

***Betty R. Torrell***

***The Pedagogy of Astra  
Zarina: Illuminating the  
Blind Spot in her Legacy.***

***The Development of Long-Term Student Success  
through Student Agency***

## **Abstract**

University of Washington (UW) Professor Emerita Astra Zarina's legacy as a difference-maker is increasingly acknowledged in the profession.

However, the pedagogy she developed remains a blind spot. Colleagues and students have cited Zarina as one of the "primary influences on their professional practice and how they see and engage with the world" (Torrell, 2011-2013). Zarina's contribution to her students' professional and personal lives has been recognized by academia, her students and practicing design professionals; however, the pedagogy that has made this possible is yet to be fully explored, researched, and documented and is still a blind spot.

References to the role of agency are found repeatedly in how her students describe her teaching methods and Zarina's influence on their lives and work. The pedagogy of student agency is then a point of entry to understanding her legacy as a difference-maker for her students. This paper sheds light on how her use of agency as a teaching method led to her students' personal and professional success as leaders in designing the built environment.

## **Keywords**

design pedagogy, leadership, student agency, long-term student success, Astra Zarina, Anthony Costa Heywood, Civita di Bagnoregio

I extend my deepest gratitude to Anthony Costa Heywood (1936–2024) for his invaluable support and contributions to this research. His insights into the life and work of his wife and esteemed colleague, Astra Zarina, provided a vital foundation for this project. His personal encouragement and generous sharing of knowledge were instrumental throughout the research process. I am profoundly grateful for his trust in me to tell this story honoring Zarina's legacy in her pedagogy.

## **Acknowledgments**

## Preface

### Blind Spot:

1. *a point of entry of the optic nerve on the retina insensitive to light*
2. *an area where a person's view is obstructed.*

(RISEBA Faculty of Architecture | RIXARCH  
Conference, 2024)

This paper on the development of student agency in the visionary pedagogy of the University of Washington (UW) Professor Emerita Astra Zarina (1929-2008) is a continuation of my research on the impact of her legacy. The research is based on documents from the Zarins Family “Latona Archives” in Seattle, Washington, and information and documents from her husband, family, colleagues, students, and friends, whose contribution was essential, but also my personal experiences and observations with Astra as my professor, mentor, and friend. I was privileged to participate as a student in the University of Washington’s “Architecture in Rome” (AIR) foreign study program in 1975, the inaugural Italian Hilltowns (IHT) program in Civita di Bagnoregio in 1976, and as a Program Assistant for the IHT program in 1979 and these experiences have also become evidence in understanding the basis for this topic, the development of long-term student success through student agency. In 2016, with my first academic position, I found myself not only an architect but also an educator, and I began to focus my research on an exploration of her innovative pedagogy as one critical aspect of her life and career.

If you were asked what is one thing you could give your students through the pedagogy you employed in design education, what would that be? Students in the Interior Design Program in the School of Architecture + Planning (AS+P) at Morgan State University, as well as students at other interior design and architecture programs where I have taught, often tell me that their primary goal is to “get a job” after

graduation and this is a valid goal for our students. One of our goals as educators should be to be career-ready students.

Beyond the short-term goal of "landing that job," what other factors are important in terms of end goals for students?

Leadership is one of the Morgan State University’s Core Values:

Morgan seeks to provide rigorous academic curricula and challenging co-curricular opportunities to promote the development of leadership qualities in students and to facilitate leadership development among faculty, staff, and students.

(Morgan State University, 2024)

As leadership is recognized as a fundamental value for students at Morgan, how can pedagogy support leadership as a primary factor of long-term success in the students’ professions? How do you create a leader through strategies and methods employed in a design education pedagogy?

## Introduction

Astra Zarina was born in Riga, Latvia, in 1929 to Alma Zarina and Eduard Zarins. In January of 1944, at the age of 15, her family received permission from the occupying German army to leave Latvia. On June 6, 1944, with the Red Army advancing rapidly toward German-occupied Riga, Zarina’s mother departed from Riga with her children, the two girls Astra and Vija (Rekevics) and the two younger boys, Valdis and Uldis, on a ship bound for Danzig with the ultimate destination the United States.



Figure 1. Alma Zarina with Vija and Astra in Riga, Latvia (Zarins Family Archives, n.d.)

