

INTELLIGENCE STARTS WITH IMPROVISATION

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I would like to present what my intentions are in art, architecture, and sociology—it always comes from the same basis. What we know about people, for example architects, about people who dwell in the buildings they built, or artists, about their public, is very, very unsure and uncertain.

In order to satisfy the people who live in a building you built, you have to let them conceive the building. As an artist, in order to satisfy people you don't know, you have to act in such a way so as to let them feel and express what they feel (I don't like the word "interaction" too much). My problem as an architect was how to be responsible for building something when you don't know anything or very little about the user, and when you have to leave the decision to the user.

In mainstream architecture, the user cannot make any decision because everything is hard—hard walls, hard ceilings, hard floors—and they cannot change anything. Now, how to make this environment elastic? Obviously, not by making it out of rubber! There is a very old technique, which is very much used in the Orient: screens. You can move a screen, but a screen cannot keep the ceiling, so you have to have some skeleton, something like columns, that keeps the ceiling in its place, in order to be able to move the screen. I mean the envelope, the space you are using and that you should be able to move as well as you can move a chair. That's the explanation I am looking for: to make buildings as mobile as chairs.

Going one step further, I think the same thing about the city. Our buildings, as they are, are obstacles. If you are driving, or if you are walking, you realize it, because you have all the time to go around these obstacles, and city plans are strategic plans how to go around obstacles. So my second interest is how to make the city less of an obstacle, less of an enemy.

The first model I made on the topic is from 1958. It shows a skeleton and boxes in it representing homes (p. 16). This is a space-frame structure with particular advantages, and I am using the voids of this space-frame structure to insert usable spaces. The apartment, the living space, is inserted in this skeleton.

This kind of technique does not necessarily follow the geometric forms like you see in mainstream architecture. I want to show, only by drawings and models, that with these techniques you can get to a very high complexity. I'd like to point out that the *Street-museum* we are doing here, in this Advanced Course in Visual Arts, does—on the same basis—leave the maximum decision to the user, and it should be as complex as possible.

As I am using space-frame structures, this permits the old usable spaces to be lifted above ground level, and ground level stays free. This means that, for example, if you wanted to change the line of a street, you could do it without demolition, which you cannot do with mainstream architecture. I have to add that this was an idea I had back in the 1950s. Now in the twenty-first century, there are more and more architects who have adopted this technique.

The other by-product besides practicality is complexity, visual complexity. I made photomontages of unused space in the city. For example, there are the maneuvering lots, and with this technique you can leave the technically necessary use, for example for the railway road, and you can construct the living part of a city

(p. 24). One of these projects was worked out in Paris, but then it was not realized because of local political reasons. The structure is supported by columns, and upstairs the most capricious forms can be materialized (p. 25).

At the Venice Biennale in 2003 I made a combination (not a decoration) of twenty-meter relief using polystyrene packings.

This system can get more and more complex, having horizontal parts, vertical parts with a horizontal skeleton. People can conceive their environment as they want: complexity doesn't therefore depend on the architect, but on the simple fact that different individuals act differently. If I am looking at you here, the complexity is that nobody among you is dressed exactly like the other person. You present a very complex visual image.

I have been proposing for a long time in New York City that skyscrapers should be linked by corridors. For example, if the Twin Towers had been linked by corridors, then there would have been at least fifty percent fewer victims. You can consider the corridors as direct escape ways from the upper floors. By any means, this solution can give the idea of what can be a city, not very resemblant to a mainstream city. The streets run under the buildings.

A very long time ago I also proposed the idea that Venice could be enlarged over the Laguna without changing the Laguna itself. From 1970 to 2005 I made different propositions, working on the map as well.

In 1970 there was a competition for the Pompidou Centre, and I had difficulties presenting my proposal. Why? The competition was asking for a façade, but my idea was that the building should have different façades and different looks every six months. The idea was that in the Pompidou Centre, exhibitions change roughly every six months, but the building does not change (p. 17). It would be logical that a building does not look the same. Why doesn't the curator of the exhibition have any right to propose some alterations to the building for the six months the exhibition is underway? Or why doesn't the artist have the right to introduce changes?

Another important issue is that the space under the building should be a public space. In the Pompidou Centre they tell you the ground floor is public. Sure it is, but you have to pass security checks and it takes away all desire for many people to enter. But if you build an open building, then there is no security risk and anybody can pass, like simply a covered square.

In the 1990s, when Israel was considering that there would be peace in the Middle East, I was trying to propose to extend the city of Tel Aviv over the sea (p. 26). It is right that they do not have enough territory, but instead of going inland, why not try to go over the sea? I was proposing it both for Tel Aviv and Gaza, and wanted to call the proposal the *Peace-Bridge*, which means increasing the territory of countries in conflict towards the sea. The technique is very old: the Dutch did it a very long time ago. But now we can do it in a different way: the sea continues. You can fish under your neighborhood from your balcony. Why not? I am not sure that there are fish there, but that's another question.



