UPSTATE ROME.
A SUBURBAN ARCHIPELAGO

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Garden cities, campsites, temporary settlements, suburban communities, kibbutz. Today, suburban living can be seen as a nostalgic myth, a dystopia, or a realistic refuge from wars, climate change, and pandemics. From the rhetoric of the global village to the intrinsic values of neighborhood, suburban living fulfills the desire for a pristine environment in which to experience new alliances between human and sylvan realms. This essay tells about a built project for an archipelago of residences, designed by Malfona Petrini Architecture (MPA) long before the novel coronavirus appeared, when a number of families started to move away from Rome to the countryside of an unpredicted "upstate Rome". Considering the large number of people involved in this process, this voluntary relocation can be viewed as a social and economic phenomenon. Begun in the late 2000s, it was an anti-urban and therefore unexpected phenomenon, which foreshadowed what would have happened in the future, in our present. Over time, this archipelago – of people, pets, plants, homes, and technological gizmos – has become a forest, where it is no longer so possible to clearly distinguish architecture from nature.

Many families prefer to move straight to the countryside bypassing the outskirts of Rome. This leap out of the city is becoming one of the main troubles of the capital city that, no longer capable of taking care of its peripheries, is losing its last urban ring. These families exchange long home-work commutes for a range of advantages, in the suburbs indeed they live a lifestyle that, while comfortable, is also devoted to concentration and a kind of enlightened isolation based on total immersion in the landscape. They can even experience a sylvan life, so to speak, losing themselves into the small, mazelike, and sometimes unpaved roads in Formello, the small town in the countryside north of Rome where this project has been developed. Benefits gained by this relocation are not mere compensations for the distance from the urban center but are viewed, rather, as an antidote to the urban disease.

In the last fifteen years, many families moved full-time to the countryside, where they reinvented their own structure and living space according to new ecological paradigms. Also, due to recent economic instability, ongoing trends of emigration, and a declining birth rate that result in smaller families, the new inhabitants have opened their homes to other guests and experimented with new forms of coexistence. But if isolation from the city is synonymous with a voluntary rejection of an overwhelming urban lifestyle it also reinforces a kind of elitist culture. This two-sided nature of suburban living was the starting point for the design process, which focused around some main topics: *upstate*

Rome; archipelago; ritual places; domestication; *ultra-residential*; ecological paradigms.

    Upstate Rome is a state of mind. It is a condition, not just a physical place. It is the Rome of commuters, who accept inconvenient traveling in exchange for a range of benefits, such as a house surrounded by a pleasant landscape, away from the city's pollution. These characteristics cannot but call to mind those commuter towns surrounding other metropolitan areas, especially the North American ones, where many well-off families prefer to make their dream come true in nearby suburbs rather than in the cities themselves. With mild sarcasm, *upstate* Rome is the analogous to the Upstate New York, and shows the sameness of suburban conditions, where isolation is the main issue: "This residential silence – Gianni Celati wrote in his book *Verso la force* – is completely different from that of the open space."
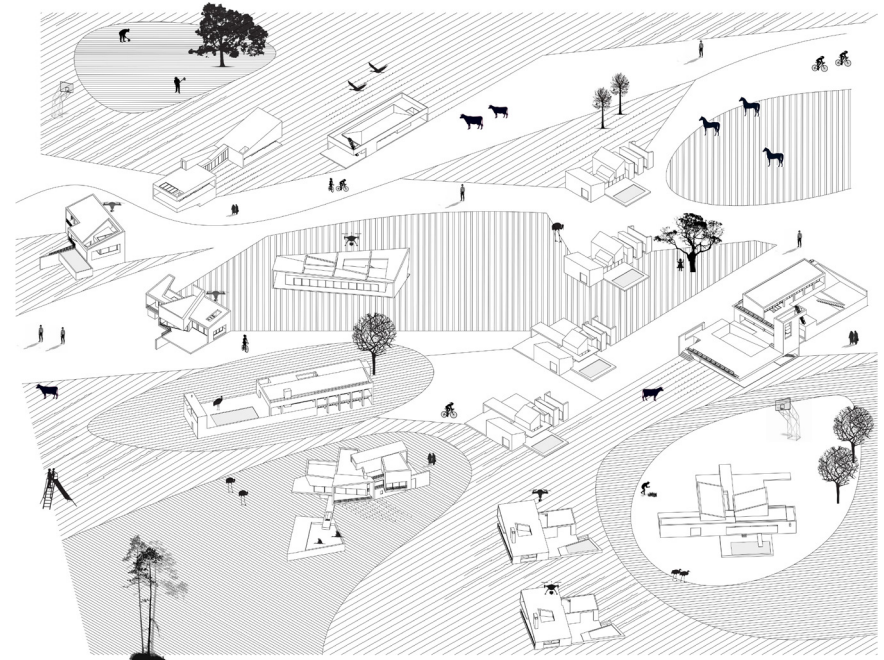

