

SEATTLE ITALIAN COMMUNITY

RITA CIPALLA

Seattle's Civita Institute honors founder with exhibit in Italy

Astra Zarina, who studied architecture at the University of Washington in the early 1950s and later became a UW professor, began traveling to the picturesque hill town of Civita di Bagnoregio in the 1960s.

This historic gem, perched high atop a slim pinnacle of land, seemed to be frozen in time. Devastated by an earthquake in 1695, bombed during World War II, home to just a handful of full-time residents, the 2,500 year-old town of Civita was built on soft clay that crumbled "like fresh ricotta," according to the *New York Times*, putting its hilltop perch in constant jeopardy.

Nonetheless, Zarina was captivated by the village, its buildings and its rich history. On one of her early 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.

In 1976, she established a much-beloved UW study-abroad program in Civita called **Italian Hilltowns**, a complement to the UW's successful **Architecture in Rome** program which she had established six years earlier. In 1981, Zarina and her husband Tony Costa Heywood co-founded the Civita Institute in Seattle, a nonprofit organization that promotes excellence in design through educational programs and cultural exchanges between the two countries.

Over the decades, the couple worked hand-in-hand with Civita residents, UW students and others to protect and preserve the town's architecture, history and culture. They retired to Civita full-time in 2001, and Zarina taught her last class there in 2003. She died on August 31, 2008, at the age of 79.



Luca Profili, mayor of Bagnoregio and Civita di Bagnoregio, opens the exhibit "Astra Zarina in Civita" last summer as Tony Costa Heywood, Zarina's husband, looks on (Museo Geologico e dalle Frane)

About 15 years ago, **Palazzo Alemanni**, a city-owned museum building in Civita, dedicated a room to Zarina, choosing artifacts to represent her impact on the city. But the town wanted a more permanent reminder of her influence, so members of the Civita Institute were asked to help design an exhibit.

Last summer, "**Astra Zarina in Civita**" opened. The exhibit was created by a trio of Seattle architects and artists from the Civita Institute, and staged in collaboration with the city of Bagnoregio and the Geological and Landslides Museum.

Installed in one of the rooms of the Renaissance-era Palazzo Alemanni – the same room where years earlier Zarina had taught her students – the exhibit focuses on three areas of Zarina's story: her life, her teaching and her legacy. The exhibit's main installation is made up of six video projectors displaying images, video and text along the room's walls.

"The projectors are oper-

ated by remote control," said Seattle artist and exhibit designer Iole Alessandrini. "It's not a static installation, but a flexible system. That means if the museum needs the space for something else, such as a special event or lecture, they can shut off the projectors and set up the room for another purpose."

Working with Alessandrini on the exhibit were Civita Institute board member Clark Pickett, who researched photographs and created the video content for the display, and Nancy Josephson, the Institute's current president, who served as project manager. Additional support was provided by Jordan Hughes, Sharon Mentyka and Cinzia Rocchi.

When planning the exhibit, the team wanted to portray Zarina's influence and legacy as accurately and as engagingly as possible. But it was not an easy task. "We wanted to get the concept just right," said Josephson, "but after several years, we felt we were not really hitting the mark. A

few years ago, we went back to the drawing board with new committee members. Within five months, a new concept and design emerged." A budget of \$20,000, raised by members, was earmarked for the display.

Born in Italy, Alessandrini met Zarina in Rome in the early 1990s. "Zarina said to me, you should come to Seattle and study at the University of Washington," she recalled. "At the time, I didn't even know where Seattle was. But I worked to make it happen. When I arrive, she and Tony were like family to me. My mother died when I was 19 and my father, six years later. They filled a big gap for me."

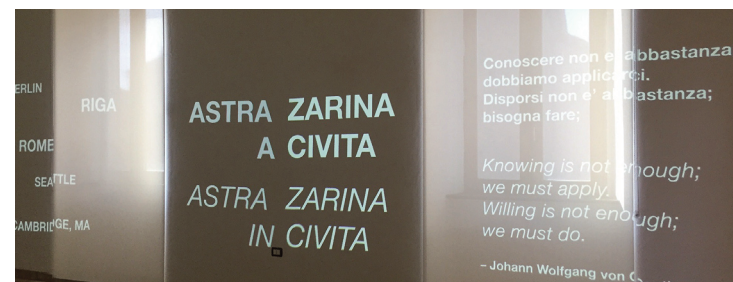
Since moving to Seattle in 1994, Alessandrini has established a reputation for innovative public art installations that manipulate light, digital media and space. She was recently chosen to create a laser-lit installation at KeyArena, home of Seattle's new hockey team, which will open in 2021. She brought these talents to bear on "Astra

Zarina in Civita."

Alessandrini spent three months designing the exhibit and another month in Civita installing it. "The location is great," said Alessandrini. "You walk up some steps in the Palazzo Alemanni, you see the projected images and it makes you pause. Her spirit is felt through these images and words."

"Astra Zarina in Civita" opened August 25, 2019, the 90th anniversary of Zarina's birth. Her husband, who lives full-time in Civita, was present as Luca Profili, mayor of Bagnoregio and Civita di Bagnoregio, cut the ribbon during the opening festivities.

The Civita Institute hopes the exhibit will continue to strengthen the ties established between Astra Zarina and the people of Civita. "People just loved her in Civita," said Alessandrini. "Some of the adults today knew her when they children. She saw the potential in them as individuals and in their town, and they are grateful for all she did."



"Astra Zarina in Civita," which opened last August, was created by the Civita Institute working collaboratively with the city of Bagnoregio and the Geological and Landslides Museum (Iole Alessandrini)



Astra Zarina gets ready to entertain in Civita in this 1960s photo (Civita Institute)