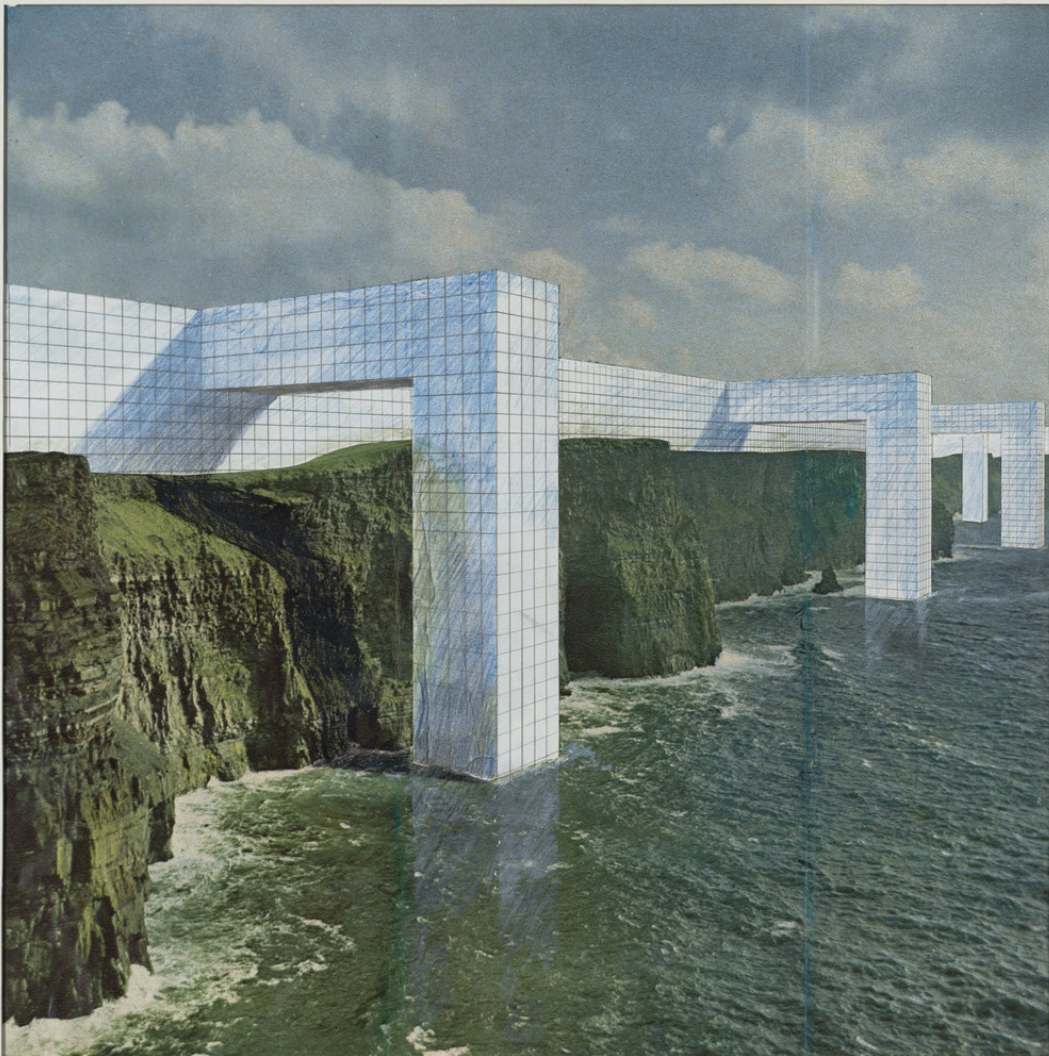


# Koolhaas, Superstudio, and the paradox of their affinity:

*Researching a friendship that emerged through misunderstanding by juxtaposing  
their professional- and personal relationship*



AR2A011 - Architectural History Thesis  
Mick van de Leur  
April 2022

**Image 1 (cover)**

*The Continuous Monument: On the Rocky Coast, project (Perspective)*

*Note.* By Superstudio, Gian Piero Frasinelli , Alessandro Magris, Roberto Magris, Adolfo Natalini, Cristiano Toraldo di Francia, Alessandro Poli, 1969, Cut-and-pasted printed paper, colored pencil, and oil stick on board, located at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, NY, United States.

*Accessed April 13, 2022, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/936>*

## Abstract

In the winter of 1970, Rem Koolhaas visited the architecture collective Superstudio, and he expressed great appreciation towards the studio's founders Adolfo Natalini and Cristiano Toraldo di Francia. What ensued was a long time of correspondence, especially between Koolhaas and Natalini. They gravitated toward each other, and they celebrated their shared perspectives on architectural design. That is until Koolhaas found out that they silently disagreed in critical moments, and their friendship began to cool off.

This thesis recounts the story of Rem Koolhaas and the architecture collective Superstudio. It delineates how the two crossed paths, how and why they sympathized, what their greatest contradiction was, and how their mutual affinity was partly based on a misunderstanding. Their greatest contradiction regarded the grid and their diverging position was informed by disagreements on multiple levels, on the value of history for example. In this thesis, the juxtaposition of their positions is combined with recently published archival material, giving insight into their personal relationship as well. It appears that in architecture, affinity can start with misinterpretation and it does not have to end with a stupefying consensus either. (185 words)

Keywords: [AR2A011](#), [Koolhaas](#), [Superstudio](#), [grid](#), [friendship](#)

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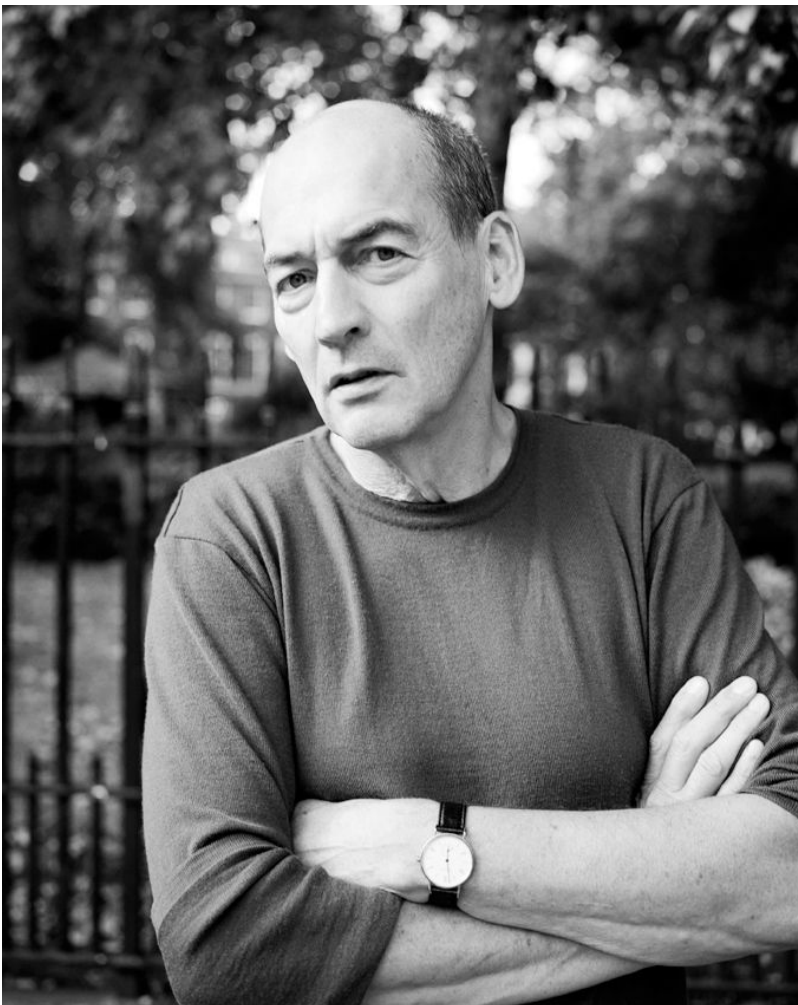
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## Image 2

*Superstudio, clockwise from left: Cristiano Toraldo di Francia, Alessandro Magris, Alessandro Poli, Gian Piero Frassinelli, Adolfo Natalini and Roberto Magris*

*Note. By Cristiano Toraldo di Francia, 1970, Photograph, located in the archives of Cristiano Toraldo di Francia  
Accessed April 13, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/12/arts/design/superstudio-civa.html>*



## Image 3

*Rem Koolhaas*

*Note. By unknown, n.d., Photograph, in possession of the artist  
Accessed April 13, 2022, <https://www.oma.com/partners/rem-koolhaas>*

## Introduction

### Object of study

"I should have written you after my visit in August, how much I liked meeting you, and how impressed I was by the work, optimistic about 'easy' architecture." (Koolhaas, 1970 p. 1)

In the winter of 1970, Rem Koolhaas expressed his appreciation towards Adolfo Natalini and Cristiano Toraldo di Francia, after he visited the architecture collective called Superstudio, of which Adolfo and Cristiano were the founders. Koolhaas, who would later become one of the most influential characters in architecture, encountered Superstudio in the late 1960s. What he found was strikingly different from the architectural climate he was in at the time during his studies in the AA in London. What ensued was a long time of correspondence between the two, mainly between Koolhaas and Natalini. The correspondence would lead to several encounters between the two and granted them mutual opportunities (Chiappone-Piriou, 2021). Their gravitating toward each other was mainly because of their apparent understanding. Koolhaas especially articulated his appreciation, only to find out that Natalini and Superstudio meant the exact opposite in their works. Their relationship became less intense and the two appear to diverge once again. According to Koolhaas, his misunderstanding was the paradox of his affinity with Adolfo.

This thesis recounts the story of Rem Koolhaas and the architecture collective Superstudio and Adolfo Natalini in particular. It delineates how the two crossed paths, how and why they sympathized, what their greatest contradiction was, and how their mutual affinity was partly based on a misunderstanding. Their greatest contradiction regarded the notion of the grid which in turn was informed by disagreements on multiple levels. The realization that they misunderstood each other is recounted and shows how friendships in architecture come and go.

