VICEVERSA

Critiques of architectures

edited by Davide Tommaso Ferrando

VICƎVƎRSA

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Critiques of architectures

Quarterly architecture magazine, published in PDF format and on ISSU; each issue is curated by a member of the editorial staff or by a guest editor. The current issue, dealing with architecture criticism, is curated by Davide Tommaso Ferrando.

Editorial

Valerio Paolo Mosco

"Critique is no more!". This is one of the few beliefs upon which everyone agrees. On the contrary, woe to those that insist on understanding more than you actually need about God knows what. Thus, if the world has become incapable of reflecting because globalization and digitalization wanted it to be so, then woe to those who linger upon, clarify, woe to the cowards who don't intend to ride the interactive speed of our times. Be therefore post-human, uncritical and determined, accumulative and expansive, otherwise you will witness your own disappearance. Given this, as if to pay homage to a world that both the apocalyptic and the integrated consider in a state of irreversible decline, this issue of Viceversa edited by Davide Tommaso Ferrando is devoted to architectural critique. Davide has summoned a number of friends who troubled themselves with writing about buildings, thus pretending critique still exists. The outcome is something we already partly knew, i.e. that critique, having deceased, by now does no longer exist in itself, that perhaps there are various forms of critique, more and more intertwined in a chiasm that is proving difficult to dismember. One sees in fact a mix of purovisibilist critique, critique of ideology like Tafuri's or Barthes's, militant or semi-militant critique, critiques that are often too profound and as such evaporate into thin air, like essential oils, o critiques that are so assertive and insolent to reach tautology after passing for cheap slogans. Still, we ought to remember, critique is dead, and given its condition at this point we must ask ourselves what death physiologically is. Is to be dead not to speak by slogans? Is it to keep on filling our lives with questions about what surrounds us? Is it to think that an architecture, like a human being, is an enigma to which, as if it were a constraint, we have to provide an answer and afterwards be responsible for it? The feeling one has today about it is thus the same Angelo Belardinelli has, that is to say that critique is certainly in a state of crisis as an easily identifiable system, but that it is still the nervous system of things, without which things themselves relinquish their vitality, become unstressed and aphasic, contributing thus to that entropy of the world which is our duty to oppose. In buildings there still exists a hidden structure, coexisting with the one which resists, and it lies on this invisible, very subtle structure which is like a nervous system, and it is critique. Without it, buildings are doomed to collapse miserably.

Critiques of architectures

Davide Tommaso Ferrando

The actual dynamics of the editorial market, characterized by the transfer of certain discursive functions from the printed to the digital sphere, are causing a deep transformation of architectural discourse, having opened, indeed, the way to new paths of experimentation, that several independent editors are now developing on web and social platforms, but also having brought to marginalization practices that, until few years ago, seemed inseparable from our system of production and transmission of knowledge.

One of the most sacrificed of these practices is, with little doubt, the critical review of the work of architecture, which today seems to have lost its fomer role of verification of the real and steer wheel of future researches, having been progressively exchanged for narratives that are mostly functional to the logics of entertainment. The literal and acritic transcription of the studios' press releases, become routinary not only in the majority of online platforms, but even in some well known printed magazines (see the curious case of Domus), is one of the most evident symptoms of a crisis that is structural to the whole editorial system, the subsistence of which seems now to depend more on the speed of contents transmission, than on their elaboration.

First consequence of such condition, the diffuse withdrawal from critical writing is playing a negative influence on architectural design itself, which, due to the scarcity of narratives capable of making explicit the volume of intelligence contained in the best works, and under the continuous pressure of digital images, is being literally flattened down to the surface. At the same time, it is becoming more and more difficult to establish value gerarchies that allow to define what architectures, being capable of representing their time in a paradigmatic way, should be considered as references for the near future.

It is therefore in reaction to these problematics, that the present issue of Viceversa is dedicated to the "critiques of architectures", using both terms in plural in order to stress the prolific diversity of the points of view that are expressed in it, as well as the necessity to return to the investigation of the single works. Each contributor has been invited to choose one project (or a group of projects) built or unbuilt, belonging to the first fifteen years of the XXI century, and thought to be highly representative of its historical period, as well as an important reference for the dynamics that will characterize the architecture of the near future. For each work, an in-depth analysis has been requested, in order to bring to the fore both its specific characteristics, and the relations it establishes with its (social, cultural, economic...) context.

Then, fortunately, the invited authors did what they wanted.

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Naked poetry

Valerio Paolo Mosco

Any valuable work of art stands in contrast to its own times. This is the distinction between artworks that can be called poetic and works that can't. The latter try their best to ride the tiger of the current moment, and in so doing they even try to run ahead of it, getting inevitably devoured. Architecture, the really modern one, as such devoid of modernist propaganda, non only struggles against its own times but, like T.S. Eliot's poetry, maintains it intends to pacify it. This is what I feel looking at the magisterial villa Valerio Olgiati has built for himself in the Portuguese countryside. A fence, a garden, a construction of rooms ringed in by an eccentric corridor: primary gestures trying to belong to a timeless architecture, one that is evocative yet already well known to that mysterious precognitive being inhabiting each and all of us. In taking the distance from its own times, this work points to a possible future. The contemporary system of architecture is already and definitively bipolar: on the one hand the thoughtless and elbowing supporters of a decomposed, coreless form, constantly after the new for its own sake, invasive and performance-driven. On the other those who know that what has been will always be, because such is the human condition. A weak state, in which we feel as if we were thrown into the world (Heidegger) and looking for a shelter, a sanctuary. Olgiati's bare structure conveys the idea of such sanctuary, which is valid today, in an ancestral time and in the future. It is an exposed *buen retiro*, conceived to preserve the intimacy of its inhabitants and at the same time what one could define, quoting Simone Weil, their social solitude. The new in what is already known, an alchemic operation that transmutes substances yet lets them remain themselves. Let

us take for example the villa's plan. It is clear that the key connotative element is the corridor that unfolds among the rooms like a corridor of lost steps: without it, without its "waste", the effect would be quite different. The same holds true for the splay towards the sky Olgiati imposes to the walls of the enclosure. A choice that might as well look like a whim, while instead it allows us to realize, in the unveiled section of the roof, that we are before a modern construction, where reinforced concrete is brought to the limit of its plastic capacity. As Novalis wrote about two hundred years ago: «in giving to the ordinary a higher meaning, to the finite the appearance of the an infinite, I make them romantic». If we replace the adjective romantic with modern, as after all Baudelaire suggested, one then sees appear the meaning and the newness of Olgiati's work.

Counterform in architecture and inner space

Antonello Marotta

The philosopher Georges Didi-Huberman in his book *La somiglianza per contatto. Archeologia, anacronismo e modernità dell'impronta [La Ressemblance par contact, Minuit, 2008]* allows us to bring into focus the reflection upon traces, in the relationship between archaeology and the project. Traces and imprints are the expression of a peculiar and specific identity. With his analysis, the philosopher tells us of an archaeology that speaks in the plural form and, investigating the XXth century, shows heterogeneous levels and layers. He is illuminating when he declares that: «It was thus that Walter Benjamin formulated, through the expression 'dialectic image,' an exemplary hypothesis on the anachronism of those works of art that still haven't attained history's 'readability:' in them, according to Benjamin, "the relation between the Already-been and the Now is not a course but a discontinuous image, a leaping one" — an image in which the past and the present mislead and transform each other, criticize one another, giving birth to something that Benjamin called a "constellation," a dialectic configuration of heterogeneous times» (Didi-Huberman 2009, pp. 10-11). The philosopher shows us how the historical interpretation (let us think of his work on Beato Angelico) needs to be constantly questioned in the light of a transformation not so much of the past, as of our perception of the present.

What is contact? Why is it the subject of this reflection?

Because in the relation between present and past, between the action of the contemporary project and archaeological remains, from classical findings to the industrial ones, contact implies a critical point, where a link that unifies times and alters them materializes. Archae-

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ology is a reflection on the body, material and auratic, the expression of a "defined" time and space, and in parallel it addresses the definition of an immaterial, of a cultural space which, exactly because it has passed through time, requires a reflection on what we are in this precise moment. Didi-Huberman offers us some interpretations that touch upon archaeology as much as upon new procedures of the contemporary project: the idea that architecture is the result of a subtraction and that, more than about form, we should speak of *counter-form*, cast, trace, imprint.

The philosopher explains that the imprint defines a complex portion which incorporates the principles of Tyche and Téchne (chance and technique). «*Form*, in the process of imprinting, is never rigorously "fore-seeable": it is always problematic, unexpected, unstable, open» (Didi-Huberman 2009, p. 31). Form «is a *model*, a *cast*, a *matrix*» (Didi-Huberman 2009, p. 50).

It is an interpretation that touches closely the past, from the gold masks of Mycenae's Tomb IV (XVI C B.C.) to Canova's neoclassical plaster models in Possagno and Rodin's casts. I rediscover possibilities of research in many contemporary interventions in archaeological areas, where architecture is decreed from the counterform of a cast which, protecting memory, renames it. Thus the philosopher: «The imprint *redoubles*. On the one hand, it creates a lining, a kind of protecting casket, a cladding in which the forms seems, for a moment, to be protected by its counterform. Let us think of the face still wrapped in its matrix-like shell, in the moment it takes the plaster or takes the likeness. However it is a double-click "catch," imposing a new meaning to the act of "catching" when it ends up *tearing off the likeness* to the body it has seized. The imprint, thus, is a predator: it preserves what we lose, it isolates us and even tears us off from our likeness» (Didi-Huberman 2009, pp. 224-225).

To employ the themes of the imprint, of the trace, of the cast let us re-read some current research, particularly Francisco Mangado's intervention on the *Museo Arqueológico de Álava* in Vitoria. The architect offers us one of the most interesting works on the relationship between museum, archaeology, restoration and insert on historical tis-

© Roland Halbe

sues. A L-shaped body is wedged into the medieval heart of the city to become tied up to a previous structure: Bendaña palace, built in the XVIth century, and housing Naipes Fournier's museum. The new intervention appears as a closed and compact block. The outside, treated with prefabricated bronze sheets, makes the building an impenetrable display case, opened by some emptying of the mass, like cubes subtracted in order to give way to light. On the contrary, the inner side, prospecting onto an irregular court, is endowed with a structure
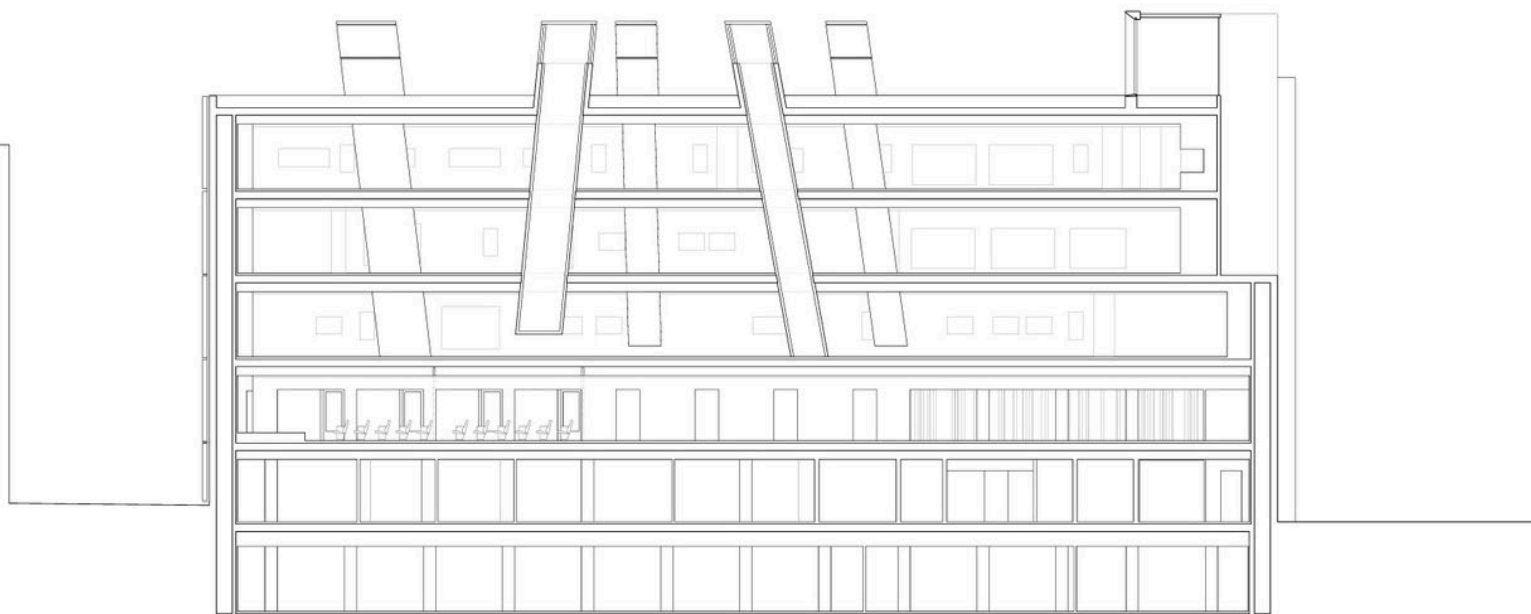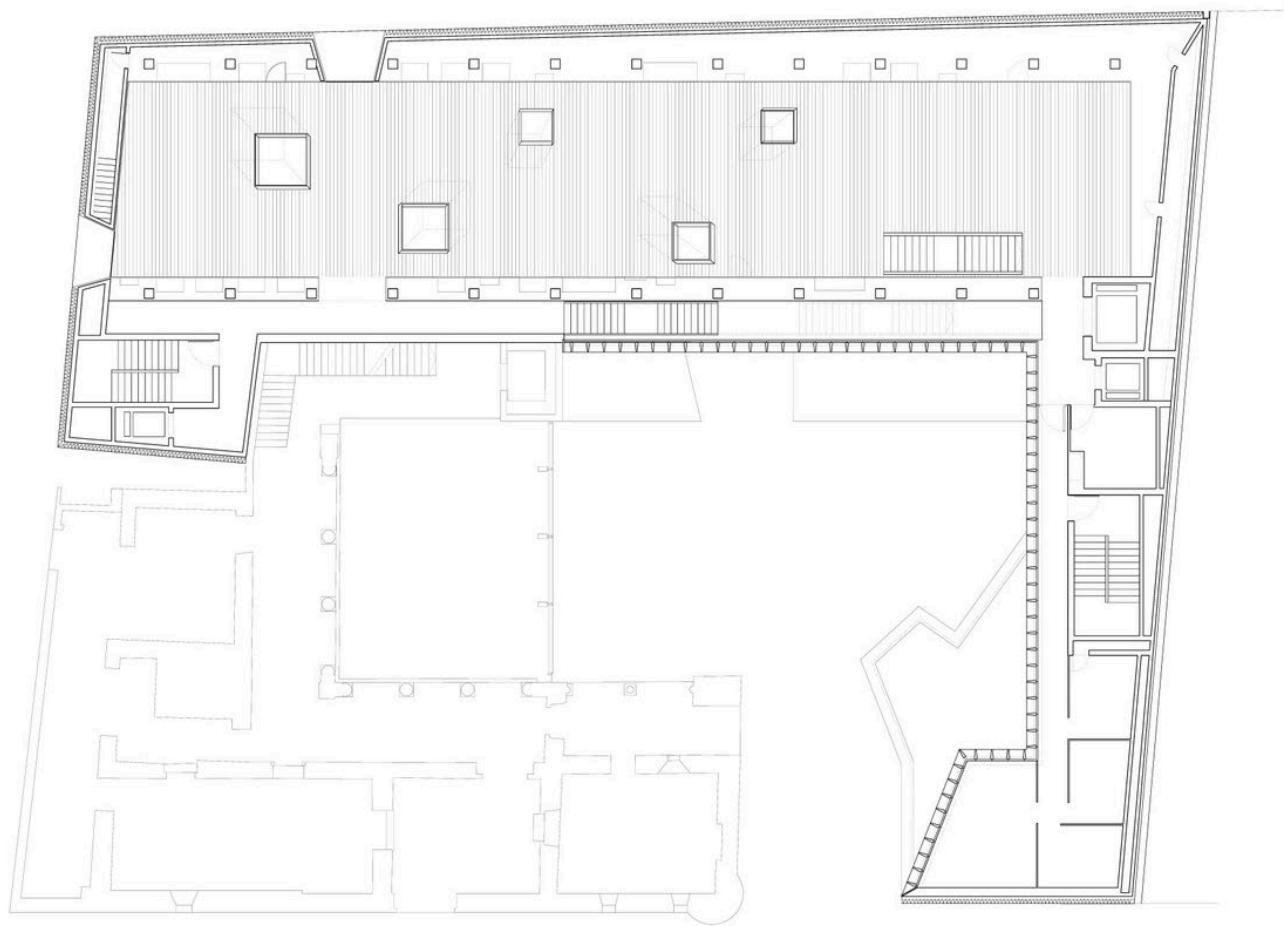
of metal foils which orientates the entrance of light, giving the elevations the strength of uniformity. Access to the museum is through the dynamic court. The building is resolved through an act of shaping of the void, of accordance between existing walls, of definition of a new identity within the historical site. Suddenly the whole perspective of the intervention opens up. While the outside is essentially hidden, in order to strengthen a urban and historical instance of medieval stronghold, the inside appears more open, as if to welcome the visitor. The court is resolved with a wooden level and skylights bringing light to the level below. History is reread by the designer as dynamic, ongoing, and it clarifies the present need to redefine the limits of the discipline's practice. In the exhibiting spaces, Mangado materializes the main choice of the museum, that is narrating archaeological history through a plan of shadow. Dug to be taken back to light, such history needs a mysterious and authentic immersion. Prisms of light cut and pierce, like tilted blades, the body's impenetrability. Such skylights, that take the light from the roofing, introduce it into the exhibiting spaces on the different levels. They create an interesting field of forces, dictated by the different size and inclination of the glazed prisms. The resolve is shifting the perception from the findings to the viewer's dynamic eye, onto the philosophy Duchamp introduced in the Twentieth century, to make the experience of the past transmissible through a reinterpretation of time. The ambient is warmed up by the dark wood walls, excavated to contain the display cases. Mangado's project should be counted among the most interesting works of the last generation, for its capacity to materialize the metaphor, to make the wall a mass which questions both archaeological history and the form of the city itself. The mould, the cast, the archaeology of contact manifest themselves here as a process of memory.

Such identity becomes a sort of manifesto in the recent *Museo de Bellas Artes de Asturias*, in Oviedo, Spain, completed in 2015.

The museum is made like a casket, which encloses two important buildings of the city: the Palacio de Velarte and the Casa Oviedo-Portal. The choice in terms of design was to keep alive the historical and urban identity of the traditional buildings and build alongside a con-

temporary space, working between the older volumes. There derives a strong tensions between the matters, the consolidated forms and the new glass membrane which, separating itself, creates a distance with the past as well as a dynamic spatiality.

Mangado works with the aim of connecting the city's histories and unifying the pre-existing buildings through a composition of complex volumes, built in the internal court. Working between the parts allow him to produce complex rooms, conceived in elevation, with large cuts bringing light into the different exhibiting spaces. These are completed with tilted skylights that create a new urban skyline. More than of form, as we said, we should be talking of counterform, a hollow, produced by a cast. The architect understands that in order to create a dialogue among the different moments in time the solutions must be complex in the spatial relations, as if to make one touch the perceptive diagonals with the senses, whereas the material choices are extremely clear and simple, such as to make the different archaeologies blend. Like a protective deity, there returns Louis Kahn's work, the *Yale Center for British Art* in New Haven (Connecticut, 1969-1974), where the American architect had invented the large sections of light. Mangado recovers such tradition and reinterprets it, offering with the *Museo de Bellas Artes de Asturias* one of the most interesting works in the interaction between historical buildings and contemporary places.

In order to understand more layers, we then call upon the world of art and music. The subject addresses the relationship between form and identity, between construction and interiority.

There re-emerges a literature of dissonance, based on contrast and counterpoints, that is experienced at the heart of modernity. An exchange of letters between Wassily Kansinsky and Arnold Schönberg in the years 1911-14 sanctions a friendship and a correspondence between two artists that were setting the foundations of the research for the total work of art. A complex phase of the century that has just ended, in which the romantic instances, absolute and total, clashed against the need to change, at an historical moment in which the imminent war spurred artists to raise questions about time, destiny, sin-

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gularity, solitude, while the whole world was asking them to reverse their searching tools. The correspondence (the two write to each other almost daily) allows us to shed light onto the understanding of those processes. Kandinsky came from an aristocratic family, Schönberg from a relatively poor one. Such difference can be detected in their attitude and approach, which are substantially different: Kandinsky is straightforward, he leads the conversation, whereas Arnold chooses an indirect, not explicit, careful and gentler form of communication.

