CONCRETE UTOPIAS

AN EDUCATION OF DESIRE

EDITORIAL:
ON CONCRETE UTO

Utopia lies at the horizon. When I draw nearer by two steps, it retreats two steps. If I proceed ten steps forward, it swiftly slips ten steps ahead. No matter how far I go, I can never reach it. What, then, is the purpose of utopia? It is to cause us to advance. (Galeano, 2013: 36)

In our current political situation, the horizon of utopia appears to have slipped still further from our grasp, and the notion of linear social progress towards such a goal may appear as idealistic and inherently impossible as utopia itself. However, this desire to improve, to undertake works which envisage something better and to spatially manifest this desire, remains fundamental to all architectural projects. But, while it is inherent to architectural design, the discussion of utopia within architectural education is continually resisted, as decried by Nathaniel Coleman (2017). Utopia in architecture is haunted by the persistent associations with totalising architectural visions and the hubristic failure of grand social intentions, which casts its proponents as simultaneously egotistical and naive. Meanwhile, its radical potential is subsumed within an education system which predominantly resists questioning the role of architecture in capitalist spatial production; constrained by both the professional accreditation process and the maintenance of the protected status of architects, and by an earnest desire to provide students with transferable and commodifiable design skills.

The work in this volume is the result of the decision to directly confront this spectre of utopia, in the architectural design studio led by Coleman at Newcastle University. It comprises work produced during and following the academic year 2016/17, by students in either the first or second year of the Master of Architecture programme. As can be seen in the texts and images produced by the students within this studio, this attempt to rehabilitate of the notion of utopia demonstrates its utility as a critical and vital space for architectural designers.

Consideration of utopia offers us the opportunity to extend the prospective horizon of architectural design, to dwell in the possibilities it holds to communicate and contribute towards better ways of being.

OPIAS

AMY BUTT

As can be read in all the texts, there was an initial reluctance by the students to self-identify as utopian, founded on their predominantly negative pre-conceptions of utopia. In order to develop these projects, the students engaged in a careful process of personal reflection, addressing their own internalised preconceptions. A common supporting voice in this process is the work of Frederic Jameson (2005) and his delineation of the duality of utopian thought. His distinction between the 'utopian programme' and the 'utopian impulse', between the totalising proposal and the intention towards social improvement, provides a way to differentiate the architectural vision from the architectural *desire*. While the projects in this volume express a utopian desire for social improvement, they resist the establishment of totalising architectural visions, rather they reflect David Harvey's conception of dialectical utopia (Harvey, 2000). As described by Coleman in the project brief for *The Rhythmanalysis of Concrete Utopias* contained in this volume, they produce "spatial closure to establish settings for open ended social processes". In doing so they demonstrate an attentiveness to the overwhelming complexity and diversity of human desire and human suffering, and strive to avoid the associated arrogance of an individual who might claim to answer both.

These projects go on to question how to design for the 'spatial closure' of dialectical utopias, and,

> **in their common desire to develop an architecture which is neither dictatorial nor exclusionary, they reassert the potential for architecture to act as a framework for individual or communal self-fulfillment.**

In doing so they embrace the radical potential of utopian thought to question the role of the architect in the design process, and the role of architecture within capitalist spatial practice. They take on the challenge described by Ruth Levitas, that "the designation of utopia as a space for the education of desire underlines the point that the imagination of society otherwise involves imagining ourselves otherwise" (Levitas, 2005: 20).

This need to 'imagine ourselves otherwise' is directly extrapolated by Alexandra Carausu in 'A Digital Cemetery in a Transhumanist Future'.

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Carusu posits that the impossibility of utopia in the traditional sense is due to the present human condition. Rather than propose a contingent or fragmentary utopia for the present, she considers the utopian possibility of a digital space for humans who have transcended our present corporeal state.

As well as re-imagining humanity, some of these projects reflect on the need to re-imagine the role of the architect, considering the skills and position held by architects and questioning how these might be used to encourage their imagined inhabitants to explore their own spatial creativity.

