

Architecture as a Puzzle

Audrius Ambrasas

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Foreword

It has been a decade since our first book was published.* While working on it, we were tormented by constant doubts. Why do we need all this? Who will be interested, apart from us? Yet, as it turns out, printed publications have a lasting value: it has since served both as a reflection of our thinking at the time, never lost in the mists of the internet, and as a catalogue of works that is always to hand.

Over more than two decades of creative work, our studio's credo has crystallised: architecture as a puzzle. Hence, the title of this current book. It is built upon the same principle as the first one: projects, realisations, sketches succeed one another without a clear dividing line. Our daily creative routine is just the same: all our work gets intertwined, interrupted and taken up again.

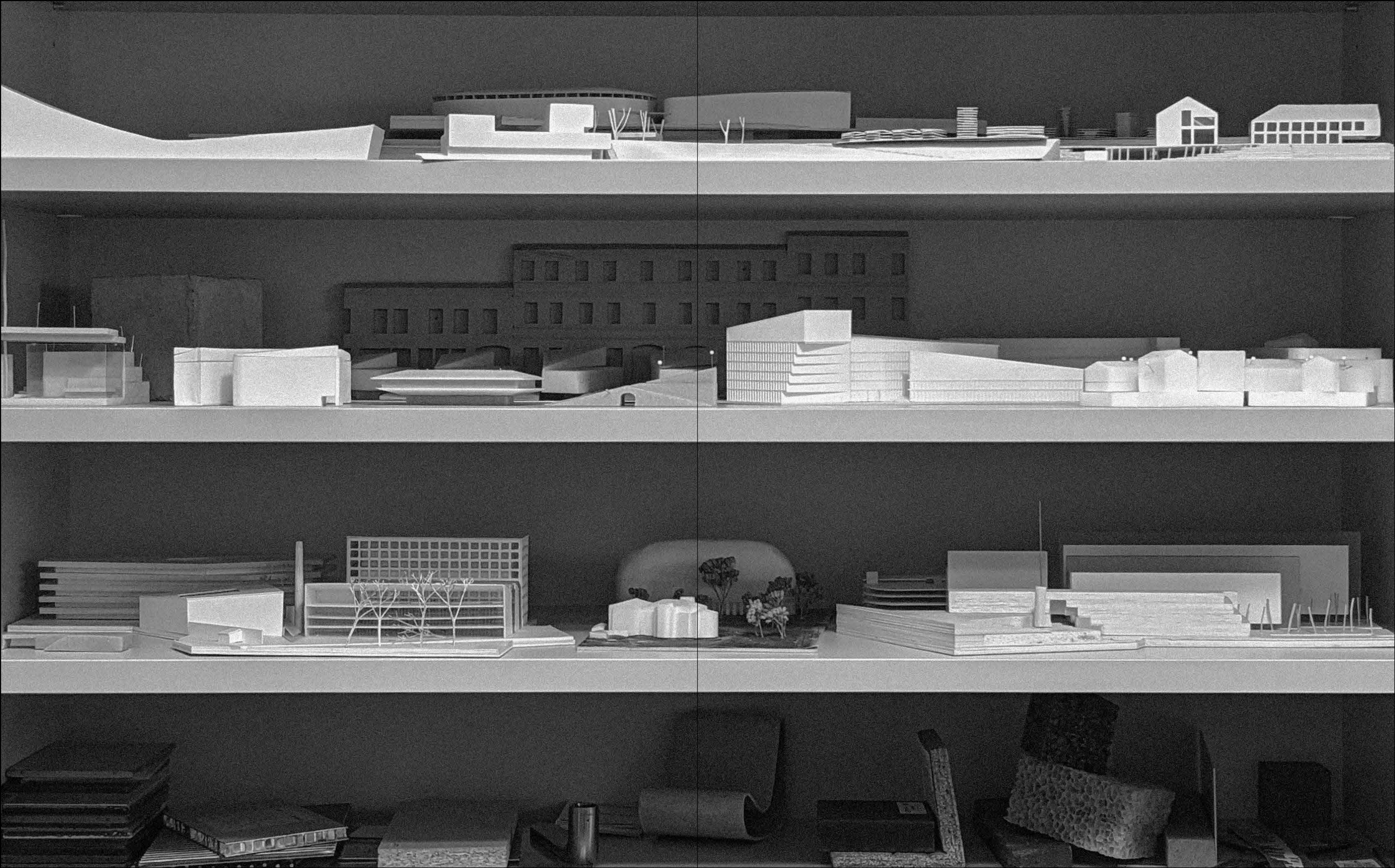
But there is a key difference: in this book, projects' sketches, drawings and photographs are complemented by the stories of their creation and reflections on what has worked out successfully, and what perhaps less so. Sometimes the unrealised ideas are more interesting than the realised ones, and sometimes they find a place in other projects, as our readers will notice when leafing through the pages of this book.

