

The City Rises and the Futurist City

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Despite its offering little actual technical information (what is being built cannot even be deduced) and few clues as to locality other than the new metropolitan reality that rises from the violent industrialisation and urbanisation of the outskirts (the reality that dominates the Futurist poetic), Boccioni's painting, *The City Rises*, nevertheless, offers key glimpses into Futurist thinking about architecture.

The building site depicted is more than a setting of work, it is a setting *to* work, the building of a site. Boccioni strains towards a future through an image of labor and traffic that sets to work every molecule within the confines of the canvas. The figures and animals strain to pull components but are themselves pulled into a swirling world of force lines that leaves no detached viewpoint or frame. The site of the future is being built.

Totally immersed in urban life the city was the source of Futurist inspiration. In that it condensed and produced a new reality from it, Futurism was the first avant garde movement directly to confront the problematic of urban development and make the city the privileged site of modernity. Marinetti eulogised this city in his Founding Manifesto of 1909:

We will sing of great crowds excited by work, by pleasure, and by riot; we will sing of the multicolored, polyphonic tides of revolution in the modern capitals; we will sing of the vibrant nightly fervor of arsenals and shipyards blazing with violent electric moons; greedy railway stations that devour smoke-plumed serpents; factories hung on clouds by the crooked lines of their smoke; bridges that stride the rivers like giant gymnasts, flashing in the sun with a glitter of knives; adventurous steamers that sniff the horizon; deep-chested locomotives whose wheels paw the tracks like the hooves of enormous steel horses bridled by tubing; and the sleek flight of planes whose propellers chatter in the wind like banners and seem to cheer like an enthusiastic crowd.¹

From the slanting light it is evident that the scene is of morning, morning in the metropolis and the morning of the metropolis, its bursting into an industrialisation, and hence a new era. The sun rises, the image of the birth of the new day that is invoked by Marinetti when, after staying up all night, they are stirred by the sudden noise of cars under the windows.

"Let's go!" I said. Friends, away! Let's Go! Mythology and the Mystic Ideal are defeated at last. We're about to see the Centaur's birth and, soon after the first flight of Angels! ... We must shake the gates of life, test the bolts and hinges. Let's go! Look there on the earth, the very first dawn!

It would seem that the Boccioni's painting had its beginnings in the central frame of a triptych entitled *Giganti e pigmi* a sketch of which bears the subtitles "La Notte," "Il Giorno," "L'Alba."² The

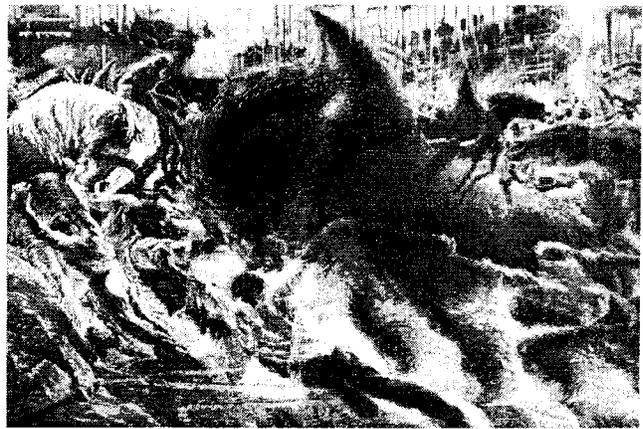


Fig. 1. Boccioni *The City Rises* (La città che sale), 1909-10.

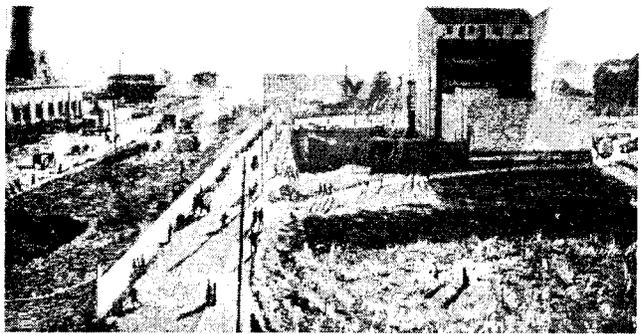


Fig. 2. Boccioni *Officine a Porta Romana*, 1909.

