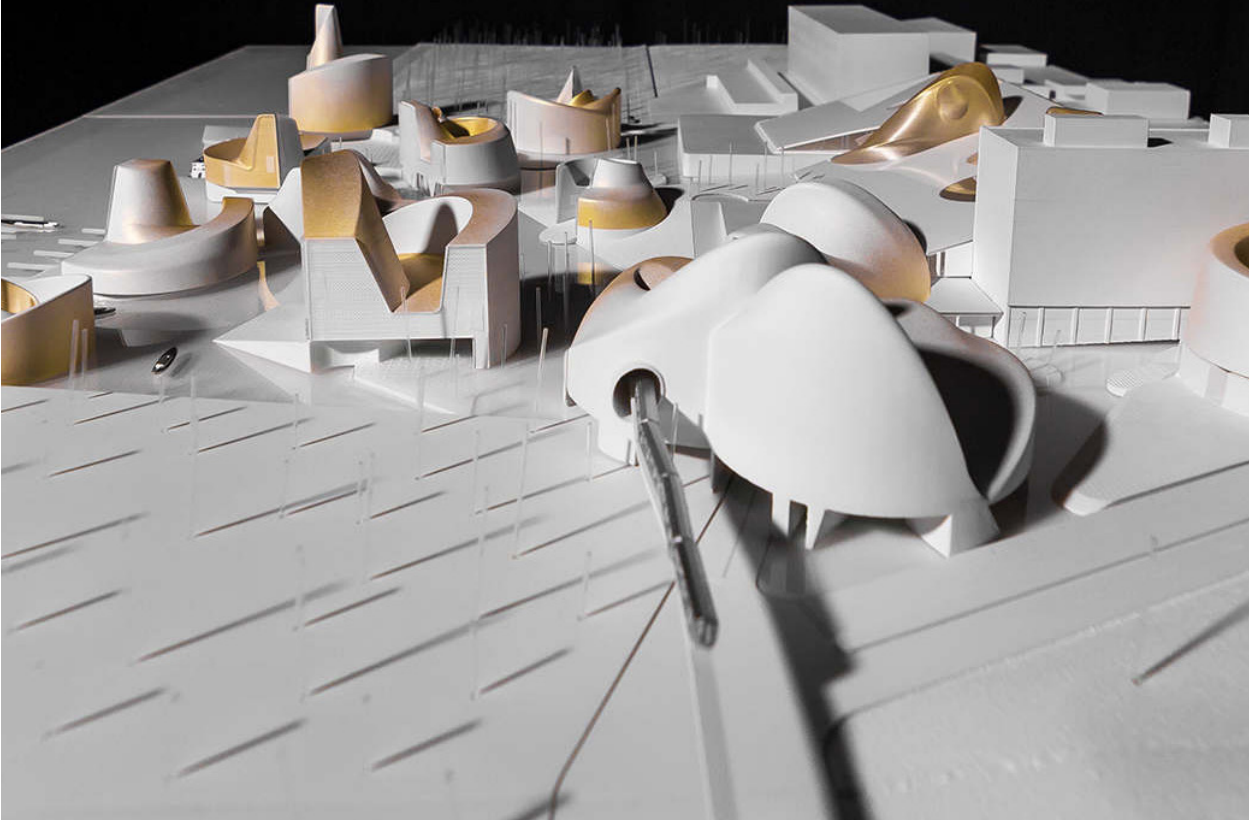# UIC and ARCd

an interview with alumna Sarah Rozman

# the interview

Sarah Rozman is unmistakably an alumna of JMU—she's bright and bubbly and friendly, the poster child of all that we are told a JMU student is. Moreover, she was happy to hold our interview call at 7:00 a.m. her time (she gets to studio at 6:00 a.m. everyday, anyway), and managed to be all of the above even at that hour. Rozman was calling from Chicago, where she is in the last year of her M.Arch program at the University of Illinois at Chicago (UIC), in order to chat with me about all things architecture-education-wise.