ARCHIPELAGO

The archipelago adds a landscape attribute to the concept of living and defines an insular mode of settlement. It is made up of finite entities, with a semi-autonomous organization. The archipelago is characterized by an open urban form, which can be found in isolated but connected housing models, in dialogue with nature. Over time this form has been used as an urban metaphor✝, conveying the idyllic vision of a city whose neighborhoods are surrounded by greenery, as in Oswald Mathias Ungers' *The City in the City – Berlin: A Green Archipelago* (1977). The archipelago can be seen as a "system of solitudes" – as Nietzsche wrote about the islands of Venice – but it may also be explained as a collection, a "magic encyclopedia" which continually regenerates itself through the experimentation of new design typologies⚡.

    The term "collection" introduces an attribute of value, which is related to the piece selection and indirectly to the design process. In the process of building a constellation of houses in Formello, the archipelago emerged as one of the most appropriate design tools in order to overcome the separatist geography of the countryside. Over time, this archipelago has become a romantic and evocative "garden of wandering" for people who relocate fragments of their identity from one place to the other.

RITUAL PLACES

During the design process, historical traits of the Italian countryside have been hybridized with the new families' portable identities, made up of experiences, rituals, and social practic-

es, caused by migrations and exchanges. In addition, this territory shows a folkloristic vernacular, a sort of "*geometra* style", which refers to the building anarchy of spontaneous and abusive homes. According to the moviemaker Giacomo Gili, the "*geometra* style" shows a *joie de vivre*, expressed by the use of color, liveliness, bricolage as a construction technique, and typically Italian fun. Although architecture culture has not generally been concerned with this whimsical anarchy, it is possible to look at this phenomenon from an anthropological perspective, taking into account the work of Ed Ruscha (*Twentysix Gasoline Stations*, 1963), Hilla and Bernd Becher (*Industriebauten* 1830–1930), and especially Giuseppe Pagano (*Architettura Rurale Italiana*, 1936). These studies on vernacular landscape have shown how the construction of a language can take advantage of the specificity of places, with their distinctive figures, perhaps capturing their spontaneity and liveliness.

DOMESTICATION

In the suburbs home is ubiquitous. Shops and stores are located in buildings formerly designed to be homes. In order to create a domestic atmosphere, even those cafes and restaurants located in recycled warehouses are set up like homes. This "home style" which now prevails in shopping malls and collective facilities promotes the concept of "continuous interiors", which means making anonymous places domestic. Floors covered with false parquet and walls covered with false stone are used to "domesticate" these places, which are frequently completed by artificial plants and the flame from a bioethanol fireplace. The current practice of incorporating one's workplace into the home in addition to social life prompts reflections on the term "domestication", which comes from the Latin *domesticus*, meaning "belonging to the house". But domestication also means making tame what is wild, with a clear reference to the animal and vegetal world. Thus, the process of domestication started from the presumption of species superiority, from humans' willingness to adapt nature to their way of thinking and living, a position that today is rightly under attack.

