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If on a winter's night an architect [booklet]

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If on a winter's night an architect

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Milano / Lund, February 2026

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This booklet documents and reflects on the workshop *If on a winter's night an architect*, developed within MInDS, Politecnico di Milano, February 2026.

The first part outlines the conceptual framework of the project.

The second follows the workshop through a sequence of daily propositions.

The third closes the booklet as an open ending.

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Framework

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MInDS / Milano International Design Studio

MInDS is an intensive design workshop conceived as an international platform for exchange and education, activated between the third and fourth semester of the Master's programme ACI-BEI at the School of Architecture, Politecnico di Milano.

The workshop takes place over two weeks and is structured into five classes led by visiting professors, each addressing a distinct architectural question.

While centred on architectural design, the workshop moves beyond fixed scales and typologies. It engages with an open form of practice that incorporates influences from other disciplines, responding to the demands of a heterogeneous and constantly changing reality.

MInDS 2026 Workshops, 2-13 February

“The eco-social network” by Adrià Guardiet & Sandra Torres (Estudi 08014, Barcelona)

“5 Oppositions” by Simona Malvezzi (Kuehn Malvezzi Studio, Berlin)

“If on a winter’s night an architect” by Jesús Mateo (Zero Architects, Lund)

“Fabricated Forests” by Pina Petricone (Giannone Petricone Architects, Toronto)

“Coral Growths” by Rajat Sodhi (Orproject Architects, New Delhi)

Workshop as an artistic research tool

If on a winter's night an architect is an artistic research project that uses the workshop as its primary instrument of inquiry. It constructs a situation in which architectural practice is deliberately displaced from both teaching and professional contexts.

Rather than presenting a design proposal, the project reorganizes the conditions under which architecture is produced. Time is compressed, sequences are structured, constraints are introduced and withdrawn, and roles shift. These operations do not support the work; they constitute it.

The workshop functions as a device that exposes architectural making in real time: how decisions gain authority, how directions shift, and how collective action reshapes intention. The aim is not a finished building, but the visibility of architecture as process.

The following text reconstructs the lectures that each morning established the conceptual ground of the experiment. It articulates the references and structural choices that frame the workshop.

The photographs presented in the exhibition do not represent outcomes. They capture moments of construction, hesitation, adjustment, and reconfiguration.

If on a winter's night an architect

If on a winter's night an architect is an experimental architectural workshop that understands design as a journey rather than a destination. Architecture is approached as a form of research carried out through making, testing, and re-beginning; without a predefined route or final resolution.

The workshop rejects linear development in favour of detours, interruptions, and partial narratives. Progress is not measured by completion, but by the accumulation of attempts, failures, and shifts in direction. Design becomes a way of moving forward without knowing exactly where one is going.

Inspired by Italo Calvino's *If on a winter's night a traveller*, the workshop mirrors the structure of the novel: a sequence of beginnings that never fully conclude. Each project opens a new path, only to be interrupted and redirected. What emerges is not a single coherent story, but a constellation of fragments.

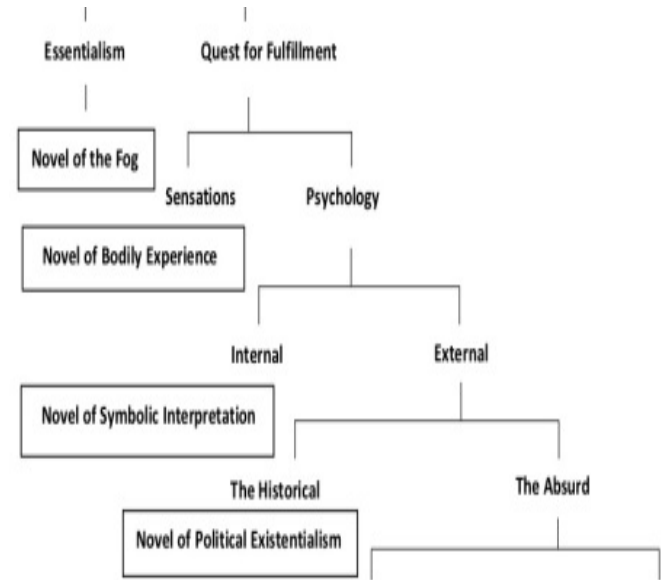
In this context, the architect becomes a traveller, moving between research and design, fiction and construction, intention and chance. Architecture is produced through a continuous act of searching, where uncertainty is not an obstacle but a working condition.

The workshop invites participants to embrace incompleteness, to design through interruption, and to understand architecture as an open-ended process of discovery.

On Binary Choices

Some months after the publication of *If on a winter's night a traveller*, Italo Calvino responded to a literary critique that deeply dissatisfied him. Rather than offering a brief clarification, he wrote a long letter explaining what the critique had failed to grasp about the structure and intentions of the book.

At the end of this letter, Calvino included a diagram. The scheme does not summarize or justify the novel. Instead, it exposes the internal logic that guided its construction: a sequence of binary choices through which the book unfolds. Each decision opens one path while excluding another, generating a branching structure rather than a linear narrative.



Fragment of Italo Calvino's explanatory scheme

Research and the Backward Process

What is significant is the timing of the explanatory scheme. Calvino produces it after the book has been written and published. The scheme is not a plan, but a retrospective act of organization. It is an attempt to understand his own work after the fact.

In this sense, research appears as a backward process. Calvino looks at what has already been produced and analyzes it, sorting his writing into categories of novels, narrative positions, and formal attitudes. The diagram does not simplify the book; instead, it reveals how complexity emerges from a series of elementary choices.

This backward movement is essential. It shows that structure does not always precede creation. Sometimes it is discovered only afterward, through reflection, classification, and re-reading. Organizing becomes a form of research in itself.

Within the workshop, the idea of the binary choice is adopted as the working tool. The scheme followed by participants is not a closed system or a predefined method, but an open-ended plan for research. Each binary decision does not resolve a question but generates a new field of exploration. The structure remains provisional, adjustable, and incomplete. The binary scheme functions as a way of navigating uncertainty: a device that allows research to remain open, reversible, and continuously reconfigured.

On Classification and Order

In *The Order of Things*, Michel Foucault begins with a strange and disorienting example: a fictional Chinese encyclopedia in which animals are classified in unfamiliar ways; animals that belong to the Emperor, embalmed animals, sirens, animals that from a long way off look like flies, *animals that just broke the water pitcher*,... The unease produced by this list does not come from its absurdity, but from the fact that it follows a logic entirely different from our own.

Foucault uses this example to reveal that systems of classification are never neutral. Every way of ordering the world is based on assumptions that shape what can be seen, named, and understood. Familiar Western classifications, such as dividing animals into those with a backbone and those without, are effective, but they also limit perception. They privilege certain criteria while excluding others: narrative, appearance, accident, fiction, or distance.

When a particular order becomes dominant, it begins to appear natural and inevitable. Alternative ways of organizing knowledge become unthinkable.

Reordering Architecture

Architectural history is shaped by a similar logic. It is most often written as a linear progression or as a sequence of styles that replace one another over time. This structure produces clarity, but it also suppresses overlaps, contradictions, and practices that do not fit within a narrative of progress.

This workshop adopts Foucault's challenge as a method: to question inherited orders, destabilize familiar narratives, and explore architecture through experimental systems of thought.

What if architectural history were organized differently?

What if its chapters were organized by unexpected affinities, gestures, or situations rather than periods or styles?

What if one chapter were titled *Architects that from a long way look like flies*, or *Architects that just broke the water pitcher*?

Such a history would not aim for completeness or coherence. Instead, it would expose architecture as a field of fragments, interruptions, and parallel trajectories. Reordering architecture in this way becomes an act of inquiry, one that opens space for alternative forms of practice and new ways of designing.

On Hejduk, Drawing, and Personal Universes

Among the workshop's references is a drawing by John Hejduk from *The Mask of Medusa*, a book that resists explanation. Its narratives are opaque and its structure elusive; rather than clarifying, it constructs a world that must be entered without expecting full comprehension.

The drawing does not function as a conventional illustration or diagram. It appears as a constellation of architectonic elements, figures, objects, spaces, catfishes, peacocks, rooms for thought, placed side by side without hierarchy. None explains the others; none claims centrality. They coexist as fragments of a personal universe.

The drawing may be understood as Hejduk's private encyclopedia: a system of classification in which symbolic figures, architectural forms, and imagined spaces hold equal weight. Meaning arises not from linear order or functional logic, but from proximity, repetition, and resonance.

In this way, the drawing unsettles familiar structures of knowledge. It refuses to separate architecture from fiction, body from building, or symbol from type. It can also be read as a poetic reworking of classical typology studies, where types are no longer abstract categories, but characters shaped by memory and narrative.

