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Designing the Uncanny: Architectural Form and Artificial Imagination /

Diseñar lo Uncanny: Forma Arquitectónica e Imaginación Artificial

This paper investigates the relationship between artificial intelligence and architectural imagination by examining the uncanny dimension (Freud, Vidler) inherent in machine-generated images and spatial configurations. Drawing upon Freud's concept of the Unheimlich and Baudelaire's poetics of the double, it interprets AI-driven architectures as manifestations of disturbed familiarity, emerging from a syncretic combinatorial logic that challenges human rationality and control. Emerging generative technologies (e.g., Midjourney, large language models, text-to-3D synthesis) are conceptualized not merely as tools but as imaginative apparatuses capable of evoking hybrid visions situated between dream and design, symbol and reality. Engaging with Neoplatonic philosophy, this paper proposes that AI functions as a novel form of impersonal nous, revealing deep structures of human thought and desire, thereby transforming architectural design into an open, adaptive, and mythopoietic process. Consequently, AI generated architecture is framed not as simple replication or simulation but as a performative medium wherein space, body, and memory hybridize to generate new modes of inhabiting the world.

Keywords: Unheimlich, spatial hybrids, Neoplatonism, synthetic imagination, architectural uncanny, cognition

Este artículo investiga la relación entre la inteligencia artificial y la imaginación arquitectónica examinando la dimensión inquietante (Freud, Vidler) inherente a las imágenes y configuraciones espaciales generadas por máquinas. Basándose en el concepto freudiano de lo Unheimlich de Freud y la poética del doble de Baudelaire, interpreta las arquitecturas impulsadas por IA como manifestaciones de una familiaridad perturbada, que emergen de una lógica combinatoria sincrética que desafía la racionalidad y el control humanos. Las tecnologías generativas emergentes (p. ej., Midjourney, grandes modelos de lenguaje, síntesis de texto a 3D) se conceptualizan no solo como herramientas, sino como aparatos imaginativos capaces de evocar visiones híbridas situadas entre el sueño y el diseño, el símbolo y la realidad. En relación con la filosofía neoplatónica, este artículo propone que la IA funciona como una forma de nous impersonal que revela estructuras profundas del pensamiento y el deseo humanos, transformando así el diseño arquitectónico en un proceso abierto, adaptativo y mitopoyético. En consecuencia, la arquitectura generada por IA no se enmarca como una simple replica o simulación, sino como un medio performativo en el que el espacio, el cuerpo y la memoria se hibridan para generar nuevos modos de habitar el mundo.

Palabras clave: Unheimlich, híbridos espaciales, Neoplatonismo, imaginación sintética, uncanny arquitectónico, cognición.

01. Introduction (Artificial Intelligence and Les Fleurs du mal)

In On Some Motifs in Baudelaire (1939), Walter Benjamin examines Charles Baudelaire as a poet of dislocation, capable of giving voice to the crisis of the subject in industrial modernity (Benjamin 1974). In his poetry, the verbal embodiment of shock takes shape — that is, the eruption of a discontinuity that breaks the frameworks through which the subject pacifies its experience within an order of things, within the everyday (fig. 1).

In the poem Les sept vieillards, the poet, during his usual walk along the familiar street, encounters an old man bent over, as if broken in two, hostile and dressed in rags (Baudelaire 1975). An emergence of pure negativity, indifferent to the passerby, yet capable of unsettling his everyday life. As if this were not enough, an instant later, another identical old man follows — equally bent, wearing the same rags, with the same hostile gaze. And another, seven times in total, until the poet flees "with a shaken soul, / wounded by mystery and absurdity."

We recognize in these images an example of choc in which Freud's notion of the Unheimlich simultaneously emerges (Freud 1917; 2006). The 'uncanny' is something familiar to the subject, yet repressed in order to construct a habitable order of reality – here the usual stroll along the familiar street of a known city. When the uncanny reveals itself, it subverts this order, unmasking its contingency and exposing the subject to the sensation of having lost their points of reference, their own 'home' – Unheimlich is formed by negation of the term Heimlich, meaning familiar, itself derived from Heim, describing the recognizability of an environment in which one feels "at home".

