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A Foot on the Earth and a Hand in the Sky: Yara Sharif and Nasser Golzari on rebuilding Gaza

Architects Yara Sharif and Nasser Golzari speak with unwavering conviction on their project *The Power of the Invisibles*, and on the urgency to rebuild with Palestinians in Gaza, on the ground.

As the world continues to reverberate from the onslaught of immense violence, it is all too easy to falter when called to action. At the launch of the [Sharjah Architecture Triennial](#), as a call for solidarity bound all participants

Interviewed by [Yara Sharif & Nasser Golzari](#)

Interviewed by [Federica Zambelletti x KoozArch](#)

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and contributors, architects Yara Sharif and Nasser Golzari speak with unwavering conviction on their project *The Power of the 'Invisibles'*, and on the urgency to rebuild with Palestinians in Gaza, on the ground.

KOOZ In her opening remarks, Hoor Al Qasimi talks about the Sharjah Architecture Triennale, as being a space not for distraction or celebration, but rather for solidarity; a space that seeks to give voice to the voiceless. What does it mean for you to be here today, amidst the inhuman conflict which is being perpetuated in Gaza?

YARA SHARIF Thank you. It's really important to be here today, despite the challenge and the difficulty. Venues like the Sharjah Architecture Triennial are truly very important, especially because the voice of the voiceless is really being silenced in so many parts of the world. If we cannot tell stories — through architecture, art, and culture — of the invisibles of Gaza, then where and when can we do it?

It's really so important that we do this. It is really important that we also choose many different forms of narrating Palestine, its architecture and landscape. That's why a platform like Sharjah and the use of film, creativity and various

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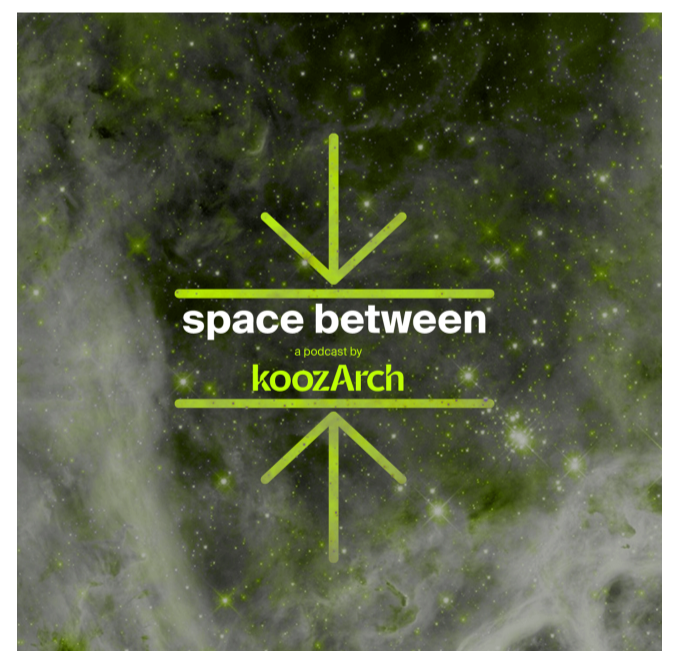
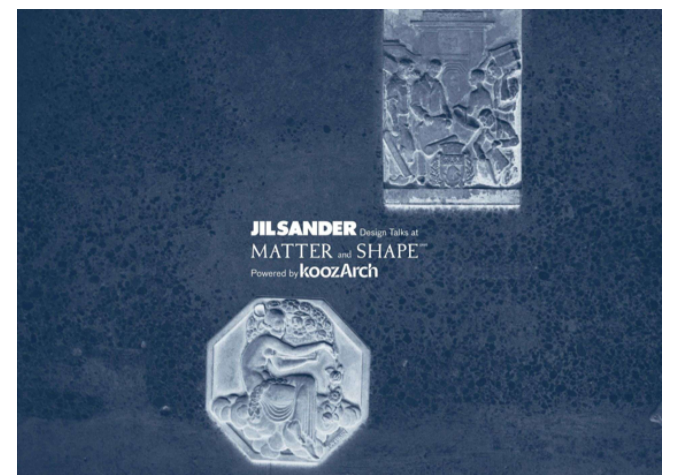
innovative techniques to narrate and to imagine, is so critical.

