

# BRAVE OLD WORLD: HOW HAS SUPERSTUDIO STOOD THE TEST OF TIME?

GERRARD O'CARROLL AND MARK GARCIA,  
BUILDING DESIGN ISSUE 1563, LONDON, 2003

\*\*\*☆\*\*\*

There is a museum in Ithaca, New York, called the New Products Showcase & Learning Center. Its shelves display a staggering range of product design failures and misfits, some has-beens, some never-would-bes. A product design dystopia and abortopia, it's unappreciated as a critical contribution to the category of the museum.



SUPERSTUDIO, *LIFE WITHOUT OBJECTS*, c.1969

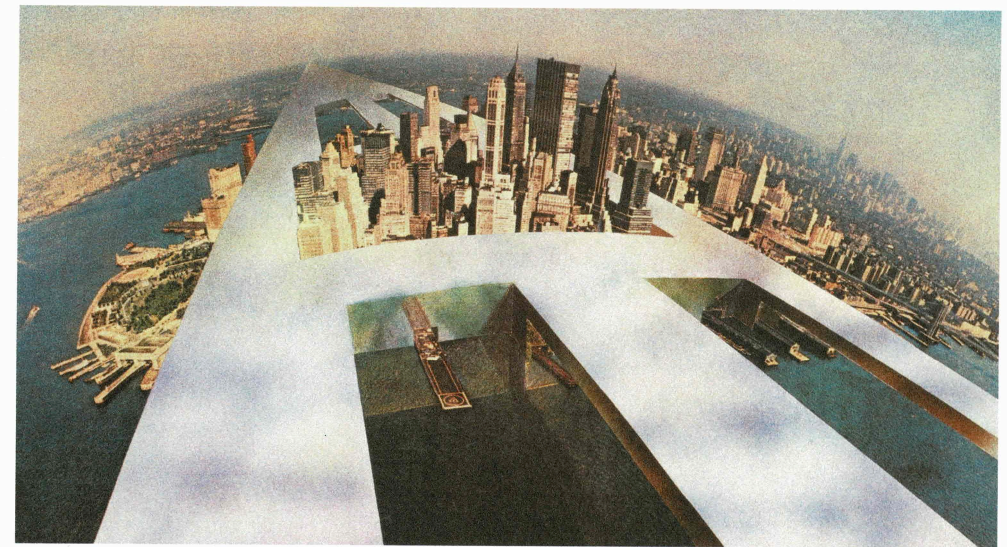
Architecture is particularly prone to similar failures in the form of 'paper architecture'; half-designed or undesigned built projects and impossible theories and manifestos. There are also projects that struggle into life deformed or are renounced by their creators as mistakes and left to rot. We are generally forced to live in 'the failure museum of architecture'. It is rare, therefore, that conceptual, theoretical or radical works are resuscitated in clever exhibitions that stimulate an immediate reappraisal. Mostly,

retrospectives of the conceptual or radical tend to leave us feeling affectionate towards the too ambitious, misguided and inherently flawed, but the nonetheless quirkily stylish and the daringly beautiful.

The Design Museum on the other hand, in its *Superstudio Show*, presents us with a more formidable dilemma.<sup>1</sup> Superstudio's reputation has fluctuated through the decades and its repertoire has been considered both failed fantasy and practically prophetic. Producing interiors, theory, sci-fi fiction, films, pop-art collages, buildings, urban plans, installations, drawings and exhibitions, critics encountered difficulties in deciphering its satirical symbolism and the nature and seriousness of its proposals.

Founded in Florence in 1966 by the kind of politically gung-ho and naive-heroic ex-art/design school students that the 2000s seem so devoid of, they were contemporaries of 'radicals' such as Archizoom and Archigram. The collective generated provocative and subversive, but surreally compelling, visions of the future by fusing socialist theories of equality and freedom from capitalist consumerism with a seductive image of glamorised, new-age-hippy communitarianism. Its architectural treatments of themes such as death, life, ceremony, education, love, capitalism, technology, consumption and work were rebellious and insurrectionary. It argued aggressively and passionately for a rational and poetic assimilation of architecture with life. Strongly influenced by cinema, Dada, theatre and the production techniques of bricolage, found-art, story boarding and

<sup>1</sup> SUPERSTUDIO (1966-1978): *LIFE WITHOUT OBJECTS*, 1 MARCH - 8 JUNE 2003, DESIGN MUSEUM, LONDON



SUPERSTUDIO, *CONTINUOUS MONUMENT CRASHING THROUGH DOWNTOWN MANHATTAN*, c.1969

narrative constructions, it began from 1969 to 1973 to generate some of its more memorable, beguiling and hauntingly iconic works such as *The Continuous Monument: An Architectural Model for Total Urbanisation, Ideal Cities, Interplanetary Architecture and Five Fundamental Acts*.

*Continuous Monument* was one of its more renowned signature works. It blanketed the planet with an uninterrupted, all-enveloping and linear mega-grid resembling a colossal, horizontal and glacial skyscraper that engulfed city, mountain, canyon, river and forest. The gigantic and potent grids of this period represented a virtually visible and metaphysical 'neutral surface'. These grids subsumed objects, people, cities and life itself under a fascistic and totalitarian apotheosis of architecture. This omnipresent, but paradoxically non-repressive 'total urbanisation' is permeated and meliorated by a homogenising and ubiquitous techno-architecture. The *Continuous Monument* and grid projects represent a 'moderate utopia' that in a 'single act', bestows 'cosmic order' and reason to humankind.

Superstudio's space-age global techno-culture featured tableaux of hedonistic and nomadic but happy white families, living in gorgeously minimal and abstracted panoramas of synthetic landscapes. A new mankind surviving a life without want and using only the 'grid and the plug'. Although its predictions of technological ubiquity were accurate, the architectural response remains rooted in its time. Far from a standardised middle-class society picnicking on the grid, we now demand a world in which a pluralist diversity is celebrated. A flaw in its vision is that we don't

believe in or envision a future where all that exists in the world is wiped away. Rather we desire one in which the new and the old, in many layers, co-exist simultaneously with, and are not dominated but facilitated by, ubiquitous networked technologies.

Unfortunately for architects, networked technologies and the future shape of the built environment are more and more in the hands of IT and electronics firms, politicians and economists, while cultural vision remains in the domains of film, literature, art and design. Avoiding its obliteration of the old and grounding this analysis in existing reality, Superstudio's vision of the seamless integration of architecture and technology as envisioned by the architect and designer still stands as a challenge to the present. Leaving aside some of its more quixotic and impractical manifestos, proposals and flawed logic, the importance of its vision appears increasingly durable. Having influenced some of the preoccupations of generations of designers and architects to develop insurrectionary new roles for architecture, the irony is that in spite of architects, its implausible vision has come into being. The colossal grids and *Continuous Monument* exist not as Superstudio's gridded physical surface, but as the integrated system of global capitalism and networked technologies. Where is today's radical, heroic, and epic melding of planet, politics, culture, architecture, technology, work and life?

MARK GARCIA IS A WRITER AND FORMER HEAD OF RESEARCH, ROYAL COLLEGE OF ART