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**Axis Naturae**  
Archipelagic Analogy as Urban Design Driver.



Manchester  
Metropolitan  
University

## Output Details

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**Co-authors/producers (where applicable):**

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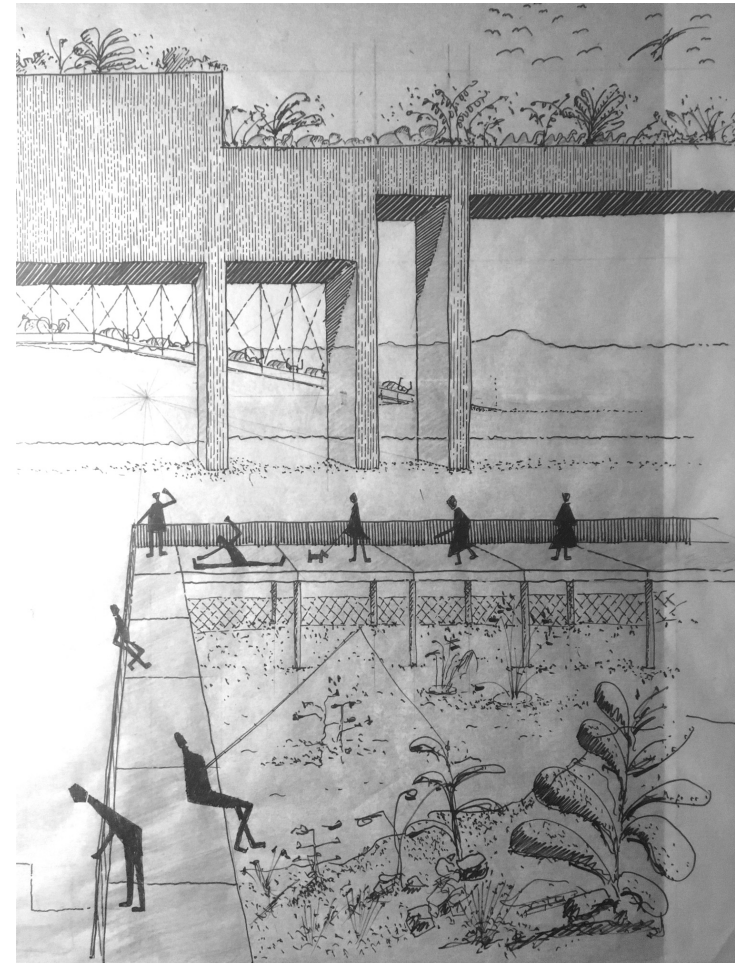
**Date of output:** Biennale Exhibition 2023 - Exhibition catalogue November 2023 – chapter publication March 2024

This research investigates how the Archipelagic Analogy can be transformed, through the act of drawing, into a transferable method for regenerative urban design, bridging speculative representation, morphological sequences, and design strategy within contemporary architectural and urban practice.

[*Axis Naturae* is a speculative research-by-design project developed through the Archipelagic Analogy as its conceptual driver. Exhibited at the Egyptian Pavilion, Venice Architecture Biennale 2023, it formed part of NiLab, a joint initiative between *Università Reggio Calabria* (IT) and *Ain Shams University* (EG) that gathered 18 international teams investigating regenerative strategies for the River Nile. Within this framework, *Axis Naturae* proposes a transferable method that transforms the natural logic of archipelagos into tools for regenerative urban design. Its originality lies in advancing a theory for practice, reconceiving drawing not as representation but as an act of knowledge generation, where analogical reasoning and morphological iteration convert geographic principles—fragmentation, autonomy, and interdependence—into spatial and ecological strategies.

The research bridges speculative representation, ecological analysis, and territorial strategy, positioning *Axis Naturae* as a demonstrator of theory for practice in architecture and urban design. Centred on the Philae Islands in the Nile, it explores how drawing mediates between heritage conservation and environmental regeneration. The project advances design research by framing archipelagic thinking as both critical discourse and operative process. It contributes to debates on post-anthropocentric design and climate resilience, offering an alternative to master-planning through situated “islands of intervention.” Though speculative, the project sparked institutional controversy when the Egyptian Ministry of Education censored select images, provoking academic debate at IUAV (July 2023) during the Biennale. Its method now informs new research papers and teaching across Manchester School of Architecture, shaping design studios and seminars on heritage-led regeneration and post-anthropocentric design thinking.

Grounded in comparative analysis of Berlin: A Green Archipelago (1977) and Roma Interrotta (1978), the research identifies a shared morphological logic of iterative drawing previously unexamined in tandem. This comparative study generates the Morphological Sequence tested through iterative workshops (2013–2022) and consolidated in *Axis Naturae*. The work demonstrates methodological transparency and verifiable rigour, showing how comparative analysis and iterative drawing yield a transferable design-by-drawing method now embedded in teaching and collaborative practice.



