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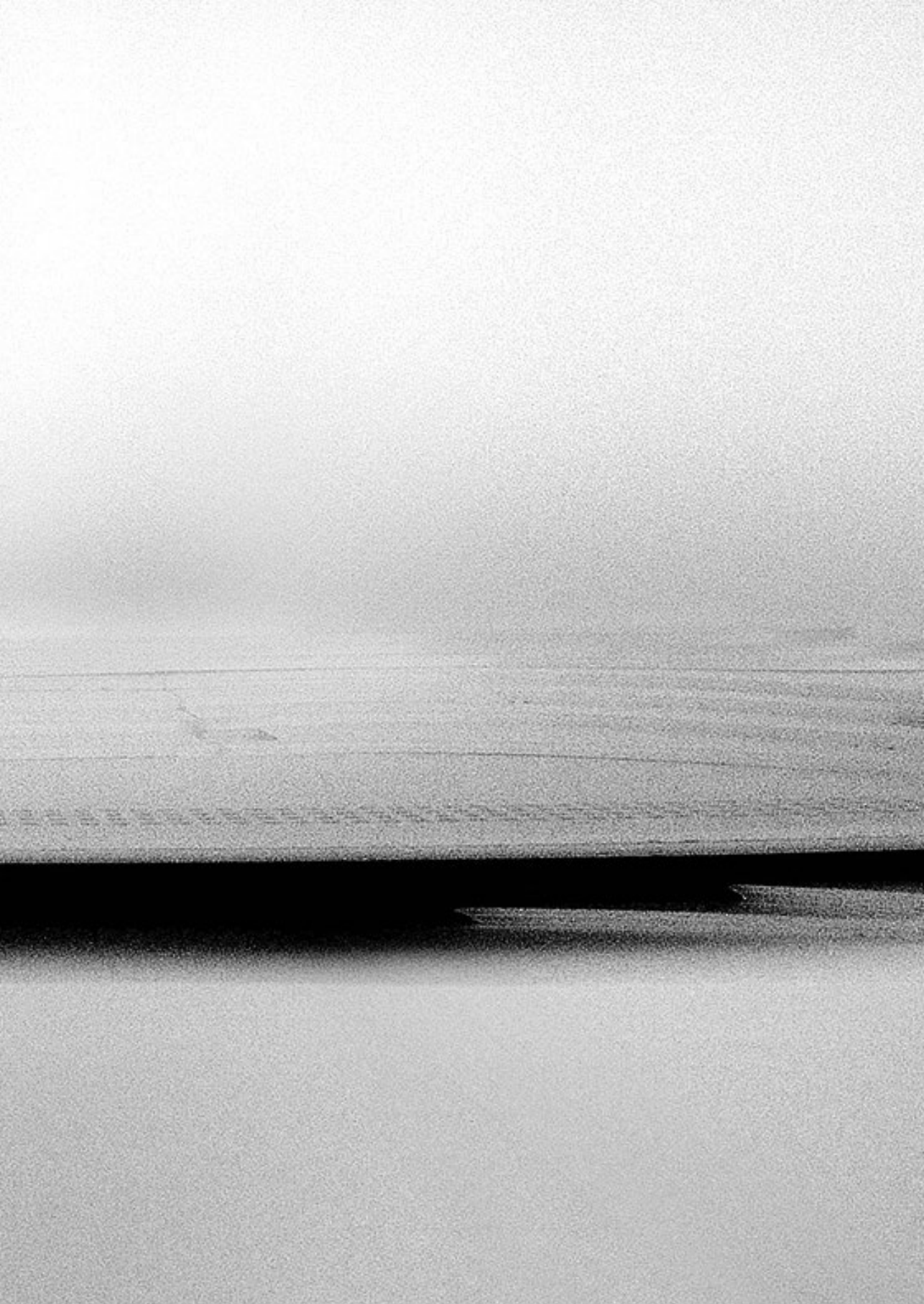
