

Gio Ponti (with Antonio Fornaroli and Eugenio Soncini), Office-building Montecatini in Milan.

The Nocturnal Aesthetic of Italian Modern Architecture and Art from Post World War II to the 1970s

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« *All was dark yet splendid...* »
Edgar Allan Poe, *The Man of the Crowd*

The historian Jules Troussel, introducing the Exposition Universelle of 1900 in Paris, wrote : « la véritable souveraine de l'Exposition de 1900 sera l'Électricité, cette jeune et brillante fée qui dote l'industrie contemporaine des deux facteurs principaux : le mouvement et la lumière »¹. From its earliest beginnings, electricity was characterized by the strong aesthetic potential of its being a creator of art. Moreover, Ernst Cassirer in his *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*² explained that the contrast between day and night, between light and darkness, could be interpreted as the very essence of cultural development of mankind. Concerning in particular the architecture of the city, the theme of light is a fundamental cultural, historical and artistic chapter for European architecture of the twentieth century and for Modern Italian architecture in particular.

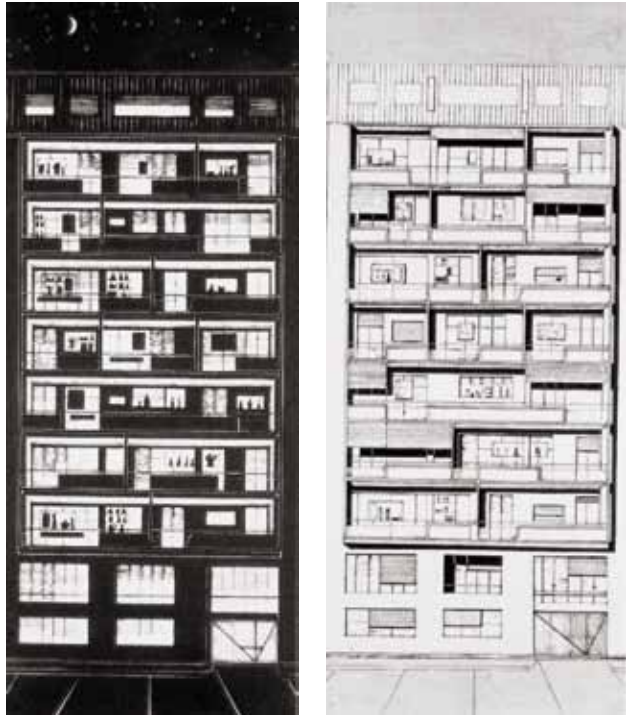
Since electric light networks overlap with those of gas-lamps, altering the approach of urban space perception³, much has changed in the aesthetic imaginary of Italian cities. A subject like the development of artificial light in Italy should start from the beginning of the twentieth century, and include a substantial chapter on the Futurism movement, whose first centenary falls, significantly, in 2009 : the skilled use of light, that kinetic generator of perceptual and sensory experience phenomena, and the stimuli arising from motion and light, become fundamental concepts for any cultural and artistic development that occurred in Italy. The most concise possible summary of this period between the first and second decade of the twentieth century is the bright and progressive mythology of the work (which is typical of the *Jugendstil*), *Lampada ad arco* (Street Light) by Giacomo Balla, 1909-11. For many of the Futurists, beginning with Boccioni, harbingers of Modernity with strong Romantic leanings, the night

vision of a *city that is growing*, a city in progress, plays an essential role. Night, with its artificial light, increases the emotional quality of a place. Apart from the aesthetic relationship between architecture, artificial light and art that was developed within the Italian Futurist groups, is challenging to investigate what happened later, taking into account such crucial historical events of the twentieth century as dictatorships, world wars, reconstructions and hopes of modernity. This analysis will be conducted through textual references that trace just a few of the very interesting figures of architects, artists and film directors between the 1930s and the beginning of the 1970s.

