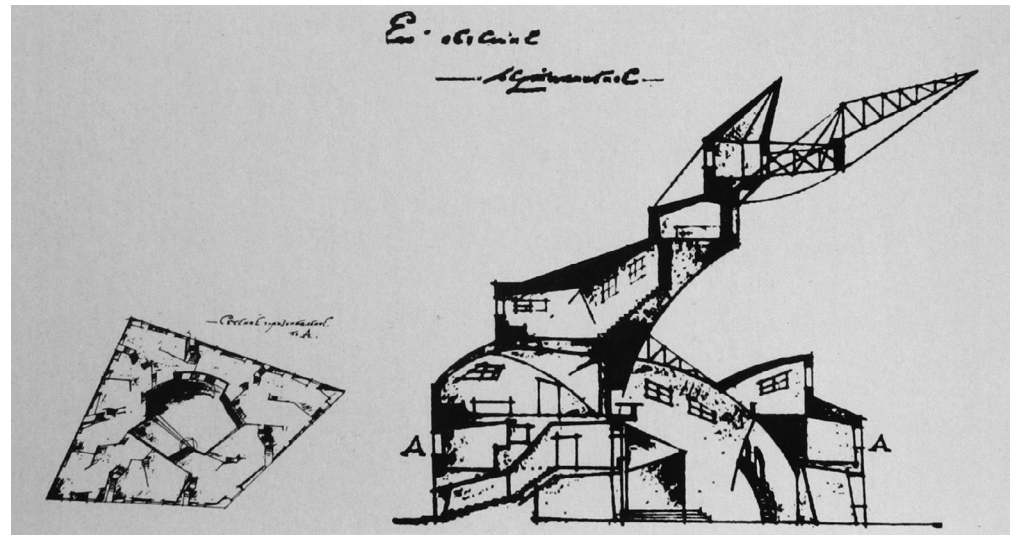
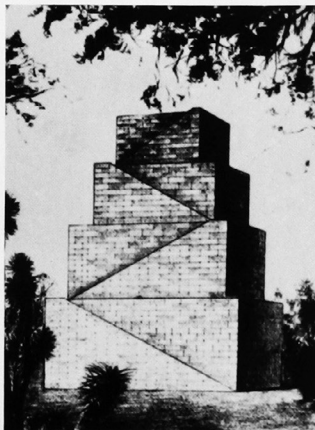
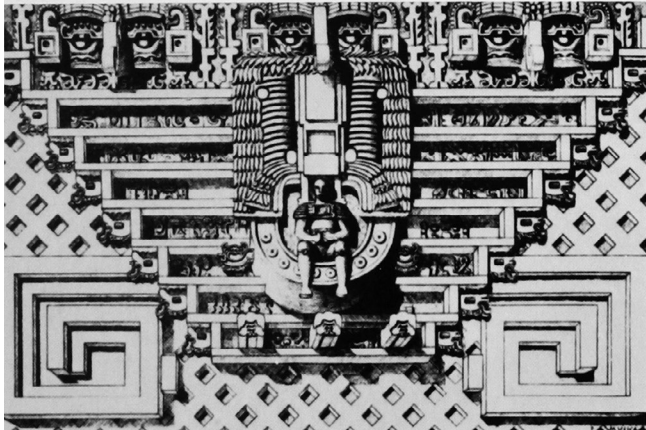




