Recognized as a pressing issue for world heritage, Venice’s environmental problems are familiar to its visitors. In 1999, Oliviero Toscani – a figure famous for initiating Benetton’s controversial advertising strategy – was commissioned by the city’s mayor to produce a poster campaign intended to discourage a certain kind of tourism. It was argued that the mass of daytrippers – those who stay in the city for just half a day, en route to an even briefer stop in Padua – were damaging the urban fabric and draining, rather than contributing to, the local economy. The images Toscani produced to put them off visiting Venice showed rubbish, dead pigeons, two hundred rats in the Grand Canal, and dogs mating on St Mark’s Square. Marketing has long been seen as the classic mode of appropriating avant-gardist negation – and as the very proof of the avant-garde’s ‘redundancy’ or ‘incorporation’ – and Toscani is widely taken to be the commodified inheritor of épater le bourgeois. And, as if to raise the stakes of controversy – and as though recognizing the contemporary limitations that applied to even his own ‘shock’ approach – Toscani had allegedly included a poster showing two men kissing. This conflation of homosexuality with urban infestation had the power to disturb even that most jaded and experienced ad reader, unmoved – and even mildly amused in a distracted sort of way – by canine copulation.

All par for the course at the end of the twentieth century. Yet, while not divorcable in any simplistic way from Toscani’s operation, the strategy of Mayor Massimo Cacciari carried a rather different resonance. Cacciari was, after all, no ordinary mayor. His intention to interrupt the industrial flow of tourism, and his willingness to let the force of the commodity rip into commodification itself (as if unleashing some auto-erotic, self-consuming energy) echoed – from the far side of his philosophical meditations on Heidegger, mysticism and angelology over the intervening years – some earlier political commitments. In this risky play with a strategy of completed nihilism – appropriated for a radical-left project – the philosophical discussions and debates of the seminar room were put into practice at the level of local administrative politics.

This project of negative publicity still reverberates with the militant intellectual climate surrounding the Instituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia from the 1960s and, in particular, the IUAV’s Instituto di storia dell’architettura. The Venice School of Architecture has become legendary within the history of architectural theory. Drawing together architects, historians and theorists, IUAV was the focus of considerable intellectual energy, especially with the presence of Manfredo Tafuri, who arrived from Rome in 1968 to direct the history of architecture section. Within a couple of years, Cacciari had been appointed to Tafuri’s team of teaching staff. Discussions of the Venice School have, by and large, been confined to the pages of architectural journals and treated as a topic of disciplinary specialism. But the work of Tafuri and his intellectual collaborators deserves much wider consideration. The engagement with the intellectual traditions of German philosophy and Western Marxism, and their application to an understanding of architectural and urban form – specifically, form conceived as a residue of social processes – puts this body of writing among the major modern reinterpretations of ‘aesthetics and politics’. Tafuri’s brilliant account of the avant-garde of the early twentieth century predates Peter Bürger’s Theory of the Avant-Garde by a few years; the theorization of the metropolis in the work of Cacciari and Tafuri was developed, as we will see, from similar critical resources as, and not long after, Guy Debord’s The Society of the Spectacle. These connections alone might be sufficient reason to place the writing of Cacciari and Tafuri among the key reference points of contemporary critical theory.

Tafuri trained as a practising architect before turning to historical work, but he never saw himself
as a historian of architecture; nor, for that matter, does it seem quite right to see him as a theorist. A feature of much commentary on Tafuri’s writing has been the elision of the politics that informed it. The consequence is a flattening out of the ideas; worse, it results in fundamental misreadings of the direction and pitch of his arguments. Arguing for Tafuri’s ascendancy into today’s theoretical canon would not, in itself, do much to alter this state of affairs. And yet, while this body of work has been shorn of the context that once gave its voice its distinctive grain (and it has been subject to the fate of historical forgetting), we have, in recent years, witnessed something of a revival of interest in some of the workerist ideas that were developed in that period by intellectuals such as Raniero Panzieri, Mario Tronti, Alberto Asor Rosa and Antonio Negri. The connection between these ideas and the analyses of the avant-garde and metropolis was not a casual one. Cacciari had studied with Negri at the University of Padua, and, like his mentor, the ‘wicked teacher’, was a prominent activist on the workerist Left. Tafuri, too, was a close associate of the major intellectuals of Italian operaismo.

The negation of the city

The concept of the ‘metropolis’ – or ‘the postulate of the intrinsic negativeness of the large city’ – became central to Tafuri’s understanding of the interwar avant-gardes. As he wrote in Modern Architecture, it was the metropolis, ‘from whose reality the avant-garde drew its very existence, which was the real proving ground for all its proposals’. The point of reference is clearly Georg Simmel’s essay ‘The Metropolis and Mental Life’ of 1903. As is well known, Simmel had addressed ‘the adaptations made by the personality in its adjustment to the forces that lay outside of it’. Modern urban experiences of constant speed, innovation and change had produced, he argued, ‘the intensification of emotional life due to the swift and continuous shift of external and internal stimuli’. Mental life took on an ‘essentially intellectualistic character’ as a necessary response to – ‘a protective organ’ against – ‘the fluctuations and discontinuities’ which threaten it. The overload of stimulation was such that the nerves and emotions were dulled through overexposure, producing, as Simmel put it, a new form of behaviour defined by the ‘incapacity to react to new stimulations with the required amount of energy’. These conditions produced a new blasé type. However, in Tafuri’s writing the metropolis has an additional valence: it not only describes the complex aggregation of urban experience described by Simmel, but is also raised to the status of a theoretical category.

