Translating Architecture into Images
Problematics of Architecture on Display

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Abstract   Considering the status of image that architecture representation predominantly assumes when subjected to an act of display, this paper aims not only to analyse the cultural circumstances for the transfiguration of architecture into images in the context of the architectural exhibition, but also to explore the conceptual and pragmatic consequences of this visual translation. Expanding from this research frame, this study will develop a critical discourse around the strategies of mediating and creating architectural culture through images, while also serving as a theoretical foundation to propose methods to resituate architecture in the exhibition.

Keywords   Architecture exhibition. Architecture representation. Architecture theory. Image theory. Exhibition studies. Curatorial studies.

Summary   1 Dealing with Absence. – 2 From Architecture to Representations. – 3 From Representations to Images. – 4 Paradigms of Visual Objectification. – 5 Disciplinary Problematics Derived from Architectural Images on Display. – 6 Hypotheses to Resituate Architecture in the Space of the Exhibition.

1 Dealing with Absence

The absence of architecture from the space of its display is the intrinsic, haunting premise of the exhibition of architecture. The problem of transforming architectural space into an object suitable for the canons of display proper to the exhibition, as well as the endeavours to obtain this metamorphosis from built object to exhibited object, can be read, historically, as the conceptual foundation myth of the contemporary reflection around the exhibition of architecture. Of the many conceptual and operational paradoxes that characterise the exhibition of architecture (Arrhenius et al. 2014; Pelkonen et al. 2015), the provocative problematics of transfer and adapt architecture into the display space generate a theoretical and practical conundrum of difficult resolution, especially if the primary interest is not focused on shifting entirely from the act of exhibition to the act of building *tout-court*.[1] The issue of having to build a display of architecture, instead of simply constructing or relocating architecture in the space of the exhibition, routinely generates challenging curatorial and installation initiatives, which have to confront directly the surreal necessity of *spatialising* and *objectifying* architecture space in order to manifest and visualise it inside the context of the exhibition – a circumstance that challenges a univocal usage of the medium of display:

> Because of its size and situation, the architectural exhibit encroaches on the territory of social and relational art, installation, site-specific work and, of course, architecture itself. Indeed, a productive way to define the architectural exhibit is as an anatomically incorrect version of all these practices, one that uses its minor physical distinctions (often hard to see hiding under cover of outward appearances) as a means of combining features of them all. (Lavin 2010, 9)

This difficulty in making architecture the subject of a display act might even seem ironic, if we consider the inherent 'exhibitionism' manifested naturally by architecture (Di Carlo 2010; Van Gerrewey, Bekaert, Patteeuw 2012) and its ability to expose itself spontaneously in the experience of its users; or if we examine the willingness of architects to intend, and not accidentally, architecture as an agent of display of architectural ideas and forms, and thus an exhibitionist generator of architectural language. To a certain extent, the act of exhibiting archi-

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1 Expanding from this statement, critical reflections can be produced around the idea of architectures temporary created for exhibition purposes, and exploring if their ontological status should be considered more tangent to impermanent architecture or spatial artistic installations, and thus if the verb 'to build' could be legitimately be applied to them.

tecture might even be considered a redundant operation,[2] a tentative to induce an artificial, *in vitro* recreation of a behaviour that can more naturally be observed in and performed by architecture itself outside the environment of the exhibition, without the mediation of any display tool except the ones already inherent to the discipline itself.

Even so, the current proliferation of exhibitions related to architecture, as well as the increasing production of spaces, institutional or para-institutional, dedicated to the display architecture (Steierhoffer 2012), tend to point in the direction that the challenge of displacing architecture into the space of display is a popular experiment to be undertaken.

Fundamental then, to understand the consequences of this status alteration of architectural objects from built entities to displayed objects, is analysing the strategies employed to adapt architecture to the condition of the exhibition.

2   From Architecture to Representations

In order to fill the spatial vacancy of architecture from the exhibition and to differentiate 'architecture-that-is-displayed' from 'architecture-that-displays' (so to say, the material space of the gallery where the exhibition is articulated with its collateral installation structures, as well as the architectural macro-system of the hosting cultural institution), architecture is generally presented in the exhibition as virtuality. Since architecture can't autonomously fit inside the exhibition frame,[3] it is necessary to simulate its presence with stratagems and apparatuses that substitute themselves to architecture and thus become the true objects of the act of display. Considering the fact that architecture, as a tridimensional ensemble of relationships within space, needs to be somehow reified to be visualised in the exhibition and that it also necessitates an objectual reference to be exposed, architecture display happens *by proxy*.

The most common exhibition techniques thus employ surrogating instruments and replacement devices that intercede and mediate for architecture at the moment of its introduction in the realm of exhibition. This structure of compensating devices materialise and conjure up architecture working as architectural *representation*s, as Sylvia Lavin writes:

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2   To this analysis should also be added the intriguing paradox of the urge to exhibit architecture, the public art *par excellence*, in order to 'make it public', as it is expressed and analysed in Lipstadt 1989.

3   For the pragmatic and conceptual uncomfortableness of architecture in the space of display, see Pelkonen et al. 2015.

> today's architectural exhibition constitutes a special case within the spectrum of experience, where the world as such (fully three-dimensional and immersive as quotidian life is generally thought to be) and the world as culture (driven by representation and other artifices from which three-dimensionality and immersion are now also expected) become anatomically isomorphic with one another. (Lavin 2010, 9)

In the context of the exhibition, architecture is therefore manifested through a heterogeneous array of multimedia and mixed media objects that describe, illustrate, document and thus narrate architecture, allowing it to be absorbed into the paradigms of display. Exhibited architecture is, then, an aggregation of representations that speaks about and for it.

To replace architecture, architectural exhibition makes use of items connected with the practices of producing, visualising and recording architecture[4] and recontextualises them in a procedure not unlike the conceptual operation of Duchamp, transfiguring them from factual materialisations of architectural work to displayable objects (Cohen 2010). Architecture exhibition thus, instead of bringing the architecture to the display space, adapt for exposition the residual of its making and the traces of its documentation: the focus of the exhibition then shifts from architecture itself to be attributed to its representations. Alienated from the building process,[5] drawings, models, graphics, photography and projectual or documentary videos lose their role as productive allies of the architectural practice to become instead vehicles to primarily show architecture in the space of display. Consequentially to this decontextualisation, architecture representations assume a new, autonomous condition as aesthetic products and enter

> into the world of architectural culture, achieving, either permanently or momentarily, the status of (relatively) independent cultural goods. (Lipstadt 1989, 111)

Employing Baudrillard terminology to the context of architectural exhibition curation, it is possible to define displayed architectur-

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4 In this paper, the term 'architectural representation' is used to encompass both architectural 'representation' (general representation of architecture created by different professional actors inside and outside the architectural discipline) and 'figuration' (specifically related to the activity of architect-generated representation). For a more complete enucleation on the difference between these definitions, see Lipstadt 1989, 110-11.

5 To expand further on the historical and conceptual consequences of the "displacement of objects and their constituting elements from their site-specific location or from the architect's studio" (Cohen 2010, 52), especially on their derived *unheimlich* qualities, see Cohen 2010; Forster 2010.

al representation as "simulacra" (Baudrillard 1994): objects that, in the absence of their material referent, which is situated outside the display space, following a principle of equivalence, serve as a substitution for the missing presence of architecture and as necessary, mitigating embodiments of its otherwise un-relatable materiality.

Stripped of its corporeality, architecture needs to at least be visualised in order to achieve the possibility to be displayed. Therefore, representational simulacra, which work to vicariously evoke architecture through surrogates, are not only assigned the task of exorcising the extravagant alterity of architecture from the space of display but also, more specifically, of producing an experienceable and apprehensible 'image' of it.