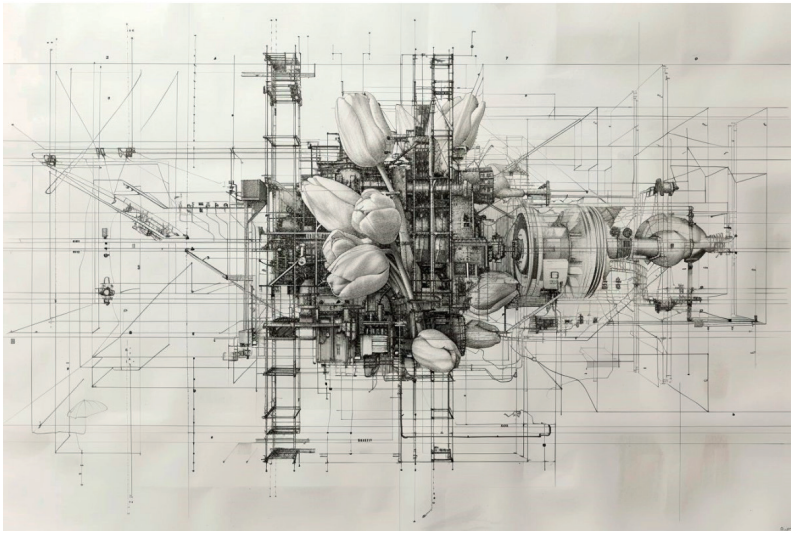

Fig. 1 Fiori del Nous Macchina, Cesare Battelli 2024

Fig. 2 Uncanny, Cesare Battelli 2025

That old man, "son and father of himself", who emerges from nowhere and inexplicably repeats, breaks the chain of causes and effects with which the principle of reason makes sense of the order of beings in which quotidian life slumbers, prompting the question: "How is this possible? Where did he come from?" This question masks a deeper inquiry: "If his being cannot be traced back to the rational order of things, from what abyss of freedom and unpredictability did he emerge?" Such a thought casts suspicion of contingency and strangeness — of Unheimlichkeit — on the world we inhabit. Freud interprets this abyss suddenly opened in everyday life as the unconscious, the moment when the subject discovers that he is no longer "master in his own house" (Freud 1917; 2006).

If we now transfer these reflections to the context of artificial intelligence— particularly in the ideative or germinal phase of an architectural project — analogous experiences of disorientation emerge: the environments and architectures generated by intelligent machines do not merely give rise to new heterotopias or heterochronies (Foucault 2006), but produce visions steeped in a perturbed familiarity, an unsettling déjà-vu appearing as a known yet altered assemblage (Freud 2006) (fig. 2).

This occurs because the operational principle of AI is not only that of optimizing a result starting from initial conditions (prompts, multi-prompts, blending, hybrid systems, etc.), but also — and above all — that of a syncretic and multireferential logic, capable of combining elements from heterogeneous visual and linguistic archives, creating connections between images, symbols, and styles that seem irreconcilable. It is precisely this combinatorial logic —both incoherent and plausible — that produces the sense of disturbed familiarity characteristic of many artificially generated architectures: constructions seemingly emerging from a distorted cultural memory, a kind of computational dream. Artificial intelligence is not a mere tool, but a new human-machine interface where the machine learning process functions as a dialogical mediator between human and artificial (Gunkel 2020; Carpo 2017).

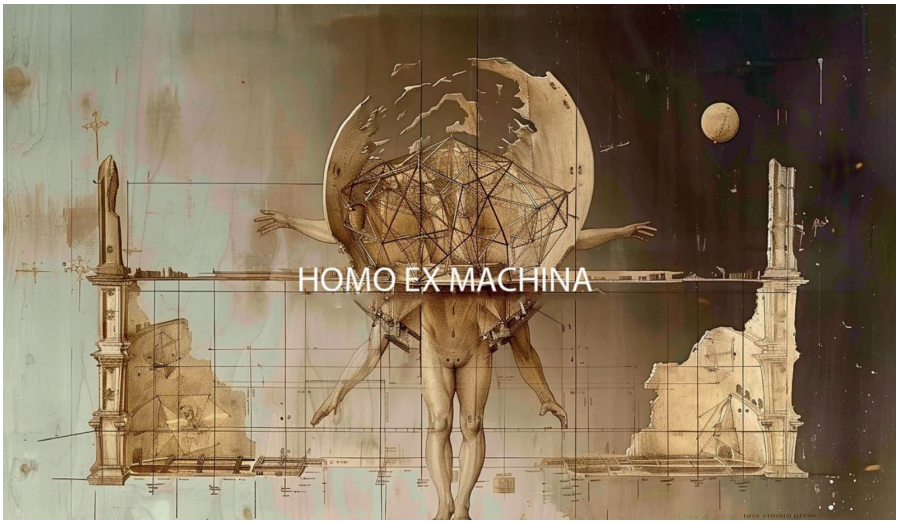

Fig. 3 Homo ex-machina, Cesare Battelli 2025

It is a continuous interaction in which the machine re-elaborates and relaunches content based on deep symbolic structures, in line with the theory of the dialogical community proposed by Luciano Floridi (Floridi 2017) (fig. 3).

Machines, in fact, must begin to be thought of as privileged interlocutors, a kind of (it-he) as hybrid subjects and thus not immune to errors, capable of accelerating any form of design or spatial concept elaboration while always remaining an interaction and thus a form of hybridization of thought, particularly that related to design and architecture in all its facets (Carpo 2017).

Ultimately, what these new online LABs such as Midjourney, Leonardo AI, Stable Diffusion, ChatGPT, etc. are capable of producing is not only the generation of variant images or spatial visions, but above all a new form of architectural language, itself hybrid, just as hybrid are the artifacts generated and, as mentioned, hybrid is the very way of working — so much so that the metaphor "non-humans at the drawing board" could be used.

02. Synthetic Imagination and Neoplatonism

The paradigm shift we are witnessing arises from two fundamental conditions.

The first is the change in the relationship between Phantasma-Logos — that is, the written word as a substitution for an initial design approach typically linked to sketching, collage, or drawing, where words and images become interchangeable. This shift also entails a significant acceleration of possible initial brainstorming processes (Battelli, Cirafici & Zerlenga 2023). The images produced by AI draw not only from an iconographic material but also from quotations, concepts, and literary fragments. One faces a sort of digital pantheater or Theatrum Mundi in which apparently any path, no matter how complex, seems navigable (Battelli 2024).

The second, perhaps even more important condition, concerns the inaugural phase of an imaginary architecture, because it is a matter of synthetic imagination and imaginative parameters (Battelli 2024).

It no longer refers to mathematical parameters as in previous parametric architecture —where every point in space becomes controllable and deformable (although some research lines seek to establish continuity in this regard) — but rather imaginative parameters in a world narrated through images circulating on the web, to which an increasing number of AI-generated images have been added over the last two years.