### Interpretive ideas

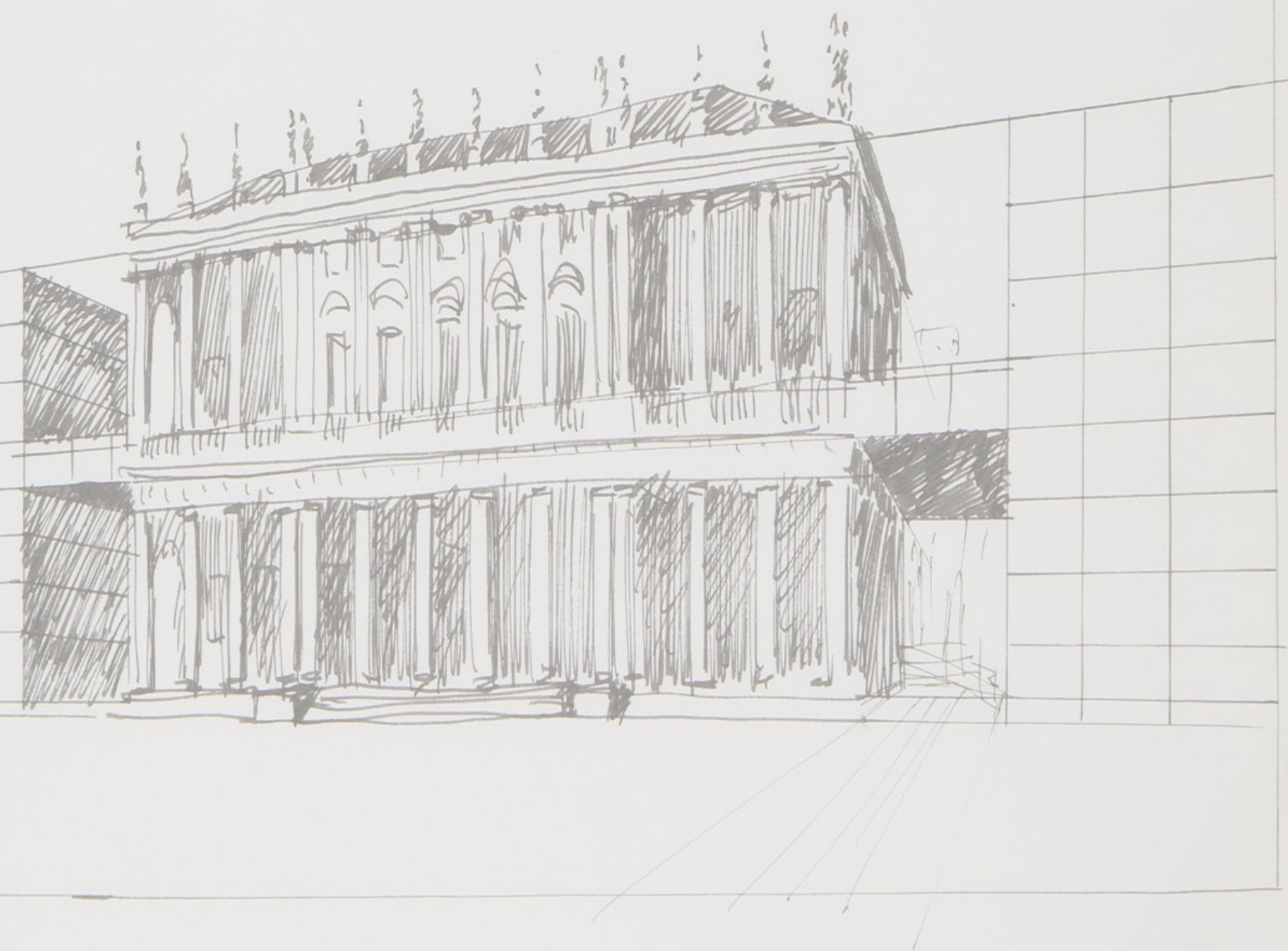
One of the main angles of approach for the thesis would be to stress the societal and architectural importance of disagreements or so-called agonism. Derived from the Greek 'agon', meaning 'struggle', agonism emphasizes the importance of respectful

conflict (Fisken, 2014). With the concept of agonism in mind, which goes beyond politics, disagreements between our two subjects become more than just differing opinions. Agonism also implies respect for each other. The aim is not to come to a numbing consensus but to celebrate different stances and positions.

### Methodology

In this thesis, a variety of primary and secondary sources are used to outline the two diverging positions regarding the grid. Sources comprise books such as *Delirious New York* (Koolhaas, 1978), imagery such as *Continuous Monument* (Superstudio, 1969), review articles such as *The Generic City* (Hajer, 1999), and publications regarding exhibitions such as *The Middelburg Lectures* (Byvanck, 2005) and *Superstudio Migrazioni* (Chiapponne-Piriou, 2021).

Rather than listing the differences and similarities of the two diverging positions, the main points are recounted through a narrative. Both Koolhaas and Superstudio elaborated projects as narratives which they used to develop design theories (Chiapponne-Piriou, 2021). According to Morgan and Wise (2017), narratives have not been given much attention in the philosophy of science as there are supposed to be no epistemological functions in them. On the contrary, philosophers of history grant narratives a vital role as they serve an explanatory function in history. Historical conclusions cannot be detached from the narratives that produce them. According to Koolhaas, a narrative is an automatic form for developing arguments (Chiapponne-Piriou, 2021) and Morgan and Wise (2017) argue that the narrative does not only give an account over time, but concerns connected elements as well. Furthermore, both Koolhaas and Superstudio used striking imagery to convey their ideas and strengthen their argumentation. In fact, imagery is indispensable to the theoretical underpinning and thus imagery will be present in this thesis too.



**Image 4**

*Superstudio Sketchbook*

Note. By Adolfo Natalini, 1969, Ink on paper, in possession of the artist

Accessed April 13, 2022, <https://drawingmatter.org/adolfo-natalini-on-drawing/>

PALAZZO  
PALAZZO CHIERICATI/VICENZA  
1969



## Academic context

This thesis is, to the best of the authors' knowledge, novel in the way it portrays Koolhaas and Superstudio together, studying their differences and similarities through a narrative. In the examined literature, Koolhaas and Superstudio are oftentimes mentioned together and analogies between their works are drawn. However, there is no similar work as this one discovered thus far. Studies that share similarities with this thesis are for example Chang's study on the relation between Koolhaas and '60s and '70s Avant-gardes (2012). Chang (2012) also mentions how the relationship between Koolhaas and avant-gardes such as Superstudio is relatively less studied. Additionally, several books within architectural discourse categorize both Koolhaas and Superstudio under a given topic. A few examples are; *Exit Utopia: Architectural Provocations 1956-1976* by van Schaik, (2005) and *Future City: Experiment and Utopia in Architecture* by Alison (2007). They however do not explicitly discuss the relationship between our two subjects. One of the latest publications regarding Superstudio comes closest to what is attempted in this thesis. This publication is the result of an exhibition held in 2021, where Superstudio's works have been displayed. The publication that followed the exhibition, revealed new material from Natalini's archive, including letters from and to Koolhaas. The publication also contains an interview with Koolhaas, where he reflects on the relationship he had with the Italian group, and Natalini in particular. However, this publication mostly delineates their personal relationship and not explicitly how their positions differed.

## Thesis structure

The thesis is structured as follows. First, the two subjects will be introduced and the stage will be set. Both are introduced separately and brought together by delineating their initial interactions. The background on the two subjects already gives insight into the second part, where their greatest contradiction will be presented. Here, the notion of the grid is expanded upon and their positions will be juxtaposed. Finally, the third chapter reflects on their relationship by recounting their interactions and reflections. It shows how the two converge and diverge.

Thus, this thesis attempts to answer the question: How does Rem Koolhaas' and Superstudio's position, regarding the grid, compare and contrast? This is done by answering the following sub-questions; How are the two subjects related through their individual background? What are the main differences and similarities regarding their notion of the grid? And how did Superstudio and Koolhaas converge and diverge?

**Image 5**

*Florence; Rescue of Italian Historic Centres*

Note. By Superstudio, 1972, Material unknown, Photograph by Cristiano Toraldo di Francia.

Accessed April 13, 2022, <https://www.wantedinrome.com/news/superstudio-radical-italian-architecture.html>



**Image 6**

*Autostrada Terra-Luna*

Note. By Superstudio, 1970, Photocollage, located in the Canadian Centre of Architecture

Accessed April 13, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/12/arts/design/superstudio-civa.html>

# 1; Setting the stage

## Context

What once started with an assemblage of some 300 students in Paris, quickly led to a general strike that involved roughly 10 million workers. Soon hereafter, Paris was engulfed in the worst rioting since the 1930s (Wolin, 2017), It was May 1968. The sentiment of the time, mainly amongst the rapidly growing student population, was that of an 'international youth culture'. However, French authorities remained autocratic and tradition-bound. Moreover, the news was dominated by U.S. forces carpet-bombing Vietnam, which antagonized the students. The animosities of the students towards the authorities escalated when the University of Paris restricted dormitory visits, preventing male and female intimacies. Additionally, the American Express office in Paris was attacked, which led to several students being arrested. The arrests led to protests, which proliferated when protests were banned from the university. Once again, arrests followed. The violent riot police that arrived at the time sparked resistance from bystanders. Soon the number of protesters grew from 300 to nearly 40.000. What began as a university-based protest, quickly engulfed France (Wolin, 2017). The fact that the events of May 1968 were numerically, geographically, and sociologically one of the largest in French history should underline its significance. However, the legacy of the events remains largely debated. According to some, May 1968 marked the acceleration of capitalism, and modernism and introduced individualism and narcissism. In their eyes, the events represented a rather conservative and libertarian revolution. Others argue that the events initiated a truly radical period (Robcis, 2014).

This tumultuous period, characterized by student uprisings, social unrest, and political violence, was also represented in architecture. The late 1960s saw the emergence of architects and designers opposed to 20th-century modernism. Superstudio, an Italian architecture collective, was an outspoken advocate of this so-called radical architecture in the 1960s and '70s (Byvanck, 2005).

