

## SPACES, POETICS AND VOIDS

Simone Pizzagalli

### Abstract:

In this paper, the term 'void' is understood as either an absence circumscribed by a boundary or a discrete area typified by disclosed, overlapping signs and traces. In the former case, the void constitutes an undefined, empty and disconnected otherness; in the latter, the void is recognised as an irrational superposition of fragments open to interpretation and inseparable from the formal development of its accommodating structure. By referring to the work of Fontana and Matta-Clark, it is argued that the void as a technique always involves the action of cutting. Additionally, as in Pasolini's literary interpretation of cinematography, which by framing and sequencing offers a twofold interpretation of reality, the architectural project interprets the city (as void) and synthesises the fragmentary elements of its language into a readable representation (of reality) by achieving formal compositions. The concepts of void, framing and sequence thus acquire a specific value in reference to the spatial narration and its formal outcome.

Key words: void, narration, borders, traces, framing, sequence

A void can be regarded as a representation of an absence, if not an absence itself, as I mentioned when describing the 1666 map of London. In opposition and in relation to the concept of space, the void as a concept is understood to be a feature with distinct characteristics that allow the development of architectural form. A void is also a tool for analysing the structure that contains it; in this particular case, London's urban context and history. This process of analysis introduces the possibility of establishing a formal, architectural narration of the city in which an understanding of the void can be used as the main tool in assisting this process.

From a formal, representational point of view, the perception of the void as something absent, missing or even invisible, is possible simply by delineating its limits within a containing structure and identifying the presence of a number of traces dispersed in close proximity to it. These two elements - boundaries and traces - are therefore helpful in circumscribing what is rather difficult to define. Boundaries and traces both constitute parts of formal compositions and spatial structures that are generated and understandable outside the realm of the perceived void.

In the first interpretation, where the void is perceived due to the existence of a boundary, it is accommodated within an existing formal structure, which enables it to be distinguished by the emergence of borders between matter and nothingness. This more conceptual understanding of the notion of void can be found in several examples of formal interpretation developed in art, and in its intentional or coincidental application in large-scale systems, such as the modern city<sup>1</sup> The very limits and borders that give 'shape' to our perception of the void are nothing other than constituent parts of that same containing structure. The void mirrors, as a negative presence, a given spatial set of elements and relations, creating a tension that not only explicates the creation of the border but also precipitates the desire to complete the disassembled and fragmented part of the structure. In the map of London a tension is established between the erased area and the surviving metropolitan fabric, where the border itself becomes a clear and stark element of transition, an osmotic membrane between what exists and what is missing, between life and death, movement and stillness, certainty and possibility. The boundary constitutes the condition for the void, and the urban structure that accommodates it, to be fully perceived and understood as parts of the same spatial narration.<sup>2</sup>

The void is therefore the negation of the form in which it is contained due to the interposition of a border that somehow becomes more important than the elements it separates. The attention of the viewer looking at the map, and thus probing the consequences of the Great Fire on London's urban fabric, is diverted in the first instance to this boundary, creating a state of confusion and anxiety about the representation of the two opposites. In the second instance, the city structure surrounding the void can be analysed in order to understand the formal characteristics of the void itself, which leads to a rational understanding

of the functioning and constituent elements of the accommodating system, as well as addressing the need for some kind of formal continuity in the interrupted composition. Therefore the sense of uneasiness and estrangement that a viewer experiences initiates an understanding of the accommodating structure (in this case the city of London), its form, the essential meanings of its existence, and its constituent elements and relationships. At the same time, this awareness allows the irrational revelation of infinite possible ways in which the gap might be filled, the structure completed. The threads stretched between the material world and human life within the metropolis are again ready to be woven into a new composition. The clarification of 'what was there' and 'what is still there' is a premise for constructing 'what could be there' in the void. The boundary is the entry point for this process of analysis, composition and re-composition; the vanished parts of the structure are understood notwithstanding their absence and are substituted by an unlimited set of potential formal compositions gathered from intuition, memory and imagination.

In the second interpretation, where the void is perceived and identified through the disclosure of a set of traces, the situation differs from the first in that these fragments are involved in potentially new interpretations of the accommodating structure or system. If the presence of the void, understood as an element that either creates or is circumscribed by a boundary separating matter from nothingness, does not allow for the complete reconstruction of the formal values of the accommodating space - given that the latter has been ruptured and broken and so is no longer intelligible as a structure - then the void is conceivable as an assemblage of traces that permeate both entities. Both the void and its accommodating structure reveal interrelating patterns of elements and fragments that are intrinsic to understanding and interpreting their forms.

