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«*In the midst of climate chaos, a new species emerged from the shadows — the Evriali, with their fish heads, webbed feet and androgynous (but scaly) human bodies.*»

# VILLA MULLET: CONSTRUCTING ARCHITECTURE'S PHANTOMS

## Brady Burrough

Brady Burroughs, born 1970, is an architectural educator and writer, Head of Second Year at KTH School of Architecture in Stockholm, where she holds a PhD in Critical Studies of Architecture. Brady has spent many summers swimming in the sea caves along the shores of Skala Eressos, Lesvos, Greece.

Ebba Bastmark, born 2000, is a third-year architecture student currently pursuing her Bachelor's degree at KTH School of Architecture in Stockholm. Ebba comes from the island Trehörningen outside of Nynäshamn, Sweden, and enjoys winter swimming after a hot sauna.

«I believe in miracles! [KICK, KICK, EGGBEATER] Where you from? [POP-UP] You sexy thing! [SPLASH, SPLASH] You sexy thing you. I believe in miracles! [TURN, BALLET LEG] Since you came along. [POP-UP] You sexy thing! [SPLASH, SPLASH] Where did you come from, baby? [BACK LAYOUT into a FLOAT]...»<sup>(1)</sup>

Hot Chocolate's groovy tune from 1975 blasts from the rooftop speakers of the new solar-powered sound system (one of the few dry places left), as Louise Mullet practices the synchronized swimming routine with her 50+ swim squad «Gills' Thrills», for the upcoming semi-finals. Her partner Lois, a tutor at the Aquatic Architectural Institute in Prague (AARCHIP), is downstairs in the salon trying to concentrate over the muffled music coming from above the surface.

The year is 2221, long after the fires in hotter, drier climates scorched The Southern Hemisphere and «The Greta Flood» submersed most of central Europe. Unequipped to live in the watery depths, humans were forced to follow mass migration to «Geoship 62 dome settlements» on burnt land.<sup>(2)</sup> The few humans who remain spend most of their days in scuba gear, servicing existing buildings in their sunken decay. In the midst of climate chaos, a new species emerged from the shadows — the Evriali, with their fish heads, webbed feet and androgynous (but scaly) human bodies.<sup>(3)</sup>

Originating in ancient sea caves on the Aegean islands (occasionally caught by local fisherman in small villages, prepared as souvlaki, and served with a complimentary tsipouro), the Evriali had been living in the canals of Venice for centuries. Forced to remain hidden, except during Carnevale, this legendary underground society moved freely at night, following the rise and fall of the tide. Every now and then, a cocky teenage Evriali raced into the flooded Piazza San Marco at dawn to show off, disappearing again in a flash. An early-riser Venetian would catch a glimpse and perpetuate the myth during their morning espresso at the local café. These creatures were eventually discovered, followed by years of discrimination and persecution. In time, Evriali culture became more or less part of mainstream society, coopted but never quite on equal terms, like any other interesting subculture throughout history. That was before the flood.

Lois and Louise moved into Villa Mullet 30 years ago, purchased from its human owners who had given up on costly constructions to avoid the inevitable. At this point, sea-level had barely reached the ground floor. They were young and adventurous, spawning out in the middle of the backyard for all of the neighbors to see. Those were the days! Today, the water's surface is just below the roof terrace, and the previous owners' concrete retaining wall has become an underwater ruin, a home for algae and sea crabs.

The hungry swim squad takes five and comes in to feed on a bit of plankton. Meanwhile Lois is crafting a letter to the most recent of a long line of professorial descendants (surname Deplazes), and the first female tasked with the latest revision of the longest standing and most comprehensive volume on architectural construction in the history of architectural education. Students are STILL using this book after its first publication over 200 years ago!

Sure, since the floods, relevant sections have been added, like «6 Rules for the controlled decay of sunken urban villas», «Floating structures: Building on water», «The opening as a porthole», and of course «Modular dome-building systems for cooperative living»<sup>(4)</sup>, for the drier parts of the world. Even the representation of architectural examples and theoretical/historical references by female architects and thinkers has improved, although the selection remains very «white» and human. Lois wonders what «else», if anything, is lurking below the surface, like a ghost shark — the phantom of the sea? Vying for her attention, their pet squid Spike clings to the warm glowing ceiling lamp (refitted for underwater use) and drops pebbles on Lois' head.

