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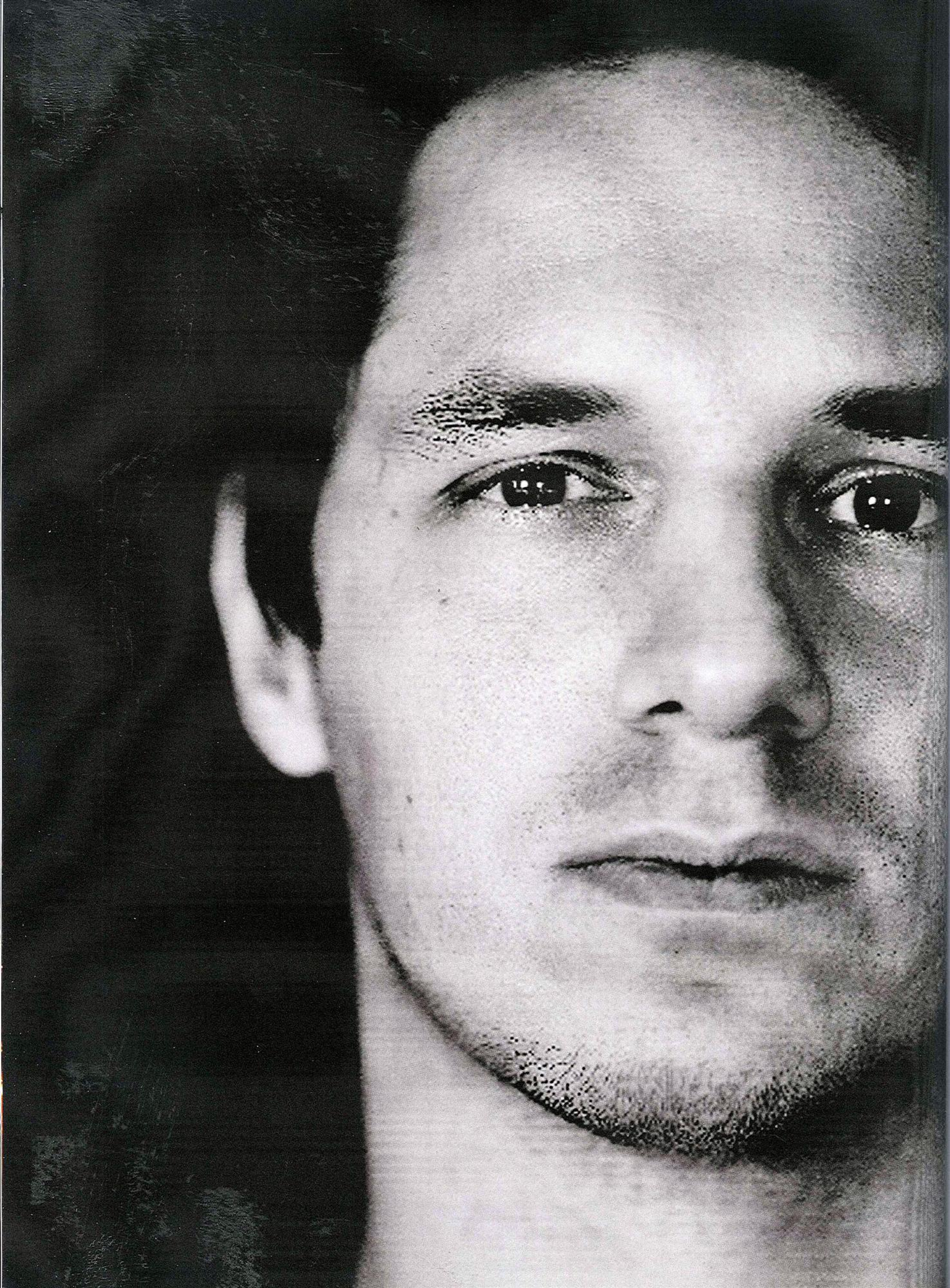

text | ralf f. broekman, olaf winkler
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CREATE MEANING

Ralf F. Broekman and Olaf Winkler in conversation with Julien De Smedt

Julien De Smedt, work in your office seems to rely less on classical ideas of the one genius coming up with the decisive sketch, but on open input, brainstorming, trial and error. Could you describe this working process a bit more? How do you reduce complexity within this process – how do you actually generate form, and how do you avoid arbitrariness?
There's a process of decomposing complexity piece by piece to eventually understand it... In fact we embrace complexity more than we reduce it. But it's through the decomposition process that we manage to make sense out of it. Ultimately our goal is to create meaning through the work we do, and if it all remains intricate and utter gibberish, the meaning we seek to propagate has no impact and what we believe to contribute to improvements in society results in a vacuum of elaborate yet discriminative effort. We use diagrams to explain our work. It's what you could call the "architecture for dummies" method: instead of actually showing or discussing the architectural "product", we explain each of the project's aspects one by one, separately and in a cumulative manner, literally rebuilding the project up from the first brick to the last.