In the Italian context of the 1960s and 1970s it was Cacciari in particular who developed the concept of the metropolis in his essay ‘The Dialectics of the Negative and the Metropolis’, an analysis of German sociological thought, which he worked on from the late 1960s and published in 1973. Negation provided him with the central category for this exploration. In a move that echoed Georg Lukács’s development of the idea of reification, Cacciari extended Simmel’s discussion, inflected it with Marx’s analysis of the commodity, and established ‘the metropolis’ as the figure for the ‘life’ of capitalism – its life as the general form for the rationalization of social relations. This rationalization, Cacciari wrote, was ‘a process that abstracts from the personal and rebuilds upon subjectivity as calculation, reason, interest’, and had reached beyond the experiences of working life to invade the most intimate pores of daily material and psychic existence. Retaining the German noun, Cacciari called this sublimation of subjective by objective processes Vergeistigung, a term that captured the increasing social abstraction and reification of modern life. In the metropolis, Cacciari argued, everyone and everything became analogous to the market’s universal equivalent; all concrete use-values, all qualitative meanings, became subsumed under the sway of quantification and exchange. The city – that is, the city conceived as an organic entity, polis or ‘Goethian city’ – had been destroyed, and was henceforth only capable of figuring discursively as a lost ideal, and as nostalgia for totality, plenitude and the integrity of values. Aware of this new metropolitan situation, the blasé type, Cacciari continued, knew that he could buy commodities (both goods and people) but also realized that ‘he cannot get close to these goods, he cannot name them, he cannot love them’. Thus, the social effects of universal equivalence manifested themselves in the form of spleen, as a response to what Tafuri called ‘the logic of assassination’. The metropolis, then, was not only a place of calculation and reason but also the site of reason’s ‘downfall’, and, within the chaos of sensory stimulations and economic forces, its inhabitants experienced ‘the loss of a center’.

The metropolis was not only a term employed to describe social abstraction; it was also an abstract category. In this regard, the metropolis was not dissimilar to Debord’s account in The Society of the Spectacle. It goes without saying that both spectacle and metropolis were indebted to Marx’s work on commodity fetishism and to Lukács’s subsequent
development of the category of reification. In each case these thinkers try to capture a complexity of societal processes, their contradictory manifestations and their fetishistic petrification in material and social forms. Spectacle and metropolis attest to the conditions of modern urban life under capitalism, conveying both the dislocation of reality and also the reality of that dislocation, and attempt to follow the transmigration and transformation of use-value into exchange-value or quality into quantity. Metropolis, like spectacle, implies a distinct phase within human history; it names capitalism at a certain stage of its development, along with capital’s most widened social effects, its impact on individual consciousness and the ‘colonization of everyday life’. Metropolis and spectacle are highly generalized terms, subsuming – in ways that can be both a helpful shorthand and unhelpfully vague – a huge range of valences; and yet this abstraction also relies on specificity, hinging on the theory of the commodity (and, to an extent, the theory of value). This specificity is what makes Debord’s ‘spectacle’ not ‘spectacle’ in its everyday sense, and it is why the conditions invoked by Cacciari’s ‘metropolis’ exceed what we usually understand to be the metropolitan condition. Spectacle and metropolis are categories that concern social process and social relations, but carry the idea of rationalization further than Lukács was ever prepared to go. Not only do they describe reification and serve as abstract categories, they also run the risk of becoming reified categories as such – a fate that has become all too common once their use was shorn of the attachments to revolutionary commitment and social agency, attachments that were formative for both Debord and Cacciari.

The differences between these attempts to characterize modern capitalism are equally significant. Where Debord, for example, emphasizes the issue of representation, metropolis turns on disenchantment and devaluation. (And just as spectacle plays on ambiguity of the words ‘representation’ and ‘image’ – hence its deceptively smooth incorporation into theories of art and postwar cultures of the mass media – so Cacciari’s metropolis flexes the term ‘value’, so that it simultaneously leans towards Marx–Lukács and Weber–Nietzsche.) Although not reducible to the large conurbation, metropolis nevertheless concerns processes that are most often identified with urban development and the type of social relations ushered in with its expansion: from Baudelaire’s flâneur (as discussed by Benjamin) through to the contradictory flows of capital investment examined by contemporary critical geographers. Cacciari’s metropolis counters the idea that our built environment is an agglomeration of static objects – a sprawl of discrete buildings. But this argument is not just intended to shift our attention from buildings to people. This is not an embrace a politics of community consultation; nor is it an attempt to celebrate the experiential character of city dwelling, as with Will Alsop’s SuperCity. Nor does it represent a move into phenomenological considerations of spatial and temporal embodiment. Rather, metropolis is about ‘seeing’ (so to speak) around, through and into all these apparently ‘static’ entities – buildings, people, complexes, ideas, categories such as ‘experience’, or ‘community’. Instead, such entities are understood as condensations of social processes; these petrified residues are seen as if, like Walter Benjamin’s ‘dialectics at a standstill’, they can be exploded. (Cacciarì was a co-founder of the journal Angelus Novus; his project was among the early philosophico-political engagements with Benjamin’s ideas. Both his writings and Tafuri’s are immersed in the figural turns and motifs of the Trauerspiel.) The conventional architectural object (the individual building) denied the reality of the metropolis by attempting to turn its back upon the flux of capitalism’s urban processes. This, in Tafuri’s view, provided the central illusion of architectural ideology: the belief that the design of a single project could make a significant difference at the social level, and that it could survive metropolitan processes. Even as extensive a project as Karl Ehn’s Karl-Marx-Hof in Vienna, ‘the Red Metropolis’ – a superblock estate on the scale of a small town, providing services for its 5,000 inhabitants – only replicated this same problem on a large scale. By the 1970s the American super-skyscraper – Tafuri’s examples are the John Hancock Building in Chicago and the World Trade Center in New York – broke away from the ‘disenchanted’ relations that, Tafuri believed, American cities had fostered. The older skyscrapers had been ‘events’ on the skyline, ‘disenchanted mountains’ in ‘the unnatural forest of the metropolis’. Now these newer super-skyscrapers had each become a self-contained, ‘gigantic antiurban machine’:

It is not emerging urban masses that erupt on the skylines of Manhattan, Chicago, and other American metropolises but, rather, antiurban paradoxes, artificial technological ‘miracles’. The insertion of such structures into the two-dimensional grid of the city tends to negate the city itself in a desperate effort to escape its irrationalities.

