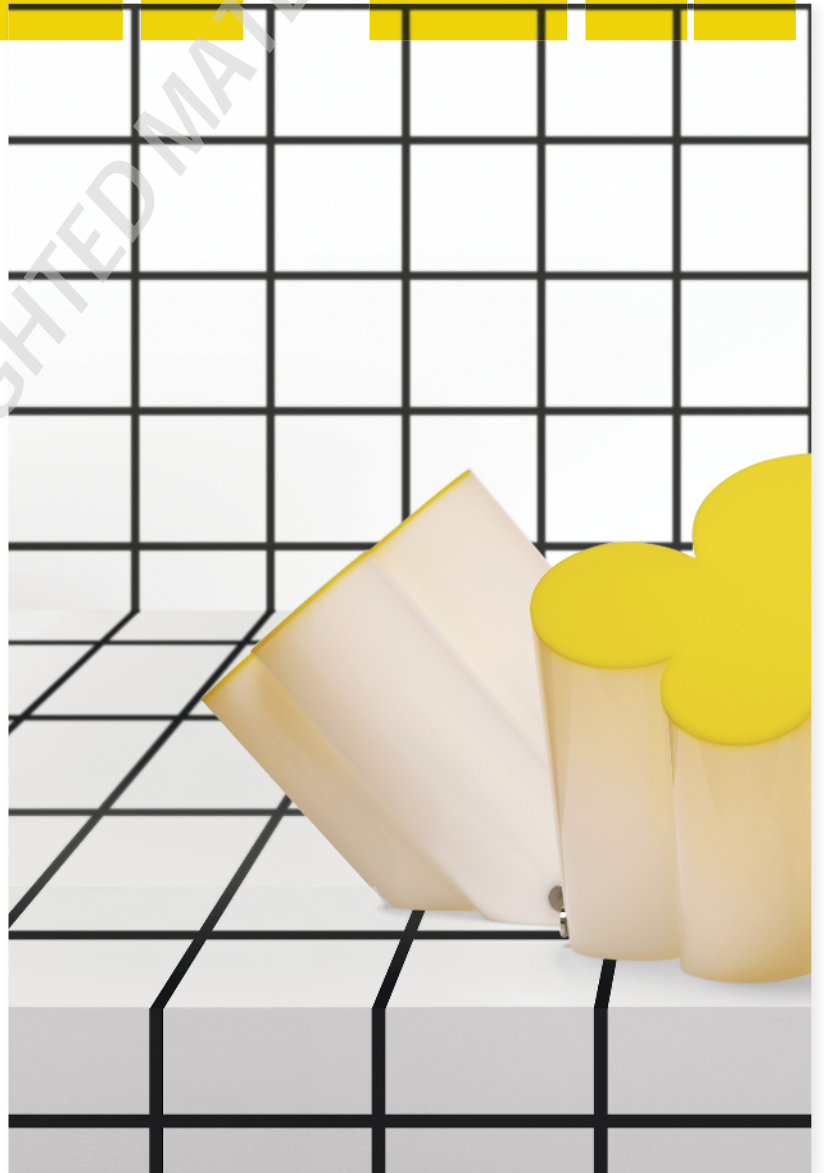


SUPER NS SUPER

Superstudio,
Passiflora lamp,
manufactured by Poltronova,
1968

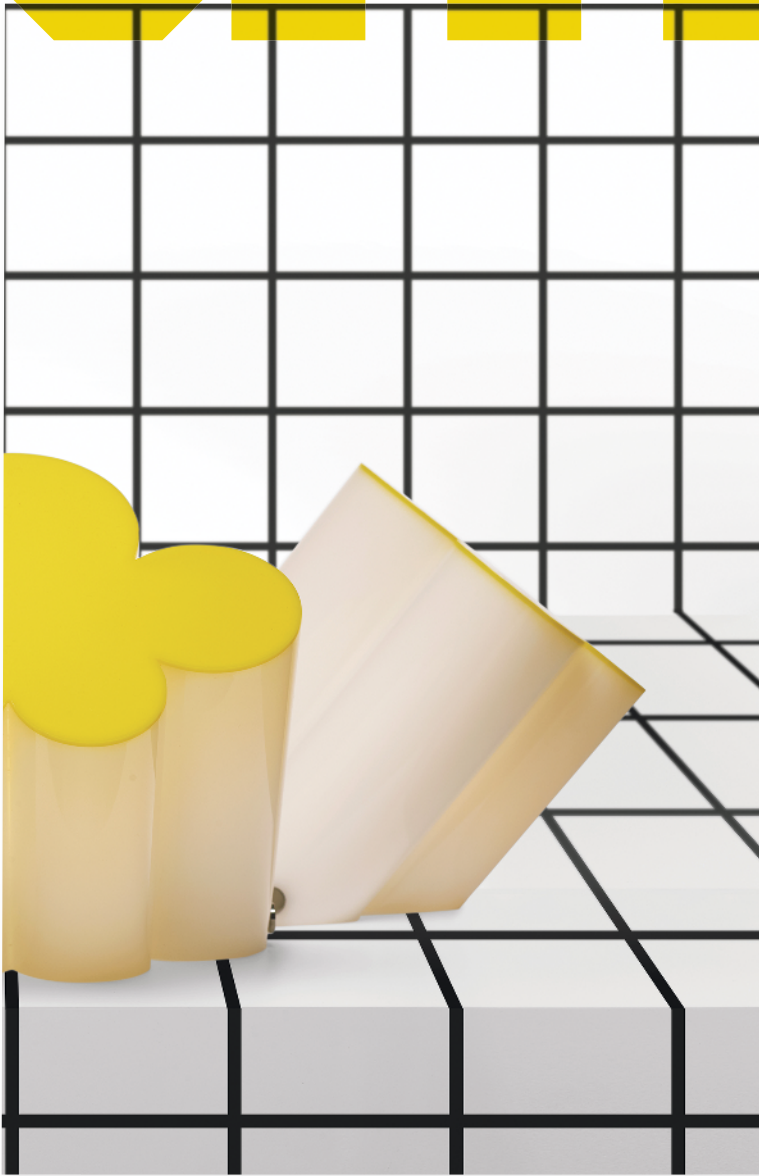
This lighting fixture comes from a painted cardboard prototype made for the 1966 exhibition 'Superarchitettura' at Galleria Jolly in Pistoia. The cardboard was replaced by transparent plastic, transforming Passiflora into what Poltronova's marketing materials describe as 'a luminous truncated column: a column whose deformed profile wavers between natural and artificial, in a game of allusions and ambiguities'.



STUDIO

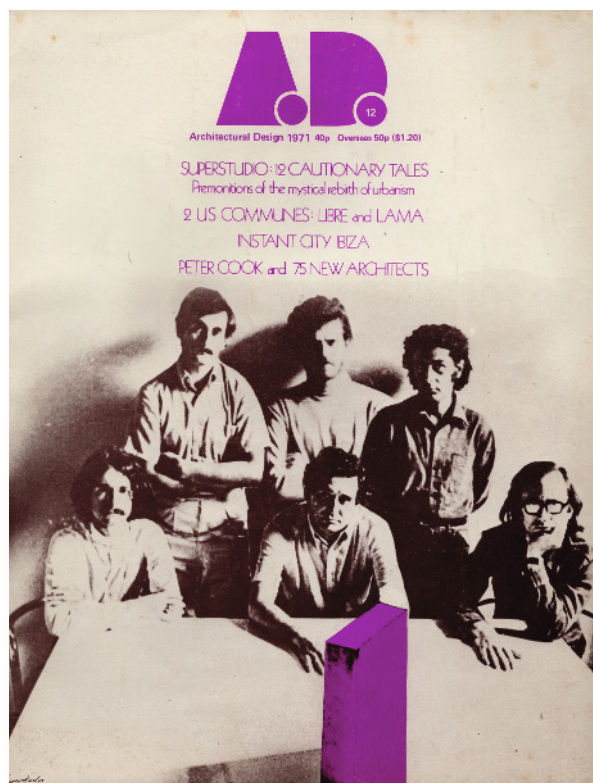
William Menking

OFFICE



THE
LABOUR
OF
RADICAL
DESIGN

Key avant-garde players are often assumed to be divorced from the reality of practice. In the case of Superstudio, this assumption is wildly inaccurate. **William Menking**, co-founder and Editor-in-Chief of *The Architect's Newspaper* and Professor at Pratt Institute, New York, co-organised the 2003 exhibition 'Superstudio: Life Without Objects' with Peter Lang. Here he puts right some myths about the nature of this well-known but much-misunderstood Florentine collaborative, setting it in the context of the intellectual and industrial climate of 1960s Italy, and exploring how its approach can inspire those seeking to rethink practice today.



