

# CIRCUS MAXIMUS DIATOMIC DIALOGUES

# VIA 1 ROME

**CITY META LAB ROME DUBAI NEW YORK  
UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON ROME CENTER  
SCHOOL OF PUBLIC ARCHITECTURE KEAN UNIVERSITY  
ZAPP URBANISM . NO WAR PEACE THEATER PRODUCTIONS**

## **ZAPP**

**Zoology Architecture Planting Painting**

**Andrew Reach**

**Tatiana Mardare**

**Massimo Marinelli**

**Javier Cardiel Martin**

**Peter Donders**

**Emanuele Faggion**

**Johanna Post**

**Herman van Bergen**

**Ken Oshima**

**Steve Badanes**

**Havana Lankegowda**

**Andrea Stipa**

**Claudia Ricciardi**

**Felipe Orensanz**

**Richard Lucas**

**Andrew MacNair**

**Antonio Marseglia**

**Bilal Rawn**

**Elisa Russo**

**Steven Holl**

**Astra Zarina**

# UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON ROME CENTER

Amity Neumeister

Founded in 1985 by architect and educator Astra Zarina—a visionary advocate for place-based learning—the University of Washington Rome Center serves as a hub for global education and interdisciplinary collaboration, bridging academic inquiry and industry innovation. This legacy is exemplified by initiatives like the Diatomic Dialogues lecture series—a vibrant convergence of architectural theory, sustainable design, and digital experimentation featuring leading scholars, builders and technologists. Through this initiative, the UW Rome Center was proud to reinforce its role in cultivating forward-thinking discourse and creative partnerships that span disciplines, cultures and emerging frontiers in design and architecture, honoring Zarina’s pioneering spirit while shaping the future of design education.



Palazzo Pio, University of Washington Rome Center, front view



City Meta Lab, Via dei Cerchi, Circus Maximus, Rome

# CITY META LAB

Bilal Rawn

City Meta Lab (CML) is an international multi-disciplinary design and architecture consultancy dedicated to crafting memorable spatial experiences across diverse scales and sectors. Founded by a collective of seasoned professionals, CML integrates over two decades of global expertise to transform each project into a unique architectural asset and city destination. Our genesis lies in a commitment to a multi-layered vision of the city—decoding urban opportunities and embracing future-proof approaches. We believe in collaboration, operating as a cross-disciplinary studio that shapes reality with foresight. By considering experience as the intersection between innovation and people, we work across all scales, spaces, functions, and urban activities. With operative hubs in Rome, Dubai, New York, and beyond, CML functions as a dynamic laboratory of ideas and tangible results. Our direction is guided by a vivid commitment to better practice and outcomes, constantly seeking to turn concepts into built, memorable spatial experiences.

# ZAPP URBANISM

This is a special issue of ZAPP Urbanism, an independent, little magazine found in 2001 at a faculty meeting in Ware Lounge at Columbia Graduate School of Architecture, Planning, and Preservation. This thirty-fifth issue of ZAPP Urbanism is a summary documentation from a series of recent presentations of work shown in a new open program, Circus Maximus, Diatomic Dialogues. The series was produced quickly without hesitation between New York and Rome to be held at the Palazzo Pio of the University of Washington Rome Center and online via WhatsApp. It grew to become a collaboration with the Michael Graves College of Public Architecture of Kean University and City Meta Lab in Rome, Dubai and New York. This workshop was presented in homage to architect and teacher Astra Zarina who founded the University of Washington Rome Center in 1976 – a place of architecture and urban study outside, on site - by hand, by eye - with paper, pencil, and pen.



ZAPP Urbanism Review, Issue 28, New York, NY

Astra Zarina International Architects Speaker Series

# CIRCUS MAXIMUS

## DIATOMIC DIALOGUES

Open To All Interested in the Future of Architecture

Wednesdays, 6:30-7:30 pm, CET  
**March 19 to April 30, 2025**

Invited Speakers - Program in Flux  
 3.19.25 Andrew Reach, Massimo Marinelli: Naple: Things  
 3.26.25 Javier Cardiel, Peter Donders, Emanuele Faggion  
 4.2.25 Johanna Post, Andrew MacNair, Herman van Bergen  
 4.9.25 Ken Oshima, Steve Badanes: Pacific Construction  
 4.16.25 Richard Lucas, Gabe Fuentes: Rome Studies  
 4.23.25 Phillip Baldwin, James Wines: Past Future Forward  
 4.30.25 Antonio Marseglia, Filippo Cannata: Rome Light

**THIS WEEK 2: MARCH 26, 6:30PM**

<b>MODELS DOING</b> JAVIER CARDIEL MARTIN Architect Rotterdam Netherlands	<b>EGGS, CHAIRS,</b> CITIES PETER DONDERS Designer Brno, Belgium	<b>ROME ACTS</b> EMANUELE FAGGION Architect City Meta Lab Rome, Italy
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Hosts: Andrew MacNair - CML NY, Emanuele Faggion, Antonio Marseglia - CML Rome  
 NOT-GET-IT? SERIES ID: POST-INTERNET MODERNITY PICTURES, TALK, LOCAL, WALKS  
 Contact: amacnair@citymetarome.com, www.postinternet.com

Circus Maximus, Diatomic Dialogues, Poster Week 1, University of Washington Rome Center, April 2025



Palazzo Pio, University of Washington Rome Center, map



Palazzo Pio, University of Washington Rome Center, Main Hall, Circus Maximus Work Sessions

# CIRCUS MAXIMUS

## DIATOMIC DIALOGUES

- Andrew Reach
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- Havana Lankegowa
- Andrea Stipa
- Claudia Ricciardi
- Felipe Orensanz
- Richard Lucas
- Andrew MacNair
- Antonio Marseglia
- Bilal Rawn
- Steven Holl
- Astra Zarina
- Elisa Russo

# ZAPP URBANISM

FOUNDED 2001, COLUMBIA GSAPP  
 IN RESPONSE TO THE 911 ATTACKS  
 New York, New York

Andrew MacNair - Editor  
 Johanna Post - Managing Editor  
 Steven Walkowiak - Editor/Designer

# ZAPP

Zoology, Architecture, Planting, Painting

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Model Citizen

I thought I left architecture behind 21 years ago when I stopped practicing. I stopped, not because I wanted to, but because my body had other plans for me. I pivoted to the visual arts, using photoshop to create two-dimensional geometric art. It was an act of survival; therapy for me to escape pain.

But, happenstance would have it that in 2022 I was commissioned to create a 3D printed sculpture for the visually impaired for an art exhibition by artists with chronic illness and disability with a mandate to make it accessible to the disabled. The work, a singular tactile hash sign was a new pivot point, re-introducing me to the world of three dimensions.

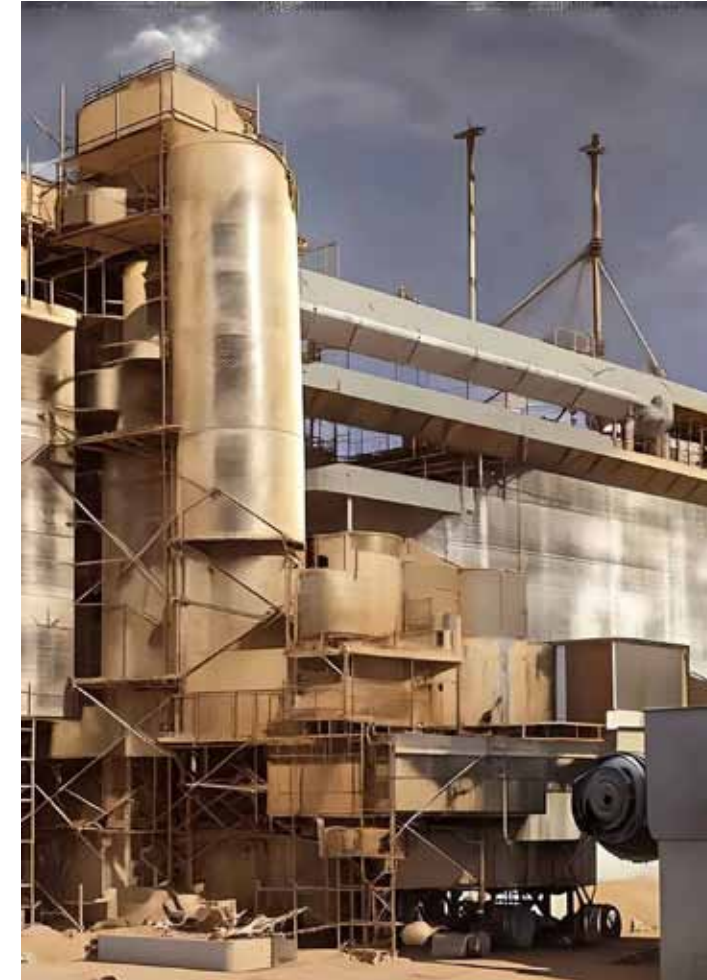
It's weird or perhaps surprising what has been re-emerging from my brain. The body translates through my blood that feeds my brain that moves electrical signals through billions of neurons that controls my thoughts that leads to my hands, that moves my mouse that controls an app that produces the work.