## Theoretical Foundations

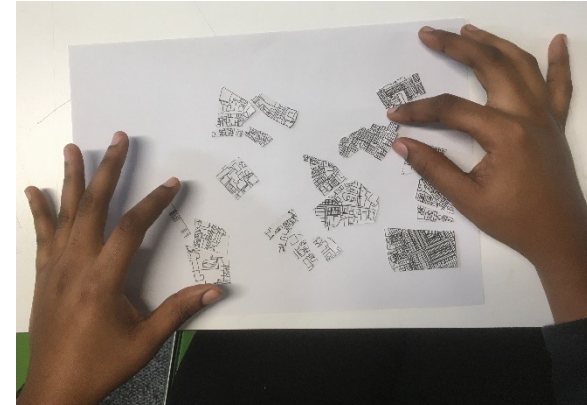
The research builds on the evolving interpretation of the archipelago as a geographic and conceptual model of connected autonomy. In its legal definition (UN Convention on the Law of the Sea, 1982), an archipelago constitutes “an intrinsic geographical, economic and political entity.” In architectural discourse, O. M. Ungers and Koolhaas (1977) translated this logic into the urban domain with *The City in The City - Berlin: A Green Archipelago*, re-imagining the shrinking city as a constellation of autonomous yet interdependent islands. Ungers traced this idea to Schinkel’s *Havel Landschaft*, noting that “*The Havel Landschaft contains the key and the essence of the idea of Berlin as a green archipelago.*” (Ungers et al., 2013, p. 59). By contrast, Roma Interrotta (1978) treated fragmentation as a collective “*exquisite corpse*”: independent fragments recomposed as autonomous, operative objects through speculative redrawing. (Sartogo et al., 2014)

Axis Naturae advances this trajectory by transforming the archipelagic analogy into an operative design method, translating the logic of natural archipelagos into artificial systems for urban regeneration.

### Research Question

How can the Archipelagic Analogy be transformed, through the act of drawing, into a transferable method for regenerative urban design?

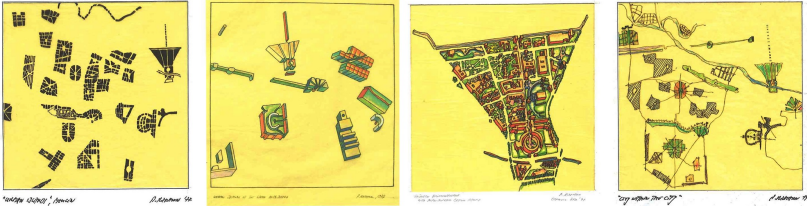
## Context



### Research Gap – From Metaphor to Method

*Berlin: A Green Archipelago* (1977) and *Roma Interrotta* (1978) arose from the same cultural context but diverged in intent and method. *Berlin* framed the **archipelago** as a strategic model of selective densification for a shrinking city, while *Rome* explored **urban fragments** as autonomous design propositions through speculative redrawing and collage, treating the city as an “exquisite corpse” of independent interventions. Despite their shared concern for fragmentation, these projects have never before been comparatively examined (1) through the lens of their drawing processes and morphological logics.

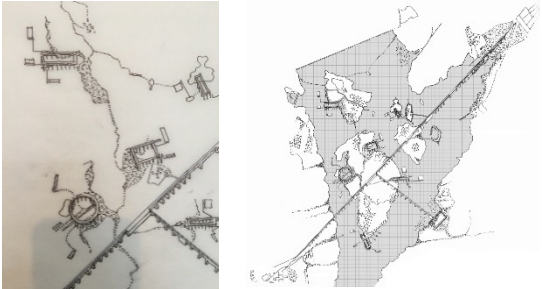
**This research addresses that gap**, analysing key iterative drawings from *Berlin: A Green Archipelago* and *Roma Interrotta* to uncover how their graphic and conceptual operations reveal distinct **morphological sequences useful to activate an Archipelagic Strategy**. While Berlin articulated the archipelago as a metaphor for selective urban renewal, *Roma Interrotta* explored urban fragments as autonomous design propositions. Yet neither established a transferable method linking these logics. **This research advances that missing step, demonstrating how the archipelagic condition can be operationalised as a design driver for urban regeneration** within contemporary architectural and urban practice. Building on these insights, Axis Naturae transforms drawing from representational act to operative design tool, establishing a transferable design-by-drawing method that integrates theoretical analysis with urban design practice — a theory for practice.



"The City in the City" Peter Riemann drawings 1977.



James Stirling drawings. Roma Interrotta 1978.



Axis Naturae drawings the archipelago

(1) A comparison have been discussed in a conference in 2014: Burrascano, M. & Capra, S. (2014) 1977/1978 Roma Interrotta / Berlin: A Green Archipelago. Conference held at Aula Ersoch, Ex-Mattatoio, Università Roma Tre, Rome, 4 December 2014. Speakers: Pippo Ciorra, Gabriele Mastrigli, Fabio Gianfrancesco.

## The Venice Biennale Framework

The Venice Architecture Biennale 2023 (The Laboratory of the Future, curator Lesley Lokko) consolidated this method within an international, peer-reviewed research framework. Within the Egyptian Pavilion – NiLab Projects: Nile as Laboratory, curated by Università Reggio Calabria (IT) and Ain Shams University (EG), eighteen teams were invited for expertise in riverine and heritage-led regeneration. Over one month of collaborative exchange and online review, Axis Naturae applied the method to the *Philae Islands*, re-imagining a disrupted territory as a hybrid archipelago uniting natural and artificial components—a theory-for-practice demonstrator validated through international collaboration. The Axis Naturae project explore the environmental challenges arising from the construction of the Aswan Dam in the *Philae Islands*.

## Context



Venice Biennale 2023 – Cover of Biennale Catalogue  
Interior view of the Egyptian Pavilion, 18th International Architecture Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia 2023.



Philae Island, River Nile – photograph of the site (Aswan, Egypt)

## Comparative Morphological Sequences (Berlin / Rome)

The Archipelagic Method translates the comparative analysis of *Berlin: A Green Archipelago* (1977) and *Roma Interrotta* (1978) into a morphological sequence that operationalises drawing as a form of reasoning. In *Berlin*, the act of selection and reduction defined islands of density within a green void; in *Rome*, the re-composition of fragments through speculative redrawing generated new analogical relations. Synthesised together, these approaches produced a procedural logic: *Identify, Select, Preserve, Densify* that structures the Archipelagic Method.