With the family settled in a refugee camp in Esslingen, Zarina applied for acceptance to the School of Architecture at the Technische Universitaet in Karlsruhe. She was accepted even though she was only sixteen. Zarina studied at Karlsruhe for most of two years between 1947 and 1949, studying under Egon Eiermann (Kögel, 2023). Zarina's father was not allowed to leave Riga with his family. He joined them in the United States after WWII ended when the family's emigration to Washington State was sponsored through the Lutheran Church (Heywood, 2008).

In the United States, Zarina received a Bachelor of Architecture degree from the UW in 1953 and a Master of Architecture degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology (MIT) in 1955, both with honors. After graduation from the UW, Zarina practiced in the influential office of Paul Hayden Kirk in Seattle, WA, and after graduation from MIT at Yamasaki and Associates in Troy, Michigan working as a

Figure 2. Student Work at Technische Universitaet in Karlsruhe  
(Drawing by Astra Zarina, n.d.)

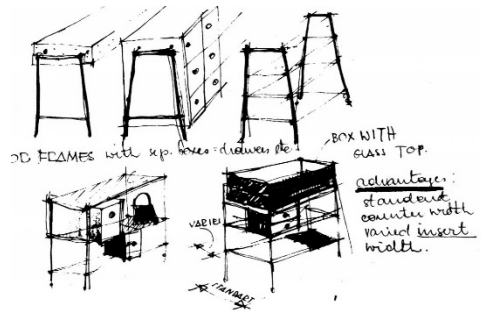


Figure 3. A Ladies Apparel Shop on Boylston Street. Boston: Approach No. 1 Towards Furniture  
(Drawing by Astra Zarina for MIT M. Arch. Thesis, 1955)

project designer with architect Minoru Yamasaki (1912-1986), also a graduate of UW's architecture program.

Zarina returned to Europe in 1960 with a Fulbright Award and the Rome Prize in Architecture from the American Academy in Rome (AAR) as the first woman to receive the award. While a fellow at the AAR, Zarina measured the Arch of Septimius Severus in the Roman Forum and drafted plates of the monument along with an analysis of its underlying geometry. In an interview with Professor Richard Brilliant, Professor Emeritus of Art History and Archaeology, an Anna S. Garbedian Professor in the Humanities at Columbia University, who was also a fellow at the American Academy then. Brilliant related that Zarina completed the measured drawings for the arch on scaffolding while experiencing intense vertigo, "Those drawings are the work of a dedicated if acrophobic architect, who for several weeks in rainy weather courageously ascended the slippery scaffold and made the observations which resulted in her magnificent drawings" (American Academy in Rome, 1966).

Zarina remained in Rome after her Fulbright grant expired, where, among other projects, she was engaged as a Project Designer at Litchfield, Whiting, Bowne & Associates. Zarina also worked independently from her home and studio in the center of Rome on

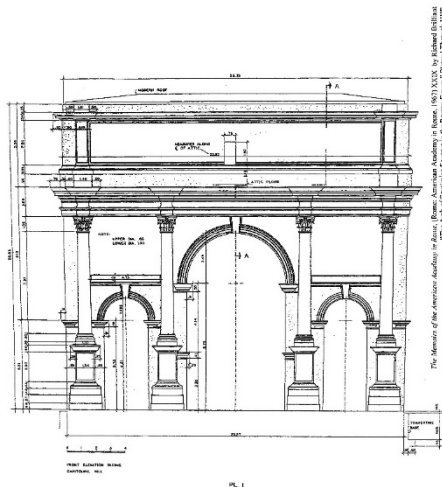


Figure 3. The Arch of Septimius Severus in the Roman Forum (Drawing by Astra Zarina, 1960)

Via Stefano del Cacco, where she worked on various projects, including the apartments for the New Town “Märkisches Viertel” in Berlin (1963) and the Club Facilities for the U.S. Officers in Vicenza, Italy (1967) (Heywood, 2008).

As Italian lawyer and long-term friend Jose’ d’Amely Melodie related, Zarina first

discovered the ancient hill town of Civita di Bagnoregio when architect Malcolm Davis “took both of us to Civita di Bagnoregio where he wished to buy a house.” “Astra and I became friends, and in 1963, we bought our houses in Civita” (Torrell, 2011-2013).

Zarina described her first visit to Civita, the ancient Italian hill town 100 kilometers north of Rome. “We left at dusk, and I thought I was going to file away one more magical memory...Perhaps the fourth time I went to Civita with Malcolm and my vacationing sister, Vija (Rekevics), I was surprised by a tremendous cloudburst. My companions were nowhere near. I knocked on the nearest door and was let in by a small child who then disappeared. The space behind the impassive door seemed so dark and large that the only thing I saw at first was what seemed to be the world’s largest fireplace. In it burned a small steady fire braced by elaborate andirons...In those

Figure 4. View of Civita from Mercatello (Photograph by R. Lauris Bitners, 2009)



moments I felt more secure that I ever remembered feeling” (House and Garden Remodeling Guide, 1974).

