

ARGIA FROM INVISIBLE CITIES

IMAGINING INTERIORS 2026

Reimagining Subterranean Living Through Material And Spatial Exploration.



REFERENCE MATERIALITY



1

MINERAL

2

LAYERING

3

SEDIMENTATION

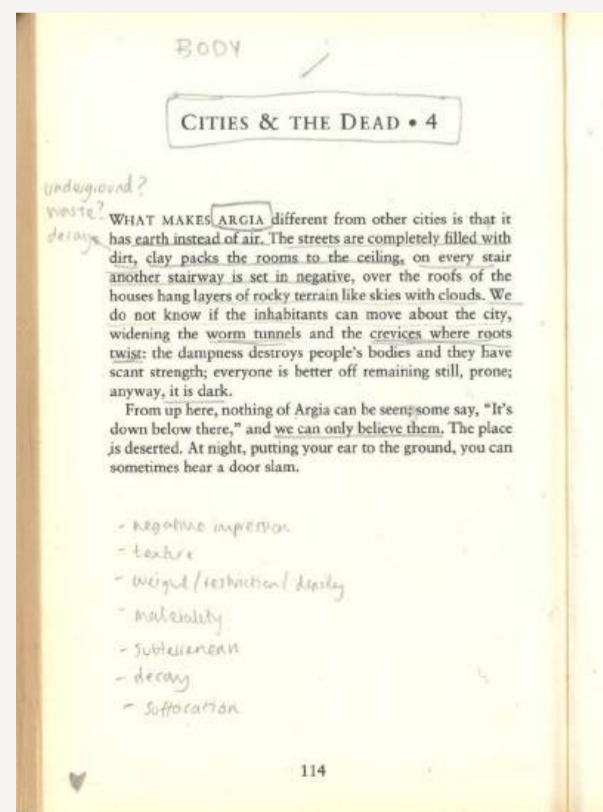
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STRATA

5

02 CONTEXT + CONCEPT

SUBTERRANEAN LIVING - INVISIBLE CITIES 1972



This model is based on Argia, one of the fictional cities described in Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (1972). Argia is an impossible subterranean city where "there is no air" and everything is buried beneath densely packed earth (Calvino, 1972, p. 114).

I was particularly drawn to its ambiguity and rich material imagery. Calvino's description that "over the roofs of the houses hang layers of rocky terrain like skies with clouds" (Calvino, 1972, p. 114) evoked rough, earthen and rubble-like textures, providing a strong tactile language to explore through model-making.

Tensions between presence and absence, life and decay, created an open framework for interpretation, informing both the conceptual and material development of the project.

SUBTERRANEAN LIVING - DERINKUYU UNDERGROUND CITY



One key precedent was Derinkuyu Underground City, the world's largest excavated underground settlement, extending 85 metres deep across 18 levels of tunnels and chambers. Used by successive civilisations for centuries, it functioned as a self-sufficient refuge containing homes, storage spaces, schools, wineries and places of worship.

While remarkable in its ingenuity, life underground would have been challenging due to the absence of natural light, limited airflow and a lack of environmental stimuli, creating conditions that may have affected wellbeing and perception.

I was particularly drawn to Derinkuyu's raw materiality. Its exposed stone surfaces and earthen textures aligned closely with my interpretation of Argia and Calvino's descriptions of earth, clay, rock and decay. This shared material language informed my model-making, leading me to work with clay and plaster to evoke weight, density and a fragmented, organic aesthetic.



01

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

This project reimagines interiority through a process-led exploration of subterranean living, inspired by Italo Calvino's *Invisible Cities* (1972) and the imagined city of Argia.

Drawing on research into underground settlements such as Derinkuyu, alongside investigations into mental wellbeing and the psychological effects of living underground, the work translates speculative ideas into a spatial and material proposal. Through experimental model-making and earthen materiality, the project explores themes of density, excavation and inhabitation, positioning underground environments as potential responses to urban density and climate change while prompting discussion around resilience, adaptation and human wellbeing.

