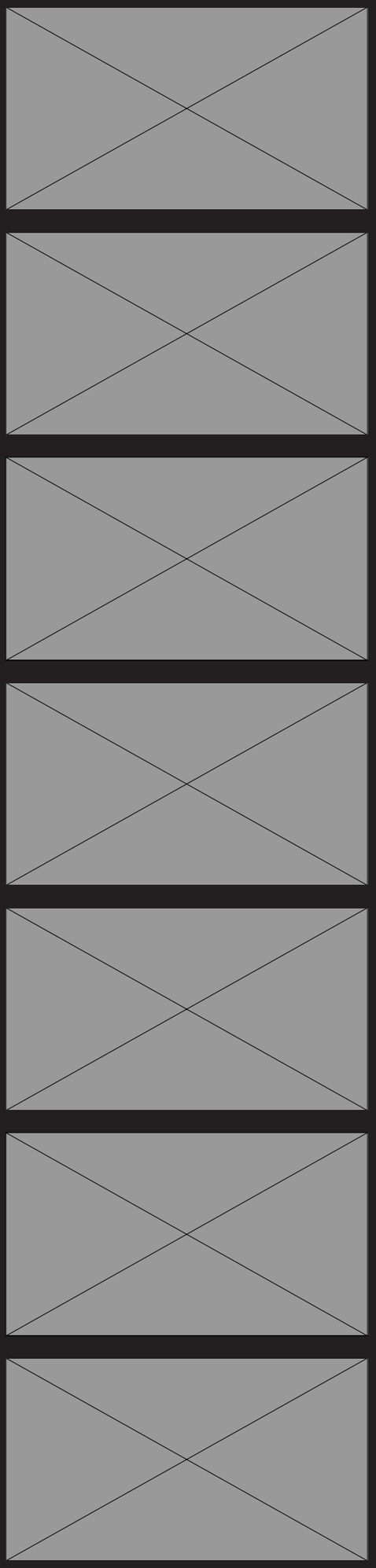
FILM AND THE MUSEUM

A CONVERSATION WITH BARRY BERGDOLL, REINHOLD MARTIN, AND PRAXIS

PRAXIS 14
Narrative/Alternative Endings
Questions for Barry Bergdoll/Reinhold Martin
December 3, 2012

THE MOMA EXHIBITION FORECLOSED: REHOUSING THE AMERICAN DREAM INCLUDED A COLLECTION OF PROPOSALS BASED ON "THE BUELL HYPOTHESIS," A RESEARCH REPORT DEVELOPED AT THE BUELL CENTER. NOT INSIGNIFICANTLY, THIS DOCUMENT WAS WRITTEN AS A SCREENPLAY; YOU THEN ASKED PARTICIPANTS TO RESPOND WITH THEIR OWN FILM, TO BE INCLUDED AS ONE OF THE ELEMENTS IN THE EXHIBITION.



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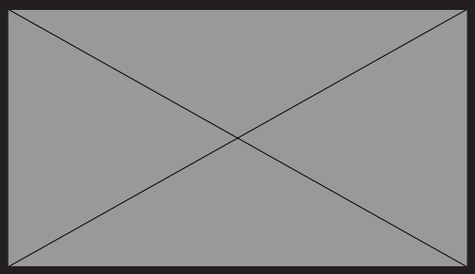
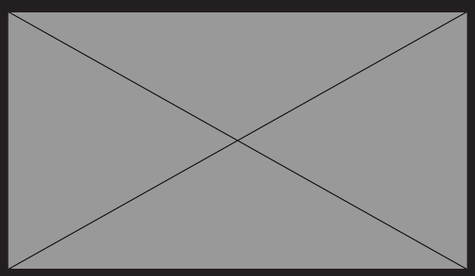
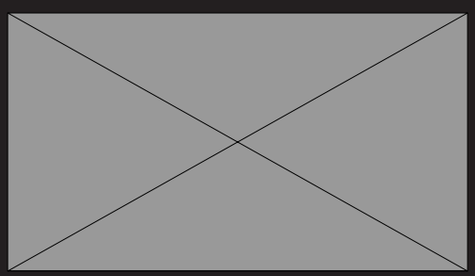
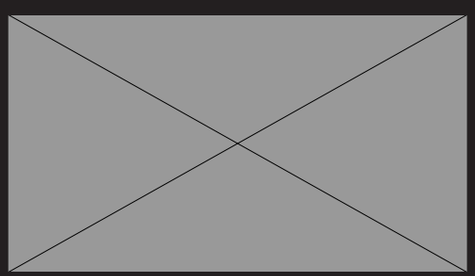
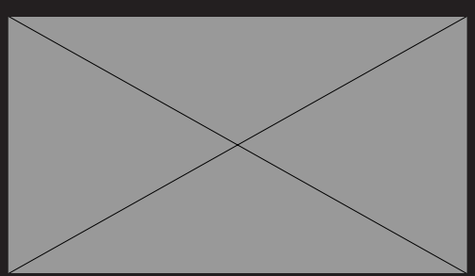
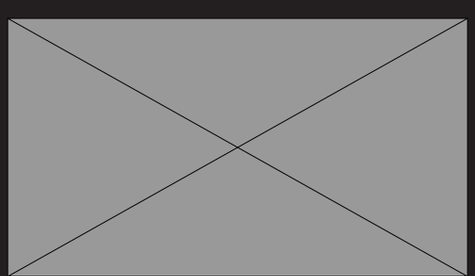
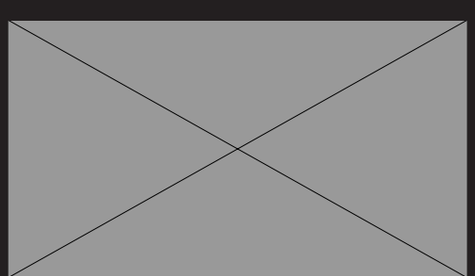
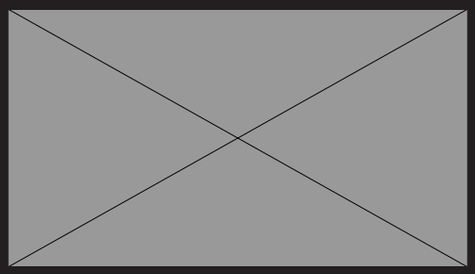
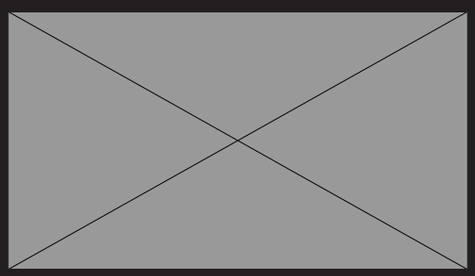










1: Can you elaborate on your decision to require each participant to make a film, and the relationship of that particular representation to the other requirements—data analysis, architectural plans, etc.?

