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In Praise *of* Penumbra

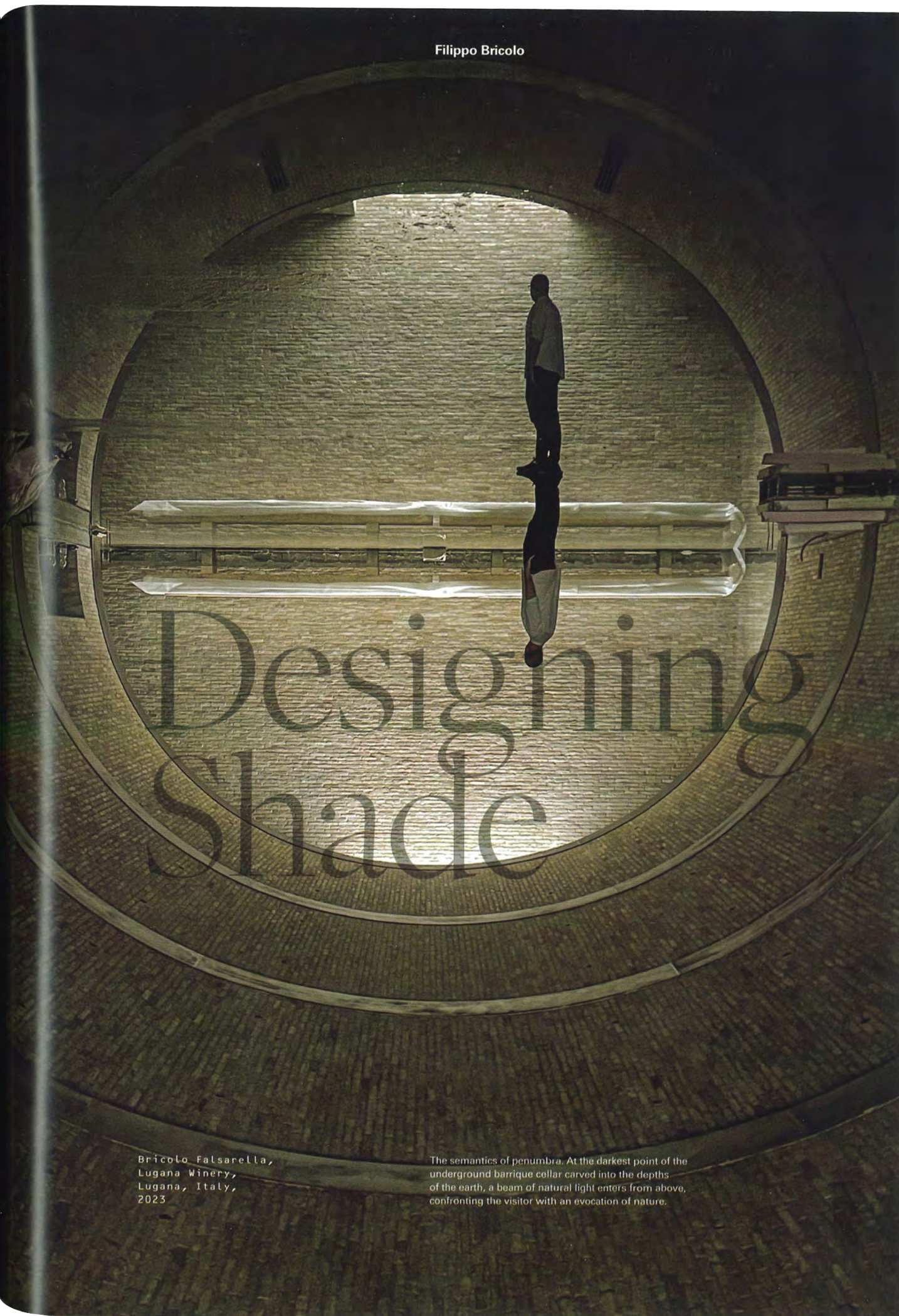
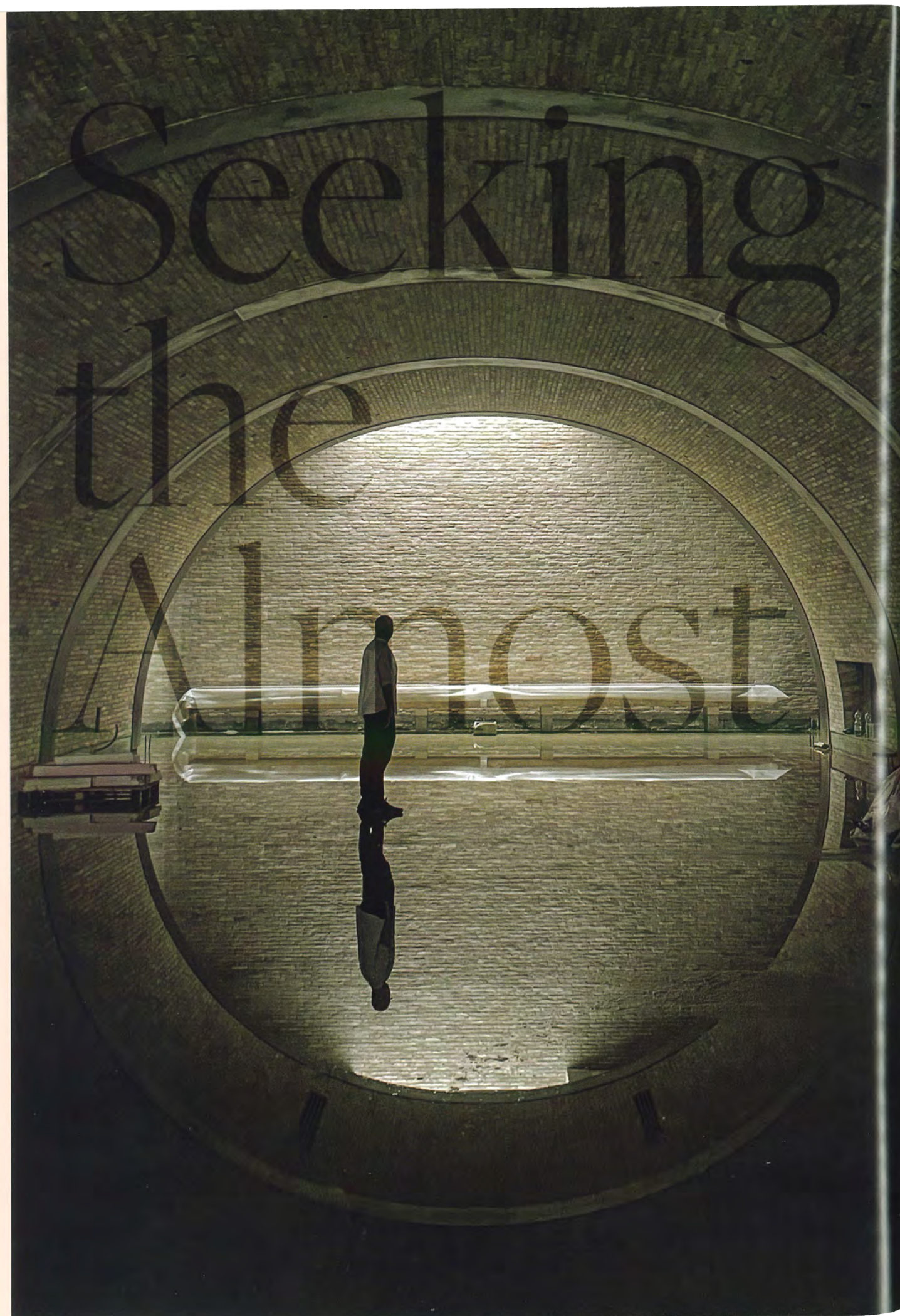
Guest-edited by Agostino De Rosa,
Alessio Bortot and Francesco Bergamo



In Praise of Penumbra

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Francesco Bergamo

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Bricolo Falsarella,
Lugana Winery,
Lugana, Italy,
2023

The semantics of penumbra. At the darkest point of the underground barrique cellar carved into the depths of the earth, a beam of natural light enters from above, confronting the visitor with an evocation of nature.

