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## Naughty, not nice

By Tom Dyckhoff

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## A group of radicals suggested tha architecture was dead. How right they were, says our correspondent

LIKE MANY REVOLUTIONARIES, Adolfo Natalini has mellowed with age. These days he has a pleasant, even bourgeois, life as a soft-spoken professor of architecture. A few glints of the old firebrand still shine through: he still calls himself a Marxist. “Oh, yes,” he nods with pride; naturally, he gets a bit heated about Silvio Berlusconi — “our national disgrace”; and every day, he says, he sighs a little deeper at the apathy of his students.

Not like in the mid-1960s, when Natalini was the rebellious young Turk, leading a band of merry Italian subversives called Superstudio, on show now for the first time in decades at the Design Museum in London.

Superstudio wore their hair long, sported Che moustaches and outraged the architectural establishment with naughty antics. Modelling themselves in part on art-house movements such as the Situationists and Fluxus, they took part in happenings, filmed satirical Pythonesque films and suggested provocative stunts such as flooding Florence to keep out the tourists.

But they weren't just silly hippies. Superstudio had a deeply serious point: the death of architecture. Or rather the death of that particular brand of utopian architecture which had lorded it over Western society since the Renaissance. For centuries, the task of the architect had been to build the ideal city, whether the city state of 15th-century Italy, or, in Natalini's day, a Modernist backdrop for car-driving, welfare-state citizens. Naturally, they all failed. Superstudio had the audacity to say that after 400 years of failure we should give it a rest. Utopia? It ain't coming.

They weren't the first: years before them, a new generation of architects and designers had crawled out of the Second World War and rattled their pencils at old-guard Modernists such as Mies van der Rohe and Le Corbusier, in whose image Western governments were furiously rebuilding their cities.

At first these young guns thought they could simply tinker with Modernism to make it more humane. By the mid-Sixties, though, disillusionment had set in. Guinea pigs had had all the experience they needed of living in concrete utopias. Much of the social and political unrest that swept across Europe and America in the late Sixties was focused on disappointment with the modern city, expressed in benign local neighbourhood protests against comprehensive redevelopment, and in more violent outbursts.

A huge column of the May 1968 rioters in Paris comprised architecture and planning students, protesting at the inhumanity of the new alienating *banlieue*, into which the French state had been dumping Algerian immigrants. Modernists had drifted far from their egalitarian roots, building “planned wastelands”, said one.

Superstudio were the most flamboyant of these provocateurs, and the latest in a long tradition of utopian architectural fantasists. Before them were Giovanni Battista Piranesi and Superstudio's own inspiration, Constant Nieuwenhuis, who also features in a current exhibition about the Cobra movement at the Baltic, Gateshead. Nieuwenhuis, of that more optimistic generation just before Natalini's, fantasised about a socialist New Babylon built on dreams and fulfilment. Superstudio were more bitterly dystopian, contradicting governments which said that things could only get better. Well, no, in fact, things were getting worse.

They savaged the absurdities of technology, capitalism and international Modernism in a series of prophetic projects in *Barbarella* space-age meets colour supplement style. The Continuous Monument is a vision of a world gobbled up by developers, a totalitarian grid of mirrored glass engulfing river, forest, desert, everywhere from the Taj Mahal to Coketown — even outgridding the grid of Manhattan: every high street and downtown looks creepily the same. Remind you of anywhere?

In the Twelve Ideal Cities, Superstudio even foresaw the lonely misery of Connex commuters on the 8.12 from Sevenoaks. The ninth ideal city was an endless conveyor belt for inhabitants: “They know that if they get off the obligatory routes established by the machine they will be crushed by the machinery.”

Instead, Superstudio asked naively, why couldn't where we live be glamorous, exciting, poetic and romantic, instead of grey and humdrum. They asked why architects, instead of designing the latest fashionable dining chair or detailing drainpipes, couldn't get off their backsides and do something about the world they were designing.

They provoked, certainly, but they failed to come up with an alternative that wasn't just hippy-dippy. Perhaps their grim message was that there was no alternative. Worse: they became “fashionable”, says Natalini with a sneer, their evocative

images selling fashion mags and, to their horror, consumer goods. They designed furniture for a joke, making it as ugly and cumbersome as they could to make it hard to sell. But it was a bestseller. Wily capitalism got the better of them. So in the 1970s, Superstudio saw a future of garish post-Modernism, environmental catastrophe and aesthetic blandness. “We ran to the hills,” says Natalini.

But come back, all is forgiven. We need a dose of Superstudio’s stupid, youthful idealism again. Three decades after the Italians exited stage left, architecture, and especially British architecture, has fulfilled all their prophecies. It’s cursed with niceness. It’s dull. Unquestioning. Terminally polite. Britain’s lottery design renaissance that we hear so much about has delivered few buildings of real oomph. Beacon projects, such as the London Eye or the city centre renaissance of Manchester, championed as if they were saviours, are just nice-enough loft-style neo-Modernism, with all of Modernism’s attitude sucked out for the tourists. Everywhere looks the same.

I swear that if I see one more brushed steel banister, one more wood floor, any more walls of glass, any more curvy blobs with cheeky nicknames, I’ll scream. Has nobody got any other ideas? And this is the 1 per cent of buildings that can comfortably call themselves architecture. Don’t even get me going on the rest. What better monument to the years of John Major and Tony Blair than design by focus group?

You can’t blame architects entirely. They’ve been through the mill, blamed in the 1970s for every social ill from inner city decay to the Bay City Rollers, walloped by Prince Charles in the 1980s, and, when finally allowed to build things again in the 1990s, told to design nice lofts, perhaps the odd art gallery, and not to complain. No wonder universities these days are turning out meek apolitical souls like Natalini’s students.

No wonder architects don’t dream any more. Most have forgotten how. Get down to the Design Museum sharpish! Grow your hair long. Read some poetry. Do something. It’s only when bold form is backed by bold thought that architecture packs a punch — say, the Pompidou Centre, the Eden Project, or Will Alsop’s library in Peckham, southeast London, all buildings cast from Superstudio’s dream world, more relevant today than ever. This is architecture with a purpose, and purpose is what most architects lack these days.

Superstudio: Life Without Objects is at the Design Museum, London SE1, until June 8 (020-7940 8790). Natalini and other members of Superstudio give a talk on their legacy there tonight, 7.15pm.

*Cobra is at Baltic, Gateshead, until April 21 (0191-478 1810).*

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