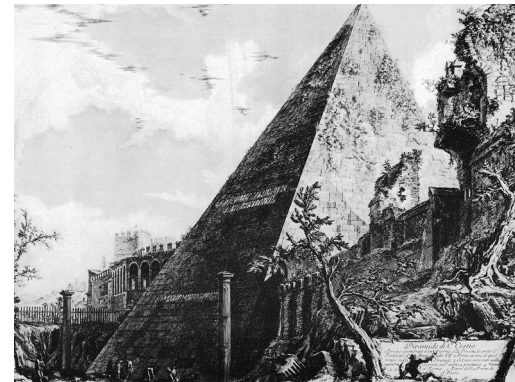
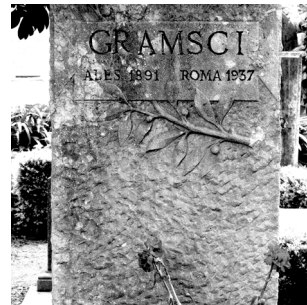
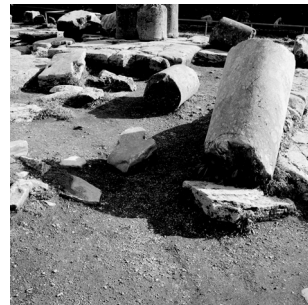
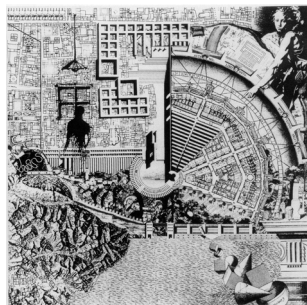
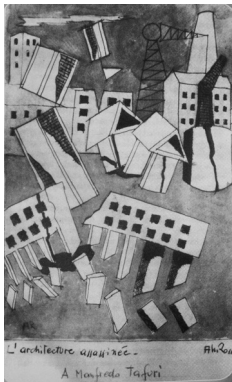
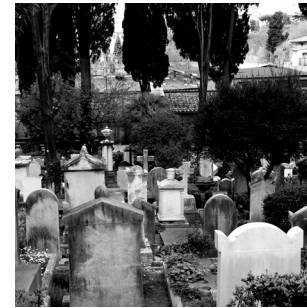
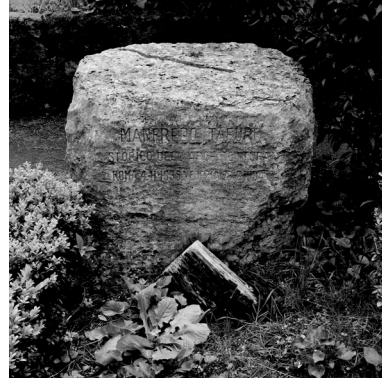
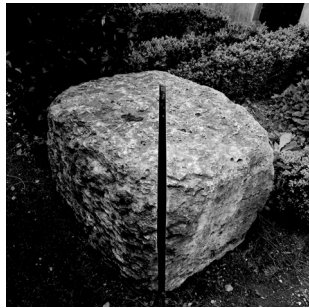
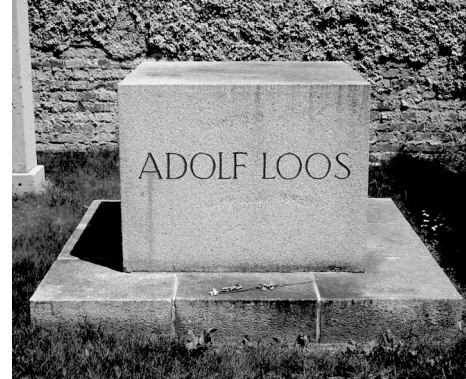
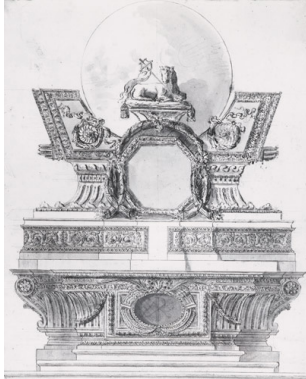
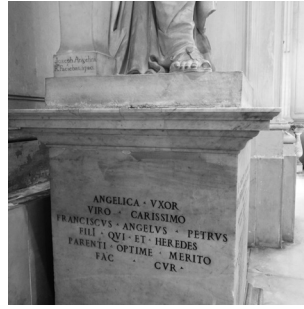




