Img. 01   1965, The Medea sarcaphagus is being delivered. Basel, Museum of Antiquities.

Museums have been and are still denounced to be complicit in colonization and imperial dominations. Museums are instrumental in the production of national, cultural and historical narratives which play a fundamental role in the naturalization of systemic inequalities, racism, classism and colonial legacies. Looted objects are widely overrepresented in their collections, while many other museums hold artifacts that have been bought by private collectors whose fortune has been built on extractivism, exploitation, and/or colonization. Far from preserving, or conserving objects and artifacts, museums were an essential piece of legitimation of a systematic destruction of culture and knowledge worlds that has been coined as epistemicide–destruction, silencing, annihilation, or devaluing of a knowledge system.

To preserve, museums actually hold a vast ecology of space and infrastructure, going way beyond the exhibition space the public has access to. Infinite surfaces of archives and storage are highly regulated in terms of temperature, humidity, oxygen levels, while an immense amount of objects are being continuously restored adding layers of chemicals to freeze them in time–and keep them in the past.

This project departs from the premise that all the displaced objects that populate museums and their ecologies will be repatriated. In the context of the extreme urban pressure Europe and Switzerland are and will be facing by 2050, museum's ecologies represent a highly significant and strategic building stock for many in the city centers, often incorporating generous green spaces. This stock however comes as a series of highly regulated environments, often sterile and hostile to life, rarely integrated within everyday life of potential inhabitants, as they are highly specialized, monofunctional, and unevenly accessible.

This project envisions a future where museum ecologies and their extensive building stock are repurposed to address the escalating housing crisis in Swiss cities. By reimagining these spaces, we propose adaptive reuse strategies that transform them into livable, scalable solutions. These transformations may or may not retain their original functions but will prioritize integration with urban life, leveraging the existing structures to create sustainable, functional, and inclusive environments.

Unit I - Research Phase

In the first four weeks, we want the students to solidify their understanding and knowledge of the relationship between museum, design and decolonial struggles. The aim is to formulate a position inscribed in the current debate that will serve as support for the development of the design.

Students will read the suggested texts. We will then collectively discuss the literature to build general knowledge on the topic, develop a critical perspective, and become familiar with the various debates surrounding art, provenance, abductions, and controversy. Students should share their personal interests related to the topic, which will ultimately enhance their understanding.

Collect material, such as scientific documents, works of art, current or past debates, controversial buildings and examples that openly refer to the establishment, operation and acquisition of artefacts. A give case study will help to deepen your understanding, by means of this case study, students should question the following concepts:

+ the meaning of culture in our everyday life
+ the role of museums for the general public
+ the role of museums as institutions (possessions and acquisitions)
+ the function and meaning of displaying things
+ the open possibilities of inhabiting spaces

Unit II - Reprogramming and Spatial Strategy

During this phase you will develop a concept to further investigate your narrative in a spatial strategy and a programme. You will prioritize architectural design that acknowledges complexity and social responsibility. Emphasizing sustainability, it aims to uncover architectural techniques and implement knowledge and technologies toward sustainable futures. Addressing decolonization, social vulnerabilities, memory policies, and intersectional sustainability, it seeks design solutions aligned with local contexts.

After choosing an anchor to develop their research through design, students will propose a program and a spatial strategy to continue their projects. The program and spatial strategy must take into consideration all the dimensions of the context while answering the critical questions raised by the topic.
Students will bring organization charts, diagrams, sketches, tentative plans/sections/ elevations of implantation to discuss the projects.

The documents must state clearly the research question, the anchor, the program and the spatial strategy that the project will further develop. The proposal must discuss the critical questions addressed by the topic.

Unit III - Materializing and Constructing a Sustainable Transformation

The design process aims to refine conceptual positions for a balanced solution. It involves intensively developing architectural expressions, particularly focusing on building structure and assembly. The detailed exploration aligns projects with specific climates, resources, knowledge systems, and building traditions. Material choices and construction methods strengthen conceptual ideas guiding programmatic and spatial strategies.

The students will develop the materiality, structure, spatiality, and sustainable concept of their projects. They will take into consideration intersectional perspectives on sustainability, looking closely at how the building will be constructed, the sources of the materials, the techniques used, the inner and outer climates, etc. For this first discussion of Unit III, students will discuss their strategies to materialize their programs and crystallize their conceptual ideas into matter.

The students will provide the necessary plans, sections and elevations of the project with the context situation, some image proposals, diagrams of their programs, typological studies and sketches, and a conceptual model. We suggest students also explore their projects through axonometric drawings with uses and users, drawings, collages, and visualizations.

Research and Critical Thinking

Grasp and problematize the historical, theoretical and social context and impact of a project, while developing a critical, situated and reflexive approach. Gather, analyze and share other projects, sources, references relevant to your investigations.

Media, Projections and Representation

Apply a range of communication methods and media to present your research, conceptual and design proposals clearly and effectively which might include but are not limited to the following instruments: Hand drawing, Diagraming, 2D drawings, 3D modeling, Physical Models, Collages, Videographic and Photographic Materials, and Recordings. Develop representations of your research, conceptual and design proposal which might include but are not limited to the following projections: perspective, axonometry, details. Use these representation to communicate and deepen multilayered dimensions of your research, conceptual and design proposal which might include but are not limited to the following: research problematics, programmes, relationships to the anchor and inhabitants, strategies for a sustainable design, ambiances, scales, topology and spatial relations, urban insertion, structural concept, material experimentations and solutions, building techniques and technologies, climatic solutions entailing heating, cooling and ventilation techniques (not only mechanic solutions but material, spatial and physical qualities), building processes.

Intersectional Sustainability

Develop a strategy for a sustainable design and building, taking into account climatic and environmental–from global (CO_2 emissions, pollutants, supply chains, etc.) to local (biodiversity, soils, etc.)–and the social dimensions of sustainability–addressing vulnerabilities created by the social structures toward social justice and equity.

Architectural Heritage

Be aware of what we inherit, perpetuate, why and how we can shape it in return as living beings, humans, citizens and architects. Embed architectural, spatial and material solutions within local climates, knowledge systems and building cultures, while unearthing and valuing pasts, presents and futures building cultures, and combine them with actual knowledge and technologies.

Design

Generate design proposals which respond to the open questions of the topic, integrate the methodological and theoretical approaches of the studio, take into account multilayered and entangled forms of sustainability and heritage, and respond to the urgency of decolonizing practices.

Communication & Collaboration

Listen actively to others, participate in groups, be able to learn alone, and in groups. Show honesty, integrity and respect for your fellows, teachers, and all staff of ETHZ. Argue and develop structured discourses which integrate evidences, arguments, hypotheses, assumptions and conclusions.

Reflexivity, Engagement and Consistency

Consider opinions, positions and affects of others, and question yourselves about your own positions, assumptions and opinions. Be aware of the impact of your discourse and proposals on others, as much as on the context and the society. Position yourselves in regard to other practitioners and fields, and critically scrutinize your work, while considering what you know, and what you don't. Be consistent during the semester, which means to be engaged in a constant manner and explore in depth and continuity all the dimensions of the questions you raise and proposals you develop.