

# “Out of the blue Foam”. MVRDV’s Didden Village as a full-scale model

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“Imagine a building exactly like the Pantheon, except pink—the Pink Pantheon. The perspectival appearance of spatial properties produced by the Pink Pantheon and by the normal Pantheon would be the same. But there would be a significant aesthetic difference.”

Nick Zangwill, *Aesthetic/Sensory Dependence*, 1998

“What is it?” asked the neighbors.

“A color,” said the wizard. “I call it blue.”

“Please,” cried the neighbors, “please give us some.”

And that was how the Great Blueness came to be. After a short time everything in the world was blue.

Arnold Lobel, *The Great Blueness and other Predications*, 1968

## 1. Introduction

In the late sixties of the last century, architects interpreted a generalized appeal to realism – a word in itself susceptible of interpretation – in different forms. They oscillated from the post-modernist way, which relies on the narrative method and quotes images of the past in purely visual and formal schemes, to the neo-rationalist which searches the historical architecture of the abstract operational categories of universal value [1]. This debate resulted in both a sort of declaration of independence from the mere social constructive mission of architecture and to a self-referencing to the discipline, which also favored a reassessment of the architectural representation as autonomous pseudo-artistic expression. This shift had consequences in many fields, from the spread of specialized galleries for exhibitions of architectural drawings and models to that of specific studies on designs, from sketches on travel notebooks to photomontages; but important consequences can also be found in the idea of project. Peter Eisenman’s *House of Cards* or Venturi & Scott-Brown’s monument to Benjamin Franklin in Philadelphia, whose house is evoked through a metal frame that traces the edges like a full-scale cartoon-like model, testify a new taste for architecture as staging, as a representation in itself, as a citation of graphical models and models needed for its definition and construction. This game to move or conceal the threshold between reality and representation [2] has produced a kind of aesthetics of the model that has been alimented by the digital revolution and the diffusion of the innovative tools and procedures for the production of photo-realistic images.

Such aesthetics of the model [3] can be pursued not only through hierarchical and construction aspects of the structure but also through the formal abstraction an architect can deliberately assume to amplify the ambiguity and actively involve the viewer. This is the case of architecture inspired by the neoplastic principles of plane decomposition and coloration, which can share with the models qualities such as abstraction, apparent lability, reversibility, exterior prominence, and structural

empiricism. From the first photographs, the “approximate” Rem Koolhaas’ Villa Dall’Ava would even been mistaken for a full-scale model [4] while the pictures of the twisted steel rods of Frank Gehry’s Guggenheim Museum in Bilbao could not help but reminding a sort of huge study *maquette* to empirically support the metallic cladding.

In the last decades, this phenomenon has become an expressive interpretation of those architects who have become aware and have learned to manage and to expand the semantic and emotional quality of their projects, as in the case of MVRDV, also due to their innovative use of color.

## 2. MVRDV’s design process

For almost two decades, Rotterdam based MVRDV firm – an acronym designated by the surname’s initials of Winy Maas, Jacob van Rijs, Nathalie de Vries, its three founders – is known for provocative, creative, and imaginative tone of the architectural proposals. Their symbolic and experimental use of color often became the outstanding touch that integrates simple architectural volumes, sometimes with unpredictable consequences. The most famous episode is concerning the (formerly) Orange House in Amsterdam (2001). It is a 60x26x23-foot-high box built into the courtyard of a residential building as the result from a low budget, a zoning plan that dictated the maximum height and the program arranged by a couple of graphic designers. Despite MVRDV’s proposal to have it painted bright blue, the studio was painted orange, the warm color requested by the clients to have also a suggestion of brick about it, which gives the building mass” [5]. However, after it was completed, other residents started to complain about the disturbing orange reflections in their houses and engaged lawyers, press, and television to have it changed. After some disappointing episodes, “the municipality decided to pay half the cost of repainting of the house (green) and that the owner would pay the rest, if the owner would be happy with an official living permission (a permit)” [6].