RM: A central argument of "The Buell Hypothesis" is that the American dream of individuality, self-reliance, and social advancement through homeownership is more than mere fantasy. Yes, it is indeed a "dream," a piece of Grade One ideology, but how does it work? It is a deeply entrenched narrative, a story told over and over again for generations, like a movie that continually replays in your head. This story, in its many variations, establishes a practical framework for real world policies and transactions. So the idea was to confront one story with another. Hence the idea of "changing the movie." The actual movies were not required to adopt a narrative style (in the end few did). Because even in punctual or non-narrative form, a movie can ask both artist and audience to consider the story to which a given project is attached, and not just to attach a story to a given project.

A related point is that policy, economics, and other practical matters are partly rooted in cultural and even aesthetic foundations. Suburban homeownership is not only a matter of rational economic calculation but also of certain widespread desires and affectations. That does not mean that it is merely a cultural choice, but it would be nothing without these desires, which are neither eternal nor universal—they vary historically and culturally. And so what better place to test their parameters and to open other possibilities than an art museum?

BB: In addition to the analysis presented in "The Buell Hypothesis," which underscored the role that films and television have played in forming the American imaginary of the suburban home, to such an extent that even immigrants seem already to have these images firmly secured as dreams before arriving on these shores, we wanted to play to the fact that more and more architects work with filmic means of representation in thinking of their own work. For instance the production of a film by MOS Architects is directly continuous with the way they've been

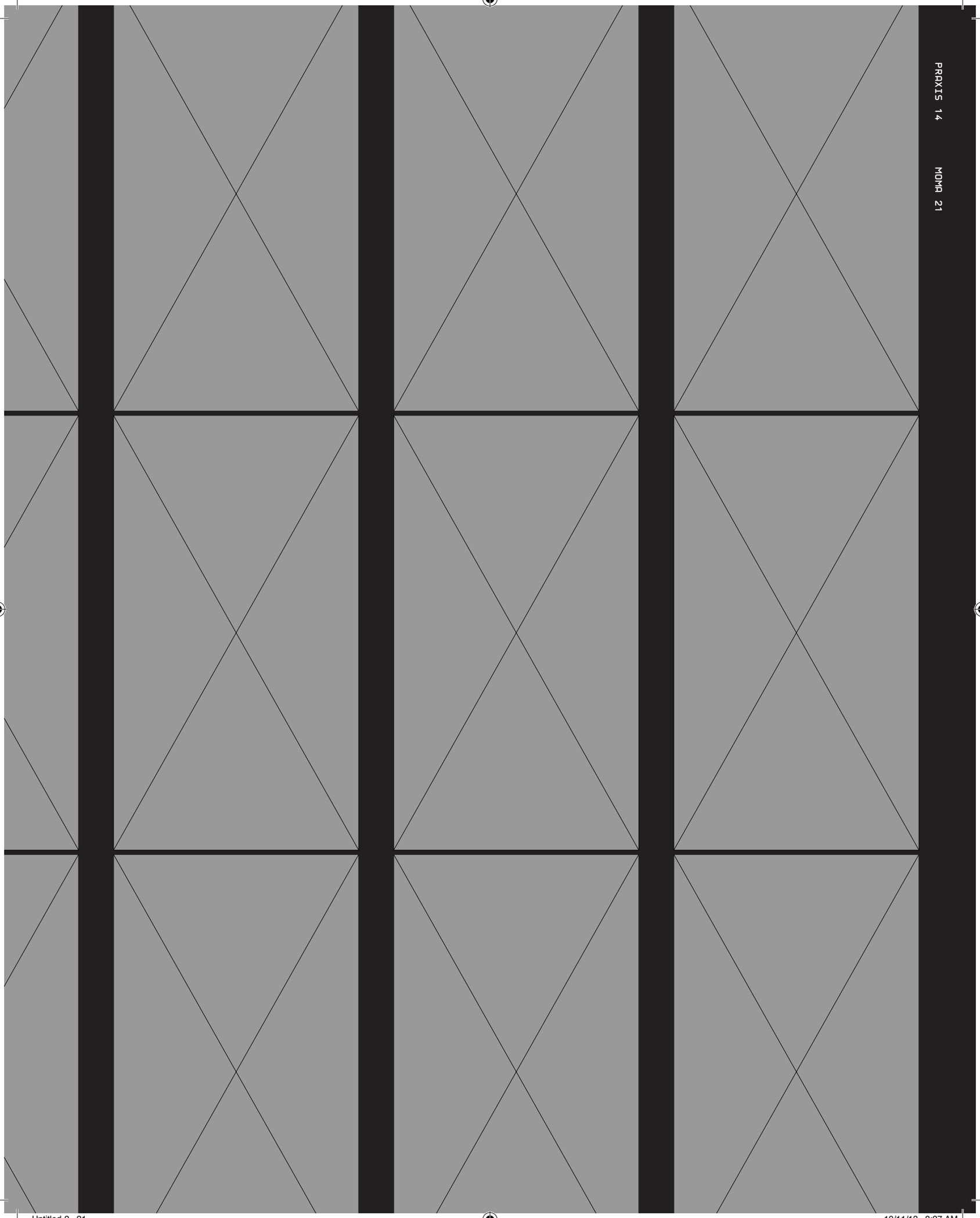
working for some time. In the realm of materials that can be presented in an architectural exhibition–where, famously, everything but built architecture can be included–films and videos are also among the most compelling representations of ideas for non-architectural audiences. The centrality of filmed imagery to our imaginations, assumptions, and predilections is clear in any gallery display that includes screens with projections–almost inevitably, this is where most gallery visitors gravitate. So just as we are captivated by the received American suburban dream as it has been honed over decades by Hollywood, so too any effort to project alternative scenarios is most effectively achieved through similar media.

