Order, Disorder.
Ten choices and contradictions
in the work of OFFICE

I've always believed I could see things other people couldn't. Elements falling into place. A design. A shape in the chaos of things. I suppose I find these moments precious and reassuring because they take place outside of me, outside the silent grid, because they suggest an outer state that works somewhat the way my mind does but without the relentlessness, the predeterminative quality. I feel I'm safe from myself as long as here's an accidental pattern to observe in the physical world. [1]
—Don DeLillo

1

OFFICE wants to make buildings liberated – at least initially – from stories, sentences and statements. To achieve this kind of architecture, it returns to the vocabulary of architecture proper, and to the elements that belong to architecture and to nothing else. The history of 20th-century architecture can be described as one long attempt to make buildings talk, to read and produce architecture as a text, to search for a semiotic dimension of the built environment, and to express – on a cultural, sociological, philosophical level – as much as possible by means of buildings. There is a famous sentence in Paul Valery's 1923 text *Eupalinos ou l'architecte* that voices another option, and that shows how every effort to equate written or spoken language with the words and sentences of architecture, is based on a misunderstanding. Valéry discusses the so-called 'potential' art forms: art that does not chat, talk or supply information, insights or interpretations, but that comes – like music or architecture – prior to language. 'Mais les arts dont nous parlons doivent,' Valéry writes, 'au contraire, au moyen de nombres et de rapports de nombres, enfanter en nous non point une fable, mais cette puissance cachée qui fait toutes les fables.'[2] Architecture is silent, but its silence is an immediate invitation to be broken.

It is easy to criticise this definition, together with the division that OFFICE wants to install between the fundamental language of architecture, and all the other languages of the world. Is it possible to make architecture without taking into account what this architecture will mean, what it will express and how it will be read? Is it not utopian to contrive a neutral architecture that withdraws as a material support? In our contemporary culture is architecture, no matter how abstract, not immediately consumed as a commodity? And doesn't architecture always, without wanting to, tell stories – stories of capital, for example, and of power, oppression, happiness (maybe), violence, fear or hope? Yes – but according to OFFICE, telling these stories is not the architect's primary task. An architect creates the conditions and explicates the circumstances in which these stories are told. Architecture is form, ordered and waiting to be filled by content, program, people – by life.

2

In a recent book, Jacques Lucan has written about the work of OFFICE, and their reticence towards meaning and language. 'L'ambition d'une cohérence intrinsèque peut vouloir dire prendre ses distances par rapport au maniérisme et rechercher ce que Roland Barthes avait appelé une "écriture blanche", soit une écriture "liberée de toute servitude à un ordre marqué du langage." Lorsque Office avance la possibilité d'une "architecture without content", ne poursuit-il pas l'objectif d'une "écriture blanche"?'[3] Lucan refers to *Le Degré zéro de l'écriture*, published in 1953 by Roland Barthes. It is revealing to give this text an historical and cultural meaning, instead of merely a compositional one. Barthes published this small book at the beginning of his writing life. He was looking for an opportunity to criticise traditional literature, and the increasingly

1
Don DeLillo, *The Names* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1982), p. 172.

2
Paul Valéry, *Eupalinos ou l'architecte* (Paris: Gallimard, 1945), pp. 45–46.

3
Jacques Lucan, *Précisions sur un état présent de l'architecture* (Lausanne: PPUR, 2015), pp. 246–247.

preconditioned and meaningless success of the Great French Bourgeois Writer. Barthes proposed to no longer invest literature with matters of language or style. Another option should be possible: 'c'est essayer de montrer que cette troisième dimension de la Forme attache elle aussi, non sans un tragique supplémentaire, l'écrivain à sa société.'[4]