same times, but not sequence, that set the scene of Marinetti's *Founding Manifesto*, though in the realised work what was day there has now become dawn. There is also the same aggression. But by comparison with Marinetti's metropolis Boccioni's is surprisingly devoid of cars. A tramcar is visible in the top left corner but no vehicle is in sight. The huge draught horses, whose yokes whirl like propellers, crowd out and dwarf a place with no edges that might define site, street or piazza. These pre-industrial beasts may be a reversal of Marinetti's machine metaphors. Presented in an exaggerated Divisionist technique, their rearing forms are endowed with an almost ghostly presence as blurred condensations of invisible waves, eluding what might otherwise appear a trite allegorisation of machines that, being without artistic precedent, were difficult to evoke outside of literature. The horse served as a key motif in Boccioni's

work till the time of his last sculpture, *Dinamismo di un cavallo in corsa + case*, before his fatal fall from a horse during cavalry exercises near Verona. As with the mechanical equivalents, cars, trains, steamers aircraft, the horse became part of a sort of mechanical and warrior bestiary. Like them, it was something that no longer implied the exercise of sovereign reason over technology but, instead, the reign of instinct and the irrational, disturbing but renewing human rhythms. The breathless movement they all embodied played on the muscular and motor memories, enticing a troubling vertiginous sense and introducing surprises, slippages and telescoping into spatial perception. They blurred the distinction between man and world, animate and inanimate. Nevertheless, though the streets of the contemporary cities were still filled with horses, the horse was a thing of the past, pre-industrial, and thus something presumably to be overcome, both as mode of transport and longstanding artistic theme. But Boccioni loved horses, in other works it represents an impulse towards the rising future, driving ever forward in irrepressible speed. In sheer inertia, the reluctance not only to start but also to stop, a line is reached which leaps both forward and back in time to discover a primordial dimension. "The poet must spend himself with ardor, splendor, and generosity, to swell the enthusiastic fervor of the primordial elements."³ Thus to speak of a "futurist attitude" here is also necessarily to speak of an element of the archaic, primitive, and primeval that is not only to be felt instinctively but was quite carefully cultivated. Both Boccioni and Marinetti belonged to an intellectual and literary milieu that was interested more and more in the meaning of customs and ceremonies of which "primitivism" was a powerful stimulant for the Futurist sensibility.⁴ As distinct from Symbolism, which appreciated the mysterious side of things and wished to guard it in mystery, the ideal of Marinetti and Boccioni was one of unleashing images arising from fantasy and spiritual worlds long since disappeared into the contemporary metropolis with full publicity. Birolli⁵ lists a book in Boccioni's possession entitled *Alluvions et cavernes* by Salomon Reinach. Lista⁶ notes the frequency of prehistoric images in Marinetti. Marinetti's father was interested in history of religions and he himself had his own personal sources such as *La Revue Blanche*, noted for its articles of ethnographic critique. Roche-Pézarid has explored the theme of birth in the *Founding Manifesto* linking it to *Mafarka le futuriste* by the fascination that archaic thinking exercised on him in the associations of Daedalus, rituals of initiation and purification and the cathartic function of destruction.⁷ For all their desire to move beyond the earlier culture of Symbolism traces of it remained. What distinguished their attitude completely was the cultivation of brutal, physical vitality and the taste for danger as a program for revolutionary change in the world. Their model was production, production of reality and its generation.⁸ With the fusion of art and life in the affirmative aesthetic of Futurism, art no longer compensated for life, it offered another way of living.

A similar reciprocal leap back and forwards in time is evident in *The Futurist 'Atmosphere-structure' -Basis for an Architecture* (1914-15) by Enrico Prampolini, an associate not of the Milanese wing of the movement around Marinetti but of the Balla faction in Rome. After the lament that "architecture has shown a disdainfully anachronistic character"⁹ and "has always lagged behind...the incessant evolution of human expression" he moves directly to the primitive hut. In the sentence "Architecture was an abstract consequence of the vegetable elements of nature, originating because of the evolution of the intrinsic necessities of primitive human life" we detect the condensation of a discourse as old as Vitruvius, but given a Semperian inflection:

Just as the habitation and architecture of primitive man were vegetable in origin, because they mirrored the primitive, aboriginal, lake-borne life of man, so future dwellings, and Futurist architecture, will be an abstract consequence of the atmospheric elements of the forms of space originated by the revolutionary needs intrinsic to Futurist human life.