Both aware of their historical weight, they live totally their dimension. On the 18th of January 1911, Kandinsky writes the first letter to Schönberg. The dignified tone and the respect for his counterpart are deduced from the following words: «In Your works you have actualized what I, in a form which is obviously undetermined, I wished I would find in music. The autonomous path along the direction of one's own destiny, the intrinsic life of each single voice in your compositions, are exactly what I try to express in a pictorial way. In this moment there is in painting a strong tendency to look for the "new harmony" in a constructive way, therefore the rhythmic element is mounted in an almost geometric way. Due both to my sensibility and my commitment, I only partly agree with such way. *Construction* is what painting, in the last few years, has lacked. It is right to look for it. Yet my *way* of conceiving such construction is different. I think in fact that harmony in our time should not be searched for in a "geometric" way, but rather through a rigorously anti-geometrical, anti-logical way. Such way is the one of the "dissonances in *art*", that is also in painting, as much as in music. And *today*'s pictorial as well as musical dissonance is nothing but tomorrow's consonance» (Schönberg, Kandinsky 2012, pp. 17-18). On the 24th of January, Schönberg's reply clarifies and reintroduces, through a concept that is as clear as innovative, the points raised by the Russian artist: «Every creative activity wishing to reach the traditional effects is not entirely devoid of conscious acts. Yet art belongs to the *subconscious*! One must express *oneself*! Express oneself with *immediacy*! However, one shouldn't express one's taste, one's education, one's intelligence, knowledge or ability. None of those qualities that are *assimilated*, but rather the *innate*, *instinctive* ones. Every creation, each *conscious* creation is based on a mathematical and geometrical principle, on the golden section or something similar. Only unconscious creation, which translates into the equation. "form=manifestation", creates true forms; only this form of creation produces those models imitated by people lacking originality, who transform them into "formulae"» (Schönberg, Kandinsky 2012, p. 19). Schönberg and Kandinsky speak to us of a private world, which links abstraction to spirituality, through a inner, underlying, personal

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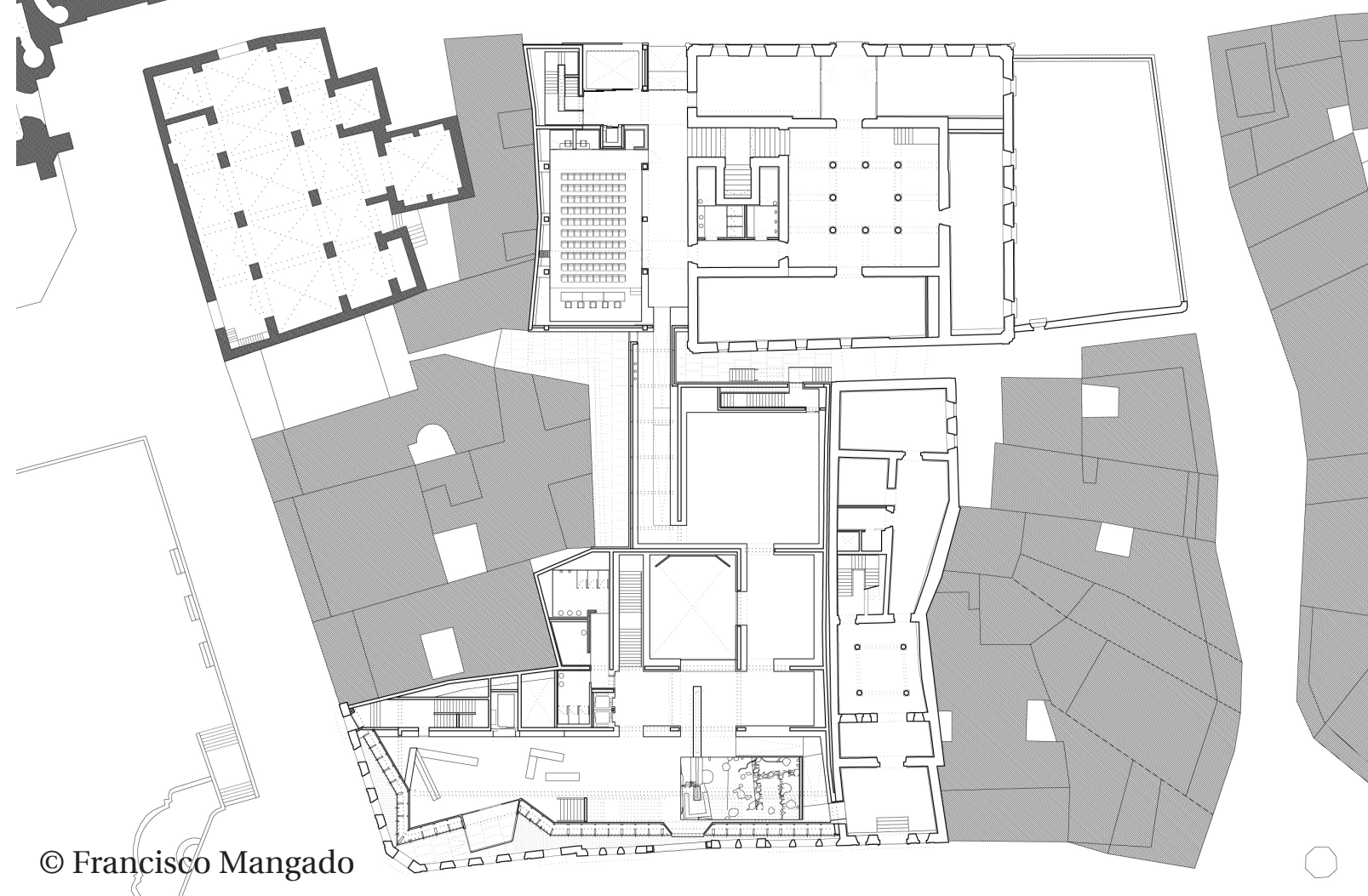
world. Themes that find an extraordinary allegiance in the relationship of the contemporary project with archaeology.

In Mangado's works, such inner identity is present, both in the *Museo Arqueológico de Álava* and in the *Museo de Bellas Artes de Asturias*, for his ability in shaping the interior space, in intervening inside architecture, like that process of unveiling the form which in art belongs to expressionism, to Boccioni's sculpture, while the image on the outside reveals itself for its capacity to respect urban history, including the developments which nourished it.

In an important book by the photographer Alexander Liberman, titled *The artist in his studio*, we find a photograph of Kandinsky's studio in Paris, taken by the author in 1954. He portrays a wall with a cabinet the artist called "my keyboard", with the paintings of the expressionism season, made in 1911. In the thin cabinet Wassily had arranged in a meticulous order the sequence of colours, from cold to warm. It was a way to affirm that form is a process that starts from order to meet an unexpected dimension, that is the unconscious one.

Thus Liberman relates the visit to his studio: «In his memoirs, the artist describes the actual moment of the accidental discovery of non-figurative art, or abstract, when he was forty-four. One afternoon in 1910, at sunset, he was coming back home from an open air session, still concentrated upon the work he had done; entering his studio he was struck by an "incredibly beautiful painting, completely irradiated by some inner light". In the mysterious canvas he could only make out "forms and colours, and no meaning". He suddenly realized that it was one of his paintings, lying down on one side. "The next day, in broad daylight, I tried to recapture the impression. I could only do it half way. Even with the painting set on one side, I was able to find the object all the same, but the bluish light of dusk wasn't there anymore. In that precise moment I realized that objects were harmful to my painting". He wrote he felt "a terrifying abyss opening under my feet". The thinking man of that epoch was divided between the unfathomable depths of his inner world, as Freud had demonstrated, and Einstein's infinite universe which surrounded him, as if his skin were the dividing line between two universes moving away from one another, in immeasurable depths» (Liberman, 1955, p. 179).

Perhaps this is actually the research of the borderline between the sedimentary, archaeological, structured city and its inner soul, the one that in redefinition acquires a new contemporary memory. Francisco Mangado, as in the picture of Kandinsky's studio, tells us of the disciplinary need to define new places that are internal to the historical city, interstitial spaces in which the present converses with immeasurable time.

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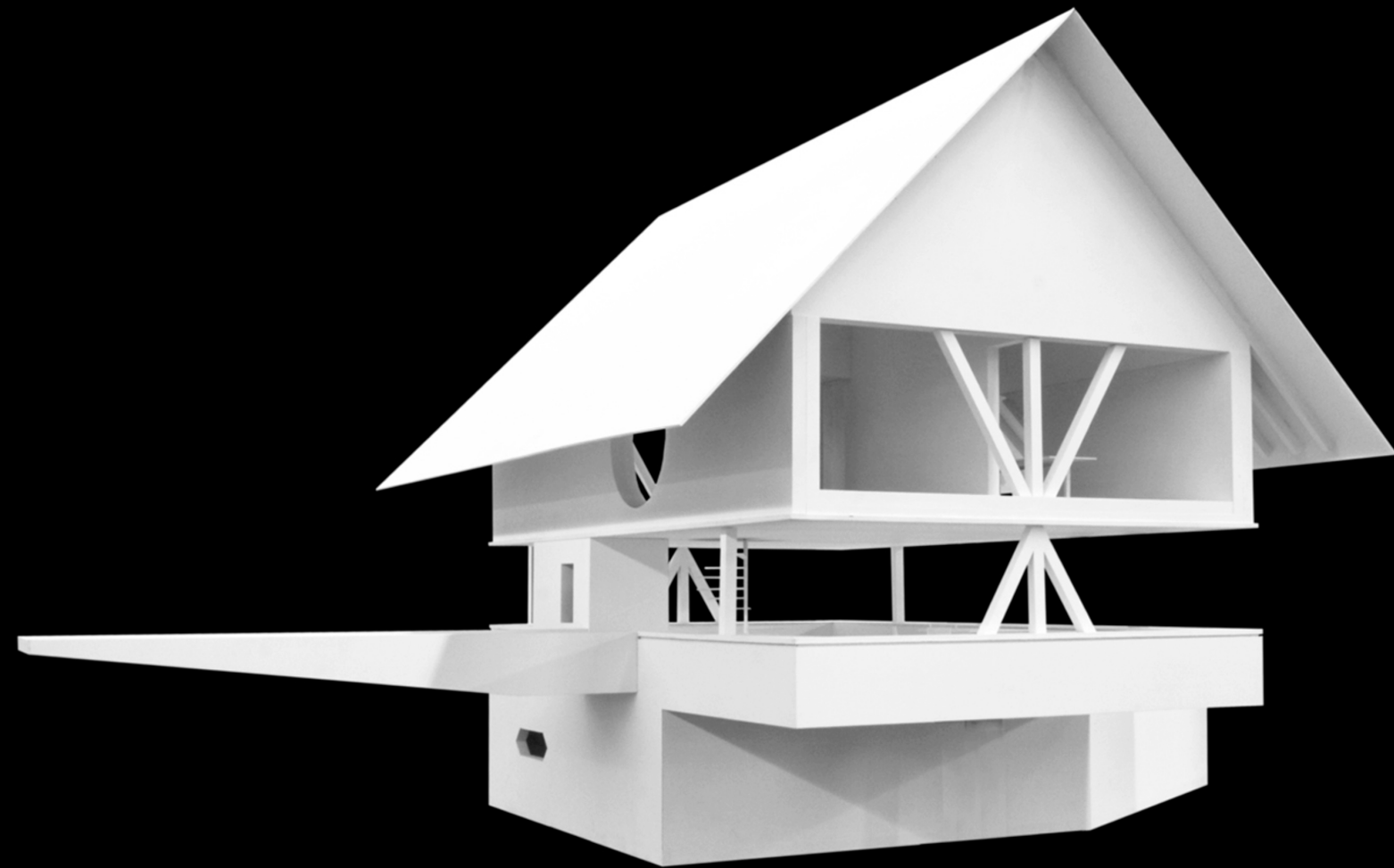Arnold Schönberg, Wassily Kandinsky, *Musica e pittura*, Abscondita, Milan 2012.

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A haunting house

Daniel Tudor Munteanu

In the Greek movie *Kynodontas*[1], the children of a middle-class family imagine the world beyond their quiet rural estate solely on the basis of their parents' accounts, regardless of how laconic or misleading those may be. Airplanes, for example, are believed to be small toys that might fall into their garden.

I shall, in a similar manner, take the risk to write about a house that I have never visited, and that I only know from its depictions in the various architectural media.

The said house[2] is located in a narrow valley in the Jura Mountains, near the Swiss-French border. Scattered around the valley are farmhouses and the so-called *Stöckli*, multifunctional agricultural buildings that are traditionally part of the farms in Switzerland and Germany. The *Stöcklis* also become the homes of retired farmers, once they have turned their farms over to their heirs. The ground and upper floors are residential areas, while the attics and the cellars were traditionally used as storage spaces for grain and other farm produce. Such a wooden *Stöckli*, damaged by rot, needed to be demolished and rebuilt; needless to mention that the very strict local building legislation requires any new house to match the footprint and pitched roof silhouette of the previous one. The owner entrusted the job to Pascal Flammer, a young architect with no previous built projects of his own. Flammer had been working for years in Valerio Olgiati's office in Flims, and he was known as his master's assistant and protégé. Just like his father before him, Olgiati had already attained cult status in Switzerland. His legacy to his devotees is a trademark trait of obses-

sive precision and formal mastery, spiced with just the right amount of narcissism and arrogance. It is therefore safe to assume that the farmer knew that he wasn't going to be presented with a traditional cuckoo-clock chalet.

The new house establishes a subversive connection to its archetype. A black stained wooden box is set along the meadow, covered with the simplest side-gabled roof. The generous glazed surface does not attempt to conceal the interior — an overall cladding of oiled, white-pigmented spruce. It is the scale and the proportion of the elements that are alienating: the eaves protrude far too much from the facade, shading strange round windows inflated to absurd dimensions; the sequence of windows, floors and opaque tympanum mock the familiar with their inappropriate proportions and composition.

As a young architect confronted with his first direct commission, Flammer felt the pressure of having to prove himself. The first such works are usually overdesigned wannabe masterpieces, dictatorial and profusely textual self-portraits masking the architect's inherent uncertainty. Such was indeed the case with Olgiati's first house: his "Haus Kucher" in Rottenburg am Neckar (1991) is «at conflict with the overabundance of referential tropes, the facade at the base literally bulging like if filled to capacity»[3]. Flammer managed to dissolve his rhetorics in a surprisingly coherent whole, but he did not escape the overbearing attitude of a tyrant.

The head of the family depicted in *Kynodontas* is in total control of the domestic social experiment he conducts. He feeds his unsuspicious children, on a daily basis, tape-recorded vocabulary lessons, in which every notion related to the outside world is linked to a domestic object. The children are therefore taught that "excursion" refers to a flooring material, that a "sea" is a sort of armchair etc.

The same autocratic conduct governs Flammer's Stöckli. Beneath the warm, cozy appearance lies a tyrannical force that assigns every activity to its particular spot and carefully framed view. The place is endowed with an absolute and inescapable logic (Flammer's logic), that makes it, at the same time, both a prison and a sanctuary. However, voluntary prisoners of architecture exist only in the architect's imagination. Regular people dislike being coerced to live in a pinball machine operated by an almighty, albeit extremely talented power. Therefore, the house failed to accommodate its owners; Flammer, who later publicly admitted that he had designed it as if for himself, rented the house and has lived in it ever since.

The house is to be approached from a carefully designated point and at a precisely calculated angle, via a grooved ramp that descends to the entrance. The ground floor exists no more, as the main floor is sunken into the ground at table-top height. There is a single vast space, and the low ceiling and all-surrounding glass with hidden frames magnifies the vastness of it, giving it the appearance of a covered piazza. The perimetral windows rise one and a half meters above the turf outside, too low to be entered through without effort, but too high to protect the privacy of the indoor space. Flammer calls that an "animalistic" space, referring to the delicate balance of comfort and exposure that an animal has while crouching in a hollow at the base of a large tree. All signs of domesticity — books, toys, dishes — are hidden in an all-encompassing perimetral storage unit. When something is left exposed, it becomes a protagonist in an impromptu exhibition. The counter has become a pedestal. Sometimes such apparently casually exposed objects are study models of the house itself. It is not the purpose of this text to dig deeper into the psychoanalytical meaning of that.

A filigree staircase with wooden threads connects all levels of the house. Experiencing the narrow spiral stair with steep risers reminds one more of an elevator ride, because each level is entirely different, like a stacking of contrasting and sometimes contradicting atmospheres.
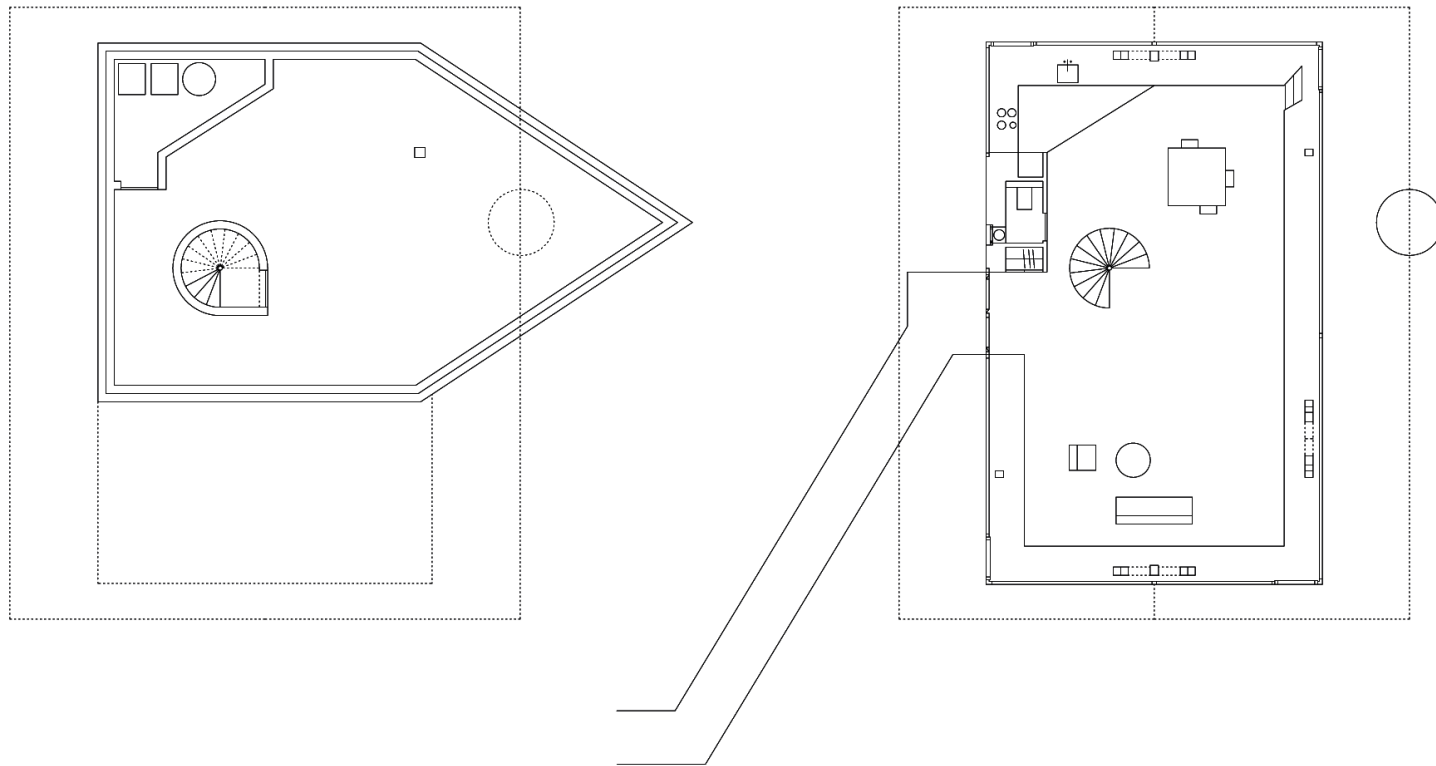
© Pascal Flammer

The first floor is reminiscent of the *piano nobile* of a villa, with generous windows facing the long valley, allowing deep, spectacular views of the "domain". High sloping ceilings, going up to six meters at the ridge, enforce the impression of luxury and dominance. This upper space is a "mansard" of sorts; one somehow only perceives the roof and the floor. From the level surface up to the sloping cornices, the space is legible as a whole, despite being fragmented in four almost similar-sized rooms. One can always see the thickness of the partitions, and therefore understand the vertical planes as screens or room dividers, rather than structural walls. Such dividing screens are cut along the outer perimeter, in order to allow for a circular path among the rooms. Vitruvian-Man scaled round windows are placed at the intersection of the transversal walls with the side elevations. Consequently, one can see from each room the roof's oversized eaves and exposed rafters — an all — protective canopy that conveys the feeling of being under a precious baldaquin.
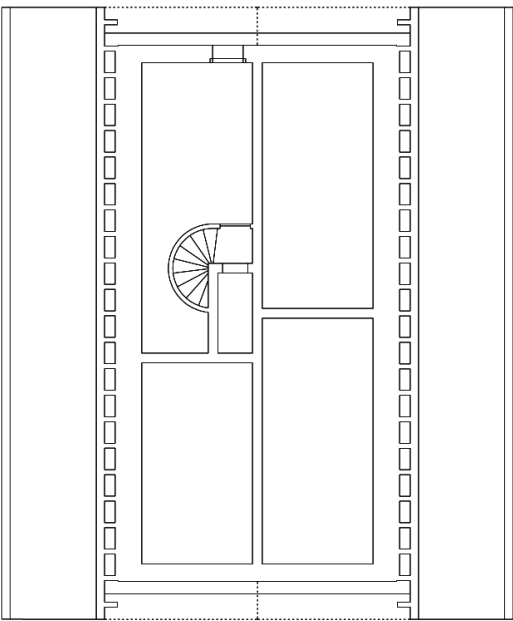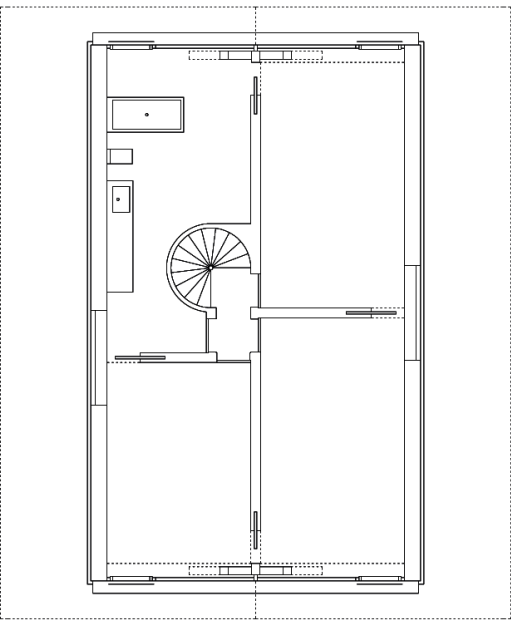
The children in *Kynodontas* are never allowed to experience the world beyond the tall fence of their property. Their house and garden are their microcosm. However, the barrier is not complete: one can still glance outside above the driveway gate, but one never feels the urge to do so. The simple presence of such a breach merely underlines the limit and paralyses any intention to escape.

"The House in Balsthal" is in itself such a microcosm, secluded from the rest of the world by the utterly boring and anaesthetizing countryside. It is a self-contained architectural feast, where, in Flammer's words, «one has to be able to stay at least seven days in the house without going out and should not be bored»[4].

Translating almost literally the Bachelardian understanding of a "house" as a vertical being created by the polarity of cellar and attic, Flammer added two more floors with no specific functions — mere drugs to treat the anticipated cabin fever. Here, the architect leaves the

realm of the prosaic and reaches for the sublime. Curiously enough, depictions of those spaces have never been shown outside of Flammer's lectures.

An attic space is placed above the bathroom, directly under the slant of the roof. It is a space of maximum rationality, an almost un-designed space resulting from the immediate intersection of the horizontal, vertical and oblique planes. That solitary escape, almost like a tree house, is a Calvinistic space of reason and clarity of mind. Not surprisingly, it is the only space that can be described as "a room with a window" (i.e. a hole in the wall, instead of a discontinuity of the wall), even if that window is placed at crotch height.

The second — and possibly the most important — space in the house is the basement. The stairs descend from the lower level into a cylindrical concrete pit. From there, one enters a space of complete irrationality, totally disconnected from the outside world, except for a small, very deep skylight. It is a dark space with angled walls and a misplaced column, impossible to understand at first, because it does not fit under the footprint of the house above. It looks as though a god of the underworld had twisted the basement at 90 degrees, a stop frame in an insane pirouette. It is a folly, at the same time a vault and a crypt, a cavern for daydreaming. Based on a close reading of the available photographs, one can conclude that the "cave" was not built according to the plans. The chimera has proven to be only a mirage; the unfathomable space was arguably too much for the Swiss farmer that had to pay for it.