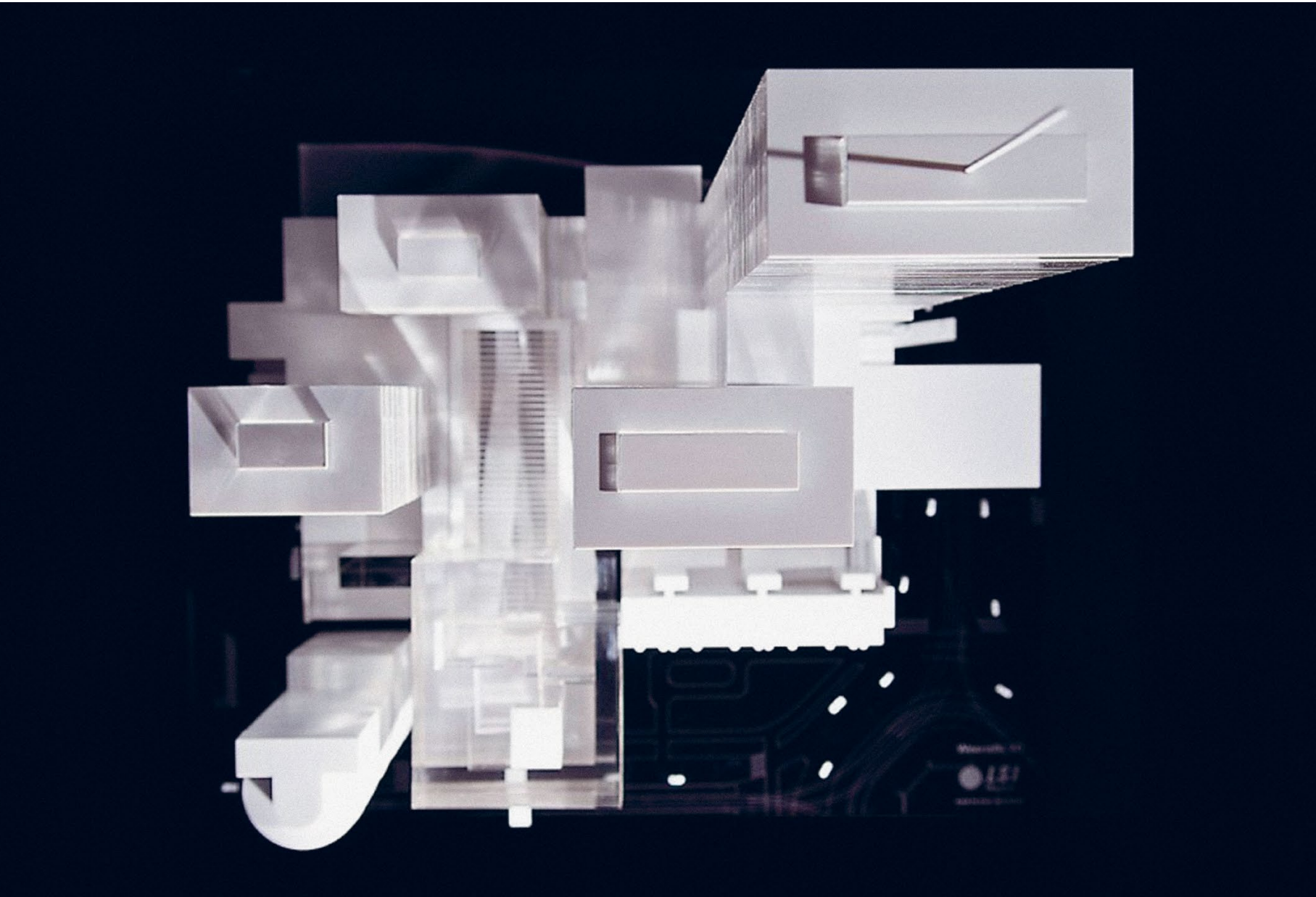
FROM OBJECT TO PROCESS

