

Leonardo Ricci

Form, the Tangible Expression of a Reality (1966)

This text was published in the Vision + Value Series edited by György Kepes that collected most of the research and contributions of Italian and foreign scholars who worked in the Center for Advanced Studies (CAVS) founded by Kepes in Cambridge at the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. The precise bibliographic reference of the text is: Leonardo Ricci, "Form, the Tangible Expression of a Reality," in The Man-Made Object, ed. György Kepes (New York: George Braziller, 1966), 108-119.

At MIT Pietro Belluschi's deanship ended in 1965 and, a couple of years later, in 1967, György Kepes founded there the CAVS by collecting a lot of work done by the Harvard-M.I.T. Joint Center for Urban Studies. Kepes arrived in the Visual Department of the Graduate Program at M.I.T. in 1946 and, between 1947 and 1956, he concentrated on the production of his publication The New Landscape in Art and Science. It was largely written in 1952 and took the form of an encyclopedic constellation of images describing the aesthetic qualities of scientific findings, as well as displaying the scientific origins of other aesthetic manifestations.

György Kepes restored the artistic and architectural production of Italian architects and artists achieving prominence right after the World War II. Some of them were Pierluigi Nervi, Ernesto Nathan Rogers and Harry Bertola. The book constituted a "radical visual academia" referred to a shared way of conceiving all visual disciplines: Design, Architecture, Town Planning, Art.

On the 'studio work' taught by Kepes at the MIT, thus on the influences among all the arts in the design process, combined with the study of the History of Art and Architecture, and on Kevin Lynch's new methodological approach based on the aesthetical study of the 'Form of the City', on spatial relations and perceptual elements, Ricci based his belief on morphological generations in architecture avoiding predetermined forms.

A short time before leaving Italy to Cambridge, Ricci and Giovanni Klaus Koenig wrote a report concerning the teaching of plastic formativity to architects following Kepes' example and wrote a purpose addressed to the Dean of the Faculty of Architecture in Florence for the renewal of the teaching program in that field titled "Sull'insegnamento della plastica nelle facoltà di architettura". After his first appointment at MIT, in Italy Ricci succeeded in turning the course name into Visual Design and its program tracing Kepes' one.

In the Sixties several Italian scholars contributed to Kepes' Vision+Value series published by George Braziller: Gillo Dorfles with an essay in the book The Nature and Art of Motion (1965), Mirko Basaldella in Education of Vision (1965), Pier Luigi Nervi in Structure in Art and Science (1965), and Ernesto Nathan Rogers in Sign, Image, Symbol (1966).



<https://doi.org/10.6092/issn.2611-0075/17719> | ISSN 2611-0075
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The world appears to us. It appears to us above all through a form. The artist expresses himself. He expresses himself through a form. And thus arises the problem: is there an analogy between these “forms”? That is to say, is the form of a man, of a cat, of a stone, analogous to the forms produced by the artist?

I must confess that for some time now I no longer set myself problems of this kind in absolute terms, because I no longer believe in the possibility of “demonstrating” what form is. To be capable of this would mean to be capable of demonstrating what life is. Today, I am interested only in examining how a form is born, that is, how a reality becomes perceivable. Therefore, excluded the possibility of making an abstract contribution, the only possibility which remains to me is that of documenting an experience: my experience in painting and in architecture, my two professions.

Form in Painting

Anyone faced with the continuous variation in my mode of painting, that is, the variation of my form in painting, must be perplexed. Indeed, I have had periods so diverse that one might think that I have never had a precise concept of form. The truth is otherwise. I believe that my form has been diverse because the contents which this form has expressed have been diverse. Consequently, in opposition to the word *form*, there is the word *content*. We shall see at the end of this paper that these terms will disappear, at least as they have been used up until now.

But why so many and such diverse contents? ‘The answer is simple. Because ever since I was a boy the questions with which life presented me were many, and many were the answers and therefore many the forms. The problem of content and of form is bound to the problem of existence.

To exist means to be born, to live, and to die. Therefore, through my various forms everyone can read all that I have believed and all that I have been in my life. But the process by which form is achieved has always been the same: a reality which found its “form,” and not a form conceived a priori.

Now I can answer the question posed at the very beginning of this paper by saying: I do not find a difference in “process” between “natural” form and “artificial” form. The inner reality of the pine tree expresses itself through the form of the pine tree, that of the stone through the form of the stone, and thus that of the cat, thus that of the man. The universe bears its knowledge within itself and expresses itself in form. The honest artist does the same thing.

