



Michela Vanda Caserini, PhD

Architect & Postdoctoral Research Fellow
Politecnico di Milano – DASTU



Profile

Michela Vanda Caserini is an architect and postdoctoral fellow at the Department of Architecture and Urban Studies (DASTU), Politecnico di Milano. Her research focuses on self-built houses, urban informality, housing participatory design processes and the use of visual and ethnographic methods in architectural research. She investigates how people dwell, adapt, and represent their own living environments in contexts marked by social and spatial segregation.

She holds a PhD in Architecture Urban Interior Design (with honours) from Politecnico di Milano, Department of Architecture and Urban Studies, DASTU (2021–2025). Her doctoral dissertation, *Drawing Self-Built Dwelling: An Architectural Ethnographic Investigation in Chamanculo C, Maputo, Mozambique*, explored unplanned houses processes through ethnographic observation, hand drawing, and photography. Supervised by Professors Camillo Magni (Politecnico di Milano), Johan Van Den Berghe, and Thierry Lagrange (KU Leuven), the research aim at developing a methodology that combines spatial documentation of the informal dwelling located in a marginal area of Maputo, Mozambique. It examined how drawing can function as a tool for understanding houses typology in unplanned areas and as a medium for understanding urban transformations in informal settlements.

Michela earned a double degree Master of Science in Architecture (110/110 cum laude) from Politecnico di Milano and Tongji University of Shanghai (2016–2019), with a thesis titled *Strengthening Rural Livelihoods - Using bamboo as a resource in Kathmandu valley*, with a focus on the use of bamboo as a resource for a community center in the Kathmandu Valley, Nepal. She holds a Bachelor of Science in Architecture from Politecnico di Milano (2012–2015), where she focused on natural materials and low-impact housing construction techniques.

Since April 2025, she has been working as a postdoctoral research fellow at DASTU department, Politecnico di Milano, contributing to the Strategic Plan for the cities of San Salvador and San Miguel in El Salvador. Her role involves the analysis of the architectural morphology of the self-built and peripheral areas of San Salvador with a deep analysis and engagement on houses participatory design processes for low-income families.

Michela has been involved in teaching activities at Politecnico di Milano since 2019. As Teaching Tutor for the Second Level Master Program namely “*Design for Development*” (2022–2025), where she supported master’s students during fieldwork and design studios in San Salvador and Maputo, focusing on context-based strategies for housing sustainable development in vulnerable urban context. Among other additional teaching roles, she has tutored in the *Design Studio III* (coordinated by Prof. Camillo Magni) and *Minds22 Workshop* (coordinated by Prof. Michael Obrist). Earlier, during her time at the Tongji University of Shanghai, she worked as a junior researcher on a housing preservation project of the YifengLi community and participated in the *Solar Decathlon China*, focusing on the design and construction of sustainable housing prototypes.

She has presented her research project in several international academic contexts, including lectures, seminars, workshops, and conferences at institutions such as Politecnico di Milano, KU Leuven, TU Delft, and other European universities. Her presentations have focused on community regeneration projects, architectural ethnography, self-built dwelling, and visual approaches to urban informality. Her participation in conferences such as CA²RE Conference for Artistic Research (Valencia 2024, Belgrade 2024), EARAU Conference (Politecnico di Milano, 2024), and N-AERUS Conference (2022) reflects her engagement with debates on the architectural ethnographic methodology and the co-design processes in contexts the Global South.

Since 2018, Michela has been collaborating as architect with Architettura Senza Frontiere Italia – Milano ETS, contributing to projects related to community co-design processes and development cooperation in the Global South.

Across her academic and professional trajectory, Michela has developed a consistent focus on architectural ethnography as a method that links design, observation, and representation. Her work seeks to document and interpret how individuals and communities shape their own self-built environment, and how these processes can inform architectural design, research and education. Her research combines field immersion, visual documentation, and reflective analysis, addressing questions of agency, materiality, and everyday spatial practices. Within this framework, she considers architectural representation not only as a means of communication but as a critical component of knowledge production.

She is fluent in Italian and English and has working proficiency in French, Spanish, Portuguese, and Chinese.