The architect's suicide and the disappearance of architecture are two equivalent phenomena: to work towards the one or the other is only a question of quantity. In both cases, it means eliminating the formal structures connected to the artificial scale of values.

In this sense, our work has used the instruments of architecture in a contrary fashion, gradually, through absurdity, showing its uselessness, its falsity and its immorality.

—Adolfo Natalini, Architectural Association School of Architecture lecture, London, 3 March 1971¹

It is now over 10 years since 'Parametricism' was declared 'the great new style after modernism'.² But while the role of computation in experimental material research and design is undeniable, the application of the computer to the design and production of buildings has also facilitated an increased regimentation and corporatisation of design practice and architectural production. In day-to-day practice the working environment in the typical architect's office has increasingly become one of disconnection, repetition of labour, lack of cooperation and, in the long term, dehumanisation and a loss of cognitive skills. The issues of architectural labour in a globalised economy are among the most important for young practitioners and are the derivation of research and advocacy groups like the American groups The Architecture Lobby and Who Builds Your Architecture?³

Many firms are trying to rethink how their highly organised command and control structures might be rearranged to better handle the massive information flows now available through distributed computing, autonomous modelling systems and artificial intelligence coming into their offices. But these firms are usually reinforcing their existing structure, rather than thinking more creatively how best to create a better, more equal shared working culture. This shift from a traditional architectural command-and-control structure to a less corporate model requires a total cultural change, and most firms are not able or are unwilling to make this leap in how work is carried out in daily practice.

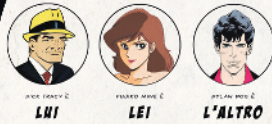
New Models of Architectural Labour

Many young architects are pushing back against this corporate structure and creating new, less hierarchical modes of practice. Perhaps because they are newly formed, more

Cover of *AD*,
no 12,
1971

The cover photo shows Superstudio in their office at 1 via di Bellosguardo, Florence. From left to right: Cristiano Toraldo di Francia, Alessandro Magris, Roberto Magris, Adolfo Natalini, Gianpiero Frassinelli and Alessandro Polli. On the table is their purple *Hidden Architecture*, published in *Design Quarterly* in January 1971.

IL DRAMUN



Warehouse of Architecture and Research (WAR), *Il Dramun*, 2018

Il Dramun, or 'drama by moonlight', is WAR's attempt to creatively represent one of its housing projects – currently ongoing near the cities of Pesaro and Urbino – in comic-book story form to reflect its architectural design in a way that captures attention, evocative of the soap opera's simple storytelling. Although digitally produced, it is clearly influenced by the storyboard-form drawings of Superstudio as presented, for example, in their *Fundamental Acts* (1971–3).

attuned to the possibilities of a shared working environment, working outside the market or simply desiring a more equal decision-making process, many are creating new forms of professional practice. These studios realise that the possibilities of shared practice are actually enhanced because of the computer.

New approaches to architectural labour can be seen in various forms in the work of two international groupings of like-minded designers. One group might include Sam Jacob in London, Olalekan Jeyifous in Brooklyn, and Warehouse of Architecture and Research (WAR) in Rome. This is the 'digitally averse' group that Mario Carpo derisively calls 'the Post-digitalists' or the PoDigs, though these practices and individuals have more refined and radical notions of computation and culture than Carpo would allow.⁴ A second group proposing new models of work are collaboratives like raumlabor (in Berlin), Assemble (in London), Crimson (in Rotterdam), FACE Design (in New York) and Traumnovelle (in Brussels). These groups are fluid and multidisciplinary in nature, often made up of not only architects, but informal groupings of social scientists, artists and craftspeople. They are frequently professionals inexperienced in design studio culture, formed and hardened in architecture schools, and they expect a decision-making process that works horizontally across production and research decisions, not top-down or hierarchical. The groups all claim to champion interdisciplinary, often open-system practice with architecture at the centre of their projects.



