



Zvi Hecker in his Berlin office. ©2018, Kabinet Architektury; photo: Daniel Alk

Zvi Hecker

Existence is essence.
Zvi Hecker
Sketchbook n. 1, 23.11/12.12.1979

*Whereas existence is the domain
of the contingent and the accidental,
essence endures within a being
beyond the accidental.*

Avicenna, Ibn Sina
(c.ca 980-1037).

PAOLA ARDIZZOLA. INTERVIEW WITH ZVI HECKER. MAY 2023

Zvi Hecker (Krakow, 1931) is a Polish -Israeli architect and artist. After the Second World War years spent with his family in Samarkand where he first approached architecture by sketching monumental Islamic buildings, he began his studies in architecture in Krakow and completed them at the Technion in Haifa, where he graduated in 1955. Later he studied painting at the Avni Academy of Fine Arts in Tel Aviv. From 1960, with an office in Tel Aviv and until 1966 in association with A. Neumann and E. Sharon he designed residential complexes, synagogues, schools, and administrative buildings. In Israel, Tel Aviv, he realised his most iconic building, the Spiral House (1984-'89). In 1991 he opened a second atelier in Berlin after winning the competition for the Heinz Galinski school, the first Jewish school in the city after the Shoah. In the same year he took part in the Venice Architecture Biennale, as well in the 1996 and 2000 editions. In 1996 he was awarded the Deutscher Kritikerpreis and in 1999 the Rechter Prize for architecture.

He participated in numerous architectural competitions worldwide and built important buildings for the collectivity. Among others, the Koningin Máximakazerne, Airport Schiphol Headquarters for the Royal Dutch Police (Amsterdam, The Netherland, 2009–2018), the Palmach Museum of History (Tel-Aviv, Israel, 1993–1998), and the Jewish Cultural Center with Synagogue (Duisburg, Germany, 1997–2000).

His works are exhibited in museums and art galleries, in Jewish Museum in Berlin, Pompidou Centre in Paris. He taught Architectural Design at Schools of Architecture in Québec, the United States, and Europe. Zvi Hecker lives and works in Berlin.

The interviewer expresses her gratitude to the architects Paolo Fontana and Sapir Faust, Zvi Hecker Stiftung and Atelier Berlin, for the kind collaboration. All the images courtesy of Zvi Hecker, Berlin.

The architecture of syncretism: transforming the ordinary into extraordinary

Paola Ardizzola: *In 1903 the French critic and author Paul Gsell, in conversation with Auguste Rodin, expressed his desire to write Rodin's remarks on art under his dictation. The great sculptor, smiling, replied: "You are a strange duck as you are still interested in art. This is hardly a concern of our time. Today artists and those who admire them are regarded as fossils. In modern life, utility is what people want. We are forced to improve existence materially." Though in risk of sounding as an outmoded duck, it urges me to pose you the same question: what are your remarks on art nowadays, in the light of your double engagement as artist and architect?*

Zvi Hecker: I stay with farsighted Rodin's assertion. I often explained that I am an artist whose profession is architecture, and I do not think there is a difference in combining the two. For art, as for architecture, the work must be approached each time starting from the very *incipit*. Rodin was right, the focus on *utilitas* (utility) became the main requirement. But we are still strongly in need of the Vitruvian *venustas* (delight), as defined by Rodin when he said that art is the delight of the mind that penetrates nature and divines the spirit by which nature itself is animated.

PA: *Throughout history, many artists considered the "non-finished" one of the supreme form of arts. What does it mean to give an accomplished form to architecture, when the architect, who is the form giver, is fully aware of the importance of an artistic process that never really achieves completion?*

ZH: In architecture the thought is the form making. In other words, the self-expression of an architect is one of the primary functions of architecture. Each work is a result of incomplete precision that always allows to go further, in search for perfection. In each project lie the germinating seeds of future projects. In the process of drawing and sketching is the vehicle, the solution.

PA: *You are a painter and an architect. This duality always represented an interesting field of mutual*

exploration for your paintings and projects. Not just to the neophytes, it is difficult to grasp the essence of this relationship...

ZH: My paintings are an attempt, sometimes fruitless attempts, to penetrate beneath the surface of what is known in the practice of architecture, and to eliminate the constant reuse of predominant geometry. And colours, the use of colour. Colour is a vital element of life and of architecture as well. The cult of the equilibrium in architecture leads to a static result. The restlessness and nomadic feeling dominate our contemporary world but architecture does not respond to these forces. Painting is excused from such constraints. Rapid, dynamic, and full of contrast, capturing simultaneously movement and harmony. In the past, pictorial art was closely bound up with architecture: mosaics, frescoes...

PA: *Your methodology of proceeding in designing by an endless reiteration of sketches is somehow a sort of stylistic code, something that I would not hesitate to define "Heckerian process." Why is it so necessary in order to achieve the definition of a project?*

ZH: Sketches, sometimes clumsy sometimes very precise, are necessary steps in the slow process of discovering the un-existing. The archaeologist looks for the remains of some extinguished culture by removing layers of rubbish, so the architect labours to peel the useless leaves and peeks of an unseen yet exotic fruit, in hope to find out its shape and taste. The significance and uniqueness of hand drawings lie not in the clarity of their message but in their inherent imperfection. They communicate with no one but their creator. Since our mind is never in complete control of our hand, it is free to create signs open to interpretation. Not once was I surprised at how hand drawing can evoke possibilities that most probably, I would not have been able to imagine consciously.

PA: *The precision, the measure, the geometry as means to find the still-unrevealed. You make me think of the*