Railway Stations, 1960, disegno / drawing

There is a series of structures I developed called *Irregular Structures*, that you can call both architecture and art, as you want. One is the *Crumpled Sheet*. It is very simple: imagine a sheet of paper that you crumple, that gives quite intriguing forms and structure solidity. It can be simply an iron grid crumpled, like a piece of paper that you crumple before throwing it away. I made one in Lyon that was a five hundred-square-meter structure.

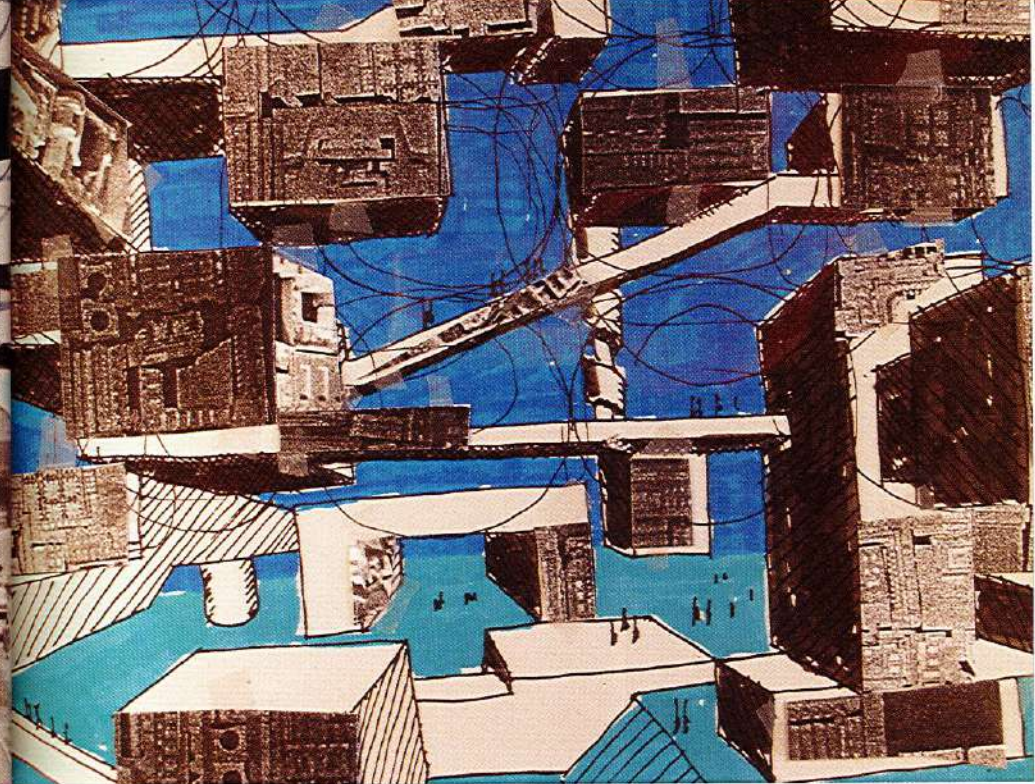
Then there are structures I call *Merz-Struktur*, after the *Merzbau* of Schwitters. One was built out of used cardboard boxes in Rovereto, another one with the same system in London. It's a very international technique.

Another structure is the *Gribouilli*, consisting of complete entanglements of plastic wires, which form a kind of roof-supporting structure.

The interesting thing is that this kind of structure is conceived as technical elements for a roof, and inevitably they become at the same time sculptures. But don't forget that the technical element covering your gothic cathedrals is a sculpture as well.

I am trying to show different roads which lead to the intention I was telling you at the beginning. Again, this is a roof structure made with cardboard. I think this was made in Paris, but I made it in Japan as well, they made it now in Frankfurt, it has become quite popular.

The *Moebian Structure* is based on the Moebius strip. It is made of bands which get a twist during construction. That means all elements are similar to the Moebius bands.



Ville spatiale, 1970, collage

When Paris was a candidate for the Olympic Games, there was the need to build new sites. I proposed a simple thing: there are the Champs-Élysées, the most fantastic place in Europe. The idea was that instead of leaving the central areas for cars, why not transform them for pedestrians and events? This is something that is by any means done every July 14. Paris has fantastic perspectives. The problem is that nobody sees them, only the cars, but the car drivers have no time to look at them. So I thought, the perspectives are important for the pedestrians, and the cars can be left to drive on the side alleys. I made a sketch as I see it (p. 18)—with tribunes, no avenues, an excellent place for cafés. The Champs-Élysées is a café road.