Kees Kaan Manuela Triggianese







Building Narratives arises from an ongoing dialogue between KAAN Architecten and the Complex Projects group at Delft University of Technology.
KAAN Architecten, an architectural practice based in Rotterdam and working internationally, is known for its clarity, precision, and civic presence – qualities developed through large-scale public projects. Complex Projects, through its research and educational activities, explores an architecture of dialogue that is dialectic, inclusive and relational.

The ground for this publication was laid in the key research project *Activating Design*, funded by the Dutch Sector Plan for Design Engineering Sciences in 2022. *Activating Design* investigates design as a form of knowledge production. By analysing collaboration and decision-making, this research deepens reflections on practice while providing new insights that feed back into this. Many contributors move between the domains of practice, education and research, and so introduce practice-based questions into research and education, and return academic knowledge and reflection to practice. The publication that follows is both a reflection on this exchange, and a tool for further inquiry. Every project begins as a question and advances through drawings, models, discussions and decisions that connect diverse fields of knowledge. Design curates knowledge – a dynamic process of communication, collaboration, and choice. This process keeps the project intelligible as it evolves, serving as both vehicle and destination.

In contemporary practice, design extends far beyond the invention of form. Projects unfold through dense constellations of actors, institutions, and technologies. Drawings, models, and presentations span multiple disciplines, enabling different forms of reasoning to converge. The architect's task is no longer limited to producing objects, but now extends to maintaining coherence across these exchanges – translating between technical systems, social values, and civic ambitions. Every architectural project can therefore be seen as an act of knowledge production. Through drawing and modelling, design constructs hypotheses about how realities can coexist: structure and use, regulation and freedom, fact and intention. Each project aligns what can be measured with what must be agreed upon, transforming complex information into a spatial proposition that

← Weena Boulevard Proposal model

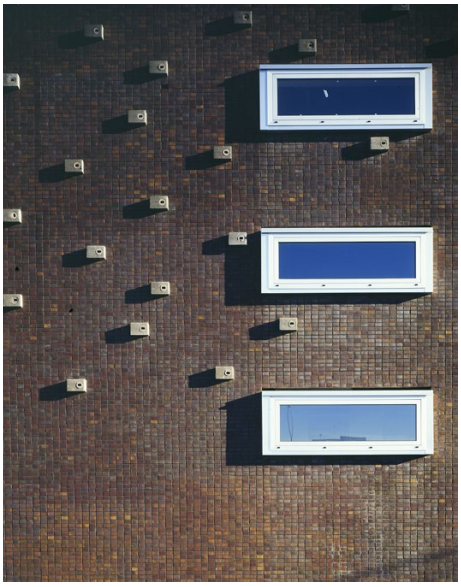
others can read, evaluate, and build upon. *Building Narratives* arises from this. It examines architecture as a form of collective intelligence – a practice that organizes knowledge and gives coherence to collaborative processes. Here, design communication is not an outcome but a method, connecting truth and agreement through the continuous work of making.

This expanded role of architecture did not appear from nowhere. To understand its emergence, we must look back at the broader changes that have shaped architectural practice. This has deep roots in the transformation of European architecture at the turn of the twentieth to the twenty-first century, when the discipline shifted away from shaping objects within stable frameworks and towards navigating processes defined by change.

FROM OBJECT TO PROCESS

In the closing decades of the twentieth century, a fundamental shift took place in the culture of building in Europe. The modernist idea of a planned, welfare-oriented city was gradually replaced by an entrepreneurial vision of urban development shaped by competition and visibility. The post-war state – once the primary client and organizer of architecture – retreated from direct investment, leaving space for new constellations of public and private actors. Cities became brands, architecture their primary medium of expression. Throughout the 1980s and '90s, this shift defined a new role for design. Urban landmarks, cultural institutions and infrastructural gateways served as symbols of prosperity rather than as tools of welfare. The construction of museums, events venues and signature buildings turned architecture into a form of communication. Cities announced themselves through skylines rather than social programmes. Governments decentralized responsibility for planning, transferring powers to municipalities and semi-public development agencies. Significant public works were replaced by fragmented partnerships balancing civic ambition with financial pragmatism.

The 2008 financial crisis exposed the fragility of speculative urbanism, and underscored the need for collaboration and continuity. The architect's work was reframed: not as the isolated invention of form, but as the capacity to align interests and sustain coherence across complex processes. Negotiation itself became the central creative act.[1] The following section summarizes the fundamental shift that followed, and that defines design today: while still producing tangible forms, the emphasis is now on the process of creating these. Still, these forms are now understood as episodes within longer trajectories of planning, construction, and use. Buildings express not only material craft, but also institutional reasoning. Drawings, models, and presentations serve as instruments that facilitate dialogue among the various disciplines involved.



1 Kaan, CHCF., & Triggianese, M. (2014). Negotiating new centralities. In M. Gausa & M Ricci (Eds.), *MED.NET.REP02*(pp. 86–93). LISt Lab Laboratorio Internazionale Editoriale.

2 Wagenaar, C. (2015). *Town planning in the Netherlands since 1800: Responses to Enlightenment Ideas and Geopolitical Realities.* Nai010 Publishers.

↑ Rietlanden housing, 2001

3 Hoog, M. de. (2013). *The Dutch metropolis: Designing quality interaction environments.* Thoth.

4 Carmona, M., Burgess, R., & Badenhorst, M. S. (Eds.). (2009). *Planning through projects: Moving from master planning to strategic planning ; 30 cities.* Techne Press.

The Netherlands was exceptionally well-prepared for this evolution. Centuries of water management had established a political culture based on consensus and shared responsibility – the *polder model*.[2] By the 1990s, national planning documents, such as the housing development programmes (known as *Vinex*) and the *Key Projects* (Dutch: *Sleutelprojecten*) initiative (facilitating large investments in infrastructure and public facilities), formalized this cooperative ethos.[3] A new urban paradigm blurred the traditional boundaries between architecture, urban design, and infrastructure. Projects unfolded across multiple timeframes, with decades-long investments in transport, energy, and housing guided through successive political cycles. Within this fluid context, architecture provided a sense of stability and coherence. It provided the civic dimension that made procedural planning tangible to the public.

