EXH. #752
Andreas Papadantonakis

TOPOGRAPHIA PRIMITIVA TERRESTRIS , THE PRIMITIVE GARDEN

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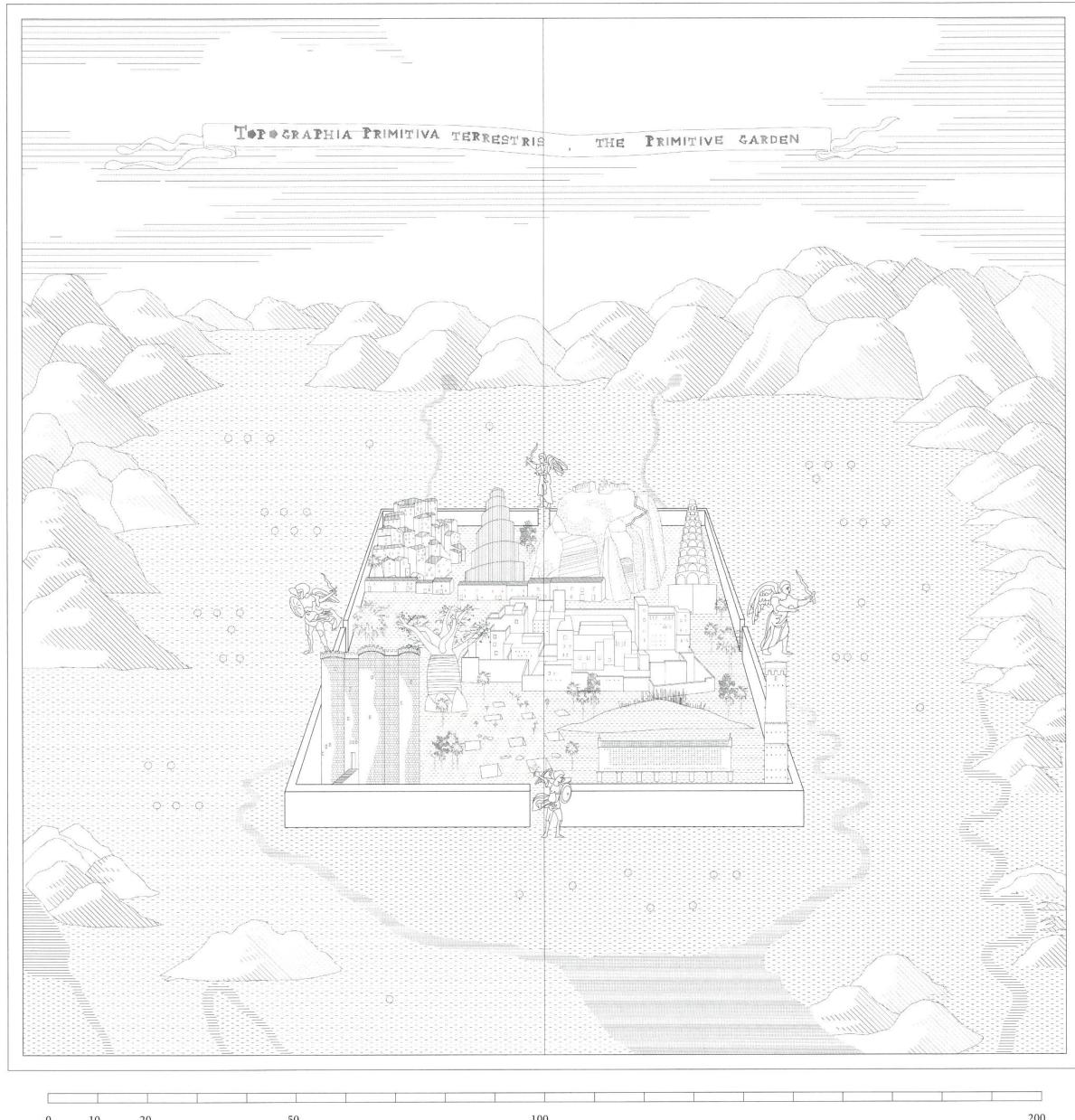
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«In orthodox architectural history, the emphasis is on the work of the individual architect; here the ascent is on communal enterprise…There is much to learn from architecture before it became an expert's art.»[1]

