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How Soon Is Now? Ten Problems and Paradoxes in the Work of Dogma

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How Soon Is Now? Ten Problems and Paradoxes in the Work of Dogma

What befalls us is but another name for the way our circumstances press upon us – so that an account of what befalls us is an account of our circumstances.

– Henry James

1.

The most important characteristic of the work of Dogma is an almost impossible love-hate relationship with architecture. On the one hand, the projects made by the Brussels-based office led by Pier Vittorio Aureli and Martino Tattara are the result of an absolute commitment to the possibilities of architecture; on the other, they show a total absence of illusion about the majority of present architectural strategies, habits, and methods. In the catalogue collecting Dogma's early work, *11 Projects*, published in 2013, Gabriele Mastrigli gives a definition of architecture as it is produced by Dogma: a "discipline that synthesizes a variety of themes (social, artistic, political), so as to represent in the clearest way the 'character' of a historical period."¹ Mastrigli suggests that this concept of architecture originates from the fact that Aureli and Tattara followed, in the early 1990s, Manfredo Tafuri's courses at the IAUV in Venice. However, there is an important difference between the position of Dogma and that of architecture's most critical historian; not surprisingly, this difference is historical in nature. Tafuri – to roughly summarize part of his intellectual project – criticized the naive ambitions of postwar architects, claiming not only that they should in no way pretend to influence contemporary societal conditions but also that the expression of these conditions was futile, since it would never be heard by society in general, let alone understood. Trying to understand, communicate, or fight the facts and the circumstances of modern existence by means of architecture had become, after the demise of the Modern Movement, a rather silly undertaking. Quite

1. Gabriele Mastrigli, "Commanders of the Field," in Pier Vittorio Aureli and Martino Tattara, *Dogma: 11 Projects* (London: AA Publications, 2013), 110.

2. Manfredo Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth: Avant-Gardes and Architecture from Piranesi to the 1970s*, trans. Pellegrino d'Acierno and Robert Connolly (Cambridge: MIT Press, 1987), 301.
3. Hans Ibelings, *Modernism without Dogma: Architects of a Younger Generation in the Netherlands*, trans. John Kirkpatrick (Rotterdam: NAI, 1991), 9.

sarcastically, then, and to give only one example, Tafuri wrote how the work of such divergent architects as Peter Eisenman and Robert Venturi and Denise Scott Brown proclaimed a real event: “the war is over.”² Dogma endorses this pessimism about the possibilities of contemporary architecture; the difference is that they realize this absence of hope has become a commonplace, either cynically shared by global architecture culture or contested by falling back on such humble aims as phenomenological pleasure, an ecological ethos, indeterminate and imprecise research, or a “bottom-up” destruction of the architect as author. The task Dogma has set for themselves is clear: as architects, they want to go to war again. The question, of course, is, how can this be done?

2.

The widespread conviction that architecture has no social role worth speaking of is illustrated in a curious document from the heyday of late 20th-century Dutch architecture culture – a culture that has been crucial in the formation of Aureli and Tattara, who were students and educators at the Berlage Institute in Rotterdam before it was closed in 2012 due to government budget cuts.

In 1991, at the Venice Architecture Biennale curated by Francesco Dal Co, the Dutch Pavilion presented a new generation. These young architects – including Ben van Berkel, Wiel Arets, and Willem Jan Neutelings – were not only working in the tradition of Rem Koolhaas and the Office for Metropolitan Architecture; in some cases they had worked for OMA during the '80s, and all of them profited from public investments in architecture and the growing *Salonfähigkeit* of Dutch architecture. The curator of this exhibition was architecture critic Hans Ibelings. In the introduction to the catalogue he writes, “There is a renewed interest among younger architects in the intellectual tradition of modernism, an interest legible in their attempts to uphold certain principles. No one, however, harbors the illusion that it is possible or even desirable to revitalize the societal program to which these principles were originally linked.” He concludes with a statement that would prove prophetic in the decades to come: “[These architects] articulate the sentiment that modernism is a valuable source from which inspiration can be freely drawn, with no concern for the idealism attached to it by the first generation of modernists. The result of this liberal and unencumbered involvement with architecture of the recent past is a modernism without dogma, inventive and with a tremendous richness of form.”³

Modernism without Dogma served as the exhibition title. There lies an important irony in this formula. As Ibelings unwittingly but succinctly described, in contemporary architecture one major ideological dogma became all the more huge precisely because it was never expressed as such: that architects have no use for ideals, nor for explicit or societal programs that contradict or confront the way of the world.

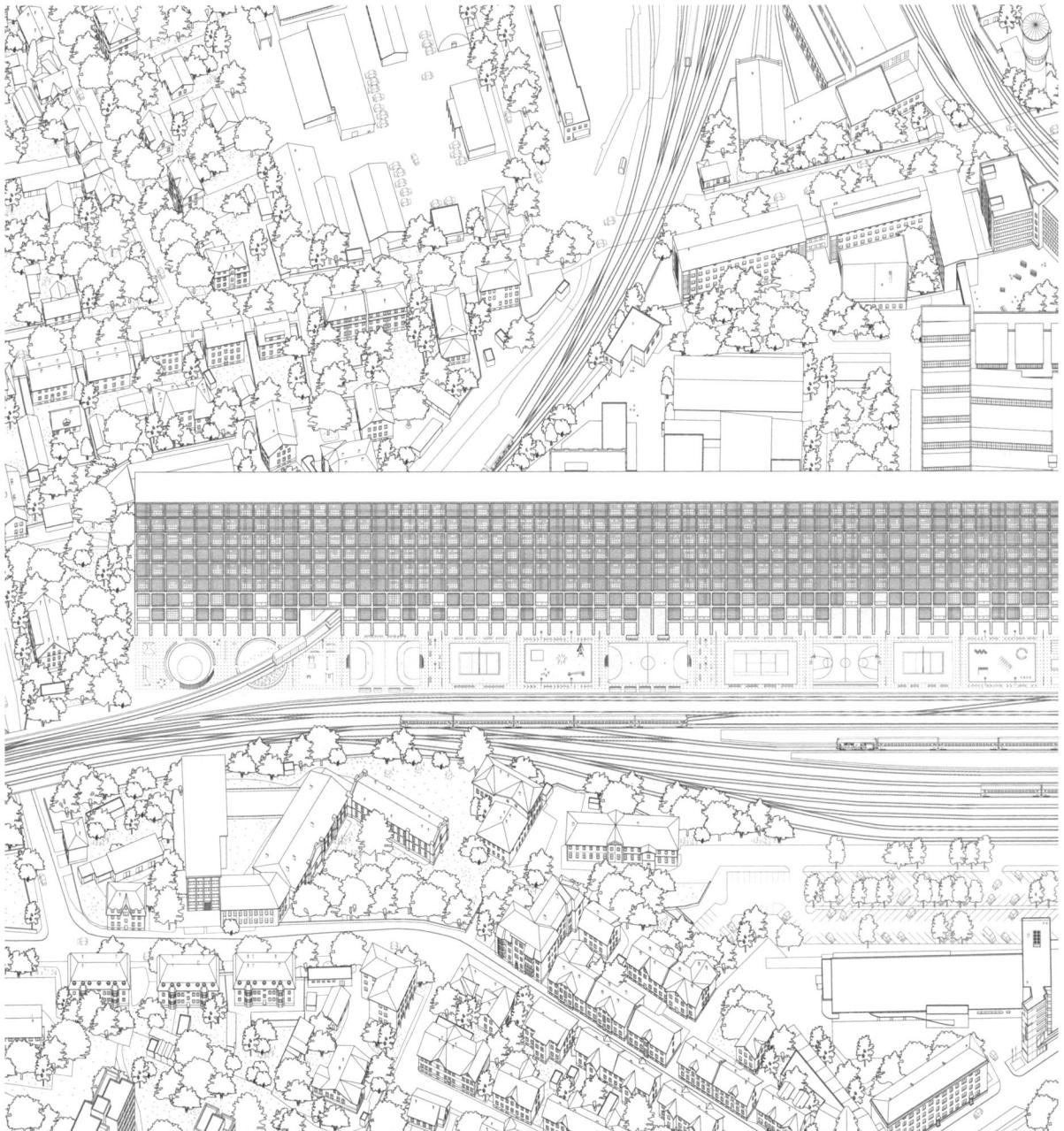
The name Dogma, chosen by Aureli and Tattara, can be interpreted in this sense: their projects polemically address an architecture culture that is dominated by one dogma, with a working and production method that is no less dogmatic – but it is a dogma that, on the one hand, is put in a theoretical and self-willed pole position and, on the other, uncovers and reverses many of the fetishes and *doxas* of 21st-century architecture. The work of Dogma is – to borrow from Ibelings's catalogue once more – not “inventive,” and it does not boast “a tremendous richness of form.” Invention and formal richness are, on the contrary, considered as the true, self-consuming problem of architecture and, as such, are annihilated, not least by the use of one formal dogma: the square. This is the conceptual basis of their approach, and it has often led to bewildered reactions, comic and sad at the same time: How can they be serious? Is that all there is? Squares, lines, and ladders? Shouldn’t architects be at least a bit creative? Dogma shows that in order to be surprising, architects today can only sabotage the very notion of surprising architectural invention.

