



INTRODUCTION BY
AARON BETSKY

TEXTS BY
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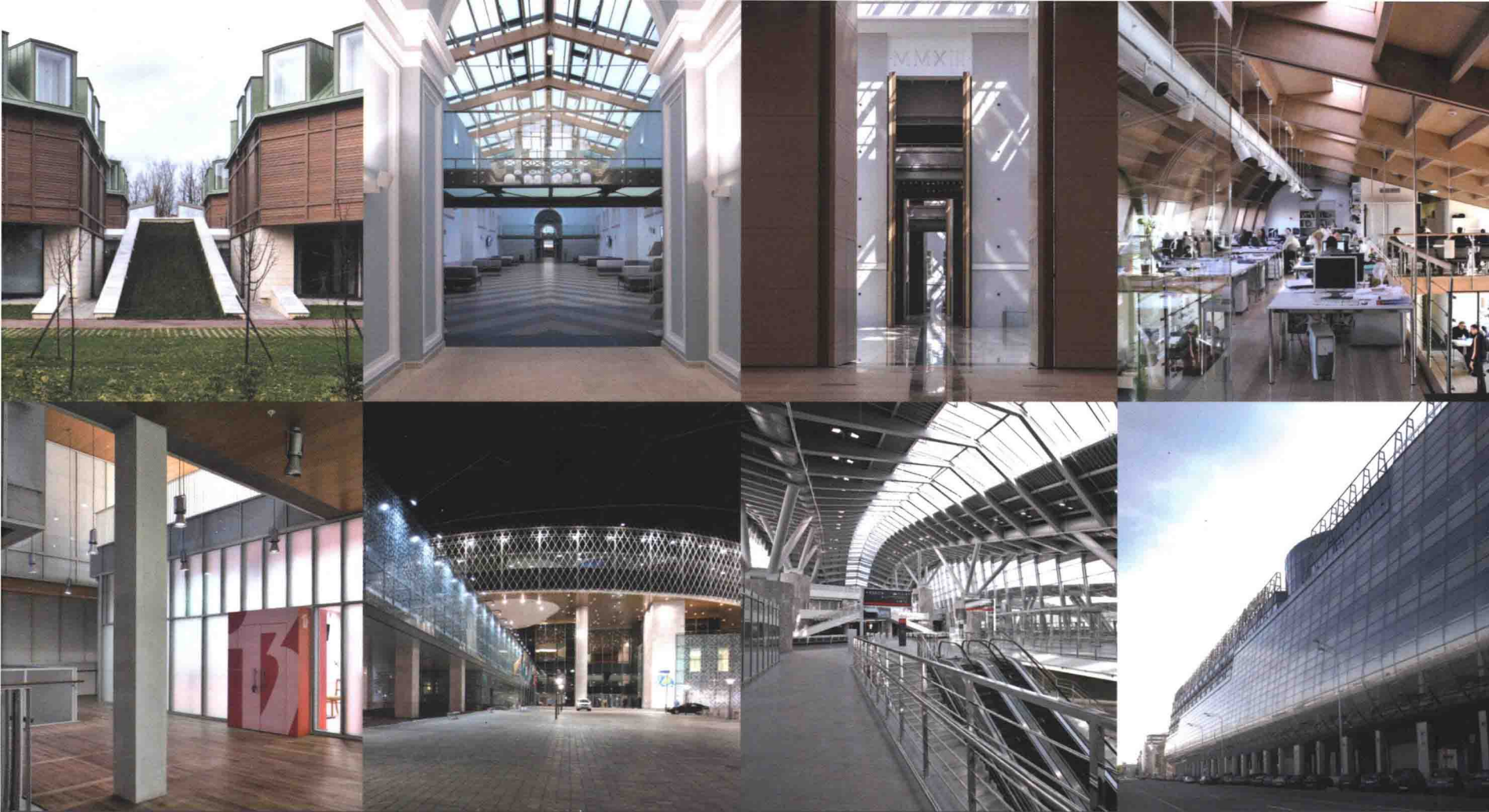
EDITED BY
GEORGI STANISHEV

STUDIO 44 ARCHITECTS

CONCEPTS • STRATEGIES • WORKS

NEW FORMS FOR RUSSIA'S
CONTEMPORARY CITIES

Thames & Hudson



‘Studio 44 is able to open up structures to current needs while adding architecture that is wholly its own. Its designs achieve a sense of clarity, beauty and a modern monumentality.’