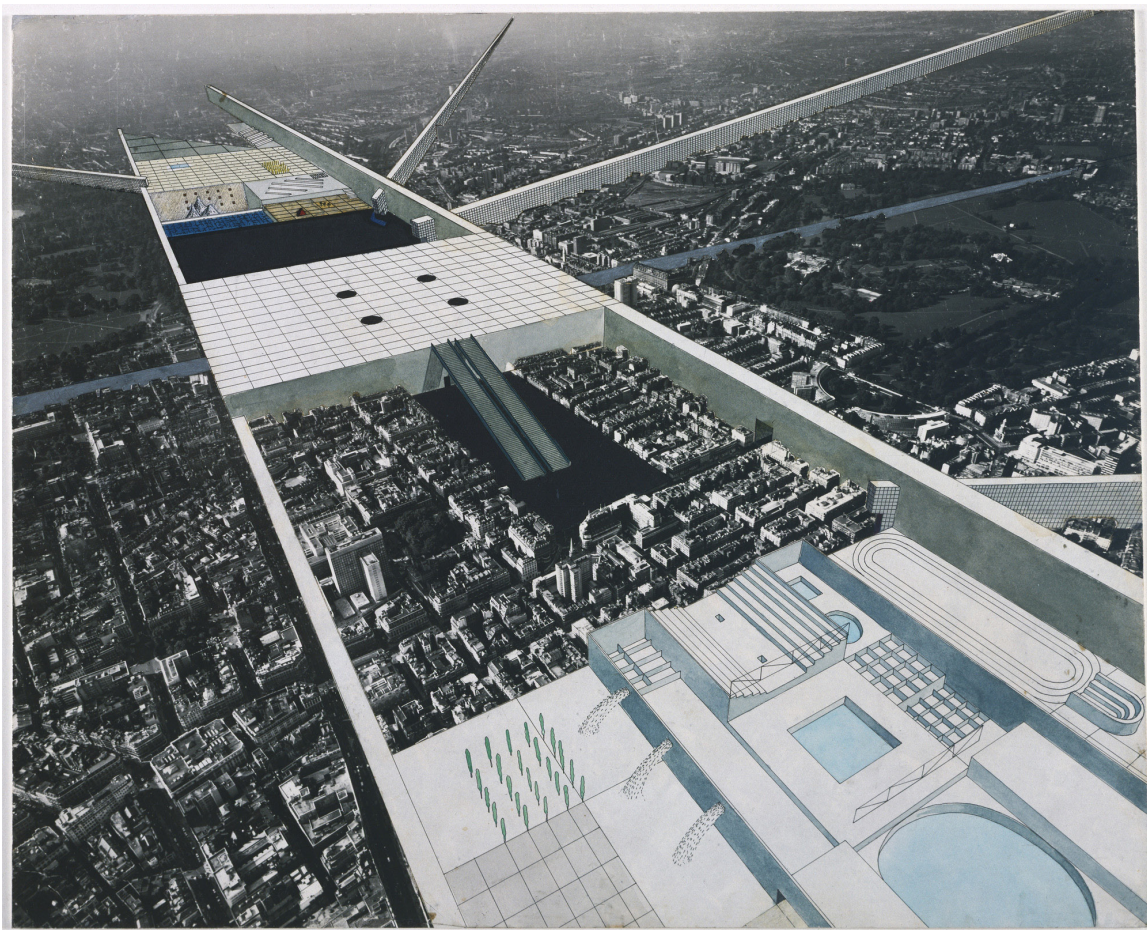
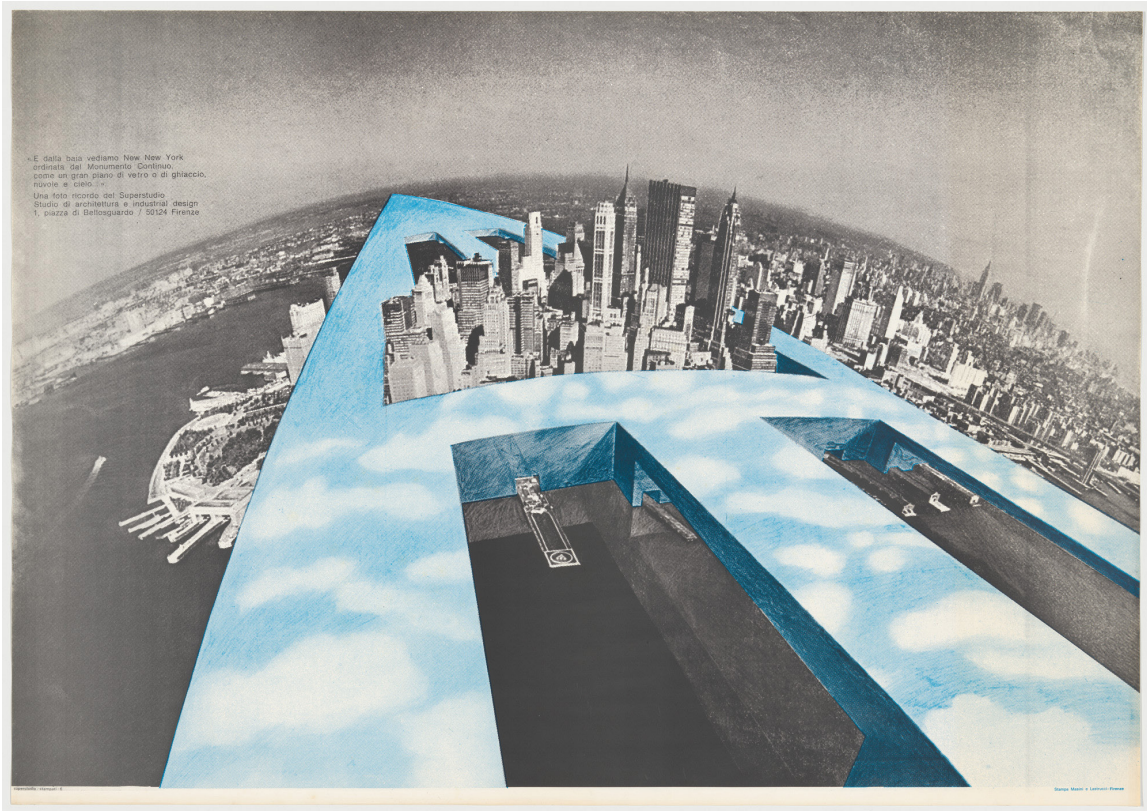
## Superstudio

On the 4th of November 1966, Florence was flooded by the Arno. More than 100 people were killed and countless art- and literature pieces were lost. On that exact day, Superstudio was born. 'I spent nearly the whole day designing the Superstudio manifesto. Then, at 5 o'clock, the water reached my studio' (Natalini, 2004, p. 29). This faithful day introduces our first subject, Superstudio. Three years earlier, student occupations took place in the architecture schools of Rome, Turin, and Milan. Politicization among students led to a renewal of the teaching staff and changes in the curriculum. Consequently, although the role of the architect as a designer prevailed, the awareness of the limits of the architect's ability increased. In this milieu, architects had to find different ways of concrete action. Some abandoned practice to pursue political careers whereas others turned to irony (Quesada, 2011). On the other hand, some designer re-examined their role in society, reconsidering for example the production-consumption cycle. Rather than designing objects for the sake of design itself, they were designing behaviors, environments, and effects caused by objects. The goal was to re-establish a cultural- rather than a solely economic relationship between object and subject. The aim was to improve the balance between humans and their artificial environment (Quesada, 2011). Superstudio's manifesto started by using ideas from Pop Art. Natalini argues that the images of Pop Art have a revolutionary potential (Quesada, 2011), which they used in their most influential works. Superstudio was founded by Adolfo Natalini and Cristiano Toraldo di Francia. The two were later joined by Roberto Magris, Gian Piero Frassinelli, Alessandro Magris and Alessandro Poli (Quesada, 2011). It was a movement that criticized not only architecture but also society through drawings and projects. They tried to 'destroy the existing system' (Natalini, 2004, p. 25), to make a new one. Free of division, consumerism, and violence.

## Image 7

### *The Continuous Monument; New York*

Note. By Superstudio, Gian Piero Frasinelli, Alessandro Magris, Roberto Magris, Adolfo Natalini, Cristiano Toraldo di Francia, Alessandro Poli, 1969, Litograph, located at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, NY, United States. Accessed April 13, 2022, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/221830>



## Image 8

### *Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture: The Strip (Aerial Perspective)*

Note. By Rem Koolhaas, Elia Zenghelis, Madelon Vriesendorp, Zoe Zenghelis, 1972, Cut-and-pasted paper with watercolor, ink, gouache, and color pencil on gelatin silver photograph, located at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, NY, United States. Accessed April 13, 2022, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/104692>

## Koolhaas

Our other protagonist is the architect Remment Lucas Koolhaas, commonly abbreviated to Rem. The Rotterdam born started his working life as a journalist for De Haagse Post, where he wrote articles and conducted interviews. In addition, he studied scriptwriting in Amsterdam where he would later produce films, write screenplays, and act in short movies. In 1968, Rem started studying architecture at the Architectural School of Architecture (AA) in London. Here he associated with teachers such as Cedric Price, Peter Cook, and Elia Zenghelis (Böck, 2015). In the AA, students were given the freedom to carry out theoretical investigations. Koolhaas took advantage of this and his study of the Berlin wall can be seen as a paradigmatic example. However, to Koolhaas, the AA was not exactly what he expected (Chiappone-Piriou, 2021, Byvanck, 2005). Koolhaas recalls; 'at the time, Archigram completely dominated the school' (Chiappone-Piriou, 2021, p. 85). Archigram was co-founded by Peter Cook and explored technologically advanced architectural concepts (Ching et al., 2011). Their wild visions included *Plug-In City* for example, a city that could walk and be plugged into readily available services (Pickering, 2006). Later, Archigram's visions tended toward *the shed*; a building as a big box, endlessly configurable inside. This concept was also adopted by Cedric Price, most notably in *Fun Palace*. The two visions were never built, although the latter was reincarnated as the *Centre Pompidou* in Paris (Pickering, 2006).

These examples attest to the visionary and exploratory attitude of the AA at the time. Although Koolhaas did not always subscribe to the school's values immediately, he recognized the conceptual freedom given by the school. The school aimed for a non-hierarchical exchange between staff and students alike. According to Koolhaas, the school represented 'flower power and hippy culture' (Chiappone-Piriou, 2021, p. 85). During his time at the AA, he received a grant to study at Cornell University. He moved to New York City to research it. Six years later one of his most influential books would be published called *Delirious New York* (Koolhaas, 1978).

## Coming together

'One day at Superstudio, which had a beautiful studio on top of a hill, (...) a tall, skinny, sad-looking young man came in and said, "I'm studying at the Architectural Association, a place completely dominated by terrible technology freaks..."' said Adolfo Natalini (Chiappone-Piriou, 2021, p. 84). Koolhaas' visit to Superstudio in 1970 marked the beginning of long correspondence between the two. But what was it that made them gravitate towards each other, to begin with? When Koolhaas was studying at the AA, he oftentimes studied in the library on Bedford Square. It was here that he first saw the work of Superstudio, specifically their *Continuous Monument*. He saw the image of the plain out of which the New York skyscrapers arose. It was an immediate moment of recognition (Chiappone-Piriou, 2021). This moment of recognition was fuelled by resemblances between their works, and therefore *Continuous Monument* did not go unnoticed.

Koolhaas' Berlin Wall study can be seen as a point of departure. In the AA, he was given the assignment to study and analyze an existing building. Unlike the rest of the students, Koolhaas chose the Berlin Wall, which at first seems like an odd choice. According to Byvanck (2005), this was a provocation towards his challenging times in the AA. When he visited the Berlin Wall he noticed how the wall manifested itself under multiple guises. Concrete slabs, barbed wire, buildings with bricked-up buildings, and emptiness (Byvanck, 2005). 'The greatest surprise is: the wall was heartbreakingly beautiful' (Koolhaas, 1997). The ambiguous power of architecture was revealed to Koolhaas through this experience (Byvanck, 2005).

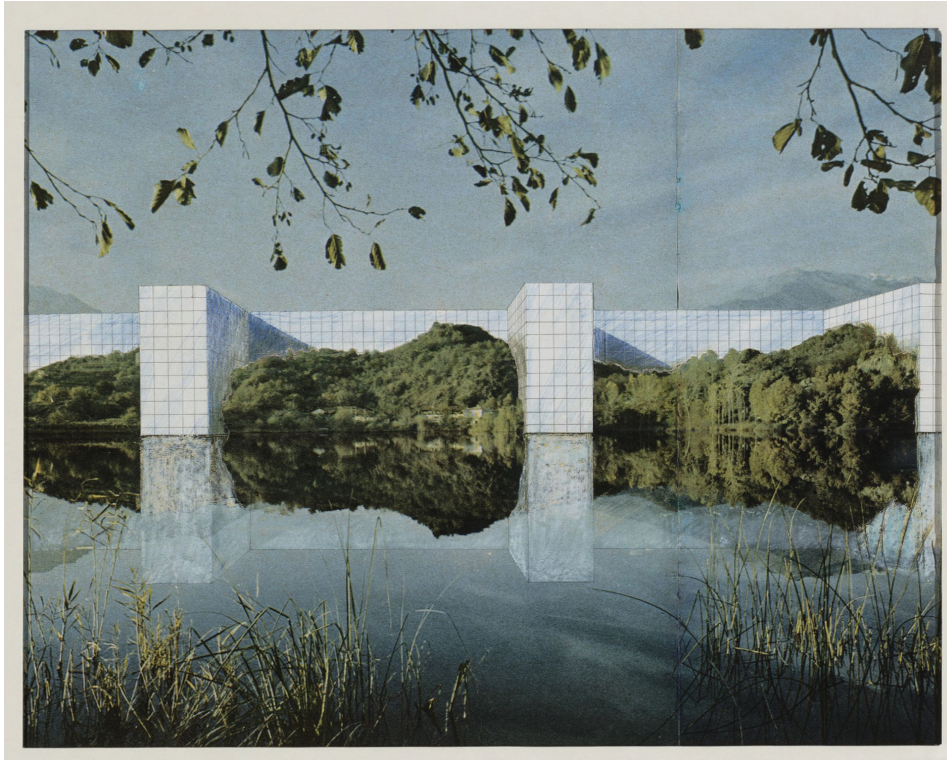
The Berlin Wall study prompted the next provocation, called *Exodus or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture*. Together with Elia Zenghelis, Zoe Zenghelis, and Madelon Vriesendorp, he designed a strip running across London which fulfilled all the residents' dreams (and nightmares) (Byvanck, 2005). According to Koolhaas, the project was a critique of the naivety and 'innocence' of the visionary architecture of the 1960s, like *Plug-in City*. They wanted to emphasize that architecture can be ambiguous and dangerous.