The code–number Exh. #752 in the archive of MoMA New York refers to an exhibition, curated in 1964 by Bernard Rudofsky. The exhibition ‹Architecture without Architects›, which was followed by a synonymous best-seller publication presented a collection of 200 images of vernacular architecture. African cliff dwellings and storage fortresses, Mediterranean hill towns, Chinese underground villages for millions of inhabitants, floating cities and the prehistoric districts in Peru are amidst the examples of communal architecture, urban and pre–industrial structures found in more than sixty countries. This large number of examples was depicted and presented in large format black–and–white pictures and were accompanied by short epigrammatic texts. Its aim was «to break down the narrow concepts of the art of building by introducing the unfamiliar world of non–pedigreed architecture.»[2] Bernard Rudofsky (1905–1988) was an Austrian born architect, curator and designer, whose entire oeuvre was influenced by his lifelong interest in anthropology and the opposition towards the universal ‹lifestyle of comfort›. From 1947 to 1980 he curated a number of exhibitions[3], that offered an alternative prism of vision to the way society was moving towards consumerism and the culture of mass production. In the interim between the decline of modern architecture and the uprise of the post/off–modern era Rudofsky curated the exhibition ‹Architecture without Architects› which at first glance seemed to be an uninnocent, pivotal tale. Yet, this was about to change.

Passing through controversies, images and parables, ‹Architecture without Architects› is used here as a vehicle to explore how the act of curating can offer potential disruptions to institutionalised movements, construct provocative narratives and thus stimulate architectural criticism. ‹Architecture without architects› was presented to the masses in the 1960s, a decade which could be characterised as the beginning of the climacteric of modern architecture. The most significant architectural movement of the twentieth century would then face the first fundamental controversies. Modern architecture at the middle of the twentieth century grew assimilated to the industrial means of production and commercialisation, finding its very nature to reside in the artificial world of machines. This crisis of Modern architecture does not issue from ‹weariness› or ‹dissipation›, it is rather a crisis of the ideology of architecture. Yet, the ideological backbone of Modernism was not only based on the fascination for the machine and technological efficiency, but rather linked to strategies of systematisation and productiv-

ity. Modernity's ambition to articulate the planning of a society, was criticised together with the general controversy of the western social models. Society witnessed the passage from industrialisation to consumerism, the developing of mass media and the formation of a ‹culture of consumption›. Architecture was inevitably swept into this maelstrom. Manfredo Tafuri writes: «The architectural discipline was critically subverted, shifting from its passive task of symbolic representation to its complete subjugation under the capitalist regime.»[4] This ambition to holistically plan society was placed into question by a younger generation of architects in the West, who were interested in the discovery of the ordinary celebrated by the so–called ‹found› aesthetics as they were visually perceived by photographs and anthropological studies. Self–built environments of settlements on colonial ground were taken into account for design processes and informed models for urban planning. With the re–appraisal of the idea of progress, and with the critique of the Modern Movement's historical dismissal architects have turned to a vision of the primal past of architecture and its constructive bases, as evinced in the pre–industrial city. A result of this shift in perspective became vibrant at the ninth CIAM (summer of 1953), in which a team of young architects (who later formed the group Team 10) presented new ideas on urbanism and architecture that were highly critical of the functional separation in urban planning. Under this state of dispute and fundamental questioning the reign of CIAM comes to an end in 1959 and Team 10, the first ‹Trojan horse›, meets individually for the first time in 1960. The years and decades to follow where overwhelmed of smaller or bigger movements and groups that seeked for an architecture which could integrate characteristics and elements of the local context.

1960s, therefore introduced the beginning of an ongoing discourse that shared a common goal: the clarification of a direction which architecture would take, at a point when the orthodoxy of modernity was drawn to a close. Accordingly, Bernard Rudofsky, by being part of that discourse, tried to combine Modernism's functional logic with an anthropocentric approach and as a result faced the criticism of a large part of the architectural community[5]. The otherwise unexpected appeal of the event was in the beginning perceived as a fortunate stroke of serendipity, with nobly savage, yet non–architectural and spontaneous paradigms. However, according to Rudofsky houses come before temples, the fundamentals of architecture are the users and the builders themselves and a historic perpetuation of technological knowledge would give architecture a social ‹raison d'être›. In Rudofsky's eyes architecture is much more connected with Marc–Antoine Laugier's[6] perception about life, nature and structure. Rudofsky tries to reach the ‹inno-