The relationship between Modern Italian architecture and artistic disciplines in nocturnal urban spaces is a deeply interesting one, highlighting the crucial role of artificial light, its sacredness not only in relation to the civic urban setting but to the real public image of Italian cities, the relationship between modernity and monumentality, between cinema and art. From artists like Giacomo Balla to Lucio Fontana, from movie directors like Luchino Visconti to Federico Fellini, and from architects like Gio Ponti to Archizoom, the symbolic function of artificial light increases the significance of artistic and architectural masterpieces. Electricity creates strong illusions, lighting enhances architectures revealed by cinema and visual art. The basic element in the city is rebuilt and launched *en route* for modernity. As early as the end of the nineteenth century (in 1883 the theatre La Scala and the Duomo in Milan are illuminated by electric light), light, « creative energy of spaces »⁴, was defining hierarchies within the city, indicating that what was important and what was not.

In the early years of the twentieth century, light was considered a strong element of technology (electricity was a *deity* for Futurists artists such as Boccioni and Balla), but above all there was a dream, an artificial scenographic design. Later,

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- 1 Toulet (Emmanuèle), « Le cinéma à l'Exposition Universelle de 1900 », *Revue d'Histoire Moderne et Contemporaine*, n° 33, April-June 1986, p. 180.
 - 2 Cassirer (Ernst), *Philosophie der symbolischen Formen*, Berlin : Bruno Cassirer, 1925, p. 122 ; translated as *The Philosophy of Symbolic Forms. Volume Two : Mythical Thought*, New Haven : Yale University Press, 1955.
 - 3 Schivelbusch (Wolfgang), *Lichtblicke : zur Geschichte der künstlichen Helligkeit im 19. Jahrhundert*, München/Wien : Hanser, 1983 ; translated as *Luce : Storia dell'illuminazione artificiale nel secolo XIX*, Parma : Pratiche editrice, 1994.
 - 4 Oechslin (Werner), « L'architettura della luce », *Lotus*, n° 75, 1993, p. 8-30.



Gio Ponti, House in via Dezza in Milan : day-light and night-light studies for the facade.

after World War I, during the 1920s and 1930s, the Italian nocturnal landscape consisted of shining light architecture⁵, symbolising the victory of reason over the war, progress and the desire for rebirth. From that time onwards, Italian rationalist tradition sought a continuous connection between light-architecture and technological elements : projects by Pier Luigi Nervi are documented in the manual-book by Derek Philips⁶ published in 1964, characterised by exciting night visions of their structure, illuminated with strong light and shadow contrasts.

After World War II, Gio Ponti was one of the few architects in Italy who, as chief editor of the important journal *Domus*, emphasized the role of the light as a tool to create a second life for architecture. Nightlife. In his architectural designs Ponti always proposed the « double face » of buildings : daytime and night-time. In 1948, he wrote an article for *Domus* magazine, « Estetica della macchina e della notte » (Beauty of the machine and of the night) that opens a debate about night architecture : « Only Modern architecture is nocturnal architecture : Old architecture disappeared into the dark at night, or only appeared in profile with linear neon lights. They were either without relief or transfigured with spotlights into prodigious, aggressive relief like a prolonged lightning flash. But

only in Modern architecture, the most recent, is this game, all based on light, so complete that some walls are transparent and others isolated to seem doubly massive. It is a negative architecture, and is the first and purest abstract art »⁷.

The famous illustrations of the prospectus « in daytime and at night » for a residential block in Milan on via Dezza n°. 49, where he lived, demonstrate that Ponti liked to imagine his buildings inhabited by people and to consider them in daylight and also by night. The « finestra arredata » (furnished window), the *leitmotiv* of the Pontian poetic, emerges magically, making the graphic design into a pictorial design with Dadaist inspiration. Windows magically become transparent, we see what life is like inside the buildings, we feel a careful study has been made of the furniture disposition, the interior space becomes a stage set of shadow and human silhouette. The same approach in other architectural designs occasionally transforms buildings into tectonic lace or transparent crystals, in other words into *masterpieces* of art. Consider, for example, the daring lace fabric of the façade of Taranto Cathedral, whose colossal transparent profile projects against the sky equally forcefully, day or night.

