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Media is the Message

A Conversation With Bart Lootsma



Abb. 1: Video Clip, Jermaine Dupri & Sweetheart, *Life in 1472*/Original Soundtrack.

"Today in the electronic age of instantaneous communication, I believe that our survival, and at the very least our comfort and happiness, is predicated on understanding the nature of our new environment, because unlike previous environmental changes, the electric media constitute a total and near instantaneous transformation of culture, values and attitudes. This upheaval generates great pain and identity loss, which can be ameliorated only through a consciousness of its dynamics. If we understand the revolutionary transformations caused by new media, we can anticipate and control them; but if we continue in our self-induced subliminal trance, we will be their slaves."

—Marshall McLuhan

Beginning in the twentieth century, architecture and media have had a relationship to one and other. With publications, such as Le Corbusier's *Esprit Nouveau*, and the Bauhaus' *Bauhausbücher*, text became an important medium for the manifestation of modern movement ideologies. Simultaneously, Hugh Ferriss's utopian visions inspired films like Fritz Lang's *Metropolis*. With the economic and social upheaval of the 1960s and 70s, architects, like John Hejduk and collaborations like Archigram, put pencil to paper to write architectural and urbanistic narratives. Inevitably, our own techno-global, media saturated *zeitgeist* has redefined architectural discourse. From the formation of OMA's mirror-image, AMO, to the emergence of 'the Gehry Syndrome' to the ubiquity of digital design practices, perhaps, now more than ever, architecture and media cultures are inexorably intertwined.

Q: We live in a time saturated with hypermedia and a strong tendency towards globalization. How do you think this affects architecture culture and especially architectural discourse?

A: In the 1980s color printing became much cheaper and there was a generation of architects who were, once again, interested in drawing. For example, architects like Aldo Rossi and Hans Hollein, but also Americans like John Hejduk and Michael Graves. They made beautiful and seductive drawings. Suddenly, there were these architects that had hardly built anything, or nothing

at all, who gained incredible exposure. This exposure meant some of them got commissions, and some it took a long time to realize something. The exposure also meant that there were exhibitions and that they were invited for lectures etc. This was good as there were a lot of people who learned from and were stimulated by the drawings.

Today, making a big jump, it is very different. Of course, still these people and also new people are stimulating, but what you can really see is that it has brought an incredible discrepancy between everyday architecture and urbanism. At this same period, urbanism lost a lot of momentum; everything went for architecture, the beautiful image, the object. There was a time when Architects and Urban Planners had a great interest in society, in politics and in a much broader meaning of architecture. I think it is very important to maintain a broad meaning of architecture that deals with society and democracy. Before you know it, architecture will be something for very particular commissions, for governments and wealthy companies. That would be bad.

Q: Has architecture become a product, which is being marketed, in an economic sense?

A: It has become a product and architects know it. There is an incredible interest in commercial strategies. Architecture has become a product-like fashion. There are all these collaborations with fashion designers, which I find interesting, like OMA and Prada and a lot of others. This is interesting since fashion is certainly a form of culture that has a much broader meaning. The publications by some architects are comparable to the perfumes fashion designers make: it is merchandising. Fashion Designers make much more money with perfumes, shampoos, etc., because that's the kind of merchandise people who can't afford the real suit, but who still want the branded product, can buy. In the case of architects this product is: the book. If you have a book, you have a Rem Koolhaas or a Ben van Berkel.

Prada has hired OMA/AMO to design its three new US Prada stores in Los Angeles, New York and San Francisco. OMA is responsible for the architectural work. AMO is researching the relationship between architecture and commerce, culture and human behavior. Prada is also currently collaborating with Herzog & de Meuron on its USA headquarters (located within the Lever House, New York), Tokyo Prada store and new production center. Within the new Prada stores, Kazuyo Sejima and Ryue Nishizawa are designing PradaBeauty, a shop within a shop.

Frank Gehry recently designed the new Issey Miyake shop in New York—complete with a 25-foot-high titanium column-like structure.

PRADA



HERZOG & DE MEURON

Abb. 2: Branding. Corporate logos of Prada, OMA/Rem Koolhaas and Herzog & de Meuron.

Q: So it's about the brand name at the end, comparable to the 'Gehry Syndrome', for instance, where cities try to get one of Gehry's designs, in order to attract the masses (like the new Guggenheim Museum in New York)?

A: Yes. It has become a short list of about twenty offices that are traveling constantly all over the world for commissions like museums and very particular other work.