After having graduated from the (then) Interior Architecture program at JMU (now Architectural Design) in 2014, she went straight on to grad school, which is a difficult choice that faces all soon-to-be graduates in the architecture field. It's not uncommon to go straight to grad school—nor is it uncommon to take some time out of school to work and get to know the field. So I set out to hear her opinion: how does one go about making this decision?
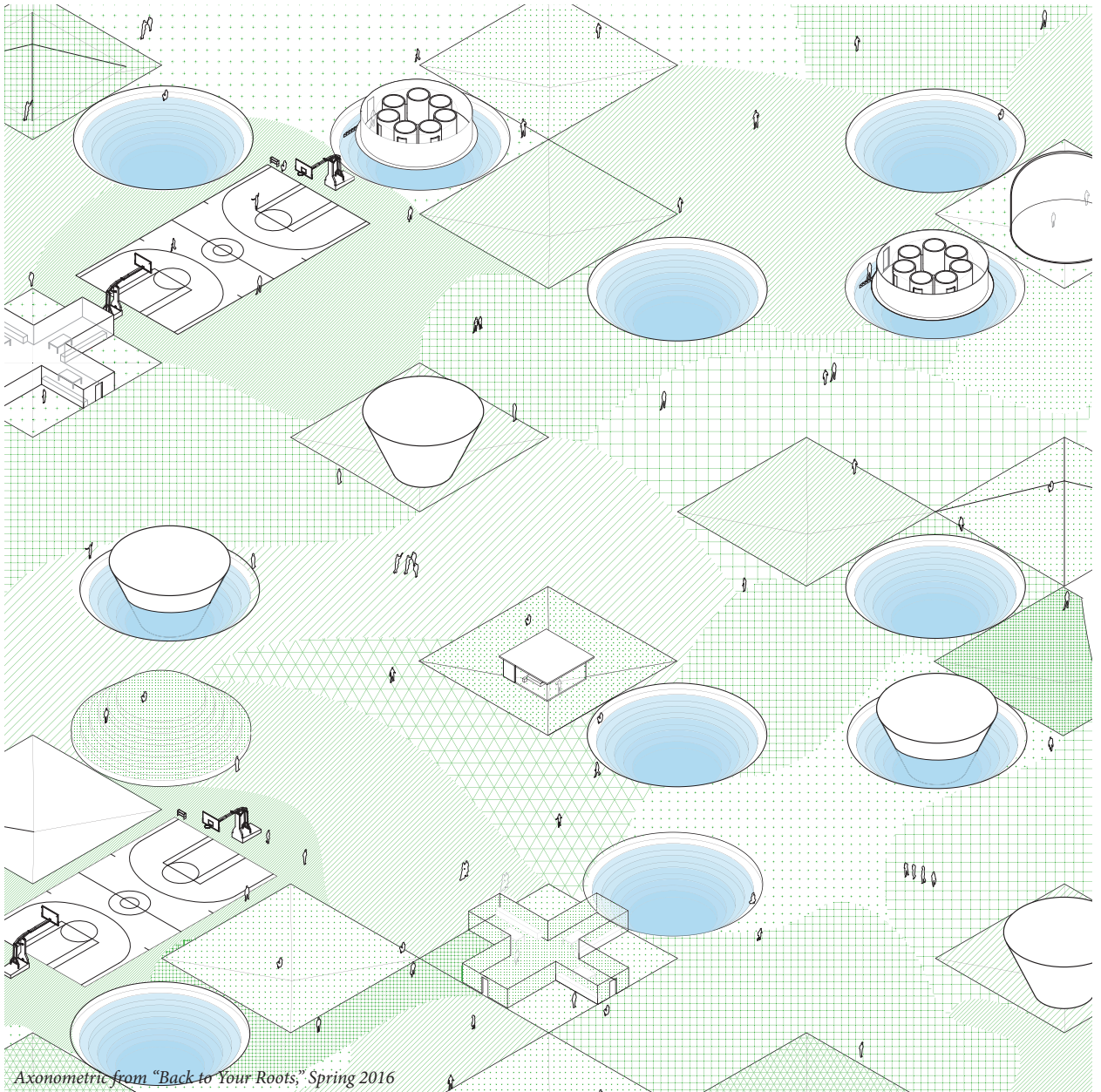
Axonometric from "Back to Your Roots," Spring 2016