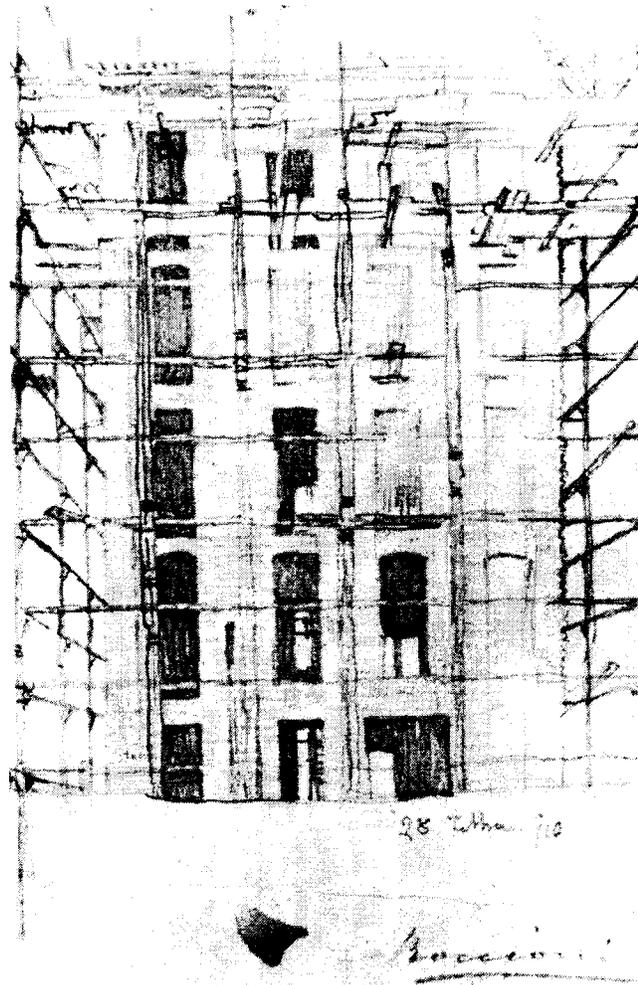


Fig. 3. Boccioni *Casa in costruzione*, 1910.

Prampolini leaps to a primordial state rejecting everything that has intervened: "we know in fact that all the architecture that has ever been built has been a timid derivation from the lake and marsh dwellings of the Bronze Age," rejecting all "*apriori* intrinsic values" in order to promote the values characteristic of the age which is being born: "Futurist architecture must have an atmospheric genesis since it mirrors the intense life of *motion, light and air* which nourishes Futurist man." In the version published in the Roman newspaper *Il Piccolo Giornale d'Italia* January 29, 1914 he had elaborated further:

Since Futurist life is made of air, of light (natural energy), and of force (artificial energy), futurist architecture must be moulded and generated by these three energetic entities that, amalgamated together, create a simple abstract entity which I call spherical diathesis, the abstract consequence of energy, which establishes the value relationship between the natural influence of the atmosphere and the material necessities of man.¹⁰

The new nature, technology, is not understood as a mimesis, in the mode of the primitive, hut but as a basis from which to draw the foundations of architecture and the laws of a new construction.¹¹ With the primordial swamp surpassed, the new architecture will be formed by air and atmosphere. Prampolini, cited Boccioni and was indebted to his definition of Futurist sculpture in *The Technical Manifesto of Futurist Sculpture* but the same values underlie Boccioni's statement concerning *The City Rises*. Writing in the

second half of 1910 he spoke of "One painting of 2 x 3 metres in which I attempted a great synthesis of labour, light, and movement."¹² The *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Sculpture* argued for renewal through "environmental sculpture," "since only by this means can plastic art develop and come to model the ATMOSPHERE which surrounds our object." A year later Boccioni described plastic dynamism as "the simultaneous action of the motion characteristic of an object (its absolute motion) mixed with the transformation which the object undergoes in relation to its mobile and immobile environment (its relative motion)" a distinction that found echoes in Prampolini's atmosphere-structure as something between the absolute, the physiological requirements of human life and the rotation of the earth, the "relative relationship" of the changing conditions of light and air.¹³