Q: And in the meantime the same offices probably forgot about their social responsibility.

A: Yes. The modernist architects, the architects of the 70s and the postmodernists felt a responsibility towards society. That responsibility has now shifted towards the client. That's a big difference - even if the client is the city or the national government.

04/2000 After the overwhelming reception of the Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao, Spain, the Guggenheim and Gehry announce a proposal to build a second museum in lower Manhattan. **10/2000** The Guggenheim Museum form an alliance with Frank Gehry and AMO/Rem Koolhaas to focus on the potential of the unbuilt, position the museum within a larger international context, and to emphasize the relevance of architecture. Upon the announcement of their collaboration, the three parties issued a joint statement as follows: "Our work will not necessarily result in a museum building, or a building designed by either architect, or a Guggenheim Museum per se. Rather, we are interested in developing aesthetic concepts in an intensely practical context. We are interested in working with local institutions in local situations to create something unique and special." The alliance's first project was the expansion on the State Hermitage Museum in St. Petersburg, Russia. **11/08/2000** The Guggenheim Foundation and the Brazil-U.S. Council/Associação Brasil +500 announce the first Latin American Guggenheim museum initiative in Brazil. The Gehry/Koolhaas alliance begins a feasibility study for possible cultural interventions in Rio de Janeiro. **11/28/2000** City officials back the Guggenheim/Gehry proposal. New York City Mayor Rudolph Giuliani states that "Civic leaders have a responsibility to leave their city far greater and more beautiful than it was transmitted to us." **10/07/2001** Two joint museums, by The Guggenheim Foundation and the Russian Hermitage Museum, open in Las Vegas, Nevada designed by OMA/Rem Koolhaas. **10/19/2001** The exhibition, *Brazil: Body and Soul*, organized by The Guggenheim Foundation and the Brazil-U.S. Council/Associação Brasil +500 opens in New York City.

At the moment, it is clear that when nation-states disappear, it will become much more difficult to make national policies about planning and architecture and also city policies. We'll have to study the mechanisms that make our cities work. We have to understand that because every architect, whether he is a star or not, has to work with the same kind of shitty situation.

MVRDV is an example of an office that is still trying to follow their responsibility, that's why they're doing all this research. There's also

the Caracas Think Tank, the project on Switzerland by the Studio Basel at the ETH, Secci and Stefano Boeri in Italy and of course Rem Koolhaas and the Harvard Project on the City. It is however much more difficult to publish this kind of work than images of a building.

Q: How do you see the role of the media from your own point of view as an architectural historian and critic? How do you use the media? Can you manipulate them maybe?

A: That is very interesting. I've been doing this now for about seventeen or eighteen years - the exact period in which the situation has changed. I started when publications were seen as a tool to make a difference. As a critic, you could present young architects for the first time and that would help launch their careers. This still probably works, but this strategy has become so normal because architects started publishing themselves. The culture has changed. It's no longer a publishing company, or an individual critic, who wants to write a monograph on an architect. Instead, the architect finances the book and asks critics to write for it.

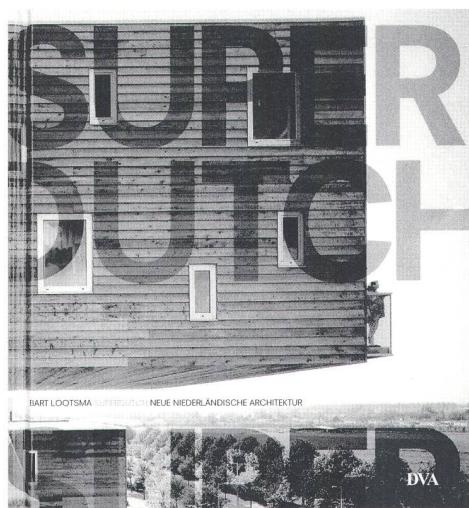


Abb. 3: Bart Lootsma, *SuperDutch* (Thames and Hudson 2000).

This has changed the role of the critic. When I started, you could really have an influence on the actual development of the city and of architecture. In all modesty, I think I played a role in the amount of work a person like Ben van Berkel, among others, got. When you publish something about an architect there's always something of a reputation that comes to you and you can use it for other things. By publishing young architects in the same way you would publish someone like Hans Hollein, for whom everyone has respect, you could use the energy or seriousness of such a person to promote new work.

