

THEATRICALITY, ABSORPTION AND ABSTRACTION. AN INTRODUCTION TO BOVENBOUW, DOGMA AND MALGORZATA MARIA OLCHOWSKA

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The three exhibitions that the VAI has generously housed this year have distinct themes and methodologies. And since detecting difference is a pertinent way of thinking, they should be addressed from that perspective. While the point of this essay is to do just that, a more generic introduction is required. The reason is that all three are genuine architectural exhibitions so they do share a common denominator, namely architectural *representation*. This is important because research around architectural representation is the object of the VAI and the fundament of what this institution cherishes, namely, architectural *culture*. Architectural culture is intimately bound to architectural representation, by which I mean the sum total of visual means employed in design: from the simple sketch to the ground plan, the complex axonometry or photography and film. Whether you are interested in Gosia's highly aesthetic conception of the city, in the ingenious projects of Bovenbouw, or in Dogma's research on the minimum dwelling, all three exhibitions convey various facets of architectural representation. Why is this important? Because this plethora of visual means justifies architecture not just as a *practice* (of building) but also as an autonomous *culture*. On a fundamental level, no architect needs this entire stenographic spectacle that we see here today in order to build: CAD or other software would do just fine in order to maintain an architectural practice. However, as Richard Sennett and others have repeatedly shown, model-making and drawing are relevant to both the design process and as a way of thinking about the world, bringing communities together in their understanding of the world.[\[1\]](#)

Symbolic forms

Extensive research has been conducted on architectural representation in all its forms. Both Evans and Perez-Gomez[\[2\]](#) emphasize the value of drawing and its transformation into a building. Their conclusions follow and echo a fundamental epistemological insight, namely the fact that the medium of representation affects the transferred content. In the words of Robin Evans, "the assumption that there is a uniform space through which meaning may glide without modulation is more than just a naïve delusion."[\[3\]](#) For a philosopher the sentence reads like yet another footnote to the history of Western philosophy but the idea is clear: it is through architectural representation that the *practice* of architecture – the act of building – becomes a *culture*, that is, a way of representing and interpreting the world. However, there is a difference between a "clear and distinct" geometrical representation vs. a highly aestheticized representation. The goal was to point out that the Modernist functionalist and transparent representation is an illusion because the means of representation themselves affect the final design.

Alternatively, architectural drawings carry both an aesthetic dimension that is transferred into the act of building and autonomous cultural value. Drawings convey structural information about a building but also capture its material, spatial and social value. They are both means to an end (to be used on the building site) and means to appropriate the building. The Modernist functionalist representation is far from ideal for a few essential reasons: a building is an entity where the aesthetic quality (meaning sensory) of material and the kinaesthetic (meaning movement) quality of space is essential. Models and drawings, paintings and sketches provide an insight in this fundamentally aesthetic dimension of architecture.

Let us call “the built” any tectonic structure made by human hands. The materiality of “the built” always resists its fundamental geometrical structure. While moving, the human body constantly evaluates the material environment where it dwells. Simply put: the structure of any building can be reduced to a “clear and distinct” geometrical model but dwelling in it is always a bodily contact. People constantly feel railings with their hands and find a rhythm in stairs that they use every day. “The built” provides a certain “habit-memory” for the body that learns its surroundings sometimes quite well while sometimes it fails. The best way of representing a roller door for a garage is probably a figure of a hurrying man bumping his head into a half open one. The figure would signify both the rolling action and the failure of a person’s habit-memory. This does not just happen all the time – the figure also conveys information about the circulation facilities.

Architects think by means of models, sketches and drawings so – as with any act of thinking that implies experimentation – they generate more material than is necessary. Nevertheless, this visual *surplus* is not just a supplement to the functionalist representation, like the one produced by CAD software. This surplus is necessary in order to show how the built environment mediates meaningful relations in the world. By means of representations – models and drawings – architecture interprets the world, the relations between people, the place of buildings and communities in history. We ought not to speak of a surplus of architectural representations but of a different *function* that architectural representation has. I would like to postulate that architectural culture is a symbolic form, in the sense of Ernst Cassirer, i.e., a way of representing, interpreting and understanding the world, between science and art. “Language and science – writes Cassirer – are abbreviations of reality; art is an intensification of reality. Language and science depend upon one and the same process of abstraction; art may be described as a continuous process of concretion.”^[4] Architecture presupposes both the structuring and abstracting function of science *and* the concrete aesthetic appearance of art. However, architecture also produces images that show people how the built environment shapes their life.



