

The List as an Urban Form

*Lists and catalogues are tools for encapsulating a kòsmos, which is why they are intrinsically linked to the architectural universe. There are two lists related to the world of architecture that, due to their uniqueness, deserve special attention: Leon Battista Alberti's *Descriptio urbis Romae* and Peter Eisenman's *Notes on a Conceptual Architecture: Toward a Definition*. Leon Battista Alberti's '*Descriptio urbis Romae*' is an extraordinary device for describing and reinterpreting the contemporary city. Although it was the first systematic study for the reconstruction of the Roman city around 1450, it transcends the medieval figurative vision and, at the same time, surpasses the perspective view of the Renaissance city. In his *Descriptio urbis Romae*, Alberti does not draw any map of Rome. He omits the image, replacing it with a list of polar coordinates that allow us to reconstruct a map of the city of Rome. His *Descriptio urbis Romae* is a device, a graphic machine, with which Alberti replaced the image with a numerical equivalent. In the non-text of "*Notes on a Conceptual Architecture: Toward a Definition*", Peter Eisenman constructs a list, a spatial absence that has no geometric derivation, but only a relational one. A "theory" of form that becomes the construction of a programme, a relational and diagrammatic system between parts. In both examples, we have the construction of a "form", a link/bond between otherwise chaotic elements: a "structure" endowed with order, which dialogues with each individual part.*

Keywords: Leon Battista Alberti; *Descriptio urbis Romae*; lista; Peter Eisenman; *Notes on a Conceptual Architecture*

Introduction: Achilles' shield and the Greek army

When the poet Homer, in Book XVIII (18) of the *Iliad* (lines 478-608), decides to describe the decorations on Achilles' shield, he chooses to use the tool of the list. In his description, he lists the order of a complete system, inspired by a harmonious universe divided into five zones. In the first zone, he describes the universe: the Earth, the Sea, the sky, the Sun, the Moon, the stars (the Pleiades, Orion and the Big Dipper). He then continues with the description of two cities: their life, their festivals, from weddings, with processions and dances, to the scene of a trial, with plaintiffs and witnesses. He describes wars, landscapes, warriors riding off on horseback, well-ploughed wheat fields and banquets, bucolic scenes and dances. Finally, he concludes his description with a great Ocean River that separates the shield from the rest of the universe, from what we might simply call infinity.

In it, in this form that is only a shield for poetic reasons, Vulcan listed everything he knew. It is as if this object were alive, not a shield but a collection of places and spaces; of events that reflect a society. A place and a form that, because it is alive and changeable, becomes impossible to describe entirely in its entirety, but whose composition, structure and limits are well known, remaining well defined and immutable. Its structure does not suggest that there is anything beyond its edges; it is a finite form, or rather, it is the *epiphany of form*: a figure

1 in which order, hierarchy and a relationship between figure and background are
 2 established, giving life to a well-constructed and familiar universe. It is easy to
 3 see in it the interpretation and narration of an idea of the city and good
 4 government. The form of a compact (walled) city, which separates an inside and
 5 an outside, *being a city* from *not being a city*. Separating the city-form from its
 6 surroundings is an ocean river, a sort of infinity in which the exact form of a
 7 known universe is immersed, leaving us unable to guess what lies beyond it. The
 8 world Homer speaks of, in Achilles' shield, is a world he knew well. He knew
 9 its laws, causes and effects, and that is why he was able to give it *form*. But what
 10 about when we do not know the limits, or when they do not even exist?

11 Homer himself comes to our aid once again. In order to convey the
 12 immensity of the Greek army, Homer begins to list only the captains and ships,
 13 without enumerating how many men are under each commander or how many
 14 there are on each ship. Although the list appears to be finite, precisely because
 15 of this omission, the effect is that of an indefinite number, which therefore
 16 alludes to infinity. This system is nothing more than a list that presupposes
 17 indefinite elements, a *non-form*.

18 We therefore have two systems: the *concluded-form* (the shield), which
 19 essentially alludes to the structures of systems that recognise and define an order,
 20 the construction of a known universe, such that we can assume we can control
 21 it, and the *non-form* (the list of ships in the Greek army), which presents the
 22 image of an imprecise universe, whose properties are simply aligned without any
 23 hierarchical relationship.

24 At the centre of the first system, “form”, hierarchically placed at the centre
 25 is “the place of truths”. Over the centuries, this centrality has changed subjects,
 26 as many as the Truths in which various societies have believed, until the total
 27 negation of a unifying conceptual structure, and therefore the total disappearance
 28 of form itself, due to the fragmentation of truths into a whole without a single
 29 ordering system, except for their simple being part of a system, of a “list”. There
 30 has therefore been an increasing shift from the construction of a *philosophical*
 31 *form* to the elaboration of a *philosophical list*.

