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DEPARTMENT RESEARCH DAY



The Booklet

by Angeliki Sioli and Stavros Kousoulas

DEPARTMENT RESEARCH DAY

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by Angeliki Sioli and Stavros Kousoulas

Organized by English Unit and Research Committee

DEPARTMENT

LET'S
TALK
CONTENT

22.01
2026

**RESEARCH
DAY**

09:30 - 12:45
REFLAGE 1

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Let's Talk Content

In his short essay regarding the art of fiction, American-British author Henry James weaves together scientific and artistic creation. He argues that they both flourish and materialize “upon discussion, upon experiment, upon curiosity, upon variety of attempt, upon the exchange of views and the comparison of standpoints.”¹ For a discipline like architecture, who dwells strongly between science and art, but also between fictional and real, a statement like that exemplifies what all architectural researchers already tacitly know. The researchers of our department discuss with peers, experiment with methods and approaches, are curious in their inquiries and engagement with their subjects of investigations, try again and again and again, and exchange findings and standpoints with other colleagues, scientists, artists, practicing architects, societal stakeholders, governmental committees and spatial actors. The researchers in our department embody Henry James’ distilled observation in their daily research practices inside and very often outside the walls of BK.

The research day “Let’s Talk Content” turned its attention on what our department’s researchers already do and asked them questions regarding the personal, professional, societal, environmental and technological relevance of their work. In the same manner that we are simply unable to understand the anatomy of half a chicken², we consider all the aspects above as not only complementary, but also necessary in the pluralism of architectural thinking that they convey. Coming together to share their answers to these questions—in a spirit of collegiality, empathy and care—created a space where discussion, exchange, and constructive comparison bloomed, reminding us that “these things are fertilizing when they are frank and sincere.”³ As the philosopher William James, Henry’s notorious sibling, would put it, we need to act as if what we do makes a difference.⁴ That potential to make a difference is what this research day expressed; even more so since, as some of James’ philosophical disciples would claim, it was a potential that

developed transindividually: changing together by making a difference together. We hope that you, as a reader now, can share the sense of that collective charge.

¹ Walter Besant and Henry James, *The Art of Fiction* (Boston: Cupples, Upham and Company, 1885), 52.

² Gregory Bateson, „Lecture on Epistemology“, Recorded 1972, Internet Archive audio, <http://www.archive.org/details/GregoryBatesonOnEpistemology.Bateson,Gregory>

³ Besant and James, *The Art of Fiction*, 53.

⁴ William James, *The Will to Believe and Other Essays in Popular Philosophy*, ed. Frederick H. Burkhardt, Fredson Bowers, and Ignas K. Skrupskelis (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1979)



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QUESTIONS

PERSONAL & PROFESSIONAL

What motivates you in your research?

How do you engage with other actors and collectives, within and beyond the faculty or discipline itself?

What future do you see for your research and you as a researcher?

SOCIETAL & ENVIRONMENTAL

How do you approach the relationship between design and its environmental effects?

What do you consider the most pressing social concern in your research?

How do you address it from an architectural and design-oriented perspective?

CONCEPTUAL & TECHNOLOGICAL

How do you conceptually approach the relationship between technology and design?

How do theory and practice relate with each other in your research?

How do you define technology and its implications in your research?



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RESPONSES

I started as an artist and architect but learned about data analytics and visualisation in my PhD and Postdoc -where I used smartphone data to study human-nature interactions. The way that architects think about, and work with data is not the same as in other disciplines. We often integrate humanist and artistic perspectives to develop design solutions. Yet, this can result in architecture being isolated from larger, data-informed processes and foundational decisions concerning the built environment. To remain relevant, architects need to operationalise data in their practice. Advanced data theories and methods can help with this, they can also provide an interface for exchange with other disciplines. This interface is necessary for architects to unlock the power of physical buildings as transformative mechanisms for environmental benefit. As founder of Living Data Studies, I develop the design-by-data theories and methods that acknowledge architecture as a keystone discipline within living systems.

CHIARA PRADEL

My current research examines the movements of soil and construction materials in landscape and urban context, in the framework of a circular *baukultur*. Starting with direct observation of small-scale cases, and looking at the everyday, the research unfolds wider (including planetary) environmental implications and investigates their entanglements with time.