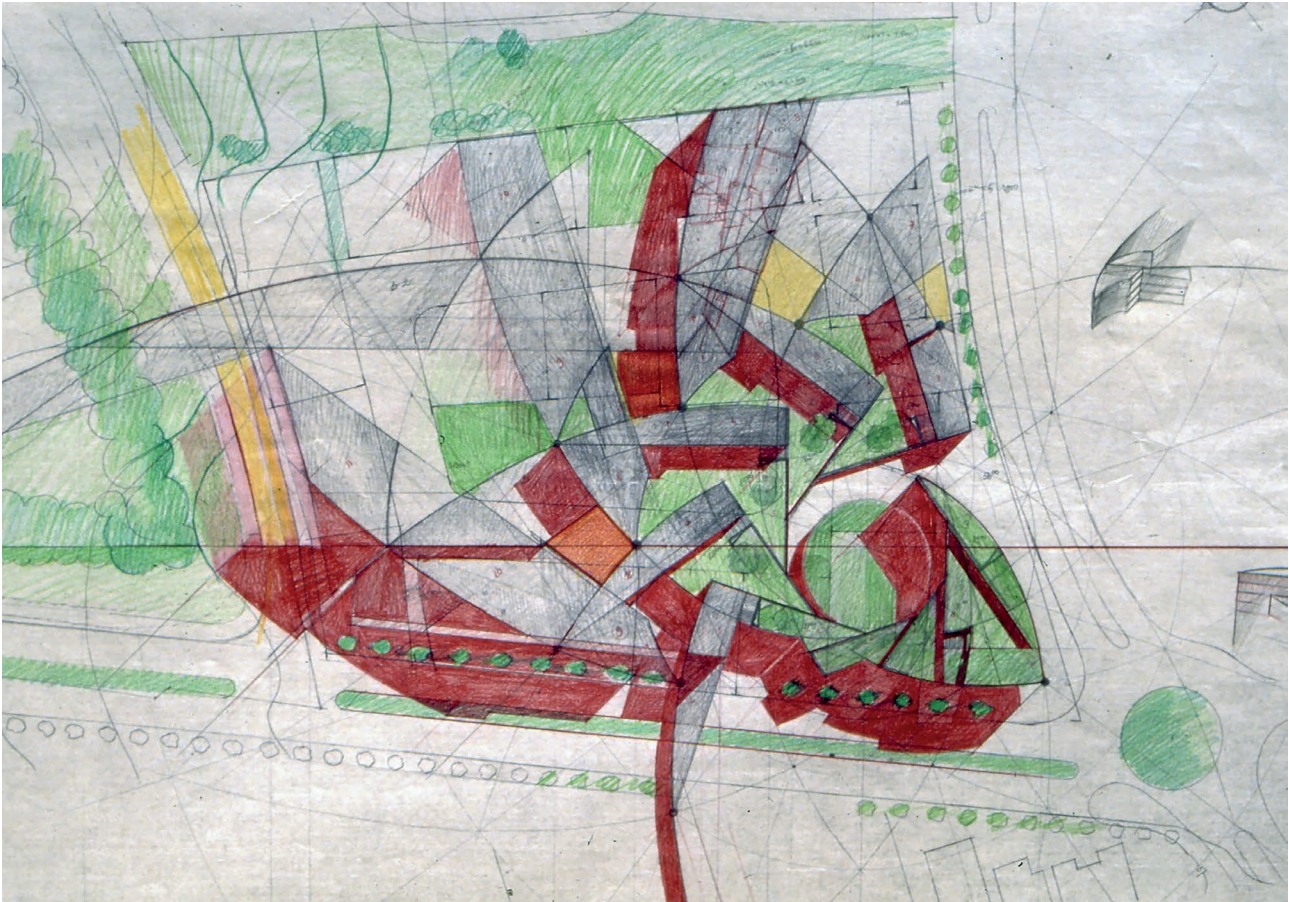


Figure 1 | Zvi Hecker, City Centre of Ramat HaSharon, Israel, project. Acrylic on paper print mounted on board, 1986 – 2012, 100×70 cm.

very first time we met, when you told me “If you are not precise you are not free...”

ZH: The only precision one could find of interest is the perfection that one has to rediscover. The Parthenon still projects total unity from his scattered remains. My architecture is animated by a very precise thought which I try to perfect during the design process and eventually to camouflage during the construction. Clarity and precision are my contribution as an artist to the understanding of the idea. Its translation, on the other hand, into the material form, must bear the marks of the building process.

PA: *Therefore, if the ruins are the residual beauty, then it is from them that the design plot can be re-woven...*

ZH: Yes, we can put it like that.

PA: *Precision is just one step from exactitude, which is not exactness, but a broader concept, I think. The Italian writer Italo Calvino, in his Six memos for the next Millennium defines it as “A language as precise as possible both in choice of words and in expression of the subtleties of thought and imagination”. Thus, the concept of exactitude goes together with that of imagination.*

ZH: The design process, to be relevant, has to be continuous and not done in a hurry. When I draw, I do not know where the process will take me; nevertheless, I have to proceed with certain rigour. What looks exact could be later revealed as incorrect, although still a valid step to continue the search toward the unknown architectural form. Therefore, exactitude is the tool that grants to proceed through a dark path with a stable and reliable lamp in your hand. In the end, it will take you to the destination.

