

The ‘becoming-complex’ of architecture

Gianni Pettena interviewed by
Jacqui Alexander and Samuele Grassi.
Illustrations by George Mellos

This interview with the Italian architect-artist Gianni Pettena reflects on his relationship with Italian and American countercultures, and the enduring lessons of the *Architettura Radicale*.

Gianni Pettena (1940) has been described as an ‘architect by training and artist by protest’,¹ and an ‘architect actively on strike’.² Both a member of the Florentine branch of the *Architettura Radicale* and a self-proclaimed outsider – as insinuated by his contribution to the iconic Global Tools portrait, in which he holds up a sign: *Io sono la spia*, or ‘I am a spy’ – Pettena’s work was unique among the group in its deep affinities with the land art and the American countercultural movement, as an extension of earlier, anti-capitalist ideas pursued in Italy that explored the decoupling of function from form in architecture.

Pettena spent much of the 1970s in America, where he developed friendships with Buckminster Fuller and affiliations with Robert Smithson and Gordon Matta-Clarke.³ In the US, Pettena’s research on non-conformist architectural tools and practices was developed within the context of countercultural movements and pacifist networks, coinciding with a renewed anti-authoritarianism in the arts and in society, more broadly. He recalls:

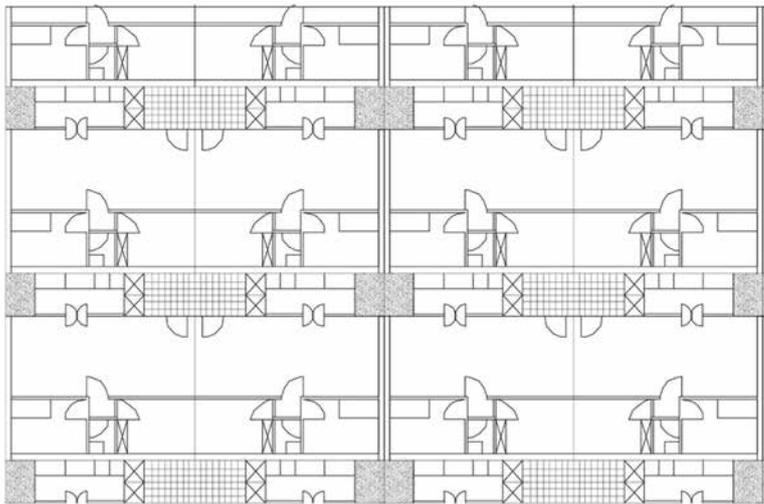
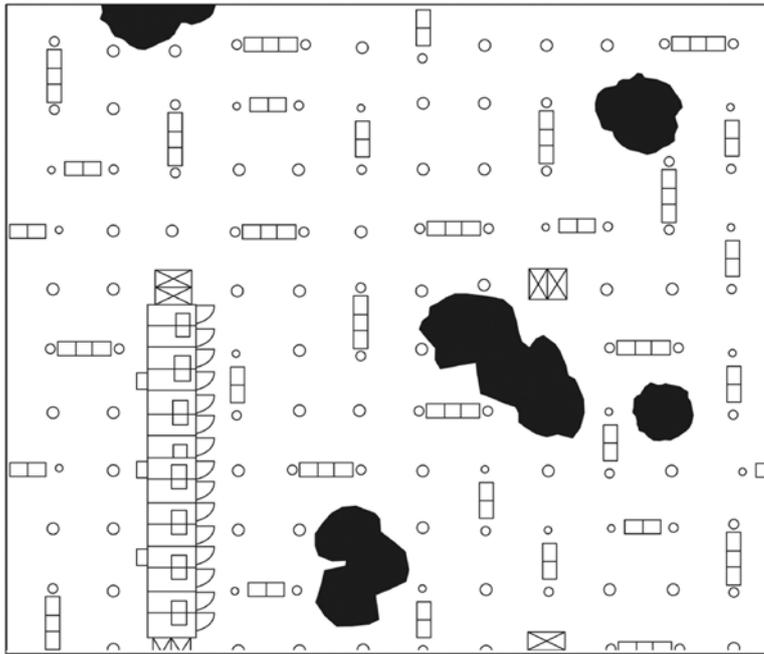
At the time, Wilhelm Reich, Herbert Marcuse, and R. B. [Buckminster] Fuller were all involved in the shaping of a youth counterculture, which was enthusiastically thought to provide a theoretical and philosophical platform for all those people who were longing to give their support in the building of a pacifist future, free from confines, yet who lacked the time to actually theorise it.