Prampolini's text in the *Piccolo Giornale* was accompanied by two drawings. One, indicated in caption as "Plan and constructional view of a single faculty -23rd embryonic sketch," anticipates Metabolism or the technological fantasies of Archigram megastructures. The other, indicated as "Materialisation of atmospheric thicknesses (Room-dormitory : section)" was probably part of a series. The section, which is very difficult to read, showed a materialization, in curvilinear shapes, of man-made atmospheric changes and seems to posit some sort of interaction between air currents, environmental filters, circulation and built form, even down to the level of dust collection. In the envelopment of its occupier, or rather its participant, around whose center an environment is moulded, it is like a demonstration at room scale of an architecture which accepts the same sort of changed relations that Boccioni's manifesto *Futurist Painting and Sculpture* of 1914 indicated with regard to painting:

For us the picture is no longer an exterior scene, a stage for the depiction of a fact. A picture is not an irradiating architectural structure in which the artist, rather than the object forms a central core. It is the emotive, architectural environment which creates sensation and completely involves the observer. We therefore maintain, unlike Cézanne, that the boundaries of the object retreat towards the periphery (the environment) of which we are the center.¹⁴

One need hardly add that *The City Rises* was already a step towards such a proposition. Though he never designed a building, in early 1914 Boccioni drafted a architecture manifesto that would remain unpublished till 1972.¹⁵ The circumstances surrounding Boccioni's writing of the piece are uncertain, possibly by the time it was written Marinetti had already secured Sant'Elia's participation through the mediation of Carlo Carrà. In it he argued:

The only road that leads to radical renewal of architecture is the return to Necessity. When I wrote that the formula of plastic dynamism contained within it the ideals of our era, I meant to say that it contained within it the necessity of our era. In modern life NECESSITY = VELOCITY.

The idea of construction according to the necessities to which the work is destined, was hardly a new concept. What was new was the joining of speed with necessity: "The more ships, automobiles, and railway stations have subordinated their architectural construction to the necessities of the uses for which they were destined, the more they have acquired an aesthetic expressiveness."

Critical of "aesthetic preoccupations," Boccioni argued for the suppression of all forms of historicism and shapes such as the cube, pyramid and rectangle which "keep the architectural form immobile." In accordance with his own Divisionist inclinations "the autonomy of the component parts of the building will rupture the uniformity of architecture and will create an architectural impressionism." So, also, the rivets used to fasten girders were to be painted a variety of colors to contrast with the red rust-proofing applied to the structural elements. He had a similarly active conception of the façade which was to descend, rise, decompose, recede or project

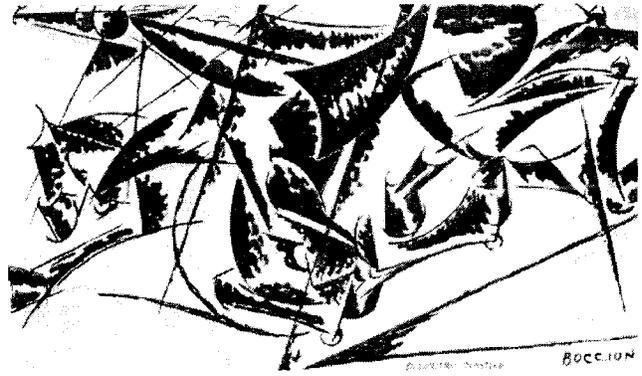


Fig. 4. Boccioni Study for Cavallo+case 1913-1914.