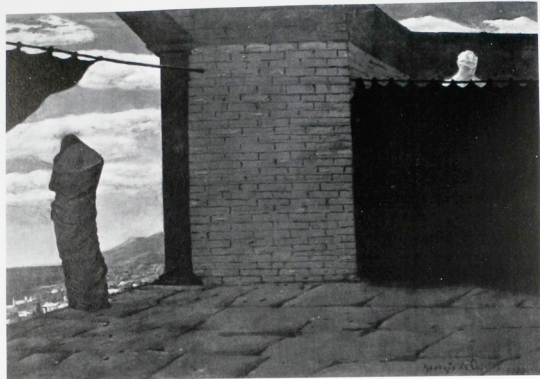




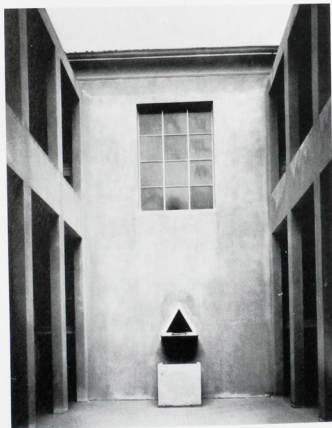




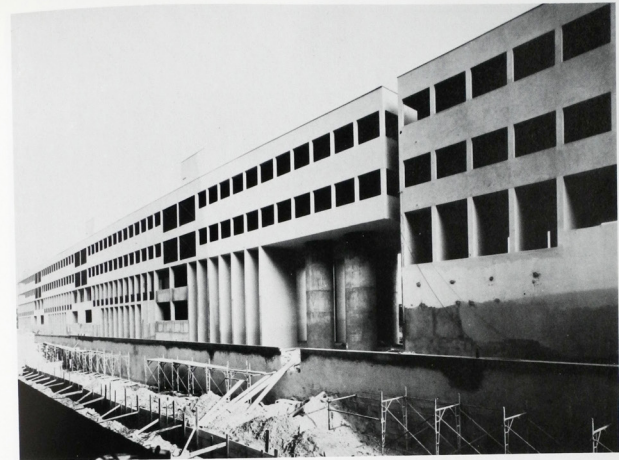




271. Giorgio De Chirico, *The Enigma of the Oracle*, 1910.



272. Aldo Rossi, the courtyard of the new wing of the De Amicis Elementary School, Brno, 1971.

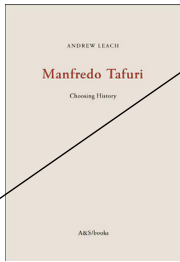
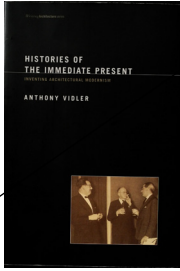
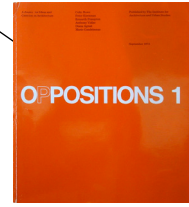
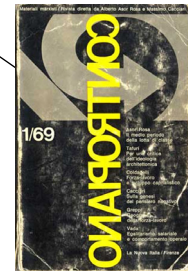
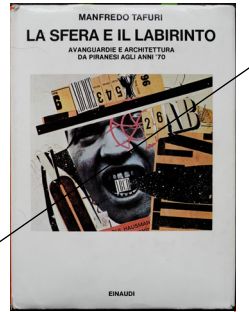
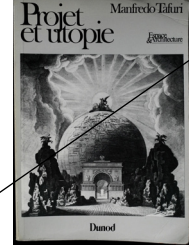
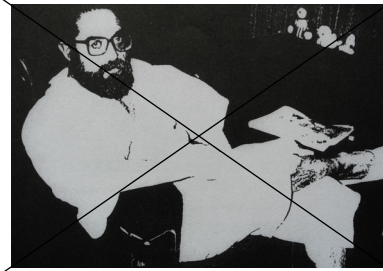
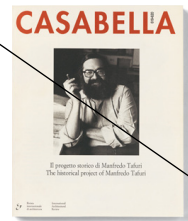


