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The Architectural *Performative* on the Threshold between the Domestic and the Extreme

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Abstract

Drawing on Lambert's (2012) classification of architectural realms as the "Extreme" and the "Domestic," this paper explores the performativity of conventional architecture in everyday life and examines how its narratives, qualities, meanings, and functions shift in response to political and social extremes. The central question emerges from the premise that emergency conditions radically transform architectural spaces themselves (e.g., a flat, a university building, or a beachfront villa), giving rise to new spatial typologies.

If architecture is understood as textual, and architectural texts are always structured in relation to their context, then political extremes inevitably reshape the semiotic framework of existing architecture. Under such conditions, certain spaces enter an altered operational state in which their dominant functions are displaced or transformed, producing a distinct effect on lived reality. This phenomenon resonates with Austin's (1975) theory of language, particularly his concept of "performatives" — utterances that are neither true nor false but actively shape the reality in which they operate.

The "architectural performative" is therefore defined here as a text that is produced by architecture that has been transformed by political or social crises. Situated at the threshold between the Domestic and the Extreme, this mode of architecture is characterised by intentional misuse. This paper demonstrates how, in such circumstances, architecture adopts or produces diverse performative roles, ranging from a weapon to a symbolic catalyst for social change.

Keywords: architectural performative; domestic and extreme architecture; social crisis

Architecture between Violence and Care

Extensively examining the weaponised conditions of architecture, Lambert (2012) proposes a provocative yet systematic and overarching argument concerning the impossibility of innocence in any architecture, regardless of its programme or original purpose. Rather than locating architectural violence solely in explicit typologies such as concentration camps, prisons, or enclosed spaces, Lambert identifies violence within everyday, seemingly benign architectural structures. He therefore distinguishes between two spatial categories: the Domestic and the Extreme (p.12), arguing that the violence embedded in the Domestic must be approached with equal seriousness and caution, as it fundamentally structures everyday life.

This idea resonates with Weizman's writings on the relationship between architecture and weaponisation. Describing the primary spatial condition of Palestine as an "elastic geography" (Weizman, 2007, p.6), Weizman demonstrates how the constantly shifting architecture of the frontier operates not as a static backdrop to action, but as an active medium that its inhabitants continually challenge, transform, and appropriate. In doing so, he emphasises the transformative and active character of space, as well as its inherent impossibility of remaining neutral.

At the opposite pole to weaponised architecture lie theoretical approaches that examine the notion of care within spatial practices. A key framework for understanding care in relation to architecture is provided by Tronto (2013), who situates care within the realm of political practice rather than treating it as an emotion or moral sentiment. From this perspective, architecture is understood as infrastructure of care — not as neutral entity, but as contingent, relational, and ethical phenomenon.

Adopting Jeremy Till's (2009, p. 173) approach to ethics in architecture as a "responsibility for the Other," allows us to examine architecture as an enabling or disabling system — an infrastructure endowed with its own political agency, as articulated by Easterling (2014). In this way, architectures of care can be conceptualised as operational rather than merely symbolic. This understanding returns us to architecture as a dynamic phenomenon with tangible effects on reality, resonating with the core principles of performative architecture and space.

Performativity as Method: Reading Architecture in Extreme Contexts

One of the most influential formulations of performative architecture, cutting across its multiple lines of enquiry — from technological to cultural and phenomenological — appears in Leatherbarrow's (2005) assertion that "it is not about what architecture is, but what it does" (p. 7). The doing of architecture can be examined through the lens of the

production (rather than representation) of meanings, shifting the focus towards the textuality of architecture, its modes of production, and the impact of these texts on the reality in which they operate. This performative capacity becomes particularly legible in extreme contexts such as war and social upheaval, where architecture actively generates meanings, effects, and lived experiences. While these performative qualities are often explored within artistic and creative practices, this study investigates how they are reconfigured when architecture operates under conditions of political or social crisis, resulting in radically different effects on reality.