## Image 9

### *The Continuous Monument; On the River*

Note. By Superstudio, Gian Piero Frasinelli, Alessandro Magris, Roberto Magris, Adolfo Natalini, Cristiano Toraldo di Francia, Alessandro Poli, 1969, Cut-and-pasted printed paper, colored pencil, and oil stick on board, located at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, NY, United States.

Accessed April 13, 2022, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/934>



## Image 10

### *The Continuous Monument; Alpine Lakes*

Note. By Superstudio, Gian Piero Frasinelli, Alessandro Magris, Roberto Magris, Adolfo Natalini, Cristiano Toraldo di Francia, Alessandro Poli, 1969, Cut-and-pasted printed paper, colored pencil, and oil stick on board, located at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, NY, United States.

Accessed April 13, 2022, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/937>

Three years earlier, Superstudio released their most sweeping critique under the name of *Continuous Monument*. A series of collages show a model of total urbanization that pushes to extremes the relationship between nature and architecture, city and country (di Francia, n.d.). Moreover, the meaning of architecture itself is put into question by using so-called semantic reduction. This is done by subverting architecture's most meaningful gesture through endless repetition (Byvanck, 2005). *Continuous Monument* did not only serve as a deterrent, to warn of the consequences of carrying forward existing tendencies but also to open up the way for a new hybrid philosophy reconstructing the relations between architecture and nature. It debates the modern distinction between natural and artificial (di Francia, n.d.).

A recurring theme in both Koolhaas' work, as well as that of Superstudio, is the relationship between planning and freedom. Both presented visions of an oppressive and artificial world employing disturbing utopias posited against the idealistic and naïve pretensions of the 1960s (Böck, 2015). These new spatial concepts reacted against consumerism and industrial mechanisms of planning. To some of the 1960's architects, these industrial mechanisms caused architecture to be reduced to mere building technology, disregarding the social aspect. Some of these architects employed ideas of utopias, which were useful in challenging the discipline. Others used dystopias as an ironic and provocative critique. These were to reveal threats, absurdities, and contradictions (Böck, 2015).

Besides the resemblance in the theoretical underpinning, there is also a resemblance in their visual communication. We can identify strategies such as the use of monumentality and gigantism but also the use of universally recognized shapes such as squares and grids (Quesada, 2011). For Superstudio in particular their aesthetics are one of the major reasons that their work is so popular (Byvanck, 2005). Koolhaas most definitely took notice of Superstudio's visuals when he first saw *Continuous Monument* in the Bedford library. As mentioned earlier, Koolhaas visited Superstudio in 1970. Here he would find an alternative to the technocratic climate of the AA (Chiappone-Piriou, 2021). However, their relationship

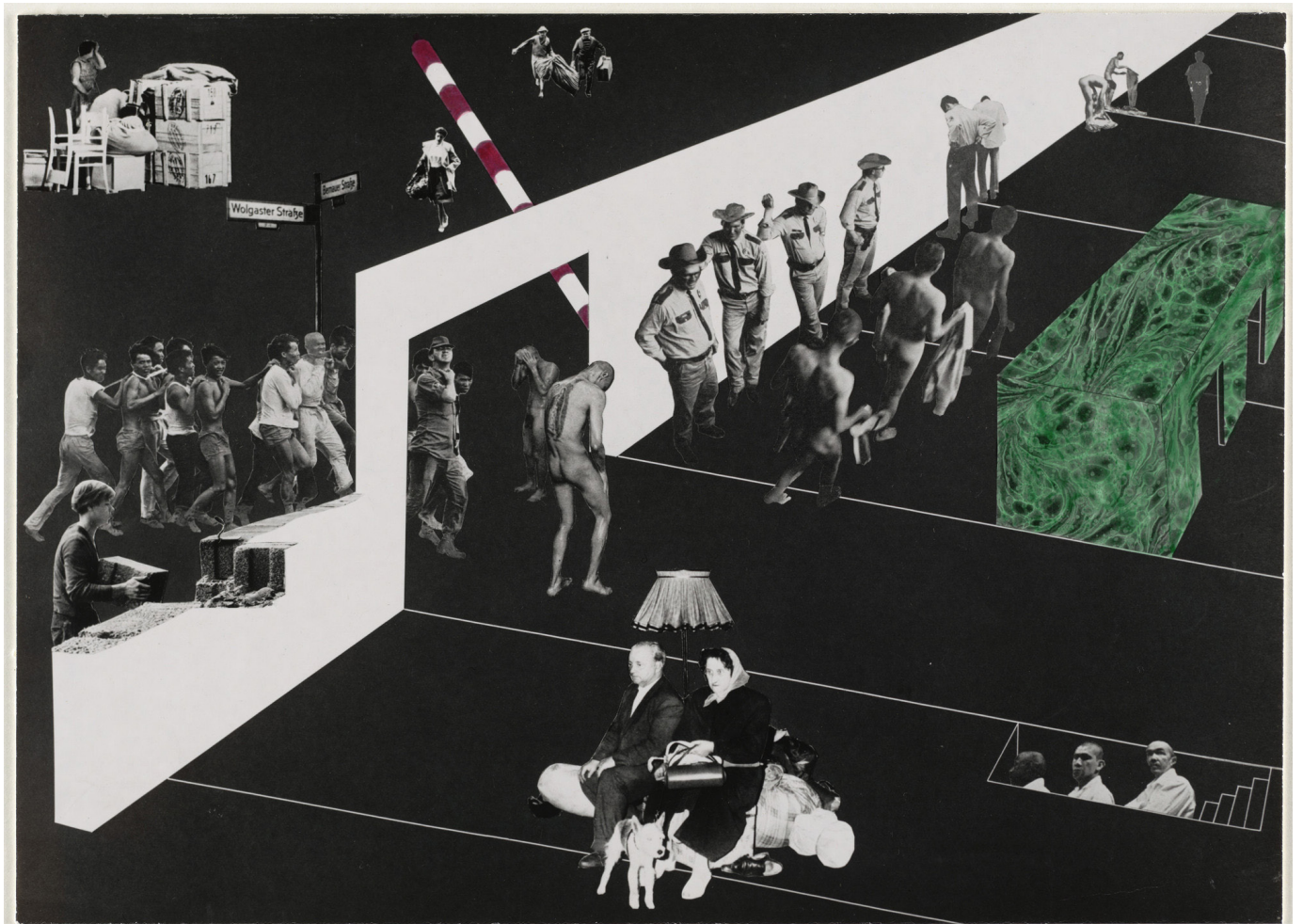
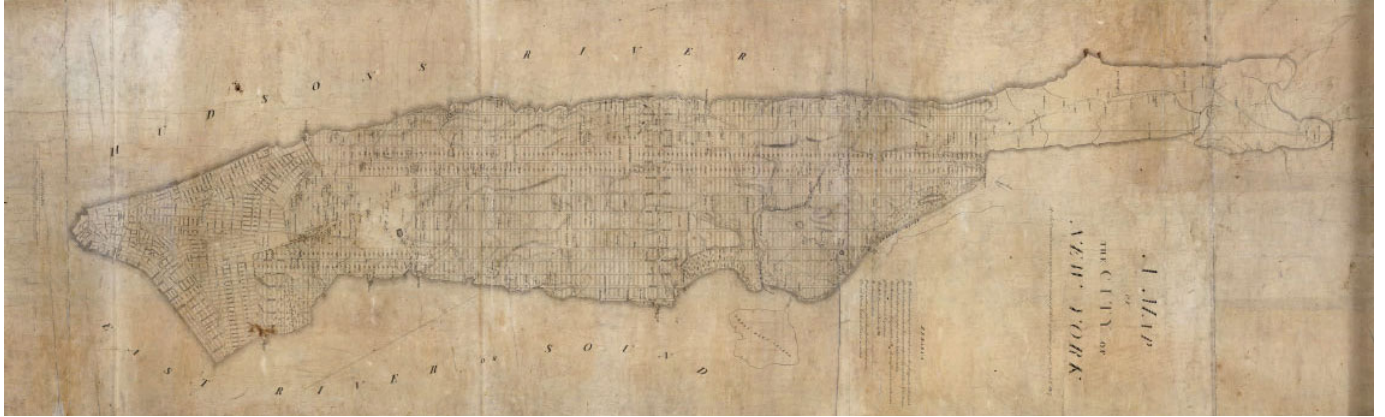
was partially based on a misinterpretation of each other's work. Koolhaas recounts; '... after a while, Natalini became quite ambiguous. He began to describe his aesthetics more and more as some sort of protest. ...it was ambiguous whether he stood for the ultimate aesthetics of modernization or actually for the opposite. It turned out that he stood for the opposite' (Chiappone-Piriou, 2021, p. 88). Koolhaas loved Superstudio's work because he took it literally, only to find out that Natalini and Superstudio meant the exact opposite with their work. According to Koolhaas that was the paradox of their mutual affinity (Chiappone-Piriou, 2021).

**Image 11**

*The 1811 Masterplan for New York City*

Note. By Simeon De Witt, Gouverneur Morris and John Rutherford, 1811, Ink on paper, located at the Museum of the City of New York, NY, United States.

Accessed April 13, 2022, <https://thegreatestgrid.mcny.org/the-1811-plan>



**Image 12**

*Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture: The Reception Area*

Note. By Rem Koolhaas, Elia Zenghelis, Madelon Vriesendorp, Zoe Zenghelis, 1972, Gelatin silver photograph with color ink, located at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, NY, United States.

Accessed April 13, 2022, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/401>



## 2; The grid

### The notion of the grid

The colonization of America contained the possibility to completely revise the foundation of cities. This 'New World' became a testing ground for new architectural ideas which did not have to account for the 'old' European models of city planning. The grid plan was used as the basis for the 'New World' as early as 1573. Eventually, Thomas Jefferson proposed a one-mile continental grid for the entire land in 1765. This grid embodied the ideology of the Founding Fathers that called for equal conditions for each citizen (Böck, 2015). In 1807, De Witt, Morris, and Rutherford were commissioned to design a plan for Manhattan that would regulate the conclusive occupancy of the island. Four years later, in 1811, they propose a matrix that captures all future activity. They have proposed the Manhattan Grid (Koolhaas, 1978). This grid is a single pattern covering the island from edge to edge without interruption. In this sense, the Manhattan grid differs from the grids used in other American cities because it is self-contained and ignores geographical features (Ballon, 2011).

Both Rem Koolhaas and Adolfo Natalini visited New York City to study the contemporary paradigm of urban planning. Natalini visited the United States and reported back to the others of Superstudio. He had wonderful memories of his trip to the 'New World' (Natalini, 1970). Rem Koolhaas moved to the United States after receiving a grant in 1972 (Böck, 2015). In New York, Koolhaas and Natalini would personally experience the grid which undoubtedly informed their positions later on.

The notion of the grid comes forward in several works by both Koolhaas and Superstudio and represents a multitude of paradigms, attitudes, and positions.