## II

## THE LETTER

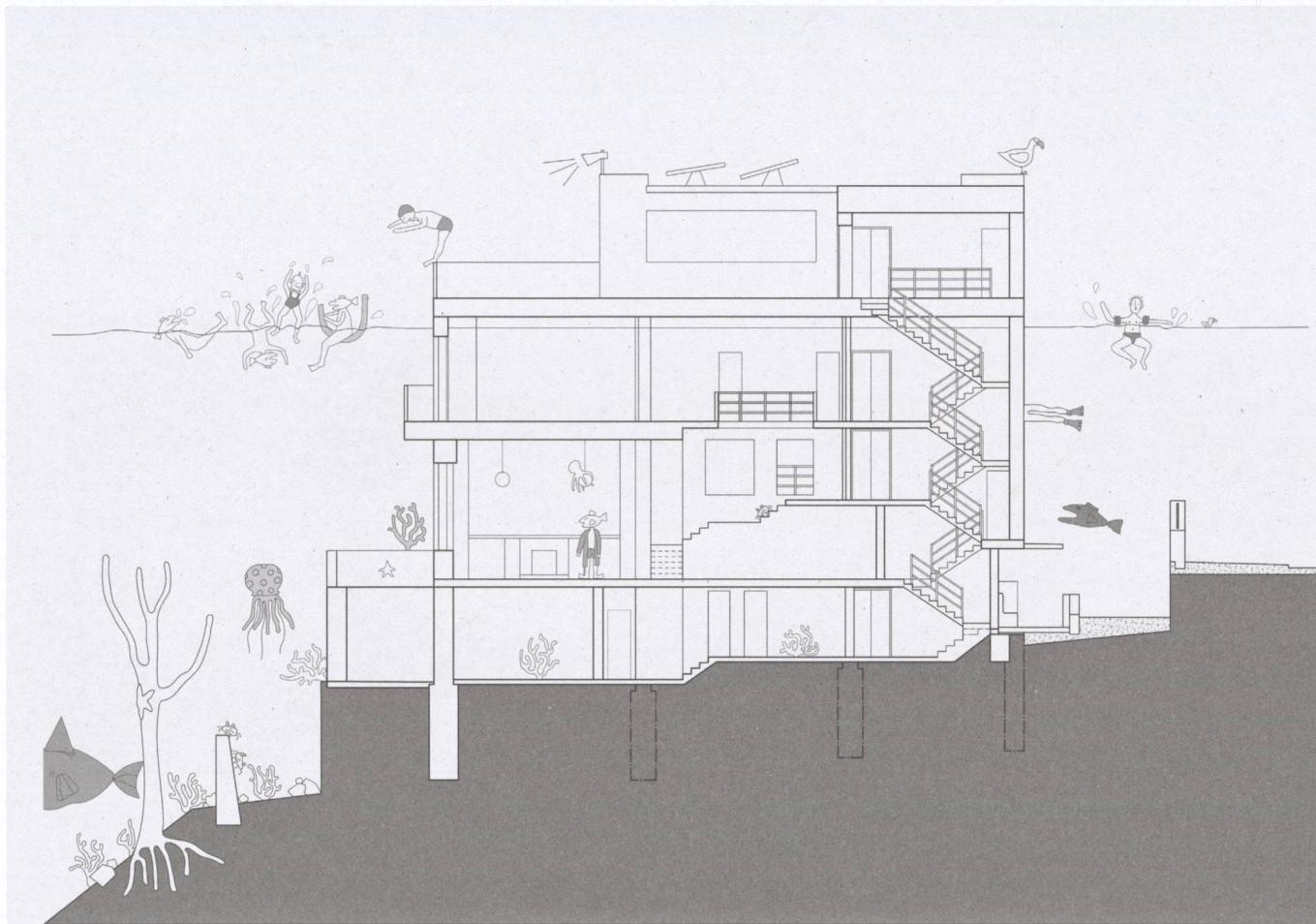
Dear Professor Deplazes IV,

First, let me say that your book «Constructing Architecture» is amazing, as beautifully organized and presented as it is useful!<sup>(5)</sup> The sheer quantity and quality of the work is overwhelming. I work as Head of Second Year at AARCHIP, which is the year of study where architecture students learn basic knowledge in building construction in relation to design, through courses in architectural technology, as well as their design studios.<sup>(6)</sup> «Constructing Architecture» is a mandatory text and an invaluable resource for architectural education.

