Architecture in the Age of Curating
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Thanks to Marko Todorović for the invitation and the nice introduction…
Ladies and gentlemen, during the last few years and decades we have all
witnessed the rise of professions that might be attributed to something that
could be called "the world of the secondary".
In this context – and for the world of music – we could mention the DJ for
example: As we all know, the DJ is a selector.
He or she selects what he or she is the best track at a very specific moment
in a club. Even though the professional horizon of the DJ is very complex
if we go deeper in the subject, most DJs don't actually produce the tracks
which they play. Only to a very limited degree are DJs embedded in a
discourse of authorship, of origin and source.…
They virtually don't belong to the world of the primary.
To a much higher degree are they embedded in a world of the secondary.
And they are so successful, so dominant in the field of contemporary culture,
that since a few decades we are used to question traditional rankings of
primary, secondary etc…
The curator is for contemporary art, what the DJ is for contemporary music.
Usually, the ascendacy of the curator is located within a context of the 80s
and 90s, with such prominent figures as Harald Szeeman and others.
Yet the difficulty of this approach is that it easily obscures the fact of the
existence and the role of curators before the 80s and its so-called "curatorial
turn". Despite of this: The curator had never such a central figure within (and
increasingly beyond) the art world as today.

(shows slide: Dontstopdontstop.…) Maybe the clearest document of
something like curatorial hubris is a cover of one of the newer books by the
Swiss curator Hans Ulrich Obrist "Dontstopdontstop.…"
It is a compendium of texts written between 1990 and 2006.
The probably most interesting aspect of the book is its cover. It shows
a Gerhard Richter painting. But this painting got overpainted by Obrist.
The Berlin publishing house Sternberg Press advertises the book with the
following words:
"The cover depicts an original Gerhard Richter over-painted picture of
Obrist himself." The message of this blurb is clear: The secondary is the
new primary. The curator is more important than the artist. Iconoclasm has
become a curator's vitrue.
Recently I had a longer conversation with the well-know Swiss art historian
Beat Wyss on curating in contemporary culture, and suddenly we were both
stunned by the incredible density of Swiss star-curators within contemporary
culture. Szeemann, Jean-Christophe Ammann, Obrist – they are all Swiss…
I asked him of it sounds to him too much like a cliché if one says that

this might have something to do with the famous Swiss neutrality. My suggestion was that it may be the neutrality – the neutral external position – that allows a curator to make his decisions; to decide what's important or not etc. to construct the curator's rankings....

(shows slide: Europe Map 1942) Of course I had in mind maps like the one you see here in my background: It shows Europe in 1942: The whole of Europe occupied by Nazi Germany; And in the mid a little yellow island: "Neutral" Switzerland. Beat Wyss reminded me that the neutrality of Sitzerland was always a very special one:
It is an armed neutrality, one could even say: an aggressive neutrality!
(shows slide: Papal Swiss Guard)
Switzerland, Beat Wyss told me, has a long history of sending mercenaries to foreign armies, especially the armies of the Kings of France, throughout the Early Modern period of European history. Maybe the most famous example of Swiss mercenaries are the Swiss Papal Guard in Vatican City, formed in 1506 and still existing today.
So for the following let's keep in mind Beat Wyss' speculation, that curating might have something to do with this special "Swiss" aggressive neutrality.

(shows slide: Madelon Vriesendorps "Object Archive")
Architecture is not immune against the ascendancy of curating, on the contrary: I think architecture provides the base for a radical curatorial practice that goes beyound the boundaries of curating in art.
In order to open a discussion about this subject I would like to show you today two architectural examples which – in my opinion – document the potential that is generated when we apply curatorial thought to the production of architecture... In the following I will use one word repeatedly (I used it already): It is the word „ranking". Ranking – in my opinion – is the key word to understand the relationship between architecture and curatorial design. Curators constantly think about one question: "What fits?"
And to answer the question "What fits?", Western culture developed the tradition of a ranking system called "decorum".
My first example for architecture as curatorial practice is very small, it is a miniature city: Madelon Vriesendorps "Object Archive".
(shows slide: Dubai) My second example is very big, it is a city in 1:1 scale, even though we are going to realize that the notion of 1:1 gets problematized in this city: I am talking about Dubai.
Madelon Vriesendorps "Object Archive" and the City of Dubai –
These two documents of a curatorial practice in architecture seem to be randomly chosen only on the first site. But, both are souvenir cities and as