As learnt while working at OMA in Nineties [7], MVRDV’s design process happens mainly thorough various scale models that constitute the major cognitive tools in the design process. To emphasise their abstract character, concept models are usually realized in a single material. The technique of modelling influences design, of course, and Foam (a Polyurethane cast of an aggregate condition between solid and void) allows designers to generate shapes that cannot be produced with other materials. Foam is soft, direct and versatile, easy to shape, to test and discard as many ideas as possible in a short time. Model-makers must not have a defined geometric idea in their mind as for a cardboard or a digital model. As Albena Yaneva confessed, “if you desperately want to find a smart idea, you go cutting foam (...). Foam cutting is the perfect medium for rapid thinking, allowing them to imagine the new shape in the moment of cutting instead of anticipating in advance” [8]. Foam models spark designers’ imagination much more then computer models usually do and occasionally favour fecund misinterpretations and mistakes that are accepted and possibly encouraged as a basic component of a design process in which “reusing, recollecting, reinterpreting, adapting, remaking (...) are all synonyms for creating” [9]. A ludic approach often prevails while arranging a model: it is shifted and rotated in the air, like a toy while his interior voids are

inspected like a doll house. Models seem to possess a sort of magnetic field attracting exogenous energies and elements, as a design choice is something strictly related to being surprised by own work. “There is something mystic in design that surprises the maker, that makes her stand and stroll and dance in the space with the model in her hands” [10].

### **3. “Il est ne pas un *photoshop* que je montre à vous”**

Like most of MVRDV’s projects, the Didden Village (2002-06) has been mainly conceived and presented through Foam models. It is an extension built on the flat roof of a traditional terraced house of the late nineteenth century in the center of Rotterdam. It consists of two concrete volumes that add about 45 sqm to the house and are surrounded by 120 sqm of outdoor area enclosed by an opaque two meters tall wall with horizontal windows (fig.1a). The outdoor areas are furnished with two cylindrical flower boxes and tables with benches. The volume covered by a gable roof contains two rooms of the children with beds on a mezzanine accessible by ladders. The two volumes are connected downstairs with two double helical staircases inserted in opaque iron cylinders [11].

MVRDV had to take in account there was little time to complete such an intervention because the city of Rotterdam was about to be included in a list of protected monuments. This deadline has affected the simplified design of the architectural volumes, the massive prefabrication of building elements, their arrangement by means of a crane placing the parts to be assembled and, in part, also the choice of a unique color unifying all and able to mask the inevitable imperfections quickly and effectively. It only took four days to put this “crown on top of a monument”, where the crown is the new construction and the monument is the traditional building below it.

The interior of the bedroom is fully painted red while the rooms of the children are covered with yellow wooden panels but it is obviously the blue hue of all exterior surfaces to characterize this small architectural intervention. Passers-by down the road can see just its blue perimeter wall but the photographs of the realization induce an alienating effect. One cannot but think of a fiction, a montage that produces a kind of continue renegotiation between reality and fiction, between Magritte’s *The Infinite Recognition* (1963) and *The Truman Show* ending (fig.2b). It is no coincidence that in 2008, introducing the slides the conference held at the Pavilion de l’Arsenal in Paris, Winy Maas told the audience: “Il est ne pas a photoshop que je montre à vous” [12].

### **4. “Le Toit-Village”**

The association between a basic-form architecture and a saturated hue constitutes a recurrent formula in the production of MVRDV, as well as the idea of differentiating chromatically the pieces that ideally constitute their composite architectures, like Mirador in Madrid (2001) or Housing Silo in Amsterdam (2005). Either inspired to stacked containers or Lego constructions (fig.2d), this strategy puts in scene not only the industrial assembly criteria but also the idea of montage [13], which is paradigmatically expressed at all levels. Montage is reflected: in the general conception of a clearly distinguished expansion to preexisting; in representing the

project (in particular the exploded isometric view reminds the assembly instruction of a Lego box, fig.1b); in its implementation, due to the massive prefabrication of the parties; in the perception of a foreign object in the environment, largely influenced by the choice of colors.