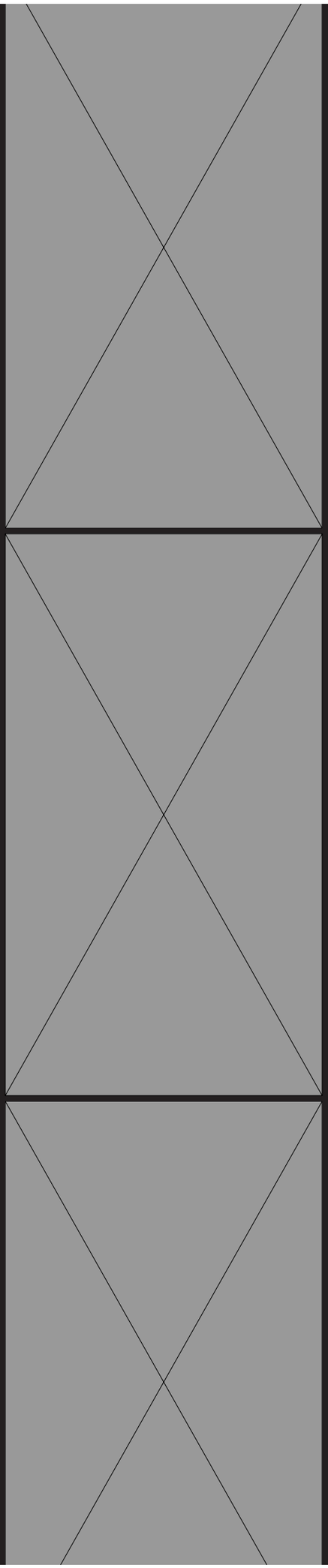
It is certainly striking, as Reinhold underscores, that film, video, or animated imagery played a markedly different role in each of the five projects, as varied as the other means of representation preferred by each team. Perhaps the most traditional approach was that of the Studio Gang-led team, which used the films to collect interviews in the communities of Cicero, almost the way a sociologist would use field evidence. Michael Bell's Visible Weather team conceived a type of fly-through of a sort now rather standard in many architectural presentations, but which would have been all but impossible in an era of different filmmaking techniques. WORKac turned to a completely different format, the television advertisement. They worked with an advertising agency and created a jingle that was as unforgettable as the imagery of their project. With the wry humor of the advertisement, their whole presentation set up something of a model showroom for a new place and a new lifestyle. Andrew Zago created a digital environment that was almost dream-like in its rhythms and imageries. So in the end we can say that the role of the filmic was not so much extra-architectural as integral, pointing to the role that different image-making technologies have always played in the practice of architecture and in the communication of its ideas that extend well beyond the dimensions and forms of the projected buildings.

2: How do you think these films contribute to the discourse on utopia and the "American dream?" How do you see them in relationship to other contemporary and historical architectural narratives?

RM: At the Buell Center we recently compiled all of the printed and online commentary on the Foreclosed exhibition into a stand-alone website and

ANDREW ZAGO





printed document. Among many other things, it's interesting to see how often the show was criticized, directly or indirectly, for being utopian. Ironically, with respect to the actual history of architectural utopianism, whether we are talking about the fantastical counterprojects of the 1960s or the wholesale reorganization of housing design and policy earlier in the twentieth century, you would have to say that all of the projects in the Foreclosed exhibition are distinctly non- or even anti-utopian. Rather than propose systemic rearrangement or evoke a parallel world, each inserts itself into existing realities—some more comfortably or "realistically" than others. I assume that it was a deliberate decision on the part of each team to focus attention on how the existing system might be tweaked, modified, or inflected toward more equitable outcomes.

But if you understand the American dream itself as an "unrealistic" story rather than as a self-evidently practical one, the tables turn. What appears as factual, foundational, becomes contingent if not fictional, no matter how many numbers are behind it. I therefore remain unconvinced by the extent of documentary materials that each team felt they had to include alongside the movies and models, as if the projects themselves were not enough. If anything, I think the diagrams and data distract from the main question

to which each project responds: if the American dream is ultimately destructive or at least unsustainable, how can we change the story?

Not do away with all stories in favor of supposedly sober calculation, but rewrite the script. Of course, you do want to show how the whole thing actually works. And you want to show what exactly might change, and how, and you want to measure the consequences. Not surprisingly, much of the criticism lamented the relative subordination, in the museum, of technical materials—the "science" of each project, if you like—to the more "spectacular" models and movies. This sort of criticism came from both the left and the right, so to speak. But what could an art museum collaborating with a small cultural research center possibly contribute to the "normal science" of city planning or housing design and policy? Aren't such institutions better suited to challenging or changing cultural narratives or norms? Arguably, the most dominant such narrative today boils down to a simple equation: Data = Truth. Witness the fetishization of polls, statistics, and other quantitative "indicators" in American electoral politics. Witness, too, the common tendency, in architecture, to criticize a rendering or a fly-through as a "mere" illustration, which implies that the numbers underlying it are somehow more real. But does not the imaginary world of the developer's spreadsheet ultimately recite a narrative with unmatched ferocity?

