

At the Threshold of Architecture

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Abstract

In structuring the programme of our interior design studio, we questioned two assumptions that are central to the discourse of modern architecture: the site being empty of its unique traits, images, stories; and the user being devoid of human subjectivities, perception, imagination, memory.

The two projects we relate here, titled Interpretations and (Dis)connections, address threshold/boundary conditions. Throughout four stages of Interpretations, we tried to challenge the concepts of 'empty space' and 'universal man' either by leaving site as well as user outside of our construct or capitalizing specifically on their entire

load. (Dis)connections, on the other hand, was based on interpretations of a film, a reference outside the functional paradigms of architecture.

Themes/constructs/patterns identified in the film generated design ideas, then programmes, sites and, finally, designs through a sequence of transitions and transformations. This entire process enabled the reconsideration of relations between building/site and building/user and other provided possibilities for questioning the boundaries of the discipline of architecture itself.

Introduction

In the 1997–98 academic year, we assigned a series of design projects to the second year students at Bilkent University, Department of Interior Architecture and Environmental Design. A search to do ‘something different’ impelled us to stay away from given building types and common functional models. [1] Many aspects of the two sets of problems we issued had been discussed in piecemeal manner throughout their development and implementation. Yet we saw new connections/ relations between the problems when we looked at them in the context of space. Small questions posed within the framework of the studio tied up with larger issues. In addressing these, our aim is not to search for answers to these questions. This is an impossible task that may only generate seductive but deceptive generalizations. What we propose to do instead is to use the studio projects to construct a particular argument.

Empty Space, Universal Man

Designing space, establishing spatial relations, understanding, recognizing and reading space are well-established practices in the discipline of architecture. The architect designs space. Yet the construction of narrations pertaining to space and a language appropriate to it are quite recent in the history of the profession. Stephen Kern claims that architects modified their conception of space around the turn of the last century, when they began to think in terms of composing with space rather than considering it a negative element between the positive elements of floors, ceilings, walls. [2] Henri Lefebvre reckons that awareness of space and spatial production arose in the 1920s, consequential to the historic role of the Bauhaus. [3] Daniel Bell suggests that the organization of space became ‘the primary aesthetic problem of mid-twentieth-century culture’. [4] Along similar lines, David Harvey maintains that ‘the conquest and rational ordering of space became an integral part of the modernizing project’. [5] Indeed, the vocabulary of architectural theories prior to modernism does not include the

concept of space. The heritage of Vitruvius and Alberti that set the parameters of the discipline refers to pragmatistical considerations such as classical proportions, stability and materials. Space became an indispensable concept of the language of architecture when modern Western theorists conferred upon architects the responsibility of designing not only buildings but manner of living as well.

Many twentieth century manifestoes and declarations on architecture allude to space in one way or another. Already in 1908, Hendrick Berlage asserted that architecture must recognize its true purpose as an ‘art of space’. [6] Geoffrey Scott reinforced this argument by stating in 1914 that architecture, amongst all arts, has ‘the monopoly of space’ and that ‘to enclose a space is the object of building. [7] In 1924, Theo van Doesburg declared that in new architecture, ‘the whole structure consists of a space that is divided in accordance with the various functional demands’. [8] Le Corbusier’s ‘five points towards a new architecture’, proclaimed in 1926, celebrated the possibility of uninterrupted space where architectural talent could freely operate. [9] In 1932, Buckminster Fuller asserted that the ‘(U)niversal problem of architecture is to compass space’. [10] In the same year, Frank Lloyd Wright referred to the: ‘sense of the “within” as reality’ and wrote that ‘(Architecture), as modern, now becomes the expression of the livable interior space of the room itself... The “room” must be seen as architecture, or we have none’. [11] Ignoring for a moment the serious differences between their conceptions of architecture, these architects and theorists share an appreciation of space as the fundamental constituent of their professional involvement.

There are two assumptions or constructs in modern architecture’s discourse on space. One is that the architect fills up/designs a bounded space that he assumes is empty but is in fact ‘emptied’ by him. Our conviction is that any given space, real or imaginary, is always loaded with memories, sensations and traces that the designer is often reluctant to acknowledge. The other is that

the design of architectural space, defined by a functional terminology, leads to the design of one's manner of living and even of being, regardless of specific subject positions based on such issues as race, class and gender. If space and its users are the main concerns of the architectural discipline, these assumptions have serious consequences for professional practice as well as education.

