CITIES & THE DEAD 4

interpretation of
Italo Calvino / DOGMA

CITIES & THE DEAD 4 (*page 159*) :

*'What makes Argia different from other cities is that it has **earth instead of air**.*
*The streets are completely filled with dirt, clay packs the rooms to the ceiling, on every stair another stairway is set in negative, over the roofs of the houses hang layers of rocky terrain like skies with clouds. We do not know if the inhabitants can move about in the city, widening the worm tunnels and the crevices where roots twist: the dampness destroys people's bodies and they have scant strength; everyone is better off remaining still, prone; anyway, it is **dark**.*
*From up here, nothing of Argia can be seen; some say, 'It's **down below** there,' and we can only believe them. The place is deserted. At night, putting your ear to the ground, you can sometimes hear a door slam.'*

CHOICE OF CASE :

I have decided, after much deliberation, to choose the text 'Cities & the Dead 4' from the book 'invisible cities' from Italo Calvino, as inspiration for my project, which talks about the city of 'Argia' and its appearence. Calvino paints a theatrical picture of an urban situation through the words of Marco Polo. The city inhabited by earth questions our definition of a city, at what point does a collection of buildings become a city? At what point is it considered a ruin or is reduced to a lifeless monument? The atmosphere described in this chapter is terrifying but equally calming, every space is completely filled with earth and yet it seems to be inhabited. The urban situation described, lacks any city characteristics that we know of. In fact there are no streets, no public buildings, and even the air is missing. The depicted city consists exclusively of mass, as opposed to emptiness, walls as opposed to openings.

This text excerpt is particularly interesting because it challenges the understanding of urban situations through a redefinition of space and organization that is foreign to us. But mostly I consider it to be a fitting litteral frame to work on the visual representation of my to-be-designed project, as it is composed by strong images which contain somber but intriguing elements and their respective atmospheres. By choosing the adequate representation technique, impressions expressed in words can be significantly underlined and supported. Furthermore the choosen style can be manipulated in a way to reenforce a certain ambiance, which seems to be appropriate for such a thetrical depiction. In order to visually underline the

impressions of the described city, a simple yet emotianlally charged style is needed.

CHOICE OF REFERENCE *(Dogma)* :

Dogma is a belgian architecture office founded in 2002 by Aureli and Tattara, which specializes in urban situations and places an emphasis on the analysis of interactions between the city as a whole, it's architecture and the people inhabiting the place. It is difficult to describe Dogma's representational style, as it varies depending on the projects intention:

On the one hand, the projects often present themselves with colorful collages or even decontextualized axonometries on a plain white background of small housing units, on the other hand, one can find what appears to be handdrawn images composed only by black lines on white planes. However the common denominators throughout Dogma's projects remain computer-aided city views, mostly axonometrical, in which the absence of a line hierarchy creates the impression that all the objects depicted are equally important as well as an omnipresent simplicity.

I was particularly intrigued by the project "A Field Of Walls" [1–11] designed and exposed at the Biennale di Venezia 2012 because it creates a special, somber atmosphere through a dark hatching combined with a sober axonometric cabinet perspective [3]. More specifically, a general overview of the project's scope is provided by a sober black-on-white cabinet view of 60 degrees, with depth created by an ever-so-slight difference in shadows from white to a light gray. It is important to note, however, that this view uses the impression of depth for only a few elements; overall, the depth of the drawing is created mainly by the continuity or interruption of lines (Gestaltungspsychologie), and the main focus of the view remains completely unshaded [2]. The choice of an axonometric view as perspective further emphasizes the horizontal hirachia inherent in this conceptual work. This image is followed by three frontal views of the focal object [3-5], seemingly scaled to 1/100th scale, retaining the 60-degree cabinet perspective, and six vertical slices through the solid wall [6-11]. In all of these last nine renderings, not a single construction or edge line is visible. The entire drawings are composed only by the varying hatching direction and density of the surfaces facing the observer, as well as the shadows they cast [22]. On closer and more detailed examination of the hatch patterns [23], we can notice different points:

Five different hatches [24-28] are used, and once the same pattern is used, it remains strictly the same in all nine drawings with no exceptions.

The background remains solid white, except for the shadows cast by the architectural object on the implied ground.