32 Homer's use of the list is not accidental. Lists and catalogues are tools for
 33 encapsulating a *kòsmos*, which is why they are intrinsically linked to the
 34 architectural universe. Architecture, in its very essence, circumscribes a world
 35 on the one hand, while on the other hand it simultaneously conveys the idea of
 36 something else outside it. Thus, by selecting a set and excluding other
 37 possibilities, the list can encompass an “etcetera”, an “infinity” within its precise
 38 and never-ending list form. Lists and architecture are delimited worlds, but at
 39 the same time they are also universes that allude, within themselves, to an
 40 unclassifiable infinity. A list gives a hint of form to an incongruous set, and we
 41 could ultimately define the city and architecture as particular forms of lists.

42 In this regard, it is worth highlighting the difference between a practical list
 43 and a poetic list. A *practical list* is drawn up to check and bring together several
 44 items under the same heading. A *poetic list*, on the other hand, is drawn up
 45 because of the inability to enumerate all the items under the same heading; it is
 46 something that escapes our ability to control. What interests us most about a

1 poetic list is its ability to move from meanings to signifiers. The intention in both
 2 the poetic and practical lists is, in any case, to create a form out of otherwise
 3 chaotic elements. It is a tension of balance within the multiple, of a “structure”
 4 endowed with order, which dialogues with each individual part.

5 In practical lists, their control function is decisive. From an administrative
 6 and bureaucratic point of view, practical “lists” such as censuses and cadastral
 7 maps are drawn up for each city every year. Each practical list is different from
 8 another in that they are closed lists, which differentiate between what is inside
 9 and what is outside, their limits are rigid and they enumerate qualities that belong
 10 to the quality of the list itself. They have very precise characteristics and, above
 11 all, they have a purely referential function and refer to objects in the outside
 12 world, with the purely practical purpose of naming them. They are lists of objects
 13 that really exist and are known. They do not evoke but rather enumerate items
 14 that all follow the same “rule” or in which they are identified.

15 *Practical lists represent a form in their own way, because they give unity to*
 16 *a set of objects which, however different they may be from each other, obey a*
 17 *contextual pressure, i.e. they are related because they are or are expected to be*
 18 *all in the same place, or because they constitute the goal of the same project*¹.

19 These lists are finite lists, because they intend to list only the objects to
 20 which they refer and no others. Furthermore, if they are present in a defined
 21 place, they are of a precise number and therefore unalterable within the list itself.
 22 In a practical list, the items it contains are all linked to its essence, its referents,
 23 its meanings: essence + set = practical list. In a poetic list, the relationship is
 24 more complex because it is linked to its properties: properties + set = poetic list.

25 If the definition by essence takes into account substances that are known and
 26 limited, ordering things according to their characteristic properties takes into
 27 account every possible accident. Definitions by essence give rise to finite,
 28 ordered and coherent lists (i.e. lists whose elements are held together by a single,
 29 clearly identifiable ordering principle); while those by property give rise to
 30 infinite, apparently disordered and incoherent lists (lists whose elements are held
 31 together by multiple criteria or by analogical mechanisms that are not clearly or
 32 potentially identifiable). We do not know their limits and it is impossible to
 33 construct a finite form (a figure). They generate an ever-open form, or rather, a
 34 non-form: a form without a figure. Poetic lists, compared to practical ones, have
 35 the “advantage” of enumerating something that escapes our ability to control and
 36 name.

37 The intention of both is to form a bond/link between elements that would
 38 otherwise be chaotic. It is a tension of balance within multiplicity, of a
 39 “structure” endowed with order, which dialogues with each individual part.

42 **Literature Review: two architectural lists**

44 There are two lists related to the world of architecture that, due to their
 45 uniqueness, deserve special attention: *Leon Battista Alberti's Descriptio urbis*

¹Umberto Eco; *La Vertigine della lista*; pag. 116; Bompiani, 2010.

1 *Romae* and Peter Eisenman's *Notes on a Conceptual Architecture: Toward a*
 2 *Definition*. In the first case, we can identify the use of a practical list, while in
 3 the second, the use of a poetic list. These two lists confer order, and therefore “a
 4 hint of form”, on an otherwise disordered whole. Two lists and, therefore, two
 5 devices that allow us to move from a programmatic system to a figure in which
 6 the relationship, the dialogue between different elements, prevails. This is an
 7 operation that we also find in the post-surrealist poetics of a “chance encounter
 8 on an anatomical table of a sewing machine and a raincoat” (Isidore Ducasse,
 9 Comte de Lautréamont, 1869), which generate forms and links between
 10 incongruous parts.