Q. So, to start, can you talk a bit about the value of grad school outside of the professional degree?

I think what's been valuable to me is being able to learn around people that really want to be here. In undergrad, you do have very passionate people, but when you get to the level of a three-year Masters program, everyone has to be very committed. They really want to work and help each other, so it creates a great atmosphere around you—a camaraderie. There's also an intensity, which I think exists throughout all of architecture school—but it's definitely a positive.

Personally though, I felt as though I hadn't absorbed enough. I think JMU has a wonderful program, but in any possible two or three years of education, you can only get so much. I felt like I was just tapping the surface of the field, and I knew I wanted to learn a lot more. In grad school, I've been opened up to so many realms of architecture that I had no idea were even available or possible. It's been the most eye-opening experience. And there's so much information all at once, which is awesome. You just become a sponge in grad school; everyone throws information at you and you do your best to take it all in.

Q. Who do you think "should" go to grad school? Is there a type of student who's ready to go straight into it, versus a student who might be better suited to a year or two of work?

Well, yes and no. A lot of undergrads here have asked me, "If don't plan on getting licensed, should I still go to grad school?" And for me, the answer is automatically yes, because I don't think grad school is only right for the person who's really serious about becoming an architect in a big office. I just don't think it has to be that type of person.

For example, I kind of went to grad school because I didn't exactly know what I wanted to do. I knew it was in this field, but I was hoping it would help me figure out what exactly I wanted. Of course, it's a very serious thing, being in grad school, and it's a very intense thing; it's your life for three more years. But I don't think you have to have decided exactly what you want in order for it to be the right.

It's also dependent upon the personality and what that person feels is right at the time. The person who is serious about their education and has it in them to do an intensive three years—that's a good person to continue on. But if you're not fully in it, then maybe taking time off is right. You don't want to be the person that's just barely scraping by. You certainly don't want to get to the point where you're only putting in the minimum effort. It requires some self-awareness about what stage of life you're in and what you're hoping to get out of the experience.

Q. So then as a follow-up to that idea, are there necessary skills?

I would say you need to be organized. The tech skills and all of that—it's okay to not have those. I didn't know any of it when I arrived. I had messed around with Photoshop some, in my time at JMU, but not very seriously. But your grad school will usually teach you those kinds of things—it's stuff you can learn.

Anyway, organization and time-management are important skills to have. I'm on top of my schedule every day, and I can see the difference between myself and those of my peers who are the opposite. They still produce amazing work—but they pull four all-nighters a week. Meanwhile, I have yet to pull an all-nighter in grad school, and I don't plan on it. And in the end, there's no difference in our work.

As I said before, self-awareness is important too. Some days you just need to stop everything, and that's not something I expected. At JMU, I just went and went and went. I don't know if it's because I'm older now [laughs], but there are times when I just need to stop and do something for myself; being able to realize that is important. Otherwise you would go crazy! A lot of undergrads see articles that say things like "architecture school makes you go insane" and they ask me if it's true—but it's been alright so far! I guess I still have a couple months…[laughs]. Anyway, I'd say soft skills like that are most important.

Q. Last question about grad school in general—the biggest one—do you have any advice about how to pick where to go?

The most important thing is that you definitely have to go to the place and feel it out. When I went, I tried to make myself as invisible as I could be, and just watched. Stand by the side; watch how people interact. Go while studio's going on. See the type of interactions that students have with each other, that students have with faculty.

vI did a lot of online research about the programs, too, of course. I looked at student work, which is the best gauge. A lot of people publish public portfolios, which I liked to look at the most because that portfolio is not presented by the school. It allows you to see what the students are actually proud of and what they want to show. And of course, every school has their "thing" that they do, which I was never particularly interested in. I was only interested in it in the sense that if it was incredibly overbearing, it turned me away from that school.