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INTRODUCTION

STUDIO 44: MONUMENT MAKERS

Aaron Betsky

It is difficult to make monumental architecture these days. If the designing of grand structures for the state, or for those who could afford the means to create imposing forms, was once at the core of the discipline, today we want our buildings to be friendly, open and flexible. At the same time, few entities or individuals have the ability to pay for anything but the minimum investment in a building, and thus anything big and expressive is seen as wasteful. On a more theoretical level, the notion that we should build for the ages is difficult to support in an era in which the use of natural resources should be kept to a minimum, and where participation in our institutions, companies and other structures is to be welcomed.

One of the few firms that is still creating monumental architecture is St Petersburg's Studio 44. Over the last few decades, it has built up a practice that is founded in monuments and monumentality. Using an eclectic set of approaches and styles, it has sought to find ways to re-imbue the institutions and even structures of everyday life with a sense of import and meaning. Abstracting the classic techniques of monument making, which sought to impress us with scale, materials, rhythmic sequences of spaces, sculptural presence and historic references, the firm designs buildings that, at their best, are able to awe.

Partially, Studio 44 is able to do so because of where it works, since Russia is one of the few countries that is still seeking to secure state power in buildings. Partially, it is successful in its approach because of its commissions, which include the renovation of already monumental buildings for uses that tap into such grand traditions, as well as large railway stations and commercial structures. But, in addressing these tasks, it has figured out how to combine modernist and classicizing tendencies to create an approach that makes the most out of its situation.

That Studio 44 has its roots in the design of large housing projects and infrastructure, something that dates in part back to the practice of the founding partners' father, means that it is well schooled in handling a mass of people with large yet efficient structures, as well as with spaces that can accommodate them, but which can also help them understand where they are and where they are going. The aesthetic developed by the firm – industrial elements cleaned up and abstracted, rooted in masonry forms and organized using modern flow diagrams – recalls the grandeur of such points of arrival and departure while working in the manner required by such places today. It is at the heart of its best architecture for other programmes.

Studio 44's training in the Soviet and post-Soviet (postmodern) era also gives it a predilection towards solid forms, superstructures and monuments that are larger than life and intended to be imposing. In its best work, however, it is able to temper and moderate these structures into something lighter, not only in terms of mass but also in terms of how it brings daylight into the structures. The designers at Studio 44 are not nostalgic, but seek to give the complex and more ephemeral projects with which they are confronted, from schools to hotels, a more complete and solid realization.

Studio 44 is able to preserve the past – both literally, when it works on restorations and renovations, and in its designs. It is also able to open up structures to current needs while adding architecture that is wholly its own. Its designs use geometry, axial and symmetrical alignments (although sometimes broken or modified), and materials that invite touch while appearing solid, as well as compositions that articulate different programme elements in balance with one another, to achieve a sense of clarity, beauty and a modern monumentality.