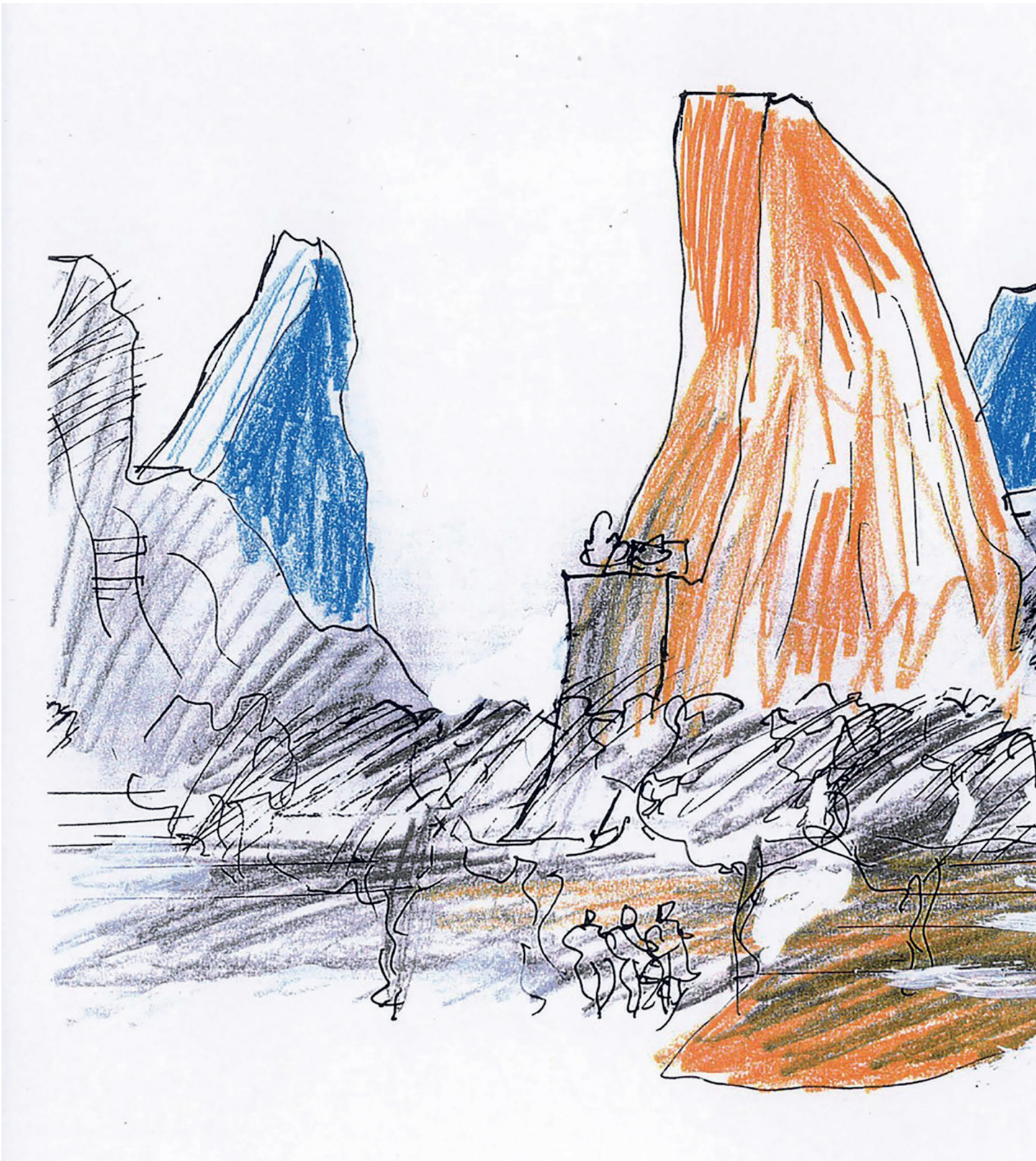


Figure 2 | Zvi Hecker, *Mountains. Architecture as Artificial Nature*. Projects chronology 1994 – 2000. Competition Rotterdam, International urban planning competition Bucharest, Berliner Berge housing project, Housing project Amsterdam.

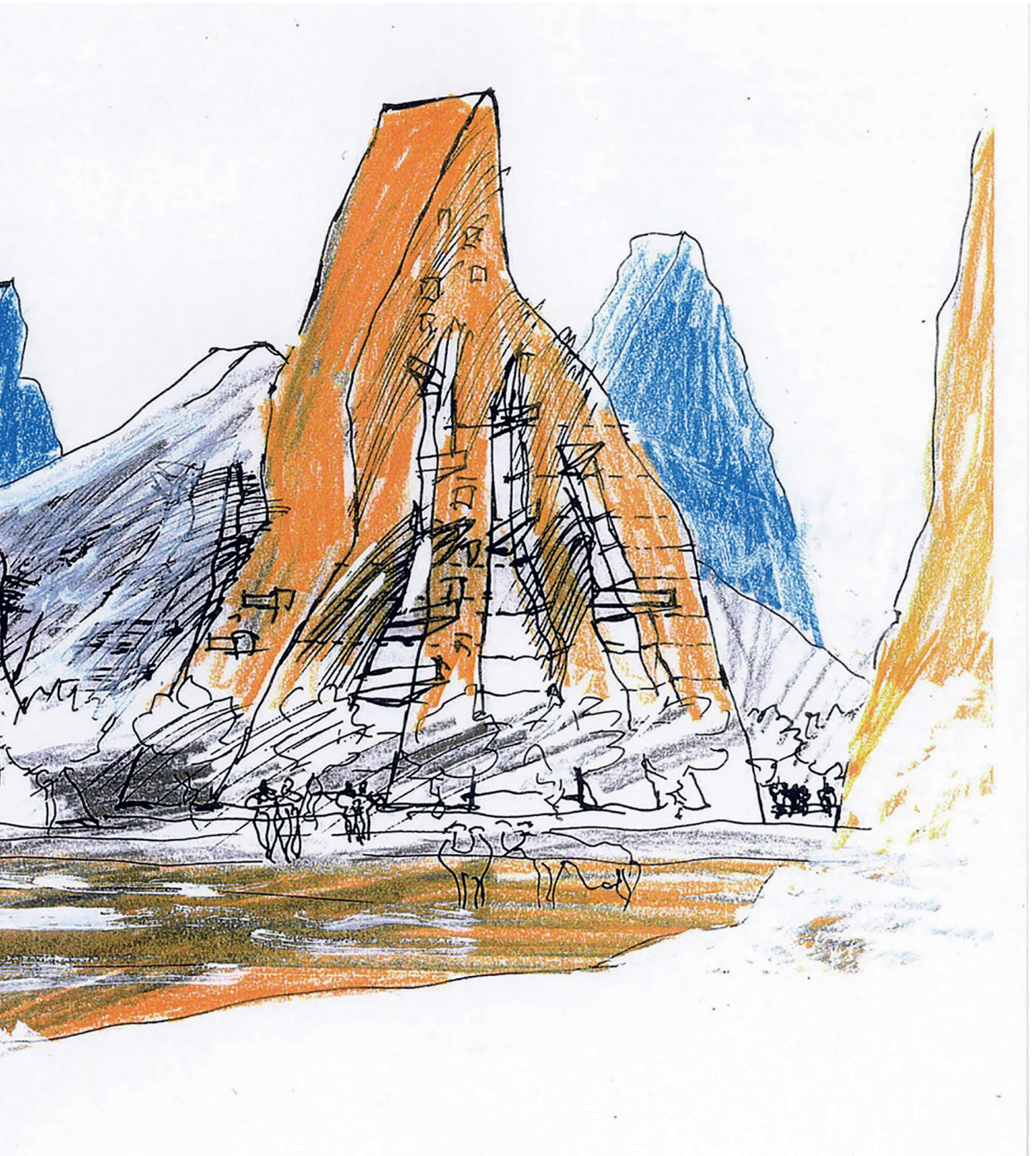




Figure 3 | Zvi Hecker, Jewish Cultural Center with Synagogue. Duisburg, Germany, 1997 - 2000.

PA: *Your projects embed a strong concept of dynamism. I think specifically about the Spiral House and the Heinz Galinski School, which can be defined “a shaken order”. Why this obstinate research on dynamism?*

ZH: For me the dynamic element is a means of conveying a notion of strength and power. But the strength and power I am referring to is the one giving protection to the users of my architecture. This is also the reason why I try to elongate the walls as much as possible, in so that a space of mediation is created between inside and outside promoting a sense of protection in the community, at whatever scale it is.

PA: *In your work, the abrupt and frequent leaps of modulation, the sudden presence of “snakes” that*

almost deform the weight-bearing phrasing of the composition do not alter the plasticity and clarity of the various sound planes of the architectural symphony. On the contrary, the jumps, the voids, the apparent compositional vacuums are interesting as a methodology that leads to a lively and vital architecture, as in the Spiral House but also in the more recent Ella’s House... perhaps this is what makes the life of scholars in architecture difficult, who over the years have tried to pigeonhole your architecture either under Metabolism, or under Constructivism etc. I think I can read your architecture, forgive the tautology, only under the meaning of Heckerism!

