



Laretta Vinciarelli, May 1980. Courtesy Judd Foundation. The Laretta Vinciarelli Papers, Judd Foundation Archives, Marfa, Texas.

# Laretta Vinciarelli and Historical Types as Generative Device

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Laretta Vinciarelli, an Italian-born artist, architect, teacher, and theorist, inhabited a world of “firsts”: She was the first woman to have drawings acquired by the Department of Architecture and Design at the Museum of Modern Art (MoMA) in 1974,<sup>1</sup> she was among the first women to teach architecture studio courses at Columbia University, and she was the first and only woman granted a solo exhibition at Peter Eisenman’s influential Institute of Architecture and Urban Studies (IAUS) in New York. By 1976, she and Minimalist artist Donald Judd had become a romantic and professional pair, and collaborated for over ten years on architecture, furniture design, and printmaking. She was acclaimed as “one of the leading architects of her generation,” exemplary of the sea changes that started to sweep through the discipline of architecture beginning in the late 1960s.<sup>2</sup> In this text I focus on the intersections between her teaching and her collaborative projects with Donald Judd in Marfa, Texas, which both centered on typology as a generative device for design in the 1970s and 1980s.



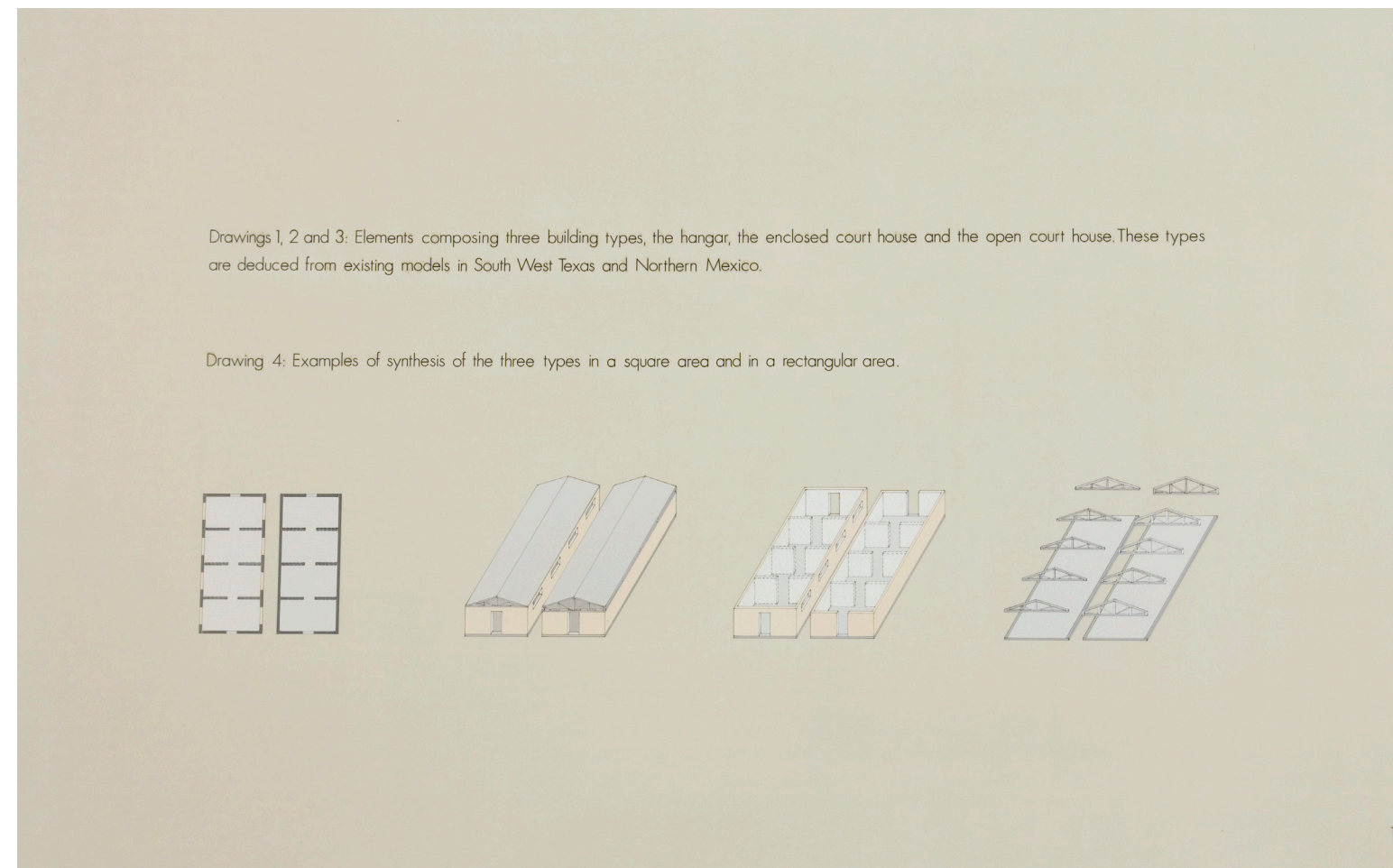
Vinciarelli's teaching career began in the United States at the Pratt Institute in 1975, where she taught design studio ("Concepts of Design") and drawing until 1978 when James Stewart Polshek, the new dean of the architecture school at Columbia University, hired her. Vinciarelli taught as an adjunct faculty member in Columbia's second-year housing studio, as well as in the third- and fourth-year design studios. From 1985–1992 she also taught a drawing course called "Representational Techniques" at City College and was Visiting Professor at the University of Illinois at Chicago Circle (1981) and Rice University (1982). When Vinciarelli was hired to teach at Columbia University, she contributed to the development of the newly formed housing studio primarily through her emphasis on typology, the study of architectural types based on a set of shared characteristics. This connected to some of Vinciarelli's key concerns—history and theory as a source for new work, and iterative architectural drawing as an investigative tool—each of which was central to Columbia's curriculum and pedagogy.

