

# utopia and the project for the city and territory

Luca Velo, Michela Pace eds.

Quello che noi oggi ci dobbiamo domandare è se questa dimensione  
franco ruffinetti e non è stata completamente interpretata

Faremo questo come Italo Calvino con le città invisibili e  
 a questo scopo una serie di "altrove" progetti realizzati e  
 solo progetti. Progetti realizzati e progetti non costruiti  
 un affronzo una fe estremo di un'interazione quella che  
 interazione tra le idee e i fatti tra le nostre pratiche cooper-  
tive e immaginative e le pratiche sociali

"Le città, le spino - ha detto Hamenbach - non sono altro che  
verba / immagini" [quello "spino" non si da alcuna funzione]

- In questo interdetto cerchiamo di entrare con due strategie
- quella degli esempi che mostrano gli dimensioni del necessario  
 e del possibile
  - quella della riflessione teorica, tutte per affronzo fatti  
 e idee funziona richiamate utopia / scienza / mito / ideologia  
~~ideologia~~ utopia / emersione / pratica  
immaginazione

ie of Capalbio beaches, destination of many Roman intellectuals or  
d countryside has completed its nemesis, depriving inhabitants in  
s which have become 'urban' (is the case of Arborea in Sardinia and  
vices for farmers, is now one of the most important towns along the  
'les *lineales* along the coastal roads, where a thriving fruit cultivation  
es (is the case of the same Metaponto plain). Where the countryside  
ri-urbanisation phenomena (supported, once again, by the machine  
is the case of some settlements in Northern Sardinia) or for a rich  
non almost independent from the quality of the project: a superb  
there are not the conditions for a *civitas* which, to quote Heidegger  
abits' a place, 'territorializes' it if there is an *urbs* in which it finds the

I call, in the early '70s, the individualistic mobilization.  
establish cooperatives for processing and marketing.

mpieza *poderale ed il tipo di insediamento*, Ente Maremma, Roma.  
rove *esperienze urbanistiche in Italia*, INU, Roma, pp. 169-206.  
contrôle", *L'Autre Journal*, n. 1, pp. 3-8  
oguerre, Dedalo, Bari.  
thier J., Guiheux A. (eds.), *La ville. Art et architecture en Europe 1870-1993*,  
Pfullingen, pp. 139-156  
*urbanization of the United States*, Oxford U.P., New York.  
lemento a *il Contemporaneo*, n. 11, seconda serie.  
Warburg, London.  
Olivetti A., 2013, *Il mondo che nasce*, Comunità, Roma-Ivrea, pp. 55-72.  
consenso", in Cavazza L., Graubard S.R. (a cura di), *Il caso italiano*, Garzanti,

asabella *continuità*, n. 201, pp. 43-47.  
ea e loro futuri", in Aa.Vv., *I futuri della città. Tesi a confronto*, Franco Angeli,

## The Viennese Terrassenhaus: An Example of a Utopian Reality?

Lorenzo De Chiffre

Recently, a small selected group of internationally renowned architects was invited by the city-owned development agency of Vienna to design a multi-functional building on a prominent site in the Seestadt Aspern district of Vienna<sup>1</sup>. Surprisingly, several of the selected architects proposed using a version of the *Terrassenhaus*. Particularly the Dutch firm Atelier Kempe Thill and the French architects Lacaton & Vassal developed buildings that are strongly reminiscent of the pyramidal designs by Henri Sauvage and Adolf Loos of the 1920s. On one hand, the choice of this stepped building form can be explained in terms of the current zeitgeist. But on the other hand, it also has links to a local discourse that can be traced back to the Red Vienna co-operative housing tradition.

With the aim of better understanding the possibilities, as well as the difficulties, inherent in the original *Terrassenhaus* concept, the following discussion of the type will focus on its development in the urban housing discourse of Vienna, where it has enjoyed a special prominence and has manifested itself in several distinct incarnations over the course of the twentieth century (Blau 2015). Despite its apparent architectural shortcomings it also offers a fusion of nature and urban housing, provides a strong private sphere within a collective structure and allows for the de-densification of the urban tissue without eroding its underlying pattern. This quality is what led to the notion that the *Terrassenhaus* could be considered a built utopia.

