

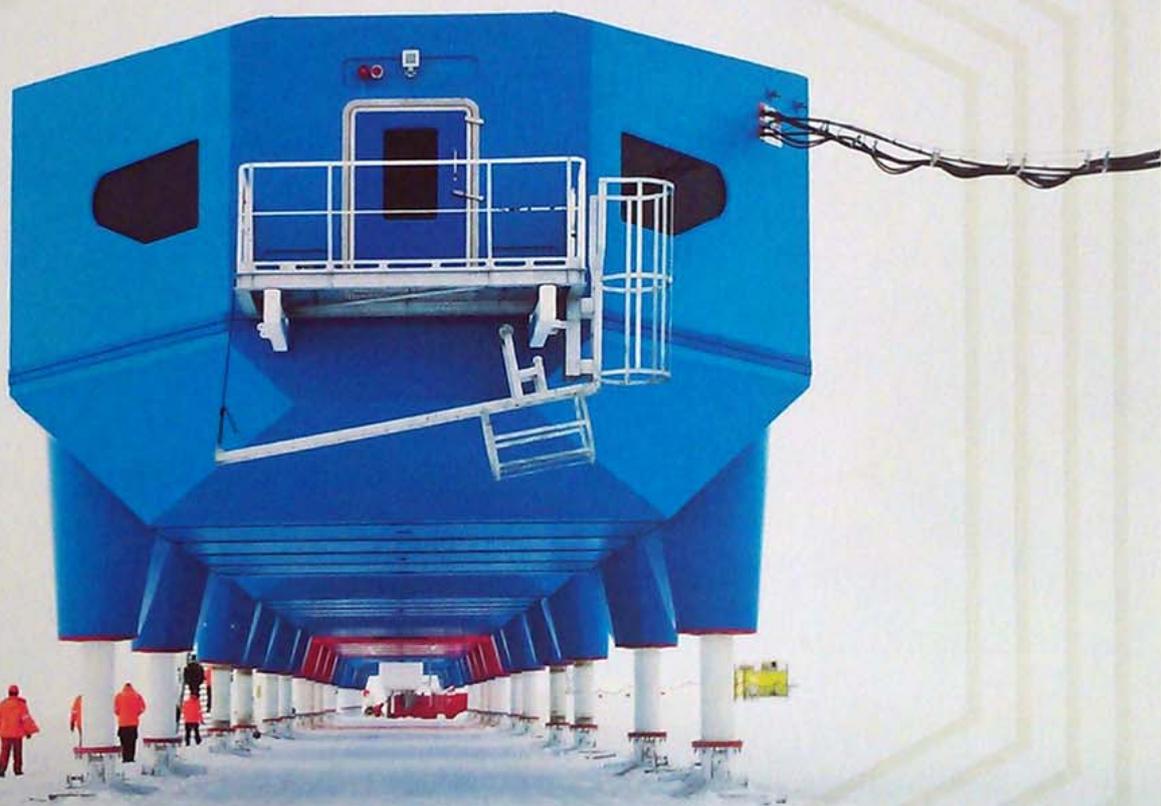
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Drehli Robnik (left) and Gabu Heindl.
Photo Alexei Tylevich



Text
Katya Tylevich

Model Behaviour

Gabu Heindl and Drehli Robnik collect film clips that feature architectural models.

Last autumn, *Mock-Ups in Close-Up: Architectural Models in Film 1919-2012*, a project by Austrian architect/urbanist Gabu Heindl and film theorist Drehli Robnik, played in a small exhibition room of Frankfurt's Deutsches Architekturmuseum, as part of the show *The Architectural Model: Tool, Fetish, Small Utopia*. It was there that I spent several relaxing sittings watching film clips like that of Ben Stiller as Zoolander smashing a model of the Center For Kids Who Can't Read Good ('How do we expect them to learn if they can't fit inside the building?') and Jack Nicholson peering over that spooky labyrinth in *The Shining*. My second, more recent experience watching *Mock-Ups* – this time in its entirety – was something closer

What are your criteria as you collect your film clips?
DREHLI ROBNIK: To play dumb, abandon all free will and include all clips of models that we can get hold of, regardless of how horrible, macho, adoring of capitalism, unfunny or colonial the movies they come from are.
GABU HEINDL: And no documentaries allowed.
Surely a film theorist and an architect can't stand to play dumb forever. What themes or arguments do you see emerging from the collection?
ROBNIK: Our thoughts change as the collection grows. One unusual thing we've noticed is that 1950s and early '60s films typically show the model at the centre of some important discussion, usually a briefing unrelated to architecture, like a military operation or a criminal heist. The models, in such cases, are at the centre of disciplined, hierarchical and sober situa-