11 With Alberti and Eisenman, although we are presented with lists of places,
 12 neither of them places the location at the centre of attention, but rather focuses
 13 on the concept of space itself. They do not present an accumulation of places
 14 upon places, but rather relational codes. The spatial list becomes a true generator
 15 of form: a conceptual device that allows the construction of an urban and
 16 architectural system. The construction of a complicated order, of a process that
 17 allows us to describe the city and architecture in its entirety through a line, the
 18 construction of a reading code. La “*Descriptio urbis Romae*”
 19
 20

21 **Methodology: *Descriptio urbis Romae***

22
 23 Leon Battista Alberti's ‘*Descriptio urbis Romae*’ represents a tool for
 24 dialogue between parties that makes the city an intelligible and communicable
 25 form. Alberti's work is, in fact, the first systematic study for a reconstruction of
 26 the Roman city around 1450. The use of a list allows Alberti to overcome the
 27 figurative vision of medieval ancestry, which considered the city of Rome to be
 28 defined by the monumental landmarks of antiquity and the new signs of Christian
 29 Rome, which legitimised each other. Leon Battista Alberti chose to treat the city
 30 of emperors and popes philologically, as if it were a text whose structure had to
 31 be recovered in order to be interpreted.

32 “*The Descriptio Urbis, and above all the surveying activity that underlies it,*
 33 *constitute the first point of encounter between the scientific needs of urban*
 34 *representation and the humanistic awareness of the values that the city*
 35 *embodies”* (Di Teodoro 2010). In this work, the Genoese architect measured
 36 ancient monuments using mathematical instruments of his own invention,
 37 attempting for the first time to reconstruct the topography of Ancient Rome. The
 38 *Descriptio Urbis* is, in theory, a map of the city of Rome, but in practice, the
 39 image is omitted and replaced with a list of polar coordinates that allow us to
 40 reconstruct a map of the city of Rome. (see Figure 1-2)

41 We know nothing about the author's surveying process or the steps leading
 42 from the survey to the table. However, the lack of a drawing of the map of Rome
 43 is not an isolated case. The omission of images in Albertian writings is of
 44 paramount importance in Albertian's entire oeuvre. It was a deliberate and
 45 conscious choice, a programmatic decision, whereby the author chose to use only
 46 the written word to convey images. All illustrations added to his texts at a later

1 date are interpretations and provide information that does not come directly from
 2 the author. His choice was linked above all to the traditional distrust of classical
 3 and medieval culture towards the transmission of images, giving greater
 4 importance to the word. It was a choice linked above all to the material conditions
 5 of faithful reproduction before the invention of printing, for which images were
 6 obviously difficult to reproduce faithfully, often distorted and therefore unreliable
 7 compared to the word. If it is true that "*with words we present an accumulation;*
 8 *with images, a totality*"². It is also true that the manual reproduction of a whole
 9 is always subject to interpretation. It is therefore not surprising that, in this
 10 context, images were often considered an inferior form of writing compared to
 11 actual writing. Alberti's task was therefore to break down the image,
 12 transforming it into a transmissible text, and thus into a list that generates a
 13 diagram of the relationship between parts. An illustration that faithfully follows
 14 Alberti's instructions does not produce a real image, but diagrams, abstract
 15 schemes, tracings and geometric constructions. In this sense, Alberti's most
 16 enigmatic work is *Descriptio Urbis*, as it aims to structure the "construction" of
 17 an image. What Alberti proposes is precisely the programme of the drawn image
 18 of a cartography, even though he simply presents a list of alphanumeric data. Not
 19 a drawing, therefore, not an image, but a list as an urban form. A "*practical list*"
 20 which, in essence, stands as an "urban epiphany" of the *forma urbis* of Rome.
 21 However, Alberti includes two drawings in this list which, paradoxically, are not
 22 related to the image of the city, but to a machine for drawing it, leaving it up to
 23 the user to create the image of Rome by following his instructions. (see Figure 3)

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26 **The constellation of the city of Rome**

27

28 What Alberti does is simply describe a space, an urban space, through the
 29 figures contained within it, using a linear sequence of signs, transforming the
 30 three-dimensional space into a one-dimensional figure, into a line of signs and
 31 dots³. The sequence of an order of this type appears as a 'complicated order'
 32 involving an extremely precise process⁴. His points are, in fact, tools that serve
 33 to organise the territory, tools for orientation that generate the "landscape" of a
 34 constellation: the constellation of the city of Rome. In this case, the constellation
 35 serves to construct a map and, just as constellations and stars were used by sailors
 36 for orientation, these points, like stars, perform the same role. According to
 37 Walter Benjamin, phenomena gather in constellations around ideas, like images
 38 of all things surrounding the original phenomena. And only in this gathering in
 39 constellations, thanks to the work of concepts, are phenomena "simultaneously

²Yona Friedman, *L'ordine complicato, come costruire una immagine* [2008]; pag. ed. Quodlibet, 2008

³Reminds me of those dot-to-dot games that hid an image and, by connecting the dots, I could reconstruct it. In a certain sense, *Descriptio* is an extension of Alberti's *Ludi*: in this sense, the use of Latin and the effort of relief avoided by those who set out to draw are ingredients of a *ludus*, one of the "most joyful things" from which to take pleasure. (cfr. pag. 176-179 Francesco Paolo Di Teodoro, op. cit.).