Kynodontas reaches its climax when the eldest child decides to leave her family's perverted Eden. She hides in the trunk of her father's car, with vain hopes of not actually entering her coffin. The next day, the father drives out of the premises and into the real world. The movie ends with a close-up of the car trunk; there is uncertainty as to whether the girl has escaped, is going to escape, or is already dead in the trunk.

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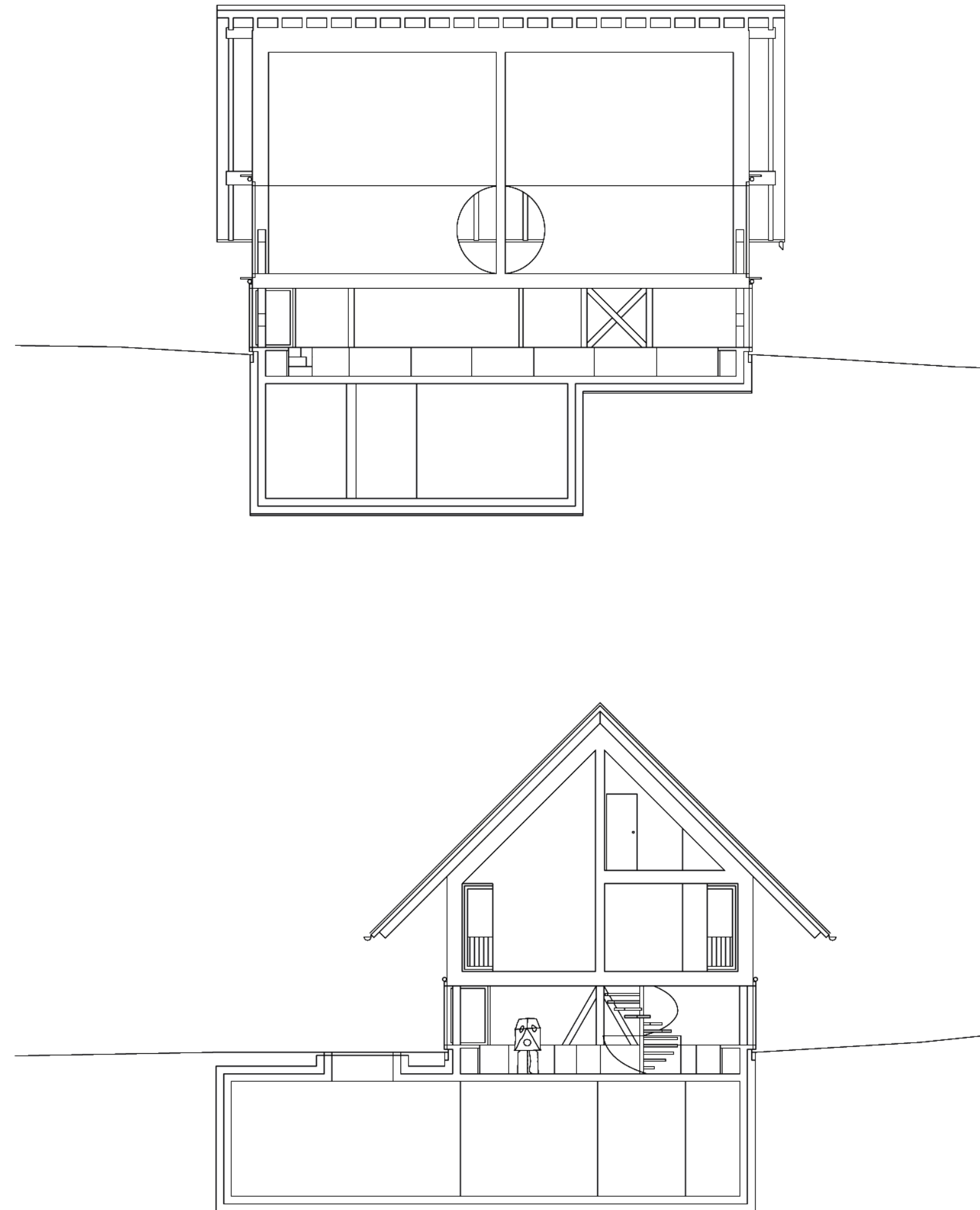
My relation with the "House in Balsthal" shares the same amount of ambiguity. While it's difficult not to appreciate its structural brilliance and formal virtuosity, I'm at the same time aware that that is not the path to follow. Although I could re-draw its plans literally with my eyes closed, I'm almost certain that I would not like to live in such a place.

One thing is certain though: that kind of house will always haunt you.

1.
Kynodontas (Dogtooth). Dir. Yorgos Lanthimos. Boo Productions, 2009.
2.
Pascal Flammer, *House in Balsthal*, Balsthal, Switzerland, 2007-14.
3.
Jeff Kaplon, *The idea of traditions (pt 2)*, in www.ofhouses.com, 28 November 2015.
4.
Pascal Flammer, *Conversations*, The Scott Sutherland School, Aberdeen, 15 March 2010.

The house for doing everything

Mariabruna Fabrizi, Fosco Lucarelli / Microcities

The Amphitheater House is a 2007 project by Greek architect Aristide Antonas. Built in Hydra, a small town on an island close to the Piraeus, the port of Athens, the building is mostly used for short-term stayings. Humble, yet subtle in its exterior features, the house is a parallelepiped constructed on a pre-existing quasi-orthogonal foundation wall, seemingly relying on a predetermined element in order not to indulge in any compositional or stylistic preconceptions. With the same attitude in accepting the existing conditions, the construction materials are excavated from the stone laying under the site. An equally unassuming wooden roof covered in traditional tiles surmounts the walls.

Internally, the main domestic space is a 9m-high-ceilinged room defined by several high and wide steps. Blowing up the size of the staircase, Antonas turns the steps into an effective interior amphitheater, allowing it to embody the main physical support for the human existence (seating, reading, resting, loving). The other — secondary — areas of the house (kitchen, bathrooms, and sleeping rooms) are concentrated in a narrow zone on the side of the building.

Almost freed from fixed and heavy furniture, the house becomes a device able to overcome the idea of domesticity and to propose collective uses, whilst symbolically and physically interpreting the common archetype of democracy represented by the amphitheater. Drawings produced by the architect and photographs of the built structure document the central stepped area as a natural habitat for a humanity
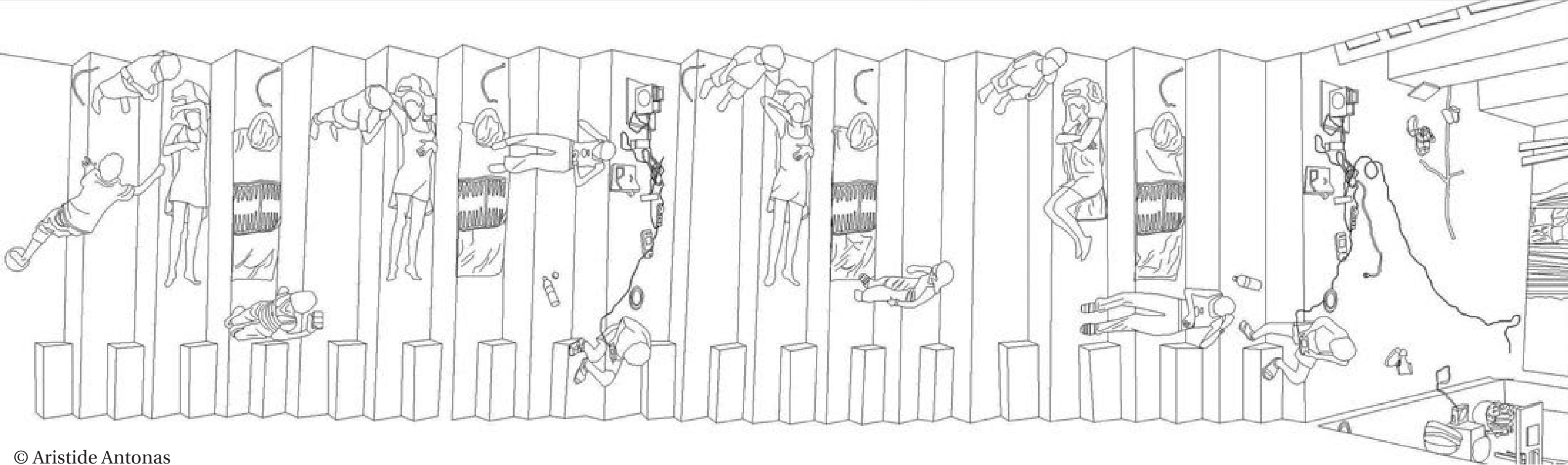
immersed in the life of electronical devices: laptops, printers, speakers, projectors, surrounded by cables symbolizing their interconnection. Overturning a recurrent cliché, technology is not presented here as a means to isolate the individual from the physical reality, but to rather become the main gathering agent for people in space.

Several pictures show the volume of the amphitheater become an indoor cinema (with projections on the facing wall), a lunchroom or a workplace, without ever losing its essential features. These images hint at a diffuse condition of recent years where the domestic often coincides with leisure and working, both progressively revolving around the presence of digital devices. Amateurism turns to professionalism, time spent on social networks becomes as much as production time as leisure, work-related communications swallow every instant of the worker's life as he is often requested to be constantly available. Unsurprisingly, corporations are exploiting this blurring of lifetime and working time through fancy interior makeovers in order for the offices to look like "creative" playgrounds or comfortable domestic scenographies.

Conversely, as public space gets progressively privatized, securitized and, consequently, erased, we might ask ourselves which are going to be the future *loci* for meeting and discussing. Which will be the centers for human interactions beyond the places of consumption and mass events if we exclude the immaterial territory of the internet? Antonas seems to suggest that the house might not only embody and enhance the blurring of the existential limits between lifetime and working time but might also incorporate an unsettling condition in the dialectics between these spheres: the presence of the place for the collective within the private interior.

The current status of the immaterial worker, someone who produces informational, cultural and intellectual content, is a recurring preoccupation for Antonas, as his built and theoretical projects relentlessly focus on the spatial impact of this condition. As stated by the archi-

tect in a text1 accompanying his "(A) House for doing nothing", «the immaterial labor of cognitive functions detaches the working man from the workplace». In this sense, questioning about labor today for an architect does not necessarily involve the design of a conventional workplace, because any place where human life unfolds is potentially able to become a space for production.

The amphitheater room, configured as a physical materialization of human connections through the web, presents a new spatial model for the place where digital communication and production happen in the tangible space, no longer occurring upon a single desk, in a cubicle or at the corner of a cafe, but rather within an intimate environment serving as the physical support for a community. As the workplace gets dematerialized, a new condition opens for architects to explore the consequences of this dissolution and interpret the physical surroundings as well as the inner space of a person connected to the web and producing immaterial content. From a state of isolation, where

contemporary immaterial workers are competing against each others, reduced to individuals and thus unable to negotiate better working conditions, the workers in the amphitheater might symbolize a new community, living and working together and able to organize and propose its own rhythms of life and production.

As the configuration of the family has evolved from a multi-generational organism, to a nuclear one, to an even more fragmented and variable entity, the house cannot respond any longer to its unpredictable needs, but will become the minimal unit which is going to absorb, at its core, more and more functions: from working place, to space for leisure, to assembly arena, hotel, school, or even a museum, in a progressive de-specialization of its own environment.

Left bare and empty, the Amphitheater house appears like an effort in asceticism. Renouncing to style and to possessions, refusing any layer of interior design and rejecting the need for mirroring the taste

© Aristide Antonas

of a specific class, the House floats on an atemporal aura where the digital devices of today will be replaced by those of tomorrow while the domestic infrastructure will be able to remain the same. Asceticism in the Amphitheater house, thus, not only does not exclude the presence of the other but allows for the creation of an appropriate background for exchange and socialization through the removal of needless layers of decoration.

Whereas the single detached house has arguably become the most isolated sphere across the contemporary urban landscape, the Amphitheater model assumes the role of a central node, a place of production for an enlarged community suspended between the physical sphere of a reinvented domesticity and the immaterial condition of the web.

1.
Aristide Antonas, *The House for Doing Nothing*, 2011 http://antonas.blogspot.fr/2011/07/house-for-doing-nothing

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Theory and tribulations of the free section

Cruz Garcia, Nathalie Frankowski / WAI Think Tank

«We must immediately warn the reader that we have no intention of reviewing recent architectural trends. Instead, we would like to focus attention on a set of particularly important attitudes, asking ourselves which role criticism must take».

Manfredo Tafuri

Criticism poses an old problem — Ito argued.

He had majored in social sciences, and was now writing about the spatial manifestations of economic models.

While a Marxist background provided him with a clear scope on historical and dialectical materialism, he was now focusing on how the concrete world, from the planning of cities to the materialization of buildings, was shaped by an ideology that fuelled different forms of speculation.

Criticism was charged with ideology too — he concluded.

To write about a built building is like writing about a film, a work of art, a book: an (often futile) exercise on projecting desires, ambitions and frustrations on somebody else's work.

Can words offer a transcendental insight into designing a building? — He scribbled down on in his notepad.

Can text complement the experience of inhabiting architecture, offer new light, reveal its secrets?

He paused for a while, puzzled about the possibility of generating a neutral point of view in a highly ideological world.

Ito thought that critique was always late and therefore retroactive. Instead, he had been developing writings in a new form of theory.

«Colonization through financial systems are achieved with the implementation of concrete manifestations. For every abstract force, there's an equivalent material structure», were the first lines he had written.

Entitled *Models of Capital: A concrete theory for spatial organizations of a materialist systemic organization*, his paper intended to prove how contemporary architecture was a modification of an old order that responded to an underlying set of economic parameters.

In the form of a Hegelian dialectic, his theory was divided in three points:

1. A thesis that stated that modernism was architecture submitted to its last radical transformation; a shift that occurred by the incorporation of modern technologies and an economic system that translated into an ontology of elements, systems and points

2. An antithesis that argued that the legacy of modernism can be found in the heritage of the Le Corbusian five points; although also in the glass skyscrapers of the corporate aesthetics championed by Mies.

3. And a synthesis that concluded that, with no major significant technological (since we are still building with concrete, steel and glass) and economic changes (capitalism can adapt to any drastic changes), contemporary architecture (like contemporary art) can only work within the framework of modernism and its materialist heritage.

He had decided to visit Shibaura House for the reason that, according to him, although the building displayed an approach clearly guided by the legacy of modernism (free plan, free composition of the façade, garden roof), the architecture seemed to respond to it with twists and turns, as in rewriting its script to answer the call of a transformed capitalist plot that was swiftly adapting to contemporary lifestyle.

After entering the lobby of the building, he began his journey through volumes of varying heights, moving effortlessly between indoors and outdoors, crossing interior courtyards and observing how, throughout the diverse plethora of spaces, a series of events were unfolding simultaneously: a meeting in a smaller transparent room, a group of children climbing up a stair, a couple of people discussing a publication over some tea, somebody eating in the kitchen, another group gathering behind some curtains on another chamber, etc.

For him, the Shibaura House was, in a way, a modernist epitome, while simultaneously suggested a slight deviation from its fundamental dogma. On one side it was flexible, universal, stripped out of ornament, and seemed to respond to its ontological principles. On the other, it displayed a spatial condition that was absent from the original modernist script. He noted how out of everything highlighted in the five points (the pilotis, the free façade, the horizontal window, the garden roof and the free plan), no element could foresee the evolution of capitalism from a manufacture and production-based system, to the fluctuating abstraction of speculation like the unannounced 'free section' did.

«The free plan, opening up space for the collectivization of production, lost its ground as the economy focused on interconnectivity, and attempted to create an image of inclusion, and flexibility. The free section was to architecture what *Airbnb* and *Uber* were to hospitality and transportation, an opportunist system, aiming to capitalize on the idea of personal freedom and on the possibilities of a self-proclaimed inexhaustible versatility» — he excitedly concluded in his paper.
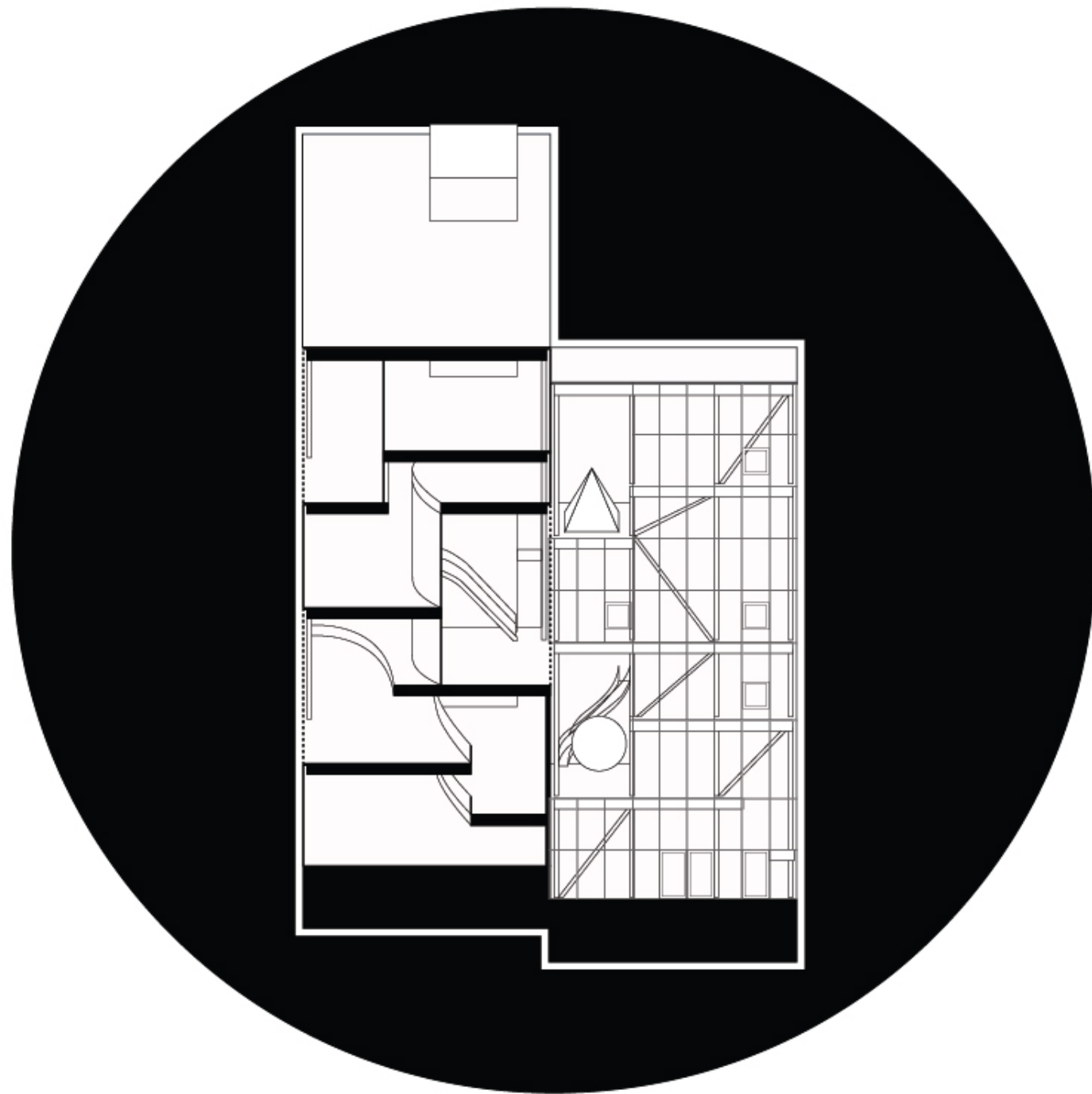
Of course, more than a fundamental difference, this condition offers a slight variation from the essential dogma of modernism. In architecture the free section presents an alternative to break away from the dictatorship of the monolithic block, a structure made out of repetitive floor slabs responding to an economic system of open plans and abstract hangars for mass-production.

Contented with the stream of thoughts that had hit him, Ito glanced one last time at his notepad and closed it. After prematurely guessing that it would have been just a "simple walk" through the promenade of the Shibaura House, he had reinforced his theory after "discovering" a building testifying through its malleable space, that it was not only part of modernism's latent heritage, but a socio-economic aberration shaping the essence of contemporary architecture.

Felling victorious after proving his theoretical triad, Ito stared into the multidirectional void one last time convinced that this new found sectional freedom was not really a break from the horizontal plan of capitalism, but the advancement into a more complex juxtaposition of networks with flows that would be as malleable as unpredictable, maximising through irregularity the capacity to capitalize on the dynamic states of the cognitariat.

As he headed back into the street, he stared straight ahead, convinced that his theory was not a form of ideological criticism, but a radical form of architectural theory.

two

Building in Malawi

Tomà Berlanda

The call from the editors of Viceversa was fairly loose and quite unexpected, an invitation to select works that would be of significance for me.

My personal trajectory over the last 5 years has brought me in contact with many different realities in Sub-Saharan Africa, and for this reason I chose to talk about this project I have recently come across, because it allows me to situate it within a larger conversation on what is design and the understanding of "home" in a context which is culturally foreign to me, but with a sensibility that I feel drawn to.

The systemic taxonomy that Christian Benimana and Jean Paul Sebuhayi, two Rwandan architects working for MASS Design Group, have developed for the Maternity Waiting Village in Kasungu, Malawi, is at first glance. not a particularly innovative approach. It in fact shows the intrinsic potential of a system to deploy — and be deployed as — a framework for different usages, something that from Habraken's studies onwards has become familiar to (too) many contexts.

In this particular instance, for the programmatic nature of the brief, the Maternity complex can be conceived of as a response to an ontological necessity for humanity: how to assists mothers in labour? how to address the dramatic rate of maternal mortality given that so few deliveries are attended by skilled professionals?

Hence the project goes some way in applying the creative mind to
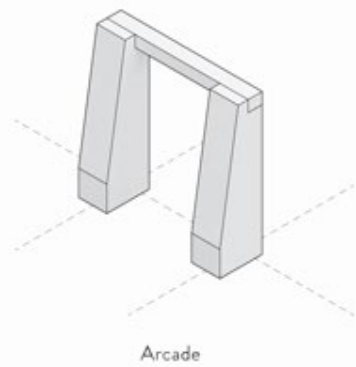
Arcade
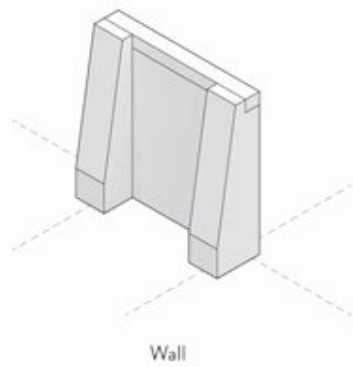
Wall

Wall with Window

Variable-Width Bench

Short Bench

Long Bench

Storage Bench

Open Storage

Closed Storage

Bed Alcove

Sink Alcove

Chimney Alcove

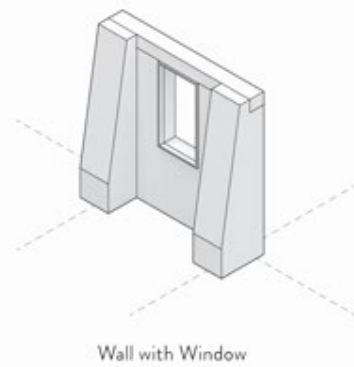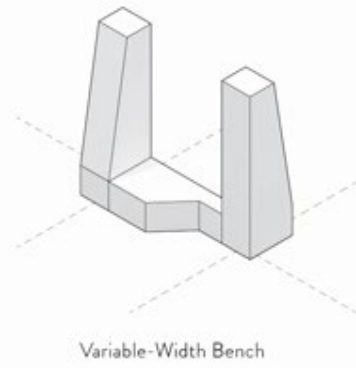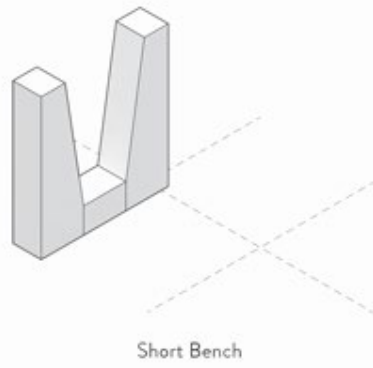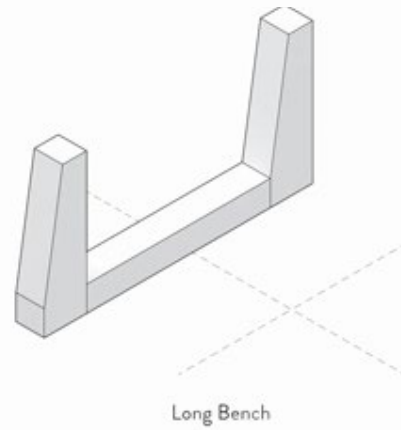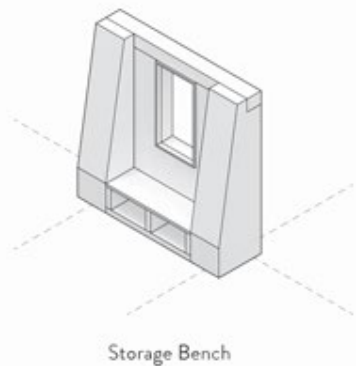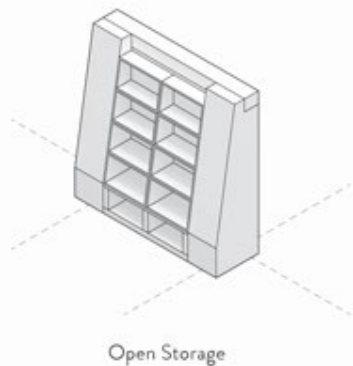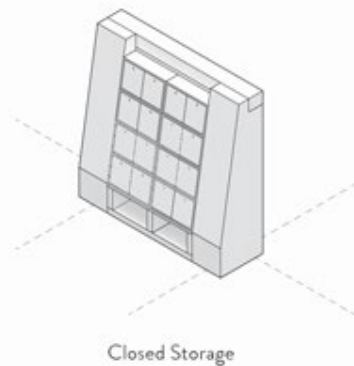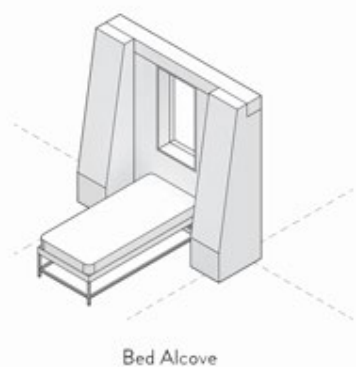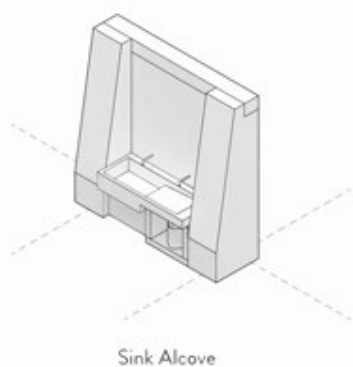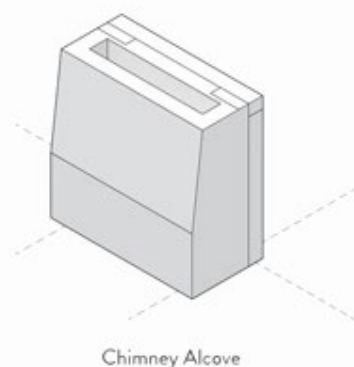setting up an enclosed, but open space, to provide expectant mothers with places to sleep, adequate ventilation, and sanitation. Basic human needs and fundamental rights that too often than not, are simply not available to large portions of the world's population. This is no abstract description of reality, and no imagined complexity for its own sake. It's a real, tangible, concern where there is little use for abstract conceptual discussions, but instead a urgent need for intelligent, practical, replicable solutions.

MASS's project is an attempt to do just that. It's not perfect, and the set up of the firm has some critical elements to it, most notably its claim to operate as a non-for-profit agency in the US, in order to be able to receive donor funding, but then transform its operations in a normal business venture in Rwanda, from where it directs its African operations. But still the concern with engaging in patient driven health care infrastructure, and uncomfortable contextual challenges, make the project we're looking at relevant. Whereas modular prototypes such as this have been tried out before, the designers' ability to operate in collaboration with the Malawi Ministry of Health, together with the decision of using *Compressed Stabilised Earth Blocks* (CESB) made on site, make the scheme a believable attempt at delivering a replicable system, that can be re-iterated without complex expertise and supervision from foreign based architects.

Further the concern with the design and delivery of health care facilities is unequivocally interwoven with MASS Design Group. The office was set up in 2009 specifically in order to design a hospital in Butaro, northern Rwanda, and from the completion of it, it has engaged with multiple research and evidence based projects in partnership with both governmental and non-governmental organisation, with the declared intention of evaluation the impact of design in improving living conditions.

Particularly from a Global South perspective, Modernism was for too long complicit in the colonial rule and in the establishment of a
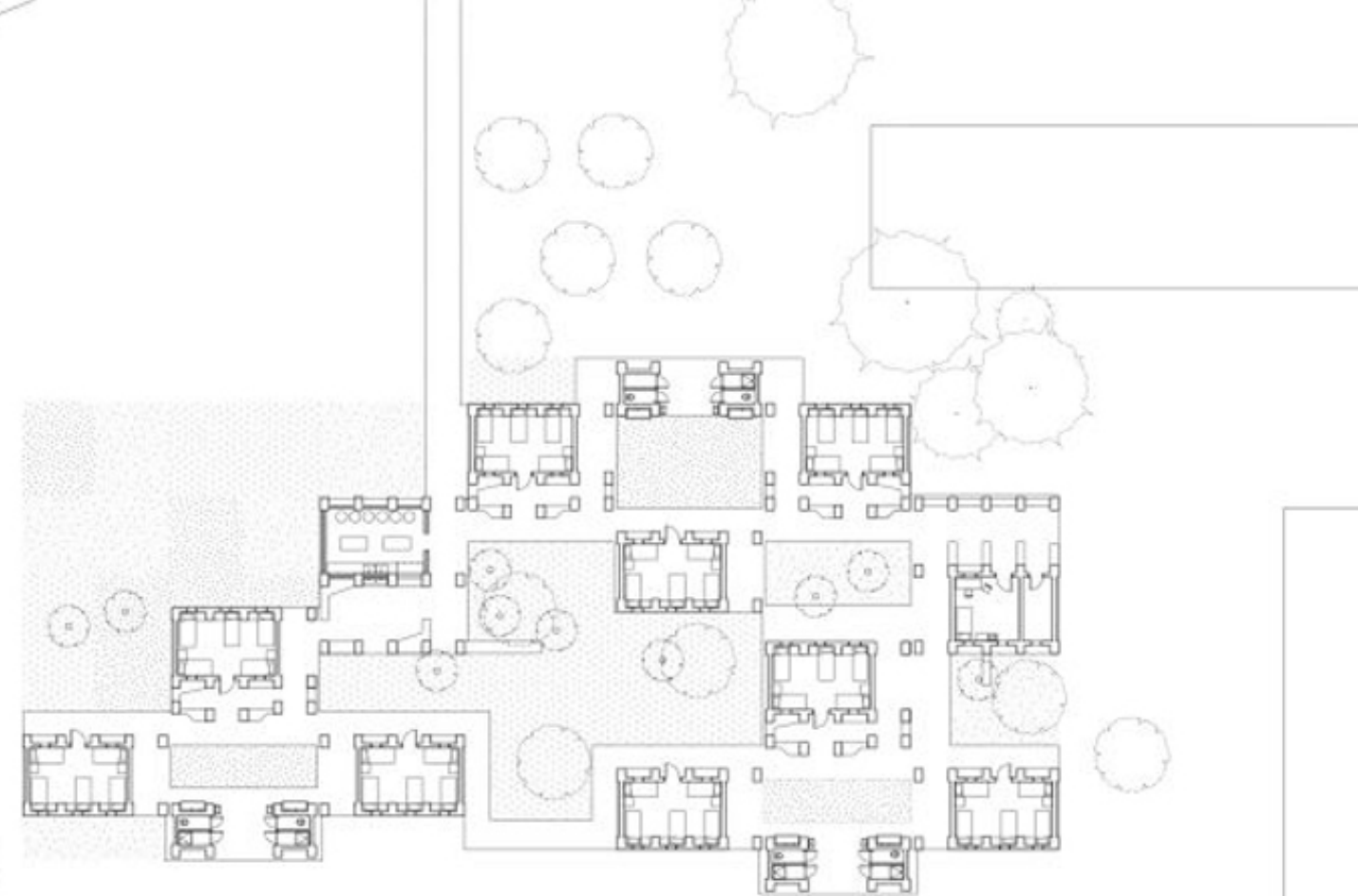
© MASS Design Group

unilateral dogmatic response of Architecture with a capital A to the challenges of development. Today, finally, the discourse has shifted, and the understanding of the 'other' has been brought to the centre of attention. It is therefore significant that this particular project has been led by Christian Benimana, the Manager of Rwanda operations for MASS, and Jean Paul Sebuhayi, who — full disclosure — I had the pleasure of having as a colleague and student respectively, at the Kigali Institute of Science and Technology. The ambition and resourcefulness that these two young Rwandan architects bring to the occasion is refreshing. The pictures from the building site — the project has only been recently completed and even though Iwan Baan has already been there to take some of his famous "socially good" pictures, but we're only showing process images —, show buildings which have a dignity and sense of belonging to the place. There is a clear articulation of permanent solid ground structure that supports a ventilated roofwork. The large overhangs allow for shade and water protection. The masonry buttresses are used for a variety of purposes,

© MASS Design Group

hence, finds the individual never quite at home. It takes the form of a detour through unfamiliar places that always need to be present. By resorting to the familiar, it is a return that constantly invites and problematizes difference rather than settle on a dualistic relation between self and other. It's some form of hybrid space, where the imported grid, a Western canon, leaves space and place for the other, and hopefully allows it to take over and subvert the system.

niches, alleyways, storage, benches, chimneys. It is a clear pedagogical handbook for constructing both the space and its use. Not a socially engineered and micromanaged "home", but — in the words of the architects — a «maternal village [resulting from] the aggregation of smaller sleeping units».

The success of the project lies in its potential to be replicated elsewhere. In fact it simply has to. It will be the only way for the stories about places, people and their houses to be woven with threads of heterogeneous origins, and become process of dissemination. The movement of expectant mothers away from their homes to these "waiting villages", and the necessary family support and accompaniment that will go together with it, will locate the abstract structure to their context.

One can think of it as a translation process that inscribes the movement towards home as a movement always away from home, and

Half-happy architecture

Camillo Boano, Francisco Vergara Perucich

We thought and discussed a lot before writing this text. Few weeks ago, we witnessed that Alejandro Aravena was nominated to receive the Pritzker Prize this year and we were puzzled by the use and the abuse of the buzz-concept of "social architect". After that then, we followed the opening speech of the 2016 Venice Biennale where the rhetoric of the social turn has been displaced, literally, on top of a metal scale staring to the frontier of the yet to come experimentation of formalist architecture with a social look.

The two events are not to be taken as connected, but rather treated as discrete. So despite the several hesitations we had in planning it, this text gives us the opportunity to develop some reflections around the implications and the reasons for not simplifying the struggle of those architects who are trying to produce relevant work in the frame of the current global challenges. Taking a distance from the critique of Alejandro Aravena as a person with good social skills (as argued by many critics) and his media-friendly "starchitect" role, we aim at focusing on the space produced by his firm and its overall aesthetic. We wish to rise two specific points hoping to contribute to a critical view on the current architectural debate and its capacity of "reporting from the front".

The first is a concise critique of the idea of a *good-half-house* coined by Elemental (Aravena's studio) for the Quinta Monroy project, contesting its real contribution to the idea of good quality architecture for the poor. For us, the contribution made by Aravena is more a good

economic strategy but not necessarily a good mode of spatial production and — certainly — not a revolution. Offering some insight into the neoliberal public policies of social housing in Chile, the first part of this text reflects on the apparent radicalism of Aravena's gesture and the problematic nature of the "social" term in such practice.

The second is related to the pragmatic, social formalism that seems at the centre of the Biennale's red carpet, with some new names on the list and the permanence of the usual suspects, although with a social touch. *Reporting from the front* seems to well fit Nietzsche's interpretation of architecture as «the aesthetic objectivation of the will to power» impulsed by the architect's «ecstasy of the great will», apparently presenting itself as an edifice that offers an interpretation of social architecture as an unfinished problem that requires both political and aesthetic indetermination.

After all, the two events and Aravena's global fame are for us an excuse to ask a simple question: is it possible to produce more social justice in the entrenched and pervasive neoliberal present?

The Pritzker Prize
Few weeks ago, the Hyatt Foundation awarded the Chilean architect Alejandro Aravena, co-founder and principal partner of the do-thank Elemental, the Pritzker Prize acknowledging his contribution to the architecture discipline. 48 years-old and in the middle of a skyrocketing professional trajectory, the world-renewed prize arrives just after Aravena has been asked to curate the 15th Venice Architecture Biennale. Apparently, 2016 is Aravena's *annus mirabilis*. The prize sparkled conflictive reactions on the web and in the press, boosting his "stararchitectculturism" (a just invented neologism that mixes the starchitect with the culturist, attempting to represent Aravena's mediatic image of an ever-young, good-looking architect, alternative to the mainstream but still conventional, successful and "planetary" in its effect) while allowing his detractors to comment on his work.

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According to the adjudication comments, the prize was assigned to him because «Alejandro Aravena has pioneered a collaborative practice that produces powerful works of architecture and also addresses key challenges of the XXI century. His built work gives economic opportunity to the less privileged, mitigates the effects of natural disasters, reduces energy consumption, and provides welcoming public space. Innovative and inspiring, he shows how architecture at its best can improve people's lives». It results disturbing to think that in the understanding of the Hyatt Foundation, the kind of social housing developed by Elemental is "architecture at its best". What is interesting, therefore, is the opportunity given by the award to use the arguments of this elitist institution for the production of a deeper discussion on the real contribution that architecture can offer to global crises, discussing the idea of a "shortcut to inequality", as Aravena says.

The Pritzker prize motivation seems to stress the transformative potential of a renewed architecture, the need for an explicit social agenda. Can it be considered a game-changer declaration? It is difficult not to agree with a particular attention to architecture, calling for its multiple agencies outside of pure formalism and exclusionary rhetoric. Considering the global failure of neoliberal ideologies, policies and cultures in developing a better social life, the role of architecture in this process cannot be underestimated, especially because it is precisely through spatial production that capital reproduces itself, and it is through the profitable aims of the construction industry that architecture has been reduced to a solely elemental condition, rather than an exploration capable of producing "architecture at its best". Profit, not quality, is the aim of neoliberalism, which is why the way in which Aravena develops social housing is just perfect: half houses obtained with public funding to activate cycles of capital accumulation and urbanize so to prepare the field for soon-to-come, better profitable real estate developments. Without touching the Chilean neoliberal rule (harsh as the Atacama desert), Aravena has invented a neoliberal method to produce social architecture, which has been broadly accepted and praised.

Aravena and the new starchitect's pursuit

Alejandro Aravena is a concrete architect, a man of reality and action, a good swimmer in neoliberal waters. Those who studied architecture in Chile, and those who got acquainted with his manifesto and the work of Elemental (his do-tank), know perfectly that his architectural ideology is based on simple equations, and geared on actions that are possible with the available, often limited, resources. In his book *Los Hechos de la Arquitectura* written with Fernando Perez Oyarzún and José Quintanilla, a title that surely shows pragmatism (*facts*) and a materialist attitude, his posture on architecture is evident: analyze, resolve and build.

The feeling one gets while reading the book is that architecture is more a solution to a problem than an expression of a cultural and social mode of inhabiting space and cities, or a cultural manifestation of people, or a technological exploration. Having said this, perhaps Aravena is offering the discipline a fantastic continuation of the engineering aspirations that Le Corbusier embodied in the beginning of the XX century, aligning an ethical shift of architecture with its potential to heal and cure the difficulties encountered on the "frontiers". Just like Le Corbusier, Aravena is responding to a call of his time. During the post-war crisis, a new *man* was arising so a new type of architecture was needed: modern architecture fitted perfectly in an international project to provide appropriate housing for a new society. In a way, the scope of Aravena is pretty much the same: a failed capitalist world requires urgent solutions for those who don't possess capital. Social housing, Aravena demonstrates, can be a good way to include the less privileged in the banking system, by providing land tenure and promoting entrepreneurialism at a small scale. Therefore, social housing is becoming a pathway to debt, which results vital for the reproduction of the capitalist landscape. If so, the Pritzker Prize allows us to think on what stage of post-modernity we live in, if any. Perhaps, following the economic trends analysed by Thomas Piketty, we find ourselves in a stage that is similar to that at the end of the XIX century and the beginning of the XX: although not only in terms of inequali-

ty and economy, but also from the point of view of other disciplines such as architecture. It is thus possible to claim that architecture is experiencing an homologation with the current economic trend, in the sense that inequality has invaded its mode of practice. As a consequence, it could be soon realistic to think that there exist two architectures: one for the poor and one for the others, as it was evident in late XIX century Chile, where the city for the civilized (oligarchy) was differentiated by the city for the barbaric (urban poor).

Aravena's masculine motto of doing, acting, not wasting time and architectural intelligence, alignes perfectly with an activist gesture (here used in the sense of holding the entire process, from design to production, into his own hands), focused on making and doing on behalf of the "common good," in the "public interest", or to achieve "social impact", however ambiguously these goals may be defined in different contexts.

Returning to the award, the fact that Aravena «practices architecture as an artful endeavor in private commissions and designs for the public realm and epitomizes the revival of a more socially engaged architect» may sound a bit disturbing to those architects that are actually socially engaged, or that practice an embedded, action-oriented and tranformative architecture. One that while suggesting solutions, research and new approaches, is able to target the root of a problem, rather than just a symptom. Calling Aravena "the anti-star architect par excellence", as recently done in an article by Eleonora Carraro, seems mistleadig at most. Aravena's gestures, postures and aestetic seem pretty much representing a new frontier of archistarism (another neologism): the adoption of social agendas and dooingoodism, normalised and domesticated in the neoliberal discource by abandoning and neutralising the radical critical originality. The radical change related to this radical critique that involves overcoming not only the lived experiences of alienation, objectification, and self-hatred, but also the more fundamental systems of oppression respon-

sible for those experiences, is left and abandoned and pakaged for being consumed in exibitions and ceremionies.

We would have been more at ease if the Pritzker Prize statement had been something like: *for his capacity to convince everyone that providing a half-house for low-income communities is a democratic idea*, or *for his capacity to demonstrate that social housing too can be a business in the neoliberal rule*, or even *for his amazing buildings developed for the Universidad Católica*. Please do not take us wrong. It is nice that Aravena won the price and it is important that architecture is paying more attention to the real challenges and responsibilities of shaping the spaces in which people live. But this has a price and a "dark side".

Where is the other half of the house?
In Argentina, during an interview, Aravena admitted that he approaches architecture as a profitable activity, which is not a problem *per se*, but it is undoubtely a slap in the face of all the architects who work with communities, marginalities, humanitarian agencies or simply in their neighbourhoods offering their professional advice in pro-bono activities.

Some questions then emerge. How can a socially engaged architect fix his goals in the profit rather than in the people? How can building and life quality be reconciled in an architectural work? How can doing good be complicit with the system that produces the inequality it aims at curing? How can Elemental be truly devoted to social causes, given that it belongs to the Angelini's, a company that owns questionable businesses such as Empresas Copec and Forestal Arauco?

In *Less is Enough* Aureli suggests what is proper to the conduct of the contemporary architect: whereas architects and designers today often concern themselves with a social agenda, «they rarely — Aureli laments — look at their own existence, which is what really constitutes the main source of their production». They would do better, and be more effectively political, were they to focus on their own lives as

formal projects, rather than concerning themselves with an architecture of good intentions.

What is out of discussion here is Aravena's capacity of producing good architecture. From this point of view, we could mention the Anacleto Angelini Centre in San Joaquin and the Medical Faculty of the Universidad Católica, both remarkable projects that Aravena should be praised for, whose characteristics have been widely documented by specialized media. Nevertheless, the "social" label given to his architecture, and his particular approach to the problem of social housing, deserve an urgent discussion.

The problematic contradiction starts with the concept. First of all, the idea of offering "half house" to low-income communities results somehow insulting, because it implies that the finished project will depend on their individual (entrepreneurial) capacity to get the funds to build the other half. Where is the architect, and where is architecture in the other half of the house? What can be seen today, thirteen years after the completion of the Quinta Monroy project, are cheap construction techniques collated in what finally results as an expensive shelter. Adaptation, self-construction and community innovation are certainly central issues, but approaching them by leaving half of the house unbuilt can easily lead to the aestheticization of poverty and the subsequent processes of marginalization.

Jeremy Till acutely reflects on the intricate tension between scarcity and austerity, where «the political ideology of austerity is challenged by the real condition of scarcity. [...] Although austerity and scarcity are inevitably intertwined — the regimes of austerity induce real scarcities — austerity is not the same as scarcity. Austerity is the outcome of the ideologies of neo-liberalism, whereas scarcity is a higher-level condition that both drives those ideologies and also threatens them. Scarcity is the motor of capitalism: scarcity of supply regulates the market; too much stuff diminishes desire and competition».

In conditions of austerity, as Till maintains, «we are left trying to do the same thing but with less and, in contradiction to Mies, less really is less». Scarcity, on the other hand, puts us in a different condition: whether real or constructed, in fact, it can inspire us to widen the field of architectural practice and operate more creatively with what we are given. We should then ask ourselves: is Aravena's half-house the outcome of a condition of austerity, or of scarcity?

Let's be clear about this: Elemental's solution is as far from challenging the architecture discipline as it is from representing an innovation in the history of social housing. It would seem that the simplicity and synthesis of Aravena's idea has obviated that previous social housing attempts in Chile, and elsewhere, were able to provide their inhabitants with living dignity. If scarcity is constructed, and if the lack of affordable houses for the low-income Chilean population is a real problem, how can giving less — more precisely half — housing space sound like an extraordinary idea? And more so once we consider that

forty years ago, with a GDP that was ten times as lower as the present one - Chilean social housing used to have European standards. While today», the social housing projects by Elemental force low-income communities to live in half-designed, weak architectural proposals.

It is worth recalling that the autonomy of incrementalism in housing production is largely indebted to the work of whom in the 1960s highlighted the level of freedom and the emancipatory value of self organisation and self building. Namely John Turner (1972) uncovered the effectiveness of self organisation practices in the peri-urban *barriadas* of Lima and the extensive range of tactics and innovations that urban poor had to offer. Informality and poverty were started to be seen as a site of potentiality to learn from, rather than a mere problem to solve.

In 2004, Chilean urbanists Ana Sugranyes and Alfredo Rodriguez warned against the rising problem generated by social housing, as

Los con techo (Those with a roof) were being excluded from the urban fabric. Since the end of the dictatorship in 1990, the Chilean State had promoted a fast and quantitative approach to the lack of housing for low-income communities, resulting in deficient architectures with low urban standards and no concern for the social production of their spaces. Quality was sacrificed for the sake of quantity; urgency destroyed the good city. As a consquence, ghettoisation became the rule, and it is arguable that the projects by Elemental are challenging such perverse logic, a part from reducing the scale of the problem.

Aravena is a really good architect, and choosing him for the Pritzker Prize might be even interpreted as a public recognition of the remarkable trajectories of many good Chilean architects, such as Emilio Duhart, Juan Martinez, Juan Borchers, Alberto Cruz, Borja Huidobro, Mathias Klotz or Smijlan Radic. Nevertheless, awarding his social housing projects can create a dangerous precedent.

A utilitarian approach to social architecture for neoliberal goals
What Aravena has done is a) convincing the inhabitants of its houses that capital accumulation is more important than dignity and quality of space, and b) reducing architecture to a kit of construction techniques barely organized in a plot. And precisely this is the most concerning contradiction of the scheme by Elemental, as it looks more like a proposal by Peruvian economist Hernando de Soto than a project deserving the most influential award for architects. Aravena has understood the rules of neoliberalism from an economic perspective, and has let them colonize his designs and social practice. As in other realms of society, a chrematistic interpretation of human activity prevails over other scopes, and under the excuse of being realistic, architecture suffers its deterioration as a discipline while undermining its own relevance.

Of course, more than to Aravena's spatial solutions for low-income communities, the problem has to be brought back to the system as a whole. What the Chilean architect does is indeed innovative within the shrunk boundaries of neoliberal public policies, but within the boundaries of dignity it is scarce, mediocre and pitiful. His proposal forces people into believing that what is available is good enough, and his awarding of the Pritzker can be read as a dangerous (and powerful) attempt to consolidate such approach. Why should the poor receive a half-house instead of a proper one? Why in some developing countries like Chile are social housing projects worse than in the sixties?

It may seem that the good intention is fine. But the problem is that a focus on problem-solving and "design action" displaces necessary considerations on how, for what purpose and in what specific system of power relations a given problem is constituted. Why have people USD300 monthly income? Why doesn't the State provide affordable houses? What are the locational conditions? Hence, as Rittel and Webber famously said: «the formulation of the wicked problem is the problem». This redirects our attention to the way in which problems are framed, rather than to the way in which they are solved. Following Rittel and Webber, we can therefore ask: why should the aim of an architect be the accomodation of architecture to some deficient public policy in social housing, instead of demanding a change in the field in order to increase the possibilities of developing a real good architecture for the poor? As architects, we should abandon the good-enough solution and gather our forces to develop real good proposal for XXI century architecture.

This challenge recalls something that Patrick Schumacher said along the discussions triggered by this year's Pritzker Prize, when he claimed that «I would not object to this year's choice half as much if this safe and comforting validation of humanitarian concern was not part of a wider trend in contemporary architecture that in my view signals an unfortunate confusion, bad conscience, lack of confidence, vitality and courage about the discipline's own unique contribution to the world». Perhaps Schumacher has no authority to discuss about social housing or whatever moral issue triggered by the Pritzker Prize, but we surely agree with him denouncing the architects' lack of confidence

on their capacity to articulate complexity in order to work collaboratively in the production of great spaces for everyone: not half-houses, but fantastic examples of architecture, with no social last name or conditions. And in order to do so, architects must organize themselves and struggle for their right not to be sentenced to design "good half-houses for low-income communities", but just good houses! And then good houses that can become excellent examples for architectural history. As slaves of the capital and neoliberal ideology, architecture cannot advance much more than what Aravena has already done. That's the limit of dignity under the neoliberal rule for social housing, which we need to break for the sake of both architecture, its inhabitants and our self-confidence as practitioners. That's why the work of Aravena is more a pathway for starchitects to get social, rather than for people to get access to good architecture. The current state of Quinta Monroy exemplifies the failure of the "half-house" model as a mode for the production of architecture. Rather than bringing a revolution about, Elemental has adapted neoliberal means to social

projects with public funding: saying that Alejandro Aravena is a revolutionary architect is therefore a stab in the heart of real revolutionary architects, who have challenged and transformed the discipline instead of adapting it to an existent reality.

What's more, the incremental housing scheme was first developed by Edwin Haramoto in 1987 and then practiced by Fernando Castillo Velasco in 1992 for the Comunidad Andalucía project in Santiago's downtown, with much better architectural outcomes than in Quinta Monroy.

Perhaps the most significant contribution of this Pritzker award is having moved the discussion on social architecture at a wider disciplinary scale. But then, why should the architecture for the poor be different from the architecture for the rich? Is there another kind of human in one house or the other? Why should a State deliver a differential spatial outcome depending on acquisitive power?

And now…reporting from the front

The widespreading practice of social architecture, together with a new attention/care for the environment, the public realm and the common good, is certainly a signal assumption of accountability for serious problems, but it is also a comforting manner to fold in the face of criticism of the exploitation patterns produced by the present state of things. However, as soon as those attitudes, gestures, and "political positions" (as Giancarlo de Carlo would have called them) will be exhibited in the Corderie, they will lose their political efficacy and become autonomous architectural concerns with their emphasis on space, form and geometry. The inclusion of social oriented formalism (of different souces) displayed for the compsumption by the socially conscious public of the Biennale is a risky process, that signals the ongoing disengagement of a critical attitude and the forging of a new alliance with the corporate and managerial agenda of liberalism.

Aravena's dictum and praxis is a simple new social project of architecture somehow referred to the multivariate forms of socially relevant architectural practices categorized by Bryan Bell and Katie Wakeford in *Expanding Architecture: Design as Activism*, where design activism is defined as a combination of social responsibility and market pragmatism carried out in the interests of the common good while also being good for business. The professional activist uses his/her skills and expertise to discover the communities' design problems and then develops innovative ways to solve them. Such interpretation of the "social" is as much about creating new, ethically surcharged markets for professional services as it is about social responsibility, in a sort of seamlessly fused narrative arguing that a long history of professional disconnection has prevented many potential clients from recognizing how their lives could be improved by "good design". Sounds familiar?

Rather then representing the anti-stararchitecturism, Aravena's program signals the complete separation of architecture from radical thoughts as it simply materialises a formalist autonomy narrowing architecture and design mission to an acritical acceptance of the status quo, dressed with social intentions. It does become a legitimizing dispositive for the neoliberal production of architecture and space: categorically excluding the questions of the political, the social and the economic from the purview of the designers; diminishing ambitions and critical power by diverting attention to pragmatism and urgent need to act; and sacrificing theory for action in what Eric Swyngedouw defines a «new cynicism that has abandoned all attempts to develop a socially responsible practice».

As Libero Andreotti righty maintains in *Can Architecture be an Emancipatory Project? Dialogues on Architecture and the Left* (one of the most challenging book on the politics of architecture recently published): «the misery of theory, however well deserved, cannot be allowed to turn into cynical dismissal of all form of theorizing. What we need today is not less but more and better theory and this is only possible through long efforts of theoretical labor». He then continues positing that «the greatest need of architecture today […] is for ethically courageous acts that proceed from the recognition of the architect's unavoidable implication in social, political and economic processes towards which one does have a margin of autonomy to engage and if necessary to oppose».

We believe that a real contribution of architecture to low-income communities can only start by eliminating the idea of "social" from the issue of housing. Luis Triveño has claimed that Aravena is the «starchitect of the poor», underlining his capacity to implement «solutions to the global housing crisis that are so creative, speedy, budget-conscious and scalable». Maybe it is better to say that he is the starchitect who learned how to make profit from doing a serious job with low-income communities.

Being critical with Aravena's project is rather difficult and surely problematic. The attention to real problems, to the reality of poor communities and to the challenges that the discipline and the practice of architecture must face in its doing good for the everydaylife of world

population — is all very welcome. But a truly radical theory and critical praxis needs to be vigilant and contrast the neutralization of political messages around justice, space and urbanism. What is needed is to critically reclaim a political emancipatory project of architecture against a technocratic, biopolitical and arrogant one. A project capable of providucing once more the much-too-early abandoned critique of contemporary capitalism and its subsequent production of urban space, without taking the risk of getting trapped in discursive

practices that are simply camouflaged as radical, overtly disciplinary and constructed specifically to be expert-oriented.

Maybe what we need today is not an operative but an *inoperative architecture*: one that, similarly to Eyal Weizman political plastic, is capable of mobilizing a differential architectural intelligence by investigating the «abyss of the worst architectural possibilities». This inoperative practice is not the one framed by Justin McGuirk on the

«activist architect […] who creates the conditions in which it is possible to make a meaningful difference and […] expanded mode of practice» or the «insurgent architects» defined by Erik Swyngedouw as the sole entitled to claim an emancipatory role and effective agency in co-animating political events. Again, architecture is not present in this remark.

An *inoperative architecture* consists of an ethical shift of deactivating its communicative and informative function, in order to open it to new possible uses, new possibilities. A new political architecture is not about mobilization, organization, civil society and aggregations — at least solely —, but a a contra-hegemonic discussion that is not insurgent nor populist, but a sort of call for a renewed autonomy. It is a *destituent* mode of thinking and practicing architecture and urbanism: an attempt to develop a subversive *ethos* to the dominant ontology of enactment or praxis infused with the arrogant ego of creative power to produce and control spatial realities[1]. Maybe it is not a front to report from. But this is another story to tell.

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The plentifulness of scarcity

Davide Tommaso Ferrando

New York City, USA. A flock of steel beams and glass panels is spotted in the early morning while gently flying over the streets of Manhattan, headed towards an empty plot facing the Hudson river, where they magically assemble in mid air, giving shape to a dense complex of shiny skyscrapers. An inelegant fantasy for the city of 9/11, this is actually the sequence of a promotional clip[1] recently made for Hudson Yards: «the largest private real estate development in the history of the United States»[2], currently under construction with projects by — among others — SOM, Diller Scofidio + Renfro and Heatherwick Studios.

Used in many recent developments around the globe, the deceiving animation of the self-building-building is a rethorical device aimed at a precise purpose, namely the commodification of architecture through its spectacularization: a subtle marketing strategy that, together with other similar tactics of seduction, offers an insightful glimpse on the kind of mystification architectural production and communication are subjected to nowadays, under the growing pressure of the real estate market. A pressure so persistent and ubiquitous that it has been widely studied and accepted by now, leading to the assumption that land speculation dwells at the very core of architecture itself. Something that, nevertheless, is not always true.

Unquillo (Córdoba), Argentina. A group of architects (Solanito Benitez, Solano Benitez, Gloria Cabral, María Rovea and Ricardo Sargiotti) have pressurized water being cast on a zigzagged brick wall to the

point that its bricks disappear, leaving a nude mortar framework as the only trace of the previous structure: a brickwork with no bricks, a transparent concrete wall... how did they do it?

A tiny installation for the MUVA art exhibition (April – May 2014), the "brick wall with its final absence" (*el muro de ladrillos con su ausencia final*) presents many of the elements that characterize the work of Gabinete de Arquitectura, Asunción-based architecture practice founded in 1987 by Solano Benitez, which he now runs together with his partner, Gloria Cabral, and his son Solanito.The project, in fact, recurs to local materials that are cheap and easy to find (mud and concrete); it employs them in a rational but experimental way (the bricks "disappear" because they are made of dried mud — a material that is easily disintegrated by water —, while the mortar resists because it's made of concrete); it optimizes their use (the bricks' mud, once dissolved, falls back to the ground where it was originally taken from, being ready to be used again); it innovates their structural behaviour (the remaining mortar framework performs as an unusual construction system); it reaches, by doing so, an unexpected formal configuration (a wall made of holes); and it expresses a poetic condition (the project as a celebration of the idea of "absence") by means of its physical presence.

Geographically and ideologically far from the global "starchitecture" market, which they look at with unconcealed sarcasm, the work of GabDeArq is deeply rooted in the environmental, economic and technological conditions of Paraguay, which define the limits inside of which they are managing to develop an architectural research of great interest and relevance for our times.

Observed from a historical perspective, it could be maintained that the work of GabDeArq falls within Kenneth Frampton's category of Critical Regionalism, whose fundamental strategy is «to mediate the impact of universal civilization with elements derived indirectly from the peculiarities of a particular place [finding inspiration] in

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such things as the range and quality of the local light, or in a tectonic derived from a peculiar structural mode, or in the topography of the given site»[3]. As a matter of fact, all these conditions characterize the architecture of GabDeArq, although it is important to stress how the way in which they «mediate universal civilization with local culture», isn't the outcome of an *arrière-garde* stance (one which, in Frampton's words, critically distances itself from the drawbacks of both poles), but rather the result of the architects' «optimum use of [the available] universal technique» in a context intrinsically defined by scarcity. I'll explain myself.

One of the most recognizable features of the architecture of GabDeArq is the use of brick as construction material. Rather than being an ideological choice meant to engage in a dialogue with the local tradition (in Paraguay, brick building became important in the 16th Century, when commercial ships heading to England would leave on ground the bricks used as ballast on the westward trip), it is instead the vast

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and cheap availability of such material, what explains its systematic employment in projects that, in the architects' words, are substantially aimed at «making bricks do things we didn't know they could do».

This last sentence is of great importance, as it explains the fundamentally experimental approach of GabDeArq, whose work is based on trial-and-error processes meant to bring bricks to their structural limits, given that «the only relation we have with matter is the possibility to imagine a different condition for it», as Benitez claims, adding that «an architecture that is not experimental, is useless». The fact is that Benitez is not interested in bricks per se, but rather in the possibilities to express human intelligence that are allowed by the experimental use of bricks. As he says, quoting a Paulo Mendes da Rocha's joke on a famous sentence by Louis Kahn, «the brick doesn't desire anything, it is stupid! It's the action of man that can transform matter into monument» (*el ladrillo no desea nada, es tonto! Es la acción del hombre la que puede transformar la materia en monumento*).

Intelligence, as Benitez claims, is not only the condition that we all share: it is also what allows us to overcome the material and cultural restrictions that define the way in which we understand — and therefore transform — reality. Using imagination as a tool, intelligence is infact capable of questioning the very boundaries of the problems we are confronted with, transforming what would be traditionally understood as a limit — a low budget, a provision of materials with poor mechanical properties, a rudimental technology at disposal, etc. — into a field of opportunities for innovation. It is in this sense that, when referring to the research of GabDeArq, Benitez admits that what he's interested in is the construction of «an overcoming human condition» (*una condición humana superadora*), rather than in the construction of a bricks and concrete building, tying the ethical dimension of his work with its capacity to provide exemplary evidences of what intelligence can actually do, when applied in architectural terms.

As a matter of fact, there's practically no GabDeArq design that doesn't show this tension towards an overcoming condition. In the project for their own office, given the very small budget at disposal, the architects had to find a way to build 100 square meters for the same cost of 15, which they did, by reducing the amount of bricks needed thanks to the optimization of the structural system (the frames of the two *fenêtres en bande*, for example, behave as beams, allowing the perimetral walls to be thinner but stiffer), as well as by using reclaimed materials and manually prefabricated elements. In the project for the Teletón Rehabilitation Center, among other experiments, they invented a structural system made of triangular brick modules, which could be easily prefabricated on site and then assembled on a wooden formwork, giving form to the beautiful reticular vault under which runs the path that leads from the site entrance to the main building of the complex. In the project for the house of Benitez's mother, the cheap bricks used for the ceramic and concrete roof of the living room have been laid diagonally on the formwork, so that their vertical proyection could be from 1 to 1,5 cm higher, and therefore improving, although slightly, their structural performance.

One of the reasons of its success, the work of GabDeArq expresses a way of thinking architecture that is truly Modern, in the purest sense of the word. Unweakened by the doubts that have shaped the architecture of second half of the XX century, and uncorrupted by the easy seduction of today's society of spectacle and finance, it clearly shows what extraordinary results the belief in poetic reason and progress can still lead to. And although it may well be that the condition of scarcity in which they inevitably operate shares part of the credit, offering a motivation for constant improvement as well as a protection from the dynamics of the star system (but for how long?), we can't but long for more architectures capable of celebrating civilization in such a powerful way.

1.
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2.
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three

HIGH.LIghting

Jason Hilgefort / Land+Civilization Compositions

Without a doubt, the High Line is one of the most iconic projects of this century. But more interesting than the design itself is how it has framed the relationship of spatial design (architecture, landscape architecture, urban design, etc) with its many "outside forces". Whereas previously spatial designers were more willing to operate within their own bubbles; currently we are all more and more aware of the intertwining and layered relationships of the myriad of actors in urban development. The High Line is indicative of the numerous ways that spatial designers now must position themselves more consciously within the larger forces at hand.

Bottoms up
There is clearly a long history to the site including the construction of the rail line, its decommissioning, and both of those realities impact on the neighborhood. But let's pick the story up in the 90s, with the formation of *The Friends of the High Line* spearheaded by Joshua David and Robert Hammond. This group fought both the city and private interests that sought demolition and redevelopment. And THEY were the ones that brought forward the notion of using it as an elevated public space. Designers might want to speak endlessly about the design of Field Operations and Diller Scofidio + Renfro[1], but in reality is the design itself that important? Look back at the other finalists for the competition now. One has to ask, would a different winner have had much of an affect on the ultimate qualities of the space? I highly doubt it. One could argue the biggest impact a "creative" had on the project was when photographer Joel Sternfeld was commissioned to

photograph the line and shared this hidden gem with society at large.

So, one of the most iconic projects of the 21st century was conceived by a couple of guys from the neighborhood. The ripple affect of this pervades the profession. Empowerment, engagement, etc are common buzz words in the practice now. Citizens themselves are more aware of their power and potential role in the forming of their own cities. All spatial designers have reacted to this reality and many even directly approach the community for works, not the public or private sector. Now, of course, there are many other examples of bottom up initiatives; but is there any more indicative of the power of the people and its impact on our profession?

Hi.Impact
One cannot talk about the High Line's influence without relating it to the much discussed "Bilbao Effect". Now, the Guggenheim put a small fairly obscure Spanish city on every globe trotting tourist's must see list; while the High Line "merely" affected the transformation of an old industrial area, in one of the most well known and touristed cities in the world (more on this later). Yet, its copycat reality is undeniable. From Chicago, to London[2], to Wuhan, to just slightly east of the High Line itself (the Low Line) there are endless cities throwing their budgets at designers in an attempt to even slightly replicate its results. Again, this is not, per se, new. Iconic structures like the Eiffel Tower, Sydney Opera House, etc. have long made mayors and tourist departments drool. What is different here, is that it is a park. Sure it is a very particular park; but yet, it is just a raised green walkway. And one can reflect on this in relation to green and cities (that's coming up next). But perhaps more noteworthy, is the fact that icons need not be buildings. Spatial designers, politicians, and developers are distinctly aware of this reality — now. Public spaces, art projects (ie "The Bean" in Chicago), and even events (biking weekends in Bogota, beaches along the Seine in Paris) are understood to be "iconic". The role of public spaces and the experiences users have within them has never been so treasured by society and subsequently the profession.

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Painting the town green
Well, if one has to mention Bilbao, then has to point out the project's impact on "Green Chic". The High Line is so iconic to the notion of greening cities that its horticulturalist — Piet Oudolf — is now practically a household name[3]. Simplistically put, they took an elevated rail, put green on it, and now people love it. It feels like a parody of the American TV series Portlandia's comedic take of "put a bird on it". Have a wasted roof — put green on it! Don't know how to design that façade — put green on it! Bus stops seem good enough already, NO! PUT SOME GREEN ON IT! Our cities have gotten green with envy of their once contradictive relationship with nature. As populations boom and consumption patterns exponentially increase, painting the town green makes us all feel better about our personal behavior. And spatial designers cannot help ourselves in incorporating this, all to often merely aesthetic, movement. For example, Stefano Boeri's recent tower in Milan "clad" in trees. It is praised by many environmentalists. But one has to wonder how much extra concrete and steel,

and therefore carbon, was necessary to hold up those trees? And how much water needs to be pumped up the façade and used to water them? Obviously the High Line cannot be solely faulted for these realities. But shouldn't we as spatial designers be more critical? Shouldn't we be talking more about what is often behind this green movement — the green of money? More on this later…

Historical Fiction
But let's expand on that notion of "put some green on it". In spite of the previously existing qualities of the space, for it to function as a publicly accessible park, things had to change. Simultaneously, the public had in their collective minds the powerful imagery of the photographs by Joel Sternfeld. Therefore the designers and construction company went to great lengths (and costs) to both remove EVERYTHING from the top of the top surface and to put the new rails PRECISELY where

the old ones had lain.

This adaptive reuse project frames the debates of historic preservation flourishing in our profession today. Koolhaas and a pile of others have weighed in on the matter. Certainly one can reflect on China tearing down villages and rebuilding them completely anew with western shopping destinations replacing villagers homes. But the location of metal lines for trains to ride on being treated as sacred? Where pedestrians and flowers will now flourish? And where previously no pedestrian was permitted? This is just silly. It is nostalgia for the unknown. Yet this is indicative of many projects where designers meticulously replace old realities anew, all in the name of "preservation".

Commodification+Gentrification

As was alluded to previously, the High Line is currently littered with selfie stick swinging outsiders wanting to capture and share their moment upon the now global icon. Further, it featured celebrity endorsements by folks such as of Edward Norton[4]; predating the interests in the profession from the likes of Brad Pitt and Kanye West. But let's back up. What allowed all of this hype to occur? This was a massively expensive project. How (and why!) did the city justify funding such an investment in a formerly industrial area that had already started to slowly transform?

The answer: the transfer of development rights. To give the short story, the city planning department set in place rules that lessoned the heights of buildings adjacent to the Line to buildings. And transferred those development rights to other buildings in the area that were far enough back to not affect views and light along the pathway. The future tax revenue generated from these new, more dense, and more commercially viable properties was "borrowed" to pay for current investments. And clearly, it worked. In fact, it worked so well that initial zoning provisions encouraging connections to the new park were soon being competed for by the many new developers. In order to obtain the right of access, for their often high end residential pro-

jects, the developers were fighting to get cultural entities to function as partners/tenants so they would make their bid for direct High Line access more appealing. Further, it is to be noted that the new Whitney Museum of American Art by Renzo Piano has relocated from its seemingly prestigious Madison Avenue location to this area. All of this is exciting, but at what cost?

Obviously the wave of development happening in the Chelsea area and in places like Hudson Yards cannot be solely laid at the foot of the High Line. After all, this is in Manhattan, redevelopment in the area predated the project, and this sort of neighborhood transformation is happening in many places all over the city and the world. We can certainly have a long winded discussion in relation to terms of urban development vs gentrification. But that is not the point. The work of the city, designers, and activists unquestionably accelerated the transformation of the neighborhood. And that is more to the point. This project reflects a new reality for spatial practitioners. It is not merely about investing in our communities — but how precisely? And what impact might those investments have? Fundamentally, who has the right to the city? How can we practitioners be more responsible? And to whom exactly? For example, we have always assumed parks improve cities. It seems inherently true. But if the High Line is drawing tourists, pricing out locals and drawing in more commercial entities — is Chelsea better for it? Is New York better? And of course, who decides? This is highly debatable. And that is the issue at hand. We as spatial designers have to debate and rethink our modes of operation and projects such as the High Line highlight these new issues facing our profession.

A Brand New World

I tell my students now, that when I reflect back on my days in university, it was such a different time. Cities were in trouble in the 70s/80s. Many people were literally scared of them and fleeing to the suburbs. Urban centers were seen as being for pioneers. We designers just dreamed of how we could make our cities more palatable to more

© David Schankbone

1.
Side bar. I find it maddening that architects will refer to it as a DS+R project and fail to mention Field Operations. How could one look at that project and possibly mention DR+S first!? And not FO at all!?
2.
Mr. Foster, are you serious?!
3.
Ok, perhaps only spatial design households. Has a horticulturalist ever been famous before?
4.
FYI, Norton's grandfather was James Rouse of The Rouse Company. One of the most influential development firms in North America, with iconic projects like Faneuil Hall Marketplace — the initiator of the 'festival marketplace' typology.

people. No one was wondering: "what we do if we make urban spaces too nice"; or "what we do if too many people wanted to live there?!". In just a generation our society's relationship with urban environments has fundamentally shifted. And therefore our role as spatial practitioners is rapidly working to keep up.

The High Line, a truly wonderful place and project, is indicative of this shifting playing field on which we are operating upon. I mean the idea of the question: "what if this beautiful, beloved, iconic park was bad for the city and our citizens?". Who could have seen that coming? It is a brand new game that we are all playing.

Naples Underground

Lucia Tozzi

There is nothing to do, architects like soaring up high. They want to expand into light, into space, occupy the air, the sky, they want to *cubate*. They love extrovert and recognisable forms. Digging is stuff for moles, ants, for intellectuals at the most, for psychoanalysts. Worse still, for engineers.

Geoff Manaugh can write as much as he likes in his blog BLDGBLOG, he can relate the wonders of the hypogeal space through books and films, images and drawings: he hasn't enough gear to convince them, neither do the other lovers of the underground, who in the end are considered little more than a bunch of fanatics. Architects proudly resists with their noses up high.

For over twenty years, one of the more extraordinary public spaces ever created in Italy or in Europe has been under construction in Naples, yet architects have hardly noticed. They have been visiting MAXXI, the Prada Foundation, even the mediocre complex of Porta Nuova in Milan, they have raged about the EXPO gate or Renzo Piano's Turin skyscraper, but few have had a ride on Naples's underground, and those few feel they are cultivated explorers.

The funniest thing is that such infrastructure is one of the very few contemporary underground transport systems that for outspoken political will — basically Antonio Bassolino's, then mayor of the city, never betrayed by his successors — involved prestigious architects in designing the stations, with the aim of creating quality spaces. And,

what is even more, it has been conceived within the framework of a public transport plan which has integrated urban planning, meaning that stations were not positioned according to the logic of transport engineers and the real estate, but in function of public interest, that is of the inhabitants, and above all that the squares and the streets in which the entrances are located were improved and redesigned very carefully, both in the finest areas and in the more degraded neighbourhoods.

Over a period of time that seems extremely long yet is quite proportioned to the orographic complexity, the presence of the sea and tuff caves and the incredible archaeological stratification, the progress of works, articulated by the opening of each single station, has objectively freed tens and then hundreds of thousand of Neapolitans from their dependence on cars. But while in Rome, in Milan and about everywhere else such spaces of transit keep being designed in an almost exclusively functional way, if everything goes well (one has to think of the very recent line 5 of Milan's underground, which is squalid beside being structured over a demented route), in Naples it was decided to monumentalize them, to make them not only comfortable places, but also a source of aesthetic pleasure, in order to reverse the feeling of stress and degradation commonly associated with everyday movement in this city.

Critical misfortunes

How does one go about explaining such a low-key critical response? Why bottom page articles, or second level, shorts, or in women's publications, touristic brochures, tired reproductions of press releases, even advertorials? Why didn't those papers that devote whole spreads of the cultural section to the tiniest intervention by Renzo Piano's team in a local market of Lorenteggio send their top journalists for a reportage in Naples? Why do architecture magazines publish only paid inserts on the subject? Why don't the architects involved list their stations among the projects in their own websites?

It doesn't take a clairvoyant to guess that communication was poorly managed, not for lack of zeal but as a result of an excessive control by the concessionary company: choosing always the role of the sponsor in cultural events and in publications, they have actually inhibited for market reasons the critique's exercise, even positive, that a project of such dimensions would have naturally stimulated. Who would invite you to a Biennale if you have already bought a pavilion? And what publisher would ever commission a serious piece of writing when you have already paid a hefty sum for a special insert? And if publications are all institutional, and as such the result of endless mediation between political, academic and economic powers, how accessible could the contents be and how effective the publicity?

However, to ascribe the whole responsibility of this media failure to the awkwardness of creators and promoters of the underground would be stupid. The diffidence and the disinterest towards this work in the world of architecture have many explanations, some even rea-
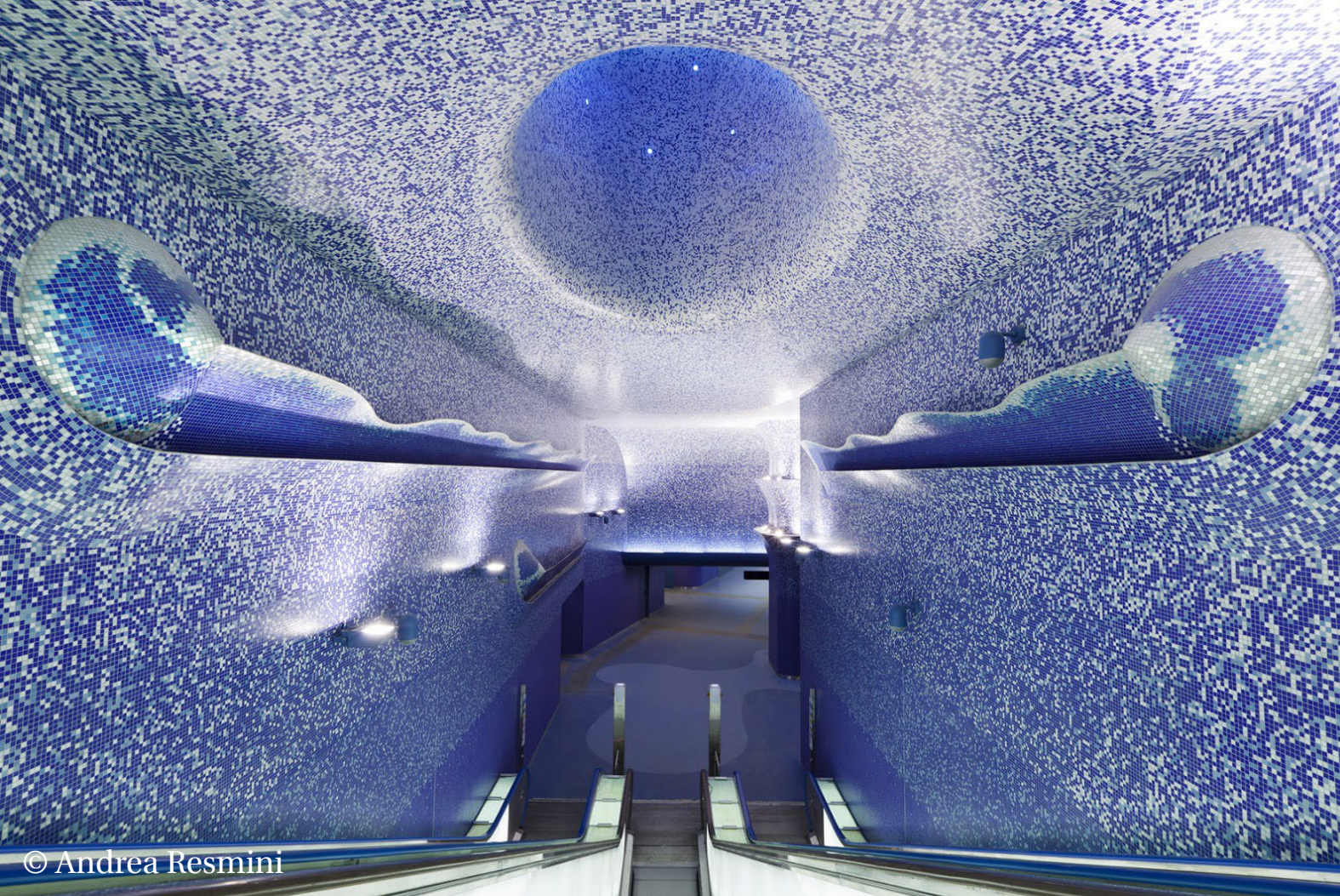
© Andrea Resmini

sonable. The choice of the architects, for one: Mendini, Gae Aulenti, Fuksas, Perrault himself among others, are not among the most loved on the national and international scene (but Siza, Souto De Moura, Karim Rashid or Tusquets already much more). They aren't "sexy" enough or even sound controversial. The results, in such a complex piece of work, one that is fragmented in space and time, are then very diverse, and the same concept of each station corresponds to tastes that are absolutely heterogeneous. There also exists a reason of a social order: like every major infrastructure, the underground concentrated on itself funds and energies that could have been distributed otherwise in the city, particularly in the suburbs, and this dampens the enthusiasm of many that in theory could have been attracted by a high quality public service. Finally, but perhaps this is the most important element, the size of the architectural project is more difficult to identify compared to a building or even an airport. Who defines the spaces, an architect or an engineer? Does the architect draw the itineraries or do they confines themselves to choosing the materials,

to the installation and the decoration? Does anyone notice that the underground space was designed or are the artworks the only things people notice? Let us proceed orderly.

Project development

The earliest core of this design story goes back to the involvement of Alessandro Mendini and Achille Bonito Oliva. Mendini, in particular, took care of the Salvator Rosa and Materdei stations (opened between 2001 and 2003), but above all built the archetype for the interventions of those architects that would afterwards work with the remaining stations. The contamination of art and architecture, which suited him particularly well, and a unitary design of the underground as well as overground space, that is of the station's interior space along with the surrounding urban context, were the cornerstones of such infrastructure, and it was Mendini who first formalized them in this context. The exit of Salvator Rosa station, in particular, was an apparently inextricable urban challenge, a fragmented void in the middle of the backside of blocks of flats that were the outcome of the worst real estate speculation, whereas Mendini's project recomposes the pieces in a sort of urban mega-installation, transforming the blind walls into painted canvases and linking with stairs and footpaths the different heights of the pseudo-square. The entrance to the underground is a building in the form of a shrine in a perfect Mendinian style and the deep ramp leading down to the platforms is a jubilation of fluorescent colours covered with artworks, including Perino e Vele's iconic Fiat 500s.

In this, as well as in the other stations, the selection of artists and works was curated by Achille Bonito Oliva, who was offered the prestigious assignment in the heyday of contemporary art in Naples, that is when Bassolino, in his first years as a mayor, decided to give a very strong signal of cultural renovation with concentrating on art in public spaces with the installations in Piazza Plebiscito, the exhibitions at the Museo Archeologico, to continue with the new museums Madre and Pan, up to the so-called "art stations". In the occasion,
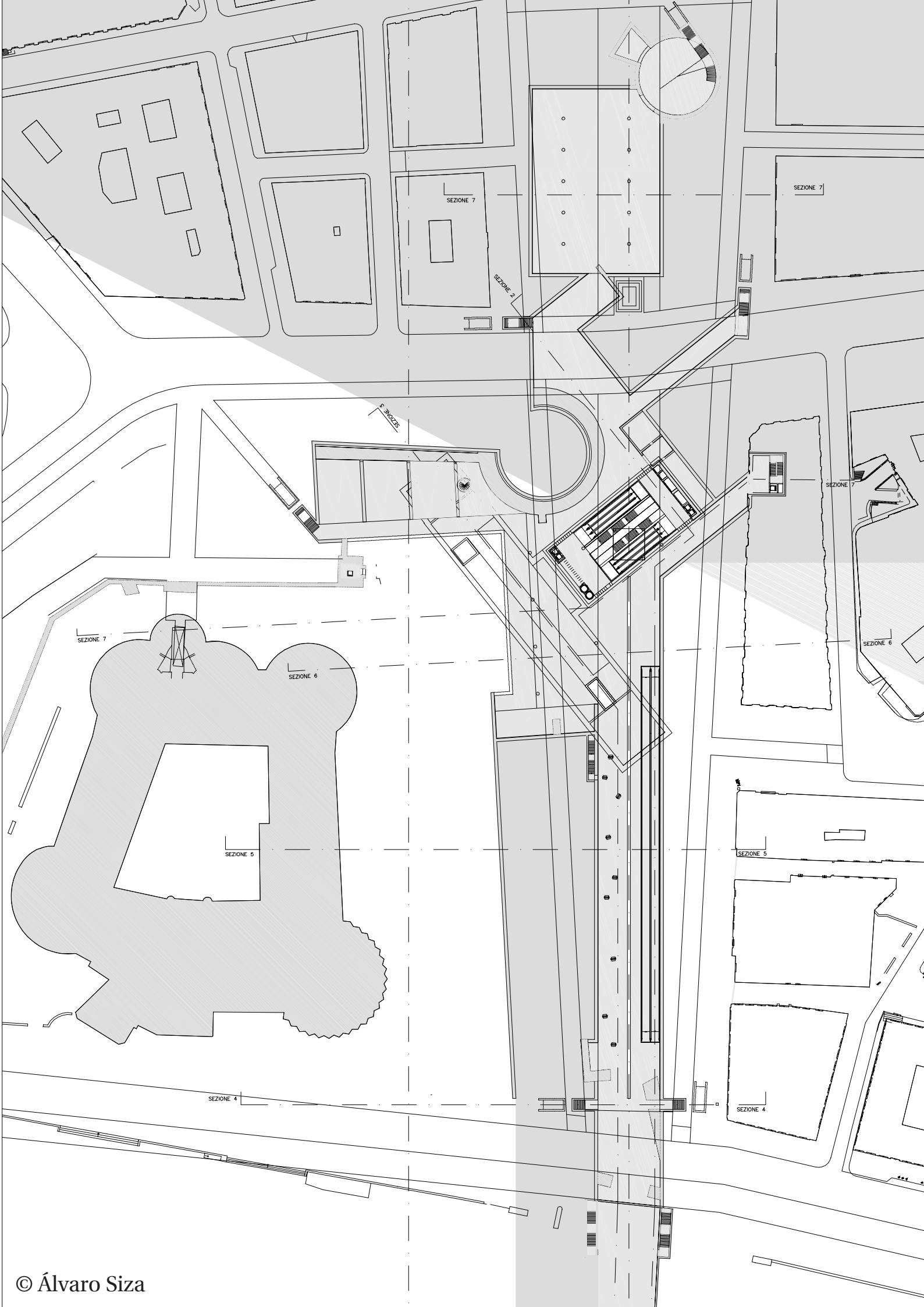
ABO coined a slogan that turned out to be very auspicious in terms of publicity yet deeply unfortunate on the semantic level, "the obligatory museum", which implied that thenceforward any user of the underground, whether they liked it or not, would have to take in their dose of Transavanguardia and Arte Povera, Clemente's and De Maria's mosaics as well as Pistoletto's mirrors, Kounellis's rails with used shoes, Kosuth's neon lights and Mimmo Jodice's photographs — prevailingly installed in Gae Aulenti's Dante and Museo stations (opened in 2001-2003), whose spaces remind one very clearly of an art gallery.

As in the end it wasn't difficult to foresee, such a blatantly 1980's connotation in a Zero years public space ended up producing some resistance, albeit never too vocal. In fact, the stations commissioned just after and finished in more recent years or still in progress, Municipio (opened in 2015 but still in a stage of completion) Garibaldi (2014), Toledo (2012), Università (2011), Aeroporto (in progress), Centro direzionale (in progress), were assigned to architects such as Oscar Tusquets, Karim Rashid, Dominique Perrault, Richard Rogers, studio EMBT and to the sublime pair Siza-Souto de Moura, and house artworks by William Kentridge or Bob Wilson. Yet what has changed isn't only the international allure and the alignment to a taste that is more widely shared. In most cases the design of interior and external spaces – also thanks to a process which has expanded in time following the extraordinary archaeological findings – has become dominant compared to the display of artworks. Piazza Municipio (by Siza and Souto de Moura), already open but still unfinished, is an immense stage set showing the Spanish walls discovered under the Maschio Angioino, to arrive layer after layer down to the famed roman ships, with a unique, very imposing system of stairs. Karim Rashid (Università) created an undivided space, bright and coloured like a discotheque, from the platforms to the exit, completely covered with a vocabulary of signs of his own invention, as well as in the main mezzanine, supported by four black pillars freely inspired by Bertarelli's Profilo continuo del Duce, which more than Mussolini remind one of Dart Vader. Toledo station, which all considered is the best loved to date, was conceived

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by Tusquets as a progressive immersion into the ground to sea level, accompanied by the shimmering mosaics that cover entirely the liquid forms of the walls. The wells of light opening like gashes over the spectator's head, Kentridge's wall processions of Neapolitan subject, Bob Wilson's lightboxes with waves build up a seamless environment, one of an infinite sensory power, resulting in a daily experience that bears no comparison with the one that a commuter in Turin or Paris or anywhere else may have.

There certainly is the recent case of Stockholm, an international paradigm, or the historical underground systems of the Soviet tradition or American modernism. And coincidentally we are always talking about operations that were born in a political context strongly oriented towards income redistribution and the struggle against inequality, the type of instances that today's fashion likes to define "populist". Because monumentalizing the underground space is the anti-Thatcher and anti-liberal symbol par excellence. It is the opposite of skyscrapers named after banks, but it also is, contrary to the commonplace which sees them associated, the opposite of a grand event: the underground transforms public money into artworks that are permanent and open to everyone, whereas the EXPO and the World Cup concentrate the same money in spaces that are restricted and temporary, extra-ordinary, in a regime of emergency.

Still, going back to the initial questions, why are architects distancing themselves from an intervention which is unique in the Italian scenario? Why does the need, however legitimate, to call oneself "non-mendinian" prevail? Or the dissociation from the taste of this or that construction, more or less accomplished, in relation to a grandiose operation which on the whole proves generous?

Aside form the swanky type, who isn't interested as a matter of principle, the only plausible answer lies in the aversion for the nature of such an operation, which is intrinsically tied to compromise. An underground system will never have the coherence and design lightness of New York's Highline or of a Japanese school, only to quote two universally appreciated examples. The underground is mired in power and propaganda, its burdensome decisional processes reflect themselves unpleasantly onto the chain of people that are called to participate in those decisions, spaces and decorations are the result of endless mediations with the claims of safety, slowness, even opportunism. Above all, the underground is by necessity a hierarchic enterprise, it is made and wanted "from high up", and it is in fact one of those complex systems that seem to be there with the sole aim of burying the archetypes of common good, open source, sharing economy, self-management – like healthcare infrastructures, for example.

So, an underground system offers too much resistance to the archistar's overflowing ego and is uncomfortably reactionary in the eyes of those anarcho-foucaldian architects who produce the bulk of theory. Fortunately it is appreciated by users, and this is a phenomenon that architects are not always happy to accept.

References
An easily consultable timeline, albeit not really updated, can be found on: http://www.tiki-toki.com/timeline/entry/234164/COMPLETAMENTO-LINEA-1-METROPOLITANA-DI-NAPOLI/#vars!date=2018-10-29_19:13:01!

A short guide to the artworks and the architects is published on ANM's website: http://www.anm.it/index.php?option=com_content&task=view&id=687&Itemid=295

(Un)compromising

Luca Silenzi / Spacelab Architects

Architecture is positive, optimistic by definition. Everyday as designers we solve problems, we see beyond what is here and now. We put great effort turning any constraint in to a resource, a vantage point from which to come up with new ideas, to test new visions.

But I think it's time to liberate this amazing discipline from a fairly widespread misunderstanding, often fuelled by the designers themselves, or by too many curators of exhibitions and architecture shows around the world in which architects are called to display their works: a totally wrong idea underlying the perception that people have of architecture, based on the mythological figure of the architect-demiurge, lonely creator of beauty.

Actually, every good architecture hides a great journey, a complex formative process by which it was, concretely, generated. In which architects/architecture studios are talented directors of a team of different, multidisciplinary professionals, each one with its own key-role: and here at Spacelab we often[1] find these processes much more intriguing than projects themselves.

Starting from these observations, I'd like to take a peek at the seemingly mundane issues faced by architecture during the design and construction process. Trying to understand to what extent these issues have affected the final result, beyond the "creative" hagiography. Finally putting to light that one of the fundamental characteristics of

a project worthy of respect is its ability to successfully govern complexity, generating a remarkable, consistent synthesis made of space, materials, and meaning.

The good compromise
We are so confident about being independent. We pride ourselves on our autonomy, on the purity of our concepts and their immediate translation into the hieratic spaces we are used to designing. Maybe we even come to think of being creators, freethinkers devoid from the constraints of reality and its load of mediocrity. Free to go our own way, paved of our unique personality, capable of inventing entire worlds from scratch.

But deep down we know we lie, though without malice, to ourselves. Because, if we live and work in the real world, we know that here things don't work that way. Here in the real world we can easily realize that architecture, without *compromise*, could not ever exist. Every design project is not only a creation of its author. And architecture *is not a creation at all*, but an amazingly complex process, necessarily linked to a whole series of issues and external influences that can not be neglected.

That's it. When out of its empyrean comfort zone it materializes into reality, architecture has necessarily to deal with gravity, with physical and dynamic forces, with context constraints, with local and national building laws. With *Genius Loci*. With the client desiderata and idiosyncrasies. With politics. With time. With climate. With budget. With the people who will use its space. Every architecture is bound to draw a direction among all these relationships, finding its special way to address all those issues in a physical, technical, technological outcome, if possible also featuring an effective spatial and architectural sense.

And probably one of the most interesting — and also the most underrated — features of architecture is this tortuous path that each project is forced to face to be actually realized. Because architecture is never,

by definition, an instant work. And many projects — unfortunately, or luckily in some cases — do not survive this complex process, and remain frozen in amazing renderings, dotted with evanescent ghosts in spaces that will never see the real life. Other projects suffer such twists that make them at last unrecognizable from how they were conceived.

What we see and recognize out there as 'state of the art' architecture, was not created like magic. Behind it, there is a huge effort: a long process of evolution and refinement of the design concept, which has to cope with and overcome countless trials.
A journey in which architecture (the design project) plays a key role, ruling in the background of spatial composition also other cultural, technical, structural, bureaucratic and diplomatic factors — most of them formerly unknown! A skill which in some cases makes an architecture a true masterpiece. I would say, *despite everything*.

It happens in every design project. The original idea is repeatedly debated, disowned, repudiated, made born again, renegotiated, adapted, stripped, distilled, mediated, revalued: by designers, by clients, by stakeholders, by bureaucratic administrations, by social representatives, by the citizens directly or indirectly involved.
A long, endless sequence of choices and crossroads, not always consistent and coherent. Where choosing how to negotiate (or opt out of negotiating) a compromise can lead to totally different results: see, for example, the American Folk Art Museum issue, a sad example of a downwards compromise outcome.

And the built result, often gone very far away from the former hypotheses, will be the more interesting the higher are the trading skills and resilience of the design team — definitely who take technical responsibility of such choices — adapting the design to external conditions: physical, bureaucratic, economic, social, geopolitical.

It becomes far too easy to refute a suppository, golden autonomy of

architecture if we think, for example, to its close relationship with power, or capital.

Well, I could give countless incontrovertible examples proving that this relationship has always existed, and indeed it is often today as yesterday so much inherent in built architecture as a basic condition of its existence in this world.

Above 98% of the world park of contemporary and historical buildings protected by UNESCO, that we all admire and appreciate, is the result of a series of positive compromises, carefully negotiated one by one by their respective authors towards the clients — high priest, king, sovereign, merchant, patron, authoritarian hierarch, more or less enlightened bourgeois — which gave them the assignment.

So: pristine, amazing built results are the outcome of discussions dealt on tables infinitely broader and more complex than the cliché of a comforting and romantic design studio.

In every single project, "Authorship" and "Consistency", those simplifications that we are often forced to use to the advantage of a romantic storytelling, have to deal with issues far more pragmatic and probably even more interesting. At least useful to understand how, in the real world, real architecture is actually generated.

Design is negotiating
So: if we try to trace the evolutionary processes leading built architecture from the napkin sketch, "in the beginning", to the final form, the brick-and-mortar outcome, we might get some great surprises. For each building we could observe and highlight its consistency, its ability to adapt, or — even better — its ability to proactively negotiate the necessary compromises and trade-offs that had to deal with along the process.

I'll make some examples of different kinds and sizes to better argue my statement.

Take the Parrish Art Museum by Herzog & De Meuron (Water Mill,
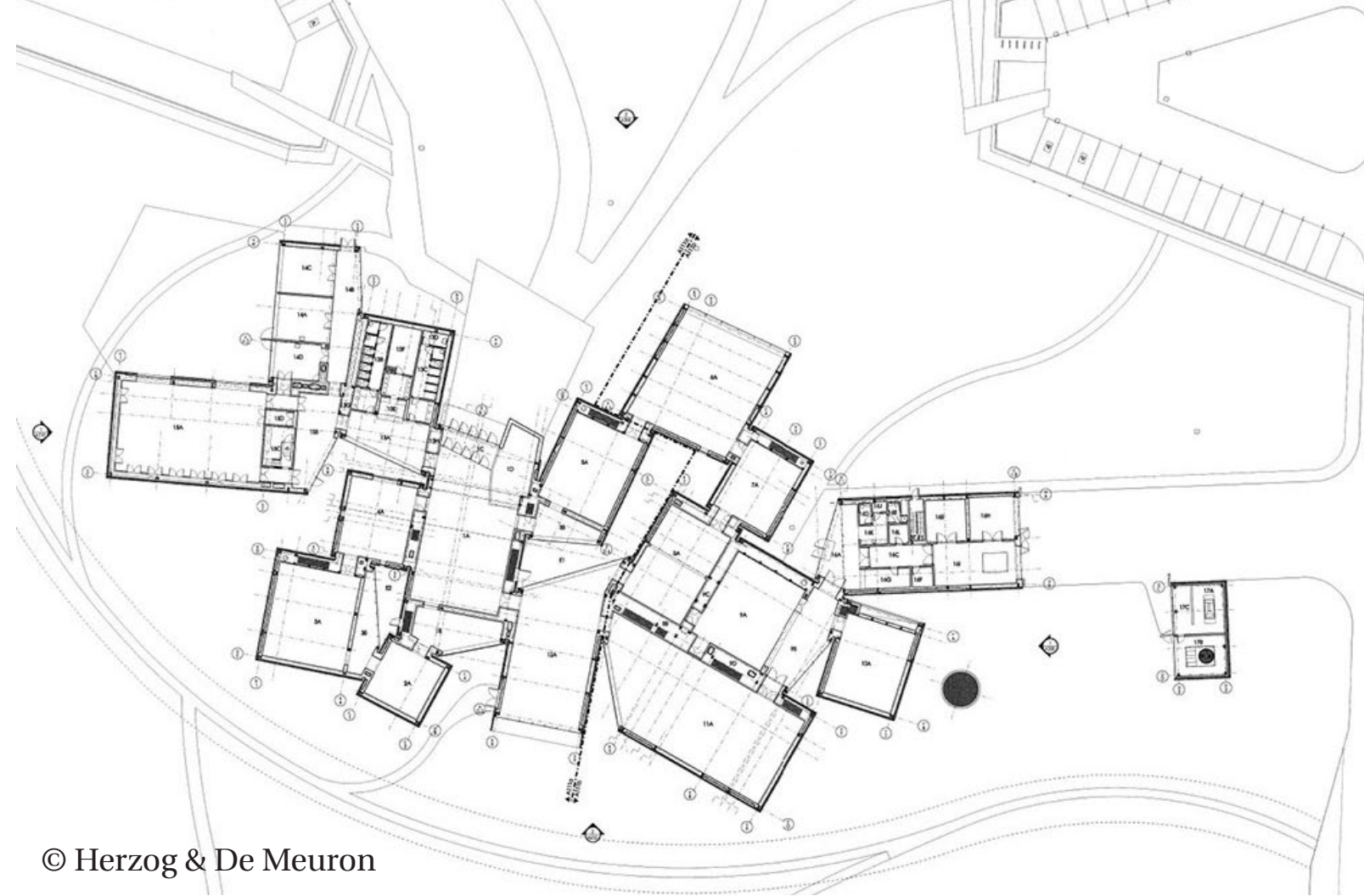
© Herzog & De Meuron

Long Island, NY 2006-2012). In 2005, the institution acquired an area of 57,000 sqm in Long Island to achieve a new, ambitious venue approximately 3,5km away the original building. Herzog & De Meuron studio was selected among 65 international candidates, and commissioned to design the new building with a more than adequate budget of 80.000.00 USD.

The Swiss duo, with partner Ascan Mergenthaler supervisor of the project team, played[2] the theme not so much as a mere collections-container, but as a plastic expression of a community of artists placed in their natural space, made of bright environments able to capture all the nuances of the particular light of this part of Long Island.

The result, visible in the design renderings produced for the early press release, was an informal composition of slightly different faceted volumes, a cluster of polygonal pavilions intended as "artist-spaces" freely juxtaposed in an extremely casual ensemble. Each volume
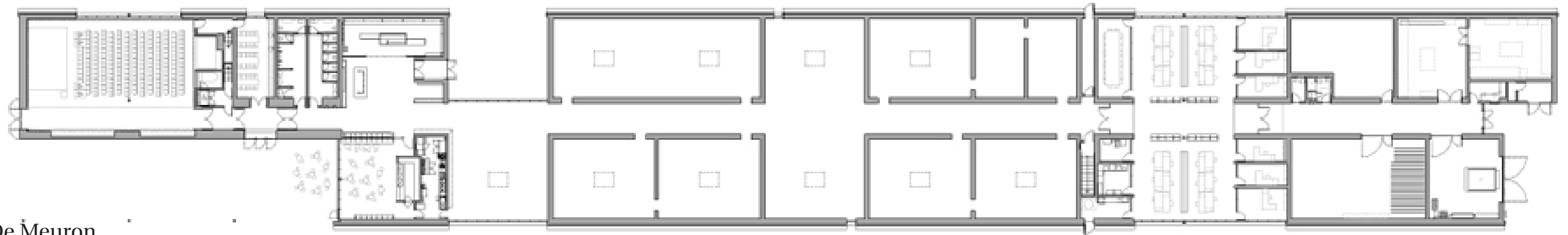
© Herzog & De Meuron

represented a gallery-studio, and would host the monographic works of an artist, with some "anchoring galleries" for the most important collections, for temporary exhibitions or for the common services.

The 2008 global financial crisis led to a drastic reduction of available funds, reduced to less than a third (26.200.000 USD). And the project for the Parrish had to be adjusted[3] accordingly. The work of the design team was targeted to typological optimization and cost containment, with a result that, at least in my opinion, has gained in authenticity, with the charm and understatement of the most mature works of H&DeM.

Literally re-formed by the recession — and, like the previous version, conceptually based on the "artist's studio" tipology, in this case achieved subdividing a linear space as extrusion of a minimal hut-shaped cross section — this project is an example of a successfull negotiation with something so diriment for an architecture, as the budget may be: in fact, the economic constraints, translated positively and with very firm hand in a clearer strategy of site-occupation, in the typology simplification and wise choice of materials, proved in hindsight great opportunities to explore the values of a simpler composition able to offer a clearer spatial experience and better adherence to the program.

Another example of compromise with the design constraints — that led to more interesting results if compared to the premises — is

MVRDV's Glass Farm (Schijndel, NL, 2011-2013): this project too has twisted due to criticism from local associations and Schijndel municipality, who forced the otherwise nonchalant authors to the maximum respect of the context with a low-profile design.
Necessary, absolute respect of the municipal building code and sensitivity towards the vernacular context materialized in a smart design solution that successfully hides sculpted shapes and an advanced curtain-wall in a reassuring and friendly image, achieved by silk-screen-printing traditional materials on the glass facade.

OMA, with an epic design group led by Rem Koolhaas and the collaboration of Madelon Vriesendorp, in 1980 won the competition for the design of an extension of a "circus theater" in Scheveningen, a seaside resort near The Hague. In 1984, on the basis of a new brief for the construction of what would become the Netherlands Dans Theatre, the project was changed significantly and adapted to a brand new site, the Spui Complex, in the center of The Hague[4].
The new context — an area undergoing substantial transformations — was bound by existing, quite strong elements: two slabs, the slope of an abandoned project for an innercity motorway, the axis towards the Houses of Parliament, the site for the future Town Hall, besides a 17th century church — a lonely memory of the once historical centre.

In this case it was necessary for the project to negotiate a triple compromise: a radical change of site, a modification of the functional program, and not least to accomplish the work with a ridiculously low

budget. The result was a real architectural miracle: a 54.000mq completed building with the equivalent of only 5.000.000 EUR. A place with a legendary quality for dance events, with a clear and unobstructed view of the entire stage (and — not a detail — of every dancer feet on it) from each one of the 1.001 seats in the main auditorium. The OMA's NDT was universally recognized as one of the best dance venues in the world.

Unfortunately the last performance hosted by this building was held on May 17, 2015: the NDT is now under the blows of hammers, and will be completely demolished[5] before being rebuilt in another area of the city, with a doubled surface and a budget 35 times greater than the original one. But I am sure that the legacy of this magnificent OMA debut building, an urban device of great complexity settled without apparent effort — one of the most successful examples of positive negotiation between many seemingly conflicting issues — has already been transmitted, and in countless ways.

At the opposite end of the NDT example, sometimes architects and design teams have to lead towards humanly achievable reality the somewhat megalomaniac desires of particularly whimsical clients, in processes that resemble the so-called "first world problems": frustrations and very-special requests by very-special clients on details that could be solved in many other — far more simple — ways, and with a more than acceptable aesthetic and technical outcome.

We can include these dynamics in the system of relations between architecture and power, and many designers and design teams have been very effective in exploiting with intelligence these opportunities to raise the bar of in-depth technical level — and the consequent built result — of architecture.

A particularly good example of the "ideal of maniacal perfection" that inevitably comes to terms with the "deceitful world in which we all live" is the Apple Campus II: "The Mothership", as they jokingly call the next Apple headquarters in Cupertino, California — or what in fact will be the *Steve Jobs mausoleum*.

© OMA
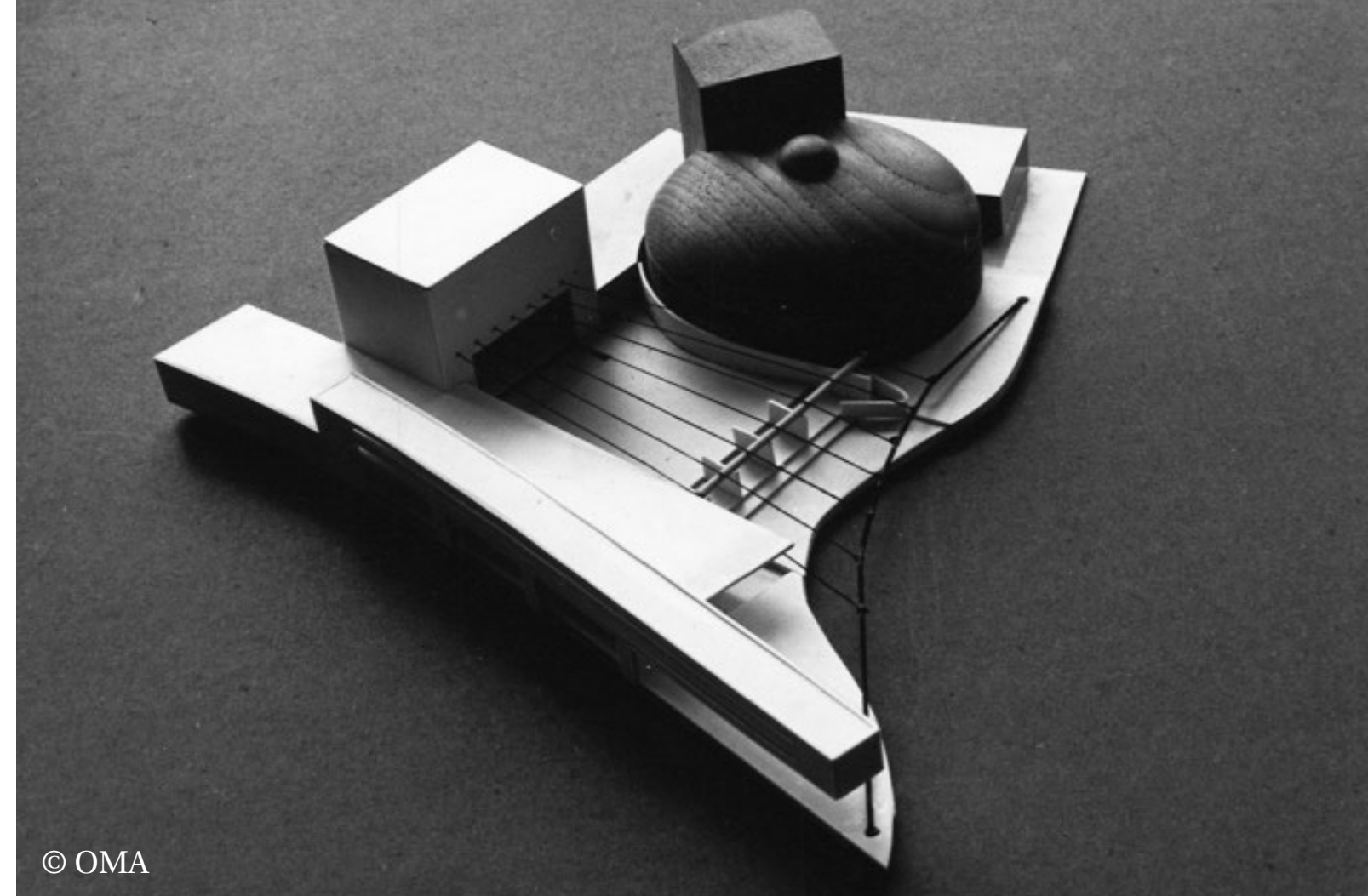
A project worth 5.000.000.000 USD[6] to be built at any cost, seemingly without compromise, challenging the physical and technological limitations of building materials, plant engineering and curtain-wall systems wisely selected by the client — Jobs himself, in his last months of life.

Apple Inc. is asking Foster & Partners design and construction standards hardly ever achieved in architecture, «pushing the boundaries of technology in almost every aspect», with the words of the project manager Stephan Behling[7]: inter alia, the glass structural function will be brought to unseen-before outcomes, with seemingly weightless roofs that apparently defy gravity — and actually will come to terms with this inevitable law of physics in a technically unprecedented and extremely elegant way.

It will be interesting to see if the result of this forcibly-upward compromise will actually represent a new, shiny benchmark for manufacturing precision in architecture: in this case, since Apple is frequently found to generate archetypes, I would welcome any form of emula-

tion in this sense — even outside of the product design world, and beyond the formal aspect of this mastodontic building, that at least for now leaves many of us quite perplexed.

With the aforementioned examples I intended to raise the question of what — really — architecture is, trying to highlight the underlying reasons why it is such a special discipline between the major arts: among these reasons there is probably an accurate skill in keeping productively together many seemingly unrelated aspects — some authorial, others really trivial and practical — in a unique, magnificent, consistent work. A work able to get out from the empyrean of *pure creation* and overcome, hopefully brilliantly, the test of the facts.

1.
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Curating as form of criticism?

Léa-Catherine Szacka

Much ink has been spilled over the first Chicago Architecture Biennial (CAB)[1]. We know that the exhibition, taking place at the very hearth of United States' modernity, was curated by art directors Joseph Grima and Sarah Herda. We were also told that the CAB, the first event of the genre to be grounded in North American soil, was strongly supported by Chicago's mayor, Rahm Emanuel, and sponsored by "supermajor" oil and gas company BP (former British Petroleum). While some praised the show for being the emergence of a new generation that understands the great agency of architecture, others, condemned it for its lack of clarity and the weight of its venue. Yet one question remains: What is (or what should be) the role of such an event within today's architectural discourse?

In response to the question raised by this issue of *Viceversa* dedicated to the "critiques of architectures", I would like, not to offer yet another general critique of the CAB, but rather to ask the following question: Can Architecture Biennials and Triennials act as a form of discourse and criticism, beyond and above the presentation or representation of specific works by selected architects? In other words, can large-scale architecture exhibitions be more that just engine of legitimization, offering a tribune to architects, the majority of which are already part of a system that too often repeats itself? Moved by a common attempt to be more than mere vitrines, it looks like the Architecture Biennials and Triennials of the last few years (Venice but also Lisbon, Oslo, Shenzhen and now Chicago) are facing an identity crisis. Should they be, as suggested by Rem Koolhaas in 2014, research based events

oriented towards a form of knowledge production? Or should they, like at the 2013 Lisbon Triennial, go out in the street and question architecture's agency in contemporary cities? Should they lead to concrete urban transformation and act as launching platforms for cities that seek to renew themselves? Or should they address hot topics and thus contribute to offer insightful reflections on society, transforming the architect in an intellectual that raises awareness on the problems of the world, and even, maybe proposes solutions? At a moment in which architecture exhibitions, and more particularly large-scale periodic events, are booming it is important to reflect on the role of these events within the larger architecture culture.

Mapping the current state of architectural criticism, the issue 81 of OASE — *Constructing Criticism* — published in 2010, suggested that criticism is an attempt to bridge the gap between theory and practice, an activity that entails both the judgment of what is genuine and valuable and mediating between avant-garde and a wider audience that is often reluctant to accept the new. Likewise, in *Does Architecture Criticism Matter?*[2], a text published in the April 2014 edition of Domus, architectural historian Joseph Rykwert was questioning the role of architectural criticism in the era of starchitecture. «I have always believed that the critic must be a fighter», wrote Rykwert. «To do so, they must of course have a base from which to operate — not only the obvious one of a newspaper, periodical, radio or television program or even a blog — that will make their views public, but they must, more intimately, have a clearly articulated notion of what they think society must expect of its builders». These references offer valuable insight when assessing the role of the CAB and other similar events.

Titled *The State of the Art of Architecture* — in reference to a 1977 homonym event organized by Stanley Tigerman for the Graham Foundation — the first CAB did not proposed a single theme or problematic, but rather wanted to feel a generation while becoming 'a platform for groundbreaking architectural projects and spatial experiments that demonstrate how creativity and innovation can radically trans-

form our lived experience.'[3] As explained by Tigerman himself (today aged 85), whilst the 1977 event presented nothing but Anglo-Americans white males, the 2015 exhibition was global — including architects from various backgrounds and origins spanning five continents — with one third of the participants being women[4]. This global and highly inclusive twist, together with the fact that, during the days of its inauguration, the CAB was at the center of architecture's media world attention — not only discussed at dinner parties and in architectural blogs and magazines, but also in daily newspapers such as The Guardian, LA Times or, of course, The Chicago Tribune — suggests that the event is an definitely an architectural project of its own, paradigmatic of our time.

The exhibition took place in the lavish Chicago Cultural Center, a space which presence is at the antipodes of the white cube. There, a collection of objects and projects offered an overview of pressing global issues. As rightfully written by Rob Wilson for Uncube, it was «a fascinating collection of snapshots but remains a collection non the less, too diffuse to be saying anything despite attempting to tick all boxes from the pragmatic to the fantastical»[5]. And if the collection remains scattered, its overall meaning hard to grasp, as many critics have implied, the most impressive part of this first CAB were the few live performances that took place during the opening days. One in particular: *We Know How to Order* conceived by architect Bryony Roberts, choreographed by Asher Waldron and performed by the South Shore Drill Team, offered a glimpse into the power of Architecture Biennials as form of criticism.