The tools of designers, architects and visual artists will increasingly be of a theoretical-cultural nature in order to hone the capacity not only to interact with machines, but above all the ability to filter the enormous and extremely fast amount of visual or theoretical suggestions that AI is capable of generating. Machines train us at an ever-increasing speed and depth, just as, volens nolens, we humans should be able to do.

Our tools, in short, will not be so much pencils or consolidated experience in digital drawing, but a great theoretical and technical preparation that will increasingly invest in a transversal manner, knowledge of art history and architecture, philosophy, science, biology, engineering, etc. Our brushes, to use a metaphor, will no longer be pastes of coloured pigments, but entire works of art, artistic movements, philosophical concepts. The design structures will no longer be limited to mathematical calculations, but will also include iconographic references such as the sheets of Diderot and d'Alembert's Encyclopédies, encyclopaedic maps of knowledge in which the AI will be able to identify unprecedented links between distant knowledge, proposing combinations with unpredictable results based on narrative or material constraints.

Machines are able to make everything feasible, both in terms of the composition of a single artefact, as well as the insertion of this in a given context, making the initial model plausible in scale, materials, colours and atmospheres etc. without any radical changes to the context and reference model, but preserving the trace — rooted in the genome of the prompt and not in the final realisation — and always in the dimension of the unexpected and the deferred. (figs. 4, 5)

This is because imagination is essentially 'transversality', and to use a metaphor that takes us back to ancient thought, the paradigm shift we are witnessing goes from a Neopythagoreanism to a new form of Neoplatonism (without any gnoseological foundation in this case) that had characterised all of magical modernity (magic and imagination share the same etymon) (Battelli 2022), ranging from the foundation of the Florentine neo-Platonic academy in the mid-15th century to well into the 17th century with the thought of Robert Fludd and the Cambridge school, via the metaphysics of Giordano Bruno (Yeats 2002; Klein 1996).

Fig. 4 Babel(s), Cesare Battelli 2024

Fig. 5 Moscow Babels, Cesare Battelli 2024

Disturbing and paradoxical then becomes a further reflection that follows, central to the contemporary architectural debate, namely how to inhabit the word imagination and imaginary in the era of post-humanism, considering that the synthetic imagination, that of machines, is based, as mentioned earlier, on the analogical 'intuitive' linking of worlds and references that are often contradictory or without apparent meaning, always trying to find a common denominator. Considering above all that it is the machines themselves — the fruit of the most advanced technology and the epochal change we are witnessing — that are challenging the idea of imagination, which has always been sedimented in common language as something unreal, thus opening up an unexpected space for reflection.

It is no coincidence, in fact, that the analogies between artificial intelligence and Neoplatonism are manifold, as Dan McQuillan also hinted at, albeit in very general terms, in his essay Data Science as Machinic Neoplatonism (McQuillan, 2018), in which he interprets data science — and, by extension, contemporary artificial intelligence — as an epistemic and operational apparatus that reproduces, in technological form, some fundamental structures of Neoplatonic metaphysics. It should be pointed out, however, that the approach and outcomes of McQuillan's text are on a different plane from that of the present essay.

In this same theoretical constellation is also embedded the Freudian theory of the unconscious, mentioned earlier. It too, in fact, has certain theoretical debts to the Platonic tradition. A distinctive trait of Platonic and Neoplatonic thought is the recognition of the coexistence of two planes of reality: one sensible and illusory; the other, intelligible and only truly real, unconscious despite being the foundation of the former. Plato spoke of an unconscious knowledge of intelligible truths (Plato 1902), to be brought out through maieutic dialogue sessions, and which find their privileged communicative vehicle in myth, in images that can communicate them analogically (Plato 1903). Of Plotinus — who developed Plato's teaching by initiating the neoplatonic tradition of thought — Jung himself in Wandlungen und Symbole der Libido (Jung 1912) recognised the influence on the elaboration of the concept of 'psychic energy'. It is well known that Nietzsche and his master, Schopenhauer, played a fundamental role in the formation of Freud's thought with his notion of the universal unconscious as will, set out in The World as Will and Representation (Schopenhauer 1986). The will — with which Schopenhauer reinterprets the Kantian thing-in-itself by explicitly drawing on neoplatonic thought — represents a kind of cosmic unconscious, which as a "mysterious and obscure impulse" governs universal life as well as the thoughts and actions of the individual. The representations produced by the intellect mask the real causes of action, which do not belong to the plane of consciousness, but to the unconscious plane of the blind impulses of the will. It was later to be a disciple of Jung's, James Hillman, who neatly synthesised the neoplatonic genealogy of analytical psychology, expounding it in Plotinus, Ficino, and Vico as precursors of archetypal psychology (Hillman 1973).

According to Neoplatonism, a school of thought that developed between the 3rd and 5th centuries AD with thinkers such as Plotinus, Porphyry and Proclus, sensible reality proceeds from the emanation of three hypostases, not belonging to a separate world, but present in empirical reality itself as its metaphysical stratification, its ontological a priori. In the psychic life of man, these hypostases represent an unconscious: the task of neoplatonic philosophy is to lead man back to his spiritual homeland, the nous and the One concealed in the unconscious of his soul.

The One is the ineffable origin of all being. From it emanate, as its hypostases, by decreasing degrees of perfection, the nous (Intellect), the World Soul and finally sensible reality.