In *Exodus, or The Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture* (1972) the first steps towards the notion of the grid are taken. Here, the scheme of a prison is turned into a place of desire (Koolhaas & Mau, 1999). Through the inflexibility and constraints of the prison imposed on London, open-ended situations of choice are propelled. The structure is defined by hermetically enclosing Walls and an intermediate Strip. The monumental scheme creates the maximum contrast between the 'old' city of London and the 'new' area within. Additionally, the strip is divided into

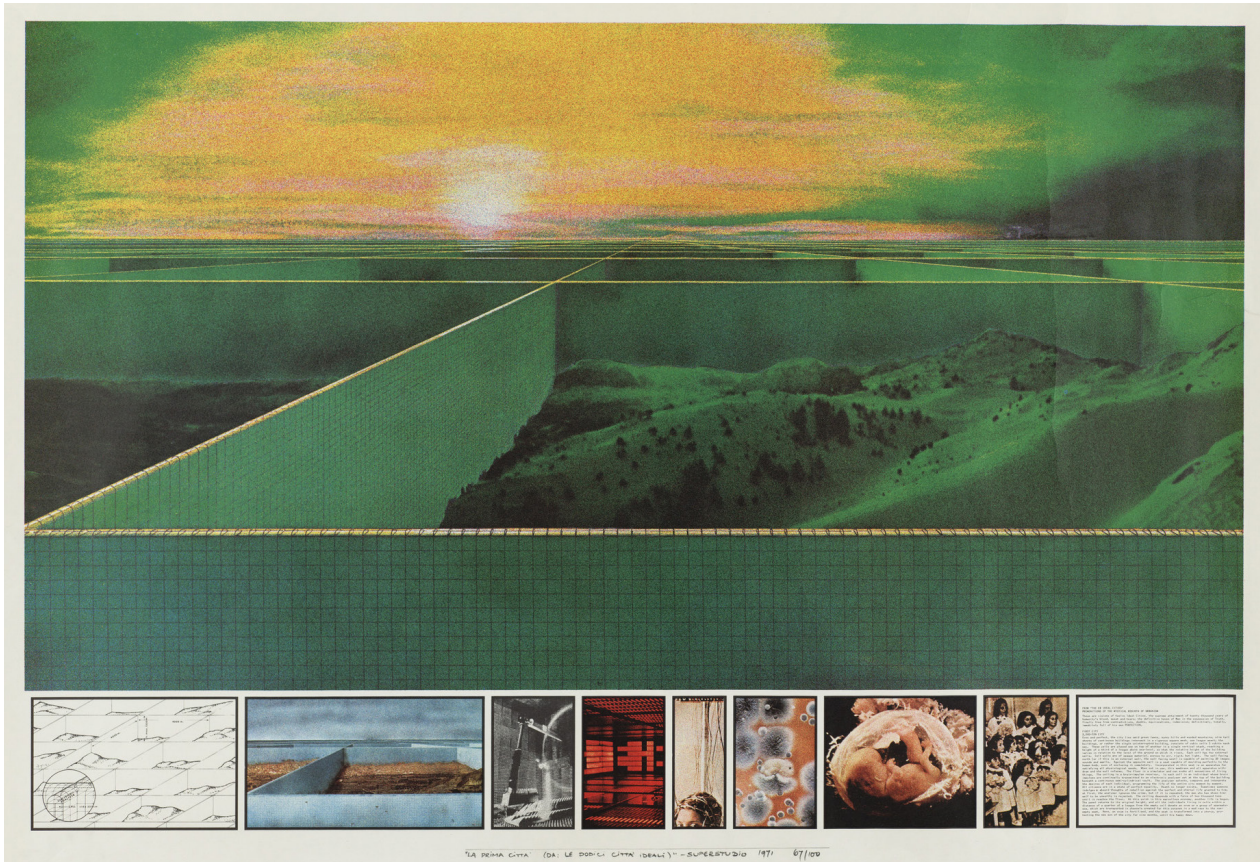
square blocks with different programs that fulfill all the inhabitant's needs. According to Böck (2015), the institutional control of individual liberty is presented as desirable. Therefore it is a retreat from pointless individual experience. The prison of *Exodus* actually liberates its inhabitants rather than subjugates them. However, the utopia bears many resemblances to Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932). This resemblance may reveal that *Exodus* can be read as dystopian rather than utopian (Serdyńska, 2020).

In *Delirious New York* (1978) the utopian (or dystopian) tradition continues (Böck, 2015). The disconnection between new potential worlds and their surroundings manifests itself in the Manhattan skyscraper. The theory of Manhattanism, effectively the conclusion of the book, is anticipated in *Exodus*. The strip in *Exodus* resembles a horizontal skyscraper, where there is a maximum discontinuity between levels in the skyscraper and between the square blocks in *Exodus*. In Manhattan, however, the skyscrapers are separated only by air or nothingness (Böck, 2015). This disconnection is generated by the grid, which makes its first formal introduction in *Delirious New York* (Koolhaas, 1978). But before the notion of the grid is elaborated the utopian aspect of Manhattan should be explained. The utopian aspect of Manhattan is the unlimited creation of sites in a single urban location, the skyscraper (Koolhaas, 1978). Koolhaas (1978) literally calls it the reproduction of the world because of the proliferation of floor space in a single building. Each of these artificial levels is treated as if the others did not exist. The building becomes fractured but still adds up to one single structure. In terms of Urbanism, the indeterminacy of the interior means that no particular site can correspond with a single function anymore. The skyscraper becomes the metropolitan destabilizer because each plot accommodates an unstable combination of activities (Koolhaas, 1978). This three-dimensional anarchy is created by the two-dimensional grid. According to Koolhaas (1978), Manhattan is forever immune to any totalitarian intervention because of the grid. The subdivision of the island into blocks gave rise to maximum increments of control. The more each block celebrated different values, the larger the unity of the entire island. "Because change is contained on the component islands, such a system will never have

**Image 13**

*The First City, from the Twelve Ideal Cities, project, Aerial perspective*

Note. By Superstudio, Cristiano Toraldo di Francia, Alessandro Magris, Roberto Magris, Gian Piero Frassinelli, Adolfo Natalini, 1971, Photolithograph, located at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, NY, United States. Accessed April 13, 2022, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/196>



**Image 14**

*Supersurface*

Note. By Superstudio, Cristiano Toraldo di Francia, Alessandro Magris, Roberto Magris, Gian Piero Frassinelli, Adolfo Natalini, 1972, Photocollage, located in the archives of Cristiano Toraldo di Francia. Accessed April 13, 2022, <https://www.nytimes.com/2021/02/12/arts/design/superstudio-civa.html>

to be revised" (Koolhaas, 1978, p. 296). Koolhaas sees the metropolitan grid as the apotheosis of urban planning.

In *The Generic City* (1995) Koolhaas further exemplifies his point. He sees the skyscraper, as a consequence of the grid, as the definitive typology. The towers can exist anywhere and are indifferent to their surroundings and they do not interact with each other. "Density in isolation is the ideal" (Koolhaas, 1995a; Koolhaas & Mau, 1999, p. 1253). The connection between the Manhattan skyscraper and utopian thinking is made explicit (Böck, 2015). Koolhaas's *Generic City* (1995a) theorizes on the configuration of the contemporary city. *The Generic City* is a city stripped of identity. What perhaps can be seen as a loss is posited as meaningful. He asks himself; "what if ... homogenization were an intentional process, a conscious movement away from difference toward similarity" (Koolhaas, 1995a; Koolhaas & Mau, 1999, p. 1248). *The Generic City* is a city without history, a surface, and it stands for urban sprawl, sameness, and repetition (Hajer, 1999).

In *Continuous Monument* (1969-70) sameness and repetition are taken to the extreme. Koolhaas's meaningful grid is put into question by subverting it through endless replication and semantic redundancy (Byvanck, 2005). *The Continuous Monument* is a globe-traversing structure consisting of walls, volumes, and surfaces. It stretches across both natural- and built sites with total disregard for local conditions. The neutrality of the grid structure takes the rationality of modernism as a starting point and by exaggerating it excludes any other form (Böck, 2015). The assertion of the rationale was used with critical intent. Furthermore, Superstudio analyzed and criticized architecture by using 'popular' illustration techniques which already hint at their ironic intention (Natalini, 1977). The 'American' advertisement style of their illustrations critically assessed contemporary consumerism.

In *Twelve Cautionary Tales for Christmas* (1971), twelve ideal cities are described. Here, it comes forward how the utopian program is both fascinating and threatening. The double nature of the city is illustrated and described. The images of the cities appear to convey desirable settings at first.

In the accompanying article, the descriptions tell us that there is hardly anything desirable about them. Through these narratives, the cities that seem ideal at first appear to be dystopian (Budzynski, 2011). The first of the twelve cities for example shows once again a continuous building that stretches across a natural landscape. The building comprises cells that accommodate every human desire. If any inhabitants try to free themselves, the ceiling of their cell will descend, obliterating the inhabitant, freeing space for a new citizen (Superstudio, 1971). In the ideal cities, the grid is used as a repressive device (Quesada, 2011).

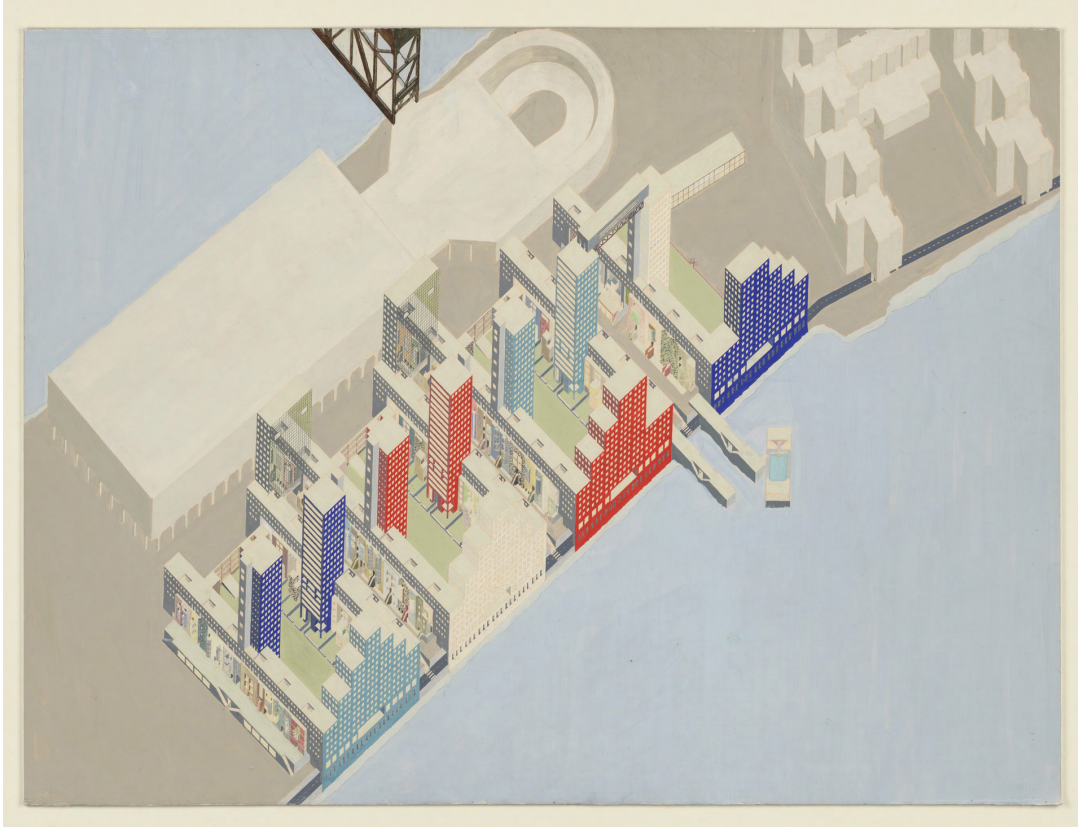
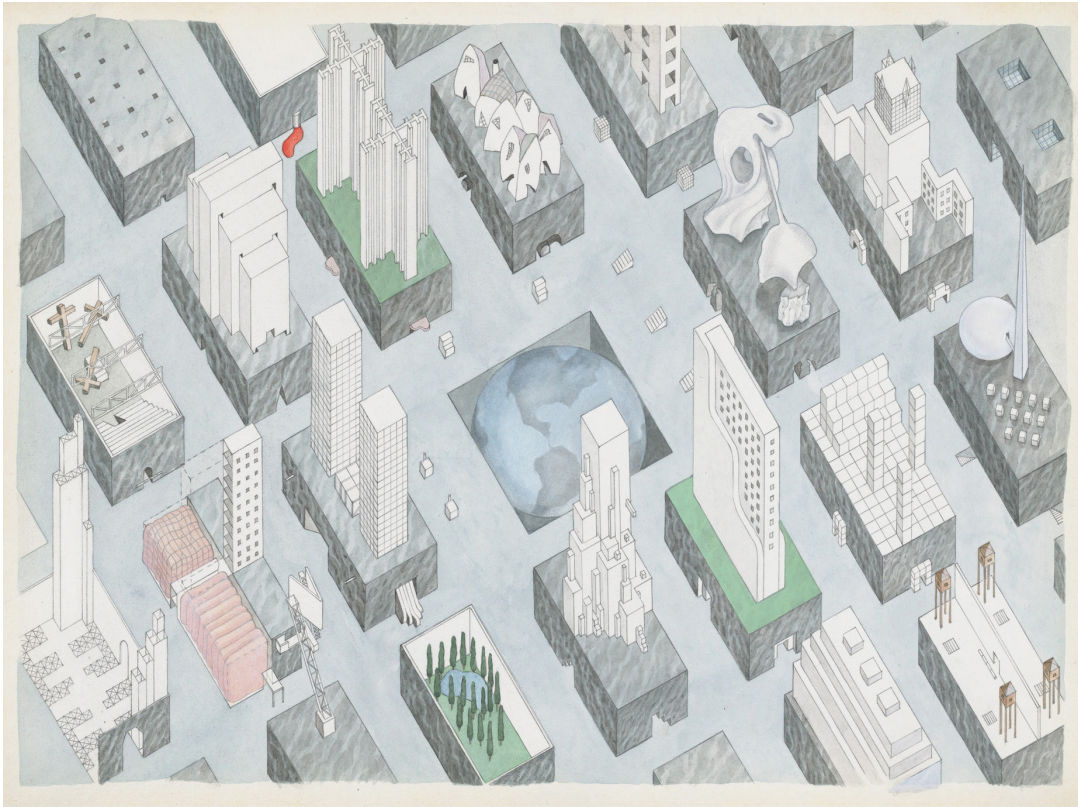
In *Supersurface* (1972) the critical intent of Superstudio was taken one step further. *Supersurface* can be seen as a counter-design. It illustrated the approach of designers who thought that no more objects should be added to the consumer-dominated physical world before truly social and political changes are made (Chiaponne-Piriou, 2021). Again, the *Supersurface* consisted of a grid. The grid provided air, water, food, and any other needs to its inhabitants. Humanity once again becomes nomadic in a world without objects. Superstudio tries to show a different kind of richness to us (Chiaponne-Piriou, 2021). The grid is a continuous system and the landscape becomes increasingly artificial and homogeneous. Every point will be the same as any other (di Francia, 1970).