Metropolis is applicable as much to Venice in the 1960s as it is to Berlin, Paris and New York, the classic examples of modern social contradictions and density
of human life, or to the sites that occupy the minds of today’s urban theorists and curators: São Paulo, Lagos–Ibadan, Mumbai, Lima, or Kuala Lumpur. The historical bubble on the Venetian islands could not, of course, stave off capital any more than did Mestre and Porto Marghera; set against the industrial haze, Palladian gems shine out all the brighter.

The differences between metropolis and spectacle rest mostly on matters of emphasis and application; it would be easy enough to imagine them synthesized into an account of social reification to be packaged for all-too-easy consumption in cultural theory. However, despite a considerable amount of shared political ground between Cacciari and Debord, it is in the end their political-philosophical orientations – and especially the attitude towards nihilism, or to capitalism’s nihilistic implications – that most separate metropolis from spectacle. For all his radical-gauchist critique of ‘the Hegelian dialectic’, Cacciari, more than Debord, was prepared to ‘look the negative in the face’ and to pursue the nihilistic consequences of capital all the way to completion.

We need to keep in mind the profile of metropolis as we consider Tafuri’s account of the European avant-gardes. The two accounts emerge in dialogue with each other. Avant-gardists responded, Tafuri argued, not only at the level of their subject matter but also by registering the metropolis at the level of form and the sign. He thought of avant-gardists as agents – albeit indirectly – in the internal reshaping of capitalist social relations through the early decades of the twentieth century; their search for new forms, for new ways of making art or designing buildings, played, especially from 1922, an important role in sweeping away older modes of being and producing the ‘disenchanted sign’.

In Architecture and Utopia, Tafuri turns inside-out the established distinction between ‘constructive’ and ‘destructive’ avant-gardes, showing how each tendency – typified by De Stijl and Dada – transformed into its opposite. In his view, the constructivists not only ‘built’ new ‘unities’, as claimed, but, through their analytic explorations of form and language, also contributed to the dissolution and breakdown that accompanied the experiences described by Simmel. The drive to unity, then, resulted in fragmentation of forms; organic ambitions translated into the ‘disarticulated recomposition’ of Gerrit Rietveld or Piet Zwart. Contrariwise, Dada’s professed nihilism and deliberate deployment of atomizing techniques such as montage and assemblage are understood by Tafuri as a mimetic affirmation of the chaos of capitalist reality. Dadaist assemblage, he argues, was a positive acknowledgement of social materiality and thereby a means of reclaiming value from the ephemera of daily existence, a way of producing meaning from a world increasingly characterized by nihilistic anti-value.

In this ‘dialectic of the avant-garde’, as Tafuri called it, positive becomes negative and negative becomes positive, unravelling the discursive parameters of so much modern art history.

The point here is not so much the formal inversion as the attempt to articulate the ramifications of metropolis. The move to abstraction, far from being a ‘flight from the real’ (as it is often perceived), had resulted, Tafuri thought, from the very ‘effort to rejoin reality’ and to break free from reification’s social abstractions. Indeed, Tafuri argued that ‘the very concept of the avant-garde’ contained a contradiction, one that was manifested as ‘moments of rupture – as moments of conflict’ emerging ‘along the problematic boundary line separating the avant-garde itself from the reality
principle’. First, avant-gardists found that they were unable ever to affect their reality in any of the ways that they had intended. Second, their striving to fuse art with life overturned into its opposite, reaffirming the very condition of alienation that many had sought to transcend. In Tafuri’s account, this troubled dialectic generated an ever-exacerbating tension for avant-garde projects. Shaped by avant-gardists’ varied attempts to relate to, and act on, their surrounding reality, Tafuri’s inversion sets in motion a dialectic of crisis.

The relation between metropolis and the theory of reification has already been noted, but Tafuri’s and Cacciari’s engagement with Lukács had a more polemical edge. Tafuri, like Cacciari, tarries with the thinkers dismissed in The Destruction of Reason. But it is in the social articulation of form – especially abstraction and montage – that the argument with Lukács is most apparent. Sharing Lukács’s critical parameters at the level of social diagnosis, Tafuri and Cacciari draw the opposite conclusions at the level of socio-aesthetic analysis and judgement. For them, Lukács’s critique of montage and defence of organic form failed to come to terms with the dynamics of modern capitalism, and his tragic consciousness bewailed the loss of an older aesthetic. Rejecting the ‘Hegelian’ legacy and privileging of synthesis – so much of which was, of course, coded attacks on the culture of the Partito Comunista Italiano (PCI) – Tafuri and Cacciari concurred with many on the New Left; within their political frame and in the face of capital, Lukács’s arguments represented an attitude that, in their view, was just far too defensive. Furthermore, the dislocating techniques of montage were not, in Tafuri’s view, necessarily passive echoes or uncritical reflexes of capital’s fragmenting tendencies. On the contrary, such strategies – and in this regard he had in mind the Russian formalists – often sought to close the gap between sign and meaning; montage was sometimes an effort to repair the fractures of the metropolis.

Tafuri understood the avant-garde as a complex and contradictory phenomenon, which in various ways had recognized the new metropolitan condition, responding to its overlapping networks of social energies. The crucial issue, however, was what attitude one was to take to this condition: ‘how to shake off the anxiety provoked by the loss of a center, by the solitude of the individual immersed in revolt, of how to convert that anxiety into action so as not to remain forever dumb in the face of it’.22

In his account of the avant-garde’s responses – understood now as political or philosophical view – we begin to see the elements of a strategy for engaging with the metropolis that was advocated by Tafuri, the moments in which the description and analysis of the avant-garde shifts into a politics. Anxiety over the metropolis had to be supplanted by embrace. ‘It was necessary’, he argued, to pass from Munch’s Scream to El Lissitzky’s Story of Two Squares: from the anguished discovery of the nullification of values, to the use of a language of pure signs, perceptible by a mass that had completely absorbed the universe without quality of the money economy.23

The metropolis was not to be – could not be – evaded but had to be engaged productively. The new language emerging from the metropolis – the possibilities presented by the breaking up of syntactical connections and the disenchanted sign – could only be unleashed once the avant-garde had ‘neutralized the paralyzing anguish that can only contemplate itself’.24 The fear of the present conditions and nostalgia for an imagined older social order could only end in a disconnected solipsism and was hopelessly ‘unrealistic’. For Tafuri, the way ahead involved actively embracing the given situation.