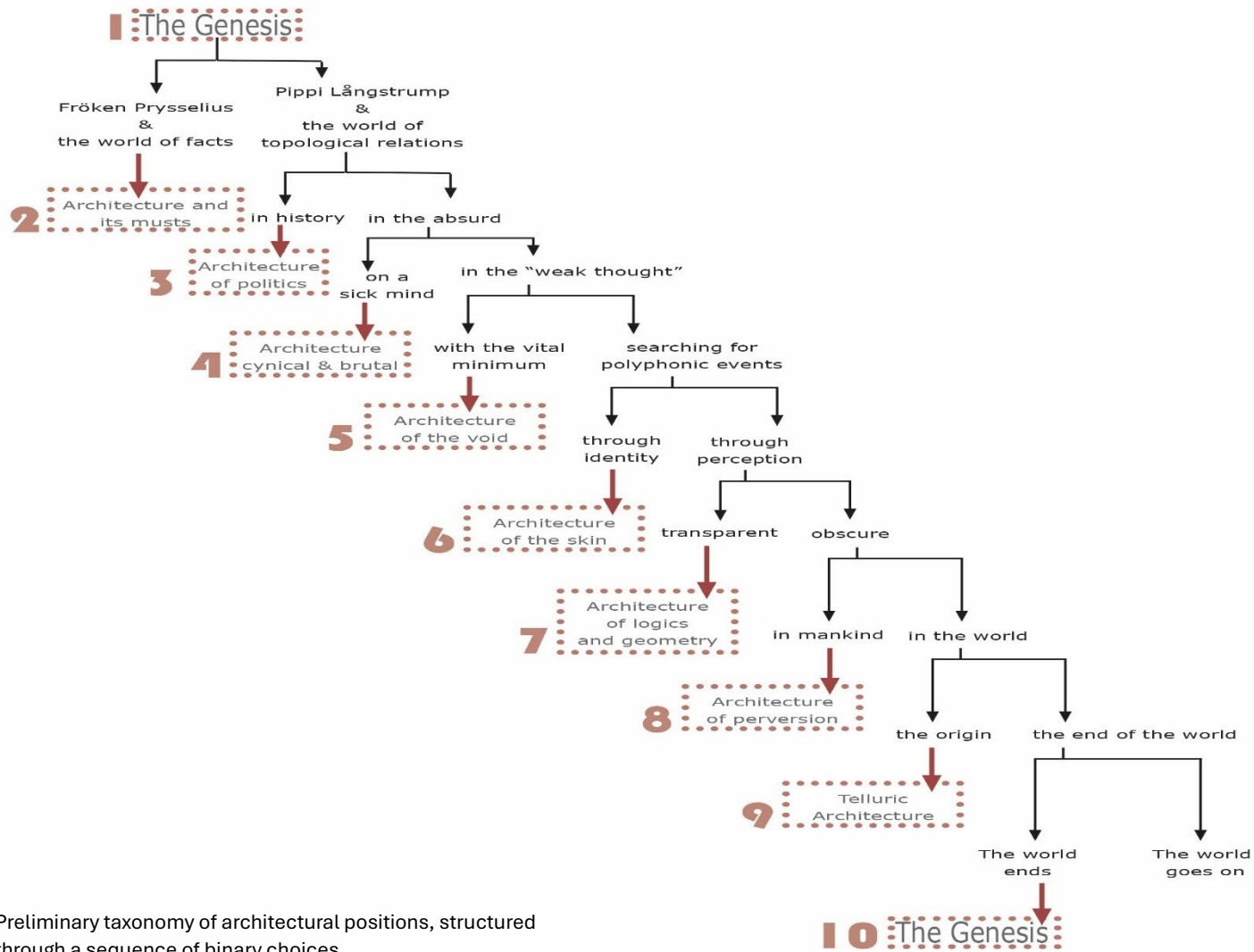
Within the workshop, Hejduk's drawing is not a reference to decode but a position to adopt. It proposes an architecture assembled from fragments and invented orders, where understanding remains partial and classification unstable. The drawing becomes a field in which a personal universe can unfold.

On Genesis and Journeys

A journey rarely follows a straight road. It advances through detours and changes of direction, moving across a landscape of thought rather than toward a fixed destination. Within this workshop, architectural research unfolds in this way: as a process in which the method is not given in advance but discovered through movement.

At a certain moment, a point of departure becomes necessary; not an origin in a historical sense, but a constructed beginning. This genesis gathers what architecture is commonly expected to be: its obligations, assumptions, and inherited necessities. From this provisional ground, other architectures can diverge.

From here, a scheme of binary choices is set in motion. Each choice opens one path while closing another, producing parallel trajectories rather than a single line of development. These binaries are not oppositions to be resolved, but devices for displacement. The scheme does not aim at completeness; it remains open, reversible, and in continuous transformation.



Preliminary taxonomy of architectural positions, structured through a sequence of binary choices

A Preliminary Taxonomy

The previous scheme proposes a preliminary taxonomy of architectural positions. It is neither history nor method, but a speculative structure for navigating architectural thought. It organizes positions rather than buildings.

At its origin stands The Genesis, from which architecture enters through two contrasting dispositions: Fröken Prysselius and Pippi Långstocking. Prysselius embodies rules, norms, and architectural “musts.” Pippi represents contingent relations, where meaning is negotiated. Architecture appears as a field shaped by positions rather than certainties.

From this point, the scheme unfolds through a series of bifurcations that generate multiple and sometimes incompatible trajectories. Rather than resolving oppositions, these divisions displace them, producing a field of positions that remain provisional, unstable, and open to reconfiguration.

At its far end, the scheme splits once more between origin and end. Closure is refused: the world ends and continues, both returning to The Genesis. The system does not conclude; it loops. Each position is a temporary stabilization within a structure that remains in motion.

On the logbook

Each day, one participant assumes the role of captain. The position rotates continuously. The captain does not lead the workshop or direct its outcomes, but takes care of the crew and records the journey of the day: where it began, what occurred, what shifted, what remained unresolved.

The logbook takes inspiration from maritime practice. Historically, a ship's log was a formal record of departure points, destinations, weather, speed, and course; factual, precise, and written from within the journey, never from its end.

In the workshop, the log expands to include what cannot be measured: changes of direction, hesitation, disagreement, discovery. Weather becomes mood; course becomes intention; speed becomes intensity or delay. What is recorded is not progress toward a destination, but movement itself.

A new captain each day introduces a new voice and perspective. The journey is described repeatedly, but never the same way. Events are reordered or emphasized differently. No single account is definitive.

In this sense, the logbook echoes the fragmented readings of *If on a winter's night a traveller*, where meaning emerges across interrupted beginnings. It does not explain or justify the workshop. By writing each day from within the journey, the workshop becomes readable, without ever becoming complete.

What emerges is not a continuous story, but a layered one: a sequence of voices leaving traces of passage, shaping the workshop as much as models or texts.

Daily Sequences

If on a winter's night an architect

in the world of facts

with practice as relation

when continuity becomes pathological

toward the vital minimum

and the body dressed to return to the world

only to realize that each journey is read differently

**If on a winter's night
an architect**



1. If on a winter's night an architect

The Genesis

Every journey begins with a decision that is rarely neutral: where to start.

Before moving through divergent paths, a point of departure must be constructed. In architecture, this choice implies an acceptance of tools, limits, and inherited ways of composing space. It defines not only how a project begins, but also the range of possibilities it can later sustain.

With modernism, this starting point became unstable. Classical systems of proportion, symmetry, and hierarchy were set aside, and with them the assurance of a shared compositional language. Architecture was forced to construct new beginnings.

One such beginning can be found in the work of Ludwig Mies van der Rohe. His plans operate as compositions rather than enclosures: arrangements of lines, planes, and intervals that establish relations. This approach resonates with Piet Mondrian and Theo van Doesburg, where balance emerges through tension, asymmetry, and placement within a field.