Each phase acts as both an analytical and generative operation, transforming drawing into a research instrument that reveals, tests, and constructs urban relationships. Through analogical reasoning, natural and artificial systems are examined in parallel, allowing morphological patterns derived from geography and landscape to inform urban design decisions. The process demonstrates how iterative drawing produces spatial knowledge, bridging theoretical reflection with regenerative urban practice.

## Research Methods

### Morphological Sequences

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#### Identify

Recognise existing urban fragments and latent spatial structures.



#### Select

Choose elements of value for potential activation.



#### Preserve

Retain and reinterpret key forms or morphological traces.

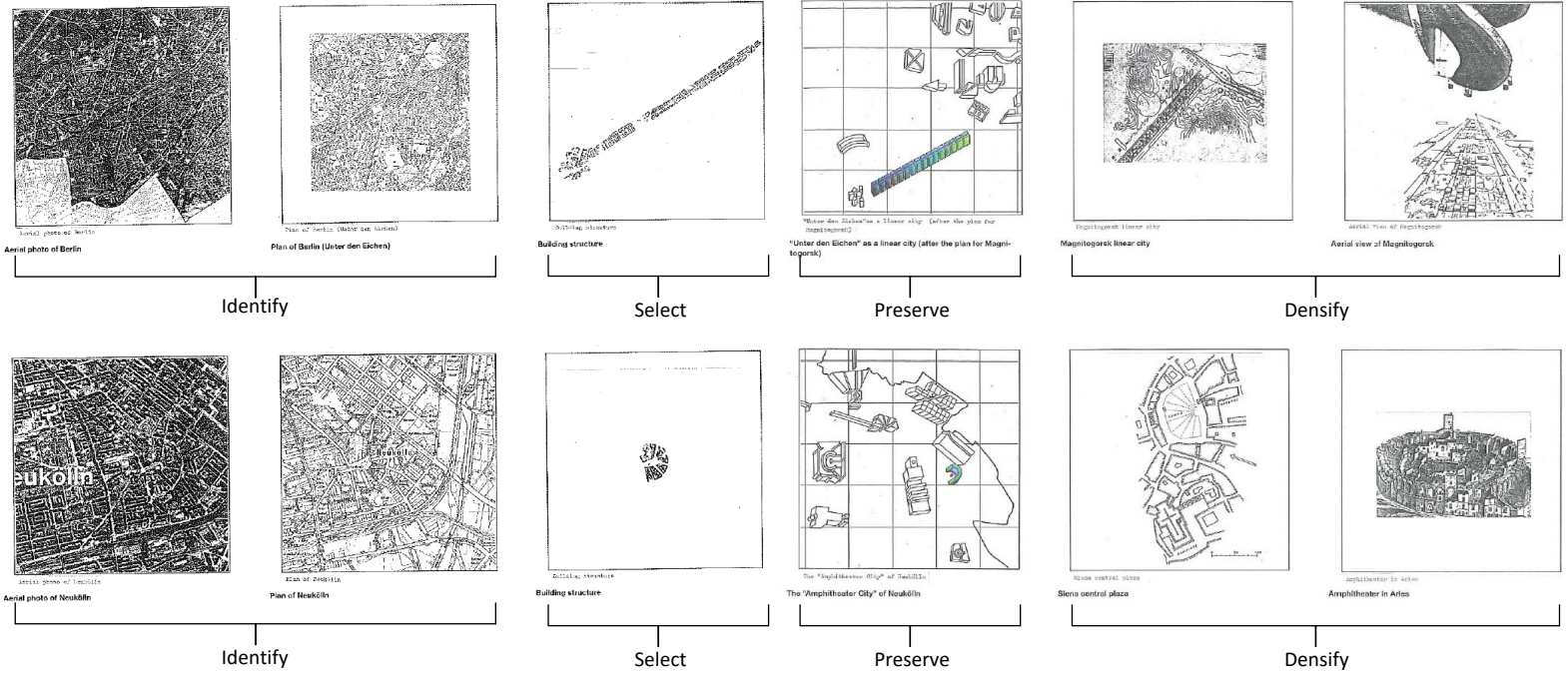


#### Densify

Intensify selected fragments into new relational configurations.

# Comparative Morphological Sequences (Berlin: A Green Archipelago, 1977)

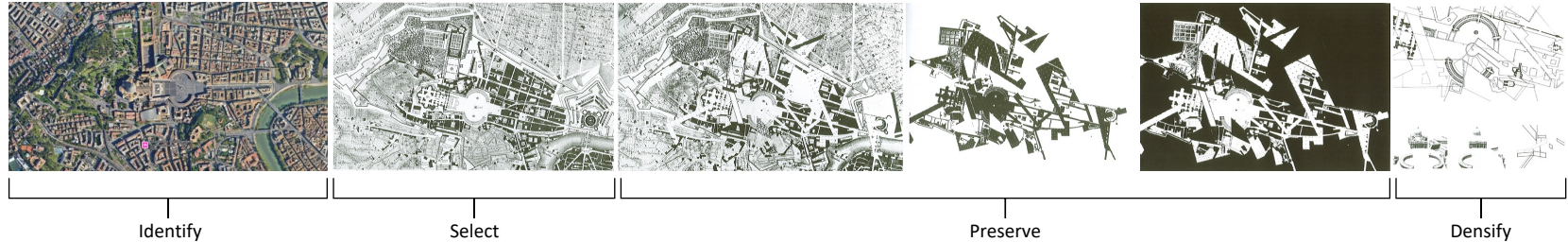
Berlin: A Green Archipelago develops an analytical morphology where drawing operates through selection, reduction, and activation. Dense urban “islands” are isolated within a green void, establishing autonomy and interdependence. The process culminates in the densification of selected precedents, turning analytical observation into operative design knowledge. Each sequence transforms iterative drawing into a morphological procedure, forming the methodological basis for the Archipelagic Method.



