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A field guide
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of architecture

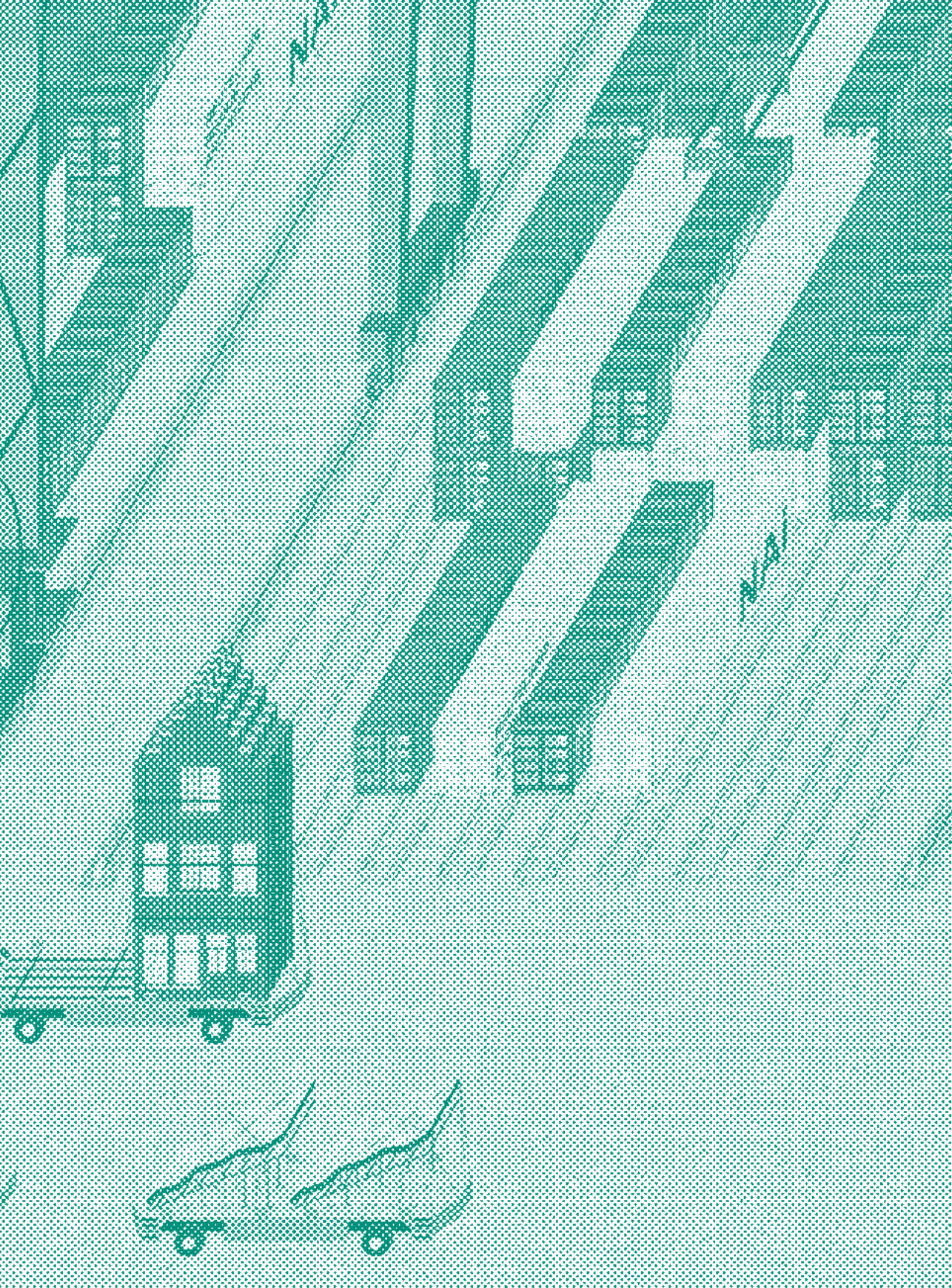
Edited by &beyond

The background of the cover is a halftone illustration of a street scene. It shows a perspective view of a street with buildings on either side. In the foreground, a tram is visible, moving along the street. The entire image is rendered in a fine, dotted pattern, giving it a textured, graphic quality.

