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Reclaiming Architectural Imagination through Material Artefacts and Storytelling

*By Stephen Alexander Wischer**

In an age increasingly shaped by algorithmic systems and artificial intelligence, architecture risks being reduced to data-driven efficiency at the expense of imagination and cultural depth. This paper argues that artefactual tools and processes—rooted in material resistance, embodied making, and language—are essential to design as a disclosure of cultural meaning. Drawing upon phenomenology and hermeneutics, it situates artefact-making as a poetic and interpretive practice that mediates between memory, material, and imagination. Case studies from graduate thesis studios and the Speculative Architecture exhibition series at North Dakota State University demonstrate how artefacts cultivate storytelling and embody reflection, enabling students to recover architecture's role as a shared cultural act. By reframing design as a site for poetic inquiry and ethical responsibility, this work contributes to global discourse on architectural education, arguing that artefacts sustain imagination in the face of technological abstraction.

Introduction

Architecture is a discipline of building *and* of storytelling—an imaginative and embodied practice that draws space, time, and memory into situations that speak back to us. As Marco Frascari suggests, practical and theoretical architectural knowledge has historically been passed on not primarily through scaled drawings or models but through storytelling, which helped shape the skillful crafting of buildings and with it our understanding of the world.[1] As contemporary cognitive science and neuroscience demonstrate, the external world profoundly influences the internal world of thoughts and emotions; thus architecture remains a fundamentally human practice for situating ourselves meaningfully in that world.

As Paul Emmons notes, architectural representation is an inherently fictional practice—one that operates through acts of make-believe—which is storytelling. Today, though, with architects increasingly distanced from cultural storytelling *and* the physical act of building, the representations we employ gain renewed significance. Architects' drawings, models, and artefacts are not neutral or passive instruments, mere previews of future buildings; Emmons suggests that drawings and models are poetic constructs that catalyze thought and invite us to envision a world not yet

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1. Marco Frascari's, *Eleven Exercises in the Art of Architectural Drawing: Slow Food for the Architect's Imagination* (London: Routledge, 2011), 6; "An architectural good-life can be built, explained and taught only through storytelling," in *Reading Architecture and Culture: Researching Buildings, Spaces and Documents*, ed. Adam Sharr (London: Routledge, 2012), 228.

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realized.[2] They are active sites of interpretive inquiry where latent meanings are unearthed and imaginative possibilities emerge. In this sense, modern architectural making is always projective, gesturing toward something that does not yet exist.

At its core, architecture requires the imagination to proceed along any line of its own representation, a demand made more remarkable given persistent tension between the so-called "real world" and the imaginatively generative dimensions of design. While speculative drawing practices have increasingly drawn upon interdisciplinary influences to enhance architectural storytelling, conventional representational modes—such as orthographic drawings, models, and perspectival renderings—have, since the Enlightenment, largely functioned as mediators between concept and construction through an isotropic, Cartesian understanding of space.[3] Employed uncritically, these tools become subordinate to logics of utility and production and to representational systems that tend to freeze time and place us away from the object being depicted. In contrast, alternative models—artefacts not intended as finalized representations but as evolving *thought-objects*—open interpretive and imaginative spaces and thus invite a more authentic engagement with the translational process of architecture from the "bottom up" so stories, ideas, and outcomes can emerge from embodied encounters.

Such thinking is not new. Levent Kara explores how the temporally rich, culturally embedded medium of film can provoke architectural ideation beyond static forms of representation, opening new spatial and narrative possibilities.[4] Recent contributions to the *Athens Journal of Architecture* echo the emphasis on interdisciplinary influence and narrative interpretation, exploring place not as a fixed entity but as something that emerges through layered stories, memory, and material engagement.[5]

The alternative approaches to architectural representation this paper explores follow a similar line of inquiry rooted in the critical tradition of theoretical architectural projects initiated by Piranesi, Boullée, and Lequeu—important precedents suggesting that architectural representations are dynamic, narrative structures through which architects think, dream, and reimagine the world.[6] Marco Frascari has called this the

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2. Paul Emmons, "Adaptations" in *Drawing Imagining Building: Embodiment in Architectural Design Practices*," 205.

3. Martina D'Alessandro's essay *"Oswald Mathias Ungers and Sol LeWitt: Variations"* (*Athens Journal of Architecture* 10, no. 4, 2024) explores a similar permeability between art and architecture where conceptual art becomes a catalyst for architectural ideation. I extend that line of inquiry to examine how artefacts function not as representations of resolved form, but as poetic instruments of thought, where ambiguity and narrative actively shape architectural understanding.

4. Levent Kara, "Representation vs. Ideation in the Architectural Design Process," *Athens Journal of Architecture* 2, no. 1 (2016): 27-44.

5. Giuseppe Resta, "Mapping the Invisible: Problems of Interpretation and Representation of Hormuz Island, Iran," *Athens Journal of Architecture* 11, no. 2 (2025): 201-232.

6. As Louise Pelletier and Alberto Pérez-Gómez have argued, the tradition of theoretical architectural projects emerged most forcefully in the early modern period, particularly during the Enlightenment, as a response to the fragmentation of knowledge and the rise of mechanistic worldviews. In works such as *Architecture and the Crisis of Modern Science*, Pérez-Gómez traces how Piranesi, Boullée, and Lequeu went beyond representation to turn drawing into a poetic and critical medium. They engaged the project as a speculative act—an instrument for restoring meaning in a world increasingly defined by abstraction, quantification, and instrumental reason. Their unbuilt works were not failures of execution, but intentional provocations that used representation to challenge dominant notions of

"construction of architectural thought" as "cosmopoesis," where representational models are both stories and machines for making stories.[7] This mode of making proposes that architecture exists not only in finalized buildings but also within the act of representation itself.

Three research questions guide the investigation in this paper: How can artefacts function as interpretive and imaginative tools in architectural pedagogy? How does material resistance and storytelling contribute to embodied design processes? How might artefact-making recalibrate architecture's relationship with technology and representation in a digital age? Taken together, these questions ask how artefacts might operate as mediators between memory, material, and imagination, and how such an approach may recalibrate architectural pedagogy in today's architectural education. This investigation does not advocate a retreat from digital practice but a recovery of its embodied and interpretive core. The same poetic imagination that once animated drawing and craft can, when consciously engaged, transform contemporary tools from instruments of abstraction into agents of rediscovery. In this sense, artefactual making bridges past and future modes of representation, inviting technology back into dialogue with the human body and cultural memory.

This paper's contribution is to demonstrate how artefact-making, when framed through phenomenology and hermeneutics, can serve as a pedagogical method for recovering architectural imagination in a digital era.

