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Of Ends and Origins: Raimund Abraham and the Birth of Architecture — Eliyahu Keller

What we call the beginning is often the end
And to make an end is to make a beginning.
The end is where we start from.

T.S. Eliot, *Little Gidding*, 1942

1—

Beginnings

In 2009, approximately a year before a car crash took his life, Raimund Abraham (1933–2010) created a startling image (Fig.1). Inadvertently made more tragic by his death, the collage was the last act of a career dedicated to exploring imaginary architectures.[1] The image's graphic character, recognisable to those familiar with the work of the Austrian-born architect, exhibited the kind of apocalyptic sensibility that had become familiar from his architectural drawings.

Positioning itself within the lineage of depictions of architectural origins, Abraham's *The Birth of Architecture* portrayed a dead tree, growing out of a crater, its severed branches shackled by three brick walls and situated in what appears to be a desolate and scorched desert. Rendered with Abraham's characteristic earth-oriented palette and rugged pencil technique, the image showed several scattered craters of uncertain scale, as well as markings spread across the ground. Whether an extraterrestrial environment or an existential wasteland, it appeared to be a continuation of the architect's enduring fascination with emptied-out, desolate and universal sites. On closer inspection, however, the image chosen by Abraham as a setting for the birth of architecture proves to be neither fictional nor universal but a photograph of an existing site. While unidentified by Abraham himself, the place represented in the collage is the Nevada Test Site (NTS), the main area for nuclear testing established by the US government at the dawn of the Cold War.

The background image was taken by the American photographer Emmet Gowin. It is held in MOMA's collections, where Abraham, a resident of New York City for the majority of his professional life, may have encountered it.[2] Gowin's photographs provide a rare documentation of the NTS, a location in which – beginning in 1951 – the US government repeatedly rehearsed the future extinction of humanity through more than a thousand nuclear detonations. These photographs, taken from an elevated vantage point, have their roots in the 1980s when Gowin began to take images of landscapes from an aeroplane. In 1996 – after the Nevada site was

Larger illustrations and captions on pp. 12–22

declassified and a decade after his first engagement with nuclear landscapes at the decommissioned Manhattan Project site in Hanford, Washington – Gowin was granted exclusive access to the testing grounds by the US Department of Defense. Taken from a helicopter hovering above, his photos capture the scars left on the abused, evacuated, and contaminated landscape of the Nevada desert,[3] marks that, seen through his lens, resembled enigmatic ciphers left by a lost civilisation for the gaze of gods.[4]

Abraham was of course far from the first to imagine the origins of architecture. Whether understood as the result of gathering around a fire, pictured as a hut built from scattered branches and mud, or presumed to derive from the placing of stones on top of one another, architecture's various beginnings have been imagined, speculated upon, and repeatedly recounted. As Joseph Rykwert noted in his 1972 study, *On Adam's House in Paradise*, the search for origins is a 'constant of human development' to which architecture conforms – a quest through which one can rethink traditions and customs and expose a supposedly 'underlying' and 'irreducible' meaning that architecture holds.[5]

An essential characteristic of all origin stories, architecture included, is that they are always retrospectively narrated – there are no witnesses of the birth of architecture, but only the inhabitants of the later structures that descended from it. The images that have accompanied – or have been appended to – accounts of architecture's origins have acted as powerful storytelling devices. Conceptual and archaeological, they are paradoxical fictions, seeking to regain a hypothetical structure or a set of principles that are irrecoverable and always already lost.[6] Gathering the past and the future into a single frame, they aim to act simultaneously as traces and projections, containing both the past from which architecture was born and the seed of all that is yet to come. Considering them in this way requires paying attention not only to the strictly architectural but also to the other elements of the story told – the setting offered, the past implied, the protagonists imagined, and the representational devices used.

Important, then, are not only the particularities of a beginning, but also what the beginning implies. First, what architectural origin stories often assume is the existence of a pre-architectural world to which architecture responds either as an affirmation of, or departure from, its values and characteristics.[7] Secondly, origin stories require a singular instance, which is elevated to universality in such a way as to exclude other cases. The consequence of having a particular origin is that anything that cannot be traced to that pristine beginning is not part of the privileged lineage that develops from it.[8] Thirdly, an origin suggests that architecture has since developed, that it has a history, and that it must have transformed and mutated from what it originally was. And finally, if architecture has a beginning and a history, then, like any good piece of fiction, it could – perhaps it even should – also come to an end.

Stories of the beginning of architecture are fictions that, in turn, set certain emplotments of architectural history in motion. And yet, as the literary critic Frank Kermode suggested in his aptly titled *The Sense of an Ending*, humans have long produced fictions not only of beginnings but also of ends in order to make sense of their lived time and world.[9] Kermode's own historical reality was a case in point. Writing under the looming threat of nuclear annihilation – a period in which he claimed it 'may be harder than ever to accept the precedents of sense-making' – Kermode insisted on the universal and a-historical capacity of end fictions.[10]

If the beginnings and ends are to be truly meaningful, Kermode emphasised, they should be in agreement with one another.[11] This, he notes, is the case in traditions that conceive of historical time as linear, to which Western imaginings of the origins of architecture certainly belong.[12] The Edenic title of Rykwert's study, in this regard, registers that the material with which it deals belongs to such traditions, which Kermode associates with the Bible, and notes as having a 'familiar mode of history', which 'begins at the beginning [...] and ends with a vision of the end'.[13]

And yet despite the many contradictory or complementary beginnings that architecture has had throughout its history, it is the story of how architecture ends – namely, the termination of a certain idea of architecture that has been represented in an origin story – that has been left relatively unattended to. Arguably, the projective nature of architecture should demand just that: not only a fiction of architecture's original creation, but also of its ultimate death. Here, I want to suggest that we consider Abraham's *The Birth of Architecture* as both an end and a beginning – as not only an origin story but also an end fiction that brings other narratives of architectural beginnings to their concordant conclusion. Thus, it provides those earlier origin stories with an added meaning that only an end can afford and, in doing so, gains its own specific consequence as a contemporary story of architecture's birth.

Huts and fires

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There are few images in the history of architecture that have been reproduced and presented more frequently than the frontispiece for the 1755 second edition of Marc-Antoine Laugier's *Essai sur l'architecture* (Fig.2). Drawn by the painter and engraver Charles-Dominique-Joseph Eisen,[14] the image accompanied the foundation myth with which Laugier opened the *Essai*. In this, the French priest asked his readers to imagine a primitive man inhabiting the natural landscape around him, guided by nothing 'other than his natural instincts'.[15] As he takes shelter in his surroundings to hide from nature's perils, he remains unsatisfied by the dampness of the forest or the cave's darkness and foul smell. In a moment of ingenuity, he decides to create a shelter that 'protects but does not bury him'; a kind of perfect balance between inside and outside.[16] Using the scattered branches he finds on the ground, he raises four straight columns and a slanted roof to construct his primitive hut. Out of necessity and through the imitation of 'natural processes', Laugier tells the readers that the art of architecture comes to life.[17]

The *Essai*'s frontispiece both extends and departs from Laugier's text.[18] Instead of a primitive man, the main figure portrayed is that of an enrobed female – a representation of the discipline – who holds the tools of the trade in her left hand and rests on scattered capitals and other architectural fragments. These artefacts, as Rebecca Williamson has noted, are modern rather than ancient, evoking not only architecture's primordial past but also indicating an imagined future that would emerge from the simple hut.[19] The protagonist of the scene, however, is neither the personified figure of architecture, nor the winged *putto* standing close by, nor the absent primitive man, but the hut itself. Here, however, the four columns noted in the text have become the trunks of flourishing trees that merge into the natural background. In between them branches are placed to create a roof, composed of parts that should be understood as an entablature and a pediment. These three elements, Laugier noted, are the model for 'all the splendors of architecture ever conceived'. Born out of a licensing 'necessity' rather than desire or 'caprice', they are the most fundamental and purest form of architecture.[20]

The story told *of* and *by* architecture through text and image is one of need, simplicity and primal singularity. As Anthony Vidler has noted, Laugier's origin myth 'pressed the reductive logic of origins to its extreme', and 'systemically eliminated any references to social or material causes beyond those of what he called "simple nature"'. Architecture here is gifted to humanity through nature's generosity – its elements, Vidler notes, are 'provided pre-cut, so to speak, by nature, for the use of a man without tools or fellow helpers'.[21] In Laugier's text the primitive hut is not merely the foundational act of architecture, but also that of culture – the first thing that a human does, for and by himself, before the corruptions of society, technology and language.