289. Aldo Rossi, residential block in the Gallarate 2 Quarter, Milan (exterior), 1970-73.



290. Anton Raderscheidt, *Begegnung*, 1921.



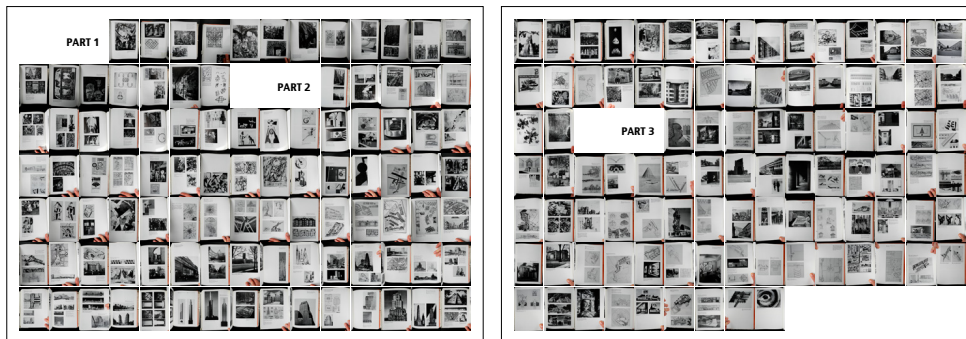


# CAPTIONS AND COMMENTS

In both the Italian edition and the English translation of Manfredo Tafuri's book *The Sphere and the Labyrinth. Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s*, images are concentrated at the end of each of the three sections in which the book is divided, for a total of 195 pages. They work altogether as a visual essay. This series of unbound tables is an attempt to 're-spatialise' these images in a significant way: from a collection of 'endnotes' to an analogical and metonymical 'translation' of the book. This choice is not trivial: the collection and organisation of images, their association side by side, is a method that Tafuri used in his study and in his lectures, inspired by the German tradition of historians like Aby Warburg, Heinrich Wölfflin or Rudolf Wittkower.

Having studied the book and other texts by and on Tafuri, it is impossible to tell if these associations of images convey a precise sense of the book, or if they remain silent like illustrations without a textual referent. Indeed, Tafuri's method is very dependent on writing. Accordingly, the following notes may help the understanding of the tables.

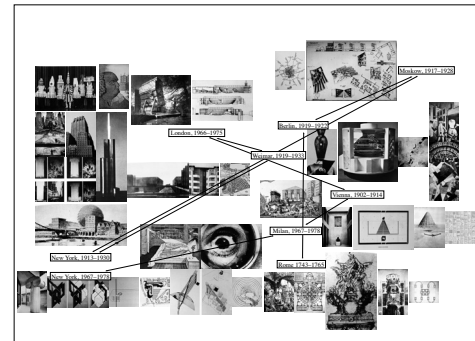
## Entire collection of images (2 tables)



In these preliminary tables, all the pages are reproduced in the order they appear in the book, following the subjects discussed in the different chapters. The first series thus concerns

Giovanni Battista Piranesi and some of the influences he had on his period (including Sir John Soane). The second, which is the widest section both in text and in images, covers avant-garde theatre, visual arts and architecture during Modernism (mostly Dada and Constructivism). The last section concerns the tendencies in American and European architecture of the 1960s and 1970s. It is worth noting that the number of illustrations used by Tafuri increases when approaching the contemporary: part I contains 19 images for 55 pages of text (ratio: 0,34), part II 112 images on 180 (0,62), and in part III images are more than text (64 on 48, ratio 1,33).

## Map of the book

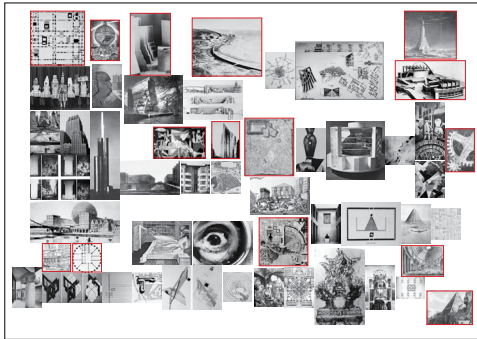


In this table, images are placed on a map rendering the main locations, time frames and conceptual associations of the subjects discussed by Tafuri. The book is in fact composed by a series of fragments, among which the historian moves like the knight on a chessboard. Each fragment (sometimes a whole chapter) maintains a certain unity of time and place, but is perturbed by the long-distance calls made by Tafuri to convoke theories, artworks, literature from other historical contexts. From these fragments, an history emerges. It is the history of the crisis of architecture in its 'operativity' within society, as well as the crisis of its internal possibilities of expression. A crisis that began in the Renaissance and that today is more present than ever.

