

## SUPERSTUDIO images: persistent hypotheses of interior space

The sharp collages of the Italian architects SUPERSTUDIO have been widely disseminated and, despite the shifts in technology that have heightened reality effects in architectural imagery, there remains something compelling about these earlier images. Working with an assumption that the strange desirability of the Superstudio images stems from their persistent social and political attention that is still needed in the present, this paper considers the nature of interiority exhibited in their images from the late 1960s and the early 1970s. It is discussed in relationship to the idea that interiority might exist in their work as a state of becoming rather than a static in-place condition and at the back of the discussion is the idea that Superstudio images might have ramifications for the present, in which architecture as finite object remains a disturbing idea.

Adolfo Natalini, a founding member of the radical architectural group Superstudio, situated their work in a critical 'mediatory' space between architecture and the visual arts. More recently, Charles Rice in his book, *The Emergence of the Interior: Architecture, Modernity, Domesticity*, has pointed out the close association between the interior and its image, suggesting that the interior emerged as a separate condition through the representation of the domestic. Rice's insights on the entwined image/interior emergent condition are demonstrated with the bourgeois interior and this is also the condition with which Superstudio dealt in the later era of burgeoning, acquisitive post-war Italy.

The context for Superstudio's treatment of the domestic interior was outlined by Penny Sparkes in her article, 'A Home for Everybody?': Design ideology and the Culture of the Home in Italy, 1945-72'. She pointed out that 'From 1950s onwards, the concept of modernity, associated increasingly with ideas of comfort and luxury, rather than with necessity, became an increasingly important element within an essentially 'bourgeois' culture of the home...' <sup>1</sup> The gap between mass high density housing, quickly and cheaply erected post war, and the idealised Italian home grew quickly in the 1950s, according to Sparkes, and "by the early 1960s, the two had moved into quite distinct areas." <sup>2</sup> Superstudio's projects have been seen as both critiques of the domestic practices of their era and also as visions that exceeded their didactic functions. As Hilde Heynen proposed,

"The work of Superstudio was also presented as a form of critique of society. But what these projects have in common is the fact that they did not aim at any direct application of their commitment, but translated this commitment in a very indirect way into images that then acquired the status of, say, a 'negative utopia'. (A negative utopia shows the ultimate consequences of taking existing social tendencies to their limit. That terrifying picture is supposed to lead to an awareness of the urgent necessity to resist the status quo. In other words, there is only hope in the horror...)." <sup>3</sup>

Throughout the later Superstudio collages and drawings, including the images from the series of their work known as *Life*, conventional interiority appears to be refused and, instead, daily life is exhibited on a gridded surface in an exposed and expansive condition; objects of fine design are sparse, comfort and luxury are remote. A well known example of Superstudio's memorable and much published images depicts a hedonistic picnic occurring, with wine and baguettes, on an island of solidity attached lightly to the grid. Another outdoor image shows a small girl sweeping away the debris of a previous domesticity and in a further image, a woman stands at an ironing board on a patch of exterior space defiantly registering the dissolution of the interior. The bright light of open air makes their domestic concerns seem trivial and a little disturbing.

Superstudio visually deployed the grid in the demarcation of variable spatial conditions but in their images it existed primarily as a horizontal surface that might, occasionally, consent to wrap objects such as the histograms or the Continuous Monument. The gridded surface, generally operating as an expansive operational condition attentive to control, evoke particular landscapes, nautical navigation or the stretching deserts that are described in the story board prepared for the film of the Continuous Monument. The landscapes are implicated in the formation of interiority.

In the storyboard, "Deserti naturali e artificiali", The Continuous Monument, the first space is a desert stretching across the infinite world. Mimicking Genesis the storyboard depicts the horizon, with one sparse cloud above indicating both gravity and its resistance. The horizontal surface then forms into vertical monuments which foreshadow the appearance of geometry and architecture, which is described as a "closed, immobile object referring only to itself..." <sup>4</sup> Architecture, as a subdivided block of geometry, remains an external condition in the storyboard even in the situation of a Drive-in

Museum of Architecture that consists of frames of structure and a rainbow crossing the road, which is driven by one point perspective to the horizon.