ANALYSIS

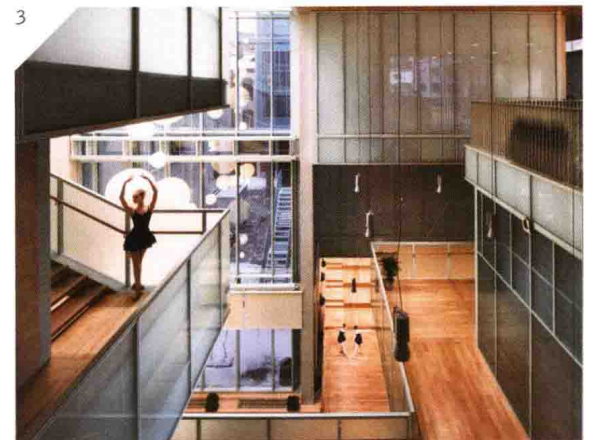
AN ABUNDANCE OF ARCHITECTURE

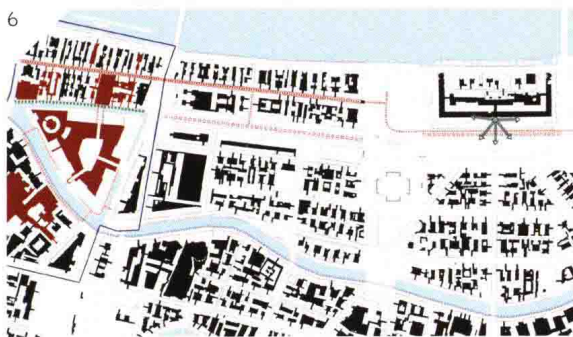
Hans Ibelings

'No artist will better compress speech to conciseness than he who has skill to enrich the same with as varied an ornamentation as possible.'
Desiderius Erasmus, *Copia* (1512).

There is no typical Studio 44 architecture. Or at least not if the notion of the typical is based on its visual appearance. While the work of many architects and architectural offices is recognizable because of their consistent idioms, recurrent motifs and stable preferences for certain forms and materials, the idiosyncrasy of the work of Studio 44 resides in an intriguing absence of such a recognizability. It is not easy to discern immediately, for instance, that the Kremlin housing on the Solovetsky Islands (1) is designed by the same office that conceived the Palace of Schoolchildren in Astana (2), even if the time that passed between the first and the second project is taken into account. The same is true for more recent works as well, such as the Boris Eifman Dance Academy in St Petersburg (3) and the Sochi railway station (4). The same applies to the office's urban-planning projects, which use very different design approaches, sometimes adhering to strict grid systems of perimeter blocks (5), particularly where urbanity is created ex novo, and sometimes sensitively and partially invisibly intervening in the existing urban fabric, such as in the development concept for St Petersburg's Konyushennaya and North Kolomna neighbourhoods (6).

The rich diversity of Studio 44's architecture and urbanism should not be mistaken for inconsistency or lack of rigour. Rather, it reflects a method of design that distinguishes the conceptual point of departure from its outward appearance. This is comparable with the idea of linguist Noam Chomsky





that there is a distinction in languages between deep and surface structures. The surface structure of Studio 44's architecture has many and diverse manifestations, but underneath this diversity is a solidly consistent deep structure. To put it differently, one could say that Studio 44 founder Nikita Yawein and his brother Oleg combine strong intellectual backbones with remarkably mercurial mindsets, leading to an ongoing exploration of new and untried architectural expressions, without deserting the core principles behind the work.

Clearly, Studio 44 is able to master multiple architectural vocabularies. Some of the work takes its cues from advanced technologies, while others explore traditional crafts of folklore and vernacular; some works are loaded with easily accessible symbolic references, while others refrain from this and display a restraint abstractness. This architectural eloquence reminds one of what Dutch philosopher Desiderius Erasmus of Rotterdam recommended in his treatise *De Utraque Verborum ac Rerum Copia*, first published in 1512. This treatise offers a method for appropriate and entertaining speech and writing. Erasmus's text has more than one English translation, and is published under different titles, one being *Copia of Words and Ideas*, and another *Copia: Foundations of the Abundant Style*. That there is more than one title for the translation of Erasmus's treatise underscores what the author claims; namely, that a speaker of merit can say everything in more than one way, in a multitude of different ways. According to Erasmus, this talent should be honed by practising abundance, which he elucidated by showing how many variations there are for such a simple sentence as 'Your letter has delighted me very much', from a scant 'Not unpleasing to me was your letter', to a very generous 'You would scarcely believe what a multitude of joys your letter brought to my spirit.'