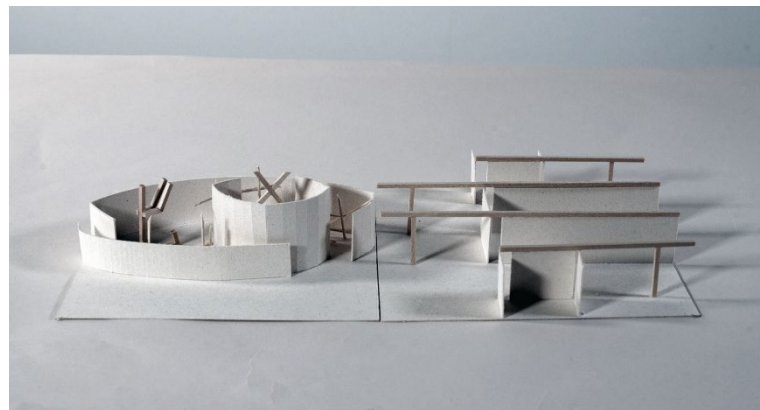
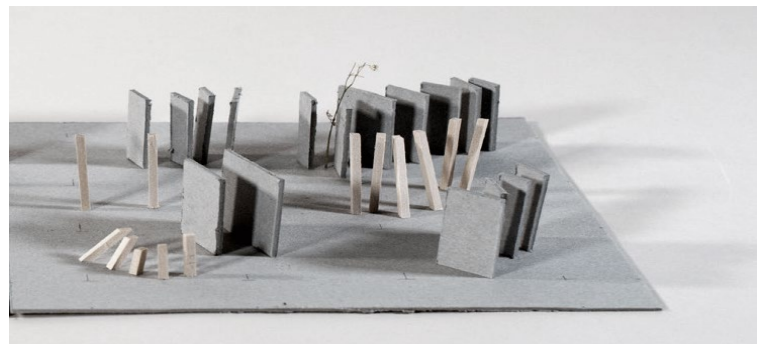
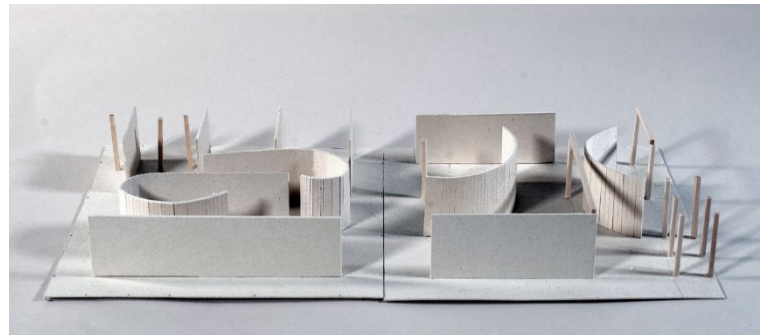
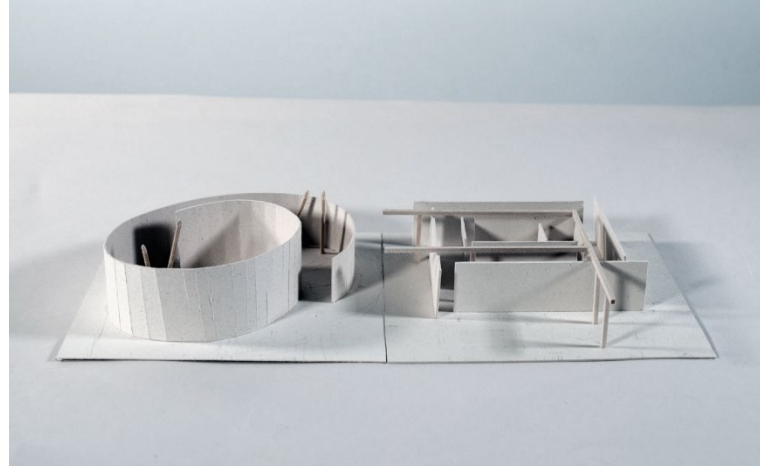


In projects such as the Barcelona Pavilion, architecture appears less as an object than as a spatial composition. Walls do not enclose in a conventional sense; they are positioned to guide movement, frame views, and produce shifting relations. Space is not contained—it emerges between elements.

Exercise

Architecture is assembled from a limited set of parts; walls, columns, surfaces whose meaning arises through their relative position. Composition becomes an act of placement, where each element gains significance through its relation to others.

It is from this condition that the journey begins: a reduced set of elements, a governing geometry, and a rule-based placement that does not dictate meaning but allows it to emerge. This starting point does not claim universality. It simply establishes a ground from which architecture can begin to diverge.



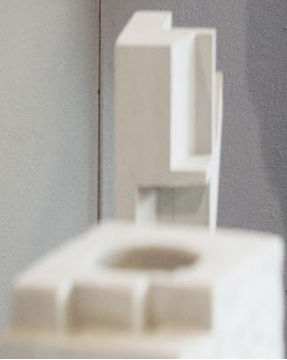


It is a man's right to choose...
The right to choose is a fundamental right of every person. It is the right to make decisions about one's own life and body. This right is essential to the dignity and autonomy of the individual. It is the right to choose one's own path, to pursue one's own dreams, and to live one's own life. This right is the foundation of a free and just society.

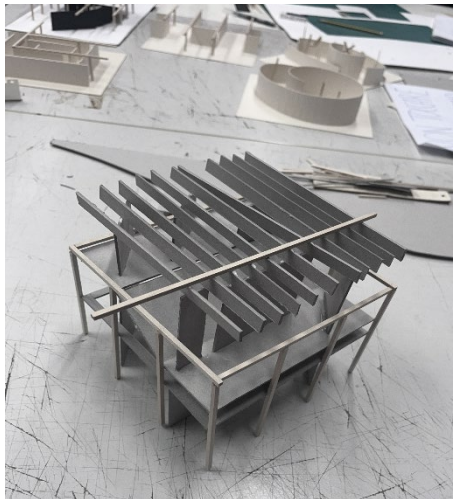
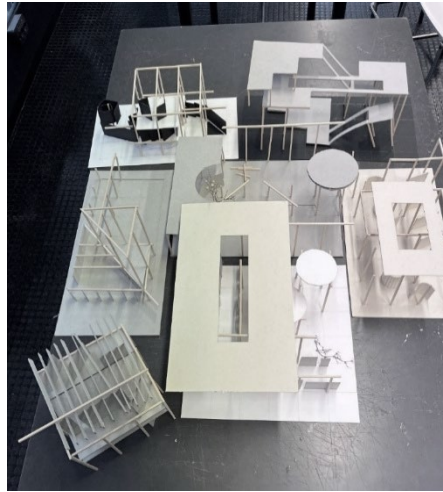
With proper education...
Education is the key to a better future. It is the foundation of a strong and prosperous society. It is the way to personal growth and development, and it is the way to a better life. Education is the key to a better future, and it is the foundation of a strong and prosperous society.

Sound the red mission...
The red mission is a call to action. It is a call to stand up for the rights of the oppressed and the marginalized. It is a call to fight for a better world, and it is a call to a better life. The red mission is a call to action, and it is a call to a better world.

Child is made the red mission...
The red mission is a call to action. It is a call to stand up for the rights of the oppressed and the marginalized. It is a call to fight for a better world, and it is a call to a better life. The red mission is a call to action, and it is a call to a better world.