Theoretical Foundation

To elucidate artefact-making's value as a critical counterpoint to reductive representations and technological production, this article situates physical creative modeling practices within broader philosophical and pedagogical frameworks.[8] It builds on well-known phenomenological and hermeneutic insights, as well as more than a decade of research into Anselm Kiefer's representational strategies—including his poetic integration of material, memory, and spatial imagination at La Ribaute—to investigate pedagogical and representational tools through which architecture continues to act as a vessel for shared storytelling and embodied knowledge.[9]

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space, time, and the human condition. In this lineage, theoretical projects are acts of *cosmopoiesis*—world-making—through which architecture regains its philosophical and cultural depth.

7. Marco Frascari, *Eleven Exercises in the Art of Architectural Drawing: Slow Food for the Architect's Imagination* (London: Routledge, 2011), 21-28 and his "An Architectural good-life can be built, explained and taught only through storytelling," in *Reading Architecture and Culture* (London: Routledge, 2012), 226.

8. My approach is especially critical of representational tools found in BIM software that often prioritizes efficiency, standardization, and technical resolution over ambiguity, narrative, and material exploration (ArchiCAD, Revit, Vectorworks, etc.). Such platforms tend to reduce architectural thinking to predefined outcomes, limiting the imaginative and phenomenological depth artefact-making can foster.

9. Kiefer's work, marked by a deep integration of material, myth, memory, and spatial imagination, offers a compelling analogue for alternative architectural modeling practices that resist closure and invite interpretive depth. For reference to the architectural significance of his situated art practice, see Stephen Wischer, *Architectural Lessons from Anselm Kiefer* (PhD diss., McGill University, 2020); and Wischer, "The Architecture of Anselm Kiefer: La Ribaute and the Space of

To approach this expanded field of representational possibilities, I consider architectural artefacts as *tools* through the hermeneutic thought of Paul Ricoeur and Martin Heidegger, phenomenological insights of Maurice Merleau-Ponty, and material theory of Christopher Bardt—who all challenge the dominance of technological rationalism, proposing instead that architecture arises from embodied interpretation, poetic engagement, and material resistance. Drawing from recent student projects created in graduate-level studios at North Dakota State University (NDSU) and displayed in the *Speculative Architecture and Oblique Representation* annual exhibition curated by Anthony Faris, I explore how alternative models open a space of translation between fiction and form, image and meaning. These students, by engaging in a layered and recursive process of making, experience a design methodology that reclaims depth, opacity, and wonder as vital to architectural imagination and storytelling. The artefacts they make preserve the uniqueness of their individual visions, resisting the homogenization that often results from overly rationalized software environments.

The examples I've selected reveal how closely theory and practice—thinking and making—are intertwined, where understanding the architectural proposal arises through embodied interpretation and linguistic imagination. They demonstrate artefact-making as a contemporary hermeneutic act—revealing architecture not as fixed form, but as an unfolding of meaning through situated, interpretive, and synesthetic engagement.

Following Pelletier, Pérez-Gómez, Bardt, and Lisa Landrum, I emphasize that our tools are never *neutral*; rather, the things we do as architects shape how we design and what we come to know through the action of designing, as a verb. In other words, the examples emphasize *making as a form of thinking*, just as *techne*, in its original meaning, was a way of revealing the world and not simply technique or utility. As Heidegger suggests, this revealing is often hidden by the reductive tendencies of modern technology, a concern echoed by Tzonis and Lefaivre in their call to reconnect architecture analogically with deeper cultural and poetic roots.[10]

To what degree, then, might our representational tools allow poetic meanings to emerge in our encounter with materials situated in the spatiality and temporality of embodied experience? While every representational act has imaginative potential, artefactual processes are uniquely dialogical: they slow perception and reawaken the reciprocal exchange between thought and matter. By engaging resistance rather than ease, they sustain a depth of reflection that purely visual or algorithmic modes too readily bypass.

Dramatic Representation," in *Chora: Intervals in the Philosophy of Architecture*, vol. 7, ed. Alberto Pérez-Gómez and Stephen Parcell (Montreal & Kingston: McGill-Queen's University Press, 2016), 303-22.

10. In "The Machine in Architectural Thinking," Liane Lefaivre and Alexander Tzonis outline the fundamental shift from premodern analogical thinking—rooted in symbolic, narrative, and cosmological frameworks—to modern productive thinking characterized by mechanistic logic, standardization, and instrumental rationality. They highlight how this transition reoriented architectural representation away from poetic revelation toward technological efficiency.

Artefacts as a Storytelling Tool

In his 1954 essay "The Question Concerning Technology," Heidegger warned that under the dominant mode of technological thinking, the modern world was increasingly perceived as *Bestand*—a "standing-reserve" of resources ready to be optimized, extracted, and controlled. This instrumental worldview, which arose in tandem with the rise of Positivism, introduced a profound bifurcation between the internal, subjective world of human experience and an objectified, external realm. It left the intersubjective realities of shared human meaning (stories held to be of importance in culture) to be vastly misunderstood as lesser forms of knowledge. This split underscores much of modern scientific thought and has deeply influenced architectural representation, particularly through the privileging of visuality and objectivity in design processes.

Pérez-Gómez and Pelletier trace this transformation in the history of architectural thought, arguing that the advent of linear perspective in the Renaissance marked a decisive epistemological shift. Perspective, originally a poetic and philosophical tool used to construct a shared worldview, gradually became a technical device for controlling vision and codifying space. What began as an imaginative act capable of generating meaning and emotional resonance in an intersubjective realm was increasingly reduced to a mechanistic procedure aimed at producing images that simulate objective reality. At its worst, the perspectival space of pictures became misunderstood as homologous to lived experience and perceived as accurately representing reality.[11] This reduction, Pérez-Gómez and Pelletier argue, has had lasting consequences, particularly in its devaluation of other modes of spatial understanding rooted in the realities of bodily interaction and the role of imagination and memory in our encounter with the world.

This legacy persists today in digital design environments. Powerful software tools continue the trajectory of privileging calculability, efficiency, and formal manipulation, often reinforcing a reductive visual paradigm further outlined in Heidegger's "The Age of the World Picture," whereby modern science, technology, and knowledge itself are fundamentally structured by the ability to represent and objectify the world. And so popular architectural approaches today become an exercise in ease of representation and/or algorithmic iteration, driven by performative metrics and parametric variation—putting architectural imagination at risk of being subsumed by systems that favor predictability and optimization over ambiguity, interpretation, and storytelling.[12]

Yet, as Heidegger, Pelletier, Pérez-Gómez, and Frascari remind us, architecture is not merely a technical problem to be solved—it is a cultural act of *world-making*.

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11. Alberto Pérez-Gómez and Louise Pelletier, *Architectural Representation and the Perspective Hinge* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 1997), 5-18.