L to a cult brainwashing. Three hours of clips of architectural models from international films, in chronological order spanning nearly 95 years, in a roomful of strangers, is bound to change some brain chemistry. Heindl and Robnik will attest to that. For over five years now, they've been travelling with their ever-growing experiment, screening in different cities around the world. The project began as video wallpaper that Robnik used while deejaying at an architecture symposium organized by Heindl, but has since evolved into an obsessive study of film, architecture and culture. The two say they plan to keep adding to the collection indefinitely. So in LA this spring, I sat down with them to ask: 'What is it with you and architectural models?'

tions. But we've come to see *The Dirty Dozen* [1967 World War II film] as something of a watershed moment, after which you start to see more and more 'teamwork' situations around the model – not at all about sobriety, but more about this neoliberal, capitalist idea of the *undisciplined* group, in which diversity and everybody's distinct temperament are emphasized. So between the old '50s World War II combat films and, say, *Ocean's Twelve* [2004], we see a shift around the model from standardized army to freak circus in images celebrating 'cooperation' among men.
Mock-Ups includes three clips from the last two decades that show Hitler and Albert Speer around Speer's famous model for Berlin. Seems pretty standardized army to me.
HEINDL: Yeah, and all three of those clips, although from different films, show two big heads over this small model, →



'The model starts functioning as something of a mind with a memory of its own'



Zoolander
Ben Stiller | Paramount Pictures | 2001

The objective of *Zoolander* seems to be to demonstrate a sick fashion industry in which male models are idiots. The film certainly reveals Hollywood's knack for producing tasteless, unfunny movies. When protagonist Derek Zoolander is shown a model of a literary centre to be built in his honour (the Derek Zoolander Center for Kids Who Can't Read Good and Wanna Learn to Do Other Stuff Good Too), he smashes it to bits, screaming, 'How can we teach children to read if they can't even fit inside the building?'



← maybe as a reference to early modernism, in which the architect dominates the city and feels he can control it. In those scenes, the power relationship and the scale between human and city is reversed, so that the human is so much bigger than his desired surroundings.

ROBNIK: But those clips are exceptions. Generally, in current film you see quite the opposite. As you move through the '90s and 2000s, you increasingly find that both film characters and viewers can no longer tell whether they're inside or outside of the depicted model.

HEINDL: One example is *JFK*, in which the model made to examine JFK's assassination is mixed with actual historical images.

ROBNIK: Another more recent example is British horror film *The Awakening*, in which the 'haunted' character stands inside a haunted house, looking into a small model of the haunted house, and in the model she sees puppet constellations depicting scenes from earlier in the film, until finally she sees a puppet of herself standing in front of an even smaller model of the house – which means the model knows what she's doing at that very minute. So more and more we see the model function-

ing as something of a conscience or a mind with a memory of its own. The model has become active. It can be a pathway to some hidden past, or it can know something about the person outside of it.

Why is that an important thing to consider?

ROBNIK: Because it probably says something about changes in modern political power relations and work-related power relations, and the growing issue of not knowing whether you're inside or outside the game. It says something about the erosion of boundaries between spare time, leisure time and the work experience – or even the erosion of a clear sense of belonging as defined by a nation, class or gender. It's about the modern question of whether you belong inside or out.

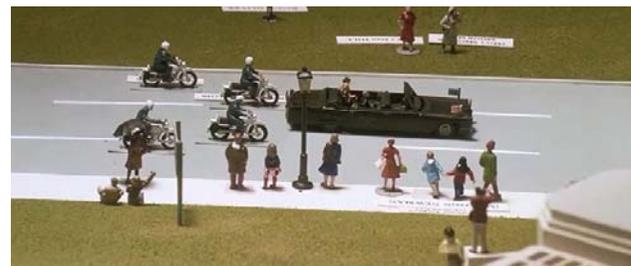
HEINDL: From the architect's perspective, I think it also says something about today's use of the digital model, and being able to overlay existing environments with unrealized ones.

What else does the architect see in this collection that others might not notice?

