

Performing Space 2023 – Conference Proceedings

(2025)

PERFORMANCE & SPACE II. PROCEEDINGS OF THE PERFORMING SPACE 2024 CONFERENCE

PS

PERFORMANCE & SPACE II

PROCEEDINGS OF THE
PERFORMING SPACE 2024 CONFERENCE

Edited by

Pablo Berzal Cruz, Athena Stourna, Tyrone Grima, Alba Balmaseda Domínguez



University of the Peloponnese

2025

Performative Spaces of the Everyday

José Vela Castillo, Óscar Valero Sáez, Elena Pérez Garrigues, Juan Cabello Arribas

doi: [10.12681/ps2023.8406](https://doi.org/10.12681/ps2023.8406)

48

Performative Spaces of the Everyday

José Vela Castillo, Elena Pérez Garrigues, Óscar Valero Sáez & Juan Cabello Arribas

IE School of Architecture and Design, IE University, Segovia and Madrid, Spain

Abstract

For medieval builders, drawing was not the visual projection of an idea already fashioned in the intellect – as implied by the synonymy of drawing and design in *disegno* – but a craft of weaving with lines. (Ingold, 2013, p. 66)

This paper presents the conceptual foundations of the work developed by the students of the Design Studio 1 course, in the first semester of the first year, reading for a Bachelor's degree in Architectural Studies at the IE School of Architecture and Design (Segovia and Madrid, Spain). The course is framed as an anthropology of the everyday oriented studio, under the title: *Reimagi(ni)ng the Domestic Space*

The studio begins with the students actively turning their senses to the minimal acts of everyday life, both in relation to the objects that populate it and to the body that inhabits it. Beginning with a domestic object chosen in relation to their memories and desires, and through an extensive hands-on process based on the performative interaction between the object and their bodies, the students reenact this interaction in movement to construct an intimate space through drawing and model making. In a sequence that moves from a simple domestic object, to the body that perceives and manipulates it, to the embodied actions that result from this relationship to the object, to the interactions with the other inhabitants of the domestic environment, the complex spatial network of relationships thus created ultimately builds a rich and multilayered architectural space from within.

Keywords: architecture, performativity, domestic space, everyday life, imagination

Performative Spaces of the Everyday¹

The course is framed as an anthropology of the everyday oriented studio, under the title *Reimagi(ni)ng the Domestic Space*. The course develops through a hands-on performative approach in which the students begin their process of understanding what architecture is, how it relates to the human body, space, and the world, what architectural meaning is and how it is constructed, and what it means to design, precisely by designing. The goal is to allow students to begin the process of design as a process of discovery in a very intuitive way. Instead of providing them with a definition of what architecture is and, above all, creating an authoritative voice by showing what architecture looks like, the point is to start with the minimal acts that constitute the spatial engagement between humans and the world, in order to arrive at architecture as a built object at the end. Without a formal preconception of what architecture is, the semester is structured as a process of discovery in which hand drawing and model making are the tools that allow the student to bridge the (in fact inexistent) gap between outside and inside, body and mind.

Students begin their exploration by actively turning the senses to the minimal acts of everyday life, precisely as acts, as constant processes of configuration and reconfiguration of a network of spatial relations that are usually taken for granted, but that are now problematised as actions that need to be recorded in drawn form. The immersion in an environment that the students know (or they think they know) in a very intimate and detailed way, the domestic environment and the meaning of what domesticity is, will allow them to design from the first moment of the studio practice. Thus, the studio proposes a sequence that moves from a simple object of daily use, to the body that perceives, manipulates and gives meaning to it, to the embodied actions that result from this relationship with the object, to the spatial relations and definition of space that result from this entangled relationship.

The key to this is to examine how objects, bodies, and space interact through movement to perform (rather than create) architectural space and meaning.

As is well known, space is not (or not only) a homogeneous continuum that can be described geometrically and mathematically. Beyond the mechanistic definition, space is also, or even primarily, both defined and influenced by the way we humans perceive it and by the bodies and objects we interact with and by the relations that are created between these different actors. Space is embodied space.