Media work with the amount of attention rather than with the amount of content. In the early nineties, I realized this very well when we did a special issue of *De Architect*, a Dutch magazine where I was working at the time. We decided we were not going to write about the offices that interested us most. Instead, we were going to see who the biggest offices were and choose the top ones to write about. The interesting thing was that even though we were very critical, most of them produced terrible work, and several of these offices presented themselves as being among the top ten of *De Architect*. I realized that it doesn't matter so much what you write about an architectural office. Instead it's the images and the amount of space that is dedicated which is much more decisive than the actual content of the article. I would say that in terms of architectural criticism the power first shifted from individual critics and authors to editors, and then it shifted from editors and publishing companies to the architects.

I'm writing articles about work that interests me. That's my critical position. My book, *SuperDutch*, was well received abroad. In the Netherlands, however, people thought that it wasn't critical enough. You can judge this in two ways. First, I think it was critical - it was critical about the system in which the architecture was produced. Secondly, it was critical because I picked 13 from over 2000 architectural offices in the Netherlands. How much more critical can you be then?

Let me give you another example. I wrote an article about a villa by Jo Coenen. This villa was published numerous times although it hadn't even been built. This had a lot to do with Jo Coenen building the NAI at this time and the institute was promoting him by launching him as an important architect. He did this villa, it was about the fifth article that had been published—the third in *Archis* and the fifth done by the NAI. At this time, *Archis* was a part of the institute. I wanted to be a bit critical and I compared it to another villa in a very academic way. As soon as I did that, everyone agreed with me that Jo Coenen, because of the criticism, was a bad architect. Suddenly, even in *Archis*, articles appeared where he was ridiculed. My article had an incredible influence. I was shocked. I may want to criticize Jo Coenen on an academic level, but he still would be among the three percent of interesting architects.

It's important to remember, that journalists from daily magazines read the professional magazines and extract their information from there.

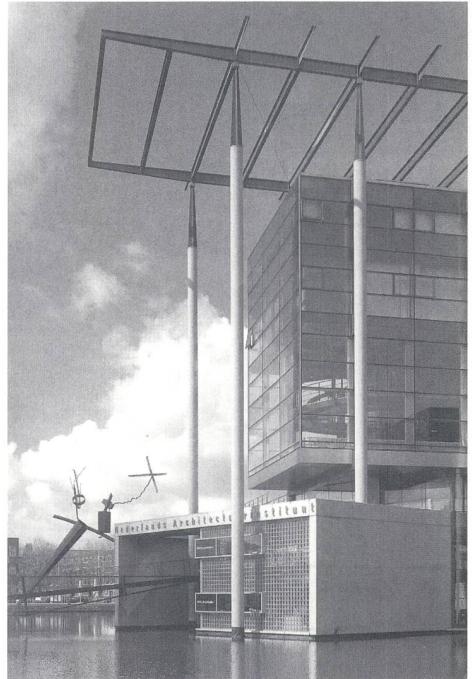


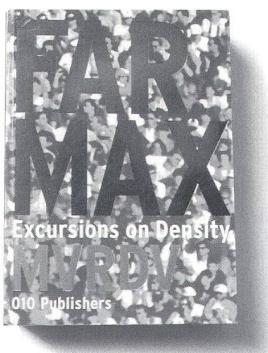
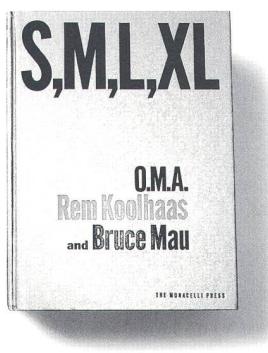
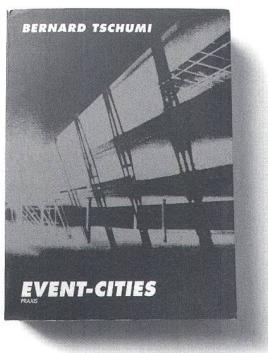
Abb. 4: Netherlands Architecture Institute, Architect Jo Coenen.

Rem Koolhaas: I criticize the critics for allowing this “reduction” to become the symbol of a “new” Dutch architecture, for using it to provide fuel for a campaign of marketing and branding that has found its provisional apotheosis in Bart Lootsma’s *SuperDutch*, and other recent books. Imagine how we would puke if there were a book called *SuperGermans*, laugh at *Super Belgians* snicker at *SuperFrench*, complain about *SuperAmericans*. This is how brutal this campaign has finally become. (Discourse between Hermann Hertzberger and Rem Koolhaas, published in *Hunch Magazine*)

Q: In 1995 OMA/Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau published S,M,L,XL. At that point no one could have predicted that this opus magnum would become the prototype for a new kind of book/publication. One which is, not

purely about presenting 'buildings and projects' as we know it from traditional architectural publications, but which started to interrelate different disciplines and had a different way of handling images and text. How do you see the role of S,M,L,XL in this sense?