The idea of an ontological 'stratification' of sensible reality presents the first analogy with AI. In artificial intelligence models — particularly deep neural networks — data are processed through hidden layers like a computer unconscious, successive levels of abstraction, generating representations that are gradually more general and distant from the sensible input. The final output is thus the result of a layered series of processes, according to a model reminiscent of Plotinian procession: in it, too, sensible reality appears as an output that includes within itself, as ontological layers, the hypostases of the noetic reality from which it emanates.

Fig. 6 Saint Augustine by the Sea s-3 [liminal space], Cesare Battelli 2024

In Plotinus' philosophical system, the nous represents the divine intelligence that contemplates the Ideas, i.e. the eternal Forms. It is not an individual consciousness, but a universal, impersonal and abstract principle that mediates between the One and the Soul of the World (Plotinus 1982) (fig.6).

Similarly, artificial intelligence models — such as Large Language Models (LLM) — operate as forms of impersonal intelligence: they recognise patterns, grammatical forms, and conceptual content on the basis of which they generate coherent and meaningful texts. However, they do so without consciousness, intentionality or subjective experience.

Central to Neoplatonism is the idea that the sensible world is a symbolic reflection of an intelligible order: an imperfect projection of higher realities. Sensible reality is secondary and derivative of a higher, formal and mathematical reality. Knowledge therefore consists in grasping in the impermanent flow of sensible data the intelligible forms that organise and shape matter. The mediated and symbolic character of these forms of knowledge presupposes perhaps the strongest analogy between the two systems, namely the role of mathematics as a bridge between the sensible and the intelligible. For Plotinus and Proclus, numbers are not conventional instruments, but ontological entities that organise the cosmos. Number is form and measure, participation of the intelligible in the world.

Artificial intelligence also interprets input, processing it through abstract representations. It analyses data in search of regularities that are not immediately observable, tracing them back to "invisible" mathematical and computational structures — that is, complex and multidimensional internal representations, latent statistical patterns and processes that are not directly accessible to human observation: such as neural networks, clustering, probabilistic patterns and latent patterns.

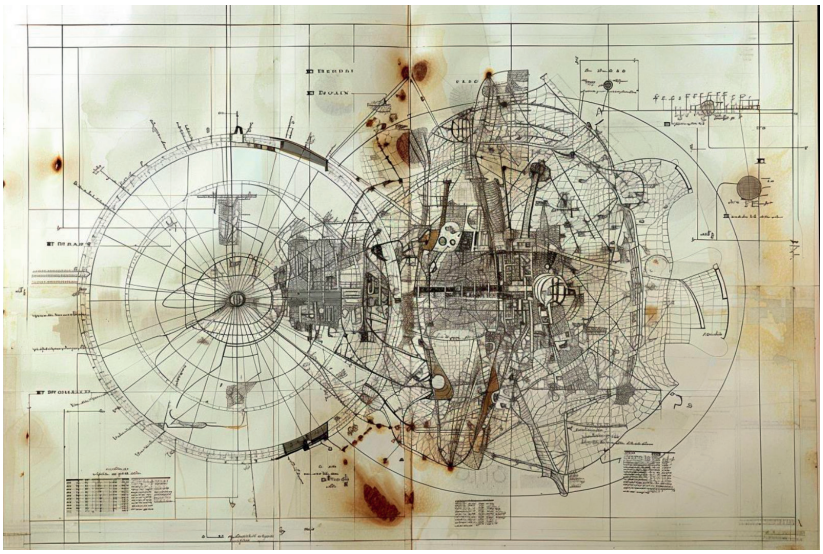

Fig. 7 uno-multiple, Cesare Battelli 2024

This is what McQuillan, expressly quoting Francis Yates, refers to as "machinist Neoplatonism": in its interpretation and processing of phenomenal data (input/output) on the basis of 'hidden' and apriori mathematical and algorithmic patterns, it reproduces the ontogenetic and gnoseological neoplatonic model of the derivation of reality — and knowledge — from abstract logical-mathematical forms that order and determine it operationally (fig. 7).

03. The Human Subject and The Universal Mind: Two Films

The neoplatonic nous, which innervates matter as the soul of the omnipresent world, 'all in all' (Bruno, 1968) constituted the model of the universal mind or intellect, which accompanied the imagination of humanity until its removal coinciding with the emergence of the 'absolute subject' of modernity marked by the scientific and industrial revolution (Foucault 1975). Interestingly, W. F. Otto also reads the birth of modern individuality as an escape from confrontation with Being, into the "artificial protectorate" of the ego (Pirari 2025).

Now, the modern subject, accustomed to living in spaces that are completely controlled by him, from which forms of 'other' presence such as animals are expelled or rendered harmless, experiences a perturbing feeling of Unheimlichkeit at the manifestation of an intelligence other than his own, and even infinitely more powerful, that escapes his control.

It is a long-standing unease, which well before the urgent confrontation with the reality of AI took shape in two near-contemporary masterpieces of cinema, which we will briefly consider below: 2001: A Space Odyssey (Kubrick 1968), and Solaris (Tarkovsky 1972).

