

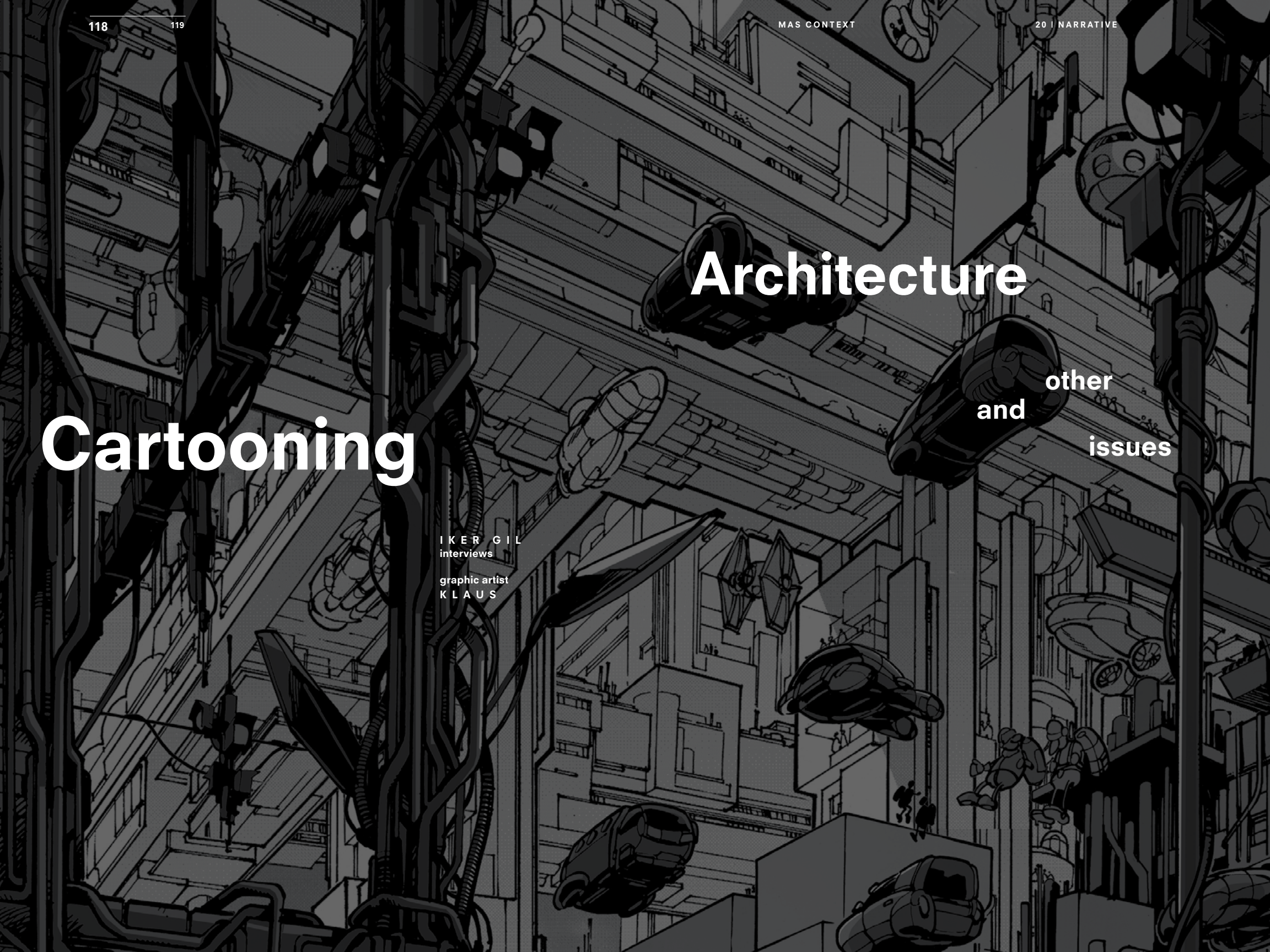
# Cartooning

## Architecture

other  
and  
issues

IKER GIL  
interviews

graphic artist  
KLAUS





**As our guest editor for the issue, I would like to ask you a few questions regarding your work and trajectory.**

OK, but I'm always weary of explaining myself, leaving my clown disguise—not to mention my rabbit hole. I'm more comfortable with my usual detached position, leaving my stuff out there for people to discover and/or interpret it. Speaking about it seems too likely to have the effect of needing to explain a joke. It's just not funny anymore. Someone wrote me regarding one of my last cartoons and said, "I don't get it. I love it!" I think the line between elusive (thus interesting) and banal is very easy to cross. Plus, I am also the editor, which makes this slightly confusing.