3.

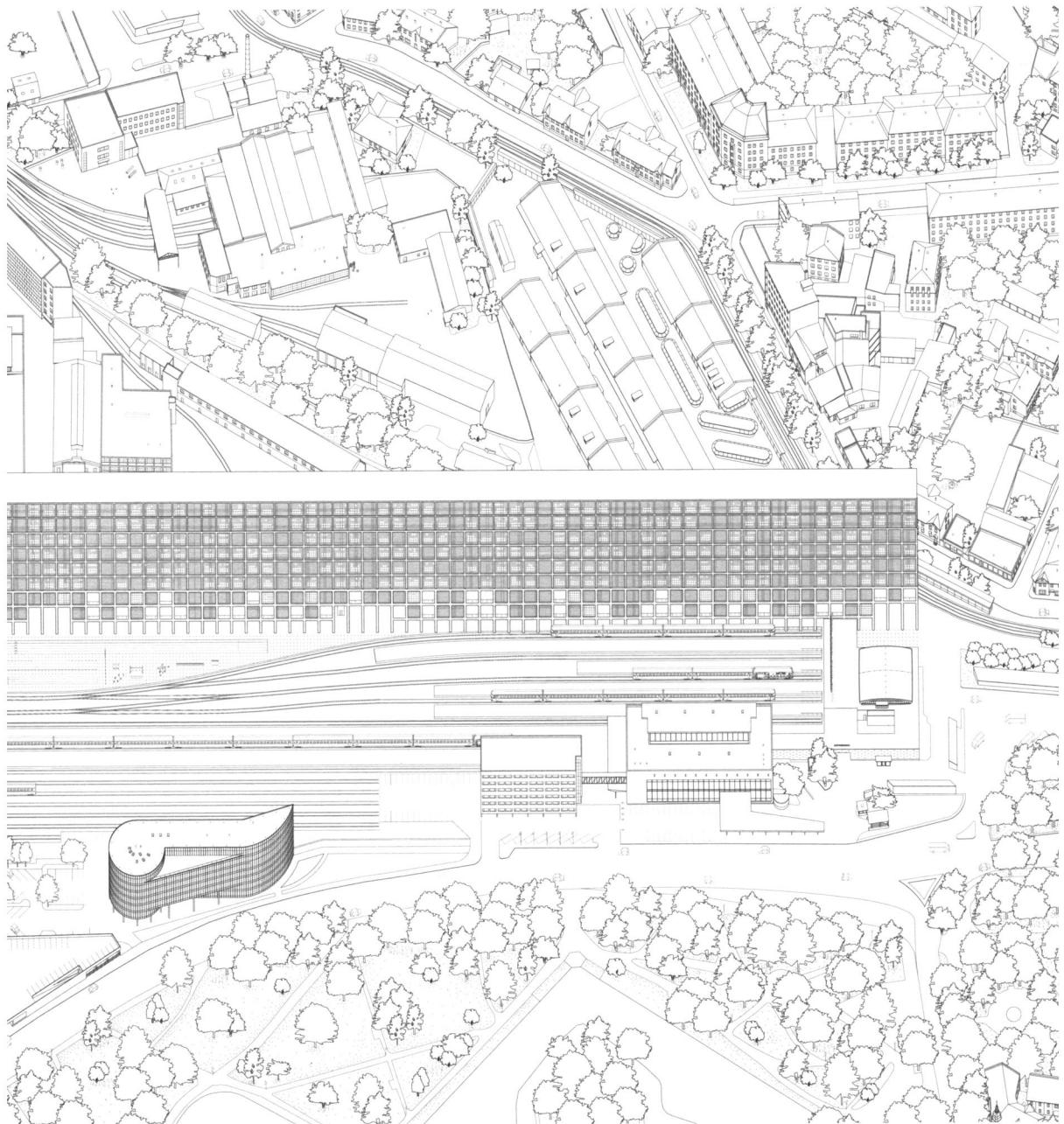
One of the unresolved tensions in the work of Dogma owes to the singularity of the architectural object. In *11 Projects*, Brett Steele begins his introduction to Dogma’s work by stressing the dominance of singularity in contemporary architecture: namely, “the intensified attention directed *in theory* as well as *in practice* not only toward the architectural object but also, and more significantly, toward a highly individuated, decidedly episodic accounting of architectural proposals and interventions, conceived no less than received as *singular* architectural undertakings, whether they are buildings, structures, installations or even larger urban spaces.”⁴ According to Steele, Dogma tries to overcome this dominance by returning architecture to more fundamental tasks, not at the scale of the building but at the scale of the city.

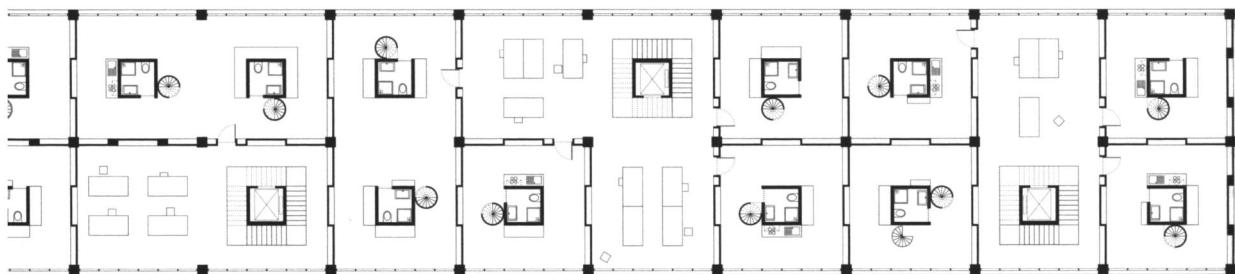
The concept of singularity is essential for modernity in general and for modern cultural production in particular. The idea, or the expectation, that one work or one event is new,