Since joining the Department of Architecture, my research process has been shaped by a plurality of practices of sharing questions, knowledge and objectives. In particular, I am part of the Testaccio Collective. Our work is also linked to other interdepartmental groups (such as the CBE Hub), finds exchange and inspiration in international research partnerships (Embodied Culture, Read. Adapt. Reuse), and extends beyond the academic sphere through collaboration with public institutions and municipalities.

A central objective for me is therefore to continue the poetic trajectory developed with Testaccio, in the framework of broader research networks. Participating in a collective research brings depth, ambition, and a radical thinking that nourish individual reflection, inspire commitment and prompt different forms of engagement. Among others modes, in my experience taking part in exhibitions hosted within schools of architecture, and within local or international institutions, has become an opportunity to develop a necessary dialogue with peers (at TU Delft or at UVA School of Architecture), and to articulate research aspects connected to sustainability ("It's About Time", Rotterdam Biennale of Architecture) or to forms of "natural intelligence" (Venice Architecture Biennale).

In such contexts, landscapes generated by processes of construction and deconstruction emerge as experimental heterotopias and as milieus in which technology, materials, and often overlooked ecologies intermingle. The ongoing research of our Collective on demolition sites (*De-Molire*), on spaces of material recovery (*Material Gardens*), and on infrastructural ground deposits within the landscape (*Monumental Grounds*, *The New Earth Arts*) on the one hand

critically raises questions about the presumed necessity of technological and social acceleration, and on the other hand pushes to move beyond orthodox design paradigms – overcoming, for example, the dichotomy between engineering and art, between intentional and non-intentional landscapes, and between human and non-human impact and agency – to make way for other practices to become central to the discourse.

Research, to me, lies in the joy of exploration, formulating the right questions and developing perspectives that generate new knowledge. It also offers the pleasure of writing and drawing and of discussing, with students, colleagues and other audiences, to understand how research resonates with broader societal challenges. My professional background and network form the foundation of my work and continue to guide my interest. At the university, I find a space for critical distance and reflection, often lacking in practice. This also drives my ambition to collaborate with partners across and outside academia. My goal is to consolidate Testaccio as research collective that positions the material dimensions of architectural culture as an interdisciplinary research field.

Sustainable building entails a paradigmatic shift that requires a rethinking of architecture as a discipline. It challenges the role of architect, the conditions of building, but also alters how we approach architectural history and education. Within Testaccio, I explore architecture as a cyclical process, studying the dynamic life of buildings through time. A recent project on demolition met attracted interest of municipalities and state organizations, and led to a Comenius grant proposal. New insights also emerge by looking at other building cultures. In India, for example, sustainable construction often grows from vernacular traditions and informal practices. During my sabbatical in Ahmedabad, I will research material recycling as alternatives to dominant European initiatives to sustainability.

As architectural theoretician Wilfried Wang argues, sustainability is a cultural problem. Being close to the humanities, architecture can connect technology to societal questions, by understanding construction as a cultural act. In the collaboration with the TU circular HUB and the international Embodied Culture network, Testaccio adds cultural and temporal perspectives to discussions on material reuse processes, technological innovation and societal transformation.

Research as Spatial Accountability

A property line on a map can look almost innocent: a thin technical mark, a notation in an administrative system. Yet such lines can determine who may remain, who must leave, what can be built, and which histories become visible. This tension is what motivates my research. Architecture matters not only as form, image, or design, but as a material record of power. I study how property regimes, administrative systems, cadastral surveys, and legal categories shape the built environment over time. What drives this work is the possibility of reading buildings, parcels, maps, archives, and urban transformations as evidence of broader social processes, especially those often hidden behind technical language.

The social urgency of my research lies in the fact that these processes do not remain in the past. Decisions about ownership, registration, and redevelopment continue to shape access to space, the preservation of memory, and the erasure of certain claims. I approach this concern architecturally by showing how abstract systems of governance become concrete spatial realities. Rather than treating property as an external context for architecture, I examine how it operates through architecture itself: through form, location, infrastructure, and the everyday organization of urban life.