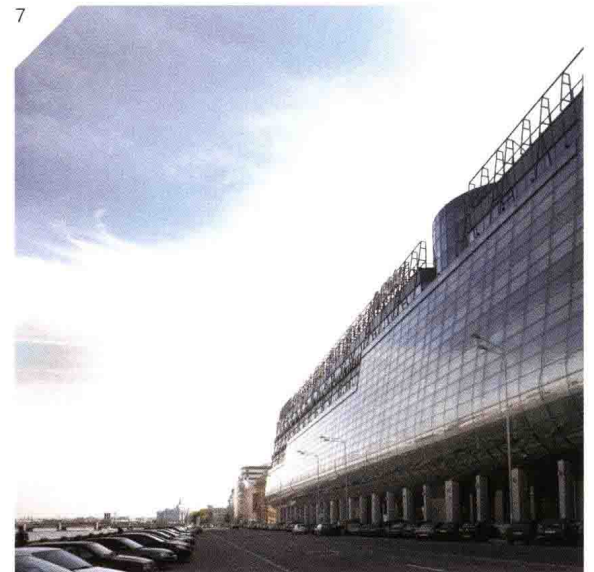
The simultaneously humorous and serious text of Erasmus (allegedly the inspiration for Raymond Queneau's *Exercises in Style*) should be interpreted not as an encouragement to say the same over and over again in slightly different ways, as Erasmus did with his single sentence, but as an argument for appropriate variation, which may be mastered only by those who can say both a lot and almost nothing: 'For as far as

conciseness of speech is concerned, who could speak more tersely than he who has ready at hand an extensive array of words and figures for conciseness?' To this Erasmus added: 'No one certainly will see more quickly and more surely what can be suitably omitted than he who has seen what can be added and in what ways' (which is a variation of the epigraph at the beginning of this piece).

The work of Studio 44 displays a comparable capacity to add and to omit, and to produce architecture that is either evocatively ornate or suggestively abstract. In this respect, Studio 44 differs from the many architectural offices that offer only one vocabulary. A majority of architects is in this sense like Giorgio Morandi, a great artist who time and time again meticulously studied the magnificent play of the same few volumes, brought together in light: a couple of bottles, a pitcher, a box and a bowl. At the other end of the spectrum is a much smaller group of architects, including the Yaweins, who are more comparable to Francis Picabia, who relentlessly explored different subjects, themes, media and styles in his artistic work.

In its mastery of multiple rhetorical figures of design, Studio 44's position could be characterized as post-postmodern, overcoming the alleged opposition between modernism and postmodernism, which has become perhaps the most ossified cliché of recent architectural history and criticism. Seen through the lenses of modernism and postmodernism, some of the works of Studio 44 are apparently directly related to the modernist ideals of innovation in form, materials and building technology, while others can be seen as postmodern, harking back to premodern or vernacular traditions, underlining the narrative, communicative aspects of buildings. Some, however, do both at the same time, such as the Linkor Business Centre (7), which contains several naval metaphors, from the hull shape of the building to the seagull-like elements hanging in the main lobby, but which simultaneously expresses a supermodern sophistication in materials and technology. The same is true for the Tsar's Garden Hotel (8), which references both contemporary and historical sources.

If in the world of art and architecture the certainties of modernism were replaced by postmodernism's equally



9



10



assured anti-modern relativism, the now prevailing post-postmodernist state is closer to an almost indifferent impartiality. Evidently, this comes closer to 'anything goes' than anything that was conceived during the period of postmodernism, which gave the motto currency.

