

Is not  
the most  
general  
political  
problem  
that of  
truth?



# to our readers...

We have witnessed a political agenda marked by consensus rather than conflict—a democracy more recognizable in stalemata than in action. Political subjectivity and difference has been stifled and “politics,” a set of practices and power relations that organize social order, has been relegated to the realm of mere management and administration. However, after the seemingly unchallenged triumph of neoliberalism, we find ourselves in the midst of global unrest and disillusionment. From Ferguson to Hong Kong, diffused systems of power and control that underpin the everyday have become glaringly obvious.

We prioritize “the political” over “politics.” For us ‘the political’ (*le politique*) is inherently conflictual. It is the space where power is challenged and reordered. In this third volume of *∞*, we explore how architecture stands as a series of actions—how architecture itself acts politically. Architectural practice is a medium of dissent with the potential to occupy, resist, reject, topple, subvert, and criticize current hegemonic systems and ideologies. An alternative cannot exist without an existing, opposing term, position, and possibility. As architects, we propose new forms and

images, but also think about the tactics to achieve those ends. This volume is concerned with strategies that promote friction and provide space for the political.

In conflict, architecture is routinely employed as a tool to enforce and shift power relations. Actively manipulating the built environment, both in its construction and destruction, must be understood as a military tactic to enact political agendas. But buildings are also material records. As sensors, they collect traces of dispute and violence. However, it is only once these records are gathered, sorted, and composed, that they operate as evidence to legitimize certain arguments and challenge political narratives. Truths, like buildings, are constructed. They set the physical and discursive limits of our world and define what is possible. They say as much about who builds them as who uses them. As a producer of truth, the forensic architect’s operational logic mirrors that of the military strategist: to plan; to simulate; to tactically pursue particular interests, often for or against others. In this episode we speak with Eyal Weizman about testimony, defense, and culpability.

## the political

## eyal weizman

# first-degree murder by architecture

Eyal Weizman in conversation with LV and C. Recorded February 18th, 2015

**LV:** At a recent lecture at Columbia University you claimed: “non-neutrality is the condition for the production of truth.”<sup>1</sup> Tom Porteus, the Deputy Director of Human Rights Watch (HRW), is interested in the notion of truth as well. In fact, he states that the role of the HRW is “to arrive as close as possible to the truth.”<sup>2</sup> Could you talk about the need to have competing truths?

**EW:** what is very productive in the field of forensics is that the truth is produced through conflict. In the courtroom you have the prosecution and the defense, and each side presents and argues over the same evidence. This is very different than “truth-production” based in a scientific lab, which is sometimes disinterested and neutral. Of course, you should be faithful to the facts, but in the courtroom, the truth is under assault. The nature of contemporary violence is that it is both against people and against the truth, or against any evidence that violence has taken place at all. It’s to kill and deny simultaneously. This situation is very evident in the drone campaign in the tribal areas of Pakistan—areas where the state neither confirms nor denies the existence or non-existence of this campaign. While increasing its own capacity to see into and know a territory, the state restricts the capacity to see and know for others. So when you enter into a situation like that, there is no neutrality! There is no neutrality between a colonizer and the colonized or between a killer and the killed. In situations like this, where information is so hard to get, you must be politically passionate about the truth—it’s a field in which the truth is a weapon.

**LV:** Could you elaborate on the distinction between the work that Forensic Architecture is doing and the existing international humanitarian agencies that have been operating? In other words, how does architecture change the way forensics operates? Does it require a new methodology?

**EW:** It’s very straightforward: we are a detective agency. In Forensic Architecture, we use architectural tools of reconstruction, modeling, and animation to look at buildings as sensors. This has two agendas simultaneously: the first, to introduce another field of forensic investigation that simply did not exist before—next to forensic pathology, forensic anthropology, and forensic archaeology. The second is to question historical method, to ask what is architectural history? Is it the history of the people that make and build architecture? Or is architectural history a history of a building itself? In what way does a building register and exist within history? What is important for us is that it is a history of architecture and not a history of architects.

An architectural toolbox—which utilizes everything from architectural history and structural engineering to architectural style—is extremely useful when the nature of violence is architectural and urban. What we’ve witnessed since the end of the 20th century is that war has become an urban phenomenon, and its evidence is left on the architectural object. The city is an incredible media environment. Not only are people recording conflict on their iPhones and TV cameras, but buildings are also recording it on their facades, and plants by the way they’ve been crushed. The city is a sensorium into which violence is inscribed.