And yet, as Pettena goes on to add, this fundamentally anarchic aspect of architecture and design

is far from outdated. It survives today in dispersed, network-like efforts to use architecture as an entry point into the articulation of more liveable spaces and places within and against the impending ‘crises’ – health, economic, and environmental – that define the times we live in.

In spite of the various phases of Pettena’s career, and his chosen media, his body of work is consistent in its commitment to exploring spatial research and practices at the 1:1 architectural scale, leaving behind its constructive functions and bringing it into the territory of conceptual art.⁴ Pettena shared the concerns of his peers in Archizoom and Superstudio about the capitalist programmes that architecture supports and perpetuates. His rejection of function can be understood equally as a rejection of the professionalisation and ‘productivist’ imperatives of the architect, as well as a rejection of the self-limiting conventions of the discipline. The work of Ettore Sottsass, redefining domestic objects according to cultural and behavioural references over functional considerations,⁵ was crucial to this line of thinking, as Pettena points out.

Pettena and his peers’ architectural education at the University of Florence in the 1960s was shaped by their professors, who included Umberto Eco, Leonardo Benevolo, and Leonardo Savioli. If Eco advocated for architecture to engage new cultural forms of signification,⁶ Pettena credits Savioli with championing emotion as an essential component in artistic expression.⁷ In this way –

1, 2 Archizoom, *No-Stop City* (1969).

and as Pettena describes in conversation – lessons from pop art, conceptual art, and behavioural art began to infect experimental attitudes in architecture. The lasting achievement of the putative Utopians, according to Pettena, was the legitimisation of ‘every language in design [...] allowing those who come from the world of visual arts to restructure their spatial research using the tools of architecture to do so and vice versa [the] increasing homogenis[ation of] a common field of experimentation.’⁸

The following interview followed a research-led teaching experiment with undergraduate students from Monash Art Design and Architecture, Australia (see pp. 315–30). We discuss with Pettena key

themes that emerged from the workshop. These include architecture as a site for both creative and political experimentation, the diverse agendas of the *Architettura Radicale*, and the media and methods engaged in realising them. Pettena contextualises his project and that of his peers in relationship to historical lineages and ruptures that shaped the language and approach of the *Architettura Radicale* in Florence, by comparison to parallel movements taking place in Milan, Turin, Austria, and America. He also reflects on his contribution to *Global Tools* – a decentralised reformulation of a school for architecture strongly connected to the environmental and DIY movements – its pedagogical objectives and its ongoing

influence on his parallel career as an academic and educator. Crucial to the evolution of the discipline, Pettena insists, is a continued commitment to the exploration and redefinition of the limits of architecture and architectural practice.

From this perspective, walking the corridors of the *Radical Utopias* exhibition opened up a utopian location where the critical and experimental efforts of the radical Florentine architects entered into conversation with the audience. This entailed a rejection of social, cultural, and political norms and ascendent capitalist trends, and a commitment to enacting change through critique and action in the present, enabling the possibility of alternative futures. It is, perhaps, in this light that we should read his closing statement on the value and the multidirectionality of the new forms of experimentation in architecture and their focus on state of emergencies: the anxiety provoked by the risk of losing the ability to imagine and to act in the world otherwise.

Jacqui Alexander and Samuele Grassi (interviewers): You made an interesting claim during our design workshop in Prato⁹ about architecture being the ‘queen of the arts’ yet also the least real, the least direct. As you said, architects are called on to imagine futures, but they are frequently operating through forms of representation that are interpreted and actualised by others. It is tempting to read this alongside the conceptual ideas informing the *Radical Utopias* exhibition, and architecture as a(n) (inter) discipline in relation to utopia. What did you learn from these other creative disciplines and did your approach infiltrate and influence them in return?