How important is an approach which – possibly connected to being part of a young generation of architects – decisively questions traditional concepts of architecture? How would you describe the main characteristics of your specific approach?
We're not rebels that scream out their hatred for the establishment and refuse to play by the rules. We also don't think of ourselves as strictly being part of the young generation of architects, if that is at all of interest to anyone: We are architects, we have built an accumulated portfolio of some 30 buildings, adding up to around 300,000 square metres of built substance, and we have had offices

jds

Hanghzhou Gateway, China, JDS+CHINACUC, 1st prize, competition 2011

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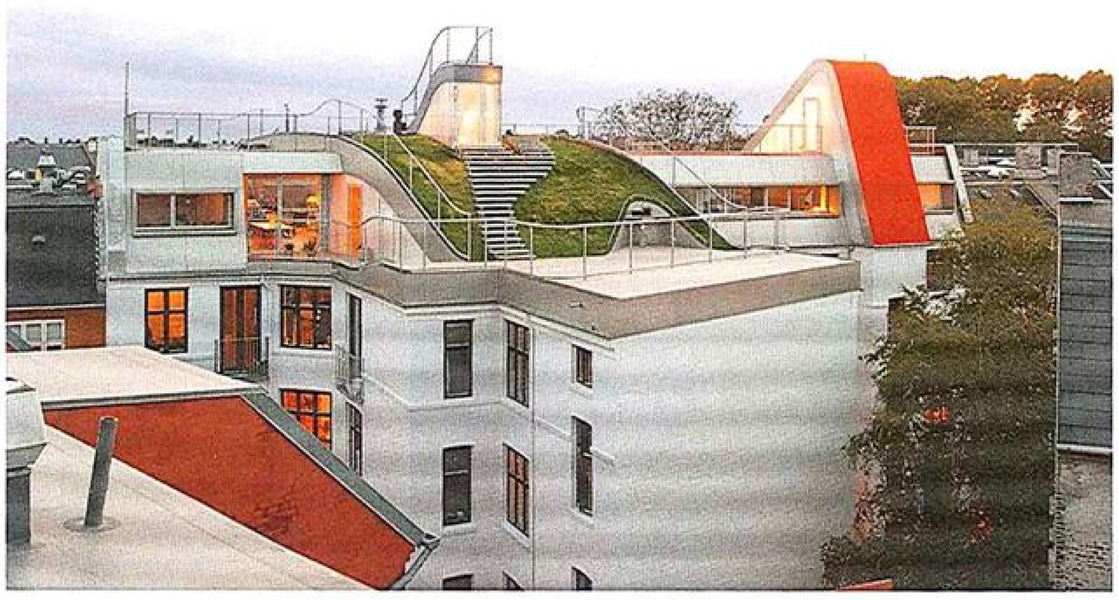


for ten years. I don't think we even ever were critical of traditional concepts of architecture. I would rather say that we're constructive and we like to learn from what is there, what has been thought through before, and we're interested in making that evolve, to improve it, transform it, manipulate it to serve new purposes, new times, new contexts. Another thing is that we're continuously self-critical rather than critical only of the world around us.

How would you define the cultural background of your office if it is not regionally or nationally defined? Do you still feel clear differences between for example Copenhagen and Brussels, or other European countries where you are involved; and how do you deal with them?

I like to see our offices as one rather than two entities. Which is not always easy and maybe not equally perceived that way by all our staff or even all the partners. I'm the only partner to constantly commute in between our offices, clients, construction sites, etc. so I have a better capacity to blend the various identities and aspects of the offices into one sort of animal. I can obviously identify differences but I think ultimately they're not national differences: Our staff is very international and mixed, and the projects we work on at either of our offices are not necessarily located where the office is. Most of them aren't.