Curriculum Vitae

Education

PhD in Architecture Urban Interior Design (with honours)

Politecnico di Milano — Department of Architecture and Urban Studies, Milan

2021 – 2025

Thesis title: *Drawing Self-built Dwelling — An architectural ethnographic investigation in Chamanculo C, Maputo, Mozambique*

Supervisors: Prof. Camillo Magni (POLIMI); Prof. Johan Van Den Berghe & Prof. Thierry Lagrange (KU Leuven)

Research areas: Self-built houses; segregated urban contexts; architectural ethnography; hand drawing; photography

Master of Science in Architecture — 110/110 cum laude

School of Architecture, Urban Planning and Construction Engineering-Double Degree program
Politecnico di Milano and Tongji University, Shanghai - 2016-2019

Thesis title: *Strengthening Rural Livelihoods - Using bamboo as a resource in Kathmandu valley*

Supervisor: Prof. Luca Maria Francesco Fabris

Research areas: hand drawing; Bamboo; communitarian center; self-built architecture

Bachelor of Science in Architecture — 98/110

Politecnico di Milano- 2012-2015

Thesis title: *Terra, Canne e Paglia — Earth, reeds and straw*

Supervisor: Prof. Andrea Campioli

High School Diploma in Arts — Architecture & Interior Design- 93/100

School of Arts Alessandro Volta, Pavia - 2006–2011

Thesis title: *Tra natura e artificio- Between Nature and Artifice*

I. Academic Teaching Experience

Teaching Assistant- Laboratorio di Progettazione Architettonica e Urbana

Coordinated by Prof. Camillo Magni and Prof. Paolo Martinelli

Politecnico di Milano, School of Architecture, Urbanism and Construction Engineering

Master of Science in "Architecture and environment"

March - June 2026

Tutoring master's students in the analysis of the housing morphology and architectural typologies in the city of San Salvador, El Salvador.

Teaching Assistant — On the ground design workshop in El Salvador

Coordinated by Prof. Camillo Magni, Prof. Laura Montedoro and Prof. Sonia Pistidda

Politecnico di Milano, Department of Architecture and Urban studies

"Design for Development", Second Level Master Program

June – July 2025

Tutoring master's students in housing and reinhabitation strategies for the revitalization of the historic center of San Salvador, El Salvador, through field-based activities and design guidance for new housing solutions aimed at counteracting urban depopulation.

Teaching Assistant —On the ground design workshop in Mozambique

Coordinated by Prof. Camillo Magni, Prof. Laura Montedoro and Prof. Sonia Pistidda

Politecnico di Milano, Department of Architecture and Urban studies

"Design for Development", Second Level Master Program

June – July 2023

Tutoring master's students in developing research, documentation, and housing design strategies for vulnerable urban contexts in Maputo, Mozambique, in particular for the case of Chamanculo C.

Teaching Assistant — Architectural Design Studio in the Global South

Coordinated by Prof. Camillo Magni

Politecnico di Milano, Department of Architecture and Urban studies

"Design for Development", Second Level Master Program

May 2023

Tutoring and support the students on the approach within the design-process for the context of the "Global South".

Teaching Assistant -Project Cycle Management lab

Coordinated by Prof. Luca Bonifacio

Politecnico di Milano, Department of Architecture and Urban studies

"Design for Development", Second Level Master Program

Feb 2023

Tutoring and support on project methodology for development cooperation.

Teaching Assistant - Tools for territorial analysis and mapping (QGIS for spatial analysis and mapping)

Coordinated by Prof. Fabio Manfredini and Prof. Luigi Carboni

Politecnico di Milano, Department of Architecture and Urban studies
"Design for Development", Second Level Master Program
Feb 2023
Tutoring and support on mapping tools for development cooperation.

Teaching Assistant —Theoretical Modules

Coordinated by Prof. Camillo Magni
Politecnico di Milano, Department of Architecture and Urban studies
"Design for Development", Second Level Master Program
Nov 2022 – Jan 2023
Tutoring in lectures and seminars on architectural and urban environments and participative housing design in the Global South.

Teaching Assistant — Architectural Design Studio III

Coordinated by Prof. Camillo Magni and Prof. Paolo Martinelli
Politecnico di Milano, School of Architecture, Urbanism and Construction Engineering
Bachelor of Science in Architecture
Sep 2022 – Dec 2022
Tutoring in the design of a secondary school in Milan

Teaching Assistant — Milan International Design Studio (MINDS)

Coordinated by Prof. Michael Obrist
Politecnico di Milano, School of Architecture, Urbanism and Construction Engineering
Master of Science in Architecture
Feb 2022
Post-pandemic housing strategies exploring affordable and collective ways of living, rethinking housing as a political, social, and resilient urban system through new models of inhabitation in Milan.

2. Scientific titles

Postdoctoral Research Fellow (Assegnista di ricerca post-doc)

Politecnico di Milano — DASTU Department of Architecture and Urban Studies

Apr 2025 – Present

Member of the PLANES research group responsible for the Strategic Plan for the regeneration and valorization of the historical center of San Salvador and San Miguel, El Salvador (funded by the Italian Cooperation and Development Agency and coordinated by Prof. Camillo Magni), specialised in the typological and morphological aspects of the houses in the informal settlement.