03 MATERIAL ITERATION

PLASTER CASTING



01 RED DYE + CLAY



02 BLACK DYE + CLAY



03 CRUSHED GREY CLAY



04 BLACK + RED DYE



05 CRUSHED RED CLAY



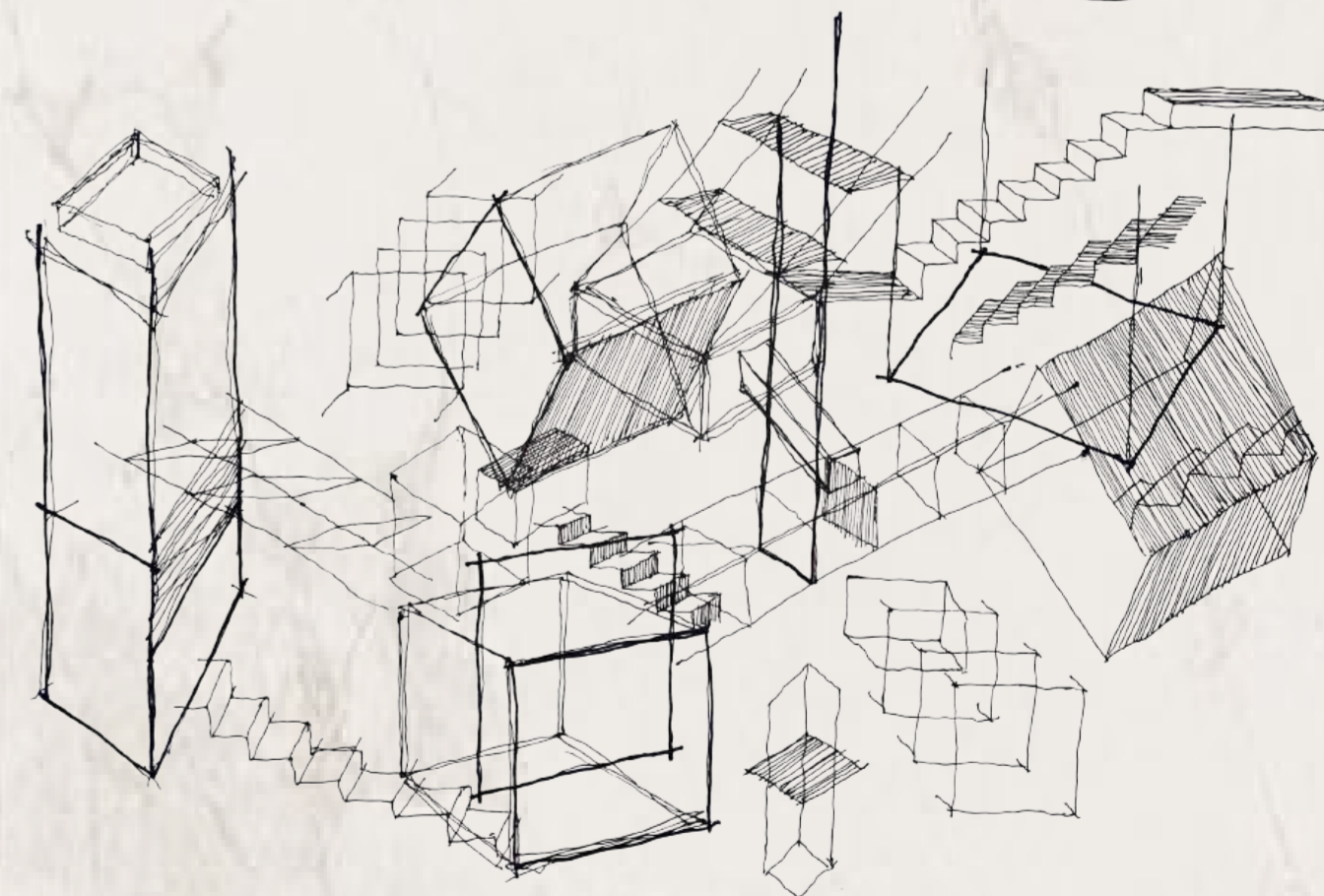
06 RED DYE, LESS MIXED



07 GREY CLAY + RED DYE

My initial material explorations, where I tested ways to capture textures associated with Argia and Derinkuyu Underground City. Working primarily with plaster, I produced iterative samples exploring variations in colour and surface. By adding red and black pigments, I generated a range of tones, and in some cases incorporated crushed clay to emphasise a rough, fragmented texture.

04 SKETCH EXPERIMENTATION



Disorientation presents itself as a key issue of living underground, as windowless spaces lack landmarks and can make navigation difficult. Enclosed spaces and narrow corridors can heighten feelings of claustrophobia and detachment, while separation from the surface may contribute to isolation.

This drawing captures my interpretation of the psychological disorientation experienced underground, where the loss of daylight, horizon and spatial reference points creates a fragmented and uncertain experience of place and perception.

Underground environments are often associated with darkness, confinement and unease. Research has shown that a lack of natural light can disrupt circadian rhythms and contribute to depression, affecting alertness, sleep and wellbeing.

FINAL MODEL

07 PROCESS



08 SHAPE + FORM



I began by cutting shapes from foam, card, and wood, following a process similar to David Umemoto. I then built a mould frame from boarding and bulked it out with foam to reduce the amount of clay needed.

Next, I constructed the 'positive' form in clay using these shapes, testing different compositions before settling on one. I embedded the forms into the clay and carefully smoothed the surface to ensure the silicone would not catch, allowing for a clean, precise mould.



