



Portada / Cover. *The Conflict Shoreline*. Eyal Weizman, Fazal Sheikh
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LAND AS FORENSIC EVIDENCE

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Understanding architecture as a device capable of recording what occurs in it, Forensic Architecture –Eyal Weizman’s practice– seeks to reconstruct historical facts from physical or material evidence. In his latest book, *The Conflict Shoreline*, Weizman extends these analyzes to conflicts over territory, reconstructing the history of Bedouin communities expelled from the Negev desert based on the traces they left on the ground.

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ALFREDO THIERMANN: In your most recent book *The Conflict Shoreline* (Weizman, 2016) we see a reflection on a particular ‘land dispute’ in the Negev Desert, represented through aerial photographs taken by Fazal Sheikh along with your essay that gives the tittle to the book. What were the motivations behind this project? And more specifically, why did you decide to use aerial photographs as evidence?

EYAL WEIZMAN: The idea was to look at the intersection. Let’s say that Forensic Architecture looks mainly at ruins of buildings and of the built environment. But what if we look at the level of larger environments as if they were ruins too? In an era of environmental destruction and climate change we can see that the house, the scale of the house, has become the scale of the environment. This is the starting point for *The Conflict Shoreline*, which is trying to look at the entangled history of climate change and colonialism, and what happens in-between. Colonialism was trying to push the line of the desert southwards –to make the desert bloom, like in a Biblical metaphor– while climate change and desertification tried to push this line northwards. In between those two massive forces, between colonialism on the one hand and climate change on the other, there are always native communities that are caught in the middle; in the case of Palestine the Bedouin communities of the northern edge of the desert. And they are displaced twice, by climate and by colonialism. I needed to think about a way



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to bring colonialism back into the history of climate change because we tend to imagine that climate change is simply the collateral damage of history, simply the bad results of the good intentions to produce, to live in cities, to urbanize, of capitalism, of trade, of transport, of infrastructure, etc. and then, shit happens and things get worse, the planet gets warmer etc. But if you don't think about this as climate change against colonialism, but [instead], try to think of those two phenomena together, you see that climate change was the very aim of colonial modernity. This is really what the book is trying to do and, to a certain extent, the research of the book had to reconstruct weather patterns, climatic patterns, before climatic record began. So, since 1931 we have rain, temperature and pressure measurements in this part of the world; but prior to that you need to look for climate in literature, in tax collection documents or in photography. The aerial photography is showing more than just objects on the surface of the earth. Aerial photography is also a photograph of the air between the surface of the earth and the lens: 15,000-feet of dense or humid or dry atmosphere, with more or less dust, which is recorded on the film. So you can actually look for weather documents in non-weather measurements, [that is] in documents that are not measuring the weather. Since photography is one of them, we are using it in this book.

You have a particular approach to architecture, by understanding it as a 'documentary form': one that registers, stores, and transfers information. Would it be fair to say that throughout the book you treat land as 'the' architectural object, the one that registers, stores, and transfers the otherwise invisible information?

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Yes. I am fascinated by building surveyors. I think as architects we have treated those people very much as a minor aspect of architectural education, and I think that in the future there is an enormous potential that is unexplored, of the cultural and political relevance of building survey. Because material, together with technology, now achieves an increasingly informational reach, we can understand many more things by looking at matter. Matter is a kind of index that allows us to understand history. And building surveyors will not look at the building as a product of a certain historical style or architect; rather, they will look at the history of the building, not at the history of the builder. It's the history of architecture not the history of architects, and that is a very different thing. It looks at architecture as a material membrane, as a dynamic entity that is always responding to political and environmental forces and their entitlement. And the reading is very difficult, always difficult: it's always contradictory, it's always non-linear... it's not easy. But a building is an enormous sensor for various reasons. For instance, every material reality registers, it is imprinted by other –by proximity to heat or things like that. Buildings are also excellent political sensors because they exist for a very long time and they are composed by various different materials in contact with each other, in contact with the use inside of the building, and with the changing atmosphere outside the building: together, they make them much more sensible to political and environmental reality than any other material sensor. Now, let's take the principle of the building surveyor and extend it to the scale of the environment. And from that principle you start to look at wheat, grass, sand, material, and imprints on the surface of the earth.

So we have land dispute treated as architecture –understood as a documentary form– and represented through both photographs and writing. In other words, the ‘sensorial capacity’ of the land is interrogated and then activated by two different media (images and words). Can you expand on how forensic aesthetics are at play in this book?