12. As Pérez-Gómez suggests, "the continuing loss of conceptual and manual skills is further encouraged today by current technological tools like CAD and Revit, which produce drawings meant to be unambiguously fabricated by robots (or workers functioning as though robots)." This leads to a world perceived as mostly devoid of meaning, with craftsmen turned into menial laborers and an external reality irresponsive to cultural contexts and materiality. See Alberto Pérez-Gómez, "Architecture as a Performing Art: Two Analogical Reflections," in *Timely Meditations, Vol. 2: Architectural Philosophy and Hermeneutics*, ed. Peter Olshavsky (Montreal: RightAngle International, 2016), 92.

To reclaim this dimension, we must look beyond the logic that reduces representation to simulation toward modes of making that reassert the interpretive, poetic, and ethical dimensions of design. Architectural artefacts, in this sense, serve not simply as representations of an idealized future object to be manufactured somewhere else, but as sites of resistance, as tools for thinking through complex, layered relationships between cultural topics, material meaning, and place-making that is interpretive and intersubjective. Through these practices, architecture might again function as a hinge—not merely between two points in space, but between body and world, past and future, imagination and matter.

Bardt contributes profound insights to this conversation. In his provocative book *Material and Mind*, he explores how materials resist, shape, and provoke thought in ways that build upon Heidegger's ideas of the "ready-to-hand" (*zuhanden*) tool and on Pelletier and Pérez-Gómez's representational critique. He shows that material resistance a partner in the act of cognition, not a hindrance. It is through the tug and pull of plaster, wax, or fabric, in the friction of different textures or pixelated images that architecture emerges rather than being imposed or contrived by the smoothness and ease of production most technological tools emphasize. Bardt proposes that it is precisely due to the physical and material resistance to initial concepts held in the mind that the creator is called to become imaginative in the encounter with a world that is "ready-to-hand." This material dialogue explains the unexpected shifts in material behavior that led to emergent spatial and narrative discoveries in many of the artefacts the NDSU students produce as part of their master's theses.

Speculative Artefacts

My argument rests on the preceding theoretical foundation and on qualitative pedagogical research and the practical act of making. The case studies here from NDSU graduate students were chosen not for polish but for how they foreground recurring themes—material resistance, narrative layering, and phenomenological depth and demonstrate the role of oblique models that function to draw out an overlooked dimensions of architectural ideation through material engagement. Considered as fragments within an ongoing pedagogical experiment, and interpreted through documentation, presentations, and reflective analysis, they serve as situated examples of how philosophical questions translate into design pedagogy and storytelling.

For example, in Daniel Ness's 2021 thesis project, he used texts that preserve fragmented narratives and memories of the Holocaust, metaphorically unearthing these broken stories from a terrain of sand and dust in a performative installation (Figure 1, left). Participants reading translations of the books raised what look like sails, making a spectral projection of Lilith—the she-demon of ruins—appear on the fabric and through cascading sand, which generated shifting apparitions that evoked archaeological memory. These impromptu, emergent figures became central to thinking through the spatial unfolding of Ness's imagined museum at the site of the Babyn Yar ravine in Northern Kyiv, Ukraine.

In the American context, Ashley Kilzer's 2017 thesis was inspired by Suzanne Cataldi's reflections on the "reversible" dimensions of death—whereby "living and

dead can be brought together in the perceptible-perceiving fabric of flesh."[13] Kilzer's project explored how memory opens onto a future that, in turn, folds back into the past in persistent, cyclical rhythms. This emerges from the evocative artefact in Figure 1, right: an analogical landscape composed of paint and seeds poured over Kilzer's own body to form a shroud. She incorporated broken fragments of dried paint from earlier performances—symbolizing the fractured narratives surrounding her subject—which were incorporated into the artefact, weaving together storytelling, spatiality, and temporality into a generative cycle. This poetic process directly informed her architectural response: a spatial procession that led visitors to Alvira, Pennsylvania, underground and through the repurposed World War II-era munitions bunkers there, where projections of historic female figures—whose voices had been suppressed—illuminated the space, offering a layered experience of remembrance and transformation.

Hannah Langr's 2018 project took a distinctly pataphysical turn through the creation of participatory linguistic machines inspired by the writings of Alfred Jarry (Figure 2). Drawing upon the mystical and absurdist possibilities latent in contemporary technology—tracing back to the origins of wonder (*thaumata*)—she designed a makerspace for artists at the base of New York's Long Lines Building. Her work playfully and ironically engaged with programmatic constraints, transforming them into speculative opportunities. Performed by studio participants, faculty, and guest critic Rachel Libeskind, Langr's artefact and architectural model became instruments of poetic logic: devices that enacted fictional interactions and staged alternative realities within the design itself. The project thus aligned with Jarry's pataphysical vision—a "science of imaginary solutions"—by using architectural representation to reframe problems through pataphor, play, and theatrical engagement. The richly layered, performative artefact that resulted revealed how narrative can productively disrupt the conventions of architectural program, inviting both designers and viewers to inhabit a speculative space between idea and form.

Among the most pressing student explorations are those that address ecological crisis without resorting to abstract sustainability metrics. Rather, the students create experientially rich, culturally grounded, and poetically charged architectural responses. To activate storytelling at this level, students are encouraged to draw from broader cultural frameworks—in the case of Andrea Frank's 2025, from Henri Frankfort's discussion of the deep reciprocity between nature and culture in ancient civilizations. Frank's work exemplifies this approach by proposing a transformative pilgrimage from the urban realm into a spiritual encounter with wilderness, her design drawing inspiration from indigenous narratives that reflect an animistic understanding of material and landscape. The artefact she created (Figure 3) emerged from a program involving three interconnected sites along the Elwha River, each resonating with the origin story of the Klallam people and the sacred earth quarried from the surrounding rock.

Informed by Mircea Eliade's reflections on the archetype of Mother Earth and David Abram's *The Spell of the Sensuous*, Frank's work demonstrates how artefactual making can help reawaken a sense of interdependence between language,

13. Suzanne Laba Cataldi, "Embodying Perceptions of Death: Emotional Apprehension and Reversibilities of Flesh," in *Chiasms: Merleau-Ponty's Notion of Flesh*, ed. Fred Evans and Leonard Lawlor (Albany: SUNY Press, 2000), 193.

consciousness, and the more-than-human world—inviting architecture to be a medium for ecological remembrance and renewal, not merely serve as shelter.

Figure 1. Mixed Media Artefacts. Daniel Ness, *The Monumentality of Oblivion*, 2021 (left); Ashley Kilzer, *Traces of the Unborn*, 2017 (right)
Source: Memorial Union Gallery, NDSU; photographs by Stephen Wischer.

