

# From Nolli's Map to Tirana Hidden: Historical Fiction as Contemporary Urban Design Approach

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This paper<sup>1</sup> aims to explore how some fictions<sup>2</sup> elaborated during the history of architecture can be applied as a methodology for a contemporary urban design approach. There are example in the history of urban representation that can become useful design tools for exploring new territories and theoretical paradigms. The contribution of this paper is based on a series of design experiments and speculations elaborated during Applied Research activities operated in Tirana (Albania). In this framework, and before addressing the main topic, two important arguments will be underlined to guide the reader:

The first argument is that ideas drawn from history of architecture can become operative instruments only if reinterpreted through a theoretical and intellectual framework;

The second one can be identified through the concept of workshop + exhibition as an effective practice in the field of applied research by design.

Following the two above mentioned arguments, I wish to underline the value of city patterns as speculative design methodologies, and introduce two fundamental historical tools, which are important to understand this paper: Nolli's Map of Rome (*pianta grande di Roma 1748*), seen in our case as an interpretative tool aimed at defining the meaning of a 'hidden frame'<sup>3</sup>; and the famous 1978 exhibition *Rome Interrupted* at Mercati Traianei in Rome, where Nolli's historical map was used as a starting point to operate design speculations.

Both cases have been observed from many perspectives and investigated thoroughly before the workshop *Tirana Interrupted* was developed in September 2014, at POLIS University in Tirana and later, in January 2015, at the UCLA Department of Architecture and Planning

in Los Angeles. The concept of these workshops draws inspiration from one of the most important moments in the history of Rome, in 1978, when 12 architects invited by Giulio Carlo Argan and Piero Sartogo<sup>4</sup> started working on the famous exhibition entitled "*Rome Interrupted: 12 Interventions on the Nolli Map of Rome*". The main objective of the exhibition was to erase two hundred years of history characterized by speculation, thus reconfiguring an image of Rome starting from the plan drawn by Giovanni Battista Nolli<sup>5</sup> in 1748.

## INTRODUCTION

Based on the above mentioned experiences, this paper explores the value of Tirana's urban texture considering its uncontrollable inclination to develop through spontaneous processes, repeatedly interrupting the main unitary vision of the city. Observing Tirana from an elevated point of view, it became rather evident how its main characteristic of disorder and urban fragmentation appears as an organic system shaped by smart particles. Following this intuition, the value of fragments became an operative mode to establish a new point of view to work with the future image of the city.

As a consequence, the choice to use the case of the *Rome Interrupted* exhibition as base methodology for this research, is motivated considering the fact that one of the main aspects of this experiment is supported by the opportunity it offers to imagine the city, not anymore through a unitary vision like in the previous design experiences, but through independent and operative fragments. The fragments can be considered as metaphysical objects with the ability to behold: historical meaning, the charm of vagueness and, at the same time, to leave room for possible future scenarios. Tirana, like Rome, is a city composed by different layers and perceivable as a strong concentration of meanings, which can be managed through critical selections belonging an exquisite complexity. To inspire the future means to create a new urban paradigm in which the city is no longer conceived through a unique design action, but rather through apparently separate fragments connected by an underlying hidden frame – a hidden frame can be visualized through an act of interpretation whereby, using specific methods of representation, it's possible to bring to the surface an image of the city yet to be discovered.

