



4<sup>th</sup> ISUFitaly International Conference | Bari, 26-28 september 2018

# READING BUILT SPACES

Cities in the making and future urban form

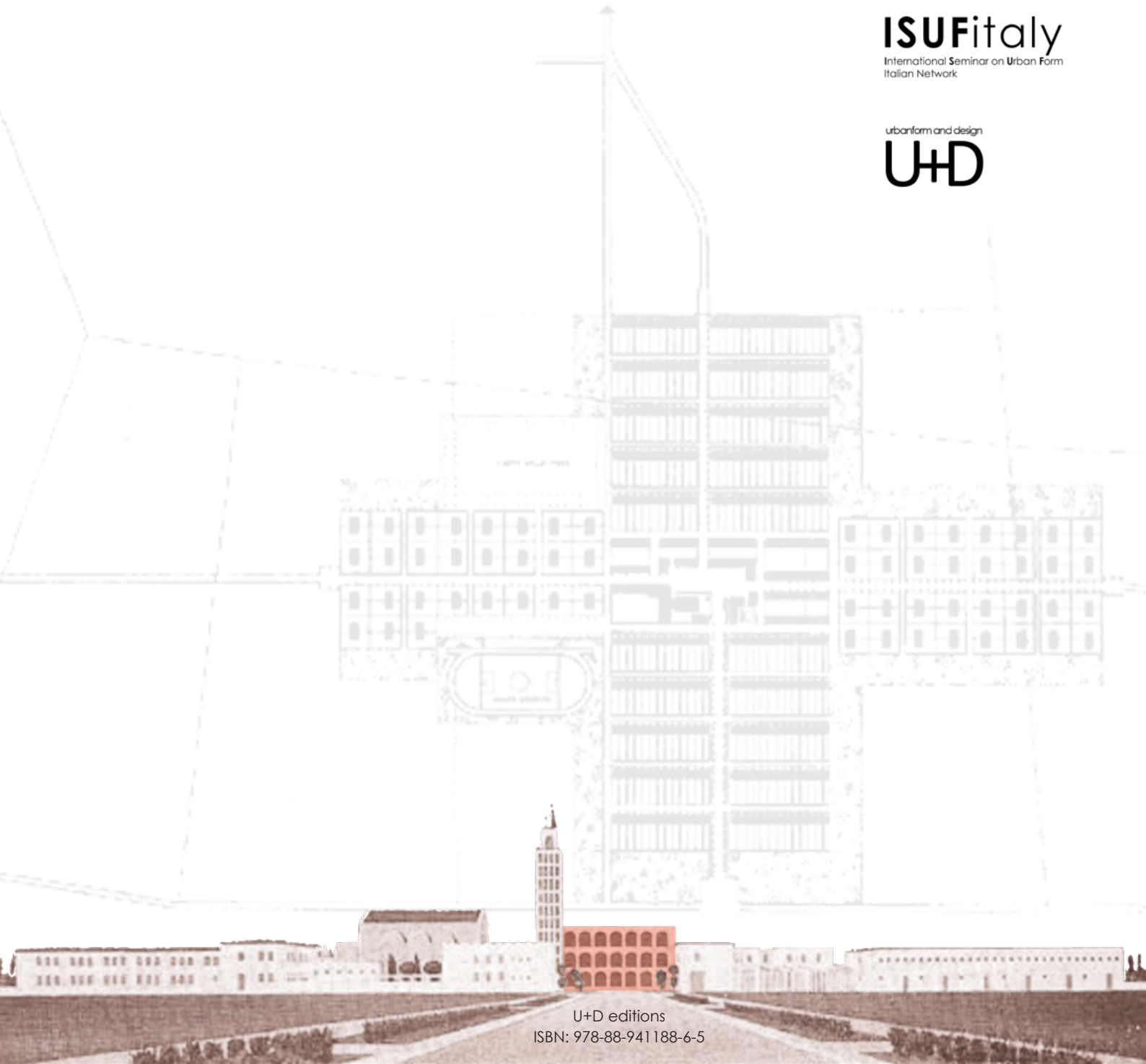
edited by  
Paolo Carlotti  
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Matteo leva



Politecnico di Bari

**ISUFitaly**  
International Seminar on Urban Form  
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## **READING BUILT SPACES**

Cities in the making and future urban form

READING BUILT SPACES | cities in the making and future urban form

# Presentation

The city is an “organism in the making”, an entity in constant transformation, not a complex of immutable elements. The city represents the entire human experiential field of the world, considered as expression of a “fundamental movement of existence” in its completeness and historicity, expressed by the formative structure of tissues and building types, by the urban hierarchies, by the relations with the territory, by the social relations, and by the values and criticalities.