In the world of facts



2. In the world of facts

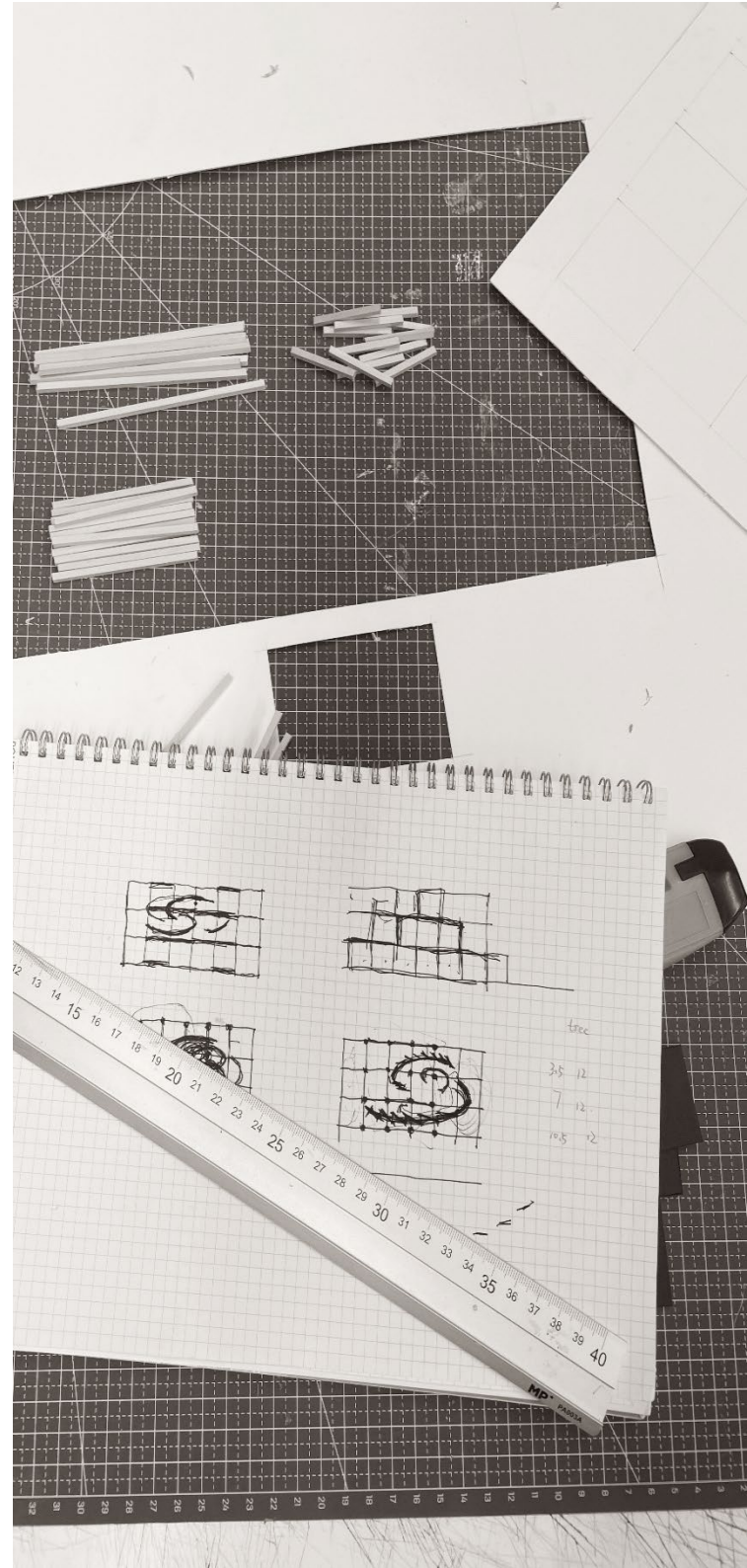
Architecture and its musts

The first binary question is introduced: who decides how the world is organized?

Opposed to Pippi Longstocking stands Fröken Prysselius, a figure of authority who believes in rules, institutions, and proper order. She represents the world of facts: a static and prescriptive view of reality composed of measurable truths and fixed norms.

In architectural terms, she embodies architecture and its musts. If she were an architect, she would admire Ernst Neufert and his *Architects' Data*, where architecture is reduced to standards, dimensions, and correct solutions: straight walls, right angles, proper rooms, and acceptable forms.

This logic also appears in architectures of order and authority, such as the Palace of Italian Civilization or Aldo Rossi's San Cataldo Cemetery, and even in the paintings of Giorgio de Chirico, where rational compositions are subtly unsettled by shadow and displacement.



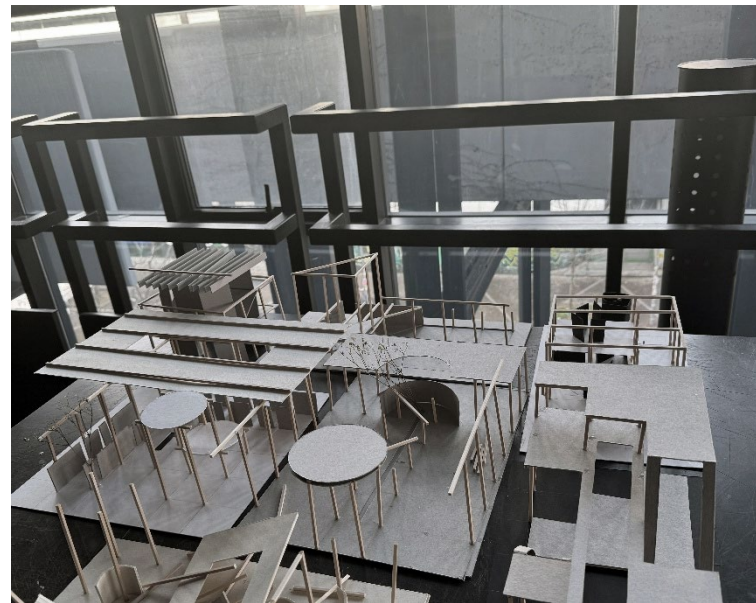
Within the workshop, this position is not questioned; it is fully accepted.

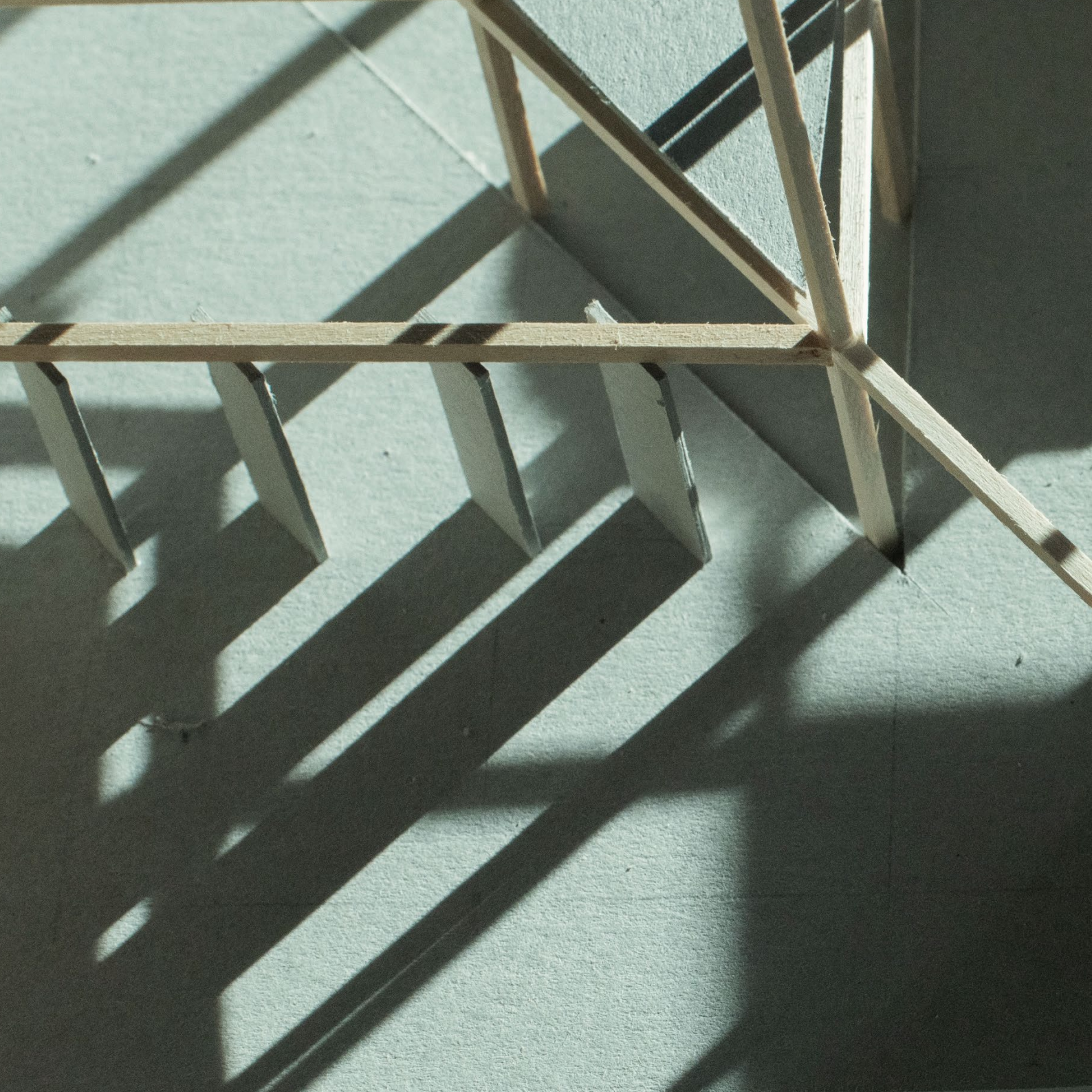
Exercise

Students must give away their models from the previous day. Each receives two models from others and is required to construct a new one. The nine plus nine squares are translated into twenty-seven cubes of five centimetres. A fixed set of elements is imposed: a tree, a pond, thirty-six pillars of three heights, twenty-one walls, three slabs, and one hundred fifty centimetres of beams. All elements must be placed according to the given grid.

At the same time, materials are exchanged, so that no model remains materially coherent.

The exercise does not allow deviation. It constructs a condition in which architecture is governed by rules, where decisions are predetermined and form emerges through compliance rather than choice.





With practice as relation



3. With practice as relation

Architecture of Politics

Pippi Longstocking and the World of Topological Relations

If Prysselius' world is built on facts, where things are defined by measurable truths that exist independently; Day 3 shifts toward the world of topological relations, where what something *is* depends on how it is connected to others. Here, meaning does not arise from isolated data but from networks, flows, and relations between individuals, movements, and spaces.