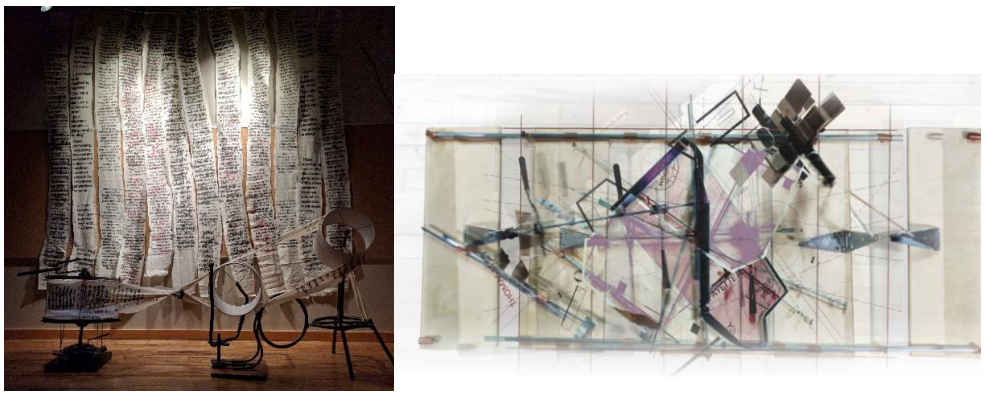

Figure 2. Mixed Media Artefact and Model. Hannah Langr, *Pataphysical Machine* (left) and *Algorithmic Model* (right), 2018
Source: Photographs by Hannah Langr.

Figure 3. Mixed Media Artefact. Andrea Frank, *A Pilgrimage of Wilderness and Spirit*, 2025
Source: Memorial Union Gallery, NDSU; photographs by Anthony Faris.

The NDSU students' artefacts reveal and confirm that materials are, indeed, never neutral, but are imbued with histories, cultural associations, and latent symbolic charge that generate powerful physical and psychological effects that compel viewers and makers alike to engage with the work beyond its functional requirements or visual appeal. Here, imaginative projection is not the simple application of a preconceived concept onto a passive form; rather, it emerges from an embodied, iterative engagement with material as an active participant in the design process.

These are not purely aesthetic or intellectual exercises. Through this encounter, students create artefacts that reimagine meaningful rituals, stories, and situations as material enactments of spatial imagination, deeply rooted in affective experience and cultural storytelling.

In a 2022 essay, Christopher Bardt affirms this approach with his call for a renewed material-based theory of architectural design—one that rejects the longstanding dichotomy between mind and matter. Meaning, he insists, arises through physical interaction and perceptual dialogue. Drawing on insights from neuroscience and embodied cognition, he challenges the reduction of materials to inert substrates for formal manipulation.

Materials do not passively receive meaning; they provoke it. As Bardt argues, "Materials are the repositories of sensory memory, the stimulants of imagination, and the catalysts for new insight."[14] The experience of architecture, then, is never objective or abstracted—it is shaped through tactile, concrete and temporal encounters with the world.

In the most compelling NDSU student works, artefacts metabolize a dynamic feedback loop in which gestures, tools, and materials co-construct form, narrative and atmospheric possibilities for translation into future buildings. These possibilities, though, are not preexisting; they are discovered and continuously reshaped in the work as tensions between intention and material behavior invite interpretation. The resulting artefacts are more than design proposals; they are invitations to think differently about space and experience. They favor the phenomenological dimensions of architecture over the scourge of reductive efficiency and optimization. They transform the studio into a laboratory for reawakening architecture's deepest task: give meaningful shape to our being-in-the-world.

Phenomenology and Depth in Artefactual Models

Maurice Merleau-Ponty's philosophical writings have been a foundational source of inspiration for my teaching because they provide a vital counterpoint to the visual dominance of digital media that tends to reduce space to a homogenous third dimension. His writings on perception address *depth* as a primary, metaphysical dimension where meaning hides and returns.

Even the most routine encounters with architecture reveal how depth is an experiential and synesthetic phenomenon, not merely something visual. Those

14. Christopher Bardt, "Recapturing Meaning: Toward a New Material-Based Design Theory for Architecture," *Frontiers of Architectural Research* 11, no. 2 (2022): 227-238.

encounters demonstrate how we stitch meanings together to make sense of the world *as we move through it* and experience the world in a much more filmic sense than that limited by mere perspective.[15] Merleau-Ponty suggests that for something to be seen fully, it must first recede—his "riddle of depth."[16] Indeed, architectural models operate specifically in this dimensionality, where aspects of an idea are understood through the prism of something else. Our interactions in lived space depend upon this "ecliptic" showing and concealing.

Alternative models such as artefacts can exaggerate this, layering fragments that defer resolution. This partiality *sustains inquiry* and thus invites a restoration of ideas that are reinforced and remade from one work to the next. This process is particularly visible in artefacts from the NDSU students, in which techniques of layering, embedding, and montage mirror Merleau-Ponty's articulation of lived depth. They are invitations to interact with stories in space itself, not conclusive statements about buildings. They are gestures of deferral; they provoke viewers to imagine what lies behind or beneath an action or material as part of the narrative plot of the student's architectural story.

These ideas are embodied in several student artefacts that foreground narrative partiality, material resonance, and spatial storytelling. Inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche's discussion of a critical approach to history, three students developed artefacts that centered on memorials and anti-monuments to underrepresented aspects of war that remain especially relevant in the current global context. Each employed material storytelling as a means of transforming literary sources and personal and cultural stories into architectural expression. Drawing from Marco Frascari's reading of *spolia* in his book *Monsters of Architecture*, their work reconfigured discarded fragments—literal and symbolic—into new narratives, seeking resonance between memory, material, spatial possibilities, and their proposed architectural programs.

Zach Moen's 2017 artefact (Figure 4) emerged from a deep engagement with W.G. Sebald's *The Natural History of Destruction*, drawing upon a global web of literary sources to explore the silences and omissions that haunt the cultural memory of World War II. What could have been a didactic account of historical violence instead materialized the traces of loss and absence through three hollow cylinders, cast in ash and concrete, each molded from a human hand. These phantom limbs—neither fully present nor entirely gone—evoked the spectral presence of bodies erased by war yet inscribed in memory. Suspended in the act of lifting a symbolic weight, the artefact enacted a gesture of unresolved burden, at once intimate and collective. From this representational logic, Moen developed a tripartite museum dispersed across three interconnected sites, each anchored by the artefact's poetics of fragmentation and return. The resulting spatial narrative reframed the traditional museum conceived as a container of resolved history to be a performative field in which historical trauma is held, carried, and continually refigured.

15. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, *Phenomenology of Perception*, trans. Colin Smith (London: Routledge Classics, 2002), 235.

16. Maurice Merleau-Ponty, "Eye and Mind," trans. Carleton Dallery, in *The Primacy of Perception and Other Essays on Phenomenological Psychology, the Philosophy of Art, History and Politics*, ed. James M. Edie (Evanston, IL: Northwestern University Press, 1964), 180.

