Unsettlements: An Interview with Ian Hodder on Çatalhöyuk and the Beginnings of Domesticity

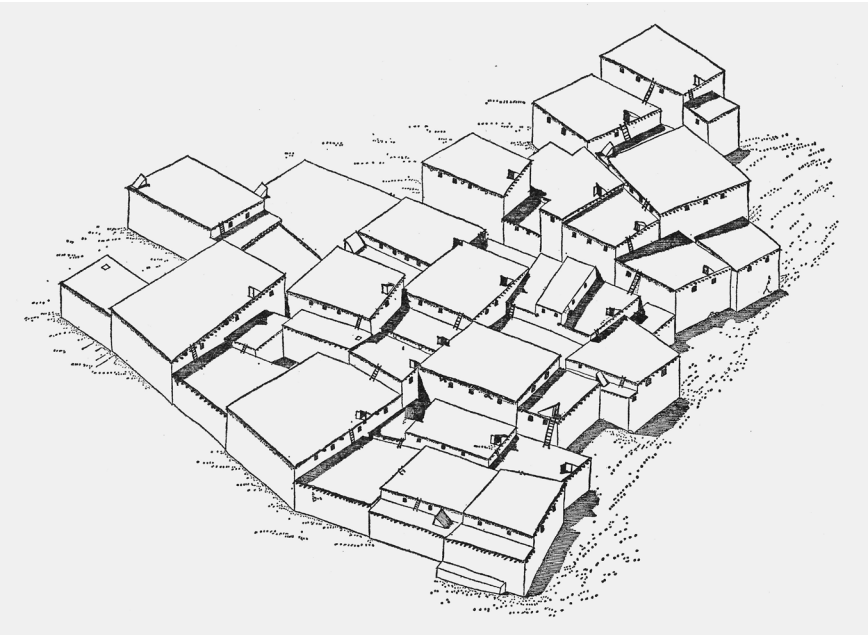
Alfredo Thiermann, Xavier Nueno

The mounds of Çatalhöyük seen from the North. From James Mellaart, *Çatal Höyük: A Neolithic Town in Anatolia* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1967), 33.

Architecture has long drawn insight from those outside its traditional boundaries—anthropologists, historians, philosophers—and Ian Hodder stands as one of the most transformative of those "outsiders." His decades-long excavation at Çatalhöyük, a 9,000-year-old settlement in central Anatolia, has radically reframed how we understand the origins of domestic space, collective life, and built form. What makes Hodder's work so compelling for architects is not just what it reveals about the past, but how it unsettles the very categories we use to think about architecture: house, plan, labor, domesticity. At Çatalhöyük, the house is not just a dwelling—it is simultaneously a tomb, a temple, a workshop, and a living being, constantly repaired and replastered. It resists separation between subject and object, language and drawing, activities and materials, production and reproduction. This entanglement forces us to rethink what architecture is and where domesticity truly began.

Interviewers: Alfredo Thiermann (AT), Xavier Nueno (XN).

Interviewee: Ian Hodder (IH).



Schematic reconstruction of a section of Level VI with houses and shrines rising in terraces one above each other. From James Mellaart, *Çatal Höyük: A Neolithic Town in Anatolia* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1967), 62.

AT: What is a house in Çatalhöyük? You have been writing about domesticity—and I hope we will get to your uneasy relationship with that term later—but can we even speak about houses at Çatalhöyük? Or should we find some other term to describe what we find there?[1]

IH: Well, you know, Maurice Bloch, a really important socio-cultural anthropologist, came to spend some time at Çatalhöyük. He asked: "*Is there religion at Çatalhöyük, or are there just houses?"* What he meant was that it is impossible to talk about houses or religion there as separate things—they are entangled. I mentioned in my talk to your students that the house at Çatalhöyük integrates functions that, in a modern city, are split apart: residential areas, places of business, cemeteries, mosques or churcheshey are all separated under the idea of the modern city. But in Çatalhöyük, they coexist within the same building, the same structure. So, what do you call such a structure? A shrine? A temple? A burial ground? A house?

Putting on one hat, I might convince myself that it is just a cemetery—people living within the cemetery. With another, I might see it as a temple. I just don't think we have the right words for it.

AT: Even the word "building" seems too specific, too narrow.

IH: Exactly. I have ended up thinking the best approach is to use a word people are less troubled by—like "house"—but in my own mind, I always put it in brackets.

AT: If we take "house" in a very expanded sense—or alternatively, call it a cemetery or temple depending on the interpretive lens—it seems that your field has long moved beyond the idea that agriculture was the driving force behind the rise of stationary settlements and with them, domesticity.[2] *You have argued that these dwellings actually precede agriculture. But now,*

1 This interview took place in Lausanne in the spring of 2025 after Ian Hodder gave a lecture in the context of the 1st year course on the history of architecture at EPFL taught by the authors. We thank the Section of Architecture for supporting this intellectual and pedagogical project.

2 Ian Hodder, *The Domestication of Europe: Structure and Contingency in Neolithic Societies* (Oxford: Blackwell, 1990).

it seems they may not be dwellings in the conventional sense either. So, could these proto-cemeteries or proto-temples be the earliest manifestations of settled life, not agriculture, not domesticity, but instead, structures grounded in relationships to death or symbolic production? Should we be looking to these other dimensions, rather than material or functional explanations, to understand the so-called origins?

IH: Yes, I think so. Gordon Childe saw these developments as a "revolution," and many archaeologists still hold onto some notion of that.[3] But true agriculture only really appears around 8500 BCE. Meanwhile, the first sedentary villages—like those of the Natufian culture—emerge far earlier, around 13,000 to 11,000 BCE. So, we are talking about 5,000 or 6,000 years of gradual change. It is a very slow and uneven process. It is naive to look for a singular cause. The Neolithic unfolds differently in different places—even within the Middle East.

My view is that these origins form an extraordinarily long, complex trajectory. Trying to explain it is like trying to explain the origins of capitalism—there is no single point of emergence or causal relationship.

Another aspect I have written about is how humans themselves began changing—biologically and physiologically—during the height of the last ice age.[4] Our mouths and teeth began to change, our stature shifted, and male–female distinctions began to transform. These changes, which included increasing reliance on plants and grinding stones, were already underway twenty-five thousand years ago. If you look at the biological data, you can see a long, slow trend toward this way of life already in motion long before sedentism or agriculture formally appear.