I also only applied to grad schools in places that I wanted to live after school, because I didn't want to build relationships and have a great network and then want to leave after graduation. I thought that would be so frustrating. So the location and the lifestyle is also quite important. So I think that's a big factor. Because you're in that building and in that school, but you're in that location too.

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Q. Let's get to some specifics about UIC. What was the deciding factor in why you picked UIC?

Well, I had been to a few other schools, realized I didn't like it there, and so I came here thinking, "You're either going to like this, or you're not going to go to grad school." Because I was not going to come here if I wasn't happy with it—it's too big of a decision to make. But it's a hard question to answer. Part of me feels like I didn't quite know what I was getting myself into. I think when you're applying to schools, you have quite a naive vision of what the school is going to be like. I think that's the case for everybody. But when I was at UIC, I liked the work, and I liked the focus of the school. When I was here, I talked to tons of faculty, and walked around, and I liked that it felt similar to JMU. One of my friends describes it as the beaten up old toy; you love it unconditionally, but it is a bit worn. It just felt like there was a specialness.

Q. What's the kind of work that UIC does? What is that focus?

Everyone says that our focus is on theory—meaning that we sort of take the history of architecture and conceptualize it in order to understand both the past and the present and the future trajectory of architecture. It can be pretty heavy. We believe that you don't just put up a curved wall because you want to

put up a curved wall. You have to understand, I guess, the—not the history of curved walls—but the implications of it, the discourse about it. It's basically us trying to understand the world of architecture. Our designs are not just shapes to be shapes. We try to understand the forms and the impact of them. We aren't a school that you'll come out of as a "master" of the plan. But I think we all come out as great thinkers about architecture. I do draw plans every day; I draw sections—but we, I think, are the people that can understand a project conceptually and theoretically.

Q. Do you feel that there are similarities to the work that you were doing here? Are there big differences?

I guess I was worried that there might be too much of a continuation of my work from JMU. After three years in that program, I didn't feel that I needed another three years of it here. I didn't want there to be too many similarities. But, I think that there are some similarities in the feel of the program—like in it's size and the uniqueness—but the work is different. Most importantly, though, it's a similar way of think-

ing. For example, we do think about the interior space. We don't just build façades of buildings — and I like that, because I still find myself interested in interiors.

The biggest difference is, of course, that it *is* an architecture program. We are, after we graduate, supposedly allowed to build buildings. So, it's a big deal. And then, we do take form seriously here. At the undergrad level, I don't think we really understood form. But here it's incredibly important, because it is the perception of the building; what you see from the outside — its odd shape or its normal shape — impacts the entire project.

Q. What role does hand-drawing play in your process?

That was something that was shocking to me, having come from JMU, where it was such a big part of the program. I don't know if you still do it there, but at UIC, we do not. We do sketch to think, if that's how you think. If you think best through study models, then you do that. Or if you think best on the comput-

er, you do that. But all of our large, intensive drawings are done on the computer. And that's because of the speed. We don't have time, every day, to go back and erase the whole thing.

When I came in, I was a big supporter of hand-drawing. I loved the look of hand drawings. In my first semester, I think I was pretty annoying to my professors because I kept trying to do that. But the techniques that the computer can do—and I'm surprised I'm even saying this because I am not a big advocate for the computer at all—but the techniques you can do on a computer are incredible. I never thought that a computer drawing could be beautiful, but the drawings that we make are gorgeous. It was hard for me to make that switch. I was used to hand-drawing; I was taught that. But it's important to get into the mindset of the practicing world, where all of your drawings will be produced on the computer. They're still not the types of drawings we do in grad school, but a closer parallel. It also encourages you to have a good 3D model of your project, because then you can work drawings out of it. And doing that requires you to have a better understanding of your entire project, because every line matters. It forces you to think about your design differently—more seriously.