⁴Cfr. Yona Friedman, op. cit

1 analysed and saved”⁵.

2 Truth connects things together, just as constellations bring together a
3 scattered multitude of stars in their arabesque patterns. The use of codes raises
4 an important question: that of the image, its representation and graphic
5 transmission. For Alberti, an image transmitted in graphic form is not a
6 sufficiently suitable tool for transmitting the cartography of a city ⁶. An image
7 as an ‘object’ can only be transmitted in analytical form, and is therefore always
8 subject to possible interpretations.

9 Alberti therefore reduces representation to a set of code points and the
10 relationship between them generates an image. A simplified and partial map of
11 the city, but metrically and proportionally correct, independent of the scale of
12 the project. Its partiality and simplification are not accidental; in fact, following
13 the instructions given, it is possible to add other data or delete it if necessary. If
14 a graphic reproduction is in itself a finished object, Alberti's project provides for
15 variation within it. The mechanism he proposes is therefore the project, or rather
16 the programme for the construction of an image or, more precisely, the
17 programme for the construction of a vision of the urban landscape. The idea he
18 conveys of the city, therefore, is not presented as an object in itself, but as a
19 system of relationships between parts, where each individual part is nothing
20 more than a fragment of a whole. This operation encompasses a playful process
21 which ultimately surprises us with the appearance on a sheet of paper of a
22 recognisable kòsmos, whose graphic result is independent of the author.

23 We can say that Alberti has replaced, or added, a numerical equivalent to
24 the image. Today we would say that Alberti has “digitised” an image⁷, proposing
25 an initial transition from ATOMS to BITS. Furthermore, if we look at the graphic
26 machine proposed by Alberti through contemporary eyes, we can reinterpret it
27 as a kind of plotter, which allows the reader to reproduce the city in graphic form.
28
29

⁵Benjamin's phrase reads: “*Ideas are to things as constellations are to stars*”. Regarding Benjamin's unique Platonism, R. Solmi specifies that it should not be separated from its relationship, on the one hand, with Romantic philosophy and, on the other, with the Kabbalistic currents of Jewish thought. *The relationship between ideas and things does not seem to be one of participation, imitation or emanation, and seems to be constituted on a plane quite different from that of the traditional alternative of immanence and transcendence. It could rather be compared, as in certain exponents of medieval Kabbalah, to the relationship between a name and the letters that compose it.*” (R. Solmi, W. Benjamin, *Angelus novus. Saggi e frammenti*, R. Solmi, Einaudi, Torino 1995, p. XV).

⁶A distrust, also present in classical culture, of graphic images, in favour instead of images without form and presented in the form of codes. Just think of Ptolemy's *Geography*..

⁷Cfr. pag. 12 Mario Carpo & Francesco Furlan; *Descriptio Urbis Romae*; ed. Leo S. Olschki 2005.

1 **Results: Image-object and image-concept**

2

3 In this type of operation, the image as a physical object loses importance, in
 4 order to highlight its conceptual process above all else. The production of the
 5 object is in fact considered secondary and unimportant, so much so that its
 6 creation is entrusted to others, albeit following the author's instructions. We find
 7 this same aspect in conceptual art, where the idea, or concept, represents the most
 8 important aspect of the work. But also in relational art, which focuses primarily
 9 on the creative process and the construction of “programmes” that involve
 10 interaction between individuals rather than the production of aesthetic objects.
 11 In both cases, every decision regarding the execution and presentation of a work
 12 of art is made in advance, giving priority to the design process, so much so that
 13 the object itself can be executed elsewhere and by other people, provided that
 14 the author's instructions, the precise explanation of his intentions and his idea.

15 If we look at Alberti's work from this perspective, we can say that it is a
 16 process of dematerialising the city as a form-object, conceptualising it in a
 17 process-relational system. For Alberti, the transition from reality to its
 18 representation does not have to pass through the creation of an object, but
 19 through its conceptualisation. The city as an object thus becomes a residue. It is
 20 no longer its form, its weight, its colours, its materials that have value, but the
 21 relationship between the points that characterise it, which generate a language,
 22 and therefore a transmissible form of the city.

23 We must therefore make a distinction between image-object and image-
 24 conceptual. The former, the image-object, is communicated through expressly
 25 graphic tools: drawing, photography, video, sound and any other form of
 26 expression that expressly results in an object. We could define these image-
 27 objects as analogue objects. The latter, on the other hand, the conceptual image,
 28 is communicated through tools that translate the object into an idea, into a
 29 conceptual process.