XN: In your book The Domestication of Europe *(1990)—and I think Alfredo was getting at this earlier—there is an argument that I found especially provocative: that the origins of domestication are not economic but instead rooted in ritual or symbolic domains. That is, domestication begins not with the mastery of plants or animals, but in the realm of representation. Could you speak more about your understanding of domestication in that book, and if those ideas have changed for you over time?*

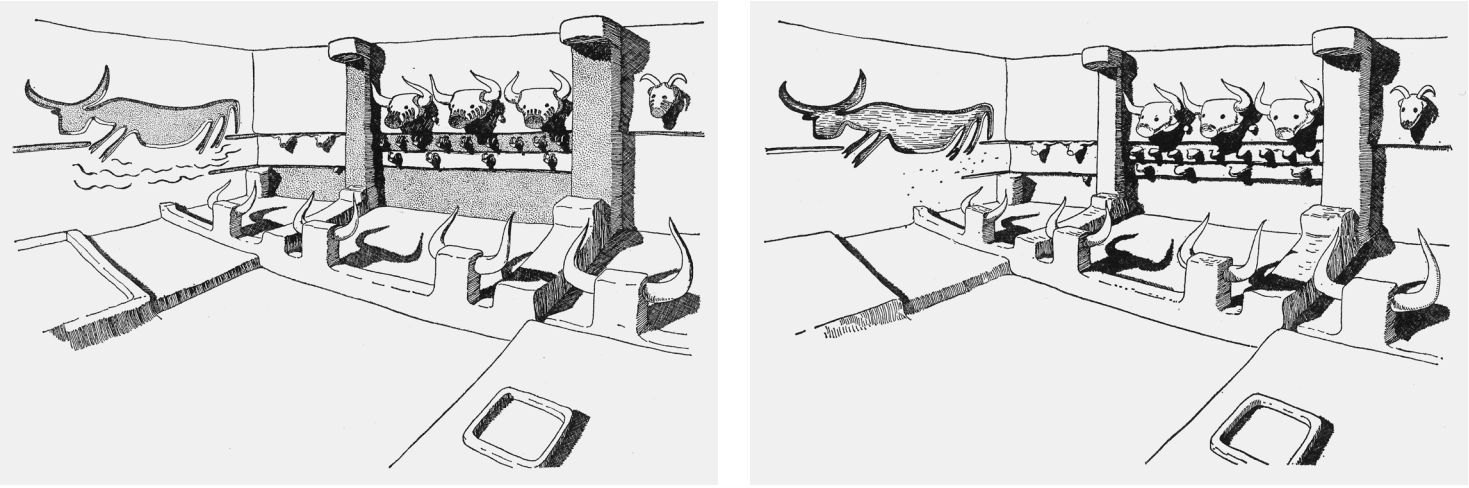
IH: Yes. You have to understand that when I was writing that book, I was reading things like Roland Barthes on the Eiffel Tower, and how he described it as a kind of mythology.[5] At that time, it was possible to think that representation could be deterministic—that symbolic structures could shape reality in fundamental ways. Barthes could talk about the Eiffel Tower as if it existed only as a myth. Nowadays, that might seem absurd, because we are more attuned to the materiality of things—to the fact that the Eiffel Tower is an object with weight made from steel through engineering, etc. But when I was writing that book, I was deeply influenced by structuralism and post-structuralism.

I think the core idea was that we had to domesticate ourselves before we could domesticate animals. The act of bringing the wild—like the bull—into the house was a symbolic act of domestication. The bull, the leopard, and other animals—by bringing them into this domestic setting, one was not just taming the animalone was bringing the energy of the animal into the house, and in so doing, creating the domestic sphere itself. Through that process, I argued, society was domesticating itself. Agriculture, then, was a consequence of that: it came after. You could only go out and domesticate the *agrios*—the wild—once this internal transformation had occurred.

3 V. Gordon Childe, "The Urban Revolution," *The Town Planning Review* 21, no. 1 (1950): 3–17.

4 For a more in-depth perspective on biological and physiological changes associated with early sedentism and agriculture, see: Ian Hodder, ed., *Humans and Landscapes of Çatalhöyük: Reports from the 2000–2008 Seasons* (Los Angeles: Cotsen Institute of Archaeology Press, 2013).

5 Roland Barthes, "The Eiffel Tower," in *The Eiffel Tower and Other Mythologies*, trans. Richard Howard (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1997), 3–17.



Decoration of the north and east walls of shrine VI.A.8, left: third phase; right: fourth phase. From James Mellaart, *Çatal Höyük: A Neolithic Town in Anatolia* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1967), 128.

So, while I would not go quite as far today, I still think there is something important in the idea that humans needed to anchor themselves in relation to the dead. That idea—that the dead were central to how people began to settle—is, I believe, very tied up with the larger transformations we were talking about. The practice of building homes literally over the dead begins very early, even in the later phases of the last Ice Age. It does not perfectly align with the emergence of grinding stones or plant processing, but it points to an early concern with locating life in relation to the dead. I think that relationship is foundational.

XN: I was also thinking about how that contrasts with the work of Gordon Childe. There is an economic determinism in his account of the urban revolution, rooted in primitive accumulation. Your argument seems unorthodox in that sense. You are foregrounding representation, imagination, ritual—almost as if those precede the economic transformations.

IH: Yes, though Childe was quite complex. He wrote in many voices and often masked his Marxism in ways that can be hard to detect. But for me, *Man Makes Himself* (1936) is his most important book.[6] In that title, you already get the kernel of what I was after—humans transform themselves.

That is the part of Childe I really supported. But I definitely wanted to push back against the idea that surplus production came first and that social or ideological change followed from that. I just did not find the evidence that supported it, and I still don't. There is very little sign of surplus accumulation until much later. These processes do not follow a simple economic logic.