Small-scale voids and erasures in the city fabric fall under this second category, together with the idea of the city as a large-scale system evolving in time and space and therefore producing overlaps and discrepancies within its form. Voids that occur in the city, whether on a small or large scale, can become part of a process of disclosure whereby layers and fragments belonging to different periods and spaces are revealed. The varying degrees of scale and speed typical of this evolutionary process inform us about the condition of the city as a permanently changing system. The emergence of small-scale deletions, forgotten spaces, temporary voids, gaps and small marginal areas in the metropolis is the result of a process of formal changes occurring over time. Such transformations do not always seamlessly substitute established forms with new ones. Economical, political and social choices, private and public endeavours, visions and utopias, temporary events, history, war, etc. are all involved in shaping the urban fabric, thus producing formal and structural changes that result in spaces clashing, overlapping or substituting one another in a sort of continuous collage of systems. The marginal areas discussed here, the small gaps and interruptions, are residual evidence of this process of overlapping; they become hosts to an accumulation of fragments belonging to the remote and complex history of a place. Once again referring to Hollar's map of London, an example of this condition is the impressive and intriguing set of traces incorporated in the representation of London after the fire, in which, as I indicated, both the lines and the remaining buildings are part of a kind of non-literal reconstruction of the city's previous form.

This interpretation shows how the void can be understood not simply as something blank or abstract, as was the case in the analysis of its boundary discussed above, but as a real and concrete composition of actual fragments belonging to its accommodating structure. The void becomes a place of formal recollection emerging out of unclear and incomplete parts that are impossible to interpret and understand and thus remain mute. This silence is what distinguishes a void from an empty space. The absence of any rational and conclusive formal value is a sign of the rich potential and profound otherness of the void. Its capacity to evoke analogous meanings and forms in our memory and imagination<sup>3</sup> defines a void as an excavation into all the possible formal overlapping interpretations of a space, whether realised or hypothetical.

Therefore a void can either be understood as an absence circumscribed by a boundary, or as a discrete area typified by disclosed, overlapping signs and traces. In the former case, the void constitutes an undefined, empty and disconnected otherness; in the latter, the absence is tangible as something inseparable from the formal development of its accommodating structure. The first interpretation sees the void as an element mirroring reality, revealing how it is composed and assembled, and

disclosing its formal characteristics through the definition of boundaries and absence, whereas the second interpretation of the void acknowledges the complexity of its accommodating structure, recognising the void as an irrational superimposition of fragments, open to interpretation. Both points of view define the relationships that occur between silence and a structured and formalised grammar of elements.

### THE VOID AS A TECHNIQUE

A void can be the result of a voluntary act that establishes a number of complex spatial relationships and formal consequences; or, conversely, it can be the accidental outcome of a specific form or act of representation. A void may be the consequence of a process of subtraction or erasure, destruction or cutting. For artists Lucio Fontana and Gordon Matta-Clark, the void represented part of their artistic practice since it constitutes a specific formal approach to the idea of absence and its spatial, conceptual representation. The void as a technique involves precise procedures that are relatively similar and always involve the action of cutting. As an act that creates a void, the cut in Fontana's case aims to violate and reveal specific spatial qualities of matter, whereas in the work of Matta-Clark the aim is the preservation of the qualities found in the city and in complex architectural compositions.<sup>4</sup>

Fontana challenged the concept of pictorial surface by physically cutting it and therefore literally creating a rupture, a void, as a 'spatial concept', transforming the flat monochrome surface of what was simply a canvas into something completely different. The margins of the cuts bent and curved towards the created voids, turning a flat surface into a three-dimensional object. This act of cutting triggers a completely new and unexpected set of relationships between the edge of the cut, the surface, and the dark mysterious inner space behind and beyond it. Acknowledging the materiality of the canvas reveals its concrete and tangible nature and the specific spatial relationships happening between its surface and the perimeter of the cut. The complex system of meanings, spatial relations and mythical evocations set up in the resulting piece of art are all woven together in an act performed in space and time. This performance and its constituent elements have been captured in a sequence of photos<sup>5</sup> that show Fontana slowly approaching the canvas, studying the surface, choosing a spot and cutting the material with precision and an awareness of the pressure, position and trajectory of himself as the cutter. The sequence of images tells us not only about the composition of the freshly created spatial relations on the white surface, but also how the voids are bound to time and space and, most importantly, how the action of the artist takes place at a precise instant, with a deliberate and determined sequence of movements, and is then frozen in time and space.

Matta-Clark cut buildings that were either destined to be demolished or substituted. For him and the group of artists involved in this kind of intervention on real objects '[...] Cutting is an act of conservation. Cutting an anonymous building means preserving it forever, and with it the life of the persons who were living there.' (Richard Nonas). The buildings were not only preserved, but also rendered even more precise in terms of their spatial characteristics, scale, presence in the city, 'inside versus outside' relationship, construction and use. This type of cut can be considered as a formalist act of estrangement<sup>6</sup> from the object's specific form and function: the artist provides an entry point to an understanding of the object-building, revealing part of its hidden elements, drawing attention to the inside spaces by making them visible from the outside, and reducing them to a non-usable composition of spaces. The cut reveals the complexity of the volumes through a new and unexpected perspective, transforming the object's 'good form', as Umberto Eco described it in his book *The Open Work*; namely, the static, perfect shape that satisfies the mind and the aesthetic perception of the viewer. The cut becomes a source of stimuli for the mind and the imagination. It starts a process of assemblage using different sets of information gathered from the object, composing these into new surreal forms, and imagining stories unfolding within the boundaries of this newly created void. The geometrically shaped voids are apprehended as even more substantial elements than the building itself: they seem to be recognised and formalised in the viewer's mind even before s/he becomes conscious of the construction materials the building is made of, the spaces it once contained, the relationships between these or their former use. The voids become sites where meanings originate, places where the history and myths of the building can be unfolded and understood. As I said at the beginning of this essay with reference to the map of the Great Fire of