Architectural historian (and Vinciarelli's colleague at Columbia University) Mary McLeod credits Vinciarelli with introducing the carpet housing type to Columbia's housing studio when she arrived in 1978.<sup>3</sup> Carpet or "mat" housing is a low-rise apartment type with interlocking modular units, providing an ideal mix of both private and communal courtyards, a form derived from centuries-old Mediterranean villages.<sup>4</sup> The courtyard type endured, but had a particular appeal in postwar Europe for its ability to be multiplied and form an entire urban fabric.<sup>5</sup> Vinciarelli's approach to carpet housing in particular was based on a generative system or "pattern," and the ways architects could adjust that pattern to suit human habitability.<sup>6</sup> James Tice, former associate professor at Columbia, explained that "[h]ousing is arguably the most appro-

priate arena for typological studies," since, even though other building types have been adjusted to incorporate new technologies or program requirements, "the fundamental problem of dwelling has changed little over the millennia." Residents will always need protection from the elements, a sense of privacy but also community, and access to light and air.

During a 1978 lecture at the New School in New York City, Vinciarelli explained how a type can serve as a "device" that generates the design: "a type is a special scheme," she stated, a "totality" that has been "schematized."<sup>8</sup> Architectural historian (and Vinciarelli's colleague at the IAUS) Alan Colquhoun noted that "one of the many reasons why a typology of forms might have a greater impact on practice in architecture than in the other arts is the inherent reproducibility of architecture and its dependence on prototype."<sup>9</sup> Vinciarelli herself "was not so excited about reinvention, formally or technologically, really," as former student and colleague Claude Armstrong stated.<sup>10</sup> His partner Donna Cohen agreed, noting that Vinciarelli "felt she [...] knew enough to make things new but based on many a more timeless concept."<sup>11</sup> That being said, Vinciarelli did not want to simply—as she put it—"repeat" the types banally," since architectural types evolve as society continually evolves: "I'm more interested in the evolution of types, which is due to the change of cognitive levels that expresses in societies when they change [...]" and I think this should be kept in mind."<sup>12</sup>

Vinciarelli believed that building types were not fixed but rather malleable, adaptable to site and climate. Working within an established set of types offered a sense of familiarity, as she explained: "Architects are asking the question: 'how can we do architecture that people can understand?' (...) And I intend [to ask] this question: in which ways can we do an architecture which is recognizable? And it is my opinion that the adherence to the historical types can