Space is not a pre-existing framework in which things, bodies and people are simply there, as if contained in a neutral box which they do not affect and which does not affect

¹ This paper presents the work developed in the first-year design studio course 2023-2024 at the IE School of Architecture and Design, taught by professors Juan Cabello Arribas, Elena Pérez Garrigues and Óscar Valero Sáez and coordinated by José Vela Castillo.

them, but rather a complex and constant co-creation of a network of relations mediated by bodily perception and movement. Space is performed space.

The students start by selecting a simple everyday object, an object that resonates with either their memories, their present state, or their desires, and that is placed in an environment that they recognise as emotionally close to them. Building upon some literary descriptions from selected narrative texts by, among others, Ózlu (2023) or Yasunari (1986), they create their own narrative space in which the object triggers specific meaningful actions that are not mechanically produced but mediated by the emotional intentionality provided by that the narrative frame.

Let us take for example a toothbrush (or a comb, or a pan, or a book, or a jewel, or a pair of trousers, or even a mobile phone) in a specific context, such as the one the students remember using when in summer holidays visiting their grandparents house. Then they map through extensive drawing the object itself and how this object establishes different types of relationships with the space in which it is 'placed' through their manipulation of it as an everyday object and its related movements when in use.

In purely geometric/mathematical terms, its shape, construction and position can be defined by a reference coordinate system as a set of points in abstract space and represented in standard orthographic projections. Thus, there are mathematical relations between the object and space in general that can be objectively measured and that the student accurately represents, depending basically on the visual perception. Let us call it a scientific kind of knowledge. But following these objective drawings, the students are asked to draw additional sets of drawings in which what should be explored and drafted is the movement of the body and the object when in action (performing its everyday task), the psychological attachment they feel with it, the aural or haptic sensations they have when manipulating it, the personal memories or intuitions that they spark in them, or the coordinated interaction with other objects, individuals and spaces. In this sense, the students perform the object, and by recording this performance in drawings (and models), they begin to build a lived space that will later evolve into a series of spaces that will produce an architectural configuration.

In this way they are expected to start realising that we humans do not perceive space (and the world) at first instance through our mind in mathematical terms, but through our senses, all the senses together. The senses are embedded in a body configuration that determines how these senses work, and that produces a specifically human set of spatial boundaries or relations. Perception is always embodied perception, because we perceive the world through our bodies. Therefore, space is always embodied space, and the knowledge that results from this embodied perception is always situated, has a location, a place, and a moment in time in which it occurs.

“Embodied space,” according to anthropologist Low (2003, p. 10), “is the place where human experience and consciousness take on material and spatial form.” This means that instead of a purely abstract space, we encounter a much richer and more complex understanding of space, one that links material, body, and culture (in the broadest sense) into a unified perception. Embodied space links body, space and culture in a way that moves from the simple experiential and material aspects of objects and bodies to the symbolic and the broader social, cultural, political, economic forces in which that body is placed or situated at any given moment.

Considering this is key to understanding how we design architecture, because what architecture is essentially a complex manipulation or articulation of space into built structures in which people live. Therefore, knowing what space is, how it is limited and experienced, and how it can be manipulated, is key.

To emphasise the performative and physical nature of the studio, all of the drawings (and models) produced by the students are made by hand. According to the opening quote, drawing is understood as a craft and a weaving of lines. The intimate connection between body, hand, pencil or pen and paper, and the continuous tracing and retracing of physical marks on physical paper is thus considered a key element in the training of future architects.

In summary, the studio helps students to navigate the architectural experience of space as embodied space, and of architecture as performed space, delving into its multi-layered complexity. By differentiating and reconfiguring the geometric/mathematical (objectively quantifiable), the experiential/sensual (embodied), and the social/cultural (symbolic) in the experience of the domestic environment, students will design a complex architectural space from within rather than from without as a continuous performance.