30 The latter do not deny the image, but its material form, describing or
 31 reformulating it in codes, in a language that can subsequently also be
 32 communicated in graphic forms, which, however, will in any case result in weak
 33 forms of the conceptual object. The abandonment of the object as matter, for its
 34 transmission as a conceptual form, is essentially due to a problem of language⁸.

35 Thinking of reducing the vision of the city to an image-object is extremely
 36 simplistic today. Its indeterminacy and lack of an all-encompassing form calls
 37 into question the use of a graphic form capable of representing the city itself.
 38 Any graphic representation of it, even cinematographic ones, has now been
 39 reduced to a descriptive account of the complexities and contradictions of its
 40 being a city as an urban event, tools that are incapable of providing a
 41 comprehensive account of the city. The problem lies precisely in thinking of the
 42 city as an image-object and wanting to translate it as such. What is usually meant
 43 by image as object is something personal, subjective, which generally reflects
 44 the author's vision.

⁸H. Flynt, speaking about conceptual art, stated: since concepts are closely linked to language, concept art is a type of art whose materials are concepts.

1 It is in itself "*a complete, autonomous image, often highlighted by a frame*
 2 *that emphasises the material limits of a vision, of a unit separated from the*
 3 *environment in which it is located. The image sometimes implies a perspective*
 4 *that helps to make the scene depicted seem realistic, yet separates it even more*
 5 *from the surrounding physical space.*"⁹ (Paolini, 2010).

6 Alberti's programme is the programme of a represented scene, it is the life
 7 that underlies the image, its being a form of infinite exteriority. It is therefore
 8 possible to encounter another perspective, this time mental or symbolic, which
 9 leads us to suppose a reaction and a multiple reading of reality, rewriting the
 10 contemporary city with a possible transmissible language, but no longer linked to
 11 an *object-form*, but rather to a *concept-form*. This is an analytical and critical
 12 process in itself, through a strictly self-reflective logic on the city itself, where
 13 the language chosen to be used is a language that is enriched and developed
 14 starting from the analysis of the space of the vision of the structures and methods
 15 of urban practice, also bringing into play elements of its history. However, this
 16 approach is not reduced to a cold investigation of everything that defines the real
 17 and cultural space of the urban event.

18 On the contrary, it is an opening to an operational perspective rich in
 19 implications and suggestions, never fixed and always mobile, of the vision of the
 20 contemporary city. As in Giulio Paolini's work, "*Vedo (la decifrazione del mio*
 21 *campo visivo)*" (I see (the deciphering of my field of vision)). In describing it,
 22 the artist states: "*Vedo is the abstract and conceptual scheme of vision, it is the*
 23 *translation into numbers of the phenomenon of seeing. In this work, I traced a*
 24 *multitude of pencil dots on the wall that correspond to the amount of space I had*
 25 *in front of me.*" (Paolini 2010)¹⁰.

26 In the Descriptio Urbis process, we therefore have a conceptual visual
 27 project, because ultimately the city exists only in the vision of those who see and
 28 experience it. Its representation is nothing more than an idea or an image of a
 29 landscape that does not replace reality, but acts as a staging of the
 30 "representation". A representation that gives concrete form to the formal structure
 31 of an image. An image that can therefore conceal an organised system of evidence
 32 and signs that tell the story of the construction of a conceptual order, a
 33 complicated order built beyond the physicality of the city itself.

34 In Alberti's Descriptio Urbis, architecture dissolves into pure evocative
 35 presence dense with meaning. His list is, to all intents and purposes, a conceptual
 36 device for shaping urban form. His conceptualisation consists of a shift in
 37 language: from the transformation of a defined figure to the codification of an
 38 image. The use of the list allows Alberti to transform a three-dimensional space
 39 into an open programmatic system. The image is replaced by the skeleton of a
 40 diagram, which implies the possibility of infinite interpretations of the image
 41 itself. The representation of the city of Rome is thus entrusted to the relationship
 42 that exists between the various architectures examined by Alberti. If it is true that
 43 the image bears a resemblance to the thing represented, both to our senses and to
 44 our intellect, Alberti's operation of "digitising the image" transforms it into a

⁹Giulio Paolini, Dall'Atlante al Vuoto in ordine alfabetico, Electa, 2010, pp. 109

¹⁰Maddalena Disch, Giulio Paolini catalogo ragionato, Volume 1, ed. Skira, 2008, pag.202

1 “model”. In other words, Alberti structures the very functioning of the urban
2 image and the concept of the city itself.