According to Barthes, the real possibility of an avant-garde position in post-war literature, and of a critical contribution to society, was to be found in formal strategies – techniques of composition, sentence-making, syntax, paragraphs, limits, structure – instead of in the romantic beauty of phrasing or in the would-be transparent expression of meaning. Literature has only partly followed Barthes' proposal, and with mixed results, although that is another story. But around the time when he proposed a *zero degree* for literature, the majority of architecture turned in the other direction. Ironically enough, the writings of Barthes paved the way, supplying semiotic and structuralist readings of almost everything. His conviction that everything has meaning, that a simple function is influential in many different and dormant ways, and that everything can help to understand and criticise society, did not go unnoticed, to say the least.[5] Consciousness of the implications of what they design, has enticed architects of different persuasion to strive for a kind of *infinity degree* of architecture. The possibility of reading architecture as a language became an obligation to *write* and conceive it explicitly as such. Architects became extremely self-conscious about the effects of their work, impatiently forgetting the idiosyncratic detours necessary for the typical architectural experience. This resulted in the expressionism of deconstructivism, in the romanticism of a recognisable style, but also in architecture as diagrammatic research, pseudo-scientific rhetoric and cultural studies. The pluriform, mannerist and often chaotic and hysterical architecture that dominates 21st-century production, can be considered an outcome of these tendencies – an almost desperate attempt to get noticed, confusing attention with meaning. Just as Barthes hoped for a zero degree for literature in the fifties, half a century later the work of OFFICE tries to create possibilities for architecture at the beginning of the 21th-century.

3

How to find words for an 'architecture without content'? Would it not be better to respect the absence of language and the experience of space? Shouldn't one stress the subjugation of contemporary architecture to private capital and power, and the impossibility of imagining a different and more social world? One strategy can be found in Manfredo Tafuri's famous article from 1974 subtitled 'The language of criticism and the criticism of language', which he developed in reaction to the work of Aldo Rossi. According to Tafuri, 'the absolute presence of form' and the suppression of linguistic tendencies in Rossi's work, 'makes "scandalous" the existence of the casual, even in that casual behaviour *par excellence*, human presence.'[6] Without a language to share with buildings, human beings are expelled from the domain of architecture. In a way, this is an easy and quite pathetic solution, ignoring how architecture can have an influence on more than just a linguistic level. Human beings *do* live in the Gallaratese neighbourhood designed by Rossi. And if they don't live there, they have to live somewhere else. Why would we bother with architecture if it is not allowed to be inhabited, experienced or consumed? The 'intrinsic coherence' (to requote Lucan), the 'absolute presence of form' (to requote Tafuri) in the work of OFFICE can only be taken at face value when it is met, confronted and transcended by the movements of bodies, the vagaries of use, the rubble of reality, the temporality of thought and talk, and the indecision of the world.

4
Roland Barthes, *Oeuvres complètes. Tome I* (Paris: Seuil, 2002), p. 173. On the relationship between the work of Office, language and deconstructivist philosophy, see: Bart Verschaffel, 'Ver voorbij de deconstructie. De architectuuropvatting van OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen', *De Witte Raaf* 148 (2010), pp. 7–10.

5
See for example, from 1969: George Baird, 'La Dimension Amoureuse in Architecture', in: Idem, *Writings on Architecture and the City* (London: Artifice, 2015), pp. 20–36.

6
Manfredo Tafuri, 'L'Architecture dans le Boudoir: The Language of Criticism and the Criticism of Language', in: K. Michael Hays (ed)., *Oppostions Reader* (New York: Princeton Architectural Press, 1998), p. 296.

Aldo Rossi
Gallaratese Housing,
1967–1974
(© Geert Bekaert/
Ghent University)

7
Don DeLillo, op.cit. (note 1),
p. 331.

8
Don DeLillo, op.cit. (note 1),
p. 331.

9
Geert Bekaert, 'Happy Anni-
versary. OFFICE Kersten
Geers David Van Severen at
the 11th Venice Architecture
Biennale', in: Christophe
Van Gerrewey (ed.), *Rooted
in the Real. Writings on
Architecture by Geert Bekaert*
(Ghent: WZW, 2011),
p. 235.

10
Le Corbusier, *L'Atelier de
la recherche patiente* (Paris:
Vincent Fréal, 1960), p. 34.

11
Jean-François Lyotard, *Misère
de la philosophie* (Paris:
Galilée, 2000), p. 2000

In his novel *The Names* from 1982, Don DeLillo writes – in the both lucid and lyric way typical of his prose – about the main character's visit to the Parthenon in Athens. 'People come through the gateway, people in streams and clusters, in mass assemblies. No one seems to be alone. This is a place to enter in crowds, seek company and talk. Everyone is talking. I move past the scaffolding and walk down the steps, hearing one language after another, rich, harsh, mysterious, strong. This is what we bring to the temple, not prayer or chant or slaughtered rams. Our offering is language.'[7] The Parthenon might seem an exorbitant or blasphemous example in a discussion in 2016 on the work of just another architectural office. But as DeLillo emphasised in *The Names*, the Parthenon is not really imposing, sacred or cut-off from the world. It may be monumental and historical, but it is above all a space: accessible, inviting and human. 'I walk to the east of the temple, so much space and openness, lost walls, pediments, roof, a grief for what has escaped containment. And this is what I mainly learned up there, that the Parthenon was not a thing to study but to feel. It wasn't aloof, rational, timeless, pure. I couldn't locate the serenity of the place, the logic and steady sense. It wasn't a relic species of dead Greece but part of the living city below it. This was a surprise. I'd thought it was a separate thing, the sacred height, intact in its Doric order. I hadn't expected a human feeling to emerge from the stones but this is what I found, deeper than the art and mathematics embodied in the structure, the optical exactitudes.'[8]