such can cast some light on issues concerning architecture as curatorial practice.... *(shows slide: OMA Pic)* Madelon Vriesendorp is together with Rem Koolhaas, Elia and Zoe Zenghelis a co-founder of OMA. She was actually the main imagineer of the first and formative years of OMA. *(shows slide: Flagrant délit; Delirious New York, Cover)*
Her most famous painting is "Flagrant délit" (1975), which later appeared on the cover of Rem Koolhaas's book "Delirious New York". We can obviously see a painting, in which skyscrapers became minituarized protagonists in a narrative. Big buildings as furniture-sized personalities: a female Chrysler Building and a male Empire State Building, caught in the act, by an intruder: the Rockefeller Center. Please note the background, the skyline of New York with human-like skysprapers.
(shows slide: Object Archive) I'm mentioning this because this background forms something like the blueprint for a second work of Madelon Vriesendorp, which she develops since the early seventies: her "Object Archive". Madelon Vriesendorp's "Object Archive" is huge: A whole world of miniature buildings, figures and animals. Laid out across large tables in her north London home, it represents the famous and the notorious, the successful and the stunted, the expired and the unborn. All objects here are somehow strange. *(shows slide: Father Christmas with wings)*
How exactly do you evaluate a Father Christmas with wings? As a misunderstanding? A failure? Cultural rankings in this archive are inverted: the low, the little and the almost invisible become sublime, forcing us to re-evaluate what it is in contemporary architecture that we consider most interestting and important.

(shows slide: Decorum) Ranking systems (as I mentioned already) are decorum systems. Decorum was a set of rules of ornamentation established in Roman antiquity, which later also governed the culture of the Renaissance. Through it, a building or any cultural artefact's affiliation to military success determined its level of decoration.
The closer a building was to this success, the denser its ornamentation (for example, a temple). Conversely, a distance or associative removal from victory resulted in an absence of ornament (for example a workman's house). The built environment became huge cabinet of mirrors in which the rules of decorum were projected even onto non-decorated areas. Even the blankest surface had something to communicate. Culture was war-culture.
(shows slide: Hütte zu Bethlehem...) Classical Roman decorum was questioned for the first time during the rise of Christianity. The result was a profound inversion of rank and importance. The little – for example the primitive stable, where Jesus was born – became theologically valorised.

The primitive stable became the new temple. The wooden structure of a cruzifiction – a death penalty handed down only to the most disreputable of criminals – became a holy icon. This high regard for the lowly was accompanied by a sudden appreciation of the miniature. Surviving fourth-century descriptions of Christian pilgrimages to the sacred sites of Jerusalem describe the souvenirs collected by the pilgrims; small tokens or relics that were seen as perfect for keeping the travellers devout.

As much as an act of theological territorialisation, the pilgrimage in this sense was an elaborate means of travel and return with little iconic things. *(shows slide: Alberti, S. Andrea...)* Despite its Christian relativizations, decorum remained effective tight up to the end of the eighteenth century, when a new culture of liberalism and autonomous aesthetics emerged. Ultimately it disappeared at the point when western culture and warfare separated from each other. Warfare became a professional pursuit, which gave it unprecedented success. Hybris made decorum obsolete. *(shows slide: Antonio Chichi's Model of the arch of Titus in Rome (1800))* The ruination of decorum was accompanied by the emergence of the Grand Tour, as the sites of antiquity were made safe and accessible to travellers. The idea of travelling for the sake saving the souls was replaced by the idea of travelling for the sake of curiosity and learning. As an educational rite of passage, it was especially popular among young British aristocrats. Grand Tourists typically returned with crates of art, books, pictures, sculptures and other cultural spoils that they would put on display in their libraries, drawing rooms and gardens. Lovers of architecture brought back beautiful and costly models of ancient Italian buildings fashioned in cork as souvenirs. A story of curatorial practice in architecture might begin in the galleries of those Grand tourists, packed with cork models of ancient building... Augusto Rosa, the Roman architect who earned an additional income by producing models from a wide variety of ruins in and around Rome, is generally considered to be the pioneer of this type of replica architectural modelling.