That said, nowadays I would emphasize that all these dimensions—economic, symbolic, social—are deeply entangled. You cannot cleanly separate them. Someone like Amy Bogaard, who worked at Çatalhöyük and wrote extensively on the origins of agriculture, still finds the idea of the *domus* relevant. I agree. The house still matters.[7]

6 V. Gordon Childe, *Man Makes Himself* (London: Watts & Co., 1936).

7 See, for example, Amy Bogaard, Dragana Filipović, and Laura Green, "The Archaeobotany of Çatalhöyük: Results from 2009–2017 Excavations and Final Synthesis," in *Peopling the Landscape of Çatalhöyük: Reports from the 2009–2017 Seasons*, ed. Ian Hodder (London: British Institute at Ankara, 2020), 97–142; Amy Bogaard et al., "Agricultural Innovation and Resilience in a Long-Lived Early Farming Community: The 1,500-Year Sequence at Neolithic to Early Chalcolithic Çatalhöyük, Central Anatolia," *Vegetation History and Archaeobotany* 26, no. 4 (2017): 415–432; and Amy Bogaard et al., "Private Pantries and Celebrated Surplus: Storing and Sharing Food at Neolithic Çatalhöyük, Central Anatolia," *Antiquity* 93, no. 367 (2019): 623–640.

In that sense, I would describe the house almost in *animistic terms*—almost as a living being. There is strong evidence for foundation rituals and abandonment rituals. Houses at Çatalhöyük seem to be born, live, and die. When a house was founded, infants were buried inside it. As it was lived in, you moved through it from the place where children were buried toward the place where elders were buried. So being *in* the house was like being inside a living organism—it was something more than just construction. It had a life.

AT: I would like to return to this question of subject-object distinctions, especially in relation to houses. In other archaeological contexts, too, I think people are beginning to move away from that binary. What you are suggesting is that, in the case of Çatalhöyük, it's not even clear whether the house is an object or a subject. But before we get deeper into that, I want to revisit something you said earlier. You mentioned this was not a "jump cut" revolution, like Gordon Childe imagined, but rather a nearly twenty-five-thousand-year transition.

IH: Yes, that's right.

AT: So where does Çatalhöyük sit in that long arc? Is it about halfway through?

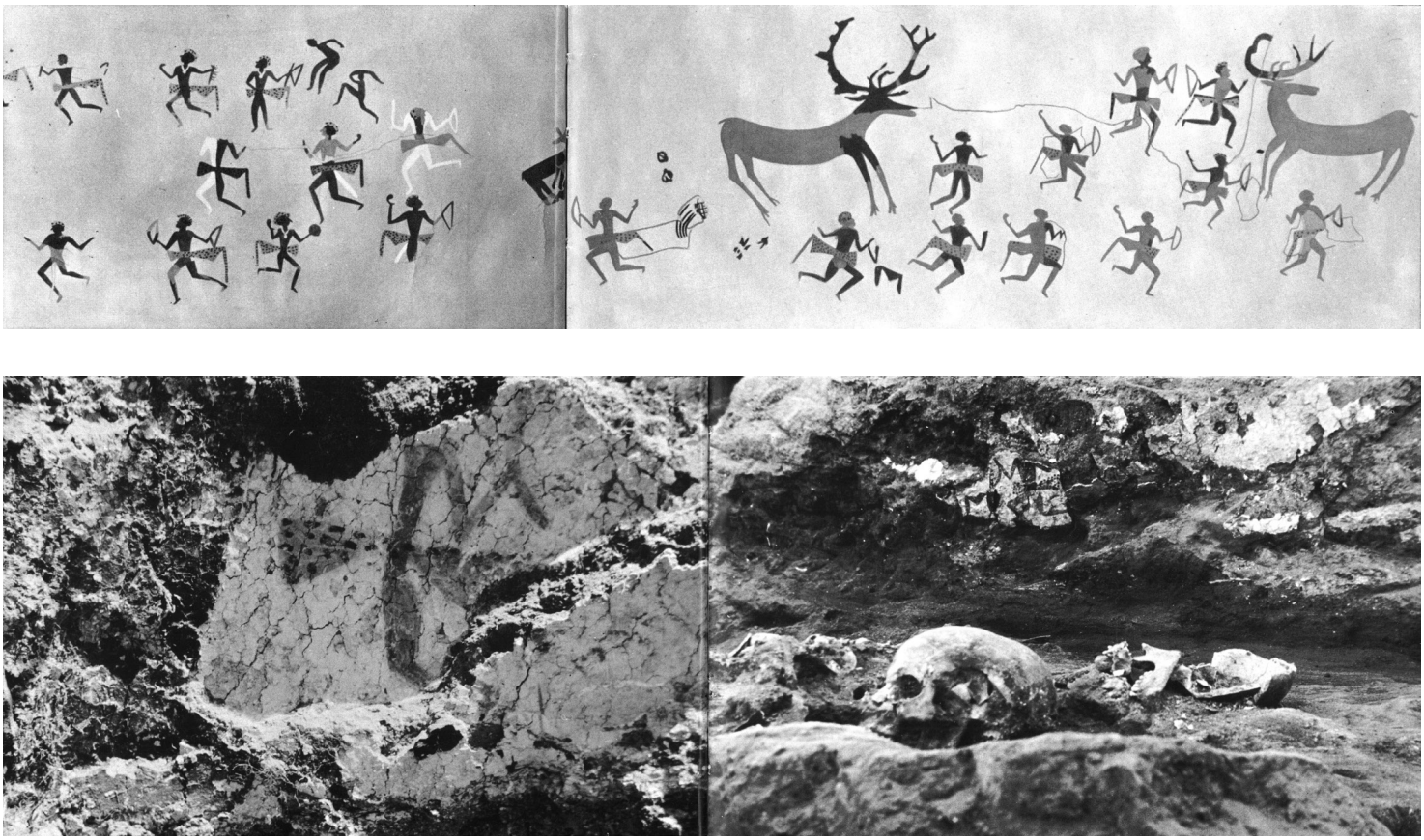
IH: Not quite. It actually comes much later, toward the last third of that span. And Çatalhöyük is strange, because it is almost fully agricultural—cattle aside—and yet it still bears the symbolic forms of much earlier times. Technically, it belongs to the Pottery Neolithic, so the seventh millennium BCE. That is well after the so-called Pre-Pottery Neolithic (PPNA).

But symbolically, it aligns more with those earlier phases—like the PPNA—and sites like Göbekli Tepe and the rest of the Taş Tepeler. The similarities are striking. Too strong, I think, to ignore. So Çatalhöyük feels like it has one foot in the past. It is a kind of cultural hangover. Maybe even reactionary in some ways.