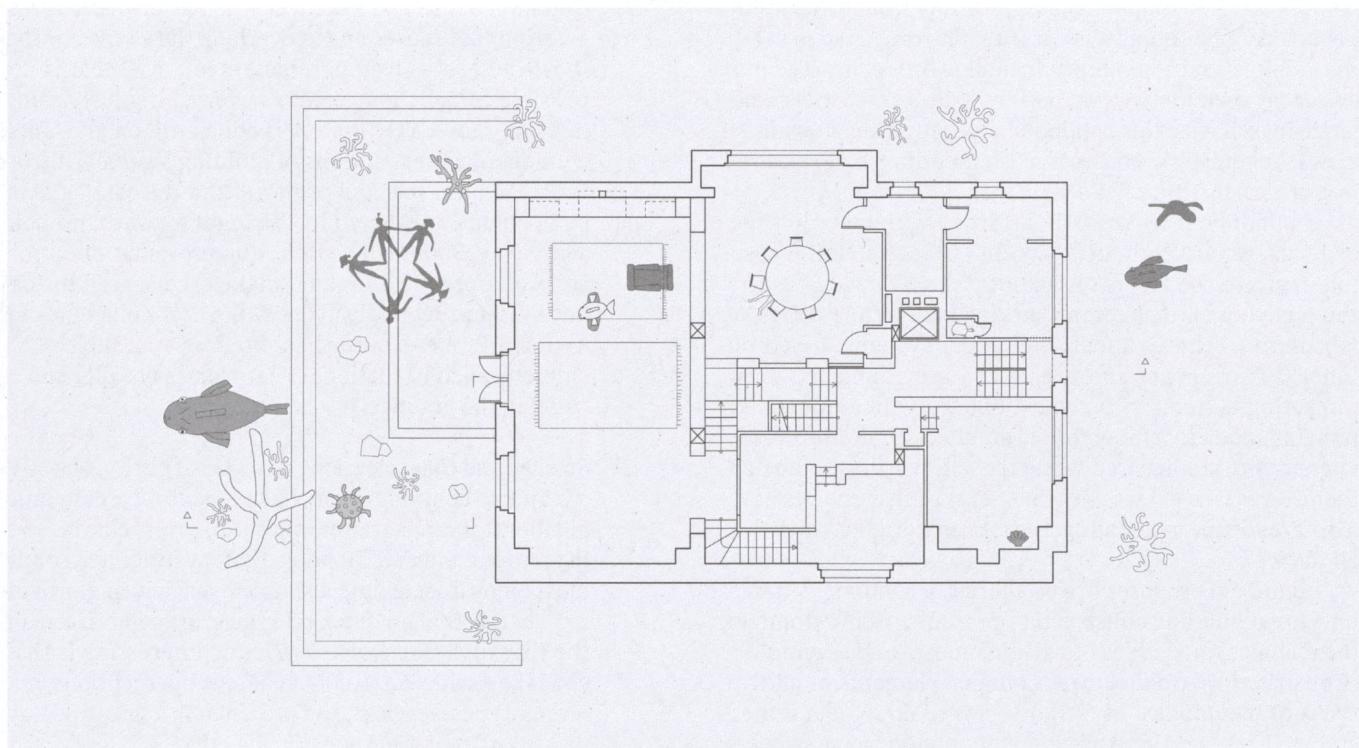
I joined the faculty when my partner and I moved into Loos' Villa Mullet (fka Villa Müller) after the flood. Included please find some drawings of our sunken villa in its current state by my former student Ebba Bastmark.<sup>(7)</sup> (fig. a, b, c) In my spare time, I also engage in critical research with a focus on feminist theory. Recently, I came across Katherine Shonfield's «Why does your flat leak?», a feminist inquiry of building construction handbooks in Britain from 1960 to 2000, and wondered what would happen if I picked up where Shonfield left off?<sup>(8)</sup> How would your book, albeit a Swiss example, compare?

In case you're unfamiliar with the text, Shonfield's premise is that architects' belief systems directly affect the way we think about building and what we prioritize when we build (sometimes regardless of undesirable consequences, such as cold or leaky buildings, for the inhabitants we build for). She calls out what she perceives as a «mind-set» of the profession, where primary concern is given to the experimentation in architectural expression, without questioning its relationship to the proliferation of products and services that aim to sustain «the livelihood of architects, and the profit margins of the building industry».<sup>(9)</sup> (I think we can both agree, in light of our current situation, that this alone has had dire consequences). And here's where it gets interesting! Shonfield suggests that handbooks on building construction play a decisive role, in that they are presented in a way (she calls them «professional fictions»<sup>(10)</sup>) that keeps us from asking questions about these underlying beliefs.