Telling Tales

**Storytelling
as architectural
representation**

By Jana Čulek



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“As architects,
we often create
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than buildings.”

With her research project “A Flat Tale”, architect and urbanist Jana Čulek analyses the phenomenon of storytelling in representing Dutch architecture in a series of three books, analysing and exploring how both visual and textual narrative can explain architecture.



As architects, we often create more stories than buildings. We have come to a point where the main criterion for a scheme's success is a compelling concept, manifested through the architectural story. *A Flat Tale* is a research project that examines architectural stories, their narrative structures and methods, through the specific investigation of Dutch architecture and visual culture.

Jana Čulek

Jana Čulek is an architect and urbanist living and working in the Netherlands. Originally from Zagreb, Croatia, she graduated from the Zagreb Faculty of Architecture in 2013. In early 2016 she completed the postgraduate master's programme at the Berlage Center for Advanced Studies in Architecture and Urban Design in Delft, Netherlands. Her thesis project, *A Flat Tale*, has been exhibited and published as a part of the Berlage Generation XXV graduation event titled "Scenes from the Good Life". Parts of the project are also published in the *Fairy Tales: Volume 3* book, produced for the similarly named competition organised by Blank Space. Her most recent design and research projects have been focusing on the topic of architectural representation and narrative methods.

Previous page: A Flat Tale: "Exporting Architecture"
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This page: A Flat Tale Book Set. Clockwise from top left: Pitch, A Reference Unreferenced, A Flat Tale and A Good Life ABC.
Photo: Lena Giovanazzi

Telling Tales

The project questions the storytelling capacity of architecture by using a research and projective method in which a known category of architectural representation is paired with a familiar literary and didactic genre. The format of the story is used as an heuristic device to extrapolate and transpose different approaches to narrative structures and methods onto architectural narratives. This method has resulted in three component publications: an alphabet book entitled *A Good Life ABC*; an architectural picture book called *A Flat Tale*; and an architectural journal appropriately titled *Pitch*. The three parts represent three phases in the development of narratives and architectural projects, as well as three different ways of correlating text and image. The project concludes with an appendix, *A Reference Unreferenced*, which explains the correlations and thoughts behind the project's texts and drawings.



A Good Life ABC:
"G is for Glasshouse".
Photo: Lena Giovanazzi

A Good Life ABC is an architectural alphabet book. Designed to be analogous to the way architecture is presented to the public, it represents the simplest way to give and receive knowledge. Intending to make projects



A Good Life ABC:
“L is for Landscape”.
Photo: Lena Giovanazzi

easier to understand, architects sometimes oversimplify. In an effort to explain the complex architectural idea in a relatable way, the architectural process is reduced to a set of simplified drawings and an icon that represents the final stage of development. *A Good Life ABC* uses letters of the alphabet, paired with drawings of familiar objects and elements of the Dutch built environment, drawn in a reductive manner with minimal detailing. In order to further remove any specificity from the objects, the colour palette is reduced to primary shades. In this way emblematic objects and places are created which refer only to themselves and perform as generic symbols of Dutch identity.

As an analogy to the architectural project, the second book, *A Flat Tale*, is presented in the form of a picture book. “Picture books are unified artistic wholes in which text and pictures, covers and end pages, and the details of design, work together to provide an aesthetically satisfying experience. The spelling *picturebook* – as one word – is utilised intentionally in order to emphasise the unity of words and pictures that is the most important