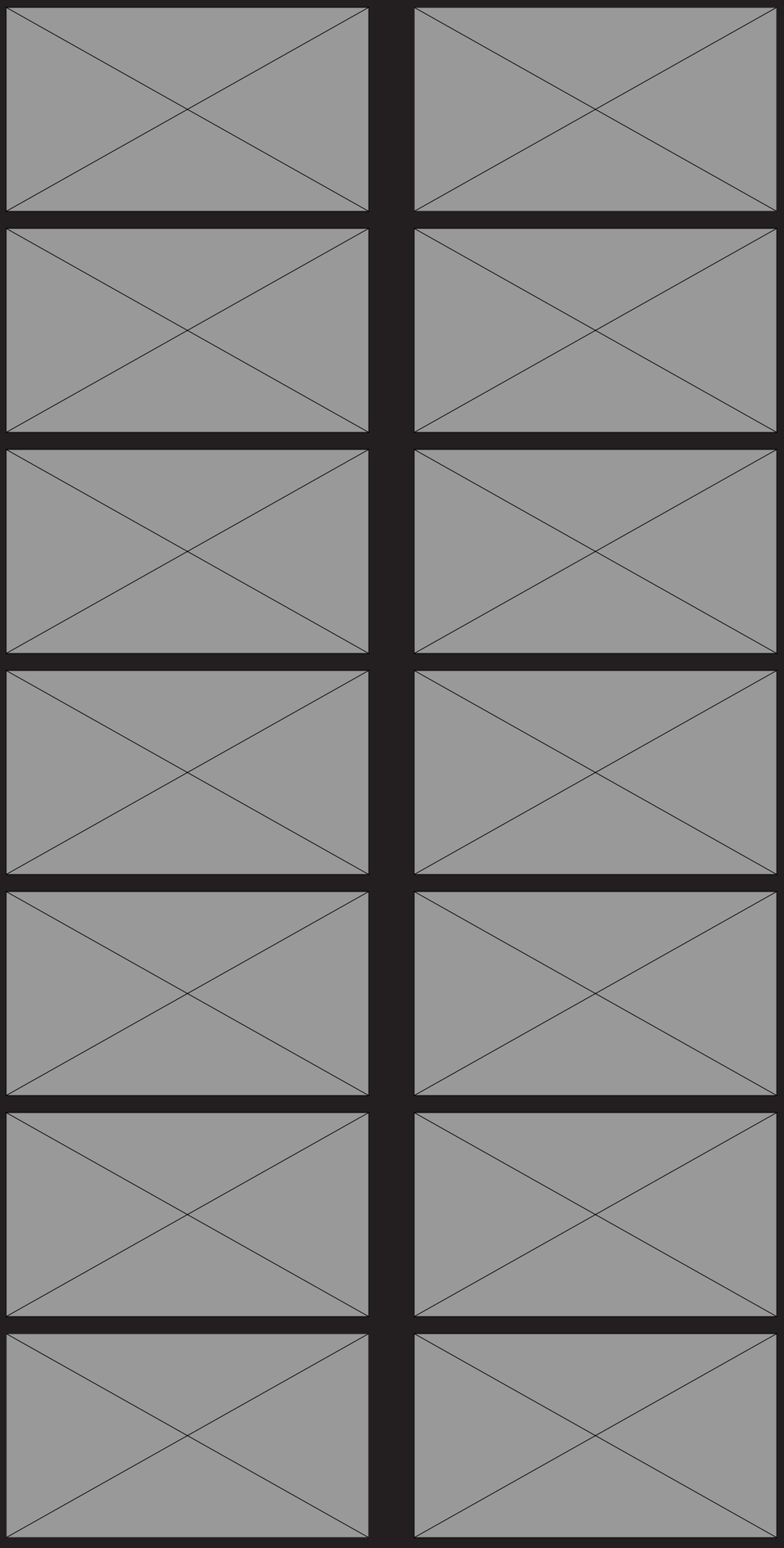
I was immensely engaged by every one of the presentations in the show, but I admit that I would have preferred that each aimed more directly for a movie that elicits the question: how would the facts on the ground have to change for this mise-en-scène to become a reality? In that case, the tables would truly have turned and the numbers could have served to illustrate or elucidate the movies. In the event, the movies—whether documentary, atmospheric, or parodic—generally illustrated the numbers.

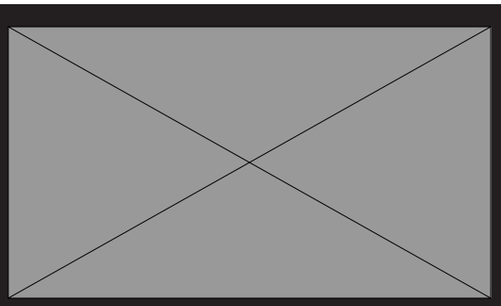
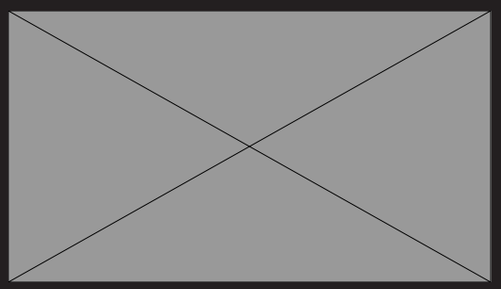
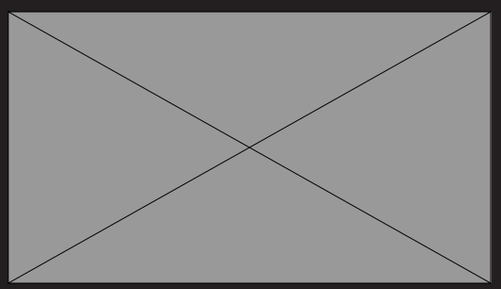
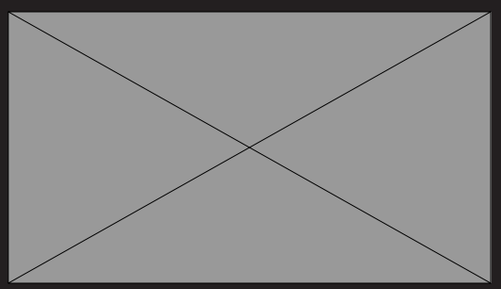
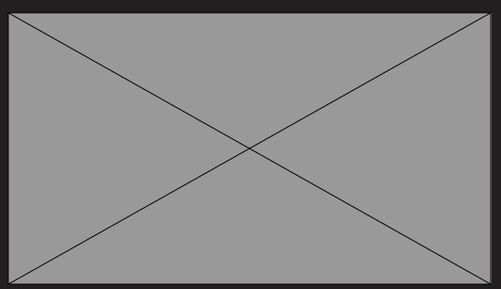
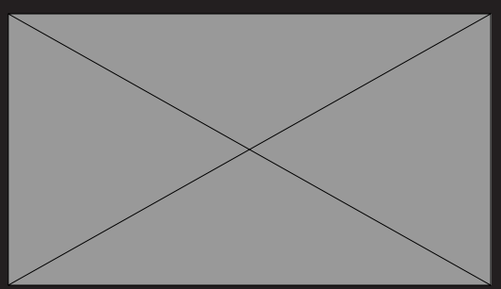
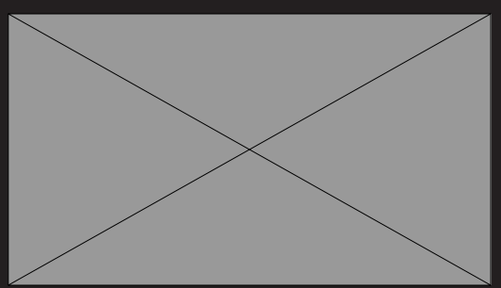
BB: Here I have to disagree. I remain convinced that for the experiment of the workshop/exhibitions that was initiated at MoMA and MoMA PS1 with Rising Currents and continued with Foreclosed to function, the projects produced need to have at once a powerful set of images that reconfigures the range of the possible, redraws the map of the discourse, as it were, and also has a very high quotient of reality. The careful analysis, numbers, and documentation were as essential to the design methods of the individual practioners as they were to the credibility of the display for the broader public. The two, to me, were the yin and yang of the whole experiment. I reiterated over and over again to the teams that their projects needed to be visionary enough to not be forgotten, and pragmatic enough to not be dismissed. "Utopian" has changed valence enormously in recent years, from a term that implied an idealistic belief in the capacity to imagine a wholesale improvement of social, political, and economic relations (often through an ideal urban blueprint), to a connotation of dreamy, unfounded, and in the realm of science fiction.

