Architecture is scary. It is not just difficult to deny this; it is impossible. Architecture involves something oppressive. Dictators by definition love architecture. Nothing is more typical of dictators than gigantic, tasteless architecture (this is the difference between dictators and gangsters: gangsters only need gigantic, tasteless cars). In Hollywood movies, bad characters are always hidden behind several layers of stone. Good characters usually just have a little house, a very ordinary one, possibly made of wood. Clearly, if you need architecture, something is wrong with you.

This probably has something to do with the origin of architecture. Indeed, architecture appeared at a moment in time when society became more hierarchical, more established. Slavery appeared at the same time as architecture (as did writing, for that matter). Whether it was a cause or a consequence, architecture is somehow related to an increase in hierarchical structure and inequality. Architecture exposes the oppression embedded in our society; it reminds us that our great-great-grandfathers had to slaughter the hunter-gatherers in order to produce our lovely boulevards.

Architecture is scary because in order to build, one must destroy. Architecture changes habits, alters traditions, erases the existing, in order to introduce something else. Architecture forbids: its only way to enhance something is, in fact, to forbid the opposite. Architecture is possibly the supreme act of creative destruction (consider, for instance, how Bramante quickly and brilliantly razed old St Peter’s to the ground in order to ensure the realization of his new scheme).
Architecture is scary because it introduces an exaggerated time-span into our daily life. Architecture not only involves a distant past, but also includes a distant future. Architecture is simply too slow and too cumbersome not to think over the (uber-)long term. Its association with kings and dictators is not just the result of a sadistic passion for oppression: architecture likes kings, tyrants and dictators because they are the only politicians who think about buildings and infrastructure for the long haul, and not just in megalomaniac/monumental terms, but also more reasonably in terms of the fortune they leave to their heirs; indeed, kings invest in palaces because their sons will inherit them. It is the time-horizon of dictators, not dictatorship itself, that is sympathetic to architecture.

Despite all recent attempts to reduce the lifespan of architecture and dream up buildings that could easily disappear (from Futurism on), architecture still disturbs the perfect flatness of contemporaneity, suggesting a longer span of time. And maybe this is what is really scary about architecture: a longer time-horizon unavoidably ushers a new character onto the stage: death.

Architecture is scary: this is a truth, not a choice. Still, scariness can also be a choice, a precise desire to scare (one’s enemies? one’s subjects? one’s allies?). The Parthenon, for instance, is a machine designed to scare people. Given the absurd amount of money invested in its construction (a gigantic potlatch?) and its incredible precision, the Parthenon’s emergence in the relatively shabby Athens of the 5th century can be understood only as a colossal menace. The precision of the Parthenon is the precision of a weapon of mass destruction. For all the legends about aliens building the pyramids, the most likely building to have been built by aliens is the Parthenon, the scariest object ever constructed on this planet.

So architecture is scary, and making architecture can be a reaction to the discovery of how fundamentally scary architecture is. If architecture is the most tangible sign of an oppressive architecture of society, design can be understood as an expression of this original evil. Guido Canella understood architecture in these terms. The dedicated desperation of Canella’s architecture is committed to the exhibition of this primitive oppression. As much as Canella’s ideological construction is awkward, and as much as his architecture is repulsive (and we’re talking about his best period), he had something there. The offensive ugliness that Canella laboriously erected in the 1970s in the barren outskirts of Milan is not just the consequence of the impoverished life of the proletariat, for these nightmares are not only modern, and this oppression is not only that of the working class: it is also the oppression of the bourgeois architect as well as a deeper, somehow unspeakable oppression, a universal Unbehagen. Similar nightmares indeed appear in the work of architects as different as Ricardo Bofill, Ludwig Hilberseimer, Kiyonori Kikutake, Hans Poelzig, Paul Rudolph and Carel Weeber.

San Rocco 5 tries to deal with the horror of architecture. What should we think of the architects who have decided to scare the rest of the world deliberately? And what about buildings that are not just big and uncanny, but deliberately dark, windowless, gloomy, repulsive or anti-human? Is scary architecture just a desperate quest for love? As Black Sabbath would put it, “Happiness I cannot feel and love to me is so unreal”.