

The Architectural Review

Architectural reconstruction of international crimes

9 November, 2016 By Zaira Magliozzi



Contemporary conflicts take place mostly within urban areas, this means destruction of homes, infrastructures and entire neighbourhoods. When a city becomes the target, the civilians die in their own house, hit by fragments of their home. Then when everything is done, all these pieces become evidences and clues, the most important means to retrace what happened. Moreover, many violations are now caught on camera and are made available almost instantly on the web. But without a serious, precise and scientific interpretation, all these data are useless.

From this simple and significant idea Eyal Weizman, in 2010, founded Forensic Architecture, a research agency based at Goldsmiths, University of London, for reconstructing scenes of violence that occurred within spatial artefacts and environments. Weizman, who is an architect, Professor of Spatial and Visual Cultures and director of the Centre for Research Architecture at Goldsmiths, University of London, undertakes advanced architectural and media research on behalf of international prosecutors, human rights organisations, as well as political and environmental justice groups. The team includes a group of architects, scholars, filmmakers, designers, lawyers and scientists that work together to produce and present architectural evidence – buildings and larger environments and their media representations.



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'Architecture is fundamental to understand the different ways in which urban violence explodes,' explains Weizman. According to him, architectural analysis is crucial because it enables new insights into the context and conduct of urban conflicts. And this is the focus of Forensic Architecture, that is also an emergent field developed at Goldsmiths by Weizman, to provide unique and decisive evidence about incidents that other methods cannot engage with.

About this emergent discipline, its peculiarities, its potential and its methods, Eyal Weizman held a lecture at the British School at Rome last May. The conference, titled *Only the Criminal can Solve the Crime*, is the fifth event of the 'Meeting Architecture: Fragments' programme curated by Marina Engel. During his speech, Weizman outlined how new disciplines merge architecture, science and informatics using digital tools and architectural knowhow to reveal what's behind the hundreds of tragical facts in conflict zones.

His work with the Forensic Architecture team includes the air strike of Atimah in Syria (March 2015), Black Friday: the war operations in Rafah, Gaza (August 2014) in collaboration with Amnesty International, and the many drone strikes in Pakistan, Gaza and Yemen. And for the latter they produced a very detailed study, the first of its kind because one of the most under-researched aspects of drone warfare has been the spatial, that is, the territorial, urban and architectural dimensions of these campaigns. Furthermore, the latest research focuses on plume analysis, the study of the clouds created when bombs are dropped in urban areas. They are not all the same. Each plume has a distinct shape and each tells a specific story.



Forensic architecture exhibition at the Venice Biennale

Forensic Architecture's exhibition at the Giardini for Aravena's Venice Biennale, analysing the effect of drone strikes on concrete and human flesh

An emergent topic is also put on the spot by Alejandro Aravena in his Venice Architecture Biennale (until 27 November). At the Central Pavilion, in the Giardini, Weizman's team analyses the US army drone strike held on 30 March 2012 that hit the market in Miranshah, Pakistan. A video recorded the building in which the people were killed. Reconstructing the room, 1:1 scale, in Venice, Forensic Architecture marked every trace left by the blast, thus establishing the location of the explosion and the places where people were killed. This model also proves that the damage was provoked by an architectural missile capable of hitting specific floors of a building.

'To use architecture as a mean of understanding', as suggested by Weizman during his lecture in Rome, can be a powerful approach that changes the way we all see what is going on in those warfare areas, also when the need to rebuild and regenerate an urban area is urgent. And this is just the beginning of a very promising journey that can help to better understand causes and effects of international conflicts. Moreover, it represents a new dimension of architecture that, working together with other scientific disciplines, regains its original goal to enhance people's lives, in those areas where there is a real need.

The British School at Rome programme

Meeting Architecture – Fragments

'FRAGMENTS considers how emotions are stirred, memories evoked and ideologies shaped by ruins, buildings and their contents. To this end, the programme focuses on the concept of the fragment, defined as an urban ruin, which may be a house and its remaining contents or may be personal relics, images, photographs and other documents. When the meanings and memories we attach to our experiences are so closely tied to the material, how are individuals, ethnic groups and nations able to rebuild their identities and histories in the face of destruction?

In an age of increasing displacement, architects and visual artists are invited, along with historians and archaeologists, to examine and to reassemble such fragments to offer a contribution to the reconstruction of personal or collective identities in zones of present or of past conflict.'

Marina Engel

Calendar

In 2016-17, FRAGMENTS will concentrate on eastern and central Europe with the participation of: Jean-Louis Cohen, Miroslaw Balka, Joseph Rykwert, Grzegorz Piątek, Helen Walasek and Dragana Zarevac.

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With the support of:

Allford Hall Monaghan Morris, Bennetts Associates, Bryan Guinness Charitable Trust, Cochemé Charitable Trust, John S Cohen Foundation, Wilkinson Eyre