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and Francesco Bergamo

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**'The ambiguity of penumbra lies
in our difficulty in perceiving
it, in establishing exactly where
it begins and where it ends.'**

— Agostino De Rosa, Alessio Bortot
and Francesco Bergamo

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Bricolo Falsarella,
Lugana Winery,
Lugana, Italy, 2023.
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Paul O Robinson,
Untitled Penumbrae, 2017.
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ABOUT THE GUEST-EDITORS

AGOSTINO DE ROSA
ALESSIO BORTOT
FRANCESCO BERGAMO



Agostino De Rosa is Professor at the Università Iuav di Venezia, Italy, where he teaches Theory and Methods of Architectural Representation and Architectural Drawing. Francesco Bergamo and Alessio Bortot both graduated in architecture with De Rosa as tutor, and are today, respectively, tenure track at the Department of Architecture and Arts at Iuav and associate professor at the Department of Engineering and Architecture at the Università degli Studi di Trieste. They have taken part in many of the research projects coordinated by De Rosa in which the projective nature and applications of light and shadow, and of the penumbra between them, play a major role. Among them are a long-term project on the *Roden Crater* artwork in the Painted Desert region of Northern Arizona by the American artist James Turrell, and a collaboration with the German director Werner Herzog on an animated sequence about the anamorphic corridor painted by Emmanuel Maignan in the Trinità dei Monti church in Rome, for the film *Salt and Fire* (2016). Their studies have also focused on the treatises by the Minim friar, painter and anamorphosis innovator Jean François Nicéron, who was the first to describe a general method for drawing geometrically correct sun shadows in perspective, and began investigating penumbral representation just before his premature death.

Agostino De Rosa coordinates the Surveying and Representing Architecture and the Environment PhD postgraduate programme at the Iuav, and also teaches at Venice International University. He has written several essays on representation, the history of images and land art. His many books include: *Geometrie dell'ombra. Storia e simbolismo della teoria delle ombre* [Shadow Geometry: History and Symbolism of the Theory of Shadows] (CittàStudi, 1996); *La vertigine dello sguardo. tre studi sulla rappresentazione anamorfica* [The Vertigo of the Gaze: Three Studies on Anamorphic Representation] (with Giuseppe D'Acunto, Cafoscarina, 2002); *James Turrell: Geometrie di luce* [Geometry of Light] – *Roden Crater Project* (Electa, 2007); *Jean François Nicéron. Prospettiva, catottrica e magia artificiale* [Perspective, Catoptrics and Artificial Magic] (Aracne, 2013); and *Cecità del vedere. Sull'origine delle immagini* [The Blindness of Seeing: On the Origin of Images] (Aracne, 2021). He has curated exhibitions for many institutions and he coordinates the Imago rerum research unit at Iuav, for which he has edited the proceedings of international seminars.