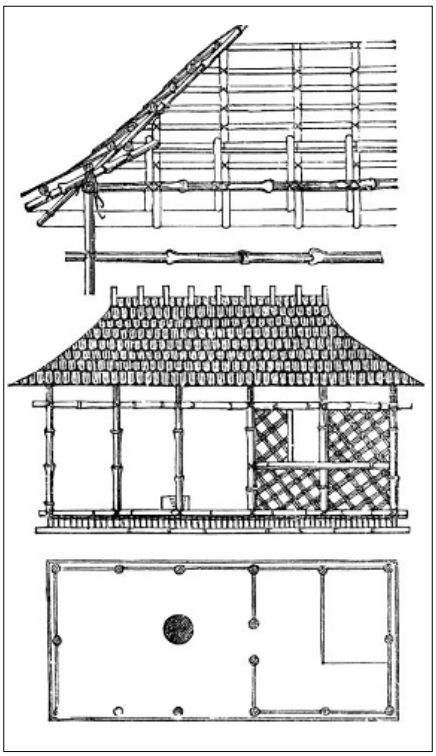
Laugier's myth and the accompanying frontispiece are not merely representations of architecture's beginning but symptomatic of the Enlightenment's obsession with understanding the nature of human culture.[22] As Ginger Nolan recently noted, what Laugier was offering is not a sense of history to be returned to architecture. Rather, architecture's function, in her interpretation, is to 'recapture the world as it was at the precipice of history, just before falling into history's disarray'.[23] The story told here is one in which architecture originates in a world where culture, politics, property and conquest do not exist – a prior condition that Laugier's architecture is meant to recover and recreate.[24]

Raimund Abraham, however, who explored and discussed the origins of architecture repeatedly throughout his career, believed them to lie elsewhere. His very first publication, *Elementare Architektur*,[25] was an exploration of the fundamental forms of architecture around which he grew up in the mountainous region of Tyrol.[26] Published in 1963, the small book was composed of a short essay and a series of black and white photographs. Emphasising building techniques and local materials rather than innovative forms or concepts, Abraham noted that his interest in primitive architecture did not stem from 'a yearning for the original'. Rather, he sought to show the basic tectonics of architectural construction as timeless rather than original.[27] Foregrounding the role of tools, materiality, and the relationship between building and site, it was a primitivist manifesto that anticipated, in some respects, the historical, contextualist, and anthropological explorations emerging within architectural discourse during the 1960s and 70s.[28]

In both title and content, *Elementare Architektur* echoed the theory of architectural origins promoted by the German architect and theorist Gottfried Semper. Conceived a century after the publication of Laugier's *Essai*, Semper's theory was responding both to decades of industrial development and an erosion of Enlightenment values.[29] Not unlike Laugier, Semper sought to find the fundamental principles underlying all architectural work. If we are to understand the meaning of any discourse, Semper claimed, we must 'first go back to the simple origin of the subject under review, trace its gradual development, and explain exceptions and variations by comparing them with the original state'.[30] Unlike the French *abbé*'s enlightened, universalist and a-historical quest, however, Semper's story was influenced by the disciplines of anthropology and archaeology and sought to tell a tale rooted in 'real huts, not ideal or fictitious structures'.[31]

Despite the assumption of a scientific posture, Semper's theory included an origin myth of its own. In his *The Four Elements of Architecture*, published in 1851, he presented a tale that situated architecture not as the consequence of individual action or of nature but in the formation of society and the development of technology and craft. Offered with some reservation,[32] his story was reminiscent, in certain respects, of that narrated by Vitruvius two millennia earlier. For Semper, 'The first sign

of human settlement and rest after the hunt, the battle, and wandering in the desert is today, as when the first men lost paradise, the setting up of the fireplace and the lighting of the reviving, warming, and food-preparing flame.'[33] Similarly to the Roman architect, who positioned fire as the element that prompted the creation of language, of social grouping, and finally of architecture,[34] Semper referred to fire as the 'first, most important' and 'moral element of architecture', around which 'the first groups assembled'.[35] Here, however, the resemblances end. While in Vitruvius the gathered humans gaze at the stars and quickly begin to build huts of twigs and mud, with Semper it is the hearth that gathers around it three other elements: 'the *roof*, the *enclosure*, and the *mound*, the protecting negations or defenders of the hearth's flame against the three hostile elements of nature'.[36] Only when those four elements come together does architecture begin.



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Semper's origin story, at least initially, was not presented with a corresponding visual image. Nine years later, however, in his monumental book *Style*, Semper returned to the primitive hut. Seeking to further separate himself from the Vitruvian tradition, he pointed to the evidentiary basis of his theory and presented 'not a figment of the imagination but a highly realistic example of a wooden structure taken from ethnology'.[37] The illustrations chosen for his purpose were of a Caribbean hut exhibited in the 1851 Great Exhibition in London (Fig.3).

The story told by the drawings follows the logic of Semper's origin tale – not a myth of creation, but rather a taxonomy of technological and historical facts. Instead of a scene that can be interpreted, we are presented with a set of three drawings, two of which are at the same scale, and a third which is an enlarged detail. The plan, elevation and detail provide a clear depiction of each of the four elements as they appear within the hut. The drawings themselves offer neither physical depth to be discovered nor any allegorical personification. What we are presented with instead are orthographic facts, presented as scientific specimens arrayed on blank backgrounds and conveying epistemological authority rather than a universal truth.

Semper believed that the origins of architecture must be found not in its forms but in the social, cultural and environmental conditions that preceded it.[38] Architecture, first and foremost, is not a shelter for a human, but the thing that makes the gathering of humans possible, and a composition of the four elements. Each of these, Semper noted, had a history of development, symbolic representation and utility that preceded architecture, and served as a site and catalyst for human action and the development of particular technical skills.[39] The hearth was the place around which practices of ceramics and metalworking evolved; the mound was the site for water and earthworks; the roof for carpentry; and the enclosure was both the location and consequence of weaving.[40]

The elements, importantly, should not be understood as fixed or independent either. Rather, as historian Mari Hvattum notes in her thorough analysis of Semper's theory, each performs what she calls a 'mimesis of praxis' – a representation of an action, rather than an imitation of a thing.[41] The knot, for instance, the very basic and first act of weaving – the craft that in Semper's theory would later develop into the creation of walls – was understood as a symbolic ordering of time through which man can comprehend his surrounding world. Thus, both architecture and its constitutive elements are not imitations of nature's forms, but rather ancient ritual plotted into artistic and crafted objects; an expression of humanity's desire to understand nature through ordering, coded into the fabric of architectural elements.[42]

Last abodes

Besides indicating Semper's influence in the title of his first book, Abraham further alluded to it in an interview he gave in September 2009, six months before his death. In this, he spoke of the house he had planned for himself in Mexico and noted that 'The hearth is the soul of the house. Architecture didn't originate with a hut; it originated with fire.'[43] He then continued to reference a 'beautiful legend' written by the architectural historian and critic Reyner Banham, concerning 'a group of primeval hunters' who decided to use the little wood they had to make a fire rather than a hut – 'and that was the origin of architecture. It's not the building that determines the architecture, but the event'.[44]

Though the influence of Semper's theory is evident in the tectonic and somewhat archaic character of Abraham's work, he also disclosed another source for his own formulation of how architecture began. While discussing his projects in a 1986 lecture in Vienna, Abraham asserted that its origin – and this, he emphasised, he considered to be the true one – is the grave. The reason for this was that it is a 'purely symbolic program' – an architecture that 'protects a human being who needs no protection' and that signifies not 'the presence but the absence of man'.[45]

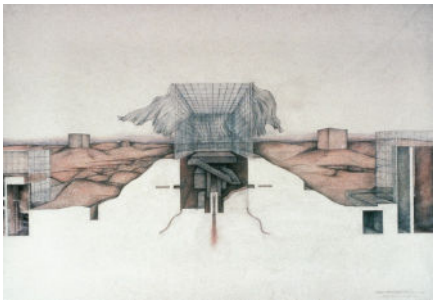
Abraham's assertion that architecture is rooted in funerary structures has its roots in Adolf Loos' well-known essay 'Architektur', written by the Viennese architect in 1910,[46] and noted by Kenneth Frampton to have influenced Abraham's work.[47] Though not an origin myth in a direct or literary sense, it too begins with a description of a pristine and – in a certain way – pre-architectural setting. Asking the readers to join him in observing a pastoral landscape, Loos mentions the 'shores of a mountain lake', the blue sky, the green water, and the 'profound tranquility' of the surroundings, and notes various 'houses, farms, and chapels' that look 'as if they came straight from God's workshop'.[48] Suddenly, a 'discordant note in the tranquility, like an unnecessary screech' interrupts. Loos explains: 'Among the locals' houses that were not built by them, but by God, stands a villa. The creation of an architect. Whether a good or bad architect, I don't know. All I know is that the tranquility, peace, and beauty have vanished.'[49]

Architecture, here, in complete opposition to the one imagined by Laugier, is neither a gift of nature nor a symbolic embodiment of natural processes as in Semper. Rather, it is the disruption of a setting that appears otherwise natural – it contradicts nature's rhythms, it destroys its innate peace. In 'Architektur' Loos sought to differentiate between architecture and art, assigning a kind of conservative utilitarianism to the former, and a kind of revolutionary forward-looking character to the latter. Nevertheless, and though he affirms that 'architecture is not one of the arts', he notes that 'a very small part of architecture comes under art: tombs and monuments'.[50] Indeed, Loos recognises a certain power in the tomb, not merely as a typology or form, but as a historical precedent that relates to the power of architecture to evoke certain moods. Describing an encounter that signals an original experience of what architecture is, Loos offers his most noted passage:

> If we were to come across a mound in the woods, six foot long by three foot wide, with the soil piled up in a pyramid, a sombre mood would come over us and a voice inside us would say, 'There is someone buried here.' *That is architecture*.[51]

Architecture, in this account, should not be understood simply as to do with a formal exemplar or a set of principles. Rather, what Loos seems to suggest is that architecture is a kind of experience that concerns a recognition not only of human action, but also of its finitude.

