

AN ARCHAEOLOGY OF THE FUTURE	4
YONA FRIEDMAN	10
CINI BOERI	36
RENÉE GAILHOUSTET	54
DANTE BINI	82
HANS WALTER MÜLLER	114
CLAUDE PARENT	136
ANTTI LOVAG	158
List of works Johanna Diehl	188
Biographies	190
Selected bibliography	191
Imprint/Photo credits/Acknowledgments	192

# Dante Bini



The story of this house by the sea begins in the mountains, in Cortina d'Ampezzo, where the young architect and inventor Dante Bini won a skiing competition in the late 1960s. The winner's trophy was presented to him by the actress Monica Vitti. Bini was born in Castelfranco Emilia in 1932 and, by that stage, had already designed an award-winning collapsible box for carrying wine bottles and registered a patent for his "Binishell", i.e. a construction technique that involves covering a house-sized rubber balloon with a steel framework, spraying it with concrete, and then inflating it so the structure as a whole slowly rises. The balloon is extracted a few days later once the concrete has cured; doors and windows are then cut into the dome that has been created.

Monica Vitti's partner at the time, the film director Michelangelo Antonioni, had recently bought a plot of land on Sardinia and was looking for an architect. "They told me they wanted a space, not a house; they wanted to live in a space, not between walls", Bini explained. The film director met Bini at the building site shortly afterwards.

"Antonioni told me he hated straight walls and smooth floors, and wanted to live among the rock. He wanted his house to be redolent of its natural surroundings. He said to me, 'Have you ever tried to smell a rock?' I said, 'Pardon?' He asked a worker to split open one of the red granite boulders. He held the chunk of granite up to my nose and, what can I say, the odour was incredible. They loved the fragrance of wild rosemary. So I built a garden that extended right into the house, so that fragrance would fill every room. And they also wanted to hear the sound of the waves."

Rather than a house, Vitti and Antonioni wanted to commission a sound, fragrance, and sense enhancer. Bini designed a porous concrete shell that sank into the tangle of gorse, rockrose, olive trees and pines, a shell where everything was even more intense in its scent, sound, and shimmer: a *machine à habiter* that intensified the natural setting surrounding the house, but also the relationship around which it was erected.

The concrete shell looked like a hybrid between a sunken revolutionary cenotaph designed by Boullée and a laboratory used for experiments involving a rare, complex and highly volatile gas or some bizarre magnetic forces – and, in a way, that’s precisely what it was.

Most summer tourists travelling south along the narrow coastal road from Santa Teresa di Gallura have no idea that this dome at the northern end of Costa Paradiso, a dilapidated holiday village erected in a bay on Sardinia’s west coast in the 1970s, had been built for Vitti and Antonioni at the beginning of the decade – and that it would set in concrete one of the 20th century’s great love stories.

Monica Vitti was born Maria Luisa Ceciarelli in Rome in 1931. By the time she and Antonioni (19 years her senior) came to the north-western coast of Sardinia, they had already shot four films together: *L’Avventura* and *La Notte*, *L’Eclisse* and *Deserto Rosso*. And for years they had been caught up in a turbulent affair that was reflected in the premises in which it was played out. Antonioni’s biographer Charlotte Chandler writes that, in Rome, they lived in two separate apartments, one above the other, “that were connected via a trapdoor and a spiral staircase so they could meet without being seen. When the affair ended, they had the trapdoor sealed into the floor. Enrica, Antonioni’s second wife, whom he married after his affair with Vitti, once lifted up the carpet to show me the trapdoor”; a door into the past that could no longer be re-opened.

Antonioni rarely used the *cupola* with Enrica, and it fell into disrepair. It then changed hands several times until it was bought up by a Neapolitan family. From the outside, the structure appears almost forbiddingly simple, but as you enter it, you find yourself inside an astonishing maze of interior and exterior spaces. Like the Pantheon in Rome, the dome is open at the top. Twisting staircases wind their way through the inner courtyard below, leading out onto terraces and platforms: even the innermost part of the building is therefore also outside. Conceptual ideas for two or three different houses were built into the shell, due no doubt to the fact that the building itself was built simultaneously by both an architect and a film director, their ideas and notions of space continually clashing, overlapping and entangling during the construc-



1



3

tion process. A cinematic notion of narrative here collides with an architectural concept of space. Bini built a device for enhancing nature itself, a mechanism for filtering perceptions: a house prised open so the sound of the rain and the wind could be heard all the more loudly; it was a mechanism that intensified the experience of life itself. Antonioni, for his part, had also turned it into a structured film, a film set for him to play out his life with Monica.

In Antonioni's films, colours and objects are often depicted with almost surreal precision – as if a milky veil has suddenly been whisked aside. Likewise, in Vitti and Antonioni's house, the plants, the furniture, the light, the scents and the smells are showcased like exhibits: the odour of the rocks, the chamomile embedded into the terrazzo flooring, the sound of the waves that echoes more densely, more loudly, more closely, more intensely inside the open labyrinth of the dome, structured like an auditory canal.