The iconography of the “house onto the house” or the “village on top of a building” has several precedents. The idea of using the roofs of the city as an artificial platform belongs to Futuristic urban visions, such as Virgilio Marchi’s designs. The (modernist) house with a garden on the top of the skyscraper in Max Fleisher’s *Mr. Bug Goes to Town* (1941, fig.2c) is a symptom of a general aspiration to intend the city as a place for a new negotiation between men and nature, whose effects can be appreciated up to Pixar’s *Up* (2009). On the other hand, the idea of living in a cottage on top of the roofs of a big city, in a sort of Arcadian compromise between nature and artifice, still embodies the dreams of many, as reported by New York chronicles [14].

In the case of the Didden Village, where vernacular forms seem to seek for a dialogue with the existing buildings, the color and the manner it is used instead produce a remarkable contrast with the city and with its brick and stone skin. The perception of the archetypical wooden houses is totally driven by their very monochromatic surface, which apparently weld them to the ground and the wall all around. The meticulously monochromatic choice, combined with the almost sculptural definition of volumes that are practically free of any obvious constructive architectural details, gives unity to all surfaces, implicitly demonstrating its constructive process of object fell from the sky. At the same time the gradation of cyan blue choose between at least four samples tested, could suggest a mimetic aspiration. However, the latitude conditions and the everyday gray and cloudy skies of Netherland would frustrate such an intent to disappear virtually in the blue of the sky.

The blue, or rather the blue-cyan, complementary to red and yellow chosen for the interiors, appears rather a color chosen for its the scarce occurrence in the urban landscape or, better said, for its obvious artificiality. Among the many possible levels of interpretation, three subtly intertwined keys lead respectively to art, imagination and representation.

## **5. “The Great Blueness and Other Pre-figurations”**

When Nick Zangwill used the upper quoted example of the “Pink Pantheon” to demonstrate that “the aesthetic properties of a work of architecture depend on both spatial and sensory properties in a mutually dependent fashion” [15], he probably did not imagine his provocation could become true few years later.

Blue transforms an everyday object such as the two archetypical houses into something extraordinary and spiritual. Such a lesson can be drawn from the experience of Yves Klein, the “Messenger of the Age of Space”, for his use of the Klein Blue paint on everyday objects and artworks as an attempt to evoke the immateriality, or rather, the liberation of the spirit from the material [16].

Marco Navarra highlighted the seductive character of the project related to the “fairytale tone of the azure blue veil, that enwraps everything and creates wonder and bewilderment” [17] and indeed there are many elements that contribute to the

idea that the Didden Village was conceived as a magical castle in the clouds. Much of the expansion is destined to children and the presence of a playful and fantastic component appears undeniable and, at the same time justified. This may have influenced the bright colors but also the double-helix staircases, which Winy Maas directly link to that of the Chateau of Chambord [18]: undeniably, they help to create a dense network of interwoven and unconventional paths between the various levels and environments, including migration on the roofs through the skylights.

Other indirect references could be found in Arnold Lobel's *The Great Blueness and other Predications*. Finding his village and residents sad and gray, a powerful wizard created and donated them some blue color with which they covered houses, clothes, objects and even animals: "And that was how the Great Blueness came to be. After a short time everything in the world was blue" [19]. Indeed, Lobel's poetic fable could constitute a sort of underground plot of the project. This would be confirmed by the presence of both a spiral staircase, similar to the one the wizard uses to go down to his underground laboratory, and the use of red and yellow in the interior, which were created by the wizard after the blue (fig.2a). Moreover, such an idea would recall the ancestral identity between artist and magician [20], like in the myth of Daedalus [21]. As highlighted by Walter Benjamin, the painter works like a magician: someone who "maintains the natural distance between himself and the patient; though he reduces it very slightly by the laying on of hands, he greatly increases it by virtue of his authority" [22].