Talking about mixture within the office – which disciplines are represented in your office? Do you have a clear attitude concerning the integration of different disciplines within your office, as opposed to open, temporary cooperations, which might be more precise, but less helpful in terms of continuity? Or, to put this way: The architect – necessarily a generalist, or a specialist within a group of specialists?

I always like to say that our specialty is not to be specialised. We love to work on new things and we believe that it is part of a method to access new solutions and to avoid delivering "cooking recipes"... In

Iceberg Dwellings, Aarhus, Denmark,
JDS+CEBRA in collaboration with Louis Paillard and SeArch,
1st prize, invited competition 2008 (above)

V House, M House, and Mountain Dwellings,
Copenhagen, Denmark, Plot=JDS+BIG, 2005 and 2008 (top l.)

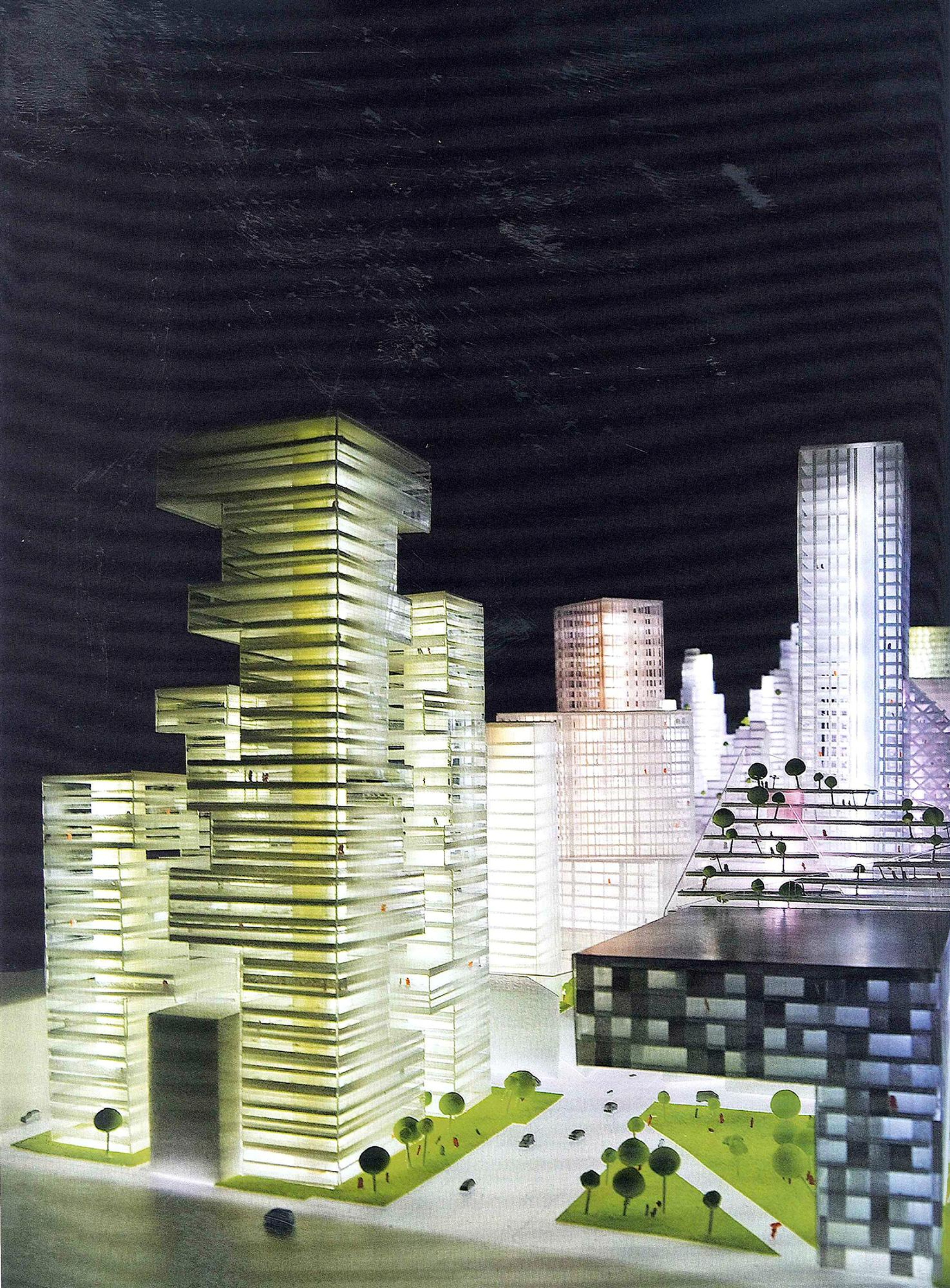
Birkegade Rooftop Penthouses, Copenhagen, Denmark, 2011 (middle l.)