London, this recognition of the formal and historical explanatory quality of the void can be compared with the analytic reading and recomposition of a structure via the perception of the void. Hence the void within the urban fabric is simultaneously a manifestation of the formal values of the now interrupted city structure, and a collector of new narratives to complete it. A similar process towards imaginative completeness can be observed when the mind becomes lost in the poetic 'de-collage' of partially demolished buildings found within the complexity of a metropolis, with their exposed traces of everyday use, the memories and residue of family talks, echoing words, mealtimes and sleep in spaces that were once kitchens and bedrooms but are now perceived as almost unrecognisable fragments of a multidimensional past.

Matta-Clark's interest in emptiness and voids was not limited to cutting openings into existing structures, it also included research related to abandonment and forgetting within city structures and daily routines: '[...] we were more interested, from a metaphorical point of view, in voids, gaps, abandoned spaces, undeveloped places, etc. For example the places where you stop to tie your shoes, places that are interrupting your everyday movements.' For the An-architecture<sup>7</sup> group of artists, collecting, intervening in, and preserving those spaces from disappearance, drawing them into a structured artistic representation, was a way of proposing a critical alternative to the commonly accepted concepts of architecture, urban planning and the American myth of land ownership. At the same time, this interest led them to conduct experiments that produced new forms of representation and interpretation of the emptiness of those forgotten and fragmented places in the city.<sup>8</sup> This approach, which considered metropolitan leftover spaces as important idiosyncratic elements within the structure of the urban fabric, was, despite the novelty and polemical nature of the intervention, more similar to an act of editing aimed at stimulating public awareness about the subject in hand, than an actual project to reconstruct formal meanings in the city. The spaces were re-presented, juxtaposed, but never really subject to a compositional or formal interpretation. As for other works by Matta-Clark - especially his photographic representation of the acts of cutting - the work of art was translated into yet another new one, this time made of paper, texts, images, and collaged assortments of information. The work became subject to a journalistic 'reportage' and, as it became part of an information and narration process, it became something different, estranged from its own original physical presence: something independent, though similarly doomed to disappear without any capacity to transform reality.

Several other examples can be given, albeit partial and inconclusive ones, on how the void may be expressed as a negation, an accumulation of traces, or an erasure of an existing structure, as well as how, in more architectonic terms, this concept of absence can be embodied by a spatial composition of elements (and therefore positively, in the sense of 'constructing an absence'). The Cemetery of San Cataldo in Modena designed by Aldo Rossi is exemplary in its opposition of void and space and the way these are taken into account in a complex and articulated public building. Both Aldo Rossi in his *Scientific Autobiography*, and Rafael Moneo in the interpretative essay 'Aldo Rossi: The Idea of Architecture and the Modena Cemetery', describe part of the building as an example of an architecture and a spatial composition aimed at expressing an absence; namely, the expressive power of lifeless spaces where time is suspended, where relationships are no longer possible and where memories are represented in the silent, hollow and lonely spaces of the cemetery buildings. The representation of the idea of loss and absence is embodied in the composition of the architecture, which is based on references capable of generating both memories and feelings of abandonment and emptiness. For the Italian architect, the 'empty house' exemplifies a building where any ongoing personal narration is impossible, but where traces of past events and human interaction are still visible. In the Modena cemetery, Rossi is referring to '[...] the Roman Tomb of the Baker, an abandoned factory, an empty house.' In these kinds of buildings, spaces are empty and unused yet filled with traces of events that happened at various times in the past, and whose characteristics, qualities and unfolding within the spatial composition we can only try to imagine, while remaining unable to understand or be part of them. For Rossi, this is especially true when a house has been abandoned, when personal stories have ended unresolved, or when someone has died: 'I also saw death in the sense of "no one lives here any more" and hence as regret, since we do not know what our relations with this person were, and yet we still search for him in

some way.'

The central building of the Modena cemetery is therefore the bearer of meanings of loss and detachment, but also of expectation, and a tension straining towards something tangible yet not completely intelligible - where the possibility of a completed narration is negated, and so instead is represented by suspended and surreal spaces. Lack and absence are the ingredients of a composition imbued with profound meanings and capable of explicating them in a truly spatial and architectural way. In Fontana's work or the instance of the Great Fire of London, a void can be either the result of a deliberate action or an accidental event; or again, as in Rossi's cemetery, it may be determined by a composition that is able to represent, in an analogous way, the same meanings and formal consequences as the more direct, interpretative action of cut and rupture.

