Dogma, *Do you hear me when you sleep?,* proposal for a cooperative housing in London, 2019.

Paint a Vulgar Picture
On the Relationship Between Images and Projects in Our Work

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1.

Since ancient times, the production of architecture in the form of buildings has required a project. A project is a set of instructions that includes texts, drawings, and scale models. This body of work can be defined as the representation of architecture. Drawing architecture before building became especially necessary with the rise of monumental architecture, that required the careful planning of large amounts of material and human resources. The importance of representation is thus strictly related to the conditions of production of architecture in the terms of its material and economic feasibility. With the rise of the architect as a distinct professional figure from the one of the builder, the representation of architecture in the form of drawings became also the place, parallel to text, for intellectual speculation about architecture. Yet, the intellectual status of architectural drawing should not be idealised, since such autonomy was primarily the result of the separation between intellectual and manual labour implied in the production of architecture. Indeed, the very idea of '*disegno*', a term in which the mental process of creation and its material expression overlap with each other, became the mark through which the architect elevated its status and

downgraded the role of builders who was thus reduced to the strict execution of the architect's *drawn* instructions.

The controversy of architectural drawing as both an instrument of control and a means of intellectual invention is even more pronounced with images of architecture. While technical drawing such as the plan, the section and the elevation is related to the planning and control of the building process, images have traditionally been used to persuade patrons about the validity of a proposed building. Contrary to the abstraction of the technical drawing, images tend to render architecture *realistically*. As such, images of architecture have been often stigmatised as a very problematic medium, because of their surplus of rhetoric and their deception about the real process of both making and experiencing architecture. Even architects themselves have often harshly criticised images in the forms of perspectival drawings because of their lack of measurability. Nevertheless, unlike technical drawings, images such as perspectival renderings make architecture, with its spatial and material character, more accessible to a wider audience. While not sufficient, images remain necessary for the communication of not-yet realised architecture.

This does not imply that representation is a way to *bypass* the moment of building. On the contrary, images of architecture can and indeed *should* address architecture as built form, yet they should retain their status of *images of architecture*, i.e. anticipations of, or speculations about built form by means of a two-dimensional pictorial representation. No image of architecture can replace the experience of built architecture or shorten the complex journey between the first inception of the building idea and its last material realisation. Yet, whether in the form of drawn pictures or photographs of real buildings, images are an essential – and indeed inescapable – aspect of our knowledge and experience of architecture. It was precisely by keeping in mind this paradox about images

