



## MIT Museum presents the utopian visions of Grazia Toderi and Désiré Despradelle

**September 28, 2016**

*Grazia Toderi and Désiré Despradelle: Spectacular Cities*

On view September 28, 2016–March 19, 2017

Kurtz Gallery for Photography, MIT Museum

Cambridge, MA—Despite careers separated by a century, architect Désiré Despradelle (1862–1912) and artist Grazia Toderi (b. 1963) share a conception of the city and urban architecture as spectacle. Presented together for the first time, Toderi's video diptych *Red Babel* (2006) and Despradelle's drawings for the *Beacon of Progress* (1893–1900) are utopian visions, both in dialogue with the Tower of Babel.

[\*Grazia Toderi and Désiré Despradelle: Spectacular Cities\*](#) is on view at the [MIT Museum](#) through March 19, 2017 in the Kurtz Gallery for Photography. The exhibition was organized by the MIT Museum and curated by Gary Van Zante, with the assistance of Jonathan Duval.

### **Grazia Toderi (b. Padua, 1963)**

Grazia Toderi is one of the most recognized visual artists working in Italy today. Trained as a painter at the Academy of Fine Arts in Bologna, she turned to media art in the 1990s. Like many artists raised on television imagery, she was fascinated by the potential of the video medium. Some of her early work attempted to capture the spectacle of global network

television broadcasts, such as the first moon landing, shared by millions of people simultaneously. Her interest in the spectacle of media culminated in *Red Babel*, an anamorphic projection that is her interpretation of the Tower of Babel myth.

Toderi gained critical attention in media art at the Venice Biennale, where she was awarded Italy's Golden Lion in 2009 for her installations. As well as being invited to participate in group exhibitions around the world, she has had solo exhibitions at venues in Europe, the United States and Australia. She lives and works in Milan and Turin.

### *Red Babel/Rosso Babele (2006)*

*Red Babel* is composed of two contiguous ovals that mimic human binocular vision and are also an homage to the planisphere, an ancient tradition of terrestrial and celestial mapping. Tower figures, one upright, the other inverted, rise and fall in a never-ending cycle. The lights of an apparently boundless urban space appear as a kind of swirling, glowing magma, while jets of light flare up and fade. Whether beacons or comets, the flares—like all of *Red Babel*'s imagery—are ambiguous. Terrestrial or celestial, they enigmatically suggest a duality like the Tower of Babel itself, which bridged the earthly and heavenly domains.

The myth of the Tower of Babel has captivated artists for centuries. The ultimate source for this subject matter is the reference in Genesis to “a tower whose top may reach into heaven.” The heavenly skyscraper was a provocative concept that allowed for great flights of artistic invention, most famously in the work of the sixteenth-century Netherlandish painter Peter Bruegel the Elder. In many conceptions of the Babel myth, the city that rose at the Tower's base became a utopian vision of the ideal city.

Toderi's interpretation of the Tower of Babel developed through dozens of preparatory drawings in the summer of 2005. She took from Bruegel the conical tower form, adding her own conception of an urban utopia by superimposing aerial still and video photography of actual nocturnal cityscapes. The resulting multilayered video diptych she called *Red Babel* after the predominant red hue of the sodium vapor streetlights of contemporary cities.

Red Babel has been exhibited at the Pavilion of Contemporary Art, Milan (2006); the Museum of Contemporary of Art, Tokyo (2008); the Serralves Foundation, Porto (2011); and the Hirshhorn Museum, Washington (2011). It is currently on permanent view in the Museum of Modern and Contemporary Art in Rovereto, Italy.

## **Constant Antoine Désiré Despradelle (Chaumont-sur-Yonne, France, 1862–Boston, Massachusetts, 1912)**

At his death in 1912, MIT Professor Constant Désiré Despradelle was recognized as one of the leading architects in the country and one of the profession's esteemed teachers of design. In his nineteen years at MIT he had a profound influence on the design of MIT's Cambridge campus and on Boston architecture through a partnership with Stephen Codman. His greatest achievement as a designer was the unbuilt Beacon of Progress (1893–1900), a spectacular expression of his aspirations as an architect and one of the most ambitious monuments of the nineteenth century.

Trained at the prestigious École de Beaux-Arts in Paris, which had been educating architects since the seventeenth century, Despradelle was acknowledged as a brilliant designer nearly from the moment he enrolled in 1882. Monumentality, order, careful detailing, and highly skilled presentation characterized even his earliest designs. As a student he won numerous awards including a competitive first prize for a tall office tower.