At the very heart of the building is the free-floating staircase without banisters, built of rough-hewn rocks rammed into the curved inner wall, a flight of steps down which you balance your way, much as you do down to the bay below – except that this staircase is, perhaps, slightly more dangerous, and deliberately so. It's a monument to danger and beauty, which, for Antonioni, were both correlated – and both demanded concentration, physical tension, and alertness.

Vitti would balance her way down this staircase, one that Antonioni insisted be built even though Bini had provided for two other staircases. Antonioni would sit at the foot of the steps and watch as a scene he so obviously loved continually unfolded: i.e. Monica Vitti, barefoot, stepping down these stones. Like a scene from a film that the house would project for him time and time again.

Clearly, Antonioni had used the house to build a stage around his obsession with Monica Vitti as she balanced her way up and down the steps, and her bare legs, a recurring motif in many of the films they shot together. The staircase is a scene from a film given architectural form, a moment captured in stone that Antonioni could rewind and play back over and over, a stage for his private obsessions – which is also why the meandering floor plan of *La Cupola* remains baffling to



2

- 1 Andrei Tarkovsky, Michelangelo Antonioni and Tonino Guerra in front of *La Cupola*, c. 1982
- 2 *La Cupola*, Costa Paradiso, Sardinia, c. 1972
- 3 Model of *La Cupola*, c. 1972

anyone unaware of what these staircases and walkways were meant to retrace or sketch out.

No one really knows what Vitti and Antonioni were seeking at the time, and why they built themselves a summer house in precisely this spot. But we do know that Antonioni was fascinated by the writer Curzio Malaparte, who in the late 1930s commissioned a house on the cliff-top at Punta Masullo on Capri that was as archaic as it was modern. Jean-Luc Godard would later use it as a shooting location for his film *Le Mépris* (*Contempt*), starring Brigitte Bardot.

Malaparte himself died of lung cancer in Rome in 1957, and there are scenes in Antonioni's *La Notte* that directly reference his death. And when you see the stone staircase that winds its way up to the first floor of the dome, where it's as if a UFO had taken a bizarre rock sample in this very spot; when you walk down through the stagnant heat of the cork-oak coppice to the bizarre slabs of rock at the sheer cliff edge where Monica Vitti would lie sunbathing on summer days in the early 1970s, then the entire house seemed like a challenge to this grand programmatic structure. The way in which the Casa Malaparte intensifies the physical experience is almost violent. And when, in a storm, the waves pound the rocks beneath the Casa, the whole house shudders. The *Grande Cupola* is the exact opposite: it's an observatory for things so tiny and indiscernible they are almost beyond perception.

Bini soon disappeared from Sardinia, but not before he had left behind seven other Binishells on Isola di Cappuccini off the Sardinian coast. Since then he has erected 1,600 buildings, including many schools and shopping malls in Australia and America, where in 1989 he devised the Pak-Home, a low-cost earthquake-resistant construction system. He also designed an ecologically sustainable city for a million people in which the city's inhabitants are transported around the metropolitan area on solar-powered walkways rather than in cars or buses.

Vitti and Antonioni lived on the Costa Paradiso for several years. Their concrete house was quickly built, but in fact it was already both a promise and a ruin the moment it was completed. The breathing, vibrant inner part – the balloon – was removed, and then the envelope, the carapace, was pecked open and perforated, the way a seagull pecks open a



4



6



5





crab's discarded shell. *La Cupola* is a paradoxical structure, an extremely simple, coherent form that nonetheless throws up enormous spatial complications: with staircases like the ear's auditory canal, surreal interconnecting rooms, and intersecting spatial segments. It is a marvel of acceleration, but also a place of extreme sluggishness where you meander along a maze of corridors and staircases and bridges, the smells and fragrances and traces of a lifetime trapped as in a filter.

In the early 1970s, as he was parking his car on Piazza del Popolo in Rome, Antonioni made the acquaintance of an art student by the name of Enrica, who had just moved into a commune. Vitti met the film director Roberto Russo, whom she later married. Antonioni died in 2007. Monica Vitti, now seriously ill, still lives in Rome, far from the public gaze.

Roland Barthes once gave a speech in Antonioni's honour, in 1980, in which he stated, "your concern for the times you live in is not that of a historian, a politician or a moralist, but rather that of a utopian whose perception is seeking to pinpoint the new world, because he is eager for this world and already wants to be part of it. The vigilance of the artist, which is yours, is a lover's vigilance, the vigilance of desire", wrote Barthes – and there is much to be said for interpreting this house as one such architecture of desire, of expectation. In his speech, Barthes talked about "that strange phenomenon, vibration"; and you feel it when the wind blows through the oculus into the innermost part of *La Cupola*. It then looks like something that is both very ancient, a wreck, and a vision of the future in which all orders of interior and exterior, nature and house dissolve, where figures from the past and from the future appear simultaneously in one place, almost as in an Antonioni film.



7

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- 4 Ground plan of *La Cupola*, c. 1972
  - 5 Dante Bini and Michelangelo Antonioni in Sardinia, 1970s
  - 6 *La Cupola*, living room with flight of steps and patio, c. 1972
  - 7 Enrica Fico walking down the flight of steps of *La Cupola*, 1979