raumlabor, Floating University, Berlin, 2018

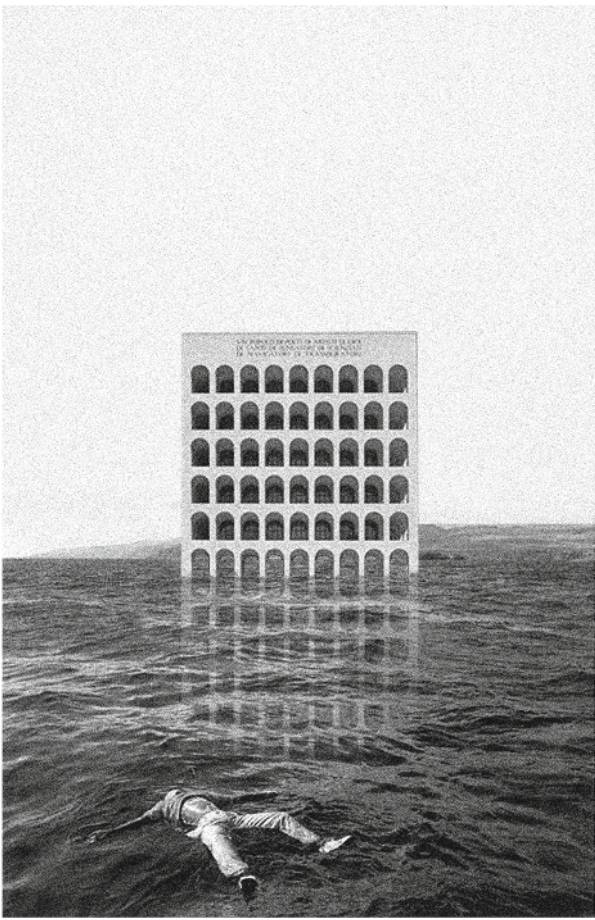
A summer learning centre in a rainwater basin, designed as a place where transdisciplinary research teams consider the complex questions of urban practice like how cities might cope with risks, strains and chances of global warming, resource shortages, super-diversity and hyper-accelerated development.

History of Non-Traditional Practice

This idea of a group architectural practice, where individuals bring different skills and abilities into a collaborative design process, goes back to at least the 1960s and groups like Archigram (in London), Ant Farm (in San Francisco), Utopie (in Paris) and others. These media-savvy groups remain role models for their powerful utopian image making, but also for their multidisciplinary approach and working structure. Today's younger practices and figures seeking new ways of work all look back, often romantically, to the period of the 1960s and 1970s for inspiration, and to the Italian 'design Radicals' – particularly Superstudio, founded in Florence in 1966 by Adolfo Natalini and Cristiano Toraldo di Francia.⁵

Jacopo Costanzo, from the Roman group WAR, claims a generational affinity with Superstudio and says 'we learned from them to question the system, to take care with storytelling and how to represent projects.'⁶ But he also believes the 'heterogeneity of the Florentines' working studio method' is a crucial part of their legacy for current generations.⁷ 'They were,' he says '*complex and contradictory* as a team, with deep differences, but every project they made was strong, clear and synthetic.'⁸

Beyond the images they produced, what makes Superstudio's working method and practice relevant to today's practitioners? It is important first to put right a widespread misconception about how the Italian group practised from their founding until 1973, when they entered into the larger collaborative design group Global Tools and began to break apart as a functioning collective. Benjamin Foerster-Baldenius, from raumlabor, admires Superstudio and says 'yes 70s utopian groups have influenced us – it's obvious, no? The difference is that we work out there in reality.'⁹ This idea that Superstudio did not work 'out there in reality' and focused only on theoretical propositions and later art installations is a common misunderstanding about the Florentines, fed by statements of theirs like the one calling 'for the architect's public suicide' or when they declared 'design must disappear, we can live without architecture'.¹⁰