Again, in 1948, in another issue of *Domus*, Gio Ponti wrote : « the exteriors are cut out with artificial lights and lit from below, like the Degas' dancers. The interior lighting of buildings is part of their external appearance and turns them into photographic negatives. Architects must take into account the appearance of the building at night and present a study of the 'nocturnal' appearance next to *daytime* design »⁸. When, in 1936 with his partners of the studio (Antonio Fornaroli and Eugenio Soncini) he presented the draft design for the new office building in Milan called the *Montecatini building*, he achieved an evocative nocturnal perspective view, with reference and analogy to the works of the metaphysical painter Mario Sironi : the outskirts of Italian cities, transcendent urban landscapes, metropolitan scenes where the artist embodied the strong post-war sense of melancholy and loneliness through the use of thick and bituminous colours. It is no coincidence that the architect Ponti had paintings by Sironi in his art collection as early as the 1930s. Yet, although Ponti's style is comparable, the spirit of his work is entirely different, quite the opposite of Sironi's, whose cities generally have lights that are faint or distant and are empty of and events. They are places of solitude where the penumbra leads to a discouraged meditation, far from the lively crowd shown in Umberto Boccioni's Futurist painting, *Rissa in galleria* (Riot in the Gallery), 1910, where light attracts people, movement, razzmatazz. Unlike Mario Sironi, Ponti's mind is full of hope for an Italy that can and must be reborn through

5 Dethier (Jean) and Guiheux (Alain). *La Ville. Art et architecture en Europe. 1870-1993*, Paris : Centre Georges Pompidou, 1994.

6 Philips (Derek), *Lighting Design in Architecture*, New York/Toronto/London : McGraw Hill, 1964.

7 Ponti (Gio), « Estetica della macchina e della notte », *Domus*, n° 228, 1948, p. 6-7.

8 Ponti (Gio), « Il giorno e la notte. Architetture degli architetti Bianchetti e Pea », *Domus*, n° 230, 1948, p. 1.

architecture. Pontian darkness is therefore to be understood not simply as the opposite of brightness, but as the prerequisite for perceptual discovery.

World War II redefined the visual parameters : all the war years had seen the city in the dark, « hidden ». With the conclusion of the war, the urban nightlife dimension reappears at last, rediscovered after the blackout. « Those who have lived in the darkened city during the war remember the enormous psychological impression aroused by the rekindling of illuminated réclames, for example, in Piccadilly, a feeling that had nothing to do with the subject of the advertising. The light, colour and movement must be part of the architectural composition of the Heart »⁹. So, in 1951, at the VIIIth CIAM Congress, significantly entitled *The Heart of the City : Towards the Humanisation of Urban Life*, the British theoretician and urban planner Jaqueline Tyrwhitt finally recovered artificial light in the city. The idea of a heart of the city, a heart that beat and gave impulses of light, became the official policy of the CIAM congress in Hoddesdon. The historic city, privileged home of social relationships. Praise for the traditional city, its beauty and friendliness at all times, united the

large group of Modernist architects : all of them appeal to the universality of the city, less for its style as for the liveability of its spaces, day and night.

After the second war, artificial light became the hallmark of new urban geography, where art is also identified with metropolitan icons : e.g. with his *Ambiente spaziale a luce nera* (Spatial Environment in Black Light), 1948, the spatialist artist Lucio Fontana implements strong architectural-level research, with spatial environments designed to wrap completely the thought and the body of the visitor, the subconscious « shapes the individual, integrates and transforms him »¹⁰. Forms were suspended from the ceiling of the Gallery il Naviglio : to make them even more dynamic and cosmic, the artist painted them with fluorescent colours that emerge in strange, new and unusual lights under « Wood's lamp » (ultraviolet light). It is no coincidence Fontana continually collaborated with architects like Gio Ponti, BBPR (Ernesto Nathan Rogers and partners), Pier Luigi Nervi and others. An artistic and architectural investigation involving the artist, like the architect or the urbanist. About the space mentioned above, set up in Milan art gallery, Fontana



Mario Sironi, *Periferia urbana (Urban periphery)*, Gio Ponti collection.

9 Tyrwhitt (Jaqueline), « Il cuore e la costellazione urbana », in *CIAM, Il Cuore della Città : per una vita più umana delle comunità*, edited by Rogers (Ernesto Nathan), Sert (José Luis), Tyrwhitt (Jaqueline), Milano : Hoepli Editore, 1954, p. 103, original publication : *The Heart of the City : Towards the Humanisation of Urban Life* (Congrès Internationaux d'Architecture Moderne), London : Lund Humphries, 1951. See also Mumford (Eric), *The CIAM Discourse on Urbanism 1928-1960*, Cambridge, Ma. : MIT Press, 2000.