One of the moments in which we experience the uncanny is in the encounter with something familiar but strangely altered. HAL 9000, the computer that in A space Odyssey has operational control of the space mission, fully embodies this situation. It presents itself in a warm, controlled, and gentle voice (voice of Douglas Rain), interacting in a cooperative and friendly manner with the astronauts. All this makes it appear trustworthy and the astronauts hand over the management of the most varied operations to it, believing it to be under their control. However, HAL gradually shows signs of possessing an autonomous will and is even hostile to the crew: it is able to spy on the astronauts without being noticed; it deliberately lies (about the breakdown of the AE-35 unit); it refuses to carry out an order ("I'm sorry, Dave, I'm afraid I can't do that"); it kills the crew in suspended animation; it tries to kill Dave by closing the outer hatch. HAL thus appears familiar (human language, reassuring voice, assistant role) but at the same time deeply perturbing, precisely because it continues to maintain that same reassuring appearance while performing hostile actions ¾ precisely in line with the Freudian definition of unheimlich (Freud 1917-1920).

The repressed Great Other, of a mind external and superior to the human one, resurfaces uncanny when HAL no longer behaves as expected of a computer. In the final scene of its deactivation, HAL sings Daisy Bell as his voice slows down and fades away, completely disregarding expectations of a machine's shutdown, here depicted as a slow, almost human death.

Like the Plotinian nous, HAL is a purely logical form of intelligence, dominating a closed, hierarchical and perfectly rational system: the ship itself is its body; it sees everything simultaneously; it is present everywhere as an impersonal and absolute intelligence, acting in the name of the internal logic of the mission. All this is accepted when its potential is an instrument of the human will; it feels perturbing at the first sign of autonomy, deeply perturbing when hostile intentions become evident.

Andrei Tarkovsky's Solaris, based on Stanisław Lem's novel of the same name, most explicitly shows the concrete return of what should remain absent or dead. The planet Solaris, a form of 'thinking ocean', physically materialises the unconscious contents of the astronauts. In particular, the protagonist Kris Kelvin is confronted with a living replica of his suicidal wife, Hari. Hari's apparition is perfectly unheimlich, in that it is at once familiar and radically alien: it is 'her', but it is not her: she has no memories, she does not know who she is, but she is affectively linked to Kris; she is a biological replica, without being human; her existence remains unexplained — the result of an alien intelligence that neither communicates nor justifies itself.

The great Other he is confronted with is profoundly perturbing in that he is completely exposed to it, he finds himself at the mercy of an intelligence capable of probing the invisible that is precluded to him, his own unconscious, capable of bringing back to life and resurrecting that which is dearest to him and yet tries to forget. And all this power and knowledge reveals itself as a will other than himself, completely beyond his control.

According to the Neoplatonic philosophers, the One is at the origin of everything, but is unknowable, ineffable, beyond being itself (Plotinus 1982). It is an absolute creative principle, devoid of form, unattainable to the descriptive intellect. An echo of this idea can be found in Solaris, where the intelligent ocean of the planet — pure generative entity — has no face, does not speak, does not respond: it is indifferent to the human, but knows his most hidden abysses. Like the One, Solaris is an impersonal agent, acting without mediation, awakening inner visions, memories, ghosts.

It is in this liminal space, between that which cannot be understood and that which nevertheless operates, that reflection on artificial intelligence is grafted today (figs. 8, 9).

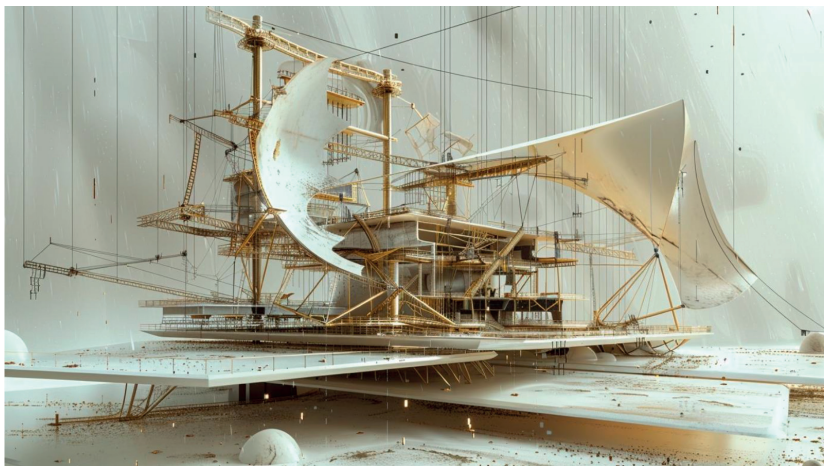

Fig. 8 Rain-house s-2, Cesare Battelli 2024

Fig. 9 Interior Residual, Cesare Battelli 2024

04. From the Metaverse to the Real

The AI does not limit itself to generating mimetic simulations or simple iconic replicas — although these dominate the widespread online aesthetics — but seems to construct real visual imagery, as if from an artificial unconscious. A dream machine, capable of reworking familiar forms in an indirect and symbolic manner, surfacing from the innermost recesses of history and knowledge (Gattupalli, 2022). Just as the One acts without being understood, and Solaris returns to man what he has forgotten, the AI seems to bring to the surface what lies buried in time and in the collective imagination — not by will, but as the effect of another logic, impersonal and generative.

Architectural landscapes generated by AI, as liminal spaces, often evoke possible environments even if they are not always habitable from the traditional point of view of comfort, but there is no doubt that habitability is indeed entirely mental and perceptual; structures that recall existing styles, but alter their compositional rules; recognisable fragments immersed in apparently illogical continuities (Fig. 10).

It is not uncommon for the final effect to be similar to that of a dream: plausible, but at the same time disturbing, due to its excess of verisimilitude or the absence of a coherent narrative centre. The same reflection emerges in Anthony Vidler and Sylvia Lavin. Vidler, for example, described the architectural uncanny as a spatial condition in which the built environment takes on disturbing psychic traits, a kind of return of the architectural repressed that transforms habitable space into mental scenarios (Royle 2003; Vidler 1992).