cent human past›, where everything was related to survival and the so–called ‹primitive hut› was the major architectural artefact. Furthermore, the dialectic of modern architecture, as presented by Rudofsky, was split between a sensuous origin linked with anonymous architecture and a faith in progress advanced through the machine aesthetic and the Bauhaus legacy. If the former had been unduly suppressed, the latter had succeeded all too well in radically transforming the built environment, a transformation that, Rudofsky believed, had assumed the totalising character of the administrative and commercial system itself. ‹Architecture without Architects› was an architectural event that despite its randomness and deductive nativity, incorporated history – the element that mainly resulted to the crisis of the International Style– into modern influences. Rather than preforming a clean cut with the past Rudofsky, a Modern architect himself, pursued the historical reinterpretation of the Modern movement. The ‹timeless beauty› and ‹true functionalism› presented in Architecture without architects belonged to an earlier paradigm of modern architecture, a formulation that, he lamented, had subsequently gone awry. Rudofsky tried to convict architectural essentialism by recalling principles, that in the beginning of the twentieth century were described as fundamental by the pioneers of modernism[7], and thus formulated a historical déjà vu.
Additionally, the exhibition epitomised an era in which the accepted cultural myths of evolution and the technological or digital progress no longer seemed convincing enough. In this regard the curating of ‹Architecture without Architects› is contingent upon a process of double mediation. In the fist place it had to deconstruct the overall ideological and political spectrum of world culture; in the second place it has to achieve through synthetic contradiction a manifest critique of universal progress.

The most important mean that Rudofsky mobilised to craft his criticism on the state of modern architecture were the IMAGES themselves. The images of ‹non–pedigreed› architecture presented an alternative to existing professional practices, thereby capturing both architects' imaginations and their disdain. The photographic material of the exhibition was a reproduction of rare images taken from all around the world. The depicted vernacular examples varied in location and visual representation, whereas photography more than a documentation of the preexisting, was a work of doubt and concern. «No doubt the picturesque element abounds in our photographs, yet again the exhibition is not an exercise in quaintness nor a travel guide, except in the sense that it marks a point of departure for the exploration of our architectural prejudice.»[8] For the Czech–born philosopher Vilém Flusser[9] the first images had the purpose of orienting people in a