These sentences show, in the most earthly and subjective way possible, how life is always stronger than architecture, even in the case of History with a capital H, Tourism with a capital T, or Architecture with a capital A. Also 'in the boudoir', to refer to the title of Tafuri's article from '74, architecture is never a separate, negligible or untouched thing. Every project by OFFICE underlines this: the belief that by being itself, by creating and limiting space instead of 'speaking' or 'criticising' or 'anticipating', architecture has a role to play. Its most important and direct declaration towards this disciplinary status of architecture and its experiential possibilities remains OFFICE 50, the extension to the Belgian pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale of 2008. OFFICE placed a high, closed fence around the building from 1907. The fence occupied the entire terrain in front, including the access roads. The result was an enclosed garden space, filled with empty chairs and confetti – an oasis inside the cultural domain of architecture, freed from it at the same time. As Belgian critic Geert Bekaert wrote: 'The project avoids the contemporary architecture discourse as much as possible. And the architects have also managed to escape the curse of inclusion in an architecture biennale. More than anything, they make us forget architecture and demand recognition for the work as work, in its elementary force.'[9]

4

The project for the Biennale was rectangular, in line with the main road but at an angle with the existing pavilion. Because of the temporary walls, the axial building from the beginning of the 20th century obtained an off-axis position. Again, a comparison with the Parthenon is revealing. One of the most concise statements on this piece of architecture comes from Le Corbusier. Under a drawing of the temple, seen from behind the Propylaea, and made during his *voyage d'Orient* from 1911, he wrote in the retrospective book *L'Atelier de la recherche patiente* from 1960: 'Le Parthénon apparaît (parce qu'il est hors de l'axe!)'.[10] The insight that architecture appears, arises or emerges, and that a building is impressive thanks to its position within a larger whole, exactly because it is off-axis, oblique, and presents itself aslant – this idea is a driving force behind OFFICE's method. It does not necessarily mean that it is an absolute law. It is rather a border that can be distinguished, touched or crossed.

Post-war – and certainly post-May '68 – generations of architects and writers have seemingly been traumatised by axial composition and the right angle, viewing them as oppressive, incarcerating and numbing. In a text from 1994 on the work of Le Corbusier, for example Jean-François Lyotard wrote: 'L'architecture impériale est toujours une stratégie, elle fait la guerre à l'espace. Le "plan libre" de Le Corbusier est un plan de paix.'[11] OFFICE views this postmodern but still very contemporary conviction that architecture itself needs to be 'free' in order to create freedom, as an equally unhealthy and dangerous fallacy. At the same time, OFFICE does not necessarily obey dogmas of formal restraint and ascetic rigidity. It allows accidents to happen, forms to deform and axes to shift and fade. What shapes its projects is the collision of basic and indeed axial elements of architecture with the wider world, whether in the form of existing

buildings, the site, program or client. Its buildings express a desire for axiality that is destined to remain unfulfilled – a frustration that becomes the project's intentional, conceptual but unspoken centre. The order is manifestly there, but it is at the same time interrupted by fragments of disorder. The regularity of the glass grid facade of OFFICE 61, the Chamber of Commerce in Kortrijk, is literally undermined by the sloping terrain – as if the building sinks into the ground, turning the street facade from a rectangle into a trapezium. Similarly, instead of being a perfect rectangular box, OFFICE 117, the drying Hall in Hulshout, is distorted both in plan and section in response to the requirements for an administrative zone and loading docks, the varying heights of trees and considerations of ventilation and drainage. One of the most effective collisions between an axial volume and an existing building takes place in OFFICE 94, the exhibition space Fabiola, where the zone between intervention and site is fundamental to the design, making entrance and circulation possible. In not wanting to choose between composition and non-composition, and in staging and exploiting the crash between the two, OFFICE both affirms and questions the power and the necessity of architectural design.