Fig. 1. Giotto, Cappella degli Scrovegni

Let us look at a well-known example, namely Giotto's 14th century *Cappella degli Scrovegni* from Padova. (**Fig. 1**) Everybody knows this image of Enrico degli Scrovegni offering the model. But we have to emphasize that the episode belongs to the *Il Giudizio Universale*, the Last Judgment section of the chapel. The offered model is an image that Enrico uses in order to justify his place in history. Architecture functions here as a *symbolic form* because the building – or better said, the *built* – is a way of interpreting his position in the order of the world.^[5] Architecture as a symbolic form represents the world as a structuring process on all levels of life. It is thus no coincidence that architecture is represented at key moments of existence, like the Last Judgment. And in the medieval tradition, the scale model (of the church) is visually present as a means to implement social and cultural relations, to represent value relations that extend over territories and to fix their image in history.



Fig. 2. Stephan the Great, Voronet monastery

In orthodox iconography, monarchs are often represented in the act of offering the church, like here in the case of Stephen the Great, painted on the mesmerizing blue of the Voronet monastery in Bucovina. (**Fig. 2**) In the same tradition, the model is employed within the actual building as a part of the ritual: here are scale models of the church that function as an ark or as a censer. (**Fig. 3**) The canopy is an early architectural model that symbolizes authority and we see here that its architecture is included both in iconography of actual building, as these examples from St. Etienne (Bourges) show. (**Fig. 4**) The building is not just the *enclosed* space but also the sign for a spiritual value that the institution – the church, which is not the same as the building – embodies in that culture.



Fig. 3 The church as ark and censer, from the collection of the National Museum of Art, Bucharest



Fig. 4. Bourges Cathedral, from Emanuel S. Klinkenberg, *Compressed Meanings* (2009)



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Appropriation

Robin Evans has introduced the image of architecture as a process of translation. However, translating a written text means that an original is already there, and that it has to be rendered in another language. In architecture, a different kind of translation occurs because drawing and models are simultaneously related to a changing model (the ideal *disegno* that the architect conceives), to the existing architectural history (of the place where the building is to be built) and to a changing situation on the ground (depending on what is possible from a technological or economic perspective). In the practice of design, there is no original text, only a pre-existing art historical background and a concrete cultural situation. Models and drawing do “translate” design into building but then in a complex way. They adapt an ideal *disegno* to a given context, and that process is a translation in the sense of an adaptation. Architectural representations are required in order to adapt a virtual model to a realized building. And just like in literature, some translations become as mesmerizing as the original. Trying to read Shakespeare in Dutch, one may encounter the translations of Willy Courteaux that prove to be as fascinating as the original. In architecture, the translations – the models and drawings – testify to a way of thinking about the built structure, and they lead their own autonomous life.[\[6\]](#)



Fig.5. Fountainhead (1949), from <https://www.archdaily.com/267093/films-architecture-the-fountainhead>

There are models, plans and sketches that makers need in order to translate design into building. But there are also *visual strategies* interlocking within these plans and models that have a different function within architectural culture: they are means to *appropriate the building*. Axonometric models, drawings and collages, photos and films constitute a body of work through which clients, professionals and amateurs enter the sensations and meanings associated with the building; they get to visualize and imagine what the building will mean and feel like. It is through this production of architectural representations that architectural *culture* becomes adjacent to the architectural *practice*. Through models the meaning of the building is mediated before and after its inception. Before its actual construction, the client is immersed in the space of building to come and can conceive the meaning of the building in history. For Enrico and for Stephen the Great, religious building mediate their own place in the holy history. After their inception, representations of buildings – either as a censer or even as a keychain – transfer the meaning of buildings beyond their geographical and cultural environment. When we refer to a building as “iconic” – from the Eiffel Tower to Burj Al Arab – we mean that its countless representations spread its value all over the world. Through models the meaning of architecture and of its makers and clients is spread throughout history. The famous debate on creative authenticity in *Fountainhead* (1949) takes place in front of models. (Fig. 5) Further, Philip Johnson made the cover of *Time* in 1979 holding the model of his AT&T building and many political leaders are perceived as builders in the presence of architectural models. (Fig. 6) In his painting *Triple Portrait of the President Nicolae Ceausescu* (1980), the Romanian painter Ion Grigorescu represented the famous dictator in an architectural debate about a new neighbourhood along two other version of himself. (Fig. 7) The suggested split-personality was a risky business during communism but the image validates the main argument: architectural representation mediates the original *appropriation* of the building. Models and drawings provide, on the one hand, an insight into the final product. On the other hand, they mediate the meaning and memory of the building.