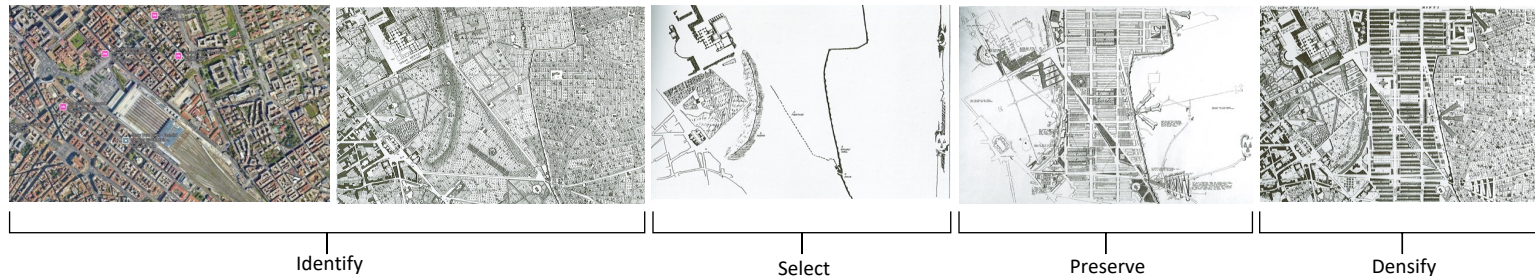
### Comparative Morphological Sequences (Roma Interrotta, 1978)

Roma Interrotta exemplifies a speculative morphology in which drawing becomes an instrument of recomposition and discovery. Through redrawing and collage, autonomous fragments are reassembled as analogical projections, revealing the city as a field of operative discontinuities. The fragments by Piero Sartogo and Romaldo Giurgola are exemplary of this approach, where the archipelagic logic of drawing—fragmented yet interrelated—is most evident, demonstrating how speculative iteration generates new urban reasoning.

Piero Sartogo (Roma Interrotta drawings iterations, 1978)



Romaldo Giurgola (Roma Interrotta drawings iterations, 1978)



# From Morphological Sequences to Archipelagic Strategy

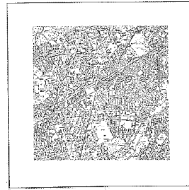
# Research Methods

The morphological sequences establish a method for comparing the iterative drawings of Berlin and Rome. To activate an Archipelagic Strategy, three interrelated phases unfold: **Reading & Reinterpreting**, **Selecting & Deleting**, and **Densifying & Envisioning**. These actions analyse the existing fabric, introduce an operative void—analogous to the sea separating islands—and transform residual territories into active fragments. Together they translate comparative morphology into an operative design method for regenerative urban transformation.

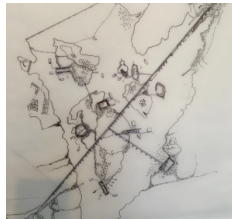
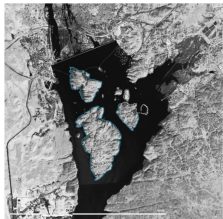
## READING & REINTERPRETING



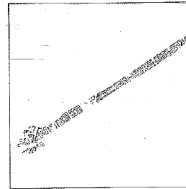
Aerial photo of Berlin



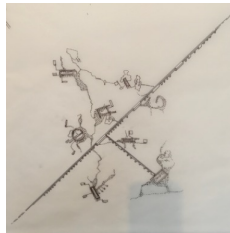
Plan of Berlin (Unter den Eichen)



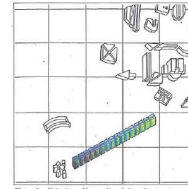
## SELECTING & DELETING



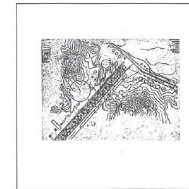
Building structures



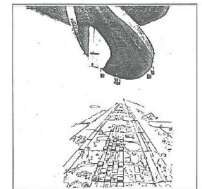
## INTENSIFY & ENVISIONING



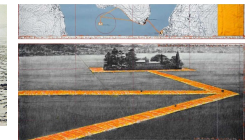
"Unter den Eichen" as a linear city (after the plan for Maggiorana)



Maggiorana linear city



Aerial view of Maggiorana



Berlin:  
A Green Archipelago

Rome  
Interrupted  
Exhibition

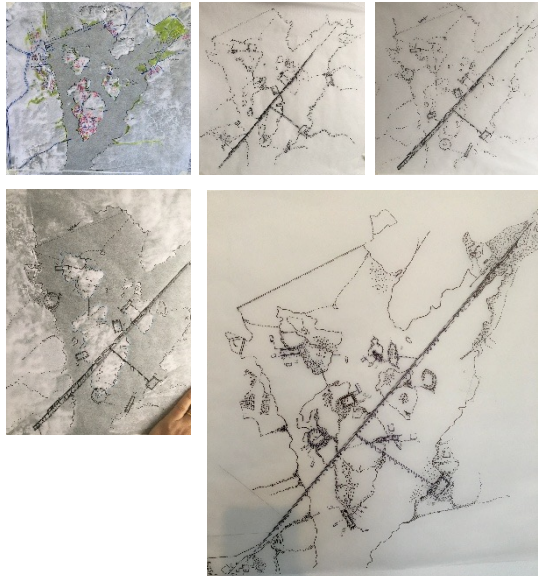
Axis Naturae

Some key reference to intensify the projects.