Marina da Glória, Rio de Janeiro, Brazil, design 2010 (bottom l.)

this context, the involvement of external experts is a prerequisite – whether it is people that we have a long history of experiences with, or new, punctual and hyper specific contributions. Within the office we would like to have as many hats as possible. Right now we have architects, urbanists, landscape architects, product designers, graphic designers, business developers, environmental experts, a filmmaker, the admin crew, and two cleaning ladies.

It's true that you work on almost every level from designing small accessories or furniture to city planning. How do these works cross-pollinate each other?
After working mostly on large-scale projects for a few years, I started developing product designs and furniture with the idea that there could be a link between the architectural concepts we develop and the smaller design challenges. Can the architect's mentality and methods be used to design products? It's nothing new but I think that today more than ever the obsessive overview and ability of architects to relate things to one another can be of use in a world where overproduction, consumption, and global distribution brings on a certain form of saturation and omnipresence of design. We would like to question those needs, not to hinder progress, but rather to redirect efforts towards new questions and real challenges.

It seems that not just on the level of city planning, but also in smaller architectural projects, the topic of urbanity is a dominant factor of your designs. How important is typological research? Do we need new architectural typologies that question and maybe restructure traditional concepts of especially urban functions and relations?
Half of the current world population lives in cities. By 2050, 80 percent of the people will be living next to each other in urban environments. It is clear that urbanity is a big issue to address, but also a huge potential for us. I like to say that architecture, and by extension urbanity, is where we are all born and where we will all die. It's



vegar moen

Sjakket Youth House,
Copenhagen, Denmark, Plot=JDS+BIG, 2007 (above)

Rue de la Loi, Masterplan of the European Union,
Brussels, Belgium, invited competition 2008 (l.)

New Holmenkollen Ski Jump
for the FIS Nordic World Ski Championships,
Oslo, Norway, 2011
(p. 38/39, photo: Marco Boella)

not to be theatrical. It's actually a simple and practical fact: If we're there, someone designed a path, a house, something architectural. In the context of exponential expansion of urbanity, typologies are obviously challenged: Overcrowded conditions impact infrastructures differently. They also generate new relationship behaviours between people. The entire spectrum of life gets transformed. The congested city spins off new technologies that make people interact again with their environment, something that had been lost somewhat with the omnipresence of cars, now increasingly obsolete as they become dinosaurs of transportation. When people cannot move around as freely, easily, or as fast as they used to, programs need to be shuffled around on the urban microchip. The idea of the big divide between programs disappears and the concept of the urban long island ice tea appears: Every recipient becomes the stage for an unleashing of programmatic fluids...

One and a half years ago, you published a book titled "Agenda" that follows your office through a year's work – and that more or less coincidentally starts on the day Lehman Brothers collapsed. How has crisis changed the idea of architecture, from your point of view? Would you, beyond a level of romanticism, talk about a productiveness of crisis?
We subtitled the first JDS Agenda "can we sustain our ability to crisis?" in an attempt to address two things with one question: the term sustainability, although barely pronounceable to the majority of the world, is still completely lacking a clear definition and needs to be questioned and challenged. To ask whether we could sustain our ability to crisis is to shift the question of sustainability to the one that generates our environmental collapse: to crisis is an action, not a condition. It's the action that makes us reach a point of collapse and allows us to rethink, criticise, and reboot our system to progress and improve.

Julien De Smedt, born in Brussels in 1975, is the founder and director of JDS Architects, who are based in Brussels and Copenhagen and lately also opened an office in Belo Horizonte, Brazil. After having attended schools in Brussels, Paris, and Los Angeles, he received his diploma from the Bartlett School of Architecture in London. Before founding JDS Architects, Julien De Smedt worked with OMA, Rotterdam, and co-founded and directed the architecture firm PLOT in Copenhagen. He has been a guest professor at Rice University in Houston, Texas, and the University of Kentucky, he has received numerous international awards, and his work has been exhibited around the world. The first monograph of JDS Architects, entitled PIXL TO XL, was published by Damdi in 2007. In December 2009 JDS released a second book entitled AGENDA, published by ACTAR. www.jdsarchitects.com