**Well, you're only guest co-editor.**

Right! [laughs] That makes it easier, then.

**You recently had a rather long chat with Brendan Cormier and Jimenez Lai in the "Ways To Be Critical" issue of *Volume* magazine, where you were quite loquacious.**

Yes, that was a most unexpected one, which had to be done pretty fast, and was totally due to Jimenez. He talked to Brendan, then he approached me, and I couldn't say no. I mean, the magazine was co-founded by Koolhaas. Given that he is the focus of many of my cartoons, isn't the irony delicious? It was a nice conversation. I have to thank Brendan and Jim for it. Actually, I have two more pending interviews this month. For some reason, they have all come together at the same time.

**Let's talk about how it all started. I guess you have been drawing and doing comics for a long time, but when did the "Klaus" trademark and the architectural theme start?**

I've been drawing as far as I can remember, but I first thought of turning to architectural-themed cartoons around a decade ago. At that point, the editor of an architectural journal approached me with the idea of revamping a comic strip about this struggling young architect that he had been publishing intermittently in the journal. He wasn't very sure about where to take it, and I suggested burning any copies that were left, because it was—let's say it wasn't very good. As it usually happens, after I decided there was no hope for the comic strip, the idea started taking shape in the back of my head, and soon it developed into a whole series with its own fleshed-out supporting cast, etc.

**Your first architectural cartoons were actually published on paper, in a printed magazine?**

Well, yes, but not in that one. When I approached the publisher and he had a look at it, he said, "but... this looks nothing like the old cartoons!" My mental response was, "well, that's the best that could happen to you, right?" [laughs] Still, he wasn't sure, so we put it into a halt while he made up his mind, and in the meanwhile, a new magazine was founded. They called me to contribute with some writing, so I took the character with me, and started publishing this comic strip called "Corb," or "The Adventures of John Corb." Unfortunately, the magazine,

which was a rather ambitious project, died after a few issues, and so did the strip. By that time, I had plotted some two hundred strips, although less than thirty had been published. I may resurrect it at some point. A little later I found out that the other journal had also closed. The reason it was taking them so long to make a decision was that the publisher himself had passed away.

**That is a surprisingly "mainstream" start for someone who is better known for such iconoclastic work. When did you decide to make a new start and go digital?**

Well, at that point I was moving to the USA, and I thought there were enough corpses on my back, so I put "Klaus" to sleep, just stepping out of the shade for occasional collaborations with small publications, such as *The Harvard Satirical Press*. But Harvard was too interesting of an environment for someone brought up as an architect in a European system. You have all these vedettes from the architectural star system coming in and out to full auditoriums like rock stars, doing their show, and being applauded by the audience—or fighting each other. It was an amusing spectacle to watch, certainly asking to be satirized. The point of no return happened when Preston Scott Cohen, recently appointed as new Chair of Architecture, created these "Discussions in Architecture" series, which basically consisted of him playing *Inside the Actors Studio* with each week's guest. I happened to attend one of the first, which featured Ben Van Berkel lecturing on the BMW museum, which—he defended—was a direct translation of a double helix diagram. Which it is not. You know it, I know it, even he knows it. The problem was that Preston also knew it, and, God forbid, he couldn't miss the opportunity to tell Van Berkel in front of everyone. He had even built a digital recreation of what a real double helix ramp would look like. But, as it often happens, Ben would not step back, and Preston, being like one of those small dogs that bite you and never let go, made everything degenerate into a Monty Python-esque "argument clinic" sketch, with different iterations of "No, you didn't," "Yes I did." So I thought, "That's it. I can't let go this, either." I drew a first cartoon, sent it to someone, and there it all started.



