MAZZOCCHIOO

#11 Form of Things

Kersten Geers
Bas Princen
Matteo Ghidoni

EDITURA UNIVERSITARĂ ION MINCU

MAZZOCCHIOO
ideas for architecture

Mazzochioo examines architecture at the crossroads of academia and practice, collecting precise and meaningful cultural fragments from its history and ongoing practice through texts, drawings, and conferences.

Editors-in-chief:
Ștefan Simion
Irina Meliță

Editors & graphic design:
Eliza Voiculescu
Ana-Maria Avramescu

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

ȘTEFAN SIMION

Mazzocchioo#11. Form of Things

Esiste la regola, ma non esiste la ricetta. - Livio Vacchini

Kersten Geers and David Van Severen have been *OFFICE* since 2002. They met back in the 1990s at the Escuela Técnica Superior de Arquitectura de Madrid, where they attended classes taught by Iñaki Ábalos and Juan Herreros — an important part of their cultural genealogy. In the early 2000s, they met Bas Princen, who would later photograph *The Notary*, their first completed project, following a humorous promise that he would document all their future work. In 2010, *Innocence*, issue zero of *San Rocco*, was published. The magazine emerged from the shared interests and friendships of a generation of architects who met during that same decade: Matteo Ghidoni, Matteo Costanzo, Kersten Geers, Francesca Pellicciari, Giovanni Piovene, Giovanna Silva, Pier Paolo Tamburelli, Andrea Zanderigo, Ludovico Centis, Michele Marchetti, Stefano Graziani, Paolo Carpi.

Echoing the conference, Mazzocchioo#11 brings together these intertwined trajectories through the presence of Kersten Geers —architect, teacher, writer; Bas Princen — artist, photographer; and Matteo Ghidoni — *San Rocco* editor-in-chief, architect, teacher. Rather than presenting them in isolation, the talk traces the continuities and resonances that link their practices and friendships within a shared architectural culture—an evolving conversation that *Mazzocchioo* continues to cultivate.

What follows are a few thoughts that grow out of the interviews in this issue.

Mirroring Each Other

The project, the photography, and the written text structurally inform one another, each becoming an instru-

ment in defining the others.

As Bas notes, the essence of the visual argument lies in the idea that photography reveals something about reality that everyone can see, yet no one truly notices. It has the power to lift reality out of its preconceived perception and return it to its ontological strangeness.

Kersten acknowledges that photography — the *a posteriori* gaze upon the built project — has profoundly influenced the way even the architect perceives the work he has just created. This is not merely a perceptual fact; it also represents a kind of test of the initial intentions to which the architect subjects the completed work. In the long run, this process shapes the architect's way of thinking: architects cultivate obsessions, pursue certain themes, and this visual argument can either confirm or challenge their line of thought.

Photography can thus testify to the theoretical significance that a particular building holds. And in this particular story, Bas is uniquely positioned: he knows intimately the subtleties of *OFFICE*'s work. As Kersten notes, theirs has been a shared evolution —"*OFFICE* time and Bas time are the same to some extent."

This affinity emerged from a shared, mirrored radicality in their thinking. Just as OFFICE gravitates toward a zero-degree architecture, reducing its conceptual vocabulary to the essentials of the discipline — room, perimeter, structure, light, material, repetition, and so on — Bas, from the outset, grounds his art in a similarly abstract and conceptual approach. For him, a space is not depicted merely to represent reality, but to propose a certain use through the chosen viewpoint.

It is a work of hierarchy and of educated omission: by mastering the placement of the focal point, one can deliberately exclude certain things. In doing so, Bas observes that "a certain possibility of use starts to appear." *OFFICE*'s archi-

tecture of the perimeter, in turn, provides an exceptional framework for photography to explore this critical reading of reality.

Projects Leading to Other Projects

Following Rossi, Kersten cites Loos's claim that all good architecture is describable. This suggests a defined narrative — a structured *line of thought* — underlying each project. It also points to the way architecture — and, in this case, photography — can be mirrored into text. Both Kersten and Bas have, through essays, interviews, and conferences, made their thinking visible.

Yet what matters most is that the practice of architecture is rooted in experience and intuition, which are then amplified through a discursive narrative. This narrative not only shapes the projects but also makes them communicable to others. At the same time, it opens the path for further research, allowing each project to inspire new explorations in future works.

For Kersten, this may take the form of coherence, as reflected in his use of the phrase *train of thought*. Within a project, it is essential that all elements be coherent with one another, and this applies equally when the project forms part of the office's broader research. Arbitrariness is a flaw.

Yet coherence, for him, is never a formula. It emerges from lived experience — from observing artists, reading the biographies of other architects, visiting buildings, writing, teaching, and constructing. Through these intertwined acts, architecture can embrace contradiction and complexity, a richness that is ultimately measured and validated only by the form itself — the form that contains and reflects all reasoning and facets of the project.

Bas highlights the importance of always establishing a link between past projects and those yet to come. "The image

creates a reference, linking it to something you've seen before — perhaps your own work or something from the history of image-making. There's a certain resonance between reality and your mind that you have to accept, not manipulate."

Series and Recurring Themes

In relation to this self-referential genealogy of work, Bas emphasizes the importance of producing photographs as part of a series — a larger, cohesive project rather than as isolated objects. In this sense, the images of *OFFICE'*s architecture form a series, while his own artistic inquiries are similarly organized: *The Reservoir series, The American West, Artificial Arcadia,* and others.

Yet the creation of a series is often slow and fluid. As Bas explains, "Sometimes it can take a few years before pictures make sense, because they don't fit in a series, don't have a proper neighbor, or don't immediately show what they reference." The series establishes relationships between its elements, rendering its internal logic visible. It carries a critical dimension, articulating a theoretical stance and, in doing so, offering a discourse on the discipline itself.

This mirrors *OFFICE*'s way of working. Beginning with their first project, The Notary's Office (2002-05), their underlying theme has always been exploring how a room can generate a project and what defines it — its limits, light, materiality, self-referentiality, interior or exterior, and so on. The research opened up new territories, which can be named in a deliberately anachronistic list: shifting focus from the content toward the perimeter (*Summer House,* Ghent 2004-07); dematerializing the room through its geometry and orienting it toward the landscape (*Solo House*, Matarraña 2012-17), the series of rooms (*New Museum*, Ostend 2004); changes in scale of the room (*Border Crossing*, Anapra 2005); taking the room

to a territorial dimension (*Cité de Réfuge*, Ceuta 2007); radically changing scale and transforming architecture into an inhabited territory (*Media House*, RTS Lausanne 2014-25); and connecting architecture and the city in terms of thinking (*A Grammar for the City*, Daejeon 2005).

The room also functions as the idiosyncratic, critical lens through which *OFFICE* engages with and comments on the history of the discipline: the 25 rooms of *Ordos* (2008-09) — "an Italian palazzo emerging from the deep grounds of the desert"[1] ; the 18 rooms of *Villa Buggenhout* (2007-12) — "the house […] is a villa […]; it integrates within its architecture elements that belong to the garden and the landscape – just as Palladio's villas do, or as Schinkel did at Charlottenburg"[2] ; the incomplete room of *The Belgian Pavilion* (2007-08) — "a simple spatial gesture produces architecture and exhibition, one entirely coinciding with the other. Through this, it establishes a relationship with certain willfully misunderstood historical events, chief among them Le Corbusier's Pavillon de l'Esprit Nouveau."[3]

San Rocco & Architectural Magazines

San Rocco may appear radical, generic (in the good sense), and heroic—an isolated cultural act. Yet all culture is contextual, and its significance is inseparable from its context: in this case, the institution of the architectural magazine and its critical role.

Bas points to the gradual decline of the autonomy of architectural magazines and the support network they once provided photographers, allowing them to develop their own perspectives and offer personal readings of the photographed work. Magazines historically had editorial projects and positions, which they constructed and defended by curating texts and images; the photographs themselves were not merely il-

lustrations of objects, but commented on how these objects were embedded in the urban fabric, the landscape, and the broader cultural context.

Today, for various reasons, magazines assume less responsibility in shaping substantial debates and expect more from those they feature. Perhaps they have shifted from proposing theses and a coherent set of beliefs to a more simplified role of dissemination. As Bas observes, "You're more likely asked to present a pre-formed idea, which is shown but not really discussed." In this way, the critical role of the magazine fades.

As one of the key founders of *San Rocco*, Kersten echoes Bas's observations. He recalls his initial dissatisfaction with the state of architectural publications: "Magazines like *Domus*, *Archis* were very uninteresting, basically just copy-pasting texts that offices provided, with a few pictures." This dissatisfaction created the impetus to produce a new critical vessel — *San Rocco* —"one that was actually about architecture, where anything was allowed."

At the heart of *San Rocco* was the radical ownership of its own agenda: "We needed to counter this lifestyle, some kind of neo-journalism in architecture, and also in writing about architecture. We felt we had to bring back architecture itself — writing about architecture — with a slight fun factor, by embracing figures of the past, mixing them with something super contemporary, and, most of all, daring to say, to speak out: I like, I dislike, bullshit, whatever."

As an intentional manifesto to break with the inertial drift toward a dull field of communication, *San Rocco* formally defined its format: a five-year plan, topics announced from the outset, a timeline that implied an end, and, importantly, a free attitude infused with humor, allowing a direct engagement with the fundamental themes of architecture. Taken together, these elements form a carefully constructed body of statements

about what it means to talk about architecture.

Matteo captures the essence by noting that the magazine placed its focus squarely on the projects themselves, rather than on architectural theory in general. These projects occupied a deliberately anachronistic space defined by *San Rocco*: contemporary buildings alongside edifices of the past, each treated as a form of architectural thinking. This approach carries an implicit preference — history over theory. As Matteo observes, "It brings history into the present, making it relevant for today, and seeing how it works before tackling theory. As such, *San Rocco* belongs to the Italian tradition of operative history, which was criticized as a non-objective history because it is driven by intentions — by project intentions."

This, ultimately, is the spirit of *San Rocco*: reclaiming the courage to state one's beliefs, obsessions, and passions; taking sides; instigating debate; and confronting the status quo.

This was made possible through the collective effort of the broader group that shaped *San Rocco*. Reflecting on the recurring topics, Matteo invokes Giorgio Grassi's phrase: "Architecture is the architectures." Though seemingly tautological, it gestures toward the totality of built and unbuilt projects across history. These recurring topics emerged from the group's shared responses to the "stupid and difficult question": *What is architecture?* The outcome is a form of collective knowledge, visible only through the architectural projects that history preserves.

As Matteo reflects, "I think that around these three core ideas — architecture as collective knowledge, architecture as a collaborative process, and architecture as a formal problem — we tried to develop the editorials, each focusing on different aspects and nuances of them." In this way, the magazine itself becomes a testament to architecture as both practice and reflection, a collective inquiry into the nature of the discipline.

Teaching *is* Research and Vice Versa

As a side note, it is worth observing the cultural and pedagogical approaches presented in this issue, both as reflections and as catalysts of the modes of production within *OFFICE* and *San Rocco*. In conversation with Kersten and Matteo, one senses a certain freedom in their methodological stance: a pragmatic attitude, generous in its confidence in a young generation that is capable and eager to learn, and to take part in the processes of knowledge exploration and production. The underlying conviction is that teaching *is* research.

Kersten, in his radical positioning, goes to the essence: "the only thing you can do is share your thoughts with the students, share your doubts, discuss this, push them into an amount of directions, but be open, and look for possible tracks, possible doors, possible maneuvers, and land together. And that's why there's no distinction there. I don't have the money, so to speak, to have a research lab and to teach on the side. [..] we have very good students. [..] if you bring something to the table, they're interested, they want to work. And they're also skilled enough — that's the ultimate luxury — I don't have to teach them architecture *per se*. I only have to teach them architecture culture. And that happens to be my interest, my topic, my research."

Matteo mirrors in his teaching — or perhaps the other way around — *San Rocco*'s strategy articulated in *The Book of Copies*: a way of looking at architecture through its forms, types, and characteristics. Conceived as a collective repository of images to be copied, *The Book of Copies* frames architecture as an accumulative, derivative practice rooted in the simple act of collecting. As in *San Rocco*, students are encouraged to form synthetic and personal thoughts on the discipline, developing critical views on the built reality through the zero-degree act of accumulation.

The Form of Things

I am among those who believe that form is never a mere result — nor a question of superficial appearance — but a deliberate synthesis of the many forces at play in artistic production. Form embodies the author's educated subjectivity, their position within a discipline and its tradition, and their capacity to order a hierarchy of problems ranging from the apparently particular to those that open toward broader cultural, social, and political dimensions. Form is a big, big issue. Form is not innocent: it bears witness to the author's inner battles and reflects the manifold contexts that have conditioned the emergence of the work.

Mazzocchioo #11 brings together a remarkable and complementary group of individuals who, over more than twenty years of shared practice and reflection, have cultivated a sustained passion for — and commitment to — the form of things.

Conceptually, form is at once a reason and a result. *San Rocco* was founded on the shared belief that architecture is primarily a formal problem. As Matteo noted, "by addressing form and space, you address all the other issues: political, social and so on; so we cannot avoid the topic of form through which all these other values converge and are made into a manifest." In deciding its character, *San Rocco*, as a commentary on its own editorial nature, began by defining its form through pragmatic, concrete decisions: a five-year plan, twenty issues, a declared ending, announced topics, treated as a folder, a catalogue of projects, with a specific theme for each issue; and NO text on the cover. Its spirit was also, in a way, a formal statement: as Kersten remarked, "*San Rocco* was like this kind of alternative music fanzine: zero compromises, you hate everybody, sometimes you love everybody.

Bas returns to the profound idea of documentary pho-

tography, a notion that is gaining renewed relevance today. "Fifteen or ten years ago, I would never have called my work documentary. But now, in an age where images circulate online, are not fixed, and are subject to minor alterations — whatever the algorithms do — the idea of the document is becoming more important again. The document, as a print or as an archival object, can exist online, but it should definitely exist offline. So, in a way, this is a long introduction to the work I'm doing now." The uniqueness of the object is central. It requires deliberate decisions regarding its physical form: the type of paper, dimensions, framing, lighting, and so on. This process may have led Bas to his profound meditations on space through the pavilions he created, sometimes in collaboration with *OFFICE*: images of reality reintroduced into the world of things as site-specific installations. In some cases, as with *Wilmarsdonk*, the photographs documenting the past serve as witnesses to the actual aging of the old, depicted tower, merging image and reality in a temporal continuum.

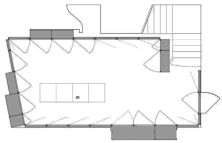
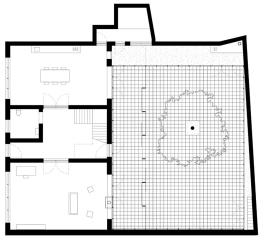
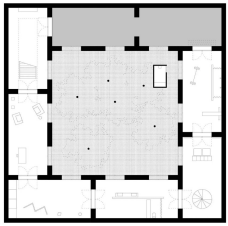
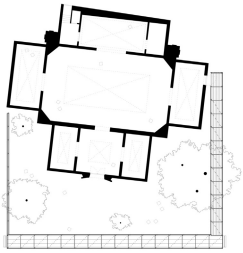
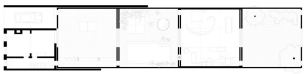
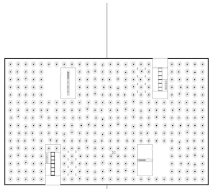
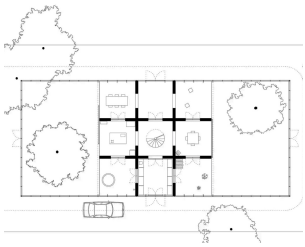
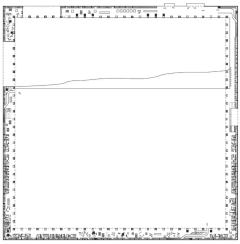
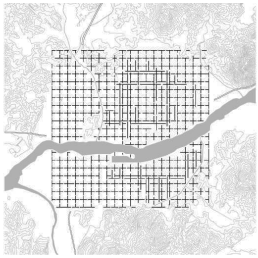
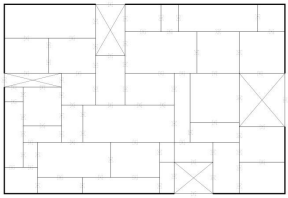
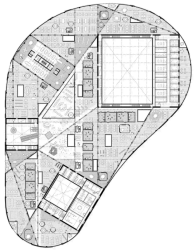
Kersten belongs "to a generation of architects who believe that if architecture has the desire to survive, than it needs to be obsessively busy with itself"[4]. The laboratory he led at EPFL was named *FORM*. The acronym itself functioned as a manifesto at a time when prevailing cultural fashions reduced architecture to the mere outcome of other concerns — social, political, journalistic, and so on. *FORM*, obsessively and systematically, sought to restore architecture from this marginal position, academically instrumentalizing its key elements, themes, and protagonists: room, grid, material, perimeter, light, structure, geometry; scale and typology, the big box, the evenly covered field; history, complexity and contradiction, zero-degree architecture; Bramante, Koolhaas, Palladio and Scamozzi, Mies and McKim, Mead & White, Rossi, Ruscha, LeWitt, Ungers, Stirling, Krier, Hockney, Siza and Venturi and their mothers, Hans Hollein, Bas Princen, and many others.

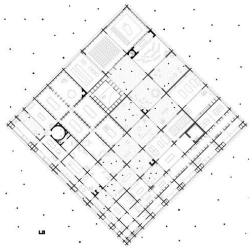
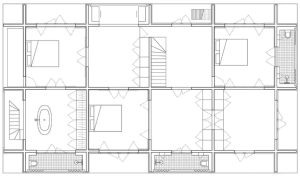
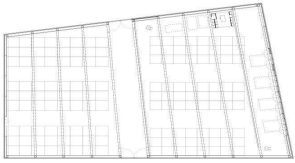
Later, his academic activity stands under the name *Office without Office* — a reverse, tongue-in-cheek reference to *OMA* and *AMO* — reflecting the ideal that practice, academia, and research should be unified. Illustrating this fundamental belief, *OFFICE*'s work is highly critical and theoretically charged; it is not composed of episodic responses to successive commissions. Their architecture is describable, coherent, and finds character within itself: "An architecture made as a sequence of spaces, is one that concentrates on the threshold, both internally and between the inside and outside. It is an architecture that is increasingly disconnected from its real content, and that – perhaps in an old tradition – concentrates on the perimeter. One could say it is an architecture without content, provocatively perhaps, but with the aim of emphasizing that its primary function lies not in the manipulation of what it contains, but rather in the simple mediation between what happens inside and outside."[5]

Epilogue: Go Hasegawa Interviews Kersten and David

Announcing Mazzocchioo.Talks #12, featuring Go Hasegawa and Junya Ishigami, we would like to express our gratitude to Go for allowing us to include in this issue an excerpt from the interview he conducted with Kersten and David in 2014, as part of his *Conversations with European Architects*.

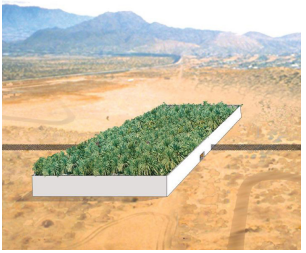
We chose to republish here the subchapter *"Measuring System and Space for Life"*[6] because, as Kersten notes in this dialogue, it might indeed be true "that the most important thing you can do as an architect is introduce a set of references, a ruler, a measuring system." Defining the form of things.

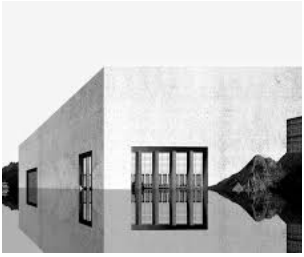
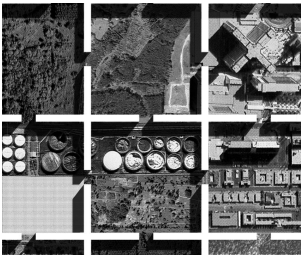
















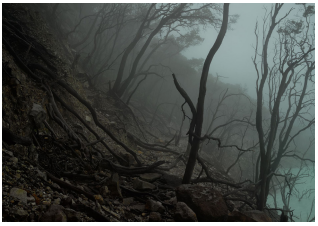








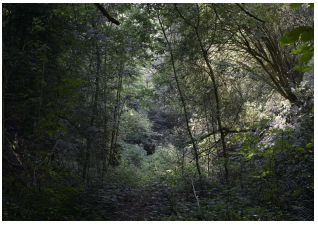


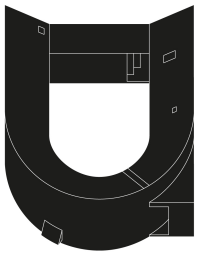



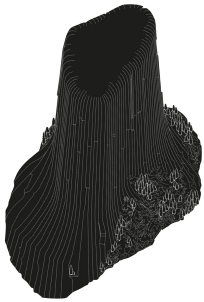
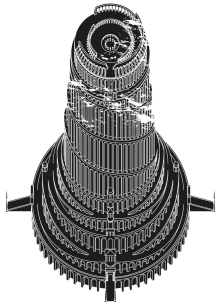
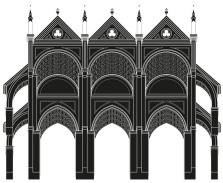


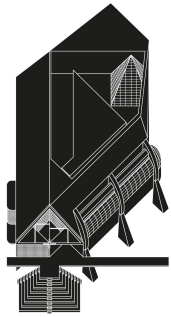
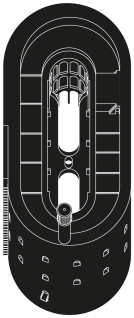
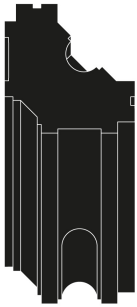
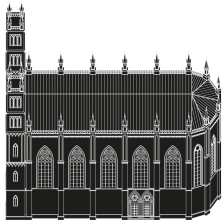
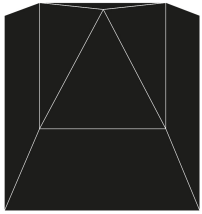
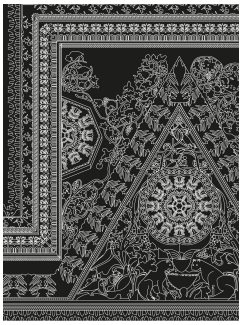
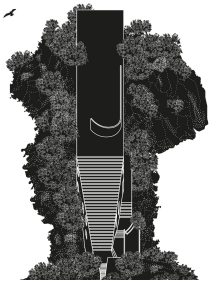
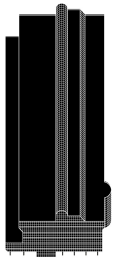
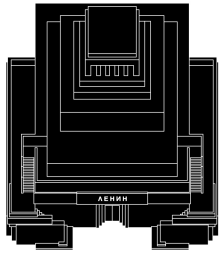




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INTERVIEWS

The interviews were recorded online.
With the participation of Kersten Geers (KG),
Matteo Ghidoni (MG), Bas Princen (BP),
Ștefan Simion (SS) and Irina Meliță (IM).

