

Zoe Zenghelis: Fields, Fragments, Fictions

- March 26–July 24, 2022
- Heinz Architectural Center
- Wall Texts

Exhibition Introductory Text

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“Some of my paintings are trying to place the city on a personal poetic plane that is in a constant state of flux. In others, time stops, creating a disturbing stillness. My buildings and houses have no connection with reality. They poeticize the urban environment. They are out of place buildings, exploring dream states, creating a new reality, turning the negative into something desirable.”

—Zoe Zenghelis

Artist and educator Zoe Zenghelis has been using thick layers of paint, abstract geometries, assemblies of forms, and eruptive color palettes to construct worlds of longing and imagination for more than 60 years. Populated with building fragments, abstract tectonics, and metropolitan landscapes, her paintings are an inquiry to the city and its architecture.

Born in Athens in 1937, Zenghelis studied stage design and painting in London, where she has lived and worked since the late 1950s. In the early 1970s, Zoe Zenghelis—alongside architects Rem Koolhaas and Elia Zenghelis and artist Madelon Vriesendorp—co-founded the architectural practice Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA). This collaborative work and Zoe Zenghelis’s approach to art-making redefined the visual culture of architecture and opened new possibilities for thinking about space and the built environment through the medium of painting. Zenghelis collaborated with Vriesendorp to transpose this exploration into a teaching method at the Color Workshop, an experimental course they taught together at the Architectural Association School of Architecture (AA) in London from 1982 until 1993.

The monographic exhibition *Zoe Zenghelis: Fields, Fragments, Fictions* at the Heinz Architectural Center celebrates Zenghelis’s art practice which stands at the intersection of painting and spatial imagination, defying disciplinary fields and classifications. Organized in four thematic units, the exhibition brings into dialogue Zoe Zenghelis’s independent painting projects with her collaborative work with OMA, and her educational methods. The show is punctuated with objects from the museum’s permanent collection, selected by the artist to situate her work in a constellation of influences and relations between her students, friends, and teachers—real and imaginary.

Zoe Zenghelis: Fields, Fragments, Fictions is organized by Theodossis Issaias, associate curator, Heinz Architectural Center and Hamed Khosravi, educator at the Architectural Association School of Architecture.

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Exhibition Section Texts

Arcadia Inverted

This section turns to the lesser-known projects of OMA in the Greek islands of Antiparos, Lesbos, and Cephalonia, produced during the early 1980s. By that time, the group had developed a clearly defined methodology of working together and of approaching the metropolitan condition and its architecture. Yet, as a series of direct commissions for projects in the Mediterranean countryside came their way, a new creative challenge emerged: What is a natural landscape and is there an architecture of the countryside? How to engage with ‘non-urban’ sites? This encounter with a “real Arcadia,” Elia Zenghelis explained, prompted the group to think beyond the binary natural and artificial—urban and rural. They attempted to both introduce density and program without interrupting the natural characteristics of the site, as well as amplify the role of landscape as a symbolic form.

In 1982, OMA opened a branch office in Athens to carry out projects in Greece. Working in the countryside rekindled Zoe Zenghelis’s interest in landscape painting, which dated back to her student years. At the same time, her unique understanding of this genre of painting had a profound impact on the ways OMA approached the question of nature. Her canvases became the territory: shimmering colors of olive groves, thick painted terrains, and brightly hued air reconstituted the sites, while geographies of lines, points, and surfaces morphed into fields of human activity.

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In 1982, following a commission for the design of a hotel on the island of Lesbos—known as 1000 Olive Trees—OMA opened a branch office in Athens to carry out projects in Greece. In the following years, this branch secured commissions from private and public entities. Although most were never realized, the projects, particularly the Sixteen Villas in Antiparos, captured the attention of practitioners and was featured on the covers of various architectural magazines. OMA’s Greek projects also included a series of landscape redevelopment plans for Cephalonia, in the Ionian Islands, funded by the democratic-socialist government.

Working in the countryside rekindled Zoe Zenghelis’s interest in landscape painting, which began when she was a student. At the same time, her unique understanding of this genre of painting had a profound impact on the ways OMA approached the question of nature. Her canvases become the territory: shimmering colors of olive groves, thick painted terrains, and brightly hued air reconstitute the sites, while geographies of lines, points, and surfaces morph into fields of architectural action.