Next, I poured a silicone mixture over the clay form, starting with a slow-setting layer to capture fine detail. I then built this up with recycled silicone to strengthen the mould. Once cured, the mould was removed.

I crushed clay into small fragments and placed them into the mould before casting tinted plaster (with black pigment), allowing the material to set around them. Once set, I demoulded the piece, revealing the final outcome.

05 PRECEDENT STUDIES

DAVID UMEMOTO

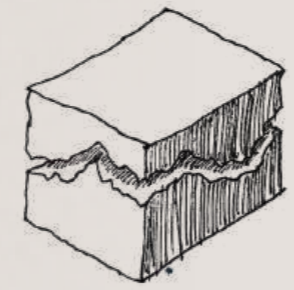
One article on David Umemoto notes that, "One way or another, these are always works where imagination joins forces with a contemplative discipline." This idea of allowing the viewer's imagination to complete the work strongly resonates with Italo Calvino's portrayal of Argia, where ambiguity encourages multiple interpretations rather than a fixed meaning.

Drawing on these influences, I began developing my final model, taking inspiration from Umemoto's architectural forms and compositions. An initial study explored these ideas through cardboard modelling, with a focus on contrasting refined architectural elements against rough, landscape-like forms. As both Argia and Umemoto's work rely on ambiguity and imagination, I chose not to create a literal cityscape. Instead, I abstracted architectural motifs such as straight edges, right angles and stair forms, incorporating them into a fragmented and suggestive spatial composition.

06 CONTINUED CASTING

I explored how city-like forms could be created through plaster casting. Using an iterative process, I formed negatives in clay and cast plaster to produce positives. I pressed objects - such as screwdriver ends - into the clay and carved block-like forms to suggest architectural motifs. I also built up layers of clay as opposed to removing, to create a hollowed effect in the negative cast.

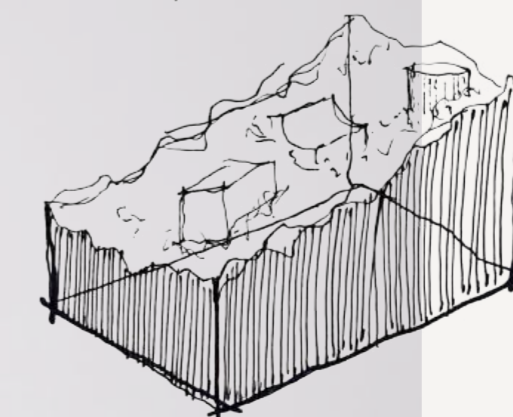
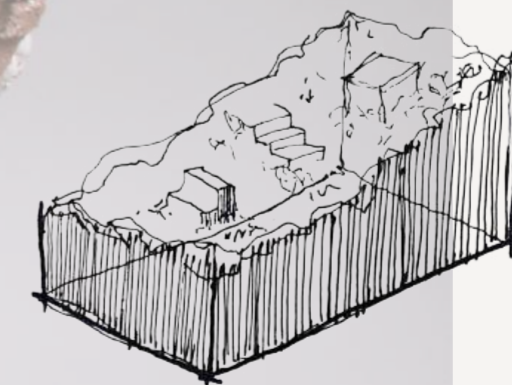
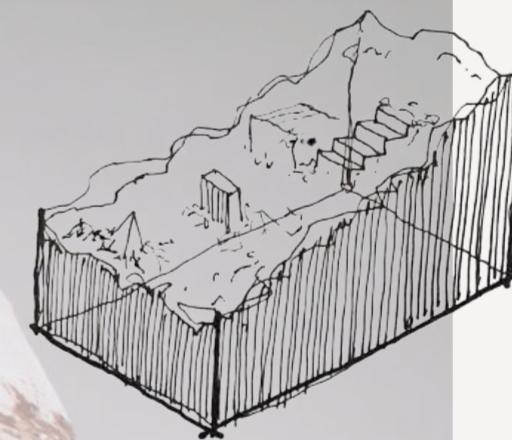




FINAL MODEL

SPATIAL RESELECTION OF A SUBTERRANEAN LANDSCAPE

The final model translates the atmospheric and material qualities of Argia into a spatial proposal that explores subterranean inhabitation. Informed by geological formations, underground precedents, and material experimentation, the design creates a layered landscape with the material language of earth and stone. Through the use of raw textures, fragmented forms, and architectural motifs, the model seeks to capture the disorientation and weight of life beneath the earth's surface.



09

SILICON NEGATIVE

A silicone mould was used as the negative form to create my final model, recording its spatial and material characteristics. Capturing fine surface detail, it became a tool for investigating the relationship between solid mass and void, whilst allowing for potential future casts.