Franz Oberthür, a theology professor from Würzburg, who had visited Rosa during a trip to Italy, gave the new modelling technique the name "Phelloplastik" (from "phello". The Greek for 'Cork'.) Phelloplastics precipitated the first widespread trade in architectural souvenirs and as such also initiated a discourse about the commodity of architecture. Which buildings sold and which did not? Which architectures were considered good enough for export, and which were not? Commodity trade, Marx argues, historically begins at the boundaries of

seperate economic communities based on a non-commercial form of production. The transformation of a labour-product into a commodity (it's marketing) is not a simple process, but has many technical and social preconditions. The commodification of goods or of a service often involves a considerable practical accomplishment in trade. It is a process that may be influenced not only by economic or technical factors but also by political and cultural considerations, insofar as it involves property rights, claims to access to resources and guarantees about quality or safety of use.

(shows slide: Gandy (1818)) The increasing commodification of architecture can be traced not just to the success of phelloplastics, but to two of the most prominent architectural paintings of the ninetenth century - Joseph Michael Gandy's "A Selection of Parts of Buildings (...) Erected from the Designs of John Soane" *(shows slide: Cockerell "Professor's Dream" (1848))* And Charles Robert Cockerell's "The Professor's Dream"
(shows slide: Gandy (1818)) Gandy had joined the London office of John Soane in January 1798 as an artist entrusted with the task of rendering any architectural design – built or unbuilt – in dramatic, luminous perspective. Twenty years later he exhibited "A Selection of Parts of Buildings" in homage to his employer's career while also recording the many renderings he produced for Soane over the preceding two decades.
The painting, in this sense, represented a catalogue of both Soane and Gandy, the architect and his imagineer. Compared to the size of the seated figure in the foreground of the painting (supposedly Gandy himself), most of the designs have a strange scale: to big to be an architectural model, too small to be an inhabitable building.

But everything was there: the Bank of England with its Tivoli Corner, the Dulwich Picture Gallery, the house/office at Lincoln's Inn Field all represented in models, plans and renderings, and all staged in a huge space, lit by a studio lamp, as if in a packed and enigmatic department store... architecture as commodity... and architecture as curatorial practice....
(shows slide: Cockerell, Professor's Dream)
There is also an allusion to shopping in the second example.
Cockerell had succeeded Soane as professor of Architecture at the Royal Academy in 1839 and in his decidedly Gadyesque watercolour, "The Professor's Dream", he illustrated the history of architecture in one all-encompassing image. The work is a peculiar amalgam of the gothic and the classical, of spires and domes, framed from above and below by an Egyptian gateway and pyramids. In this eclectisism, if nothing else, the painting reveals itself as a radiant shop window of architectural commodities, with the implicit slogan: In which style shall we built?

(shows slide: Souvenirs (Boym)) With the sweep of a railway network extending across Europe, from around 1825, the tradition of the Grand Tour continued, but tourism itself became cheaper, safer, easier and open to increasing numbers of people. With the introduction of public air traffic after the Second World War, the growth of the travel industry expanded even further: the age of mass tourism had arrived.

Significantly, the democratisation of travel also brought with it a democratisation of souvenirs. These objects represent an important part of our civilisation's material culture. They can be found in every home, regardless of economic or social status, and can be as formally different as a miniature marble leaning Tower of Pisa and a monkey made of coconuts. Not surprisingly, the sale of souvenirs amounts to big business – more than $20 billion annually in the United States alone. Yet the entire phenomenon of the souvenir is largely excluded from the high culture of design and almost completely ignored by the design professions. One of the very few exceptions is the designer Constantin Boym, who in the 80s and 90s developed the so-called "Buildings of disaster" series of souvenirs…

(shows slide: Constantin Boym…) The word 'souvenir' itself stems from the French and means 'to remember'. But in contrast to the active remembrance of 'je me rapelle', the phrase 'se souvenir' indicates a passive memory. The object works metonymically, as a part or a fragment that evokes larger places and events. Its partialness, however, is always supplemented by a personal narrative or recollection.

The popular appeal of souvenirs is rooted precisely in this combination of a material object and an immaterial, fleeting sentiment. Unlike many 'serious' products or appliances, the souvenir always contains a built-in emotional value, such as a memory of a past journey or the affection of a faraway friend. With souvenirs we also have a (previously almost undetected) indicator of contemporary architectural rankings.

Only the most valuable buildings deserve souvenirs, and here, value does not mean real estate value. With sale figures of sold souvenirs we have exact data about the importance of certain buildings for certain populations. The shelves of souvenir shops are contemporary decorum.