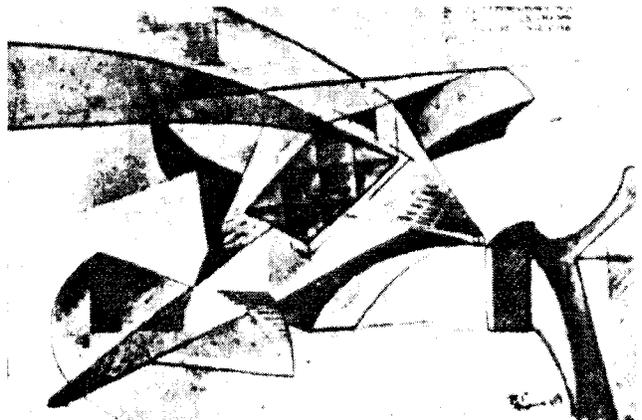
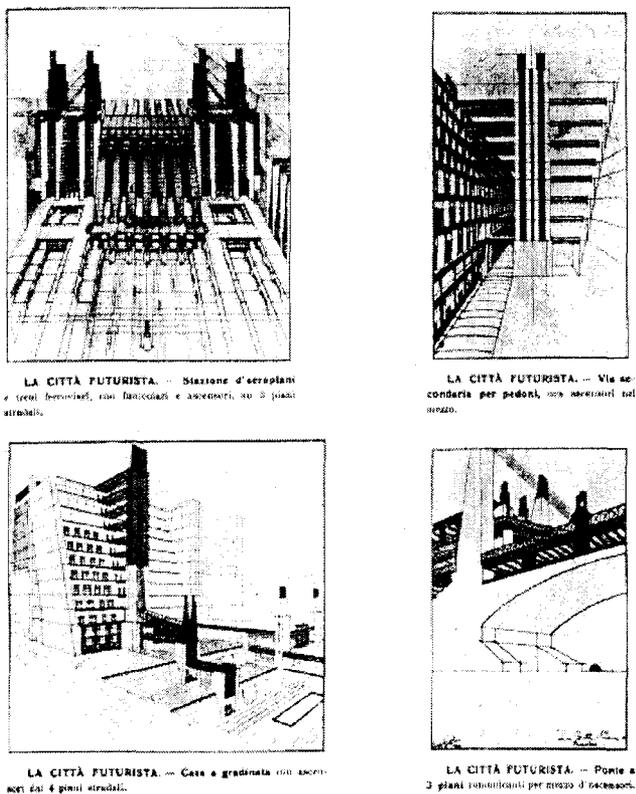


Fig. 5. Prampolini, "Schizzo embrionale n.3. Costruzione architettonica futurista non prospettica."

according to the requirements or importance of the rooms behind. This was a far clearer application of his proposition from the *Technical Manifesto of Futurist Painting* than Prampolini could formulate. Going further he suggested its consequence, "the architectural space of the city is transformed into an enveloping space."

The City Rises already shows the city transformed into an enveloping space as a form of uncontrollable development. It is a vision of industrial growth and the social contradictions derived from it, the chaotic vortex around which labor, tied to the city, is pulled and revolves, the functioning and dominance of the communication and transport grids, the acceleration of vital rhythms, the promotion of machine activity, and the definition of a new urban sensibility in its physical and sensual manifestations.¹⁶ Boccioni's architectural manifesto clearly foresaw the requirement of unprecedented architectural solutions and advocated a decisive rupture from traditional practice, shapes, materials, colors and spatial relations. He could intuit the dimensions that would be needed to give form to the new city but neither he nor Prampolini could give it any precise representation.

Before Futurism there had certainly been a general solution in a pragmatic manner to the problems of urbanism through the use of new materials, steel, glass and concrete, but it had left aside the question of a radical renewal of architectural language. The symbolic and typological themes of the metropolis, skyscrapers, factories, residential and commercial complexes, power- and railway stations, had already been treated by Wagner, Tony Garnier and the Chicago School. The first real urban vision of the future in Italy was presented by Antonio Sant' Elia in the *Messaggio* which appeared in the catalogue that accompanied the exhibition of the *Nuova Tendenza* group in Milan in March 1914 where his drawings of "La Città Nuova" were shown.¹⁷



Antonio Sant'Elia.
architetto.

DIREZIONE DEL MOVIMENTO FUTURISTA: Corso Venezia, 61 - MILANO

Fig. 6. Sant'Elia Page from the original of the Manifesto 11 July 1914.