The turning point in Tafuri’s dialectic of the avant-garde paralleled transformations in the role of ideology and the character of capital accumulation, and was echoed in new forms of social and economic theory.
The broad shift from laissez-faire to monopoly capitalism – and the particular consolidation that followed the 1929 crash on the New York stockmarket – provided the framework for these ideas. One of the distinctive features of Tafuri’s account was his refusal to posit the ‘crisis of the avant-garde’ on the cataclysmic effects of political dictatorship. Not that they were ignored. Tafuri’s Marxism framed both Hitler’s Germany and Stalin’s USSR within the emergent socio-economic developments of the interwar period. If these political developments were dominant and dominating events, they did not represent absolute exceptions for Tafuri, but were, in essence, part of the same economic fabric as liberal-capitalist states such as Franklin D. Roosevelt’s America. As Tafuri emphasized, the histories of modern architecture’s crisis were typically framed through the political impact of Stalin and Hitler; the fundamental problem, in his view, however, was the underlying restructuring of capital and the realization of the modern economic form.25 In Architecture and Utopia, Tafuri introduces his discussion of this social transformation in terms of a shift from ‘Utopia’ to ‘Plan’. This epochal change within capitalism lies at the heart of Tafuri’s argument that intellectuals and artists had taken on new social roles, one that involves constantly intervening in, and organizing, reality. This transition, then, involved a move from a world orientated towards stable values to that of ‘action’. The avant-garde’s negation of tradition and value was, he argued, required to release that action from the strictures of ethical justification. Economists such as John Maynard Keynes devised models ‘starting from the crisis and not abstractly against it’, and instead of seeking ways to stabilize economic conditions they aimed to work with conflict and contradiction. The point was to manage the chaos of the modern world and to make its crises work for capital, or, as Tafuri described it, to work with ‘the negative … inherent in the system’.26 It is worth noting that, for Tafuri (and contrary to the everyday sense conveyed by the word), ‘the plan’ signified the very opposite of a fixed and rigid model. The plan was conceived as a process of constant intervention and revision that aimed to absorb and adapt capitalism’s contradictions at ever-higher levels. This meant that negativity – the transitory, the temporary, the contingent and the oppositional – was incorporated into the very processes of social and economic development, as capital’s power; the plan, sought to harness this dynamic. Through these social developments, the way was cleared for active intervention in the here and now; it was this anti-historicism that allowed the avant-gardes ‘to explode towards the future’, and enabled them to find a role within the emerging ‘planner-states’ of the interwar years.27

For the avant-garde movements the destruction of values offered a wholly new type of rationality, which was capable of coming face to face with the negative, in order to make the negative itself the release valve of an unlimited potential for development.28

As we have seen, the avant-gardes had participated in this new climate of dynamic intervention ‘once the environment was reduced to things devoid of significance’, when art’s syntax had been reduced to pure geometrical signs and when its function had shifted from symbolism to perceptual organization.29 Of course, some members of the avant-garde attempted to do more than just flirt with the ‘reality principle’. Nevertheless, so far as Tafuri was concerned, they could not evade the founding contradiction of avant-gardism. As the avant-garde moved into ‘design’ – and more specifically into urban design – the ‘crisis of the object’ unravelled architecture itself.

We might note how discursive parameters similar to those laid out in Cacciari’s and Tafuri’s sense of the metropolis have continued to shape debates on the city. On the one hand, we encounter the characterization of buildings such as John Portman’s Bonaventure complex as worlds isolated from their surroundings (as in the discussions of Fredric Jameson or Mike Davis); Tafuri would, no doubt, emphasize the failure of such acts of separation, corporate security and social immunization. At the other extreme is Rem Koolhaas’s delirious immersion in the urban inferno (whose attitude Tafuri found just too cynical). When conceived as an isolated object, or as a self-contained structure, architecture in Tafuri’s view could be no more than an ‘ambiguous object’ in the ‘Metropolitan “Merz”’. Some designers attended to the urban process itself and understood the individual building as absorbed within the city. Once again, however, this move provided no solution to the fundamental problem because many urban planners imagined that they could re-impose form and rationality over the totality of the metropolitan environment. And so, as Tafuri argued, the entire cycle of modern architecture and of the new systems of visual communication came into being, developed, and entered into crisis as an enormous attempt – the last to be made by the great bourgeois artistic culture – to resolve, on the always more outdated level of ideology, the imbalances, contradictions, and retardations characteristic of the capitalist reorganization of the world market and productive development.30
The prevailing conditions required that ‘architecture’ in its classic sense self-negate, and that its translation into the realm of urban design fully acknowledge the contradictory processes of capital accumulation. The ‘environment’ with which the planners worked was available neither for formal experimentation nor for grand social syntheses; to conceive the metropolis as a gigantic village, or as an agglomeration of villages, was not to have begun to conceive, let alone understood, the environment of metropolis. Moreover, once the avant-garde had ‘come within the sphere of the reorganization of production in general’ they found, as Tafuri put it, that they had become ‘the objects and not the subjects of the Plan’. In coming ‘face to face’ with the negative, avant-gardists were forced to abandon tragic consciousness and accept the conditions of metropolitan devaluation and disenchantment. They had to confront, in other words, reality in all its contradictions and reified confusions – its ‘masks’, its ‘illusions’, its invisible processes, its being beyond synthesis. Tafuri’s account may have departed from Lukács’s understanding in fundamental ways, but it was, nevertheless, a form of radical realism.