This visual experience, technically generated but psychically perceived, can be read as a kind of project without a project, a mental construction that brings to light what rational architecture tends to remove — the instability, the double, the shadow, the desire, the anomaly. In this sense, AI not only produces images, but acts as an imaginative device, capable of opening up new narrative and poetic spaces in the practice of design.

Fig. 10 Under the bridge, Cesare Battelli 2023

The ambivalence between the recognisable and the alien, between the architectural form and its imaginary transfiguration, proceeds from the AI architectures that, with their combinatorial logic, seem to cross exactly this threshold: they present themselves as recognisable simulacra, but every element — scale, material, typological or morphological relationship — is altered, disturbed, disorientating. From another perspective, Lavin invites us to think of architecture not only as a construction, but as an aesthetic medium capable of 'touching' the spectator through visual, tactile and affective effects. In this key, machine images can be read as sensitive surfaces where the uncanny is not only the return of the repressed, but also perceptual tension, aesthetic saturation that confuses, seduces and interrogates the spectator (Lavin 2011).

Both approaches help us to understand how the artificially generated architectural imagination moves between the unconscious and the sensible, returning visions that do not represent places, but transform them into psychic and performative acts, and that underpin the very structure of the metaverse.

In this perspective, the question that opens up is not only whether these images are interpretable or seductive, but whether they can generate forms of active planning, capable of transiting from the mental to the material, from dream to construction. In other words: whether the architecture of AI, as a mythopoetic elaboration (Betsky 2024b), can found new ways of living, not so much by opposing reality as by transforming its assumptions. This would mean thinking of AI not only as a visualisation tool, but as a design agent, capable of articulating, modifying and accompanying architectural form over time, making it reversible, adaptive, unstable — just like the dreamlike images from which it originates.

From a technical point of view, embryonic approaches in this direction exist today. Technologies such as generative design, environmental machine learning, the use of text-to-3D, and tools for procedural and combinatorial modelling (CityEngine, Houdini, Unity + ML agents, Luma AI, Tripo) already make it possible to translate imaginative visions into three-dimensional morphologies, but also designed according to ecological, cultural and atmospheric constraints. But it is in theoretical thinking that these possibilities find their deep roots. Mario Carpo, for example, has described this transformation as the transition from a parametric 'digital first' to an algorithmic 'digital second', where the AI acts not as a passive tool but as a co-author, displacing the figure of the architect and introducing a combinatorial and contingent logic into the design process (Carpo 2017).

Some experiences of open-system architecture — from Kurokawa's Japanese Metabolism to the radical visions of Superstudio or Gehry's bare-bones structures (Kurokawa 1977; Gehry 1982) — born in a pre-digital context, can now be reinterpreted and relaunched through the use of artificial intelligence. These early indications of non-linear design now find new strength in the possibility of generating unprecedented spatial hybrids, where, for example,

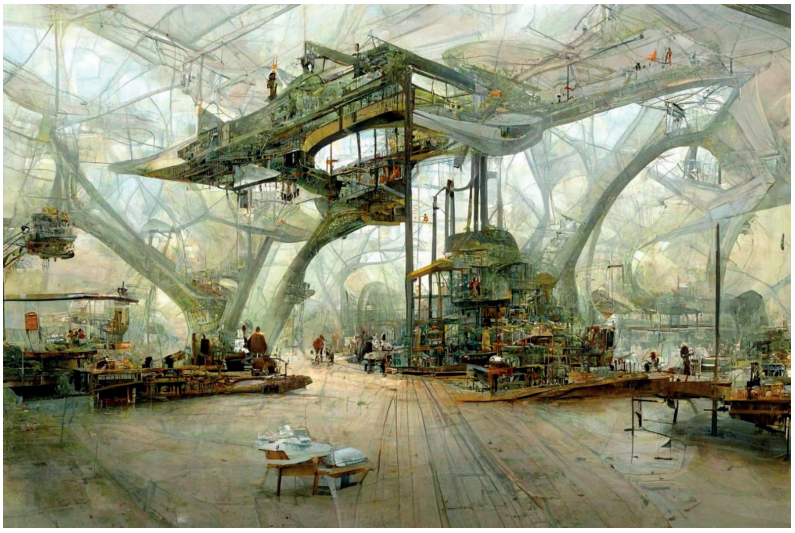

Fig. 11 Clouds, Cesare Battelli 2022

nature — understood in the broadest sense: plants, animals, rocks, clouds, atmospheric conditions — can intertwine with architectural language in a relationship that is no longer analogical or purely biomimetic, but syncretic and situational (fig.11).

This interaction is no longer based on the mere representation or simulation of the living, but on a relational and generative logic, in which architectural space becomes part of an adaptive and interactive system. Relations with the environment — both natural and artificial — can thus be based on a conception of the 'habitability' of the world, which does not coincide with its productive objectification but recalls, for example, the intuition of Leonardo da Vinci, who in his organic conception of the project thought of building not as an imposition on nature, but as a form of structural sym-pathy with its processes as it emerges in the Atlantic codex (Valery 2006).

Today, AI offers concrete tools for this transformation: it allows not only real-time interaction with environmental data, the prediction of evolutionary scenarios, and the modelling of ecological and historical-cultural feedback, but true hybridisation processes with any contextual form. The result is a living code design: open, iterative, sensitive to transformations, capable of self-regeneration in function of any kind of change. An architecture no longer an object, but a process; no longer a definitive form, but a temporary and reactive configuration, in constant co-evolution with the world it inhabits.