"If we cannot tell stories — through architecture, art, and culture — of the invisibles of Gaza, then where and when can we do it?"

- Yara Sharif

NASSER GOLZARI If I could just extend on what you have just said: you see, one of the important issues for us was the decision to be here itself. Obviously, we were commissioned over a year ago, and we've been working on our project — but when incidents happened, when the bombing started, the catastrophe in Gaza began to unfold, we obviously had second thoughts whether it was correct thing, whether it would even be ethically possible for us to participate, to come to the exhibition, or any kind of event.

The organisers, first of all, were very sympathetic. We felt that actually, maybe



being here could be a more productive and effective reason for coming to a place like this, which itself is in the global south. The context of this year's Triennale means that many international architects are here because they care for climate, for humanity, for justice, for community projects, for participation. So we thought that this could probably be one of the more effective or sympathetic contexts where we can actually talk about those who are usually invisible, but also to raise the urgency of addressing what is happening in Palestine now — this ecological, social, environmental catastrophe.

"This could probably be one of the more effective or sympathetic contexts where we can actually talk about those who are usually invisible, but also to raise the urgency of addressing what is happening in



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Palestine now —
this ecological,
social,
environmental
catastrophe."

- Nasser Golzari



Yara Sharif and Nasser Golzari, THE POWER OF THE 'INVISIBLES', 2023. Sharjah Architecture Triennial 2023. Photo: Danko Stjepanovic

KOOZ Your work narrates an ephemeral landscape, one that is not obsessed with a single image at the expense of all other images. It speaks of impermanence and of possibilities that may otherwise remain invisible. Can you share a little bit more about how you understand impermanence, both as a form of power and resilience in response to the colonial canon, and

also in terms of its significance at this specific historical moment?

NG Colonialism today is more of an economic strategy; in the film, what we show is the fact that there is this world rooted below the apparent surface, which is grounding and steering the world above and many of the conflicts today. When you go underneath the phenomena; when you actually touch, or go below the skin of the conflict, there is an economic agenda.

"When you go underneath the phenomena; when you actually touch, or go below the skin of the conflict, there is an economic agenda."

- Nasser Golzari

There is a colonisation of economic resources, as Gaza has gas under the sea. Israelis are very much interested in that. So it is with many other African countries, where we see hazardous practices of mining, long exploited by France and many other superpowers.

And as we know, the reason that France remained in Africa and refused to leave, was not solely tied to the fact that they were trying to fight extremism. In reality, there was a different form of colonialism that was taking place. In a way, moving back to what Gandhi did in India — rejecting the very material or symbolic source of colonialism used by the British empire in India — by just going to get salt from the sea, this was an example of resisting a form of material colonialism.

We think that, in a way, if we can resource existing practices, and use alternative sources of materials that are extant within the community, then the invisibles could be much more powerful, and can actually challenge colonial acts.

"When we talk about architecture of impermanence as a form of power and resilience, we talk about empowering communities, which is more important for us

than creating
architectural
monuments that
stay in the
landscape."

- Yara Sharif

YS We do talk about the ephemeral and of impermanence as a form of power. This also pushes our work into a different direction: as architects, we are not obsessed with the image at the expense of land. We're not interested in making monuments. When we talk about architecture of impermanence as a form of power and resilience, we talk about empowering communities, which is more important for us than creating architectural monuments that stay in the landscape. It is the building of the community that matters.

Also it shows up in the new aesthetic that we are trying to put forward as a new skin for Gaza — this probably would not be similar in its form to more permanent styles that can be observed elsewhere. That's why we see the impermanence as a form of power. That's why we see it as a form of resilience. It may be related to time. It may be related to ephemerality. But what matters is that it empowers

communities.

"We see the impermanence as a form of power. That's why we see it as a form of resilience"

- Yara Sharif

NG Imagery is also a form of colonialism. The theory of soft power is very important. Since the 1930s and even more so after the second world war, the United States has been able to sell us the idea of the developing world: a *lifestyle*. They propagated a specific lifestyle accoutrements that came with it. This was about smoking a cigarette, it was coca cola, it was all the other machinery and brands and products that they wanted to sell us. First, they sell you the lifestyle. Then you think that in order to be modern, you really need this. So then you are encouraged to go and buy that lifestyle, in a somewhat desperate bid towards becoming modern.