4. Brett Steele, “Dogma Squared: Architecture and the City,” in *11 Projects*, 2.



**DOGMA, LIVE FOREVER: THE RETURN
OF THE FACTORY, 2013. PROPOSAL FOR
A LIVE/WORK UNITÉ D'HABITATION FOR
1,600 PEOPLE IN THE BALTI STATION
AREA, TALLINN, ESTONIA. ALL
IMAGES COURTESY DOGMA.**



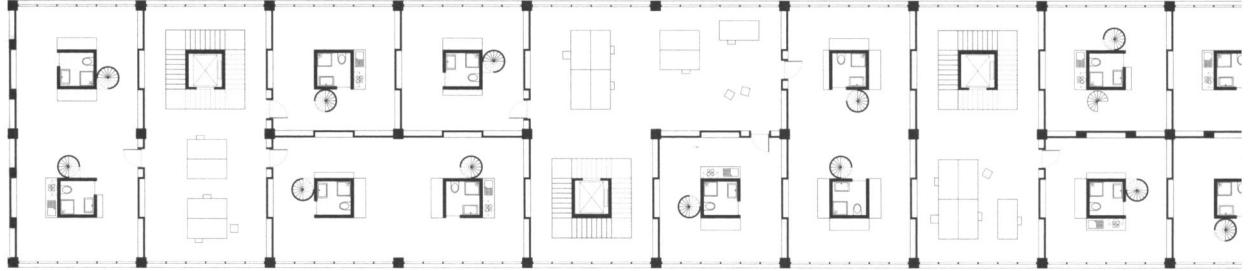


LIVE FOREVER: THE RETURN OF THE FACTORY. TYPICAL FLOOR PLAN.

different, and singular, and that it has a valuable transforming and critical effect, is rooted in an old tradition with religious, anthropologic, and ritualistic aspects. Contemporary architecture thrives on this expectation, and no matter how absurd it has become – one need only think of the more than 1,500 entries to the Guggenheim Helsinki design competition in 2014 to understand the implications of being exceptional and different – it is not easy to imagine how it can be overthrown. In a conversation with Jean Nouvel published in *The Singular Objects of Architecture*, Jean Baudrillard considers whether there is an alternative to critical singularity: “I think that each of us can resist,” he said. “But it would be difficult for such resistance to become political. I don’t get the impression there could be any organized political resistance as such. It would always be an exception, and whatever you do will always be ‘exceptional’ in that sense. . . . We are definitively immersed in the order of culture, that is, until the apocalypse arrives.”⁵

This word *apocalypse* is strange, and in a sense it is not correct. The immersion in culture, the world system, can easily be swept away by an apocalypse. But there is a more positive idea of an apocalypse as a complete and total change not caused by nature but organized and willed by a large group of people. The “singular objects” of architecture can be replaced not only by an apocalypse but also by a revolution. The work of Dogma asks us to reconsider our options. What would it mean if architects produced not beautiful singular objects and exceptional new places but rather urban environments in which singularity is no longer the norm? What can replace singularity? What is the opposite of singularity? The opposite of a singular object is a replacement of the totality: instead of piercing the bubble to let light and air in, you take the bubble away; instead of confronting the city with “acupuncture with a big needle,” as Elia Zenghelis described it,⁶ you cut open the body of the city and replace its vital organs. This is a much more collective and indeed revolutionary change: as an individual, you can take isolated critical actions, but if

5. Jean Baudrillard and Jean Nouvel, *The Singular Objects of Architecture*, trans. Robert Bonanno (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2002), 20–21.
 6. Elia Zenghelis, “For A New Monumentality,” in Pier Vittorio Aureli, *Brussels, A Manifesto: Towards The Capital Of Europe*, ed. Véronique Patteeuw, Joachim Declercq, and Martino Tattara (Rotterdam: NAI Publishers, 2007), 225–33.



you want to change the totality of the conditions we live in, you will not succeed on your own. In texts both by and about Dogma, three words consistently pop up: *politics*, *capitalism*, and *the city*. There is a danger of indistinctness and tautology in this insistence, but what it boils down to is that the architects of Dogma go looking for a client that is neither simply an individual commissioner nor a society in which exchangeable individuality and commercial singularity remain the norm. The result is a hypothetical practice vulnerable to the reproach that they ignore the reality in which architects have to perform their pragmatic duties.

4.

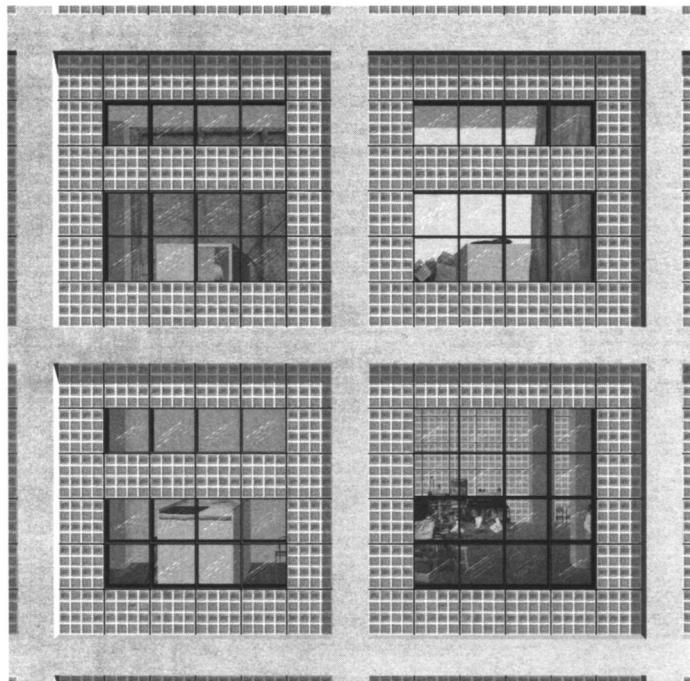
In a 1926 letter to Gershom Scholem, Walter Benjamin expressed an uneasy conscience with regard to the society of his day – a conscience that would steer him away from the religious influence of Scholem and toward the communist practice of Bertolt Brecht: “Anyone of our generation who feels and understands the historical moment in which he exists in our world, not as mere words, but as a battle, cannot renounce the study and the praxis of the mechanism through which things (and conditions) interact with the masses.”⁷

These words resonate with Dogma’s project Live Forever: The Return of the Factory, created for the 2013 Tallinn Architecture Biennale. The topic of the biennial was “Recycling Socialism,” or the exploration and study of socialist and modernist spaces and ideas, but Dogma did not recycle an existing socialist utopian project. For them, the first task in the development of a social dimension in architecture today is the formation and definition of a collective; it is a task handed to them in part by Italian philosopher Mario Tronti, who wrote in 2008, “We must start speaking about workers again, with programs and projects that concern them directly, existentially.”⁸ They thus proposed the construction of a housing block for 1,600 inhabitants next to the train station in Tallinn. The building, a large slab consisting of nine floors and a basement, has a single

7. Walter Benjamin to Gershom Scholem, May 26, 1926, quoted in Howard Eiland and Michael W. Jennings, *Walter Benjamin: A Critical Life* (Cambridge: Belknap Press, 2014), 260.