**Image 15**

*The City of the Captive Globe Project, New York, Axonometric*

Note. By Rem Koolhaas, Madelon Vriesendorp, 1972, Gouache and graphite on paper, located at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, NY, United States.

Accessed April 13, 2022, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/104696>



**Image 16**

*Roosevelt Island Redevelopment Project, New York, Axonometric*

Note. By Rem Koolhaas, Elia Zenghelis, 1975, Gouache and graphite on board, located at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, NY, United States.

Accessed April 13, 2022, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/818>

## Differences and similarities

In Superstudio's earlier work the grid expresses rationality. Here, it has leveled out all the qualitative aspects and therefore neutralized any form of meaning. The grid was the embodiment of homogenization that was consequently encouraged by globalization. The rationale of modernism led some to believe that standard models could be used worldwide. Superstudio strongly advocated against this tendency. Their works were used as a deterrent, and the redundancy of the grid was emblematic of its use. They would even go so far as to use it as a repressive device. Later, they would use the grid in a less hostile way, but still with critical intent. On the other hand, Koolhaas celebrates the grid. Although at times its use is ambiguous, for example in the utopian/dystopian *Exodus*, the grid contained a certain condition for meaning. To him, "the beauty of the grid has always been that you start neutrally. That neutrality then provokes or enables different identities" (Chiaponne-Piriou, 2021, p.88). Koolhaas' celebratory attitude towards 'the culture of congestion' in Manhattan, which is formed by both the skyscraper and the grid, exemplifies his appreciation for the grid.

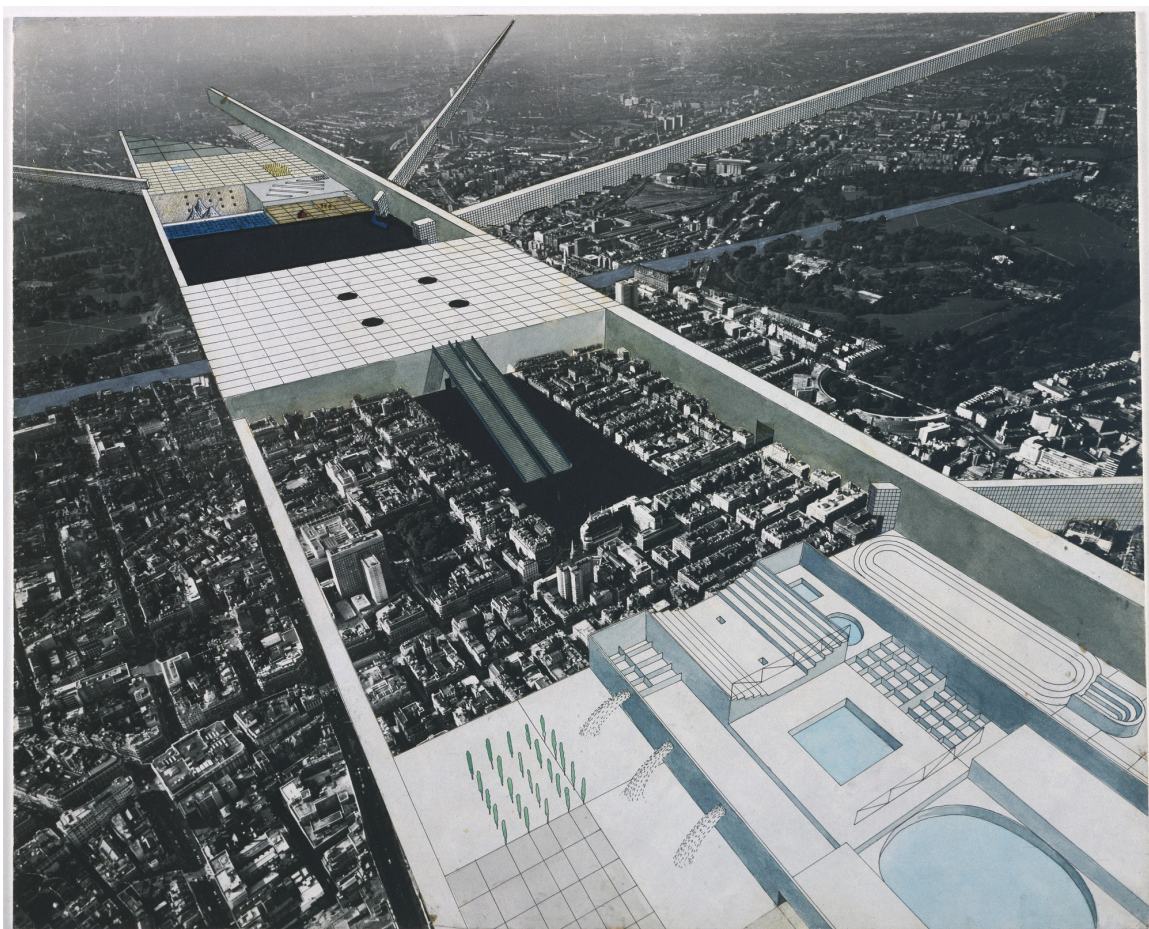
It must be noted that the use of the grid between Koolhaas' and Superstudio's works is not always by means of the same architectural elements. Koolhaas mostly describes and uses the grid in the form of urban configurations, like the street and avenue pattern of New York City. This is prevalent in his works, most notably in *The City of the Captive Globe* and in *The Generic City*. Nonetheless, Koolhaas does not limit himself to urban configurations. The grid also comes forward in facades, as in *Exodus* or *the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture* but also in *Roosevelt Island* and *Hotel Sphinx*, which were made shortly after *Delirious New York*. In Superstudio's work, the grid mainly comes afore in the façade, particularly in *Continuous Monument*. Here the gridded façade comprises a curtain wall, at the time the most modern and widespread used façade system, hence its critical use by Superstudio. Manfredo Tafuri, although he was an outspoken critic of Superstudio, stated that the grid of the curtain wall, led to the complete globalization of an inescapable world order (Quesada, 2011).

Both for Koolhaas and Superstudio, the grid represented sameness and repetition. Moreover, the grid neutralized pre-existing elements and homogenized a certain area. On this, they would agree. However, they disagreed on the effects of neutralization because they had an opposing stance on the value of history. Natalini argues that even in his later career when he designed actual buildings, his work is 'still anti-utopian if the only utopia left to us is globalization' (Byvanck, 2005, p. 27). He goes on to decry that contemporary architecture has been 'homogenized by a cynical and useless experimentalism' (2005, p. 27). For Natalini, the only correct response would be to return to order and tradition. To counter globalization with harsh local realities. Koolhaas could not have disagreed more: The future of the practice 'will not be based on the twin fantasies of order and omnipotence; it will be the staging of uncertainty' (Koolhaas & Mau, 1995, p. 969). The aim will no longer be on permanent configurations but on enabling fields that accommodate processes without definitive forms (Hajer, 1999). Furthermore, Koolhaas disparages that 'regret about history's absence is a tiresome reflex. It exposes an unspoken consensus that history's presence is desirable. But who says this is the case?' (Koolhaas, 1995a, p. 1263). According to Koolhaas, not history but adaptation are the key variables. This is an attack on a Western obsession with history as a source of social identity (Hajer, 1999).