One frame of the storyboard is drawn with an interior that is formed when a heavy block of matter, one of the monuments, takes to the air floating over the desert. It lands on the corridor in which two figure shelter from the mirrored surface of the airborne block. The interior in this situation becomes a long dark tunnel and it is from darkness that the first view of the Continuous Monument appears. The black tunnel interior, devoid of any markers of domesticity, is a temporary slot (the roof could slide away again) formed in order to produce the image of the new architecture of total urbanisation.

Interiority was present in an abbreviated condition in Superstudio's histogram projects published in *Domus* in 1971. Superstudio wrote that, "From the catalogue of histograms many objects have since been effortlessly generated: furniture, environments, architecture ... But all these things are not very important to us, nor have they ever been. The surface of these histograms was homogeneous and isotropic: any spatial problems and any problems of sensitivity having been accurately removed."<sup>5</sup> A frequently published photograph of the histogram depicts a Superstudio family perched on the edges of a histogram, a section of gridded surface, sharing food. Scaled somewhere between house and furniture, the histogram replaces both ground and architecture and complicates notions of interiority;<sup>6</sup> the floor is exaggerated and the ceiling absent.

In another published photograph of a histogram a small thumb-sucking child, lying under a cover, pats the side of a subdivided column. The space on which he lies is larger than a bed and smaller than a room. His tousled head rests on a pillow that is shared with a large red toy. His blanket carries faint traces of the same grid that covers the floor and the columns, a grid now crumpled and a little dirty. There are no walls and no apparent ceiling; a patch of sunlight on the surrounding ground suggests external nature. Domestic functions take place on an island of order that implies the familiar geometry of a conventional room, a room that is also partial or dissolved.

A catalogue of the architectural histograms (*Istogrammi D'Architettura*) appeared in 1968 -69. A photograph of that time depicts the separate pieces laid out in a 3 x 9 grid in an interior exhibition space. The photograph is taken from a high viewpoint and the array of pieces perspectively recedes into the image. The histograms include, in groups of three, linear elements, elements that are centrally perforated or with central protrusions. There are corner elements, repetitive surfaces, stepped elements and a series with vertical posts and flat planes. The set of elements, the catalogue, seems to be able supply all that might be needed for architectural composition. Two young women stand on the edge of the array. Dressed in studded mini skirts with perforated tops they seem to be both fashionable and also somehow overly ornamental or barbaric compared to the cool geometry laid out in the empty room.

The image organises the histograms with regularity, sequence and series, and suggests a landscape from elsewhere, an architectural world concerned with exterior surface. Supplying an unexpected scale the two women are theatrically posed and their outfits (with a slight inference of disembowelment in the cut-outs) suggest attendants at a ritual or guardians of the significant pieces and it turns out that the title of the sequence is "The Architects' Tombs' (1969). The absence of signs of interiority in the histogram signalled the ultimate interiorisation after death, in the ground. Each use of the histogram, the picnic, the Misura M series tables and even the villas that were to come later, where perforations of the cubic buildings seems to dig out interiority, each was a declaration that regular geometry was a sign that marked death, that day to day life had an inevitable end.