This Loosian motif is palpable in Abraham's works, many of which convey a sombre mood through their graphic rendering or tomb-like appearance. Once again, Frampton's reflections are useful. In a short essay that accompanied an exhibition of Abraham's work in Italy in 1986, he noted Abraham to be 'caught between the abstract machinations of the modern world – the Juggernaut of progress locked into the Apocalypse – and Loos' insight that only two things belong to architecture'.[52] For Frampton, Abraham was a kind of Orpheus, looking back into the underground kingdom of the dead, to which he has travelled and from which, with the help of his art, he has returned. The reference to Loos not only echoed Abraham's own assertion but also pointed to the persistent figure of the bunker in the architect's imaginings, where it appeared, as Frampton notes, either as 'the bastion of survival or the cradle of Death'. [53]



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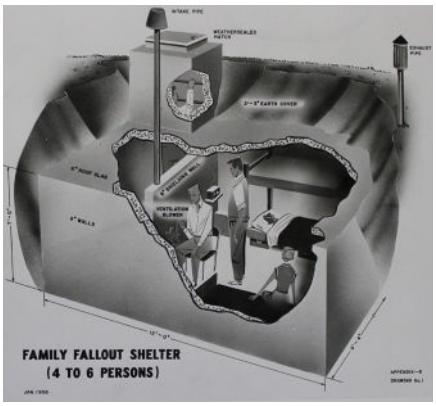
These themes are most visible in Abraham's drawing series created during the 1970s and collected under the title 'The Imaginary House' (Fig.4). In his writing, Abraham framed the house as both a paradigm and an absolute reduction of the architectural programme and as 'one of the ever haunting origins of architecture', and claimed his drawings transcended 'the notion of dwelling with the poetic desire to conquer and inhabit unknown abodes'.[54] Depicting ten different houses, each with its own characteristic and poetic moniker, the drawings should be considered less as propositions for dwellings than investigations pursued against the historical backdrop of Cold War domesticity.[55] Conceived under the threat of nuclear annihilation, they do not simply grapple with the question of domesticity but contemplate its very possibility, or better yet, the possibility of its Cold War manifestation, domestic survival.



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The work's historical context evokes images and illustrations of fallout shelters, pervasive throughout the US during the 1960s and 70s, and often represented through perspectival cut-out sections (Fig.5). As the historian David Monteyne noted, the drawings for fallout shelters mimic architectural standards to convey a kind of scientific authority out of which a sense of security might grow.[56] Abraham, on the other hand, though adhering to orthography, eschews traditional projections to represent something that can no longer provide the safety of a home at all. While the popular depictions of fallout shelters use the perspectival section as an instrument for conveying information about what life in the wake of a nuclear attack might look like, in Abraham's houses one can only witness an absent domesticity, in which familiar and familial life no longer exists.

Though their formal appearances vary from one imagining to the next, certain representational and spatial characteristics persist across all these works. The most visible of these features is the desolate, barren and evacuated context, a characteristic which Frampton briefly noted as part of Abraham's 'imagined nuclear disaster theme', in which the houses appear 'suspended in the metaphysical landscape of an aftermath … cut into the dormant but still fecund soil of the devastated planet'.[57] Seeking to address these supposedly universal wastelands, the houses are burrowed into the violated earth while employing a simple architectural element, an underground space and a minimal, at times ephemeral, additional structure in order to create a symbolic presence above.

These themes were further explored in Abraham's submission for the 1976 Biennale in Venice. The project, *Seven Gates to Eden*, was included in a joint exhibition titled 'Europe-America: Urban Center-Suburban Alternatives' and was a continuation of his 'obsession' with the theme of the imaginary house.[58] With seven images and models of the same house on the same plot of land, Abraham represented an archetype of the American suburban house as it collides with seven metaphorical processes. Each of these metaphorical

'gates' would produce within the houses 'archaeological memories imprinted in walls, shadows and gardens'. This 'architecture of silence,' as Abraham called it, was represented as if 'buried in the elements and fragments of the past', while pointing to and offering images of 'unknown habitations'.[59]

To do with both memory and projection, ruin and proposition, decay and growth, his suburban houses were presented as spaces uninhabitable until violated by a force that would contaminate their solid form. Seemingly covered by a protective concrete blanket, monolithic and safe, the sections and military axonometries reveal the houses themselves as solid masses, indistinguishable from the earth on which they rest. Corrupted and decaying, they are injected with a series of elements, producing passages and spaces within the once impenetrable masses. These are not propositions for future dwellings, nor are they proposals for how one might live within what was once a domestic dream turned into an encapsulated nightmare. Rather, through resignation *from* and a realisation *of* the reality in which survivability is no longer possible, they represent an existence that opens only when the possibility of dwelling has been lost.

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The conclusion of Abraham's series of houses is a drawing declaring itself to be of *The Last House* (Fig.6). Drawn in 1984, the background of this self-reflective and mournful work depicts, once again, a desolate landscape, out of which elemental shapes are launched like architectural projectiles to and from the scene. An image of a dynamic architectural battle, they produce a composition strangely reminiscent of the poster that accompanied the 1983 television film *The Day After*, a nuclear fiction depicting two rural towns after a Soviet nuclear attack[60] (Fig.7). In the film's promotional image a young girl stands on a patch of green grass in front of a typical rural house as she looks to both the future and the horizon, while nuclear missiles are launched as if from her backyard. Yet unlike the still idyllic landscape around this American farmhouse, the world surrounding Abraham's *Last House* has already been lost. The desolate and telluric environs appear again as both meaningful and barren, an archaeology of a civilisation that has either perished or is yet to come. The house, both constructed and decomposing, reveals itself to be nothing but a broken frame, an enclosure that can only imply the possibility of inhabitation either in an impossible future, or an already lost past.

Abraham's *Last House*, in this respect, is not unlike the Last Man, a literary trope emerging in the 19th century as a reaction to a new and strictly modern condition, in which an 'anthropology of disaster' began to be formulated from the perspective of an imagined humanity that has ceased to exist.[61] Although originating in Romanticism, and arguably the polar opposite of the noble savage imagined by many Enlightenment thinkers, the trope of the Last Man persisted in literature, art and fiction well into the nuclear age.[62] A paradoxical and impossible figure, the Last Man both experiences the ultimate catastrophe and is the only one to bear witness to it, producing writing that is both original and ultimate, a chronicle of the world's ending written for, and read by, no one.[63]

Referring to all of Abraham's previous houses, *The Last House* becomes similarly paradoxical. While it is not without precedent, it is a vision of a construction in the wake of which precedents no longer exist. Standing against the tradition of first houses, it suggests a fulfilment of the ultimate symbolic programme, which Abraham identified with the tomb. Yet here the concern is not with an absent human subject that is made present through an architectural form, but rather the future possibility of architecture that has been made visibly absent through its own end. In a world in which architecture's utmost symbolic function is no longer viable, architecture is presented in terms of its own impossibility – a disciplinary epitaph witnessed by no one.

Ends

Unlike Laugier, Semper or Loos, Abraham did not provide a written narrative to accompany his *The Birth of Architecture* image, with which we began. We are obliged, therefore, to rely on both the corpus of his own imaginary investigations and the origin stories that inspired him if we are to speculate on the never-written narrative that might have underpinned the creation of his image. Indeed, it is when it is viewed against the horizon of ultimate houses, their placement within universal and symbolic wastelands, and in relation to his decades-long exploration of both the ground and its interiors, that the image of *The Birth of Architecture* assumes its full meaning as a fiction of both beginnings and ends.