as necessary *for*, yet distinct *from* the experience of built form, that we developed our method of representation of architecture and especially our own way of producing images for our own architectural projects. Our intention was to develop a representation method in which images were simultaneously clear explanations of architecture and *real abstractions*.
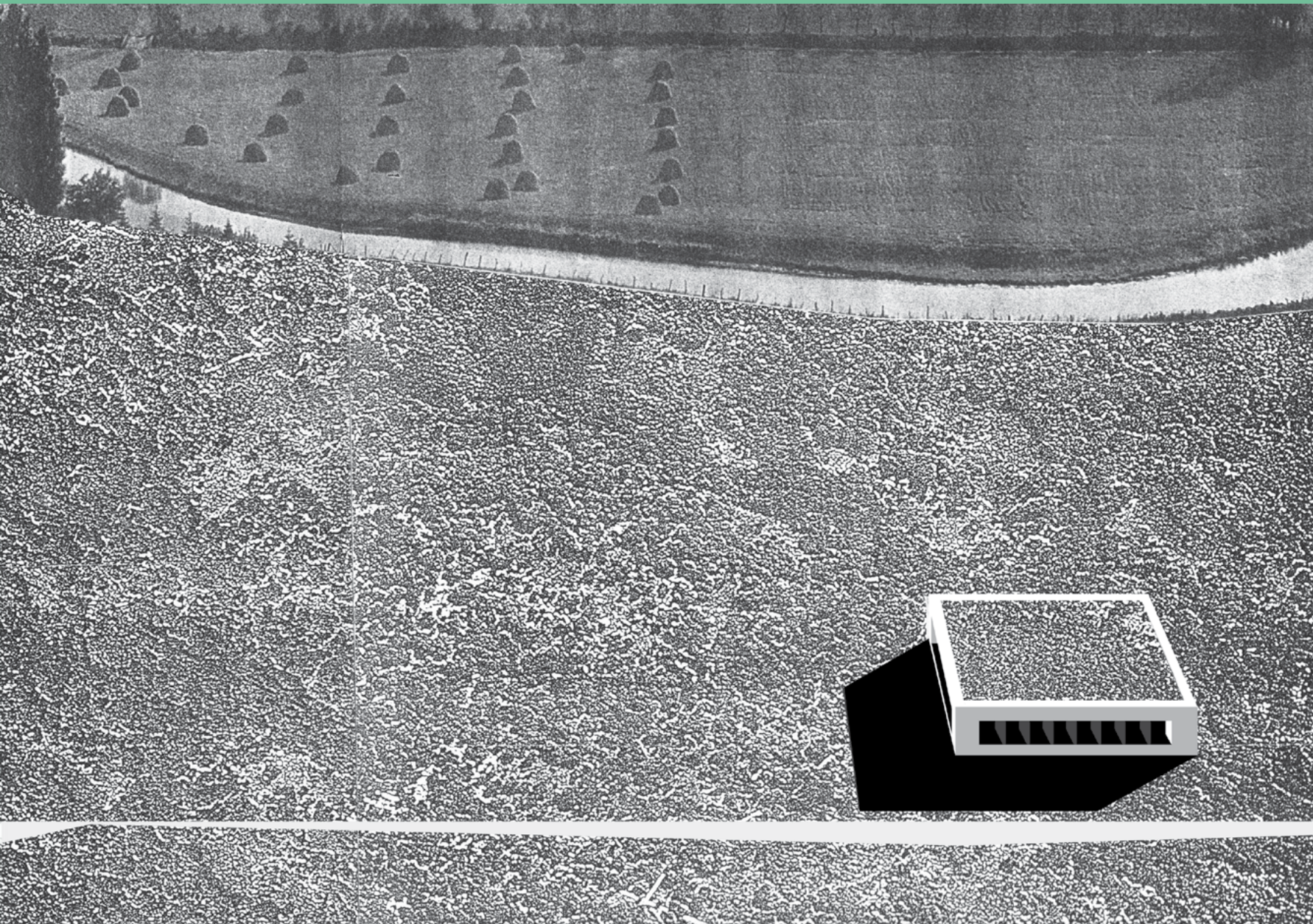
Martino Tattara, *Proposal for a single building typology for the area between Venice and Treviso*, graduation project at the Istituto Universitario di Architettura di Venezia - IUAV, 2002.

2. Our own method of making images is inseparable from the design themes that we have developed since the beginning of our practice. At the start of our work, we were especially interested in reclaiming the city as a field for architectural experimentation and in developing a representation method that was consistent with the content of our work. The first time we attempted to produce architectural images 'in our own way' can be traced back to projects and workshops we were involved in in the early 2000s. In those years, images of not-yet built architecture were predominantly renderings made with advanced computer software such as 3DStudio or Archicad that gave images a persuasively realistic power, where materials such as glass, steel or stones were rendered through an excess of realistic effects, unprecedented in any previous architectural representation. The abundance of representational effects such as reflection, transparency and the rendering of the tridimensional grain of a material surface ends up in images that were even more real than the real architecture. Retrospectively, it can be argued that the rise of the realistic computer renderings with its excess of realism that emerged between the late 1990s and the early 2000s was related not just to the architects' infatuation with the digital, but also – and especially – with the increasing financialisation of architecture. Renderings that made design proposals looking as they were already built were considered by investors as the best assurance about the positive prospect of their investments.

Another important consequence of the sudden widespread of realistic images of architecture was that their making required skills in working with specific software that at that time were not easily accessible to the average practising architect. This had an immediate impact on education, with universities starting to offer new computer-based drawing courses or shifting traditional hand-drawing courses towards computer-based ones. At the same time, it prompted professional practices to increasingly rely either on specialised labour or firms for making digitally-made renderings of architecture, thus widening the division of labour between designing and representing architecture. Above all, the realistic rendered image offered a very specific idea of architecture and of the life happening within it that was rooted in the illusions of the 1990's booming economy and that was finally shattered by the onset of the great recession of 2007-08.