Lauretta Vinciarelli, drawings for *Hangar* and *Courtyard*, 1980, pastel, graphite and ink on vellum, 11½ × 12 in. (29.2 × 30.5 cm).  
Courtesy Judd Foundation. The Lauretta Vinciarelli Papers, Judd Foundation Archives, Marfa, Texas.

help."<sup>13</sup> By diverging from type in subtle ways and creating variations, however, each iteration would take on new meaning. As Vinciarelli maintained, the main focus of her work was "the elaboration of various forms of inhabitable space." She argued that architecture ought to be "the art that transforms space into place."<sup>14</sup> In her work in Marfa, Texas, with Donald Judd, for example, she wanted to explore how types correspond to site and climate and see how far a type could be stretched before becoming something else.<sup>15</sup>

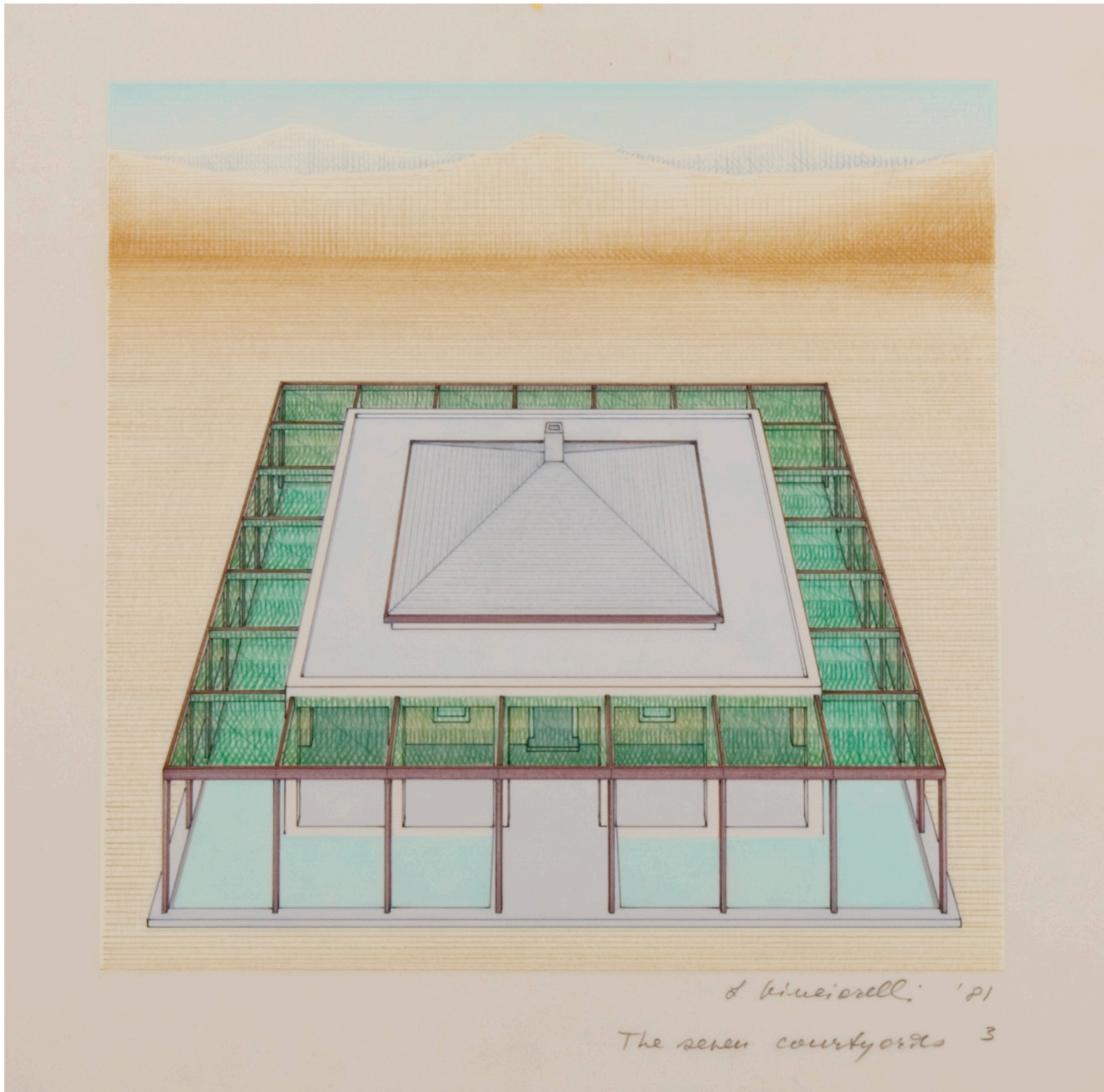
## Marfa

Vinciarelli met Judd in 1976, and the two would be involved both romantically and professionally for at least the next decade. During their time together from the late 1970s to the late 1980s, Vinciarelli had a vital impact on Judd's work in architecture and design, collaborating on some of his most well-known architectural