To better understand this perspective, three concepts concerning utopia developed in a recent book on the topic by the philosopher Ágnes Heller prove useful. First, Heller asserts that the general notion of a 'utopian construct' is an idea based on segregation and isolation that is best exemplified by the island metaphor often adopted as the locus of historical utopias. She also suggests, however, that a 'utopian reality' is a place somehow related to architecture where people can form a community without giving up their personal freedoms and where moments of happiness can still be enjoyed (Heller 2016, 95). Lastly, the philosopher states that human history can largely be defined by its 'utopian moments'. In the discussion that follows, these ideas are used to interpret the past phases of the Viennese *Terrassenhaus's* development.

### ADOLF LOOS AND THE 'TERRASSENHAUS' AS A 'THEATRE FOR COMMUNAL ACTION'

Unlike Henri Sauvage, who, together with his business partner Charles Sarazin, succeeded in building two famous *immeubles à gradins* in Paris<sup>2</sup>, a building type he is generally credited with having invented, Adolf Loos, who in fact had concurrently developed an equivalent principle, never managed to realise his idea in built form. The only *Terrassenhaus* realised by Loos is Scheu House, built in 1912-13. After World War I, the project's client, lawyer Gustav Scheu, became a member of the social democrat city government and, impressed by Loos' interpretation of Anglo-Saxon domestic culture and garden-city ideals, decided to employ him as Vienna's housing development architect. The early years of the Red Vienna period could be described as a 'utopian moment' in Heller's sense of the term, for self-organised settlements actively supported by the city administration and assisted by the leading architects and sociologists of the time became the basis for a strong co-operative movement.

In opposition to the superblock, a group of architects with Loos among its protagonists formulated an alternative mass-housing model based on the concept of the *Terrassenhaus*. This can be seen as an attempt to embody the

initial concept of the settlers' movement in an intra-urban form<sup>3</sup>. The design by Loos was a transformation of his row-house concept into a stepped multi-storey structure similar to Scheu House with a so-called *Hochstraße* (street in the sky) as its central element. The project's cascading terraces, described by Manfredo Tafuri as "a theatre of collective action, [and as] a scene for the representation of living" (Tafuri 1995, 76), connected the dwellings and the urban fabric in a completely different way than the courtyards of the superblock housing type. Unlike the semi-public landscaped courtyards of the housing blocks, criticised by the historian Eve Blau for confusing "insiders with outsiders" (Blau 1999, 173), Loos' concept envisaged a clearly defined spatial domain wedged in between the public and private realms that could provide a stage for the performance of communal life.

#### URBANISING POST-WAR VIENNA WITH 'HOUSING MOUNTAINS' AND 'GREEN VALLEYS'

One of the main protagonists of the generation of Austrian architects educated after the World War II was *Arbeitsgruppe 4*. In its exhibition project *Wien der Zukunft* of 1964, its architects formulated an urban concept based on a reinterpretation of Otto Wagner's radial city (Wagner 1912). But unlike the urban block interspersed with public squares and civic buildings that Wagner proposed, *Arbeitsgruppe 4* modelled its concept, which it called *Wohnberge* (housing mountains), of a large self-contained courtyard structure with communal facilities in its centre, on a combination of the Karl-Marx-Hof by Karl Ehn and the stepped section of the Loosian *Terrassenhaus*. The *Wohnberge* idea represents one of a pair of principles that has dominated the Viennese discourse on urban development in the post-war era: *Stadterweiterung* (urban extension) and *Stadterneuerung* (urban renewal). The principle of urban extension, which until the early 1970s was, generally speaking, the preferred option, was also the focus of the seminal exhibition *Neue städtische Wohnformen* (New Forms of Urban Housing) mounted by the ÖGFA (Austrian Society for Architecture) in 1966–67 (Hufnagl, Czech 1967). Among all the projects for the urban periphery that it showcased, a relatively unknown one by Hermann Czech in particular chose the existing city as its field of intervention. Czech had developed his project in direct response to the *Wohnberg* idea of *Arbeitsgruppe 4*, applying its principles to urban renewal. He polemically argued that it was feeble to try to 'fabricate' a new form of urbanity on the city periphery when the traditional city's pre-existing fabric was equally in need of attention. Czech designed a detailed reconfiguration of the city that retained the basic block structure. The results could be described as a *grüner Tal* (green valley), demonstrating that the traditional notion of the street could be preserved while introducing a different, landscape-like condition into each urban block in a manner similar to Tafuri's idea of the theatre<sup>5</sup>. In the context of the present discussion, this shift from the *Großform* enclave on the urban periphery to its application within the existing city can be considered a second example of the *Terrassenhaus* as a utopian reality.