The infamous "argument clinic sketches" played by Preston Scott Cohen and Ben Van Berkel at Harvard, December 2008 © Klaus

**Was this the start of *Klaustoon's Blog*? Before the revamping I remember it had a subtitle that read, "Cartooning the GSD and other issues."**

No, not yet. This one, as well as other GSD-related strips were first published in the late GSD Online Journal, *Trays*, edited at that point by Quilian Riano [from DSGN AGNC] and some others. However, the pace at which I produced them exceeded the cadence of the journal, and, having no respect whatsoever for institutions, I foresaw I could get them into trouble. Also, I felt I wanted to tackle issues that had more to do with my private obsessions, so I decided to go on sending them the GSD-related strips and open *Klaustoon's Blog* on the side.

**Is this the point where the Koolhaas "Hope" cartoons happened? Could you speak a little bit about how this series of cartoons came into being? In a way, they have come to represent your work. People loved them during the *Architectural Narrative* exhibition we organized last year.**

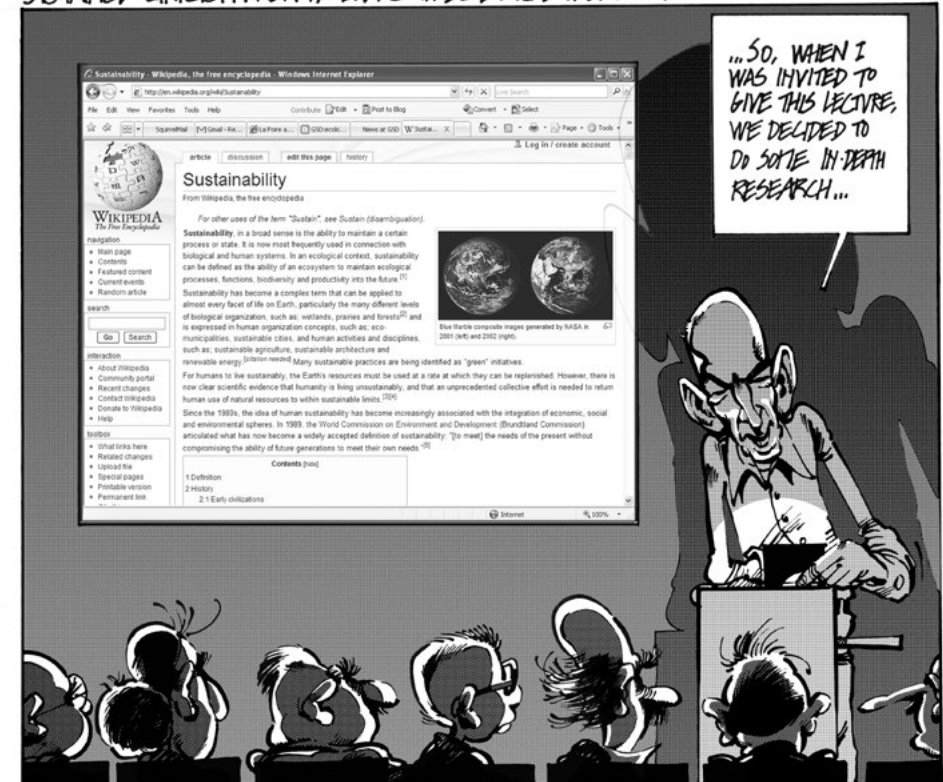
Yes, complete death of success. If I remember correctly, it still took some cartoons to get to that point. Actually, that one sprang from a previous, GSD-related cartoon with Koolhaas in it. In April 2009, the GSD hosted a big conference/exhibition titled *Ecological Urbanism*, curated by Gareth Doherty and Mohsen Mostafavi. And, seemingly with a straight face, they invited Mr. K as a keynote speaker, to lecture about sustainability. He didn't disappoint, and turned it—inadvertently or not—into a big joke, which I am not sure everyone got. There was a common agreement on the banality of it, so I decided to channel that into a cartoon, which soon Kazys [Varnelis, director of the NetLab at Columbia] uploaded to his blog, making it immediately successful. So, I saw some light in that direction. This was only a few months after Obama won the presidential election for the first time, and Shepard Fairey's poster was still everywhere. Exactly one year before that, the April issue of *L'Uomo Vogue* had featured good ol' Remmett both on his cover and in several of his inner pages. It just seemed a natural step forward in this particular ego-trip, both the identification with "the most powerful man in the world", and specially the "Hope" motto. My only quip is: I'm not sure everyone got the obvious irony.