Francesco Bergamo has a PhD in the Sciences of Design and teaches Drawing for Product and Visual Design, Data Visualisation for Fashion Communication and New Media, and History and Theory of Representational Methods in Architecture. His research focuses on the genealogy and forms of contemporary representational artefacts for architecture, design, politics, art and sonic ecology, and on the mutual relationship between aural and visual cultures. His books include: *Stereotomia. Dalla pietra al digitale* [Stereotomy: From Stone to Digital] (with Gabriella Liva, Cafoscarina, 2010); *Architectural Perspective in the Venetian Villas Along the Riviera Del Brenta in the Province of Venice* (with Massimiliano Ciammaichella, Aracne, 2016); and *Il disegno del paesaggio sonoro* [Soundscape Design] (Mimesis, 2018). With Agostino De Rosa he published 'Geometries of Light and Shadows, from Piero della Francesca to James Turrell' (in *Handbook of the Mathematics of the Arts and Sciences*, 2020), and darkness and penumbra are also relevant in his article 'In Unknown Lands: Epistemology, Representation and Design in the Age of Intelligent Machines' (*Vesper*, 2020). He coordinates the SSH! (Sound Studies Hub) research group and the LaSD (Laboratorio Strumentale per la Didattica) at Iuav.

Alessio Bortot is Doctor Europaeus in Architecture, City and Design, with a specialisation in Representation. He has taught Descriptive Geometry, Advanced Technologies for Representation and Digital 3D Modelling at Iuav, at the Faculty of Engineering of the University of Padova, and at the École National Supérieure des Travaux Publics in Yaoundé (Cameroon). His research focuses on the history of representation and advanced technologies for architecture. He has lectured at international conferences and participated in national and international research projects. He is author of several publications, including: *Modelli digitali. Approcci multidisciplinari alla rappresentazione eidomatica* [Digital Models: Multidisciplinary Approaches to Eidomatic Representation] (with Mark Sonogo, Cafoscarina, 2010); *La Geomatica per la documentazione e la tutela dell'architettura e del paesaggio Veneto* [Geomatics for the Documentation and Protection of Veneto Architecture and Landscape] (Iuav, 2012); and *Emmanuel Maignan e Francesco Borromini. Il progetto di una villa scientifica nella Roma barocca* [Project for a Scientific Villa in Baroque Rome] (LetteraVentidue, 2020). His national and international awards include the Bruno Zevi Prize and the Unione Italiana Disegno (UID) Gaspare De Fiore award. ▀