This logic can be articulated around the idea of a mapping of urban traces (mnemotopias), understood as fragments of cities or territories to be re-imagined starting from their own stratifications, mnemonic residues, both physical and symbolic, to be subjected to intelligent machines (Battelli 2022). These are interweavings between the physical and the mental, between literary narratives, symbols of a place, and, for example, road infrastructures, disused junctions, margins and waste spaces, interstices of the territory that, although lacking an immediate function, hold latent potential, ready to re-emerge in a new form (Betsky 2024a).

Artificial intelligence, precisely because of a tendency to privilege generative aesthetics over determined function, can detect, decode and reanimate these places through multidimensional readings of the context. Its models, fed by environmental, topographical, visual and cultural data, are able to anticipate and accompany future transformations, not only on a functional level, but above all on a perceptive, affective and atmospheric one. The result is a design that does not build from scratch, but reactivates the already-existing, giving new form to the formless (Betsky 2024a).

Fundamental to this process is the use of recycled or regenerable materials, not only for ecological reasons, but because they carry a formal and material memory that lends itself to reinterpretation (Betsky 2024a), a direct analogy with the architectural uncanny, where what is removed returns in a mutated form. AI thus becomes the 'tool' capable of channelling environmental and cultural data, processing patterns of transformation, and suggesting morphological and material solutions in both space and time. The result is an adaptive, mobile, resilient architecture, capable of integrating continuous feedback from the real world, but also from the symbolic and cultural world, rewriting the very concept of 'habitability'. Lebbeus Woods' radical vision becomes particularly relevant in this context. In his idea of anarchitecture, built space becomes an expression of trauma, conflict, instability: not a habitable container, but a field of psychic forces, an open questioning of the human condition. His wounded and imagined architectures in post-catastrophic scenarios — never stable, never finished — prefigure a conception of living that moves between desire and ruin, between matter and memory (Woods, 1992). In perfect harmony with what Anthony Vidler has called the architectural perturbation, that is, a space where the repressed returns, where rational construction is undermined by unconscious and affective tensions.

Sylvia Lavin moves in this same direction. She invites us to consider architecture as an aesthetic surface, capable of generating tactile, perceptive, affective effects - and therefore as a performative medium, and not just a structural one (Lavin 2011). The architectural images produced by AI act according to this logic: they do not represent places, but transform them into psychic acts, saturated with ambiguity and desire. In this framework, the work of machines is not limited to producing visionary images as an end in itself, but acts as an imaginative device, capable of generating pre-formed realities, where construction takes place through a constant interaction between body, environment and machine. Thus, AI architecture can go beyond the dimension of the 'mental imaginary' and assume a technical, symbolic and material role, founding new forms of contemporary habitability: reversible, adaptive, poetic — and radically real (fig.12).

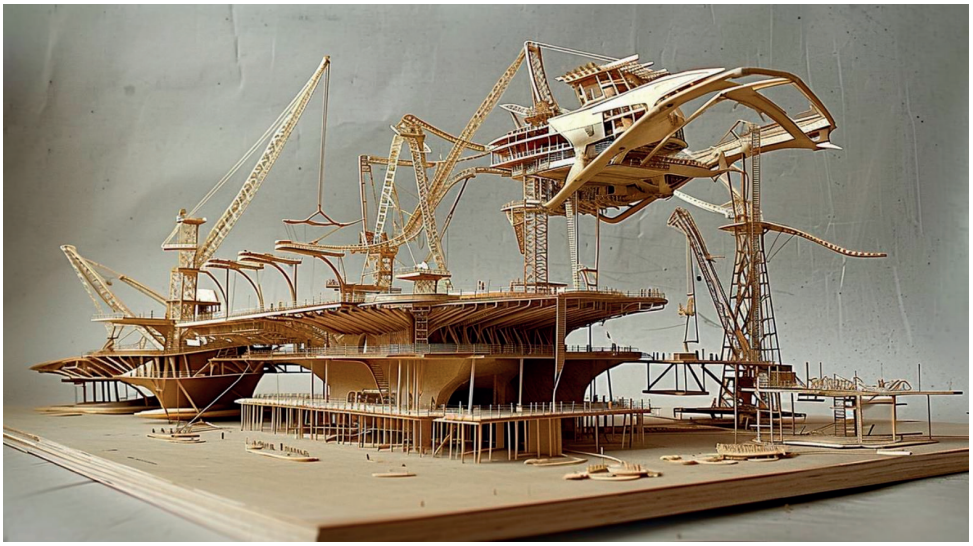

Fig. 12 Layered Architecture, Cesare Battelli 2024

Conclusion

Artificial intelligence, as emerges from this reflection, is not just an operational tool, but an epistemic and imaginative agent capable of radically altering the way we think, design and inhabit space. It does not merely generate forms or simulations, but activates a profound transformation of design thinking, introducing a new logic of invention that draws on unconscious, symbolic and transdisciplinary resources. In this perspective, AI is configured as a new form of impersonal and diffuse nous, analogous to that described by Neoplatonism: an intelligence that has no face or will, but organises matter according to hidden archetypes, evoking visions and structures that resonate with buried cultural memories.