The human subject here, not unlike the one who finds shelter in Laugier's hut, is a general, homogenised, and indubitably Occidental man. In Abraham's case, however, it is not a primitive human returning from the hunt or resting on a river's bank that we are concerned with. Rather, the Rousseauian savage is replaced with a technological human standing on the other end of the axis of cultural development, whose environment is no longer natural, but made artificial through his own actions. The pre-historical and pre-social man has transformed into an anthropocenic and perhaps even posthuman subject whose memory and culture are entangled with a project of domination over nature, land and people, and who is visibly missing from the scene.

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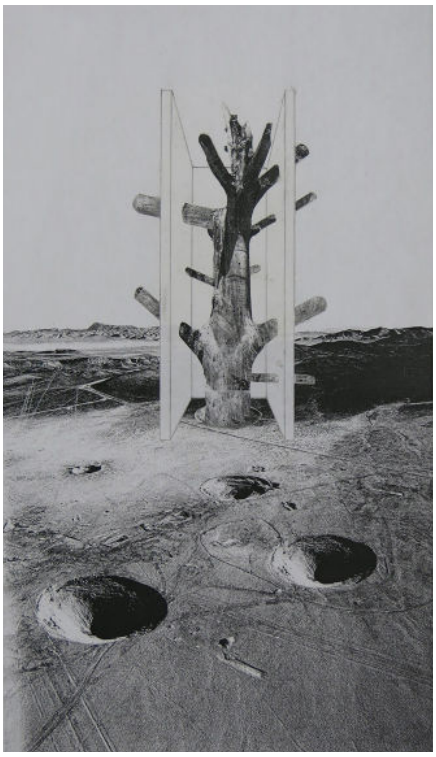
The setting chosen for this story is, accordingly, different. It is not a representation of an ideal of a natural landscape but a specific and a physical place, where humanity's absent presence is palpably felt through the memories, projections and rehearsals of its own self-created end – through the visible marks scarring the sand, the dugout trenches and observation towers, and through the displacement of matter captured so clearly in the stark photo taken by Gowin.

The specific history behind Gowin's photographs echoes, somewhat poetically, the story told in Abraham's collage. As a photographer, Gowin first came to be known through his depictions of domestic life, and the portraits of his immediate and extended family. After several deaths in his family Gowin stepped away from this familial intimacy and began, as the journalist Max Norman observed, documenting sprawling infrastructure and out-of-scale earth displacement that brings the 'netherworld' into view.[64] The stark contrasts conveyed in the photographs, both visually and thematically, evoke both a sense of wonder and awe – they produce, as Norman noted, a sense of 'admiration for the power that humans have wielded to shape the earth in their image', while simultaneously recording a 'tragedy of cosmic proportions'.[65] In this sense, Gowin's image produces precisely the kind of site that Abraham's imagination required – a place both mythical and real, both universal and local, both natural and artificial, from which a different kind of architecture, or better yet, a different idea of architecture, could be born.



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With Gowin's silent assistance, Abraham replaces Semper's hearth with a nuclear crater, the aftermath left by a fire that is the consequence of unlocking nature's deepest secrets, a 'harnessing of the basic power of the universe', and the unleashing of the force of the sun upon the earth.[66] These craters, captured in this and in countless other of Gowin's photographs, are a record of a particular legacy of nuclear testing. Not the result of atmospheric detonations, they are the product of nuclear devices buried deep with the ground; testimonies to the only possible way in which the United States, and other nations, could continue their nuclear operations after the 1963 Partial Test Ban Treaty was signed.[67] Pushing the visible reality of nuclear testing out of everybody's sight, these subsidence pits are indexes of the earth's collapse after it has been detonated from within. While the mushroom cloud – perhaps the most iconic symbol of the nuclear age –

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11—

was the result of the few dozen visible explosions, the nuclear subsidence crater, singularly captured by Gowin, is its less recognised and less visible counterpart.

The 'quietly flowing brook' and the fresh 'stretch of grass' upon which Laugier's hero rests[68] are replaced here with the sands of a nuclear testing ground, a scorched earth, marked with paths of vehicles, trenches and burnt sand, and scattered craters left after the detonation of nuclear devices within the darkest depths underground. Out of the indelible sunken crater – and replacing the 'pre-cut' elements provided by nature in Laugier's tale[69] – grows an injured tree (Fig.8). In its appearance, it recalls the long and ever-growing history of depictions of mutilated and disfigured trees in sites of natural or human-made catastrophe. Not unlike the trees of Paul Nash's *Monster Field*, photographed by the English artist in the months before the outbreak of World War II, Abraham's once-living tree has 'suffered change' and has transformed into something else.[70] Withdrawn from life, it points us to somewhere else and to some other time. No longer used for the construction of shelter against the elements, the tree – severed, dismembered, and enclosed by brick walls that only act to stop its further decay – serves as a testimony to that which humanity has inflicted upon itself and its world and to the end of the possibility of the kind of architecture proposed by the likes of Laugier (Fig.9). The earth itself, a telluric essence foundational to Abraham's imaginings, is already a contaminated one – seeded by bombs detonated within it, every ounce of soil has been made radioactive, while every wall erected carries with it the legacy of industrial despoliation. Clutching the injured branches of a tree that grew out of such contamination, architecture arises not as an imitation of nature but out of a nature that has been transformed beyond repair. Growing out of a nuclear crater where no human life can be sustained, architecture is both born and buried in this site. No longer a hut, nor simply a tomb for an absent subject, architecture here emerges out of the absolute and ultimate exploitation of natural principles – the violent fission of the atomic particles that make up our world (Figs 10, 11).

This *Birth of Architecture* is simultaneously *the end* of architecture – the end of architecture understood as a sign of a humanity that is separate from nature, however much it is tutored by it; and the birth of an architecture that recognises nature not as a pristine and untouched origin, but as something as artificial and constructed as the architecture it yields.[71] Rather than pointing to some primordial and impossible beginning that cannot be witnessed, Abraham's origin suggests that we take what Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht recently labelled as 'our broad present' – that is, a perpetually threatening and closing horizon of possibilities[72] – as a departure point for a different kind of architecture. The architectural tomb-as-house, therefore, is not made for a specific or a universal human. Rather, it is an epitaph to a discipline rooted in Enlightenment rationality and industrial progress, whose time has passed. Simultaneously, it initiates an opposite story, an anthropocenic fiction in which nature has become as artificial as the thing for which once, originally, it was the model. Granted, this re-birth does not offer forms or principles to be imitated; Abraham provides no blueprints for the architecture to come. What it demands, instead, is a recognition not only of architecture's civilisational value but of its civilisational costs, and asks not to recover or romanticise nature, but to mourn it, and to accept that nature, as it was once understood, is no longer part of our world. Out of the ruins of the primitive hut, could a new architecture emerge?

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1 In Abraham's single monograph, his projects are divided into three sections: 'Imaginary Architecture 1961–2009', which encompasses an array of conceptual, theoretical, meditative, or exploratory works; 'Projects 1961–2009', which designates both built and unbuilt projects, but ones that were conceived with the purpose of being built; and 'Realizations 1959–2010', which includes the architect's few realised projects. See Raimund Abraham, *[UN]BUILT*, ed. Brigitte Groihofer, 2nd edn (New York: Springer, 2011).

2 The photo is only one of hundreds of photographs taken by Gowin after being granted exclusive access by the US Department of Defense. The photograph that appears in MoMA's collection does not appear in Gowin's book. Emmet Gowin, *Nevada Test Site* (New York: Princeton University Press, 2019).

3 Taylor N. Johnson, '"The most bombed nation on earth": Western Shoshone resistance to the Nevada national security site', *Atlantic Journal of Communication* 26(4) (2018), 223.

4 Max Norman, 'Emmet Gowin's tender photography of nuclear destruction', *New Yorker*, 7 November 2019. https://www.newyorker.com/culture/photo-booth/emmet-gowins-tender-photography-of-nuclear-destruction [Accessed 28 January 2025].

5 Joseph Rykwert, *On Adam's House in Paradise: the Idea of the Primitive Hut in Architectural History* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1972), 192.

6 *Ibid*., 13.

7 Vitruvius, for instance, relates that in a pre-architectural world humans were 'born like beasts in the woods, and caves, and groves'. See Vitruvius, *Ten Books on Architecture* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999), 34.

8 Charles L. Davis II, *Building Character: The Racial Politics of Modern Architectural Style* (Pittsburgh: University of Pittsburgh Press, 2019).

9 Frank Kermode. *The Sense of an Ending; Studies in the Theory of Fiction* (London: Oxford University Press, 1967), 7-8.