84

#### THE VOLUNTARY PRISONERS OF THE 'TERRASSENHAUS'

Of the *Terrassenhaus* projects realised in the 1970s, two of them – both related to the concept of the *Wohnberge* concept – stand out. One is the Am Schöpfwerk project, which was the direct outcome of the aforementioned *Neue städtische Wohnformen* exhibition. If the Am Schöpfwerk project was favoured by the architecture critics but disliked by its inhabitants, the opposite can be said of the other large housing development, the Wohnpark Alt-Erlaa. While architects and critics derided it<sup>6</sup>, the project has emphatically proven itself to be the peoples' choice<sup>7</sup>. The Wohnpark Alt-Erlaa was developed by the city-owned housing agency Gesiba and was designed by a group of 'commercial' architectural firms with Harry Glück as the lead designer. Appropriating the main insights of the discourse on urban housing from the 1960s, the project consists of three housing slabs in which the lower thirteen stories have a stepped section forming the base for between nine and thirteen stories of regular flats on top. The approximately 3,200 dwellings are supported by a large range of social infrastructure. One of the project's most striking features, besides the lush greenery of its park-like landscaping and private terraces, is the provision of swimming pools on

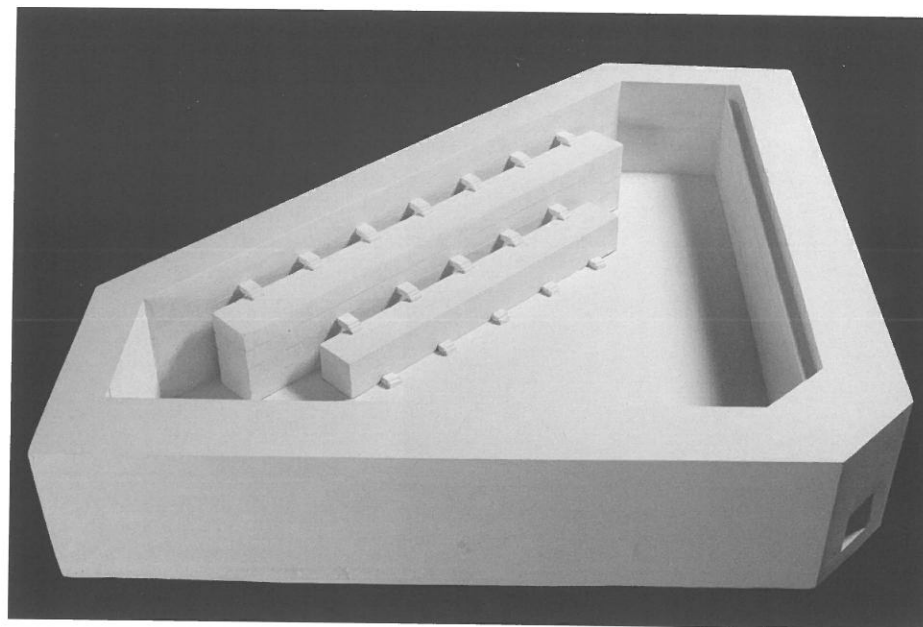
intra-urban form<sup>3</sup>. The design by Loos was a transformation of his structure similar to Scheu House with a so-called *Hochstraße* (street with cascading terraces, described by Manfredo Tafuri as "a theatre of presentation of living" (Tafuri 1995, 76), connected the dwellings and courtyards of the superblock housing type. Unlike the semi-blocks, criticised by the historian Eve Blau for confusing "insiders with outsiders" and "saged a clearly defined spatial domain wedged in between the public and the performance of communal life.