Surely, the Didden Village is linked to the idea of representation, staging, fiction. Similar to Oldenburg and Van Bruggen's ordinary objects depicted in monumental scale, it is as conceived and built as it were a model, a full-scale *maquette* temporarily resting onto Rotterdam roofs, transformed into a monumental podium. Thanks to the archetypal form, the simplification of details and the monochrome aspect, MVRDV claim it is a prototype for other interventions through which not only to expand individual buildings but also to plan urban "densification". The Didden Village paradigmatically illustrates their ideas about intervention in the historical city. Therefore, it can be associated to the (formerly) Orange house as well as to the famous WoZoCo as strategies to fill empty spaces and extend apartments in collective residential buildings. As evidenced by Navarra, "Didden Village does not limit itself to a generic extension of hypothesis, but it suggests a transformation that, starting from the inside of a single architecture, can circulate like a virus, using the resources of the organism as a guest for the renewing of the entire body of the city" [23]. As a corollary, the color becomes a possible perceptual key to read the urban scale of the expansion work as a network of extraneous objects placed on roof as well as to highlight the idea of urban development itself.

## **6. "The Blue Mark" or the color of prefiguration**

To highlight the huge potential of all that temporarily occupied space in the Netherlands, during the twelfth Venice Architecture Biennale in 2010, the Netherlands Architecture Institute (NAI) and Rietveld Landscape conceived the exhibition *Vacant NL*, whose main feature was a blue-Foam model city suspended in the top half of the Dutch pavilion (fig.3a). Visitors entering the pavilion passed under the large model with few clues about its actual form and function. Only after

ascending to the mezzanine, they could discover the cityscape from above and discover the sense of the installation as a representation of existing potentials of Dutch urban areas.

In 2012, MVRDV themselves made something similar in Bordeaux to show the master plan for the 35-hectare Bastide Niel development (fig.3c). Blue-painted metallic miniature buildings were erected on the opposite side of the river on top of the *Miroir d'Eau*, or “water mirror” fountain, which caused clouds of mist to rise up and surround the exhibition while Tennis umpires’ chairs around the edges provided a viewpoint over the rooftops, like after stepping up a medieval town in an historical center.

These applications are symptomatic of the role concept models have gained in recent years, passing from the formal definition to communication. They both go beyond the simple representation of a project, adopting the model to put-in-scene an event, a sensorial experience engaging body and mind, a sort of epiphany of future. The early mysterious vision of the model either from below or in the midst of the vapor, is functional to its full discover from a vantage point to be reached after a sort of initiatory route. This is not too different from the Didden Village experience itself, which can innovate the perception of an entire city as predicted by Jörn Utzon years ago [24].

These applications also underline the blue Foam models seem to embody today the idea of planning. Like a manifesto, their blue skin stands for a not-yet-defined materiality of a future building, like in a sort of cinematic Blue Screen. Lacking any visible quality of the materials, the reification process is suspended. The concept models only advice the transformation process has begun, returning the observer’s gaze to the architect. Already Leon Battista Alberti recommended “that the models are not accurately finished, refined, and highly decorated, but plain and simple, so that they demonstrate the ingenuity of him who conceived the idea, and not the skill of the one who fabricated the model” [25]. At the same time, beyond the many controversial cultural acceptations of this color [26], in the design process blue is literally the color of the space as perceived by men, relating with the concepts of incommensurable, limitless, and available to be occupied.

Thus, blue Foam models have become part of the iconography of the contemporary architect who prefers to appear no more as a cultured person in a refined wood-cladded studio but as a relaxed artisan working. While in the mid-sixteenth century, the Dutch Marten van Heemskerck had imposed the iconography of the artist’s self-portrait before the ruined Colosseum [27], MVRDV’s Winy Maas would rather appear with blue Foam models surrounding him. This is confirmed, for example, by the video in which he outlines his ideas on the future development of the Grand Paris, shot in MVRDV office with models in blue Foam in both the foreground table and the background metal stacks [28]. As a sort of symbolic reference, the blue color distinguishes the additions from existing parts even in the renderings after digital models shown in the presentation (fig.3b).