Alexandra Carausu
'A Digital Cemetery in a Transhu

This utopian desire fundamentally counters the idea of the built environment as a commodity product. Rather than a singular output, architectural design becomes a sustained dialogue, a process at the service of those who inhabit it.

This is apparent in the work of Sophie Baldwin, in 'The Liberated Housing De Eendracht', where the role of the architect is radically reconsidered and placed at the service of the imagined occupants of the housing project. Baldwin has developed a design and construction methodology to facilitate individual self-expression, in direct challenge to the repetitious and deterministic existing building. This desire to facilitate self-expression is echoed in Jess Goodwin's 'The Groothandelsgebouw: A Socialist Perspective'. Goodwin's proposal develops from a consideration of the scale of this vast building, and the void that it creates within the city, spatially, socially, and morally. It breaks down this block to a scale where the individual can intervene, establishing sites for non-productive inhabitation or play, and creates a space to confront the building's implicit support of dominant capitalist spatial practices.
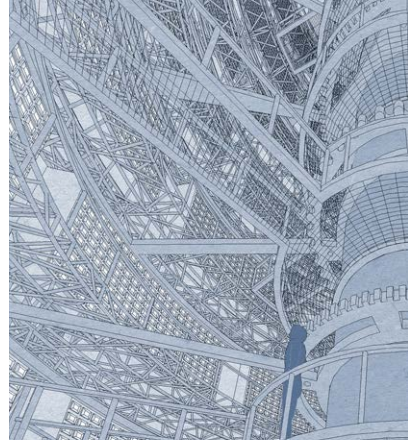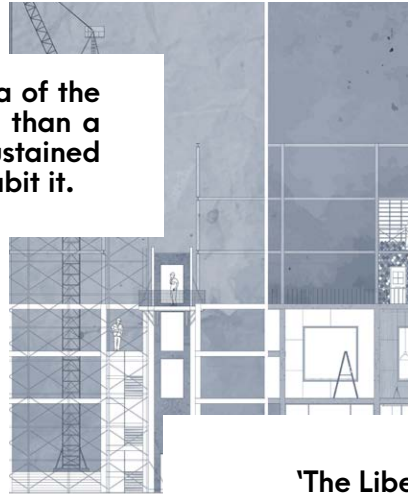
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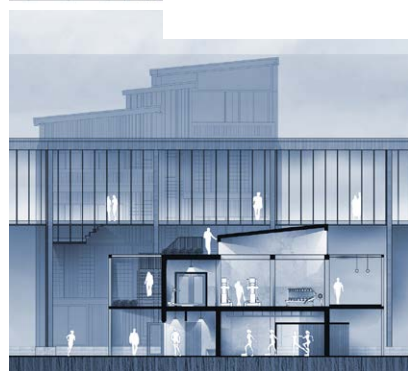
Jess Goodwin
'The Groothandelsgebouw: A So

The *Spectres of Utopia and Modernism* brief addressed by the first year MArch students required them to situate their proposals within an existing building in Rotterdam. By comparison, *The Rhythmanalysis of Concrete Utopias* brief which was addressed by the second year MArch students, operated on the larger scale of the urban realm. Across both briefs, the engagement with an existing building or city offered no decisive break from the morass of history which has proceeded them, or from the previous visions for an improved society embedded within these environments.

Rather, by confronting and engaging with these historic fragments of utopian intent, these projects engage in the creation of a reflexive and accumulative utopianism.