This main narrative – albeit open to its own contradictions – superposes on a multiplicity of micro-histories that create, if read independently, a second layer of interpretation. The tension between these two, somewhat antithetical approaches constitutes an original feature of Tafuri's critical and literary style, a relentless movement from the historical fact to a conceptual web of significant considerations. As readers, we can choose either of them, or choose both. More than *Theories and History of Architecture* (1968) and *Project and Utopia* (1973), his previous works that contain most of the theoretical premises of this book, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* is an hypertext that can be approached in different manners. Single chapters appeared in international magazines and have their own fortune. The Introduction is a small treatise of philosophy of history in itself, and the chapter breakdown is punctuated by some previously unpublished short texts quoted in the main text.

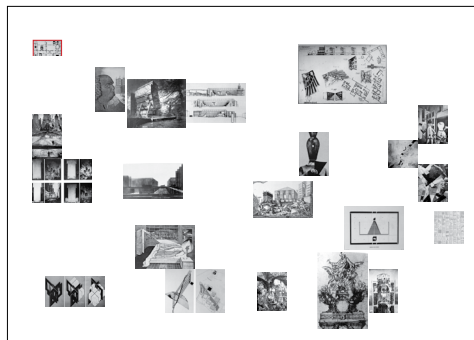
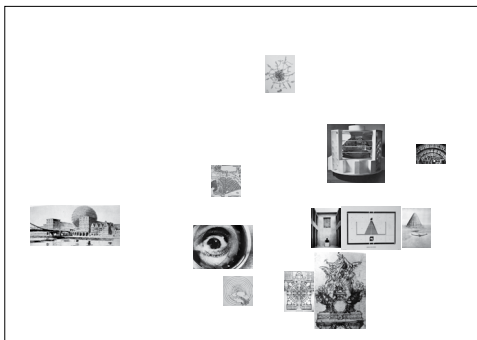


## Completion of the mental map



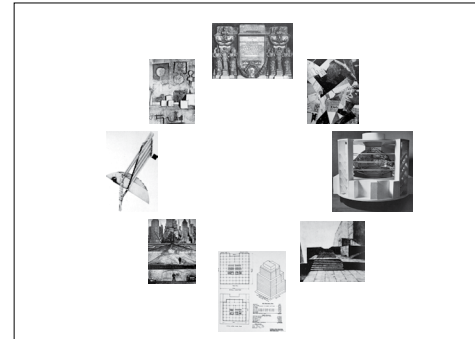
In the space left by the elision of the map, 'missing images' are added (outlined in red). Their positioning maintains the logic of thematic and analogic proximity with the others. These include Le Corbusier's design for the *Palace of the Soviets* (1931-33) against the winning proposal by Boris Iofan (this association works as a critique of the populist turn in Soviet architecture under Stalin); Piranesi's reconstruction of the *Campo Marzio* (1762) and Aldo Rossi's drawing *La Città Analoga* (1976), almost like an update of Piranesi's famous etching; *New York Boogie-Woogie* by Piet Mondrian (1942-43), commenting on the Manhattan's grid and the catastrophic imagery of the skyscrapers' ballet; the formal provocation on monumentality represented by Adolf Loos's proposal for the *Chicago Tribune* architectural competition (1922; here pictured is the plan, bottom left); the last and most important political stances in Modern art: *Guernica* by Pablo Picasso (1937) and the plan by Le Corbusier for Algiers (1931).

## Elisions: the Sphere / the Labyrinth (2 tables)



The map of time/place of the previous table is cleared; two tables are generated by taking out some of the images. One keeps only what Tafuri calls 'the limits of form': a research for purity and unspeakability. The other is labyrinthian: 'a violence to forms themselves' (cf. p. 95).

