

146 Speaking (of) Architecture

Gülsüm Baydar Nalbantoglu and Nur Altinyıldız

Abstract

To stimulate seeing, thinking and 'speaking' architecture in ways other than conventional practice dictates, we devised two projects for second year interior architecture students. We identified prior architectural constructs, a tower in one case and two parallel walls in the other, and questioned how they could be imagined differently. Alongside the objects, we assigned activities which did not lend themselves to be housed in given architectural types: clowning, unicycling, acrobacy, fortunetelling. The challenge of establishing meaningful links between the objects and the designated activities initiated architectural reinterpretations at

various levels. The two problems diverged at this point: the project entitled 'Wall of Entertainment' resulted in the transformation of the object whereas 'Towers' involved the mutation of the activity. Seemingly intact entities generated new forms, presumably ordinary functions yielded unusual narratives. In each case, ordinarily unheeded components of architectural constructs and programs were explored, producing unconventional designs.

Introduction: Architecture from Within

Unconventional approaches to design usually capitalize upon sources outside the discipline of architecture. These range from film to literature. Bernard Tschumi's Manhattan Transcripts is an architectural exercise that employs photographic sequences. [1] Coop Himmelbau's projects are derived from intuitive and enigmatic sketches which they call 'psychograms' [2]. Peter Eisenman's Biology Center in Frankfurt makes use of fractal geometry. [3] Inspired by such approaches, which are also adopted in numerous schools of architecture around the world, we had previously devised problems relying on film, painting, sculpture and dance. [4] In two projects we assigned during the 2000–2001 academic year at Bilkent University, we took a different approach.

This time rather than looking for outside sources, we addressed architecture 'from within'. We started by identifying architectural constructs per se such as walls, windows, doors, bridges and towers and thought of alternative ways of looking at them. Such constructs point to complete, intact and irreducible entities with unmistakable architectural expressions. Hence, they are charged with power. Precisely because they seem untouchable, they hold the potential to be 'imploded' [5]. It seemed worthwhile to recognize their full load to be able to use their capacity elsewhere. How can these constructs be imagined differently? In search for answers, we were inspired by John HedJuk's small structures. These are creative products which integrate unusual narratives with essential forms [6]. Particularly intriguing are their simplicity and directness. They led us to explore the power of architecture as architecture rather than its representational and symbolic attributes.