AT: That is interesting—to think of it as reactionary. And yet it has been a kind of touchstone for your work over many years. So, what is it about Çatalhöyük that kept your attention, especially if it is "late" in this larger process and not, so to speak, the origin point?

IH: Well, when I first got involved, those other sites in southeastern Turkey—Göbekli, Karahan Tepe, and the rest—were not well known. Back then, Çatalhöyük was a singular star in the archaeological firmament. And while it may be less unique now, it still holds the highest concentration of narrative wall painting we have found anywhere. That alone makes it extraordinary.

Then there is the quality of preservation. It is astonishing. You find textiles, soft human tissues —organic materials that are rarely preserved at sites that old. It is a beautiful site to excavate. In most Near Eastern sites I have worked on, the layers are indistinct, the colors hard to read. But Çatalhöyük is bright and clear. That clarity allows you to do incredibly detailed and sophisticated work.



The Hunting Shrine of Çatalhöyük III (A.III.t.). From James Mellaart, *Çatal Höyük: A Neolithic Town in Anatolia* (London: Thames & Hudson, 1967), 98-99.

AT: Could you give us a sense of what that kind of excavation looks like? Maybe share an anecdote or an example?

IH: Çatalhöyük is a kind of question-generating device. There is something tantalizing about it. It is as if it is trying to tell you something—it is all there. People are buried in their houses. That means we can directly relate the dead to the domestic setting, which is a huge deal. Normally, archaeologists find burials and houses in separate contexts. But here, everything is together: people, dwellings, art. And so, it feels like you are close to understanding something fundamental. But actually, the more you learn, the more complex it becomes. The more you know, the less you understand.

XN: We began this conversation by asking what a house at Çatalhöyük is. You suggested it might be a temple, a cemetery, or a domestic space—but what about the houses in literal, material, and constructive terms? How are they built? What are they made of? And how are they organized? Maybe we could even look at one of the plans as a way into the question.

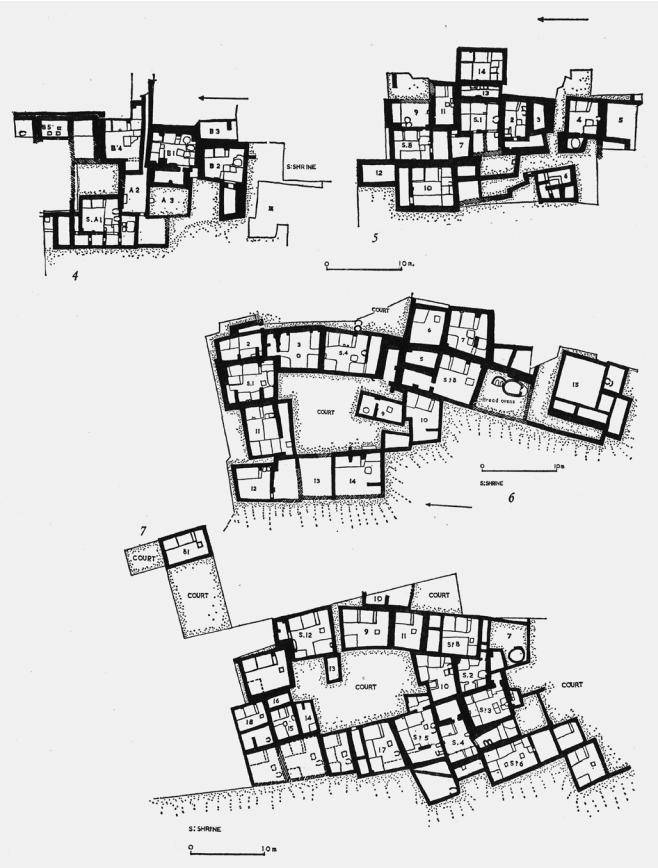
IH: The houses are all made of sun-dried mudbrick. They are either one or two stories high, with flat roofs. Entry is from above—you descend a ladder into the house. Inside, the walls are coated in layers of plaster—sometimes up to four hundred and fifty times re-plastered—and occasionally painted. The floors are also carefully maintained.

Beneath the floors, people are buried. And on the surface, you find hearths, ovens, and work areas. In fact, one could define these spaces by their productive functions—they are almost like industrial zones, in miniature.

Most houses are quite small—about five by six meters, or roughly thirty square meters total. Typically, there is a main room and a smaller side room, which we think served as storage. The houses were usually lived in for about thirty years, although this varies widely—some for as few as fifteen years, others for over a hundred.

When a house was abandoned, it was meticulously cleaned and decommissioned. The ovens were demolished, the wall art removed—everything was carefully dismantled. Then the space was backfilled, and a new house would be built on top.

Importantly, each house had its *own* walls. Even when rebuilt over the same footprint, the structures were independent. You can sometimes see this in the wall thicknesses, though, in this particular drawing, it is not



Plans of building-level, above: second floor; above right: third floor, center: fourth floor; below: fifth plan. From James Mellaart, *Çatal Höyük: A Neolithic Town in Anatolia* (London: Thames & Hudson; New York: McGraw-Hill Book Company, 1967), 57.

ideal. (This wall here, for example, it is too thick. You should be able to see the joint between phases, but it's not clear here.)

AT: But you still see the double wall, right? There's a visible overlap?