These assumptions are consolidated when the concept of space is brought into architectural theory by figures like Bruno Zevi and Siegfried Giedion in the 1950s. For instance, Zevi proposes that there are deliberate links between qualitative attributes of space and the mental disposition of its occupiers, that space can invoke 'a sense of peaceful contemplation' or 'a mood of imbalance, of conflicting impulses and emotions, of struggle'. [12] Here, concepts like serenity and disturbance refer to universal situations separate from specific subjectivities, therefore subscribing to the illusion of 'universal man'. Indeed, the latter notion has dominated architectural thinking since Vitruvius' proposition that 'the well-shaped man' provides the measure and proportion of all architectural elements in a building. [13] In addressing functional, emotional and perceptual issues, architectural design is based on the illusion of universally valid conditions of living, thinking, perceiving and feeling.

A survey of current architectural journals reveals that these two assumptions have still not lost their validity. The 'creative' architect designs an empty space. In other words, s/he confers meaning upon an otherwise meaningless place as s/he substantiates and confirms relations that either already exist or are aspired after. Architecture either serves or constructs realities, without questioning the discipline's founding assumptions about these. The illusion here lies in the premise that it is possible to start from zero, to liberate a given context from the burden of images and stories in order to reach the universal. By means of this illusion, the status of the architect as creator is strengthened. Both the architect and the users abandon their subjectivities to attain 'universality'. Yet, so far as subjects and spaces are concerned, there is no

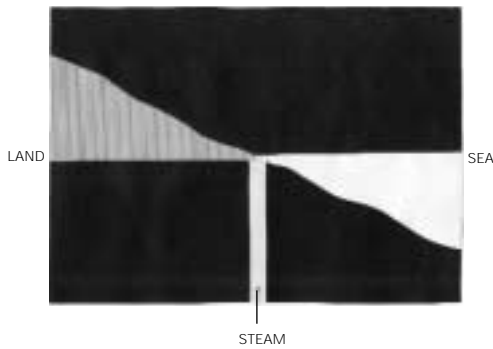
tabula rasa and 'the canvas is never empty'. [14]

At this point, space acquires an additional meaning to the commonplace usage of the term denoting expanse. The 'canvas-space' is not physical: it is the bearer of figures, images, stories, relations, not all of them known, that pertain to a specific moment or place.

In composing the studio programme, one way of avoiding the notions of 'empty space', and of 'universal man' was to construct situations independent of spatial programmes and inhabitants. The relations designated by these situations opened up a range of possibilities concerning the very materiality of architecture.

Subjects, Spaces, Relations

Interpretations was the common title of four separate but related stages of the fall semester project. Our initial attempt was to leave 'subject' and 'space' outside of our construct. We were then left with plain architectural elements: the familiar wall, window, door. Once released from their bondage to space, however, they ceased to be familiar. What endured was their common attribute of constituting 'thresholds'. A threshold implies a situation of transition and a site of interaction. Works of architecture always embody thresholds, like those between bedrooms and bathrooms or between public and private realms. Yet design priority is often given to functional spaces separated by the thresholds. The design of the threshold itself where interaction actually occurs remains secondary. Our studio programme necessitated the denomination of the parties between which a relationship was expected to be established on the threshold. To liberate the students from the constraints of obvious significations, they were asked to imagine visionary realms between which these architectural elements would exist. The realms had to be made up of situations or conditions independent of subject and space. Conceptual, physical, social and functional realms constituted the parties on either side of the thresholds at consecutive stages of the project.



During the second stage of the problem, for example, the threshold was designated as a wall and a window between two physical realms. In response, one group took up the threshold condition between land and sea (Fig. 1). They defined the relationship as that of the sea eating up the land. Their wall would protect the land from being consumed by the sea. They created a hollow at the meeting point of land and sea, hot air emanating from under the ground evaporated the water at this point, thus protecting the land. Wind blowing over the ground dispersed the vapor to re-establish visual continuity between land and sea. Here, the wall and the window do not have architectural materiality. There is no object designed by the architect but an intervention to a place that conveys complicated relationships between its constituent elements.