It appears that architecture never left; it lives inside me, dormant, but now, blood pumping, neurons reactivated. Geometric structures, different kinds of architectures, emerge that uncovers, discovers, unexpected three-dimensional patterns, forms and dynamics. They engage simultaneously the analog and the synthetic. The analog, my brain, my body. The synthetic, the app.

I feel like an explorer again, digging for archeological fragments of form. With enough fragments collected, I can stitch them together. These tectonic building parts re-constitute, synthesizing some parts architecture, some parts sculpture in constructs I call "Art-itectures". Being synthetic entities, they live in video with original music. As music is choreography of notes of sound, architecture is choreography of notes of form.



Astrodome



The Chimera



Dystopia in Segovia (Collage)

## Manifesto on AI and Architectural Imagination

Architecture has always been mediated by models—sketches, physical constructs, digital prototypes. Tools of projection. Instruments of doubt and desire. As Peter Cook insists, speculative drawings are acts of becoming, not static representations. They are models that mutate, drift, and speculate (1). Artificial Intelligence introduces a new threshold in architecture—a model that makes models—drawings, fragments, mockups, collages, hybrids. These are not outputs; they are provocations. They do not conclude; they propose. AI-generated imagery takes this further. It is a model that imagines. It is fast, fluid, generative—unfolding the space between the real and the not-yet.

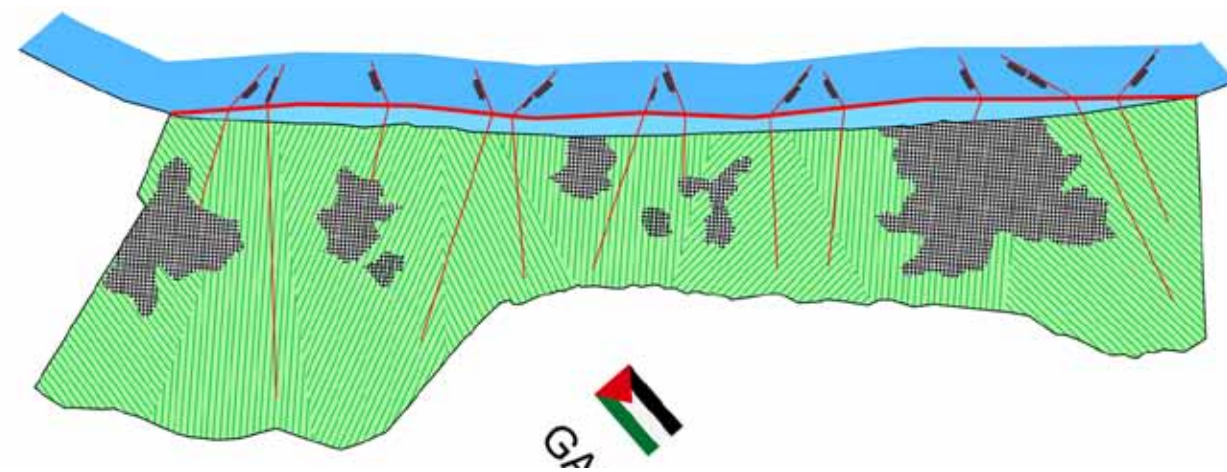
This work embraces this through investigation of three hybrid typologies: The Chimera, echoing Peter Cook's morphologies and matter, The Metamorphosis, as in Frank Gehry's evolving skins, The Collage, Hans Hollein recontextualizations. In Dystopia in Segovia (Collage), AI confronts forgotten urban fragments, producing future ruins and speculative remains. Echoing Matta-Clark's anarchitecture, it critiques systemic neglect: abandonment, superficial repair, bureaucratic inertia. Architecture is devalued—materially, ideologically. AI, here, serves not to fabricate utopias, but to diagnose, map decay, and visualize the long-term impacts of systemic failure. This is not escape. It is projection. Through AI, we recover architecture's visionary impulse. We distort, we challenge, we reimagine. We re-inhabit.



Andrea Stipa and Francesca Luciano  
DAM(n) Gaza, DAM(n) Cities, Italian Pavilion, Venice Biennale 2025



DAM(n) Gaza, Andrea Stipa Architect Rome M.S.AAD, Francesca Luciano Architect Rome



DAM(n) Gaza, Map of Coastline Dam, Andrea Stipa Architect Rome M.S.AAD, Francesca Luciano Architect Rome

By removing the rubble produced by the war a large part of the limited territory of Gaza will be used for agricultural production, while the linear structure will generate energy required to power the growing economy and population utilizing wind and sea currents. In the future agri-food production will be moved on the dam, where fish farms and hydroponic systems will be developed, allowing for a more balanced relationship between humans and

nature on the mainland, through the creation of large forests and natural habitats for plants and animals.

The project is part of the research called DAM(n) CITIES presented at the Italian Pavilion at the Venice Biennale 2025

**AROUND ANTROPHO ARCHITECTURE**

Anthropo-architecture is mainly concerned with its users, their meaningful transformative experience in space. The analysis's meta-design phase of accelerated complex systems allows us to integrate the generative rules of modified ecological systems to redesign their places and artefacts, giving life to deliberately significant spaces full of possible meanings, responding to a renewed *téchne* (art of building / Τέχνη).

Our projects derive generative metrics from a synthesis between design, function and context analysed from an anthropological perspective and from the shared desire to enrich the quality of life of the world in which we live with soft and vibrant places and buildings, capable of guaranteeing well-being for people the users.

**DE/ONTOLOGICAL ARCHITECTURE**

The new Morbegno Velodrome (Italy) is conceived as architectural poietic tool designed to harmonize with its natural surroundings. This "deontological", or rather "neo-ontological" responsibility therefore us to design and create appropriate and convenient proposals respecting all the constraints present at the outset: economic, environmental, cultural, aesthetic, social. We believe in the built form and strive to make it less tectonic and more aesthetic.

**SPATIAL POETICS**

We believe in the built form and strive to make it less tectonic and more aesthetic. The conceptual premise of this attitude lies in the passion for an interpretable beauty suggested by nature, or a human vision of forms. If this often sought after meets the criteria of standard architectural practice, we like to spread the idea that there is a certain distance between thought appearance and the physical one.

We are focused on improving the well-being of the individual and communities through design, which is reflected in the percep-



Massimo Marinelli and Tatiana Mardare, United Office Architects  
Morbegno Velodrome - Morbegno, Italy

tion and final behavior in the space. The choice of materials, the structures, and the layout of the interior, the roofs and the façade all play a key role in evoking emotions and building an atmosphere. Macro signifiers such as cultural symbols and colors, architectural style, construction period, are also important devices in creating an atmosphere.

**NATURE AS CO-AUTHOR**

The New Morbegno Velodrome (Italy) is conceived as architectural poietic devices designed to harmonize with its natural surroundings. These devices highlight the emotional qualities of a design.

Design cannot be about controlling the environment but about understanding architecture's role, limits, and potential to comprehend how to cohabit with nature. VELODROMO proposes an architecture that acts as a mediator in the relationship between people and nature, where nature is the active agent in creating new places.



Massimo Marinelli and Tatiana Mardare, United Office Architects  
Morbegno Velodrome - Morbegno, Italy