Metropolitan Affairs

OMA's practice from 1972–1985 is characterized by projects that complicate our understanding of the metropolitan condition of the late-capitalist city. Their story begins in 1972, when Zoe Zenghelis joined her then husband, architect Elia Zenghelis, his student at the Architectural Association (AA), Rem Koolhaas, and artist Madelon Vriesendorp to submit an entry to Casabella magazine's idea competition "The City as a Significant Environment." Less than three years later, the group became known as the Office for Metropolitan Architecture (OMA). The main idea behind OMA's early projects is best summarized in the name of the office itself: metropolitan architecture. New York, London, and Berlin—archetypal cities of Western modernity—offered the context for a radical experimentation. Rem Koolhaas's writings, Elia Zenghelis's drawings, and Zoe Zenghelis's and Madelon Vriesendorp's paintings created a universe of beauty and unapologetic hedonism. They were inspired by the complexity, richness and, at the same time, chaos and multiplicity of metropolises around the world.

This early work mostly consisted of architectural competition entries and visual manifestos that creatively challenged established modes of thinking and making within the field. The group advanced a design methodology that brought closer together the bifurcating traditions of art and architecture. The paintings were not merely a rendering of an architectural project, but a way of developing and being the project. During her fourteen years of collaboration with OMA, Zenghelis painted some of the most iconic architectural and urban ideas of the second half of the 20th century. Of those, presented in this gallery, are Egg of Columbus Center (1973), OMA's urban manifesto for the bank of the East River in Manhattan; Hotel Sphinx (1975), a provocative social housing proposal for Times Square; and the Roosevelt Island Housing competition entry (1975).

Spaces of Learning

Zoe Zenghelis believes that teaching art is foremost about cultivating students' unique ways of seeing the world. She asks students to see lines, shapes, colors, and textures without pre-determined associations that tend to restrict both meaning and imagination. This process involves a sense of wonder and it reflects her own path to learning. She received her first lessons in painting in Greece, and, in 1958, she moved to London to pursue studies in interior and stage design at Regent Street Polytechnic. However, she changed direction focusing in painting at studios led by modernist painters Frank Auerbach and Leon Kossoff. Her encounter with the professional culture of architecture, and, especially, the creative exchange with her collaborators at OMA and her circle of friends around the Architectural Association (AA) created new opportunities for learning with and from each other.

In 1982, Zenghelis and Vriesendorp joined the AA and began their course Color Workshop, which they taught twice a week for 12 years. At the core of their teaching method was that painting is a mode of thinking and designing rather than a rendering tool or a visualization of an outcome. Zenghelis has said, "our work was not at all about rendering, it was about space imagined and designed through colors and materials." By fostering a studio culture based on play and discovery, Zenghelis and Vriesendorp inspired students to cultivate their spatial imagination and challenge established conventions of architectural representation. Black and white plans, sections, and axonometric drawings that had been the dominant visual language of architecture at the time were replaced by fields of colors and play.

Cities of Choice

From the mid-1980s to today, Zoe Zenghelis has concentrated on her independent artistic practice. Since the break from OMA, her work continues to be inspired by the city and its architecture but becomes unapologetically personal. “My paintings became influenced by my architectural experiences, but they work differently as conceptual views of my own world of images,” says Zenghelis. “My affinity with architecture is thematic and goes into a genre that could be called pure fiction. The straight rendering gets reduced to conceptual elements that are of a different nature; they are in a state of dematerialization to enter the world of imagination.”

Sometimes her paintings allude to a dream-world akin to the surreal cityscapes of René Magritte or Salvador Dalí, at times to the architectonic formations of Russian Constructivists. Zenghelis composes surfaces with abstract geometries and color palettes, but she also invites us to conjure up places and environments. In her paintings, assemblies of forms and fields of color morph into buildings, urban fragments, and urban landscapes. Tectonic plates are carried away by clouds, cities walk on idle fields, and buildings are suspended from the sky. While the titles of the paintings urge recognition by naming these objects; the paintings themselves remain open. They invite viewers to become active participants in the creation of this other possible space, which Zoe Zenghelis calls the City of our Choice.