The studio is framed by a set of theoretical references that help to understand the conceptual underpinnings of the work. At its core is the long tradition of phenomenology, and in particular the phenomenology of perception (Merleau-Ponty, 1978), which has been applied to architecture in various ways, from the seminal work of Norberg-Schulz (1980) to the more recent work of Pallasmaa (2005). The approach to architecture as an experience, as presented in the book *Understanding Architecture* by MacCarter and Pallasmaa (2013), is another related area. So is the concept of “embodied space” developed by Low and others. “Situated knowledge” as proposed by Haraway (1988) and interpreted by Rendell (2011) as situated practice in the field of architecture, as well as Butler’s (2006) work on performance and the performative, both coming from feminist approaches to the production of knowledge, should also be mentioned here.

There is also a foundational approach that comes from anthropology, as developed in the work of Ingold (2013), who specifically proposes the relevance of anthropology to architectural design. Anthropology is a different but closely related field to ethnography, from

which this studio also benefits, as in the proposals of "architectural ethnography" by Kajima of Atelier Bow-Wow and others.

Finally, a clear inspiration for this design studio comes from the writings of Perec (1974), especially his text *Species of Spaces (Espèces d'espaces)*, a quotation from which opens the course and concludes this paper: "To live is to pass from one space to another, while doing your very best not to bump yourself" (p. 6).

Figure 1

Extended vision. The lamp. Student's work: María Urrutia.

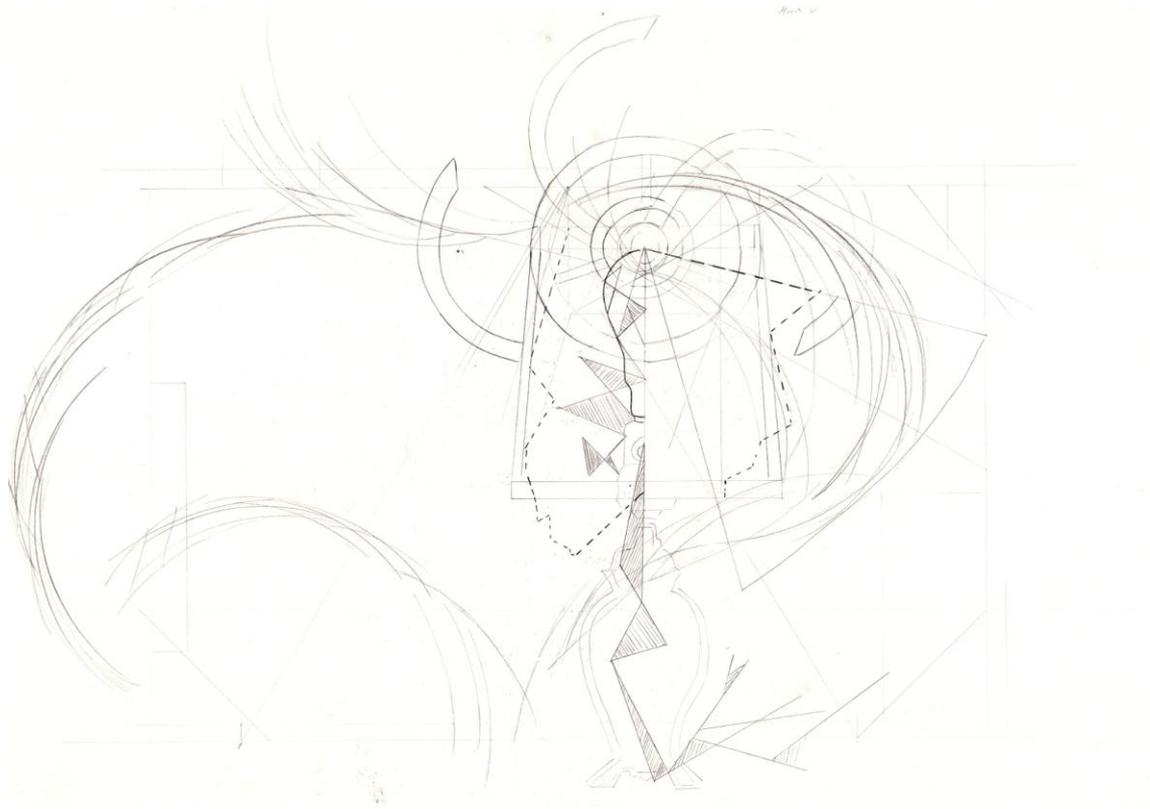


Figure 2
Performing violin. Student's work: Trinidad Badía.