3 From Representations to Images

The exhibition of images of architecture is "central for the conceptualisation of architectural form and its communication to others" (Lipstadt 1989, 130), which is the most customary and essential objective of the display of architecture. Representations work as a visual support structure that situates architecture into the space of display; there, architecture's atmosphere, performativity and interactiveness are transposed and distilled into a system[6] of spatially organised images where

> the relationship between image and represented object is not direct, but mediated by the relationship among the images; and it is these latter relationships, binding the images together into larger entities, that structure the subject of architectural representation as a whole. (Blau, Kaufman 1989, 14)

At the moment of exhibition, it is not specifically the objectual quality of architectures representations that counts, but rather their capacity to deliver a simulation of architectural presence through a predominant visual methodology: simulacra use their power as im-

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6 Due to their nature and function, architectural representations are partial and rarely synthetical. Each of them contributes to providing a specific perspective or an aspect of their referent, formulating harmonically multiple alternative solutions to the question of the depiction of architecture; yet, they encounter difficulties embodying the totality of the phenomenon of the built object. For this reason, architecture representations are entities that rarely work autonomously: to perform their full potential and succeed in effectively synthesising and portraying the constructive and experiential complexity of the built object, they need to be part of an organised visual system of collaborative interrelation to produce meaning. For an in-depth analysis of the organisation of architectural representations in significant systems and series in the context of the exhibition, see Blau, Kaufman 1989, 13-14; Cohen 2010, 51.

ages to summon a mirage of architecture, 'figuring' it into existence for the sake of display.

From a semantic perspective then, exhibiting architecture can be described as the complex linguistic performance of the 'translation'[7] or 'paraphrase' of architecture into a space of display operated through images. In the exhibition, the materiality, the concreteness, and the interactivity of the built object are converted into a series of images that develops a visual discourse about architecture into the space of display. From a certain point of view, this operation can be defined also as an inverted, and thus eminently visual, *ekphrasis*: a conceptually charged, rhetorically infused commentary on a material object developed primarily using images.

In the architecture exhibition, it is the status of image of the architectural representation that provides not only the access, but the way to reconstruct the meaning and form of the represented object. Essentially, even if we can agree that the devices used to represent architecture can be considered as objects, sometimes even as objects demonstrating an enviable degree of spatiality, it is also possible to argue that in the display space they are, however, generally employed and presented in their status of images, and that their visual qualities are emphasized as dominant. Therefore, exhibiting architecture triggers a process where images come to stand for architecture, combining both its conceptual premises and its material essence in a solely visual manifestation. Architecture is thus exposed through the employment of a methodological *synecdoche*, in which it is primarily the visual quality of its representations that concurs to symbolise the atmospheric, contextual and interactive experience of space in multi-sensory materiality: the image accounts for the whole, global complexity of architecture.

As a result, it is possible to argue that, when on display, architecture is routinely the subject of a process of 'visual objectification': by negating the necessity of architectural representations to be acknowledged and to operate as objects, they are thus reduced to images.

4 Paradigms of Visual Objectification

This metamorphosis of architectural representations into images happens specifically for reasons deeply embedded into the mechanism of the exhibition itself. The functional paradigms of display not

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7 The idea of translating architecture into images is used here with a specific intention, since it is considered important to highlight how a fundamental conversion of architecture from the language of spatiality and to that of visuality is enacted and developed in the space of display.

only enhance and exacerbate the unavoidable effect of the predominantly visual aestheticisation of architectural representation in the exhibition, but also encourage the transition from representational objects to architectural images for specific conceptual motivations.

To begin with, it is fundamental to remember that the methods of exhibiting architecture profoundly interiorise and adopt the display and curatorial strategies employed for the exhibition of art objects.[8] Historically, during the troubled process that sanctioned the access of architecture in the ritualised space of display, while seeking methods to legitimise itself in the eyes of humanistic culture, architecture was indeed determined to prove that its productions could behave like artworks.

On the one hand, it was specifically the artistic institution that demanded this accommodation of status to grant architecture a place inside the display frame. The main intention of the institution was here to employ the canonical display system for artistic products to domesticate and alleviate the traumatic and shocking introduction of the alien presence of architecture in the traditional space dedicated to art (in this context, still mostly, yet increasingly hesitantly, singular). Harnessed into place by the 'legitimate' methods of articulating artistic discourse in the display space, which incidentally also shielded the institution from the critical urgency of having to reflect, rethink or expand their outdated approaches to exhibition, architecture could be more easily metabolised into the realm of aesthetic objects (Urbach 2010, 13).

On the other hand, also architectural professionals advocated for the extensive adoption of the traditional methods of artistic display, which in their hands became instead a methodological propagandistic tool, functional to vouch and assert the status of architecture as a legitimate fine art, as well as an instrument to emancipate conceptually their practice, conferring "to a manual activity the status of a liberal art" (Lipstadt 1989, 109).