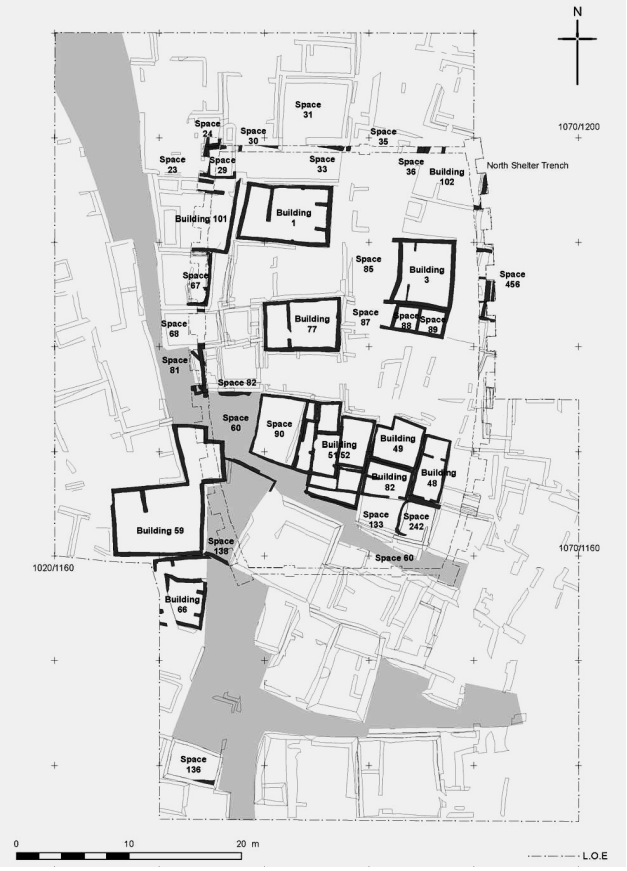
IH: Yes, in better drawings or sections, you can see where one wall ends and another begins. What is striking is that Çatalhöyük was built as a dense patchwork of individual houses. There is no evidence of collective demolition or rebuilding. There is no "master plan." It is all very organic.

This particular image is from one of Mellaart's plans.[8] But he over-

8 James Mellaart (1925–2012) was a British archaeologist best known for leading the first major excavations at Çatalhöyük between 1961 and 1965. His work at the site was abruptly halted when Turkish authorities banned him from further excavations following the controversial Dorak Affair. To read more on Mellaart's early publications on Catalhöyük, see James Mellaart, *Çatal Hüyük: A Neolithic Town in Anatolia* (New York: McGraw-Hill, 1967).

simplified things by assuming each building had only one phase. In reality, each house underwent multiple renovations and transformations over time. So, these kinds of drawings—while useful—are a bit factitious. Mellaart treated the site as if it were all one level because the top surfaces were roughly aligned. But that's not how it works at all. It's far more complex.

AT: Coming from architecture, I find these kinds of drawings particularly fascinating. What they show is that activities and materials—the walls themselves—cannot really be separated. There seems to be a constant co-production at work: changes in activity push back on the material form, and in turn, the materiality redefines what can happen within it. Could you tell us more about these representations? Why do these become more appropriate ways of visualizing these houses than, say, the more static plans archeologists traditionally use?



Plan of buildings in Level North G in the North or 4040 Area with midden zones indicated (Camilla Mazzucato and Çatalhöyük Research Project). From Ian Hodder, "Çatalhöyük: The Leopard Changes its Spots. A Summary of Recent Work," *Anatolian Studies*, 64 (2014): 7.

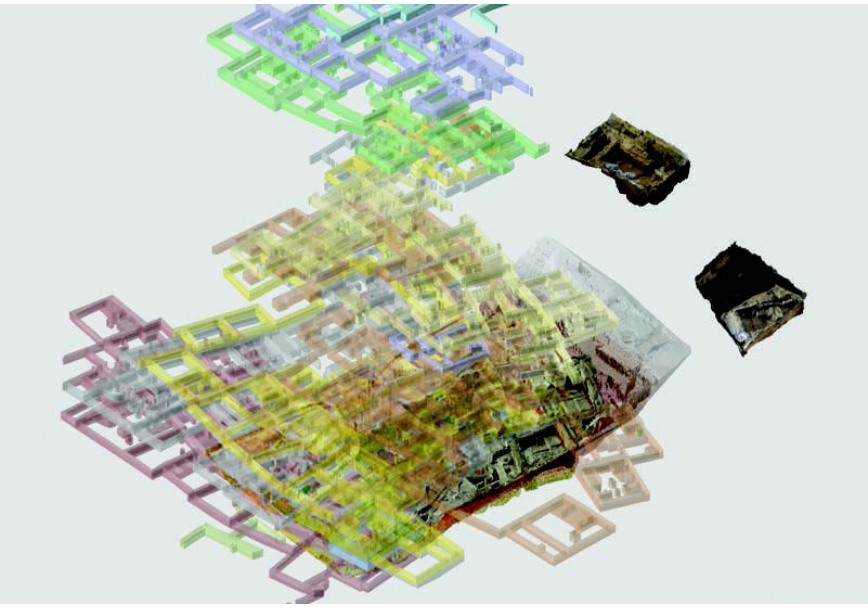
IH: Yes. In this particular case, for example, we are looking at Building 5. It was eventually demolished, and then Building 1.2B was constructed in its place, followed by other phases on top of that. Mellaart, however, would have drawn just one version. He would select a single moment—typically the latest phase—and represent just one hearth, one oven. But in reality, there are ovens and hearths from multiple phases layered into the same architectural footprint.

He would essentially ignore the earlier ones. His method was to dig down until he hit the first usable floor, document that, and then remove it—often with picks and shovels—to reach the next. That approach produces a very flattened picture of something much more dynamic and complex.

AT: What you are describing, to me, is compelling precisely because it defies the two most dominant representational tools we have as architects to engage with the built environment: language and drawing. These structures resist plans and orthographic projection, because they are in flux, they are changing all the time—they do not hold still. And they also defy language. We do not want to call them houses, because they are not just houses. But they are not exactly factories either, although production happens in them.

So, I am beginning to understand why Çatalhöyük always generates so many questions. It destabilizes our categories, and our tools of representation seem insufficient.