ULTRA-RESIDENTIAL

In the suburbs the home is the place where people prefer to gather, the privileged place where conversations with neighbors, dinners and Sunday meetings take place. But the residential program alone does not satisfy the aspirations of those families who

recently chose to move to the suburbs. For this reason, each of the houses that MPA built in the countryside hosts associated, connected, incorporated, or complementary programs into the home, in addition to the residential one. Thanks to the double program, this archipelago of homes triggers an environmental transformation process, which reactivates the sleepy suburbs. The result is an open and expanding project, an archipelago of residences that includes a kindergarten, a home studio, and a home restaurant. This typological hybridization still needs to be explored in the countryside, where *ultra-residential* programs could provide further opportunities for mending the existing built fabric and social relationships.

ECOLOGICAL PARADIGMS

Houses in Formello are equipped with passive systems, such as solar greenhouses and ventilation chimneys, as well as technological systems, like underfloor heating, water recovery and purification plants, photovoltaic panels and solar thermal as energy supply. They are also provided by green roofs, a construction technology used to ensure optimal thermic insulation, with the end result that such buildings disappear completely when viewed from above. But living according to new ecological paradigms does not only mean equipping houses with innovative and environmentally sustainable technologies, or creating visual continuity between interior and exterior, solutions that are certainly desirable in any case. It also means creating a landscape inside the house. Some of these homes, for example, have become containers – or better nurseries – for particular species of plants, easily movable because arranged in pots or boxes placed on wheels. One such house, named *La Villa*, has even a plant shower placed right in the middle of the living room. However, this does not mean wanting to domesticate nature or place it inside a museum display case. It means taking care of the Earth and incorporating nature as a living being within one's life. The same can be said for animals, who are often the real recipients of architectural design, as very often the house not only provides a space for them but is rather designed with the integration of human and pet space in mind.

COUNTRYSIDE

The entire territory of Formello was originally agricultural land, parceled out and assigned by the Agency for the Colonization of the Tuscan-Latvian Maremma [Ente per la *Colonizzazione* del-

Malfona Petrini Architettura, *La Villa*.
Photo by Angelo Talia.

la Maremma Tosco-Laziale] to the land workers who submitted requests, as a consequence of the Agrarian Reform in 1950. This reform had profoundly changed the national property structure, extinguishing large estates [*latifondo*] and initiating *appoderation* practices. The epic construction of a series of rural buildings [*poderi*] began on the agricultural lots assigned by the Maremma Authority [Ente Maremma], with the migration of hundreds of workers coming to the capital city and its hinterland. But later on, these buildings came to be irregularly turned into residential buildings and legally remitted, following a long series of amnesties. Around 2000, rural land was converted into building land, so a ravenous race to build hundreds of isolated villas began, visibly altering the perception of the rural landscape, now largely lost. Today these new buildings – originated from speculative operations addressed by rapacious builders – have visibly altered the ancient landscape and the tradition of rural houses and *poderi*.

In order to carry out an updated, dynamic and transversal reading of this particular region of the Roman countryside, its spontaneous and largely abusive past cannot be overlooked.

However, the territory of Formello is also characterized by a large infrastructure project started in the Etruscan Age. This territory is crossed indeed by caves and tunnels, a complex system for the drainage and collection of water, linked to a set of wells for water supply. The Piranesian image of an underground world has been a design inspiration: burrowed through, vertically and horizontally, a land that is in large part made of tufa, and therefore spongy, malleable, and full of water. The wild imagery of the cave merges with that of the forest which the houses are embedded in, and peep out from. Finally, the house itself is thought of as a forest, broken by wells and clearings, where light filters in from above, as from the treetops.