But can architecture bear to renounce space and its human occupiers? Can an intervention claim to be architectural if it casts off its spatial and human components? These questions led us to the final stage of the project. We endeavoured to create another threshold condition, this time addressing functional relations. We chose thresholds between public and private realms that corresponded to working and dwelling spaces for a particular occupant. This situation needed to be specified to avoid the trap of empty space/universal man. We looked for situations that are not commonly addressed by architectural programmes. To this end, we capitalized on the work component of the programme and used such activities as scarf-making, wine production and jewellery design. The

relationships generated by these activities would constitute the load on the canvas-space. The human component was neither an anonymous user, nor a specific subject with defined characteristics. Also, instead of selecting an empty site, we chose a narrow building squeezed between two edifices on a major shopping street at Ankara. We based all decisions pertaining to space and to subjects on interpretations of the work defined by the programme. There are two examples that we want to relate.

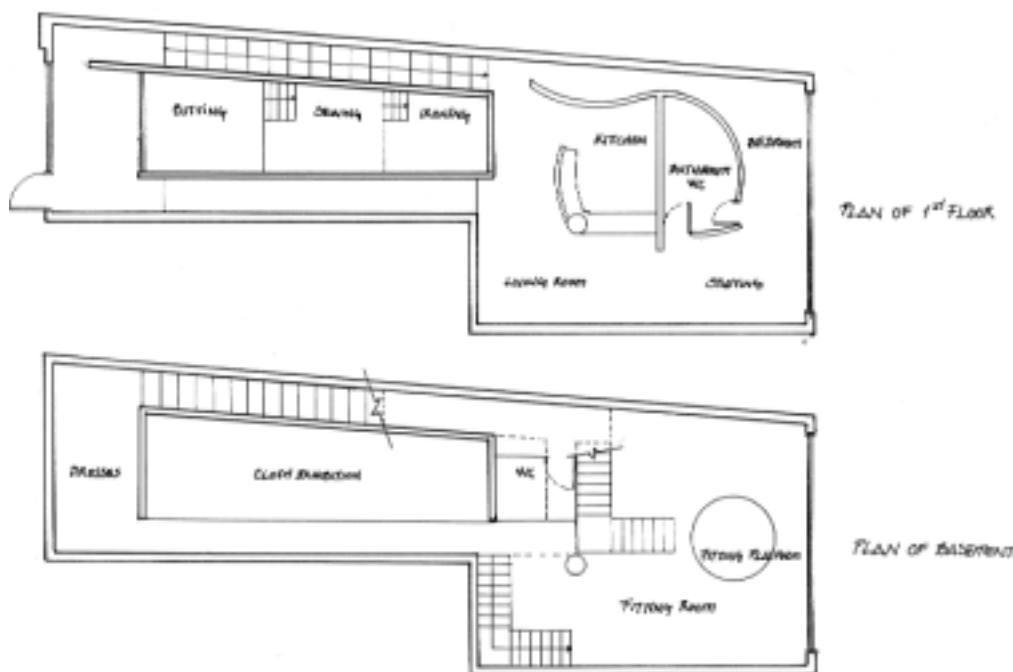
In Serkan Ates's project, the workshop of a tailor constitutes the core space (Fig. 2). The workshop, a box placed at the centre, acts as the agent that establishes relations not only between users but also between work and leisure, public and private. All circulation takes place around the box whose perimeter is shaped by the correlation of subjects. These are relations that are redefined in the context of the tailor's work. The design specifies moments of encounter between the product, the tailor and the client. Thus, the perimeter of the box acts as the threshold between the parties at each encounter. The subjects contained in the box become the objects of the client's gaze.

Ilhan Karabag's design concerns the living and working environment of a jewellery designer (Fig. 3). Again, the thresholds created between spaces for work and residence play a significant role in constructing the positions of the subjects with respect to each other. The constitution of connections/separations as well as the correlation of subjects are complicated in this case. Even naming the parties on either side of any threshold becomes difficult because of their relative positions and architectural definitions. Object/subject conditions are not constant but interchangeable.

Thresholds, hence, moments of encounter, are 'designed' in these projects. Aspects that are not pertinent to these moments are ignored; left undesigned. Similarly, identities/roles of subjects are only partially designated.

Interventions, Mechanisms

The concept of threshold was addressed in all



stages of the first project, but space and subject were introduced only in the final phase. In retrospect, we realize that the final stage, the threshold between functional realms, resulted with designs that remained within the domain of familiar architectural concepts and languages. Perhaps foremost because the given problem did not involve any component which was not already incorporated in the discipline of architecture. In the former phases, the reinterpretation of architectural elements like the wall and the window was made possible by the imaginary realms on either side of the threshold, realms outside the functional paradigms of architecture.