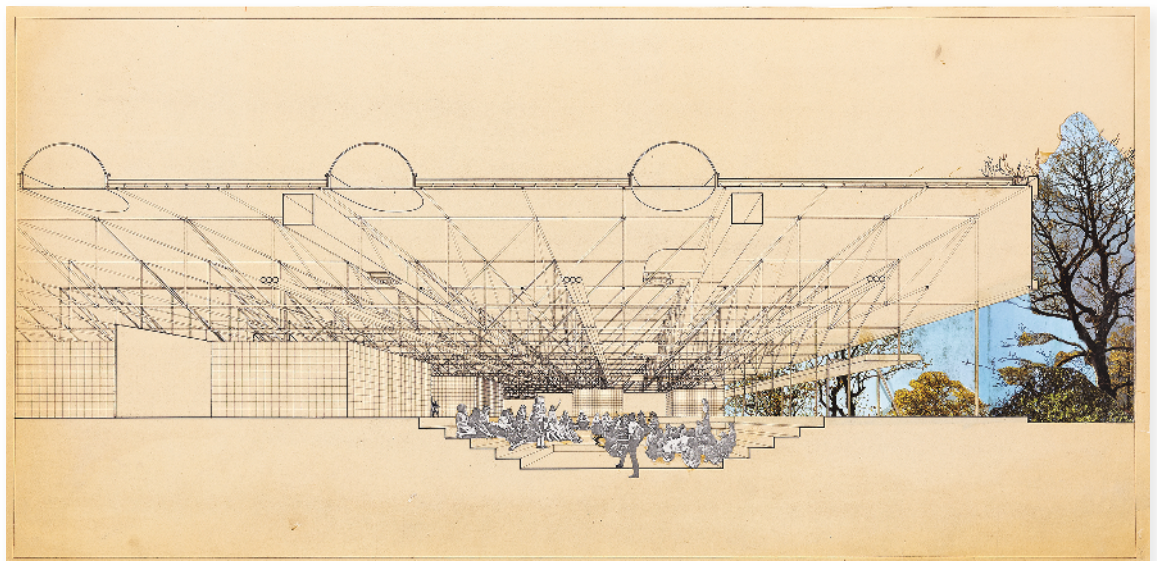


Traumnovelle,
Ode to Joy,
2018

Traumnovelle describe themselves as a 'militant faction' of three Belgian architects. They, like Superstudio, claim to follow a multidisciplinary approach with 'architecture at the crossroads' and acknowledge their landscape collage technique.

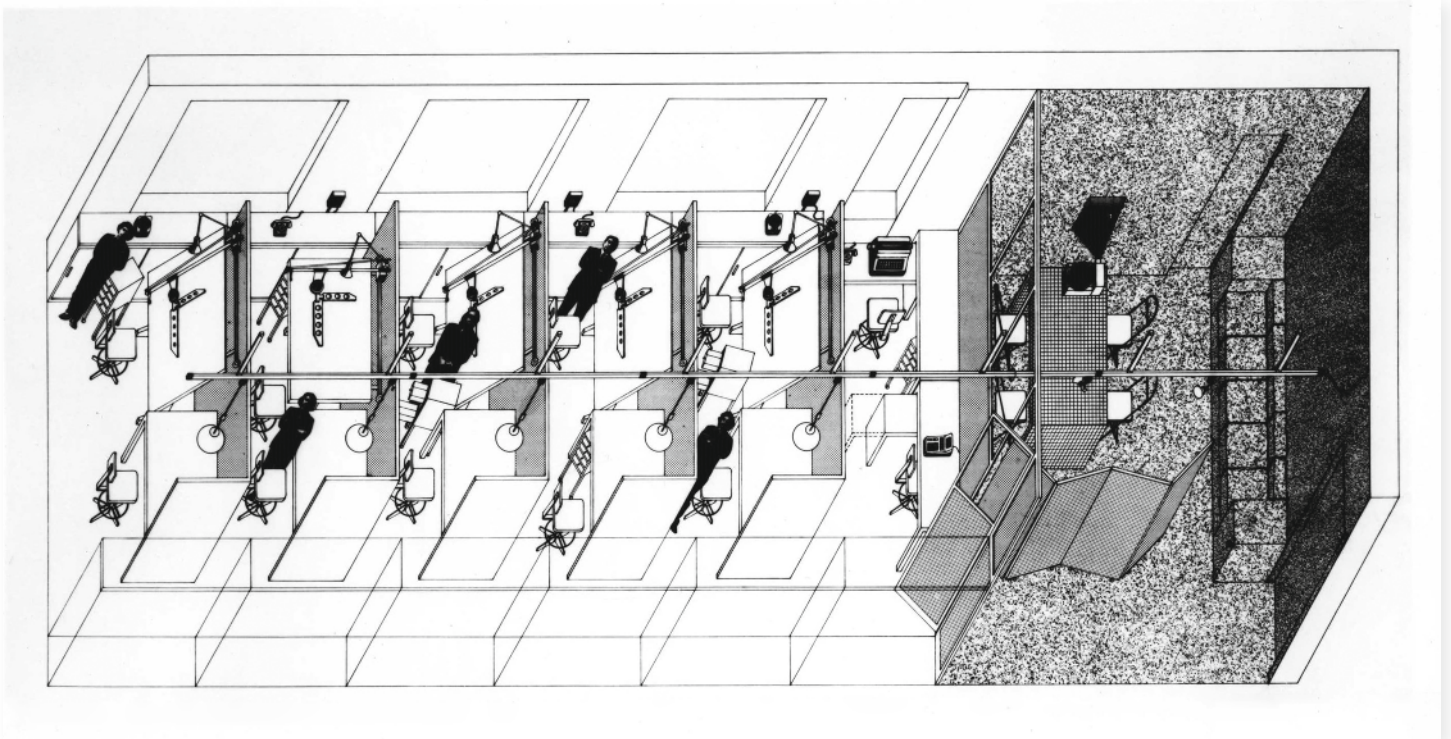
Superstudio,
Competition design for
a school in La Spezia,
Italy,
1968

Superstudio as a professional office entered competitions and hoped to win and build their designs. This drawing and collage illustrates their *Continuous Monument* grid and their 'theory-practice-theory check' way of working.