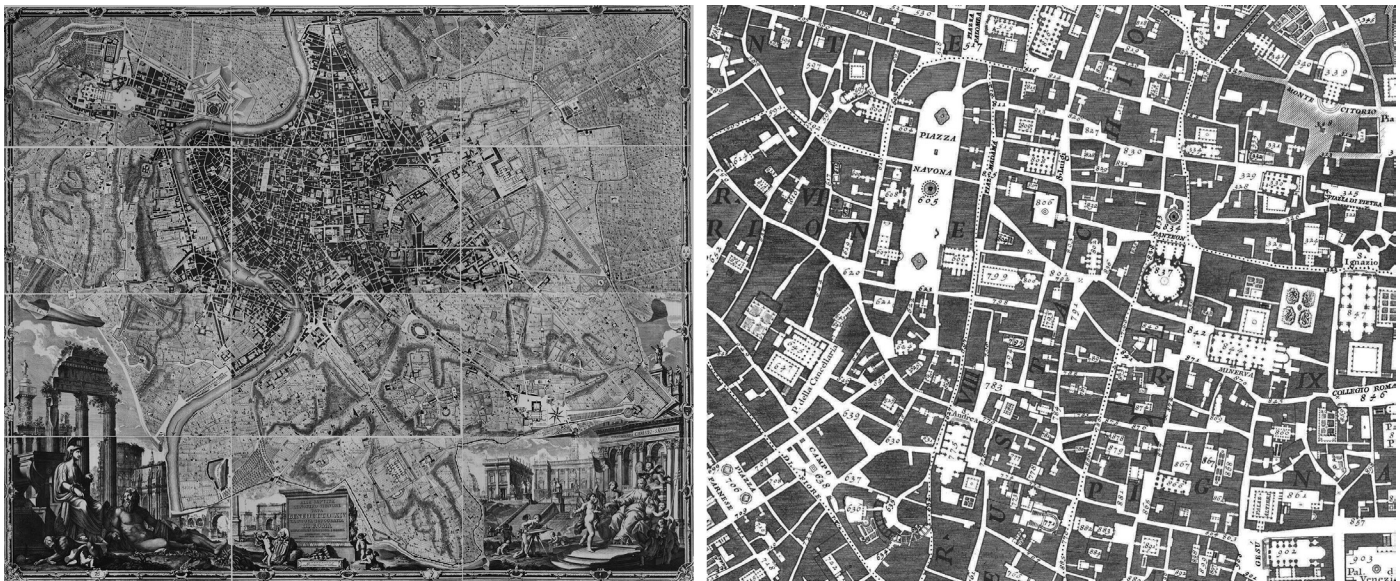


Figure 1: Nolli's map and a detail view, 1748. Source internet

### INTERPRETATIVE MAPS BETWEEN NOLLI'S MAP AND THE ROME INTERRUPTED EXHIBITION

The starting point of the Rome interrupted exhibition was the already mentioned map drawn by Nolli, the great map of Rome (pianta grande). Giambattista Nolli, who was not an architect but a surveyor, designed the first scientific topography of Rome in 1748. He considered the space between buildings as a swelling void<sup>6</sup> with an unusual capacity to generate urban space as a reaction. In other words, Nolli's idea was to represent, for the first time, an innovative map where the representation of the urban void, considered as unitary continuous space, became a diagram capable of connecting roads with important buildings. The scientific operation on the plan drawing was contradicted by a kind of representation in which, again for the first time, the beauty of Rome emerged through a representation in between the scientific and the interpretative field.

This paper attempts to explore the creative capacity that can rise between scientific and fictional urban representation techniques. The method applied by Nolli to measure and draw the topography of Rome was scientific; conversely, the way in which the section of buildings was represented was a fiction elaborated by him. In fact, when operating a plan section, it is not conceivable to represent only a selection of the building plans. In a certain sense, for the first time in the history, a scientific representation in plan was attempting to represent the invisible patterns of the city's morphology. This observation is a key element in the underlying logic described in this paper, particularly important to explain the concept of 'hidden frame'.

In the '70s, Rome was one of the most important centers in Italy, where intellectual experimentation in contemporary arts started to create new debates in the promotion of cultural activities. In this spirit an important non-profit organization was born, under the administration of Graziella Lonardi Buontempo and the presidency of Alberto Moravia, with the clear objective of balancing the public and private productions of intellectual events in Rome: the International Art Meetings (Incontri

Internazionali d'Arte). The main intention of this organization was to create new scenarios promoting experimentation in contemporary art and new approaches to cultural activities. This was also the time of the great Rome exhibitions, and precisely in this frame of work the idea of *Rome Interrupted*<sup>7</sup> started taking shape. Rome Interrupted is considered one of the most innovative architecture exhibitions organized in the last 70 years, and it's valued as an important moment of reflection, one that laid the foundations of the new architectural season that followed<sup>8</sup>.

The main objective of the curators was to imagine a map of Rome deprived of 200 years of buildings<sup>9</sup>; a kind of Fictional City elaborated in *twelve fragments* by twelve highly important international architects active during that period. The twelve fragments can be seen as twelve quadrants where the image of a new city is projected, a kind of mental exercise in which each participant could contribute with its specific research, without taking into consideration the entire map of Rome<sup>10</sup>.