The back cover of S,M,L,XL reads as follows "This massive book is a novel about architecture. Conceived by Rem Koolhaas - author of *Delirious New York* - and Bruce Mau - designer of *Zone* - as a free-fall in the space of the typographic imagination, the book's title, *Small, Medium, Large, Extra-Large*, is also its framework: projects and essays are arranged according to scale. The book combines essays, manifestoes, diaries, fairy tales, travelogues, a cycle of meditations on the contemporary city, with work produced by Koolhaas's Office for Metropolitan Architecture over the past twenty years. This accumulation of words and images illuminates the condition of architecture today – its splendors and miseries exploring and revealing the corrosive impact of politics, context, the economy, globalization – the world."



A: I still think that *S,M,L,XL* is a unique book, because it is a book in itself. Rem calls it a novel and it certainly is a novel. You have to see it as a thing in itself. People often forget that it's compiled of a series of articles that Rem had written over a period of almost 20 years. At the same time it has become an example for other publications.

Rem used it to create a myth about his own work. There are a lot of projects that are not in the book - secret projects - like the projects in Groningen, in Rijswijk and so on. With this work left out, *S,M,L,XL* became an autobiographical novel, which is different from an autobiography, and thus created a myth. Through the myth, OMA became Rem. In the beginning, he always emphasized that it was OMA that did the work. At a certain point, offices always become associated with a person. This is a media thing. These offices employ a lot of collaborators, so it's never one person who did the work. But the media makes people believe this guy does everything. Rem tried to avoid this, but he couldn't. Today he doesn't try anymore.

Q: How do you then see the role of FARMAX by MVRDV?

FARMAX is different. I would say it relates far more to *S,M,L,XL* like Giorgio Grassi's *The Logic of Construction of Architecture* to Aldo Rossi's *Architecture of the City*. Grassi makes this very interesting distinction between a treatise and a handbook. He considers himself doing a handbook as opposed to Rossi's treatise. Therefore, I consider *FARMAX* a handbook and *S,M,L,XL* a treatise. And I think that is very good. *FARMAX* was certainly derived from the methods of OMA, but it's a very different book - it's a series of case studies. You also should understand that *FARMAX* and *MOVE* both were produced in a much shorter time than *S,M,L,XL*. *FARMAX* isn't just by MVRDV, but by a lot of different authors - so it's much more a compilation.

Q: Could one say that the first generation of that kind of book was the start of a culture of the 'pseudo-book' (as defined by Sanford Kwinter on September 13, 2000 at Columbia University, the pseudo-book exists when "content is abandoned and the book is a free assemblage of images and contextless text") where content was traded over speed and images?

A: I find *Move* problematic because Ben van Berkel is not doing justice to his own work by presenting it that way. He should have chosen a different format and should have focused much more on the images than on the text. Again with *FARMAX*, I don't have so much of a problem because it's a handbook - a series of handbooks - and it's meant to be used as a handbook. Therefore, the format is much more correct than in the other cases.

Q: Talking about MVRDV, how do you see later publications like Metacity/Datatown or Costa Iberica? If you look a bit more closely at their content, one realizes that the research isn't done very carefully. The content mainly consists of images, some of them not even well selected. Is there a pressure to publish quickly and frequently?

A: In the first place, *Metacity/Datatown*, is the catalogue of an installation and it took a life of its own. In this case it was certainly published too early, but they had a subsidy from the Dutch Fund for Architecture which means that the money needed to be spent within a year. This need for speed has also caused a lot of problems for other books in the Netherlands. *Metacity/Datatown* was published with only four cities represented and now the whole project consists of 22 cities. It's pity that it was produced so quickly. *Costa Iberica* is a continuation of *FARMAX*, in the sense that it is a handbook containing a series of student projects.

Q: Speaking about the Dutch government being involved in architecture by supporting publications, exhibitions, studies, etc. How do you see the role of the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAi) and how much can it be seen as a political instrument - an instrument to push and sell Dutch architecture all over the world?