Fig. 6. Philip Johnson and the AT&T model on the cover of Time



Fig. 7. Ion Grigorescu, Triple Portrait of the President Nicolae Ceausescu (1980) (from Ion Grigorescu, The Painted Work: 1963-2017)

Theatricality

Having introduced the meaning of architectural representation, we can now look into other concrete implementations. The strategy of mediation can determine design choices. Cass Gilbert's grotesque ornaments of his *Woolworth building* (1913) represent the architect holding the model of the building. (Fig. 8) In this case, the building and the architect become iconic as they are integrated in its ornament. But the model can be a way to mediate the architectural value of a building. Further, Bovenbouw opens their VAI show with an intriguing refurbishment of the Antwerp Town Hall. Since modern supplies do not easily fit a lavish interior, Bovenbouw transformed a scale model of the 16th century town hall into a coffee corner. (Fig. 9) The model is here both an accurate architectural study *and* a way to appropriate the entire building by associating it with a necessary

function. Architectural representation oscillates between the pragmatic and the historical; it points to the historical value of the building that it adapts to a modern facility.



Fig. 8. Cass Gilbert, Woolworth building (1913)

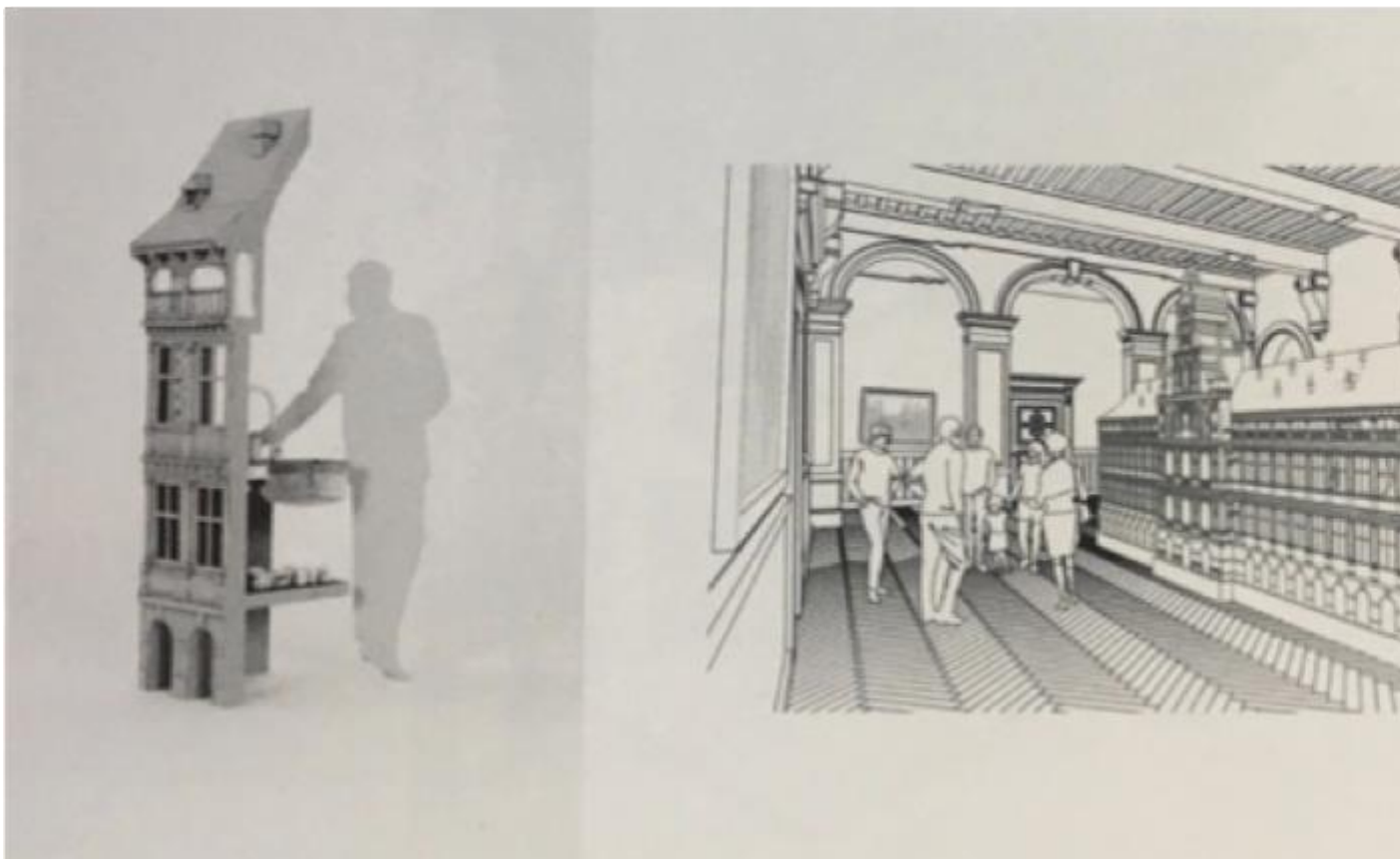


Fig. 9. Bovenbouw, Refurbishment of the Antwerp Town Hall

In their designs, Bovenbouw experiments in a self-conscious way with model making, especially with axonometry. They inject the readable and regular structures of the ground plan with painterly collages, systematically expanding the surface into depth. Take the axonometric drawing of the House Bazel: the spatial potential is not just readable in the representation of the interior but also in the disproportional colourful trees.

(Fig. 10) Further, the viewer is invited to move around the corner of the construction where the model is inserted and to view the scenography from another side. Each side is conceived in a different way. While the client appropriates the house by moving her own body around it, she also gets a distinct sensation of the interior. Desire implies movement of the body and of imagination. When a client gets acquainted with a project, she reads a set of objective coordinates on ground plans and perspectives. But what if this set is integrated in a space where the body and the imagination of the client is animated? Besides the structural coordinates of the building, a model can also include a scenography that appeals to the perception and imagination of the viewer.