projects, including those for Marfa; Providence, Rhode Island; and Cleveland, Ohio. In a 2008 interview with Judd's daughter Rainer, Vinciarelli explained that she and Judd collaborated both "formally" and "informally" during the nearly ten years that they were together.<sup>16</sup> Judd has been hailed as a visionary architect for his interventions in Marfa, notably with Fort D. A. Russell, the abandoned army base that was purchased by the Dia Art Foundation in 1971 to house long-term installations of his and his contemporaries' art. Beginning in 1978, Vinciarelli would spend significant amounts of time with Judd in Marfa, where she worked on a variety of projects that she described as "case studies" for her analysis of the typological approach that she had been exploring in her concurrent work at Columbia University.

Marfa was chosen for its sense of "permanence," she wrote, in which "is inherent a tie of necessity with the place and its richness."<sup>17</sup>





Lauretta Vinciarelli, drawing for *The Seven Courtyards* series, 1981, pastel, graphite, and ink on vellum, 20 × 32 in. (50.8 × 81.3 cm).  
Courtesy Judd Foundation. The Lauretta Vinciarelli Papers, Judd Foundation Archives, Marfa, Texas.

Speaking of the local vernacular architecture such as well houses, she ruminated on issues of scale, emotion, and permanence: “If I consider the town and the landscape in which the town is, these big things are the only human artifacts there which in a way are comparable in scale, and in scale with the desert, and also the level of emotion (...) the landscapes give the impression of the incredible peace and calm, and also these big buildings in a way have this property of serenity, and in a way eternity, because they are so big and basic.”<sup>18</sup>

Marfa was also chosen as the site for this case study, she explained, because of “its small size of less than 3,000 inhabitants, for its location in a beautiful mountainous desert which relates to the architecture and the layout of the town, and for the clarity of its architectural tradition which contraposes pitch-roofed houses to Mexican court-houses and domestic buildings to industrial hangars.”<sup>19</sup> In fact, in her drawings titled *Hanger and Courtyard* (dated 1980), she mixed these different types—airplane hangar, enclosed court house, open court house—in various combinations, pushing each type beyond its normal definition. Implicit in her architectural statement was the connection between building types and their ability to form a spatial fabric, a synthesis that was vital to the project.