We decided to start the project for the second semester with something 'outside' of architecture – a film. The choice had no particular significance. Our only concern was that the film should have a multi-layered narration rather than a closed story. We selected Federico Fellini's *Amarcord*. We watched the film with our students and discussed it. Then we divided them into five groups. Each group identified and interpreted a theme/construct/pattern from the film. At this point, we

reached the boundary between film and architecture. How would we make the leap? What would be the concrete constituents of the object to be designed? What would be designed and where? The answers to these questions demanded a sequence of transitions/transformations to reach a generating design idea, then a programme, a site, and finally, a design. So, the film would remain as the term of reference throughout the design process yet each stage would involve a new construction and thus, a (dis)connection. Hence, the title of the second project: (dis)connections.

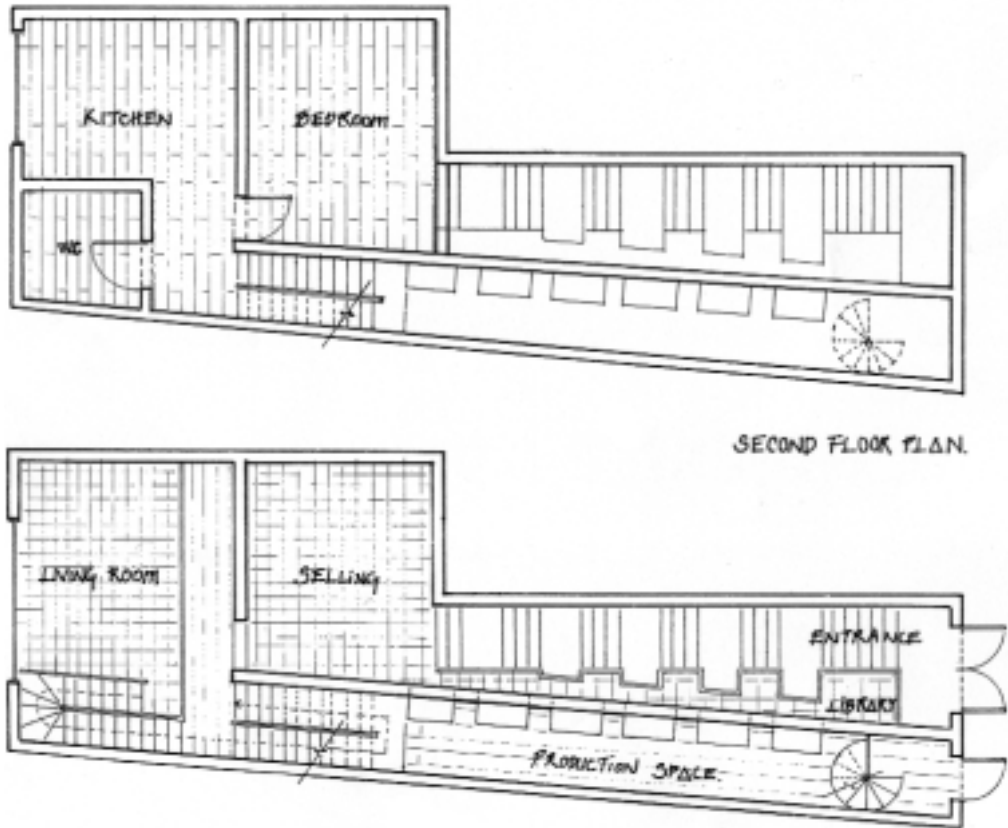
One of the groups made an interpretation about beginnings and ends in the network of incidents in the film. They discerned that a photographer appeared at the beginnings of ceremonies like funerals and weddings and a blind accordion player emerged at their end. They concluded that beginnings were single images, frozen moments that could be readily perceived whereas ends were incomplete instants that were open to interpretative and creative interventions. So, their designs were constructs that involved such beginning and end conditions. The plurality of

Opposite:

Figure 1
Threshold between
Land and Sea, graphic
representation,
group work

Above:

Figure 2
A Tailor's Workshop
and Residence, plan,
Serkan Ates

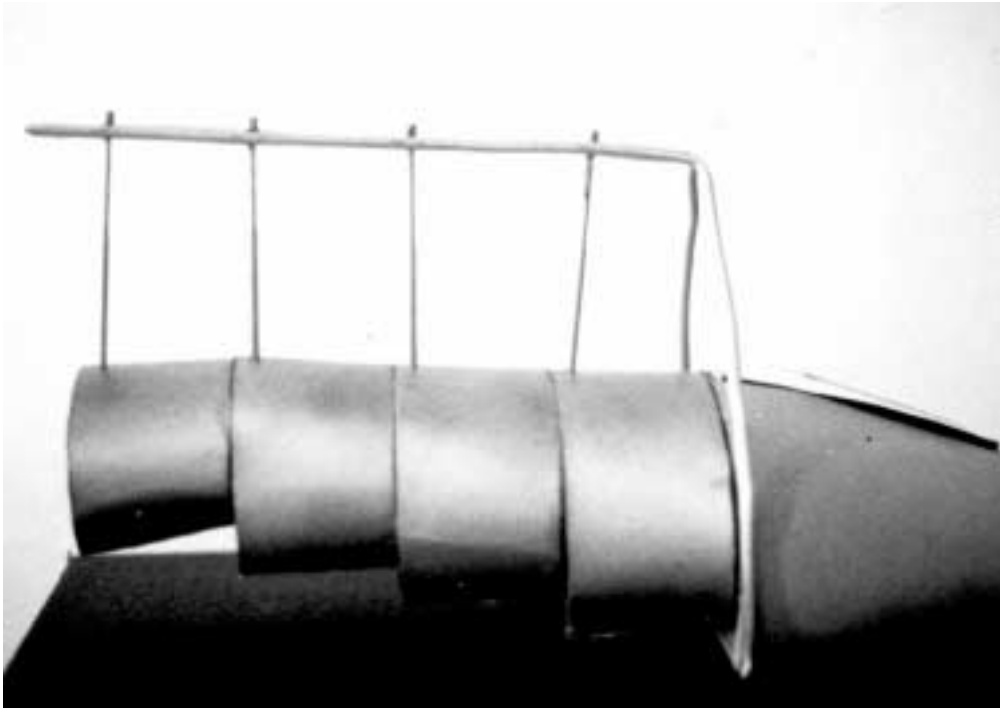


images made possible by the blindness of the accordion player implied a design programme relating to the five senses. This enabled members of the group to step out of the film and into architecture that constituted the common framework. Then, each individual constructed a separate perceptual experience within this framework. Metehan Özcan started off with the inference that vision has a privileged status since it incorporates knowledge about the other senses. He considered that perception induced by any of the other four senses opens up possibilities in the imagination whereas sight freezes such possibilities by informing the other senses. His design is made up of five units of perception, each stimulating one of the senses (Fig. 4). With the passage of anyone from one unit to the other, the structure moves to take in a new stimulus from the environment. As knowledge about the environment

increases, possibilities for imaginative interpretations about it decrease. The last unit admits vision and thus freezes the imagination.

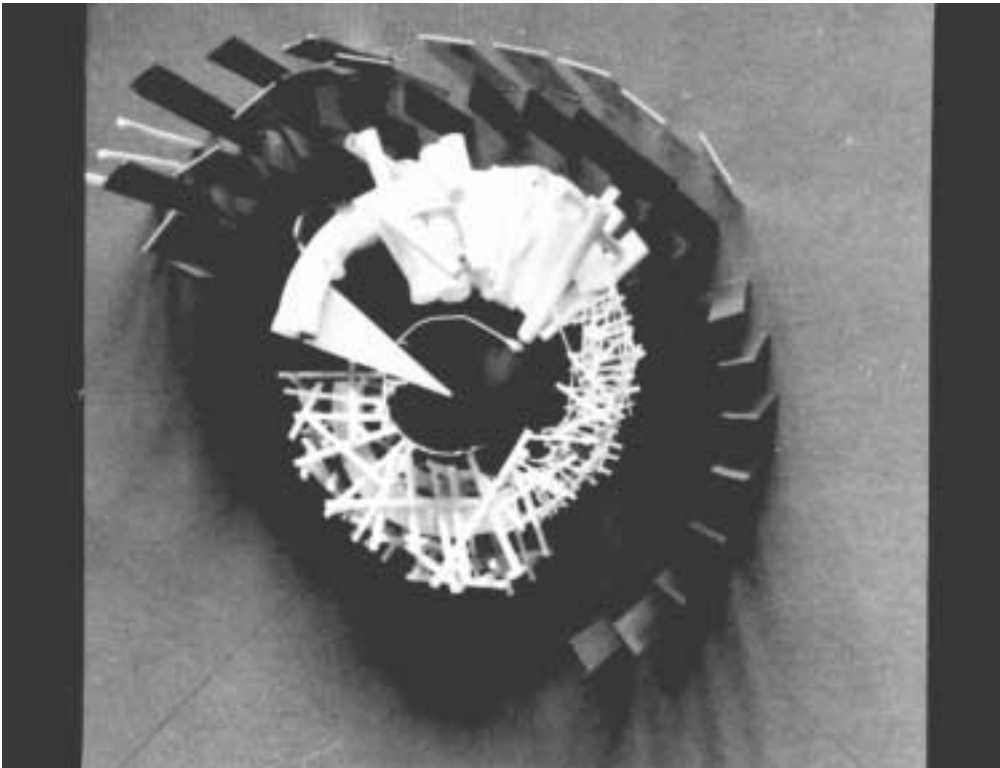
Contrary to Metehan's construct, Defne Kocabiyikoglu's design begins at a point when all senses are stimulated (Fig. 5). Then, the senses are brought to their thresholds one by one and made to vanish. The sensory impulses that are lost are committed to memory. At the end of the process, the reminiscences of the senses allow endless possibilities for recreation.