Methodologically, the analysis maps the dominant narratives and meanings that architecture reflects or generates across varying contexts, tracing how both these narratives and the contexts themselves are radically reconfigured under conditions of emergency and turmoil.

Architecture as Weaponised Apparatus

The first example in the analysis of architecture and its distinct roles within social and political extremes relates to the context of military activities conducted in Gaza after 7 October 2023. Several months after the escalation of warfare, an Israeli real estate company posted on social media an image advertising the pre-sale of settlements on the territory of destroyed Gaza, accompanied by the caption: "Wake up, a house on the beach is not a dream."¹

The post presented an image composed of two layers: the background depicts a low-opacity photograph of a destroyed city, overlaid with a three-dimensional simulation (a quickly exported image from 3D modelling software) of five beachfront villas in the foreground. The photographed city is emptied of people, with the sea and coastline visible in the background. The urban matrix of the photographed city resists an orthogonal grid, while the newly designed urban structure that overlays it appears as a straight line directed toward the coast. The following analysis focuses particularly on the new architecture depicted in this image and on the meanings it embeds, transforms, and produces within its visual, semiotic, and social context.

Observed independently from the photograph that provides the dominant contextual layer, the newly designed architecture refers to a generic type of contemporary beachfront villa: with its flat roofs, cubic orthogonal structure, lack of ornamentation, and serial repetition reflected in the multiplication of a single design. Through these formal characteristics, the depicted architecture embeds meanings of repetition, standardisation, typological genericity, rapid visualisation, and a capitalist-driven mode of

¹ Harey Zahav real estate Company on their Instagram profile [[@hareyazahav](#)]. (2023, December 13).

architectural production. Yet these meanings do not remain autonomous: as architecture appears within a context already loaded with meaning, which inevitably intervenes in what architectural form initially conveys, its signification can be radically and very precisely augmented, reshaped, or transformed. In the case of the Instagram post analysed here, the surrounding image of a destroyed city dialogically structures the meanings produced by the five villas: neglect of spatial memory, rewriting and replacement, erasure, disregard for *genius loci*, and an approach to land as a *tabula rasa*. Additionally, when read alongside the caption's call for awakening, the new architecture may be interpreted as "a dream come true." Most radically, however, the political, temporal, and social context in which the image was posted reveals the depth of the semiotic charge carried by this newly designed architecture. Knowing that the photograph does not depict an unknown ruined city, but Gaza - and that the causes of its destruction are widely understood - the architecture of the five villas comes to signify erasure, oppression, and, ultimately, architecture being used as a weapon².

This architecture was deliberately placed within its context and represented by it. Therefore, the effects it produces become an integral and intentionally constructed part of its reality. This example does not merely demonstrate how architecture inevitably acquires new meanings through changing social circumstances and contextual relations. Rather, it illustrates a condition in which the intertextual relationship between architecture and its surrounding texts emerges from the designer's intention: the resulting meanings themselves become the architecture's programming task.

Thus, a seemingly innocent architectural type of a beachfront villa demonstrates how its primary role, ostensibly dedicated to improving human life, can transform from dwelling into an instrument of oppression. This radical transformation occurs through architecture's capacity to generate meanings with profound effects on reality — a power inherent in the performative potential of architectural space.

Architecture as Emancipatory Infrastructure

The second example relevant to this analysis occupies the opposite end of the spectrum from weaponised architecture, demonstrating how architecture can operate as an emancipatory infrastructure, rather than as an instrument of harm. In December 2024, higher education institutions in Serbia became the sites of a nationwide wave of student blockades following the collapse of a canopy at the newly renovated railway station in Novi

² See more about this example in *Architecture's Weaponising Performance* (Žugić, 2025)

Sad³. What began as a response to a fatal architectural failure developed into an occupation of university buildings that lasted almost a year and evolved into a broader student-led movement advocating for social justice and corruption-free institutions.