### USING MOUNTAINS' AND 'GREEN VALLEYS'

The position of Austrian architects educated after the World War II was outlined in *Die Stadt der Zukunft* of 1964, its architects formulated an urban concept of a radial city (Wagner 1912). But unlike the urban block interspersed with courtyards Wagner proposed, *Arbeitsgruppe 4* modelled its concept, which it regarded as a large self-contained courtyard structure with communal facilities in its centre, based on the principles by Karl Ehn and the stepped section of the Loosian *Terrassenhaus*. The concept of *Neue Wohnformen* (New Forms of Urban Housing) that has dominated the Viennese discourse on urban extension and *Stadterneuerung* (urban renewal). In the early 1970s was, generally speaking, the preferred option, was also the *Neue Wohnformen* (New Forms of Urban Housing) mounted by the *Arbeitsgruppe 4* (1966–67 (Hufnagl, Czech 1967). Among all the projects for the urban extension, the one by Hermann Czech in particular chose the existing city as its model. It was a project in direct response to the *Wohnberg* idea of *Arbeitsgruppe 4*, which polemically argued that it was feeble to try to 'fabricate' a new form of housing when the additional city's pre-existing fabric was equally in need of attention. The results could be seen in the city that retained the basic block structure. The results could be seen in the city that retained the traditional notion of the street could be preserved and integrated into each urban block in a manner similar to Tafuri's idea of the *Großform* enclave on the urban periphery to be considered a second example of the *Terrassenhaus* as a utopian reality.

### 'TERRASSENHAUS'

In the 1970s, two of them – both related to the concept of the *Wohnberg* project, which was the direct outcome of the aforementioned *Neue Wohnformen* project, which was favoured by the architecture critics but disliked by the other large housing development, the Wohnpark Alt-Erlaa. While the *Wohnberg* project emphatically proven itself to be the peoples' choice<sup>7</sup>. The Wohnpark Alt-Erlaa was designed by the architecture agency Gesiba and was designed by a group of 'commercial' architects. Appropriating the main insights of the discourse on urban extension, it consists of three housing slabs in which the lower thirteen stories have a height of nine and thirteen stories of regular flats on top. The approximately 1000 units of social infrastructure. One of the project's most striking features, which is the provision of swimming pools on the terraces and private terraces,



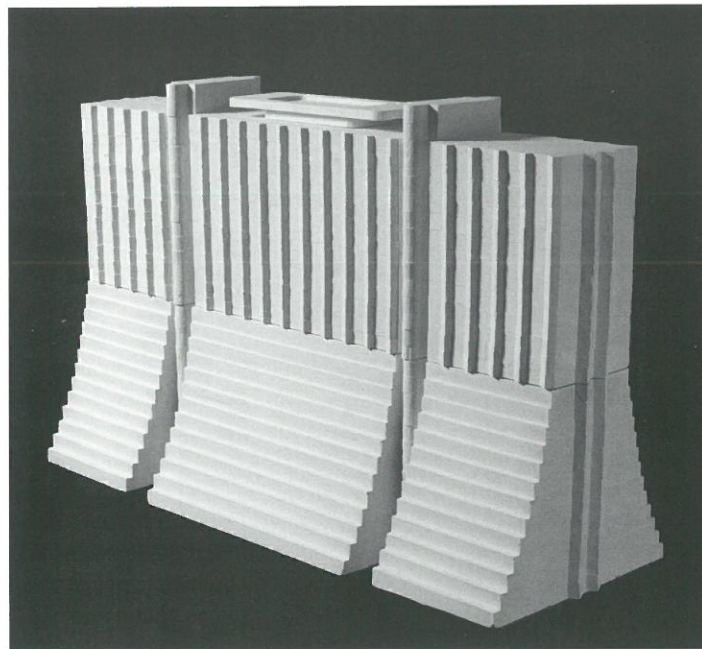
Adolf Loos, *Terrassenhaus* (second version), c. 1923, model by Lorenzo De Chiffre for the exhibition *The Terrassenhaus. A Viennese Fetish?*, Architekturzentrum Wien, 2017. Photo by the author.

the roof tops as well as indoor pools in the 'belly' of the building volume. In comparison with the Am Schöpfwerk project, the selection of tenants, which involved the inhabitants being required to pay a large deposit, was notably more selective (Steiner 1982).