Superstudio,
Collage of the Superstudio office
at 1 via di Bellosguardo,
Florence,
1973

Created for an exhibition at the Neue Galerie Graz, Austria,
this is a theoretical not actual depiction of Superstudio's
working office. Despite their reputation as theorists, they
are pictured here as practising architects.



Superstudio,
Design for a hotel in the Coliseum,
Rome,
1969

Superstudio's building project is clearly unbuildable
because of its location in the Roman Coliseum but a
concept that is entirely realisable.

Labour Inside Superstudio

During the preparation of the catalogue for the exhibition 'Superstudio: Life Without Objects', which was first shown at London's Design Museum in 2003, multiple conversations with members of the group – particularly Gianpiero Frassinelli and Adolfo Natalini¹¹ – revealed that while their work has used the instruments of architecture in a contrary fashion, as a working group they intended to transform architecture from inside the profession and wanted to practise 'architecture'.¹²

They were not proposing that architects give up on the profession, as their contemporary critic Manfredo Tafuri argued, or become artists or anthropologists.¹³ It is easy to read their 1973 *Project Zeno* as a call for designers to focus on planning or anthropology, or the 1978 installation *The Wife of Lot* as architects working as artists at the Venice art biennale. Peter Lang points out how Superstudio differed from the other Florentine Radicals:

Superstudio embarked on a 'classical' architectural trajectory, effectively campaigning to destabilize modern architecture while remaining within the enlightenment language of perspectival space ... they did not ... seek to challenge the conventions of representation, or the projection of two-dimensional singular ocular perspective, but to subvert the principles of architecture within this convention.¹⁴



Superstudio,
Table, manufactured by Zanotta,
1973

The table was presented at the Neue Galerie Graz, Austria and then went into commercially successful production – an illustration of Superstudio's 'theory-practice-theory check' which stemmed from a combination of the particular conditions of craft production and the overheated intellectual atmosphere in Italy at the time.

In fact, Superstudio's ubiquitous black-on-white grids, used so powerfully in their *Continuous Monument* series (1969), might be understood as refined architectural language used to poetically communicate their thinking with other designers. Given the experiments in perspective by architects and artists in Renaissance Florence, the use of the grid had a special resonance for the members of the group. The 1971–3 Superstudio series *Fundamental Acts* (*Life, Education, Ceremony, Love, Death*), they claim in *Casabella* magazine, is a plea specifically to architects 'to engage or re-engage in the profession', and they emphasised the 'fundamental themes of our life'.¹⁵ Further they conclude the Acts by stating 'the attempt to regenerate architecture both anthropologically and philosophically becomes the core of our reductive process'.¹⁶ Even their collaboration in the 1973 super-group Global Tools can be understood as a last attempt to reform, not leave, the profession.

In order to understand Superstudio's formation as a collective it is important to be aware that it came together at the time of Italy's 'economic miracle'.¹⁷ This was the time of the creation of a consumer and rebellious youth culture in the country and the specific conditions of Italian 'collective action'.¹⁸ But to understand Superstudio's 'classical trajectory', it is more important to go back to their founding at the University of Florence and the special architectural culture of the Tuscan city.

Italian Architectural Education in the 1960s

Italian architectural education in the 1960s was unique and, with no centralised education or professional standards in place, each school, as Peter Lang argues, had its 'own archaic system' that 'effectively managed to create a sort of permanent antagonistic relationship between a cast of characters that included the administrations, the faculty the students and that carried on throughout most of the 1960s'.¹⁹ Located in major urban centres – Rome, Milan, Venice and Florence – each was dominated by local architects and intellectual figures. In Rome, Bruno Zevi created a school inspired by the organicism of American architect Frank Lloyd Wright (1867–1959); Milan focused on industrial production; and Venice was under the influence of the historical and theoretical writings of Manfredo Tafuri. Florence, dominated by a conservative local profession and ancient faculty, had its own dynamic that included the student occupation of administrators' offices (including by several of the Superstudio members) and the creation of a council of students and faculty. What made Florence unique was that the council's suggestions were taken up by faculty members like Leonardo Ricci and Leonardo Savioli, and this introduced an entirely new sensibility to the university's classes.²⁰ As Peter Lang writes, it kept education 'less concerned with an ideologically driven socially conditioned architecture ... and far more interested in investigating new cultural phenomena and their impact on establishing new building technologies'.²¹

