

Zarina, Astra (1929-2008)

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Astra Zarina (left), Tony Costa Heywood (center), Sala Grande, Civita di Bagnoregio, Italy, 1960s
Courtesy The Civita Institute



Sala Grande after restoration, Civita di Bagnoregio, Italy, 2010
Courtesy The Civita Institute



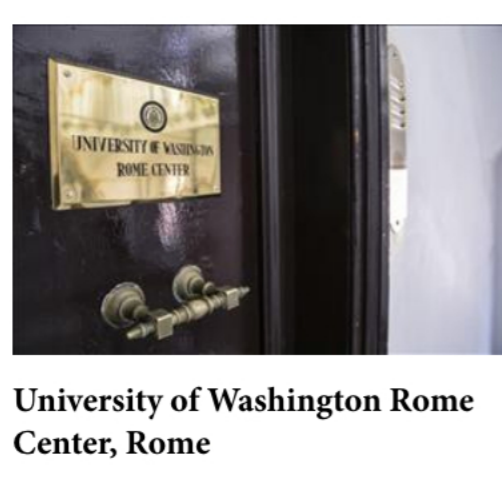
Astra Zarina and neighbor Felice Rocchi, Civita di Bagnoregio, Italy, 1995
Courtesy The Civita Institute



Astra Zarina, courtyard outside Sala Grande, Civita di Bagnoregio, Italy, 1970
Courtesy The Civita Institute



Astra Zarina, Civita di Bagnoregio, Italy, 1960s
Courtesy The Civita Institute



Civita di Bagnoregio, Italy, 2018
Courtesy Rita Cipalla



Tony Costa Heywood, Astra Zarina, Rome, 1960s
Courtesy The Civita Institute



University of Washington Rome Center, Rome
Courtesy University of Washington



Classroom, University of Washington Rome Center, Rome
Courtesy University of Washington

Astra Zarina taught architecture for more than 30 years at the University of Washington, both in Seattle and in two study-abroad programs she created in Italy. With her genius for design and her passion for historic preservation, she influenced hundreds of architects who were her students. Born in 1929 in Riga, Latvia, she and her family immigrated to the Pacific Northwest in 1949. She received a bachelor's degree from the UW and a master's degree from the Massachusetts Institute of Technology, both in architecture. In 1960, she became the first woman to receive the prestigious Rome Prize in Architecture, followed by a Fulbright Fellowship. In 1970, she established the University of Washington's Architecture in Rome study-abroad program. Six years later, she started a second UW architecture program focused on Italian hilltowns and based in the historic village of Civita di Bagnoregio, about 60 miles north of Rome. To promote design excellence through education and cultural exchange, she co-founded the Civita Institute, a nonprofit organization in Seattle. She died August 31, 2008, at the age of 79.

From Latvia to Seattle

Astra Zarina was born in Riga, Latvia, to Eduard Zarins and Alma Zarina, on August 25, 1929. Her siblings included two brothers, Uldis and Valdis (who later became a sculptor), and a sister, Vija. When the Germans occupied Latvia in 1941, her father, who held a political position, knew it was dangerous for them to stay. The family left to visit relatives in Salzburg, Austria, and never returned.

Denied permission to stay permanently in Salzburg, they traveled farther south, taking refuge in an Austrian village near the Italian border. After the war, they moved to a refugee camp in Esslingen, Germany, and in 1947, 16-year-old Astra began two years of study in an architecture program in Germany.

The family was given political asylum in the United States in 1949 and moved to the Pacific Northwest to start anew. At first, they lived simply in a log cabin and tried their hand at farming, but with little success. In 1951, Astra enrolled in the architecture program at the University of Washington at a time when there were very few women in the field. There she excelled, studying under UW professors Lionel Pries (1897-1968), Wendell Lovett (1922-2016), and Victor Steinbrueck (1911-1985).

Degrees and Awards

In 1953, as a college senior, Zarina and classmate Douglas Philip Haner jointly won a first prize of \$750 in the Carrier Weathermaker Home Competition, sponsored by the Carrier Corporation of Syracuse, New York. That same year, Zarina graduated with a bachelor of architecture degree, winning a faculty award for design and excellence. On December 26, 1953, Zarina and Haner were married.

She began her career in Seattle with architect Paul Hayden Kirk (1914-1995) but decided to continue her studies and applied to Harvard, Illinois Institute of Technology, and Massachusetts Institute of Technology. MIT offered her a scholarship, and in 1954 the couple moved to Boston. While Zarina pursued a master of architecture at MIT, her husband enrolled in a similar program at Harvard.

