Programs and manifestoes on 20th-century architecture

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1914 Antonio Sant'Elia/Filippo Tommaso Marinetti: Futurist architecture

In 1914 two young architects, Antonio Sant'Elia and Mario Chiattone, exhibited in Milan drawings and plans for a 'New City'. The radical ideas put forward by Antonio Sant'Elia (b.1888 in Como, killed 1916 at Monfalcone) in the foreword to the catalogue were immediately reinterpreted by Marinetti, the mouthpiece of Italian Futurism, into a 'Manifesto of Futurist Architecture', which appeared in July of the same year, four months after Marinetti's manifesto *The Splendour of Geometry and Mechanics and the Sensibility of Numbers*, and concluded the series of great Futurist proclamations.

The words and passages in italics were added to Sant'Elia's statement by Marinetti and Cinti.

Since the eighteenth century there has been no more architecture. What is called modern architecture is a stupid mixture of the most varied stylistic elements used to mask the modern skeleton. The new beauty of concrete and iron is profaned by the superimposition of carnival decorative incrustations justified neither by structural necessity nor by our taste, and having their origins in Egyptian, Indian or Byzantine antiquity or in that astounding outburst of idiocies and impotence known as 'neo-classicism'.

In Italy these products of architectural pandering are welcomed, and greedy incompetence from abroad is rated as brilliant inventiveness, as the very latest architecture. Young Italian architects (those who gain a reputation for originality through the clandestine machinations of art magazines) display their talents in the new quarters of our cities, where a joyful confusion of ogival columns, seventeenth-century foliage, Gothic arches, Egyptian pilasters, rococo volutes, fifteenth-century putti and bloated caryatids seriously claim to be regarded as style and arrogantly strive for monumentality. The kaleidoscopic appearance and disappearance of forms, the constantly growing number of machines, the daily increase of needs imposed by the speed of communications, by the agglomeration of people, by the demands of hygiene and a hundred other phenomena of modern life, cause no concern to these self-styled renewers of architecture. They stubbornly continue to apply the rules of Vitruvius, Vignola and Sansovino and with a few little German architectural publications in their hands try to reimpose age-old imbecilities upon our cities, which ought to be the direct and faithful projections of ourselves.

Thus this art of expression and synthesis has become in their hands an empty stylistic exercise, an endless repetition of formulas incompetently employed to disguise as a modern building the usual hackneyed conglomeration of bricks and stones. As though we – the accumulators and generators of movement, with our mechanical extensions, with the noise and speed of our life – could live in the same streets built for their own needs by the men of four, five, six centuries ago.

This is the supreme idiocy of the modern architecture that constantly repeats itself with the self-interested complicity of the academies, those prisons of the intelligence in which the young are forced onanistically to copy classical models, instead of opening up their minds to the search for limits and the solution of the new and imperious problem: 'the Futurist house and city'. The house and the city spiritually and materially ours, in which our turbulent existence can take place without appearing a grotesque anachronism.

The problem of *Futurist* architecture is not a problem of linear rearrangement. It is not a question of finding new profiles, new door and window frames, substitutes for columns, pilasters, consoles, caryatids, gargoyles. It is not a question of leaving the facade bare brick, painting it or facing it with stone; nor of establishing formal differences between new and old buildings. It is a question of creating the *Futurist* house according to a sound plan, of building it with the aid of every scientific and technical resource, of fulfilling to the limit every demand of our way of life and our spirit, of rejecting everything grotesque, cumbrous, and alien to us (tradition, style, aesthetic, proportion), establishing new forms, new lines, *a new harmony of profiles and volumes*, an architecture whose raison d'être lies solely in the special conditions of modern life, whose aesthetic values are in perfect harmony with our sensibility. This architecture cannot be subject to any law of historical continuity. It must be as new as our frame of mind is new.

The art of building has been able to evolve in time and to pass from one style to another while maintaining the general characteristics of architecture unaltered, because, while changes due to fashion and those resulting from successive religious movements and political regimes are frequent in history, factors that cause profound changes in environmental conditions, that overturn the old and create the new – such things as the discovery of natural laws, the perfecting of mechanical systems, the rational and scientific use of material – are very rare indeed. In modern times, the process of the consistent stylistic evolution of architecture has come to a stop. 'Architecture is breaking free from tradition. It must perforce begin again from the beginning.'

The calculation of the strength of materials, the use of reinforced concrete, rule out 'architecture' in the classical and traditional sense. Modern building materials and our scientific ideas absolutely do not lend themselves to the disciplines of historical styles and are the chief cause of the grotesque appearance of buildings à la mode, in which an attempt is made to force the splendidly light and slender supporting members and the apparent fragility of reinforced concrete to imitate the heavy curve of arches and the massive appearance of marble.