Well, aesthetics operates at various levels. The first level – what I call ‘forensic aesthetics’– is the material one which refers to the senses, to the sensorium, to what is perceived, so the question is how a building perceives its surroundings.



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It’s an inversion of the process of phenomenology: while phenomenology is concerned with how humans perceive the building, I am concerned with how the building perceives the human, registering him or her. For the second level, you need to invert it once more: you use the building as an instrument of measurement; you have a pressure sensor, a light sensor, a rain measurement system, but the building is a kind of political sensor, an instrument of historical measure that you need to read. Such reading requires a set of translations of the material aesthetics into a comprehensive material that functions through another interface of images, which operate through the medium of human perception. Of course, that also involves various other sensors to read, every sensor goes through a series of mediations, something that happens to a building is registered in a photograph, that is developed through a screen and so on. And on a third level, you need to make politics out of it and present it in a convincing, inspiring way; you need to use theater, and demonstrations, you need to build a model of projected images, and that is also aesthetics. So aesthetics are an entire field. It’s not something that is external but rather the means by which one material relates to another material, and then to perception, and then it’s translated into politics. So effectively it’s not an aspect of our work, it is actually the field in which we work.

If architecture has this documentary capacity, what are the techniques, technologies, and procedures that architecture can offer to this process?

Architecture is a synthesis of a lot of fields of study and disciplines: we synthesize information through space. When we do evidence files for courts –for human rights organizations or others– we synthesize different scientific discoveries and data, and we spatialize them. So the data set might not come from us –it might come from meteorologists or whatever– but it will be synthesized through space. And we see space in three distinct ways. One is architecture, the materiality of architecture as object of analysis. We use the materiality of buildings as the means through which we tell the story, so this is an idea of architecture as



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primary evidence. But architecture also works as secondary evidence, in the sense that architectural models allow us to create what we call the 'architectural image complex', that is, a kind of spatial synthesis of either data or photographs, video and material evidence, together with documentary, human testimony and satellite imagery: all this synthesized in a time-space medium. The third is that architecture is a great means of presentation, because people understand architecture and spatial models rather intuitively, so we find that both lawyers and judges, and also the general public, are capable to understand architecture presentations, so it's a very good tool to explain things.

You make an interesting distinction between the “design of the ground” and the notion of “collateral effects.” In that regard, the ground as an architectural artifact operates not only as the record of political violence but literally as the vehicle through which that violence is exercised. Can you expand on that distinction between design and collateral effects, and through which specific mechanisms it is manifested?

We are saying that space is something in between a sensor and an agent: it is not enough that it 'senses', because to sense seems to be a passive thing; it senses something that is external to itself. However, space, architecture, landscape, plants, forests and the territories are not only the evidence of something, but are also the means of violation. Already in *Hollow Land* (Weizman, 2007) I showed how architecture is not an embodiment of politics: it exercises politics. Politics is matter in movement, matter that is organized across the terrain. Architecture –here understood as 'the earth'– is a kind of logistic, a military tool of violence like tanks in a battlefield. It's something that is not passive, that snaps back and bites you: it's a kind of active sensor. In Forensic Architecture sensing is always an active practice.

You mentioned before that climate modification operates as a designed mechanism for political violence, and that this procedure has a tradition in colonial modernity. How do you read that phenomenon through a particular ground condition in the Negev desert? Or, to put it in your own words, where do you see the ‘cracks’ in the ground that speak about this other phenomenon?

The ‘crack’ is always looking for the line of least resistance. In my work, I am always looking at threshold conditions, examining things through threshold conditions. So I look at the threshold of the law, at the threshold of visibility –those objects that are seen and non-seen, captured and non-captured. In the desert book there is a relation to the threshold of the desert and to the threshold of the law. When you cannot see evidence, when the evidence of Bedouin settlements is at the threshold of visibility, when the state says that actually they have not been there –that is not a cemetery, that is not a tent, and that there hasn’t been anyone here before, because the images and the aerial photographs are not capturing things very clearly, then they are also at the threshold of the law, and they are basically banned as illegal. To enter into the law you need to enter into visibility, and all that happens at the threshold of the desert.

I am interested in the role that the idea of truth plays in your practice: the idea that truth is a project, that is, something that does not exist by itself but rather needs to be constructed. Can you expand on this idea and how the ground is here mobilized to construct a particular truth?

