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architecture & design
تصميم و هندسة معمارية

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MORPHING

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Carmen Andriani • Cherubino Gambardella • DW5/Bernard Khoury
Franco Purini • Greg Lynn Form • Jörn Utzon • Jean Nouvel
Lorenzo Capobianco • Marco Navarra/NOWA • MM26 • Peter Eisenman
Plot, JDS + BIG • Snøhetta AS • Zaha Hadid

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Dubai - United A



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architecture and the earth

Matteo Belfiore

“My concept of architecture embraces the entire environment of human life; we cannot remove it from architecture, as long as we are part of civility, as it represents both the modification and alteration made on the earth surface, in view of the human necessity, except for pure desert”¹. This famous definition by William Morris dated 1881, effectively condenses the fine principals of architecture: the transformation of the Earth.

Some decades before “Simeon deWitt, Gouverneur Morris and John Rutherford received the appointment to design the model that would regulate the employment «final and definitive» of Manhattan. Four years later they proposed [...] 12 avenues in the north-south direction and 155 streets in the east-west direction. With this simple act they defined a city by 13x156=2028 islands (excluding the topographic encumbrances): a matrix that at the time, captures traces of the most courageous and prophetic acts of western civilisation: the earth that is separated is empty; the population that is described, hypothetical; the edifices individualised, ghosts; the activities that are conceived, inexistent”.² The morphing consist of an ideal image lowered onto real territory. A similar gesture to that of the director Lars von Trier

in Dogville: a design plan of the ideal contours of a town, then lets you act its characters.

With the coming of the twentieth century the perception of the city changes. Futurism gives to man the illusion of the absolute domain in space and in nature. “We no longer feel to be men of the cathedrals, of buildings, of the arengari; but of great hotels, train stations, immense roads, of colossal ports, indoor markets, light filled galleries, of rettifili (straight streets), of demolition goodbyes”.³ The technology and the impressiveness of architecture offer new and infinite intervention possibilities.

Again the 1960’s are the dimensional parameters, the instruments of intervention. The mega-structural utopia acts on the city and what remains of nature with “indifference to the architectonic dimension in the construction of the urban image given precisely from the macrostructure or from containers. In fact, moving the project interest from the traditional architectonic scale to that of town-design, the single architectonic element that remains necessarily unchanged on the human scale, loses value.”⁴ From Japan, home of the Metabolism Group, comes an even more efficacious

definition. “The megastructure is a large framework 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 hill towns were built.”⁵

In the 1990’s the morphing concept returns to abstraction. Among the first “Eisenman adopts a technique called morphing used in contemporary cinema: transformation operated with the technique, a system capable of modifying the chosen image in such a way that none are dominant; there is not any relation between the figure and the earth, but only between the superimposed figures, transformed into a new system of urban life. Architecture is reborn outside any recognised dogmas.”⁶ The same technique is interpreted by Greg Lynn in a way that “...Instead of a neutral abstract space for design, the context for design becomes an active abstract space that directs form within a current of forces ...”.⁷ The suggestive image of Manimal by Ben van Berkel is probably the most evocative of this topological theory. “The amalgamation generates a new notion of identity. The different features of the work are blurred and exist in layers which do not necessarily relate to each other

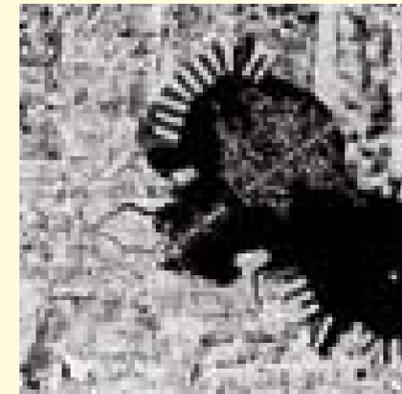
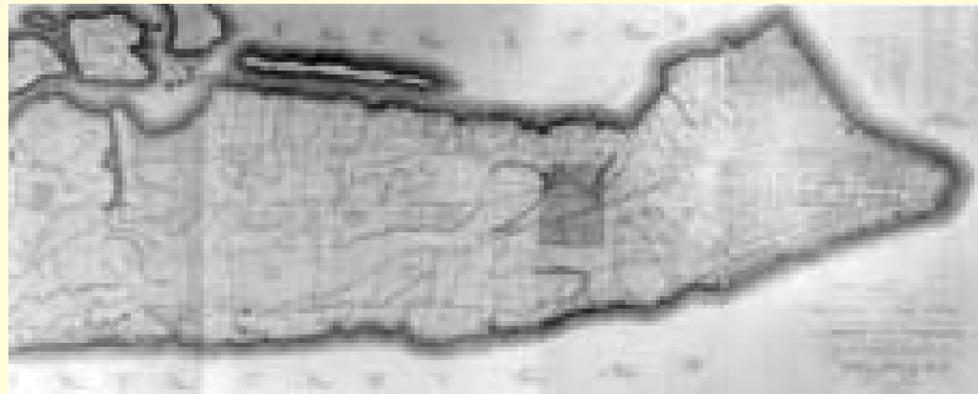