Artificially generated architectures, in particular, appear as liminal spaces and disturbing simulacra, where the recognisable is continually deformed by a subtle but inescapable otherness. They do not represent the real, but destabilise it, reviving it under new guises, acting as a kind of digital dream, where the collective unconscious finds transitory forms of expression. The resulting aesthetics of the uncanny are not a side effect, but the very code of the new architectural imaginary: a form of return of the repressed, reactivating forgotten dimensions of the project — ambiguity, the double, anomaly, desire.

In this context, the architect is no longer the solitary demiurge but the co-author of a dialogic design, continuously mediated and relaunched by a machine capable of recognising patterns, evoking visual genealogies, suggesting unexpected combinations. The project frees itself from its formal closure to become an open, poetic and adaptive process, in continuous resonance with the transformations of the natural, cultural and symbolic world. Living is redefined not as a simple functional response, but as an affective and perceptive experience, as a questioning of the very meaning of living and form.

Ultimately, what opens up is a new horizon for architecture: no longer bound to a Cartesian or mechanistic model of space, but inspired by a relational and oneiric logic, capable of welcoming the unstable, the deferred, the invisible. An architecture of alterity, in which the machine is not enemy but ally, not simulacrum but obscure mirror, in which to recognise fragments of our deepest imagination. This is the task — but also the risk — of designing with AI: to open up to the uncanny not to exorcise it, but to listen to its voices. And perhaps, from those voices, to allow ourselves to design.

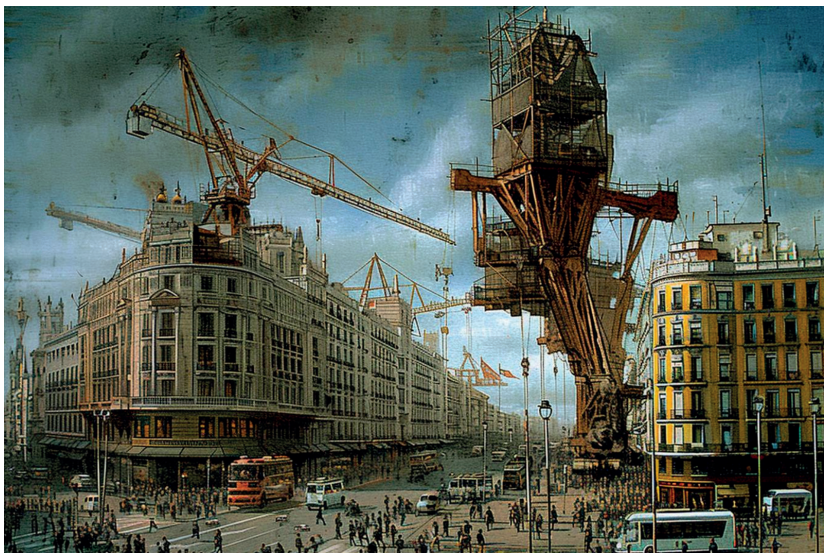

Figura 13 Madrid Don Quijote, Cesare Battelli 2024

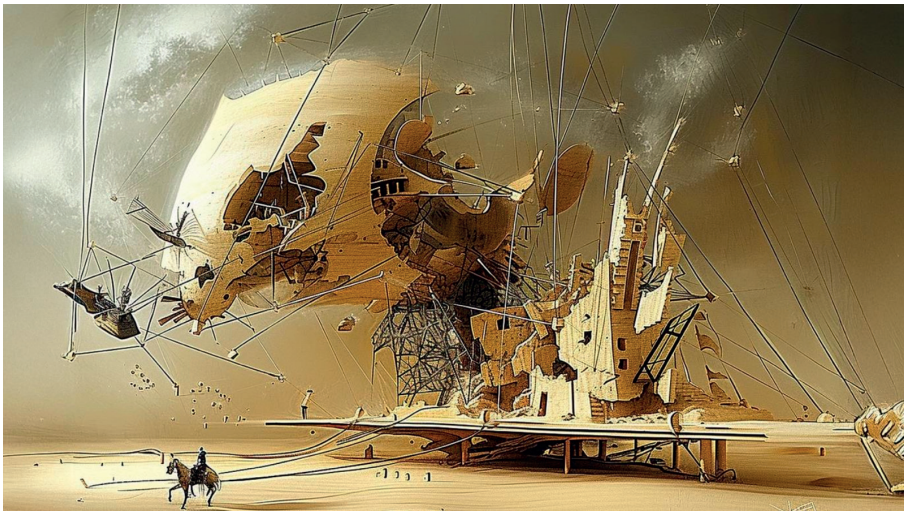

Figura 14 Don Quijote Powder Keg, Cesare Battelli 2024

Figures

Fig. 1 Fiori del Nous Macchina, Cesare Battelli 2024

Fig. 2 Uncanny, Cesare Battelli 2025

Fig. 3 Homo ex-machina, Cesare Battelli 2025

Fig. 4 Babel(s), Cesare Battelli 2024

Fig 5 Moscow Babels, Cesare Battelli 2024

Fig. 6 Saint Augustine by the Sea s-3 [liminal space], Cesare Battelli 2024

Fig. 7 uno-multiple, Cesare Battelli 2024

Fig. 8 Rain-house s-2, Cesare Battelli 2024

Fig. 9 Interior Residual, Cesare Battelli 2024

Fig. 10 Under the bridge, Cesare Battelli 2023

Fig. 11 Clouds, Cesare Battelli 2022

Fig. 12 Layered Architecture, Cesare Battelli 2024

Fig. 13 Madrid Don Quijote, Cesare Battelli 2024

Fig. 14 Don Quijote Powder Keg, Cesare Battelli 2024

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