Gianni Pettena (GP): The *Radical Utopias* exhibition (Florence, 2017; Montreal, 2018) was concerned with the origins of the Italian Radical architecture movement. Focusing exclusively on the Florence area, it did not broaden its scope by looking at the movement’s repercussions on the contemporary architecture scenes in Milan and Turin (and the work of, namely, Sottsass, Mendini, De Rossi, Strum, and so on). The radical proposals advanced by Archizoom, Superstudio, UFO,

Pettina and others did not fail to acknowledge what had been going on in London (with Archigram) or Vienna (with Hollein, or Pilcher). Rather, they all shared a common critical-ironic approach to the ideology of development, mass production, and consumption, often taken to extreme absurd levels. This was particularly noticeable in the work of Archizoom and Superstudio, whose productions *No-Stop City* and *Continuous Monument* offered a visual rendition of inherently insane ideas about development with no boundaries. Conversely, UFO's – and my own – works were trying to pursue a different agenda, aiming to infiltrate the texture of the city. This was intended to provide a standpoint from which to question, in real life – that is, through building temporary structures, works, and artefacts – the impossible mediation between history and the contemporary world.

The visual languages employed were indebted to pop art (see, for instance, Archizoom, Superstudio, and UFO) and conceptual art, where arte povera and land art played a key role in the search of a suitable visual language through which to express one's ideas. There were no disciplinary boundaries separating the visual arts, music, and experimental theatre. Research in architecture was no exception. Artists like Jannis Kounellis often collaborated, for instance, with experimental theatre practitioners, whereas Michelangelo Pistoletto went as far as to set up his own theatre group. I worked together with Nanni and Kustermann for their experimental theatre in Rome, as well as participating in music performances showcased by the MEV group, Giuseppe Chiari, Vittori Gelmetti, and Steve Lacy in Florence, Rome, and Milan. All these collaborative experiences would take place either in art galleries or in some of these artists' large studios, in both Florence and Rome.

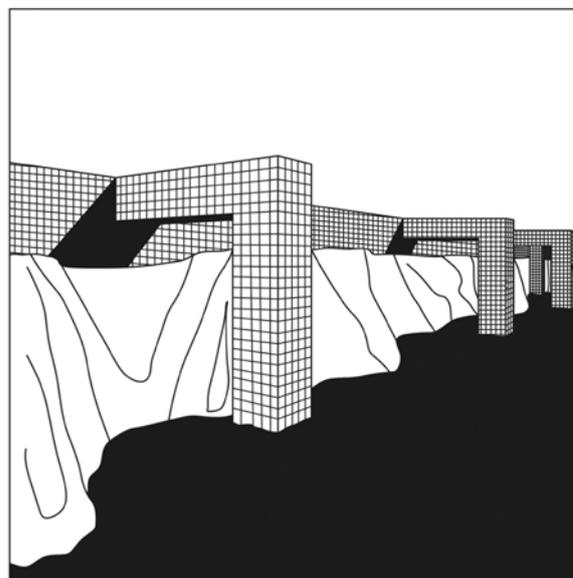
Interviewers: Alessandro Mendini, known for his editorship of *Casabella*, *Domus*, and *Modo*,¹⁰ credits you for introducing him, and many other Italians, to the work of Buckminster Fuller, whom you met in California. Can you tell us how you met Fuller, and the differences and similarities of the parallel countercultural design movements that were happening in the US and Italy?

GP: It was just upon coming back from travelling in California, Utah, and Arizona – where I had been searching for hippies' communes, Native American Reserves, and experimental collectives like Ant Farm and Portola Institute (who were then editors of the *Whole Earth Catalogue*) when I stumbled across Fuller. I had stopped in London, where I was to give a presentation of my journey to the Architectural Association, and he would present a lecture at the same university in the following couple of days. I attended his presentation and, at the end of the talk, I went up to meet him and interviewed him on behalf of the monthly magazine of the university, and of *Domus*, which would later bring him to worldwide attention.