### ROME 1978 - TIRANA 2016. SPECULATIVE PRACTICES

The Architect Piero Sartogo, the creator of the Rome Interrupted exhibition, froze the beauty of Rome exactly at the moment in which, in the 18<sup>th</sup> Century, Nolli offered to Pope Benedetto XIV the city center's first plan divided into twelve quadrants. A fascinating image, as well as a contradictory one, which still inspires many contemporary architects<sup>11</sup>.

*"It's easier to design the city of the future than the city of the past. Rome is an interrupted city because people stopped imagining it and started designing it (badly)".* Giulio Carlo Argan Mayor of Rome, 1978.

With this slogan, Giulio Carlo Argan, one of Italy's 20<sup>th</sup> century most important figures, an art historian and the Mayor of Rome at that time, stirred the minds and imagination of many intellectuals, architects and artists. A brave choice that put into question the work realized until that moment, underlining the fact that the tendency of that period did not favor creativity and imagination in urban design.



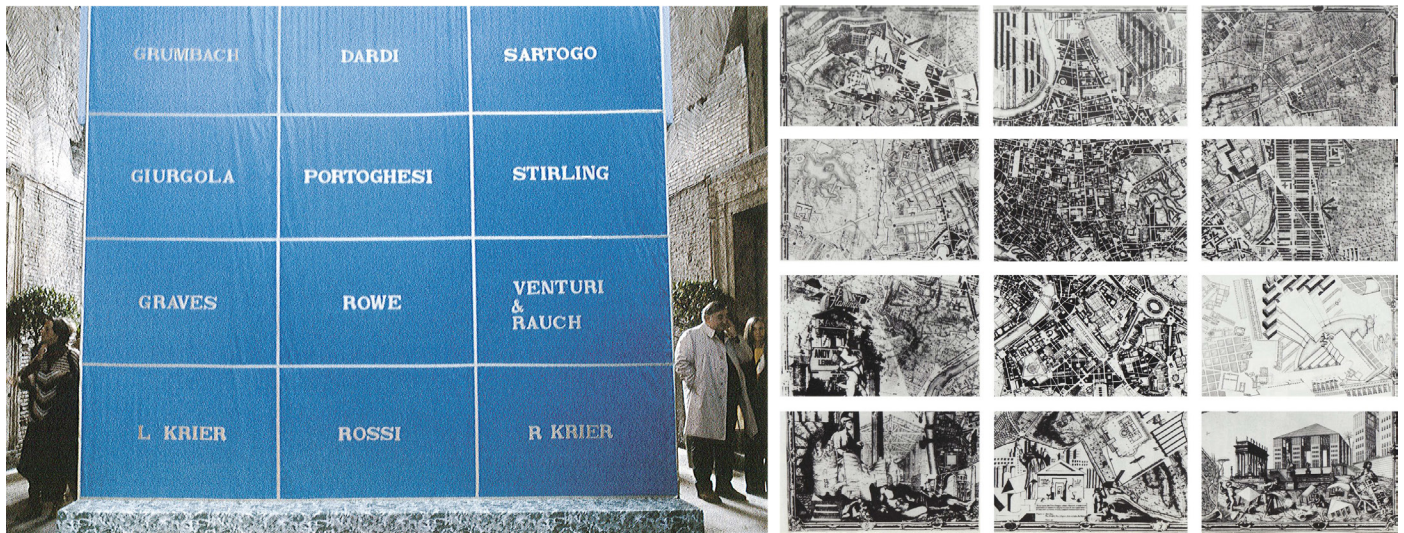


Figure 2: Rome interrupted exhibition 1978 – Mercati Traianei. The twelve names and their elaborations. Source internet

To better understand the importance of G.C. Argan in terms of our research, we must explore how, in some cases, different places and historical moments can coincide. The Rome interrupted exhibition was created in a specific political environment in which a Mayor and art historian alongside an architect - Piero Sartogo - decided to inspire (or provoke) new thoughts and perspectives regarding the future image of Rome. In a different time and context, Albania's current Prime Minister Edi Rama<sup>12</sup> - who is also a well-known artist and was Mayor of Tirana from 2000 to 2011 - decided to define a new image for Albania, through demolition and reconstruction, or rather, deleting the existing city and imagining the city of the future.