We Know How to Order was ephemeral — only performed a few times during the opening days of the CAB in front of Mies Van der Rohe's Federal Center — yet it will survive thanks to the countless snapshot that circulated the net and, more importantly so thanks to the official video shot by Andy Resek[6]. Robert's site-specific project was a way of ordering bodies in the contemporary cities by performing high-energy drill routines infused with street choreography. Playing on the
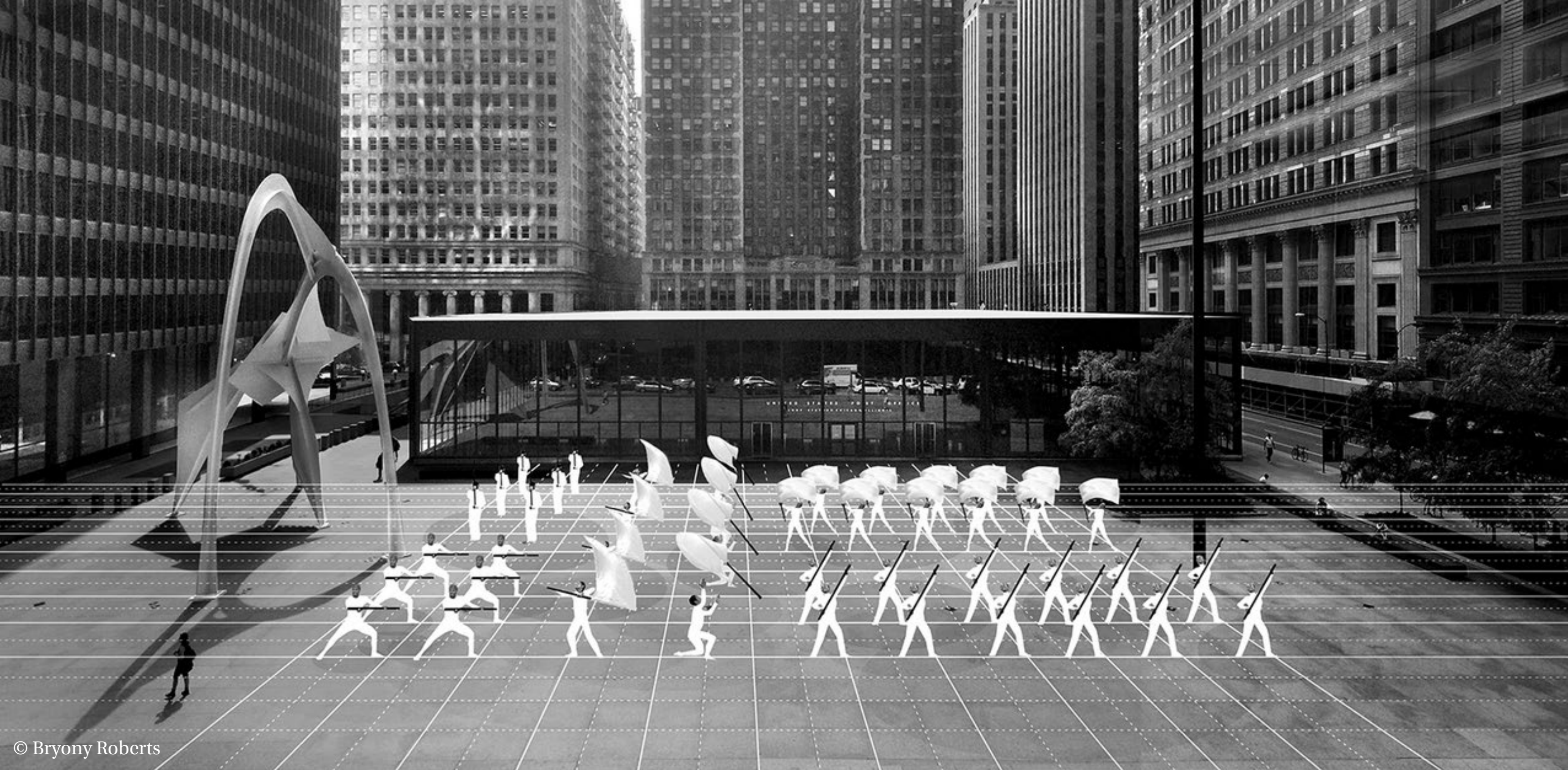
© Bryony Roberts

idea of the grid — the 4'-8" module that governs the architecture of the Federal Center and that of the South Shore Drill Team Routine that «transform conventional military drills into expressive fusions of street moves, flag tossing and rifle spinning»[7] — *We Know How To Order* «superimposes multiple systems of order onto each other — street choreography onto precision drills onto the Federal Center»[8]. It also refers to the history of Chicago, more particularly addressing racial issues.

With *We Know How To Order* it seems that the CAB achieve something more: it truly and significantly (albeit very briefly) entered in dialogue with the city of Chicago and its inhabitants, bridging ideas (theory) with some of Chicago's greater architectural masterpiece (practice), while mediating a form of judgment. The performance caught the attention of a large number of passer by whom, for a moment, directed their distracted gaze towards one of Chicago's greatest piece of architecture and urban public space. In this sense, it called «attention to

the accessibility of public space in the U.S. — how architectural systems alongside social expectations influence the occupation of common space»[9].

If, as notoriously declared by Bernard Tschumi in the 1970s, there is no architecture without event, without action or activity, today, we could say that there is no criticism without exhibitions. In fact, exhibitions, with their complex apparatus comprised of catalogues, press release, and online media presence and collateral events may allow a "shock" and a cross-programming and non-conventional occupation of space that no doubts attracts more attention that any other traditional channel of judgment and knowledge production within architecture culture. Yet, it is when taking a strong and uncompromising position that exhibitions better achieve a critical act of some sort. Otherwise, they remain mere communicative platform promoting individual talents in a system that may soon enough exhaust itself.

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All of the ants left Paris

Ethel Baraona Pohl, César Reyes Nájera / dpr-barcelona

«This human body and this Earthly landscape of matter are only the default settings. They are not destiny».

Benjamin Bratton

One night last summer, we were looking for Perseids stars in an urban hill, when suddenly a roar disrupted our peaceful night exploration. A wild pig emerging from the dark trotted to our position attracted by the smell of the peanuts we were impulsively eating. We secured ourselves while nervously giving away the peanuts to the hungry animal. Some days after and recovered from the scary moment, we realised that we're inhabiting a system with humans and no humans beings in constant negotiation for their agency in the system we share and that we call the city.

Our anthropocentric understanding of the urban phenomena leads us to perceive the world we inhabit as given to fulfil our needs. This perception remains even in the attempts to preserve it, meeting the needs of the present «without compromising the ability of future generations to meet their own ones»[2]. Both the concept of needs and that of limitations allude to conditions needed to secure human permanence. We would give for granted that, if cities are human creations, then their destiny should be to secure human living conditions. We understand that the task of city managers deals with the application of technical knowledge to efficiently achieve the right liveable conditions.

In the case of architecture work, it is sublimely intended to reach the same goal, while the project rarely goes beyond the limits of the plot or construction site, except from its connections to the city grid of services. Orthodox critic in architecture is often based in such parameters to analyze the formal or spatial quality of architecture works, focusing in the creative skills of the creator while often disregarding the input of the myriad of agents who determine the characteristics of the resulting spaces. Thus architectural critics and architects in general are well trained to manage spaces, dimensions and materials, but have a scarce — if not inexistent — vocabulary to refer to change, complexity and contingency. But the complexity of actors and relations intermingled in urban systems and architecture realisations demand an upgraded terminology, a dynamic set of metrics conceived to understand and describe the scope of agents and relations giving form to the spaces we inhabit.

In his Urban Protocols, the Greek architect Aristide Antonas introduces concepts such as "indeterminate spaces", "diagonal commonhold", "invisible or parasitic councils", which seem more a terrain of radical literature rather than planning; it seems that such protocols address different metrics and interactions within the cities, like social trust, which are not under the scrutiny of conventional regulations. Structured as a five chapter charter[3], they contain subversive and simple ideas to manage, through unconventional appropriation, the nooks of the city falling out of the control of city managers[4]. Naming them "protocols", and using legislative jargon is only a way to make them readable and accepted by bureaucracy. Its main purpose is to establish cluster-like micro-legislative constructions with communal functions. Surprisingly, the suggestive architectonic outcomes of Antonas' protocols are driven by the immaterial set of relations described, rather than urban spaces and their modifications.

In some way Antonas' protocols suggest the possibility to expand the scope of urban conventional metrics towards an understanding of the city under the logics of complex systems and thereby, leaving
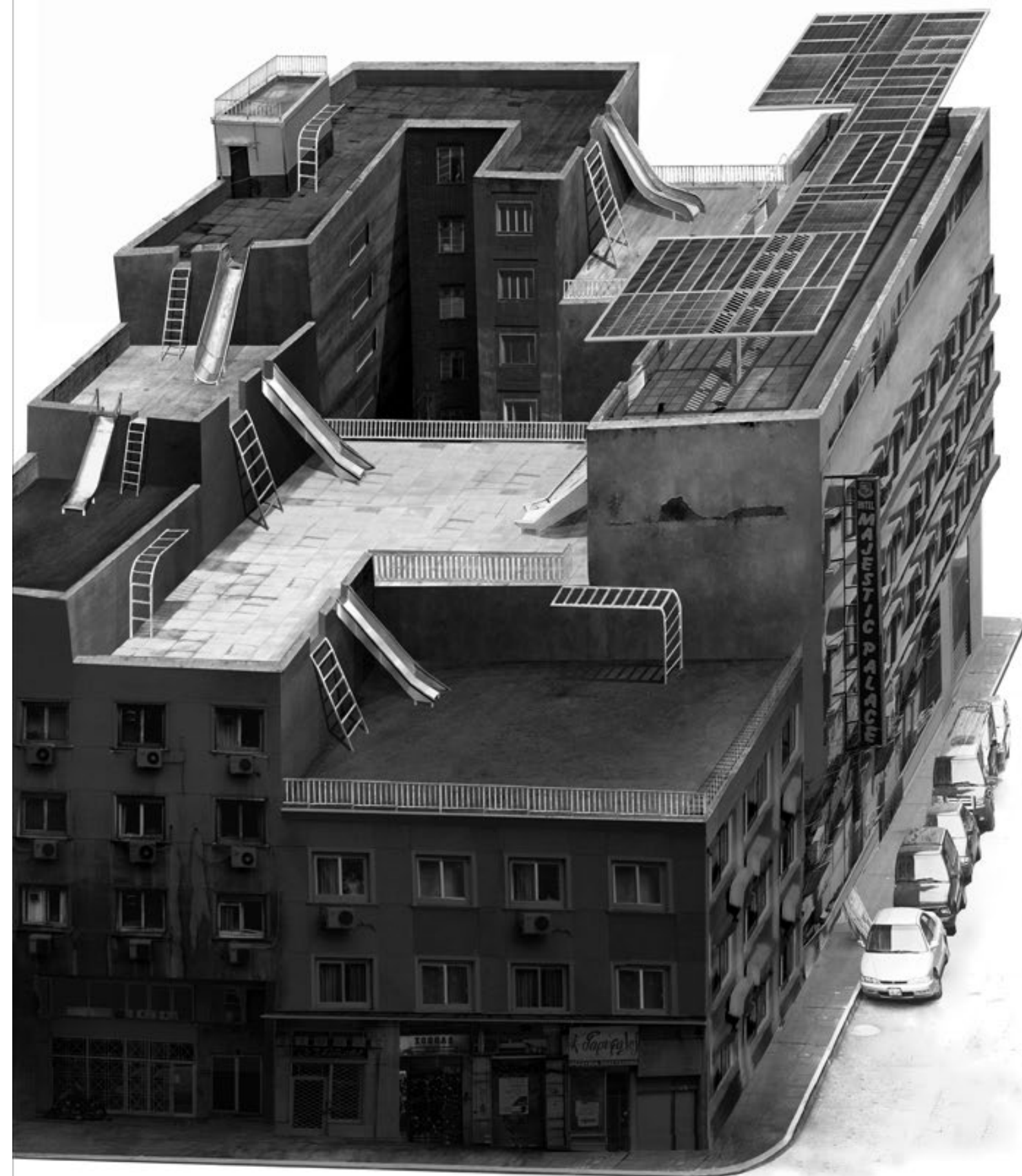
space to indeterminacy, in favour of all kind of interactions which are at last, the main characteristic of the flows of information, energy and matter configuring any living system. While proposing strategies to manage this territory of the commons, they are addressed to humans; but humans with the availability to be affected. This naked human-ity interacting within our cities constitute a different understanding of the purpose of architecture and its urban reality, aside from the preeminence of human being, posed instead as just another element of an ever changing environment.

A study that recognizes the city as a composite of layers which is the home to millions of species, from microbes to insects to vegetation to sapient mammals, has been recently developed by Benjamin Bratton in his proposal *The Stack*. Bratton understands the city as a «situat-ed ecology of predation and symbiosis», matching a bacteriological tumult with sensing technologies, and just another layer itself with-in a wider system of platforms superimposed one to the other. This megastructure, literally circumscribing the planet, configures a sort of supermachine through a series of strata, composed by preexistent geological layers and new spaces, created in its own image; as net-worked ecologies, megacities, and weird technologies, among others. Bratton's Stack constitutes an attempt to understand the technical and geopolitical structures of planetary computation as a totality. Follow-ing this description, Bratton points that we could perceive the Earth itself as a spherical stack with several layers and we the humans and most of our dynamics occurring in two and only two of those layers.

«We the humans, while included in [the Stack], are not necessarily its essential agents, and our well-being is not its primary goal. After bil-lions of years of evolution, complicated heaps of carbon-based mol-ecules (that include us) have figured out some ways to subcontract intelligence to complicated heaps of silicon-based molecules (that include our computers). In the long run, this may be for the better– and maybe not»[5].

© Aristide Antonas

Within the compendium outlined by Bratton which deals with politi-cal philosophy, architectural theory and software studies, it is remark-able the contingency of humans within a series of platforms where machine-to-machine communication could lead to the creation and further modification of newly created layers. This approach consti-tutes a slap in the face for the anthropocentric conceptions of the space we inhabit. Under a political understanding, Bratton's points recall some of the ideas contained in *The Cybernetic Hypothesis* by Tiqqun[6], who describe it as a fable that has supplanted the liberal agenda from the end of the Second World War; conceiving biological, physical and social behaviours as fully programmed and re-program-mable, and that finds its commercial outburst in the emergence of "Big Data" and "Smart City" narratives.

One of the concerns raised by Bratton's system of platforms, is that of the limitations of orthodoxal critical reviews of the works of ar-chitecture, when we realise the complex emergence of phenomena

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that define the spaces we mould and occupy. From this perspective it sounds somehow futile, the intention to reduce the analysis to that of a single work. This attitude would possibly have sense in a world of fully isolated objects and spaces, but in any case in that of mutual affection. Thus, the work of architecture immersed in a dynamic process of conception through design, building through subtraction, and decay through use, seems something closer to digestive processes rather than the subject of pure design concerns.

In our opinion, we need an entropic understanding of the inputs and outputs of the works of architecture within complex systems. If there is any, this would be a relevant contribution from architectural criticism to the evolution of the discipline. The way that criticism was done along the XX century, was in total correspondence with the *status quo* of the architecture practice in those years, within a world perceived solely under human requirements, that found its paroxysm in the outcomes of capitalism. Nevertheless, that approach reveals

insufficient to meet and question the deteriorating consequences of our own development. A relevant analysis and critique derived from it, would need to consider this cycle of conception, ingestion, digestion and possible regeneration — dreamed, and poorly communicated, by the narratives of sustainability.

Alexey Buldakov from Urban Fauna Laboratory[7] points out to the fact that human self-consciousness is limited by the space and time of an individual life, and that we don't have particular organs to perceive entropy and genetic heredity. Referring to the work of Richard Dawkins[8], Buldakov highlights the capacity of mostly all living forms to modify their environment in order to perpetuate their permanence. This includes human beings and by extension our architectural manifestations. But this evolutionary task never occurs in complete isolation, as we subtract materials and conform spaces and layers that also host numerous non-human species. So, although cities are designed by humans as a shelter, and as an evolutionary way to preserve and reproduce human DNA, we as species are the minority in the city, just like cells containing human DNA are in minority in our bodies[9]. This analogy makes sense if we realise that our own body is like a small city populated by human and non-human forms of life which coexist and often parasite us in order to preserve their existence, generating an inner microecology that somehow guarantees our own existence too[10]. Perceived at the scale of urban relations, and from it to a level of geological events, we can neatly realise the small part that we humans and our architectonic masterpieces seem to play in the game of evolution. But even if it appears as something to be discouraged, the growth and flows of human population reveal ourselves as an expansive species, in need of ever expansive systems of shelter, which are also populated by alien neighbours that finally get connected with us to this planetary network of platforms.

We think it is possible and desirable to overcome the distinction between nature and artifice, the dichotomy between human and non-human interactions in the city, and the allegedly supremacy of this hu-

man centered conception which also sustains most of the analysis of architecture. In their *Manifesto of Urban Cannibalism,* Wietske Maas and Matteo Pasquinelli celebrate the digestive process occurring in the layers we inhabit, this "big stomach outside us" which we have been calling city for centuries. Considering the inorganic sediment of the city and the social metabolism of human-non human relations would led us to understand, analyse and describe the outcomes of our steps within history from a different perspective[11].

This way we would be able to extend the narrative of our realisations to the time when we become indistinguishable from our environment, when our existence resembles that of the microbiota within us. If this time finally comes, despite our current insensitiveness to the warnings of climate change, maybe we'll become able to read the signs of non human dynamics in the urban systems. That would be a good moment to question again the utility of our criticism and of our architectures. In that moment, we will realize that we can keep moving forward until algorithms stop revealing us new spaces, and be aware and cautious of the time when wild pigs quit searching for food in the urban hills of Barcelona, or when all the ants have finally left Paris[12].

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Iconography

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Experiencia MUVA, process © Ricardo Sargiotti, source: http://www.plata-formaarquitectura.cl/cl/02-359098/experiencia-muva-un-muro-de-ladril-los-con-su-ausencia-final/536b9b3ac07a80725e0000d0

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Teletón Rehabilitation Center, brick vault in construction © GabDeArq, source: http://morfologiaarquitectonica.blogspot.it/2011/09/solano-benitez.html

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Teletón Rehabilitation Center, completed brick vault © Federico Cairoli

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Train passing underneath Manhattan's Western Electric complex in 1936, source: https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Rail_freight_transportation_in_New_York_City_and_Long_Island#/media/File:Western_Electric_complex_NYC_1936.jpg

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A Railroad Artifact, 30th Street, May 2000 © Joel Sternfeld,fonte: http://www.the-highline.org/blog/2015/08/19/photo-of-the-week-walking-the-high-line-with-joel-sternfeld

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Highline aerial view in NYC © David Schankbone, source: https://www.flickr.com/photos/shankbone/14082063968

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Materdei Station, work by Gligorov

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Salvator Rosa Station, works by Pisani, Paladino and Barisani

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Toledo Station by Tusquets © Andrea Resmini

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Municipio Station by Siza and Souto de Moura, floorplan @ Álvaro Siza

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City Wall Rooftop basketball court in Dubrovnik, source: https://es.pinterest.com/pin/420664421421546148/

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Parrish Art Museum, first proposal floorplan © Herzog & De Meuron, source: http://www.averyreview.com/issues/12/parrish-art-museum

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Entrance hall of the Chicago Cultural Center © Steve Hall / Chicago Architecture Biennial, source: http://www.uncubemagazine.com/blog/16131615

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We Know How To Order, render @ Bryony Roberts, source: http://bryonyroberts.com/index.php/project/we-know-how-to-order/

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Collection of "gifts" given to Gaby Mann by crows after continuously feeding relationship, source: http://www.bbc.com/news/magazine-31604026

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Roof Playgrounds as example of The Diagonal Commonhold. Archipelago of Protocols © Aristide Antonas

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Bloom's Room. An investigation on the possibilities of a room that provides the simulation of a flight © Aristide Antonas

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Bloom's Room anchorage elements. Archipelago of Protocols © Aristide Antonas

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Francisco Vergara Perucich is a Chilean architect and planner. He was Head of Advisory, Management and Planning for Roads Department in the Public Works Ministry of Chile, Partner of Plural Architects and Private Consultant for Environmental Projects in Chile. He is professor at Central University of Chile and at Universidad de Santiago de Chile (USACH). He holds a MA at Catholic University of Chile and MSc in Building and Urban Design in Development at The Bartlett DPU, where he is now a PhD Candidate studying the relations between neoliberalism and urban design in Santiago de Chile.

Léa-Catherine Szacka is an Assistant Professor at the Oslo School of Architecture and Design (AHO). After studying architecture in Montreal and Venice, Szacka completed a PhD in history and theory of architecture at the Bartlett School of Architecture, with a thesis on the history of the 1980 Venice Architecture Biennale. Szacka's work focuses on architecture exhibitions and on the historical period broadly known as 'postmodernism'. In 2014, she curated the installation Effimero: Or the Postmodern Italian Condition, a contribution to Monditalia exhibition at the 14th Venice Architecture Biennale.

Luca Silenzi is an architect and writer, co-founded Spacelab in 2005: a prizewinning design and research firm directed with his wife Zoè Chantall Monterubbiano. Works and writings of Luca Silenzi and Spacelab were awarded, exhibited and published worldwide in the most prestigious international design magazines (Domus, Abitare, Clog, Studio among others). On invitation by Rem Koolhaas, Spacelab was among the contributors in the *Monditalia* section at the 14th Venice Architecture Biennale with the project *State of Exception.*

Lucia Tozzi is a critic and researcher on urban politics. Journalist, she collaborates with pagina99 and is responsible for culture at Zero.eu, after having worked for Il Manifesto, Domus, Abitare, Eddyburg.it, Alfabeta2, Wired, Public Domain and many other magazines.

WAI Architecture Think Tank is a studio focusing on the understanding and execution of Architecture from a panoramic approach. Founded in Brussels in 2008 by Puerto Rican architect, artist, author and theorist Cruz Garcia and French architect, artist, author and poet Nathalie Frankowski, WAI is currently based in Beijing where its directors run the parallel artist practice Garcia Frankowski and the conceptual space Intelligentsia Gallery. WAI is a workshop for architecture intelligentsia. WAI asks What About It?

VICEVERSA

«PI draws on the concept of an "urban forest", with the "branched" outer envelope designed to simultaneously conjure up primitive and technological images.

The weave of lines creates a play of light, shadow, solids and voids that generates a sculpture-like building with clear hints of land art.

The spark for PI was a concept of cohesion in which the force of attraction generates a rediscovered sense of community and belonging.

The internal piazza represents the community's energy»