In particular, Ricci's hands-on experimental workshops promoted a multi-dimensional approach, including broad freedoms in composition strategies, materials, sculpture, film and music. Cristiano Toraldo di Francia claims this approach shook up the school and because the students were encouraged to take education into their own hands Superstudio formed as a collaborative focusing on theoretical media experiments, proposals and installations.²² 'Radical Architecture,' Frassinelli claimed, 'was born in the occupied university'.²³

In addition, Florence was home to a lively cultural, publishing and art scene. Maria Gloria Bicocchi's avant-garde gallery Centrodifusionegrafica brought international artists to Florence including those featured in the New York-based magazine *Avalanche*, such as the Americans Dennis Oppenheim, Allan Kaprow, Vito Acconci and Bill Viola. Their presence served as inspiration for the Superstudio architects to remain professionals while addressing important contemporary social issues. Bicocchi (whose gallery assistant was the partner of Frassinelli) says about this period in Florence:

I think that everyone in Florence in those days (1971/74) was connected and influenced each other, centrodifusionegrafica without Schema Zona, Superstudio, UFO, Archizoom and all the atmosphere of experimental culture would probably have not existed one without the other ... we shared artists, exhibitions and ideas. We were very much tuned together!²⁴

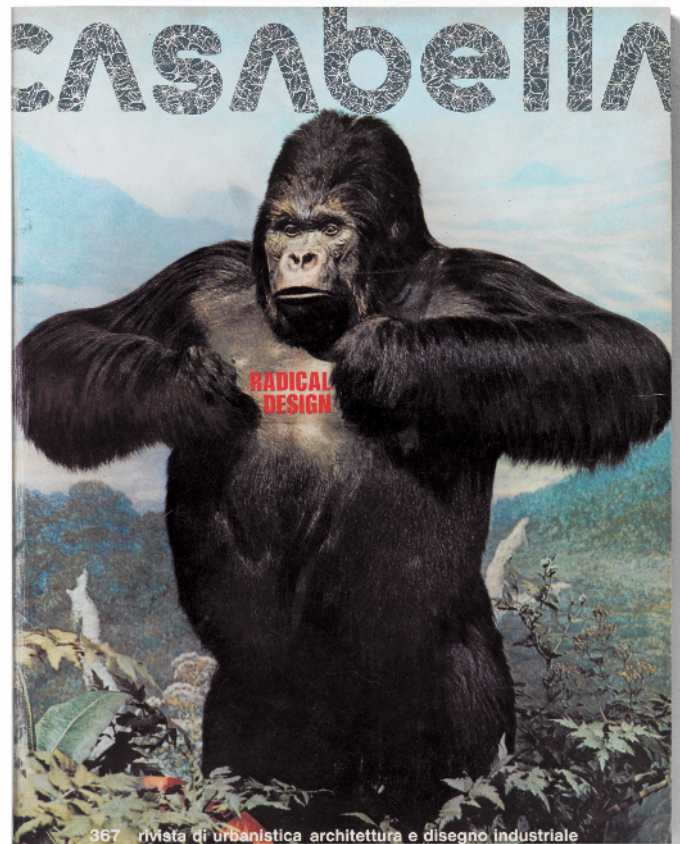
Theory-Practice-Theory Check

Further, in the period when Superstudio produced their most important theoretical and artistic work they were simultaneously designing and building nightclubs, banks, private houses, furniture, lamps and even railway carriages. In this particularly Italian condition, as Lang notes, 'the process developed into a series of checks and balances whereby the theory engendered the production, and [was] subsequently re-theorised, controlled and modified'.²⁵ Superstudio's black-on-white *Continuous Monument* grid, for example, became a commercially successful line of tables, lamps and luxury household objects. Natalini claims Italian architects focused on designing luxury goods because so many were unemployed. In the Florence School of Architecture, he goes on, there were '6,000 students, and architects in Italy are in charge of only 25% of the total built volume of buildings ... so there was little work for these professionals'. The Italian 'furniture industry' had only two firms with more than 500 employees, while its many small independent craft workshops allowed 'an ample margin of little experiments'.²⁶ Natalini calls this the 'theory-practice-theory check' that arose in this special condition of craft production in Italy and the overheated intellectual atmosphere of the period. But this 'overheated atmosphere' began to play itself out by about 1972, when the Radicals were put on an international stage at the Museum of Modern Art in New York for the exhibition 'Italy: The New Domestic Landscape'.²⁷ In addition to being included in this seminal exhibition, Superstudio continued to produce key works that year, as well as help co-found the short-lived open educational experimental workshop project Global Tools. Intended to be a revolutionary institution, it hoped to integrate education into the daily life of the population. This workshop was intended to be 'devoted to the formation of a school in Florence to nurture the creative facilities of every single human being and bridge the alienating gap that has taken the form between the work of the hands and that of the brain', and 'behaviors and gestures whose mere memory risks being erased by the logic of specialization, speed, and economic efficiency which characterize advanced capitalism'.²⁸