Superstudio wrote about their experiments with the geometry of little squares noting that, in the end, they "amply showed that somewhere the lines were slackening and spatial accidents had altered the archetypal grids so that nothing could return to its Platonic form."<sup>7</sup> The spatial accidents and deviations and their effects on interiority are pronounced in a published photograph of a later exhibition of the histograms that accompanied the Middelburg Lectures on Superstudio in 2004.<sup>8</sup>

In the photograph that accompanies the essays and interviews the histograms, the architects' tombs, are again positioned on the floor of an exhibition hall. The photograph records histograms with attached planes, with vertical posts and histograms with centralised holes. Across the catalogue, set on irregular diagonal lines, are the linear histograms, disturbing the rectilinear geometry and obliquely suggesting that the graves have been evacuated and the architects resuscitated from the grip of ideal form. However viewed through the centralised holes in the histograms can be seen another regular gridded geometry in the ancient tiled floor of the hall. The photograph has turned the histograms into discarded objects from another time and the selective frame of the photograph, cropping just a section of the catalogue of forms, reasserts the conventional interiority of the hall.

Superstudio's three dimensional histograms, lights and furniture were, as Felicity Scott has pointed out, supposed "to exorcise indifference and become weapons to fight dreariness by creating conditions for what was termed a "space of involvement."<sup>9</sup> This approach to design was instigated in a studio project run by Professor Savioli and Adolfo Natalini at the University of Florence in 1966-67 and is also described in terms of the space of co-involvement, 'spazio di coinvolgimento', which was to imply that not only was the space a geometrical measure but also it was designed for psychological involvement.<sup>10</sup>

Natalini described the intention of the projects: "During the Course it was proposed to establish a hypothesis of internal space as a matrix for behaviours, interior space that is no longer considered the 'negative' of architecture, as opposition between full and empty, but a spatial element which generates experiences.

By dissolving the dialectical opposition between full and empty, the interior gains a new existential dimension that involves totally its users in a 'field' experience."<sup>11</sup>

Interiority was to be understood as a matrix, an arrangement of connections, generative of experience, open to extension. Interiors were to actively engage inhabitants in a field of experience, suggestive of broadness and limitlessness, not bounded conditions but sufficiently connected to create active involvement. In his 1965 book, *Happenings*, Michael Kirby was to describe such events as being outside the set matrix of theatrical performance which dictated a coherence time, character and plot, but for Superstudio the notion of a matrix provided a framework that resisted the closure and containment of conventional understandings of interiority.

Il Night-Club Mach 2, published in *Domus* in 1969 was potentially one of Superstudio's most extremely interiorised projects. Located in a basement, the nightclub is almost entirely internal but this is complicated in its representation and, possibly, through physical experience of the space. The published images of the nightclub included photographs taken by one of the members of the Superstudio group, Toraldo di Francia, a schematic plan and two part axonometrics. The photographs do not register the complete enclosure of the space focussing as they do on linear strips of lighting that thread through the darkness. The back space of the night-club recedes infinitely into the blackness and there are no obvious limits to the expansive darkness in the photographs.

Blackness as an unlimited condition is also utilized in the part axonometric of the 'the two dancing tracks' in the nightclub. Viewed from below white gyrating figures appear to dance in free space – there is no ground and little in the way of vertical or horizontal enclosure. The underside of the strip lighting directs movement and for Superstudio this is an image of a space of co-involvement: "What we want to do is lay the foundations for an existence this is one long protest: a 'be-in.' ... To switch our attention to interior space, this may become a genuine space of involvement (a space for a continuous performance or, in other words, a place for happenings, a place for the be-in') by the agency of the design products we place in it."<sup>12</sup> The happening was to take the form of a be-in instead of the more familiar sit-in. No ground that might limit the event but rather the happening was free forming in space. Through 'evasion design' dreariness was to be avoided and with the introduction of foreign bodies into the system – extreme sensory objects - indifference would be exorcised.

The construction of free forming space, complexly external and also shaping interiority, was also deployed in the later inter-planetary projects. *L'Architettura Interplanetaria*, a series of designs that Superstudio produced after the Continuous Monument and that was described by them as one of the "didactic projects, architectural critiques; we used architecture as self criticism, endeavouring to inquire into its promotional mechanisms and its ways of working."<sup>13</sup>

The hypothesis behind the project was the "enlargement of the terrestrial surface",<sup>14</sup> which involved bringing the earth and the moon into a proximity in which they could be considered to be a "single body", while still remaining sufficiently distance to ensure the functioning of the tides. An earth moon highway was formed and "Two artificial belts around the Earth and the moon respectively are coupled together permanently with a rectilinear body."<sup>15</sup> The disparate couple, dependent yet separate, was to promote occupation of space, to interiorise that which had previously defined the limits of occupation.