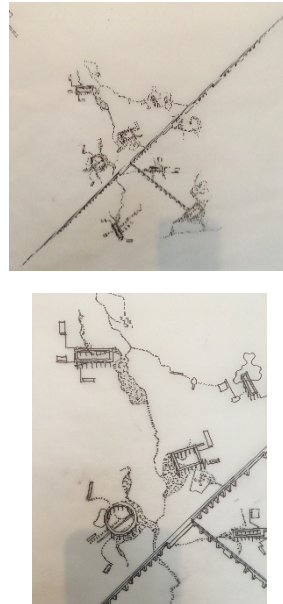
## Drawing the Archipelago

In *Axis Naturae*, drawing functions as a research instrument, testing the Archipelagic Method through iterative morphological exploration. Each drawing translates the three design actions—Reading & Reinterpreting, Selecting & Deleting, Intensifying & Envisioning—into spatial experimentation, transforming theoretical reasoning into operative design. Through successive overlays, drawings iterations and envisioning case study, the process reinterprets the Philae Islands as a hybrid archipelago where natural and artificial systems coexist. These drawings act as instruments of discovery, demonstrating how form and knowledge emerge through iteration, bridging speculative inquiry with regenerative urban outcomes.

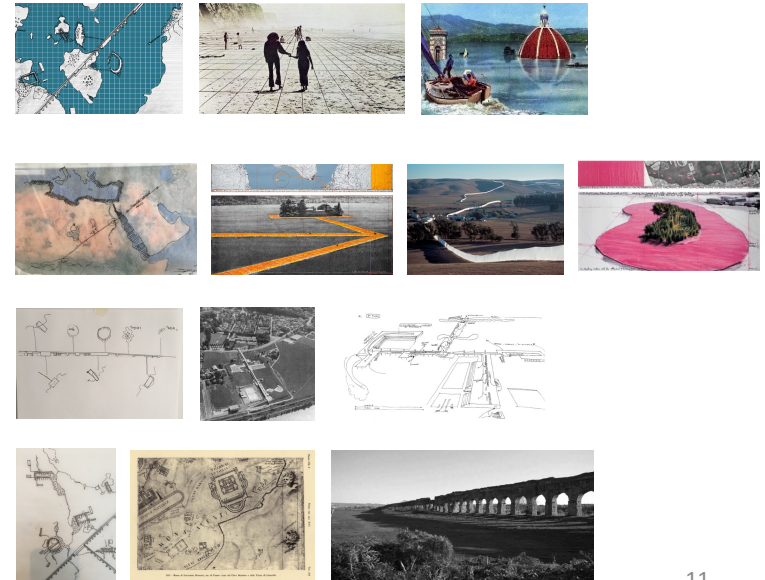
### READING & REINTERPRETING



### SELECTING & DELETING



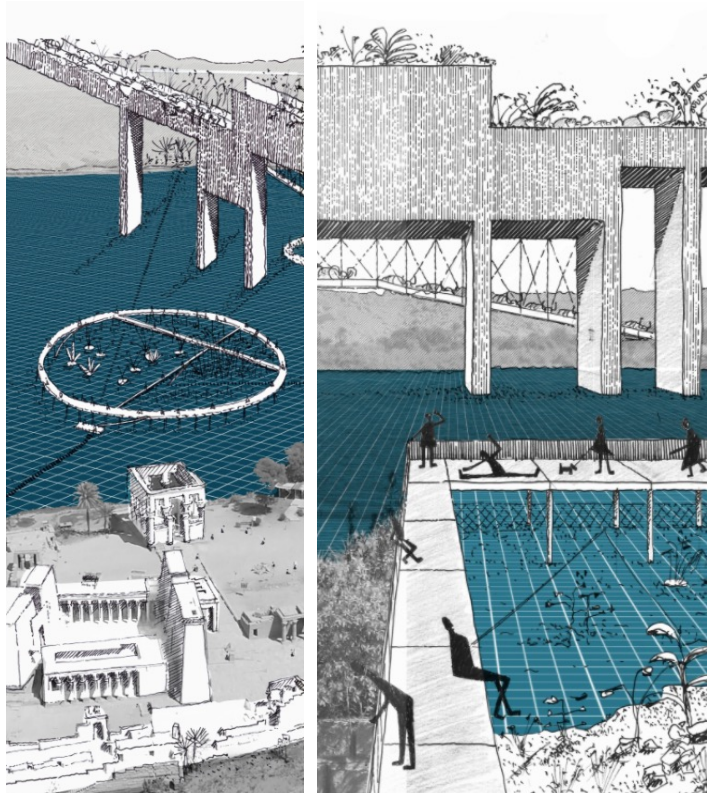
### INTENSIFY & ENVISIONING



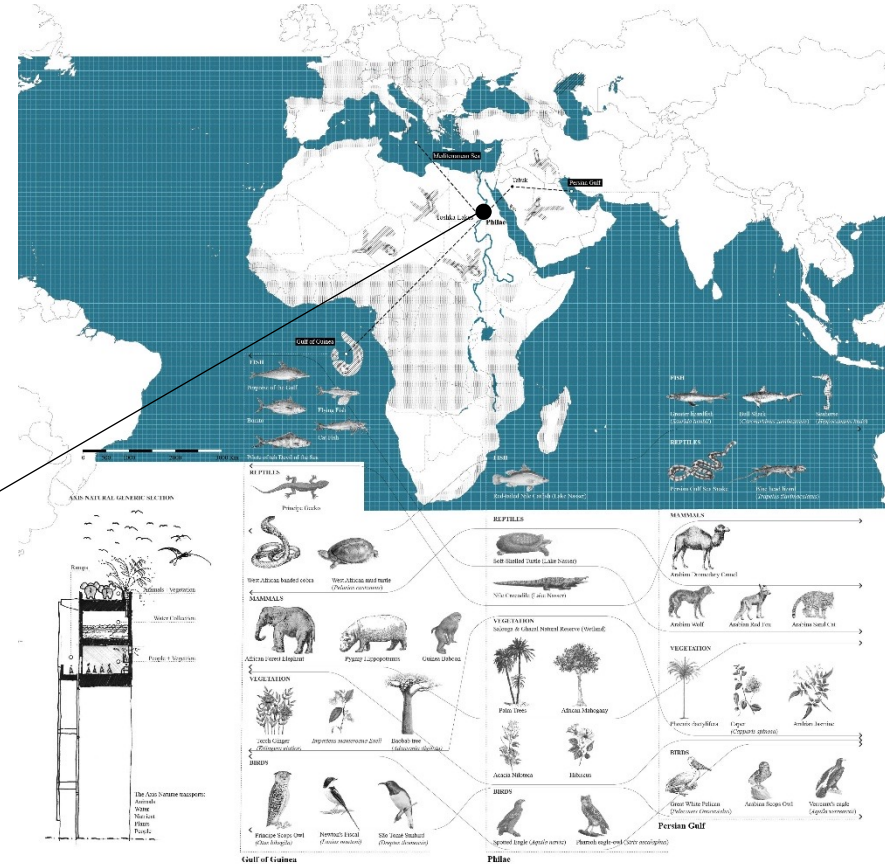


# The Axis Naturae

Axis Naturae scales the archipelagic strategy from local intervention to territorial system, fostering coexistence between humans and other species within evolving environments.



# Process of discovery



## What the research discovered

### What the research discovered

The research revealed that **drawing operates as a mode of reasoning** (Lucas, 2019), capable of transforming representation into inquiry. Through comparative analysis of *Berlin: A Green Archipelago* and *Roma Interrotta*, iterative drawing acted as a form of thought experiment, exposing how analytical reduction (*Berlin*) and speculative recomposition (*Rome*) work as complementary operations. Together, they test relationships between autonomy and interdependence in fragmented urban form and establish the conceptual basis for *Axis Naturae*.