Today, having found my justification of existence, I believe that I shall not undergo any more earthquakes, either of content or of form.

What do I want to express? And what form is born of this? At this point, since I make notes for each painting, I believe the best thing is to give a documentation of two pictures which were written about as well as painted. It will become more obvious how form is born.

The death of my father. My father died several years ago. I do not even remember the year: perhaps it was nine or ten years ago. My father died in my arms. Death. Man dies. My father died.

What is a dead man in the arms of a living one?

You understand that if I believed in the hereafter, or more precisely, if I were a Christian, this dead body in my arms would be a body waiting for resurrection, for an eternal life. On the other hand, if I believed that nothing exists after death, this body would be only a thing which disintegrates forever in the earth, eaten by maggots.

But my father died and I was neither one nor the other. Facing death, facing my dead father, there was only a son watching the father who slipped away from him, certainly to be forever just as he was then. I could have sworn to nothing in that moment: neither that his soul would rise to heaven, nor that there would be nothing left of him. There was only the subjective recollection of me, his son, of my brothers, his sons, of my mother, who died several years afterwards, perhaps also of a few others.

My father was dead. I was neither desperate nor full of hope. My father was there as I try now to paint him, without bringing in myself and the others.

Before me there is a canvas. Perhaps it is three feet by four feet. Against the brown background of the canvas there is a greenish body: skin and bones, because my father had been ill for three years and he was very thin. A whitish line makes the contour.

It has already been several months since I stopped working on this painting. I did not have the courage to continue it because until this "moment" it was something spontaneous and natural and right "to draw" this body and to detach it slightly from the background by using two different tones. But now I know that it would be unwarranted to add or to take away.

It would be good to set up other canvases. Better still to vary, to change the support, to use wood because I feel more at ease with wood. I shall reproduce this drawing on the new support and try to get something which contains as much as possible of that unknown reality which existed in my presence. Both for me and for the others, because for me it represents my dead father, for the others only a dead man. But what most interests me is death itself.

I draw my father because, having loved him and loving him still in memory, I cannot do so with rhetoric and untruths. My father died in the ordinary bed of a hospital. He died during the night. At two or three o'clock in the morning. My mother, worn out by her vigil which had lasted for days, was sleeping, dressed as she was, in a nearby room.

My father's suffering had lasted for a long time, and for three days, at a sign of his hand or his eyes, I had turned his poor body first to one side, then to the other.

My father died on a white sheet. He was not naked but was covered by some

sort of pajama. Someone could therefore ask if I, by painting him nude and light upon a dark ground, am doing something arbitrary to idealize this death. The question is legitimate. I could ask it myself. The fact is that I remember my father like this, as if he were nude. Perhaps it is because I washed him myself when he was very sick. Perhaps it is because in turning him I felt neither sheet nor pajama but only the suffering body. Besides, when today I approximate as closely as possible that which I saw and lived through, I still do not know exactly what color my father's body will assume, nor that of the color of the plane on which it rests. Because color does not make sense unless it signifies a specific thing in a specific circumstance. Color by itself has no meaning other than as a decorative thing. Here it is a question of using form and color which express real things.

Much time has passed: three, four, ten months, I don't remember. That I don't is due to the fact that for me the days have again become long, as when I was a boy. They are no longer hurried and fleeting. The day once again belongs to time.

Now there are two paintings instead of one. The difference between the two is that in the first there is only the recollection of my dead father; the second is my father, but dead for everyone, dead even for others: a dead man.

Perhaps the painting is finished. Certainly this dead man is different from those previously painted, at least it seems so to me. There is no fear of death in it, nor hope of a paradise, nor affirmation of what is death. There is only that mystery which death carries with it. That expression of reality which the death of a man produces. That sense of expectation-no matter what expectation. That interruption of an unknown rhythm, that of life, to become part of another unknown, that of death.

That body will no longer breathe. It will no longer speak to me. It will no longer smile at me. All that there was of life is finished forever.

But that body is there to testify to a real contact which took place between me and my father when he was at the point of death, exactly at the moment when life "left" him. When everything, apparently absurd and without reason, silently testified to an inner logic such as I had never felt before. So much so that I can say that never in my life did I understand myself to be so bound by the vicissitudes of man, and not only of man but of the earth and of the whole universe. That is to say, I was thrust into the world without knowing why, nor caring why, and the more I became a part of it, the less I could detach myself to ask the question.