Theory and practice are therefore inseparable in this work. Theory allows property and governance to be understood as spatial forces, while practice tests these ideas through historical reconstruction, visual analysis, and digital methods. Technology is understood broadly, not only as contemporary computation, but as any system that organizes reality and makes it actionable. A land registry, a cadastral survey, or a digital model are all technologies in this sense, as they determine what can be seen, measured, and claimed.

For me, research matters when it produces knowledge, but also, and especially, when it enables others to read, challenge, and transform the worlds they inhabit.

Research, for me, begins with curiosity and an urge to look deeper and unpack what a place conceals beyond the visible: to explore new ways to mediate and unravel its hidden layers. One site I return to repeatedly is the archive, whether institution-curated or ephemeral and informal. I am driven by the question of what happens to architectural knowledge when memory is no longer a room but a condition?

My work sits at the intersection of computational architectural history, immersive media, and data-driven design, and it is animated by a persistent unease with how the discipline handles its own past. I engage with a wide range of actors, from cultural institutions and media practitioners to software developers and communities directly affected by the sites I study. These collaborations are not instrumental; they shape the epistemological frame of the research itself. Collectively, we ask: whose memories get recorded, and in what form do they survive?

The most pressing social concern in my work is the fragility and selectivity of collective memory. The stories we tell about buildings, cities, and the environment are not neutral; they encode power, ideology, and selective imagination. Working across contexts ranging from the Dutch context to Israel-Palestine, I try to develop methods that make this selectivity visible and, where possible, correctable. Technologies of participatory mediation, such as augmented reality, Gaussian splatting, and linked open data, serve here as analytical instruments for re-situating architectural knowledge in space, time, and community, and it is precisely this entanglement of method and meaning that makes theory and practice inseparable in my work.

Looking forward, I see the field moving toward a relational ontology of the built environment, expressed through multi-scalar, computationally assembled documents that are open, interoperable, and critically framed. My ambition is to help build both the infrastructure and the theoretical language for that shift.

It's Never 'Just About'...

Architecture, like my own research, is never about 'just one thing'. It is never just about buildings, or the designs of buildings. It is never just about ideas that shaped those buildings, nor about the minds from which those ideas emerged. It is never just about the spatial, social, or historical contexts within which those minds lingered and unfolded. It is never just about form, type, style, movement, language, nor just about materials, technologies, techniques, function, users and clients, agents or actors, human or not. It is never just about frameworks, policies, treatises, regulations. It is never just about method, system, process. But above all, it is never just about theory, or practice.

Design and architecture, as material-discursive practices, are involved in the ways worlds, environments, publics, and forms of life are produced, reconfigured, remembered, extended, augmented, reduced, neglected, destroyed, forgotten. They participate in social, environmental and planetary transformations, and thus, are ethically implicated in these processes. This is what motivates me in my research: how certain realities are made visible, thinkable, inhabitable, contestable, felt, experienced.

In more concrete terms, the content of my research work develops this motivation by examining the conceptual, social, environmental, technological, and cosmological conditions through which architecture participates in worlding processes. The trajectories that I follow in my research gravitate towards theoretical, philosophical and conceptual frameworks, which allow me to approach architecture as the entanglement of meaning and matter.

This poses interesting problems that theory helps me to formulate, intensify and work through. Theory is not external to practice, nor is it 'just about' commentary or critique. It is a way to find better questions and produce concepts that open design toward other possible paths and horizons. Theory is a generative practice that, like design, requires the creativity of architectural thinking.

As a theorist, I express my research through writing, and as I see it, writing is not 'just about' academic research, but also about storytelling. It is a practice through which we explore how to repopulate our existing worlds with narratives for more life-affirming futures.



CONCEPTUAL & TECHNOLOGICAL

How do theory and practice relate with each other in your research?

How do you define technology and its implications in your research?

How do you conceptually approach the relationship between technology and design?