The tremendous antithesis between the modern and the ancient world is the outcome of all those things that exist now and did not exist then. Elements have entered into our life of whose very possibility the ancients did not even dream. Material possibilities and attitudes of mind have come into being that have had a thousand repercussions, first and foremost of which is the creation of a new ideal of beauty, still obscure and embryonic, but whose fascination is already being felt even by the masses. We have lost the sense of the monumental, of the heavy, of the static; we have enriched our sensibility by a 'taste

for the light, the practical, *the ephemeral and the swift*'. We feel that we are no longer the men of the cathedrals, *the palaces*, the assembly halls; but of big hotels, railway stations, immense roads, colossal ports, covered markets, brilliantly lit galleries, freeways, demolition and rebuilding schemes.

We must invent and rebuild the *Futurist* city: it must be like an immense, tumultuous, lively, noble work site, dynamic in all its parts; and the *Futurist* house must be like an enormous machine. The lifts must not hide like lonely worms in the stair wells; the stairs, become useless, must be done away with and the lifts must climb like serpents of iron and glass up the housefronts. The house of concrete, glass, and iron, *without painting* and without sculpture, enriched solely by the innate beauty of its lines and projections, extremely 'ugly' in its mechanical simplicity, high and wide *as prescribed by local government regulations*, must rise on the edge of a tumultuous abyss: the street, which will no longer stretch like a foot-mat level with the porters' lodges, but will descend into the earth on several levels, will receive the metropolitan traffic and will be linked, for the necessary passage from one to the other, by metal walkways and immensely fast escalators.

'The decorative must be abolished.' The problem of *Futurist* architecture must be solved not by plagiarizing China, Persia, or Japan with the aid of photographs, not by foolishly adhering to the rules of Vitruvius, but by strokes of genius and armed with scientific and technical *experience*. Everything must be revolutionary. We must exploit the roofs, utilize the basements, reduce the importance of the façades, transplant the problems of good taste from the petty domain of the section, the capital, the entrance door, to the wider one of great 'groupings of masses', of vast 'town planning projects'. Let us have done with monumental, funereal, commemorative architecture. Let us throw away monuments, sidewalks, arcades, steps; let us sink squares into the ground, raise the level of the city.

I oppose and despise:

1. *All the pseudo avant-garde architecture of Austria, Hungary, Germany, and America.*

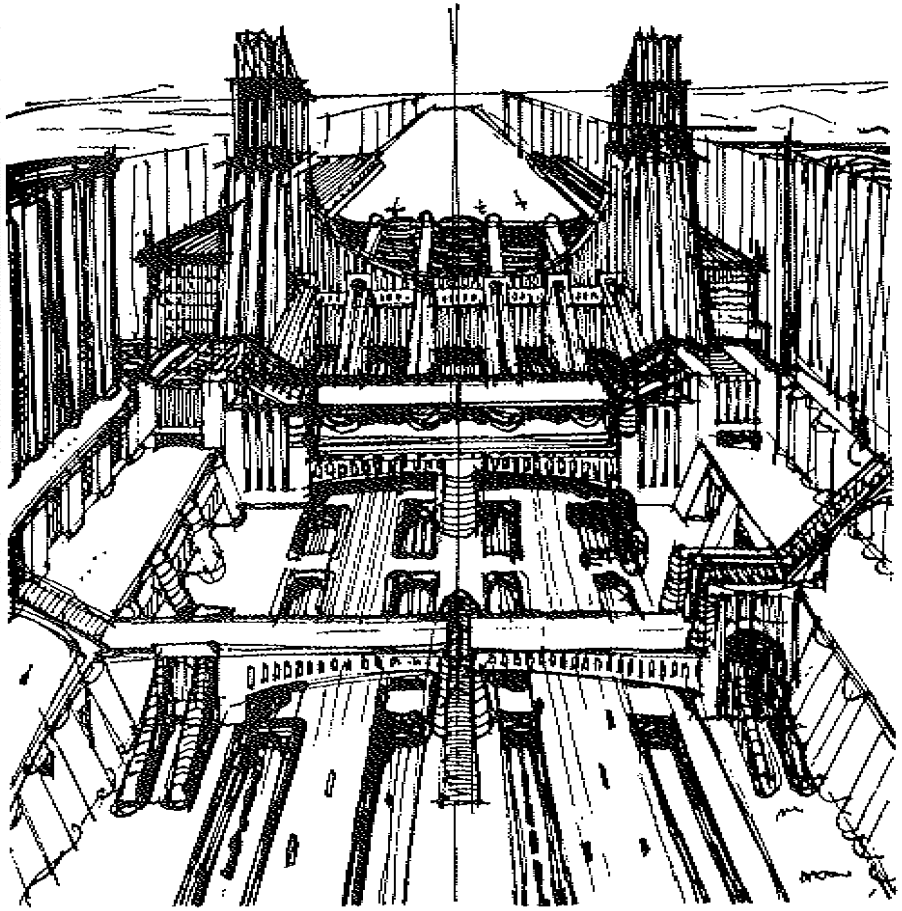
2. *All* classical, solemn, hieratic, theatrical, decorative, monumental, frivolous, pleasing architecture.