**LV:** As you know very well, one of the roles of military intelligence agencies is risk analysis and battle damage assessment. Marc Garlasco, who worked as a senior building analyst for the US Defense Intelligence Agency, advised the United States on the type of weapon to use according to the type of building target.<sup>3</sup> If forensics is about gathering materials from a past event, could you imagine forensic architecture developing methods to withstand future attacks from specific weaponry?

Can forensic architecture be projective rather than retrospective?

**EW:** I have a problem with the projective dimension. What I call predictive forensics is a certain dark art. It is a dark art that originates from phrenology in which people’s skulls are seen as indications of what they might do in the future. It goes all the way to the predictive forensics that the state applies to kill individuals in targeted assassinations. An American State agent can’t legally kill somebody for something they did in the past—only for what they will do. We have the judicial system for things someone committed in the past. Preemptive violence is the only justification for targeted assassination. There is a lot of projection and imagination in it, and various algorithms enter into the calculative domain that starts with predicting people’s behavior. For me this is a very dangerous development. Algorithmic pattern analysis is the contemporary equivalent of phrenology.

**C:** After the devastating Israeli-Gaza war in 2014, known as Operation Protective Edge, many consider another war in Gaza inevitable.<sup>4</sup> Another way of thinking about how projective forensic architecture could be helpful would be to understand the weapons Israel is using, and consequently try to build an infrastructure that is resilient to that weaponry.

**EW:** It might be prudent, but this is not what we consciously do in forensic architecture—we are not working for the military wing of Gaza and Hamas. If I come to a place where my services are needed, then it’s already so grave and too late for most people involved. I can only help to create accountability and show other people what has happened. And I don’t know if it will affect the world in preventing something, the future perspective of forensic architecture is in creating forums. One thing that is very important to remember is that the relation between site research and proposition is not linear as they teach us almost always in architecture school. I’m not studying the destruction of Gaza in order to design the reconstruction of Gaza. I don’t believe Gazans need reconstruction. I think the Gaza Strip needs to be dismantled—people need to go and settle where they want to.

**C:** Architecture and shelter have always been integral to human life, to the degree that the destruction of buildings approaches the threshold of the destruction of life. In Operation Protective Edge it was reported that along with “more than 2,100 Palestinians [who] died... 10,800 buildings were demolished and more than 50,000 others damaged, including 277 schools, 270 mosques and 10 hospitals,” in addition to the only power plant.<sup>5</sup> I am arguing for a reevaluation of the destruction of the built environment in relation to life itself. In line with your statement that “human rights are increasingly being violated by the organization of space,”<sup>6</sup> I was wondering if you could expand on this connection between the physical world that we inhabit and the lives that it hosts.

**EW:** There is a destruction of life and there is a destruction of forms of life that together are formed in a juridical framework as crimes against humanity. Destruction also operates through the denial of the conditions of a certain form of life. Genocide is obviously operating on various scales with the intention to destroy all parts of a group. When we were working in Guatemala, together with Paulo Tavares, for example, we could see that not only did the Ríos Montt government of the 1980s destroy the Ixil Maya communities, killing up to 200,000 people over the course of the war, but also, more importantly, we could see the relation between patterns of urbanization, agricultural economic patterns, and deforestation. In the end, the forest was the greatest sensor of this war—a kind of archaeology of war. We could plot the transformation and transition of the

forest itself, from the traditional Ixil Maya villages with shared cornfields to an economy introduced by the state and evangelical churches at the time—that of parceling land and teaching people capitalism. It was a transformation of the environment in which dispersed forest communities were collected into urban forms on a grid that could be supervised. Those individuals that were once outside the state were pulled into the state, reeducated, and turned into citizens of the state. If you live outside of the economy, outside of the state in a territory nominally of the state, then you are a threat to the state and need to be destroyed. This destruction is not by killing you, but by violently civilizing you. That’s the story of colonialism that was condensed in Guatemala into two years.

**C:** In your book *The Least of All Possible Evils*, you mention an architectural model in a conference room that was used to decide the placement of the Israeli-Palestinian wall. You say that this model “generated the geographical grammar for the law to shape physical reality in a similar way that a chessboard dictates the possibilities of a chess game.”<sup>7</sup> We found this analogy of the chessboard extremely insightful because it runs contrary to some other prevailing ideas in architecture, which remove the design from the agency of the building. That idea is rooted in the claim that the architecture does not determine how space will be used. But by designing the chessboard and the rules of the game, one is determining the possibility of the outcome of that game. Can one be held accountable for arranging a physical environment that will enable a crime against humanity?