Several artists have developed their own techniques and skills to stretch the potential of the language of art toward the border between matter and absence, sound and silence, or language and a random juxtaposition of words.<sup>9</sup> Though not directly related to this topic, a relevant example of an intervention situated between land art, architecture and art is the famous *Cretto* by Alberto Burri, completed in the village of Gibellina (Sicily) in 1984.<sup>10</sup> By applying the technique of the *cretto*,<sup>11</sup> the artist created a sculpture in the form of a vast spatial composition that people can physically experience and explore. In this way, the work of land art not only becomes a monument and thus a memory of a collective emotional state or event (the calamity of the earthquake that destroyed the village in 1968), but also a new set of interpretable elements, volumes and spaces that have been detached in a specific way from their former use. The concrete volumes and the chasms between them become a silent reminder of urban life, the visualisation of an absence that underlines the relationships between the urban fabric and its streets, since the limited height of the blocks allows visitors to walk both between and on top of them, thus emphasising the invisible relationship between a home's interior environment, now destroyed, and the village's public spaces. The composition allows the entire village to be viewed at a glance: a desolate space where events can be imagined to happen again within the frozen memory of a complex structure of forms and relationships.

As the examples above illustrate, making a cut can be regarded as an act that turns a number of formally defined spatial relationships into a temporal state of potentialities, while simultaneously maintaining them in a state of abstract otherness. The cut freezes the meanings and formal qualities of a space and its collected temporal layers of narratives, while opening them up to new interpretations in both a conceptual and physical way. The act of cutting and the creation of an absence, both characterised by the disclosure of a set of traces and non-interpretable fragments and boundaries, can therefore be considered a point of connection between the concepts of void and space. The action of cutting is a technique that allows the formal relationship between an absence and a defined space to occur and become tangible, mediated (as it was for Fontana) by a deliberate, interpretative act performed to alter reality. This act can be recorded as a sequence of operations, an ordered and precise syntax of steps that allows these formal relations to be achieved, culminating in a suspension of sense or non-sense that will form the basis for a new construction of meaning. This syntax,<sup>12</sup> established through a sequence - a collection of moments, movements and fragments, arranged according to defined, though arbitrary motivations - permits the creation of a continuity of elements which, within the same sequence, the same narrative logic, and in the created or acknowledged void, will make room for the development of form. Beyond the deconstructive intention of using the technique of cutting to create an absence and expose a set of fragments, a further, more complex construction of sense is possible: the narration of forms and meanings within a spatial interpretation of reality, as occurs in Rossi's cemetery. Space once again becomes the repository of a narrative of forms and spatial relationships; the architectural project constitutes the tangible element that re-establishes a meaning within the chaos of the metropolis, a meaning situated somewhere between interpretation and preservation, void and space, form and fragmentation.

## FRAMING

Pier Paolo Pasolini gives his own precise reading to the idea of framing in cinematography, extending it to include a more general interpretation of reality as a language. For Pasolini, the act of framing<sup>13</sup> is an intentional ordering of the parts

that constitute reality in order to communicate a specific meaning. The film director and poet associated reality and cinematography with language and writing, whereby reality represents the 'oral' equivalent of what cinema formalises into a normative, 'written' language. Therefore one could say that reality shares its roots with spoken language since both are determined by factors such as place, time, history, traditions, habits, regionalism, etc. Cinema, understood as a written language formalised into syntactical structures, notational compositions of elements and a grammar, selects and organises elements that are spontaneous and unfiltered in the real world. Selecting specific elements in order to film them is already an interpretative representation of reality. The film frame is the boundary within which the selected object and spaces are organised in a delimited field of existence, either included or excluded from the image. Pasolini states that we cannot disregard the fact that reality hosts a multiplicity of objects present in countless compositions and relationships to one another. This fact renders the task of selecting and composing objects within a frame ambiguous and delicate since the corpus of their relationships will always transcend the boundary.

Every composition of objects within a film frame assumes a specific meaning engendered by the combination of selected elements and their associative relationships. An important aspect of this interpretation is that reality is already considered as a non-formalised language in whose infinite variety of compositions and forms the content of cinema is rooted. The role of the 'individual' within this constellation is not only that of 'actor', an 'object' that affects reality in combination with other objects and forces, but also that of 'spectator': an external and independent viewer. The elements selected in the framing process are subsequently involved in a further composition, that of sequencing<sup>14</sup> all the single frames in an ordered linear structure, connecting them to each other according to syntactical and grammatical rules. The composition of cinematographic language is therefore articulated on two levels: first, the single frame, and then the sequence achieved by the technique of montage.

The specifics of Pasolini's linguistic interpretation will not be considered here, but two further concepts are important in clarifying a narrative interpretation of architectural composition. Firstly, the act of sequencing not only enables a linear composition of elements, but also the formulation of complex and unexpected meanings and formal statements. Secondly, the film frames remain incomplete and insignificant when separate and unrelated, whereas they acquire a new narrative dimension and sense when arranged in a composition.<sup>15</sup> Framing, editing and arranging the framed material in a sequence is a synthetic process that affects the language of reality, and transforms it into something that Rossi has defined as 'analogous' to reality itself; namely, a meaningful representation that has the same characteristics and qualities as reality but produces completely new formal results.

Given this interpretation of the concepts of framing and editing, it is possible to relate the idea of space to Pasolini's theory about the cinematographic representation of the language of reality. Space can be considered as a narrative composition of elements: by definition, the three-dimensional repository of objects, events, memories, people and their reciprocal relationships. Space constitutes the inhabited realm wherein these elements, objects, relationships and memories exist. The city is where spaces of different types and qualities are organised according to a given logic and in a syntactical manner, namely through a process of selection and the creation of clearly defined boundaries within which the formal composition of the parts and their sequencing is possible. This in turn leads to the narration of forms that express a specific meaning.