### Discovering the Method

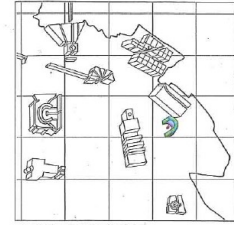
From this comparative process emerged the **Archipelagic Method**, synthesising these morphological logics into a framework that links cartographic, ecological, and architectural scales. Within *Axis Naturae*, this method was applied to the Philae Islands and Aswan Dam context, translating geographic observation and hydrological data into spatial reasoning. Drawing shifted between mapping, analysis, and projection, reframing fragmentation as a **productive condition** through which new continuities can emerge between nature, heritage, and design.

### Unfolding the Archipelagic Strategy

Successive design iterations identified a recurring sequence — *Reading and Reinterpreting, Selecting and deleting, Intensify and Envisioning* — in which separation becomes generative. The *void* acts as connective tissue, transforming gaps into territories of exchange. Within *Axis Naturae*, these operations shaped regenerative prototypes that tested the interaction between natural and artificial ecosystems.

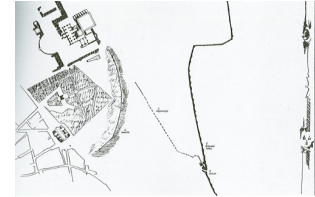
### Theory into Practice

The research advances drawing as a **method of knowledge production**, merging analytical investigation with speculative invention. The **Archipelagic Analogy**, tested through *Axis Naturae*, becomes both theoretical construct and operative method for **regenerative urban design and archipelagic territories**.



The "Archipelagic City" of Nouakchott

Berlin green Archipelago detail drawing



Roma Interrotta detail drawing



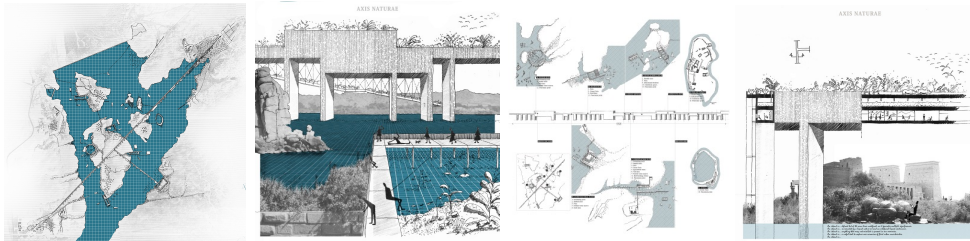
Axis naturae detail drawing

## Applied Significance

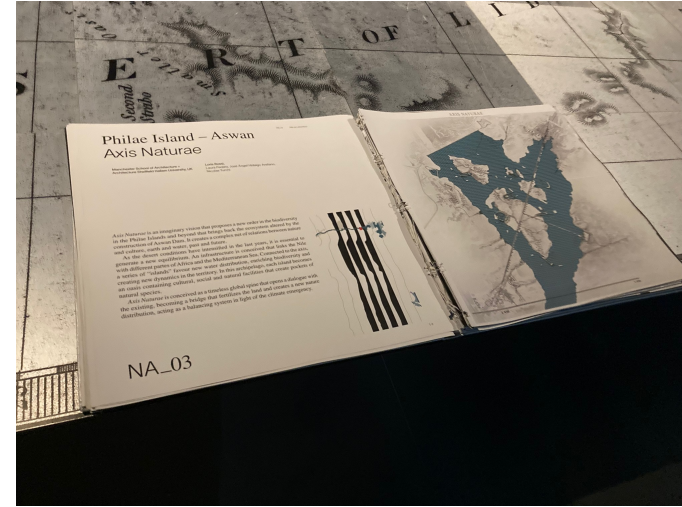
The application of the Archipelagic Method in Axis Naturae provided a test of its operative and regenerative potential.