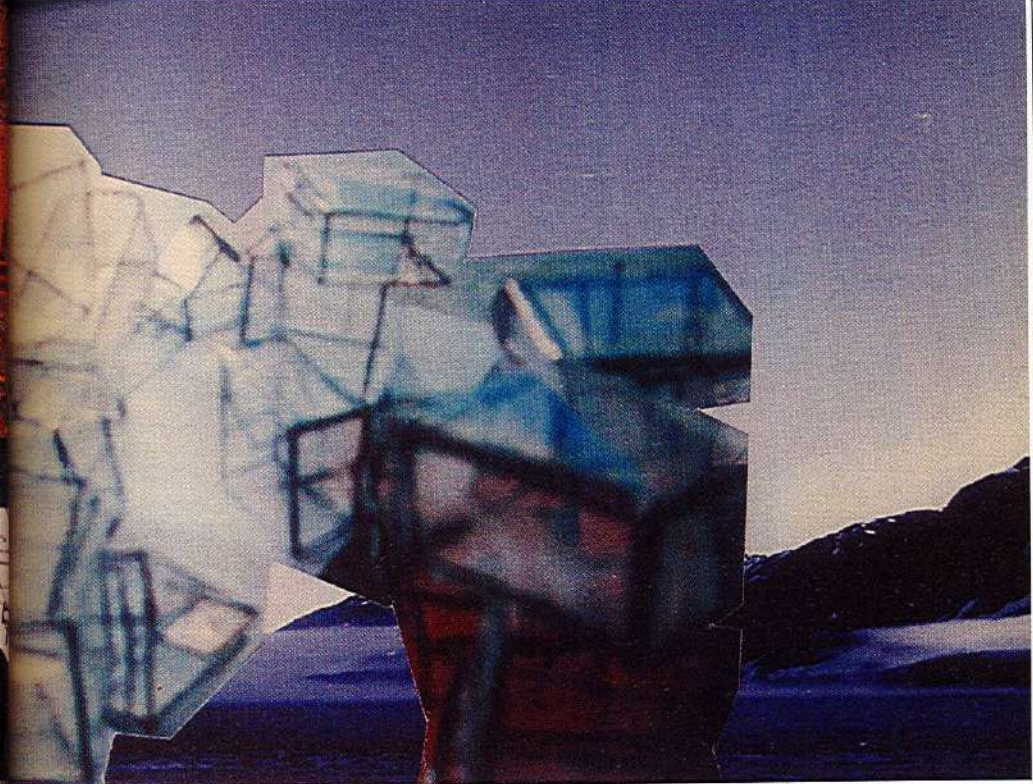
I had a nice dog, a black dog named Balkis, who died, but was very popular with friends. A friend of a polar expedition suggested to give the name Balkis to a city on an Arctic island. The Eskimo name of that island is "Dog's Island." They brought me pictures of this island asking me: "How would you imagine a city on it?" Due to global warming, some believe the northern passage will be opened quite soon. And the island would be used as a hub of the northern passage, from the Pacific to the Atlantic Ocean. Therefore I thought that if it is a navigation hub, it will work only in the summer. In the winter, even with the warming, there will be no maritime traffic. The winter will be hard. In my intentions this city should be inhabited only in the summer, but in the summer it does not consume any energy. In the polar region you have twenty-four hours



Peace-bridge, 1990. collage

of sunlight a day, and in the wintertime you go somewhere else. I was trying to formulate this principle only to discover that most animals do it, they don't live in the summer in the same place where they live in the winter, so they don't have energy problems (p. 27).

The city of Shanghai is the largest, really important city in China, a city that is slightly larger than New York City. In the center there is a river, a quite important river, the Huangpu, but you cannot cross from one part of the city over the river to the other part, except by subway, taxi, or bike: pedestrians cannot cross, because all the links are tunnels under the river. In 2002, when I was in China for the first time, I proposed: "Why shouldn't you continue the main commercial street over the river to the other side? Not just a corridor to walk over the river, but a street with shops, cafés, whatever you want." In 2002 it was not taken seriously. I was invited to Shanghai in 2007 and I got what is called a "political green light." As I am now eighty-five, I am not interested anymore in this kind of project, but it was decided that I am proposing ideas as models and Chinese architect groups would work them out. A competition among Chinese architects is expected in 2010 for an exhibition in Shanghai. These building techniques of the seven bridges are similar to the ones we were talking about at the beginning. There are completely different shapes. One is called *Promenade Bridge* and it will feature green areas on the bridge (p. 19).



Balkis Island, 2007. collage

I wanted to show you quite a number of ideas, not projects, and not really as an opposition to mainstream architecture, only to show that perhaps something very different is possible. The fact that some of these ideas are now copied by colleagues in the United States, China, and Europe makes me very glad, as I am not able to materialize these projects. I am perhaps in good shape, but I am eighty-five years old and I feel it. But I think that there are many young architects for whom these ideas serve as an incitation. This is what I see from the people who write to me. I feel my task is to start incitation, this is what gives me pleasure, and this is what I find I could be useful for. I am very grateful to the Fondazione Ratti that, with such a small project like *Street-museum*, made all this possible, and as for every incitation: I have no idea where the last station is. I only know where the start is.