Truth is a construction site. We are in a situation where denial and lies are tools of domination. Contemporary domination needs to hide its own track, it cannot admit that, and denial of the truth is a weapon to perpetuate domination. It has nothing to do with reckoning with historical crime. Denial is what will allow you to keep perpetuating violence. So truth is a strategic thing in a conflict, it’s an operative category.

If we agree that truth is a project, I see it as an intersection between both a historical and an aesthetic project. I see it as if it were like a reversed astronomical project. Astronomers look at the past from the ground into the sky, with particular aesthetic devices, while here you seem to be looking at the past from the sky and into the ground, with your own aesthetic mechanisms. Can you expand on the intersection between history –or past– and aesthetic practices as vehicles to construct truth?

Truth is not something that preexists materials. Truth is something that needs to be harvested. To build truth is hard labor. People think that truth is just lying there, that you can just pick it up, and that ‘to lie’ is a construction, that to lie is something complicated. But on the contrary, truth needs to be harvested, it needs to be worked, to be composed; you need to build it, you need to construct relations between things, you

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need to learn. Even to look at the images you need to learn how to look at the images, you need architecture to look at the images, you need to construct the apparatus through which you can see. This is what is important to me.

Within this process, when does truth happen? I ask you this because it seems to be a political *a priori* that mobilizes certain aesthetic mechanisms in order to make the 'matter speak', or to make the ground speak in this case.

No! Truth needs to be constructed; it needs to be composed. It's like an architectural project: you need to build it and you need to demolish the untruth: it is an operative concept. The State is building stories that you need to demolish, and you need to construct, you need to build very slowly a construction that is not at the basis of violence justification, but based instead on a close and precise interrogation of life, of agricultural and architectural practices of indigenous communities that are on site, that were built very slowly and lightly on the ground. That is not so easy, it is a much more difficult practice.

If evidence collected in the field allows you to deconstruct the truth –as you do in this book– how does this operation work in the forum? Can you talk about that distinction between field and forum?

There are three sites where we operate. There is the field, there is the land –or the studio in our case– and there is the forum. The field refers to when you go somewhere far away, you make an expedition, you take notes; then you go to the lab, you process it, and then you go to the forum and you present



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it. Our aim is to break the distinction between those three sites: to turn the field into a lab, to work with people on site. We are now working with the Bedouins in the Negev desert, we are running various photographic workshops, we are using kites to document the ground, we are working with kids from the displaced villages to take images, and we also put our own forum on site, in that place, located in the desert in the Negev, where the people are. So the field, the lab, and the forum are combined in the same place.

Although the evidence presented both in the images and the text may be compelling, it is still presented in a media –a book– focused on a specific kind of reader that may support your point of view. But, what if those who you are criticizing read the book? If they know the evidence in advance, can it become a way for them to use it in their own defense? How do you deal with this potential misuse of the argument you are putting forward?

I think that to make evidence is always dangerous, to make politics is always dangerous, and if you are simply a critic, you don't really face the political danger. The political danger is not danger to your life, or that something will happen to you. The worst political danger is that your work becomes misappropriated and starts to be used against the people that you care most about, against the people you love and you have worked with. The paradox of politics –everyone that practices it understands it– is that to become effective you need to go very close to this danger, you need to assume it, you need to be aware of it. Your hands need to be shaking and trembling when you make these decisions because appropriation is always possible, is always there. But if you get further away from the danger, you also become further away from being effective. And you always need to measure that risk, you always need to think about it and understand it. And many times –unfortunately, I will have to say– our work was sabotaged to a certain extent and abused by people that we have nothing to do with.

So there is always that kind of tension that you have to play with...

This is the title of the first article that I have ever written for *Forensic Architecture*: “Only the Criminal can Solve the Crime.” It is a main principle of *film noir*.

I would like to finish by asking you to expand on the idea of architect that you are putting forward in your practice.

I think is a very traditional idea of architect. An architect that works with his clients, with his communities, his stakeholders for each place, an architect that seeks to provide the conditions for communities to build their own lives. However, building is not always the right answer for this. Not always one needs to build, although building can be part of it. We have built in the desert our own forum that lasted exactly



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48 hours before it was destroyed. It was called “Ground Truth” in which we presented the work. For in order for a claim to be made and heard you need a forum, so a building could be a part of making this space. And although one not always needs to build something, sometimes a building can be part of a larger strategy. **ARQ**

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