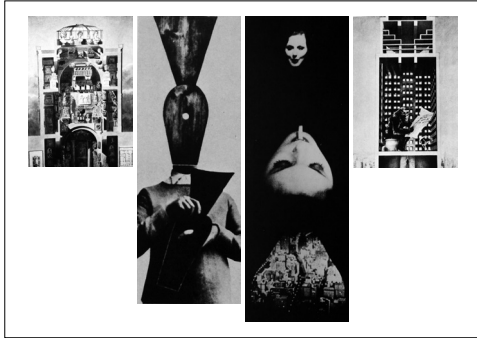
## Most significant images on a compass



**North:** the frontispiece of Piranesi's etchings collection *Different Ways of Adorning Chimney Pieces and Every Other Part of Buildings* (1769); it shows the 'virtuous wickedness' of Piranesi's use of architectural languages after architecture's loss of meaning. **East:** the model for the *Totaltheatre* designed by Walter Gropius in 1927 for Erwin Piscator, allowing the spectators' conscience of the illusionary representational devices, in the modern (critical) spirit of Bertold Brecht's *epic theatre*. **South:** the stripped design for a skyscraper in New York (Park Avenue Building by Buchman & Kahn, 1926-27) clearly opposes Piranesi's exoticism but is seemingly mute. **West:** in the *boudoir*, architecture is no more involved with society's forces of productions, condemned to an intellectually rich, but politically disinterested play of beads (the title of the last section of the book is 'The Glass Bead Game'); here pictured is a *paper architecture* by Mario Gandelsonas, *A Building as a Classifier of the Human Body* (1976).

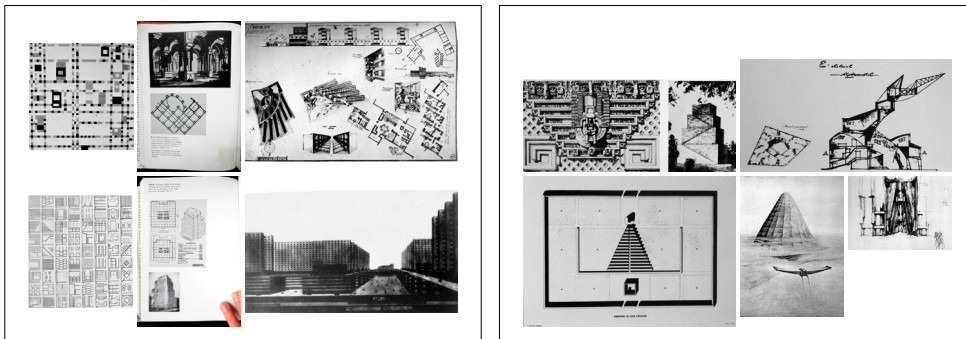
These 4 images are accompanied by an intermediary image issued from the art world, that somehow anticipates changes in architecture's position towards society. **North-East:** Kurt Schwitters' *Merz* collages (*Mz 273*, 1921) and other Berliner Dada works constitute the destructive moment of the critical, but positive attitude of Gropius' projects (and of Russian Constructivists). **South-East:** the bare silence of the Metropolis in this Adolphe Appia's stage design for *Parsifal* (1922) prefigures Ludwig Hilberseimer's *Grossstadtarchitektur* (1927) and its realised utopia in America. **South-West:** Diego Rivera's mural *Passive Capitols, Sections of the City* (1931) questions the solitude and alienation of the American city for the worker, reclaiming figuration, in painting, after its dissolution by the Modernist process of the avant-garde. **North-West:** Aldo Rossi's sketches of archetypal, absolute forms and memories (here for the school in Fagnano-Olona, 1975) express a longing for a dialogue with the past that is opposed to the 'Tradition of the New' (Harold Rosenberg) carried out by the historical avant-gardes.

## Verticality, Masques, Irony and the Modern Project



George Bailey, the dome of the John Soane's House (c. 1810); costume for a Dadaist performance at the Cabaret Voltaire in Zurich; still from the movie *Gold Diggers* (Busby Berkeley, 1935); Peter Wilson, *The Enigma of Cultural Appropriation* (drawing, 1977).