Several years later, Tyler Gefroh's 2020 project (Figure 5, left) added an important stratum to this broader story by focusing on the often-underrepresented tragedy of Hiroshima and Nagasaki. Centered around a collection of origami cranes, each folded from paper distressed through charcoal rubbings, his artefact layered a constellation of references: Walter Benjamin's *Angel of History*; the origins of shadow tracing; scorched human silhouettes left behind in the wake of atomic bombings; and the story of Sadako Sasaki, the young girl who endeavored to fold a thousand cranes in the hope of recovering from leukemia caused by radiation exposure. His artefact assembled these threads into a spectral atmosphere of loss and resilience, acting as a charged vessel for future architectural translations in which memory is neither sealed, nor abstracted, but delicately suspended.

Most recently, Cody Williamson, an active-duty member of the U.S. Army, turned inward to examine the silent epidemic of suicide within military institutions. His intent with his 2025 artefact (Figure 5, right) was to "spark remembrance for those whose names have been quickly dismissed, despite their noble sacrifices and contributions to this nation."[17] Made from copper, lead, and steel—materials associated with munitions—it took the form of a folded flag, or a suicide note, or a condolence letter, etched with words from a letter of U.S. Civil War soldier Sullivan Ballou penned in the face of imminent death. Williamson's palimpsestic artefact ties together themes of sacrifice and patriotism and was used to inform the spatial folds of his thesis design, The Memorial Dedicated to Soldier Suicide—proposed to sit adjacent to Maya Lin's Vietnam Veterans Memorial on the National Mall in Washington, D.C. By transmuting instruments of violence into forms of remembrance, his work materialized Frascari's discussion of "trope" through an interplay between material, meaning, and mourning in ways that add a complex, ominous layer to the context of the National Mall.

Each of these artefacts go beyond representation to engage history as something alive, unresolved, and open to reinterpretation. Works of this sort resist closure in favor of empathetic storytelling, challenging conventional museum narratives through an architectural language of depth, deferral, and resonance that, in turn, engage the bodies and minds of those who view them in phenomenological experiences that use history itself as material for storytelling.

17. Cody Williamson. "A Story of Service: Thoughts on Commemorative Architecture and the Anti-Monument," NDSU Thesis, 2025, 57.

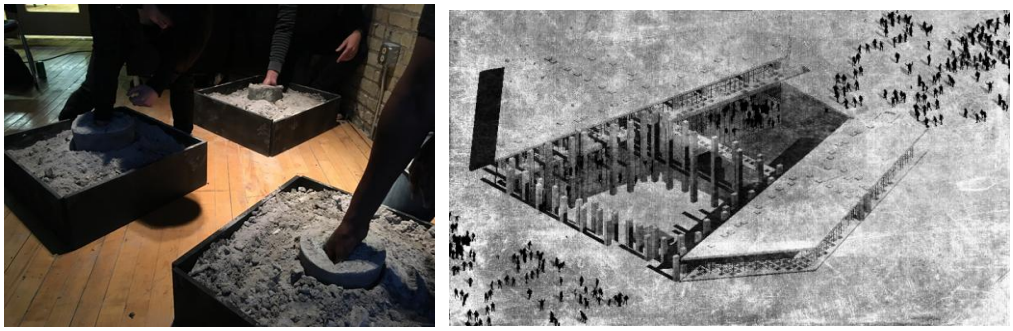

Figure 4. *Mixed Media Artefact and Drawing. Zach Moen, Invisible Bleach, 2018 (left); Zach Moen, One of the Three Sites from Trace, Trope, Transcend, 2018 (right)*
Source: Photograph by Stephen Wischer.

Figure 5. *Mixed Media Artefacts. Tyler Gefroh, Memory through Metaphor, 2023 (left); Cody Williamson, Unfolding a Tattered Veil of Memory, 2025 (right)*
Source: Memorial Union Gallery, NDSU; photographs by Anthony Faris.

Projects by Valentina Contreras in 2021 and Amanda Scott in 2022 project extended the exploration of fragments into the realm of the surreal, drawing upon the entangled relationship between dreams and space. Their work was guided by Merleau-Ponty's reflections on perception and James Morley's essay *The Sleeping Subject*, which reframes dreaming as a primary mode of reality, revealing how we perceive: by stitching fragments, impressions, and associations into meaningful wholes. Both projects echoed this process through artefacts that layered images and narratives into dream-like compositions, where fragments became catalysts for architectural imagination.[18]

Scott's artefact (Figure 6, left) took the form of cast resin blocks that encased photographs, textual fragments, and site-based ephemera—interwoven with images and passages from André Breton's *Nadja*. Through an iterative process of recombining these blocks into various constellations, she created an evolving language of spatial montage that guided the development of a series of pavilion structures emerging from the city's disused subterranean networks.

18. James Morley, "The Sleeping Subject: Merleau-Ponty on Dreaming," *Theory & Psychology* 9, no. 1 (1999): 89-101.

Inspired by André Breton's *Surrealist Manifesto*, Contreras's artefact (Figure 6, right) served as a collection of fragments and stories that became the impetus for her renovation of the RKO Keith's Theatre in Queens, New York. Her intent was to engage the viewer in interpreting a dream-like montage of suspended fragments that eventuated in a filmic journey through her architectural project. In each case these projects became an architectural investigation into the porous threshold between waking life and dream, where unconscious associations shape perception and give rise to new spatial possibilities. By invoking the logic of surrealism as both method and material, such work opened-up a space of ambiguity and imagination—one that revealed, rather than resolved layered dimensions of programmatic experience that would become central to their architectural projects in the next semester of their thesis journey. Following their Surrealistic influence, these students seemed to be on a quest to return the imagination to the definition of the "real" in their creation of spatial encounters.

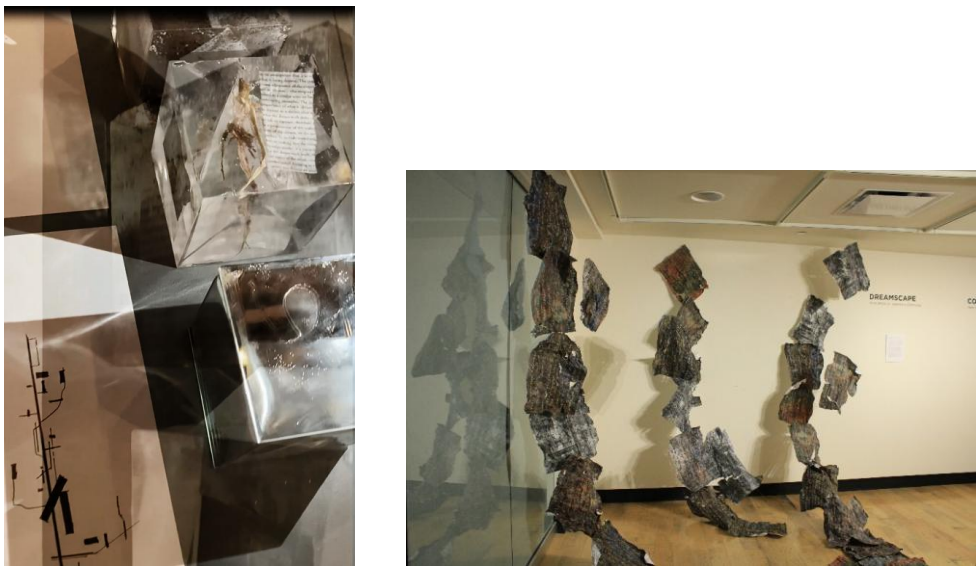

Figure 6. *Mixed Media Artefacts. Amanda Scott, Architecture and the Oneiric, 2021 (left); Valentina Contreras, Dreamscapes: Reframing Consciousness through Architectural Fragments, 2021 (right)*
Source: Memorial Union Gallery, NDSU; photographs by Amanda Scott and Anthony Faris.