Axonometric from "X, Y, Z Axis," Fall 2014
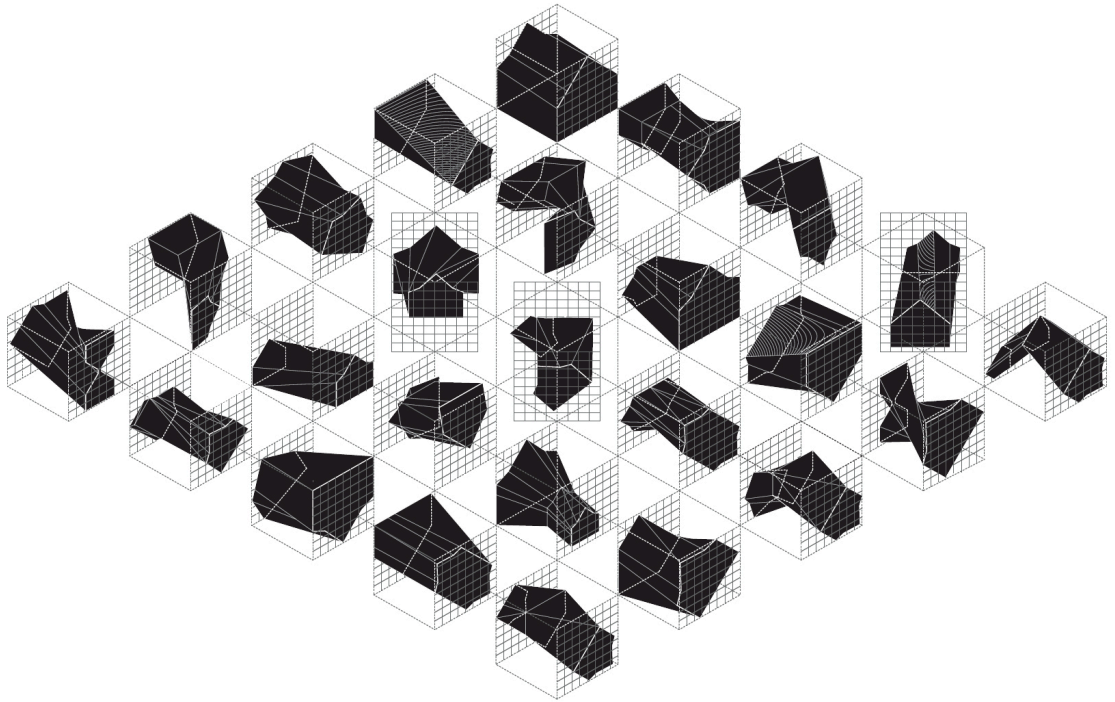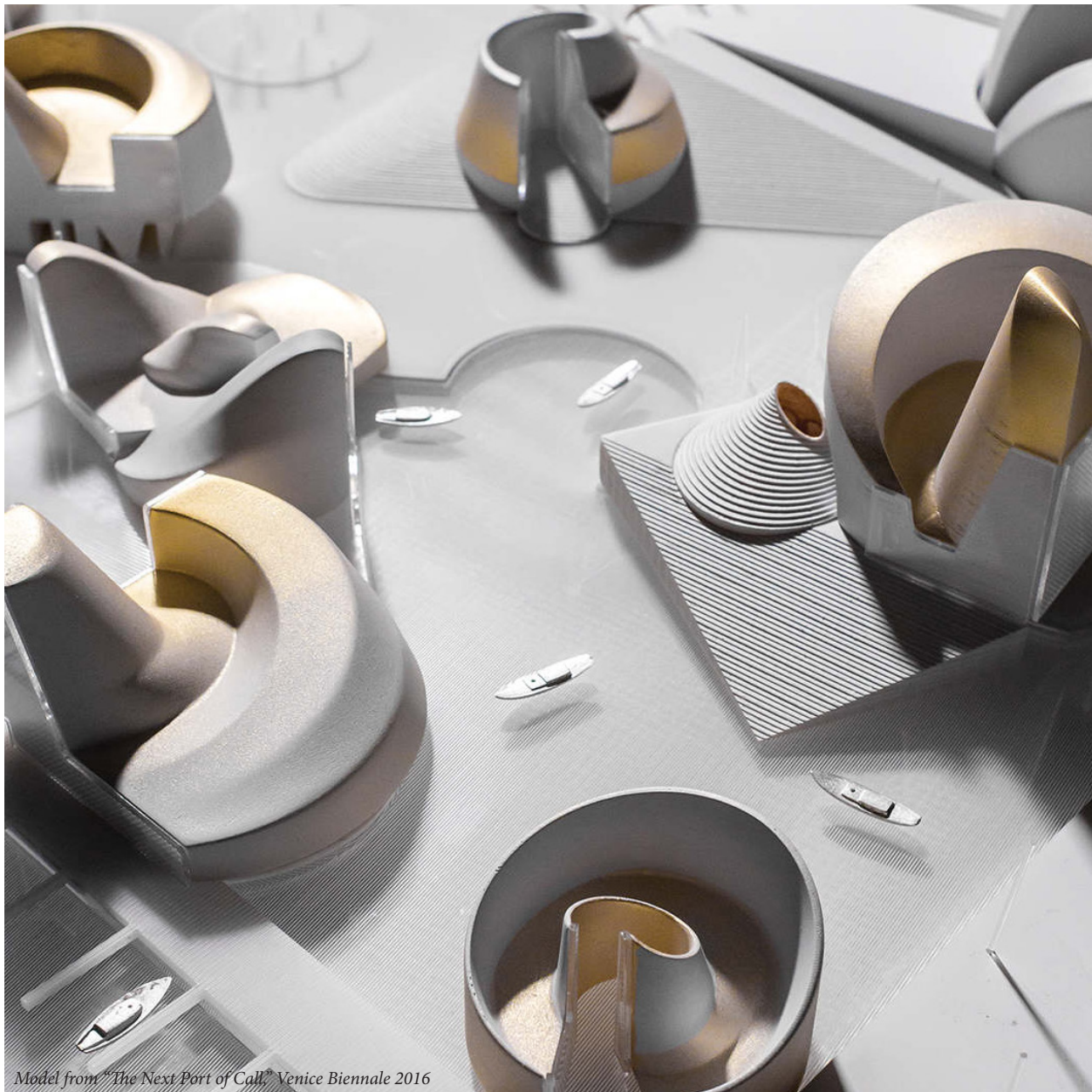
Model from "The Next Port of Call," Venice Biennale 2016

