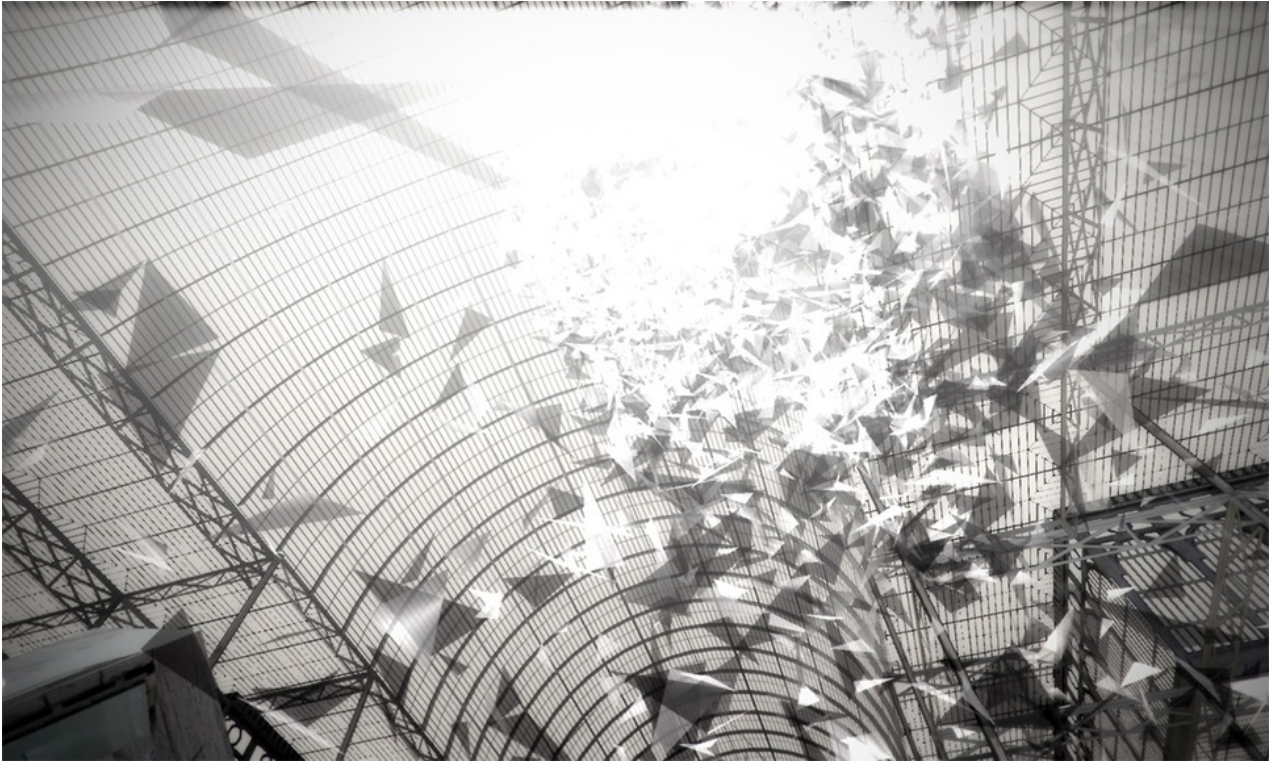


The Architectural Review

Exhibiting the Immaterial: Architecture Gone AWOL

10 June, 2014 By [James Haldane](#)



Tackling the elusive brief of an architectural exhibition, Sto Werkstatt's offerings were a refreshing break from Clerkenwell Design Week's commercial dominances

For better or worse the realm of contemporary curating springs from a soil of perennial debate, profound and otherwise. Where should public funding be focused? Does Tate Modern *really* need another Tracey Emin neon? And, perhaps most pressingly, how are you to sort the wheat from the chaff when browsing 200 million Instagram feeds? Yet, there's one question that's endured longer than all of these – to the point of becoming an ontological cliché in its own right: how can architecture be exhibited?

The question stems from the paradoxical frustrations of displaying something in its absence. The scale of architectural construction almost always precludes featuring an original specimen, but what are the alternatives? Displaying an artefact from the design process, such as a development drawing or model? Perhaps integrating a representation of the finished building, photographic or literary? It's all been tried, but such substitutes usually leave the visitor with a sense of remote disconnection. Occasionally, we do see a curator doubling down with a 1:1 reconstruction or one-off commission (as with the Royal Academy's [Sensing Spaces](#) exhibition), but questions remain surrounding the likeness of these depictions to the true practice of architecture.



Lawrence Lek's video game, *Shiva's Dreaming*, housed in a Sto sound-insulated hut, puts the player in the Crystal Palace on the night of its fiery destruction

Undeterred by this troubled track record, however, curator Amy Croft and designer Adam Nathaniel Furman have joined forces to tackle this vexing brief anew. Hosted by the Sto Werkstatt showroom, their exhibition, *Re.presence: How to See Architecture*, marshals a group of original works as a petition for an expanded definition of the field. Opened to coincide with Clerkenwell Design Week, it succeeds in proposing a new answer by expanding the old question. Acknowledging architecture's habitable and even tangible products as only one facet of its greater reality, the show presents the discipline without inhibition, as a shifting medium of design, thought and experience.