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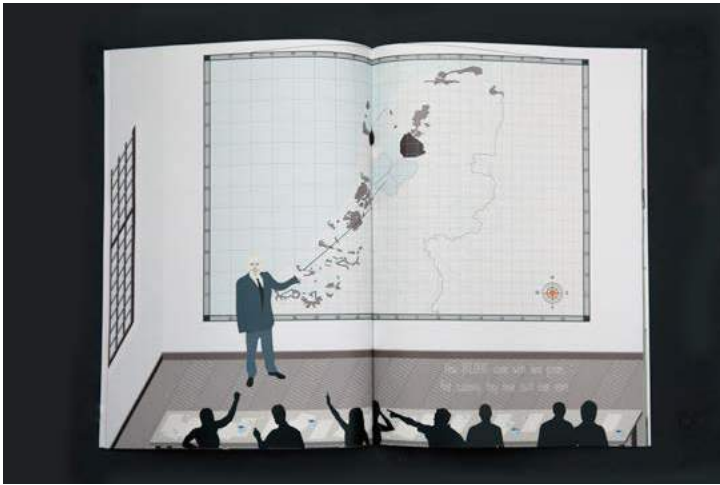
1 Sipe, Lawrence R. “Picture-books as Aesthetic Objects”. *Literacy Teaching and Learning*, Volume 6, Number 1. pp.23-42

2 Nodelman, Perry. *Words About Pictures: The Narrative Art of Children’s Picture Books*. University of Georgia Press: 1990

hallmark of this type of book.”¹ Picture books use images to illustrate the events of the corresponding *fabula*. Image is used as a conveyor of spatial narrative, while text is used to convey the temporal one. Since “words and pictures necessarily have a combative relationship, their complementarity is a matter of opposites complementing each other by virtue of their differences. As a result, the relationships between pictures and texts in picture books tend to be ironic: each speaks about matters on which the other is silent.”² But unlike the picture book, where both the drawing and the text are used as critical and didactic tools, the architectural drawing has become mere representation. In order to regain its critical use, the drawing has to perform as something more than just a visual description of a project at hand. It has to become a speculative tool, containing an additional layer of thought and information. In this way, the nature of the architectural drawing can change. In a world that has already been oversaturated with images, the drawing can cease to be a representational end-product and become, once again, part of the process of creating and disseminating architectural thought.

The story depicted in *A Flat Tale* is centred around the development of Almere, the newest city on the youngest Dutch polder. From large areas of housing developments, to the masterplan for Almere Centrum created by the Office for Metropolitan Architecture in 1997, and public buildings designed by other famous Dutch architectural offices, Almere has it all. The story of Almere can be viewed as a compact version of Dutch architectural history, a fruitful resource for creating imagery relating to various aspects of Dutch architectural production. In *A Flat Tale*, Almere is used as a lens for presenting and observing architectural, urban and infrastructural