Sant' Elia proposed, even if in utopian terms, the profound modifications that were needed to connect architecture to urban structure. The power and originality of his vision of the Futurist metropolis derives from an ability to interrelate the forms and volumes of his chosen architectural elements in all their complexity. Sant' Elia's futuristic interpretation is of an interconnected system of circulation and communication. His is a city that rises in a different mode from the American model of the isolated skyscraper. Though it would seem in part to derive from illustrations of futuristic American visions,¹⁸ it is an architectural interpretation of simultaneity derived not simply from criss-crossing circulation but, above all, from a close relation between the study of urban form and building type. There is a new and mutual dynamism between building and circulation that can only be understood by reference to the concepts that Boccioni had pioneered: fusion and all-embracing atmosphere. But nowhere in Sant' Elia do we find Boccioni's concept that the new architecture and city will be conceived and constructed from the inside outwards. Even as Sant' Elia seemed to want to create a new typology, he did not completely efface the memory of primordial archetypes, while the "strange" medieval air that Argan saw in his futuristic drawings would seem to be less of a dream of the city of tomorrow than an attempt to see how the city of the past, the historic city, might be developed afresh.¹⁹

We may never know if Sant' Elia was aware of it but Boccioni had already prefigured the concept of architectural envelopment at an urban scale and, above all, grasped the potential of instability in the vertical dimension in his unpublished draft :

We have said that in painting we place the viewer at the center of the frame, making him the center of the emotion instead of being a simple onlooker. So also the architectonic environ-

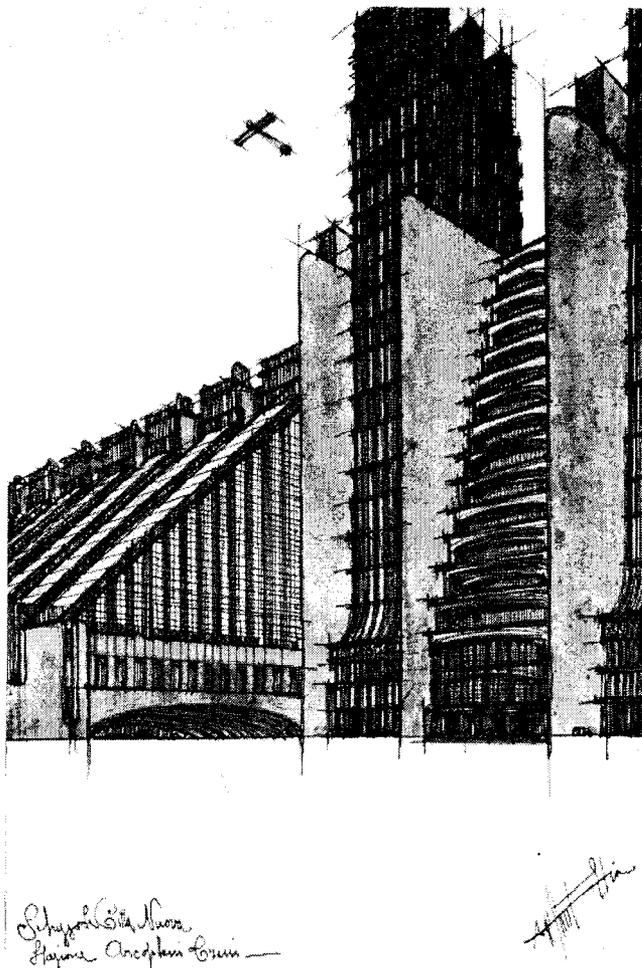


Fig. 7. Sant'Elia La Città Nuova: Station for airplanes and trains, 1914.

ment of the city is changing in an enveloping sense. We live in a spiral of architectural forces. Until yesterday construction proceeded in a successive, panoramic manner. One house was followed by another house, one street by another. Today we are beginning to have an architectural environment around us which develops in all directions: from the well-lighted basement floors of the great department stores, from the various levels of tunnels of the metropolitan subways, to the gigantic upward leap of the American skyscrapers. The future will make the architectural possibilities in height and depth progress ever further.²⁰

Even in *The City Rises* a similar separation of levels of traffic flow is depicted. Though a ground is depicted, the actions of figures and horses could scarcely be described as grounded in the sense that his earlier images of building sites had been. The house under construction was a favorite subject, he painted himself in front of one. Here they suggest something of Marinetti's preference:

To a finished house we prefer the framework of a house in construction whose girders are the color of danger — landing platforms for air planes — with its numberless arms that claw and comb out stars and comets, its aerial quarterdecks from which the eye embraces a wider horizon... The frame of a house in construction symbolize our burning passion for the coming-into-being of things.²¹