Observing the city's problem areas can sometimes inspire architectural ideas that might perhaps contribute to untangling these complex knots. Some projects also lead to small-scale historical research, exposing the motives behind certain urban planning decisions, often mythologised on spurious grounds.

Architectural competitions are a creative exercise, a way of generating ideas and a way of getting commissions. The results are sometimes disappointing: sometimes it looks like we have done our best work, but our efforts have not been appreciated by the jury. During this period, we have worked on many competition projects and had a wide range of experiences: everything from winning and successfully realising a project to being disqualified. Yes, a competition's outcome depends on all kinds of things, including the brief and conditions set by the organisers, the jury's composition and, of course, the idea that appears best at that moment. I have recounted the most interesting stories from competitions in this book, sometimes taking the liberty of polemicising against the juries' arguments. The book also contains project metrics for the most important works in our studio, covering the period between 1997 and 2024.

Architecture is a collective undertaking: without the efforts of a large team, there would be no projects or buildings. I thank all my fellow co-authors and collaborators: they have been and are important and their contribution to our joint works remains invaluable.

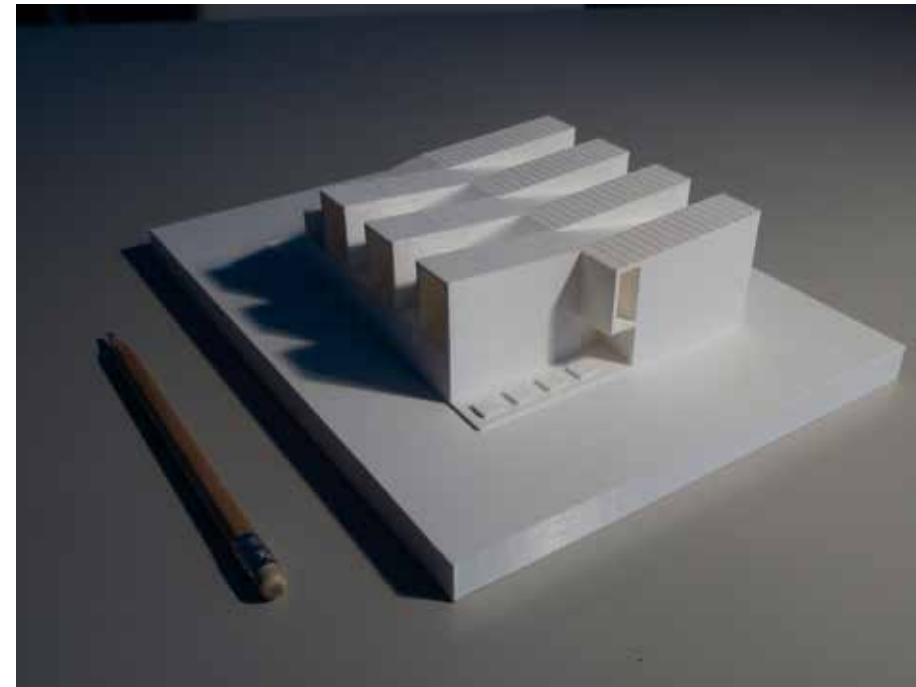
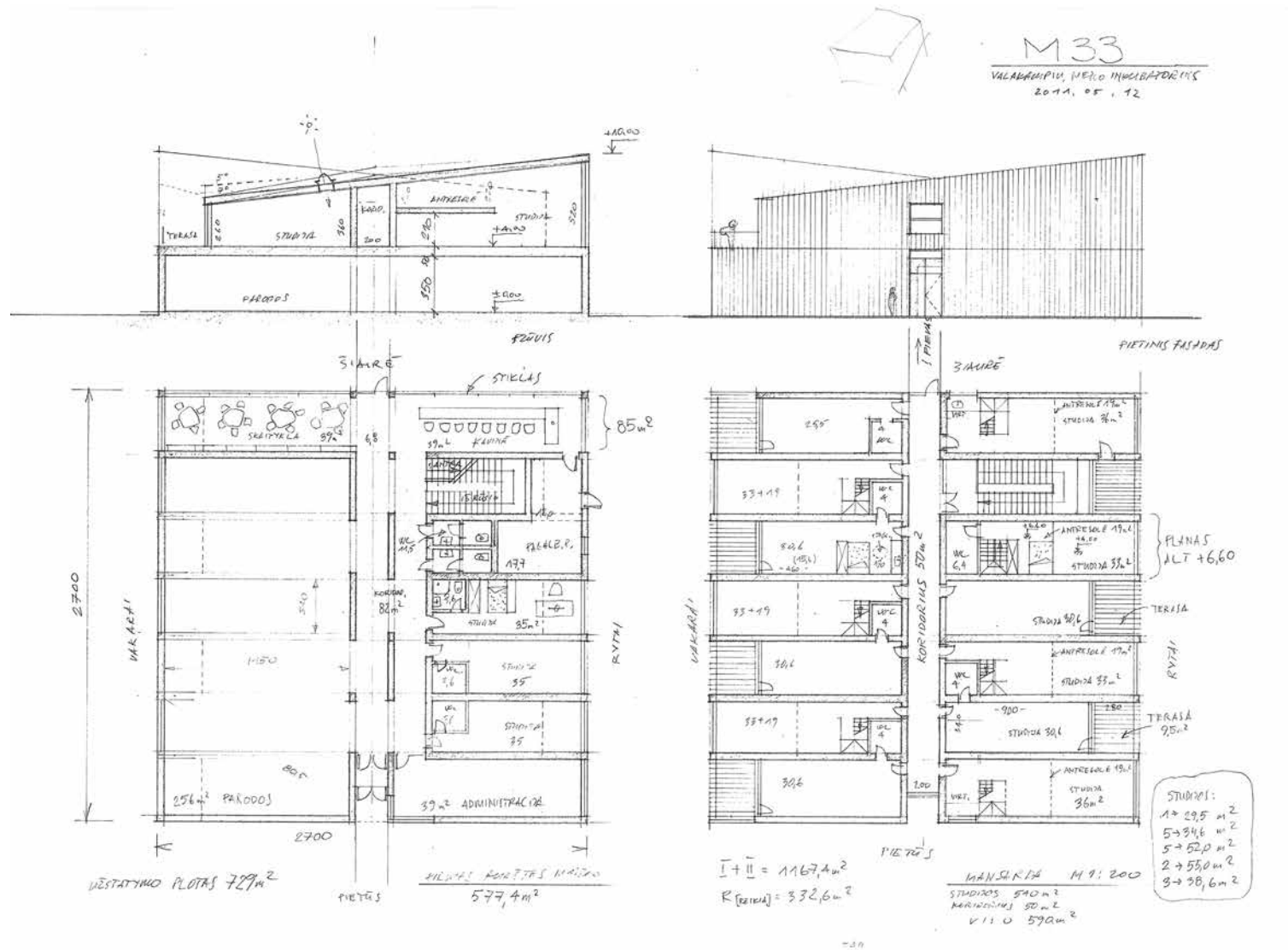