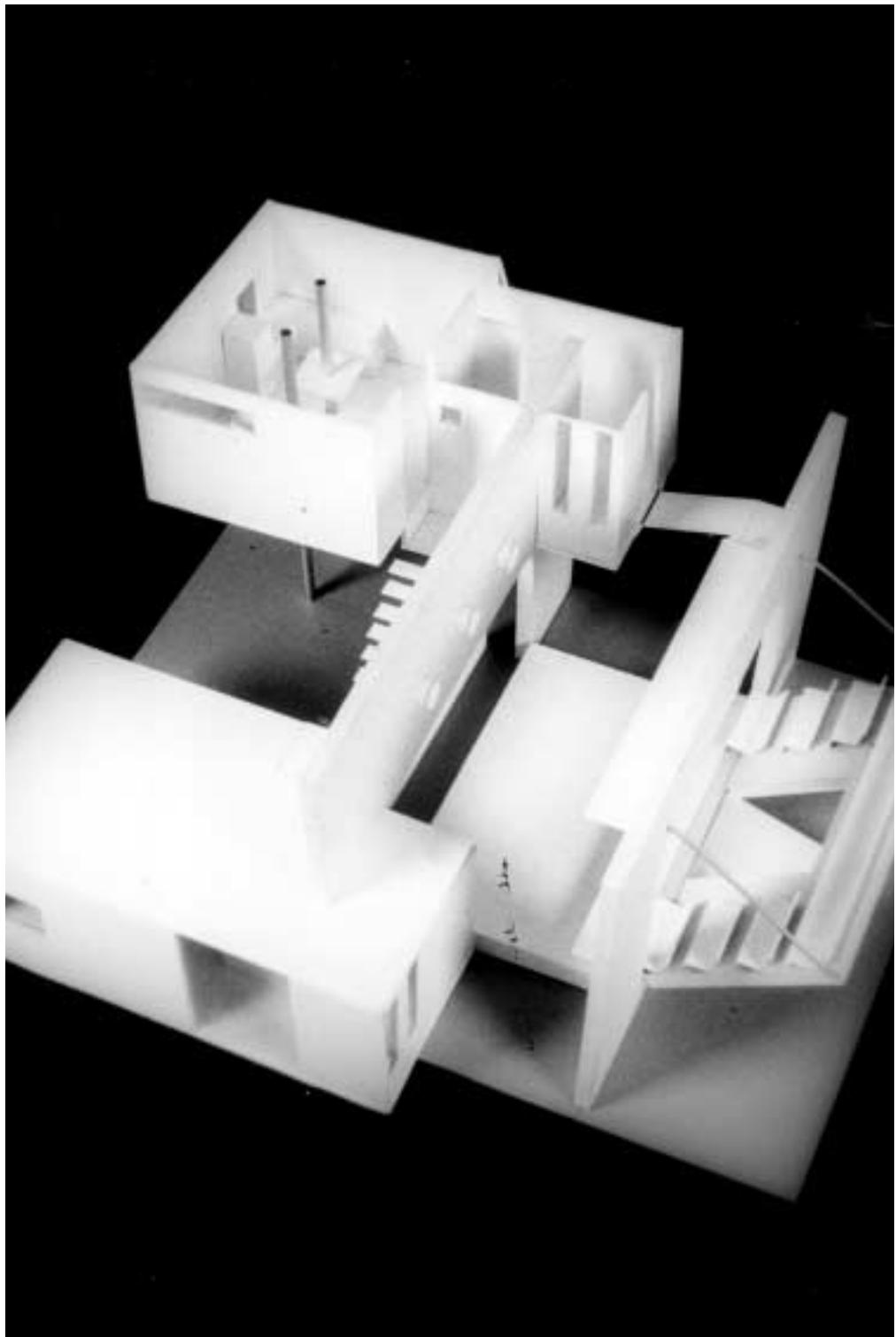
The two sets of problems we issued to second year interior architecture students, *Wall of Entertainment* and *Towers*, were designed precisely with these concerns in mind. They were assigned consecutively, explore similar issues and challenge similar architectural assumptions. However, they differ in the mode of architectural reinterpretations they initiate. In both cases we

refrained from conventional design programs which specify site, function and user. We left the site unspecified, to be shaped during the process. Instead of providing a strict schedule of accommodations, we assigned activities which were themselves open to interpretation: acrobatics, bird watching, puppet-making, fortune-telling, hang-gliding, kite-making, knife-throwing, clowning and uni-cycling. The critical addition to each problem was the designation of a thing, a prior architectural construct to inform design.

These things are related neither to function nor to user: two walls in one project and a tower in the other. Walls and towers are different kinds of objects. A wall is an architectural element. It defines a boundary. A tower is an architectural type. It incorporates space. This difference turned out to be consequential considering the design process and its products. In the problems we issued, both the walls and the tower are specified to a certain extent. The walls are parallel, 4 meters apart and 6 meters by 10 meters each. The tower has a length to height ratio of 3 to 1 and a base area of approximately 20 square meters.

The organization of the studio also diverged from conventional practice. The students worked in groups of four or five to enable the production of large scale models throughout the design process. Both working and final models were done in 1: 10 scale. This stimulated the students' imagination in conceiving the design object in its immediate materiality. Spatial relations as well as design details were magnified relative to the necessary abstractions of smaller scales customarily used.

The challenging aspect of the problems was that neither the walls nor the tower are directly associated with the given activities. Hence, the design process involved the task of relating the object and the activity with each other. The originality of the final product relied upon the distinct expression of this relationship. The attempt to provide a link between the activity and the object required architectural reinterpretations at a number of levels. In order to accommodate the activity of say, a fortune-teller in a tower, both



fortune-telling and tower had to be defined in relation to each other. The crucial difference between the two problems appeared at this point. The Wall of Entertainment proved to be more potent in the transformation of the object whereas Towers turned out to be more effectual in the permutation of the activity.

'Wall of Entertainment'

What is a wall? What does a wall mean? These are the questions we posed to the students as we embarked upon the project. Our intention was to get answers beyond stating its obvious function in making space. We wanted them to explore the 'wallness' of the wall; its capacity to form a threshold, to act as a barrier, to create a boundary and so on. The next step was to analyze their selected activity. Each ensuing structure was expected to house a couple's living and performance spaces, simultaneously incorporating and empowering the walls.