**EW:** Accountability is the convergence point of various levels of responsibility and liability. Some of them are direct—the guy who pulls the trigger—and some of them are diffused into something that we call field causalities. In this situation, agency is diffused between multiple state organizations, militaries, economies, churches, manufacturers, and the guerrillas themselves. The molecular level of human rights is always the incident: somebody shooting, beating, or torturing someone else. Criminal law is always a direct line between perpetrator and victim. That incident may not always be aberrant of standard operating procedures. You need to show the distribution of that violation, where it is located and where it is repeated. There are different juridical frames from the molecular to the global. The scale of the environment is what Rob Nixon called “slow violence.” Environmental violence exists within this field causality, but the transformation of the environment does not yet have a forum. There are currently no environmental laws—they have to be written from research. Criminal law is allergic to explanations like slow violence—you need to clean the evidence. In court, environmental violence is called “dirty evidence,” it has all sorts of excessive explanations that are not actionable. We need to invent new forms to evaluate these actions.

**C:** It seems that this insistence on a direct line between perpetrator and crime is often used as a scapegoat for avoiding the larger problems of these environmental conditions. The Architects/Designers/Planners for Social Responsibility (ADPSR) last year proposed an amendment to the AIA that would prohibit licensed architects in the AIA of designing spaces “intended for execution, torture or other cruel, inhuman or degrading treatment or punishment, including solitary confinement.”<sup>8</sup> The amendment was rejected, but could this be an example of one way that laws impose responsibility for a wide range of people that are two or three degrees removed from pulling the trigger? Could this sort of ethical code, similar to a doctor’s Hippocratic oath, provide a way of turning grey issues into black and white, and thus allow them to be prosecuted through the justice system?

**EW:** Yes, sometimes you have to be brutally pragmatic, and I always support these actions. But this is really just the starting point of understanding the multiple ways in which space and violence interact. The Israeli architects building in the West Bank are not once, or twice, or any degree removed from the crime—that is exactly their claim: that there is nothing really wrong with the house itself. I would say no: the crime itself is produced on the drawing board. The line is designed to bisect two communities in order to create material damage, and create spaces where it would be impossible for Palestinians to live. The suffocation of a community is done by the way you lay a settlement down, and cut up space—so really we are here in the first order, not in a sort of aid and abet. In the West Bank we have first-degree murder by architecture.

**LV:** Do you think another possible alternative to prevent this violence could be done through the educational formation of the architects? Do you think architects should go through ethics seminars or take on ethical standards that go beyond the state in order to be licensed?

**EW:** I don’t think you can convince people to be good. I think we need to understand the power of architecture. What I am showing you is the incredible power of that tool both to exercise damage and to expose it. Very often I find myself in an environment that is well-intentioned, but I am more attracted to someone like Garlasco, who is simultaneously a killer and an excellent forensic analyst. I think that my approach is to get as close as possible to evil—you need to put your hand in the mouth of the pitbull to get the ball out. Praying is not going to work.

Front image. Normalized Difference Vegetation Index (NDVI) analysis of the Ixil territory for satellite images taken in 1986, a year after the genocide. Visualization by Forensic Architecture and SITU Research.

1. Eyal Weizman. “The Conflict Shoreline.” Columbia University, New York. 11 Feb. 2015. Lecture.
2. HumanRightsWatch. “Syria”, YouTube video, 2:25, accessed February 28, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=OPTaQFGIbA#t=153>
3. Eyal Weizman. *The Least of All Possible Evils*. Verso, 2011. p73
4. New York Times Editorial Board, “Having to Rebuild Gaza, Again.” *The New York Times*. 10 Oct. 2014. <http://nytimes.com>
5. Jodi Rudoren. “As Truce Holds, Dazed Gazans Get to Work.” *The New York Times*. 27 Aug. 2014. <http://nytimes.com>.
6. Eyal Weizman. “The Evil Architects Do” in *Content*, ed. Rem Koolhaas. Taschen, 2004.
7. Eyal Weizman. *The Least of All Possible Evils*. Verso, 2011. p99
8. Architects/Designers/Planners for Social Responsibility. Proposed Rule 1.402. <http://adpsr.org>