* *Audrius Ambrasas Architects. Works 1998–2014, LAPAS, 2014.*





RUPERT

Creative Industries Centre
Vilnius, 2013



Small, yet exceedingly charming. Built on a small budget, constrained by numerous limitations, this building project was initiated by Darius Žakaitis. For the whole decade, it has been fascinating to observe the life of this building – how it is being used, how it is aging and becoming a residency space for international artists.

Thermally processed pine cladding applied to facades has paid off, having turned grey, even black, over time and blended in completely with the surrounding Valakampiai pine forest. In the interior, the use of whitewashed timber provided an ideal backdrop for exhibiting the artists' creative process.

The multi-purpose hall on the ground floor serves as a venue both for art exhibitions and various events, which, in summer, tend to spill out from the hall directly into the open air. The small library space, with its adjacent kitchenette, is suitable for smaller gatherings or cosy dinners. The first floor houses studios of two types: high-ceilinged ones, with interior mezzanines, and the lower ones, with outdoor terraces. Some of the studios are designated for artists-in-residence, while others are rented out to creatives.

This was our first-ever design for a public and not a commercial building. Here, we sought to create a distinctive atmosphere through rational and economical solutions. Concrete, wood, and meticulously finished details form its essence – devoid of unnecessary ornaments or embellishments.