Another group noted the contribution of the narrators to the film. They revealed that the narrators informed us of different realities about the town where the film unfolds. These realities were determined to be historical facts, legendary tales and mundane truths related to the town. Therefore, they reached the resolution that their designs would be interventions that disclose differ-



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Opposite:

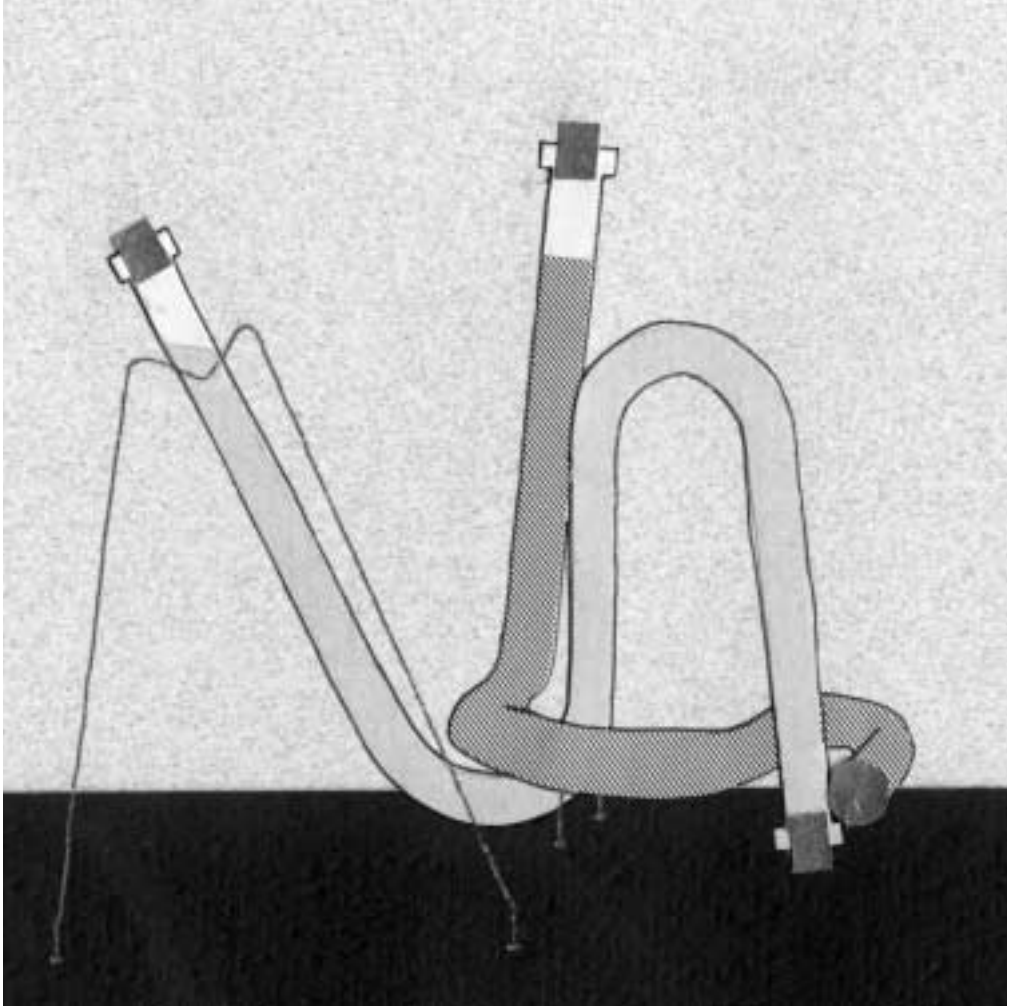
Figure 3
A jewellery
designer's workshop
and residence, plan,
Ilhan Karabag