This is the world closer to Pippi Longstocking: flexible, relational, and resistant to dogma. In history and society, topological relations generate continuity and direction; they describe how we organize ourselves, how collective decisions are made, and how power circulates. This is politics.

Architecture, seen through this lens, becomes a political act, not through representation, but through participation and connection. Bottom-up practices such as Dreamhamar by Ecosistema Urbano, which reimagined the center of Hamar through citizen involvement, or guerrilla architectures like the Bow-House by Stéphane



Malka, show how spatial interventions can emerge from collective action rather than institutional authority.

Exercise

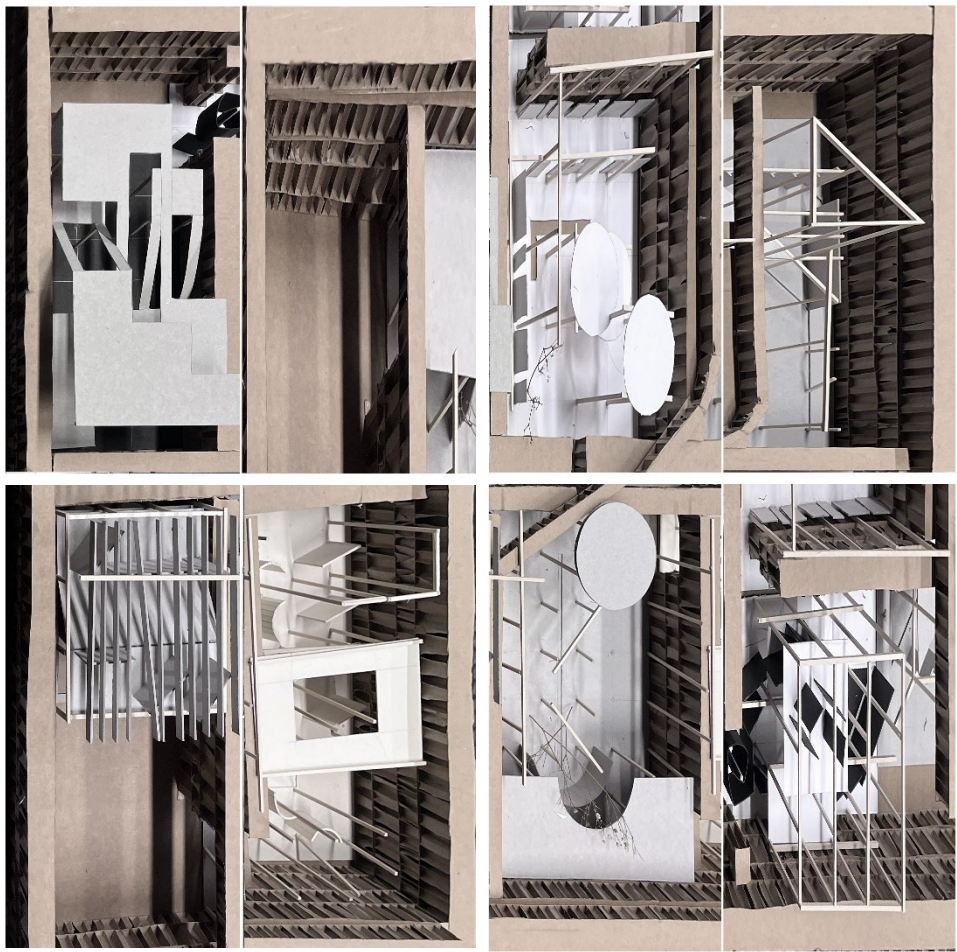
Accordingly, today's assignments are not framed as strict rules but as invitations and suggestions: students are invited to work collectively in a group of seven, coordinated by a captain, and to produce a shared model using simple orthogonal cardboard elements (maybe a representation of a recycled material in the real world). A further suggestion introduces a stick-based pedestal that may support, contrast, or reposition the model. These proposals leave room for negotiation, interpretation, and adaptation.

Architecture here is no longer a fixed object governed by musts, but a living network of relations, held together by cooperation, tension, and shared decisions.





**When continuity
becomes pathological**



4. When continuity becomes pathological

Architecture Cynical and Brutal

If Day 3 approached architecture as a field sustained by relations and negotiation, this day begins where those relations no longer operate. Continuity persists but emptied of reciprocity. Connections remain as structure, not as care. Architecture turns cynical and brutal.

Cynical, because it speaks in the language of progress, beauty, or emancipation while operating through exclusion. Brutal, because human experience is no longer a concern. Architecture no longer negotiates relations; it imposes them.

A clear example is Le Corbusier's Obus Plan for Algiers. Described through references to landscape and climate, the project proposes a continuous megastructure imposed over the city. Behind its rhetoric lies an architecture indifferent to social life, reduced to the expression of a singular will.

A similar logic appears in Superstudio's Continuous Monument. Conceived as a neutral structure extending across territories, it promises liberation through uniformity. Yet this elimination of difference



produces alienation. Continuity becomes total, and life is reduced to its minimum expression.

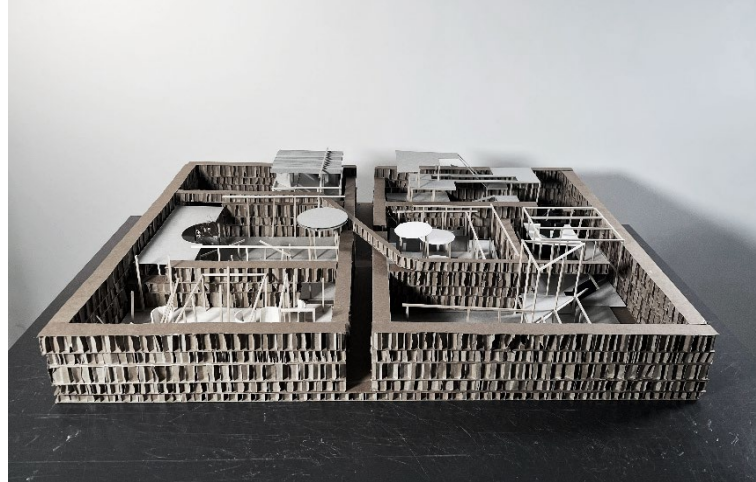
This ambiguity is also present in Rem Koolhaas's *Exodus*, where a portion of London is enclosed as a voluntary prison. Participation appears as choice, yet the project depends on separation and control. Culture is preserved through confinement.

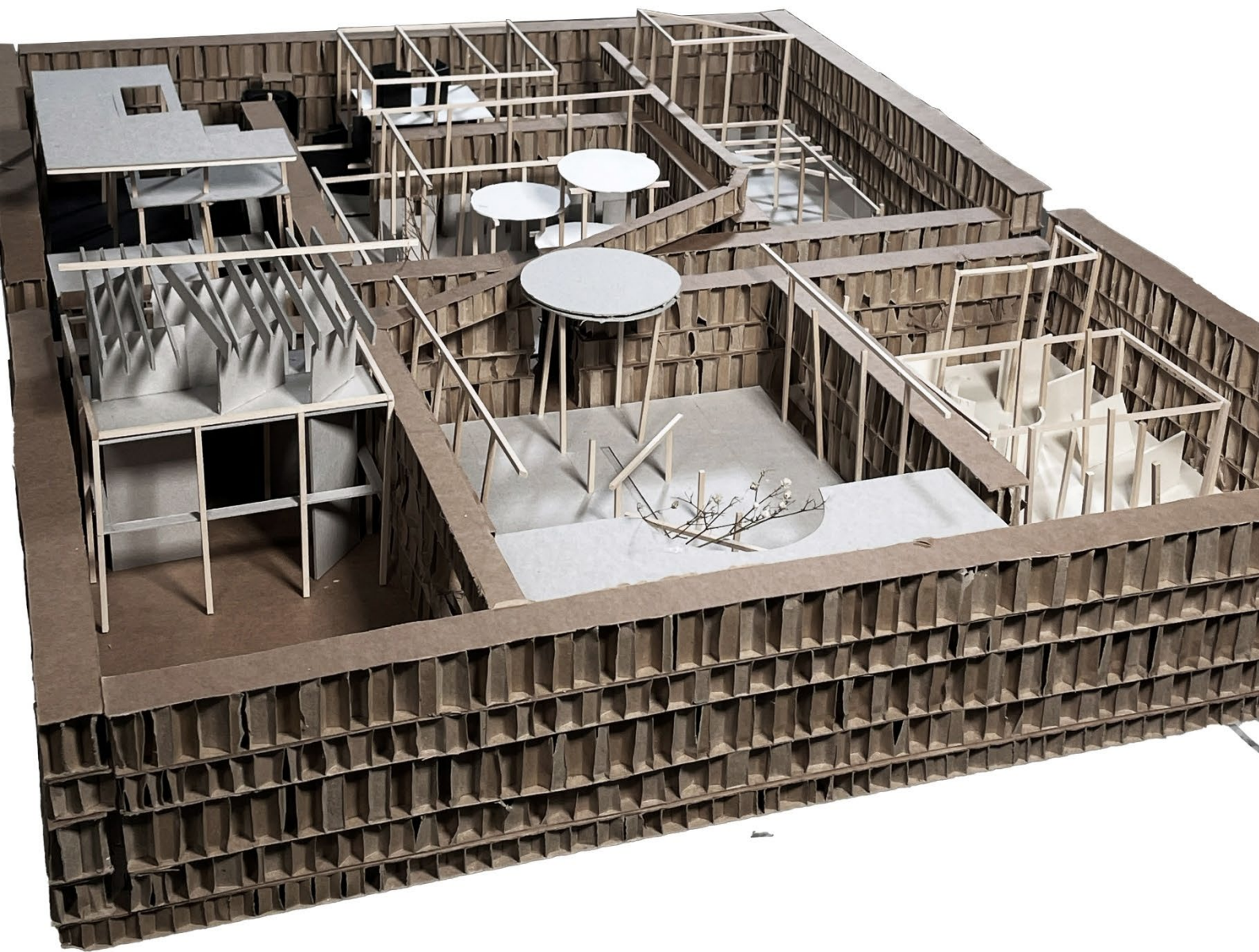
In these cases, architecture claims political intent while operating through enclosure, gigantism, and indifference. Continuity no longer produces relations; it produces control.