Rupert's story provides a bridge between both books. Rupert commenced operations in late 2013, and by February 2014, it was here that we opened the exhibition of our studio's works, '21 Models' (first exhibited at the Kaunas Architecture Festival, KAFė, in 2013), and launched our first book.





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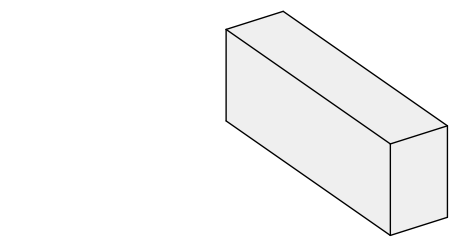




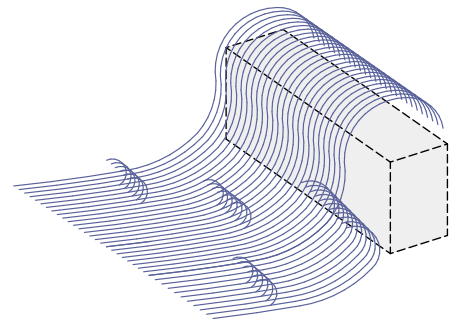


BOLD

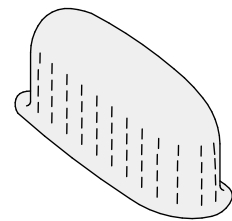
Sara Hildén Art Museum
Tampere, Finland, 2020



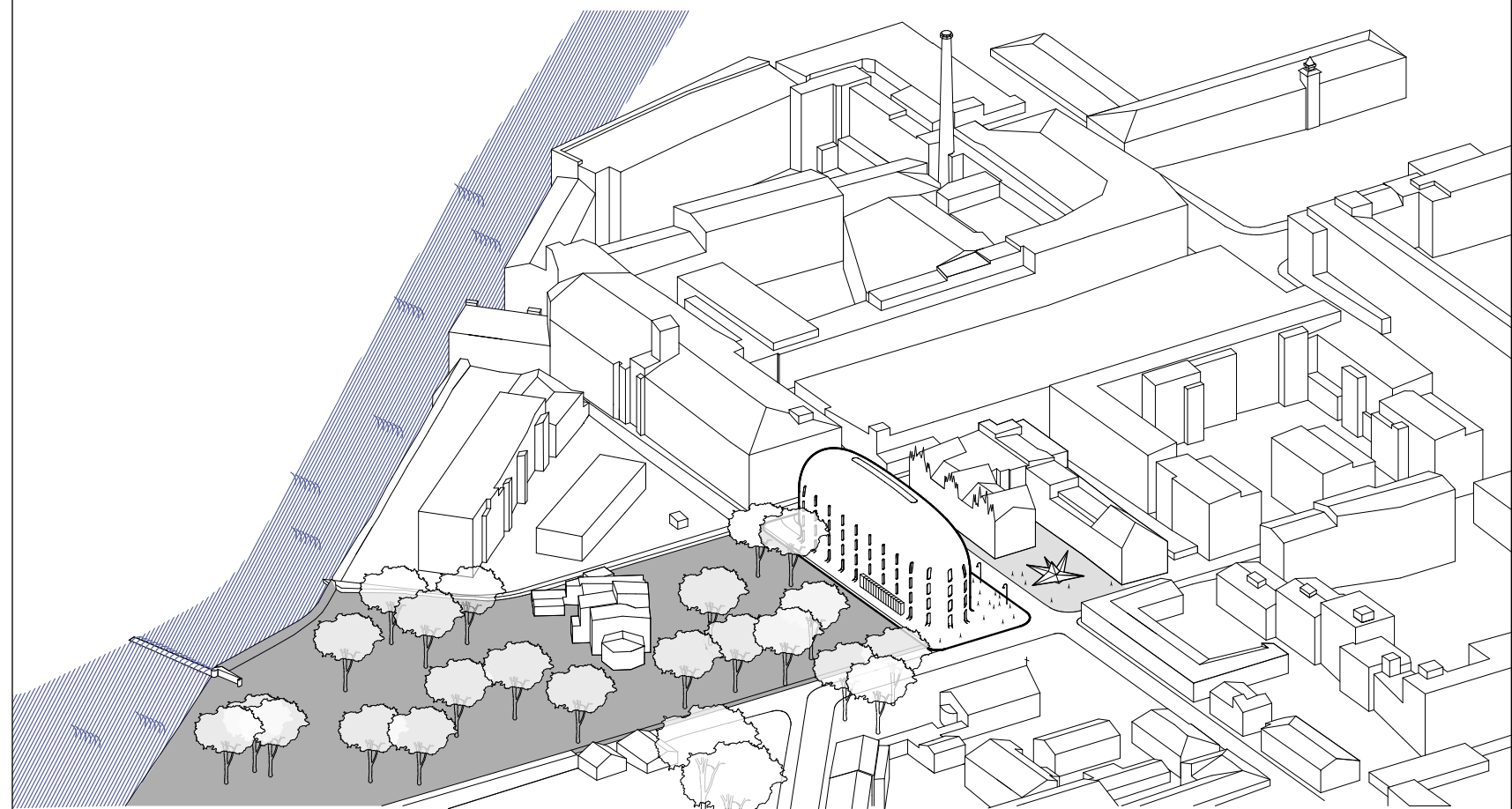
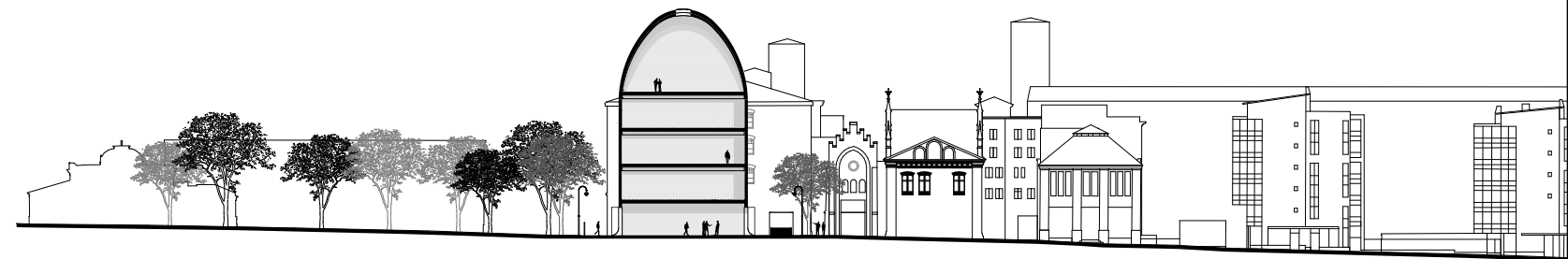
RED BRICK