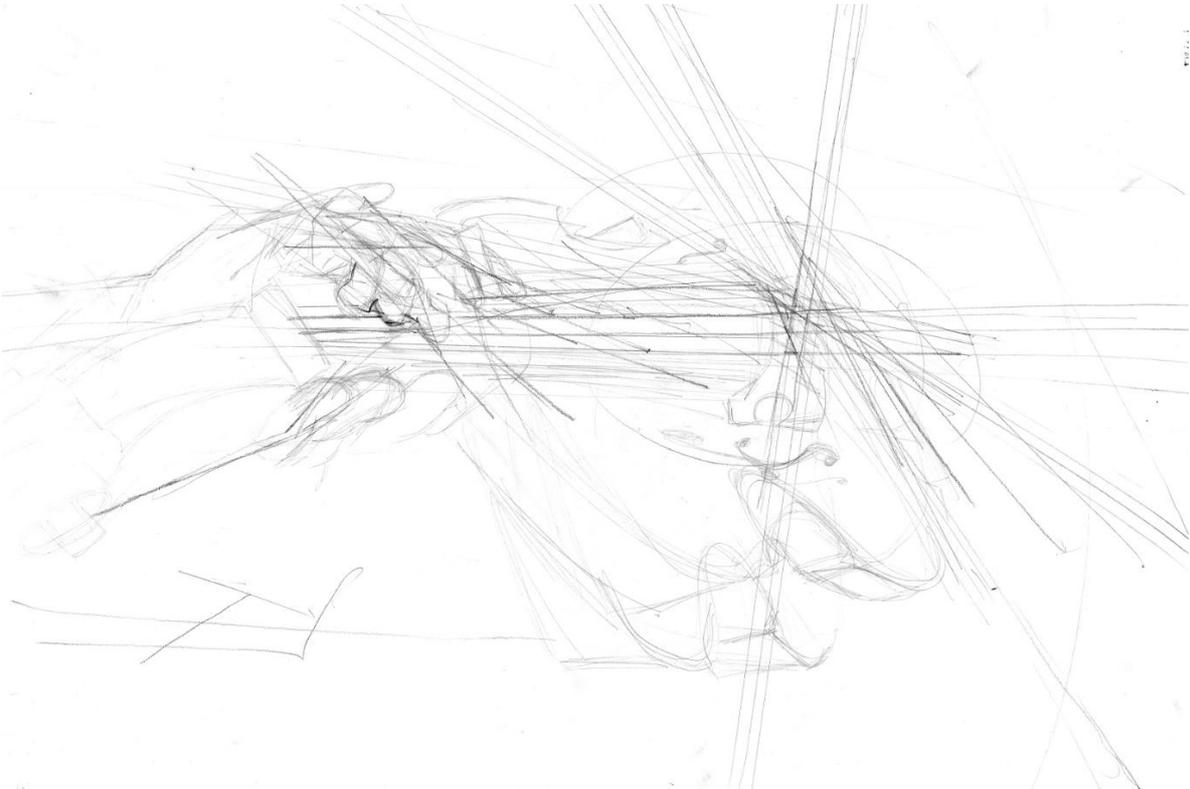


Figure 3
Mapping the performance. Student's work: Maria Nikolova.



Figure 4

Claustrophobic space. Student's work: Gerardo Santamarta Sestelo.