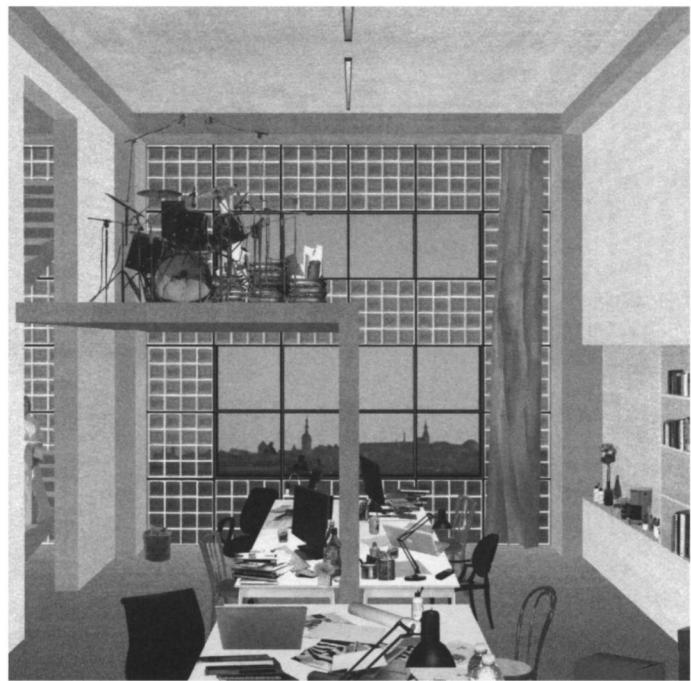
8. Mario Tronti, “Politics at Work,” in *Rome: The Centre(s) Elsewhere*, ed. Franco Ambrosio (Milan: Skira, 2010), 61.

LIVE FOREVER: THE RETURN OF
THE FACTORY. EXTERIOR DETAIL.
OPPOSITE PAGE: LIVE/WORK UNIT
INTERIOR, 6 × 6 METERS.



symbolic function: it gives an architectural form to the mass of creative workers currently living not only in Tallinn but in Western Europe in general. As such, the project responds to an existing reality: it gathers together young people who exist in similar conditions – in coffee shops, shared atelier spaces, and small apartments. The project does not alter these conditions: inside the building, the rooms (based on a modular unit of 6 × 6 meters) are adapted to the life of 20- and 30-something things who have to work hard, without long-term prospects, with the continuous threat of change, without a house of their own, and without a clear division between work and “free time” (after all, you can send and receive emails everywhere, 24 hours a day). Dogma’s project gives these activities a large-scale material presence in the city. Hence the return of the factory as an impressive, threatening volume in the urban skyline – a building where people work and dwell, an architecture that makes its inhabitants, as well as the rest of the world, conscious of the collective that was already there, dispersed throughout the city and only visible virtually on social media.

Why? Wherein lies the merit of this architectural articulation of “the mechanism through which things (and conditions) interact with the masses”? The hope latent in this project, as in the entire work of Dogma, is that by reflecting back a part of the world through the mirror of architectural form, the inhabitants of this world and of this architecture



will be able to see not only what is happening to them but also how it could be changed. Rather than thinking that everything is perfect so long as we all keep working hard enough or nihilistically acquiescing to the futility of every undertaking, it is possible to try to understand what is going on and to imagine collectively how it can be changed. This hope is also present in the 1994 song “Live Forever” by the British rock band Oasis, from which Dogma borrowed the title for the Tallinn project: “Now is not the time to cry / Now’s the time to find out why / I think you’re the same as me / We see things they’ll never see / You and I are gonna live forever.”

5.

An archaeology of Dogma’s method can be found in the academic projects called Capital Cities that Aureli and Tattara conducted at the Berlage Institute at the beginning of the century. Rather than engaging the contemporary city as a globalized condition, Capital Cities focuses on the historical city (Tirana, Brussels, Moscow, Rome, Brasília, and Seoul) and history in general. The method in each of these cases is similar. A study of the way in which cities have changed during consecutive periods of political power (in the case of Rome: antiquity, early and late Renaissance, the rise of the modern nation state, fascism, and postwar postfascism) leads to the conclusions that history seems to have ended in the 1970s and that the

city is no longer the artifact that expressed society for more than 2,000 years. In the absence of a government or larger power (other than that of uncontrolled, often immaterial economic development), the teams led by Aureli and Tattara came up with large-scale projects that group middle-class citizens into collectives represented by architectural form.

To analyze what happens in these projects, we can return again to Tafuri's critical analysis of the historical role of the architect in the city, or rather the separation between architecture and the city. In his introduction to *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, Tafuri writes about the task of the architectural historian and the important questions he must ask himself about the division of labor: "When and why did the autonomy of techniques define itself as a permanent crisis, a conflict among languages, and even among the various dialects found within one language alone? Does it help us in some way, in the field of architecture, to recognize its increasingly radical fragmentation, from the eighteenth century on, into disciplinary areas that only a regressive idealism today wants to re-establish as operative unities?"⁹

9. Tafuri, *The Sphere and the Labyrinth*, 8.

The Capital Cities program and Dogma's project as a whole are attempts to reestablish the fragmented field of architecture as an operative unity. To use Tafuri's term, this is indeed a matter of "regressive idealism": it returns to historical periods in which the immense complexity of the city, the atomization of society, and human thought in general were not yet a hindrance to imposing on the urban fabric material changes based on explicit ideas and ideals. One can argue that this impossibility is what constitutes, or even guarantees, modern life in an open society: the certainty that no one will be able to impose a form on the city and thus on life. The classic critical rejection of this liberal argument is that form is constantly imposed, day by day, in a fragmented and insidious way – not by architects, religions, governments, or institutions but by private initiatives, developers, and commercial entrepreneurs. The idea that this is the price we pay for living in "a free world" has led to frequent misunderstanding and occasional intolerance of even fictional speculation about giving form to ideas of large-scale collective living in the contemporary city.

In Brussels, *A Manifesto – Towards the Capital of Europe*, a Berlage Institute project, book, and exhibition in 2007, large parts of Brussels are destroyed and replaced by what could be considered places in which the inhabitants of Brussels are invited to become part of a city reimagined as the capital of Europe. A good example is the Carrefour de l'Europe at the

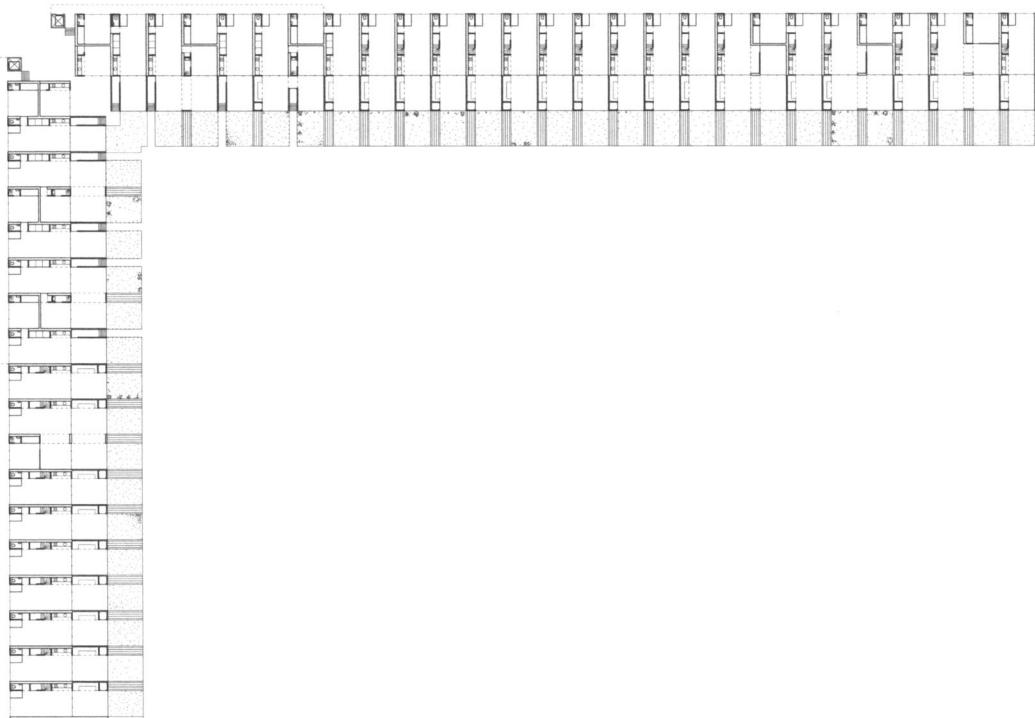
10. On the history of projects for the Carrefour de l'Europe, see Christophe Van Gerrewey, "Amnesty for the City: The Hoogpoort Design for the Carrefour de l'Europe in Brussels (1983)," *Journal of Architecture* 19, no. 3 (2014): 435–53.
11. Aureli, *Brussels, A Manifesto*.
12. Isabelle Doucet, "A Vision for Brussels: Fuel to the Urban Debate or, at Last, an End to the Brussels Trauma?" *Footprint* 1 (August 2007): 104.
13. Hans Teerds, "De verleidelijkheid van het grote gebaar: Het werk van Dogma," *Archined*, November 21, 2013, <https://www.archined.nl/2013/11/de-verleidelijkheid-van-het-grote-gebaar-het-werk-van-dogma>. My translation.