Zarina proceeded to buy the room and the adjacent lean-to, which was a former pig sty, on the spot. This was the first of subsequent purchases of spaces adjacent to the room with the fireplace. Since the late 1960s, Professor Zarina and her husband, American architect Anthony Costa Heywood (1936-2024) collaborated on the restoration of their property in Civita, including numerous buildings both for themselves and for clients. The restoration of the Zarina-Heywood residences became the classroom for the IHT program and later the facilities for the non-profit Northwest Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies (NIAUSI) they established (Cipalla, 2020).

At this time, Zarina and the prolific and celebrated photographer Balthazar Korab worked on the book, “I tetti di Roma: Le terrazze, le altane, I belvedere,” which was to be published in 1976. As John Comazzi relates, shortly after arriving in Italy, Zarina contacted Korab to propose a collaboration surveying the “urban environment atop the roofscapes of Rome,” which became Korab’s ambitious and comprehensive project during his entire sabbatical in Italy” (Comazzi, 2012).

In 1965, Zarina returned to Seattle to teach in the UW Department of Architecture (as the first women professor), where she developed the foreign study programs AIR I&I in Rome and IHT in Civita di Bagnoregio, Italy. She later founded the UW Rome Center in the Palazzo Pio and served as Director of the facility from 1984 to 1994, after leading the design for the restoration of the building along with her husband, Heywood. “Originally designed for students of architecture, the Pio today houses

programs from across the university – from business to literature. On average, 80 to 100 students participate each quarter” (Cipalla, 2020).

In 1982, Zarina and Heywood later established NIAUSI, currently DBA The Civita Institute, as a permanent facility located in Civita di Bagnoregio with the primary mission to “inspire and foster an interdisciplinary understanding of the unique qualities of Italian hill towns that remain pertinent to our contemporary experience through the promotion of historic preservation, education and scholarly research, artistic creation, cultural exchange, and professional explorations” (The Civita Institute, n.d.), originally through the offering of fellowships and residencies for mid-career professionals from the Pacific Northwest.

Zarina spearheaded the creation of a model for a sustainable cultural and architectural future for Civita di Bagnoregio, one of the tuff towns of central Italy. In 2006, Zarina, Heywood, and NIAUSI worked to secure Civita di Bagnoregio’s listing to the World Monuments Fund’s “100 Most Endangered Places” (World Monuments Fund, 2022).



Figure 5. Professor Emerita Astra Zarina in Lo Studio at Civita (Photograph by Betty Torrell, 1980)

### **Difference Maker**

“Her goal was...to show us the wonder of what we were capable.”

Lucy Sloman  
(Torrell, 2011)

The above reflection by urban designer and planner Lucy Sloman, American Institute of Certified Planners (AICP), student and teaching assistant on the UW AIR foreign study program, former Planning Manager for the City of Issaquah, Washington (WA), USA and current President of CityWorks, Inc., as contributed to my nomination for Zarina to the Institute of Classical Art & Architecture (ICAA) Arthur Ross Award in Education, illuminates Zarina’s legacy and more specifically the brilliance of her pedagogy.

Colleagues and students have credited Zarina as one of the “primary influences on their professional practice and how they see and engage with the world” (Torrell, 2011-2013). Zarina’s legacy as a difference-maker is increasingly acknowledged in academia and the profession, but the pedagogy she employed remains a blind spot.

### **Gifted Architect**

“Astra Zarina, perhaps the most talented artist ever to work for Yamasaki, was a fellow University of Washington alumnus who joined the firm...shortly after receiving a master’s degree from MIT.”

(Dale Allen Gyure, 2017)

It is a given that Zarina was multitalented. Latvian American architect Gunnar Birkerts, Fellow of the American Institute of Architects (FAIA) and Fellow of the Latvian Association of Architects (FLAS) described her as a colleague and collaborator who was “...one of the most gifted and creative minds I have known” (Torrell, 2011-2013).

Zarina introduced Birkerts to her beloved Civita di Bagnoregio, the hill town in central Italy she had adopted, and where he trusted her with the commission of the restoration of his property for his family’s Italian home. “Architect Astra Zarina, a family friend and former colleague at Yamasaki’s office, introduced Birkerts to Civita after she renovated a home for herself there. It was she who designed and supervised the

reconstruction of the Birkerts property over a five-year period” (Kaiser, 1989).