*Red MechEgg, 3D Printed Steel*



*Alienometry, 3D Printed patina and gold leaf*



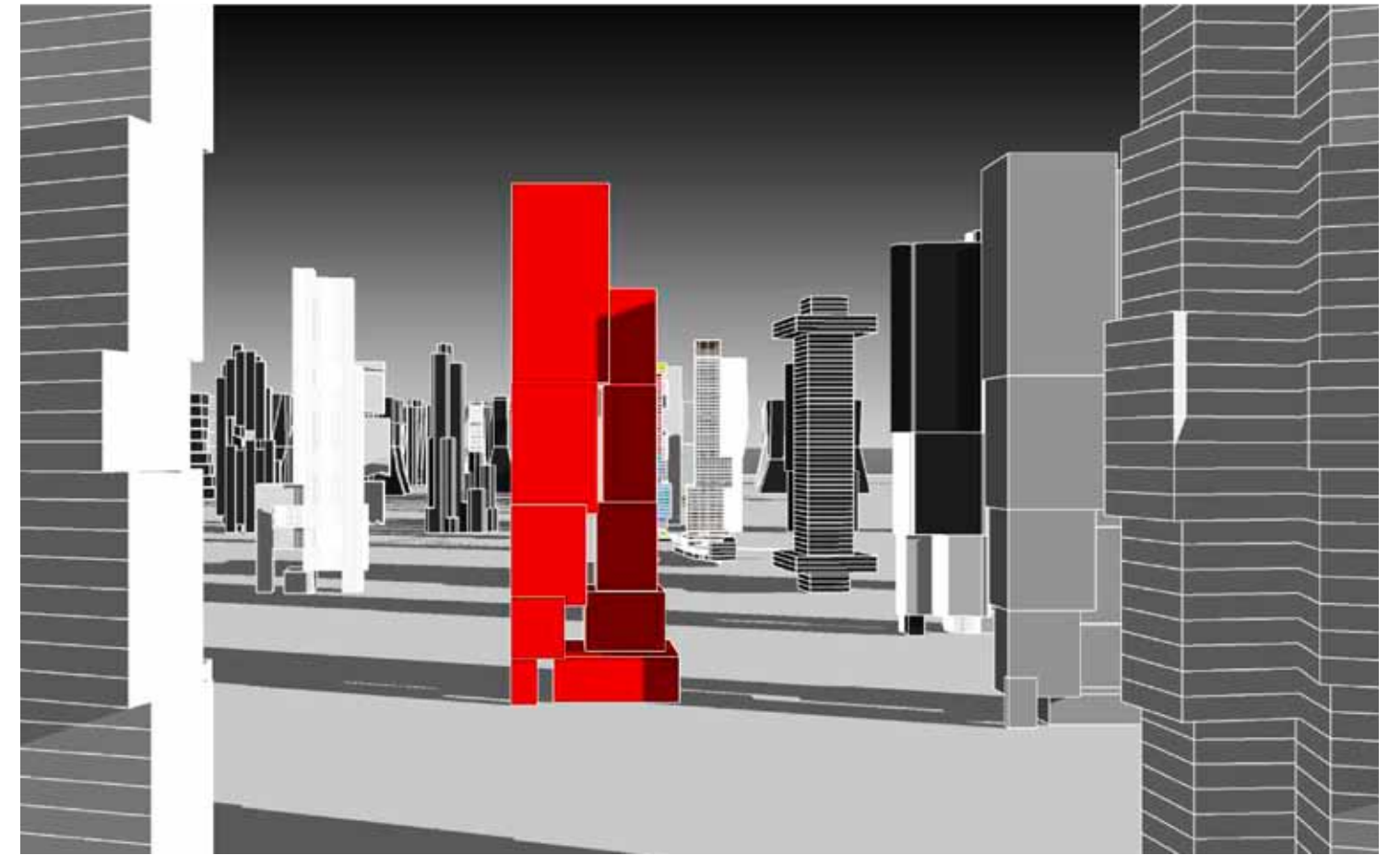
*Unified City, Digitwins, A Digital Meta Universe City, by Peter Donders*

"It" is about Location and Place. Peter Donders works there with high craftsmanship and Dada caustic wit. His work is driven by a combinatorial, sequential design: From Gut to Heart to Hunch to Idea to Eye to Hand to Material to Process to Tool to Forming to Tuning to Finishing to Artifact. "It" is made in flows. Making and freezing quizzical beauty. He will not admit working any references to sentimental history. A dominp effect Without memory. If he does, he doesn't say so. Just straight on. No big words. No chit-chat. No theory. – all work. I believe Peter's work comes out of his local culture in Bree, Belgium. Bree is located between Eindhoven to the north and Maastricht, Netherlands to the south - along the Maas River and near the Belgium-Netherlands border. Bree looks west to Brussels and Antwerp. East to Paris. These cities make a phenomenal cultural crush. Location is a mashup intersection. A fertile field. Forming and fueling an unbounded, Surreal Elasticity with a Dada Elan for, around, in Peter's wild and wooly world of works working.