ISADORA AUBEL OLIVARES

At its core, research forces us to engage seriously with the people and communities at the center of our questions. It requires finding ways to cross boundaries, between disciplines, between individual and collective concerns, between insider and outsider knowledge. Part of that work is about communication: how we establish shared conventions that allow understanding across different contexts and actors. Drawing, for instance, is not just a technique but a language, and recognising it as such opens up what counts as rigorous inquiry. It can also challenge inherited assumptions. The polarisation we see in the world, the „them vs. us“, is present in academia too, in ideas about what is worth studying and what is not, who belongs and who doesn't. Questioning those boundaries is itself a form of contribution. At a conceptual level, what we do as researchers shapes how we define the tools we work with. There is an assumption that technology means machines, and that more sophisticated machines mean better solutions. But this way of thinking tends to overlook simpler, more direct forms of technology. And when we do that, we also lose sight of human agency: the capacity to act, to make, to intervene directly. How we define technology shapes what we consider a valid solution in design.

Research needs an audience

The Research Day asked us to talk about content. What we research, and why. What kept surfacing was a quieter question, the one I keep returning to: who is the research for?

Architecture rarely poses that question to itself. We measure research by publications, by citations, by the internal circuits in which it travels among colleagues. That measure is incomplete.

Research becomes consequential when it leaves the seminar room and finds a form that can address a student, a policymaker, a neighbour... It depends on the publics they bring. Content matters at three levels at once, and they are inseparable.

It matters disciplinarily. Architecture sits inside larger systems, and research is one of the few places these entanglements get examined with precision. There, theory and practice belong to the same motion.

It matters institutionally. A faculty that produces research without publics produces mainly itself. What it researches, and how it makes that research readable, shapes how the built environment is debated far beyond its walls.

It matters civically. The crises we study (housing, water, density, displacement, energy, etc.) are lived by people who do not open our journals. Design itself produces them: land, labour, maintenance, carbon, governance. Forming an audience for research is where knowledge becomes communicable and open to debate, and where it starts doing work in public.

We already have the tools. Drawing, mapping, editing, sequencing, staging, comparison: these are how we move research into public form. As technologies of address, they let research be argued.

If research matters on various levels, it is because content is never neutral. It chooses its audience. The question is whether we choose that audience deliberately, or by default. That is what I work toward.

Making the World a Bit More Beautiful Everyday

Research content only matters when it is of use to everyone. A personal adage I live by, when people ask *why* I do my job, is fairly simple: “to make the world a bit more beautiful every day.” When we as researchers also educate students, we prepare them, slowly and bit by bit, for that outside world. As the future designers and researchers of the built environment, they will carry that intention forward. This may sound like a cliché, but it is what I ultimately do this for: to make the world a bit more beautiful every day.

My research is intended to reach beyond my peers. I want to reach people who are disgusted by Disney and who adore it, people amazed by its physical existence or those who simply take it for granted: the same range of reactions any of us can have to our own city and built environment. Disney’s theme parks have attracted sustained scholarly attention in the social sciences and humanities for decades. What is largely missing, however, is sustained spatial analysis: reading these environments the way we read our own cities. That gap is precisely where my research intervenes, and that is precisely what can deepen our understanding of the current and future challenges of the built environment.

That ambition takes the form of an atlas: a tool whose content is for *everyone* who wants to engage with the built environment through a built environment most would never expect to find, but everybody knows about and has an opinion on: Disneyland.

Architectural Design Research through Knowledge Integration

Architectural research is driven by the belief that design is not only a professional practice but a mode of inquiry capable of producing situated, relational, and transferable knowledge. Central to this approach is 'knowledge integration': connecting academic design research with societal expertise through transdisciplinary collaboration. By engaging with students, researchers, policymakers, creative industries, and interdisciplinary teams, design becomes a shared language for collective problem-solving.

Drawing on 'mobility' as both my fascination and an integrative design tool, the research explores co-creation, participation, and transdisciplinary collaboration in architecture. It addresses pressing societal and environmental challenges by reframing architecture as an integrative discipline capable of mediating complexity. Through research-based design studios, collaborative methods, **valorization as a 'way of working'**, and funding structures, research findings are translated directly into societal and professional practice. Projects such as *CARB HUB*¹ and *WALK-IN*² connect education, research, industry, and society. Here, architecture is understood not merely in terms of physical outputs but also in its capacity to foster engagement, communication, and collaboration across disciplines and sectors. *Building Narratives*³ further demonstrates how design can operate as a communication engine, enabling collective action and connecting diverse perspectives, aligning with the 'Activating Design' theme within the Complex Projects group.