Q. I've got a few last questions about your reflections on JMU as an undergrad program. What would you say were the strengths the program had given you?

I think the way that I was taught to think was a major strength. I had a way of thinking and creatively understanding things that I don't think my peers had—and they might still not. I think the conceptual project is exaggerated at JMU, but because of that, it became something I was able to tap into here. Even the values as a liberal arts college were important; I write everyday for my classes, I read all the time, and those are things that we had to balance in undergrad. But overall, the way of thinking was the biggest—I think everybody comes out of JMU's program with that skill.

Q. Did you pick the school because of the (now) ARCd program, or did you arrive and then say "oh, I'll do that"?

I did extensive research on undergrad schools, as well. But I think I was even more naive about it all because I had no way of truly knowing what each program was about. I went to a lot of different schools and sat in on some of the different classes. At the time, I was strictly looking at interior design, and JMU's program was called Interior Design, then. I remember sitting in on classes at other schools, and it was

fabric focused and about furniture. It was fine. I'm sure I could've been happy there. But, I don't know... there was something about JMU and the people I talked to there. Something about JMU just felt different. It felt personal. I don't really think I knew what I was getting myself into, or that it would be so impactful to how I thought. I don't think I had any expectation of that. I chose it, and then the program ended up being, obviously, so unique and so great. I'd like to think I did a lot of research, but then at the same time, I feel like I totally just fell into it.