The construction of a basic alphabet of forms and relationships, arrived at through an analysis of the urban context, allows for the composition of complex formal sentences, which can then be organised and sequenced into spatial narratives. The city can be imagined as a written text with the characteristics and nuances of an oral language expressed through the transformation and composition of spaces by human actions. According to this interpretation, Pasolini argued that one of the primary languages of man is constituted by the impulse to transform reality, an act that both reconstructs the world and represents to other people the inclinations of the 'individual' acting on reality. Political, physical and economic actions therefore include shaping spaces and creating relationships between objects, forms and meanings in the city. This transformation unfolds over time within a process of addition, substitution and overlapping, and in doing so produces discrepancies,

fragments and erasures within an existing urban fabric, thus obstructing the formulation of one unique, absolute and indisputable spatial narrative that can encompass the totality of the urban form.

The language of the city is established by spaces that express only partial and inconclusive meanings, and are constituted by indefinable fragments, voids, and more complex formal compositions. The architectural project is the point of synthesis for this raw language, it is the discipline that presupposes the existence of these elements and composes them into a readable representation, namely, a formalised 'written' interpretation of reality. Just as Pasolini interpreted the synthesis of cinematographic language as a representation of reality capable of expressing some of the latter's otherwise undecipherable meanings, so, in the same way, the architectural project provides a normative, readable construction of the indeterminate realm of parts and fragments that make up the city. This process of formal composition is articulated on two levels, similar to the way Pasolini describes it in his interpretation of cinematographic language. The first level is the one in which materials, objects, forms and spaces are selected from within the realm of the city. Then, as in the 'framing' described above, boundaries are traced in a process that encloses the chosen spaces and objects with the aim of expressing partial, though meaningful formal compositions. Subsequently, these compositions are arranged into sequences, characterised by their ability to express unexpected meanings that unfold in new and more complex spatial narratives.

On the basis of this interpretation, the evolution of the city form can be understood in reverse. As I previously mentioned, social, economical and political forces continually stimulate the evolution and transformation of the urban fabric. The composition of completely new spatial narratives, derived from what Pasolini described as the twofold process of interpretation and reconstruction of the raw language of reality, interacts with this evolutionary process and constitutes one of the main factors in the transformation of urban form. In fact, the autonomous architectural object that results from a process of spatial narration can be regarded as both the consequence and the cause of the transformation of the socio-political and economical premises at the base of the actual construction of the city. Architecture that is the result of a clear syntactical composition of parts rooted in reality is able to restore the urban fabric and its inner logic, and at the same time influence social, political and economical changes.

## **NARRATIVES<sup>16</sup>**

The process of framing, composing and sequencing the materials available in the urban realm in order to define complex formal narratives is only possible when all the constituent parts, characteristics and relationships that make up the urban context are understood and visible. This can only be achieved by creating a representation. The difficulty in constructing architecture that corresponds to a meaningful formal interpretation of the urban fabric is due to the lack of adequate representational tools for interpreting the urban elements involved in the architectural composition and, paradoxically, not to the actual technical realisation of the architectural artefact itself. The relationship between the architectural object and its representation lies in the differences between realisation and imagination, reality and utopia, written language and drawing, the act of composition and the analytical process.<sup>17</sup>

A distance separates the architectural artefact from its analogous image, which has been drawn within the complexity of two-dimensional notational languages. The apparent fictional character of the unrealised architecture opposes its actual material form, unexpectedly making the image more influential and specific than the completed construction itself. In his essay 'The Flatness of Depth' John Hejduk wrote that for the spectator 'the most profound confrontation of all' with a representation of an architectural object 'takes place' in front of a photograph of the architecture when 'the mind of the observer is heightened to an extreme, exorcising out from a single fixed photographic image all its possible sensations and meanings - a fragment of time suspended, a recapturing of the very image that has been photographed.' In other words, as if the mere act of excluding a part of reality from a composition presented on a static framed surface could invest the image with more impact, power and clarity than the real object itself. However, despite the evocative power of a single photograph, it is impossible to convey all the qualities and characteristics of a spatial composition in a single image. No single, invariable representation can contain the meaningful overlapping of the different interpretative levels of the urban fabric,

its complex physical unfolding and construction, and the history of its evolution into a specific form. Hejduk described how a truthful representation of a building or a space is impossible and will always be limited to compositions of two-dimensional fragments and partial representations (schemas, pictures, drawings) organised as far as possible to be consistent with the original. He stated that a representation is in itself already an architectural reality,<sup>18</sup> and concluded that a three-dimensional entity can only be represented as a composition of discrete, two-dimensional elements and parts. The intuition that gives rise to an architectural form is just as fragmentary as any of its representations, and both architecture and representation are generated by means of a specific notational system. If it is impossible to understand reality as a whole, as Aldo Rossi concluded in *A Scientific Autobiography*, then what is left is a form of relativity expressed by means of a sequence of partial and inconclusive truths.<sup>19</sup>