The Primitive Ark
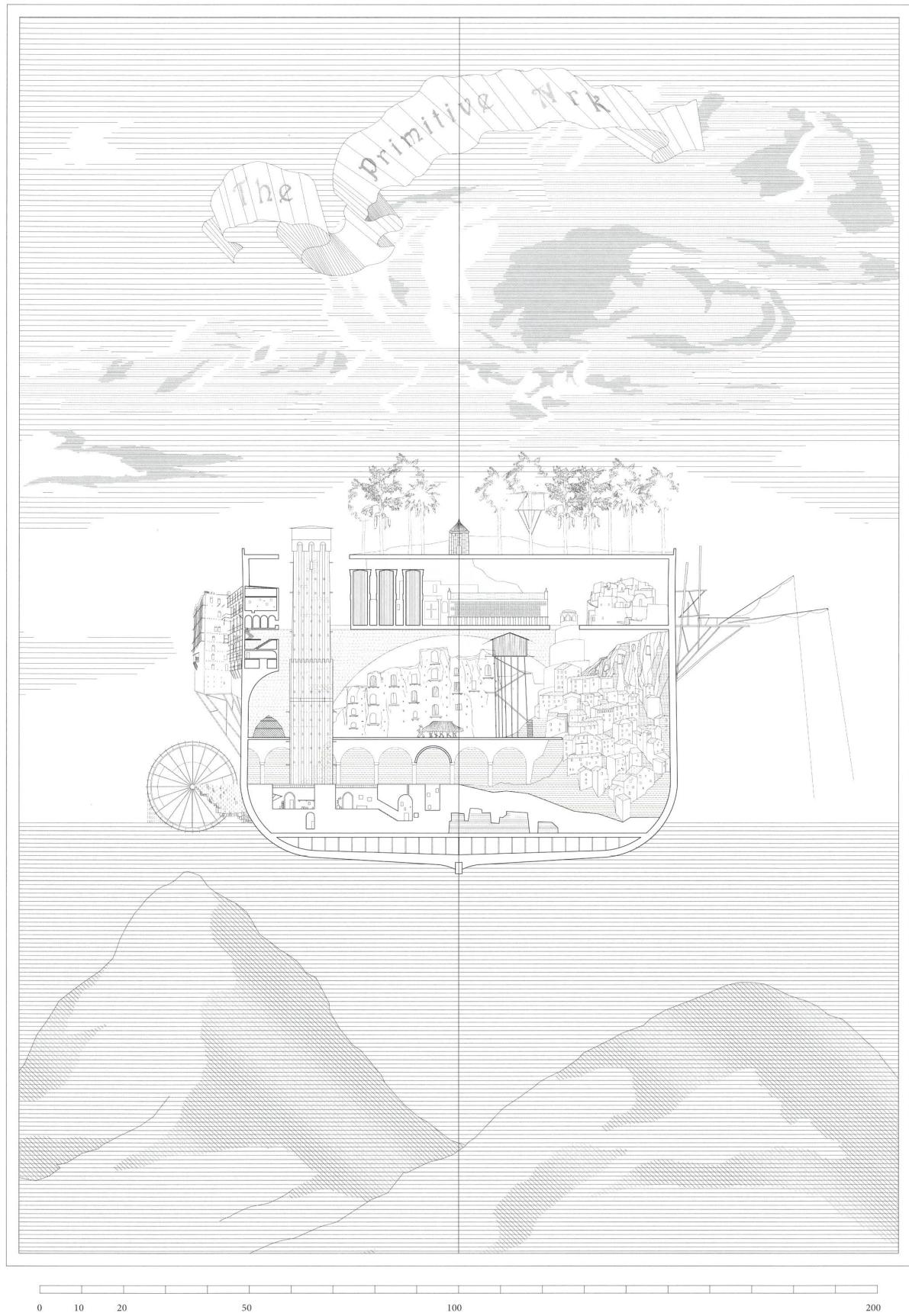
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world which they are thrown in. Thus, an image could offer the possibility to view the world from an objective distance. The images Rudofsky's exhibition, transcending the linear evolution of postwar architecture, traced Modern architectural language along preexisting paths, without insisting on a kind of idolatry towards the optical result of the vernacular. These recurrent examples did not have the character of a theoretical investigation; instead, they stood for design topics, identified with a formal architectural solution. The images were selected to reveal the architecture for being evocative, inventive, responding to the local condition, and functional. More than picturesque elements, with metaphysical notions of beauty, the diverse paradigms did function as a whole, breaking off a long discourse on the reformation of the Modern architectural perception. The exhibition stepped out of the scene of the architectural avant–garde of its era and projected elements, examples and methods which were expelled, from Modern architecture's practices.

Photography, the most popular media of the twentieth century, was already used by architects of that time as a form of mediation or a tool of promotion and advertising. Architecture and the machines took their place in the same frame. The comparison of the views of Parthenon with photos of new car models in the ‹Towards a New Architecture›[10] visualises that relation of Modern architecture with the industrial apparatus. Rudofsky with his unceremonious, yet inspirational dissertation, much more than a ‹point of departure› marked a shift. Taking a step back from Modernism's processual evolution, he tries to reform the character of an architectural language using a mean of objectivity such as photography for giving birth to architectural criticism. The great success of the exhibition was mainly due to the seductive and powerful images distributed over various levels and in various sizes that constructed a rich visual experience, analogous to what the demanding audience of a contemporary metropolis would expect. Formed within the universalising aesthetic logic of Western modernism

and displaced into one of its key institutions Rudofsky's images of vernacular architecture were seamlessly incorporated into a narrative, which predominantly offered a comparison in terms of technology.

Rudofsky's narrative, as suggested by himself in one of his numerous lectures, should not be persistently understood as a proposal or an aesthetic model for designers that prescribed the return to the ‹vernacular›. Yet, in order to fulfil his monastic approach towards architecture he structured an exhibition with a rhetorical scope, in the principles of a PARABLE. Parables are typically used as rhetorical devices that convey meanings through symbolic figures, images or events, which together produce the moral, spiritual or political meaning the author wishes to convey. When Le Corbusier compared the edifice with a machine he introduced the analogy of architecture with something technologically new. Rudofsky's narrative, willing to deform that analogy, reintroduced the primal use of architecture. His purpose was indeed didactical. The construction of an image based collection both implies analysis and synthesis. An analysis of the existing palaio–methods of building and creating structures that correspond pragmatically to the human needs. A synthesis of thoughts that result out of the agglomeration of images and their allegorical extensions. The exhibition catalogue begins with architectural paradigms that are mostly related with religious archetypical structures. The city of Enoch, Noah's Ark and Shem's hut are examples with an indispensable purpose. Through them he begins questioning western culture's orthodoxy.