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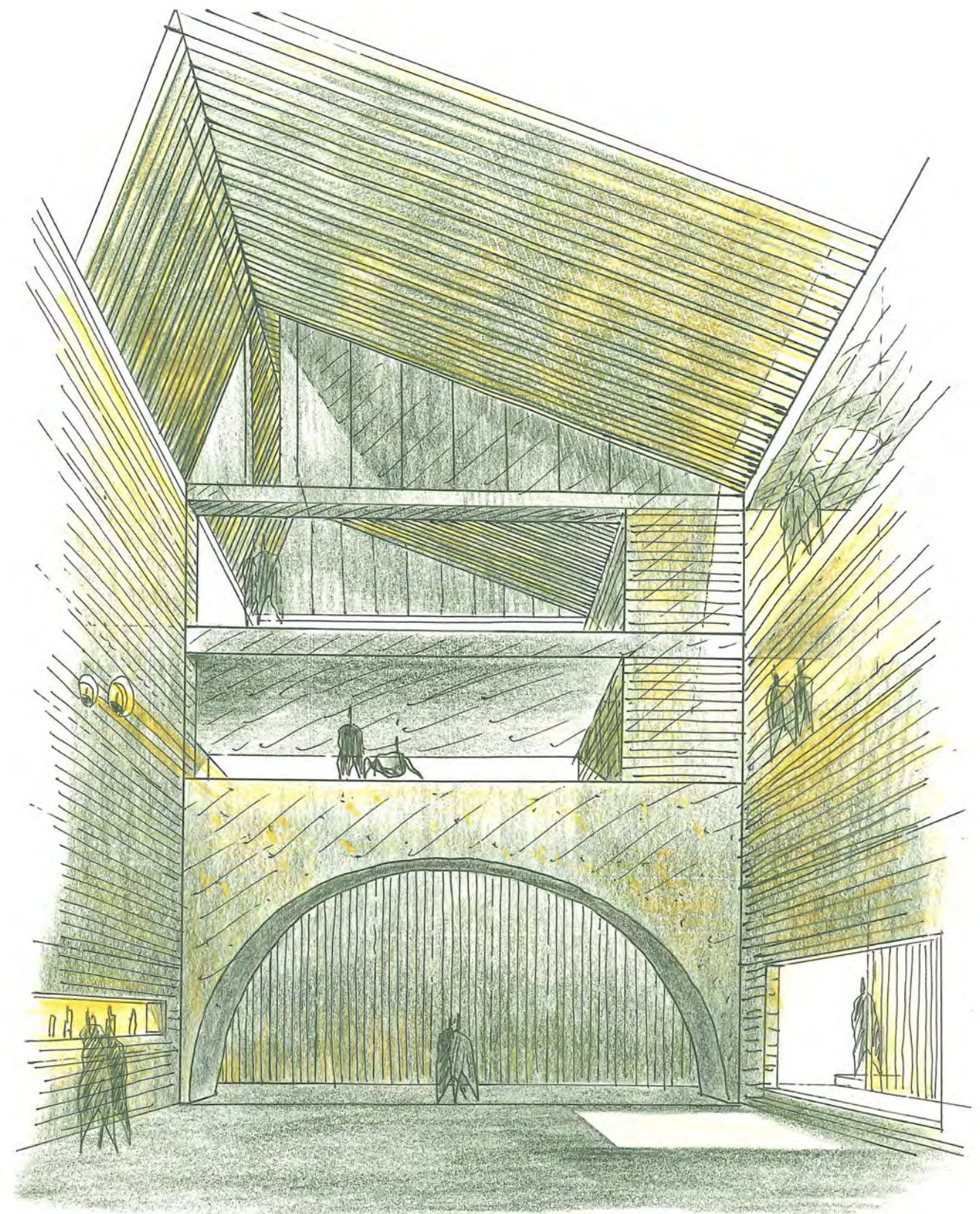
Co-founding partner of Bricolo Falsarella Associati, **Filippo Bricolo** describes himself as a designer of penumbra, and spends much of his studio time choreographing the practice's designs and buildings. He believes the fast pace of contemporary living, communication and technology, with its techno-positivist agenda, has made consideration of the penumbra almost extinct. Here he describes some of the architectural shadowy set-pieces of his office and others.

If someone were to ask me, 'What do you do for a living?', I would say 'I design penumbra'. But that would not be a provocative answer. Every day, in fact, I get up very early, go to my studio and for a few hours I design penumbra spaces in the silence of my room. I don't use computers, renderings or models, but a simple pen and two or three colours, often always the same ones. Slowly I begin to understand how the lights will enter that space, where the more intense shadows will thicken and where the softer ones will linger. It is a slow process that requires many hours and a lot of patience. This process is the opposite of the fast pace of our contemporary times. And it is no coincidence that it is. Because it was the speed of the modern, which comes from the *hybris* of positivism, that killed the value of penumbra.

The more I practise this exercise of consciously drawing the penumbra, the more I realise that these lights and half-shadows have now entered a cone of invisibility and can no longer be seen if one remains in the tight and superficial time of our daily life. One has to go deeper, descend into slow time, where awareness and poetry, which are then the same thing, are produced. By going deeper, one realises that all these things coincide with that lack of definition that is characteristic of the penumbra, with that programmatic indecision that makes it a sort of perennial promise. Drawing the penumbra means wanting to remain in that suspended epiphany, in that almost oblivion that is a little bit rebirth, in that almost shadow, in that almost light, in that almost everything that is then our existence. But these are nothing new. They are things that have always been part of us. They are cultural elements, identity factors, even secular things.

Filippo Bricolo,
Lugana Winery drawing,
Lugana, Italy,
2023

Drawing the penumbra. It is penumbra, and not space, that is the real subject of the drawings Bricolo has been making every day for years. Drawing is the best way to free the penumbra from the cone of invisibility into which it has fallen. To draw is to see consciously.