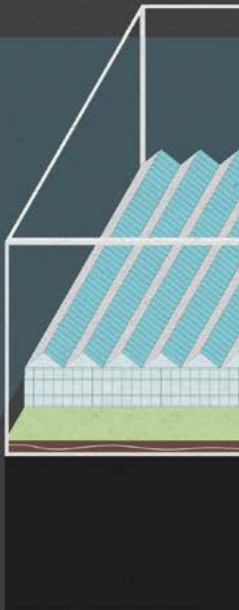
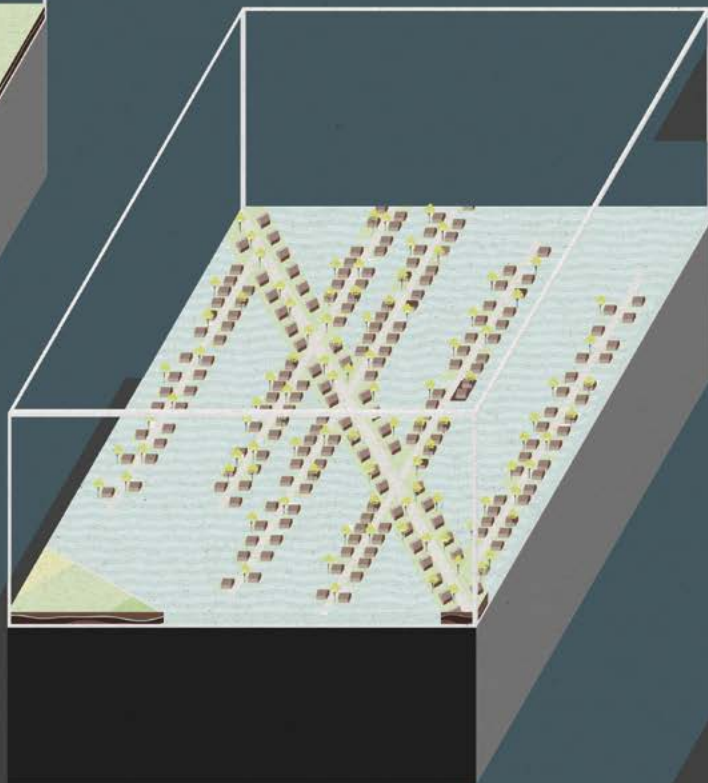
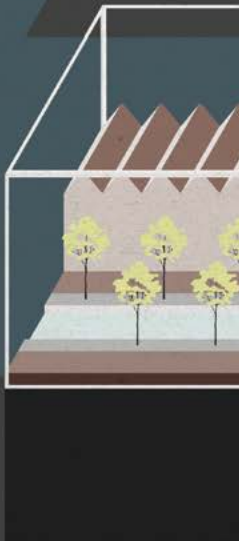
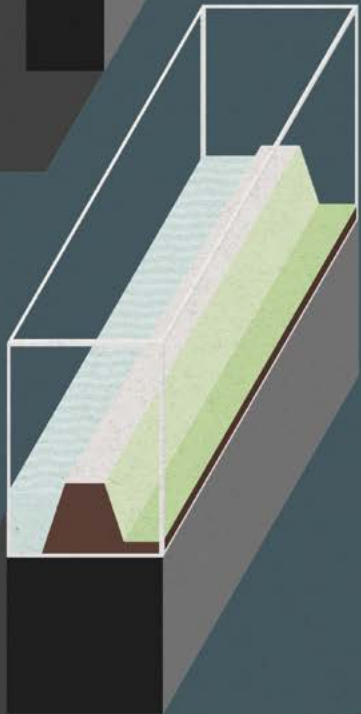
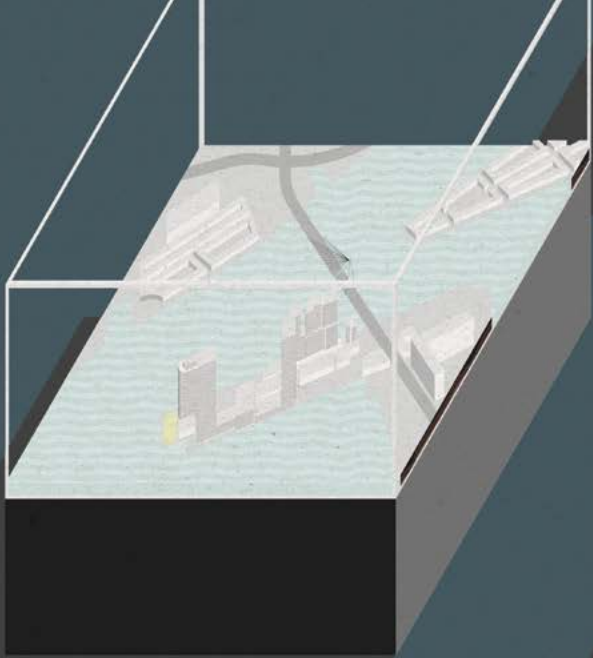
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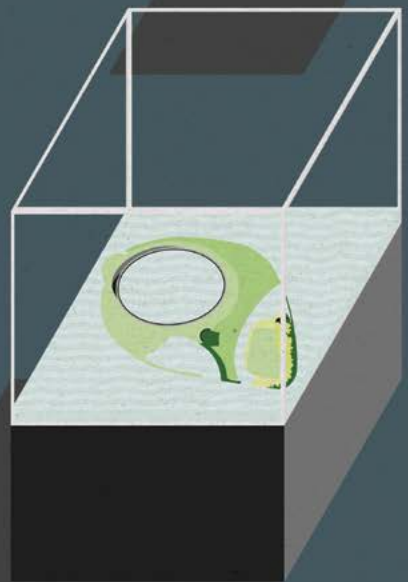