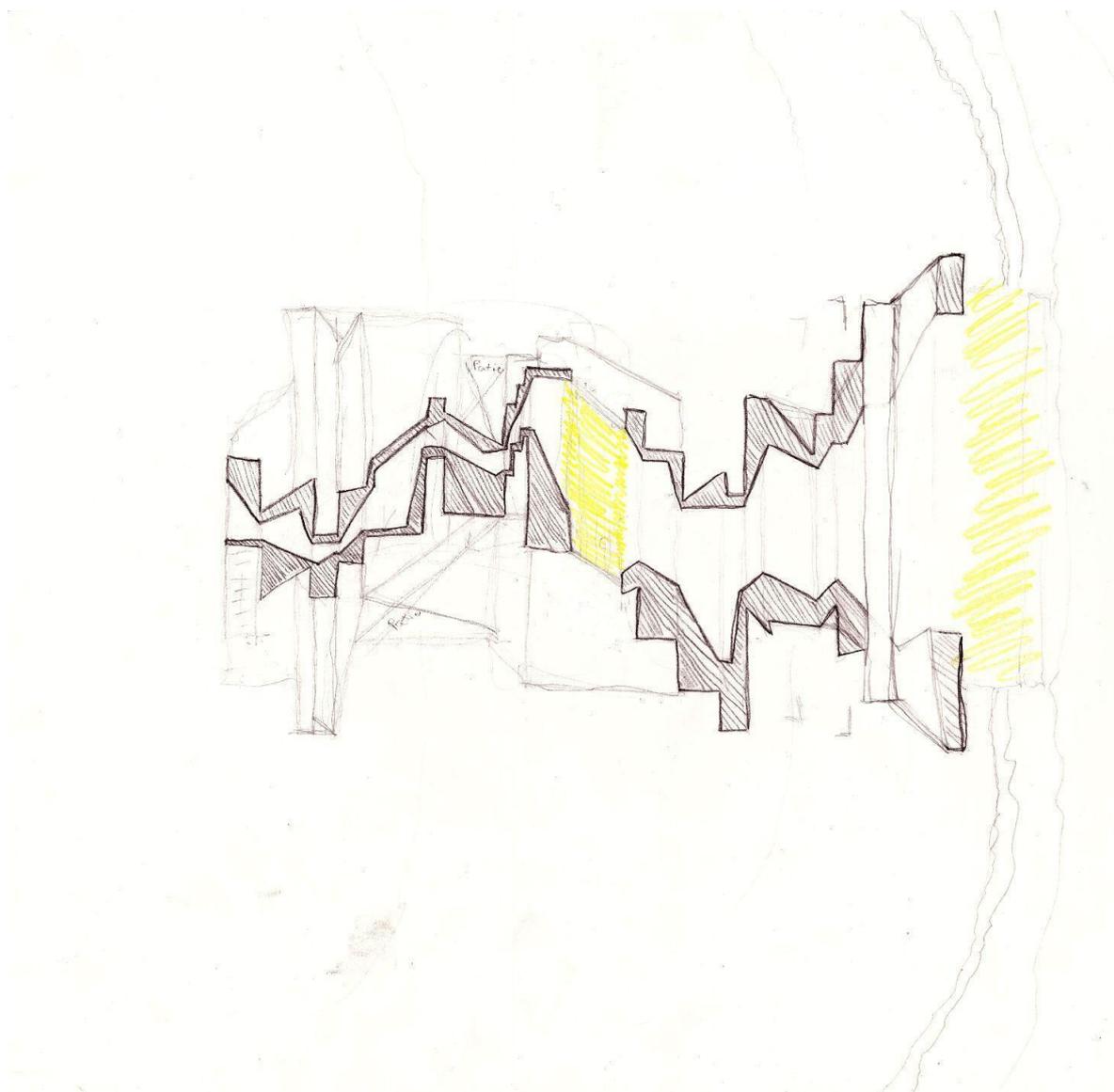


Figure 5
Taking place. The cliff. Student's work: Maria Urrutia.