It was already in the late 1990s that we found ourselves wondering if there were alternatives to both the cultural *ethos* of that time and its modes of representation. For example, although our graduations projects developed when digital drawing was on its steeped rise, we decided to use analogue techniques such as hand-drawing, collages and large models[1]. When relying on computer drawings, we kept rendering techniques as simple as possible, avoiding realistic effects, unexpected points of views and the distortion of the perspectival view typical of digitally-made renderings. These simple images were also generally used as a blueprint for what would become, by using a software such as Photoshop, a digital collage, where surface, shadow and light were rendered by applying patterns using a digital tool in an 'analogical' way. It is important to say that the decision to rely on simple techniques of representation was motivated not by simplicity *per sé*, but by the desire to keep the design process as direct as possible, rooting our own idea of architecture in few and intelligible formal decisions. Digitally aided drawing inevitably prompted complexity of forms and, for us, relying on simple ways of drawing and representing architecture became a way to impose on ourselves an economy of means and thus to resist what at that time was emerging as a fatal obligation, namely investing in formal complexities. By using simple forms, the design process relies more on the argumentative force of architecture rather than on its techniques of production. This attitude was reflected also in the way images were composed. Rather than exploiting the illusionism of images, we used images to 'abstract' architecture, i.e. to

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[1] We graduated at the IUAV in Venice respectively in 1999 (Pier Vittorio Aureli) and 2002 (Martino Tattara).
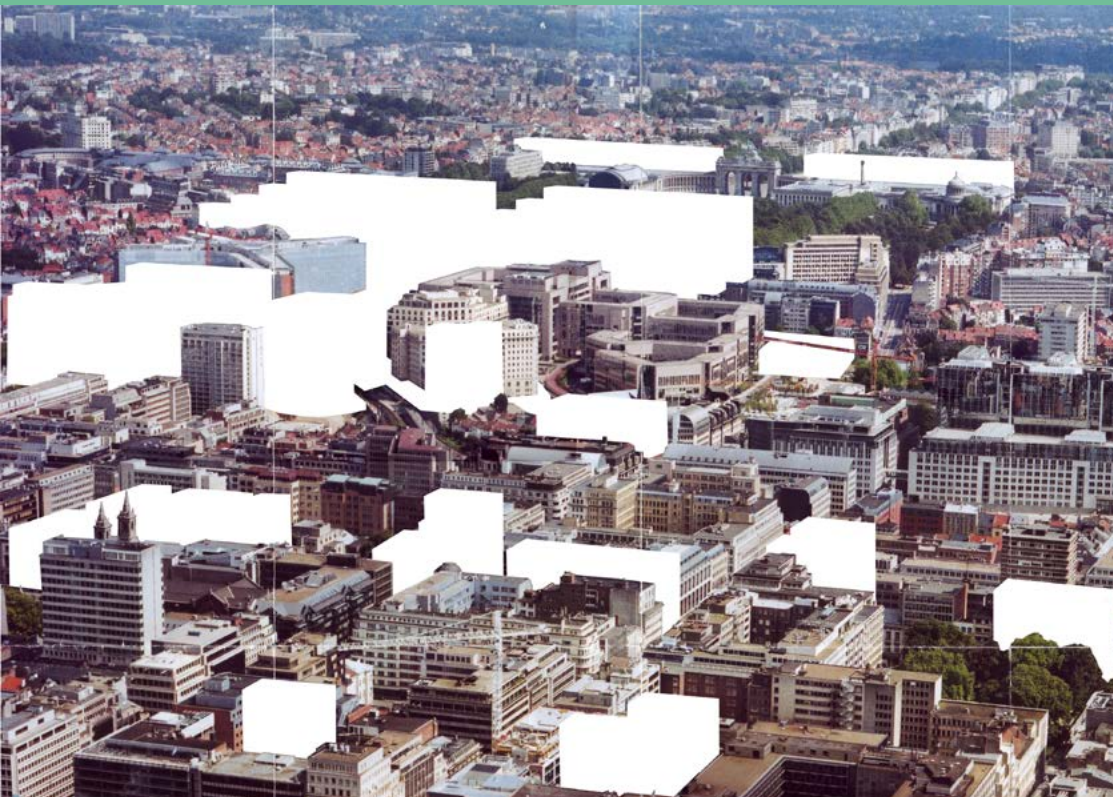
Dogma, *Core,* project for the redevelopment of the European Quarter, Brussels, 2005.