ZH: Definitions are often cages of thought. What I can state is that my architecture lies in the strand



Figure 4 | Zvi Hecker, Jewish Cultural Center with Synagogue. Duisburg, Germany, 1997 – 2000. Study plan, graphite and coloured pencil on paper, 84,1×118,9 cm.

of traditional architecture because, in each of my projects, I try to address the traditional needs of the people. I do not try to attain a particular expression that would be distinctly mine, but rather to let each building manifest its own specific character. What is of interest to me is what stays hidden. In Chekhov's work, the substance lies entirely in the unsaid, the unspoken.

PA: *Today there is a strong trend of considering the future of architecture mainly based on green technology and sustainability. What is your thought in this regard?*

ZH: Proust explored the past to explain the present. I think nothing grows without soil and architectural

memory is the architect's soil. The future of architecture risks to lose the focus on the complexity of the whole process of doing architecture as exploration of an idea, which comes first and foremost. Sustainability is just a limitation, and even not so recent, in the process of design. Great architects in the past always dealt with limitations with outstanding results. Just think of what Michelangelo did with the project of Santa Maria degli Angeli church in Rome: his constraints were the ruins of the Diocletian Bath complex! Personally, I have always been interested in the architecture of survival; architecture in extreme basic conditions. Architecture will come back to its basic function which is protection of humans, protection of life. This, in my opinion, remains the dominant theme of

*"They" make architecture out of Architecture
I make architecture out of the need*

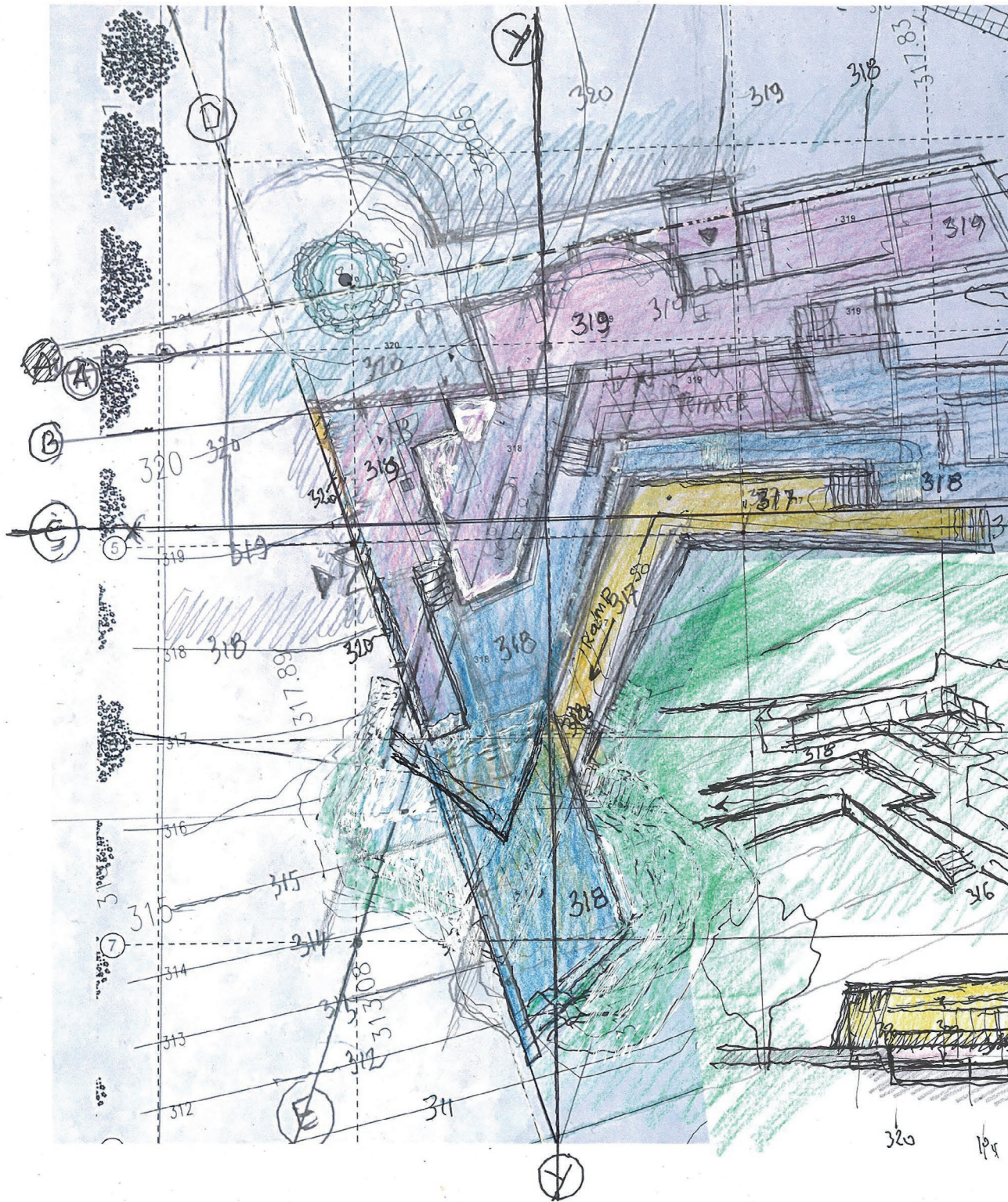
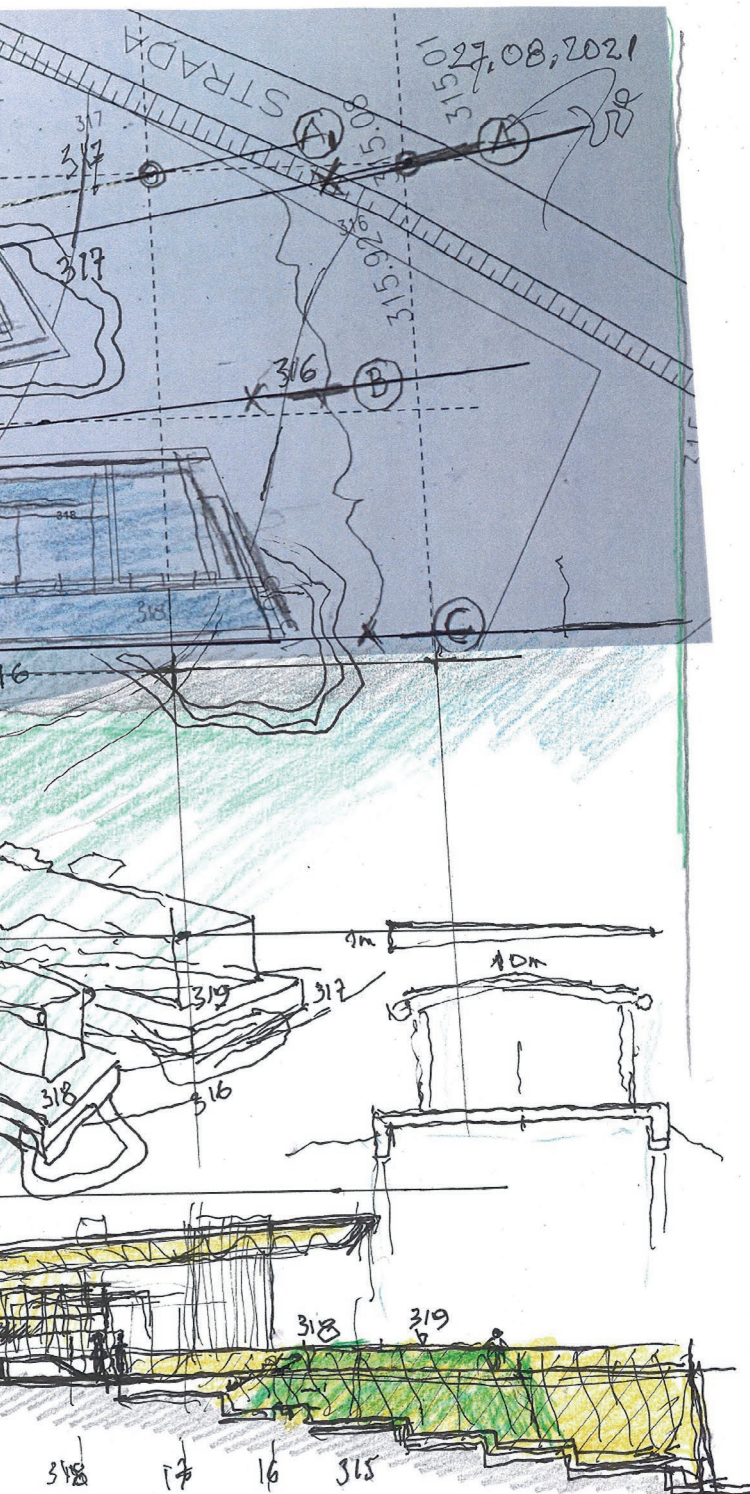