The painting shows no foundations. The rising city, with its insistent verticals, chimney stacks and scaffolding, is without horizon and base. Both are crowded out by the tumult and cancelled by the



Fig. 8. Marchi, *City Vision*.

distortions of perspective. *Futurist Painting: Technical Manifesto* argued "Space no longer exists: the street pavement, soaked in rain beneath the glare of electric lamps, becomes immensely deep and gapes to the very centre of the earth." Sant'Elia proposed an urban architecture along the same lines:

The house of concrete, glass and iron, stripped of painting and sculpture, rich only in the innate beauty of its lines and relief, extraordinarily ugly in its mechanical simplicity, higher and wider according to need than the specifications of municipal laws. It must soar up on the brink of a tumultuous abyss: the street will no longer lie like a doormat at ground level, but will plunge many stories down into the earth, embracing metropolitan traffic, and will be linked up for necessary interconnections by metal gangways and swift-moving pavements.²³

The preoccupation continued in the characteristic theme of Sartoris, architecture levitating over the void.²³ The idea that the city of the future was to be as expendable as its creators, "THINGS WILL ENDURE LESS THAN US. EVERY GENERATION MUST BUILD ITS OWN CITY," may have been added by others, perhaps by Marinetti,²⁴ but the statement "We must reinvent and rebuild the Futurist city *ex novo* like an immense and tumultuous shipyard, agile mobile and dynamic in every detail," is very much in conformity with his drawings (for all the absence of humans in them). As in *The*

City Rises, no recognition is made of any pre-existing urban fabric.

The immediate legacy of architectural Futurism after Sant'Elia's death was continued by two other architects, Mario Chiattone and Virgilio Marchi. Chiattone picked up the possibilities of co-ordinating infrastructural elements but focused on single typologies in a phase of his work that the Rationalists would continue to a further degree of abstraction. The theme of "dynamic compenetration" gave way to the machine analogy. Marchi's vision of the city, by contrast, persisted with the theme of the continuous shaking of the senses often by reference to ephemeral places of entertainment. The legacy of Boccioni's vision was evident in his proposal "to give forms, or better, deformations, or even better, formal exaltations to the different elements of construction, which follow the inner strain (*sforzo*) of the components and the mechanical moments of the materials... the conciliation of practical commodity with the lyric of an energetic drama required by pure engineering."²⁵ The idea of synaesthesia suggested by the more poetic directions of the *Futurist Reconstruction of The Universe*, 1915 pervades some of his urban work, but the ludic and imaginative element would become reduced to the decorative "reconstruction" of everyday settings.

Concluding his discussion of pre-war Futurism Doordan repeats the commonest theme of discussion on the Futurists: "The Futurist metropolis, described by Marinetti, painted by Boccioni, Carrà, and the rest of the Futurist Painters is an *experience* as much as it is a *place*... Any discussion of Saint' Elia urban vision must be qualified by phrases such as 'it seems' or 'one could interpret' because he produced no plan for his "Città Nuova"²⁶ Such vagueness and lack of definition lie at the heart of most that can be, and has been, said about Futurist architecture, here also. But the question of working on a central void is precisely what is raised by the ramifications of a painting that depicts a scene of brutal and frenetic construction in an empty lot, filled with dust, smoke, light, speckles, molecules. The core is an unfinished and expanding structure. Are we to see it as "a modernised version of the Pauline notion of God's builders ceaselessly laboring on God's building,"²⁷ or as Babel? Does this "tumultuous abyss" of turbines in creation of a world "*de novo*" represent the moment of full unfolding, when "space" has become dynamically, historically significant and can no longer be understood as self-contained and inert but must simultaneously complete and liquidate all historical sequence? If the original prophecy of Futurism's founder parallels Boccioni's the answer must be *yes*:

We stand on the last promontory of the centuries!... Why should we look back when what we want is to break down the mysterious doors of the impossible? Time and Space died yesterday. We already live in the absolute because we have created eternal, omnipresent speed.²⁸

