

The Museum of Modern Art

11 West 53 Street, New York, N.Y. 10019 Tel. 956-6100 Cable: Modernart

RELEASE NO. 44

ITALY: THE NEW DOMESTIC LANDSCAPE

Archeological Environment

Director: Emilio Ambasz

May 26, 1972 - September 11, 1972

Designer: Gaetano Pesce

Patron: Cassina, C & B Italia, Sleeping International System Italia

Producer: Centro Cassina, with the collatoration of Sleeping International System Italia

This environment represents the finding, in the year 3000, of a dwelling belonging to a small subterranean city, of the year 2000. It purports to be an ironic comment on our present situation...

Materials: plastic-sprayed wood
Color: brown

Color film for TV directed by Klaus Zaugg.

Photo credit: 13, 15, 16, 17 Klaus Zaugg.

(more)

Statement by Gaetano Pesce:

Explanatory study notes

Subject: discovery of a small subterranean city, belonging to the epoch known as "The Period of the Great Contaminations"; location: Southern Europe (Alps).

The basic living unit of the urban settlement was found to be in a reasonable state of preservation, and with the salvaging of further documents, it has been possible to reconstruct models for a probable "Commune for 12 people" (N. 1, scale 1:10, measuring in metres $13 \times 6,5 \times 6,5$ in height), and for a doorway, probably the entrance to the city or some important building (N. 2, scale 1:10, measuring in metres $6 \times 2,5 \times 6$ in height). An original part of the latter was discovered (N. 3), together with a seat of the same epoch (N. 4). Model N. 5 (longitudinal section of the soil, scale 1:2000) represents our hypothesis of the city; it is the result of suppositions drawn from many various documents. The soundings of the subsoil produced no important results, partly because many passages had collapsed, etc.....

It is nevertheless possible to say, with a fair degree of certainty, that the communities of the "Great Contaminations" (to give them a name) exploited for their settlements underground pockets drained of mineral oils, water, etc. The immense hole made for digging was closed by a huge stone, thus hermetically sealing off the interior from the outside world. Once inside, the men of the "Great Contaminations" began to spread out, looking for further potential spaces in which to settle.

The intention of model N. 5 is to illustrate this situation. The two pyramidal volumes in the upper part represent the possible transport stations leading to the outside world, or even advance defence posts against attack from the outside the square spaces are considered to be results of excavation by man, while the others were natural, and already in existence, some still containing various liquids the cylindrical volume above right represents the probable water reserve while the natural pocket below right was probably an area for leisure, baths, propitiatory rites, etc., on a small lake the space in the upper left, divided into various levels, could perhaps represent production and general works zones.....

Finally, the discovery of a film of a few minutes in length was a particularly happy find. It documents some scenes in a family life, and was probably shot by a member of the family concerned

These documents together give us an indication, even if vague, of the probable conditions of life around the end of the 2nd. and beginning of the 3rd. millenia A.D. Deeper study could throw further light on the psychological effect that the terms "the year 2000" had on those living both before and after that date, and on the consequences that such a "status" had on their behaviour etc.....

In order to be able to understand the origin and development of the architecture of the period of the "Great Contaminations", and the geographical, climatic, environmental, technological and religious laws influencing its art, we must give a general explanation of the bases on which one of the expressions of that time was formed.

To give such an explanation is indispensable if we consider that the infrastructure of these inter-european civilisations has hardly a point in common with ours of today.

In that context evolution took a completely different course from what we habitually consider to be normal; furthermore, the setting in which this culture developed bears no similarity to that of the rise of the great agrarian empires of ultra-antiquity. There is, in reality, no affinity between the plains which were periodically flooded and irrigated by great rivers such as the Nile, the Tigris, the Euphrates, the Indus or the Yellow River when in spate, and the great excavations of the "Contaminated" era (the cities lay underground, several tens of metres below sea level), where it is quite hard to determine the conditions for survival, though easy to imagine that they were based on the filter capacity of the many layers of subsoil, on its internal richness, its heat, etc.

(over)

It comes naturally, therefore, to begin even with this superficial preliminary description of the characteristics of that environment, for they are indicative, and will help us to understand the origins of its architecture and art. In this connection, the innumerable cities of the "Contaminated" era spread over the territory in question offer many rich and varied examples of architectural material of considerable interest. Unfortunately only the stone objects have survived up to the present day, and though the stone shells have come down to us more or less unharmed, all the structures in wood, fiberglass, melamine, polyurethane, etc. have been irremediably lost or damaged by humidity and heat. But although most of the dwellings and public buildings leave insufficient evidence for interpretation, nonetheless the habitat in question presumably for two people, is surprisingly well preserved. Its basic form is characterised by certain essential factors, which we shall consider immediately, as they condition the structure of all the buildings of the "Great Contamination". The habitat is almost invariably placed on a base with steps leading up to the entrance. This base is of dry mortised blocks of rigid plastic and never more than 60 cm. in height, though it may be lower (in our case 40 cm.). This base, serving as a thorough insulation, is to protect the inhabitants from the infiltration of residual humidity during the period of the great condensations. The dwelling itself is then fitted onto the square "rock" floor. The plan is square, the principal directrix runs diagonally, the whole measuring in metres $4,80 \times 4,80$, and 3,60 in height. There is only one door about 60 cm. wide and 220 cm. high, placed on the corner of the parallelepiped, perpendicular to the principal directrix. There is normally no other opening, either in the walls or in the roof, and apart from the drains, there are no other apertures or windows. The walls, fixtures and fittings etc. are of mortised blocks of rigid, semi-rigid polyurethane, and the seats are of soft polyurethane. However distant and strange the architecture of the "Contamination" may seem, however difficult it may be to establish links with the buildings of our day, the reticular module on which this architecture is based is nevertheless enlightening and meaningful to us.

I consider it opportune and interesting at this point to quote some fragments from a manual which the author came across in the place in question; they concern the interior space. These fragments, even though apparently obscure, together with the other drawings, will certainly help to clarify the contents of our habitat: "..... in the architecture of the 'Great Contaminations' the square and the rectangle are the absolute and fundamental form, permitting of no variation, not even constructive; these basic forms must not be covered or hidden by decoration, though this can exist in certain cases, possessing the value of an emblem....."

"..... it is only deducible that the module as such is without architectural value. It is the meaning with which the architect invests it which decides its action and reflexes in architecture....."

"..... it is not difficult to find the geometric key to a plan, but when it is a question of clarifying the esoteric content of the constructions and of the formulae traced therein, one is forced into the sphere of conjecture....."

"..... the house is in itself not only a mass of blocks arranged for a precise purpose, but nurture and conceals an interior pregnant with symbols in a univocal relationship to the configuration of the time....."

Thus, having come to understanding of the spirit of those spaces through the above words, we can draw up a list of motivations which have in our view led to the identification of the architectural typology in question. These motivations will constitute the subject discussed point by point in the following chapter:

