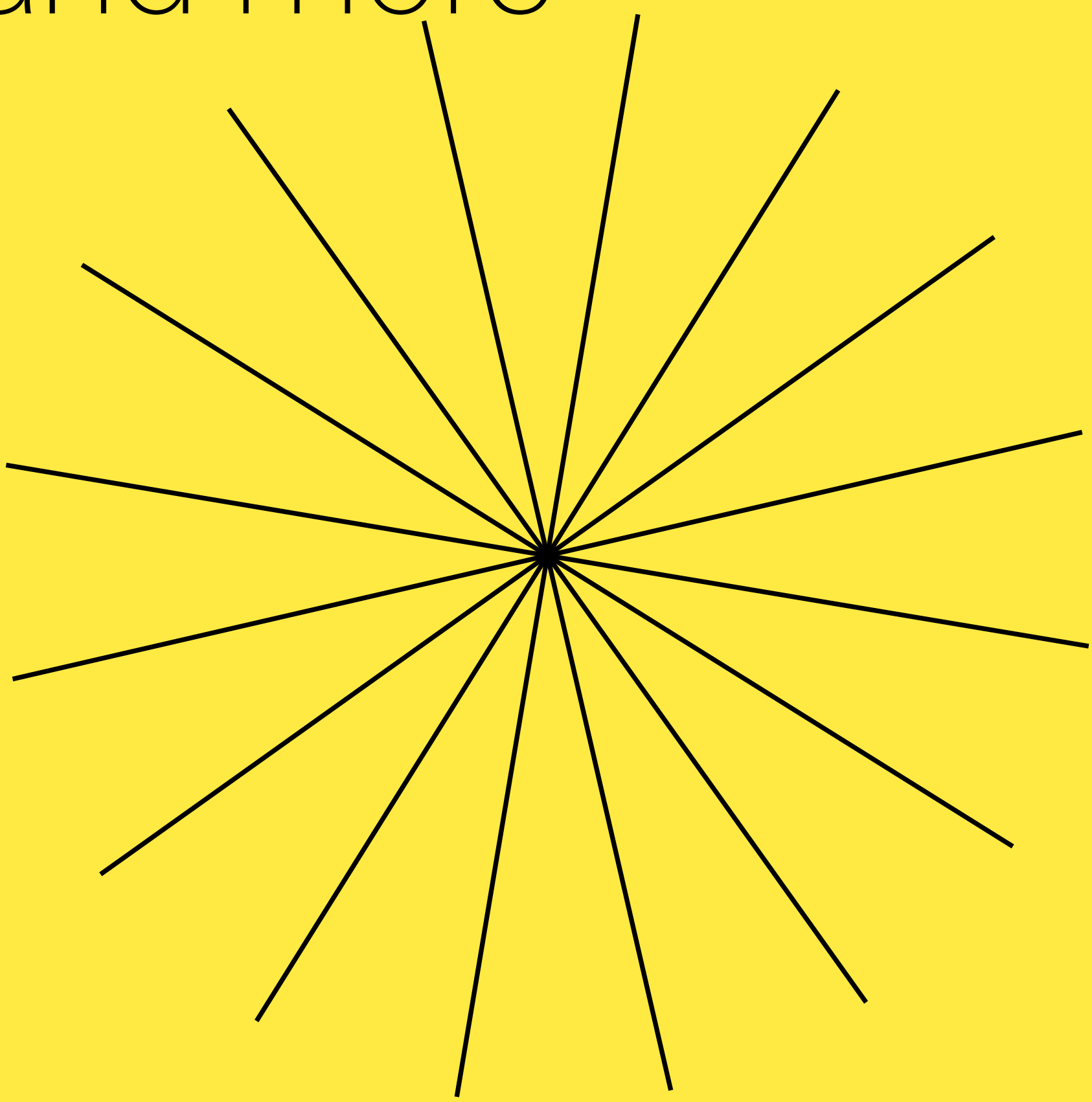
Archined
The Persistence of Questioning
Critical reflections on the future, on architecture and more



‘Where is design practice at today?’

The Persistence of Questioning. Critical reflections for the future, on architecture and more is an extensive and multifaceted project in which Archined stimulates discussion about key issues in architectural practice and culture. In addition to written and visual essays — both online and in print — the project includes podcasts and physical gatherings. The questions posed by Archined in *The Persistence of Questioning* are not easy to answer, but that does not make them any less important. How relevant will the profession be in and for the future? How do design and ethics relate to each other? When can we speak of architecture and with what criteria do we assess it? And what is the purpose of architectural culture?

In this publication report three duos — Veerle Alkemade and Catherine Koekoek, Véronique Patteeuw and Kersten Geers, and Saskia van Stein

and Reinier de Graaf — discuss the question: ‘Where is design practice at today?’ Reviewing the recent history of the field, the changing role of architects within society and their transitioning position in the design and construction process, they outline perspectives for the future relevance of the profession.

Colophon

Where is architecture practice at today?

Twenty-five years ago, on 4 September 1996, Archined published its first article online. Browsing through the platform's extensive digital archive, the editors discovered that certain subjects, such as the position of the architect, the relationship between ethics and design, and the bandwidth of the profession — not entirely unsurprisingly — surfaced again and again over the past quarter of a century, although the reasons and the arguments differed each time.

If the framework of the past twenty-five years prompts us to reflect on the recent history of the profession, we can see that a number of striking shifts have taken place. The years before the economic crisis of 2008 were characterized by the influence of globalization and the transition to a market economy, generating a belief in the power of commerce, the ability to effect change, and statement architecture. Owing to the economic crisis, many offices were forced to reorganize, rethink and reposition themselves. The gap between big and small offices widened. Young architects had to find other ways to practice their profession. For example, by returning to an 'ordinary', more restrained and traditional

design language that emphasizes authenticity and the credibility of the spatial gesture, after all the visual and material inventiveness of SuperDutch. In the post-crisis years, the design of this more modest architecture has gained momentum — particularly in Flanders — with an impressive array of mostly small schemes, very precisely detailed, which emphasize form, materials and craftsmanship.

Balancing this line of development is a culture of criticism that has been running continuously through architectural practice in recent decades and that has its roots in the 1970s. The insight that architecture and design — and hence the actions of the architect — cannot be viewed in isolation but have to be contextualized within the larger sphere of influence of resources and powers, and are therefore essentially political, has produced a movement and design attitude centred on inclusivity and engagement with nature. The upshot of this more activist approach is that architects assume other roles than that of designer.

Now we find ourselves, undeniably, at a drastic tipping point. The Covid-19 pandemic marks the end of the post-credit-crisis period. The global impact of the virus on our daily, social and cultural life, on our economy and

infrastructure, on our built environment and how it is used, has pushed our world view into another reality and made certain problems all the more visible. A recently released report from the Intergovernmental Panel on Climate Change (IPCC) shows — not for the first time unfortunately — that the climate change wrought by humankind is causing irreversible extremes in the weather. The comprehensive and large-scale effect of these confrontational insights and tendencies provides concrete arguments for changes and shifts. The question, however, is what direction these will or should take.

With the extensive and multifaceted project *The Persistence of Questioning. Critical reflections for the future, on architecture and more*, **Archined wants to stimulate discussion about key issues in architectural practice and culture. In addition to written and visual essays — both online and in print — the project includes podcasts and physical gatherings. The questions posed by Archined in *The Persistence of Questioning* are not easy to answer, but that does not make them any less important. How relevant will the profession be in and for the future? How do design and ethics relate to each other? When can we**

speak of architecture and with what criteria do we assess it? And what is the purpose of architecture culture?

In this report, Veerle Alkemade (Central Government Real Estate Agency) and Catherine Koekoek (PhD in political philosophy from Erasmus University Rotterdam), both architecture graduates from TU Delft and makers of the *Respons* podcast, discuss, in an exchange of letters, their concerns and wishes for the inclusive city. Looking back at activist movements of the previous century, they ask how architects can contribute to creating settings where people can dream of brighter futures.

Véronique Patteeuw (senior lecturer at ENSAPL and guest professor at KU Leuven and EPFL Lausanne) and Kersten Geers (OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen) discuss the persuasiveness of architecture as form and gesture. While they do not seek to avoid engaging with major global themes, they note that such engagement increasingly comes at the expense of architectural form and the internal coherence of the building. Can architecture communicate a position, an idea and an intention if it is increasingly disconnected

from architectural form? The visual essay by artist and photographer Filip Dujardin captures the ambiguous situation of our time: certainties are falling away and architecture is increasingly treated as a commodity. Can a renewed focus on elementary architectonic forms and typologies constitute the future of architecture? Saskia van Stein (curator, moderator and director of IABR) and Reinier de Graaf (architect and partner at OMA) discuss developments in the profession through the lens of De Graaf's eventful career at OMA. Architects often fail to sufficiently realize that they are caught up in economic and social forces. In a globalized world, can designers escape the complexities and perverse mechanisms of the market, power and politics?

Filip Dujardin, *frameWORKframe*, 2021 © Filip Dujardin

A place to dream
Infrastructures for activism

Veerle Alkemade
Catherine Koekoek

Dordrecht, 8 June 2021

Dear Veerle,

Whit Monday and it's raining. I'm sitting with my parents on a terrace on the market square in Wageningen. Delft School architecture around me. Rebuilding work in the bombed city centre started before the end of the war. Now that restaurant doors remain shut, the facades are nothing but a backdrop. I ask my parents about the city during their student years – that same backdrop, only almost 40 years previously.

In a book I recently borrowed from my mother I discovered extensive inscriptions from friends wishing her success on the final leg of her dissertation. I also came across a book-mark from Shikasta, a women's bookshop. A bookshop for women in Wageningen?

Dozens of women's bookshops opened their doors in the Netherlands in the 1970s and 1980s. The first is the only one still in existence:

Savannah Bay in Utrecht, the successor to the ‘De Heksenkelder’, which opened in 1975. The women’s bookshops bore such names as De Feeks, Dulle Griet, Dikke Trui, Sappho, ’t Wicht, Xantippe. When did they disappear? In a 2005 blogpost I read a guide to bookshops in Wageningen. Shikasta is praised for stocking ‘reading for the feminist woman’. *De Gelderlander* newspaper in 2008 makes mention of a weaving demonstration.

‘I didn’t know about it at all, that women’s bookshop,’ I say to my mother. She tells me that she occasionally took part in campaigns, organized by the squat where her friend Erica lived. She herself remained somewhat neutral; she was just about radical enough to join in, though she wasn’t one of the in-crowd.

You might be wondering what sparked my interest in women’s bookshops, now vanished. In her 2017 book *Public Things*, the American philosopher Bonnie Honig writes about the importance of the public things that maintain democratic infrastructure. According to her, the continued existence of democracy is partly a material matter: voting stations, pencils, parliament convening in a new venue.

The same applies to activism: an infrastructure is needed in order to dream, a network of places and people where and with whom you can imagine how the world could be improved.

Alongside and opposite the dominant public sphere, there were always other public spheres that made space for another form of discussion and publicity. In a well-known 1990 article, *Rethinking the Public Sphere: A Contribution to the Critique of Actually Existing Democracy* [↗], philosopher Nancy Fraser notes, as an example of those other public spheres, the extensive feminist networks of magazines, bookshops, publishers, film and video distribution networks, research institutes, academic programmes, conferences, festivals and local women's centres that emerged in the second half of the 20th century in the Unites States. But such *subaltern counterpublics* also arose in the Netherlands and in other places and periods. All that suddenly felt very close when I found that bookmark from Shikasta bookshop in Wageningen.

So where have those counterpublics gone? Our student years were coloured by the economic crisis of 2008. We are told that the starchitect was dead, that for collaboration

and taking sustainable building seriously, it was time for new architects — or The New Architect who, it must be said, looks suspiciously like the old starchitect in his oneness and maleness. Now that we've been graduated for a few years, we've discovered that practice is more conservative than we had been taught during our studies. At the same time, ever since we started reflecting on the profession in our podcast *Respons*, we've often been seen as the voice of the new generation. A generation that is said to be more critical and activist than the previous one.

But that feels harsh. All too often, pointing to a new generation shifts the responsibility for a meaningful practice, one that treats people and the environment responsibly, onto the shoulders of young people with little power. Moreover, it does no justice to the activists who came before us. Decades ago, feminist groups such as Vrouwen, Bouwen, Wonen [↗] ('Women, Building, Living'), the department of Women's Studies [↗], and many other forms of social design [↗] examined issues similar to those that now occupy us. They offer inspiration for alternative forms of architecture that are not based on the 'star system' where one leader, usually male, is seen as the author, and

all other staff as ‘second bananas’ or drafting clerks, as Denise Scott-Brown so aptly put it in her 1975 essay *Room at the Top? Sexism and the Star System in Architecture* [↗].

To present diversity and the climate crisis as new challenges for a new generation is to forget a history. After all, how come we have to reinvent the wheel if the questions and problems we address are not new? Why is it that the counterpublics of the second feminist wave have disappeared?

Many public, accessible infrastructures of knowledge and activism have disappeared in our early years. Community centres and libraries have closed to cut costs. And that makes it more difficult to remember the activism that went before us.

And thus we still write in isolation — an isolation that is all the more palpable during this pandemic. In our neoliberal world we are all individuals: the social structures and institutions where we can unite are long due an overhaul. That is also evident in architecture where, after the 2008 crisis, numerous small architecture offices were founded, containing an infinite number of ambitious individuals who are not

very united. There is still no real trade union. Few architects are members of the FNV, and the Royal Institute of Dutch Architects (BNA) is not a trade union but a professional association.

When I think of women's bookshops that have disappeared, I see places and networks where we can dream of another future. Not as individuals but as part of a shared struggle. What is the relevance of architecture to today and to the future? To answer that question, we must first of all remember the past, and all the places where answers were previously formulated. Where do we find, or rebuild, those settings where we can imagine the future?

Affectionately yours,
Catherine

Schiedam, 21 June 2021

Dear Catherine,

Today is the longest day of the year, but it's raining. Three goals by the Dutch football team against Northern Macedonia have pushed to the background the reports that dominated sites this morning, namely the demolition of the Tweebosbuurt neighbourhood in Rotterdam.

I understand your astonishment regarding the rise and fall of women's bookshops. But the oblivion is not total, since histories can sometimes be re-ignited, luckily. By your mother's bookmark, for example. The revival of vanished histories of feminism and activism in architecture underlines the importance of those accessible infrastructures of knowledge that you write about. The past can be brought to live once again. But that's more difficult because of the effects of the neoliberal dismantling of institutes, because it's impossible to remember everything individually. An event can then quickly recede into the distance, as we saw today with the demolition of the Tweebosbuurt after a football match.

Pictures of the demolition saddened me. “The city mayor and alderman have cut away a piece of my heart,” a resident says on the NOS news bulletin [↗]. Standing behind him is an orange demolition machine, which will shortly punch the first hole in the brickwork facade. The homes in the Tweebosbuurt have to make way for a more expensive new development — many residents will not return to their old neighbourhood. “The other homes they offer us are far too expensive,” the same resident explains. He is referring to Vestia housing association, which will replace the 524 demolished social housing units with just 137 new-build homes, roughly a quarter of the original number.

According to the city council, the demolition is necessary because the homes are anti-quated and no longer meet current standards. Such an argument for demolition sounds all the more bitter because it’s basically the housing associations themselves that have let the homes fall into disrepair by not carrying out overdue maintenance [↗].

The residents of the Tweebosbuurt protested against the demolition of their neighbourhood for three years. They also united with residents

of other neighbourhoods to form the pressure group Recht op de Stad [↗]. Together they campaigned for a better and fairer housing policy in Rotterdam. Alas, their battle had no effect on the city council's plans. Even recent criticism [↗] from the United Nations – of all places! – to the effect that the demolition possibly contravenes the human right to appropriate housing did not lead to any delay or cancellation of the plans.

It is disheartening to witness. You ask about settings where we can dream of another future, but then such settings should not be demolished. Events in the Tweebosbuurt show that the disappearance of infrastructures for knowledge and activism is not something just from the past.

The Tweebosbuurt is a working class district with a solid social infrastructure. Many residents have set down strong roots there. It's been home to some of them for over fifty years. But the City of Rotterdam undervalues that infrastructure The demolition of the Tweebosbuurt is not an isolated incident but part of the Rotterdam Housing Vision [↗], which states that one of the city's aims is to 'ensure a more differentiated housing stock

in areas where it is still too lopsided and where the quality of living is under pressure'. In other words, too many inexpensive homes (social rental) grouped together is undesirable, at least in the opinion of the city council. But why exactly?

Thinking about the central question in this publication — what is the relevance of the architectural profession to the future? — I ask myself: whose future are we actually talking about here? What is happening to the people from the Tweebosbuurt, for whom there is no longer a place in Rotterdam, demonstrates that there is not one single future, and that the future does not belong to everybody.

As the women's bookshops and many public infrastructures of knowledge and activism were disappearing, architecture became increasingly enmeshed in the market. And that market concerns itself with nothing but the future of property developers and other investors.

Architects who are working for commercial property developers to implement policies of gentrification are therefore boosting the future relevance of these property developers

above all else. Their renderings and pretty facade compositions help to win tenders, and they can even help push up square metre prices. The more architecture becomes enmeshed with the market, the more difficulty I have in imagining ways in which the profession can be relevant in the future.

Can architects also be of relevance to others for the future? In what ways could architects contribute to the rebuilding, as you put it, of those settings where we can dream of a different future?

Yours,
Veerle

Rotterdam, 25 June 2021

Dear Veerle,

Immediately after finishing your letter, I read the essay by Arna Mačkić in the latest *Architecture in the Netherlands Yearbook*. Mačkić discusses the urban renewal of the Schilderswijk district in The Hague in the 1980s. The case offers a painful counter-point to the demolition of the Tweebosbuurt in Rotterdam today.

Back then, the same fate as the Tweebos-buurt awaited the Schilderswijk: demolition and new development that would be too expensive for the existing residents. But under the supervision of Alderman Adri Duivesteijn [↗], urban renewal as a techno-cratic process made way for ‘Urban renewal as a Cultural Activity’. Instead of focusing on demolition and new development — ‘a revenue model that appealed to the interests of housing associations, contractors and architecture practices’ — Duivesteijn sought ‘an architect who would take the identity and culture of the Schilderswijk residents seriously and regard them as equal discussion partners’, writes Mačkić.

That architect was Álvaro Siza. He visited homes as part of the design process. During gatherings and sessions held in a sports hall, Siza and residents built the plans out of wooden blocks. The project has often been described. Strolling across Giudecca Island in Venice in 2016, I happened upon the project in the Portuguese pavilion at the architecture biennale. I was deeply impressed by the sensitivity revealed in the films as Siza, thirty years later, visited residents living in his design.

Whereas the planned demolition of the Schilderswijk was seized upon to initiate a project packed with residential involvement that did justice to the various social structures and cultures in the neighbourhood, the Tweebosbuurt will soon be filled with homes that are too expensive. Perhaps, some years from now, we will come across the new development in the *Yearbook*.

I have to think about a meme I came across this week. It featured Kirsten Dunst as Mary Jane, who says to Peter Parker alias Spiderman: ‘Tell me the truth… I’m ready to hear it.’ Instead of revealing his identity as Spiderman, Peter Parker replies in this

Twitter [↗] version: ‘Contemporary architects are primarily valued for their capabilities in monetizing space.’

Defining relevance in terms of square metres of rentable space, and not in terms of networks of people and surroundings, means that places like the Tweebosbuurt get bulldozed and architects are forced into an oppressive straitjacket. They serve the market. No Siza in the Tweebosbuurt.

For us, the lack of room to manoeuvre and the narrow focus on financial relevance was but one of the reasons not to work as architects after graduating. Our frustration also formed the point of departure for our quest, through the podcast and in discussions like this, to find ways of doing things differently. We discovered that we’re not the only ones to abandon architecture: many women, as well as people with a migration background, are leaving the profession. The recent *Jaarrapportage Ruimtelijke Ontwerpsector 2021* [↗] underlines their under-representation once again.

Yet the lack of diversity in the field seems to be not only a result but also a cause of

the limited financial definition of what architecture can mean. In her Yearbook essay, Mačkić writes about the inadequate representation of people with a migrant background, women, seniors, people with a disability, and generally anybody who doesn't fit the white male norm. Many architecture offices, she writes, have a way of working, 'and how this had led to the inability of many architectural practices to empathize with and imagine different social worlds'. And when you cannot imagine the lives being led behind the facades, it is easier to design them bloodlessly, and demolish them without emotion [↗].

You know what, we still don't know what a non-sexist city [↗], a just world, might really look like. Once in the while we catch a glimpse of it, like when we come across Christine de Pisan's medieval City for Women of 1405, or women's bookshops, or democratic urban renewal projects of the 1980s, and we think: 'Ah, this is not a new question.' But an omnipresent architecture that derives meaning from making space for **equality remains a dream.**

As we studied in Delft and became familiar

with feminist architecture theory — the relief! — names and books were passed from hand to hand. Hushed voices in informal networks told horror stories — a hand placed on a knee during a tutorial by a building technology teacher, a racist comment from another — but the names of feminist teachers were shared in the same way. Hélène Frichot's *How to make yourself a feminist design power tool*, a tiny pink book whose pages hung loosely from the cover, was secretly passed around before it had to go back to the library. When I opened it again recently I read a recognizable quote. Frichot writes:

> No doubt many who have ventured into the walled city of architecture have discovered, sooner or later, that they have something to complain about in terms of why they have not been able to 'pass' as an architect, or why they have been obliged to exit or escape, even once they have achieved their qualifications.

The walls of the city of architecture are invisible, until you walk into them. For philosopher Sara Ahmed, who left the academic world for similar reasons, important

knowledge can be acquired by rendering those invisible barriers visible. If we are talking about the relevance of architecture, then it is also important to make visible where social relevance ceases, where so few people remain after demolition and clearance, and where the architect is forced into such a straitjacket that we can no longer really talk about relevance.

And yet...

Catherine

Rotterdam, 27 June 2021

Dear Catherine,

Your meme made me laugh out loud.
It's a painfully appropriate depiction of our struggle to answer this question, and perhaps our struggle with the architectural profession more broadly too.

'Do you still have faith in architecture?' people sometimes ask me when I voice my concerns. We have to remind outselves now and again why we actually devote so much of our time, outside our day jobs, to investigating and reflecting on architectural practice.

'And yet,' you write. And yet I believe that we invest precisely because we still have faith in architecture, although it's often put to the test. We believe that architects could have more impact than simply on the economic front if they and their clients were prepared to consider the multitude of lived experiences in a place or on a site. If only architects had the courage to take on other roles in designing the built environment.

Besides, we are simply curious to find out what the world would look like if it was built from a feminist perspective, if the teams that build the city brought to the table a diversity of expereinces and perspectives. For we simply don’t yet know what that would be like, what the city and its architecture would then look like.

When you wrote about those women’s bookshops, and about the essay by Mačkić, I had to think of the Zelfregiehuis, which until recently was a genuine counter-public in the Bospolder-Tussendijken district of Rotterdam. A place where local residents could shape their future in various ways; a place packed with potential. Alas, the Zelfregiehuis has also fallen victim to city policy during the past year. Apart from the gentrification madness, Rotterdam is busy selling off its property [↗], with little thought for the social consequences. In the summer of 2020 the Zelfregiehuis was sold to the highest bidder. The organization was housed on Taandersstraat in a building that had been a meeting point for the neighbourhood in different guises ever since it was completed in 1929 – first as a school,

and later as a community centre and women's centre.

I lived in the neighbourhood myself and graduated with a project about this building. I studied how users could become involved in its redevelopment. I asked myself: What happens when as a designer you shift your focus from searching for efficiency and formulating norms and standards to designing places full of potential? What if you could design places that can continue growing, that can let existing social infrastructures continue growing? How can you consider that multitude of experiences in a place not only in the design but also in construction itself?

The current construction industry and the policies of national and local governments make it difficult to create significance in architecture. Some years before the city put the Taandersstraat building up for sale, the Zelfregiehuis was busy making plans [↗] to purchase the building itself. Together with other neighbourhood organizations, Zorgvrijstaat West and Delfshaven Coöperatie, a 'hybrid earnings

model' was being developed to ensure the continued social impact of the place. The plan was thorough, and even had the backing of Koninklijke Heidemij and Arcadis. The director of Rotterdam City Development had also been briefed [↗]. But alderman Bas Kurvers — 'an inclusive city is also for penthouse residents' — was in a hurry and the sale proceeded without interruption. There was no time to consider social value and output in the sale.

Despite the forced relocation, the Zelf-regiehuis still exists, thankfully, although split into two venues in the neighbour-hood: at Schiezicht and in the Bollenpandje. Here they are again succeeding in tapping into new networks, but these venues are also precarious. Under pressure from a landlord levy (a levy imposed on land-lords and based on the value of their social-housing units ed.), Havensteder housing association also has a policy of selling off properties.

Survival is possible, just as the questions from the second feminist wave and the democratization movements still echo today, albeit in the margins or online.

Yet I am forced to consider what the city would look like if places like this did receive the support they deserve.
Just imagine that, alongside their daily activities, they did not have to fight for their survival. Just imagine the significance that architecture might then have.
What a wonderful world that would be...

Yours,
Veerle

The Permanence of Form

A conversation with Kersten Geers, OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen

Véronique Patteeuw

The Anthropocene poses a number of challenges for architectural practice. Growing attention for processes, participation and *commons* increasingly pushes every classical notion of architecture into the margins. Does the current transition of society necessitate another form of architectural practice? Conventional design instruments seem less and less appropriate, and the traditional role of the architect between client and contractor is no longer tenable. Manifestations such as 'practices of change', 'shifting positions', 'the architecture of degrowth', or 'how will we live together', suggest that a reconsideration of the classical understanding of architecture is the only route forward. OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen posits a different view. Since 2005 the Brussels design outfit has been amassing a body of work that is committed to architecture. Founded in the slipstream of the post-OMA generation, OFFICE believes in the power of typology and claims that architectural form offers a valuable alternative in these times of transition.

Architecture as form

Véronique Patteeuw Your office will be twenty years old next year. You've been incredibly active over the past two decades — developing over 200 projects, writing numerous texts (some of which have been compiled into the recent publication *Without Content*), and teaching at numerous schools of architecture across Europe and the United States. A year ago you confided to me that architectural education is vital to you because it 'enables you to conduct research alongside your office'. For seven years you taught at the EPFL in Lausanne, in a unit with the explicit name 'Laboratory for Architecture as Form'. Why the emphasis on form?

Kersten Geers Our office designs architecture and constructs buildings, but it also manifests itself in thinking about architecture and construction. Teaching is an important component in that process. The 'Form' research laboratory at EPFL was a way of uniting two of our fascinations: on the one hand form, and on the other 'architecture without content', a way of reflecting on architecture without programme. Both themes embrace a belief in the cultural

Office Building, OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen © Bas Princen

heritage within which we as architects — in our opinion — must operate. Architecture can offer answers to many questions, but architecture must be aware of its own history and determine its position within it. Context is therefore primordial. After all, it determines not only the place of the individual within society but

also the framework within which the architect moves. To us, architecture does not start from nothing; it is a continuation of a larger project on the basis of a shared background. ‘Form’ for us means embracing that background and its tools of expression. However, we understand that we cannot solve everything with those tools. As an architect you have to carry out numerous tasks, such as translating a programme into space, responding to a context, meeting climate norms. We tackle those with varying degrees of success, but firmly believe that we also play a key role as cultural actors in the survival of culture, even if that basis is debatable.

VP Many of your references date from the 1960s and 1970s, a period in which the modernist project — faith in progress — was questioned. At the time, various figures took an anti-modernist stance. Jean-François Lyotard, for example, foresaw the end of the modernist project because, according to him, society was no longer capable of sharing big stories, was no longer capable of believing in a shared project for society. Jurgen Habermas believed the very opposite and argued in favour of the unfinished modernist project.

He believed that faith in progress had not run its course, and that we could achieve a better world through emancipation and technical development. Haven't we arrived at a similar pivotal point again?

KG David (van Severen) and I used to say to each other that 'we're not that modern'. Now I'm no longer certain if that's the case, to be honest. Perhaps modernity is an intrinsic aspect of our work and our thinking. So in a sense I support the unfinished modernist project. If anything should be saved, then it is perhaps the modernist project: social emancipation and a hypothetical shared value system; the project of searching for the shared, the civic, in an effort to live together. Perhaps we should make that more explicit in the future. Incidentally, the next incarnation of our teaching work will deal with modernity. But we will study it with a certain naiveness, just as we did that twenty years ago with the theme of history.

That research into history stems from a discomfort that I share with a number of contemporaries, among them Pier Paolo Tamburelli and Pier Vittorio Aureli who, like me, were in Rotterdam between 2000 and 2005. We belonged to a generation for whom architectural discourse had been stifled by a sort of

journalistic version of the diagram. The immediate response to every possible phenomenon was a diagrammatic drawing, which was then translated into architecture. We had a lot of difficulty with the incredible superficiality of what architectural culture exactly was at the time. I grew up in Belgium in a context where Rem Koolhaas was initially embraced as a cultural architect. That was down to architecture critic Geert Bekaert. He wrote about Aldo Rossi, then about Koolhaas, and saw no contradiction in that. By the way, I was a visitor to the Netherlands of the diagram for a very short period. The neoliberal building culture in which building involved as much serial construction as possible, with tunnel formwork and protruding balconies, based nonetheless on a somewhat legitimate social engagement, had become totally uninteresting because of rapid privatization. What was lacking was the big story, the deep cultural knowledge that Koolhaas imparted. Everything he said was open to at least four interpretations. As a young generation, we were searching for meaning. You could say that our half-hearted embrace of history was primarily an embrace of the history of the generation that preceded us. As soon as we had a partial grasp of that history, we could start making things with more solid ground beneath

our feet. The idea of architecture as form (and history) stems in part from that. We examined whether it was possible to extract history from postmodernism. If you take that as the starting point, the emphasis will be different.

Architecture as gesture

VP Your recent book *Without Content* includes texts by Hans Hollein, Reyner Banham, Aldo Rossi, Robert Venturi and James Stirling, among others. Taken together, they amount to a plea for history, architecture and the power of design.
It reminded me of how philosopher Bart Verschaffel attempted to grasp architecture as ‘gesture’. Verschaffel was interested not so much in the authenticity of that gesture but in its credibility — just as an actor can never be ‘real’ but only good and convincing. Today the gesture seems to have become separated from architectural form: either it is reduced to a powerful image, or every effort to create form is avoided by an emphasis on processes, participation, circularity. Do you feel called to account by Verschaffel’s plea for the persuasiveness of the gesture?

I’m fond of that idea from Verschaffel — architecture as gesture — but I don’t see that translated into an embrace of process. Quite the contrary actually. Architecture as gesture stresses the importance of the figure itself, and searches in its credibility for the coherence of the ‘gesture’. The reasoning you mention sometimes results in good things, but it’s less relevant to us. Naturally, you can or must address major themes, but a building — to us — should primarily possess an internal coherence. Coherent architecture is not to say that it is honest. Architecture is never honest — that’s an important insight. Just think of Roman architecture where marble is painted, or modern architecture where concrete is imitated. There’s a big tradition in architecture where the project shows what it wants to be, not what it actually is. In that sense, our architecture is no different. On the other hand, our architecture reveals a sort of economy of means. Even if that notion has become rather hollow, it seems to be interesting in the context of our conversation. In Belgium we’ve never really be able to work with lots of resources. That has resulted in an architecture that is perhaps relevant today, precisely because it’s not exuberant. It’s never been exuberant, for that matter. On the contrary,

this architecture believes very strongly in being implicit. We do not believe you have to offer a specific answer to a specific question. Rather, we believe in the opening offered by implicit architecture. Our view is that the form of architecture is somewhat distinct from what happens inside it. A building can accommodate many different things over time. Its creation anticipates a certain scenario; it is the implicit answer to that, though not the definitive answer. Buildings can eventually become anything. Even so, the building in its first incarnation is obliged to communicate its position, its contents and its intentions, as a gesture so to speak.

That's why the Crematorium in Oostende is a key project for us. On the one hand it's part of a study of 'big boxes', buildings that are remarkably functional yet anything but attractive as machinery. On the other hand, a crematorium is one of the few buildings in which you can represent the public. In such a building people experience a momentous occasion. So this building is highly practical and functional, while at the same time it has to represent the 'unrepresentable'. In collaboration with artist Richard Venlet, we designed a big box in the form of a sloping table on which are placed a number

of elements, like a still life. They become the unspeakable. But the sloping roof also creates a building that functions very practically, since the low spaces for intimacy conceal the taller spaces for the machines. Critic Enrique Walker speaks in this regard of the MacGuffin — the figure that turns up so frequently in Hitchcock films and always put you on the wrong foot; it renders certain

Crematorium, Oostende, 2020 © Bas Princen

things visible so that other things disappear. A building like this ‘acts’. The building pre-tends to be something that it is not and vice versa.

Architecture as *Umbau*

VP In 1989 the Austrian architect Hermann Czech argued in a short but powerful text for architecture to be approached as ‘Umbau’. Whether it con-cerns renovation, an extension or new development, architecture is always — according to Czech — a continuation of a spatial continuum. Indebted to his Viennese forefathers Josef Frank and Adolf Loos, Czech collected fragments in new compositions. Within your work, transformation is not absent. Indeed, right from the very first project, the entrance hall for the notary office in Antwerp (2002-2005), to the extensions to the houses in Merchtem (*Weekend House*, 2009-2012) and Brussels (*City Villa*, 2008-2021), the office building in Kortrijk that you recently completed (2014-2021) and the school in Antwerp that you are currently designing, you

have been dealing with this issue. How do you work with existing structures and what form do you give new programmes? Do you focus on structure or on materials and their circulation? And how visible or invisible is your intervention?

KG That's a really interesting question. As architects we perhaps find ourselves in an evolution. One the one hand we could speak of a renewed awareness of the ecological impact of society, and on the other hand you might ask whether current issues are all that different from those of, say, fifty years ago. The school we're now working on in Antwerp involves transforming an abattoir. The provincial office building in Kortrijk is a transformation of an existing office building. Would we have transformed it in another way at another moment in time? Possibly, though it's difficult to say. Design choices are often down to an endless and complex dance with energy standards that constantly change and vary. And besides, we don't know for sure whether our reasoning regarding it is correct. Is it correct to insert more insulation into a building to reduce energy consumption? Or should we instead wear something

warmer? I remember that the winter garden in the summer house in Ghent provoked such questions. The work of Lacaton and Vassal, which had an important influence on us, proposes a doubling of the skin by deploying spaces as insulation. That's a totally different vector to wrapping up a building.

In Kortrijk the line between the old and the new is deliberately left vague. On the one hand you want to make a building with a certain coherency, while on the other hand various generations of architecture have succeeded in layering themselves in such a building over the years. Renaissance architecture, for example, was not built in one go. The most obvious examples are the famous villas by Palladio, which are almost all works of rebuilding. Czech's idea of Ümbau is correct in that sense. In Kortrijk we thought it had to be possible to retain the existing light structure and to add a new structure, which is incidentally just technical in nature, around the existing and, moreover, to make them appear heavier. That leads to a remarkably new reading of the building: the supporting columns appear more slender than the columns that serve for ventilation. They are unnaturally heavy,

serve no other purpose than to comply with current norms, but at the same time they make a composition of the building. You could argue that the idea of ‘architecture without content’ in Kortrijk is pushed to an absolute extreme. The architecture supports nothing, organizes nothing, does nothing. It’s literally pure, independent form. But, strangely enough, that form is here the form of the installation, the form of the process, the form of the ecology, the form of the energy. In that sense the antagonism between economy, energy and form is completely ridiculous, because form here is the exact expression of those processes.

The conversion of an abattoir into a school in Antwerp is based on a similar search for ambiguity. The main hall of the abattoir is retained, but its double-height space is divided into two levels by a concrete slab. The new architecture aligns with the existing. The table, for example, has columns just like the hall, resulting in a strange sort of dance between the existing and new columns. We decided, for that matter, not to pull apart the existing structure and the intervention. Richard Venlet has drawn our attention to that. The museum projects by Carlo Scarpa might

belong to another era, but they have nonetheless influenced us. They are explicit in what they add in a totally ambiguous manner, but they make it almost impossible to disconnect the new and the existing.

Architecture as resilience

VP In your projects you do not aspire to a circular economy, or reuse local materials, or highlight craftsmanship. How do you view the importance of your architecture in the long term? Do your structures offer some sort of resilience? And is that resilience another way of looking at sustainability?

KG The life span of a building is very important to us. It is perhaps also implicit in Czech's reasoning about layered architecture. Many programmes are no longer fixed permanently; they shift and fluctuate, and buildings have to respond accordingly. In our view, the potential of a long life span lies largely in the power of spatial typologies, in types that admit interpretation. If mutations or changes occur in the programme, the type must be able to overcome

such changes. The architecture should therefore provide adequate guidance. That's something we learned in our media projects: the building for the Swiss radio and television broadcaster (RTS) in Lausanne and the building for the Flemish Radio and Television (VRT) in Brussels. Both buildings called for a series of recording studios and editorial offices — a number of open and closed workspaces that had to be interchangeable over time. In Lausanne we therefore made one big open space with open workspaces and a number of closed volumes, or *émergences*, positioned above that space. Over the past six years we're been able to assess

RTS model © OFFICE Kersten Geers David van Severen

what happens in the open and closed spaces and how they evolve and mutate within the building. That has been allowed to happen because the building facilitates it.

VP ‘Providing guidance to enable change over time’ sounds like a good architectural idea. How does that translate into architecture? Do you think more of a functional machine like the Centre Pompidou in Paris or of the Basilica in Vicenza that Aldo Rossi praised as an ‘urban artefact’.
A building that, to Rossi, provides so much guidance that it can absorb mutating programmes.

KG I’m 100% with the Basilica in Vicenza! That’s my architectural world. But isn’t the Basilica also something of a machine? The Centre Pompidou, by the way, is less of a machine than we like to think and more an architectural object. That’s perhaps its lasting success. In essence, the primary quality of the Pompidou is that it represents a machine but isn’t actually one. The big coloured tubes are architectural elements that supply pipes inside. The basilica, on the other hand, is more of a machine than

you might suspect. That idea has always fascinated us. Machines are important in our contemporary dealings with the world, even if you want as few of them as possible in your building. We played with that idea in Bahrein. We investigated how the building could work passively in the winter, but air conditioning is needed in the summer. Instead of literally displaying the air conditioning, we hide it inside a box; that principle is indebted to the Centre Pompidou. In that sense, our designs for the RTS in Lausanne and for the VRT in Brussels are similar. They are much less of a machine than you might think. But if they are a machine, they are largely the form of the machine. In other words, the machine is a figure that, despite its contents, will always endure. Technology for us is too temporary. We're too interested in making a building that can endure, and that prevents us from falling into the trap of pure machinery.

VP So what does a building need in order to survive?

KG Form! (Laughs). Our media buildings are good examples of that. The RTS

building brings together two spatial typologies: a horizontal field with sawtooth roofs and a number of supporting volumes. The size of the volumes, or *émergences*, changes and therefore makes things in the middle or at the edge of the horizontal field possible. Those *émergences* have the same windows and can therefore house varied programmes. RTS was designed as a media building, but it could also become a university building on the EPFL campus in 2060. In fact, RTS explicitly considers the campus-like context by inserting an urban artefact into the set of existing buildings — a building, as Aldo Rossi described in *The Architecture of the City*, that possesses an enduring form, so that it can survive the passing of time. It is perhaps our contemporary response to bigness; not through the architecture of the big box that offers no clue as to what happens inside, but through a staging, *mise en scène*, of urbanity. Our design for the VRT in Brussels can be more easily compared to the Villa Farnèse in Caprarola, an object that seeks to stand alone, an anchoring point that not only negotiates with the city through its facade but also wants to create sufficient interior space.

VP Finally, in what way can you adopt a position, based on your architecture, in debates surrounding urgent contemporary issues? Does architecture require an autonomous role or a more serving role?

KG The answer is simple. The buildings that we make are, in our view, very explicit answers to questions posed. Yet we should remember one thing: architecture is slow. It takes four to eight years to realize a building, sometimes even longer. We have to ensure that no confusion ensues. There's a lot of misunderstanding about what the process in architecture can be. A building should be capable of communicating its entire cultural heritage and its times. Kortrijk is a passive building, a responsible answer to the question posed and, at the same time, an expression of architecture. There's certainly nothing wrong with developing the know-how needed to use raw materials in a responsible way, but it's very difficult to make a distinction between the fashion of the day and genuinely sustainable solutions. In my opinion, sustainable solutions are largely

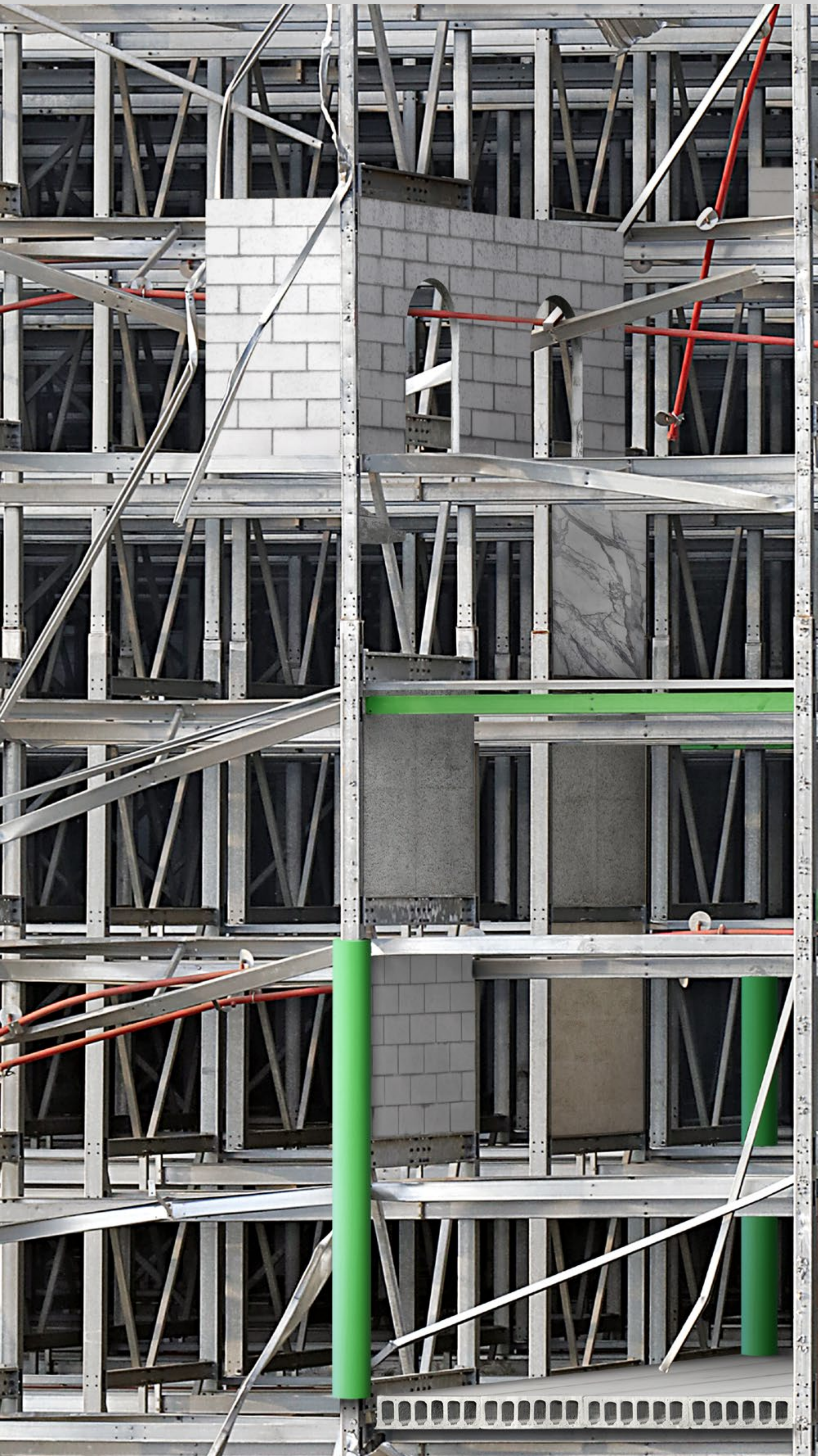
typological, spatially typological. I think we should not underestimate that. Sustainable solutions also lie in making buildings that last longer than one programme. You also have insight into the carbon footprints of various materials, and we should treat that insight very carefully. I would argue that our architecture has always been sufficiently conceptual to not be materially dependent.

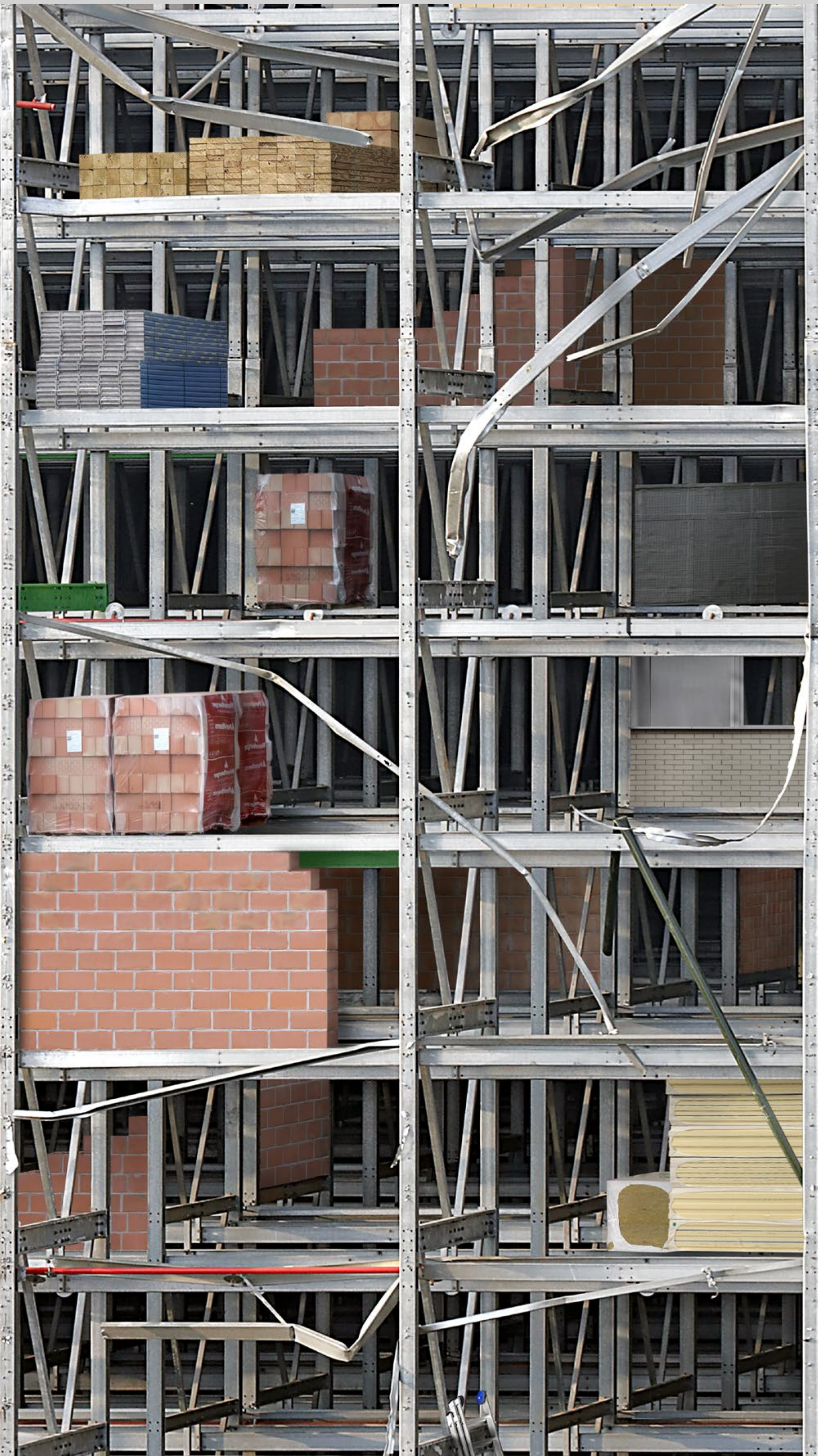
VP In that sense, your architecture perhaps appears most similar to the protagonist in Robert Musil's *The Man Without Qualities*, a book in which he portrays a man in a changing society. An architecture without material properties, without visual properties, typologically open and implicit yet offering sufficient footing to survive future evolution.

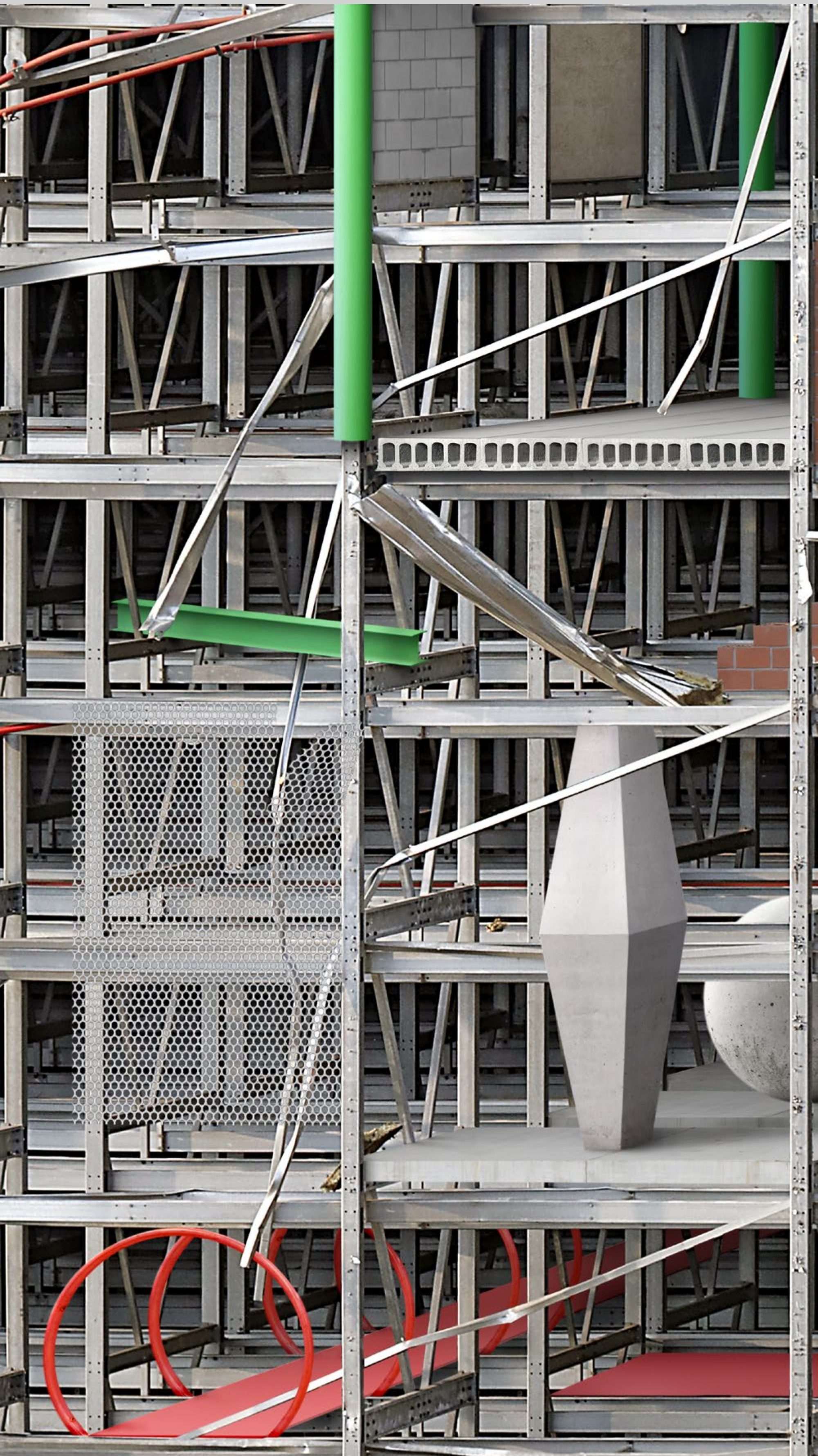
Brussels 5 July 2021

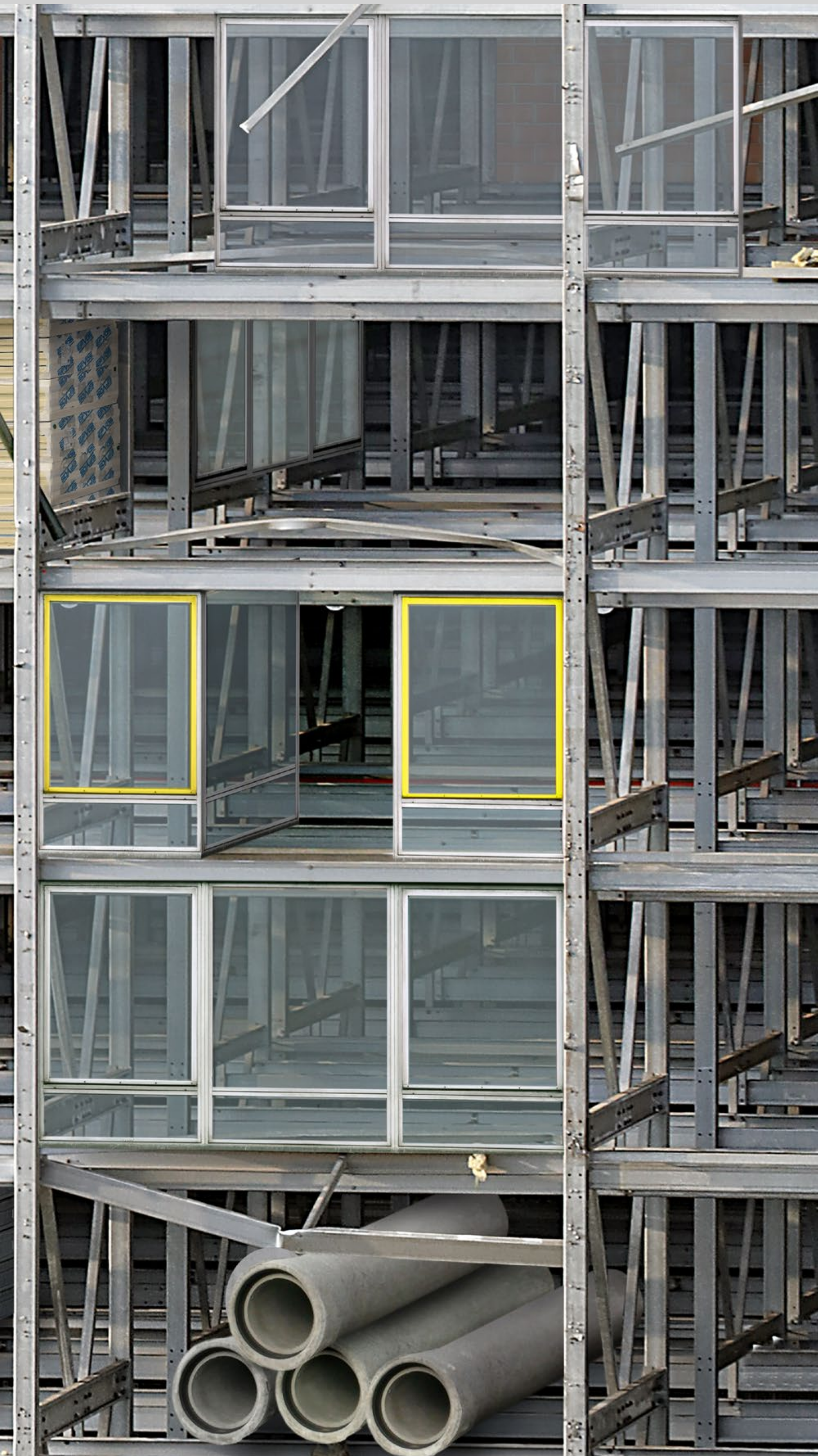
Filip Dujardin, *frameWORKframe*, 2021

The basis of Filip Dujardin *frameWORKframe*, 2021 consists of a frame of metal shelves that is being dismantled. It is a metaphor for old ideas in architecture versus new solutions for future problems of the profession.
The old frame still exists but is disintegrating. The open structure allows for new interpretations based on a different logic. This ambiguous condition represents the present transition of our world from an ecological, economic, social, ethical and architectural perspective. The various elements placed in the frame show both the materials of a market-dominated construction world and the most elementary architectural forms and typologies that have lost none of their design power. Together they form the building blocks of future architecture. Reorganizing current resources, materials and production processes, and revising how we deal with historical baggage will shape the architecture of the future.









Reinier de Graaf and the universe of permanent promise

Saskia van Stein

Referencing various moments from the past quarter of a century and the eventful history of the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA), Saskia van Stein and Reinier de Graaf discuss developments in architecture through the lens of its social context. As an architect, urbanist, OMA partner, thinker, curator, educator and writer, De Graaf is an active and usually provocative contributor to architectural discourse, as illustrated by his two recent publications: *Four Walls and a Roof* (2017) and *The Masterplan* (2021).

Saskia van Stein Let's go back to the 1990s. Under the policies of the Lubbers III and Kok I cabinets in the Netherlands, social services as well as social property were being privatized and subjected to the neo-liberal market economy. The excuse given was that it would improve government finances. Yet 1991 also saw the publication of *Space for Architecture*. This policy document presented the government's integral vision on the relevance of architecture.

This was around the time you graduated and entered the field of practice. What architectural climate did you encounter and how do you look back on it now?

Reinier de Graaf To start with, the 1990s wasn't one single period. After graduating from the Berlage Institute in 1992, I won, together with Don Murphy, the Europan 3 competition for a site in Den Bosch. That seemed to be an excellent opportunity to start my own office, which didn't work out unfortunately. Unemployment was high among architects at the time. After writing a hundred application letters and receiving as many rejections, I heard there was work at OMA, but that it would mean the end of any private life. After being insulted for a full twenty minutes, they hired me. We were working with about 35 people at Heer Bokelweg in Rotterdam. The financial situation at the office was fragile. After almost going bankrupt in 1995, everything was done on credit. Then we were taken over by an engineering firm called De Weger, which was in turn bought by Haskoning. These firms hadn't a clue what they'd gotten into with us. And partly because of that, we developed a curious sort of freedom.

In the second half of the 1990s, OMA was

mostly active in the United States, and the office made a transition to the market economy. We got paid in dollars, which we converted into guilders at favourable rates. Our fortunes improved, enabling us to buy ourselves out. We also made a transition to partnerships with a number of individuals who'd been at the office from the start. If you look at the OMA portfolio from the 1980s and early 1990s, you see that public commissions accounted for 80% and private commissions 20%. Over time, those figures reversed, and the focus came to lie on private clients.

SvS What do we see when we look at that period through the lens of today? To me, society at the time had a deep appreciation of architecture. A generation of Dutch architecture firms was grouped under the label 'SuperDutch'. It enjoyed national and international fame and stature for its conceptual designs, its optimism and its faith in feasibility, as expressed through architecture. If you were to take the temperature of Dutch architecture today, what would you read on the thermometer?

RdG The world has changed of course — that's unavoidable. But trying to keep up with the

times can be counterproductive. I think that time does works linearly; it's often curiously cyclical. In the 1990s we could do nothing wrong — the sky was the limit. But now we find ourselves in a period in which earlier success has almost become a source of suspicion, some kind of implicit guilt, though that probably comes with a generational change.

In my opinion we should count our blessings in Dutch architecture. Our profession is not generous or inclusive. Architects are always trying to outdo one another. As soon as one style comes in for criticism, another senses a fantastic opportunity. Architects rarely realize that they are trapped in the same boat. But if you zoom out and look at the social forces and the motives of clients, then a different world appears. No matter whether you design modern, post-modern, pre-modern or what-ever, we're all part of the same form of mani-pulation, the same form of conservative forces. People don't realize that enough because of a peculiar form of hubris.

SvS Let's jump to the early twenty-first century: the emergence of AMO (OMA written backwards). You could argue that technology, just like ideology, has aban-doned us. The 9/11 attacks, the image of

the Twin Towers collapsing, and a year earlier the crashing of Concorde, that ultimate symbol of acceleration and progress. There was a growing awareness that the West was no longer the undisputed frontrunner and world leader. That became clear when the United States undermined its position by adopting military methods to implement democracy in other countries, as a way to safeguard its own economic interests. That was around the time that AMO emerged as the research and publications division of OMA. Why did you choose for this distinction between design and research?

RdG AMO is actually a product of the 1990s, which acquired a more public profile in 2002. A part of OMA, and precursor to AMO, was the Großstadt Foundation, with which we acquired funding. The construction with Großstadt enabled us to carry out work that clients did not commission, but that we as an office still felt was important — everything influenced by globalization and the transition to a market economy. Issues such as design research and the analysis of social trends gave our work an academic, intellectual and cultural dimension. AMO arose in part because the influence of

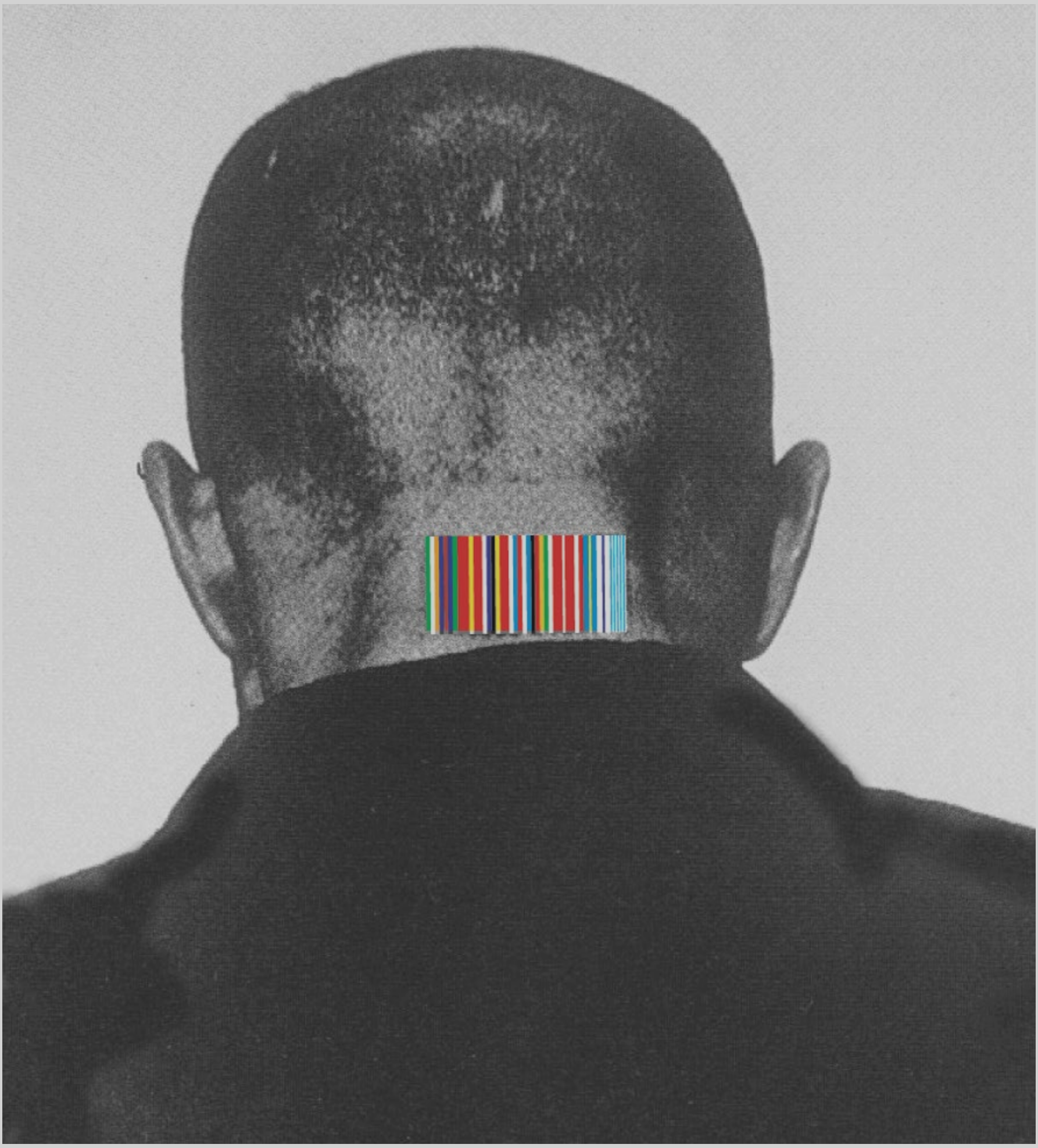
the government began to seriously decline at the time. More and more services and organizations were privatized, and cutbacks reduced countless cultural subsidies. We shifted from state patronage to a sort of private patronage. AMO was a vehicle to continue that intellectual dimension of the company, albeit within a different context. Architects by nature think associatively, three-dimensionally and not always linearly. It was also a commercial wing; it earned money to carry out research that expanded the commission. For instance, we used the design of the Prada store in New York to study the multiple use of space as a knock-on effect of the 24/7 economy. We translated a commission for Schiphol into a study of the future of area development and various forms of mobility. An increasing number of clients turned out to be interested in various issues that arose around commissions, for which buildings were not necessarily the best solution. In short, the 'birth' of AMO coincided with a period of huge change and a higher turnover rate, with major clients increasingly coming to us for non-linear strategies. We worked globally, so we had lots of international references for comparable problems. So when we formally registered AMO as a limited company in the Netherlands,

this research division within the office already existed. AMO had its genesis in an awareness that if the world commercializes completely, you have to carve out space in which to think.

SvS That intellectual line in the office is maybe also about storytelling, a form of immaterial production of content. Can you say something about the inter-play between the building and the research into the surrounding world, and how that context can be analysed? That condition intrigues me.

RdG Me less so, because does that type of research result in totally different buildings to those you would design without conducting any research? That's true to a certain extent only. For me personally, the most interesting projects are precisely those projects that have absolutely nothing to do with buildings. For example, the EU study, a product of which was the alternative flag for Europe, and the circus tent we erected on Place Schumann in Brussels, in front of the headquarters of the European Commission and the headquarters of the Council of Ministers.

The clients, the European Commission, originally approached us with a different



EU barcode © OMA

question. It had set up a think-tank to consider the possible symbolic implications of the EU for a city such as Brussels, given the fact that it's the capital not only of a country and a region but also a transnational political system. People came to OMA/AMO to investigate the urban dimension. In the end we pointed out to them that it wasn't the symbolic implication for Brussels that needed to be studied but the way in which the transnational

political system itself was represented. That transnational political system suffered from what we termed an *iconographic deficit*. This assertion afforded us an opportunity to design flags and symbols with complete freedom, and in fact to come up with a design for the whole political arena. The flag was front-page news: *'New symbol of Europe: approval pending'*. Totally fake news, but there was no stopping it. The European Commission could do nothing but become embroiled in the ensuing storm. To me that demonstrates the great power of design. An architect has to operate in many different fields where people are not accustomed to applying design.

Design has two definitions in English: *To give material shape to something* and *To make a plan of action*. So it's important both to shape material and to deploy architecture as a purely conceptual medium. The most fascinating projects emerge in this combination of object and strategy.

SvS From broadening the scope of the commission to building on another continent. The design competition for the Twin Towers memorial in New York almost coincided with the design assign-ment for the CCTV tower in Beijing.

Why did you go for the CCTV? And how do you make such a choice?

RdG I didn't draw a single line for the CCTV tower, but it's a project I get asked about to this day. Although many of the choices made within the office are the result of a series of coincidences and split second decisions, which can be interpreted retrospectively as brilliantly timed actions, the decision to take part in the CCTV competition was not all down to chance. We'd been working for quite some time in the US. When George Bush Jr. was elected president, the country started to move in a direction that we disliked. That prompted us to consider China and design the CCTV. But we were also driven by curiosity for another continent. We suspected that the whole issue of the Twin Towers would turn into an endless talk show dominated by American smugness. Our timing was largely born out of a big succession of possibilities that we gladly embraced. Precisely because we often take a leap into the dark, into uncharted waters, we create a sort of intensive, high-tempo, lived reality, a form of acceleration that yields insights. That curiosity and optimism win out, because architecture is a profession that condemns you to optimism.

CCTV/OMA Rem Koolhaas and Ole Scheeren © OMA

Architecture confronts you in an extreme way with reality. You couldn’t practice this profession without optimism and a certain form of naiveness, and that’s true at every scale. The more you do, the more you discover that there are no good or bad pro-

fessions. Nor are there any good or bad countries, at least not in the sense that the media would have us believe. Every image has been artificially created by the media. Much of our thinking and conditioning turns out to be different in reality. Architecture is just the tip of the iceberg. You can have nothing to do with it, but I'm curious about that complexity and the perverse mechanisms of those types of things. Every project is a neck and neck race between 'good' and 'bad' intentions. Your moral obligation as an architect is to make that assessment to the best of your ability and to be sincere in doing it. Things can of course turn out differently to how you imagined or anticipated. The Chinese state, and the state media, did not develop as we thought they would when he decided to make that building. The US also developed in way we hadn't anticipated. You always run that risk. If you take part and make money through the knowledge economy, then you're scarcely in a position to really make a totally unconditional decision. At OMA we've never had **a policy of only working for 'that particular client' or in 'that particular place' because the rest of the world is too murky. Even so, political considerations do play a role in accepting or**

declining commissions. Where to work and where not to, and at what moment and under what conditions? We always look and decide when the moment arises. If a project to make Orban appear more respectable presented itself, I would turn it down now.

SvS In 2008 the Western world was hit badly by a financial recession, symbolized by the bankruptcy of the Lehman Brothers investment bank. Our profession was also hit badly, with lots of layoffs, high unemployment among designers, offices that went bust, and a huge increase in the number of self-employed architects. How did you experience that upheaval? And what are the effects of that period today?

RdG We've undergone an evolution recently that has led to increasing accountability; everything has to be quantifiable. We've started to use checklists, though you can never distil a good building from them. Moreover, to me a checklist is an excuse to really think or design something.
I increasingly come across juries without a single architect. Instead, they consist of accountants and financial advisors.

That hardly leads to better projects. Usually the opposite. One of the great things about architecture is that it knows how to deal with the unmeasurable, with the unpredictable. It's a profession that feels at ease when it comes to making a leap of faith, in a society obsessed by risk analysis. For instance, the young offices that emerged in the late 1990s and early 2000s could start with a limited professional liability insurance. They received a bank loan and could take part in tenders for big buildings. That's not possible any more. For European contracts you have to have done something five times already or else you're not eligible. You have to have a big bank balance so that, if legal action is taken against you, you have the resources to pay. Insurance premiums are exorbitant. All of this keeps many architecture offices small. Being activist, or working on small commissions, is now sold as a form of ideology against the evils of big money. I see it more as a necessity, comparable to the situation that prevents young people from buying a home today, or even from renting one. We should realize that many of the changes in architectural culture that are now presented as conscious choices are in fact

a consequence of a reality dictated by the market economy and regulations.

During that period I chronicled my experiences in a diary that resulted in the book *Four Walls and Roof: The Simple Nature of a Complex Profession*. The publication documents experiences working on projects in the United Kingdom, Russia, the Middle East and one in Iraq. By the way, none of them were built. It was a period in which some strong forces, some turbulent troublemakers, thwarted those plans. The project in the United Kingdom: just before the Lehman Brothers crisis. The Iraq project: just before ISIS. The designs in Russia: just before Putin. Schemes in the Middle East: just before the collapse of the oil market. You can consider those projects as a form of failure, but they also taught us a lot. Those projects reveal much about the world in which we're active.

SvS Is this making failure productive the result of marketing or economizing? Or is it about something else?

RdG When all sorts of large urban plans within our office were cancelled because of the financial crisis, I turned the question

of failure in 2011 into something productive with an exhibition. The plans were not officially cancelled, but all put ‘on hold’. That was also the title of the exhibition, and it’s perhaps the best metaphor that the market economy has ever produced: a universe of permanent promise. It’s vita that those promises always remain promises, since that’s the force that keeps the whole show running.

For that matter, I also recognize the role of failing in teaching. Over the years I’ve noticed that teaching is something you really have to learn. We shouldn’t forget that the culture of teaching has changed. When I started teaching my attitude was fairly opportunistic. I saw students as extra staff. It was an operational exercise, similar to that at the office, an extension of the labour supply for current research. But I’ve come to understand that you have to thread carefully, because if you do that explicitly, you’ll disappoint both them and yourself. Now I try and adopt a more open attitude, a mixture of influences, an environment in which you learn that failing can also be interpreted as a form of progress. Education can then become a means of shaping your intentions, instead

of a process of instrumentalizing or reproducing. But finding a good balance remains a challenge.

Teaching has also changed my understanding of knowledge. I was taught on the basis of the idea of specialization, and later I became multidisciplinary. That's how I would describe my attitude today. I'm a complete omnivore: I like to read about architecture just as much as literature, or tabloid news. At present I'm particularly interested in the anti-disciplinary. The core value of an anti-discipline is the ability to escape from the normative criteria of the discipline. Anti-disciplinary thinking offers more freedom of movement, because collaboration occurs on condition that everybody comes out of their comfort zone. That brings you closer to genuinely meaningful decisions.

SvS What, in your opinion, are the social trends that architects, especially younger ones, should engage with? What instruments do designers have at their disposal? And in what fields of influence do they operate?

RdG One of the biggest problems of our

time, apart from the issues of housing, climate and sustainability, is the loss of freedom. Democracy is under threat around the world and is giving way to an increasingly repressive reality. On the one hand that's being driven by authoritarian male leaders, for their time is not nearly up. Now that their power is waning, they impose more tyranny on population groups. On the other hand the loss of freedom is caused by a sort of out-of-control political correctness, implemented more subtly, which finds expression in — unconscious — self-censorship.

A second aspect of concern is the current economic trend of bailing out private entities with public funds. This reveals a system error, which results in a hard division between the haves and the have-nots. Piketty shows that we have income from labour and from capital, but something is now going wrong in the relationship between the two. At present, architecture serves that repertoire — the huge profit margins of the market economy for those who earn money with real estate. I don't think that we in architecture are capable of creating a different economic system, but I'm amazed at the extent to

which architects are deaf and blind to this whole subject. We should at the very least be having a discussion about this.

SvS Let's close by taking about the world stage. China is on track to becoming the most influential power in the world as the global cards are reshuffled. In your novel *The Masterplan* you describe this aptly: "The construction site of Bilunga exemplified the perfect microcosm of globalization — Asians and Africans doing the actual work with Westerners passing judgement in the form of a running commentary." How do you view those developments and why do they form the basis of your novel?

RdG Rising economies, as we see in certain countries in Africa, need money for all sorts of investment. They then come knocking on the door of the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund or other Western agencies. Those bodies set a number of conditions before issuing a loan, covering issues such as trans-parency, democracy and anti-corruption.

It's a long list that actually presupposes an ideal situation, one that doesn't exist at all. China does not impose any moral conditions when it issues a loan. It only sets conditions concerning how the money may be spent. For it wants the money borrowed to be spent on Chinese materials, transport and companies. In short, China loans the money exclusively on paper; it's a sort of rapid barter in which capital and labour actually remain in China, circulate within China, and accumulate in value. Valuable natural resources such as oil, gold and diamonds are offered as security on the loans. Those resources move from Africa to China, and concrete panels and labourers move in the opposite direction. If the price of oil drops, something strange happens, because then the loan taken, just like that on a house, will incur debt. The security offered for the loan is no longer worth the loan. New agreements are then reached on the basis of the resulting inequality.
A form of economic colonization results, on a continent that has only very recently decolonized. I studied that mechanism and wanted to write a book about it. Since so many macro-economic forces and

political motives come together, I thought there couldn’t be anything better than a story where an innocent architect falls into the trap of that complexity.

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Colophon

The aim of Archined Foundation is to stimulate discussion about urban design, architecture and landscape architecture as widely as possible through various channels, including the Archined website. Editorially independent, the critical online community-based site has been in existence since 1996. Archined articles are written by designers, academics, students and others active in the field.

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The Persistence of Questioning
Critical reflections on the future,
on architecture and more
*Where is design practice at today?

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