Figure 5 | Zvi Hecker, Ella's House, Manoppello, Italy, 2021-ongoing. Conceptual studies.



architecture, a concept entrusted to the responsibility of the architect.

PA: *Hugo Häring reinterpreted architectural history to provide a base to his architectural theory. What is your relationship with history, I mean how relevant is in your work the relationship with it?*

ZH: History and cultural milieu of a place are always embedded in its physicality, so our work is often based on the understanding of its different layers that contribute to the definition of a new form, that is rooted in the past.

PA: *With his design contribution, do you think the architect still has a role in contemporary society?*

ZH: I think artists are political beings, they digest the information with some degree of interest. I am not interested in problem solving as an approach to architecture, I take for granted that architecture is valuable. Neither am I interested in solving human problems, frankly I even do not know how I might do it. I am interested in satisfying human needs. Indeed, by architecture I mean not only the building of houses, but the whole edifice of our everyday existence. I think a great architect is a real hero as compared to a great painter. He cannot hide or escape the consequences of his work. He must pay for his courage. A painter can contradict everything and evade a punishment, architect cannot. Many people ask for the reason why so many buildings are so ugly, why so many new neighbourhoods are so depressing. I would add: why so many people in rich countries are so poor? In our civilization, we all work for others. Though slavery was abolished, it did not disappear. The true enemies of architecture are the architects.

PA: *The sea created the continents by retreating. I also see this process of "contraction" in your design process, when the extended work contracts to leave room for the final creation, almost in an autopoietic process which then allows easy appropriation of the space by the user.*

ZH: Interesting interpretation. What interests me is the transformation from one idea to another idea that occurs during the design process. In whichever