STRATEGIC URBAN PROJECTS

The changing role of architecture was most clearly expressed in the emergence of *strategic urban projects*.[4] Large, hybrid interventions replaced the comprehensive master plans of the post-war period. These projects focused on former industrial, port, and railway areas where public and private interests intersected. Rather than a single design solution, these advanced through negotiation, iteration, and phased implementation. Municipalities needed a way to coordinate investment and vision without reverting to centralized control. The strategic project offered exactly this: a flexible framework linking long-term vision with short-term feasibility. Here, design operated as an organizational method.[5]

Across Europe, the model took different forms. In France, the arrival of high-speed rail was accompanied by the urban development of station districts, such as Euralille, which links national and international infrastructure to local identity.[6] In Germany, the *Internationale Bauausstellung* tradition redefined architectural innovation as a policy experiment. British regeneration agencies used design competitions to channel private capital into public-realm improvements such as London's Canary Wharf. In Southern Europe, cities such as Barcelona and Turin mobilized architecture to weave together fragmented territories.[7] Despite their variety, these experiments shared a reliance on architecture as a mediating medium for aligning institutional, technical, and civic agendas. By the mid-1990s, this approach had become an integral part of European planning culture.

The Dutch contribution to this movement was distinctive. The country's compact geography and dense infrastructure demanded coordination across ministries and municipalities from the outset. The new generation of *Key Projects* in 1994 exemplified this approach, linking national transport investment to local urban renewal in station areas such as Amsterdam Zuidas, as well as central station areas of Rotterdam, Utrecht, The Hague, Arnhem, and Breda. Architects were engaged early to visualize options and mediate between technical and civic requirements, turning the design process into a shared tool of governance.[8] These station-area projects became laboratories for the procedural transformation of architecture.[9]

5 International Architecture Biennale Rotterdam. (2012, December 17). *Making city: 5th IABR draws to a close* [Press release].

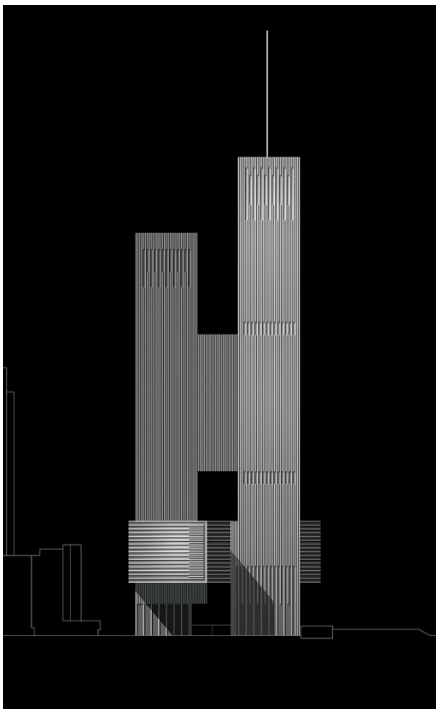
6 Triggianese, M. (2015) Eurallile: Twenty years on. In R.J. Rutte, H.J. Engel, E.H. Gramsbergen & O.R. Diesfeldt (Eds.), *OverHolland 16/17* (pp.111-139). Nijmegen: Vantilt.

7 Smets, M., Il nuovo paesaggio delle infrastrutture in Europa, in Lotus International. Global Cities, n. 110, dic. 2001; Sassen, S., (2001) *The Global City: New York, London, Tokyo*, Princeton University Press.

8 Schaap, P M. (2016, October 12) *De Nieuwe Sleutelprojecten: op weg naar 2030*. Spoorbeeld. Retrieved from https://www.spoorbeeld.nl/inspiratie/de-nieuwe-sleutelprojecten-op-weg-naar-2030.

ROTTERDAM CENTRAL DISTRICT

Few European examples capture this as vividly as the long-running redevelopment of Rotterdam Central District. When first proposed, Rotterdam's new central railway station was framed as a symbol of metropolitan ambition. The expectation was that improvement of the public transport network would reinforce Rotterdam's position on the European map and establish a new gateway to Schiphol Airport. Early plans, in 2001, envisioned a grand interchange for high-speed trains, surrounded by commercial towers and cultural venues, known as 'the Champagne Glasses'. Yet changing economic conditions and conflicting mandates soon rendered this vision untenable. In 2003, the project was reorganized as a phased collaboration with three leading actors sharing responsibility: Holland Rail Consult (now ProRail, which manages infrastructure); NS Stations, overseeing commercial functions; and the Municipality of Rotterdam, representing civic interests. The design process became a process of ongoing negotiation.[10] Technical studies determined the geometry of the platforms and tunnels, while urban design studies explored how the station could be integrated into the city. Each drawing acted as a record of decision-making in progress.