center of Brussels, the result of postwar infrastructural work near Central Station.¹⁰ In the 1970s, a group led by Maurice Culot and Leon Krier opposed selling out the urban environment to developers, arguing for the right to dwell in the European city in a neotraditionalist architecture while pretending the Industrial Revolution never took place. By the '90s these actions had culminated in the current historicist architecture at the Carrefour – alas, an architecture not of houses but of hotel chains. In *Brussels, A Manifesto*, all of this is demolished so that Carrefour can be recast as "the main gate to the city as the seat for the regional authorities" and "a series of urban balconies that will accentuate the descent from the upper to the lower city."¹¹ In a review of *Brussels, A Manifesto*, Isabelle Doucet criticizes these proposals for not presenting "a concrete and operative redefinition of 'citizenship'" and for "creating an illusion of an all-solving architectural answer to our urban *problématiques*."¹² In a way this is true, but one should not confuse cause and effect. In the current absence of European citizenship, *Brussels, A Manifesto* uses architecture to create a city that, rather than arising from citizenship, offers itself as the incubator of a new one. A scene at the end of Balzac's *Le Père Goriot* comes to mind: Rastignac looks down on Paris from the heights of the cemetery of Père Lachaise and cries out to the city, "A nous deux maintenant!" (Now it's between the two of us!) *Brussels, A Manifesto* invites us to imagine life in a European capital that not only is formed by real political power but also stages, in a grandiose fashion, daily confrontation with it.

6.

In his review of the exhibition *Dogma: 11 Projects + 1* at the Faculty of Architecture of Delft University in November 2013, Hans Teerds writes about Frame(s), Dogma's contribution to a competition organized by the Belgian government architect in 2011. Teerds stresses how this project for 44 social houses in the suburban town of Westerlo is "nothing but a little fluff on the wall" compared to Dogma's usual "megalomaniac" oeuvre. "Here," he writes, "Dogma leaves the domain of architecture theory, and the office could, just like that, start bringing architecture into practice." Teerds concludes: "One can wonder, however, whether you really need this history of large-scale structures in order to work out, in the end, an all-too-practical commission in this way."¹³

Teerds seems to accuse Dogma of pragmatism and complicity for devising a project that, in stark contrast to the



DOGMA, FRAME(S), 2011. A PROPOSAL FOR 44 SOCIAL HOUSING UNITS IN WESTERLO, BELGIUM.

majority of their work, could be executed immediately and is therefore not a stubbornly critical “grand gesture.” The opposite is true: although Dogma’s proposal for group housing in Belgium may seem completely acceptable, it is not. Rather, the project again reveals the dogmatic habits of its immediate surroundings and of the context in and for which architects must work if they want to build.

Two elements are crucial here: the installation of a common garden and the interchangeability of every housing unit. The exterior of each of the 44 houses is indistinguishable within the larger whole. The site – a triangular open meadow surrounded by typical Belgian suburban villas, each with its own small private garden – is respected as much as possible: the proposed houses are arranged in an L shape along two edges of the site. The resulting open area is a common garden, separated ambiguously from the houses by strips of open verandas and allotment gardens. This spatial organization elides the strict division between public (the infrastructure) and private (the house), a division that is central to Belgian suburbia. The interior plan of the houses complicates this strict zoning: a service wall runs the length of one side in each unit, and more than a third of this wall runs outside along the veranda. This, together with the large window that frames a view of the garden, has the strange effect of blending

inside and outside and of emphasizing the presence of the common garden without impinging on privacy. The view of the outside world, the “perspective,” is always the green of this common garden. Looking out the window, the inhabitant does not see the suburban houses or his own small private garden but rather a shared space, almost idyllic in its natural character, undisturbed by the usual chaos of urban sprawl. Frame(s) provides every assurance to the inhabitant that he is not alone – with all the liabilities and opportunities attendant on social existence.

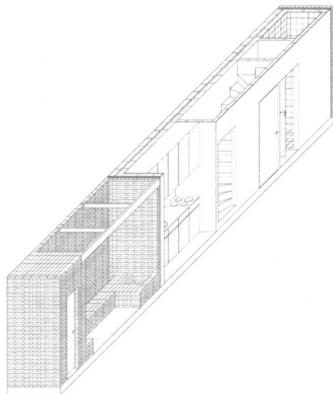
It is almost an overstatement to suggest that Frame(s) goes even more against the grain than Dogma’s programmatic Stop City (2007). While Stop City rather drastically (and ironically) shows a strong willingness not only to criticize but also to obstruct continuous urbanization (and more particularly, the architecture’s role in it), Frame(s) can be read as a more subtle and seductive attempt to overturn residual social and architectural habits that further fragment, individualize, and thus squander space.

Frame(s) had its defenders, but in the end took second prize in the competition. It is revealing to compare it with the winning project by Plus Office Architects, also based in Brussels. Unlike Dogma, Plus Office did everything that was expected. They introduced the project by stating that their design was anything but “definite” and that “all kinds of options” would “still be under consideration.” The maxim behind their design, as they wrote in the project book, was “the recognizability of one’s own house,” which resulted in a chaotic overall appearance that hardly differed from that of the “unplanned” suburban parcelling and met the general public’s desire for materialized individuality. Instead of proposing a large and common garden where people could abide together, Plus Office cut up the open space to create “special public places,” suitable as a “meeting point” or the “starting point of a walk,” and adapted “to bear the identity of the neighborhood.”¹⁴

14. The winning entry by Plus Office Architects is held in the archives of the Vlaams Bouwmeester, Brussels.

7.

“Who really wants to know the reason?” Irénée Scalbert asks about the work of London architects 6a. “Who wishes to observe and to interpret [an architectural] statement? How often does the public scrutinize architecture in the same way they do works in the art gallery? Are the attitudes and the values that buildings make manifest necessary to the experience of architecture? Has not *ceci* – literature, the press – long



FRAME(S). SERVICE WALL
AXONOMETRIC.