Tafuri’s hostility to tragic consciousness forced him to pursue the logics of devaluation and disenchantment – the logic of the negative – to their extremes. As he had pointed out in the Preface to Architecture and Utopia, we must accept that we are left with ‘form without utopia’, with a ‘return to pure architecture’. When faced with the crisis of the object, architecture was obliged ‘to become a spectre of itself’, a condition best exemplified by architectural contributions to the artificial environments of the university campus or the international exhibition: the ‘cities’ of formal experimentation. Buildings such as Mies van der Rohe’s German State Pavilion of 1929 for the Barcelona World Exhibition (the ‘Barcelona Pavilion’), Tafuri suggested, had ceased to resist and had given up trying to repair the damage wrought by the metropolis. As he put it some years later: ‘what is left to pursue is empty architecture’. In The Sphere and the Labyrinth, this argument was cast in metaphysical terms. He spoke of ‘the limit that separates language from silence’. Tafuri favoured ‘silence’ – the ‘absolutely asemantic quality’ – rather than ‘noise’, as the most appropriate response to the metropolitan world ‘without quality’. Mies’s late buildings, he argued, were ‘objects that “exist by means of their own death,” only in this way saving themselves from certain failure’. For Tafuri, then, it was with works such as these that one faced the “negative” of the metropolis. Having accepted its elements as ‘pure signs’, this architecture abandoned any attempt to reclaim, reconstruct or reimpose meaning: having understood contemporary negativity, this was architecture ‘conscious of the impossibility of restoring “synthesis”’.8

Defeat or history?

It is not difficult to understand why Architecture and Utopia was taken to be a dire assessment of the possibilities for architectural practice and avant-gardist projects. By the time of Tafuri’s The Sphere and the Labyrinth (1980), the Miesian route of total alienation, ‘empty architecture’ and ‘silence’ had been further framed by Cacciari’s account – and advocacy – of a strategy of completed nihilism. Tafuri’s early reviewers already thought his account to be bleak, but it has been Fredric Jameson who – by way of analogy with Adorno’s negative dialectic and Roland Barthes’s zero-degree writing – has done most to cast Tafuri’s account as a version of ‘cultural pessimism’. Yet Tafuri himself constantly distanced his analyses from the charge of being doom-laden. We should, I believe, take his repudiation of the pessimism charge seriously. Writing in 1975, Tafuri observed that his 1969 essay ‘Towards a Critique of Architectural Ideology’ – the early version of Architecture and Utopia – had provoked violent criticism and, more to the point, that its arguments had been grossly decontextualized:

The journal that published this essay (and others by myself and by colleagues working along the same lines) was so clearly defined in its political history and particular line of thought and interests, that one would have supposed that many equivocal interpretations might a priori have been avoided.

This was not the case. By isolating the architectural problems treated from the theoretical context of the journal, the way was found to consider my essay an apocalyptic prophecy, ‘the expression of renunciation,’ the ultimate pronouncement of the ‘death of architecture’. The journal was the forum for Tafuri’s discussion of the Austro-Marxist urban projects of ‘Red Vienna’ as well as Cacciari’s political analysis of class struggle at the Montecatini–Edison plant at Porto Marghera and his early articulations of ‘negative thought’. Francesco
Dal Có, another young scholar from IUAV, was also involved, contributing political essays and articles on the avant-garde and architecture in the Soviet Union of the late 1920s. Commentators on the work of Tafuri have remained remarkably silent on the political background that he flagged in his Preface.

Emerging in the 1950s as an anti-Stalinist tendency among dissidents of both the PCI and the Partito Socialista Italiano (PSI), Italian operaismo coalesced in the early 1960s around the journal Quaderni Rossi, developing its full articulation in Classe Operaia. Like the Trotskyist tendencies ‘Socialisme ou barbarie’ in France or the Correspondence group of Raya Dunayevskaya and C.I.R. James in the United States, and like the situationists, operaismo drew its political lineages from a critical engagement with council communism and the experiences of early Weimar revolutionary activism, the phenomena that Lenin had famously criticized as ‘left-wing communism’. Workerist intellectuals tried to rethink Marx’s theory of political economy in the context of their experience of Italy’s postwar ‘economic miracle’. The extraordinary pace of modernization and urbanization through these years saw large-scale migrations and the ongoing restructuring of labour relations. Emphasizing the integration of theory and political practice, workerists explored the changing nature of class composition; challenged the bureaucratization, and reformist logic, of the labour movement; developed the critique of the neutrality of technology. They emphasized the creative force of living labour and its potential – especially when recognizing its ‘autonomous’ power – to dislodge the suffocating weight of dead labour. In the labour–capital relation, it was labour that drove productive development, forcing capital to respond with defensive and repressive measures. Italian workerism was subject to various shifts in allegiances, factions and splits, and Contropiano was the focus for one of these.

Tensions over organizational strategy recurrent throughout the history of operaismo, one of the most important of which was that between ‘entrist’ and ‘autonomy’. Although sometimes bitter, these divisions – which resulted in organizational splits – need also to be taken in context; they often had a tactical element rather than being decisions of principle. ‘Tactical entrisms’ and ‘autonomy’ represented different solutions to the same issue: how to advance social struggles without unnecessary exposure to defeat. Local context, as often as ideological principle, shaped whether militants thought it more productive to pursue these struggles within the PCI or to build an independent political organization. Contropiano is a case in point. Prompted by the decision of the Rome caucus (Tronti, Asor Rosa, di Leo) to re-enter the PCI, Negri and the Veneto-based group formed Potere Operaio veneto-emiliano (POv-e) in 1967. Thus at the time of the launch of Contropiano in 1968, the editorial board and contributors consisted of individuals who operated both inside the PCI and independently of it. Following the conference ‘Students and Workers’ in summer 1968 (co-organized by POv-e and the PCI), Cacciari too adopted the entrist tactic, and Negri left the journal’s board, later dissolving PO into Autonomia in 1973. These internal divisions provide the backdrop for the Contropiano project and for Tafuri’s arrival in Venice. When Tafuri alludes to the importance of the journal for understanding his project, there is rather more at stake than a simple intellectual ‘context’. Although Tafuri was closest to the Rome group, Negri’s contributions – and especially ‘Keynes and the Capitalist Theory of the State post-1929’ remained important for him. In the following discussion, it is important to acknowledge the distinctive directions (political and intellectual) taken by Negri, Tafuri and Cacciari, while recognizing some commonalities at the heart of their thinking.