The conference's aim is to propose a dialectical comparison between scholars of Architecture, Urban Planning, Urban History, Restoration, Geography, on the theme of urban morphology with an interpretative perspective based on the concept of “operating history”. Search for a multidisciplinary syncretism that eludes single analyzing techniques and aims to the complete reconstruction of the urban phenomenology in its totality and concrete essence, through the study of the changing and inflexible condition of ‘fluidity’ hinged on the world's events. An integrated thought based on the critical concept of ‘making’ that constitutes, phase by phase, the signifying element of each present, explained through the relationship between the before and the after: that is the research perspective of ‘being’ that announces the notion of transformational process.

Therefore, the projection in the future of the urban form is the central theme of the conference that proposes to stimulate the reflection on the issues as: recovery (not only of the historical city), re-use of existing urban spaces, regeneration, ex novo design in peripheral and peri-urban areas and natural spaces. All that, without neglecting the issue of sustainability, not considered with the strabismus of those who surrender to the “technique” pre-domain.



# Organization

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# Conference Themes

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- B.1 Urban form between architecture and landscape
- C.1 Urban form between identity and spatial semantics
- D.1 Contemporary urban spaces between form and process
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## Analysis device: mega-structures on the threshold

**Luigi Mandraccio**

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**Keywords:** *Threshold, Density, Interface, Mega-structure, Landscape*

The urban framework experiences a permanent face-off with transformation and evolution processes, both inside and outside it, and also on the thresholds. The connections toward a more territorial frame, such as the network of infrastructures are more evident at this stage because of a lower density.

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The visible interfaces within the city boundaries, as a sort of urban gates, are not only infrastructures, but also large industrial complexes. Beyond every single case, with its own characteristics, all these situations concern huge artifacts in which architectural qualities are also recognized.

Following my present PhD research path on the scientific mega-structures and their role inside the architectural practice, I will explicit how they could be an efficient device as a provocative case of study to struggle the city's capacity to manage its thresholds. The relation with both the city, on one side, and the nature on the other but also within more complex area in which these two entities are not so distinct can be studied in a register of different scales: from the architectonic level of a laboratory building to the landscape of an antenna, 3 kilometers long, for gravitational wave. It is not just a matter of discussing the placement of these structures, but also how their strong symbolic meaning can be managed and absorbed by the city.

Architecture is facing off a crisis about its relevance on the matter of the city – in spite of connections that obviously exist between both. It does not seem able to deal the complex and dynamic mix of issues and needs inside the contemporary city.

In order to recover its role architecture should focus on a deeper research over the cities' matter, so as to identify some arguments on which it can be determinant again.

Each research about the city must consider the series of contradictions that emerges in the last decades. The main trend describes a large-scale urbanisation, with a frenetic speed: the prevision says that about 69 per cent of the population will live in a city by 2050. The idea of this conurbation process, apparently unstoppable, can generate anxiety and fear because it seems to change our lives in term of quality and lifestyle. Architects do not appear to be able to prevent and manage these changes with a true urban strategy. All their actions take place in retrospect, when it is often too late.

If it is no clear that the future will be as worrying as it seems, then it is not necessary to hypothesise a completely different model of the future, because I think that it will be true that a growing part of the population will live in a "city". But we have to reconsider what is "city" inside this premonition.