(shows slide: Souvenir City…) At a first glance the products of a souvenir shop are not war-related. This seems to be the major difference to the Roman system of decorum. But it appears that only those souvenirs that capture a history of collective stress actually sell – the stress of defending or conquering a city or state (for example, the Great Wall of China, the Brandenburg Gate, Berlin Wall, Edinburgh Castle etc.); or the stress of erecting the tallest building in the world (Empire State Building, Sears Tower,

Petronas Towers, etc.). The consumer act of purchasing a souvenir is in this way a seemingly relaxed process of exchange that actually disguises a history of collective conflict and effort.

(shows slide: Object Archive) Everything discussed so far could be said about almost every souvenir collection. The uniqueness of Vriesendorp's object archive lies in two aspects: its scenographic dramaturgy and its dense 'culture of congestion'. In terms of its theatrical staging, all figures, all faces, all building fronts are orientated towards the viewer. The archive forms an uncanny mass of observers.
Inside the calmness of a domestic setting it represents a virtual stadium of screaming silence; a pop cultural version of the figurines on Sigmund Freud's desk, just a few hundred metres away. Vriesendorp herself also always stresses that it is the 'cultureclashyness' of her objects that interests her. And these clashes are not only within the objects (Father-Christmas-with-wings) but also in between them: it is the density of their flaws and misunderstandings that transforms them into something completely other. Vriesendorp loves high aspirations only when they cannot be attained. She ensures that the losers are never alone.
(shows slide: Dubai) Now I would like to move on to my second example, the city of Dubai, and I move on from te losers to the winners (so to say)....
„Dubai has more per-capital entries in the Guiness Book of Records than any other country on Earth – and more records are 'under construction': *(shows slide: Burj Dubai)* - the tallest buildig in the world; *(shows slide: Shopping Mall)* - largest shopping mall in the planet; *(shows slide: Airport)* - the biggest airport ever built; *(shows slide: Burj el Arab)* - the only "7 Stars" Hotel in the world.
Dubai is a city of superlatives (...)"[1]. "It's going to compete for the world's Best Of, a Greatest Hits of cherished geographies and icons. (...) It's like Pimp My World"[2]. And it is the main capital of ranking consciousness: Being No. 1 is the only state to be. "The city-state clearly follows the dictum that nobody remembers who comes second"[3]. "(...) it will soon break the record for the location with most world-breaking records"[4].

(shows slide: Dubai islands) "Post 9/11, billions of dollars of Middle Eastern investment have been diverted from the United States back into more local interests. This is one of the major factors contributing to Dubai's extraordinary boom in the last few years. The Dubai-effect – where massive amounts of liquid capital is turned almost instantly into high-value property - has given rise to the second largest building site in the world (...)"[5]. (after China...). "Dubai's concept of 'city' is based on everything that has long

been declared 'non-city'. Its morphological models seem to oscillate between Potemkin-like corridors of endless development along 'boulevards' (that are really highways) and the suburban model of cul-de-sac islands and private gated communities"[6].
"Dubai's fundamental unit of literal and symbolic development
[is] 'the island' – a private and bounded mini 'city' or 'village'
where all necessary amenities (living, eating, working, shopping)
are provided, each island packaged with a distinct theme and style"[7].
"These islands are all equal centres, self-contained nodes appearing adjacent to one another and connected to each other by the thinnest possible road network"[8]. "(...) it is the young Emirate's adoption of the archipelago model as a conceptual, legislative and planning system of development that constitutes the uniqueness of Dubai's mode of creation as a city - a, city of cities'"[9].

The question now is: What exactly gets build on those archipelagos?
The best, we could say. The Number ones. But what is the Number 1 in a contemporary architecture? In a premodern architecture, I said, the highest architecture is that with the most ornaments; And the buildings with the most ornaments were the building with the highest proximity to success in warfare. The name of this premodern ranking order – I said – was decorum.