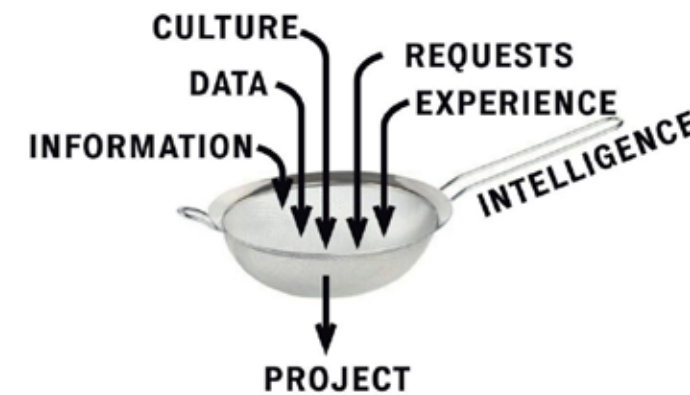
- Andrew MacNair



*Vine Red Chair, Digitwins, by Peter Donders*



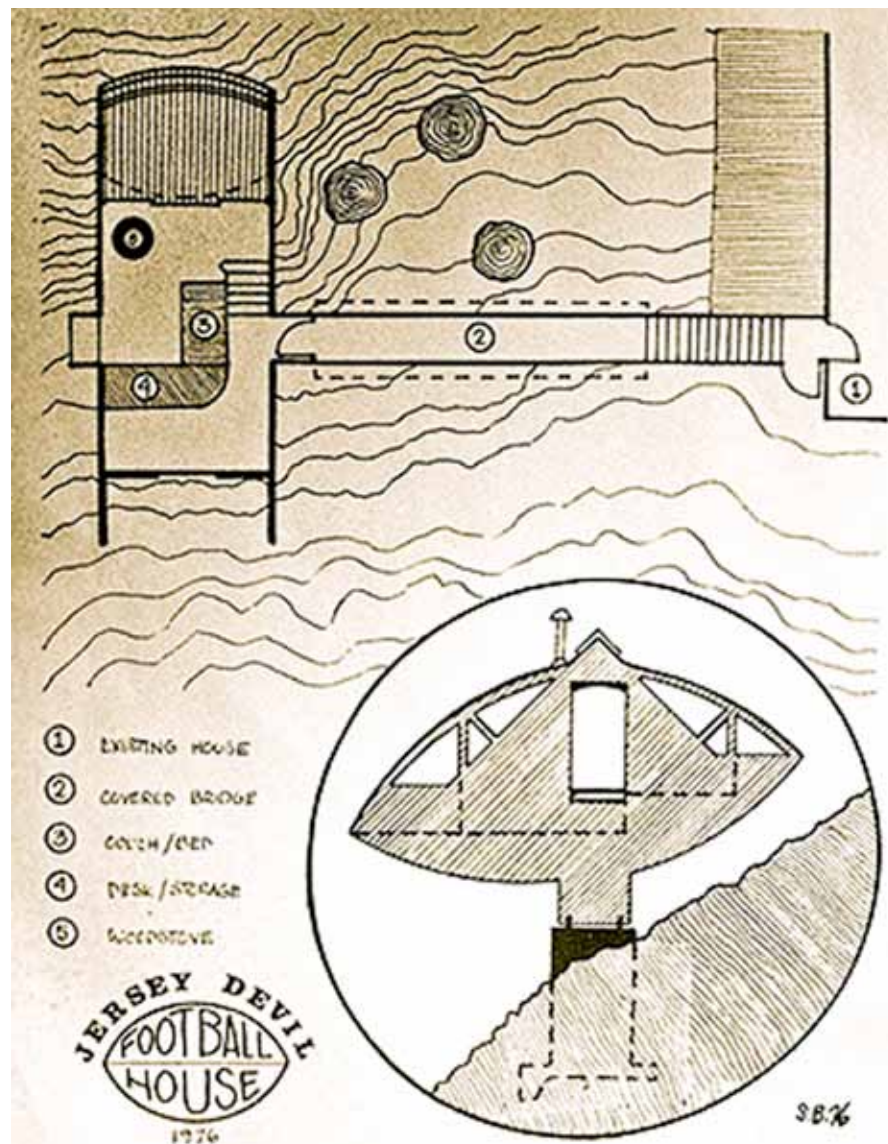
*An Opening in Time*



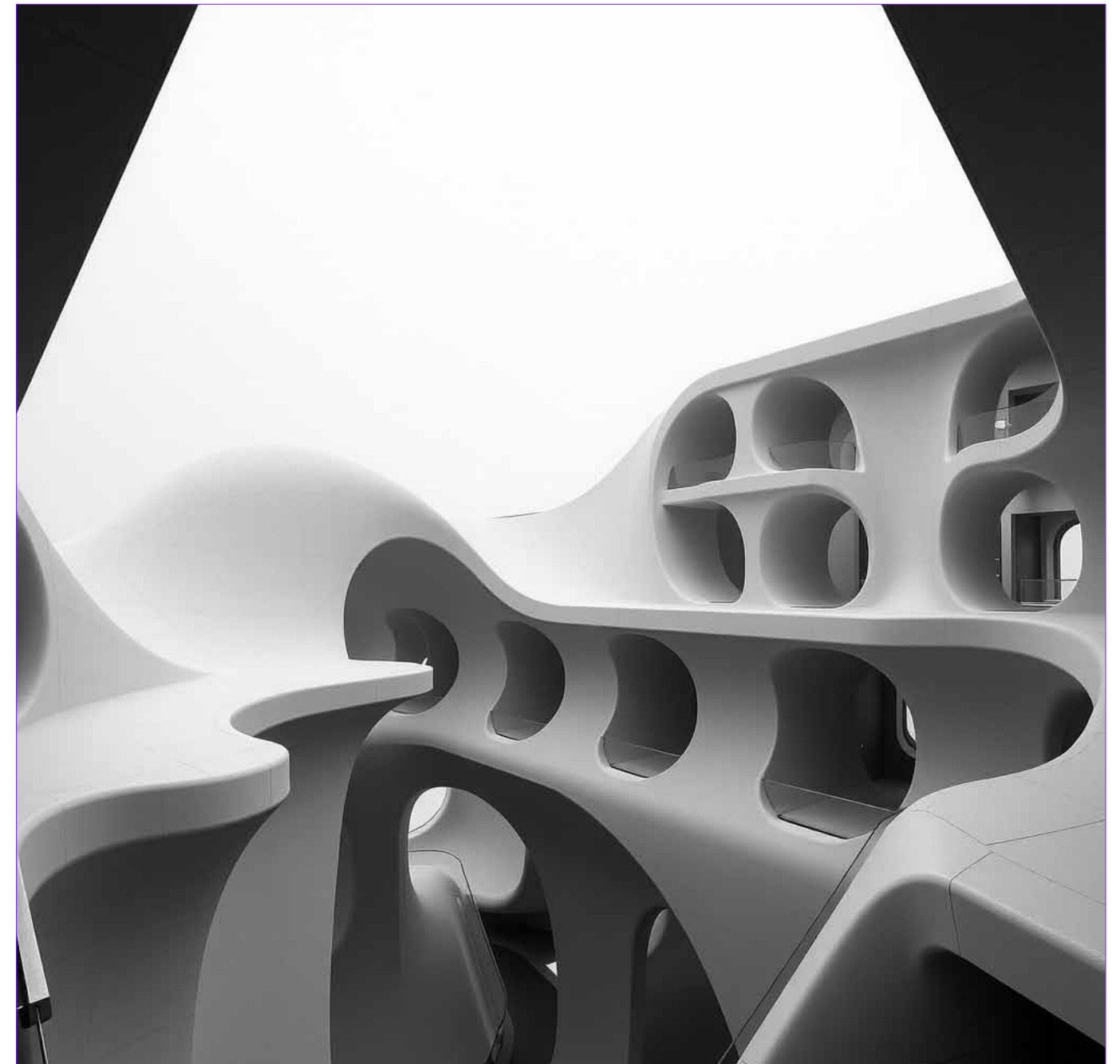
**A Project is More than a Project**

Its value lies not only in the built result, but in the knowledge generated along the way. Knowledge that often escapes the boundaries of architecture: social patterns, local stories, forgotten systems, and spontaneous behaviors. The process becomes a lens to see the city differently. We resist the comfort of predetermined ideas. There is no fixed image at the start. No master-plan to force reality into shape. The design path remains open, responsive, and unfinished. It is shaped by friction, discovery, and dialogue—with people, with place, with constraints. This isn't about spontaneity for its own sake. It's about precision through adaptability. Each decision builds on the last, not to reinforce a vision, but to challenge it. We treat context as active material: something to read, question, and rework. What matters is not just how the architecture looks, but what it connects, what it unlocks, what it reveals. We see design as a tool for learning, not control. A way to participate in complex realities rather than edit them out. The project is not a conclusion—it's an opening. In a time when architecture is often reduced to image, CML\_DD proposes a shift: from spectacle to substance, from product to process, from certainty to curiosity. This is architecture that stays curious, stays open—and stays relevant.

One of the few examples of a capital A-architecture redirected, compressed in hands-on design-build operation celebrated and practiced by an actually highly educated, talented team of Princeton architects radically yet humbly aimed to be and become sardine can as packed form with jam packed content where low, medium and high are contained and carried simultaneously into and via this one house. The Jersey Devils are children of the 1940's, teenagers of the 1950's, students and young architects of the early rebellious but well-behaved architects in and out of upheaval of the 1960 at Princeton University where 250 years of preppie, male, white, privileged Ivy League tradition was up-ended in four years of student objection, protest and effective action. I know because I was there then. Steve Badness, John Rangel, Jim Adams were studying as undergraduates (Adams) and graduates (Badanes, Ringel in the school during 1967-69. They formed Jersey Devils as a pragmatic, polemical, didactic and upbeat counter-point to the usual model of ego-centric, formalist, fame-driven practice. Jersey Devils were funky, smart, liberated, and fun and funny carpenters. They embodied the joy of construction as the "right" and unfettered, non-academic, anti-establishment way to practice – to build a practice by building buildings – from beginning to end – zero to Z. They, along with Ant Farm, Haus-Rucker Co. - were and still are part of the few alternative, independent, experimental, and liberated ways to make architecture. Fifty-five years Jersey Devils still work as design-build architects with Badanes in Washington, Ringle in New Jersey, and Adams in Florida. Their work as seen in the Football House do it all – it is a rare work engaging what I think is important aspects, attributes and conceit within a Rosalind Kraussian "expanding field" - including unfounded aspects of Architecture, Not Architecture, and Not-Not Architecture?



Architecture Parlante, Football House, Jersey Devils, Steve Bandanes, John Ringel, Jim Adams



Dreamscapes via AI - The Architecture of Dreamscapes, Havana Lankegowda

Each night, as we drift into sleep, we enter spaces that defy gravity, logic, and time. In dreams, architecture is no longer constrained by structure or physics. Rooms unfold endlessly, buildings float above oceans, and staircases lead both upwards and inwards. These dreamscapes are constructed not by engineers or architects, but by the subconscious mind—by memories, emotions, and fragments of daily life reassembled into surreal forms. Dreams often borrow from reality; remixing spaces we know with those we've never seen. A familiar hallway may stretch into infinity; a childhood home may float above a futuristic city. This architecture is fluid, symbolic, and emotionally charged. It responds not to logic, but to feeling. Artists like de Chirico and Dalí captured this essence—spaces that felt uncanny, stretched between nostalgia and strangeness.

Unlike real-world architecture, which must obey structure and stability, dream architecture is illogical and impermanent. Yet it

reveals deep truths. It expresses our inner states through space. A collapsing building might symbolize anxiety; a glowing room, a long-forgotten memory. Freud and Jung both viewed dream architecture as a reflection of the self—a house with rooms we have yet to explore.

But would we want to live in such a space if it could be built? Dreamscapes are compelling, but unstable. They lack continuity, coherence, and control. While they offer creative freedom, they also deny comfort and permanence. Still, they inspire. Visionary architects have long drawn from this world - they dissolve form into fluidity. Today, virtual reality and digital design bring us closer to simulating these dreamlike experiences. Dreams remind us that space is not only physical—it's psychological, symbolic, and deeply personal. While we may never build our dreamscapes, they invite us to rethink how architecture can move beyond the real, into the emotional and the imagined.

### Ruins 2025

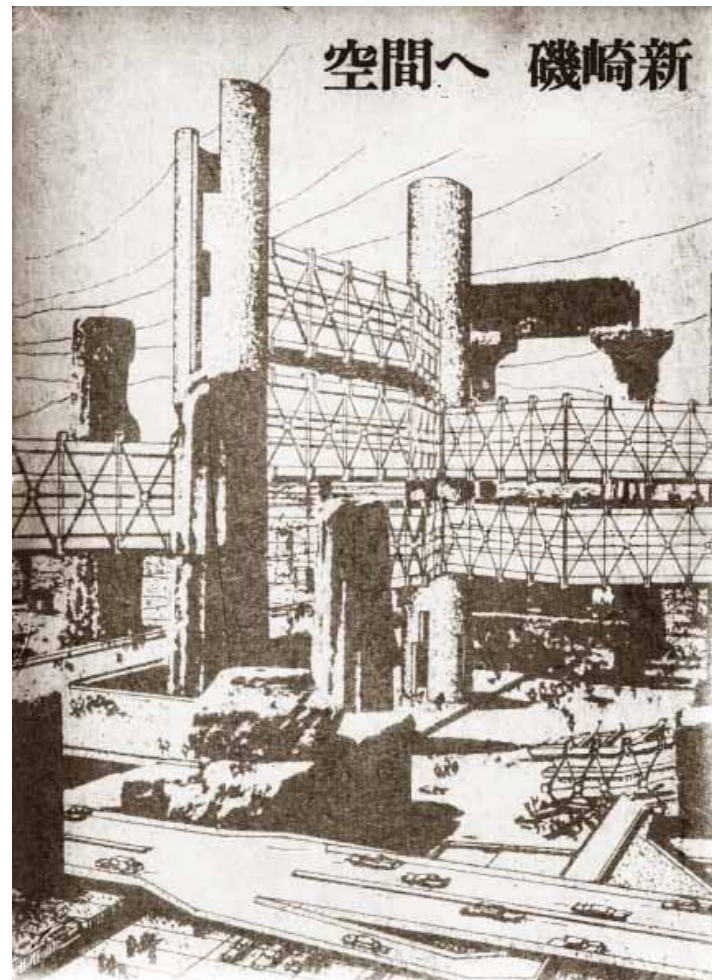
While this polemical statement emerged from the context of postwar Japan from the ruins of the destruction of Hiroshima in juxtaposition with hyper-development in the 1960s, notions of ruins today can be equally ambivalent. The January 2025 Eaton and Palisades Fires in Southern California highlight the inherent fragility of the built environment in the age of increasing climate change. Rome, as a capital built on centuries of ruins, questions the permanence of any new construction – especially of 2025 Jubilee year designs.