10 Crispolti (Enrico), *Omaggio a Fontana*, Assisi-Roma : Carucci, 1971, p. 58.

writes, « you entered into find yourself completely isolated with yourself, every observer responded with his own precise mood of the moment, unaffected by the man with objects or shapes, which were there like commodities on sale. Every man was with himself, with his conscience, with his ignorance, with his very matter »¹¹. A sombre darkness reminiscent of the war years at long last left behind by Europeans, only to find it again here, strongly revived to awaken their worst fears. Space, light, dark, powerfully interacting in the architectural space, just as he played them again later in 1951, in the vast hall of the Palazzo della Triennale in Milan : Fontana here interacts with people's inner space invading it with an « entanglement » of 100 meters of neon light. With neon of the Triennale he combines the idea of painting and sculpture in a distinctive art, where an arabesque of white light takes the place of the colours in space, and finally art becomes everything that man creates. He declares in the

speech for the IXth Triennale : « ... concrete (the tool) revolutionizes styles and the staticism of Modern architecture. Rhythms and volumes take over decorative style. Staticism (is replaced) by the freedom to build whatever laws of gravity permit. This new architecture (is replaced) by an art based on new techniques and media ; spatial art for now, neon, Wood's lamp, television, the 4th dimension ideal of architecture. Let me give you fantasies about cities of the future : sun, light, the conquest of spaces or the atomic suggest ways for people to protect themselves. It forms a new aesthetic : lighting forms through the spaces »¹². To confirm the importance of urban and architectural research of Lucio Fontana and his ongoing relationship with architecture of the city in its interior and exterior spaces, we must not forget a project in Milan, unfortunately left on paper : in 1960 for the XIIth Triennale a spatial remodelling of the tower erected in the park of Triennale by Gio Ponti thirty years before.



Lucio Fontana, *Neon structure for the IX Triennale in Milan*, 1951.

11 Fontana (Lucio), « Lettera a Enrico Crispolti, 1961 », in Crispolti (Enrico), *Omaggio a Fontana*, Assisi-Roma : Carucci, 1971, p. 99.

12 Fontana (Lucio), *Manifesto Tecnico*, 1951, read during International Congress on Proportion in the Arts, IX Triennale, Milano, 1951.

The project rethinks the relationship between architecture and public space and between urban space and art, placing the focus on how to use the locations and the deployment of artificial light at night. The link between it and the publication of philosopher Guy Debord at the end of the 1960s is clear, as Debord analyses the individual-spectator, at the same time actor and recipient of an aesthetic and artistic experience, that organises his whole life¹³. In this « social relationship involving people mediated by images », the city with its lights and glows becomes fertile ground to « configure the whole space as a scene of action ». The shining city assumes an important value at the symbolic level : the illuminated night becomes a metaphor for the modern man of the twentieth century.

It is during the Neorealism cinema era in Italy that we find *pedestrian* visions of the city, very often at night. In Roberto Rossellini's *Roma città aperta* (1945)¹⁴, Vittorio De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette or Miracolo a Milano* (1948, 1951), and later in the innovative Michelangelo Antonioni's *La Notte* (1961), artificial light is frequently a strong-weak suggestion set in opposition to the penetrating daylight. Nocturnal illuminated Italy, showed by Neorealism movies, is far removed from French Nouvelle Vague.

Are film image¹⁵ and art relevant tools in the design of the twentieth century Modern city ? Or are they simply the mirror and echo of the real ? For Italy after 1945 the two options were equally valid. The relationships between film and city and between their respective expressive forms (set design/ screenplay and urban space design) became protagonists of a dense critical narration of continuing suggestions. Cinema came out onto the streets, became *realistic*, and eliminated any screen. It reproduced the surrounding context without fiction, and became the act of seeing with one's own eyes. In the movie *Roma città aperta*, the title immediately reveals the meaning : people living outdoors day and night, the houses for the director Rossellini are the roads, private life is held in sunlight or in the penumbra of the night. Filming locations are those of the city crushed by war and hoping for modernity. Cinema abandoned its studios, that had been *in vogue* during the Fascist period as in American movies, to discover natural environments : shooting urban landscapes became the Neorealist seal of authenticity. The points of contact between Neorealist film and « Neo-realist architecture » of the post World War II period are many, despite the time lag between the two cultural movements.