How could the wall's potential as threshold, barrier and boundary be related to these functional requirements? Searching for answers, the students were impelled to interpret the program in such terms. Instead of taking the program as a series of functional spaces to be organized with respect to each other, they began looking at it as the domain of two-inhabitants and two realms, private and public. As a result, walls rather than the space between them became design sites. In the final products, they retained their autonomy as conspicuously visible objects. This does not mean that the walls were kept intact as 6x 10 meter planes. Numerous interventions, transformations and modifications expressed their power and rendered them even more prominent.

In one of the projects for acrobats, for example, a large portion of one wall was tilted at an angle to carry the tiers of benches for seating the audience while the corresponding portion of the other wall was tipped over to the ground to constitute the floor of the stage. The walls here play two significant roles. On one hand, they are molded to accommodate specific functions. On

the other hand, they form thresholds between residence, performance and audience.

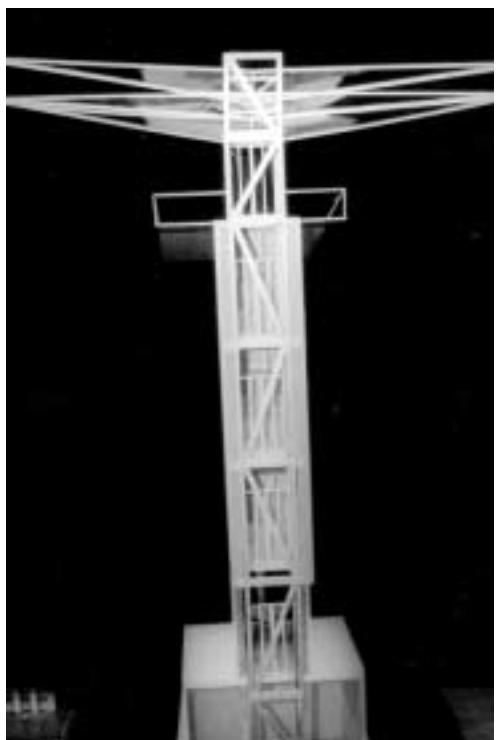
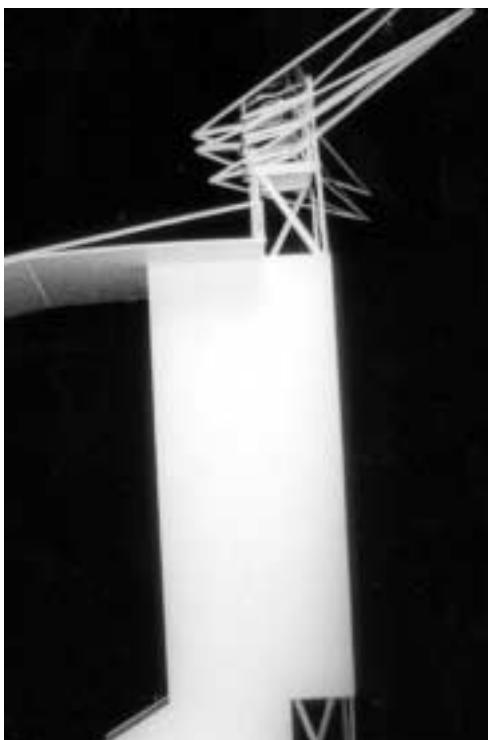
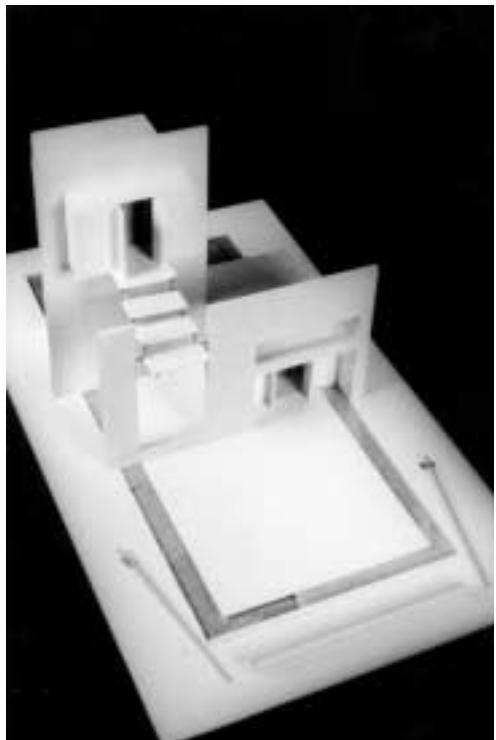
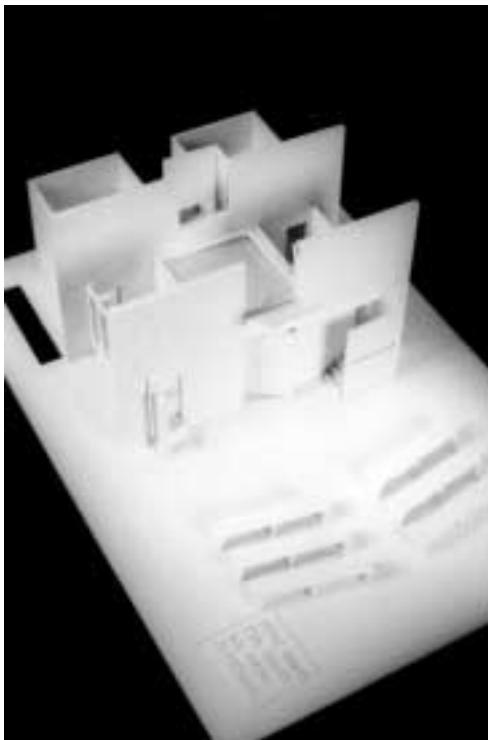
A somewhat similar approach was adopted in a project for a knife-thrower and his assistant. Here, a small wall portion constituted the rotating background target on which the assistant was tied. Her figure was outlined on one side. When that side faced the audience outside, with her tied on it, the performance took place. When it rotated to the other side, empty, the knife thrower practiced in private on the drawn figure. At this instance, the public face of the wall was intact. The two walls form thresholds between the residential domains, the practice and preparation spaces and the performance area. The latter is the only place where the knife-thrower and his assistant come together. Their private spaces are contained in two separate volumes that pierce through the two walls.