In April 11, 1970 Apollo 13 was launched but suffered an explosion in its service module oxygen tanks. Its Moon landing was cancelled and instead the ship circled the moon before establishing its trajectory back to earth.<sup>16</sup> Space travel was current at the time of Superstudio's Interplanetary projects and the potential and difficulties of the

exploration were well known; interplanetary architecture always had a frisson of anxiety connected to the impossibility of being at home in outer space.

The grid that bridged the darkness of space in 1970, stretched across the world in Superstudio's installation at Ambasz's 1972 exhibition and catalogue, *Italy the New Domestic Landscape*, held at the Museum of Modern Art. The mirrored model and the axonometric drawing depicting their installation conveyed visually the complexity of their versions of interiority that exploited reversibility, reflection and dislocation to shape an interior architecture that refused to settle or stabilise.<sup>17</sup> Superstudio described their installation in the section 'Environments' as follows:

"The microenvironment is like a room with walls; the floors and ceiling are covered with black felt; thin luminescent lines make the corner angles stand out clearly.

A cube about six feet wide is placed in the center on a platform about sixteen inches high. All the walls of the cube, except the one facing the entrance, are made of polarized mirrors, so that the model inside becomes clearer and clearer as we move to the end of the room. The model, repeated to infinity by the mirrors, is a square plate of chequered laminated plastic, with a little 'machine' out of which come various terminals. One of the terminals is connected to a TV screen, which transmits a three-minute movie, a documentary on the model seen in various natural and work situations. The sound track gives information about the original concept for the model.

Meteorological events will be projected on the ceiling: sunrise, sun, clouds, storm, sunset, night.

The lighting of the cube varies according to the phenomena projected. The rest of the room is permanently plunged in darkness."<sup>18</sup>

The drawn image of the installation provides a template for the conditions of interiority produced by Superstudio. Described as an alternative model for life on earth, the microenvironment involved a network of energy and information represented by the gridded surface. Elementary human requirements such as control of the environment are provided by energy and information from the grid, by the augmented body and through cyclical uses of territory. The structures that create traditional interiors were to vanish: "The membrane dividing exterior and interior becomes increasingly tenuous: the next step will be the disappearance of this membrane and the control of the environment through energy (air-cushions, artificial air currents, barriers of hot or cold air, heat-radiating plates, radiation surfaces etc.)."<sup>19</sup>

The drawing of the microenvironment was articulated with a light, liner structure, with the corners of the 'room' shaped by luminescent lines in space. The axonometric construction of space has an inherent reversibility that undermines simple notions of interiority and its reversal. Superstudio's denial of parallel lives and closed hermetic boxes occurs together and the microenvironment alludes to an airtight box but then dismantles it, forcing a gap between planes with lines of light. The microevent space is described as being 'like a room' but not a room, the claim of similarity is inevitably also a distancing. The space within the cube received the external atmosphere with the sounds of storms and sunsets coinciding with the reflected images of global weather.

At the end of the description the rest of the 'room' is permanently plunged into darkness; at the moment when the word room is confidently asserted it ceases to exist in an abyss of blackness without limit. As in the nightclub design and the images of interplanetary architecture, blackness is used to dissolve solidity. Black felt, homogenous and absorbent, covers the floor and ceiling of the microevent removing potential support and containment. Black felt as a surface material sucks out the light and disperses any residue of interiority; the lines of luminescence, however, trace a containment of the black nothingness.