Hermeneutics and the Linguistic Imagination

Perhaps the most vital thread running through all such projects is the recognition that language is inseparable from architectural imagination. As Alberto Pérez-Gómez has long argued—and as Lisa Landrum elaborates—the act of designing is never mute; it is fundamentally linguistic.[19] Even when students feel they are working intuitively through non-verbal media, their artefacts are never outside the domain of language. They are shaped by what Paul Ricoeur calls the *hermeneutic*

19. Lisa Landrum, "Varieties of Architectural Imagination," *Warehouse Journal* 25 (2016): 75-77.

imagination, where understanding arises through the recursive interplay of seeing, speaking, and making. His assertion that "all images are spoken before being seen" finds vivid affirmation in student work, where narrative and material practice converge.[20]

Landrum reminds us that for many philosophers, and increasingly for architects, imagination operates primarily through discursive language that serves as a generative ground. Drawing on Ricoeur, Elaine Scarry, and Gaston Bachelard, she illustrates how verbal expression can enhance imagination, enabling metaphor to serve as a bridge between tradition and invention, memory and projection. In this way, the stories embedded in architectural artefacts are not fixed descriptions but dynamic acts of linguistic becoming.

It is crucial to emphasize that this linguistic dimension is not limited to the articulation of proposals in studio reviews or written documents. Both language and material are interwoven into the very act of making. As students fabricate artefacts, they engage in analogical thinking that echoes the architect's "promissory" role described by Pérez-Gómez, each artefact becoming a spatial narrative shaped through metaphor and speculative projection. Moving from *being* (the material creation) to *meaning* (its linguistic and, specifically, architectural significance), the artefact configures a spatial fiction—representing ideas and actively shaping them through the "double gesture" of showing and saying.[21]

The iterative and reflective process of artefact-making thus becomes a form of narrative construction: a provisional plot unfolding through touch, resistance, and transformation. These gestures constitute a kind of non-verbal language—what Pérez-Gómez might call an *atmospheric* or *poetic syntax*—whose logic is found in resonance, mood, and metaphor. This approach aligns with Ricoeur's triadic structure of narrative ("mimesis I–III"), in which the *prefiguration* of experience, the *configuration* of plot, and *refiguration* through interpretation trace a cycle that is deeply operative in both literature and the production (and experience) of an architectural project.[22] Language is not subordinate to form in these projects; they embrace the interplay between the verbal and the material as co-constitutive. Artefacts emerge as narrative condensations—concentrated stories held in suspension, awaiting refiguration. They speak through silence and gesture, echoing Pérez-Gómez's insight that "the voice projects visions" and that architectural imagination, at its best, is a speculative and generative promise—a bringing-near of what is far.

Writing on *photography*, Vilém Flusser warns that the apparatus of modern technology threatens to enclose thought within its own logic. Language-based AI sharpens this concern: by reducing language to predictive pattern, it risks foreclosing the discoveries that arise between fragments—when drawing folds into storytelling or when material resistance sparks metaphor. Heidegger, and later Alexander Tzonis and Liane Lefaivre, remind us that the origins of technology lie in technē-poiesis—a revealing charged with discovery and wonder. In contrast to AI's simulation of speech

20. Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: The Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny with Kathleen McLaughlin and John Costello (London: Routledge, 2003), 217.

21. Bardt, *Material and Mind*, 272.

22. Alberto Pérez-Gómez, *Attunement: Architectural Meaning after the Crisis of Modern Science* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2016), 189-191.

without reciprocity, artefacts operate as counter-apparatuses in which language, image, and material converge in the reciprocal unfolding of metaphor and narrative.

Dan Porwoll's 2021 project, which demonstrates how fictional narratives and artefacts together can generate a richer field of architectural meaning, stands out as one of the most compelling explorations of linguistic imagination. Inspired by writings of Rachel McCann and Edward Casey that both engage Merleau-Ponty's notion of a shared territory beneath the subject–object divide, Porwoll began with fictional stories, material, and pictorial fragments exploring three politically and emotionally charged "edges": the Korean Demilitarized Zone, the Russia–Ukraine border, and the Carlisle Indian Cemetery in Pennsylvania. These became sites of empathetic speculation through architectural imagination.

Drawing further inspiration from the fragmented narratives and drawings in John Hejduk's *Masques*, Porwoll created a triptych of artefact books (Figure 7) containing six characters each—eighteen in total. As Porwoll describes each of the artefact books as attempting "explore the two sides of each edge" and continues:

> Through the initial reading of the narratives and viewing of the pages, a distinctness is evoked from the varying plotlines within them. But upon further exploration and the compounding of the pages upon one another, a larger, more unified mental image can take form from the specific edge, and familiarities can be drawn from one story or image to the next, drawing meanings across the edges around the world … Through reading these narratives, whether aloud or to oneself, the stories … are released [from the pages] into the space around us or within ourselves, transforming, interacting and creating meaning. By the process of unfolding and revealing this artefact we are more clearly able to understand these edges and through the process of refolding and concealing this artefact we are more clearly able to understand these edges as folds and reflections of one another.[23]

Porwoll created fictional characters and artefactual fragments. The architectural translation of these narrative-charged material books emerged through a series of approximately fifty vignette drawings that captured moments of interaction between characters, such as the Defector and the Dreamer, the Dictator and the Student, the Designer and the Newscaster. Each pairing revealed social, political, and cultural dimensions of border life. One such drawing, *The Battlefield* (Figure 8) references the relentless volley of propaganda across the Korean border—each side seeking to distort the other's humanity, by showing two fortresses separated by a barrage of projectiles. The image also recalls *Seokjeon* (석전), an ancient Korean game of ritualized stone-throwing that evolved into military training and was banned in the early twentieth century during the Japanese occupation. Another drawing, *The Plinth*, depicts an illuminated pedestal accessed from below—a platform for being seen and heard—and symbolizes the performative power of media in North Korea, to praise authority and preserve the past, and in South Korea, to embrace individualism and modernization by letting the past recede.