Exercise

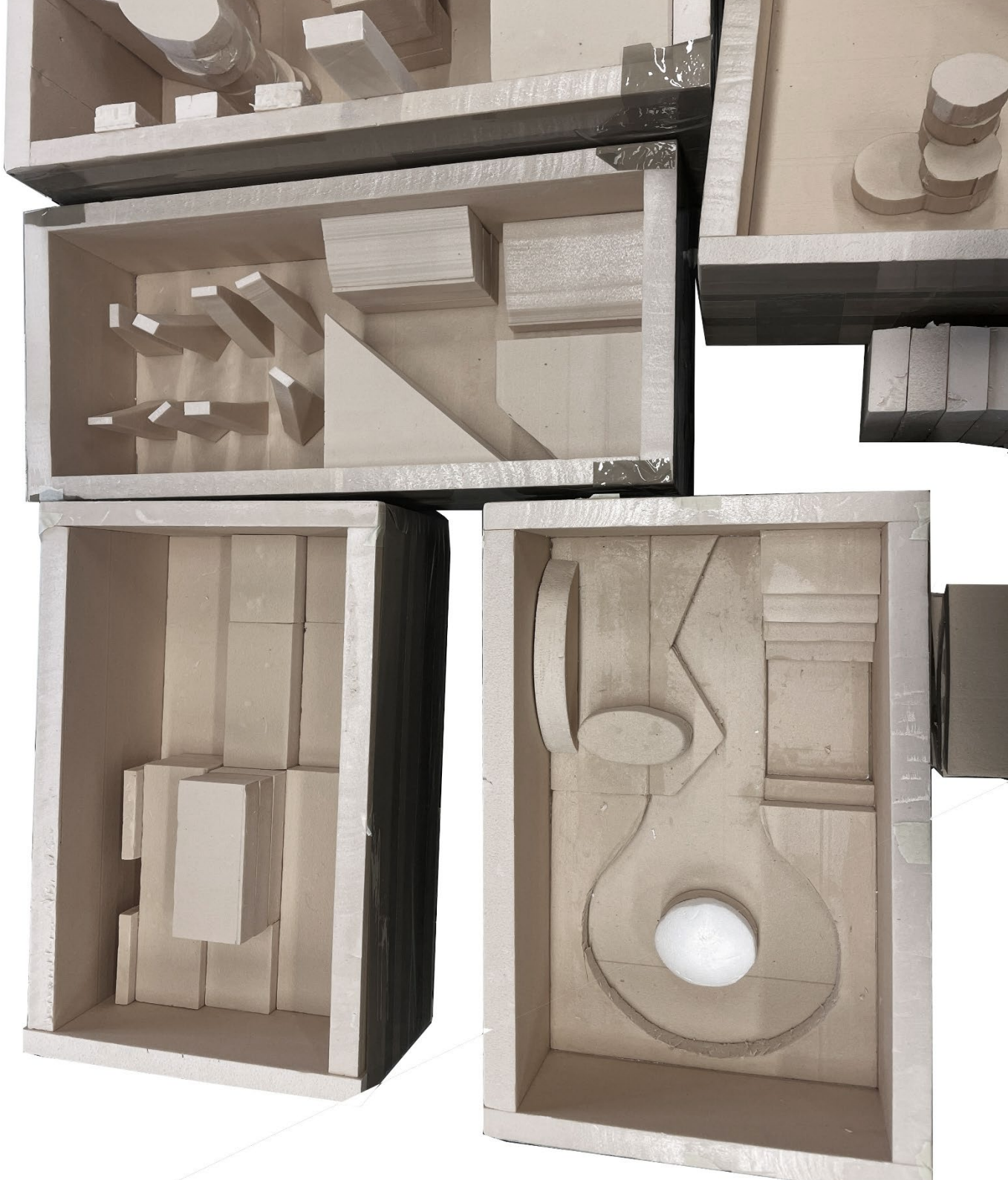
This condition is translated into space. Using Superstudio's *Le dodici città ideali* as a reference, students insert their Day 2 models into a single, enclosed city. The whole is isolated, and its parts are separated from one another.

What emerges is a condition of mutual confinement: a controlled enclave in which architecture no longer connects, but confines.





Toward the vital minimum



5. Toward the vital minimum

Architecture of the Void

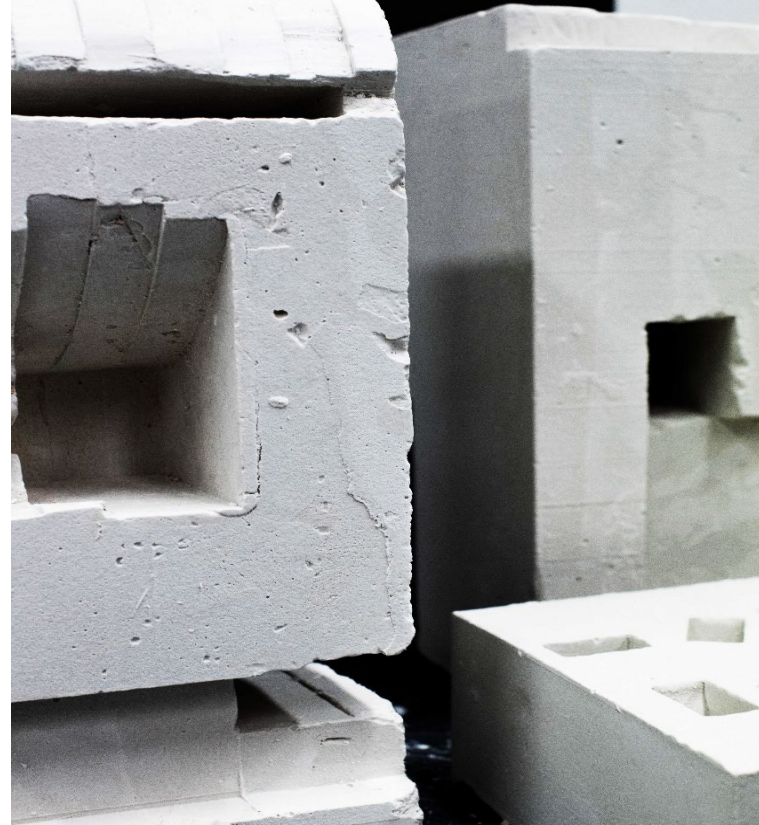
Weak thought and the vital minimum

If history can be understood as a continuity of relations, the absurd marks the moment when those relations lose their explanatory power. From this collapse, two responses emerge: one compensates through force and control, producing cynical and brutal architectures; the other accepts the collapse without resolution.

Here, strong meanings dissolve without replacement. This position aligns with weak thought: the abandonment of absolute truths and total systems. The absurd becomes a condition to inhabit, opening space for fragility and care. Architecture no longer seeks to dominate or explain. It asks instead: what is the minimum required so that life can continue?