It is clear that the intellectual collaborations for which IUAV became known – including the study of the American city and the project on the Soviet Five-Year Plans – were forged in the intense atmosphere of debates, practical and theoretical, around Contropiano and local political activity, at the conjuncture of intellectual enquiry and revolutionary militancy. Even after the demise of operaismo as a distinct and powerful force, Tafuri’s interests and theoretical arguments continued to demonstrate themes associated with this tendency. Outside of this political context, his research projects and the lines of argument developed through them cannot be properly comprehended. A book such as Architecture and Utopia did not merely represent some general Marxist-inspired interest in locating art and culture within the context of the capitalist economy; it had a quite specific theoretical resonance within the far-Left Italian culture of the 1960s and 1970s.

It is with the notion of the ‘Plan’ – central to Tafuri’s writing throughout the 1970s – that we can best situate his argument within the workerist political frame. The ‘plan’, Tronti had argued in his classic essay on ‘Social Capital’, was itself premised on the socialization of capital, and what he saw as the concomitant socialization of class struggle. The metropolis, as used by Cacciari and Tafuri, provides a more philosophically inflected account of Tronti’s social factory. The title
of the theoretical journal condensed the workerist stance ‘contro il piano’ to Contropiano; ‘Against the plan’ became the snappier (and more indeterminate) ‘Anti-plan’. What was at stake in all these discussions of the plan and development was not only the prospect of Italian modernization, but also the very concept of modernity and the future. Tafuri’s analysis of the plan drew explicitly on Negri’s article ‘Keynes and the Capitalist Theory of the State post-1929’. Published in the first issue of Contropiano in 1968, Negri attempted in this essay to elaborate the historical transitions that had been outlined by Tronti in Operai e Capitale.58 In the wake of the 1929 crisis, Negri argued, capital came to terms with the threat posed by 1917 revolution. At this point, the tendencies in the ruling class finally abandoned nostalgia for the liberal-constitutional state, and faced up to the loss of values – that is, the values that had already been rejected and destroyed by the protagonists of 1917. For Negri – as for Tronti and Tafuri – the significance of Keynesianism was not so much the question of state intervention as its reconstruction of the state ‘based on the discovery of the inherent antagonism of the working class’.49

The planning of economic development had been at the heart of postwar ideological alliances and in 1962 formed the platform for the centre–left coalition between Christian Democrats and the PSI. The Left – and this included Togliatti’s PCI – hoped to go beyond mere ‘corrective’ reforms and, by way of planning, to achieve ‘structural’ changes.50 It became increasingly clear, however, that the much-touted ‘improvements’ were failing to materialize and that the plans were being conducted in the interests of capital. By 1964 there was extensive disillusion that reform could provide improvements, let alone construct an ‘Italian road to socialism’. The realization that even moderate neo-Keynesian initiatives would be quashed by Italy’s ruling class was one of the spurs to the emergence and success of dissident workerist groups.

Debates on radical town planning and the housing question had an urgency and purpose at this point, and not only at IUAV. The question of housing occupied a particularly important role in the politics of postwar reform in Italy, and Tafuri paid close attention to the history of mass housing projects (private and cooperative) that were the subject of much discussion and controversy, from the ‘myth of equilibrium’ at the heart of the Vanoni Plan to the ‘poetics of the neighbourhood’ celebrated by socialists.51 In the early 1960s, the progress of the building and planning programmes associated with the centre-left government was closely monitored by architectural students and was an important focus in their growing militancy. For Tafuri, the projects developed under social-democratic governments or administrations, in places such as Weimar Germany, Amsterdam and Red Vienna, provided a significant historical test case of the limitations of architectural and reformist ideology, and represented for him an allegorical reckoning with recent Italian urbanism, and especially the PCI’s pride and joy: Bologna’s city administration.52 In the 1960s, the PCI in Emilia-Romagna had done more than any other local administration to implement the government-initiated Piani di Edilizia Economica e Popolare (‘Plans for Economic and Popular Housing’). Like Ernst May in Frankfurt in the 1920s, the Bolognese council had some significant successes. Nevertheless, in Tafuri’s view, the crisis that had emerged for the Frankfurt project was not identified with the rise of the political Right, so much as with the economic sea in which the experiment floated, and which, as he put it, ‘came to grief’ on the rocks of the 1929 crash. Similarly, in Bologna, the PCI’s political control was not economic power, and many of the reforms were thwarted by this disjunction. Its attempts to create ‘community’ – an effort to stave off social atomization – also echoed the projects of the interwar Viennese höfe. Moreover, the attempt to replicate the social relations of the village in the city – whereby organic relations would be re-proposed as isolated complexes ‘fortressed’ from the ‘metropolis’ – was taken by Tafuri to be not only retrograde but also incapable of success within its own terms. The metropolis, as we have seen, would allow no such luxury and would simply consume these concrete ‘prayers for consolation’. He used the same terms to criticize the Tiburtino quarter, built on the edges of Rome between 1949 and 1950:

Exiled from the city, the Tiburtino scornfully turned its back on it. Modeled after places of popular and rural ‘purity,’ the new complex was to reproduce the latter’s vitality, ‘spontaneity,’ and humanity … here one exalted the craftsmanship that constituted the necessary mode of production of the complex, welcoming it as an antidote for alienation.53

Representing, for Tafuri, ‘a “manifesto” for architectural neorealism’, where ‘the anti-avant-garde polemics of neorealism bit their own tail’, the Tiburtino’s ‘illusion of engagement, paradoxically pronounces a big “yes” to the forces that turned popular housing into an incentive for speculation and technological backwardness into a means of development for advanced sectors’.54

Tafuri’s position was clearly articulated in opposition to the reformist policies of postwar Italy, and
particularly sharply against the PCI and PSI, but it is important to recognize the extent to which it also represented an intellectual challenge within the New Left. Much as his politics would have appealed to the student mood at IUAV and beyond, Tafuri’s arguments stood in sharp contrast to the currency of Maoist cultural revolution and with populist desires to ‘serve the people’, which were especially prominent in the fields of theatre, medicine and architecture. Tafuri was consciously intervening in these debates, from a particular Left perspective. While clearly unpalatable – then and now – to many on the Left, his was certainly no dreadful argument that ‘nothing is possible’; it was a hard reckoning with the contemporary politics of the PCI. To take on the reformist policies of the PCI’s ‘showpiece’, however indirectly, was, of course, to go for the jugular, and represented a target and test-case for a workerist historian and theorist of metropolis and Plan. It is this context that makes Jameson’s critique of Tafuri – and I have in mind here both the charge of ‘cultural pessimism’ and his advocacy of a theory of socialist enclaves – so misguided. It was precisely the glaring social limitations of – and the substantive ‘inversions’ of content that occurred within – the PCI ‘enclaves’ that Tafuri was addressing in the first place. Waving the *Prison Notebooks* at Tafuri, as Jameson does, may seem politically honourable, but it deracínates the strategic arguments of Gramsci’s politics.