reduce architecture to simple formal compositions of built masses. Such abstraction of both architecture and its image was obtained by flattening perspectival views or, in other words, by making images without depth. An early example of this type of representation was a collage made in 2002 of an urban villa in the Veneto region, in which the perspectival effect of the view was countered by the uniformity of surfaces each obtained by applying a found grey texture previously enlarged with a simple photocopy machine. The technique of flattening images became even more explicit in collages in which the design intervention was inserted within a certain context as a simple white cut-out of the image itself. In some cases, these cut-outs were left empty, delineating the intervention as a white shape in sharp contrast with the rest of the image. Examples of this technique are represented by a research project centred on the city of Brussels conducted at the Berlage Institute in 2004, in which the interventions on the European quarter were shown as a series of white cut-out geometrical figures interspersed within the dense fabric of that part of the city, or as in the case of our collages of our project *Stop City* of 2007. In other cases, the cut-out was later filled with the drawing of the intervention itself, as in some of the collages of our proposal *A Simple Heart, Architecture on the Ruins of the Post-Fordist City* of 2004.
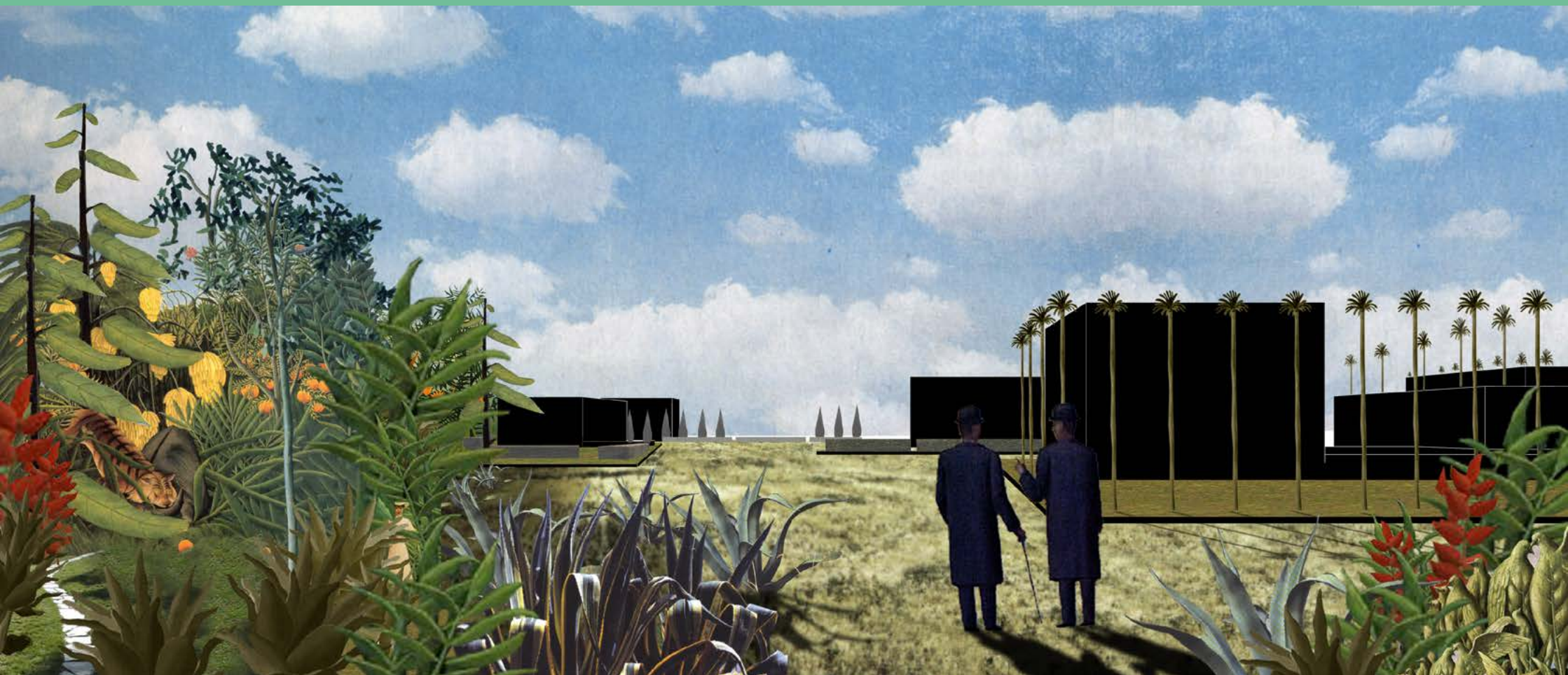
Dogma (with Elia Zenghelis), *Marienbad*, proposal for the Hellenikon Metropolitan Park, Athens, 2003.