All the walls of the microevent cube, except the one facing the entrance, are made of polarised mirror. Deploying pleasures and estrangements the Superstudio microenvironment model sets up *mise en abyme* between two mirrors, multiplying into an infinite number of models that become the nodes in the expansive grid, the Supersurface. The expansion and repetition of the models is signalled in the drawing by the repeated nodes of technology that punctuate the grid; each node a dispenser of domestic potential. The photographs of the model, even as they record the extension of the supersurface, also catch a trace of the alien technology. The photographer's camera, viewed at a different scale casts its obtrusive oversized oculus into the field of free ranging nomads and with its insertion other more sinister stories of surveillance and observation might be told.

## Conclusion

For Superstudio interiority was a complex and at times concealed condition. The domestic interior as an enclosed and occupied space had been rejected (or abandoned) and instead the grid supplied a bare gestures of containment with hot air streams and temperature adjustments. Interiority had become momentary or provisional; it occurred as a temporary

passage or tunnel. The augmented bodies that dwelt on the supersurface had within them conditions previously associated with interior living and the inner life of the dwellers on the grid was both provided for and compromised by connecting wires and tapes.

In the relatively short course of their work Superstudio interiors shifted from being partial with the histograms, completed to final in the tombs of architects (only to be revisited and abandoned). The interior became unlimited in the nightclub and in the interplanetary zone architecture both expansively interiorised outer space and claustrophobically lodged in the darkness. The very possibility of interiority was shown to be recursive and invisible on the gridded surface on which Life was to take place. With these strategies the ideal bourgeois interior from the 1950s, full of fine Italian design, was both dematerialised and homogenised.

In 1976 Superstudio member Frassenelli received third place in an architectural competition for a story. It was a tale of a journey along the 'Line of Architecture' in search of intersections, and started with Frassenelli lying in the interior of a Bedouin tent. He wrote "I turn around and look at it, and the tent moves softly to the rhythm of my breathing; I have been sheltered by a living thing, incredible for a person such as myself, used to the inert stillness of indifferent geometric cavities ...".<sup>20</sup> The interior was not an augmented body issuing internal instructions but rather the shelter of the tent corresponded to an internal mechanism of his own body, blurring the architecture/body differentiation. As he departed, walking across unfamiliar sand, Frassenelli noted that he left behind "friendly whispering from the tent."<sup>21</sup>

1 Penny Sparke, 'A Home for Everybody?': Design, Ideology and the Culture of the Home in Italy, 1945-72.' In *Culture and Conflict in Postwar Italy: Essays on Mass and Popular Culture*, (eds.) Zygmunt G. Barański and Robert Lumley, London: The Macmillan Press, 1990, p. 232.

2 Penny Sparke, 'A Home for Everybody?': Design, Ideology and the Culture of the Home in Italy, 1945-72.' In *Culture and Conflict in Postwar Italy: Essays on Mass and Popular Culture*, p. 235.

3 Hilde Heynen, 'Intervention in the relations of production, or sublimation of contradictions? On commitment then and now,' Website; engagement + eng.doc do[https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&q=cache:v0iMDDGSL-4J:https://lirias.kuleuven.be/bitstream/123456789/75770/1/engagement%2Beng.doc+hilde+Heynen+Interventions+in+the&hl=en&pid=bl&srcid=ADGEESh4WBOCejDyVsxX3WaY1Kxa5KTalY4Vgp0hnqip2D1wcpk2hIDIS0Oz2fuhRcwLFM5vOejdO8G2BOJqBUHnXpk8uD4wjO6yqeGmSued4A0omShJvGAYxXAbA82j61V\\_PLB2Pv24&sig=AHIEtbT13yLPg1cpA4uKX5bKTLTWUrMFgQ](https://docs.google.com/viewer?a=v&q=cache:v0iMDDGSL-4J:https://lirias.kuleuven.be/bitstream/123456789/75770/1/engagement%2Beng.doc+hilde+Heynen+Interventions+in+the&hl=en&pid=bl&srcid=ADGEESh4WBOCejDyVsxX3WaY1Kxa5KTalY4Vgp0hnqip2D1wcpk2hIDIS0Oz2fuhRcwLFM5vOejdO8G2BOJqBUHnXpk8uD4wjO6yqeGmSued4A0omShJvGAYxXAbA82j61V_PLB2Pv24&sig=AHIEtbT13yLPg1cpA4uKX5bKTLTWUrMFgQ)