The layers of original intent, compromised realisation, and subsequent reinterpretation are made visible. They demonstrate a process of incremental improvement, and appear to reflect Angelika Bammer's desire ''to replace the idea of 'a utopia' as something fixed, a form to be fleshed out, with the idea of 'the utopian' as an approach toward'' (1991: 7).
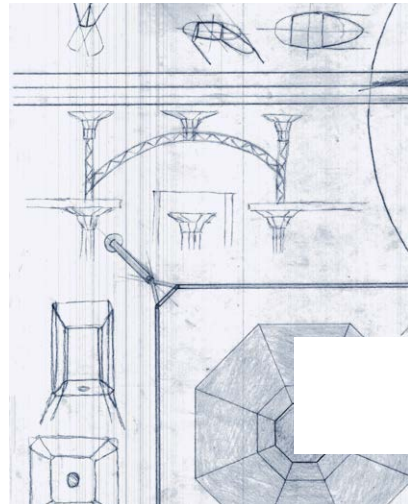
The impact of the ideology of an existing site is particularly appreciable in the projects which address the Van Nelle factory in Rotterdam. Alex Blanchard excavates the layers of authorial and architectural intent which underpinned the design and construction, in 'Van Nelle Technê Fabriek'. This project traces the alienating spatial layout of the factory and the implicit subservience of the worker to the means of production back to the functionalist school within the Bauhaus, and sets this against the lofty spiritual intentions of the building's architect. Blanchard proposes a corrective, drawing on the alternative spiritualist school within the Bauhaus to develop a Theosophic monastery and synesthetic discothèque,

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Sophie Baldwin
erated Housing De Eendracht'
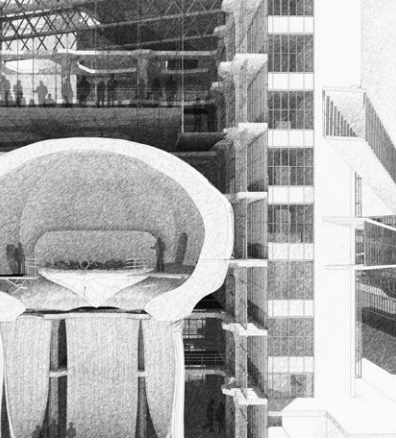
cialist Perspective'

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creating a site for spatial transcendence which elevates the individual rather than place him in the service of the machine. By comparison, the Van Nelle's UNESCO world heritage listing is addressed in Robert Douglas' project 'Disrupting the Order of the Van Nelle Factory.' Here, the preservationist intent of listing is re-interpreted as a stultifying limit on its social function, as the desire to protect the building as object destroys the building as inhabited place. In response, Douglas proposes a violation of the UNESCO protection, and the creation of a central ruin within the building which allows it to be enlivened and occupied. James Anderson's project, 'The Van Nelle Fabriek Museum', also addresses the UNESCO listing. However, Anderson draws out the conceptual disjunction within the listing process between preservation of fabric without preservation of function, by proposing a heightened attentiveness to material conservation. The proposed fetishising of specific elements requires the destruction of elements outside the limits of the frame, subverting the desire to preserve and redressing the perception of listing processes as ideologically neutral.

This attention to authorial desire ensures that none of the existing sites are dismissed as being ideologically neutral. Rather, each project engages undertakes critical research into the intentions which underpinned their creation, utilising the archaeological mode of utopian thought as delineated by Levitas (2013). They examine these buildings as fragments of a model of the good society, from which they then draw out the ideology of their designers and clients. In exposing the ideological positions of these existing buildings each of these projects is prompted to define its own critical counter-position, allowing these new propositions to enter into a dialogue or a debate with these existing spaces.
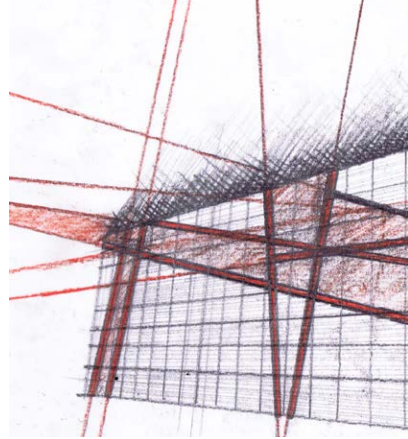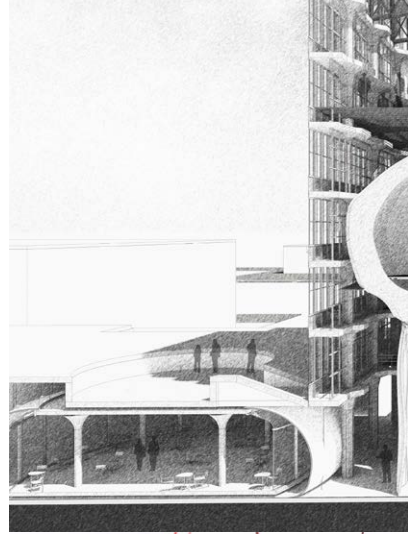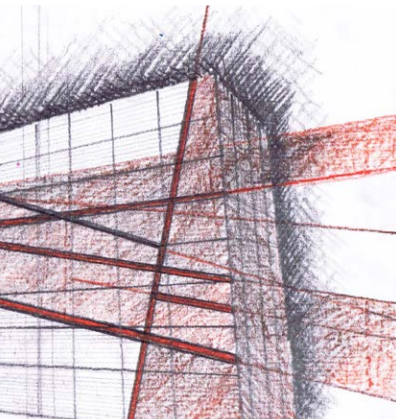