Both the above mentioned cases work on the idea of addition and subtraction; in the first case – Rome Interrupted experiment - the starting point was a map drawn by Nolli<sup>13</sup> (the city represented without two hundred years of buildings) and the action is similar to operating a *post process on a historical map*. In the second case - contemporary Tirana - the concept of addition and subtraction is related to a concrete action: the demolition of mostly of the unauthorized buildings. In this specific case, we could identify a *process in reverse* where the contemporary *urban ruins* are added to the new urban fabric.

These apparently casual details are very important when considering the fact that the experiment done with the workshop was built with the idea of using the case of Rome Interrupted as a theoretical and historical paradigm in order to imagine a new map of Tirana. In other words, comparing the Rome Interrupted experience to Tirana means putting under discussion the value of spontaneous, uncontrolled construction, reconsidering it as a post-process action, or a process in reverse.

#### HIDDEN FRAME AND HISTORICAL PERSISTENCE

The history of Tirana's urban development has been characterized by a mix of intentions; each tentative, belonging to a different period, overlapped with the previous one, generating a disordered map<sup>14</sup>. The city as we see it today appears to have imprecise boundaries, where all the underlying meanings are still waiting to be discovered. For the purpose

of the workshop we had to go through some key moments of Tirana's development; considering each tentative of urban design was crucial to understand the logic behind the city's present day condition. The history of Tirana's development should be read as a recipe book in which only some ingredients may be useful for future experimentations<sup>15</sup>.

For this reason, exploring a topic related to urban disorder means experimenting with various creative impulses beyond the traditional urban design project. **In this context, the idea emerged from the concept of 'hidden frame', which is an act of interpretation whereby, through certain representational methods, it's possible to make visible, forces that are not**<sup>16</sup>. Similar to the case of Nolli's map, where he used the technique of representing the city from above so as to underline aspects that would have otherwise never been known, Tirana's urban disorder cannot be represented through traditional representational means; **we must find a new tool capable of disclosing energies which were interrupted or are now hidden**. A hidden frame is a subjective and visionary tool that plays the role of intermediary between past and future. To address it we must start exploring different scenarios considering the use of diagrams that can support the logic related to the variation of forms and concepts. **To investigate a hidden structure also means to import a similar behavioral logic from a continuous dialogue with the history, in which processes of phase change become creative constants that can be repeated in our case study**. The future urban development of Tirana is waiting for a new vision in terms of representative processes as well as architectural visions.

#### 2015 UCLA WORKSHOP – TIRANA INTERRUPTED<sup>17</sup>

The aim of the workshop conducted in the Department of Architecture and Planning at UCLA University, Los Angeles<sup>18</sup>, in January 2015, was to track down, within the existing building fabric of Tirana, hidden characters as creative impulses that can be highlighted and designed in terms of possible future scenarios. The main question asked to the students was: *"How do we represent the city's future image?"*. Drawing inspiration from the exhibition of Rome Interrupted, the idea was to create a new map of Tirana with the same dimensions as those





Figure 3: (left) Ruins of a demolished house in Tirana. Source author – (right) Giovanni Battista Piranesi (1720 – 1778), The view of the ruins of Tito's thermal baths' second floor in Rome. Source internet

represented in Nolli's map (210 cm x 168 cm) imagining how a hidden frame can generate a new version of Tirana's map (*the beauty of Tirana is not interrupted but hidden*). The work was developed by thinking about Tirana in the future through different steps. The steps were represented with diagrams that showed the idea of the variation from the present to the future image of the city. The last step was represented on the final map. Each group (composed of two students) was assigned a quadrant where they elaborated their concept. The dimension of each quadrant was 70cm x 42 cm. The map was in scale 1:3000 (the Nolli's original map was 1:2900). The final result was the composition of 12 quadrants elaborated through graphical representation, presenting a new vision for Tirana. In the end, the work was shown in an exhibition. The main body of work consisted in two big maps composed of 12 quadrants each: one map was representing the Tirana of the present in black and white, while the second map was showing the map with the future vision of the city. For the purpose of the workshop, students were asked to intervene in a map of Tirana proposing possible urban scenarios as projections for the future image of the City. To inspire future growth, the students were required to inject new processes in the urban organism, where the city was 'imaged' and not designed; in others words, the meaning of the city was turned upside down. The workshop offered the possibility to investigate this topic thoroughly and reach the current elaboration, which shows the ways in which an abstract representation can inspire new urban design concepts. The twelve quadrants assigned to the twelve groups<sup>19</sup> were the subject of many debates. One of these debates concerned the fact that, compared to the Rome Interrupted experience, the map of Tirana missed a starting point, an initial plan on which to base and elaborate the new vision. For this reason it was decided to add one more map to the two that were initially planned. In addition to the map of present day Tirana and to the map of Tirana's projected future plan, the suggestion was to insert a map of Tirana's hidden frame. The reason behind the inclusion of this new map was the intent to create an image able to highlight, through representation, aspects of the city that would have otherwise never been known. To some extent, we can consider