5

12
See: Jacques Lucan, 'Composition et parcours. Auguste Choisy et le pittoresque grec', in: Idem, *Composition, non-composition. Architecture et théories, XIXe-XXe siècles* (Lausanne: PPUR, 2009), pp. 349–366.

Le Corbusier 's remark about the Parthenon's off-axis siting, shows his indebtedness to the book *Histoire de l'architecture* from 1899 by Auguste Choisy, who argued that the 'open order' of the collection of buildings on the Acropolis, created a 'Greek picturesque'[12]. The separate pieces of architecture may be symmetrical but their distribution is empirical, resulting in a framed landscape of disparate elements.

Similarly in OFFICE's collages or in the photographs by Bas Princen, the combination of regular and right-angled objects represented in an oblique perspective, often leads to effects that can be called picturesque in the literal sense – 'fit to be made into a beautiful picture'. The plan of OFFICE 95, the community centre in Tirua, is a square with a circle inside, completed with a trapezoidal volume containing exterior stairs, toilets, a stage and backstage, a storage space and office. The building consists of a dome structure – 'crude and basic', according to the project description – framed by a box, and extended to one side with a distinguishable servant space. The pictures that represent this design do not, however, follow the symmetrical axes of the dome and the box. In one collage, the building is observed obliquely from a distance and from between trees, showing two facades; in another, a view is presented from inside the building, but with an off-centre viewpoint. The same technique is present in the photographs Bas Princen made of OFFICE 47, the Computer Shop in Tielt, although in this project the axial organisation is garbled by the composition of the plan itself. The Computer Shop is constructed out of two identical buildings, rectangular in plan, and separated by a courtyard. The party walls have been raised by OFFICE to the maximum allowed height and painted white, making it impossible to view the project from the symmetrical axes: either there is not enough space to do so, or the building is partly hidden behind one of the protruding walls. The most clear and telling picture – it is almost an emblem – that Princen made for OFFICE, shows OFFICE 61, the Chamber of Commerce in a landscape filled with snow. Again, the building is pictured edgeways; the platonic perfection of its L-shape volume made indiscernible or rather unverifiable, by the sloping terrain that partly conceals the ground floor, and by the flight lines of the two-point-perspective. What we see together with how we see it could be a matter of supreme harmony, but we're not sure.

Le Corbusier
(Charles-Édouard
Jeanneret)
Le Parthénon,
Athènes, *Carnet
du Voyage d'Orient
N°3*, p.115, 1911
(© FLC/ADAGP)

6

'The function of representing the world back to itself as an image,' Ellis Woodman wrote in the monographic issue of *2G* from 2012, 'is a central one of every OFFICE Kersten Geers David Van Severen project. (…) The office views the production of buildings as a subsidiary activity to the production of images. We might now add that this is true in a more fundamental sense still: the studio's buildings are machines for making images.'[13]

13
Ellis Woodman, 'Picturing the present', *2G* 63 (2012), p. 7.

This is confirmed by the strategies used in the collages, the intense collaboration with Bas Princen, and the dialectic between order and disorder in almost every project. But the work of OFFICE has also shown an extreme attention to detail, materials and usefulness. If this can indeed be considered a zero degree architecture on account of the concise vocabulary and the precise grammar it manipulates, at the same time it deserves to be judged a maximalist architecture because of the wide range of human faculties it addresses. This is again only seemingly a contradiction. The work of OFFICE is architecture for the intellect, conscious of architectural history, and critical of the possibilities of 'architecture in the expanded field'. It is architecture for the eye, rich in overlapping visual strategies and picturesque combinations of building volumes and existing elements. But it is also – and this is often overlooked – an architecture of the body and the hand, with an important stress on the use and experience of the interior, down to the smallest scale. This has been the case from the very beginning. In their first executed project from 2003, OFFICE 2, the entrance and reception area of a notary's office in Antwerp, a modular mirror glass wrap, conceived as a repetition of one module, encloses an office space. The modules open by means of small leather handles, providing access to the adjacent rooms, to the hallway, and to storage space. This debut project is in a way a small predecessor to OFFICE 78, the University Library in Ghent from 2014. A grandiose central hall in a neoclassical building from 1890 is transformed by means of a giant piece of furniture, that respects the axial organisation of the space, while at the same time enriching it by means of vertically sliding perforated panels, and especially by the coloured, both chaotic and regular visibility of almost 50000 books.