What becomes important with these projections is the capacity for people to see the reality of their world in them, to be able to see them as carriers for legitimate desires, as embodiments of desirable alternative presents, since none of the projects posited anything that could not be built right now. That can redraw the contour of the discussion, of people's desires… and also shock people into realizing that received "dream" images and everyday reality are profoundly out of sync with one another.

3: Can you comment on how you think these films engage and/or contribute to both the history and also the trajectory of architectural filmmaking?

RM: To be specific, there were no films in the show; they were all digital videos. Technologically, the instruments with which they were made differ from cinema at least as much as the iPhone camera differs from the Leica. To the degree that the history of media is a history of such discontinuities, videos like these are structurally distinct



from earlier films, just as the mostly realistic renderings that accompanied them differ from earlier drawings made using filmic techniques like montage. But so-called new media always bear traces of older ones. One striking attribute of the videos and renderings in the show, as well as any number of other contemporary visualizations, is the predominance of perspectival views. Just as the photographic camera internalized certain technical aspects of classical perspective such as the standpoint or viewpoint, computer algorithms have rewritten "photorealistic" perspective as code and made it ubiquitous, built-in.

The reasons for this might seem a bit chicken-and-egg: audiences (i.e. clients, or markets) demand realism, even as those audiences are daily trained by the entertainment industry that writes the software to expect their video games and special effects to be evermore lifelike. Partly in sync with these developments, perspective has returned to architectural representation with a vengeance. After all, the animation software with which architects usually make their movies was designed for Hollywood and is still used there to far more dramatic effect. More importantly, the demand for photorealism works, in microcosm, on exactly the same ideological register as does the American dream: it naturalizes decisions that

MICHAEL BELL

are otherwise contingent, such as the decision to favor, and to represent as natural-real, given, unquestioned-a way of life.

As the follow-up Buell Center research also showed, the most widely circulated images from the show were the most "realistic" ones, whether they were renderings or photographs of models. The videos were surely seen by a much smaller portion of the audience, since watching videos takes time, and they did not circulate outside the gallery space. A YouTube exhibition might have put them into wider circulation, but that would probably have required a different format!

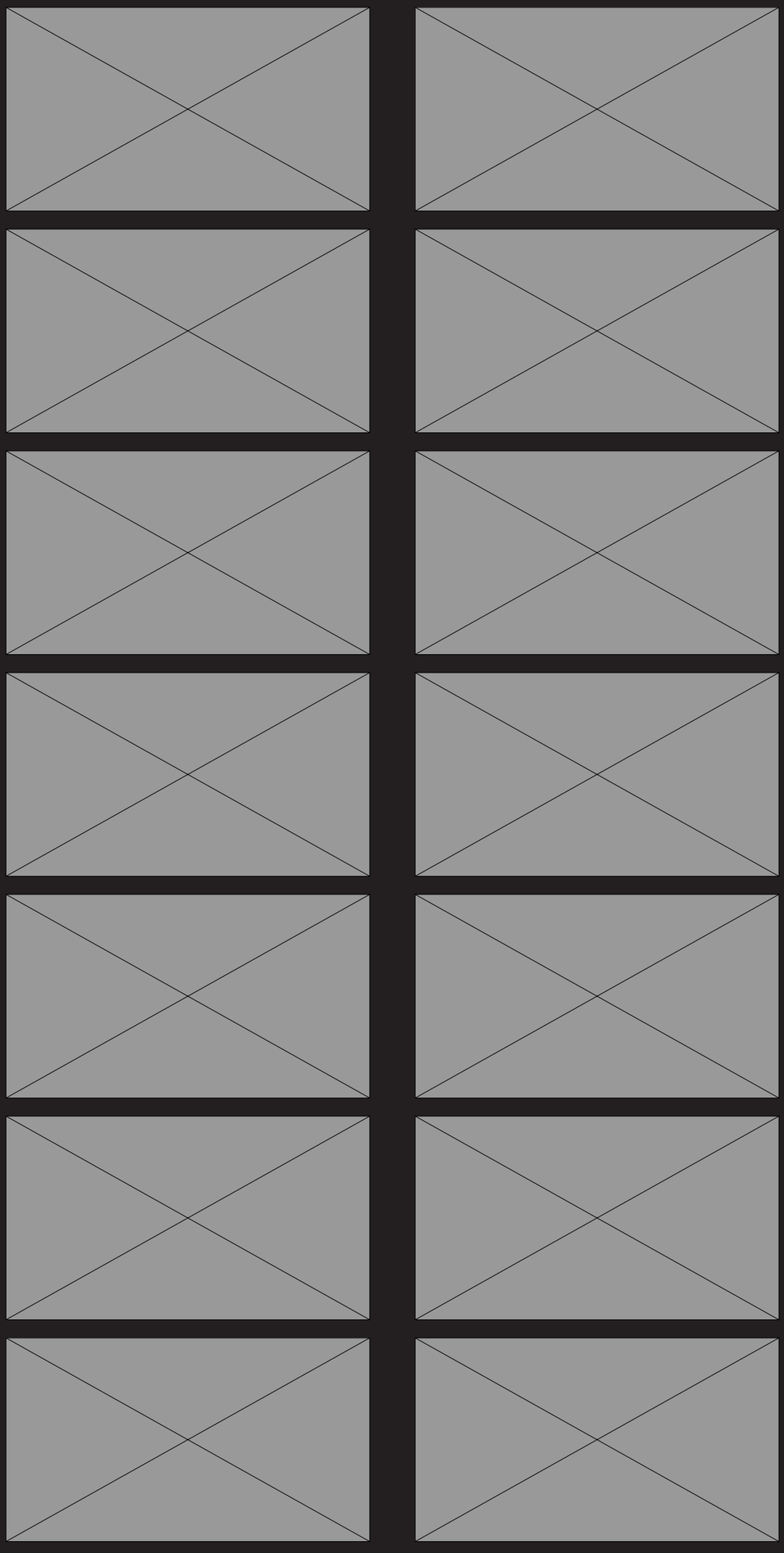
To your other question: I'm not sure how aware most of the designers were of precedents in architectural filmmaking or videography, since these are not widely known for similar reasons. If anything, the most notable continuity with precedent was in the overall effort to communicate with a general public, to explain the work rather than just present it. Even the most artful of the videos were, in the end, didactic. This was in keeping with earlier multimedia efforts to explain architectural or urban propositions to a broader public, whether at museums like MoMA or in venues like world's fairs.