MATTEO GHIDONI

10th September, 2025.

Teaching

SS: To begin, we'd like to situate the conversation in the present: where are you today, and how would you describe your practice and your teaching? And as a follow-up, how has the *San Rocco* experience shaped what you're doing now and where you find yourself?

MG: At the moment I am in Cambridge where I am staying for 45 days now to teach at MIT as first part of the semester. Then, I will go back to Italy, teach remotely and I will come back in November, December to finish the semester here until the final review. This is something I've been doing for three years. So, teaching in the US is my first experience of this kind. In Italy, I am currently teaching at Politecnico in Milano. All this teaching is not part of a structured academic career, I would say. Especially in Italy, that is some sort of a specialization — an academic career that doesn't really fit the people who are practicing architecture at the moment, that's how I feel — although some people manage to keep the two things together.

I have always had my office, *Salottobuono*, that was already existing at the time of the beginning of *San Rocco*. *Salottobuono* is a very small office. My practice is small and, in terms of dimension of the office, it's really variable and connected to specific commissions. And I must say that in the last three, four years, the weight of the academic activity and teaching was heavier and, in a way, the office suffered from it. Especially when I am abroad and since it's a very small office, I don't have the structure that can support my presence abroad, in order to have control from here of what happens in the office. So what

happens, in fact, is that the office travels with me. I am working here on my projects in Italy. In the recent years I worked on a series of public commissions, mainly with small municipalities in the North center of Italy. I worked really on public projects, meaning projects of a square, of some parks or civic center, the extension of a casino in Venezia — which is a public-private mix. This area of work is really interesting for me, really difficult and demanding. There is a lot of bureaucracy, not a lot of money involved all the time. Most of these commissions are direct commissions — this implies that they are below a certain

Market Square, Enrico Dusi & Matteo Ghidoni, Sant'Agostino (Terre del Reno), Italy, 2019, Photograph: Giorgio De Vecchi.

Casinò di Venezia, Ca' Noghera, Enrico Dusi & Matteo Ghidoni / Salottobuono, Venice, Italy, 2020, Photograph: Marco Cappelletti.

level of budgets. And sometimes the scope, the expectation, the ambition of the project is much larger than the budget you have. So I would describe my situation right now as a mix of this academic and professional work. It has always been like this, I would say — all research and production, ever since the beginning, right after I completed my studies in Venice. But maybe what is new is the amount of academic work I'm doing: teaching here in Milan, also in private schools in Milan, and before that I was teaching in Genova and so on. So let's say that since the COVID year, this activity became more and more important in my life.

SS: You teach the project, the studio?

MG: Yes, normally I teach the studio. Sometimes it happens that I teach something more theoretical, connected to architectural drawing, but mainly the architectural studio.

SS: May I ask — perhaps as a side note in the broader discussion — what your current project at MIT is about? How did you conceive it? I imagine you have the academic freedom to propose the subject yourself.

MG: Yes, it is an option studio, so I have the freedom to propose. Core studios, on the other hand, are more structured around certain topics that students might face in their first, second, or third year. I decided to bring here in the beginning — like three years ago — a topic that I was already working with in Italy, in Genova especially, which is *Enclosures*. Somehow, starting from an article by Vittorio Gregotti, well, an editorial for the first issue of his amazing magazine, *Rassegna*, published in 1979, I guess, the first issue. I don't know if you know this magazine *Rassegna* …

It's not really well known abroad — also because it was written in Italian — but it was a fantastic magazine, I would say, monographic, monothematic. It started in 79 and lasted for 77 issues and then it stoped. The very first issue of *Rassegna* is about enclosures, *recinti* in Italian, which is an ambiguous word in a way because it defines this idea of the architecture of the perimeter. But what Gregotti says about this topic is that — let's say — he tries to provide a kind of possible definition, which is exactly what you are trying to do with this very broad concept. He sees it as an act of territorial conquer, but it's an act of a primary act of construction that is done collectively.So it's one of these foundation acts of architecture. I started to work on this with the students, trying to make projects that could add to the catalog of examples that Gregotti proposes — which is by definition incomplete — but at the same time, it offers this generosity of being completed by others. It's almost like launching a series of proposals and then let it open to be completed by others. So as I worked two semesters on Enclosures, this year I decided to continue with this approach to architecture through specific single elements or basic gestures. And this time I proposed to work on the roof. So somehow I turned the problem 90 degree and moved from the centrality of the plan to that of the section. So the studio now is called Under One Roof, because we are interested in the collective and public agency of the roof. So not so much in itself as a technical element, but once again as a selective element — something that makes a territory discrete in defining what is under the roof and what is outside of the roof. The studio is interested in investigating the spatial, atmospheric, structural qualities of the space under the roof. And I'm working on two scales with the students: the first exercise is shorter and it's a pavilion and then a civic infrastructure in the city.

SS: Do you choose specific sites for these projects?

MG: Yes, I propose some locations. In a way it's tricky because I want to work locally. I want to work in Boston or here in the context where I am and it's a context that I don't know very well. So this is the main struggle every year to try to find the place, the site, the topic or the specific program that can go with the broader topic I am proposing. So we don't start from: this is the site, this is the program, let's design something — but it's a project-based research. So for instance, now I am conducting the series of roof talks — I call them the roof talks — inviting offices or authors that dealt with the topic in an interesting manner and discussing with the students about one single project for each author in a very in-depth way. So yeah, finally we have sites, we have programs, but it's not the first thing. I mean, I know it's tricky, it's like — you have to design a roof in the end. And so you already know what would be the project.

The Book of Copies

SS: If we move toward a discussion of San Rocco, I'm thinking right now about *The Book of Copies*, and it seems to me that the roof could be another topic worth exploring. Of course, it's essential — one might even argue it's the central issue in architecture.

MG: Yes, I'm quite sure, I don't remember, but there should be some book of copies around the topic of the roof, maybe a more specific kind of roof. And yes, the structure and the method of *The Book of Copies* really influenced my teaching in a way. Many times I ask the students to put together sort of a book of copies around the

Book of Copies, San Rocco, February 2015.

topic. For instance, we did it for the *Enclosures*, because it's really this idea of creating — trying to explore this collective knowledge of the architecture that has been built or designed through time and, considering what are the relevant aspects we can find for our projects today. And so I like a lot to work with the students, at least in the preliminary phase of the studio, as a collaborative research unit in which the knowledge is shared. Especially here in the US I must say that the behavior of the students is a bit more individualistic. It's not a surprise and it's difficult to convey this idea that architecture is not a secret. It's more like a shared knowledge and we should work together on a specific topic, then everybody develops their own proposals.

Early Days of San Rocco

SS: I think you have mentioned earlier the beginnings of *San Rocco*. From what we understand, it was a very collaborative process, which is fantastic. We'd like to ask about those early days: how did things come together? How did you all meet?

MG: It's true that collaboration is a word that we have always used. And it's something both structural, I would say, in the DNA of *San Rocco* and a topic of discussion and an argument that interests us as a topic for the magazine. San Rocco is exactly a collaborative project made by four offices in the beginning. There were *Salottobuono*, *baukuh*, *2A+P/A*, and also Kersten Geers, David Van Severen, and two photographers, Giovanna Silva and Stefano Graziani, and one graphic designer, Francesca Pellicciari. That was more or less, let's say, the starting group. We knew each other from school, from the university in Venice. Well, many of us were studying in Venice and few in Genova and few in Rome, but we had a chance to meet each other during the school days because of the mutual interest in the projects and competitions that we were starting to develop. And I think one key figure we all worked and collaborated under was Stefano Boeri at the time when he came to teach at IUAV. At that time I was already graduating and then we collaborated with him. After my graduation, I moved to Milan to work with him mainly in the research and the academic environment. He was really a collector, a sort of reference point for many of us. After finishing the school, many of us started to collaborate with magazines, especially with *Abitare* and *Domus*, somebody with *Casabella* too. So we all had some editorial experience. Personally, with my office, we curated, we edited the section called *Instructions and Manuals* on

Abitare Magazine under the direction of Boeri. So we met several times before starting San Rocco. We met by chance, sometimes with the occasion of an exhibition or the Biennale or other collective moments, and we started talking about the panorama of magazines at the time — especially Italian magazines. It was already 2007, 2008, so the economic crisis started to affect the financial resources of the magazines, and there was a huge debate around what kind of direction should they take — how to face this — and also the digital publishing was stronger and stronger, and that also posed a question about the future of paper publication. So, I would say that the outcome of this discussion was a sort of dissatisfaction with what was happening and with the kind of direction that some magazines took. In our opinion, they didn't focus anymore on architectural problems, on the specifics of architecture, and they took a much wider range of problems, of arguments. So I think we were at dinner and we started saying: Why don't we try to make our own magazine, our own publication? Why don't we try to say what we want to say and see what are the things, the interest that we share and try to create a platform that is not limited to Italy, but could generate a debate with other countries. We were also already looking a lot to Belgium, to the Netherlands, to what was happening in Switzerland, and so on. And so we simply said: " Let's try to do this", and we started.

IM: It was also kind of a small rebellion of some sort.

MG: Maybe, yes. You can feel a bit of rage in some of the editorials, maybe, a bit of, like: "Enough!".

SS: Did you also have good models that you admired, like various magazines or publications that were somehow on the table as references?

IM: Maybe older?

MG: Yes, there is a bit of nostalgia, of course, in what happened, also in the idea of publishing on paper that we had since the beginning, because we were very fascinated by these products that we could touch. The Italian publishing *Panorama* had a lot of amazing references, like some directions of *Casabella*, the history of *Domus*, but even lesser-known magazines like *Rassegna* that I was mentioning before — each of us had their own favorites, of course. We didn't really bring them and put them on the table, but we had them in our mind. Think about *Terrazzo*, for instance, this publication by Ettore Sottsass. We also started to understand, maybe, that what most of the magazines we loved had in common was a limited lifespan. So the possibility of recognizing a project that could cover, 20 issues, 10 maybe — *Terrazzo*, for instance, had 12 or 13 issues, *Rassegna* 77, certain moments of *Casabella*…

IM: Maybe that was a decision made at the beginning.

MG: Yes, in our case, yes. But in the case of *Rassegna* or *Terrazzo*, I think it was more a matter of money, a matter of conditions under which this happened. But you still have the feeling that the project had a precise task — to be completed in a certain number of issues. Maybe they already knew that it was not going to last forever. This is really good, in our opinion, we all agreed on this — on giving yourself a goal, a task, that makes the project more precise, more suitable for your intention. In that moment, when *San Rocco* was born, or after *San Rocco* was born, we observed that many fanzines, magazines around Europe, around the world were popping up. There was a renewed interest on publishing on paper, but many of them lasted only one issue,

or they started and they never went on. So deciding from the beginning that we wanted to have 20 issues — a goal that we didn't completely accomplish, because we made 16 in the end — was an assumption of responsibility, saying: we want to do this — and then we will succeed, we will not succeed, let's see, but this is our goal. That can change for external reasons. For instance, we immediately understood that in the beginning we declared we wanted to make four issues per year in order to have the 20 issues completed in five years. We immediately understood that it was impossible for us to do this, because it was not our main activity. All of us had offices or work — we had to do the profession. Some of us already started to be in the academic environment, pursuing academic career, so it was simply impossible to put together four books every year with the kind of project we had in mind. And that changed, but, at least in the beginning, if you don't state your intention, it's really difficult then to see the scope of your project.

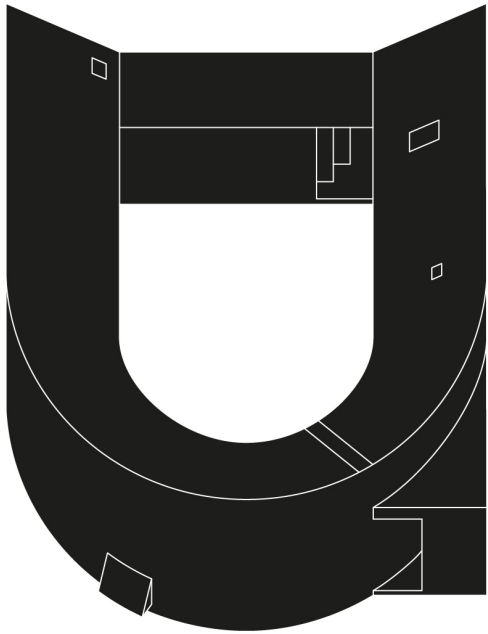
SS: Just out of curiosity — did you consider any alternative names before settling on San Rocco?

MG: Not that I remember. We loved it right away — it was Italian and a bit unexpected. I don't remember any other name. That's a nice question. I don't remember any other proposals before San Rocco, but I should check.

The Form of San Rocco

SS: You mentioned the formal aspect of printing the magazine on paper. Before discussing content, did you have initial conversations about the magazine's structure — like the relationship between text and images — or the type of articles, whether more theoretical or applied?

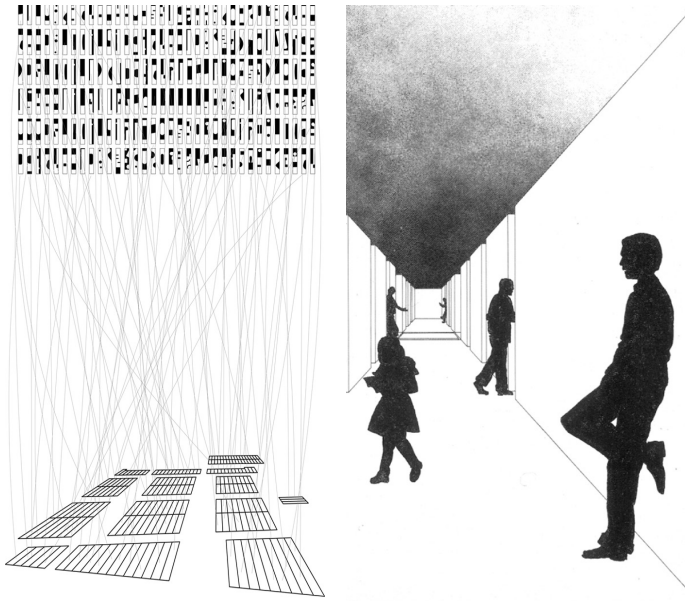
MG: Yes, of course, we discussed a lot about the form of the thing, because as architects we work on form. We spent two years discussing about the cover for instance. The first issue, the number zero of *San Rocco*, was launched in 2010, but I guess we started discussing about it in 2008 at least or maybe 2007. So it was in the air for a long time and we had several discussions and of course, many of these discussions were about the layout of the magazine. Well, not the internal layout — for this we trusted our graphic designer Francesca, she did the job. Also the internal layout was really influenced by the cost, so you see that most of the pages of *San Rocco* are printed in black and white and there is probably one-sixteenth or two-sixteenth in color. But the cover, the cover was a huge topic, because we tried many kind of titles and so on.



San Rocco cover, Innocence, Issue 0, July 2010. Cover drawing of Toyo Ito's U House by Michele Marchetti.

SS: I love the radical choice of leaving the cover completely text-free.

MG: Yeah, I don't remember exactly what led to this decision. We made a lot of proofs, we printed some attempts, some proofs and I guess the text on the cover made it look old in a way. And finally, we erased the text, we erased the color, it's just black and white and the drawing — an axonometric drawing most of the time — which was a kind of drawing that we were exploring with my office a lot in that moment and it's also something that connected us to the other offices. That was in a moment in which, in the beginning of 2000s, renderings were booming and when competitions were really based on the quality of your renderings and so on. *Baukuh* for instance participated in a European competition with two projects that were just drawn in lines in black and white and they won the two competitions. It was in Budapest and in Amsterdam.



Cassius, baukuh / Far West & City of Amsterdam, Amsterdam, The Netherlands, 2003, Competition project

SS: Do you think it's still possible today to win a competition only by such drawings without renderings?

MG: They were digital drawings, line drawings, black and white. It became very fashionable afterwards and I think it still is to some extent, but you need some renderings and models to convince. What I'm saying is that maybe this idea of hand drawing spoke a lot about our intention to take objects that were built or designed in history and to reconsider them as something that can speak about our time. So redrawing them with the same technique of the axonometric drawing made them like a series of objects that could be put on the table and let's say detached from their specific historical period and can be observed as such — as architecture. This idea of using the drawing speaks a lot about this aptitude on the cover.

San Rocco's Audience

IM: Did you have in mind the target that *San Rocco* would speak to? I mean, do you think it was mainly addressed to architects and people who were initiated or not necessarily?

MG: Before I answer your important question, I want to clarify that the magazine was intended to focus on the projects themselves, rather than on architectural theories in general. But if we want to simplify, we can say that it's treated as a folder, as a catalog of projects. You put together these objects — so the structure of the magazine is very simple. It's just one article after the other, there are no surprises. Most of the time, it's really treated in a very schematic manner in which every article talks about a specific project — and this is under the umbrella of the topic that we chose every time— but the intention was not to produce a magazine that spoke about abstract theories

on architecture, but just going on with the project.

And maybe this also relates to your question about the audience. The typical audience that we imagined was somebody like us. First of all, we did *San Rocco* for us — meaning all the people that were in our condition of being practitioners, but also architects who participated in a sort of debate, in competitions, in exhibitions, in publications, and sometimes work in the academic environment, they teach and so on. I think that this kind of subject was targeting a particular kind of intellectual architect or architect doing the intellectual work, which is what architects should do. We recognize that there were many like us, at least in Europe, and we wanted to speak to this particular kind of audience. The choice of the audience was not really driven by strategic economic choices. It was a very honest way to say: "We are in this condition. We are here. We are 10 people, but there are hundreds of people like us around and we want to expand the debate". That is, I guess, the subject we wanted to address.

SS: It was significant that many of the group's initiators were practitioners, not only theoreticians.

MG: Yes, all of us. We didn't have pure theoreticians in the group, but among us, there were many interested in studying history of architecture and theories, and so on. Mainly history more than theories — and history in the sense that we wanted to understand what was there to take from the architecture of the past. It was a process of selection that we wanted to start.

Call for Papers

SS: Did you receive feedback from readers or students that influenced how the magazine evolved?

MG: Of course, because as I was saying, the main tool of *San Rocco* was the *call for papers*. So, in the beginning, for instance, for the number zero, we invited the contributors directly, but already from number one on, *San Rocco* was triggering a debate and we received a series of proposals, a series of abstracts in response to our call for papers. And as we moved on, we had more and more abstracts to the point that for some issues, we had something like 100 or 120 abstracts to read, and then we had to select 20 of them. We were surprised by the sort of instant success of the magazine. We launched the number zero during the Biennale of Architecture of 2010, but not like an official event. We "parasited" the Biennale in a way. And in 2012, we got already invited to contribute to the Biennale, by David Chipperfield, on the *Common Ground*.

San Rocco exhibition, Collaborations, 13th International Architecture Exhibition, Venice Biennale, Venice, 2012. Photograph by Giovanna Silva

I think it was one of the first times or occasions in which an editorial board was invited as a contributor to the Biennale, recognizing that this editorial board was also a bunch of practitioners that with their work, tried to do something with architecture. So yes, we had this feedback mainly through the call for papers, because you could sense that every call received answers that were somehow reacting or commenting previous calls. In a way, the terms of the debate were stated and the people who contributed, most of the times, had the sense of the kind of environment in which they were participating.

Then we could observe the popularity of the axonometric drawings — it became evident in architectural schools. We were sometimes worried, even a bit ashamed, of this spread of white-on-black drawings and axonometrics, because we thought it was just a kind of stylistic copy. In our case, the reasons for using these drawings were a bit deeper. So yes, I think it had an effect and generated feedback on many levels. The most amazing thing was the instant popularity the magazine achieved —we didn't expect that.

SS: Did you talk about that in the editorial board?

MG: Not really. Well, we talked about it, but in very simple terms — like we should increase the print rate.

IM: And celebrate.

MG: Well, none of us did really make money out of it. But of course, we printed, I don't know, 1,000 copies for the first issues, and then we ended up printing 3,000, I guess. And now they are all sold out, most of them.

SS: Are you planning to reprint some of the issues?

MG: No, but not to make it an object of desire. It's more like a problem of storing all this paper. At least in the beginning, we were really independent. So we managed also distribution by ourselves. Then we had some distributors in Europe and in the US and some other countries. But mainly we had a lot of papers in our offices, because then we didn't have a specific building for *San Rocco*. They were all in our offices. And so the management of paper was a big issue. One person had to be dedicated to moving, sending, shipping the magazines and so on. So this is another reason why we didn't want to reprint the issues. Also what we did was simply put them in PDF on the website and you can download the PDF that is exactly the same as the magazine. If you want, you can print it yourself. It's available on the website.

Our intention was not to make this information available only to a few or the gifted, but it was just a practical reason. We wanted to spread the magazine as much as possible in many ways, that's why we published the PDF.

You were also mentioning *The book of copies* earlier on. *The book of copies* was printed in the form of books, a series of five books. And it was really expensive because there were really a lot of pages. So we printed them on demand. We accepted the orders beforehand and then we said: "Oh, we have to print — I don't remember how many — 500 copies of the book". And they were all sold in advance. In the same way, the content is online, so anyone can put together their own book.

The Editorials

IM: You mentioned that the editorials were collective, not signed by a single person, and often tackled topics others in architectural theory were ignoring — almost like acts

of rebellion. Were they meant as a way to reclaim architectural theory, addressing subjects important to practicing architects in Europe? And while *San Rocco* organized articles by topic, were the editorials more like manifestos highlighting the issues that deserved attention?

MG: Yes, the editorial and the call for papers, I would say — it's the editorial with the call and with the proposal of some case studies we thought about. As you said, while the editorial has a sort of common voice, there were topics that matter to us that were not expressed most of the times with a lot of theoretical accuracy. We took some freedom of using the irony— we were purely post-modern in this, trying also mixing, writing styles and genres and so on.

SS: Would you say that humor was also part of the equation in the approach?

MG: Yes, humor, absolutely. It was a part of the equation. Sometimes the editorials are more, let's say, more like trying to fight something. We published the title *Fuck Concepts! Context!*. That was maybe one of the most evidently manifesto styles. Some others were quieter and so on. But sometimes we also published bad jokes, I would say. Of course, we were not philologically or theoretically accurate, but we stated it in the first editorial. We were a bit impulsive sometimes. In practical terms, what happened was that in one of the magazine's first editorial meetings we had already decided on the 20 issues—their topics, almost even their titles—though these later changed again. It's so precisely stated that it takes also the risk of contradiction and saying: "Okay, we changed our mind. We will not do this, we will do that". But we wrote down a series of arguments that were important for us and we wanted to

San Rocco cover, Fuck concept!
Context!, Issue 4, 2012.

develop them through the issues of *San Rocco*. Some of them remain uncovered. In the last issue, we published all the drafts of the possible topics that we wanted to publish and offered them to the possibility — people that want to continue the adventure of *San Rocco*. Some of them were really important, some were more like a joke, but also these jokes contain some elements of truth and that matters to us. So, yes, that was the spirit.

IM: Do you recall the editorial from the *Clients* issue? You mentioned earlier that you now work mainly on public commissions, while that text addressed the very demise of the public sector. I found it striking and still very accurate today, at least in Romania. How do you see things having changed in the nine years since its publication?