In several private projects, concentrated attention is paid to the design and the fabrication of cupboards, small doors and domestic devices. In the weekend house in Merchtem – an enfilade of five identical square rooms – each space is characterised and defined by the furniture. In the second room, following the existing house along the street and the parking lot, a sliding wall hides a stowage for garden utensils that can easily be appended to the exterior space, but that also functions as a covered passageway, connecting the first room to the third one. This third room contains a swimming pool; a rockery with a terrace; and a round cubicle with a shower and a washbasin, clad in reflective steel mirroring the plants in the garden. The fourth square in the composition is a living room with two fixed elements, a curved one – clad with leather on the inside, and with a wooden pattern on the outside – hiding a bed, the other one a kitchen and more storage space. The last room is the most natural, containing a lawn, a tree, some bushes, a bench, and a gate as a rear entrance. A mobile roof can cover the garden with the swimming pool or the first space behind the existing house. The brick walls between the rooms are doubled, making connection or separation possible by means of sliding doors. The freedom of the plan becomes paradoxical: on the one hand, there is a structure of five volumes with identical dimensions, while on the other each volume is carefully and meticulously differentiated and equipped for habitation, relaxation and physical enjoyment. The classic *corbusian* notion of the *machine à habiter* is realised in both senses: the organisation of the house with the five squares is as abstract and as mechanical as can be, but at the same time the architects demonstrate how exactly this orthogonal and seemingly inhuman architecture can provide the most leisurely kind of dwelling.

7

In 2012, OFFICE was approached by a client with a concept note entitled 'Der Bau' – the title of a story by Franz Kafka, unfinished – in a sense unfinishable – and published posthumously in 1931. 'I have completed the construction of my burrow', the story begins, 'and it seems to be successful. All that can be seen from outside is a big hole; that, however, really leads nowhere; if you take a few steps you strike against natural firm rock. I can make no boast of having contrived this ruse intentionally; it is simply the remains of one of my many abortive building attempts, but finally it seemed to me advisable to leave this one hole without filling it in. True, some ruses are so subtle that they

14
Franz Kafka, 'The Burrow',
in: Idem, *The Complete Stories*
(New York: Schocken, 1971),
p. 354.

defeat themselves, I know that better than anyone, and it is certainly a risk to draw attention by this hole to the fact that there may be something in the vicinity worth inquiring into. But you do not know me if you think I am afraid, or that I built my burrow simply out of fear.'[14]

It is a story about an attempt to be at peace with the world and with oneself. Kafka recounts the impossibility of 'being done', and of looking back satisfied at past achievements, exemplified by the construction of a burrow, an underground house, a place for dwelling. As it turns out, the real danger threatening 'Der Bau' does not come from the outside world, but from the inhabitant and narrator: the construction is unsafe because he himself has undermined and 'moled' it by grubbing, by digging tunnels and by constructing traps to outwit intruders. The more you try to be safe, the less you succeed. By putting 'Der Bau' on the table, the client was not asking for this neurosis to be expressed by his own house – for such an undertaking, OFFICE would not have been the right office anyway. Rather, he was expressing his desire for a house that would meet the world with openness and confidence, free from fear and inhibition.

Der Bau (Office 119) became a challenge for Office. In other housing projects, compositions were directed inward – shut partly off from the outside world, enclosed towards a patio, or in the case of communal projects (such as OFFICE 75, the urban villa in Genève) towards a common garden. The border of the parcel of OFFICE 39, the Villa in Buggenhout, is doubled: an overgrown garden all around separates the ground floor from the neighbours and the Flemish sprawl. In OFFICE 56, the weekend house in Merchtem, the surroundings are almost invisible – the rooms might as well be located at the other end of the world. OFFICE 62, the city villa in the periphery of Brussels, is an extension in the form of a partly sunken plinth, organised internally by means of a field of columns. In these examples, design decisions are often a consequence of the site. But even in the case of OFFICE 130, the Solo summerhouse in a large natural forest in Spain devoid of cultural interventions, the circle of the building volume cuts out and defines a territory, an island, even if it looks out continuously at the scenery.