In contrast to the highly flammable construction in Southern California destroyed by the 2025 fires, numerous trees proved resilient to the wildfires in drawing water from the earth. This organic primacy of land/landscape thereby underscores the necessity to prioritize these natural elements. Isozaki’s 2011 totemic designs for Obscured Horizon concrete desert pavilions built in the Mojave Desert embodies the temporality of construction and permanence of natural elements of earth and sky. Inspired by the classic 1212 text by abbot Kamo no Chomei as “An Account of my Hut,” the 100 square feet pavilions are merely concrete platforms upon which one may sleep, read, or take in the sun or the moon. Here lies fundamental notions of never-ending temporality:

Ceaselessly the river flows, and yet the water is never the same, while in the still pools the shifting foam gathers and is gone, never staying for a moment. Even so is man and his habitation. Kamo no Chōmei

Images:

- 1. Cover photo collage of ruins juxtaposed with Arata Isozaki’s Cities in the Sky from Arata Isozaki, Kukan he, 1979
- 2. Roman Forum, photo Ken Tadashi Oshima
- 3. Obscured Horizon pavilion, Arata Isozaki, 2011, Mojave Desert, California, photo Ken Tadashi Oshima



Giovanni Battista Piranesi, Via Appia e Via Ardeatina (Le Antichita Romane), 1756



TARI architects, Piazza del Popolo (The Untouchables), 2020

### TIMELESS TENSIONS

It is no simple task to capture a singular image of Rome. In fact, the City is made up of multiple landscapes, held together by the tension of a millennia-old stratification that has preserved its identity while opening itself up to transformations, reinterpretations, and new uses. “Rome is a city unlike any other, a city entirely invented,” as Giulio Carlo Argan once described it, capturing the essence of a living palimpsest where traces endure despite time, shaped by “the interpretation that each era gave to the past in relation to the problems of the present.” The City’s propensity to welcome overwriting and erasure over time has resulted in an urban form capable of revealing both what remains and what disappears. The Baldassarre Peruzzi’s architectural insertion over the arches of the Theatre of Marcellus, the numerous episodes of reuse of the Mausoleum of Augustus or of the Palazzo Montecitorio, the repurposing of the Stadium of Domitian into Piazza Navona are just a few examples of interventions that define Rome as an ‘open city’ deeply receptive to new experimentation, yet firmly anchored in respect for its past. Once we acknowledge that time—not space—is the founding principle of the Eternal

City, a critical revision of the past becomes indispensable in shaping the threads of the City’s future. A City in which—as Argan astutely continued—“the tides of different eras have come and gone, leaving on the sand the wreckage of distant shipwrecks. It is a city that once lived off spoils, then ruins, and now waste.” This same critical interpretation of history was pursued by Giovan Battista Piranesi in his etchings, which sought to give substance to the contemporary by revisiting the past not through a faithful reconstruction of once-existing monuments, but by dissecting the city’s body in search of its origins, interrogating it, and interpreting it through imagination. In recent decades, Rome has ceased to be imagined. The past has been crystallized rather than reinterpreted, leading to a dangerous standstill for the city. In this context, it becomes essential to reclaim space for contemporary interventions rooted in history but oriented toward defining the future face of Rome. Will Rome be able to re-negotiate the Contemporary within the eternal dimension of its own history? This appears to be the most urgent question through which to critically read the City and, through the development of a new set of operational and perceptive tools, construct a renewed vision for Rome’s future.

**MAKING**  
**ARCHITECTURE**  
**PICTURE**  
**IMAGE**  
**FORM**  
**SPACE**  
**TIME**  
**POINT**  
**LINE**  
**PLANE**  
**VOLUME**  
**SYNTAX**  
**SIGN**  
**SYMBOL**  
**ICON**  
**INDEX**  
**MICRO**  
**MACRO**  
**PAPER**  
**PENCIL**  
**ERASER**  
**PEN INK**  
**BRUSH**  
**PAINT**  
**KNIFE**  
**WOOD**  
**GLUE**  
**FLATNESS**  
**2D**  
**3D**  
**4D**  
**IN OUT**  
**UP DOWN**  
**SUN**  
**SHADOW**  
**TEXTURE**  
**LANDSCAPE**  
**STILL-LIFE**  
**RHYTHM**  
**STONE**  
**TONGUE**  
**VOICE**  
**FARBUNG**  
**SPIRIT**



No War Peace Theater, Montage, Gaza - Space of Refuge



Egg Chapel, Construction, W-Zone, Munho-ri, Seoul, South Korea, By Andrew MacNair, Jaesung Jung, Johanna Post, Lawrence Marek, Will Harmon, Michael Capitain for the Hi Family

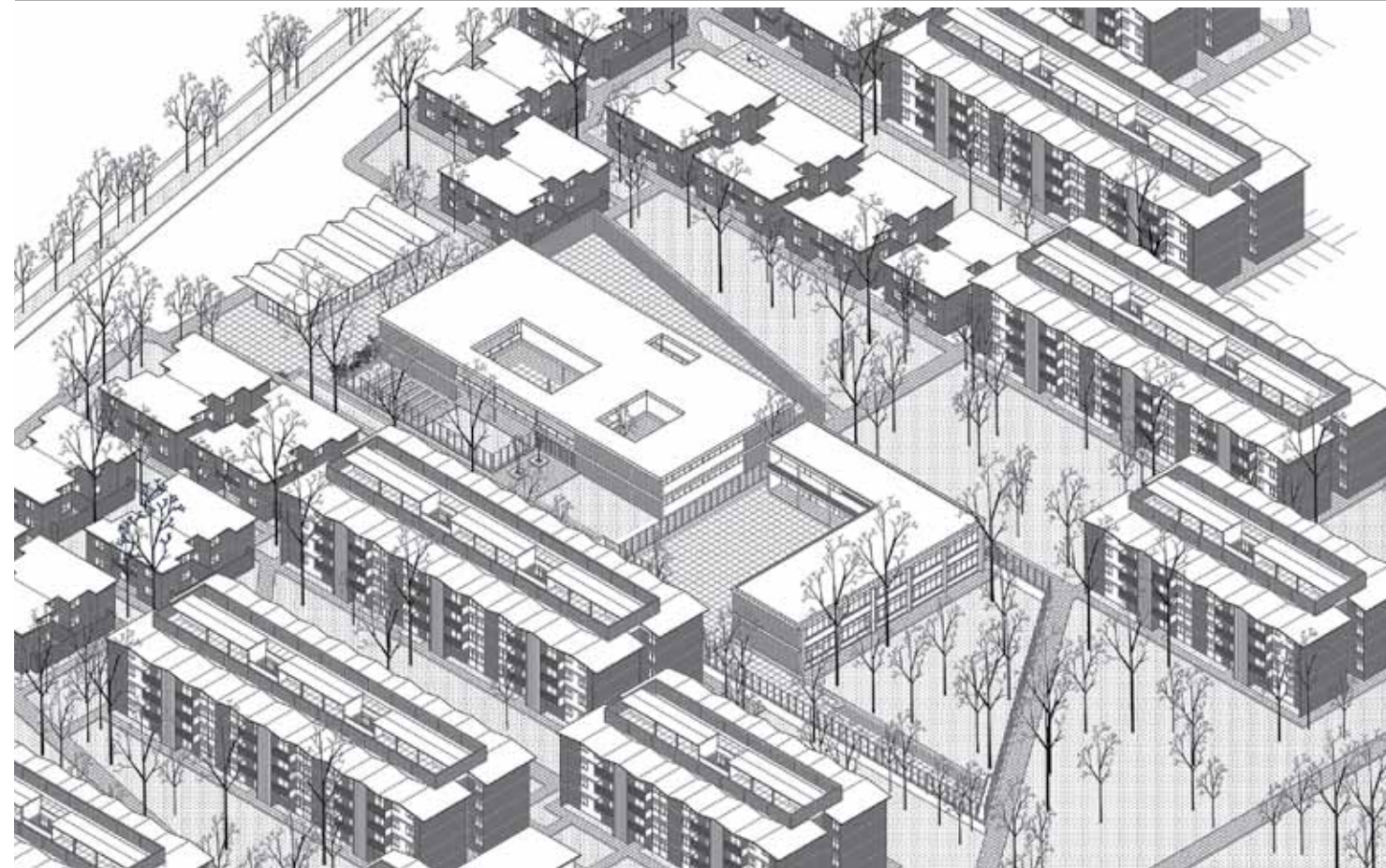


Cathedral Labyrinth Of Thorns Landhuis Bloemhof Santa Rosaweg 6 Willemstad, Curaçao, Hermanus van Bergen



