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# LECTURE



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MANTOVARCHITETTURA 2025  
"ARCHITECTURE AND CONFLICT"*

EDITED BY SOFIA CELLI (POLITECNICO DI MILANO), ELENA FIORETTO (POLITECNICO DI MILANO) AND ELENA POZZI (MINISTERO DELLA CULTURA)

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# BEYOND LENS AND SKETCH *ANDREA BRUNO IN AFGHANISTAN, BETWEEN DRAWING AND PHOTOGRAPHY*

By Giorgio Danesi (Università Politecnica delle Marche and Università Iuav di Venezia) and Fabio Marino (Politecnico di Milano)

Throughout his long and distinguished career, during which he was deeply involved in architectural conservation, the architect Andrea Bruno (1931–2025) cultivated an unconventional dialogue with built heritage, combining careful preservation with a deliberate and functional repossession of it. He developed an approach in which transformation was essential for the survival of historical structures, rather than a threat to their integrity<sup>1</sup>. From the 1960s his lasting collaborations with UNESCO, took him to sites across the Mediterranean, the Middle East and Central Asia, with Afghanistan at the center. For more than five decades, Bruno carried out surveys, conservation projects and advisory missions at landmarks such as the Buddhas of Bamiyan, the Minaret of Jam and the Citadel of Herat. These interventions unfolded in contexts of political instability, conflicts and iconoclastic violence, where the protection of monuments is inseparable from broader questions of social resilience and cultural rights<sup>2</sup>.

In 2019, the extensive documentation produced over this trajectory - including drawings, sketchbooks, photographs, technical reports - was donated by the architect to the Università Iuav di Venezia, where it is now preserved and made accessible as the *Andrea Bruno Fund* within the Archivio Progetti. Among its sections, the materials dedicated to Afghanistan, largely digitised, stand out for its breadth and coherence, tracing Bruno's long-term relationship with a country repeatedly affected by wars and geopolitical tensions. The following paragraphs highlight two complementary tools that accompanied the architect on each mission: his travel sketchbooks and cameras. From the 1960s onwards, Andrea Bruno travelled with a notebook in one hand and a camera in the other, using drawing and photography as intertwined ways of understanding and engaging with heritage in periods of conflict and instability.

## TRACES OF MEMORY IN THE AFGHAN SKETCHBOOKS

Across his long life, Bruno considered drawing both as a daily practice and a fundamental instrument of his profession. From his early years at the Faculty of Architecture of the Politecnico di Torino in the 1950s to his most recent

works, he meticulously preserved an extensive collection of drawings. This corpus includes sketches, academic design exercises, views of Turin, diary pages, travel notes and much more. At its core are the small pocket sketchbooks, sorted by year and topic, that accompanied him on his travels around the world. These modest objects, sometimes worn by use, contain a vast and surprisingly coherent production: surveys, technical notes, but also images that go beyond simple documentation and search for what lies beyond the visible.

It was in Afghanistan, where Bruno first arrived in 1960, accompanying Giuseppe Tucci and the ISMEO missions<sup>3</sup>, that this practice of filling sketchbooks found its full expression. Accustomed to drawing Turin, moving between strongly expressive accents and the precision learned in Mario Passanti's open-air lessons, he suddenly found himself immersed in a context different in scale, form and culture. Drawing thus became a means to orient oneself, to understand, to measure: the sheets dedicated to the survey of monuments reveal a rigorous line, dense with notes and comparisons, and show how the graphic gesture often anticipate the project, shaping and questioning it.

The Afghan sketchbooks unfold a series of unusual perspectives, unexpected viewpoints, and visual montages interacting across different planes. In a series of video interviews focused on his drawings<sup>4</sup>, conducted during the preparation of a book on his drawings<sup>5</sup>, Bruno speaks of the need to go "beyond boundaries". Photography, he explains, captures the dimensional limit of a surface, whereas drawing instead allows viewers to perceive "behind, above, below", as if it were a succession of images taken from unreachable points. Over forty years, Bruno recorded not only what he saw, but also what he feared and hoped for: the fragility of monuments, the destructions of war, and the uncertainties surrounding each intervention. Drawing becomes a repository to which he could return over time, a personal archive gathering testimonies, intuitions and reconsiderations. He never spoke of sketches, but of drawings and *di-sogni* [*sogni* means dreams in Italian], each one "unique and repeatable, always authentic".