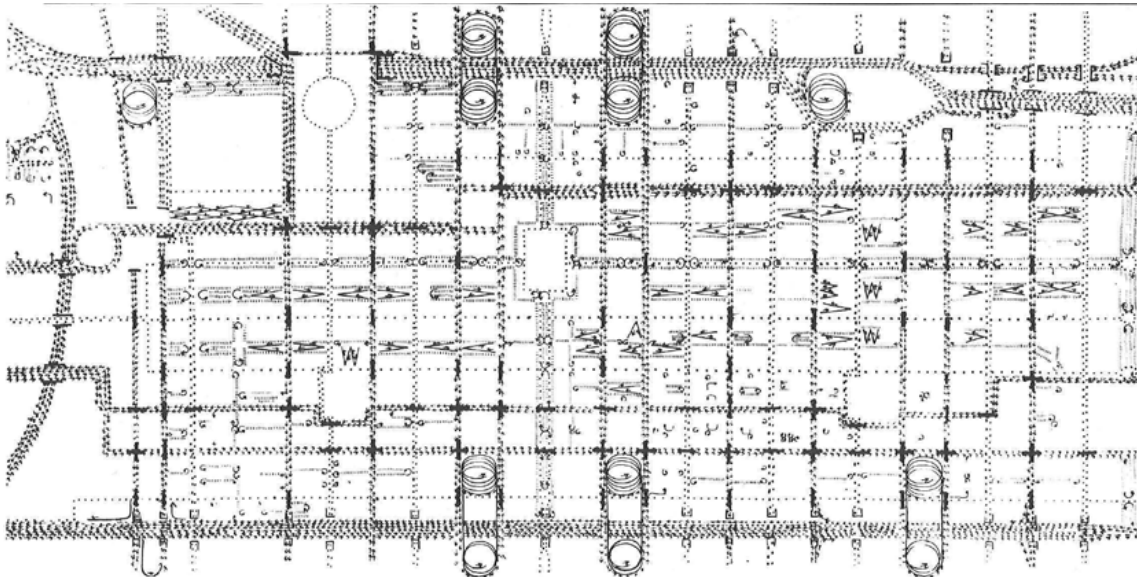
Probably the idea of the city as a hyper-technological megalopolis is no longer so relevant. Rem Koolhaas proposes his "new" point of view through the upcoming research/exhibition "Countryside: Future of the World"<sup>1</sup>. On the opposite side, as evidence that the question about future is absolutely open, I can suggest "Don't Waste Time in the Countryside", written by Patrick Schumacher in 2016.

Inside this uncertainty moment about the very meaning of "city", especially in relation with what it will represent in the future, we are experiencing the dynamics of change and evolution of the present cities.

174 As architects, we must go deeper with the research on the city in order to deal with the high level of complexity of the matters related to the urban context. Our starting points are two consolidated models, plus certain more "advanced" trends.

**Figure 1.** Reformed traffic circulation project, Philadelphia (Louis Kahn, 1952).

This scheme underlines how much "circulation" can affect a project, even if the author is not a modernist *tout-court*.



The first model is the historical and traditional city. It is certainly a fact, a parameter, inside the design process. But it is also a clean model of "city", by different elements, shapes, relations, quality. The traditional city is a living mark to be considered very

<sup>1</sup> The Solomon R. Guggenheim Museum has invited Rem Koolhaas and AMO to collaborate on this project. The team involves the Harvard Graduate School of Design. The exhibition will open in fall 2019.

carefully.

Then, the second model: the *city-in-the-park* paradigm, always presented in bewitching images that never really materialize.

If the traditional city is built, is accomplished, this second model represents first of all a design strategy not completely accomplished; it is still under development.

From this *city-in-the-park* model descends an approach that, mixed with the tragicomic Italian bureaucracy, brought at the paralysis of the town-planning/urban design.

The exasperated diagramming, without any efficient model of mediation, of understatement and of contextualization, produce the alienation of the town planning from the reality of life and of the design. A gap that is clear in the major part of the present planning works.

**Figure 2.** Downtown Fort Worth project (Victor Gruen Associates, 1956).

The model/collage represents the level of the organization – spaces and functions – reached by this proposal, and the impact that this kind of operations has on the surrounding.



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To overcome this *empasse*, and to try to dominate the evolutionary processes within the cities, many researches started to work really hard on the analysis.

It can be developed in many different ways. One is quite "historic": the approach of Giovanni Astengo, who worked with a kind of analysis that I call "neo-realista", in the sense of the cinematographic and literature stream from the first decades after the Second World War. A human and accurate point of view on the contexts, both built and social. Unfortunately, this vision fails to affect the design, or it does, but in a non-simple way.