Despite the great diversity of their works, you see immediately that the show's four main contributors have all drawn heavily on digital technologies. It's an appropriate response given the nature of the profession today, and one that's too often shunned by the connoisseurial (read 'stuffy') attitudes of curators. The strategy is most apparent in Lawrence Lek's *Shiva's Dreaming*, an interactive work employing the familiar format of a video game. Immersed in the sounds of crashing glass and roaring flames, the player is free to roam around a digital replica of the Crystal Palace at Sydenham on the night of its destruction by fire in November 1936.

In addition to the broader poetic narrative of reaching through time to recapture a destroyed space, Lek's work carries a heightened resonance given the recent talks about reconstructing Paxton's triumph. The work is most intriguing to my mind, however, as a lens on to the ubiquitous architectural motif of *the archetype*. After all, we so often discuss the Crystal Palace as the grandfather of modern modular construction. Knowingly, the game is installed at the exhibition in a mini 'house' – sound-deadened thanks to a Sto acoustic render – linking it to the Primitive Hut of Laugier et al. Despite its seemingly commonplace medium, the installation manages to intertwine architectural histories of technology, mythology and typology – more than can be said for the latest *Grand Theft Auto*.



The Visceral Intricacies of Magister Ludi's Archetypes by C Fredrik V Hellberg combines *trompe l'oeil* projections with an audio track, using scenarios drawn from the books plot

Advancing digital representation further is *The Visceral Intricacies of Magister Ludi's Archetypes* by architect C Fredrik V Hellberg – a work that combines *trompe l'oeil* video projection with a four-channel audio track. It too picks up the idea of architecture as constituted by narrative, but opts to pull focus on the lives of its inhabitants. While partly inspired by the characters of Hermann Hesse's *The Glass Bead Game*, Hellberg scenarios combine the book's plot with an intentional elusiveness. It's ironic therefore that, across the whole show, his work 'builds' on architecture in the most conventional sense. When working in unison, his projected video and its stepped screen conveys a monumentality reminiscent of Mussolini's astylar Square Colosseum.

Clearly this is a curatorial effort unconcerned with prescriptive labels. In fact, this *laissez-faire* attitude can easily lead you to forget that the exhibition is a commercially sponsored endeavour from a billion-dollar company operating across 87 countries. This is to the credit of the enlightened strategists at Sto. While the rest of Clerkenwell Design Week managed to [fumble the delicate sponsorship issue so badly](#), Ilona Sagar's video-led piece typifies the company's home run. *Haptic Skins of a Glass Eye (Proxy)*, a film shot largely at Sto Werkstatt, explores architecture's sensory dimension by highlighting the human body's trace upon it.



The film *Haptic Skins of a Glass Eye (Proxy)*, shot largely at Sto by Ilona Sagar, includes vivid shots of Sto materials being handled as if they were cooking ingredients

The film splices together shots of Sto materials being handled like cooking ingredients. It conveys a vividness that almost morphs into a tactile experience – or, as Sagar describes it, a 'haptic, fleshy quality'. This is a particularly intriguing idea given that, as a digital work, it lacks even the material artefact of a film-reel. Nevertheless, despite being the most direct response to the sponsor's product, Sagar's rhythmic shots induce introspective reflection on the personal, subjective and emotional.

This compelling psychological thread is also legible in *Outside*, a two-part piece produced by Furman himself. Dealing with the role of imagination, the work in his words, 'activates the gap between reality and myth in architecture'. Consisting of two 3D-printed sculptures cast in resin alongside a digital animation of their forms, it satisfyingly rounds off the exhibition's playful exploration of binary dualisms – in this case, the known and the imagined.



Co-curator Adam Nathaniel Furman's own piece, *Outside*, features a 3D-printed miniature landscape obscured in the haze of a resin block, at once everywhere and nowhere

Again digital fabrication lends a sense of poetry, here between the precise accretion that the 3D-printing process represents and the blurred mediation of the milky resin. The product is a hazy miniature landscape populated by seemingly familiar vernacular forms. Yet you are kept from fully conceiving of the geometric volumes and recognisable rooflines by the eternal mist that sits between. Furman has created a utopia in its original sense, as an etymological confusion between a 'good place' and a 'no place' – it is at once everywhere and nowhere.

Omnipresence was, in fact, a curatorial goal for Croft and Furman from the initial stages as they always envisioned the project extending beyond the gallery walls. To this end, they commissioned visual communication and branding company Studio BAAKO to create www.re-presence.org, a wiki-like virtual platform to collect references and inspirations for the works.

Arguably, the site best represents the potency of an intelligently planned sponsorship arrangement. Through neither it nor even the physical exhibition boasts much hope of boosting Sto's business in the immediate period, that's not their purpose. In business, as in art, design and architecture, the objective must always be to 'intrigue the viewer and elicit a curiosity that encourages further inquiry'. In this, it makes good on all fronts.

The accompanying animation to Adam Nathaniel Furman's 'Outside'

Re.presence: How to See Architecture

Where: [Sto Werkstatt](#)

When: 21 May - 21 July

Lawrence Lek's piece 'Shiva's Dreaming': <http://vimeo.com/95834100>

Adam Nathaniel Furman's animation 'Outside': <http://vimeo.com/93719121>