Fully aware of the value of this heritage, Bruno devoted considerable care to its archiving. Browsing the collections he personally organised, the sequential logic of many drawings becomes evident: a subject recurs, shifts, and is explored from different angles, tracing the development of thought. This is evident in his encounter with the great Buddha of Bamiyan in the 1960s, in the views of the Minaret of Jam from the same period, and in scenes of daily life observed in a country undergoing radical transformations, from Soviet occupation to American intervention. His use of colour is equally sparing and intentional, while words - short notes and marginal thoughts - remain a constant presence, completing the image.

When Bruno returned to Afghanistan in 2002, following the destruction of the Buddhas, the sketchbooks registered a different tone, more poetic and suspended. Facing the Minaret of Jam, once again under threat, his notes intertwine with reflections on the duration and fragility of a monument that, as he wrote in a sketch, "may never end, may have no beginning". His drawings reveal the strength of a line shaped by the sensibilities of an architect and a dreamer, guided by an ethical impulse refined through a long, thoughtful wandering.

## THE ROLE OF PHOTOGRAPHY IN THE AFGHAN CORPUS

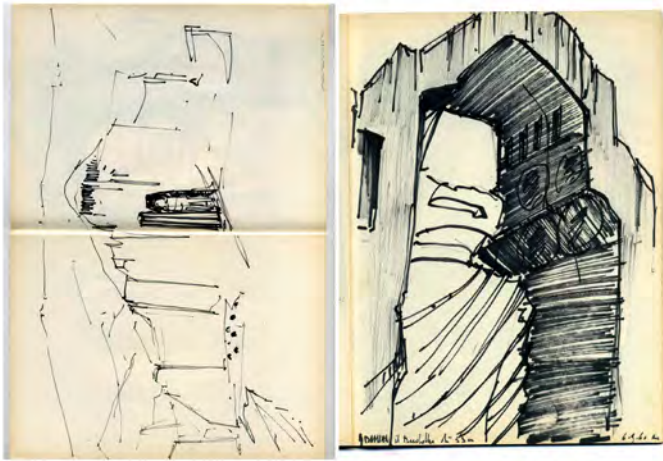
Within the *Andrea Bruno Fund*, the Afghan materials include a dense photographic corpus comprising several hundred images produced between

the early 1960s and the 2010s. While the notebooks record impressions, constructive details and rapid notes, the photographs capture situations in their spatial and material complexity: the encounter between monuments and landscape, the condition of decorated surfaces, the organisation of building sites, the gestures of craftsmen and the everyday life of communities marked by conflict. For this selection, the focus has been placed on photographs from the 1960s, which are of particular depth and are often dedicated to monuments that no longer exist as a result of iconoclastic destruction, such as the Bamiyan statues demolished by Taliban attacks in 2001. In those years Bruno used a *Rolleiflex* camera, later replaced by a *Hasselblad*, both producing square-format images. Once back in his studio, these materials became the basis for technical drawings and projects of restoration, consolidation or reconstruction.

A first group of shots is devoted to the relationship between architecture and territory. For example, the sequences on the Buddhas of Bamiyan and the Minaret of Jam show how Bruno constructs viewpoints that situate the monument within a wider landscape. Distant shots frame the sites within the morphology of the valley or the river; closer views progressively isolate the architectural bodies, until only the rock face or the cylindrical shaft of the minaret occupy the square frame. The passage from panoramas to details reveals an operational use of photography as a tool for reading scales, hierarchies and vulnerabilities. Equally important is the series focused on surfaces and materials. Bruno documents the textures of Afghan monuments: incised brickwork, glazed tiles, carved rock. Many photographs concentrate on zones of loss, fractures in the decorative skin, detachments between facing and structural core. These images become working documents that support the diagnosis of decay, the mapping of lacunae and, later, the design of reintegration strategies based on compatibility and distinguishability.

Another nucleus concerns construction sites and local labour. The documentation of the restoration of the Timurid mausoleum of Abdur Razzaq in Ghazni follows the stages of the work: shoring, underpinning of foundations, reconstruction of collapsed vaults and walls, cleaning of interiors, and the installation of a small archaeological museum. The images underline the role of Afghan workers, portrayed while handling bricks and mortar, checking new masonry with plumb lines, or assembling steel and glass display cases. Photography thus records not only the transformations of the monument, but also the collaborative dimension of the chantier.