HEINDL: This is probably obvious to most viewers, but since the 2000s you start seeing more and more windmills and solar panels in models. One thing that's less obvious, though, →

Le mani sulla città
Francesco Rosi | Galatea Film | 1963

***Le mani sulla città (Hands Over the City)* is a political film that effectively infuriates the viewer. It exposes corruption among members of Naples City Council and concedes the impossibility of doing anything about it. We watch as one councilman secures key building contracts for his private real-estate company by bribing and threatening his opponents. The movie is a study of power mechanisms, hypocrisy and greed, caught in powerful images, such as a scene in the council chamber in which the unscrupulous politicians display their 'clean hands' to the public.**



JFK
Oliver Stone | Warner Bros. | 1991

The architectural model in *JFK* is as serious as the film itself. It's a piece of evidence. Director Oliver Stone is a man on a mission, as was New Orleans District Attorney Jim Garrison, the protagonist of the film (played by Kevin Costner) and the man who investigated the assassination of President John F. Kennedy, later claiming to have uncovered a conspiracy. The mission is to undermine the official story, to question the role of major organizations (the CIA, the FBI, the US military), to produce a 'counter-myth', and to point out inconsistencies in official statements. One result of the film was the passage, in 1992, of the JFK Records Act, which states that all government records concerning the assassination must be made public by 2017.



The Dirty Dozen
Robert Aldrich | Metro-Goldwyn-Mayer | 1967
In *The Dirty Dozen*, set during World War II, 12 military prisoners convicted of felonies are offered their freedom; all they have to do is parachute behind enemy lines and kill a large party of German officers attending a meeting at a French chateau. The film depicts war as a cruel event in which innocent people are massacred in brutal ways. This ruthless violence is exemplified by methodical preparations for the assault, which include a model of the chateau and step-by-step instructions for each of the key players.



'The physical model is some kind of substitute for the architect's object of desire'

The Awakening
Nick Murphy | Studio Canal | 2011
Set in England in 1921, *The Awakening* stars 'ghost hunter' Florence Cathcart (Rebecca Hall) who investigates a mysterious incident at an isolated boarding school. In the first half of the film, science triumphs: hoaxes are exposed and frauds unmasked. But as the story develops, the supernatural becomes more and more 'tangible'. The turning point features a model of the boarding school that Florence finds in a remote, unoccupied corner of the school. Peering through the dollhouse windows, she sees a model of herself looking at a model of the model of the school. Spooky, no?



Secret Beyond the Door
Fritz Lang | Diana Production Company | 1947
In *Secret Beyond the Door*, Celia (Joan Bennett) marries architect Mark Lamphere (Michael Redgrave) only to find out that he 'collects' rooms in which women have been murdered. He buys them, takes them apart and rebuilds them along a special corridor in his own mansion, creating a series of 1:1 models. Room 7 is always locked. One night Celia tricks her way in and discovers a replica of her own bedroom. At that moment, the architect enters the room ...

← is that models now appear with little figures – cars and people – as if there's more interest in scale and how people actually fit into the picture an architect is trying to create. That didn't used to be the case. Those tiny people used to be considered pollutants to the model; now they're integral to it.

ROBNIK: This change in thought also moves the model closer to the notion of a toy or something you might gaze upon in fascination. We've thought about our position on this and have decided that there is often no clean distinction in film between an architectural model and a puppet house or toy.

Does it surprise you that so many physical models still appear in today's films, rather than digital ones?

ROBNIK: Well, a physical model is immediately appealing and fascinating to the layperson, and it's still very appropriate to show in cultures driven by ideas of the spectacular, of beauty and commoditization. When we recently showed our film in Weimar, which was part of the GDR until 1990, an audience member suggested that in Communist countries it was always much more common to represent architecture in film using maps, drawings, or sections – something a layperson can't really understand. It was a symbol of rationality, planning and, again,

sobriety. Whereas in Western film, architecture was always condensed into a fetish-like object: the model as commodity, something easily recognized as beautiful.

A physical model is also a good prop, apparently, given the many clips of architects either breaking their models in anger or making love on top of them.

ROBNIK: The lovemaking only happens in Dutch films. [Laughs.] Strangely, we have two Dutch clips, and in both of them there's a hetero sex scene [De Lift, 1983, and Flodder, 1986]. And there's a Turkish-German film from the '90s with a gay sex scene as well [Lola & Bilidikid, 1999].

HEINDL: Interestingly enough, early versions of our film had a much higher proportion of models being destroyed, as an expression of the architect's unhappiness. But the dominance of certain themes changes as we collect more and more clips and as more and more movies are made. In virtually every case, though, the physical model is some kind of substitute for the architect's object of desire, whether physical or emotional. ←

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