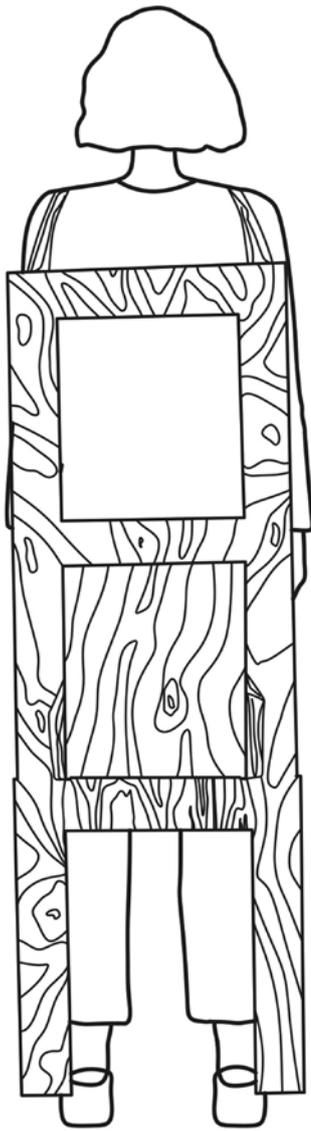
At the time, Fuller, Wilhelm Reich, Herbert Marcuse were all involved in the shaping of youth counterculture, which was enthusiastically thought to provide a theoretical and philosophical platform for all those people who were longing to support the building of a pacifist future, free from confines, yet who lacked the time to actually theorise it. And, in both the US and European countercultural scenes, Fuller was invited to give talks at extremely successful gatherings, which were nearly always as crowded as music festivals. What interested me then was the ways in which the youth countercultures in the US and in Europe were striving for a language through which to reshape architecture into

something for themselves. So, the hippies built their own communities (Drop City, Pacific High School) and also their Funk Architecture¹¹ – their own way of life – while also finding a voice for their idea of architecture by employing Fuller's project for the geodesic dome, a self-build piece that existed in a wide number of guises, as well as the Native American's Tee-Pee and the architectural style of the American pioneers.

The visual arts refused to maintain a traditional relationship with the world of art galleries, and instead sought to move away from the 'city-as-everything' out into the desert to build an altogether new relationship with the environment – one that would speak and use its own visual language. These massive, poetic actions manifested in scarcely functional architecture that was not made for living, and yet, it was driven by theoretical and expressive needs. Architecture and radical design (as in the case of Funk Architecture and Land Art) represented an almost solely European, phenomenological, update. From the mid-1960s onwards, it [radical design] came to be associated with the work of a younger generation of architects who opened up the discipline to contemporary cultural debates. These artists' recourse to irony, to the urban and planetary scale, aimed to find alternative ways of living and to criticise, say, a single piece of furniture as radical self-fashioning. In its many forms, this



3 Superstudio, *Continuous Monument* (1969).

4 Gianni Pettienna, *Wearable Chairs* (1971–2001).

expressive energy was translated into a more complex and lively kind of architecture and décor [which was] able to give shape to a certain theory, as opposed to interpreting users' actual needs. These kinds of architecture and design attempted to decipher purposes and thoughts while deliberately disregarding those functions that could only be subjected to interpretation in ironic and critical ways.

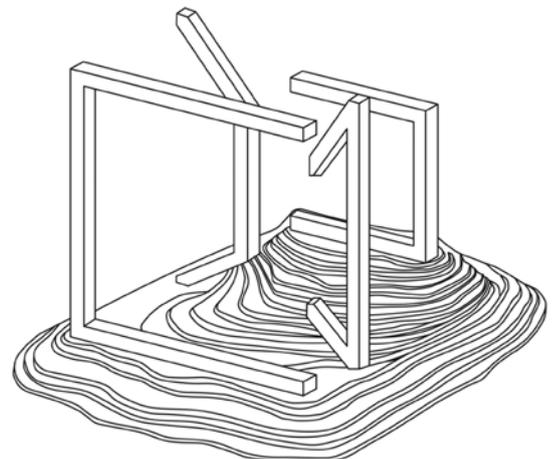
Interviewers: Scholars like Pier Vittorio Aureli and Ross Elfline have suggested that the expansion of architectural media, and modes, that flourished in the Radical period resulted from a 'refusal to work' as building professionals. Conventional architectural practice was viewed a means to further capitalistic agendas and commodity consumption. During the workshop, you discussed your interest in furniture and objects primarily as a means to challenge behavioural practices. Was there a political dimension to your interest in furniture and object design?