Especially after the Taliban destructions, these photographs now assume the role of visual testimony, reconstructing the arc that precedes and follows the loss: images of the statues still standing, photographs taken during the demolition, views of the empty niches and the pulverised rock. Within the archive, the same images bear witness to Bruno's ethical position against literal reconstruction and in favour of reversible, contemporary devices to evoke the absent statues. Seen from today's perspective, the Afghan photographs of the Andrea Bruno Fund are no longer only operational documents, but archival objects that make it possible to retrace the intersection between architecture and conflict. They reveal how the camera accompanied, in parallel with the sketchbook, a practice of conservation based on close reading of places and systematic documentation of change. In the context of a country repeatedly devastated by war, these images help to recompose a visual memory that is at once professional and personal<sup>6</sup>.



ARCHIVE OF AFGHANISTAN - Inventory of Drawings: Carnet

575 ARCHIVE OF AFGHANISTAN - Inventory of Drawings: Carnet

587

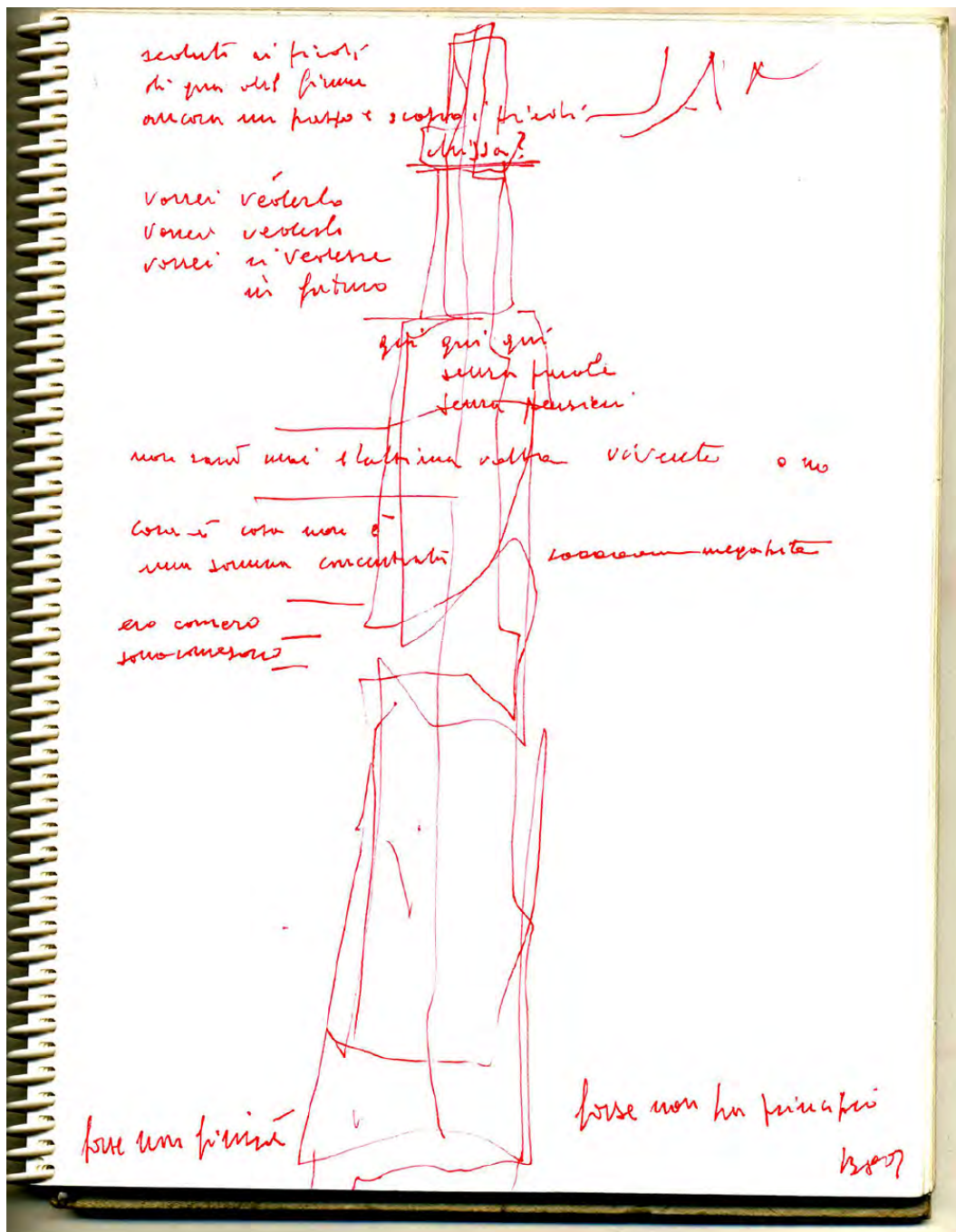
A. Bruno, The Great Buddha of Bamyan, 1960