Art and science. What also belongs to these two words is emotion, the impact things make and regulate your energy! Specially experiencing architecture in daily life, including work, free time, hobby, study, contemplating, philosophy, anthropology, sports, growing foods, music, dance, handcrafts, maintenance, discussion space design, sculpture drink and so on. The living species dwelling in his surroundings where he/she was one of the designers from Idealistic architecture, expressed just after the second world war in Northern Europe by the COBRA (CO=Copenhagen BR= Brussel A= Amsterdam) movement in the arts, specific the Dutch artist Constant Anton Nieuwenhuys and his project New Babylon wherein the Homo Ludens {Huizinga} lives, the human-being free from physical labor, knowing machinery will overtake, the creative creature, as a reaction on the destroying creature during World War II! The artist's dilemma and also the architectural, political concern, control through bureaucratic office buildings or centers of playing with the mind, to free the mind from mental illness (slavery) which happens a lot. How come I had to make a Cathedral of Thorns, simple as it is, from day one during the 'discovery of the new world' (hahaha)

we just destroy and live under the power of other ones dictating! The free arts are very, very important in understanding history and its results these times of tensions between the rich and poor and especially the definition of rich, rich with money or rich between the ears! That's what we need expressing the free mind/spirit defend our talents and learn from history! Be curious and know you have to make failures to learn from. In this state of humanity the labyrinth through all the religious findings and intolerances the gathering of more than 60 autonomous artists expressing an ode to the free spirit, in recesses saved out of the labyrinths walls, completely from thorns, 92 million thorns. Caused by deforestation the acacia tortuosa could overgrow, the labyrinth is a manifest of our malfunctioning ecological and humane, the discovery of the "new world" came hand in hand with an ecological scar and human tragedy. In the name of God 100 millions of indigenous people found death and people from Africa made to slave. The status quo we are living in with doubt about a controlling system which works for earth and the sake of humanity. Everything seems to be for the egocentric self.



City of Independence, Zona Club Deportivo, Mexico City, Isometric by Rebasado

## MEXICO CITY CITY OF INDEPENDENCE

There are nice, obedient, standard books, there are not nice, not obedient, far from standard norms and the usual expectations. Similarly, there are nice, standard, obedient and proper architectural practice, following the traditional firm models of architectural practice as a service business with sub-tones and at times in some practices outspoken creative aspirations to work as artists, to make art, and to be (real?) artists.

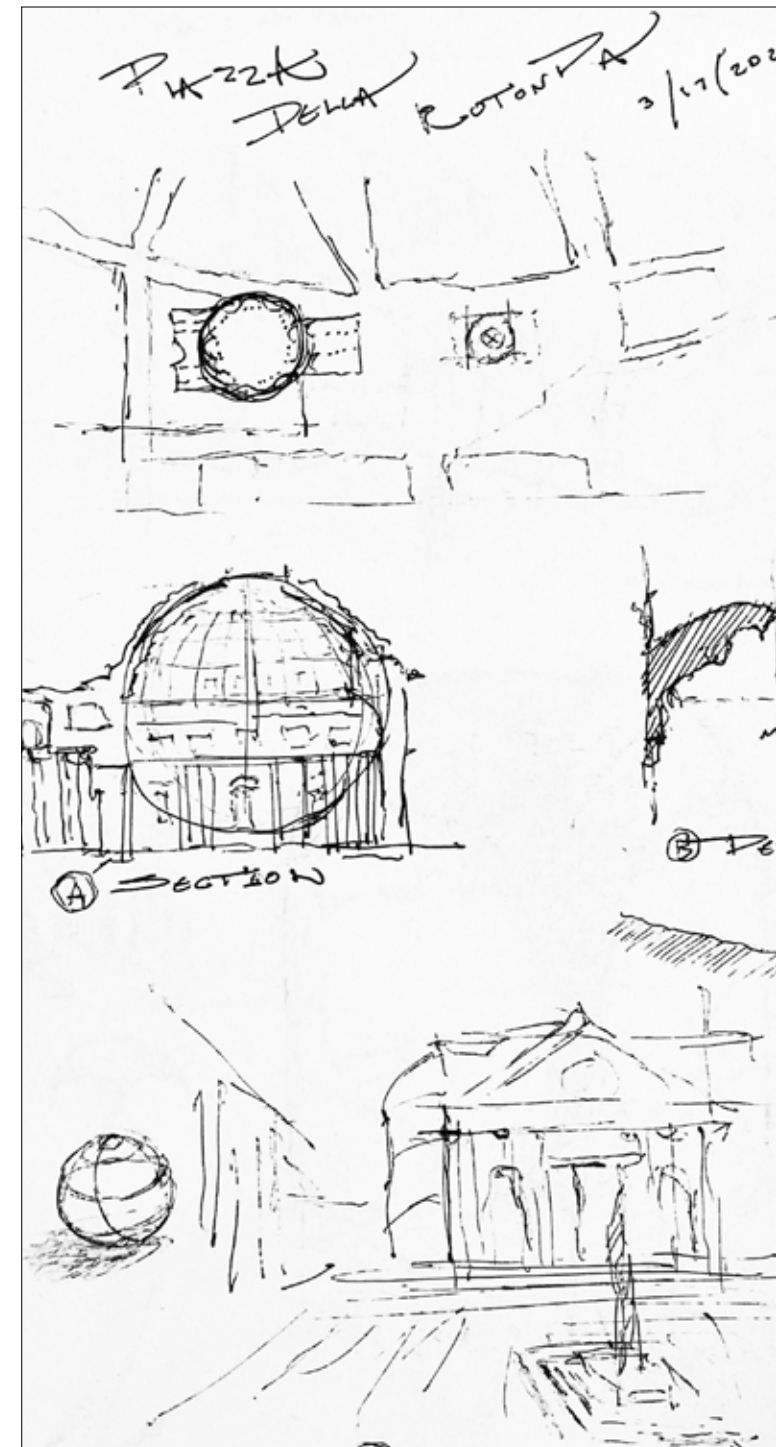
So the normative practice of architecture acts conspicuously most often in part as an umbrella, a platform, a vessel and a vehicle, and an engine room for making and building architectures. A business to be creative within, not on top, but like any business, creative or not, it's based and driven mainly by money.

The work of Felipe Orensanz, architect and planner, along with his colleagues, friends and family is defined on both nice and not-nice paradigms, seemingly, in constant flow and flux within a shifting contextual field of place, location, and time.

The recent book, "Ciudad Independencia, Seguro Social" reads both ways, even, at least, three aspects of O, Z and O+Z directions and dialectical, inquisitive dimensions – nice and not nice, obedient and not-so-obedient, normative and radical. As books can be read in multiple ways, so too a practice of architecture, traditionally the art and science of building buildings, can be seen and read in similar dynamic geometries, which Herbert Dreyfus examines on philosophically in his book, "Background Practices:



Essays in the Understanding of Being." -- While he does not discuss directly the practice of architecture, the book sets-up an un-touched, area, an unspoken field within, and mostly outside the traditional foreground practice of architecture practice as we know it. -- This is changing. - AM



Rome Study Sketches, by Leilliana Hubbard, Michael Graves College of Public Architecture, Kean University, Union, New Jersey

In the 1400's, after measuring and documenting the ruins of ancient Rome, Brunelleschi took his notes, drawings and details of Roman architecture – the foundations, masonry, domes and vaulting work - and returned to his native Florence. There, through the commissions he would soon receive, he translated his discoveries with inspiration and rigor into something else altogether. Recognizable and familiar yet still, wholly new, his work, along with that of his contemporaries in the arts and humanities, ushered in a new era of design and thought, paving the way for countless others to further develop and transform his initial research. Nearly thirteen centuries before, in a similarly innovative and transformational vein, the Emperor Hadrian built his Villa outside Rome, supposedly composed of the many elements and themes he experienced during his extensive travels through-



Students - Michael Graves College of Public Architecture, Kean University, Union, NJ



Drawing Rome by Professpr Richard Lucas, Michael Graves College of Public Architecture, Kean University, Union, New Jersey

out the Empire. Rather than directly copying specific buildings, Hadrian translated them into his own 'Memory Palace', a sequence of architectural forms, volumes and spaces, magnificently composed across the landscape, where he could live, entertain and quite literally walk amongst his memories, thoughts and ideas. This is what architects do: We travel; we see; we experience. Even before Architecture School, we sketch and draw; we document, notate, analyze, dissect. We research, interrogate and investigate our world through drawing. We take things apart so that we might understand how they came together. In the process, we add to our 'toolbox' of ideas, concepts and details so that, in the future, we might draw on them for inspiration and ideas, as did the many architects who've come before us. -- Richard Lucas



Via dei Cerchi is one of the most historically charged streets in the world. Just steps away from the Circus Maximus, time seems to settle in every stone, every shadow, every line of perspective. And yet, from this place so steeped in memory emerges one of the most forward-looking projects in architecture and urbanism: City Meta Lab, a design studio operating between Rome and Dubai, bridging two seemingly opposite worlds. On one side, the Eternal City — a symbol of historical layering and continuity. On the other, the Emirati metropolis — a paradigm of rapid, vertical, meticulously planned urbanization. It is precisely in the dialogue between these extremes that the lab's bold experiment takes shape.