Q. As someone who has gone through the program and on to a great grad school, do you feel like you would still—if you knew then what you do now—have chosen JMU?

Yes. Totally. I 100% would choose it, knowing how it has helped me. It's easy to worry at the time "How are people going to understand this work?" I know I felt that sometimes—and even still at UIC—I

wonder how my work is going to be perceived, because it's different. I think most people have those kinds of reservations. Sometimes we become quite timid about that. But I think what I understand now is that that is what makes it good. I think not being able to draw a wall section when you come out of JMU is *fine*. But the way of thinking is what's valuable. It's a unique way of understanding the discipline. Facing those worries is hard. But yes, I would choose it again.
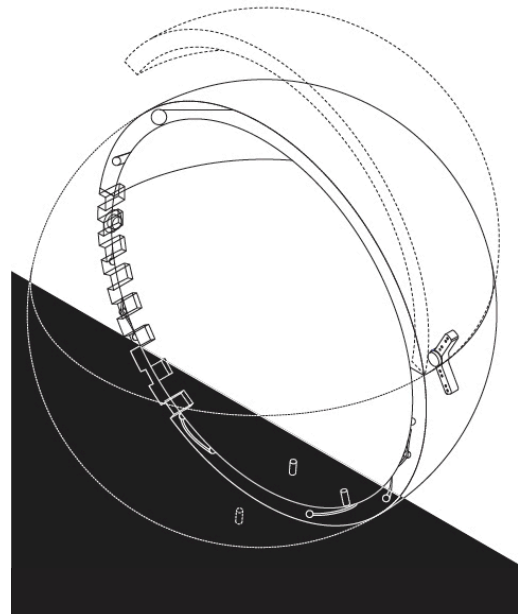
Axonometric from "A-Pool," Spring 2016 2-Day Workshop
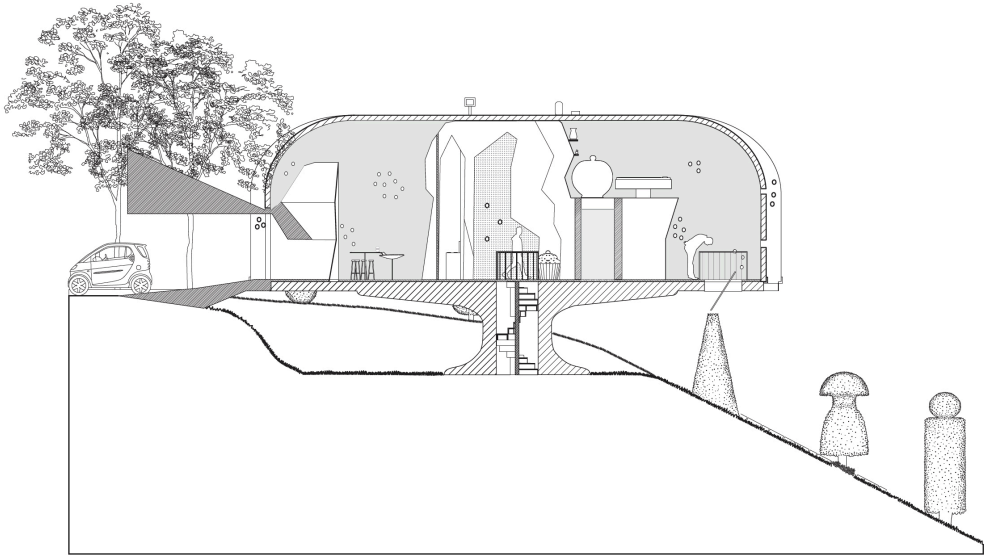
Section from "Dome-estic Living," Fall 2015; Model from "The Next Port of Call," Venice Biannale 2016 (front cover)