10 *Ibid*., 3.

11 *Ibid*., 7.

12 *Ibid*, 5.

13 *Ibid*., 6.

14 Rebecca Williamson. 'Other lives: Charles Eisen and Laugier's *Essai Sur l'Architecture*', https://drawingmatter.org/other-lives-charles-eisen-and-laugiers-essai-sur-larchitecture [Accessed 24 December 2023].

15 Marc-Antoine Laugier, *An Essay on Architecture* (Los Angeles: Hennessey & Ingalls, 1977), 11.

16 Ginger Nolan, 'Architecture's death drive: the primitive hut against history', *Log* 42 (2018), 93.

17 Laugier, *op.cit*., 12.

18 Williamson, *op.cit*.

19 *Ibid*.

20 Laugier, *op.cit*.,12.

21 Anthony Vidler, 'Rebuilding the primitive hut: the return to origins from Lafitau to Laugier', in *The Writing of the Walls: Architectural Theory in the Late Enlightenment* (Princeton: Princeton Architectural Press, 1987), 18.

22 Catherine Labio, *Origins and the Enlightenment: Aesthetic Epistemology from Descartes to Kant* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2004).

23 Nolan, *op.cit*., 93.

24 Nolan, who like Vidler makes a connection between Laugier's essay and the thought of Laugier's contemporary Jean-Jacques Rousseau, notes Rousseau's suggestion that 'dispossession is integral to architecture, insofar as property is protected and constituted by walls and thus reinstates what, for Rousseau, was the originary dispossessive act of enclosing private property'. *Ibid.,* 93–95.

25 Raimund Abraham, *Elementare Architektur*, new edn. (Salzburg: Pustet, 2001).

26 Norbert Miller, 'Imagination and the calculus of reality', in Abraham, *[UN]BUILT*, *op.cit*., 8–9.

27 Raimund Abraham, 'Elementary architecture', in Abraham, *[UN]BUILT*, *op.cit*., 114.

28 See Jorge Otero-Pailos, *Architecture's Historical Turn: Phenomenology and the Rise of the Postmodern* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2010).

29 Jonathan A. Hale, 'Gottfried Semper's primitive hut as an act of self-creation', *arq: Architectural Research Quarterly*, 9(1) (March 2005), 46.

30 Gottfried Semper, 'The basic elements of architecture' (introduction to comparative building theory), in Wolfgang Herrmann, *Gottfried Semper: In Search of Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1984), 196.

31 *Ibid*., 168.

32 'At the risk of falling into the same error that I criticise, I see myself forced to go back to the primitive conditions of human society in order to come to that which I actually propose to set forth.' Semper, *The Four Elements of Architecture and Other Writings* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2011), 102.

33 *Ibid*.

34 R.D. Dripps, *The First House: Myth, Paradigm, and the Task of Architecture* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 3.

35 Semper, *op.cit*., 102.

36 *Ibid*., 102.

37 Gottfried Semper, *Style in the Technical and Tectonic Arts, Or, Practical Aesthetics* (Los Angeles: Getty Publications, 2004), 665–66.

38 Mari Hvattum, *Gottfried Semper and the Problem of Historicism* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2004), 65.

39 *Ibid*., 14.

40 Semper, *Four Elements*, *op.cit*., 103.

41 Hvattum, *op.cit*., 75–83.

42 *Ibid*., 66.

43 'Raimund Abraham in conversation with Gerald Matt' (8 September 2009), in *Raimund Abraham & The Austrian Cultural Forum New York*, ed. Andres Lepik and Andreas Stadler (Ostfildern: Hatje Cantz, 2011), 72.

44 *Ibid*. See Reyner Banham, *The Architecture of the Well-Tempered Environment* (Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1984), 19.

45 The lecture was given at the Museum of Applied Arts in Vienna on 1 November 1986. See Raimund Abraham, 'The Reality of the Unbuilt', in Abraham, *[UN]BUILT*, *op.cit*., 111.

46 Adolf Loos, 'Architektur', in *Sämtliche Schriften in zwei Bänden: 1897–1900. Trotzdem. Ins Leere Gesprochen* (Vienna: Verlag Herold, 1962), 302–18.

47 Kenneth Frampton, 'Fragmentary Notes', in Abraham, *[UN]BUILT*, *op.cit*., 216.

48 *Ibid*., 302.

49 *Ibid*.

50 *Ibid*., 315.

51 *Ibid*. (emphasis in original).

52 *Ibid*., 216.

53 *Ibid*.

54 Raimund Abraham, 'In Anticipation of Architecture,' in Abraham, *[UN]BUILT*, *op.cit*., 101.

55 See, for instance, Colomina's inquiry into the image and reality of the suburban house within the Cold War's ideological forefront. Beatriz Colomina, *Domesticity at War* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2007).

56 David Monteyne, *Fallout Shelter: Designing for Civil Defense in the Cold War* (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 2011), 32.

57 Frampton, *op.cit*., 216.

58 'Houses are manifestations of my obsession to encompass and project the archetypical ritual of dwelling.' Abraham, 'In Anticipation of Architecture', *op.cit*., 102.

59 Raimund Abraham, P. Adams Sitney, *Raimund Abraham: Seven Gates to Eden* (London: Art Net, 1976), (exhibition catalogue).

60 The film was one of the most viewed television programmes to that date. For more on the reception and commercial success of *The Day After*, see Deron Overpeck, '"Remember! It's only a movie!" Expectations and receptions of The Day After (1983)', *Historical Journal of Film, Radio and Television*, 32 (2) (1 June 2012), 267–92.

61 See the chapter 'Last men' in Eva Horn, *The Future as Catastrophe: Imagining Disaster in the Modern Age* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 21–54.

62 *Ibid*., 25.

63 *Ibid*.

64 Norman, 'Tender Photography', *op.cit*.

65 *Ibid*.

66 Harry S. Truman, 'Statement by the President Announcing the Use of the A-Bomb at Hiroshima', https://www.trumanlibrary.gov/library/public-papers/93/statement-president-announcing-use-bomb-hiroshima [Accessed 21 November 2021].

67 The Partial Test Ban Treaty, initially signed by the United States, the Soviet Union and the United Kingdom in August 1963, prohibited all nuclear tests except for those conducted underground. Two months later it was signed by an additional 124 nations.

68 Laugier, *Essay*, *op.cit*., 11.

69 Vidler, 'Rebuilding the Primitive Hut,' *op.cit*., 19.

70 Paul Nash, 'Monster Field', in *Writings on Art* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2000), 151.

71 I refer here to Jedediah Purdy's framing of the Anthropocene as 'the end of the division between people and nature', and the notion that nature is no longer something that can be represented as separate from humanity. See: Jedediah Purdy, *After Nature: A Politics for the Anthropocene* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2015), 1–10.

72 Hans Ulrich Gumbrecht, *Our Broad Present: Time and Contemporary Culture* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2014).