In 1955, she graduated from MIT at the top of her class and moved to Michigan to work as a project designer with architect Minoru Yamasaki (1912-1986) also a graduate of UW's architecture program. (His firm was selected in the 1960s to design the World Trade Center in New York City.) During her four years in Michigan, Zarina contributed to several projects, including the design of the Detroit School of Arts and Crafts and the First Methodist Church in Warren, Michigan.

Zarina was a master of languages, not surprising for a person who grew up in several different countries. She was fluent in English, Italian, German, French, and Latvian, and had also studied Greek and Latin. In 1960, she applied for and won the prestigious Rome Prize in Architecture from the American Academy in Rome, the first woman to receive the award. Zarina moved to Rome that year and was able to extend her stay in Italy by successfully pursuing a Fulbright Fellowship.

UW in Rome Program

In 1964, while living in Rome, Zarina and her husband won a first prize of \$15,000 in an international architecture competition with their submittal of a residential design. In 1968, she joined the University of Washington's Department of Architecture as a visiting lecturer, and in 1970, in conjunction with the department, established the UW Architecture in Rome program. Six students participated in the first year.

Twenty-five years later, Zarina recalled how the program got its start: "I was a guest lecturer in Seattle in 1965 and 1968. I told them I can teach much better in Rome. The chairman agreed to give it a try, and with the help of Professor Hermann Pundt, we selected six students to come in 1970 ... It was supposed to be a one-shot deal, but those students felt it was so fantastic, the experiment continued and eventually became a significant part of the curriculum" ("25 Years ...").

One of the students in the inaugural program was Steven Holl (b. 1947), born in Bremerton, Washington. As principal of Steven Holl Architects, Holl designed the award-winning Chapel of St. Ignatius on the Seattle University campus in 1997 and the Bellevue Arts Museum in 2001. In 2012, when he received an award of excellence from the University of Washington, Holl credited Zarina with helping him see in new ways. "It would be while studying in Rome in 1970 that Steven Holl would have what he later described as an 'awakening' when the program's founder, Professor Astra Zarina, fostered his way of thinking about architecture in its cultural context" ("Important Contributions ...").

Zarina viewed Rome itself as a living classroom and encouraged her students to walk, explore, draw, and measure the streets and neighborhoods that made up its historic districts. These urban design analyses helped students see how people interacted with their environment, buildings, and each other, important lessons they would draw on later in their careers.

Zarina was a whirlwind of activity, bubbling with energy and enthusiasm, and often had several projects going at once. Besides launching the campus-abroad program, she had "five men and one woman under her wing this quarter, arranging their placement with families, lecturing and guiding their field-work activities. In addition to her work as a practicing architect, Miss Zarina has found time to restore a farmhouse she owns near Rome and has completed an about-to-be-published book on rooftop living in the Italian capital" (Mary Jane Jacobs). Zarina was one of 25 American women featured in the April 1970 edition of *Cosmopolitan* in an issue devoted to Rome.

But there were changes afoot in her personal life. She and Douglas Haner divorced, and on June 20, 1971, she married American architect Anthony Costa Heywood in Rome. She continued to devote her time and energy to the UW Architecture in Rome program, which continued to grow. "Students come to Rome not for the academic credits they earn. Judging from their predecessors, the experience is sure to change their outlook, definition of urbanism and world view. Many have said spending a quarter or more in Italy has expanded their concept of time and given new meaning to the city as an artifact of history ... What do they learn? Besides how to speak better Italian and the value of good footwear, they come to know, moment by moment, what is often said but difficult to comprehend: how architecture and cities are expressions of the cultures that produced them" (Ryan).

For years, Zarina divided her time between Rome and Seattle, returning to the UW campus each spring to teach. From 1970 to 1980, she taught about 140 students during the summer and fall quarters in Rome. "Married to Anthony Heywood, an American-born architect who works with a large firm in Italy, Zarina lives with her parents ... while teaching here [Seattle]. (Her liberated husband stays there [Rome].) Her commute between Rome and Seattle has become so routine that I never carry clothes any more, just books and papers," she said ("Architecture in Rome Tribute ...").

Civita di Bagnoregio

In the early 1960s, Zarina began traveling to the largely abandoned hilltop town of Civita di Bagnoregio, about 60 miles north of Rome. Civita escaped modernization in part because of its topography: It is perched on a slim bluff of land accessible only by a pedestrian bridge that at that time was fast crumbling. There were no cars, and only about 12 fulltime inhabitants. Devastated by an earthquake in 1695 and bombed during World War II, the 2,500-year-old village was built on soft clay that "falls away like fresh ricotta" (Bruni), putting its hilltop perch in constant jeopardy.

Zarina was captivated by the village, its buildings, and its rich history. On one of her visits, she was caught in a fierce rainstorm and was invited to wait out the storm in a local home. As she admired the large fireplace, the family offered to sell her the one-room house. She bought it on the spot, and spent the next two years restoring her "room" as well as undertaking several other restoration projects in Civita.