Dogma, *Stop City*, proposal for an urban theoretical model, 2007.

3.

The technique of using found images and cutting out things in them led us to rediscover the pictorial dimension of images, i.e. their artificiality as two-dimensional artefacts against their pretence of a tridimensional illusionism.

It was the rediscovery of the pictorial side of images that led us to refer and use paintings and art photography as materials to make images, a method we later abandoned when we became aware of its too easy-going abuse. In this period, we were interested in the work of the Dusseldorf School of photography and specifically in the early work of Thomas Ruff and Andreas Gursky, whose photographs we often used as material sources for our own images. We were particularly fascinated by the simplicity of their composition, which completely contradicted the implied naturalism of the landscape view. This interest into anti-naturalist representation led us to use, also as material for our own images, certain painters whose style was both realistic and abstract, such as David Hockney, Henri Rousseau and Peter Doig. From our point of view, these different painters share a way of depicting reality as both familiar and estranging. Yet, what we liked the most about these three painters was a certain air of 'vulgarity' in their way to appropriate the glorious tradition of Western painting. We recognise in their pictorial style a debased version of Piero della Francesca's hieratic depiction of reality. We thought that this style was well-fit to represent something that could be appealing and yet slightly estranging. The work of these painters inspired to us a sense of dry stillness that deliberately challenged the dynamic and crowded scenes of the 2000's realistic

renderings. Moreover, these painters' rendering of surfaces as uniform blocks of colour or of plants and trees as nearly bi-dimensional objects devoid of depth proved to be consistent with our desire to make images flat. A few years later, we gradually abandoned the use of their work when we realised it had become an unbearable trend, devoid of any meaning.

The technique of appropriating pictorial images and combining them with proposed architectures was introduced for the first time on two occasions. The first one was a design workshop organised by the Berlage Institute in the island of Spetses (Greece) led by Elia Zenghelis in 2002, whose topic was the transformation of the ex Hellenikon airport in Athens into a large metropolitan park. The second was Dogma's entry to the competition that was a few months later organised with the same brief and developed in collaboration with Elia Zenghelis in the winter of 2003. It is fair to say that the images produced in both these occasions were among – if not the very first – 'digital collages' ever created. These images, executed mainly in Photoshop, combined various fragments with different sources, such as paintings by Magritte and Rousseau, photographs by the 'New Topographics' and the iconic park scenography of Alain Resnais's movie *L'Année dernière à Marienbad*. The intent of these images was to emphasise the artificiality of the park as a synthetic environment against the naturalness that is often attributed to this urban amenity. Rather than overdetailing the design of such a vast area, the images were meant to deliberately simplify the representation of the project by making its conceptual aspects more emphatic. This technique was subsequently applied and perfected through our own early projects executed between 2003 and 2007, such as *Simple Heart*, *Stop City* and *City Walls*, and through our teaching activities at the Berlage Institute, where we met and collaborated with several young architects that would play a role in the early affirmation of the so-called 'post-digital' drawing.