### TWO LATITUDES, ONE SHARED VISION

City Meta Lab is a multidisciplinary collective of architects, urban planners, digital researchers, and public art theorists, with its headquarters in Rome and an operational team in Dubai. The studio's mission is to experiment with new concepts of urban life, drawing from the immense heritage of collective memory and historical depth that cities like Rome—and European cities more broadly—embody after centuries of transformation.

In Dubai's ever-shifting landscape, where entire neighborhoods rise within months, City Meta Lab positions itself as a voice of critical reflection. Through urban studies, masterplans, temporary installations, and public art interventions, the lab works to integrate cultural, historical, and social dimensions into contemporary urban development—dimensions often overlooked in fast-paced construction. The goal is to ensure that behind every new square, boulevard, or public space, there is a narrative, a legacy, a story to be told.

### ARCHITECTURE AS A CROSSROADS OF KNOWLEDGE

City Meta Lab's design philosophy reflects a broader shift in

contemporary architecture: no longer a stand-alone discipline, but a meeting point of diverse forms of knowledge. Designing today means confronting global challenges—from climate emergencies to energy transitions, public health to emerging lifestyles—while incorporating insights from economics, science, technology, philosophy, and the social sciences. In this context, architecture becomes a “science of sciences,” a hybrid field in which the urban form is not an end in itself but a tool to engage with critical issues such as sustainability, resilience, collective wellbeing, and environmental adaptation. The goal is not merely to build, but to imagine future living scenarios—flexible enough to embrace uncertainty and responsive to the evolving needs of communities.

### INSPIRED BY ROME:

#### FROM FORMA URBIS TO CONTEMPORARY FORM

The lab's work is grounded in a key insight: European cities—Rome above all—are not just inhabited spaces, but cultural palimpsests. Each neighborhood, fountain, and urban garden holds a layered memory that has become integral to the city's fabric over time.

In the masterplans designed by City Meta Lab for new residential and mixed-use developments in Dubai, the influence of European urban models is clearly visible. This is not about imitation, but interpretation. The concept of the square is reimagined not as a decorative void, but as a space for social interaction, a functional node, a place for movement and pause. Boulevards echo the historic “promenade,” where walking becomes an act of urban living. Public buildings—schools, libraries, civic centers—are strategically positioned to create a complex urban system in which private and collective spaces continuously interact.



### PUBLIC SPACE AS FOUNDATION

One of City Meta Lab's core focuses is the enhancement of public space in newly built urban environments. In many contemporary cities—including Dubai—shared spaces are often reduced to gaps between buildings, obligatory green areas, or commercial zones in disguise.

To counter this trend, the studio has initiated collaborations with European universities and research centers.

The concept of the square is reimagined not as a decorative void, but as a space for social interaction, a functional node, a place for movement and pause. Boulevards echo the historic “promenade,” where walking becomes an act of urban living. Public buildings—schools, libraries, civic centers—are strategically positioned to create a complex urban system in which private and collective spaces continuously interact to map and analyze Italy's most successful examples of public space and reinterpret their principles in a contemporary key. This means focusing on human scale, permeability, the role of greenery as both social and climatic infrastructure, and the interplay of multiple functions—recreational, commercial, cultural. In this vision, public space is not an optional feature, but the structural backbone of future cities.

### TECHNOLOGY, AI, AND THE RISK OF GLOBALIZED THINKING

A major enabler of City Meta Lab's transcontinental practice is its advanced use of digital tools and artificial intelligence throughout the creative process. Parametric modeling, urban simulations, territorial data analysis, and digital co-design platforms allow the studio to work on multiple projects across diverse geographies while maintaining a coherent design methodology. But it's not just a matter of efficiency. The use of AI—to generate urban scenarios, assess the social impact of design choices, or optimize environmental sustainability—also

carries a risk: the risk of globalized thinking. For this reason, authenticity must be sought through critical, natural intelligences. Contextual analysis, local knowledge, and human interpretation remain essential to ensure that each project preserves meaning, specificity, and cultural depth. AI, in this sense, becomes a tool that must be handled consciously: capable of unlocking new scenarios, but never a substitute for human judgment.

### A NEW WAY OF INHABITING THE WORLD

City Meta Lab ultimately represents a shift in paradigm: from the architect as isolated creator to the designer as curator of meaning, translator of context, and bridge-builder between cultures and systems. Rome teaches us that a city is an endless collective work, layered over centuries. While Dubai demands swift, flexible, scalable answers. Connecting these two visions is no easy task—but it is one of the most fascinating challenges of our time.

### THE FUTURE IS ROOTED IN MEMORY

In the interplay between a millennia-old city like Rome and a futuristic metropolis like Dubai, City Meta Lab finds a way to design the future by revisiting the past. Cities are not just built environments—they are living archives, bodies where every stone reflects a vision of coexistence, every empty space suggests a mode of interaction, every layer contains knowledge.

Reclaiming this heritage does not mean replicating ancient models. It means extracting their underlying principles, reinterpreting them, and adapting them to today's conditions. In this light, the past becomes an inexhaustible source of insight for imagining the future. It is from this dual root—anchored in history, yet reaching toward innovation—that a new way of inhabiting the world can begin to take shape.



Astra Zarina



Steven Holl, Video on Exhibition about Astra Zarina by T-Space, Opening for Circus Maximus, Diatomic Dialogues, University of Washington Rome Center, April 2025



I'm Stephen Holl, architect here in New York, and I'm very grateful of the Architekti Foundation in Riga for bringing our exhibition, Rome and the Teacher, about Astra Zarina to the people of Riga. It's an exhibition that we made four years ago, and it's traveled now to, this'll be the fourth place. So we're very, very excited about it.

And we made this exhibition because Astra Zarina was so influential in my life. And I think when you get older, you start to think back, how did you get here? And I think I had great teachers. And I went to the University of Washington. I was arrogant. I started out as a hot rod punk in Bremerton, Washington. I had the fastest car in town.

I won't get into that. By the time I got to the university, I decided to settle down. But I still had a kind of rebellious attitude. And when they asked us to make an eight by eight by eight cube in the first year architecture problem to be a place to sleep and live and work, I made a diagram that said, you can't fit psychological space into an eight by eight by eight cube. And the professors decided to pass me.

And I came in contact with this incredible professor, Herman Punt, who wrote Schinkel's Berlin. And he was a very emotional teacher. Everybody loved to be in his lectures. I was influenced also by Richard Haag, a great professor, a landscape architect, but really a poet and a Zen master.

And he said something to me that I'll never forget. He gave us a

blue book and we're supposed to say, what do you do when you begin as a landscape architect, a new project on a new place. And there are people that wrote long essays.

And then one guy just wrote three words, "be the site". And he held that up in front of us, that this was really the most brilliant answer to his end of the year, end of the semester question. Anyway, Richard Haag was very influential to me as was Herman Punt.

Astra was not at the university that time, she was in Rome. And there was a piece of paper on the wall about the Rome program being initiated by Astra. And Herman, in those days, you had a little mailbox, a slot each student, so you could communicate, you know, versus sheets of little notes.

And he sent me a note, Stephen, you must go to Rome. And he gave a quote by Goethe, Rome is a city where one can spend a lifetime in Pythagorean silence and not know it. So I decided I'm gonna, you know, send my portfolio and try to get in.

I got into the program and there were seven students. And it was my first, I had been up, growing up in Seattle, and it was the first time I ever left America. First time I went to Europe. Flew over the North Pole, came on the train, went across the English Channel, came on the train down through Europe and with my good friend, Ed Weinstein, we're on the train. And the train pulled into the big train station in Rome, which this is 1970, this is January, 1970. And I said, oh my God, this can't be Rome.