In our architecture, what we are trying to push for is the alternative aesthetics — unfamiliar aesthetics — to

challenge this colonial image. What we see here is very much the universal kind of projects, buildings that are planted in every city that you may visit. They're all similar; the materials come from companies that the market enables and pushes to sell their materials. Also, it is worth noting that a false kind of greenwashing has been sold to many corporate or large companies; comforting promises of the alleged reduction in climate damage are exchanged for the most expensive forms of so-called green technology. All of this, on a grand scale, is only affordable and achievable for the big boys. So moving away from that imagery is also a way of decolonising, right, or resisting colonialism.



“THE POWER OF THE ‘INVISIBLES’” by Yara Sharif and Nasser Golzari, installation view at Al Qasimiyah School, Sharjah. Sharjah Architecture Triennial 2023, November 11-March 10, 2024. Credits: Yara Sharif and Nasser Golzari.

KOOZ Your intervention at SAT is articulated through a film projection, which captures and critiques the

unequal distribution of wealth and capitalist greed. The accompanying installation indicates the alternative use of materials that grapple with conditions of scarcity. Why did you choose this approach using these two media?

YS Whenever we worked on projects as the Palestine Regeneration Team (PART), Nasser and I would always use this term “a foot on the earth and a hand in the sky”. With a foot on earth, we work with what is available: we work with the community, we discuss life projects and actual problems. But equally, we feel because of the contestation of the land, because of the exhaustion of the land, because it's too overwhelming — we always feel that we do need that hand in the sky. That hand in the sky is that power to imagine, it's a form of liberating ourselves mentally: liberating the mind and the imagination is very crucial and (more than ever) we need to bring it back. That's why we used film, to imagine a future Gaza in which a new skin can emerge that from the ruins we can rebuild — with that one foot on the earth, we can rebuild it.'

"With a foot on earth, we work with what is available:

we work with the community, we discuss life projects and actual problems. That hand in the sky is that power to imagine, it's a form of liberating ourselves mentally."

- Yara Sharif

The installation itself is saying that this is the rubble, and here is what we created from it. This is what life could be about. The two approaches acknowledge the need for dreaming and imagining, but also being practical on the ground. And we need them both; they complement one another.

NG Film and moving image is actually a very good tool to aid the imagination, to be able to move beyond the barriers, beyond the content and constraints. Equally, it is a more dynamic form of communication and representation, which we think is quite important: we can't do it purely by passive

acts and techniques, we need to bring this active, dynamic engagement into the art form, to enable genuine engagement.

"Film and moving image is actually a very good tool to aid the imagination, to be able to move beyond the barriers, beyond the content and constraints."

- Nasser Golzari



"THE POWER OF THE 'INVISIBLES'" by Yara Sharif and Nasser Golzari, installation view at Al Qasimiyah School, Sharjah. Sharjah Architecture Triennial 2023, November 11-March 10, 2024. Photo by Federica Zambelletti. ©KoozArch

KOOZ It also draws in a broader

collective imaginary, as film as a medium is accessible beyond an architectural audience; it expands the field of action. In her talk yesterday, Lesley Lokko challenged us to rethink scarcity as a form of abundance, of ethics, imagination, and actions. How can this reinterpretation fuel an alternative reality?

YS That's a very difficult question. Would you like to start with that?

NG I think it is an interesting, maybe simultaneously optimistic and pessimistic statement. Although I live in the north, I still identify as being from the south. The fact is that in the global south, often it is urgency or scarcity that creates context, a situation where we have to act. Therefore, I think the ethics — maybe because of the cultural practices or the communal associations we have in the south — the social ethics we have, are probably because we are far slightly away from the power of capitalism.

Capitalism embeds the belief that you have to survive as individuals, to think individually. Maybe being in the south, being in association with divergent social practices, within the realities of lived space, creates that richness of ethics that pushes us to create new and imaginative possibilities. Looking at the practices, tools and skills, there is a

pattern of resilience that can be observed across the global south. In a way, it's easier: the ingredients are there. It just requires us to create conditions for these ingredients to be realised, to give space for new imagination.