One can also argue that an entity can be understood and represented only when removed from its context, when it becomes 'other than itself'. The process of making meaningful architecture in an urban context evolves by arranging the city's constituent parts into a formalised sequence, so that relationships are created within a fundamental formal discourse. In his essay 'Observations on the Long Take' ('Osservazioni sul piano-sequenza', [1967]) Pasolini argues that if reality is something we experience as temporally present, then cinema renders these realities as something past and concluded. 'Only the facts that have already happened can be coordinated and thus acquire a sense [...] it is therefore necessary to die, because as long as we live we lack sense, [...] and it is not possible to translate the language of our life, which is a chaos of possibilities, an endless search for relations and meanings.' Therefore, only within a narration, the act of telling a story by coordinating and sequencing some elements into a plot, is it possible to separate reality from itself and understand it objectively. To paraphrase Pasolini: narration is the act of converting the present into something belonging to the past, thus making both time frames comprehensible and able to be represented. Representation in this context is intended as a process that implies a logic, a grammar and a syntactical structure of sequenced materials. As I said earlier, the specificity of Pasolini's approach to representation and visual narration lies in the way he sees the process as comprising a first stage, which entails the selection and organisation of reality into sequenced frames, and a second, editorial phase, which requires the syntactical correlation of the parts. In this regard it is important to note that a narration achieved through framing and editing is different from a process whereby reality is reproduced through a mere bricolage and juxtaposition of elements unable to transcend their actual fragmentation.

If editing is understood as a linguistic tool that coordinates different elements selected from reality, in the way that montage is for Pasolini, then it is part of a process aimed at a synthetic representation of reality, but a reality removed from the present, whereas editing<sup>20</sup> in the form of a bricolage<sup>21</sup> of fragments constitutes only another empty and static reproduction of the present. Representation can therefore be understood as the degree of formal synthesis of reality the architect achieves as a result of a spatial narration. Narration is therefore not only the process by which reality is objectified in order to be understood, but also the representation of reality itself, a reminder of both Fontana and Matta-Clark's approach. The synthesis achieved by framing, sequencing and editing the elements of the urban fabric means the city can be represented in new formal narrations while at the same time acknowledging the narrated and represented reality, and understanding the meaning and logic of forms and spaces.

In this way the concepts of void, framing and sequence acquire a specific value in reference to the spatial narration and its formal outcome. From this perspective, the void becomes the unrelated and timeless place where the possibility of form is suspended between nothingness and silence, and, at the same time, the entry point for a possible interpretation of the language of the city. If the process of selection - the starting point for the linguistic arrangement of the city's fragments into a formal narration - is to be developed from the contents of the urban fabric, it will probably start from a place where there is nothing, such as the area of destruction shown in the map of the Great Fire of London, which I referred to at the beginning of this essay. The delineation of borders or limits within the formal possibilities of the modern metropolis is a first step towards understanding the 'infinity' of different realities and languages present in the city. The deliberate constraint imposed by choosing and framing a delimited group of elements is not only

an act that interprets reality, but also the way to achieve a meaning that is no longer a random juxtaposition of elements but a composition of interrelated, sequential parts, a structure that narrates and transmits meaning.

As I said in reference to Pasolini's interpretation of the 'language of reality', the individual is both the object and spectator of the same narration, and constitutes the primary force in transforming and evolving the urban form by assuming the twofold role of actor and interpreter: citizen and architect. In this way the architect acquires a role that is no longer external to reality or confused with that of a sociologist, economist, developer, sculptor, designer of objects or editor, but one that is an inherent part of reality, and essential for understanding and formulating spaces and forms for everyday life. Through interpreting, representing and constructing new formal narratives the architect is able to formalise transformations in the language of the city; thus, within defined boundaries, the 'poiesis'<sup>22</sup> of form occurs during the spatial narration of an architectural form. Just as Hejduk claimed was the case for painting and sculpture, architecture generates objects that are simultaneously conceived, represented and realised within a process of constructing sense.

## NOTES

1 I am referring to examples such as Fontana, Matta-Clark, etc., discussed extensively later in the text, and exemplary cities like London, Rotterdam or Berlin, which were heavily affected by events that erased large parts of their historical city fabric.

2 The idea of 'boundary' refers to the analysis of the idea of space provided by Heidegger in his essay 'Dwelling, Building, Thinking': 'A space is something that has been made room for, something that is cleared and free, namely within a boundary, Greek *peras*. A boundary is not that at which something stops but, as the Greeks recognised, the boundary is that from which something *begins its presencing*.' I would like to think that this concept might be appropriate in the definition of 'absence' introduced earlier in the text. Despite differences in the use of terms, what is interesting is the idea of *peras*, or perimeter, as the fundamental element for a space to exist and therefore to be able to accommodate objects, events and relationships. This can be compared to the ancient myths when cities were founded by defining their limits or boundaries, designating a space characterised by different jurisdictional and spatial values from the rest of the surrounding world: a place set apart.

3 This recalls the famous Adolf Loos quote from the essay 'Architecture': 'When we come across a mound in the wood, six feet long and three feet wide, raised to a pyramidal form by means of a spade, we become serious and something in us says: somebody lies buried here. This is architecture.' The simple, almost silent form of the mound in the wood has the power of stirring the emotions of the onlooker, eliciting an acknowledgement of the multitude of meanings and formal reasons such a simple composition of elements is able to convey. I see the fragments involved in the exposure of an urban void as having the same formal evocative power, but this time on manifold and extremely complex interpretative levels.