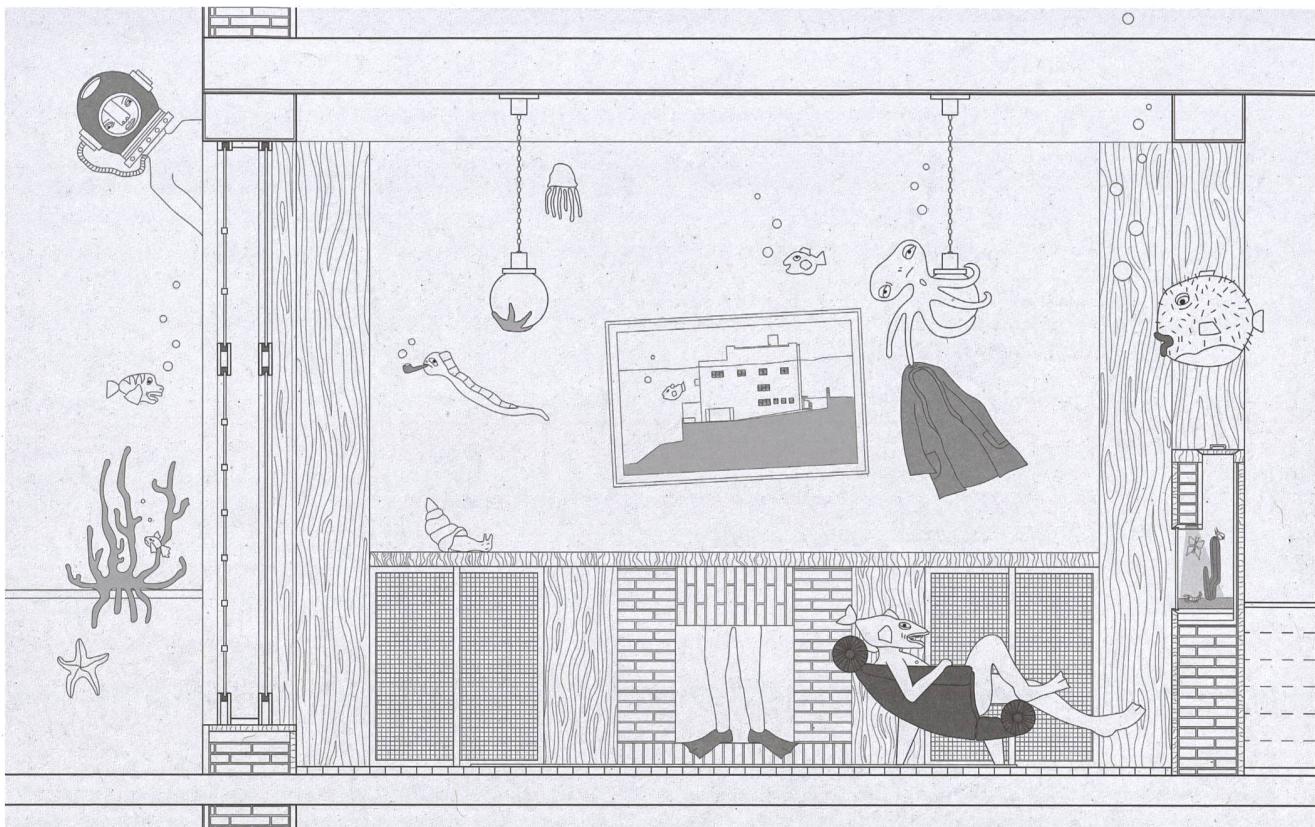
As someone whose daily endeavors are distant to the practice of architecture (what is built), I will admit I don't spend much time engaging with handbooks on construction, nor do I have the experience or expertise to question the detailed solutions provided. I do, however, know a thing or two



Villa Mullet, section 1.  
Image: Ebba Bastmark



(fig. b) Villa Mullet, floorplan.  
Image: Ebba Bastmark



(fig. c) Villa Mullet, section 2.  
Image: Ebba Bastmark

about fictions and critically questioning the values and assumptions (what's behind, around, and embedded in what is built) that design decisions, even material and construction choices, are based upon. You're probably wondering «Why my book?» The simple answer is that it reaches so many in the architectural community, including ALL of my students. As for my own motivation, besides a desire to better familiarize myself with this handbook, I've only seen glowing reviews, undeniably well-deserved, but nothing that ventures into critical territory.<sup>(11)</sup> So, here we go!