GP: My use of new materials, like different versions of plastic, was one of the ways I envisaged giving new shape to industrial production, which was then characterised by anomie, and which worked exclusively in the interests of the market. However – and this applies to both

architecture and design – it is the shaping of new languages, new colours, and new décor that allows for an altogether different visual language. At the time, your highest hopes were that the following generations (of artists), when using this very architecture and design, would be driven spontaneously toward DIY methods. Being exposed to such an environment, the architect would thus become a technician skilled in transforming a prototype into a real product.

Interviewers: The relationship of the *Architettura Radicale* to the Operaist Workers Movement in Florence has been documented by scholars like Aureli. We are interested in the role of radical furniture in this context – for example, we can think about the work of Archizoom, Sottsass, and Superstudio for Poltronova. Was there any intention to improve, disrupt, or challenge the conditions of workers through this new engagement with the industrial manufacture of products and furniture?

GP: We should see Sottsass' work as building bridges between the rationalism of the 1930s and its subsequent overshadowing in the post-WWII era. At the heart of rationalist architecture was the idea of a work entailing a conscious refusal of matter, colour, and ornament. We could say that for many a generation

5 Gianni Pettienna, *Laundry* (1969).6 Gianni Pettienna, *Archipensieri* (2001–11).

this was a necessary detox from the excesses that had characterised the beaux arts and art deco. For the younger generations of post-WWII artists, the work of Sottsass represented a contemporary rereading of the richness of colours, the use of new materials, and a high degree of freedom. His was a work whose vitality was seen to respond to the desires, both conscious and unconscious, of this new generation striving to find a language to speak to the times they were living.

Interviewers: You credit Sottsass for teaching you about the language of architecture. Can you explain his influence through some of your works?

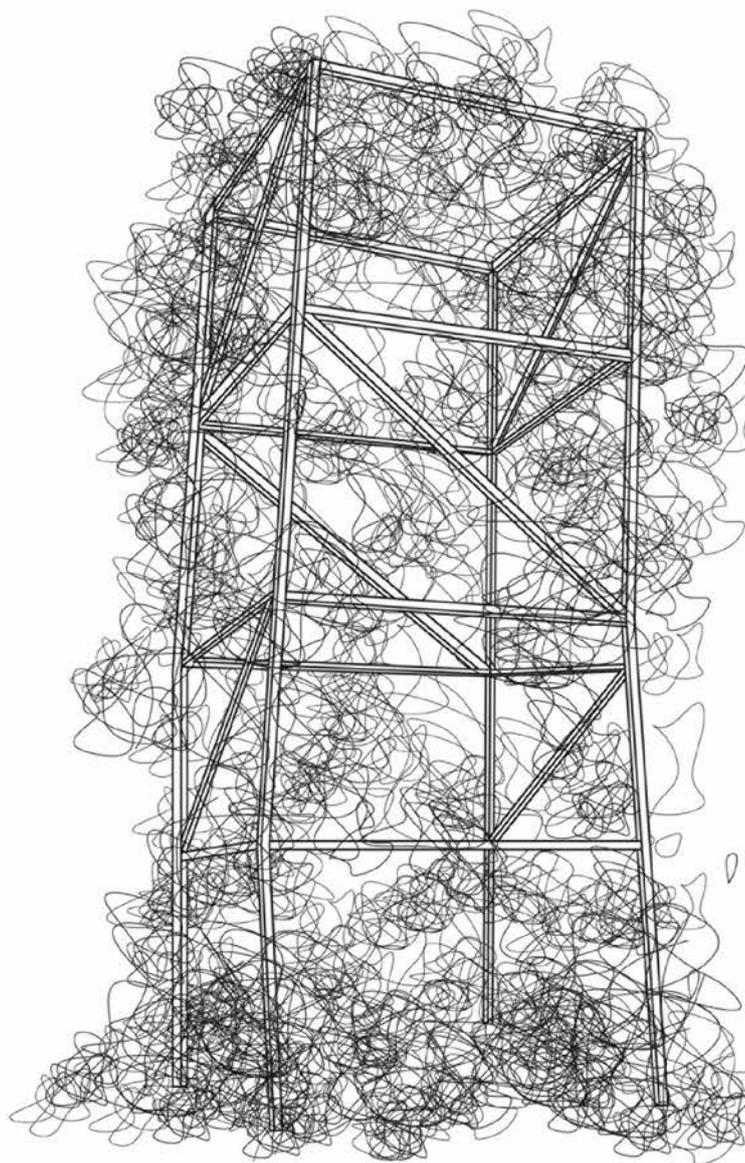
GP: The influence of Sottsass's architectural language can easily be discerned in the arrangement of the first loft I designed in Piazza Donatello, Florence, including its furniture. That was a project I made in the mid-1960s when I was still a student in architecture. I soon became aware that I would have to leave it all behind so that I could develop my own language.