A project for two clowns was different in the way it related the walls with the program. Each wall belonged to one clown. As the clowns were interpreted as a giant and a dwarf, their corresponding walls were placed vertically and horizontally. At performance time, the tall wall enabled one clown to appear on an elevated platform to put on sticks while the other came out of an opening on the low wall. Like the project for the knife-thrower, the two performers only meet on stage. Their residences were behind their respective walls.

In all the projects, the activity in question enabled a critical intervention upon an apparently neutral architectural element – a 6x 10 meter wall – and loaded it with meaning and significance. In these instances, spaces are not created by the walls, but are subservient to them. In other words, the materiality of the wall is privileged. It takes upon itself functions ordinarily attributed to spaces.

'Towers'

The term tower, unlike wall, marks an abstraction. Towers come in a variety of shapes, dimensions and proportions. As we assigned this problem, we set certain limitations in relation to these. However, a tower with a length to height ratio of



3:1 and a base area of 20 square meters does not have the same degree of material specification as a 6x10 meter wall. Hence, the students faced a different kind of challenge here. None of the assigned activities required a tower by its own nature. The early stages of the design process called for the reconsideration of the selected activity so that it could be housed in a tower. A further constraint was that each tower was expected to be identifiable by its function. In other words, a fortune-teller's tower was to be distinctly different from a kite-maker's. This was to ensure that the students would not confine themselves to any existing image of a tower type, like office tower or watch tower.

At the beginning, it seemed that some activities such as bird-watching and acrobacy, lent themselves much more readily to be housed in towers. This is by virtue of their obvious association with height. Fortune-telling and puppet-making, on the other hand, have no such correspondence. Contrary to our initial expectations, some of the most outstanding products belonged to the latter category. It seemed that the incongruity between the object and program inspired creative interpretations.