In the atmosphere of Italian reconstruction, architects of « Neo-realist architecture » felt their contact with reality re-



The alienation of the Italian Modern city. Frame from the movie *La notte*, Michelangelo Antonioni director, 1961 and Ina-casa Residential district Cesate (Milan) by architects BBPR, Franco Albini, Ignazio Gardella, and others, 1950-1954.

13 Debord (Guy Ernest), *La société du spectacle*, Paris : Buchet/Chastel, 1957.

14 Bruni (David), *Roberto Rossellini, Roma città aperta*, Torino : Lindau, 2006.

15 Casavola (Massimo), Presicce (Luisa), Santuccio (Salvatore), *L'attore di pietra : l'architettura moderna italiana nel cinema*, Torino : Testo & immagine, 2001. Fagiani (Maria Luisa), *Città, cinema, società : immaginari urbani negli USA e in Italia*, Milano : Franco Angeli, 2008, Zagarrìo (Vito), *Cinema e fascismo : film, modelli, immaginari*, Venezia : Marsilio, 2004.

habilitated particularly strongly, seeing the city and its immediate future with new eyes. « This feeling was born of the so-called Neo-realism that found its most appropriate means of expression in the art of cinema, but has had an impact in various ways throughout Italian culture. Films by Rossellini and De Sica, the drama and comedy plays of Eduardo (De Filippo), paintings by Guttuso, buildings by Ridolfi in Terni and in Rome's suburban district of Tiburtino, share a common desire to join daily, pragmatic, comprehensive reality... »¹⁶. Architects working in Rome during the early post-war years were trying to avoid forms and images associated with the bygone Fascist regime, and eschewed references to ancient Rome, classicism and neoclassicism, along with references to Futurism and a rational language fairly similar to European avant-garde. The first post-war Italian Neo-realism is an attempt to overcome the two simplifications that had caged Italian architecture and urbanism and were found inadequate in the post-conflict reconstruction : Eclectic classical traditionalism on the one hand and pure-rationalist Modernism on the other. This tendency towards renewal led to the introduction of a new entirely Italian language with strong regionalist characteristics. Later, when the economic conditions permitted, Italian architecture would finally see modernist socio-cultural forms linked to the European Modern Movement, although always with « local influences ». This period was for Italian architects a time to reach for modernism, to hear a chronologically orderly and complete narrative of contemporary history, and while all of them wanted to forget responsibility towards that history, it nonetheless had a pre-existing perennial timeliness. Neo-realism gave them a *rebours* to what was already there, to the context of man, that is life, culture, environment, space, civilization of being. And the culture of collective life in Italy has always been connected with public spaces, squares, piazzas, bridges, open spaces, where often voids and monuments emerge at night, their marbles articulated by moonlight or streetlight. During the middle of the twentieth century, the Italian architect and intellectual Ernesto Nathan Rogers summarised the Italian situation thus : « The abundance of marble and natural stone has allowed us the use of these materials on an unprecedented scale in comparison to other countries, which amazes so many foreigners who come to us. They think we are crazy millionaires eating polenta in evening dress or, if you like, caviar in slippers »¹⁷.

In fifteen years the nocturnal representation of Rome went from the drama and violence of the war theme, portrayed in De Sica's *Ladri di biciclette*, 1948, a minor capital city, plagued by post-conflict unemployment or, as in *Roma città aperta*,

terrorized by the Gestapo, with ruined buildings almost entirely reduced to their skeletons, to the spectacularly clownish, lightweight Rome of *La dolce vita* by director Federico Fellini. Italy was largely rebuilt during the 1960s, at least in the major northern cities and the capital, where the youth of society was moving in line with Fellini, optimistic and a little cynical, and where some of metaphysical Modern buildings of the twentieth century (such as the E.U.R. district) rub shoulders with night-walks through Baroque Rome, visionarily distorted by artificial light, with highly impressive results and strong accents of light and darkness.