Junior researcher

College of Architecture and Urban Planning, Tongji University, China at Yifeng Li community, Shanghai.

Responsible architect and professor: Li Qing.

Participation as junior researcher in a co-funded project by the College of Architecture and Urban Planning, Tongji University, for the preservation of a working-class neighborhood threatened by demolition, namely *YiFeng Li*. In collaboration with the local community, architectural drawings were produced, self-built urban furniture elements were constructed, and murals were painted along the affected street, contributing to the preservation of the buildings for three years.

Feb-Aug 2019

Invited Lectures

--*Drawing Self-Built Dwelling, a narration of domestic practices in Chamanculo C, Maputo, Mozambique*
— Urban ethnography course, Politecnico di Milano, School of Architecture Urban Planning Construction Engineering, Coordinated by Prof. Massimo Bricocoli and prof. Paola Briata
(Dec 2025)

-Drawing Self-built dwelling and fieldwork
Fieldworks course, TU Delft, MSc Architecture, Urbanism and Building Sciences, coordinated by Prof. Jurjen Zeinstra
(Nov-2025)

-*Drawing Self-Built Dwelling* — Research Thematic Seminar: Contemporary Cities, Politecnico di Milano, Study Course in Architecture and Urban Design, Coordinated by Prof. Simonetta Armondi and Prof. Beatrice Galimberti
(Nov 2025)

-*Drawing Observational Method* — International PhD Seminar: Exploring Research Backstage, KU Leuven, Coordinated by prof. Thierry Lagrange
(Oct 2025)

-*Architectural Ethnographic Investigation in Maputo* — International Seminar of Architectural Ethnography, Interior space design studio, Politecnico di Milano, coordinated by prof. Gennaro Postiglione, prof. Matteo Clementi and prof. Stamatina Kousidi
(Oct 2025)

-*Drawing and Photographing Self-Built Dwelling* — Studio Anatomy, KU Leuven, Department of Architecture in the field of Technè and Poiesi, coordinated by prof. Johan Van Den Berghe
(Feb 2025)

-*How the Other Half Dwells Overseas* — Politecnico di Milano, Department of Architecture and Urban studies "Design for Development", Second Level Master Program, coordinated by prof. Camillo Magni
(Sep 2024)

-*Ethnographic Drawing and Photography in Mozambique* — Workshop for phd students, Politecnico di Milano, Department of Architecture and Urban Studies, coordinated by prof. Gennaro Postiglione
(Sep 2024)

-*Ethnographic Picture as a Qualitative Method for the Analysis of Subaltern Architecture* — Politecnico di Milano, Department of Architecture and Urban studies "Design for Development", Second Level Master Program, coordinated by prof. Camillo Magni
(Feb 2024)

Conference Presentations

CA²RE - "Disposition"

Conference for Artistic and Architectural Research, University of Belgrade – Faculty of Architecture

Title of the contribution: *Hidden orders How the other -more than a half- lives*

(7-9 Nov 2024)

EARAU- "in-presence / the body and the space: the role of corporeity in the era of virtualization"

European research on architecture and urbanism international conference

Politecnico di Milano

Title of the contribution: *Beyond the ring-road: Ethnographical reading of a spontaneous settlement in Maputo*

(19-22 Jun 2024)

CA²RE – "Experimentation"

Conference for Artistic and Architectural Research, School of Architecture – Universitat Politècnica de València

Title of the contribution: *Representing and Designing the Domestic Space of an Unplanned Environmen*

(11-13 Apr 2024)

N-AERUS- “Transforming Role of State in Addressing Inclusive Urban Development”
Network- Association of European Researchers on Urbanisation in South
Urban and Rural Planning Discipline, Khulna University in Bangladesh with the Department of
Sustainable Cities and Communities, at the University of Kassel in Germany.
Title of the contribution: *The Role of the NGO in Mozambique*
(27-29 Oct 2022)

Awards

Siena international photo awards- *finalist-2026-Photojournalism (selection from the phd thesis)*
Tokyo Photography Awards- *Gold winner-2025- Photojournalism (selection from the phd thesis)*
Re-Focus Awards- *Bronze winner-2025-Photojournalism (selection from the phd thesis)*
Muse Photography Awards — *Gold Winner- 2025- Photojournalism (selection from the phd thesis)*
Berlin Photo Awards — *2nd Place, Photojournalism-2025 (selection from the phd thesis)*
World Water Day Photo Contest — *2nd Place- 2025 (selection from the phd thesis)*
Photography 4 Humanity (United Nations) — *Top 10 Finalis- 2024 (selection from the phd thesis)*

Exhibitions

Piano Terra, Milano (Italy)

Echi e tracce, le vene aperte dietro il paesaggio olimpico

Selection of drawings narrating the impact of the Olympic games of winter 2026 in Italy, from the article published by *Altreconomia*. The exhibition is promoted by *Offtopiclab* collective as part of series of event to strengthening the debate on the preservation of the Italian landscape.