the hidden frame map as the equivalent of the creative error applied by Giovanni Battista Nolli in his 1748 map. The image below (Figure 5) is just a part of the workshop results, and must be read through the above mentioned reflection. Just as in the case of the Rome Interrupted exhibition, this workshop offered the possibility to challenge the existing map of Tirana through an exercise of theory and imagination. The work completed by each group was useful in describing all the processes that take place before the design action. The conceptual elaborations are grouped under keywords that define similar creative approaches and with the hope of inspiring many more suggestions in future urban design activities: *Fragments and Ruins*— group n° 3 and n°11; *Migration of terms*— group n°1; *Diagram and Variation* - group n°7, n°9, and n°10; *Creative Presences*— group n°2, n°5, n°8 and n°12

## CONCLUSION

The results of the workshop at UCLA demonstrate how the dialogue with history of architecture can be full of suggestions when an intellectual process is activated. In general, if framed under a specific historical background, workshop & exhibition experiences are repeatable experiments that can help to reconnect historical meanings with contemporary urban scenarios. To evaluate the real benefit of this experiment in the case of Tirana, we must compare the value of Nolli's map within the experiment of Rome Interrupted. As previously mentioned, each fragment of the big map of Rome drawn by Nolli was used as a starting point by the twelve architects to elaborate new future visions during the 1978 experiment. Through this consideration it's now easier to look at the Nolli's map as a kind of shrinking map, selected within the existing and more complex city pattern of Rome. What the workshop experience shows us is the opportunity to represent the map of Tirana in a different way, highlighting new fragments and showing the hidden frame that lies beneath the surface. Like in the case of Nolli's map, also the new maps of Tirana can be seen as a starting point to generate a new urban design approach. To conclude, the cases of Rome Interrupted and Nolli's map discussed in this paper are examples drawn from the history of Urban theory, which demonstrate how creative tools can be recycled to re-conceptualize past