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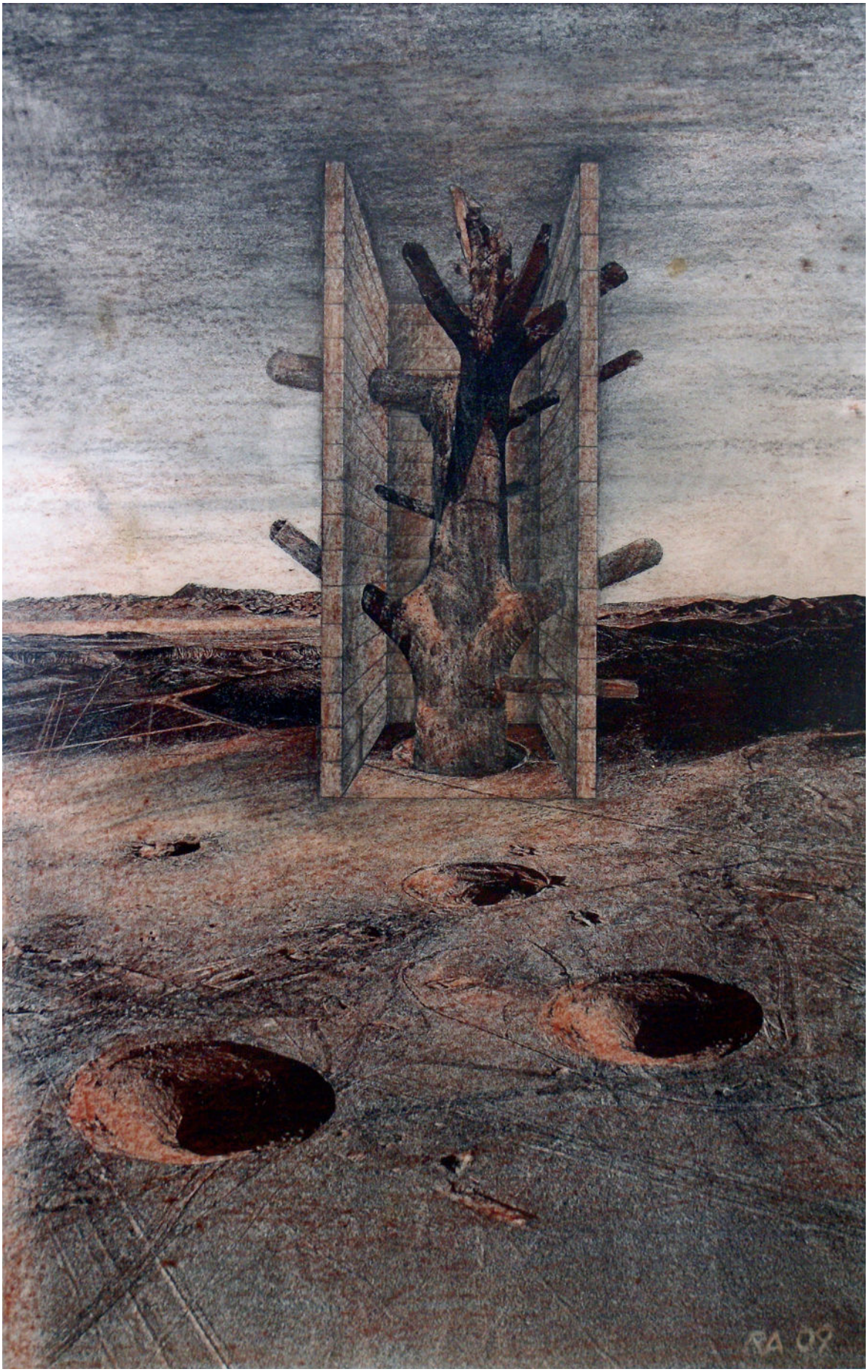
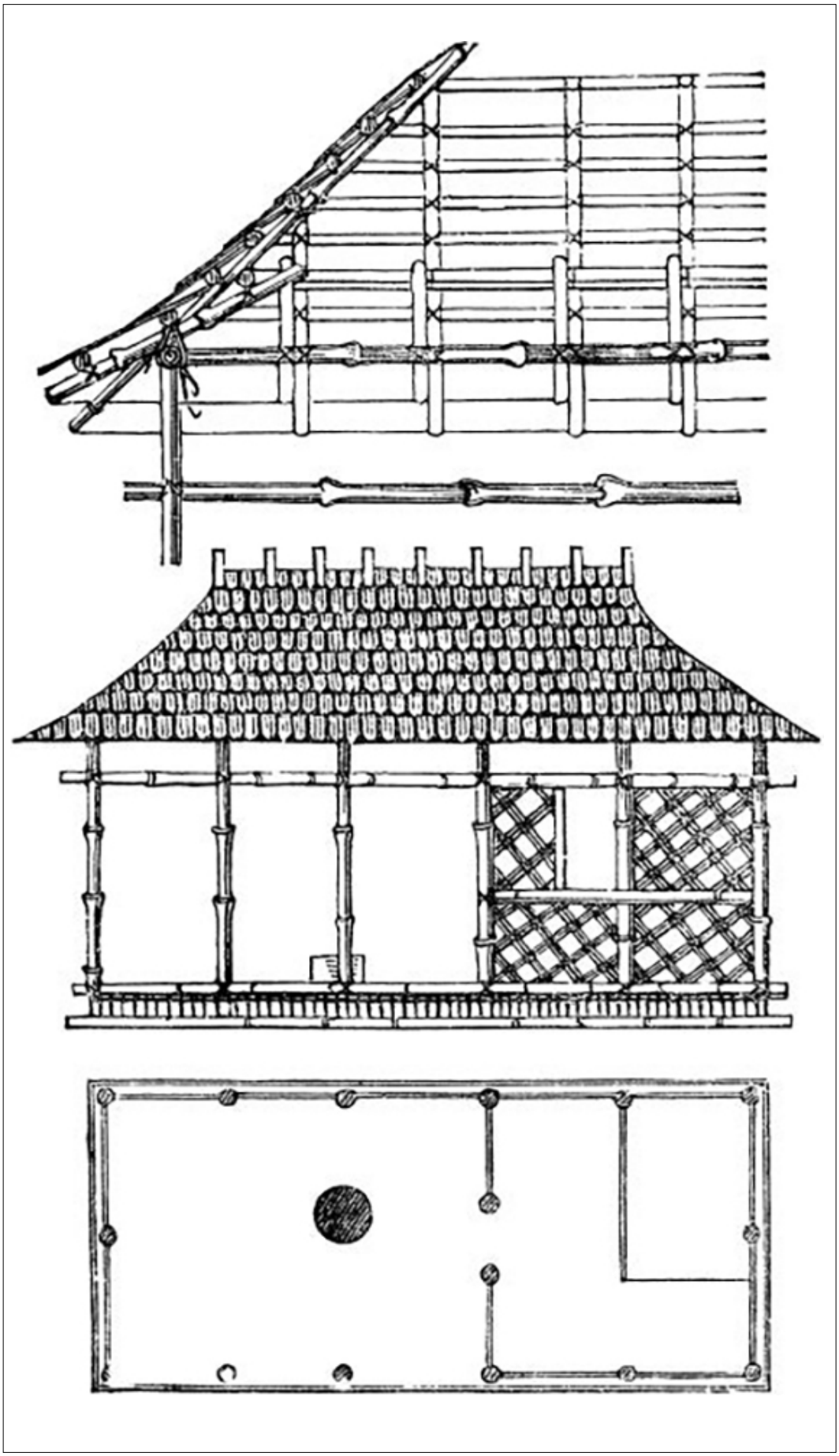


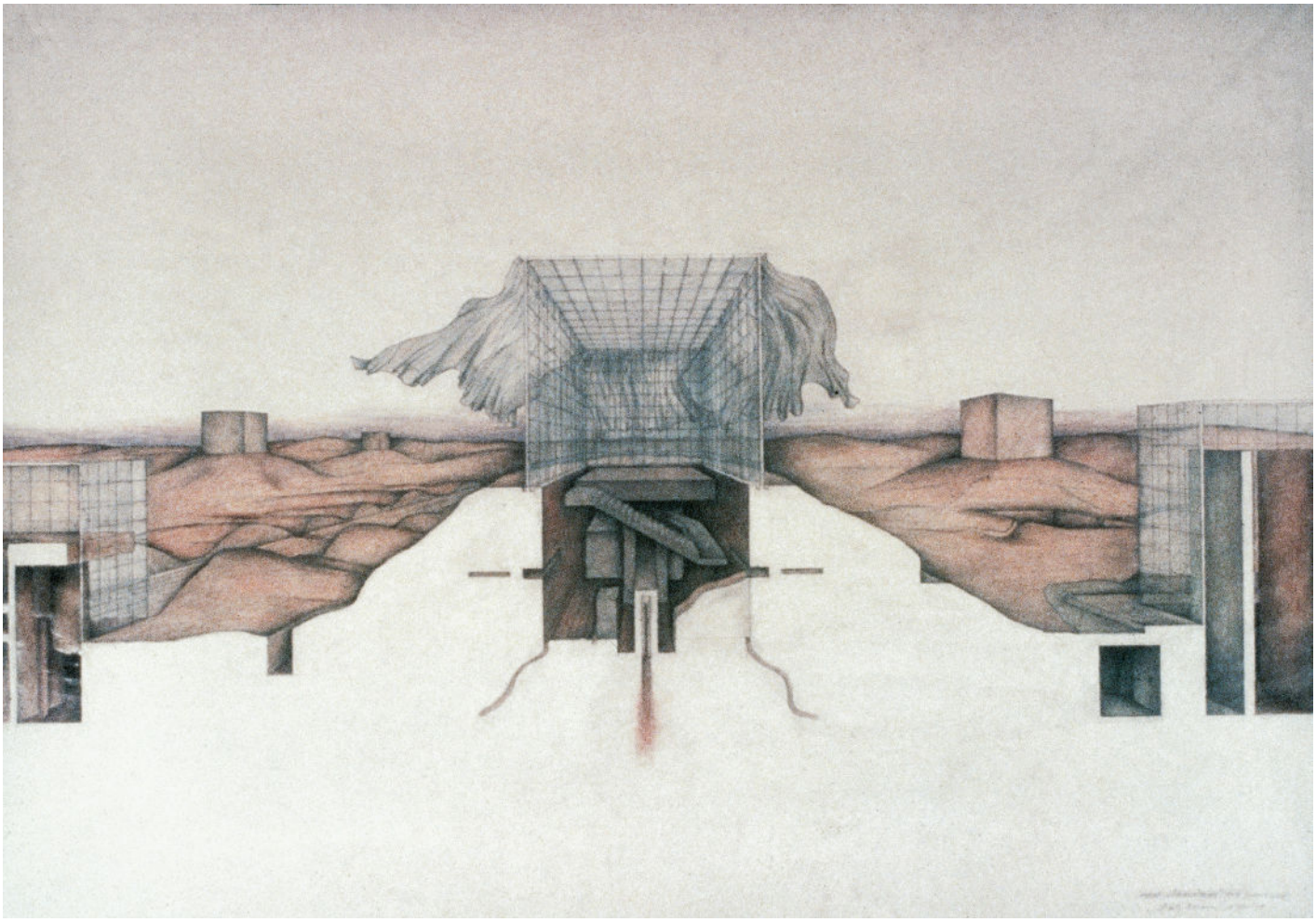
Raimund Abraham, *The Birth of Architecture*, 2009. Courtesy of Una Abraham.