In testament to her role as an architect, Zarina received the following three recommendations for a position as Visiting Critic in the UW Department of Architecture and Urban Planning and further describe her as an architect and designer:

- Renowned Pacific Northwest architect Paul Hayden Kirk, FAIA, described her as “one of the most talented people in the field of architecture I have ever known.”
- Architect Richard A. Kimball, Director of the American Academy in Rome (AAR) (1960-1965), described her as “a most thorough and thoughtful architect.”
- Portland, Oregon-based, Italian American architect Pietro Belluschi, FAIA and later Dean of the Architecture and Planning School at MIT, stated, “In my long career, I have known a great many people engaged in the profession of designing buildings; only a handful of them had the magic gift and you (Zarina) are one of them...” (Kirk et al., 1964).

As UW Department of Architecture Professor Emeritus and colleague Phillip Jacobson said, Zarina possessed “multiple talents, interests, and attainments – practicing architect, designer, researcher, urbanist, writer, visionary, historian, academic administrator and above all a dedicated and superb teacher” (Torrell, 2011-2013).

It is this last role that I believe is her true legacy through her influence on the lives and work of the students who have become leaders in the roles of urban planners, urban designers, architects, preservationists, and designers. The influence of this teaching on the professional lives of her students was formally recognized by academia when she received the UW Distinguished Teaching Award in 1979.

Daniel S. Friedman FAIA, then UW Professor of Architecture and Dean of the Department of Architecture and Urban Planning, later described her influence, “Over the long arc of a distinguished teaching career, both in

the U.S. and Italy, Astra Zarina influenced thousands of students who continue to benefit from her inspiring passion and genius for architecture, Italy and education” (O’Donnell, n.d.).

### **Indomitable Character**

“She had a strong character and was motivated to accomplish what she wanted to do.”

Jose’ d’Amely Melodie,  
(Torrell 2011-2013)

Zarina has often been referred to as a force of nature. Students and colleagues have often described Zarina’s inspiration as a result of her unique personality; “brilliant, funny, open, opinionated, lively, inspirational, passionate, eye-opening, remarkable, intimidating, nurturing, stinging and healing, generous, witty, dedicated, tough and caring, stimulating, sincere, helpful, encouraging, talented, demanding and passionate;” all qualities that make a successful educator (Torrell, 2011-2013). As respected Seattle-based architect Edward Weinstein FAIA, founder and Principal of Weinstein AU and student on the first AIR program, said, “Astra was not a reserved personality. She was opinionated and passionate and challenged her students to exceed their expectations of themselves. For most of us, she redefined the professor-student relationship” (Torrell, 2011-2013).

Although you can’t discount the contribution of her personality as inspirational, you cannot ignore her pedagogy as significantly influential to her students’ success. When I began to examine her teaching methods, the clues to her wide-ranging and profound influence became apparent in her pedagogy. Zarina routinely taught graduate-level design studios in the UW Department of Architecture. She also instructed the foreign study programs she developed in Rome (AIR I & II) and Civita di Bagnoregio (IHT). Although her methods were similar, this paper employs the IHT program in Civita as the model for her pedagogy, as discussed later in this paper.

## Transformative Teacher

"I'm an architect. I am also by nature a teacher. I love to see people develop, grow, and discover themselves. When I work with them, I discover things too."

Astra Zarina  
(Griffen and Marmor, 1995)

Zarina's pedagogy is a valuable case study for the development of student agency, as references to agency are repeatedly found in students' descriptions of her teaching methods.

As Portland, Oregon-based architect Michael Dowd, Principal of Dowd Architecture Inc., recalled from his experience as a student in the IHT program, "We also learned that sitting in a classroom was not enough...one must take personal responsibility to learn throughout your life in and out of the academic setting" (Torrell, 2011-2013).

As IHT alumnus and former Senior Planner for the City of Bothell, WA, David Boyd, AIA, recalled, "It was in Civita that Astra introduced me and the other students to...learning by directly engaging with the patrimony of the ancient cultures that formed such a rich environment for all types of human activity...inspiring my work in architecture, urban design and planning as well as my appreciation of history, culture and life" (Torrell, 2011-2013).

As Ed Weinstein further recalled, "She introduced us to a way of observing and engaging in the world that was not even considered in the academy" (Torrell, 2011-2013).