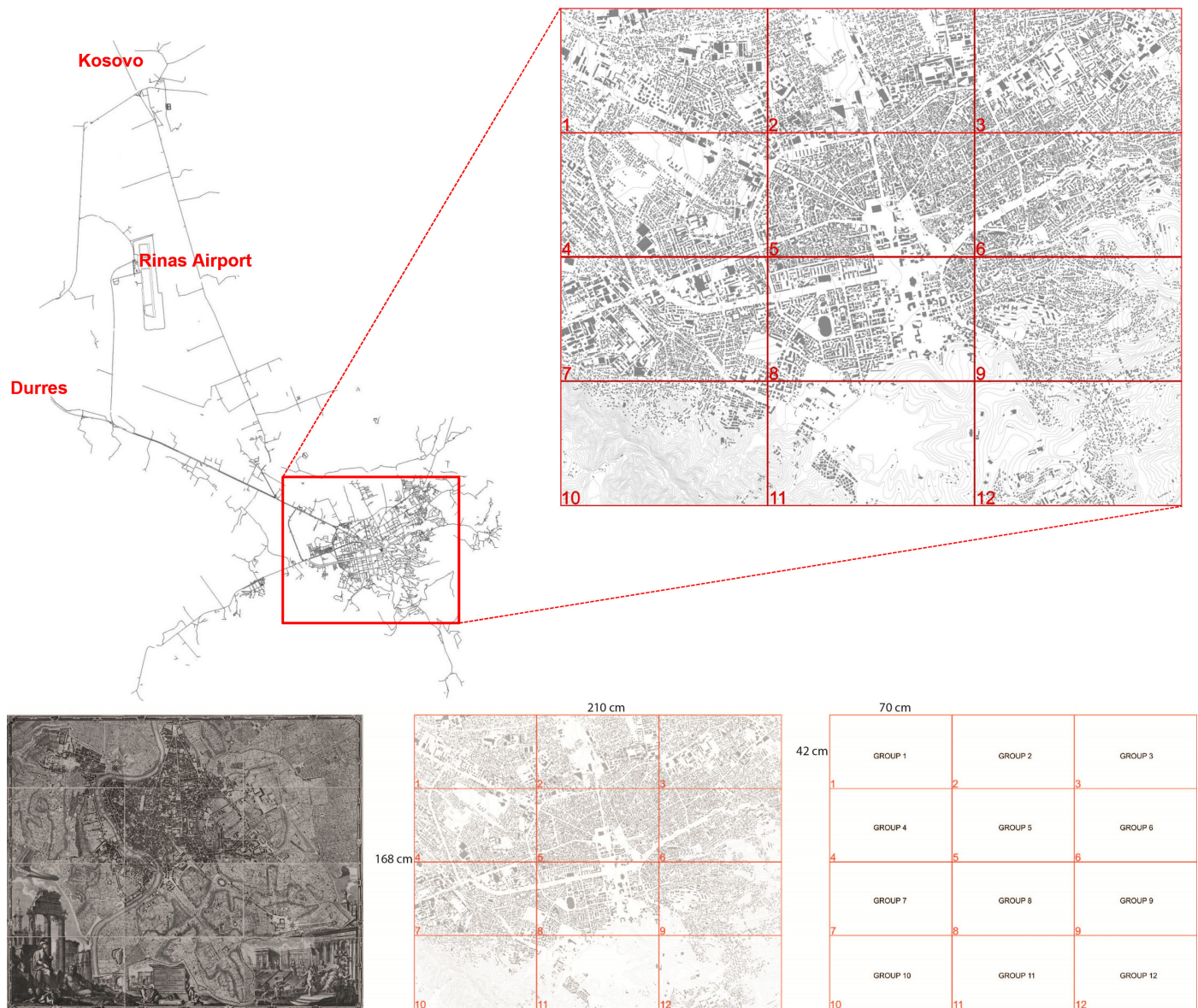


Figure 4: Workshop site Maps / comparison (Nolli map. Source internet – Tirana map. Source author)

debates about cities. Moreover, the concepts underlying Nolli's map, as well as the methodology applied in the case of Rome Interrupted demonstrate how, within the research of creative tools, history of architecture can produce remarkable new scenarios.

#### ENDNOTES

- 1 This paper is based on a series of workshop and lectures organized in the last three years on the topic Tirana Interrupted.
- 2 In our research interest the word Fiction is intended as "something invented by the imagination" that allow us to collect ideas and open new debates.
- 3 The meaning of hidden frame will be later explained.
- 4 The architects invited were: Piero Sartogo, Costantino Dardi, Antoine Grumbach, James Stirling, Paolo Portoghesi, Romaldo Giurgola, Robert Venturi, Colin Rowe, Michael Graves, Robert Krier, Aldo Rossi, Leon Krier.
- 5 Giovanni Battista Nolli (Como 1692 – Rome 1756) was one of the most important engravers and surveyors of the 18th century. From the beginning he was involved as surveyor for the land registry in Milan, after which he moved to Rome and started working on the first topographic map of the center of Rome. Nolli's map was the first scientific survey of Rome's center; its importance came from the fact that in the previous period (Baroque) most of the graphical representations of Rome were idealized, bird-eye views, as is the case, for instance, of the beautiful engravings by Giovanni Battista Falda in the 17th century. In addition to being an exact scientific survey, the new Nolli map was also considered an innovative graphical representation. It provided a new image of the city to show the world how the urban paths and inner spaces of the city's most important monuments were joined in a continuous flow of space.
- 6 Christopher Alexander spoke of the idea of swelling space, theorizing about the meaning of positive space: it occurs when every bit of space swells outward, insubstantial in itself, is never the leftover from an adjacent shape. We may see it like ripening corn, each kernel swelling until it meets the others, each one having its own positive shape caused by its growth as a cell from the inside. Christopher Alexander, *The Nature of Order*, volume I, *The Phenomenon of life*, Centre for environmental structure, Berkeley, 2003, p. 173.
- 7 During the years this exhibition has been displayed in different research centers as well as important museums like: The international Congress UIA in the City of Mexico, The Georges Pompidou Centre of Paris, the Architectural Association of London, Columbia University of New York, the biennale of San Paolo and Venice, the Museum Maxxi of Rome.