That dead body. So like all those already dead, those who at this moment are dying, those who will die.

My wife in childbirth: More exactly, my wife in the night which followed her giving birth, which had occurred at one o'clock in the morning, with the baby-or rather, the baby girl-beside her.

My wife gave birth in my house. She was asleep in the same room. She slept in the big bed, I in a little bed at her feet. It was night but there was some light

in the room. I am in the habit of leaving the windows uncovered because I love the light which the night gives. My wife and daughter slept. I heard two breaths in the room: that tired, and slow, and strong of my wife and that rapid, scarcely perceptible of my daughter. I did not hear my own. At least I was not aware of it. From time to time I got up to look at those two creatures in their sleep.

The picture which I am drawing and which already begins to take form, wants to be a testimonial to that night. The two bodies are nude while that night they were hidden in part by the covers. But I saw only their bodies and I remember coat my wife's hair, a chestnut-blond color, became so black in the nocturnal light that the visual focus was her pale face surrounded by the shadow of her hair. I watched them for a long time, attentive to each small movement, waiting for their call. A kind of adoration of my wife and of my daughter and of the miracle of maternity.

There are moments during the execution of a painting in which one shows the force and the character of he who is painting. These are the moments of transition in which a thing of "imagination" becomes "concrete."

I find myself in one of these moments. The night, the presence of the mother in the night, the child who has not yet achieved a precise form, her pretty little face still shows signs of birth, of a difficult birth. All these things are present on the wood. I could stop. It is all evanescent and full of wonder. But I remember how, despite the night, I saw the form clearly. Even the sunlight could not have defined it more sharply, such was the attention and the quietness and the care with which I observed each small detail. So that the image was strikingly exact, even in those things which the eye could not see. I was so very aware of that belly which earlier that day I had pressed with all my strength and hurt, because at the very moment of giving birth the mother's strength had died out and the baby, later my daughter, risked death with her little head suspended halfway, at the threshold between going out into life and remaining in the warmth of her mother's belly. Thus this belly swollen with the wound, and the blood, and those things inside a woman, placenta, umbilical cord, water, which were still present-even though it was now all over-present at least in me there observing these creatures asleep.

Certainly this is the moment of danger. I can ruin the picture. But I am fortunate. The picture in itself does not interest me. What does matter is to see if I am capable of defining that state of my existence and theirs. I want whoever looks at it to feel that I am not outside the rectangle of wood, even if I am not visible.

The mistake. Certainly the mistake. Better to make it evident, if it exists. Not to conceal it within the picture.

After two days of hard work the painting is all black again. I want to explain the reason, that is to say, the "moments" of this painting. There was a first phase during which the painting was extremely pictorial but lacked reality. Then I wanted to define the contour with more exactness and strength.

I cut into the wood with a pyrographic instrument. With the fire I felt that I could render the strength which maternity has. But the needles were small and the incision in the wood superficial. The fire gave strength, but the painting became brutal, whereas in the night I had felt strength, yes, but pervaded with a sweetness which the fire killed.

So this morning I repainted the picture with oil colors. Slow overlays of color. But the figures became slimy, "varnished," a little like all those oil paintings, even those by painters like Raphael or Titian. Beneath the "film" there is nothing. A theatrical pretense. That pretense which good sculptures-like some of those of Giovanni Pisano in the Baptistry at Pisa-often do not have, because the material remains material. But in a painting the problem changes, because the problem of the material changes. However much I try to enrich the nature of the material, the wood always remains without depth. The mistake in the painting. Because beneath the real skin there is blood and flesh and the brain and the heart. Beneath the skin of the painting there is nothing. And this is the tragedy: the feelings of the painter, who has seen and understood, are more tangible than the object itself, which is not really seen and understood, yet is real.

When I was a "painter" I would have been upset enough to die over this human impotence. Today no. I wait for something to happen, trying to understand what it is that passes between the real object and the represented one, what there is in the represented object, and how it can render that truth which the real object has but which flees from the inattentive observer.

For the present the painting is only a dirty, black thing, but it has mystery.

While I wait for the glues and oils of the painting to dry, I try to think which among the maternities represented in painting and sculpture have struck me most and which seem to me nearest to what I should like to express.