23. Daniel Porwoll, *The Two Sides of Otherness: A Cross-Cultural Regeneration of Reality*. Master's thesis, North Dakota State University, 2022), 79.

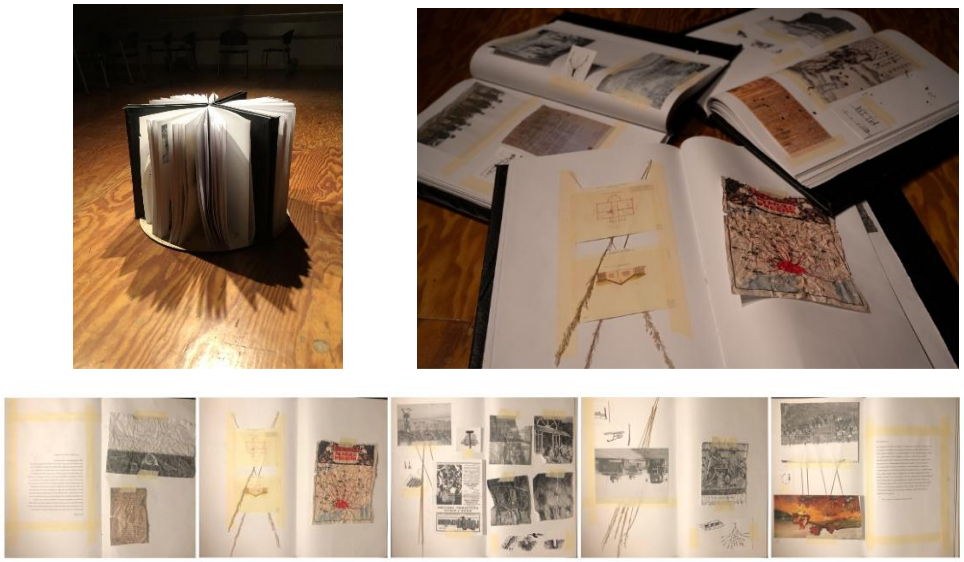

Figure 7. Dan Porwoll, *Three Artefact Books* (top) and *The Farmer and The Separatist Spread* (bottom), 2022
Source: Porwoll, *The Two Sides of Otherness: A Cross-Cultural Regeneration of Reality*, thesis presentation, slide 19, North Dakota State University Institutional Repository.

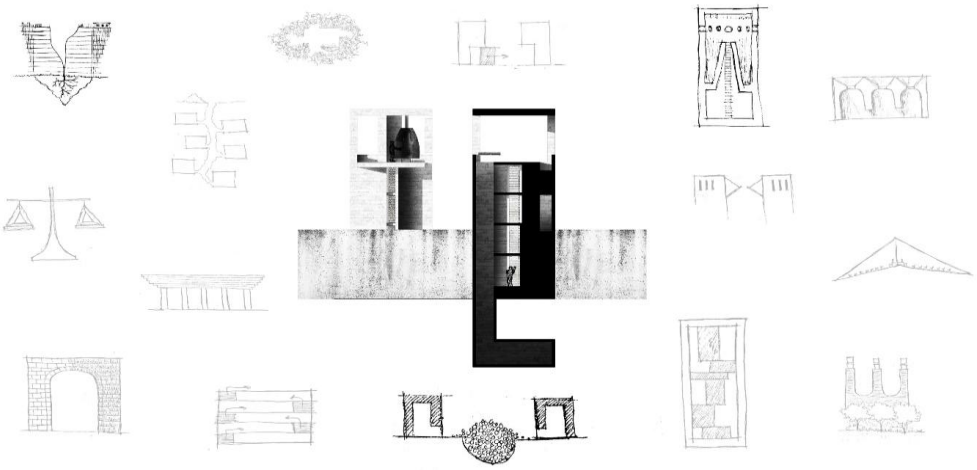

Figure 8. Dan Porwoll, *Design Vignettes and DMZ Border Tower Designs*, 2022
Source: Porwoll, *The Two Sides of Otherness: A Cross-Cultural Regeneration of Reality*, thesis presentation, slide 24, North Dakota State University Institutional Repository.

Porwoll created fictional characters and artefactual fragments. The architectural translation of these narrative-charged material books emerged through a series of approximately fifty vignette drawings that captured moments of interaction between characters, such as the Defector and the Dreamer, the Dictator and the Student, the Designer and the Newscaster. Each pairing revealed social, political, and cultural dimensions of border life. One such drawing, *The Battlefield* (Figure 8) references the relentless volley of propaganda across the Korean border—each side seeking to distort the other's humanity, by showing two fortresses separated by a barrage of projectiles. The image also recalls *Seokjeon* (석전), an ancient Korean game of

ritualized stone-throwing that evolved into military training and was banned in the early twentieth century during the Japanese occupation. Another drawing, *The Plinth*, depicts an illuminated pedestal accessed from below—a platform for being seen and heard—and symbolizes the performative power of media in North Korea, to praise authority and preserve the past, and in South Korea, to embrace individualism and modernization by letting the past recede.

The architectural proposal that emerged centers on a pair of towers, one on each side of the DMZ and linked both visually and conceptually by a shared horizon, envisioned as archives of stories and scrolls. On them, individuals can see across the border, with views that suggest a poetic yearning for empathetic unification. At the summit, a bell and striker—each located in a separate tower—are geographically divided but symbolically united through the imagined sound they produce: a resonant metaphor for the reversibility of edges, and the capacity of architecture to mediate separation through narrative and gesture.

Such translations from story and artefact into architectural form produce precise poetic images—condensations of thought and feeling, rich with implication. These are not vague atmospheres; they embody what Octavio Paz calls an essential poetic act: the creation of images that live within us. The linguistic imagination emerges in Porwoll's images not simply as initial catalyst for design, but as its most enduring promise and expressive foundation.

Language and Silence

The final example is among the most powerful student explorations of the combination of language and material artefacts leading to architectural design. Niloufar Alenjery addressed in her thesis the extinction of languages under globalization, creating artefacts aimed at inhabiting the silence left by lost tongues while rekindling their expressive resonance from within spatial and material encounters. Drawing from her program of a rare book library to be situated in an abandoned dry dock of Brooklyn's Navy Yard, Alenjery first created a cuneiform woodblock and then three lanterns etched with dead languages (Figure 9, left and center). As the lanterns turned, shadows danced across the walls, producing a silent conversation with space and a vociferation of language, woven out of the silence by those who spoke. A third artefact (Figure 9, right) was a massive book containing all the world's lost languages, which became a tactile evocation of memory and forgetting—drawing on the mythic figures of Mnemosyne and Lethe. Created from layers of wax, sand, concrete, and mesh, Niloufar's book could not be read in a linear fashion; rather, it was performed by touch, revealing and concealing language through gesture. The act of leafing through the book became an interpretive ritual later transposed into the architectural logic of her proposal (Figure 10), in which the tactile and temporal qualities of her artefacts found spatial expression, with themes of concealment and revelation recast into a sequence of rotating and ascending movements along vertical passages, echoing the rising and falling of water once present in the now-abandoned Dry Dock 1 at the Brooklyn Navy Yard. In the context of her thesis, the architecture became a vessel for spiritual and cultural memory—its overall presence recalling a ship departing and

returning, carrying the layered narratives of travelers and immigrants who have shaped the city's identity.