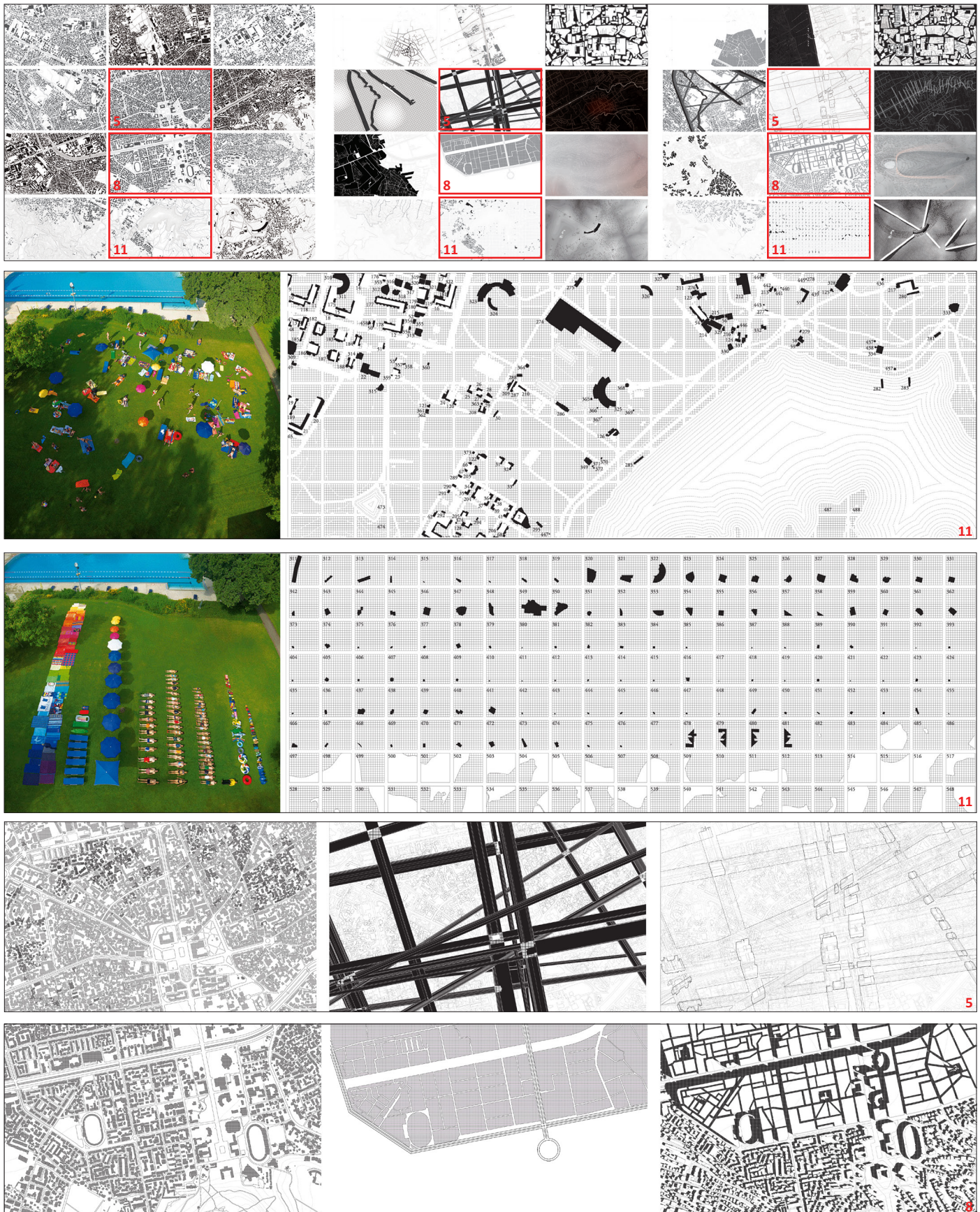


Figure 5: (FROM TOP) Workshop results, Tirana map today; Tirana Hidden frame map; Tirana projected in the future. Quadrant n°11 students Austin Kaa & Naomi Steinhagen, an example of fragments and ruins elaboration in comparison with Ursus Wehrli representation “The art of cleanup”. Quadrant n°5 student Angel Gonzalez. Quadrant n°8 student Derek Woods two examples of Creative Presences.