Architecture of the void operates at this threshold. It reduces rather than accumulates. Meaning is suspended. The void is not empty, but a charged condition shaped by matter, light, gravity, and time.

In this lineage, architects of the void work through precise reductions: Ensemble Studio's Truffle and



Junya Ishigami's Yamaguchi Restaurant, where space emerges through excavation; Peter Zumthor's Therme Vals, where minimal form intensifies bodily experience; and Jørn Utzon's Can Lis, where architecture withdraws to walls, openings, and horizon.

This logic extends beyond architecture into sculpture, as in the work of Eduardo Chillida. The void is treated as material; shaped, contained, and made present. Meaning emerges from the articulation of absence. Across these works, architecture does less in order to allow more.

Exercise

Students produce a plaster model conceived as a hellscraper: an architecture excavated downward. Subtraction, imprint, and gravity define the process. Architecture is formed by what is removed.

The Day 1 models serve as the starting point for the hellscraper, generated through a negative extrusion of their geometry.

What remains is not a conclusion, but a condition: architecture suspended over emptiness, held together by the minimum.





**And the body dressed
to return to the world**



6. And the body dressed to return to the world

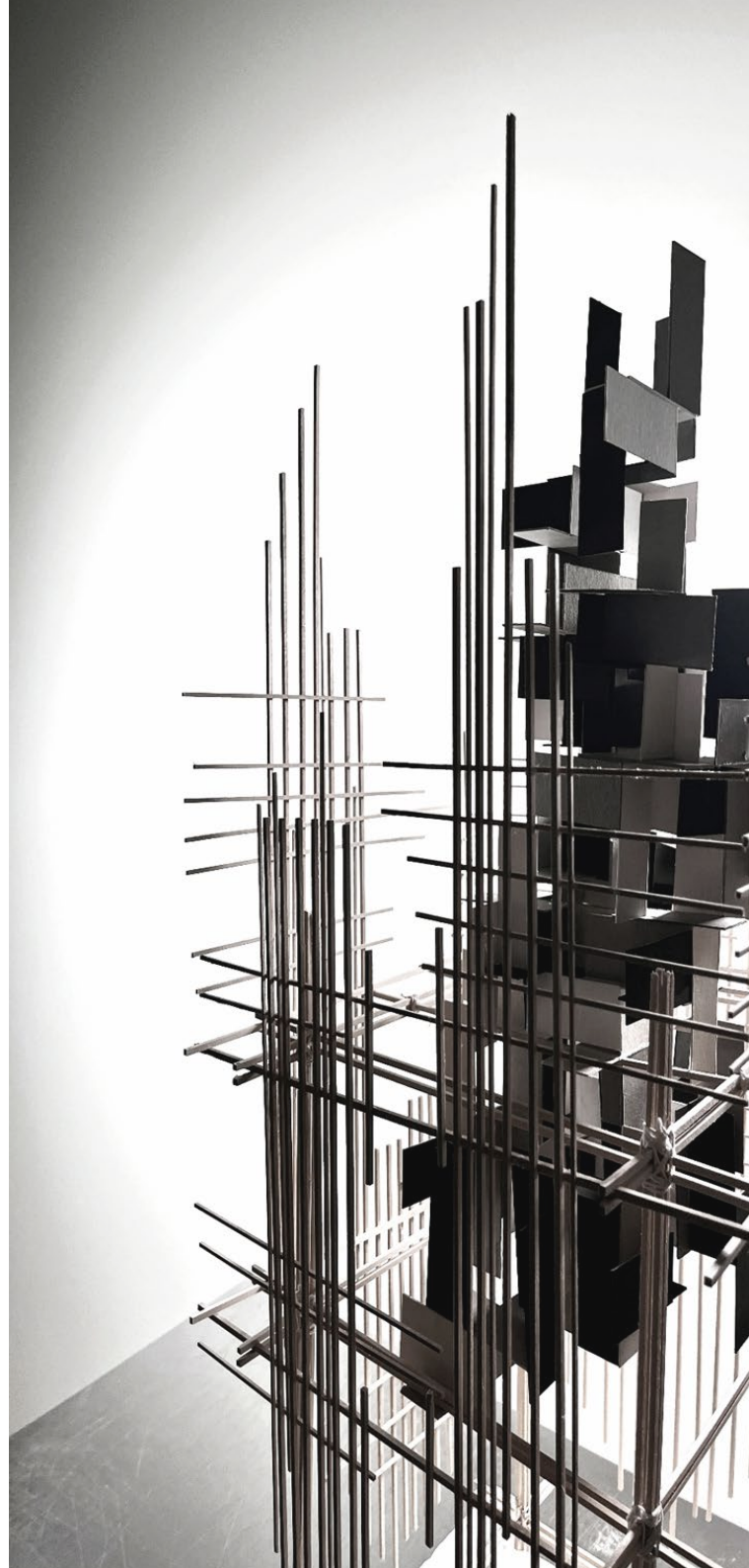
Architecture of the Skin

Within the scheme, Architecture of the Skin emerges after the collapse of strong meanings and the reduction toward the vital minimum. If Architecture of the Void withdraws, Architecture of the Skin operates at its edge. Meaning is no longer produced through structure or essence, but through appearance, interface, and surface.

This position lies at the threshold between identity and perception, linked to the search for polyphonic events. Architecture no longer speaks with a single voice, but produces overlapping readings that shift with the observer, the moment, and the context. The skin becomes the medium through which this multiplicity is staged.

To dress is not merely to cover, but to assume a role. Historically, clothing has functioned as a device of hierarchy, ritual, and power, as well as a means of constructing presence. It amplifies identity and establishes distance from the ordinary.

A clear architectural parallel appears in the 1931 Beaux-Arts Architects' Ball, where William Van Alen



dressed as his own Chrysler Building. Architect and skyscraper merge into a single figure: the Man-Skyscraper, where architecture becomes an extension of the body.

This image resonates in Ayn Rand's *The Fountainhead*, where architecture is worn as a visible manifestation of individuality. Yet disguise is never neutral. It can exalt or ridicule. In carnival, identities overlap, contradict, and remain temporary. Meaning becomes performative and polyphonic.

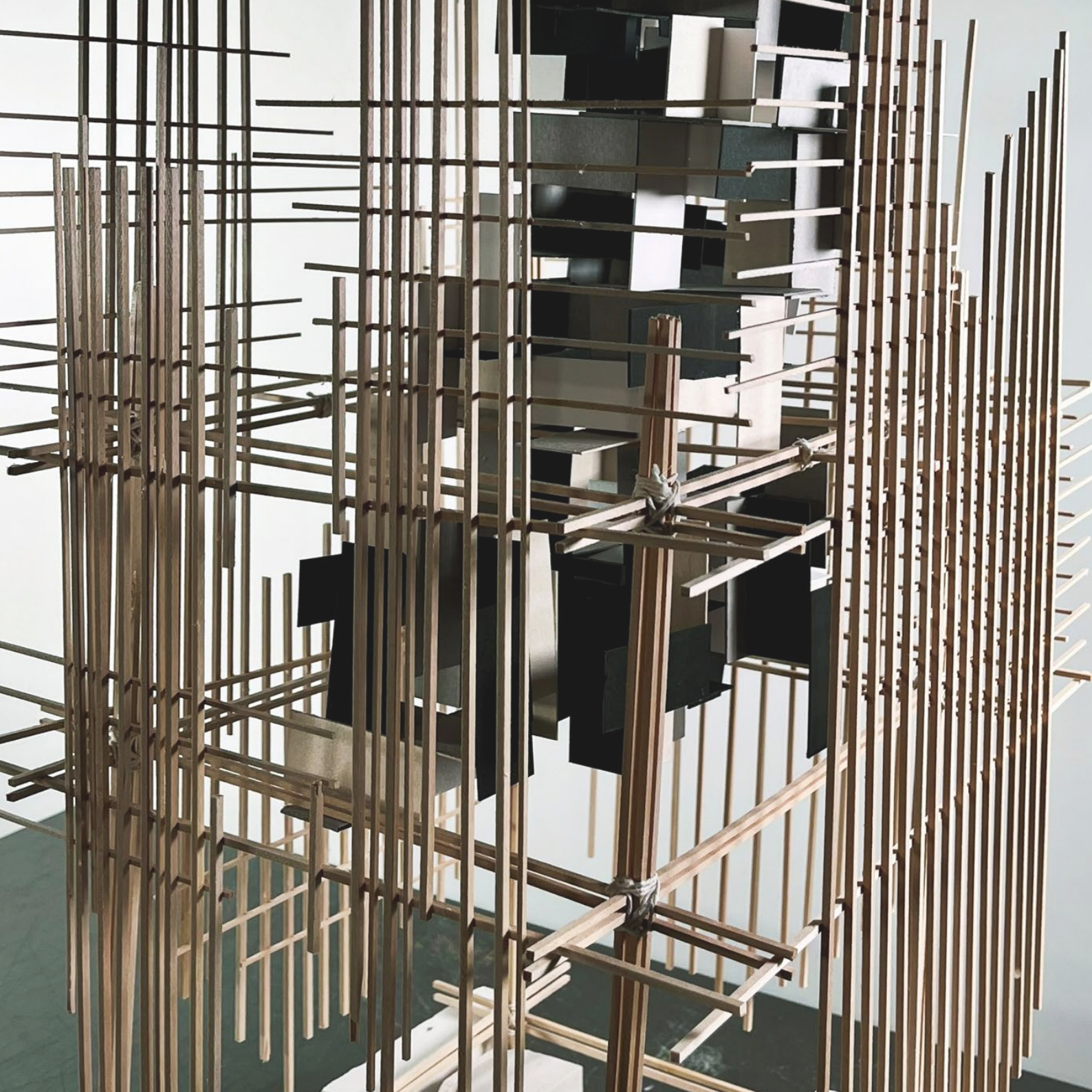
This logic persists in contemporary architecture. In the work of Rem Koolhaas, buildings are dressed after their form is defined. The envelope becomes a site of variation, producing multiple readings of the same body, as in the Seattle Public Library.