MG: It's even less. It got worse.

IM: Yes, but I love the optimistic ending — the idea that architecture, with its long-term vision, could be the last art standing. Would you agree to us translating this text and publishing it in a major cultural newspaper in Bucharest?

San Rocco cover, The Client Issue, Issue 12, 2016.

MG: I think it's possible. I'll need to check with the others, but yes, that should be fine.

IM: That would be amazing. *Dilema* is one of the few cultural newspapers in Bucharest and Romania with a wide readership, yet architecture remains underrepresented. We often face the challenge of showing that architects are not solely to blame for the way cities look. This text is perfect for that, and publishing it would bring these ideas to a broader, non-architect audience.

MG: Absolutely. It would be an honor to have this editorial published there and thank you for the interest. I think

that you touched an important point: Why do they not talk about architecture anymore? Because architecture is not profitable, precisely for its intrinsic, long lifespan. It's not made for a market in which you need to have revenue after five years and have your investment covered in a short time span. And this is precisely the reason why architectural projects now are seen as financial assets. That's why the lifespan of buildings decreased drastically.

IM: Yes, the decision-makers also think very short-term. Politicians want quick results to get reelected, so most competitions—like those for parks—favor fast, visible outcomes. These issues need to be discussed and addressed. Thank you.

MG: I love the idea that you can possibly spark a debate in your country. I hope so. I'm sure you're doing your part there, and if we can contribute to it, that is amazing.

If you look through the editorials of *San Rocco,* you can say that we are always repeating the same things, more or less, with different nuances. And that's true. That's why we didn't plan for a lifespan longer than 20 issues — because with 20 issues, we will have said what we wanted to say, and our lives will likely have changed by then. And that, of course, happened. But one of the main topics that you can identify through the different editorials is this topic of architecture as something that lasts — the monumental quality of architecture, meaning that the monument is something for the memory, and it's not strictly related to the specific time when you are building it — this topic of permanence and collective enterprise. And this idea that architecture is based on a collective knowledge, on a collaborative work and it's not a solitary individual and market-oriented activity. I think these convictions are ex-

pressed quite clearly in most of the editorials that we published, even if one time we talked about *Bramante*, one time we talked about *Clients* or *Collaborations*.

SS: You've just answered the question I wanted to ask about how all 16 or 20 topics intersect, and whether any recurring themes appear.

MG: The recurrent topics are based on what we shared as a group in terms of our opinions or the big question of: "What is architecture?". It's at the same time a stupid question and a difficult question. So what we can say is that our idea of architecture is based on the fact that we see it as a collective knowledge once again, a knowledge that is constructed through the architectures that have been built through time.

In this sense, we always love this phrase of Giorgio Grassi: *"Architecture is the architectures"*. It seems like a tautology, but it is not, because the second term is plural and it refers to all the different objects that have been realized or just thought in history. As a consequence, it should be a collaborative work. We wanted to understand our work as an editorial team, as a collaborative work, but also think about the collaborative nature of architecture. We dedicated specific issues and also our participation in the Biennale to this.

There's also the fact that we strongly see architecture mainly as a formal problem. By addressing form and space, you address all the other issues: political, social and so on; so we cannot avoid the topic of form through which all these other values converge and are made into a manifest. So I think that around these three core ideas — architecture as collective knowledge, architecture as a collaborative process, and architecture as a formal prob-

lem — we tried to develop the editorials, each focusing on different aspects and nuances of them.

SS: I loved what you said about focusing more on history than theory. It's thought-provoking, because I usually approach things theoretically. Your way of bringing history into the present, making it relevant for today, and seeing how it works before tackling theory is really compelling.

MG: You know that in Italy, we had this thing called *the operative history* that was accused to be a non-objective history because it is driven by intentions, by project intentions.

SS: Yes, I greatly appreciated the book *Capolavori* by Roberto Masiero and Livio Vacchini. It's in the same vein — they examine buildings of the past by exploring their logic, rather than analyzing them from a historicist perspective.

MG: I think the approach is the same. There is a slight difference, in my opinion, in that work, which is the very personal tone of the research and its connection to a personal experience — a memory that truly belongs to the author. What we tried to do, perhaps, was to address this topic from a more collective perspective, from the perspective of the public — the intrinsic public quality of architecture. But you've studied Vacchini's work much more closely, so perhaps you have a more accurate perspective on this.

SS: It's a very unique take, his and Masiero's view. For me, it's the same perspective somehow.

MG: Maybe what we wanted to push forward was a more logical perspective. It's somewhat what happened

in Aldo Rossi's career — he had a logical moment in the beginning, which then became more personal with *Autobiografia scientifica* and his later works. We are, in a way, more attracted to the moment when his analysis of the city and of architecture was a bit more logical, maybe colder in a sense.

San Cataldo Cemetery, Aldo Rossi, Modena, Italy, 1971.

Architectural Publications Today

SS: Now that a few years have passed since the end of *San Rocco*, we were wondering if, with this distance, you might draw some conclusions or share some thoughts about this important chapter. And as a secondary question — not 'What is architecture?', but rather: What should an architectural magazine be today?

MG: Even more difficult.

SS: Or not be today. Or if you feel that we're still in the same moment and place in time — a cultural time — as when *San Rocco* emerged, during the 2008 crisis, the economic and financial one. Now we are after the pandemic, with many wars and many identity crises.

MG: No, it's a good question, a very difficult one. Somehow what we have always tried to avoid was a nostalgic attitude. Then we never wanted to celebrate the good old times when the things were better than today. We have always tried to make a magazine. That seems contradictory, but we looked a lot into history of architecture, in order to generate a debate on topics of today and tomorrow. So the attitude was really never nostalgic. It's not like we didn't want to indulge into celebrating the past per se. I would like to think that magazines today are representing a possible path, a possibility — although I don't see many. Maybe it's my ignorance. I'm not so constantly focused anymore on architectural publishing. I am still disappointed with the publishing panorama of my country. If I see, let's say, all celebrated magazines like Domus or Casabella today, it seems to me that they are repeating themselves over and over. I mean, it's based on a celebration of novelty and publishing the new things and so on.

SS: And fame.

MG: Fame, yes, of course — trying here and there to generate a little discourse. At the moment, I really like publications, magazines that want to talk about the projects in a very in-depth way — also trying to understand what the process behind the project was, things that are not usually told, the conditions, the economics, and the context. In general, the context read as a social, economic, cultural, political context, in a wider sense, and not just: "the site is beautiful and they will put my building here".

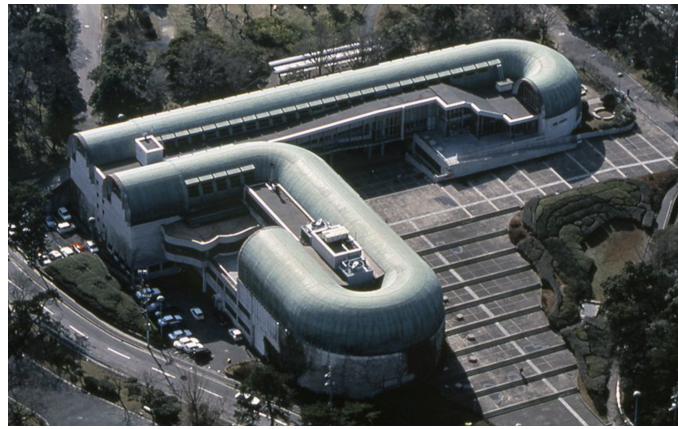
For instance, there is a Greek magazine. I don't know if you know it, *DOMa*. A few years ago, they started this new path in which they wanted to talk about five projects for each issue, but in a very wide, very rich with docu-

ments, trying to represent the process behind every project. So, I would expect more accuracy from the magazines and I would expect that they tell us something about the context in which the projects are produced. For instance, in Italy, there is this problem that we look a lot at Swiss architecture, which is celebrated, published, and is really photogenic. But the risk is that, we look at models and contexts that have nothing to do with our country. Think about the public project, as you were saying. If you publish today a public project that has been realized in Italy, you should really try to represent what are the conditions, what is the context of the project and not just the project, per se, as an image, a good or a bad image. Then, I would like to have a bit of debate — which is not always very polite — a bit of nasty questions and nasty answers.

It happened to me to find here some issues of *Harvard Design Magazine*, for instance. There was an issue from 1980 in which the students invited a bunch of architects to discuss around the topic of modernism and postmodernism. That was the topic of the moment. What they did was to organize a very brief well known projects presentations, like *Gallaratese* or some projects by Venturi or the library by Isozaki, this sort of vaulted tube. What happened was that they had a debate among the panel. There was Eisenman, there was Pei, there was Stan Allen and many other personalities that attacked their peers. There were really nasty, sometimes violent critiques. I remember Eisenman saying: “We shouldn’t even discuss about this project. It’s not relevant”. And I miss this — a bit of this impoliteness and a bit of “blood” in the debate.

SS: We had this at our university: after a year project, several studios would come together to discuss each student’s work, and intense, ‘blood’ discussions would

Gallaratese Quarter, Aldo Rossi, Carlo Aymonino, Milano, Italy, 1972.



Kitakyushu City Central Library, Arata Isozaki, Kitakyushu-City, Japan, 1974.

happen. But over time, people became more cautious, concerned about the professor's image, and the institution changed. Now, as you said, everything is very polite and orderly.

MG: Everything is very polite because you need to preserve your position in the school. And as our positions become increasingly unstable, you have to do everything to be accepted in the academic community. And that's a problem. It's understandable — I see why. It's not that you have to hate your opponents forever. It's a conversation that happens, framed by a certain time and context. And

that's it. That's what happens there. But maybe if there's a bit of a fight, there will be something to remember in this context. What I see is a very polite environment everywhere. There's no reason to discuss anything beyond celebrating your beautiful project or your very good students. And that's it.

IM: These are thoughts for our next project. We'll call it the "Bloody Project". Like *Fight Club*, you know?

MG: *Fight Club* is great. It's a great title for a magazine — not only about architecture. Because there is so much violence around, the possible antidote is to have your space for — I wouldn't call it violence, but for antagonism.

But I remember also on magazines like *ANY*[7], for instance, they organized this debate around projects. The point to me is always to have the evidence of the project in the center of the debate — and then a possible discussion around it. I remember Rem Koolhaas showing the project of one of his first villas in Miami — the one with the parallel walls — and receiving critiques from his peers. I don't

Early collage study for the Pink House, c. 1973, Laurinda Spear, Rem Koolhaas, Miami, Florida, USA, 1979.

know where it was published. So each of us as architects is subject to critique. It's good that these critiques exist and that they often start from the specifics of a project, then expand into broader considerations about the role of architecture in today's society.

IM: Maybe that's exactly what's missing — a platform for debate. Schools no longer provide it, and neither do the bigger magazines, which aren't interested. Architecture information is becoming atomized, with news and discussions scattered into smaller, specialized channels — like individuals curating Instagram accounts on specific types of houses. Everything is getting smaller and more fragmented.

MG: Yes, specialized. I mean, the image of what you're saying, in my opinion, is the current Venice Biennale. I don't know if you have visited it, but...

IM: Not this one. You mean this specific one?

MG: The one that is going on now. The tone is really technocratic, with this trust in technology as something that will save us all. But if you look at the Biennale, the titles and intentions are getting broader, looser, and less defined as the event unfolds. The number of participants keeps growing — I think this edition has the largest number ever, maybe five or six hundred. That says a lot about this quantitative approach: you don't have to clearly express ideas, just launch vague calls around vague subjects and fill the exhibition spaces. That's it. So yes, rethinking the role of these institutions and the format of such events would be a good thing, in my opinion — again, with the goal of producing a meaningful debate.

KERSTEN GEERS

2nd September, 2025.

Teaching

SS: In your monograph, you spoke of a "near obsessive desire to make coherent architecture — an architecture that could strive for universality", a pursuit that you described as unfolding "right in the middle of this mess – the even covered field."[8] To open our conversation, I'd like to return to that idea: as an architect who not only builds, but also writes, lectures, and teaches, do you see coherence as the thread that runs through all these different aspects of your work?

KG: I would say that you try to be coherent, and you don't necessarily always succeed. But I'd also argue that there's a difference between coherence and formula. Because you could say: if I define very clearly the bandwidth of what I do, and I stay within that bandwidth, then I'm always "right," right? That would be a kind of coherence, but it's more like a formula. For example, imagine if everything I built were always out of brick, or if everything I wrote were always about, I don't know, 18th-century architecture. That would be a kind of coherence. But that coherence will only be there because I would limit my set of topics. I think the argument of coherence, as we meant it back then in the monographs, has to do with an ultimate, I would dare to say, test — whether what you've done, what you're making, or what you're about to finish, makes sense. It's almost like an a posteriori test. It's not something you do beforehand. What I mean is that it's important to try out different tracks: to look at different things, to look at artists, to read other architects' biographies, to visit buildings, to write a text, to do research with the stu-

dio, to make a building. You do all that, and then there's the moment when you look at it and ask yourself: does it make sense for you? I guess that's the moment when you can probably say, "oh yeah, it's pretty coherent with everything else." So in that sense, coherence is a very fluid term, not a strict one.

If I remember well, when I was writing that short introduction, it had to do with digesting — if I can put it that way — the work of Venturi and Scott Brown, and more specifically Robert Venturi's Complexity and Contradiction (his first book, from 1966). There, you could ask yourself: if you allow a certain contradiction or complexity in your architecture, when does it work and when doesn't it? And for us, I guess, it's when those things start to fit together. That's probably what we would then call coherence. It's very formalist, if you want. I've always had the feeling that, although it's a tricky word to use — the word formalism, since people associate it with very particular things, not necessarily what we do — I think it's really about an interest in form. Or perhaps even the belief that, ultimately, it's the form of things that makes you decide whether they make sense or not. That also connects to the way David and I work together. In the end, we're two individuals, and then there are other people in the office. You move forward with a project, different ideas come to the table — the plan is drawn, the model is made — and at a certain point we think, "oh, wow!, that makes sense". And making sense, I think, is a very vague term. But in that case it has a very formalist aspect, which is simply that we see it, we believe in it and we like it. And whether David likes it for one reason and I like it for another — that's maybe not so important. The most important thing is that we feel it's right. So that's where the form of the thing starts to play a role.

And if I connect this, for example, with working together with Bas Princen, I think that's very much what happens: you don't need to explain him every aspect of a building, or why exactly, in the end, it looks the way it does. Of course, first of all, he's fairly well informed about why we do things, and we're also fairly well informed about what he's doing alongside. So we evolve — his practice evolves, our practice evolves. And then he goes and takes a few pictures. Maybe he has seen some collages before, maybe a few plans, or maybe he just sees the building in its context. And then suddenly there's a set of pictures — two, three, five, ten, fifteen, I don't know — and he's like, "yeah, makes sense." So again, I think the form of the picture is somehow convincing, and we often have that sensation — that moment when we think: "Oh, wow!, it's like we just discovered the building to be this." We realize the building is close to what we wanted it to be, but we almost need the pictures to finally confirm it. That's the dialogue we very much have, and that's again where I think the form of things—the form of the picture, you could say — and coherence, if you want, play an important role.

Garden Pavilion (7 Rooms / 21 Perspectives), Office KGDVS in collaboration with Bas Princen, Venice Biennale 2010.

SS: I'd like to return to the word you used—'fluidity'—since it allows coherence to be interpreted in different ways. I'm interested in how coherence might relate to autonomy — whether the autonomy of the discipline, or of generic and typical plans. How do improvisation, subjectivity, and authorship play into this, especially given your often clinical, radical approach? Many of your projects appear very straightforward, almost aiming at a kind of zero-degree architecture.

KG: I think the plan type is a very important factor, among other topics. But what's interesting is that these types, of course, come in many different final guises. I mean, the figure as it appears — whether in the plan or in the way the building appears, if it ever gets built—might remind you of another one, or it might be part of a family of other types. And that's perhaps the fluidity of the thing. But it's not about how it was designed, and it's not a type that we project onto something a priori. Some architects work in a way where they almost start with the solution. Like: "Okay, it's another bar, another little courthouse," and so on. That's not how we work. Of course, in a given context we might have some preconceived ideas. But when these ideas are drawn on a plan or made in a model, we often think: "Oh yeah," and realize connections to previous projects. It might remind us of something we made before, or we see it as part of a family of projects. Especially now, as we're working again on the set of 3D monographs—one, two, three, and now four, five, six, due at the end of November, when we do the conference — you start to see them along a certain timeline. The office numbering tracks when projects started, so you see some projects that have been ongoing for years, others that ended long ago, and some that moved very quickly, since the timeline is

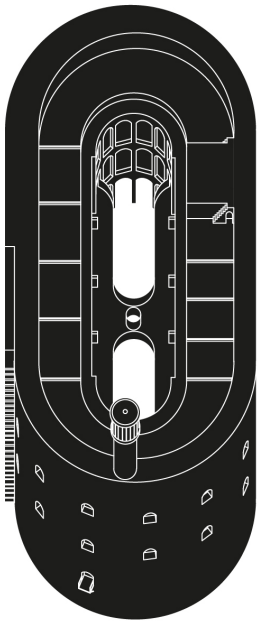
very rigid. The first ideas come early, and then you start to see some fascinating patterns and you would say: ”Oh, wow, wait a second”. When we did the Beer project[9], for example, we were also working on another project with a similar roof, and we were clearly testing this roof. But I do remember that in the process itself nobody in our office said: “Let’s do the same roof as that other one.” That’s not what happened. Rather, it became apparent that the roof was a sort of obsession at that time. Hence, you can see it as a group of projects, but it’s not a linear process — and I’m very happy it’s not linear. If it were so linear, so unilateral, I guess the practice would have already lost most of its blood and it wouldn’t be very vivid anymore.

Brussels Beer Project (BBP), Office KGDVS , 2018 – 2022, Photograph: Bas Princen.

San Rocco

SS: I'd like to turn to *San Rocco* and architectural magazines, since you've been involved from the very beginning. To start broadly: how do you see architectural magazines today? And before *San Rocco* appeared, what were your motivations — what themes or questions were you most interested in?

KG: That's of course difficult to answer, but let's start from a historical perspective — I think that's the easiest. If I'm not mistaken, we launched *San Rocco* in 2010. And of course, when we launched *San Rocco*, it was, first of all, a group of people. There were not so many, but still an important group of friends for me. On the one hand, there was Pier Paolo Tamburelli, who I think was very impor-



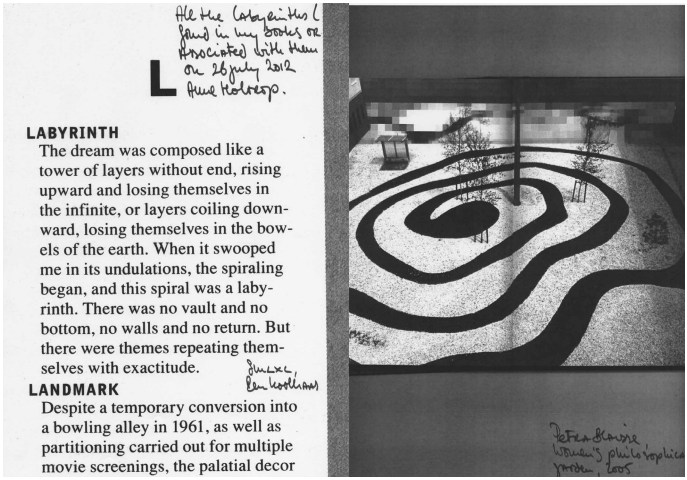
San Rocco cover, Islands, Issue 1, 2011.

tant for the magazine. There were Giovanna Silva, Stefano Graziani and Andrea Zanderigo. There was also Matteo Ghidoni, and his group at that time called *Salottobuono*, which later split. Then there was Matteo Costanzo, who had in Rome an office maybe less visibly connected, but still very important in the very beginning. And yes, there was also Francesca Pellicciari and *Pupilla*. So, in a way, it was a fairly small group of people. We were there from the very beginning, and the group of people remained unchanged throughout the magazine's entire run. We started it together, and in the same way, we brought it to a close.

Okayama Nishi Police Office, Arata Isozaki, 1997, published in Pilotis by Go Hasewaga in Book of Copies, San Rocco.

SS: How did the group first come together around *San Rocco*?

KG: Well, I mean in a sense, it was a result of a set of dynamics, I would dare to say. On the one hand, I knew Pier Paolo Tamburelli and the *baukuh* friends, together with Andrea Zanderigo, who's also at *baukuh*, from years before. That was essentially a friendship which started, I think, around 2002, maybe 2003 or 2004. At that time he was studying at Berlage (*Berlage Institute*), and I was involved in Berlage with Pier Vittorio Aureli ; Pier Paolo Tamburelli was studying together with Martino. Of course, that was not exactly studying, it was more like research units, which were an important part. So I think Pier was, in a way, my introduction to many of these other people. Andrea became a very important friend, and also Stefano Graziani. They were already clusters of people, and *baukuh* was already in Genoa and in Venice. They had their own cluster of people, and they knew each other a little bit by accident. There were also various people who maybe wanted to do a magazine, like the people from *2A+P/A* in Rome — and I already mentioned Matteo Costanzo. The


All the Labyrinths I found in my Books, or Associated with them on 26 July 2012 Anne Holtrop.

LABYRINTH
The dream was composed like a tower of layers without end, rising upward and losing themselves in the infinite, or layers coiling downward, losing themselves in the bowels of the earth. When it swooped me in its undulations, the spiraling began, and this spiral was a labyrinth. There was no vault and no bottom, no walls and no return. But there were themes repeating themselves with exactitude.

LANDMARK
Despite a temporary conversion into a bowling alley in 1961, as well as partitioning carried out for multiple movie screenings, the palatial decor

Labyrinths, Anne Holtrop in Book of Copies, San Rocco.

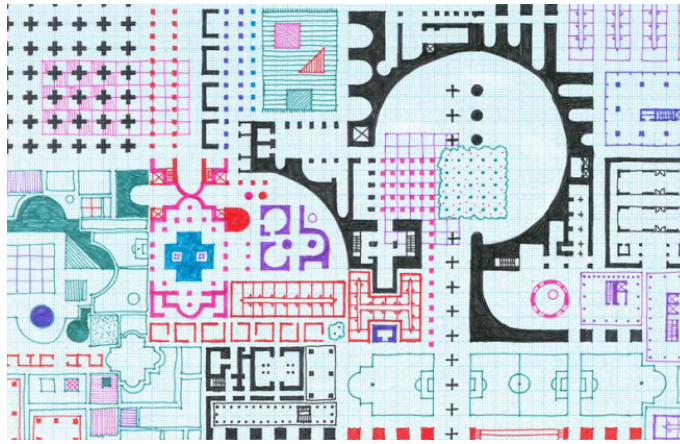
Salottobuono people as well, and not just Matteo, but also Giovanni Piovene, were involved. They were, I think, deeply involved with *Domus* at the time, in the evolving direction guided by Stefano Boeri, of course, who was moving around a bit, from magazine to magazine. They were doing some infographics, I think that was one aspect of it.