A more recent and "advanced" approach is the KAAU<sup>2</sup>'s one. Inside this path – characterised by a technological and digital point of view – maps don't show a series of physical and dimensional reliefs. The focus looks at relations, connections, "animation" models of an environment instead of the environment itself. The attempt to keep up the

<sup>2</sup> Knowledge Alliance for Advanced Urbanism; please see <http://ka-au.net> and the report of the research.

complexity of the city produces results, in term of design, characterized by the same high level of complexity of the matter of study. The overall results are an addition of different levels – both while reading and designing the city – intertwined and very thick. Unfortunately, this approach is often not easy to understand and to enforce.

Furthermore, the *formal* subject is outstanding: completely ignored by this advanced approach and not held in due consideration even by the most classical visions.

Marco Romano, on the contrary, pointed the attention on a system based on logic bonds, displayed in sequences. The core of this logic system is the exterior shapes of the buildings, but more in general is related to the entire form of the city. It is his *aesthetic theory*.

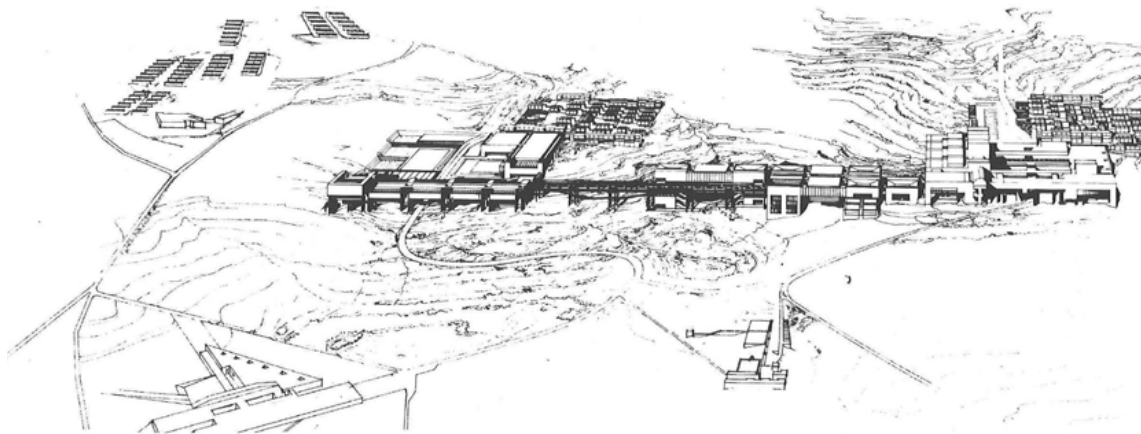
Before trying to summarise the Romano's point of view it is necessary to spend few words on two important forewords.

The first regards a methodological argument: "theory". It is an interesting concept, whose etymology bring us to the Ancient Greece: within the *polis* the "teori" were the people sent, as city's delegates, to attend to important religious and sport events. Their role was to observe the rites, and this condition means that they had to take part to the rites, but from the outside. "Observe from the outside" can be a proper synthesis of the heart of what is the architectural theory: it looks at the discipline from an external point of view<sup>3</sup>.

**Figure 3.** University of Calabria project (Vittorio Gregotti and partners, 1974).

The competition entry, more modest than Florence's one, sketches a megastructure larger than ever built.

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The other concept to be briefly discussed is "form". Regarding the city probably it will be better to use it in the plural, "forms". This "grammar" detail depends by the kind of research that one wants to achieve and by the degree of in-depth analysis one wants to reach, but it is clear that different levels can naturally co-exist inside the whole theory. If you want to make a main description of a city, something more synthetic than analytical, you can draw quickly a representation made by few signs, few shapes, but with both a strong element of personal interpretation and a strong communicative power, such as an icon. Then, inside the same frame on interpretation, you can work a little bit on the details that emerge from the city when you try to improve your knowledge about it. What will probably happen is that more forms will become evident and you can represent the city through different and maybe contradictory, but always overlapping, forms. Behind every sign there is a process marked by a certain degree of complexity: various interests at stake, different cultural approaches, unstable lifestyle and trends, etc. And also working on the urban form means dealing with disciplines like history of the city, social analysis,

<sup>3</sup> This analysis about a definition of "architectural theory" is taken from a conversation with arch. Ph.D. Antonio Lavarello, later reported in an essay not yet published



hygienic principles and so on.