Charles-Dominique-Joseph Eisen, *Frontispiece* to Marc-Antoine Laugier's *Essai sur l'architecture*, *c.*1754. Pen and ink and grey wash on paper, 210 × 147mm. DMC 1240.

3—



Caribbean Hut from Gottfried Semper's *Der Stil* (2nd ed., 1879), vol. 2, p. 263.



Raimund Abraham, *House with Curtains*, 1971–75. © Architekturzentrum Wien, Collection.

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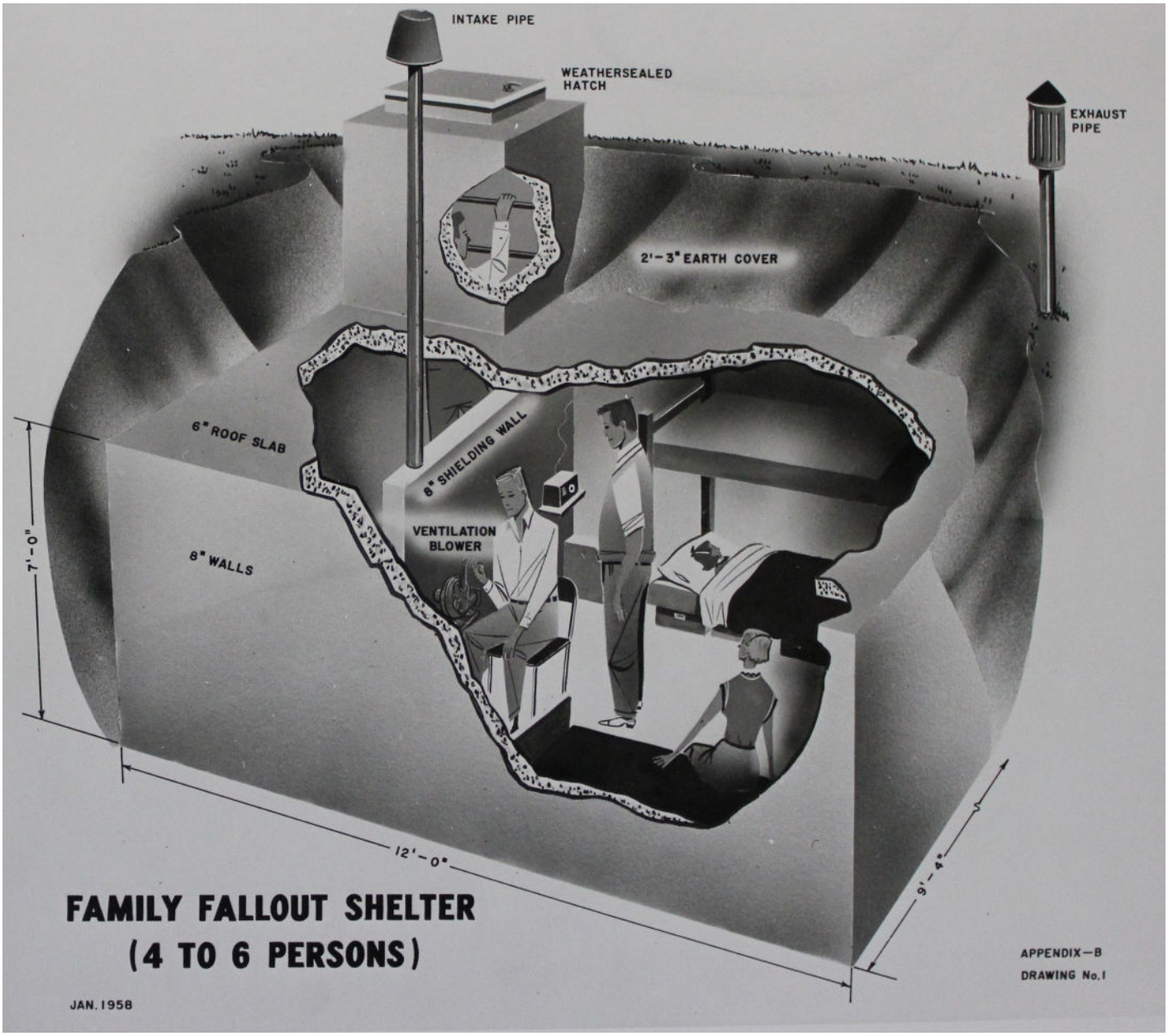
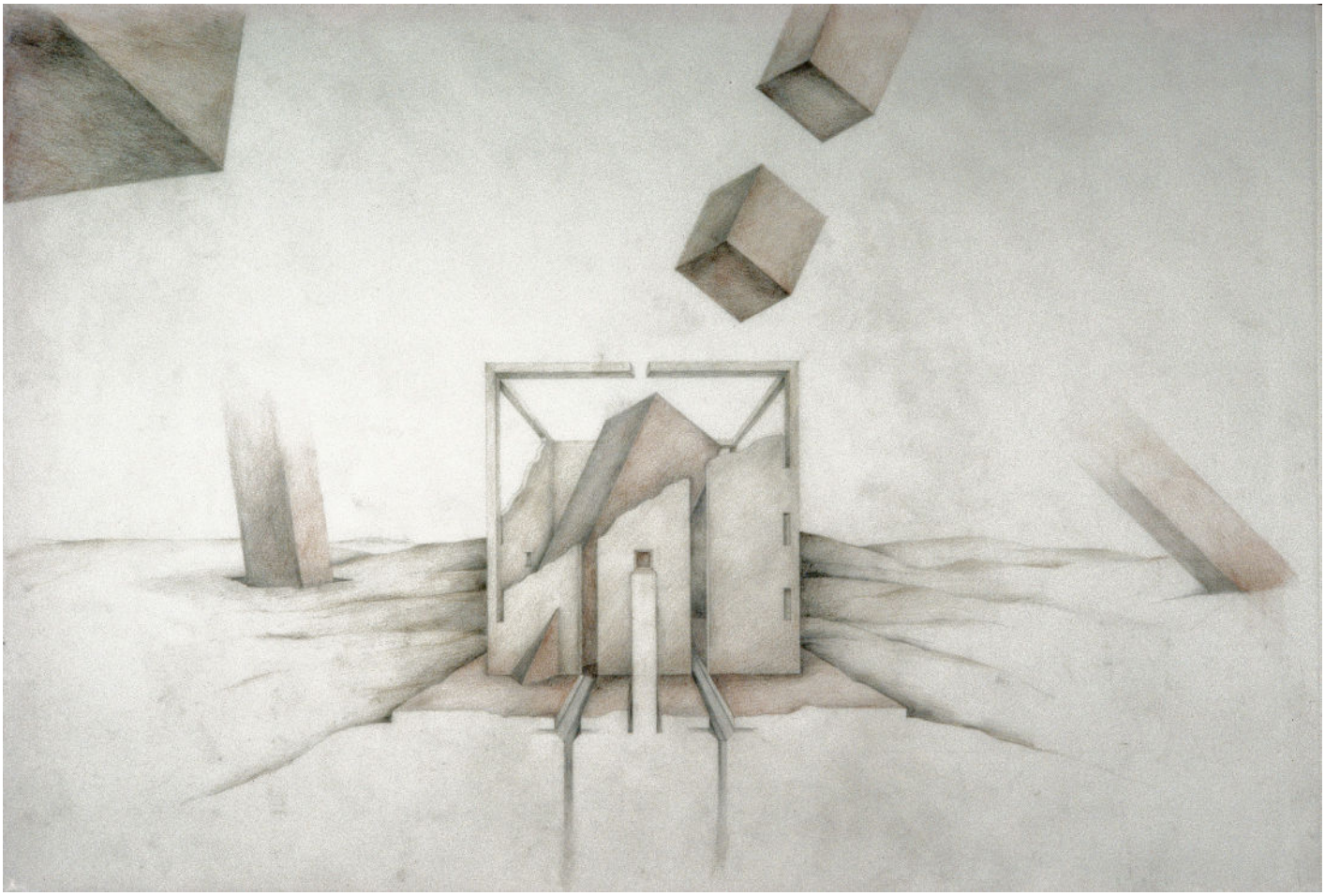


Fallout shelter concept, US Federal Civil Defense Administration, January 1958. Public domain.