"In many cases, there is surely a scarcity of material resources. But there is often an abundance of skills, power and resilience."

- Yara Sharif

YS There may be scarcity of resources; in many cases, there is surely a scarcity of material resources. But there is often an abundance of skills, power and resilience. If anything, we are learning from them. If anything, this is the time to share these resources. It is sad that our world is a very unequal one, and in it, these people have been almost invisible. But within that scarcity of resources, if there is an abundance of ethics, then it is time for us to learn from them.

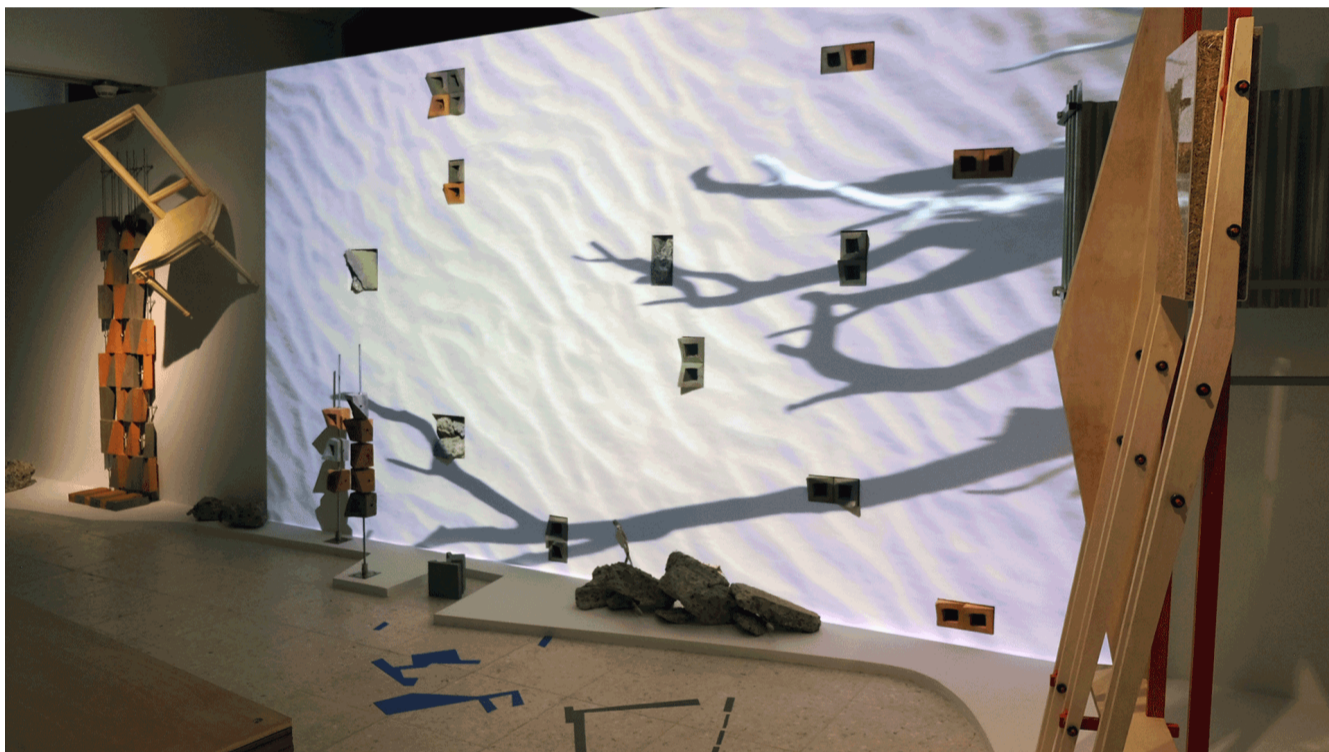
NG There are also more traditional practices of sharing knowledge in the south; knowledge is not possessed in the same way. It doesn't become a product that you have to sell in order to accumulate money. This notion of collective intelligence is, I think, quite an important one to me to share that knowledge, so that it may be put to broader use.

KOOZ You have discussed the intervention in Sharjah as an “experimental laboratory”. I see it as a call to action, which you have also been undertaking with the work you do as **PART**, or Palestine Regeneration Team. At a time when you can no longer act upon the ground, what role do platforms like **SAT** and others play in ensuring that certain stories are told and not forgotten? Can the act of storytelling become an action in its own right?