Around the new station (delivered by Team CS, a collaboration between Benthem Crouwel Architects, Meyer and Van Schooten, and West 8), the Weena Boulevard provided an urban counterpart to the station's transformation. Weena Boulevard Development, designed by architects Claus en Kaan Architecten (later KAAN Architecten) in collaboration with Maxwan (later PosadMaxwan), engineers, and real estate developer LSI, became a laboratory for design as negotiation. Running east-west through the central business district, Rotterdam's Weena thoroughfare had long been a symbol of post-war modernity: wide carriageways, repetitive slabs, and an impersonal scale. The challenge was to transform this into a mixed, pedestrian-friendly environment without disrupting ongoing investment. Instead of prescriptive plans, the Municipality adopted design guidelines – a document of principles rather than blueprints. It established alignments, building heights, façade materials, and proportions for public spaces, enabling private developers to adapt while maintaining visual coherence. A city-appointed urban designer coordinated proposals, reviewing each intervention in workshops with architects and investors. Over time, the boulevard evolved into a collective composition. Delivered across four local councils, two economic cycles, and one national transport reform process, Rotterdam Central District demonstrates how design served as civic memory, managing to hold together a long sequence of decisions that might otherwise have unravelled. Within this process, design operated as both an instrument and a record: the means by which urban coherence was continually renegotiated. This procedural mode of working – aligning

9 Terrin, J.J. (2011) *Gares et dynamiques urbaines Les enjeux de la grande vitesse*. Parenthèses.

10 Triggianese, M. (2023) Design of Co-creation in Rotterdam Central Station (1996-2007): Architecture and urban design roles in the multi-stakeholder collaboration. SPOOL, 10 (1), 57-72.

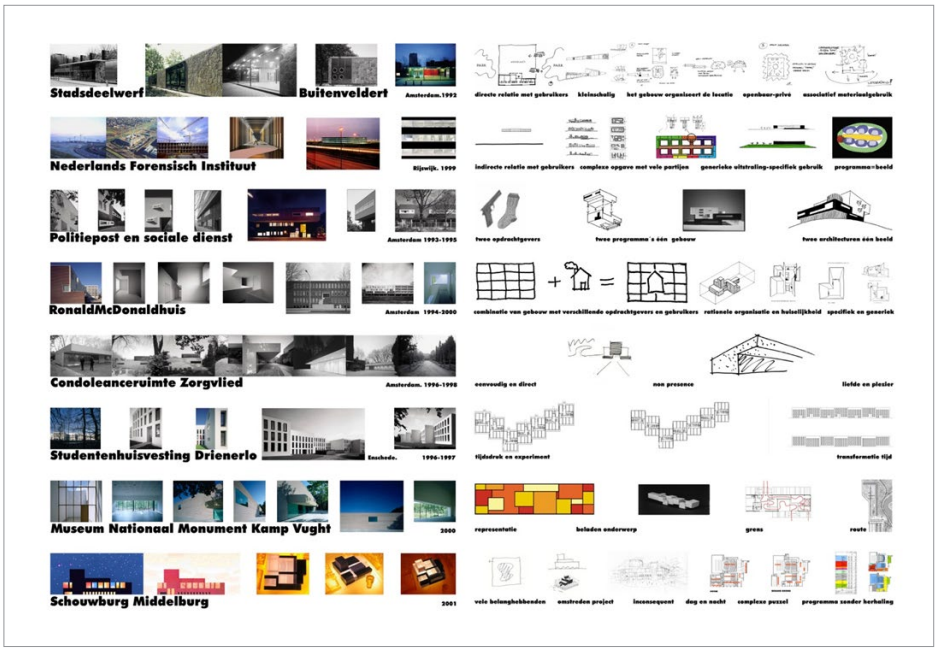
↑ Weena Boulevard Volume Study: A new landmark

shifting alliances, budgets, and mandates – became a defining feature of Dutch architectural practice in the early twenty-first century, revealing architecture's capacity to sustain continuity amid change.

ARCHITECTURE AS KNOWLEDGE AND EXCHANGE

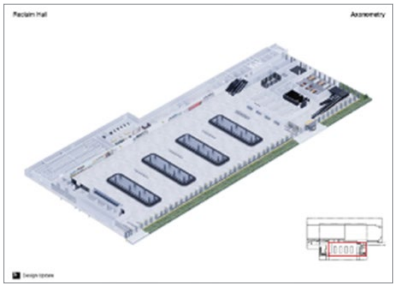
The evolution visible in Rotterdam reflects a broader shift in architectural practice across Europe: design now begins before the brief is fixed, and continues long after a building is completed. Within increasingly complex governance frameworks, architects engage not only in shaping form, but also in defining purpose. The brief itself becomes a design product – constructed, tested, and revised through dialogue between clients, users, and designers.[11] Each phase of work, from feasibility to construction, generates knowledge that refines both scope and method. Design communication lies at the heart of this process. Sketches, models, and diagrams serve as a shared language that enables multiple disciplines and institutions to collaborate. These artefacts transform coordination into a creative act: translating complex intentions into spatial propositions that can be discussed and adjusted without losing coherence. Architecture thus becomes a medium through which collaboration remains legible. Such an expanded role requires designers to operate across time as much as across space.