Robert Douglas
'Disrupting the Order of the Va

Alex Blanchard
'Van Nelle Technê Fabriek''

an Nelle Factory'

James Anderson
'The Van Nelle Fabriek Museum'

The projects which are sited in the Groothandelsgebouw shopping center, demonstrate this development of a critical counter position. Adam Hill's project, 'Remembering Rotterdam' addresses the internal condition of the Groothandelsgebouw and the sense of disorientation and dislocation created. It theorises on the perpetual present established by the spaces of post-modernity, and posits that this might be challenged though the insertion of a documentary film archive, woven into and disrupting the existing building layout. In this way, the project establishes pockets of social and communal memory, enclaves which counteract the existing building's disavowal of social complexity. Similarly, Adel Kamashki's project 'A Shelter to Reflect' considers the Groothandelsgebouw as a fortress of capitalist consumption. But, rather than breaking down the imposing building façade, Adel Kamashki repurposes the building as a defensive space to shelter vulnerable communities, thus subverting the power structures implied by this dominant form.

It is notable that even in these projects, where the ideological position of the proposal is diametrically opposed to that which is currently manifest, there is no wholescale demolition of the existing structure.

These projects use interventions and strategic demolitions as a form of architectural critique, to redress perceived ideological failures through the adjustment of the material fabric of the building.

In this way, these projects engage in an ongoing spatial dialogue, between and across theory and design work, developing their own ideological argument through the making of an architectural response. This process of architectural design is directly addressed by David Boyd in 'The Draughtsman's
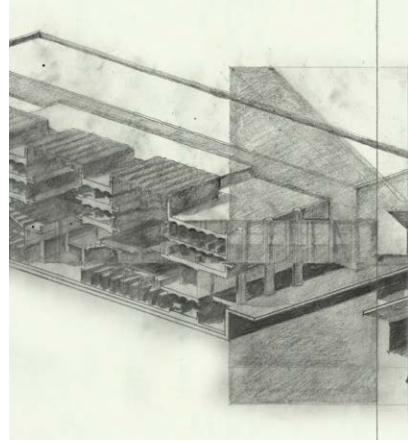
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Quietus: Methodologies Towards a Counter Architecture'. By moving between VR and hand-drawing techniques, Boyd examines the impact of standardisation, in both processes of representation and material construction. Boyd uses this dialectic process of design development to explore the limits of CAD technologies as a system of mass-production that potentially restricts spatial vibrancy and reflect on the impact technological change has on the remaking of architectural thought.
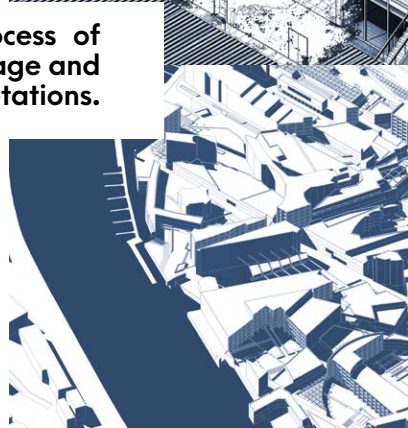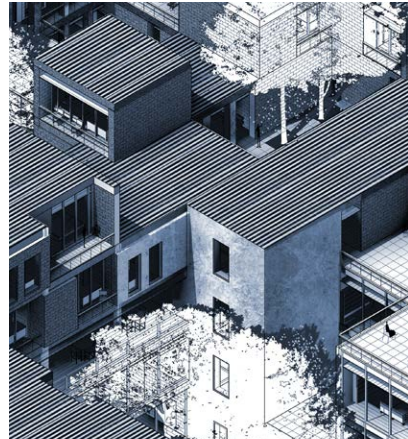
The process of design development allows for each iteration to radically reshape the work which had preceded it and redirect the course of the project. In doing so, the projects extend the accumulated layers of meaning that were revealed in the 'archaeological' analysis of the existing sites. The cumulative nature of this approach is entirely in keeping with the critical utopianism of the studio, in that it fundamentally challenges the perception of architectural design as the production of a singular object. It resists the notion of architecture as commodity by establishing the process of critical reflection, through drawing and making, as the product of the studio.