BB: There is no single history of architectural filmmaking, but the great moments in that diverse history would include films that are as inventive in their techniques of framing, editing, montage, and even title sequences as Le Corbusier's highly propagandistic films of the 1920s and the amazing film work of the Eameses. Almost since its invention filmmaking has appealed to architects as a medium that is spatial and temporal in a way with fascinating parallels to architecture itself and thus has attracted a great deal of experimentation from architects. One thinks of the incredible resonance between experimental abstract films, such as those by Hans Richter, and the emergence of an architecture of spatial planes and sequences, a relationship solidified for instance by the seminal film issue of the avant-garde review G in the 1920s.

4: How do these films fit within the larger institutional direction and/or ambition of architectural curation at MoMA?

BB: MoMA was a pioneer in using film and television in relationship to its architectural and design objectives over the decades, although that history has yet to be written. One thinks , in particular, of the television appearances of Edgar Kaufmann, Jr. around the "Good Design" campaigns of the 1940s and early 1950s.

Ever since I arrived at the helm of Architecture & Design in 2007, I have found film critical to my commitment to architectural exhibitions that engage audiences in understanding what is at stake in architectural design and decision making. For instance, in the exhibition Home Delivery: Fabricating the Modern Dwelling (2008), film played an essential role in creating an exhibition that was about the design and fabrication process rather than simply about end results. The real challenge in making an architectural exhibition is how to engage the public critically with the work on display. In past decades the means of architectural representation often cultivated a level of complexity that was frankly mystifying to the uninitiated. For me the real challenge of an architectural curator working in a museum that has a mass appeal is to exhibit not simply the results but the very processes and the larger stakes-creative, social, economic, even ethical-of architectural practices in a world that demands radical change. In Home Delivery this took the form of creating anthologies of historical footage-mostly documentary-of house prefabrication. And then for the new commissions of prefabricated prototypes the website of the Museum hosted weekly updates on the design, fabrication, and delivery of five prefabricated or digitally fabricated houses. The exhibition itself played out temporally.



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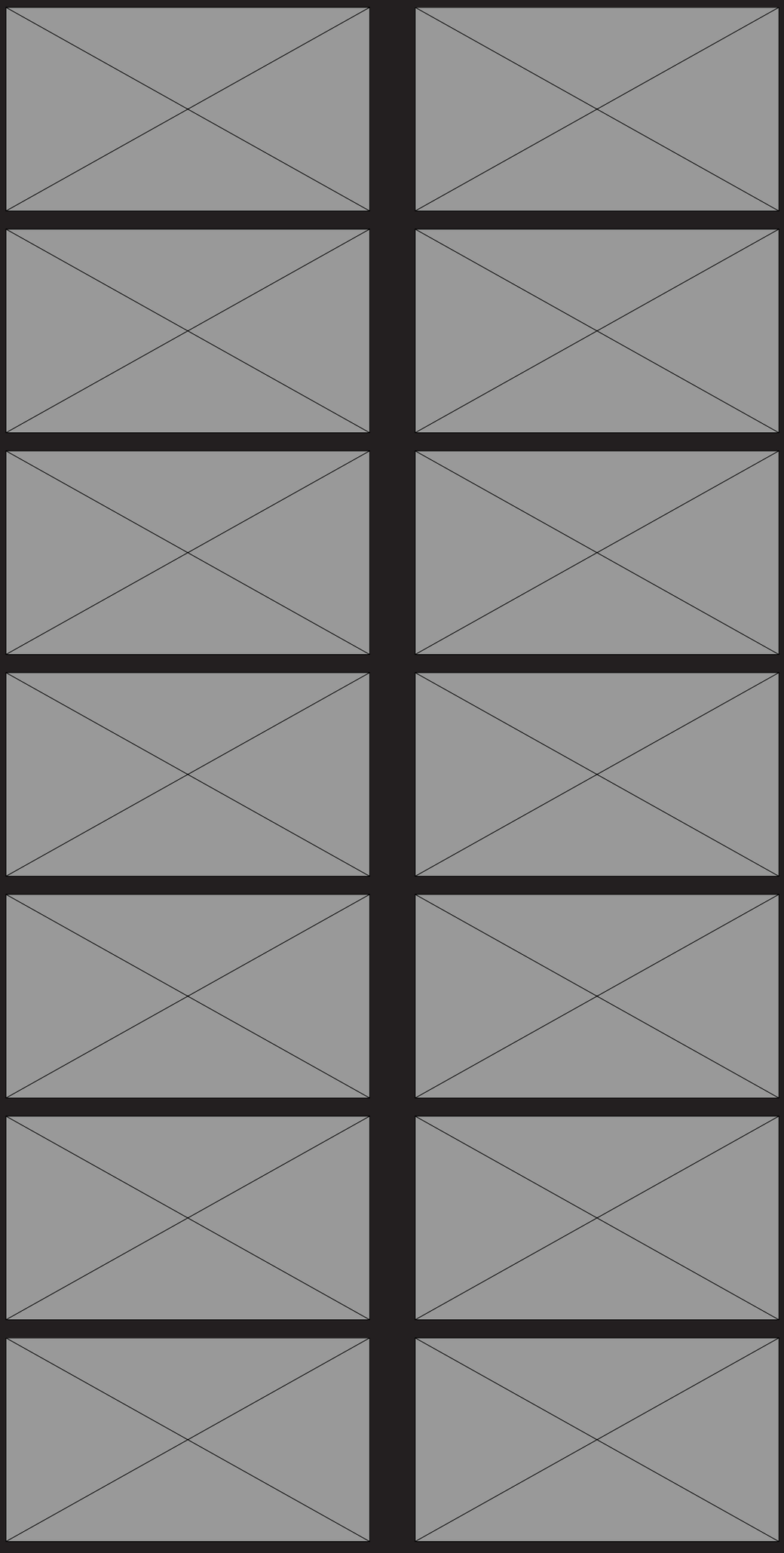
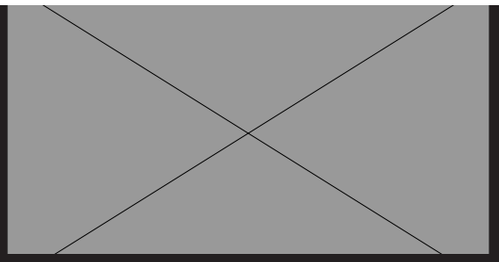
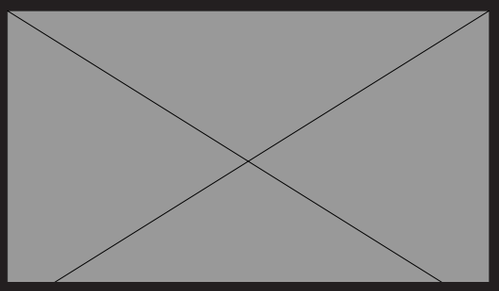
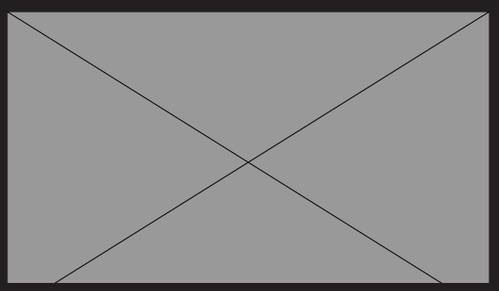
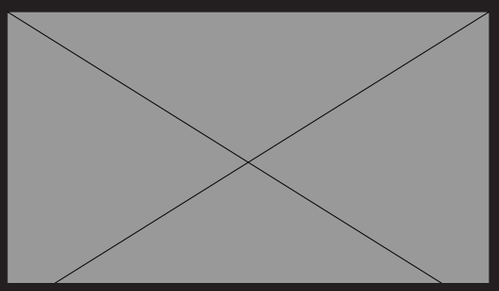
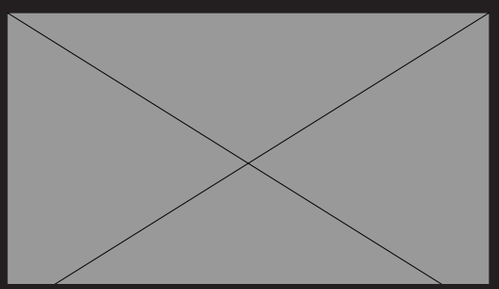