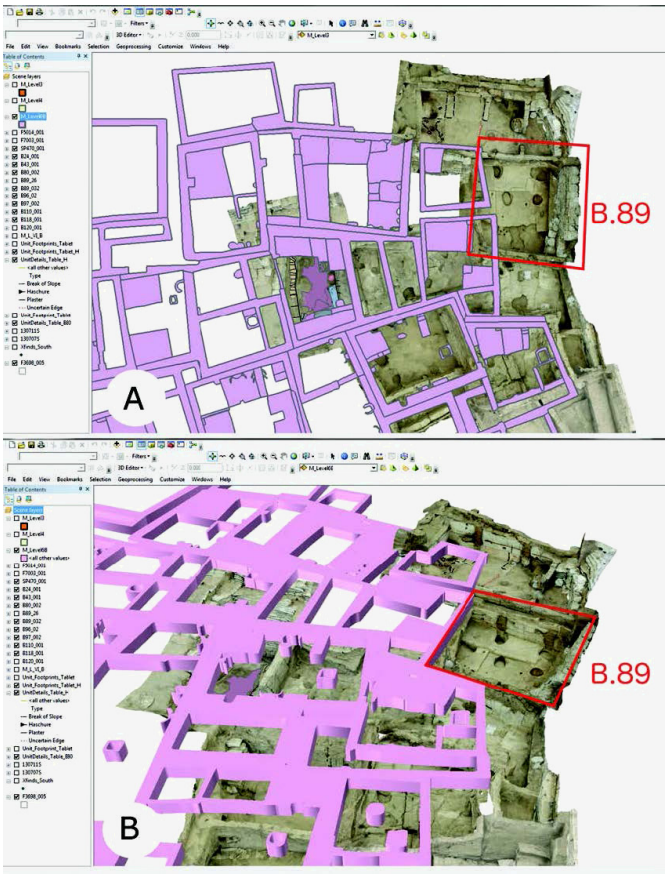
IH: Yes, exactly. I have often thought the only real way to represent the site would be through some kind of dynamic video—three-dimensional, even four-dimensional—something that could unfold through time. Since I wrote the original book, we have actually moved toward something like that. We now have around a thousand radiocarbon dates from Çatalhöyük, and we have been able to use Bayesian statistical models to get a much more precise sense of when specific buildings were in use.



3D GIS visualization of Mellaart phases superimposed to the models generated by IBM by the 3D-Digging Project. From Maurizio Forte, Nicolò Dell'Unto, Kristina Jonsson, and Nicola Lercari, "Interpretation Process at Çatalhöyük Using 3D," in *Assembling Çatalhöyük*, ed. Ian Hodder and Arkadiusz Marciniak, *Themes in Contemporary Archaeology* vol. 1 (Leeds: Maney Publishing, 2015), 49.

AT: Staying with the diagrams for a moment—there are two ways in which these buildings are changing, right? One is stratigraphic: layers of buildings built atop one another. But then there is also this continuous plastering of the walls. Are these two forms of change related in how the building seems to "live" or transform over time?

IH: Yes. Now, with the radiocarbon and Bayesian modeling, we can estimate the lifespan of a given house, maybe fifteen years, say. And if that house has four hundred and fifty layers of plaster, you can divide one by the other and get a sense of how often people were replastering. Sometimes it is as frequent as every couple of weeks, though more commonly about once a month.



Ortho view (a) and perspective view (b) of building 89 in the 3D GIS of the South Area. From Maurizio Forte, Nicolò Dell'Unto, Kristina Jonsson, and Nicola Lercari, "Interpretation Process at Çatalhöyük Using 3D," in *Assembling Çatalhöyük*, ed. Ian Hodder and Arkadiusz Marciniak, *Themes in Contemporary Archaeology* vol. 1 (Leeds: Maney Publishing, 2015), 51.

Plastering, however, does not happen in isolation. It often coincides with other events—painting, for example. Painting happens in specific moments, then stops, and then resumes. What we have seen is that painting tends to be associated with burial activity. So, you get these bursts: no burials for a while, then a flurry of burials—and during those periods, you see more plastering and painting. These rhythms tell us a lot about how the house was entangled with life and death.

XN: But why so much *replastering? What's the motivation behind it?*

IH: There are a lot of possibilities. One is practical: these were dark, smoky interiors, and white plaster would have helped reflect what little light there was.

I had a student working on disease and hygiene who argued that replastering might have helped prevent infestations—by sealing off the breeding grounds of insects. And when burials occurred, the floor was often replastered—so perhaps they replastered the walls as part of the same ritual gesture.

But I think it is more than that. There's so much repetition, so much careful maintenance, that it feels almost obsessive—like a form of neurosis. Interestingly, early on at Çatalhöyük, they knew how to make lime plaster—a hard, durable material used widely in the region. But they abandoned it very early and shifted to a much softer mud plaster, which *requires* constant upkeep.

It is almost as if they chose a building material that forced them into this continual cycle of care. Yet, if we return to the idea of animism, many societies believe that in order for something to remain *alive*, it must be continually repainted or replastered—continually renewed. That seems to be what was

happening here.

XN: Yesterday in class, you mentioned that the walls at Çatalhöyük are not particularly stable—that they are almost in motion from the moment they are built. Could you say a bit more about that material instability?

IH: Yes, the walls are made of clay bricks—just clay upon clay, with clay mortar in between. But the type of clay used is what is known as *smectitic* clay. It is a fairly common kind of clay, but it expands and contracts far more than other clays when exposed to moisture and drying. So, if these walls were allowed to get wet and then dry out again, you would get slippage, cracks, even partial collapse.

That is part of the reason I have suggested that the houses were built in such tight clusters, sometimes even with secondary walls around them. These were likely structural strategies to hold things in place, to prevent too much movement or collapse.

AT: I want to bring up something related to language and architectural thinking. A very good question came up yesterday during the student discussion, and it touches on a foundational dilemma: does it mean to include Çatalhöyük in the history of architecture?

In traditional definitions, architecture begins with a division between those who draw and those who build. Architecture as a discipline, as a profession, is defined by that separation: between planning and execution. The architect is the one who projects, who throws forward a vision. That is embedded in the word project itself—projectile.

But in Çatalhöyük—if we even want to call it an "object"—there is no such distinction, even at a basic level. Planning and execution are completely entangled, even in the most elementary sense. It seems to be an architecture of trying in the making, of responding in real time. So, we are left with two options: either we admit that this is not architecture at all, or we have to radically redefine what we mean by architecture in order to include it in our canon of objects of interest.

IH: You invited Tim Ingold to give the inaugural lecture of your course last year, right? Did he talk to you about *hylomorphism*? Well, Ingold is very critical of the hylomorphic model—the Aristotelian idea that a form is first imagined and then imposed onto passive matter. He argues that making is never like that. Instead, he sees it as a *correspondence*—an ongoing negotiation between the maker and the material.[9] He illustrates this with the example of basket weaving. The qualities of the reeds—how they bend, how they resist—shape the outcome just as much as the intentions of the weaver. There is a kind of conversation happening between the hand and the material.