In Shonfield's words, «bombarded with facts and specialisms, we are content to accept at face value the absolute truth of the terms of technical «knowledge».»<sup>(12)</sup> The thing is, there are phantoms lurking behind this fiction of «absolute truth» — underlying belief systems, based on inherited privileges and prejudices and connected to intersecting systems of power. While these phantoms may remain hidden for students (and architects) who are already aligned with similar architectural positions, those who find themselves face to face with these exclusionary beasts have a different experience altogether. As an Evriali, I know this all too well.

Shonfield proposes five categories of handbooks, based on «how» building construction presents itself more than the technical intricacies of what it appears to be saying».<sup>(13)</sup> «Constructing Architecture» contains elements of all five types of handbooks. In fact, it seems to do it all and then some! However, there are a couple of additional aspects

worth mentioning that compel me to propose a sixth type for your handbook. I'll briefly go through each.

- 1 Common Sense and Practical — a matter-of-fact presentation that causes one to overlook the «why» for the «how» and sets given parameters in a way that is impossible to question them, as everything just seems to make sense. YOUR book is chock-full on all fronts, with detailed descriptions of building systems, historical examples, selected projects, and the catalogue of components, presented in a straight forward, no-nonsense way. Shonfield writes, «the presentation in the style of a practical manual makes the search for belief systems seem absurd.»<sup>(14)</sup> Several colleagues at AARCHIP refer to your handbook as «the Bible of architectural construction». That alone says a lot about belief in the practical!
- 2 Science and Classification — an idea of purity, objectivity, and no contamination, like a scientific architectural laboratory. Diagrammatic summaries, charts, and lists throughout YOUR book (that my inner nerd finds most enjoyable), giving a simple overview and providing a handy tool for quick reference, are reminiscent of the Classification style.<sup>(15)</sup> What is interesting is that you take a wide variation of content - perceptions, materials, types, services, and present it in a scientific way, making all of it seem equally objective.

- 3 Tolerance — the practice of allowing for a certain measurable amount of «acceptable» variation in building components. YOUR book mentions tolerances, in relation to masonry joints, window casings, heavy external cladding, jointing in the façade, and wall cavity construction, simply as a factor to consider with modern building components. Shonfield, on the other hand, questions the very idea of tolerances, more specifically the «quantifiable dimension for tolerances» and the statistics that support them, in that it only takes one panel outside of the accepted range to cause a leak that will affect the whole building.<sup>(16)</sup> She writes, «tolerance by definition must be able to accommodate even the most extreme circumstances.»<sup>(17)</sup>
- 4 Structural Honesty — promoting visual transparency in «the absolute delineation of a building's structural components». <sup>(18)</sup> Shonfield is critical of this ideology, with examples of the building industry using public housing in post-war Britain as their own «experimental playground», boosting their profits and blatantly disregarding the inhabitants.<sup>(19)</sup> Specifically, the use of brick panels in a structural frame with exposed concrete floor slabs, allowing in cold and moisture. In YOUR book, there is a clear enthusiasm for an «appearance» of Structural Honesty, although projects make use of other «hidden» technological solutions, whether a combination of thermal and facing bricks (and insulation where needed) in the Baden apartment blocks, or copper pipe heating integrated into the solid masonry wall constructions of the Marktoberdorf art gallery.<sup>(20)</sup> Also, the clients of your 14 selected projects of architecture with a capital A, would be unlikely to accept a role as architectural guinea pigs.
- 5 The traditional — a mixture of the Practical, Common Sense, and the Classifiable in appearance, with extensive technological advances (and an explosion of specialized products) within the walls of the structure, to support the fiction of an «honest» construction. Shonfield likens the double-skinned cavity wall of the traditional handbooks to the beauty trend «natural no make-up look», where enormous effort and a cornucopia of products goes into achieving an «uncontrived appearance.»<sup>(21)</sup> Several of the selected projects featured in YOUR book use a type of cavity wall, but perhaps with less «make-up», as there is always an effort toward simplicity and precision. You mention the dilemma of the «multi-layer wall» and the desire for it to «appear like a solid wall» in your discussion of insulation.<sup>(22)</sup> Likewise, you advocate more cost-effective and sustainable solutions in terms of building performance, such as the Vella school, where conventional aluminum louvres are repurposed to redirect light and solar energy is stored in the solid components.<sup>(23)</sup> Later on, you even speculate on future possibilities with «monolithic-synthetics», making this type of wall construction obsolete.<sup>(24)</sup>
- 6 Philosophical and Pedagogical — a traditional handbook with practical knowledge that attempts to connect architectural ideas with constructional solutions,