It might be too far-fetched to relate this post-postmodernism in the work of Studio 44 to a larger scheme of things, but there is at least a parallel between this stance and the Russian society in which the studio emerged, which had seen the rather abrupt demise of one the strongest ideologies of the twentieth century. In a short period, Russia morphed from post-socialist to a complicated ex-socialist condition, which could equally be called post-post-socialist. In many ways, the Russian context in which Studio 44 worked and works is a place where indeed anything – or sometimes nothing – goes, a very complex and contradictory place, ruthlessly capitalist, but not without nostalgia for the most ruthless of Soviet leaders; patriotic at a time when Russia is much more globalized than it ever was during the Soviet times of international socialism. These contradictions illustrate an aspect of a post-ideological world, in which opposites have lost much of their antithetical character, because everything is accepted and assessed in its own terms.

This applies to the work of Studio 44 as well. In the office's architecture, the way a building looks can be disconnected from both its context and its programme. This can be illustrated by comparing Ladozhsky railway station (9) in St Petersburg with the towers (10) designed a few years later for the same area, and with two other stations of Studio 44.

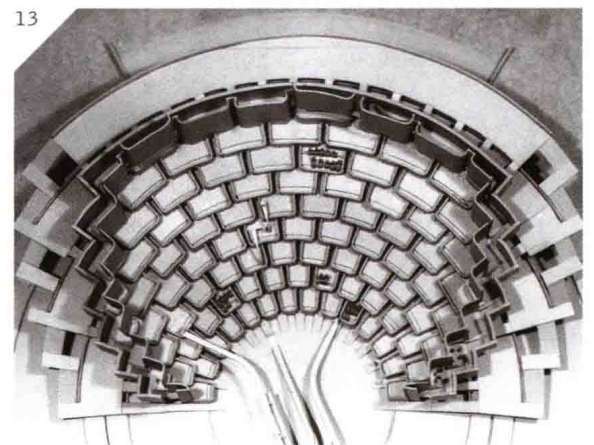
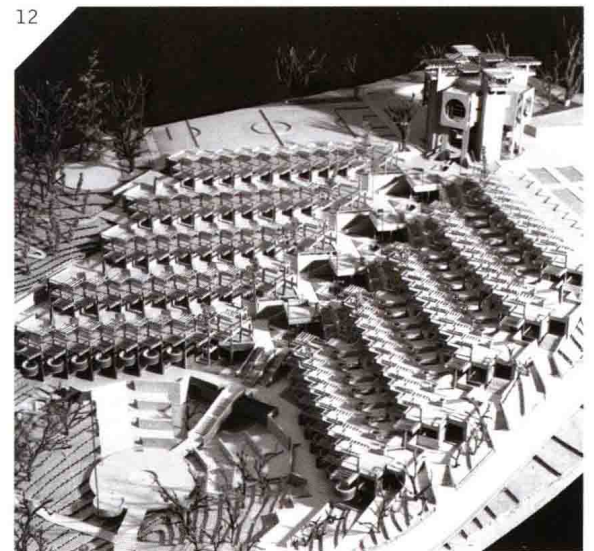
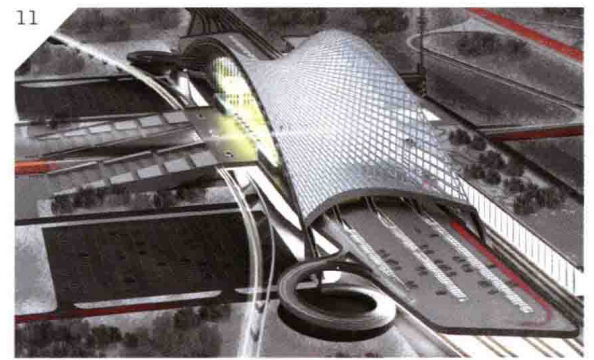
Ladozhsky station has obviously taken its cues from the railway palaces of the nineteenth century, which were themselves often steel-and-glass versions of Caracalla's baths in Rome. In this respect, it reminds one of Aldo Rossi's notion of autonomy, of architectural types that are able to accommodate different programmes without changing their form, withstanding functional determinism. More than anything else, Ladozhsky station is conceived as a building with its own logic, apparently not dictated by the pragmatism of its programmatic and infrastructural requirements. In other words, it is a building with a deliberately static form, which resists the pressures exercised on every station,

including this one, as a nexus of flows of people and modes of transportation. Just like New York's Grand Central Terminal, Ladozhsky station is first and foremost a place and a space, one that does not emphasize that the complex is an infrastructural hub for different forms of public and private transportation.