A: The interesting thing about the Netherlands is that they have an architecture policy, similar to how a country would have a defense policy. The reason why this exists is very political. The NAI and the Dutch Architecture Fund are political instruments - they are not cultural instruments - that's a very important distinction to make.

The Dutch government was influential in two ways. First, they saw that the publications in the Netherlands, both of foreign and Dutch architects, really helped to improve the Dutch environment. From Alvaro Siza to Aldo Rossi, everybody did projects in the Netherlands. The other thing that happened - and this was very problematic - is that they saw that within the European Union the Netherlands would never be able to continue to financially forge a system of social housing. As in any social democracy, urban planning and housing are regulated by means of governmental subsidies. Entering the EU posed a big problem for the Dutch socialist party: they were about to lose a lot of control. The formation of the Dutch Architecture Fund and the NAI was quite visionary at the time. They must be seen as political instruments, created by a political party losing power, and very cleverly trying to regain it.

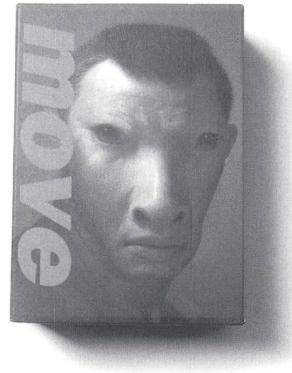


Abb. 5-8: In order of publication date: Bernhard Tschumi, *Event Cities*, 1994; OMA/Rem Koolhaas and Bruce Mau, *S,M,L,XL*, 1995; MVRDV, *FARMAX*, 1998; UN Studio/Ben van Berkel and Caroline Bos, *Move*, 1999.

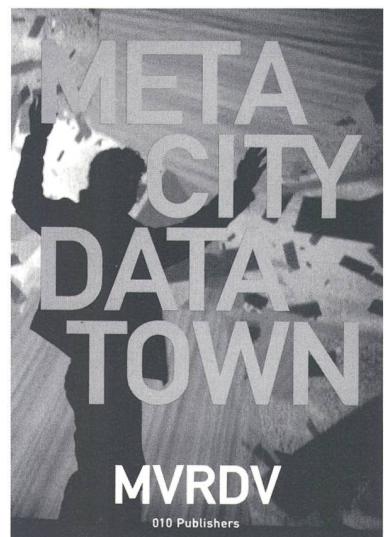


Abb. 9: MVRDV, *Metacity/Datatown* is based on the video installation for the Stroom, Centre for the Visual Arts, The Hague, originally on exhibition from December 12, 1998 through February 13, 1999.

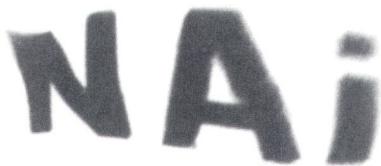


Abb.10: Corporate Identity of the Netherlands Architecture Institute, designed by Bruce Mau
Design, Toronto.

Q: Do you think it is also the NAI that is responsible for creating the so-called 'Dutch Style' which became very popular in the past years?

A: To be honest, not at all. I think that was much more a particular circle, not the NAI, although the funding of individual subsidies was extremely helpful. Rem and other architects received subsidies to make their publications, to make exhibitions abroad and give lectures.

Q: Is 010 publishers an in-house publisher of the NAI?

A: No. NAI publishers is their own company. I find this to be a big problem. In the early nineties, I organized a protest against the NAI establishing its own publishing company. I still find it very problematic that an institute with that much money has established its own publishing company. The reason for

its founding is again very political. 010 wanted to have its own independent agenda whereas Adri Duijzersteijn wanted them to be a part of his policy. They're now competing companies. 010 is definitely independent and I think there's a

big difference in the quality of the books 010 produces and those published by the NAI. Of course, the NAI has much more money to invest. Institutions, like 010, are suffering from that. NAI publishers really caused the over publication of Dutch architecture.

Q: But even with all these difficulties, Dutch architecture became internationally popular; as opposed to the architecture of Belgium, Austria and other places, where such 'instruments' are missing.

A: You have to understand two things. I think Belgian architecture is extremely interesting, just as Austrian at this moment, and the Spanish and the Italians that are coming to the forefront. But the main reason that nineties Dutch architecture was so interesting is not just related to the excess of publication, but because so much was built. The second thing was certainly the political situation in which architecture was produced changed. And if you think about it, every country that has experienced a political or bureaucratic change—look at Barcelona after Franco, look at Basel after Carl Fingerhuth was city developer—you see that there is a major change in architecture. This is certainly the case in the Netherlands. The publications came afterward.