Fig. 10. Bovenbouw, House Bazel

In the case of Bovenbouw, model making shifts between the *diagram* and the *index*, two notions that are borrowed from semiotics of Charles Peirce. On the one hand, the *diagram* is a sign that codes the relations between its internal parts and the object it represents, in our case, between model and actual building. A diagram is a ground plan that captures the quality of the represented thing, the building. Without a diagrammatic representation, architectural practice would be impossible because the ground plan sets the stable relations between model and building. CAD drawings do that very well. Maps are classical diagrams because they represent a territory by coding distances and directions. On the other hand, the *index* is a sign that represents a physical, sensory contact with the represented object: smoke means fire or a scowling face means dissatisfaction. Bovenbouw's models are full of indexes that transgress the diagrammatic clarity. Instead of painting shadows, they fabricate them and so they invite the viewer to perceive an effect that the building itself will generate. (Fig. 11) Subtle shadows create this kind of relief that reminds us of the hardly reproducible depth of Guy Mees's *Lost Space* series. (Fig. 12)



Fig. 11. Bovenbouw, School Extension in Rumst (detail)



Fig. 12. Guy Mees, Lost Space (from: Guy Mees, Galerie Micheline Szwajcher, 1988).

The strategy is “seducing” in the etymological sense of the word: *se-ducere* means *leading someone aside*, persuading the viewer to take another position towards the model, to elicit a different reaction in the appropriation of the building. Each model leads the viewer astray from the frontal to the interior where a different scene is represented. The Bovenbouw designers know that the best way to relate to a building is to move the body around its image, and they take these shifts quite far. For instance, they combine the axonometric views with the bird’s eye view when they place the model of Hasselt’s beguinage vertically, like Richard Meier

did with his famous Getty Museum. (Fig. 13) The self-consciousness of viewing and playing with models allows us to argue that Bovenbouw explores what Michael Fried calls “theatricality”, an attempt to involve the viewer, “to impress the beholder and solicit his applause.”^[7] The same theatricality allows me to postulate that Bovenbouw would make brilliant stage designers.