FOREST (AND) ARCHITECTURE

The Roman suburban villa can be seen as both a space to enjoy country life and a place for intellectual pursuits. Pliny the Younger wrote of the villa as a place of quietness and intellectual well-being, extended into the landscape almost by germination, through its long arms, paths, pergolas and cryptoporticoes, somehow anticipating the typology of the house made up of pavilions. Pliny himself owned two suburban villas: the one located in the Apennines, *Villa in Tuscis*, and the other on the Tyrrhenian coast not far from Rome, the *Laurentinum*. Only Pliny's description and a few ruins of this latter villa remain, but many architects, including Karl Friedrich Schinkel, tried

Malfona Petrini Architettura, *Finestre sul fiume*. Model A. | Etruscan well.
Photos by Lina Malfona.

to make reconstruction drawings of this enigmatic residence, influenced by these descriptions.

The architect Léon Krier sketched out a very careful outline of this suburban villa, a residence intended as a "village" made up of a set of private and public buildings:

> This villa [...] is an ensemble of buildings which serve very diverse functions; sometimes strictly private, sometimes very public. [...] Through his text, Pliny encouraged me to conceive his villa as a great number of separate buildings. This village does not have to ward off pirates.⋀

Through these words, Krier highlighted the dual nature of the suburban villa, a protected world but also an open organism, a private and contemporary public residence, a control center as well as a hub to connect sprawling suburbs.

In 1804, Claude-Nicolas Ledoux published the first tome of his treaty, *L'architecture considérée sous le rapport de l'art, des moeurs et de la législation*, in which he included his drawings for the ideal city of Chaux (1773-1806). Around the Royal Saltworks of Chaux, a productive complex built in 1778, Ledoux designed a network of prototype residences and workshops located in the forest. The aim of these "fabriques" was to reform the habits of this region's "rude men", by promoting group living and fostering corporatism.

As Antoine Picon noticed, "in the work of Ledoux, architectural production began to be polarized in terms of services and habitation, with the traditional opposition between the monumental and the vernacular being subsumed within the public/ private dyad"⌐. In this project, the home-workshops' aim was to exploit the productive countryside, and the forest in particular, as a geography of energy sources. Thus, these houses can be read contemporarily as private-collective places, countryside control towers, and environmental sentinels. Antoine Picon wrote that Ledoux's architecture "dominated the countryside, and surveyed it, as was borne out by the frequently repeated motif of the belvedere, the observatory or the mirador"⌐.

These two *ultra-residential* projects highlight two opposite ways in which architecture relates to the natural landscape. In the first case, the landscape is a familiar, unintimidating environment that can be occupied by residential pavilions; in fact, Pliny's house with its pergolas and porches stretches pleasantly into this landscape, becoming a forest itself. In the second case, the landscape is a dark forest, an ecosystem to be preserved but also to be protected from. In this case, Ledoux's residences become domination devices, which while controlling the landscape also display their otherness.

Abbot Marc-Antoine Laugier, in his book *Essai sur l'Architecture* (1753) developed the theory of the city as a forest, derived not from the organic fluidity of nature but from the relational geometries of Le Nôtre's parks, a model that contrasted sharply with Giovanni Battista Piranesi's city by fragments. More recently, the curator and art critic Nicolas Bourriaud claims that today any artwork is a relational object, not only a product but essentially a process. It is intended as a cooperative system, as the place of negotiations, ties and coexistence with countless interlocutors.

The concept of "relational aesthetics", understood in a social, landscape and urban sense, allowed me to conceive of the house as the place where users can live alone but at the same time feel part of a whole universe, the "residential pavilion" where "collective individuality" is formed. Since 2008, my colleagues and I have been designing and building a forest of homes, located a short distance from each other in Formello, a small town north of Rome. If it is true that the powers-that-be tolerate the presence of art only in the peripheral, marginal areas of the system, since it does not represent a direct threat here, then the peripheral can unexpectedly reveal itself as a privileged condition, one in which it is possible to enjoy a certain autonomy of thought⌐.