3 4 5 **Discussion: Notes on a Conceptual Architecture: Toward a Definition**

6
7 In the text “Notes on a Conceptual Architecture: Toward a Definition”,
8 published in Casabella 359-360 in 1971, Peter Eisenman arranges 15 numbered
9 points on four blank sheets of paper, corresponding to footnotes rich in
10 references to the world of contemporary art, Chomsky's linguistics and Erwin
11 Panofsky's iconography. (see Figure 4)

12 His operation replaces the empty space and absence of text with the balance
13 and architecture of the rigour of a careful *theoretical framework*.¹¹, on which the
14 text-absent is constructed. This gives rise to a project which, as in Alberti's
15 *Descriptio Urbis*, dissolves space, proposing architecture as a purely evocative
16 presence dense with meaning. A presence among parts placed in relation to one
17 another. His is a poetic list that allows for infinite possibilities and figurations.
18 The interpretation of Eisenman's text as the construction of a poetic list brings
19 us back to the “Chinese Encyclopaedia” in Borges' essay “The Analytical
20 Language of John Wilkins”:

21 “A ‘certain Chinese encyclopaedia’ states that “animals are divided into: a]
22 those belonging to the Emperor, b] embalmed, c] trained, d] piglets, e] mermaids,
23 f] fabulous, g] stray dogs, h] included in this classification, i] those that act like
24 madmen, j] innumerable, k] drawn with a very fine camel hair brush, l] etc., m]
25 who have just broken the vase, n] who look like flies from a distance”.¹²

26 What makes the relationship between each of the categories in the *Chinese*
27 *Encyclopedia* possible, as in the *Notes*, is not the same link that connects the
28 entries in Homer's description. In that case, we found a well-identified and
29 “formed” commonplace in the *background*, and what Borges and Eisenman
30 subtract is the presence of a comforting form: a shield, the map of the city of
31 Rome, an exact form that protects from the disorder of things. The *Notes* and the
32 *Chinese Encyclopedia* rest on silent ground where each individual entry behaves
33 like an “evocative presence” in which the context disappears completely,
34 proposing an alphabetical order (the *Chinese Encyclopedia*) or a numerical order
35 (the *Notes*). Behind this order, in reality, even before an order of “*beings*,” there
36 is an order of “*concepts*.” An order whose sequence is totally irrelevant, whose
37 function is only to bind parts together. The Chinese Encyclopedia, like
38 Eisenman's Notes, presents us with the image of a universe that merely aligns
39 properties, sweeping away any rational classification as a finite form. It is the
40 construction of an order that gives a hint of form to previously incongruous
41 things. In the project “Notes on a Conceptual Architecture: Toward a
42 Definition,” Peter Eisenman's poetic list takes over in the creation of a granular
43 space that essentially becomes, through the conceptualization of form, the

¹¹Tafari Manfredo; *Five Architect*; pag. 13; 1981, Officina edizioni

¹²Jorge Luis Borges; “El idioma analítico de John Wilkins”, *Otras inquisiciones*, pag. 142; 1960, Emecé Editores, Buenos Aires

1 evocation of an architecture or a city.

2 The essence of “*Notes on a Conceptual Architecture: Toward a Definition*”
3 is therefore linked to an absence that has no geometric derivation, but only a
4 relational one. A ‘theory’ of form that becomes the construction of a programme,
5 in which form itself is not given by a “figure” or a “face”, but by its being a
6 relational and diagrammatic system between parts. These parts are devoid of any
7 kind of body or figure, form or possible representation, but they carry
8 instructions codified in an open language that can be interpreted in infinite ways,
9 just like notes to a text. A form that extends beyond its material essence to
10 become a binding agent and, as a result, the very invention of infinite and
11 possible realities.

12
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14 **Conclusions: evocative presences**

15

16 In both works, Alberti's *Descriptio Urbis* and Peter Eisenman's *Notes on a*
17 *Conceptual Architecture*, we find that the authors chose to abandon images in
18 favour of other forms of conceptual elaboration, such as that offered by
19 language, giving rise to lists: a practical list for Alberti's *Descriptio Urbis* and a
20 poetic list for Peter Eisenman's *Notes*.

21 In Alberti's Renaissance vision, reality was given by the construction of a
22 logical and geometric order, which he attempted to rationalise thoroughly in
23 order to build the structures of a new language: a unity and organicity that lives
24 on the same balance as the cosmos, in which the beauty of the architectural
25 organism is conceived as a law of rational harmony in mutual agreement
26 between social and universal principles.¹³

27 In Peter Eisenman, on the other hand, architecture is an agent of reality
28 itself. “*Architecture, as bricks and mortar, offers a promise of reality,*
29 *authenticity and true truth in a surreal world where truth is a manipulated*
30 *object.*” [...]”¹⁴. His vision is of a world in constant transformation and
31 metamorphosis, where architecture takes on the role of a conceptual universe,
32 deconstructed into an autonomous system of signs and spatial relationships. For
33 him, “*architecture is the continuous displacement of living*”, or in other words,
34 “*the permanent invention of living*.”¹⁵. Architecture therefore needs to
35 constantly reinvent itself in order to construct ever-new realities.