4 The theme of the void as an element capable of preserving certain urban characteristics and at the same time evoking infinite possible urban forms is strongly present in Wim Wenders' idea of the modern city; in particular, with reference to Berlin: '[...] When I filmed *Himmel über Berlin*, I took shots of the paths created by people passing by, nobody had traced them, people chose to pass there. In the film, when the children were playing in an absence of organised places for games, they were free. The voids that I defend, the city spaces that for me make the city alive, are these.' And again: '[...] you don't only have to create new buildings but also spaces for freedom: free and empty space in order to conserve the equilibrium of voids, so that the overabundance does not render invisible the world that surrounds us.' From: C. Lamberti, 'La Città di Berlino nel cinema di Ruttmann e Wenders' (09.12.2001) [www.architettura.it](http://architettura.it). [<http://architettura.it/movies/20011209/index.htm>, accessed on 11 April 2011]

5 The photographs shot in Milan by Ugo Mulas in 1964 portray the process of creating the painting *L'Attesa*. The photographer describes the artist's actions, though rapid and concluded in a few seconds, as something more precise, more complex than mere movements, something more than an operation: a real 'moment' worth photographing. '...*Forse fu la presenza di un quadro bianco, grande, con un solo*

*taglio appena finito. Quel quadro mi fece capire che l'operazione mentale di Fontana (che si risolveva praticamente in un attimo, nel gesto di tagliare la tela) era assai più complessa e il gesto conclusivo non la rivelava che in parte. Vedendo un quadro di buchi, un quadro di tagli, e' facile immaginare Fontana mentre fa il taglio o i buchi con un punteruolo, ma questo non lascia capire l'operazione che e' più precisa e non e' solo una operazione, ma un momento particolare, un momento che capivo di dover fotografare...*' From: U. Mulas, *La Fotografia* (Torino: Giulio Einaudi Editore, 1973).

6 The same theme is discussed in the book *Art as Technique* by Viktor Shklovsky. Here the formalist goal of the artistic act performed on reality is to make the object 'unfamiliar' and thus perceived in a new way by the spectator due to its transformation into an art object.

7 *An-Architecture* is the name of a group of artists (Laurie Anderson, Tina Girouard, Suzanne Harris, Jene Highstein, Bernard Kirschenbaum, Richard Landry, Gordon Matta-Clark and Richard Nonas) active in New York during the 1970s. 'We knew it had to be a kind of "anti" name, but that by itself seemed just too easy. And we were not at all clear what the second half - the cultural thing to push the "anti" against - should be. Architecture did not start out being the main point for any of us, even for Gordon. But we soon realized, however, that architecture could be used to symbolize all the hard-shelled cultural reality we meant to push against, and not just building of "architecture" itself. That was the context in which Gordon came up with the term an-architecture. And that, perhaps, suggests the meaning we all gave it.' Richard Nonas, letter to the IVAM, August 1992, in: *Gordon Matta-Clark*, exhibition catalogue, IVAM Centre Julio Gonzalez (Valencia: 1993), p. 374.

From: [www.mattaclarking.co.uk](http://www.mattaclarking.co.uk) [accessed on 11 April 2011].

8 I am referring more specifically to the *Fake Estates* project, which took place during the 1970s in New York.

9 A good bibliographical reference to this theme can be found in a short article by Giovanni Corbellini in which he analyses the impact and influence of the term 'absence' on the cultural production of the 20th century. In this schematic bibliography, the author focuses on the theme of void, absence and disappearance, and has created a history of this concept through research in different artistic and non-artistic fields. The article 'Assenza' by Giovanni Corbellini is published on the website [www.architettura.it](http://www.architettura.it). [<http://architettura.it/parole/20041204/index.htm>, accessed on 9 April 2010]

10 Gibellina is a small town in Sicily. It was completely destroyed by an earthquake in 1968 and reconstructed some kilometres away from its original location. Numerous artists and architects contributed to the reconstruction of the village including Ludovico Quaroni, Vittorio Gregotti and Franco Purini.

11 The Cretto technique consists in producing the natural formation of cracks and splits within a thick, dense pictorial or sculptural surface left drying in open air.

12 Syntax: from Greek, *syn* = together, *taxis* = sequence, together in a sequence, the arrangement and conjunction of phrases and sentences.

13 Among other things, 'framing' means to form or make by fitting and uniting parts together; to construct; to conceive or imagine as an idea; a structure for admitting or enclosing something.

14 Sequence: from Latin *sequi*, a 'thing that follows'; list of objects (or events) arranged in a 'linear' fashion, either finite or infinite.

15 What is intended here is a composition of elements within a frame, one that combines the most basic fragmented pieces of reality into a recognisable part-object, defined by specific and autonomous characteristics and forms. In his essay 'Nuovo e moderno in architettura', Ezio Bonfanti writes an extensive analysis and interpretation of Aldo Rossi's work, focusing in particular on the concepts of 'pieces and parts'. According to Bonfanti, Aldo Rossi uses a simple vocabulary of already formalised architectural forms (parts and pieces: the staircase, the corridor, the wall, etc.) composed and recomposed every time according to implicit and different logics spanning memory, rationality and biography.