But I think really — and I don't exaggerate — Pier and myself, maybe Andrea a bit, we were very much running the discourse of this thing. I think Pier deserves a lot of credit, because it was this conversation which had started a few years earlier between me and Pier: maybe we should do a crazy magazine. I actually said to him, 'Hey Pier, do we do a magazine?' — I think it even had a working title at the time, something like T*wo Buildings*, *Two Texts*, something in that genre. We shared this malaise with what was going on: magazines like *Domus*, like *Archis* (or maybe already *Volume*), which were very uninteresting, basically just copy-pasting texts that offices gave, with a few pictures. That was it. We thought: could you still do a magazine, a little bit in the tradition of *Oppositions*? A magazine which was actually about architecture, where anything was allowed, maybe with a bit more humor than *Oppositions*. And also because we had this agenda in some sense — certainly at *baukuh* and at *OFFICE* and with some of our close people — that we needed to counter this lifestyle, some kind of neo-journalism in architecture, and also in writing about architecture. We felt we had to bring back architecture itself, writing about architecture, with a slight fun factor, by embracing figures of the past, mixing them with something super contemporary, and most of all daring to say, to speak out: I like, I dislike, bullshit, whatever. I think that's how it started.

And of course, you might have the small group of people with that idea, but the first step was the group who

finally started it — already hybrid, not always with the same ideas. Matteo Ghidoni, who I liked a lot at that time, certainly was not representing the same thoughts on architecture, but that was fine. Stefano Graziani and Giovanna Silva were photographers, and they had a different take. Giovanna developed later her *Humboldt Books* project, this whole idea of traveling, documenting and discourse — that was an important element. And you can clearly see it: if you look at the magazine, there are texts written by Pier, or Andrea, or myself, talking about certain things, and then there are other texts written by others, talking in the end about very different things. And of course, then with the *call for papers*, it was also a way to bring in people we felt close to, whether it was Oliver Thill or Sam Jacob from *FAT* at the time. People who we felt wrote similar things or had similar ideas, who were embracing in the same way a cluster of thoughts. That was important. And then, of course, with these calls, other people came in, people we didn't know, who suddenly wrote fantastic things — and we wanted them again.

Tutta la solitudine che meritate – Viaggio in Islanda, Giovanna Silva, Humboldt Books, 2019.

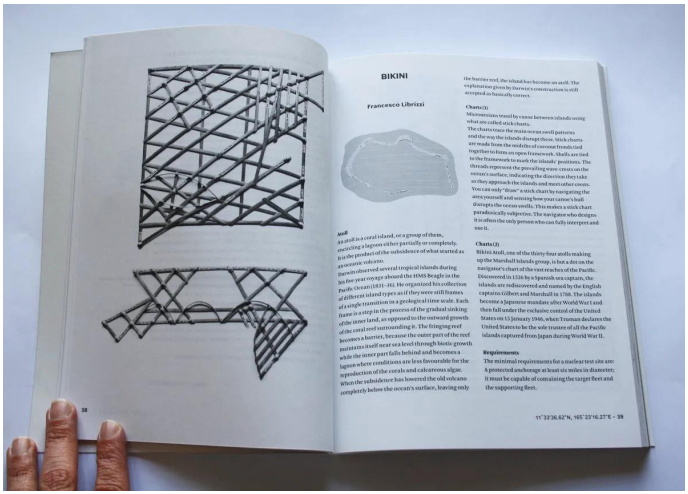


Drawing by Sam Jacob, for Les Nuits sans Kim Wilde, written by Simon de Dreuille, published in San Rocco, Issue 2 (The Even Covering of the Field), 2011.

I think this idea was very important: the magazine had an agenda, it was a project — a project against what we felt was a very boring field of communication about often-built work. It needed a manifesto, which was in a sense the *San Rocco* manifesto. It needed a plan, which was this five-year plan. It needed topics, which we announced. Of course, it was also done with a certain sense of humor. In a sense, it was deliberately doing everything the other way around from other magazines, because the topics were often unclear, there was no plan, no timeline. We thought we needed that — for the magazine as such, but also for our own health, meaning that it had an end point. And that end point also made the magazine, in its very form — if I can use this word again — as an amount of statements about what talking about architecture should be about. What have I always liked about San Rocco is that even if in certain issues 50% of the texts are not what I would be saying, it doesn't matter — because the form was set, the boat was designed. If you then entered the boat, it was okay. I think San Rocco worked well exactly for that reason.

And ultimately, I think *San Rocco* stopped because — and this was very much a decision among our

small group, especially Pier, but also myself — these calls for papers, which were always in a way the next argument for the next issue, became a lot of work. Gradually we felt that everything was coming from our side, and not much else from the outside — no twists, no other ideas. It became, in a way, a vehicle for our own ideas for the 10th time, the N-th time. Although we had always thought the magazine would end at some point, we hadn't yet passed the five-year mark, and we had actually produced fewer issues than originally planned because it took so much time, it made sense then to close it. So, when we did the *Bramante* issue, it felt like the right moment to bring it to an end. It felt good, it felt great. By then, we had also gotten a bit older, and we sensed that there were other projects where we could invest the same energy. In that context, closing the magazine made perfect sense, I think.

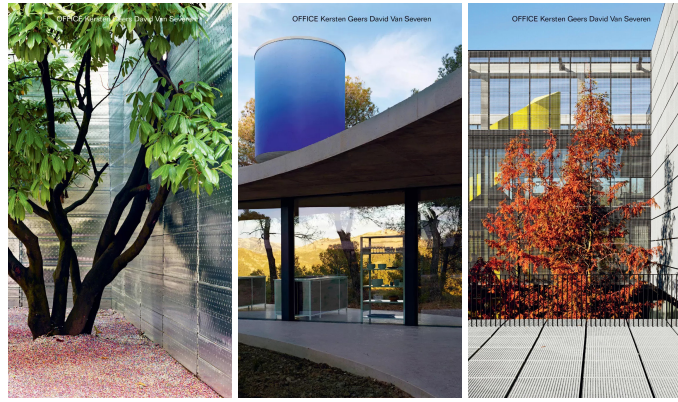


Bikini, Francesco Librizzi, San Rocco, Issue 1 (Islands), February 2011.

SS: I noticed many analogies between *San Rocco* and your architectural philosophy. Some are small but telling — like the cover of *San Rocco* without text, and similarly your monograph cover. More broadly, I find the

magazine's approach to history interesting: it doesn't aim to contextualize everything historically, but rather brings past buildings into the present, renders them instrumental. I sense this is also your interest — for instance, in the way you sometimes refer to the classical.

KG: Yeah, sure, I would, in a sense, agree with what you say. At the same time, I've always felt that the beauty of *San Rocco* is that it's not at all far from what was done by us alone. First of all, in a sense, David was never consciously involved in *San Rocco*. I mean, my collaboration with David is the office. It's certainly true that, in a way, when *San Rocco* went down a bit — meaning we stopped being super busy with it — that was around the time I had already started doing all this stuff, like *Architecture without content* and all these things. It kind of coincides to a certain extent: I started putting more energy into teaching as a project, which also didn't allow me much time and I started to make these monographic books, for example. One thing took over instead of the other, and that was also true for Pier and so forth. At the same time, despite all its parallels, the beauty of *San Rocco*, for me, has always been that it was really the result of all of us.



OFFICE Kersten Geers & David Van Severen: Vol. 1, 2, 3, Publisher: Walther König, 2017.

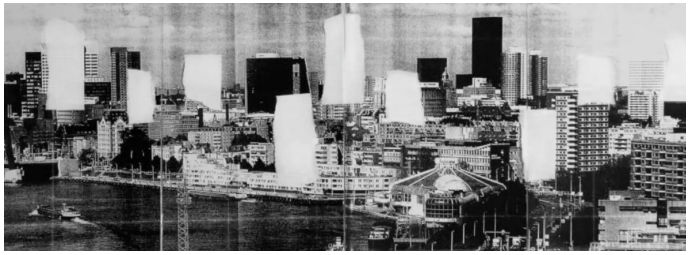
I mean, yes, I embrace *San Rocco*'s cover the way you describe it, but I would never have come up with that actual drawing myself — it clearly came from *Salottobuono*, not from Matteo, but from one of the partners who was actually drawing like that. And then it became a figure on its own. I certainly share the approach to history with a sense of humor, but the initiator of this — and often the push — came very much from Pier Paolo. We were co-writing this call for papers, he was really instrumental and I've always appreciated that, it was very important. And so, for a moment, I think *San Rocco* was also a place where we all learned from each other and we came closer to one another. Let's say baukuh was an office, not exactly like an office, but to some extent we grew close to each other and we started using each other's references, and that was part of the beauty of that collaboration. For example, Stefano Graziani, who I didn't know very well before we started, became an important person alongside Bas in our own kind of world. That was interesting. It really was like defining a place, inviting a few people, and giving yourself that space to create something beyond the sum of its parts – and that was very special. And it's true that in retrospect, you can see many parallels to us, to baukuh, to others. But it happened along the way, and it even became influential to other people, and even influenced our own practices – and I say 'our' in the plural, because I think it's not just ours, it's all of these.

Images and Photography

SS: I remember at your 2014 lecture in Lausanne you spoke about carefully choosing which photos of your projects are made public. How do you see the role of photography in your work? Do you discuss this with photographers

before they shoot? And do the photos, in turn, influence how you think about the buildings afterwards?

KG: Yeah, well, the simple answer is yes to all. An exciting, more elaborate version of the answer is that our office period — our time in the office so far, David and myself which is about 22 years, from 2000 to 2022 — it coincides almost exactly, maybe six months or a year difference, with our friendship with Bas Princen. So, in a sense, office time and Bas time are the same to some extent. From the very beginning we did a few projects together — experimental projects about Rotterdam with Bas and Milica[10]. But it's also true that we were trying some things: a few competition entries, one lost, plus early attempts to build a building, starting with this small interior in Antwerp. It all coincides with our exchanges with Bas.



Tower and Square – Rotterdam, Office KGDVS in collaboration with Bas Princen, Milica Topalovic, 2004

Office Entrance – Antwerp, Office KGDVS, 2002-2005, Photograph: Bas Princen.

He was always there, from day one, because he photographed his first place in Antwerp. I asked him for that, although I hardly knew him. In a way it was a gamble for us, I guess, but also for him — and it was from then always, and in a complex way — not just simply once a year when he comes and photographs, but on many occasions, many situations. I mean, we're good friends, so that means also that his interest in photography — who he likes, who he would show to me — has also influenced very much how I look at photography. Evident names like Lewis Baltz or people like that, which were very formative for him at a certain point, became also very formative to us in terms of how we judge our photography and Baltz is a particular example. Of course, there are also many of these Germans, but Baltz was a shared fascination — shared afterwards, not in the beginning — which I'm sure Bas brought to us.

Lewis Baltz, Hidden Valley, Looking Southwest, gelatin silver print, c. 1977–78, Nevada series.

And then he says "Baltz," we say, say "Ed Ruscha" and then all of a sudden, we think "hey, wait a second, one has also an interest in the other", and so forth. And then of course later in the process, perhaps came Stefano, with his own set of references, and you have Armin Linke, and

I don't know who else — I mean, now I use the clichés again, but there are many more, obviously. And they made this exhibition together recently in the CCA[11] — their world is more complex than these kind of simple tropes.

The Lives of Documents— Photography as Project, curators: Stefano Graziani, Bas Princen, Canadian Centre for Architecture, Montreal, Canada, May 2023 – April 2024, photograph: Matthieu Brouillard.

But what I want to say is that their way of looking at photography — the status, the quality, the amount, the way you show it, the size, all of it — has heavily influenced the way we look at our work. And since we have always had an interest in — well, I often quote Ruscha — artists who have a very deliberate, premeditated approach to their work: they conceive an idea, execute it, frame it, and compose it.

Ten years ago I might have used Ruscha or Baldessari[12] as evident references. Those never went

away, but as we grew older, we also looked at other things. Many of these artists became household names. It's like saying, as an architect 15 years ago, that your favorite artist is Gerhard Richter — it is a bit the same. Their personal presence may be less now, but we learned a lot from them: how they looked at images, how they thought about composition, how they understood the status of the object — many of these conceptual artists, not just painters, but many more.

And of course, we also learned from our photographer friends and how they were referring to the art scene. So you have a lot in common. All of this mix together means that, yes, we make a collage, which defines a certain idea of looking. Today it happens on the computer — as many of the students in Mendrisio, or before in Lausanne did — and also now in our office, by working in super complex 3D programs. We still try to make them look at the view of the composed image, even though it's now composed in a very different way. We think that by reducing viewpoints and simplifying, we have more control, at least in these views. Later, other elements may or may not be part of the project. I think these are important thoughts, connected also to the conceptual idea about the status of things: this is one project, another project, which has to do with hierarchy and with framing. And of course, our approaches themselves are already about framing, so we have a lot of this kind of project in a project —the projects echo each other. That's why I think it feels so natural. And I happen to have had this experience now in the last four days, because as I said, Bas was here from Friday till Monday, photographing a few things for these new volumes. That means photographing the gray pages[13], as you know, *"One, Two, Three,"* and photographing, in a way, the buildings themselves.

That's also why we made these books that way—it can be something which is not me, it can be some sort of data center, computer program, display, and that's then a picture. And it can be also on the construction site of a building. And it can be just a piece of nature he just photographed, since they're actually cutting the trees, and you have to ask yourself: "What is the status of the nature, of the tree?"— reuse, and so forth. This is something he just did in Java[14] and he brings these on his computer, or he has prints with him, and we think: "Oh, wow!, that's amazing. We should use this". It can also be a picture of Aldo van Eyck, which we took together because we made a little book on this. And the same counts for certain things Stefano brings in. So that's how all this is composed. It was like that seven years ago when we made *"One, Two, Three"*, and it's still like this today. So again, it's not predefined, but of course we share a very big world together.

Hubertus House, Amsterdam, 1973-1981. Photo by Bas Princen from Kersten Geers & Jelena Pančevac, Aldo & Hannie van Eyck, Excess of Architecture, 2023.

SS: There's also a certain analogy with *San Rocco*. I'm thinking of the contributions from your architect friends who wrote short essays about your work are dispersed through the *One, Two, Three monographs*. This actually anticipates my next question about the collages you produced, especially early in your practice. I've noticed that more recently you've also been using renderings…

Community Cenre – Tirúa,
OFFICE KGDVS
in collaboration with Pezo von Ellrichshausen,
UTIL Struktuurstudies,
Chile, 2011.

KG: Well, yes and no. The problem, of course, is that these collages exist — we still make them for recent projects — but they shouldn't become some kind of nostalgia for something. If they exist just because later you have to make a lecture and you have to pretend that it came together like this, then that makes no sense.

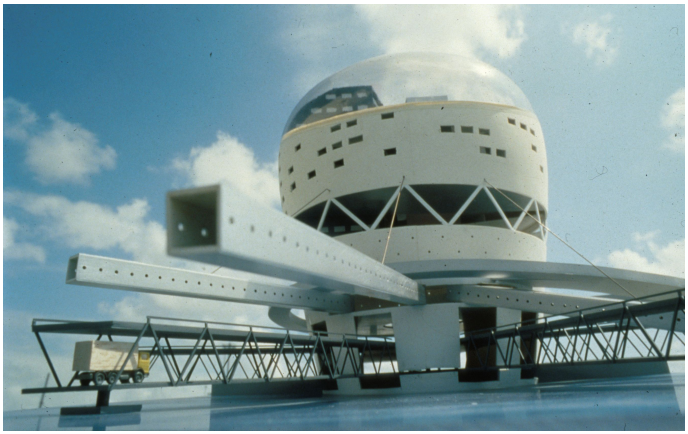
I also see this with students, like the ones I mentioned in Indonesia: we want to create simple images, but they produce a fully rendered object instead. You

then have to guide them in making decisions about how to look at that object. In a sense, we also take this with us into the office, partly because some of those students might eventually end up working with us — that's one aspect.

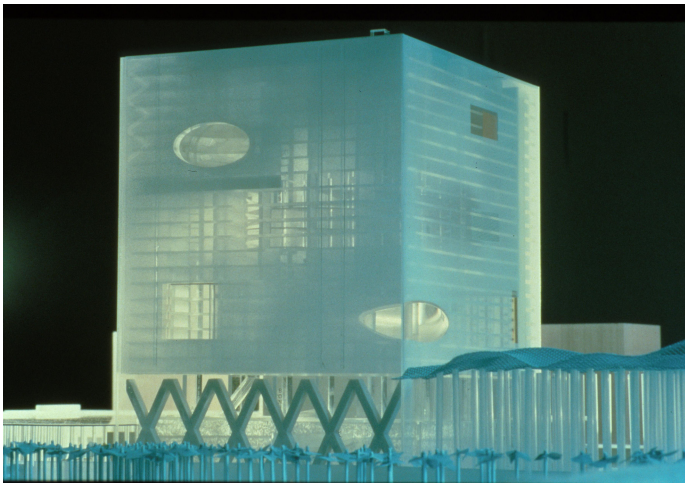
But of course, it's also true that if a building becomes quite big, you go through many steps and processes. You maybe get close with the initial pitch — maybe the last five, eight, or ten iterations — but then they want you to develop that further. I don't necessarily think that's a good evolution, but gradually, if you ever win big buildings — and you don't win them very often — they become endless iterative processes and dialogues. You have to add a lot more detail, or at least the fiction of the detail. These renders sometimes pretend to be more realistic and their aesthetic makes people believe a lot has already been decided, which often is not per se true.

So we are facing that and I think we are trying to find a way to deal with it. We've certainly had a period when these images came in, and we thought: "Wow, are we sure?". At one point, we relied on external people to produce images, and we were endlessly post-producing them. That was crazy — a year and a half, maybe two — kind of a semi-crisis. Luckily, now we've moved on. We make these images, whichever they are, entirely in-house, and it's very important. We aim for a certain abstraction, like before, although they're different, because we make them ourselves now and in a way that's entirely our own. This has given us a sense of control, which is incredibly important. It's true that things change, but I'd dare say today— maybe something I couldn't say three years ago — that gradually we're landing really close to where we want. A few years ago, things were different, but now, fortunately, we're there.

Now, truth be told — without being overly nostalgic — competitions in the late ‘80s, even early ‘90s, were about ideas and then later you would figure it all out. Of course, there’s some nostalgia for buildings we all love, like the *Zeebrugge Terminal* or *Très Grande Bibliothèque* by OMA. Nobody knows what they actually are, and I think that’s what makes them so durable in time, because we keep on projecting — that’s why they are so important, so influential.



Zeebrugge Sea Terminal, OMA, Zeebrugge, Belgium, Competition Project, 1988.



Très Grande Bibliothèque, OMA, Paris, France, Competition Project, 1989.

Now, competitions are different. There are plenty of new parameters in which competitions are judged and they are not often choosing the best idea, but something more pragmatic. Even the schemes that don't win are almost too real, too practical, to be interesting as an architectural thought afterward.

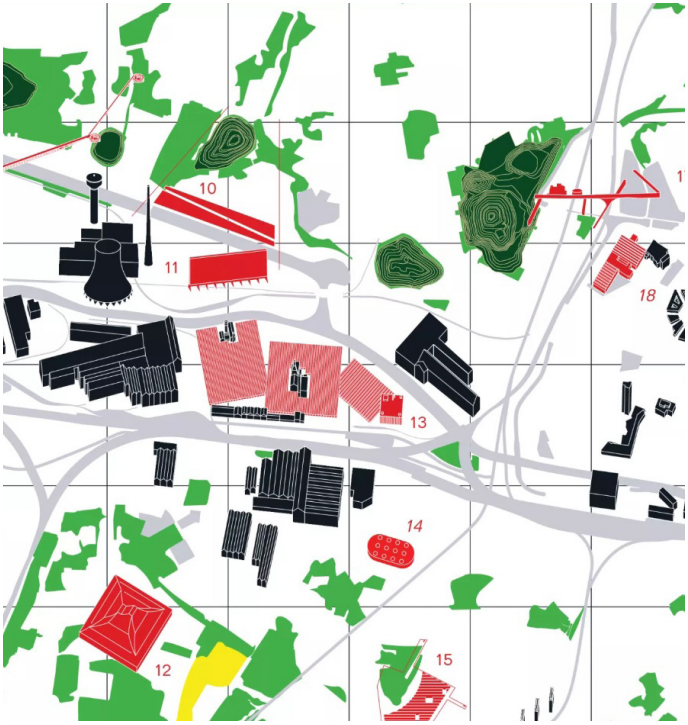
Teaching and Practice

SS: I was struck by what you said about misinterpretations[15] — that simplified readings are central to how architectural culture travels, and that devotion can sometimes compensate for gaps in knowledge. Does this perspective still shape the way you approach teaching?

KG: Yeah, of course, we're all getting older, so you hope that you still have something interesting to discover, and sometimes something interesting to say. You cannot deny that the architecture culture, or the architectural discourse goes in waves, and we are part of a wave that started more than 20 years ago. So you have to ask yourself: "What are we currently seeing?" And given that we are not blind, we are not dead, we also see what's happening now and a lot is about material. The discourses today are a lot about material. And as much as we make precise buildings, I think our world has never been so much about material, because for us the interior has always been fairly interchangeable. So that's, I think, some sort of confrontation to a certain extent. I mean, if certain people are only talking about wood, and rammed earth, or recycled concrete, and stuff like that, one of the questions you have is: Wait a second — are we saying this is all important and included, and by seeing this we're part of that? Or is the fact that we see this as a fairly evident topic not well

enough? I think these are serious topics, right? My tendency is toward the first position, which obviously opens up some criticism, but at the same time, I'm interested in these new anxieties — which are obviously there.

But I try to find answers not only in the symbolism of the material applied to a project proposal, but maybe by seeing them on a more urban scale. You talked about the even covered field — How do you make a reasonable building? How do you make a durable building? That leads us into questions like: What is Roman architecture? — territorial interventions and stuff like that. Most recently we were working in Charleroi with the studio, and we made this small book called *The Large City*. And so you ask yourself: "What is now this thing?" If you go to the territory around Charleroi, you see that actually



The Large City
Office Without Office, Map of Charleroi, Academy of Architecture USI, Mendrisio (Fall Semester 2023 / Spring Semester 2024), Faculty: Kersten Geers, Chiara Malerba, Guido Tesio.

everything there is the result of a modernist transformation. We're talking about the mines, and how the whole landscape you think you see, all the hills, are artificial slag heaps. All of this, I believe, is an attempt to tweak or readjust the current debate. Also, working on De Carlo, I was thinking the same thing, you try to understand: "Wait — what are we saying when we talk about engagement? What were they saying in '68, or '66, or '70?". For me, that's reason enough to think, but I don't have to pretend to be sure — that's what we are still doing in the studio. That's also why it was probably healthy, about four or five years ago, to close *Architecture Without Content*. Within that umbrella of *Everything*, we said: "Through this, we didn't radically change, but we did shift the focus a little bit". We certainly started working more on the late modernist avant-garde — we are talking about *Team X* and the people around it. Because I felt I had never been so sure whether I liked them or didn't like them — but I knew I had to understand them better. I had to figure out what they meant for us, and if we could use it. In a way, I simplified it: they were all, in one form or another, "enemies" of Koolhaas. And since we grew up in the 1990s — as kids in architecture — you ended up on one side or the other. And the side we landed on was the Koolhaas side, so to speak. So in the last couple of years, it was interesting to move over to the other side and ask: "Wait a second, what did they say in fact?". They always had this aura of sérieux — De Carlo, the Smithsons, Aldo and Hannie van Eyck — very serious people with very good intentions. So I think it was important to figure out what those intentions were, whether we could work with them, and whether they succeeded. What was their form? Were they really as "non-formalist" as they claimed, or was it in fact more confusing? All of this was on the table in the last years. And I'm quite happy with what we tested.