Der Bau is not walled, confined or enclosed. In no way does the architecture assist in turning one's back to the world to concentrate on what is happening inside. Rather the opposite is true. The house consists of three levels: a kind of glass house in the middle – with entrance, kitchen and sitting room – and two more or less identical floors with eight square rooms, each with small annexes that function similarly to the porticoes in Palladio's villas: they can be used as terraces, as viewing platforms, or as extensions to the rooms, but they also disperse the monolithic mass of the building. Because of the eager way the project opens up to the site – a large, beautiful landscape, an open area in the periphery of Brussels that the inhabitants use for gardening and small-scale farming – with Der Bau OFFICE indeed imitates the way Palladio connected a site to its villa and vice versa. In the words of Colin Rowe: 'Its owner, from within a fragment of created order, will watch the maturing of his possessions and savour the piquancy of contrast between his fields and his gardens; reflecting on mutability, he will contemplate throughout the years the antique virtues of a simpler race, and the harmonious ordering of his life and his estate will be an analogy of paradise.'[15] The difference with the villa that OFFICE built lies, again, in the more relative harmony of the ordering, and in the differentiation of use, view and seclusion – in, to quote Kafka, a more 'frequent alteration or modification, though within narrow limits, of the views on how the building can best be organized.'[16]

15
Colin Rowe, *The Mathematics
of the Ideal Villa and Other
Essays* (Cambridge: MIT Press,
1976), pp. 2–3

16
Franz Kafka, op.cit. (note 14),
p. 357.

Andrea Palladio
Villa Foscari,
Mira, 1571–1589.
(© Stefano Graziani)
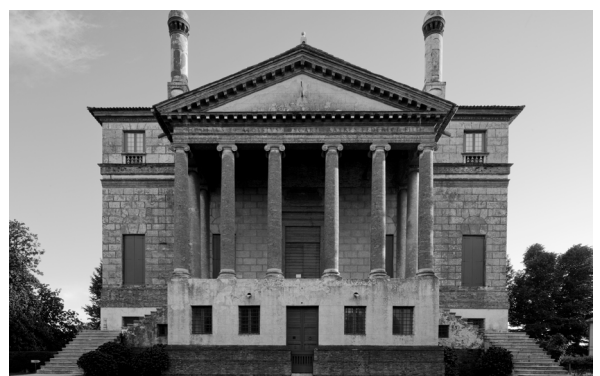
8

OFFICE has emphasised that the environment in which it operates represents an 'even covering of the field'. This phrase is the title of issue number 2 of *San Rocco* – a journal founded in 2010 on the instigation of several architectural offices, such as Baukuh, 2A+P/A and OFFICE. The 'even covered field' is a Western spatial condition in which all space has been consumed. There is no longer any difference between nature and culture, between city and countryside, between vacant or occupied. Everything is full. In the editorial of *San Rocco*, the consequences for architecture have been described: 'The field defines a new condition for architecture, reducing its ambitions and mocking its principles (at least the Western ones). In fact, the very existence of the field makes the figure-ground relationship look obsolete. The figure is lost among figures. The possibility of the figure disappears not because of abolition, but because of proliferation, or visual pollution. The landscape becomes a "figure-figure" universe, to the point that figures become irrelevant. Form disappears because of the oversupply of figures, desires and creativity. Architecture disappears because of the oversupply of architects.'[17]

    The statement is deliberately paradoxical and polemical, but it is valuable to know how Office deals with this situation. To put it bluntly: their work is unthinkable without the 'even covered field', to such an extent that it can almost be considered a retro-active interpretation of the world that keeps architecture going rather than sabotaging it. The paradox is that there still remains a possibility for the classic difference, the modern singularity and the critical uniqueness of the independent architectural project, in so far as it is prepared to be complex and simple, and intelligent and clear-cut at the same time. The field is, after all, not completely covered by architecture of a zero degree. The contrary is true. So projecting, onto the world, a piece of architecture that formalizes contextual, functional and ritualistic aspects of contemporary life – and nothing but that – is enough. Many projects illustrate that, but to show how this is a matter of anthropology rather than of urban planning or European culture, the three oases that OFFICE constructed in the Heritage Area of Sharjah in the United Arab Emirates are illuminating. At the Sharjah Biennial in 2013, three pavilions with a square floor plan were built with the most modest of means. The spaces that came into being in this pedestrian area were immediately used as public centres, as resting places, and as zones of exception.