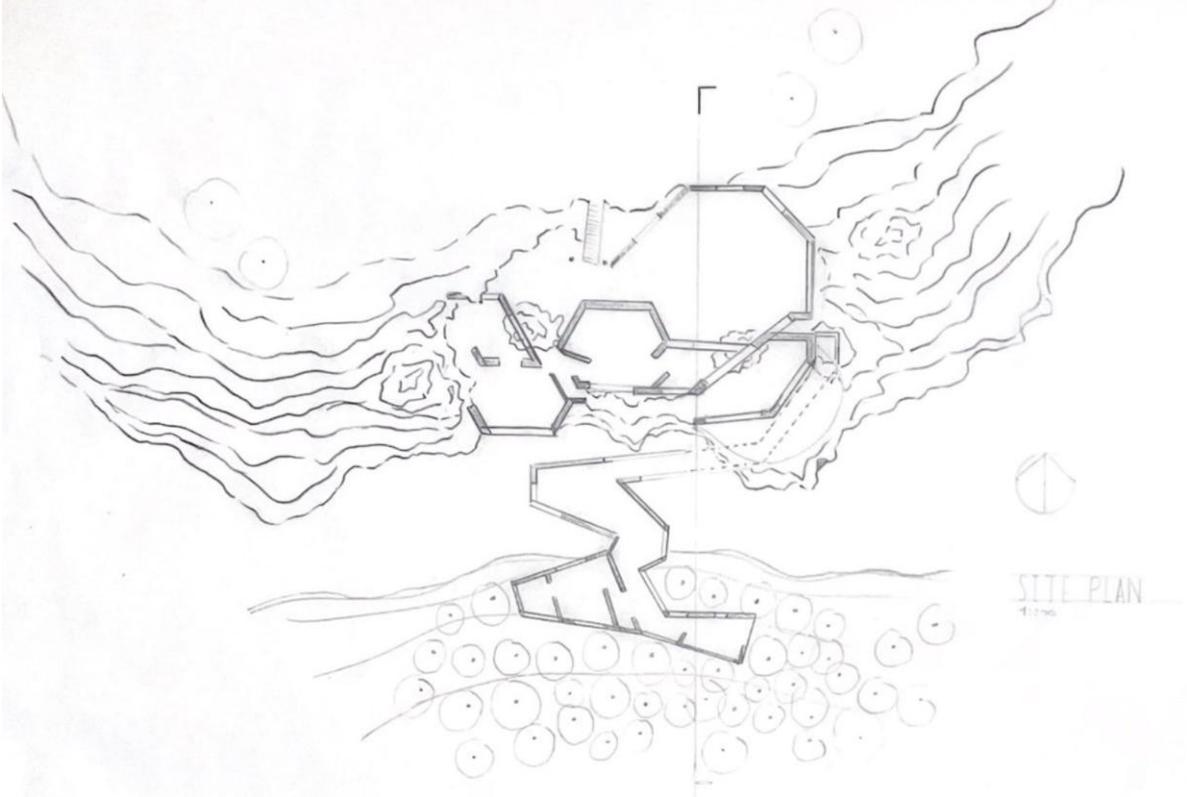


Figure 6
Taking place. The infinite. Student's work: Malak Kamel.