Decades later, this large room, or Sala Grande, housed the library and archives of the Civita Institute with one of the "most extensive English language libraries of architectural and art history-related research material in the environs of Rome. It also includes historical maps, thousands of photographs, periodicals, and original art" (Education).

When Zarina arrived in Civita, daily life for residents was challenging. "When she first moved there, many buildings were not occupied. There was no water, no central heating. She had the first functional bathroom in town" ("Seattle's Civita Institute ...").

In 1976, spurred by the success of the Architecture in Rome program, Zarina established a second UW study-abroad program based in Civita. Students lived with local families as they studied and documented the town; much of their research went into helping families rebuild their homes. "By carefully researching historic building patterns and the use of local materials, she successfully adapted many of Civita's buildings to new uses and a new era. In doing so she helped establish a high standard of restoration that continues ... Importantly, Astra Zarina's architectural work helped to weave together families and place, adding renewed vitality to the physical, cultural and social fabric of Civita" ("A New Exhibit ...").

Also in 1976, in collaboration with photographer Balthazar Korab (1926-2013), Zarina published "I Tetti di Roma" ("The Rooftops of Rome") in which she made the case that a "successful city is connected by all levels of public space -- from truly public destinations at street level to the personal, yet still public scattering of individual terraces, and everything in between" (Gamolina). The book, and her work with students in Italy and Seattle, reinforced the importance of design that reflects and engages with public life -- a theme central to her work, teaching, and legacy.

Palazzo Pio

In the early 1980s, Zarina got wind of a fifteenth-century building in the center of Rome, known as the Palazzo Pio, that could serve "as a home for herself and as a site for architecture classes. At the time, several floors had been abandoned. Zarina made a deal to rent the floors for a reasonable price, and in return, the University would fund and lead renovations and repairs" (Sudermann).

She secured the support of UW Provost George Beckmann and Gordon Varey (1931-1994), dean of the College of Architecture and Urban Planning, negotiated a lease for the space, and coordinated the design of both the classrooms and residential space. Palazzo Pio had once been the site of an ancient temple and a theater complex founded by Pompey the Great. It is close to where Julius Caesar was assassinated in 44 B.C.

In the Middle Ages, it was a fortified house used by the Orsini family and during the Renaissance, was known as the Palazzo dell'Orologio because of a large clock on the tower facade. After the house was acquired by the Pio da Carpi di Savoia family, it became known as Palazzo Pio. While restoring the building in the twentieth century, Zarina discovered the ruins of the Orsini clock tower. Thought to have been demolished centuries earlier, the tower had instead been covered up inside the palazzo walls. Zarina incorporated the tower into her restoration plan.

The renovated Palazzo Pio (called simply the Pio) opened in 1989. Alain Gowing, a UW classics professor who took his first group of students to Rome in 1988, described Zarina's approach to the restoration: "She did things frugally, but beautifully. Simple things like the shutters in the windows were spectacularly beautiful. If something was old but still serviceable -- like a 17th-century door on an apartment -- she used it ... To be able to take students there was an unbelievable privilege ... It's a real jewel in the crown of our study-abroad programs" (Sudermann). In 1980, tuition and housing for the summer-abroad program cost \$1,015 with transportation to Rome extra. The 10-week fall program was double that amount.

Zarina served as director of the Rome Center from 1984 to 1994. Originally designed for students of architecture, the Pio today houses programs from across the university -- from business to literature. On average 25 to 30 students participate each quarter. Although there had been several building updates and renovations over the years, in 2019 the university began a major three-year restoration of the Pio. The study abroad program itself celebrated its 50th anniversary in 2020.

A Gifted Teacher

Zarina's students called her a "force of nature ... She was demanding but knew how to pull the best out of them. She understood people on many levels and accepted them where they were" (Nancy Josephson interview). Her influence on students went beyond the classroom walls. She expanded their way of thinking, encouraging them to see the world from different perspectives. She learned a lot from her students as well. "I'm an architect. I am also by nature a teacher. I love to see people develop, grow, discover themselves. When I work with them, I discover things too" ("25 Years of ...").

Zarina considered food, wine, and fellowship critical components of a life well-lived, and often invited students to her home for meals. At a student dinner in 1988, the menu included "risotto with porcini mushrooms, chicken with tarragon and Bavarian cream with homemade pomegranate sauce. Students helped prepare meals and joined guests at a carefully laid table where rich conversation then flowed for hours" (O'Donnell).

The Civita Institute

Zarina remained connected to Civita throughout her lifetime. She and her husband restored several buildings in the town that became the center of the UW Italian Hilltowns program. In 1981, the couple co-founded the Northwest Institute for Architecture and Urban Studies in Italy, based in Seattle and now called the Civita Institute. This nonprofit organization promotes excellence in design through educational programs and cultural exchanges between the U.S. and Italy.