Interviewers: In your lecture, you described the cultural production of the 1960s as committed to establishing other languages and identities in order to challenge institutionalised modes of representation, such as dress code for example. One of the architectural examples you provided was the 'phallus tower' by Archizoom, which you positioned in opposition to prevailing Catholic norms and imaginaries. Could you elaborate on the work of the radicals in the context of Catholicism?

GP: Young adults often tend to criticise whatever belongs to the culture that precedes them. For them, this means making the first steps towards shaping an independent vision, one in which, say, ideologies and religion(s) are conceived of as merely outmoded ways to apprehend the world.

Interviewers: Can you tell us about the concept and contexts surrounding the large-scale textual works that you created, like *Carabinieri* (1968), *Milite Ignoto* (1968), and *Grazia & Giustizia* (1968)?

GP: I view them as a series of writings summarising the



7 Gianni Pettena, *Tumbleweed Catcher* (1972).

conventional ways though which one often represents institutions, such as the police, violence, and justice. Through their gigantic shape they were able to enter a dialogue with the surrounding city and its size, and their own size was highly influenced by the city itself. In a way, these temporal architectures signalled a new urban landscape.

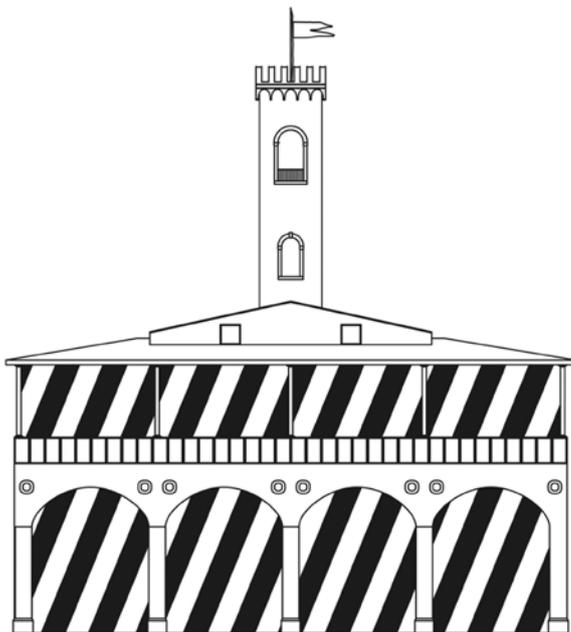
Interviewers: Are these works related to your concept of the '(An) architect' as put forward in your 1973 book of the same name?

GP: My book *The Anarchitect* was a declaration of intent that I used to move beyond my previous background in architecture as an academic discipline. My aims were different in that I was disengaging myself and my work from the figure of the architect-as-

professional, choosing instead to theorise alternative conceptions of architecture that would not be regulated by the norms that constrained its full expression in everyday life.

Interviewers: Please could you tell us about the Global Tools Collective and what you contributed to the group?