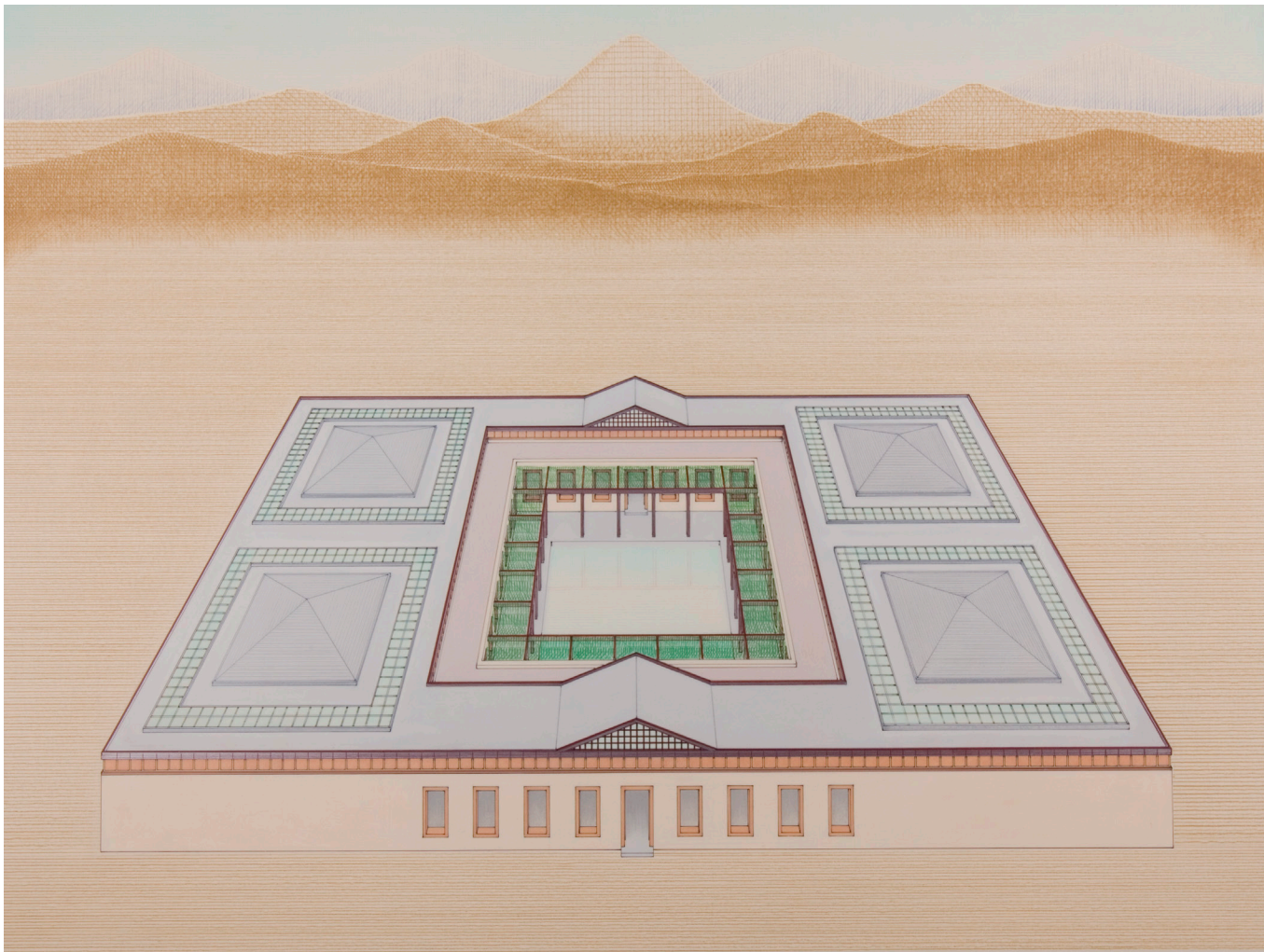
In a 1989 essay on courtyards, Judd wrote: “I’ve made my place in Marfa into a courtyard and have considered many other kinds of courtyards, open to closed.”<sup>20</sup> Indeed, the additions of the courtyard, the so-called *hortus conclusus* (Latin for “enclosed garden”), and the pergola are integral to Judd’s architecture in Marfa. These elements are some of the reasons why he has been praised as an innovative architect,<sup>21</sup> especially considering few changes were made to the pre-existing buildings themselves. The *hortus conclusus*, like a courtyard, offers shade and respite from the heat by incorporating elements of water and greenery, all contained

by a walled perimeter. The entire Mansana de Chinati, Judd’s living quarters in Marfa, is essentially a large, open courtyard surrounded by a thick adobe wall. Within the compound (often referred to as “The Block” since it occupies an entire city block), there is another open courtyard. At the Arena Building, a social hall for meetings and festivities that Judd began to renovate in 1981, the original exterior courtyard was preserved, as was the smaller, enclosed courtyard within. The smaller courtyard’s roof was removed, essentially producing an open courtyard within another open courtyard.<sup>22</sup>

To say that the courtyard was a fundamental component of Vinciarelli’s work, however, would be a gross understatement. She called on type in her teaching in the housing studio at Columbia and was concurrently investigating the courtyard type in Marfa, as we see in two sets of perspective drawings from the late 1970s and early 1980s: *The Seven Courtyards* and *Courtyard Building for Donald Judd* (published together in *Arts + Architecture* magazine in 1981). As she explained, “These seven drawings [*The Seven Courtyards*], part of my ongoing research on the architectural theme of the courtyard, occupy territory between finished architectural projects and pure architectural statements.”<sup>23</sup>