Zarina never flagged in her devotion to calling attention to the plight of her beloved hilltown. "Civita is stunning: an extremely compact warren of medieval buildings -- the ones, that is, that have not tumbled over the edge ... From left and right, north and south, we are threatened," [Zarina] said ... Ms. Zarina and Mr. Heywood said local, regional and national officials were not doing nearly enough to slow it. So the couple appeal constantly -- and often vainly, they said -- to philanthropic organizations for help" (Bruni). In 2006, Zarina, Heywood, and the Civita Institute worked to get the town added to the World Monuments Fund's list of 100 Most Endangered Places.

In 2001, Zarina and Heywood retired to Civita full-time. She taught her last class in Civita in 2003, retiring after 33 years of teaching. In 2007, a year before she died, she and her husband signed an agreement to transfer five historic houses, library and archives, courtyard, and garden to the Civita Institute. It took six years to complete the complicated real estate transfer.

Zarina died on August 31, 2008, at the age of 79, survived by her husband, siblings, two nieces, and a nephew. She is buried in Bagnoregio. Her influence continued to be celebrated more than a decade later. In 2019, two exhibits related to her life and career were staged, one in the U.S. and one in Italy. "Rome and the Teacher, Astra Zarina" opened in Rhinebeck, New York, in an exhibit space designed by her former student Steven Holl. Across the ocean, "Astra Zarina in Civita" opened in that town's Palazzo Alemanni where Zarina had once taught her students. Using six video projectors to display images, video, and text related to her life, the exhibit opened August 25, 2019, the 90th anniversary of her birth.

Sources: Mary Jane Jacobs, "Notes & Notables," *The Seattle Times*, April 12, 1970, p. H-8; "Architecture in Rome: Tribute to its Founder," *Ibid.*, February 10, 1980, p. K-6; Dennis Ryan, "Rome: Not for Everybody But Almost a Must for Architects," *Ibid.*, October 31, 1982, p. D-7; "Astra Zarina," *Ibid.*, October 19, 2008 (www.seattletimes.com); Frank Bruni, "Civita di Bagnoregio Journal," *The New York Times*, February 9, 2004 (www.nytimes.com); *HistoryLink.org Online Encyclopedia of Washington State History*; "Minoru Yamasaki" by Walt Crowley; "Steven Holl" (by John Pastier) <http://www.historylink.org> (accessed February 24, 2020); Rita Cipalla, "University of Washington Rome Center Begins plans to celebrate 50th anniversary," *Italo-Americano*, July 25, 2019; Rita Cipalla, "Seattle's Civita Institute Helps Preserve a Hill Town Unique Way of Life," *Italo-Americano*, July 23, 2015 (www.italoamericano.org); "A New Exhibit in Italy" (press release), The Civita Institute, August 22, 2019, website accessed February 13, 2019 (<https://www.civitaainstitute.org/3104/astra-zarina-in-civita.html>); Catherine O'Donnell, "Co-founder of University of Washington Programs in Italy Dies," *UW News*, September 25, 2008 (<https://www.washington.edu/news/2008/09/25/co-founder-of-university-of-washington-programs-in-italy-dies/>); "25 Years of Distinguished Teaching Award Winners," *UW Magazine*, September 1, 1995 (<https://magazine.washington.edu/25-years-of-distinguished-teaching-award-winners/>); Hannelore Sudermann, "Roman Revival," *UW Magazine*, December 1976 (<https://magazine.washington.edu/roman-revival/>); Julie Buckley, "Inside the Italian Town that Charges Tourists an Entry Fee," *CNN Travel*, January 16, 2020, website accessed February 13, 2020 (<https://www.cnn.com/travel/entry-fee-civita-di-bagnoregio-italy/index.html>); "Important Contributions Recognized in 2012 Awards of Excellence," *UW News*, June 7, 2012 (<https://www.washington.edu/news/2012/06/07/important-contributions-recognized-in-2012-awards-of-excellence/>); James S. Russell, "Nurturing a Long-Term Vision for the City," *Architectural Record*, May 1994, p. 33 (www.usmodernist.org/AR/AR199405.pdf); Julia Gamolina, "A Story No Longer Untold: Astra Zarina's Influence on Modern Architecture," *Metropolis*, July 26, 2019 (www.metropolismag.com/architecture/rome-teacher-astra-zarina-exhibition/); Education, Civita Institute, website accessed March 2, 2020 (<https://www.civitaainstitute.org/1432/education.html>); Rita Cipalla interview with Nancy Josephson, February 14, 2020, transcript in possession of Rita Cipalla.

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