When and which pattern is used follows clear rules that differ only between frontal and sectional views, but remain the same for the same view.

The shape of the drawing is chosen according to the architectural intention of the image: The general view is in the form of a square [2], the zoomed general one is circular [3], the frontal perspectives are in horizontally stretched rectangles [4-5] and the sections are in vertically stretched rectangles [6-11].

In addition, Dogma proposes a technical plan [1] of the projects environment consisting of black lines on a white background, with a light shade of gray used to mark differences in the ground texture.

PROJECT (representation) :

During the conceptual phase [12-21] of this project, it was important to respect the main aspects of Calvino's representational text. These key words are mainly: *'earth instead of air'*, *'it is dark'*, *'it's down below'*, as underlined in the text excerpt, which lead to the project as seen on the representation page: a seemingly random juxtaposition of different volumes that follow the shape of the gap in which they are located, creating a staircase-like settlement along the walls of this interstitial space [18-21]. Some of these volumes resemble housing units, others are perceived only as plain cubes, some are too small to be inhabited and others are too narrow. Classical architectural elements such as windows, doors, stairs, roofs, terraces or tunnels appear in this urban 'Landschaft' that addresses the ambiguous aspect of inhabited natural formation and built city. Nature in the floral/faunal sense does not appear in this design, although the whole scenery seems to be formed and made from nature. The connection between the surface, the sky, the air and the isolated "city" is made through a cenital orifice.

In terms of visual representation, my project consists of six images: a general view, two more detailed frontal views, and two sectional views, as well as a plan. Overall, the chosen design style highly respects Dogma's visual representation language. As for the production of the different views, I first started off by creating a 3D model [18-19] that gradually went through various stages of experimentation [16-21]. Once the project was satisfying in the three-dimensional space, different rendered images of the same view were created through camera positioning and shadow casting. Most importantly, the shadow [41-42, 60, 68] and outline planes [39-40, 70, 76]. Then, 2D generation and post-processing could begin with the creation of five generic hatches [29-33]. During this step, it was especially important to pay attention to the density, visual appearance, degree of perceived gray, and seamless nature of those patterns [34-38].

Finally, I gradually applied the created patterns to the identified surfaces by categorizing them by types [43-52, 63-67, 71-75].

Both, the general rendered view [76] and the technical plan needed only slight adjustment in terms of gray shade and line quality.

REFLEXIONS :

In general, adapting the style of Dogma, more precisely the style chosen for the project *'A Field of Walls'*, to my own project was logical, as there are many analogies and similarities between the two projects: Both projects describe a generic character with pure, mostly cubic forms. No high level of detail is required to satisfyingly represent the two projects. The general development is horizontal, but the vertical sections are significant for both projects.

Despite the great similarities between the two works, there are still some differences: the field of the wall project is inorganic, without any impurities such as cracks or dirt, it is a strongly rithmic and repetitive design with an understandable logic that is intrinsic. My project, in contrast, speaks of a city hidden underground, with all its impurities and unpredictable forms, just as the juxtaposition of units is meant to represent a part of randomness, disorganized growth, chaos.

In addition, it is important to note the intentional aswell as unintended differences in the way the two projects are represented:

The unintentional differences include the spacing between hatch areas, which becomes visible upon closer inspection of my drawings, a slightly perceptible repetition in the patterns, which is especially visible in large, uni-hatched areas, and finally, the lack of continuity between the different hatch pattern lines. All these problems could be solved by a slight improvement in the workflow [59].

The desired differences are the following:

The technical plan of my representation is showing the shadows, giving an impression of depth as opposed to Dogma's *'A Field of Walls'* plan. This is important because my project cannot be cut at ground level due to the verticality of the valley. The cuts for my project depict a large and heavy hatch pressing down on the houses from above [67, 75], which is consistent with the intention of my project to convey the damp and massed character described in Calvino's text.

Overall, adopting the representational style of Dogma for Cities & Death 4 is appropriate and fitting. Nevertheless, it is important to note that this style is only suitable for a few theoretical projects, as it has strong emotional connotations due to both: darkness and roughness. Representing a project only through hatches and patterns without any construction or edge lines is an interesting concept to analyze and reproduce, especially since the way of representation becomes almost more important than the architectural object itself. Which is why it should only be used in cases where that intention is justified by the project itself.