Conceptually, technology, particularly data, artificial intelligence, visualization, and simulation, is approached as an active design material rather than a passive instrument. Design provides the spatial and human-centered thinking necessary to reinterpret these technologies meaningfully, reinforcing architecture's role as a transformative discipline shaping future societal change. These ideas are further explored through the session 'Reframing Practice' at

the Design Research Society Conference⁴, which positions architecture and urban design within broader Design Research debates and examines how practice itself can operate as a form of research and societal engagement.

¹ CARB-HUB: Climate-Adaptive Resilient and Balanced Mobility Hubs. NWO-Grant ID: <https://doi.org/10.61686/SBREX58302>

² WALK-IN (acronym): Widening sustAinable mobiLiTy networKs: Impact on Nodes. GOCI.KIEM.01.045

³ Building Narratives Book. NWO-Grant ID: <https://doi.org/10.61686/KQQVX21096>

⁴ Design Research Society Conference 2026: <https://drs2026.thedrs.org/4-2-reframing-practice>

LET'S TALK CONTENT

22.01.2026

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Image Research Day,
22.01.2026

'When mineral stones are cut, their sections contain drawings.' Ever since writing this first line for the paper *Time Draws the Stone* (presented at the Drawing Matter archive in 2023) I have found myself returning to it. It encapsulates the content, approach and ambition of my research in architecture and guides me in expressing these – this time in the context of our departmental research day.

Mineral stone – as seen in the Drawing Matter collection of John Ruskin – provides a material lens to architecture. Reading the stone in section brings architectural actions – the production of a section – together with geological and environmental matter. The stone's image, composed of brecciations and lines formed under enduring forces, highlights how architectural ideas affect existing environments. The materiality of the built and the material of the environment are inextricably linked with no hierarchical distinction. Consequently, every section drawing, model, or visualization provides instructions with physical impact beyond the building itself. But to what extent are architects equipped to express the affective relationship between architectural project and environmental dynamics? My research consequently focuses on the expression of these material encounters.

To develop the sensible and logical knowledge about how materials touch, gather, and transform through architectural action, I engage with them directly. Understanding architecture through the material means that modeling becomes a practice of following matter and accepting that material theorizes itself; as exemplified by the evolutionary section drawings found in stones. A model is an expression of a material and embodied thinking process which dissolves the separation of theory and practice. As Karen Barad writes: 'Theorizing, a form of experimenting, is about being in touch.' Ultimately, this 'being in touch' implies that design and technology cannot be isolated – neither from each other nor from a situated perspective.

Infrastructures, Fragmented Urban Spaces, and Architectural Inquiry

My contribution to the discussion examines the relationship between mobility infrastructures, particularly railways, and urban transformation from an architectural perspective. Railways have historically played a fundamental role in shaping cities and continue to structure contemporary urban development. At the same time, they often function as physical barriers, producing fragmented urban conditions and residual spaces frequently perceived as disconnected, inaccessible, or inadequate. Yet these infrastructures are nowadays deeply embedded within urban environments and occupy strategic locations with significant potential for future transformation. Their surrounding urban contexts are characterized by layered constructions, overlapping systems, and spatial conditions that have emerged through multiple decision-making processes involving different stakeholders, disciplines, projects, and institutional frameworks. This complexity has led me to increasingly engage with other fields of knowledge, their methodologies, and the ways in which they intersect with architecture.

As infrastructures lay the groundwork for urban development, architecture can play a crucial role not only in mediating between actors and disciplines, but also in identifying the spatial opportunities through which design can generate new relationships and configurations. This perspective raises broader questions about the role of architecture in relation to other areas of knowledge and about the capacity of design to operate across heterogeneous systems and scales. It also calls for reflection on intervention strategies and on the role of design in addressing complex urban conditions shaped by multiple networks and competing interests. In this framework design should not be approached simply as a problem-solving activity aimed at producing a final result, but also as a vehicle for inquiry and knowledge production.

Design becomes an experimental process through which hypotheses, concepts, and spatial strategies are developed and tested, strengthening architecture as a research practice capable of connecting diverse issues, fostering creativity, and opening pathways toward innovation.

Play!