And he takes that logic all the way to Gothic cathedrals. He claims that even there, what we imagine as master-planned edifices were actually more improvisational. Builders would adjust the design on the spot, fitting something into a corner here, modifying a vault there. He is not saying there were no plans at all but rather that the plans were loose and constantly evolving. It was all, in his view, co-produced. Now, personally, I find that hard to believe, at least in the case of cathedrals. But I see what he is getting at.

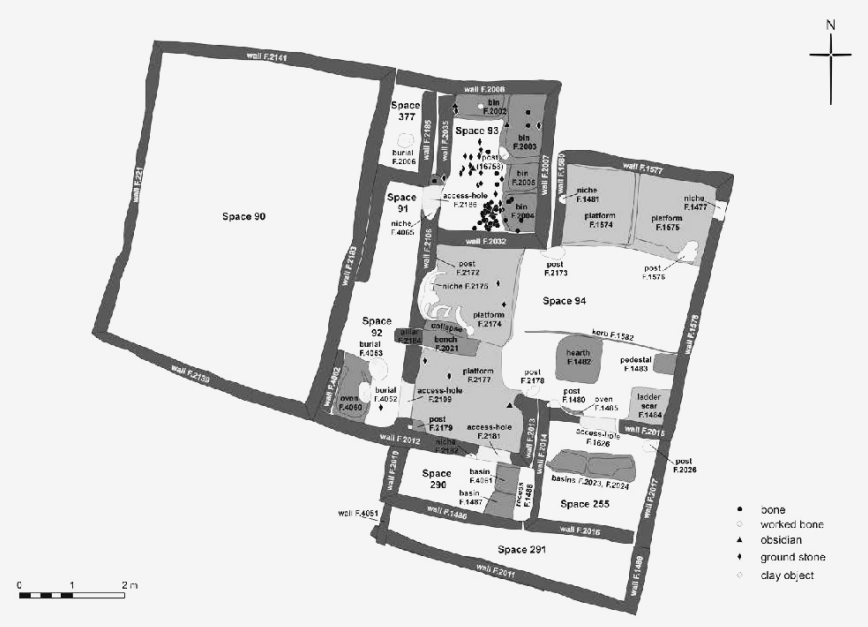
AT: That sounds like a very -century, British Romantic image of the Gothic. John Ruskin and others of that era projected onto the Gothic this communal vision—everyone building together—set against the alienation of the workers due to industrialization. In that sense, Ingold's position fits right into that legacy.

9 To read more on Tim Ingold and his critical take on the idea of hylomorphism, see Tim Ingold, *Making: Anthropology, Archaeology, Art and Architecture* (London: Routledge, 2013).

IH: Yes, I think so. To me, Ingold is *very* Romantic. And frankly, it frustrates me. His notion of making is rooted in an idealized, sensuous engagement between humans and materials—a kind of frictionless, harmonious co-creation. There is no room for alienation or disaffection in that model. It becomes an expressive, almost spiritual act, and I just don't buy it.

Still, to return to your earlier point—about Çatalhöyük—it is true that I often describe it as a processual space, something made through action and response. But we also have clear evidence of order and intention. For a significant period, all the buildings are oriented on a north-south, east-west axis. That consistency is hard to explain *without* assuming some concept in the builder's mind. Maybe it was purely practical—the prevailing winds come from the north, so placing the entrance on the south helps with smoke ventilation. But even so, I find it hard to believe that there was not *some* mental image, some planning logic behind it.

AT: Before we close, I want to come back to something material again—the walls, the plastering, the floors. What kind of labor are we talking about here? What kind of imaginary or worldview is encoded in that labor? And then, related to that: the density. You mentioned earlier that there is no spacing between houses. When we look at the plans, they are almost a continuous block, where houses are holding onto each other. What is the logic of that spatial condition?



Plan of latest occupation Phase B52.5. From Ian Hodder and British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara, *Çatalhöyük Excavations: The 2009–2017 Seasons*, Çatalhöyük Research Project Series (London: British Institute of Archaeology at Ankara, 2023), 397.

IH: Yes, the density is striking. One idea is that the houses are packed so tightly because they physically support each other, leaning in to protect against the harsh climate. The Konya Plain is brutal. Summers can be scorching—over 50°C—and winters bring heavy snow. Exposed mudbrick does not hold up well in those conditions. So, clustering might have been a survival strategy.

But I think there is more to it. At the height of Çatalhöyük's occupation, we see people building houses that are incredibly small—sometimes just a single square meter—with a hearth, an oven, and a burial inside. These are not houses you can actually live in. What they seem to be doing is *staking a claim*, trying to remain close to an ancestral house or grave.

So yes, climate is one reason for the tight packing. But another reason—perhaps a more profound one—is the desire to live among the dead. To be near one's lineage. That spatial intimacy was symbolic as much as it was structural.

*XN: As we begin to wrap up, we wanted to ask you about your article "*Staying Egalitarian.*"[10] What caught our attention was the use of the word* staying*—rather than* being *or* becoming*. It suggests that egalitarianism is not a given fixed condition, but something you must actively maintain, something negotiated. Could you speak to this tension—the pull toward hierarchy and the push back—and how you read that dynamic in the material record at Çatalhöyük?*

IH: Yes. There is a long-standing debate in archaeology about whether the Neolithic in the Middle East and Anatolia was hierarchical or egalitarian. The general view is that it was largely egalitarian until the fourth millennium BCE. But even then, we see persistent traceshints of inequality pushing through, trying to surface.

At Çatalhöyük, a particular pattern kept emerging. Houses did not grow significantly in *size*, but they did aggrandize in symbolic terms. A simple bench, for instance, would be adorned with goat horns. Then, later, those would be replaced with bull horns. Over time, the bench became more elaborate, the house more symbolically dense—filled with bull horns, filled with burials. But then, often suddenly, the house would be burned down and a much smaller, simpler structure would appear in its place. And then the cycle would begin again.

It is as if, ritually and socially, some form of hierarchy or display was always tempting the community, but it kept getting checked. I interpret that pattern as a constant negotiation: a strong ethic of equality, but also the continuous pressure to push against it. I think David Graeber and David Wengrow are helpful here—their idea that "the state is always there on the horizon"hat fits.[11]

XN: And these burnings or fillings-in of the houses—do they imply a severing of ties with the dead? A conscious break?