The current state of this project is a collection of more than twenty architectures, which contribute to defining an adaptive, relational and multifaceted organism, one might say a resilient community without common roots and open to welcoming new components. It is an architectural as well as a social and landscape experiment, a continuous workshop open to students, manufacturers and users, which fosters unusual and creative ties.

Over time, it became clear that the use of a specific architectural language has made these homes similar and that the same style has played a decisive role in developing a feeling of belonging, in addition to simple coexistence. As an author, what appeared as an unexpected but considerable discovery to me was that an individual syntax may be able to shape a collective sense of community. But today authorship is inappropriately considered as authoritarian while, on the contrary, it implies civic responsibility and stimulates the creation of a strong synergy between author and users, a relationship in which the role of the architect cannot be secondary. By authorship I mean the crystallization of the designer's political and social action in architectural form, an effort that allows the author's hand to be glimpsed. The act of planting trees and designing buildings is similar to the act of creating a collection, and analogously to the collector and the curator's eye, the architect's hand needs to be read only in filigree.

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The shift of creative tension from the production of objects to the making of communities – read as adaptive and resilient environments – made it possible to better understand how research on architectural form can induce new models of sociality and new forms of coexistence. These first considerations lead to a tentative definition of architecture as the art of creating innovative and useful forms which, on the one hand, create intimacy and on the other stimulate sociality.

ECOLOGY AS FORMATION

In the process of designing and building an archipelago, the concept of form has been absorbed by that of formation, which explains how this constellation of houses has grown over time in symbiosis with the landscape. The concept of formation allows us to understand the creative processes as subjected to continuous variations and evolutions. Therefore, we developed these houses as formations rather than complete forms, generators of space rather than containers. They are samples of a design practice that uses architecture to stimulate new settlement matrices and new forms of life.

Today, a Copernican-like revolution is undermining anthropocentrism, leading humanity to establish new alliances with the nonhuman, and to build new spaces common to different realms. According to philosopher Timothy Morton, there is a need to return to the enchanted world that preceded the disenchantment wrought by Galileo and Newton, and ecological thinking can become the engine of this change. Such thinking, supported by OOO (Object-Oriented Ontology), a kind of renewed animism, brings to the surface the mystery and magic of reality, attributes that the dominant, techno-scientific thinking had long suppressed or ignored. An ecological society is not a society of control but will rather be a society that is "a tad improvised, unhinged, limp, twisted, sardonic", writes Morton, who in one of his recent books criticizes the Anthropocene by quoting Sophocles' Antigone: "many things are terrible but nothing is more terrible than man". For better or for worse, new artistic practices and creative processes are emerging today, animated by an ecological consciousness that induces thinking by phases, across multiple time scales, and elaborating projects with increasingly blurred and unfinished boundaries, in the direction of overcoming the fixity of dogma and prejudice. Ecological thinking and its correlationist vocation induces to overcome finitude and the fracture that divides different realms, in order to attenuate the centrality of the human species.

Malfona Petrini Architettura, *Finestre sul fiume* (foreground), *La casa sul bosco* (background). Photo by Fabio Bascetta.

Malfona Petrini Architettura, *La Villa*, detail.
Photo by Angelo Talia.

Environmental issues formed the backbone of the design for a constellation of houses in the Roman countryside. These suburban houses – sometimes productive houses, more often residential pavilions – have embodied the theme of the forest, equipping their outdoor space with masking vegetation wings or areas inside the property left wild, as they are impossible to maintain, given their extension. Some of these residences developed connections with other conterminous houses, as in the case of the project for the three homes *Finestre sul fiume*, where the hedges that make up the fence have, by design, a zigzag pattern that makes possible secret passages, leading from one house to another; finally, the forest has become a metaphor for the whole process of formation of this archipelago. Designing a suburban house according to an ecological paradigm is not rhetorical, nor redundant, nor fanatical. Rather, it means that sooner or later nature will reclaim its space, that is, the space that was taken away during the excavation and construction of the house. In this sense, the house is understood as a portion of the forest that will be returned over time. As early as ten years after the construction of these houses, the image of the forest visually overlapped with that of the house, which originally was in a dominant position.