Projects financed and managed through public-private frameworks often span decades, requiring decisions that can adapt to changing regulations, budgets, and technologies. Within these conditions, design functions as an instrument of continuity – maintaining intent and meaning as circumstances evolve. Seen in this light, architecture is a form of knowledge production. It interprets

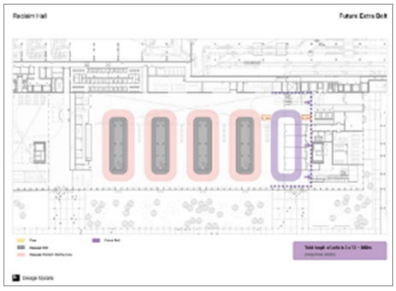


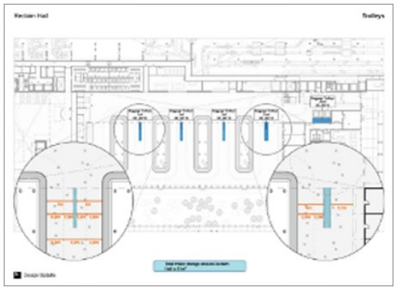
↑ Visual simplicity as a method

and mediates between technical, political, and cultural rationalities, organizing a collective understanding of the built environment. Each project serves as an inquiry; a means of testing how diverse realities can coexist. Its value lies not only in what is built, but in how it enables learning, negotiation, and shared reasoning. Collaboration replaces hierarchy; knowledge emerges from exchange. The following chapters build on this understanding. They examine how architecture mediates between truth and agreement, how it sustains coherence through negotiation, integration, and activation, and how design, as both a process and a narrative, continues to produce knowledge in a public-facing manner.









FROM CONTEXT TO NARRATIVES

The ideas developed in this introduction are explored through a series of essays and case studies that together define *Building Narratives*. The book unfolds in two complementary parts: the first establishes a conceptual framework; the second examines how this framework operates within specific projects and practices. The opening statement, *Between Truth and Agreement*, outlines the theoretical ground for understanding architecture as a discipline that mediates between what is measurable and what is negotiable. It introduces the notion of the *Critical Design Space* – the zone where truth, agreement, and practice intersect – and positions design as the orchestration of contradictions, rather than their resolution. *A Room Is Still a Room* reflects on the enduring human dimension of architecture. It revisits the discipline's fundamental questions – light, scale, presence, and encounter – within a rapidly evolving technological and social environment, suggesting that the core of architectural meaning persists