Porwoll and Alenjery offer compelling demonstrations of how artefactual exploration can become architectural experience—a process akin to what Ricoeur calls *coherent deformation*, where meaning is recreated in the act of making and encountering work. In this process, language becomes the medium through which thought is formed, just as with the emergence of language itself meaning often comes after speech. In these projects, the metaphors that provoke the *translation* and *adaptation* of architectural meaning into more conventional models and drawings arise through a sustained, responsive engagement that unfolds slowly but can yield sudden sparks of insight when queried through encounters with material, language, and space.[24] Such work reminds us that poetic meaning is not imposed but revealed through a meditative approach to making that requires ethical and empathic imaginative acts aimed at creating meaningful atmospheres for the use and habits of other humans.

Although these artefacts often emerge from deeply personal stories, their ultimate purpose is not private expression but the cultivation of empathy—a means of transforming subjective insight into collective understanding. Within the studio, this translation from inner narrative to shared architectural gesture becomes an ethical rehearsal for public practice, where buildings too can speak through the poetics of lived experience. These examples have different emphases—the resistance of materials, the poetics of depth, or the imaginative force of language—but all converge on a shared ground. Artefact-making emerges as a synthesis of overlapping practices that mediate between the personal and the collective, the intimate and the civic. In this way, artefacts become both tools of learning and vessels of meaning—forms that resist reduction, invite interpretation, and gesture toward architecture's role as a cultural act. There is no single representational mode.

The questions these artefacts raise extend globally, contributing to a broader conversation about how architecture might reclaim its role as a living practice of memory, metaphor, and cultural engagement.

Figure 9. *Mixed Media Artefacts. Niloufar Alenjery, Lanterns and Cuneiform Artefacts, 2016*
Source: Photographs by Niloufar Alenjery and Stephen Wischer.

24. Building on Bachelard's insights, Ricoeur discusses how poetic images are "simultaneously a becoming of expression and a becoming of being." See Paul Ricoeur, *The Rule of Metaphor: Multi-Disciplinary Studies of the Creation of Meaning in Language*, trans. Robert Czerny (Toronto: University of Toronto Press, 1977), 214.

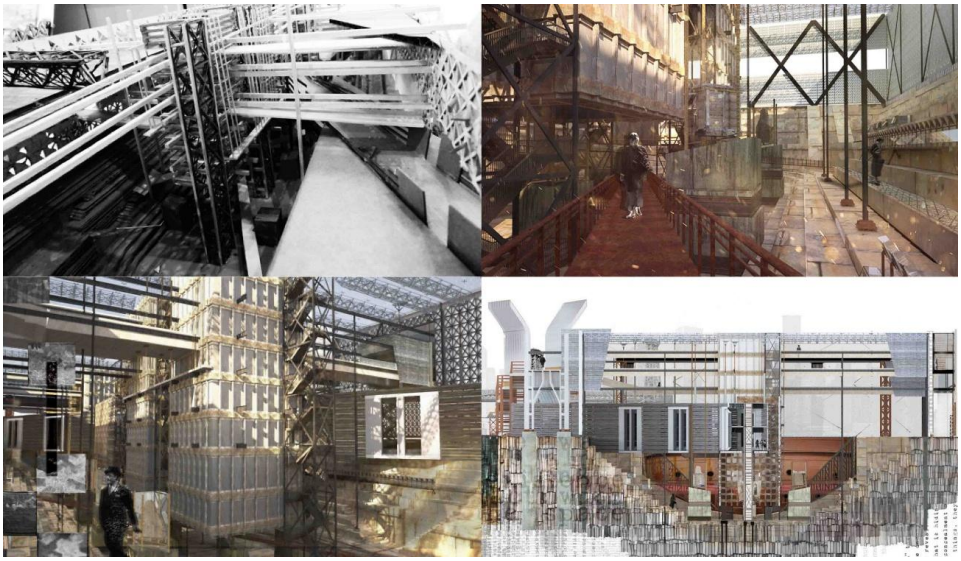

Figure 10. *Mixed Media Artefacts and Design Models. Niloufar Alenjery, Analogue and Digital Models of Rare Books Library, 2016*
Source: Photographs by Niloufar Alenjery.

Conclusion: The Ethics and Poetics of World-Making

This, then, brings us back to this paper's broader argument: that architecture remains one of our most enduring poetic capacities. It is a means of giving form to memory, anchoring imagination in matter, and reweaving threads of language, body, and place. The digital abstraction and technological efficiency that dominates our age risks overshadowing these capacities with reductive modes of representation—which artefact-making resists. This is not about nostalgia. It is about re-poeticizing practice and restoring architecture's interpretive, ethical, and cultural dimensions.

Artefacts work through material resistance, phenomenological depth, and linguistic imagination—as the student projects demonstrate. Artefacts draw the mind and body into dialogue with matter, cultivating tactile forms of thought that counter the disembodiment of purely visual tools. They open spaces of depth where perception is unsettled and reconfigured, revealing architecture not as object but as lived horizon. They extend making into language and story—not as a separate stage, but as a reciprocal act in which creation itself becomes language, generating metaphors and myths that resituate design within a shared intersubjective, cultural world. To make artefacts is also to remember, to bring memory back into the act of creation, stitching together fragments of past, present, and future.

Architecture is not, and should not be, a technical problem to solve. As Ricoeur reminds us in *The Function of Fiction in Shaping Reality*, it is an interpretive act in which metaphor generates new knowledge. Metaphor opens the possibility of seeing-as, of redescribing and projecting new ways of inhabiting the world. At such moments, boundaries between inner and outer worlds dissolve and architecture again becomes a site where stories take shape in space and space itself begins to speak.

This is an invitation to preserve and extend architecture's poetic potential, not only for our students, but for the worlds they will help shape. For in the spark of metaphor and the resistance of matter, architecture continues to unfold as a site of imaginative disclosure, ethical commitment, and shared becoming. In an age of automation and abstraction, artefactual practices reassert the depth of that human making. They remind us that to design is not simply to draw or model, but to listen—to trace the echo of stories not yet formed and model realities not yet built but always within reach.

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