But now I also feel — and I would dare to say it's almost like a scoop — that this phase has, to a certain extent, come to a close. Last year, or maybe still this year, we made that little book on Itsuko Hasegawa[16], and I had the feeling that closed a chapter. After that we made *The Large City*[17], and again it felt like time to move forward. Of course, this was anticipated. When we were doing *Architecture Without Content*, all these structuralists were already in the air. There was no abrupt change — Ungers was always lingering somewhere, because he was everywhere. But I now think we may have to be more explicit. I'm very interested — there's nothing spectacular here — in the modern project. Especially when you see what surrounds us today, I feel we need to embrace it more explicitly, and with less cynicism than in our previous iterations. I feel the need— well, I never really left it — but the need to re-embrace the modern project more tightly. For example, this semester, in the individual studio, I will explicitly state that this is the studio topic. Will it last for two semesters, or six years? I don't know. But the very fact that you can do this—that's the luxury of teaching.

SS: Is there a difference between research and teaching for you?

KG: Not really. On the one hand I can say I'm pretty lucky with my team, teaching in Switzerland. Obviously it gives you a certain amount of context, a certain amount of means, to be able to do things you cannot always do in another place in the world, not even in Europe. And teaching there becomes an extremely pragmatic affair, right? You want to try to help kids study architecture, so you have to help them with that project. You don't have a real space, a real topic, you have nothing, no context. So I guess that's

already good news in Switzerland in general. And that's true for Lausanne, for Mendrisio, and certainly true for Zurich, where perhaps the means at your disposal are even more than in any of the other two places. At the same time — and that's certainly true for Mendrisio — it's not that you have so much to spend. It's very difficult and Mendrisio is very specific in that. It's kind of hard to academize your research — a little bit less so in Zurich, I know from my friends — meaning that it's not a school built around lots of PhD researchers. I had my own trouble to actually get or not get these. So, in a certain sense, you have to have a lean operation.

Our lab — which is not even anymore called a lab in Mendrisio as it was in Lausanne, but in my head it's still a lab — has to help the students, make an exciting semester, teach architecture, and somehow yield some sort of thinking. So the only thing you can do is share your thoughts with the students, share your doubts, discuss this, push them into an amount of directions, but be open, and look for possible tracks, possible doors, possible maneuvers, and land together. And that's why there's no distinction there. I don't have the money, so to speak, to have a research lab and to teach on the side. And I don't have the autonomy that some professors do. I think in Vienna it's very much like that: you're a chair, and then you research a bit, and you have other people teaching on your behalf in the chair, and you do a couple of lectures or so. I mean, I know Pier does it more or less in Vienna. We don't have that. So, on the one hand, we have very good students. Mendrisio had had good students historically, and it still does. So if you bring something to the table, they're interested, they want to work. And they're also skilled enough — that's the ultimate luxury — I don't have to teach them architecture per se. I only have to teach them architecture

culture. And that happens to be my interest, my topic, my research. So yeah, that works somehow, I think.

The Difficult Double

SS: A final question: *the Difficult Double*. I first met you at the conference, on the day Bijoy Jain presented his work and his reading of Louis Kahn[18]. Which architect would you consider your own "difficult double"?

KG: The good news about our lecture series was that we chose for them. Okay, so because it's such a difficult question to answer — I would say this to you — although I'm not even sure. I mean, with whatever it means, my difficult double is evidently Koolhaas, that's the evident one. Now, it's also probably the answer I would love to hide as long as I can.

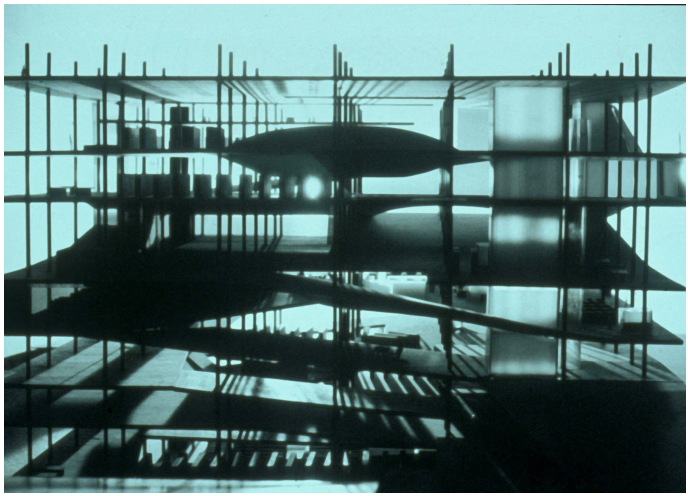
SS: You won't be able to hide it when we publish the magazine, if you maintain this.

KG: That's a little bit of a problem, I think. Honestly, I may come with another name by the time you publish it, but the real answer is Koolhaas. It's also the problematic answer. At the same time, in the generation before us, Koolhaas is the one single person who tries to operate on these. But that's also why the difficult double is a difficult double. Koolhaas is the one which probably somebody would give to me because it's very visible, but it wouldn't be me that says it. And I wouldn't say: "Oh, fuck, Koolhaas". That's hard. I mean, yeah, Koolhaas.

SS: As an illustration to this answer, would you be okay if we republished your short essay, *Showing Everything,* on OMA's Netherlands Architectural Institute[19]?

KG: Yeah, sure, but you expected my answer, right? You had the same thought.

SS: Yes, of course. And I'm also a great fan—especially of Koolhaas's unbuilt projects, though of course many of the built ones as well.



Jussieu – Two Libraries, OMA, Paris, France, Competition Project, 1992.

KG: Yeah, but my problem with this is the following: I'm not sure whether I'm a fan. I'm intrigued. I'm impressed by the intelligence, by the manipulation, by the weird mixture of sérieux and absurdity. I think that's what it is. But yeah, if you're a fan of a band, you follow the band and you go to the singer and say: I'm a fan of the band, then you know that you're that, right? That's like the worst you could be. You should never be a fan.

SS: Yeah, fan is a bad word. I take it back and I replace it with...

KG: No, no, but I understand. I see the problem because of course, casually you can say: "I'm a fan", you can

say that between friends. Probably that occurred in other conversations that it's certainly something which I share with Pier Paolo. I've been always a big fan, so to speak, of alternative music, say the early 90s, which was also very common back then. It was this whole bunch of American college rock, what they started to call later post-rock in some sense — Steve Albini produced — and there are *Slint* or *Codeine*, for example, very dark, depressing in some sense. And then Low came and all these figures. I did have my thing with Val' Doonican and other people in the British scene. But apart all these being deeply independent, I think the most evident, most popular exploit of that, is of course *Sonic Youth*, the most accessible of this whole era. But with all of these, the love you have for them has a kind of an anti-hero aspect to it. It's not the pop star, it's not the rock star, and it's not the *Rolling Stones* or something like that. And it's kind of anti-music sometimes with hardly any singing. If there's a singing in the mix, it's so deep in the mix that you can hardly hear what they sing.

Album cover for Sonic Youth, Goo (DGC Records, 1990). Artwork by Raymond Pettibon.

This ethos has always been very important and this scene doesn't exist anymore because music is now made in a very different way. Perhaps in electronic music, you find here and there people, or in alternative hip hop or strange stuff. But yeah, I think that I find this exciting. And what is fun about this is that it's very young and it has kind of a teenage vibe to it, it's naïve, very serious and it's also full of humor. It doesn't take itself too serious, however and it's totally convinced of its own truth. And I think *San Rocco* was like that, you know? We were like that. And *San Rocco* — even more than our office, in the office is in the end architecture, you know? — But *San Rocco* was like this kind of alternative music fanzine: zero compromises, you hate everybody, sometimes you love everybody. And today I say: "a new order", great, and tomorrow I say: "I always hated — I don't know who — *Smashing Pumpkins* or something". That kind of absurd fanzine like radicalism, which is very serious and super devoted, but it's also a little bit tongue in cheek, a little bit humorous. And I think that to me *The Difficult Double* works like that as well. Yes, you have that person, you love him, but at the same time he's the biggest idiot in the world. So yes, my difficult double is still the same name we had before, but with that confusion. You love and then there's not anybody you can hate as much as that figure as well. I think then it's exciting.

BAS PRINCEN

2nd September, 2025.

Early years

SS: After graduating in architecture, you turned to photography. What drew you to it, and how did you experience that transition?

BP: I was photographing while studying Design for Public Space in Eindhoven, at the school that is now called the *Design Academy*. With quite an experimental approach to the idea of public space — not about designing a bench or an object to place in it, but about asking: *What is public space? Does it still exist? And how can we define it?*

While graduating, you had to propose a project yourself. I decided that I didn't have to graduate only with what I'd been taught, but that I could start in a new direction. I had always liked designing very small iterations in public spaces, just to reroute people's movement and make them use space in a different way. Then I realized I could photograph these small alterations. I could photograph a space in such a way that it was no longer simply reality, but proposed a certain use through the chosen view. You could exclude some things and create a focal point. It wasn't that I was altering the pictures in Photoshop, or that I was staging things — it was about where you placed the focus. And when you put these imagined/depicted spaces next to each other, a certain possibility of uses starts to appear. It was an interesting experiment, and I decided to take an extra three months over the six that were given for the graduation project, because I felt it had a lot of potential and I needed to find the right way.

There was a long discussion about whether you could graduate with a kind of photographic proposal of

a space as a design proposal. In the end, the jury, which included architects and an art curator, saw the potential of this way of seeing as being constructive for the wider field.

At that time, there was artistic photography within architecture and design publications. For instance, in *Domus* or, in Holland, *de Architect*, there was always a large section that was quite autonomous, about looking at the world through images — image essays by Andreas Gursky, Hans Aarsman, Bustamante, and Candida Höfer, or photographs meant to show the kind of world in which architecture is supposed to exist. I liked that. I liked this link: that you could propose something — not by doing architecture directly, but by showing the world, and still have an influence on the design or architectural discourse.

So that's how I started to photograph. I did it on my own. I'm autodidact in that sense — I didn't have training in photography. But it's not so difficult as long as you have a clear subject. The technical understanding you can always learn.

After graduating, I realized I needed more substance for these works, or for the research I had started. I applied to *The Berlage* in Amsterdam, which at that time was a postgraduate architecture program. I was the only Dutch person there. Our focus was entirely on researching the city — not architecture itself. The main concern was how to define urbanity and what could be included in it.

There were lectures by Armin Linke and Gabriele Basilico, and also by Francesco Jodice. It was the time of *Mutations*, and Koolhaas was often there. Stefano Boeri was teaching and brought a couple of photographers with him as part of a research project he was doing called The *Eclectic Atlases*, in which you described the world from different angles and media, and photography was part of that. It was encouraging because I realized you could do

something within the architectural cultural field without having to practice architecture directly.

I continued my research. I started in Eindhoven, talking to professors who understood more about the relationship between photography and architecture, or photography and urbanity, and how that could be defined. This helped me sharpen the project, and I added the second part of the work that I situated in the harbour of Rotterdam, which later became a book — my first publication, *Artificial Arcadia*[20]. It's about a set of landscapes in the Netherlands that are all man-made and artificial, and groups of people who find uses for these landscapes, usually some kind of leisurely activity. In my understanding, they were specific experts on the landscape. They could read it and value it for their use, and understand certain specifics of the landscape.

Photograph from Artificial Arcadia, Bas Princen, 2004.

In a way, they were more expert on the landscape than I was as a designer at the time. I decided to photograph them while I defined what kind of landscape was interesting, and they guided me to see why these new types of landscapes were a new frontier of certain publicness.

SS: You mentioned that at that time there was more artistic photography. Do you think that's something that has been lost since then?

BP: Well, the support network has been lost — the one that used to make and distribute views on architecture and urbanism — meaning the many magazines that once existed and were quite autonomous. *Domus*, for example, had budgets to send Basilico to photograph a new building that interested them. They didn't need to ask the architect, and therefore were not getting only the view approved by the architect. They could focus on an aspect they were invested in — for instance, how a work could be understood in the city, rather than as an object.

That's one part. You already had a more critical — or at least potentially more critical — view. On top of that, these photographers or artists had a project of their own. Since the focus was not so much on objects, but on how they were embedded in the city fabric and the landscape, it all fit quite well. That whole world has now shifted and been absorbed into the art world, where architects either don't go, or go for different reasons — not to be critical about their own practice. So I'd say there were many more possibilities then, because the cultural field was a bit wider than it is now. Would you agree, or do you have a counter-opinion?

IM: It's different, I think. It's more polarized or atomized.

SS: I tend to agree, but today everything is highly specialized across domains. Still, since everything is connected, I find it hard to say that the architectural cultural field is any less effervescent than in the past.

BP: Last Sunday I was at the Centre Pompidou, where Tillmans[21] has a large show in an empty Pompidou, since they're renovating it. He was given an entire floor, completely hollowed out, to present his works. I've seen quite a few of his shows and have many of his books, so I know his work well. What I found interesting is that many of his early works were magazine-based, editorial commissions — projects where you partly do what's asked and partly what you think fits. These were not minor works; they made up a substantial part of his early practice.

This format allows a certain conversation, a critical stance, because you have to position yourself in relation to something else. I think, specifically, that aspect is challenged today. Now, everything has to come entirely from yourself, which is not necessarily difficult, but it just doesn't automatically lead to the most productive or sharp results. There's value in being asked to respond to something — to find an answer through a way of looking. That position pushes you to create in a meaningful way.

Today, you're more likely asked to present a preformed idea, which is shown but not really discussed. I find the earlier model easier and more productive — it allows you to react and develop interesting answers, because there's already a question from society or a larger context to engage with.

IM: So the role of editorial curation by big magazines is gone — why do you think that is?

BP: There's no more budge to spare for this. Fewer magazines exist, and print runs are smaller. Other platforms have taken over, but they work differently, changing the dynamic.

IM: Do you feel the same when you photograph for architects, for instance?

BP: I don't do that very often. I mostly do it for *OFFICE.* With them, it's a different story because we started out together, we're good friends, and photographing the buildings is somewhat a collateral. It happens alongside the other things we do together. I know all their projects, so it's also nice to see the projects delvelop as buildings in the end and how they relate to reality or to the initial sketches. There's always a search for what the image should be, and with *OFFICE* that feels quite natural. They are always open to exploring what the final image of the building could be, rather than insisting on a predetermined outcome.

For other clients — whether institutions or architects — it's usually a question that needs exploring. There isn't a prescribed image; it's more like: *"Would you be interested in looking at this? We don't know how to approach it, but maybe you can find a way."* That's what makes it interesting for me. If there's a question about the image that doesn't have immediate answers, I'm eager to collaborate. When it's just the task of *"Can you photograph the building?"* — then I'm not the right person. For me, there always has to be an image-related question. That's the most important part.

SS: In the *OFFICE* monograph, I liked the part where Stefano Graziani shifts from speaking about architectural photography to photography and architecture — treating them as intersecting disciplines. He also raises the question of authorship in the result. In your collaboration with

OFFICE, which is one of the topics of our lecture, how do you approach the projects? Do you discuss them in advance with Kersten or David, or do you prefer to discover the place directly, without knowing beforehand what to look for?

SOLO HOUSE – Matarraña, Office KGDVS, 2012-2017, Photograph: Bas Princen.

BP: It's a very natural process. I'm at *OFFICE* maybe three times a year, so I see all the new projects—the ones that move forward and the ones that don't. There are models, collages on the wall, and we always go quickly over what's in progress. In that sense, I roughly know the projects from conception to execution. So when I photograph them, I already have some familiarity with them.

SS: Does it happen to discuss the ongoing project?

BP: A lot of times we go there together. The way I photograph does not take very long. The weather is not important — the weather is the weather. The moment of the day is given. It's like visiting the building: you're there for maybe two hours, and you photograph it. In a way, I focus on the things that interest me and the things that remind me of earlier projects or of projects still in progress. We always try to create a link between previous projects and those that follow. Then, during the editing, we talk about what is most essential — what can be left out and what cannot.

IM: I liked what you said about proposing alternative views or uses of public space through new ways of seeing them. Do you think this approach also applies to architecture?

BP: I think photography, for me, is always like that. I photograph something because it reminds me of something, or because I want to tell something else that isn't happening at that moment. I have no prescribed plan at all. And I don't want to photograph a view I've already photographed before, or re-photograph it just because the weather wasn't perfect the first time. That never works —

then it becomes almost like a drawing, which you have to redraw again and again.

For me, it's really about the moment when you're there: a certain aspect of the building makes an impact. And if you're there at another time, in another light or with different weather, another aspect makes an impact. It can also be about how it's used, or if someone is using it. So it's a reaction to the moment and the space. And that's it. I can't do it any other way.

IM: It can even surprise the architects who conceived it, which I find really nice—a new way of seeing.

BP: Yes, I think it's also interesting for them to see my take, because there are things photographed that they hadn't really noticed or focused on before. But it can also happen that things very important to them I don't fully capture. So it goes both ways. Normally, though, they're fine with that.

SS: When photographing a building, is the process different from a photographic project where you put together a series of images, or is it similar?

BP: It is different, but when you work on both over a long period, it almost stops being a 'project' and becomes a constant element you can add to. Sometimes, for certain buildings, one photograph is enough because it fits within the context of other images, and nothing more needs to be said. It shouldn't be overly artistic — that's unnecessary. The work is collaborative, and it has a goal: to communicate the building. This isn't about my project on architecture, but their architecture. It comes back to the question of the image — finding a way to represent their idea of architecture over time.

SS: How long have you collaborated with *OFFICE*?

BP: Since the beginning.

SS: Do you remember how you met?

BP: Well, we met in the *Berlage Institute* — Kersten did not study there — but he was working at *Maxwan* and at *Neutelings Riedijk*, so he was in Rotterdam and came to the lectures or for other reasons. So that's where we met. I can't remember exactly. When they were building their first project, they were doing *The Notary*[22] on the side and David was still working for Xaveer de Geyter, I think.

Office Entrance – Antwerp, Office KGDVS, 2002-2005, Photograph: Bas Princen.

We were already friends, and we were joking a little bit: *"Okay, I'll photograph The Notary, but if I photograph it, I'll photograph everything you'll ever do."* So that's, in a way, how it started.

SS: For a broader perspective, your collaboration extended over 20 years.

BP: In the beginning it was really a lot more about looking at each other's works and in a way also being inspired by it. Our fields overlap, but they are not the same. I think there was a mutual respect for each other's work. When I say the photography is collateral, it's literally like that — so there are other reasons why we engage with each other's work, because there's something to learn from that.

From Perception to Image

SS: You describe a very natural encounter with the places you photograph, yet your images are powerful and transcend the immediate subject. If taking a photograph feels effortless, does that mean you spend considerable time afterward reflecting on the series, reviewing the images, and carefully selecting which to keep? Does this approach also apply to series like the *Reservoir*[23] and to your work photographing for *OFFICE*?

BP: Working digitally has changed things a lot. Now I take many more photographs, since there's no need to be as careful with each shot. When I had only ten negatives in a day, I had to be sure before taking one. Back then, I would set up the camera, look through it, and decide yes or no — most often no. Now I record the view and decide later. Still, the process hasn't really changed: something

catches my interest, or I recognize a reference in my mind, then I set the camera to see if that idea is still visible in the picture. That's the magic — sometimes it is, sometimes it isn't. You may have a clear idea when you see something, but that doesn't guarantee it will work in the image.

Reservoir Series — Valley (Jing'an), 2007
Photograph: Bas Princen.

And sometimes it is the other way around: you sense that something is there but can't quite figure it out. You set up the camera, take the photograph, and then look at the image — not at the reality, not at the context.

You just look at the picture and think: "Now it somehow works" — once the context is removed and what interests me comes forward. This doesn't require long preparation. To achieve a powerful or even monumental photograph doesn't necessarily take much time; it's a moment of realization. You walk with the camera, often already on the tripod. When there's a reason to stop, you stop. And when you realize why you stopped, that is exactly when I need to photograph it. I don't take five more shots in the same place; there was a reason I stopped there, and that's what should be captured.

The image creates a reference, linking it to something you've seen before — perhaps some of my own works or something from the history of image-making. There's a certain resonance between reality and your mind that you have to accept, not manipulate. You need to be clear that the reason you stopped is the reason you stopped, and that's what you have to photograph.

SS: I wanted to ask about this idea of reference you mentioned. As you explained, it seems more like an internal process — a kind of resonance — rather than a postmodern gesture of pointing to a specific reference or citation. That's what explains how you arrived at that image in that moment.

BP: No, I never say, *"Today I want to reference this."* No, it doesn't work like that at all. It's much more fluid, and therefore editing can be difficult. Sometimes it can take a few years before pictures make sense, because they don't fit in a series yet, don't have a proper "neighbor," or don't immediately show what they reference. But the initial reason, while photographing, is always what I need to return to and try to make visible for others.

IM: I was wondering, what is your current obsession, or what do you want to capture? Where do you want to point your camera now?

BP: This will be a long answer, and it will touch on a couple of questions you've already asked. Three years ago, we curated a big show on photography at CCA[24], together with Stefano Graziani. CCA has an amazing photography archive because Phyllis Lambert realized that when you want to make an archive of architecture, you also need an archive of reality, or of context: "*Where does this architecture live? Where does it belong?"* So while acquiring the architectural archive, she also acquired a parallel archive of photography. She collects complete photographic projects by photographers and artists, focusing on the built environment, as archive prints, not as exhibition prints.

The archive is quite large and has its challenges. Since the late '90s, it hasn't grown much, so most of the collection comes from earlier periods. When we were asked to create a project based on their archive, we had to understand why the idea of the "photographic project" was important and why the museum wasn't collecting large prints. We realized something similar in both Stefano's and my photography: the project always exists, but usually only in books. You're rarely asked to show a complete project in an exhibition because it's impossible to display, say, 50 large prints. So the complete project lives primarily in the book.

And the complete project, as we understand it — I think Stefano and I are quite similar on this — and what we chose as the subject of the exhibition, is that the project is an argument. A visual argument, not written down, but a

proposal for how to see reality or an aspect of it, made by an artist or photographer using only images or sequences of images. With that, you can say something quite powerful — a visual argument — and it can take many forms. In the exhibition, we explored these forms.

We went into the archive and selected about ten projects. Then we asked ten photographers and artists we already knew to explain and expand on their own projects. These were artists who could have fit naturally into the collection but weren't yet represented. We also added nine new projects that we thought would work well if collected.

While doing this, I think we both began to realize — I certainly did — that documentation is important, and that the notion of documentary photography is changing and becoming relevant again. Fifteen or ten years ago, I would never have called my work documentary. But now, in an age where images circulate online, are not fixed, and are subject to minor alterations — whatever the algorithms do — the idea of the document is becoming more important again. The document, as a print or as an archival object, can exist online, but it should definitely exist offline. So, in a way, this is a long introduction to the work I'm doing now.