There are several instructional theories in which student agency is central to student success, and it is not a coincidence that Zarina's pedagogy employed many of these active learning methods under the larger umbrella of Constructivist Learning Theory. In short, "Constructivism is the theory that says learners construct knowledge rather than just passively take in information. As people experience the world and reflect upon those experiences, they build their representations and incorporate new information into their pre-existing knowledge (schemas)" (University of Buffalo, n.d.). Much of Zarina's teaching methods, which could now be described and cataloged under the broad umbrella of Constructivist Learning Theory, were applied within Zarina's curriculum years before the tenets of these methods became codified and commonplace in design education. Two of these are:

- Applied Learning, and
- Experiential Learning (ExL).

Although these methods overlap, let us first examine one of these that Zarina's pedagogy actively employed: Applied Learning. Applied Learning pedagogies share a design fundamental: the nurturing of learning and growth through a reflective, experiential process that takes students out of the traditional classroom setting. The approach is grounded in the conviction that learning is maximized when it is active, engaged, and collaborative (Ash & Clayton, 2009).

Figure 6. Professor Emerita Zarina with Students in the UW IHT Program  
(Photograph by Betty Torrell, 1979)



The Applied Learning process consists of four crucial phases (Knobloch, 2003). These phases are referenced in several ways, and for this study, the nomenclature is used as follows:

1. *Construction of knowledge,*
2. *Hands-on learning experience,*
3. *Reflection, and*
4. *Value beyond school.*

In Zarina's pedagogy of the IHT program, these phases were actively employed as follows:

1. *Construction of knowledge* was presented as understanding the historical and existing community, culture, and context of Civita and its original inhabitants, the Civitonici. Zarina shared her extensive research and experiences with the students through formal and informal means.
2. *Hands-on learning experience* was either as an independent student project or a Problem-Based Learning (PBL) project as a student team.
3. *Reflection* consisted of an analysis of the learning experience, concluding in a documentation of the project as a student report.
4. *Value beyond school* consisted of the dissemination of the student work, often in a public presentation to visiting scholars and professionals and the resident Civitonici.

These four crucial steps reinforce the meta-cognitive skills required for lifelong, self-directed learning (agency) that Applied Learning so critically supports (Ash & Clayton, 2009).

The next method Zarina's pedagogy employed that directly promoted student agency was Experiential Learning (ExL). Experiential Learning refers to a pedagogy originally developed by Aristotle. In "The Nicomachean Ethics," Aristotle famously states: "For the things we have to learn before we can do them, we learn by doing them." ExL is a process of education through

experience, followed by reflection on that experience, and "...is part of the larger category of active learning because it directly involves students in the process of their own learning" (Top Hat, 2019). There are four elements described as pillars of ExL.

- *Learning in real-life contexts,*
- *Learning by doing,*
- *Learning through projects and*
- *Learning by solving problems* (Knobloch, 2003).

Central to these elements of ExL, the learner must be willing to be actively involved in the experience. ExL invites the student to "take charge," that is, become the "agent" of their own learning.

Student learning experiences in the IHT program were involved through active learning of all four pillars.

- *Real-life contexts* – Student projects were local to Civita or the immediate surroundings, and projects directly engaged with Civita and/or the residents of Civita, the Civitonici. Students understood that the research for their projects was not only a learning experience but an essential way of preserving a culture.
- *Learning by doing* – Student projects were hands-on activities. Projects were as diverse as documenting a traditional kitchen or canteen with measured drawings and photographs to excavating a cistern or inventorying a Civita garden.
- *Learning through projects* – Student work was researched, analyzed, and documented in project reports.
- *Learning by solving problems* – Students were given introductory information about the specific topic, its place within the broader culture of Civita, and its importance of preserving aspects of that culture, but students worked to create their own programs for their project, including objectives, methods, metrics, and deliverables.

As Carolyn Mooney described in "Sketches of Hope on an Italian Hilltop" for the Chronicle of Higher Education, "Over the years Civita has served as a living laboratory

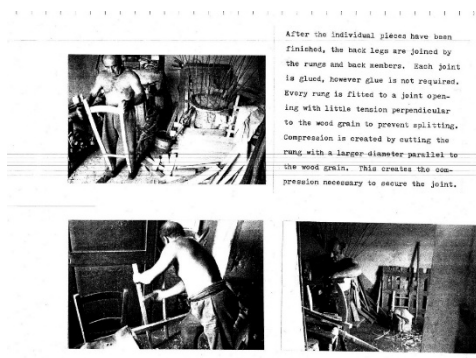
for dozens of students, who have surveyed its residents, analyzed its economic base, compiled its genealogy, sketched its buildings, collected its recipes, scrutinized its church restoration, identified its plants...and other projects” (Mooney, 2001).

