

Architecture: Antonio Sant'Elia

By PAUL GOLDBERGER

ANTONIO SANT'ELIA had the briefest of architectural careers: he was born in 1888, began to work as a draftsman in 1907 and was killed while fighting in World War I in 1916. He left behind almost no completed works of architecture, yet he is one of the most compelling figures modern architecture has ever produced.

Sant'Elia made his mark through drawing—in his short, intense career he created a vision of the possibilities of modern architecture that surely stands as the high point of the Italian Futurist imagination. Sant'Elia's drawings, many of which are only a few inches square and the largest of which is but two feet wide, are sketches of extraordinary power and grace. Together, they give us a picture of modernism as an emerging, yet benign, force; they suggest a new world of monumental buildings in which bridges and towers leap over space.

Sant'Elia's name has the power of legend among architectural students, few of whom have ever seen more than a single drawing or two reproduced in a book. The public knows him not at all. Both groups, happily, now can give Sant'Elia's work its due in a superb exhibition of the visionary architect's drawings at the Cooper Union.

Organized by Dore Ashton and Guido Ballo, the exhibition, which is the first retrospective of Sant'Elia's work ever assembled, contains more than 80 drawings, most of which have never before left Italy. It includes

work ranging from his rarely seen early sketches, many of which have a quality that seems to miss Piranesi with the *Bianco-Arco*, to his better-known series of drawings for the "New City," his 1904 plan for large buildings with terraces, bridges and atriums.

It is hard to look at the "New City" drawings and not think of the remarkable sets of Fritz Lang's great film "Metropolis," not to mention the real skylines of so many postwar American cities. But these images also bear an uncanny resemblance to the specific work of several architects of our own time—in Helmut Jahn, whose State of Illinois Center in Chicago has echoes of Sant'Elia, and most of all to John Portman. One can look at several Sant'Elia drawings and see almost the whole range of Mr. Portman's work prefigured, from the Hyatt Regency hotels that made him famous to the recent Marriott Marquis Hotel in New York, to which one drawing has an almost chilling similarity.

But to compare Sant'Elia with John Portman or Helmut Jahn is to miss the point entirely. The similarities here are curious, but they are not crucial. For Sant'Elia was much more than a precursor of some of the contemporary architecture that has been produced in the last generation. He was a prophet of a much more general sort—an artist-architect who issued a clarion call to the glories of modernism, who wanted to proclaim the potential of 20th-century technology to remake the world.

Sant'Elia dealt in dreams. In his lifetime, the dreams were new—to new, in fact, that they still hold onto a

kind of innocence. There is no innocence to John Portman; there is only a kind of exploitation of modernist imagery that, by our time, has become not a little tired. Sant'Elia is the opposite of such fatigue. In his world, modernism is not bitter and cold, and it has not been commercialized or co-opted to fit the Postmodern bed of economics. We see in Sant'Elia only energy, only belief, only a fresh and romantic dream that modernism really could change society.

It is the clarity of his vision that is so striking today—how precisely and exactly he saw the world, with none of the ambivalence, none of the chattering about that many of the early modernists displayed. This really is the revolutionary stance of youth, brimming over with passion—though some of this should suggest that Sant'Elia was anything other than a first-rate draftsman.

Indeed, many of these sketches, like "Lighthouse-Tower" of 1913, are strong works of modernist drawing in themselves, works of art beyond any of their value as architectural polemic. Few could express the sense of movement, the full dramatic potential of modernism, with the perfect spareness that Sant'Elia exhibited in these drawings.

This is at once the most innocent and the most sophisticated architectural show around. In this sense, it makes a wonderful contrast to the retrospective of Mies van der Rohe at the Museum of Modern Art. Mies, who was never innocent about anything, was in a sense the dry, fundamentalist preacher of the Modern movement; Sant'Elia was its flamboyant holy roller.



"Study for the Città Nuova With Terraced House," in an exhibition of drawings by the architect Antonio Sant'Elia, at the Cooper Union.

This important exhibition, which was sponsored by Olivetti, will be on view at the Houghton Gallery in the Foundation Building at Cooper Union, 41 Cooper Square, in Greenwich Village, only through Feb. 28, from noon to 5 P.M. on weekdays and from noon to 5 P.M. on Saturday. It will travel to five other museums in the United States, including the Yale Art Gallery next fall, and is accompanied by a handsome catalogue that reproduces virtually all the pieces in the exhibition.