Is there something like a hidden decorum system also in contemporary architecture? A system, that would bring all the number ones together in one place? The place of gathering is clear: It's Dubai. But what's the system? One thing is clear: It's not simply the star system.
(shows slide: OMA – Renaissance project/Generic architecture)
Rem Koolhaas, maybe the biggest star in architecture today, faces a serious problem in Dubai: How shall we build, when everybody is doing star architecture?
Koolhaas writes: "For architecture, The Gulf represents, simultaneously, the apotheosis and the ultimate democratization of the icon.
The collapse of a whole series of earlier legitimations of architecture – function, efficiency, organization, originality: all exiled to the realm of the big yawn – creates a titanic struggle on an infinitely reduced battlefield.
The ubiquity of extravagance creates fewer and fewer opporitunities for distinction; it will therefore erase the distinctions between the first, second and third rate... The winner will be the one who walks away from this battle first"[10]. The result of this is a kind of generic anti-starchitecture which you see here in this picture. A grey boring slab within an accumuation of sensations... The slab – by the way – is called "Renaissance"....

Again: What might be the hidden decorum system in a place like Dubai?
My answer to this question is the following:
The highest ranks of Dubai architecture are the measurable ones.
The highest building is easily quantifyable.
And being the highest became almost something like a new norm, as we can see in the project Falcon City.
Being shaped like a Falcon, the project incorporates not only residential units, hotels and theme park, but also imitation of world-famous landmarks, which include Pyramids of Giza, Eiffel Tower, Venice, Hanging Gardens of Babylon, Taj Mahal, and leaning Tower of Pisa. The Eiffel Tower will be 20 meters taller than that of original in Paris. The largest pyramid will be 40 storeys and 150 meters in height, which is slightly taller than Khufu, the largest of three pyramids in Egypt.
And if ranking orders like this are not so easily adaptable, an import of rankings from other systems than architecture is practised. What do I mean by that? *(shows slide: Boris Becker Tower)* If ranking orders like bigger, higher etc. don't work, then ranking systems external to architetcure get important into the field of architecture. Being No.1 in the sports is for example very clear: It's measruable time. This makes it almost natural to propose a Boris Becker Tower. *(shows slide: Michael Schumacher Tower)* Or a Michael Schumacher Tower. *(shows slide: Niki Lauda Tower)* Or a Niki Lauda Tower.

(shows slide: Final Image)
Ladies and gentlemen, I don't want to close without a quick summary. I opened up with stressing the importance of curating in contemporary art and linked curatorial practice to "aggressive neutrality". Then I moved on to the case of Madelon Vriesendorp and her "Object Archive", which is basically a curatorial practice with souvenir architectures. With Madelon Vriesendorp I introduced you to the concept of ranking and decorum and concluded that her Object Archive is an inversion of traditonal rankings in archietcture: the low, the little and the almost invisible become sublime. Then I moved on to Dubai, where the political elite of a rentier state has the collective ambition to be Number One. The result is an inversed souvenir city: The Number Ones of the whole world get assembled. But just bigger.
In both cases, curatorial practice became the mode of production for a radical and new architectural landscape.
Thank you!

1. Amer A. Moustafa: „*My Dubai*", *in: Mitra Khoubrou, Ole Bouman, Rem Koolhaas (eds.): Volume No. 12*, „*Al Manakh*", 2007, p. 14.

2. Shumon Basar: „*Twelve Ultimate Critical Steps to Sudden Urban Success*", u: Shumon Basar (ed.): *Cities from Zero*, London: AA Publications, 2007, p. 95.

3. Shumon Basar: „*Twelve Ultimate Critical Steps to Sudden Urban Success*", u: Shumon Basar (ed.): *Cities from Zero*, London: AA Publications, 2007, p. 49.

4. Shumon Basar: „*Twelve Ultimate Critical Steps to Sudden Urban Success*", u: Shumon Basar (ed.): *Cities from Zero*, London: AA Publications, 2007, p. 77.

5. Shumon Basar: „*V + M + HC = Cfz / Introduction*", u: Shumon Basar (ed.): *Cities from Zero*, London: AA Publications, 2007, p. 21.

6. Amale Andraos: „*Dubai's Island Urbanism: An Archipelago of Difference for the 21st Century?*", u: Shumon Basar (ed.): *Cities from Zero*, London: AA Publications, 2007, p. 47.

7. Amale Andraos: „*Dubai's Island Urbanism: An Archipelago of Difference for the 21st Century?*", u: Shumon Basar (ed.): *Cities from Zero*, London: AA Publications, 2007, p. 49.

8. Amale Andraos: „*Dubai's Island Urbanism: An Archipelago of Difference for the 21st Century?*", u: Shumon Basar (ed.): *Cities from Zero*, London: AA Publications, 2007, p. 49.