Photography as an Object

SS: Just as a side note: why must it exist physically, offline as well?

BP: Photography has always been an object. And when it's an object, it fixes itself in time — you can see when it was made, which gives it a certain significance. We used to have negatives, and that was the moment of creation — the object itself — before printing. When I say "object,"

I don't mean the exhibition print; the old object was the negative. It indicated when something was documented.

When images remain entirely digital, I'm not convinced they can hold that moment in time. You can't pinpoint them, and they're subject to change. I think this is one of the most interesting challenges. That's why my archive is offline; the server is offline. It's not that I don't trust digital storage, but I believe there's a responsibility for the photographer: documenting something also involves archiving it and ensuring it can be seen in the future. It's not strictly necessary, but the work should serve as study material. So when I say the print is still important, I mean the archive print. It should exist in my archive, or somewhere it can be understood as an object created at a certain time, with a certain view.

If we go back to Tillmans, the magazines functioned in a similar way. The moment of publication was also the moment when the photography belonged somewhere and was archived — an almost instant record through the magazine.

SS: I was thinking exactly about this — I can't settle for accessing architecture digitally. When something truly interests me, I feel the need to have the physical book to engage with it fully. Sometimes I wonder if I'm anachronistic, given how easily information flows online and how many magazines sell PDFs. Yet, to me, a physical book operates on another level. A friend even calls it a "fetish," but reflecting on what you said, I recognize my instinct in it.

BP: In my understanding, the book — especially in photography — is the only place where you can grasp the full project, or what we would call the visual argument.

The complete argument exists only in the book; it doesn't exist online, where there's only a selection of the work.

SS: In architecture, even plans and drawings are increasingly treated as images that can be consulted and understood in great detail.

BP: Yes, and I think we need to start understanding these things as important documents — I believe that's the only way to truly understand them. They might seem a little like a fetish, but I don't see them that way. I see them as documents, and with documents comes a certain duty.

SS: I also appreciate the importance of limits. Online content flows endlessly, while a book is a curated, finite document with clear physical boundaries.

Singapore. From Documenting Cities to Artifacts and Nature

BP: Coming back to your question — what am I working on now — last year we spent a year in Singapore with the family. We had also lived there ten years ago, and it was during that first stay that I began a project. At the time, I was observing the city but didn't relate to it and found it uninteresting to document. That period also marked my shift from analog to digital photography. I realized I no longer wanted to photograph cities and urbanity. Photography can always promote an idea or highlight a virtue, but these cities didn't need validation, even if some aspects remained compelling. This shift helped me rethink what I wanted to focus on after fifteen years of documenting cities and landscapes.

With digital photography, I also wanted to move away from obsessing over composition and perfect or-

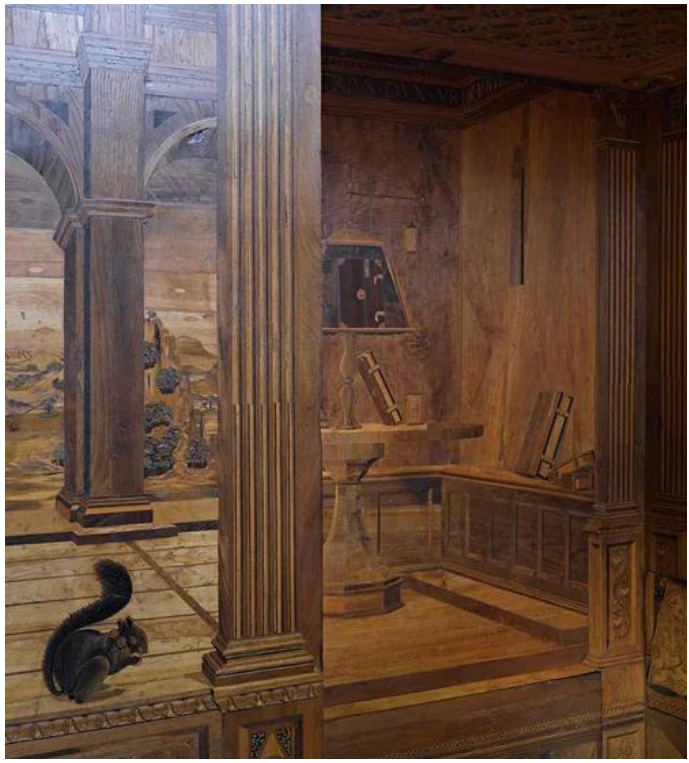
ganization. I wanted to photograph more freely — not abandoning monumentality, but personally challenging the predictability of my own approach, which had become too familiar to me. I already knew how a photograph would look before taking it, and that predictability had made the process uninteresting.

I began photographing artifacts — material objects or buildings that might disappear — and approached them in a very specific way. At the same time, I was interested in nature, but as a counterpoint to urbanity rather than in a National Geographic sense.

One key example is the *Studiolo del Duca* in Urbino. I photographed the intarsia walls at a one-to-one scale. These depictions are architectural or embedded within architecture. I printed them on very matte paper, without gloss or glass. By making the prints life-sized, the usual layers separating viewer and image disappear, creating a direct, human-scale encounter. I developed a set of 15–20 works, shown at Vitra in the exhibition *Image and Architecture*[25].

Buildings like this can be lost forever, which makes photographing them especially urgent. In reality, these objects are already monumentalized; entering the space carries the weight of history. I wanted to free that perception, creating works that allow viewers to engage with something important in relation to architectural imagery, or images embedded within architecture.

SS: This process is fascinating — how you chose this specific type of paper, and how you spoke of its relationship to reality. It feels like a work of art in itself. I wonder, though: is it still documentary, or does the relationship to reality become merely a background reference?



Studiolo del Duca, Bas Princen, 2016, Image and Architecture Exhibition, Vitra Design Museum Gallery, 2018 .

BP: It's very documentary, because in the end it could also be understood as a scientific object. It's photographed perfectly, at one-to-one scale or close to it. You can sense the materiality and get an idea of the experience of being there. So yes, I think it's quite documentary — it just doesn't take the conventional form. We aren't used to recognizing that as documentary, which is part of what makes the image interesting: it raises questions about how we consume and understand images.

On a side note, I wanted to create works that can't be experienced on a phone, where the shiny, small screen misses so many elements. I tried to make a work that, when photographed and shown to a friend, would make them ask, "Why is this interesting?"

IM: Does this approach work with nature as well?

BP: I started photographing nature as part of a larger project: 17 volcanoes in Java[26] — currently the most densely populated landmass, highly urbanized. The volcanoes, of which there are many, are like holes in the urban landscape. When you ascend one, you enter what could be called nature, but it's a nature that will inevitably change — maybe not disappear completely, but it will transform. There's a reason to document it, to photograph it, or simply to observe it. There are around 50 works in this series, of which only three, I think, have ever been exhibited. I returned to Singapore to add to the series and explore further possibilities.

As nature photographs, these images have limits. They can quickly be read as almost romantic, which is not the intention — and that's fine, but it's not the main point. Until now, the works have mostly been exhibited as monumental images. That approach is valid, but I realized it has limitations. The show at CCA taught me that a project can be more open, not just the five or ten iconic images that are always repeated. I'm now working in a more archival way, including many more pictures.

For this nature series — though I hesitate to even call it that — I am documenting parts of the landscape that might change, disappear, or are under forces driving transformation. Last year, I began adding small image stories to the series. For example, in the mountain villages near the volcanoes in Java, there are old wooden houses, somewhat like Japanese houses, which locals call "jungle houses" (though that's not their real name). They are built without nails, just fitted together, and are beautiful objects. Traders buy them, take them to workshops to clean, repair, and replace rotten parts, then sell them as luxury cultural arti-

facts to art collectors in Jakarta, who place them in their gardens as pavilions. This is a very local practice; it's not driven by foreign buyers.

I've been photographing these small narratives of the original objects — moments of disassembly, repair, reassembly, and transport. I turn them into stories of six or seven small-scale images, printed as small archive prints that can be displayed in a vitrine, for example. There are now 10–15 of these side stories, showing how artifacts and nature intersect. The artifacts are no longer captured as perfect objects; like the landscapes, they are transient, transforming, and it's important to consider how we treat them. In the end, it's very documentary.

I don't yet know how to exhibit this work or how it will appear in books. It's a body of work I'm printing now. In Singapore, I also spent a year photographing clouds from our balcony, anticipating that AI-generated images could never truly recreate them — or at least, there would be no reason for them to. Yet photographing them makes sense.

History. Indonesia

IM: When you explore these subjects, do you sometimes draw on historical approaches or ideas?

BP: History is always there because photography is full of these kinds of precedents.

IM: Or does geography, or a specific place, influence your approach?

BP: Yes, in this case, it's all Indonesia, and there's a reason for that — Indonesia was a Dutch colony. I also

feel there's a certain obligation to work on it. Contrary to what everyone might say — that you shouldn't touch it — I actually think there is an obligation to deal with it. I've also been collecting pictures of Indonesia by Dutch photographers, who were commissioned by companies, the Dutch society, or the Dutch government. These photographs aimed to understand what the landscape could offer at the time. But they are interesting as objects, and they also tell the story of that landscape. All of these photographs are kept in archives in Holland, so I think my work has to relate to that as well.

The Photographer's Studio

SS: Do you keep the archive in your studio? Given how much you travel, what is the importance of having a studio and access to your archive?

BP: The studio is like an artist's workspace. For me most photographers are studio artists in that sense: most of the work — the thinking, the experiments — happens here. We're actually photographing only a small portion of the time, maybe 10% of my time.

SS: Yes, I saw a beautiful photo of your studio in one of your lectures, which I really liked, also for its industrial setting.

BP: There are two studios. I live in Switzerland now, on behalf of my family. In our house, I have a basement that serves as the studio — it has a domestic scale, so it feels more like an office, an office full of piles of pictures. Here, I do much more thinking: I make prints, run tests, and produce archive prints.

Then there's the old studio in Rotterdam, where the archive is kept and the large works are stored. It's a big industrial space where you can really understand what a monumental work would look like in a museum exhibition. There's a huge difference between testing a museum-scale work at home and seeing it in its intended space. You can't rely on large prints at home to grasp how the work will function; the feeling is completely different. You need the proper scale to understand how the work interacts with the space, and I think that's part of the work itself. You have to consider how the viewer will encounter it in an exhibition — you're not thinking about how it would look in a house. Normally, works are experienced either in books or in exhibitions.

SS: Do you still have a darkroom in the studio?

BP: I never had a darkroom because I never photographed in black and white, and a color darkroom is very complex. There was one at school where I could print, and for a while, some colleagues and I had such a color darkroom in Rotterdam. After that, everything shifted to digital very quickly — you'd scan the negative and then print it. I think it's valuable to have the experience of printing color in a darkroom because it's very complex and quite different from black and white. But I can't even remember how long it's been since the process stopped being a wet one and became dry, digital.

The Gray Pages

SS: I wanted to ask you about the *"gray pages"* in the *OFFICE KGDVS* monograph. It seems to me that many of the interests you just discussed — your personal projects

and your way of looking at the world — are reflected there. Interestingly, in consulting their three-book monograph, I haven't found any specific explanation of what the "gray pages" are. What purpose do they serve within the book?

BP: You'll have to ask Kersten. I don't know if you've already spoken to him, but that's where you should start. In a way, it was their inception of making a monograph — or not even a monograph, more like an ongoing catalogue raisonné. Why include these *gray pages*? I have an idea, but you should ask Kersten.

I think it's always important to show work the way you want it to be seen. It's the same for me when I make my own book — I decide how it will be presented. When work appears in a magazine, a group exhibition, or elsewhere, a curator decides how people will interpret it, so that's already different. The same applies to architectural monographs. You can have an *El Croquis* or an *a+u*, but your own catalog doesn't have to follow the same rules. You can choose what's important and how you want to present which parts of the work matter and how they should be looked at.

The Construction of an Image, Bas Princen, Bedford Press, 2015.

If I take it a step back to my own practice, I think you make images so that they can be embedded in a history of images. My images don't exist by themselves — they are surrounded by historic images, by works of other photographers, other artists. My images should situate themselves within a world of existing images.

So if you ask me what the "gray pages" are, they are images, projects, ideas, and thoughts that provide the context in which the works should be understood. It's a curated context, and that's fine. What interests me is that they fix certain ideas at a certain time. The pictures I made appear in the *"gray pages"* alongside projects by *OFFICE* at the same moment, so you can see similarities or influences across works. They also cement the architectural projects within a certain visual thinking of that moment — of *OFFICE*, of Kersten and David, or however you interpret it — but essentially, it's a document of the wider context in which these projects were created. I would still say my explanation is a bit limited, but that's how I understand it.

Martin Parr

IM: I'm curious — and not sure if it's a bit risky — but how would you position yourself toward, or critique, the work of a very different photographer, Martin Parr? What are your thoughts on his work?

BP: Well, we could talk about many photographers, and Martin Parr is clearly very different from me. But when I look at his work professionally, I understand exactly what he's doing. I'm quite impressed by how he does it and by the consistency of his work.

What impresses me most — what usually impresses me about photographers — is that they reveal

something about reality that everyone can see, but no one noticed. That's amazing. You look at these pictures and think: "I know these people, I've seen this," yet while looking at them, you realize: "Actually, it's much stranger than I thought when I encountered it in reality." In a way, that's the essence of a visual argument.

There are many ways to understand photographers in this sense. You can look at a work and think: "I didn't see this," or "I didn't see it like this." It's interesting that I now know how to look at something photographed by someone else. And another thought I often have is: "Ah, great — someone else did it. I don't have to do it anymore."

IM: Do you think he also brings a critical eye to his subjects?

BP: It's both. It's a kind of love and critique. You have to have a love for it; otherwise, you wouldn't be able to do it for so long. There has to be a certain fascination or love — it can't be only irritation or critique. That's also why I tend to prefer longer projects: they require real investment. It can't be just a quick critique, a quick snap.

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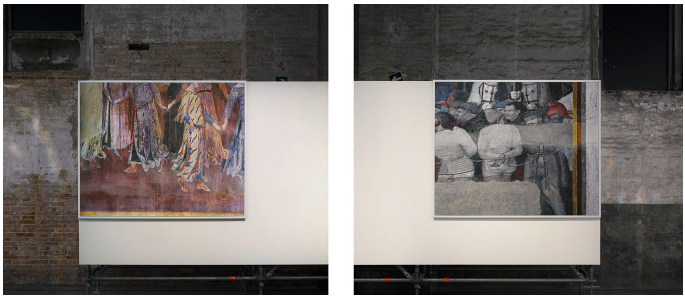
Postcript: The Pavilions

SS: As a photographer, you produce physical objects, as you've mentioned. You also seem interested in creating a particular kind of place — suspended somewhere between imagination and reality — where photography doesn't just depict reality, but produces new images and creates new spaces. Can you tell us about your work on the Pavilions, a long-standing collaboration with *OFFICE*?

BP: For *OFFICE*, these interventions are small, allowing them to experiment quickly and test an idea. For me, they are very large projects where I have to let go of certain tediousness, and they are more prescribed, so you can't control everything. I find this fascinating — the way image and space are tested together. This is a collaboration we're both invested in: *"How far can you push this?" "Can you do this or not?"*

In 2012 we conceived the circular pavilion for the Shenzhen Biennale. Then, there's *The Room of Peace*, which is done solely by me and was first shown as an exhibition-installation at the 2014 Venice Architecture Biennale. It's already one of the first artifacts.

Wall Pavilion – Shenzhen, Office KGDVS and Bas Princen, 2013-2014, Shenzhen Biennial, Photograph: Bas Princen.



"Room of Peace", Bas Princen, 2014 Venice Architecture Biennale, Photograph: Bas Princen.

Potteries Thinkbelt Project,
Cedric Price, United Kingdom
(Staffordshire), 1964, Unbuilt.

Model for a pavilion,
Bas Princen, Office KGDVS, 2015
Chicago Architecture Biennial,
Photograph: Bas Princen.

After Singapore, this was the first idea of making these copies and describing the space. I used a Japanese very matte paper, for a one to one photograph. There's also a booklet in parallel.

The Model for a Pavilion came as an artistic reaction to Cedric Price's unbuilt project, *The Potteries Thinkbelt*[27]. It was meant to be a kind of railroad university set within a Becher-style industrial landscape. I went there to photograph the site, which is now just an overgrown railway. In the end, this hidden architectural element — Cedric Price's *Thinkbelt* site — became the subject of our object. And for us, the hidden question was: "How can you make a space without solid materials? Can you build it from a very thin image?" The result was a beautiful space that, at first, seemed almost postmodern — with large arcade windows and a narrow ramp. But once it was hanging, you would pass under a perfect black void. It was striking.

At Vitra[28], I was really trying to understand this possibility of photography and architecture — trying to depict moments where the two collide, where architecture and image become one, intricately connected to each other.

Model for a Tower

BP: *Model for a Tower*[29], created with *OFFICE* as part of an art route commemorating Pieter Bruegel in Belgium. The main museum in Rotterdam holds Bruegel's *Tower of Babel*, the smallest of three versions worldwide. To begin, I needed special permission to photograph the painting — a process closely supervised by its guardian.

From these photographs, I extracted sequences of buildings and details. Bruegel's painting itself is a layered time frame: kilns and industry on the left, ghostly figures and nature on the right. I was struck by his precision —

leaves and bricks painted at the same scale, one green, one red — a subtle critique in itself. And in the background, cleared forests and arriving building materials reveal the dystopian landscape left in the wake of the tower's construction. From these fragments, I built a new narrative within the painting.

Model for a Tower, Bas Princen, Office KGDVS, Dilbeek, Belgium, 2018, Photograph: Bas Princen.

We then imagined a circular structure of slender poles, with the pictures suspended from them — a kind of proposal for an object that might one day exist (though it never truly would). Our idea was to place it in a forest, but this meant mapping every tree. The task was far more

complex than expected: we had to locate a perfect circle untouched by trunks. From the outside, the silver structure was clearly visible; from the inside, it seemed to vanish.

IM: This is so beautiful.

BP: These pavilions are important experiments because they bridge two worlds we move between: architecture and art. They show that these worlds have always been connected, and in a way, we need to keep reconnecting them. Frescoes and wall murals, for instance, were once integral to architecture — at least until a certain point. Even in early modernism, the Bauhaus curriculum still included wall painting. Only later did this connection begin to fade, and with it, the understanding that an image could be part of architecture. These experiments are also a way of asking: "*Can we bring back the possibility of the image as an essential part of how we understand space?"*

Wilmarsdonk[30]

BP: There's a tower in the harbor of Antwerp that once belonged to the village of Wilmarsdonk. In the 1960s, three polder villages — churches included — were erased to extend the harbor. Just before demolishing Wilmarsdonk's church, they realized that without its tower there would be no fixed point from which to measure the expansion. This was before GPS, so they decided to keep the tower as a reference. The rest was buried under two or three meters of sand, and the harbor grew around it.

When I found it, the tower stood on a small plot, completely enclosed by industrial halls and containers. By the 1990s, it had no monumental status, only the condition that it couldn't be destroyed. The harbor company, as owner, had to

keep it from collapsing, nothing more. It wasn't considered important architecture, just an artifact of history. Eventually, they decided to stabilize it and asked five artists to propose how it might be made into an "experiential object" for the harbor.

I spent weeks with the tower, questioning what makes an artifact important if it isn't monumental architecture. I found it strange that a 450-year-old tower had to serve as a backdrop to glorify a 40-year-old harbor. To me, the harbor felt temporary — it has been there for only 40 years and may last another 20 before something else replaces it. So I proposed not to monumentalize the harbor but to shield the tower, using photography.

I photographed it one-to-one, as an artifact, before renovation began — capturing the patina and details that would soon disappear. Using scaffolding, I went up to record the surfaces, later erasing the scaffolding from the images to produce perfect one-to-one prints of the tower as it was. Some elements, like a rotten wooden beam, would vanish in renovation, so the photographs preserve what was about to change.

I also excavated the old zero level, since 1.10–1.20 meters of sand had buried part of the tower's base. Using the cadaster map, I marked its original plot and created a small inner garden to assert its place. Around it, I proposed a circular protective installation of 14 large-scale photographs.

This work also questions a dogma of photography: you rarely encounter photographs of the very place you are standing, because images usually transport you elsewhere. Here, the photographs act instead as a transplantation of time, preserving the tower just before its renovation. Finally, I suggested reopening the back of the church to allow people to walk through, even though the tower itself could no longer be entered.

SS: Is the frame something important to your idea of producing these objects?

BP: Yes, this was all designed by me — including the frame. It enhances the relationship with the harbor. It needed a strong color: one that, in a way, integrates with the surroundings, yet is not found in the harbor — a color that complements it.

IM: It's very beautiful in contrast with what is around it.

BP: It's a very strange project, but what I learned — or what I found interesting — is that it's always this kind of question about the image: "What can an image do?". Or, more specifically, "What can it still do?". By now, we might say it can't do much anymore, that there are too many images. But I still believe the image can do a lot. What was very interesting is that when people visit and look at the pictures — that the images become the reality of the tower. It's not the renovated tower that exists in their mind. All the elements you saw in the pictures are gone: the slates have been replaced by black slates instead of purple, the wooden frames inside have been fully clad in metal to prevent collapse — everything has disappeared. Yet, by doing this installation, the tower is now fixed in the moment when I photographed it. That's the tower that exists — not the one physically next to the visitor. I didn't anticipate this, and it turned out to be a very interesting outcome.

SS: It's fascinating how an image can be drawn from reality and then reinserted into it in a new, tangible form.

BP: Yes. I think it still makes sense to make images. It's not obsolete.

ESSAYS

SAN ROCCO

Fuck Concepts! Context![31]

Contemporary architecture is generally presented with the phrase "My concept is . . . ", in which the blank is filled in by some sort of notion: "My concept is freedom", "My concept is the iPad", "My concept is the Big Bang", "My concept is democracy", "My concept is panda bears", "My concept is M&M's". This statement is then followed by a PowerPoint presentation that begins with M&M's and ends with round, pink bungalows on paradisiacal Malaysian beaches.

According to concepts, to design is to find what buildings are: an ontology for dummies that turns banality into spectacle. Thus, the library is the books, the stadium is the muscles, the promenade is the beach, the aquarium is the sh, the swimming pool is the water and grandmother 's garage is grandmother.

Concepts are a tool used to justify design decisions *in the absence of architecture*. Concepts originate from a state of self-inflicted despair in which design needs to be justified point by point, and architecture by definition has no cultural relevance. Concepts presuppose that nothing specifically architectural exists in reality: there are no spatial relationships, no territories and no cities, and it is thus impossible to obtain any knowledge about these phenomena. Concepts are the tools used to make architecture in a world of postatomic barbarians. Conan and Mad Max would dream up a concept for imagining how to erect their own primitive huts.