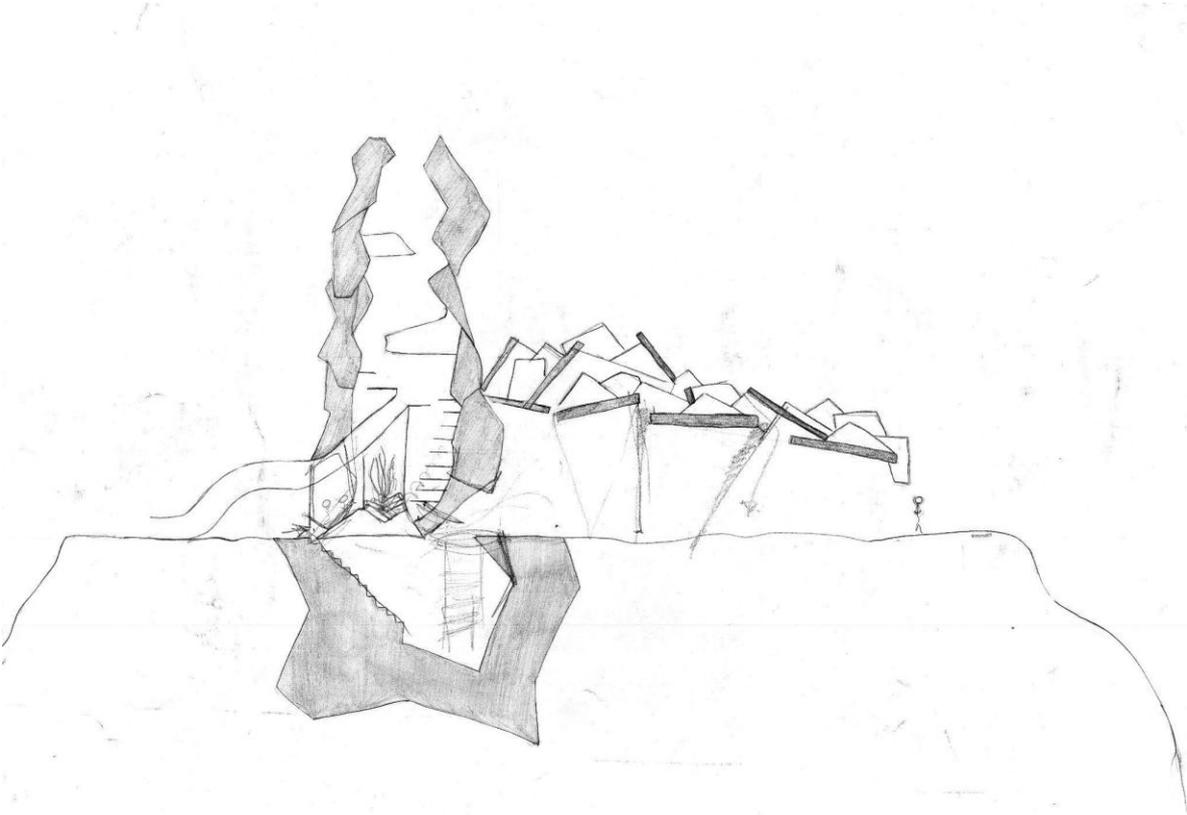
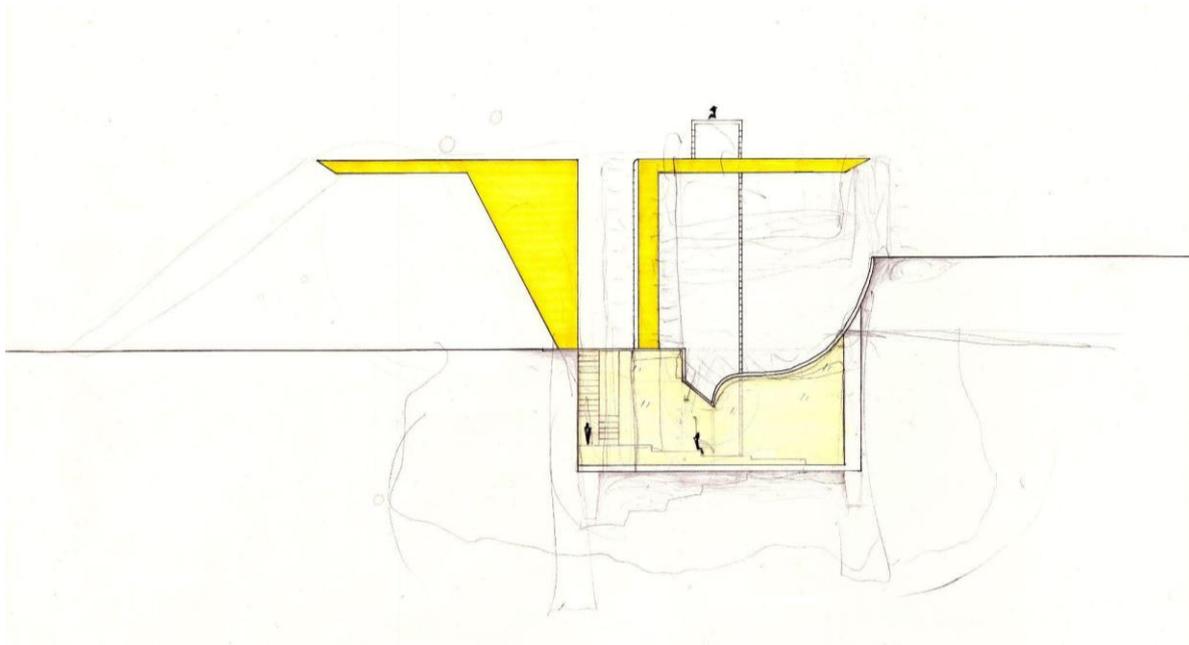


Figure 7

Taking place. The cave. Student's work: Nour Iskander.

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