- 8 For many years, the exhibition *Rome Interrupted* has been at the centre of many discussions, not just regarding the international debates on the issue of city design of Rome, but especially because the twelve names involved in this experiment prepared the foundation for POMO (postmodern) theories. It is a well-known fact that during the same time Colin Rowe wrote a manifesto on the idea of the city: *Collage city*. This book as well, as specified by Léa-Catherine Szacka, could have inspired the idea of *Rome interrupted*. To learn more about this issue, refer to: Léa-Catherine Szacka, *Roma Interrotta: postmodern Rome as the source of fragmented narratives*, in Dom Holdaway, Filippo Trentin, Rome, *Postmodern Narrative of a Cityscape*, Pickering & Chatto, London, 2013, pp. 155-169.
- 9 To have a clear picture of how Rome's urban development has been shaped in the period following the end of the 18th century, refer to: Italo Insolera, *Roma moderna. Da Napoleone I al XXI secolo*, Einaudi, Torino, 2011.
- 10 This type of exercise draws inspiration from the famous surrealist technique called: *The exquisite corpse*, in which the main objective is to assemble images or words in a compositional sequence without first seeing the contribute of the previous person, and discovering the main picture only at the end.
- 11 On the influence of Nolli map see: Allan Ceen, Ian Verstegen, Giambattista Nolli and Rome. Mapping the city before and after the Pianta Grande, Rome, *Studium Urbis*, 2014, p. 219.
- 12 To better understand the Edi Rama figure and his thought see: Edi Rama's TED talk in [www.ted.com](http://www.ted.com) - on the issue Take back your city with paint and A Vision Beyond Planning, in Joachim Declerck, Bart Melort, Marc Ryan, Martino Tattara, Tirana Metropolis, The Berlage Institute, Rotterdam, 2004, p. 10 - 17.
- 13 The exhibition done in the Mercati Traianei in Rome, in 1978, compared two images; the first one was Nolli's plan from 1748 - which emphasized creativity from the past - the second one represented Rome dissected into 12 fragments presented, like G. C. Argan himself explains, as images of unrealized desires. The 12 images were intellectual tools that operated on a theoretical level and not solely on a practical one; in order to inspire the future development of Rome, this operation challenged the contemporary way of conceiving urban development.
- 14 Since the collapse of the Communist regime, Tirana has been characterized by diffused 'urban disorder', where historical urban layers are merged haphazardly without a unitary plan.
- 15 The urban evolution of Tirana is thoroughly described in: Besnik Aliaj, Keida Lulo, Genc Myftiu, *Tirana the Challenge of Urban Development*, Ceti edition, Slovenia, 2003, p. 11-126.
- 16 Gilles Deleuze in his book on Francis Bacon, gives an interesting interpretation starting from Paul Klee's famous formula - "Not to render the visible, but to render visible". Deleuze focused on the idea that some forms of art such as music and painting must be able to make visible forces that are not. In this way the forces are strongly connected with the sensations; in Gilles Deleuze, Francis Bacon: the logic of sensation, Continuum, London, 2003, p. 56.
- 17 A first workshop on the idea of *Tirana Interrupted* was organized during Tirana Architecture Week (TAW\_2014) at POLIS University, in Tirana. The result is published in: Rossi, Loris, *Tirana Interrupted Urban vision to inspire the future*, in *Forum A+P* 16, ed. Pedit, Tirana, 2015, p. 78, 87.
- 18 I would like to mention the generous support offered by Jason Payne who is an Associate Professor at the Department of Architecture and Urban Design - UCLA of Los Angeles. The debates created and suggestions received during the workshop greatly enriched this research with new meanings.
- 19 The names of the students were: n°1 Julio Perez, n°2 Hillary Bretcko, n°3 Steve Martinez & Fimalino, n°4 Nawid Piracha, n°5 Angel Gonzalez, n°6 Isabel Branas, n°7 Adrien Forney, n°8 Derek Woods, n°9 Dami Olufowoshe, n°10 Trenman Yau, n°11 Austin Kaa & Naomi Steinhagen, n°12 Sarah Johnson.

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