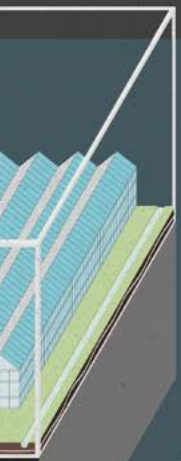
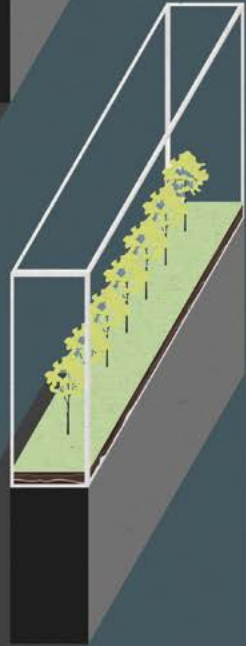
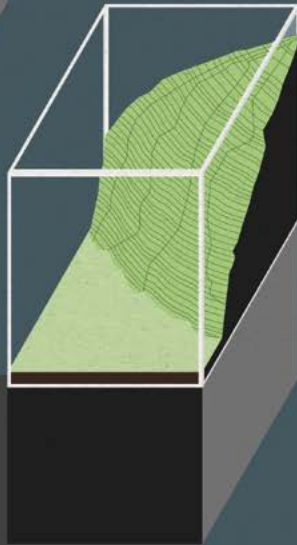
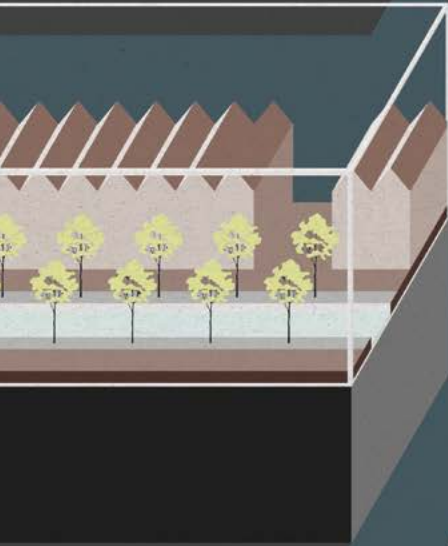
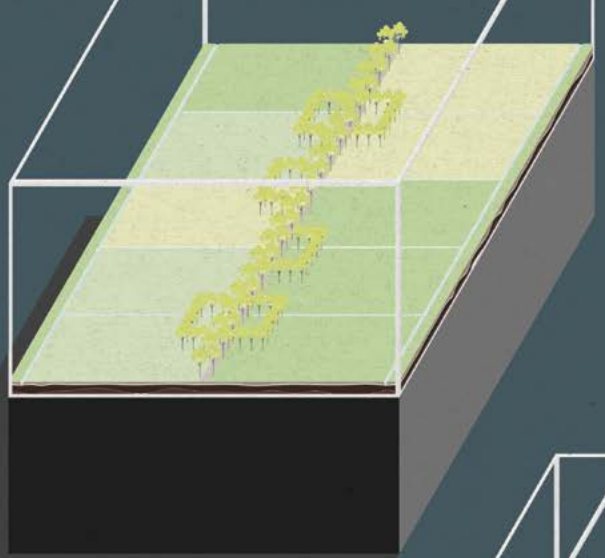
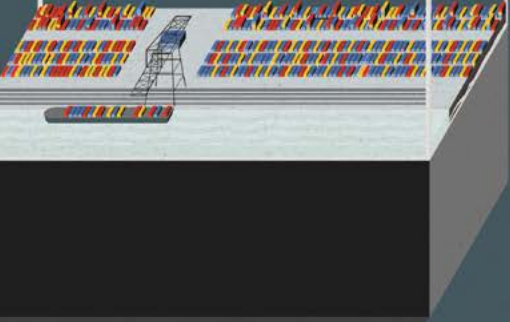