The sculptures. Above all, some in wood by African sculptors. Some Mexican ones in terra cotta. Some Indian ones in stone. Certainly wood-especially when time has removed its polished external skin, and revealed the antiquity of its fibers, that sense of the sap which has run through it for years, its organic strength, even if now spent-has helped the artist in his expression. But the phallic content and the endogenous forces of the mother are so strong that they obscure those other things one might see in a maternity, such as the subtle relationship which exists between a smile and the miracle. A miracle because it is so little understood and is, at least until now, impossible to achieve in the laboratory. For even those acts which precede maternity, and all those of maternity itself, are not important in themselves but for the fact that they bring man back to possibilities once considered to be of a metaphysical and spiritual order. Possibilities which today are not definable, but are certainly bound to that reality which pervades all things and makes life beautiful.

But as I think of those wooden sculptures, where is the awareness outside that of the event itself, that consciousness of the two people breathing, for example, and the presence of myself in that room, of myself as I was watching?

How to realize and represent the reality of my own presence in that maternity, I who did not see myself with my own eyes, but who nevertheless existed?

What could make my presence tangible without translating it into surrealistic and expressionistic terms? How to materialize the outline of myself which no one saw? That is, how to place myself within the space of this painting?

In this instance, as before, a certain amount of time has passed. I should have liked to have reported carefully all the "relations" between me and the painting that changed as the painting proceeded. More precisely, all the events that took place between me and the reality of that night.

Now I consider the painting finished. Not because I was able to achieve a perfect identity between myself today and myself that night. On the contrary, I feel that an infinite number of elements have escaped me and are not attested to. I consider it finished only because there is nothing arbitrary. Nothing that creates a false charm. Nothing which puts the observer before an insoluble problem. Many things are missing. But that which is there is enough for me to bear witness to a birth.

In the night the mother was alive and alive was the daughter. In the night the mother breathed and so breathed the daughter. In the night mother and daughter were bound by the umbilical cord which binds us all together in this terrestrial adventure. But in the painting all that is not possible and will never be possible. The painting will only serve as a remembrance, to focus more attention on what birth means. Because the whole secret of existence is only to know how to seize at each moment the marvelous possibility of existence.

Form in Architecture

Whoever follows my work as an architect will note fewer alternatives and changes than in my painting. The development of form here has a more regular and continuous progress. There are definite reasons for this. First of all because I began to design and build later. At twenty-six rather than at fourteen. At a more mature age. Besides, architecture is bound to more limited themes because it must solve problems which have not been chosen by the architect. Moreover, the logic of construction impedes gratuitous freedom of form. Finally, when I was in a state of crisis, I did not design. However, from a formal point of view, an evolution has occurred which I might express in these terms: architectural form has increasingly freed itself from theoretical presuppositions to be united with its content, that is, to be born from its content.

If the content of a picture seems more obvious to some, given that the rapport between the painter and the canvas is immediate, while the rapport between the architect and the building is modified by many components (client, cost, function, structure), this does not mean that architecture does not have content. The process of achieving form is not different from that of painting. I shall illustrate this, as I did for painting.

The birth of my house: I wanted to build a house for myself. More or less like everyone else, my wife and I set out to find some land which would be suitable for us. And since we no longer wanted to live in the old central part of the city, because it no longer suited us, we looked for some land on a hill. But not for example, Fiesole, or Bellosguardo, which still have a feeling of the old city. Rather, we looked for a virgin hill and especially one in a place where the vegetation was natural, not planted by man: broom and thicket on a rocky terrain.

We chose a place which, although it was without gentleness and humanity, permitted us to experiment with a new way of living, in regard to the relationship between a man and his own house.

The variety of a house and the process to the final form of a building can come about in a thousand ways. I shall describe mine.

My wife and I did not reason this way, for example: that we needed so many bedrooms, a living room, a kitchen, two baths, etc. We started from something different. We asked ourselves what it meant to awaken. How we would wish to open ourselves to the world each morning, to the life of a day. We asked ourselves what it meant to go to sleep, that is, to close our day. What it meant to eat, to be among ourselves or with friends. How to give the children their own private place to develop their own natures, and also a collective place so that they would learn to be with others, even if for now only among themselves.