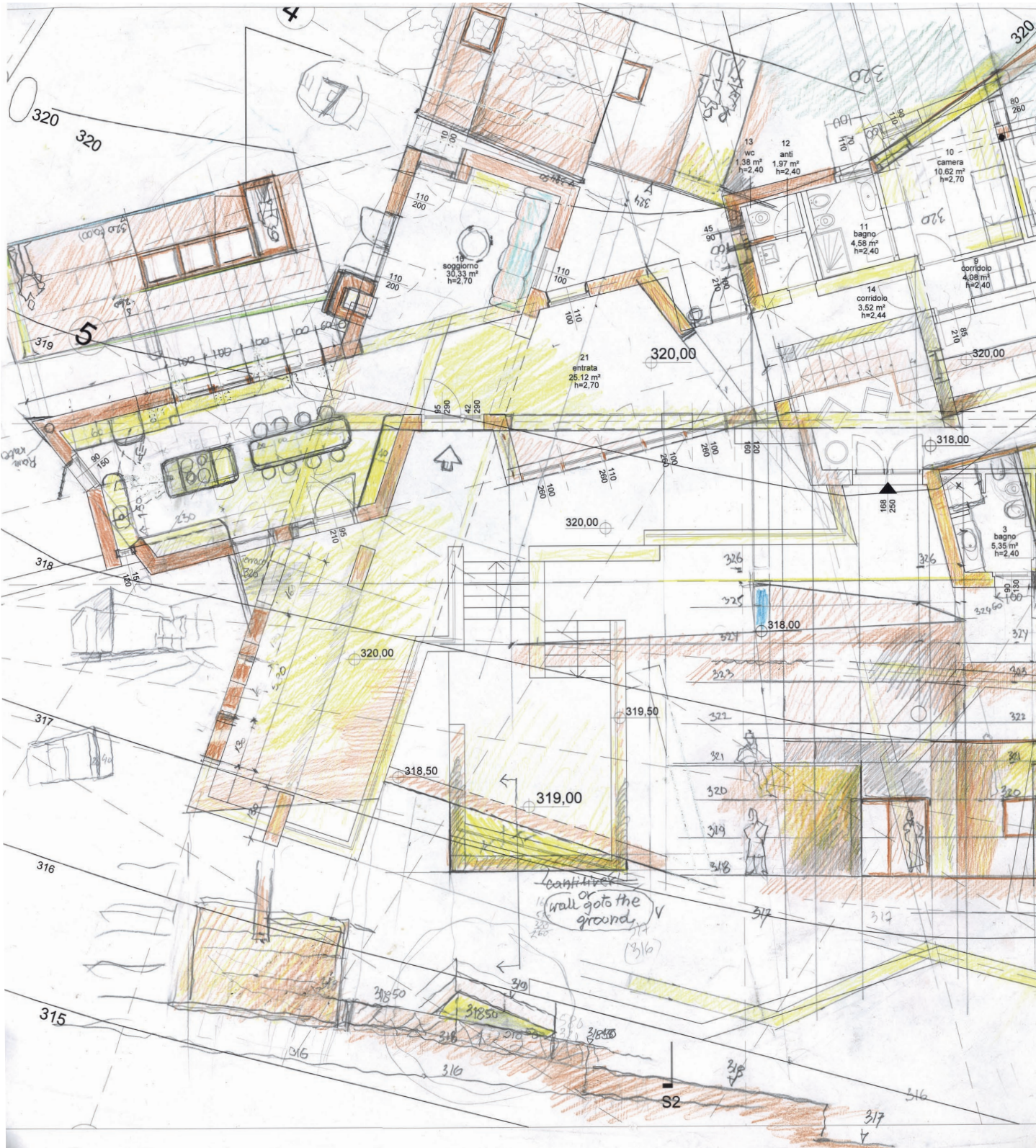
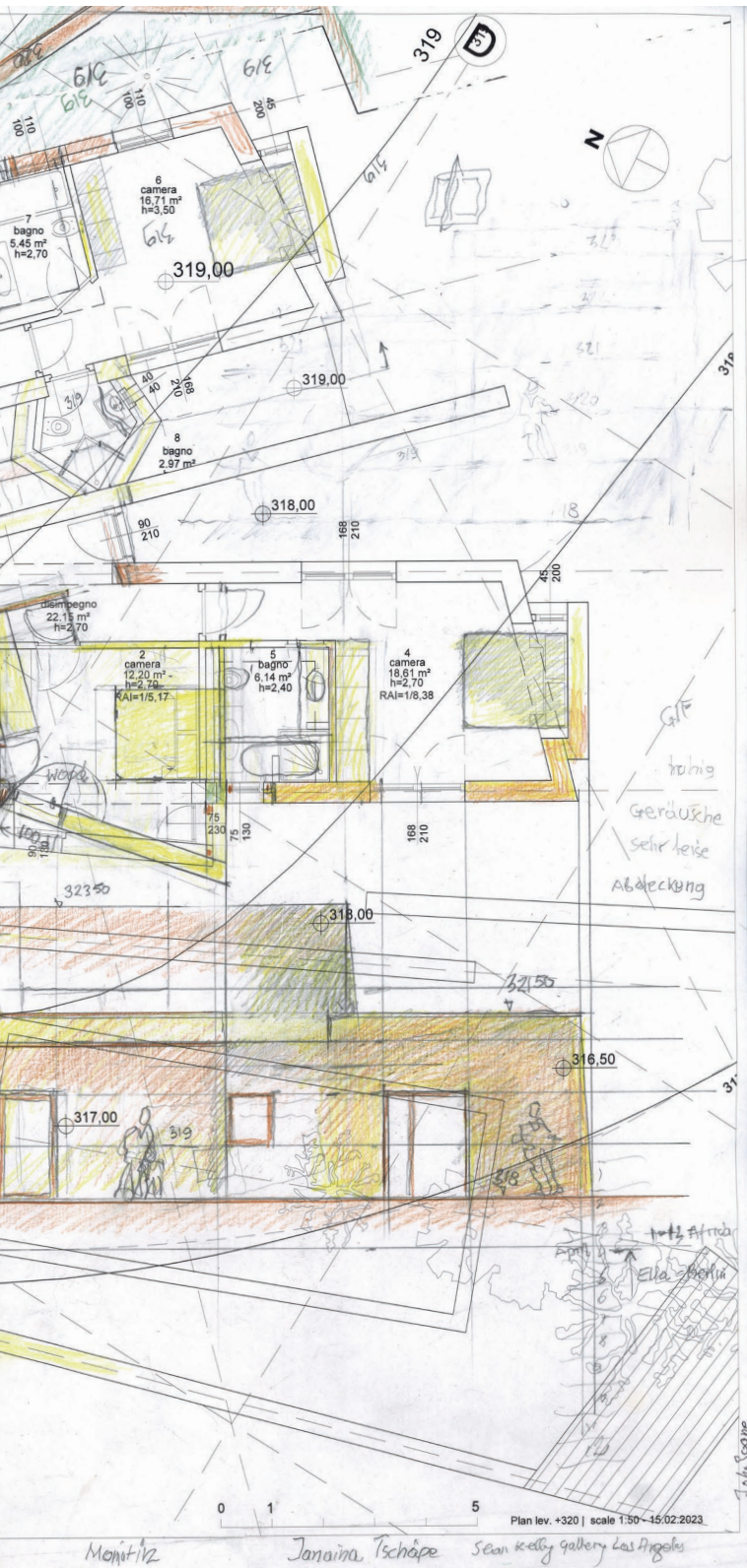


Figure 6 | Zvi Hecker, Ella's House, Manoppello, Italy, 2021-ongoing. Plan, elevation, section.



way the process starts, it is the result that counts. I try to give each of my designs a distinctive voice. If one perceives a pertinent continuity in my work, it is a consequence of what I stand for. It is not a conscious attempt toward a distinctive expression of mine, but rather a faithfulness to what is manifested in the design.

PA: Your latest Italian project, *Ella's house*, is under construction in Manoppello, Pescara. For this project, you stated that one of the most persistent concerns was how to take the land into the house, not the contrary. In this project, you literary put art at the service of the landscape, which is free to flow in the building as the most natural thing. The gorgeous Abruzzese landscape is composed by two mountain ranges almost embracing each other, Majella the female, Gran Sasso male. In between, a tiny valley as space of respect between two bodies in dialogue. They are the vertical component of the landscape, like town walls, counterbalanced by the horizontal plane of the plan and sea in the distance.

ZH: The house here had to grow from the landscape, in order to become its crown. What we did for this house is what generations have done in this land: terraces to build upon. Not like in Jerusalem, where the hills have been flattered. On these terraces we can build the house not like a large block but rather like small pavilions with respect for the scale and the beauty of this unique landscape.

PA: You make me think again about Rodin, when he said that statues are not placed in a garden to embellish the garden, but rather to be embellished by the garden!

ZH: (Smiling) The change of perspective is not a disrespectful attitude, but rather an acknowledgment of Nature as the supreme perfection. It is an attempt by the artist, to achieve completeness and continuity.

PA: Peter Blundell Jones wrote: "for organic modernists the articulation of parts according to function, and their juxtaposition in hierarchies, oppositions, adjacencies, and other meaningful relationships, was central to the art of architecture." It is a general statement regardless the scale I wish to discuss with you...