approaches. It is also used to establish ideas forming generative theoretical elements of Dutch architecture and culture (such as concept, export, good life, welfare, subsidies, etc).

Top: A Flat Tale: "Planning Polders". Photo: Lena Giovanazzi

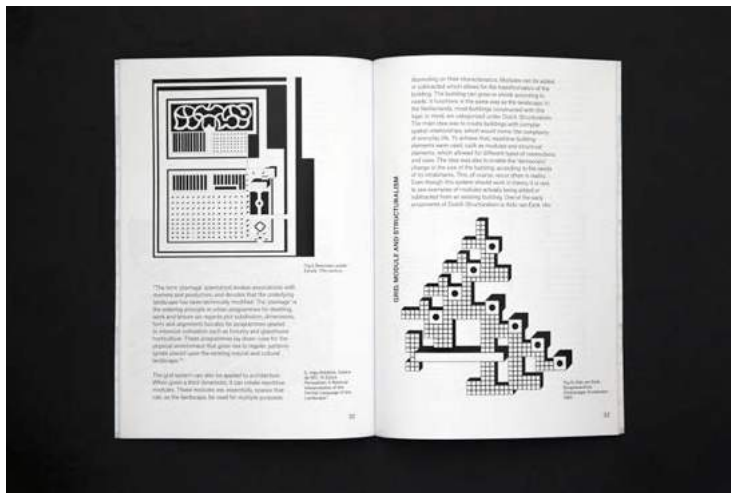
Bottom: A Flat Tale: "Polder Life". © Jana Čulek





Previous page: *A Flat Tale: "Constructed Landscapes"*.
© Jana Čulek

Focusing predominantly on architectural texts, the third element, *Pitch*, takes the format of an architectural journal. Composed from texts, paired with simple black and white diagrammatic drawings, it examines Dutch architectural projects through the use of narrative, argumentation and criticism. The format of the architectural journal is almost without exception aimed at architects. When writing about architecture, or related subjects, architects tend to use jargon filled with overly complicated semantic constructs, alluding to a complex, deep and intellectual creative process. But Dutch stories are different. When writing about their projects, Dutch architects tend to use terms, images, words and experiences relatable to everyone. These are stories aimed for the end user and the architectural theoretician or critic. In *Pitch*, these stories are collected and used as case studies in order to re-examine the concepts, diagrams and original project pitches created for some of the most iconic examples of Dutch architecture.



Pitch: "Grid, Module and Structuralism".
Photo: Lena Giovanazzi

Pitch ends with a fictional conclusion, an interpretation of the same type of material, but through a written

description of an architectural project.³ It is set in an undefined future. It is a utopian, infrastructural, urban and architectural project for a mountain in the Netherlands. The description excludes all the visual elements that typically define architectural projects in order to question if it can still remain accessible, relatable and understandable even without the use of graphic tools of representation. It questions the capacity of architectural storytelling by presenting an architectural project, which is inherently visual, only through text. Diagrams and allusions to the project in the form of ‘infiltrators’ are placed in the first two publications in order to entice the reader to re-examine the entire set after finishing the first read.



A Reference Unreferenced is the project’s appendix. It contains references, sources, inspirations and explanations for all three elements of the project. The appendix draws on the research carried out on Dutch architecture and visual culture: the history, meaning and structure of tales and narratives and the approaches, elements, meanings, structures and formats of picture books. Formatted

3 “The Appendix should be regarded as a fictional conclusion, an interpretation of the same material, but not through words, but in a series of architectural projects.”
Koolhaas, Rem. *Delirious New York*. New York: The Monacelli Press, 1994

A Reference Unreferenced:
“Part 2: A Flat Tale”.
Photo: Lena Giovanazzi

as a reference lexicon, it illuminates the stories and backgrounds behind the texts and drawings, positioning them in the architectural discourse and giving them an added meaning, which can be explored through re-examining the entire set.

By merging existing visual and lexical narrative forms with methods of architectural representation, a different set of rules is applied to forming and sharing architectural thought. Examining architectural representation through both its lexical and visual qualities allowed for the elucidation of three main categories forming this project: the diagram and emblematic object presented through the alphabet book; the architectural design project and its narrative presented through the picture book; and the architectural journal with its short story conclusion. These elements, together with the appendix, represent the symbols, depiction, reflection and story of the good life in the Netherlands. ■