These projects are the result of a continual process of production and reflection, a movement between image and text, a layering of preceding iterations and interpretations.
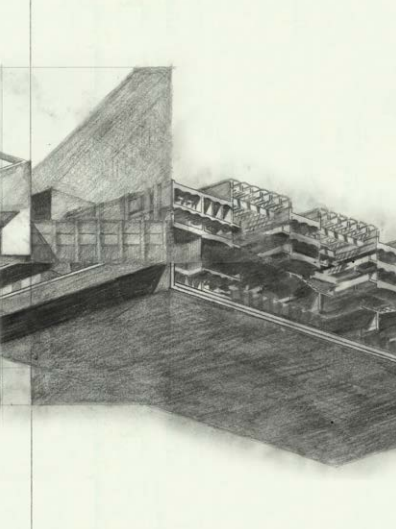
The layout of this volume attends to this simultaneity by displaying images and texts alongside and between one another, and by gathering these projects together as part of a continuing conversation. This volume is also an invitation to engage in the development of the dialogues established by these projects, and subsequent issues will invite further critical readings. In this way, it is hoped that this volume will facilitate further reflection on these projects through Jameson's definition of utopian thought as an education of desire.

Adam Hill
'Remembering Rotterdam'

David Boyd
'The Draughtsman's Quietus'

I believe that each of these projects demonstrates a very personal education of desire, establishing contingent and reflexive arguments for the potential of architectural design, and prompting individual designers to explore architecture's utopian intent. But they are also an education *in* desire, in the necessity of acknowledging that the practice of architecture is never ideologically neutral. These projects expose the potential complicity of architecture to reinforce dominant systems of production when entrenched ideological positions are disregarded or overlooked.

They act as a call to designers, to enter into a dialogue regarding the ideological position of design and to define the desire that drives architectural practice.

In their application of this process these projects demonstrate that architectural works which strive for social improvement, that are inherently utopian, can also be insightful, rigorous and determined.