Vinciarelli preferred the courtyard type for its ability to prioritize the human scale: “This form creates a primary nucleus of order and measure at the human scale that counterbalances the order of nature and, at the same time, invites it to participate in the architectural form.”<sup>24</sup> At the same time, she explained how the courtyard also had greater potential to connect to the surrounding area by creating a spatial fabric, or at least the “nucleus of a spatial fabric,” as it is “the smallest environment capable of carrying the urban idea.”<sup>25</sup> The courtyard also corresponds to the “*hortus conclusus*,” whose creation Vinciarelli described as an ancient practice: “A garden that is walled [is] something that has been done since humanity started.”<sup>26</sup> More importantly,





Lauretta Vinciarelli, drawings for *Proposal for an art museum in Southwest Texas*, 1980, pastel, graphite and ink on vellum, 11½ × 12 inches (29.2 × 30.5 cm).  
Courtesy Judd Foundation. The Lauretta Vinciarelli Papers, Judd Foundation Archives, Marfa, Texas.

Vinciarelli noted that at that time “these sorts of archetypes and types were very much studied in Italy”—a student of architecture in Italy during the late 1960s, Vinciarelli was well-acquainted with that context.<sup>27</sup>

### The Contemporariness of Typology

We must reflect upon the legacy of Columbia University’s housing studio and Vinciarelli’s exploration of types in Marfa—specifically courtyard-type housing and *horti conclusi*—to understand the impact it had on the history (and historiography) of postmodern architecture. In the United States and Europe alike, postwar architects and urbanists were coming to grips with the awesome responsibility of historic preservation; New York, for example, witnessed the destruction of landmarks like the original Pennsylvania Station and Lewisohn Stadium

on the campus of City College, where, among other influential figures, Martin Luther King Jr. once spoke. The preservation movement not only gained the attention of activists like Jane Jacobs, but also the Columbia University faculty (Columbia’s Historic Preservation Program, the first such program in the United States, was founded in 1964 by James Marston Fitch). The urgency of historic preservation at that time encouraged architects to look to history as a source for inspiration. However, even as post-modern historicists were gaining popularity for their eclectic application of historical elements (classical columns, broken pediments, and more) as a stylistic counter to the minimalist aesthetic of the Modern movement in architecture, Vinciarelli and others emphasized that time-tested types are perpetually relevant and adaptable even as aesthetic trends ebb and flow.

Courtyard-type housing and *horti conclusi* have made a comeback as of late, in part due to the possibilities for sustainability.<sup>28</sup> However, they have also been called upon for their potential for escapism. The 2011 Serpentine Gallery Pavilion, for example, designed by Swiss architect Peter Zumthor as a *hortus conclusus*, was meant to engage the senses and provide a place for rest in an increasingly turbulent world.<sup>29</sup> Considering the social, political, and

environmental upheaval we have seen since 2011, I think it is safe to assume that there will continue to be a need for these types in the years to come. This underscores Vinciarelli’s belief in the timelessness and enduring appropriateness of historical types despite our constantly fluctuating society. Typology continues to be a useful design tool today, as we address the unique dilemmas of the twenty-first century.