3. The embalming, reconstruction, and reproduction of monuments *and ancient palaces.*

4. Perpendicular and horizontal lines, cubic and pyramidal forms that are static, heavy, oppressive and absolutely alien to our new sensibility.

And proclaim:

1. That *Futurist* architecture is the architecture of calculation, of audacity and



Antonio Sant'Elia. 1914

simplicity; the architecture of reinforced concrete, of iron, of glass, of pasteboard, of textile fibre, and of all those substitutes for wood, stone, and brick which make possible maximum elasticity and lightness.

2. That this does not render architecture an arid combination of the practical and utilitarian, but that it remains art, that is to say, synthesis and expression.

3. *That oblique and elliptical lines are dynamic by their very nature and have an emotive power a thousand times greater than that of perpendicular and horizontal lines and that a dynamically integrated architecture is impossible without them.*

4. That decoration, as something imposed upon architecture, is an absurdity and that 'the decorative value of *Futurist* architecture depends solely upon the original use and arrangement of the raw or bare or violently coloured material'.

5. That, just as the ancients drew the inspiration for their art from the elements of nature, so we – being materially and spiritually artificial – must find this inspiration in the elements of the immensely new mechanical world which we have created, of which architecture must be the finest expression, the most complete synthesis, the most efficacious artistic integration.

6. *Architecture as the art of arranging the forms of buildings according to predetermined criteria is finished.*

7. *Architecture must be understood as the endeavour to harmonize, with freedom and great audacity, the environment with man, that is to say, to render the world of things a direct projection of the spirit.*

8. *An architecture so conceived cannot give birth to any three-dimensional or linear habit, because the fundamental characteristics of Futurist architecture will be obsolescence and transience. 'Houses will last less long than we. Each generation will have to build its own city.' This constant renewal of the architectonic environment will contribute to the victory of 'Futurism' already affirmed with 'Words in Freedom', 'Plastic Dynamism', 'Music without Bars', and 'The Art of Sounds', a victory for which we fight without pause against the cowardly worship of the past.*

1918 'De Stijl': Manifesto I

The famous first manifesto of the De Stijl group, the full importance of which can only now be assessed, appeared in November 1918 and introduced the second year of the periodical of the same name. A year earlier a group of radical artists had been formed in Leyden under the leadership of Theo van Doesburg (b. 1883 in Utrecht, d. 1931 in Davos). Their goal: the organic combination of architecture, sculpture and painting in a lucid, elemental, unsentimental construction. The group took the name 'De Stijl', thereby stating quite precisely that their constructive doctrine was aimed at a new aesthetic. The first word was 'purity'; a 'white' world was to replace the 'brown' one.

1. There is an old and a new consciousness of the age. The old one is directed towards the individual. The new one is directed towards the universal. The struggle of the individual against the universal may be seen both in the world war and in modern art.

2. The war is destroying the old world with its content: individual predominance in every field.

3. The new art has brought to light that which is contained in the new consciousness of the age: a relationship of equality between the universal and the individual.

4. The new consciousness of the age is prepared to realize itself in everything, including external life.

5. Tradition, dogmas and the predominance of the individual stand in the way of this realization.

6. Therefore the founders of the new culture call upon all who believe in reform of art and culture to destroy these obstacles to development, just as in the plastic arts – by doing away with natural form – they have eliminated that which stood in the way of pure artistic expression, the logical conclusion of every artistic concept.

7. The artists of today, all over the world, impelled by one and the same consciousness, have taken part on the spiritual plane in the world war against the domination of individualism, of arbitrariness. They therefore sympathize with all who are fighting spiritually or materially for the formation of an international unity in life, art, and culture.

8. The organ *De Stijl*, founded for this purpose, seeks to contribute towards