16 Narration: in Italian *narrare*, from Latin *narrare*, and the root *gna*, meaning 'to know', to let someone know something, to tell a story. Narrative is the process of transmitting connected events or information by means of a story.

17 The work of Aldo Rossi provides an example of how an architecture structured within a rigid logic, and research on the contamination of notational languages, have been developed by the architect in the formulation of a specific point of view about the architectural project and its representation. In his book *A Scientific*

*Autobiography* the architect explains the generative process of his projects and introduces the themes of silence, the impossibility of speech, muteness or, as he preferred to call it, the 'absence of words'. Rossi links these themes to his interest in and fixation about the differences between drawing and writing. He writes: 'the difficulty of the word often creates an inexhaustible verbal continuity as with certain expressions of Hamlet or Mercutio. "Thou talk'st of nothing" is a way of saying nothing and everything - something similar to that graphic obsession I spoke of just before. I recognize this in many of my drawings, in a type of drawing where the line is no longer a line, but writing.' This 'graphic obsession' leads to a convergence of the two notational systems and thus it becomes difficult to discern and complex to understand - a mixture of ambiguous and mysterious languages and compositions that clearly recall some of Rossi's most enigmatic and poetic projects. Rossi comments that '[...] the union of different techniques resulting in a sort of realisation-confusion has always impressed me. It has to do with the boundary between order and disorder; and the boundary, the wall, is a fact of mathematics and masonry. Thus the boundary or wall between city and non-city establishes two different orders. The wall can be a kind of graphic sign representing something like the difference between drawing and writing, or the meaning can emerge from the conjunction of the two.' Rossi considers the composition and meaning of an architectural project to be viable only within a partial and inconclusive interpretation of reality. Furthermore, the architectural composition is the assemblage of meaningless fragments and parts that become meaningful only within a sequence whose premises, for Rossi, lie somewhere between autobiography and logic.

18 Matta-Clark developed this same concept in the materials he produced to record his performances and interventions on buildings. As I mentioned before, the juxtapositions of texts, sketches and images developed by the artist during and after the completion of his interventions were composed as a means of recording traces of the spaces and forms destined to disappear. Once the original building had been demolished, its representation became the only real object for any intervention and the only remaining reality. In this way, any representation of reality assumes an independent existence once the world it represents disappears.

19 Among the theories I considered during the design process were those of Roland Barthes and Robbe-Grillet concerning the end of the traditional novel and the idea of language and literature recommencing from a tabula rasa of meaning and form. Other interesting references regarding this topic are Raymond Roussel's *How I Wrote Certain of My Books*, where the quasi-mathematical method of composition the author used for his novels is revealed; the work of Jorge Luis Borges; the experimentations on meta-literature of groups like the OULIPO (Ouvroir de littérature potentielle formed by Queneau, Calvino, Perec, etc.) and *The Outsider* by Albert Camus. In this last example, the act of writing consists in reporting a reality that appears before the eyes of the author and main character as nothing more than a quantity of juxtaposed objects. In the book, writing becomes a mere listing of events - no questions are raised and no answers are given - the text sketches in a dry, essential style the interplay and relationships of living and dead objects, man and things. Another important source that deals with the idea of multiplicity and openness of meaning and language is Umberto Eco's *Opera Aperta*.

20 Referring to the concept of editing and the figure of the artist in post-modern society in an interview with Bennet Simpson, the critic Nicolas Bourriaud states that 'artists today don't really "create" any more, they reorganise. There are two dominant figures in today's culture: the DJ and the programmer. Both are dealing with things that are already produced.' Brian Eno expressed the same idea in the interview 'Gossip is Philosophy' with the magazine *Wired* in 1995. An artist is now a curator. An artist is now much more seen as a connector of things, a person who scans the enormous field of possible places for artistic attention, and says, "What I am going to do is draw your attention to this sequence of things." If you read art history up until 25 or 30 years ago, you'd find there was this supposition of succession: from Verrocchio, through Giotto, Primiticcio, Titian and so on, as if a crown passes down through the generations. But in the 20th century, instead of that straight kingly line, there's suddenly a broad field of things that get called art, including vernacular things, things from other cultures, things using new technologies like photo and film. It's difficult to make any simple linear connection through them. [...] What postmodernist thinking is suggesting is that there isn't one line, there's just a field, a field through which different people negotiate differently. Thus there is no longer

such a thing as “art history” but there are multiple “art stories”. [...] You have made what seems to you a meaningful pattern in this field of possibilities. You’ve drawn your own line. This is why the curator, the editor, the compiler, and the anthologist have become such big figures. They are all people whose job it is to digest things, and to connect them together [...] To create meanings - or perhaps “new readings”, which is what curators try to do - is to create.’

21 Bricolage: a construction made of whatever materials are at hand; something created from a variety of available things randomly selected.

22 The word ‘poetic’ used in the text and title of this project derives from the Greek root *poieo* and the word *poiesis*, meaning to make, construct, compose, or combine forms. Its specific meaning here refers to the possibility of creating a language that can be put to use in the process of constructing reality and architectural forms.