GP: That was one of my attempts to produce something collaboratively with people who had been invested in finding an independent vision of architecture. All in all, it was a very productive experience although, eventually, it would lead to altogether different strategies. We divided into research groups (communication, survival, theory, and body). What we were able to produce still provides a fitting example of the many ways in which

8 Gianni Piretti, *Palazzo D'Arnolfo* (1968).

you can give shape to your creative energy. Among these were Alchimia and Memphis: a production that contained a series of prototypes that gained considerable worldwide attention. I was no longer with the group by that time, so I did not collaborate on these two projects, or *The New Domestic Landscape* exhibition at MoMA [the Museum of Modern Art in New York]. My particular style was celebrated a couple of months beforehand with an exhibition at the John Weber gallery in New York, which was very much into conceptual and land art.

Interviewers: You have had a prolific career as an architectural critic and historian alongside your practice. Did Global Tools have an ongoing impact on the way you

think about education? Do you consider your pedagogies to be radical or does this need to come from the bottom-up (from the students)?

GP: The rationale behind Global Tools was that it offered a school of architecture. However, in time, many of its founders also became students and producers of new works. Arguably, the pedagogic novelty introduced by the group concerned the idea that, when teachers assigned a certain project to students, they were supposed to develop their own projects as well. In my view, every vanguard was always the result of a collaboration among really young people. Say, people in their twenties. Therefore my teaching – which was delivered to the same age cohort – had to

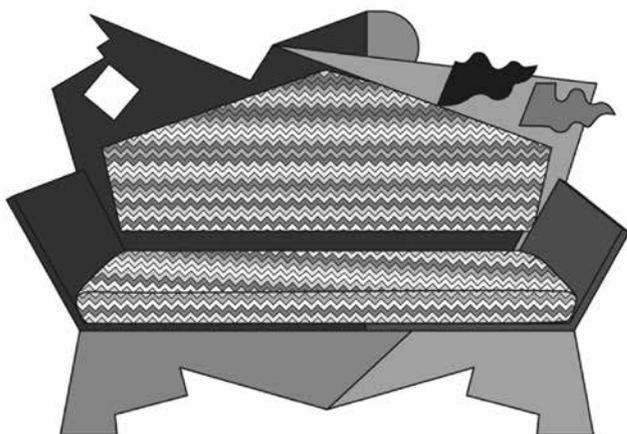
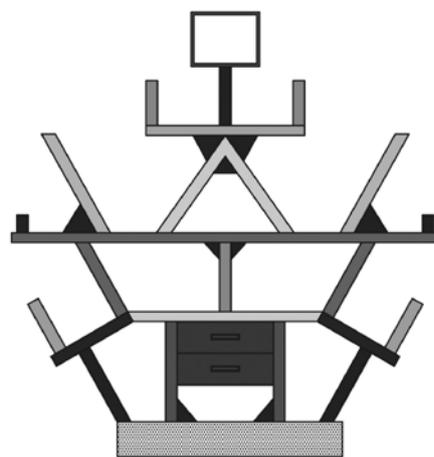
exemplify what had been done in the past, which future generations would still be able to admire and rely on. I was trying to provide students with examples of their rights and duties as people called on to find ways to represent the world in which they are living.

Interviewers: You have suggested there is a lack of pure or experimental research within the discipline of architecture today, which you think is a lost opportunity. Isn't this the role of the academy? Or is there a lack of cross-fertilisation between practice and academe in your opinion?

GP: If the academy actually promoted research, in addition to teaching, those who find themselves in the world of employment at a very young age would have to struggle even more to affirm their views, rather than adjusting to the demands of production and consumption.

Interviewers: Today we have entered another politically turbulent time. Neoliberalism has exacerbated many of the concerns that gave rise to the countercultural movements of the sixties and seventies. What tactics and lessons can we learn from the Radical era for the contemporary context?

GP: Nowadays, when you have a chance to compare the work done in universities with those of young architects, for instance at the Biennale in Venice, you have the impression that most of the research done in the field of architecture focuses on different types of emergencies. What I mean is, there is a lot of examples borne

9 Ateliero Mendini for Alchimia, *Kandissi Sofa* (1980).10 Ettore Sottsass for Memphis Milano, *Carlton Bookcase* (1981).