### Notes

- 1 Matilda McQuaid and Terence Riley, ed., *Envisioning Architecture: Drawings from the Museum of Modern Art* (New York: The Museum of Modern Art, 2002), 37, n36. Lilly Reich also had work acquired that year, including a lacquered screen. It was not until 1994 that Reich’s drawings were researched and catalogued by Matilda McQuaid and Pierre Adler. Charlotte Perriand had furniture acquired by MoMA as early as 1934, but that work was jointly attributed to Le Corbusier and Pierre Jeanneret. Information retrieved from MoMA’s online collections, <https://www.moma.org/collection/> (accessed July 21, 2017) and Terry Riley, “Preface,” in Matilda McQuaid and Magdalena Droste, *Lilly Reich: Designer and Architect* (New York: Museum of Modern Art, 1996), 7.
- 2 Martin Filler, “Harbingers: Ten Architects,” *Art in America* (Summer 1981): 122.
- 3 Mary McLeod, “The End of Innocence: From Political Activism to Postmodernism,” in Joan Ockman, *Architecture School: Three Centuries of Educating Architects in North America* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2012), 190.
- 4 Ruth Rutholtz and Diana Ming Sung, “Carpet Housing,” *Heresies: A Feminist Publication on Art and Politics*, Issue 11: Making Room: Women and Architecture, Volume 3, No. 3: 23.
- 5 James Tice, “Theme and Variations: A Typological Approach to Housing Design, Teaching, and Research,” *Journal of Architectural Education*, 46 No. 3 (Feb. 1993): 163.
- 6 Gutman and Sparling, interview by author, March 30, 2013.
- 7 Tice, “Theme and Variations: A Typological Approach to Housing Design, Teaching, and Research,” 162.
- 8 “Lecture: Lauretta Vinciarelli” (1978), Giuseppe Zambonini papers; Open Atelier of Design Lecture Series. *New School Archives and Special Collections Digital Archive*, [http://digitalarchives.library.newschool.edu/index.php/Detail/objects/KA0130\\_OA\\_14](http://digitalarchives.library.newschool.edu/index.php/Detail/objects/KA0130_OA_14) (accessed January 7, 2015).
- 9 Alan Colquhoun, “Postmodernism and Structuralism: A Retrospective Glance,” *Assemblage* 5 (February 1988): 10.
- 10 Armstrong and Cohen, interview by author via Skype, April 21, 2013.
- 11 Armstrong and Cohen.
- 12 “Lecture: Lauretta Vinciarelli.”

- 13 “Lecture: Lauretta Vinciarelli.”
- 14 Vinciarelli, “Statement on my work” (1986), in *Emerging Voices: A New Generation of Architects in America*, 36.
- 15 “Lecture: Lauretta Vinciarelli” (1978), Giuseppe Zambonini papers.
- 16 Lauretta Vinciarelli, interview by Rainer Judd and Barbara Hunt McLanahan, February 25, 2008, New York, NY; transcript, Oral History Project, Judd Foundation, Marfa, TX.
- 17 Lauretta Vinciarelli, “Marfa 2a,” *Précis* 2, “Tradition: Radical and Conservative,” 53.
- 18 “Lecture: Lauretta Vinciarelli” (1978), Giuseppe Zambonini papers.
- 19 Vinciarelli, “Marfa 2a,” 53.
- 20 Judd, “Horti Conclusi,” in *Donald Judd, Architektur* edited by Donald Judd and Marianne Stockebrand (Münster: Edition Cantz, 1989), 40.
- 21 See Judd and Stockebrand, Donald Judd, *Architektur*; Marianne Stockebrand, *Chinati: The Vision of Donald Judd* (New Haven: Yale Univ. Press, 2010); John Messina, “Principle and Practice: The Ethic and Efficacy of Donald Judd’s Interventions at La Mansana de Chinati,” *98th ACSA Annual Meeting Proceedings, Rebuilding* (2010): 533-39.
- 22 Marianne Stockebrand, *Chinati: The Vision of Donald Judd*, 132.
- 23 Lauretta Vinciarelli, “Courtyard Building for Donald Judd Installations,” *Arts + Architecture* 28 (1981): 36.
- 24 Vinciarelli, “Courtyard Building,” 37.
- 25 Vinciarelli, “Courtyard Building,” 37.
- 26 Vinciarelli, interview.
- 27 Vinciarelli, interview.
- 28 Günter Pfeifer, Per Brauneck, *Courtyard Houses: A Housing Typology* (Basel: Birkhäuser, 2008); Ulrike Passe, “Sustainable Building typologies: Free Flow Open Space as a Climate technology,” the International Journal of Environmental, Cultural, Economic, and Social Sustainability 3 (2008): 15-8; Donia Zhang, *Courtyard Housing for Health and Happiness: Architectural Multiculturalism in North America* (New York: Routledge, 2016); Markus Bulus, Malsiah Hamid, Yaik Wah Lim, “Courtyard as a Passive Cooling Strategy in Buildings,” *International Journal of Built Environment and Sustainability*, 4 no. 1 (2017): 48-55.
- 29 Amy Frearson, “Serpentine Gallery Pavilion 2011 by Peter Zumthor,” *Dezeen*, June 27, 2011, <https://www.dezeen.com/2011/06/27/serpentine-gallery-pavilion-2011-by-peter-zumthor-2/> (accessed August 18, 2017).