Iterative drawing sequences reinterpreted the Philae Islands as a hybrid archipelago where natural and artificial systems coexist. Through the design actions of Reading & Reinterpreting, Selecting & Deleting, and Densifying & Envisioning, theoretical reasoning was translated into spatial intervention. This process validated the method’s transferability: what began as comparative morphology of Berlin and Rome evolved into a reproducible design-by-drawing framework.

Its public presentation within the Egyptian Pavilion at the Venice Architecture Biennale 2023 offered peer-reviewed, international recognition, while subsequent integration into research-led teaching at MSA demonstrated its pedagogical and disciplinary reach. The project confirmed that iterative drawing can generate actionable knowledge—bridging theory and practice and positioning the Archipelagic Strategy as a transferable model for heritage-led regeneration and ecological urban design.



Axis Naturae. Some of the final images



Egypt Pavilion Show case

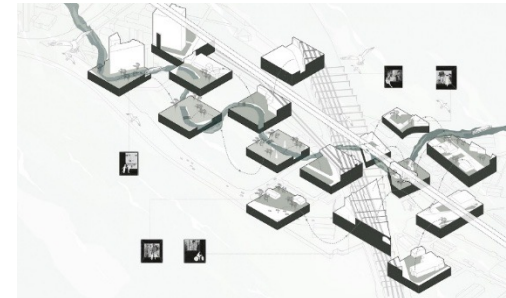


Image by Ana Plesa “Kino Archipelago” BA3 Flux 2022.23 [source](#)

## Conference at IUAV Venice – Architecture Biennale Venice

**Conference at IUAV Venice, 17 July 2023, Aula Tafuri (9:30 AM).**

Attended by 18 international research groups, representatives from BA3 Atelier Flux (Loris Rossi & José Ángel Hidalgo - Manchester School of Architecture), students from the IUAV School of Architecture, and the curators of the Egyptian Pavilion.



**Exhibition at Egypt Pavilion, 20.05 – 26.11 2023**

Nilab – Nile as Laboratory. 18th International Architecture Exhibition. Venice Biennale 2023



## Catalogue Exhibition & Book Chapter

**Rossi, L., Pedata, L., Hidalgo Arellano, J.A. & Turchi, N. (2023) *Philae Island – Aswan: Axis Naturae*.**

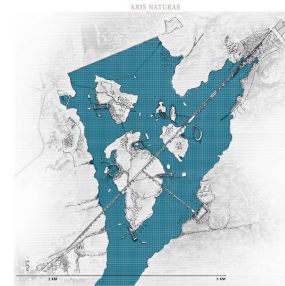
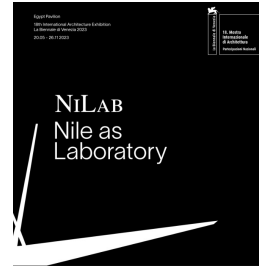
In: Tornatora, M., Amaro, O., Sami Abd Elrahman, A. & Samir, M. (eds) *NiLab – Nile as Laboratory: Egyptian Pavilion Catalogue, 18th International Architecture Exhibition – La Biennale di Venezia 2023*, pp. 56–57. ISBN 978-88-99532-97-4.

**Commissioners:** Ministry of Culture (Arab Republic of Egypt), National Organization for Urban Harmony, Egyptian Academy in Rome.

**Curators:** Ahmed Sami Abd Elrahman, Marina Tornatora, Ottavio Amaro, Moataz Samir, Ghada Farouk Hassan.

**Participants:** Ain-Shams University, Faculty of Engineering (Egypt); University Mediterranea di Reggio Calabria (Italy).

**Rossi, L., Pedata, L., Hidalgo Arellano, J.A. & Turchi, N. (2024) *Philae Island – Aswan: Axis Naturae*.** In: Tornatora, M., Amaro, O., Sami Abd Elrahman, A. & Samir, M. (eds) *NiLab: Nile as Laboratory*. Siracusa: LetteraVentidue, pp. 122–129. ISBN 978-88-6242-932-0.



### Axis Naturae

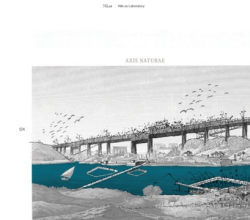
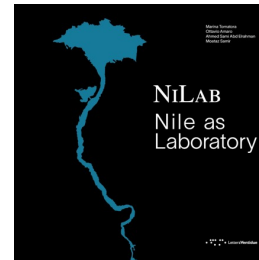
Masterclass School of Architecture  
L. Rossi, L. Pedata, L. Hidalgo Arellano,  
J.A. & N. Turchi

*Axis Naturae* is an ethnographic project that proposes a new order in the biodiversity of the Nile delta and beyond that brings back the reciprocity shared by the construction of Aswan Dam. It creates a complex web of relations between nature and culture, which reconfigures the landscape.

As the climate conditions have worsened in the last years, it is essential to generate a new equilibrium. An urbanization is conceived that links the Nile with different spaces of Africa and the Mediterranean Sea. Connected to the sea, a series of "Nile as Laboratory" water distribution, which continuously and creating new spaces of the territory of the architecture, each space functions as a social laboratory. The Nile, as a natural laboratory, is reconfigured as a social laboratory.

*Axis Naturae* is conceived as a flexible global system that opens in dialogue with the existing, becoming a bridge that fertilizes the land and creates a new urban laboratory, which is a laboratory of governance for the climate emergency.