11 Gianni Pettena, *Icehouse* (1971–2).

out of architects' desire to address natural catastrophes, like earthquakes or floods, or else to respond to varying states of emergency of a people in need. All this has little to do with experimenting with or in architecture. First aid architecture is aimed at finding a solution to a certain state of emergency. However, research in architecture should concern itself with using architecture as medium through which to understand the becoming-complex of cultural changes.

Jacqui Alexander is Senior Lecturer in Architectural Design and Architectural History at Monash University. She is Co-Director of Alexander Sheridan Architecture and a founding editor of POST Magazine, an award-winning independent Melbourne- and Paris-based journal exploring the lived experience of buildings and cities. Jacqui's current research investigates the interplay of platform technologies, global real estate capital, and architectural production. In 2021, she was the recipient of the Australian Institute of Architects' Emerging Architect Prize (VIC).

Samuele Grassi is part-time Lecturer at Monash University Prato Centre and Adjunct Lecturer at University of Florence. His research interests focus on the connections of queer gender theories and postanarchism, interdisciplinary critical pedagogies, sexualities and citizenship education, including cultural, and educational exchanges.

George Mellos is a graduate of architecture engaging in urban and design research at Relative Projects. He is an educator at Monash University where he has taught into the Foundation Studio programme and has co-taught a design studio focused on urban infrastructure, amenity, and modes of production in the middle rings of cities.

George currently teaches a unit titled *Architectural Communications*, which dissects different approaches to documenting and representing spatial ideas.

Gianni Pettena is an architect, artist, critic, and Professor of History of Contemporary Art and Architecture at the University of Florence. Since the 70's he has been a visiting professor, critic and lecturer in many USA and UK universities and architecture schools. Founder, together with Archizoom, Superstudio and UFO, of the *Architettura Radicale* movement, he has been involved since the end of the '60s in the study and practice of experimental architectural activity through exhibitions, lectures, articles and books. He writes for art, architecture and design magazines. As an architecture critic and historian he has organised exhibitions on the best known contemporary architects for public museums and city administrations. His works are in the permanent collection of museums and art centers such as the Pompidou Center in Paris and the Frac Center in Orléans as well as the Venice Biennale. His archives are hosted and available for consultation at the Canadian Center for Architecture (CCA) in Montreal.

Notes

1. Luca Cerizza, 'Gianni Pettena: The Archi-teller', in *Non-Conscious Architecture*, ed. by Marco Scotini (Berlin: Sternberg Press, 2017), pp. 46–50 (p. 46).
2. Joseph Masheck, quoted in Marco Scotini, 'Gianni Pettena: The Rejection of Work', in *Non-Conscious Architecture*, ed. by Scotini, pp. 8–17 (p. 10).
3. Marco Scotini and Gabriele Sassone, 'Editor's Note', in *Non-Conscious Architecture*, ed. by Scotini, pp. 4–8.
4. Marco Scotini, 'Gianni Pettena: The Rejection of Work', in *Non-Conscious*

Architecture, ed. by Scotini, pp. 8–17 (p. 9).

5. Gianni Pettena, 'The Reasons for Utopia', in *Radical Utopias*, ed. by Pino Bruggellis, Gianni Pettena, Alberto Salvadori (Florence: Quodlibet, 2017), pp. 21–33.
6. See also: Jacqui Alexander, Samuele Grassi, George Mellos, 'Radical Practices, Radical Pedagogies', pp. 315–330.
7. Pettena, 'The Reasons for Utopia', pp. 21–33.
8. *Ibid.*, p. 31.
9. Alexander, Grassi, Mellos, 'Radical Practices, Radical Pedagogies'.
10. As well as his practice, *Atelier Mendini*, which produced the Kandissi Sofa for Alchimia (1980). See [9].
11. Connected with the Do-It-Yourself (DIY) movement.

Illustration credits

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George Mellos, 3–11

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Competing interests

The authors declare none.

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