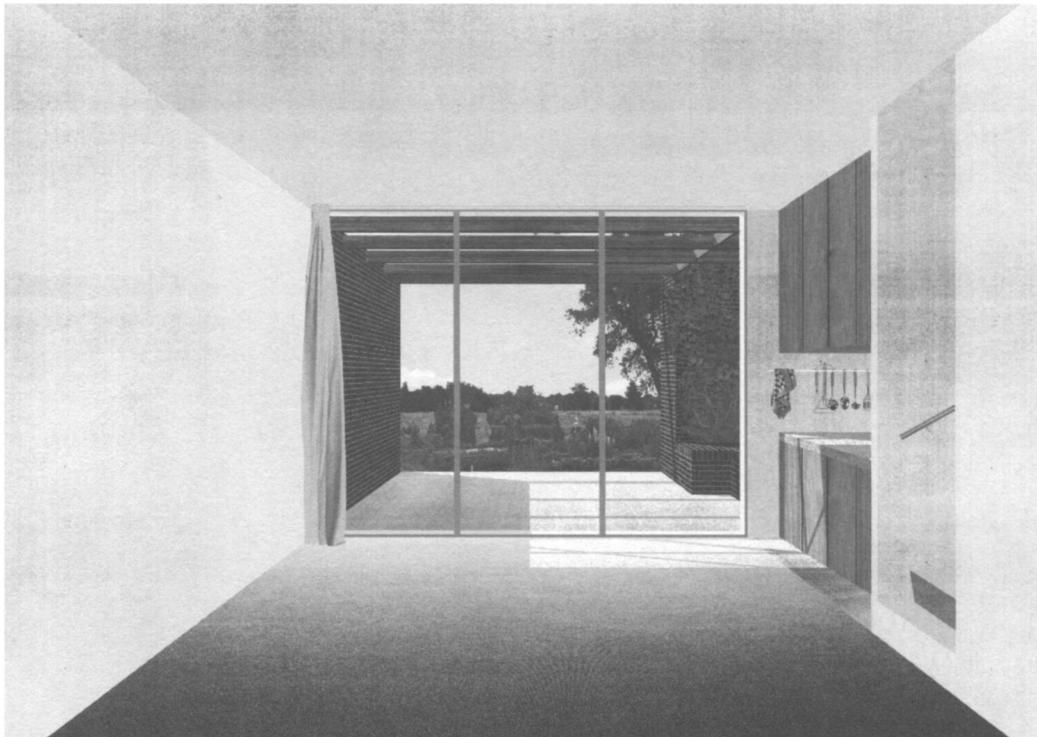
ago killed *cela* – architecture’s didactic capacity?”¹⁵ While Scalbert’s rhetorical questions are part of an argument specific to 6a, they are also worth considering when thinking about the work of Dogma.

It is hard to name a more didactic architectural practice than Dogma – in a literal sense, as Aureli and Tattara earn their living as educators, and in a figurative sense, since their projects are in every way presented as worthy of imitation. Dogma’s work is *ceci* – literature and the press – rather than architecture as a “mute” three-dimensional space or construction. The work consists of texts, references, and ideas about architecture – it is made up of sentences and words rather than bricks and mortar. These words are accompanied by images, drawings, and architectural projects, often overwhelmingly beautiful and fastidiously detailed. Paradoxically, the nonfigural architectural language Dogma deploys rejects every possible meaning, yet receives and retains the social meaning addressed in the accompanying texts.

As such, text and project cannot be separated, and if they are, the drawings may lose their meaning and their intended force. When presenting *Live Forever: The Return of the Factory* in Tallinn, Dogma was reportedly asked by the audience if the proposal was simply a standard industrial loft. Maros Krivy, in his account of the presentation, went a step further: “To what extent is the success of making social contradictions of the day explicit dependent on how the architecture is read and used? And can this issue be resolved on architecture’s terrain?”¹⁶ The answer is simply no, although again everything depends on how architecture is defined. Dogma makes clear that every plan, drawing, and building must be accompanied by clearly defined intentions. By doing so, they seem to annul the division between design, theory, history, and criticism. Of course, in the process each of these activities is redefined in a condensed form. But when confronted with the work of Dogma, one gets the impression that something is happening on a large cultural scale, that one is witnessing an almost crazy attempt at investing architecture with relevance, meaning, and power. Scalbert’s questions about who wants to observe and interpret these statements and whether the public has the energy or the means to scrutinize this architecture is, when applied to Dogma’s work, justified but superfluous. Similar to the way it creates commissioners, inhabitants, and collectives for its own projects, Dogma aims to create an ideal audience for literary and intellectual architecture. This results as much from what it does as

15. Irénée Scalbert, *Never Modern* (Zürich: Park Books, 2013), 74.

16. Maros Krivy, “Participation, Housing, and the Question of ‘Good Architecture,’” *Footprint* 13 (Autumn 2013): 170.



FRAME(S). UNIT INTERIOR.

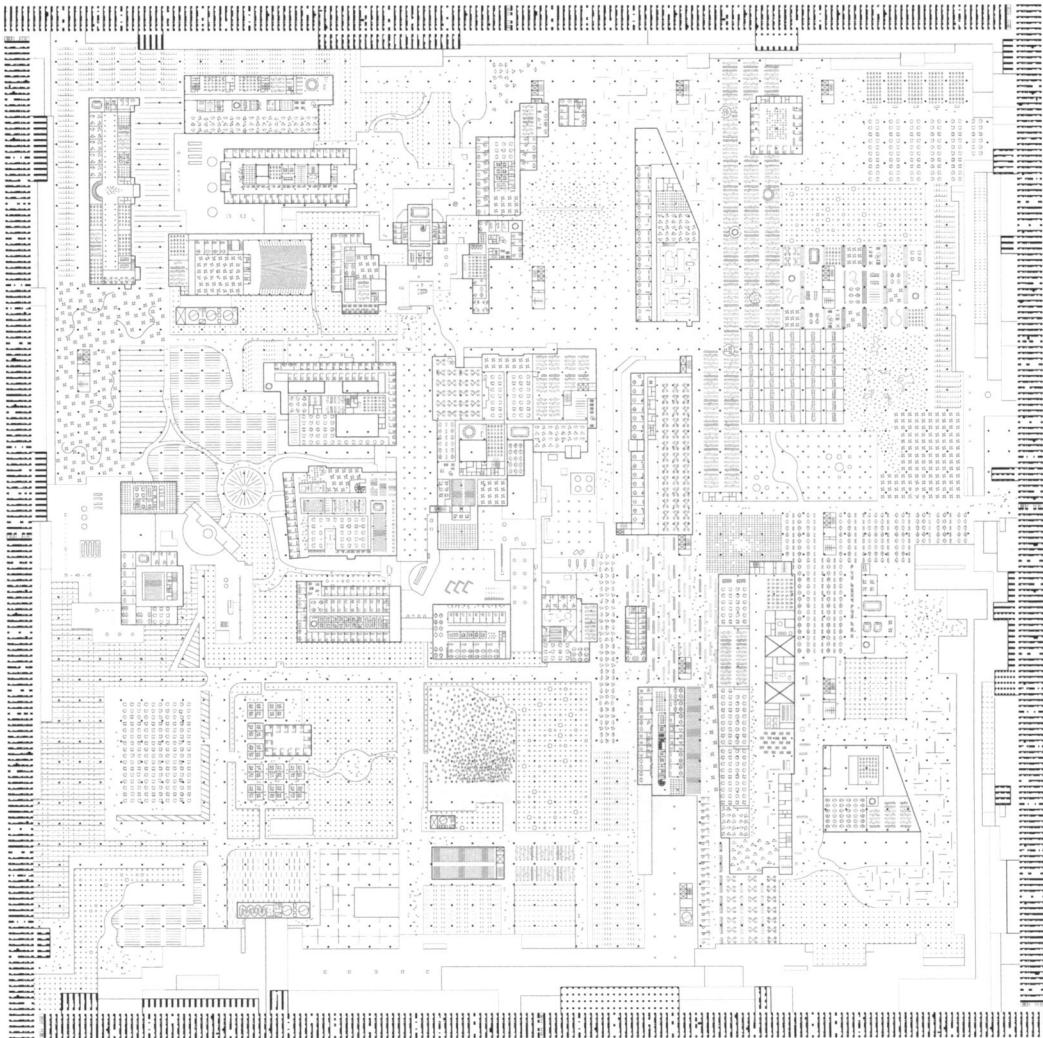
from what it doesn't do: instead of trying to find out modestly and opportunistically what the public wants, Dogma confronts its audiences with what it considers their most pressing needs and desires.