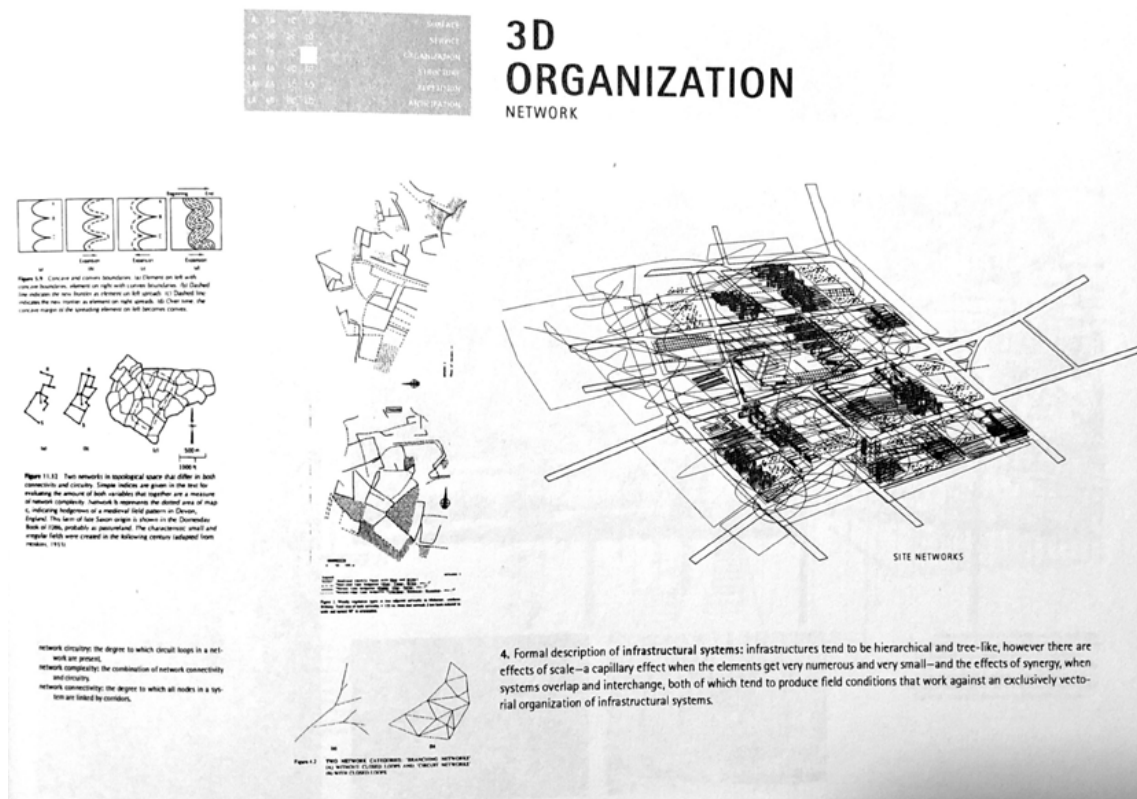
The theoretical approach of Marco Romano fits perfectly the concept of “theory” as previously expressed and the needing for a *formal* investigation. He oriented the research toward a focus on the observation, as literally intended, of emerging characteristics of the city, to build a description based on what people see, not on single-side analysis, each very specific, put together afterwards. An architect has a different gaze than common people and his feeling is probably – or hopefully – more accurate or simply more focused on certain circumstances.

Romano’s method is focused on the *surface* of the state of the art of the city and this approach allows a real and tangible comprehension of the elements that compose it and the system of relations that operates within it. This *skin-deep* contact does not produce approximative method and results, because a certain degree of interaction with other disciplines is nevertheless established. It happens especially with commonly considered secondary disciplines like, in this case, anthropology and sociology. Far from being really secondary, they look at the very base stage of human communities and it is what Romano looks for to retrace the development of the city, specifically the European one, under the aesthetic point of view.