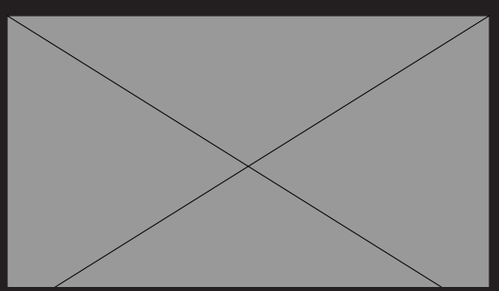


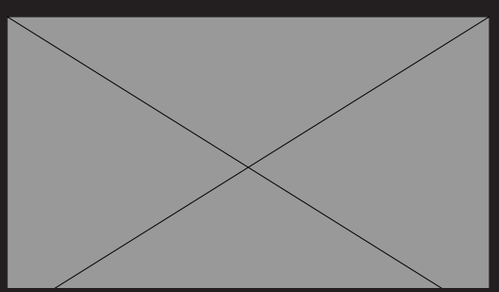




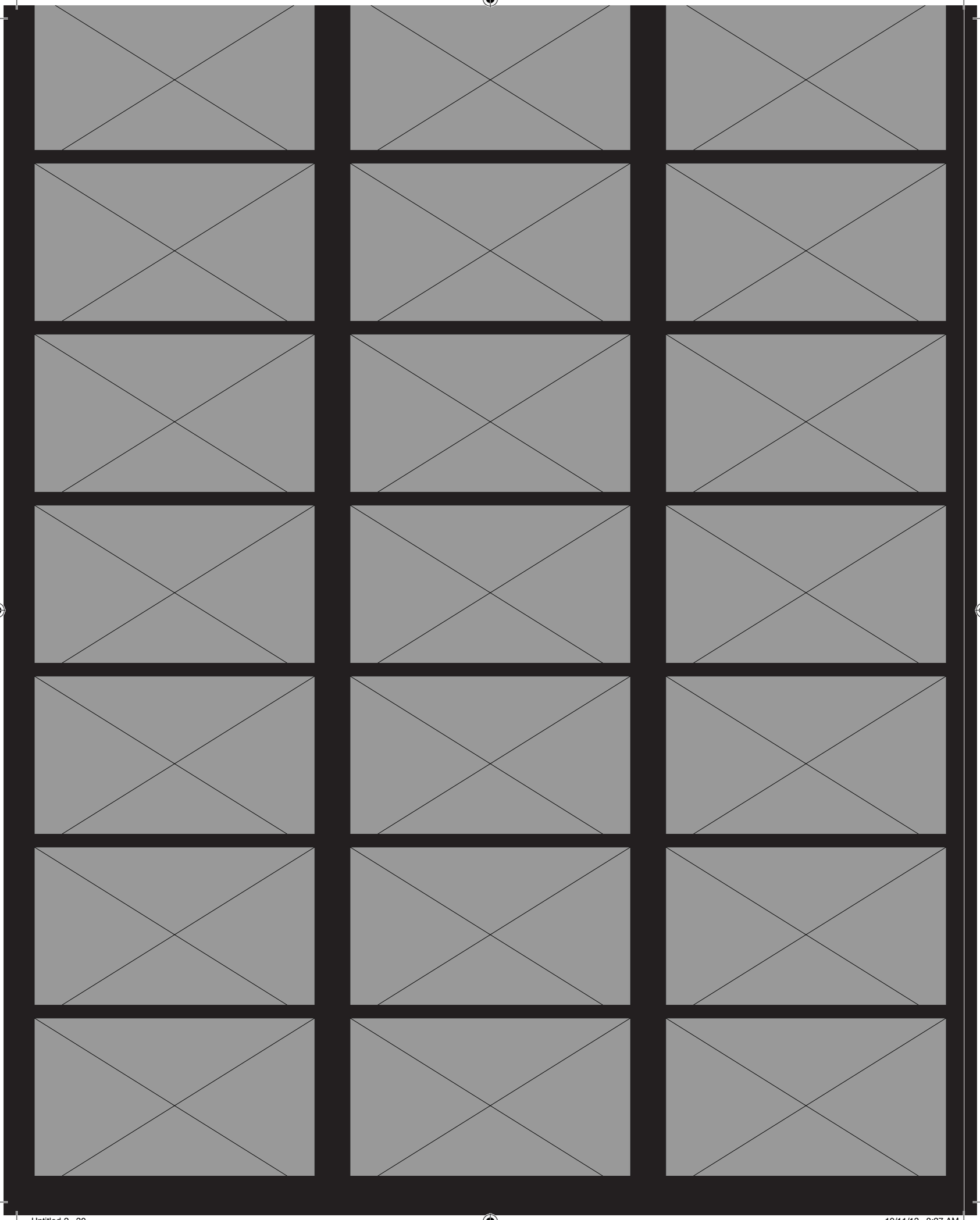








JEANNE GANG



Given a larger budget it would have been very interesting to precede the presentation of the projects in Foreclosed with a room of projections of films and television programs that had helped build the American dream, from "Mr. Blanding Builds His Dream House" (1948), inevitably, to "Leave it to Beaver." Ever since Beatriz Colomina's pioneering work, we know that media representations of architecture are an integral part of architectural culture, as much building blocks of the horizon of possibilities and desires as any other forms of representation by which architecture is projected or recorded.