Tafuri’s assessment of the avant-garde was also conceived as part of a larger political project. Tafuri’s judgements on the avant-garde were made in a spirit that was more akin to critical solidarity – that is, were designed to advance a project, much in the same way that political militants might criticize the mistakes of their forebears. The effort was to think the issues of the past from the ‘inside’, to analyse differential moments in all their contradictions. Tafuri would certainly have recognized that it would be a ludicrous substitutionalism to treat the avant-garde as if it were simply identical with the revolutionary vanguard: Hannes Meyer was not Preobrazhensky. Nevertheless, if, as Negri had argued, ‘permanent revolution’ needed to be reappropriated from capital – by way of a ‘paradoxical Aufhebung’ to the second degree – then so too did the most advanced thinking of the avant-garde projects. Indeed, in Tafuri’s analysis, certain avant-gardists, with their thoroughgoing disenchantment, had been well ahead of the game. ‘Capitalist reformism’, Negri noted in his 1968 essay, had learned to assert its own interests, while the ‘socialist reformists’ of the Left continued to ‘whine’ about the ‘imbalances’ of the system. The point was – and here we find the political dynamic at the heart of Cacciari and Tafuri’s version of completed nihilism – to face the negative, to meet capital head-on and outwit it. Harsh and sympathetic, the Tafurian critique of the avant-garde was certainly not posed in a dismissive tone, and bears no relation to those views that consider the Soviet avant-garde and Bolshevism to be co-authors of the Gulag. Even the interpretation that sees the avant-garde as the research and development wing of capital has to be treated with more caution than most late-twentieth-century commentators – with their tendency to theoretical flattening and social disillusion – are prepared to
take. The point for Tafuri was the limitations of the avant-garde vision, particularly when circumscribed by its relative isolation from social struggle. His history of the avant-garde was not orchestrated towards some ‘inevitable’ telos and nor was his critique intended to serve as a form of theoretical and historical closure. On the contrary, this was critique that – like its object – was orientated towards the future. ‘Critical history’ was not critique abstracted from history, like so much contemporary theory, but critique inserted into ‘history as an event’.

Influential as the Frankfurt School was for these Italian thinkers, social agency was firmly on the agenda. And I need to emphasize exactly what is meant here: I do not just mean that social agency was present for them as a historical fact of the late 1960s. Rather, it was the very heartbeat of the theory of operaismo.

The ‘ineliminate antagonism’ of the working class to capital did not, for operaisti, emerge only in the big show-downs of mass industrial action, in spectacular street demonstrations or in the dramatic high points of struggle (the stuff that, in far too many histories, is the ‘proof’ required to recognize the very existence of social resistance, and allows the very possibility of its acknowledgment, let alone its entrance into representation). Largely formulated during periods of downturn, this component of workerist theory did not particularly require the events of 1968 to sustain it. Operating in the daily refusal to be subsumed into workplace discipline, in the small and ongoing ‘refusals’ that took place even during periods of apparent quiescence, workerism considered resistance to be both a permanent and a universal feature of capitalism. Even as it is dislodged from specific identification with the working class, the same political sensibility – a sensitivity to the pulse of freedom and moment of excess in living labour (not to be confused with the PCI’s notion of the working class as the ‘myth of Promise’) – remains at work in recent arguments concerning the multitude. Capital’s internalization of negation did not mean ‘the end of the working class’ for operaisti in the 1960s; even in the wake of political defeats, this core principle of workerism did not come to signal the subsumption of resistance. The most that capital could expect from new modes of repression, Negri insisted in his 1968 essay, was a postponement of its problems. Similarly, capital’s ‘appropriation’ and ‘recuperation’ of avant-gardist techniques, far from representing the latter’s initiating impulse and creative capacity. As Tafuri argued, addressing the fate of the avant-garde projects in an interview in 1989: ‘what you have

is realization, rather than failure’. From a workerist perspective, such an outcome is to be expected: capital’s development since 1917/1929 – the transformation of capital and the state – was, for them, the very outcome of the social dynamics of class contradiction; and the same goes for the structural transformations of the 1970s and 1980s. Far from being in the driving seat, capital, in their view, was determined by class struggles: capital’s measures were forced on it by labour’s initiatives. Tafuri’s thought is best seen as grasping a homology, rather than making an identity, between the avant-garde and class resistance to capital. It is not that Tafuri’s avant-garde is reductively equated to workerism’s concept of the working class, but rather that the avant-gardes’ ‘dialectic’ and ‘crisis’ of architecture is thought through the same ‘paradoxical’ movements of the new mode of capitalist reconstruction described in the writing of Tronti and Negri. As Tafuri put it in Architecture and Utopia: ‘the basis of Keynesian interventionism is the same as that of modern art’.

Tafuri’s critique was directed very precisely at its substitutionalist appropriation by the discipline of architecture and its own mythified adoption of avant-gardist ideology. This essentially reformist ideology blinded architecture to what it had become and prevented it from recognizing how:

Architecture as ideology of the plan is swept away by the reality of the plan when, the level of utopia having been superseded, the plan becomes the operative mechanism.