Fig. 13. Bovenbouw, Hasselt beguinage and Richard Meyer, Model of the Getty Museum



Fig. 13. Bovenbouw, Hasselt beguinage and Richard Meyer, Model of the Getty Museum

Absorption

Gosia’s scenography of desolation presupposes a different attitude than the self-conscious theatrical apparatus of Bovenbouw. The challenge here is to reveal a set of sensations and imageries that have once pertained to a community that is now absent. The lost city denotes precisely the absence of the human factor but also of constant transformations that such an (imaginary) city underwent. What is “lost” here is not so much a demolished section of a city as the implied layers of buildings, the *in-between* shadings of “the built”.

Paul Vermeulen's highly poetical text reads like an elective ornament to a scenography that needs no discursive companion yet it also does not mind having one. After all, texts and images make good bed fellows. The sensation that Gosia's models evoke is that of fading sections, slides of buildings that wane away. (Fig. 14) Architecture appears mostly as a stable structure on a solid ground. What is less perceptible is its temporal transition, the transformation of walls and roofs that "peel off" like old skin in order to make room for new sections, new walls, new structures.



Fig. 14. Malgorzata Maria Olchowska, The Lost City

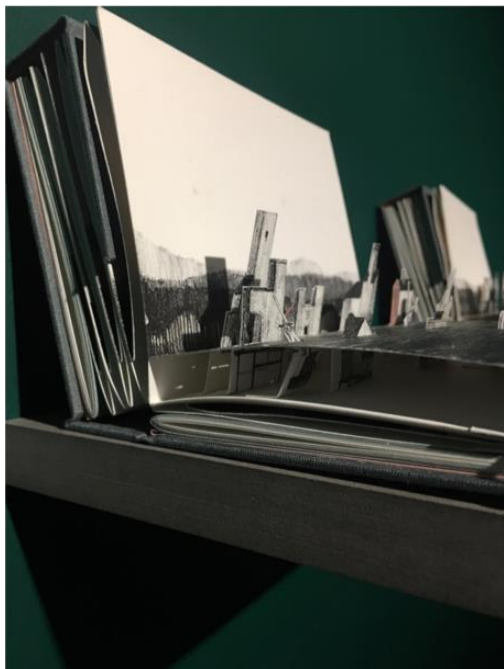


Fig. 14. Malgorzata Maria Olchowska, The Lost City

That temporal transformation evokes a few passages from the great book of interiors and interiority, Rainer Maria Rilke's *Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge* (1910): "...they were houses that were no longer there. Houses that had been pulled down from top to bottom. What was there was the other houses, those that had stood alongside of them, the neighbouring houses. ... One saw at the different storeys the wall of rooms to which the papers still clung, and here and there the joining floor or ceiling. ... But most unforgettable of all were the walls

themselves. The stubborn life of these rooms had not let itself be tramped out. It was still there; it clung to the nails that had been left, it stood on the remaining handbreadth of flooring, it crouched on the corner joints where there was still a little bit of interior ... and from the walls once blue and green and yellow, which were framed by the fracture-tracks of the demolished partitions, the breath of those lives stood out – the clammy, sluggish, misty breath, which no wind had yet scattered.”^[8] Parts of houses disappear like old skin but a certain *stubbornness* resists transformation: the sight of solid materials and the sensations of those who inhabited those places. (Let us call “ghosts” the stubbornness of memory, material and spiritual.) Why is this fragment relevant? Because even though the human element is quite absent in the Gosia’s work, it is precisely what the viewer is invited to imagine and deal with in this complex scenography. Like in Rilke’s prose, Gosia’s architectural models mediate a bodily presence that seems lost but stubbornly hangs on to dark cartoon façades.