## Image 17

### *The Continuous Monument; New York*

Note. By Superstudio, Gian Piero Frasinelli, Alessandro Magris, Roberto Magris, Adolfo Natalini, Cristiano Toraldo di Francia, Alessandro Poli, 1969, Litograph, located at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, NY, United States. Accessed April 13, 2022, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/221830>



## Image 18

### *Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture: The Strip (Aerial Perspective)*

Note. By Rem Koolhaas, Elia Zenghelis, Madelon Vriesendorp, Zoe Zenghelis, 1972, Cut-and-pasted paper with watercolor, ink, gouache, and color pencil on gelatin silver photograph, located at the Museum of Modern Art in New York, NY, United States. Accessed April 13, 2022, <https://www.moma.org/collection/works/104692>

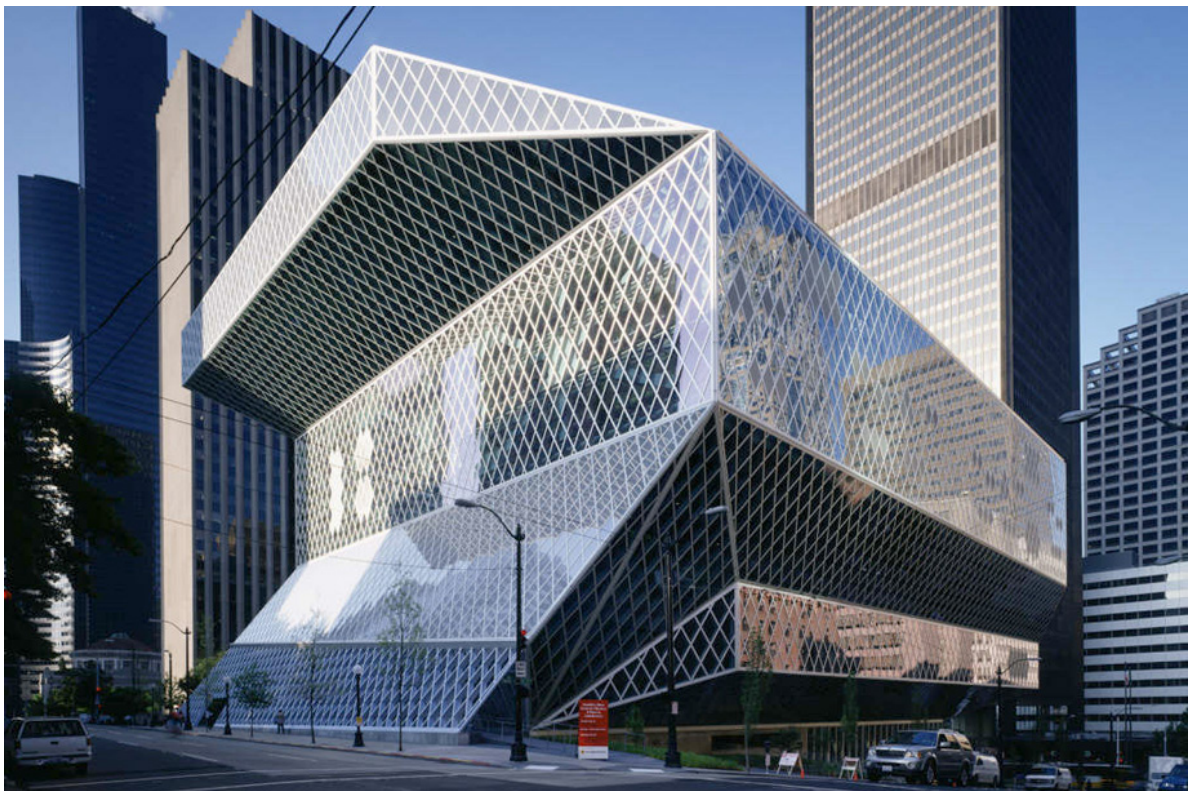
Although they seem to disagree fundamentally, common ground can still be found. The greatest similarities between Koolhaas and Superstudio can be found in their earlier works, particularly in *Exodus*, *Continuous Monument*, and the *Twelve Cautionary Tales*. Not only does the imagery of the works correspond closely, but also do their messages. Both can be read as a warning for contemporary society. In *Exodus*, the city of London is on its way to self-extinction. However, the alternative, which fulfills every citizen's demand, is equally unpromising. The monolith structure covering London bears many resemblances with the structure from *Continuous Monument*, which also fulfills every thinkable desire. Interpreting both works as dystopian, it can be concluded that both Koolhaas and Superstudio made effort to warn about the possible consequences of further development of civilization. The dystopian argument gains traction when looking at references within both their works. Serdyska (2020) and Böck (2015) reveal that *Exodus'* theoretical underpinning bears many resemblances with Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932). Furthermore, Böck (2015) shows how in *The City of the Captive Globe* there is a direct reference to Huxley's *Brave New World* as well. Superstudio's work has been directly linked to Huxley's *Brave New World* (1932) as well by Prina (2015). What can be said is that both Koolhaas and Superstudio pursued the struggle for a better world.

**Image 19**

*Muzenplein, De Resident; Den Haag*

Note. By Natalini Architetti, 1992, Photograph, In possession of the artist

Accessed April 13, 2022, <https://architectenweb.nl/nieuws/artikel.aspx?ID=47090>



**Image 20**

*Central Library; Seattle*

Note. By Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), Rem Koolhaas, 2004, Photograph, In possession of the artist

Accessed April 13, 2022, <https://www.okaluxna.com/reference/seattle-central-library/#additional-information>



## 3; Convergence and divergence

### Recognition

As discussed previously in chapter one, Koolhaas articulated his fascination with Superstudio in multiple letters after he saw one of their works. Koolhaas recalls; 'I saw the work of Superstudio for the first time in 1970. I believe it was an image of *Monumento Continuo*, more particularly of the plain out of which the New York skyscrapers arose...' (Chiapone-Pirou, 2021, p. 85). Koolhaas immediately recognized a certain mentality and a connection between architecture and counterculture. Fuelled also by his discontent about the AA, he approached Superstudio the same year. Natalini recalls a sad-looking young man coming to their studio in August wishing to completely change the school (Chiapone-Pirou, 2021). This was the beginning of their friendship. In the following winter, Koolhaas once again reached out to Natalini. 'I should have written you after my visit in August, how much I liked meeting you, and how impressed I was by the work' (Koolhaas, 1970 p. 1). In the same letter, Koolhaas invites Natalini to give a lecture at the AA, the beginning of mutual opportunities provided by them both. The next year Natalini invites Koolhaas to visit them 'so you [Koolhaas] can confirm a good tradition of regular yearly visit at Superstudio' (Natalini, 1971, p.1). Their friendship becomes quite intimate and the letters get increasingly longer and more personal. In 1973, Koolhaas tells Natalini that he misses their exchanges and consultations and that he is annoyed with his architectural loneliness (Koolhaas, 1973).

### Misunderstanding

As mentioned in chapter two, both Koolhaas and Superstudio were elaborating on a similar campaign. Particularly the similarities in *Exodus*, *Continuous Monument*, and the *Twelve Cautionary Tales* exemplify this. In his own words, Koolhaas 'loved' Superstudio's work because he took it literally, and 'it would be stunning if built' (Chiapone-Pirou, 2021, p. 89). However, whenever they discussed the works, Natalini would say that it was just a commentary. To Koolhaas, it was unclear if he misinterpreted it or if he appreciated their true intentions. Koolhaas' misunderstanding became clear when he saw Natalini's built works in the Netherlands. Consequently, their relationship became less intense. Koolhaas argues that Superstudio's ambiguity invited multiple interpretations of their work, including false

ones. Koolhaas' false interpretation actually made their work 'more attractive' to him. (Chiapone-Pirou, 2021, p. 90).

### Proceedings

Once, architects had to experiment and modernize in order to break free from tradition. However, in the 20th century, modernization became the norm and consequently the tradition. Natalini, unlike Koolhaas, countered this tendency by returning to order and tradition (Byvanck, 2005), which can be seen in his built works. When Superstudio disbanded in 1978, Natalini would start his own architecture firm, building mainly in historic city centers. It was only then that Koolhaas would understand that he did not fully understand the person he grew so fond of. 'My misunderstanding only became completely clear when I saw his [Natalini's] work in the Netherlands with amazement' says Koolhaas in an interview (Chiapone-Pirou, 2021, p. 89). Natalini's built works are characterized by relatively simple forms, identifiable and traditional. The use of brick, natural stone, and concrete under a zinc or copper roof distinguishes Natalini's work. Hans Ibelings proclaims that, where Koolhaas sees a world of difference in Natalini's early and late work, that difference is actually considerably smaller than it may seem. In his built works, Natalini uses simple forms to pursue simplicity as such. When seen in the context of his earlier work, which is more or less anthropological studies into simple elements and processes of change, there is a certain continuation. (Byvanck, 2005). The return to order and tradition in Natalini's work, at first, seems like the exact opposite of Koolhaas' work. Although Koolhaas also pursued processes of change. His aim was also that of accommodating processes without definitive forms (Hajer, 1999).

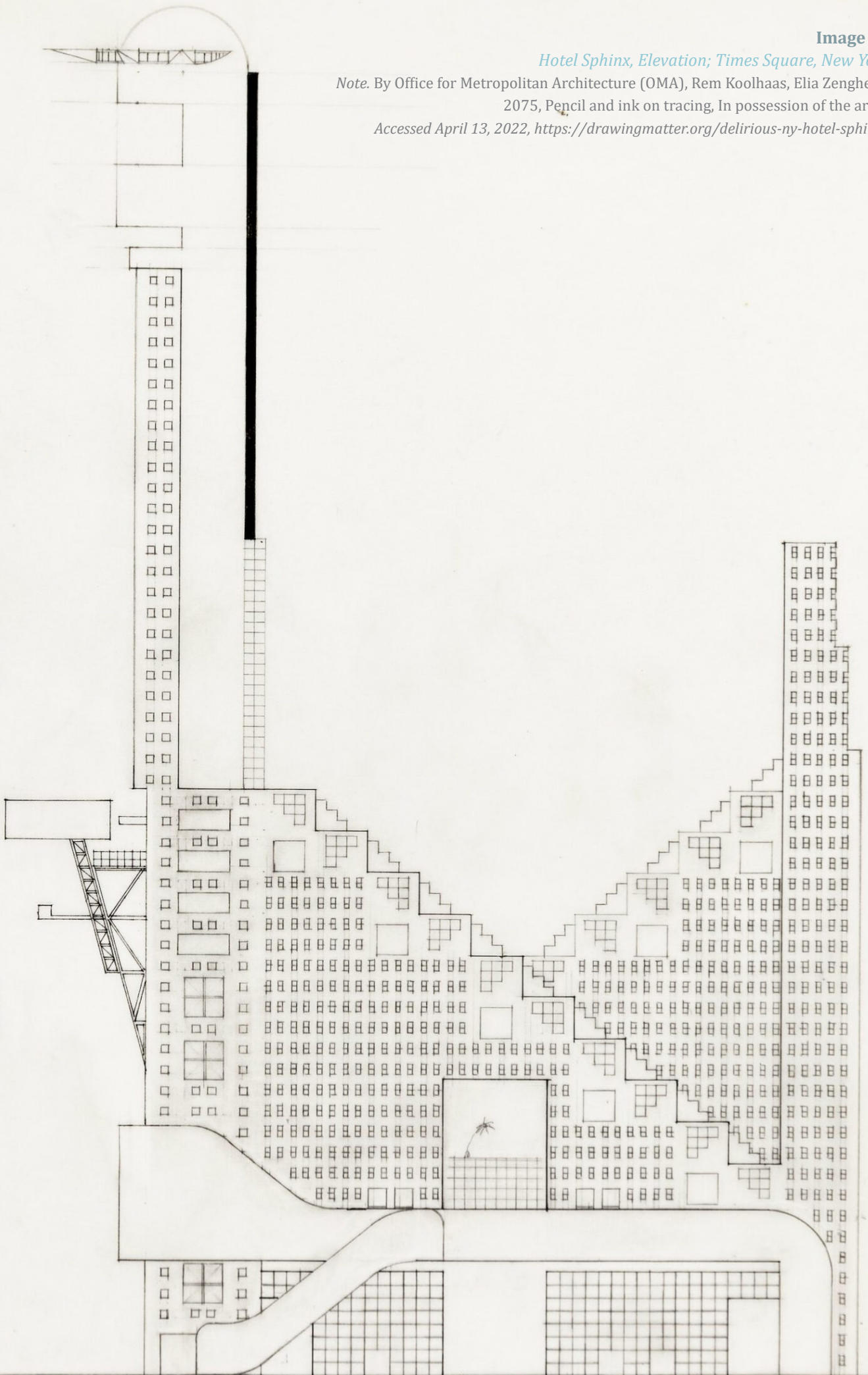
Koolhaas would proceed to found the Office of Metropolitan Architecture, which became one of the most reputable firms in its field. In one of Koolhaas' letters, he already hints: '... in the near future, we should, as a larger and loosely connected international group, more or less claim the subject of intense metropolitan architecture... and form an institute which is active as a practice...' (Koolhaas, 1973, p. 3). This ambition became reality two years later when OMA was founded in 1975.