ZH: Blundell Jones was a very sensitive architectural historian. He was right: the mutual relationship between the parts and the whole is not a matter of



Figure 7 | Zvi Hecker, Heinz-Galinski School, Primary School, Berlin, Germany, 1991 – 1995.

scale. One can apply the same principles to different scales, and conceive a school in the form of a micro-city, a house in which each room is part of an interlocking organism or a large housing complex where the courtyards are conceived as inner social spaces. My buildings very often tend to interchange into a semblance of a city; its walls shape buildings, squares, and courtyards, providing an enclosure and a sense of security. They do not have to be admired from the outside: one must go inside them, even though you will still be outside.

PA: *While you are talking, I see clearly a possible correspondence to your projects by referring to, respectively, the Heinz Galinski school in Berlin, Ella's House in Manoppello and the Ramot Polin housing complex in Jerusalem.*

ZH: Yes, for example.

PA: *Your architecture could be defined the architecture of syncretism: each semantic value is intrinsically intertwined with another. The most varied components have a perfect harmony in an open dialogue, made up of continuous iterations and digressions that consolidate the idea that there is not just one main theme in the project, but multiple ones.*

ZH: The syncretism you refer to can be epitomised in the Spiral House: it speaks Arabic regarding the human condition when sheltered by the high walls. It argues in Hebrew over the sheer necessity to bring together muscles and materials, but at the same time it is quite fluent in Russian when construction becomes architecture. Its Italian is very Baroque, as spoken in Piedmont by Guarino Guarini.

PA: *We spoke about the role of history in architecture, the attitude of reading the precedents in landscape and the cultural milieu, and the importance of the*

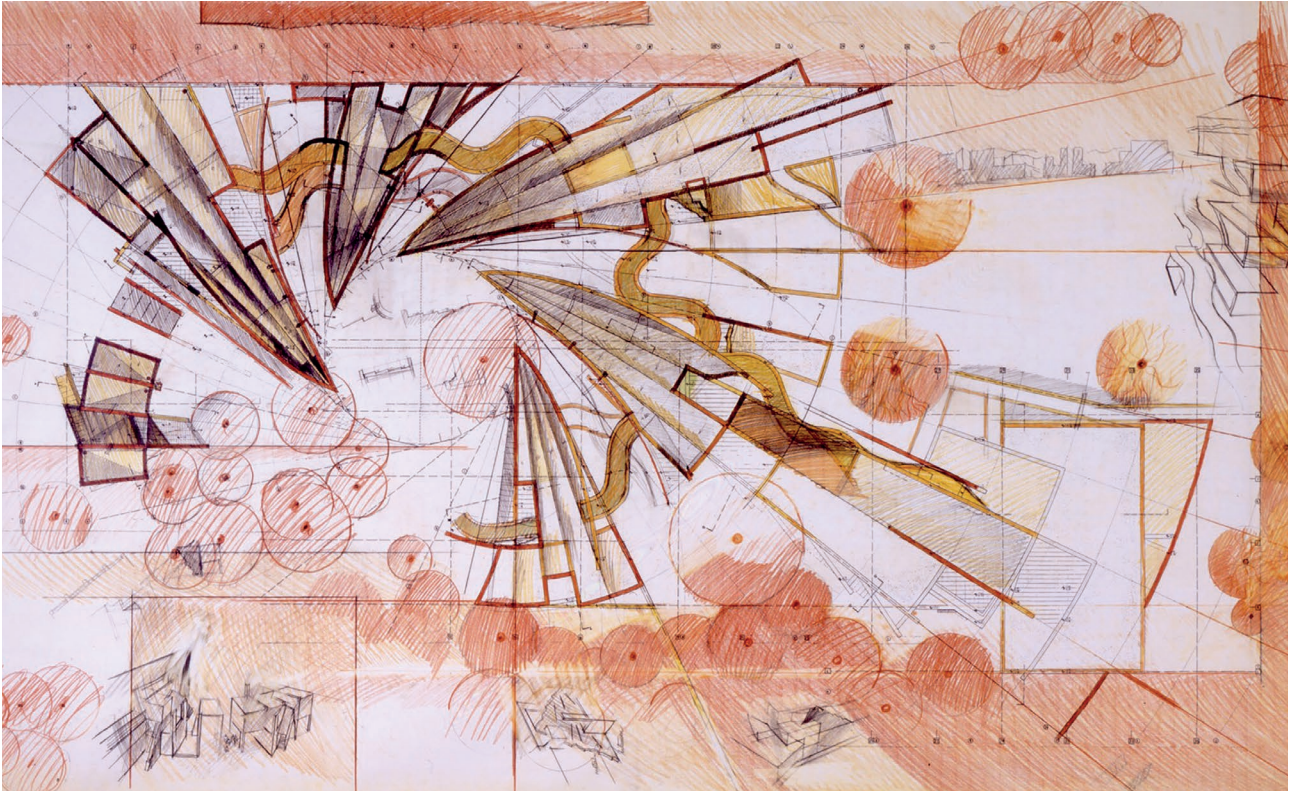


Figure 8 | Zvi Hecker, Heinz-Galinski School, Primary School, Berlin, Germany, 1991 – 1995. Study plan, graphite and coloured pencil on paper, 84,1×118,9 cm.

correct articulation of the parts, applicable at different scales. These concepts could be epitomised in the word continuity, I think.

ZH: Theodor Fisher in the late XIX century, the century in which the real urban revolution took place in the European cities, stressed the importance of urban continuity, and advised about the danger to preserve just monumental buildings in old cities, regardless of the general urban fabric as connecting tissue. He emphasized the role of the street and the *piazza* as outer inner spaces. We think that also the relevance of existing topography, previous morphology, natural and built irregularities, and observing how the local materials are used and methods of construction are applied can concur to a significant innovative architecture in line with the concept of continuity.

PA: *A curiosity. In your professional life, who is the person who counted the most?*

ZH: Alfred Neumann. Great architect, great man. My professor at Technion, with whom later I had the honour to collaborate with.

PA: *The very last question. The complexity behind the simplicity of your architecture makes me think about the noble attitude of transforming the ordinary into extraordinary. In your perspective, to whom does this attitude belong?*

ZH: To the alchemist, of course.

For the sake of completeness of the interview, two considerations written by Zvi Hecker in 2009 and 2010 are published, which focus on the conceptual assumptions of making architecture.

Architecture - an act of magic

Architecture - an act of magic was written by Zvi Hecker in October 2000 and published on "Architektur Aktuell" n. 246-247. The notion of what *architecture's soul* and the *true stones of architecture* are, is still extremely relevant.

The attempts undertaken in the early twentieth century to improve the breed of the human race and its condition caused immense destruction and unprecedented loss of human life. Not much was achieved except ultimate suffering.