9. Amale Andraos: „*Dubai's Island Urbanism: An Archipelago of Difference for the 21st Century?*", u: Shumon Basar (ed.): *Cities from Zero*, London: AA Publications, 2007, p. 49.

10. Rem Koolhaas: „Frontline", *in: Mitra Khoubrou, Ole Bouman, Rem Koolhaas (eds.): Volume No. 12*, „*Al Manakh*", 2007, p. 195.

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01 Karta Evrope iz 1942. godine / Europe Map 1942 **02** Papska švajcarska garda / Papal Swiss Guard
03 Naslovna strana knjige *Dontstopdontstop Hans Ulrich Obrista* / Book cover *Dontstopdontstop* by Hans Ulrich Obrist
04 *Charles Robert Cockerell*, Profesorov san, 1848 / Charles Robert Cockerell, Professor's Dream, 1848
05 Arhiva predmeta, *Madelon Vriesendorp* / Object Archive, Madelon Vriesendorp **06** Grad suvenir / Souvenir City
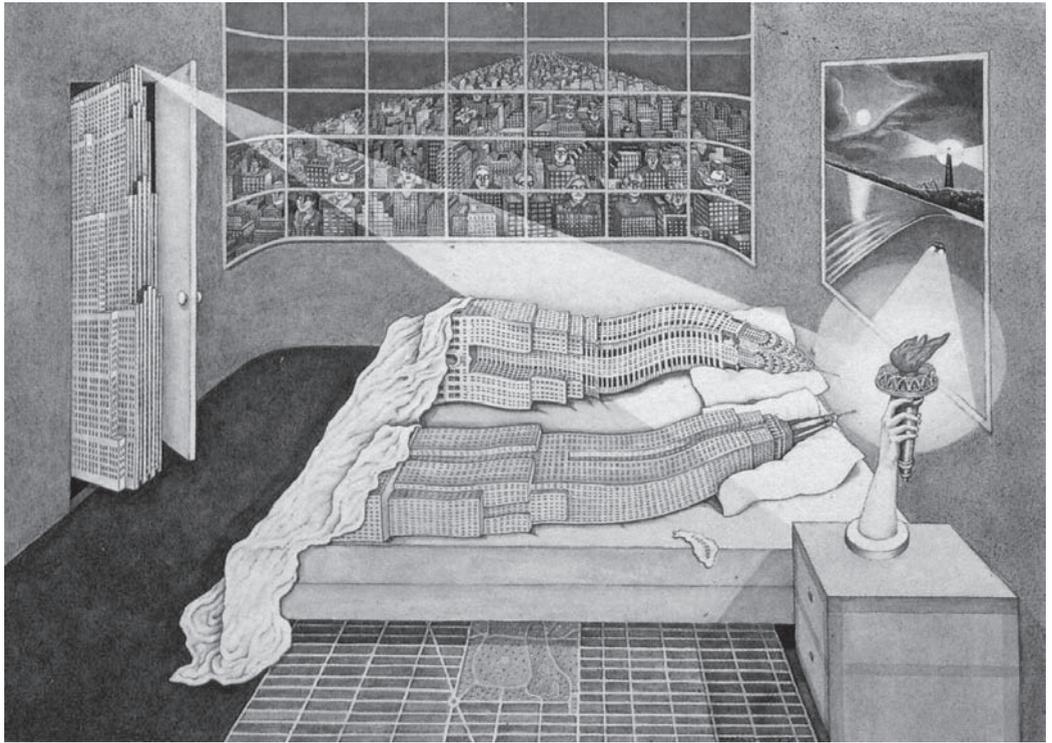
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07 *Madelon Vriesendorp*, Inflagranti, 1975 / Madelon Vriesendorp, Flagrant Délit, 1975
08 Grad čuda *Falconcity*, Dubai, 2005 / Falconcity of Wonders, Dubai, 2005 **09** *Leon Battista Alberti*, Sveti Andreja, Mantova,
Italija, 1476 / Leon Battista Alberti, San Andrea, Mantua, Italy, 1476 **10** *Joseph Michael Gandy*, Odabir delova zgrada, 1818 /
Joseph Michael Gandy, A Selection of Parts of Buildings, 1818
11 OMA – *Dubai Renaissance* - Generička arhitektura, Dubai, 2007 / OMA – Dubai Renaissance - Generic architecture, Dubai, 2007