**Adel Kamashki
'A Shelter to Reflect'**

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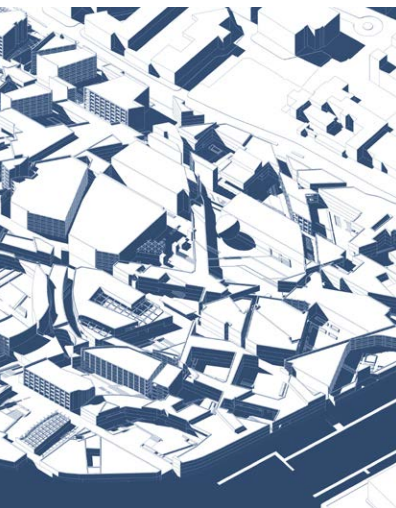
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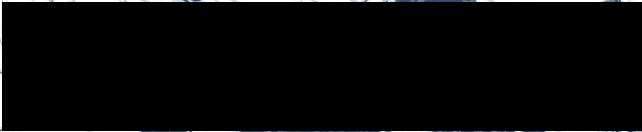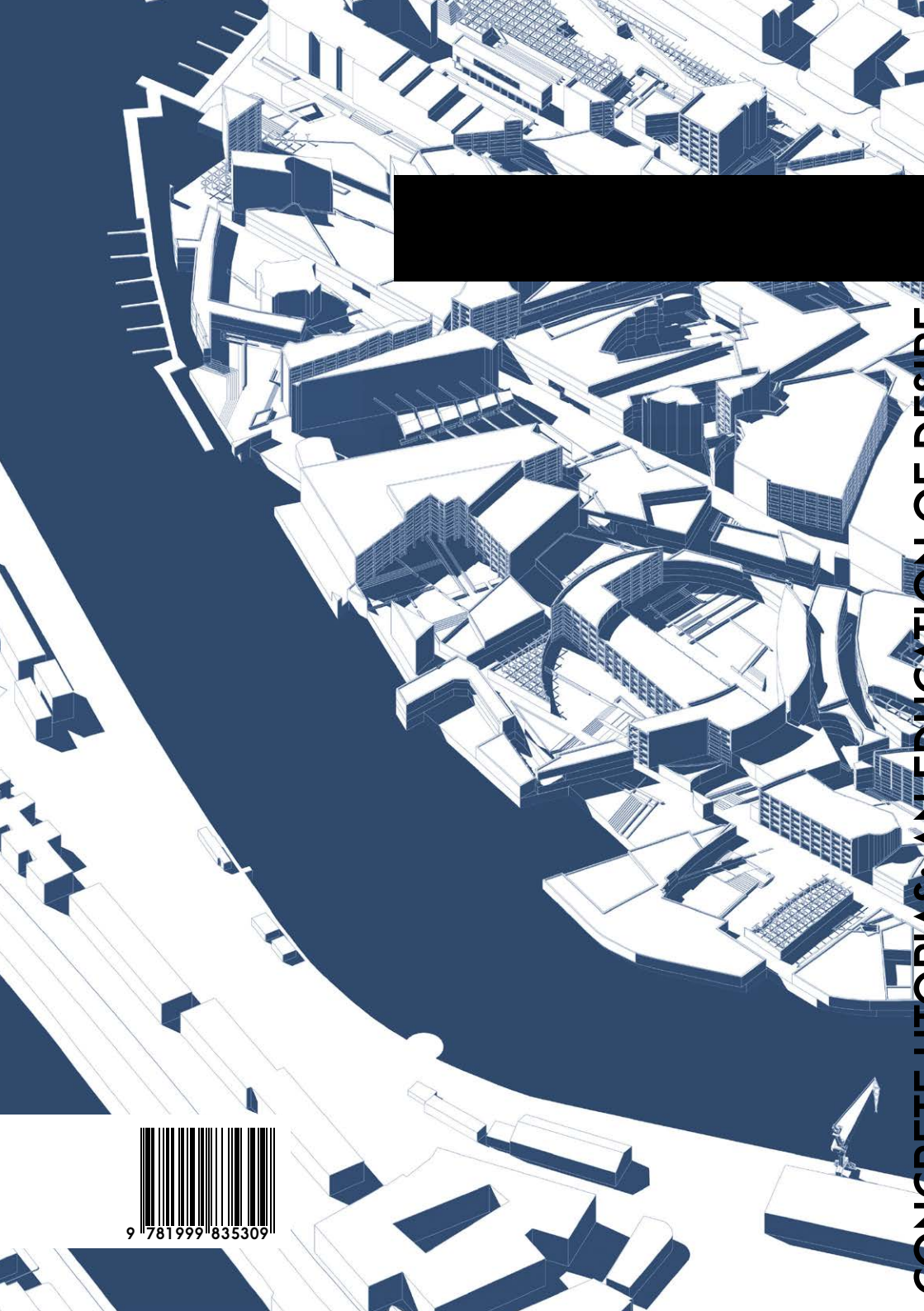
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