Because of the territorial scale of these projects, the composition of these collages was kept very simple and often adapted to the found image. This type of representation reflected a design approach based
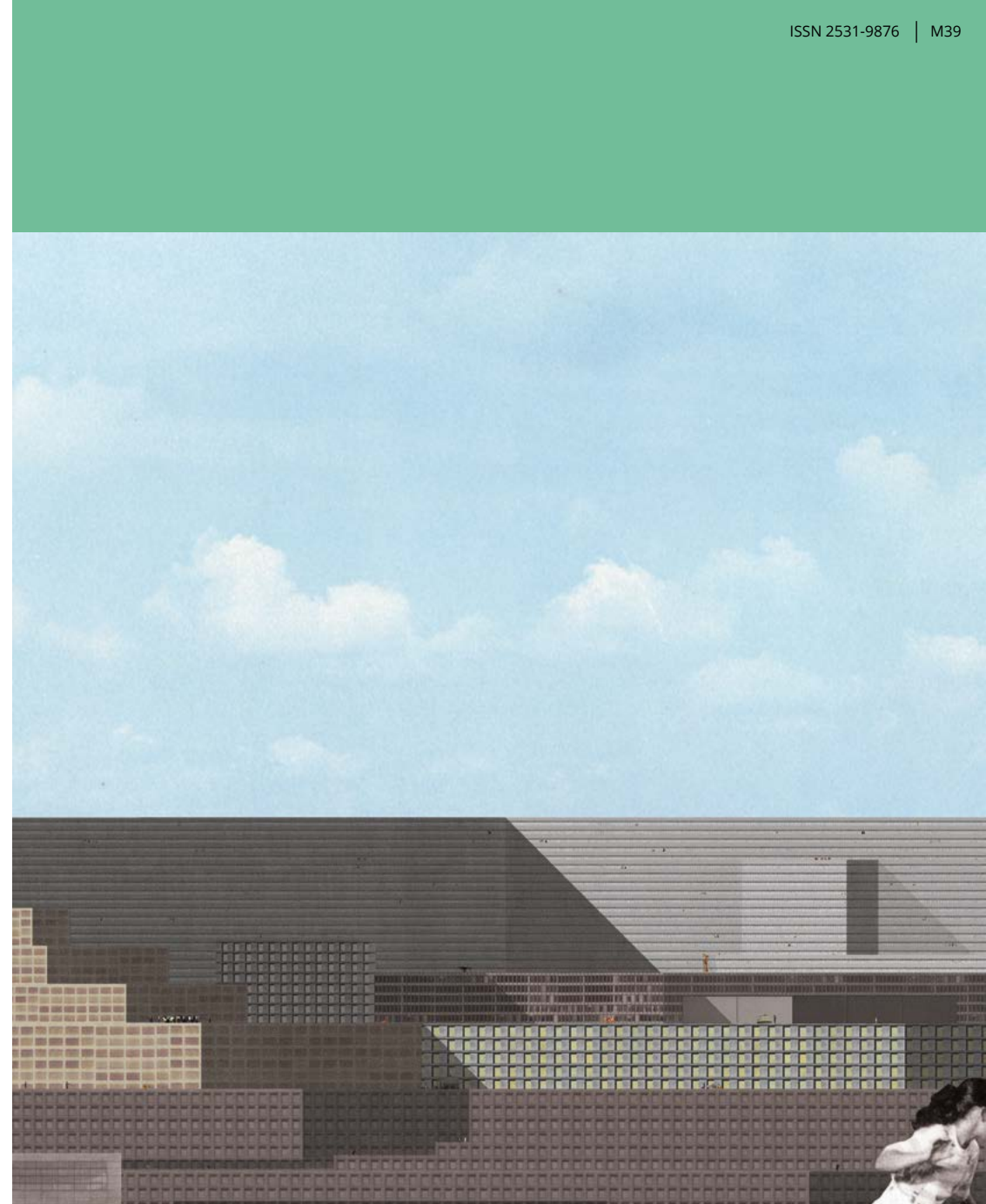