Concepts *claim to translate architecture into an everyday language*. As such, concepts claim to be *democratic*, and therefore claim that they allow people with no architectural education to understand buildings. The point here is that *translating architecture into an everyday language* is nonsensical (and, contrary to popular opinion, there is nothing democratic about nonsense). Architecture is immersed in and appropriated by language, but it is not itself a language: architecture is about modifying landscapes and shaping spatial con-

ditions, not about communicating information or celebrating values (values can occupy architecture, but architecture cannot produce them: like a bowl, architecture can be filled, but it cannot generate its own content). So, no *translation* of architecture is possible, just as it is impossible to "translate" dance or ice hockey. Here the problem is not only the reduction of complexity that is associated with any kind of populism, but also the translation into a mediocre story of something that is simply not a story. In other words, the problem is not that of *mediocre translation*; the problem is *translation in general*. In the end, there is nothing to understand in buildings. And democracy is certainly not about *understanding* architecture: it is about accessing architecture. You just need to enter, move, look, wait, climb, stop . . . That's it.

Concepts exist because of the unnecessary feeling that architecture *needs an explanation*, that architecture needs to *apologize*. Concepts describe what architecture will do before architecture is made, thereby guaranteeing that it will not do anything else. Concepts turn architecture into something safe, predictable, tamed. With concepts, there are no nightmares in the city, no nasty jokes, no surprises, no contradictions, no complexity, no congestion, no memory, no subconscious. Concepts prevent any free appropriation; they erase any surprise. The only gestures admitted into buildings are the *conceptual* ones that were used to *explain* them. Like ghosts, concepts do not want to vacate the buildings they generated; concepts do not accept their own disappearance in the final product.

Concepts introduce a kind of rationality that makes projects automatic-pilot-justified in every step of the construction process. Concepts help decision-makers to remember and re-tell the reasons for their decisions to those who charged them with this task, whether these people are parliamentary commissions, committees of kindergarten mothers or voters.

In this way, concepts start an endless chain of justifications that are certainly more bureaucratic than democratic (concepts and bureaucracy have always been allies, at least since Colbert and Perrault screwed poor old Bernini). The need to explain, justify and certify the project *now* – and to do all of this *easily* – prevents any possible future complexity in the building. Concepts operate as a form of violence of the present against the future. The period of construction becomes more important than the building's lifespan. The immediate dialogue with clients and contractors becomes more important than the future richness of the building. The design is totally dependent on the narration that is required to sell the building. (Note: this, to a certain extent, is unavoidable; what *is* avoidable is building the cultural legitimacy of architecture precisely upon its very dependence on these oversimplified narrations, or turning selling into an ideology.) Concepts protect us from running the risk of engaging with form. Why should we bother with form when we have an *idea*? Why waste time seeking beauty when we can claim that *we are solving problems?* Why think when we can happily sit around a table and do some *brainstorming?* Why take the pains to learn something when we can shout "Eureka!" in your face?

Anyhow, it is possible to escape from this *selbstverschuldete Minderheit*. Complexity exists, in reality, in context. Cities and territories are here, and it is possible to understand them!

Nothing else is needed. Just pay attention; just trust silence and immobility. In the end, to design is to define contexts, to re-shape what is already there, to formalize the given. Concepts are not needed, and neither are messages or literature. The relationship between humans and buildings is *spatial*, being simply based on the fact that both humans and buildings occupy portions of space but with this difference: contrary to humans, buildings survive for long periods of time

and do not move. There seems to be a possibility for interaction between humans and architecture, one that is quite interesting and unpredictable: the possibility for built matter to operate on human behaviour by means of its own immobility. And this clumsy brotherhood of architecture and human gestures, this mute complexity, survives only if the relationship is both immediate and indirect, evident and untold. Probably nobody has ever exposed the nature of this relationship as precisely or bravely as Rossi did: "Go to an old folks' home: sorrow is something tangible. Sorrow is in the walls, in the courtyards, in the dormitory" (Rossi, *The Architecture of the City*, 1966).

"Go to an old folks' home" and "sorrow is something tangible" – there is no link between the two phrases, no explanation: sorrow and the old folks' home are just there together. The relationship is spatial in character in the sentence itself too: here is the building, there is sorrow. "Sorrow is *in* the walls". No jokes. No concepts. Sorrow manifests itself *in* space – *in* the walls, *in* the courtyards, *in* the dormitory. This crystallized sorrow that materializes as walls cannot be described, just pointed out. Sorrow is not the *concept* behind the building, nor does the building *represent* sorrow; rather, sorrow is a specific condition produced in space by the series of acts accumulated through time in a speci c place. Unhappiness does not need concepts, and neither does happiness.

So, fuck concepts! Context! And fuck content! Form! *San Rocco 4* attempts to understand the genealogy of concepts and ultimately tries to imagine a new architecture without ideas.

• Genealogy •

There is a tradition of concepts in architecture, quite a serious one, with all kinds of related topics (character, *architecture parlante*, and so on): Serlio's Book VI with its houses that change appearance according to the different professions of their inhabitants, Palladio's villas, Colbert's reasonable objec-

tions to Bernini's Louvre, Laugier's hut, Ledoux's *architecture parlante* . . .

• No-nonsense Classicism •

As our world became increasingly bureaucratized, it became crucial for architects to find a way to deal with concepts. Various strategies were developed in order to react to this situation and to offer an architecture befitting the logic of bureaucrats (e.g., Durand, Schinkel, Semper). A strange kind of no-nonsense classicism appeared, one that was logically arranged, repetitive, economical and realizable in stages.

• Content •

Modernism accepted the 17th and 18th-century infatuation with *concepts*, yet it recognized only one of these: *content*, or, in other words, *quantity.* Modernism (a truly Protestant project) was an architecture of quantity, measurable in terms of the amount of social housing produced in a year, or a given project's cost per square metre. But *content* (which is to say quantity) was still not a reality; rather, it was the *concept* of modernism. For its only concept, modernism also invented an entire body of propaganda, thereby creating a model of the happy marriage of concepts and propaganda that would be so successful later on. In the process, form was dismissed because modernism was about doing the right thing, and context was ignored because modernism was about *doing the right thing in large quantities*. Architecture had to sacrifice itself in the name of a *good cause.* But then that good cause somehow got lost. Concepts survived, though, as brutal as Bolshevik propaganda and as regressive as Lady Thatcher's social policies. How could modernism come to such a sad a conclusion? What went wrong along the way? Is there a parallel here with the depressing history of the European political left after May 1968?

• Into the Ears of Millions •

Concepts correspond to the need to *whisper into the ears of millions* (as Jeff Koons has said, "At one time, artists had only to whisper into the ear of the king or pope to have political effect. Now, they must whisper into the ears of millions of people"). To do this, contemporary architecture enthusiastically embraced all sorts of trashy allegories. But did this populistic attempt really work out? For all its love of cheap slogans, contemporary architecture is still highly non-communicative, misunderstood and neglected. Any other art form works better, and any other expressive medium (considering architecture, just for the sake of argument, as an expressive medium) has higher returns. Why should we not learn from this failure? Why should we not accept this situation and make use of it? Consider how successful contemporary art has been in being deliberately obscure. Maybe what is wrong with contemporary architecture is precisely its (modernist) humbleness, its desperate eagerness to sacri ce itself in the name of something else.

• A Defence of Concepts •

Over the last four centuries, concepts have been very popular. As a result, a large majority of our readers might be irritated by (or at least have doubts about) our argument against concepts. So, please explain to us why we are wrong. You know we are open-minded.

• Stirling's Non-dogmatic Accumulation of Formal Knowledge •

Stirling is often considered a stupid architect, probably partly because (at least in the second part of his career) he didn't write, and what has appeared in print is indeed a mishmash of statements, vague interviews and sloppy prize acceptance speeches. It is also probably partly be-

cause he seemed so strangely inconsequential in his trading in of British industrialist brickwork for pink, oversized railings. In his "inconsequential" actions, however, Stirling was a fundamental contextualist, though his context was not the gloomy universe in which he was supposed to place each of his buildings, but the one that he constructed himself along the way. For Stirling, the series of preceding formal solutions created the context for the new ones he would develop. In each of his commissions, reality turned out to be confrontational yet fertile. Over time, Stirling put together a body of non-dogmatic formal knowledge comprised of imprecise sources, inconsequential fascinations, bad jokes and out-of-place erudition. But then again, imprecision can generate a world if one is stubborn and consistent and ignorant enough not to care too much about it.

• Le Corbusier, a Contextual Architect •

Despite his initial claims for a new universal, machine-inspired architecture, a number of essays from *L'Esprit nouveau* (later to be included in *Vers une architecture*) communicate Le Corbusier's deep interest in specific landscapes such as the Acropolis in Athens or the city of Rome. Le Corbusier considers the Acropolis to be an architectural device that provides the key to the interpretation of the entire landscape lying between Piraeus and Pentelikon. Convincingly enough, Colin Rowe states that the La Tourette monastery acts in the very same way with respect to its context. On another scale, it is easy to consider the series of projects ranging from *Plan Obus* to the sketches for South American cities as obvious members of the same family. Among the apparently most un-contextual operations, even the *Plan Voisin* or the Beistegui attic clearly fit within the very specific Parisian context

of the Haussmannian erasures and the cult of the urban axis, curiously coupled with the surrealistic excision of the Cadavre Exquis.

• Why Architecture by O. M. U. (Peace Be Upon Him) Always Looks So Bad •

The architecture of Oswald Mathias Ungers is always uncomfortable, uneasy and fundamentally unhappy. And the worst thing about it is that you always suspect that there is some sort of reason for this; you always have the feeling that its failures exist on purpose, or that its shortcomings are supposed to tell you something. Ungers's architecture is an example of how concepts can destroy all good presuppositions. In fact, Ungers was right on almost every level. He was intelligent, educated and realistic, had a precise notion of monumentality and an impressive understanding of the city, and he did not lack good taste. He may also have had some sort of (German) sense of humour. Still, he felt the need to turn all his impressive architectural knowledge into *arguments*, and so he never made a decent building.

• Vanna at the Door •

In a famous photo of her house, Vanna Venturi stands next to the entrance. The photo is frontal: it shows the house as in an elevation. In the image, Vanna hides in the shadow, almost unnoticeable at first glance. The owner and the house are clearly two separate things. The house is clearly not a portrait. Robert Venturi is extremely delicate with his mother: architecture must keep its distance from the world of feelings. A house for one's mother, however, is a house just the same, and Vanna Venturi's house is a masterpiece of abstraction and, as such, a masterpiece of respect. It clearly corresponds to the rigorous

mannerism of Robert Venturi's early production. The house is not an icon; it has no message, and it develops no argument. Vanna was lucky: Bob designed her house before learning all the *ideas* that his wife would later discover in his architecture – brilliant ideas, but ideas nonetheless.

• The Concept Is "Concept" •

Whether you consider Eisenman's, OMA's or Tschumi's entries for the competition for the Parc de la Villette, the contest was clearly about concepts even if nobody understood what those concepts were. Maybe the concept was just "a concept" – the concept of a concept, or a manifesto about the potential of an architecture of pure concepts. In fact, the proposed pavilions had no programme, no message and no reason. They were expensive and they clearly did not do any good for the surrounding urban fabric. They were also uncompromisingly ugly (as the ones that were built still testify). The question is: Why red? Why did concepts in architecture appear in 1983 as something entirely unintelligible, apart from the fact that they had to be red?

• Vito Acconci, Architect •

Could you please go back to masturbating under art gallery floors?

• Examples •

San Rocco is also interested in contributions analyzing concepts and contexts in the buildings included on our lists of the Top 25 Contextual Masterpieces and the Top 25 Conceptual Disasters.

San Rocco's Top 25 Contextual Masterpieces:

• Flatiron, New York, USA

• Forum Nervae, Rome, Italy

• Seagram Building, New York, USA

• Annunziata, Ariccia, Italy

• Portico dei Banchi, Bologna, Italy

• Bowery Savings Bank, New York, USA

• Currutchet House, Buenos Aires, Argentina

• Haus am Michaelerplatz, Vienna, Austria

• Brasília, Distrito Federal, Brazil

• Twin Parks Northeast Houses, New York, USA

• Satellite Towers, Mexico City, Mexico

• Economist Building, London, UK

• York Terrace, Regent's Park, London, UK

• Kiefhoek social housing, Rotterdam, The Netherlands

• San Carlo alle Quattro Fontane, Rome, Italy

• John Deere headquarters, Moline, Illinois, USA

• Sokollu Mehmet Paşa Mosque, Istanbul, Turkey

• Centre Georges Pompidou, Paris, France

• Public Library, Seattle, USA

• Stone House, Tavole, Italy

• Santa Maria della Pace, Rome, Italy

• Fire Station No. 4, Columbus, Indiana, USA

• Casa Milà, Barcelona, Spain

• Gehry House, Santa Monica, California, USA

• National Farmers' Bank, Owatonna, Minnesota, USA

San Rocco's Top 25 Conceptual Disasters:

• Tour Eiffel, Paris, France

• Tallest tower in the world, wherever it is right now • Fred & Ginger, Prague, Czech Republic

• Bibliothèque François Mitterand, Paris, France

• Villa Capra (a.k.a. "la Rotonda"), Vicenza, Italy

• The Calatrava project of your choice

• Fondation Cartier, Paris, France

• Dubai, United Arab Emirates

• Louvre, Paris, France (except the pyramid, of course)

• Einsteinturm, Potsdam, Germany

• NEMO Museum, Amsterdam, The Netherlands

• Cemetery of Modena, Modena, Italy

• Olympic Stadium (the so-called Bird's Nest), Beijing, People's Republic of China

• Reichstag (the old and the new), Berlin, Germany

• Aqua tower, Chicago, USA

• San Ivo alla Sapienza, Rome, Italy

• Kubuswoningen, Rotterdam, The Netherlands

• Mountain dwellings, Copenhagen, Denmark

• J. P. Getty Center, Los Angeles, USA

• Capitol, Dhaka, Bangladesh

• Central library, Delft Institute of Technology, Delft, The Netherlands

• McCormick Tribune Campus Center, Illinois Institute of Technology, Chicago, USA

• Dutch Pavilion, Hannover, Germany

• Wissenschaftszentrum, Berlin, Germany

KERSTEN GEERS

Showing Everything[32]

OMA's Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi) is perhaps the most important building the office never built. In light of what came afterwards-a set of gigantic buildings with towering inner complexity, all more or less incarnations of "Bigness, or the Problem of Large"[33], i.e. OMA's key manifesto for the nineties-it is easy to be underwhelmed by the modest size, the simplicity or even the banality of the design for the NAi. Perhaps, more than in other projects of the first decade, what you see is not what you get. A haphazard accumulation of architectural elements is brought together under a simple and strangely elegant tilted roof: a nondescript container of modest proportions, consciously underperforming. If OMA's NAi is an endpoint of sorts, then it is the final incarnation of its investigation into the "idea" of architecture. Form is both the consequence and the subject of this pursuit; the idea of the spatial principles of architecture is the weapon of choice.

The NAi project is probably best known through a set of elaborate façade drawings and a monumental zoom of this façade a collage that is by far the most particular product. Because of its specific aesthetic and material "thickness". It makes for one of the most compelling re-incarnations of Miesian composition-wit in the fourth quarter of the last century. The meticulously constructed perspective shows carefully composed layers of abstract material in subtle overlap, and it presents a somewhat complex but equally simple exploration of late-modern space. Caught between Colin Rowe and Robert Slutzky's first and second concept of transparency,[34] it seems to rework the language of the equally flat collages of Mies van der Rohe's Resor

House Project and Museum for a Small City, in the opaque manner of Le Corbusier: everything is visible, yet nothing is clear.

The mostly parallel placed material-surfaces enhance the references to the canon of mid-century modernism. Mean- while, the composition of the surfaces and textures, straight but not too straight-organised into two groups with slightly tilted angles-undermines the perception of a simple “re- boost”. The modernist perspective we seem to recognise is wilfully sabotaged. Probably because of this constructed dissonance, the view is extremely elegant. Spatial ideas of architecture are elegant assets.

The Netherlands Architecture Institute, OMA, Rotterdam, Netherlands, Competition Project, 1988.

The framing of the perspective is an act of architectural cunning in itself, as it manages to show a great deal by revealing very little. Consciously limited,

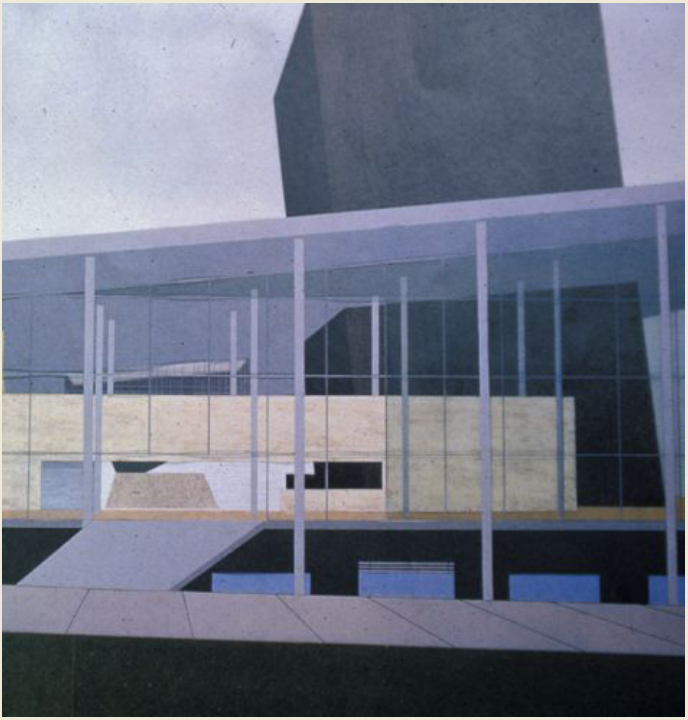
and focusing on that part of the building where a deep slice in the surrounding ground level reveals a black pedestal, the view suggests a building with a glass and column structure that rests on a black base, half dug into the ground. It monumentalises both the hall and the content. The precision of the frame brings the argument, as presented by the perspective, full circle: the NAi as the self-declared endpoint of monumental modernism. Complete and complex, refined and self-centred, it sells the tropes of a fugitive modernism to Rotterdam, a city that personified by a modernist past it never quite got rid of. As tradition prescribes, the perspective is where the story is told, but not where it happens. OMA's NAI is a big box lost in the Netherlands. A building that ignores, from the outset, the place it was intended to populate. Not out of arrogance, but simply because it understands that place is not an important context for an architecture institute. The context here is not location, the context is Architecture. How to make a building about Architecture? For OMA (in 1988) there was only one way: a building that is "the least architecture possible" in order to contain the unavoidable; a receptacle for architecture, in perpetual conflict with its content. A big box born full: OMA's NAi is a container of Form.

The container captures maximum volume under a single tilted roof, carried by a simple structural grid, 6 by 6 m. The field of columns rigorously takes stock of the terrain. The grid seems both necessary and irrelevant. It is the perfect incarnation of the idea of the column as architectural device. This becomes clear in the project description: "In the exhibition space these columns play the role of bridge between the exposed

objects and space itself. To enable larger installations (e.g. full-size reconstructions), one of the columns can be taken away". The structure does not really care about its structural feats; it does carry, but fundamentally it organises the site visually. The grid is cut at the edges of the site: columns are taken away, one by one. The few columns left make up the three façades of the building: a colonnade that carries the façade or the cantilevered roof, defining a territory that coincides with the one defined by the grid. The sharp sloping triangle creates the volume of the big box. The three façades-glass with a slightly different colour and opacity-form another more or less autonomous perimeter, following its own rules. If the column is presented as a tectonic device rather than as a structural or technical element, the façade becomes autonomous in its own right: strangely immaterial, but fully conscious of its dividing powers. Perhaps to emphasise this, one of the façades is drawn in an elegant curve, subtly disconnecting itself from column and roof, where in the other two instances the glass simply joins the dots of the columns.

This design is a set of overlapping perimeters, presenting different ways to define a precise territory, a space. The field of columns, the projection of the roof and the (almost) triangular perimeter of the façade are composed around the same point of gravity: the space they define together. Inside, in the gravitational centre of the space, one finds an accumulation of abstract forms. A huge, slightly tilted tower attached to a flat block with a patio that functions as a pedestal, filling up the middle of the building. The black tower evokes many things. From Kazimir Malevich's Black Square

(the zero degree of painting) to the Kaaba (a volume so black it hints at the indescribable), it incarnates Form as a piece of relentless mass: only volume, no detail. The patio block seems to hint at form as type: a volume with an opening that organises everything unknown. Together, tower and block present the purest manifestation of architecture as form. Only a limited amount of space remains in the box, as if the triangular building was made to house and frame these strange forms. Not unlike the Pergamon Museum in Berlin, which houses reconstructed monumental building parts transported from Turkey, this institute brings together fragments of architecture that start to mutate ambiguously with the very building that protects and contains them. The result is a confusing status of object and pedestal.



The Netherlands Architecture Institute, OMA, Rotterdam, Netherlands, Competition Project, 1988.

In the end, there is so little room left for the "programme" of the institute that one can only conclude that the construction itself rendered the programme irrelevant. Everything that is supposed to happen, essentially happens on top of, in between, and somehow in the fringes of the projected architecture. Using this NAi is like appropriating a temple. Of course: there are exhibition halls, lobbies, a library and coffee places. But because of the looming presence of architecture (as itself), all that becomes quite secondary.

Is that the endpoint OMA reached in 1988? If architecture is able to be both space and form, one becomes the "context" of the other. As sculpture and pedestal, both are intrinsically intertwined. One does not survive the absence of the other. Looking back at the particular detail of the zoomed-in collage reveals that all this is consciously on show. The cut, revealing the pedestal-like base of the envelope, also "creates" a bridge to enter the very building, and to leave Rotterdam. Cut and bridge show the power of obstruction. Inside the institute everything is available, everything is shown. Curiously enough, this land of plenty is as oppressive as it is liberating. It turns into a container cut loose from every context, in order to indulge in the glorious presence of nothing but architecture. The demonstration of its powers is therefore simultaneously the mise-en-scène of its limits. Architecture becomes both exposition device and exposition material. It undoes itself of every possible criterion of success... an absolute architecture... a building that can only refer to itself: an institute for architecture that is impossible to build.

The Netherlands Architecture Institute, OMA, Rotterdam, Netherlands, Competition Project, 1988.

BAS PRINCEN

Ringroad (Houston), 2005: The Construction of an Image[35]

"Our eyes convey to us a surface image of things around us, and the mind processes the viewed objects into ideas and creates an inner world that we interpret in the most varied of ways"[36]

Travel

A few days after hurricane Rita in 2005, I drove east of Houston, anxious to see the effects of this force of nature on the landscape through which we had travelled a few months earlier. I imagined emptiness, void and ruin, but the fragility of the landscape was only exposed by the debris of human interventions – upturned electricity polls, collapsed trailers, car parts and bent corrugated steel panels. The landscape itself was not really affected – it looked the same as I had seen it before; quiet and resilient. It had become a backdrop for the scattered debris.

When I see the image that I made later that day, nothing of this comes to mind. The image of the golden office block on the ringroad at the periphery of Houston has absorbed new references and new meanings. It has become abstracted, losing any relation to the place and time of its making, and relating now instead to other images made before and after.