Perhaps the most striking product in this respect was a project for a fortune-teller who predicted the future according to the zodiac. Spatial requirements for such an activity are very limited indeed. A tiny room for the encounter of astrologer and client is sufficient. This can hardly be conceived to fill up a tower. So, as a first step, the students decided to complicate the strictly private activity by adding a public component to it. Their fortune-teller exhibited her periodical prophecies about world affairs on the ground level, saw individual clients on the intermediate floor and meditated solitarily at the top story. This division into different levels of privacy was expressed on the exterior of the tower while encounters between them rendered the interior elaborate. For example, access to individual sessions was underneath the exhibition hall, through a corridor lined with images of zodiac

signs and up a private elevator. The glass ceiling allowed the client to have glimpses of the display while remaining unseen. The resulting form lent itself to dramatic lighting and constituted a suitable setting for a ritualized event

The students designing a tower for hang-gliding decided to benefit from height by incorporating the act of flying into their scheme. The slanting platform at the top of the tower enabled trial flights while screens all around the walls of the freely accessible ground floor provided for the simulation of the flight experience. Three intermediate floors each corresponded to a different weight range of prospective buyers. Three different sizes of wings suspended at the top platform to be utilized during the test flight became constituent parts of the tower's design. The result was an elegant structure which clearly manifested its purpose.

To design a tower for bird-watching proved to be particularly challenging. Ordinarily, a pair of binoculars is all that is needed. One group of students overcame the problem by including subsidiary functions that would enrich this simple activity. Their tower was almost reduced to a stair well, its landings used for distributing catalogues to identify birds, watching video films when birds were absent and renting binoculars when they were present. These activities were accommodated in protrusions and recesses on the walls such as in-built shelves for catalogues, a large video screen with a recessed seat across and pigeon-holes for binoculars. Forming patterns on the exterior, they provided clues to the events inside. Platforms for the actual bird-watching surrounded the shaft on three levels. The beauty of the design lied in its simplicity

Unlike the '*Wall of Entertainment*' which ended up in sophisticated transformations of the given object, the '*Towers*' project resulted in creative interpretations of the activities. Here, the incongruity of the object with the activity compelled the students either to invent programs that highlight aspects of the functions that are ordinarily overlooked or to reinterpret the activity in question.

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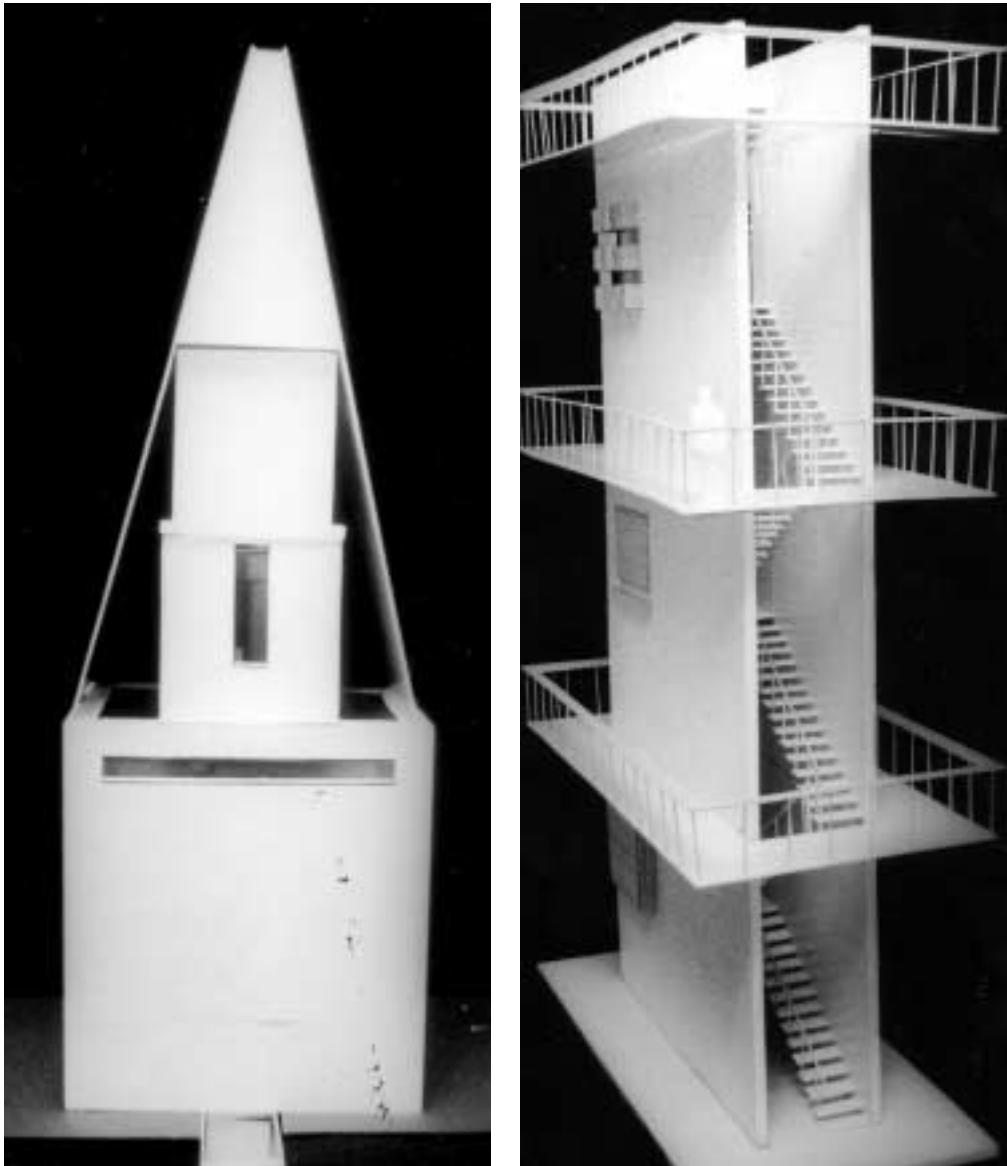
Figure 2
Structure for a Knife thrower and his assistant by Deniz Dorgan, Zeynep Gulec and Ilic Kirtas