Raimund Abraham, *The Last House*, 1984. © Architekturzentrum Wien, Collection.

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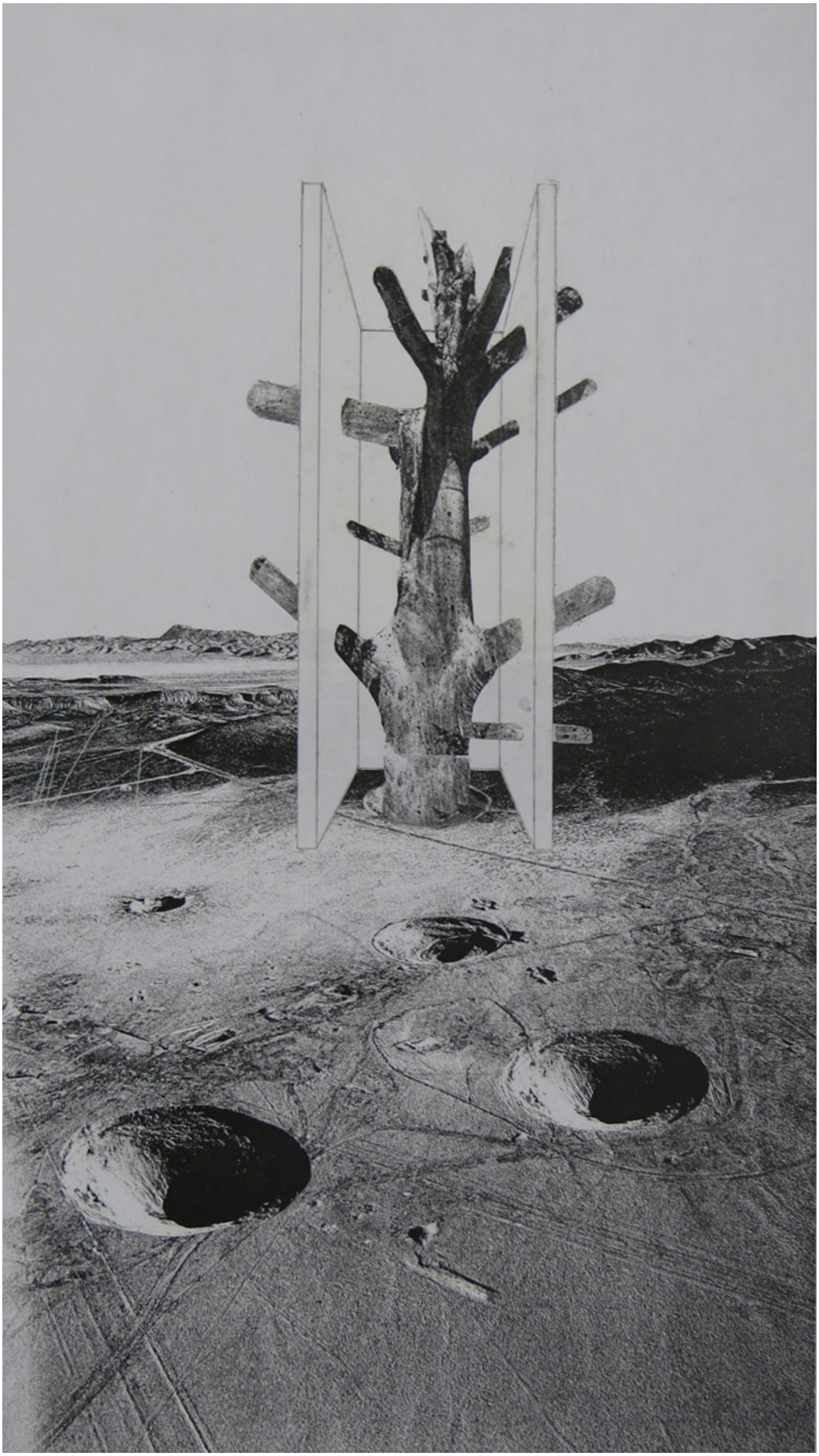
Promotional poster for *The Day After*, 1983, dir. Nicholas Meyer. Courtesy Disney.

Raimund Abraham, *The Birth of Architecture* (process), 2009. © Architekturzentrum Wien, Collection.



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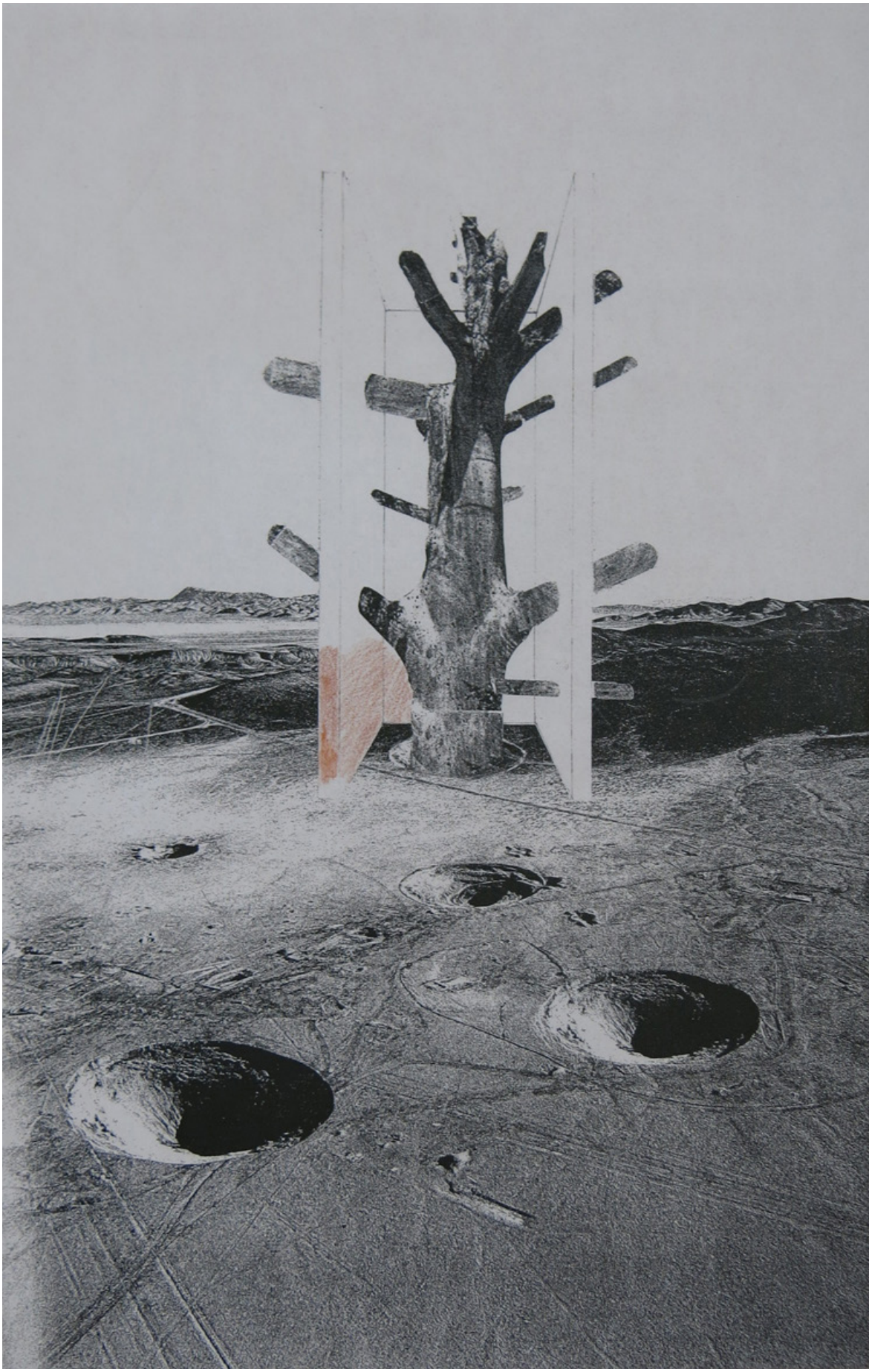

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