CONCLUSIONS

The suburban villa is the most complex form of individual living but also the one that typically is less regulated. After the construction of the first houses and as soon as the idea of an archipelago started to emerge, I found it necessary to combine the practice of taking roots with the experience of moving across, for this reason I have designed buildings that protect but allow you to look far ahead. Initially, houses were characterized by a central core and an envelope; the coexistence of both represents the relationship between intimacy and sociality. Thereafter, it followed a progression in the relationship between typology and topology, between artisan practices and necessary standardization, between local cultures and global expression. Between nature and artifice, this single-family house started to mirror the geography of suburbs: open to the landscape on the one hand, protected and self-sufficient like an island on the other.

If the archipelago is an expression of reciprocal relations, the villa, like the island, reveals a search for autonomy. Each of the villas that make up this suburban constellation, surrounded by a large green area, is inserted in a low-density fabric. These autonomous and self-sufficient slivers are intercalated in a fragmented and dispersed territory, to whom the new islands – which

Malfona Petrini Architettura, *La casa sul bosco*, detail.
Photo by Fabio Bascetta.

are instead rigorously designed – propose an alternative settlement strategy. As evidence to both their design rationale and sensibility, over time they became "pockets of optimal climatic and ecological conditions that allowed their inhabitants enough comfort to co-exist"⚎⚏.

To summarize, this constellation of houses, which developed from a series of independent design opportunities, over time became an archipelago of residences. The archipelago as a landscape, territorial, and urban figure has emerged as one of the most appropriate design tools: an open, adaptive strategy to build suburban communities endowed with urban values, which is to say, urbanity without urbanism.

Malfona Petrini Architettura, *La casa sul bosco*.
Photo by Fabio Bascetta.

※   See M. Cacciari, *L'arcipelago*, Adelphi, Milano 1997; V. Quilici, *Roma capitale senza centro*, Officina Edizioni, Roma 2007.

Ɔᴄ   W. Benjamin, *Unpacking My Library: A Talk about Book Collecting*, H. Arendt (ed.), *Illuminations*, Schocken Books, New York 1969, p. 60.

⇊   M. Serres, *Atlas*, Éditions Julliard, Paris 1994.

⋀   L. Krier, *Houses, Palaces, Cities*, in "Architectural Design," vol. 54, 7/8, 1984, p. 121.

⌐   A. Picon, *French Architects and Engineers in the Age of Enlightenment*, Cambridge University Press, Cambridge 1992, or. ed. *Architectes et ingénieurs au siècle des lumières*, Éditions Parenthèses, Marseille 1988, p. 278.

Ⱶ   Ivi, p. 274.

✳   M. A. Laugier, *Essai sur l'Architecture*, Duchesne, Paris 1755.

‖   N. Bourriaud, *Relational Esthetics*, Les presses du réel, Dijon 2002, or. ed. *Esthétique relationnelle*, Les presses du réel, Dijon 1998, pp. 45-46.

⅄   N. Bourriaud, *Inclusioni. Estetica del capitalocene*, Postmedia Books, Milano 2021, or. ed. *Inclusions. Esthétique du capitalocène*, PUF, Paris 2021, p. 12.

※Ⴤ   T. Morton, *Being Ecological*, Pelican, London 2018, cap. I.

※※   T. Morton, *Dark Ecology*, Columbia University Press, New York 2016, p. 31.

※Ɔᴄ   P.V. Aureli, M.S. Giudici, *Island: The Settlement from Property to Care*, in "Log," 47, 2019, p. 179.

FOREST, UTOPIA, MODERNISM

III