Dogma, *A Simple Heart*, study on the European North West Metropolitan Area, 2004-2011.

on simple architectural configurations, in which buildings were meant to act as frames of what was already there. This approach is evident in the set of images produced for the project *Simple Heart,* in which a vast courtyard building encloses existing parts of the city. The images show iteration of the proposed structure viewed frontally so that, even if the viewpoint is oblique to the structure, the latter appears as a perfectly flat and horizontal band that, in each image, frames different urban conditions depicted by using mostly found images of buildings and landscapes. This type of representation, based on the framing of found-images, is inseparable from a design method based on an idea of architectural form understood not as an object in itself, but as the frame of what is already in the existing context. This understanding of both architecture and images led us to conceive the representation of our projects consistently in terms of composition or/and viewpoint. In this way, the contrast between project and context would be augmented, making the context as important as our proposal. This reflected a fundamental aspect of our design method: the importance of the context – physical, social and historical – as the very *conceptual* material of architecture. Yet, the idea of iterating the same composition and viewpoint depended also on another principle of our design, which was the making of structures based on the repetition and variation of the same module. For example, in projects such as *Ramones* (2011) and *Live Forever* (2014), all the images follow a compositional thread which, in the case of the first project, is the linearity of the bridge as the main formal theme of the park and, in the case of the second, is the module of the room as clearly delineated by the load-bearing structure.

Dogma, *Live Forever/The Return of the Factory*, proposal for a living/working *unité d'habitation* for 1600 inhabitants at the Balti Station area, Tallinn, Estonia, 2013.
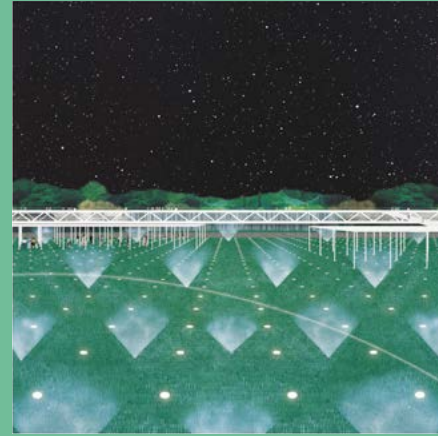
Dogma (with Andrea Branzi and Favero&Milan), *Ramones*, project for the Taichung Gateway Park, Taichung, Taiwan, 2011.

Dogma (with Realism Working Group), *Communal Villa,* proposal for a living and working unit for 50 artists, Berlin, 2015.

Dogma (with Realism Working Group), *Communal Villa,* proposal for a living and working unit for 50 artists, Berlin, 2015.

4. Since the development between 2010 and 2014 of few housing competitions and didactic projects that focused on the conditions of living in the city, we became interested in the domestic space and in its potential for transformation in relation to contemporary societal challenges, such as the changing demographics or the advent of new modes of production. This interest unfolded in a long, partly ongoing, research by design trajectory that includes several projects, such as studies, competition entries and commissioned work. In all these projects, we have been searching for a method of representation of domestic space that was as much as possible in line with the content of our design agenda – the bypassing of the rigid definition of domestic space as the place of family living and the understanding of the house as the place of both productive and reproductive labour. While, on the one hand, we have been using some of the same representation techniques previously described, as the attempt of making perspective flat using found abstract patterns, on the other this body of images is based on few persistent characters: the strict deployment of the central perspective, the lack of any stylistic features, and the careful use of generic, non-descriptive objects to suggest possible uses of domestic space.