9

OFFICE works efficiently and is prolific. Since 2002 it has developed more than 200 projects, and although some have never passed an embryonic stage, their number is twice that of the projects produced by OMA over the first 14 years of its existence. By devising a formal system free of well-known contemporary rhetoric, it may seem that OFFICE has solved the problem of architecture by means of a combination of self-restraint and versatility. And indeed its approach can be compared with the positivism of a post-revolutionary French architect like Jean-Louis-Nicolas Durand. Durand was first and foremost an educator, and his treatment of architectural history is similar to the educational project of Kersten Geers, and to the consecutive iterations, since 2011, of the design studio 'Architecture Without Content'. A book by Durand from 1800, *Recueil et parallèle des édifices de tout genre, anciens et modernes: remarquables par leur beauté, par leur grandeur, ou par leur singularité, et dessinés sur une même échelle*, is comparable in the way it assembles 'ancestors' from the history of architecture as

17
N.N., 'Editorial', *San Rocco* 2 (2011), p. 4.

Jean-Nicolas-Louis Durand
Plate 18 from
Recueil et parallèle des édifices de tout genre, anciens et modernes: remarquables par leur beauté, par leur grandeur, ou par leur singularité, et dessinés sur une même échelle,
(1800)
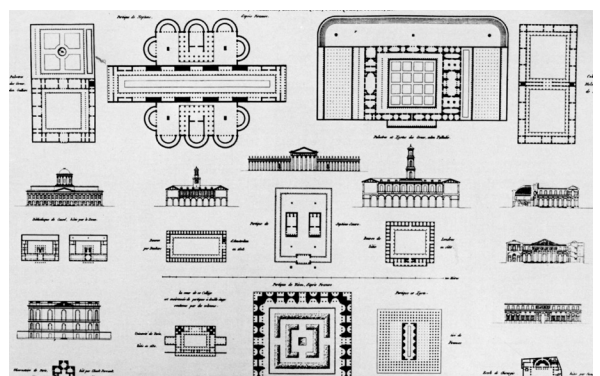
good examples of buildings that are the result of a focus on the correct and trim organisation of a plan, on the realistic estimation of the liabilities and the abilities of an architect, and on an immediate and social use.

Durand wanted to rid architecture of superfluities, discursive nonsense and ghosts of the past, in order to build as economically and as swiftly as possible for the new French nation. A good many passages from his *Précis des leçons d'architecture données à l'École royale polytechnique* from 1809 are easily applicable to the work of OFFICE, because of its stress on composition and execution, on general principles of architecture, and on the endless combination of nearly eternal building elements. Durand was one of the first theoreticians to use the language metaphor for architecture, but at the same time he rejected any kind of mimetic or expressionist tendencies. Walls, columns and roofs simply divide space and organise activities. If architecture is a language after all, its words and sentences cannot be translated.

Of course, OFFICE does not share Durand's scientific intentions. It has not created an architectural technique that should be adopted by everyone as soon as possible. Nevertheless, OFFICE has developed an architectural program that becomes visible in their oeuvre, in related projects tackled in a coordinated and rational manner to obtain controlled results that would not be obtainable from dealing with them individually. Its most theoretical project – in the sense that it presented a vision of what should follow – was developed in collaboration with DOGMA in 2005: 'A grammar for the city'. Designed for 500,000 residents, this city is organised as a sequence of rooms formed by large walls. Together the walls and the rooms create city space. It is important to note that, once again, the grid is not perfect or absolute. Walls are drawn that negate the symmetry of the city plan, and that create lines, borders and connections distorting, partly, the discipline of the grid. With 'A grammar for the city', OFFICE developed a compositional language for architecture. As the designs and buildings in this book show, in the years since 2005, it has applied and tested this language to create a space for architecture – in cities and outside of cities; in the even covered field; and, in a sense, wherever in the physical world the spatial articulation of human activities is necessary.

10

In 1919, Paul Valéry wrote a series of what he later entitled as *Essais quasi politiques*. According to him, a new kind of Hamlet was walking around in Europe, an intellectual Hamlet, troubled by the awareness that truths are gone, that so much has become impossible, that the weight of knowledge, history and information has become practically unbearable. 'Il songe à l'ennui de recommencer le passé, à la folie de vouloir innover toujours. Il chancelle entre les deux abîmes, car deux dangers ne cessent de menacer le monde: l'ordre et le désordre.'[18] Both order and disorder crystallize and in the end neutralise a situation and pinion the immediacy of experience. The work of OFFICE shows, by means of architectural projects, how only swaying between the two does justice to the rich difficulty of contemporary life.

18
Paul Valery, *Oeuvres. Tome I* (Paris: Gallimard, 1957), p. 993.