In short, I did not seek to put a beautiful dress on conformist and a priori-accepted functions but on the contrary, to examine the acts of our own daily life in order to make them, through their contact with the architecture, more vital, more important. The act and then the consequent form. That is to say, I saw us getting up in the morning, my wife and myself and our children; I saw her go to get them ready for school: I saw the children chatting with their friends, we with ours, our being and living together and with others, our entering the house and leaving it to go into the countryside. And not only these things, which seem beautiful and poetic. I also saw the milkman bringing the milk, the vegetable vender the vegetables. That is to say, I tried to see our life in all its aspects.

So the space was born to contain us. The structure to materialize that space. The form is a consequence of all this. The reasons for the form, that is to say, are not born from aesthetic or hedonistic preoccupations.

A floor was put at a certain height to suspend us in the void. A wall was erected to protect us from the wind. Another to relate the hills in front with the centre of the house. A material to give concreteness to the force of gravity. "Style" was destroyed, and the form was not intellectual or conceptual. It was simply born.

For eleven years now we have lived there. We have not been bored; it has not grown old. It lives with us as a dog or a cat might, or better, a beloved person.

I have used my house as an example because for me it is the simplest, most familiar thing. But I could make the same kind of analysis for each type of structure. The problem is the same. It is a question of establishing whether the

architect chooses his form or whether he is forced to his form by necessity. I believe that the falseness and gratuitousness of the first attitude and the truth of the second are obvious. Arriving at an apparent paradox, I might say that the architect has absolutely no choice.

At the basis of the actual design various components exist: the client, the available funds, the land on which the building will rise, the environment, the system of construction, the materials. Then there is the architect, the architect with his own reality, with his personality, with his biology.

The more precise the analysis of all these elements, the more the architect will find himself in a position of not being able to choose. Faced with the reality of the starting point, the architect can only make these realities achieve their own nature and translate them into form. Not a dictator, therefore, but a servant, that is to say, in the service of man.

Someone might ask me: But poetry? But imagination? But beauty? What are these? I could answer that I do not believe any more in poetry, in imagination, in beauty. But I do not wish to be equivocal. I say: A flower, does it not perhaps contain poetry, imagination, beauty? And perhaps does not the marvelous face of a woman? Is not the poetry, the imagination, the beauty of a flower or the face of a woman the result of the reality intrinsic to the flower or to the woman? And why must it be different in architecture? Is man, in this case the architect, perhaps something different, detached from the internal logic of the world? Can the architect detach himself from this internal logic? And if the architect acts strictly in accordance with the content that is given him, is his architecture then perhaps nothing other than the product of this internal light?

I could continue at length about architecture. As for painting, I have examined the birth of two pictures, I could for architecture examine other of my designs: house, store, or factory. As I could also examine still others which I have not yet had the fortune to design: schools, hospitals, skyscraper offices. But even for these the analysis would not be different. Instead of the life of my family, I would examine the lives of children, of sick people, of clerks. I would examine the acts which they perform or which they will perform, these future inhabitants of future organisms. From these acts form arises naturally.

Thus, in architecture as in painting, form is only a result. In painting it arises as testimony to acts which have happened or which are happening; in architecture as the presence of acts which have happened or which are happening.

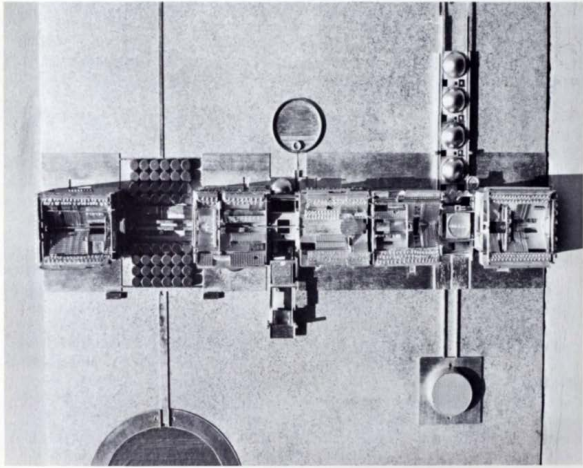
In conclusion I must say that for me form no longer presents itself as a problem. The contents that produce form no longer present themselves as problems. So that it is basically absurd to speak of content, and perhaps the very word "form" becomes so inappropriate as a semantic extension of the concept as to destroy the word form as a concept. In other words, I am fed up with all the intellectualisms and with all the preoccupations which are aesthetic or pseudo-aesthetic, literary or pseudo-literary, ethical or pseudo-ethical, in art and in form. And I say to myself, returning to the first question which was posed as a problem and is now

no longer a problem: The form of the cat is born because inside there is the cat, the form of the mountain because inside there is the mountain, that of the woman because inside there is the woman. The form of a house because inside there is that house. That of a painting because inside there is that painting.