Despradelle came to the attention of MIT while in his first professional position as inspector of state buildings in Paris. The Institute recruited him in 1893 to teach architectural design. He joined the MIT faculty in what was the first and, at the time, one of only a small number of academic programs in architecture in the country. He brought to MIT not only the prestige that came with his École training, but also teaching methods that were a model for the new academic architectural programs springing up across the country, elements of which are still in use in pedagogy and practice today.

Much admired for his teaching, Despradelle was also an accomplished practitioner. His contributions to Boston architecture (with Codman) include the glazed terra-cotta Berkeley Building (1905) in Boston's Back Bay and the Peter Bent Brigham Hospital (1913) on Huntington Avenue, for which he

produced an innovative pavilion plan. He developed unbuilt plans for Harvard Library and the Boston Museum of Fine Arts, and his design for the MIT campus, although also unrealized, inspired the built plans (1913–16) of William Welles Bosworth.

### *The Beacon of Progress (1893–1900)*

One of Despradelle's earliest impressions of America was the Columbian Exposition in Chicago, which he visited shortly before arriving at MIT in 1893. The Chicago fair was a marvel: a showcase of technological progress in a vast campus of Beaux-Arts architecture that dazzled the eye. Most impressive was the electric illumination: the Exposition site on Lake Michigan was the most electrified place on Earth and a demonstration of the utopian promise of an electrified future.

Inspired by the spectacle of the Exposition, Despradelle conceived of a monument that would supplant the ephemeral fair and memorialize its achievements, while paying homage to the country that welcomed him as a young immigrant. Called the Beacon of Progress, his monument took the form of a 1,500-foot-high obelisk, taller than any existing structure and a fitting tribute, in his words, to the "glory of the American people." It was an over-the-top architectural image as ebullient as the "American spirit of advancement and ingenuity" that he admired and to which he dedicated the monument.

From 1893 to 1900, Despradelle produced dozens of drawings elaborating his design, which were widely exhibited. The project evolved to include a complex program of interior spaces with electrification as a rationale. At the apex of the tower was a beacon of light generated by powerful electric arc lamps engineered to be visible for 200 miles.

An occupied structure of this height was possible to achieve only with recent advances in construction technology. Despredelle designed a steel and concrete frame to lighten the building loads of his granite-faced shaft, adopting methods developed from the mid-1880s for tall office buildings in

American cities. As a designer and teacher he had been swept into these architectural developments that were occurring just as he arrived in America.

The final design drawings for the Beacon were exhibited at the Paris Salon of 1900. Sending competition drawings to France gave Despradelle an international platform to demonstrate his assimilation of American architectural innovations and his maturity as a designer, confirmed by a first medal in architecture and nearly universal praise. One critic observed that the Beacon was “the most ambitious architectural project ever devised in the brain of man since the Tower of Babel.” Uncompromising in its design, Despradelle’s tower could never be built, just as the Biblical skyscraper could never be completed.

### ***About the MIT Museum***

The MIT Museum’s mission is to engage the wider community with MIT’s science, technology and other areas of scholarship in ways that will best serve the nation and the world in the 21st century. The Museum features two floors filled with ongoing and changing exhibitions, currently with an emphasis on robotics, photography and holography, MIT history, and current MIT research. The Museum presents monthly programs that appeal to middle school students and older, and presents the annual Cambridge Science Festival in late April. [mitmuseum.mit.edu](http://mitmuseum.mit.edu)

### ***About the Arts at MIT***

The arts at MIT connect creative minds across disciplines and encourage a lifetime of exploration and self-discovery. They are rooted in experimentation, risk-taking and imaginative problem-solving. The arts strengthen MIT’s commitment to the aesthetic, human, and social dimensions of research and innovation. Artistic knowledge and creation exemplify our motto— mens et manus, mind and hand. The arts are essential to MIT’s mission to build a better society and meet the challenges of the 21st century. [arts.mit.edu](http://arts.mit.edu)

### ***Visitor Information:***

**MIT Museum**  
265 Massachusetts Avenue  
Central Square Cultural District  
Cambridge, MA 02139 USA  
Phone: **617-253-5927**  
<https://mitmuseum.mit.edu/>  
Open daily 10 a.m.–5 p.m. Closed major holidays.

**General admission: \$10.00 for adults; \$5.00 for youth under 18, students, seniors; free admission for MIT card holders and alumni. Discounts are listed online.**

**Parking: Metered street parking and area lots**  
**Public Transportation: Red Line "T" to Central Square or #1 bus**

***Press contacts:***

**Leah Talatinian, Communications Manager, Arts at MIT:**  
**617-253-5351 / [leaht@mit.edu](mailto:leaht@mit.edu)**  
**Tina McCarthy, Digital Communications Associate, MIT Museum:**  
**617-253-0783 / [tinam@mit.edu](mailto:tinam@mit.edu)**