The formal/aesthetic approach – expression of a much broader system of values – led the development of the city for a long time. The city worked for centuries on its inside: it grew enlarging its edges, but the actions as a collective force – the whole entity made of all citizens that Romano, following the classical tradition, calls “*civitas*” – were pored over the redefinition, over the re-shaping of the inside area, which is identified consequently as “*urbs*”.

Even if new elements or functions were disposed on the edges, soon the expansion of the city brought them inside the fabric and suddenly the *civitas* started to think how to assimilate them. It was not so difficult because, typologically speaking, additions were not so different than the existing city – buildings, streets, squares and so on.

**Figure 4.** “Organization” panel for Logistic Activities Zone project in Barcelona (Stan Allen, 1996).



Then this recursive process, engine of the city's life for centuries, got a crisis. For Romano it happened because of the problem of "circulation", within the city and between them at a wider scale – so approximately around Twentieth Century. If circulation challenged the traditional process of settlement of the city mainly in-between of its consolidate forms, I think that also the factories must be considered as one of the elements of the crisis of the city, in a quite exclusive relation with the threshold.

Since the second half of the Eighteenth Century England started to build factories that tried to be as more familiar as possible in respect of other buildings. The Albion Mill on the South side of London near the Blackfriars Bridge, a flour mill power by a steam engine<sup>4</sup>, was designed as a traditional building with classical architectural principles and decoration. This approach of a sort of gradual and peaceful coexistence between the classical city and these new elements was extended to a lot of industrial cities, such as Manchester, Leeds and so on. But that idea was undoubtedly ephemeral and soon the dimensions of the factories made any sort of *camouflage* impossible. The rise of the so-called "heavy industry" established greater awareness about the existence of those big and complex *objects* that were unrelated with the history of the city and with the management process of the evolution of its forms as described by Romano.

"Aesthetic" parameter stopped to determine the design of the city. Two main factors create, in my opinion, the crisis: factories and infrastructures. They act in the threshold between city and nature, and that is the location of the crisis of the city.

Crisis arose from the inability – descended from the absence of experience – to deal successfully with this kind of objects, but it also depends on the speed of the appearance of those elements – which is basically the speed of the progress itself.

178 The city and, by consequence, architecture aren't able to find a solution in continuity with the traditional approach. Most of this situation is connected with the deep differences that characterised these entities in relation to what was previously absorbed by the city.

The estrangement was so hard that architecture has almost renounced to take care of factories (or similar) and therefore of the threshold, which have become, through factories and infrastructures, an expression of engineering. The main exceptions are probably the residential sector and the "zoning" – as the unique form of urban project today. The sad fact is that probably these are two of the themes in which architecture does not give its best at the moment.

Starting from the complexity of the *city* and from the consciousness of the relevance of the urban form, architects are called for an incessant attention to this subject, in order to improve our instruments about description, conceptualisation and theorisation and finally to reaffirm our deep competence on the project of the city.

My proposal is quite different than building a theory or establishing a further analysis, because I think that the way of nit-picking, in term of breaking a situation in small pieces, can't be successful in this case. My attempt regards the usage of a "device" that is able to struggle the context: urban fabric, threshold and nature.

"Device"<sup>5</sup> is an important term. Giorgio Agamben wrote a tiny book devoted to it, from a philosophical point of view, in which he retraces various elements from the work of Foucault and Hegel. Foucault in particular during an interview in 1977 said:

«First of all what I try to identify with this name [device] is an absolutely heterogeneous whole that involves discourses, institutions, architectural structures, regulatory decisions, laws, administrative measures, scientific statements, philosophical, moral and philanthropic propositions [...]. The device is the network that is established between these elements. [...] The device has a strategic nature and it implies a certain manipulation of strength's relations and of a direct intervention over the balance of power, either to orient them in a certain direction, either to block them or to fix them or to use them. [...] The device is precisely this: a set of strategies regarding the power relations that conditions certain types of knowledge and that is conditioned by it.» (Agamben, 2006)

4 It was only the third steam engine produced by Matthew Boulton and James Watt

5 It has some other synonymous, such as "apparatus" or "system", all referred to Italian "dispositivo"

6 This excerpt was translated by the author, from the text published in Giorgio Agamben, *Che cos'è un dispositivo?* (Milano: nottetempo, 2006), pp. 6-7. The original version was presented in *Dits et écrits*, vol. III, pp.