5: Bonus and optional question—intentionally if impossibly broad: can you speak to the value of architectural storytelling, in the past and today?

RM: That would depend. Stories about what? About technological triumph, about the glorious past, about the heroic future, about the eternal present? Stories about justice or injustice, equity or exploitation, truth or lies? Mythical stories or historical ones? Stories with a beginning, a middle, and an end, or just an end? Or maybe: stories about value itself, about how it is constituted, how it is maintained, and how it may be renegotiated? But even then—as comedy, tragedy, farce, or epic?

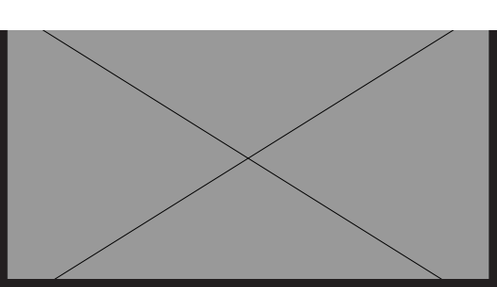
The narrow answer to your question, then, is that there has always been a narrative element to architecture. Think of the great friezes that crowned the Parthenon or wrapped the Pergamon Altar. Think of the symbolic rituals staged in such structures, or the liturgical procedures written into the plan of a Gothic cathedral. Think of the scriptural cadences sweeping across the surfaces of a centuries-old mosque, or the symbolic and political differences among imperial palaces planned around symmetrical or asymmetrical spatial sequences. Or think of the innumerable instances where buildings exude national myth or prosaic, archaic custom. Some of these were designed self-consciously to tell, repeat, or stage stories of different sorts. Some were not. It doesn't matter. They do it anyway.

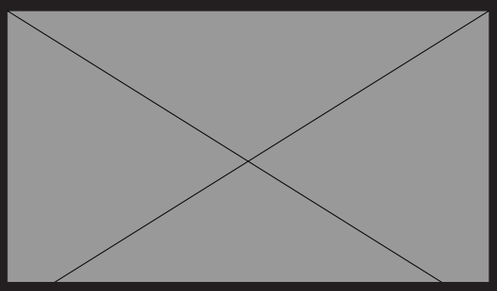
Today many architects and many critics suffer under the delusion that narrative equals figuration. But even the most abstract designs, and the media in which they are rendered, tell stories. El Lissitzky allegorized it cheekily in his lithograph "Beat the Whites with the Red Wedge." Still, some are tempted by all of those stories about the end of stories—stories that speak, tautologically, of replacing an outmoded literariness with the immediacy of sheer instrumentality. But as I've been saying, there is nothing more instrumental than a story. So we might as well learn.

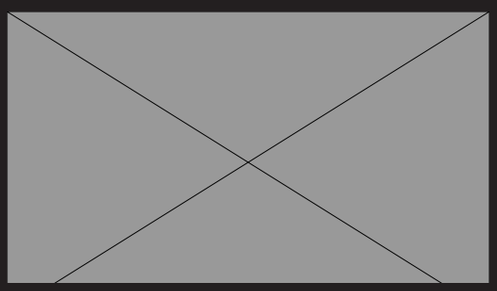
BB: I would only add that the very first printed text on architecture with illustrations is a narrative tale, the famous Hypnerotomachia Poliphili of Francesco Colonna. And I would also add that the relationship between space and memory is so intricately intertwined that the standard technique of the Memory Palace tells us that even without a story per se that space has deep resonances with the very way our minds structure the world, time, and experience.

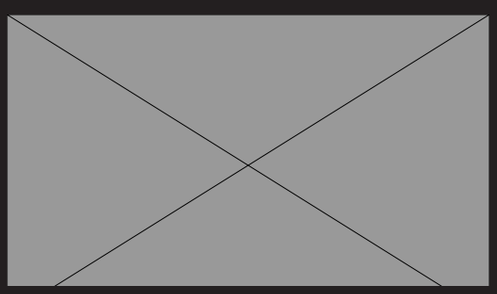
While architecture is not always narrative in its conception, it generates narratives in the way it enters the world. A building once completed and occupied interacts not only with its users but with the changing configurations of its environment as well. Narrative thus accrues even to architecture which sets out to refute or resist it.

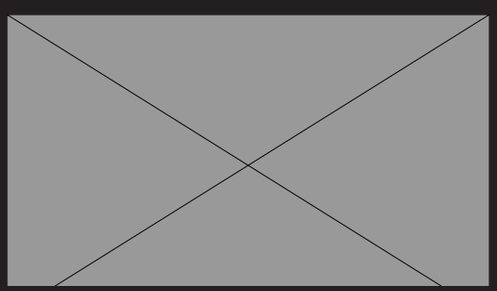
What was distinctive about the invitation to deploy filmic techniques as part of the making of a project in Foreclosed was the notion that those elements that accrue can also be part of the way in which architecture helps us to imagine new stories.

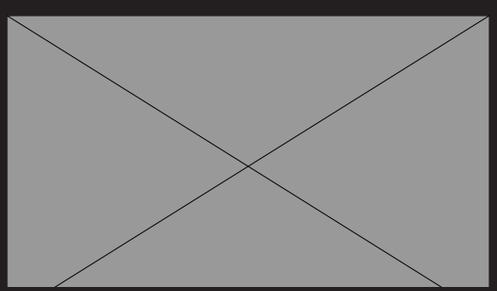












How might architectural history advance if groups of talented film and video makers were charged with telling stories in significant buildings of the past? Just as multiple performances of the repertoire of classical music vastly increase our understanding of the invariant texts of Mozart or Wagner, architectural scholarship stands to gain by encouraging media makers to "perform" works of Schinkel or Le Corbusier, preferably by filling them with human beings and narratives. The pretense of the camera surveying architectural spaces devoid of bodies, as if this provided a gold standard of objectivity, has become threadbare. Anyone concerned with the potential of moving images to illuminate the built environment will want to read this conversation. Two thumbs up!
–EDWARD DIMMENBERG