**Image 21**

*Hotel Sphinx, Elevation; Times Square, New York*

Note. By Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), Rem Koolhaas, Elia Zenghelis,  
2075, Pencil and ink on tracing, In possession of the artist

Accessed April 13, 2022, <https://drawingmatter.org/delirious-ny-hotel-sphinx/>



Natalini responded; 'The founding of an international institute sounds great to me... The Metropolitan Institute sounds very sexy...' (Natalini, 1973, p.2). Besides running the firm, Koolhaas continued to pursue the academic side of architecture as well. In one of his famous essays *Whatever happened to Urbanism?* he would once again argue against a return to tradition. According to Koolhaas, since May 1968 two parallel campaigns emerged; Praising the existing city but at the same time ridiculing the field of urbanism out of existence. Rediscovering the virtues of the classical city at the height of urbanization seems to be the 'point of no return' (Koolhaas, 1995b, p. 28). 'It [urbanism] will no longer be about meticulous definition, ... but about expanding notions, denying boundaries...' (Koolhaas, 1995b, p.29).

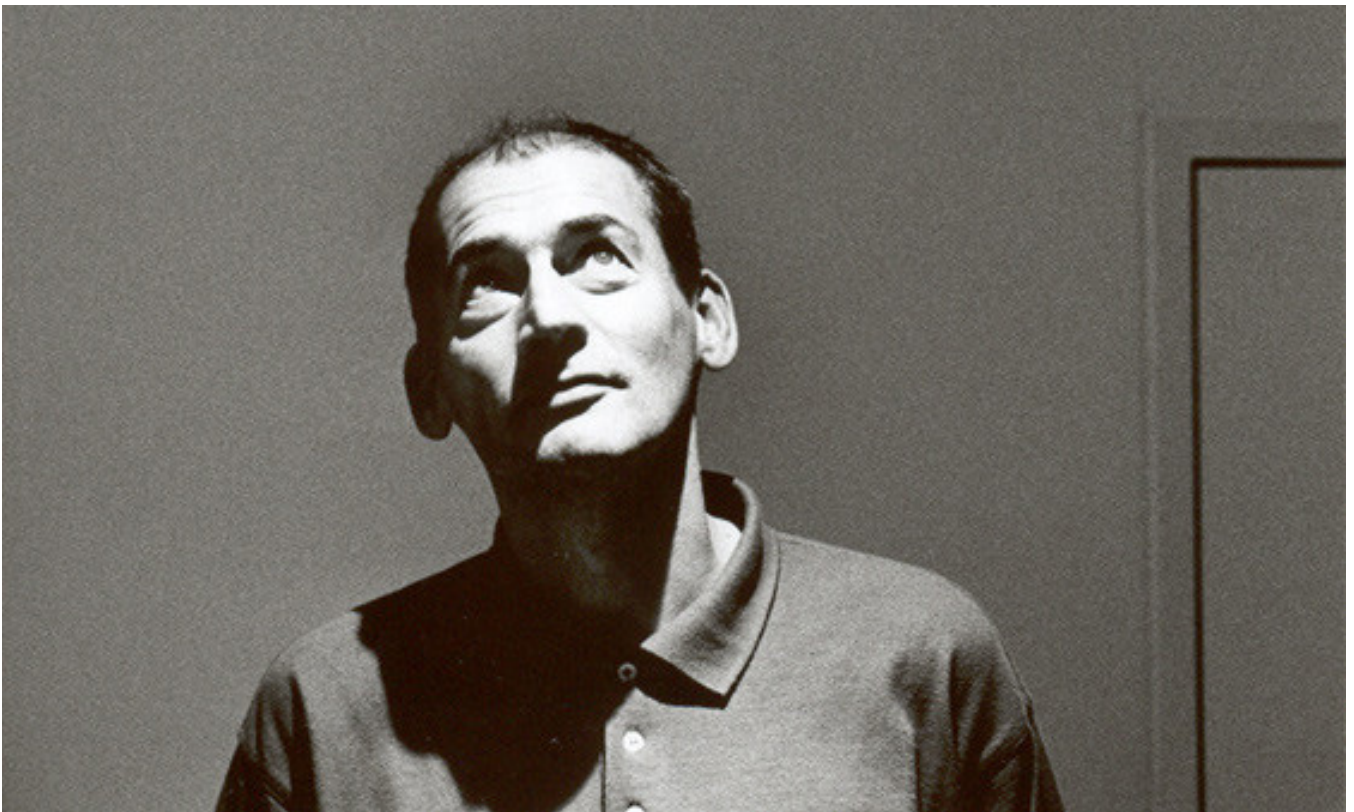
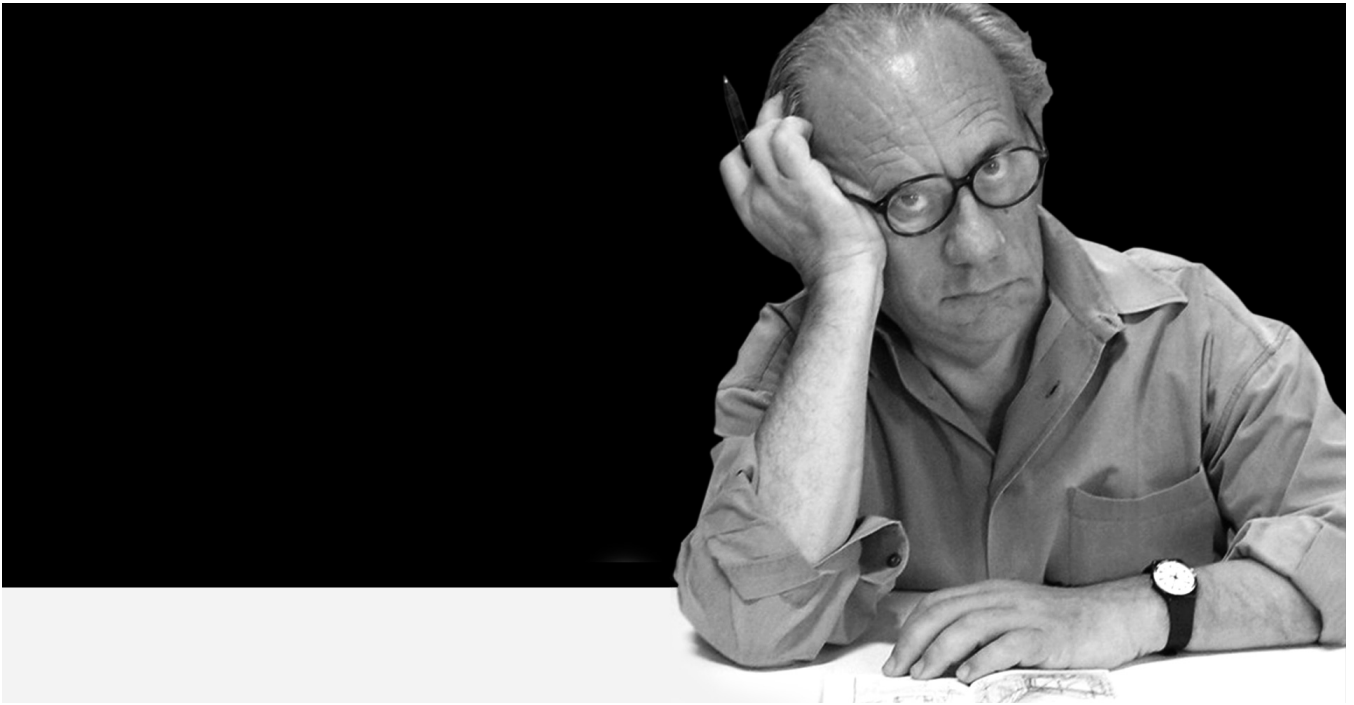
It seems as if Koolhaas and Natalini fundamentally disagreed on certain architectural perspectives, even though they initially thought otherwise. After coming together, they drifted apart once again. In architecture, friendships come and go. Another illustrative example of this tendency is the friendship between Bruno Zevi and Sigfried Giedion, as described by Baciú (2020). Moreover, Baciú suggests that the two subjects of a deteriorating friendship do not have to be antipodes by definition. However, they can grow apart because of natural processes of diversification, an integral part of life (Baciú, 2020).

**Image 22**

*Adolfo Natalini*

Note. By Unknown, n.d., Photograph, In possession of the artist

Accessed April 13, 2022, <https://www.upgroup.it/en/adolfo-natalini/>



**Image 23**

*Rem Koolhaas*

Note. By Unknown, n.d., Photograph, In possession of the artist

Accessed April 13, 2022, <https://www.archdaily.com/294325/happy-birthday-rem-koolhaas>

## Conclusion

May 1968 marked a common starting point for Koolhaas and Superstudio and can be regarded as a pivotal moment in architecture. Although its societal ramifications are hard to estimate, it sparked the uprising of so-called radical architecture, which ties the fate of the two subjects: Superstudio, an Italian Architecture collective, founded by Natalini and di Francia, who re-examined their role as designers through compelling projects. And Rem Koolhaas, who quickly noticed Superstudio's compelling works. Koolhaas had a hard time fitting in the architectural milieu that surrounded him at the time. He saw in Superstudio a similar mentality and reached out to them, in the hope of celebrating their shared perspectives. At first, their work shared significant similarities. Resemblances are clear in *Exodus* and *Continuous Monument* for example. Not only in its visual communication but also in its theoretical substantiation. After a while, it became clear to Koolhaas that they shared less common ground than he initially thought.

Their greatest contradiction regarded the notion of the grid, which predominated their works at the time. Superstudio used the grid to express rationality, with critical intent. In their works, the grid leveled out all qualitative aspects of any local context and neutralized any form of meaning. In this way, they criticized the rationale of modernism, which suggested that standard models could be used worldwide. Superstudio strongly advocated against this tendency and used their works as a deterrent, to warn against perpetuating standard models worldwide. At times, the grid was even used as a repressive device, mainly in their dystopian projects. To Koolhaas, the grid represented something else. Its neutrality would enable or provoke different identities, and that way served as a condition for meaning. Both agreed that the grid represented sameness and repetition. Natalini advocated for a return to order and tradition whereas Koolhaas thought that the return to tradition was a tiresome reflex. And instead of order, Koolhaas advocated for the staging of uncertainty.

Initially, Koolhaas thought that he found in Natalini a true counterpart. They corresponded frequently and their meetings became ever more intense. They granted each other mutual opportunities and undoubtedly contributed to each other's careers.

But as the meetings became more intense, so did their misunderstanding come to the surface. They disagreed on critical moments and uncertainty grew. Koolhaas realized that he misinterpreted Superstudio's work on which their friendship was partly based, and their relationship cooled off. Superstudio dissolved and Natalini would continue to build in historic centers of European cities. It was only then that Koolhaas fully realized that he misunderstood Natalini when he saw his buildings with amazement. Koolhaas would continue his writing and founded OMA in 1975. The coming together and drifting apart of Koolhaas and Natalini serves yet as another example of the processes of diversification that are part of life.

Agonism, the respectful conflict through disagreement, plays an important role in the development of architects and their concepts. Although disagreement might cool friendships off, it serves a vital role in architecture and is perhaps indispensable to the architectural discourse. Juxtaposing their professional relationship with their personal relationship exposes a paradox; Affinity generated by misunderstanding. Nevertheless, Koolhaas and Natalini always treated each other with respect, which is an integral part of the concept of agonism.

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- Image 22: *Adolfo Natalini*
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*AR2A011 - Architectural History Thesis*  
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