In the architectural exhibition, architecture has to simulate to be an art object in order to be considered a vessel of artistic quality: the only characteristic that counted in the still conservative display logic of the exhibition. Therefore, isolating models on pedestals and encapsulating them under glass vitrines as statues, as well as the strategy to frame architectural drawings, photographs and similar declinations of architectural documentation like paintings. Therefore, isolating models on pedestals and encapsulating them under glass vitrines as statues, as well as the strategy to frame architectural drawings,

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8 The two systems seem to evolve in parallel: as artistic curation starts to favour display methods that valorise performativity, environmentality and interaction, so the display of architecture also regains and restores the notion of spatiality and relational experience.

photographs, and similar declinations of architectural documentation like paintings, became familiar habits of display behaviour generically employed to upgrade architecture into the realm of art objects and in the esteem of the cultural institution. It is important to note here how all these methodologies of display insist specifically on the necessity to perceive and read the architectural representation predominantly as a visual manifestation, since that was the perception most commonly associated with the fruition of the object equipped with inherent artistic qualities. As a result, even if these strategies of exhibition certainly facilitated and accelerated the acceptance of architecture representations as artworks (Lipstadt 1989), they also invited for a merely visual acknowledgement and consumption of their specificities (Rubin 2020).

As a further commentary on this subject, it is also important to add the not-negligible aspect that the institutionalised behaviours required by the coded context of display rarely encourage proactive, not hetero-directed interaction with the exhibited objects, preferring instead a heavily mediated systems of approaches that desirably support the acts of aesthetic contemplation, educational metabolisation and visual enjoyment. These paradigms of prophylactic approach, which discourage participation and interaction, or simply a more inclusive sensorial approach to the artistic object, when applied to the architectural representation, ultimately and definitely foment the endemic detachment of the architectural object from its objectuality to propose instead the straightforward availability of visual consumption to the public.

To this situation should be added that the mediating strategies employed by the architectural exhibition, which tends, in order to attune with aesthetic necessity, to organise the objects into spatial narrations following techniques of visual rhyming, juxtaposition and comparison, nurture sometimes a formalistic approach that enhances the strictly visual interpretation of architecture representations. These choices of display are also used, in a non-neutral fashion, to valorise the 'artistic potential' of the architectural representations, thus subtly encouraging and suggesting a predominantly apprehension of architectural representations at the epidermal level of predominantly aesthetic manifestations.

To further complicate the situation created by the adoption of the mechanisms of artistic display, it should also be considered the influence played on the identification of the architectural representations with images by the 'functional illiteracy' of the average publics concerning the decoding of architectural representations[9] – an

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[9]   To further expand these thematics and other notions concerning the 'true' accessibility and democratic fruition of architectural exhibitions, see Rubin 2020.

interpretative limit of the specificities of the language of architectural representation that needs to be attributed mostly to the lacking efforts from the educational system to integrate efficient methods of introduction to architectural culture than to an actual individual resistance imputable to the public. This lack of hermeneutic and interpretative means often confines, for the 'non initiated', the experience of exhibited architecture into a superficial visual reading of architectural simulacra as a succession of images and forms, more or less imbued or evoking aesthetic and artistic references: an attitude which is sometimes, as it was mentioned above, also legitimated and approved by the cultural institution itself.

5 Disciplinary Problematics Derived from Architectural Images on Display

Even if it is not the intention here to define or promote the experience of architecture through images as a secondary or inessential conceptual encounter, it is necessary to underline in this context that this focalisation of architecture representation on predominant visuality, which is a theoretical as well as pragmatic act, is not without an impact: not only on the construction of the relationship between the public and architecture but also on the development of the architectural discipline itself.