11 Blyth, A., & Worthington, J. (2010). *Managing the brief for better design* (2nd ed.). Routledge.

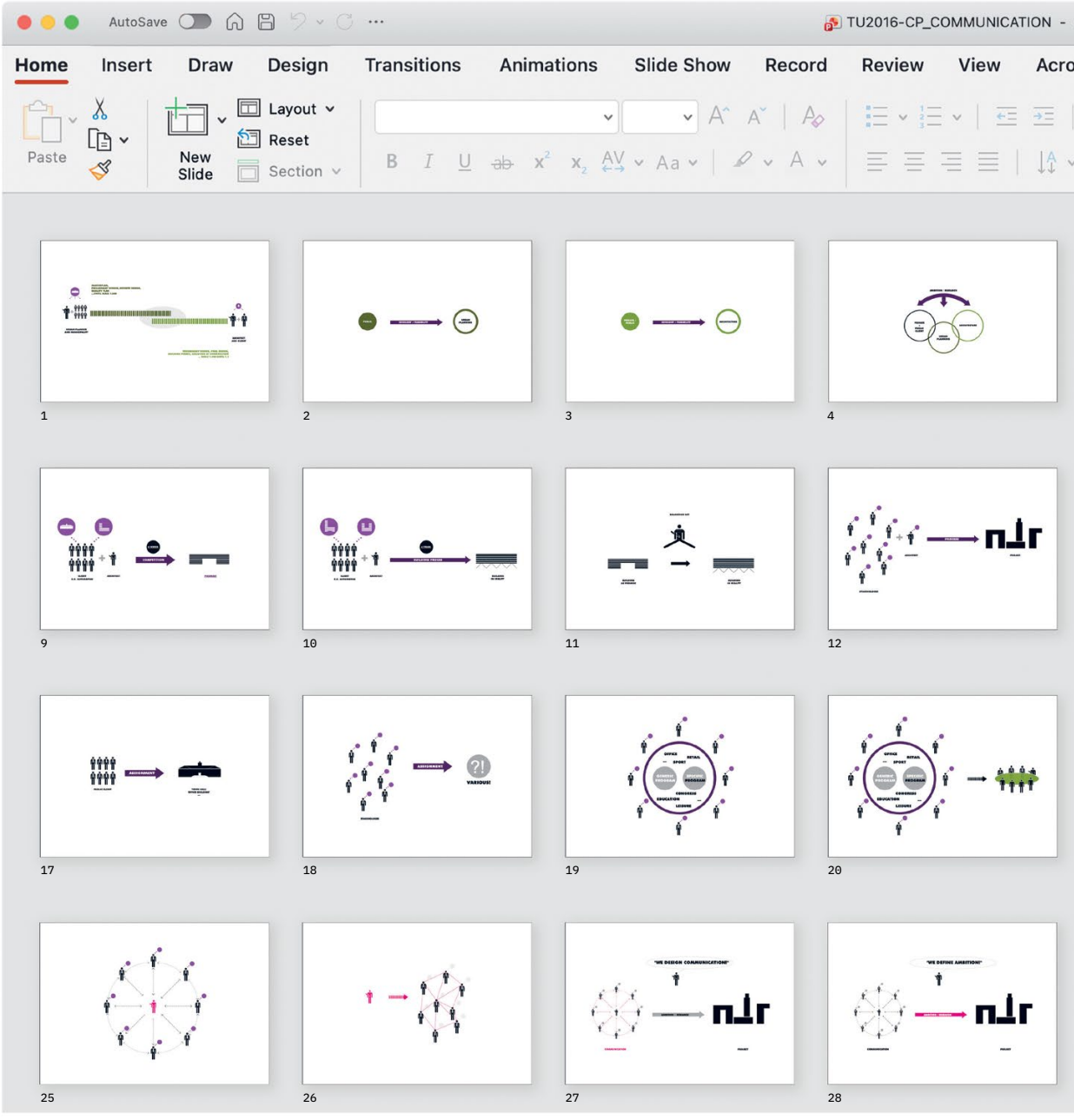
↑ One space, four representations: the combination keeps the dialogue informed and whole

through change. *Design Thinking in Practice* situates *Building Narratives* within the broader discourse of design research. It revisits the debates surrounding rational and reflective modes of thought, and relates these to contemporary practice, demonstrating how narrative-based methods maintain coherence in complex settings. Following the conceptual framework, the book translates these ideas into three project-based studies that examine how negotiation, integration, and activation take shape in practice. SPOT (Design as Negotiation) explores how design mediates between public ambitions and private initiatives within Amsterdam's Amstel III district. NACH (Design as Integration) analyses the Amsterdam Courthouse, showing how structured dialogue within a public-private partnership can align technical, institutional, and civic objectives. Schiphol (Design as Activation) examines the design of the new terminal at Amsterdam Airport, tracing how architecture operates within a state of continuous change, maintaining coherence amid shifting conditions.

The closing *Conversation: Design as Collective Intelligence*, brings these insights together within a dialogue. Through the exchange between Kees Kaan and Georg Vrachliotis, it examines how architectural reasoning evolves as new technologies, such as Artificial Intelligence, enter the field. The discussion reflects on the changing boundaries of design agency and the enduring responsibility of architects to give coherence to collective thought. Each contribution was developed through collaboration between KAAN Architecten and the *Activating Design* research group at Delft University of Technology. The book was edited by Kees Kaan, Manuela Triggianese, Alice Colombo, and Yağız Söylev, with contributions from Georg Vrachliotis, Stijn Drolenga, Aldo Trim, Marco Lanna, Giulia Rapizza, and Hrvoje Šmidihen. Together, they trace the continuous dialogue between theory and practice, between the making of buildings and the making of narrative. The research background of *Activating Design* continues at Delft University of Technology through a doctoral programme that investigates design communication and shared intelligence in complex projects. The research of the PhD candidates Ömer Faruk Ağırsoy, Marija Mateljan, Yağız Söylev and Halina Veloso e Zárate is connected to the Activating Design theme.