That's a very modern building. Let's just stay on the train. It must be the next station.

Anyway, that was Rome. So we had to get off the train and buy tickets back to Rome from a little town South of Rome. And then I got to Rome and I was stunned by the arrogance of Astra Zarina.

She was something else right from the beginning. First she said, you must learn Italian. And she put us in lessons every morning at Signorita, this really old lady teaching us Italian.

And if you want to be an architect, first you need to learn how to cook. So she was like very forceful right in the beginning and I was kind of put off by it, but I was inspired by her energy and her smile and her fiery eyes. And I mean, she was really a kind of diva.

I mean, she would walk into a room, throw her coat off in one direction, throw her camera on the table and then start telling us what we had to do. She had a wonderful loft villa with a roof garden, a roof scape overlooking Collegio Romano in Rome. And that's where we worked in her studio.

And as students, we were doing our projects with her and we would work at night. And I remember the way that she would dismiss the evening. She would bring a tray of silver goblets with a little Fernet Branca.

And that's a little bit a way of saying, okay, the day is over, take a sip and good night. And to this day, whenever I smell Fernet Branca or have a taste of it, I think about that day in Rome, those days in Rome. She taught architecture and urban design for over three decades in both Seattle and at the University of Washington in Italy.

And she founded the UW Center in Rome and served as its director from 1984 to 1994. There's a really interesting story about my arrogance. I said, when I want to do my project, I want to just analyze the life.

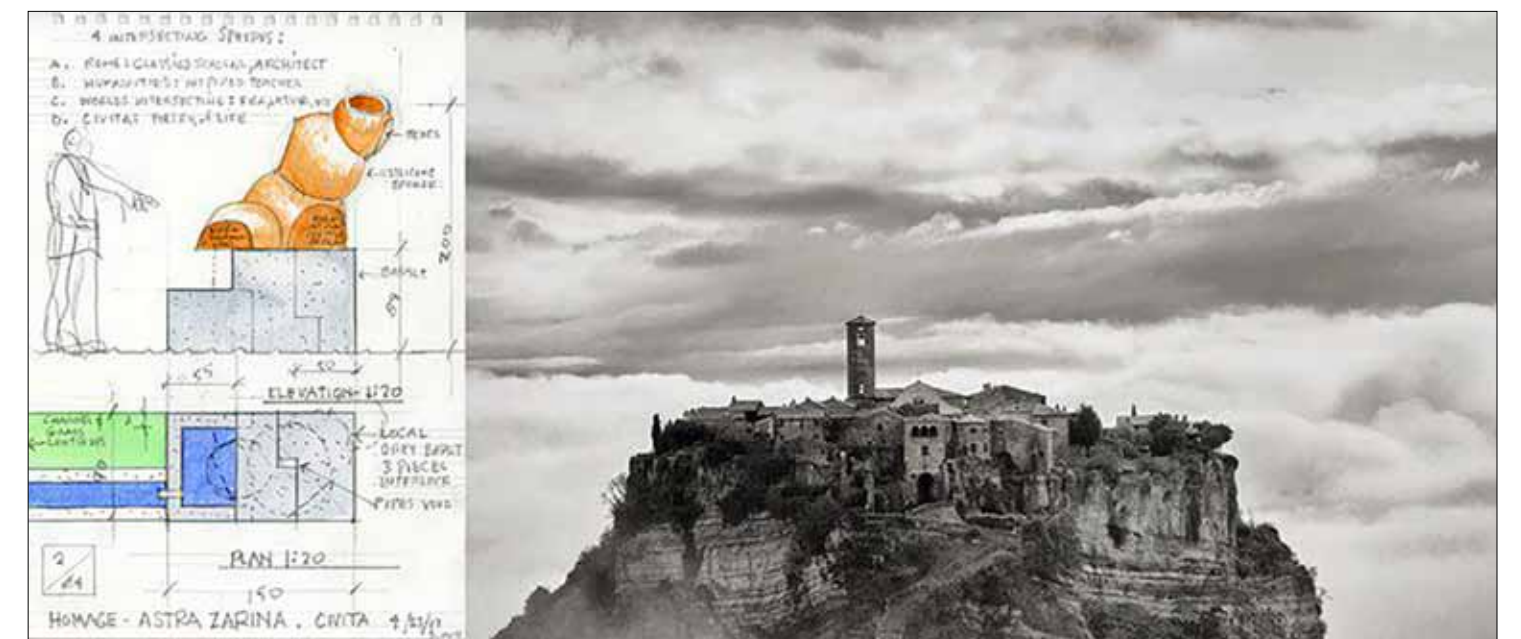
I don't wanna study monuments. I don't need to go to the St. Peter's Cathedral. I'm not interested in Michelangelo. I'm interested in the day-to-day life. So she assigned me, she helped me choose the street, Via dei Giubinari. That's where I did my thesis. I worked the whole time on Via dei Giubinari. I still have the book that I made. And she helped me understand the changes in the day.

And it's a very, very interesting street because it opens out onto Campo dei Fiori. That was in 1970. And about eight years later, there came a space available at Palazzo Pio, which overlooks Campo dei Fiori.

So I think in some ways, our collaboration and enthusiasm helped her decide where this UW Center of Rome would be. Astra was always brilliant. Just a few years after graduating, she became the first woman to win the Rome Prize for Architecture at the same time that she got a Guggenheim Fellowship.

Her explorations of Rome and the countryside during the fellowship changed her approach to architecture and historical preservation. And I just summarize, as I did for the exhibition that's traveling, the seven values. I know she never wrote this exactly, but I've summarized this, paraphrasing what she always taught.

The value of urban space, the value of organic food, its color, its taste, its texture and presentation. She said, if you want to be an architect first, you must learn to cook. The value of historic buildings. Astra was ahead of her time, very far ahead of her time.





Antonio Marseglia, Circus Maximus, Diatomic Dialogues, University of Washington Rome Center, April 2025

## A POINT OF VIEW

**Elisa Russo**

1. Architecture, urbanism, design — for too long, these disciplines have spoken mainly to themselves. Caught in their own languages, their own references, their own echo chambers. But the future doesn't need more icons. It needs alliances.
2. If we want to stay relevant, we must stop asking what architecture is, and start asking what it does. Not in theory, but in reality. Who does it serve? Who does it exclude? What does it change?
3. Creativity must return to usefulness — not as obedience, but as urgency. Not as service to capital, but as service to community.
4. Projects must be judged not only by their form, but by their function in the social fabric: do they open or do they close? Do they connect or divide? Do they imagine, or simply decorate? The future of design will be interdependent, not isolated. It will be hybrid, incomplete, in conversation.
5. Disciplines will have to trespass, collaborate, interfere. Because if we don't shape tools for collective life, we are simply building beautiful, empty shells. And beauty alone is not enough.



Circus Maximus, Diatomic Dialogues, University of Washington Rome Center, April 2025

Hello and Welcome, Thank you for coming. Tonight in Rome we are opening a New International Architecture Exchange as a Work Incubator - called "Circus Maximus: Diatomic Dialogues" presented by City Meta Lab in association with the University of Washington Rome Center, the Michael Graves College of Architecture, Kean University in Union, New Jersey, and Zapp Urbanism/No War Peace Theater Productions. - This first series presents work-in-progress sessions between two or three disparate architects. The series is inspired in part in homage to Astra Zarina, pioneer architect and radical teacher at the University of Washington and founder of the UW Rome Center - an arm of the Seattle School of Architecture in the City of Rome. A far way school by a far away city in another far away city. That said, Let's pass this on to Antonio Marseglia, architect and founding director of City Meta Lab Rome, Dubai, and New York. And then the biz of show biz goes on to Havana and Emanuelle who work as CML architects by day and moderators of Circus Maximus by night. - Don't forget, Rome was founded by King Romulus on April 21, 753 B.C.

Andrew MacNair - New York/Rome - March 19, 2025



**NEXT MAXIMUS SERIES OCTOBER 2025**  
**CIRCUS MAXIMUS II DIATOMIC DIALOGUES**  
**SEATTLE, NEW JERSEY, NEW YORK, ROME, DUBAI**  
**UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON ROME CENTER**  
**CITY META LAB ROME DUBAI NEW YORK**  
**ZAPP URBANISM . NO WAR PEACE THEATER**

Image: Project Space Up and Out by Havana Lankegowda

**CIRCEUS**

**MAYXIMUS**

**DIATOMIC DIALOGUES**

**VIA ROME**

**ZAPP**

**CITY META LAB ROME DUBAI NEW YORK  
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MICHAEL GRAVES COLLEGE OF ARCHITECTURE KEAN UNIVERSITY  
ZAPP URBANISM.NO WAR PEACE THEATER PRODUCTIONS**