In response to pressure from the client to aim for a high density of inhabitants, Glück and his team collaborated with sociologists and ethnologists (behavioural studies specialists) to create a socially balanced environment. This was not unusual at the time, and the main sociologist consulted, Kurt Freisitzer, had already been part of an experimental *Terrassenhaus* project that had involved the participation of its future inhabitants in Graz<sup>8</sup>. But it could be argued that in the Wohnpark Alt-Erlaa project the function of interdisciplinary teamwork was utilised to provide an unusually stringent anthropological basis for mass housing. This was made economically viable thanks to a very efficient shear-wall construction employing a standardised bay width designed to accommodate the underground car park and to a highly optimised internal-corridor access typology. In summary, the project created a sophisticated 'biotope' for human living that has always enjoyed exceptionally high approval among its residents.

Yet this radical interpretation of what mass housing and urban life should provide also has a cynical side that is clearly recognisable in the ethnological rhetoric cited in support of the concept. Here the biological premise of pre-historic man – a creature conditioned by millennia of life on the savannah and possessing an ingrained desire to live in and according to the social practices of small, herd-like groups, to enjoy distant views and to be close to fresh water and plants – was reinterpreted in a synthetic and mechanistic way. Seen from this perspective, Glück's *Terrassenhaus* concept acquires an anti-urban dystopic quality, for in it a seemingly imposed sense of happiness due to communal living becomes evident, something far removed from the general ideal of free civic life.

In this context, a comparison with the early seminal project *Exodus, or the Voluntary Prisoners of Architecture* by Rem Koolhaas in collaboration with Elia Zenghelis from 1971-72 seems justifiable<sup>9</sup>. The speculative project by Koolhaas



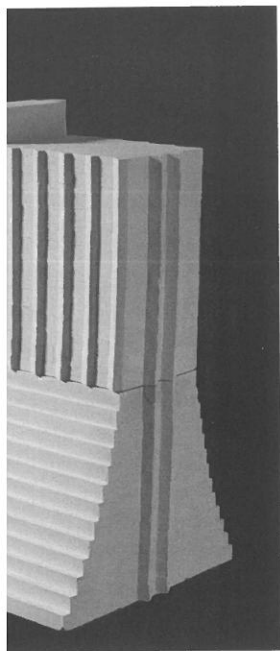
Harry Glück and Partners, Wohnpark Alt-Erlaa, 1969 / 1973-85, model by Lorenzo De Chiffre for the exhibition *The Terrassenhaus. A Viennese Fetish?*, Architekturzentrum Wien, 2017 ©. Photo by the author.

and Zenghelis, which was inspired by the Berlin Wall interpreted as absolute architecture, comprises a walled "strip" of nine large programmatic fields cutting through central London and containing "intense metropolitan desirability" in a condensed form as an alternative to the "old city". Elements such as "the baths," for "testing and possible introduction of new forms of behaviour", and "the allotments," for "recover[ing] in privacy from the demands the intense collectivism and communal way of life make on them" (Sigler 1995, 2-21), as well as other recreational facilities provide a synthetic and highly choreographed environment whose aim is to manipulate the subconscious of its 'voluntary prisoners'. In the project, the remaining city, which progressively turns into a ghost town as the walled 'strip' slices through the urban territory, becomes a picturesque ruin (Koolhaas, Zenghelis et al. 1972).