IH: In some cases, yes—I presume so. But not always. Today, we cremate people and still maintain ties to them. At Çatalhöyük, there is evidence of retrieval. Bodies or bones would be brought back up and kept close. So even if a relationship is "broken," it is also remade in another form. But when buildings were burned, there is no sign that people dug back down to retrieve the bodies. So, the burning might represent a more definitive kind of ending—perhaps to a lineage, a particular relationship, or social identity.

AT: Your book The Domestication of Europe*, written in the 1990s, has had a considerable influence, including some architectural historians. But over the course of our discussion, you have seemed increasingly skeptical of the term* domesticity*. It seems that you are moving away from seeing the* domus *as a fundamental category. Where does that term stand in your thinking today? If you have moved away from it, are there any alternative concepts that seem more useful?*

IH: I suppose I would still phrase it similarly to how I have described it earlier. The problem with "domesticity" is that it implies a contrast—*domestic* as opposed to what? The *wild*? That is where the book, in retrospect, goes astray. I no longer see the bull or the leopard as *wild* animals brought into the house. I now see them as forces—animating forces. The

10 Ian Hodder, "Staying Egalitarian and the Origins of Agriculture in the Middle East," *Cambridge Archaeological Journal*32, no. 4 (2022): 619–642.

11 David Graeber and David Wengrow, *The Dawn of Everything: A New History of Humanity* (New York: Farrar, Straus and Giroux, 2021).

power of the bull animates the building. The power of the leopard does the same. The ancestors do as well.

In that sense, the word *domestic* does not carry much explanatory power to me anymore. What is happening inside these buildings is incredibly complex: burials, animal imagery, ancestor veneration, food processing. And we have not even touched on that—on grain, for instance. We now have very detailed knowledge of food processing sequences: grain being brought in at a certain stage, dehusked, stored, reprocessed, pounded with wooden tools, then ground on stone, made into bread, and baked. We can map that entire chain across the architecture.

And then there is the labor. Use-wear studies on obsidian tools show us which were used for scraping leather, which for working fibers. The amount of labor is enormous, time-consuming, exhausting. And yet, strangely, no one seems to care about labor anymore.

AT: One fascinating definition you have offered—especially from an architectural point of view—is how the domestic space, traditionally associated with reproductive labor, is not easily separable from productive labor in Çatalhöyük. There are no clear distinctions.

IH: Exactly. There is no "industrial quarter" at Çatalhöyük—no area specifically for making grinding stones or working obsidian. That kind of spatial zoning emerges later, but at this point in history, nothing like it exists.

AT: And not only is there no "industrial zone," there is not even a clear mapping of one household to one lineage. In your writings, you mention that women breastfed children from other families. So even the flows of reproduction and production move as much across the boundaries of the families as they did across the walls of the houses.

IH: That's true—though with a caveat. Early Çatalhöyük does seem more biologically lineage-based. But halfway through the settlement's history, something shifts. We see the emergence of fostering, adoption, wet-nursing—practices that mix households and make the whole community a reproductive unit.

AT: So if we use the word evolution, what we are seeing is a shift from a kinship structure toward a broader social network—a more distributed relational field?

IH: Yes, though I would put it slightly differently. The family does not disappear—it is redefined. It becomes social rather than strictly biological. Claude Lévi-Strauss talked about a shift from kinship systems to "house societies" as an intermediate phase before the emergence of the state.[12] And while his model is overly schematic, Çatalhöyük does seem to confirm the idea that there is an in-between phase—a non-kin-based form of collective identity.

AT: So you see Çatalhöyük as occupying this transitional position?

IH: Yes—precisely.

XN: And one last question. In your lecture, you said something that stuck with me. You said the house at Çatalhöyük might be a temple, might be a cemetery. It is built of this porous, unstable material—walls that slump inward, almost onto the people living inside. And using these elements, you ended up describing the house as a kind of trap. *Could you say more about*

12 Claude Lévi-Strauss introduced the concept of the "house society" (*société à maison*) in his lectures at the Collège de France between 1976 and 1981. To read more on the complex relationship between houses and social structures as understood by Lévi-Strauss see Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Concept of 'House'" in *Anthropology and Myth: Lectures, 1951–1982*, trans. Roy Willis (Oxford: Basil Blackwell, 1987), 151–153. See also Claude Lévi-Strauss, "The Family," in *Man, Culture, and Society*, ed. Harry L. Shapiro (New York: Oxford University Press, 1971), 333–357.

that—about being entrapped in domesticity?

IH: Yes, and I don't think that is unique to Çatalhöyük. It is still true today. You borrow money to buy a house, and then you are trapped in mortgage payments. You invest your resources, your labor—your life—into it. And it traps you.

At Çatalhöyük, the situation was particularly difficult. Not only were walls crumbling because of the weather, but people also tried to build on earlier walls, which did not hold. Eventually, they had to build on middens—essentially on garbage—and that made for unstable foundations. Over time, the entire mound became twenty-one meters high, layered with all kinds of soil types. It became increasingly wobbly, unstable.

I think that is why the site was eventually abandoned. Living there required more and more effort. As I described yesterday, people had to dig to get sandier bricks, re-plaster constantly, build double walls, buttresses, bigger bricks, thicker walls. Every attempt to stabilize required even more labor.

That is what I mean by *entrapment*. To stay at Çatalhöyük meant constant reinvestment, constant repair. And that labor was not just technical—it was existential. People were plastering their houses to hold them together, yes—but also to hold together a way of life.

AUTHORS

Ian Hodder is an archaeologist and professor. Since 1993, he has been excavating the 9,000-year-old Neolithic site of in central Turkey, shedding light on the development of one of the world's earliest societies, the social and economic organization of the settlement, and the transformation from hunting and gathering to agriculture and civilization. He is the former Dunlevie Family Professor in the department of anthropology at Stanford University. He now teaches at Koç University in Istanbul.

Alfredo Thiermann is a professor of history and theory of architecture at the École Polytechnique Fédérale in Lausanne, where he directs the Laboratory for History and Theories of Architecture, Technology and Media.

Xavier Nueno is post-doctoral researcher at the Laboratory of History and Theories of Architecture, Technology and Media, where he also teaches architecture history.

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