Above top:

Figure 4
A structure of
perception, model,
Metehan Ozcan

Above bottom:

Figure 5
A structure of
perception, conceptual
model, Detne
Kocabiyikoglu



ent layers of realities pertaining to a particular site. The multi-layered quality of the town suggested an excavation area. So, each member of the group interpreted the properties of such an excavation site for an intervention to render them legible.

Yesim Kunter selected an excavation site under water. Having seen its realities as being unrevealed, abandoned and deteriorated, she designed the way to and from the site (Fig.6). Her path to the site reveals its obscurity, the path from the site exposes its deserted condition and the traces left at the actual contact with the site lay bare its decay. In the experience she constructed, moments of confrontation between arriving and departing

individuals as well as those between them and the excavation site inspire the design of the paths.

Various kinds of deterioration of the site constitute the realities that Muzaffer Karadagli's project aspires to surface. He chose a sunken ruin partially above and partially under water. He considered marks of damage caused by water, air and humans. Conceptually, his design consists of a glass jar placed for protection on top of a portion of the ruin. Three spots are specified at which parts of the ruin inside and outside the glass are viewed together to enable the discernment of different agents that impair the ruin.

Boundaries of Space/Architecture

The common attribute of the designs produced during the course of this problem is their being movable structures that are not bound to specific sites. Hence, the concept of 'site' ceases to be the empty plot where a building is erected. Instead of being rooted into their sites, these structures perch on them: a condition which calls for the reconsideration of the relation between building/site. Yet this is not in the sense of a building 'type' that is expected to function anywhere, independent of its location. On the contrary, the relation between building/site is immanent. These structures cannot function without their sites.

The relation between building/user is analogous to that of building/site. The structures can be placed at different locations and can serve different users. But similar to the site's variance from the concept of 'empty space', the user is different from 'universal man'. Both the site and the user participate in the design process with their unique traits and qualities. On the one hand, all physical and non-physical characteristics of a specific site – its smell, its layers, traces of its former inhabitants, its desertion – play a role in the design. The architectural intervention creates awareness of the load of a burdened site rather than filling up an empty site. On the other hand, human attributes like perception, imagination, intellect and memory are not ignored but incorporated into the designs with all their richness.

The description of all these projects involves a terminology which pertains to boundary conditions. Relevant terms like 'threshold', 'transition', 'encounter', 'inclusion' and 'intersection' refer to relational conditions. Likewise, space is secondary to boundaries in the actual designs. The intriguing aspect of boundaries is their being places where relations are constructed. The self meets the other at the boundary – identities are constructed there. Endeavouring to design space on a tabula rasa rejects the questioning of boundary conditions from the start, allowing space to remain as the bearer of known identities. Attempting to design thresholds, on the other hand, relies on the

acknowledgement of the load of a site. The threshold constructs relations between elements found in the canvas-space.

The structures designed in the course of the second project are temporary shelters. Unlike customary building types, they do not aim at accommodating defined requirements of human beings. In this sense, they are 'useless'. They do not aspire to attaining status like permanence or monumentality that the discipline of architecture has perpetually valued and which architects have constantly pursued. They provide shelter not in the sense of containing or protecting, but as enabling effective interaction. Interaction occurs not in the space but at the threshold where relations actually take place. The threshold, not the space, is the design element.

The concept of boundary has played a significant role throughout our argument. Following it in another context, the boundaries of the discipline of architecture itself, its inside/outside, its content, can be reconsidered. In fact, this is exactly the point where the educational significance of these projects comes into the picture. For we believe that the purpose of design education extends far beyond re-affirming professional boundaries and imparting architectural or artistic skills. The making of an architect or an artist involves the making of a critical thinker. As such s/he is bound to question every assumption on which his/her discipline is based. The projects that we discussed above provide fresh possibilities to contemplate/ imagine other spaces and other architectures. In fact, such possibilities made the entire process magical for us.

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Opposite:

Figure 6
A structure of
revelation,
conceptual model,
Yesim Kunter

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