A. Bruno, Heading to Jam, ca. 1962



A. Bruno, Scenes from Kabul, and from the construction site of the Minaret of Jam, 2005

SKETCHES FROM THE SERIES ARCHIVE OF AFGHANISTAN - INVENTORY OF DRAWINGS: CARNET FILE (IUAV ARCHIVIO PROGETTI, ANDREA BRUNO COLLECTION)



Notes on the Minaret of Jam, 2002, Sketch from the series ARCHIVE OF AFGHANISTAN - Inventory of Drawings: Carnet File (luav Archivio Progetti, Andrea Bruno Collection)

A. Bruno, Flight over the Bamiyan Valley. In the background, the cliff of the Buddhas, ca. 1960-1964

A. Bruno, Shot documenting one of the Bamiyan statues and its surrounding landscape, before its destruction in 2001, ca. 1960-1961

A. Bruno, The Minaret of Jam. The upward view highlights both the complexity of the decorative scheme and the critical state of conservation of the monument, ca. 1960-1964

A. Bruno, Mausoleum of Abdur Razzaq in Ghazni. Workers carry out integrations of decayed masonry using new bricks, guided by plumb lines, ca. 1960-1966

PHOTOGRAPHS TAKEN WITH A 6×6 CM ANALOGUE ROLLEIFLEX (IUAV ARCHIVIO PROGETTI, ANDREA BRUNO COLLECTION)

## NOTES

[1] For a more in-depth understanding of Andrea Bruno's work, the following publications are particularly recommended: Di Giuda, Giuseppe M., Dulio, Roberto, and Fabio Marino. 2023. *Andrea Bruno: opere e progetti (1956-2016)*. Milano: Electa; Danesi, Giorgio. 2025. *Il Progetto del limite. Tempo, materia e monumento nell'opera di Andrea Bruno*. Treviso: Anteferma.

[2] Regarding Andrea Bruno's travels and projects in Afghanistan, we would like to highlight the exhibition *Andrea Bruno Afghanistan*, curated by Giorgio Danesi and Sara Di Resta with Ugo Bruno, held at the Università luav di Venezia (Tolentini campus) from 19 February to 6 March 2025. We also draw attention to the forthcoming article: Danesi, Giorgio, and Sara Di Resta. 2026. "Andrea Bruno and Afghanistan: Memory, Restoration, and Cultural Landscapes between the 20th and 21st Centuries", currently in press for the journal *Restauro Archeologico*.

[3] Giuseppe Tucci (1894-1994) was one of the most authoritative and renowned orientalists, as well as a prominent figure in twentieth-century Italian culture. He was among the few who successfully combined the breadth of theoretical research with an uncommon organizational acumen, which culminated in the founding of ISMEO (Institute for the Middle and Far East) in 1933.

[4] See, "Renowned Italian architect Andrea Bruno talks about his New York drawings." Accessed November, 2025. <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=NlefYDskFBU&t=16s>.

[5] See Janulardo, Ettore. 2020. *Andrea Bruno segni e disegni inediti*. Roma-Bristol: L'Erma di Bretschneider.

[6] The brief introduction to Andrea Bruno and his role in Afghanistan was written by both authors; the paragraph dedicated to the role of notebooks and sketches during the architect's travels and assignments in Afghanistan was signed by Fabio Marino, while the paragraph on the role of photography in the same contexts was authored by Giorgio Danesi.



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