We see the blackness
of the marble that
welcomes us at the
entrance almost as
if it wants to coincide
with the shadow

Deep Meaning

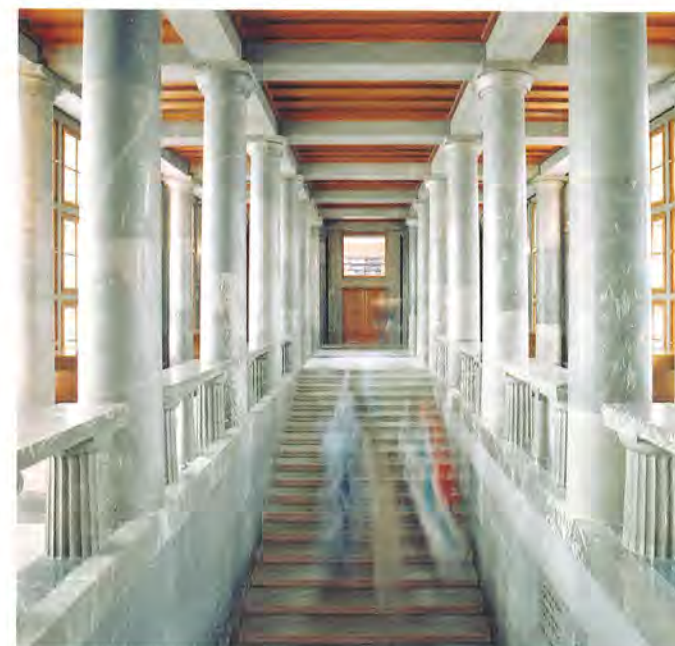
I cannot say whether the penumbra can be traced back to the laws of semantics. Many might disagree with this fact. Yet, somehow, the penumbra is a bearer of meanings that we all know how to read and experience if only we decide to access its slow time. This is what Jože Plečnik and Gunnar Asplund wanted to suggest to us in drawing those dark staircases of theirs that intentionally lead us to the rediscovered light of knowledge. When we think of the spaces in semi-darkness, of the black staircase in Plečnik's National and University Library in Ljubljana, Slovenia (1941) or the similar ones in Asplund's Stockholm Public Library, Sweden (opened 1928), we see them as one spatial and experiential message telling us about the possibilities of semi-darkness. We see the blackness of the marble that welcomes us at the entrance almost as if it wants to coincide with the shadow, almost as if it wants to merge with it, and then we see this rediscovered union between architecture and darkness, accompanying us up the dark staircase to the very clear space of the main hall invaded by the allusive transcendence of full light.

These two sequences, which represent in a small space the ideal path of our existence, seem to demonstrate how penumbra can be an element of a project that can even claim its own centrality due to its strong bearing of meaning and potential. It is a sense, in fact, that finds its effectiveness by exploiting that fertile non-verbality that is proper to the language of architecture. Through this process of happy indefiniteness, we can easily overcome the binding and invalidating plane of conceptual contents and logical structures typical of the word, arriving at designing spaces that open up to an encounter with ourselves. For this ability to speak to us, the penumbra is a spatial gradient of great importance for architecture because it can bring it closer to the mysterious intensity of poetry. If poets, in fact, wrote their poems in an attempt to reduce the reductionism brought about by concepts, architects can find in the allusiveness of the penumbra a device that, through its natural veiling, invites the inhabitants of our spaces to unveil themselves and search for an awareness.

Bricolo Falsarella Associati's design for a winery in Lugana, Italy (2023) sought this path, creating a descending and slow movement that progressively leads from the light of the vision of the vineyards to the penumbra of the barrique cellar located deep inside the soil. Descending downwards, the natural lights, due to architectural devices, slowly reduce their presence and visitors find themselves imperceptibly passing from light to darkness. At the end of the path, at the darkest point, a natural light descends on the rough wall made of recycled bricks, bringing into the depths of the earth the evocation of the cyclical nature so important for our life and for the production of wine.