All of these features of the project are conspicuously similar to the built reality of the Wohnpark Alt-Erlaa, which also functions as a self-contained, potentially extendable enclave in which the inhabitants are said to be so pleased with their lives that for long periods of time they don't even leave the complex (Seiß 2014). Seen from this perspective, it could be argued that the utopian element is inherent in the *Terrassenhaus* concept, for which it provides the basis for proposing a segregated enclave that is dangerously similar to the description of Koolhaas' dystopia.

The intention of this discussion is not to belittle the success of the Wohnpark Alt-Erlaa. To sustain such a high level of outspoken support over the entire course of its forty-year existence is an indisputable achievement.

But in spite of this project's singular success, can such an anti-urban concept be justified as a model for the future development of cities more generally? The question is, in fact, currently being debated by the top levels of Vienna's city administration. As seen in the examples by Adolf Loos and Hermann Czech, the *Terrassenhaus* building type can be used in a way that allows it to embed itself in the existing urban fabric, working with rather than against what is there already, whilst simultaneously providing a range of different spatial solutions and thereby expanding



Harry Glück and Partners, Wohnpark Alt-Erlaa, 1969 / 1973-85, model by Lorenzo De Chiffre for the exhibition *The Terrassenhaus. A Viennese Fetish?*, Architekturzentrum Wien, 2017 ©. Photo by the author.

lin Wall interpreted as absolute architecture, comprises a walled "strip" through central London and containing "intense metropolitan desirability" like the "old city". Elements such as "the baths," for "testing and possible recreation," and "the allotments," for "recover[ing] in privacy from the demands of the modern life make on them" (Sigler 1995, 2-21), as well as other recreational and social spaces, are part of a planned environment whose aim is to manipulate the subconscious of the inhabitants, turning the walled city into a ghost town as the walled city becomes a picturesque ruin (Koolhaas, Zenghelis et al. 1972). This concept is closely similar to the built reality of the Wohnpark Alt-Erlaa, which also represents a defensible enclave in which the inhabitants are said to be so pleased with their environment that they don't even leave the complex (Seiß 2014). Seen from this perspective, it is inherent in the *Terrassenhaus* concept, for which it provides the basis for a concept dangerously similar to the description of Koolhaas' dystopia. The success of the Wohnpark Alt-Erlaa. To sustain such a high level of quality of life, can such an anti-urban concept be justified as a model for the future? The question is, in fact, currently being debated by the top levels of Vienna's government. As by Adolf Loos and Hermann Czech, the *Terrassenhaus* building type developed itself in the existing urban fabric, working with rather than against the grain, providing a range of different spatial solutions and thereby expanding

the morphological repertoire of urban housing. Through this approach, the sociological aspect of the *Terrassenhaus* remains an integral part of the overall concept, but it no longer inhibits the building type's other, subtler features from unfolding.

As mentioned at the beginning of this article, Ágnes Heller ends her recent essay *Von der Utopie zur Dystopie* with the surprising suggestion that contemporary architecture is where 'utopian reality' can be found today. This brief discussion of the *Terrassenhaus* has shown that there is a crucial difference between what Heller calls a philosophically constructed utopia, with its inherent totalitarian connotations (i.e., the projects by *Arbeitsgruppe 4* and Harry Glück), and the spatial notion of a 'utopian reality' as a stage for communal living (i.e., the projects by Adolf Loos and Hermann Czech) that can be encouraged by the architectural development of the *Terrassenhaus* concept. The derivation of both of these fundamentally opposed results from the application of the *Terrassenhaus* type warn us to be cautious and alert when confronted with the concept's employment as a wholesale solution for urban housing today.

#### Notes:

1. The architects' projects were exhibited in a show entitled *asperm INTERNATIONAL* at the Architekturzentrum Wien from 12 June to 24 August 2015.
2. The projects are located in rue Vavin (1912–13) and rue des Amiraux (1913–30).
3. Two different designs by Adolf Loos as well as a large building complex by Oskar Strnad, none of which were realised, are the only known examples.
4. Its members included Wilhelm Holzbauer, Friedrich Kurrent and Johannes Spalt.
5. This concept had been studied in principle in an earlier project called *Valley City* by Hans Hollein for Manhattan in 1960/64.
6. Two examples are the architect Roland Rainer and the architecture critic Friedrich Achleitner.
7. The project has scored the highest levels for user satisfaction in several sociological studies over the years, including independent studies from 1978, 1983 and 2004.
8. The project was designed by Werkgruppe Graz in 1967/1972-78.
9. The project was originally designed in the autumn of 1971 for a competition entitled *La città come ambiente significativa* held by *Casabella* (Gargiani 2008, 6-7).