YS Thank you for asking. Storytelling plays a very important role, especially now when voices are unheard. But we also feel that it is at exactly this time where we need to take actions on so many different fronts. We do not believe, or we do not want to think that we cannot take action on the ground; we feel that our interventions are going to take place at so many different levels. Some are virtual, some are real on the ground,

some are about using salt.

To address the realities on the ground, we do believe that we can build and that we will rebuild. Our first aim is to start work on going back to Gaza. It was seen as impossible when we went 10 years ago: they said you will never get in. It took us time, but we got in and we worked with the community and we will do it again. That will happen.



“THE POWER OF THE ‘INVISIBLES’” by Yara Sharif and Nasser Golzari, installation view at Al Qasimiyah School, Sharjah. Sharjah Architecture Triennial 2023, November 11-March 10, 2024. Photo by Federica Zambelletti. ©KoozArch

NG The agency (of PART) goes pretty far beyond storytelling. It is more about action on the ground. We feel that as architects, because of our profession and our ethics — we have professional ethics, and of course also as professional academics — we have to act upon these. When a house is destroyed, a street is completely wiped out, when the neighbourhood is completely erased; when children cannot go to school, when

people can't have access to clean water... We have to act because it's our professional duty to do that. I think because of the extent of urgency, it may very well be that we may not actually be able to do that much through storytelling, but rather more through action on the ground.

"We decided to initiate and use PART as a platform to gather architects and designers working for Gaza. We see it as a group or clusters of architects that will work both ways."

- Yara Sharif

YS This is why we decided to initiate and use PART as a platform to gather architects and designers working for Gaza. We see it as a group or clusters of architects that will work both ways. On the ground, we have a team of designers and architects that will continue on this lab, and we will continue to work with the

community. There is also a virtual aspect, through which we are creating an online school or virtual university, utilising the skills of the academics within our group. We want to address students of architecture in Gaza and who are unable to finish their education now. We will work with them to finish their academic degrees online until the current crisis is over. There is that level.

We tell stories, but we also make. There is a level of action where some of us will continue testing and making, and we're creating parallel clusters across the world. We see the lab as a form of accumulation where the lab can travel, and keep aggregating knowledge. All those groups who are joining us now for Gaza, will share their knowledge through various series of workshops. We are going to continue to experiment, and then we will take all of this experimentation and apply it on the ground. So, the action is there. It will happen in all different forms. As Nasser said, storytelling is just one way, but it's not the only way.



“THE POWER OF THE ‘INVISIBLES’” by Yara Sharif and Nasser Golzari, installation view at Al Qasimiyah School, Sharjah. Sharjah Architecture Triennial 2023, November 11-March 10, 2024. Photo by Federica Zambelletti. ©KoozArch

KOOZ Sandi Hilal, from the practice DAAR, rightfully pointed out that even if there was to be a ceasefire now, it would take more than 20 years before the Palestinians could return to Gaza. Beyond the physical reconstruction of the city, we're also speaking about the reconstruction of a community, of an entire population. Can one talk about reconstruction now? How do you interpret this term beyond its material connotations?

NG I would like to take a slightly different view on this. There's a famous saying by Karl Marx, “All that is solid melts into air.”

To place long barriers — like the notion that nothing will happen fairly, and that it will take at least 20 years — I think that can have a negative impact on what one does, or feels able to do. The situation is quite desperate, but the important thing is

the population of Gaza are very thirsty, very resilient, and they're real fighters.

"Personally, I feel that the moment that our foot is on the ground, the reconstruction would start."

- Nasser Golzari

Personally, I feel that the moment that our foot is on the ground, the reconstruction would start. It would be very fast, because the families are desperate to get back. They don't want to leave. Perhaps you've seen the endless number of threatening statements: Leave, or we're gonna bomb you. Palestinians are saying, where do we go? This is our home. We've already left, in 1948, in 1967... So they're desperate: they want to rebuild their home. I don't think it's going to take that long, if there is the possibility of a condition in which the big powers get out of the way and allow professionals, others with families, NGOs and other humanitarian groups to get together and start to produce in collaboration with each other and with the community.