I think *this* device is a proper *escamotage* to examine in depth the context of the threshold and, more in general, of the urban area.

Architecture took on the urban design with its “megastructure moment” during Sixties and Seventies, probably starting from other forewords than to resolve the crisis that I addressed before, but in any case producing something that can help that work.

Fumihiko Maki, in 1964, defines “mega-structure” as «a large frame in which all the functions of a city or part of a city are housed. It has been made possible by present day technology. In a sense it is a man-made feature of the landscape. It is like the great hill on which Italian town were built.» (Maki, 1964) In 1968 Ralph Wilcoxon improved the definition with an explanation more schematic and articulated.

At the beginning of the megastructures' tale there is the city, and this is quite surprising, mainly because they have not similarity with the traditional form of the city. If this aesthetic factor makes impossible the automatic assimilation of the megastructures into the city according to the traditional processes, it creates a detachment that helps an independent judgement.

However, the city was the heart of the reflection and of the design of megastructures. This fact is evident by the taxonomy of cases «admitted, appointed or discovered to the megastructure canon from past periods» (Banham, 1976) as conveniently collected by the masterpiece on this subject: *Megastructure* by Reyner Banham.

Banham said that megastructures are the perfect answer to the separation between architecture and urbanism, because they work on a ground abandoned by both the disciplines. Banham called it “urban situation of about half miles square”. Inside that space megastructure reasons in parallel with multiple factors, about both landscape and architectural composition. There is a continuous dialog with the context, and in fact the megastructure doesn't take care only its internal structure, but it looks outside at the relations that emerge – naturally or artificially – with the context.

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Admitting that each megastructure realizes a perturbation of the dynamic equilibrium of the context, we know that every system tends to return to equilibrium<sup>7</sup>, carrying out actions of different types. These relations and reactions are the more interesting product of the hypothetic contribution of the megastructure as an analytic device.

Megastructure means experimentation, looking at macroscopic and symbolic aspects, like in *Instant City*<sup>8</sup> project, that also highlights a functional attitude that explain a close relationship between the megastructure and the theme of “infrastructure”. A link that guarantees them, beyond cyclical sequence of trends, a constant topicality.

The ability of megastructures to associate different concepts, functions and forms with each other, emphasizing the system more than the elements, is unique. The resulting symbolic effect in the collective imagination is disruptive: large astonishing machines devoted to a purpose – specific or generic. A complex of form and function effectively condensed.

This is not just about the single object, but it is addressed to the whole context. In 1968 Ungers produce the study “Berlin 1995”, from which comes this image. Inside the relation of the study he stated: «the concept of “megastructure” used in this study will not be designate a universal, multi-purpose and omni-competent super-building, but will describe this new type of three-dimensional architectural planning». Compared to planning, megastructure is presented as a device based on the idea of relationship, able to activate its context, prepared for an analysis of interaction between the components rather than an “a priori” point of view. The project for the Bay of Tokyo by Kenzo Tange in 1960 is a proper demonstration for this designing values, both when it occupies the existing city and when it designs the expansion.

I think that we might use megastructure as “structure” under the meaning described in *Words and Buildings*<sup>9</sup> (Forty, 2004): an interpretative key extended to the whole urban

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299-300.

7 Please refer to the Le Chatelier's principle as universal expression of this natural rule.

8 Project by Stanley Tigerman, 1968.

9 Forty's thinking can be summarised in: the structure is the system of relations that manages a subject, like a building, and which allows to understand it.

fabric, by whose complexity trying to understand a bit more how we can struggle the crisis of the city and the crisis of architecture itself.

I'm appealing to the work that Stan Allen has started on infrastructure, claiming that «infrastructural urbanism offers a new model for practice and a renewed sense of architecture's potential to structure the future of the city» (Allen, 2012). A semiotic architecture can really reactivate the relationship between city and architecture.

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