In the end, MVRDV’s choice of a blue-cyan village-like addiction can be mainly attributed to the meaning of “prefiguration of the project” that blue color has acquired from the massive use of blue Foam models in contemporary architectural offices.

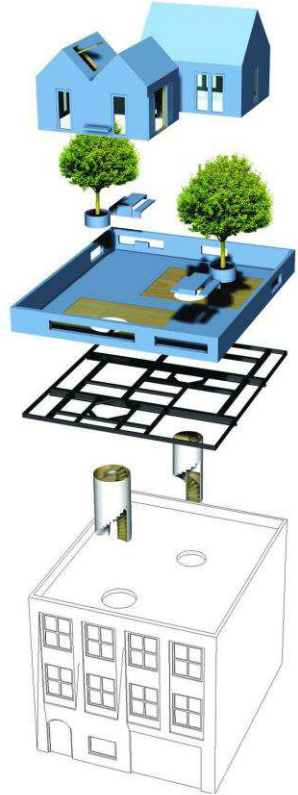


Fig. 1 – MVRDV, Didden Village, Rotterdam, 2002-06. a. Views of the building. b. Exploded axonometric view with constructive layers. From below: the existing house; the two double helical staircases; the horizontal structure; the “tray” with trees and built-in furnishings; the two huts. Photo and drawing: Courtesy of MVRDV.

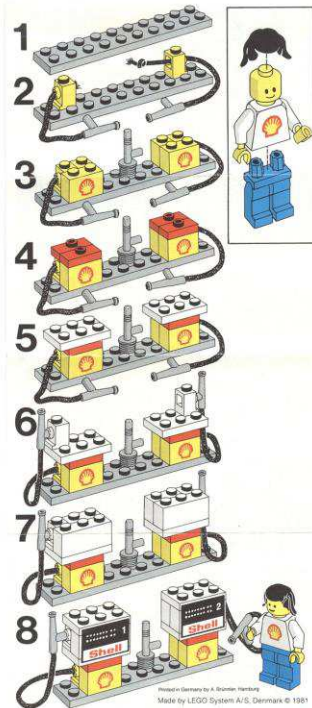
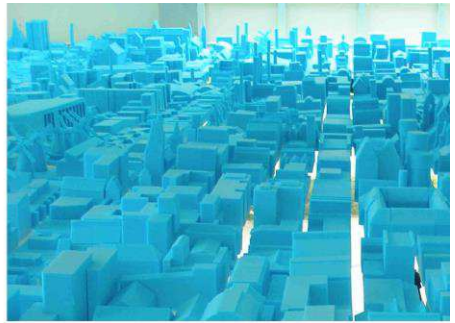


Fig. 2 – From above: a. A. Lobel, *The Great Blueness*, 1968: the wizard painting his own house and the red version of his staircase to dungeon; b. P. Weir, *The Truman Show*, 1998: a final shot; c. M. Fleischer, *Mr. Bug goes to Town*, 1941: the dream of the village upon the skyscraper; d. LEGO's instruction to build, axonometric view, 1981.





SUPER SORBONNE



ET SI GRANDPARIS DEVENAIT LA VILLE LA PLUS COMPACTE AU MONDE ?  
(LE CUBE)

218 KM  
6 X 6 KM



Fig. 3 – From above: a.NAI & Rietveld Landscape, *Vacant NL*, XII Venice Architecture Biennale, 2010: views of the foam model from below and above; b. W. Maas, *Grand Paris 10*. MVRDV avec ACS et AAF, 2010: two renderings from digital models and W. Maas talking between models; c. MVRDV, *Model of Bastide Niel development*, Bordeaux, 2012. Courtesy of MVRDV.

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