Echoing Panzieri’s critique of the PCI and PSI, Tafuri rejected the architects’ claims to be ‘anticipating’ or ‘prefiguring’ revolutionary socialism. This is why, for him – in a direct echo of Lenin and Trotsky on Proletkult – there was no ‘class architecture’, only a class critique of architecture, and why he saw himself not as a historian of architecture ‘but also a historian of architecture’. It should also be apparent why, in later years, he maintained a clear distance between his own views and the ‘incomplete nihilism’ of post-modernism, and why he rejected its obituaries to projects of social emancipation. Defeat, Tafuri noted in 1989, is perceived as such ‘only by those who don’t see the real historical consequences of what took place’.

Notes
This article brings together elements of two papers delivered at the conference ‘Marx, Architecture and Modernity’, University of Westminster, May 2004, and the Radical Philosophy conference ‘Shiny, Faster, Future: Capitalism and Form’, March 2005. My thanks go especially to David Cunningham,
who was instrumental in organizing, and inviting me to, both events. Both papers draw on a much longer study of Manfredo Tafuri, which forms a chapter of my forthcoming book Dialectical Passions: Negation and Postwar Art Theory.

1. I have in mind here those dissident left traditions that have attained a new profile in those publications seeking to intervene in recent social protests. Hardt and Negri’s Empire is only the most obvious lineage with Italian workerism. Michael Hardt and Antonio Negri, Empire, Harvard University Press, Cambridge MA, and London, 2000. See also Paolo Virno and Michael Hardt, eds, Radical Thought in Italy: A Potential Politics, University of Minnesota Press, Minneapolis and London, 1996. Attention generally focuses on the continuity with Autonomia and the shift to emphasizing ‘new social subjects’; here I am interested in pushing back a few years to the high point of workerist activity. For a distinct set of arguments also emerging from a council communist tradition see Retort’s Affected Powers: Capital and Spectacle in a New Age of War, Verso, London and New York, 2005.


6. Ibid., p. 325.

7. Ibid., p. 326.

8. Ibid., p. 329.


14. One of the most famous of Vienna’s many mass housing developments, intended to provide a practical prefiguration of socialism, Karl-Marx-Hof (1927–30) was built with two central laundries, two bathing houses, dental and maternity clinics, chemist, post office, library, youth hostel, health insurance office, and twenty-five commercial outlets, including restaurant and shops. In 1934, the complex was the site of working-class resistance to fascism, and has remained the symbol for the defeat of Viennese socialism.


20. Tafuri, Modern Architecture/1, p. 112.


29. Tafuri, Modern Architecture/1, p. 110; Theories and History of Architecture, p. 36.


31. Ibid., p. 100.

32. Ibid., p. ix.

33. Ibid., p. 145–8.


38. Tafuri, The Sphere and the Labyrinth, p. 112.


for granted’, and readers should be able to detect these simply from the research focus and the reconstruction of historical material (p. xi).
45. See note 48 below.
46. See The American City, and also Tafuri, Socialismo, città, architettura U.R.S.S. 1917–1937: Il contributo degli architetti europei, Officina Edizioni, Rome, 1971. The first part contains essays by the IUA researchers (Tafuri, Dal Cò, Marco de Michielis, Giorgio Ciucci and Bruno Cassetti). This first section is billed as a coherent thesis, and the IUA essays are framed by additional contributions from, significantly, Alberto Asor Rosa and Rita di Leo (whom Tafuri had invited). The second part of the book represents, as Tafuri put it, more diverse interpretative contributions from invited scholars and first-hand witnesses – Hans Schmidt, Kurt Junghanns, Vítězslav Procházka and Gerrit Oorthuys – on the ‘history of realised socialism’.
47. Mario Tronti, ‘Social Capital’, Telos 17, Fall 1973, pp. 109, 111 (originally from Tronti’s Operai e capitale, Einaudi, Turin, 1966, a volume that collected together some of the texts that would define workerism, and, a few years on, autonomism).
50. On Riccardo Lombardi’s mythologization of planning as the route to socialism, and the contrasting interpretation of planning by Guido Carli, Governor of the Bank of Italy, see Wright, Storming Heaven, p. 65, and Ginsborg, A History of Contemporary Italy, pp. 265–73.
51. See Tafuri, History of Italian Architecture, for discussion of the Vanoni Plan and the INA–Casa (National Insurance Institute, the government’s financial plan for low-cost accommodation), and projects such as the INA–Casa Tiburtino quarter in Rome (Ludovico Quaroni, Mario Ridolfi, Carlo Aymonino et al., 1950–54).
53. Tafuri, History of Italian Architecture, p. 17.
54. Ibid., p. 18.
55. Moreover, to do so in the service of an abstracted theoretical debate fails to take account of the extent to which Gramsci’s name had, in the Italian context, been reduced to an apotropaic fetish.
57. Ibid., p. 13.
58. ‘The communism of capital can absorb all values within its movement, and can represent to the full the general social goal of development; but it can never expropriate the particularity of the working class which is its hatred of exploitation, its uncontainability at any given level of equilibrium. Because the working class is also a project for the destruction of the capitalist mode of production.’ Ibid., p. 36.
60. See Negri’s recent comments: ‘It is a lovely paradox: capitalism has entered into a new phase, and it is capital itself that will fulfill the promises we made in the 1970s and were unable to keep. I speak of failure, but in fact this metamorphosis of capital is precisely the result of our struggles’. Negri on Negri, p. 63.
62. Ibid., p. 135. Cf. Tafuri, Theories and History of Architecture, ‘Note to the second (Italian) edition’ (the note is unpaginated).
63. Cf. comments on Trotsky’s ‘class point of view’ made by Ciucci, Dal Cò, Manieri-Elia and Tafuri: the construction of the ‘class point of view’, they argued, ‘is not to be understood as the creation of a ready formula on the basis of which to pronounce the merits and the faults of bourgeois intellectual products. The problem is to bring this point of view up to date in terms of the historical levels of the material analyzed by continually applying criticism to both the complex of phenomena and the criticohistorical acquisitions that the values of bourgeois culture present and interpret’. Preface to The American City, p. xi. See also Architecture and Utopia, p. 179.