The comparison with Rossi's idea of typology is not accidental here; in plan, there is a striking parallel between the station and some of Rossi's projects, including his famous San Cataldo Cemetery in Modena. While Rossi imposed his rationalist order on such relatively simple and malleable programmes as a graveyard, Studio 44 has managed to put a comparable approach into practice in a far more complex situation of a train and bus station on a small site.

Right next to the station, Studio 44 has proposed a completely different project: a high-rise ensemble comprising five soaring, crystal-like objects. This project is not only unlike anything else in the neighbourhood, but also unlike any other design of Studio 44. While the station manages to induce a shock of recognition, the towers offer a 'shock of the new'. Even though they are directly next to each another in the very same St Petersburg setting, the architecture of these two projects is completely different – even, at first sight, irreconcilably so. Yet on closer inspection they appear to be determined by a comparable confidence in the structuring logic of geometry. The station is based on an axial symmetry, which is palpable everywhere in and around the building. The five towers suggest that their shapes and position are random; in plan, however, they seem to be forming a near-symmetrical order.

Aside from Ladozhsky station, Studio 44 has designed two other railway stations: one in Astana, and one in Sochi, the latter having been built on the occasion of the 2014 Winter Olympics. Each station is completely different. The St Petersburg station is playing on conventional railway-station typologies; the Astana station (11) is dominated by a monumental, transparent hyperbolic paraboloid roof, which seems to build on the engineering traditions of (late) modernism; and the Olympic Park station in Sochi is a dynamic reflection of traffic movements, capable of being read as an architectural flow diagram.





This double comparison, of Ladozhsky station with a high-rise project for the same area, and with two other programmatically related projects elsewhere, offers at least two insights. The first is that contextualism, even if it is seriously taken into account, is not the main driver behind the architecture of Studio 44; the second is that there is no functionalist idea of 'form follows function', as shown by the stations, which are three completely different buildings for essentially very similar programmes. Each individual work of Studio 44 follows its own internal logic, and has a unique architectural expression and spatial articulation. However, underneath every work is a coherent design approach. No matter how complex the eventual building, the essence is always a rigorous, systematic concept. This logic can be an elementary geometry inscribed in the plan or section; a structure of repetitive geometric forms of different scales; or a clear contour that determines the perimeter of the intervention. So this, perhaps, is what characterizes the work of Studio 44 and sets it apart from other architectural offices: that it is diverse on the surface, but unified by a strong logic under its skin.

In many of the earliest works there is a clear emphasis on structure not dissimilar to the repetitive patterns of Western European structuralism, championed by the likes of Herman Hertzberger, or metabolism, professed by such Japanese architects as Kiyonori Kikutake and Kisho Kurokawa. Yet, as demonstrated particularly by the projects that predate the establishment of Studio 44, this interest in structure is driven less by the wish to create buildings that in theory could be extended in every direction, and more by a desire to establish a definite, and definitive, form. Projects like the Cube, A Home for Three Generations of One Family, the Signal Children's Pioneer Camp (12) and the Amphitheatre of Boxes (13) are exemplary illustrations of how patterns, and repetitive forms, can actually structure architecture on different scales. These early Studio 44 works offer clues for reading the later projects as well, which in essence are almost always using, and sticking to, a geometrical starting point, albeit less often based on repetitive forms.

The strategy of basing a design on a geometrical point of departure is most convincing when Studio 44 is working