The more evident consequence, employing Benjamin terminology, is the loss of the 'aura'[10] of architecture in its displayed images. The capacity to produce atmosphere, as well as architecture sense of space and its potential for interaction, is lost when transferred and adapted to the exhibition space (Blau 2010, 20; Urbach 2010, 13). Losing the possibility to be experienced as a three-dimensional complexity, architecture on display converts into a kind of *machine celibataire*, a decontextualised mechanism deviating from its purpose and necessitating to develop new approaches to generate signification. Exhibited architecture thus, instead of creating a spatial event or producing a tridimensional experience, has to concentrate on generating a conceptual discourse and construct a new status for itself: architectural images then become a medium for propagating and developing architectural discourse and culture, documenting the discipline and theorising and conceptualising its problematics (Blau 1998; Cohen 2010). From this perspective, this approach can be interpreted as a method employed by the architectural representation to resist its complete

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10   For aura, it is meant here that "the specificity and singularity of architecture lay [...] in its identity as large-scale, three-dimensional, inhabitable materiality" (Lipstadt 1989, 109).

identification with the *eidolon*. Refusing to act uniquely as a mere *escamotage* for display, architectural representation reinvents itself as a tool for architecture to depict disciplinary ideas, meta-reflect on itself and communicate its purposes. The loss of the 'aura' is then not forcibly an exclusively depauperating consequence, since it enables the architectural discipline to conceptualise and interpret its production. Yet it should be highlighted that this nevertheless contributes not only to propose and advertise a radically expanded definition of architectural work and products, thus refocusing the discipline on a more abstract level of production and on a different interpretation of the acts of building and constructing,[11] but also to foster an interpretation of architecture production farther and farther divorced from its built results.

Directly stemming from this first problematic of focussing the exhibition on architectural images, it should indeed be said that, by privileging the display of images created during the process of

> imagining, producing, and recording architecture, the exhibition inevitably shifts the focus from finished object to process, from built work to idea, from the physical properties of the building to its conception and critical reception. (Blau 2010, 20)

The exhibition used as a visualisation of theories reinforces the idea of the visual domain as the main realm for the conceptualisation and theorisation of architecture. Momentarily putting aside the contemporary crisis of architecture theory and criticism, it can be said that today, for this very reason, the exhibition and its visual apparatus have become the main medium for architecture reflection and strategic theorisation, thus assigning to architectural images a significant and crucial role in the development of the conceptual reasoning around the discipline (Blau 1998; Lavin 2010). To be even more specific, exhibiting images of architecture is becoming a manifestation of architectural practice in itself, thus configuring the moment of display "as both a means of consuming and producing work" (Lavin 2010, 7).

Another consequence, which derives this time from the necessity for architecture representation to adapt to the artistic and museological codes of display and presentation, is the museification and commodification of architecture through its images (Cohen 2010; Rubin 2020).

Programmatically, entering the exhibition space and becoming an image, architecture validated itself as an art, thus compensating

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11 To expand on the contemporary shift in the concept of 'architectural work' derived from the practice of exhibition, see Lavin 2010.

a historical identitarian crisis which now seems quite absurd to architecture theorists and practitioners, but that nevertheless marked dramatically the development of the discipline (Lipstadt 1989). Yet, to do so, architectural representations

> were sublimated into the conventions of exhibiting art in order to be granted access to the institution. […] Architecture was welcomed in the museum gallery so long as it agreed to these, or similar, representational conventions and declined, quite simply, to be architecture. (Urbach 2010, 10)

Through this process, which alienates architecture representation from the archive and more praxis-oriented spaces, architecture became the victim of a process of aestheticisation and 'artistification' (Rubin 2020), which contributed to turning, in a fetishistic way, the architectural object into an art object: a medium to be collected and exhibited or, even more problematically, another mediatic commodity in the system of consumer culture (Cohen 2010; Lavin 2010; Urbach 2010).

In addition, the exhibition of architectural images "substitutes the absence of the architectural work through a representation of its maker creative process" (Lavin 2010, 10), "loaded with authorial intent" (Rubin 2020, 19), reinforcing in this way the anachronistic notion of authorship, and compromising the idea of architecture as a shared collective process which the architectural object on display should instead testify.[12]

Going to extremes, to acritically museify architecture through images threatens it with the possibility of "extermination by museumification" (Baudrillard 1994, 9): death sanctioned by the radical transfer into a different order of reality and of sign, which pauperise meaning from architecture, alienating it from the performance of its specificity as a discipline. In the long run, the insistence on reinforcing the axiom of architecture images as museological property contributes to distance architecture practice from its productive encounter with the user, thus "stripping architecture of its agency as a material intervention in the physical world" (Blau 2010, 21) and limiting its performative capacity.