Opposite Top Right

Figure 3
A structure for two clowns by Melis Kurultay, Efemec Kutuk and Volkan Muderris

Opposite Bottom Left and Right

Figures 4 and 5
A tower for hang-gliders by Ali Akbudak, Kursat Akkasoglu, Cuneyt Basar, Baris Cinar and Ulas Diniz



Conclusion: Architecture of Difference

In both *Wall of Entertainment* and *Towers* projects we expected the students to establish a relationship between the given object and activity. This required them to look at both in ways other than each is given-to-be-seen [7]. In other words, they had to look at a 6x10 meter wall and see 'more' than a 6x10 meter wall. Seeing 'more' than what is already there was enabled by the activity. In the

projects that we described, the students were able to see the wall itself as a seating area for the audience of acrobats, as a target for a knife-thrower and as a stage set for clowns. All these cases surfaced a different potential that is embedded in a simple wall.

A similar process was reversed in *Towers*. There, the students were able to see something 'more' in the activity by conceiving it in a tower.

Fortune-telling was enriched by both public and private components, hang-gliding was ritualized and bird-watching was extended beyond the duration of looking at birds. All activities developed into more intriguingly complicated events while the structures that housed them turned out to be dramatically simplified yet impressive objects.

In assigning these programs, we privileged and isolated certain architectural constructs. Engaging with them enabled the studio to explore their potential beyond readily visible and seemingly obvious traits. Although the students remained within the language of architecture, they were able to speak it differently.

References

1. Tschumi, B. [1994] *The Manhattan Transcripts*. London: Academy Editions.
2. Betsky, A. [1990] *Violated Perfection*. New York: Rizzoli, p.114.
3. Ibid. p.148.
4. Altinyildiz, N. and Nalbantoglu, G.B. [2001] 'At the threshold of architecture' in *The International Journal of Art and Design Education*, Vol. 20. No. 2. pp.195–204. One such project starting off from a film is described there.
5. This term is inspired by Jean Baudrillard, but we use it in the opposite sense, implying re-production rather than destruction of contents. Leach, N. [ed.] [1997] *The Beaubourg Effect: Implosion and Deterrence, Rethinking Architecture*. London & New York: Routledge.
6. We have in mind particularly his masque projects for Berlin and Lancaster/Hanover. John Hedjuk, J. [1985] *The Mask of Medusa*. New York: Rizzoli, pp.138–153, 404–421, 428–453.
7. Kaja Silverman [1996] introduces this term in the context of photography and video in her *The Threshold of the Visible World*, New York: Routledge, pp.175–193.

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Opposite Left

Figure 6
A tower for fortune tellers by Fulya Ballı,
Hande Canpolat,
Turac Capan and
Aylin Dincer

Opposite Right

Figure 7
A tower for bird watchers by Yasin Aydin, Tonguc Capan, Aydin Delice and Gulnihal Demiray