Gunnar Asplund,
Stockholm Public Library,
Stockholm, Sweden,
1928

The black-walled staircase leads to the circular
central space bathed in natural light.



Jože Plečnik,
National and University Library,
Ljubljana, Slovenia,
1941

The dark staircase leading to the
full light of the reading room.



Bricolo Falsarella,
Villa Saccomani,
Sommacampagna, Italy,
2017

Penumbra and evocation. Inviting awareness, every
morning a ray of grazing light enters the penumbra
space and glides over the rough stone wall for a few
minutes before disappearing.

Matter, Shadows and Lights

This evocative light, always present in our architecture, reminds me of the beautiful book that French poet and art historian Yves Bonnefoy dedicated to the American realist painter Edward Hopper. The book has a beautiful title, *La fotosintesi dell'essere* (*The Photosynthesis of Being*),¹ and describes the paintings pervaded by a sense of intense expectation where suspended and solitary souls are portrayed in the act of gazing at an evocative light. Bonnefoy goes so far as to define these paintings as 'annunciations without theology',² forging a definition that very effectively conveys the idea of light entering the penumbra as a message, as a revealing entity. This idea of light as message ran through the entire history of pre-20th-century architecture and continued beyond thanks to the work of some doubtful masters who wanted to oppose the whiteness of the International Style with a domestic sacredness of great intensity. We need only think of the works of architects such as Dom Hans van der Laan, Sigurd Lewerentz, Juliaan Lampens, just to mention the Europeans who have always been imbued with this sense of time, sedimentation and humble wear and tear. Their architectures are full of intense spaces in which the idea of light as annunciation that has always been part of Mediterranean culture is alive. This is perhaps what Le Corbusier had found inside the ruins of Hadrian's Villa and had tried to bring back forcefully in the last 15 years of his life, but it is above all what Postmodernism had not understood – that what modernity had erased was not history in its formal manifestation, but history in its relationship to structure, light, penumbra, matter and construction, and that without these aspects, form lost its meaning because sense simply derived from the inseparable relationship of a millenary adventure made up of dialogues between matter, shadow and light.

Of all the 20th-century spaces where the relationship between shadow and evocation is most intense, the most poignant is probably the central space of Can Lis (1972), Jorn Utzon's house in Majorca. Here, a ray of light enters the penumbra gliding diagonally across the rough masonry for a few minutes. It enters through a small hole in the stone masonry, a hole that takes on the task of confronting us with the fleetingness of existence. Its significance perhaps implies that it can be something more than a cut in the wall and is meant as an invitation – the best condition for architecture, and one that Bricolo Falsarella has tried to create in many of our works. For example, such a window can be found in the practice's restoration of the rustic annexes of the 18th-century Villa Saccomani in the moraine hills of Lake Garda in Italy (2017). Every day, when the sun rises, a ray enters the room and moves over the rough wall of moraine stones. Like the most intense moments of our lives, the ray lasts only a few minutes, during which we witness this dance between light and penumbra.

Designing a Crisis

Penumbra and light are complementary opposites that cannot exist independently. Between them there is a mutual alley that inextricably binds them together. To say this is perhaps almost banal, but from this apparent banality may arise instead a consideration of great impact for architecture, namely that designing penumbra always means designing a crisis. On this

reasoning, it is necessary to focus on questioning ourselves in order to move towards an anti-iconic and non-assertive architecture that can approach the complex motions of the human soul. Designing a crisis means giving presence in a project to the duplicity of our feelings, always suspended between desire and impediment, between light and darkness. This duplicity is the principle of every narrative and the main condition of the coexistence of opposites that is the penumbra.