36 While in Alberti the use of a practical list becomes a tool for constructing
37 the epiphany of a possible finished form, in Eisenman every possible hypothesis
38 of form disappears, acquiring a purely conceptual character. The various notes
39 construct a multiple and infinite reality, where everything dissolves as if on a
40 whiteboard. What remains are points. A list of notes of programmatic density,
41 beings capable of merging within themselves the multiplicity of
42 contemporaneity, in which one can read the alphabet of a new code of the
43 contemporary. Eisenman's list is poetic, allowing the semantic dimension to be

¹³Tafuri Manfredo; *L'architettura dell'umanesimo*; pag. 32; ed. Laterza 1969

¹⁴Peter Eisenman; *Inside Out. Scritti 1963-1988*; pag. 322; ed Quodlibet 2014

¹⁵Peter Eisenman; op. cit. pag. 322

1 paralysed in order to give substantial weight to the syntactic dimension. This
 2 generates a liberation from ideology, which leads the American architect to focus
 3 on the relationships between objects rather than the objects themselves. A
 4 process that we also find in his House III project, which leads to an
 5 “*estrangement of form no longer from reality, but from itself*”.¹⁶ That is, the
 6 creation of a *kòsmos* made up of signs-events in dialogue with each other. In
 7 both operations, Alberti's and Eisenman's, their architectures, before being
 8 objects, are evocative presences that give life not to a *completed form*, but to a
 9 *relational form*.

10

11 **Figure 1.** Table VII of the 16 panels of the list of alphanumeric topographical
 12 data from *Descriptio urbis Romae* (1450), by Leon Battista Alberti (Genoa
 13 1404–Rome 1472)

• PORTARVM INIATIO

NOMINA PORTARVM	ORIZON	TRANSIB	LEONINE	AD ALMUM	
TOPULA	45 1 3/4	32 0	43 0	40 0	
ZUCINA	0 2	28 1	43 1 1/2	31 0	
SALARIA	3 2	30 2	43 1 1/4	26 0	
LADONA	4 1 3/4	32 0	43 1	22 3	
LAUREN	6 5	32 1	42 3	21 1	
MAIOR	11 0	36 2	42 1	20 2	
LACRAM	14 2 3/4	30 0	41 2	20 2	
LADONA	17 3	36 0	41 2 1/2	1 1	
APIA	18 1 3/4	37 0	40 2	22 2	
PAULI	24 3 1/4	29 0	39 3	21 3	
NOMINA PORTARVM		PORTAE IN MVNIS		TRANSIB	
		ORIZON		TRANSIB	
ROMEFIS	27 3	26 2	39 0	27 1	
BRACCI	32 3	29 2	38 2	27 3	
SUBIANO	34 0	20 2	37 3	27 3	
NOMINA PORTARVM		PORTAE IN MVNIS		LEONINE	
		ORIZON		TRANSIB	
SUBIANO	37 3	29 2	36 2	25 1	
IGNACIA	37 1/2	27 2	36 0	23 1	
NICOLA	37 2	44 2	35 2	19 3	
SUBIANO	38 3 1/2	35 3	35 0	17 0	
AD ALMUM	47 3 1/2	27 2	34 3	15 0	

Hic fluvius dividitur in duas qd
 diffunditur. Ergo de f. b. em. Aus
 infulam q. interceptur. Postea
 dabim. lacera fluminis: usq. ubi
 in unu redeant.

14

15 Source: Leon Battista Alberti, *Descriptio urbis Romae*: tables VII à X. Oxford, Bodleian Library,
 16 ms. Can Misc. 172 [=O], f° 235v.

¹⁶Tafuri Manfredo; *op. cit.* pag. 15

1 **Figure 2.** Table XVI of the 16 panels of the list of alphanumeric topographical
 2 data from *Descriptio urbis Romae* (1450), by Leon Battista Alberti (Genoa
 3 1404–Rome 1472)