or to the scale and structure of the shapes and substances from which they originate.”⁸ The Yokohama Port Terminal planned by F.O.A. represents a tangible result of this theory. “We use the diagram very literally as an instrument to determine and explore architectural performance. [...] In Yokohama, the material “ground” is deployed to turn the no-return diagram into a three-dimensional diagram. Ergonomic and functional information are then incorporated in the diagram to determine the scale and geometry of the surface’s deformations.”⁹

The contemporary paradigm is the return to the landscape, possibly motivated by the growing concern for the future of the planet. “The presence of architecture – regardless of its self contained character – inevitably creates a new landscape. This implies the necessity of discovering the architecture which the site itself is seeking...”¹⁰. At the same time the conscience that nature naturalis is by now exhausted, and is required to define a new field of application. “If we stop looking at the landscape as an object of human activity, we discover straightaway (will it be a forgetfulness of a cartographer, or the negligence of a politician?) a quantity of undecided space, privy of functions which are difficult to place a name. [...] They propose Third landscape...”¹¹

The opportunities offered by new software such as Google Earth echo back to the judgment of Le Corbusier on the sight from above offered by the first flights. “The aeroplane indicts...the city!”.¹² A similar premonition to that of Aleksandr Rodchenko who wrote “the most interesting points of view of contemporary photography are: from above, downwards and downwards towards above”.¹³

The most interesting challenge for the contemporary architect has therefore transferred to that which Le Corbusier defined fifth façade. In line with a consistent strategy to develop Dubai’s tourism industry, and generally to enhance the city’s image and reputation, the government of Dubai has begun the construction of the world’s two largest man-made islands. They are both shaped like palm trees and are called the Palm Jumeirah and the Palm Jebel Ali respectively”.¹⁴ The same morphing on a large scale, with transformation of extensive parts of territory, would not have been perceivable without the auxiliary of this new form and technique of representation.



¹ William Morris, *Prospects of Architecture in Civilization*, discorso tenuto alla London Institution il 10 marzo 1881.
² Rem Koolhaas, *Delirious New York*. A retroactive manifesto for Manhattan, Oxford University Press, New York Academy Editions, London 1978.
³ Antonio Sant’Ella, *Manifesto dell’architettura futurista*, da “Lacerba”, a.II, n.15, Firenze, 1914.
⁴ Renato De Fusco, *Storia dell’architettura contemporanea*, Laterza, Bari, 1974.
⁵ Fumihiko Maki, *Investigations in Collective Form*, a special publication, no.2, The School of Architecture. Washington University, 1964.
⁶ Luca Galofaro e Peter Eisenman, *Digital Eisenman: An Office of the Electronic Era*, Birkhäuser, Berlin, 1999.
⁷ Greg Lynn, *Animate Form*, Princeton Architectural Press, New York, 1999.
⁸ Ben van Berkel e Caroline Bos, *Move, vol.2 Techniques*, Un Studio & Goose Press, Amsterdam, 1999.
⁹ FOA, *Code Remix 2000*, in 2G, No.15, Gustavo Gili, Barcelona, 2000.
¹⁰ Kenneth Frampton, *Tadao Ando*, Museum of Modern Art New York, 1991.
¹¹ Gilles Clement, *Manifeste du Tiers-Paysage*, ed. Sujet/Objet, Paris, 2004.
¹² Le Corbusier, *Aircraft*, Universe Books, New York, 1988 (reprint of a 1935 English edition).
¹³ Evelin Weiss, *Rodtschenko: fotografien 1920-1938*, Kohn, 1978.
¹⁴ Mimi Sheller e John Urry, *Tourism Mobilities*, Routledge, London, 2004.