8.

Archizoom, Ludwig Hilberseimer, and Mies van der Rohe are the influences, examples, and points of comparison most often cited by Aureli and Tattara and by those discussing their work. A more recent and revealing comparison can be made with the work of OMA and Rem Koolhaas. Dogma shares with OMA a definition of the architect as a cultural producer: an author who offers autonomous, or at least polemical, intellectual statements and who combines history, theory, and criticism by means of words and images that analyze or reveal current conditions while expressing them architectonically.

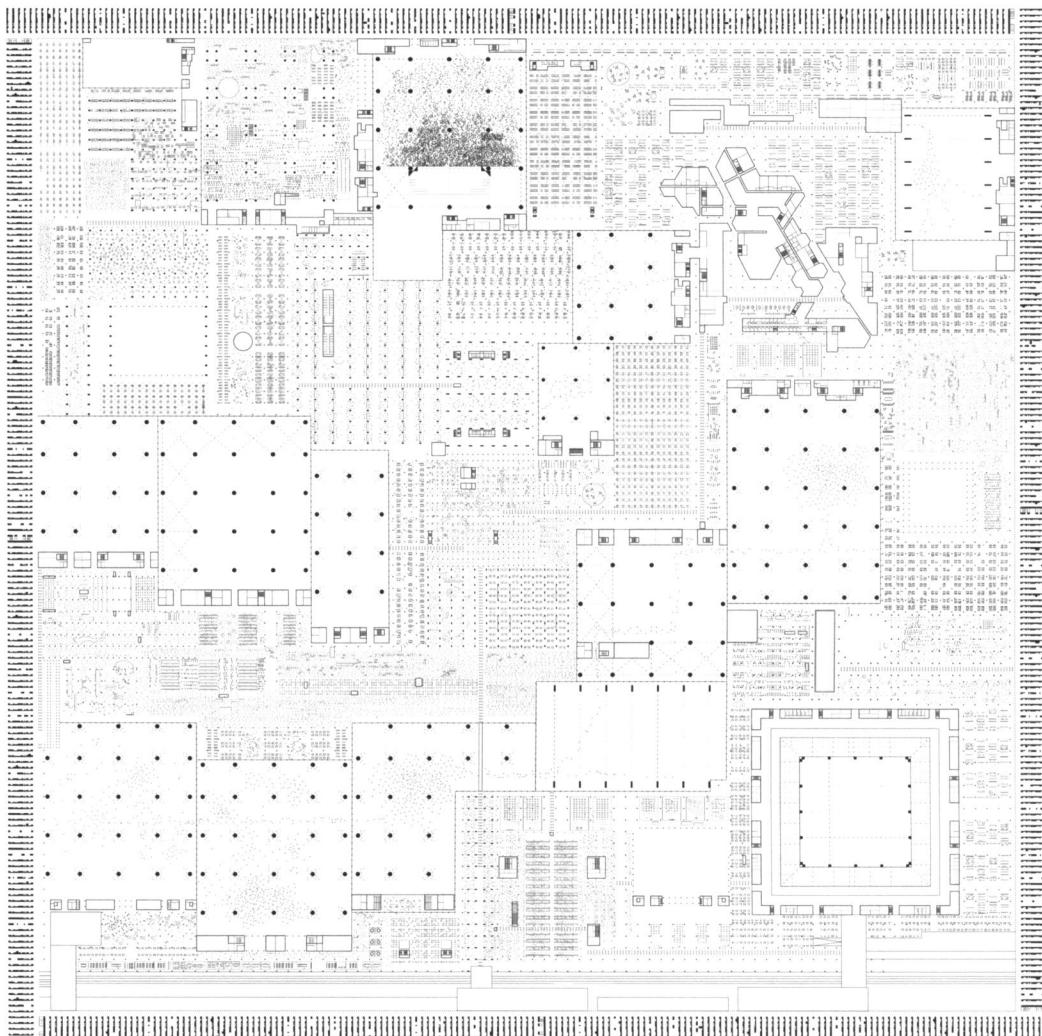
It is no coincidence that Aureli's first published text, in 2001, was a scathing attack on the late work of Koolhaas, his growing elusiveness, and the deadlock of OMA's over-identification with commercial evolutions and the entrepreneurial spirit.¹⁷ Dogma has learned a lot from OMA and the rise and fall of Koolhaas's metropolitan project during the last two decades of the 20th century. Also in 2001, Koolhaas wrote

17. Pier Vittorio Aureli and Irène Lund, "From Nothingness to Nothing at All: An Answer to Rem Koolhaas," *Hunch* 4 (2001): 142–45.



DOGMA, A SIMPLE HEART, 2011. AN URBAN STUDY OF THE EUROPEAN NORTH WESTERN METROPOLITAN AREA. 800 x 800M PORTIONS OF EXISTING TERTIARY DISTRICTS ENCLOSED WITH AN INHABITABLE WALL. DUISBURG. OPPOSITE PAGE: DÜSSELDORF.

what remains his last great text: "Junkspace," one of the most depressing pieces of writing ever published on the role of the architect and contemporary life in general. With its lesson that "Junkspace reduces what is urban to urbanity,"¹⁸ the essay can be read not only as Koolhaas's farewell address to architecture but also as the starting point for the work of Dogma. That urbanization has been completely out of control since the turn of the 20th century, that it has become nearly impossible for an architect to defend or intensify metropolitan conditions or to search for valuable delicacies and small gaps within the system, seems for Koolhaas an endpoint, a resignation. But for Dogma it is the starting point for a new project on the city. Instead of surfing the waves of the metropolis, Dogma wants to erect breakwaters that halt the ongoing flood of interchangeable architecture and an ever-individualizing society.



In Dogma's work, the realism of Koolhaas is replaced by idealism about a possible collective and political existence – about a better life and a world that is more just. But at the same time there has always been an idealist side to the architecture of OMA and to the writings of Koolhaas. Both contain a critical dimension that urges architects to engage actual social problems that tend to be overlooked, not in the least by the often naive, unworldly, and even hypocritical humanism of Dutch structuralism. It is easy to forget today that Koolhaas's theories in the 1970s and '80s were born out of a genuine desire to liberate architecture from its social isolation and from the resulting irrelevancy of postmodern architecture.¹⁹ This too is a point for comparison with Dogma: no matter how redeeming the realism of OMA seemed when it was first posited, in our historical moment architecture

18. Rem Koolhaas, "Junkspace," *October* 100 (Spring 2002): 184.

19. See also Christophe Van Gerrewey, "'Hope Has Returned': The Glorious Reception of OMA/Rem Koolhaas in the Dutch-Speaking World," *Architectural Theory Review* 18, no. 3 (2013): 356–71.

A SIMPLE HEART. DUISBURG. DIGITAL COLLAGE.