In the East Wing of the Castelvecchio Museum in Verona, Italy (2018), Bricolo Falsarella designed the passage between the light area of the entrance and the space in semi-darkness to be dedicated to the Mosaic Room using a dichotomy of elements: an iron portal invites one to enter while a panel seems to oppose it. It is the trigger of a gentle crisis that forms an atmospheric threshold that preludes the entrance of the penumbra by bringing about a necessary slowdown. Beyond the panel is a fragment of a Roman mosaic suspended in the half-light; what is missing is speaking through its absence. Here, the undefined of the penumbra mingles with the unfinished of the mosaic fragment on display, encouraging the observer to question the image. The act of visiting the museum therefore entrusts individuals with the task of questioning the relationship between the uncertainty of the penumbra and the imperfection of the fragment.



Bricolo Falsarella,
Castelvecchio Museum
East Wing,
Verona, Italy,
2018

above: Penumbra and the undefined. A fragment of a Roman mosaic is suspended in the semi-darkness of the room, absence blending with the indefiniteness of the penumbra, inviting the observer to question the scene.

opposite: Designing the crisis. To design the penumbra is to design a crisis: light and shadow, affirmation and negation as in this portal based on a dichotomy of invitation and denial that determines a slowdown before entering the penumbra space of the Mosaic Room.



Bricolo Falsarella,
Gorgo Winery,
Verona, Italy,
2022

right: Penumbra and the imperfect as a verbal form. Dialoguing with the indefiniteness of the penumbra, the building seeks the path of a timeless architecture by attempting to decline the narrative of spaces in the allusive verbal form of the imperfect.



Today, architects need to respond to the anaesthesia of gaze that is characteristic of the new age of the overabundance of images. In the places where I was born and have lived, in the rural areas around Lake Garda in northern Italy, there is an intimate historical relationship between the rough surfaces of walls and shadow, and the strength of these places lies in this age-old love affair. We need to take the baton from the shadows that surround us and bring them back in new, imprecise walls that tell of belonging and permanence. More than an atmospheric manifestation, the relationship between penumbra and imperfection is a fundamental element of my culture. But not just the physical imperfection of rough masonry; the imperfect as a temporal action. In the Italian language, the verbal form *imperfetto* is used to set a story in an undefined past time. The Bricolo Falsarella studio seeks to do the same in architecture in creating works that can be declined in the form of the imperfect and projected within the suspended and activating time of the penumbra. As long as we remain in the penumbra, we will continue to be seekers. ∞

Notes

1. Yves Bonnefoy, *Eduard Hopper: La fotosintesi dell'essere*, Abscondita (Milan), 2018. See also Yves Bonnefoy, 'The Photosynthesis of Being', in Musée Cantini and Editions Adam Biro (eds), *Eduard Hopper*, Tabard Press (New York), 1989, pp 15–28.
2. Bonnefoy, *Eduard Hopper, La fotosintesi dell'essere*, op cit, p 48.

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In Praise of Penumbra

Penumbra, from the Latin *paene* (almost) and *umbra* (shadow), can be defined as an intermediate zone of transition between light and shadow. Penumbra is therefore that space, both physical and imaginary, where everything is possible: it is the place of the uncanny, where presence and/or absence can produce wonder or horror.

This Δ positions this archetype in the contemporary world of architecture, investigating the ways it permeates different expressive forms – from critical theory to architectural drawing, from design and planning to photography. The contributors illustrate and discuss how penumbra has shaped their creativity and modified their approach to the design process. As a physical phenomenon, penumbra has supra-historical and global connotations; nonetheless, different cultures elaborate its symbolism in different ways. Its wide semantic spectrum powerfully inspires creative forms that hover between fullness and emptiness, presence and absence, past and future. The critical perspectives in this issue offer a wide analysis of penumbra's expressive potential and the key to an in-depth understanding of this elusive layer of reality.

Δ ARCHITECTURAL DESIGN

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