The failure to manufacture a better Homo sapiens also diminished the chances that glass architecture, then still infantile, could become its showcase. It had to wait for another half a century before finally being embraced

by the world of business. Genuinely concerned about its questionable public image, it found the apparent transparency of the glass architecture its best alibi. Soulless reincarnation took place.

Architecture is above all an act of magic. Not because a magician is at work or because of its scarcity, but rather due to the fact that it hides more than it reveals. What we look at, what we see, is only a reflected image of what we cannot see: the architecture's soul.

Invisible and immaterial, it displays a surprising degree of resistance to the passage of time and ever-changing fashions. It refuses to abandon even the ruins of architecture, particularly the ruins of once great buildings.

Architecture benefits greatly from its partial imperceptibility, the way Chekhov's plays gain from the inhibitions of its characters. What makes for the dramatic effect and the continuous relevance of these works is not what is said on the stage but what is never spelled out. Silence can never become outdated.

Our environment is continuously changing as a result of 'development' and our inclination to please the time. However, our emotional spectrum remains very much the same as that of a caveman. Fear and terror invade our subconscious as a part of contemporary experience.

The awareness of the ever-changing nature of the world and of humanity's archaic origins are the true stones of architecture. What remains is only the question of how to put them together.

Architecture has never stopped being an art. It is an art in constant search for an expression of the human soul in its ever-changing condition. It is a human art, but never humane enough.



Figure 9 | Zvi Hecker, Spiral Apartment House in Ramat Gan, Tel Aviv, Israel, 1984-1989.

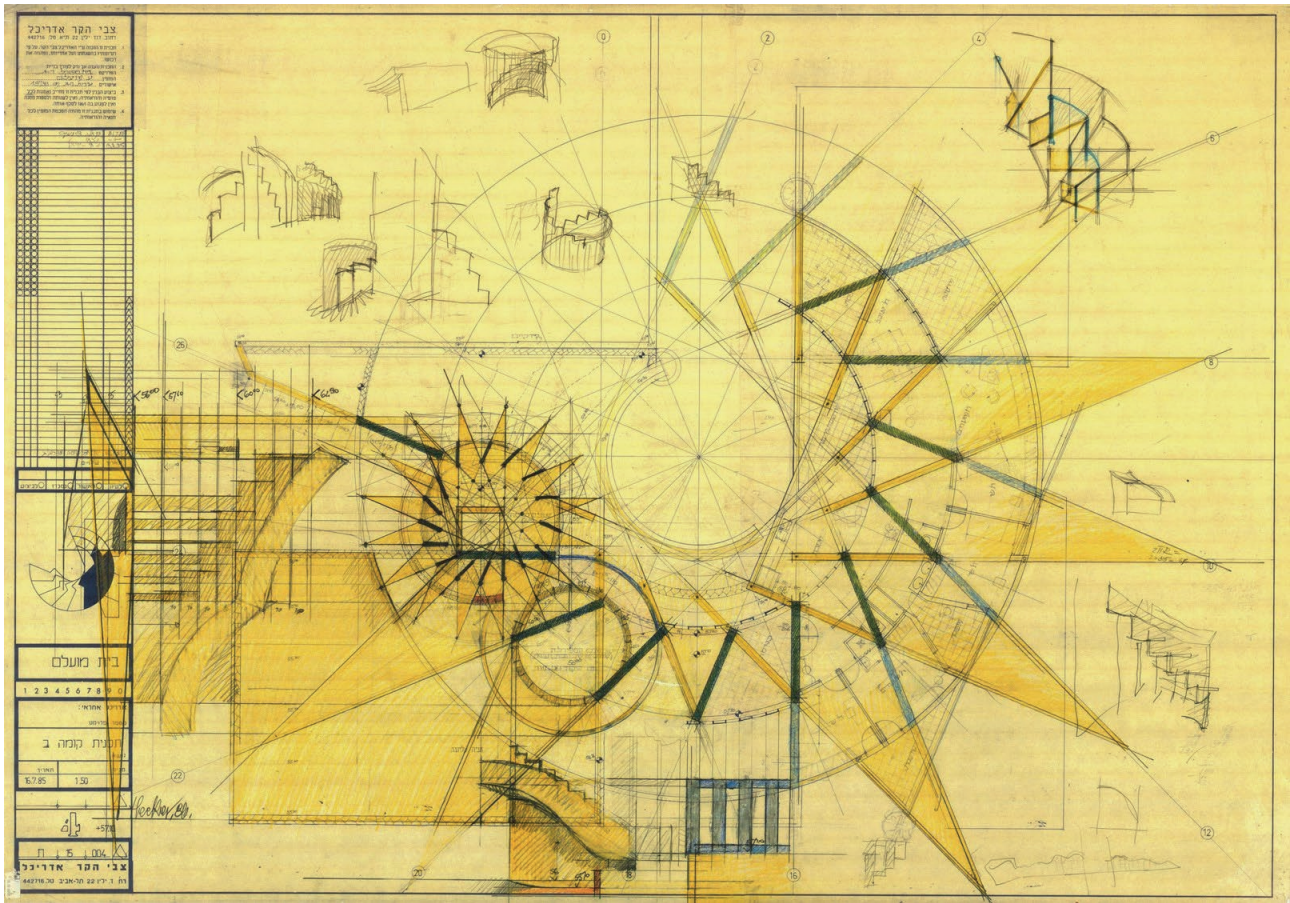


Figure 10 | Zvi Hecker, Spiral Apartment House in Ramat Gan, Tel Aviv, Israel, 1984-1989. Study drawings on the general plan.

Seven Lamps of Architecture

Zvi Hecker wrote *Seven Lamps of Architecture* in July 2009 as speech notes for a Symposium that took place in Graz, Austria. The renewed “eptalogoi” do not state what architecture is, but rather what architecture is not. The initial part of the notes stated:

There are three important rules of how to make architecture, but nobody knows them. They are probably lost in antiquity. That is why it is easier to adjudge what architecture is not:

1. Architecture is not about itself, but about the human condition.
2. Architecture is not creating an object. Much of architecture today seems to be in competition with designers of perfume bottles.
3. Architecture is not a monument to walk around but an environment to walk in.

4. Architecture must not entertain us, but protect us.
5. Architecture is not a blown up sculpture but a building to use. There are only a number of good sculptors in the world and no one of them seems to be an architect. The last were Michelangelo and Bernini.
6. Architecture is not part of dominating trends, its originality stems from the three thousand years' long architectural memory.
7. Architecture is not a universal solution, at best it answers the most urgent needs hopefully without destroying the environment or the urban fabric. Sadly, for some this task seems not exciting enough.