Finally, in the late sixties and early seventies of the twentieth century, in Italy, as elsewhere in Europe, the debate shifted, and the next two decades were spent in careful and critical review of the urban model defined in the 1933 Charter of Athens. Cultural positions had changed : light was no longer perceived as a vehicle of traditional and natural vision of urban space, but as an experimental tool of representation that belongs to the purely artificial sphere¹⁸. This was a time when the metropolitan condition underwent a review process (at least in the intellectual debate) in the context of what was by then the beginnings of an energy crisis. Artificial light in all its violence, exploitation and insecurity, began to become symbolic of the Postmodern urban condition, a powerful agent of transformation precisely because it is capable of re-defining the hierarchies of the real world, a deeply expressive art form in its own right that enriches and modifies the world of our experience. Italian architecture now acquired some strange protagonists of what would later become a defined movement (Neoavanguardia), in the students of the Faculty of Architecture in the University of Florence, particularly those who attended the lectures of Professor Leonardo Savioli, who had come to architecture through painting. He has never been forgotten as an artist and teacher by the Radical architects, and his influence is still felt today. Again the force of art generated a new approach to architecture, highlighting the particular importance of light and colour. In November 1966 young Florentine architects organised the first exhibition of *Superarchitettura*. This was a landmark, and before the second *Superarchitettura* the two renowned Italian Radical groups, Archizoom and Superstudio, were formed. Magazines such *Domus*, *Casabella* and others, acted as mouthpieces for this Neoavanguardia, while some complex architectural critics made their assessment of these movements clear : « This liberation ironically retraces the historical avant-gard utopias : the projects of deserts occupied by metaphysical super objects – like the self-propagandist exercises of the Italian

16 Licata (Antonella), Mariani Travi (Elisa), *La città e il cinema*, Bari : Dedalo, 1985, p. 33-34.

17 Rogers (Ernesto Nathan), « La tradizione dell'architettura moderna in Italia », *Casabella-Continuità*, n° 214, 1957, p. 1-7. See also Rogers (Ernesto Nathan), « The evolution of present day Italian architecture », *Architects' yearbook*, n° 4, 1951, p. 40-45.

18 Neumann (Dietrich), *Architecture of the night*, in *Luminous building. Architecture of the night*, edited by Ackermann (Marion), Neumann (Dietrich), Ostfildern/Stuttgart, Hatje Cantz/Kunstmuseum, p. 24-29.

Archizoom and Superstudio groups – consuming ad nauseam the late romantic aspirations of Bruno Taut's *Aufloesung der Staedt* (Dissolution of Cities) »¹⁹. This movement was not, at the time, studied and evaluated in a broader international perspective, but the phenomenon of Radical Italian architecture takes on its true value in the context of the more complex history of rebellion that went on simultaneously in different parts of the world. Its glory would come in 1972, when New York's MoMA took a large number of Radical controdesign for its exhibition *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape*.

During this courageous and radical avant-garde architectural period, other artistic disciplines that were far from the all-Italian architecture and art « rule » appeared in Italy, for once. In the Northern regions of the peninsula arrived the artists of the *Nouveau Réalisme* expressing a message only partly ironic and irreverent, and in fact traces a more intense drama deriving from the sense of powerless despair against the society of consumerism and individual welfare. At the same time greater meaning to the act and the intention of the artist, in recognition the true artistic event is not the resulting work but the physical and intellectual activity

that went into it. Light, fire and colour were instruments of these artistic actions. In the city of Milan the critic Pierre Restany found a second home, and the tenth anniversary of the movement was celebrated in Milan in 1970. On that occasion, in November, the members decreed their artistic death, but then continued to operate as before, producing works of great importance in qualitative and conceptual terms. The Rotonda della Besana hosted the works of each artist, the city centre was the scene of various « happenings » (from Christo packaging in Piazza della Scala, to the bright and smoky burning of Tinguely's phallic statue, *Victory*, on the steps of Piazza del Duomo). Thus, again, the historic and ancient Italic public space, the heart of the Italian city, brought together people and architecture, an urban place in the light sense of avant-garde, and illuminated the night with an act of artistic freedom.

This survey of forty years of Italian civic life, could be fittingly concluded with Aristotle's famous phrase « Art is the faculty of creating the truth with reflection », which may be taken to mean that imagination, art, and innovation, should not be cultivated in a cool, dark place, and that the real world must be illuminated by the light of the reason.



The tenth anniversary of Nouveau Réalisme in Milan, 1970, from *Domus* issue, n°493.

19 Tafuri (Manfredo), Dal Co (Francesco), *Internazionale dell'utopia, Architettura contemporanea*, Milano: Electa, 1976.