Abstraction

Other than Bovenbouw’s practice and Gosia’s artistic experiment, Dogma presents us with a rigorous architectural research. *Abstraction* is the notion that comes to mind as a memory of Dogma’s *Loveless Rooms*, if you allow this slightly insolent expression. The two sections that constitute their work concern the minimum dwelling and the private room. Starting from Karel Teige’s influential essay on the topic, the research serializes various models of the minimum dwelling. Their representation mediates certain concrete spatial *variables* that this typology allows: various architects have conceived of the minimum dwelling by modulating fundamental geometrical forms. After all, the challenge of the typology concerns a process of cleaning up one’s life, reducing it to a set of essentials. The *minimum* denotes the demarcation of dwelling as a series of indispensable objects: bed, table, shelves, etc. Simultaneously, the challenge is to adjust the body’s movement to this series of indispensable objects. However, because the minimum dwelling is based on a series of essentials, their variable adjustments quickly shows the few spatial possibilities that this typology can generate. In their rigorous analyses, Dogma abstracts the deep level structure that emerges from a variety of cases. Their drawings, when viewed from a distance make manifest the mechanism of meaning that explains the working of the minimum dwelling.

(Fig. 15)



Fig. 15. Dogma, Minimum Dwelling



Fig. 15. Dogma, Minimum Dwelling

Further, these drawings transcend their apparent formalism as they inspire a political debate. Architectural representation, as we have seen, is a way of appropriating, imagining, evaluating, projecting desires onto buildings and mediating their larger cultural meaning. The minimal dwelling and the private room imply a political dimension precisely because they frame the place of the individual in the world, her/his essential rights and possibilities. More importantly, this concentration of dwelling should launch a debate on what we do together vs. what we do alone. The political dimension of the exhibition – in the sense of an ongoing “conversation of mankind” (Oakeshott) – consists in a negotiation of this indispensable minimum: defining the minimum implies exclusions of what is deemed as “excess” and a debate on what we should share. Good design crystallizes a temporary yet stable consensus on what we do together and what we do alone. Good design requires both sharp pencils and sharp moral principles concerning respect for the private and for the common. Dogma could have dwelled more on that topic, the thorny human element of design: not just what is the minimum dwelling but how to cultivate a general respect for what we will have to share.

Nevertheless, the research takes a brusque turn towards the private room. The latter is not a luxury but the right of any individual, the *conditio sine qua non* of subjectivity. Remember Virginia Woolf’s testimony from *A Room of One’s Own* (1929): “A woman must have money and a room of her own if she is to write fiction.”^[9] If writing is a testimony of subjectivity, then the private room is its architectural condition of possibility. Recently, Charlotte Mutsaers evoked in her novel *Harnas van Hansaplast* (2017) a scene that captures this condition where the private room (or the lack thereof) signifies the desire to fall back on oneself. She remembers how her father would send everyone to their own rooms after dinner, so that he could be alone in the dining room. Apparently, he had no room of his own and that rule that he could implement, considering his patriarchal authority, was his only chance to find a temporary private space.