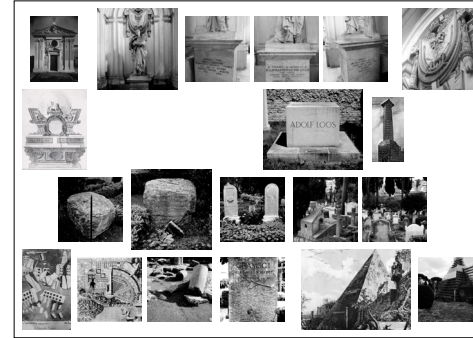
## Grids and Pyramids (2 tables)



One of Tafuri's abilities is to let distant historical fragments speak to each other, establishing fragile connections that draw a lipstick trace throughout history (see also, above, the caption for the map). These two thematic tables show examples that reveal striking similarities and eternal returns. Grids (left to right): *Hollywood Boogie-Woogie* (painting by Piet Mondrian, 1942-43); view of a *Group of stairs, embellished by magnificent architecture* (Giovanni Battista Piranesi, 1743); lost competition for the Serpuchovskaya Ulitsa, Moscow (Kostantin Melnikov, 1922-23). Typologies by Franco Purini, 1968 (another resonance with Jean-Nicolas Durand's typological researches in the 18<sup>th</sup> century); Park Avenue Building by Buchman & Kahn, 1926-27; view of Ludwig Hilberseimer's *Grossstadtarchitektur* (1927).

Pyramids: imaginary reconstruction of the pyramids of Papantla, Mexico (plan) and of Teopantepec (perspective) by Francisco Mujica, 1929; design for a new communal housing typology in Soviet Russia (Nikolai Ladovsky, 1920). Winning design for the San Cataldo cemetery (Aldo Rossi, 1971); *The Pilot of the Labyrinth* (Paolo Soleri, 1978, latent image of the Babel Tower); sketch for the French new town of Cergy (Ricardo Boffil, 1971).

## Monuments and Death



With the exception of Piranesi's drawing for the altar of San Basil in Santa Maria del Priorato, none of these images are printed in the book. The largest images express important moments around this theme. Top to bottom, they are Piranesi's funerary monument inside the same church; Adolf Loos' square tomb in Vienna, probably quoted by Manfredo Tafuri's own tomb in the Protestant Cemetery in Rome, less than a mile away from Santa Maria del Priorato; Aldo Rossi's drawing *L'Architecture assassinée* ('The Assassination of Architecture', 1974) dedicated to Tafuri; and Piranesi's etching of the Caius Cestius pyramid overlooking the Protestant Cemetery. In the same cemetery are buried, among others, poet John Keats (1795–1821, 'Here lies One whose Name was writ in Water') and political thinker Antonio Gramsci (1891–1937), who brought Marxist thesis to a further step towards practice.

Some notes on the reasons for these associations: 1) A double bond is revealed between Piranesi and Tafuri: he centres the book on Piranesi's church, where he is buried; Piranesi's drew several views of the Protestant Cemetery, where Tafuri is buried. 2) Adolf Loos's writings are well known by Tafuri, who recalls his 'tragic' assumption that true architecture only belongs to the monument and to the tomb. They also share a deep scepticism towards their contemporaries' formal gesticulations, getting to recover, in architectural history, a problematic, polemic position against almost everything that happens. 3) Aldo Rossi's dedication to friend/enemy Tafuri is a sign of this difficulty; Tafuri explicitly attacked Rossi's drawing of the *Analog City*, pictured right, and suggested that all practitioners refrain from teaching or taking theoretical positions (this critique is against what he calls 'operative criticism': he advocates instead a clear separation between history and design practice). 4) The 'death of architecture' is a theme of *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*: by becoming autonomous, along a crisis that lasts for several centuries (at least since Piranesi; but in *Theories and History of Architecture* Tafuri identifies the origins of the crisis in the Renaissance and precisely with Leon Battista Alberti, around 1450), architecture has lost its signification and its operativity within society.