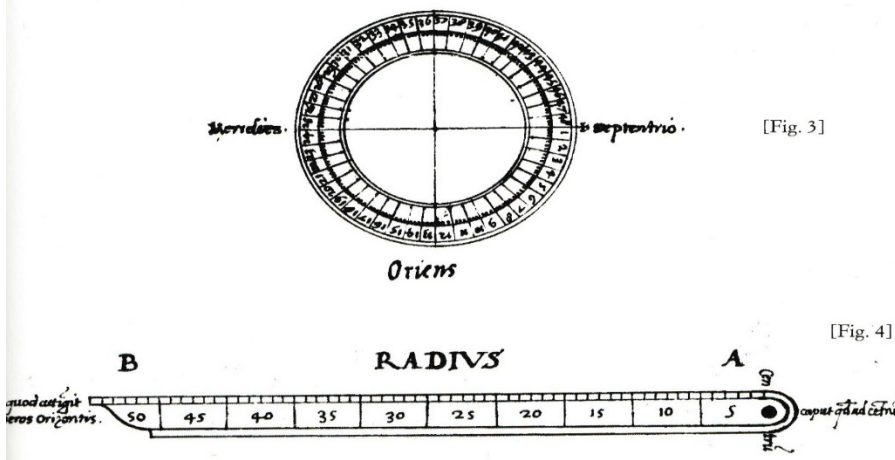
Templa & publicorum aedificia

NOMINA LOCORUM	Ordo	ADIVS
max. zeri basilia	39 0	38 0
meta	28 3	39 4
Castellu	26 3	40 0
Spiritus	29 2	38 1
Paronimicus	17 1	38 3
Onlogii capo flos	16 2	37 0
zocida zaitet	13 1	42 0
Columna Amrod	14 2	45 3
Columna Adiciam	5 2	47 4
mensa neris	13 2	47 4
Carvina turres		
Furthum Coltan	10 3	1 4
Militia	5 0	4 2
Saba	24 2	22 4
Balbina	22 2	20 0
Ins ad Latina	36 0	17 0
Ins Apostoli	28 2	14 2
Crucis	39 2	13 0
Stephanopu	22 0	16 2
Ins z'ant	17 0	17 0
Maria minor	22 0	8 0
Capaque	23 2	10 0
Thorne	21 2	4 3
Zampend	12 1	6 3
Zem mmo	24 1	32 1

Gradus Minuta Gradus Minuta

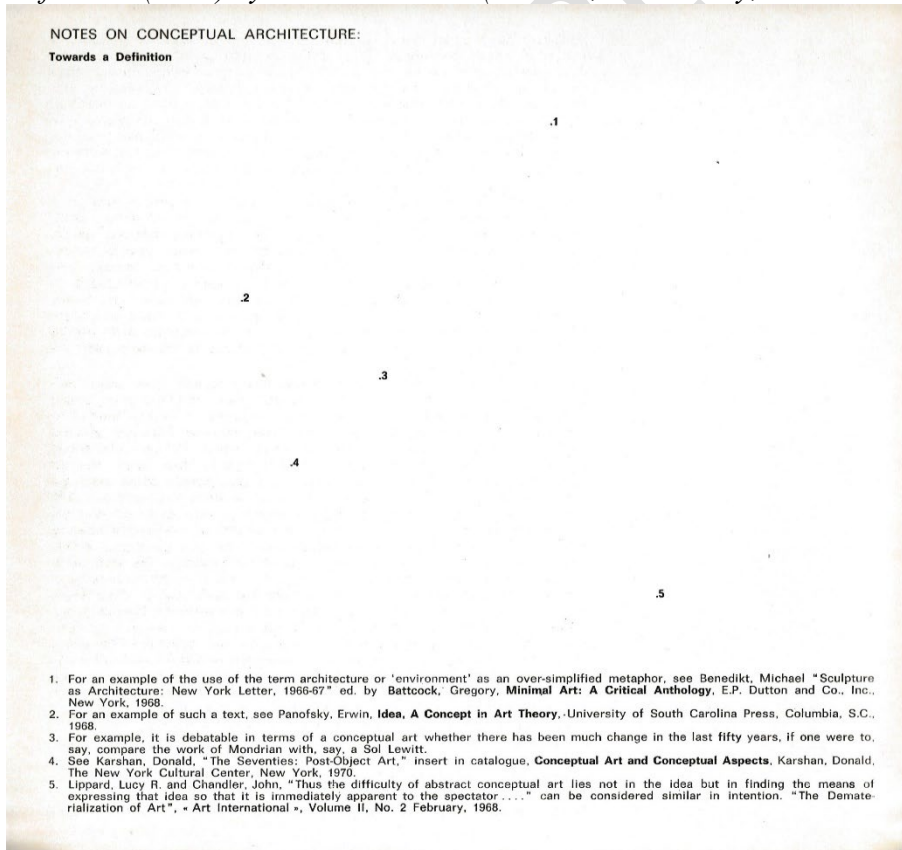
4 Source: Leon Battista Alberti, *Descriptio urbis Romae: tables XVI, première partie* Oxford,
 5 Bodleian Library, ms. Can Misc. 172 [=O], f° 236v.
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1 **Figure 3.** Leon Battista Alberti's representation of the horizon and radius, the
2 tools used to "build" the "machine" for representing the Descriptio urbis
3 Romae



4 Source: Leon Battista Alberti, representations of the horizon and radius of the Descriptio urbis
5 Romae in codex Chig. M vii 149 of the Vatican Apostolic Library
6
7

8 **Figure 4.** The first page of Notes on a Conceptual Architecture: Toward a
9 Definition (1971) by Peter Eisenman (Newark, New Jersey, United States, 1932)



10 Source: Peter Eisenman la prima pagina di Notes on a Conceptual Architecture: Toward a
11 Definition", published in Casabella 359-360 in 1971
12
13

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