The publication *PLAY! A Cultural Perspective on Design of Playgrounds*, which I co-authored with Janna Bystrykh, is the outcome of research into the current state of public urban playgrounds, through the lens of Rotterdam and over 250 playgrounds across the city. Through fieldwork and conversations with playground designers, environmental experts, urban thinkers, and the municipal planning, construction, and maintenance team, we aimed to gain insight into the systems and current thinking behind spaces that are widespread and common, yet little discussed.

Urban playgrounds, including skateparks and urban sports areas, form a vast, intricate spatial and social network. Increasingly influenced by standards and regulations, and under growing pressure in the limited public space of densifying cities, they risk fading into the background of urban design and thinking—despite their vital role in public life, social interaction, and the growing-up of urban youth, and their environmental potential as extensive network of open space. By capturing the current environment of play in a photo documentation, and bringing to the fore ambitions, discussions, and inspiring initiatives we came across, the book aims to contribute to new conversations about playgrounds—ranging from their role in climate mitigation strategies to their place in children’s encounter with nature and design.

Looking closely at material, construction, and maintenance systems—where we discovered for example the municipal playground depot, where storage, repair, and relocation of used play equipment is organized—a technical lens led to findings with relevance to design. While at the moment refurbished equipment from the depot is mostly used for incidental replacement of broken pieces, it could be designed with on a much larger scale and with greater intention.

STEFANO MILANI

My research investigates architectural drawing within the broader ambition of formulating a theory of architectural design - an ambition that is simultaneously productive and problematic. It is productive because it challenges the conventional approaches and enables the imagination of new territories for the architectural project; problematic because many of the issues shaping architecture today appear external to the discipline itself, leaving architectural thought without a clearly defined critical ground.

Rather than understanding drawing through a romanticised or purely representational lens, I am interested in its relationship to language and notational systems, and more generally in the possibility of considering drawing as a form of thought in itself. Within this perspective, drawing is therefore not only an instrument through which architecture is communicated or designed, but also a specific medium of theoretical speculation capable of producing architectural knowledge.

I am particularly interested in how drawing can operate with relative autonomy, constructing an internal architectural discourse while simultaneously questioning its limits. This view inevitably raises the danger that architectural thought becomes detached from the social and political realities it claims to address. Yet it is precisely this tension that makes the question urgent today, without alternatives.

The societal problems informing contemporary architectural discourse and the “opportunities” offered by computational intelligence call for a profound reshaping of theories, techniques, and the ways architects work, in search of better places where a more balanced and happier society can live. These totalising issues cannot, in my view, be addressed directly by architecture alone, nor resolved within a strictly disciplinary framework. Yet this awareness also implies that they must first be tentatively reformulated - rewritten and redrawn - critically tested beyond rhetoric, and verified within the disciplinary domain of architecture itself through the analytical and creative operations of what we call the project.

Interest Follows Issue

Despite, or maybe thanks to, all recent digital developments, producing new, original content in written form may still be the most important activity to doing research. What motivates me in research often relates to the processes of writing and publishing: deciding on submitting for a new Call for Papers, choosing a journal for a new article idea, letting new thoughts mature while writing, even registering output in Pure and other scholarly portals in the very end. The latter is not some annoying task after the hard work of generating new output. Is it not akin to a birth registration at the municipal office? Once registered, the existence of something new becomes official, making it easier to share with the whole world. That also motivates me in research: the societal duty, as an employee of a public knowledge institute, of showing what you actually produced at the end of the day.

It also implies we should not just research and write about whatever we like anymore, not in the year 2026, with all major challenges around us. Let's put our intellectual interests in service of broader societal issues—health, environmental change, digitalization, democracy—many of which already profoundly link to work in our department. Our education may further change as a result: while students still enroll for a certain discipline in our faculty today, could they in a few decades not enroll in study tracks revolving around a specific societal issue? The relevance of the architectural canon would change as a result too. I once had a student in my History Lectures class saying 'Mies van der Rohe? I don't know her [sic]', after which this student nevertheless went on to develop solid research ideas on housing shortage, inspired by Mies' 'Industrialized building' manifesto. Less modernist aesthetics, more building industry innovation: let's discuss which societal issue we're tackling today, and our research interests will naturally follow.



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CONCEPTUAL & TECHNOLOGICAL

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