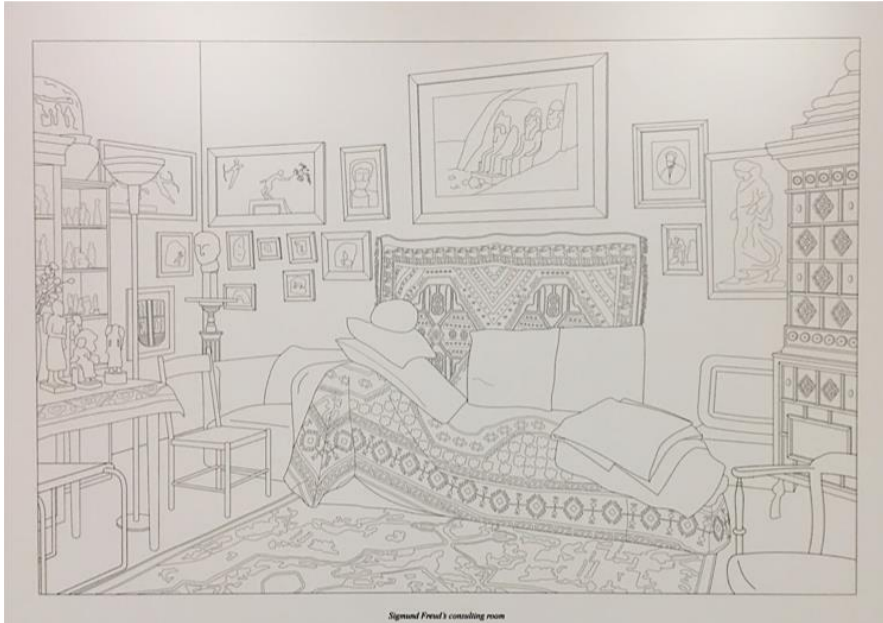


Fig. 16. Dogma, analysis of Freud's study

As with the minimum dwelling, Dogma approaches the room based on *variable* set of concrete cases, from Sir John Soane's interior to Sigmund Freud's study and Steve Job's room. Yet the *invariable* element that characterizes this series of interiors is their unequivocal *linear* representation. (Fig. 16) The Dogma researchers approach each interior by means of a clear and distinct outline. The line recalls Valerio Adami's drawings of interiors, minus his surreal effects. (Fig. 17) Maybe Hans Vredeman de Vries' perspectival drawings are closer to the analytic ambitions of Dogma. While that allows them to abstract the spatial essence, they divest them of their texture and material aura. When perceived *in vivo*, these interiors differ drastically as they represent distinct spiritual and aesthetic dispositions. Even though both Soane and Freud were avid collectors, the thick colourful carpet on Freud's divan connotes a sort of materiality that is completely different from Soane's archaeological mindset. This might seem a trivial observation but the sense of a self is as much deducible from the linear arrangement as from the complex layered aesthetic dimension. Before entering the Renaissance *studiolo* (Antonello da Messina), Saint Jerome designs a protective "enclave"^[10] in the desert where his constructions include the minimum requirements for his spiritual life, the cross and the Bible set against the rock and the tent (Joachim Patimir). The material set up is an important variable for the constitution of the private room and the specificity of the spiritual life it mediates. It would be naïve to suggest that "spirituality" is the common denominator for Saint Jerome's and Steve Job's interiors. The Bible and the cross in Saint Jerome's construction point to a *different attitude* towards humanity than Steve Job's corporate exercise in minimalism. Here too, the challenge of pertinent architectural research is how these interior seclusions relate to the world at large. Falling back on oneself is as relevant as returning to the world and contributing to its improvement. The private room is indeed a precondition of the first movement but the *adagio* to this movement is only suggested in the work of Dogma: how have these idiosyncratic interiors affected the life world, the shared horizon of our human experience?

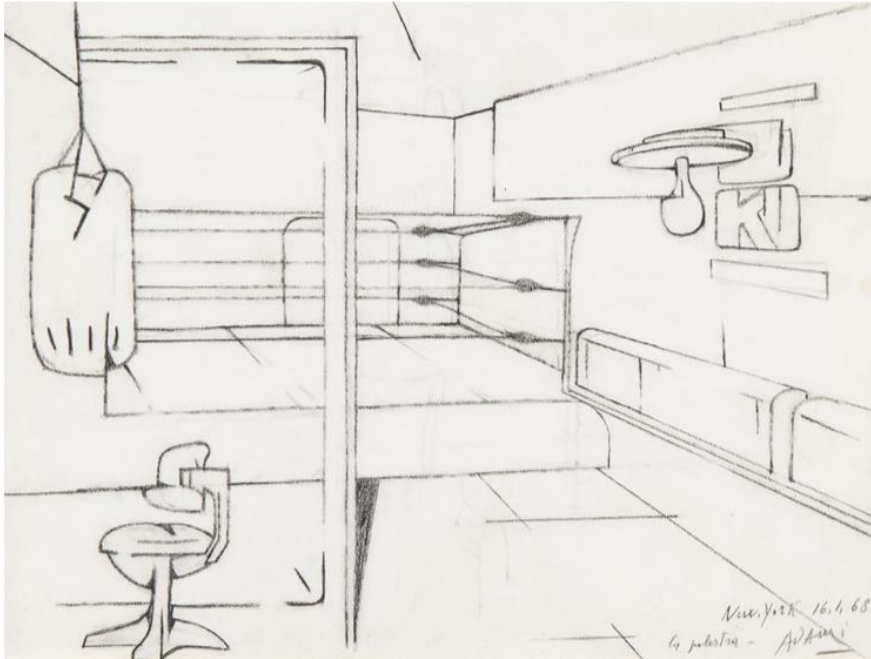


Fig. 17. Valerio Adami, La Palestra (1968)

Dogma's focus on the interior and interiority repress all a relation to a broader context. They are slightly uncanny mechanisms of abstraction because on a manifest level the individual, the inhabitants, disappear whereas they are always a latent presence. Is this a pure aesthetic choice or an intended avoidance? Regardless, Dogma's research is relevant for the debate it opens regarding the relationship between the secluded individual cell and the collective space that we all share. This relationship between the minimal and the collective dwelling is an urgent research topic considering that we always have to negotiate the relationship between what we do together and what we do alone.