NA\_03



**Philae**

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NA\_03

## Editions that have published news about the project NiLab\_Nile as Laboratory which includes also Axis Naturae:

— "INTERNI" (webzine, IT)

Sabrina Sciamia, The Egyptian Pavilion at the 2023 Biennale, Giardini, in "INTERNI" (IT), 11 May 2023  
<https://www.internimagazine.com/pavilions-biennale-2023/il-padiglione-dellegitto-alla-biennale-2023-giardini/>

— "My Art Guides" (webzine, Italy)

Editorial Staff at My Art Guides, Egypt 2023. NiLab - Il Nilo come laboratorio, in "My Art Guides" (Italy), 11 May 2023  
<https://myartguides.com/national-participations/venice/egypt-2023/>

— "Artribune" (webzine, Italy)

Editorial Staff at Artribune, 18. Mostra Internazionale di Architettura – NiLab Il Nilo come laboratorio, in "Artribune" (Italy), 11 May 2023  
<https://www.artribune.com/mostre-evento-arte/18-mostra-internazionale-di-architettura-nilab-il-nilo-come-laboratorio/>

— "World Architecture" (webzine, United States)

Editorial Staff at World Architecture, Egyptian Pavilion Will Spark Debate On Water Sources Over The Nile River In Venice Biennale 2023, in "World Architecture" (United States), 12 May 2023  
<https://worldarchitecture.org/architecture-news/fzhhv/egyptian-pavilion-will-spark-debate-on-water-sources-over-the-nile-river-in-venice-biennale-2023.html>

— "Artribune" (webzine, Italy)

Niccolò Lucarelli, Biennale Architettura 2023. I padiglioni di Oriente e Australia, in "Artribune" (Italy), 14 May 2023  
<https://www.artribune.com/progettazione/architettura/2023/05/biennale-2023-padiglioni-oriente-australia/>

— "designboom" (webzine, United Kingdom)

Myrto Katsikopoulou, the laboratory of the future: what to expect at the venice architecture biennale 2023, in "designboom" (United Kingdom), 14 May 2023  
<https://www.designboom.com/architecture/venice-architecture-biennale-2023-laboratory-future-african-diaspora-climate-change-02-22-2023/>

— "Wallpaper\*" (webzine, United Kingdom)

Ellie Stathaki, Venice Architecture Biennale 2023: the ultimate guide, in "Wallpaper\*" (United Kingdom), 20 May 2023  
<https://www.wallpaper.com/architecture/venice-architecture-biennale-2023>

— "Elle Decor (Italia)" (webzine, Italy)

Eugenia Murialdo, BIENNALE ARCHITETTURA 2023: GUIDA AI PADIGLIONI DA VEDERE AI GIARDINI, in "Elle Decor (Italia)" (Italy), 21 May 2023  
<https://www.elledecor.com/it/architettura/a43947866/biennale-architettura-2023-i-padiglioni-da-vedere-ai-giardini/>

— "Il Nuovo Terraglio" (webzine, IT)

Valentina Nespolo, 18ª Mostra Internazionale di Architettura: i Padiglioni ai Giardini di Venezia, in "Il Nuovo Terraglio" (IT), 19 May 2023  
<https://ilnuovoterraglio.it/18-mostra-internazionale-di-architettura-sintesi-dei-padiglioni-ai-giardini-a-venezias/>

— "The Architect's Newspaper" (webzine, United States)

Matt Shaw, Looking forward to next week's Venice Architecture Biennale amid frustration shared by curator Lesley Lokko, in "The Architect's Newspaper" (United States), 12 May 2023  
<https://www.archpaper.com/2023/05/looking-forward-next-weeks-venice-architecture-biennale-amid-frustration-shared-curator-lesley-lokko/>

— "forma" (webzine, Russian Federation)

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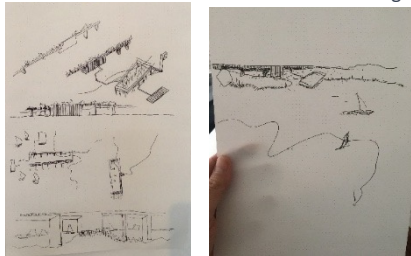
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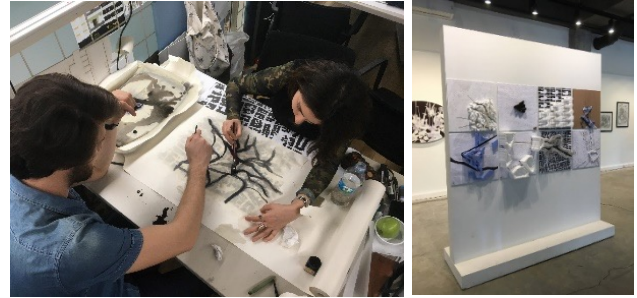
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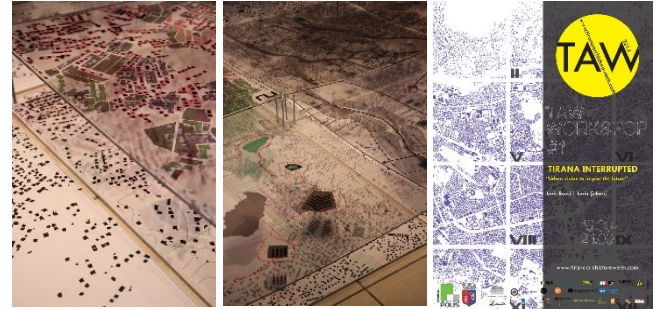
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## Context



2018 Istanbul Future Epigraphs. Diagramming Istanbul



2014 Tirana Interrupted: Urban Vision to inspire the future