primarily directed toward education. You differentiate YOUR book from «exclusively technology-focused literature». <sup>(25)</sup> One way of doing this, is by aligning your work with the material world of sense and perception, and references most commonly associated with a phenomenological approach to architecture (Frampton, Norberg-Schulz, Semper). An unsurprising choice and clear position, but one with some ghost sharks of its own — phenomenology's insistence on a universal subject (that is, man) and its reluctance to acknowledge systems of power and the role they play in everything we do, raising questions not only of «Who can be an architect?», but perhaps more importantly «Who has something to say about architecture?».

Shonfield focuses on handbooks in relation to a profession and industry, whereas I understand your primary focus to be toward education. Since YOUR book is so widely used as a pedagogical tool, is it worth considering whether the practical presentation precludes students from thinking critically about what is presented? Besides knowledge in building construction, students also take away ideas about how we define architecture, who gets to decide what is valued, even how we practice architecture. What does «Constructing Architecture» take for granted and what other questions might it ask?

I have a proposition for you. The best part of critical theory, in my opinion, is that it helps us to find new ways of understanding the things we think we already know. In the upcoming fifty-fourth edition, I would be delighted (and surprised) to find a second companion folder, similar to that on Archetypes added in the fourth edition, that raises questions about what we are «not» seeing. One of your great diagrammatic overviews with a curated reading list, to be read along-side the current material, shedding new light on what's already there. Not to undermine the importance of the tectonic, but to intentionally «trouble» the phantoms of the apparently obvious, and to raise awareness for «the complex business of architecture» from a wider range of critical positions.<sup>(26)</sup> How great would it be if students turned to your work for help in the art of construction, and it opened doors to critical theory to boot!?

You could start off in familiar territory, by introducing Sara Ahmed's «Queer Phenomenology», based in queer and critical race theory, bringing a discussion of power to the phenomenological table.<sup>(27)</sup> Or feminist readings of practical material like Shonfield's, such as Katie Lloyd Thomas' work on looking at what's behind the seemingly neutral documents of architectural specifications.<sup>(28)</sup> In Jack Halberstam's transfeminist writing, you'll find architectural ideas on transgender representation around the cut and reorganization of bodies and built forms, through an act of building and unbuilding.<sup>(29)</sup> Or, if you're feeling daring, why not WAI Think Tank's «An Anti-Racist Architecture Manifesto» that proposes «un-making architecture», in contrast to your book that tells us how to put it together?<sup>(30)</sup>

There are so many design students who would benefit from this simple gesture. And what of practitioners? Who knows, maybe you CAN teach an old seal new tricks? I guess what I'm asking is, for the sake of a more generous pedagogy and discipline, are you willing to challenge «Constructing

Architecture»'s phantoms? Anyway, give it some thought and perhaps this definitive volume on architectural construction will usher in its third century, by taking the lead in artfully constructing bridges between the practical fields and the critical ones!

Yours truly and critically,  
Lois Mullet,  
PhD in Critical Studies of Aquatic Architecture

### III LEAVING VILLA MULLET

Louise hates to see Lois disappear into her writing. If truth be told, Lois has been in a foul mood for days (ornery as a seagull)! Swimming up and down, muttering something about phantoms? She cancelled meetings, skipped social activities, and sat glued to that screen for days on end. Starved for attention, even poor Spike has been misbehaving lately. It is a long time since Louise has seen Lois struggle so much with her writing, but this time she nearly bit off more than she could chew.

Before leaving the house to cheer Louise on at the semi-finals, Lois sent off her letter to ETH (now located above flood lines at the top of Mount Rigi). Lois hopes that she has managed to convey the respect and admiration she feels for the work, and yet pose critical questions worth aski... «Where you from? You sexy thing! You sexy thing you.»<sup>(31)</sup> They must be taking the boat, and Louise is in charge of the stereo.