Coda

In sum, the three exhibitions reveal two points: first, through architectural representation architecture becomes a way of interpreting the meaning of "the built" within the broad experience of the world. Architectural representation is the precondition of architectural culture. The visual surplus that architects create and exhibit (as models, drawings, collages photos and films) represents both a form of thinking and a body of work that contributes to the understanding of the world. That is why any modern culture worthy of the name ought to provide the necessary conditions for the cultural dialogue that architecture has always kept alive, as the Renaissance treaties or avant-gardist manifesto, as architectural archive or architectural museum. Building is more than profiting from laying bricks – it dictates how to live separately together on the sole planet available.

Second, the history of architecture and culture is always implied in architectural design yet not as a "course unit" worth a few study points during the education of an architect. Architectural history is a precondition of design since adding something valuable to the built environment presupposes understanding its cultural and architectonic past. Arguably religion is the only other human practice as full of conventions and predictions as architecture. After all, they are both as old as mankind. Yet, as Robin Evans pointed out, "the enormous weight of convention that has always been architecture's greatest security and at the same time liability."^[11] Pertinent architectural design has always addressed the built world from an art historical and anthropological perspective. Nevertheless, as Dogma and Bovenbow evince, the architectural approach differs from the professional historical approach. As Dirk Somers suggested, architects need to enjoy architectural history, that is, to *understand* the cultural background of the site where they build and to appropriate it, to improvise on it.

Architectural history and the history of culture is required in the design of future architecture because in order to intervene within a given situation, one needs to comprehend what is already there, either a Baroque city hall or a desolate “modern” village. Even the avant-gardist rejections of traditional art and architecture entailed their initial understanding, a mature analysis of their limitations and historical condition. Both a Baroque townhall and a modern silo are testimonies of choices that others have made; the desires and fears that have motivated them ought to be understood in the process of designing something new. After all, just like an intelligent politician reads history in order to understand mankind’s vicissitudes, an intelligent designer reads the built world as a testimony of a similar challenges and hopes.

[1] See Richard Sennett, *Building and Dwelling. Ethics for the City*, London, Allen Lane, 2018. Especially chapter 9, *The Bond of Making* deals with the various layers of model-making.

[2] Alberto Perez-Gomez, *Architecture as Drawing*, in *Journal of Architectural Education*, vol. 36, no. 2, 1982, pp. 2-7.

[3] Robin Evans, *Translations from Drawing to Building*, Cambridge, Mass.: The MIT Press, 1997, p. 154.

[4] Ernst Cassirer, *An Essay on Man, An Introduction to a Philosophy of Human Culture*, New York, Doubleday Anchor Books, 1953, p. 184.

[5] Emanuel S. Klinkenberg, *Compressed Meanings. The Donor’s Model in Medieval Art to Around 1300: Origin, Spread and Significance of an Architectural Image in the Realm of Tension between Tradition and Likeness*. Turnhout, Brepols, 2009.

[6] Louis De Mey’s ongoing research project at the Faculty of Engineering and Architecture (Ghent University) deals with this autonomous life of architectural representation.

[7] Michael Fried, *Absorption and Theatricality. Painting and the Beholder in the Age of Diderot*, Chicago, The University of Chicago Press, 1980, p. 100.

[8] Rainer Maria Rilke, *The Notebooks of Malte Laurids Brigge*, translation by M.D. Herter Norton, New York, W.W. Norton and Company, 1992, p. 46 ff.

[9] Virginia Woolf, *A Room of One’s Own and Three Guineas*, edited with an introduction and notes by Morag Shiach, Oxford, Oxford University Press, 1992, p. 4.

[10] See Alison Smithson, *Saint Jerome. The Desert. The Study*, in Alison and Peter Smithson. *From the House of the Future to a House of Today*, ed. Dirk van den Heuvel, Max Risselada, Rotterdam, 010 Publishers, 2004, p. 227.

[11] Robin Evans, *Translations from Drawing to Building and Other Essays*, Cambridge, Mass., The MIT Press, 1997, p. 186.