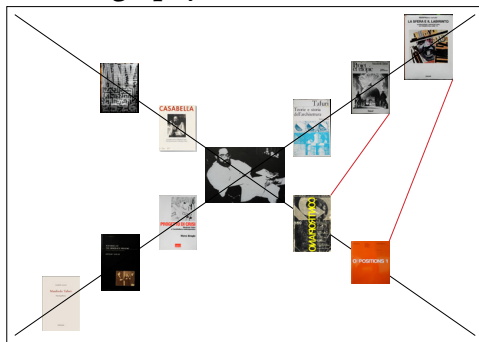
## The analogous method



Despite the dense network of references created in the text, only two pages of illustrations contain the 'analogous method' of juxtaposing two images to show their latent keenness.

This happens for two projects by Aldo Rossi, maybe because of his attachment to universal memories and affections, conveyed by images. Rossi's *mythical method* (T.S. Eliot), or *Musée imaginaire* (André Malraux), or *Mnemosyne Atlas* (Aby Warburg) is directly embedded in his architecture. The two paintings recalled by Tafuri evoke the mystery of human presence on Earth, the solitude and alienation of the modern world and a certain silence provoked by a loss.

## A bibliography



This table simply recollects the most important texts that inform on *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* (1980, transl. 1987, pictured top right). The publications on the right are written by Tafuri, whereas the publications on the left are about him; the ascending diagonal contains books, the other magazines. Along the same axis, publications are laid out chronologically, from the centre to the corners. *Theories and History of Architecture* (1968) already contains many of the theses in architectural historiography that will later be developed in the Introduction of *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* (1980). This introduction will be translated and published separately in many publications, among which *Oppositions* no. 17 (Summer 1979). *Oppositions* had published other chapters of the book: 'The Dialectics of the Avant-

Garde: Piranesi and Eisenstein' (*Oppositions* no. 11, Winter 1977) and 'L'Architecture dans le Boudoir' (*Oppositions* no. 3, May 1974). Another echoing chamber for Tafuri's articles was the left-wing Italian magazine *Contropiano*, in which he published, among others, 'For a Critique of Architectural Ideology' (*Contropiano* no. 1/1969) and 'Intellectual Work and Capitalist Development' (*Contropiano* no. 2/1970). These two essays later became the second important book by Tafuri, *Project and Utopia: Avant-Garde and Capitalist Development* (1973, transl. 1976).

Two issues of important magazines were published on Manfredo Tafuri after his death in 1994: *Casabella* no. 619/620 *The Historical Project of Manfredo Tafuri* (1994), which contains important contributions by, mostly, former collaborators or acquaintances of Tafuri, and *ANY* no. 25/26 *Being Manfredo Tafuri* (2000), slightly less hagiographic but very rich, notably for an oral history conducted with him in 1992 (see the booklet with some excerpts). The fact that all these magazines are Italian and American reflects the main audiences of Manfredo Tafuri's work.

Finally, three books have been dedicated to Tafuri's historical project: Marco Biraghi's *Progetto di Crisi* (2005, untranslated), Anthony Vidler's *Histories of the Immediate Present: Inventing Modernism* (2008; he is one of the four historians of modernity discussed by Vidler, besides Emil Kaufmann, Colin Rowe and Reyner Banham), and Andrew Leach's PhD thesis *Manfredo Tafuri: Choosing History* (2007).

## Acknowledgments

This work was realised within the module *Theorising Practices / Practising Theories* of the Master in Architectural History at the Bartlett School of Architecture, London, April 2013.

I would like to thank the following people for the precious insights and support that helped me define this project. My tutor, Professor Jane Rendell, for the selection of the numerous, brilliant pieces of writing that animated the course's seminars; also, for letting us students prepare and lead such seminars, thus infusing the responsibility, passion and courage necessary for the important task of introducing difficult theoretical concepts to fellow students, which certainly inspired this work on Manfredo Tafuri. Professor Robert Trevisiol at the Faculty of Architecture La Cambre Horta, where I obtained my diploma, for the email exchanges and the time he dedicated me on 15 April 2013. Pier Vittorio Aureli and Martino Tattara (Dogma) for the brief discussion we had about Tafuri on the side of an interview on 1<sup>st</sup> April 2013. And Sophie Dars for offering me the disappearing and expensive Italian edition of *The Sphere and the Labyrinth* in December 2011.

## Contact

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## **Full bibliography**

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