**You've kept adding new items to this series, and Koolhaas has been a recurrent topic in your cartoons, usually depicted under a rather sarcastic light. What's your opinion on Rem Koolhaas as the celebrity architect *par excellence*? Do you have an active stand against him?**

Well, the Kunst-Haas series is a good example of me milking the cow. Seriously speaking: ideas usually come in clusters, partly because of simple reactive thinking, partly because it is easier to think in terms of narratives. In the case of the "Hope" cartoon, the many iterations and puns of it that you can find throughout the Internet speak tons of how appealing it is. Once I drew the first one, I couldn't stop coming up with new twists. I had planned twelve of them, to make a sort of Warhol-esque composition, but they are rather time-consuming, so only the Hope, Kool, Hush, Evil, and Pope were finished.

As for Koolhaas, I do not have an active stand against him. Obviously, I do think "starchitecture" has played a big part in leading architecture to the point it is

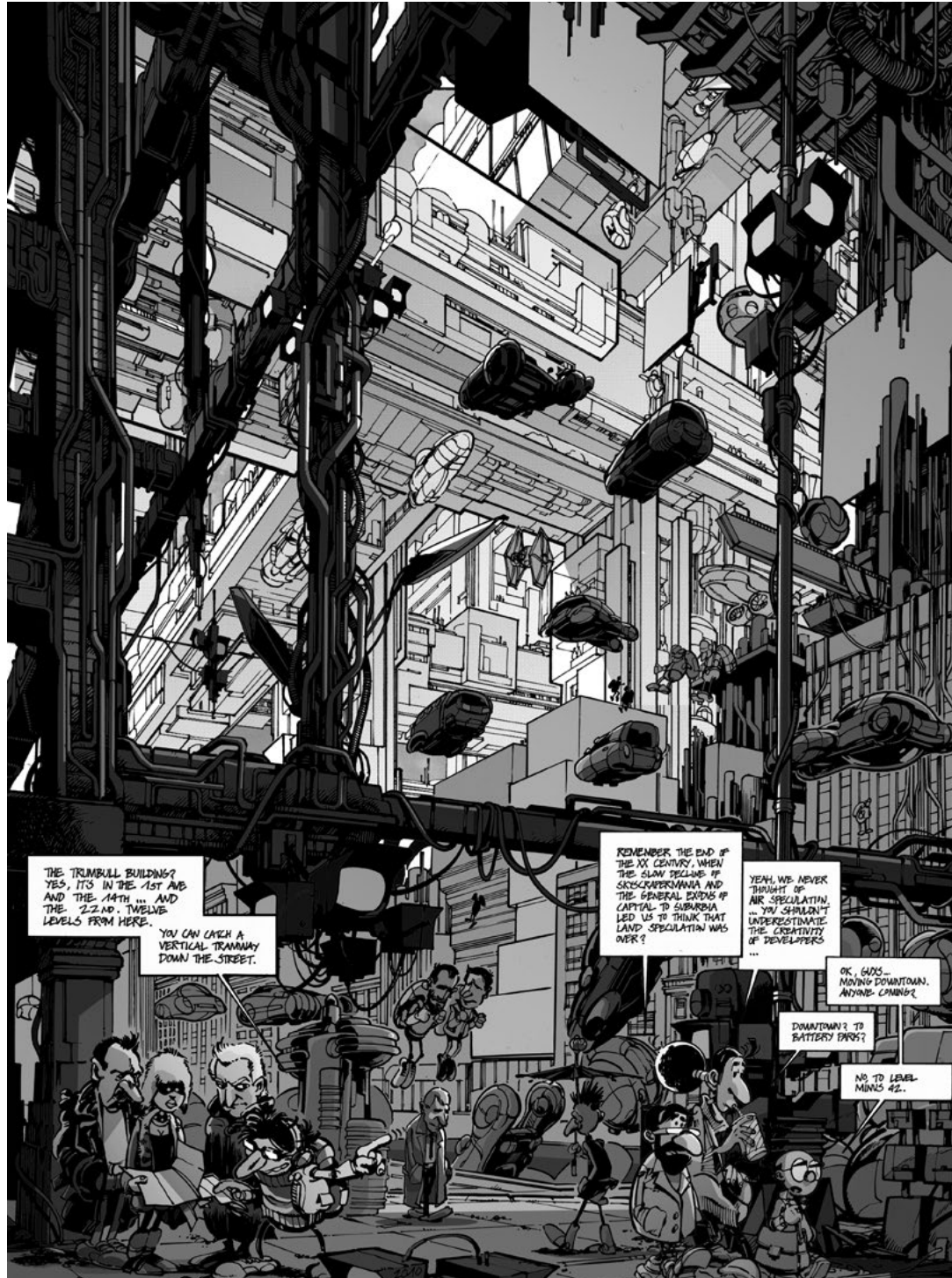
**SUSTAINED CINICISM: REM KOOLHAAS IN ECOLOGICAL URBANISM.**



now, although it also has to do with architects avoiding for several decades facing an inevitable crisis in the traditional understanding of the discipline/profession—that is, until the general economic crisis made it explode. Very tellingly, "starchitects" are the sector that has been affected the least by the crisis. Koolhaas himself is an interesting figure, one that's difficult not to notice. He has been very carefully constructing his own legend in order to present himself as the new Le Corbusier—to the point of making a revamp of the Ville Savoye in Paris—which makes him eminently cartoonizable. He also plays with his public image as a game, being deliberately ambiguous about the way his words and works are related. He has been very successful in coating himself in an aura of mystery, so that everything he does seems part of an overall strategy. Many of his moves are very calculated, so that one tends to think that everything—even the fortuitous stuff—is, too.

**Do you know if he's conscious of your cartoons and his presence on them?**

I don't know. I guess so, though. The "Hope" cartoon is all around the Internet, and some weeks after it first appeared, someone sent me a photograph of it hanging on a wall in OMA's canteen in Rotterdam. However, I don't really care that much. To me, all this started as a private joke. Most of the cartoons are designed to entertain myself, thus, they feature my own obsessions, and all those