This penultimate attempt by Superstudio in the Global Tools collaborative to reform the profession, brings us back full circle to the current practice of corporate architecture and the concentration on computer algorithms so prevalent in design practice today. The Florentines' call to nurture the creative facilities of human beings 'stifled by specialization and the frenzy to achieve efficiency' perfectly describes the working conditions of today's digital design environment.²⁹ If we fixate on Superstudio's compelling graphic images and ignore their social conception of labour and working, we miss the truly 'radical' nature of their project. It is imperative that the contemporary generation of critical practitioners continue to reform the meaning of work and labour begun by the Radicals nearly five decades ago. ▢

Notes

1. Peter Lang and William Menking, *Superstudio: Life Without Objects*, Skira (Milan), 2003, p 31.
2. Patrik Schumacher, *The Autopoiesis of Architecture, Volume 1: A New Framework for Architecture*, John Wiley & Sons (Chichester), 2011.
3. See <https://architecture-lobby.org> and <http://whobuilds.org/>.
4. Mario Carpo, 'Post-Digital "Quitters": Why the Shift Toward Collage is Worrying', *Metropolis*, 26 March 2018; www.metropolismag.com/architecture/post-digital-collage.
5. *Casabella*, no 367, 1972. There is debate about when the term 'Radical Design' was first used. I refer to its use in *Casabella*.
6. Email exchange with Sam Jacob, 13 November 2018.
7. Email exchange with Jacopo Costanzo, 19 November 2018.
8. *Ibid.*
9. Email exchange with Benjamin Foerster-Baldenius, 13 November 2018.
10. Lang and Menking, *op cit*, p 31.
11. *Ibid.*, pp 31–51.
12. *Ibid.*, p 44.
13. Manfredo Tafuri, 'Design and Technological Utopia', in Emilio Ambasz (ed), *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape*, exhibition catalogue, Museum of Modern Art (New York), 1972, pp 388–404.
14. Lang and Menking, *op cit*, p 44.
15. *Casabella*, no 367, July 1972, pp 16–26.
16. *Ibid.*
17. Paul Ginsborg, *A History of Contemporary Italy: Society and Politics 1943–1988*, Penguin (London), 1990, p 212.
18. *Ibid.*, p 298.
19. Lang and Menking, *op cit*, p 39.
20. Marie Theres Stauffer, 'Utopian Reflections, Reflected Utopias: Urban Designs by Archizoom and Superstudio', *AA Files*, 27, 1994, pp 23–36.
21. Lang and Menking, *op cit*, p 40.
22. *Ibid.*, p 46.
23. *Ibid.*, p 40.
24. Email exchange with Maria Gloria Biocchi, 14 November 2018.
25. Lang and Menking, *op cit*, pp 46–7.
26. *Ibid.*, p 60, quoting Adolfo Natalini.
27. Ambasz, *op cit*.
28. Valerio Borghonovo and Silvia Franceschini, *Global Tools 1973–1975*, SALT (Istanbul), 2015, p 12 (originally published 1974); http://saltonline.org/media/files/globaltools_scrd.pdf.
29. *Ibid.*



Casabella,
no 367, July 1972

The then editor of *Casabella* Alessandro Mendini, who was also the author of the cover illustration, made the magazine available for the Global Tools group to publish its manifesto of 'the rejection of work as a necessary condition to the recovery of a meditative civilization'.