### Student Agency

But what is student agency, and how does it contribute to long-term student success and students’ future roles in the profession? Historically, the creation of student agency or “taking charge” has been articulated through various scholarly perspectives. Scholars have underscored how agency intersects with contesting institutional norms, making choices, and constructing identities through dialogue and language. But also important to our understanding, Albert Bandura (1901–1994), a psychologist who developed social learning theory, linked agency to the pursuit of control in one’s learning activities and self-efficacy (Bandura, 1986).

Moreover, the concept of student agency, as conceptualized currently in the Organization for Economic Co-operation and Development (OECD) Learning Compass 2030, centers on students’ capacity and volition to positively influence their own lives and the broader world. It encompasses setting goals, reflective action, and responsible decision-making to bring about change. According to the OECD, when students are active agents in their learning, they demonstrate higher motivation, engage in self-directed goal setting, and

Figure 7. The Civita Chair -- A Vernacular Form (IHT Student Project Page by Betty Torrell, 1976)



acquire the crucial skill of "learning how to learn" for the lifelong application of learning (OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030 Concept Note, 2019).

The pedagogy of student agency is then a point of entry to understanding Zarina’s legacy as a difference-maker for her students in their future accomplishments and contributions. Building from these theoretical orientations, a model of agency empowers students by giving them the ability and confidence to actively shape their own learning experiences through the development of:

- autonomy,
- critical thinking,
- adaptability,
- curiosity,
- self-regulation, and
- purpose.

In summary, when students develop agency, they are more likely to set meaningful goals and connect learning to personal aspirations, instilling a sense of purpose and promoting sustained engagement and lifelong learning beyond formal education, all skills that empower them to make a difference (OECD Future of Education and Skills 2030 Concept Note, 2019).

The intent of this paper then is to illuminate a blind spot in Zarina's legacy, focusing on her pedagogical approach that facilitated the cultivation of student agency through Applied and Experiential Learning methods and underscoring the transformative potential of pedagogical strategies in nurturing lifelong learners poised to enact meaningful contributions to the world as leaders in the creation of the built environment. This student agency fostered through her pedagogy continues to empower her students to effect positive change as difference-makers in various capacities, including educators, mentors, and innovators, shaping not only the built environment as practitioners when architect Michael Dowd relates, “Her influence lives on in the hundreds of buildings and spaces designed by her students...” (Torrell, 2011-

2013), but also through their contributions in their professional abilities as related by urban designer and planner Lucy Sloman when she says, **“I regularly cross paths with her students in city government, large architectural firms, and small construction companies...”** (Torrell, 2011-1013), and as catalysts for societal transformation as related by renowned Seattle based architect Tom Kundig, FAIA, Royal Institute of British Architects (RIBA), and Principal, Owner & Founder of Olson Kundig, **“The strongest testaments to the quality of Astra’s mentorship are the young practitioners who advanced under her tutelage to become successful visionaries themselves. Today, I work alongside many of Astra’s students, many of whom are renowned worldwide, and still see her inspiration and teachings reflected in their work”** (Torrell, 2011-2013).

## Conclusion

“There is no past we can bring back by longing for it. There is only an eternal now that builds and creates out of the past something new and better.”

Johann Wolfgang von Goethe

An exploration of Professor Emerita Astra Zarina's profound legacy as an educator can illuminate a crucial blind spot in our understanding of her impact: her pedagogical approach fostering student agency. Through her innovative methods aligned with but predating the methods of Constructivist Learning Theory, Experiential Learning and Applied Learning, Zarina empowered her students to become active agents in their learning journeys. By instilling autonomy, critical thinking, adaptability, curiosity, self-regulation, and purpose, Zarina's pedagogy cultivated lifelong learners poised to make meaningful contributions to the world. Her influence extends beyond the realm of architecture, shaping leaders in design, urban planning, preservation, and societal transformation. As we reflect on Zarina's legacy, we are reminded of the 'eternal now,' as described by Zarina's beloved Goethe in the quote

above, where the past serves as a foundation for building something new and better. Through her dedication as an educator to the empowerment of her students, Zarina continues to inspire generations of professionals to embrace their potential and effect positive change in our ever-evolving world.

## List of Figures

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