The Sequence (Landscape and Architecture in an Image)

The chronological sequence represented in this book comprises a series of images in loose dialogue with each other. The sequence was made in 2005 and concentrated on the architecture and man-made landscape of the "American West'. I started out photographing the man-made landscape of the Netherlands, during studies of architecture

and design for public space, using photography as a way to "make space'. Dutch landscape is compact, controlled and fully designed; the architecture of the Dutch landscape resembles the architecture of buildings; Dutch landscape is itself a designed object. By contrast, the American landscape is experienced through its great scale, openness, and a certain wilderness. There is less control and more redundancy, even abandonment and desolation are allowed to surface and consume territory as part of an economic process. In its default state American landscape is not designed – it is not "architecture" – it is "nature", or at least perceived as such.

Historically, there have been interesting depictions of American landscape and, travelling west in 2005, many of these were in my mind. The birth of photography coincided with the conquest of the American landscape, the frontier. The American landscape was "discovered", mapped, measured and rationalised through photographs; the myth of the American frontier is photography-based.

In turn, photography itself was defined as a rational medium of scientific, documentary work, through this first portrayal of American landscape.

Later different kinds of images, bold photo-based collages of utopian architectural projects were used to show visions of the American landscape. Buckminster Fuller's Tetrahedron City, Superstudio's Continuous Monument or Constant Nieuwenhuys' New Babylon present vast hybrid environments spanning the planet, where gigantic futuristic structures coexist in harmony with the landscape. These collages are interesting as landscape representations because they show landscape as an instrumental part of the projects; the landscape is as important as the architectural objects placed in it.

Contrary to these totalising visions, land artists developed their own image for the American landscape, to show a new vocabulary of landscape interventions. Rather than wanting to conquer its great scale, they were making a place within the landscape, with comparatively small and precise in situ interventions like Robert Smithson's Spiral Jetty and Michael Heizer's Double Negative. These projects, or actions, in remote places are essentially made known through photographs, rather than through direct encounter with the work of art. Land art is more an image and an idea, than a place or an object.

The image and the imagery of the American landscape also extends into built architecture. A whole generation of architects, including Frank Lloyd Wright, Richard Neutra, Rudolf Schindler, Charles and Ray Eames, and Philip Johnson used the idea of the frontier to create new architecture for new ways of living.

The sequence in this book starts with an image of the derelict "Union Tank Car Dome' built in 1958 by Buckminster Fuller near Baton Rouge, a kind of materialised leftover of utopian thinking (the idea of the human controlled biosphere), shown as a solitary object in the landscape. After the dome, I photographed other sites of experimental projects, for example the ruin of Llano Del Rio at the edge of the Mojave Desert where, in the 1920s, colonists tried to build a commune on the principles of "equal ownership, equal wage, and equal social opportunities'. Ideas of realised and failed experiments recur in the sequence.

A second theme concerns the ambiguity between the natural and the man-made landscape. Several photo-

graphs depict the water infrastructures in California (at the time all of the reservoirs were empty; one looked like Robert Smithson's Asphalt Rundown). Here, for the first time, I began attempting to photograph the tension between the present and the future in such landscapes. In these images it is hard, or even impossible, to discern whether the landscape is in the process of construction or destruction, if it is being built or becoming a ruin.

Similar ambiguity between an architectural object and the landscape whose boundaries are unclear or under tension is something I also tried to work with. In the Superior Court image, the building can be imagined as an endless structure in the landscape, echoing e Continuous Monument. The Hour of Power is an image of the Crystal Cathedral, a televised church building designed by Philip Johnson, which in reality looks like a closed office block from the outside, but from the inside is a transparent void with a congregation space and a TV studio. It is a veritable boîte à miracle as proposed by Corbusier, a piece of architecture which owes its infinite potential to technology, in exchange for the ultimate denial of the landscape in which it exists. I photographed it as a kind of hyper-collage, an architecture of pure techno-devices, contained inside a gridded mirror-glass volume, potentially endless. From the first to the last image, the sequence steadily grows more complex visually and thematically. The images interfere with each other, as if they begin to layer on top of one another, adding and reusing elements from the images before.

Ringroad, the last in the sequence, is an image of a generic office block on a generic site on the edge of Houston. The image contains elements of images made before, it is also a "miracle box' of transparency, mirroring an un-

interrupted horizon. Elements of a banal urban periphery are transformed – non-architecture is shown as architecture, nonlandscape as landscape – they are turned into a potential, a project. The tension between the object and the landscape is made explicit, but also in some way resolved. In the image the architectural object and the landscape come together and unite into one.

The Mirror, The Double

You travel to see new things but, paradoxically, you see them only because in them you recognise something you have known before. The eye travels from image to image. One image may be in the mind's eye, an image seen or made before and stored in your memory (perhaps a reference); the other is there to be seen in front of you. A remembered image leads you to see, or rather to perceive, a new image. Only through memory can a new image be perceived and recognised. The moment when a thought and reality converge is the moment you stop and start looking for the image.

The camera introduces a set of transformations into the process of seeing; most importantly, it frames, decontextualises, abstracts, measures and records. The view camera I was using at the time would also literally mirror the scene in front of me. The reality doubles, it is inverted and projected as an upside down image on a gridded sheet of ground glass. The image travels through an empty box-like space – a small room – before being captured in negative; the camera as a space capturing space.

On the ground glass you see the image for the first time without its context and can understand more clearly

why your eye has stopped on that particular scene; the camera shows you the potential of the image outside its reality. An idea can take shape inside the camera, and it can take several photographs over a long period of time to refine it, to make it recognisable.

Four months after seeing Fuller's dome in the industrial outskirts next to the Mississippi, I stand on an empty parking lot. In front of me is an office building, a highway and some roadside diners. I see that the image hovering – inverted upside down and projected over the grid of the ground glass – is a floating gridded cube cut by a horizon. The two grids perfectly overlap, but the image and the reality have hardly anything in common anymore; the image already has its own reality.

Archive of Images (References)

I work with images at every step; from the first idea to a finished photograph; I look for its references, its predecessors. Over the years, I have made several A5 booklets consisting of series of collected reference images – scenes of landscape and architecture – sometimes famous, sometimes completely unknown, or already long forgotten. These reference images can all be found as digital copies on the internet, to be copied endlessly. The booklets are between 24 and 32 pages long, and the web images are low in resolution and can't be reproduced any larger than 6 Å~ 9 cm. The booklets are handmade; they can be changed quickly and reprinted on standard A4 sheets. These simple booklets direct my view. They can work, for example, as early maquettes for new books I'm making. They can act as sketches of certain themes and they can set possible sequences of photographs where the

references are used as placeholders for the photographs that still have to be taken. These maquettes are also made to test the possible dialogues and formal arrangements of the future photographs or to make it possible to compress compositions and subjects taken from several reference images into a new photograph. The booklets are not intended to be shown; when the work is finished, the booklet is obsolete.

The booklet reprinted here was made in 2016 during the process of conceptualising this book. It is composed of images collected in 2005 and other references that later resonated with the photographs in the sequence. This work showed that for Ringroad multiple readings are possible.

For example there are links with the modernist ideas of the continuous ground and the incorporation of landscape into a building, and links with artworks that explore man's attempt to recreate or contain nature that may look like "environments' set inside boxes.

Because of the resonance with the camera obscura in the history of photography I now realise that the camera and the image of a transparent grid building are both viewing devices.

An Image in a World of Images

The only way I can think of defining a "good image' is as one that connects itself to some earlier images, and others made afterwards. It is an image that becomes part of our world of countless images and depictions, and can find a place there. This is how an image is constructed; not at the moment of its making but through the way it ac-

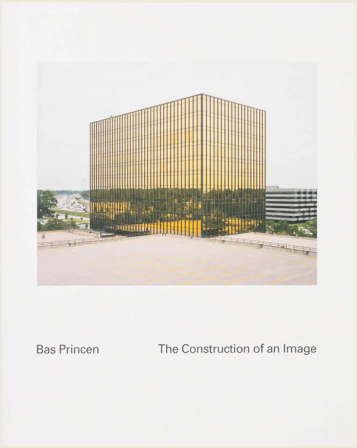
cumulates meaning over time by relating to other images and ideas. In that sense, an image is always a construct. I think that a photographer generally cannot direct the life or use of an image after it has been finished. Ringroad has never been a document of a place, but it became a capsule of thoughts and ideas and other images have started to resonate with it.

When Only the Image is Left

We found the rusting yellow "Union Tank Car Dome' by Buckminster Fuller in the middle of nowhere at the outskirts of Baton Rouge in April 2005. I later found out that the dome was bulldozed by its owner on Thanksgiving Day 2007, a few weeks before its 50th anniversary – an event that would have automatically made it eligible for heritage protection in the US. is gesture of destruction eliminated not only an exceptional architectural object but also its value as a realised experiment. Annihilated as a piece of reality, the experiment now returns again to imagination and to an image. Inspired by the ruins of Mayan temples, Frank Lloyd Wright's Ennis House was severely damaged in the earthquakes of 1989 and 1994, and eroded by time and rainfall. When I saw it in 2005, it was itself a ruin which mirrored its inspiration more closely than desired. In 2007, the house was reconstructed, not only for architectural value but also for its memorable role in film history as a classic Hollywood set piece. The house was eventually returned to its pristine 1924 image; time was not allowed to interfere with the monument. It is unclear if the photographs I made eleven years ago are valuable as fictions or documents or both. It is an interesting reversal that the images I had intended and photographed as ideas, as projects, are now, with time, also becoming relevant as

documents. The golden building is no longer gold. It has been updated and reclad in new silver glass, perhaps more energy efficient. A student told me that he was sure the building had never been gold and it was I who had coloured the glass digitally.

Time in photography preserves a moment, but it also creates a fiction, a myth, a story.



Left - Bas Princen, book cover of The Construction of an Image (Rotterdam: Office Kersten Geers David Van Severen; Bedford Press, 2016).

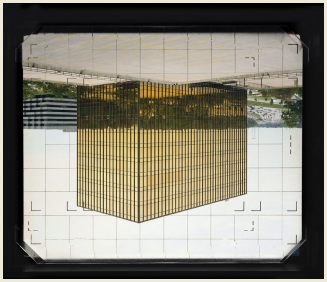
Right - Bas Princen, Train Depot (Hexagon exoskeleton),

Left - Bas Princen, Ennis House, 2005.

Right - Bas Princen, Train Depot (Hexagon exoskeleton), 2005.

Left - Bas Princen, Ringroad Houston, from The Construction of an Image (Rotterdam: Office Kersten Geers David Van Severen; Bedford Press, 2016).

Right - Bas Princen, Inverted and Upside Down Matt-Glass Projection, Ringroad Houston, 2005, from The Construction of an Image (2016).Depot (Hexagon exoskeleton), 2005.



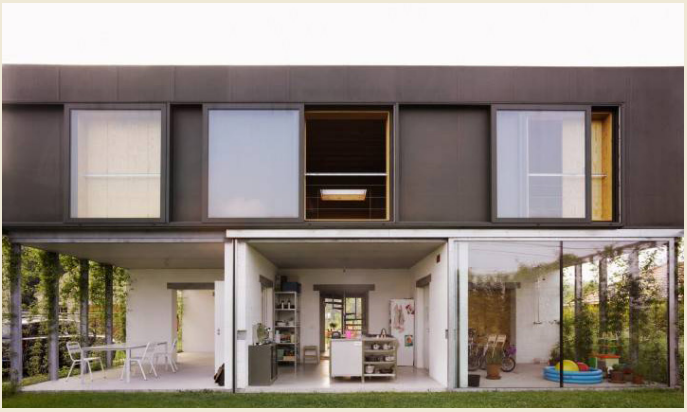
EPILOGUE

MEASURING SYSTEM AND SPACE FOR LIFE

Excerpt from the interview conducted by Go Hasegawa (GH) with Kersten Geers (KG) and David Van Severen (DVS)[37]

GH: Today I was able to visit four of your buildings. I found a kind of simple grid system in each one-the four square rooms of the OFFICE 56 Weekend House in Merchtem (2012), nine square rooms of the OFFICE 39 Villa in Buggenhout (2010), the colonnade of the OFFICE 62 City Villa in Brussels (2012), and the PC panel wall of the OFFICE 90 Agriculture School in Leuven (2014). I found it interesting that several times you have mentioned measuring. Tell me about this measuring system. What do you measure? What's your aim?

OFFICE 56, WEEKEND HOUSE – Merchtem, Office KGDVS, Belgium, 2009-2012, Photograph: Bas Princen.



OFFICE 39, VILLA – Buggenhout, Office KGDVS, Belgium, 2007-2012, Photograph: Bas Princen.

OFFICE 62, CITY VILLA - Brussels, Office KGDVS, Belgium, 2008-2012, Photograph: Bas Princen.

OFFICE 90, AGRICULTURE SCHOOL – Leuven, Office KGDVS, Belgium, 20011-2015, Photograph: Bas Princen.

KG: I would almost dare to say that the most important thing you can do as an architect is introduce a set of references, a ruler, a measuring system. It's almost like a trace of culture. So there is something there, and you don't necessarily want to change that, but you do want to be able to grasp it, to control it to a certain extent. This idea of measuring, like a Cartesian grid, is very important for that.

There's a word painting by Ed Ruscha called "Talk about Space." The tiny pencil in it is painted in full

size, one to one. It allows you to measure the work, the tableau. It also allows you to measure, in some strange way, space. “Talk about Space,” you could say, is also measuring space.

So this idea that you introduce elements to use as reference to something you cannot completely control is in many ways a common thread that runs through all our work. Call it classicism, rationalism, or other things, it always goes back to this attempt to make something part of a system, but at the same time allowing exceptions to that system. And exceptions are, of course, only possible as soon as you have put in enough effort to establish the system. If there is only exception, there is no system. So I think there is a search for equilibrium in our projects-more system than exception. This happens in many different ways and scales, and sometimes very literally.

DVS: Measuring is repetition. A unit needs a second to make it a system. In the four rooms of the Weekend House, the nine (or actually 18 because it has two floors) rooms of Buggenhout, and the City Villa where columns frame the rooms, the common factor is rhythm. Rhythm frames the

OFFICE 62, CITY VILLA - Brussels, Office KGDVS, Belgium, 2008-2012, Photograph: Bas Princen.

rooms. Creating rhythms or a multiplication of things is important, as it begins a background and fore- ground conversation where you see and yet don't see, and it is the architecture that gives you the power to understand that discourse.

GH: I also notice in your buildings a sort of materiality that exists in parallel with their strong forms. Your system controls the space very clearly, but it looks very natural. You achieve an equilibrium between architecture and nature that I can relate to.

KG: I must say that when I saw your buildings in Tokyo- I went to the wooden house (House in Komazawa, 2011) and the steel-roof house (House in Kyodo, 2011) — it was amazing. I saw a lot of parallels. I got the impression that the negotiations behind each decision on the materials-let's say, for the wooden house, how you make the floor, what you close, what you don't close, the shelf, the stair, and so on — I thought that was all very similar to how we make decisions. And the wooden house carried something more than an organizational idea. Through its material, it became a special place. The same can be said of the steel house. Our buildings are bigger, but they are very similar. And there are not so many architects who do things like that.

House in Komazawa, Go Hasegawa and Associates, Tokyo, Japan, 2010-2011, Photograph : Iwan Baan.

House in Kyodo, Go Hasegawa and Associates, Tokyo, Japan, 2010-2011, Photograph : Iwan Baan.

I've visited the Müller House (1928-30) by Adolf Loos, and it's so beautiful. It's also far more radical than I thought it was from the pictures, because he presents things in strange relationships, too. On the one hand the house, on the outside, is white, with these yellow windows, but when you're inside it has this crazy marble and very nice wood. All these elements lure you into a certain way of use. It's not exactly decoration.

I like materials that seem to represent something else. You could say it's similar to Aldo Rossi's concept of memory. Not memory of the city, but simply the idea that pure, abstract architecture does not exist. Whatever you

build, there will be a certain memory of another building, another space in that construction. And that is fascinating.

GH: In the Buggenhout Villa I sensed an architecture that places great value on the joy of life. This belief in life seems to me to be a very strong statement of your architectural discourse.

Müller House, Adolf Loos, Prague, Czech Republic, 1928-1930.

KG: In terms of life, quite frankly I have learned a lot from David. Before we met, I didn't have this direct experience of life as extreme or hedonistic, because I came from another background. David always had this enormous laissez-faire sense about things. There was at least this celebration of life, all the time. His father was extremely hedonistic. David grew up like that. And I think that this, plus our LA experiences and fascinations when we were students, is what made us make things that were never constructions or ideas about architecture. They were really very close to life. I think it came from that place.

Life is full of ambiguities, so let's allow them to happen. It's how it is. You can't change that. From that perspective, it should come rather easily!

ABOUT

BAS PRINCEN is a Dutch artist and photographer whose work explores the complex relations between architecture, landscape, and image. Based in Rotterdam and Zurich, Princen's practice operates between documentation and construction, questioning how architecture is represented and reimagined through photography. He has exhibited widely, most recently in What Mad Pursuit (Teatro dell'Architettura Mendrisio, 2023), a group exhibition with Aglaia Konrad and Armin Linke that examined photography as a spatial and critical practice. His solo exhibitions include Bas Princen. Image and Architecture (Vitra Design Museum Gallery, Weil am Rhein, 2018); Reservoir (deSingel, Antwerp, 2011); Five Cities (Istanbul, 2010); and Artificial Arcadia (Rotterdam, 2004)—each tracing different ways in which the photographic image mediates the built environment. From the very beginning, Princen has worked in close dialogue with OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen, whose monographs and exhibitions rely on his photographic essays to articulate their visual and conceptual identity. His curatorial and editorial work includes the furniture series MANIERA 01 & 02 with OFFICE and Studio Anne Holtrop, and the volume The Lives of Documents: Photography as Project (Walther König / CCA, 2024). Among his books are Artificial Arcadia (2004), Reservoir (2011), and Wiel Arets – Bas Princen (2015), each extending his investigation of how the built environment and its representations shape one another. Princen's work has been recognized with the Charlotte Köhler Prize (2004) and the Silver Lion at the Venice Architecture Biennale (2010, with OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen).

KERSTEN GEERS is an architect, writer, and educator whose work is driven by a quest for radical coherence in architectural thought. He graduated in Architecture and Urbanism at the University of Ghent and at the ETSA Madrid, and together with David Van Severen he is founding partner of the Brussels based architecture firm OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen. From the very beginning, OFFICE has relied on close collaborations with artists and photographers—most notably Bas Princen—whose photo essays have shaped the firm's monographs and exhibitions. OFFICE has been widely published by leading journals such as El Croquis and a+u, and the firm's own oeuvre catalogue follows an ordered sequence of Volumes 1, 2, 3

(and now the upcoming Volumes 4, 5, 6). OFFICE has received numerous honours, including the Belgian Prize for Architecture (2009), the Silver Lion at the 12th Venice Biennale of Architecture (2010), and the Aga Khan Award for Architecture (2021). Geers has taught at distinguished institutions including the Berlage Institute, Columbia GSAPP, Yale School of Architecture, Harvard GSD, and EPFL Lausanne; he currently holds a professorship at the Academy of Architecture in Mendrisio. He was a founding member of the architecture magazine San Rocco, and his pedagogical production has been prolific, including the Architecture Without Content and Everything series of student projects and research, as well as the Difficult Double conference series he conceived. Among his recent publications are the research- and teaching-based volumes Excess of Architecture (2022) and Experiments in Thickness (2023), alongside books documenting built work such as Without Content (2021), each extending his ongoing investigation of representational and curatorial dimensions of architecture.

MATTEO GHIDONI is an architect, teacher, and editor whose work investigates pragmatism, radical realism, and the analysis of urban conditions. He teaches at the MIT Department of Architecture and at the Politecnico di Milano, where his design studios—such as MIT's 4.154 Enclosures—explore the architecture of the perimeter, examining separation, inclusion, and the technical and conceptual dimensions of architectural space. Across both institutions, Ghidoni emphasizes intellectual engagement and critical thinking, encouraging students to develop projects through rigorous technical rationale and to see architectural education as part of a longer trajectory of critical judgment. He is the founder of the Milan-based design studio Salottobuono, whose projects span urban research, public design, and commissioned works, and have been presented at major venues including the Venice Biennale. Ghidoni is also the co-founder and editor-in-chief of the independent international architecture magazine San Rocco. Previously, he served as editor of the "Instructions and Manuals" section of Abitare and as creative director of Domus, contributing to the discourse of contemporary architecture through both editorial and design practices.

SAN ROCCO was an independent architecture magazine published between 2010 and 2019, conceived as a finite, thematic project investigating architecture as a critical and shared corpus of knowledge. Its editorial stance was deliberately provoca-

tive: “it does not solve problems. It is not a useful magazine. It is neither serious nor friendly.” The magazine appeared as the initiative of Matteo Ghidoni (editor-in-chief), Matteo Costanzo, Kersten Geers, Francesca Pellicciari, Giovanni Piovene, Giovanna Silva, Pier Paolo Tamburelli, Andrea Zanderigo, Ludovico Centis, Michele Marchetti, Stefano Graziani, and Paolo Carpi, and was designed by pupilla grafik. Parallel to the periodical, the Book of Copies assembled a multi volume archive of images intended for reuse in architecture, reflecting the magazine’s commitment to pedagogy, experimentation, and critical inquiry. San Rocco published essays, drawings, postcards, and other contributions that challenged conventions, emphasizing intellectual rigor and experimentation over trend or style.

ȘTEFAN SIMION is an Associate Professor of Architecture at UAUIM Bucharest, where he leads the Mazzocchioo studio. He has also taught at EPFL Lausanne, École Internationale de Rabat, Pratt Institute in New York, and Politecnico di Milano. Simion is the author of the award-winning book Ambiguity of the Masterpiece: Livio Vacchini in 11 Dialogues, published in Arhitext Design as part of his postdoctoral research at EPFL Lausanne. Alongside Irina Meliță, he co-founded and serves as chief editor of Mazzocchioo magazine. Together, they also co-founded the architecture office Poster, which curated the Romanian Pavilion at the 17th Venice Biennale, titled Fading Borders, a project exploring the relationship between migration and urban environments. Poster has received several prestigious architecture awards, including the Prize and a Mention at the Timișoara International Biennale of Architecture BETA 2020.

IRINA MELIȚĂ studied architecture at the “Ion Mincu” University of Architecture and Urbanism in Bucharest (1998–2004), followed by a Master’s degree in Integrated Urban Planning at the same institution. She taught first-year architecture studios at UAUIM for four years and, during her studies, participated in a one-year Erasmus scholarship in Toulouse as well as internships and collaborations in Geneva, Paris, and Lausanne. In 2014, she taught at the École Polytechnique Fédérale de Lausanne. Since 2004, Irina Meliță has worked in several architectural partnerships, and in 2007 she co-founded the architecture office Poster with Ștefan Simion, where they have undertaken projects ranging from urban research to exhibition curation, including the Romanian Pavilion at the 17th Venice Biennale. www.theposter.ro

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12 John Baldessari.

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IMAGES INDEX

p. 18 Projects by Office KGDVS, https://officekgdvs.com/

p. 19 Ibid.

p. 20 Photographs by Bas Princen.

p. 21 Covers of San Rocco magazines, https://www.sanrocco.info/magazine

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