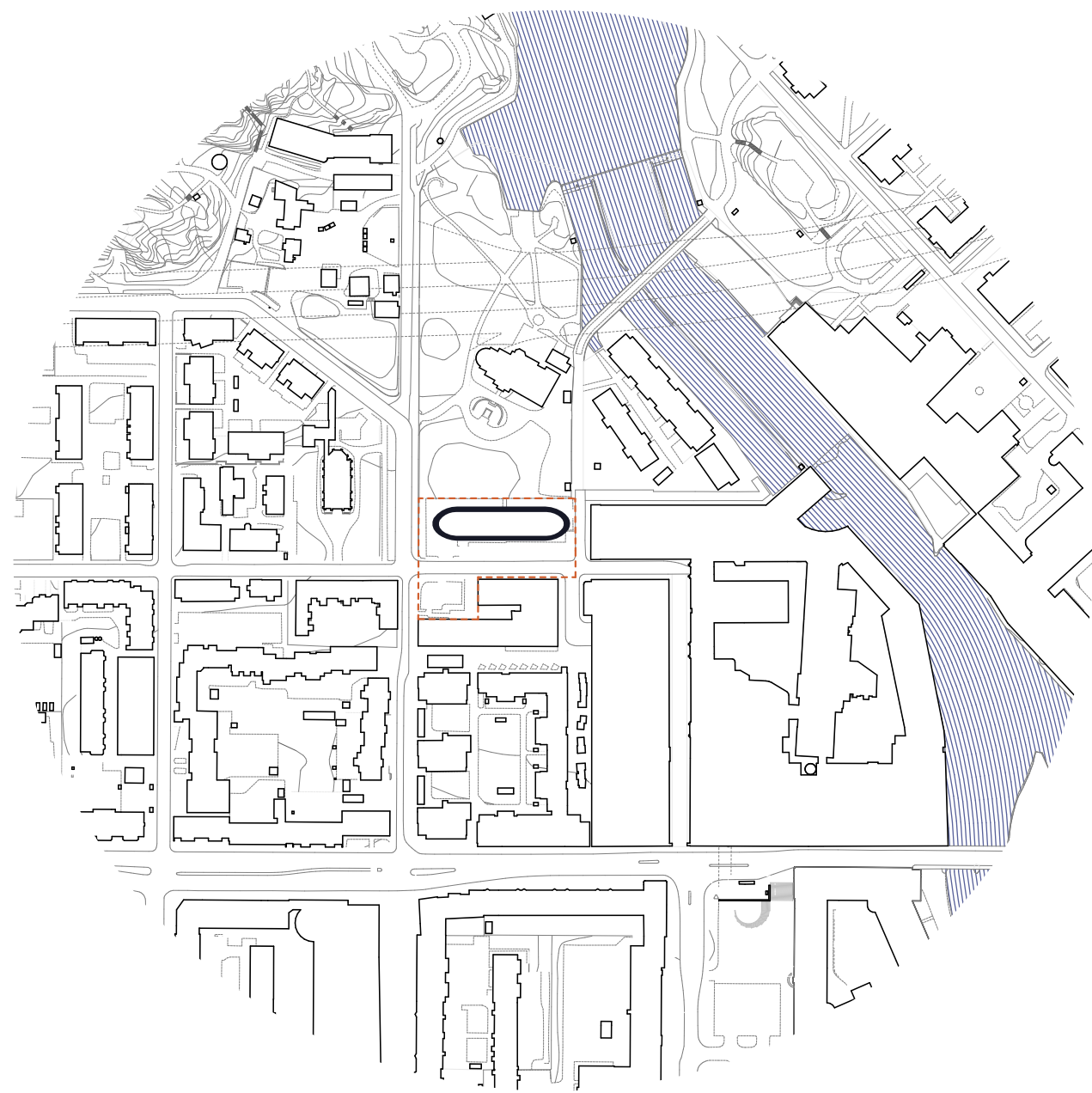


FORMATION BY THE STREAM



BRICK STONE





When a pause occurred between projects, we decided to fill it by participating in yet another competition that Olga and Karolina came across while browsing the internet. The competition was for a small museum in Tampere. The existing Sara Hildén Museum was located on the city's outskirts, and the clients – the Sara Hildén Foundation in conjunction with the Tampere City Municipality – desired a new museum building in the city centre to relocate the exhibition. Although the competition was organised in accordance with the public procurement rules, the terms were very clear and allowed for considerable freedom in interpreting the task and, furthermore, did so without imposing specific qualification requirements on the participants. A total of 472 entries were submitted, with Finnish architect Janne Hovi's studio taking the win. The jury evaluated all entries based on three core criteria: 1) integration with the cityscape and urban structure, 2) architectural and functional solutions, and 3) feasibility. They categorised the entries into five shelves: upper category (51), upper middle category (121), middle category (146), lower middle category (94), lower category (60). Our entry, 'Bold', was placed in the upper middle category. All entries were presented on a website in an informative way, allowing for sorting and comparison by various parameters. The terms of the competition stated that the jury would first select up to 15 entries and request models from their authors which they would then insert into the city's model. During the official announcement of the results, the jury members came to the shared insight that nearly all the selected works appeared too large for the city's context. The winning project was a very modest, *Finnish* design, whose interior structure was almost identical to that of the current Sara Hildén Museum building. It turns out that such was the competition's goal – to relocate the existing exhibition into as similar a space as possible, rather than to create a distinctive building.

We took a different approach, aiming to create a building that would stand out distinctively on the city skyline, without disregarding the architectural, urban, or natural environment. The museum's sleek round shape resembles a large stone, sculpted by wind and rain, rising from the ground, while its interior layout echoes the internal layout of a ship. The surrounding architecture and stricter urban context playfully contrast with our project. Yet, a visual connection with the environment is maintained – the building not only follows the logic of the street grid but also directly replicates the materiality of Tampere's historical buildings with its red brick facade.



'It is always easier to talk about architecture when observing it from the outside, from the distance of time,' architect Audrius Ambrasas once said in an interview. The architect's second monograph, *Architecture as a Puzzle*, presents the studio's work, giving a more detailed look at both built and un-built creative visions from 2014 to 2024, reflecting on un-won architectural competitions, un-realised ideas, intertwining, interrupting and re-emerging projects and sketches. An important part of the book is the research study – which has itself become a narrative – carried out between 2019 and 2023, on three myths of Vilnius: the Lukiškės Square, the meridian axis, and Tautos Namai (House of the Nation) on Tauras Hill.

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ISBN 978-609-8198-85-0

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