If the collapse of a modernist architectural element from the 1960s exposed the violent consequences of neglect and corruption, the subsequent occupation of university buildings revealed the counter-potential of architecture when subjected to intentional misuse. Addressed here as a building type rather than as singular objects, university buildings became the primary spatial apparatus through which the movement was organised, sustained, and articulated.

Constructed largely during the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s within former Yugoslavia, the University campus in Novi Sad originally embodied the ideological narratives of Yugoslav modernism, emphasising both education and architecture as vehicles for social emancipation and collective progress. When formal teaching activities ceased in December 2024, the buildings underwent their most radical transformation since construction — one that was not physical, but programmatic and semiotic. Through occupation, the dominant educational functions of university buildings were replaced by new modes of inhabitation and governance. Dormitories, kitchens, workshops, cinemas, self-organised classrooms, and logistics centres were established, transforming spaces of higher education into spaces of shelter, care, and operational centres of the movement.

This deliberate “dis-programming,” in Tschumi’s (1994) terms, unified universities across the country into a coordinated movement grounded in direct democratic practice. Although the movement expanded beyond campus boundaries, into streets, squares, highways, media spaces, domestic interiors, rural peripheries, and international contexts, the occupied university buildings remained its spatial anchor. As students succinctly articulated, “School became our Home, and Streets became our School.” (Architecture Students, Novi Sad, 2025).

As the movement unfolded, the meanings attached to university architecture shifted from those of institutional education and inherited ideology to protection, hospitality, and collective empowerment. In contrast to weaponised architecture, which produces harm through spatial control and destruction, these buildings operated as fortresses of safety and as symbolic condensers of hope, justice, and solidarity.

Through this process, university architecture functioned performatively, not by enforcing power but by enabling care, cohabitation, and political agency. This transformation primarily occurred at the level of meaning and effect, demonstrating that

³ The tragedy resulted in sixteen deaths and one severe injury. A year after the event, no one has been held accountable.

architecture, which is never innocent nor neutral, can nonetheless operate as an emancipatory force. Situated at the threshold between the Domestic and the Extreme, these buildings reveal architecture's capacity to actively reshape political and social reality, not through violence, but through care.

Figure 1

Faculty of Technical Sciences, Novi Sad, Serbia, 11:52 a.m., December 6, 2024. A gathering for 15 minutes of silence, three days before the start of a year-long blockade of the university building by its students. Photo: Stefan Simić.



Towards the Architectural Performative

The analysed examples, although situated at opposite ends of the spectrum, are connected through the emergence of a new spatial condition shaped by extreme social and political contexts. Through the intentional misuse of architecture, whether the transformation of a residential building from a space of dwelling into an apparatus of oppression, or the dis-programming of a university from a site of education into an agent of social metamorphosis, this condition becomes particularly productive at the level of meaning and in its direct effects on reality.

Drawing on Austin's (1975) theory of language, and his concept of "performatives" as acts that do things rather than merely describe them, I define the "architectural performative" as a productive architectural text: a spatial gesture that shifts the focus of enquiry from the verbal to the spatial domain. Through its materiality, such a gesture produces the illusion of a speech act, incorporating meaning and entering the domain of enunciation — non-verbal, yet nonetheless eloquent. In this way, the architectural performative emerges as a spatial gesture operating within a broader spatio-temporal context, functioning as a productive and effective built act.

Conclusion: Architecture In-Between

The transformed state of architecture, brought about through a radical questioning of its fundamental purposes and functions, appears as a dynamic and often temporary condition. In this state, architecture shifts from one mode of operation to another, mirroring the in-betweenness of the social and political contexts from which it emerges. These transformations are most clearly visible in the changing quality and hierarchy of functions that architecture fulfils or generates.

Through such shifts, existing buildings oscillate between the Domestic and the Extreme, operating either as violent or as hospitable infrastructures. In doing so, they remain essentially liminal: suspended between established typologies and unstable contemporary modes of operation. Architecture thus occupies an in-between condition, neither innocent nor neutral, in which its performative capacity actively reshapes political, social, and spatial realities.

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