When we went to Gaza, we set up the Green Gaza coalition, which acted as an umbrella under which other actors could gather. This kind of coalition means that acts of reconstruction could take place very fast, because we have to act now — and in the long term, too. In the short term, however, these people should not be living in tents: it's about to be winter.

"We aim to create conditions for people to initiate what needs to be done, giving guidance and expertise to allow groups to start organising for themselves, within this urgency."

- Yara Sharif

YS That's why we're thinking of our own actions as a sort of self-help lab. What we're doing is perhaps more about self help. Within the current political constraints, even the failure of a political

system, really, anything to be rebuilt has to start from the street, from the community. So we're trying to build up that community. We aim to create conditions for people to initiate what needs to be done, giving guidance and expertise to allow groups to start organising for themselves, within this urgency.

In 20 years, if the institutions survive, they will do it — but self help actions are all about accumulating small changes. We may not notice them on the ground; these actions may come in different forms and across various interventions. But they will start now, because of the dire urgency. When we talk about reconstruction in Gaza, we're not only talking about the physical materiality of say, building blocks. We're also talking about recycling water; we're talking about better, humane living conditions; about passive heating and cooling, and how to green the environment.

It's about bringing more dignity and a sense of agency back to the lives of the people. And that can start instantly; it works across so many different skills. They had created a car that ran on cooking oil; they had hacked and reinvented solar panels...



A vigil for Gaza, “THE POWER OF THE ‘INVISIBLES’” by Yara Sharif and Nasser Golzari, installation view at Al Qasimiyah School, Sharjah. Sharjah Architecture Triennial 2023, November 11-March 10, 2024. Photo by Federica Zambelletti.

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NG Yes, they made their own photovoltaic panels which are actually quite sophisticated. They are very skillful. But no, it’s not only that: I think the will is there. When we went in 2010 to Gaza, we met many families. It was both humbling and amazing how eager they were to get to work in the act of rebuilding their homes, lives and communities. They would say, “Just tell us, give us the

information: we're going to do it, just give it to us.” Mostly the big constraints come from the big powers. The first order is the ceasefire — the calls for ceasefire from the whole world — it has to be stopped, basically.

The important thing to emphasise is what we are planning to do: we have two levels of practice. On the ground, the ideal scenario would be going to work with the families straight away. At the same time, this is a big community of people getting really involved, many of whom would not be able to come to Gaza, of course. Those who join us virtually will be able to help those who can go. We will go in, start work with the family, set up groups of builders and develop their ideas; we will start to move on. We have to draw up a plan of action for technical support. Last time we went, for example, we had the support of several water engineers working in London. So there's a lot of technical demand, but that can be given; there's a lot of work, but it has been done before. We can learn from those experiences: the main thing, hopefully, is to go back.

Bio

Yara Sharif and Nasser Golzari are practising architects and academics. They interrogate through their work the

interlink between architecture, politics, ecology, and social justice. While they question and critique ecological inequalities, they reconstruct through design new social narratives and alternative architectural practices that challenge the Western dominant approach, calling for new aesthetics inspired by the Global South. Sharif and Golzari's collaborative research and live projects have been nominated and have won several awards including the 2013 Aga Khan Award, 2014 Holcim Award for Sustainable Construction, RIBA President's Award for Research 2013 and 2016, and the Civic Trust Award. They have curated several exhibitions globally including *Secrets of a Digital Garden* as part of the Chicago Architecture Biennial in 2019 and *Berlinale* in 2020 in collaboration with Riwaq. Their recent installation as part of *Instant Modernism* is currently on display at the Qattan Foundation. They co-founded Palestine Regeneration Team (PART), a design-led research group that aims through speculative and live design projects to search for creative and responsive spatial possibilities.

Federica Zambelletti is the founder and managing director of KoozArch. She is an architect, researcher and digital curator whose interests lie at the intersection between art, architecture and

regenerative practices. In 2015 Federica founded KoozArch with the ambition of creating a space where to research, explore and discuss architecture beyond the limits of its built form. Parallel to her work at KoozArch, Federica is Architect at the architecture studio UNA and researcher at the non-profit agency for change UNLESS where she is project manager of the research "Antarctic Resolution". Federica is an Architectural Association School of Architecture in London alumni.

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