4 G.K.K. Deserti Naturali e Artificiali, *Casabella* no. 358, 1971, p. 20.

5 Quoted in Peter Lang and William Menking, *Superstudio: Life without Objects*, Milano: Skire Editore, 2003, p. 114.

6 "Dai Cataloghi del Superstudio: istogrammi, *Domus*, no. 497, 1971 pp. 46-49.

7 Quoted in Peter Lang and William Menking, *Superstudio: Life without Objects*, Milano: Skire Editore, 2003, p. 114.

8 Valentijn Byvanck, *Superstudio: The Middelburg Lectures*, Netherlands: De Vleeshal and Zeeuws Museum, 2004.

9 Felicity Scott, "Superstudio: Pratt Manhattan Gallery/Artists Space/Storefront for Art and Architecture, New York", *ArtForum*, March, 2004. [http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi\\_m0268/is\\_7\\_42/ai\\_n6005388/?tag=content;col1](http://findarticles.com/p/articles/mi_m0268/is_7_42/ai_n6005388/?tag=content;col1)

10 Lang quoting interviews in Peter Lang and William Menking, *Superstudio: Life without Objects*, Milano: Skire Editore, 2003, p. 41.

11 A. Natalini, "Spazio di coinvolgimento" [trans. Manfredo Manfredini], *Casabella*, no. 326, 1968, p. 36.

12 "Design d'invenzione e design d'evasione: Superstudio," in *Domus*, 475 (6 June 1969), p. 28. Republished in *Superstudio and the Radicals' Japan Interior Design (1982)* pp. 228 -30. Website for document Superstudio invention evasion p. 440. [web.mac.com/.../fiu/.../superstudio%20invention%20evasion.pdf](http://web.mac.com/.../fiu/.../superstudio%20invention%20evasion.pdf)

13 Superstudio, "Superstudio on Mindscape 30 April 1973", *Design Quarterly*, no. 89, 1973, p. 20.

14 'Superstudio presenta L'Arcchitettura Interplanetaria' in *Casabella*, no.364, 1972, p. 46.

15 'Superstudio presenta L'Arcchitettura Interplanetaria' in *Casabella*, no.364, 1972, p. 47.

16 April 11, 1970 - Apollo 13 is launched, suffering an explosion in its SM oxygen tanks. Its Moon landing is aborted, and the crew, James A. Lovell, Jr., John L. Swigert, Jr. and Fred W. Haise, Jr., return safely.

September 12, 1970 - Soviet Luna 16 is launched, conducting the first successful return of lunar soil samples by an automatic spacecraft.

November 17, 1970 - Luna 17 lands on the moon, with the first automatic robot, Lunokhod 1. Driven by a five-man team on earth, traveled over surface for 11 days.

December 15, 1970 - Soviet Venera 7 is the first probe to soft-land on Venus, transmitting for 23 minutes. <http://my.execpc.com/~culp/space/timeline.html>

17 Emilio Ambasz [ed.], *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape: Achievements and Problems of Italian Design*, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1972

18 Emilio Ambasz [ed.], *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape: Achievements and Problems of Italian Design*, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1972, p. 242.

19 milio Ambasz [ed.], *Italy: The New Domestic Landscape: Achievements and Problems of Italian Design*, New York, The Museum of Modern Art, 1972, p.244

20 Piero Frassenelli "Third Place" in *JA*, December 1976, p.32.

21 Piero Frassenelli "Third Place" in *JA*, December 1976, p.32.