I have said “inside” to make it understood that form is nothing but the visual experience of an internal reality. But even this word “inside” can become equivocal because it might seem that there is an inside and therefore an outside, thus a content and a form, but in reality one should not even speak of an inside. Form is nothing other than the tangible expression of a reality and when this truly coincides with reality it is in consequence true, it is in consequence beautiful.

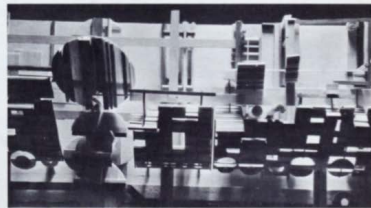
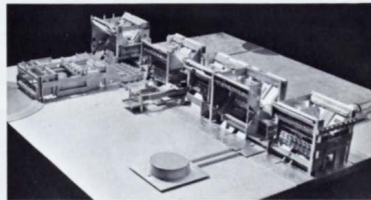
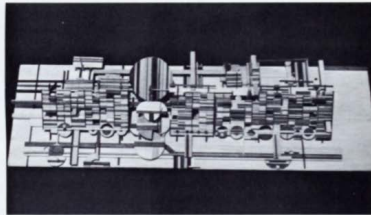
MODEL I

Organism studied in reinforced concrete. Megastructure in extruded pylons, with different types of beams according to specific needs. In the megastructure can be integrated at different times not only the communication system, but also secondary structures containing organisms of diverse functions.



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1 |

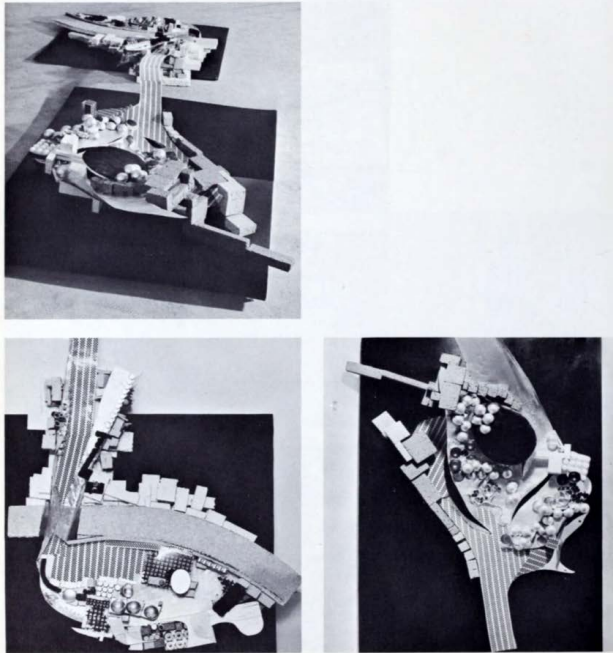


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2 |

MODEL II

Continuous organism which combines different industrialized structures and space according to their various needs and functions. The organism can grow in any direction and at any time.

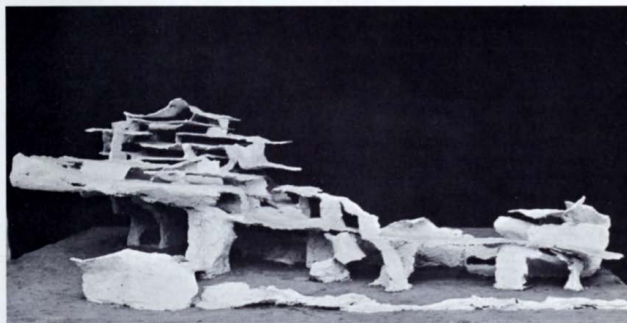


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3 |

MODEL III

Continuous organism constructed in a plastic material which permits the growth of space for different uses.



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4 |

Fig. 1-4

Images of models I, II, III, chosen by Leonardo Ricci for his text, "Form, the Tangible Expression of a Reality", published in *The Man-Made Object*, ed. Gyorgy Kepes (New York: George Braziller, 1966), 108-119. Original pictures of three models kept in Casa Studio Ricci, Monterinaldi, Florence, folder "USA".