Q: The tendency towards publication could become a real problem for architecture. How do you think it affects the profession of the architect in general?

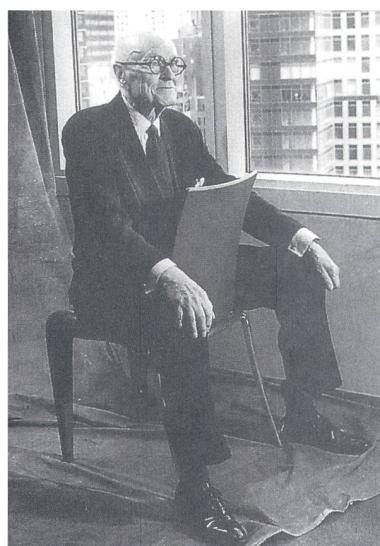


Abb.11: Philip Johnson on Philippe Starck's Louis XX chair for an advertisement campaign of Vitra.

A: If you want to produce architecture with a certain quality, at this moment it is a necessity to have publications in most countries. The whole post-modern and Deconstructivist era started with all that publishing, and was so successful because developers, commissioners and politicians would read those architecture magazines, too. For instance, *De Architect* gives a discount to municipal workers. All these people are reading it and that has an immediate influence.

Magazines such as *Wallpaper*, and its American equivalent *Surface*, have impacted the popular culture predominance of architecture. From Janet Jackson's video filmed at Peter Zumthor's baths at Vals to Mariah Carey and Jermaine Dupri's video at the Guggenheim Bilbao to U2's shooting their album cover at the JFK Saarinen-designed TWA airport terminal, the music industry has been bombarded with architecture. Philip Johnson was featured in a recent advertisement for Absolut Vodka as well as in an ad campaign for Vitra chairs.

Q: How can architects use the media to get their work accepted on a broader base and still be socially responsible?

A: It is interesting that the work of Stefano Boeri is widely published. The work of the Berlage Institute is widely published - not only by Berlage itself, but also in other magazines. There is an interest and attention for social responsibility. We might have to look within a different kind of circle than we're used to: the circle of cultural studies and those kinds of things. At this moment, it's much more difficult to publish research-oriented work than to publish a building - but I'm not pessimistic. By the way, and not only in the Netherlands, you see a lot of commercial offices starting a research department, like 'De Architecten Cie' and also other offices.

On July 24, 2001, Condé Nast, publisher on such magazines as *Vogue*, *Vanity Fair*, and *House and Garden*, hires Rem Koolhaas as an editorial and marketing consultant. Condé Nast editorial director tells The New York Times, "We thought it would be exciting to bring another mind into what we do, particularly the mind of someone who is brilliant at drawing different media and different ideas together."

Modern architects had to deal a sudden shock of big changes - such as rapid urban growth and railroads entering the city. They knew they would have to come to terms with them - which meant, first of all, trying to understand them. Hilbersheimer, along with Le Corbusier, van Eesteren and van Lohuizen, were interested in statistics. We're experiencing a similar period now.

Architecture is basically a bit like alchemy: you try to produce gold out of shit. We know most of the time that doesn't work out. But in the course of the process of all these experiments we have learned and discovered some things and that's what architecture should be. It's not about the brilliant geniuses that parachute their buildings all around and see publications as a kind of 'prizes'. It's about dealing with the everyday shit and trying to make gold out of that.

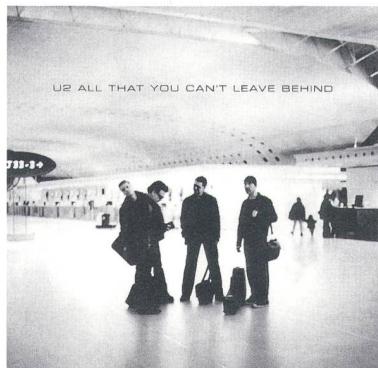


Abb. 12: Cover, U2, *All That You Can't Leave Behind*, JFK Airport in New York.

Mr Lootsma, we thank you for this conversation.

This conversation took place on the 13th of September 2001 at the 4th Architecture Symposium in Pontresina and was generously supported by Forbo Giubiasco.

Salomon Frausto recently graduated from Columbia University and practices architecture in New York.
Reto Geiser is student of architecture at the ETH Zurich.