All our collages are strictly based on the deployment of the central perspective, either with the viewpoint placed at the height of the viewer, or with the viewpoint artificially placed above the space to be represented, as if the ceiling is removed and the space could be artificially seen from the top. In both cases, the use of this type

of perspective attempts to solely underline the spatial features of architecture, in terms of section, dimension, proportion, light and material over the individual subjective perception of the viewer. By avoiding diagonally placed viewpoints or any attempt to reproduce the points of view of the inhabitant, we attempted to avoid as much as possible the process of individuation of the subject, which is traditionally embedded in all forms of representation. Baldassare Peruzzi's *Sala delle Prospettive* in Villa Chigi in Rome (1515-17) is a clear example of the relationship between the choice of a specific type of representation and the process of subject individuation. Peruzzi's painting on the walls of the large *sala* of the perspectival view of a loggia with Rome in the background is drawn considering the viewpoint of a person entering the room from a door positioned on the edge of the room itself. While, on the one hand, the position of the door underlines the proliferation of antechambers in the Roman palazzos' apartments of the time and the subsequent transformation of the chamber from a place to stay into one of passage or movement, the perspective drawn on the walls clearly individuates the subject of the room as the passer-by and not as the person that stays in this space. To avoid the power of individuation embedded in all architectural representation, our collages of interior spaces, through the abstract and generic character of the central perspective, aim towards the possibility of 'de-individuation', namely the capacity of representing a domestic space that can possibly be used by anyone. A clear example of this approach is represented by the two images of the individual room for our project *Communal Villa* (2015), a study for a communal house where fifty artists could live and work together. In these two images, the room is seen from the large window of the room looking towards the back wall, the plywood 'inhabitable wall' containing bathroom, the bed alcove and storage, which appears with the sliding door of the bathroom respectively open or closed in each of the two otherwise identical images. While this view might appear as the simplest one possible, it is at the same time the most distant from the inhabitant's perception, thus creating a sense of estrangement and distance through which, consequent-

Dogma, *After Hilberseimer*, proposal for the retrofitting of Ludwig Hilberseimer's settlement unit, Chicago, 2014.

ly, the architectural qualities of the room come to the fore. The focusses of the image are therefore the surfaces of its architectural elements and their different materials such as the concrete of the floor, the plywood of the inhabitable wall and the green fabric of the curtain on the upper floor. This focus on the material qualities of these interior spaces reinforces the absence of any explicit architectural language or style, as to avoid referring to any reference or deploying a specific style – making our architecture non-identifiable, without a clear story or lineage. In this respect, this is where design and representation are interwoven with each other. While images are a representation of architecture, architecture itself is embodied with a congenital representational power which is related to its style, language and historical references. While all this has traditionally been used in architecture to define its relationship to power, class and gender, the attempt of our architecture is to reduce this rhetorical apparatus to the minimum.

Images of domestic interiors are strongly influenced by the ubiquitous presence of objects such as pieces of furniture. In commercially driven renderings, often these acquire a predominant and distinctive role, immediately imposing a certain style on the domestic space – the classic or the modern, the vintage or the minimal interior –, forcing architecture on the background. In our collages, we try avoiding such risk by placing simple furniture objects characterised by a lack of recognisable features, non-descriptive objects that could be found in any house and belong to anyone without explicitly imposing a predetermined idea in relation to age, sex, financial means of the subject that inhabit our spaces. This does not translate in a minimalist interior; on the contrary, our interior spaces are filled with the most simple and generic tables, chairs, armchairs that often emerge for their colour or material rather than for their design quality.

Next to generic and non-descriptive pieces of furniture, our collages are populated of many objects, material traces of the potential life that can unfold in each of these interior rooms. The presence of these objects is very important, since it hints to the possible uses that can take place in these spaces without explicitly imposing a predetermined function to space. This is particularly clear in our images of projects such as *After Hilberseimer* (2014) or *One-room house* (2017), where architecture is reduced to a simple infrastructural element that can support the unfolding of potentially very different forms of life and whose traces are suggested by objects such as records, plants, posters on the wall and books, in line with our explicit attempt of not imposing predetermined functions or domestic rituals.

Dogma, *One-Room House*, project for a house prototype at the Edersee (Germany), 2017.

5.

In terms of representation, our work has without a doubt been largely affected by the emergence of the computer as the main daily drawing tool and, at the same time, by the attempt to react to the ways in which realistic architectural renders started being produced from the very onset of modelling and rendering software. Since the very start of our practice, we have always been searching for ways to establish a meaningful relationship between our design ideas and representation, understanding drawing as the place of mental creation and material expression, avoiding the risk of turning a tool into an end.