NOTES

- 1 F.T. Marinetti, *The Founding Manifesto of Futurism*, in Umbro Apollonio, ed., *Futurist Manifestos* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1973), p. 22.
- 2 See Uwe Schneede, *Umberto Boccioni* (Stuttgart: Hatje, 1994), p. 59.
- 3 Marinetti, *Ibid.* p. 21.
- 4 Fanette Roche-Pézard, *L'Aventure futuriste 1909-1916* (Rome: École française de Rome, 1983), p. 75..
- 5 Z. Birolli, *Boccioni. Scritti editi e inediti* I, p. 442.
- 6 Giovanni Lista, *Futurismo* (Lausanne, 1973), pp. 75-76.
- 7 Roche-Pézard, *Ibid.*
- 8 See Andrew Hewitt, *Fascist Modernism Aesthetics, Politics and the Avant-Garde* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1993), p. 36.
- 9 Apollonio, p. 181, published in *Noi* (Rome, 1918).
- 10 Cited Denis P. Doordan, *Building Modern Italy 1914-1936* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1988), p. 7.
- 11 See Ezio Godoli, *Il futurismo* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1983), p. 11.
- 12 *Umberto Boccioni Gli scritti editi e inediti*, ed. Z. Birolli, (Milano:

- 1971). Translated in Coen, Ester. *Umberto Boccioni* (New York: The Metropolitan Museum of Art, 1988), pp. 248-250. See also Calvesi, Maurizio and Esther Coen, *Boccioni* (Milan: Electa, 1983), p. 374.
- ¹³ See Ezio Godoli, *Il futurismo* (Roma-Bari: Laterza, 1983), p. 2.
- ¹⁴ Apollonio, p. 177.
- ¹⁵ *Umberto Boccioni: Altri inediti e apparati critici*, ed. Zeno Birolli, (Milan, 1972). Also in Godoli, *Ibid.*, pp. 185-187.
- ¹⁶ See Fochessati, Matteo and Pietro Millefiore, "La città nuova" in *Futurismo i grandi temi 1909-1944*, ed Enrico Crispolti and Franco Sborgi, (Milan: Mazzotta, 1997) and Crispolti, Enrico, "L'idea dell'architettura e dello spazio urbano nel Futurismo," *Controspazio* (April-May 1971).
- ¹⁷ A revised and enlarged version was published in July of the same year in the Florentine journal *Lacerba* under the title "Manifesto of Futurist Architecture." The vexed issue of the precise authorship or authorships of the Manifesto is too complex to enter into here.
- ¹⁸ The image of "Future Traffic and Cloudscrapers in New York," published in *Illustrazione Italiana* (Feb., 1913), was first posited as a source by Longatti, A. *Antonio Sant'Elia tra Decadentismo e Futurismo*, see also Godoli, pp. 122-24.
- ¹⁹ G. C. Argan, cited in Caramel, Luciano "Antonio Sant'Elia tra città reale e "città nuova", in *Antonio Sant'Elia: l'architettura disegnata* (Venezia: Marsilio, 1991) p. 36.
- ²⁰ Godoli, *Ibid.*, p. 187.
- ²¹ *Birth of a Futurist Aesthetic* (1910) cited *Futurismo i grandi temi 1909-1944*, ed. Enrico Crispolti and Franco Sborgi, (Genoa: Mazzotta), p. 25, Perloff, Marjorie. *The Futurist Moment: avant-garde, avant guerre, and the language of rupture* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1986), p. 101.
- ²² *Manifesto of Futurist Architecture*, 1914, Apollonio, p. 170.
- ²³ Giolli, *Alberto Sartoris* (Milan, 1957).
- ²⁴ See Pär Bergman, "Modernolatria" et "Simultaneità," (Uppsala: Appelbergs Boktryckeri, 1962), p. 133.
- ²⁵ V. Marchi, "Manifesto dell'architettura dinamica, stato d'animo, drammatica," *Roma Futurista* alII, 29 (Feb. 1920), republished in Crispolti and Sborgi, *Ibid.*, pp. 189-190. See also Crispolti's chapter "L'idea dell'architettura e dello spazio urbano nel futurismo," in *Storia e critica del futurismo* (Bari, Laterza, 1987).
- ²⁶ Doordan, p. 16.
- ²⁷ See Marianne Martin, *Futurist Art and Theory 1909-1915* (Oxford: Clarendon Press, 1968), pp. 86-87.
- ²⁸ *The Founding Manifesto of Futurism*, Apollonio, pp. 21-22.