The long list of contributors to the educational activities includes Henri van Bennekom, Eline Blom, Olindo Caso, Maria Finagina, Esther Gramsbergen, Matrin Grech, Benjamin Groothuijse, Maruli Heijman, Marija Mateljan, Hrvoje Šmidihen, Yağız Söylev, Manuela Triggianese, Jelmer van Zalingen. A roadmap at the end of the book brings together illustrated material, glossary entries, and information on related research and educational activities, offering readers an extended view of the work presented here. Ultimately, *Building Narratives* offers both an insight into a specific body of work and a framework for understanding how architecture thinks through the act of making. It invites the reader to see practice as an evolving discourse that gives form to collective reasoning – where the many truths, agreements, and responsibilities of design converge in tangible expression. It aims to make visible what usually remains implicit in architectural production: the collective intelligence, negotiation, and judgement that allow architecture to appear both rational and self-evident in the world.

→ Design as negotiation slides from 2016: tracing the beginnings of the office's journey of visual communication in the design process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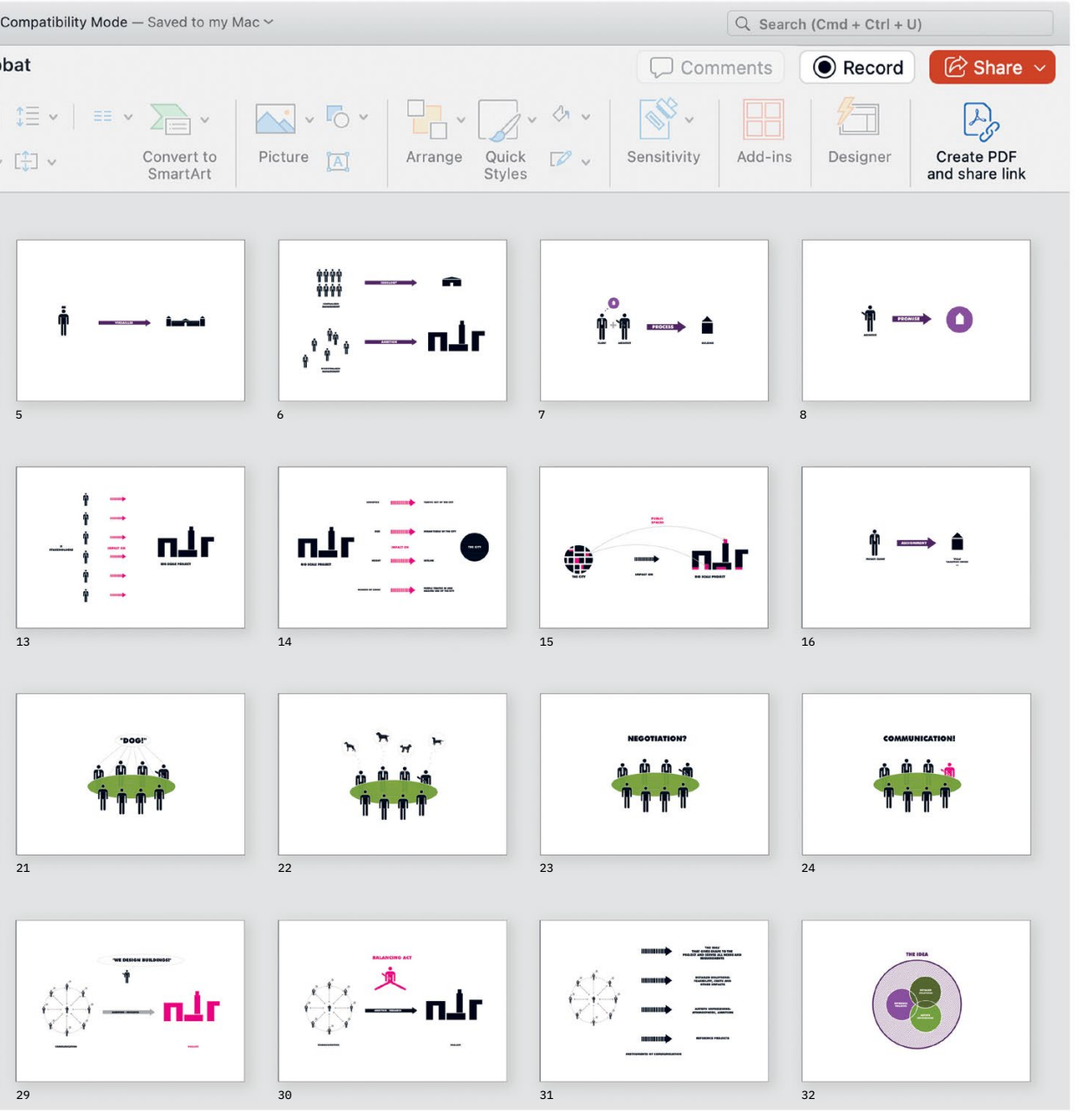
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