

## Rome as E-utopia

by Manuela Pacella

*The entire city is accessible to everyone; and people go to where they are drawn.  
There is no conflict, because people who have the same opinions always find each other.*

Bruno Taut, *The City Crown*, 1919

In 2014, Marleen Leitner and Michael Schitnig – known as studio ASYNCHROME – produced *Der Weltbaumeister*, an animated film inspired by Bruno Taut's 1919 *The World's Master Builder*. The boards used for the video were then reused for the beginning of the comic book *Niemandsräume. Eine utopische Spurensuche – No Man's Spaces. A Utopian Search for Traces*, published for the TU-Graz press in collaboration with the IZK Institute for Contemporary Art, as the outcome of their thesis in architecture.

It is a true artistic manifesto, where studio ASYNCHROME, using text, drawings and the narrative structure of a comic strip, tackle the difficult theme of utopia in relation to architecture and urban planning. Taut's expressionist utopia is a source of inspiration and basis of a reflection on the human-architecture relationship. While for Taut, architecture was a point of fusion of all the arts, for the Austrian duo, it instead becomes more and more disharmonic with the social body living in it. Here begins a utopian discourse that again involves the double meaning of the original English word that Thomas More's 1516 *Utopia* was based on, that is, e-utopia (homophony between *utopia*, which in Greek means "no place" with *eutopia*, meaning "good place").

With a vision of utopia thus becoming a tool for critical analysis with a newly proactive meaning, studio ASYNCHROME chose to dedicate themselves to the visual arts rather than architecture, believing that visual art is freer and therefore more effectively active.

Curiosity led the artists to investigate the fabric of Rome, so full of historical layers, of religious, cultural and political pilgrimages, of beauty together with daily chaos and idleness. They asked questions and engaged in dialogue with various figures living and working in Rome; visiting the most touristy sites, the most precious corners, the meaningless suburbs, the magnificence of apparent grandeur, the constant architectural change in the succession and intertwining of suburban neighbourhoods with many political faces. The result is *Urban Vision 2.0*, a hypothesis of analysis, a proposal of interconnection between the various aspects they found, at times paradoxical, at times almost ironic, where that "Urban Vision" is a direct reference to the name of a famous company for sponsored restoration of buildings and monuments.

The network of connections between concepts, sentences, drawings on the wall and on paper, is brought to life in a constant state of updates and change, thanks to the activation of the network by visitors. While the intermingling of facts, places and sentences extrapolated from life, news and media in the small diary-like drawings are of local relevance, their 'urgency' becomes clear when compared to more global themes, analysed in large-format works on paper, while the bitter irony of the two video animations and of the wall drawings are a visual counterbalance to the words on the walls, deliberately disrupting any attempt at linear narration.

The context in which *Urban Vision 2.0* develops is the not exactly reassuring space of Ex Elettrofonica in Rome, famous – in its almost ten years of activity – as a place of architectural challenge for the artists called to work there.

And here, from the right angles they were used to, studio ASYNCHROME had to deal with organic architecture (to quote Bruno Zevi), where the central tree of the exhibition space could refer to the pre-architecture of the *Der Weltbaumeister – The World's Master Builder* video, that is, to nature as the first form of shelter from the elements, a reflection of that (only apparent?) chaos which everyone complains about but which is in line with the spirit of adaptation, acceptance and resilience that Rome and its inhabitants have, not just as a survival instinct but as probably the only form of success, not at all utopian and very close to reality.