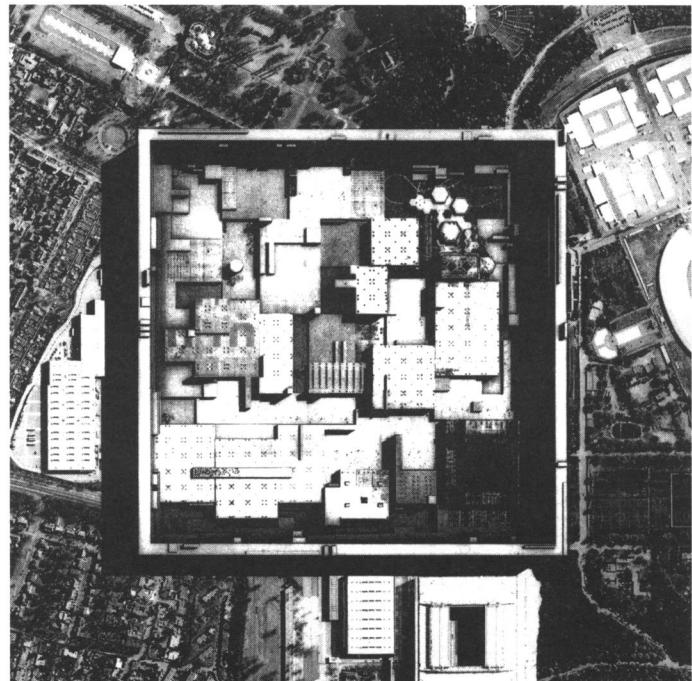


has been rendered irrelevant precisely by this kind of realism. According to Dogma, it can only be saved by an idealism that does not follow the expectations that are projected onto architects. Yet it is also possible to associate their idealistic approach with a strict realism, concerned not with the contemporary tools of architecture but with the material, economic, and spatial conditions in which people live and work.

9.

Given the discursive complexity and restrained formal language of their work, it seems as if everything Dogma does is extremely serious, absolute, and severe. This is true. Yet this rigor never becomes pathetic or unbearable thanks to their profound yet good-humored self-consciousness. This does not mean that Aureli and Tattara ironically try to defend themselves against the possible failure of their project by suggesting it should all be considered a joke. Rather, the humor is born out of amazement and shame about the extreme positions Dogma seems forced to take, and thus about the absurdity and madness of architecture in the 21st century. What is both funny and devastating in Dogma's work – to recall a line from Gramsci – is the ineluctable gap that it reveals between “the pessimism of the intellect and the optimism of the will.”²⁰ It is the sad and apologetic smile of someone who knows both his findings and his desires are as justified as they

20. Antonio Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, trans. Quintin Hoare and Geoffrey Nowell-Smith (New York: International Publishers, 1971), 175.



are extreme – someone who is surprised and almost embarrassed to admit that this is the way things are.

Dogma's use of the square is essential to conveying this. The project *A Simple Heart*, developed between 2002 and 2010, is, together with *Stop City*, a clear declaration of intent: 22 inhabitable units are spread across the European North Western Metropolitan Area: "Each unit is defined by enclosing an 800 × 800m portion of an existing tertiary district with an inhabitable wall. Twenty stories high and 25m thick, the wall contains 860 hotel rooms per floor, each measuring 19.2 × 2.6m and accommodating one or two persons."²¹ Each square acts as a kind of boxing ring for the activities that not only fuel the current cultural, scientific, and academic industries but also coincide with the things most of us do all of the time: talking, teaching, learning, commenting, e-mailing, phoning, ordering, texting, researching, targeting, marketing, Skyping, updating, booking, cancelling, arranging, downloading, uploading, assessing, evaluating, peer reviewing, editing, outsourcing, congregating, workshopping, exhibiting, and designing. The proliferation of squares is aimed at the impossible: materializing places for immaterial labor to take place. The square embodies this impossibility, a perfect industrial ready-made without a clear origin – a design by Dogma that is not designed. The humor of an architectural office that presents square after square after square as

21. Aureli and Tattara, "A Simple Heart," in *11 Projects*, 20.

new formal elements in an urban environment – not only in *A Simple Heart* but in other projects too – is similar to that of the painter Titorelli in Kafka's *The Trial*. In the novel, someone gives K. – convicted of a crime without knowing the charges – a letter to give to Titorelli, who will explain his predicament and tell him what to do. During the visit no such thing happens. At the end, Titorelli, like every good artist, tries to sell his work to K. "Sunset over the Heath," he says. "Good," says K. "I'll buy it." Titorelli offers to sell him another, saying, "Here's a companion piece to that picture." K. notices at once that the companion piece is exactly the same picture as the first. Nevertheless he says, "They're beautiful landscapes, I'll buy both and hang them in my office." Titorelli manages to sell K. a third identical painting, concluding, "I'm delighted you like the pictures, you can take all the pictures I have under here. They're all of the heath, I've already done lots of pictures of the heath. Some people reject pictures like that because they're too gloomy, while others, and you're one of them, are particularly fond of gloominess."²² Commenting on exactly this scene in *The Trial*, Walter Benjamin writes, "The 'modern,' the time of hell. The punishments of hell are always the newest thing going in this domain. What is at issue is not that 'the same thing happens over and over,' and even less would it be a question of eternal return. It is rather that precisely in that which is newest the face of the world never alters, that this newest remains, in every respect, the same."²³ The squares of Dogma are the result of a belief in the renewal of architecture against all odds, of knowing that the new is always the same but keeping on, offering the repetitive slapstick footage of someone slipping on a banana peel, standing up, slipping again – ad infinitum.

10.

Does the work of Dogma confront us with a utopian vision of the future? In a certain sense, yes: to use a line from Roland Barthes, their projects "press incessantly against what is not possible in the world."²⁴ Yet this impossibility is not to be located in the existential or social circumstances expressed by this architecture but rather in the imagination of their architectural expression. Many might find this imagination not only utopian but ridiculous: instead of searching for workable methods for architecture in the expanded field of its worldwide success, Dogma performs as a team of somewhat aristocratic hunger artists, doing things that would lead any viable architectural firm in the world to bankruptcy. This isolation seems

to be the price they must pay in order to fight for what they see as architecture's ability to make visible what befalls us all.

Their method is combined with a kind of three-stage rocket of historical progress, leading to an imminent explosion. This can be deduced from the way in which Dogma has appropriated projects from the 20th century, including Archizoom's No-Stop City, Cedric Price's Potteries Thinkbelt (in *A Simple Heart*), and – in a recent article by Aureli²⁵ – OMA's entry for the Parc de la Villette competition. The historical scheme is similar: these three projects express a last phase of the postwar Fordist economy, of material labor and of the late modern metropolis. Dogma interprets them as preparations for the advent of the current post-Fordist economy, of immaterial labor, and the complete urbanization of the Western world. The drawings and writings update these projects by expressing contemporary conditions without predicting what is to come. Instead of showing the future, they create spatial and theoretical conditions in which the next historical phase can finally take place. By expressing the now, the architect acts as midwife of the future.

Gramsci also wrote about this hope for a better future at a time when improvement is almost unimaginable: "The crisis consists precisely in the fact that the old is dying and the new cannot be born; in this interregnum a great variety of morbid symptoms appear."²⁶ In the projects of Dogma these symptoms are translated into architecture. They show what is happening now by means of an architecture that is not yet possible because it also tries to create the conditions to overcome the current situation. Dogma often borrows titles from late 20th-century pop and rock in naming their projects – the song from Oasis, references to the Ramones, and singles from Morrissey and the Smiths ("Everyday Is like Sunday," "Barbarism Begins at Home"), a band critical of the Thatcher era and the kind of politics and "lifestyle" that have become the norm in Europe over the last decade. Another song by the Smiths, from 1984, expresses both desperate resignation and ardent impatience. It poses the question that Dogma's projects leave us with: *How soon is now?*

25. Pier Vittorio Aureli, "Architecture and Counterrevolution: OMA and the Politics of the *Grands Projets*," *OASE* 94 (2015): 45–51.
26. Gramsci, *Selections from the Prison Notebooks*, 276.

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