June 2026

Politecnico di Milano, CRAFT department (Italy)

Echi e tracce, le vene aperte dietro il paesaggio olimpico

Selection of drawings narrating the impact of the Olympic games of winter 2026 in Italy, from the article published by *Altreconomia*.

March 2026

La centrale dell'acqua, Milan (Italy)

World Water Day Photo Contest — Travelling exhibition

Reportage on the March 2024 floods and the affected houses located in a marginalized neighborhood in Maputo.

January 2026

Borneo Island, Amsterdam (Netherlands)

Portraits from Chamanculo C, Maputo

Exhibition of hand drawings representing the affected houses located in the Chamanculo C neighborhood in Maputo, Mozambique, developed for the phd Thesis.

6th November 2025

Tu Delft (Netherlands)

Drawing Self-built Dwelling

An architectural ethnographic investigation in Chamanculo C, Maputo, Mozambique

Selection of some of the hand drawings representing the affected houses located in the Chamanculo C neighborhood in Maputo, Mozambique, developed for the phd Thesis.

Nov 2025-on going

Malpensa Airport (Italy)

World Water Day Photo Contest — Travelling exhibition

Reportage on the March 2024 floods and the affected houses located in a marginalized neighborhood in Maputo

2025

Weston Library, University of Oxford (UK)

A Lens on Climate Justice – The Foot Bath

Curated by Fotografiska & UN Human Rights

Selected photo from the reportage on the March 2024 floods and the affected houses located in a marginalized neighborhood in Maputo

2025

Pontedera (Italy)

World Water Day Photo Contest — Travelling exhibition

Reportage on the March 2024 floods and the affected houses located in a marginalized neighborhood in Maputo

2025

United Nations Headquarters, New York (USA)

Photography 4 Humanity – The Foot Bath

Selected photo from the reportage on the March 2024 floods and the affected houses located in a marginalized neighborhood in Maputo

2024

Living the Way

Portrait series travelling exhibition (A slow transition from China to Italy)

Lecco, Mandello del Lario, Milan (Spazio LUME), Castello di Vezio

2019-2020

La Stecca, Milan

Drawing Portraits of CAT — For ASF Italia

Selection of hand drawing narrating the story of the lives in a temporary settlement (Centro di Accoglienza Temporanea) located in the periphery of Milan.

2019

3. Postgraduate Qualifications

PhD in Architecture Urban Interior Design (with honours)

Politecnico di Milano — Department of Architecture and Urban Studies, Milan

2021 – 2025

Thesis title: *Drawing Self-built Dwelling — An architectural ethnographic investigation in Chamanculo C, Maputo, Mozambique*

Supervisors: Prof. Camillo Magni (POLIMI); Prof. Johan Van Den Berghe & Prof. Thierry Lagrange (KU Leuven)

Research areas: Self-built houses; segregated urban contexts; architectural ethnography; hand drawing; photography

4. Other academic and professional experiences

Professional Practice

Architect — Architettura Senza Frontiere Italia - Milano ETS

La stecca 3.0, Milan

Oct 2018 – Present

Participation in design, illustration, and research initiatives for local and international cooperation projects, (in Italy and in the context of the Global South) supporting vulnerable communities in the development of sustainable housing and service solutions, with the aim of fostering collaborative co-design processes among stakeholders.

Junior architect

Politecnico di Milano with ARS Progetti S.p.A., Rome

Aug 2023 – May 2024

Ethnographic research on housing typologies and morphological patterns in Chamanculo C (Maputo, Mozambique), with a focus on housing design processes for informal settlements, especially in the mitigation of the verticalization approach for slum up-grading projects.

Landscape Architect

Agence TER, Paris (France)

Oct 2020 – May 2021

Junior architect involved in the design of a public garden in Shenzhen, China, with a focus on the development and architectural detailing of landscape elements and garden structures.

Junior architect— Solar Decathlon in Dezhou, China

Coordinated by Prof. Qui Cui Song

College of Architecture and Urban Planning, Tongji University, China

Master of Science in Architecture and Urban Planning

Aug 2018

Design and construction of a sustainable housing prototype within the Solar Decathlon academic competition team.

Architectural Intern

Fabio Viti Architect, Siziano (Pavia)

Nov 2015 – Jan 2016

Internship focused on housing rehabilitation projects located in the province of Pavia and Milan.

Languages

Italian — Native

English — Excellent

French — Very good

Spanish — Very good

Portuguese — Very good

Chinese — Good