In Addition, disorienting the modern story of progress Rudofsky insistently traced values within the primitive architecture that could inform the contemporary way of designing and building. Concepts as nomadism, mobility and sustainability were bought to the front through the presentation of images of tents, floating villages and underground villages. Thus, he suggested that a subject's relation to technology might function to different ends– might retain, that is, a sensuous dimension.

The problem for Rudofsky, instead of evidently opposing technological progress, became how to forge a mode of accomplishing architecture that could harness the potentially liberating effects of technology without being subjected to administrative and commercial control. In this story the exhibition and its images seems incredibly strong, whereas the architect seems to be overshadowed by the amplified magnitude of his beliefs. There is no doubt that the whole work of Rudofsky could be characterised as a travelogue, rather than an academic dissertation. Moreover, Rudofsky's texts and image–descriptions rather weakened than boosted the importance of an exhibition that, above all, pointed a turning point without aphorising the beliefs of the past. In that sense Bernard Rudofsky managed to create an exhibition that manifested the absence of an absolute author, but created a total perspective. He constructed an autonomous collection of images rather than a speculative examination. And he visually succeeded.

Consequently, ‹Architecture without architects› can be perceived as an archive[11] of precedents that functioned as a loose whole under the umbrella of primitiveness. An archive of structures which as innocent, inconsistent or obscure as they may seem, designates the collection of all historical traces left behind by the linear evolution of the Modern movement. The fundamental purpose of such an archive was to mediate the impact of universal civilisation with elements that derived from the peculiarities of places and belonged to the past. Therefore Rudofsky formed an archive of regionalism or an Ark full of primitive architectural species that informed a historical discourse. After examining these species, one cannot form a holistic comprehension of the ‹off–modern› architecture, still their multitude triggers an alternative prism of vision and a way of understanding the preposterous aspects of the present and the past. After all, an archive as a mechanism of memory doesn't refer to the past, but rather to the future.

1   Bernard Rudofsky, ‹Architecture Without Architects: A Short Introduction to Non–Pedigreed Architecture›, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1964, Preface.
2   Ibid.
3   Are Clothes Modern? (1947), Streets for People: A Primer for Americans (1969), The Unfashionable Human Body (1971),Now I Lay Me Down to Eat: Notes and Footnotes on the Lost Art of Living (1980).
4   Manfredo Tafuri, ‹Toward a Critique of Architectural Ideology›, in: ‹Architecture Theory since 1968›, edited by K. Michael Hays, Cambridge–Massachusetts, 2000, p. XX
5   In September 1965 Reyner Banham published a short review of Architecture without Architects.Entitled ‹Nobly Savage Non–Architects›, Banham's review wrestled with a paradox, for the 'primitive' buildings Rudofsky presented appeared to the English critic to be irrelevant to «our present technological and social dispensation» and yet, as he concluded, conceding a pertinence, «an excursion like this into architectural noble savagery is just serendipity a Ia mode.» Felicity Scott, ‹Bernard Rudofsky: Allegories of Nomadism and Dwelling›, in ‹Anxious Modernisms, Experimentation in postwar architectural cul-

ture›, edited by Sarah Williams Goldhagen and Réjean Legault, Canadian Centre for Architecture and Massachusetts Institute of Technology, 2000.
6   Marc–Antoine Laugier, ‹Essay on Archotecture›, Paris: Jombert, 1753.
7   Already in the beginning of the 20th century, Le Corbusier and Walter Gropius had expressed their appreciation towards anonymous architecture, mainly found in the area of Mediterranean.
8   Bernard Rudofsky, ‹Architecture Without Architects: A Short Introduction to Non–Pedigreed Architecture›, New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1964, Preface.
9   Vilém Flusser, ‹Towards A Philosophy of Photography›, ed. Derek Bennett, Göttingen: European Photography, 1984.
10   Le Corbusier, ‹Towards a New Architecture›, Dover Publications,1985.
11   The notion of archive as was defined by Foucault reminds us that the storage, organisation, and redistribution of information are never passive or innocent; they always inform political and historical discourse.

Andreas Papandantonakis, born 1987, holds a diploma in architecture from the National Technical University of Athens, as well as a Masters of Advanced Studies in Urban Design from the ETH Zurich. Andreas is engaged in the contemporary aspects of the urban realm through competitions, exhibitions and various publications. He is currently living and working in Zürich, being part of the architecture office KARAMUK*KUO Architects.