Exercise

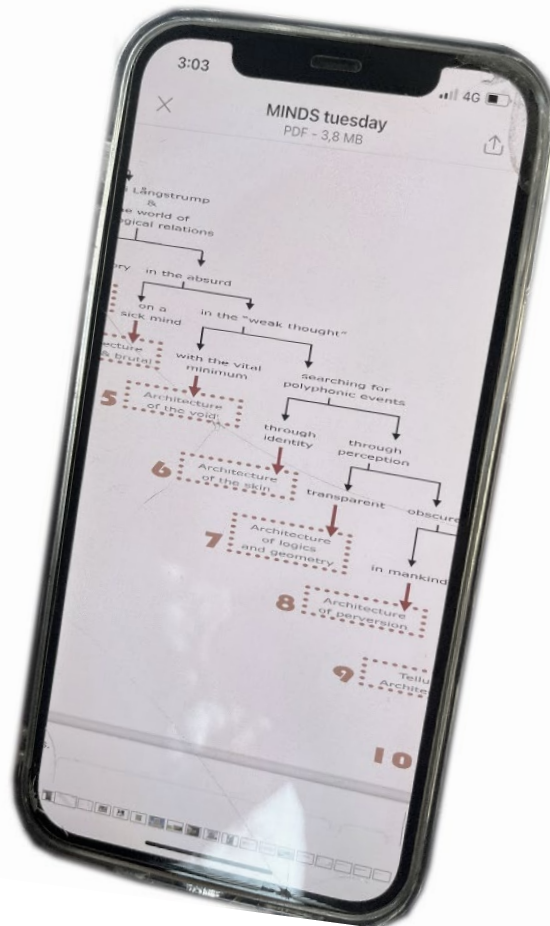
Students work in groups to dress the structure produced in Architecture of Politics. At that stage, the model consists only of bones and flesh: structure and basic mass. The task is to produce a skin that transforms its presence, amplifies or distorts its identity, and introduces polyphony.

The exercise explores how architecture, once reduced to its minimum, re-enters the world through appearance.





**Only to realize that
each journey
is read differently**



7. Only to realize that each journey is read differently

On Seven Students and What Might Have Been

One student experienced the workshop as a single, continuous project. For him, each day transformed the previous one, absorbing it. Models, texts, references, and exercises became chapters of one long work. Nothing stood alone. Even what appeared contradictory was incorporated. Looking back, he felt he had never stopped working on the same architecture.

Another student recognized something more distant. Throughout the workshop, she felt drawn toward an architecture she could not fully name; something remembered rather than discovered. Certain exercises resonated with images and sensations from earlier encounters with space. The workshop did not teach her something new; it allowed something old to surface.

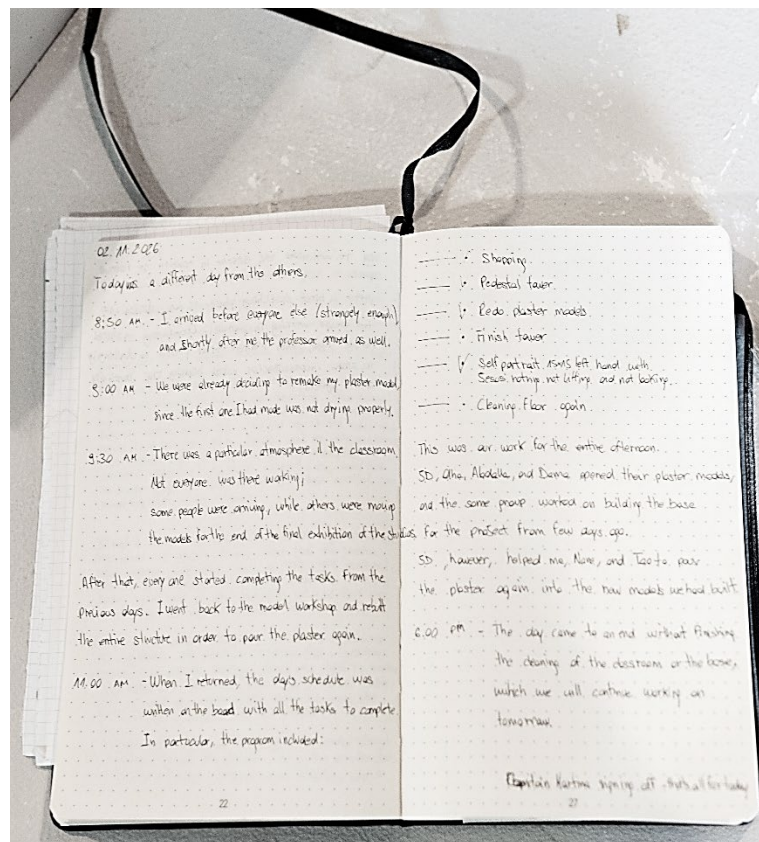
A third student says the workshop worked mainly as a source of distraction and drift. He lost himself in daydreams. A model, a title, or a small operation carried him away from architecture toward another reality. For him, the value lay in this displacement: architecture mattered insofar as it pushed him outside itself.



Another student insists on the opposite. For her, nothing could be skipped. Every exercise, every constraint, every shift in the scheme demanded attention. Meaning resided in continuity and careful alignment. She read the workshop closely, step by step, returning again and again to the same operations. The workshop never really ended; it remained open as something to be reread and refined.

A fifth student speaks of repetition. He felt he was always returning to the same questions: order, relation, reduction, skin; but each time these appeared altered. Sometimes he felt he was advancing; at other times, he sensed all the versions of the workshop layered together, without hierarchy. Architecture revealed itself as a practice without a stable object.

Another student admits that often very little was needed. For her, a title, a diagram, or a single image was enough to activate the imagination. She worked less with what was given than with what was promised. The strength of the workshop lay not in its content, but in its capacity to suggest architectures that might never be built.



A final student searched for an ending. He wanted a position from which the workshop could be understood as a whole. Yet the more he looked for closure, the more it receded. The end appeared only as a horizon beyond the last exercise, something sensed but not reached.

But perhaps most of them, silently, preferred something else entirely: clear beginnings, distinct projects, and defined outcomes. Yet leaving the workshop, something had shifted. Architecture no longer appeared as a sequence of complete works, but as a series of suspensions.

The workshop does not decide which of these readings is correct. Like the readers gathered in the library at the end of *If on a winter's night a traveller*, the students do not share a single understanding of what has taken place.

What remains is not a unified lesson, but a plurality of experiences. One journey produces many readings, none of them complete, none of them final. Architecture, here, does not end. It stays suspended; between what was built, what was imagined, and what continues elsewhere.



Closing

*If on a winter's night an architect
in the world of facts,
with practice as relation
when continuity becomes pathological,
toward the vital minimum,
and the body dressed to return to the world
only to realize that each journey is read differently.*

Read this way, the titles no longer belong to the workshop alone. They form the opening sentence of something else: the beginning of another project, or of a work still without form.

What has taken place does not close into a method or a conclusion. It settles instead into a narrative readiness. The sentence remains available, ready to be continued, interrupted, rewritten, or taken elsewhere, by others or by the same readers at a later time.

Like in Calvino, the ending refuses to end. What appears as a final chapter is in fact a threshold. The story does not conclude; it pauses, waiting for the next reader to begin again.

Milano, 13 February 2026