#### REFERENCES

- Blau E., 1999, *The architecture of Red Vienna, 1919–1934*, The MIT Press, Cambridge Massachusetts.
- Blau E., 2015, "From Red Superblock to Green Megastructure: Municipal Socialism as Model and Challenge, Swenarton", in Avermaete M., Heuvel T., Blau E. (eds.), *Architecture and the welfare state*, Routledge, New York, pp. 27-49.
- Gargiani R., 2008, *Rem Koolhaas | OMA: The construction of Merveilles*, EPFL Press, Lausanne.
- Heller Á., 2016, *Von der Utopie zur Dystopie: Was können wir uns wünschen?*, Edition Konturen, Vienna.
- Hufnagl V., Czech H., 1967, *Neue städtische Wohnformen: Ausstellung, Veranstaltet von der Österreichischen Gesellschaft für Architektur, Vienna*.
- Seiß R. (ed.), 2014, *Harry Glück: Wohnbauten*, Mury Salzmann, Salzburg and Vienna.
- Koolhaas R., Zenghelis E., 1972, "Exodus, or the voluntary prisoners of architecture. Architectural Association, London", in Sigler J. (ed.), 1995, *S,M,L,XL; Small, Medium, Large, Extra-Large OMA (Office for Metropolitan Architecture, Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau)*, O10 Publishers, Rotterdam, pp. 2-21.
- Steiner D., 1982, "Erschöpftes Schöpfwerk – Die wichtigste Wohnanlage Wiens ist seit Jahren unbeachtet", *Die Presse*, 8 July.
- Tafuri M., 1995, *Vienna rossa: La politica residenziale nella Vienna socialista, 1919–1933*, Electa, Milano.
- Wagner O., 1912, "The Development of a Great City", *The Architectural Record*, n. 31, pp. 485-500.

- Q1** **Scenari**, a cura di Maria Chiara Tosi
- Q2** **New Territories**, a cura di Paola Viganò
- Q3** **Comment vivre ensemble**, a cura di Paola Pellegrini e Paola Viganò
- Q4** **Storie del futuro**, di Paolo Bozzuto, Andrea Costa, Lorenzo Fabian, Paola Pellegrini
- Q5** **Landscapes of urbanism**, a cura di Viviana Ferrario, Angelo Sampieri, Paola Viganò
- Q6** **The Next Urban Question**, a cura di Valentina Bandieramonte, Chiara Cavaliere, Irene Guida, Kaveh Rashidzadeh
- Q7** **Suolo**, a cura di Monica Bianchettin Del Grano
- Q8** **Bernardo Secchi. Libri e piani**, a cura di Cristina Renzoni e Maria Chiara Tosi
- Q9** **Utopia and the Project for the City and Territory**, a cura di Luca Velo e Michela Pace

utopia and the project for the city and territory

utopia and the project  
 Andrea Cavalletti  
 Daniele Vazquez P  
 of Bernardo Secchi  
 postmodern dysto  
 the farm as a hob  
 architecture Cami  
 rhetoric for place  
 the age of metacit  
 utopias in Italy aft  
 of a utopian reali  
 Tessenow's urban  
 subjects that urba  
 and the analogous  
 Carlo Pisano • utop  
 networks for terri  
 utopia Qinyi Zhan  
 uncertain utopia L  
 design Eliana Mar  
 to the contempora  
 imaginaries for a s  
 a vision for the me

ISBN 9788860492920



9 788860 492920

On cover: detail from Bernardo Secchi's preparatory notes for a cycle of lessons about the role of Utopia in Urbanism (November-December 1991). Courtesy of Annacarla, Maralessandra and Piercesare Secchi, p. 117.