cross-references that you would need to dwell inside my head in order to get. I work in a niche within a niche: you need to be an architect to get into the game, and even that wouldn't grant you total access; Eisenman, Banham, Kubrick, Gangnam Style... it's all just a big, private joke.

**However, your work has broken the borders of the blog very often.**

Yes, and it happened very quickly. I think the first thing I did outside the blog was *The New City Reader*, a journal-performance that Joseph Grima and Kazys Varnelis were editing to go along with the Last Newspaper exhibition that the New Museum organized in New York in late 2010, early 2011. They asked me to provide editorial cartoons for that, "Sort of New Yorker cartoons"... Of course, I went wild and what they got was something radically different. At the same time, the Architects Society of South Portugal, via a former colleague, approached me to do an exhibition on my work still not even two years into it. In September of the following year, the exhibition celebrating the first 50 years of the Harvard GSD featured several of my cartoons. I'm still amazed by that. In terms of magazines, I've been here and there, in *Harvard Design Magazine*, *Conditions*, *eVolo*, in the fantastic *MAS Context* [laughs], in the *Russian Journal Project International*... *Praxis* is the last one I've collaborated with. Funnily enough, I created my "Klaus" persona not to contaminate my academic work. Now, it grants me access to places I would not normally be able to go. That's one of the main reasons I keep it alive. That, and the fact that, like Graham Chapman, I haven't had enough fun yet.

**Now that you are done guest editing this issue, what are your plans for the future?**

For the time being, I think I have enough with trying to keep pace with my monthly collaboration with *uncube* magazine, and there had been some talking about starting another collaboration with a (very) big magazine, but that's still to be confirmed. Also, I plan to expand my venting of my architectural frustrations via comic books, and design some architectural follies in fiction. There is a big project, "Tales of the Pneumatic Passage," which I have been pulling back for a while, and I will probably have to postpone yet one more time, because of two other things that may or may not happen, involving a couple of editors featured in this very issue. We'll see, fingers crossed.