To conclude this survey of the problematics of insistent identification of architectural representation with images in the display context, and to reconnect with a more pragmatic framework, it can be stated that the predominant act of exhibiting architecture through images also establishes a sort of dictatorship of the visual field which

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12   To further explore the reinforcement of the notion of authorship through the process of exhibition, see also Lipstadt 1989.

is additionally reflected in contemporary trends in built architecture. In many cases, contemporary design and planning projects give birth to constructions that condensate their impact and conceptualisation mainly on their visual surface, thus contributing to buildings that seem to be imagined with the main objective to 'be seen' rather than to be experienced. This exasperation of the visual component generates a tendency to the spectacularisation and iconification of architecture manifestations, thus creating tridimensional architectural events imagined predominantly as sculptural objects, hybrid installations or already-canonised mediatic monuments. As a main result, this attitude creates a complicated relationship between architecture and its notion as public art and social agent, not only challenging the centrality of spatial experience, but also adulterating architecture interaction and presence within the public space.

6 Hypotheses to Resituate Architecture in the Space of the Exhibition

To conclude, I would like to open a speculative parenthesis to reflect on possible strategies potentially employable by exhibitions to mitigate the dictatorship of the visual produced within their context and to explore viable strategies to resituate architecture in the space of display.

A tendency widely observed to be the predominantly popular one is the effort to recreate, in the exhibition of space, the condition for the replication of a certain interactive atmosphere: a tentative reproduction of the performative and relational qualities of architecture (Urbach 2010), which materialises into a heavy recourse to immersive environments and spatial installations, sometimes even enhanced by the collaboration with digital video material and virtual reality software. These simulations of architecture remain however mostly tridimensional simulacra, and lack, in many cases, the curiosity or the bravery to imagine a different way to build architecture or to deploy an architectural act in a manner that can be suitable and adapt to the specificities of the coded behaviours of the exhibition.[13]

Perhaps less spectacularly, instead of focussing on recreating experience, an alternative solution could be the possibility to rethink architecture exhibitions and challenge their visual exasperation with a return to the centrality of the status of object of the architecture

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[13] An interesting effort in this direction is offered by Eve Blau, who stated that "architecture exhibition should no longer be a mere show of projects, but a 'project' unto itself: a project that the visitor should be able to experience, not unlike experiencing a built, functioning edifice" (Blau 2010, 34).

representation, revitalising the importance of its inherent 'object-hood'. Borrowing here the terminology of Eyal Weizman (2010), while also drawing from the reflection on objecthood of Byung-Chul Han (2021) and adapting it to the context of exhibition display, maybe it would be possible to attempt the development of 'forensic exhibitions', where the adjective 'forensic' finds here again a crucial connection with its etymological source, connected with the ancient Roman forum practice where objects were called to testify in front of the collectivity.[14] Envisioning the architectural exhibition as a forum where the voices of the representational objects are first to be heard, and where the curator act as a mere translator[15] for the object in order to facilitate the manifestation of its architectural referent, could conjecturally be an operative option to restore the agency of the architectural object and re-place architecture in the exhibition as an ensemble of processes and acts that generate a collective discourse.[16] Letting the objects retake the stage could then be a productive solution for reimagining the purpose of architectural exhibition, posing the foundations to create a space where the objects can perform, regaining then their authority as instruments of production and not only as representational devices. In this perspective, the act of translating architecture into images can instead shift into a novel use of the 'prosopopoeia' (Weizman 2010, 126), where the object will again be the main orator in the architectural discourse.

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14 Here the reference is specific to Weizman's interpretation of the expression and of the rhetorical praxis, as conceptually developed in Weizman 2010, 126: "Forensics was part of rhetoric. Rhetoric, of course, is about speech, but forensics does not refer to the speech of humans, but to that of objects and things. In forensic rhetoric, objects address the forum".

15 "Things, however, need a 'translator' to interpret and mediate their speech. Because the thing speaks through, or is 'ventriloquised' by its translator, the object and its translator make a necessary and interdependent duo" (Weizman 2010, 126).

16 To explore further the idea of interrelated spatial relations between publics and things in the context of architecture, see Weizman 2010, 126-7.

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